

ABSOLUTES

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Abstract

Participial absolute constructions are examined as means of condensation. They function as adjuncts, typically referring to the accompanying circumstance or providing additional explanation/ specification. They are loosely attached to the matrix clause; the link may be marked explicitly with augmentation devoid of specific adverbial content. The subject of absolutes, often realized by a proform, is typically co-referential with a matrix clause element in the non-subject territory. These characteristics make absolutes resemble non-restrictive postmodifying clauses. The absolute may be preferred to the participial postmodifying clause for syntactic reasons, serving to disambiguate the sentence.

In the present paper¹ we would like to examine the role of absolute constructions as means of condensation in present-day English. We shall focus on participial absolutes, juxtaposed to the matrix clause (non-augmented absolutes) or introduced by a subordinator (augmented absolutes), performing the function of an adjunct. Stylistically, our study is limited to scientific texts.² The stylistic limitations lead also to a restriction in terms of the choice of the subordinator: out of the narrow range of subordinators available to absolutes in general - *what with*, *and*, *with* and *without* – only the latter two are not stylistically marked as colloquial. As far as the form of the participial predicate is concerned, present, perfect and past participles (active and passive) all occur in absolutes (cf. Table 1). Stative and copular verbs are frequently used as the predicates of absolutes.³ It seems that these verbs are well suited for the expression of the semantic roles which absolutes most frequently convey (accompanying circumstance, explanation). It is these types of predicate that support the treatment of absolute constructions as substitutes for rather than condensed forms of subordinate clauses, since stative and copular verbs never occur in *-ing* forms in finite predicates.

	present participle		perfect participle		past participle	total
	active	passive	active	passive		
	<i>-ing</i>	<i>being -ed</i>	<i>having -ed</i>	<i>having been -ed</i>	<i>-ed</i>	
non-augmented absol.	73	17	3	1	6	100
augmented absolutes	71	18	1	0	10	100
total	144	35	4	1	16	200

Table 1: The form of the participial predicate in absolutes

Syntactically, the subordinate character of absolute clauses is indicated by the nonfinite form of the predicate, and by the subordinator *with/ without* in augmented absolutes. From the semantic point of view, “the syntactic inequality of subordination tends to bring with it a semantic inequality” (Quirk et al. 1985: 919), which makes it possible to present the information in the adverbial clause as backgrounded (cf. also Povolná 2003).

In this respect, participial absolutes resemble ‘subjectless’ participial adjuncts. The syntactic difference between the two constructions consists first in the presence vs. absence of the subject in the surface structure of absolutes and ‘subjectless’ adjuncts, respectively, and second, in the range of subordinators available to the two types of clauses. The unexpressed subject of participial ‘subjectless’ adjuncts is generally recoverable from the matrix clause; in most cases the ‘attachment rule’ applies, i.e. the unexpressed subject of the adjunct is co-referential with the matrix clause subject. Thus it might be expected that in absolutes the overt subject (Sa) will be different from that of the matrix clause (Sm). However, Kortmann notes that as far as the subjects of absolutes are concerned, in most cases there exists some “referential relation their denotations may bear to the denotations of matrix constituents or, more generally, of constituents in the surrounding linguistic material” (Kortmann 1991: 91).

ABSOLUTES

	absolutes in end and medial* position			absolutes in initial position
	Sa non-coreferential with a matrix clause element*	Sa (fully / partially) co-referential with a matrix clause element		
		Sa antecedent in Sm-territory**	Sa antecedent in non-Sm-territory	
non-augmented absolutes	7	38 (6 / 32)	51 (28 / 23)	4
augmented absolutes	6	33 (6 / 27)	48 (11 / 37)	13
total	13	71 (12 / 59)	99 (39 / 60)	17

* There were only two absolutes in medial position, both of them non-augmented.

