

***Tough*-constructions and the issue of thematicity: a study of the word *easy* in 17th and 18th century English**

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of *tough*-constructions (TCs) which attempts to describe the formal syntactic properties of these constructions in light of their functional sentence perspective (FSP). It has been suggested by Quirk et al. (1985), Mair (1989) and Biber et al. (1999) that the usage of TCs appears to be motivated, *inter alia*, by the information structure of the sentence's content, i.e. the ordering of individual clause elements in such a way that the linear arrangement complies with, or at least closely imitates, the natural progression of an utterance from what is circumstantially given to what is immediately new. TCs, therefore, are expected to be favoured in situations when the noun phrase in the position of their subject is functionally thematic, containing a piece of information that has already been mentioned in the previous discourse. The present study is based on the data obtained from the Old Bailey Proceedings and Ordinary's Accounts published between the years 1675 and 1775.

KEYWORDS

tough-constructions, functional sentence perspective, Early Modern English, Late Modern English, language of court proceedings

1. INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to *Tough constructions in English and Japanese* (1996), Ikeya describes the syntactic structures to which the chapters of his monograph are dedicated as having often performed the role of a "touchstone" used to "test the validity and feasibility of linguistic theories" (Ikeya, 1996, 1). During the second half of the 20th century, *tough*-constructions (also referred to as *easy*- or *easy-to-please* clauses) have been studied for their grammatical and semantic properties within a number of different theoretical frameworks. The syntactic idiosyncracies of these constructions came into focus especially during the late 1960s and 1970s as they became a widely debated topic in transformational approaches, for which they represented one of intriguing and long-standing challenges. While the subject has received a considerable amount of syntactic treatment within the generative framework, much less attention seems to have been paid to the pragmatic and contextual aspects of *tough*-constructions (TCs), including their textual and communicative role within the broader scope of discourse.

This article focuses on the structure of TCs primarily in relation to information packaging. Namely, it addresses the question of whether the linear arrangement of



the constituents of these clauses corresponds to what Firbas (1992) terms a natural progression of communicative dynamism, i.e. proceeding from phrases including information relatively less important for the communication to move forward to those including information which is relatively more important for the communication to move forward.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term TC was coined in the late 1960s by Rosenbaum (1967), who proposed a rule establishing a transformational relationship between sentences such as *It is easy to please John* and *John is easy to please*. The rule, later labeled *tough*-movement, postulated that the object of the infinitival clause in the extraposed construction is re-analyzed as the subject of the TC. The notion was further developed by Chomsky and Postal in the early 1970s and was supported by a number of other related syntactic phenomena, such as the fact that although one is able to rephrase a sentence *John is eager to please* as *John's eagerness to please*, one cannot do the same for the superficially similar *John is easy to please*. The mechanics of *tough*-movement was later challenged by Lasnik and Fiengo (1974), who criticized the proposed rule for the possibility to incorrectly predict generation of sentences which would be judged as ungrammatical. Instead, they proposed to treat the relationship between the extraposed and *tough*-constructions as a case of object deletion, which allowed them to account for a wider range of interrelated structures, including sentences of the type *John is an easy man to please* (these constructions are sometimes referred to as *hard nut* or pseudo-TCs; see below). The label *tough* has nevertheless since been used as a general term for these types of constructions, without any theoretical implications of the original *tough*-movement analysis.

A prototypical TC is characterized by a NP subject and a copular verb (most usually *be*) followed by a complex subject complement which includes an embedded infinitival clause. These subject complements are mostly adjectival (as in the previously mentioned sentence *John is easy to please*), but they may also be nominal, e.g. *Elizabeth is a pleasure to teach* or *John is an easy man to please*.¹ The last example is also sometimes called a pseudo-TC, as the adjective which would otherwise serve as a subject complement in a regular TC becomes a modifier to a (mostly semantically empty) NP head. The subject of a pseudo-TC construction may either be a NP capable of functioning as the subject in a regular TC, or an empty *it*. The second type of pseudo-TCs corresponds more closely to extraposed constructions, as their subject is purely formal (cf. examples 2a and 2b in Table 1 below).

