

French Control, and the Verbs Pardonner and Persuader

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I Introduction

Control, also known as Equivalent NP Deletion, is a process wherein a subject NP in an embedded clause is deleted under identity with an NP in the matrix clause. The syntactic role of the NP controlling deletion varies from verb to verb. That is to say, depending on the verb, the controller could be an object NP or a subject NP. Gilles Fauconnier (1974) attributes controller selection in French to the crucial presence of certain entailments in the meaning of the EQUI verb, which effectively characterizes controller selection as a semantically driven process, rather than a syntactic one. The purpose of this paper is to build on the work of Fauconnier by examining the French verbs persuader and pardonner, for which he provided preliminary entailment characterizations and controller selection properties, and to determine for each verb: which NP in the matrix clause (subject or object) is the unmarked controller, which properties of the controller are responsible for its selection, and whether or not these facts bear out Fauconnier's predictions for these verbs.

II Controller Selection

Fauconnier attributes controller selection to three entailments, which if present in the meaning of the verb, will allow an NP X to serve as a controller:

- ENT A [X bring about P]
- ENT B [P is good/bad for X]
- ENT C [P describes a property of X]

Where X is the denotation of an NP argument of the verb in the matrix clause, and P is the proposition denoted by the embedded clause. These entailments are exemplified in the meaning of the following sentences and the application of control thereto:

1. J'admire Néron d'avoir brûlé Rome. 'I admire Nero for having burnt Rome.'
2. Le FBI a promis a Getty d'être tenu au courant. 'The FBI promised Getty that he would be kept posted.'
3. Elle envie sa sœur d'être aussi aimable. 'She envies her sister for being so gracious.'

Sentence 1 is object controlled, which means the deleted subject of the lower clause is understood to be coreferential with the object of the matrix clause Néron. This NP is the controller because Néron brought about event described in the lower clause, namely the burning of Rome, and therefore satisfies ENT A. Sentence 2 has as a part of its meaning ENT B, where the NP X is the object NP Getty. The lower clause expresses a proposition that is good for Getty, specifically that he might be kept posted, so this NP serves as controller. Finally, the embedded clause in sentence 3 attributes the property of graciousness to the referent the NP sa sœur, so that NP serves as controller as per ENT C.

Fauconnier attributes the application of control with all EQUI verbs in French to the crucial presence of one or more of these three entailments in the meaning of the verb itself, including the EQUI verbs persuader and pardonner, for which he has provided preliminary remarks on which NP serves as controller. He explains that for both verbs, either the subject or object may serve as controller, depending on the most salient entailment in the sentence's meaning. If the object NP satisfies ENT A, then *it* is the controller, and if the subject NP satisfies ENT B, then *it* serves as controller. Thus, for both

verbs, either the subject or the object may be the controller, depending on the context and the ENT present in the meaning of the sentence itself.

I have therefore devised tests to see which of the two NP's is the unmarked, or most natural one to serve as controller for each verb, and to see if the manipulation of context and meaning will allow the other NP to serve as controller under any circumstances.*

III Persuader

Fauconnier predicts that this verb may be object controlled if ENT A is present with X as the object, and subject controlled with if ENT B is present with X as the subject. I began to test his prediction with sentences like (1), which are active reflexives:

(1) Le coiffeur a persuadé Jean de se couper les cheveux.

‘The barber persuaded Jean to cut his hair.’

Theoretically, either le coiffeur or Jean could serve as controller, depending on the entailment present, but both speakers claimed that the individual having his hair cut was the individual denoted by Jean. This is object control, and corresponds to ENT A, where Jean is the individual bringing about the haircutting event. This was their first reaction, which hints that the unmarked controller for persuader is the object, but when attempting to change the context, no second meaning was possible for either speaker. Take the following sentence:

(2) Jean a persuadé le coiffeur de se couper les cheveux. †

‘Jean persuaded the barber to cut his hair.’

