

Towards an Empirical Characterisation and a Corpus-Driven Taxonomy of Fragments in Written Contemporary English

Hacia una caracterización empírica y una taxonomía de fragmentos en inglés escrito contemporáneo

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This study investigates ‘fragments’ in contemporary English. Fragments are structurally non-canonical constituents that convey the propositional meaning of a full clause, such as *Good Old Hendon next stop* or *What a weirdo*. This investigation constitutes an innovative approach to the topic since it (i) explores fragments in exclusively written (i.e. planned/edited) discourse, and (ii) aims at providing a corpus-driven taxonomy and an empirical account of the constructions, strategies and phenomena that are classifiable as fragments based on linguistically objectifiable (formal/textual) criteria, two areas much neglected in prior literature. The results reveal that fragments are not uncommon in written registers, particularly in letters and novels/stories. The most frequent types identified are phrasal and verbless, followed by clausal, *wh*-fragments and Small Clauses. Most of them show a high rate of subject and/or verb omission whose recoverability in context is facilitated by means of functional elements or latent lexical items licensed by the construction itself.

Keywords: *fragment; ellipsis; corpus-driven; written discourse; parsing*

Este estudio investiga ‘fragmentos’ en inglés contemporáneo. Los fragmentos son constituyentes estructuralmente no canónicos que tienen el significado proposicional de una cláusula completa, como *Good Old Hendon next stop* o *What a weirdo*. Esta investigación constituye un enfoque innovador sobre el tema ya que (i) explora los fragmentos en el discurso escrito exclusivamente y (ii) tiene como objetivo elaborar una taxonomía basada en corpus y una descripción empírica de las construcciones, estrategias y fenómenos clasificables como fragmentos basada en criterios lingüísticos objetivables (formales/textuales), dos cuestiones poco exploradas en la literatura previa. Los resultados revelan que los fragmentos no son infrecuentes en los registros escritos, especialmente en las cartas y las novelas/historias. Los tipos más frecuentes identificados son frasales y sin verbo, seguidos de clausales, *wh*- y Small Clauses. La mayoría muestran una gran proporción de omisión de sujeto y/o verbo, recuperables en el contexto mediante elementos funcionales o elementos léxicos latentes justificados por la construcción en la que aparecen.

Palabras clave: *fragmento; elipsis; corpus; discurso escrito; análisis sintáctico*

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language shows a wide variety of stand-alone constructions which, despite their reduced, non-canonical, fragmentary structure, are still semantically, discursively and

pragmatically equivalent to a complete clause construction. Consider (1)-(3) – italicisation is used throughout the paper to identify fragments and underlining to signal unexpressed material:

- (1) *That it should have come to this!* [‘How amazing it is that it should have come to this!'] (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 944)
- (2) *The more, the merrier.* [‘The more there are of us, the merrier we are'] (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985: 843-844)
- (3) *Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era the kind of peak that never comes again.* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999: 225)

Lacking an overtly fully-fledged clausal structure, utterances such as (1)-(3) above have been discussed in comprehensive grammars under the labels ‘irregular sentences’ (Quirk et al. 1985: 838-849) and ‘minor clause types’ (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 944-945). In particular, (1) is claimed to be ‘irregular’ or ‘minor’ inasmuch as it is an “unembedded dependent clause”, that is, a formally subordinate construction which can felicitously occur without a matrix clause (Biber et al. 1999: 223). In the case of (2) and (3), the subject and the main verb are omitted. This is common practice in certain styles when a more casual tone or economical strategy is intended (e.g. fiction, advertising, headlines), thus dispensing with function and redundant words (Quirk et al. 1985: 845-849; Biber et al. 1999: 224-225).

Despite devoting a section to discuss fragmentary units of discourse, both the comprehensive grammars and, in general, prior literature lack a comprehensive account and a more fine-grained classification of English fragments. In fact, examples such as the above and related instances such as *A pound of butter, please; New hat?* or *Joan, my sister – John, a good friend of mine* are discussed in either a separate category (e.g. ‘nonsentences’ in Quirk et al. 1985: 849-852) or within the section of elliptical phenomena. The lack of a homogeneous treatment is also evidenced by the varied terminology used in previous theoretical and empirical studies to refer to fragmentary units of diverse nature: i.e. ‘nonsentential utterance types or units’ (Fernández & Ginzburg, 2002; Fernández Rovira, 2006; Progovac, Paesani, Casielles & Barton, 2006; Fernández, Ginzburg & Lappin, 2007; Bowie & Popova, 2019), ‘non-sentences’ or ‘subsences’ (Stainton, 2004, 2006; Hall, 2007), the above-mentioned ‘minor sentences’ (Kline & Memering, 1977; Sadock & Zwicky, 1985) and ‘clause/sentence fragments’ (Morgan, 1973; Bowie & Aarts, 2016; Bowie & Popova, 2019; Goldberg & Perek, 2019).

Fragments have garnered a great deal of scholarly attention in recent decades, but prior research has been mainly framed within the Generativist framework, where scholars have focused on the derivational or non-derivational mechanisms that explain the use and interpretation of fragments. Empirical analyses and, more specifically, corpus-based syntactic accounts of these structures are scarce, by contrast (cf. Greenbaum & Nelson, 1999; Fernández & Ginzburg, 2002; Fernández et al. 2007; Bowie & Aarts, 2016; Cappelle, 2020). Fragments being more characteristic of spoken discourse, previous studies have generally overlooked their use in written texts, a register where they have nonetheless been shown to “have positive, powerful rhetoric effects” (i.e. emphasis, more natural conversational tone; see Schuster, 2006: 83).

