The vagaries of subject *it*: can it serve as a style marker?

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the distribution of the different functions of the subject *it* in two text types: academic prose and fiction. Its objective is to discover to what extent and in which aspects the two examined text types differ. The analysis is based on two hundred examples of *it* in the subject function obtained from the British National Corpus (BNC), one half of them drawn from academic prose, the other from fiction. The functions of *it* analysed include anaphoric *it*, anticipatory *it*, empty *it* and *it* as the subject in a cleft sentence (focusing *it*). Additionally, the instances of *it* that did not fit into any of the four main categories are also examined.

KEY WORDS

anaphoric *it*, anticipatory *it*, empty *it*, cleft sentence, extraposition

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the analysis of the representation of the different functions of the subject *it* in two text types: academic prose and fiction. It examines four basic functions of subject *it* — anaphoric *it*, empty *it*, and *it* as the component of extraposition (anticipatory *it*) and the cleft sentence (focusing *it*). Focusing not only on the distribution and frequency of the different functions but also on their correlations with other features of the two registers, it aims to discover in which respects and to what extent the two text types differ and whether such a basic, common word as *it* can play a role as a style marker.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The pronoun *it* has the same basic functions as the other third person pronouns, serving deictic and anaphoric uses. Aside from those, it can also have several "special uses" whose exact number varies in different interpretations. The *Longman Grammar* identifies the following three:

— Empty subject/object
— Anticipatory subject/object[1]
— Subject in cleft constructions (Biber et al., 1999: 332).

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1   Given the topic of this paper, the discussion of the special uses of *it* will only include subject uses.

a. Anaphoric *it*

In the anaphoric function, *it* generally refers to a noun phrase denoting an inanimate entity or an animal, a clause or an entire sentence (Dušková et al., 2006: 392). Most commonly, the meaning of *it* is identified via an antecedent mentioned previously, but anticipatory anaphora (cataphora) is also possible (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 1468).

b. Empty *it*

A semantically empty *it* (also called prop *it*, dummy *it*, weather *it*, ambient *it* etc.) occurs mainly in expressions of weather conditions, time and distance, where there is no real participant to fill the subject slot required by English sentence structure (Biber et al., 1999: 125):

(1) *It was not as cold as on the previous night.*
(2) *By the time you get back it's nine o'clock.*
(3) *It was seven miles to the nearest town and I had to bus or walk everywhere.*

Traditionally, *it* in such constructions is considered to be entirely devoid of meaning (Seppänen, 2002: 444). An alternative view is taken by Bolinger, who believes that *it* is always to some extent referential, and in the above examples it would have some very general referent such as "environment" (1977: 78). In a similar approach, Kaltenböck describes the referential capacity of *it* as a gradient ranging from "wide reference" of "prop *it*" to "narrow reference" of "referring *it*" (1999: 62).

Given the types of construction where empty *it* generally appears, it can be expected that its frequency in academic prose will be significantly lower than in fiction.

c. Anticipatory *it*

Anticipatory *it* functions as the grammatical subject in instances of extraposition, where it anticipates the notional subject, which has the form of a finite or non-finite clause.

(4) *It was hard to believe that he had become this savage with the bare knife.*
(5) *It really hurts me to be going away.* (Biber et al., 1999: 155)

There is some disagreement about the level of "referentiality" or "dumminess" of the anticipatory *it*. Different approaches place it closer to empty *it*, closer to referential *it* or establish it as a separate category (Kaltenböck, 1999: 51). An inconsistency in interpretation can be found even within one grammar: Quirk et al. first state that anticipatory *it* plays "essentially a structural [role]" and "carries virtually no information of its own", its only function being to fill the obligatory subject slot (1985: 89). They find that it has even less independent meaning than empty *it* in time or weather expressions, but at the same time, they admit that it cannot be said to be "quite void of meaning, since it arguably has cataphoric reference" to the extraposed clause (ibid.: 349). However, the main difference between anticipatory and truly cataphoric *it* is that cataphoric *it* can be turned into anaphoric *it*, i.e. both the pronoun and its referent have to be present regardless of their sequence:

(6) *When you least expect it, a mistake invariably occurs.*
(7) *A mistake invariably occurs when you least expect it.* (Smolka, 2007: 56)

Whereas when the subject clause is moved from the extraposed position to the initial one, *it* becomes superfluous:

(8) *It is clear that something must be done immediately.*
(9) **That something must be done immediately is clear it.* (ibid.: 57).

