


<p><b>EMPTY SUBJECT (EXISTENTIAL ‘<i>THERE</i>’) AND CONCORD IN ENGLISH AND ALBANIAN LANGUAGE</b></p>		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Syntax</b></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Empty subject, existential ‘<i>there</i>’, verb, concord, English language, Albanian language.</p>
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**Abstract**

Empty subject expressed with existential ‘there’ has confounded English linguists for a longer period of time. While some grammarians do not consider existential ‘there’ as real subject, Jespersen was the first to recognize and call it a ‘lesser subject’. Huddleston and Quirk argue that ‘there’ is subject of existential sentences. On the other hand, there is no subject when we translate simple sentences from English to Albanian language with existential ‘there’. In fact, such translated sentences start with a predicate. Existential ‘there’ and concord between the subject and predicate is also analyzed in this study. There are different examples where existential ‘there’ as subject takes a singular or a plural verb depending on the object in English language. There is a similar situation with the predicate in Albanian language when objects have an influence on the verb number. There are some differences, however, when existential ‘there’ is not in concord with some translated sentences in Albanian language. The second part of this study is focused on a questionnaire filled by students who had to choose between two given options, a singular or a plural verb with existential ‘there’ as the subject of the sentence for translated sentences from English to Albanian language.

## INTRODUCTION

English and Albanian languages are part of the Indo-European language family trunk. After comparing two languages of a same or different language family, the duty of linguists is to find similarities or differences in their grammar. This study focuses on the notion of empty subject (expressed with existential ‘*there*’) and concord (i.e., agreement) in English and Albanian language. The first part of this paper is focused on the notions, theories and examples, whereas the second part focuses on a short two-question questionnaire related to concord between the subject and the verb, as well as the influence of subject complement or object on the verb. After a brief analysis of English and Albanian language, empty subject and concord, we must emphasize that the syntax of English and Albanian has some significant word order differences. This means that declarative sentences in English must have a subject, whether a real or an empty subject (expressed with ‘*there*’ or ‘*it*<sup>2</sup>’) in order to have a full and correct sentence in the syntactic aspect. English is different from Albanian language because English is non-null subject language<sup>3</sup> and sentences must have a word with the function of a subject. Empty subjects, compared to subjects, are grammatically necessary, but with no full meaning, i.e., they are semantically empty. According to Memushaj, empty subjects in Albanian language may be expressed with ‘*expletive*

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented on the 5th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference (IMSC-2022) held by The Association-Institute for English Language and American Studies, Tetovo, North Macedonia.

<sup>2</sup> Quirk R., Greenbaum S., Geoffrey L. & Svartvik J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman, p. 348.

<sup>3</sup> Rauch I. & Carr G. F. (1995). *Insights in Germanic Linguistics: Classic and Contemporary*. Mouton De Gruyter, p. 155.

words<sup>4</sup>. This statement is similar to the theoretical aspect of empty subjects presented by Quirk and other linguists mentioned below.

The status of empty subject has been a topic of discussion among linguists for a long period of time. Jespersen recognized ‘*there*’ as an introduction, followed by a verb and a subject and emphasized that ‘*there*’ is a device to bring about the word order verb-subject<sup>5</sup>. The natural question to this statement was why this is the preferred word order in languages where the subject is located before the verb. This was the case with English language. It was this moment when the term ‘*lesser subject*’<sup>6</sup> was used, a term generally indicating the existence of something which needs more information. This statement directly or indirectly tells us that existential or introductory ‘*there*’ was recognized as a subject long time ago. Furthermore, the status of ‘*there*’ has been studied in Old English by Quirk in poetry or charters such as in *Beowulf*<sup>7</sup>. This shows us that ‘*there*’ has played the role of subject long time ago, even though it has not been studied extensively in the past. Furthermore, Greenbaum and Quirk argue that the notional subject is postponed if it required having focal prominence<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, we can see that the real subject is postponed or extraposed, and there is still an empty subject expressed with ‘*there*’.

Verb agreement, i.e., concord, is closely linked to words following the verb. With this type of sentences (empty subject sentences), the verb number is not determined by the subject, but by the word next to it. This is one of the most pronounced differences when sentences of this type are translated from English to Albanian language. For example, ‘*There is a person in the building. / There are people in the building. – Ka një njeri në pallat. / Ka njerëz në pallat.*’ These two simple sentences translated from English to Albanian language show two significant syntactic changes analyzed in this paper.

