Means of Control:
Deriving the Properties of PRO in the Minimalist Program

A thesis presented

by

John Herbert O’Neil III

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Within the Principles and Parameters approach to syntax, it has been considered necessary to stipulate a Theory of Control, to explain the distribution and interpretation of certain instances of unpronounced subjects in non-finite clauses. However, with the advent of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995), the assumptions which made Control Theory necessary (such as the Theta Criterion and the Projection Principle) are either superfluous or have been called into question on independent grounds. In this thesis, the properties of Control Theory — and of PRO, the object of Control Theory — are derived from independently-motivated conditions on movement and feature-checking in the Minimalist Program. The Theta Criterion, a necessary stipulation in GB Theory, is replaced by more minimalist conditions on theta-role assignment at LF. This theory is applied to a variety of languages, showing its empirical as well as its theoretical coverage. I also argue that obligatory and non-obligatory control constructions do not form a natural class. Different theories, derived from the Minimalist Program in different ways, are used to explain the differences (and similarities) between them. Insofar as this proposal is simpler and contains fewer stipulations than Control Theory, as well as having adequate empirical coverage, PRO and Control Theory become redundant and can be eliminated.
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Succeeding sentences, the second explicitly or implicitly referring to the content of the first (and so on until the text is presumed to be completed), give us the impression of a continuing reality. But they are only sentences, one after the other, each itself and only itself. And grammar? All prestidigitation employs rules.

—Zulfikar Ghose

*Hulme’s Investigations into the Bogart Script*
Acknowledgments

Recently, a friend of mine got a kidney stone. Wakened in the middle of the night by terrible pain, he was taken by his wife to the emergency room, where the stone was eventually removed. While he was waiting, a nurse attending to him said, “A kidney stone is the greatest pain a man can ever feel.” She was wrong; I just finished my Ph.D. dissertation—now I know better. There are in fact important similarities between writing a dissertation and passing a kidney stone. It is impossible to prepare adequately for either of them, and in fact no one ever expects that it will really happen to them. Both are crushing emergencies when they actually do happen. Getting them out causes pain indescribable to anyone whom it has not happened to, and when it’s all over, it seems unbelievable that all that anguish could have been caused by something so small.

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