Two types of verb fronting in Russian
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Introduction: Verb fronting with doubling (VF) is a common phenomenon cross-linguistically (Cable, 2004, Kandybowicz, 2007, a.o., Landau, 2006). Russian has two types of VF: in the first one the fronted verb is an infinitive (uninflected verb fronting, UVF) while in the second one the fronted verb is fully inflected (inflected verb fronting, IVF):

(1) Pit' (- to) on p'ët, no v meru. [UVF]
drink.IP.FV.INF TOP he drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG but in measure
(2) P'ët (*)-to on p'ët, no v meru. [IVF]
drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG TOP he drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG but in measure

I present novel empirical data on the semantics of the two types of VF in Russian that suggest that in UVF the fronted constituent is predicative while in IVF it is propositional. I propose a syntactic analysis under which the fronted constituent is a VP in UVF and a vP in IVF; both morphological and semantic facts fall out naturally from that assumption. My analysis thus fares better in accounting for the Russian data than the one in (Abels, 2001), which doesn’t deal with IVF at all, and the one in (Aboh and Dyakonova, 2009), which doesn’t capture the semantic differences between UVF and IVF.

Semantics of VF: In both UVF and IVF the fronted constituent is a topic and both require a contrastive continuation; however, the two differ with respect to the contexts in which they can appear. UVF can be used, among other things, in response to unbiased, information-seeking polar questions while IVF cannot:

(3) A: Rasskaži mne pro Ivana. On p'ët?
tell.IMP.SG me about Ivan he drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG?
‘Tell me about Ivan. Does he drink?’
B: Pit’ / # p'ët to on p'ët, no v meru.¹
drink.IP.FV.INF drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG TOP he drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG but in measure

IVF is typically used in response to assertions (and possibly biased, confirmation-seeking questions); UVF is also good in such contexts:

(4) A: My ne možem vzjat' Ivana na rabotu. On ved' p'ët!
we NEG can take Ivan on work he EMPH drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG!
‘We cannot hire Ivan. He drinks! (= I am reminding you that he drinks.)’
B: Pit’ / p'ët to on p'ët, no delo znaet.
drink.IP.FV.INF drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG TOP he drink.IP.FV.PRS.3SG but trade.ACC knows

I argue that while both constructions require a discourse antecedent, UVF picks up predicates while IVF picks up propositions. Thus, in UVF the fronted constituent is semantically a predicate, e.g., the (ordinary) semantic value of the fronted constituent in the UVF examples above is $Ax.\text{drink}(x)$. In IVF the fronted constituent is a proposition, e.g., the (ordinary) semantic value of the fronted constituent in the IVF example in (4) is $\text{drink}(he)$. Informally, B’s UVF response in (3) can be paraphrased as ‘As for drinking, John does that, but moderately’, while her IVF response in (4) can be paraphrased as ‘As for the fact that John drinks, it is indeed true, but he knows his trade (…so his drinking is not important)’.

Note that IVF has to pick up a proposition from the common ground (or at least the speaker using IVF is acting as if it is in the common ground) and can only confirm its status (adding that it is irrelevant or unimportant in view of the fact brought up in the continuation). In unbiased polar questions, like (3), there is no suitable antecedent proposition (the sentence radical of the question is trivially not in the common ground, otherwise there would be no reason to ask the question in the first place), so IVF is not licensed. A salient predicate antecedent is present both in (3) and (4), thus, UVF is licensed in both cases.

The claim above is further corroborated by the fact that in UVF the focused constituent can be any one that can plausibly participate in constructing a set of alternatives while in IVF it can only be the lower occurrence of the verb:

¹ There is some variation across Russian speakers with respect to the acceptability of IVF, especially, in the presence of a UVF alternative. Thus, the generalizations I report here hold for speakers who accept IVF in the first place.
As for the internal argument in UVF, 111th aspectual V(P)‐fronting.