On the (im)possibility of partial argument coreference

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Abstract

In 1966, Paul Postal claimed that it is impossible to find grammatical sentences in which there is partial overlap between subject and object, i.e., in sentences like I like us. This observation lead, in direct scholarly descent, to the infamous Binding Principle B (Chomsky 1981). In this article we argue against Postal’s original observation, as we claim that sentences with partial argument overlap are perfectly possible in English and sundry languages, although such expressions are conversationally constrained. The real-world situations that are described in such utterances are unusual, and thus the constructions are used infrequently, leading to uncertainty on the part of the speaker whether such expressions are well-formed or not. In the process of grammaticalization of pronouns into person-marking inflection this dispreference appears to turn into real impossibility.

1. Introduction

Paul Postal observes, in a footnote of his 1966 reply to William Bright’s commentary on Postal’s article on Mohawk prefixes (i.e., the kind of insights that normally are lost in the rapid fire of scholarly discussions), that there is something strange with expressions in which there is partial overlap between the subject and the object:

The problem concerns the description of sentences with subjects and objects which, while not fully identical, embody common reference to either a first or second person element, i.e., sentences which express meanings like ‘I like us’, ‘we like me’, ‘we inclusive like you’, etc. It is interesting that in both Mohawk and English it is apparently impossible to find grammatical sentences which express such meanings. (Postal 1966: 91, Note 1 [emphasis added])

A few years later, in a review article addressing a collection of papers by M. A. K. Halliday, Postal extends this basic observation to other constructions,
arguing that “the distribution of pairs of NP in certain sentence types is greatly
restricted if these are coreferential” (Postal 1969: 418). Although these publi-
cations show some incipient interest in this topic, the kind of publications do
not bode well for any follow-up research. But, to the contrary, these observa-
tions had a tremendous impact in linguistics for decades to come. Again a few
years later, Chomsky (1973: 241) followed Postal’s analysis under the name of
the “Unlike Person Constraint”:3

The point seems to be that a rule of interpretation (RI) applying to the struc-
ture NP-V-NP (among others) seeks to interpret the NPs as nonintersecting in
reference, and where this is impossible (as in the case of first and second per-
son pronouns), it assigns “strangeness”, marking the sentence with *. (Chomsky
1973: 241)

Ultimately, this observation led to the Binding Principle B, which states that
“a pronominal must be free in its governing domain” (Chomsky 1981: 188; cf.
Lasnik 1989 for some more background on the development leading from the
Unlike Person Constraint to the Binding Principle B).

Cases of partial argument coreference are intermediate situations between
(i) typically transitive subject/object configurations, in which there is no over-
lap between the reference of the subject and the object, and (ii) reflexive or
reciprocal situations in which there is complete overlap between the subject
and the object. In the context of government and binding, most of the discus-
son revolved around situations of complete overlap, though it has been claimed
repeatedly that the same principles also explain the impossibility of partial
coreference. Partial coreference is mostly discussed for third person pronouns;
only incidentally examples of first or second person are being presented in the
binding literature.

In this article, we will question the claimed impossibility of partial argument
coreference for pronouns, with special emphasis on first and second person
pronouns. In Section 2 we will argue that partial overlap of arguments is not
impossible, but rather disfavored in actual conversation. Given the right con-
text, cases of partial argument coreference are perfectly possible. However,
there are various asymmetries in the acceptability of such sentences (i.e., some
contexts work better than others), and we will propose that these asymmetries
can be explained by frequency of occurrence. In Section 3 we will present a
few languages in which partial argument coreference is encoded by reflexive
constructions. This is particularly interesting from the perspective of binding
theory, which neither allows personal pronouns, nor reflexive pronouns to
express such meanings. Instead of neither-nor it appears to be an either-or
question.

In Section 4, we will turn to languages with inflectionally bound bipersonal
(i.e., bound subject and object) argument marking. In such languages partial
argument coreference indeed seems to be impossible. Apparently, somewhere
in the grammaticalization of independent pronouns into bound markers, combinations of arguments with partial coreference are blocked. In Section 5 we discuss a few examples with clitic pronouns, which are intermediary between free personal pronouns and inflectionally bound person marking. There are some indications that the status of partial argument coreference is likewise intermediate between the two poles, but more research is necessary on this point. Section 6 concludes the article.

