

Subjectless Sentences in English

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The present study investigates when, where, and why subjectless sentences occur in English, a non-pro-drop language that normally requires a subject. To achieve this goal, 146 examples collected from multiple sources, such as flyers, advertisements, bulk emails, and so on, are examined from syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic perspectives. It is found that subjectless sentences occur more often with the present tense, main clauses, pronouns with immediacy (*I, you, and we* as opposed to *s/he, they, and it*), and verbs used on a everyday basis rather than those used in formal settings. The major function of subjectless sentences is found to lubricate interactions between participants. Based on these findings, the necessary and sufficient conditions for the phenomenon of subject deletion are proposed.

Keywords: subjectless sentences, fragments, holophrases, ellipsis

Introduction

In English, subjects are obligatory elements and cannot be omitted freely unlike Spanish and Italian which are called pro-drop languages and have a rich agreement system between subjects and verbs (Ando and Ono, 1993). However, there are some instances in English where subjects are omitted. The following are some of those examples from Mackenzie (1998).

- a. A: **Got** a light?
B: Sure, mate.
- b. A: Do you know what Carson has got here?
B: **Seen** it.
- c. A: Will you come and see me in my room?
B: **Promise**.
- d. **Mind** if I smoke?
- e. A: Would you care for some tea?
B: **Wouldn't say** no.
- f. **Care** to have a little look?
- g. **See** you in the morning.

- h. He's a reporter. **Writes** for the Sunday Globe, in London.
- i. He didn't use it. **Sent** me a cable, saying 'Think stuff unwanted'.
- j. He got it round, and then he was hit. **Knocked** him into the back seat.

The phenomenon that subjects are omitted in English, as in the examples above, is observed only in certain situations. Mackenzie (1998) gives an observation for holophrases in general: "in situations where participants know each other and each other's goals well, and/or where there is great task urgency, verbal interaction takes place in units that are markedly shorter than the examples of linguistic expressions normally dealt with in grammatical analyses" (p.268). As opposed to "linguistic expressions normally dealt with in grammatical analyses," examples of subjectless sentences are categorized as the minor sentence type. According to Bowman (1966), many scholars who study the English

grammar have a consensus on the difference between the major sentence type and the minor sentence type. That is, the major sentence type “is distinguished from other patterns by having a subject and a predicate” (p.2). Normally, textbook writers or grammarians deal with the major sentence type, and the minor sentence type is ignored or at best mentioned marginally. However, some scholars eloquently discuss the completeness of the minor sentence type: “In a normal sentence both subject and predicate are present, but sometimes the one or the other or both may be absent and yet the sentence may be a complete expression of thought” (Curme, 1931, cited in Bowman, 1966, p.2). Similarly, Mackenzie (1998) states that “rather than taking these (elliptical or incomplete utterances) as fragmentary realizations of an underlyingly complex structure, I will regard them as complete within the situation in which they occur” (p.269).

Given these views, the minor sentence type should deserve some investigation. Unfortunately, subjectless sentences observed in English, one type of the minor sentence pattern, have not been much focused and extensively discussed in literature. Therefore, close examination on the use of subjectless sentences is needed in order to reveal a good picture of the usage, which may shed more light on the importance of the minor sentence type in general in English. The present paper contributes to such examination by investigating when, where, and why subjectless sentences appear in English. Specifically, the phenomenon of subject omission in English is examined from syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic points of view. Under the syntactic considerations, constraints on tense and types of clauses (main vs. subordinate) are discussed. The semantic considerations are framed around issues of types of subjects omitted and features of verbs typically occurring in subjectless sentences. The pragmatic considerations are concerned with the functions that subjectless sentences bear. Lastly, the considerations from the three perspectives are revisited under a discussion of necessary and sufficient conditions for subjectless sentences.

The Data

The 146 examples examined in this study come from

flyers and advertisements on university bulletin boards in the United States, bulk emails, personal emails, a movie, and a TV show as well as from the literature work cited at the end of the paper. When the examples from the literature work are used, all of the transcription notations in the original work are removed, and they are presented to show points inherent to the current study.

