The Zero Copula in Russian and Arabic Sentences as Compared with English

Japen Sarage, M.A.

English Education Department of Ahmad Dahlan University
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
japen.sarage@gmail.com

Abstract: Research in linguistics is marked by an analysis of linguistic data in the terms of linguistic units ranging from morphemes to sentences even to discourse. Apart from such data, there is a linguistic fact that a certain unit is absent from the data but its absence can be understood from the arrangement of other linguistic data. In morphology, linguists are familiar with zeromorpheme, where a non-existent morpheme is added to convert a word class into another. Since syntax deals with words as the smallest unit, the absence of certain word may mark a linguistic phenomenon.

In English, the absence of relative pronoun which is understood in the sentence the answer I received was satisfying. This fact can be traced through a comparison with The answer, which I received, was satisfying. In English syntax, a subject and a verb play an important role, where anyone of them cannot be absent from a sentence. In Arabic the copulative verb is represented by kāna as found in kāna l-jawwāxārran (was-the weather- hot) The weather was hot. The verb kāna in a certain condition is not present. The same case happens in Russian. The sentence Tatyana bylastudien kāna татянабуластудентка (Tatyana was-a student) Tatyana was a student. has a copulative verb byl where in a certain condition it is omitted.

This paper deals with the absence of copulative verb in Arabic and in Russian known as zero copula where such a case does not appear in English. Furthermore, it is also concerned with verb conjugation, which is not found in English. It is important to know that Russian belongs to an analytic language and English is a synthetic one whereas Arabic shows both characteristics.

Keyword: copulative verb, case, conjugation, zerocopula.

1. INTRODUCTION

The existence of linguistic data such as morphemes, phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourse is very important in language research. These data are described, classified, manipulated, and analyzed in order that a linguistic phenomenon be understood. Through these data any linguistic processes can be determined and even some other hidden and nonexistent data can be predicted and explained. Consider the followings:

(1) The answer, which I received, was satisfying.
(2) The answer I received was satisfying.

In (1) the word which is possible to eliminate so as to produce (2). The absence of the relative pronoun or connector (Gelderen, 2010:) which does not affect the ability of the clause I received to attach to the head word answer. Sentence (1) can be diagrammed in the following.

From (3) it is clear that the connector which together with sentence S (others name it a clause), which consists of a noun phrase (NP) defined as something built round noun and a verb phrase (VP) defined as something built round verb comprise a connector phrase (CP). The VP consists of a verb and an embedded object answer resulting in a null NP Ø.
In the same way, sentence (2) can also be diagrammed in the following:

In this diagram the null NP is embedded with the N answer whereas the connector is nonexistent represented by null connector Ø. Thus, both embedded part and zero part are marked by Ø.

The zero linguistic element in the above sentence shows its function as a connector. This phenomenon may happen in other languages. In Arabic, for example, there is a copulative verb that joins an NP and a VP, where the VP can be absent. In English a sentence must have two obligatory elements i.e. an NP and a VP. These two elements may be embedded in a clause but their existence is, of course, able to be explained. On the contrary those two elements are not a must in Arabic. A sentence can have no verb. Consider the following:

(5) \textit{L-madīnatu ʔāmiratun.}

\textit{the town-busy}

\textit{The town is busy.}

The above sentence definitely has no verb. In fact, there is an agreement between the two elements the topic \textit{l-mubtada ʕ} and comment \textit{habar}. The topic or NP is feminine and the comment Adj. is also feminine with the suffix -\textit{tu(n)}.

(6) \textit{Kānat l-madīnatu ʔāmiratun.}

\textit{was-the town-busy}

\textit{The town was busy.}
The verb Kānat in the above sentence also indicates an agreement with both the topic and comment. In short, the sentence in (5) and (6) have shown the nonexistent linguistic element or zero element.

A zero linguistic element is also found in Russian. The Russian copulative verb sometimes appear in a sentence and is sometimes absent from it. The followings may explain the case.

