

An HPSG Analysis of Bulgarian *egati* and *super* constructions: Adjunct-related constructions with a formally definite article

Daniil-Konstantin Arbuzov and Stefan Müller
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

June 17, 2026

An HPSG Analysis of Bulgarian *egati* and *super* constructions: Adjunct-related constructions with a formally definite article

1 The phenomenon

This is a presentation of the descriptive properties of phenomena that are called *egati* and *super* construction and a subsequent HPSG analysis of them. The central feature of these constructions is the use of a semantically empty, formally definite suffix with a nominal (noun or adjective), which is triggered by adjuncts such as *egati* or *super*. The difficulty in syntactically representing these purely formally definite constructions in Bulgarian lies in the fact that in some cases adjuncts appear to have the property of determining the definiteness of the nominal phrase they occur in and ignoring overt definiteness markings in the NP.

Definiteness in Bulgarian is marked by the presence or absence of a definite suffix, which attaches after the first (leftmost) inflectable word in an NP. There is no properly grammaticalized indefinite article. In the context of this work, the Bulgarian definite article is treated as a phrasal affix, as it is in Popova (2000), who cites Miller (1992: 110) and Nevis (1985). A phrasal affix is an affix that is lexically attached to its stem, but whose distribution is fixed in relation to complete phrases.

The following examples illustrate this:

- (1) a. Gospodin-ăt si zakup-i zelen-i-te očil-a.
Sir.SG.M-DEF REFL.DAT buy-3.SG.AOR green-PL-DEF glasses-PL
'The gentleman bought the pair of green glasses.'
- b. Uvažаем-i-jat gospodin si zakup-i hubav-i-te zelen-i očil-a.
honorable-SG.M-DEF Sir.SG.M REFL.DAT buy-3.SG.AOR pretty-PL-DEF green-PL glasses-PL
'The honorable gentleman bought himself the pair of beautiful green glasses.'
- c. Po-loš-a-ta novina dojde po-kāsno.
COMP-bad-SG.F-DEF news-SG.F come-3.SG.AOR COMP-late
'The worse news came later.'
- d. Po-kofti novinata dojde po-kāsno.
COMP-bad news-SG.F-DEF come-3.SG.AOR COMP-late
'The worse news came later.'

The suffixes *-ăt*, *-te*, *-jat*, and *-ta* attach to the first inflectable word. These are a noun and an adjective in (1a) and adjectives in (1b). In (1c)

The *egati* and *super* constructions that will be discussed are a type of NP or AdjP with an adjunct. These phrases are found in informal registers. *Egati* constructions, whose behavior is slightly different, require the swear word *ebasi* or its variations and derivatives ((*e*)*bati*, (*e*)*basi*, (*e*)*gati*, (*e*)*gasi*). *Super* constructions often use newly loaned adjuncts such as *super* and *mega*, but can also be seen with other native vocabulary such as *bezkraino* 'infinitely'. These phrases have three distinctive features. First, the definite article has to be inserted, even though the meaning contribution it has in "orthodox" phrases can be absent. This results in a construction that is ambiguous without context. (2) shows that the definite suffix comes with a definite semantics, while this is not the case with *egati*, as (3) shows:

- (2) a. Tova e mnogo gotin-o.
this is very cool-SG.N
'This is very cool.'

- b. Tova e mnogo gotin-o-to.
 this is very cool-SG.N-DEF
 'This is the very cool one.'
- (3) Tova e ebasi gotin-o-to.
 this is ebasi cool-SG.N-DEF
 'This is f***ing cool,' rarely 'This is the f***ing cool one.'

The reading 'This is the f***ing cool one.' is not attested in corpora, and is very marked according to our intuitions.

Secondly, the insertion of the definite article is optional in all cases where it can occur (4), except in the case of *ebasi* and its variations and derivatives, where the article is mandatory (5).

- (4) a. Tova e super gotin-o-to.
 this is super cool-SG.N-DEF
 'This is super cool,' rarely 'This is the very cool one.'
- b. Tova e super gotin-o.
 this is super cool-SG.N
 'This is super cool.'
- (5) * Tova e ebasi gotin-o.
 this is ebasi cool-SG.N
 'This is f***ing cool.'

