6.

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Not so tough: a response to Harley

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In *Snippets* 2, Heidi Harley points out the grammaticality of (1).

(1)  [ How tough to please ] is the tenure committee?

Based on this sentence, she argues against the tough-movement (NP-movement) analysis of “the tenure committee is tough to please” type constructions. Her reasoning is that if tough-constructions involved raising, (1) should be ungrammatical, since raising a phrase containing a trace in it out of the c-command domain of the trace’s antecedent results in ungrammaticality due to Proper Binding Condition, as noted by Lasnik and Saito (1992).

(2)  a. *[ How likely t to be a riot ] is there?
   b. *[ How likely t to be taken of John ] is advantage?

Since this prediction is not borne out, Harley argues, the preposed phrase in (1) cannot contain a trace of NP-movement. As a matter of fact, if her reasoning is on the right track, (1) also poses a problem for Chomsky’s (1977) wh-movement analysis of tough-constructions, as long as traces of wh-movement must be bound. In this snippet, I show that the grammaticality of (1) does not point to her conclusion.

Note that tough-adjectives can take a beneficial phrase, headed by for, as in (3a), or can have unbounded dependency, as in (3b). (There is some variation with respect to the judgments on these sentences.)

(3)  a. The tenure committee is tough for all the assistant professors to please.
   b. The tenure committee is tough to persuade all the assistant professors to please.

Note that these types of sentences do not allow the relevant portion to be preposed.

(4)  a. *[ How tough for all the assistant professors to please t ] is the tenure committee?
   b. *[ How tough to persuade all the assistant professors to please t ] is the tenure committee?

The ungrammaticality of these examples contradicts Harley’s claim: (4) in fact should be grouped with (2). It thus seems reasonable to suppose that tough-
constructions involve movement (either NP-movement or wh-movement).

The problem then is why (1) is grammatical. It is true that, as Harley argues, if (1) had a trace in the preposed phrase, the example should be ungrammatical, on par with (2) and (4). I would like to suggest that sentences like the tenure committee is tough to please are derivationally ambiguous, but (3) is not. In particular, tough-to-please seems to form an adjective, as evidenced by the fact that it can appear prenominally.

(5) a [ tough to please ] tenure committee

In English, prenominal adjectives cannot have a complement.

(6) * a [ good at syntax ] student (cf. a student [ good at syntax ])

This suggests that tough-to-please in (5) behaves like a bare adjective without a complement in syntax. Perhaps it is stored as an adjective in the lexicon. This would give us a principled reason why (1) does not have a trace: it is not a tough-constructions in the same way as (3).

The tough-phrases in (3) cannot be bare adjectives due to the presence of the beneficial for phrase or long-distance dependency: these examples necessarily involve a trace, resulting in violation of the PBC in (4). For this reason, they cannot be prenominal modifiers. (7) is ungrammatical.

(7) * a [ tough for the assistant professor to please ] tenure committee
       * a [ tough to persuade the assistant professor to please ] tenure committee

To summarize, I have shown that Harley’s sentence in (1) should be treated separately from typical cases of tough-constructions in (3).

References