

What is *this*, Where is *this*? On Some Syntactic Oddities of the Pronominal Copula Construction

1. Introduction: the Facts

→ This talk addresses the puzzling properties of the Russian¹ Pronominal Copula Construction (PCC) shown in [1] and discussed in Pereltsvaig 2001, Geist 2005, Citko 2006, (inter alia)

- [1] a. Misha **eto** (byl) /Ø doctor
Misha *this* (was) is doctor-nom
Misha was / is a doctor
- b. Cookie **eto** koshka
Cookie *this* cat-nom
Cookie is a 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[cf1a].

→ The Pronominal Copula Construction 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* ***koshk-oj**
Cookie *this* **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’, while a construction that does not involve *eto* is possible there [4 v 5]

- [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

¹ While I focus primarily on Russian here, Polish works essentially the same way (Citko 2006)

→ The third, and possibly the most intriguing property of the PCC is that it disallows ‘long’ adjectives and Prepositional Phrases in the predicate position. Only nominal predicates are allowed.

→ 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

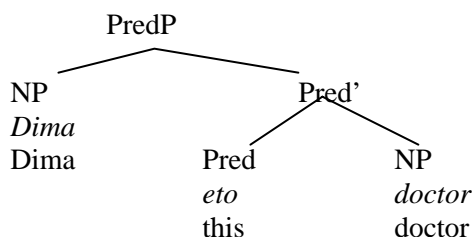
→ How can we explain this odd behavior of the Pronominal Copula Construction?

2. Possible approaches from previous work

→ What if:

- The pronominal element *eto* is the lexicalization of the head Pred (Bowers 1993)?

[8]a.

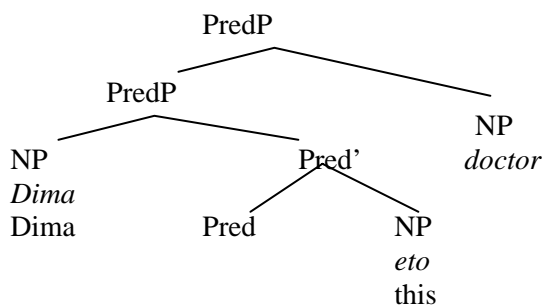


- But, if so, it should be allowed under Exceptional Case Marking verbs such as ‘believe’ that take PredP as a complement (Den Dikken 2006 for extensive arguments). But it can’t:

[8] b. [TP [John believe [PredP [Dima-acc [Pred(**eto*) doctor]]]]

- If *eto* is the actual predicate, while the NP ‘doctor’ is adjoined, as argued by Adger and Ramchand 2003 for similar constructions in Scottish Gaelic, it should allow instrumental case in Russian as other predicates do, but it does not as we can see from [10]

[9]



[10] * Dima etim doctor/ doctorom
 Dima *this-instr* doctor/ doctor-instr
 Dima is a doctor

HAITIAN CREOLE (Deprez 2001)

[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

→ So, we are left with the following questions:

(A) First, what is the position of *eto* and why does the Pronominal Copula Construction in Russian disallow instrumental NPs and prohibit agreeing adjectives or PPs as predicates?

(B) Second, how can we unify the Pronominal Copula Construction with the other three types of constructions that involve the demonstrative pronoun *eto*?

3. The Proposal.

3.1 Where is *eto*?

→ I argue that *eto* in the Pronominal Copula Construction is a Topic head (Junghans 1997, Cover 2006). It occupies the same position in the Pseudo-Cleft, Presentational, and Cleft constructions

→ Since *eto* heads the Topic Phrase, it is too high to appear embedded under ECM verbs; hence the contrast in [4vs.5]. The complement of the verbs such as ‘believe’/‘consider’ is a Small Clause that cannot involve the structure above the Tense Phrase (TP)