Thirdly, the etymology of *egati* should be considered. Although it functions as an adjunct, its form mostly seems to derive etymologically from a minced-oath form of the verb *eba* in the 3rd person singular that has been unified with *si*, the reflexive pronoun in the dative case. This means that these constructions originate from verbal phrases. So far we have looked at constructions with *egati* als adjective or adverb, but there are other *egati* constructions that could easily be analyzed as utterances with the verbal head *ega* and an object *ti*. The following example looks like a sentence without an explicit subject and with a nominal direct object and a pronominal indirect object:

- (6) Eg-a ti život-ăt.
 f**k-3.SG.AOR 2.SG.DAT life.SG.M-DEF
 'What a f***ed up life.'

But the more appropriate analysis of phrases like (6) seems to be one that treats *ega ti* as a preverbal modifying VP as in (7):

- (7) četjašt-i-te knigi hora
 reading-PL.M-DEF books people
 'the people who read books'

Furthermore, *egati* and *super* constructions do not only occur with a copula as in (3)–(4) or in VP contexts as in (6), but it can also occur in all kinds of noun phrases. (8) shows a sentence with *ebasi* in an NP that is modified by a numeral and an adjective:

- (8) Sega edin ebasi nacepen-i-ja tip mi predlag-a 4S.
 now one.SG.M ebasi ripped-SG.M-DEF guy.SG.M me offer-3.SG.PRS 4S
 'Now a crazy ripped guy is offering me an iPhone 4S.'

At the same time, ordinary adjectives without a definite article cannot precede an *egati* construction:

- (9) a. *Vleze nov ebasi nacepen-i-ja tip.
 come.in-3.SG.AOR new-SG.M ebasi ripped-SG.M-DEF guy.SG.M
 Intended: 'A new ripped guy has arrived.'
- b. *Vcera vidjah nov-a ebasi bărz-a-ta kol-a.
 yesterday see-1.SG.AOR new-SG.F ebasi fast-SG.F-DEF car-SG.F
 Intended: 'Yesterday I saw a new really fast car.'

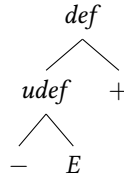


Figure 1: Type hierarchy for subtypes of *def*

2 HPSG Analysis

The analysis of *egati* and *super* constructions rests on a modified version of Popova’s (2000) HPSG analysis of the Bulgarian definite article. Popova stipulates the CAT feature DEF which can carry the values + or -. She also stipulates the principle in (10) to preserve the rule that only the leftmost inflectable word can carry the definite article.

- (10) The Definiteness Principle. If at least one of the daughters of a phrase or of a *complex-morph* is marked DEF+, then the mother node also bears the marking DEF+. Otherwise it is DEF-.

For this to ensure that the leftmost inflectable word carries the article, she posits that adjectives can only modify phrases that are DEF-.

In what follows, we will modify this to fit the more complex constructions being discussed. We do not consider the feature DEF as something with a binary value (+ or -). Instead, both + and - are values of DEF that imply different things about syntax and semantics. In this case, other values of DEF can also be defined. For example, the new value *E* can be stipulated, which allows *egati* to modify phrases with definite articles and generate indefinite semantics at the same time.

For our new Definiteness Principle, we postulate a hierarchy of the three definiteness values: $E > + > -$. As in the original formulation of the principle, the presence of DEF+ in one of the daughters means that the mother also has the DEF value +. Similarly, the presence of *E* in one of the daughters means that the mother has the value *E*. For the semantic contribution, we assume a unary rule, which projects an N' to an NP and contributes a quantifier.¹ Which quantifier is contributed depends on the DEF value of the N' . NPs with the DEF *E* or - feature receive the semantic relation *udef_q* (we assume MRS for the semantic representation Copestake et al. 2005). Those with DEF+ contribute the quantifier *def_q*. The type hierarchy for subtypes of *def* is provided in Figure 1.

Numerals such as *edin*, *dve*, etc. can modify phrases with DEF *E* as in (8) but also indefinite phrases with the DEF value -. With this, all constructions in the observed data should be accounted for.

