Russian *èto,* predication, and big DPs

Irina Burukina (MTA Research Institute for Linguistics, Eötvös Loránd University, irine-bu@caesar.elte.hu)
Lena Borise (MTA Research Institute for Linguistics, Harvard University, borise@fas.harvard.edu)
Marcel Den Dikken (MTA Research Institute for Linguistics, Eötvös Loránd University, dmarcel@nytud.hu)

1 This paper addresses the well-known puzzle of *èto* copular constructions in Russian, illustrated in (1). We develop a novel analysis whereby *èto* in constructions of the type '(NOM$_1$) *èto* NOM$_2$' (where NOM represents a nominative noun phrase) plays the role of a predicate (cf. Moro 1997 on English *it*), with NOM$_2$ as the subject of predication. We further argue that NOM$_1$, when present, forms a constituent with *èto* – a 'big DP' (cf. Torrego 1992, Uriagereka 1995, Kayne 2005), with *èto* in D^0 and NOM$_1$ in SpecDP. The proposal goes against treating *èto* in '(NOM$_1$) *èto* NOM$_2$' constructions as the subject of predication (Junghanns 1997, Geist 2008), or as a dedicated functional head on the clausal spine (Bowers 1993, Geist & Błaszczak 2000, Markman 2007, a.o.); it also explicitly rejects a treatment of NOM1 as a hanging topic.

(1) a. Èto moj brat. b. Petja – èto moj brat
this my brother Petja this my brother
'This is my brother.' 'Petja is my brother.'

The proposed analysis captures all the relevant properties of *èto* constructions and makes some important predictions about their distribution. In addition, the 'big DP' approach allows us to establish a link between *èto* copular constructions with a nominal subject and clausal prolepsis, with the potential to provide a unified analysis for various constructions involving *èto* and equivalent demonstrative pronouns in other languages.

2 The analysis of Russian '*èto* NOM$_2$' constructions is schematized in (2), where *èto* is the underlying predicate, merged in the complement of the RELATOR head (Den Dikken 2006), and NOM$_2$ is its subject. In the course of the syntactic derivation, *èto* is moved to Spec,TP (predicate inversion; Moro 1997, Den Dikken 2006); an overt copula is in T^0.

(2) [$_{TP}$ be [$_{SC}$ NOM$_2$ [$_{R'}$ R^0 *èto*]]]

That *èto* is a predicate pro-form is evident from (3): in (3B), *ona* cannot be used to refer back to the wife of Henry VI, the predicate of the preamble (3A); only *èto* can take a predicate as its antecedent.

(3) A: I think that Isabella of France was [the famous wife of Henry VI]$_i$.
B: Net, èto$_i$ / *ona$_i$ byla Margarita Anžujskaja.
No, this / she was Margaret of.Anjou
'No. This (= the wife of Henry VI) was Margaret of Anjou.'

3 The analysis in (2) straightforwardly accounts for the following properties of *èto* copular constructions, which do not follow automatically from other accounts: (i) *èto* cannot appear in predicative copular constructions or in specificational constructions of the kind 'It/this *èto* NOM', since there can only be one main predicate per clause; (ii) being the subject of predication, NOM$_2$ must be referential – i.e., in '(NOM$_1$) *èto* NOM$_2$' constructions, NOM$_2$ cannot refer to a property (cf. also Geist 2008); (iii) NOM$_2$ must carry nominative case and control the agreement, since, as the subject of predication, it is probed by T^0 (in a similar way T^0 agrees downwards with the notional subject in OVS clauses; see Pereltsvaig 2019). We further assume that, since *èto* always corresponds to given information, it obligatorily moves to Spec,TP (a position that commonly hosts presupposed/referential material in Russian; cf. Bailyn 2004, Titov 2018), allowing for NOM$_2$, the new information, to occupy the clause-final position, associated, in Russian, with identificational focus (cf. Pereltsvaig 2004), as in (4).

(4) [$_{TP}$ *èto$_i$* [$_{T'}$ [T^0 be] [$_{SC}$ NOM$_2$ [$_{R'}$ R^0 t$_i$]]]]

4 For constructions of the type 'NOM$_1$ *èto* NOM$_2$', we argue that their structure is parallel to that in (2/4) with one exception: NOM$_1$ and *èto* form a 'big DP', where the demonstrative is in D^0, while the NOM$_1$ is merged in Spec,DP and a silent *pro* sits in the complement of D^0 (5).

