"Bridging the gap" between French *tough*-constructions and pseudo-relatives[1]

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1. The case of the French *tough*-construction

1.1. Prepositional alternation

Tough-constructions (henceforth **TC**, Lees, 1960; Chomsky, 1964; Rosenbaum 1967 a.o.) involve a subjective predicate (like *tough*, *easy*, *impossible*, *important*, *annoying*) embedding an infinitival clause, and taking an optionally overt EXPERIENCER argument, as shown in (1) for English. In both English and French, TCs famously alternate between a "gapped" variant (1a)/(2a) and an "impersonal" variant (1b)/(2b). The former features a DP-like subject and a gapped infinitival clause. The latter features a subject proform (English *it*, French il/c'), and a gapless infinitive. Unlike English, which makes use of the clause-introducing preposition *to* across the board, French exhibits an alternation between two prepositions: *à* in gapped TCs (2a) vs. *de* in impersonal TCs (2b), the latter being optionally preceded by the complementizer *que*.[2] We dub gapped TCs like (2a) *à*-TCs, and impersonal TCs like (2b), *de*-TCs. What is the reason behind the prepositional alternation in French TCs, and what further differentiates them from English TCs?

(1) a. **John** is tough (for Mary) to convince __.
b. **It** is tough (for Mary) to convince John.

[1] I wanted to thank my advisors David Pesetsky and Athulya Aravind for the fruitful discussions on the *tough*-construction in English, French, and beyond. I also wanted to thank Donca Steriade for helping me clarify some data in Romanian, Tia Wulansari for sharing her intuitions about *tough*-constructions in Jakartan Indonesian during a fieldwork class, Anastasia Tsilia, Lorenzo Pinton, and Giovanni Roversi for sharing their judgments in Greek and Italian. Lastly, I wanted to thank the organizers and participants of SICOGG 25, in particular Rajesh Bhatt for the useful questions, discussions and comments about this work. All mistakes are mine.

[2] The use of *que* is fairly rare and mostly restricted to higher registers. Below are a few examples taken from the Internet (respectively: address of the former French president François Mitterrand; academic paper by Nadège Carbonnel; online interview of French singer Mylène Farmer).

(i) c'est dur, c'est difficile **que** de voir ici et là son pouvoir d'achat affaibli [...]
https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/136059-interview-de-m-francois-mitterrand-president-de-la-republique-accorde

(ii) il est aisé **que** de tomber immédiatement sous le charme de cet homme [...]
https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-02274841/document

(iii) Mais, après, c'est difficile **que** de s'avouer qu'on est capable de le faire [...]
https://www.mylene.net/mylene/mylene-farmer_interview_escale_mcm_02-janvier-1993.php

(2) a. **Jean** est (pour Marie) difficile **à** convaincre _.
Jean is (for Marie) tough À convince _.
'Jean is tough for Marie to convince.'
b. **Il** est (pour Marie) difficile (que) **de** convaincre Jean.
It is (for Marie) tough (that) DE convince Jean.
'It is tough for Marie to convince Jean.'

1.2. A non-composite dependency

English gapped TCs famously exhibit both A and Ā properties, what has been sometimes dubbed a composite dependency (Longenbaugh, 2017). By contrast, the dependency established between the matrix subject of *à*-TCs and the embedded position exhibits A, but not Ā properties. (3), (4), and (5) are adapted from English examples in Longenbaugh (2017) and respectively show that the subject-object dependency in *à*-TCs is not sensitive to weak-crossover effects, feeds Binding Principle A (in that *voiture*$_i$ can successfully bind the anaphor [*son propre*]$_i$), and bleeds Binding Principle C (in that the R-expression *Marie*$_i$ would have been bound by the EXPERIENCER pronoun *elle*$_i$, had it been in the embedded gap position). Those three properties tend to signal A-dependencies.

(3) **No weak crossover**
Aucun animal$_i$ n'est pour son$_i$ maître facile à abandonner _.
No pet$_i$ NEG-is for its$_i$ owner easy to abandon _.