(7) Tatyana studentka. татьянаСтудентка
Tatyana-a student
Tatyana is a student.

Sentence (7) shows no verb in it. The sentence consists of two NPs Tatyana and studentka. Without a comparison with another sentence (minimal pair analysis) the zero linguistic element is not found. Thus, sentence (7) should be compared with the following:

(8) Tatyana bylastudentka татьянаБывала студентка
Tatyana-was-a student
Tatyana was a student.

Sentence (8) above reveals an element, which is absent in (7). The copulative verb byla is absent from sentence (7). This is then called the zero part of the sentence or zero copula.

The above mentioned phenomenon i.e. the zero copula is interesting to study since in English such a case is not found. This paper tries to see the presence and the absence of copulative verbs in Arabic and in Russian and their role in syntax. It also tries to investigate the agreement or concord among sentence elements in those languages.

2. Copulative Verb

The following section discusses the copula in English, Russian, and in Arabic, which covers their forms, absence in sentences, and their agreement to other syntactic functions.

2.1. English Copula

In English, verbs are distinguished depending on what object or subject they select (Gelder, Elly, 2010:72). Verbs that select an object are called transitive verbs i.e. mono and ditransitive. Verbs that select a subject predicate, others called it subject complement, are called copulative or linking verbs. The subject predicates or the subject complements are mainly realized by an Adj.P.

(9) He is pleasant.

An NP. or a PP. can be a subject predicate when it makes a claim about the subject such as the followings.

(10) He is a nice person.
(11) He is in the garden.

The above sentences use is as the copula, which agrees to its subject. In English the copula agrees to the subject in number and person. See the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Past</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td>was</td>
<td>am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>were</td>
<td>are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>was</td>
<td>is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some verbs may take the position of be such as become, look, appear, feel, etc. These verbs are also called copulative verbs. The position of the copulative verb in English comes directly after the NP, which is the subject of the sentence.

2.2. Russian Copula

Unlike in English, in Russian a copulative verb can come before or after an NP as the subject of the sentence or even it can come at the end of a sentence. As we know Russian belongs to an
analytical language where the order of words is relatively free. Cinque, Guglielmo and Kayne, Richard S. (2005:402) present the following verbal sentences as an illustration.

(12) Ученикi прiнесли квiтцi.
пupils.nom brought flowers.acc
‘The students have brought flowers.’

(13) Квiтцi прiнесли ученикi.
flowers.acc brought pupils.nom
‘Students brought the flowers.’

(14) Квiтцi ученикi прiнесли.
flowers.acc pupils.nom brought
‘It was flowers that the students have brought.’

(15) Ученикi прiнесли квiтцi.
pupils.nom brought flowers.acc
‘It was students who brought the flowers.’

(16) Ученикi прiнесли квiтцi.
pupils. nom brought flowers.acc
‘The students have (already) brought flowers.’

The words in the above sentences take different positions with the same syntactic functions. The function of each word is marked by the case. This fact is also found in the sentence containing a copulative verb such as the following.

(17) Я буду гатов.
Я буду гатов.
I will ready
I will be ready.

(18) Буду я гатов.
буду я гатов.
will I ready
It will be me who will be ready.

(19) Гатов буду я.
Гатов буду я.
ready will I.
It will be ready of me.

The above mentioned sentences show different position of the copulative verbбуду in the future form, which agrees with the subject in the nominative formя известно as conjugation. With a conjugation, a subject in nominative case can be left out. Thus, without the subject я, the sentence is well understood.

(20) Буду гатов. Буду гатов.
will ready.
(I) Will be ready.

Other conjugations of Russian copulative verb can be seen in the following diagram.

