

The Presence or Absence of *It* After English Denominal and Deadjectival Verbs

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Abstract

This paper discusses *it* in English denominal or deadjectival verb + *it* phrases. The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen regards *it* in this type of phrases as a morphological marker to make out distinctly the verbal function of denominal or deadjectival verbs. This paper, considering Jespersen's examples, makes it clear that *it* after denominal verbs can be left out if a directional or positional phrase follows them. This implies that this *it* could act both as a morphological marker to signal the verbalization of nouns and as a device to complement the non-existence of a directional or positional phrase. This paper also suggests that *it* in deadjectival verb + *it* phrases cannot be left out in any context, and that this sort of *it* could be considered as 'situation *it*'. This implies that the *it* could function both as a morphological marker to indicate the verbification of adjectives and as a device to refer to the circumstances surrounding the speaker of the utterance.

1. Introductory remarks

This paper discusses what will be referred to as the V + *it* construction (V designates a denominal or deadjectival verb¹): *foot it*, *leg it*, *cab it*, *bus it*, *lord it*, *rough it*, and so on.² Jespersen (1933, 1961) treats *it* in the construction as a morphological marker of verbing from a noun or adjective,³ writing that "the use of *it* is frequent with verbs that are derived from substantives without the addition of

1 A denominal verb is a type of verb derived from a noun, whereas a deadjectival verb is one derived from an adjective.

2 The denominal V + *it* construction is productive in that a wide range of nouns can feature in it, as Kageyama (1999) notes. One could coin neologisms such as *canoe it*, *hitchhike it* and *motorbike it*.

any ending: here *it* serves to make out the verbal function distinctly” (Jespersen 1933:155–6). It can be said, in other words, that Jespersen takes some verbs in the V + *it* construction to be zero-derived from a noun or adjective and *it* to act as highlighting the verbal nature of these zero-derived verbs.⁴

Regarding the Jespersen view, this paper will discuss the V + *it* phrases exemplified by him, pointing out (i) many of the denominal verbs can appear without *it* in contexts where a directional or positional phrase follows them, and that (ii) all the deadjectival verbs must occur with *it* in any context.

2. Jespersen’s V + *it* examples

Jespersen (1961) has grouped his examples of the V + *it* construction as follows (note that the last three involve adjectival roots).⁵

- (1) a. To play the X: *cat it, devil-porter it, fool it, God it, hare it, heroin it, lord it, man it out, man-and-woman it, queen it, virgin it*
- b. To use X: *hotel it, inn it, pub it, cab it, bus it, foot it, hoof it, leg it*
- c. Obscure sense-development: *hook it*
- d. A little hard to classify: *Latin it, penny-fight it, Aldershot it*
- e. From adjectives: *brave it, high-and-mighty it, rough it*

(Based on Jespersen (1961: 108–9))

From among Jespersen’s examples in (1), the present paper will focus on the ones which have been found in late 20th- and 21st-century fiction⁶ and on the Internet: *foot it, hoof it, leg it, lord it, queen it, hare it, hotel it, pub it, cab it, bus it, brave it* and *rough it*.

3 Similar discussions appear in Biber, D. et al. (1999) and Kageyama(1999). Prior literature such as Ōtsuka & Nakajima (1982) and Araki et al. (1992), however, regards the *it* in question as referring to something unmentioned that can be assumed in context.

4 It should be noted that not all denominal V + *it* expressions have *it* as a marker of zero-derivation. It is assumed that *brown-bag it, button it* and *can it*, for example, play on the presumption that the hearer knows the full construction, that is, *brown-bag one’s lunch, button one’s mouth* and *can the chatter*.

5 The 1961 Jespersen work is a reprint of one originally published by Einar Munksgaard in 1942. At that time, all of Jespersen’s examples in (1) could have been commonly used, but some of them (*cat it, devil-porter it, fool it, God it, heroin it*, etc.) seem to be obsolete nowadays.

6 Google Book Search was used as an investigation tool to cite instances from those literary works.

3. With *it* or without *it*?

As was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it seems that some V + *it* phrases do not necessarily require *it*, whilst others do. What follows will discuss this matter.

