REVISITING THE SEMANTICS OF THE SENTENCES WITH INITIAL 'IT'

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ABSTRACT

The review of monographic works concerning the impersonal sentences in English shows that in some of them 'It' is regarded only as a formal subject. This non-real subject does not indicate any agent of the action. Its appearance is mostly conditioned by language laws, which in the case of English is the fixed word order: S-P.

The questions concerning the origin and nature of impersonal sentences are of great interest to the linguists. The impersonal sentences present a kind of exception to the syntactical rule of any language as they contradict to the fact that every sentence should have of a subject and a predicate. Therefore, linguistic investigation of this problem can not be made without seeking aid from logic and psychology, and even philosophy since the results of such an inquiry may help throw light on the relation of grammar to logic. The analyses of some researches in this field reveal that some authors underscore the ambient character of the pronoun "It". Guided by this point of view, the purpose of this article is to analyze some types of the sentences with the initial "It", where the ambient meaning acquires certain communicative signification depending on the context it has been used.

Key Words: Impersonal sentences, semantic field, impersonality, subject, theme, rheme.

1. Introduction

The questions concerning the word order in European languages are still widely discussed in modern linguistic literature. In this regard, the correlation or interdependence of structure and semantics of the sentences has been subject to thorough investigation in many monographic works (Bolinger, 1973; Finegan, 2012; Hall, 2005; Ivanov, 2004 etc.).

The sentences with initial "It" in the English language have been chosen as a research topic, since the relationship between the structure and semantics in these sentences presents a great interest. Moreover, they have complex structures in terms of theme and rheme. "Despite being in the structure of mainly the simple sentences and not possessing any lexical meaning, the sentences with initial "It" bear semantically substantial information" (Hamitseva, 2012:1).

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Analyzing the sentences, like "It was strange to be hated", S. Hamitseva (2012) underscores that the anticipatory *It* here serves as a theme in relation to the second part (rheme)-to the part "to be hated".

For further investigation of the sentences with initial "It" in English, we took Dwight Bolinger's work as a point of departure; a great deal of research had been made to prescribe certain meaning to "it" in this article. The insightful article provides the detailed analysis of the ambient 'It' depending on the context it had been used.

2. Semantic approaches

Referring to Wallace Chafe's examples and analyzing the sentences like "It is hot" among many others, Bolinger (1973) draws attention to their meanings and emphasizes that they denote 'all-encompassing states'. But he disagrees with the authors, who define the 'It' constructions as the property of verbs due to the centrality of the verbs in them. Bolinger (1973) examines these sentences mainly from the point of semantics; the correlation between the semantics and syntactic constructions that have been used in them are dealt only partially.

The thorough analysis of the sentences with initial "It" reveals their inherent feature, and that is their frequent usage in weather or time related expressions. Even if the "weather and time do exhibit the trait that Chafe ascribes to ambience; they are all-encompassing. But this is not what determines the nature of ambient *it*. All that ubiquity of weather and time contributes is obviousness" (Bolinger, 1973:262).

In Bolinger's opinion, the "It" constructions without patients are more common, but still there are many other sentences in which the agents of the action may occur.

The opinions of most Russian linguists, who have done extensive researches in the field of English verbs, contradict to this point of view. Most of them define the sentences with initial "It" as the entirely impersonal constructions and the agent of the action is not easily revealed or it doesn't exist. Their opinions are based on the verbs that are frequently used in these constructions; mainly impersonal ones. For this reason, they name these constructions as *the impersonal constructions with "it"*. The impersonal verb is defined by them *as a verb that is mainly or almost only used in impersonal constructions*. E.g.: *It rains. It snows.*

Approaching the sentences with initial "It" from the point of syntax, S. Ivanov (2004) underscores the complexity of the interpretation of syntactical relations in some types of impersonal sentences. In his opinion, the relations within a complex sentence, for example, do not fit into the syntactic relationships of an ordinary sentence, because there is no direct dependence on a single member of the main clause. This correlation was interpreted in traditional grammar as *anticipatory relationship* and, consequently, the 'It' element had been seen as a *prelude* to the subject. The same opinion is shared by another Russian grammarian A. Leykina. Labeling the sentences with initial "It" as anticipatory, she emphasizes that they are part of complex sentences that have been further complicated either by infinitive or

gerund. The subject "it" in these constructions may serve as an introductory word in non-emphatic sentences or as a rhematic component of a complex sentence (Leykina, 1992).