Table 2. The Conjugation of Russian Copulative Verb in Future Tense (Lexus, 1997:28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Person</td>
<td>буду-буду</td>
<td>будем-будем</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>будьем</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Person</td>
<td>будйеш-будешь, you (familiar)</td>
<td>будьте-будует, you (familiar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>будять-будет, he/she/it</td>
<td>будут-будут</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The conjugation of Russian copulative verb in the future tense consider number and person. In (20) the number is singular and the person is first person. The first person plural conjugation of Russian copulative verb is будем, which means we. Thus, sentence (20) can have the first person plural subject we, which results in:

(21) Будем гатов. Будем гатов.
will ready
The Zero Copula in Russian and Arabic Sentences as Compared with English

(We) will be ready.

The subject of the sentence we is conjugated with the copulative verb. Thus it can be omitted as seen in (21).

In addition to the conjugation of Russian copulative verb in future tense, the conjugation in past tense considers number and gender. It does not consider the person. This fact can be seen in the following table.

Table 3. The Conjugation of Russian Copulative Verb in Past Tense (Lexus, 1997:28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Neuter</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>byл</td>
<td>была</td>
<td>были</td>
<td>были</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he</td>
<td>she</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned before, the conjugation makes it possible to omit the subject in the sentence when it has been understood as a result of mentioning before. Thus, the sentence:

(22) Byla student. Была студент.

is clearly understood to have the subject third person feminine she. If the subject is the third person masculine the conjugation will be byл, which means he. In the case of the conjugation in plural form, there is no distinction of gender so the same form of copulative verb были is applied to all genders. The sentence:

(23) Byli student. Были студент.

can convey the subject of feminine, masculine, or mixed.

In contrast to the subject omission, the Russian copula is omitted in the present tense. As a result both the subject and the complement in the present tense are always present. The following sentences show a zero copula or the omitted copula.

(24) Ana na rabotye. Она на работе. (Ooms, Miriam, 1994:35)

She at work.

She (is) at work.

(25) Ya tozhe student. Ятоже студент. (Ooms, Miriam, 1994:51)

I also student.

I (am) also a student.

The zero copula indicates something present i.e. the presence of the tense. The agreement occurs between the subject and the complement indicating gender and number.

2.3. Arabic Copula

If a copula can occupy different positions in Russian as a result of its analytical language, Arabic shows a bit different characteristic. This language is also classified as an analytical language but to some degree it still considers a word order or arrangement. The Arabic kāna can move freely in a sentence in two positions, where in Russian the copula can occupy three positions i.e. initial, medial, and final. The following positions of Arabic copula are possible:

(26) Kāna l-jawwu xārran! كان الجوهر الحار! (Badawi, El Said, 2002:400)

was the weather hot.

The weather was hot.

(27) L-jawwu kāna xārran! الجوهر كان حار! the weather was hot.

It was the weather that was hot.

The copula presents at initial position of the already connected subject and complement as in (26). It indicates a certain grammatical meaning i.e. the past tense form. The copula kāna can also
appear in between the subject and complement. It really links or joins them as in (27). Arabic belongs to a VSO language where the VP precedes the NP.

Arabic knows two kinds of sentences i.e. nominal and verbal sentence orِ l-jumlatu l-ismiyatu and l-jumlatu –lfi’liyyatu. Besides the copula kāna, it appears in nominal sentences like in (26) and in (27), it can also appear in a verbal sentence. We can compare the following sentences

(28) Yadzhu Zaidun.  
laughing Zaid  
Zaid is laughing.  
(Thahir, In’aam Ismail, 2009:6)

(29) Kāna Zaidu yadzhu.  
was Zaid laughing  
It was Zaid, who was laughing.  

From the above mentioned sentences, we know the default is sentence (28) whereas sentence (29) belongs to a derived sentence. Thus, sentence (27) is also a derived sentence.

For a nominal sentence, the absence of a copula or the zero copula in Arabic means a different thing. It indicates the simple present tense. Consider the following.