3.1. With *it*

The examples in (2)–(13) below show that the denominal verbs (*foot, leg, hoof, bus, cab, pub, hotel, hare, lord, queen*) and the deadjectival verbs (*brave, rough*) are followed by *it*, which seem to support Jespersen's observation that *it* in the construction acts as a morphological marker of verbing from a noun or adjective.⁷

- (2) Here in Eastern France we sometimes **footed it** along these duck boards.... (I. Cobb, *The Glory of the Coming*, 2017)
- (3) From my windows I watched him **legging it** along the quai, fast. (J. Jones, *The Merry Month of May*, 2011)
- (4) The trailer with all my worldly possessions is still attached to the truck, so I decide to **hoof it** down the hill into town and the diner. (M. L. Quinn, *Lost and Found*, 2014)
- (5) What we really wanted to do was to catch the train from Lima to Huancayo...and then **bus it** to Cusco. (V. Brewis & C. Simmons, *Inca Hoots*, 2007)
- (6) In the morning I **cabbed it** to Grand Central and bought a ticket for the train that would take me to New London.... (J. Weiner, *Then Came You*, 2011)
- (7) We...ate lunch at a really old Irish pub. It was next door to “the oldest tavern in America” but that was closed for lunch so we **pubbed it** instead.⁸
- (8) But it's only fair, after all, & cheaper than having **hotelled it** in Melb. (P. A. Grainger, *Farthest North of Humanness*, 1985)
- (9) ...the tutors liked to **lord it** over the nannies, the nannies liked to **lord it** over the servants.... (J. A. Larson, *Driving the Saudis*, 2013)
- (10) ‘Georgie was **queening it** over a pack of young pups.’ (M. Kaye, *The Rake and the Heiress*, 2012)
- (11) Once sure that the fall hadn't killed me, I jumped up and **hared it** across the tracks, over the barbed wire fence surrounding the station.... (J. Stenbuck, *Typewriter Battalion*, 1995)

⁷ Notations are added to all examples but those invented in this paper; the denominal/deadjectival verb and *it* are always highlighted by boldface.

⁸ Retrieved 25 May 2019 from <http://www.healtherpaiges.com/yesterday-boston-tomorrow-portland/>

- (12) So many people have wonderful ideas in them but fear has imprisoned them from taking the bold decision if actualizing their ideas. The logic is simple, they refuse to **brave it**, and so they remain stagnant in life. (E. O. Uffoh, *Fundamental Principles of Success and Fulfillment*, 2012)⁹
- (13) “...I didn’t have much money, so I **roughed it** in many European countries.” “What does **roughed it** mean?” asked Martin, somewhat perplexed.... (D. H. Millender, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 2014)

3.2. Without *it*

The same zero-derived verbs as those observed in 3.1 will be examined again here. Note that those verbs do not take *it* after them in the examples in (14)–(23). Interestingly, my data include no *it*-omitted *brave* and *rough* examples.¹⁰

- (14) This was said as we **footed** along eastward on our first stage to Coolgardie. “Did you ever make a dry camp?” asked my mate.... (G. F. Young, *Under the Coolibah Tree*, 1953)
- (15) People were piling out of every house and more than one man who was **legging** in the danger direction yelped at me as I went past and asked where I was going. (M. Brand, *Max Brand: 5 Complete Novels*, 1982)
- (16) She sneaked around the front, rushed down the road, and **hoofed** to the center of town.... (K. Daniel, *From the Womb to the Tomb*, 2000)
- (17) Over the next two years, 250 black elementary school students voluntarily **bused** to schools in East Berkeley. (G. Orfield & E. Frankenberg, *Educational Delusions?*, 2013)
- (18) ...she and Derrick left the network headquarters in Midtown and **cabbed** to Bellevue Hospital. (C. Donlea, *Don’t Believe It*, 2019)
- (19) We **pubbed** at every pub we found. We found plenty.¹¹
- (20) They travelled, **hotelled** and ate together for several days. (P. Hawkins, *Coaching, Mentoring And Organizational Consultancy*, 2013)
- (21) But if you think that you can **lord** over him, then he is going to **lord** over you — he’ll be your lord and master with force. (E. Greenberg & A. Rappaport, *Woman to Woman*, 1996)
- (22) In this period, just after Father’s death, when Mother was **queening** over us, I grew close to

9 *Brave it* seems to be much less common than *brave it out*. My data has only two tokens of the sequence *brave it*.

10 A BNC and COCA research finds no tokens of the versions without *it*, either.

11 Retrieved 25 May 2019 from <https://chocolateamer.wordpress.com/2005/11/14/>

Floyd. (P. Theroux, *Mother Land*, 2017)

- (23) I then climbed the fence at the back and **hared** across the fields to telephone for help. (S. Christie, *Granny Made Me an Anarchist*, 2007)

Many English speakers would agree that the denominal verb phrases in (14)–(23) are paraphrasable by their *it*-added versions.

It seems that the examples so far in this section indicate that the denominal verbs *foot*, *leg*, *hoof*, *bus*, *cab*, *pub*, *hotel*, *lord*, *queen* and *hare* appear without *it*.