The research reported in this paper contributes to fill these gaps in the literature by reporting the results of a corpus analysis of sentence fragments in written (i.e. planned/edited) contemporary English discourse. The main aim is to provide a corpus-driven taxonomy and an empirical account of the constructions, strategies and phenomena that are classifiable as fragments based on linguistically objectifiable (formal/textual) criteria. To this end, data have

been retrieved from a parsed written sample of the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB) (Nelson, Wallis & Aarts, 2002).

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 offers some theoretical background on fragmentary structures; Section 3 describes the aims and the methodology of the study and delimits the concept of fragment used in this investigation; Sections 4 and 5 report the results from the corpus-based analysis and propose a preliminary corpus-driven taxonomy of fragments in written contemporary British English; finally, Section 6 presents some concluding remarks and avenues for future research.

2. FRAGMENTARY STRUCTURES IN PREVIOUS LITERATURE

In the broadest sense of the term, ‘fragment’ can encompass a wide array of structures of a very diverse nature, including interjections, headings, lists, public notices and other non-canonical structures deliberately produced as non-sentential, along with discourse markers, idioms and formulae (see Quirk et al. 1985: 852). Research on fragments, however, tends to focus on more compositional (4) or even more conventionalised (though not fully idiomatic) (5) units of discourse, either with (6) or without (7) an explicit antecedent, where clausal status is intended, whether potentially reconstructable (8) or not (9) (cf. Progovac et al. 2006 on ‘fragments’ (8) vs ‘nonsententials’ (9)).

- (4) (Benigno got into a taxi and said:) *To Segovia. To the jail.* (Stainton, 2006: 96)
- (5) We didn’t have a choice, Jim. *Not a real one. Not one that was right.* (Cappelle, 2021: 71)
- (6) A: Who did she see?
B: [She saw] *Bob Dylan.* (Harnish, 2009: 252)
- (7) (Uttered by a waiter displaying a bottle of wine to customers) *From Italy.* (Hall, 2019: 605)
- (8) A: Which movie did you see?
B: [I saw] *Casablanca.* (Progovac et al. 2006: 2)
- (9) *Me first.* [*Me am first] (Progovac et al. 2006: 2)

Previous studies have shown that these fragmentary structures realise a wide range of speech acts (i.e. ask/answer, show (dis)agreement, etc.) and contribute to create cohesion in the discourse (Bowie & Aarts, 2016: 286). Still, fragments such as (4)-(9) constitute a challenge for linguistic theories inasmuch as some lack previous linguistic context from which their full propositional meaning can be derived and not all of them can even be fully reconstructable. Instead, it is the hearer/reader that has to enrich their reduced structure to a full proposition based on the extralinguistic information available in the discourse context (Merchant, 2004: 661-662).

A great deal of the research on fragmentary units of discourse has been carried out within the Generative framework, where scholars have explored the syntactic mechanisms and operations whereby fragments are construed and interpreted as full propositional sentences. In this regard, there have been two main approaches: ellipsis-based or sentential, and base-generated or nonsentential. Scholars who advocate for a sententialist perspective claim the existence of a silent sentential structure reconstructable via ellipsis (Morgan, 1973; Hankamer, 1979; Stanley, 2000; Merchant, 2004). Antecedentless fragments, such as (4) and (7) above, are thus felicitous as long as the extralinguistic context evokes the relevant linguistic expression or information that serves as ‘antecedent’ and thus enables the interpretation of the fragment

(Stanley, 2000). Nonsentential approaches, on the other hand, take as evidence examples such as (9) above to maintain that not all fragments can be claimed to derive via ellipsis and reject positing a silent, elided sentential structure. Fragments are thus argued to be all subsentential expressions which, when lacking an overt antecedent, are enriched pragmatically to full propositions within a given context (Barton, 1990; Ginzburg & Sag, 2000; Carston, 2002; Barton & Progovac, 2005; Progovac et al. 2006; Stainton, 2006; Bezuidenhout, 2013). Along the same lines, constructionist approaches also advocate for a non-derivational, non-ellipsis-based account of fragments and contend, instead, that the semantic recoverability of their full propositional meaning “is accounted for by an independently needed psychological ‘pointer’ function” which “allows some constructions to point to a quite specific overt linguistic string, while others only require that a semantic entity or proposition be evoked” (Goldberg & Perek, 2019: 188, 191).

Scholarly attention, however, has also been devoted to the empirical study of fragments. Prior literature can be divided into more qualitative analyses that classify or describe fragments retrieved from samples of English texts of diverse nature (e.g. plays, journals, essays) (Kline & Memering, 1977; Malá, 2000, 2001; Schuster, 2006), and quantitative analyses based on corpora. Within the latter we find studies that 1) propose corpus-driven taxonomies based on English oral corpora with the aim of facilitating the automatic identification and classification of a series of fragmentary structures with Machine Learning techniques, and/or 2) interpret those fragments within the Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar framework (Purver, Ginzburg & Healy, 2001; Fernández & Ginzburg, 2002; Schlangen & Lascarides, 2003; Fernández Rovira, 2006; Fernández et al. 2007). Only a small number of corpus studies have delved into the use and/or communicative function of certain types of fragments in spoken and written English (Greenbaum & Nelson, 1999; Bowie & Aarts, 2016: 259; Cappelle, 2020).

3. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

This section presents the main aims of the study (§3.1), proposes a definition of ‘fragment’ (§3.2) and describes both the corpus used and the data retrieval procedure (§3.3).

