Russian *èto,* predication, and big DPs

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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 '(NOM₁) *èto* NOM₂' (where NOM represents a nominative noun phrase) plays the role of a predicate (cf. Moro 1997 on English *it*), with NOM₂ as the subject of predication. We further argue that NOM₁, when present, forms a constituent with *èto* – a 'big DP' (cf. Uriagereka 1995, 2005; Kayne 2005), with *èto* in D^0 and NOM₁ in SpecDP. The proposal goes against treating *èto* in '(NOM₁) *èto* NOM₂' constructions as the subject of predication (Junghanns 1997), 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** byl   moj brat.   b. Petja – **èto** byl   moj brat
        this was.M.SG my   brother.NOM   Petja this this was.M.SG my   brother
        'This was my brother.'   'Petja was 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* NOM₂' constructions is schematized in (2), where *èto* is the underlying predicate, merged in the complement of the RELATOR head (Den Dikken 2006), and NOM₂ 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 NOM2 [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 / *onaᵢ 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, NOM₂ must be referential – i.e., in '(NOM₁) *èto* NOM₂' constructions, NOM₂ cannot refer to a property (cf. also Geist 2008); (iii) NOM₂ 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 NOM₂, 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 NOM2 [R' R^0 tᵢ]]]]

4 For constructions of the type 'NOM₁ *èto* NOM₂', we argue that their structure is parallel to that in (2/4) with one exception: NOM₁ and *èto* form a 'big DP', where the demonstrative is in D^0, while the NOM₁ is merged in Spec,DP and a silent *pro* sits in the complement of D^0 (5).

(5)   [DP NOM1 [D' [D^0 *èto*] [NP *pro*]]]

Since NOM₁ (qua specifier of the occupant of Spec,TP) is not itself in a relationship with T^0, this accounts for the fact that NOM₁ in the sentences under discussion never controls agreement. This is shown in (6), where NOM₁ is plural and NOM₂ 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*] [D' [D^0 *èto*] [NP *pro*]]]ₖ [T' *byl* [SC [*Petja*] [R' R^0 tₖ]]]]]]

The proposal that NOM1 and *èto* form a constituent is compatible with the prosody of (1b). Based on an analysis of a random sample of 'NOM1 *èto* (be) NOM2' constructions from the audio section of the Russian National Corpus, we show that NOM1 and *èto* are often produced without a prosodic break, contra the commonly held belief that NOM1 and *èto* are separated by a pause or prosodic boundary.

5 The fact that [NOM₁ *èto*] can be a constituent occupying Spec,TP correctly predicts that 'NOM₁ *èto* NOM₂' can readily be embedded under non-bridge predicates, as in (7). The grammaticality of (7) is an insurmountable problem for accounts of 'NOM₁ *èto* NOM₂' constructions that treat NOM₁ 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 [NOM₁ *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 [NOM₁ *èto*] unit; moving NOM₁ 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 NOM₁ (*kto*) can neither be a hanging topic (for information-structural reasons) nor be raised to Spec,CP via subextraction from [NOM₁ *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 'NOM₁ *èto* NOM₂' constructions is a D^0, not a Top⁰ (as in e.g. Markman 2008), there is an important parallel between the construal of *èto* in 'NOM₁ *èto* NOM₂' 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 (NOM₁ 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.

Selected references: **Den Dikken, M. 2006**. *Relators and Linkers*. **Geist, L. & Błaszczak, J. 2000**. Kopulasätze mit dem pronominalen Elementen to/èto im Polnischen und Russischen. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics 16*, 115-139. **Junghanns, U. 1997**. On the so-called èto-cleft construction. *FASL 1997*, 166-190. **Markman, V. G. 2008**. Pronominal copula constructions are what? Reduced specificational pseudo-clefts! *WCCFL 26*, 366-374.