

Russian *èto*-focus and *to*-topic sentences as elliptical question-answer pairs

1 Specificational pseudoclefts (SPCs) in which the *wh*-clause precedes the focused constituent (XP) and in which XP can (subject to speaker variation) be contained in a full clause (*What he likes is* [_{IP} ([°]*he likes*) [_{XP} *syntax*]]) are argued in Den Dikken, Meinunger & Wilder (2000) to represent question-answer pairs (QAPs): the *wh*-clause is a question and the postcopular constituent is a full finite IP, usually reduced by ellipsis of the type also operative in QAPs involving two interlocutors (A: *What does he like?* B: (*He likes*) *syntax*). The structure is given in (1), where the copula *is* spells out the head Top, whose specifier houses the question-CP and whose complement is the answer-IP.

(1) [_{TopP} [_{CP} What he likes t] [_{Top'} *is* [_{IP} (he likes) [_{XP} syntax]]]]

Although English allows SPCs with a variety of *wh*-operators, it strictly prohibits them with yes/no (*whether*) questions: **Whether he likes syntax is* {*yes/he likes syntax/he does*}. Is this restriction language-specific or universal? This paper argues on the basis of Russian data that UG does not prohibit self-answering reduced question-answer pairs of the yes/no-type. We fill in the gap in the typology of SPCs by juxtaposing Russian *èto* clefts and *to* topic constructions, arguing that the latter should be analyzed as yes/no question SPCs, the type of SPCs that is missing in English.

2 Russian SPCs with a *wh*-question and the demonstrative *èto* 'this', such as (2), are parallel to their English counterparts. For (2), it is clearer than it is for its English prose translation that it should be analyzed as a self-answering question (3). The QAP nature of Russian (2) manifests itself in the presence of an unambiguously interrogative pronoun (*kto* 'who' is available in SPCs and questions, but not used in relative clauses), availability of multiple *wh*-operators (which is prohibited in relative clauses), and in case connectivity (in (2) *mašinu* is accusative, demonstrating case connectivity, as expected on the analysis in (3)).

(2) Čto Petja kupil, (tak) èto MAŠINU.
what Petja bought PTCL this car.ACC

'What Petja bought is A CAR.'

(3) [_{TopP} [_{CP} Čto Petja kupil t] [_{Top'} èto [_{IP} MAŠINU Petja kupil]]]

3 Russian SPCs allow the *wh*-question portion to be wholly elided when it is unambiguously recoverable from the context, as has been noted by Markman (2008). Wholesale ellipsis of the *wh*-question results in an *èto*-focus construction in which *èto* is sentence-initial (4). The answer clause typically spells out in full, with the focused constituent located in its left periphery (Spec,FocP, following Dyakonova 2009), hence to the immediate right of *èto*.

(4) Èto MAŠINU Petja kupil.
this car.ACC Petja bought

'It is A CAR that Petja bought.'

(5) [_{TopP} [_{CP} Čto Petja kupil t] [_{Top'} èto [_{IP} MAŠINU Petja kupil]]]

4 For Russian sentences featuring left-peripheral topics adorned with the demonstrative *to* 'that' (6), we present novel arguments which show that they should also be analyzed as SPCs of the QAP-type. But unlike in (2/3) and (4/5), the question portion of the *to*-topic construction in (6) is a yes/no question, reduced via syntactic ellipsis following the topic fronting, as shown in (7).

(6) a. Mašinu to Petja kupil.
car.ACC that Petja bought

'As for a car, Petja bought one.'

b. Q: Petja kupil mašinu? A: Da, Petja kupil mašinu.

'Did Petja buy a car? Yes, Petja bought a car.'

(7) [_{TopP} [_{CP} Mašinu Petja kupil?] [_{Top'} to [_{IP} Petja kupil mašinu]]]

The structure in (7) accounts for connectivity effects, including case connectivity, and captures all the relevant properties of *to* topics that distinguish them from ordinary fronted topics in monoclausal constructions: (i) uniqueness (there can be only one *to* topic in a clause), and (ii) left-edge position (*to* topics always precede foci and unmarked topics). It further provides an

explanation for the peculiar behavior of *libo* and *by to ni bylo* ‘wh-ever’ indefinite pronouns. As NPIs, these are usually illicit in affirmative clauses (Pereltsvaig 2000, i.a.); but they are acceptable in questions and also as *to* topics. The patterning of *to* topics with questions regarding the distribution of these NPIs is expected if the topic preceding *to* is merged in an interrogative clause.

- (8) Kakuju by to ni bylo mašinu *(*to*) Petja kupil.
 whichever car.ACC that Petja bought
 ‘As for a car, Petja bought it.’

5 The analysis proposed here allows us to approach *èto* foci and *to* topics in a unified way. The constructions in (2), (4) and (6) uniformly involve juxtapositions of a question and an answer (9), with ellipsis reducing either or both of the constituent clauses. Key variables are the nature of the question (*wh*-question vs. yes/no-question) and, concomitantly (as shown in §6 below), the choice of demonstrative (*èto* ‘this’ vs. *to* ‘that’) inserted in Top⁰.

- (9) [TopP [CP Question] [Top⁰ *èto* /*to* [IP Answer]]]

6 The distribution of *èto* and *to* is tied to the nature of the question in the QAP: selection of the distal demonstrative (*to*) correlates with the presence of a yes/no question in Spec,TopP; the proximal demonstrative (*èto*) is selected in the presence of a *wh*-question. We argue that the choice of the demonstrative depends on the location of the feature [+proximal] in the QAP, as follows. While *wh*-questions are not marked for proximity, the silent operator in Spec,CP in yes/no questions is arguably specified as [+proximal]. The overt y/n-question operator of English, *whether*, is the [+wh] form of either, which occurs on the first member of disjunctions. In the unmarked case, coordination of two demonstratives with opposite values for [+proximal] involves the proximal demonstrative as the first member and the distal one as the second: *either this or that*, not *either that or this*; the latter being a highly marked option, unlikely to lead to grammaticalization. Because *either* (and, by extension, *whether* and its null allomorph) in coordinations of demonstratives accompanies a proximal element, we hypothesize that it itself is specified as [+proximal]. With the y/n-operator occupying Spec,CP and entertaining a Spec-Head relation with C, the [+proximal] feature propagates to the yes/no-CP as a whole via head-to-phrase percolation. That yes/no questions are [+proximal] is supported further by the fact that, unlike *wh*-questions (which typically concern a previously established context), yes/no questions are often discourse-new: when a new entity is introduced into the discourse it can be accompanied by a proximal demonstrative, not by a distal one (*This/*that topic I’m going to tell you about will fascinate you*). We further propose that SPCs of the QAP type are OPPOSITE: of the two clauses in Spec,TopP and the complement of Top⁰, only ONE is marked [+proximal]. On the assumption that the demonstrative in Top⁰ entertains a downward-Agree relation with its complement (the answer clause), it then follows that when Spec,TopP is occupied by a [+proximal] yes/no-question (as in (7)), the answer clause is NOT specified as [+proximal], and hence the agreeing Top⁰ will be distal *to*; by contrast, when Spec,TopP is occupied by a NON-proximal *wh*-question (as in (3) and (5)), the answer clause and the agreeing Top⁰ must both be [+proximal], so *èto* is selected.

7 The data contribute to the discussion of SPCs as focus/topic constructions across the world’s languages. The syntax of TopP-contained QAPs not only sheds light on Russian information-structurally marked constructions featuring *èto* and *to* but, in turn, is illuminated by these constructions, regarding both the spell-out of Top and the distribution of *wh*- and yes/no questions.

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