
THE PRONOUN 'IT' AS AN EMPTY SUBJECT IN ENGLISH – IS THERE AN EQUIVALENT IN ALBANIAN LANGUAGE?

Rilind Mahmudi

Mother Teresa University in Skopje, North Macedonia, rilind.mahmudi@unt.edu.mk

Majlinda Ismaili Mahmudi

Mother Teresa University in Skopje, North Macedonia, majlinda.ismaili.mahmudi@unt.edu.mk

Edona Vinca Zhuta

Mother Teresa University in Skopje, North Macedonia, edona.vinca@unt.edu.mk

Abstract: Word order is crucial when we study the functions of words in different sentences and constructions. The position of words in sentences and their function are closely observed in comparative studies. Function is not solely determined by the position of words in sentences. There are languages with fixed word order (like English language) and languages with flexible word order (like Albanian language). An important difference discussed in this paper is that English is a non-null subject language which means that subjects are grammatically mandatory. On the other hand, Albanian language is a null subject language and there are various sentences without a subject. Having in mind that the term empty subject is somehow new in English, questions are raised whether there are empty subjects in other languages and if they are recognized as syntactic constituents. The empty subject expressed with the pronoun 'it' is used to introduce a clause or provide a grammatical structure with no clear referent, but serves as a grammatical necessity. Examples with empty subjects in English language are translated to Albanian language in order to see if there are similarities or differences, or if there are empty subjects in Albanian language. However, the analysis in this paper found no such equivalents in translated sentences to Albanian language, especially when talking about empty subjects. Subjects in Albanian language are expressed explicitly and clearly and there is no need of an empty subject when the grammar of Albanian language and the word order allows sentences with no subject. Subjects, whether they are real or empty subjects (semantically empty), are usually found in the initial position in English. While this is generally true in English language, with some exceptions, it is not always the case with Albanian language because of the word order and null subject properties. Empty subjects have been studied for some time in English language, but there are not vast studies comparing empty subjects in English and Albanian language. The pronoun 'it' is an essential feature of English language to refer to time, weather, emotions and more (*It is ten o'clock. It is sunny. It is unbelievable!*). The pronoun 'it' in English language is not used only to express empty/dummy subjects. It can also be used as anticipatory 'it', which means that 'it' can be used to refer to a real subject found after the verb (*It is likely that we will be late.*). These are not rare occasions in English, but when these sentences are translated from English to Albanian language there are differences, including different word order or no subject at all in Albanian language (*It is late./Është vonë.*). Another important use of the pronoun 'it' is that it can be used in passive constructions as an empty subject (*It is believed that he is guilty./Besohet se është me faj.*) and the real subject is extraposed. Empty subject 'it' can be challenging for non-native speakers to master its varied uses and functions. Learners must master the use of 'it' in a variety of contexts and understand nuances and differences in meaning with translated sentences from English to Albanian language. The analysis of similarities and differences highlights divergences between these two languages. These findings contribute to understand the syntax and semantics of English and Albanian language by highlighting cross-linguistic variations.

Keywords: Empty subject, pronoun 'it', word order, English language, Albanian language

1. INTRODUCTION

English and Albanian are two Indo-European languages with distinct grammatical structures, each offering unique similarities and differences. Their grammatical differences are not studied in depth with contrastive analyses, thus leaving space to authors to study their constituents, constructions and word order. In this paper we explore the notion of *empty subject* or *dummy subject* (Pearce 2007:66), and if there are equivalents in Albanian language.

English, known for its relatively simple grammar, uses a fixed word order pattern (S-V-O) with a subject in the initial position in all basic sentence structures (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002:33) in declarative sentences. On the other hand, Albanian grammar exhibits more complex structures. It also has a free or flexible word order where the subject may appear in different positions in the sentence, granting more freedom of expression. This is possible because Albanian has a rich system of cases and makes it easy for the subject to change its position. Furthermore, Albanian is a *null-subject language* (Kortmann & Van Der Auwera, 2011:204), resulting in sentences with no subject whatsoever (real or empty subject). This is the first difference to be noticed when comparing both languages. While

the subject is mandatory in English, it is not in Albanian language. This difference between English and Albanian language made us compare sentences with subjects (real and empty subjects).

