

Irregularities of Sentence Structure in Contemporary Colloquial English

Markéta Malá

The paper attempts to describe and classify the irregular sentences characteristic of present-day colloquial English¹. Only those structures satisfying the following criteria of sentence status have been considered: the criterion of complete intonation contour (reflected in punctuation in written texts) has been adopted for distinguishing the sentence with respect to higher units. The criterion of identifiability of the predicative function in the sentence is used to differentiate it from lower units, from denomination. Both parcels, e.g. *He wants me to go down to see him. In London. To fix things up.*, and sentence fragments, aposiopeses, such as e.g. *Where is my, are you reading my pamphlet?*, were excluded from the description on the basis of the above criteria.

The syntactic structure of colloquial English comprises two large groups of sentences: first, syntactically regular sentences identical with those found in the neutral sphere of the language, and "regularly incomplete" sentences - i.e. elliptical structures derived from the regular sentences. The second group consists of irregular sentences occurring only in the domain of colloquial English. According to Bowman the irregular sentences constitute about 25 to 35% of the informal dialogue (cf. Bowman, 1966).

The opinions on what makes a sentence regular or irregular vary, but the most generally accepted feature of a regular sentence is the presence of both a subject and a finite-verb predicate in a complete sentence structure. As far as the completeness of a sentence is concerned, there appear to occur two principally different types of incomplete sentences in colloquial English. The incompleteness of a large group of sentences is of elliptical character. Elliptical sentences are derived from regular patterns according to certain rules. They lack constituents that can be uniquely recovered from the linguistic or situational context and inserted in the elliptical construction, which results in a grammatically complete, regular sentence with the same communicative function as the corresponding elliptical sentence. Such incompleteness can be therefore considered regular. On the contrary, nonelliptical irregular sentences, although superficially incomplete, are in fact complete in themselves in that they neither require nor permit any unique extension. However, the boundary between ellipsis and nonelliptical sentences is not clear-cut. There are many transitional instances.

We shall concentrate on the nonelliptical irregular sentences typical of colloquial English only. These structures are either subjectless or contain both the subject and the predicate. The subjectless sentences are irregular not only in terms of their incompleteness but they also deviate from the central "unmarked" way of expressing the predicate in that their predicate is nominal, i.e. expressed by means other than the finite verb. Irregular nonelliptical sentences containing both the subject and the predicate can be further analysed in terms of the means of expressing the predicate. The irregularity of this type may consist

¹ The description is based on 455 examples of irregular sentences obtained from 23 contemporary British theatre and radio plays.

in the nominal realisation of the predicate. If the predicate is expressed by the finite verb, the sentence shows a deviation from the regular pattern on a level higher than that of the simple sentence itself. This is the case of subordinate clauses operating as independent sentences. Their irregularity consists in the irregular function of the subordinator (*if* or *that*) which operates here as a fixed opening of a distinct sentence type rather than as a dependence marker. Certain types of irregular sentences can become parts of complex sentences.

In the following paragraphs, a description of some of the individual subtypes of irregular sentences will be given². The starting point of the classification is the formal structure of the sentence; however, further subclassification is based on the communicative (discourse) function of the given sentence which is often context-bound and displays some degree of emotional involvement on the part of the speaker.

Subjectless nominal predicate sentences constituted 85% of the excerpts. These sentences frequently display a tendency towards a **specific structure** often characterised by a fixed opening, e.g.

1. a. What if he wakes up when we're out?
b. A: And you can come and live with us. B: What if I don't want to?
2. In the end, what I feel for Janusz is pity. And to think he brought it all on himself.
3. The way that shit of a driver took the corners, my bum skidding, my stomach churning, my head pounding.
4. a. God, how awful.
b. What gaiety.
5. Why stop it if you enjoy it?

However, the degree of fixedness seems to form a gradient. At one end of the scale there are formulae. In stereotyped social situations even whole conversations take the form of formulae:

6. A: Goodbye. Good luck. B: And you.

The fixed question *So what?*, has become formulaic and changed its communicative function to an expression of disagreement with the presupposed opinion of the preceding speaker:

7. So she gives him a lift home, so what?

At the other end of the scale there are the directives (ex. 8.), especially the adverbial ones (ex. 9.), that have no fixed opening.

8. a. Don't be afraid, Mary. Courage!
b. Not another drug addict, Grant, please.
9. Up mountain and glacier!

² For a more detailed classification and description of further subtypes of irregular sentences cf. also Malá (2000).

Also, usually a verb of motion is implied and the more unique the verb, the more plausible the elliptical interpretation of the sentence. What makes it possible to describe the adverbial directives as fixed is the invariable connection of this type of nonevaluative adverbial predicate sentence with directive communicative function. On the other hand, the formally fixed sentences beginning with *What* or *How* about followed by a noun (pronoun) have two distinct communicative functions: that of a real question, often introducing the topic of the following conversation (ex. 10.a.), and that of an invitation or suggestion (ex. 10.b.). The same construction with gerund instead of the noun is limited to the latter function only (ex. 10.c.).

