

How to Teach the Expletive "It"

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Abstract

In some English grammar books used in schools in Japan, the expletive *it* in a sentence like (i) *It seems that John loves Mary* is not given a detailed explanation and sometimes appears to be regarded as having the same status as ambient *it*. I assume that this is because both refer to nothing and behave differently from the expletive *it* in a sentence like (ii) *It is likely that John loves Mary*, where *it* refers to the *that*-clause with which it can be replaced, as in *That John loves Mary is likely*. However, according to Napoli (1988), *it* in a sentence like (i) differs from ambient *it* in that the former cannot control PRO, whereas the latter can. Furthermore, *it* in a sentence like (ii) can also control PRO, which indicates that the expletive in (ii), rather than that in (i), seems to share this property of ambient *it*. In order to teach these expletives to students effectively, it is essential for teachers to understand their idiosyncrasies. Recent syntactic studies, such as Honda (2015), reveal how the expletive *it* is derived and what its nature is. I therefore suggest here that pedagogical grammar would do well to take advantage of the fruits of such syntactic studies.

Keywords: the expletive *it*, pedagogical grammar, syntax

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Introduction

In this paper, I discuss how English L2 students can be taught what we call the expletive *it*. This appears in sentences like that in (1).

(1) It seems that John loves Mary.

(Honda 2015: 307)

For native speakers of Japanese, this kind of sentence is difficult to understand. This is because Japanese does not have expletives like the English expletive *it*. Such expletives are not associated with any obvious meanings, and thus cannot be translated into Japanese.

Thus, teaching this kind of sentence to Japanese learners of English can be problematic, and the question arises as to how it might best be done. Note that the complement clause in (1) is easy enough to teach Japanese learners. The *that*-clause *that John loves Mary* can be translated into Japanese as *John-ga Mary-o aisiteiru*. In contrast, the matrix clause cannot be translated so straightforwardly.

Some school grammar books in Japan explain that the expletive *it* in (1) has the same status as what we call ambient *it* in a sentence like (2).

(2) It is cold today.

Note that *it* in (2) has the same status as *it* in (1), in that neither has semantic content, and neither can be translated into Japanese. Consider now the expletive *it* in (3).

(3) It is likely that John loves Mary.

(Honda 2015: 307)

In English classroom instructions, Japanese teachers often explain that the *it* in (3) refers to the *that*-clause with which it can be replaced. This indicates that the sentence in (4) has the same meaning as that in (3).

(4) That John loves Mary is likely.

(ibid.)

In contrast, note that the *it* in (1) cannot be replaced by the *that*-clause, as in (5).

(5) *That John loves Mary seems.

(ibid.)

Thus, it seems that the expletives in (1) and (3) differ in certain respects. This may be why some English grammar books for Japanese students explain that the expletives in (1) and (2) have the same status, and that they both differ from the expletive in (3).

Three Types of Expletives

Judging from the facts above, there appears to be no problem for current classroom instruction. It seems natural to explain that the expletives in (1) and (2) are two of a kind, and that the expletive in (3) is of a different kind.

However, recent syntactic study has revealed certain counterexamples to this explanation. Let us consider these and then discuss how the expletive *it* may be taught.

First, consider the sentences in (6).

- (6) a. *It seems enough that John died [PRO to upset me]. (Napoli 1988: 329)
b. It got cold enough [PRO to snow]. (ibid.: 327)

As can be seen in these examples, sentence (6a) is unacceptable, whereas sentence (6b) is acceptable.

According to Napoli (1988), ambient *it* can control PRO, as it does in (6b). PRO refers to the subject of the infinitive and is not phonetically realized. In other words, the subject of the infinitive is the same as that of the matrix clause in (6b). On the other hand, the expletive *it* in (6a) cannot control PRO, and this is why (6a) is unacceptable. Interestingly, however, the expletive *it* in (7) can control PRO.

- (7) It's likely enough that John did it [PRO to convince me we ought to question him]. (ibid.: 328)

With regard to the control of PRO, the expletive *it* in (7), which is the subject of the predicate *is likely*, seems to be of the same kind as ambient *it*, rather than being the same as the expletive *it* in (6a), which is the subject of the verb *seem*. Such examples contradict the school grammar book explanation mentioned above.

In addition, a new question arises here: Why do ambient *it* and the expletive *it* in (7) behave similarly?

