

A Semantic Study of Dummy Subjects in Dickens' Novel "Hard Times"

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Abstract

To be required for some grammatical properties, dummy elements have lost their lexical meaning. They have no sense of their own. However, such items have meaning in context. They play essential roles in the general semantic structure of sentences.

This study attempts to confirm that dummy constructions can have some semantic meaning and there is no matter how abstract they are. It also highlights the functions of inserting these elements to satisfy the structural and semantic needs in Charles Dickens' novel "Hard Times".

Keywords: empty elements, emphasis, lexical, grammatical functions

1. Introduction

Dummy subjects can be used to act as a host for supplying the new information and leaving the hearer(s) with what is worthwhile. With having small or little meaning, this paper is intended to investigate the intended uses of dummy subjects in Charles Dickens' novel "Hard Times".

It is hypothesized that dummy subjects are common in Charles Dickens' "Hard Times". It has expected that they are meaningful and they have specific functions in the text above.

The procedures of the present study are: firstly, presenting a theoretical idea about dummy subjects, their different types, uses, and functions. Secondly, showing the semantic properties of dummy subjects and choosing texts from Dickens' novel "Hard Times".

After analyzing the data selected, the findings of the investigation have validated all the hypotheses above.

2. Literature Review

Many scholars studied *null constructions* from various perspectives, and most of them focused on the analysis of their syntactic functions or language translation, while few studied this topic from the perspective of semantics. For instance, Arista (1998) discussed the concept of given and focused information and its relation to dummy elements. Similarly, Křiklán (2009) differentiated between the position of dummy subjects in Old and Modern English. Farrokh (2011) figured out the challenges of the translating such constructions into Azeri. El Kassas (2014) examined dummy subjects and their significance in grammar

Linguistically, Al - Shammary (2000) studied the topic in general. She did not go beyond their intended meaning.

This paper deals with dummy subjects in terms of semantics so as to bridge this gap. It intends to further validate that dummy subjects can have meaning beside the syntactic one in Charles Dickens' novel "Hard Times".

3. Dummy Elements in English Grammar

3.1 Definitions of the Notion "Dummy"

Crystal (2008, pp. 158-9) defines the word "dummy" as a "term used in linguistics to refer to a formal grammatical element introduced into a structure or an analysis to ensure that a grammatical sentence is produced. Apart from the formal role in this study, dummy elements have no meaning, and they are semantically empty".

1) It is raining.

Grimshaw (1997), as cited in Newson and Szécsényi (2012, p. 85), notes that "a dummy is simply a vocabulary

item inserted into an expression to spell out purely grammatical elements”.

Dummies, as Arista (1998, p. 67) says, are also called “*semantically empty constituents*”. He also explains that they are “relatively widespread phenomenon across languages”.

According to **A Glossary of English Grammar** (2008, p. 9), Dummies “fill a syntactic position that has been left empty”.

In their introduction, Newson and Szécsényi (2012, p. 80) state that “dummy, is a meaningless element which serves only for grammatical purposes”. Similarly, Aarts (2013, p. 247) defines dummy elements as “lexical elements without semantic content, i.e., they are meaningless”.

Contrary to the above mentioned ideas which deprive dummy elements of their meanings, Grimshaw (1997) emphasizes that “dummies have small semantic content” (Newson and Szécsényi, 2012, p. 85).

3.2 Types of Dummy Elements

Dummy constituents can be divided into many categories as follows:

3.2.1 Dummy Subjects

Farrokh (2011, p. 4) states that dummy subjects are “semantically empty, have no function.... either in the discourse context or the outside world”.

“It” and “there” are the dummy subjects which are meaningless by themselves. They are used to keep on the semantic structure of the sentence (Biber et al., 1999, p. 150).

- 2) **There** were a lot of people displaced.
- 3) **It** was two weeks before the news reached London.
- 4) **There** is a meeting this evening.

3.2.2 Dummy Object

Deb (2004, p. 282) defines “dummy object” as “an assumed virtual object which is not a real object existing in an original image”.

- 5) you must find **it** exciting working here.

3.2.3 Dummy Auxiliary (Dummy Verbs)

To be often called auxiliary verbs, dummy verbs include do, be and have (Newson et al., 2006, p. 221). Tenschner and Evans (2007, p. 69) and Aarts (2013, p. 318) note that the insertion of the dummy auxiliary *do* is used for emphatic form and to form an interrogative sentence.

- 6) Janice does calculus every night.
- 7) **Do** you believe her?

With the absence of an operator, the construction “*do* + the base form of the main verb” is required to show tense (Leech, 2006, p. 34).