10. a. *What about Michael? How was he? Was he all right?*
 b. *Well, mightn't it help if you published something? What about a monograph?*
 c. *What about our publishing your fellowship dissertation?*

Infinitive clauses introduced by *Oh* expressing an exclamatory wish (ex. 11.a.) are often used without the poetic or archaic fixed opening in informal speech (ex. 11.b.), even though it makes their communicative function context-bound rather than sentence-structure-bound.

11. a. *Oh to be free!*
 b. A: *Well, we used to lie in every weekend.* B: *Oh don't. A lie in. What I wouldn't give for a lie in, and to read the Sunday papers in bed.*

Some of the subjectless sentence types do not have a fixed opening but the form of the whole sentence is fixed, e.g. the directive type in ex. 12 is formed by a nominal predicate denoting the desired object or state to which the noun or pronoun referring to the person involved in the implied action is connected by the preposition *for*.

12. *Psychiatrics for her.*

A second large group of subjectless sentences comprises structures with **nominal predicate only**. The communicative function of this type of sentences is totally dependent on the context. To illustrate this we can quote A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (Quirk et al., 1985: 850) interpreting the exclamatory sentence *The door!* as *Shut the door!*, *Watch the door!*, *Open the door!*, or even *Leave the room!*, to which we can add an example (ex. 13) which falls also into its category expressing the "alarm or frustration after a period of forgetfulness":

13. [A and B start to make love. C appears at the doorway, stops.] A: *Oh, the door.* B: *Oh yes.* [B crosses to door, closes it].

B's reaction shows that the context makes it possible to interpret these sentences although they have no distinctive form, which is why we suggest to subclassify them on the basis of the word class representing the predicate.

Within the given context, some of these sentences perform a single function, e.g. in ex. 14 the declarative nominal sentence gives an explanation of the cause or circumstances of the event and a corresponding interrogative type asks about these.

14. a. *Enid can't get this far. Her rheumatism.*
 b. A: *In fact I'm on a sick leave at the moment. I had an accident.* B: *Car?*
Motorbike? Plane, train, hovercraft?

Frequently, these sentences perform more functions simultaneously. They serve as means of textual cohesion and progression, and they convey an appeal or evaluation at the same time. So examples 15.a. and b. represent sentences, often beginning with a preposition, that introduce the topic of the following conversation and also involve an appeal to change the topic, the speaker or the activity.

15. a. *Now of my belief in capitalism and revolution, do both exist, are both a good thing, or does one exist while the other is a good thing and if so which?*
 b. *And now, led by a choir, a sing-song.*

Sentences exemplified by ex. 16. serve to make the preceding statement more correct or accurate and may also indicate the speaker's attitude.

16. a. A: *What about the councillor?* B: *The magistrate.*
 b. A: *We could make our own dinners. Have our tea with the family.* B: *The same house as your family?*

With the ex. 17. type of sentences the speaker comments negatively and often ironically on the preceding context, usually summarising it. S/he implies being familiar with the topic and having had negative experience with it.

17. A: *Hagg was a brother to me.* B: *Ah, fraternal love! I have heard of such things.*
 [self-mocking].

The most common type of subjectless sentences is constituted by those functioning as an evaluation of something present in the linguistic or situational context or asking about such evaluation. The predicate is adjectival or nominal. If the noun itself does not have an evaluative meaning, it is modified by an adjective:

18. a. A: *He's a vegetarian.* B: *Poor chap.*
 b. A: *How about you?* B: *Went to Di's parents at the weekend.* A: *Fun?*
 c. A: *And all this for little Debbie.* A: *A very lucky young lady.*
 d. *She's not the least bit interested in politics.* B: *Lucky lady.*
 19. a. A: *I think he's got a talent quite definitely.* B: *Marvellous.*
 b. *Neat, isn't it?*

Some of the nominal predicate sentences allow for elliptical interpretation (ex. 18.c.) but, as ex. 18.d. shows, others are to be understood as nonelliptical, the absence of the article as compared with a complete sentence suggesting the nonelliptical interpretation. There are no indicators of nonelliptical interpretation in adjectival predicate sentences. On the contrary, the question tags appended to them (ex. 19.b.) often support their treatment as ellipsis of subject + *be*.

As we have mentioned before, the principal irregularity of the **sentences with a subject and predicate structure** may consist in that the predicate is expressed by other means than the finite verb. But this is not the only irregularity encountered in these sentences. The most frequent type, exemplified here by ex. 20., deviates not only from the normal realisation of the predicate but also from the neutral word-order as well as from the unmarked theme – rheme ordering: the rhematic nominal predicate is in initial position, followed by the thematic subject.

20. a. *Very worrying this, Helen.*
b. *Greedy creatures, gulls.*

The imperative type, ex. 21., can either follow the unmarked subject – predicate sequence (21.a.) or have the reversed order (21.b.).

21. a. *All passengers in the subway please.*
b. *Pens down everybody.*

Here the irregularity consists not only in the subjective rheme – theme order in the latter type of sentences and in the nonverbal predicate, but also in the presence of subject in an imperative sentence. However, some of these sentences can be interpreted as ellipsis of a finite verb of motion, the closeness to ellipsis depending on the uniqueness of the verb implied. The following exclamatory or interrogative type, ex. 22., makes use of repetition as a device of conveying surprise or doubt.