1.   *It was an awful sight of money when it was piled up* (Twain, 1885:7).

2.   *It is through him that the train is without a regular guide* (Reid, 1866:11).

As it is known, the construction with an anticipatory pronoun (mostly the anticipatory *it)* is used to emphasize the rheme-clause of the sentence, and at the same time it presents the information of the subject clause. Therefore the anticipatory construction is preferred in cases when the content of the subject clause does not suit to the place of a real subject or suppressed by the predicate of the sentence. *E. g.: 3.*It is a miracle *how he managed to make ends meet.*

Bolinger (1973) characterizes the similar sentences as the case of extraposition and does not make great emphasis on the semantics of them. In our opinion, the semantic aspect or communicative function of such sentences should not be ignored. If we are trying to ascribe the ambient character to "It", then the overall meanings that could be inferred from them awe or amazement (1), blaming somebody for something. (2), whereas in the last sentence (3) it denotes either astonishment or surprise.

3. SYNTACTIC FUNCTIONS OF "IT"

There are many other cases, where "It" just fills the space of a main subject since it cannot be placed there due to some reasons, such as:

        a) The formal subject *It* could be used if the logical subject is the subordinate clause;

    E.g. Tom reached school ahead of time*.* It was noticed that this strange thing had been occurring every day latterly (Twain, 1884 95).

As far as the semantics concerned, the meaning is not easily exposed without referral to the previous sentence. In this case, it may be the overall meaning of the previous sentence, which is compressed in "It" *as a strange behavior of a boy*.

    b) The formal subject *It* is introduced if the logical subject is the infinitive construction;

    E.g.   It was a hard struggle with him to make new advances, now, but he nerved himself to it and entered (Twain, 1884:65). The meaning of "It" here is already clear, since the word "hard" gives us a hint (tough movement) without referring to the context.

     Usually, this construction is used with "for clauses".

E.g. It is easy for you to talk of annulling the law of development, but where is the new law of development that will maintain your strength? (London, 1913:12]. The meaning of "It" appears to be the easiness of doing something; however after reading the second clause, we can sense some irony through the emphasis that is made on the rheme-clause of the sentence.

Moreover, some other points which should be singled out about the ambient "It":

(1) the impersonal *it;* (2) the introductory or anticipatory *it;* (3) the emphatic *it.*

1. The impersonal ***it*** is used:

(a) to denote natural phenomena or that which characterizes the environment. In such sentences the predicate is either a simple one, expressed by a verb denoting the state of the weather, or a compound nominal one, with an adjective as predicative.

It often rains in autumn. It is cold here.

 (b) to denote time and distance.

It is 10 o'clock. It is about two miles to the city.

2. The *introductory* or *anticipatory* **it** introduces the real subject.

It's no use *demeaning him like that.*

3. As it has been mentioned before, the *emphatic* **it** is used for emphasis. More detailed description of emphatic *It* is provided in Edward Finegan's work [see below].

Linda Wood and Rolf Kroger (2000) characterize "It constructions" as "a classic *dummy it* phrasing" and do not ascribe any meaning to *It*. Still, their opinion coincides with others in one point, and that is the use of *it* as a dummy subject in sentences about time and weather (e.g., *It's snowing*) and in certain idiomatic expressions (e.g. *It is Greek to me).* Based on their characteristics, dummy *it* refers to nothing at all; it simply serves a grammatical function. In other words, dummy *it* has a grammatical meaning but no lexical meaning. But as it has been mentioned above, Bolinger's point of view contradict to their opinion and for the sake of argument we will adhere to his approach.