3.1 Aims

This investigation is framed within a larger project on non-canonical syntax in written contemporary English whose ultimate goal is to account for fragmentary structures in written contemporary English from a usage-based and constructionist perspective, thus conceiving fragments as form-meaning pairings with varying degrees of conventionalisation (i.e. from formulaic structures such as *Morning!* to more compositional constituents like *If you put it that way...*) (see Goldberg & Perek, 2019; Cappelle, 2021). The research reported in this paper aims at providing a usage-based characterisation of non-canonical sentences by means of both corpus-driven and corpus-based analyses of the constructions, strategies and phenomena classifiable as fragments in the written component of ICE-GB. In particular, in Section 4 I will present the results of a corpus-based analysis of the fragments retrieved which examines not only the frequency of the types of fragmentary structures under scrutiny but also their distribution across written registers and their potential augmentation to fully-fledged clausal propositions. In Section 5, I will propose a preliminary corpus-driven taxonomy of fragments in written contemporary English.

3.2 Delimiting the concept of ‘fragment’

Against the theoretical background presented above, in this paper the constructions that qualify as ‘fragments’ are conceived of along the following terms. As concerns their meaning, they are semantically, discursively and pragmatically stand-alone constituents which are equivalent in propositional meaning, force and communicative function to a full clause, as is the case of *Some guy she met at the park* in (10) and *Hi to Simon* in (11).

- (10) (Abby and Ben are at a party. Abby sees an unfamiliar man with Beth, a mutual friend of theirs, and turns to Ben with a puzzled look on her face. Ben says:) *Some guy she met at the park.* [= ‘He is some guy she met at the park’] (adapted from Merchant, 2004: 661)
- (11) Well that’s all my news. / *Regards to Simon.* [= ‘Give my regards to Simon’] (W1B-006 #149:4)¹

In terms of form, fragments as defined here not only have their own prosodic contour but also meet another four syntactic criteria: syntactic independence, formal reduction, potential augmentation and compositionality. Starting with syntactic independence, the notion of fragment is narrowed down here to functionally stand-alone constituents, thus excluding structures which are syntactically more loosely or fully integrated into another clause, as is the case of *if at all* in (12) and *as necessary* in (13):

- (12) It is not absolutely clear how far, *if at all*, this is a climatic effect. (W2A-024 #008:1)
- (13) Recheck the tension and readjust *as necessary*. (W2D-018 #014:1)

Formal reduction refers to the fact that their clausal meaning is conveyed with a reduced clausal structure, where elements like the subject, the verb (14) and/or part of the predicate (15) are unexpressed:

- (14) Dear Yibin, / *Just a quick line to let you know you’re not forgotten!* (W1B-014 #031:2)
- (15) Your new earrings look lovely. / You spendthrift! / *Anyhow why not?* / I’m still lusting after that ring but can’t afford it tomorrow. (W1B-004 #092:2)

The fragments analysed here can be potentially augmented to complete clauses, those which they are functionally and semantically equivalent to and which are provided in between square brackets in (16) to (19). This augmentation can be lexical and non-lexical. In the latter case, the unexpressed arguments in the fragment are semantically bleached constituents, mainly intensive verbs and expletive subjects, as in (16):

- (16) There lies the problem. / *Not much to entertain you with on the North Line tonight* [= ‘There is not much to entertain...’] (W1B-010 #087:2)

¹ In the references of the examples from the ICE-GB provided in brackets, the first three characters indicate the text category (W stands for written texts and the other two characters conform the text code that identifies the text types listed in *Table 1*); the second set of three characters corresponds to the identity number of the text and the third set to the number of text unit within that text (only the text unit where the fragment occurs is cited here); finally, the number after the colon identifies the subtext. The forward slash / signals the separation between two different parsing units (PUs) and square brackets [] are occasionally used to enclose the omission of part(s) of a given example.

Lexical augmentation, on the other hand, concerns latent material which is not expressed mainly for three different reasons: (i) the availability of that lexical material in the preceding or in the following linguistic context (i.e. ‘matching’), as in (17), (ii) the stand-alone use of formally dependent clauses such as (18), and (iii) the conventionalised design of a given construction, as is the case of the fragmentary pattern ‘X to somebody’ illustrated in (19), which instantiates a transitive construction with a prepositional complement and an unexpressed verbal form:

- (17) Other questions would need to be asked. / How hard do I hit them? / *How often?* [= ‘How often do I hit them?’] (W2B-017 #068:1)
- (18) But now it was filthy; it smelled of dead things and dripped with slime. / *That a star, the brightest star in the heavens, should come to this.* [‘How amazing it is that a star...’; see Huddleston & Pullum, (2002: 944)] (W2F-020 #110:1)
- (19) Hope the summer’s good – / *well done to Giles!* [= ‘Say well done to Giles’] (W1B-011 #116:3)

Finally, fragments have to show certain compositionality (see Goldberg, 1995: 13-17; also, Goldberg, 2006: 45, 212). Although they may be highly or partially conventionalised, as illustrated by (20) and (21), none of the fragments considered here is fully ‘formulaic’, if ‘formulaic’ is taken as in Wray (2002: 9): “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, [...] stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar”. The main premise is that there is at least one slot in the structure that allows for certain variation (cf. Fillmore, Kay & O’Connor, 1988; Laury & Ono, 2020: Ch.1). Compare (*I am*) *sorry* with (22) and (23) (see Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 1541).

