# THE MEANING OF VERBLESS SENTENCES: A CONTRASTIVE CORPUS APPROACH

Where do verbless sentences stand in terms of propositional meaning? 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. Although such structures exist in many languages (e.g. Bertinetto et al., forthcoming; Janda et al., 2020; Goldberg & Perek, 2019; Bîlbîie, 2017; Landolfi et al., 2010; Merle, 2009; Behr et al., 2005; Guillemin-Flescher, 2005; Fernández & Ginzburg, 2002; Lefeuvre, 2001; Benveniste, 1971), their study has been limited by challenges in automatic retrieval. We develop their processing and take a contrastive corpus approach to the phenomenon. 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 (e.g. Stassen, 2013; Weiss, 2013; Kopotev, 2007; McShane, 2000). We develop a methodological framework that combines contrastive linguistics with corpus-driven methods and 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' (Author, 2019; 2021). Notably, we built a 1,4-million-word parallel-and-comparable corpus of 19th–21st century translated realist fiction to enable both quantitative and qualitative contrastive analysis of the verbless phenomenon, automatically retrieved (as per Author, 2021, 2019).

The traditional view of sentence meaning, i.e. that verbs project an argument structure and thereby specify the meaning of a sentence, is unable to account for propositional meaning in verbless structures (e.g. 'Genius!', 'What genius?', 'Off with his head.') without reconstructing the verb either syntactically or semantically. In the present paper we present quantitative contrastive corpus evidence against reconstruction, i.e. supporting arguments that verbless structures are neither syntactic nor semantic reductions (e.g. Elugardo & Stainton, 2005 ; Barton & Progovac, 2005). The potential of verbless structures to constitute *constructs* with non-conventionalized meaning (in the sense of Goldberg & Casenhiser, 2006), further complicates their situation. We propose an explanation of the propositional meaning of verbless structures, including *non-conventionalized* instances, to justify their sentential status.

Relying on contrastive corpus data, we explore the pragmatic implicature of the absence of the verb in English and Russian from a quantitative perspective. Preliminary results reveal the common use of the structures to mark (dis)agreement, quantification, (in)formality, deixis, questioning and emphasis. Contrastively, English tends to use verbless structures to mark particularly indefinite reference (e.g. (a) *What a* strange meeting on *a* strange night.), while emphasis of intensity is statistically important particularly for Russian (e.g. (b) О, эта ужасная тирания большинства!; Oh, *this* terrible tyranny of majority!). Key n-grams 'why not' and 'what for' in English suggest two potential conventionalized forms of verbless sentences. Providing a portrait of what verbless sentences are made of in terms of statistically significant lexical and grammatical elements, our results also identify semantico-pragmatic differences in the use the structures in the two languages.

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