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*Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (1983), pp. 292-300

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HOW DO YOU SAY *IT* IN RUSSIAN?

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the English pronoun *it* and its correspondents in Russian, i.e., "how to say *it* in Russian." In order to avoid misunderstanding, it should be kept in mind that the focus here is not on the **interpretation** of pronouns, but on the **selection** of pronouns — i.e., not how the reference of a given pronoun should be construed or can be determined, but, rather, given that a pronoun is needed to fill a specific slot, which one is appropriate?<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, this paper makes no claims as to how and where in the grammar pronouns originate. It remains neutral in the debate which has been carried on in the transformational literature as to whether pronouns arise by a rule of pronominalization which turns underlying full NPs into pronouns in the derived structure (cf. Lees and Klima 1963, Langacker 1969, among others), whether they originate in the base and are thus part of deep structure and must receive semantic interpretations which associate them with their antecedents (cf. Dougherty 1969, Jackendoff 1972, among others), or whether NPs in underlying structure contain only referential indices — the argument nouns being supplied from outside the clause — with pronouns serving to fill an NP identified by a second or subsequent occurrence of the same index (cf. McCawley 1970, Wasow 1975, among others). The present discussion is compatible with any of these approaches: all of these, as well as any other abstract analysis, must eventually face the question of how to fill the slot which at some point and through some process has been assigned to a pronoun; non-abstract analyses, too, must account for why a given pronoun form is observed, and not another. It is hoped that the present paper will contribute to the understanding of the Russian and English pronoun systems, and that, through the contrastive approach, it will advance the understanding of pronoun systems in general by shedding light on the factors which can serve as bases for distinctions.

Before proceeding, I should make certain terms and assumptions clear. The term **ANAPHORA** will be used in its strict sense to mean "the use of a grammatical substitute to refer to a preceding or previously introduced word or group of words," and not in some of the looser senses that have appeared in some recent work. Thus, assuming a normal context for 1 and 2, *it* in 1 would be anaphoric, while *it* in 2 would not.

1. It was leaking.
2. It was raining.

An **anaphoric pronoun** thus substitutes for and refers to a previously introduced N or NP, while a pronoun which stands for some N or NP which has not been previously introduced is **non-anaphoric**. I distinguish, also, between the **antecedent** and the **referent** of an

anaphoric pronoun; the ANTECEDENT is the earlier mention of a particular N or NP, the reintroduction of which gives rise to an anaphoric pronoun, while the REFERENT is the absent reiteration of that N or NP, which is replaced by the anaphoric pronoun. That these two are not always the same can be seen from 3 and 4.

3. Roger saw <sup>antecedent</sup> a movie , and I saw <sup>anaphor</sup> one (=a movie), too. <sup>referent</sup>
4. Roger saw <sup>antecedent</sup> a movie , and I saw <sup>anaphor</sup> it (=the movie), too. <sup>referent</sup>

The antecedent and referent NPs in 3 are formally identical, and both are indefinite; in 4, however, they are not formally identical, the antecedent being indefinite while the referent is definite. Both 3 and 4 are cases of anaphora, but since the truth-conditional meanings of 3 and 4 are different, we must conclude that the distinction between the antecedent and the referent is a significant one. This is only one illustration of various possible differences between the antecedent and the referent. Finally, following the practice of assigning features to lexical items as in, e.g., Katz and Fodor (1963) and Fillmore (1969), I regard pronouns as being sets of features which are summed up in lexical items, and have proposed analyzing pronoun selection as a process of matching the features expressed by the referent with the features expressed by the various anaphoric pronouns which the language makes available. Some examples of this approach can be seen in Channon 1980, Channon 1982, and Channon in press. With these preliminaries in mind, we can move on to consideration of *it* and its Russian correspondents.

Textbooks and dictionaries of Russian regularly equate the English word *it* with the Russian *on/ona/ono* (and/or their case forms).<sup>2</sup> While *on* often does correspond to *it*, there are many places where they do not correspond. In particular, English *it* is frequently represented by Russian *èto* (which is usually glossed as 'this' or 'this/that'), and it is also frequently represented by  $\emptyset$  in Russian. Each of the Russian forms, in turn, may also correspond to things other than *it* in English.