Derivations under Minimalism

In order to solve these puzzles, the manner in which expletives are introduced in the syntactic derivation needs to be clarified. Let us consider how expletives are treated under Minimalism (see Chomsky 2001).

English has two expletives, namely *there* and *it*. The expletive *there* is generally said to appear in existential and unaccusative sentences, as in (8a) and (8b), respectively.

- (8) a. There is someone in the room.
b. There appeared a ship on the horizon. (Fujita & Matsumoto 2005: 58)

With regard to how these sentences are derived, within the recent minimalist framework, sentences are built up through the operations *Merge* and *Agree*. For example, sentences like that in (9a) are derived through the derivation shown in (10).

- (9) a. John broke the vase.
 b. The vase broke.
- (10) a. [VP break [DP the vase]]
 b. [_v*P v* [VP break [DP the vase]]]
 c. [_v*P [DP John] [_v' v* [VP break [DP the vase]]]]
 d. [TP T [_v*P [DP John] [_v' v* [VP break [DP the vase]]]]]
 e. [TP [DP John]_i [T' T [_v*P t_i [_v' v* [VP break [DP the vase]]]]]]]

First, the verb *break* merges with its complement *the vase*. These two elements constitute a verb phrase (VP). In (10b), v* is the transitive light verb. Whether a verb is transitive or intransitive in a sentence depends on its light verb. The transitive light verb has two main tasks. One is to assign accusative Case to the verb's complement, i.e., the internal argument, in this case, *the vase* in (10). The other task of the light verb is to merge an external argument; in this case, *John* is merged in (10). Then, T(ense) merges with v*P. T has an EPP-feature, thereby requiring something to fill its specifier position. The specifier of TP corresponds to the subject position of a sentence. The nearest element that matches the EPP-feature is the external argument *John*, making *John* the subject of the sentence in (9a). *John* agrees with T and is raised to the specifier position of TP, and is assigned nominative Case by T. For expository purposes, I avoid mentioning here the feature-inheritance proposed in Chomsky (2008).

Let us return now to the derivation of the intransitive counterpart of (9a), i.e., the sentence in (9b). In this regard, consider the derivation in (11).

- (11) a. [VP break [DP the vase]]
 b. [_vP v [VP break [DP the vase]]]
 c. [TP T [_vP v [VP break [DP the vase]]]]
 d. [TP [DP the vase]_i [T' T [_vP v [VP break t_i]]]]

The first step, in (11a), is the same as that in (10a). Then, VP merges with v, which in this case determines the verb to be intransitive. This light verb does not assign accusative Case to the internal argument, nor does it merge an external argument. Then, T merges with vP. The nearest element that matches the EPP-feature on T is the internal argument *the vase* in (11c). Thus, the internal argument agrees with T and is raised to the specifier position of TP, becoming the subject of the sentence in (9b). Additionally, the internal argument is assigned nominative Case by T.

Let us now consider the derivations of the sentences in (12).

- (12) a. The ship appeared on the horizon.
 b. There appeared a ship on the horizon.
 (Fujita & Matsumoto 2005: 58)

According to Fujita & Matsumoto (2005), (12a) and (12b) share the base structure shown in (13a) to (13c).

- (13) a. [VP appear [DP the ship]]
 b. [vP v [VP appear [DP the ship]]]
 c. [TP T [vP v [VP appear [DP the ship]]]]
 d. [TP < α > [T' T [vP v [VP appear [DP the ship]]]]]

At the point of the derivation at (13d), two options are available. Note that the phrase *the ship* actually has the structure in (14).

- (14) [DP the [NP ship]]

The Determiner (D) selects an NP as its complement. Thus, what is raised to the specifier position of TP, which is marked < α > in (13d), can be either the string *the ship* or the D on its own, i.e., *the*. If the whole DP, namely *the ship*, is raised to the specifier position of TP, (12a) is derived. However, if only the D is raised to the specifier position of TP, it is phonetically realized as *there* and (12b) is derived. Fujita & Matsumoto (2005) propose that the expletive *there* is originally the D, i.e., *the*. This proposal might explain why sentences like that in (15) are unacceptable.

- (15) *There appeared the ship on the horizon.

If the expletive *there* is originally *the*, it is impossible to derive a sentence like that in (15), where two Ds are required.

Note that the D *the* is the head of the DP in (14). Therefore, what agrees with T is not the noun or the NP but the D. This is why T can agree with either the DP as a whole or D on its own.