The differences between TCs and other sentences with similar surface structure can be demonstrated by looking at their possible paraphrases. Consider the examples summarized in Table 1 (the terminology is taken from Mair, 1990):

1 Some researchers also include among TCs sentences with verbal predicates, such as *This will take so long to decipher*. These types of TCs are, however, beyond the scope of the present study. For further information on verbal TCs, see Mair (1990, 58–60).

	<i>easy</i>	<i>eager</i>
(1)	John is easy to please. tough-construction	John is eager to please.
(2)	a. John is an easy man to please. b. It is an easy thing to please John. pseudo-tough-construction	a. ?John is an eager man to please. b. *It is an eager thing to please John.
(3)	It is easy to please John. extraposed construction	*It is eager to please John.
(4)	To please John is easy. intraposed construction	*To please John is eager.
(5)	*John is easy.	John is eager.
(6)	*John's easiness to please.	John's eagerness to please.

TABLE 1 Adjectival predicates of the *easy*- vs. *eager*-type and their related paraphrases

An extensive amount of literature has been dedicated to the question of what kinds of adjectival or noun phrases can participate in TC predicates and what kinds of grammatico-semantic criteria their subjects have to meet in order for the TC to be acceptable. It is generally agreed that *tough*-predicates convey some kind of subjective evaluation of the speaker (Lasnik and Fiengo, 1974; Mair, 1989) and include either expressions denoting various degrees of ease and difficulty (the *easy*-type) or conveying some kind of value judgements (the *pretty*-type). The two types differ in the range of possible structures they may be employed in, but they are both capable of forming the basic TCs (1) and pseudo-TCs (2) and are unable to undergo nominalisation (6). Pseudo-TCs appear to be generally less semantically restrictive in this sense, as they allow adjectives which are normally not considered permissible in simple TCs (cf. *That's a stupid book to set as a text for Year 1* as opposed to **The book was stupid to set as a text for Year 1*) (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, 1249).

The subjects of TCs are restricted in the sense that they appear to exclude an existential, i.e. indefinite, reading (consider e.g. **Someone interesting was a delight to talk to* or **Someone would be easy to kill with a stick like that*) (Mair, 1989, 67; Miki, 2000, 258) and that they have to be somehow "characterized by the rest of the sentence" (Takami, 1996, 96). Thus for instance one may say *Mt. Fuji is impossible to climb in winter*, because the claim pertains to one of the characteristic features of Mt. Fuji, but one cannot say **Winter is impossible to climb Mt. Fuji in*, because the impossibility to climb Mt. Fuji is not one of the inherent characteristics of the winter season (Takami, 1996, 95). Takami's characterisation condition seems to resonate with some other observations made by Quirk et al. (1985), Mair (1990) and Biber et al. (1999) about the role of FSP in TC usage, as it builds upon a premise that the "acceptability [of TCs] is heavily affected by context or the speaker's/hearer's background knowledge" (Takami, 1996, 94).

Quirk et al. (1985), Mair (1990) and Biber et al. (1999) argue that one of the main functions of TCs is connected to their topicalisation ability, which enables them to adjust the information structure of an utterance according to the speaker's intention and makes them useful in thematic progression sequences. Quirk et al. (1985, 1394-5)

treat TCs predominantly not for their morpho-syntactic properties, but for their role in information processing as instances of thematic fronting. The authors claim that the fronting can be performed on different clause elements according to where the speaker wants to put focus. Thus for instance a sentence *It is difficult to pour cream out of this jug* can be rearranged either into *This jug is difficult to pour cream out of*, in which case the difficulties are implied to lie with the jug (“perhaps its spout is too narrow”), or *Cream is difficult to pour out of this jug*, in which case it is the cream which causes the difficulty (“perhaps it is too thick”).