** I.e. a clause element preceding the verb of the matrix clause.

Table 2: The subject in absolutes (Sa) in relation to the subject (Sm) and other elements of the matrix clause

Most absolutes are end-placed in relation to their matrix clause (cf. Table 2). In this position the search for the Sa antecedent may be, in most cases, limited to the preceding matrix clause (sentence) elements. In initially placed absolutes the search for the Sa preceding co-referent exceeds sentence boundaries. In medially and end-placed absolutes the Sa co-reference pattern appears to be different from that predominant in 'subjectless' adjuncts. In the majority of end-placed adjuncts the Sa is co-referential with a matrix clause element closely preceding it, i.e. a non-subject element (this may be the object, subject or object complement, adverbial, notional subject in existential *there*-clauses, or the verb). If the Sa is related through reference to the Sm, the link is in most cases overtly indicated by repetition, pronominalization, using numerals etc (ex. 1).

- (1) A number of safeguards were said to be in force, the first being that all applications had to be made in writing. (ASB, 820)

As far as the degree of co-reference between Sa and a preceding matrix clause element is concerned, a gradient of 'attachment' of the absolute to the superordinate clause may be detected, with full co-reference between Sa and a matrix clause element representing one end of the scale, and complete absence of co-reference the other.

The subject of the absolute may be fully co-referential with a matrix clause element. This clause element is typically not the subject of the matrix clause (cf. Table 2: the proportion of full co-reference, i.e. the first number in the brackets, is higher if the Sa antecedent is in the non-Sm territory). The relation between the two elements may be achieved through reiteration (including a synonym) or substitution by a proform. The Sa antecedent may be either a clause element or a part of a phrase realising it.

- (2) Standardised registration ratios were calculated by expressing the observed number of cases as a percentage of the expected number, *the expected number being calculated by applying the national age specific rates for each five year age group to the number of people in the group being considered.* (EA0, 274)

One type of full co-reference is particularly frequent. The antecedent of the absolute's subject in the matrix clause denotes a set of referents, and the pronominal subject of the absolute refers either to the set as a whole (*both* in ex. 3) or to its members individually (*each* in ex. 4).

- (3) In Seascale there were two cases of non-Hodgkin lymphoma, *both occurring at ages 55-64.* (EA0, 307)
- (4) The cards were then presented to six groups of undergraduate students, *each group containing four or five members.* (J89, 57)

The relation does not necessarily obtain only between nominal clause elements. The following example shows an analogous relation between a verb and its adverbial modification in the matrix clause (a set) and the subject of the absolute clause (individual members of the set).

- (5) Whether this means that life originated just once, or that it originated many times, *each origin acquiring a different code*, but that one origin gave rise to more successful competitors, we do not know. (AE7, 170)

If the subject of the absolute is not fully co-referential with a clause element of its superordinate clause it may be attached to its antecedent through paradigmatic sense relations other than synonymy. The relations of part or individual/ whole (ex. 6, 7) and hyponymy (ex. 8) are frequent. These relations are indicated linguistically using the cohesive devices of reiteration, ellipsis, or substitution.

- (6) Jail sentences of eighteen months each were meted out to five of them, with the sixth (the only woman) receiving twelve months. (ASB, 1439)
- (7) Most cutters engage in the behaviour on several occasions, some cutting themselves hundreds of times altogether. (B30, 1216)
- (8) There is also evidence of slower acquisition of language and, in the school years, a higher frequency of learning difficulties and behavioural disturbance - hyperactivity, anxiety, and poor concentration being prominent features. (EA0, 1112)

The other extreme end of the scale of attachment of the absolute is represented by those sentences in which there is no co-reference between the subject of the absolute and any clause element of the superordinate clause or the sentence.⁴

- (9) This involves combined action by hospital providers, who have fulfilled their contracts *with a quarter of the year remaining*, and general practitioners... (EA0, 32)

Returning to Table 2, let us mention another difference between juxtaposed and augmented absolutes (in end and medial position): full co-reference between the Sa and a matrix clause element is twice as frequent in non-augmented absolutes (34 cases) than in their augmented counterparts (17 cases). This supports Kortmann's conclusions concerning the role of augmentation in absolutes: *with-* augmentation represents "an important means of syntactically integrating two clauses which exhibit an unusually high degree of semantic (referential) detachment" (Kortmann 1991: 201). The need to indicate clearly the link between the dependent clause and the rest of the sentence arises also in initially placed absolutes. This may explain the higher number of augmented absolutes in this position. Augmentation may be accompanied by reference ties to the matrix clause.

