



DEPENDENT VERBLESS CLAUSE: ITS STRUCTURE, FUNCTION AND USE

Jarmila PETRLÍKOVÁ*

Abstract: The term “clause” is not only applied to structures which comply with formal prerequisites, containing a subject and a predicate conveyed by a finite verb, but also to such structures which are analysable into clause elements. The verbless clause is a structure containing no verb element at all (either finite or non-finite), usually having a covert subject, but containing other expressions which can be identified as a part of predicate (subject complement or adverbial). The verbless subordinate clause is joined to its superordinate clause syndetically or asyndetically (a supplementive verbless clause), or by the prepositions *with* or *without*. As an optional clause element, it functions as an adverbial, expressing a range of semantic roles, usually suggested by the introductory conjunction, or as an “optional subject/object adjunct” (supplementive verbless clauses), conveying a twofold relationship: to the predication and, at the same time, to the subject or object of its superordinate clause. Considered one of the means of sentence condensation, it is mainly used in written language.

Keywords: Verbless clause; syntactic compression; complex/sentence condensation; predicate

Özet: “Yantümce” terimi sadece bir özne ve bir yüklem içeren ve çekimli bir fiil tarafından aktarılan resmi ön koşullar ile bağdaşan yapılar için değil aynı zamanda da cümlenin öğelerine ayrılabilenler gibi yapılar için de kullanılabilir. Fiilsiz cümle, genellikle bir gizli öznesi olan ama yüklem bir parçası olarak nitelendirilebilecek başka ifadeleri (tanımlama tümleci veya zarfı) içeren, fiil ögesini (çekimli veya çekimsiz) hiçbir biçimde içermeyen bir yapıdır. Fiilsiz yan cümle kendisinin üst cümlesine bağlantılı veya bağlantısız olarak (eklemeli fiilsiz bir cümle) veya *ile* veya *sız/siz* edatları ile eklenmektedir. Seçmeli bir cümle ögesi olarak, birçok anlamsal rolü ifade eden genellikle tanıtıcı bir bağlaç tarafından ileri sürülen bir zarf olarak veya üst cümlesinin yüklemine ve aynı zamanda da öznesine veya nesnesine iki katlı bir ilişkiyi ileten “seçmeli bir özne/nesne eki” olarak işlev yapmaktadır. Cümle kısaltma araçlarından birini hesaba katarak, o çoğunlukla yazılı dilde kullanılmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Fiilsiz cümle; sözdizinsel kısaltma; bileşik/cümle kısaltma; yüklem

Introduction

In the following text, the aim is to focus on a structure traditionally called “a verbless clause”. The term itself may seem rather contradictory as one of commonly cited grammatical rules states that in order to be regarded as a clause, a structure has to consist of a subject and finite-verb predicate (at this point we should take into consideration the relationship between the terms “sentence” and “clause”; a sentence being described as a syntactic unit consisting of at least one independent clause). In most current grammar reference books (e.g. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*; henceforth, CGEL) however, this strictly formal concept of a sentence is extended to include structures which can be analysed into individual clause elements. In other words, this refers to structures where it is possible to assume subject and predicate are considered clauses, regardless of the form (or even the presence) of the subject and verb.

* Dr., Department of English, Faculty of Education, University of West Bohemia, Plzeň, Czech Republic, coufalov@fpe.zcu.cz

Structures containing a non-finite verb phrase (either subject-less, in which the implied/covert subject is co-referential with the subject (or object) of a superordinate clause, or those with an explicit subject) are labelled “non-finite clauses”.

Structures which lack a verb element completely but the rest of the predicate is retained are labelled “verb-less clauses”. Like in non-finite clauses, their subject can either be implicit (co-referential with the subject or object of a superordinate clause, or expressing GENERAL AGENT), or it is explicit (both, non-finite as well as verbless clauses with an explicit subject are commonly called “absolute clauses”). The core of our interest in the article is focused on verb-less clauses.

