

With (and Without) Absolutes

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Abstract

We shall focus on augmented absolute clauses as style markers in four registers: journalistic, academic and imaginative writing and spoken language. Apart from the differences in the distribution of absolute constructions in the four registers, two tendencies in absolute use may be traced distinguishing between journalistic and academic writing on the one hand, and fiction and spoken discourse on the other. While in periodicals and academic texts augmented absolute clauses constitute productive means of clausal condensation, in fiction and spoken language there is a tendency towards using a restricted set of idiomatic absolute constructions loosely integrated in the sentence.

As a matter of fact, the topic of the present study was suggested to me by Professor Dušková, who asked me about the characteristics of absolute constructions introduced by subordinators during the defence of my doctoral thesis. I'd like to thank her for all her questions and I hope this time I shall be able to give her a better answer.

1. Preliminaries

The constructions which will be referred to as 'augmented absolutes' here comprise nonfinite and verbless clauses with an overt subject, attached to the matrix clause with the subordinators *with*, *without*, and *what with*. Syntactically, these clauses are marked as subordinate by the form of their predicate and by the subordinator. From the semantic point of view, "the syntactic inequality of subordination tends to bring with it a semantic inequality" (Quirk et al. 1985: 919), i. e. the information in the absolute adverbial clause may be presented as backgrounded. Absolutes may be viewed as a means of condensation of the adverbial clause. Therefore they are likely to be distributed unevenly across various styles. Indeed, Vaněčková considers absolutes (alongside 'subjectless' participial adjuncts) style markers, rare in fiction, absent in journalistic writing, and appearing "only in a few cases" in scientific writing (Vaněčková 1996: 193). In the present study we shall compare the augmented absolute constructions occurring in four types of texts: periodicals, academic writing, imaginative prose, and spoken language. From each of the three former domains 100 absolute constructions introduced by *with* were excerpted. Approximately 28,500 sentences, 59,500 sentences, and 221,500 sentences from written journalistic, academic and fiction texts, respectively, were needed to obtain the 100 sentences containing an absolute clause. As expected, the absolute constructions are much rarer in spoken language: having searched 829,000 sentences, we only found 60 absolute clauses – these will represent the spoken domain in our study. We focussed primarily on absolutes introduced by *with*, which is the most frequent, and stylistically unmarked, subordinator available for this type of constructions. Absolute clauses may

also be introduced by *without* and *what with*. In our four subcorpora, there occurred a single *without*-absolute per 100 *with*-absolutes both in journalistic and in scientific writing, and three *without*-absolutes per 100 and 60 *with*-absolutes in fiction and in spoken language, respectively. In the British National Corpus (i.e. 100 million words) there are 55 absolute constructions introduced by *what with* (in 52 texts). Most of these come from imaginative writing (19 clauses) and spoken language (9 clauses); all the uses, even if from periodicals (usually leisure or arts domains), bear features of informal colloquial language.

2. The predicate

The predicative element of the absolute may be either verbal (participial) or non-verbal (an adjective, adverb, noun or prepositional phrase). The four registers do not differ significantly in the form of the absolutes' predicates, as shown in Table 1. Present and past participial predicates together with those expressed by a prepositional phrase are the most frequent types. The absence of perfect absolutes suggests that there are either other means of expressing the temporal relations between the matrix clause and the absolute, or that most absolutes denote actions and states simultaneous with those denoted by the matrix clause predicate. Both these assumptions are true, to a certain extent: absolutes expressing the relation of temporal anteriority constitute 5% of our data, while the relation of temporal simultaneity occurred in 15% of absolutes. Anteriority absolutes were invariably placed in initial position with respect to their matrix clause, their predicate being typically a past participle (8 clauses) or a prepositional phrase (6 clauses, where the preposition may serve as an indicator of the temporal relation: *behind [her]*, *off [her mind]*).