- (10) *With the nuclear ship constantly manoeuvring to avoid the dinghies, the crew* refused to stop dropping the drums over the side. (AN9, 270)

In contrast to finite and 'subjectless' participial adjuncts, augmentation in absolutes does not seem to be linked with the expression of particular semantic roles. Another difference between finite and participial 'subjectless' adjunct clauses on the one hand and absolutes on the other consists in the fact that absolutes behave in quite a uniform way in terms of the semantic roles

they perform. Not only is the range of the semantic relations expressed by absolutes limited; moreover, 74 % of absolutes perform a 'weak' semantic role (accompanying circumstance, explanation/ exemplification, manner, temporal simultaneity).

	position	'weaker' relations				'stronger' relations				
		acc. circ.	expl.	manner	time simult.	time anter.	time post.	result	reason	cond.
non-augmented absolutes	initial	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	medial	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	end	18	54	4	1	4	6	1	6	0
	total	18	55	4	1	4	6	1	8	3
augmented absolutes	initial	0	0	0	3	4	0	0	5	1
	medial	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	end	23	34	9	2	0	3	7	9	0
	total	23	34	9	5	4	3	7	14	1
all absolutes - total		41	89	13	6	8	9	8	22	4

Table 3: Semantic roles of absolutes

These semantic relations require minimum background knowledge on the part of the reader to be identified. They are all based on temporal co-reference between the predicates of the matrix clause and the absolute, adding background information to or further specifying the content of the matrix clause. We tried to find certain criteria to distinguish between the individual roles, yet the boundaries between the categories remain blurred. Accompanying circumstance (ex. 11) will be understood here as a state (either a copular or a stative verb is employed in the *-ing* participle or an *-ed* participle) attendant on the event/state in the matrix clause with no clue being provided as to the specification of the relation between the two. The expression of temporal simultaneity or overlap (ex. 12) typically involves activity verbs in *-ing* participles. In manner adjuncts (ex. 13) the verb is also typically dynamic. However, while temporal

simultaneity clauses refer to an action separate from that described by the matrix clause, in manner adjuncts both the matrix clause and the adverbial clause refer to the same action. The adjunct clauses for which the last of the 'weak' semantic relations, explanation/ specification/ exemplification (ex. 14), can be inferred are frequent in the language of science. They provide an explanation of the matrix clause proposition or a part of it by rewording, specifying it, or providing examples. "Where the adjunct/ absolute adds details to some event, this relation may sometimes be difficult to distinguish from manner." (Kortmann 1991: 167) As in manner adjuncts, the predicate verb of the explanatory adjunct is typically related through synonymy or hyponymy to the expression in the matrix clause it explains. However, usually an expression like *that is, for example, namely, in particular* can be used to introduce the adjunct of explanation.

- (11) ...they groan and cheer in panic unison with their neighbours - *the worst sound of all being the hysterical scream of laughter that greets any little trip or fall of a player.* (B17, 526)
- (12) ...Faroe Islanders each year herd large schools of pilot whales into shallow waters and then, *with man and whale alike thrashing in red bloodstained water*, the animals are gaffed, speared, or knifed to death. (ABC, 788)
- (13) Scattered and recoiled particles are velocity analysed by measuring their flight times from the sample to the detector, a distance of 1m, *with standard timing electronics being used for data collection.* (ALV, 1681)
- (14) It is in these circumstances that there occurs, according to Merton, a situation of anomie, *with people striving for goals of material success, but not having the opportunities to reach them through legitimate means.* (B17, 293)

Even though some of the absolutes could be assigned one of the weak semantic roles, their relation to the matrix clause seems to be so weak that they resemble postmodifying non-restrictive clauses rather than adverbial ones. This applies in particular to absolutes whose subject is an anaphoric proform co-referential with an adjacent matrix clause element. It seems that the absolute was sometimes chosen for syntactic rather than semantic reasons: for example in (15) the presence of an overt subject *both* makes it possible to postmodify jointly both the coordinated noun phrases in the object of the matrix clause. A postmodifying participial clause in the same position in the sentence (ex. 15') could be understood as referring only to the latter object noun phrase *severe anorexia*.

