Evidence for the syntactic attachment of -able

At least since Chomsky (1970), it has been observed that deverbal adjectives in -able do not allow raising (1a), even if the corresponding verb does (1b). Existing accounts of this restriction assume that -able is attached to a stem in the lexicon. Chomsky (1970) attributes the contrast in (1) to a lexical redundancy rule that requires the subject of V-able to correspond to the lexically selected object of V. Since raised subjects are not lexically selected by a raising V, they are predicted to be impossible with -able adjectives. Work from the 1980s treats raising with -able adjectives, nominalizations (1c) and adjectival passives (1d) as a violation of the ECP, on the assumption that these forms enter the syntax as nouns and adjectives, which, unlike verbs, cannot govern the trace of the embedded subject. In this paper, I demonstrate that both the traditional empirical observations and the traditional analysis are incorrect. -able adjectives actually do allow raising, and -able is attached in the syntax, not in the Lexicon.

The first set of relevant facts concerns tough-movement. The subjects of tough adjectives appear to be nonthematic; for example, they can be idiom chunks (2). Chomsky (1970) points out that nominalizations of tough-predicates disallow tough-movement (3). What has not been observed before, to my knowledge, is that tough-movement can occur with an -able adjective (4a), though not with the corresponding nominal (4b). This shows that the subject of V-able need not correspond to a thematic object of V. I assume that tough-movement involves A- after A-bar movement (Rezac 2006, Hartman 2008), but the key point is independent of this assumption.

The claim that -able adjectives disallow raising because they enter the syntax as adjectives is problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, there is a well-known class of raising adjectives in English, illustrated in (5) (see Dixon 2005 for discussion). Worse still, there are -able adjectives that allow raising, including Chomsky’s original example, believable (6). It is notable that raising improves significantly with the addition of a manner adverb like easily; I return to this point below.

My analysis of -able is inspired by Kratzer (1996) and Pylkkänen (2002/2008). Kratzer argues that gerundive -ing can attach at various different syntactic levels: directly to V; to a phrasal VP; or to VoiceP, which includes the external argument. In a similar vein, Pylkkänen argues that a causative v can select a bare lexical root, a phrasal vP, or a syntactic phase (VoiceP or a high applicative). I propose that English -able can select either a lexical root or a vP as its complement, though not an agentive VoiceP. Raising from the infinitival complement is impossible when -able selects a lexical root, but possible when it selects vP. I postulate that this is because the infinitival complement is actually an argument of v, not of the root; thus it is also ruled out with derived nominals.

Evidence for the proposed analysis comes from predictable, which semantically disambiguates the two attachment options for -able. The root-attached version means something like dull, while the vP-attached version means something like possible to predict. The root-attached version of predictable (7a) has different selectional properties from the verb (7b), and disallows modification by a manner adverb. On the other hand, the root \textit{predict} allows modification by partway (7c) (cf. Tenny 2000). This shows that the root is a syntactic constituent (Pylkkänen 2002/2008). By contrast with (7), the vP-attached version of predictable (8a) shares the selectional properties of the verb (8b), and allows a manner adverb. On the other hand, unlike the verb, it disallows agentive modifiers like eagerly (8); this suggests that -able does not embed agentive Voice.
(1)  
a. *He is believable [t to have left].  
b. He is believed [t to have left].  
c. *his belief [t to have left]  
d. *He is very/blindly believed [t to have left].  

(2) Tabs are tough [to keep t on John].  

(3)  
a. John is tough to please  
b. *John’s toughness to please  

(4)  
a. Mary is desirable [to avoid t].  
b. *Mary’s desire/desirability [to avoid t]  

(5) John is likely/certain/sure [t to be confused t by the directions].  

(6)  
a. John’s harassment claim is provable to be false.  
b. Raising to subject is easily arguable to involve movement.  
c. Conrad Black is easily believable to have been the most entertaining fraudster this country has seen.  

(7)  
a. That film was very/*easily predictable. (its plot was dull)  
b. #I predicted that film. (=predicted its existence, not its plot)  
c. That film was partway predictable/*dull.  

(8)  
a. That film was easily/*very/*eagerly predictable to fail at the box office.  
b. Ebert and Roeper easily/eagerly predicted that film to fail at the box office.  

References  