

A Re-examination of Otto Jespersen's Analysis of English Denominal or Deadjectival Verb + *It* Phrases

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Abstract

This paper revisits Otto Jespersen's (1933, 1942) analysis and classification of English denominal or deadjectival verb plus the personal pronoun *it* phrases such as *queen it*, *foot it* and *rough it*. The author reinterprets Jespersen's classification of these fixed verb phrases from a semantic point of view, updating it to be a more informative and more systematic one to provide a more extensive account of these phrases in present-day contexts.

Keywords: Otto Jespersen, denominal verb, deadjectival verb, unspecified *it*, semantically empty object

1. Introductory remarks

Linguist and English grammarian Otto Jespersen, in his two works published in the first half of the 20th century, referred to English fixed verb phrases including the personal pronoun *it* (such as *queen it*, *cab it*, *foot it*, *rough it*), discussed the function of this *it*, and treated it as a semantically empty object to mark distinctly the verbal function of denominal or deadjectival verbs. Succeeding this point of view of Jespersen's, this paper will review and revise Jespersen's classification of these denominal/deadjectival verb + *it* phrases,¹ since his grouping seems to need to be updated to provide a more extensive account of these phrases in terms of present-day contexts.

This renewed classification differs from Jespersen's in the following ways: (i) the semantic relations between the base noun/adjective and the derived verb in each *it*-phrase are described; (ii) several of Jespersen's *it* phrases seen as obsolete or rare in present-day English are excluded, and several more phrases found in present-day English are added.

Reinterpreting Jespersen's classification this way will lead to some new findings including the differences in morphology and semantics between denominal verb + *it* types and deadjectival verb + *it* types. This re-examination has several implications for further discussion in many directions, which will be mentioned in the final section.

2. Jespersen's classification of 'unspecified *it*'

2.1. Various usages

Jespersen (1933) groups *it* with no identifiable independent meaning, which he calls 'unspecified *it*', into several types, as in (1)-(6) below. The sentences in (1) describe natural phenomena, those in (2) denote time and those in (3) relate to space or distance.

- (1) a. It rains (snows, freezes, clears up, etc.).
b. It is cold today. It has been cloudy all day.

- (2) a. It is half-past six.
b. It was a long time before he came to.
c. It is Sunday tomorrow.

- (3) a. How far is it to Charing Cross?
b. It is a long way to Tipperary.

(Based on Jespersen (1933, Ch. 16.17))

These types of sentences containing *it* in (1) – (3) can be regarded as impersonal *it* constructions. Interestingly, Jespersen (1933) further observes that unspecified *it* appears in a large number of generally colloquial idioms as the object of verbs or the object of prepositions. In the examples in (4) and (5), which are all idiomatic phrases, *it* appears as the object of verbs. In the examples in (6), *it* is found in prepositional phrases.

- (4) a. We must have it out some day.
b. That is coming it rather strong.
c. I say, you are going it!
d. I will give it him hot.
e. If you are found out, you will catch it.

- (5) a. We can walk it quite easily (bus it, cab it, foot it).
b. To lord it, queen it.
c. We would sleep out on fine nights; and hotel it, and inn it, and pub it when it was wet.

d. He devil-porter it no further.

- (6) a. Make a day of it.
 b. Make a clean breast of it.
 c. There is nothing for it but to submit.
 d. You are in for it.

(Based on Jespersen (1933, Ch. 16.18))

The present paper will focus on cases like those in (5), where, as Jespersen (1942, Ch. 6.87) interprets, unspecified *it* functions 'as a kind of "empty" object', which one might identify as a derivational suffix (a term Jespersen himself does not use) to convert a noun or adjective into a verb.

2.2. Denominal/deadjectival verb + *it* phrases

Jespersen (1942) groups his examples of denominal/deadjectival verb + *it* combinations into five categories, as illustrated in (7) below. (The table was made by the present author.) The three items in (7e) involve adjectival roots, and all of the rest have nominal roots.