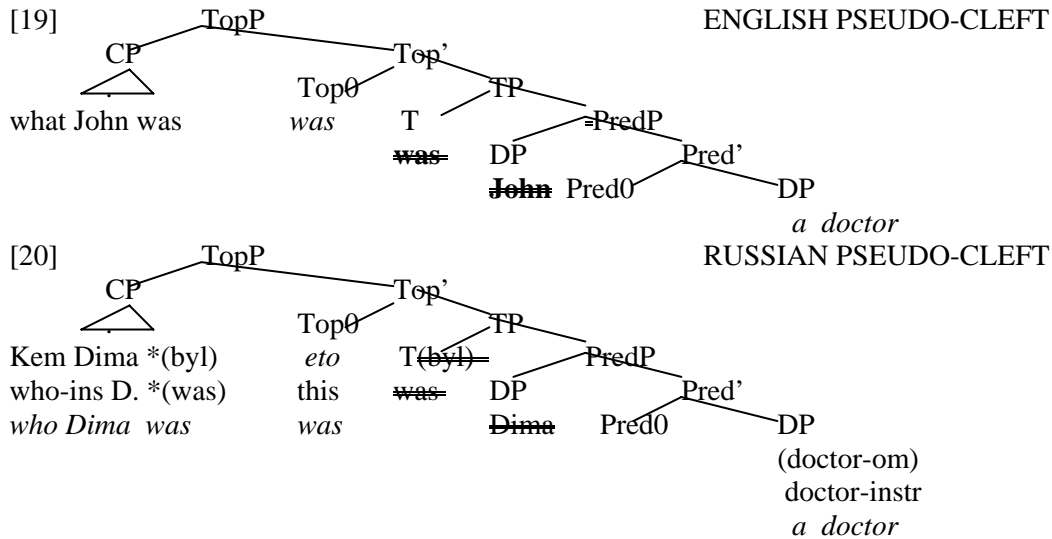
[4]*Misha schitajet [Dimu eto doctor/ doctor-om]	[5]Misha schitajet [Dimu doctor-om]
Misha considers [Dima eto doctor/doctor-instr]	Misha considers [Dima-acc doctor-ins]
Misha considers Dima this doctor	Misha considers Dima a doctor

→ I further propose that the structure of the Pronominal Copula Construction is akin to that of Specificational Pseudo-Clefts (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 Topic position (spec TopP), headed by *be* in English (and *eto* in Russian), and a partially-elided sentence (TP) that retains only the phrase that ‘answers’ the wh-question.

→ This is illustrated in [19] and [20] (Den Dikken et al 2000).



→ 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 [21] (Heycock&Kroch 1999; Den Dikken 2001:28 for Specificational Pseudo-Clefts).

- [21] a. **Kto** Dima? b. Dima eto **doctor** c. #Doctor eto **Dima**
 who Dima? b. Dima this doctor c. Doctor this Dima
 who is Dima? b. Dima is a doctor c.# The doctor is Dima

→ The focus on the ‘answer’ phrase is expected assuming that the portion preceding *eto* is in the Topic position

→ **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

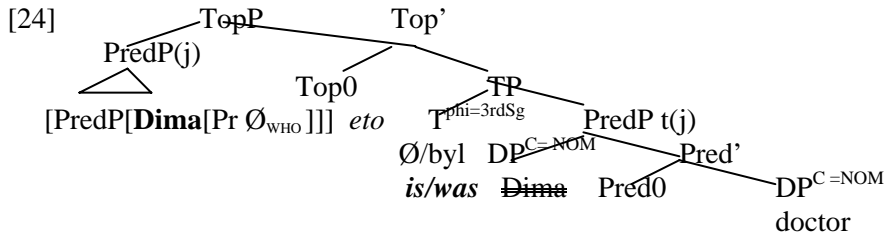
→ **Third**, both have the same extraction restrictions [23] (Den Dikken et al 2000). That is, it is not possible to form a wh-question from a predicate NP as shown in [23a] for Pronominal Copula Construction and in [23b] for a Specificational Pseudo-Cleft

- [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. *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* of the Predicate Phrase (PredP) into spec TopP [24]. That is, they do not involve a *base-generated* question in the Topic position

Second, they involve a *null* wh-element that remains in-situ [24].



→ What is happening in [24] is as follows:

- 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] explains why the aux *byl*= ‘was’, which is merged in T, cannot precede *eto* in Pronominal Copula Constructions [24], but must do so in Specificational Pseudo-Clefts.

→ In other words, in the PCC, the part that precedes *eto* is small – just the PredP. The tense-bearing T(*byl* = *was*) cannot appear there. Hence, the ungrammaticality of [25a].

→ The Specificational Pseudo-Cleft, on the other hand, involves creating the question in the spec of TopP (the topic position), and hence, the tense bearing ‘*byl*’ = ‘*was*’ does appear there [25b]

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

→ [24] also explains why there is no analogue of the PCC with verbal predicates [26]

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

→ Again, since we must copy the entire predicate, if the predicate is verbal, the verb must also appear before ‘*eto*’, not just the subject. In fact, such a construction is indeed attested [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 Tense Phrase, which is not copied into the Topic position

3.2 Restrictions on the Type of Predicates in the Pronominal Copula Construction

3.2.1 Why instrumental predicates cannot appear in the PCC

→ Finally, we come to the question concerning the restrictions on the type of predicates allowed in the Pronominal Copula Construction

→ First, it must be noted that the wh-element and its ‘answer’ in Specificational Pseudo-Clefts and Pronominal Copula Constructions must have the same case, category, and agreement features (Den Dikken 2001 for SP-Cs). Consider Specificational Pseudo-Clefts for a moment again:

- [28] a. ***Kem** Dima byl eto **doctor**
who-instr Dima was *this* **doctor-nom**
 Who Dima was was a doctor
- b. **Kem** Dima byl eto **doctor-om**
who-instr Dima was *this* **doctor-instr**
 Who Dima was was a doctor
- [29] a. ***Kak** Dima byl eto **krasiv-yj**
how Dima was *this* pretty **MscSg.**
 what Dima was was pretty
- b. **Kak-oj** Dima byl eto **krasiv-yj**
how-MscSg Dima was *this* pretty **MscSg.**
 what Dima was was pretty

→ This is natural if Pseudo-Clefts indeed have the question-answer structure. In Russian, the answer to the question has to have the same case (if it is a noun) as the question word:

- [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
good-nom / bad-nom
 A good one/ bad one

→ Now, since the PCC unlike the SP-C involves a null wh-element [31], it can only match a noun phrase with the morphologically unmarked nominative case[1].

[31] [Top [PredP[Dima [Pred \emptyset_{WHO}]] Top(eto) [IP **doctor-nom**]]]

→ Instrumental case on the null *who* will result in a *Stray Affix Filter (SAF)* violation (Lasnik 1981/1995).

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!

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

→ [31'] illustrates the violation of the Stray Affix Filter where the instrumental suffix ‘-im’ appears on a null wh-element

→ Instrumental NP predicates are thus impossible in Pronominal Copula Constructions

3.3.2 Why there are no ‘long’ Adjectival Phrase complements in the PCC

→ Now, what is responsible for blocking AP predicates in Pronominal Copula Constructions?

→ 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:

- [32]a John was sick and tired vs. b. *John was sick and a doctor

→ But, this would not explain why PCCs **do** allow *short* adjectives that lack agreement features [33]. The predicate in [33] is an adjective, but it does not match the subject noun phrase in agreement features. It is the so-called ‘short’ adjective that lacks number and gender marking

[33]a. Pirog eto xorosho! / vkusno! b. Jabloki eto polezno
 pie this good / tasty Apples this healthy
 A pie is a good thing/ tasty thing Apples are healthy

→ So, we can use the *Stray Affix Filter* to explain why ‘long’ APs are impossible in Pronominal Copula Constructions while short 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 [34].

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

→ However, short adjectives 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 Pronominal Copula Construction allows short adjectives.

3.3.3 Why there are no Prepositional Phrase complements in the PCC

→ Finally, a version of the Stray Affix Filter also explains why PPs cannot be complements of Pronominal Copula Constructions. Before we see how this works, the nature of the wh- word ‘where’ in Russian must be considered.

→ Russian lacks a simplex wh-element ‘where’, and has a complex ‘where-at’=*gde* and ‘where-to’=*kuda*[35] instead.

[35] 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’.

→ The two forms *gde* and *kuda* are formed by incorporating the preposition ‘at’ and ‘to’ respectively into a location-denoting wh-element.

→ Crucially, an incorporation of the P ‘at’ into the wh-element is impossible if the wh-element is null: the P will lack an overt host, once again inducing a *Stray Affix Filter* violation.

→ This is illustrated in [36]

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

→ To summarize, the impossibility of instrumental NPs, long AP, and PP predicates in the Pronominal Copula Construction is uniformly attributed to the fact that the Pronominal Copula 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.

→ Answer: the above properties of the Pronominal Copula Construction cannot be explained if we treat the NP appearing before *eto* as just being fronted to the topic position.

→ In fact, in the above constructions *eto* is obligatory. It is highly odd, if not impossible, to omit the pronominal element in these constructions.

→ If *eto* were just a copula and not a topic marker, this would be an unexpected consequence. Also, treating *eto* as a kind of a copula of identity would not explain its appearance in the inverted structure [38c] that does not necessarily involve identity.

→ I argue that the common link between the contexts in [38] is the topicalization of the constituent appearing before *eto*. The Pronominal Copula Construction has a Topic /Comment structure

→ Since the subject appears in a topicalized position (as a part of a larger phrase), it receives discourse prominence compared to the remaining utterance, which is required in the contexts involving predicate inversion and identification.

→ The same Topic/Comment structure is present in Presentational Constructions, Pseudo-Clefts, and Clefts.

6. 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

→ Long adjectives that have gender and number agreement features and prepositional phrases are impossible in 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 languages with Pronominal Copula Constructions will disallow agreeing APs in the predicate position 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 Pronominal Copula Constructions, Presentational Constructions, Clefts, and Pseudo-clefts in unrelated languages indicates that there are important 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 End