Verbless independent vs. dependent structures

From the point of view of the syntax of a sentence, verbless clauses seem to fall into two classes:

A. Structures standing on their own, formally independent, representing a complete unit of meaning, closely related to the situation or context¹. This type of structures can be completed into a finite clause in several ways, but none of the two-element finite versions can then be regarded as the only suitable equivalent of this verbless clause:

- (1) *Now to the business.* (Now, let's get down to the business/ Now let's return to the business)
- (2) *Really delicious!* (It is really delicious / it tastes really delicious / I think it is really delicious...)

At this point it is necessary to distinguish this type of formally independent verb-less clause from an ellipsis, which is described as a structure incomplete in its form and contents, but perfectly recoverable into its complete form on the basis of the knowledge of a situation, grammar or context (Dušková, 1985, p. 378-9):

- (3) *Where are going?* - (I am going) *To the hairdresser's.*
- (4) *(Are you) tired?*

The border line is not clear cut, and a large number of cases where just one finite structure appears the most suitable are just on the border between these two structural types:

- (5) *A brilliant idea!* (“This is a brilliant idea” appears the most suitable interpretation).

B. Structures which are part of a larger syntactic unit and as such they function as clause elements (“verbless subordinate clauses”):

- (6) On the other hand, a mundane task supremely devised and carried out, *however small* – the buying of cheese, for example, filled him with a sense of completion... (Anita Brookner (AB, henceforth), p.6)

In the following text we focus on this type of a verbless clause.

Verbless subordinate clause and its distinctive features

A. CGEL (1985, p. 996-7) uses the term “verb-less clause” and describes it as one of structural types of dependent clauses (in addition to a finite clause, with a finite verb as its

¹ Detailed classification of syntactically independent verbless structures is presented in Vilém Mathesius's *A Functional Analysis of Present Day English on a General Linguistic Basis* (1975, p. 87 – 90) translated by Libuše Dušková, and in Libuše Dušková's *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny* (1985, p. 377 – 389)

verb element, and a non-finite clause, where the verb element is realized by one of the non-finite verb forms [to-infinitive, bare infinitive, *-ing* participle and *-ed* participle]).

The term “verbless clause” is also found in *English Grammar – A University Course*. This reference book calls it a “subsidiary type of clause” (1986, p.100). In the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (LGSWE, henceforth), verbless clauses are included among “peripheral elements”; they are called “detached predicatives” and are described as structures “similar to subject predicatives (subject complements)² both in form and meaning, but unlike the latter, they can be used independently of the type of the verb ... and are loosely attached to the core of the clause, usually at the beginning or the end” (1999, p. 136-7).

In the *Cambridge Grammar of English – A Comprehensive Guide – Spoken and Written English Grammar and Usage*, the term “verbless clause” is not used, though structures having no verbal element are listed as one of the types of subordinate clauses “with ellipsis of subject and copular verb *be*” (2006, p. 539).

All the above mentioned grammar reference books point out the following features of a verbless clause:

- It lacks a verbal element completely, but in most cases the missing verb can be interpreted as *be*, thus the nominal element in the verbless clause is understood as subject complement (or subject-predicative);
- In most cases the missing subject is co-referential with the subject (or object) of a superordinate structure. If not, it can either be interpreted as GENERAL AGENT, or it can refer to the whole contents of a superordinate clause;
- The status of the verbless clause as a dependent clause is signalled by the absence of a verbal element, but it can be made explicit by the presence of a subordinative conjunction, which not only predetermines the syntactic function of the verbless clause - that of adverbial, but also suggests semantic roles which the verbless clause conveys; the most common being TIME, CONDITION, CONCESSION, COMPARISON, CONTRAST. The most usual subordinative conjunctions introducing a verbless clause are listed in CGEL (1985, p. 1003): *although, though, as though, as if, as soon as, if, even if, even though, unless, once, when(ever), while, whilst, where, wherever, whether...or...)*:
 - (7) *Although younger than Hartmann, she had always had a grown-up air...* (AB, p. 19)
 - (8) He just stood there, *as if totally unaware of what was going on.*
- Apart from the subordinative conjunctions, a verb-less clause can be introduced by conjuncts (i.e. adverbials having a connective function), or prepositions *with, without*:
 - (9) Marjorie, however, feels that she must put in an appearance down-stairs, *however token*, before he leaves for work, ... (David Lodge: *Nice work* (DL, henceforth), p. 18)
 - (10) *With that recital out of the way*, relations between mother and daughter became amiable but distant. (AB, p. 26)
 - (11) *With resources so slender and so hazardous*, Martine had indoctrinated her daughter with a need to succeed.... (AB, p. 27)

