Failure to control is not a failure: it’s pro

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Despite their similarities as (typically) silent pronominal elements (typically) appearing in subject position, a distinction is normally drawn between obligatory control (OC) PRO and pro. OC PRO yields only sloppy readings under vP ellipsis, is obligatorily coreferent with a “controller” and, in attitudinal contexts, is obligatorily de se (“the OC Signature” Landau, 2013); pro lacks these restrictions: it yields strict and sloppy readings under ellipsis, and need not be coreferent with a controller or interpreted de se. Given that PRO and pro also have different distributions, there are in principle two ways to model the distinction between them, which we’ll call the Inherent approach and the Derived approach. The more standard Inherent approach (e.g. Chomsky, 1981; Martin, 2001; Hornstein, 1999; Landau, 2004, 2013) posits two inherently distinct elements PRO and pro, with different underlying properties which are responsible for the differences in their distribution. The alternative Derived approach (Borer, 1989; Manzini, 2009; Kissock, 2014, Duguine, 2015, among others) argues instead that PRO and pro label different manifestations of a single underlying element, with the distinctions derived from its interactions with different grammatical environments.

Here, we motivate a version of the Derived approach, positing a single element PRO/pro with an underspecified semantics that can be further specified to yield the two distinct interpretations. When PRO/pro occurs in a syntactic position where control can be established, it takes on the interpretive properties of OC PRO, while the interpretation associated with pro arises from the underspecified semantics when such control is syntactically impossible. An approach along these lines is common for the distinction between de re and de se. Given that PRO and NOC PRO are not met (Landau, 2013), but for us they must be alike in not having the interpretive profile of OC PRO, which arises from the control relation. We implement control in terms of Agree (Landau, 2004), meaning that it will be subject to the structural conditions on Agree, i.e. c-command, minimality and locality. When these aren’t met, Agree fails, and the bound variable OC interpretation is not derived. E.g. clausal subjects are typically not c-commanded by a matrix DP, and fully finite embedded CPs are phases, thus Agree with something outside the CP is generally impossible. Hence OC can’t obtain into (most) clausal subjects (1) or full-fledged finite clauses (2).

(1) [PROsoc to run out of beer] would be a shame.

(2) Gianni ha deciso [che proi/j/#pro partìra domani]. (Italian)

Gianni has decided [that pro will leave tomorrow]

‘Gianni decided that he/she will leave tomorrow.’

Well-known cases of “finite control” typically involve subjunctives or other clauses with intermediate finiteness, where it is plausible to posit the lack of a phase boundary or an escape-hatch mechanism for Agree, yielding transparency for OC (see e.g. Landau, 2008).

The real novelty of the current approach is the assumption of a single underlying element PRO/pro in all these cases, to which OC applies in a way that is conditionally obligatory, but fallible, much like agreement for Preminger (2011). That is, OC of PRO/pro is obligatory if its structural conditions are met, but if they aren’t, there is no ungrammaticality, just a different interpretation. This yields some clear advantages for our approach. Improving on Inherent approaches, it posits a single underlying element rather than two, a modest Occam’s Razor gain. More importantly, it draws an explanatory connection between the interpretations of PRO and pro and their distributions. The interpretations available to OC PRO are a proper subset of those available to pro/NOC PRO (see also Landau, 2015, and works cited there, for the idea that de se is a special case of de re.), because control restricts the referential and attitudinal possibilities of PRO/pro, and when it fails, the restrictions simply don’t apply. Also, use of Agree rather than movement Hornstein (1999, et seq.) simplifies the treatment of adjunct OC, obviating the need to posit sideward movement.

The strongest argument for our approach is, however, empirical. We make a clear prediction, which is not only confirmed, but also explains an otherwise puzzling pattern – the “Finiteness/pro-drop generalization” – noted by Sundaresan (2014) for a number of pro-drop languages (Spanish, Italian, Romanian, Hungarian,
Japanese, Hindi and Tamil) which allow an alternation between overt and covert subjects in certain non-finite clauses (ex. from Spanish):

(3) Al mostrår Maríai/ECs₁,j,k los síntomas de la gripe, Carlosj se vacun-ó.
    P show-INF Maríai/EC the symptoms of the flu, Carlosj SE vaccinate-PST
    “[CP (With) Maríai showing the symptoms of flu], Carlosj got vaccinated.”

Given the possibility of an overt, non-anaphoric subject in such clauses and of pro-drop elsewhere in these languages, we expect the covert subject here to be pro, or at least for pro to be possible alongside OC PRO. But Sundaresan shows that only the restricted OC PRO interpretation is possible: the null subject is obligatorily coreferent with the matrix subject, interpreted obligatorily de se, and yields sloppy readings under vP ellipsis. Descriptively, these clauses have an intermediate status: unlike e.g. complements of verbs like ‘try’, they allow inherently non-controllable subjects like María, but unlike prototypical finite clauses, they are also transparent to control. Under the Inherent view that pro and PRO are underlyingly distinct, they may certainly have distinct distributions due to their other properties, but there is no expectation of complementarity. It is thus difficult to see how to exclude pro here, especially given that overt pronominal subjects are possible. Under our Derived approach, however, we predict that PRO and pro should be in complementary distribution, since they are contextually-derived interpretations of a single element. The fact that these clauses are transparent to control means that, whenever the subject is PRO/pro, control will apply obligatorily, yielding OC PRO and ruling out the less restricted reading associated with pro, as desired.

A question that might be asked at this point is why, if PRO and pro are really two interpretations of the same element, PRO seems to be universal, while pro-drop is famously parametrized. Note first that at least certain types of pro-drop are related to the morphological expression of agreement (though characterizing the precise relationship remains tricky, see Biberauer, Holmberg, Roberts, and Sheehan, 2010; Duguine, 2015, for discussion), a point that is itself subject to cross-linguistic variation. PRO, on the other hand, is primarily found in precisely those contexts where agreement is blocked at a deeper level, so that variation in its surface expression is largely ruled out. Furthermore, for us, NOC PRO is actually pro, thus languages like English actually do allow a restricted form of pro-drop. The conditions on silent subjects are in any case clearly subject to cross-linguistic variation, and there is ample evidence (Barbosa, 2009; Szabolcsi, 2009; Livitz, 2014, a.o.) that DP-(c)overtness and -interpretation (including OC vs. NOC) are conditioned by orthogonal factors. Thus there is nothing to stop underlying PRO/pro in a particular context from surfacing as silent pro in Italian, but as an overt pronoun in English. This of course raises the question to what extent a Derived approach may be extended to the pronoun/anaphor distinction more generally. Almost certainly, not all pronouns and anaphors are realizations of a single underlying element, given that the complementarity between (overt) pronouns and anaphors breaks down in certain environments (Reinhart and Reuland, 1993, among others). What is less clear is whether such an account should be extended to overt variants of OC PRO and pro (Manzini, 2009). If the factors conditioning the (c)overtness of a DP are themselves fully contextual, then it would follow that these are realizations of a single element, but if the factors are partially featural (as e.g. has been proposed for overtness due to focus), it would not.