ENGLISH VERBLESS CLAUSES
As a Case of Ellipsis

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Part one

General Survey of the Concept of Ellipsis:

1.Traditional Viewpoint:

Traditional grammarians, owing to their preoccupation with the establishment of the 'parts of speech' and definition, have offered very little to the study of 'ellipsis' as a linguistic phenomenon. They have dealt with language structure on the basis of meaning. Thus, they have considered sentences as elliptical whenever there is an element which is understood but not expressed.

Eckersley and Eckersley (1967:318) define 'ellipsis' as the part that "is missed out but is 'understood' by the speaker and listener", and point out that 'ellipsis' is a common feature in English. Mittins (1976:52) mentions that ellipsis is the omission of items that can safely be "taken for granted".

On the other hand, Jespersen opposes traditional grammarians who speak of ellipsis. He accuses them of using it "as a sort of panacea to explain a great many things which either need no explanation or else are not explained, or not sufficiently explained, by the assumption that something is 'understood'(1969:153). In saying this, Jespersen is not against the legitimate use of the term 'ellipsis'. On the contrary, he (ibid,154) mentions that "it would generally weaken the force of an utterance if the speaker were to say explicitly everything that the hearer will easily understand. In this respect, Jespersen agrees with other traditional grammarians in pointing out the aim of ellipsis which is brevity and conciseness.

When traditionalists deal with elliptical sentences, their main concern is whether to consider them as complete or incomplete sentences. In this context, Bachelor *et al.* (1967:76) come to the conclusion that "the elliptical sentence usually does not have grammatical completeness, but its meaning is always perfectly

clear." They believe that elliptical sentences can be expanded into complete sentences from what precedes them , *e.g.*

How do you feel?

(I feel) very well.

That is why Jespersen (ibid,153:4) applies the term "complete sentence" indiscriminately. He uses it to cover those instances of sentences in which something is deleted either at the beginning or at the end, and to other utterances of different kinds which can hardly be considered as involving ellipsis of understood items, *e.g.*

(It's a) lovely day!

As for elliptical clauses, they should be analysed and parsed as they stand, being classified simply as elliptical ones, and in this respect they are similar to elliptical sentences. Krapp (1936:228) believes that we should not supply the unexpressed parts for the sake of parsing since "they are not necessary for the expression of thought and are silently understood in the mind of the speaker or writer who uses the elliptical construction." Mittins states that adverbial clauses can sometimes be compressed to phrases by ellipsis. *e.g.*

Although (they were) exhausted, they staggered on. (1976,106)

2.The Structural Viewpoint

Structural grammarians tried to analyse grammar according to the form and function of a 'word' in different patterns of structures. They concerned themselves with the structure of the sentence rather than with its meaning. Bloomfeild (1961:140) believes that meaning is not so flexible with some methods of analysis. As a result, structuralists consider ellipsis as "purely a surface phenomenon" in the sense that what is uniquely recoverable can be added or restored to the elliptical sentence.

Sledd (1959:210) points out that ellipsis is a term "used to mean the omission of a word or words that can be supplied from the context". Further, he applies the label "sentence fragment" or nonsentence to refer to that utterance which does not contain a complete subject or a predicate. He assumes (ibid,277) that sentence fragments should be avoided in exposition and arguments because they violate the convection . In addition, he proposes that they are effectively used in conversation and in serious literature. However, he warns against appealing to ellipsis in a way used to

depict the elliptical items rather than being "understood". Chalker (1984:264) agrees with Sledd that 'ellipsis' means 'omission'. According to her, the two processes are closely connected, and are described as "substitution by zero". The omission of words is only to be considered ellipsis when the words omitted are "uniquely recoverable", *i.e.* there is no uncertainty about which words have been omitted. This means that, for example, subordinate non-finite clauses with no conjunction like:

Sitting in the garden, Tom fell asleep.

do not illustrate ellipsis, or only weak ellipsis, since one could *recover* several possible conjunctions, *e.g.* while, when, *etc.* But missing words that are clearly recoverable from the text are classified as ellipsis.

Ellipsis is considered as one of the syntactic processes involved in connectivity. Parts of the sentence are often omitted in conversational speech when their meaning is clear from the situation or verbal context (Crystal and Davy, 1984:4). Halliday and Hasan (1976:144) claim that where there is ellipsis, there is recoverability in the structure, that something is to be supplied, or "understood". They also assume that its essential characteristic "is that something which is present in the selection of underlying options is in itself 'incomplete'".

On the other hand, some structuralists warn against the wide use of ellipsis. Sledd, for example, states that the serious difficulty in using the concept of ellipsis is that native speakers very often do not agree on the omitted words, *e.g.* to the question:

What did you say?

a perfectly normal answer would be:

That I'm ill

but the answer might be expanded to:

I said that I'm ill or what I said was that I'm ill.