It may be noted here that some of the prepositional phrases operating as the predicates of *with*-absolutes are used figuratively. These predicative idioms are rare in academic writing, and considerably more frequent in spoken language and in fiction, several of them being used repeatedly: *in mind/off [her] mind*, *behind him/her/us*, *in sight*, *on the decline*. It was demonstrated by Riehemann and Bender (1999: 477) that "in contrast to the *with*-absolutes, not all of the idioms are acceptable in the *with*-less absolute construction". They seem to form an idiomatic construction including the subordinator *with*. The prepositional phrase *in mind* does not appear to be used as the predicate of non-augmented absolutes. If it does occur in *with*-less absolutes, it is as a part of the complementation of a present participial predicate (exx. 1, 2). The prepositional phrases *in sight*, *on the decline* also seem to operate as predicates only in augmented absolutes. The construction *behind [him/her/us etc.]* was attested in both augmented and non-augmented absolutes, being more frequent in the former though (exx. 3, 4).

- (1) *With the above background in mind*, the task of selling services is perhaps more difficult than that of selling products... (K94,1582)
- (2) *Bearing these points in mind*, let us now turn our attention to new developments. (EV4,738)

- (3) *With her schooldays behind her*, Diana felt as if some great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. (ECM,637)
- (4) *The baptism of fire behind her*, Lucinda had found her lost appetite... (CEH,2795)

Table 1: The form of the predicate in *with*-augmented absolutes

		periodical (total=100)	academic (total=100)	imaginative (total=100)	spoken (total=60)	
verbal (participial) predicate	past part. (-ed)	21	20	15	12	20.0%
	pres. part. pas. (being -ed)	2	1	0	2	3.3%
	pres. part. (-ing)	56	54	42	32	53.3%
non-verbal predicate	AdjP	9	6	10	2	3.3%
	AdvP	1	3	5	3	5.0%
	NP	1	0	0	0	0.0%
	PP	10	16	28	8	13.3%

3. The anchor

Huddleston et al. (2002: 1350–51) characterise absolute clauses syntactically as supplements, "elements which occupy a position in linear sequence without being integrated into the syntactic structure of the sentence. ... Although supplements are not syntactically dependent on a head, they are semantically related to what we will call their anchor." The main clause is considered the anchor for supplement clauses. However, in the majority of absolutes, more specific referential ties can be traced between the clauses: 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). We can imagine a scale of referential dependence of the absolute on the matrix clause, with full coreference between a matrix clause element and an absolute clause element constituting one end of the gradient, and absence of coreferential ties the other. Generally, the degree of attachment to the matrix clause in augmented absolutes is lower than in absolutes without subordinators. At the same time, there appear to be differences in referential attachment of augmented absolutes also among registers. The referential ties are strongest in academic prose, "a register often noted for the precision of its communication of information" (Biber et al. 1999: 825). Moreover, in academic texts the link between the absolute clause element (most frequently the subject) and a matrix clause element tends to be overtly indicated using reiteration or pronominalization (ex. 5). Conversation displays the loosest links (ex. 6). This is consistent with the general characteristics of clausal linkage in this register. Two further factors appear to support this tendency: firstly, the prevalence of initially positioned absolute clauses, where the ties to the preceding context, across sentence boundary, may replace the intra-sentential ones; secondly, some absolutes seem to be stereotyped, being attached to any

matrix clause irrespective of reference ties, e.g. *with it being* [day of the week], *with/without this* (noun) *in mind*, the disjunct *with all things considered* (ex. 7). Larger segments of specific communicative situations also seem to be fairly stereotypical, cf. the reference to time in sports commentaries: *With four minutes of the first half left, ...; With the second half only four minutes old...,* and ex. 8.

The nature of referential ties in fiction appears to be closer to that in spoken language than to the other written registers, a pattern to be repeated also when other characteristics of absolute clauses are considered.