- (20) Saddam Hussein’s style is to go just beyond the wire but then to embrace the unacceptable[.] / *But what if he refuses?* (W2E-007 #075:2)
- (21) ‘You must believe me.’ / [...] / She is lying. *If only she would admit it.* (W2F-008 #066:1)
- (22) Enclosed is the settlement for the Birmingham Six Victory Celebration. / *Sorry about the delay.* (W1B-021 #103:8)
- (23) See/write/hear/phone you soon. / Love / Swoo! / P. S. / *Sorry for boring paper.* (W1B-004 #108:2)

3.3 Corpus and data retrieval

The data for this study were retrieved from the written texts of the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB). The corpus comprises over 1 million words (1,061,263 words) and covers the period 1990-1993. As shown in Table 1, the sample of written texts analysed consists of 423,581 words (and 23,935 syntactic trees) from 50 non-printed texts (mainly students’ untimed essays and examination scripts, social/business letters) and 150 printed texts that can be divided into four subcategories: ‘informational’ (academic, non-academic [also known as ‘popular’], press reports), ‘instructional’ (administrative/regulatory, skills&hobbies), ‘persuasive’ (press editorials) and ‘creative’ (novels&stories) writing (see Nelson et al. 2002: 4-8).

Table 1: *Composition of the written component of ICE-GB*

Text type [text code] (number of texts in corpus)		Number of words (%)	
non-printed	students' untimed essays [1A] (10)	21,304 (5.03%)	
	students' examination scripts [1A] (10)	21,225 (5.01%)	
	social letters [1B] (15)	31,085 (7.34%)	
	business letters [1B] (15)	30,491 (7.20%)	
printed	academic [2A] (40)	85,586 (20.21%)	
	informational non-academic [2B] (40)	86,645 (20.46%)	
	press reports [2C] (20)	41,539 (9.81%)	
	instructional	administrative/regulatory [2D] (10)	21,142 (4.99%)
		skills&hobbies [2D] (10)	21,199 (5.00%)
	persuasive	press editorials [2E] (10)	20,719 (4.89%)
creative	novels&stories [2F] (20)	42,646 (10.07%)	
Total	200	423,581 (100%)	

The main asset of ICE-GB over larger corpora is the fact that the texts are fully parsed, which enables one to carry out grammatically specified searches using the *ICE Corpus Utility Program 3.1.1* (ICECUP 3.1.1) (Nelson et al. 2002). Since this paper focuses on stand-alone fragments, the queries were aimed at retrieving fragmentary ‘parsing units’ (PUs), which is the function label “applied to the topmost node on *every* tree” (Nelson et al. 2002: 52; emphasis in the original). Inspired by Bowie and Aarts’ (2016) investigation on clause fragments in the spoken component of ICE-GB, I retrieved stand-alone fragments from the written component of ICE-GB by means of two grammatically specified searches:

- (i) PU, NONCL (i.e. non-clausal parsing units)²
 - (24) It was agreeable [...] not to have to rush back to wife and family as did, for instance, Hubert[.] / *No wonder he was threatened with ulcers.* (W2F-018 #017:1)
 - (25) The problem is I think he may be here at the same time as Antonio. / *Anyhow enough about me.* (W1B-005 #148:5)
 - (26) Dearest D. B. / *How lovely to be writing to you again!* (W1B-003 #111:2)
- (ii) PU, CL(DEPEND) (i.e. dependent clausal parsing units, that is, subordinate clauses that are parsed and function as independent clauses)³
 - (27) But now it was filthy; it smelled of dead things and dripped with slime. / *That a star, the brightest star in the heavens, should come to this.* (W2F-020 #110:1)
 - (28) Mind you I’m made up with my hair tied back, dressed all in black and with some particularly nice earrings so all that helps. / *To meet someone you look like and whose blood and characteristics you have...* (W1B-003 #123:2)
 - (29) ‘It doesn’t add up, Michael. / Does it?’ / No. / *If you put it that way...* (W2F-008 #083:1)

² Bowie and Aarts (2016: 264) retrieve only those non-clausal parsing units “containing at least one immediate constituent with the function label ‘element’ (i.e. containing phrasal material)”, while here all non-clausal units are considered.

³ The node PU, CL(DEPEND) also retrieved a few independent units which, given their non-clausal status, were also taken into account in this investigation: e.g. *He, a man of science, considering a curse!* (W2F-016 #071:1); *No soldiers here, although those waiting squads in trucks were only minutes away.* (W2F-015 #034:1).

In earlier stages of the investigation, I carried out a pilot analysis of a random sample of 100 instances of these two syntactic nodes as well as of the node ‘detached function’ (DEFUNC), which contained some more integrated fragmentary structures such as those in italics in (30) and (31):

- (30) I had an interview this morning but the job wasn’t what I want – *too secretarial*. (W1B:001 #198:5)
- (31) Tom is a feminist, *remarkable for someone of her generation* and has laid the ground rules for domestic duties. (W1B:012 #095:2)

To detect further potential sources of fragments, I also examined the whole *grammaticon*, that is, the set of “*annotated nodes* in the corpus” (Nelson et al. 2002: 210; emphasis in the original). As a result, I identified fragmentary structures in syntactic nodes such as PU,DISP (i.e. disparate parsing units), which contain conjoined phrases of different categories as in (32), and A,CL (i.e. adverbial clause), illustrated in (33).

- (32) *Hi to Simon & take care*. (W1B:010 #146:3)
- (33) *Arriving just before lunch*, I looked for Harry Frampton in the dining room but he wasn’t around. (W2B-004 #067:1)

However, the greater integration of these last three categories in a matrix clause has led me to limit the scope of this investigation to the fully stand-alone ‘non-clausal parsing units’ in (24)-(26) and ‘dependent clausal parsing units’ in (27)-(29) above.