4. Other approaches

James D. McCawley (1998) also prescribes to 'It" an ambient character. He states that the ambient *It* occurs only in combination with a limited set of verbs and predicate adjectives that express "environmental conditions" (especially, but not exclusively, the weather). Commenting on the ambient nature of *It*, he mainly emphasizes the grammatical function of *It* thereby stating that in most cases ambient *it* is the subject of its clause either in surface structure or in what is arguably the deep structure (as in the case of *The lake makes it pleasant here*, which allows an analysis in which the deep structure direct object of *make* is a sentence *It is pleasant here* whose subject is ambient *it*) (McCawley,1998:26).

Edward Finegan (2012) characterizes the It-constructions" as "an *it*-cleft construction, in which the clefted phrase presents new information, while the rest of the sentence is given information. As an example, he provides the following situation, with the questions to be

asked to reveal the rhematic component of the sentence. "It-cleft constructions" serve as a theme here.

Situation: Alice told me that Stan saw someone at the party that he knew from his high school days. It turns out it was Nick *that Stan saw at the party*.

1. Who did Stan see at the party?
2. It was Nick that Stan saw at the party.
3. *It was Stan who saw Nick at the party.

The second answer is more correct one, since it presents the new information and is therefore a clefted phrase, but it can't be answered with 3 because the clefted element is not the requested new information (Finegan, 2012).

If we approach to the "It" constructions from the structural point of view, then Malchukov's opinion seems to be adequate. "Under the functional view, impersonalization is viewed as under-elaboration or demotion of the agent/instigator" (Malchukov, 201120). The appearance of impersonal verbs is conditioned by the language laws, which in the case of English is the fixed word order: S-P. Andrej Malchukov & Akio Ogawa (2011) explain this state of impersonal verbs as ambiguity, since the impersonal constructions are used with meteo-verbs with a generic ("ambient") subject or no subject at all.

Malchukov' and Ogawa's opinions coincide to a certain extent with Bolinger's point of view, since they also agree that the impersonal verbs are used with ambient subjects. But in the case of a sentence such as "It is hot", one can say that it is according to someone "It is hot", therefore it means the evaluation of the environment. So the similar sentences could be characterized as the ones, in which the subject of perception appears only in the evaluation content of the "it" constructions. But there are cases when the recipient is explicitly expressed, e.g. *It seems to him that somebody wants to steal something from him* (Ivanov, 2004).

To make a differentiation between *It + impersonal verbs* and other sentences with initial 'It', it is reasonable to divide the impersonal verbs that are used in "It"+Vimp sentences: a) the impersonal verbs such *drizzle, rain, blow* etc. that are used in the sentences with initial "It"; b) functional-impersonal verbs, such as *look, seem, appear* etc. which can appears both in regular sentences as well as in the sentences with initial 'It'.

Besides, in modern English, in most constructions with initial "It", the centre of attention belongs not to the object of reality but to some kind of imagination or idea about it.

It was a great many years ago, and I can scarcely remember anything about it, but I think it was in some foreign country (Twain, 1884:42)

It was a wild night for homeless young heads to be out i n (Twain, 1884:122)*.*

It was after sun-up, and I had been sound asleep (Twain, 1885:53).

As it is seen from the last two sentences, there are cases when the sentences with initial 'It' could also be used to denote the time frame, during which some incident had occurred.

Moreover, some scholars analyse the clause introduced by the anticipatory construction as presenting two possibilities of interpretation which stand in opposition to each other. According to the first and more traditional view, it is just a subject clause introduced by the anticipatory *it,* while in the second, the clause introduced by *it* is appositive.

The initial element "IT" in the function of an impersonal subject or appositive possesses a feature of the so-called "centripetal orientation" (Maksimova, 1984:77). These sentences are formed for disclosing the qualitative side of something; it could be state or condition of ambient air, environment, or any object. E.g. It is warm. She underscores that in impersonal sentences despite the absence of any semantic value, "It", acting as a subject, finds its further development in the preceding component. To the semantically empty "It" some qualities are prescribed. E.g. *The summer evenings were long. It was not dark, yet.* (Twain, 1884:11)

This is a case when "It" means all-encompassing state. "It" introduces an impersonal sentence and the meaning of it is revealed in the following component, which was expressed by a predicative construction and semantically describes the general state of the "summer evenings".

