"Bridging the gap" between French *tough*-constructions and pseudorelatives

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Introduction

Tough-constructions (**TC**, [1]–[3]) involve a subjective predicate embedding an object-gap infinitival clause. In both English and French, TCs famously alternate between an "impersonal" (1) and an "extracted" (2) variant. Subject-gap dependencies are sharply ungrammatical (3).

(1) **Il** est difficile (que) **de** convaincre Jean.
It is   tough   (that) **DE** convince   Jean.
'It is tough to convince Jean.'   [gapless **de**-TC]

(2) **Jean** est difficile **à** convaincre __.
Jean is   tough   **À** convince   __.
'Jean is tough to convince.'   [object-gap **à**-TC]

(3) * **Jean** est difficile **à** __ dormir.
Jean is   tough   **À** __ sleep   .
Intended: 'Jean has troubles sleeping.'   [*subject-gap **à**-TC]

Like English TCs, French **à**-TCs have A-properties: the "extracted" element does not trigger a weak crossover violation (4); constitutes a new antecedent for condition A (5), and "escapes" condition C violations (6).

(4) [Aucun chat]$_i$ n'est   pour [son$_i$ maître] facile **à** comprendre __.
No   cat   NEG-is for   its   owner easy **À** understand __.

(5) [Ce chien]$_i$ est pour [son propre]$_i$ maître difficile **à** gérer   __.
This dog   is for   its   own   master tough   **À** handle __.

(6) [Le père   de Marie$_*$] est pour elle$_i$ difficile **à** apprécier __.
Le father of Marie   is   for   her tough   **À** like   __.

Moreover, French **à**-TCs pattern like passives in many respects: gradience in idiom chunk separability (7); unavailability of an indefinite reading of the 3.SG/1.PL pronoun *on* (9), stranding of *tous* ('all') (10).[1]

(7) **Assistance** est {difficile **à** porter / portée} aux   victimes.
Assistance is {tough   **À** carry / carried} to-the victims.
Idiom (quite literal): porter assistance ('help')

(8) # **La croûte** sera   {difficile **à** casser / cassée} à midi.
The crust   will-be {tough   **À** break / broken} at noon.
Idiom (quite metaphorical): casser la croûte ('have a snack').

(9) **On**   {est durs   **à** tromper / a   été   trompés}.
We/*someone {is   tough **À** trick   / has been tricked}.

(10) Ces   livres ont été   {durs **à** ranger / rangés} **tous** là.
These books have been {tough **À** put   / put}   all   there.

Unlike English TCs, French TCs exhibit a very limited range of Ā-properties.
➤ By which mechanism are TCs, which are bi-clausal constructions, related to passives?

Key idea

We argue that **à**-TCs are infinitival pseudorelatives (in the sense of [15]), which underwent an additional passivization process (following insights by [18]) in order to fit the complex argument structure of *tough*-predicates. As for **de**-TCs, they simply involve an embedded CP.

Background on the Pseudorelative (PR, [4], [6], [8] a.o.)

PRs are often surface-similar to appositive relatives as shown in (11), but:

- their head noun can be cliticized (12)-(13);
- they only appear below perception verbs (12);
- they only feature *subject*-gaps (13).

(11) Jean voit Marie **qui** danse.
Jean sees Marie **WH** dances.
Jean sees Marie dancing (PR) / Jean sees Marie, who dances (RC).

(12) Jean **la** {**voit** / *pense} **qui** danse.
Jean CL {sees / *thinks} **WH** dances.
Jean sees her dancing.

(13) * Jean **la** voit **que** Marc appelle __.
Jean CL sees **WH** Marc calls   __.
Intended: Jean sees Marc calling her.

PRs alternate with a structure in which a perception verb embeds a full CP, such as *Jean voit que Marie danse* ('Jean sees that Marie dances').

