



## CHALLENGES FOR ALBANIAN STUDENTS USING NON-REFERENTIAL 'IT' AND 'THERE' CORRECTLY: SOME USEFUL TEACHING SUGGESTIONS AIMING FOR THEIR PROPER USAGE

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### **Abstract:**

Even though Albanian students studying English as a foreign language attain a high proficiency in the language, they still end up using the referential 'it' and 'there' incorrectly. Most of these errors are inter-language errors and should be attributable to the L1 (first language) rather than the target language (L2). Given the above, almost all studies conducted in other languages have laid the blame so far on the language structure of their respective first languages (L1). Despite the large number of studies in other languages, there has not been any comprehensive studies to date in Albanian with regard to causes of errors with non-referential 'it' and 'there'. Almost all studies in Albanian have scratched the surface of such non-referential subjects 'it' and 'there' by providing only examples of correct usage by failing to resort to the comparative approach between the grammatical structures of both languages and stopping short of providing any teaching suggestions that would help English teachers in Kosovo and Albanian-speaking countries to cope with such inter-language errors. In order for us to grasp the nature of these errors and the real linguistic structures which are behind such errors, it would be wise in this study to examine closely the morphological structures in both languages, and by means of comparative analysis to pause briefly at each of the examples provided for both 'it' and 'there' to explain the nature of the errors associated with each one of these. Along with the explanations provided to this effect, we will be trying to provide the Albanian teachers with some teaching suggestions as how to go about teaching the non-referential 'it' and 'there', in order for the Albanian student using English as a foreign language not to fall into the trap of making the inter-language error of 'it' and 'there'.

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## 1. Introduction

The Albanian language is an Indo-European language, which has evolved from an unknown Paleo-Balkan language. Albanian is now an isolate within the Indo-European; no extant language shares the same branch. As such it shares no affinity with English language, which also is an Indo-European language (Albanian grammar, 2002). That being the case, any errors that occur in speech is because of the errors that come from the L1 itself. Such errors are pretty common among English language learners. In today's paper we will be focusing on the confusion with introductory subjects *it* and *there*.

Even though non-referential *it* and *there* enjoy a common occurrence in English language, they cause a great many difficulties for Albanian students using English as ESL/EFL. *It* and *there* go by many different names: non-referential, dummy, ambient and empty. This means that these subjects appear to have no clearly definable antecedent. It as a dummy subject when *it* is used in sentences to talk about times, dates and the weather and in certain idioms. It is also known as ambient '*it*' or empty '*it*' (R. Nordquist, 2015). Whereas '*there*' has the status of a dummy subject fulfilling the grammatical and semantic function of the subject (D. Crystal, 2003)

### Challenges for Albanian students arising from their L1

The fact that English has two non-referential subjects, '*it*' and '*there*', is a potential source of confusion to speakers of Albanian language. Albanian users who speak the language do not require a surface subject '*it*' and '*there*', the way English does (for every non-imperative and non-elliptical sentence), may produce sentences that are ungrammatical in English as in the following examples:

\*is raining.

*Alb.* Po bie shi. (no dummy subject used)

What time is it?

*Alb.* Sa është ora?

\*is 9 o'clock.

*Alb.* Është 9:00.

\*The time is 9 o'clock.

*Alb.* Ora është 9:00.

\*A book is on the table.

*Alb.* Gjendet një libër në tavolinë

At times the confusion increases because Albanian may have just one form, the meaning of which may overlap with the meanings of English 'it' and 'there'. The state of affairs sometimes results in students producing errors such as:

\*There is very nice in Prishtina.

*Alb.* Është shumë mire në Prishtinë.

Any similarities that the two non-referential subjects share are far outweighed by many obvious differences: 'it' and 'there' occur in different contexts and have different meanings. As the last example shows Albanian speakers may translate literally from Albanian language into English and say:

\*The time is 9 o'clock.

*Alb.* Ora është 9:00.

In such cases it might be stated that Albanian speakers may preserve the structure of the native language and instead of producing sentences with the non-referential 'there', use sentences as:

\*Taulant's school has 27 students in it.

*Alb.* Shkolla e Taulantit ka 27 nxënës.

In the above example, Albanian students employ the verb 'have' to generate well-formed sentences in English, but which are not grammatically correct. It is understandable for an Albanian teacher to be inclined to correct sentences like this by supplying the non-referential 'there' and use the following sentences.

*There are 27 students in Taulant's school.*

*Alb. Ka 27 nxënës në shkollën e Taulantit*

Such ungrammatical learner utterances do not stem from the use of the verb 'to have', but rather conform to Albanian grammar which uses the verb *to have* to express the above statements.

### **Confusion of Albanian speakers of English with non-referential *it***

There is a great deal of confusion over the use of '*it*' with Albanian students studying and using English. Chafe (1970) and Bolinger (1977) refer to it as ambient '*it*'. Ambient '*it*' is grammatically necessary, but lexically vague. It is the latter which is adding a lot of confusion to Albanian speakers of English as a foreign language. The meaning of it derives from the rest of the sentence, which makes it clear to the listener/reader what is being discussed. The following are some of the instances in which Albanians do not use the non-referential *it*, thus making a grammatical error which is influenced by the Albanian language:

#### **Time:**

\*Is June. *Alb. Është qershor.*

\*Was the year 1976. *Alb. Ishte viti 1976.*

#### **Distance:**

\*Is about 4 hours's drive by car from Tirana to Prishtina.