² this term is used in CGEL (1985)

The semantic meaning of both these verbless clauses introduced by the conjunction *with* can hardly be regarded as explicit; it may suggest CAUSE/REASON (conjunctions *because* or *as* seem to be quite acceptable in the interpretation of the meaning of both the clauses), or TIME (conjunctions *when*, *after*, *as soon as* are acceptable as well). As we can see, the preposition *with* may cause some ambiguity in denoting semantic relations; nevertheless, such semantic indeterminacy allows us, at the same time, to make full use of this semantic overlap as a stylistic device.

- A verbless clause can also have the form of what is called “supplementive clause”, which is a structure simply attached to its superordinate clause, introduced by no subordinator at all. As for its position, it is relatively mobile - and can precede or follow the subject of the superordinate structure, though (partly to avoid ambiguity) the initial position is preferred (CGEL, 1985, p. 1123):

(12) *Quite upset at the news*, Victoria started strolling along the corridor.

(13) Victoria started strolling along the corridor, *quite upset at the news*.

(14) Victoria, *quite upset at the news*, started strolling along the corridor.

(15) Once, *desperate for a full night's sleep*, he had accepted her offer of a Valium,... (DL, p. 14)

(16) His secretary, Shirley, smirks from behind her desk, *self-righteous at being at her post before the boss*,... (DL, p. 35)

Here too, the interpretation of the semantic relations between the verbless clause and its superordinate clause suggests a scale of meaning shades, including TIME, CAUSE, ACCOMPANYING CIRCUMSTANCE, getting as far as the non-restrictive ATTRIBUTE in (14), where the verb-less clause follows the subject of the superordinate structure immediately.

B. At the beginning of the article we defined a verbless clause as a structure, which, despite lacking a verb element, could be analyzed in terms of clause elements. Taking this prerequisite as the starting point of the analysis of the internal structure of a verb-less clause, we can state the following:

- the subject of a verbless clause, as already mentioned in 3.1, is usually covert and, most commonly, is co-referential with the subject of a superordinate clause, or interpreted as GENERAL AGENT. In some cases, it can be co-referential with the object of a superordinate structure:

(17) He cast a long lingering glance at the middle management, *now flashed and talkative*, and reflected how even his business life managed to avoid such infelicities. (AB, p. 8)

Here, the implied subject of the verb-less clause is co-referential with the NP “the middle management”, the object of the superordinate verb.

On the other hand a supplementive verbless clause can have its own subject, conveyed explicitly (i.e. overt subject), because it refers neither to any of the nominal elements in the superordinate clause, nor does it express the GENERAL AGENT. Such structures are labelled “absolute structures”³:

(18) *The exam over*, we headed off to the Golden Cup.

³ See “absolutní prapicipiální konstrukce” in *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny* (Dušková, 1988) or “absolute clauses” CGEL (1985)

(19) She was on the point of leaving, *her bonnet and her coat on*. (Vachek, 1974, p. 79)

(20) Robyn, *a dressing-gown over her underclothes and slippers on her feet*, descends the short dark staircase to the ground floor ... (DL, p. 45)

(21) ... when Marjorie shuffles into the kitchen, in her dressing-gown and slippers, *a scarf over her curlers, her pale round face puffy with sleep*. (DL, p. 20)