(30) L-jawwu bāridun.  
the weather cold  
The weather is cold.  
(Thahir, In’aam Ismail, 2009:6)

Although there is no copula in the above sentence, there is still an agreement i.e. agreement between the subject and the complement. In the sentence the agreement is between the third person masculine singular noun and the third person masculine singular adjective. The following sentence shows the agreement between the subject l-bintu and the complement jamīlatun indicating third person singular feminine.

(31) L-bintu jamīlatun.  
the girl beautiful  
The girl is beautiful.  

In addition to the zero copula, the presence of copula indicates tenses i.e. the past tense such as kāna (26) and in (27). Furthermore, its inflective form yakūnu is used to indicate the future tense. Consider the following sentence.

(32) Sayakūnu hunā.  
will (he) be here.  
He will be here.  
(Thahir, In’aam Ismail, 2009:7)

In the above mentioned sentence, the copula contains the element of third person singular masculine pronoun and the future time. All of them are integrated in the verb or the copula known as conjugation. In other words the Arabic conjugation involves gender, number, and person. The following table shows conjugation of the copula in imperfective or future tense (Abu-Chacra, Faruk 2007:109.)

Table 3. The Conjugation of Arabic Imperfective Copula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person and Gender</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Dual</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.m</td>
<td>yakūnu</td>
<td>yakūnāni</td>
<td>yakūnūna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.f</td>
<td>takūnu</td>
<td>takūnāni</td>
<td>takūnūna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. m</td>
<td>takūnu</td>
<td>takūnāni</td>
<td>takūnūna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. f</td>
<td>takūnīna</td>
<td>takūnāni</td>
<td>takunna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. m.f.</td>
<td>t'akūnu</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>nakūnu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In sentence (32) the prefix sa- س indicates the future tense where the rest of the word indicates third person masculine (See table 3.)

The special use of Arabic copula is seen in the derived sentence as in (29). The sentence containing a subject and a complement in the present tense i.e. with the zero copula, can be emphasized with the use of imperfective copula.

(33) Yakūnu l-jawwu jamīlu inda mā tasyaqu l-syamsu

was the weather beautiful when rises the sun.

*The weather is beautiful when the sun rises.*

The sentence shows the use copula for emphasis.

As Arabic copula is used in future tense and it involves conjugation, the copula in the past tense or in the perfective form also conjugates with the subject of the sentence considering the person, number, and gender. The following table indicates the conjugation of the copula with its person, number, and gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. The Conjugation of Arabic Perfective Copula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Person and Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. m. f.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of the copula kāna كن is exemplified in sentence (26) and (27). In the following sentence all the words i.e. the copula, subject, and the complement agree one to another.

(34) Kānat Zaidatu jamīlatun.

*Zaidah was beautiful*

Zaidah was beautiful.

The above sentence is the default form of Arabic sentence where it follows VSO principle. The derived sentence is the one like (27).

3. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion we can conclude that there is a copula in English, Arabic, and Russian. In English the copula agrees with person and number whereas in Arabic and Russian it agrees with person, number, and gender. Arabic and Russian copula is sometimes absent indicating the present tense while in English it is always present. The position of English copula is the middle, the Arabic copula is the initial and the middle, and the Russian copula is the initial, the middle, and the final position. In Arabic and in Russian there is a conjugation, which makes it possible to omit the subject of the sentence whereas in English there is no such a thing that a subject always present in a sentence.

The discussion on syntax becomes interesting because certain things can be expressed in different ways. This fact results in the idea of the default and derived sentence.

REFERENCES


Gelder, Elly van, 2010, *An Introduction to English Grammar*, Amsterdam, John Benjamin Publication

Ooms, Miriam, 2002, *Russian Basic Course*, Moscow, Berlitz

Potapova, Nina, 1959, Russian, Elementary Course, Moscow, Foreign Language Publishing House


Thahir, In’aam Ismail, 2009, *Journal Al-Fatih*, Diyala Iraq, Diyala University