(4) **Feeds Condition A**
Cette voiture$_i$ est pour [son propre]$_i$ conducteur difficile à démarrer _.
This car$_i$ is for [its own]$_i$ driver tough to start _.

(5) **Bleeds Condition C**
Le père de Marie$_i$ est pour elle$_i$ difficile à apprécier _.
Le father of Marie$_i$ is for her$_i$ tough to like _.

Additionally, (6) and (7) (also adapted from Longenbaugh, 2017), show that the dependency cannot cross multiple clausal boundaries, license parasitic gaps, or create islands for extraction. These three properties would have been characteristic of Ā-movement.[3]

[3] The argument based on long distance dependencies might be weakened by the possibility of embedding under causatives (Kayne, 1977):

(i) Cette decision sera difficile à faire accepter au comité

The argument based on parasitic gaps is weakened by the fact that parasitic gaps are only marginally accepted inthe standard case:

(ii) ? Quel livre as-tu vraiment apprécié $_{-g}$ sans complètement lire $_{-pg}$?
Which book have-you really appreciate $_{-g}$ without fully read $_{-pg}$
'Which book did you really appreciate without reading in full?'

(6) **No long-distance embedding**
?? Ce livre est dur à convaincre Marie de lire __.
This book is hard to convince Marie to read __.

(7) **No parasitic gap**
?? Ce livre est dur à vraiment apprécier $\__g$ sans complètement lire $\__{pg}$.
This book is hard to really appreciate $\__g$ without fully read $\__{pg}$.

(8) **No island creation**
? Qui_2 les enfants_1 sont-ils difficiles [à convaincre $\__1$ [d'apprécier $\__2$]]?
Who_2 the children_1 are-they tough [À convince $\__1$ [to-like $\__2$]]?
'Who is the person x such that the kids are tough to convince to like x?'

Lastly, it is worth noting that French *à*-TCs, unlike English TCs, disallow dependencies linking the matrix subject to an embedded adjunct position (cf. (9a)/(9b) vs. (9c)). In other words, only object-gap dependencies appear possible in French *à*-TCs. This is consistent with the absence of Ā-movement in those constructions, and also, might be linked to some observations made in the next section, pertaining to their passive-like properties.

(9) a. **This road** is tough for Mary to drive her car on __.
b. **Tomorrow** will be tough for John to talk to Mary __.
c. **Demain** sera pour Jean difficile { *à, *de } parler à Marie __.
Tomorrow will be for Jean tough { *À, *DE } talk to Marie __.
Intended: 'Tomorrow will be tough for John to talk to Marie.'

1.3. Passive properties

On top of being A, the subject-object dependency in *à*-TCs is passive-like, as pointed out by Authier and Reed (2009), and Aguila-Multner and Crysmann (2022), building on classic observations by Kayne (1975). In particular, *à*-TCs and passives allow to separate the same kinds of idioms (10), and both disallow an indefinite reading of the pronoun *on* (11).[4]

(10) **Idiom chunk separability in TCs and passives (adapted from Kayne, 1975, and Authier and Reed, 2009)**
a. Assistance est {difficile à porter / portée} aux victimes d'inondations.
Assistance is {tough to carry / carried} to victims of-floodings.
'Help is {difficult to make / made} available to flood victims.'
b. ?[4] La croûte est {difficile à casser pour / cassée par} les ouvriers a midi.
The crust is {tough to break for / broken by} the workers at noon.
Intended idiomatic readings: 'It is tough for the workers to have their snack at noon.' (TC) / 'A snack is eaten by the works at noon.' (passive)

[4] Note that *on* always triggers third person singular verbal agreement, but can be understood as either a third person indefinite (like English *someone*/*they*), or, as a colloquial way to express first person plural (like English *we*). First person plural agreement can still surface syntactically, on adjectives or participles (e.g. *faciles*, *convaincus*) which unlike the main verb appear to agree with the "semantic" gender and number of the pronoun.