Based on the findings of Biber et al., it can be expected that extraposition will be more frequent in academic prose than in fiction (1999: 674).

d. Focusing *it*

It can function as the subject in a cleft sentence, which serves as a means of focusing on a particular element. In a cleft sentence, one propositional content is divided into two clauses:

(10a) *I bought a red wool sweater.*
(10b) *It was a red wool sweater that I bought.* (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 1415)

The cleft sentence thus differs from a simpler, non-cleft sentence not by the content but by the FSP structure — it highlights the rheme of the utterance (Dušková et al., 2006: 537).

Structurally, the *it*-cleft (or cleft sentence proper) consists of the pronoun *it*, a form of the verb *be* which can be negated or modified by a focusing adverb such as *just* or *only,* the focused element,[2] and a dependent clause similar to a relative clause, introduced by *that, who, which* or zero (Biber et al., 1999: 959). The forms *whom* and *which* are infrequent, and if they appear after a preposition, only a non-cleft interpretation of the sentence is possible (Dušková et al., 2006: 625).

The status of the pronoun *it* in a cleft sentence is a matter of some debate (Smolka, 2007: 31; Dušková, 1993: 74, note 8). In structurally similar non-cleft sentences where the subordinate clause is a relative clause, *it* is anaphoric and refers to an antecedent mentioned previously. In that case, it can be replaced by *this, that,* and the noun phrase it refers to, but this is not possible in the case of an *it*-cleft[3] (Dušková, 1993: 74). In this respect the *it* in a cleft sentence is more similar to anticipatory *it* in sentences with an extraposed subject (Quirk et al., for example, group them together (1985: 349)), as it has no semantic content of its own and seems to point forward to the subordinate clause. While the cleft sentence bears some resemblance to extraposition, *it* here

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2   According to Collins, the focused element is only an optional component. He considers ex-amples such as *It's not that Mervyn's totally unreliable* as clefts, although he admits that con-vincing evidence for this interpretation is lacking (1991: 34–35).

3   There is, however, a minor subtype of the cleft sentence that uses demonstrative pronouns instead of *it*, e.g. *Those are my biscuits you're eating.* The demonstrative is used deictically in this case (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 1420).

cannot be considered truly anticipatory because it cannot be replaced by the *that*-clause, which is possible for anticipatory *it* (Smolka, 2007: 31).

Based on the findings of Biber et al., it can be expected that focusing *it* will be more frequent in academic prose (1999: 962).

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The analysis presented in this article is based on 200 excerpts obtained from the British National Corpus (BNC), a corpus of 100 million words of British English from the latter part of the 20ᵗʰ century, accessed using the web-based interface *BNCweb* (CQP-Edition) available on-line from http://bncweb.lancs.ac.uk/. Two subcorpora of similar sizes were created from this corpus, one of academic prose and one of fiction.

The same search for *it* in the subject position was then carried out in both subcorpora, using the query "it (_{ADV})? _V*[D,Z]". The result of this query should be *it* followed by an optional adverb and any verb in either past tense form or third person singular present tense form.

This query returned 79,597 hits in the Academic prose corpus and 111,307 hits in the Fiction corpus. The results were then thinned to 120 random hits from each corpus — given that not every *it* followed by a verb must necessarily be a subject, the sample size was a little higher than the target number. The results were sorted manually and all hits that did not meet the criteria were discarded. (The discarded hits were those in which *it* was not the subject or those where *it* occurred in a quotation from a different text type.) The first 100 valid hits from each subcorpus constitute the research sample.

