TYPES OF ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS IN MODERN ENGLISH

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Abstract: The paper offers a general characterization of the English absolute construction (AC) and a detailed classification of the various types of ACs in present-day English. Some observations on the use of this construction in different types of discourse are also made. The results are finally systematized and presented in a table illustrating the frequency profile of ACs in Modern English.

Keywords: absolute construction, AC, Modern English, types

1. Introduction

The absolute construction (AC) is a detached secondary part of the sentence linked semantically and intonationally to it, but lacking any overt expression of a syntactic linkage. According to Ganshina and Vasilevskaya (1964: 386), “the detached secondary parts of the sentence are those parts which acquire certain independence in the sentence and are consequently more loosely connected with the parts of the sentence on which they depend.” Quirk et al. (1985: 1120) say that such constructions are absolute (from the Latin absolutus, literally meaning made loose) in the sense that they are “not explicitly bound to the matrix clause syntactically.”

(1) Old Ivar, his white head bare, stood holding the horses. (WC: 85)

2. Characteristic features of the AC

One of the most important characteristic features of the AC is the presence of its own subject, different from the subject of the matrix clause.

(2) Anthony jumped out of bed and, the night being cold, put on his dressing-gown and slippers. (Barkhudarov 1966: 129)

The AC has a binary structure – it consists of two members, the first being an NP and the other either a verbal non-finite form or a non-verbal part of speech. Despite its two-member structure resembling a sentence, however, the AC cannot be considered one, since it lacks the typical subject-verb structure – the verbal form is not finite and the two members do not agree in person and number. Hence, such constructions cannot be used on their own, but only as part of a sentence.

(3) Cf. The night was cold. The night being cold... (Barkhudarov 1966: 128)
Since the AC is either non-finite or non-verbal, it is unmarked for tense and mood. However, it can be marked for aspect and voice, when its predicative element is expressed by a verbal form.

(4) He said that, the point having been raised, the same mistake would not occur again. (Reishaan)

Intonationally, the AC is separated from the matrix clause by pauses, which is usually but not necessarily marked by commas in writing.

(5) They stood on the sloping turf beside the stone urn, [the papers and books collected], ready to take indoors. (EJ: 109)
(6) Alexandra closed her door, and Emil sank down on the old slat lounge and sat [with his head in his hands]. (WC: 130)

3. Types of ACs

3.1. Structural classification

As it has previously been said, the structure of the AC is binary, the first member always being an NP, the second – either a verbal non-finite form or a non-verbal part of speech. Therefore, two main types of ACs can be distinguished “with respect to the nature of the head of their predicative element” (Kortmann 1991:10) – verbal and non-verbal (or verbless). Verbal are those ACs in the structure of which there can be observed a non-finite form of the verb – the present or the past participle or the infinitive, while non-verbal have a nominal (NP), prepositional (PP), adjectival (AP), or adverbial head (AdvP). Thus, the following structural subtypes (patterns) of ACs in English can be systematized and presented visually:

![Figure 1. Structural Types of ACs](image)

The following examples illustrate these structural patterns of ACs:
• NP + V (present participle)
  (7) A minute later, nerves still tangling, Jem and I were on the sidewalk headed for home. (HL: 107)

• NP + V (past participle)
  (8) Mayella looked at her father, who was sitting with his chair tipped against the railing. (HL: 183)

• NP + V (to-infinitive)
  (9) With the moonlight to guide you, feel the joy of being alive. (MOR)

• NP + NP
  (10) Merrill stood up suddenly, her fists clenched against her sides, her eyes a glacial blue-grey. (KK)

• NP + PP
  (11) There he would stand, his arm around the fat pole, staring and wondering. (HL: 8)

• NP + AP
  (12) (…) when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh. (HL: 3)

• NP + AdvP
  (13) She lay on her back, with the quilts up to her chin. (HL: 107)

3.2. Semantic classification

The absence of standard subordinators (when, where, etc.) overtly specifying adverbial relations enhances the semantic indeterminacy of the AC. Thus, the adverbial semantics of a given AC in the sentence needs to be determined for each individual instance (see Kortmann 1991: 1).

According to Blokh (1983: 349), there are three types of ACs with respect to the adverbial meaning they may express in the sentence: temporal, causal and attendant-circumstantial. Kortmann goes further on in classifying and analyzing the semantic interpretation of ACs. From his table (1991: 135) illustrating the distribution of semantic relations of absolutes and free adjuncts, it becomes clear that, apart from the previously mentioned semantic representations of ACs, the latter may also express other adverbial meanings such as manner, reason, condition, concession, contrast, result, etc. However, the number of such examples is very small, and, as Kortmann (1991: 157) points out, there is a wide gap between “what absolutes, in theory, can express and what they actually do express when seen against the background of a considerable amount of data.”