As for our methodology, we basically have used our own linguistic intuitions for our argumentation in the case of various West-European languages. However, to corroborate our intuitions we tried to find written examples (mostly from the internet) of the kind of constructions that we expected to be possible. Of course, the existence of a particular construction on any random blog post is no strong evidence. However, all examples that we present also seem fine in our eyes. In effect, this amounts to extending our own personal intuitions with incidental uses from other people.

2. The impossible is possible

When thinking about sentences like *I like us*, the first important observation to be made is that conceptually there is nothing wrong with such situations. I can like myself, and I can like you, so why not express both these situations together as *I like us*? Also, syntactically there is nothing wrong with an English sentence as *I like us*, as least it is not more wrong than a sentence like *colorless green ideas sleep furiously* (Chomsky 1957: 15). Intuitively, there is definitively something odd about the sentence *I like us*, but it seems much too easy to simply proclaim ungrammaticality on the basis of this odd feeling.

A simple internet search immediately results in some examples of Postal’s claimed impossible sentences *I like us* and *we like me*. For example, in one particular internet forum there was a discussion about another forum, and then the following exchange took place, repeated here in (1):

(1) 〈Shadowman 235〉*I just read a thread on that forum, they don’t like us*

   . . . 〈Wifout Teef〉*I like us* :D

The usage of the “laugh”-smiley :D indicates that the user Wifout Teef realizes that he is saying something funny. Probably he also has something of an odd feeling writing down the sentence *I like us*. Still, such an example indicates that given the right context, users of English are perfectly able to produce such a sentence. Another example occurs in the comedy series *Friends* in which the character Chandler says:
We don't know Bob, ok? We know me. We like me. Please let me be happy.\(^6\)

Again, being in the context of a comedy like *Friends*, this is definitively intended to be funny, where part of the humor stems from saying something that is understandable, but somehow not completely right.

The central question is why a sentence like *I like us* feels wrong. As indicated in the introduction, various authors have blamed it on the fact that the arguments are partially overlapping. However, the context in which the overlap occurs also seems to be important. For example, consider the examples in (3) with the verb *prepare* and the examples in (4) with the verb *see*. All these example feel much more acceptable than the examples with *know*, indicating that given the right context, it is indeed possible to have partial argument overlap.\(^7\)

(3) a. *When I get motivated, I am going to prepare us a fabulous picnic.*\(^8\)
    b. *My best friend, Nikki, prayed a lot with me and we prepared me mentally.*\(^9\)

(4) a. *Every time I closed my eyes I saw us winning.*\(^10\)
    b. *We saw me on TV! Yeah! I couldn't bear to watch myself (most actors can't) but Mom said I did good.*\(^11\)

García Calvo (1973: 293–29), in the time before the World Wide Web, also searched for examples or partial overlapping reference. He found various examples in Spanish and French literature. In this first example, from Christiane Rochefort’s *Printemps au Parking*, the narrator tells how she was looking at herself and Thomas in a mirror:

(5) *En tout cas je nous voyais comme deux rois dans la glace, et je nous aimais, je ne vois pas de Malheur à le dire. Thomas aussi nous regardait . . .*\(^12\)

His second example comes from a Spanish translation of Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Capricorn*. In this story, the narrator evokes times past when he and his friend O’Rourke used to take a walk in the streets of New York saying:

(6) *Puedo volver a vernos, parados en medio de una calle a las cuatro de la mañana . . .*\(^13\)

Another example originates from a newspaper article by Henri Jeanson, which likewise describes a situation in the past that is remembered by the narrator:

(7) *En écrivant ces lignes, je revis notre dernière reencontré à Honfleur. [. . . ] Je nous revois à table.*\(^14\)
García Calvo concludes from these examples that partial overlap is possible, though only in particular circumstances. He claims that it is only possible if there is a temporal or visual dissociation between two different “versions” of the speaker. In the situation with the mirror there are in a sense two different speakers, the real one and the one in the mirror. In the examples evoking a past event there is likewise a difference between the speaker in the past and the speaker now. Although such an approach seems to make sense for the examples that García Calvo found, the examples discussed previously in (3) and (4) cannot be explained by dissociation between two different speakers. Apparently dissociation is not a crucial condition to make partial overlap grammatical.

Reinhart and Reuland (1993: 677) also note that the acceptability of partial argument coreference depends on the choice of examples; some cases are better than others. They claim that acceptable cases force a collective reading of the plural argument. They illustrate this claim with the unacceptability of (8a), arguing that voting is normally not collective, in contrast to the acceptability of (8b), because electing is normally a collective affair.