Three major types of subjectless sentences included in the examples are the following:

1. Subject alone is omitted.
 - 1) **Hope** you had a nice weekend. (personal email)
 - 2) A: Would you care for some tea?
B: **Wouldn't say** no. (Mackenzie, 1998, p.288)
2. Subject and copula are omitted.
 - 3) **Interested** in Egypt?
How about a two-week guided tour? (bulletin board)
3. Subject and auxiliary verb are omitted.
 - 4) **Want** to make some extra money, AND gain research experience?? (bulletin board)
 - 5) Room for Rent
Seeking 1 roommate for a 2 bedroom house, and bath, off street parking, walk to shuttle. (bulletin board)
 - 6) **Seen** any good movies lately? (Zwicky, 1981, p.536)
 - 7) Medial News -- Anti-aging Breakthrough - Thousands Grow Years Younger. **Proven** by laboratory test results. (bulk email)

Although command or imperative sentences bear no subjects, as is shown in (8) to (10) (Bowman, 1966, p.5) below, they are traditionally considered as the major sentence type, and therefore excluded from the study.

- 8) Don't talk to any of the higher-ups.
- 9) Put them back.
- 10) Wait a minute.

Syntactic Considerations

In order to investigate if the occurrence of subjectless sentences is constrained by tense, the 146 examples are classified as in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Classification of Subjectless Sentences by Tense

Present Tense (N = 126 (86.3%))			Past Tense (N = 20 (13.7%))		
Simple N (%)	Continuous N (%)	Perfect N (%)	Simple N (%)	Continuous N (%)	Perfect N (%)
108 (74%)	11 (7.5%)	7 (4.8%)	19 (13.0%)	1 (0.7%)	0 (0%)

As one can see in the table, 126 out of the 146 examples are instances of the present tense, which amount to 86.3% of the examined corpus. Furthermore, within the present tense category, instances of the simple present are dominant, resulting in 74% of the whole data. Some of the examples of this category are given below.

11) **Need** help with

S

EDIETING-SKILLZ? (bulletin board)

12) **Glad** you find it interesting — **hope** it is helpful!
(personal email)

13) **Mind** if I smoke? (Mackenzie, 1998, p.4)

The corpus also includes some present continuous and present perfect examples although they are much less frequent, accounting for 7.5% and 4.8% of the whole data, respectively. One example for each category is given below.

14) **Graduating?**

Need a Full-Time Job?

Call CRIS!!! (bulletin board)

15) Ever **been** to Chicago? (Schmerling, 1973, p.580)

Observing the high ratio of instances of the present tense, it appears that subjectless sentences typically occur in the present tense. However, as Table 1 shows, they are not completely limited to the present tense. The following are examples of the past tense found in the corpus.

16) He *didn't* use it. **Sent** me a cable, saying 'Think stuff unwanted.' (Mackenzie, 1998, p.289)

17) A: That wasn't the guy I met, was it - when we *saw* the building?

B: **Saw** it where?

A: When I went over to Chetwynd Road

B: Yes. (Clark, 1996, p.200)

18) R: You've got a new battery if your trouble *was* nothing but sulphating.

K: **Was** what? (Bowman, 1966, p.45)

19) K: And I *got* a telephone call from Mr. Newman. **Wanted** to see me

M: Nehman. (Bowman, 1966, p.47)

It is important to note that the four examples above share one common feature: They all occur after the clear indication of the past tense in the previous sentence, which is presented with italics. Particularly noteworthy are (17) and (18) where the second speaker echoes the past tense verb uttered in the previous sentence. It seems to be the case that the past tense is not conveyed for the first time by subjectless sentences, but it is indicated by previous major sentences. Now, look at the following instances which at first glance seem against this observation.

20) (Reading a newspaper article by a rival journalist:)
Fair old piece. **Too** care of mine anyway.
(Mackenzie, 1998, p.289)

21) I say, Bertie, why don't you answer my telegrams?
Sent you two today saying Come immediately serious rift Madeline and self. Unless you come earliest possible moment prepared lend every effort effect reconciliation, wedding will be broken off. Reply.

GUSSIE

(Zwicky, 1981, p.536)

In examples 20) and 21), the subjectless sentences occur without having a previous sentence that contains a verb in the past tense. However, in these instances, the past tense is implied by other means by the time when the

speaker utters the subjectless sentence. For example, in 20), the speaker is reading the newspaper article by a rival journalist. The final product, the article, is the result of the rival's having written it. Therefore, the article itself is an indication of the past time, to which the subjectless sentence *Took care of mine anyway* is connected. In 21), the telegram writer is referring to the telegrams, *my telegrams*, which were sent before. Therefore, *Sent you two today*, is not exactly the first mention of the past time.

