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EXPLETIVE IT AND TRUTH VALUE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Summary. In this paper we have analyzed syntactic structures with expletive *it* in terms of truth-value of the sentences in which they appear within the scope of academic writing. They have been considered as presupposition triggers and propositional attitude reports. The paper also presents a communicative approach to writing academic texts, taking the peculiarities of their syntactic structure as a starting point.

Key words: expletive *it*, academic writing, proposition, presupposition, propositional attitude, truth value

Scientific research always finds its representation in the text of science. Scholars not only rely on their own empirical research, but also on the research of their colleagues, which can be a premise of their own research, and all this usually happens through texts. That is why erroneous interpretation of academic texts (possibly, because of the way that text was written, too) may lead to scientific inaccuracies or mistakes. Thus, language is important both for cognition and for representation of results of cognition, in the form of academic discourse.

Problem statement. When we use constructions with expletive *it* in sentences, we say something like “it seems that”, “it appears that” etc., but we mean something like “it seems to me”, “I think”, “I am of the opinion that”. There is no reference to the seat of knowledge in the impersonal construction like this, but often this seat of knowledge is the author/the speaker him/herself. Besides the reasons for and the effect of (if any) of using such impersonal attitudinal phrases instead of the personal ones, there are three more things that attract our attention here: 1) if the phrase with expletive *it* is a part of proposition, 2) how it projects presuppositions, 3) its truth value; and answering these three questions is **the purpose of this paper.**

A lot of **recent research** has been dedicated to the focus in the left periphery of the sentences [1; 2] and evidentiality markers [3]. Expletive *it* both functions as evidentiality marker and moves the evidence for the statement to the focal position, where it serves as an attitudinal operator as well. Relying on the latter syntactic and pragmatic theories, and also on the older tradition in philosophy of language [4; 5] we will do research into their influence on the truth value of propositions.

Firstly, we need to define what type of syntactic structures is to be analyzed. These are structures with expletive *it*, such as in (1), which does not have any lexical meaning, that is with a formal grammatical subject which does not project any lexical properties, but must fill the subject position (according to the EPP) [6, p. 69–70].

1) *It seems* that anthropology be used at this time to contribute to the debate on policing, for since the 1964 Police Act and the preceding Royal Commission which was generated through concern over police practice, the organization has held an increasingly central place in the public imagination [BNC A0K 127].

2) It is good news that the introduction of GCSE has endorsed this kind of methodology and response [BNC CCV 1389].

Such constructions present either evaluative or evidential phrase that allows an author to place their evaluation or evidence in a priority position, making the meaning of attitude a starting point of an utterance and a perspective from which content of a sentence is viewed. With the help of expletive constructions it is separated from what it refers to, at the same time being salient and accentuated. Such sentences in a way relate to indirect discourse, with that difference that instead of an expression referring to a speaker, which is characteristic of sentences in indirect discourse, we have an impersonal construction; compare, for example, (3a) and (3b): both have two-place predicate “said” (or equivalent) and a demonstrative referring to an utterance.

3) (a) He said that it was a complicated issue.

(b) It was said that it was a complicated issue.

It is interesting how a predicate in such sentences relates expletive (which in other cases of indirect discourse could represent the originating speaker or source of evidence), present speaker and a sentence. According to Davidson sentences of this type entail a paradox: on the one hand we discover semantically significant structure in a clause, not in a principal sentence, and on the other hand, the failure of consequence-relation invites us to treat clauses as semantically inert [5, p. 133].

When we speak about the relation between certain phenomena we describe in an academic piece of writing and the language we use to describe them, what really matters (or is supposed to matter) is coherence between our statements and reality, in a way that these statements hold to truth-conditions and are true. However, the meanings of the sentences of which we build our discourse do not necessarily correspond to these phenomena in such a way. According to Frege, the sense of a sentence is its proposition, not nominatum [4, p. 90]. He further states, that in every judgment a step is made from propositions to nominata (the objective facts) [4, p. 91]. From this follows that proposition alone does not give knowledge, but also nominatum alone is not the truth value of a sentence, so the truth value consists in proposition together with its nominatum. Then we have a real object (or objective fact), a sign, that represents it (a word, phrase or sentence) and sense of that sign. Be as it may, but this correspondence is not that easy to gain because of inconsistencies of the natural language, especially at the level of propositions and presuppositions, definition of which in certain cases (e. g. in complex sentences) often poses a difficulty; and it seems to be the case with expletive constructions. Special attention here is drawn by complex sentences with expletive in a principal clause: the actual content of an utterance seems to come in a subordinate clause, but expletive clause seems to affect its truth value in several ways. The problem is that one single proposition is formed by the principle sentence (in our case – with the expletive *it*) together with its clause, and, following Frege, the truth of the whole implies neither the truth nor the falsity of the subordinate clause, while the actual sense of the whole sentence appears to be contained exactly in the subordinate clause. Let us