[5] Here '?' means the sentence is strange because its idiomatic reading is unavailable.

(11) **Unavailability of an indefinite reading of *on* in TCs and passives**
On {est facile*(s) à convaincre / a été convaincu*(s) par Marie}.
We/*They {is easy.PL to convince / has been convinced.PL by Marie}.

The questions that remain are then: why don't *à*-TCs show any passive morphosyntax (no past participle, no *by*-adjunct)? How does the matrix subject of *à*-TCs end up in its position? And why is the French *à*-TC passive-like in the first place, unlike its English counterpart?

2. Key idea

This paper is an attempt to relate the French *à*-TC to another construction attested in that language (and unattested in English), the **P**seudo-**R**elative **C**onstruction (henceforth **PRC**, Radford, 1975; Schwarze, 1974; Guasti 1988 a.o.). We show that the infinitival clause of *à*-TCs can be seen as an infinitival PR (in the sense of Sportiche, 2011 and Koopman and Sportiche 2014), which underwent an additional passivization process (following insights by Aguila-Multner and Crysmann 2022) in order to fit the complex argument structure of *tough*-predicates. As for *de*-TCs, we argue that they simply involve an embedded CP or TP.

2.1. Background on the pseudo-relative construction (PRC)

Pseudo-relative constructions[6] are often surface-similar to appositive relatives, as shown in (12a). Three main properties however, differentiate PRs from standard relatives: (i) their head noun (in bold in the examples) can be cliticized, i.e. separated from the PR structure (cf. (12b)-12c)); (ii) they mainly appear below perception verbs (cf. (12b));[7] (iii) they only allow subject-gap dependencies (12c). PRs alternate with a more "classic" structure in which a perception verb embeds a full CP (cf. (12d)).

(12) a. Jean voit {**Marie**, **la fille**} qui danse.
Jean sees {Marie, the girl} who dances.
'Jean sees Marie/the girl dancing.'
b. Jean **la** {voit, *pense} qui danse.
Jean CL {sees, *thinks} who dances.
'Jean sees her dancing.'
c. * Jean **la** voit que Marc appelle.
Jean CL sees that Marc calls.
Intended: 'Jean sees Marc calling her.'
d. Jean voit que **Marie** danse
Jean sees that Marie dances
'Jean sees that Marie dances.'

[6] Previous selected works of the PR include Schwarze (1974), Radford (1975), Kayne (1975), Graffi (1980), Guasti (1988), Rizzi (1992), Casalicchio (2013). For cross linguistic observations, see Rafel (1999), Grillo and Costa(2014), Papadopoulou and Clahsen (2003), Desmet et al. (2002), Lovrić (2003), Yuan (2022) a.o.

[7] Verbs like *trouver* ('find'), *surprendre* ('catch') or *rencontrer* ('meet'), as well as existential/presentative contexts (*Voilà X qui* ..., 'There is X who...', *X est là qui* ..., 'X is here who...') also appear more or less compatible with the PR (Prebensen, 1982; Graffi, 2016).

PRs have been argued to appear in other constructions of French. Sportiche (2011) and Koopman and Sportiche (2014) in particular, appeal to PRs when discussing the problem of Ā-extraction from the complement of bridge verbs, in sentences such as those in (13). They claim that in such sentences, the apparent long extraction of the subject is actually a case of short extraction from the subject of a pseudo-relative small clause, which allows to explain why the "special" pronoun *qui* is being used in (13a), instead of the usual complementizer *que* – a puzzle already identified by Kayne (1976).

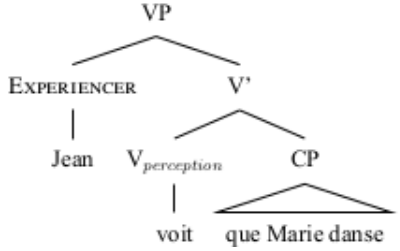
(13) a. Qui$_k$ tu crois {qui,*que} t$_k$ danse avec Jean?
Who$_k$ you think that t$_k$ dances with Jean?
'Who do you think dances with Jean?'

b. Qui$_k$ il disait [t$_k$ [PRO être parti]]?
Who$_k$ he was saying [t$_k$ PRO to be left]]?
'Who was he saying had left?'

