

### Personal pronouns

#### With specific reference

- 6.15 The personal pronouns usually have definite meaning, and resemble the noun phrases introduced by the definite article in that they may have situational, anaphoric, or cataphoric reference (*cf* 5.28*ff*).

The 1st person and 2nd person pronouns, when they have specific reference, are used to refer to those directly involved in the discourse situation: *viz* the speaker(s)/writer(s) and the addressee(s) (*cf* 6.6).

The 3rd person pronouns may also be used situationally, to refer to some person(s) or thing(s) whose identity can be inferred from the extralinguistic context:

Are *they* asleep? [spoken to his wife by a husband nodding his head towards the children's bedroom]

Oh, how kind of you! May I open *it* now? [said by someone receiving a present from a guest]

Much more frequently, however, the identity of the referents of 3rd person pronouns is supplied by the linguistic context. As with the definite article, we distinguish between the ANAPHORIC and the CATAPHORIC uses of a 3rd person pronoun, according to whether the element with which it corefers (the ANTECEDENT) precedes or follows it (*cf* 5.30*ff*). The more common type of textual reference is anaphoric reference:

We have an excellent museum here. Would you like to visit *it*?  
[= the museum] [1]

My brother is afraid that *he* will fail the test. [2]

The young girl stared at Dan and said nothing: *she* seemed offended by *his* manner, as if *he* had had the intention of hurting *her*. [3]

Dr Solway took the student's blood pressure that day. *He* also examined *his* lungs and heart. [4]

It will be noticed that in [4] *he* and *Dr Solway* are coreferential, and *his* and *the student's* are coreferential. We recover the appropriate antecedent by means of the content of the sentence. For example, the second sentence of [4] can be changed so as to enforce a different interpretation of the pronouns:

Dr Solway took the student's blood pressure that day. *He* had felt sick during the night and came for *his* help as soon as the clinic opened. [4a]

Now the content of the sentence suggests that *he* refers to *the student* and *his* to *Dr Solway*. If the use of the pronoun is felt to be ambiguous or confusing, the antecedent can be used again, or a lexical equivalent can be found:

... The student had felt sick during the night, and came for { Dr Solway's / the doctor's } help as soon as the clinic opened. [4b]

#### 'Referring *it*'

- 6.16 The neuter or nonpersonal pronoun *it* ('REFERRING *it*') is used to refer not

only to inanimate objects as in example 6.15 [1] above, but also to noncount substances (such as *some soup* in [1] below), to singular abstractions (such as *the sack of Rome* in [2]), and even to singular collections of people, such as *Parliament* in [3]:

- She made *some soup* and gave *it* to the children. [1]  
*The sack of Rome* shook the whole of the Western World: in a sense, *it* was the end of the Roman Empire. [2]  
*Parliament's* answer to all awkward problems is to establish a Royal Commission whose findings *it* can then ignore. [3]

In fact, in the personal/nonpersonal opposition, the nonpersonal gender is 'unmarked', in that for any antecedent for which *he* or *she* is inappropriate, *it* will be used instead. Hence, *it* can corefer to a whole clause or sentence, as in [4] and [5]:

- A: Who said *that I was crazy*?  
 B: I said *it*. ['that you were crazy'] [4]  
*Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410 AD. It* ['the sack of Rome'] was the end of civilization as the West had known it. [5]  
*Many students never improve. They get no advice and therefore keep repeating the same mistakes. It's* a terrible shame. [6]

As is illustrated by [6], *it* can even corefer to a sequence of sentences.

*It* is the only personal pronoun which is almost always unstressed. *He* and *she*, for example, can be contrasted with one another by nuclear stress:

*SHE* earns more than *HE* does.

*It*, on the other hand, can only very rarely receive stress, for example when it is used as a citation form:

Is this word *IT*? [looking at a manuscript]

One reason why *it* is rarely stressed is that when a stressed nonpersonal pronoun is needed, *it* is supplanted by *this* or *that* (cf 6.40ff, 12.10ff). Thus [5a] is identical to [5], except that *this*, a stressed and slightly more emphatic proform, replaces *it*:

*Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410 AD. This* was the end of civilization as the West had known it. [5a]

Note There are several restricted usages with nuclear stress on *it*. For example:

Is that *it*? ['Is that all you wanted me for?']

Also, with the sense of 'sex appeal', 'charisma', etc, *it* is stressed in:

She's got *it*.

In children's games, stressed *it* is used to indicate whoever is next to play, in expressions like the following:

You're *it*. She's *it*.

### 'Prop *it*'

6.17 Since *it* is the most neutral and semantically unmarked of the personal pronouns, *it* is used as an 'empty' or 'prop' subject, especially in expressions denoting time, distance, or atmospheric conditions:

What time is *it*?           *It's* half past five.  
 How far is *it* to York?   *It's* a long way from here to Cairo.  
*It's* warm today.           *It's* been fine weather recently.  
*It's* getting dark.          What day is *it* today?

This 'PROP *it*', if it has any meaning at all, refers quite generally to the time or place of the event or state in question (cf 10.26).

Even less meaning can be claimed for the *it* which occurs as an anticipatory subject in cleft sentences (cf 18.25ff) or in clauses with extraposition (cf 18.33ff), as in [1–3]:

Isn't *it* a shame *that they lost the game*?                                    [1]  
*It* must have been here *that I first met her*.                                [2]  
 I take *it* then *that you're resigning*.   [3]

But here, too, it can be maintained that the pronoun is not quite void of meaning, since it arguably has cataphoric reference (forward coreference) to a clause (italicized in [1–3]) in the later part of the same sentence. One justification of this is the feeling of ellipsis in sentences such as [1a] and [2a], which are like [1] and [2] except that the antecedent of *it* has to be supplied from the linguistic context:

A: They lost the game.  
 B: Yes, so I hear. *Isn't it a shame?*   [1a]  
 A: Where did you first meet her?  
 B: *It must have been here.*   [2a]

In some cases, it is necessary to add words which do not precisely replicate those in the text, eg:

The bell rang, and I went to the door. *It* was Dr Long.                    [4]

To make full sense of sentences like [4], we have to supply, for example:

It was Dr Long (*who had rung the bell*).

Note [a] Perhaps the best case for a completely empty or 'nonreferring' *it* can be made with idioms in which *it* follows a verb and has vague implications of 'life in general', etc:

At last we've made *it*. ['achieved success']  
 have a hard time of *it* ['to find life difficult']  
 make a go of *it* ['to make a success of something']  
 stick *it* out ['to hold out, to persevere']  
 How's *it* going?  
 Go *it* alone.  
 You're in for *it*. ['You're going to be in trouble.']

[b] *It* can be used as a substitute for a predication, and especially for a characterizing complement (cf 10.20):

She was  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{a rich woman} \\ \textit{rich} \end{array} \right\}$  and she LOOKED *it*. ['a rich woman', 'rich']

If there could ever be such a thing as a modest Roman, Augustus was not *it*.  
 ['not a modest Roman']

This last example is exceptional in that *it* is stressed (cf 6.16). Other uses of *it* as a substitute form are discussed in 12.13, 12.24ff.