

On the (im)possibility of partial argument coreference¹

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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])²

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,

1 arguing that “the distribution of pairs of NP in certain sentence types is greatly
 2 restricted if these are coreferential” (Postal 1969: 418). Although these publi-
 3 cations show some incipient interest in this topic, the kind of publications do
 4 not bade well for any follow-up research. But, to the contrary, these observa-
 5 tions had a tremendous impact in linguistics for decades to come. Again a few
 6 years later, Chomsky (1973: 241) followed Postal’s analysis under the name of
 7 the “Unlike Person Constraint”.³

8 The point seems to be that a rule of interpretation (RI) applying to the struc-
 9 ture NP-V-NP (among others) seeks to interpret the NPs as nonintersecting in
 10 reference, and where this is impossible (as in the case of first and second per-
 11 son pronouns), it assigns “strangeness”, marking the sentence with *. (Chomsky
 12 1973: 241)

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

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

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

40 In Section 4, we will turn to languages with inflectionally bound bipersonal
 41 (i.e., bound subject and object) argument marking. In such languages partial
 42 argument coreference indeed seems to be impossible. Apparently, somewhere

1 in the grammaticalization of independent pronouns into bound markers, com-
 2 binations of arguments with partial coreference are blocked. In Section 5 we
 3 discuss a few examples with clitic pronouns, which are intermediary between
 4 free personal pronouns and inflectionally bound person marking. There are
 5 some indications that the status of partial argument coreference is likewise
 6 intermediate between the two poles, but more research is necessary on this
 7 point. Section 6 concludes the article.

8 As for our methodology, we basically have used our own linguistic intu-
 9 tions for our argumentation in the case of various West-European languages.⁴
 10 However, to corroborate our intuitions we tried to find written examples
 11 (mostly from the internet) of the kind of constructions that we expected to be
 12 possible. Of course, the existence of a particular construction on any random
 13 blog post is no strong evidence. However, all examples that we present also
 14 seem fine in our eyes. In effect, this amounts to extending our own personal
 15 intuitions with incidental uses from other people.

16
 17
 18 **2. The impossible is possible**
 19

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

28 A simple internet search immediately results in some examples of Postal's
 29 claimed impossible sentences *I like us* and *we like me*. For example, in one
 30 particular internet forum there was a discussion about another forum, and then
 31 the following exchange took place, repeated here in (1):
 32

- 33 (1) <Shadowman 235> *I just read a thread on that forum, they don't like us*
 34 ...
 35 <Wifout Teef> *I like us. :D*⁵
 36

37 The usage of the “laugh”-smiley :D indicates that the user Wifout Teef realizes
 38 that he is saying something funny. Probably he also has something of an odd
 39 feeling writing down the sentence *I like us*. Still, such an example indicates
 40 that given the right context, users of English are perfectly able to produce such
 41 a sentence. Another example occurs in the comedy series *Friends* in which the
 42 character Chandler says:

- 1 (2) *We don't know Bob, ok? **We know me. We like me.** Please let me be*
 2 *happy.*⁶

3
 4 Again, being in the context of a comedy like *Friends*, this is definitively
 5 intended to be funny, where part of the humor stems from saying something
 6 that is understandable, but somehow not completely right.

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

- 15 (3) a. *When I get motivated, **I am going to prepare us** a fabulous picnic.*⁸
 16 b. *My best friend, Nikki, prayed a lot with me and **we prepared me***
 17 *mentally.*⁹
 18
 19 (4) a. *Every time I closed my eyes **I saw us** winning.*¹⁰
 20 b. ***We saw me** on TV! Yeah! I couldn't bear to watch myself (most*
 21 *actors can't) but Mom said I did good.*¹¹

22
 23 García Calvo (1973: 293–29), in the time before the World Wide Web, also
 24 searched for examples of partial overlapping reference. He found various
 25 examples in Spanish and French literature. In this first example, from Christiane
 26 Rochefort's *Printemps au Parking*, the narrator tells how she was looking
 27 at herself and Thomas in a mirror:

- 28 (5) *En tout cas **je nous voyais** comme deux rois dans la glace, et **je nous***
 29 ***amais, je ne vois pas de Malheur à le dire.** Thomas aussi nous regardait*
 30 *...*¹²