- (15) The eating disorders include compulsive overeating and severe anorexia, *both being found in some patients*. (B30, 1189)
- (15') The eating disorders include compulsive overeating and severe anorexia *found in some patients*.

The absolute construction may disambiguate the intended postmodification of a modifier (i.e. *individuals differing from every other* in ex. 16) from the postmodification of the head of the noun phrase (i.e. *a population differing from every other*).

- (16) And then it is clear how Darwin has come to be thinking of a species as a population of individuals, *with each member differing from every other...* (CMA, 129)

A similarly 'weak' absolute occurs in ex. 17. Here the omission of the absolute's subject (as in 17') would again change the adverbial clause into a postmodifying one. The absolute construction seems to have been preferred to avoid the possibility of a restrictive interpretation of the participial clause (17'').

- (17) In Seascale there were two cases of non-Hodgkin lymphoma, *both occurring at ages 55-64*. (EA0, 307)
- (17') In Seascale there were two cases of non-Hodgkin lymphoma, *occurring at ages 55-64*.
- (17'') In Seascale there were two cases of non-Hodgkin lymphoma *occurring at ages 55-64 (and three occurring at ages 65-70)*.

Although augmented absolutes outnumber the non-augmented ones slightly in the expression of 'stronger' semantic relations, the augmentation itself cannot serve as a device for indicating a certain interpretation.

In our corpus there occurred only 4 absolutes expressing condition, one of them *with-* augmented (ex. 18). The three nonaugmented absolutes comprise the stereotyped formulae *other things being equal*, and *that being so*. We may therefore conclude with Kortmann that the absolute construction "does not provide a productive pattern for the expression of this [i.e. the conditional] adverbial role" (Kortmann 1991: 157).

- (18) From what we now know about the nature of meaning, a hybrid or modular account seems inescapable: there remains the hope that *with two components, a semantics and a pragmatics working in tandem*, each can be built on relatively homogeneous and systematic lines. (J2K, 9)

More frequently absolutes, both with (ex. 19) and without augmentation, were found to express the relation of reason/ cause.

- (19) *With more and more reactors coming on stream every year*, it was inevitable that problems would begin to occur. (AN9, 140)

The interpretation, however, may border on that of explanation: in ex. 20 the absolute may either be considered the reason why the book was found readable or further explanation of what is meant by the object complement *readable*.

- (20) I found the book to be very readable, *with each subject being given just the right amount of coverage, considering the intended readership*. (AALW, 2645)

In Kortmann's data, absolutes do not express the relations of temporal sequence, which he relates to the fact that "for two events with different agents it requires much more background knowledge of the expectable order of events in order to decide on whether they, in a given context, happen successively or simultaneously" (Kortmann 1991: 143). However infrequent, absolutes expressing anteriority and posteriority did occur in our corpus. Looking at their subjects though, we can see that they are fully or at least partially co-referential with a matrix clause element. Moreover, the temporal sequence is indicated by the form of the participial predicate (anteriority is expressed by absolutes with perfect or past participles) and/ or iconicity of clausal ordering (all *with*-absolutes expressing anteriority are in initial position) as well as by lexical means (posteriority absolutes either contain a modifier explicitly indicating the sequence, e.g. *afterwards, subsequent reference*, or their predicate verbs continue a sequence of events started by the matrix clause verb, e.g. *strip and clean the walls – reapply plasterwork and paintings* in ex. 22). Unless these clues indicate otherwise, "the present participle is generally interpreted as being simultaneous with the nearest reference time, provided either by time adverbials ... or a finite verb" (Kortmann 1991: 155).

