Visser's Generalization: A Window into the Syntax of Control
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This paper presents a solution to a long-standing problem in control theory, Visser's Generalization (VG) (Jenkins 1972; Bresnan 1982). VG is the observation that verbs like promise do not allow subject control in the passive (1a-b).

(1)  
   a. Santa promised me to bring me gifts.  
   b. *I was promised to bring me gifts.

The problem with (1b) is not that implicit subjects cannot control (2a), nor that verbs like promise are incompatible with passivization (2b):

(2)  
   a. It was decided (by them) to have brunch.  
   b. I was promised to be allowed to open the gifts.

This paper shows that, instead, VG taps into a hitherto unrecognized restriction on control. Specifically, it is argued that, cross-linguistically, implicit subjects only control if there is default agreement on T (and no nominative argument in the clause).

The proposal:
This statement of VG is derived from two current proposals about the syntax of implicit arguments and control.

1. Implicit arguments project φ-features in the syntax (Landau 2010; Legate 2010).  
2. Control “piggybacks” on φ-agreement by functional heads (Borer 1989; Landau 2000 et seq.).

Under these assumptions, control by an implicit argument involves an Agree relation between a φ-probe F and the implicit argument, and F and PRO (3). These two steps create a binding configuration between the implicit argument and PRO, à la Kratzer (2009).

(3)  
[FP F{φ} … [DP Implicit Argument{φ}] … [DP PRO{φ}] … ]

In addition to this, we stipulate that implicit arguments always have unvalued φ-features (and therefore never come with specific presuppositions about person, number, or gender - instead, some mechanism identifies them with the centre of a centred world (Stephenson 2010)). The VG data then follow. Implicit subjects, for which F=T (since T is the only φ-probe that c-commands the implicit subject), can only control if T is available. This explains the VG effect. We can then tie the distribution of VG across constructions to transparent differences in agreement. If there is a “promoted” argument for T to agree with, as in (1b), this Agree relation will preclude control by the implicit subject. If, as in the passives of intransitive control verbs (2a), T does not agree with a lexical DP, T can agree with the implicit subject and establish control (apparently “default” agreement on T then belies agreement with the implicit subject).
VG cross-linguistically:
This proposal predicts that VG effects should arise widely. In languages such as Dutch, English, German, and Icelandic, all transitive control verbs that allow subject control in the active indeed do not allow it in the passive (4a), including those verbs which only allow subject control under control shift (Ladusaw & Dowty 1988) (4b-c).

(4) a. *I was offered to bring me gifts.
   b. *The teacher, was asked to be allowed to tickle him.
   c. *Ik werd overtuigd om me te mogen kietelen.
      I.NOM became convince.PART to may.INF tickle.INF
      'lit.) I was convinced to be allowed to tickle me.'

It is also predicted that VG effects should disappear if the object does not agree with T. That this is borne out is demonstrated by passives like (5a-b).

(5) a. Er werd mij beloofd om me op de hoogte te houden.
      there became me.DAT promise.PART me on the height to hold.INF
      'I was promised to keep me informed.'
      Dutch
   b. Es wurde dem Hans angeboten, ihm sein Geld zu schicken.
      it was Hans.DAT offer.PART him.DAT his money to send.INF
      'It was offered to Hans to send him his money.'
      German

In these examples, as in the passives of intransitive control verbs, T does not agree with a lexical DP. As such, T may agree with the implicit subject and PRO, thereby establishing control.

Extension to tough-movement:
This account also sheds light on a restriction on tough-movement, due to Jeremy Hartman (p.c.), illustrated here in (6a-b).

(6) Hartman's Generalization: Only adjectives that tolerate implicit experiencers allow tough-movement.
   a. Squirrels are tough/easy/hard/difficult to catch.
   b. *Squirrels are rude/polite/stupid/unusual to catch.

Observe that adjectives like rude in (6b) have implicit agents (these can be made overt using of-phrases) instead of implicit experiencers. The ungrammaticality of (6b) can then be seen as a VG effect. In the current proposal, tough-movement is analogous to the passive, since it feeds agreement with T (it has no effect on (6a), however, for which I argue that F=v, cf. (3)). As such, control by the implicit subject is impossible in (6b). If these adjectives require control by their agent arguments, the contrast is derived.

References