- 8) She *does* not complain.

3.2.4 Dummy Prepositions

Jong (1992, p. 200) and Newson and Szécsényi (2012, p. 82) remark that there are some prepositions which are considered as dummy elements. Lacking their lexical meaning, these prepositions are inserted for grammatical purposes.

- 9) Trees surround the house.

3.2.5 Dummy Quantifiers

In addition to the above mentioned types of dummy elements, *much* can be used as a dummy element in so-called *much* support (Solt, 2009, p. 1).

- 10) Fred is diligent; in fact, he is too **much** so.

3.3 A Linguistic Study of Dummy Subjects

The “Dummy subjects” have been dealt with by several scholars such as Quirk and Greenbaum (1973, p. 173), Wilson (1993, p. 160), Biber et al. (1999, p. 154) and Bruntt (2012, p. 119). Having no semantic value, they all agree that such elements are used to fill a grammatical gap.

Wilson (1993, p. 160) points out that dummy subjects have been given various names such as expletives, empty subjects or anticipatory subjects. In spoken and Informal writing, Wilson (ibid) adds that “these dummy subjects are handy entries into sentences whose real subjects you have not yet chosen”.

In the margin of his paper, Kaltenböck (1999, p. 50) mentions that grammarians have employed various terms to name this meaningless element (i.e., it). The most common ones are “preparatory *it*, provisional *it*, introductory *it*, the prop *it*, ambient *it*, dummy, empty, expletive *it*, pleonastic *it*, impersonal *it*, anticipatory *it*, non-referring *it*”.

Biber et al. (1999, p. 154) explain that the notion of a *dummy subject* is an umbrella term which includes “prop-it, clefts, extrapositions, and existential clauses”. In details, he classifies *dummy subjects* into the following:

1- *Prop* it which “denotes weather distance and time”.

13) **It** was midday.

2- *Clefting* refers to the subordinate clause that makes concentration on the most prominent element.

14) **It** was just depression and unhappiness that made her blow up.

3- *Extraposition* means transforming a word or group of words at the end of a sentence.

15) **It** is not true that the Crown jewels are “priceless”.

4- *Existential Clauses* are “the only specified construction type that uses *there* like a dummy subject; it introduces new discourse entities and is formed with verbs indicating existence, appearance, and motion”.

16) There are trout.

In both written and spoken forms, Huong (2015, p. 42) points out that the dummy subjects “it” and “there” are very common. However, the dummy subject “it”, as Bruntt (2012, p. 119) remarks, is much more common than “there”.

Structurally, dummy *it* is “always followed by *me* or some other linking verbs” (Hlebec, 2013, p. 39).

17) **It is** impressive the way she’s so quick at picking up the music.

Dummy *it*, as Chocholoušová (2008, p. 36) highlights, is “considerably more frequently used as a dummy subject as compared to *there*”.

According to Huong (2015, p. 42), “the choice between “it” and “there” is determined by that second subject. When the second subject is a noun phrase, the dummy subject “there” is used as the dummy. When the second subject is a clause, the dummy subject “it” is used as the dummy”.

From the pragmatic perspective, dummy constructions are used to prepare for what is new.

18) **It is** [distressing]*Focus* [that she is drinking again]*New Topic*.

In English, impersonal pronouns, superficial pronouns, dummy pronouns are other indications used for dummy subjects (Huong, 2015, p. 42).

Having no constraints concerning its structure, the dummy construction can be used with all types of verbs (El Kassas., 2014, p. 196).

23-It thunders. (Intransitive Case)

24-It comes from three persons. (Transitive Case)

25-It has destroyed three trucks. (Prenominal Case)

4. Data Analysis

Relying on the foregoing discussion, it is worthy to mention that the model adopted for analyzing the following selected verses is developed on the basis of other models, such as Newson and Szécsényi (2012) and Biber et al. (1999), who highlight the ignored meaning of dummy elements by themselves, in addition to the observations made by the researcher. The eclectic model used for the analysis of the present study illustrates the semantic functions of the dummy subject.

Text- 1-

“There was light with nothing to rest upon a fire with nothing to burn a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression”.

Referring to the artificial subject, this word *there* is meaningless explicitly, but implicitly it indicates the crime

against children to rob them of their childhood. This sentence shows the emptiness and dissatisfaction in both Thomas and Louisa after their father had caught them watching the circus. They indulge themselves in the child's world. However, Mr. Gradgrind, the father, kills the fire of imagination inside them. Childhood behaviors are lost. They are considered a threat to their authorities.