31
 32 His second example comes from a Spanish translation of Henry Miller's *Tropic*
 33 *of Capricorn*. In this story, the narrator evokes times past when he and his
 34 friend O'Rourke used to take a walk in the streets of New York saying:

- 35
 36 (6) ***Puedo volver a vernos, parados en medio de una calle a las cuatro de***
 37 ***la mañana** . . .*¹³

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

- 40
 41 (7) *En écrivant ces lignes, je revis notre dernière reencontré à Honfleur.*
 42 *[. . .] **Je nous revois** à table.*¹⁴

1 García Calvo concludes from these examples that partial overlap is possible,
 2 though only in particular circumstances. He claims that it is only possible if
 3 there is a temporal or visual dissociation between two different “versions” of
 4 the speaker. In the situation with the mirror there are in a sense two different
 5 speakers, the real one and the one in the mirror. In the examples evoking a past
 6 event there is likewise a difference between the speaker in the past and the
 7 speaker now. Although such an approach seems to make sense for the exam-
 8 ples that García Calvo found, the examples discussed previously in (3) and (4)
 9 cannot be explained by dissociation between two different speakers. Apparently
 10 dissociation is not a crucial condition to make partial overlap grammatical.

11 Reinhart and Reuland (1993: 677) also note that the acceptability of partial
 12 argument coreference depends on the choice of examples; some cases are bet-
 13 ter than others. They claim that acceptable cases force a collective reading of
 14 the plural argument. They illustrate this claim with the unacceptability of (8a),
 15 arguing that *voting* is normally not collective, in contrast to the acceptability of
 16 (8b), because *electing* is normally a collective affair.

- 17 (8) a. **we voted for me*
 18 b. *we elected me*
 19

20 Now, it actually turns out to be easy to find examples alike to (8a), as shown in
 21 (9). Using a past form of the verb is not very common, but in the progressive
 22 (9c) it is particularly widespread.¹⁵ It is also possible to find examples of “each
 23 of us [Verb] me”, which forces a distributive reading, cf. (10). So, although we
 24 agree with Reinhart and Reuland that most examples of partial argument core-
 25 ference have collective ‘we’ reference, this does not seem to be a necessary
 26 condition. Also note that overall most uses of ‘we’ in context have collective
 27 reference, so this also does not seem to be the crux of the issue.

- 28 (9) a. *Connie informed me last time, after **we voted for me** to be a*
 29 *representative on that board, that there was another gentlemen*
 30 *who was supposed to have been listed.*¹⁶
 31 b. *When we conjoined our band with Tom’s and Matt’s band, **we***
 32 ***voted for me** to play keyboard.*¹⁷
 33 c. *Sorry, was busy with important stuff, IRL, yesterday. So, any*
 34 *reason **we are voting for me**? I still don’t see the reason.*¹⁸
 35 (10) a. *I would like to create a document collating each of our projects to*
 36 *date. If **each of us can provide me** with a concise and pithy*
 37 *outline of your work . . .*¹⁹
 38 b. ***Each of us can focus attention on me** or on you.*²⁰
 39
 40

41 Rooryck (2006) revisits the impossibility of partial overlapping arguments
 42 with examples from French. He also notes that argument overlap is possible in

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

13
 14 (11) French (Romance, Indo-European)

- 15 a. **Nous m'avons acheté des billets.*
 16 'We have bought tickets for me'
 17 b. *Je nous ai acheté des billets.*
 18 'I have bought tickets for us'
 19 (Rooryck 2006)

20
 21 (12) French (Romance, Indo-European)

- 22 a. *Et oui, nous m'avons acheté un blouson pour préparer l'hivers dit*
 23 *rude (-50°C).*²¹
 24 b. *Au passage, nous m'avons acheté une baguette magique.*²²

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

39
 40 (13) German (Germanic, Indo-European)

- 41 a. *Ihr habt dich als Fahrer angegeben.*²⁴
 42 b. *Er hat deinen Freund geschlagen. Und du hast euch verteidigt.*²⁵

1 For third person it is even more difficult to find examples, because a phrase like
 2 ‘they [Verb] him’ is extremely common, but it almost always occurs with
 3 disjoint reference of ‘they’ and ‘him’. However, this does not mean that it is
 4 impossible to have partial overlap. For example, consider a choir listening to a
 5 recording of their concert. On the recording, they hear that one of the choir
 6 members, John, is singing out of tune. Retelling this event, the responsible
 7 audio engineer could then have said:

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

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

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

- 34
 35 (15) – singular subject + plural object >>> plural object + singular subject
 36 – coreferent first person pronouns >>> coreferent non-first person
 37 pronouns
 38 – collective interpretation of plural pronoun >>> distributive
 39 interpretation of plural pronoun
 40 – time/space dissociation between referents of coreferent participant
 41 >>> no dissociation between referents of coreferent participant
 42 – indirect object >>> direct object

1 There is definitively something special about sentences with partial argument
 2 coreference. However, we propose the hypothesis that this is not a purely lin-
 3 guistic effect, but possibly a result of the very peculiar and unusual circum-
 4 stances that are necessary in the real world for a sentence with partial argument
 5 coreference to be produced. So, these sentences feel “strange” or “unusual” to
 6 a speaker because the situations they describe are very infrequent. As the situ-
 7 ations are infrequent, so are their linguistic expressions.

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

20 3. Reflexive constructions

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

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

35 Even (Tungusic, D. Matić, p.c.)

- 36 (16) a. **Bi:* *mundu* *teti:-ge-wun* *ha:rat-tj-w*
 37 1SG.PRON 1EXCL.PRON.DAT coat-DESIG-POSS-1EXCL buy-PAST-1SG
 38 b. **Bi:* *muttu* *teti:-ge-t* *ha:rat-tj-w*
 39 1SG.PRON 1INCL.PRON.DAT coat-DESIG-POSS-1INCL buy-PAST-1SG
 40 c. *Bi:* *me:rdur* *teti:-ge-wur* *ha:rat-tj-w*
 41 1SG.PRON REFL.DAT.PL coat-DESIG-POSS.REFL.PL buy-PAST-1SG
 42 ‘I bought us coats (for me and the others).’

1 A similar situation is attested in the Nakh-Dagestanian language Lezgian
 2 (Haspelmath 1993: 414), as shown in (17). This example has a slightly differ-
 3 ent structure as all others discussed until now, because the partial overlap is
 4 between the subject (*Mizafer*) and a possessive pronoun ('their'). However, the
 5 relevance of this example for the current discussion lies in the fact that it is
 6 possible in Lezgian to explicitly indicate that *Mizafer* is part of the group
 7 referred to by 'their' by using a reflexive pronoun. So, the reflexive pronouns
 8 signals partial argument coreference, while the normal personal pronoun would
 9 lead to a strict disjoint interpretation.

- 10 (17) Lezgian (Nakh-Dagestanian)
 11 *Mizafer čpi-n k'wal.i-z ata-j-la . . .*
 12 NAME 3PL.REFL-GEN house-DAT come-AOR-CONV
 13 'When Mizafer came to their house . . . (i.e., the house belonging to
 14 him and others)'
 15 (Haspelmath 1993: 414)

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

24
 25 **4. Bipersonal inflection**

26
 27 In the previous sections, we have argued that there is linguistically nothing
 28 wrong with partial argument coreference, using examples from English,
 29 French, German, Spanish, Even, and Lezgian. However, for other languages
 30 the situation appears to be different. In particular, languages that have both
 31 subject and object person reference marked inflectionally on the verb (i.e., lan-
 32 guages with BIPERSONAL inflection) do not seem to allow such constructions at
 33 all (when using a bipersonally marked verb). In the original observation from
 34 Postal (1966), as quoted at the start of this article, he spoke of partial argument
 35 coreference being impossible for both Mohawk and English. While we think
 36 his claim does not hold for English, the situation is possibly different with
 37 regard to Mohawk. Mohawk has bipersonal person inflection on the verb, and
 38 it seems to be the case that partial argument coreference is indeed impossible
 39 in languages using such structures.

40 Another language having bipersonal person marking is Basque. Hualde and
 41 Ortiz de Urbina (2003: 624) note that in Basque the following sentence is
 42 ungrammatical.