There are many other instances where 'it" denotes some quality or state of subject under discussion. Cf. E.g.*It's inspiring here at MIT* (see Bolinger, 1973) and:

E.g. It was a genuine relief to the whole congregation when the ordeal was over and the benediction pronounced (Twain, 1884:47)

In the last sentence, the meaning of "It" coincides with Bolinger's definition, where he refers to the sentences of similar type as expressions without patients. In those sentences, the tame component "It" provides additional information on the real subject while being in the structure of a complex sentence.

There are cases where "It" has a limited deictic meaning, which is directed to the referent and is represented by the nominal structure. Decoding the meaning of "It" in these sentences usually begins with symbolic representation of subject, which precedes its semantic disclosure. The speaker in these cases mainly underscores the space coordinates and establishes that syntactic position from which the decoding of the referent begins. For this reason, the initial "It" acquires a significant syntactic position in the sentence thereby contributing to the functioning of impersonal sentences in English. The center of attention in this sentence is directed not to the object but to the imagination about it; it could be the condition of an object or location. E.*g. It is pouring rain. It's blowing a gale.*

In Chafe's opinion, these sentences introduce the notion of 'complement'. Since 'blow' implies 'wind' as 'sing' implies 'song', and 'gale' specifies 'blow' more narrowly than 'wind'. But D.Bolinger disagrees with Chafe's definition by stating that "a complement is only a patient that duplicates more of the semantic traits of the verb and gives fewer other traits" [cited in Bolinger, p.262].

But F. Recanati (2007) has a different opinion about the impersonal sentences relating to meteorology. In his opinion, the common view about meteorological predicates like 'rain' is that they carry an argument slot for a location which can be filled explicitly or implicitly. In

the absence of an explicit location the words 'rain' demands that the context should provide a specific location. So, when there is a tacit reference to a location, it takes place for pragmatic reasons and therefore the meaning of a sentence (e.g. It rains) bears a location-indefinite content.

Slightly different approach to Recanati's view is proposed by Christopher Hall (2005) concerning the use of meteorological verbs, used in impersonal constructions like *snow, rain*. He states "[S]nowing is just snowing: not even God can *snow*, and although we can be *snowed on, in,* or *under*, the meaning of the verb *snow* just doesn't require anything to be snowed (except snow itself, I suppose, but that would be a little redundant). So semantics doesn't explain why we need to express a subject, even a 'dummy' one like *it* in *It is snowing*" (Hall, 2005:170).

Christopher Hall's (2005) opinion denies any semantic value of *it* and his approach contradicts to all arguments, which make attempts to ascribe the ambient character to *it*. Many other examples could be provided to prove in which *It* bears some semantic load such, for instance the spatial location: E.g. *It was pretty close to the shanty, and I thought I heard the old man coming all the time* (Twain, 1885:55).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of works reveal that *It* contains in itself some kind of information, which is only revealed in communication process; the meaning of it remains semantically "colorless" until it is disclosed in the nominal part, and the semantics of the nominal part influences the thematic load of the subject. However, the meaning of "It" does not necessarily require the nominal part to clarify the meaning, as "It" already bears a certain meaning in itself so the structure of the sentence or sometimes even context may help disclose it. For this reason, regardless of the mutually exclusive approaches in the analysis of the sentences with initial "It", we cannot deny that that all the uses of *It* stem from a common semantic base and sometimes from a communicative intention. In fact, it would be wrong in itself to draw consclusion that the element *It*, which has already an independent lexical meaning by itself, somehow loses its meaning in the structures or in combinations with other words. So without a thorough investigation of all its usages, the lexical meaning of *It* should not be taken so lightly for the convenience of syntax.

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