(8) a. *we voted for me
   b. we elected me

Now, it actually turns out to be easy to find examples alike to (8a), as shown in (9). Using a past form of the verb is not very common, but in the progressive (9c) it is particularly widespread. It is also possible to find examples of “each of us [Verb] me”, which forces a distributive reading, cf. (10). So, although we agree with Reinhart and Reuland that most examples of partial argument coreference have collective ‘we’ reference, this does not seem to be a necessary condition. Also note that overall most uses of ‘we’ in context have collective reference, so this also does not seem to be the crux of the issue.

(9) a. Connie informed me last time, after we voted for me to be a representative on that board, that there was another gentlemen who was supposed to have been listed.
   b. When we conjoined our band with Tom’s and Matt’s band, we voted for me to play keyboard.
   c. Sorry, was busy with important stuff, IRL, yesterday. So, any reason we are voting for me? I still don’t see the reason.

(10) a. I would like to create a document collating each of our projects to date. If each of us can provide me with a concise and pithy outline of your work . . .
   b. Each of us can focus attention on me or on you.

Rooryck (2006) revisits the impossibility of partial overlapping arguments with examples from French. He also notes that argument overlap is possible in
some cases, but he argues that partial overlap is only possible in situations with a singular subject and a plural object, a constraint that he calls syntactic asymmetry in disjoint reference (Rooryck 2006: 1563–1564, an intuition also described by García Calvo 1973, 1974). Rooryck substantiates his claim by giving the judgments repeated here in (11). However, it turns out not to be difficult to find examples of the apparently impossible expression (11a), as shown in (12). Also, we have already shown numerous examples of plural subject with singular object in the examples above. So, we do not agree that there is something principally wrong with plural subject and singular object, as far as partially overlapping arguments are concerned. Such cases seem to be somewhat less easy to find, but once a suitable context is found, they are perfectly possible.

(11) French (Romance, Indo-European)
   a. *Nous m’avez acheté des billets.
      ‘We have bought tickets for me’
   b. Je nous ai acheté des billets.
      ‘I have bought tickets for us’
      (Rooryck 2006)

(12) French (Romance, Indo-European)
   a. Et oui, nous m’avons acheté un blouson pour préparer l’hiver dit rude (−50°C).21
   b. Au passage, nous m’avons acheté une baguette magique.22

Rooryck also proposes a paradigmatic asymmetry, saying that partial overlap is only possible for first person, and not for second and third person. Indeed, all example that we have reviewed until now are in the first person. However, it is just as well possible to find examples in the second person. We found some good examples in German, which is particularly suited to find such examples because of the case system of the pronouns, and the clearly separate reflexive forms.23 The example in (13a) is written in the context of a speeding ticket. A speeding ticket is always sent to the owner of the car in Germany. However, when somebody else was driving, this other person could take up the responsibility and pay for the ticket. Apparently in this situation, the owner and the driver are not the same person, and they together wrote back to the police, indicating who the driver was. Then, when there turns out to be a legal problem later on, somebody else gives the two of them some advice, summarizing their action with sentence (13a). The context of (13b) is self-explanatory.

(13) German (Germanic, Indo-European)
   a. Ihr habt dich als Fahrer angegeben.24
   b. Er hat deinen Freund geschlagen. Und du hast euch verteidigt.25
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For third person it is even more difficult to find examples, because a phrase like ‘they [Verb] him’ is extremely common, but it almost always occurs with disjoint reference of ‘they’ and ‘him’. However, this does not mean that it is impossible to have partial overlap. For example, consider a choir listening to a recording of their concert. On the recording, they hear that one of the choir members, John, is singing out of tune. Retelling this event, the responsible audio engineer could then have said:

(14) They were all really upset when they heard him singing out of tune
— John himself most of all.

Regarding the phrase they heard him, there is a tendency to interpret the arguments as being disjoint, i.e., such that ‘him’ is not part of ‘they’. However, the addition John himself most of all shows that this tendency is a conversational implicature that can be cancelled, and not a necessary aspect of the meaning of the sentence (cf. Levinson 1987, 1991 for a more extensive proposal to use conversational implicatures to approach binding effects in language).

