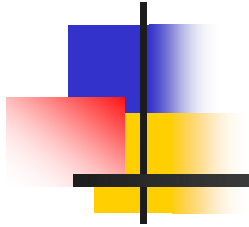# *Tough*-Construction in British English Non-Fiction Texts 1550-1950.
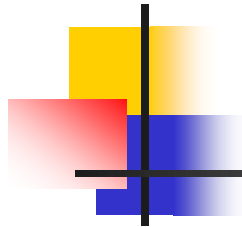
A Case Study of *Difficult*

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Tough-construction (TC)

- n Postal 1971 – *tough*-movement
- n *John is <u>tough/easy/difficult</u> to please.*
- n The grammatical subject is the logical object of the action expressed by the infinitival clause verb

The corpus

- Compiled by Dr. Mark Kaunisto for his 2004 dissertation *Adjective pairs ending in* -ic *and* -ical*: a study of variation and change across centuries*

- British non-fiction texts 1550-1950, 8.5 million words

- Composition:

	authors	texts	word count
1550-99	18	21	582,000
1600-49	38 (+4 anon.)	49	1,254,000
1650-99	47 (+6 anon.)	80	1,859,000
1700-49	20	23	489,000
1750-99	25	31	1,677,000
1800-49	28	40	1,221,000
1850-99	29	49	1,056,000
1900-50	17	25	384,000

Weaknesses of the corpus

- n Different compositions of the 50-year subcorpora
  - n different number of texts
  - n different number of authors
  - n different word counts
  - n word counts of individual texts within each 50-year period vary greatly
- n In the analysis, these have to be taken into consideration

Method

- n Software: MonoConc Pro
- n Search string: "difficult to". Finds basic TCs
- n The search string also finds extraposed sentences (*it is difficult to please John*) and a small number of other irrelevant cases.
- n TCs manually identified from the data

1550-1599 (582,000 words)

- No instances

- One *difficult*, in predicative position:

    Namely to make him ambitious of honour, iealous and *difficult* in his worships, terrible, angrie, vindicatiue, a louer, a hater, a pitier, and indigent of mans worships: finally so passionate as in effect he shold be altogether Anthropopathis.

    (George Puttenham, *English Poesie* 1589)

1600-1649 (1,254,000 words)

- n   3 TCs

  - n   one TC of the 'normal' form:

    But if he take all Discontents on this side Adultery, to be common, that is to say, not *difficult to* endure[...] (John Milton, *Colasterion* 1645)

  - n   in two TCs, the infinitive is in the passive:

    [...]that for the act of Adultery it [the prove] is as *difficult to* be found as the track of an eagle in the air,[...] (John Milton, *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* 1643)

    [..]but is grounded upon some rational cause not *difficult to* be apprehended[...] (John Milton, *Tetrachordon* 1645)

1600-1649 (1,254,000 words)

- n Notes:
  - n All the examples from Milton (6 texts, 166,000 words, 13%)
    à Low generalizability
  - n Milton uses both the normal TC with the active *to*-clause, but also the variant where the infinitival clause is in the passive (TC_{pass})
    à Motivation for this variation?

1650-1699 (1,859,000 words)

- 8 TCs in five different authors' texts
  - of these, 3 TC_{pass}

- Margaret Cavendish (3 TCs) uses both variants:

Most Hectick Feavers are caused by an Excessive Heat in the Arteries, which Heat is more *difficult to* quench, than to stop a prickt Artery: […] (Margaret Cavendish, *The World's Olio* 1655)

True Love is an Affection, which is very *difficult to* settle, and hard to remove, when once placed. (Margaret Cavendish, *The World's Olio* 1655)

[…] but I found the World too *difficult to* be understood by my tender yeers, and weak capacity, […] (Margaret Cavendish, *The World's Olio* 1655)

1700-1749 (489,000 words)

- n 4 TCs
  - n ALL 4 are TC_{pass}
  - n three from John Dennis and one from John Ray (120,000 words, 24,5%).

1750-1799 (1,677,000 words)

- n 41 TCs
  - n of these, 16 TC_{pass}
- n Different authors have very different practices
  - n Adam Smith:
    55 instances of "difficult to", of which only 8 TCs (5 TC_{pass})
  - n James Stewart:
    24 instances of "difficult to", of which 18 TCs (10 TC_{pass})

    à When it comes to TCs, these two writers favour the passive variant.