- (21) Of the six patients who underwent intra-aortic balloon counterpulsation and were discharged from hospital after transplantation two are alive, *the four others having died at 10 weeks, 31, 42, and 61 months.* (EA0, 534)
- (22) To restore the walls to their former glory they are being completely stripped and cleaned, *with the plasterwork and paintings being reapplied,* now using only material that will breathe. (ALV, 163)

Conclusion

We have seen absolutes modifying the predicate of the matrix clause and performing the same semantic roles as finite clauses (even though the range of semantic relations expressed by absolutes is more limited). Therefore they can be considered a means of condensation of the adverbial clause: they make it possible to present the message in a minimized way both formally (non-finite verb forms, lack of a subordinator), and semantically (the semantic relation between the participial clause and the matrix clause is typically not made explicit). On the other hand, "economy in utterance has to be balanced against the time and effort that listeners or readers are prepared to spend in decoding the message" (Greenbaum 1988: 9). In this respect absolutes, which have their own subject expressed, seem to represent a step in condensation intermediate between finite clauses and 'subjectless' participial adjuncts. However, the presence of a subject in the absolute, which might be considered its advantage (considering the effort needed to identify the unexpressed subject in 'subjectless' clauses), may actually make the interpretation of the semantic relations obtaining between the matrix and the subordinate clause more complex. This concerns in particular the relations based on temporal sequence rather than simultaneity, i.e. the 'stronger' semantic relations of concession, condition, purpose, reason, and result (together with temporal anteriority and posteriority). It generally requires more co-/contextual background knowledge to identify the relations between actions performed by different agents than between those carried out by the same subject. This seems to be a serious drawback inhibiting the use of absolutes to express 'stronger' semantic relations. 'Subjectless' participial adjuncts obeying the 'attachment rule' (which reduces the problem of identification of the unexpressed subject) are more frequent in the expression of these roles. Moreover, augmentation not being a means to denote a particular semantic role in absolutes, the interpretation of absolute adjuncts relies on a combination of lexical clues, clausal order and temporal relations indicated by the form of the participial predicate. Again, the interpretation of 'subjectless'

adverbial clauses is facilitated in this respect as they may be introduced by (some of) the subordinators used in finite clauses.

Absolutes may thus be characterized as modifying constructions loosely attached to the matrix clause (with the possibility to mark the link explicitly using augmentation devoid of specific adverbial content), typically referring to the accompanying circumstance/ state or providing additional explanation/ specification. It is not only these characteristics that make them resemble non-restrictive postmodifying clauses: moreover, their subject is typically (fully or partially) co-referential with a matrix clause element in the non-subject territory or even adjacent to the subject of the absolute. Especially if the subject of the absolute is realized by a proform (*each, both, the former* etc.), the parallel with a participial clause postmodifying the antecedent of the absolute's subject suggests itself. The absolute may be preferred to the participial postmodifying clause for syntactic reasons, serving to disambiguate the sentence.

We hope to have shown that their properties make participial absolutes an important means of complex condensation in present-day English. They can be seen as complying with Leech's textual pragmatics economy principle ('be quick and easy') with the maxim of reduction ('reduce where possible') (Leech 1983: 66-68). At the same time they allow maintaining the recoverability of the message, whether used as an alternative to an adverbial or to a postmodifying clause.

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Sources

The data cited herein have been extracted from the British National Corpus World Edition, December 2000 Release (CD), Published by the Humanities Computing Unit of Oxford University on behalf of the BNC Consortium.

(Endnotes)

- ¹ This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic as a part of the research plan MŠM 206806.
- ² Representing an important means of complex condensation, absolute constructions occur predominantly in written texts where condensation is employed to a considerable extent: in newspapers (frequently in sports reports) and academic writing. The present study analyses 100 non-augmented and 100 *with/without*- augmented absolutes drawn from 20 BNC texts from the domains of natural sciences, arts and social science.
- ³ In 61 non-augmented and 48 augmented absolutes with an active present or perfect participial predicate the predicate verb was copular or stative.
- ⁴ The Sa antecedent may be unexpressed but implied if it is the agent of a passive matrix clause (e.g. The cut may be made [by the patient] with little or no apparent awareness, *the patient suddenly discovering that she has cut herself and at the same time experiencing a sense of relief*. (B30, 1223)). Absolutes with *there* and anticipatory *it* subjects were also included in this category although, strictly speaking, the referential ties are again present, albeit between a matrix clause element and an element of the absolute other than the S (e.g. ... there is no provision for security of tenure for the Commissioner, *it being provided only that he "shall hold office in accordance with the terms of his appointment"*). (ASB, 1141)).