Table 1 also shows that the simple form, whether it is the present or past, is preferred to the continuous or perfect form as a subjectless sentence. Out of the 126 instances of the present tense, 108 examples are in the simple form, and 19 out of the 20 instances of the past tense are in the simple form. This finding appears to reveal a feature of subjectless sentences concerning complexity. That is, the simpler the form is, the more likely the subject can be omitted since the subject in the simple statement is easier to be retrieved.

In summary, subjectless sentences with the past tense are less frequent than those with the present tense because those with the past tense occur in a more restricted environment - the environment in which the past tense has to be indicated in the previous discourse either explicitly or implicitly. The present tense, on the other hand, is freer from such a tense indication constraint, since it is more neutral, where "neutral" is defined as the reading without context. This observation is also related to the issue of the retrievability of the omitted subject, which will be discussed in more detail later.

The second syntactic question is concerned with types of clauses. Specifically, it is investigated whether there are any constraints on types of clauses where subjectless sentences occur. Types of clauses are divided into two groups: main clauses and subordinate ones. The relevant subordinate clauses in the discussion here are *that*-complement clauses, *whether/if*-clauses, and adverbial clauses that typically start with *when*, *while*, *where*, etc. Out of the 146 examples, only one instance where a subject is omitted in a subordinate clause is found, which is given in 22).

22) **Want** to do it quick, start with a cold engine. (if you)

(Bowman, 1966, p.52)

According to Bowman (1966), the parenthesized words *if you* are omitted from the beginning of the sentence¹. Bowman's (1966) study contains 188 instances of subjectless sentences, and example 22) is the only one where the subject in a subordinate clause is omitted. It should also be noted that the subject *you* is not the only one omitted, but the conjunction *if* is also omitted in this sentence. That is, a sentence like the following where the subject alone is omitted is not observed in both Bowman's corpus and my corpus.

23) *If **want** to do it quick, start with a cold engine.

Similarly, consider the following pairs of examples.

24) a. A: That wasn't the guy I met, was it - when we saw the building?

B: **Saw** it where? (Clark, 1996, p.200)

b. A: That wasn't the guy I met, was it - *when **saw** the building?

B: **Saw** it where?

25) a. **Guess** I should be going. (Mackenzie, 1998, p.288)

b. *I guess **should be going**.

26) a. **Wish** I hadn't done that. (Mackenzie, 1998, p.288)

b. *I wish **hadn't done** that.

27) a. **Hope** you had a nice weekend. (personal email)

b. *I hope **had** a nice weekend.

In the adverbial clause in 24), the omission of the subject *we* results in an awkward utterance as is shown in 24b). However, once the clause becomes a main clause as is in B's words, then the omission does not cause any problem. The rest of the examples show pairs of sentences, where the a) sentences demonstrate the omission of the subject in a main clause, and the b) sentences exemplify the omission of the subject in a subordinate clause. The b) sentences are the ones that seem nonexistent. Observing these instances, it can safely be said that subjectless sentences are restricted to

Table 2. The Classification of Subjectless Sentences by Subject Type

Subjects with Immediacy (N = 106 (76.3%))			Subjects with Distance (N = 33 (23.7%))			
you N (%)	I N (%)	we N (%)	it N (%)	s/he N (%)	they N (%)	personal names N (%)
62 (44.6%)	37 (26.6%)	7 (5.1%)	21 (15.1%)	6(4.3%)	6(4.3%)	0(0%)

main clauses.

Semantic Considerations

In this section, types of subjects omitted and features of verbs typically occurring in subjectless sentences are considered. For the purpose of discussing the first topic, a line is drawn between the first person and second person (*I, you, and we*), and the third person (*s/he, they, it, and personal names*). The reason for the distinction lies on the difference on immediacy. The first group that includes *I, you, and we* inherently bear the sense of immediacy since the referents are present at the moment of conversation whereas the second group that consists of *s/he, they, it, and personal names* has in a sense some distance from conversationalists. Table 2 presents the classification of the examples by subject type. The total number of the examples considered here is reduced from 146 to 139 since the subjects in seven instances cannot in any way be located due to the significant lack of context.