Summarizing, partial argument coreference is possible. There appear to be various asymmetries related to the acceptability of partial coreference, as summarized in (15). These asymmetries should be read as “the left side is more acceptable than the right side”. However, partial argument coreference is not restricted to the situations listed at the left side in (15). It is not restricted to constructions with a singular subject and plural object; it is not restricted to first person; it is not restricted to situations in which there is a dissociation the speaker in the present and in the past; and it is not restricted to collective reference of the plural argument. It seems to be easier to use overlapping constructions in these situations, but other contexts are not impossible. The asymmetry between direct and indirect object is also be added to this list, at least that is suggested by our personal intuitions (and the intuitions of B. Comrie, whom we thank for this suggestion). Somehow, it seems easier to find acceptable examples of partial argument coreference with indirect objects than with direct objects. However, the examples cited in this article contain very many examples in which a strict direct object is partially coreferential with the subject, e.g., (4), (5), (6), (7) and (14). So again, this asymmetry is not an absolute restriction, but a gradual acceptability issue.

(15) – singular subject + plural object >>> plural object + singular subject
– coreferent first person pronouns >>> coreferent non-first person pronouns
– collective interpretation of plural pronoun >>> distributive interpretation of plural pronoun
– time/space dissociation between referents of coreferent participant
>>> no dissociation between referents of coreferent participant
– indirect object >>> direct object
There is definitely something special about sentences with partial argument coreference. However, we propose the hypothesis that this is not a purely linguistic effect, but possibly a result of the very peculiar and unusual circumstances that are necessary in the real world for a sentence with partial argument coreference to be produced. So, these sentences feel “strange” or “unusual” to a speaker because the situations they describe are very infrequent. As the situations are infrequent, so are their linguistic expressions.

Frequency might also account for the intuitive asymmetries for the acceptability of sentences with partial argument coreference. In general, first person subjects are more common than second person subject. Further, sentences with singular subject and plural object seem to be more frequent than sentences with plural subject and singular object. Likewise, the collective interpretation of ‘we’ is probably more common overall than the distributive reading. Finally, situation in the real world in which there is partial argument coreference seem to be more “natural” when there is dissociation between different kinds of ‘I’ or ‘you’. All the asymmetries proposed in the literature are thus not specific for sentences with partial argument coreference, but might be simply a side-effect of more general frequency effects.

3. Reflexive constructions

In the literature on binding theory it has always been argued that partial argument coreference can neither be expressed by a personal pronoun, nor by a reflexive construction. We have argued above that it actually is possible to express such meaning by using a personal pronoun in English, Spanish, French and German. In contrast, the examples from Even in (16) and the Lezgian example in (17) show that some languages express such meaning using a reflexive construction.

In the Tungusic language Even (D. Matić, p.c.), it is not possible to express meanings like ‘I bought us coats’ by using regular object pronouns, as shown in (16a) and (16b). However, partial argument overlap can be expressed by using a reflexive construction, as shown in (16c), but only in the singular subject-plural object constellation. The reversed situation, with a plural subject and a singular object, is rejected by the speakers consulted.

Even (Tungusic, D. Matić, p.c.)

(a) *Bi: mundu teti:-ge-wun ha:rat-ți-w
    1sg.pron 1excl.pron.dat coat-design-poss-1excl buy-past-1sg
(b) *Bi: muttu teti:-ge-t ha:rat-ți-w
    1sg.pron 1incl.pron.dat coat-design-poss-1incl buy-past-1sg
(c) Bi: me:rdur teti:-ge-wur ha:rat-ți-w
    1sg.pron refl.dat.pl coat-design-poss.refl.pl buy-past-1sg

‘I bought us coats (for me and the others).’
A similar situation is attested in the Nakh-Dagestanian language Lezgian (Haspelmath 1993: 414), as shown in (17). This example has a slightly different structure as all others discussed until now, because the partial overlap is between the subject (Mizafer) and a possessive pronoun (‘their’). However, the relevance of this example for the current discussion lies in the fact that it is possible in Lezgian to explicitly indicate that Mizafer is part of the group referred to by ‘their’ by using a reflexive pronoun. So, the reflexive pronouns signals partial argument coreference, while the normal personal pronoun would lead to a strict disjoint interpretation.

