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Quelque *

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1 *Quelque*

As observed by van de Velde (2000:255–263), the singular *quelque N* (‘some N’) is less frequent in modern French than the other forms of the paradigm, namely *quelques Ns* (‘some Ns’) and *quelqu’un* (‘someone’), *quelque chose* (‘something’). *Quelque* can combine with count nouns and with mass nouns, but only abstract mass nouns:

- (1) Il aura rencontré quelque camarade et se sera arrêté.
‘He will have met some friend and will have stopped.’
- (2) Pierre a montré quelque courage en la circonstance.
‘Peter demonstrated some courage on this occasion.’
(Wilmet 1996)
- (3) * Il aura renversé quelque eau.¹
‘He will have spilled some water.’

A peculiarity of *quelque N* noted in the literature (cf. Culioli 1984, Dobrovie Sorin 1985, Wilmet 1996) is its association with epistemic/modal contexts. Although it does not extend to all uses of *quelque* (*quelqu’un/quelque chose* can be used in simple assertive sentences), it is a property which is particularly interesting for the theory of polarity-like phenomena.

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¹According to van de Velde (2000: 258), such sentences are odd in modern French.

A property common to all uses (extending to plural *quelques*), and not mentioned in the literature about French, at least to our knowledge, is the “anti-negative” nature of *quelque*, i.e. the fact that *quelque* is interpreted as a variable that cannot appear in the scope of negation.²

1.1 *Quelque N* and epistemic/modal contexts

Quelque (singular, followed by a count noun) is restricted to epistemic/modal contexts. As noted by Culioli (1984: 7), “*quelque N* est nécessairement lié à la présence d’un marqueur modal”, “*quelque N* est incompatible avec l’assertion stricte”.³

There are three kinds of licensing contexts:⁴

A) Sentences expressing a hypothesis (1) or a question (4).

- (4) Avez vous rencontré quelque coquille, ou quelque faute d’orthographe dans ce devoir?
 ‘Have you found any typo or any spelling error in this homework?’

B) Sentences involving a reiteration:

- (5) Si quelque lièvre ou chevreuil traversait la route, il fallait s’arrêter.
 ‘If some deer or some hare crossed the road, you had to stop.’

C) Sentences expressing some sort of ignorance:

- (6) Il avait rencontré quelque voisin ou parent dans ce train.
 ‘He had met some neighbor or relative on this train.’
- (7) Quelque vague général qui se trouvait disponible, se vit confier les rênes de l’état. (Culioli (1984))
 ‘Some general or other, who was available, was given the direction of the state.’

If *quelque* occurs in a past tense sentence, there is a strong tendency to interpret the sentence as expressing a supposition:

- (8) Il a rencontré quelque camarade.
 ‘He met some friend’

And this reading is very often reinforced by a disjunction, as in (6).

It is not clear whether this restriction to epistemic/modal contexts fully holds for *quelque* followed by an abstract noun, as can be seen from (2) above. The restriction to epistemic/modal contexts does not

²Since Jespersen (1922) and Baker (1970), who introduces the notion of “positive polarity item”, this kind of prohibition has received less attention than negative polarity licensing. A notable exception is Szabolcsi (2001) on English and Hungaria.

³‘*quelque N* requires the presence of a marker of modality’, ‘*Quelque N* is incompatible with genuine assertion’.

⁴My presentation is very close to Culioli’s taxonomy.

extend to *quelqu'un*, *quelque chose* and *quelques Ns*, which can be freely used in any context.

A natural assumption is that *quelque N* (singular) is an indefinite licensed by a special class of modal contexts. The common feature of the licensing contexts is that they play with the existence of an entity as a value for a variable, without giving any real importance to its nature, and even to its singularity; very often, *quelque N_i* occurs as a member of disjunctions like: *quelque N_i ou N_j*, *quelque N_i ou plusieurs*. In other words, the precise identity of the individual does not seem to really matter. As compared to the standard indefinite *un N*, *quelque N* is not ambiguous, and can only be interpreted as a dependent variable, not as a wide scope (existential) indefinite. It could thus be compared to polarity items like *le moindre*. The main difference from true polarity items is that the sets of licensing contexts are not identical, and the most salient difference is that negation is *not* in the licensing set of *quelque* as shown by (9):

- (9) * Je n'ai pas mangé quelque pomme.
 I not-have neg. eaten some apple

If we see *quelque N* as a variable to be interpreted in the scope of a specific set of logical operators, negation is excluded from this set. It is thus clearly different from negative polarity items (NPI), but also from positive polarity items (PPI).

1.2 *Quelque* as an anti-negative item

1.2.1 *Quelque N*

Sentences like (9) above are ungrammatical, unless one reinterprets them as questions: (*N'aurais-je pas mangé quelque pomme?*). This indicates that if *quelque N* occurs in the C-command domain of negation, the sentence as a whole must be reinterpreted not as a true negation, but as a question. In the following example, it is the epistemic value of the *futur antérieur* ('future in the past') which is the licenser:

- (10) Il n'aura pas prévenu quelque collègue de son départ et celui-ci aura été mécontent.⁵
 'He will not have warned some colleague that he was leaving, and he would have been upset.'