1 (18) Basque

2 **gu aipatu gaitut*

3 we mention AUX

4 'I mentioned us.'²⁶

5 (Hualde and Ortiz de Urbina 2003: 624)

6 The "auxiliary" in Basque includes marking of tense and referential indices for
 7 both subject and object arguments. The form *gaitut* is actually a made-up
 8 example consisting of the morphemes *gait-* '1PL.OBJ', *-u-* 'ROOT' and *-t* '1SG.
 9 SUBJ.PRES'. Although all these morphemes exist, this combination is ungram-
 10 matical. The central question now is whether this claimed ungrammaticality is
 11 alike to the many claims of ungrammaticality for English, in that it is just
 12 unusual, but not impossible (as argued in Section 2), or whether the ungram-
 13 maticity in Basque has a different status.

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

25 (19) a. *nos compr-é unos helados*²⁷

26 1PL.PRON buy-1SG.PAST some ice cream

27 b. **izozki-ak erosi n-i-gu-n*

28 ice cream-PL.ABS buy 1SG.SUBJ-ROOT-1PL.OBJ-PAST

29 'I bought us some ice cream.'

30 (20) a. *a mí me exclui-mos de la*

31 PREP 1SG.PRON.OBL 1SG.PRON.OBJ exclude-1PL from the

32 *expedición*

33 excursion

34 b. **txango-tik barzterzen na-u-gu*

35 excursion-ABL exclude 1SG.OBJ-ROOT-1PL.SUBJ.PRES

36 'We exclude me from the excursion.'

37 (21) a. *os compra-ste helados*

38 2PL.PRON buy-2SG.PAST ice cream

39 b. **izozki-ak erosi zen-i-zki-zue-n*

40 ice cream-PL.ABS buy 2SG.SUBJ-ROOT-PL.OBJ-2PL.IOBJ-PAST

41 'You (sg.) bought you (pl.) some ice cream.'

- 1 (22) a. *te va-is a retratar en el jardín*
 2 2SG.PRON go-2PL PREP photograph in the garden
 3 b. **lorategi-an erretratatu-ko zaitu-zue*
 4 garden-LOC photograph-FUT 2SG.OBJ-2PL.SUBJ
 5 ‘You (pl) are going to photograph you (sg) in the garden.’
 6

7 Although it is clearly ungrammatical to use the word *gaitut* in Basque, speakers
 8 of Basque do have the intuition to make up this form. For example, we found
 9 the following usage of this word as it was written down by a native speaker of
 10 Basque (23): ‘I remember us in Etxarri’. However, this sentence is immedi-
 11 ately followed by ‘and I do not care that Euskaltzaidia [i.e., the academy of the
 12 Basque language, MC & JFL] does not accept my memory, I remember us, me
 13 and you, in Etxarri.’ This author is clearly making fun of the ungrammaticality,
 14 somewhat in the spirit of the jocular usage in (1) and (2).
 15

- 16 (23) *Etxarri-n oroitzen gait-u-t*²⁸
 17 Etxarri-LOC remember 1PL.OBJ-ROOT-1SG.SUBJ
 18 ‘I remember us in Etxarri.’
 19

20 It is also not possible in Basque to use a reflexive construction to express par-
 21 tial argument coreference, like attested in Even or in Lezgian. As shown in
 22 (24a) and (24b), regular reflexives agree in number with the subject. A mis-
 23 match between the two, as shown in (24c), leads to ungrammaticality. Sum-
 24 marizing, the only option in Basque to describe a situation with partial argu-
 25 ment overlap is to use a circumlocution. There is no direct translation of ‘I see
 26 us’.
 27

- 28 (24) a. *ni-k ispilu-a-n neure burua ikusten*
 29 1SG-ERG mirror-DET-LOC 1SG.REFL head see
 30 *d-u-t*
 31 3SG.OBJ-ROOT-1SG.SUBJ.PRES
 32 ‘I see myself in mirror.’
 33 b. *gu-k ispilu-a-n geure burua ikusten*
 34 1SG-ERG mirror-DET-LOC 1PL.REFL head see
 35 *d-u-gu*
 36 3SG.OBJ-ROOT-1PL.SUBJ.PRES
 37 ‘We see ourselves in the mirror.’
 38 c. **ni-k ispilu-a-n geure burua ikusten*
 39 1SG-ERG mirror-DET-LOC 1PL.REFL head see
 40 *d-u-t*
 41 3SG.OBJ-ROOT-1SG.SUBJ.PRES
 42 ‘I see us in the mirror.’