- (5) These exercises can easily be incorporated into an exercise routine, *with each exercise repeated a number of times.* (AD0,1024)
- (6) *With so much cash about,* was there any, any problems with security? (HDL,70)
- (7) *...with all things considered* we did a lot didn't we? (KE6,2201)
- (8) *With four minutes of the match remaining,* a scramble in the Didcot goal mouth saw Patterson hold his head in disbelief as his shot went literally inches wide, ... (KS7,886)

Table 2: The degree of coreference between an element of the *with*-absolute clause and an element of the matrix clause

	periodical (total=100)	academic (total=100)	imaginative (total=100)	spoken (total=60)	
full coref.	1	9	0	2	3.3 %
partial coref.	85	79	64	19	31.7 %
zero coref.	14	12	36	39	65.0 %

4. The position

According to Biber et al. (1999: 201), by using the absolute clause the speaker marks the information given in the clause “as background (initial position), parenthetical (medial position), or supplementary (final position)”. The position of the absolute clause may therefore be considered one of the factors co-determining its semantic role. Generally, initial and end positions are preferred to the medial position. Based on the prevalent position of absolute clauses, as given in Table 3, we may expect more differences between academic and journalistic writing on the one hand, and fiction and conversation on the other. In imaginative prose, and still more frequently in spoken language, the *with*-absolute may be juxtaposed to the sentence as a parcel.

It is rare for more absolute constructions to co-occur in a sentence; if they do, they are usually coordinated even if the realization forms of the predicates are not the same (ex. 9). In this respect the behaviour of absolutes introduced by *what with* differs from that of *with/without*-absolutes substantially. *What with* frequently introduces coordinated structures, the absolute may be followed by another construction of the same type or by a noun phrase (universal quantifiers [*and*] *all/everything* occurred repeatedly) (ex. 10). The

absolute clause may act as a matrix clause for another subordinate clause, typically adverbial (ex. 11).

- (9) *With the Arts Lab in full swing and the free festival about to take place,* David flew to Italy to take part in a song contest... (AB5,20)
- (10) And he will rend the plans in twain, *what with it being such a nice pub and all, and the lads not laughing at his poncey suit.* (ECT,268)
- (11) *With eyes fixed on me as if I was hypnotisin' him,* he takes the papermate out of the tray and moves away as if I might bite. (ALH,2624)

Table 3: The position of the with-augmented absolute clause with respect to the matrix clause

	periodical (total=100)	academic (total=100)	imaginative (total=100)	spoken (total=60)	
initial position	14	30	80	44	73.3 %
end position	76	68	19	15	25.0 %
medial position	0	2	1	1	1.7 %

5. The semantic role

In contrast to subordinators introducing finite and ‘subjectless’ participial adjuncts, *with*-augmentation in absolutes is not linked with the expression of particular semantic roles. Still, we cannot fully agree with Quirk et al. (1985: 1124), who claim that “clauses introduced by *with* and *without* often convey little more than a vague notion of accompanying circumstance”. *With*-absolutes indeed behave in quite a uniform way in terms of the semantic roles they perform: almost 66 % of augmented absolutes express a ‘weak’ semantic role: accompanying circumstance, explanation/exemplification, manner, temporal simultaneity. Nevertheless, they were also attested to express ‘stronger’ relations, however infrequently (the only exception consists in the expression of the reason relationship by 24 % of augmented absolutes, cf. Table 4).

The ‘weak’ 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. Although certain criteria to distinguish between the individual roles may be devised, the boundaries between the categories remain blurred. Accompanying circumstance (ex. 12) will be understood here as a state (if the predicate is verbal, either a copular or a stative verb is employed) 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. 13) typically involves activity verbs in *-ing* participles. In manner (and means) adjuncts (ex. 14) 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 semantic relations of explanation/exemplification (ex. 15) can be inferred are particularly frequent in the language of science and journalism. 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 element of 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. If the absolute clause is anchored to an adjacent noun phrase of the matrix clause through full coreference between the pronominal subject of the absolute and the NP clause element(s), it borders on a postmodifying clause. The absolute construction may be preferred to a ‘subjectless’ non-finite postmodifying clause to avoid ambiguity (cf. exx. 16 and 16’, adduced to illustrate the potential ambiguity: postmodifying jointly *sexual* and *cultural difference* vs. only *cultural difference*).