(7)

a. To play the X	<i>cat it</i> ² <i>devil-porter it</i> ³ <i>fool it</i> ⁴ <i>God it</i> ⁵ <i>hare it</i> ⁶ <i>heroine it</i> ⁷ <i>lord it</i> ⁸ <i>man it out</i> ⁹ <i>man-and-woman it</i> ¹⁰ <i>queen it</i> ¹¹ <i>virgin it</i> ¹²
b. To use X	<i>hotel it</i> ¹³ <i>inn it</i> ¹⁴ <i>pub it</i> ¹⁵ <i>cab it</i> ¹⁶ <i>bus it</i> ¹⁷ <i>foot it</i> ¹⁸ <i>hoof it</i> ¹⁹ <i>leg it</i> ²⁰
c. Obscure sense development	<i>hook it</i> ²¹
d. A little hard to classify	<i>Latin it</i> ²² <i>Aldershot it</i> ²³
e. From adjectives	<i>brave it</i> ²⁴ <i>high-and-mighty it</i> ²⁵ <i>rough it</i> ²⁶

(Based on Jespersen (1942, Ch. 6.87))

Jespersen is an important figure in augmenting our understanding of classification of denominal or deadjectival verb + *it* combinations. Even so, there seems to be a need to modify the Jespersen classification in (7) for some reasons in order to semantically analyse these combinations in terms of present-day or contemporary English, i.e., the English language postdating the year 1980 spoken and/or written by na-

tive English speakers.²⁷

First, some of the phrases shown in (8) below seem to be already obsolete or rarely used in present-day English. The judgement of whether a certain phrase is commonly, rarely or no longer used depends upon the information provided by OED or other dictionaries of contemporary English, which will be shown in the subsequent section.

(8) a. Obsolete or rare nowadays: *devil-porter it, fool it, God it, heroine it, inn it, man it out, Latin it, pub it, virgin it*

b. No entries or appearances in current English dictionaries: *Aldershot it, cat it, high-and-mighty it, man-and-woman it*

For what reason(s) have these phrases (nearly) disappeared even though all of the examples in (7) could have been commonly used when Jespersen wrote this monograph (*A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles Part VI*), published nearly eight decades ago? One major reason may be because, as Jespersen writes, many of denominal/deadjectival verb + *it* combinations are nonce phrases.

Second, the deadjectival verb + *it* phrases *brave it* and *rough it* in (7e), unlike the denominal verb + *it* combinations in (7a) and (7b), are not given a semantic description by Jespersen. Furthermore, the phrase *hook it* in (7c), whose sense-development, Jespersen says, is unclear, is not offered a semantic description, either.

3. A dictionary-based reclassification

In this section the classification Jespersen has only partially done for his examples will be renewed, which will show semantic relations between the derived verb and the base noun/adjective in each of all the phrases illustrated in the table on the next page. The denominal or deadjectival verb + *it* phrases which go into the table are those that appear in at least one of the following eight English dictionaries which were published or revised after the year 2000:

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. 5th ed. (LDOCE)

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English. 8th ed. (OALD)

Oxford Dictionary of English. (ODE)

Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)

Oxford Idioms Dictionary for Learners of English. 2nd ed. (OID)

Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary for Learners of English, 2nd ed. (OPD)

Oxford Thesaurus of English, 2nd ed. (OTE)

The Free Dictionary by Farlex (TFD)

The phrases to be newly added to my classification, which are illustrated in (9) below in bold type, are (alphabetically) *boss it*, *bush it*, *gut it out*, *ham it up*, *pig it*, *slum it*, *tough it out*, *train it*, *tram it*, *tube it* and *wing it*. The phrases to be left out from (7) are those listed in (8) in the preceding section and *hook it*, where the association between the meaning of the base noun and that of the phrase is unclear.²⁸

(9)

a. To act like X	boss it ²⁹ ham it up ³⁰ <i>hare it</i> <i>lord it</i> pig it ³¹ <i>queen it</i>
b. To use X	bike it ³² <i>bus it</i> <i>cab it</i> ³³ <i>foot it</i> <i>hoof it</i> <i>hotel it</i> <i>leg it</i> train it ³⁴ tram it ³⁵ tube it ³⁶
c. To be (as if being) in X	bush it ³⁷ slum it ³⁸ wing it ³⁹
d. To face something in an X way or with X	<i>brave it out</i> gut it out ⁴⁰
e. To face something X or to have an X time	<i>rough it</i> tough it (out) ⁴¹

This classification could be more informative and more systematic in accounting for the *it*-phrases above than Jespersen's in the following points:

- (10) a. Three more categories, i.e., (9c, 9d, 9e) have been added to describe the semantics of the denominal/deadjectival verb + *it* phrases. (Jespersen's original classification, illustrated in (7) in the preceding section, has only two semantic categories, which do not cover the phrases in (9c,d,e).)
- b. Several obsolete or rare phrases have been excluded; several more phrases in present-day English have been added.

