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Yoon Chung - *Smith College*

Against the Two Types of Tough Gaps: a Response to Jacobson

ychung@smith.edu

In issue 1 of *Snippets*, Pauline Jacobson notes the difficulty in creating a deeply embedded gap in *tough* sentences. She speculates that there are two distinct types of *tough* gaps or gap licensing mechanisms, depending on whether the *tough* construction is bounded or unbounded. When the *tough* construction is unbounded, she writes, it creates a WH-island, and vice versa. She offers the following examples:

- (1) a. Which violin is that sonata easy to play on? (Chomsky 1977)
b. *Which violin is that sonata hard to imagine anyone playing on?

Jacobson conjectures that the difference in grammaticality shown in (1) is due to the distinction between a local *tough* gap and a non-local *tough* gap. When the *tough* gap comes under more than one embedded VP, the *tough* infinitive behaves like a WH-island, as shown by (1b).

There are a couple of problems with Jacobson's speculation. First, she omits a parallel ungrammatical example to (1a), illustrated in (2).

- (2) *Which sonata is this violin easy to play on?

Like (1a), (2) shows a local *tough* gap, but unlike (1a), it is ungrammatical.

Second, if Jacobson's speculation is correct, then (3a), like (3b), should also be ungrammatical, since the *tough* gap occurs under more than one embedded VP.

- (3) a. Who was John hard for us to persuade to marry?
b. *Who was John hard for us to expect to marry?

Rather, the difference in grammaticality in (3) seems to be related to the fact that *tough* gaps can occur in the complements of 'Control' verbs but not in those of 'Raising-to-Object' verbs. It seems necessary, then, to distinguish between the kinds of verbs from which an NP is *tough*-'moved': 'Raising-to-Object' verbs vs. 'Object-Control' verbs.

Furthermore, in parallel cases with more appropriate contextual information, the sentence becomes correct. Compare (1b) with (4).

- (4) What topic might Mary be hard to imagine anyone talking to about since she is conservative?

If the ungrammaticality of (1b) is due only to a syntactic structure, there is hardly any reason that (4) should sound more natural than (1b).

Third, Jacobson argues that the distinction between the unbounded vs. bounded gaps is found in the *too/enough* construction. Consider (5).

- (5) a. This topic is too disgusting to talk to Mary about.
b. ?*This topic is too disgusting to imagine John talking to Mary about.

Even in cases like (5b), changing the embedded verb under *too* to a Control-type verb like *ask* would improve their acceptability. See (6).

- (6) This topic is too disgusting to ask John to talk to Mary about.

Thus, even though Jacobson's distinction is true in her provided examples, it is ad hoc because it cannot be found in constructions other than the *too/enough* construction.

In conclusion, contrary to Jacobson's argument, more complex aspects of lexical and pragmatic information interplay to affect judgements of acceptability in the unbounded dependencies of the *tough* construction.

References

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