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Expletives, referential pronouns and *pro*-drop: The Russian extraposition pronoun *èto* in light of the English *it* and the German *es*

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the Russian pronoun *èto* ('it', 'this') used in extraposition construction. In this construction, similar to extraposition construction in English and German, *èto* refers to a right-peripheral embedded clause. Starting from the observation that *èto* shares a number of important properties with the English *it* and the German *es*, it is argued that two types of *èto* have to be distinguished: a referential and an expletive *èto*. Since Russian is unlike English and German w.r.t. to the possibility of *pro*-drop (or, in other terms, zero anaphora), the fact that *èto* resembles *it* and *es* may seem surprising. However, I suggest that the properties that *èto*, *it* and *es* have in common constitute a cluster of the properties that are inherently linked to expletiveness, namely, to lack of referentiality. This entails that expletives in other languages are expected to have at least some of the same properties.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the Russian propoun *èto* ('it', 'this') used in a construction similar to extraposition construction in the Germanic languages.¹ This type of construction is illustrated by the examples in (1) for Russian, English and German, respectively²:

- (1) a. *Èto horošo, čto ty takoj umnyj i rassuditel'nyj.*
it.NOM good that you.NOM.SG so smart and
sober_minded
'It is good that you are so smart and sober-minded.' (RNC)

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¹ Here follows the list of abbreviations used: 1, 2, 3 = first, second, third person; ACC = accusative; COND = conditional mood; CONJ = conjunction; COP = copula; DAT = dative; F = feminine; FUT = future; GEN = genitive; IMP = imperative; INDF = indefinite; INF = infinitive; INS = instrumental; M = masculine; PASS = passive; PL = plural; POSS = possessive; PP = past participle; PREP = preposition or prepositional case; PRS = present; PST = past; PTCL = particle; PTCP = participle; SBJV = subjunctive; SG = singular.

² Most Russian examples cited in this paper were sourced from the Russian National Corpus (RNC, www.ruscorpora.ru). I have constructed the examples for which the source is not indicated.

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- b. *It is obvious that Peter will succeed.*
c. *Es ist denkbar, dass Peter schon morgen*
it is possible that Peter already tomorrow
zurückkehrt.
return.PRS.3SG
'It is possible that Peter will return tomorrow.'

The correlates *it* and *es* that refer to the extraposed embedded clause are often assumed to be expletive. I will show that *èto* has striking similarities with *it* and *es*, which suggests that *èto* is also an expletive in some of its uses.³

What is unexpected about such an assumption is that the existence of an expletive pronoun in extraposition construction in English and German is commonly associated with the fact that both English and German have no *pro*-drop, that is, do not allow subjectless sentences. Now, Russian is assumed to be a partial null subject language (Franks, 1995; Roberts and Holmberg 2010): Russian does have *pro*-drop, though *pro*-drop in Russian depends on discourse conditions that make it much less regular than, for instance, in Italian. See an example of zero anaphora in Russian, which is not due to syntactic ellipsis, in (2):

- (2) *Slušaju vas.*
listen.PRS.1Sg you.ACC.2PL
'[I] am listening to you.' (used as an answer to a telephone call)

In extraposition construction, the pronoun *èto* can often be omitted. Cf. the examples (a) and (b) in (3) and (4):

- (3) a. *Èto zdorovo, što u muravja šest' nog.*
it.NOM cool that PREP ant.GEN.SG six leg.NOM.PL
'It is cool that an ant has six legs.' (RNC)
b. *Zdorovo, što u muravja šest' nog.*
cool that PREP ant.GEN.SG six leg.NOM.PL
'It is cool that an ant has six legs.'
- (4) a. *Menja raduet, što u menja est' takoj syn.*
I.ACC make_glad.PRS.3SG that PREP I.ACC be. PRS.3SG such
son.NOM.SG
'I am glad to have such a son.' (RNC)
b. *Menja èto raduet, što u menja est' takoj syn.*
I.ACC it.NOM make_glad.PRS.3SG that PREP I.ACC be.PRS.3SG
such son.NOM.SG
'I am glad to have such a son.'

This fits perfectly the analysis of Russian as a *pro*-drop language. In some other cases, however, *èto* is obligatory in extraposition construction, see (5), and this, by turn, is in line with characterizing *pro*-drop in Russian as partial.

- (5) **Èto imeet smysl, što Kylo Ren pol'zuetsja oružiem drevnej konstrukcii.*
it.NOM make.PRS.3SG sense.ACC.SG that Kylo Ren use.PRS.3SG
weapon.INS.SG ancient.GEN.SG construction.GEN.SG
'It makes sense that Kylo Ren uses weapons of an ancient design.' (Google)

³ Here and below, the term "extraposition" will be referred to the constructions exemplified in (1). For Russian, this term is not as consistent as for English and German, since the embedded clause in the Russian construction is not clearly extraposed. I will nevertheless use this term in order to unify the terminology for all three languages.

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