1 Another explicit description of the impossibility of partial argument corefer-
 2 ence is given for the Sino-Tibetan languages Belhare by Bickel (1994: 102).
 3 This situation appears to be the normal structure for languages that have bipersonal
 4 inflectional person marking. In all descriptions of bipersonal paradigms
 5 that we are aware of, the descriptions simply omit any mention of the marking
 6 of situations with partial overlapping arguments. Just to name a few randomly
 7 chosen examples of languages with bipersonal marking, this situation is
 8 attested in Tenneset ([Surmic] Randal 1998: 231), Dumi ([Sino-Tibetan] van
 9 Driem 1993: 99), Yimas ([Lower Sepik] Foley 1991: 200), Apalai ([Carib]
 10 Koehn and Koehn 1986: 108), and Bunuba ([Bunaban] Rumsey 2000: 84). In
 11 all these descriptions there is no discussion of what would happen in contexts
 12 of partial overlap. It might be the case that a reflexive construction can be used
 13 (like in Even or in Lezgian), or that that possibility is also absent (like in
 14 Basque), but at least the “regular” transitive bipersonal person marking cannot
 15 be used to express such meanings.

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

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

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5. Clitics

40 If partial overlap is possible for free pronouns, but not for bipersonal inflec-
 41 tional marking, then we would expect that the behavior of languages with clitic
 42 pronouns should be somewhere in between. Indeed, Corver and Delfitto (1999:

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 highscool!*³¹
- b. *We hebben me hier eerst aangemeld, en zijn daarna omdat we nog zoveel tijd overhadden naar de dolfijnenshow wezen kijken!*³²

Spanish (Romance, Indo-European)

- (26) 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

1 shown by examples (28b) and (29a). Only the combination of the two factors
2 leads to the dispreferred status.

3
4 Serbo-Croatian (Slavic, Indo-European)

5 (28) a. *kupio sam kaput nama*
6 bought AUX.1SG coat.ACC 1PL.PRON
7 ‘I bought us coats.’

8 b. *kupio sam nam kaput*
9 bought AUX.1SG 1PL.CLIT coat.ACC
10 ‘I bought us coats.’

11 (29) a. *mi volimo mene*
12 1PL.PRON like.1PL 1SG.PRON
13 ‘We like me.’

14 b. *?mi me volimo*³⁶
15 1PL.PRON 1SG.CLIT like.1PL
16 ‘We like me.’
17 (D. Matic, p.c.)

18
19 What seems to be going on is that at some point on a grammaticalization-cline
20 from independent pronouns to bipersonal person marking, as illustrated in
21 (30), the mere “slightly awkward” status of partial argument coreference turns
22 into complete impossibility. Languages might differ with regard to how
23 acceptability is aligned with this scale of grammaticalization. However, with
24 pronouns it is generally possible to express such meaning; with clitics it starts
25 to become more difficult. With separatistic bipersonal inflection (i.e., subject/
26 object inflectional marking in which the subject and the object element are
27 separable) speakers are often still able to “make up” and interpret the forms
28 (like in Basque), but their acceptability becomes worse. We expect that lan-
29 guages in which the internal structure of bipersonal marking has become
30 completely opaque (i.e., with cumulative/portmanteau bipersonal marking)
31 speakers will not even have a clue as how to “make up” such forms.

32 (30) independent pronouns
33 → person marking clitics
34 → separatistic bipersonal inflection
35 → cumulative (“portmanteau”) bipersonal inflection
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37

38 39 6. Conclusion

40
41 Given the impact that Paul Postal’s original observation has had on the gram-
42 matical literature in recent decades (as witnessed by its prodigy, Binding Prin-

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

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

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29 **Notes**

- 30
31 1. Correspondence address: Michael Cysouw, Research Unit “Quantitative Language Com-
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33 Postbox 129, Geschwister Scholl Platz 1, D-80539 München, Germany. E-mail: cysouw@
34 lmu.de
35 2. Postal earlier discussed the impossibility of such constructions for Mohawk in his doctoral
36 dissertation (Postal 1963: 173–174).
37 3. Around the same time in Spain, Agustín García Calvo discusses the same observations much
38 more extensively, though without much impact outside of the Spanish-speaking scientific
39 community (García Calvo 1973: 269–302; García Calvo 1974).
40 4. MC is a native speaker of Dutch and German, and near native in English. JFL is a native
41 speaker of Basque and Spanish, and fluent in French.
42 5. Attested on (<http://www.bungie.net/Forums/posts.aspx?postID=25321802>), accessed 25
August 2008.
6. Attested in the *Friends* episode “The one with five steaks and an eggplant” from 1995.

