A non-trivial problem

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Form-meaning mismatches
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QUESTION

- **Logicality of language hypothesis:** The language system includes a 'natural logic' module that can identify and filter-out as strictly unacceptable those expressions that, although syntactically well-formed, are uninformative in the sense of being 'trivial' (cf. Del Pinal 2021).

(1a) *Some students but Alice left.
(1b) *There is the student in the class.
(1c) *Alice read any book.

- At the same time, other examples that can be seen as trivial as well, are not unacceptable.

(2a) Bennett is not Einstein!
(2b) If Bennett is a bachelor, then Bennett is a bachelor.
(2c) It's raining and it's not raining.

- But why would such contradictory or tautological sentences not be unacceptable? What distinguishes G(rammatical) triviality from L(ogical) triviality (cf. Chierchia 2013, 2019)?

BACKGROUND

- **Gajewski (2004) / Chierchia (2013, 2019)**: an utterance is unacceptable if when the content terms are replaced by variables of the same type, every possible assignment of the variable ends up being trivial.

(1c') $[EXH\ [[any\ v_{et}]_i\ \lambda 1\ w_e\ y_{eet}\ t_i]]$
(2c') $[v_t$ and $[$ not $w_t]]$

- No matter how v is assigned in (1c'), there is always a contradicton; in (2c') there is only a contradiction when v=w.
- **Del Pinal (2021)**: what underlies the difference between (1)-(2) is that content terms can be modulated by context-sensitive operators at LF. Expressions whose triviality depends on the co-identity of content terms are not seen as trivial because each token can be modulated in slightly different ways, thereby avoiding triviality.
- As *It's drizzling but it's not raining cats and dogs* is not contradictory, natural language will not filter out (2c) as unacceptable.

PROBLEMS

- Is a separate logicality module really necessary or can the relevant intuitions also be captured without such a module?
- Both approaches must make a sharp distinction between content and functional terms, but in certain cases, the triviality of an utterance is due to a content term and not a functional term. In (3), *surprised* is responsible for the licensing of *any* but it is clearly a content term.

(3) I am surprised that she bought any cookies.

- Context-sensitivity plays a role in determining triviality (cf. (4)). Only if *few* does not trigger existential inferences can it license strong NPIs, but it's context that determines whether *few* triggers such inferences or not. Logicality should rule in both (4a-b).

(4a) *Few students have been here in weeks.
(4b) He was one of few dogs I'd met in years that I really liked

PROPOSAL

- The ill-formedness of the G-trivial examples in (1) and the well-formedness of the L-trivial sentences in (2) are not due to some logicality module but rather due to their usage conditions:
- **An acceptable sentence must be informative in a particular context of utterance.**
- The latter states that uttering the sentence should remove some but not all worlds from the context set. Its contribution to the conversation should be meaningful.
- The consequence of this is that the sentences in (2), unlike what is predicted under Logicality, are only usable when their meaning contribution is non-trivial. That is, when the sentence makes intuitive sense. (2c) *must* mean something like *It's drizzling but it's not raining cats and dogs*
- The proposal does not allude to content vs functional terms (3).
- Context-sensitivity as in (4) is expected to play a role.