From relativization to complementation: identifying steps of evolution

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The polysemy of relativizers and complementizers has been widely attested cross-linguistically. We offer a case study tracing the steps of grammaticalization of a relative clause construction into a complement construction in Russian. First steps of this development have been identified in the existing literature; this work is aimed at describing the recent process starting from the 1990s.
Standard Russian has a relative clause construction headed by a demonstrative pronoun:

(1a) *Eto **ta**, o **kom** ja govoril.*

(1b) *Ne begi ot **togo, čto** l'ubiš.*

The demonstrative in (1a, b) is marked for gender, case and number, and the relative pronoun (animate-referring *kto* 'who', inanimate-referring *čto* 'what' etc.) bears the morphosyntactic features of the relativized element.
A subtype of this construction is used in complement clauses (the examples are attested in [Stecenko 1972: 315] dating already 15th century):

(2) *Ja somnevajus' v **tom, čto** my sdelaem vtoroj film.*

In that case, the demonstrative takes the case required by the matrix predicate, but the second part is a complementizer which goes back to the fixed nominative/accusative form of the inanimate relative pronoun *čto* 'what' occurring in (1b). The demonstrative is often accented and requires an intonation break (sometimes a pause) after it. The demonstrative is always the neuter gender *to*.
The distribution of the complement construction with *to, čto* is described in terms of information structure: it is used if the complement clause is focused or topical. Kobozeva (2013) proposed a unified analysis of both cases in terms of givenness. The construction in question does not encode complement clauses involving new asserted information (except for complement-taking predicates disallowing all other complementizers).
Starting in the 1990s, the fixed nominative-accusative form *to čto* evolves into a new complementizer in vernacular Russian: it is largely used to encode new information with all types of complement-taking predicates:

(3) *Ja somnevajus', **to čto** my sdelaem vtoroj film.*

The demonstrative is unaccented, and there is no pause. This construction is stylistically marked as non-standard and is only used in oral speech.

The present study is focused on the exact evolution of (2) into (3). We check the following hypotheses:

(A) The new construction evolved from (2) with complement-taking predicates requiring nominative/accusative.
(B) The new construction is semantically restricted in terms of asserted propositions vs. irrealis complements vs. events.
(C) The speech of subjects who use the discussed construction shows other non-standard phenomena.

To test these hypotheses, we have conducted two experimental studies with 149 Russian speakers, one of which involved elicitation of quasi-spontaneous speech and another was based on acceptability judgements.

The results speak in favor of the hypotheses (A) and (C) and against the hypothesis (B). Thus, we claim that the new complement construction first developed with complement-taking predicates requiring nominative-accusative, and then expanded onto the other ones. We suppose that this development passed through the topical use of (2).

References

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