Russian èto, predication, and big DPs

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. Torrego 1992, Uriagereka 1995, Kayne 2005), with èto in D⁰ and NOM₁ in SpecDP. The proposal goes against treating èto in ‘(NOM₁) èto NOM₂’ 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 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 specificalional 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 T⁰ (in a similar way T⁰ 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).

(2) [TP be [SC NOM₂ [R: R⁰ 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].
          No, this / she was Margaret of Anjou
       ‘No. This (= the wife of Henry VI) was Margaret of Anjou.’

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(4) [TP èto[i] [T⁰ be] [SC NOM₂ [R: R⁰ 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 D⁰, while the NOM₁ is merged in Spec,DP and a silent pro sits in the complement of D⁰ (5).

(5) [DN NOM₁ [D [D⁰ èto] [np pro]]]

Since NOM₁ (qua specifier of the occupant of Spec,TP) is not itself in a relationship with T⁰, this accounts for the fact that NOM₁ in the sentences under discussion never controls agreement. This 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] [v [D₀ èto] [NP pro]]] k [T' byl [sc [Petja] [w: R₀ tk]]]]
   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 D₀, the complement of D₀ 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 T₀, which explains the limited distribution of the [NOM₁ èto] unit (in particular, its unavailability in e.g. fragment answers and coordinate structures).

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) Udívitěno, čto železný čelovek – èto Toni.
   surprising that iron man.NOM this Tony.NOM
   ‘It is surprising that the 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).

   Mum asked iron man.NOM Q this Tony.NOM
   ‘Mum asked whether the Iron Man is Tony.’

b. Kto (*èto) Toni?
   who.NOM this Tony.NOM
   ‘Who is 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 D₀ 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 D₀ 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’ D₀=èto [pro]]]

b. Èto prijatno, čto my guljaem v parke.
   this nice that we walk in park
   [DP [D’ D₀=èto [pro]] … [CP čto my guljaem v parke]
   both: ‘It is nice that we are walking in the park.’

7 Though in the ‘big DP’ analysis the èto of ‘NOM₁ èto NOM₂’ constructions is a D₀, not a Top₀ (as in e.g. Markman 2007), 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.