Biber et al.’s (1999, 729–731) corpus-based research confirms that TCs are generally favoured over extraposed constructions in cases where the raised subject is structurally simple and represents a contextually given piece of information, although their usage appears to be influenced by personal preferences and semantics of the adjectival complement. Mair (1990) shows that the syntactic properties of TCs also make them suitable for observing the constancy of the subject in longer stretches of text and that they can be used as means of textual cohesion (Mair, 199, 66–72).

Albeit instances of TCs may already be found in literary materials written during the Old English period, the frequency with which these constructions appear in the available texts surviving from this era is estimated to be considerably lower than it is today and their grammatical makeup seems to be more restricted (with e.g. no instances of infinitival complements featuring prepositional stranding, such as we may find in PDE’s *This problem was tough to deal with* or *He is hard to get straight answers from*) (Fischer et al., 2001, 262). TCs with prepositional stranding start to appear during the early 15th century, which may be indicative of a more pervasive trend observable in the development of passive constructions in Middle English (Fischer et al., 2001, 272–3). An overview of research carried into the diachronic development of TCs during the Old and Middle English period is summarized in Fischer (2001). While the development of TCs appears to have been studied on both Old and Middle English material, TCs in the Early and Late Modern periods seem to be documented relatively scarcely. The results presented below are part of a research project which attempts to map and describe the changes in the frequency of TCs and their grammatical properties from the end of the the Early Modern English period to the beginning of 20th century and to discern what role their FSP structure plays in their usage.

3. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The analysis is based on data retrieved from the digitalized collections of the surviving editions of *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey* and *The Ordinary of Newgate’s Accounts of the Behaviour, Confession and Dying Words of the Condemned Criminals Executed at Tyburn* available online at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>. *The Proceedings*, published between 1674 and 1913, contained accounts of trials carried out at today’s Central Criminal Court of England and Wales, also known as The Old Bailey. Originally designed as brief and popular summaries of select cases, the *Proceedings* gradually began to evolve into a more specialized piece of literature. From the

early 1710s, the *Proceedings* started to include occasional transcriptions of verbatim testimonies. These transcriptions increased in length after 1729 with the change of the format which the publisher introduced to make the *Proceedings* more appealing to its readers. A combination of a loss of readership due to the growth of commercially produced newspapers and the increased demands by the City during the 1770s to exercise control over the contents of the reports in terms of authenticity and fairness has led to a change of status of the *Proceedings* from a popular enterprise to a “more or less an official publication of the City”, targeted at a professional legal audience. (<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Publishinghistory.jsp>). From its inception in 1674 to the end of its publication in 1913, the *Proceedings* informed about nearly 200, 000 cases. The corpus of the entire collection contains about 127 million words.

A sister publication to the *Proceedings*, *The Ordinary of Newgate’s Accounts* were designed as overviews of the felonies committed by the criminals executed at Tyburn with a strong emphasis on the moral evaluation of their actions, which was meant not just to entertain but also to instruct the readers. The accounts contained the criminals’ life stories, criminal record and behaviour before and during execution. Their publication history coincides with the more commercial stage of the *Proceedings*; the earliest *Account* was published in 1676 and with some isolated exceptions the publication virtually ceased in 1770s (<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Ordinarys-accounts.jsp>).

While the corpus of texts published in the *Proceedings* and *Ordinary’s Accounts* has not been originally assembled for linguistic purposes, it offers several advantages for the present research, most importantly a) a complete, free access to full texts, which enables the author to search and evaluate the immediate linguistic context of the analyzed constructions, and b) a glimpse into the written, as well as spoken language of the period (as reflected in the transcription of the testimonies).

