

Expletives in a pro-drop language and criteria for expletiveness: evidence from Russian¹

This study investigates a set of pronouns used to refer to a right-peripheral complement clause in Russian, cf. *èto* ('it, this'), *ono* ('it') and *tak* ('so') in (1a-c)². In a number of languages, the pronoun used in such construction is assumed to be an expletive (cf. the English *it*, the German *es*, the French *il* etc.), and this view is commonly associated with the fact that these languages do not allow subjectless sentences (see a.o. Roberts & Holmberg 2010). Russian is considered to be a partial null subject language (according to the typology proposed in *ibid.*: 10): it allows null subjects, albeit under certain constraints. Nevertheless, two of the pronouns used to refer to a complement clause in Russian, *èto* and *ono*, display a number of properties characteristic of an expletive in at least some languages.

- Both *èto* and *ono* can refer to new information. This is evidenced in (1a) and (1b) by the prosodic pattern, namely by the fact that the falling accent, associated with focus, can be realized inside the complement clause. Now, it has been argued that the referential *it* (see, for instance, Kaltenböck 2004) and *es* (see in particular Sudhoff 2016), linked to a right-peripheral complement clause, differ from the corresponding expletives in that they can only refer to a prementioned state of affairs.

- Both *it* and *es* can only refer to a postposed embedded clause (see Vikner 1995: 239). This link between expletiveness and the linear position is maintained by *èto* and *ono*, too. *Ono* can only precede the embedded clause; in (1b), for instance, the clause order cannot be reversed. *Èto*, though positionally free, displays a number of features associated with expletiveness only when it is preposed to the embedded clause (see an example of such feature immediately below).

- Cross-linguistically, expletives tend to be subjects (Biberauer & van der Wal 2012). It is in line with this fact that in the case *èto* precedes the embedded clause, it is more likely to be marked for nominative than for an oblique case. See the infelicitous (2a), which differs from the felicitous (1a) in that *èto* is marked for genitive. Note also that (2b), in which a genitive *èto* follows the embedded clause, is well-formed.

- *Ono* can be neither focused nor contrasted, as is typical of an expletive (Haegeman et al. 2017: 70). In (3), *èto* cannot be substituted with *ono*, since it is contrasted by means of the particles *vot* and *i*. *Èto*, as evidenced by the same example, can be contrasted, but in this case it can only refer to a prementioned state of affairs, hence, it can only be referential.

Contrary to *ono* and *èto*, the pronoun *tak* is always referential. In particular, *tak* differs from *ono* and *èto* in that it can simultaneously be contrasted and yet refer to new information. Cf. (4), which is naturally pronounced with the focus accent within the complement clause, while *tak* is in the scope of the focus particle *daže* ('even'). This behaviour of *tak* is presumably due to the fact that *tak* ('so') is originally an adverbial proform. When used to refer to a complement clause, it partly retains its adverbial semantics. Since this adverbial meaning is expressed in the sentence only by *tak*, automatically *tak* cannot be semantically empty and, hence, cannot be an expletive. For the same reason, *tak* can refer to new information (which is banned for the referential *èto*, *it* and *es*). Indeed, the ban in question might be taken to follow from a more general ban on cataphora (see a.o. Trnavac & Taboada 2016), which holds, however, only in the case the pronoun and its postcedent are strictly coreferent. For *tak* and the complement clause this is presumably not the case.

The following conclusions emerge from these data.

- Russian belongs to the set of languages that both allow null subjects and make use of expletives or expletive-like elements. Other examples of this kind, already discussed in the literature, include Finnish and Vietnamese (see Haegeman et al. 2017).

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² Here follows the list of abbreviations used: DAT = dative; FUT = future; GEN = genitive; NOM = nominative; PTCL = particle.

• A careful analysis is needed to discover whether or not a pronominal element has a referential meaning, since the elements that at first sight seem functionally similar may turn out to differ significantly (cf. *èto* and *tak*). The parameters mentioned above (given vs. new, preposed vs. postposed, focusability etc.) can be used as criteria to identify the referential status of the pronoun referring to a complement clause.

Examples

- (1) a. **Èto** *horošo,* *čto ty takoj umnyj i rassuditel'nyj.*
 it.NOM good that you so smart and sober-minded
 'It is good that you are so smart and sober-minded.' (RNC)
- b. **Ono,** *konečno, neploho, čto žizni prizyvnik a budet grozit'*
 it of.course not.bad that life.DAT conscript.GEN FUT threaten
tol'ko kulak pjanogo "deda", a ne pulja.
 only fist drunk.GEN bully.GEN and not bullet
 'It is of course not bad that the life of a conscript will be threatened only by the fist of a drunk bully and not by a bullet.' (RNC)
- c. **Tak** *slučilos', čto papa umer nakanune.*
 so happened that dad died day.before
 '[It] so happened that [my] dad died the day before.' (RNC)
- (2) a. [?]*Ja ètogo ne znal,* *čto ty takoj umnyj i rassuditel'nyj.*
 I it.GEN not knew that you so smart and sober-minded
 'I did not know (lit.: this) that you are so smart and sober-minded.'
- b. ^{OK}*Čto ty takoj umnyj i rassuditel'nyj, ètogo ja ne znal.*
 that you so smart and sober-minded it.GEN I not knew
 'That you are so smart and sober-minded, I did not know that.'
- (3) – *Mne ne bol'no, babuška, govorju ja. –Vot èto <*ono>*
 me not hurts grandmother say I PTCL it it
i ploho, čto ne bol'no.
 PTCL bad that not hurts
 '- It does not hurt me, grandmother, I say. – This is what is bad, that it does not hurt you.' (RNC)
- (4) *Daže tak polučilos', čto èto ona so mnoj rasstalas'.*
 even so happened that PTCL she with me separated
 '[It] even so happened that it was she who separated from me.' (RNC)

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