This sentence was set up with the same context as before, with the addition that Jean wants to have his hair cut, and must convince the barber to let him. With this extra bit of information, ENT B (P is good for X) should have applied with X being the NP Jean, and (2) should have been able to be subject controlled. However, neither speaker thought it possible to express that situation using sentence (2). My first speaker only saw the object NP le coiffeur as a possible controller, despite the peculiarity of this interpretation. The second speaker was aware what the sentence *should* mean given the context, and because of this deemed it ungrammatical altogether. They both claimed they would have restated it with something like:

(3) Jean a convaincu le coiffeur de lui permettre de se couper les cheveux.

‘Jean_i convinced the barber to let him_i get his_i hair cut.’

They could not express this situation with the verb persuader, and chose to substitute the verb convaincre, which is also object controlled. This result shows that the unmarked controller for persuader is most likely the object, and also suggests that any reading that requires subject control is impossible.

This is true of my first speaker, who allowed only object control with persuader, but in a follow up meeting with the second speaker, I found that under certain circumstances, persuader could be subject controlled too. This occurred in the sentence:

(4) L'enfant a persuadé sa mère de pouvoir sortir avec ses amis.

‘The child persuaded his/her mother to be able to go out with his/her friends.’

This sentence was constructed to allow ENT B to be present for the child, that is to say, that it is good for the child to go out with friends. This interpretation should have allowed for subject control, and did, but this was not the most natural reading for the speaker. These results seem consistent with a general view that the unmarked controller for

persuader is indeed the object. However, the fact that subject control *was* an alternative shows that with manipulation of context, a second interpretation can be derived, but it is still rather uncommon. Here, I believe the possibility of a second reading to be due to the presence of the verb pouvoir ‘to be able to’ in the lower clause. It seems that this verb makes it less clear ENT A is present, since it is unlikely that the mother is bringing about her own ability to go out. The curious fact is that despite the strangeness of this object controlled reading, it was still preferred to the subject controlled version.

This is not what Fauconnier predicts. He asserts that ENT B *is* part of the meaning of persuader and that if present with X as the subject, then the subject should be the controller as often as the object. As it turns out, none of the sentences I initially provided the native speakers allowed an interpretation where the subject of persuader was the controller.

Take the following sentence, a canonical active sentence:

(5) Jean a persuadé Marie de boire le liquide.

‘Jean persuaded Marie to drink the liquid.’

When asked ‘who is drinking’, both speakers replied ‘Mary’ immediately. This is again object control, with ENT A applying to the object NP X. I then asked the speakers to consider the following context:

‘Jean is sick, and thinks the liquid will cure him. Mary doesn’t want him to drink it, because she thinks it is dangerous. However, Jean convinces her to let him.’

This context sets it up nicely for ENT B to apply to the NP Jean, because the drinking event is now good for him. This should allow subject control. I then asked the speakers if they could ever use this sentence in this context, to mean Jean drinks the liquid. Both said no, and proceeded to restate the sentence with a different verb. This is more evidence that there is some confounding factor that, in most cases, causes the presence of ENT A and possible object control to override any interpretation involving ENT B and subject control. This could be due to the fact that the object is the unmarked controller for this verb, or it could be that syntactically standardized object control is preferred to semantic control, which allows variation as to which NP serves as controller. In the anomalous case of (4), the object control reading was less plausible than the subject controlled one, so there was a kind of ‘default to semantics/pragmatics’, which allowed the second reading.

Take sentences (6-7), which demonstrate passive and non-agentive subordinate clauses:

(6) Le général a persuadé le caporal d’être envoyé en Egypte.

‘The general persuaded the corporal to be sent to Egypt.’

(7) Le roi a persuadé l’homme de recevoir des coups de baton.

‘The king persuaded the man to receive a beating.’

Both speakers agreed that these sentences had one interpretation, in which the object is performing the action in the lower clause: for (6), le caporal is being sent to Egypt; and for (7), l’homme is being beaten. In no context could they see either sentence having an interpretation where the subject was controller. However, in the follow-up meeting, a modified (6) did allow for subject control:

(6’) Le caporal a persuadé le général de conduire le tank.

‘The corporal persuaded the general to drive the tank.’

