

Finite Verb Forms Without a Subject

This is an attempt to determine when the omission of the subject with a finite verb form is possible. The starting point is the assumption that a finite verb form requires a subject as a rule but in certain instances the subject may be omitted. Here we do not include the instances where the subject (or both the subject and the finite verb form) is occasionally omitted in colloquial speech at the beginning of utterances [(the house) *Could do with a lick of paint* / (he) *Wanted to sell him a vacuum cleaner*; or even: (it will) *Cost you fifteen bob* / *I say, (would you) care to split a ginger-pop with me some time?*]. We shall consider the instances where the subject is stated with a finite verb form and is not repeated with subsequent finite verb forms. The omitted subject is formally or logically identical with the one stated and this, as a rule, comes first. In fact, only one example has been found where the stated subject comes after the omitted one, in the following clause, but as this is a case of prosiopesis, it could be argued that the subject omitted by prosiopesis is the »stated« subject, in which case the omitted subject comes second. Here is the example:

(she) *Has learnt to dabble at planchette, and goes once a week to a senace in Maida Vale, where, with Bluefeather as control, she »gets in touch«* (GWS).

The omitted subject, if inserted, would be either formally identical with the stated one or it would be vicariously represented by the corresponding pronoun. Thus in

Well, Sid can tell me about it while you go in and put on what you call an evening frock (JMP)

the subject before *put* would be *you*, the same as the one before *go*.

With nouns as subject, the omitted subject is the corresponding antecedent personal pronoun rather than the noun itself. Thus in

Helen was still happy with me and **liked** having me around (JPM) the omitted subject before *liked* is *she* rather than *Helen*.

Thus also in the following example the omitted subject is *they* rather than *those*, because the plural of *he (one) who* is usually *those who* and when the relative no longer follows, *those* becomes *they*:

Those who knew how to do it tuned their instruments, and those who did not furtively wiped sweaty hands on their trousers and looked with amazement at the music spread out before them. (EL)

The collected material is divided into two groups. The first group comprises examples with only one finite verb form without subject; the second group is made up of examples of two or more such verb forms.

The instances of finite verb forms in the first group, with very few exceptions, are found after *and*. Of a total of 232 examples belonging to this group, only two occurred after *but* (*Pillars and columns might possibly support an arch or cornice, but were as likely to be employed for their decorative value alone* (OL)), one after *or* (*I had noticed that Art Herz sometimes exhibited pain when I made suggestions or asked for a few minor changes* (JPM)), and three without a coordinating conjunction (*She loves psychology — laps it up like anything* (AM)/ *There is great joy there for my aunt, for there on the legal page Somerset House in all its black delinquency has been caught napping, has been found against by some despairing claimant* (SM)).

It has been found that the subject of the first finite omitted before the second is:

he: *He pulled a straight-backed golden oak chair to the table beside her and picked up a pencil* (JPM)

I: *she nodded and I straightened myself uncomfortably, and felt like a younger officer paying a formal call upon the commanding officer's wife* (JPM)

it: *It thundered like a drum and banged like gunfire as its back burst and swallowed the millionaire's skull in its huge interior* (EL)

noun: *Melville returned to the kitchen table and ate his soft-boiled egg* (JPM)

she: *She had estimated the situation and had taken action* (JPM)

we: *so we went through the Canal and turned north to have a look at Costa Rica* (EL)

which: *The only sound (and it, with the accompanying smell, was quite enough) was the whickering hissing of the gas flares which lit the hall and cast sharp shadows from their noses across the faces of the Brethren (SG)*

who: *The ball was retrieved by a mob of screaming urchins, handed back to the rate-collector, who scratched his hand and then bowled his fast yorker (AGM)*

they: *This they opened and turned into a rough track (SG)*

you: *Then if you had a lasso and lassoed the top of the Monument and climbed up, you could say you had climbed the Monument? (AAM)*

one: *as long as one received a good education and went to church (JPM)*

everybody: *After the hymn, which was sung sitting down, everybody crossed their legs and arranged themselves more comfortably (SG)*

those: *Those who knew how to do it tuned their instruments, and those who did not furtively wiped sweaty hand on their trousers and looked with amazement at the music spread out before them (EL)*

phrase: *poking about with a skewer is fatiguing work and makes me late with the fireplace (HFE)*

combined: *Phil Bentley and I had been trained in the same practical school and spoke the same trade language (JPM)*