What follows is a series of analyses, including the structure of *egati* and *egati tãpoto* ‘f**cking stupid’, as well as syntax trees for phrases and sentences relevant to *egati* and *super* constructions. (11) shows the lexical item for *egati* ‘f**ck’:

- (11) Lexical item for *egati* ‘f**ck’:

PHON		<i>(egati)</i>	
CAT	HEAD	adv CAT HEAD noun ∨ adj DEF + CONT LTOP [1] IND [2]	
	MOD		
DEF	E		
SPR	⟨ ⟩		
COMPS	⟨ ⟩		
CONT	LTOP	[3]	
	IND	[2]	
	RELS	egati LBL [3] ARG1 [1]	
	HCONS	⟨ ⟩	

egati can modify a noun or an adjective. Its DEF value is *E* and semantically it contributes the *egati*’ relation, which predicates over the modified adjective or noun: The LTOP value of the modified element is identified with the ARG1 of the *egati*’ relation. The index of the modified element [2] is identified with the index of *egati* (Copestake et al. 2005: 316).

(12) shows the phrase *egati tãpoto* ‘f**cking stupid’:

¹This is similar to what Zlatić (1998: 10, 2014: 31) suggests for Slavic NPs. Zlatić has a unary projection saturating the SPR requirement without providing a semantic contribution. She treats universal quantifiers like *sve* ‘all’ and determiners like *ove* ‘these’ as adjuncts (2014: 32,33). Treating determiners as selected via SPR ensures that all NPs are closed off by a quantifier, something that cannot be ensured in grammar treating determiners as adjuncts.

(12) Phrase for *egati tãpoto* ‘f**cking stupid’:

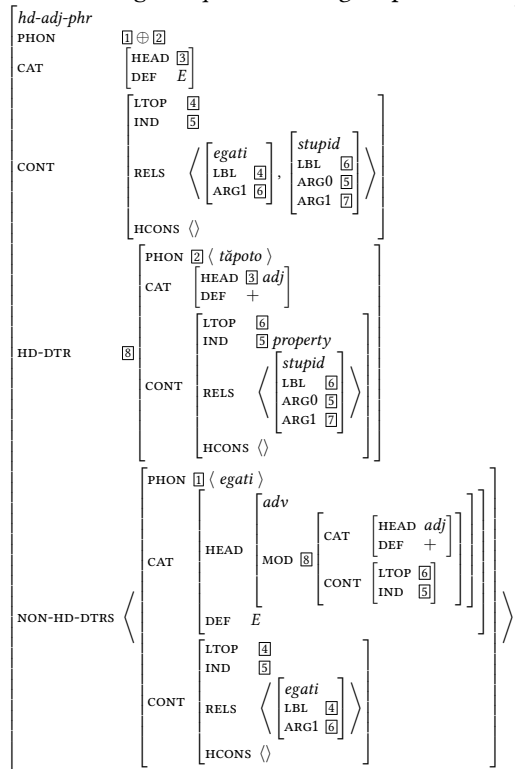


Figure 2 shows how the DEF value is determined in the examples in (2). The figure on the left shows a normal predicative structure with a predicative adjective. The adjective is DEF— and the adjective phrase as well. It is used directly as the predicate. The figure at the right shows a structure that is equivalent to the English phrase *the smart one*. English uses the pronoun *one* while there is no pronoun in languages like Bulgarian, German, and even in some cases in English (Arnold & Spencer 2015). One could handle these cases with a unary projection, but we used an empty noun for presentational purposes. The empty element corresponds to material that is present in cases with overt nouns. The empty noun forms an N' together with the prenominal AP. The N' is lacking a determiner. A unary projection projects a fully saturated NP and contributes the meaning that a definite determiner contributes in languages like English. We do not assume an empty element for the determiner, since determiners are never visible in Slavic languages. The copula that combines *tova* ‘this’ and *mnogo gotinoto* ‘the very cool one’ is the equational copula, combining two referential NPs (Müller 2009).

The left figure in Figure 3 shows the analysis of *ebasi gotinoto* ‘f**cking cool’ in (3). *ebasi* combines with *gotinoto* and the complete AP predicates over *tova* ‘this’. The definiteness marking is formal. No definite meaning is added.