Listing the phrases systemically and analysing them semantically leads to the following new findings:

- (11) a. The deadjectival verb + *it* types are much less productive than the denominal verb + *it* types.
- b. The deadjectival verb + *it* types, i.e., *brave it*, *rough it* and *tough it* all imply some challenging attitude towards a burden or obstacle.
- c. The phrases which imply facing something difficult in a determined way, i.e., *brave it*, *tough it* and *gut it* all normally or frequently have the adverb *out* after them.
- d. A fair number of the coined phrases in Jespersen's time have gained currency up until the present time (i.e., *hare it*, *lord it*, *queen it*, *bus it*, *cab it*, *foot it*, *hoof it*, *hotel it*, *leg it*, *brave it* and *rough it*), although Jespersen (1942) says that many of denominal/deadjectival verb + *it* phrases he offers are nonce expressions.

4. Concluding remarks

Jespersen (1933, 1942) greatly contributed to clarifying and consolidating the function of *it* attached to verbs formed through zero-derivation from nouns or adjectives. This paper has revised his classification as follows from a semantic point of view and in terms of present-day contexts. First, several more semantic categories have been added to Jespersen's original classification in order to show the semantic relations between the base noun/adjective and the derived verb. Next, some obsolete or rare items in current English have been excluded and some more phrases appearing in present-day English have been added. In this way I think I have been able to clear up a number of points unexplained by Jespersen. (It is not meant as a criticism of Jespersen's very insightful and extremely useful analysis, of course.)

This revised classification, I hope, will provide grounding for discussions in many directions. Let me mention a few by way of conclusion. Postal and Pullum (1988: 651) treat the *it* of *can it*⁴² or *cheese it* as 'the *it* making no semantic contribution at all'.⁴³ However, as the *it* of *shut it*⁴⁴ and *zip it*⁴⁵ could be interpreted as referring to *your mouth*, the same account might also apply to the *it* of *can it*: the *it* is a substitution for *your mouth*.⁴⁶ As for *cheese it*, whose meaning is to run away or get out of a place or stop what one is doing, the semantic association between the base noun *cheese* and the overall meaning of the idiomatic phrase is a mystery,⁴⁷ and therefore more consideration might be needed before concluding that the *it* of *cheese it* is a semantically empty pronoun.

Another matter which is worth discussing but is beyond the scope of this paper is the phenomenon

that the phrases in (9a,b), (with the exception of *ham it up*), can appear without *it* in certain contexts, while those in (9d,e) cannot in any context.

One last thing to be mentioned here for future study is whether or not denominal/deadjectival verb + *it* combinations have anything to do with the idiomatic phrases *come it* or *go it*, exemplified by Jespersen in (4b,c) above, where the two verbs, which normally do not allow objects, are followed directly by *it*.

Notes

- 1 A denominal verb is a type of verb derived from a noun, whereas a deadjectival verb is one derived from an adjective; there are some others who take a similar view to Jespersen. For example, Biber, D. et al. (1999), referring to *leg it* and *tough it*, also regard the *it* in question as a dummy object of the verb. Jespersen himself does not use the term denominal and deadjectival verbs.
- 2 No entries for the phrase *cat it* have been found in any dictionaries the author has consulted. Jespersen's example is *cat it up a water pipe*.
- 3 To act as gatekeeper for the Devil (OED). No entries for the phrase appear in any dictionaries as far as the author has searched. See (5d) in the text for the example offered by Jespersen.
- 4 To act as a foolish or weak-minded person; to play the fool, trifle, idle (OED). No examples to show how the phrase is used in context are given by Jespersen, OED or any dictionaries consulted by the author.
- 5 To play the god (OED). OED is the only dictionary to list this phrase as far as the author has searched. Jespersen's example is *Not long shall that poor girl of Crete God it in my despite*.
- 6 To run or move with great speed (OED). No examples to show how the phrase is used in context are given by Jespersen, OED or the dictionaries consulted by the present author. An example in modern-time fiction (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the author):
 - (i) She picked up her skirts and **hared it** out the door and up the stairs before he could draw breath to yell again. (Alice Duncan, *Secret Hearts*, 1998)
- 7 To act or play the heroine (OED). Jespersen's example is *she could not heroine it into so violent and hazardous an extreme*.
- 8 With the preposition *over* followed frequently, the phrase means to act as if you are better or more important than someone (OALD). Jespersen offers no example of how the phrase is used. An example from OTE is *When we were at school, you used to lord it over us*.
- 9 To act outwardly in a manly fashion (OED). Jespersen's example is *Well, I must man it out*.
- 10 There are no entries for the word *man-and-woman* or the phrase *man-and-woman it* in any dictionaries consulted by the author. Jespersen (1933) writes this phrase means 'to be in love'. Jespersen offers no example of how the phrase is used.
- 11 Of a woman: to be a queen; to act or rule as queen; to behave in a queenly manner; to act haughtily or imperiously; to assume airs of grandeur (OED). Jespersen's example is *I'll queen it no inch farther*. An example from ODE is *She may one day queen it over that fair demesne*.
- 12 To remain a virgin (OED). The example given by Jespersen is *my true lippe hath virgin'd it ere sinoe*.