The Derivation of Expletive *It*

In Honda (2015), I applied the above analysis to the expletive *it*. To my present knowledge, a *that*-clause is usually analyzed as a CP, but I assume a structure like that in (16) for *that*-clauses.

- (16) [DP Δ [CP that ...]]

(Honda 2015: 312)

In (16), Δ is a D that is phonetically null and selects a CP, namely a *that*-clause. I further assume that a CP cannot agree with T.

Let us return to the case of the sentences in (1) and (3). I propose that the structures underlying (1) and (3) are those in (17) and (18), respectively. I assume that the verb *seem* directly selects a CP, as in (17), but that the adjective *likely* selects a DP, as in (18).

- (17) [CP C [TP < α > [T' T [vP v [VP seem [CP that John loves Mary]]]]]]
 (18) [CP C [TP < α > [T' T [vP v [VP is [AP likely [DP Δ [CP that John loves Mary]]]]]]]]

As might be expected on the basis of the discussion above, in (18), there are two options to fill the position marked < α >. One is to raise the whole *that*-clause, i.e., the

DP as a whole is raised to the subject position. This is how the sentence in (4) is derived, with the DP being assigned nominative Case by T. The other option is to raise only the D, namely Δ in (18). By this option, the *that*-clause remains in situ, and Δ is raised to the subject position and assigned nominative Case. I assume that if Δ is assigned Case, it is phonetically realized as *it*. This, in my view, is the origin of the expletive *it*. Furthermore, I assume that Δ inherits the semantic features of the *that*-clause, making the sentence in (7) acceptable.

In contrast to (18), the structure in (17) does not contain Δ , and, as assumed above, a CP cannot agree with T. This makes it impossible for the *that*-clause to be the subject of the sentence, as in the case of (5). In such a view, there is no option to fill the $\langle\alpha\rangle$ position in (17), and I therefore assume that the expletive *it* is inserted as a last resort repair strategy. Thus, the expletive *it* brings nothing other than the features to agree with T. This is why the expletive *it* in *seem*-sentences, such as that in (6a), cannot control PRO. According to Napoli (1988), an element that is not assigned any thematic role cannot control PRO; the ungrammaticality of (6a) follows.

The above discussion suggests that the expletives in (1) and (3) have different origins. Honda (2015) shows evidence for this claim, as in (19).

- (19) ?*It [is likely that John loves Mary] and [seems that Bill loves Sue].
(Honda 2015: 314)

According to Honda (2015), the unacceptability of (19) suggests that one type of the expletive *it* cannot be substituted for the other type.

In addition, the expletive, which is originally Δ , also differs from ambient *it*. Ambient *it* is a kind of argument, rather than an expletive. Chomsky (1981) classifies ambient *it* as a quasi-argument, and, as Fujita & Matsumoto (2005) points out, ambient *it* can be replaced by an ordinary argument, as in (20b).

- (20) a. It rained.
b. Blood rained.
(Fujita & Matsumoto 2005: 34)

The analysis of *that*-clauses as either DPs or CPs also explains a further fact. Consider the sentences in (21) and (22).

- (21) a. Mary asked what time it was.
b. Mary asked the time.
c. It was asked what time it was.
(22) a. Mary wondered what time it was.
b. *Mary wondered the time.
c. *It was wondered what time it was.
(Chomsky 1995: 32-33)

As we can see in (21b), the verb *ask* selects a DP as its complement, as reflected by the structure in (23).

- (23) [_{VP} ask [_{DP} Δ [_{CP} what time it was]]]

Thus, when such a sentence is passivized, Δ is raised to the subject position and assigned nominative Case, instead of the external argument in the active sentence. Thus, Δ is phonetically realized as *it*, and (21c) is derived.

On the other hand, the verb *wonder* selects a CP as its complement, with the structure in (24).

(24) [VP wonder [CP what time it was]]

The verb *wonder* does not select a DP, which is why (22b) is unacceptable. Furthermore, this indicates that there is no Δ in the complement of the verb *wonder*, which explains that there is no way to derive a sentence like (22c). One might wonder why it is impossible to fill the subject position of (22c) as a last resort repair strategy. In this regard, I assume that passive sentences like (21c) are derived from the structure in (25).