*Alb. Është rreth 4 orë me makinë nga Tirana për në Prishtinë.*

#### **Environment:**

\*is never crowded at the international hotel.

#### **Weather:**

\*Is cloudy. *Alb. Është dite me re.*

\* Is raining. *Po bie shi.*

As we have seen in the above examples non-referential *it* occurs in a number of simple statements and questions in English dealing with time, distance, weather and other environmental features. Use of *it* in the above sentences allows such questions or statements to be shorter and less redundant than it would be if content noun such as '*time*', '*day*' '*weather*' were used instead. It is precisely these content nouns that add to the confusion of Albanian speakers, since Albanian contains such content nouns in speech as in the examples:

*Alb. Ora është 8:00.*

*\*The time is 8:00*

At times it is difficult to find the referents for some of the cases of *it* above. In the sentences above we don't know what is raining: *Is it the clouds? Is it the sky? Is it the weather?*

Therefore, for the above reasons- first the fact that unlike the personal pronoun *it*, non-referential *it* requires no antecedent or anaphoric referent, and second, there is often no conceivable referent for the *it* – linguists conclude that the non-referential *it* takes its meaning from the ambience/environment in which it occurs.

### **Confusion of Albanian speakers of English with non-referential 'there'**

As mentioned earlier, Albanian speakers using English as a foreign language encounter difficulties with the correct usage of '*there*'. '*There*' has certain syntactic properties. One is that *there* is the subject of the clause. According to Langacker (1991) *there* has a presentational meaning, that is, *there* brings an element into awareness. *There* serves as a signal to the addressee to direct his/her attention toward an item of new information (Breivik 1981). Differentiation should be made with the pro-adverb sentence in the following sentences:

Let's go to Prishtina. *There* we can see lots of nice things. (adverb)

*There* is a nice restaurant in Prishtina which serves local food. (non-referential subject)

As a subject *there* is followed by the verb '*to be*'. In terms of the subject-verb agreement *there* is much more problematic than the non-referential '*it*'. Depending on the noun phrase, sentences with the non-referential *there* can be singular or plural as in the examples.

*There* is a book on the table. → *There* are books on the table.

Since native speakers to ignore the agreement, Albanian teachers teaching English to their students should not expect them to respect the subject-verb agreement. Albanian speakers of English tend not to use the non-referential *there* in the following instances:

-*There* followed by the verb '*to be*'. Instead of the structure *there + to be*, Albanian users of English tend to use the verb '*to have*'.

\*The class has 20 students.

*Alb.* Klasa ka 20 nxënës.

*Correct:* Here are 20 students in the class.

-*There* followed by the verbs: *exist, live, stand, lie, remain*

\*exists a problems with the usage of the verb *to be*.

*Alb.* Ekziston një problem me përdorimin e foljes '*to be*'

*Correct:* There exists a problem with the usage of the verb '*to be*'.

-*There* followed by verbs that describe something happening, developing, or materializing: *develop, arise, appear, emerge, happen occur*:

\*Arose a conflict.

*Alb.* Lindi një konflikt.

*Correct:* There arose a conflict

-*There* with verbs of motion: *come, go, walk, run, approach*.

\*Comes John.

*Alb.* Po vjen Xhoni.

*Correct.* There comes John.

Since the function of the non-referential *there* is to focus the listener on what follows the verb, the information status of this part of clause must somehow be new in the moment: that is, the listener must have been unaware of the referent, or must have forgotten about it and needs to have his or her memory "reactivated" (Chafe 1970).

### **Some teaching suggestions with the non-referential *it* and *there*.**

One suggestion would be to ask students to listen to a weather report before coming to class. They should be asked to report it to class. In addition to that, they may cut out weather reports from magazines and newspapers, bring them to class and make statements with non-referential *it* using the weather information.

It was hot yesterday.

It was 34 degrees C.

It was dry.

It was windy.

Students might also be asked to use a calendar to practice asking and answering questions concerning the day, month, year and date.

What day is it today?

What month is it?

What year is it?

What date is it?

They may be asked to bring a map of Kosovo to make statements about distances and travel time.

How far is it from Gjakova to Prishtina? It is about 120 km.

Students will be asked to do a survey. They could make use of the signs of zodiac. After the students have learned each-other's astrological signs, they should tally the numbers of each sign and make summary statements.

There are five Capricorns in the class.

There is one Libra.

## Conclusions

We have seen in this paper the scope and complexity of sentences with non-referential subjects is far greater than what most grammar books out there would lead us to believe. This paper has shown us that *it* and *there* are not just fillers in discourse, they serve important functions. It has also been proven that both forms *it* and *there* have proven challenging to Albanian students speaking English. It is not good to avoid using them. It also does not help to follow such prescribed structures as: *there + be + NP + there*. This structure may be useful when teaching English to beginning-level students. The other general challenge is to help students understand the distinction between the two non-referential forms, *it* and *there*. In addition to the above teaching suggestions, teachers should instead to use innovative teaching methods to drive home the correct usage of both forms to students.

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