We can find examples involving the interpretation of *quelque N* in the C-command domain of negation, provided that this negation is outscoped by another logical operator:

⁵It is worth noticing that in this case, *quelque* will have to take scope over negation. The sentence means: (it is likely that) there is one colleague that he did not inform. It cannot mean: (it is likely that) he did not inform any colleague.

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- (11) S’il n’a pas rencontré quelque collègue, ou ami, il sera là bientôt.
 ‘If he has not met some colleague or friend, he will be here soon.’

More surprisingly, double negation can license *quelque N*:⁶

- (12) Je ne dis pas qu’il n’a pas rencontré quelque collègue.
 ‘I don’t say that he has not met some colleague.’

But if we consider examples like (13) and (14), we might conclude that it is not the higher negation *per se* which is the licenser of the negated *quelque*:

- (13) ?? Marie ne savait pas qu’il n’avait pas rencontré quelque collègue.
 ‘Marie did not know that he had not met some colleague.’
- (14) ?? Marie ne croyait pas qu’il n’avait pas rencontré quelque collègue
 ‘Marie did not believe that he had not met some colleague.’

Although the syntactic configuration looks similar, *quelque N* is not licensed. We might suggest that the licensing context of (12) is the complex *I do not say that + negative*, which is interpreted, as a whole, as an epistemic-modal context: *it is possible that S*. On the contrary, the double negation of (13)–(14) would count as an assertion and would not provide the required epistemic context.

To sum up, the data shows that *quelque N* can only occur in the C-command domain of negation if this negation is not the highest operator of the representation, and if the highest operator can be interpreted as the epistemic/modal licenser of *quelque*.

2 Quelques Ns

2.1 The negative constraint

This fact points to another one concerning the two French indefinite pronouns *quelqu’un* and *quelque chose*: if these pronouns are in the syntactic scope of negation, the only way to accept the sentence is to interpret the indefinite as taking scope over the negation:

- (15) Je n’ai pas mangé quelque chose / Je n’ai pas vu quelqu’un.
 ‘I did not eat something / I did not see someone.’

These sentences can only be interpreted as: “there is something I did not eat, there is someone I did not see”. Moreover, most speakers feel

⁶Such intervening contexts are mentioned in the literature on PPIs since Jespersen (1922), see Szabolcsi (2001). The interesting point about French data is that *quelque* (singular) is *not* a PPI: it is not licensed in simple assertive sentences (see above).

that (15) is not a natural way to express this meaning. The same is true for *quelques N*:

- (16) Je n’ai pas salué quelques amis.
 ‘I did not greet some friends.’

This sentence can only mean: “there are some friends I did not greet”. It is important to state correctly the precise nature of the constraint. One cannot say that *quelques N* is not licensed by negation, or is ruled out by negation. In fact, *quelqu’un* is syntactically correct in the syntactic scope of negation. One cannot say either that *quelques N* is a wide scope (“existential”) item. Although, and this is the main difference with *quelque N*, it *can* be interpreted as an existential (wide scope) indefinite, it is perfectly correct as well with any other subclass of NPI licensors (e.g. questions and conditionals).

- (17) Si vous avez besoin de quelqu’un / de quelque chose, appelez-moi.
 ‘If you need someone / something, call me’

The point is precisely that *quelques N* cannot be interpreted in the scope of widest scope negation; we will take this as a feature of the whole *quelque* paradigm.

- (18) **Negative constraint:** a variable introduced by *quelque* cannot be interpreted in the scope of widest scope negation.⁷

This constraint makes nice predictions for more complicated sentences. Consider (19):

- (19) Pierre ne mange pas quelque chose le matin.
 ‘Pierre does not eat something in the morning.’

The sentence can only mean that there is something Pierre does not eat. But consider (20):

- (20) Si je ne mange pas quelque chose le matin, j’ai faim à midi.
 ‘If I do not eat something in the morning, I am hungry at noon.’

The negative constraint does not prevent the interpretation of *quelque chose* in the scope of the negation outscoped by the antecedent of the conditional, which is a nice consequence, since (20) can be used for saying: “if I eat nothing in the morning, I am hungry at midday.”

⁷By ‘widest scope negation’ we mean a negation taking scope in the representation over any other operator like questions, conditionals, etc. We do not take the indefinite itself as a logical operator, but as a variable (as in DRT).

2.2 *Sans*

One could object that *sans* (‘without’) has licensing properties which are very close to negation (see chapter 19) and can nevertheless be used with *quelque*. But it is striking to observe that *quelque N* is licensed after *sans* mainly when *sans* is itself in the scope of a clause-mate negation. If *sans* is in an affirmative sentence, *quelque N* is not licensed:

- (21) *Sa jovialité était sans quelque cynisme.
her joviality was without some cynicism

We have found empirical confirmation of this strong constraint in the data base FRANTEXT. We found 26 occurrences of *sans quelque N* in a given set of texts. In *all* examples, the main sentence contains some negative particle: *ne ... pas* or *non*. Typical examples are:

- (22) Le tout, je crois, ne sera pas sans quelque grandeur... (Hugo, Correspondance)
‘The entire thing, I think, will not be without some greatness.’
- (23) Arrivé, non sans quelque peine, au pied de la tour... (Hugo, Le Rhin)
‘Once arrived, not without some pain, at the foot of the tower.’