- 13 To stay at a hotel (OED). An OED example is *Everyday we was hoteling it. Hotels cost money, man.*
- 14 No entries for the phrase have been found in any dictionaries the author has consulted. See (5c) in the text for Jespersen's example.
- 15 To visit or frequent a pub or pubs. Formerly also with *it* (obsolete) (OED). Refer to (5c) for Jespersen's example.
- 16 To travel in a taxicab or (formerly) taxi carriage (OED). Refer to (5a) for Jespersen's example. An example from OSD is *If you're coming from the city, you might want to cab it.*
- 17 To travel by bus (OED). Refer to (5a) for Jespersen's example. An example from modern fiction (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the present author):
- (i) What we really wanted to do was to catch the train from Lima to Huancayo on the world's highest passenger railway line and then **bus it** to Cusco. (Vicky Brewis & Caius Simmons, *Inca Hoots*, 2007)
- 18 To move the feet as a means of locomotion; to walk or run; to step, tread (OED). Refer to (5a) for Jespersen's example. An example which appears in modern fiction (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the present author):
- (i) The stairwell's concrete amplified his echoing footfalls as he **footed it** up to the fourth floor, and then into the hallway: mildewed carpet, dim ceiling bulbs. (Rob Benvie, *Safety of War*, 2000)
- It is interesting to note that *foot it* has several variations such as *hot-foot it*, *lead-foot it*, *soft-foot it* and *sugar-foot it*, although they are not listed in any dictionaries consulted by the author. An example from fiction (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the present author):
- (ii) Then I **lead-footed it** to my temporary home, hauled in my bags, and dashed up to my new bedroom. (Tami Dane, *Blood of Dawn*, 2011)
- 19 To go somewhere on foot (OALD). An example from OALD is *We hoofed it all the way to 42nd Street.*
- 20 To run especially in order to escape from somebody (OALD). An example from OALD is *We saw the police coming and legged down the road.*
- 21 To move with a sudden turn or twist. Now slang or dialect (OED). An example from TFD is *We hooked it when we heard police sirens advancing.*
- 22 OED says this phrase means to speak or write Latin. If it is so, the phrase should be listed not in (7d) but in (7b). Jespersen's example is *How the slave does Latin it*. Curiously, according to OED, in the case of *Greek it*, it means to follow the practice of the Greeks or to play the Greek scholar, not to speak or write Greek.
- 23 No entries for the phrase *Aldershot it* appear in any dictionaries consulted by the author. Jespersen's example is *An' you're sent to pennyfights and Aldershot it*, which is cited from a work of Rudyard Kipling. *Aldershot* is a town in Hampshire in southern England, known as an important centre for the British army (LDOCE).
- 24 To deal bravely with something that is frightening or difficult (LDOCE). The phrase is normally followed with the adverb *out* in present-day English. An example found in TFD is *They had far fewer votes than the opposition but they decided to brave it out.*
- 25 No entries for the phrase in any dictionaries consulted. Jespersen's example is *a nice one indeed to high-and-mighty it over her*. The adjective *high and mighty* is synonymous with *imperious* or *arrogant* (OED).
- 26 To face or submit to hardships, rough or basic accommodation, etc.; to do without ordinary conveniences or

luxuries; to live in a rough way (OED). An example from OALD is *We can sleep on the beach. I don't mind roughing it for a night or two.*

27 The definition of present-day English (contemporary English) seems to differ from scholar to scholar. This is my personal definition.

28 Like Jespersen, after referring to many dictionaries, the author has so far been unable to account for how the senses of the base word *hook* work in the meaning of *hook it*, since the roots of the phrase are obscure.