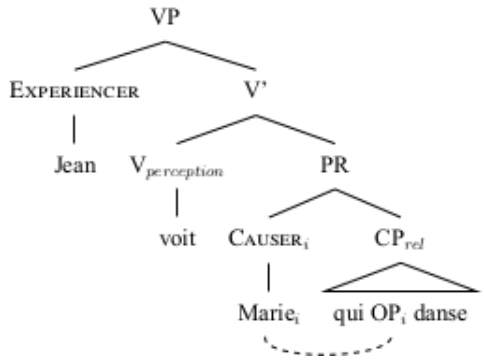
2.2. Parallel between TCs and PRCs

The argument structure of PRCs and TCs are remarkably similar: both perception verbs and *tough*-predicates can either take a whole clause as complement (finite for PRCs, infinitival for TCs), or an element extracted from that clause (subject for PRCs, object for TCs). In both cases, this element is understood as the CAUSER of the perception/toughness-judgment: in (12b) for instance, Marie is seen as the one who makes the dancing-event noticeable; in (2a), Jean is the one who makes the convincing-event difficult (Bayer, 1990; Hukari and Levine, 1990; Kim, 1995). In both cases also, the predicate and the CAUSER seem to undergo agreement: in PRCs, the head of the relative can be attached to the perception verb (cliticized), and in TCs, the *tough*-predicate agrees in gender and number with the matrix subject. Finally, both kinds of predicates are subjective in the sense that they take an obligatory (although not always overt) EXPERIENCER argument. The only, yet crucial, difference regarding this EXPERIENCER argument is that in PRCs, the EXPERIENCER is the subject of the perception verb, while in TCs, it is an extra argument of the *tough*-predicate, which has been claimed to bind a subject PRO in the embedded clause (Pesetsky, 1987). The putative argument structures of clause-taking and PR-taking perception verbs, as well as that of *de*- and *à*-TCs, are sketched in (14)-(17), where dashed arcs indicate binding dependencies. What remains to be done is to explain how the structures we posited for *à*- and *de*-TCs are syntactically derived.

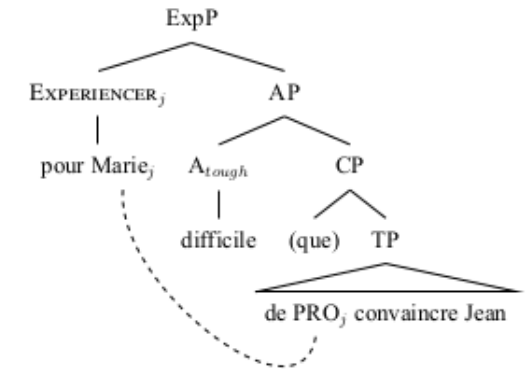
(14) CP under a verb of perception, cf. (14)



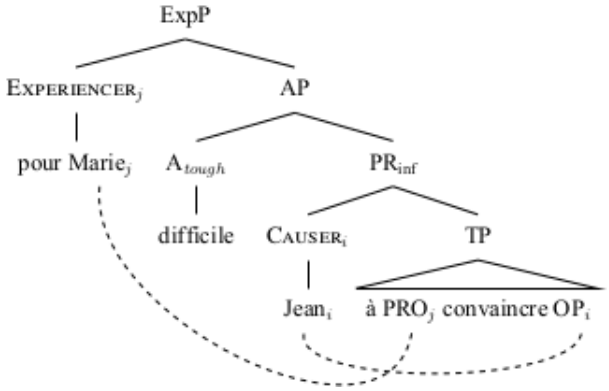
(15) Pseudo relative under a verb of perception, cf. (12a)



(16) CP under a *tough*-predicate (*de*-TC, cf. (2b))



(17) Infinitival PR under a *tough*-predicate (*à*-TC, cf. (2a))



3. Towards an analysis of French TCs

In this section we connect the trees outlined above for TCs to the passive-like properties noted in Section1.3.