The queries PU,NONCL and PU,CL(DEPEND) retrieved a total of 3,362 and 129 fragments, respectively, which were analysed exhaustively. The category PU,CL(DEPEND) is found to be a very infrequent type of clausal PU, representing just a 0.63% of all PU,CLS (i.e. 20,527) in the written component of ICE-GB, which is mostly composed of clausal parsing units (86%). The 3,362 non-clausal PUs retrieved prove very uncommon in comparison, as they amount to barely a 14% of the total number of PUS in the written sample of the corpus (i.e. 23,935).⁴

The data were manually pruned to discard all the instances that did not meet the criteria described in Section 3.2. First of all, I excluded complete sentences and instances where clausal or sentential status is not intended, as is the case of headlines (34), headings, lists, bullet-point language (35), bibliographical references, asides (36), names, figures, dates and abbreviations.

- (34) Yeltsin under fresh attack by hardliners (W2C-019 #023:2)
- (35) First, Carla Dichter’s death. / Second, poor Mrs Lennox’s collapse while out for a walk. / Third (though it had started happening some days before), Martha Kraus’s incipient craziness. (W2F-016 #004-#006:1)
- (36) (For the attention of Mr Hardy) (W1B-020 #056:4)

Likewise, I discarded fragments resulting from constituent or polarity matching, even in cases like (37) and (38), where the same writer asks and ‘answers’ (with the italicised fragment) their own question:

⁴ A marginal number of instances (46; 0.29%) in written ICE-GB are parsed as either PU,DISP, that is, a disparate parsing unit such as (32), or PU,EMPTY, which refers to a parsing unit that “contains only non-textual material, e.g., editorial references to graphics, photos, or editorial comments” (Nelson et al. 2002: 47).

- (37) How are you? / *'Not too bad'*, I hope. (W1B-001 #137:4)
 (38) Can registration marks be transferred? / *Yes, in some circumstances.* (W2D-010 #047:1)

Appositions, such as *Nick, for example* in (39), dislocations, extrapositions, such as *all that feeling* in (40), and other displaced modifiers were disregarded for their higher degree of syntactic integration in the co-text:

- (39) Have you seen any of the others lately? / *Nick, for example.* (W1B-002 #109:2)
 (40) [...] I don't know what it is... / *all that feeling.* (W1B-008 #024:1)

Finally, I also excluded fully fixed formulae (i.e. farewells, apologies, reaction signals, greetings; see Quirk et al. 1985: 852), idioms and discourse markers, as they leave no room for variation; unfinished utterances (in (41)), sentences containing unclear material (42), and instances of direct speech in creative writing so as to discard instances of a pseudo-real/fictitious dialogic nature (43). After this manual pruning, the total number of valid fragments in the database is set at 261.

- (41) *If the dip is the same direction as a slope but to a greater extent then:* (W1A-020 #054:2)
 (42) <unclear-word> *Richard Hamilton, a British pop progenitor, unlike Warhol, <unclear-words> from and working in America.* (W1A-019 #047:2)
 (43) 'Then I have to bluff. / [...] / *Body searches at the slightest excuse.'* (W2F-015 #158:1)

4. EMPIRICAL CHARACTERISATION OF FRAGMENTS IN WRITTEN BRITISH ENGLISH

This section reports the results of the corpus analysis based on the data from the ICE-GB. Section 4.1 reports the overall frequency of the two types of fragments analysed and their distribution across the different written text types in ICE-GB, while Section 4.2 deals with the elements unexpressed in fragments and their potential augmentation to structurally complete sentences.

4.1 Overall frequency and distribution of fragments across text types

Section 3.3 has already given a glimpse of the remarkably different incidence of the two types of syntactic nodes investigated here. Table 2 displays the overall frequency of PU, NONCL and PU, CL(DEPEND) after the manual pruning of the results. The data show a significantly higher frequency of non-clausal fragments (88.51%) compared with dependent clausal fragments, which barely amount to 11.49% of the whole data set.

Table 2: *Frequency of the two fragmentary syntactic nodes*

Syntactic node	Raw and relative (%) frequency	Normalised frequency/1,000 PUs
PU, NONCL	231 (88.51%)	9.65
PU, CL(DEPEND)	30 (11.49%)	1.25
Total	261	10.90

Overall, these two types of fragments altogether have a normalised frequency of 10.90 per 1,000 parsing units in the written component of ICE-GB.⁵ This observation suggests that, although fragments are not highly pervasive in written British English, their incidence is by no means negligible and thus they merit further consideration.

Before moving on to the distribution of fragments across the different text types represented in the corpus, it bears mentioning that I used the broadest and simplest classification of written text types in ICE-GB outlined in Table 1: i.e. informational, instructional, persuasive and creative. The only exception concerns non-printed texts, which I decided to separate into two different categories (following the classification in ICECUP 3.1.1): ‘non-professional’, which covers both students’ untimed essays and students’ examination scripts, and ‘correspondence’ for social and business letters.

Table 3 presents the raw, relative (per cent) and normalised frequencies of the two fragment types analysed in each of the text types. In this case, the normalised frequencies were calculated based on the total number of parsing units per text type, as the text categories differ in size.⁶

Table 3: *Frequency of fragments per text type*

Text type		Raw (relative %) freq.	Norm.freq./1,000 PUs per text type
non-printed	non-professional	10 (3.83%)	4.77
	correspondence	175 (67.05%)	36.91
printed	informational	22 (8.43%)	2.14
	instructional	3 (1.15%)	1.18
	persuasive	4 (1.53%)	3.98
	creative	47 (18.01%)	14.26
Total		261	10.90

The results evidence a remarkably higher incidence of fragments in both the texts in the ‘creative’ text type (n.f./1,000 PUs: 14.26) and, particularly, the ‘correspondence’ category (n.f./1,000 PUs: 36.91), which in fact comprises two thirds of the whole data set (67.05%). This observation comes as no surprise in view of Biber et al.’s (1999: 225; see also Quirk et al. 1985: 846, 849; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 1540) claim on the use of sentence fragments to adopt a more “informal style” as well as to “mirror the stream of thought of a fictional character”, as is illustrated in (44) and (45), respectively.