Due to the structural nature of TCs and technical limitations (such as the lack of tagging), the search results had to be sorted mostly manually. A keyword search was conducted for texts containing the lexeme *easy*, which represents one of the most prototypical and frequently occurring TC adjectives in PDE. The search was conducted for the period of the first one hundred years of the *Proceedings’* publications. The actual results span the period from 1675 to 1774, because no matching tokens were found in the *Proceedings* published in 1674. The period was divided into ten decades and for each decade an overview was made of the syntactic environments in which *easy* appeared.

An initial search returned 764 texts, out of which 347 were part of the *Proceedings*, 166 of *Ordinary’s Account* and 251 were listed in the *Advertisements* section of either of these publications. The tokens from the advertisements were discarded upon closer inspection due to their exceedingly repetitive nature. The remaining 513 texts contained a total number of 697 instances of the lexeme *easy* in all its word forms. In one case, part of the original sentence was missing, which made the syntactic function of the word impossible to determine.

The remaining 696 tokens were analyzed individually for their morphological properties and syntactic functions. The results are summarised below.

4. RESULTS

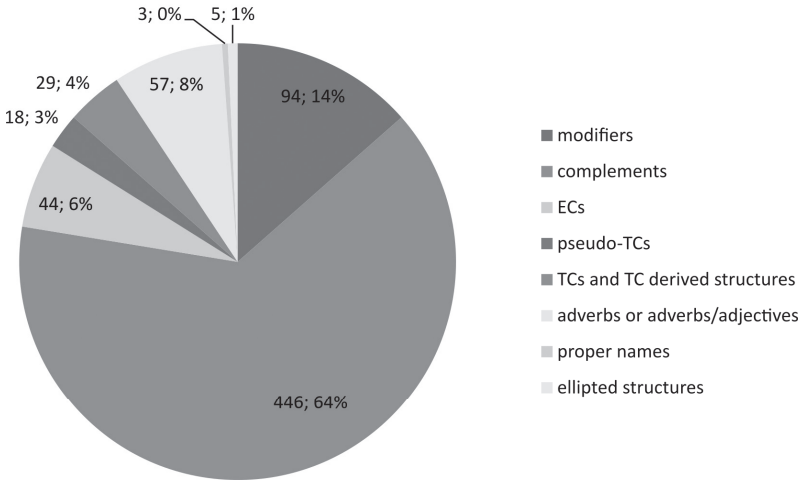


FIGURE 1 Morphological and syntactic analysis of EASY

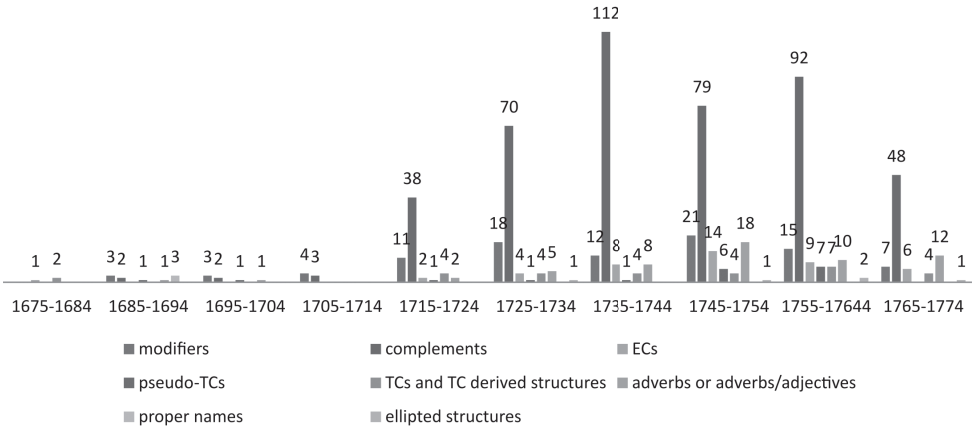


FIGURE 2 Syntactic functions of EASY

4.1 The majority of occurrences (64%) represent cases, in which *easy* has been found to function as a subject or object complement. In most of these clauses, *easy* appears to be used primarily in the sense of “comfortable”, “content”, “peaceful” or “obliging”, rather than “uncomplicated”. These clauses often appear to be featured in testimonies or their summaries, a tendency which seems to be reflected in the fact that a sharp rise in their numbers can be perceived to correlate with the introduction of verbatim reports in the *Proceedings* in 1712 and the change of their format in 1729 (cf. Figure 2 above).

