Commentary on Sevdali’s Paper

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Sevdali’s analysis assumes that (i) in AG, controlled PRO has no independent case (i.e., it must inherit its case from the controller); (ii) Overt DPs must be licensed by Case (The Case Filter); and (iii) Control in MG does not depend on semantic tense but on contrastiveness of the embedded subject. In fact, (i) is false, as AG features ACC-marked PRO controlled by a DAT/GEN object; (ii) is dubious in light of much recent work on separation of Case from DP-licensing; and (iii) is non-explanatory, failing to provide an independent criterion for the licensing of [+contrast].

1. Introduction

The Balkan languages in general, and Modern Greek (MG) in particular, pose a lingering challenge to traditional theories of control. Such theories were constructed on the basis of languages exhibiting a strong correlation between finiteness and Obligatory Control (OC): Only nonfinite clauses display OC. Although this correlation is true of many languages (e.g., English, French, German, Irish etc.), the Balkan situation demonstrates that it is not part of UG. In languages like Greek, Bulgarian and Romanian, there are no productive infinitives. All complements are finite – indicative or subjunctive. A subset of the subjunctive complements displays OC. The fundamental problem is then how to best characterize this subset. A broader issue concerns the integration of the Balkan system into a general theory of control, which also accounts for OC infinitives in other languages.

The fact that both finite and nonfinite complements may display OC has led several researchers to propose that finiteness, as a unitary feature, does not determine control (see Landau 2004 and references therein). Sevdali’s paper joins this trend, as its title suggests. Indeed, Sevdali bolsters the case against the relevance of finiteness by comparing MG with Ancient Greek (AG); the latter features many nonfinite clauses with overt subjects, i.e., uncontrolled. The question of how to predict the status of a clause – controlled or uncontrolled – is therefore central to our understanding of the syntax of these languages and the general theory of control.

Sevdali’s strategy focuses on the phenomenon of case transmission, where the case of a matrix DP controller is “copied” down onto a predicate in
2. OC is not Linked to Case Transmission in AG

Standard descriptions of case transmission in AG portray a different picture than Sevdali’s discussion. While subject control indeed always displays NOM-transmission to PRO and never allows case independence (Sevdali’s (3)), object control shows an alternation between case independence and case transmission. Since the independent case for infinitival subjects in AG is ACC, the contrast is detectable only with non-accusative objects, i.e., dative or genitive objects. All the major studies of case transmission in AG, in fact, cite examples with independent ACC (i.e., failure of case transmission) under object control. (2a-c) are taken from three different sources (the PRO notation is mine).

   the. Athenians. GEN asked. 3PL PRO. ACC to. them. helpers. ACC to. become
   ‘They asked the Athenians to become their helpers.’
   (Andrews 1971:29b)

b. sumbouleu: o soi [PRO pro:thumon eina].
   advise. 1sg you. DAT PRO. ACC zealou ACC to. be
   ‘I advise you to be zealous.’
   (Quicoli 1982:114, 23b)

c. Éxestin umin [PRO genesthai eudaimo].
   is. allowed you. DAT PRO. ACC to. be happy. ACC
   ‘You are allowed to be happy.’
   (Lecarme 1978:105, cited in Hudson 2003:44b)

The alternation between case transmission and independence in AG object control is a well established fact. Quicoli (1982:21) cites Smyth’s (1920) classic Greek Grammar, which states it very clearly: “When the subject of the infinitive is the same as the object (in the genitive or dative) of the governing verb, it is often omitted, and a predicate noun is either attracted into the genitive or dative, or stands in the accusative agreement with the omitted subject of the infinitive”.

Furthermore, such an asymmetry between subject control (obligatory case transmission) and object control (optional case transmission) is not a quirk of AG; Russian exhibits the same pattern. Landau (2007) develops an account of this asymmetry in terms of the four featural structure of the matrix heads that interact with the infinitival C head. Somewhat misrepresented by this analysis, Sevdali writes: “Landau argues that many of the differences between infinitival Cs that allow for case transmission and those that do not are transferred by the little v’s that select them. This cannot be the case in AG since the same main verbs (for instance phe:mu ‘I say’) can take both controlled infinitival CPs, which allow CAAC (=case transmission, I’ll) and ones that do not” (p. 13).

Note that the objection presupposes a bi-unique correlation between case transmission and OC ((1a) above), such that failure of case transmission must imply lack of control. The presupposition is false, as (2) indicates. That

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1 Sevdali calls this phenomenon “case agreement across a copula” (CAAC); I keep to the traditional term.

b. Overt DPs must be licensed by Case (The Case Filter).

   “When the infinitival clause is a control clause and under our assumptions
   a CP, it enters the derivation without a contrastive feature and consequently
   without a Case feature either. In these cases, nonfinite T,
   albeit morphologically rich, does not inherit a Case feature from
   anywhere and therefore cannot license an overt subject”
   (p. 10)

c. Control in MG does not depend on semantic tense.