(5) [$_{DP}$ NOM$_1$ [$_{D'}$ [D^0 *èto*] [$_{NP}$ *pro*]]]

Since NOM$_1$ (qua specifier of the occupant of Spec,TP) is not itself in a relationship with T^0, this accounts for the fact that NOM$_1$ in the sentences under discussion never controls agreement. This is shown in (6), where NOM$_1$ is plural and NOM$_2$ is masculine:

(6) a. Moi   kazni   egipetskie – èto   **byl/*byli/*bylo**   Petja.
          my   plagues Egyptian   this was.M/were/was.N   Petja.NOM
          'My plagues of Egypt (i.e. my bane), that was Petja.'

     b. [TP [DP [*Moi Kazni Egipetskie*]$_i$ [D' [D^0 *èto*] [NP *pro$_i$*]]]$_k$ [T' *byl* [SC [*Petja*] [R' R^0 t$_k$]]]]]]

Similarly to the 'big DPs' identified for the Romance languages (Torrego 1992, Uriagereka 1995, 2005, a.o.), formed by a referential nominal phrase in Spec,DP and a clitic in D^0, the complement of D^0 in Russian 'big DPs', *pro*, must always be silent. The *pro* must be licensed by being in a local relationship with a structurally present, non-elliptical (though not necessarily overt) finite T^0, which explains the limited distribution of the [NOM$_1$ *èto*] unit (in particular, its unavailability in e.g. fragment answers and coordinate structures).

5 The fact that [NOM$_1$ *èto*] can be a constituent occupying Spec,TP correctly predicts that 'NOM$_1$ *èto* NOM$_2$' can readily be embedded under non-bridge predicates, as in (7). The grammaticality of (7) is an insurmountable problem for accounts of 'NOM$_1$ *èto* NOM$_2$' constructions that treat NOM$_1$ exclusively as a hanging topic.

(7) Udivitel'no,   čto   železnyj čelovek –   èto   Toni.
     surprising   that iron   man.NOM   this Tony.NOM
     'It is surprising that Iron Man is Tony.'

The fact that [NOM$_1$ *èto*] can (and in embedded contexts *must*) be a constituent raised to Spec,TP also provides an explanation for the ungrammaticality of (8a) with *èto*: the question particle *li* cannot break into the [NOM$_1$ *èto*] unit; moving NOM$_1$ to Spec,CP via subextraction out of this unit is a violation of criterial freezing. The ungrammaticality of *èto* in *wh*-questions such as (8b) also follows: here NOM$_1$ (*kto*) can neither be a hanging topic (for information-structural reasons) nor be raised to Spec,CP via subextraction from [NOM$_1$ *èto*] in Spec,TP (because of freezing).

(8) a. Mama   sprosila železnyj čelovek   li (*èto)   Toni.
          Mum   asked   iron   man.NOM   Q   this   Tony.NOM
          'Mum asked whether the Iron Man was Toni.'

     b. Kto   (*èto)   Toni?
         who.NOM   this   Tony.NOM
         'Who's Tony?'

6 In other contexts the 'big DP' may be an argument, like any other DP; this is not precluded by the analysis. In (9a), the big DP serves as the subject of prijatno 'nice', with *èto* in D^0 and the subordinate clause in Spec,DP. The CP can alternatively be 'extraposed', with *èto* as a proleptic pronoun (9b). Here, the CP binds the *pro* in the complement of D^0 from its surface clause-final position and establishes the interpretive link between CP and the matrix clause subject thereby.

(9) a. Čto   my   guljaem v parke,   èto   prijatno.
          that we   walk   in park   this nice
          [DP [CP *čto my guljaem v parke*] [D' D^0=*èto* [*pro*]]]

     b. Èto   prijatno,   čto   my   guljaem v parke.
         this nice   that we   walk   in park
         [DP [D' D^0=*èto* [*pro*]]] [CP *čto my guljaem v parke*]
         both: 'It's nice that we're walking in the park.'

7 Though in the 'big DP' analysis the *èto* of 'NOM$_1$ *èto* NOM$_2$' constructions is a D^0, not a Top^0 (as in e.g. Markman 2007), there is an important parallel between the construal of *èto* in 'NOM$_1$ *èto* NOM$_2$' constructions and the function of *èto* as a Top-head: in both, *èto* is a functional head mediating a relationship between two terms that are in a semantic co-construal relationship (NOM$_1$ and *pro* in the former, and the topic and the comment in the latter). This establishes a fundamental parallel between these two approaches to *èto* that have generally been viewed as irreconcilable.

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