

Pronominal Copula Constructions Are What? Reduced Specificational Pseudo-Clefts!

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses the puzzling properties of the Russian Pronominal Copula Construction (PCC) shown in (1) and discussed in Pereltsvaig (2001), Blaszcak and Geist (2000), Geist (2005), Citko (2006), Matushansky 2006 (inter alia).

- (1) a. Misha **eto** (byl) /Ø nash doctor
Misha *this* (was) is our doctor-nom
Misha was / is our doctor
- b. Cookie **eto** tolstaja koshka
Cookie *this* fat cat-nom
Cookie is the fat cat
- c. Denis **eto** moj brat
Denis *this* my-nom brother-nom
Denis is my brother

Descriptively, the Pronominal Copula Construction involves a demonstrative pronoun, *eto* = ‘this’, placed between the subject and the predicate. The Pronominal Copula Construction can also involve the verb ‘be’ that indicates tense and follows the demonstrative pronoun (1a). The PCC is interesting in a number of respects. First, it disallows instrumental case on the nominal predicate (2), unlike the Verbal Copula Construction, shown in (3), which does not involve a pronominal element *eto*:

- (2) a. Misha *eto* (byl) /Ø ***doctor-om**
Misha *this* (was) is **doctor-instr**
Misha was / is a doctor
- b. Cookie *eto* ***tolst-oj koshk-oj**
Cookie *this* **fat-instr cat-instr**
Cookie is a cat
- (3) a. Dima byl doctor/ **doctor-om**
Dima was doctor-nom / **doctor-instr**
Dima was be a doctor
- b. Dima budet **pisatel-em**
Dima will be **writer-instr**
Dima will be a writer

Second, it cannot be embedded under Exceptional Case Marking verbs such as ‘believe’ or ‘consider’ (4 vs 5):

- (4) *Misha schitajet [Dimu *eto* (doctor/ doctor-om)]
Misha considers [Dima *eto* doctor-nom/doctor-instr]
Misha considers Dima *this* doctor
- (5) Misha schitajet [Dimu doctor-om]

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Misha considers [Dima-acc doctor-ins]
Misha considers Dima a doctor

Third, the PCC disallows any agreeing adjectives¹ and PPs in the predicate position. Again, this contrasts with the Verbal Copula Construction where *eto* does not appear: (6 vs.7):

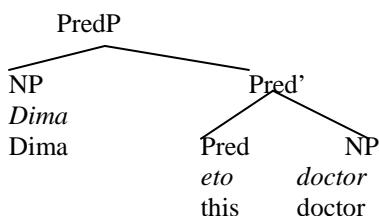
- (6) a. Misha eto mal'chik b. *Misha eto **krasiv-(yj)** c. *Dima eto **v shkole**
Misha *this* boy Misha *this* **pretty-3rdSgMsc** Dima *this* **in school**
Misha is a boy Misha is handsome Dima is in school
- (7) a. Misha byl doctor-om b. Misha byl **krasiv-yj** c. Misha byl **v shkole**
Misha was doctor-instr Misha was pretty-3rdSgMsc Misha was in school
Misha was a doctor Misha was handsome Misha was in school

The goal of this paper is to explain this odd behavior of the PCC and unify this construction with other constructions where *eto* appears, such as pseudo-clefts, presentational constructions, and clefts. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 considers some possible and previous approaches to *eto* and shows that they do not explain the facts adequately. Section 3 offers a proposal concerning the syntax of the PCC that explains the restrictions on the categories that can appear in the post-copular position in this construction. Section 4 extends the proposal to other constructions involving *eto*. Section 5 is the conclusion.

