

English tough-constructions and their analogues in Russian

Alina Tsikulina, Efstathia Soroli
University of Lille, France

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Abstract

This study focuses on *Tough constructions* (TCs) –syntactically complex constructions that present atypical *form-to-meaning* mappings– with special focus on English TCs and their Russian counterparts. Although English speakers use so-called TCs to evaluate an event/process –constructions in which the syntactic subject of the matrix sentence is logically the missing object of the embedded non-finite verb– Russian has been described as a language without TCs that offers instead functional analogues (e.g., impersonal predicatives, deverbals, passives). This study combines parallel corpus-based analysis with experimentally-collected data from 25 L1-Russian speakers. The findings challenge previous theoretical descriptions, revealing alternative functional analogues for Russian. This comprehensive approach highlights the need for both corpus and experimental investigations to fully grasp variability across languages in this domain.

Keywords: tough constructions, experimental linguistics, corpus-based investigation, Russian, English, semantics-syntax interface

Introduction

Tough adjectives, such as *difficult*, *tough*, *hard*, *easy*, express evaluation and exhibit a dual usage: they can occur in impersonal constructions (e.g., *It is easy to understand this article*), as well as in personal tough constructions (e.g., *This article is easy to understand*) in which the matrix subject is coreferential to the implicit infinitival object complement (Postal, 1974). This dual functionality sets them apart from control adjectives like *eager*, which lack an impersonal use and in which the direct complement position of the infinitive in personal use can be fulfilled (e.g., *Ben is eager to read this article*). Notably, tough adjectives accommodate both inanimate and animate subjects (e.g., *This article is difficult to understand*, *You are difficult to understand*), unlike control adjectives such as *eager*, which necessitate an animate subject (e.g., *Ben is eager to read this article vs. #This article is eager to be read*) (see also Becker et al., 2012).

This paper focuses on two tough adjectives, *easy* and *difficult*, as used in personal *Tough constructions* (TCs) in English, which typically express evaluation about a process or an event. Structurally, TCs involve a matrix clause featuring a topicalized NP in subject position, a copular verb, a tough-adjective and an embedded infinitival clause with an ostensibly “missing” object coreferential to the matrix subject (Hicks 2009). TCs are typically complex structures that

present: (i) atypical form-to-meaning mappings, wherein the syntactic subject of the matrix clause diverges from what can be understood as its semantic subject; and (ii) great variability in terms of use and availability across the languages of the world (Comrie, Mathews 1990, Tayalati et al. 2020). For example, although in languages such as English, to evaluate an event or a process speakers use so-called TCs (1a) in which the syntactic subject NP of the matrix sentence is logically the “missing” object of an embedded non-finite verb –configurations which alternate, for example, with expletive (EXT) impersonal constructions (1b) and intraposed (INT) clausal subject constructions (1c) –, in some languages, such as Russian, TCs are not possible and the speakers use a variety of functional analogues instead to express evaluation: e.g., use of passives (PASS/RFLX) in constructions with action predicates realized with a passive participle or a reflexive verb coupled with a manner adverb (2a-b respectively); use of deverbals (DEV) in constructions involving a deverbal noun realized as a restrictive prepositional complement (2c) (Paykin, Van Peteghem 2020); or predicatives (PRED) in constructions involving a topicalized NP in the accusative case, a predicative adverbial and a dependent infinitive (2d) (Comrie, Mathews 1990).

- 1 a. This article is easy to read (TC)
- b. It is easy to read this article (EXT)
- c. To read this article is easy (INT)
- 2 a. Èta stat’ja legko čitaema (PASS/RFLX)
DEM-F.SG.NOM article-F.S.NOM easy-O read-PR.PASS.PART-F.SG
Lit. ‘This article (is) easily read’
- b. Èta stat’ja legko čitaetsja (PASS/RFLX)
DEM-F.SG.NOM article-F.S.NOM easy-O read-INF.REFL
Lit. ‘This article easily (can) be.read’
- c. Èta stat’ja legkaja dlja čtenija (DEV)
DEM-F.SG.NOM article-F.S.NOM easy-F.SG PREP.for read-
F.SG.GEN
- d. Lit. ‘This article easy for reading’
Ètu stat’ju legko čitat’ (PRED)
DEM-F.SG.ACC article-F.S.ACC easy-O read-INF-IPFV
Lit. ‘This article easy to.read’

Despite a growing interest in TCs with respect to their syntactic-semantic unalignments and their high crosslinguistic variability, the inherent semantic and morphosyntactic properties of evaluative constructions, especially in languages such as Russian that, from a structural point of view, do not offer TCs, have been only superficially discussed. The aim of the present study is (a) to explore English TCs and their Russian counterparts; and (b) to identify the properties and the contexts of occurrence of the most frequent functional analogues coupling two types of data: corpus-based and experimental.