(17) Lezgian (Nakh-Dagestanian)

\[
\text{Mizafer čpi-n k'wal.i-z ata-j-la . . .}
\]

NAME 3PL.REFL-GEN house-DAT come-AOR-CONV

‘When Mizafer came to their house . . . (i.e., the house belonging to him and others)’

(Haspelmath 1993: 414)

Although we currently know of only two of such examples, these two cases indicate that some languages can express partial argument coreference by using a reflexive construction. So instead of a universal neither-nor situation (i.e., partial argument coreference can neither be marked by personal pronouns, nor by reflexive pronouns, as claimed by binding theory), there seems to be a typological either-or parameter for the coding of partial argument coreference (i.e., either by personal pronouns or by a reflexive construction).

### 4. Bipersonal inflection

In the previous sections, we have argued that there is linguistically nothing wrong with partial argument coreference, using examples from English, French, German, Spanish, Even, and Lezgian. However, for other languages the situation appears to be different. In particular, languages that have both subject and object person reference marked inflectionally on the verb (i.e., languages with bipersonal inflection) do not seem to allow such constructions at all (when using a bipersonally marked verb). In the original observation from Postal (1966), as quoted at the start of this article, he spoke of partial argument coreference being impossible for both Mohawk and English. While we think his claim does not hold for English, the situation is possibly different with regard to Mohawk. Mohawk has bipersonal person inflection on the verb, and it seems to be the case that partial argument coreference is indeed impossible in languages using such structures.

Another language having bipersonal person marking is Basque. Hualde and Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 624) note that in Basque the following sentence is ungrammatical.
The “auxiliary” in Basque includes marking of tense and referential indices for both subject and object arguments. The form *gaitut is actually a made-up example consisting of the morphemes gait- ‘1pl.obj’, -u- ‘root’ and -t ‘1sg. subj.pres’. Although all these morphemes exist, this combination is ungrammatical. The central question now is whether this claimed ungrammaticality is alike to the many claims of ungrammaticality for English, in that it is just unusual, but not impossible (as argued in Section 2), or whether the ungrammaticality in Basque has a different status.

One of us (JFL), being a native speaker of both Basque and Spanish, can compare intuitions across these two languages. His intuitions clearly favor a different status for the following constructions (19) through (22) between Spanish (a) and Basque (b). Although the Spanish examples feel a bit strange, they are perfectly possible. In contrast, the Basque equivalences are completely wrong. They sound like somebody speaking Basque on the basis of the paradigms from a grammatical description and extrapolating the existence of these forms from the lists of possible affixes. For completeness sake, we give examples for both first and second person, and for both singular subject on plural object and plural subject on singular object.

(19) a. nos compr-é unos helados27
   1pl.pron buy-1sg.past some ice cream
   b. *izozki-ak erosi n-i-gu-n
      ice cream-pl.abs buy 1sg.subj-root-1pl.obj-past
      ‘I bought us some ice cream.’

(20) a. a mí me exclui-mos de la
   prep 1sg.pron.obl 1sg.pron.obj exclude-1pl from the
   expedición
   b. *txango-tik barztertzen na-u-gu
      excursion-abl exclude 1sg.obj-root-1pl.subj.pres
      ‘We exclude me from the excursion.’

(21) a. os compra-ste helados
   2pl.pron buy-2sg.past ice cream
   b. *izozki-ak erosi zen-i-zki-zue-n
      ice cream-pl.abs buy 2sg.subj-root-2pl.obj-2pl.iobj-past
      ‘You (sg.) bought you (pl.) some ice cream.’
(22) a. te va-is a retratar on el jardín
   2SG.PRON go-2PL PREP photograph in the garden
b. *lorategi-an errertratu-ko zaitu-zue
garden-loc photograph-FUT 2SG.OBJ-2PL.SUBJ
   ‘You (pl) are going to photograph you (sg) in the garden.’

Although it is clearly ungrammatical to use the word gaitut in Basque, speakers of Basque do have the intuition to make up this form. For example, we found the following usage of this word as it was written down by a native speaker of Basque (23): ‘I remember us in Etxarri’. However, this sentence is immediately followed by ‘and I do not care that Euskaltzaidia [i.e., the academy of the Basque language, MC & JFL] does not accept my memory, I remember us, me and you, in Etxarri.’ This author is clearly making fun of the ungrammaticality, somewhat in the spirit of the jocular usage in (1) and (2).

(23) Etxarri-n oroitzen gait-u-t
    Etxarri-LOC remember 1PL.OBJ-ROOT-1SG.SUBJ
   ‘I remember us in Etxarri.’