2. Possible approaches to the location of *eto*

Take one: the pronominal element *eto* is the lexicalization of the head Pred (Bowers 1993). This is shown in (8):

(8)



If so, it should be allowed under Exceptional Case Marking verbs such as ‘believe’. As argued extensively in Den Dikken (2006), Small Clauses cannot involve a symmetrical structure of the form [DP DP] (contra Moro 1997, 2000, Pereltsvaig 2001). Instead, all Small Clauses involve a structure mediated by some functional head such as Pred. While a detailed overview of Den Dikken’s arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, one argument is that a symmetrical structure that involves two DPs will necessarily have an equative interpretation because the two DPs will have to be co-indexed in the syntax and hence co-referential (Den Dikken 2006:67). Yet, an equative interpretation is not correct for *all* Small Clauses, including those in (5). Now, assuming that Small Clauses are mediated by a head such as Pred, if *eto* were a realization of Pred, it should be possible in (4), contrary to the fact.

Take two: *eto* is the actual predicate, while the NP ‘doctor’ is adjoined, as shown in (9). This is argued by Adger and Ramchand (2003) for constructions with the pronominal ‘augment’ in Scottish Gaelic. But, if (9) were the correct structure for the PCC in Russian, *eto* should be able to take instrumental case as other Russian predicates do, but it does not, as seen from (10):

¹ Russian has long adjectives that agree in gender and case features (e.g. *krasiv-yj* = pretty3rdSgMscNom) and short adjectives (e.g. *krasiv* = pretty3rdSgMsc) that agree in gender only. For discussion see Siegel (1976).

b. Wall-i mo **ko** ann (PSEUDO-CLEFT)
 help-rel.v 3rdAcc *this* 2ndIndep
 who helped him is you

c. **Ko** Amadu mbalu –mi (CLEFT)
this Amadu help-rel.v 1stSg
 It is Amadu I helped

HAITIAN CREOLE (Deprez 2000)

(16) a. Jan **se** zanmi mwen (PRONOMINAL COPULA CONSTRUCTION)
 Jan this friend my
 Jan is my friend

b. **Se** te li (PRESENTATIONAL CONSTRUCTION)
 this past he
 this was him

c. **Se** Jan Marie renmen (CLEFT)
 this Jan Marie likes
 it is Jan Marie likes

The following questions arise. First, what is the position of *eto*? Second, why does the PCC in Russian prohibit instrumental NPs, agreeing APs, or PPs from appearing as predicates? The answer to (A) and (B) should hopefully bring us closer to unifying the PCC with the other three types of constructions that involve *eto*.

3. The proposal

3.1 Where is *eto*?

I argue following Junghans (1997), Blaszcak and Geist (2000), Geist (2005), and Cover (2006) that *eto* in the PCC is a Topic head, not a copula. It occupies the same position in pseudo-clefts, presentational constructions, and clefts. Since *eto* heads the TopP², it is too high to appear embedded under ECM verbs. This immediately explains the contrast between (4) and (5). Complements of ‘believe’/‘consider’ are Small Clauses, which lack tense by definition (Den Dikken 2006:61), and hence cannot involve the structure above the TP, such as the TopP.

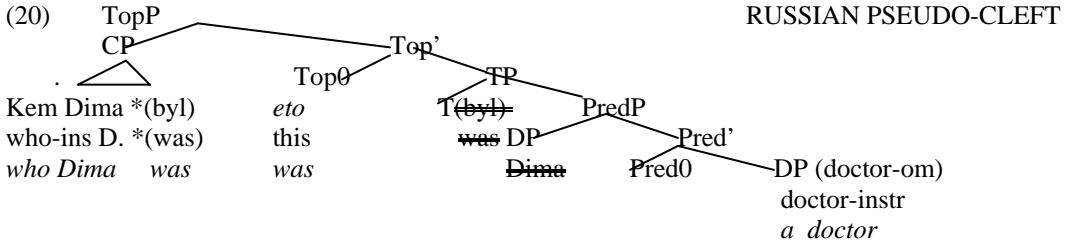
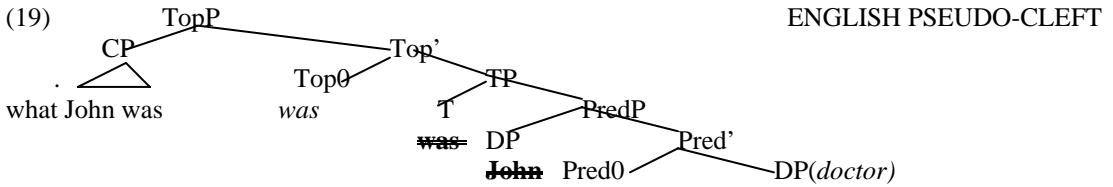
(4)*Misha schitajet [Dimu eto (doctor/ doctor-om)] (5) Misha schitajet [Dimu doctor-om]
 Misha considers [Dima eto doctor/doctor-instr] Misha considers [Dima-acc doctor-ins]
 Misha considers Dima this doctor Misha considers Dima a doctor