As is demonstrated in Table 2, the omitted subjects are dominantly subjects with immediacy (76.3%), and none of the examples show a case in which personal names are omitted. These findings are reasonable since subjects with immediacy are easier to retrieve than subjects with distance, and the articulation of personal names is almost always the first mention in discourse, and if they are omitted, there is no way of retrieving them. If personal names occur not as the first mention, the speaker has some special intention to do so, such as emphasis, and therefore the names should not be absent. The following are some of the examples where subjects with immediacy are omitted. The omitted subjects are suggested in parentheses.

28) Like Psychology?

Then come to the next PSI CHI meeting! (you)
(bulletin board)

29) I think that's all for now. **Hope** you enjoy the weekend! (I)

(personal email)

30) R: Well, what'll we do if we have a war?

M: **Jump** in the lake. (we) (Bowman, 1966, p.57)

The omission of the pronoun *we* is relatively infrequent, which can be explained by the ambiguous status of this pronoun. That is, *we* can refer to all of the conversation participants, and in this case, it is doubtlessly a member of subjects with immediacy. However it can also refer to one or some of the participants plus someone else not present at the time of the conversation. In this case, it has a mixed characteristic of subjects with immediacy and subjects with distance.

Subjects with distance are also omitted in some instances although the omission is much less frequent than those with immediacy. Some examples for this pattern are as follows.

31) He didn't use it. **Sent** me a cable, saying... (he)

(Mackenzie, 1998, p.289)

32) Principal Currin: I'm afraid that I've got a terrible news. I've just received the word sometimes last night someone broke into Ida May's statue and stole the time capsule.

Encyclopedia Brown: **Stole** it! (someone) (Movie, *Encyclopedia Brown*)

33) Monica: Okay, everybody relax. This is not even a date. It's just two people going out to dinner and not having sex.

Chandler: **Sounds** like a date to me. (it) (TV show, *Friends*)

- 34) R: Is the elephant a mammal?
 L: Yeah
 R: **Looks** more like a horse cart. (it) (Bowman, 1966, p.55)
- 35) Want a wedding dress? **Hardly used.** (it is) (TV show, *Friends*)

Similarly as the case of the past tense discussed earlier, instances of the omission of subjects with distance are infrequent because they require a more restricted context. The issue of whether subjectless sentences require restricted contexts is relevant to the notion of dependent versus independent minor sentences (Bowman, 1966). Bowman describes dependent minor sentences as the sentences that “have a close connection with an adjacent - usually a preceding - major sentence; in fact, considered without the adjacent major sentence, they lose most of their significance” and independent minor sentences as the sentences that “have a looser connection with the adjacent major sentences, in that they do not depend on them for their significance” (p.38). Under Bowman’s definitions, therefore, examples 31) to 35) are all instances of dependent minor sentences. That is, the referents of the omitted subjects are found right in the previous sentences: *He* for 31), *someone* for 32)², *two people going out to dinner and not having sex* for 33), *the elephant* for 34), and *a wedding dress* for 35). The generalization that instances of the omission of subjects with distance are dependent minor sentences holds for most of the examples in the present corpus. Exceptions to this generalization are Schmerling’s (1973) examples given below, which constitute a major contribution to the relatively high ratio of the *it* deletion (15.1%) as shown in Table 2.

- 36) **Seems** like the class always wakes up five minutes before the bell rings.
 37) **Looks** like an accident.
 38) **Sounds** like another ghost.
 39) **Smells** like hot metal.
 40) **Tastes** like almonds.
 41) **Feels** like real silk.
 42) **Has** a sort of greasy taste. (Schmerling, 1973, p.582 and p.585)

The examples above, where the verbs are all perception verbs³, and the omitted subjects are all *it*, can occur without having any previous major sentences that include the referents. In other words, they can be called as independent minor sentences. However, it is important to note that they all heavily depend on situations. In 37), for instance, it is obvious that the speaker is seeing some accident-like scene. Similarly, for 40), it can easily be imagined that the speaker is eating something and making a comment on it. Without these situations, the sentences are unlikely to occur. Therefore, although they do not exactly fit the Bowman’s definition of “the dependent minor sentence” in that they are independent of previously uttered sentences, but they are probably not truly independent minor sentences either since they never occur without highly specific situations.

Furthermore, a sentence can be a dependent minor sentence with the omission of a subject with immediacy as 43) shows.

