THE USE OF VERBLESS SENTENCES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Verbless sentences are considered as features of spoken discourse. However, they may be found in English literature in the form of written discourse and dialogues. Hence, this article tackles the issue the occurrence of such structures in literary texts. Since the present study draws its methodology from descriptive linguistics, it relies on the technique of text based elicitation to supply a corpus of sentences that illustrate how verbless clauses function within a context to achieve distinct purposes.

The following article attempts to provide information about the use of verbless sentences in English literature with special reference to the works of home-school writers. First, it provides various definitions of the concept and its different grammatical functions. Then, the issue of the employment of such constructions in literary productions is discussed through the analysis of pieces of discourse taken from the novels of various British authors. Generally speaking, this article aims at explaining the writers' utilization of certain features of spoken language within their writings to produce a specific effect.

Keywords: Verbless sentences - written discourse - literary texts.

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İNGİLİZCEDE
FİİLSİZ CÜMLELERİN KULLANIMI

ÖZET

İngilizcede genellikle bir cümle bir özne ve bir fiil içermelidir. Ancak günlük dilde bazı konuşmalar fiilsiz oluşabilir. Bu makalede, İngiliz literatüründe fiilsiz cümlelerin kullanımı incelenmiştir. Kavramın farklı tanımları verilmiş ve dilbilgisel işlevleri tarif edilmiştir. Çalışmada, betimsel dilbilim yöntemleri izlenmiştir

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fiilsiz cümle, İngilizce, yazılı metin.

INTRODUCTION

Grammatically speaking, any utterance should contain a subject with its verb to be considered as a sentence. Thus, the written text is acceptable if it includes a set of sentences following the rules of grammar. However, certain kinds of discourse may involve the use of verbless clauses that are just fragments of sentences. For instance, these types of clauses may often be found in literary texts although they are not acceptable in academic writing. This article attempts to show that verbless sentences, which are considered as devices of spoken English, may be successfully utilized in fiction to depict everyday speech.

The methodology of this research work is based on the use of the research methods of descriptive linguistics including introspection and text-based elicitation. Introspection depends on the intuitive competence of the linguist for gathering data (Widdowson 72); it helps to understand the reasons of using specific language forms in certain contexts through the interpretations of the linguist. In addition to this, the technique of elicitation is employed to get sufficient data whose analysis will confirm or reject the linguist's interpretations.

In fact, elicitation, in its broader sense, implies gathering information about a specific linguistic issue by requesting the native speakers to produce sentences in the target language, but it may sometimes refer to the process of eliciting texts which is called ancillary elicitation or text-based elicitation (Thieberger 79; Chelliah and De Reuse 379); this technique involves the collection of texts or sentences that will serve to describe language use.

In this study, a corpus of sentences extracted from literary works of British authors is employed to provide illustrations of verbless sentences. The analysis of the collected data relies on the technique of descriptive analysis which results in descriptive statements about the function of verbless clauses illustrated by a set of examples as well as the method of discourse analysis which focuses on the examination of the relationship between the linguistic structures and the purposes they have to achieve within a specific context whether in written or spoken language (Brown and

Yule 1; Paltridge 3). Thus, this technique is followed to explain the writers' use of verbless sentences to fulfil distinct functions.

This article moves from the explanation of the meaning of verbless sentences in grammar to their use in literature. First, it gives a thorough description of the grammatical functions of such structures. Also, it illustrates the use of verbless clauses in literary texts through examples from various novels. Then, it discusses the prominence of the occurrence of verbless sentences in the writings of homeschooled authors. Finally, it displays the different linguistic points of view concerning the use of such features of spoken language in writing.

Types and Functions of Verbless Clauses

A verbless clause is a group of words that does not contain a verb. For example: 'good morning', 'happy birthday'. Although the verb is ellipted, the sentence fragment has a meaning since it provides specific information (Knapp and Watkins 47). Aarts refers to verbless clauses as small clauses (39). Generally speaking, verbless clauses are independent which means that they can function alone and provide meaning without needing to be included in a sentence. This is why they are also called verbless sentences.

Verbless clauses can be classified into four categories: declarative, exclamatory, interrogative and interjectional. The declarative verbless clause provides an answer to a question or a response that does not include yes or no. For instance:

A: did you enjoy the party?

B: very much.

The second type is the exclamatory verbless clause which expresses surprise, discontent, warning or alarm. For example:

Strange man! ; Gossiping girl! ; Beware!