I further propose that the structure of the Pronominal Copula Construction is akin to that of a Specificational Pseudo-Cleft(SP-C) of Type A (Den Dikken et.al 2000). An example of a Specificational Pseudo-Cleft is given in (17) for English and (18) for Russian:

(17) What John is is important to himself! (18) Kem Dima byl eto velikim pisatel’jem!
 Who-instr Dima was this great writer-instr
 What Dima was was a great author

Den Dikken et al (2000), adopting an intuition of Higgins (1979), argue that Specificational Pseudo-Clefts have a question-answer structure with the wh-question merged into the spec of TopP, headed by *be* in English (and *eto* in Russian), and a partially-elided TP that retains only the phrase that ‘answers’ the wh-question. This is illustrated in (19) and (20) (Den Dikken et al 2000).

² See Geist (2005) for a somewhat different proposal concerning copular constructions with *eto* in Russian.



The similarities between Pronominal Copula Constructions and Specificational Pseudo-Clefts are as follows. First, both constructions involve focus on the ‘answer’ phrase indicated by question/answer pairs in (21) (Heycock and Kroch 1999; Den Dikken 2001:28 for Specificational Pseudo-Clefts).

- (21) a. **Kto** Dima? b. Dima eto **nash doctor** c. #Nash doctor eto **Dima**
 who Dima? Dima this our doctor Our doctor this Dima
 who is Dima? Dima is our doctor #Our doctor is Dima

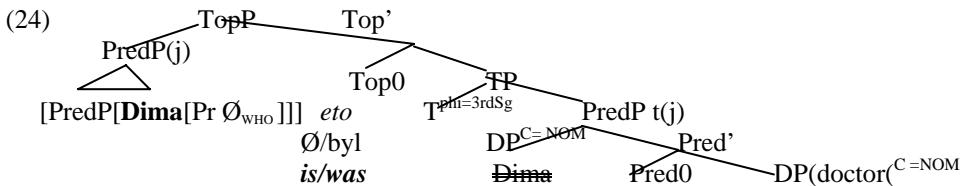
The focus on the ‘answer’ phrase is expected, assuming that the portion preceding *eto* is in the spec of TopP, i.e. topicalized. Second, both cannot be embedded under ECM verbs (22, 4) (Den Dikken 2001).

- (22)* Ja schitaju [kto Dima byl eto doctor]
 I consider [who D. was this doctor]
 *I consider who D. was was a doctor

Third, both have the same extraction restrictions as illustrated in (23) (Den Dikken et al 2000). That is, it is not possible to form a wh-question from a predicate NP, as shown in (23a) for the Pronominal Copula Construction and in (23b) for a Specificational Pseudo-Cleft:

- (23)a. *Kakaja kartina ty schitajesh chto prichina volnenij eto?
 which picture you think that cause riots-gen *this*?
 which picture do you think that is the cause of the riot? [Pronominal Copula Construction]
 b. *Chto ty schitajet chto chto prichina volnenij byla eto?
 what you consider that what reason riots-gen was this?
 what do you believe that what caused the riot was? [Specificational Pseudo-Cleft]

However, I propose that Pronominal Copula Constructions differ from Specificational Pseudo-Clefts in two respects. First, PCCs involve *copying* the PredP into spec TopP (24) a la predicate clefts (Koopman 1984, Abels 2001), as opposed to *base-generating* the question in the Topic position. Second, they involve a *null* wh-element that remains in-situ (24).