In the right figure, which provides an analysis of the construction in (6). *ega* ‘f**ck’ selects *ti* ‘you’ and the complete verbal phrase modifies the N' *životāt* ‘life’. The resulting phrase is DEF E and hence the quantifier that is added is *udef_q*.

It is important to make sure that the phrase with the definite adjective in (2b) cannot be used as a predicative adjective phrase. If it would be able to occur in constructions like the ones in Figure 2 left or Figure 3 left, we would get a structure with definiteness marking but without definite reading. This can be avoided by requiring that predicative APs must have the DEF value *def*, that is, be of type — or E.

Figure 4 shows the analysis involving the quantifying adjective *edin*, which was discussed in (8). This adjective can modify N's with DEF value E, while other adjectives exclude it, as was shown in (9). Other adjectives allow modification of DEF— N's only. Again, the DEF value of the complete N' is E and hence the quantifier for the whole NP is *udef_q*.

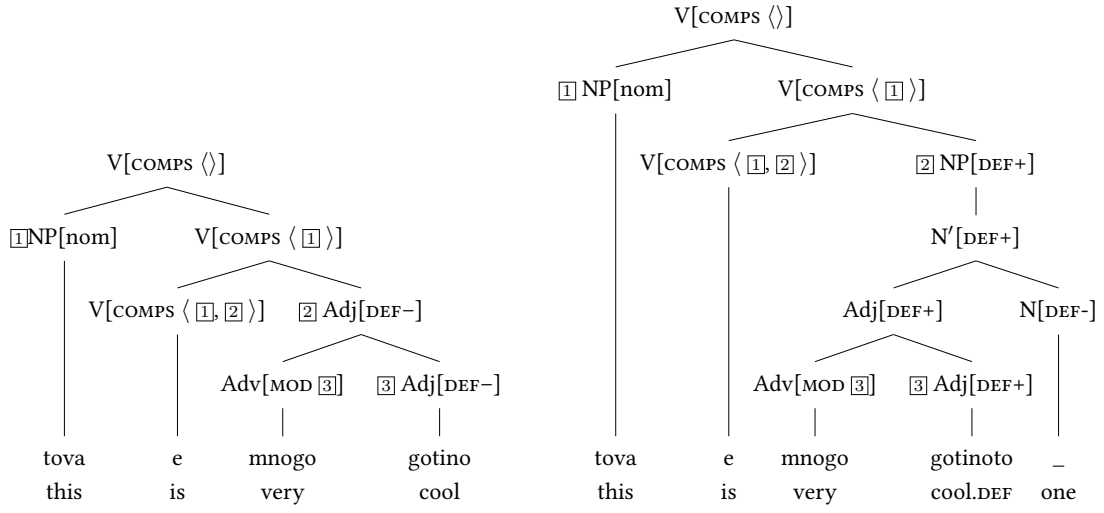


Figure 2: Different definiteness marking with *mnogo* ‘very’ and determination of DEF values

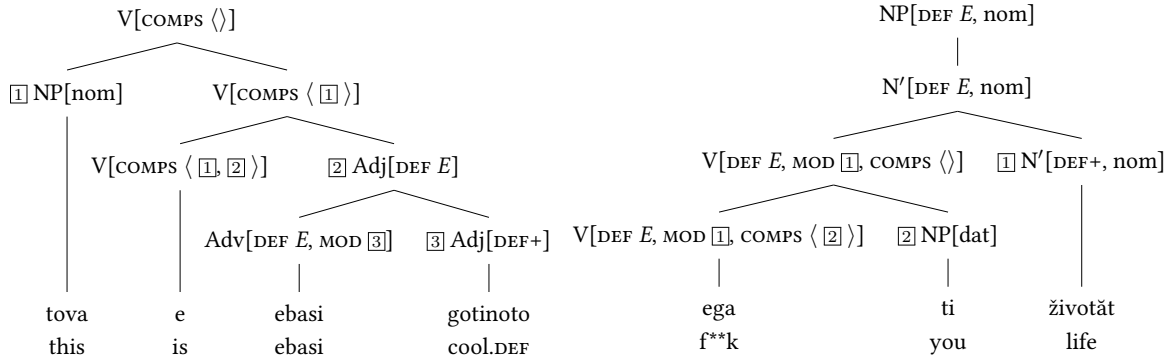


Figure 3: Combination of *ebasi* with adjective marked as definite, verbal modification of a noun with *eba ti*

