Tough Constructions: Their Tense and Aspect

1. Introduction

It is pointed out that tough constructions characterize their subject (cf. Takami (1992)). It is also claimed in Miki (1996) that tough constructions have genericity and that their predicates (henceforth, tough predicates) apply to the ontology proposed by Carlson (1977), so that they exclude an existential reading.

We will take up such examples as tough constructions in the past tense, which appear to be against the above claim. We will discuss the relation among a for-phrase, a problematic adjective first and the tense in tough constructions. Moreover, we will discuss the nonfinite perfect form in tough constructions, which is said to be ungrammatical in the previous studies. We will claim that all of these phenomena are reduced to the genericity of tough constructions. Before discussing the tense and aspect of tough constructions, we will briefly see the genericity and the parallelism between tough constructions and individual-level predicates in the next section.

2. Tough Constructions and Individual-level

The subjects of tough constructions preclude an indefinite reading but include a generic one, so that they cannot have any indefinite element like someone in the subject positions (cf. Postal (1971:29), Lasnik and Fieno (1974:544-546), Berman (1974:302-303)). On the other hand, they are acceptable, given the generic interpretation to bare plural subjects.

(1) a. *(A man/Someone) would be easy to kill with a stick like that.
   b. Men would be easy to kill with a stick like that.

As a subject of tough constructions, definite nouns, and not indefinite elements are possible. However, an indefinite noun is possible as a subject in tough constructions if it is construed definitely or generically and not indefinitely. A bare plural noun can only be interpreted generically.

There has been a notion, "genericity" in the history of linguistics, and it is divided into two types: reference to kind and characterizing sentence, though some scholars employ different terms for
them (cf. Carlson (1995)). They are exemplified as in (2):

(2) a. The lion is extinct.
   b. John smokes a cigarette after dinner.

*The lion* in (2a) refers to a kind itself rather than a concrete or particular object. Kind-reference is brought from such a kind-referring NP or a generic NP. On the other hand, the subject in (2b) refers to a concrete object but the sentence as a whole expresses certain regularity, a habit. We will take Carlsonian ontology as a study of genericity and explain why the bare plural subjects of tough constructions preclude indefinite interpretation, whereas they allow generic in light of Carlsonian ontology.

In Carlsonian ontology, entities are divided into three: kinds, object, and stages. We call the first two individual-level, or genericity, which we have just seen. Objects may, on a certain scene, occupy only one place at a time, while kinds may function in such a way to appear in many places at a given time. It is often said that predicates of a temporary state are stage-level predicates, while those of a permanent state are individual-level predicates. In addition, we use the other criteria to distinguish them.

We will see each case of these two sub-levels, kinds and objects. See the following examples applying to individual-levels as in (3).

(3) a. Doctors are intelligent.  (individual-level (kind))
   b. John is intelligent.  (individual-level (object))

*Intelligent* is over individual-levels since the generic interpretation is attributed to the bare plural subject, *doctors*. In addition, *doctors* can appear at any given time in various different places in the world. To put it another way, a kind in this case consists of many different stages of *doctors* who are intelligent. Thus, (3a) applies to a kind, one of individual-levels. On the other hand, unlike kinds, objects cannot have stages that appear at various distinct places at a given instant. (3b) is also an individual-level predicate, however it is different from (3a) in that *John* is bounded to only one place at a given time.

This reasoning is true of tough constructions. See the next examples.
(4) a. Men are tough for Mary to please. (individual-level (kind))
    b. John is easy to please. (individual-level (object))

The bare plural subject in (4a) receives the generic interpretation, so that (4a) applies to individual-levels. *Men* who are tough for Mary to please can appear at several places at a point of time, not bounded to only one place at a given time, which is characteristic of a kind. As for (4b), it has the characteristic reading attributed to *John*. *John* occupies only one place at a point of time, so (4b) belongs to an object. Therefore, we confirm that Carlsonian ontology gives a proper treatment as to what kind of NPs can appear in the subject position of tough constructions.