The second most widely represented group are simple modifiers, which constitute 13% of the total number of tokens. The meaning of modifier *easy* appears to vary from

“uncomplicated” or “unhindered” to “undemanding”, “obedient” or “lenient”. The third largest group of cases, and one of the most problematic in terms of analysis, is represented by a comparably heterogeneous array of clauses, in which *easy* is or can be interpreted as an adverb rather than an adjective.² The smallest two groups of occurrences are represented by proper names (3 cases) and ellipted structures (5 cases). The latter mostly appear in the transcripts of testimonies as quick corroborations or short answers to questions (e.g. — *Was it easy for him to do so?* — *Yes, very easy.*) If in their full form, two of these clauses would most likely correspond to extraposed clauses, one to a *tough*-construction and two to simple copular clauses with *easy* as their subject complement. Due to their specific nature, however, these structures are listed separately from their full, non-ellipted counterparts.

4.2 In comparison to complements and modifiers, full extraposed clauses (ECs), *tough*-constructions (TCs) and pseudo-*tough*-constructions (pseudo-TCs) are relatively lowly represented, ranging from 6 to 3 percent of the total number of tokens (see Figure 1). The lowest of the three groups in terms of frequency are pseudo-TCs. All instances of pseudo-TCs in the given sample correspond to type 2b in Table 1, i.e. they contain empty subject *it*, rather than a notional NP. Cf. examples (1) to (3) below:

- (1) **Ann Thomas Mathews Tobin, Theft > shoplifting; Mary Richard Dean Rusty, Theft > shoplifting, 22nd February 1758.**
Is it not an easy matter, where there are a great number of stockings, for 2 pair to drop on the floor?
- (2) **Daniel Cable, Deception > fraud, 6th July 1748.**
Gentlemen, in such an election as this, it was not an easy thing for a boy to pass under such circumstances, for this boy was neither a freeman nor an householder [...].
- (3) **Ordinary’s Account, 7th March 1764.**
It was no easy task to lay hold of a man long practised in much greater frauds, and yet evading the hand of justice.

In none of the examples could the choice of a pseudo-TC over an EC have been motivated by the desire to move a thematic post-verbal element into the subject position, as that position is still occupied by a purely formal *it*. It appears that the choice was influenced by a personal preference or a desire for a slightly higher level of specificity (especially in example (3)).

Both pseudo-TCs and regular TCs were found to appear in various syntactic functions. An overview of the syntactic functions of all TCs is given in Table 2:

2 In the majority of clauses (36), the adverbial function of *easy* could be established from the syntactic structure of the clause or the immediately surrounding context (e.g. *Easy got, easy gone*), but in some (21) the usage of *easy* appears to straddle the adjectival and adverbial function or to offer two possible interpretations. For the sake of simplicity, these two subgroups are tentatively represented together in Figures 1 and 2.

	1675-1684	1685-1694	1695-1704	1705-1714	1715-1724	1725-1734	1735-1744	1745-1754	1755-1764	1765-1774
main clause							1	4	4	
relative clause	1					3	2		1	
nominal content clause						1			1	2
adverbial clause	1									
TC > object complement					1		1		1	1
TC > modifier					3					1

TABLE 2 Syntactic functions of TCs

Apart from main and independent clauses (ex. 4), both could also fulfil the role of nominal content (ex. 5) or adverbial clauses (ex. 6). In 7 cases, simple TCs also appeared as adjectival relative clauses (ex.7), which seems to testify to their role in textual cohesion. TCs also appear to have the possibility to be used in coordination with other adjectives, in accordance with the principle of the constancy of the subject (example (8) would otherwise have to be formulated as “[...] in Conformity to Christ Jesus, who was Meek and Lowly, Gentle and it was easy to entreat him”).