The obtained excerpts were then divided into categories and further analysed. In the analysis of anaphoric *it*, attention was paid to the realisation form and semantic role of the referent, as well as the location of the referent in relation to the pronoun. The analysis of anticipatory *it* focused on the type of subordinate clause realising the extraposed subject and the realisation form and semantics of the predicate in the superordinate clause. For focusing *it*, the analysis dealt mainly with the realisation form and underlying syntactic function of the element highlighted by the cleft sentence. Empty *it*, as well as uses of *it* that do not fit neatly into any of the four categories, were also examined. The results of the analysis are briefly presented below.

4. RESULTS[4]

The research clearly shows that there are indeed differences in the distribution of the functions of subject *it* and their uses in the two text types. Academic prose and fiction differ not only in the frequency of the functions, but also in the ways the functions are used.

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4 In the text below, if the referent of anaphoric *it* is not included in the text of the excerpt, it is provided in square brackets after the pronoun. The context of the excerpt is provided in square brackets if it is needed for the discussion. The letters A or F at the end of the excerpt indicate whether it comes from academic prose (A) or fiction (F).

First, it is important to mention the most general difference: the total number of instances of subject *it* in each text type. The query used to look for subject *it* in the two subcorpora found 79,597 instances in the Academic prose corpus and 111,307 instances in the Fiction corpus. When related to the sizes of the subcorpora, we get the relative frequency of 5044.8 instances per million words in academic prose, and 6942.09 instances per million words in fiction. *It* in the subject position is, therefore, overall more frequent in fiction than it is in academic prose.

Text type	Subcorpus size (words)	Instances of subject *it*	Instances of subject *it* per million words
Academic prose	15,778,028	79,597	5044.8
Fiction	16,033,634	111,307	6942.1

TABLE 1: Frequency of subject *it* in academic prose and fiction

The numbers presented in Table 1 are of course only approximate, since the query used looked for instances of *it* followed by an optional adverb, followed by a verb, which does not necessarily have to be a subject, and there can be instances of subject *it* occurring in different patterns, but this is sufficient for a general idea about the distribution.

There are at least two reasons why the subject *it* is less frequent in academic prose. The first is the lower variety of its functions — as will be seen below, empty *it* alone makes up almost one quarter of our sample of fiction, but does not appear in academic prose at all. The second reason is that academic prose aims at precision, and it is therefore likely to avoid using a pronoun where its reference might be misinterpreted by the reader, and opts for a nominal referring expression instead. It generally uses personal pronouns more rarely than other registers (Biber et al., 1999: 333).

Type of *it*	Academic prose	Fiction
anaphoric	57	51
empty	0	24
anticipatory	37	11
focusing	6	4
other	0	10
total	100	100

TABLE 2: Functions of *it* in academic prose and fiction

Looking at the frequency of the different types of *it* in the two registers, summarized in Table 2 and Figure 1 above, we find that anaphoric *it* is slightly more frequent in academic prose and anticipatory *it* is significantly so. As expected, focusing *it* is also more common in academic prose, but since the numbers are very low it is impossible to make any definitive pronouncements about this. Empty *it* was found only in fiction,
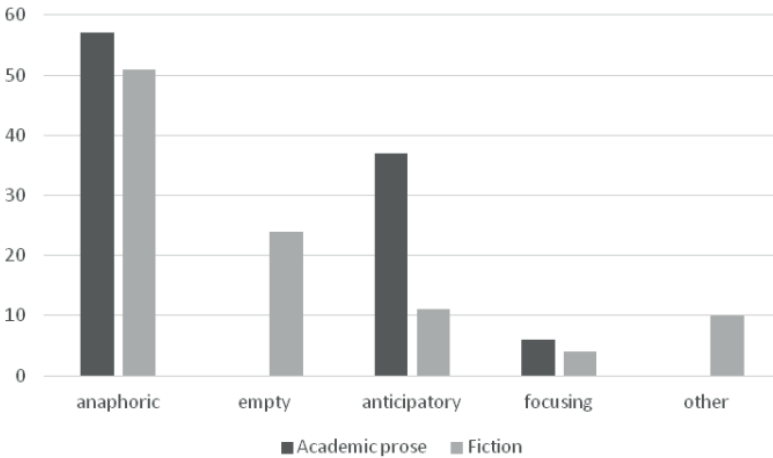
FIGURE 1: Functions of *it* in academic prose and fiction

as were the uses labelled "other", which did not fit neatly into any of the four main categories and had to be examined separately.

a. Anaphoric *it*

Anaphoric *it* was found 57 times in academic prose and 51 times in fiction, so the difference in frequency is not very striking. There are, however, significant differences in the use of anaphoric *it*.