29 To act as master (OED). The dictionaries consulted by the author include no examples of how the phrase is used. An example from fiction (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the present author):

(i) The captain rules the mates, the mates the harpooners, the harpooners the boat-steerers, the boat-steerers the line-coilers, and so on in a graduated scale which descends to the ordinary seaman, who, in his turn, **bosses it** over the boys. (Andrew Lycett, *Conan Doyle's Wide World: Sherlock Holmes and Beyo*, 2020)

30 To act in a deliberately artificial or exaggerated way (OPD); A *ham* is an informal word for an actor who performs badly, especially by exaggerating emotions (OID). Several dictionaries comment that *ham it* is normally used with *up* in present-day English. An example from OED is *When we realized we were being filmed, we all started behaving differently, hamming it up for the camera.*

31 To live in an untidy or slovenly fashion; to live in cheap or inferior accommodation; to accept a standard of living lower than that to which one is accustomed (OED). An example from OED is *He pigs it in a tiny old flat in Camden.*

32 To travel by bike (OED). OED's example of *bike it* is cited from literature published in 1931, about nine decades ago. A present-day example from fiction (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the present author):

(i) It's not much over twenty kilometres and they **biked it**, for they were poor, the tram or the train cost a lot for a family, and we spent our money on something better. (Nicolas Freeling, *Some Day Tomorrow*, 2000)

33 Although they are not common enough for entry in dictionaries, vehicle name plus *it* combinations can be fairly freely coined such as *boat it*, *canoe it*, *tram it*, *motorcycle it*, *rickshaw it*, *tube it* and even *skateboard it*.

34 To go by train, travel by railway. Chiefly used in American English. (OED). An example from OED, which is quoted from literature published in 2004 is *Both teams then trained it back to Detroit.*

35 To travel by a tramway or on a tram-car (OED). OED's example of *tram it* is cited from literature published in 1904, over a century ago. A present-day example from fiction (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the present author):

(i) The day before the broadcast we all schlepped up to Manchester on the train, then **trammed it** to Salford where the orchestra awaited. (Mark Kermode, *How Does It Feel?: A Life of Musical Misadventures*, 2018)

36 To travel by tube railway (OED). OED has no example of how the phrase is used. An example from modern fiction (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the present author):

(i) ... I jumped up, ran out, **tubed it** to Waterloo and legged it to this studio they were rehearsing in (Alfie Boe, *Alfie: My Story*, 2012)

37 To camp out in the bush (CODE, DSUE). This phrase, the two dictionaries write, is especially or only used in Australian English. I have been unable to find any examples including the phrase in modern fiction. An Internet-sourced example (the phrase including *it* is rendered in bold type by the present author):

(i) Paloma Soto-Castillo is a 24-year-old student who has missionary parents, so she's lived in different places. A year and a half ago, went to Kenya to do volunteer work where she "completely **bushed it**," she said. (https://www.realityblurred.com/realitytv/2008/09/survivor-gabon-paloma_soto_castillo/) (Retrieved on 15 December 2020)

- 38 To accept conditions that are worse than those you are used to (OALD). An example from OALD is *Several businessmen had to slum it in economy class*.
- 39 To do something without planning or preparing it first = improvise (OALD). This meaning can be taken to be figuratively derived from the description of actors or actresses waiting in the wings of the theatre for a chance to replace another actor or actress. An example from OALD is *I didn't know I'd have to make a speech—I just had to wing it*.
- 40 To work in a very determined way to achieve something, often despite great problems or physical pain (OPD). An example from OPD is *Those kids went into the game and gutted it out. And they won!*
- 41 This phrase is frequently followed by *out* (OED). An example from TFD is *I'm amazed you toughed it out and went to school with such a fever*.
- 42 To be quiet or to shout up (TFD).
- 43 Postal and Pullum (1988) also cite *ham it up*, *rough it* and *wing it* as cases where *it* has no semantic content. As far as these phrases are concerned, their interpretation seems to be like mine.
- 44 To stop speaking or be silent (TFD).
- 45 To stop talking immediately (MWD).
- 46 This kind of analysis could be applied to the analysis of *bag it*, *air it out*, and so on. For example, in *bag it*, whose meaning is to be quiet, the *it* could be interpreted as a substitution for *you face*.
- 47 The OED etymological information says the origin of *cheese it* is uncertain, and that it is perhaps a variant or alteration of another lexical item.

Dictionaries

COED: *Collins Online English Dictionary* (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>).

DSUE: *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. 8th ed. 2002. London: Routledge.

LDOCE: *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. 5th ed. 2009. Pearson Education Limited.

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