There are four pieces of diagnostic evidence that tough predicates basically apply to individual-levels. First, the bare plural subjects of individual-level predicates are compatible only with a generic reading: *Violists are intelligent*. The bare plural subjects of tough constructions receive only a generic reading on a parallel with those of individual-level predicates as well: *Men are tough for Mary to please*. Secondly, individual-level predicates cannot serve as the post-modifiers of the focus NPs in *there*-constructions but stage-level predicates can, as in: *There are pumpkins heavy. / There are pumpkins visible on the vine*. Likewise, tough predicates cannot post-modify the focus NPs in *there*-constructions, either: *There are men easy to please in my office*. As the third evidence, individual-level predicates cannot serve as the small clauses of perceptional verbs in a sharp contrast with stage-level predicates: *I saw Bill naked / *I saw Mary tall*. Tough predicates cannot appear in such a position, either: *I saw Mary easy to please*. Lastly, with predicates used as a free adjunct, the conditional interpretation is impossible in the sentence of individual-level predicates and the same observation in the interpretation of free adjuncts is made in tough constructions.

(5) Standing on a chair, John can touch the ceiling. (stage-level)
    = If John stands on a chair, he can touch the ceiling.
    = As John stands on a chair, he can touch the ceiling.
(6) Having unusually long arms, John can touch the ceiling. (individual-level)
    □ If John has unusually long arms, he can touch the ceiling.
(7) John being easy to please, you can feel relaxed with him.
    □ If John is easy to please, you can feel relaxed with him.

Again we found that tough constructions have characteristics in common with individual-level
predicates.

In sum, we have shown tough predicates basically belong to individual-level predicates whose bare plural subjects are construed as generic by means of the four tests: the generic interpretation of bare plural subjects, the incompatibility with there-constructions, the impossibility to be small clauses of perceptual verbs, and the unambiguous interpretation of the free adjuncts. Next, we will analyze tough constructions which appear to be incoherent with this claim.

3. Problems

There are some phenomena concerning tough constructions to be explained in the Carlsonian ontology. First, some tough constructions are possible even with phrases referring to a point of past time like yesterday, which are clearly incoherent with genericity in tough constructions. In addition, the acceptability of such tough constructions in the past depends on the properties of the subject.

(8) a. The book was easy to sell yesterday.
   b. *The picture by Yamagata Hiro was easy to sell yesterday.

Second, Nabeshima (1993) says that the tough construction cannot express an unrepeatable action, while the extraposed sentence can, because the former is an experiencially-based construction. An adjective like first expresses no experience, so that first cannot appear in tough constructions like their extraposed sentences.

(9) a. It is wonderful to take first holy communion with John.
   b. *John is wonderful to take first holy communion with. (Nabeshima (1993))

However, not all tough constructions are based on experience. See the following examples.

(10) a. A nuclear missile is not easy for normal persons to produce.
   b. God is impossible to kill.

(11) a. I don’t know whether John is easy to please.
   b. I can’t say that John is easy to please.

Generic sentences like (10) don’t need any actual experience and tough constructions are well-formed
even in the contexts like (11), where the speaker’s experience is denied. In fact, we find some tough constructions with first perfectly acceptable, but it is rather complex given a for-phrase. In some tough constructions, the well-formedness depends on a for-phrase.

(12) a. The first baby is tough (for people in general) to bear.
   b. *The first baby is tough for Mary to bear.

The above sentence is possible if a for-phrase expresses the implicit Agent or a noun with kind-reference rather than a definite noun. In tough constructions, the property reading is possible even if there is no element to contribute to genericity because genericity is brought from the implicit Agent of the infinitive, as in:

(13) This car is easy to drive. (= This car is easy for people in general to drive.)

We will explain the relation of genericity and a for-phrase in tough constructions.

Third, we will deal with nonfinite perfect form (have plus a past participle) in tough construction such as:

(14) *She was great to have worked with. \hfill (Jones (1990))

Jones (1990) claims that the impossibility of aspect have in tough constructions is attributed to their syntactic structure: tough constructions don’t have a CP but a VP as their complement. We will claim that it is not necessarily the case, since some tough constructions can include the perfect form in the complement and others cannot. We will also verify that the availability of the nonfinite perfect forms in tough constructions is attributed to a semantic problem rather than a syntactic problem. In the next section we will analyze the problematic phenomena mentioned in this section.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Past Event

It appears that the following sentence is not consistent with our theory because it is grammatical in spite of an expression referring to a specific time.
(15) The book was easy to sell **yesterday**.