The third category includes interrogative verbless clauses. This type encompasses a form of yes/no question that is used to elicit information by urging the respondent to answer either by yes or no. for instance:

Anybody there?

Any news?

Also, it can include ‘wh’ questions like: Why?

The fourth type is the interjectional verbless clause which takes the form of an interjection. For example: Yes! ; No!; Ok!; Well!

Verbless clauses can fulfill different functions. They may be used as modifiers. According to De Haan :

verbless clauses…can not be looked upon as phrases, they are called verbless clauses not merely because they can be extended to finite relative clauses, but because of the fact that their constituent parts relate to each other in ways that can not be described in terms of phrasal constituents (modifier-head, etc.), but only in terms of clausal functions (76).

Therefore, such type of clauses may have specific functions that are accomplished by the other kinds of clauses. De Haan refers to the possibility of using verbless clauses as postmodifiers (66).

A verbless clause may function as a subject. For example:

A: Who is speaking?

B: The minister of foreign affairs

It can be as an object. For instance:

A: What did she buy?

B: A very nice dress.

A verbless clause may function as a complement like:

A: How do you feel?

B: Much better.

It can also take the form of an adverb. For example:

A: Where did they camp?

B: Near the river.

On the other hand, Mathesius identifies two categories of verbless sentences including one element and two element verbless clauses (87). One element verbless sentence presents a specific content embodied in one unit. For instance: 'Really!'; 'Sir'. The two element verbless utterance is composed of two constituents tied without the verb expressing both the theme and the rheme of the sentence. For example, the expressions: 'You ready?'; 'You bad boy' represent illustrations of two element verbless sentences including the theme followed by the rheme. However, "… a very common type of two element verbless sentence has the rheme at the beginning while the theme is expressed only afterwards" (Mathesius 89). The sentences: 'very genial, these Britons' and 'fairly interesting, this book' provide examples of verbless sentences involving the rheme followed by the theme. Hence, these structures can have different functions.

Verbless clauses are part of the English grammar, but their use is often restricted to the spoken form of language. The American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield, mentions the existence of aphoristic verbless sentences (qtd. in Barber 183). Therefore, it is very frequent to find such clauses in aphorisms and proverbs. For instance, the following proverbs are in the form of verbless sentences: 'any port in a storm'; 'better an egg than a hen tomorrow'. Although verbless sentences represent features of spoken language, they may be found in written discourse. Mathesius claims that:

The headlines in English newspapers have a different syntax from the rest of the text in that they are often construed as verbless sentences…Scenic notes in plays are often expressed by verbless sentences…Impressionist poetry sometimes displays whole poems consisting of verbless sentences (90).

From the above quotation, it can be inferred that verbless sentences fulfil various functions. For instance, they can be found in lines of poetry. As an example, one can cite the following lines from William Wordsworth's

'She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways': "A violet by a mossy stone / Half-hidden from the eye!" (52)

According to Barber, such kind of sentences frequently occurs in plays to provide an illustration of everyday speech (183). Hence, they are used in scenic notes of plays. For instance, in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*, one can find the following note: 'Act III. The Picture Gallery at Hunstanton (40). In addition to this, verbless clauses may be employed in newspaper headlines like 'Anyone for Tennis' (Parker 1); 'Bigger Bill Ahead for Care of Elderly' (Neville et al. 3).

From these examples, it can be noticed that these verbless constructions resulting from the ellipsis of the verb are considered as part of the discourse of English speakers. Therefore, verbless clauses which are considered as a prominent characteristic of speech may occur in writing to convey a specific meaning and to reflect the real use of language in authentic situations. Moreover, they are often utilized in literary texts.

Verbless Sentences in English Novels

Verbless sentences are often used in English literary texts. They can be found in different types of discourse. They may be included in dialogues to ask questions or provide responses. In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, verbless clauses are employed in various instances as it is illustrated in the following examples.

a)- A verbless clause in the form of an exclamation:

- "Oh, excellent !" (21)

- "Oh, delightful !" (25)

b)- A verbless clause expressing a question:

- "A what?" (52)

- "A rich someone or a poor someone?" (95)

c)- A verbless clause providing an answer:

- "Well, tomorrow." (25)

- "Nothing, my child." (479)

- "Only a small thing, one hundred and sixty-six, six and eight pence, at the wit of Mr. Natan" (500).

