

***Tough*-constructions and lexical aspect**

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We will assume that the *tough*-construction (TC) is a variety of the so-called Null-operator constructions whose canonical syntactic analysis (Chomsky 1977) is illustrated in (1a). TC has been a matter of debate for decades. The main issue discussed is whether the subject of (1a) is base-generated (Chomsky 1977) or derived by a (complex, A' and A) long-distance movement (e.g. Hicks 2009). This question originates from the fact that in sentences analogous to (1a) the subject, which is coreferential to the missing object of the infinitival clause, does not seem to receive a theta-role from the matrix adjectival predicate: (1a) does not entail *This book is difficult*. As a result, the predicate in (1a) licenses the expletive and infinitival constructions (1b) (cf. Alexiadou et al. 2015, Schäfer 2008 on the relationship between “non-(role-)selecting” predicates and licensing of the expletive subject).

- (1) a. This book_i is difficult [_{CP} OP_i [_{PRO}_{ARB} to find t_i]]
b. It is difficult to find this book./ To find this book is difficult.

TC is usually illustrated by sentences with “tough” adjectives (*easy*, *hard*, *tough*) and is opposed to another variety of Null-operator constructions, the *pretty*-construction (2a). Though structurally similar to TC, (2a) differs from it in that its matrix predicate does select for a theta-role (*these flowers are pretty*), and hence it does not license expletive and infinitival structures (2b).

- (2) a. These flowers_i are pretty [_{CP}_i OP_i [_{PRO}_{ARB} to look at t_i]]
b. *It is pretty to look at these flowers./ *To look at these flowers is pretty.

However, the contrast between *tough*-constructions and *pretty*-constructions is not always as clear as in (1) and (2). Some adjectival predicates (*pleasant*, *amusing*, *annoying*), which will be termed *pleasant*-predicates, seem to be similar to the *pretty*-construction in that they do assign a theta-role to their subject: (3a) entails *this book is annoying*. Yet this does not prevent them from being compatible with expletive and infinitival constructions (3b). At the same time, *pleasant*-predicates are reluctant to combine with non-finite verbs like that of (1a) in the embedded clause (3c).

- (3) a. This book is annoying to read.
b. It is annoying to read this book. / To read this book is annoying.
c. ???This book is annoying to find.

We will argue that *pleasant*-predicates are subject to restrictions due to the lexical aspect of the non-finite verb (or its aspectual construal) in the embedded clause. They are hardly compatible with “pure” achievement verbs (3c) and are fully compatible with (transitive) activity verbs (*This dress is pleasant to wear*). As to accomplishment verbs, *pleasant*-predicates are reluctant to their achievement-like (culminating) construal (4a) and trigger their processive (activity-like) reading (3a) and (4b). In contrast, *tough*-predicates are underspecified (cf. Chung & Gamon 1996). They are compatible with both punctual (achievement-like) aspect (or aspectual construal) (4a) and processive (activity-like) aspect (or construal) (4b) of the embedded clause verbs.

- (4) a. This book is difficult/???pleasant [to read [in two hours]].
 b. This book is [difficult/pleasant to read [for two hours]]. Then it becomes easier/annoying.

In (4a) the time span adjunct modifies only the embedded clause predicate and constrains a punctual reading: what is difficult is to achieve the change-of-state point (get the book read). The “tough” predicate then refers to the modal trajectory leading to this goal (Goal-directed Trajectory, GDT, cf. Guéron & Vogeleer 2022), independently of whether the “filling” of this trajectory is lexically specified by the verb (4a) or not (1a). Within the punctual aspectual construal there is no temporal overlap between the modal “tough” trajectory and the goal event (change of state). The PRO agent is not an agent in the actual world as its agentivity is confined to the modal world of the embedded clause. Within the main clause, it is not assigned an experiencer role either (cf. below).

In (4b) the durational adjunct modifies the whole complex AP, which constrains a processive reading of the VP: what is difficult/ pleasant is the lexically specified process (activity). The processive construal triggers a temporal overlap between the process and the agent’s (physical or mental) state, which turns this agent into an agent-experiencer, with both *pleasant*- and *tough*-predicates. The peculiarity of this construal is that it combines the properties of three related structures: its (complex) predicate refers to: (i) the property of the entity (=pretty-constructions), (ii) the property of the process (=infinitival structure), and (iii) the agent’s state (=expletive structure), à the same time. This intricate combination makes it different from each of these individual constructions.

One of the debated “tough” issues is whether the infinitival clause is a selected argument (e.g. Guérin 2006 for French) or an adjunct (modifier) (e.g. Canac Marquis 1996 for French) of the matrix predicate. We will argue that the infinitival clause is an argument when the construal of the VP is punctual (achievement-like). By contrast, the embedded clause is a modifier (adjunct) when the reading of the verb is processive (activity-like).

Mary’s task in the famous example *John is easy to please (for Mary)* is not as easy (and pleasant) as it would seem at first glance. To account for that, we will try to shed light on the interaction between syntax, lexis and the conceptual-intentional interface within the (diverse) “tough” family. Our study is based on cross-linguistic empirical evidence.

References

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