The interpretation of this sentence refers not to a specific or unique event in a specific time but to the several indefinite events over the time. Exactly to say, (15) is ambiguous in the interpretation of **yesterday**. One reading of **yesterday** is **for yesterday in people could sell books easily for yesterday**. The other reading is **until yesterday in the book had been easy to sell until yesterday, but today it will be more difficult**. Whichever **yesterday** means, the **book** in (15) is interpreted as if it were a plural noun, "books with this title --- but not the same book." That enables us to have an iterative reading of the event expressed in the infinitive of tough constructions.

Next, consider the following tough construction including a common noun as its subject and the past tense together with an expression referring to a point of the past time.

(16) John was easy to please **on Friday**.

**On Friday** in this case does not refer to a specific time but **every Friday**, or **on Fridays**. So, the whole sentence expresses the habitual reading in the past such as **John used to be easy to please every Friday for some reason (for example, John got wages on Fridays)**. This sentence is grammatical because it rather has a habitual reading than expresses a particular event. See the next sentence with **last Friday**, which precludes such a habitual reading.

(17) John was easy to please **last Friday**.

This sentence is odd but acceptable if this sentence means a speaker’s surprise, as in **John is usually not easy to please, but, to my surprise, John was easy to please only last Friday**. In other words, the speaker aims at a rhetorical effect, or an irony, with emphasis on a speaker’s surprise gained by breaking a kind of rule that tough constructions cannot refer to the state in any specific point of time. Tough constructions in the past as well as in the present also express genericity like a habitual reading. This speaker’s surprise is based on such a characteristic of tough constructions and (17) does not form a counterexample. Next, we will see the relation between **for-phrases and first** of tough constructions in the past.
4.2. *For NPs and First of Tough Constructions in the Past*

This section shows that the grammaticality of tough constructions sometimes depends on the relationship between the tense and a for-phrase. When the subject of tough constructions expresses the unique entity or event in the past, the sentence is ungrammatical.

(18) *The picture by Yamagata Hiro was easy to sell yesterday.*

Note that the picture drawn by Yamagata Hiro is unique in the world. A tough construction with such a subject cannot co-exist with the past tense. In contrast, some tough constructions in the past tense are possible in spite of the unique subject modified by first.

(19) a. The first baby was tough for Mary to bear.

   b. *The first baby is tough for Mary to bear.*

(19a) is paraphrased by the following: *the first baby was tougher for Mary to bear than the other children.* Even if the first baby uniquely refers to an entity like John, the event expressed in the infinitive refers not to the unique event like the first birth but to the several events like births and the subject is involved in one of the births. A tough predicate easy describes the speaker's judgement on the event. On the other hand, the tough construction in (19b) is not grammatical because the infinitive for Mary to bear the first baby refers to the unique event.

See the ill-formed sentence below:

(20) *When John was 14, the first date was pleasant for him to have.*

It is possible to pick out the first date among the dates John have had in his life and to describe it but this sentence is limited to a point of the past time, his age of 14, so that it is unacceptable.

We find that tough constructions with the implicit Agent such as for people in general don't make difference between the past tense and the present tense in grammaticality.

(21) a. The first baby was tough (for people in general) to bear.

   b. The first baby is tough (for people in general) to bear.
(21) has such interpretation as *people generally think that the delivery of a first baby is or was tough.* Genericity is brought from the implicit Agent and *the first baby* does not refer to any specific individual and has a generic or kind reading.

To sum up, tough constructions are related to some events or genericity without specifying the time. That is why tough constructions are said to be experiencially-based.

4.3. The Nonfinite Perfect Form

It is said that such a nonfinite form as *to have done* expresses not aspect but tense because the nonfinite form in the complement indicates the time prior to that of the matrix clause. In other words, it is used when there is a difference in the tense between the matrix clause and the complement clause (cf. Comrie (1976)). Therefore, a sentence in the perfect form precludes an expression referring to a point of past time like *yesterday*, whereas a complement in the perfect form doesn’t.

(22) a. John seems to have studied English *yesterday*.

b. *John has studied English yesterday.*

As for tough constructions, not all the nonfinite perfect form are impossible. That is, some tough constructions cannot include non-finite perfect form in the complement and others can.

(23) a. *These books {are / were} easy to have sold yesterday.*

b. These books were easy to have sold *by seven o'clock.*

(23a) is impossible even in such a reading as *I now think books of this kind are easy to sell, which I didn't realize when I sold some yesterday.* With *by seven o'clock* in (23b) instead of *yesterday* in (23a), the sentence is grammatical. This is true of the sentences including *reach the summit of this mountain*.