- 43) R: Well I will but I can’t. **Can’t** keep the two lines of thought separate. (I)
 (Bowman, 1966, p.55)

However, in other instances, the same subject *I* is omitted, and the resulting sentence can be an independent minor sentence as shown below.

- 44) **Seeking** married
 man 25-40 yrs.
 for good sex
am same
 leave date/time (Zwicky, 1981, p.542)
- 45) A: **Tell** you who I met yesterday
 B: who? (Clark, 1996, p.210)
- 46) M: Go and turn that TV off.
 K: **Think** so. (Bowman, 1966, p.31)

In sum, types of subjects omitted in subjectless sentences are typically subjects of immediacy - subjects who are present at the moment of communication and are easy to retrieve when omitted, namely *I*, *you*, and *we*. Subjects of distance, *s/he*, *it*, and *they*, are possibly

Table 3. Frequently Used Verbs in Subjectless Sentences

Verbs	Examples
1. need (need)	Need a Full-Time Job?, Need help with...?, Need a job now?, Need an elective for Spring semester? (bulletin board)
2. want (want, wanting, wanted)	Want to make some extra money...?, Want some tax relief?, Wanting to upgrade that old dinosaur?, Wanting to build a new computer? (bulletin board), Want a beer? (Clark, 1996, p.214), Wanted to see me (Bowman, 1966, p.47), Want to do it quick,... (Bowman, 1966, p.52), Want some help? (Bowman, 1966, p.54), Want a wedding dress? (<i>Friends</i>)
3. seek (seeking)	Seeking 1 roommate, Seeking married man 25-40 yrs. (bulletin board)
4. have (have, having, had, has)	Having Computer Problems? (bulletin board), Have a car? (Clark, 1996, p.221), Having another fight... (Bowman, 1966, p.54), Why have a scene about it? (Bowman, 1966, p.55), Had that dream, Never had that dream (<i>Friends</i>), Has a sort of greasy taste (Schmerling, 1973, p.585)
5. get (got)	Got a Minute? (bulletin board), Got a light? (Mackenzie, 1998, p.285), Got any spare cash? (Mackenzie, 1998, p.288), Got a few more up there (Bowman, 1966, p.54), So, got any advice?, Got me (<i>Friends</i>)
6. see (see, saw, seen)	Seen it (Mackenzie, 1998, p.285), See you in the morning (Mackenzie, 1998, p.288), Seen any good movies lately? (Zwicky, 1981, p.536), Saw <u>Manhattan</u> last night (Zwicky, 1981, p.537), Saw it where? (Clark, 1996, p.200), See you tonight (Clark, 1996, p.335), See the long life doesn't last ten times longer than the regular battery (Clark, 1996, p.343)
7. send (sent)	Sent me a cable... (Mackenzie, 1998, p.289), Sent you two today... (Zwicky, 1981, p.536)
8. know (know)	Know what I mean? (Mackenzie, 1998, p.292), Know what was great? (<i>Friends</i>), Know what Dick did last spring? (Schmerling, 1973, p.581)
9. guess (guess)	Guess I should be going (Mackenzie, 1998, p.288), Guess I better settle for the short life (Clark, 1966, p.343), Guess I should have been more careful (Schmerling, 1973, p.579)
10. take (take, took)	Took care of mine anyway (Mackenzie, 1998, p.289), What are you going to do when you get home? – Take a nap (Schmerling, 1973, p.579)
11. be (am, was, been)	Seeking married man 25-40 yrs. For good sex am same leave date/time (Zwicky, 1981, p.542), Was what? (Bowman, 1966, p.45), Been in deep freeze for an hour (Bowman, 1966, p.54), Ever been to Chicago? (Schmerling, 1973, p.580), Been to the exhibit yet? (Schmerling, 1973, p.581)
12. think (think)	Think so (Bowman, 1966, p.31), Think I'll have another cup of coffee (Schmerling, 1973, p.582)
13. look (looks)	Looks more like a horse cart (Bowman, 1966, p.55), Looks like an accident (Schmerling, 1973, p.582)
14. feel (feeling, feels)	Feeling as if there is nothing you can do about it? (bulk email), Feels like a real silk (Schmerling, 1973, p.582)
15. seem (seem, seems)	Seem impossible? (bulk email), Seems like the class always wakes up five minutes before the bell rings (Schmerling, 1973, p.582)
16. hope (hope)	Hope to see you there, Hope you enjoy the weekend, Hope you had a nice weekend, Hope you can make it, Hope it is helpful (personal email)
17. go (go, going)	Going to lunch? (Schmerling, 1973, p.579), Why go to the tropics, when the tropics can come to you? (bulk email)
18. find (find)	Find what you were looking for?, Find him yet? (Schmerling, 1973, p.580)

omitted if they have clear referents in previous sentences or perceptual situations in case of the omission of *it* with perception verbs.