Each adverbial meaning is exemplified below:
(14) *The pudding plates being removed,* the rest of the company were invited to take cheese. (EJ: 100) (time)
(15) She paused, but *Cecil remaining silent,* she went on with a slight heaving and swallowing: “I think she is very self-absorbed…” (EJ: 233) (cause or reason)
(16) *Politics being the natural field for such talents,* he neglects his farm to attend conventions and to run for county offices. (WC: 74) (cause or reason)
(17) Nobody’s gonna shoot me *with the grandmother watching.* (MOL: 50th min.)
(18) Politics being the natural field for such talents, he neglects his farm to attend conventions and to run for county offices.
(19) Weather permitting, we will have a picnic. (Reishaan) (condition)
(20) Today, with the national polls consistently unfavourable for the Alliance, the faith of the Liberals in what [...] was called the constituency of Chippenham remains untarnished. (Kortmann 1991: 163) (concession)

3.3. Position in the sentence

ACs may be observed at the beginning, at the end, or within the sentence. Hence, the three positions available for an AC in the complex sentence are *initial,* *final* and *medial,* the latter two representing the most frequent and the least frequent position respectively. The three positions are illustrated below:

(21) *With this thought in mind,* I made perhaps one step per minute. (HL: 52) (initial)
(22) He turned slowly and faced the front door, stooping slightly, *his face heated and tired,* with an absent smile. (EJ: 145) (medial)
(23) The Samsung Wave 723 is a promising and stylish full touch handset, *with its main disadvantage being the poor screen.* (SAM: 21) (final)

3.4. Presence/absence of augmentation

The AC can be introduced into its matrix clause either with the help of certain linking words (in most cases the prepositions *with* and *without*) or without them. When linked to the clause without the help of such words, the AC is said to be *unaugmented.* The presence of certain linking words employed to introduce the ACs is known as *augmentation* and, according to Blokh (1983: 349), it is used for the purpose of semantic emphasis. The ACs introduced in this way are termed *augmented.* For Kortmann (1991: 201), augmentation is “an important means of syntactically integrating two clauses which exhibit an unusually high degree of semantic (referential) detachment.” He also points out that the possible augmentors of ACs are *with* and *without,* as well as, marginally, in colloquial English, *what with* and *and.* “In earlier stages of English, practically no limitations existed on the inventory of lexical items that could serve as augmentors of absolutes. This has drastically changed in present-day English, where, even under a generous count, this inventory has been reduced to no more than four members, namely *with/without, what with, and and*” (Kortmann 1991: 199).
Here are some examples:

(24) Alexandra looked from one to the other, her eyes full of indignation. (WC: 126) (unaugmented)
(25) He turned painfully in his bed and looked at his white hands, with all the work gone out of them. (WC: 19) (augmented)
(26) It got satellite lock in just over two minutes without the A-GPS on, which isn’t too bad at all. (HTC: 22) (augmented)
(27) We worry about Miss Masha a bit, with her daddy being away and all. (Kortmann 1991: 203) (augmented)
(28) Like an old horse’s hoofs they are – and this fellow wearing gloves and rings! (WC: 108) (augmented)

3.5. Nature of case-marking onto a pronominal subject

Another criterion for the classification of ACs is the case of the subject as seen when it is expressed by a pronoun. Thus, Kortmann (1991: 12) distinguishes between nominative ACs (when the subject is in the nominative case) and object-case ACs (when the subject is in the dative case).

(29) Off they went, she remaining behind. (Kortmann 1991: 12) (nominative AC)
(30) But you see, him being here in the room – I had to be careful. (Kortmann 1991: 12) (object-case AC)

It should be pointed out, however, that some authors use the term nominative absolute to refer to the general notion of AC as defined and described in this paper. Although this has its grounds, the nominative AC being the most frequent and normally accepted form in Modern Standard English, the presence of object-case ACs in present-day informal language gives enough reason for the terms employed to be specified. Thus, here absolute construction (AC) is the general term, and nominative AC and object-case AC are terms denoting two of its subtypes. This specification is also necessary because many linguists use the term absolute in a very broad sense. According to Pence (1958:120), for example, “an absolute construction is any expression (word, phrase or clause) used independently”, while a nominative absolute is a construction consisting of “a substantive without any grammatical function in the statement in which it appears, modified by a participle.” As Reishaan (2003) quite rightly notices, grammarians always relate the nominative absolute to a type of participle, although participles represent only one kind of non-finite clauses which may be part of its structure. In addition, there also exist verbless ACs, as defined by Quirk and Greenbaum (1985: 996). What all authors are unanimous about, however, is that the nominative absolute is called so because its subject is in the Nominative case.