The most obvious difference is the **realisation form of the referent**. While in academic prose, it is realised by a clause only in two instances (3.5 %), in fiction, clausal or sentential realisation represents over 27 % (14 instances) (the rest being noun phrases in both text types). This could probably be attributed to the fact that a clausal or sentential referent is somewhat "vaguer" than a nominal one. Especially if the sentence or clause is long, or the referent is realised by more than one sentence or clause, it can be difficult to conceptualise it as one specific entity. This is in a way reflected in the fact that it is often difficult to replace *it* by its clausal or sentential referent without adding to it or rewording it to some extent:

(11) *[**Zoe** had expected **to be put in charge of the baby**.] **It** was reasonable.* (F; BNC: K8R 2152) = For Zoe to be put in charge of the baby was reasonable.

An interesting point is that in this sample fiction uses *it* to refer only to inanimate entities, while in academic prose, it also refers to animals and people (through collective nouns, such as ex. 12). This leads to a wider variety of semantic roles of the referents in academic prose, as we also find roles generally attributed only to animate entities, such as agentive or experiencer.

(12) *This point has been reinforced further by the findings of Goldsmith and Newton (1986) who show that, while **the Thatcher government** has been very directive*

> *towards local authorities on council house sales, by contrast* **it** *hardly involves itself in matters of environmental health (a reflection of the much lower priority the Thatcher government gives to this policy area).* (A; BNC: G19 1194)

For the analysis of semantic roles, I used a classification based on Quirk et al. (1985: 741–7) and Biber et al. (1999: 123–5), distinguishing the subjective roles of agent, external causer, instrument, recipient, experiencer, positioner, affected, identified, characterised, locative, temporal, and eventive. In both text types, the most common semantic role is "characterised", i.e. the role assigned to the subjects of copular verbs in qualifying and classifying constructions. This is not necessarily surprising, since both registers provide ground for describing and characterising things. It is, however, significantly more common in fiction, where it represents almost 55 % (as opposed to only 28.1 % in academic prose). What might be a contributing factor to this is the fact that while academic prose can only present objective descriptions, fiction also includes subjective views of the characters, thus the amount of things that can be characterised and the ways it can be done is theoretically larger. This is supported by the fact that in fiction we also find perception copulas such as *look* or *sound*, which present the content as relativized (Dušková et al., 2006: 206).

(13)   *It was simply a happy coincidence that* **it** *[=* ***her honest opinion****]* <u>*sounded*</u> *like an insult!* (F; BNC: H97 290)

Another feature of anaphoric *it* that I examined was the **distance of the pronoun from the referent,** and in this respect the differences between the two registers are not very striking. The percentage of cases where the referent is found either in the same sentence or in the immediately preceding one is exactly the same in both text types (82.4 %), and academic prose shows only a slightly stronger tendency for the referent and the pronoun to appear in the same sentence (45.6 % vs. 41.2 % in fiction).

The only significant difference lies in the "extreme" cases, in terms of how far the referent can be. In academic prose, the highest number of sentences separating the referent and the pronoun was 8, the referent being referred to by other instances of *it* four times in the intervening sentences. In two examples of fiction, however, the referent was found as far as 16 and even 19 sentences back, without a clear referential chain in-between. In both these cases, both the referent and the pronoun were found in dialogue and separated from each other by both dialogical and narrative passages; however the referent and pronoun are much "closer" to each other if instead of sentences we count only the intervening dialogue turns. This seems to suggest, therefore, that if the anaphora occurs within a dialogue, intervening narrative passages are irrelevant for determining the distance of the pronoun from the referent, in the sense that they do not make the interpretation of the pronoun more difficult — no ambiguity arises whether *it* could possibly refer to something mentioned in the narrative passages.