This preference of *sans ... quelque* for a clause-mate negative particle seems to hold for *quelqu’un/quelque chose*.

- (24) ? Marie se promenait sans quelqu’un / Marie ne se promenait jamais sans quelqu’un.
‘Mary was walking without someone / Mary would never walk without someone’
- (25) ? Marie était toujours sans quelque chose à faire / Marie n’était jamais sans quelque chose à faire.
‘Mary was always without something to do / Mary was never without something to do.’

Many examples in our corpus illustrate this:

- (26) Je n’ai pu faire un pas sans rencontrer quelqu’un qui m’en parlât.
(Zola)
‘I was unable to make a step without meeting someone who told me about it.’
- (27) ... puis, comme elle ne voulait pas s’ en aller sans dire quelque chose, (Zola)
‘... then, as she did not want to go without saying something.’

Moreover, there is a strong collocation between negation and *sans quelques N*, as illustrated by the following examples:

- (28) Gringoire monta sur l’ escabeau, et parvint, non sans quelques oscillations de la tête et des bras, à y retrouver son centre de gravité. (Hugo)
 ‘Grégoire climbed on the ladder, and succeeded, not without some oscillations, in finding his balance.’
- (29) Il ne passait guère devant cet homme sans lui donner quelques sous. (Hugo)
 ‘He rarely walked past this man without giving him some money.’

How can we explain these rather strange data involving *sans*? We will show that as strange as they are, they follow to some extent from our hypothesis.

Let us assume that *sans* has most properties of the negative, in particular the property of taking an indefinite in its scope.

Quelque N is a member of the *quelque* paradigm: as such, it cannot be interpreted in the scope of the widest scope negation; see the negative constraint (18) above. But *quelque N* cannot be interpreted by existential closure, as asserting the existence of an individual. This is why (30) is not acceptable:

- (30) * Pierre n’a pas appelé quelque camarade.
 ‘Peter did not called some friend’

If *sans* shares with *ne ... pas* the property of introducing a negative operator in the representation, the following sentence should be ruled out for the same reason:

- (31) *Pierre est parti sans quelque camarade.
 ‘Peter is left without some companion

and I think that this prediction is borne out.

We have now to explain why the combination of the negative particles (*ne ... pas*, *non*) with *sans ... quelque* is fine, and, in fact, highly typical. Pursuing the parallelism between *sans* and the negative particles, we can try to generalize to *sans* the properties which hold of the negative particles, which would give: *sans quelque N* cannot be interpreted unless a higher operator is a licenser for *quelque*. We have found for instance, that a higher conditional can play this role (see (16) above). It can also license *sans quelque N*:

- (32) Si Pierre est parti sans quelque camarade pour l’aider, il est stupide.
 ‘If P. has gone without some companion to help him, he is stupid.’

In (32) the variable contributed by *quelque* is neither existential, nor bound by widest scope negation. In this very context, any member of

the *quelque* paradigm is licensed and can be interpreted in the scope of the out-scoped negation.

How then should we analyze the context created by the negative particles, illustrated by (22)–(23)? It can be taken as satisfying the negative constraint: the variable contributed is in the scope of negation, but the negation does not have widest scope (there is another negation taking scope over it). This would predict that the whole *quelque* paradigm will be licensed, which is true.

Nevertheless, it is not enough to predict that *quelque* will be fine, since *quelque* requires, except with abstract nouns (cf. *supra*), a variable in the scope of an “epistemic” operator. Again, we can solve the problem, by making the assumption that double negation is an operator which does not give any real importance to the identity of the individual satisfying the predicate.

3 Conclusion

The *quelque* paradigm in French seems to illustrate a very specific constraint: it contributes a variable which cannot be interpreted in the scope of widest scope negation. Our formulation of the constraint exhibits three interesting features: it is a semantic constraint (it signals a scopal configuration in which the variable cannot be interpreted); it is a constraint which sets negation apart from any other logical operator; it is a constraint concerning widest scope negation. It might be the case that such items should be compared to the category of Positive Polarity Items, introduced for English in the literature in the 70’s, but the data regarding *quelque N* (singular) shows that this category cannot apply to all uses of *quelque*, and we think that the members of the *quelque* paradigm are better characterized as anti-negative items.

As for singular *quelque*, we showed that it is governed by an additional licensing condition requiring the interpretation of the variable in some kind of epistemic-modal context. It should, in this respect, be compared with other dependent indefinites (e.g. *vreun* in Romanian (Comorovski 1984, Farkas 2002); reduplicated cardinals in Hungarian (Farkas 1997)).

Both constraints offer an interesting enrichment of the landscape of dependent indefinites in natural languages.

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