22. A: *They (= he + Dorcas) cycle everywhere, didn't you know? He's the fittest man I've ever met.* B: *Yes, but Dorcas cycling. I don't believe it.*

The two types of subordinate clauses used irregularly as independent sentences to express an exclamatory wish in case of *if*-clauses (ex. 23.) and disapproval or regret in case of independent *that*-clauses with putative *should* (ex. 24.) have both been thoroughly described in the literature (cf. Dušková, 1991).

23. *Everything I do is a mistake. If I could start again, but how far back.*
24. *That I should have hit Humpty. Of all people.*

The *if*-clauses represent the only colloquial finite-verb simple-sentence type English has for the expression of a wish, the *that*-clauses, stylistically marked as formal, illustrate the fact that the expression of emotion in colloquial English leads to deviations from the normal on all levels, including that of stylistic characteristics.

Certain types of irregular sentences can become parts of complex sentences, sometimes changing their communicative function in the process:

25. *A man that's been in the sea a week has no eyes. You can tell how long he's been there, threshed around, by his face. Ten days and it's the lips and the nose.*
26. a. *You're leaving this minute and you're taking that young man with you. Honestly, Helen. Turning up like this. What are my neighbours going to say, and you a married woman.*
- b. A: *I married John yesterday.* B: *You a married woman.*

Example 25. shows that subjectless nominal clauses appear in a conditional relationship to the following regular clause, to which they are often connected by *and*. If the order of the clauses is reversed (ex. 26.a.), the irregular clause of the subject-nominal predicate type functions as an adverbial referring to the circumstances of what is expressed by the preceding clause, conveying the speaker's disapproval. If the same nominal clause is used independently (ex. 26.b.), it has a rather different function, i.e. that of conveying the speaker's surprise. However, the change in function does not seem to be a regular feature accompanying the inclusion of a nominal sentence into a complex sentence.

The large number of sentence types whose function is dependent on the context, linguistic or situational, supports the theory that the significance of function tends to prevail over the significance of structure in colloquial English (when compared with the neutral layer of the language), described by Skrebnev as the implicative tendency (Skrebnev, 1985). Instances of subjectless nominal predicate sentences formed merely by the predicate (exx. 13. - 19.) or independently used clauses formally marked as subordinate (exx. 23. - 24.) can be regarded a manifestation of this tendency. However, it is interesting to note that when some of the colloquial structures violate the neutral patterns they do not remain in the form of independent clause elements of the former patterns but constitute new sentence types with a tendency towards a specific structure and communicative function, e.g. the pattern *Why (+ not) + predicate* functioning as a suggestion or a question (ex. 5.), or the fairly fixed subject – nominal predicate sentence type with subjective word-order (ex. 20.). This tendency, termed explicative by Skrebnev, seems to oppose (and balance) the implicative tendency.

Literature

- Bauer, J. and M. Grepl (1980) *Skladba spisovné češtiny*. Praha, SPN
- Bowman, E. (1966) *The minor and fragmentary sentences of a corpus of spoken English*. The Hague, Mouton & Co.
- Daneš, F. (1987) "Cognition and emotion in discourse interaction: a preliminary survey of the field." Preprints of the Plenary Session Papers, XIVth International Congress of Linguists. Berlin 10.-15. August 1987, 272 – 291.
- Dušková, L. a kol. (1988) *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny*. Praha, Academia.
- Dušková, L. (1991) "An Attempt at a Classification of Irregular Sentences and Nonsentences." *Acta Universitatis Carolinae 1, Prague Studies in English* 19, 71 – 81.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and R. Hasan (1976) *Cohesion in English*. London, Longman
- Malá, M. (2000) "Irregular Sentences in Colloquial English", *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica* 5, 1997. *Prague Studies in English* 22, 79 - 90.
- Mathesius, V. (1911) "Poznámky o tzv. ellipse a anglických větách neslovesných." Praha, *Sborník filologický*, roč. II., část II., 215 – 234.

- Mathesius, V. (1975) *A Functional Analysis of Present Day English on a General Linguistic Basis*. Praha, Academia.
- Mluvnice češtiny, 3 – Skladba (1987). Praha, Academia.
- Nekvapil, J. (1993) "On the Asymmetry between Syntactic and Elementary Textual Units", in *Studies in Functional Stylistics*, eds J. Chloupek and J. Nekvapil, Academia, 186 – 222.
- Nosek, J. (1969) "Pause and Repetition in Modern Colloquial English", *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Philologica* 3, *Prague Studies in English* 13, 35 – 58.
- Nosek, J. (1971) "Truncated Utterances in Modern Colloquial English", *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Philologica* 5, *Prague Studies in English* 14, 89 – 108
- Peprník, J. (1950) "Nominální věty v moderní anglické próze." *Časopis pro moderní filologii*, roč. 34, č.1, 40 – 41.
- Quirk, R. and S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, J. Svartvik (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London, Longman.
- Skrebnev, Ju. M. (1985) *Vvedenije v kollokvialistiku*. Saratovsk, Izdatel'stvo Saratovskogo universiteta.