

# Experimental evidence of variation and gradience in the syntax and semantics of transitive subject control



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## Abstract

This article explores transitive subject control phenomena using experimental syntax methodologies. Existing theoretical accounts of transitive subject control are problematic: syntactic theories either disregard transitive subject control or find it ungrammatical (e.g., Chomsky, 1980), while semantic theories cannot explain the structure's reduced acceptability (Postal, 1970), or its rarity as suggested by work on corpora (Egan, 2006). A set of three acceptability judgment task experiments explores these issues. Experiment 1a tests the acceptability of transitive subject control across a direct object. Experiment 1b tests acceptability of transitive subject control across a PP complement. Experiment 2 tests the effect of both syntactic and semantic violations in control. Although the experimental results demonstrate interspeaker variation, they do suggest that transitive subject control across either a direct object or a PP complement is of reduced acceptability and that violations of both syntactic and semantic constraints influence acceptability. It is argued that these results indicate that both syntactic and semantic strategies of interpreting transitive subject control are available simultaneously. The way the two strategies of interpretation interact may vary across speakers.

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## 1. Introduction

Transitive subject control (TSC) structures require a subject control verb to take both a direct object and a non-finite clause as complements, and display subject control across the object (Rosenbaum, 1967). Only a few English verbs exhibit transitive subject control. Examples of such verbs include *promise* as seen in (1), *threaten* as seen in (2) and *ask* and *beg* under conditions of control shift as seen in (3) (Landau, 2000, 2013).

- (1) Jane promised Sarah to do the dishes.  
*subject main verb direct object non-finite complement clause*
- (2) Chris threatened Steve to kill himself.  
*subject main verb direct object non-finite complement clause*
- (3) The student begged the teacher to go outside.  
*subject main verb direct object non-finite complement clause*

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The type of structure exhibited in (1) through (3) has been difficult to accommodate within the theories of control. Attempts to describe transitive subject control fall generally into two categories. The first consists of those that base their explanation of this phenomenon primarily in syntax or structural approaches, and are characterized by an understanding of control based on locality (Chomsky, 1980; Larson, 1991; Hornstein, 1999; Manzini and Roussou, 2000). Although these theories differ widely in terms of how locality is understood, each of them contends that the proximity of the controller to the controlled element is what determines control relations, and predicts that TSC structures are illicit. However, TSC structures are generally considered to be grammatical in the literature, and examples such as (1) often appear in syntax text books (Haegeman, 1994; Carnie, 2013) to illustrate the grammaticality of TSC structures. Another prediction the structural approaches make is that transitive subject control across a PP complement, as in (4), should be degraded, given that intervention effects with PP experiencers of raising verbs such as *seem* are exhibited in many languages. It is not however obvious what the empirical picture is.<sup>1</sup>

(4) Danielle vowed to Amanda to floss more regularly.

An alternative group of theories describes control phenomena primarily in terms of semantics (Postal, 1970; Jackendoff, 1972; Ruzicka, 1983; Chierchia, 1984; Farkas, 1988). Proponents of these approaches argue that syntactic mechanisms are insufficient to capture the full breadth of control behaviour. And, in spite of disagreement in terms of the precise strategies used to describe control, this set of approaches agrees that some element(s) of semantics must be employed to do so, and predicts TSC structures to be fully grammatical. Although transitive subject control may be part of the grammar, there is a view that these structures (at least the ones with a direct object) have reduced acceptability (Postal, 1970). Moreover, data from corpus analysis suggests that the TSC structure is rarely used in contemporary spoken English, further raising questions as to the grammatical status of the TSC structure. Jeffrey (2012) examined the Contemporary Corpus of American English and found that, among a random sample of occurrences of the verb *promise* modified by a complement clause, transitive subject control *promise* appeared at only a rate of one percent in the spoken data of this sample. Egan (2006) examined the British National Corpus and did not find transitive subject control *promise* among the data he considered.

As the syntactic and semantic approaches make conflicting predictions regarding the grammatical status of the TSC structure, having a clear picture of the native speaker judgment on the structure is necessary in evaluating the two approaches. In this paper, we present three acceptability judgment task experiments to clarify the native speaker intuition on the TSC structure, and to test whether the TSC phenomenon is a product of syntactic constraints such as locality, semantic constraints such as the lexical properties of the control verb, or both.

The first experiment (Experiment 1a) assesses the acceptability of transitive subject control across a direct object, and the second experiment (Experiment 1b) assesses the acceptability of transitive subject control across a PP complement. The third experiment (Experiment 2) tests the effect of both syntactic and semantic violations on acceptability. The experimental results indicate that transitive subject control across a direct object or a complement PP is of reduced acceptability, but not unacceptable, thus exhibiting gradience in acceptability judgments (Keller and Alexopoulou, 2001; Keller, 2000, 2001; Sorace, 2000; Sorace and Keller, 2005). They also indicate that control structures with a semantic violation lead to reduced acceptability just as those with a syntactic violation. We argue that these results suggest that both syntactic and semantic strategies of interpreting transitive subject control are available to speakers simultaneously and that the conflict between these derives the reduced acceptability observed. We further suggest that the results of these experiments demonstrate variation in the use of syntactic and semantic strategies both between speakers as well as within the acceptability ratings assigned by individual participants.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a more detailed overview of both the syntactic and semantic approaches to transitive subject control, and a discussion of control shift as this concept plays an important role in the design of the third experiment. Sections 3 and 4 present the methodology and results of Experiment 1a and Experiment 1b respectively, and section 5 presents the methodology and results of Experiment 2. We discuss the theoretical implications of these results in section 6.

## 2. Theoretical approaches

### 2.1. Syntactic approaches

Structural approaches to control begin from the premise that the choice of the controller is related to locality. This line of research began with Rosenbaum (1967) and his proposal of the Minimal Distance Principle. Subsequent theorists such as Larson (1991), Hornstein (1999) and Manzini and Roussou (2000) have attempted to maintain his basic insights. Here we provide a brief discussion of these approaches and explain why transitive subject control remains problematic for each.

<sup>1</sup> We thank a reviewer for raising the issue of TSC structures with a PP complement in connection with TSC structures with a direct object.

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