It is also not possible in Basque to use a reflexive construction to express partial argument coreference, like attested in Even or in Lezgian. As shown in (24a) and (24b), regular reflexives agree in number with the subject. A mismatch between the two, as shown in (24c), leads to ungrammaticality. Summarizing, the only option in Basque to describe a situation with partial argument overlap is to use a circumlocution. There is no direct translation of ‘I see us’.

(24) a. ni-k isiplu-a-n neure burua ikusten
    1SG-ERG mirror-DET-LOC 1SG.REFL head see
d-u-t
    3SG.OBJ-ROOT-1SG.SUBJ.PRES
   ‘I see myself in mirror.’
b. gu-k isiplu-a-n geure burua ikusten
    1SG-ERG mirror-DET-LOC 1PL.REFL head see
d-u-gu
    3SG.OBJ-ROOT-1PL.SUBJ.PRES
   ‘We see ourselves in the mirror.’
c. *ni-k isiplu-a-n geure burua ikusten
    1SG-ERG mirror-DET-LOC 1PL.REFL head see
d-u-t
    3SG.OBJ-ROOT-1SG.SUBJ.PRES
   ‘I see us in the mirror.’
Another explicit description of the impossibility of partial argument coreference is given for the Sino-Tibetan languages Belhare by Bickel (1994: 102). This situation appears to be the normal structure for languages that have bipersonal inflectional person marking. In all descriptions of bipersonal paradigms that we are aware of, the descriptions simply omit any mention of the marking of situations with partial overlapping arguments. Just to name a few randomly chosen examples of languages with bipersonal marking, this situation is attested in Tennet ([Surmic] Randal 1998: 231), Dumi ([Sino-Tibetan] van Dreim 1993: 99), Yimas ([Lower Sepik] Foley 1991: 200), Apalai ([Carib] Koehn and Koehn 1986: 108), and Bunuba ([Bunaban] Rumsey 2000: 84). In all these descriptions there is no discussion of what would happen in contexts of partial overlap. It might be the case that a reflexive construction can be used (like in Even or in Lezgian), or that that possibility is also absent (like in Basque), but at least the “regular” transitive bipersonal person marking cannot be used to express such meanings.

It is important to realize that in most cases of bipersonal marking the actual morphemes are opaque to the speakers. Sometimes linguists (or linguistically naive, but intuitively sophisticated speakers) will be able to recognize parts of such bipersonal affixes as showing some remnant of earlier separatistic marking, but mostly such affixes are simply non-transparent. This opaqueness implies that most speakers will not be able to make up any affixes for the special situations of partial coreference. As long as the formulation of partial coreference only needs the creative combination of two existing clearly separate morphemes, this situation can be expressed (be it with a slightly eerie feeling as in the languages discussed earlier in the article). However, as soon as there are no morphemes to be combined (because the paradigmatic structure has become opaque), even this possibility is lost, and the expression of partial coreference becomes really ungrammatical (instead of just unusual).

As an explanation for the apparent impossibility of partial argument coreference in bound bipersonal marking we propose that this might be an effect of grammaticalization. The slightly awkward status of such constructions when using independent pronouns blocks their full-fledged grammaticalization into bound marking. To investigate this diachronic hypothesis further, we looked into intermediate stages of the grammaticalization of pronouns into bound person marking.

5. Clitics

If partial overlap is possible for free pronouns, but not for bipersonal inflectional marking, then we would expect that the behavior of languages with clitic pronouns should be somewhere in between. Indeed, Corver and Delfitto (1999:
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853, Note 30) claim that for Italian the version with a stressed postponed object pronoun *noi amiamo me* is better than the version with a clitic preposed object pronoun *noi mi apprezziamo*.29 We cannot judge the status of the Italian examples ourselves, but for other Spanish and Dutch clitics we cannot replicate this difference.30 As shown in (25) for Dutch, both the tonic pronoun *mij* in (25a) and the clitic-like pronoun *me* in (25b) are fine, and as shown in (26) for Spanish, both the free preposed pronoun (a) and the clitic postponed pronoun (b) are fine. Just to repeat the point made in Section 2 above: we also have slightly eerie feeling about these examples, but this impression is far from resulting in ungrammaticality. Example (27) shows a few more examples of regular (a) and clitic (b) pronouns in Spanish. Concerning the difference between the tonic and the clitic version, we actually tend to prefer the clitic variants (b) in both these languages, contrary to the expectation (though this intuition is not unequivocally shared among fellow native speakers we have consulted). We think that this preference for the clitic pronoun is due to the more colloquial sound of such examples, alleviating the slightly strange feeling that still comes with such examples.