3.1. The case of *à*-TCs (17)

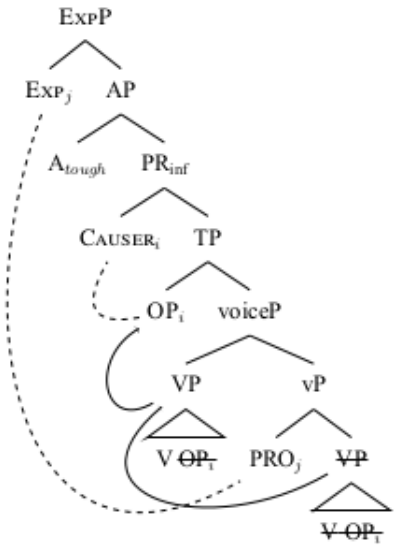
We assume *à*-TCs are built on passivized infinitival PRs. In doing so we follow proposals by Aguila-Multner and Crysmann (2022), and Authier and Reed (2009) regarding passivization in French TCs. We also take inspiration from Sportiche(2011), and Koopman and Sportiche(2014) regarding PR small clauses and the typology of French relativizers, according to which *à* introduces infinitival relatives. Let us focus on the structure surrounding the *tough*-predicate, which we assume starts out as the following:

$$[_{\text{ExpP}}\ \text{EXP}\ [_{\text{AP}}\ A_{tough}\ [_{\text{PR}_{\text{inf}}}\ \text{CAUSER}\ [_{\text{TP}}\ [_{\text{voiceP}}\ [_{v\text{P}}\ \text{PRO}_j\ [_{\text{VP}}\ \text{V}\ \text{OP}_i\ ]]]]]]]$$

The goal is to ensure successful binding between, respectively, CAUSER/OP$_i$, and EXP/PRO$_j$. Assuming *v*P is phasal, only PRO$_j$ (located at its edge) is accessible for binding at that point of the derivation, which would leave the CAUSER/OP$_i$ dependency unresolved. We assume that passivization takes place as a repair, moving the VP containing OP$_i$ higher than *v*P, to Spec-voiceP (following the "smuggling" approach of Collins, 2005[8]). OP$_i$ subsequently moves out of the VP, to Spec-TP. This creates a configuration in which PRO$_j$ and OP$_i$ can be respectively bound by EXP and CAUSER, and for the latter, respecting the subject-gap configuration required by the assumed infinitival PR-structure. This derivation is illustrated in (18) below, whereby solid arrows indicate movement and dashed arcs, binding.

[8] This assumption is just made for concreteness, and we think, does not influence the general form of the deriva-tion.

(18)



Before moving on, let us discuss some of the assumptions made in the above derivation. First, we stipulated that the relative contained a TP instead of a (phasal) CP. This assumption was made to eventually allow for the binding of the two operators OP_i and PRO_j by respectively CAUSER and EXP within the domain defined between Spec-TP and Spec-*v*P. If a CP had been present, only its edge would have in principle been accessible for binding.[9] The absence of a CP layer is also supported by the fact that *à*-TC, unlike *de*-TCs, disallow the use of the complementizer *que*.

Another claim we made was about the necessity of passivization as a repair to allow for double binding. What if the necessary movement operation had been simpler, e.g. only VP-movement to Spec-voiceP? This would have been enough to bring OP_i in the accessible binding domain of either EXP or CAUSER . But this would have allowed PRO (instead of OP) to move to Spec-TP to fulfill the subject-gap requirement of the PR structure, leading to the wrong binding configuration, taking for granted minimality/non-crossing dependencies. Another element supporting passivization is the ban on adjunct gaps in *à*-TCs, which suggests that the only operation allowed to bring OP_i high enough to be bound, is an operation of object-promotion – which is exactly what passivization is. Therefore, passivization is useful for three reasons: (i) explain the passive-like properties of *à*-TCs; (ii) allow for the right double-binding configuration; (iii) fulfill the subject-gap requirement of the stipulated PR structure.