have a closer look at such sentences considering expletive phrases as presupposition triggers.

One of the issues of the biggest interest in presupposition researches [7; 8; 9; 10] has been the explanation of the behavior of presuppositions occurring in embedded positions, within the scope of an attitude verb, including the cases when presuppositions are projected by this attitude verb. Among presuppositional triggers (expressions and constructions projecting presuppositions) there are factives [11] and clefts [12]. Presuppositions are viewed both as a semantic notion, whereby only sentences presuppose something [13] and a pragmatic notion involving both the speaker and the listener [13]. For the sentences with the expletive phrase in the principal clause it has the following consequences: on the one hand, semantically these presuppositions cannot be avoided, and pragmatically they affect the context and communication (here – academic communication), which poses a problem, since addressees take a lot for granted. The structure we are going to speak about in this part of the paper are those with factive predicates (predicatives), “holes” in Karttunen’s terminology [8, p. 188], that seem to generally allow presuppositions to project.

Speaking about academic writing, where the concept of truth is the key one, some questions arise concerning such an evaluation. It may appear that utterances with factive evaluation can be viewed in terms of truth value. However, from the perspective of semantics, only the principal clause can be ascribed truth-value here, while the actual content of an utterance is found in a subordinate clause, which contains proposition as well; but, the factive predicate functions as a presupposition-trigger, requiring from the proposition of a subordinate clause to be true, thus turning it into presupposition, which cannot be attributed truth-value any longer (it can only be true, never false, otherwise, the whole utterance is semantically inconsistent). The subordinate clause becomes a complement of the factive predicate and a presupposition of a sentence as a whole [8], so what is expected to be a proposition, turns into presupposition, causing certain ambiguity for truth-conditions in discourse.

Factive evaluative impersonal constructions create what can be called *niches* in language structure [15], which help to produce utterances that semantically seem to be true, even if they are not in reality. In other words, judging from the surface structure an utterance is true, but it is only a halo covering another structure of an utterance, in regard to which the surface one is only a reflection, moreover, a distorted one.

Verbs in higher clauses may also be propositional attitude reports. They can be factive, as the above described, but not necessarily. If we try to embed presupposition under trigger, e. g. “believe”, as in (4), we observe two types of inference, (a) and (b):

(4) *It is believed* that they migrated to central Italy from Asia Minor or possibly further east in the eighth century B.C.; remaining dominant and independent until the third century B.C. after which they were gradually Latinised under Roman rule [BNC HBV 2084].

(a) they migrated;

(b) it is believed that they migrated.

According to Karttunen, predicates like *believe* are not classified as ‘holes’, but as ‘plugs’, which have the property that the presuppositions of the complement sentence are not presuppositions of the superordinate sentence [8, p. 188]. That is, the impersonal construction in the principal clause is not a presuppositional trigger, because the subordinate clause does not have to be true anymore: someone may completely believe in something without its being true. In this case (but not exclusively) we observe another

function of impersonal construction – it serves as a propositional attitude report.

Propositional attitude reports are associated with the cognitive relations people bear to propositions. As we find in Fintel and Heim [7], expressions like *believe, know, doubt, expect, regret* and so on are usually said to describe propositional attitudes, expressing relations between individuals (the attitude holder) and propositions (intensions of sentences). All of these can be found in expletive phrases. Propositional attitudes are mental states that we might have towards propositions (e. g. belief, knowledge, suspicion, discovery etc.), expressed by such attitude predicates as *believe, know, realize, think, desire, discover, want* etc. The domain of propositional attitudes, however, can be expanded to speech predicates (such as *say, ask* and so on), since these have many semantic and syntactic parallels with attitude predicates [16], for example, both embed propositions and show the attitude of the author or any second/third person to them; also this sentence-embedding makes them similar in terms of propositions and presuppositions of a principal sentence and a subordinate clause.