- 1 7. Their is a clear syntactic difference between the examples in (3) and (4). In (3), the partial
 2 coreference is between the subject and the recipient of a ditransitive construction, while in
 3 (4) the coreference is between the subject and the theme of a monotransitive construction.
 4 Throughout this article, we will not distinguish between these two situations. When we use
 5 the term “object”, we will generally imply both themes of monotransitives and recipients of
 6 ditransitives.
- 7 8. Attested on <http://missingslipper.blogspot.com/2008/02/being-loveable.html>, accessed 25
 8 August 2008.
- 9 9. Attested on <http://jolithomeart.blogspot.com/2008/08/higher-power.html>. See also “*we*
 10 *prepared me for my new form of artistic expression*” as attested on <http://www.bmezzine.com/scar/A40214/scrscars.html>; both pages accessed 25 August 2008.
- 11 10. Attested on [http://www.independent.ie/sport/rugby/every-time-i-closed-my-eyes-i-saw-us-](http://www.independent.ie/sport/rugby/every-time-i-closed-my-eyes-i-saw-us-winning-i-couldnt-help-thinking-i-cant-see-us-losing-1393848.html)
 12 [winning-i-couldnt-help-thinking-i-cant-see-us-losing-1393848.html](http://www.independent.ie/sport/rugby/every-time-i-closed-my-eyes-i-saw-us-winning-i-couldnt-help-thinking-i-cant-see-us-losing-1393848.html). See also “*I kept look-*
 13 *ing at the empty rooms and seeing the events that had taken place there. [. . .] I saw us ex-*
 14 *changing Christmas and birthday presents; I saw us eating pasta and watching Amadeus.*”
 15 as attested on <http://www.esotericrabbit.com/blog/?p=616>, both pages accessed 25 August
 16 2008.
- 17 11. Attested on <http://www.indypaws.com/post/index/16862>. See also “*In five minutes we have*
 18 *to remember to look for this moment when we saw me moving my head slightly.*” as attested
 19 on <http://www.nat.org/blog/?m=200510>, both pages accessed 25 August 2008.
- 20 12. “In any case, I saw us as two kings in the mirror, and I loved us, I see no woe to tell. Thomas
 21 also looked at us . . .” (translation MC & JFL), as attested in Christian Rochefort, *Printemps*
 22 *au Parking*, Paris (1969: 222).
- 23 13. Attested in Henry Miller, *Tropico de Capricornio*, Buenos Aires, 1962: 68. Note that in the
 24 original English version a different construction is used: “*I can see again the two of us*
 25 *standing in the middle of a street at four in the morning . . .*” Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capri-*
 26 *corn*, Grove Press (1961: 65).
- 27 14. “While writing these lines, I remembered our last meeting at Honfleur. [. . .] I saw us again
 28 sitting at the table.” (translation MC & JFL), as attested in an article by Henri Jeanson pub-
 29 lished in *Canard Enchaîné* 2611 (1970: 1).
- 30 15. The arguments in the examples in (9a) and (9b) are not necessarily directly co-arguments of
 31 the verb *vote*, depending on the details of the syntactic analysis of the sentence. Sentence (9a)
 32 seems best analysed as “we voted for [I BE representative]” (we thank B. Comrie for point-
 33 ing this out). A more restrictive search revealed a strict example of *we voted for me* with both
 34 pronouns being co-arguments of the verb, though again this attestation is followed by a smil-
 35 ley, indicating that the author acknowledges the strangeness of the construction or situation
 36 (example attested on <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2435363078>, accessed on
 37 25 September 2009).
- 38 16. Attested on <http://www.vanderburghgov.org/Index.aspx?page=969>, accessed on 26 August
 39 2008.
- 40 17. Attested on <http://www.freewebs.com/frostbyte1/biographies.htm>, accessed on 26 August
 41 2008.
- 42 18. Attested on [http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/118/t1236834-star-wars-deadly-mistakes-](http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/118/t1236834-star-wars-deadly-mistakes-part-six/5.htm)
 43 [part-six/5.htm](http://www.neoseeker.com/forums/118/t1236834-star-wars-deadly-mistakes-part-six/5.htm), accessed on 16 February 2011. See also “So, why **are we voting for me?**”
 44 as attested on <http://diablo.incgamers.com/forums/showthread.php?t=613724&page=49>,
 45 accessed on 16 February 2011. Apparently, this situation of voting for one of a group occurs
 46 regularly in close-knit online communities.
- 47 19. Attested on <http://silenceandotherways.wordpress.com/2006/09/25/exhibition-review/>,
 48 accessed 26 August 2008.
- 49 20. This example is attested in a philosophical article on the concept of mind (Scott 1971: 30).