1750-1799 (1,677,000 words)

- 6 authors (1,276,000 words, 76%) use TCs
  - Stewart 18, Smith 8, Banks 7, Ellis 4, Bentham 3, Paine 1
- 3 of these accommodate the passive variant
  - Stewart 10, Smith 5, Ellis 1

"difficult to"	TC	TC_{pass}	Percentage of TC_{pass} of TCs
121	41	16	39%

1750-1799 (1,677,000 words)

- What motivates the use of either TC or TC$_{pass}$?
  - The infinitive clause verb?

    The scheme of a general excise was pushed with too much vivacity, was made a matter of party, was ill-timed, and the people nowise prepared for it; hence it will be the more *difficult to* bring about at another time, without the greatest precautions. (James Stewart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* 1767)

    If this be *difficult to* be brought about, from the want of confidence in the moneyed men, he may, in their favour, contrive expedients to become the borrower himself, […] (James Stewart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* 1767)

1750-1799 (1,677,000 words)

- n What motivates the use of either TC or TC_{pass}?
  - n The environment?

    The last, or the knowledge of the manners of a people, is by far the most *difficult to* acquire, and yet is the most open to every person's observation. (James Stewart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* 1767)

    [...] but I must confess that the first is by far the most *difficult to* be obtained. (James Stewart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* 1767)

1800-1849 (1,221,000 words)

- 20 TCs
  - The previous 50-year period 41 TCs
    à A significant decline (24.5 pmw à 16.4 pmw)
- Of the 20 TCs, 6 TC$_{pass}$
  - The previous 50-year period 41 TCs / 16 TC$_{pass}$
    à A small drop in comparison to normal TCs
  - But, a significant drop in frequency per million words
    9.5 pmw à 4.9 pmw

1850-1899 (1,056,000 words)

- 17 TCs
  - The proportion of TCs about the same as in the first half of the 19th century
- Only 2 TC$_{pass}$
  - TC$_{pass}$ on the decline (1.9 pmw)

1900-1950 (384,000 words)

- n 10 TCs
- n Not a single TC_{pass}

Summary of the findings

Period	word count	"difficult to"		TC		TC$_{pass}$	
1550-99	582,000	0	0 pmw	0	0 pmw	0	0 pmw
1600-49	1,254,000	5	4.0 pmw	3	2.4 pmw	2	1.6 pmw
1650-99	1,859,000	17	9.1 pmw	8	4.3 pmw	3	1.6 pmw
1700-49	489,000	8	16.4 pmw	4	8.2 pmw	4	8.2 pmw
1750-99	1,677,000	121	72.2 pmw	41	24.5 pmw	16	9.5 pmw
1800-49	1,221,000	117	95.8 pmw	20	16.4 pmw	6	4.9 pmw
1850-99	1,056,000	96	90.9 pmw	17	16.1 pmw	2	1.9 pmw
1900-50	384,000	32	83.3 pmw	10	26.0 pmw	0	0 pmw

TCs in a larger context

Period	*difficult*s		"difficult to" of all *difficult*s	TCs of all "difficult to"	TC_{pass} of all TCs
1550-99	1	1.72 pmw	0 %	0 %	0 %
1600-49	30	23.9 pmw	17 %	60 %	67 %
1650-99	89	47.9 pmw	19 %	47 %	38 %
1700-49	34	69.5 pmw	24 %	50 %	100 %
1750-99	226	134.8 pmw	54 %	34 %	39 %
1800-49	221	181.0 pmw	53 %	17 %	30 %
1850-99	174	164.8 pmw	55 %	18 %	12 %
1900-50	73	190.1 pmw	44 %	31 %	0 %

Conclusions

- TC has gained ground since the 16th century in terms of frequency per million words

- Only a slight drop in the 19th century in both frequency pmw and compared to the extraposed construction

- Possible reasons for the increase in TCs:
    - Overall increase in the use of the word *difficult*
    - Increased use of *to*-clause complementation

Conclusions (continued)

- The passive variant TC_{pass}
  - Co-existed with the 'normal', active TC
  - Apparently could be used interchangeably (no lexical conditioning, no semantic or pragmatic differences)
  - Used less than the active TC à after a peak in the 18th century, TC_{pass} gradually faded away and became obsolete

- Which one was earlier, TC or TC_{pass}?
- Did they evolve independently?

Conclusions (continued)

- The situation nowadays (a sneak peek at the BNC, random sample of 100 "difficult to" in non-fiction texts)

- 34% are TCs

- No instances of TC_{pass}

- TCs 39,5 pmw

  à significant increase from 1900-1950 (26,0 pmw)

References

- Kaunisto, Mark. 2004. *Adjective Pairs Ending in* -ic *And* –ical*: A Study of Variation And Change across Centuries*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Tampere.
- Postal, Paul M. 1971. *Cross-Over Phenomena*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Thanks for attending the presentation!

Comments are more than welcome.