## EXISTENTIAL ‘*THERE*’

Existential ‘*there*’ is a relatively new term in linguistics. It refers to sentences where expletive ‘*there*’ occurs immediately in front of the verb phrase, representing the grammatical subject, whereas the noun phrase which may contain modifiers or followed by adjuncts is the postponed notional subject<sup>9</sup>. Existential ‘*there*’ is also studied on the syntactic and pragmatic criteria which view it as a particular type of inversion<sup>10</sup>. According to these statements we can see that there is an inversion of the subject from its initial position, but that empty space is then filled by an existential ‘*there*’ which, on the syntactic point of view, functions as an empty subject.

<sup>4</sup> Memushaj R. (2008). Gjuhësia gjenerative. SHBLU, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> Jespersen O. (1984). *Analytical Syntax*. University of Chicago Press, p. 130.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 130.

<sup>7</sup> Quirk R. (1951). Expletive or existential *there*. *London Medieval Studies*, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Greenbaum S. & Quirk R. (1990). *A Student’s Grammar of the English Language*. Longman, p. 425.

<sup>9</sup> Carlos J., Alonso P. (2007). *Inversion in Written and Spoken Contemporary English*. USC, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Hartvigson H. & Jakobsen L. K. (1974). *Inversion in Present-day English*. Odense University Press, p. 62.

Sentences starting with ‘*there*’ are quite common in English language. However, *there*-sentences have two things in common: a) their subject noun phrases are focus elements; b) their verbs have a lower degree of communicative dynamism<sup>11</sup>. These two statements lead us to two different, but close issues that need to be analyzed. The first one is the word order pattern because a noun phrase would generally follow the verb, and the second one is whether the word or phrase following the verb would have an impact on the verb number.

The occurrence of empty subjects in English existential sentences are instances of more general rules of English grammars where the basic word order of English declarative sentences is SV(O)<sup>12</sup>. This means that English sentences must have a word filling the empty space of the subject position (such as the existential ‘*there*’). Of course, there are variations of word order in English with different constructions. Such example is the passive form when there is a different word order and the object is located before the verb.

The empty subject is also called ‘dummy *there*’<sup>13</sup>, according to Huddleston who argues that ‘*there*’ is inserted in order to take the function of the subject as in the example below:

(1) At least one person should be in the group.

Së paku një person duhet të jetë në grup.

(2) There should be at least one person in the group.

Duhet të jetë së paku një person në grup.

Sentence (1) shows that there is a real subject in English and Albanian language, whereas in sentence (2) we can see that there is no empty subject in Albanian language because Albanian is a ‘null-subject’<sup>14</sup> language. In fact, the real subject in sentence (2) in Albanian language is ‘*një person*’. Albanian language is mainly free word order language, and this makes it easy for the subject to change its position. Because of extraposition in English, ‘*one person*’ loses the subject status in sentence (2) and ‘*there*’ functions as the empty subject of the sentence. On the other hand, we have an extra-posed subject in sentence (2) in Albanian language because of the free word order (‘*një person në grup (one person in the group)*’).

Another issue raised among linguists is the status of ‘*there*’, i.e., whether it is an empty subject or an adverb. Such concerns were raised by Traugott who argues that ‘*there*’ which functions as an empty subject-marker is different to ‘*there*’ as an adverb<sup>15</sup>. For example:

(3) There are players in the field. – Ka lojtarë në fushë.

(4) The players are there. – Lojtarët janë atje.

<sup>11</sup> Fisiak J. (1984). Contrastive Linguistics: Prospects and Problems. The Hague, New York: Mouton, p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>13</sup> Huddleston R. (1984). Introduction to the Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Kortmann, B. & Van Der Auwera J. (2011). The Languages and Linguistics of Europe – The World of Linguistics. De Gruyter Mouton, p. 204.

<sup>15</sup> Traugott E. C. (1992). Syntax. In: Richard M. Hogg (ed.), The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume 2. Cambridge University Press, p. 218.

In sentence (3) ‘*there*’ is empty subject, whereas the real subject in Albanian language is extraposed (‘*lojtarë*’). Sentence (3) shows us that there is no empty subject in Albanian language which presents a big difference between English and Albanian language. Sentence (4) shows a totally different situation compared to sentence (3) where in both languages ‘*there/atje*’ is adverbial. English language native speakers have no difficulty in understanding that ‘*there*’ in sentence (4) is clearly an adverb of place. Word order in English is another tool in helping English speakers understand and identify words, their location and their syntactic functions. However, there are adverbs that may be located in the initial, middle or final position in a sentence, but they cannot have an influence on word order patterns or concord. Such adverbs are *however*, *yet*, *quickly*, etc.