In this way, Thackeray uses these types of clauses in the conversations of the characters to display a degree of informality between the interlocutors. Also, the use of such a technique leads to the production of a sort of shortened discourse, reflecting a degree of intelligence on the part of the speakers / listeners who are assumed to grasp the meaning of the conversation.

Jane Austen uses some verbless sentences in her novels but in a very restricted form as this technique does not pervade on the discourse of her characters mainly because she describes people of specific social classes. In Austen's *Pride and prejudice*, certain verbless clauses are used as quick responses such as:

- "Nonsense, nonsense!" (4)
- "Never sir" (18)
- "Certainly not" (26)
- "Such as vanity and pride" (43)
- "Not at all" (62)
- "Most willingly" (91)

Bronte's *Jane Eyre* contains a considerable number of verbless clauses. For instance, the statement, "Silence! To your seats!" (48), expresses request. Some verbless clauses are employed to ask questions like:

- "What then?" (60)
- "And the little girl – my pupil?" (102)

- “And better?” (139)
- “What power?” (139)
- “How, sir?” (151)
- “Mr. John?” (220)

Other verbless sentences provide replies such as:

- “Yes, sir; Jane Eyre” (25)
- “Fifty miles” (44)
- “A pit full of fire” (34)
- “No, sir (34)”
- “As short a time as possible, sir” (222)
- “Not five shillings sir; nor five pence” (224)
- “No, sir, only the candlestick on the ground.” (151)

In other cases, verbless clauses occur in the speech of both interlocutors like the following statements:

a)- “Your name little girl?’

‘Jane Eyre, sir.” (34)

b)- “What about ?’

‘Family troubles, for one thing.” (129)

From the above examples, it can be noticed that small clauses are employed to ask questions and provide responses. It has to be stated that these structures may often be found in English novels. However, their recurrence in a literary work depends on the style and language of the author.

Verbless Clauses in the writings of Mechanically Literate Authors

It is assumed that verbless sentences are part of spoken English. Thus, their occurrence in literary works may be restricted to a set of writers who employ them for specific purposes. Ticken-Boon Van Ostade and Van Der Wurff mention the use of verbless clauses by mechanically literate authors (26). In this way, writers are classified as well-educated authors and mechanically schooled writers. In fact, there is the identification of two types of literacy: higher and mechanical literacy (Moran and Jacobi 64). This means that well educated writers attended school and were taught compositional writing which makes their style structured and complex. On the other hand, mechanically literate writers did not attend school and learnt writing as a mechanical skill by copying letters from books to form words and sentences.

According to Fairman, "mechanically schooled writers wrote as they spoke…the writers were not trained to write/compose and had little occasion or reason to teach themselves …mechanically schooled writers are extinct species in the UK" (425). Many famous authors were mechanically literate or semi-schooled. Among British homeschooled writers, one can list Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie and Helen Beatrix Potter. In Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), the verbless sentences are sometimes used in the conversation of the characters. An illustration of such a case is provided in the following example:

- "The real thing – Scotland Yard ? or Sherlock Holmes?'

  'Certainly, Aunt Emily" (9)

- "But not now ?'

  'This minute!" (12)

- "Always?'

‘Yes, sir’

At what time?” (49)

- “No green, sir’

‘Nor anyone else in the house?’

‘ No, sir” (51)

- “In what way?’

‘Well, Mr. Laurence Cavendish's evidence for instance?” (103)

- “No, right the other side of the room. Why?” (131)

Therefore, verbless clauses occur mainly in the dialogues of the characters of Christie's novels to denote the structure of spoken English and depict everyday speech. However, in Potter's writings, verbless sentences are employed in the songs that often exist within the tales of this writer. For instance, in Potter's *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* , such structures may be found in the following lines:

A little wee man, in a red coat! / A staff in his hand, and a stone in his throat (17)

Another example is: Hitty Pitty within the wall / Hitty Pitty without the wall (18)

Also, in *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle* , Potter employs verbless clauses in songs like the following example: Lily-White and clean, oh! / With little frills between, oh! (6)

İn fact, discourse may be either context-embedded or context reduced. Context embedded discourse takes place in immediate physical contexts and familiar situations; it refers to speech and some types of written discourse like advertisements and shopping lists. However, context reduced discourse which is associated to literate spoken and written texts involves an abstract level of interaction as it lacks the physical context (Celce-Murcia and

Olshtain 6). Hence, the writers' utilization of verbless sentences, which are features of spoken language reflects their reliance on the context-embedded discourse in order to give the readers a picture of everyday interaction

The employment of verbless sentences is very prominent in Charles Dickens's style. According to Hardy, "Dickens is a master of dialogues, and uses it in many kinds of drama and narrative" (127). In *David Copperfield*, the writer uses small clauses as a sort of instrument to elaborate a dialogue in which verbless sentences act as questions and answers. This is clearly found in the following examples:

a) - "Some local irritation, ma'am?'