What the previous account does not straightforwardly explain is the lack of obvious passive morphology in *à*-TCs. However, we want to suggest that such morphology does not surface due to the fact that the element which agrees with T is a null operator, devoid of the relevant Φ-features (gender, number) to mark a putative French past participle. A reflex of this failure may the presence of the special marker *à*. Indeed, this particle is not present in sentences like (13b) or (19) below, which have been argued to involve infinitival, yet not passivized PRs.

[9] We might have considered that CP may have multiple specifiers, i.e. multiple "slots" at its edge. This might allow for double binding, but would lead the object-gap dependency in *à*-TCs to have Ā-properties – which doesnot appear to be the case.

(19) Jean voit Marie danser.
Jean sees Marie dance.
'Jean sees Marie dancing'

3.2. The case of *de*-TCs (16)

We now turn to the gapless *de*-TCs, which allow an optional complementizer *que* (cf. (2b)). We therefore assume that sentences like (16) may embed a CP, and are thus analog to (14). The presence (or the absence) of a CP is unproblematic in that case, because the infinitival clause of *de*-TCs only contains one bindee (PRO_j which must be bound by EXP). If CP is indeed present, successful binding can be achieved by moving PRO_j to its specifier, as schematized below. The absence of passivization can explain the use of the standard preposition *de*.[10]

$$[_{\text{ExpP}}\ \text{Exp}_j\ [_{\text{AP}}\ A_{tough}\ [_{\text{CP}}\ \text{PRO}_j\ (\text{que})\ \ldots\ [_{v\text{P}}\ \sout{\text{PRO}_j}\ [_{\text{VP}}\ \text{V DP}]]]]]$$

It is however worth noting that the presence of CP seems to be optional and tied to that of the overt complementizer *que*, as the following examples show via Ā-extraction (∅ just signals the absence of a complementizer). Whenever *que* is present, Ā-extraction out of the embedded clause is impossible, in line with the assumption that some covert element (PRO) already underwent Ā-movement in the CP domain. When *que* is not present, Ā-extraction becomes more acceptable, which might be a sign that no Ā-movement of PRO took place in that case, but instead, maybe, A-movement to Spec-TP.

(20) * Qui vous est-il difficile { *que, ?∅ } d'apprécier?
Who you is-it tough { *that, ?∅ } to-like?
Intended: Who is the individual x such that it is tough for you to like x?

4. A typological generalization?

We argued above that French TCs are different from English ones because French, unlike English, is a language which allows for pseudo-relative constructions. The apparent generalization is then that other languages allowing for pseudo-relatives may also exhibit the distinctive characteristics of French TCs: a prepositional alternation in gapped vs. impersonal TCs, and, for gapped TCs, signs of embedded passivization, and/or agreement between the *tough*-predicate and the matrix subject. Interestingly, the pseudo-relative construction is widespread across Romance, with the notable exception of Romanian (Casalicchio, 2016; Cecchetto and Donati, 2023). Examples (21)-(23) show TCs from Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Italian and Romanian.

(21) Reider (1993)

a. El libro es fácil **de** leer _.
The book is easy DE read.INF _.
'The book is easy to read.'

b. Es fácil leer el libro.
Is easy read.INF the book.
'It is easy to read this book.'

[10] We call de "standard" because, just like *that*/*to* in English, *de* fronts infinitival clauses in predicative positions:

(i) Mon voeu est de finir cet article.
My wish is DE finish this paper.

(22) Martins and Nunes (2005)
a. O João é difícil **de** elogiar __.
the João is difficult DE praise.INF __.
'João is difficult to praise.'