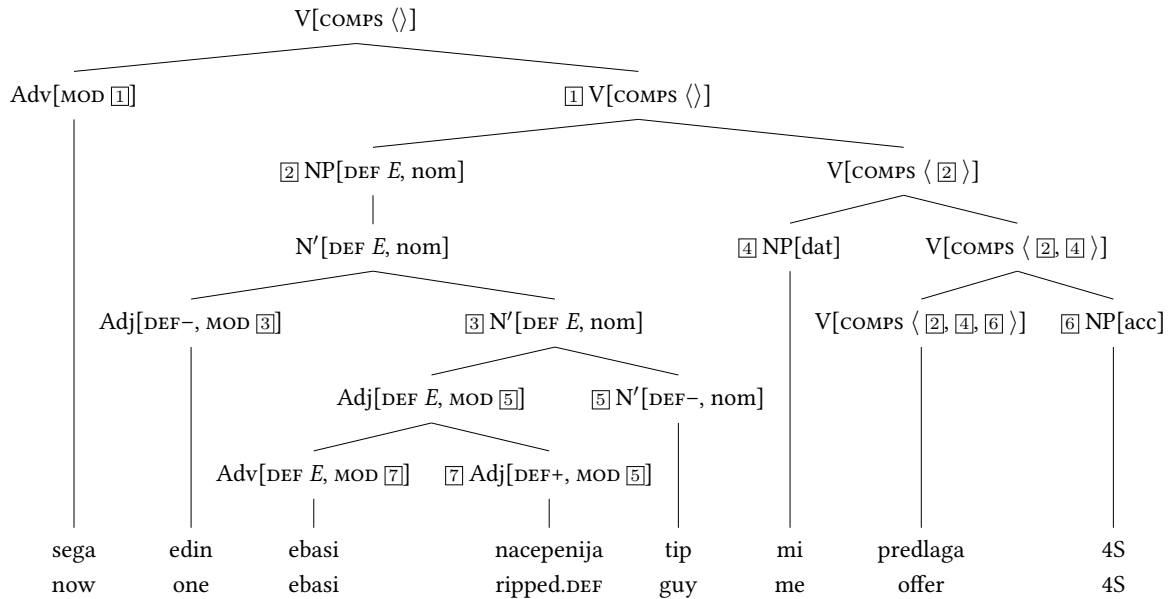


Figure 4: Sentence with an *egati* construction with indefinite quantifying adjective preceeding *ebasi*

References

- Arnold, Doug & Andrew Spencer. 2015. A constructional analysis for the skeptical. In Stefan Müller (ed.), *Proceedings of the 22nd International Conference on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore*, 41–60. Stanford: CSLI Publications. DOI: 10.21248/hpsg.2015.3.
- Copestake, Ann, Dan Flickinger, Carl Pollard & Ivan A. Sag. 2005. Minimal Recursion Semantics: An introduction. *Research on Language and Computation* 3. 281–332. DOI: 10.1007/s11168-006-6327-9.
- Miller, Philip H. 1992. *Clitics and constituents in Phrase Structure Grammar*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Müller, Stefan. 2009. On predication. In Stefan Müller (ed.), *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, University of Göttingen, Germany*, 213–233. Stanford: CSLI Publications. DOI: 10.21248/hpsg.2009.11.
- Nevis, Joel A. 1985. *Finnish particle clitics and general clitic theory*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Popova, Guergana. 2000. Towards an HPSG account of the Bulgarian definite article. In Catherine Pilière (ed.), *Proceedings of the ESSLLI-2000 Student Session*, 220–231. Birmingham, UK.
- Zlatić, Larisa. 1998. Slavic noun phrases are NPs not DPs. In *Workshop on comparative Slavic morphosyntax*. Bloomington, IN.
- Zlatić, Larisa. 2014. Definiteness and structure of NPs in Slavic. In Lilia Schürcks, Anastasia Giannakidou & Urtzi Etxeberria (eds.), *The nominal structure in Slavic and beyond*, 17–38. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. DOI: 10.1515/9781614512790.17.