- In most cases the missing verb can be interpreted as BE. This interpretation then suggests that the underlying pattern of the internal structure of a verb-less clause is:
 - S – V_{copula} (BE) – C_{subject} or
 - S – Verb (BE) – Adv; with the omitted S and V, what is found in a verbless clause is interpreted as: subject complement (realized by AdjP, NP or PP), or adverbial (realized most commonly by PP) as constituent clause elements.
- The structure of a verbless clause can also contain various optional clause elements, such as optional adverbials conveying various semantic roles, modifiers, adjective complementation or conjoint phrases or structures:

(22) Every night she virtually dressed up to go to bed, *comfortable in the knowledge that she could at last sleep undisturbed*. (AB, p. 32),

Where the implied S is “*she*”, the missing V is understood as the copular verb BE, the SC *comfortable* is complemented by PP consisting of the preposition; the prepositional complement realized by a complex NP *her knowledge that she could at last sleep undisturbed*, with the nominal head postmodified by a nominal content clause (*that*-clause);

(23) *Now a mother of a large family*, she felt really happy;

Where, apart from the implicit subject “*she*” and the understood copula BE, we can find obligatory subject complement realized by a complex NP *a mother of a large family*, with the head postmodified by a PP, and the optional TIME setting adverbial *now*;

(24) *Finally at home*, she burst into tears;

Here the optional TIME setting adverbial *finally* and obligatory adverbial *at home* are realized by PP.

- Apart from the two most common clause patterns underlying the internal structure of a verbless clause, CGEL (1985, p. 996) suggests another one, with the understood verb HAVE and object: S – V (HAVE) – O – Adv. This structure seems applicable in the interpretation of absolute clauses, and also of clauses introduced by the preposition *with*:

(25) As he loped home from the printing works in his dirty shirt, *a precious shin bone and a pound of carrots in his shopping bag*, he had nothing to which he could look forward except Hartmann's return (AB, p. 41);

Where two interpretations offer themselves:

a) S – (V Be) – Adv:

explicit S (two coordinate Nps) – understood BE – obligatory Adv conveying PLACE; or

b) (S – V HAVE) – O – Adv:

implied S *he* – understood verb HAVE – obligatory O – obligatory Adv

Verbless clause vs. ellipsis

If we take into account the above mentioned factors about the structure of a verbless clause, we may raise the question of what makes a verbless clause (especially one introduced by a

subordinative conjunction conveying explicit semantic meaning) with a missing verb unequivocally interpretable as BE, different from an ellipsis.

If we consider such structures as *if necessary, whenever possible, if possible, as soon as possible*, clearly this question does not sound completely incongruous or improper. In LGSWE (1999, p. 201) structures like those above are called “formulaic expressions” as they seem to have lost their clause character gradually and acquired the character of a single semantic and even lexical unit. Further on, CGEL (1985, p. 424) describes a supplementive clause with an adjective “as the sole realization” of this type of clause as an elliptical one, with an ellipsis of a particular form of the verb BE, and of a subordinator:

(26) And he was here, in this hotel dining-room, waiting for his bill, *replete, contented, even lively* (AB, p. 8);

With no subordinator; the ellipsis of BE; the only element, subject complement, is realized by coordinated Adj phrases.

If we apply the criteria for ellipsis formulated in CGEL (1985, p. 884-8), we will see that structures of this type meet at least two criteria:

(a) the one of “verbatim recoverability” (i.e. the ability of recovering the ellipsed words precisely), and (b) one of the structures becoming grammatical after the insertion of the missing words (i.e. the structure containing all the recovered words is formally, grammatically correct).

On the other hand, structures of this type seem to fall short in the other three criteria: (c) asking for the missing expression to be recovered from the neighbouring context (there is no such a context), (d) requiring the inserted expression to be the exact copy of its antecedent (there is no antecedent), and (e) the structure itself being defective (structures of this type are analyzable in terms of individual clause elements, so they cannot be considered as defective).

