

**Background:** A common approach to the syntactic analysis of copular constructions involves treating them as structures where thematic relations are introduced at the level of small clauses (SCs). Consequently, various types of copular constructions — such as existential, equative, and stage-level predication — have been analyzed as constructions derived from a corresponding type of SC syntactic head (Citko 2008; Markman 2008; Myler 2018, a.o.).

**The unaccusativity test in Russian:** Since Harves (2003), it has been generally assumed that Russian NP/AP-predication possesses an unergative structure (1), whereas locative, existential, and possessive predications are analyzed as having an unaccusative configuration (2), as only the latter can license the genitive of negation.



This raises several problems for accounts suggesting that thematic relations are introduced within different types of SCs. For instance, approaches arguing for a specific  $\text{Pred}_{\text{EXIST}}$  treat the NP in these constructions as a predicate rather than an SC subject (see, e.g., Myler 2018). On the other hand, it was argued that the holder role in stage-level predication must be introduced below vP in  $[\text{spec}, \text{PredP}_{\text{EV/STAGE}}]$  (Markman 2008; Myler 2018), but these constructions fail to license the genitive of negation test (3-4), which means that subject of stage-level predication is never introduced in a position below vP.

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| <p>(3) <i>*Peti ne bylo uchitelem</i><br/>                 Petya.GEN NEG was teacher.INSTR<br/>                 ‘Petya was not a teacher.’</p> | <p>(4) <i>Petya ne byl uchitelem</i><br/>                 Petya.NOM NEG was teacher.INSTR<br/>                 ‘Petya was not a teacher.’</p> |
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**Lankness of genuine equative structure:** There is substantial evidence that Russian lacks a genuine equative structure, in the sense that such constructions cannot be formed within a single copular clause (see Geist 2007; Bondarenko 2022; Sibilev 2025). Instead, they must introduce this relation via a non-argument pronominal element (*eto* ‘this’), which in standard pseudo-cleft constructions creates an additional syntactic position for the introduction of a relative clause (5). This presents a major challenge for analyses that attempt to reduce equatives to constructions formed around a special type of SC or a specialized copula of identity (Mikkelsen 2005; Heller 2005; Citko 2008). Even if one assumes that an identity SC in Russian can only introduce a single argument, with the second argument being satisfied in  $[\text{spec}, \text{etoP}]$  via delayed gratification (Myler 2016, 47), it remains unclear what prevents a second NP argument from occupying  $[\text{spec}, \text{VoiceP}]$ , as that position should be available given the obligatory unergative structure involved in nominal predication. Moreover, it seems that this restriction is sensitive to the same parameter that determines whether a language can form HAVE- or BE-possessives. Thus, despite the fact that Polish is a HAVE-language that also uses a pronominal copular construction (PCC) to derive equative meaning, it appears that the PCC in Polish introduces both NP arguments within the domain of the copular clause. For instance, the PCC in Polish allows the precopular NP to form a *wh*-question (see Bondaruk 2012, 17), which is impossible in Russian PCCs (6). Additionally, the PCC in Polish can exhibit agreement between the copula and the precopular NP, while in Russian do not (7–8).

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| <p>(5) <i>Kto prishyol tak *(eto) Sasha.</i><br/>                 who came PTCL PRON S.<br/>                 ‘Who came was Sasha.’</p> | <p>(6) <i>*Kto eto Petya?</i><br/>                 who PRON P.<br/>                 ‘Who is Petya?’</p> |
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- (7) *Jan to był straszna świnia.*  
 J. PRON was.masc terrible-FEM pig-FEM  
 ‘Jan was a real bastard.’  
 (Polish; cite from [Citko 2008](#), 266)
- (8) *Vasya eto (\*byl / byla)*  
 V. PRON was.masc was.fem  
*strashnaya svin’ya.*  
 terrible-FEM pig-FEM  
 ‘Vasya was a real bastard.’ (Russian)

**The claim:** These problems can be resolved by adopting several assumptions regarding the architecture of copular constructions: (i) copular constructions are light verb constructions, but they are not necessarily formed around a semantically vacuous *v* (contra [Myler 2016, 2018](#)); (ii)  $\text{Pred}^0$  serves as an argument-introducing head which, depending on the properties of its complement, is capable of projecting a specifier position; for instance, when  $\text{Pred}^0$  receives a PP-predicate in Russian, it necessarily projects a specifier position, whereas an NP-complement never allows such a position, leading to an unergative configuration; and (iii) adopting Myler’s (2016) approach, thematic roles are part of the meanings of functional heads.

**Two Possible Syntactic Configurations:** Since predicational and reversed predicational sentences — i.e., specificational sentences in the sense of [Higgins \(1973\)](#) — do not involve any specific thematic relations, only these types of non-verbal predication must be formed around  $\text{Pred}^0$ . All other types must be composed by the internal properties of the syntactic heads from which they are formed; for example, existential predication must be the result of a direct Merge of  $\text{DP}_{\text{GQ}}$  into the [*v*, *Comp*] position (see [Francez 2007](#) on the denotation of existential predication and [Tsedryk 2020](#) for its syntactic adaptation). This certainly explains why existentials in Russian pass the unaccusativity test, as they directly occupy the canonical position for an unaccusative subject. On the other hand, stage-level predication in Russian is predicational and should represent the merge of  $\text{PredP}$  to an eventive *vP* in the sense of [Kratzer \(1996\)](#). This approach carries significant predictive power, as it helps explain why — despite the possibility of an ergative pattern in predicational copular constructions — languages may exhibit parametric variation regarding whether  $\text{Voice}^0$  can project a specifier position when an NP merges directly with *vP*. Thus, some languages (so-called HAVE-languages; e.g., English, Polish) allow an unergative or even a “transitive” configuration in the sense of [Myler \(2016\)](#) when *vP* merges with a NP directly, whereas others (so-called BE-languages; e.g., Russian) allow only the unaccusative one:

- (9) {HAVE-languages}  
 a.  $\text{Voice}_{\{\text{D}\}} - v - \text{NP}$   
 b.  $\text{Voice}_{\{\text{D}\}}\phi - v - \text{NP}$
- (10) {BE-languages}  
 $\text{Voice}_{\{\}} - v - \text{NP}$

**Equative puzzle solved:** Equative constructions in Russian are also derived from (10). Yet, contra approaches postulating a separate SC of identity or an “unambiguous copula” for equative constructions, this approach treats the identity relation as the result of the interaction between identificational focus ([Kiss 1998](#)) — which marks the exhaustive alternative (i.e., the post-copular NP) — and topicality, which turns the pre-copular NP into a domain of possible alternatives. For this reason, the non-argument *eto* is well-suited for deriving equative constructions, since it always projects contrastive focus on its complement (see [Shipova 2023](#)). For the same reason, Russian equatives are incompatible with universal quantifiers (11) and *even*-phrases (12), as such contexts are incompatible with identificational focus ([Kiss 1998](#), 253).

- (11) *\*Maksim eto kto-to.*  
 M. PRON who-INDEF
- (12) *Vasya eto (\*dazhe) svin’ya.*  
 V. PRON even pig-FEM  
 ‘Vasya is a bastard.’

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