The empty subject in English language is expressed with 'there' or 'it'. Since the pronoun 'it' is the most neutral and semantically unmarked of the personal pronouns, 'it' is used as an empty subject (Quirk et al. 1985:348). While there is already a contrastive analysis on the empty subject expressed with existential 'there' in English language and its equivalent in Albanian language (Mahmudi, IsmailiMahmudi & Vinca 2022), this comparative study highlights the role of empty subject expressed with the pronoun 'it'. Another difference between English and Albanian language is that there is no gender-neutral pronoun in Albanian language. There are differences when the pronoun 'it' is used as a *real subject* and as an *empty* or *dummy subject* (Downing & Locke 2006:44). While there can be similarities in translated sentences with real subjects, there are unique differences when the pronoun 'it' is used as an empty subject.

The empty subject 'it' is a common feature of the English language and is used to introduce a clause or provide a grammatical structure when there is no clear referent. Empty subjects have no meaning, but they are used because we need a subject (Chaudhuri 2022:398). The empty subject has special uses in English language with expressions referring to time, distance, weather, temperature, or current situation (Sujiatmoko 2022:11). There are many examples with empty subjects in English, for example:

- (1) *It is late.* / *Është vonë.*
- (2) *It is dark.* / *Është errët.*
- (3) *It is close.* / *Është afër.*
- (4) *It is serious.* / *Është serioze.*

The first and obvious difference when we compare sentences in English and Albanian is the number of words. This is a clear sign that we deal with a huge difference after comparing these two languages. While there are empty subjects in sentence (1-4) in English language, there are clearly no empty subjects in sentences (1-4) in Albanian language (*null-subject language*).

There is a similar situation even if past tense is used. English verbs used to describe weather or other phenomenon require a *pleonastic* or *semantically empty subject* (Dalrymple, Lowe & Mycock 2019: 59) in the form of 'It'. For example:

- (5) *It rained.* / *Ra shi.*
- (6) *It snowed.* / *Ra borë.*

Sentences (5) and (6) show us the most important difference when we compare English and Albanian language. Even though there are two words in the English and Albanian sentences, words do not have the same functions in English and Albanian language. While there is a S-V word order pattern in English, there is a V-S pattern in Albanian language. But this is not the only difference. In English the pronoun 'It' is empty subject of the sentence, while in Albanian the real subject of the sentence is 'shi (rain)'. The same situation is noticed in sentence (6) with the same functions as in sentence (5). However, there are other examples showing other differences. For example:

- (7) *It is her.* / *Është ajo.*
- (8) *It is mine.* / *Është e imja.*

The function of words in sentences (7) and (8) is not the same in English and Albanian language. This is the first step towards understanding one main and major difference in the syntax of English and Albanian language, including word functions, i.e., subject complements, adverbials, objects, etc. The pronoun 'it' occurs in various forms, i.e., *referential 'it'*, *dummy 'it'*, *anticipatory 'it'* and *cleft 'it'* (Aarts 2011: 62). This is why understanding grammar and sentence structure is crucial when we compare two or more languages of the same or different language families. With translated sentences we can achieve a comprehensive analysis of the real and empty subject in English and Albanian. Such sentences provide in-depth examination and cross-linguistic insights, facilitating a deeper understanding of how empty subject in English language functions in different languages.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The descriptive and comparative methods are crucial in the analysis of constructions with empty subject in English and sentences translated to Albanian language. The descriptive method involves examination of grammatical structures and linguistic features and we closely analyze sentences derived from texts, written works, spoken language and formal literature to identify instances of empty subjects. This method aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how empty subjects are used in English language.

A corpus of sentences, ranging from informal discourse to scholarly texts, is collected and some of them are used and analyzed in this paper to capture the essence and differences of both languages. This study encompasses a diverse array of sentences. The comparative analysis involves observation of the syntactic functions, patterns and

semantic implications of the empty subjects in English. The comparative study of both languages and translated sentences yields valuable insights into the distinct grammatical structures of the English and Albanian language.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we present findings from our analysis which is based on a corpus of English texts. We examine the frequency, syntactic patterns and functions and semantic roles associated with the empty subject ‘*it*’ in both languages. Additionally, we investigate similarities and differences in the usage of the empty subject construction between English and Albanian language.

