Let's Get One Thing Clear – We Still Do Not Know If Partial Control Exists

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This paper is a contribution to the debate about the untractable nature of the phenomenon of partial control (cf. Hornstein 1999, 2003, Landau 2000, 2003, 2016a, 2016b, Boeckx, Hornstein and Nunes 2010, among others), the exemplification of which can be seen below:

(1)   John$_1$ told Mary$_2$ that he$_1$ wants [PRO$_{1+}$ to meet in the morning].[1][2]

The relation between the non-lexical subject, standardly marked as PRO in syntactic theories, of the bracketed clause and the lexical subject of the matrix clause, i.e. *John* is not one of identity. The referent of the silent PRO seems to include *John* along with other individuals salient in the context (in this case it is *Mary*). Hence the notation $_{1+}$ on PRO. Since the matrix subject only partially controls the reference of the lower subject, this phenomenon has come to be known as partial control (PC).

Various theories have been offered to account for the enigmatic state of affairs in (1), the most originative one being put forward in Landau (2000). With new empirical facts being brought to linguistic attention combined with novel solutions, this work has proved provocative and it has altered the direction of the overall discussion of control.[3] On Landau's analysis, PC PRO is syntactically singular but semantically plural. On other analyses, PC PRO is both syntactically and semantically singular (Hornstein 2003, Rodrigues 2008, Boeckx, Hornstein and Nunes 2010, among others). Various mechanisms of deriving PC aside, all of the theories rely on Landau's (2000) cross-linguistic empirical observation that PC is sanctioned only by factive, propositional, desiderative and interrogative verbs, while implicative, aspectual and modal verbs prohibit it. A sample of each verb class with PC is provided below:

(2)   a.   John$_1$ preferred [PRO$_{1+}$ to meet at six].   desiderative
        b.   John$_1$ wondered [where PRO$_{1+}$ to meet at six].   interrogative
        c.   John$_1$ denied [PRO$_1$ having met at six].   propositional
        d.   John$_1$ regretted [PRO$_{1+}$ having met at six].   factive
        e.   *John$_1$ managed [PRO$_{1+}$ to meet at six].   implicative
        f.   *John$_1$ began [PRO$_{1+}$ to meet at six].   aspectual
        g.   *John$_1$ should [PRO$_{1+}$ meet at six].   modal

Landau argues that some contextual salience of the group about to meet is necessary to render (2a-d) licit but no context can rescue (2e-g).

In view of the data above, it is surprising that Polish, pace Landau, legalizes PC with all verb classes. The interesting cases are those that involve implicatives (3a), aspectuals (3b) and modals (3c):

(3)   a.   Jankowi$_1$ udało się [PRO$_{1+}$ spotkać o   six].
               John-DAT managed   to-meet at six
               'John$_1$ managed PRO$_{1+}$ to meet at six.'
        b.   Janek$_1$ w końcu zaczął [PRO$_{1+}$ spotykać się w tej   starej szopie].
               John in the-end began   to-meet REFL in this old   barn
               'John$_1$ finally began PRO$_{1+}$ to meet in this old barn.'
        c.   Janek$_1$ powinien był [PRO$_{1+}$ spotkać się w eleganckiej restauracji, a
               John should-have   to-meet REFL in elegant   restaurant and
               nie w tej starej szopie].
               not in this old   barn
               John$_1$ should have PRO$_{1+}$ met in an elegant restaurant and not in this old barn.

Hungarian follows the same pattern – implicatives (4a), aspectuals (4b) and modals (4c) also allow PC:

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[1] The linguistic context in (1) provides the necessary participants of the meeting other than the matrix controller. However, one should bear in mind that when such a context is missing, pragmatics will allow us to set up another one easily. And this is what makes PC different from split control.

[2] I use PRO in lieu of the non-lexical subject for purely expository reasons as most of the linguistic world is accustomed to this type of marking.

[3] Landau's vision has undergone some changes (Landau 2003, 2004, 2008, 2016b) but it is of no relevance to the point under discussion.

(4)   a.   John$_1$ mert [PRO$_{1+}$ 6kor   találkozni].
                   John   dared   at-six   to-meet
                   'John$_1$ dared [PRO$_{1+}$ to meet at six].

         b.   John$_1$ elkezdett [PRO$_{1+}$ 6kor   találkozni].
                   John   began   at-six   to-meet
                   'John$_1$ began [PRO$_{1+}$ to meet at six].

         c.   Johnnak$_1$ kell [PRO$_{1+}$ 6kor   találkoznia].
                   John-DAT needs/must at-six   to-meet
                   'John$_1$ needs [PRO$_{1+}$ to meet at six].

The data above clearly shake the foundations of the PC module meticulously constructed by Landau and as such they question the direction of the overall discussion on PC. Since this species of control is extremely context-dependent, all the attempts to make it a syntactic regularity may be futile and thus lead us astray. Undoubtedly, this calls for a greater examination of more languages or even a more thorough analysis of the same languages before suggesting new theoretical solutions.My voice in the debate on PC is a simple common-sense voice. Instead of constructing novel theories of PC or "embellishing" the already existing ones, let us take a step back and reanalyze the empirical data on PC. It may turn out that the phenomenon is nothing but a grammatical phantasm. And then the alleged step back is in fact tantamount to a step forward in our understanding how language expresses silent subjects. After all, to understand is what we are all after.

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