(ibid, 210).

3. Transformational Viewpoint:

Ellipses are handled by T.G.G. by transformations and are considered as one type of deletion. It seems a matter of naming for some transformationalits as Huddleston (1976:226-29) who uses the term 'ellipsis' to refer to deletion of elements under identity condition handled by deletion transformation to achieve syntactic

well-formedness, and to deletion of elements where there is no such identity between covert or overt elements in the sentence.

Grosz (1978:337), who deals with ellipsis of noun phrases functioning as complete sentences in questions and responses, asserts that ellipsis is an example of the local influence an utterance exerts on the interpretation of the following utterance, and that two kinds of information: syntactic and semantic are needed to be recorded from one utterance to help in processing the following one.

Liles (1971:60) uses the term deletion saying that by deletion we remove something from the structure. Only elements that cause no loss in meaning may be deleted, *e. g.*

Bill couldn't hear you, but I could.

In this sentence the MV underlying *hear you* has been deleted, since it is repeated. He (ibid, 85) agrees with other transformationalists in stating that "elements deleted by transformations are always clearly understood by both speaker and listener. This understanding is possible because they are very precisely specified". In accordance with this, Oliphant (1962:63) mentions that the relative pronoun is frequently omitted if it is in the accusative case, *e.g.*

I saw a man (who was) sound asleep.

Part Two

1. Verbless Clauses:

A verbless clause represents one type or form of the ellipsis found in English. It is discussed by Radford (1988:98) under the term *gapping* because, as he says, "it has the effect of leaving a 'gap' in the middle of some phrase or clause." He adds (ibid, 238) saying that it is quite frequent for the verb of one clause to be 'gapped' when it is identical to the verb of another clause, *e.g.*

John bought an apple, and Mary a pear.

However, he admits that there are complex restrictions determining when gapping of the head of V of a VP is and is not permitted.

According to Quirk *et al.* (1985:996) verbless clauses take syntactic compression and they are commonly subjectless. In verbless clauses, it is often possible to postulate a missing form of the verb *BE* and to recover the subject, when omitted, from the context, *e.g.*

Whether right or wrong, he always comes off worst in arguments [whether he is right or wrong].

Verbless clauses can sometimes be treated as reduction of non-finite clauses:

Too nervous to reply, he stared at the floor. [being too nervous to reply …]

Any verbless clause may occur in either of the following two clause-types because it can be interpreted as having an omitted <u>BE</u>:

_ either Subject-Verb- complement (SVC)

We can meet again tomorrow, if necessary. [this is necessary]

_ or Subject-Verb- Adverb (SVA)

Mavis sat in the front seat, her hands in her lap. [her hands were in her lap]

Quirk *et al.* (ibid, 844-5) give five types of verbless clauses, most of which are existential:

1. **In the first one which is a colloquial type, the subject is appended like a noun-phrase tag.**
   Just our luck, Sue finding out. [Sue found out that it was just our luck]
2. **A verbless clause consisting of subject and subject complement which may be linked by *and* to a preceding clause with regular clause structure.**
   How could you be so spiteful and her your best friend. [… seeing that she is your best friend]
3. **A verbless clause, consisting of complement alone: It is usually taken as a comment on the preceding clause, and is linked to it by *and*.**
   They are thick as thieves, and no mistake. [they are thick as thieves, and that is no mistake.]
4. **A verbless clause which represents one literary and somewhat archaic type of rhetorical WH-interrogatives. It consists of a subject followed by subject complement or of subject complement alone. It represents a comparative relationship.**
   What belief so foolish but some will embrace it? [There is no belief so foolish but that there will be some who will embrace it.]
5. **Another verbless clause representing a rhetorical WH-interrogative, but less formal, contains a comparative.**
   Who more fitting than you? [who is more fitting than you?]

Moreover, there is what is called by Quirk (ibid, 1068) *the nominal verbless clause.* This clause is required to account for construtions which, although superficially noun phrases, have some of the semantic and structural characteristics of clauses, *e.g.*

Wall-to-wall carpets in every room is their dream. [Having wall-to-wall carpets in every room is their dream.]

2. Non-finite and Verbless Clauses:

Verbless clauses are usually discussed in association with non-finite clauses because they have similar syntactic structures. They can be recognized as clauses because their internal structure can be analysed into the same functional elements that are distinguished in finite clauses.

A non-finite clause is a clause whose verb element is non-finite such as *to work, having worked, taken, etc. e.g.*

Knowing my temper, I didn't reply.

A verbless clause is a clause that does not have a verb element, but is nevertheless capable of being analysed into clause elements, *e.g.*

Although always helpful, he was not much liked. (ibid, 992)

Typically non-finite and verbless clauses lack both subject and operator, and their relation to their main clause can be explained if one postulates an ellipsis of these elements, the identity of the subject being recoverable from the main clause, because this implied subject is normally identical with the subject of the superordinate main clause.