The analysis of sentences (3) and (4) and their word order pattern leads us to another logical issue slightly mentioned in this paper. English language has a fixed word order pattern and sentences start with a subject in all ‘*seven basic sentence structures*<sup>16</sup>’ or patterns. This normally applies to declarative sentences in English, but there are some exceptions especially with literature works. Differences arise when writers use literary style in writing, thus avoiding grammar rules, especially word order in some specific sentences, for example: *I have never seen such a beauty.* > *Never have I seen such a beauty.* This is an example showing word order change in a declarative sentence which only happens on rare occasions.

Sentences with no subjects (null-subject sentences) exist in different languages like Italian, Chinese, Russian and Greek where the subject can be implied and understood from the context<sup>17</sup>. Linguists must make a clear distinction between null-subject and empty subject sentences. Here we focus only on empty subject simple sentences. The following sentence shows a difference between English and Albanian language regarding empty subject sentences and null-subject sentences.

(5) ‘It is late.’ - ‘*Është vonë.*’

Sentence (5) is somehow similar to sentence (3) where the subject is expressed with ‘*it*’ instead of ‘*there*’. While there are doubts whether ‘*players*’ is extra-posed subject in sentence (3), there is no word that can be considered extra-posed subject in sentence (5). In English ‘*it*’ is an empty subject of a sentence on the syntactic point of view without denoting someone or something real. On the other hand, there is no subject in Albanian language in sentence (5), whether a real or an empty subject. Albanian is null-subject language and has a mainly free word order pattern, easily forming grammatically and semantically correct sentences.

<sup>16</sup> Greenbaum S. & Nelson G. (2002). *An Introduction to English Grammar – Second Edition*. Longman, London, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Camacho J. A. (2013). *Cambridge Studies in Linguistics - Null Subjects*, Cambridge, University Press, p. 3.

## CONCORD IN *THERE* – SENTENCES

Concord must be analyzed when we deal with *there*-sentences and word order. It is important to highlight the role and impact of ‘*there*’ as empty subject of a sentence on other sentence constituents. The issue analyzed here is whether we deal with close-or long-distance agreement. To be more specific, we are interested to know whether the empty subject ‘*there*’ has a direct influence on the verb number or no influence at all. ‘*There*’ as an empty subject cannot participate in agreement and cannot determine the verb number because it does not have a full meaning. Therefore, the missing information is found in the word following the verb. This leads us to Chomsky’s Agree system dealing with long-distance agreement<sup>18</sup>. This means that ‘*there*’ cannot be qualified for verb number assignment because it has no direct influence on the verb. The word following the verb, usually a noun or a noun phrase, assigns the number of the verb as below:

(6) There is only me. – Jam vetëm unë

(7) There are only us. – Jemi vetëm ne.

Sentences (6) and (7) show us differences and similarities in English and Albanian languages at the same time. The difference in sentences (6) and (7) is the same as in sentence (2) when we deal with an extra-posed subject in Albanian language. But when we analyze concord, we can see that the word/phrase following the verb has an influence on the verb number in both sentences in both languages. We can see that verbs are in full agreement with the word/phrase following the verb.

However, there are sentences where the verb in Albanian language has the same form/number and this may lead to confusion:

(8) There is hope. – Ka shpresë.

(9) There are a lot of rich people. – Ka shumë njerëz të pasur.

This type of sentences in Albanian language usually start with a singular verb even though the word/phrase following the verb is plural when translated with the verb ‘*ka*’. However, there is a different situation if sentences (8) and (9) are translated in a different style with different verb in Albanian language ‘alb. *ekzistoj* – eng. *exist* ≈ *there is/are*.’ For example:

(10) There is hope.

Ekziston shpresë.

(11) There are a lot of rich people.

Ekzistojnë shumë njerëz të pasur.

<sup>18</sup> Chomsky N. (2000). Minimalist Inquiries: The Framework. In R. Martin, D. Michaels & J. Uriagereka, eds., Step by Step: Essays on Minimalist Syntax in Honor of Howard Lasnik. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 89-155.

When comparing sentences (8) and (9) with sentences (10) and (11), we can see that there is an exception to the rule that a plural noun requires a plural verb in Albanian language. This depends on the verb that is used and on the style of translation.

## QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

An online questionnaire<sup>19</sup> was carried out with a total of 91 university students to see whether they were able to choose the correct verb number when they deal with empty subject sentences in English language. Two translated sentences with empty subjects were analyzed to find differences or similarities. The two sentences were chosen from two books (*Environmental Biotechnology* and *siRNA Design*) translated from English to Albanian language. One sentence was given in English and students had to choose the correct translation in Albanian language and from Albanian to English language for the other sentence. In the first sentence (Fig. 1), students had to choose the correct verb number. The sentence in Albanian language starts with a verb, whereas in English language with an empty verb. In the English version of the book the verb is in plural, despite the fact that there is a noun in singular (*number*) after the verb. But we can see that the noun '*number*' is head of the noun phrase followed by a prepositional phrase as a post-modifier (and within the prepositional phrase there is a noun in plural '*tools*'). Therefore, the noun '*tools*' in plural requires a plural verb in English language. This is a clear indication that the verb number is not assigned by the empty subject, but it depends on the number of the word/phrase following the verb. There is a different situation in Albanian language where the singular noun '*numër*' requires a singular verb '*ekziston*' for agreement.

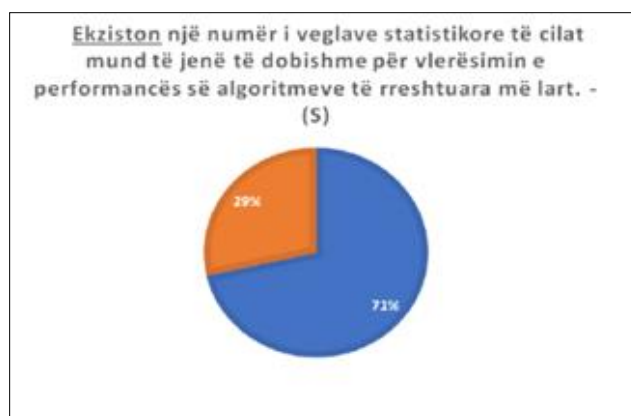


Fig. 1. A sentence from the translated book from English to Albanian language (*Environmental Biotechnology*).

According to responses from Fig. 1, we can see that 65 students have chosen the wrong answer compared to 26 students who chose the correct answer '*there are*'. This percentage was expected because this sentence can also be found with singular verbs, but the difference lies in the fact that

<sup>19</sup> [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1n6ViCbqKzfYtQDQG9K3lu9NaVm\\_wlmlXimfP66DdBA/edit](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1n6ViCbqKzfYtQDQG9K3lu9NaVm_wlmlXimfP66DdBA/edit)

singular verbs refer to a group as one thing, while plural verbs refer to the components of the group. Therefore, the correct answer here is ‘*there are*.’ Fig. 2 shows a sentence with empty subject in English language. Students had to choose the correct verb number in Albanian language since the sentence starts with a predicate.



Fig. 2. A sentence from the book *siRNA Design*.

The correct answer in the translated text in Albanian language is ‘*ekziston*.’ This is the correct answer because of the concord between the verb and the extra-posed singular subject in Albanian language. Fig. 2 shows some surprising results. Only 34 students (37%) chose the correct option ‘*ekziston*,’ while 57 chose the wrong option. We suspect that students were influenced by the plural of the sentence in English (‘*There are*’) and did not pay enough attention to the whole sentence. They should have carefully read both full sentences in the questionnaire before choosing one of the options.

## CONCLUSION

Empty subject, concord and translated sentences show some similarities and differences in English and Albanian language. While there are more similarities, the main difference after comparing these two languages is that English is a SVO language and non-null subject language, while Albanian is null-subject language with mainly free word order. This is the reason English has introduced empty subjects, while the same sentences translated into Albanian language start with a verb followed by an extra-posed subject (or other word if the subject is located further due to free word order).

While there are still differences among linguists on the status of ‘*there*’ as an empty subject, sentences with ‘*there*’ as adverbial do not pose a problem in determining their syntactic function. English and Albanian language speakers have no difficulty in understanding that ‘*there/atje*’ in such sentences is clearly an adverb of place.

Empty subject in English may be expressed with ‘*there*’ or ‘*it*.’ Translated sentences in Albanian language may start with verbs such as ‘*kam (to have)*’ or ‘*ekzistoj (to exist)*’. Subjects should be in concord with verbs in both languages in order to have a grammatically correct sentence. Concord is closely connected to words following the verb in sentences with no subject in the initial position. This leads to the above-mentioned long-distance agreement which is necessary for this type of sentences. With empty subject sentences, the verb number is not determined by the subject, but by the word next to it. There are pronounced differences when such sentences are translated from English to Albanian language.

The questionnaire results show that students need to be fully focused and read the whole sentence, rather than only the beginning of the sentence and the options that are given to them. Not reading and analyzing full translated sentences in both languages may result with wrong answers.

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