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Verbless Sentences

A Multidimensional Contrastive Corpus Study

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This paper explores the theoretically controversial and often marginalized phenomenon of the verbless sentence, i.e. structures in which the typical syntactic marker of sentential status – the verbal predicate – is absent. Persuaded that linguistic constraints hidden from a monolingual perspective can emerge in cross-linguistic comparison, we examine the structures in two languages that have profoundly different typological characteristics regarding the verb: English and Russian. We develop a multidimensional methodological framework that combines contrastive linguistics with quantitative corpus-driven methods and fine-grained qualitative enunciative analysis, with the goal of (a) providing a corpus-based description of the semantico-pragmatic features associated with the absence of the verb in English and Russian and (b) exploring the theoretical implications of the results for linguistic models of the ‘sentence’.

Highly influenced by the contrastive method of Guillemin-Flescher (2003), we analyse reoccurring translation patterns for language-specific typological regularities, further developing the approach. Taking advantage of digital corpora and statistical tools, we also push NLP boundaries in terms of the elusive search for absence and its translations. Potential pitfalls of parallel-text studies (raised by e.g. Nádvorníková 2017; Loock 2016; McEnery & Xiao 2008; Stolz 2007; Malmkjaer 1998) are addressed in the present corpus design and multidirectional analysis. Notably, we create a 1,4-million-word parallel-and-comparable corpus to enable both quantitative and qualitative contrastive analysis of the verbless phenomenon, automatically retrieved (as per Bondarenko 2021; 2019). Morphosyntactically tagged and sentence-aligned, the corpus of 19th–21st century translated realist fiction is analyzed from three perspectives. From a *monolingual* perspective, translations are treated as genuine language samples (following Zanettin 2013; Olohan 2002; Baker 1993; Biber 1993) and compared with originals in terms of specificity analysis (statistically-key forms, lemmas, morphosyntactic categories, n-grams, that are semantico-pragmatically classified). Secondly, we look for *reciprocal* patterns across multiple translations, texts and directions, paying attention particularly to *verbal* correspondences (and the correlation of the latter with manually annotated syntactic ellipsis, information structure and speech act). A *third-language* sub-corpus of Russian and English translations from French controls for source language interference.

Combining the strengths of contrastive and corpus methods makes it possible for us to lift data limits on previous research and push the boundaries of the existing descriptive accounts and theoretical perspectives on verbless structures (e.g. Elugardo & Stainton 2005; Merle 2009; Weiss 2011; Goldberg & Perek 2019). Through contrastive corpus analysis we contribute new evidence that:

- Syntactic explanations do not account for the observed absence: syntactic-ellipsis is overrepresented not in Russian, the more elliptically-productive language, but in English.
- Verbs that are pragmatically implicated by verbless sentences are a part of the informational focus. This finding challenges accounts of the phenomenon in terms of the omission of a predictable and reconstructable semantic element. Furthermore, it provides evidence that the bare constituents of a verbless sentence can themselves be sufficient to express a complete thought and satisfy the requirements for constituting full instances of predication.
- Pragmatic differences concerning topic activation and the marking of (in)direct speech acts explain some of the frequency differences in the use of the phenomenon in our languages.
- Verbless sentences are not as significantly affected by translation language, as by genre.

Taking a contrastive corpus approach gives us new empirical grounds for defending the sentential status of structures without a syntactic predicate, and leads us elaborate a model of the sentence that strives to be capable of accounting for the verbless phenomenon and emphasizes the communicative functions of language.

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