Another consideration is given to semantic features of the verbs that typically occur in subjectless sentences.

For the purpose of the discussion here, those examples that lack both subjects and copula, such as *Interested in Egypt?* and those with modals, such as *Wouldn't say no*, are excluded. Table 3 lists the verbs that appear in more than two instances in the current corpus. The verbs are

presented in the infinitive form, and the forms actually used in the instances are given in parentheses.

One thing that can be said about the verbs listed in Table 3 is that they are all frequently used in everyday life or they are not so-called “big words.” That is, most of them occur far more frequently in daily conversation or in informal writing than in formal situations. Another observation may be that many stative verbs (Vendler, 1967) including verbs of perception are found as frequently used in subjectless sentences. Stative verbs can roughly be defined as verbs denoting something beyond human controls. That is, one cannot *need, want, have, see, know, be, feel, seem, or hope* “deliberately or carefully, and none of us can be accused of, or held responsible for, having “done” so either” (Vendler, 1967, p.106). Yet another point is that some subjectless sentences are highly fixed, such as *See you, Got me,* and so on, and therefore it is natural that the verbs used in those fixed expressions are nominated as frequently used verbs in subjectless sentences.

Verbs that may not fall into the category of everyday use can be omitted. When this happens, the following two patterns seem to be typical.

1. Repeating the previously uttered verb

e.g. 47) M: That’s the worst part of it, trying to *separate* the words.

P: **Separate** what words? (Bowman, 1966, p.45)

2. Listing

e.g. 48) AFRICA

VOLUNTEER

in Angola, Mozambique, or Zimbabwe

- **Organize** village health campaigns.
- **Teach** in schools for street children and vocational schools.
- **Assist** small scale farmers in agricultural work.
- **Construct** schools, clinics, and latrines.
(bulletin board)

49) Need an elective for Spring semester?

Explore the Phenomenon of Humor
with Dr. Rick Shade

Get the tools to make any career better.

- **Investigate** humor styles.
- **Learn** how to create positive learning & work environments.
- **Gain** skills to help manage your classroom or any work environment. (bulletin board)

As shown above, the first pattern is the repetition of the previously uttered verb. In repeating the verb in the former sentence, the degree of difficulty or commonness associated with the verb does not play any role in the occurrence of subjectless sentences. Many would probably agree that the verb *separate* as given in 47) is a less common word than, say, the verb *have*. The second pattern is listing, which typically occurs with advertisements as shown in examples 48) and 49). In order to describe the contents accurately and concisely, the writers use any verbs as needed in subjectless sentences regardless of the features of the verbs.

In conclusion, the verbs that typically occur with subjectless sentences are relatively simple and used on an everyday basis, and among them, stative verbs are often observed. Relatively complex verbs can also be found occasionally in situations where the speaker or writer repeats the previously uttered verb or lists contents in advertising.

Pragmatic Considerations

This section devotes to the discussion of pragmatic functions of subjectless sentences. Putting together and expanding various ideas in previous work, three major functions are proposed to explain the use of subjectless sentences in English: 1) conventionalized use, 2) lubricating function, and 3) exclamatory use. Concerning the first function, conventionalized use, Mackenzie (1998) states that “there are a number of fixed phrases and ready-made constructions available in everyday language for holophrastic use” (p.278). Some of the most common fixed expressions are given below.

50) **Thank** you.

51) **See** you.

52) **Got** it.

53) **Got** me.

- 54) **Hope** ...
 55) **Looks** like...
 56) **Sounds** like...
 57) **Depends**.

These fixed expressions can be viewed as the extreme outcome of the speaker's intention to lubricate the conversation. Thus, conventionalized use is closely linked to the lubricating function.