- 'What?'

- 'Some local irritation, ma'am?

- 'Non sense!" (20).

b) -"Davy, who?'

-Copperfield" (30)

c) - "All the way, where?'

- 'There…near London". (63)

d) - "Her name?'

- 'Ah!'

- 'Peggotty'

- 'Christen name? Or natural name?" (98)

e) – "What? Brooks?'

- 'No, Sir, David Copperfield" (133)

f)- "All well, my dear Traddles ?'

- ‘All well, my dear Copperfield, and nothing but good news!” (672)

Thus, all these statements express a form of inquiry followed by a reply. The same technique is used in the following excerpt:

-“Ay! At home or abroad’

- ‘Surely, surely, one or other’

- ‘One or other’

- ‘No’

- ‘No ?’

- ‘Not the least’

- ‘No motive for meaning abroad and not at home ?’

- ‘No” (194)

The above examples give an idea about the use of declarative and interrogative verbless clauses. In addition to this, Dickens also utilizes exclamatory verbless clauses. For example:

a) – “Master Copperfield’s box there !” (62)

b) – “Silence, Mr. Sleerforth !” (89)

c) – “Stuff and nonsense, Trot !’

- ‘Ah ! and not silly ?’

- ‘Silly, aunt !” (413)

d) – “Not light-headed ?’

- ‘Light-headed, aunt !” (413)

e) - "Why, what a question !'

- 'What a fancy !" (605)

Interjectional verbless clauses can be found too for instance:

- "Clara !" (51);
- "Ah' , 'Her !" (64);
- "Strong!" (180);
- "No !" (412).

This type of clauses is also utilized in Dickens's *Hard Times* as illustrated in the following examples:

a) – "Your definition of a horse'

- 'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive… Age known by marks in mouth'. 'Thus (and much more) Bitzer" (4)

b) -"Yes, sir !' From one half. 'No, Sir !' From the other

- 'of course, no" (5)

- "In idle imagination, Gradgrind '

- 'A very bad thing for anybody, but a cursed bad thing for a girl like Louisa" (16)
- "Outside? Where? '
- 'Outside this door, sir" (205)

In fact, *Hard Times* is considered as a novel that is rich in creative conversation (Hardy 127). This is why it includes features of spoken

language embodied in the form of verbless clauses providing questions or responses such as the following examples:

- "Yes, ma'am, pretty fair, ma'am. With the usual exception" (103)

- "Very philosophical, and very exemplary and laudable" (107)

- "Mr.Bounderby, perfectly right" (113)

- "Young and handsome. Yes!'… 'As bonny as a rose! And what a happy wife!" (page138)

- "The name of being troublesome" (142)

- "Not a word, Tom?" (170)

- "Me unnatural!'… 'Me inhuman! To my dear boy? (234)

Mathesius (1975: 90) affirms that verbless sentences are often used to depict scenery or characters especially in the works of dickens. In Hard Times, he employs such structures to describe places like in the following statements:

- "A calculated, cast up, balanced and proved house. Six windows on this side of the door, six on that side; a total of twelve in this wing, a total of twelve in the other wing" (8)

-"Gas and ventilation, drainage and water-service, all of the primest quality" (9)

He also utilizes verbless sentences in this novel to describe characters. For example:

a)- "Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations" (2)

b)- "A big, loud, with a stare, and a metallic laugh" (12)

c)- "Five and thirty, good looking, good figure, good teeth, good voice, good breeding, well-dressed, dark hair, bold eyes" (107).

Moreover, verbless sentences are used in Dickens's *Hard Times* for narrative purposes. The following examples illustrate the use of this type of utterances for narration.

a)- "So many hundred hands in this mill; so many hundred horses steam power" (61).

b)- "The looms and wheels and Hands all out of gear for an hour" (62)

c)- "Silence between them. The deadly stastical cloch very hollow. The distant smoke very black and heavy" (86).

d)- "six days, seven days, far on into another week" (228).

e)- "Day and night again, day and night again. No Stephen Blackpool"'.