   “Varlokosta & Hornstein approach has to do with semantic tense, as
   opposed to morphological tense, being responsible for lack of availability
   of control. This is not the road we want to follow”
   (p. 12)

(1a) is an empirical claim, while (1b,c) are more theoretical in nature. All three
claims, I believe, are unsupported. (1a) is directly contradicted by documented
data; (1b) is provably insufficient to handle DP licensing; and (1c) is not argued
for, but simply attached to an alternative account (in terms of focus/contrast) that
fails on logical grounds.
4. Control in MG Depends on Semantic Tense

As is well known, subjunctive complements in MG fall into two classes—controlled and free, C-subjunctives and F-subjunctives in Landau’s (2004) terminology. Previous studies have established that the dividing line is semantic tense: the tense of C-subjunctives is identical (anaphoric) to the matrix tense, whereas the tense of F-subjunctives is either dependent on the matrix tense (irrealis) or independent of it (see Varlokosta 1993, Krapova and Petkov 1999, Krapova 2001, Landau 2004). Once again, the relevance of semantic tense to OC is neither restricted to MG nor to Balkan languages. Landau (2004) extends the analysis to inflected infinitives in European Portuguese and Hungarian. Landau (2006) discusses the complementation systems of Welsh and Basque, where semantic tense (together with morphological Agr) directly predicts whether a complement clause will display OC or not. The same conclusion emerges, independently, from consideration of the complex complement system of Turkish (Słodowska 2007).

Sevdał (p. 12) rejects all these systematic observations. Instead, she offers a sketchy proposal, whereby the temporal properties of the complement are irrelevant to control. Rather, the crucial criterion is whether the na-clause is a weak or strong phase (the former transparent to OC, the latter opaque). “Strength” of a phase, in turn, depends on “discourse properties”, such as the contrastiveness/force of the embedded subject. A strong phase allows its subject to be contrastive, hence disjoint from matrix arguments, but a weak phase does not.

How does this proposal answer the original question—which na-clauses are controlled and which are not? Compare the complements of hope and know-how (Sevdał’s (8)-(9)). Why does the former allow a disjoint subject and the latter not? Presumably, Sevdał would argue that the na in (8) headed a strong phase (specified [+contrast]) and the na in (9) headed a weak phase (specified [+contrast], or no [contrast]). But this begs the question of what distinguishes the two complements. What is it about the first na-clause that makes it a strong phase and what is it about the second one that makes it a weak phase? As long as the “strength” of a phase is unrelated to any independently established property of the clause, the “strong/weak phase” terminology simply restates the controlled/uncontrolled distinction without explaining it.

As far as we know, there is just one objective property that cuts the pie of na-clauses in the right way: semantic tense. Thus, one could say that strong phases have semantic tense and weak phases do not. At this point, however, it would not be clear whether the “strong/weak phase” terminology adds any explanatory depth.

Sevdał is right to point out that overtness of the subject often correlates with contrast (“Montalbetti effects”). Crucially, though, this is only true when a

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Note that the property is objective since it is testable independently of control, simply by checking whether or not temporal modifiers in the matrix and in the embedded clauses must coincide.

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2 Sevdał further claims that AG is different from Russian in that subject control across an object in AG still forces NOM-transmission. Her example (28), however, cited as the crucial evidence, is irrelevant. All the example shows is that NOM-transmission is possible—not that independent ACC is impossible. NOM-transmission across an object is also possible in Russian—contra Sevdał’s remark that “such an example is different from the situation in Russian”.

3 Note that the property is objective since it is testable independently of control, simply by checking whether or not temporal modifiers in the matrix and in the embedded clauses must coincide.
choice exists between a null or an overt subject, i.e., in F-subjunctives, indicative complements in null subject languages, or gerunds in English. A traditional approach to this phenomenon invokes a preference for minimal or null forms to express coreference: The “Avoid Pronoun” principle (Chomsky 1981), which reflects either a parsing strategy or a conversational implicature.

The important point here is that “Avoid Pronoun” cannot predict where pronouns (or full DPs) are not licensed in the first place; it only states that if a pronoun is licensed, then it must be disjoint from some matrix DP. An overt subject embedded under know-how (or dare, forget, avoid etc.) is simply never licensed — even when it is intended to be contributive and hence permitted by “Avoid Pronoun”. Nor would the strong/weak phase device — which is but a recoding of this principle — license it.

In short: Contrast can explain when a pronoun/lexical DP is favored over PRO/pro, but not when it is excluded in principle. In classifying MG na-complements solely by [xcontrast], Sevdati’s proposal, in fact, leaves the fundamental puzzle of OC (the distribution of PRO vs. pronoun/DP) unanswered.

References


