

The Anticipatory "It" and Postponed Subjects in English Grammar

Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms

It is the anticipation of victory that's so sweet and not the victory itself. (Jose Luis Pelaez Inc/Getty Images)

In English grammar, *anticipatory "it"* involves the placement of the [pronoun](#) *it* in the usual [subject](#) position of a [sentence](#) as a stand-in for the postponed subject, which appears after the [verb](#). Also called an *extraposed subject*.

Anticipatory *it* tends to place the [emphasis](#) on the verb or (more commonly) on the [noun phrase](#) that follows the verb.

Anticipatory *it* is "commonly used in [speech](#) and [writing](#), especially when the subject is longer than the [complement](#) and is better placed at the end of the sentence" (Downing and Locke, *A University Course in English Grammar*, 2002).

EXAMPLES AND OBSERVATIONS

- *It is* a shame that the break-in wasn't immediately reported to the police.
- *It is* clear that inadequate resources will have an impact on the care of children with disabilities.
- "*It's* no concern of mine what happens in this village, so long as my customers don't quarrel when they're in here."
(John Rhode [Cecil Street], *Murder at Lilac Cottage*, 1940)
- "*It is* time you stopped working. You are the head of the family and *it is* right that you should be at home to see that everything is in order."
(Masti Venkatesha Iyengar, "The Curds-Seller." *Best Loved Indian Stories, Volume 2*, ed. by Indira Srinivasan and Chetna Bhatt. Penguin, 1999)

Uses of *It*

MINOR WORD CLASSES

In the section on pronouns, we saw that the word *it* is a third person singular pronoun. However, this word also has other roles which are not related to its pronominal use. We look at some of these other uses here.

When we talk about time or the weather, we use sentences such as:

- - What time is *it*?
It is four o'clock
It is snowing
It's going to rain

Here, we cannot identify precisely what *it* refers to. It has a rather vague reference, and we call this DUMMY *IT* or PROP *IT*. Dummy *it* is also used, equally vaguely, in other expressions:

- - Hold *it*!
Take *it* easy!
Can you make *it* to my party?

It is sometimes used to "anticipate" something which appears later in the same sentence:

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- *It's* great to see you
It's a pity you can't come to my party

In the first example, *it* "anticipates" *to see you*. We can remove *it* from the sentence and replace it with *to see you*:

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- *To see you* is great

Because of its role in this type of sentence, we call this ANTICIPATORY *IT*.

See also: Cleft Sentences

Exercise

In each of the following sentences, indicate whether the highlighted word is pronoun *it*, dummy *it*, or anticipatory *it*.

1. **It** won't do any good to hide from me.

- Pronoun *it*
- Dummy *it*
- Anticipatory *it*

2. I think you've broken **it**.

- Pronoun *it*
- Dummy *it*
- Anticipatory *it*

3. **It's** very kind of you to see me at short notice.

- Pronoun *it*
- Dummy *it*
- Anticipatory *it*

4. **It** was after midnight when I left the office.

- Pronoun *it*
- Dummy *it*
- Anticipatory *it*

5. I've had **it** with this place - I'm leaving!

- Pronoun *it*
- Dummy *it*
- Anticipatory *it*

Existential "There" George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

The use of the [expletive](#) *there* in front of a verb (usually a form of *be*) to assert that someone or something exists. The construction as a whole is called an [existential sentence](#).

As David Crystal has noted, existential *there* is entirely different from *there* used as a [place adverb](#): "It has no locative meaning, as can be seen by the contrast: *There's a sheep over **there***. Also, existential *there* carries no [emphasis](#) at all, whereas the adverb does: ***There* he is"** (*Rediscover Grammar*, 2003).

EXAMPLES AND OBSERVATIONS

- *There* is a river that runs from Pittsburgh down into West Virginia.
- "*There* is a cult of ignorance in the United States." (Isaac Asimov)
- "Why *there* is a large patch in the hollow of his left breast as bare as a snail out of its shell."
(J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 1937)
- "Ah, *there* is a horrible witch sitting in the house, who spat on me and scratched my face with her long claws." (Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "The Bremen Town Musicians," 1812)
- "*There's* a storm coming, Mr. Wayne."
(Anne Hathaway as Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012)
- "*There's* good reasons to stick to what you know in this world."
(Patricia Hall, *Dead Reckoning*. St. Martin's Press, 2003)
- *There* are good reasons why warfare needs to be regulated.
- "'In the Garden of Eden *there* was a Tree,' Chef said, passing him the pipe."
(Stephen King, *Under the Dome*. Scribner, 2009)
- "*There* were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac; and carnations, masses of carnations."
(Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 1925)
- "The **existential *there*** has the status of a [dummysubject](#) fulfilling the grammatical but not the semantic function of the subject."
(Jiří Rambousek and Jana Chamonikolasová, "The Existential *There*-Construction in Czech Translation." *Incorporating Corpora: The Linguist and the Translator*, ed. by Gunilla M. Anderman and Margaret Rogers. Multilingual Matters, 2008)
- "**Existential *there*** has commonly been treated in [transformational grammar](#) in terms of a transformation--*There*-insertion--that inserts *there* in subject position . . . and moves the original subject into the V' in a position immediately following the [verb](#) . . ."
(James D. McCawley, *The Syntactic Phenomena of English*, 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, 1998)
- **Existential *There* vs. Referential *There***
"The word *there* is often called *nonreferential* or *existential*, *there*. As shown in (11), *there* fills the subject position and does not refer to anything previously mentioned.

(11) *There is a unicorn in the garden.* (= *A unicorn is in the garden.*)

Note that *there* is followed by a form of the [copular](#) *be* and by an NP ([noun phrase](#)) that would be the subject if the sentence did not include *there*. Nonreferential *there* can be distinguished from referential *there* by the fact that it fills the subject position in a [clause](#). Referential *there*, in contrast, can occur in many positions in a sentence. Nonreferential *there* passes the three tests of subjecthood . . . : It undergoes subject-aux [inversion](#), as shown in (12a); it reappears in [tags](#), as in (12b); and it [contracts](#) with copular *be* in speech and informal writing, as in (12c).

(12a) *Are there any cookies left?*

(12b) *There was another road, wasn't there?* (12c) *There's something we need to talk about.*"

(Ron Cowan, *The Teacher's Grammar of English*. Cambridge University Press, 2008)

OMISSION OF EXISTENTIAL *THERE*

"Existential *there* may be omitted when a locative or directional [Adjunct](#) is in initial position:

Below the castle (there) stretches a vast plain.

Out of the mist (there) loomed a strange shape.

Without 'there' such clauses are very close semantically to reversed circumstantial clauses. However, the addition of a [tag question](#)--with *there*, not a personal pronoun (*Close to the beach stands a hotel, doesn't there? *doesn't it?*)--suggests that they are in fact existentials."

(Angela Downing, *English Grammar: A University Course*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 2006)

Also Known As: nonreferential *there*