What is interesting about impersonal constructions as propositional attitude reports is that there is no reference to the source of attitude. There is a predicate which refers to proposition, but no person (subject) associated with that predicate. So, it may appear that authors in this way may express an attitude, distancing themselves from it.

There are also expletive phrases which function as modal operators, for example, *it could be that, it is possible, it seems, it must be, it should be, it is necessary* etc. Modality in such cases explicitly refers to the whole statement, not an object (modality *de dicto*), and expletive phrases demonstrate how thoughts, ideas are modalized in academic writing. Modality as an expression of propositional attitude means that the predicate which expresses attitude carries proposition of a sentence. For example, the sentence *It is said that the earth is round* is true, if somebody really says so, and it is not necessary for the earth to be round for the statement to be true [17]. Such constructions take the commitment off the author, since he/she in fact does not make their own statement, but refers to some source (which, by the way, may not even exist), while the most important information is found in that part of a sentence, which comes to be out of proposition, and the actual proposition loses its propositional features – it becomes inappropriate to speak of its truth-conditions. Impersonal constructions then make it possible for authors to distance themselves from the modal stance, and they add objectivity and authoritativeness to the whole statement, in case there is not enough evidence for it to do without modality at all. Nevertheless, authors of academic texts should be careful with modality.

Another point, expletive phrases mark evidentiality. Evidentiality is a grammatical category, the most important meaning of which is a source of information [18, 3]. In many languages reference to the source of information marks also speaker’s attitude to the reliability of this information [19, p. 342–343]. This can be seen in English impersonal constructions. For example, a sentence with a construction of the type “*It is said that...*” has three meanings: (1) a speaker refers to the second/third persons as a source of information; (2) a speaker is not sure, whether information is true (modal meaning); (3) a speaker avoids responsibility for truthfulness of presented information (this meaning points that the construction also functions as a hedge). The second meaning relates evidentiality with epistemic modality (evidential modality in Palmer’s classification [20]). The construction “*It is said*” introduces indirect discourse,

and contains a lexical marker of evidentiality, but, being impersonal, does not refer an addressee to the source of information, showing that the source of evidence is not the author of an utterance, and focalizes the information that the author is trying to restrict his responsibility for proposition. Turning to academic writing, every realization of the category of evidentiality conceals or reveals a source of information, and since the purpose of any academic text is to establish the real world picture, then a source of information is very important in it as an instrument for interpretation of its truthfulness.

Conclusions. Writing academic texts aims at establishing and spreading the truth, so the truth value of the sentences they consist of cannot be overlooked. One of the syntactic structures which affect truth value are constructions with expletives. Sentences with expletive *it* have their peculiarities in terms of semantic meanings independent of the context. But context, the pragmatic aspect should be always taken to consideration when using them in order to avoid communicative deviations which in this case also mean scientific mistakes. That is why authors should be careful when using them for expressing their evaluation towards information in propositions if they lack evidence and do not want to add it to the common ground. Also, expletive *it* constructions distantiate authors from propositions they express and reduce their responsibility for truth-value. Focal position of such constructions in the sentence structure raises question for **further study**.

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Кунець Х. Б. Експлетивне *it* та значення істинності в академічному письмі

Анотація. У статті аналізуються синтаксичні конструкції з експлетивним *it* у термінах значення істинності речень, в яких вони вживаються, в академічному письмі. Розглянуто, як названі конструкції проєктують пресупозиції й виражають пропозиційне ставлення. Стаття також представляє комунікативний підхід до академічного письма.

Ключові слова: експлетивне *it*, академічне письмо, пропозиція, пресупозиція, пропозиційне ставлення, значення істинності.

Кунець Х. Б. Эксплетивное *it* и значение истинности в академическом письме

Аннотация. В статье анализируются синтаксические конструкции с эксплетивным *it* с точки зрения значения истинности предложений, в которых они используются, в академическом письме. Рассмотрено, как названные конструкции проецируют пресуппозиции и выражают пропозициональное отношение. Статья также представляет коммуникативный подход к академическому письму.

Ключевые слова: эксплетивное *it*, академическое письмо, пропозиция, пресуппозиция, пропозициональное отношение, значение истинности.