Here, I switched the two NP’s, so that the authority roles might allow for a different interpretation. Specifically, the general is less likely to be driving a tank, and even less likely to be persuaded by a corporal to do so. Surprisingly, the speaker’s initial reaction

was one in favor object control, where the general was driving the tank (as per ENT A), but given the correct context, she saw subject control as a possibility. I gave her the context:

‘The general wants the corporal to drive a truck, but all his life, the corporal has dreamed of driving a tank. He begged the general, and he gave in.’

I also added that we should assume that generals don’t ever drive tanks. With these two additions to the context, she said the second reading was possible. The key addition that this context gave was ENT B: it is good for the corporal to drive the tank. As Fauconnier predicts, ENT B *does* allow for subject control, but the fact remains that object control is greatly preferred.

It is for these reasons that I conclude that the verb persuader is a primarily object controlled verb. This contradicts Fauconnier’s assertion that if ENT B is present in the meaning of the sentence, with X as the subject, then the subject can serve as controller as readily as the object. It seems that if ENT B is present at all, the only way we can get a subject control situation is if the ENT A object control interpretation is extremely unlikely. Sentence (5) demonstrated that even when ENT B is present for the subject, subject control is dispreferred, and object control wins out. It seems that for this verb, the syntactic object is the default controller, and only in certain environments may the semantics dictate otherwise.

IV Pardonner

For the verb pardonner, Fauconnier posits the same two entailments present in its meaning. Specifically, ENT A is present for object control, and ENT B for subject control. This is the same situation as with persuader. However, with pardonner, the NP serving as controller varied with context much more frequently, where the controller of persuader did not.

Take the example sentences:

(8) Le professeur a pardonné l’étudiant d’avoir raté son examen.

‘The professor forgave the student for failing (having failed) his test.’

(9) L’étudiant a pardonné le professeur d’avoir raté son examen.

‘The student forgave the professor for having failed his test.’

(8) was set up to allow for object control with ENT A, since it is most likely that a student brought about the test failing event, not the professor. This is exactly the interpretation that both speakers saw immediately, and they saw no possibility for any context where the professor failed the test. However, in (9), something surprising happens. This sentence was constructed so that ENT B could be present for the individual denoted by the NP the student (failing the test is bad for the student), and therefore allow subject control. However, for both speakers, the most natural interpretation of this sentence involved a context where the professor failed the test! It seems again, that the possibility of a reading with ENT A and object control wins out over any reading involving ENT B and subject control. This holds for my first speaker, who saw no interpretation of (9) in which the student was failing a test. However, given the correct context, the second speaker did allow a second reading of (9), wherein the student failed the test, and the sentence was subject controlled. For her, it seems again that the presence of ENT B with pardonner may allow a subject controlled interpretation, but object control was still preferred.

This generalization holds in the following sentences as well:

(10) L'homme a pardonné son amour d'être envoyé(e) en Afrique.

'The man forgave his lover for being sent to Africa.'

(11) L'homme a pardonné son agent de voyages d'être envoyé en Afrique.

'The man forgave his travel agent for being sent to Africa.'

Sentence (10) was a control sentence in the scientific sense; meaning it was tested just to see which NP was the more likely controller in this frame. As expected, the object controlled interpretation won out, and by ENT A, the individual denoted by the NP his lover brings about the event in the subordinate clause. Neither speaker saw a second interpretation of subject control possible in this sentence. However, (11) was set up so that ENT B could be present and allow for subject control, since being sent to Africa could conceivably be bad for the man. The object NP was changed to his travel agent in hopes that a reading in which this NP was controller would be harder to get. It should have been much less likely for the travel agent to be sent to Africa, but for both speakers, this was the preferred reading despite its semantic peculiarity. They both noted that it was anomalous, and grammatical, but their first reaction was that the travel agent was being sent. When presented with the correct context, only the second speaker thought subject control was possible: the first said you would have to change the sentence altogether to express this situation, but admitted that some people might allow the man to be controller. He claimed he didn't allow the subject controlled reading himself, but admitted other people might.