Cataphoric reference is rare in both registers. It did not occur at all in the sample of academic prose and was found only twice in fiction. Both cases are found in dialogue and refer to clauses, so the reason for using cataphoric rather than anaphoric reference seems to be the ease of expression and the end-focus principle:

(14) *I know **it** sounds silly but I think **Miss Hatherby is too interested in Constance**.*
      (F; BNC: CEY 854)

This phrasing is both neater than the variant with anaphoric reference *I know Miss Hatherby being too interested in Constance sounds silly, but I think so,* since it avoids a long subject clause, and it places the most informationally prominent part at the end of the sentence. In this respect the use of cataphoric *it* here is similar to anticipatory *it.*

b. Anticipatory *it*

There is a significant difference in the frequency of anticipatory *it* in the two registers. In fiction, anticipatory *it* occurred in only 11 instances, while in academic prose, the number was more than three times higher: 37 instances.

The analysis of anticipatory *it* registered the realisation form of both the extraposed subject clause and the predicate of the superordinate clause, but it has shown that the type of extraposed clause is not particularly interesting in this respect: in both registers the extraposed subject is realised by a dependent declarative content clause in more than a half of the cases, followed in terms of frequency by infinitive clauses and interrogative content clauses. The type of extraposed clause is often dependent on the **predicate of the superordinate clause**, and that is where the main difference between the two registers lies.

In academic prose, the most common type of predicate is adjectival (54.1 %), followed by verbal predicates in the passive voice (29.7 %). Fiction, in contrast, uses mainly verbal predicates in the active voice (54.5 %), followed by adjectival predicates (36.4 %). Aside from the difference in frequency of the types of predicate, the semantics of the predicates also plays an important role, both for the verbal and adjectival predicates.

In adjectival predicates, academic prose uses mostly **certainty adjectives** (e.g. *(im)possible, doubtful, apparent…*) , in order to specify the certainty level of the facts presented in the subject clause. They can also be used when the author wants to avoid committing him-/herself fully to the truth value of the statement contained in the subordinate clause, i.e. they can function as hedging devices:

(15) **It is also likely** *that this view is a departure from earlier law, in which it is not attested.* (A; BNC: B2P 1290)

In contrast, adjectival predicates in fiction contain in the vast majority of cases **evaluative adjectives** (e.g. *appropriate, wrong, surprising…*), expressing a character's opinion of the content of the subject clause:

(16) **It was ironic** *to Victor and the colleagues sitting round the table that morning that Gorbachev had been the KGB choice as leader.* (F; BNC: FSF 1744)

The fact that the information is presented from a character's point of view can be made explicit, as in the example above (*to Victor*), or it is obvious from the fact that the sentence is a part of a character's inner monologue.

In general, extraposed subject clauses with adjectival predicates allow academic prose to present a view that is not directly attributable to anyone (Biber et al., 1999: 721), which contributes to their high frequency in this register.

A similar tendency can be observed in the semantics of the verbal predicates. In fiction (ex. 18), they include the verbs *matter, occur (to someone)* and *cross (someone's mind)*, i.e. verbs expressing mental processes and attitudes. They are in the active voice, while the vast majority of verbal predicates in academic prose (ex. 17) denote opinions, decisions and observations (e.g. *assume, decide, show*) and are in the passive voice — a major reason why anticipatory *it* appears so frequently in academic prose thus seems to be its tendency to avoid mentioning the agent.

(17) *At the outset, **it was decided** to use direct observation of how clients spent their time as the principal measure of effectiveness.* (A; BNC: GWJ 146)

(18) *For a silly moment **it crossed** her mind that he must be the Nazi spy.* (F; BNC: FPX 2019)

The major difference in the use of extraposition in academic prose and fiction is therefore that in academic prose, extraposition is a means of presenting information as objective and/or avoiding attributing it to a particular source, while in fiction, it presents subjective information filtered through the consciousness of a character.

c. Focusing *it*

The number of cleft sentences was rather low in both academic prose (6) and fiction (4). The higher frequency of cleft sentences in academic prose is in accordance with the observations made by Biber et al. (1999: 961); we can therefore assume despite the low occurrence in the sample that this result is not an aberration. Additionally, some tendencies can nevertheless be observed in the realisation form and underlying syntactic function of the focused element.