If we trace back the origin of ACs, we can see that they occur with other grammatical cases in Indo-European languages. Thus, we may observe accusative and ablative ACs in Latin, genitive ACs in Greek, dative ACs in Gothic and Old Church Slavonic, and locative ACs in Vedic Sanskrit. Since the present study is not
a diachronic but a synchronic one, these types of ACs are only mentioned for information purposes. In Modern Standard English, if there is a pronoun in subject position, it is normally in the Nominative case, whereas Old English standardly employed the Dative in ACs. However, object-case ACs can still be observed in Present-day Non-Standard varieties of English and informal language.

3.6. Type of matrix clause the AC is embedded in

There are two types of syntactic relationships between clauses – paratactic and hypotactic. Parataxis is the relationship between units of equal status, and hypotaxis – between units of unequal status. In hypotactically related clauses, one clause is syntactically and semantically subordinated to another or to a series of clauses. As Downing and Locke (1992: 281) state, however, it should be kept in mind that syntactically the nature of this relationship is not always marked explicitly.

No matter what type of clause the AC is embedded in, the relationship between them is always a hypotactic one. Thus, the matrix clause of ACs may be either a main or a subordinate clause to which, semantically, the absolute always adds further information.

(31) Miss Grosvenor sailed back with the tray held out in front of her like a ritual offering. (AC: 2) (main clause matrix)

(32) Imogen was glad of her large, shady hat; as she came out of the shop, the suitcase in her hand, the road was blinding white. (EJ: 154) (subordinate clause matrix)

4. The use of ACs in various types of discourse

“ACs, in all periods, seem to be basically a characteristic of written rather than spoken language. Yet, some absolutes can be used during dialogues and in conversations. Many grammarians such as Wooley (1920: 67.8), Pence and Emery (1965: 63n) and Onions (1971:76) state that the nominative absolute is a perfectly proper construction as far as grammar is concerned. Moreover, it is an effective device, in the hand of the skilled writers, for the unobtrusive insertion of descriptive and narrative details. However, it can easily call attention to itself and thus becomes ungraceful only in the hand of an inexpert writer” (Reishaan 2003).

Logically, fiction happens to be the richest source of examples containing ACs of any type. The main reason which makes this construction highly preferred by authors is its concise form and stylistic markedness. As a result, greater expressiveness of the narration is achieved in comparison with texts where a subordinate clause is used instead of an AC.

(33) Through all the turnings of his thoughts one image dogged him – Colberg’s face, so sharply carved, his eyes a wee bit slanting at the corners, his nostrils cut
on a long shallow curve, his forehead not rounded but angled above the glossy black hairs at the outside ends of his eyebrows. (DC)

(34) With Evelyn beside her, she drove off, head forward, lips pursed, with an air of almost sacerdotal dignity. (EJ: 150)

(35) My father looked at me mildly, amusement in his eyes. (HL: 75)

(36) He stood looking at the carpet, his bushy head bowed, his hands clasped in front of him. (WC: 68)

The compactness and the high degree of expressiveness of the various types of ACs make them a powerful syntactic device of the functional sentence perspective (FSP) with a pretty high frequency of occurrence in Modern English. In his book Syntactic Devices of the FSP Localizing the Communicative and Informational Focus of the Sentence in Modern Standard English, 15-20 c., Grancharov (2010: 341-344) points out the increase in AC use in Late Modern English as compared to the earlier stages of the language development. From a table (2010: 361) illustrating the frequency of occurrence of some main FSP syntactic devices during that period, it becomes evident that, of the twenty-two FSP devices listed there, the AC, with its 9.79 percent, takes the forth place.

In technical texts ACs, scarce as they are, skilfully moderate and lend variety to the narrow technical information. The compact form of the AC makes it extremely appropriate to this type of discourse. The AC fits well in such texts, on the one hand lending them colour and, on the other, contributing to their overall perception as specialized materials by the audience.

(37) With USB on-the-go enabled on the Nokia C7, you can also use the file manager to access USB flash drives and even other phones connected over the optional USB cable. (NOK: 12)

The texts under observation here are mobile phones reviews. Such materials, though intended for a wide audience, are expected to abound with technical terms and narrow specialized information. However, the analysis has shown that, when expertly written, they may be well diversified with stylistic devices, typical of fiction, such as metaphors, comparisons, puns, personifications, etc.