In the other work referred to above (1980, 1982, in press) I have discussed the question of pronoun selection in terms of features which must be matched up with the referent (not the antecedent) of the pronoun. Among the features relevant to the pronouns under discussion here are *definite/indefinite*, *discrete/nondiscrete*, *singular/plural*, *masculine/feminine/neuter*, *animate/inanimate*, etc. A partial specification of Russian *on* and English *it* is given in 5. While the specification for *it* may turn out to be sufficient, the specification given there for *on* is not, as will be seen later.

5. Russian *on*: [definite] [discrete] [singular] [masculine]  
*ona*: [definite] [discrete] [singular] [feminine]  
*ono*: [definite] [discrete] [singular] [neuter]

English *it*: [definite] [discrete] [singular] [inanimate]

Some simple examples showing the correspondence of *on* and *it* are given in 6-8. Russian nouns have grammatical gender and so we see three separate forms, *on/ona/ono*, according to whether the referent noun is masculine, feminine, or neuter.

6. Ja pročital ètot roman včera. *On* (\*èto, \*∅) očen' interesnyj.  
I read that novel yesterday. *It's* very interesting.
7. Ja pročital ètu knigu včera. *Ona* (\*èto, \*∅) očen' interesnaja.  
I read that book yesterday. *It's* very interesting.
8. Ja pročital èto pis'mo včera. *Ono* (\*èto, \*∅) očen' interesnoe.  
I read that letter yesterday. *It's* very interesting.
9. Vy pročitali ètot roman včera? Èto (\*on/\*ona/\*ono) očen' interesno.  
You read that novel yesterday? *That's* very interesting.

Note also that the pronoun *èto* cannot be used in any of these cases, and that *∅* is likewise not possible. There is a grammatical use for *èto* in an environment like this, but the antecedent and the referent (and thus the meaning) are quite different, as seen in 9. 9 means not that **the novel** is interesting, but rather that **the fact that the addressee read the novel** is interesting. No form of *on* can be used here, and the observed *èto* is invariant, regardless of the gender of the noun representing the thing which was read.<sup>3</sup> This type of sentence will be discussed further below.

Because *on* is often inappropriate as an anaphor for abstract or intangible referents, it is sometimes suggested that *on* can refer only to nouns representing concrete or tangible entities, and that *èto* is used for other cases instead. The examples in 10-11, among many others, illustrate that this is not so, and that *concrete* or *tangible* are not part of the specification of *on*.

10. Berežite svobodu; *ona* (\*èto/èta, \*∅) doroga.  
Protect freedom; *it's* precious.
11. Pravit'nost' ètogo podxoda k probleme dokazana ne tem, čto vse *ego* (\*èto) prinjali. *Ona* (\*èto) dokazana tem, čto *on* (\*èto) daet vernye rezul'taty.  
The correctness of this approach to the problem is shown not by the fact that everyone has accepted *it*. *It* is shown by the fact that *it* gives accurate results.
12. Čto èto? Èto (\*ona) kniga.  
What's that? *It's/That's* a book.
13. Ja včera pročital novuju knigu Solženicyna. Èto (\*ona/\*on) očen' interesnyj roman.  
I read Solzhenitsyn's new book yesterday. *It's* a very interesting novel.

14. Gde moja knjiga? *Ona* na stole.  
Where's my book? *It's* on the table.
15. Počemu vy думаete, čto takoj mašiny net? *Ona est'*. Ja ee videl.  
Why do you think that there is no such machine? *It exists.*  
I saw *it*.
16. Èto (\*ono) ne vaše delo.  
*It's/That's* not your affair.

On the other hand, some seemingly straightforward cases of English *it* where the referent is a simple concrete tangible noun do **not** allow the use of *on* in Russian. Some examples of this can be seen in 12-13 above, which can appear only with èto. In general, the occurrence of *on* is very restricted in sentences with equational-*be* (i.e., sentences of the form 'NP *be* NP,' e.g., 12-13), though it occurs freely in attributive-*be* sentences (of the form 'NP *be* ADJ,' cf. 6-8), locational-*be* sentences (of the form 'NP *be* LOC-PHRASE,' cf. 14), or existential-*be* sentences (of the form 'NP *exist*,' with or without anything following, cf. 15).<sup>4,5</sup> The examples in 9, 12, and 16 show that *on* requires an explicitly-stated and named antecedent, an overt noun. A non-linguistic antecedent, along the lines discussed by Hankamer & Sag (1976), will not do in Russian as an antecedent for *on*, nor will a sentential antecedent, though they are permissible antecedents for èto. In 9, 12, and 16 there is, of course, an antecedent, but it is either not named, not a noun, or both.