By showing the ways how the empty subject ‘*it*’ is used in English language, we provide valuable insights into the syntax and semantics of these languages. Furthermore, this analysis contributes to broader understanding of cross-linguistic variations and the ways in which the subject is expressed in these languages. By comparing English and Albanian language, we aim to shed light on the similarities and differences in the usage of the empty subject construction, enriching our knowledge about these two languages and their underlying grammatical structures. Overall, this section presents a deeper exploration of the empty subject and word order patterns expressed with the pronoun ‘*it*’ in English and sentences translated to Albanian language, offering valuable linguistic analysis.

A number of sentences from a written and spoken corpus are given below in English language referring to weather, time, distance, emotions, etc. Sentences are translated to Albanian language to show if both languages have the same word order, or if there are differences in the word order pattern. The following sentences in English language are translated to Albanian language followed by their syntactic functions. The following symbols are used below to explain their syntactic functions: S – Subject, _{ES} – Empty Subject, _{EXPS} – Extraposed Subject, _{SCL} – Subject Clause, SC – Subject Complement, V – Verb, O – Object).

(9) *It is raining.* / *Po bie shi.* (_{ES}-V/V-S)

Sentence (9) is one of the most common sentences that is used in English language with an empty subject. The word order in sentence (9) is not only reversed in Albanian language, but syntactic functions are also not the same in both languages. We can see that ‘*It*’ in English is an empty subject because sentences require a subject in English language. On the other hand, we have a real subject in the sentence in Albanian language, i.e., ‘*shi*’. The syntactic constructions and the semantic requirements require a subject in Albanian language and the sentence cannot be left without a subject. However, the word order in sentence (9) may be changed in Albanian language (S-V: ‘*Shi po bie.*’). Nevertheless, changing word order does not change syntactic function of the words in this sentence.

(10) *It is clear that you are wrong.* / *Është e qartë se ti je gabim.* (_{ES}-V-SC-_{EXPS} / V-S_{CL})

An empty subject followed by a verb, subject complement and a subject clause resulted with an interesting change of functions in the translated sentence in sentence (10). While there are four syntactic functions in sentence (10) in English, there are only two syntactic functions in the same sentence in Albanian language. This is because the subject in English is not mandatory in Albanian language (because it is a null-subject language), the SC (‘*clear*’) is integral part of the V in Albanian (predicate), and the rest is S_{CL}. We notice various differences in sentence (10), but the most noticeable difference is that in English there are two types of subjects, empty subject and extra-posed subject, and there is only one subject clause in Albanian with no empty subject.

(11) *It is beautiful.* / *Është e bukur.* (_{ES}-V-SC/V-S-[Det./SC])

Sentence (11) shows another difference in both languages. While there is an empty subject in English, there is a short form of the personal pronoun in Albanian ‘*e*’ which functions as a real subject. The semantics in this sentence plays crucial role on the syntax of the sentence. If we refer to a landscape that is beautiful, then no full real subject is used in Albanian. If we refer to a beautiful animal that we do not know its gender, then a full or real subject may be used in Albanian but with a change of the pronoun ‘*It*’ to masculine or feminine since there is no neutral pronoun in Albanian (*It is beautiful.* / *Ajo [She] është e bukur.*). Another difference is that while V and SC are two sentence constituents in English (Verspoor et al. 2022:31), this is not the case in Albanian language because ‘*bukur*’ is a determiner of the verb.

(12) *It is Wednesday.* / *Është e mërkurë.* (E_S-V-SC / V - S)

Sentence (12) is slightly similar to sentence (11), but the verb is followed by a noun instead of an adjective. It is observed the same word order in English in sentences (11) and (12), but not in Albanian language. While there is only a predicate without a real subject in Albanian in sentence (11), and there is a real subject located after the verb in sentence (12). This is an indicator that the word class has an impact on the syntactic functions in sentences with empty subjects translated to Albanian language.

(13) *It is getting late.* / *Po bëhet vonë.* (E_S -V-A / V-[Det./A])

Sentence (13) is a typical example when there is no subject in Albanian at all, even though there is an empty subject in English. Another difference noticed in this sentence is the number of sentence constituents where there are three sentence constituents in English, and only one in Albanian because ‘*vonë*’ in the Albanian is a determiner of the verb and it is recognized as a constituent on its own on the second level of a tree diagram analysis.