(25) Dutch (Germanic, Indo-European)
   a. *We zijn mij dan gaan inschrijven in de highschool!*31
   b. *We hebben me hier eerst aangemeld, en zijn daarna omdat we nog zoveel tijd overhadden naar de dolfinenshow wezen kijken!*32

(26) Spanish (Romance, Indo-European)
   a. *me vamos a matricular*
   b. *vamos a matricularme*

(27) a. *A fin de mes le pagan a mi viejo y me vamos a comprar el PC.*33
   b. *Mira, vamos a comprarme unos calcetines que tengo frío en los pies, y luego tomamos un Taxi.*34

For Serbo-Croatian there might be an asymmetry of acceptability in the expected direction.35 As shown in (28), both the full pronoun and the clitic pronoun are equally acceptable for the plural object of the sentence ‘I bought us something’, alike to the situation in Spanish and Dutch described previously. However, in the reversed situation with a plural subject and singular object, as shown in (29), the usage of a clitic object pronoun (29b) is judged as being “weird” (though not necessarily ungrammatical). The disfavored status of the example in (29b) can be analyzed as an effect of the combination of two factors that reduce the acceptability of partial argument coreference. Both the situation with a plural subject and a singular object and the usage of an object clitic results in a dispreference for this example. Alone, neither of these factors are sufficient to lead to question the possibility of partial argument coreference, as
shown by examples (28b) and (29a). Only the combination of the two factors leads to the dispreferred status.

Serbo-Croatian (Slavic, Indo-European)

(28) a. kupio sam kaput nama
   bought AUX.1SG coat.ACC 1PL.PRON
   ‘I bought us coats.’
   b. kupio sam nam kaput
   bought AUX.1SG 1PL.CLIT coat.ACC
   ‘I bought us coats.’

(29) a. mi volimo mene
   1PL.PRON like.1PL 1SG.PRON
   ‘We like me.’
   b. ?mi me volimo
   1PL.PRON 1SG.CLIT like.1PL
   ‘We like me.’
   (D. Matić, p.c.)

What seems to be going on is that at some point on a grammaticalization-cline from independent pronouns to bipersonal person marking, as illustrated in (30), the mere “slightly awkward” status of partial argument coreference turns into complete impossibility. Languages might differ with regard to how acceptability is aligned with this scale of grammaticalization. However, with pronouns it is generally possible to express such meaning; with clitics it starts to become more difficult. With separatistic bipersonal inflection (i.e., subject/object inflectional marking in which the subject and the object element are separable) speakers are often still able to “make up” and interpret the forms (like in Basque), but their acceptability becomes worse. We expect that languages in which the internal structure of bipersonal marking has become completely opaque (i.e., with cumulative/portmanteau bipersonal marking) speakers will not even have a clue as how to “make up” such forms.

(30) independent pronouns → person marking clitics
    → separatistic bipersonal inflection
    → cumulative (“portmanteau”) bipersonal inflection

6. Conclusion

Given the impact that Paul Postal’s original observation has had on the grammatical literature in recent decades (as witnessed by its prodigy, Binding Prin-
On the (im)possibility of partial argument coreference

On the (im)possibility of partial argument coreference, it is astonishing that the apparent impossibility of partial argument coreference has not been discussed more widespread. Although we are still far from having resolved this question once and for all, it seems clear that it is wrong to simply dismiss expression with partial argument coreference as being impossible. It is clearly possible to use such constructions in various languages (English being among them), although there is definitively something peculiar about such examples. Even Chomsky (1973: 241) originally used the term "strangeness" to refer to such expressions, not "ungrammaticality".

We propose that the reason for this "strangeness" is the strongly constrained setting in the real world that is necessary to evoke expressions with partial argument coreference. This leads to a very low frequency, coupled with uncertainty about their well-formedness among speakers (who are still perfectly able to produce such expression given a suitable situation). Only in case of extreme grammaticalization of subject and object pronouns, in the form of languages with portmanteau bipersonal inflection, it seems indeed to become impossible for speakers to even produce partial argument coreference. The number of suitable situations were simply too few for such expression to take part in the grammaticalization process. However, the way to express situations with partial argument coreference in languages with portmanteau bipersonal inflection is still only rather limitedly described in the literature, and more in-depth investigations of this topic in such languages is dearly needed.

