Context. The semantic architecture of an existential sentence and its syntactic mapping have been explored with a focus on the position of the post-copula theme NP. One possibility is to view this NP as the predicate of a clause embedded under the copula BE (Stowell 1978, Chomsky 1982, 1988, Williams 1994, Hazout 2004, *inter alia*). On the contrary, Moro (1997) and den Dikken (1995), for instance, consider the post-copula NP to be the subject in an inverted copula structure. Central to this debate is the extractability of a constituent out of the theme NP, as shown in English and Italian existentials (1), which supports the view of the theme NP as the predicate (Left Branch Condition, Ross 1967; Kayne 1984). Moro (1997), however, argues that expletives *there* and *ci* turn the copula BE to an L-marker (*à la* Chomsky 1986) so that extraction out of the subject governed by BE is possible. This paper argues for the theme-as-predicate analysis by considering relative degradation of *wh*-extraction in Russian existentials (including possessives).

*Wh*-extraction in Russian existentials/possessives. The Russian existential/possessive sentence consists of a pre-copular location/possessor PP, BE, and a theme noun. In Russian, *wh*-extraction must involve pied-piping. While the lack of pied-piping always degrades sentences, the degree of degradation varies depending on from where a constituent is extracted. The sentences in (2-3) illustrate relative degradation caused by the movement of a *wh*-element in transitive sentences with a clear tendency: *Wh*-extraction from the object is more acceptable than that from the subject, and a sentence in which a moved *wh*-word is adjacent to the rest of the phrase is more acceptable than a sentence in which a *wh*-element and the rest of the phrase are separate. The instances of the moved *wh*-word adjacent to the rest of the phrase in (2a/2c/3a/3c) must result from the movement of the whole phrase containing a *wh*-word to Spec,CP, along with the subsequent *wh*-movement to Spec,DP within the moved phrase. In this case, pied-piping actually takes place and the *wh*-word is not extracted out of the DP, which must make (2a/2c/3a/3c) more acceptable than (2d/3d) with *wh*-extraction out of the subject. The contrast between relatively acceptable sentences (2b/3b) with *wh*-extraction out of the object and totally unacceptable ones (2d/3d) clearly reflects the asymmetry between an object and a subject in terms of *wh*-extraction.

The same relative acceptability is observed with *wh*-extraction out of the post-copula theme NP in existential/possessive sentences (4-5). The sharp ungrammaticality of (4d/5d) tells us nothing definitive about the status of the *u*+Gen possessor phrase. (4d/5d) could be ruled out either because a *wh*-element is extracted out of the subject, thus violating the Left Branch Condition, or because the possessor/location phrase is an adjunct. However, crucial to the argument structure are sentences (4b/5b), in which *wh*-extraction out of the theme phrase does not trigger sharp ungrammaticality. This indicates that the theme phrase is not the subject but the predicate. In other words, (4b/5b) are not inverse but canonical copula sentences. The weaker degradation of (2b/3b/4b/5b) is due solely to the lack of pied-piping, in contrast with the absolute unacceptability of the sentences in (2d/3d/4d/5d) due to the Left Branch Effect (or possibly due to the adjunctive status of the possessor/location in the case of (4d/5d)) in addition to the lack of pied-piping.

BE and argument structure. Moro’s assumption concerning the theme NP as the subject is crucially based on his contention that expletives *there* and *ci* lexicalize the originally functional predicate BE. In the Russian existential/possessive construction, there is no expletive that fills Spec,TP. Can we, then, construe BE as lexical and not functional in the existential/possessive sentence? Although the copular in the possessive/existential sentence is overt in the present tense (*est’ 3SG[-Agr]_), in contrast with the zero-copula in other types of copula sentences, it is implausible that BE is the only verb in Russian that can be lexical or functional depending on the semantics (*à la* Harves 2002; cf. Kondrashova 1996; contra Chvany 1975). Furthermore, the existential semantics does not seem to derive from *est’* lexically. This semantic factor is present and brings a syntactic effect such as Genitive of Negation in non-copula sentences as well as in copula constructions. Given that *wh*-extraction out of the theme NP is consistently allowed in
Russian, English, and Italian, it is much simpler and more straightforward to conclude that the existential construction is a non-inverted structure, rather than to justify a lexical BE in varying ways across languages. The construal of the theme NP as the predicate elegantly and consistently explains wh-extraction phenomena in all three languages, while Moro’s solution costs various additional assumptions.

(1) a. [Which man] do you think that there was [a picture of t] in the room?  
   b. [di quale libro] credi che ci fossero [molti copie t] nello studio?  
   [Moro 1997: 103]  
   of which book you think there were many copies in the studio?
   ‘Which book do you think there were many copies of in the studio?’

(2) a. [[Kakogo avtora]j knigi tj] ty chitali ti?  
   what author:GEN books:ACC you read
   ‘What author’s books did you read?’
   ?b. [Kakogo avtora]j ty chitali [knigi tj]?
   ?c. [[Kakogo fakul’teta]j studenty tj] ti chitali eti knigi?
   what department:GEN students read these books
   ‘What department’s students read these books?’
   *d. [Kakogo fakul’teta]j eti knigi chitali [studenty tj]?

(3) a. Ej nravitsja tot roman, [kotorogo]i knigi tj ja kogda-to videl ti.
   her:DAT like that novel:NOM which:Rel:GEN author:ACC I once saw
   ‘She likes that novel, the author of which I once saw.’
   ?b. Ej nravitsja tot roman, kotorogo ja kogda-to videl [avtora tj].
   her:DAT like that novel:NOM which:Rel:GEN author:NOM presented her candy
   ‘She likes that novel, the author of which presented her candy.’
   *d. Ej nravitsja tot roman, kotorogo konfety ej podaril [avtor ti].

(4) a. [[Kakogo avtora]j knigi tj] zdes’/u vas byli ti?
   what author:GEN books here:Adv/at you:PP GEN be:Past
   ‘What author’s books did you have/were there here?’
   ?b. [Kakogo avtora]j zdes’/u vas byli [knigi tj]?
   ?c. [[Kakogo fakul’teta]j v auditorii/u studentov tj] ti byli slovari?
   what department:GEN in auditorium:PP LOC/at students:PP GEN be:Past dictionaries
   ‘What department’s students had dictionaries?/In what department’s classroom were there dictionaries?’
   *d. [Kakogo fakul’teta]j eti knigi byli [v auditorii/u studentov tj]?

(5) a. Ej ponravilsja tot avtor, [kotorogo]i knigi tj u nee byli ti.
   her:DAT liked that author which:GEN books at her:PP GEN be:Past
   ‘She liked that author, whose books she had.’
   ?b. Ej ponravilsja tot avtor, kotorogo i u nee byli [knigi ti]
   her:DAT liked that novel which:GEN at author:PP GEN be:Past some taste
   ‘She liked that novel, the author of which had some taste.’
   *d. Ej ponravilsja tot roman, kotorogo byl kakov-to vkus [u avtora tj].

REFERENCES


Ross, J. 1967. “Constraints on Variables in Syntax.” Ph.D. Diss., MIT.