(4) **John Mac Kelvey, Theft > burglary, 28th June 1758.**

- Q. Can you say who took the ring from your finger?
- Flannagan. I cannot swear that.
- Q. Could it be taken from your finger, and you not know the time when it was taken?
- Flannagan. Yes, Sir, it was very easy to be taken off.

(5) **Ordinary's Account, 17th March 1755.**

He had taken notice of the yard as he had passed by the house, and, he says, that he thought it was easy to get into.

(6) **Harker, Theft > animal theft; Harker, Theft > grand larceny, 19th February 1675.**

He was then disguised with a Periwig so that he was not easy to be known.

(7) **Ordinary's Account, 22nd November 1742.**

George Anderson, and Thomas Studder the Evidence, were the Persons who first put Richard Studder on this wicked Way of Life, which once engaged in, is not easy to leave off.

(8) **Ordinary's Account, 22nd December 1729.**

[...] at the Hour of Death, a joyful Serenity ariseth in our Minds, from the Reflection upon the Innocency of our past Life, in Conformity to Christ Jesus, who was Meek and Lowly, Gentle and easy to be intreated.

From the 29 instances of non-ellipted TCs in our sample, 8 are what we might term TC-derived structures. These include examples (9) and (10) listed below. Their characteristic feature is that they include the adjective *easy* complemented by an infinitival clause, which is related to a NP in a way that corresponds to the relationship between the subject and adjectival predicate in a regular TC semantically, but not syntactically (i.e. the NP does not play the role of a subject). The cases include TC-like structures in the function of modifiers (9) or object complements (10).

(9) **Joseph Bury, Theft > shoplifting; Thomas Williams, Theft > shoplifting, 7th September 1722.**

Halfpenny depos'd, that himself and the prisoners coming by the Prosecutor's Shop, Williams lookt in, and told em it was a Rum Ken, i.e. a Shop easy to be rob'd.

(10) **John Clarke, John Pullen, William Rooke, Theft > theft from a specified place; William Rooke, Violent Theft > highway robbery, 6th July 1774.**

- Q. Do you take him to be a man of sense?
- Wells. A man of very great sense.
- Q. Then you think him not easy to be imposed on?

The infinitival complements to *easy* seem to point to a considerable level of grammatical integration of TCs in the English syntactic system of the period, featuring a large amount of passive infinitives (17 instances, cf. e.g. examples (6), (8) and (9)) and cases of prepositional stranding (6 clauses, cf. examples (5) and (10)). The subjects of TCs, or their semantic equivalents in TC-derived object complements, are predominantly pronominal (19 cases), subject realised by noun-headed NPs were comparatively scarce (3 occurrences). In TC-derived modifiers, the head of the NP phrase was realised by a noun, which, in all four cases, carried some kind of spatial reference (*house, shop, place*).

From an FSP point of view, all 22 TC subjects and subject-like equivalents in TC-derived object complements that were realized by NPs were thematic. In 21 cases, the referents of these subjects were retrievable from the immediately preceding discourse, i.e. could be described as contextually given (Svoboda, 1974). In one case, the TC is preceded by sentential structures containing a possible co-referent to the TC's subject; however, the TC itself appears to have a generic, rather than referential meaning (see example (11) below). The absence of co-referentiality with any of the NP constituents in the previous discourse is reflected in indefinite reference of the the NP head noun *money*:

(11) **Thomas Wright, Royal Offences > coining offences; Thomas Watmore, Royal Offences > coining offences, 16th February 1774.**

Wright laid down a 10 l. **bank note**; I gave him nine guineas, a half guinea and a sixpence; I ordered my brother to weigh the gold; it was all good; Wright took it up; Watmore said he did not do right **to change the note** as he was going in the country, money was not so easy to carry as a note; Wright said he could not pay for the hat without change, the other said he would lend him money to pay for it; [...]