In academic prose, the underlying syntactic function of the focused element was an adverbial of place in half of the excerpts and subject in the other half. In fiction, most of the focused elements were subjects, one was a direct object.

Additionally, the underlying subjects in academic prose differ from those in fiction — in academic prose, the subject is inanimate, expressed by a noun phrase and has the semantic role of external causer, while in fiction, it is animate with the agentive semantic role and it can also be realised by a personal pronoun or a proper name. Fiction has overall a high number of personal pronouns and proper names, it is thus not surprising that they appear as focused elements more frequently here.

(19) ***It is literariness** and not mimesis which interests the Formalists.* (A; BNC: H8V 174)

(20) ***It was she** who turned away first and when she rested her arm against the wall to support the linen whilst she put the key in the lock, he came forward, saying eagerly, 'Let me.'* (F; BNC: AT7 1957)

Given the very low frequency in both samples, these results can of course be considered only tentative.

d. Uses found only in fiction

Fiction is overall richer in the functions of *it*: apart from the three types of *it* discussed above, fiction also contained empty *it* and several instances of other uses, which were not found in academic prose.

i. Empty *it*

There were no instances of empty *it* in the sample of academic prose, while it constituted 24% excerpts from fiction. One reason for this can be the fact that academic prose has overall less need for expressing the information where empty *it* appears, such as indicating time or atmospheric conditions, and when they are needed, they are presumably expressed using different constructions, for example adverbials.

In the sample of fiction, empty *it* occurred in the typical expressions related to time, weather and general conditions, such as ex. 21:

(21)   *But **it** had been so long since she'd talked, really talked to anyone, that now she felt stiff and awkward.* (F; BNC: H9V 329)

It also occurs in sentences introduced by *It was as if/though* (22) and *It seemed that*[5] (23):

(22)   ***It** was almost as if stroking the kitten was a substitute for touching her hair.* (F; BNC: HHA 3660)

(23)   *So delightfully muzzy was she that **it** seemed to her the night in Nice had never happened...* (F; BNC: FPH 3382)

Both these types of sentence serve to express a character's subjective view, which is unlikely to happen in academic prose. Although the *it seems/seemed that* constructions did not occur in my sample of academic prose, it is not impossible for them to appear in this text type — unlike in fiction; however, in academic prose they would most likely function as hedges.

Overall, it can be said that a very low frequency of empty *it* is characteristic of academic prose and can be considered one of its defining features.

ii. Other uses of *it*

There were ten excerpts in the sample that did not fit into any of the four previous categories — or at least not unequivocally. They are referential but not (clearly) anaphoric, it is difficult to determine the referent exactly (yet the *it* cannot be said to be semantically empty) or they refer to some vague concepts, which is something that often occurs in conversation (Crystal and Davy, 1986: 103).

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5   Although some grammars (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985: 1392) interpret sentences of the *it seems that* type as extraposition, there are several objections against this interpretation, the strongest being that the verb *seem* requires a subject complement, and in the absence of another element to fill that role, the *that*-clause has to be interpreted as such (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 961; Dušková et al., 2006: 596). Accordingly, the *it* is not anticipatory.

One of the more straightforward examples is (24), representing what Huddleston and Pullum call **quasi-anaphoric** use. This refers to a situation where there is an element preceding the pronoun that cannot be considered as the antecedent, but it nevertheless creates a context of discourse that enables an unambiguous interpretation of the pronoun, as in *Tom's getting married at the weekend. She's already two months pregnant* the verb *marry* makes it possible to identify the referent of *she* as Tom's bride (2002: 1470–1).