The state is unstable. Thus, some characters find it is difficult to cope up with the community. The dummy element *there* demonstrates the lack of peace and contort of this materialistic life. It also stands for children's deprivation of even their simple rights.

Text -2-

“**It** is said that every life has its roses and thorns, there seemed, however, to have been a misadventure or mistake in Stephen's case, whereby somebody else had become possessed of his roses, and he had become possessed of the same somebody else's thorns in addition to his own.”

In this text, the dummy subject *it* gives a chance to confront one's life, regardless of all difficulties. Happy and unhappy situations are the two sides that one encounter in his life. There is a sense of equality. Such decisive parallelism paves the way for peacefulness to be spread. The dummy denotes that there is no way from reality and one should face his inescapable fate. Here, the dummy subject *it* stands for the struggle of a man with his unlucky destination.

Euphemistically, the dummy subject *it* refers to the circle of life and compensates for what is missing in life at the Victorian age. It also means that every life has a beautiful side; here rose is a symbol of beauty. At the same time, life has an ugly side which is the throne.

Text -3-

“**It** would be hopeless for me, Louisa, to endeavor to tell you how overwhelmed I have been, and still am, by what broke upon me last night”.

After many events laden with overwhelming monetary that echo inside him, Louisa's father confesses all the mistakes that have been done by him. The dummy shows senses of disappointment and pain. Dickens intends to cast a look beyond the scene showing the unfavorable consequence behind the industrialism. Uttering such words explains Mr. Gradgrind's weakness to suppress his failure of upbringing his children flexibly. Indirectly, he remarks that leniency is required in social life. In a very disastrous conclusion, he notices that something is missing in their life, which is imagination. He reaches to the fact that imagination should take its place in one's life. The dummy subject *it* highlights that one should make a balance between the physical and the spiritual sides to have a happy and prosperous life.

Text-4-

“It seems to present two things to a person, don't it, Thquire? said Mr. Sleary, musing as he looked down into the depths of his brandy and water one, that **there** with love in the world, not all Self-interest after all, but something very different”.

In spite of being different from one another, love is found to be everywhere. The dummy element *there* has little meaning in this text. It flickers hope. Sleary makes use of a dummy subject *there* to present what is new for the reader or hearer. By employing this dummy subject, he conveys his personal experience to Mr. Gradgrind. He also tries to handle painful situations that accompany many characters. Thus, the dummy *there* symbolizes the salvation for a better future. It represents Sleary's wisdom and his understanding of life. His insights offer a typical model of family life which is in contrast to Gradgrind's failing model.

Text-5-

“**There** is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart. I have not supposed so; but, as I have said, I mistrust myself now”.

Using the dummy *there* emphasizes that people are forced to follow rigid systems. Mr. Gradgrind sticks to facts, however; he is not free from fancy. Ironically, Dickens criticizes systems of that time saying that there should be a sort of resistance to progress.

In a very gloomy atmosphere, the dummy *there* indicates that there is a clear-cut distinction between fancy and fact at that time. Imagination is untouched, and it is regarded as a non-existing thing. The dummy *there* makes the sentence completely dummy. With the absence of hope, one can feel the emptiness of the whole life. The dummy subject *there* generalizes its emptiness to include the meaning of the sentence as a whole. In other words, there is no room left for fancy and man's thought is occupied by industrialism.

Text-6-

“It was not my meaning to ask a question that would give pain to anyone here”.

To deal with different issues wisely, Louisa is a principal female character. In the middle of cruel, merciless Victorian people, she is so sensitive that she does not want to hurt anyone deliberately. The dummy *it*, here, demonstrates her sensitivity and cautious. She puts more room for spiritual sides, such as love and respect, to cater for by using this particular dummy *it*. The dummy subject also implies the experiences of solitude, deprivation, and lack of adequate place within her family and society as well.

5. Conclusion

Having an artistic effect in Dickens' novel “Hard Times”, dummy subjects contributes in managing the semantic denotation of the sentence as a whole. They are distributed in a marked way to penetrate to the heart of the matter. They also give priority for new ideas to be focused on. Tracing back such elements that enrich sentences, it is found that they have been chosen in harmony with the various discussed topics.

In Dickens' novel “Hard Times”, dummy subjects have many functions. The most salient ones are thematic emphasis showing, equality, and contrast. Euphemistically, they are used as compensation for removing the unfavorable feeling. Simply, they are employed to mitigate the speech.

Aptly, each dummy element has been picked up to match the idea concerned. In other words, dummy subjects have little meaning which determines the positivity or negativity of the sentence as a whole.

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