Owing to this, it might be justifiable to consider such structures as “QUASI-ELLIPSES”, which is the term suggested in CGEL (1985, p. 889).

Syntactic function of verbless clause

Since we consider a verbless clause part of its superordinate structure, we should think about its syntactic function.. As already mentioned at the beginning of the article, the most common syntactic function of a verbless clause is that of an adverbial. From the point of view of individual grammatical functions of an adverbial, verbless clauses, especially those introduced by a subordinative conjunction and thus conveying their semantic roles very explicitly, can be regarded as optional adjuncts:

(27) *Though very anxious about the result of the exam*, she looked calm and composed.

Similarly, verbless clauses introduced by the preposition *with*, suggesting a semantic blend, function as optional adjuncts:

(28) she found a group that discussed great works of French literature, and she decided that, *with her fine accent*, she would make a good impression there. (AB, p. 31)

On the other hand, we should take into account a large category of verbless clauses which are introduced by no subordinator at all and are very flexible in terms of their location (taking the initial, medial or final position). These supplementary clauses (CGEL, 1985, p. 1123) rank among adverbials, too (called “optional subject/object adjuncts” by some grammarians). They have a very significant feature which makes them distinct: they imply a twofold relationship towards the elements of their superordinate clause:

First they refer to the predication of the superordinate clause. At the same time they refer to the subject (or object) of the superordinate clause, thus conveying a current, temporary quality or feature of the subject (object) of the superordinate structure in the course of verbal action or event:

(29) She glanced with disgust at the cat, *quiet now in her daughter’s lap* (GCEL, p. 425)

(30) Marjorie looks unhappily at Vic, *uncertain of his drift*. (DL, p. 23)
Bored, she stepped outside, on to a steel gallery overlooking the factory floor. (DL, p. 128)

(31) Startled, *but still asleep*, drugged with Valium, Marjorie swivels to face him. (DL, p. 13)

They are similar to non-restrictive postmodification, which is seen as expressing a relatively permanent, stable quality or feature of its nominal referent (the difference in the nature of these properties is significant in distinguishing between the two syntactic functions).

In LGSWE (1991, p. 136-7) supplementary structures are labelled “detached predicatives”.

The usage of a dependent verbless clause

From the point of view of usage, dependent verbless clauses represent significant structural elements.

Because of their condensed structure (the omission of a subject and a verbal element) verbless clauses are, together with non-finite clauses and nominalizations, ranked among means of “syntactic compression” (CGEL, 1985, p. 996), or “complex condensation” (Mathesius, 1975, p.146)⁴ in as much as they could be used as a means of expressing circumstances of the superordinate clause which are usually conveyed by finite subordinate clauses. Thus, the resulting sentence is more compact in its structure and, at the same time, it “can express entire complexes of content” (Mathesius, 1975, p. 146). Because of this quality, verbless subordinate clauses are mainly associated with a more formal style and written language, where intricate hierarchically structured sentences are used, combining two or more predications in them.

As fully-fledged means of expression at the syntactic level, verbless clauses also make it possible to exploit their qualities connected with the omission of a conjunction suggesting particular semantic meaning. The absence of a conjunction, causing considerable semantic indeterminacy on the one hand, allows relative freedom in the interpretation of their semantic meaning on the other hand. At the same time, this makes it possible to use verbless subordinate clauses as a suitable means of conveying various shades of semantic meaning in the literary style.

⁴ Josef Vachek uses the term “sentence condenser” (1974, p. 59)

Verbless subordinate clauses and their place in the process of teaching and learning English

As mentioned before, dependent verbless clauses represent significant structural elements (the omission of a subject and a verb), and as such they are mainly associated with a more formal style and written language, where larger, complex syntactic units are used, combining two or more predications in them. This is why the grammar of subordinate verbless clauses can be presented to learners of English at the upper-intermediate and advanced level. Nevertheless, the passive knowledge of such structures, i.e. the ability to describe such structures as “incomplete”, “ellipses” or “structures with no verb” and to understand their function in a sentence as “some more information about the subject of a sentence”, is often evident even with intermediate learners of English.