Parallel between TCs and PRs

The arguments of PRs and TCs are strikingly similar:

- both perception verbs and *tough*-predicates can take a clause as complement, cf. (14)/(16), or an element extracted from it, cf. (15)/(17).
- the extracted element is in both cases understood as the Causer of the perception/*toughness*-judgment (cf. [9]–[11], [19] for this point on TCs).
- both kinds of predicate are subjective; however, in PRCs, the Experiencer is the subject of the perception verb, while in TCs, it is an extra "controller" argument of the *tough*-predicate [7], see (16)/(17).

(14) / (15) / (16) / (17)
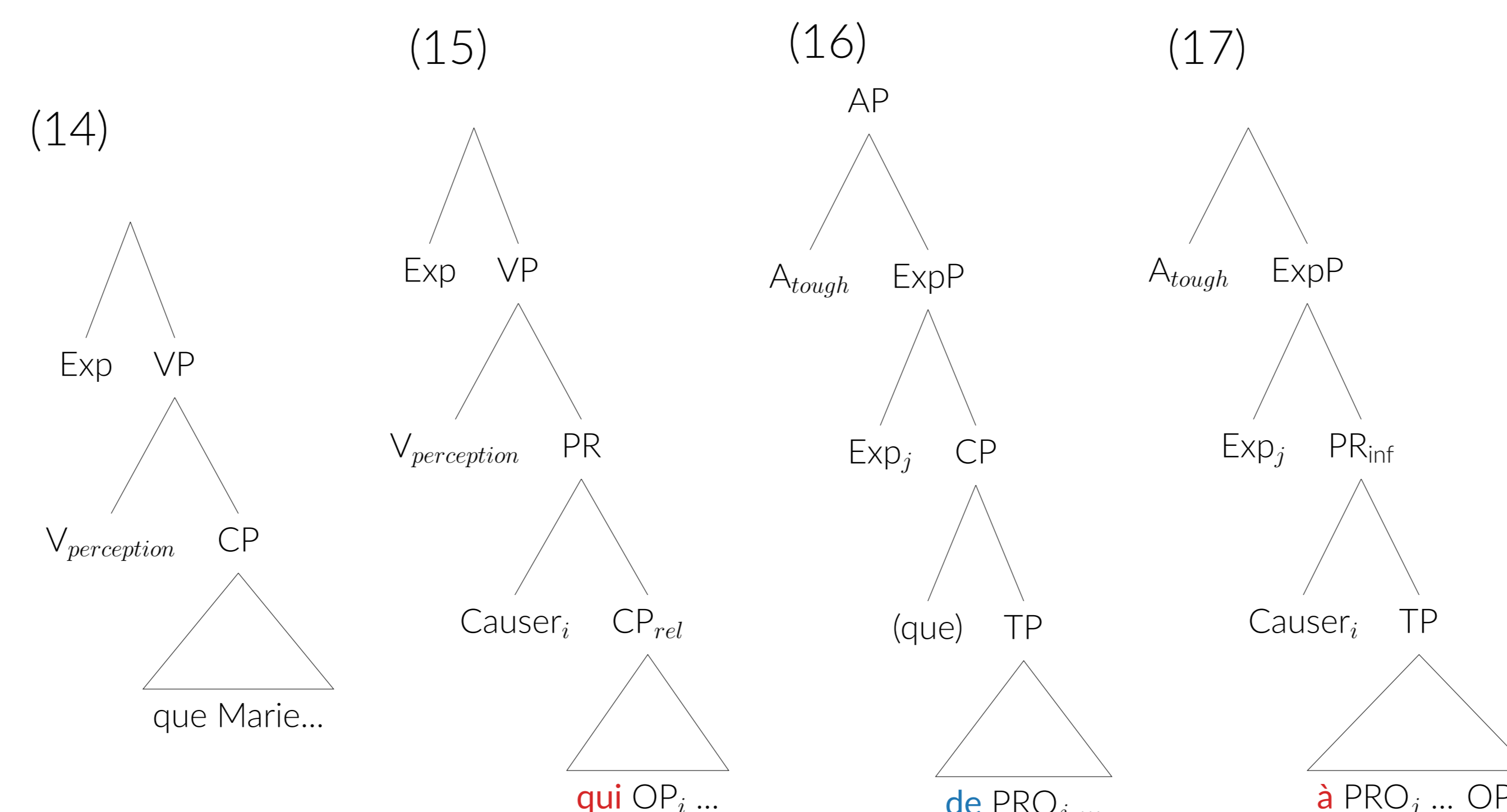
The structure of French TCs

The **à**-case (17).