(44) Thursday 12.50 pm. / *Early Tonight!* (W1B-007 #034:2)

(45) She could detect no sound other than the steady ticking of the grandfather clock.
/ *Something though... / Something fishy... / Smelled fishy? / Evil, she thought. / A sense of evil.* (W2F-020 #038-#039:1)

By comparison, the incidence of fragments in the other text categories is considerably marginal, with ‘non-professional’ and ‘persuasive’ texts showing a subtly higher normalised frequency (around 5 and 4) than the ‘informational’ and ‘instructional’ categories, whose frequencies remain below 2.15. Section 5 will elaborate on these results with a more detailed analysis of

⁵ The normalised frequency was calculated based on the total number of parsing units in the written component of the corpus: 23,935.

⁶ Total number of parsing units per text type: 2,095 in ‘non-professional’, 4,741 in ‘correspondence’, 10,259 in ‘informational’, 2,540 in ‘instructional’, 1,005 in ‘persuasive’, and 3,295 in ‘creative’.

the different types of fragmentary structures that have been identified within the PU,NONCL and PU,CL(DEPEND) categories.

4.2 Unexpressed constituents and potential augmentation

This section deals with the taxonomy of unexpressed constituents and with the strategies whereby the fragments can be augmented to the complete clauses which they are functionally and semantically equivalent to. Starting with the elided elements, Table 4 shows that in the vast majority of the fragments considered in this investigation what is unexpressed is the subject and the verb (67.05%), as in (46). The omission of only the verb, in (47), or of the subject and part of the predicate, as in *Where in the country?* in (48), is considerably less frequent but nonetheless common (13.03% and 17.24%, respectively), especially if it is compared to the negligible incidence of the omission of the subject and/or the operator (2.68%), as in (49).⁷

Table 4: *Frequency of the types unexpressed constituents in fragments in written ICE-GB*

Unexpressed constituent(s)	Raw and relative (%) frequency
subject-verb	175 (67.05%)
subject-predicate	45 (17.24%)
verb	34 (13.03%)
(subject-)operator	7 (2.68%)
Total	261

- (46) Got back to Athens at 10 pm yesterday, and went to this museum again today[.] / *So, off to Mavrommati this eve.* (W1B-009 #168:5)
- (47) Monday 27th Aug. / *A really lovely day yesterday, spent at the Marin Headlands, a rocky, sandy area just over the Golden Gate Bridge and part of the Golden Gate Recreation Area.* (W1B-011 #079:2)
- (48) When do you start your PHD? / *Where in the country?* (W1B-009 #150:4)
- (49) Should he thank somebody? / *Say goodbye politely?* (W2F-018 #126:1)

Concerning these unexpressed elements, Table 5 lists the four types of strategies which could facilitate the augmentation of the fragments under analysis into formally fully-fledged structures. The data show that in more than half of the cases the fragments could be augmented with non-lexical material, that is, by means of the insertion of semantically bleached constituents (i.e. mainly intensive verbs and expletive subjects), as illustrated in (50). The rest of the strategies of potential augmentation involve the assumption of lexical material and vary considerably in incidence in the data set. Among the ‘lexical’ strategies, the ‘constructional’ and the ‘matching’ ones are the most frequent (25.67% and 17.24%, respectively). These differ substantially in the types of elements that are unexpressed and can be augmented in each case: while ‘matching’ is based on the recoverability of exactly the same material available in the previous linguistic context, as illustrated in (51), the ‘constructional’ type assumes the omission of certain constituent(s) in specific linguistic constructions, thus resulting in reduced constructions such as the Small Clause in (47) above and the ditransitive construction in (52).

⁷ The omission of only the subject, as in *Hope the sun keeps shining for you* (W1B-013 #092:2), is not considered in this investigation because it is not retrieved by any of the two grammatical queries used here (i.e. PU,NONCL and PU,CL(DEPEND)).

Table 5: *Frequency of the strategies of potential augmentation of fragments*

Augmentation strategy	Raw and relative (%) frequency
non-lexical	141 (54.02%)
constructional	67 (25.67%)
lexical	
matching	45 (17.24%)
matrix	8 (3.07%)
Total	261

- (50) As it jerked upwards, I glanced at my watch. / *A little after ten.* [= ‘It was a little after ten’] (W2F-004 #051:1)
- (51) I’ll be able to have my first shorts and burgers Bar-B-Q on my balcony in no time at all. / *And why not.* [= ‘And why not have my first shorts...at all’] (W1B-002 #116:2)
- (52) Hope the summer’s good / – *well done to Giles!* [= ‘Say well done to Giles’] (W1B-011 #116:3)

The least frequent strategy by far has been labelled ‘matrix’, a category that exclusively accounts for cases of insubordination such as (53) and (54). These instances are borderline cases of fragments but are considered here inasmuch as their fragmentary nature involves a latent matrix clause in which they could potentially be embedded (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 944), though the recoverability of such main clause is not always as straightforward as that of the latent material in the other fragment types (see Beijering, Kaltenböck & Sansiñena, 2019: 5-8 and the references cited there).

