

## Revisiting Russian copular construction with *èto*<sup>1</sup>

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**Intro:** Russian is one of the languages that has the so-called pronominal copula construction (see Citko 2008) — a construction consisting of a DP and non-verbal constituent separated by *èto* (1). There are many different approaches to copular constructions with *èto* (CCE), but only one of them, presented by Markman (2008), argues that CCEs are reduced pseudo-cleft constructions formed around topical *èto* as a regular *èto*-cleft (EC) (2).

- (1) Maksim *èto* mestnyj vrach / malen'kij. (2) *Eto* ya prishyol.  
M. ETO local doctor small ETO I came.  
'Maxim is the local doctor / the little one.' 'It was me who came.'

This type of analysis solves the problem of all alternative approaches to CCE (Geist 2007; Citko 2008; Seres and Espinal 2019; Burukina et al. 2024), since such approaches are unable to explain why — if CCE is not a sub-type of EC — it cannot be over-modified by *èto* in the same way that EC prohibit such over-modification:

- (3) (\**Eto*) *èto* Masha sdelala *èto*. (4) (\**Eto*) Anya *èto* prepodavatel'.  
ETO ETO M. did this ETO A. ETO teacher  
'It was Masha who did this.' 'Anya is the teacher.'

However, Markman's analysis is also problematic. For example, it predicts that CCE derived from regular copular clause being copied and then partially deleted in [spec TopP]. Such mechanism is simply unable to explain why CCE prohibits predicative readings (5) (see, e.g., Burukina et al. 2024, 15). Additionally, reduced pseudo-cleft analysis predicts that PP after *èto* should be prohibited (Markman 2008: 372-373) which is not borne out (6).

- (5) \*Anya *èto* po professii prepodavatel'. (6) Parizh *èto* vo Francii.  
A. ETO by job teacher P. ETO in France  
intended: 'Anya is a teacher by job.' 'Paris is in France.'

**The proposal:** Myler (2016, contra Citko 2008) expressed the idea that pronominal copula constructions are in fact intransitive copular clauses, and a pronoun / NP1 in such constructions must be reanalyzed in a different way. I argue that Myler's suggestion is correct and CCEs are intransitive copular constructions modified by topical *èto*, when NP1 is an implicit cleft argument ( $\emptyset_{CA}$ ) based-generated in [spec TopP].

- (7) [<sub>TopP</sub> NP1<sub>CA</sub> /  $\emptyset_{CA}$  [<sub>Top'</sub> [Top<sup>0</sup>=*èto*] [<sub>TP</sub> NP2 ]]]

**Different structures, one principle:** Russian and English cleft constructions obviously have different syntactic structures. English *it*-clefts are derived from copular clause, while in EC *èto* is generated as Top<sup>0</sup> which results in ability to modify VP-clauses. Despite different syntactic configurations EC and English clefts shares same semantic properties such as existential and exhaustivity inferences (see Halvorsen 1978; Horn 1981; Kimmelman 2009; Shipova 2023):

- (8) \*It's nobody who came (9) Net, (\**eto*) nikto ne prishyol.  
no ETO no.one NEG came  
'No, no one came.'

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<sup>1</sup>The results of the project "Linguistic and cognitive diversity in formal models, computer tools, and educational resources" (2025-2027), carried out within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University), are presented in this work.

I propose that all cleft constructions are identity constructions universally structured around three obligatory elements: (i) an  $\emptyset_{ca}$  presupposing the existence of some X that is accessible from the context (e.g. *it* or NP1), (ii) functional element / structure introducing identity function (e.g. *is* or Russian *èto* or Polish *to*) and (iii) a focused constituent or proposition (e.g. NP2 or VP clause in EC) which by identification with  $\emptyset_{CA}$  creates an identity reading.

**Distribution of  $\emptyset_{CA}$ :** Typically,  $\emptyset_{CA}$  is null but can surface in certain configurations — for instance, as the null head of a relative clause in pseudo-cleft constructions (10).  $\emptyset_{CA}$  can also be overtly expressed as a regular DP, but only in cases where complement of *èto* is a regular DP, too. For this reason predicative readings under CCE is prohibited. By modifying the regular clause, *èto* should receive a complete proposition, but in the case of (5) the argument of the nominal predicate is not filled, which leads to a crash of derivation. For this reason, AP after *èto* always imposes identity reading, since it's not true adjective but rather a nominalized property (11). Since English cannot have an unmodified null argument before a verb, the insertion of an expletive occurs in *it*-clefts (12).

- (10)  $\emptyset_{CA}$  [Kto prishyol] — èto Petya.  
           who came               ETO P.  
           ‘Who came was Petya.’

- (11) [Maksim]<sub>CA</sub> èto malen’kij.  
       M.               ETO small  
       ‘Maxim is the little one.’  
       (e.g. in a group photo)

- (12) [It]<sub>CA</sub>’s Masha who came

In cases where *èto* modifies a VP clause,  $\emptyset_{CA}$  must necessarily be zero in order to contextually link an non-linguistic stimuli or a previous utterance capable of being identical to this VP clause.

**Predicatives and PP after *èto*:** In the existing literature cases where *èto* is followed by a predicative or PP are postulated as problematic (Burukina et al. 2024, 29-31). However, these cases are explained right away under the proposed approach. Thus, in the case of predicatives, such constructions just are defective adjectives (Letuchiy 2022) being nominalized to be able to appear in the position of the intransitive copular argument. For this reason, the predicatives modified by *èto* can no longer be co-refer with the null argument of infinitives, since in CCE they are not used like defective adjectives with their own null argument:

- (13) Horosho poparit’sya.  
       good.PRED to.steam  
       ‘It’s good to have a steam.’

- (14) \*Banya èto horosho  
       Bathhouse ETO good.PRED  
       poparit’sya.  
       to.steam  
       intended: ‘A bathhouse is a good  
       place to have a steam.’

In the case of [NP1 *èto* PP] structures — PP is an internal modifier of the zero DP. This is evident from the distribution below (15-16) — NP1 in such constructions cannot be an individual, which is due to the special interpretation of null arguments in Russian (Zimmerling 2008).

- (15) Arkasha èto \*(chelovek) v dome.  
       A.               ETO human       in house  
       Arkasha is the man in the house.’

- (16) Parizh èto (gorod) vo Francii.  
       P.               ETO city       in France  
       ‘Paris is a city in France.’

**Consequences:** The presented approach, supports  $v_{BE}$ -hypothesis (Myler 2016, 2018), eliminating the need to postulate the pronominal copula construction (Citko 2008) as an independent phenomenon. Moreover, postulating  $\emptyset_{CA}$  may potentially explain why cleft constructions differ so

much cross-linguistically, by attributing it to the syntactic position in which  $\emptyset_{CA}$  can be introduced in a particular language.

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