Received 21 April 2011
Revised version received 27 Sep 2011

Notes

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3. Around the same time in Spain, Agustín García Calvo discusses the same observations much more extensively, though without much impact outside of the Spanish-speaking scientific community (García Calvo 1973: 269–302; García Calvo 1974).
4. MC is a native speaker of Dutch and German, and near native in English. JFL is a native speaker of Basque and Spanish, and fluent in French.
7. They is a clear syntactic difference between the examples in (3) and (4). In (3), the partial coreference is between the subject and the recipient of a ditransitive construction, while in (4) the coreference is between the subject and the theme of a monotransitive construction. Throughout this article, we will not distinguish between these two situations. When we use the term “object”, we will generally imply both themes of monotransitives and recipients of ditransitives.


11. Attested on [http://www.indypaws.com/post/index/16862]. See also “In five minutes we have to remember to look for this moment when we saw me moving my head slightly.” as attested on [http://www.nat.org/blog/?m=200510], both pages accessed 25 August 2008.


14. “While writing these lines, I remembered our last meeting at Honfleur. [. . . ] I saw us again sitting at the table.” (translation MC & JFL), as attested in an article by Henri Jean推广 published in Canard Enchaîné 2611 (1970: 1).

15. The arguments in the examples in (9a) and (9b) are not necessarily directly co-arguments of the verb vote, depending on the details of the syntactic analysis of the sentence. Sentence (9a) seems best analysed as “we voted for [I BE representative]” (we thank B. Comrie for pointing this out). A more restrictive search revealed a strict example of we voted for me with both pronouns being co-arguments of the verb, though again this attestation is followed by a smiley, indicating that the author acknowledges the strangeness of the construction or situation (example attested on [http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2435363078], accessed on 25 September 2009).


20. This example is attested in a philosophical article on the concept of mind (Scott 1971: 30).
21. “And further, we have bought a blouse for me to prepare for the heavy winter (−50°C)” (translation MC & JFL), as attested on (http://www.lutece-milwaukee.com/article-13568874-6.html), accessed on 25 August 2008.


23. In Spanish it should also be possible to find examples, weren’t it for the fact that in Argentinean Spanish the originally second person plural form of the verbal inflection is used for singular reference. All Spanish examples with second person plural inflection and second person singular object pronouns that we looked at turned out to be Argentinean Spanish reflexives.

24. “You both have indicated you (sg.) as the driver.” (translation MC & JFL), as attested on (http://www.car2.de/2008/06/21/verstaendnisfrage/), accessed on 25 August 2008.


26. The translation of (16), as provided by Hualde and Ortiz de Urbina (2003) is not correct. It should be in the present, not in the past.

27. See also the example “Llegamos tarde poco después de las 6pm así que no pudimos entrar. En su lugar nos compré helados de un vendedor cerca, solo $10 (0.70 euros) cada uno.” as attested on (http://www.brit-journal.com/fmw1/1741/The+Weekend.html), accessed on 27 August 2008.


29. Why Corver and Delfitto change the verb in these example is unclear to us. As we have argued in Section 2, the choice of verb can have a strong influence on the acceptability of these constructions. So, to make a strong argument the lexical choice has to be kept constant.

30. See also the French examples in (11) and (12).


32. “We first enrolled me here, and then we went to watch the dolphin show, because we had so much time left.” (translation MC & JFL). Attested on (http://marliekenaarcura.waarbenjij.nu/reisverhalen/marliekenaarcura/Nederlandse+Antillen/32e+dag/?&module=site&page=message&id=2540962), accessed on 27 August 2008.


35. Based on the intuitions of the native speaker D. Matic in personal communication with the current authors.

36. An example of exactly this sentence is attested on (http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=285736647), accessed on 14 October 2008: “Mislim da imam više lichnosti (mi me volimo = D) i da se prilagodjavam svemu zadrzavajući neko svoje misljenje.” (I think that I have two personalities (we love me = D) and I adjust to everything by holding on to my opinion). Again note the smiley that is added, which indicates that the author of this phrase realizes that there is something comically about saying “we love me” (cf. examples 1, 2, and 23).
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