Overall, pardonner seemed to operate like persuader in that the unmarked controller was the object NP. This generalization held to an extreme with my first speaker, who saw no subject controlled interpretations for any of the pardonner sentences. However, my second speaker allowed some subject control, even though it was not the initial interpretation. Take the following sentence:

(12) Claire pardonnera sa chienne d'être couverte de poils.

'Claire will forgive her dog (FEM) for being covered (FEM) with hair.'

This sentence was set up so that ENT B could be present for the referent of the NP Claire. That is to say, being covered with hair is bad for Claire. The feminine agreement on the word couverte 'covered', serves to make the sentence ambiguous between Claire being covered, and the female dog being covered. Initially, both speakers claimed that in this sentence, the dog was covered in hair, and they admitted that it was weird for a woman to forgive her dog for being hairy. I then presented them with the following context:

'Claire has a big job interview, and her dog slept on her suit. When Claire put the suit on in the morning, she realized it was covered in hair. However, she loves her dog, and forgave her.'

This context should have allowed ENT B and subject control, since being covered in hair for an interview is bad for Claire. Only my second speaker thought that this sentence could be used to express a context where Claire was covered in hair; my first speaker said the sentence would have to be restated to get that meaning.

Yet again, object control wins out, even when it results in a semantically bizarre interpretation. As it turns out, only my second speaker saw subject controlled readings as possible with pardonner, while the first speaker only allowed object control with this verb, just as with persuader. The results are different here than with persuader, since the second speaker was much more willing to accept a context which required subject control, but the fact remains that object control is preferred.

V Conclusion

Fauconnier predicts that the process of control in French is a semantically driven operation. That is to say, the semantic properties of the event, predicate, and its arguments determine which NP serves as controller. The entailments he claims are present in the meaning of French EQUI verbs are indeed present, but at least for these speakers, syntactic controller selection seems to be the default method of selection, and the default controller for these verbs is the object. This means even when an object controlled interpretation would be anomalous, it is still preferred.

For the first speaker, almost all sentences I provided were object controlled, even when an entailment was present which should have allowed for subject control. My second speaker was open to interpretations where ENT B allowed subject control, but her default controller was still the object, even when object control was semantically bizarre. Therefore it seems that object control is the default for both persuader and pardonner. Persuader allowed subject control almost never, where pardonner allowed it more often. It seems unlikely that for both of these verbs, the entailment [X bring about P] applying to the object is always dominant. Rather, there is a preference independent of entailments that selects the object as controller. For persuader, this preference always wins out and subject control is nearly impossible, but for pardonner the preference only goes so far as to designate the default controller; other readings can arise. This explains for these verbs why object control was not only more prominent and unmarked, but why the object was selected as controller even when it came at the cost of semantic peculiarity.

This does not prove Fauconnier wrong, it only shows that the means by which EQUI verbs select their controllers is not as cut and dry as the entailments he provides. In the case of persuader, syntactic control is the dominant mode of selection. And, in the case of pardonner, it seems the story is a little more complex. This verb demonstrates a marked preference of object controllers, but under some circumstances, will allow subject control (c.f. 9, 11, 12). This could be because syntactic control is the default means of selection, and we only resort to semantics as a last ditch effort to make the sentence interpretable, which would mean syntactic control is the default for most verbs. Or, this may just mean that pardonner is semantically controlled, and it is hard to find a context for subject control. It may just be unlikely that the individual denoted by a subject NP X would attempt to persuade an individual denoted by an object NP Y for X to bring about P, when X could bring about P itself. There are situations where this seems plausible, but if speakers can produce them and interpret them is another story.

* The sentences in this paper were tested on two native speakers. The first was Laurent, the second, Sophie. Their help is greatly appreciated.

† Originally, I had hoped that by switching the NP's in (1), I could allow a different meaning to come forth, since the barber should be less likely than Jean to have his hair cut. However, I soon realized that reflexive verbs like se couper only have one argument, and this sentence might be better glossed as 'Jean persuaded the barber to cut his own hair'. So, it makes no difference that one of the NP's in the matrix clause denotes a barber.