- (12) It was cold that early in the morning, *with a sliver of moon hanging among the stars*. (A15,995)
- (13) *With the huge shaggy Kodiak bounding around me*, I plodded down the path next morning in Mrs Knelle’s son’s wading boots. (ADM,598)
- (14) Logistic units will be established well forward, *with resupply aircraft landing on ‘dirt strips’*, which in reality are no more than flat fields. (A77,83)
- (15) The bivalves have long geological history, *with a few doubtful species known even in Cambrian strata ...* (AMM,436)
- (16) Several kinds of difference figure in contemporary cultural theory but two especially: sexual difference (deriving usually though not invariably from psychoanalysis) and cultural difference, *with each of these complicated by a third kind of difference which construes meaning and identity in terms of difference or, more exactly, differential relations*. (A6D,229)
- (16’) Several kinds of difference figure in contemporary cultural theory but two especially: sexual difference (deriving usually though not invariably from psychoanalysis) and cultural difference, *complicated by a third kind of difference ...*

Table 4: The semantic roles of *with*-absolutes

		periodical (total=100)	academic (total=100)	imaginative (total=100)	spoken (total=60)		total (360)	
						%		%
‘weaker relations’	acc. circ.	15	25	30	16	26.7%	86	23.9%
	explanation	41	35	3	9	15.0%	88	24.4%
	manner	2	4	3	0	0.0%	9	2.5%
	time simult.	15	9	21	9	15.0%	54	15.0%
‘stronger relations’	time anter.	5	4	7	2	3.3%	18	5.0%
	time post.	2	0	0	0	0.0%	2	0.6%
	result	6	1	1	0	0.0%	8	2.2%
	reason	12	22	34	19	31.7%	87	24.2%
	condition	0	0	1	3	5.0%	4	1.1%
	concession	2	0	0	0	0.0%	2	0.6%
disjuncts		0	0	0	2	3.3%	2	0.6%

It is not common for augmented absolutes to express ‘stronger’ semantic relations. The reason may be sought in the fact that there is not “any explicit indication of the semantic relation between the supplement and the anchor [i.e. the main clause]. This has to be inferred from the content of the clauses and/or the context” (Huddleston et al. 2002: 1266). 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 infrequently, absolutes expressing anteriority and posteriority did occur in our corpus. The temporal sequence may be indicated by the form of the participial predicate (past participles in anteriority adjuncts) as well as by the meaning of the predicate verb (ex. 17), by the iconicity of clausal ordering (all *with*-absolutes expressing anteriority are in initial position), and by lexical means (the preposition in predicates formed by a PP – ex. 3 above, modifiers explicitly indicating the sequence – ex. 18, or the predicate verbs of the matrix and absolute clauses denoting individual steps in a process – ex. 19).

- (17) *With the paperwork finished*, it’s across to the Mess for a cup of tea and to catch up on the rest of the news. (A77,1636)
- (18) Then Alan Wakefield will be demonstrating walking stick making over that latter weekend, *with Les Davis turning on 25-26 August and John Adams caning seats on 22 September*. (A0X,75)
- (19) *With the bolt in the hole*, bring up the second part of the joint, and mark round the circumference of the bolt. (A16,111)

The only exception to the generally low occurrence of augmented absolutes in the domain of ‘stronger’ semantic relations is represented by absolute clauses of reason (ex. 20), particularly frequent in imaginative

prose and spoken language. Most of these clauses were in initial position with respect to the matrix clause, it being sometimes difficult to distinguish them from the clauses expressing mere temporal anteriority.

- (20) *With less than an hour of daylight remaining, he carried a flashlight – not that it would be of much help with the rain cascading down as if the Maya Rain God had corralled every raincloud in Central America and pulled the plugs out.* (AMU,2319)

The expression of reason is exceptional in yet another aspect: “very rarely and predominantly in colloquial speech, causality in absolutes, just as in gerundive clauses and prepositional phrases, may be marked by *what with*.” (Kortmann 1991: 202)

- (21) So you see, *what with the Church never keeping adequate records and relying on the personal network all the time and the patronage system doing the same but relying on a different network*, we’re all rather in the dark. (HA2,2308)

Comparing the four registers in terms of the semantic roles performed by augmented absolutes, it may be noted that the periodicals display the largest variety of semantic roles, the spoken and academic registers being the most limited in this respect. The reasons leading to this restriction, however, seem to be different in the two types of discourse.