While I ascribe the use of èto rather than *on* in 13 — even though there is a named noun antecedent — at least in part to the fact that the second sentence of 13 is an equational-*be* sentence, there is nevertheless some kind of connection between the acceptability of *on* and concreteness/tangibility — or perhaps the relevant feature is more properly *specific/nonspecific* — as can be seen by comparing 13 with 17 below; 17 is an example very similar in form to 13, but quite different in meaning.

17. Ja včera pročital novuju knjigu Solženicyna. *Ona očēn'* interesnyj roman Dostoevskogo.  
Yesterday I read Solzhenitsyn's new book. *It's* a very interesting novel by Dostoevsky.

In 13 the referent of èto — and the thing which is an interesting novel — is not the tangible book itself, but rather the contents of that book (and of potentially many others like it), and thus the putative antecedent *knjiga* in the preceding sentence may not correspond to the referent of the pronoun in the sentence that follows. In 17, on the other hand, what is being referred to is not the intangible new "book" that Solzhenitsyn has written, but rather a physical book which he newly possesses, and which happens in this instance to be a novel by Dostoevsky; i.e., a form of *on* is indeed possible in this sentence just in the

case where *kniga* is taken not as the **contents** of the book, but as **the book itself**. Thus 13, too, really has two possible readings; on the tangible reading of *book*, it is an appropriate antecedent, and *on* can be used as an anaphor, but on the intangible reading, *book* is not an appropriate antecedent (does not match the referent), and *on* does not appear.

The example in 18 illustrates the fact that the antecedent or referent of *on* cannot be an S.

18. Ivan skazal, čto on poedet, no ja ètomu (\**emu*) ne verju.  
Ivan said that he will go, but I don't believe *it/?that*.
19. Ivan skazal, čto on poedet, no ja *emu* (\*ètomu) ne verju.  
Ivan said that he will go, but I don't believe *him* (\**it*).

The only pronoun which can appear here in the meaning "but I don't believe it" is a form of èto (ètomu), and not a form of ono (*emu*). The ungrammaticality of *emu* in this reading should not be confused with the grammaticality of *emu* in a totally different reading (cf. 19), in which ètomu is ungrammatical. That is the reading which in English would be "but I don't believe him," and the antecedent is then not the subordinate clause, but *Ivan*, and that is why a form of *on* is possible. In English, of course, it can without difficulty stand for an entire clause, as in the English version of 18.

In 20-21 we see instances in which English *it* corresponds to Ø in Russian.

20. I hear *it's* coming out soon, your book.  
Ja slyšal, čto Ø (\**ona*) skoro vyjdet vaša kniga.
21. Your book, I saw *it* on the table.  
Vašu knigu ja videl Ø (\**ee*) na stole.
22. Ja slyšal, čto *ona* skoro vyjdet, vaša kniga.  
I hear *it's* coming out soon, your book.
23. Gde moja kniga? Vaša kniga? *Ona* na stole.  
Where's my book? Your book? *It's* on the table.
24. Gde moja kniga? Vaša kniga? Ja ee videl na stole.  
Where's my book? Your book? I saw *it* on the table.
25. Vy ne videli moju knigu? Vašu knigu? Ja ee videl na stole.  
Have you seen my book? Your book? I saw *it* on the table.

The *it* in these examples (20-21) in English is not really anaphoric. It is, rather, a place filler for a dislocated or displaced (but not deleted) NP, which appears elsewhere in the sentence. As such, it is an artificially-induced element in English, called forth by the requirements of English word order; for example, the subject must come before the verb, and if it is moved, say, by right dislocation, it must leave behind a dummy pronoun to satisfy this constraint of English sentence structure. Russian, on the other hand, has no such word order requirement, and the elements of a sentence can appear in almost any surface order,

