

“Floor it, baby!”

A corpus-based investigation of empty *it*-constructions

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Our research project deals with so called empty *it*-constructions, as instantiated in (1)-(3):

- (1) Oh, Emmett, that nice Officer Phelps is trying to get our attention. **Floor it**, baby! (COCA; TV, Back To The Future, 1992)
- (2) Everybody out! **Move it!** OUT NOW! They retreat so fast they crash into the next group coming up the stairs. (COCA; FIC, Mov: Terminator2, 1991)
- (3) Marlow Rhodes is dead. Please call me. You know what? **Fuck it**. I'm comin' over. (COCA; TV, The OA, 2019)

As these examples show, the empty *it*-construction consists of a verb followed by a dummy *it* that is non-referential. It serves to enhance a verb's transitivity by equipping it with a pseudo-object and is often found in speech acts such as imperatives and imprecatives.

In general, the empty *it*-construction displays a valency-increasing property, an observation that challenges traditional accounts of syntax along the lines of dictionary-and-grammar models. However, one has to keep in mind that a verb taking dummy *it* scores higher in terms of transitivity than one without any kind of object, while at the same time it scores lower on transitivity than one with a fully-fledged direct object.

Previous literature on the empty *it*-construction, as by Mondorf (2016), has shown that pseudo-objects, like other postverbal elements such as particles, delimit the scope of the verb's meaning. In addition, empty *it* can support the verbhood of weakly established verbs and support the verbhood of weakly established verb senses. Also, it can enhance the verbal territory of already existing verbs.

In our research project, we zoom in on four weakly established verbs that occur in the empty-*it* construction and investigate to what extent they are attested as fully-fledged verb forms. Based on the assumption that well-established verbs may occur in all kinds of syntactic contexts and that inflected present-tense contexts (i.e. 3rd person singular), past tense contexts and progressive contexts are contexts that would require a verb to reveal its verby nature the most, we hypothesise that weakly established verbs are rather restricted to those contexts in which no inflection is necessary (infinitival constructions, imperatives and uninflected present tense contexts). We test this hypothesis by drawing on data from the COCA.

References

Mondorf, Britta (2016) “Snake legs it to freedom’: Dummy *it* as pseudo-object”. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory* 12(1): 73-102.