- The derivation in (24) involves the following steps:
 1) Copy PredP [PredP [Dima [Pred [Doctor]]] into spec TopP

- 2) Replace [*Doctor*] with the null ‘who’
- 3) Delete the lower copy of the PredP, leaving only the ‘answer’ phrase [doctor]

The structure in (24) that involves a copied PredP, as opposed to a base-generated question, explains why the aux *byl*=‘was’, which is merged in T, cannot precede *eto* in the PCC, but must do so in Specificational Pseudo-Clefts (25a vs. b). Since in the PCC the part that precedes *eto* is small – just the PredP --the ‘be’, inserted into T to bear tense features, cannot appear there. Hence, (25a) is ungrammatical. The Specificational Pseudo-Cleft, on the other hand, involves creating a question in the spec of TopP. Consequently, the tense bearing ‘be’ can appear there (25b):

- | | |
|--|--|
| (25) a. Dima (* <i>byl</i>) eto doctor
Dima was this doctor
Dima was a doctor | b. Kem Dima *(<i>byl</i>) eto doctrom
Who-instr Dima was this doctor-instr
Who Dima was was a doctor |
|--|--|

The derivation in (24) also explains why there is no analogue of the PCC with verbal predicates (26):

- | | |
|--|--|
| (26) *Dima eto ljubit sup
Dima this likes soup
Dima likes soup | (27) Konfety *(<i>est</i> ’) eto my mozhem
Candy eat this we can-1stPl
eat candy- that we can do! |
|--|--|

Again, since we must copy the entire predicate into spec TopP headed by *eto*, if the predicate is verbal, the entire VP must be fronted before *eto*, not just the subject. In fact, such a construction is indeed attested, as seen in (27). Crucially, in (27) the verb is a) obligatory and b) infinitival, i.e. appears in its base form. The latter is due to the fact that the tense information is not part of the verb, but rather appears later, at the TP, which is not copied into the spec TopP.

3.2 Deriving restrictions on the possible predicates in the PCC

3.2.1 Why instrumental NP predicates cannot appear in the PCC

With the above structure of the PCC in mind, we finally come to the question concerning the restrictions on the type of predicates allowed in the PCC. First, it must be noted that the *wh*-element and its ‘answer’ in Specificational Pseudo-Clefts must have the same case, category, and agreement features (Den Dikken 2001 for SP-Cs). Consider Specificational Pseudo-Clefts for a moment again. The mismatch in case causes the ungrammaticality of (28a):

- | | |
|--|--|
| (28) a. * Kem Dima byl eto doctor
who-instr Dima was <i>this</i> doctor-nom
Who Dima was was a doctor | b. Kem Dima byl eto doctor-om
who-instr Dima was <i>this</i> doctor-instr
Who Dima was was a doctor |
| (29) a. * Kak Dima byl eto krasiv- yj
how Dima was <i>this</i> pretty MscSg .
what Dima was was pretty | b. Kak-oj Dima byl eto krasiv- yj
how-MscSg Dima was <i>this</i> pretty MscSg .
what Dima was was pretty |

This is natural if SP-Cs indeed have a question-answer structure. In Russian, the answer to a question has to have the same case (if it is a noun) as the question word, as seen in (30):

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| (30) a. Kakim doctor-om byl Dima?
What-instr doctor-instr was Dima?
What kind of a doctor was Dima? | b. Xorosh-im! Plox-im
Good-instr ! bad-instr
A good one/ bad one | c. * Xoroshij/ *ploxo j
good-nom / bad-nom
A good one/ bad one |
|---|--|---|

Now, since the PCC, unlike the SP-C, involves a null *wh*-element, it can only match a noun phrase with the morphologically unmarked nominative case (1), as shown in (31):

- (31) [*Top* [*PredP*[Dima [*Pred* \emptyset_{who}]] *Top*(*eto*) [*IP* **doctor-nom**]]]
Instrumental case on the null *wh*- will induce a **Stray Affix Filter(SAF)** violation (Lasnik 1981/1995).