Susan telephoned *before coming over.* [*…* before she came over] (non-finite clause, present participle)

Although (he was) exhausted by the climb, he continued his journey. (non-finite clause, past participle)

While (she was) at Oxford, she was active in the dramatic society.

(verbless clause) (ibid, 910)

Although non-finite and verbless clauses can be preceded by some subordinate conjunctions like *as, because, as long as, whether, while, since… etc., e.g.*

***While travelling home last night,* I suddenly had a bright idea.**

This is not a must, because in such clauses the mere absence of a finite verb is often quite a sufficient signal of subordination.

***Travelling home last night,* I suddenly had a bright idea.**

***Running down the road,* I tripped and fell. (Chalker,1984,239)**

2.1 Subordinators for Non-finite and Verbless Clauses:

Some of the subordinators that precede non-finite and verbless clauses appear under more than one heading, so that in some clauses the relationship they bear may be ambiguous, *e.g.*

***as* (time, reason, manner, concession)**

***as long as* (time, condition)**

***if* (condition, concession)**

***in case* (purpose in British English), but(condition in American English)**

***now that* (time, reason)**

***since* (time, reason)**

***so that* (purpose, result)**

***when* (time, concession)**

***while* (time, concession) (ibid,243)**

Accordingly, the structural classes of clauses vary in the subordinators that they admit. However, all the classes except for that of the bare infinitive clauses may be introduced by the subordinators *with* and *without.* A noun phrase is required after the subordinator, and with such clauses a contingency relationship can be expressed:

***Without* you to consult, I would be completely lost.**

***With* you as my friend, I don't need enemies.**

***With* the audience making so much noise, I couldn't hear the opening of the concerto.**

Non-finite clauses (mainly with an –ed participle) and verbless clauses may be introduced by some subordinators that are also used for finite clauses: *although, as if, as, as soon as, as though, even if, once, though, until* (only –ed participle clauses), *when(ever), where(ever), whether,* or (conditional-concessive)*while.*

When taken according to the directions, **the drug has no side effects. [when the drug is taken] (non-finite clause)**

Although not yet six months old, **she was able to walk without support. [although she was not …] (verbless clause)**

Fill in the application form *as instructed.* (non-finite clause)

He bent down *as if tightening his shoelaces.* (non-finite clause)

(Quirk,1985,1003-5)

If **and *unless* are also subordinators which are considered specifically conditional, *e.g.***

The grass will grow more quickly *if watered regularly.* (non-finite clause)

It has little taste, *unless hot.* (verbless clause)

Moreover, the two subordinators *with* and *without* may express a conditional relationship:

Without me to supplement your income, **you wouldn't be able to manage. (non-finite clause)**

With them on our side, **we are secure. (verbless clause) (ibid,1090)**

Part Three

1. Proverbs as Verbless Clauses:

Eckersley and Eckersley (1967,342) talk about one type of comparative clauses which has the following construction: the…comparative…the…comparative

e.g. **the more you work, the more you earn.**

They say that this construction can become very elliptical in some proverbial expressions to form verbless clauses such as:

The sooner the better

On the other hand, Quirk *et al.*(1985:843-4) approach the same subject under the heading "aphoristic sentences" saying that such proverbial expressions represent the aphoristic sentences such as:

The more, the merrier

May be considered elliptical for something like *the more there are of us, the merrier we are.*

2. Exclamations as Verbless Clauses:

Krapp (1936,299-330) decides that exclamatory utterances may be grouped under the heading of incomplete sentences, *e.g.*

Six moths at sea

Nevertheless, he considers such an utterance as a sentence because it is capable of expressing a thought but it is exceptional since it does not follow the ordinary structure of a regularly expressed sentence. It is incapable of grammatical analysis.

Eckersley and Eckersley agree with Krapp in considering exclamations like: *silence!, well done, goodbye! , farewell!* as elliptical sentences equivalent to something like:

I want silence.

You have done well.

God be with ye.

May you fare: go well. (ibid,316)

In this respect Chalker (1984,12) gives another form of exclamation beginning with *what* or *how, e.g.*

What a strange story!

She states that such kind of exclamation can be regarded as a verbless utterance implying this sentence:

What a strange story it was!

Conclusion

Verb less clauses are compressed utterances that replace finite and non- finite clauses when the deletion of the verb does not leave any doubt as to its identity, *i.e.* when the verb is easily recoverable by both speaker and hearer. The phenomenon is especially common in subordinate clauses with the verb be as the deleted element. It is also common in proverbs and proverb-like utterances that are commonly used in everyday spoken English.

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