- (53) After all, listeners need never know, or care, whether the person speaking to them had cerebellar disease. / *If it were not for one thing more – the speech.* (W2B-001 #095:1)
- (54) But now it was filthy; it smelled of dead things and dripped with slime. / *That a star, the brightest star in the heavens, should come to this.* (W2F-020 #110:1)

5. A PRELIMINARY CORPUS-DRIVEN TAXONOMY OF FRAGMENTS IN WRITTEN BRITISH ENGLISH

The previous section provided an overall empirical account of the two types of fragmentary PUs under analysis here. In this section, I draw on these data to propose a preliminary corpus-driven taxonomy of the types of fragments identified in written contemporary British English. Furthermore, I will also explore the distribution of the different fragment types across the written text types in ICE-GB.

To start with, as illustrated in Table 6, five main categories of fragments have been identified in written British English. The most frequent fragment type of the five is that of phrasal fragments such as (55) and (56), which amount to more than half of the whole data set. Verbless fragments, illustrated in (57) and (58), are also considerably frequent in the written texts in ICE-GB (26.82%).

- (55) I can just see you now chatting up the customers, winking an eye now and again, talking the talk. / *Pure Anne-flo.* (W1B-008 #177:6)

- (56) I'm trying to psyche myself up to do some computer theory revision. / *BORING.* (W1B-005 #094:4)
- (57) He lost his wife through cancer and his daughter is also 4. / *Anyway more of that later...* (W1B-003 #189:2)
- (58) Friends from more distant times or places can be collected from the Christmas card list. / Professional acquaintances? / *Stickier ground here.* (W2F-019 #124:1)

Table 6: Frequency of the fragment types

Fragment type	Raw and relative (%) frequency
phrasal	138 (52.87%)
verbless	70 (26.82%)
clausal	26 (9.96%)
<i>wh</i> -	14 (5.36%)
Small Clause	13 (4.98%)
Total	261

The frequency of the three other fragment types is remarkably infrequent in comparison, amounting altogether to one fifth of the data set: clausal fragments, such as (59) and (60), do not reach 10%, while *wh*-fragments, in (61) and (62), and Small Clauses, in (63) and (64), barely represent a 5% each of the whole data set.

- (59) I can't remember the last time I read a paper – / I never have time these days! / (*not that I managed to read one that often in London!*) (W1B-002 #015:1)
- (60) We would be grateful if you could ask him to refrain from issuing any further demands until the revised assessment is issued. / *Thanking you in anticipation.* (W1B-023 #029:3)
- (61) It's the middle of the night and all is quiet, even the cat is asleep and there is only the clock ticking its way to 1 A.M. / *So, why this at this hour of the morning?* (W1B-005 #016:2)
- (62) I can't distinguish between my different daydreams because I don't have any. / I don't dare to have! / *What an admission for an actor.* (W1B-003 #011:1)
- (63) Better go now. / *Good old Hendon next stop.* (W1B-003 #105:1)
- (64) Anselm Kiefer is a contemporary German artist. / *Kitaj, a figurative painter.* (W1A-019 #069:3)

To explore the data in more detail, Tables 7 and 8 present the different subtypes of phrasal and clausal fragments identified in the written registers in ICE-GB. Starting with phrasal fragments, the data in Table 7 reveal that the most common phrasal fragment type in written British English is nominal, as illustrated in (65). In fact, this category represents about 66% of all the phrasal fragments.

Table 7: Frequency of the phrasal fragment types

Phrasal fragment type	Raw and relative (%) frequency
nominal	91 (65.94%)
adjectival	12 (8.70%)
prepositional	12 (8.70%)
adverbial	7 (5.07%)
coordinated	16 (11.59%)
Total	138

- (65) Dear John, / *A day of hectic activity.* (W1B-008 #033:2)

The remaining 34% corresponds, on the one hand, to adjectival, prepositional and adverbial fragments such as (66), (67) and (68), respectively, whose incidence remains below 10% (i.e. 8.70% the former two and 5.07% the latter), and, on the other hand, to a fragment subtype that represents about 11% of the subset and comprises coordinated phrases such as the nominal phrases in (69) and the adjectival ones in (70):

- (66) Nor was there much thought of Britain asking, or even expecting, other nations to contribute bilaterally. / *Undignified.* (W2E-003 #085:3)
 (67) Emily's Registration day at school today. / *Into a new group: different friends and all in French.* (W1B-003 #072:1)
 (68) P.S. Thought you might enjoy this article from a magazine I bought! / *Purely linguistically of course!* (W1B-006 #113:2)
 (69) 'You're not going to let me see him!' / *No need to be in fear, and nothing any more to hide...* (W2F-012 #043:1)
 (70) And it had been quite easy, after all. / *Not strictly legal, perhaps, but easy.* (W2F-006 #260:1)

Moving on to clausal fragments, Table 8 displays the frequencies of the three subcategories identified: 'insubordinate', 'subordinate' and 'other'. Insubordinates, which are stand-alone subordinate clauses, that is, structures that lack an explicit matrix clause such as (71) and (72), represent more than 38% of the clausal fragments. 'Subordinate' fragments, by contrast, are remarkably less frequent, amounting to only 23.08% of the cases. Unlike insubordinates, the subordinate fragments illustrated in (73) and (74) can be structurally integrated into the preceding context, but they are nonetheless presented as separate units of written discourse.