We assume **à**-TCs are built on passivized PRs, following proposals by [14], [18] regarding passivization in TCs, and [15], [16] regarding the PR-structure of **à**-clauses in a potentially related context.[2] We take (17) as a starting point, where Exp and Causer both bind into the infinitival clause.[3] Assuming vP is phasal, only PRO$_j$ is accessible for binding, which would leave the Causer dependency unresolved. Passivization takes place as a repair, moving the VP containing OP$_i$ higher than vP, to Spec-voiceP (following [13]), with OP$_i$ moving further 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:

$$[_{ExpP} \text{ Exp}_j \text{ } [_{PR_{inf}} \text{ Causer}_i \text{ } [_{TP} \text{ OP}_i \text{ } [_{voiceP} \text{ } [\textbf{V OP}_i \text{ }] \text{ } [_{vP} \text{ PRO}_j \text{ } [_{vP} \text{ V OP}_i \text{ }]]]]]]$$

We think passive morphology is absent due to the subject's being a null operator, devoid of the relevant Φ-features to mark a putative past participle. The special marker **à** may constitute an artifact of this failure.[4]

The **de**-case (16).

Because **de**-TCs can exhibit an optional complementizer *que* (cf. (1)), we assume (16) embeds a CP and is thus analog to (14). A (phasal) CP is unproblematic here, because the infinitival clause of **de**-TCs only contains one bindee (PRO$_j$ which must be bound by Exp). Successful binding can be achieved by moving PRO$_j$ to Spec-CP. The presence of a CP (or the absence of passivization) can explain the use of the standard preposition **de**.[5]

$$[_{ExpP} \text{ Exp}_j \text{ } [_{CP} \textbf{ PRO}_j \text{ (que) ... } [_{vP} \text{ PRO}_j \text{ } [_{VP} \text{ V DP}]]]]$$
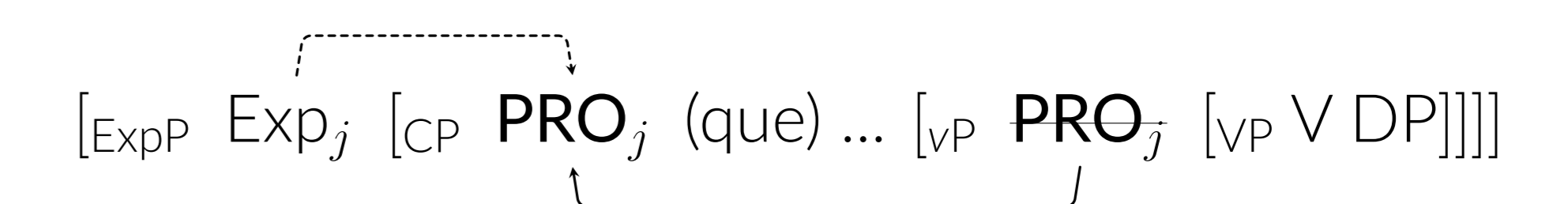
Conclusion

We argued that TCs only allow object gaps due to them being passivized PRs. Moreover, we claimed that the passivization witnessed in TCs (and not in standard PRs) is triggered by the more complex argument structure of *tough*-predicates, which require both an Experiencer and a Causer argument to bind operators within the embedded clause. This analysis allowed us to conflate two gap-related puzzles 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 (e.g. Italian, whose TCs are also clause-bounded [12] and which is also a PR-language, or Romanian, which exhibits a special "supine" morphology in its **à**-TCs [17]) – and beyond (e.g. Indonesian which exhibits overt and obligatory passive morphology in its **à**-TCs).

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