(38) Flash video support is also pretty dodgy with the Wildfire failing to play the Vimeo and Netcafe videos that we tried. (HTC: 19)

The AC is far less frequently used in speech than in writing. It can be observed in films, videos, TV or radio interviews, although its presence there is not so frequent. The analysis of the spoken examples containing ACs showed that in speech there prevail the ones augmented by with, although some cases of unaugmented ACs can also be observed, the latter most often being stereotyped phrases as in (42) below.

(39) I was standing right in this very spot, with my back to him, looking at the window. (STA: 65th min.)
(40) If someone... if I was there and someone says something to him, I wouldn’t sit... I couldn’t sit *with my mouth shut*. (BGT: 1st min.)

**SPATIU**

Another source of spoken examples are the comments left under publications of various kinds in websites, personal blogs, social networks, etc. Although formally they represent a written text, they can be considered part of the spoken rather than the written language, because of the way they are originated. In their nature, comments are nothing more or less than a spontaneous, immediate expression of one’s thoughts or emotions on a certain topic. Another argument in support of the spoken nature of online comments is the dialogical form achieved between the participants in the discussion, which is very often carried out in real time.

(41) Good evening, guys! Hope you are having a swell evening at home *with your favourite drink in hand!* (FB status)

(42) They look yummy! *That said, given the choice,* I’d still pick the chocolate brownie every time! (Comment under a food photo)

In speech, the AC is most often used for description and its semantics is typically attendant-circumstantial. Still, other semantic relations can be observed, such as the ones in (42) – the meaning of the two consecutive ACs here is temporal and causal, respectively.

### 5. Frequency profile

The table below illustrates the frequency profile of the English AC. It presents the summarized information about the various types of ACs in English and their frequency of occurrence in language as observed in my corpus of examples. The statistic data are presented in percents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERION</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>MOST FREQUENT (more than 50 %)</th>
<th>LESS FREQUENT (10-40 %)</th>
<th>LEAST FREQUENT (less than 10 %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRUCTURE</strong></td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>- present participle</td>
<td>- past participle</td>
<td>- to-infinitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-verbal</td>
<td>- PP</td>
<td>- AdvF</td>
<td>- NP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MEANING</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>- manner</td>
<td>- time</td>
<td>- condition</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- attendant circumstances</td>
<td>- cause/reason</td>
<td>- concession</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>POSITION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>- final</td>
<td>- initial</td>
<td>- medial</td>
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<td><strong>AUGMENTATION</strong></td>
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<td>- unaugmented</td>
<td>- without</td>
<td>- what with</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- with</td>
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<td>- and</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CASE-MARKING</strong></td>
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<td>- object-case</td>
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<td><strong>TYPE OF MATRIX CLAUSE</strong></td>
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<td>- main</td>
<td>- subordinate</td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>TYPE OF DISCOURSE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>- fiction</td>
<td>- technical texts</td>
<td>- speech</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Frequency Profile of the English AC SPATIU

6. Conclusion

The analysis of my corpus has revealed that the infinitive is not among the most preferred forms as predicative element in ACs. The most frequent patterns of verbal ACs are those containing present or past participles, and of the non-verbal ones – PPs and NPs, followed by AdvPs and APs.

As far as the semantic interpretation of the AC is concerned, the attendant-circumstantial meaning predominates over the less frequently expressed temporal and causal relations. The examples containing ACs denoting condition or concession have the lowest degree of occurrence in language.

The most preferred position in the sentence of an AC has proved to be the final one, followed by the initial and the medial positions, in descending order.

The number of unaugmented and with-augmented ACs is almost the same and they have the highest degree of occurrence in language. I have found rather few examples of ACs introduced by the preposition without and very few, if any, with what with and and.

The nominative AC is the most frequent and normally accepted form in Modern Standard English, yet there are object-case AC instances in present-day informal language as well, but their number is very small.

As previously pointed out, the matrix clause of the AC may be either a main or a subordinate clause. After analyzing the material excerpted so far, it became clear that the number of ACs embedded in a main clause is greater than that of those embedded in a subordinate clause.

As for the distribution of ACs among the various types of discourse, my analysis has revealed that the more formal a text is, the lower the ACs frequency of occurrence is. Thus, narrative texts abound with ACs, while in technical texts their presence is pretty scarce.

Basically, the AC is characteristic of written rather than of spoken language. In speech it is rarely used, mainly for descriptive purposes. This is to a great extent due to its nature, on the one hand, and the diversity of its types and ways of interpretation, on the other: the AC is considered tricky to use and therefore is instinctively avoided in speaking. Written texts, however, are studded with ACs of all types, because of the high degree of expressiveness of the text achieved through their use.

With all of the above in mind, the final conclusion that can be drawn is that, in Present-day English, ACs are more and more frequently and widely used in various types of discourse.

References