Table 8: *Frequency the clausal fragment types*

Clausal fragment type	Raw and relative (%) frequency
insubordinate	10 (38.46%)
subordinate	6 (23.08%)
other	10 (38.46%)
Total	26

- (71) 'It doesn't add up, Michael. / Does it?' / No. / *If you put it that way...* (W2F-008 #083:1)
 (72) It looked as though Mr Wet or Mrs Dry would pop out any moment to say the weather had changed. / *If only it would!* (W2F-003 #047:1)
 (73) But then he caught the infection of violence and hate raging through Mananga; ultimately needed to fight to keep himself safe. / *Until, in the end, she happened to be the one who killed him.* (W2F-015 #046:1)
 (74) Try and learn the joy of this. / *Just as I have so much to learn tomorrow.* (W1B-007 #155:4)

The category 'other', which is found to be as frequent as that of the insubordinates, comprises instances of clausal fragments which lack a subject and an operator, as in (75), together with

other clausal fragmentary units that do not fit in the other two categories, as is the case of (76) and (77):

- (75) Should he thank somebody? / *Say goodbye politely?* (W2F-018 #126:1)
- (76) She emphasises the objects themselves. / *Beginning with the maxim that objects establish our identity through time.* (W1A-011 #101:2)
- (77) Even as he formulates the question to himself, he says in response: absurd! / *He, a man of science, considering a curse!* (W2F-016 #071:1)

Finally, let us explore the distribution of the different fragment types across the written text types represented in ICE-GB. Table 9 reports the absolute and the normalised frequencies (per 1,000 PUs per text type) of each of the five fragment types. Since phrasal was found to be the most frequent type of fragment, it comes as no surprise that it is the most common fragment in the two text types that concentrate the greatest amount of fragments: ‘correspondence’ and ‘creative’ (20.88 and 7.59, respectively). Interestingly, letters show a considerable incidence of verbless fragments (9.91), which is the second most frequent type of fragment and is remarkably less frequently found in creative texts (2.43). This last category, by contrast, displays a slightly higher proportion of clausal fragments (3.03) compared to verbless clauses, while it is in ‘correspondence’ that most of the *wh*-fragments retrieved from ICE-GB are found.

Table 9: *Distribution of the fragment types across text types*

Text type	Fragment type (norm.freq./1,000 PUs)				
	clausal	phrasal	Small Clause	verbless	<i>wh</i> -
non-professional	3 (1.43)	2 (0.95)	1 (0.48)	4 (1.91)	0 (0.00)
correspondence	10 (2.11)	99 (20.88)	8 (1.69)	47 (9.91)	11 (2.32)
informational	3 (0.29)	10 (0.97)	1 (0.10)	7 (0.68)	1 (0.10)
instructional	0 (0.00)	1 (0.39)	0 (0.00)	2 (0.79)	0 (0.00)
persuasive	0 (0.00)	1 (1.00)	0 (0.00)	2 (1.99)	1 (1.00)
creative	10 (3.03)	25 (7.59)	3 (0.91)	8 (2.43)	1 (0.30)
Total	26 (1.09)	138 (5.77)	13 (0.54)	70 (2.92)	14 (0.58)

Fragments are too scarce in the other text types to draw firm conclusions, but the data reveal that phrasal fragments also predominate in ‘informational’ texts, while in the ‘non-professional’ text type there are more clausal than phrasal fragments if all the clausal fragmentary structures are taken together (i.e. ‘clausal’, ‘verbless’ and ‘Small Clauses’).

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The main aim of this paper is to contribute to the research of fragments in contemporary English by adopting a usage-based perspective and exploring a much neglected aspect: their use in written discourse. The results reported confirm that fragments are not highly frequent in the written texts in ICE-GB, but that they are nonetheless common, which merits further attention. In particular, the corpus-based analysis revealed that, among the six text types surveyed, fragments are more frequently found in ‘correspondence’ and ‘creative’, which appear to be more prone to using fragmentary sentences due to the informal character of letters and the reflection of a character’s stream of consciousness in novels and stories (see Biber et al. 1999: 225; also Quirk et al. 1985: 846, 849; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 1540). In terms of form, it has been shown that a great number of the fragments retrieved consist of verbless and/or

subjectless utterances, which in more than 50% of the cases have been found to correspond to unexpressed non-lexical material. Interestingly, among the considerable proportion of fragments with unexpressed lexical elements, there is a subset of fragments whose reduced form is justified by a given constructional profile (i.e. Small Clauses, ditransitive constructions). It is precisely this type of fragments that will be worth exploring in more depth and in larger corpora in future research, with the aim of characterising this subset of more conventionalised (though not fully idiomatic) fragmentary constructions in contemporary English.

The ultimate goal of the paper was to elaborate a corpus-driven taxonomy of the fragments retrieved. As a result, it has been found out that in written discourse the most common fragments are non-clausal, particularly nominal phrases, while among the clausal fragments only verbless clauses show a considerable incidence: fully clausal utterances, Small Clauses and *wh*-fragments represent altogether just a fifth of the whole data set.

In view of the results obtained here, it is clear that fragments in written discourse are not as uncommon as has been thought and deserve further scholarly attention. In fact, it is necessary to expand the corpus study by exploring (i) larger corpora of contemporary English, (ii) subsets of fragment types, as is the case of those that can be potentially augmented by constructional strategies, (iii) the distribution of fragments per register, tone and style, and (iv) the categories mentioned in Section 3.3 to thus analyse other fragmentary utterances which do not occur independently but as loosely integrated in the host clause (e.g. *Not too many adults here*, but someone would report whichever way they went. (W2F-015 #039:1)), as well as those which are not integrated as orthodox sentence or clause constituents (e.g. *It is not absolutely clear how far, if at all, this is a climatic effect.* (W2A-024 #008:1)). This investigation would also benefit from an in-depth analysis of the communicative functions that the different types of fragments identified perform in the different text types represented in the ICE-GB corpus.

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