The tenses and tense forms of both verbs are mostly the same, but instances of the two verbs being in different tenses or tense forms are quite frequent, e. g.

he had finished his tea and was filling his pipe when Colonel Blount came into the library (EW) / I had never told a living soul of the first time I had kissed a girl and never would (JPM) / but Muriel had a low fever and had told him to go ahead to the Saturday night dance (JPM) / We, the undersigned, have heard that you are again writing against dogs next Sunday, and wish to say that we forgive you in advance (NG) / and Mr Shakespeare Pollock, who had shot off the mark and was well ahead of the field (AGM).

The above considerations show that both the type of subject and the verb form change and what remains as a constant is the conjunction, mostly *and*, so that the conjunction seems to be the decisive element determining whether the second subject can be dropped or not. The cases with *and* seem to follow the

same pattern as two nouns linked by this conjunction. In »a poet and a painter« the reference is usually to two people, as against »a poet and painter« where only one person is involved. In the same way »He had finished his tea and was filling his pipe« refers to one person, whereas »he had finished his tea and he was filling his pipe« could imply that each of the two *he's* refers to a different antecedent. This, however, is no rule, it only indicates the situation where the second subject *may* be omitted. Compare: *He was very polite and he carried her picknick basket and helped her on and off the car* (JPM).

In the case of the two clauses having an element in common (expressed mostly through reference by personal pronouns), the conjunction itself may be dropped:

She loves psychology — laps it up like anything.

Here the construction may be rendered as

SV₁O₁ — V₂O₁

the first O₁ being expressed by *psychology* and then repeated (the second O₁) by the pronoun *it*.

The two clauses of the sentence

Somerset House has been caught napping, has been found against by some dispairing claimant

have the phrase »by some dispairing claimant« in common and, consequently, the conjunction is dropped. If the conjunction *and* is inserted the sentence could be interpreted as »Somerset House has been caught napping and a dispairing claimant has found against it.«

The conjunction does not necessarily have to precede the second finite, it may stand at some other place in the sentence:

Then the local aborigines have a rising, attack some neighbouring islanders, and Miss Wilmer and her girls hurry to their aid in the motor-boat (AM)

The second subject is the more likely to be omitted the simpler the two clauses joined by *and* are. In the case of the two clauses being more complicated, particularly if another clause with a subject of its own is inserted, the subject after *and* is more likely to be repeated:

I had met him first in Boston when he was a reporter on the »Post«, and later I saw something of him in Washington (JPM)

The omission is more likely to occur if the clauses joined by *and* contain a series of events following one upon another or taking place at the same time than when the events stand in a relation other than temporary. Compare:

He looked upon it for a moment in astonishment and then threw it down angrily and (then) started to massage the injured joint (JPM) (where then indicating time sequence is actually found in the sentence or it can be inserted)/ His presence was a jarring note and created a guilty sort of silence (JPM) (at the same time)

with

He had graduated from the catch-as-catch-can class and he deserved his promotion (JPM) (consequence rather than time sequence)

The second group of examples contains instances where more than one finite form occurs without a subject. The conjunction, mostly *and*, comes only between two last clauses (*He backed it out of the barn, turned it correctly into the yard, and went in low out to the street (JPM)*, or the conjunction may be repeated also before other finite forms (*Melville backed away carefully and climbed behind the wheel of the Ford, put the bayonet on the seat beside him and accelerated the motor (JPM) / Gilbert sighed and sat down in his armchair and placed the tips of his long fingers together (JPM)*). The following combinations have been found:

F&F&F (19 examples): *The General checked himself and cleared his throat and laughed at his memory of Svenson while we all waited to hear the anecdote (JPM)*

FF&F (18 examples): *He squared his shoulders, pulled the little gas lever, and let the clutch drop back into high (JPM)*

F&F&F&F (2 examples): *We listen for a while, and hold our breath and open our eyes wide, and then seem to forget about it (JPM)*

F&FF&F (1 example): *Melville backed away carefully, and climbed behind the wheel of the Ford, put the bayonet on the seat beside him and accelerated the motor (JPM)*

FF&F&F (1 example): *It matters little, and luncheon will be congealing on the table with Irene still staring, her eyes popping from her head, trying to discover just who it was who garrotted Mademoiselle, set fire to the Chapel, and tarred and feathered Miss Parkinson's bust (AM)*

FFF&F (5 examples): *Creeping up, he laid his hand on the door-handle silently, twisted as though to the manner born, flung it wide and shouted breezily, »Boo!« (B)*

F&FF&F&F (1 example): *As the orchestra stumbled and fumbled, tottered and shuffled and scuffled away, Nikitin called Juan and Isadore (EL)*

FFFF&F (2 examples): *She plays hockey, »goes down like a nine-pin,« dodges round the right-back, scores the winning hit, and is handed a medal by Sir Richard Trevallion (EL)*

FF&FF&F&F (1 example): *Then Colonel Blunt shut his book with a broad sweep of his arm rather as the headmaster of Adam's private school used to shut the Bible after evening prayer, folded his napkin carefully and stuffed in into a massive silver ring, muttered some words of grace and finally stood up saying: »well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to have a little nap,« and tottered out of the room (EV)*

FFFFFFFF&F&F (1 example): *He halted at the wicket before going back for his run, glared at Mr Harcourt, who had been driven out to umpire by his colleagues — greatly to the regret of Mr Bason, the landlord of the Shoes — glared at Mr Southcott, took another reef in his belt, shook out another inch in his braces, spat on his hand, swung his arm three or four times in a meditative way, grasped the ball tightly in his colossal palm, and then turned smartly about and marched off like a Pomeranian grenadier and vanished over the brow of the hill (AGM)*

One example with *but*: *Staircases no longer took the shortest route from one floor to another but writhed and curled in every direction (OL)*

The omitted subjects are: *he, I, it, noun, she, they, we, who and you.*

The subject may be omitted after the second and subsequent finite verb forms when they come after *or, but* and particularly *and*, and when the omitted subject is formally and/or logically identical with the subject stated and the clauses represent a string of consecutive events or events taking place at the same time, no matter whether the finite form with the subject omitted has the same tense form as the form with the stated subject or it has a different tense form. All instances of the omission of the subject have the subject-verb word-order, no instances of inversion have been recorded.

The examples used in this paper are from the novel *Melville Goodwin, USA* by John J. Marquand (Bantam Books, New York, 1954) — abbreviated as JPM in the text — and the anthology *A Book of Wit and Humour*, chosen and presented by Michael Basley (Pan Books Ltd, London, 1954) from which examples have been taken from the following authors:

Evelyn Waugh (EW)
A. A. Milne (AAM)
A. P. Herbert (APH)
Osbert Lancaster (OL)
Ivor Brown (IB)
W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman (S&Y)
A. G. Macdonell (AGM)
Eric Linklater (EL)
Stella Gibbons (SG)
Timothy Shy (D. B. Wyndham Lewis — TS)
Arthur Marshall (AM)
Stevie Smith (SM)
Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon (B&S)
Nicholas Bentley (NB)
Michael Barsley (MB)
C. A. Lejeune (CAL)
H. F. Ellis (HFE)
Dane Chandos (DC)
Beachcomber (J. B. Morton — B)
Angela Milne (AMi)
Maurice Richardson (MR)
Marghanita Laski (ML)
Nathaniel Gubbins (NG)
Patric Campbell (PC)