(24) a. The summit of this mountain was easy to have reached *at seven o'clock.*

b. The summit of this mountain was easy to have reached *by seven o'clock.*

*By*-phrases refer to a deadline or time which something happens at or before. *By seven o'clock* does not indicate such a specific time of happening as *at seven o'clock*. In (23b) and (24b) the event did not necessarily occur *at seven o'clock.*
In addition, there is no problem when the complement expresses the state as follows:

(25) a. Tokyo is tough to have lived in **for a long time**.
    b. John was difficult to have loved **for a long time**.
    c. English was easy for me to have studied **since childhood**.

With such an expression as **for a long time**, (14), which Jones (1991) regards as ungrammatical, is grammatical. These facts show that the nonfinite perfect form of tough constructions expresses not the tense but the aspect in a sharp contrast with the other nonfinite perfect forms. It, as well as the finite perfect form, cannot co-exist with expressions to refer to a point of the past time, since the perfect in English tells us nothing directly about the situation in itself but rather relates some state to the preceding situation.

Again we show that the complements of tough constructions express rather events related to previous situations in the past or habitual states "over a period of time" than a specific event in the past.

5. As Compared with Middle Constructions

In this section, we will briefly overview the genericity of middle constructions in Matsumoto and Fujita (1995) and compare them with tough constructions. They divide genericity into two, following Krifka (1998): Definite-genericity and Indefinite-genericity. In other words, Definite-genericity corresponds to kind and Indefinite-genericity object in Carlsonian ontology. Particularly, Indefinite-genericity involves two reading: a habitual reading and a property reading. Middle constructions show both Definite-genericity and Indefinite-genericity, but they have rather a property reading than a habitual reading of Indefinite-genericity.

(26) This car handles smoothly.  (Matsumoto and Fujita (1995))

For example, Definite-genericity (kind-reference) of (26) is derived from the implicit Agent of middle constructions; (26) is interpreted as **people, in general, can handle this car smoothly**. Moreover, it always describes the property of **this car** and shows Indefinite-genericity (object) as **it is a necessary property of this car that people generally handles it smoothly**.

Note that Definite-genericity of middle constructions depends on the implicit Agent.
(27) This car breaks easily for students.

(28) This car breaks easily {for the students / for John}.  (Matsumoto and Fujita (1995, note 4))

Definite-genericity in (27) is brought from the bare plural students which refers to a kind. On the other hand, with definite phrases for the students or for John, (28) is no longer interpreted as Definite-generically. Compare middle constructions and tough constructions:

(29) This car is easy {for the students / for John} to please.

Although the middle construction in (28) is similar to the tough construction in (29), they are different in that for-phrases are obligatorily stressed in middle constructions, and not in tough constructions. This shows that the middle constructions including a for-phrase are marked, since the middle constructions usually have such a property reading as is the case with everyone rather than a habitual reading expressed by a for-phrase.

Tough constructions have both a property reading and a habitual reading in unmarked ways unlike middle constructions. A habitual reading concerning the participants in for-phrases makes possible such sentences as the first baby was easy for Mary to bear, as we have observed.

It is pointed out that middle constructions are compatible with various tenses including the past tense, of course as in: the book sold easily yesterday. Umata (1996) claims that middle constructions express "indefinite" events by "indefinite" participants over a period of time. In fact, the participants or Agents of middle constructions are overtly expressed, as we have just seen. Therefore, tough constructions have much to do with middle constructions. Matsumoto and Fujita (1995) analyzes the English middle as an individual-level predicate under the minimalist theory of syntax. Tough constructions and middle constructions are different in how the participants or the Agents are involved in the eventualities. There is room for further investigation.

6. Conclusion

This paper claims a characteristic of tough constructions is that they cannot refer to an isolated fact in the past, since they are constructions whose predicate applies to individual-level. Tough constructions even in the past tense express the state or episodes over a period of the past time. Moreover, as well as the perfect form in finite verbal constructions, the nonfinite perfect form in tough constructions expresses the aspect rather than the tense, so that they are not compatible with an
expression referring to a particular past time. Last, we have briefly observed the comparison of tough constructions and middle constructions in light of genericity.

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