A similar situation may be found in three of the four TC-derived modifiers. In these examples, the head of the subject-like equivalent NPs is realized by an indefinite noun. In all three cases, the NP expresses an explanation of a term which has been mentioned before (cf. example (9)). The indefinite article may in these cases be interpreted as “any” or “all” (i.e. “any shop, which is easy to be robbed, is called Rum Ken”). The fourth case of a TC-derived modifier is slightly different, as it is embedded in an existential clause:

(12) **Joseph Gould, Killing > murder; Jonathan Stevens, Killing > murder, 18th September 1765.**

I am a surgeon; I open'd the deceased body; I found the ball had penetrated his breast, and into his lungs; I took it out, it was a pistol ball; that undoubtedly was the occasion of his death: there is no place in the world better situated for robberies, or easier to get off, than the place where the deceased was found; there frequently are a great number of prostitutes and bad people about there on nights: there are roads go several different ways.

The indefinite head noun is completely contextually new (i.e. does not have any preceding terminologically obscure counterpart) and the *easy*-construction appears to be part of a larger coordinated structure, analogous to example (9).

Another notable exception to the strong tendency for structurally simple, given subjects in regular TCs appears in three examples, listed below. The subjects of these sentences are characterized by two unusual features: firstly, that they are realized not by NPs, but by *wh*-clauses, and secondly, they predominantly comprise contextually new elements. The FSP of these subjects may be interpreted in two different ways. Their sentence-initial position can render them thematic, with the information focus being placed at the post-verbal part of the sentence (see Smolka's article on 'The strength of the weakest factor' included in this issue). Alternately, they may be seen as rhematic, with the choice of the initial sentence position being intentionally used for a rhetoric effect, to draw attention to the content of the subject clause. This usage would correspond to the possibility of modern Czech to stress the rhematicity of an element by placing it in a highly marked, initial position in the sentence (cf. Mathesius, 1947, 340 and Firbas, 1992, 120). Example 15 might be said to be the former case; in examples 13 and 14, however, the author of this paper inclines to the latter interpretation, based on the assumption that the sentence stress would most probably fall on the subject element.

(13) **Ordinary's Account, 12th July 1742.**

So far is the Account given by Burnham himself, but how true, or how much to be depended on, is mighty easy to be seen by the strong Evidence against him at his Trial, when it was plainly prov'd, that Burnham with either a Knife or Dagger, struck the Deceased in the Face, and redoubling his Blow, the Black fell to the Ground and never spoke more.

(14) **Ordinary's Account, 20th April 1761.**

[...] at the same time he farther declared that his wife, who betrayed him, stole two horses, on one of which he rode when he committed the fact he was

to die for; and that she used to put on his clothes and ride out with him on the like designs. This explained in some degree what he had before declared, that she had first seduced, and then betrayed him. But how much credit is to be given to this report, uttered perhaps in resentment, after mutual treachery and ill treatment, is not easy to determine.

(15) **Ordinary's Account, 17th January 1763.**

On observing one day how unacquainted he was with the service of the church and the use of his Prayer-book, he was asked whether he used to frequent the church? His answer was, "never since he had been to service;" which was now near three years. Who is to be blamed for this, (now too general neglect) is easier to say, than to reform the fault.

5. CONCLUSION

The study confirms that many of the observations on TCs in PDE have been in operation already during the late 17th and 18th centuries. The high frequency of constructions with passive infinitives and prepositional stranding, along with the presence of TC-like structures in the function of modifiers and object complements seems to suggest a high level of integration of these types of constructions into the grammatical system of English in that period. That integration is also manifested in the possibility of forming TCs with a generic, rather than a referential meaning. The subjects of TCs in the analyzed sample are predominantly thematic; rhematic subjects in TCs appear to have been used for an emphatic effect. This supports the view that TC usage is in part FSP motivated.

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