Method

The corpus investigation of the present study was based on the Opus-corpus movies and TV-series subtitles database (Tiedemann, J. & Thottingal, S., 2020), accessed through the CLARIN VLO system (<https://vlo.clarin.eu>). More specifically, a parallel corpus was built using attribute expressions that contained the two most frequently occurring adjectives in English TCs (*difficult*, *easy*) as source, and their Russian translations as target alignments. The queries used to retrieve the occurrences of the target words were based on 281.28 million words and returned 6530 segments that involved 1827 strings with *difficult* and 4703 with *easy*. The extracted dataset was further filtered for repetitions and not-aligned strings, and then coded manually in order to extract TC segments excluding strings without embedded infinitive clauses. The analysis returned a total of 125 target segments with *difficult* and 252 with *easy*, further mapped with their parallel Russian translations. The dataset was then coded for: predicative constructions (PRED), extraposed/subjectless sentences (EXT), intraposed (INT), passive/reflexive uses (PASS/RFLX), compact constructions in which modality was expressed either with a modal verb (MOD) or a compound (COMP), deverbal uses (DEV), and non-aligned segments (N/A) –as occurred in the data.

The experimental study consisted in collecting written data from 25 L1 Russian speakers using a written description task. Participants had to type in a short sentence to describe a set of pictures presented on a PC monitor using three target words: an animate or an inanimate NP, a tough adverb and an infinitive, counterbalancing their order of presentation. More specifically, participants were instructed to watch a picture depicting an event (e.g., a woman washing an unhappy cat) and the three provided words (e.g., кошка ‘cat’, мыть ‘wash’, тяжело ‘difficult’), and then type in a sentence containing the meaning of these words, a sentence that best described the picture, changing the order of the provided words or even adding additional words when necessary. The analysis was focused on the types of the constructions used (e.g., PRED, DEV) as a function of NP animacy and word order.

Results

The parallel corpus findings suggest that Russian offers mainly constructions involving impersonal predicatives (PRED), alternatively subjectless (EXT) and several functional (COMP) and (MOD) analogue constructions, as in (3a-c).

The experimental study confirmed the general preference of Russian speakers for impersonal predicative (PRED) constructions, similar to (2d), revealing additional alternative analogues not captured in the corpus study, such as subject-object constructions (SR), which occurred especially when the target words were presented in the tough-adverb+verb+NP order and with an animate NP (4).

- 3 a. *He's difficult to live with* > *Trudno žít' s nim*
Lit. '(It.is) difficult to.live with him' (EXT)
- b. *Next target must be in a location difficult to access* > *Sledjušaja cel' dolžna byt' v trudnodostupnom meste*
Lit. 'Next target must be in a.hardly.accessible place.' (COMP)
- c. *I never knew money was so easy to get* > *Ne znal, čto tak legko možno zarabotat'*
Lit. '(Did).not know that so easily (one) could earn.money' (MOD)
- 4 *Devuška legko pomyla košku v taznu.*
'The.Girl easily washed the.cat in the.basin' (SR)

Conclusion

This work reveals several analogues, functionally similar to *tough constructions*, that extend beyond the typical extraposed and intraposed clausal constructions, such as several compact alternatives involving compounds, modals (cf. corpus study) and active subject-object constructions (cf. experimental study) –to our knowledge, never discussed before for Russian in the domain of evaluatives. Passive/reflexive and deverbal constructions, although described as frequent functional analogues for Russian in theoretical papers (e.g., Paykin & Van Peteghem, 2020), only marginally occurred in the present study. Overall, the present findings partially support previous theoretical classifications in the domain of TCs, and further suggest that parallel corpus and experimental investigations are both necessary to explore deeply the grammar-thought relationship and to fully grasp crosslinguistic variability in this domain.

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