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English Tough constructions and their analogues in French and Russian: a parallel corpus investigation.

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The languages of the world present great variability in form-to-meaning mappings. Such diversity comes out clearly when one examines how constructions are used. For instance, evaluative constructions involving Tough predicates (e.g., This road is difficult to cross) present atypical mappings and vary greatly across languages: in some languages (e.g., English/French), speakers typically use so-called tough constructions (TC) – constructions involving sentences in which the syntactic subject NP of the matrix is logically the missing object of an embedded non-finite verb (Chung 2001; Guérin 2006 but see Van de Velde 2020 on the functional alternatives French offers); in others such as Russian (RU) – a language without such syntactic property – speakers opt for a variety of functional analogues (e.g., impersonal constructions, use of passives, deverbals) (Comrie/Matthews 1990; Paykin/Van Peteghem 2020).

Despite a growing interest in TC asymmetries and this great crosslinguistic variability, little is still known about the involvement of the semantic aspects of such evaluative constructions (e.g., the scope of the adjective, the animacy of the involved NP, or the degree of transitivity of the non-finite verb) and their role in across- and within-language variation (Becker/Estigarribia/Gylfadottir 2012; Boutault 2020; Kim 2014; Tayalati/Mostrov/Van de Velde 2020).

The aim of this paper is to explore and contrast the syntactic and semantic features of TC and their analogues in French and Russian based on a parallel corpus, identify the most typical patterns across these systems, and investigate how specific semantic properties (NP animacy, adjective scope, transitivity) relate to specific evaluative configurations.

The corpus study, based on the Opus corpus subtitles database (Tiedemann/Thottingal 2020), allowed to extract target English TC as source patterns using attribute expressions that contained two of the most frequently occurring adjectives within TC (difficult and easy) which were further mapped and compared with the corresponding aligned translations in French and Russian. In total, 375 target segments were identified (125 with difficult and 250 with easy).

The results show that even though English and French have been thought to belong to the same language type, French seems to allow a multitude of functional equivalents (e.g., reflexive uses, deverbals, compact suffixed adjectival predicates) that co-exist with typical TC, as previously suggested by Van de Velde (2020). With respect to Russian, this language offers mainly constructions involving a predicative (Comrie/Matthews 1990; Shcherba 2004), passive uses (Paykin/Van Peteghem 2020) and alternatively some compact adjectivals, deverbals and some other functional analogues (e.g., distributive adjectival uses, impersonals). Additionally, the data suggest that, although French and Russian offer similar functional patterns, their contexts of use differ to some extent. More specifically, the analysis showed that the animacy of the NP as well as the adjective-type do not influence much the choice among different functional analogues, as opposed to the degree of transitivity of the English embedded infinitive, which had a differential impact in the translations:

although highly-transitive verbs allowed for great functional variability in both Russian and French, less prototypical contexts for evaluatives (low-transitive ones) led to an almost unique functional strategy in Russian translations (use of predicatives).

This parallel corpus study allowed an in-depth investigation of a grammatical phenomenon that is only little discussed for Russian, and mainly explored from a syntactic point of view in English and in French. The findings support a multidimensional account of evaluative constructions that takes into account their inherent semantic properties, and further suggest a classification on a cline of tough-predication according to their degree of compactness.

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