Partial control: The embedded predicate matters, even in English!

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Much work on control has highlighted the importance of the matrix predicate in determining whether partial control (PC) is possible (Landau 2000, 2004, Pearson 2016). In recent work, it has become increasingly obvious that, in many languages, the embedded predicate also affects the acceptability of PC: reciprocal predicates undergoing a comitative alternation facilitate PC:

(1) a. Kim and Sam met this morning.   b. Kim met with Sam this morning.

Sheehan (2014) argued this to be the case for some Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian European Portuguese) based on informant work and subsequent experimental work supports this claim for French (Pitteroff and Sheehan 2018) and also German (Pitteroff et al. 2017a, b).

In this paper, I claim that English is like French (and especially) German in this respect, contrary to the picture that had emerged from non-experimental work. Where the embedded predicate is comitative (+COM), PC becomes acceptable regardless of matrix predicate, as illustrated in (2):

(2) Context: John has just had his first date with a new girlfriend.
      a. He tells her that he hopes to meet again soon.
      b. He tells her that he hopes to kiss soon.
      c. He tells her that he can meet again next Saturday, if she's free.
      d.*He tells her that he can kiss next time, if she likes.

As in German, the only context which rules out partial control is (d): a non PC matrix predicate combined with a –COM embedded predicate. Results from an online study show that EC predicates (*can, try, need, avoid*) more generally permit PC when combined with a +COM complement, whereas PC predicates (*hope, want, hate, refuse*) permit PC regardless of complement.

Table 1: Mean acceptability by Matrix and Embedded Predicate in English.

n=33/37	+COM	–COM
EC	5.08 (0.20)	3.57 (0.20)
PC	5.68 (0.16)	5.29 (0.16)

The difference between [EC, +COM] and [EC, – COM] is highly significant (p<.0001). The difference between [EC, + COM] and [PC, + COM] is also significant (p=.005). The difference between [PC, + COM] and [PC, – COM] is not significant (p=.02). These results suggest that English, like German, has two different kinds of PC, which we call true PC and fake PC. I show further evidnece that PRO is semantically singular in fake PC but not in true PC.