Thus, dickens employs small clauses to describe the setting and characters. Also, he uses this type of structures to express the ideas and thought of the characters in a meaningful manner. In this way, verbless sentences are not only employed in dialogues but also in the narrator's discourse. Consequently, they seem to be a prominent characteristic of the style of home-schooled writers.

Linguistic Controversy about Verbless Sentences:

There is a certain disagreement concerning the nature and function of verbless clauses in English. Some linguists question their position in the formation of written discourse. According to Boye and Engberg-Pederssen, "v*erbless clauses are an integral part of the grammar of the spoken language*" (180). However, they wonder if these clauses can constitute a part of the written form of the English language. It is claimed that spoken discourse is ungrammatical as it includes half completed sentences unlike writing which is more elaborate and organized (Paltridge 14). Thus, the problematic question concerns the use of small clauses in written discourse. In fact, "Henry Fowler (1858-1933) described a sentence as 'A word or set of words followed by a pause and revealing an intelligible purpose'. He accepted what he called 'verbless sentences' as long as they were not over

used" (Martin 275). However, some linguists may find it awkward to employ such structures in writing.

Mathesius claims that small clauses were not admitted in the written forms of language as they were considered as part of colloquial speech (86). Nevertheless, research has shown that they may be employed in writing to fulfil specific functions especially in literary works since "…authors do not slavishly follow 'rules' but go their own ways, for example, sometimes using dramatic effect" (Martin 275). It is believed that verbless sentences often exist in Romantic and Victorian literature (Aarts 39). For instance, the titles of the earliest novels written in English incorporate these structures to suggest a symbolic notion. Hence, verbless clauses occur especially in the titles of novels that refer to names of people, places or moral concerns As an illustration, one can list the following titles: *Silas Marner David Copperfield, Vanity Fair, Emma, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion.* However, the titles of post war British novels do not include verbless sentences; this is clearly displayed in the works of some modernist writers such as David Lodge's *How Far Can You Go?* and James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (Carter and McRae 490).

Generally speaking, linguists mention the frequent use of verbless sentences in early modern English drama (Barber 183). Ticken-Boon Van Ostade and Van Der Wurff refer to the employment of such structures in Late Modern English texts produced by less educated writers (27). Moreover, Fairman views the verbless clauses employed in literary passages as pieces of spoken discourse intruding in texts produced by mechanically schooled writers (425). İn fact, discourse may be either context-embedded or context reduced. Context embedded discourse takes place in immediate physical contexts and familiar situations; it refers to speech and some types of written discourse like advertisements and shopping lists. However, context reduced discourse which is associated to literate spoken and written texts involves an abstract level of interaction as it lacks the physical context (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 6). Hence, the writers' utilization of verbless sentences, which are features of spoken language, reflects their reliance on the context-embedded discourse in order to give the readers a picture of everyday interaction

One can say that the distinction between speech and writing lies in the fact that the former represents the language of immediacy characterized by simplicity while the latter is the language of distance featured by complexity. Thus, the writer's use of spoken language conveys the spontaneity and dynamics of face to face interaction (Herman 413). This strategy is mainly displayed through dialogues to show real language use via the characters' conversation. İn addition to this, the employement of spoken and written discourse within the literary work reveals the writer's skill.

CONCLUSION:

Verbless sentences constitute a feature of spoken English. However, they may be employed in written texts to fulfil various functions. They are often used in novels to depict the daily conversation of English people. In fact such structures may frequently occur in the works of mechanically schooled authors whose style reflects their mechanical literacy. Although verbless sentences do not occur in academic writing they are employed for effect in literary texts to give the readers an idea about how individuals speak in real contexts. As writers are not restricted by the strict application of grammatical rules, they may employ these elliptical constructions, which are not considered as full sentences, to fulfil specific purposes. However, such a phenomenon remains a feature of spoken language that may intrude in fiction.

In fact, grammarians forbid the use of small clauses in writing. However, linguists display different views. Some of them totally refuse the employment of such structures in written production while others allow their use in literary texts.

The occurrence of verbless sentences in fiction denotes the fact that the spoken and written language which diverge in various linguistic features, converge in literature to depict a realistic picture of the different social classes through the writer's manipulation of language.

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