In academic writing there appear to operate two tendencies that have to be balanced against one another: on the one hand, there is a tendency towards concise expression involving complex condensation, and on the other the effort to present the information, including the relations between clauses, clearly and unambiguously. The most frequent relation between an absolute adjunct and the matrix clause is explanation and exemplification, where the link between the two clauses is usually indicated by the lexical relations of hyponymy, meronymy, or those of the individual and the group, obtaining between coreferential elements of the two clauses. With the exception of reason clauses (albeit less frequent than in spoken language), it is generally not preferred to use absolutes to express ‘stronger’ semantic relations, where the cost of the reader having to arrive at the interpretation on the basis of secondary contextual clues cannot be compensated for by the advantages of condensation.

In spoken language the reasons why the range of semantic roles is narrower than in other registers appear to be different. As demonstrated above, there is a tendency in (colloquial) spoken language to use stereotypical and idiomatic absolutes, i. e. if any absolutes are used at all. Such constructions are associated with the performance of a particular semantic role and may be attached to the matrix clause without the need to establish any referential ties between the clauses. The subordinator *with* is sufficient to mark the absolute clause as integrated in the sentence.

6. Conclusion

We hope to have demonstrated that augmented absolute constructions may serve as a style marker. As expectable, the four types of texts studied differ with respect to the frequency of occurrence of absolute constructions. However, other less eminent features distinguishing between the registers of journalistic, academic and imaginative writing and spoken language may also be traced. Considering the parameters of the position of the absolute with respect to the matrix clause, the reference ties between the matrix clause and the absolute, and the prevalent semantic relations expressed by the absolute, we have seen that imaginative writing resembles spoken language rather than the other written registers.

In periodicals and academic texts augmented absolute clauses constitute an important means of clausal condensation, making it possible to present the message in a minimized way both formally (cf. the form of the predicate) and semantically (the semantic relation between the participial clause and the matrix clause is typically not made explicit). They may be used wherever the economy of utterance so achieved is not outweighed by the amount of time and effort that readers have to spend in decoding the message (cf. Greenbaum 1988: 9). The possibility to decode the message is enhanced by coreference ties (indicated by various cohesive devices: reiteration, substitution, lexical paradigmatic relations) between the matrix and absolute clauses: absolutes with no reference ties to the matrix clause are notably less frequent in journalistic and academic writing than in the registers of spoken language and imaginative prose. The *with*-augmentation serves here as an important means of syntactically integrating the absolute in the sentence. In academic and journalistic writing the absolutes are typically used to refer to the circumstances attendant on the state/event denoted by the matrix clause or to extend the information given by the matrix clause by providing examples or further explanation of some part of it.

In imaginative prose, and even more so in spoken language, absolute constructions are more loosely attached to the matrix clause: zero coreference between the elements of the two clauses is frequent. Therefore the integrating function of the *with*-augmentation seems to be important here too. Yet it seems to perform also another function in these registers. The absolutes tend to be fixed in their form (and the corresponding semantic role), and the idiomatic construction comprises also the initial *with/without*. The subordinator *with* appears to act as a marker of a particular construction associated with a certain meaning rather than a marker of a particular semantic relation. The infrequent colloquial subordinator *what with* is different in this respect: it marks the relation between any absolute and its superordinate clause as causal (in the same way as the subordinators for finite adjuncts). The relation of reason is the semantic relation expressed most frequently by *with*-augmented absolutes in fiction and in spoken language.

The two tendencies described above cannot provide an exhaustive characteristic of the behaviour of augmented absolutes in the four

registers. Many features of augmented absolutes are not register-specific. Nevertheless, these two tendencies may suggest another clue, which could, together with the contrast between spoken and written language and that between formal and informal discourse, account for the differences in the distribution of augmented absolutes in the four registers. While in fiction and spoken language there seems to be a tendency towards using a restricted repertory of absolutes in specific situations, in journalistic and academic writing *with-absolute* clauses appear to constitute a productive means of clausal condensation.

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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.