- 1 21. “And further, we have bought a blouse for me to prepare for the heavy winter (–50°C)”
 2 (translation MC & JFL), as attested on (<http://www.lutece-milwaukee.com/article-13568874-6.html>), accessed on 25 August 2008.
- 3 22. “On the way, we bought a wonderful baguette for me.” (translation MC & JFL), as attested
 4 on (<http://farfadus.nice-forum.com/farfadus-f16/alphaice-parapluie-lover-t43.htm>), accessed
 5 on 25 August 2008.
- 6 23. In Spanish it should also be possible to find examples, weren’t it for the fact that in Argen-
 7 tinean Spanish the originally second person plural form of the verbal inflection is used for
 8 singular reference. All Spanish examples with second person plural inflection and second
 9 person singular object pronouns that we looked at turned out to be Argentinean Spanish
 10 reflexives.
- 11 24. “You both have indicated you (sg.) as the driver.” (translation MC & JFL), as attested on
 12 (<http://www.car2.de/2008/06/21/verstaendnisfrage/>), accessed on 25 August 2008.
- 13 25. “He has beaten your friend. And you (sg.) defended both of you.” (translation MC & JFL),
 14 as attested on (<http://board.raidrush.ws/archive/t-328896.html>), accessed on 25 August
 15 2008.
- 16 26. The translation of (16), as provided by Hualde and Ortiz de Urbina (2003) is not correct. It
 17 should be in the present, not in the past.
- 18 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
 19 attested on (<http://www.brit-journal.com/fmwl/1741/The+Weekend.html>), accessed on 27
 20 August 2008.
- 21 28. Attested on (<http://www.gara.net/idatzia/20060414/art160214.php>), accessed on 25 August
 22 2008.
- 23 29. Why Corver and Delfitto change the verb in these example is unclear to us. As we have
 24 argued in Section 2, the choice of verb can have a strong influence on the acceptability of
 25 these constructions. So, to make a strong argument the lexical choice has to be kept constant.
- 26 30. See also the French examples in (11) and (12).
- 27 31. “We went to enroll me in high school” (translation MC & JFL). Attested on (http://www.bloggen.be/jisa_belle/archief.php?ID=26), accessed on 27 August 2008.
- 28 32. “We first enrolled me here, and then we went to watch the dolphin show, because we had so
 29 much time left.” (translation MC & JFL). Attested on (<http://marliekenarcura.waarbenjij.nu/reisverhalen/marliekenarcura/Nederlandse+Antillen/32e+dag/?&module=site&page=message&id=2540962>), accessed on 27 August 2008.
- 30 33. Attested on (http://www.fotolog.com/matsuri_xan/53446002), accessed on 27 August
 31 2008.
- 32 34. Attested on (<http://mujeresdefuego.blogspot.com/2007/11/irse-al-agua-un-millon-de-personas.html>), accessed on 27 August 2008. See also “*Después, ya que no podemos ir de playita ni piscina con Laura, nos vamos a comprarme zapas.*”, as attested on (<http://irene2006-2007.blogspot.com/2008/07/el-viernes-despus-de-unos-das-de-relax.html>), both
 33 pages accessed on 27 August 2008.
- 34 35. Based on the intuitions of the native speaker D. Matić in personal communication with the
 35 current authors.
- 36 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:
 37 “*Mislam da imam vishе lichnosti (mi me volimo = D) i da se prilagodjavam svemu zadržavajući neko svoje mishljenje.*” (I think that I have two personalities (we love me = D) and I
 38 adjust to everything by holding on to my opinion). Again note the smiley that is added, which
 39 indicates that the author of this phrase realizes that there is something comically about saying
 40 “we love me” (cf. examples 1, 2, and 23).
- 41
 42

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