(25) [CP C [TP < β > [T' T [PartP < α > [Part' -en [VP ask [DP Δ [CP what time it was]]]]]]

Based on Hornstein, Martins & Nunes (2008), I assume that passive verbs consist of VPs and participle (Part) phrases whose head is the passive morpheme *-en*. Additionally, I suggest that the passive morpheme requires that something fill its specifier position, marked < α > in (25), as T does. I assume that the last resort repair strategy of inserting the expletive *it* is only available in the specifier position of T. Thus, there is no way to satisfy the requirement of the passive morpheme in (22c), as (22c) does not contain Δ . This assumption is validated by the absence of impersonal passive sentences like (26) in English.

(26) *It was danced.

If the expletive *it* could be inserted in the specifier position of PartP, (26) would be acceptable.

Educational Implications

The above discussion set out the differences among (1), (2), and (3) with regard to expletive *it*. Let's discuss the implication for pedagogical grammar. It would appear that it is incorrect to teach English L2 students that the expletives in (1) and (2) are the same, or to treat these expletives as equals. Despite sometimes being classified as the same, they are quite different from each other. In my view, English L2 teachers may make error because they are unaware of the existence of sentences like that in (20b). In fact, *it* in (2) is not an expletive, but rather a kind of argument of the verb, and one that does not have counterpart in Japanese.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this situation is that English L2 teachers fail to show students the correct picture of the expletive *it* in (1). Indeed, the expletive *it* that Japanese junior high school students encounter for the first time is that in sentences like (27a), according to the current course of study for lower secondary school (MEXT 2008).

(27) a. It is important (for us) to study English.

- b. (For us) to study English is important.

Note that the expletive *it* in (27a) is of the same kind as that in (3), because it can be replaced by an infinitive clause, as in (27b). This suggests a strong possibility that students might believe that the expletive *it* can always be replaced by a clause that appears in the same sentence. Such a belief can cause a problem when Japanese senior high school students encounter a sentence like that in (1). Worse still, students may come across sentences like those in (28).

- (28) a. John seems to love Mary.
b. John is likely to love Mary.

(Honda 2015: 307)

Such examples may lead students to believe that the predicate *seem* behaves in the same way as does the predicate *is likely*. In fact, they do have the same structure if the complement clause is infinitival, as in (29) and (30).

- (29) [CP C [TP John_i [T' T [_{vP} v [_{VP} seem [TP *t_i* to love Mary]]]]]]]
(30) [CP C [TP John_i [T' T [_{vP} v [_{VP} is [_{AP} likely [TP *t_i* to love Mary]]]]]]]]]

However, the predicate *seem* and the predicate *is likely* have different structures if the complement clause is finite, as seen above. These facts may well confuse English L2 students, and I assume that most teachers are unable to explain them, as the current pedagogical grammar in Japan does not address the different status of the expletives in (1) and (3).

The question arises: How should English L2 students be taught sentences with expletive *it*? I believe that it may be both difficult and ineffective to teach them the syntactic derivations. A straightforward approach would be to tell them that there are three types of *it* other than the personal pronoun, and to demonstrate unacceptable sentences such as those discussed above. Whereas it is natural and essential to make an issue of unacceptable sentences in syntactic studies, it is relatively rare to do so in classroom instruction. However, I believe that showing English L2 students the unacceptable sentences in this particular case will provide them the opportunity to understand the underlying structure of such sentences. Only through such unacceptable sentences can one come to understand the underlying difference between constructions.

Furthermore, it is essential for English L2 teachers to understand how sentences with expletives are derived. When such teachers are asked why the expletive *it* in a *seem*-sentence cannot refer to a *that*-clause, whereas the expletive *it* in sentences like (3) and (27a) can, many might say, “Just remember the correct sentences!” without referring to syntactic knowledge of expletives. In addition, note that the above discussion also implies that the *that*-clauses in (1) and (3) differ. Thus, attention needs to be given not only to the expletive *it* but also the *that*-clause in English L2 instruction.

Concluding Remarks

As the discussion above has shown, syntactic studies have clarified why the expletive *it* behaves differently among the sentences in (1), (2), and (3). Syntactic studies within the framework of Minimalism have offered a more detailed explanation of aspects that are not explained by current pedagogical grammar. Thus, I conclude that pedagogical grammar would do well to take advantage of the elucidation offered by recent syntactic studies. This may lead English L2 students to a better understanding of difficult concepts like the expletive *it*.

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