There are certain verbs that are used in sentences with ‘*it*’ as an empty subject such as: *seem, appear, happen, prove, turn out, etc.*, (Eastwood 1994:60). This type of verbs leads to the use of *anticipatory ‘it’* which is used to stand in for a *Clausal Subject* or *Object* which has been extraposed (Aarts 2011: 63). Such typical examples are sentences (14) and (15).

(14) *It seems that the restaurant is closed.* / *Duket se restoranti është i mbyllur.* (E_S-V-_{EXP}S / V-_{EXP}S)

(15) *It is hard to pass the exam.* / *Është e vështirë të kalosh provimin.* (E_S-V-SC-_{EXP}S / V-[Det.]-_{EXP}S)

(16) *It is difficult preparing for the exam.* / *Është e vështirë përgatitja për provim.* (E_S-V-SC-_{EXP}S / V-[Det.]-_{EXP}S)

There are three different clauses used as extra-posed subjects in these sentences: *that-clause* in sentence (14), *infinitive clause* in sentence (15) and *gerundial clause* in sentence (16). Again, there are no empty subjects in sentences (14), (15) and (16) in Albanian language, but there are real extra-posed subjects in all three sentences. These are typical cases of anticipatory ‘*it*’ (Aarts 2011: 287) where a clause is moved.

It-cleft sentences are another category where the pronoun ‘*it*’ is followed by a form of the verb *be* and the subject position of the *it-cleft* is filled with the pronoun ‘*it*’ (Aarts 2011: 295). These forms are not used very frequently in English because most sentences may be constructed with real subject instead of an empty subject.

(17) *It is a holiday what you need.* / *Ke nevojë për pushim.*

(18) *It was Jonida they criticised, not Jon.* / *Jonidën e kritikuan, jo Jonin.*

Cleft constructions have an effect of giving prominence and shift the focus of interest (Borjars & Burrige 2010: 233). This is the reason why literal translation would produce semantically incorrect sentences and different word order and syntactic functions. However, in both translated sentences to Albanian language (17) and (18) there are no empty subjects. If a literal translation was done, then the pronoun ‘*it*’ would have been a subject, not an empty subject (17- **Ai është pushim që të nevojitet.*). This is not a semantically correct sentence in Albanian language.

Up to this point we have discussed mostly simple sentences in active voice. What is interesting is that the empty subject is also found in passive constructions. Reporting verbs are used in the passive after the empty subject ‘*it*’ to make a distance from the reported information and these types of sentences are used when we are not sure if the information is reliable (Yule 2006: 63). For example:

(19) *It is said that Albanian is a hard language.* / *Thuhet se anglishtja është gjuhë e vështirë.*

(20) *It was reported that the thief had died.* / *Ishte raportuar se vjedhësi kishte vdekur.*

In both sentences (19) and (20) there is a same word order with same syntactic functions, but without empty subjects in the Albanian sentences. Sentences in Albanian start with verbs and this is possible because Albanian is a null-subject language and sentences convey full meaning.

Apart from functioning as an empty subject, the pronoun ‘*it*’ in rare occasions can function as a semantically empty object because it has no full meaning.

(21) *I found it quite amazing that he didn't give up.* / *Është për t'u mahnitur që ai nuk u dorëzua.*

In this sentence the pronoun 'it' serves as an object in extra-posed constructions. A parallel comparison cannot be made with the Albanian language with sentences with various expressions. A literal translation would produce a semantically incorrect sentence. However, these constructions are not common in English language and are mostly used to highlight a constituent or to focus on specific information.

Some selected sentences that were analysed above are written below again, but now with a different word order, i.e., putting the subject in the initial position in English. The reason why is to try to omit the empty subject and see if such constructions are possible, and if there are semantic implications on the sentence. It is obvious that such changes cannot be made to all sentences like 'It is raining.' or 'It is beautiful.' where there is no noun, noun phrase or pronoun to substitute the empty subject 'It' and act as a real subject of the sentence. What we want to highlight here is that extra-posed subjects may replace empty subjects and be put in the initial position by completely removing the empty subject. For example:

(22) *It is clear that you are wrong. – That you are wrong is clear.*

(23) *It is hard to pass the exam. – To pass the exam is hard.*

(24) *It is difficult preparing for the exam. – Preparing for the exam is difficult.*

(25) *It is a holiday what you need. – What you need is a holiday.*

The syntactic and semantic aspects are important for the analysis of sentences (22) to (25). Both sentences in each pair convey the same meaning, but the difference lies in the word order, syntactic functions and emphasis of the subject in the second sentence. Therefore, there are no empty subjects in sentences on the right side and the subject construction is filled with *that-clause* (22), *infinitive clause* (23), *gerundial clause* (24) and *wh-clause* (25). All these clauses act as real subjects of the respective sentences.