Playing a central role of subjectless sentences, the lubricating function has a great deal with economizing and smoothing interactions. Subjectless sentences are more economical than major sentences since subjects and in some cases other elements are absent. They avoid redundancy in interactions. The best manifestation of this point would be echoic utterances as shown in the following.

- 58) A: That wasn't the guy I met, was it - when *we saw the building*?
 B: **Saw** it where?
 A: When I went over to Chetwynd Road.
 B: Yes. (Clark, 1996, p.200)
- 59) Roger: Now, - um *do you and your husband have a j- car*?
 Nina: **Have** a car?
 Roger: yeah.
 Nina: No. (Clark, 1996, p.221)
- 60) M: Then *you turn it over*.
 E: **Turn** it over. (Bowman, 1966, p.55)
- 61) R: You've got a new battery if *your trouble was nothing but sulphating*.
 K: **Was** what? (Bowman, 1966, p.45)

The subjectless sentences illustrated in examples 58) to 61) are all at least partial repetitions of the previous sentences, which are indicated by italics, but they are maximally economized; that is, they express only the most essential points. The subjects are not the most essential elements in the instances since being presented right in the previous sentences, they are obvious, and they are not the contents that the second speakers want to ask about. Therefore, repeating the subjects would be redundant, and indeed, by not repeating them, the

interactions are lubricated and accelerated.

Bowman observes that "it (a subjectless sentence) seems to contribute a comfortable air of informality" (p.66). This observation is perhaps relevant to the discussion of the lubricating function. Advertisements, for examples, often use subjectless sentences, aiming for the "comfortable air of informality." For example, compare the following two sentences.

- 62) a. **Need** a job now? (bulletin board)
 b. Do you need a job now?

Example 62a) is the one actually found on a bulletin board, and 62b) is the version where the omitted elements are retrieved. The advantage of 62a) over 62b) seems to be more than just saving space and ink. The writer of the advertisement uses the subjectless sentence probably because it is more casual and broken. He or she wishes to convey friendliness or "comfortable air of informality" in order to appeal to readers. In this sense, 62a) is catchier than 62b) - the formal and more complete counterpart. It is not difficult to understand that subjectless sentences are often found in flyers and advertisements because their primary mission is to be catchy. Subjectless sentences lubricate the communication between advertisement makers and their potential customers.

Yet another specific example under the lubricating function can be introduced by Schmerling's (1973) observation. She provides the following two examples (p.581).

- 63) **Know** what Dick did last spring?
 64) **Remember** where we saw Gordon?

Then, she states: "Sentences like this are used by the speaker to lead into a story, or to jar the addressee's memory" (p.581). The following example also belongs to this kind.

- 65) **Know** what was great? The way his smile was kinda crooked.
 (TV show, *Friends*)

Slightly different, but similar examples are provided in Mackenzie (1998, p.292) as shown below.

- 66) One [of the photographers] was a Frog-Jean-Paul something. Belmondo, maybe. St. Laurent army fatigues and a gold chain, very tough with the Gauloises, no filters - **know** what I mean? ‘I was a Left Bank layout ‘til I discovered photo-journalism.’
- 67) ...and furthermore it’s not a rebellion, it’s a secession - **get** the picture?

Mackenzie’s account for the use of the subjectless sentences in 66) and 67) is that it “signals a desire to retain the floor” (p.292). The speakers of 66) and 67) make sure that the addressees are following their stories by inserting subjectless questions in the middle of their stories because they want to keep the addressees motivated to listen to them further. There is a difference between Schmerling’s and Mackenzie’s examples: The subjectless sentences under Schmerling’s “informality” observation typically occur at the beginning of the sentence or even at the beginning of the discourse, and those under Mackenzie’s “retaining the conversational floor” account usually occur discourse medially or finally. However, they have an essential function in common: they both serve as a device of involving the addressee into the speaker’s story. In other words, the addressee is required to give some acknowledgement to what the speaker is going to tell or was telling, but the way subjectless sentences (e.g., *know what I mean?*) require the answer is probably less burdensome to the addressee than the way full sentences (e.g., *do you know what I mean?*) do. Here again, subjectless sentences lubricate communication: they nicely involve the hearer into the speaker’s story.

The last function to be considered is the exclamatory use. The following examples are safely classified into this category.

- 68) Principal Currin: I’m afraid that I’ve got a terrible news. I’ve just received the word sometimes last night someone broke into Ida May’s statue and stole the time capsule.