(23) Adapted from Hartman (2009) and Russo Cardona (2022)
a. Questi problemi sono impossibile **da** { capire / capirsi } __.
These problems are impossible DA { understand.INF / understand.INF.CL } __.
'These problems are impossible to understand.'
b. E impossibile capire questi problemi.
Is impossible understand.INF these problems.
'It is impossible to understand these problems.'

(24) Adapted from Giurgea and Soare (2007)
a. Aceste întrebări sunt greu **de** răspuns __.
these questions are hard DE answer.SUP __.
'These questions are hard to answer.'
b. E greu { să răspundem / de răspuns } la aceste întrebări.
is hard { SBJV answer.1.PL / DE answer.SUP } to these questions
'It is hard to answer these questions.'

A first thing to notice is that all languages exhibit some kind of prepositional alternation: the preposition *de*/*da* invariably appears in gapped variants (21a)-(22a)-(23a)-(24a), and, with the exception of Romanian which allows *de* in both variants, never appears in impersonal variants.[11] Romanian allowing *de* in both variants makes it closer to English, which is consistent with the fact that this language does not allow for PRs. Nevertheless, it remains unclear to us why *de/da*, which are likely cognates of French *de,* end up surfacing in gapped TCs in other Romance languages.

A second thing to note has to do with agreement between the *tough*-predicate and its syntactic subject (the CAUSER). Gender/number agreement is noticeable in all languages but Romanian, which only exhibits agreement on the copula. This might be an additional sign that the argument structure of Romanian *tough*-predicates might differ from that of the other Romance languages, in the sense that Romanian *tough*-predicates might not take their subject as a proper syntactic and semantic argument. This difference in argument structure might itself be linked to the fact that Romanian *tough*-predicate are incompatible with PRs.

Lastly, regarding passive features, two languages, Italian and Romanian, optionally exhibit a morphology that is associated with the passive voice in other areas of their syntax. In Italian, the clitic *-si* has been argued to be linked to passive constructions (Belletti, 1982; Russo Cardona, 2022). In Romanian, the supine form was claimed to be involved in the same kind of argument structure as the passive (Giurgea and Soare, 2010). This observation about Romanian is surprising, given our account, but not totally incompatible with it given that Romanian TCs might still require passivization for reasons independent of the existence or absence of a PR structure.

5. Conclusion

[11] According to the literature (Martins and Nunes, 2005), Brazilian Portuguese does not have a "pure" impersonal TC, but instead, a structure that is surface-similar but closer in meaning to a raising construction.

In this paper, we argued that the various specificities of the French gapped *à*-TCs could be accounted for by assuming that these constructions involve a pseudo-relative sub-structure, giving rise to the special preposition *à*. The reason why *à*-TCs only allow object gaps can be linked to their passive features (i.e. the promotion of the embedded object to an embedded subject position) and the locality restrictions of PRs (which only allow subject-gap dependencies). Additionally, we claimed that the passivization witnessed in TCs (and not in standard PRs for instance) was itself triggered by the need for the EXPERIENCER argument of the *tough*-predicate to bind a subject PRO_j in the infinitival clause, thus preventing the bindee of the CAUSER argument (OP_i) to be itself base-generated in the target subject position. This analysis allowed to conflate two questions (pertaining to the gaps of PRs and TCs) into one – *why do PRs require subject gaps?* – that we leave open. It may also help connect French to other languages in the Romance family – and even beyond.[12]

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[12] Preliminary fieldwork on Colloquial Jakartan Indonesian suggests that this language exhibits overt and obliga-tory passive morphology in its gapped TCs, which additionally cannot be long-distance:

(i) a. Bukunya susah (untuk/buat) dibaca
the-book hard to read.PASS
'The book is hard to read.'

b. * Bukunya susah diminta Budi untuk (di)baca.
the-book hard ask.passive Budi to read.(PASS).
Intended: 'The book is hard to ask Budi to read.'

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