The ability to recognize a verbless clause in a sentence structure and comprehend its function proves learners’ appropriate level of their knowledge of English and, at the same time, can be considered the starting point for the process of acquiring active knowledge of it.

That is why it seems useful to work in classes with a larger context (extracts from current British or American fiction, or newspapers have proved most convenient), where possible:

- To find and identify such structures within sentences:
(ex 32 a) *But once in a flat, where Hartmann would be sitting in front of the television, she would find the ideas that had suggested themselves, had indeed been eagerly discussed by the group, ridiculous, and would retire to pamper herself with a leisurely bath and a flattering nightgown. Every night she virtually dressed up to go to bed, (32 b) comfortable in the knowledge that she could at last sleep undisturbed. (AB 31-2);*
- To note their position in a sentence, ranging from the initial through medial to final, and thus realize their status as optional sentence elements from the syntactic point of view:
initial position in (ex 32 a); final position in (ex 32 b);
- To highlight the absence of the subject (in many a case), being either co-referential with the subject of a superordinate structure or “general agent”:
the subject of both the verbless clauses is overt, co-referential with the subject *she* of the superordinate clause;
- To pay attention to their semantics, conveying a current, temporary quality or feature of the subject of a superordinate clause in the course of an action realized by the superordinate verb:
it is possible to paraphrase the contents of both the verbless structures as *When she was in the flat, and she was/ felt comfortable in the knowledge.....*; where it is possible to see how structures of that type work as sentence condensers.

The process of acquiring active knowledge of this kind of structural device involves the formation of such structures within larger syntactic units. The students have certain facts at their disposal which they are supposed to use in order to make up sentences containing verbless clauses of various types:

- (33) Thomas was very tired; nevertheless, he insisted on giving his wife a hand with making dinner ready. → solution: *Although very tired,*
John insisted on giving his wife a hand with making dinner ready.

- (34) Peggy has calmed down, she is quiet now and is resting in her mother's arms. → solution: *Calm and quiet now, Peggy is resting in her mother's arms.*

When forming sentences of that type, the students are rather apt to use the present participle of the verb *be*, or another full verb, thus getting structures as “*though being very tired, John...*”, or “*having calmed down, Peggy is....*”, which are grammatically correct, but do not contain a verbless clause, and thus do not fit the task. Being reminded of this, the students realize the presence of the verbal element and are able to accomplish their task. Nevertheless, they ought to be assured of the fact that what they have formed was not incorrect, and that from the point of view of language, there are very often more ways of expressing or describing extra-linguistic reality, and it is up to them to choose the most suitable one according to the situation, context and stylistic requirements. The more ways of expression the students are able to think of, the more advanced and competent they are becoming.

References

- Alexander, L. G. (1991). *Longman English grammar*. London: Longman.
- Biber, D., Stig, J., Leech, G., Conrad, S., Finegan, E. (2000). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Brookner, A. (1989). *Latercomers*. London: the Collins Publishing Group.
- Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (2006). *Cambridge grammar of English – A comprehensive guide spoken and written English Grammar and usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Close, R. A. (1986). *A reference grammar for students of English*. Essex: Longman.
- Downing, A., & Lock, P. (2006). *English grammar: A university course*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Dušková, L. et al. (1988). *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny*. Praha: Academia.
- Greenbaum, S. (1996). *The Oxford English grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Huddleston, R., Pullum, G. K. & et al. (2002). *Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lodge, D. (1989). *Nice work*. London: the Penguin Group.
- Mathesius, V. (1975). *A functional analysis of present-day English on a general linguistic basis*. Praha: ČSAV.
- Miller, J. (2008). *An introduction to English syntax*. Northampton: Edinburgh University Press.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. New York: Longman.
- Quirk, R., & Greenbaum, S. (1998). *A student's grammar of the English language*. Harlow: Longman.
- Vachek, J. (1974). *Selected chapters from English syntax*. Praha: SPN.