- (32) **Stray Affix Filter (SAF)** = Affixes must have phonologically overt hosts (Lasnik 1981/1995)

In other words, there will be no overt host for the affix to attach to if the NP has instrumental case:

(33) [Top [PredP[Dima [Pred * \emptyset_{WHO} -im] Top(eto) [IP doctor-instr]]]]

In (33), the instrumental suffix ‘-im’ appears on a null wh-element, thus inducing an SAF violation. Instrumental NP predicates are thus impossible in Pronominal Copula Constructions.

3.2.2 Why there are no agreeing AP predicates in the PCC

Next, we come to the question of what is responsible for blocking agreeing AP predicates in PCCs. A possible proposal, due to Citko (2006), is that the copular element in the PCC requires syntactic category symmetry. In other words, it acts like a conjunction that can only unify identical categories (34a v, b):

(34) a John was sick and tired vs. b. *John was sick and a doctor

However, this view does not explain why PCCs **do** allow *short* adjectives with default (3rd person neuter) agreement features (35). The predicate in (35) is an adjective, but it does not match the subject noun phrase in gender and case features:

(35) a. Pirog *eto xorosh-o!* b. Jabloki *eto vkusn-o!*
 pie-3rdSgMscNom this good-3rdSgNeut apples-3rdPINom this tasty-3rdSgNeut
 A pie is a good thing Apples are tasty things

The *Stray Affix Filter* can be invoked again to explain why agreeing APs are impossible in PCCs, while non-agreeing APs are allowed. A feature match with ‘long’ APs is impossible when the wh-element is null: the agreement features realized as the suffix ‘-oj’ of *kak-oj* = ‘how-MscSg’ have no host,³ as seen in (36):

(36) [TopP [PredP [Dima [Pr * \emptyset_{WH} -oj]]] Top0(eto) [IP ~~Dima-by~~ krasiv-yj(pretty)]]]

In contrast, the adjectives in (35) lack agreement features and the “match” in agreement between the null wh-element and the ‘answer’ is satisfied trivially. Hence, the null wh-element present in the PCC allows short adjectives, a fact not predicted on the ‘symmetrical’ approach to *eto*.

3.2.3 Why there are no PP predicates in the PCC

Finally, the *Stray Affix Filter* also explains why PPs cannot be predicates in the Pronominal Copula Construction. Before we see how this works, the nature of the wh-word ‘where’ in Russian must be considered. Russian lacks a simplex ‘where’, and has a complex ‘where-at’=*gde* and ‘where-to’=*kuda* (37a, b) instead.

(37) a. Gde / *kuda Dima? b. Kuda / *gde Dima idet?
 where-at /where-to Dima where-to/where-at D.goes?
 where is Dima? where is Dima going?

The word *gde* can be viewed as a suppletive form for ‘where-at’, while the word *kuda* is a suppletive form of ‘where-to’. Arguably, *gde* and *kuda* are formed by incorporating the preposition ‘at’ and ‘to’ respectively into an abstract location-denoting wh-morpheme. Crucially, it is impossible to incorporate the P into a *null* wh-element: the P will lack an overt host, once again inducing a *Stray Affix Filter* violation. This is illustrated in (38):

³Similarly, agreeing short APs are also impossible in (36) since they won’t be able to match the null wh- in gender.