Overall, the pair of sentences (22) to (25) demonstrate different syntactic structures by rearranging the word order and shifting the subject clauses to the front. These syntactic differences highlight the various ways subject clauses can be incorporated in sentences.

Despite the syntactic rearrangements, the semantic meaning of the sentences remains relatively consistent or the same. The original message is conveyed with a slight shift in emphasis due to the change of word order.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the empty subject expressed with the pronoun 'it' in English and Albanian reveals several interesting findings. One striking observation is the absence of an empty subject in Albanian language. Unlike English, where sentences like 'It is raining.' or 'It seems like a bad idea.' are common, Albanian does not rely on this construction to express similar concepts, syntactic functions and word order. The absence of the empty subject in Albanian can be attributed to several factors.

Firstly, Albanian exhibits a more flexible word order compared to English. In English the word order is generally fixed and the subject normally appears before the verb. However, in Albanian the word order is flexible and subjects can appear either before or after the verb. This flexibility allows Albanian to omit the subject because the verb itself can convey the necessary information.

Furthermore, Albanian language is considered a nullsubject language, which means that it allows omission of subjects in certain contexts. In English language, sentences must have a subject and the empty subject 'it' is used when the subject is not explicitly stated. In Albanian language, the subject can be null and the structure of the sentence does not rely on the empty subject 'it' to convey the intended meaning. However, there are instances with extra-posed subjects in Albanian language.

It is worth noting that with translated sentences from English to Albanian language there may be instances where there is a change in word order. This is due to differences in the grammatical structures of the two languages. Translating from English to Albanian may require reordering the sentence constituents to accommodate them, especially empty and extra-posed subjects.

In summary, the analysis of the empty subject expressed with the pronoun 'it' highlights the divergences between these two languages. While English relies on the empty subject to express certain concepts, information, situations, Albanian does not utilize this construction because there is no empty subject in Albanian. Syntactic and semantic observations contribute to our understanding of the flexibility and nuances of sentence structures and the impact on meaning and emphasis. These findings contribute to our understanding of the syntax and semantics of English and Albanian by highlighting cross-linguistic variations.

REFERENCES

Aarts, B. (2011). Oxford Modern English Grammar. Oxford University Press.

- Borjars, K. & Burridge K. (2010). *Introducing English Grammar (Second Edition)*. Routledge.
- Chaudhuri, P.R. (2022). *A Handbook of Complete English Grammar*. Prabir Rai Chaudhuri.
- Dalrymple, M., Lowe J.L., & Mycock L. (2019). *The Oxford Reference Guide to Lexical Functional Grammar*. Oxford University Press
- Downing, A. & Locke, Ph. (2006). *English Grammar - A University Course (Second Edition)*. Routledge.
- Eastwood, J. (1994). *Oxford Guide to English Grammar*. Oxford University Press.
- Greenbaum, S., & Nelson, G. (2002). *An Introduction to English Grammar (Second Edition)*. Longman, London.
- Kortmann, B., & Van Der Auwera, J. (2011). *The Languages and Linguistics of Europe – The World of Linguistics*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Mahmudi, R., Ismaili Mahmudi, M., & Vinca, E. (2022). *Empty Subject (Existential ‘There’) and Concord in English and Albanian Language’*. IMSC.
- Pearce, M. (2007). *The Routledge Dictionary of English Language Studies*. Routledge.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Geoffrey, L., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman.
- Sujatmoko, A.H. (2022). *Applied English Grammar*. BintagSemesta Media.
- Verspoor, M.H., Kassenberg, T., Keijzer, M., & Poarch, G.J. (2022). *English Sentence Structures*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Yule G. (2006). *Oxford Practice Grammar (Advanced)*. Oxford University Press.