primarily regulated only by pragmatic considerations. It is thus entirely expectable that, under conditions of movement within the clause, no pronoun copy will be left behind, since none is needed to satisfy any surface word order constraint. In fact, if a copy were left behind in 20-21 it would be more than unneeded: it would violate a rule of Russian clause structure which allows only one subject, one object, etc., per clause at a given time. The situation in 20-21 should not be confused with that in 22-25, where a form of *on* can appear; in these examples the NP for which *on* is an anaphor stands outside the clause in which *on* appears; this is indicated above by punctuation, but the real evidence is in the intonation patterns, where 22 differs sharply from 20 and 23-25 differ from 21, and, in the case of 24, in the morphology, since the nominative *vaša kniga* must be an echo question formed from the preceding sentence (cf. 23 vs. 25), rather than a dislocated, topicalized, or "previewed" direct object from the following sentence.

The sentences in 26-27 are parallel to those in 20-21, except that the dislocated material is not an NP, but an entire S.

26. *It seems to me that he is right.*  
 Ø (\*èto) mne kažetsja, čto on prav.
27. *It is interesting to note that he is still here.*  
 Ø (\*èto/\*ono) interesno zametit', čto on ešče zdes'.

These are, of course, examples of the type which has been called, among other things, *extraposition*. To the extent that a corresponding process exists in Russian, it operates without leaving behind anything to serve even as a nominal subject; no form of *èto*, *on*, or any other pronoun can appear here.

It can be seen, then, that English *it* has a number of different kinds of uses, and that no single Russian pronoun covers all of them. Russian *on*, the traditionally-cited equivalent of English *it*, shares only some of them, with (at least) *èto* and Ø also serving as correspondents of *it* under certain syntactic conditions. In particular,

English *it* corresponds to Russian *on* when it is used as an anaphoric pronoun whose referent is an NP headed by an N; Russian *on* must have an overt antecedent (which must be a noun), its referent must be absent, and it cannot stand for an S;

English *it* corresponds to Russian *èto* when it is used as an anaphoric pronoun standing for an S, or standing for an absent referent when there is not an overtly-named linguistic antecedent; generally (though not always) *èto* is used in sentences with equational-*be*;

English *it* corresponds to Russian Ø when it is used non-

anaphorically (in at least one such usage — there may be others which behave differently) as a dummy or filler pronoun standing for a displaced but not absent referent and having no antecedent at all.

At least in Russian, then, we will need some kind of additional features or other means to specify such information as whether or not the pronoun has an antecedent, whether the antecedent has been overtly named, whether the referent is present or absent, and what the linguistic structure of the antecedent is (i.e., whether it is a simple NP or an S).

It also seems clear that we must distinguish among the various different uses of English *it* dealt with here, and perhaps among some others not treated here as well, since these functions are differentiated in some other languages. Finally, although the focus of this paper has been on lexical selection to fill a given pronoun slot, the facts observed here suggest that there will have to be corresponding mechanisms in systems for the interpretation of pronouns which can take account of the kinds of distinctions that have been brought out, i.e., which can correctly distinguish between such pairs of examples as 13 and 17, 18 and 19, etc.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> While a great deal has been written on the origin and/or interpretation of pronouns in generative/transformational-type analyses, very little has been done on the choice of surface realizations to fill the slot allotted to a pronoun, and studies of pronouns often tacitly assume that the correct form will somehow appear when and as necessary.

<sup>2</sup> *On/ona/ono* are the forms for the different genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter, respectively) of the 3rd person singular pronoun. Since the distinction among the genders and among the various case forms is not relevant for the discussion at hand, I will, for simplicity, refer to any or all of them collectively as *on* in the rest of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the normal English pronoun found here is not *it*, but *that*.

<sup>4</sup> I have no good explanation at this time for why *on* should tend not to occur in equational-*be* sentences, or for why equational-*be* sentences should be different from other kinds of sentences with *be* or from other kinds of sentences in general with regard to this particular factor (occurrence of *on*). It should be noted, also, that *on* is not entirely prohibited in such sentences, cf. i, where both *èto* and *ona* (from *on*) are possible, with no apparent difference in meaning.

- i. Ja včera poznamkomsja s vašej sestroj. Èto/Ona očen' interesnyj čelovek.  
I met your sister yesterday. She's (??That's) a very interesting person.

The status of *on* in equational-*be* sentences remains a topic for further investigation.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed treatment of different types of *be*-sentences in Russian can be found in Chvany (1975).

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