(38) [TopP [PredP [Dima [Pr * \emptyset_{wh} -AT]]] Top0(*eto*) [IP ~~Dima~~-v(in) New York]]]

To summarize, the impossibility of instrumental NPs, agreeing AP, and PP predicates in the Pronominal Copula Construction is uniformly attributed to the fact that the construction involves a *null* *wh*-element that cannot support any overt affixes. That said, one may still wonder why such an articulated structure is required for such a minimal construction as the PCC. The answer is that the above properties of the PCC cannot be explained if we treat the DP appearing before *eto* as just being fronted to the spec TopP. Since *eto*, being so high in the Topic position, cannot select something below the TP, a ‘simple’ proposal would not explain why we cannot use long APs, instrumental NPs, PPs, and verbal predicates in the position following *eto*. A more articulated structure is needed to explain the properties of the PCCs. In the next section I address the extensions of the proposal to other constructions involving *eto*.

4. Extensions: other constructions with *eto*

We have already seen how the SP-C in (11) is derived (20). I argue that the presentational construction such as (12) minimally differs from the PCC: it involves a contextually salient DP that appears in the spec TopP, also headed by *eto*, but the DP is not pronounced because it is easily recoverable from context. The structure for (12) is shown in (39):

(39) [TopP [PredP [~~Dima~~ [Pr \emptyset_{who}]]] Top0(*eto*) [IP ~~Dima~~-by doctor]]]

Turning to clefts, I would like to propose that it involves an elided yes/no question preceding *eto* (40):

(40) [TopP [CP ~~John hit Misha?~~] Top0(*eto*) [IP Dima udaril(hit) Mishu]]]

In other words, a cleft such as ‘It was Dima who hit Misha’ is an answer to a possibly implicit, but contextually presupposed question along the lines of “Did John hit Misha?”⁴

The common link between pronominal copula constructions, pseudo-clefts, presentational constructions, and clefts is the Topic /Comment structure involved in all of them. Since the subject appears in a topicalized position (as a part of a larger phrase), it receives discourse prominence compared to the remaining utterance. In presentational constructions and clefts, the constituent preceding *eto* is not overtly realized, but must be contextually salient, i.e. part of the shared information. This accords with the general notion of topic-hood (Vallduvi 1992, McCoy 2001, references therein). If *eto* were a copula, not a topic marker, this would be an unexpected consequence.

5. Conclusion

In sum, treating the Pronominal Copula Construction as a reduced Specificational Pseudo-Cleft that involves a null *wh*-element explains why only nominative NPs and short APs can appear in the predicate position in these constructions. Agreeing adjectives that have gender and/or number agreement features and PPs are impossible there because their presence will invariably trigger a violation of the *Stray Affix Filter* (Lasnik 1981/1995), a constraint prohibiting affixes without overt hosts. Furthermore, the proposal has consequences for analyzing a cross-linguistic typology of constructions with pronominal elements found in Hebrew, Pulaar, and Haitian Creole among other languages. For example, it is predicted that other languages will disallow agreeing APs in the predicate position in the PCC and may also ban PPs from appearing there. The prediction is borne out in Hebrew, where the Pronominal Copula Construction with the demonstrative pronoun ‘ze’, also used in pseudo-clefts, exhibits the same restrictions on AP and PP predicates as we see in Russian (Heller 1999). Finally, the fact that the same pronominal element is used in PCCs, presentational constructions, clefts, and pseudo-clefts in unrelated languages indicates that there are important

⁴ Gundel (1977) makes a similar argument concerning cleft sentences, specifically, she relates them to pseudoclefts.

commonalities between these constructions. I have argued that all of these constructions involve a Topic/ Comment discourse structure where the constituent preceding *eto* is topicalized and the constituent following *eto* is focused. The current account leaves many issues regarding the PCC open, among which, is the interesting question concerning the nature of the pronominal element involved (e.g. non-agreeing demonstrative vs. an agreeing personal pronoun) and its influence on the resulting construction. I leave this question and other important issues for future research.

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