Encyclopedia Brown: **Stole** it! (Movie, *Encyclopedia Brown*)

- 69) **Did** it again! (Schmerling, 1966, p.583)

In the exclamatory use, known subjects are omitted because the contents of actions, which are expressed by verbal predicates, are much more salient and deserve much more attention. This last function is separated from the lubricating function because its primary role is to show an emotional state of the speaker, such as surprise, annoyance, and so on, rather than to lubricate interactions⁴.

The Conditions for Subjectless Sentences

In this section, a necessary condition and a sufficient condition for subjectless sentences in English are proposed based on all the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic considerations discussed so far. By so doing, it is hoped to provide a clearer picture for the phenomenon of subject deletion in a non-pro-drop language.

The necessary condition is posited as follows:

Necessary Condition

Subjects CAN BE omitted in English when they are obvious and can be easily retrieved either by immediate situations or common ground/shared knowledge between participants.

The syntactic considerations have reached the conclusion that the present tense and the main clause are preferred for subjectless sentences. Also it is found that the simple form is more frequently used than more complex forms, such as the continuous and perfect forms. The semantic considerations have led to the observations that pronoun subjects *I*, *you*, and *we*, whose referents are present at the time of interaction, are more typically omitted than the third person pronouns, *s/he*, *they*, and *it*, and that less complex verbs are more frequently found in subjectless sentences. These conclusions are the basis of the first condition. “Immediate situations” are characterized with here-and-now elements (i.e., the omission of *I*, *you*, and *we* rather than that of *s/he*, *they*, and *it*, and the preference for the present tense) and plainness (i.e., the preferences for the simple form, the main clause, and

less complex verbs). When subjectless sentences have the past tense or the third person pronoun omission, they face the constraint that the previous discourse has to indicate the same tense or the referent of the subject pronoun. This finding is reflected in the condition of common ground/shared knowledge between participants.

It should also be mentioned that subjectless sentences occur more often in informal settings since immediate situations are likely to be available, and it is easier to establish common ground/shared knowledge between participants in an informal setting like conversation among friends than a formal setting like an interview.

The necessary condition denotes when subjects can be omitted. In contrast, the sufficient condition claims when they are omitted. This condition is posited as follows:

Sufficient Condition

Subjects ARE omitted when the necessary condition is met, and the speaker or the writer has an intention to lubricate interactions with others or convey a special emotional attitude.

The major pragmatic findings - the lubricating and exclamatory functions - constitute the basis for the sufficient condition. By meeting this condition, subjectless sentences can be realized as felicitous expressions of thought rather than deficient fragments.

Conclusion

I have examined in this paper the phenomenon of subject deletion in English from syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic points of views. Syntactically, it is found that 1) subjectless sentences occur more often with the present tense, but with the previous indication of the past tense, they are possible with this tense as well, and 2) they seem to be limited to main clauses. Semantically, it is reported that 1) the first and the second person pronouns (pronouns with immediacy) are more frequently omitted than the third person pronouns (pronouns with distance), and 2) the verbs that typically appear with subjectless sentences are those used on an everyday basis. Pragmatically, the lubricating function is found to be the most noteworthy role of subjectless sentences.

These observations constitute the basis for the

proposed conditions - the condition that requires the retrievability of omitted subjects either by immediate situations or common ground/shared knowledge between participants and the condition that requires the speaker/writer's motivation for lubricating interactions with others. It is hoped to help capture the phenomenon of subject deletion in English better and to stress the importance of the minor sentence type.

The study's limitation includes the small size of the corpus. Any generalizations made in the study should be tested with more instances so that they could be revised accordingly for the purpose of increasing their validity.

Notes

- ¹ Another possibility is that the first part of the sentence is the question *do you want to do it quick?* (Riddle, personal communication). If it is the case, my corpus includes no instance of the subject omission in a subordinate clause.
- ² Besides the reason stated, *someone* can easily be omitted since it is too indefinite to be important, and in the example, the stealing is uniquely important and focused (Riddle, personal communication).
- ³ The verb *have* is not strictly a perception verb, but the use of this verb in 42) has an apparent resemblance to the perception verbs given in 36) to 41).
- ⁴ Detecting the exclamatory use of subjectless sentences may sometimes be difficult since it involves examining the surrounding context and the way the speaker utters them.

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