(24) [*Athens is a capital city too, you know. Honestly, you Londoners are so insular! It's not the only place in the world.'*]
      '*No — no,* **it**'*s not.'* (F; BNC: H8S 867)

Here, *it* refers unambiguously to *London*. While *Londoners* is thus not the antecedent of *it*, it plays a similar role, as the concept of "London" is contained within it — once Londoners are mentioned, London itself is present in the reader's consciousness too, which makes it possible to refer to it only by a pronoun. The interpretation relies on associative reference and it poses no more difficulty than if the author had instead used "people from London", in which case *it* would have had a direct antecedent.

Another uncomplicated case is (25), a fairly typical example of the situational function of *it*, where it is used to identify a person:

(25) [*She was looking down to the garden gate, which at that moment Greg Hocking was closing carefully behind him.*] '**It**'*s your mother's fancy man,' said Margaret Seymour-Strachey, in tones of intense revulsion.* (F; BNC: H9D 1229)

The remaining excerpts were somewhat less straightforward, but they represent a significant feature of the usage of subject *it* in fiction — **vague reference**:

(26) [*'He was driving too fast. If you weren't familiar with them, the roads up in the [orig: moutains] mountains were treacherous.*] **It** *was a complete and utter waste of life.'* (F; BNC: HGT 4445)

In ex. 26, two characters are talking about an actor who died, and the referent of *it* is "his death" or perhaps "the way he died", or something similar. There is, however, no direct antecedent, and despite the death being the topic of the conversation, it is not referred to in explicit terms. The reader and the other character are able to interpret the reference of the pronoun simply because there is nothing else the speaker could mean by it. In essence, it could be said that we are able to interpret the pronoun because fictional characters are, just as real people, expected to follow the Cooperative Principle — in this case, specifically to observe the maxim of relevance (Leech and Short, 2007: 236).

The remaining excerpts classified in this category are similar: *it* has a very vague reference to the general situation or some aspect of it that has to be inferred from the context, which would run against the main purpose of academic prose, i.e. to provide precise information. Academic prose requires the reference of pronouns to be always

unquestionably clear, thus it is also likely to avoid quasi-anaphoric associative reference and any use of a pronoun where its meaning could be misinterpreted and potentially cause a misunderstanding. Furthermore, instances of vague reference such as these are generally features of informal conversation (Biber and Conrad, 2009: 184), which has no place in academic prose. Fiction, on the other hand, usually does include conversation passages. Dialogues in fiction are in many ways distant from unedited, spontaneous speech, in that they contain fewer false starts, hesitation pauses, incomplete sentences and syntactic anomalies (if they contain them at all) etc., and they are overall much more polished (Leech and Short, 2007: 129–130), but authors nevertheless try to imitate spontaneous conversation in many ways — so the other uses of *it* could be considered to be one of them. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of the other uses occurred in dialogues, and if not, then in a character's inner monologue, which can also be expected to have conversational features.

5. CONCLUSION

The research shows that academic prose and fiction do differ in their use of the different types of *it*. The use of a particular type is significantly influenced by the fact that academic prose aims to be objective, while fiction tends to be subjective. This is apparent especially in the frequent use of extraposition in academic prose, where it generally occurs as a result of using the passive voice and the necessity to express the certainty level of the facts presented. Fiction, on the other hand, uses extraposition in order to filter the information contained in the subject clause through a character's point of view. Additionally, the greater prevalence of the "characterised" semantic role of the referents of anaphoric *it* may be linked to the fact that fiction describes things not only as they are, but also as they appear to a character (which is evidenced by the use of perception copulas), and empty *it* occurs in structures used to express subjective impressions, such as *it was as if*.

Overall, the most distinctive features of each register are the following: academic prose is characterised by a high frequency of anticipatory *it*, occurring especially with adjectival predicates and verbal predicates in the passive voice, and a very low to no occurrence of empty *it*. Fiction displays a significant percentage of empty *it* and a great prevalence of the "characterised" semantic role of the referent of anaphoric *it*. Anaphoric *it* in fiction also often refers to a clause or a sentence, which is rare in academic prose. Finally, *it* has additional uses in fiction besides the main four — most importantly, *it* can refer to vague referents not explicitly mentioned in the text.

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