

On the Interpretation of *Èto* in so-called *Èto*-clefts¹

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In Russian, there is a construction with the pronoun *èto* in sentence-initial position, the so-called *èto*-cleft. This construction with *èto* has two types: a sentence with contrastive focus (1) (focus *èto*-cleft), andthetic sentence (2) (thetic *èto*-cleft). There are two problems for the analysis of these constructions:

- (1) Okno razbil Vasja? – Net, *èto* **Petja** razbil okno².
window break Vasja no *èto* Pete broke window
Did Vasja break the window? No, it's Pete who broke the window.
- (2) Čto za šum, čto slučilos'? – Èto Petja razbil **okno**.
what prep. noise what happen *èto* Pete break window
What's the noise, what happened? Pete broke the window.

Problem 1: What is the syntactic position of *èto*, and is it the same for both cases?

Problem 2: What is the semantic status of *èto*, and is it the same for both cases?

The first problem was observed by King (1993) and Junghanns (1997). King (1993) proposes that *èto* occurs as specifier of a focus phrase, and that the argument of the focus phrase is the constituent which is focused and therefore moved to the position adjacent to *èto*. Junghanns (1997) provides arguments against this analysis: (i) the focused constituent need not be adjacent to *èto* (3), (ii) the whole IP can be focused (thetic sentences), and (iii) the syntactic status of the moved constituent isn't clear.

- (3) Petja razbil stakan? – Net, *èto* Petja **okno** razbil.
Pete break glass No *èto* Pete window break
Did Pete break the glass? No, Pete broke the window.

Junghanns 1997 analyses both thetic and focus *èto*-clefts by considering *èto* as a base-generated topic, which occurs as a higher adjunct to Agr_SP. The argument for this analysis is the fact that *èto* occurs in a position lower than specifier of CP but higher than anything else in the clause (4). Junghanns proposes that *èto* is not a focus-marker, but a topic, which is connecting the sentences in the context. Focus appears in every sentence, and doesn't depend on the presence of *èto*. Junghanns' analysis also offers a uniformity of syntactic structure for focus *èto*-clefts and thetic *èto*-clefts.

- (4) Ja znaju, [CP čto [èto [Agr_{SP} **Petja** razbil okno]]].
I know [CP that [èto [Agr_{SP} Pete break window]]].
I know that it's Pete who broke the window.

This analysis presents semantic difficulties connected with Problem 2. First, focus *èto*-cleft has an additional meaning, namely **contrast**. A focus *èto*-cleft is good only when in the preceding context there is a marked alternative to what is asserted in the *èto*-cleft, while the same sentence without *èto* has no such restriction. In (5) there is a marked alternative: 'Vasja broke the window', and the *èto*-cleft is OK. In (6) there is no marked alternative in the preceding context, and the *èto*-cleft is not so good. But in the same situation the sentence without *èto* is suitable (7).

- (5) Ty slyšal, Vasja razbil okno! ^{OK} Net, *èto* **Petja** razbil okno.
you hear Vasja break window no *èto* Pete break window

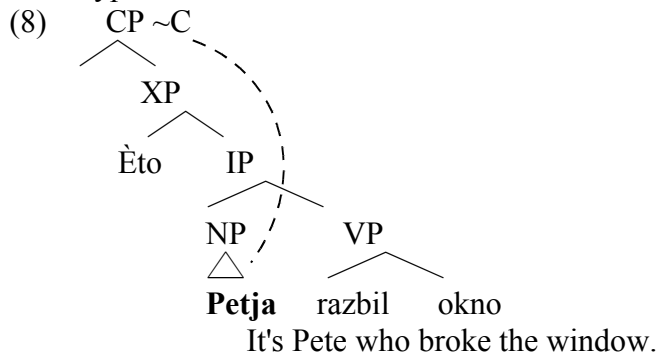
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² **Bold** means the word with the main phrase (pitch) accent.

Have you heard: Vasya broke the window! No, that's Pete who broke the window.

- (6) Kto razbil okno? ?? Èto **Petja** razbil okno.
 who break window èto Pete break window
 Who broke the window? Pete broke the window.
- (7) Kto razbil okno? OK Okno razbil **Petja** .
 who break window window break Pete
 Who broke the window? Pete broke the window.

We propose that *èto* is a kind of a filter that restricts an alternative set (C), which is defined by focus (in sense of Rooth (1992)) (8). The restriction made by *èto* is: "In the alternative set there must be a marked alternative different from the assertion of the *èto*-cleft". So *èto* in this type of construction is a contrast marker.



Second,thetic *èto*-cleft has no contrast. There need not be a marked alternative to the situation ofthetic *èto*-cleft in the preceding context. *Èto* in (9) and (10) is an anaphoric pronoun, referring to the just-described situation. In fact, we can argue that the word *èto* in thethetic construction is a marker of **causal relation**: it signals that the (rest of the)thetic sentence is connected with the situation described in the context (the situation-denoting topic connected withthetic sentences in the framework of Erteschik-Shir (1997) = the situation *èto* refers to) by a causal relation. Sentences (9) and (10) convey the same content via different means. In (10) the subordinating conjunction *potomu što* 'because' is an overt marker of a causal relation. In (9) the causal relation is implied by the presence of *èto*.

- (9) Naša Tanja gromko plačet. Èto ona uronila v rečku **mjačik**.
 our Tanja loudly cry èto she drop in river ball
 Our Tanja is crying loudly. She has dropped a ball into the river.
- (10) Naša Tanja gromko plačet. Èto potomu, što ona uronila v rečku **mjačik**.
 our Tanja loudly cry èto because she drop in river ball
 Our Tanja is crying loudly. That's because she has dropped a ball into the river.

Athetic sentence without *èto* can be connected to the context with other relations, but athetic sentence with *èto* can only be connected to the context with a causal relation.

- (11) Naša Tanja gromko plačet. Èto ona mamu zovjot.
 our Tanja loudly cry èto she mother call
 Our Tanja is crying loudly. She is calling her mother (it's the cause of crying).
- (12) Naša Tanja gromko plačet. Ona zovjot mamu.
 our Tanja loudly cry she call mother
 Our Tanja is crying loudly. She calls her mother (may be later).

We conclude that the analysis of Junghanns (1997) is semantically inadequate for so-called focus *èto*-clefts, because there is no reason to consider the contrast marker *èto* in focus *èto*-clefts a 'topic'. But for so-calledthetic *èto*-clefts this analysis is adequate, because it is plausible to analyze anaphoric pronoun *èto* as a topic. And since the semantics of *èto* in these two types of so-called *èto*-clefts is different, it would probably be worthwhile in future research to consider whether the syntactic structure for these types might also be different.

References

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