3.3. *It* is unomissible: where and why?

The observations up to now have made it clear that the denominal verbs *foot*, *leg*, *hoof*, *bus*, *cab*, *pub*, *hotel*, *lord*, *queen* and *hare* appear with or without *it*. This, however, does not mean that these verbs can do without *it* freely in any context. In the following contexts in (24)–(28), where no directional or positional phrases are contained, the denominal verbs without *it* would sound much less natural than their *it*-added versions.¹²

- (24) ‘How will you get there?’
a. ‘I’ll {foot it /??foot}.’
b. ‘I’ll {bus it /?? bus}.’
c. ‘I’ll {cab it /?? cab}.’
- (25) ‘Where did you stay after leaving the party?’
‘We {pubbed it /??pubbed}.’
- (26) ‘How did you travel in Tokyo for three months?’
‘We {hotelled it /? hotelled}.’¹³
- (27) ‘So where are they?’
a. ‘They {legged it /?? legged}.’
b. ‘They {hoofed it /?? hoofed}.’
c. ‘They {hared it /?? hared}.’
- (28) ‘You seem to be afraid of him.’
a. ‘Yes. He {? lords it /?? lords}.’¹⁴
b. ‘Yes. She {? queens it /?? queens}.’

¹² Examples (24)–(28), judged to be acceptable by a native speaker of English, were invented by the author.

¹³ ‘hotelled’ in (26) is acceptable to some native speakers; not all who were consulted agreed.

Let us now consider (14)–(23) above except (20), in which no directional or positional phrase is included, from this viewpoint. If, for instance, the directional or positional phrases (the *along* phrase in (14), the *in* phrase in (15), the *to* phrases in (16)–(18), the *at* phrase in (19), the *over* phrases in (21) and (22), the *across* phrase in (23)) were deleted from those examples, then the utterances would be unnatural or unacceptable:

- (29) ?? This was said as we footed.
 (30) ?? More than one man who was legging yelped at me.
 (31) ?? She sneaked around the front, rushed down the road, and hoofed.
 (32) ?? 250 black elementary school students voluntarily bused.
 (33) ?? She and Derrick left the network headquarters in Midtown and cabbed.
 (34) ?? We pubbed. We found plenty.
 (35) *But if you think that you can lord, then he is going to lord.
 (36) *When Mother was queening, I grew close to Floyd.
 (37) ?? I then climbed the fence at the back and hared.

This seems to strongly suggest that these verbs are required to occur with *it* unless they are followed by a directional or positional phrase and that if they are followed by such a phrase, they do not necessarily require *it*.

In light of these facts pertaining to (14)–(37), we may well take our questions to be this: (i) Why is *it* required when the denominal verbs appear without a directional or positional phrase?; (ii) Why do we not find any examples of the deadjectival verbs *brave* and *rough* without *it*?

One possible explanation for (i) might be that *it* is not only a morphological marker of verbing from nouns but also a marker to affect the existence of a directional or positional phrase in the context. And one possible way to account for (ii) might be to treat the *it* added to *brave* and *rough* as what Curme (1931) calls ‘situation *it*’, which has vague implications of ‘a difficult, uncertain situation’, ‘life in general’, ‘the situation in which someone is’ and so on. If this account were a satisfactory one, then the Jespersen view that *it* is a morphological marker of the verbing of *brave* and *rough* should be more or less modified.¹⁵

14 Out of five native English speakers consulted, three persons commented neither *lord it* nor *queen it* is used without being followed by the *over* phrase.

15 One more deadjectival verb can be found with *it*: *tough it out*.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper, examining Jespersen's (1933, 1961) examples, has considered the phenomenon of the inclusion or omission of *it* after English denominal and deadjectival verbs. It has been suggested that the existence of a directional or positional phrase affects the existence of *it* in denominal *V + it* phrases. This *it* could be taken to act both as a dummy object to be inserted simply to signal the verbalization of nouns, and as a device to complement the non-existence of a directional or positional phrase. This paper has also suggested that the *it* in deadjectival *V + it* phrases could be considered to be 'situation *it*', which implies that it functions both as a dummy object and as a device to refer to the circumstances surrounding someone. For these reasons, the Jespersen account of the *it + V* construction might be given some modification.

It should be acknowledged, though, that the reason for *it*-omission or *it*-addition may be indeed a complex one which might extend to syntactic and perhaps sociolinguistic areas. Although I have suggested a possible treatment for the phenomenon, I have not been able to reconcile it all at this stage, which therefore necessitates further study.

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Corpora

BNC: British National Corpus (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>)

COCA: Corpus of Contemporary American English (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>)