

SYNTACTIC ECONOMY AND EXPRESSIVENESS: AN ANALYSIS OF NOMINATIVE ABSOLUTE PARTICIPIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Ioan-Beniamin POP*

Abstract: Nominative absolute participial constructions are a distinctive and stylistically versatile feature of Modern English syntax. Comprising a noun phrase in the nominative case in combination with a participial phrase, they form a clause that is grammatically independent of the main sentence. These constructions provide contextual information related to time, cause, condition, or attendant circumstance. Nominative absolute participial constructions are syntactically independent but semantically linked adjuncts, which enhances their ability to play a significant role in improving narrative flow, technical precision, and literary expressiveness. The present paper investigates their structural properties, semantic versatility, diachronic evolution, and examines the propensity of their employment.

Key-words: *absolute constructions, participle, nominative, participial constructions*

1. Introduction

Nominative absolute constructions, as Pop (2022: 219) states, ‘receive their name due to the fact that they modify a noun or pronoun in the nominative or subjective case which is not the subject of the main clause’. Nominative absolute participial constructions (NAPCs) are syntactic phenomena that allow for the inclusion of supplementary information within a sentence without explicit subordination. They do not resemble dependent clauses, which rely on conjunctions such as *because, if, when*, etc., since they are syntactically detached but semantically cohesive. In the vast majority of situations, they function as adverbial modifiers to the main clause. NAPCs are characterized by their pairing of a noun phrase (NP) in the nominative case with a non-finite verb form, namely a participle, creating a compact and efficient way to express temporal, causal, or circumstantial relationships. Take, for example, the following examples:

- a) The fire spreading rapidly, the residents evacuated the building.
- b) The sun having set, the travellers decided to set up camp.

The NAPC in a) provides a dynamic, causal context for the main clause, signalling simultaneity with the action of evacuation. It offers a vivid depiction of events, whereas the perfect participle in b) sets the temporal context for the main clause.

* Conf. univ. dr., Universitatea Tehnică din Cluj-Napoca, Centrul Universitar Nord din Baia Mare, Facultatea de Litere, str. Victoriei, nr. 76, Baia Mare, Maramureș (beniamin.pop@fsc.utcluj.ro)

NAPCs are employed, in the vast majority of situations, by writers who aim to enhance narrative fluidity or technical clarity as these constructions exhibit syntactic economy. They are used across registers, from literary and narrative writing to formal and technical contexts. Although not very frequently met in everyday speech, they are an integral part to writing thanks to their ability to condense complex relationships into succinct phrases.

A short historical analysis of the Nominative absolute participial constructions in English reveals their deep linguistic roots in classical languages. They are based on the ablative absolute in Latin and the genitive absolute in Greek. In terms of their structure, it was made up of a noun (or pronoun) and a participle, both in the ablative case, which functioned as an adverbial modifier in order to provide temporal, causal, or circumstantial context.

Traditional grammarians like Jespersen (1933: 256) argue that the English verbal absolute construction directly inherits the structural compactness and semantic versatility of these classical models. He notes that ‘the English absolute construction, though less formalized than the Latin ablative absolute, serves a similar function in providing circumstantial information detached from the main clause’. From a diachronic perspective, Kortmann (1991: 72) highlights how the ablative and genitive absolutes established a template for circumstantial constructions in later Indo-European languages, including Old English, whereas Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 456) view these classical constructions as foundational for ‘enhancing clause complexes’, where the additional clause serves to elaborate or extend the primary action.

Circumstantial expressions in Old English (450–1150 CE) were primarily realized through subordinate clauses introduced by conjunctions. However, absolute-like constructions were introduced via Latin influence, especially through translations of religious writings. Mitchell and Robinson (1992: 114) argue that Old English lacked the full syntactic detachment characteristic of verbal absolute constructions. These constructions were often semantically integrated into the main clause. The reliance on subordinators like *þa* (‘then’) or *þe* (‘which’) limited the structural independence specific to later periods. Another important role in introducing proto-absolute constructions was the influence of Latin ecclesiastical texts, such as translations of the Vulgate. Early English writers sought to emulate the stylistic conciseness of Latin, which led to the gradual adoption of detached participial phrases.

Middle English (1150–1500 CE) marked a transitional period in the development of verbal absolute constructions. According to Fischer (1992: 243), English moved away from its heavily inflected Old English forms, and thus created an environment centred on increased reliance on word order and prepositions. This facilitated the development of NAPCs due to the fact that

participial phrases gained prominence as tools for encoding circumstantial information. Kortmann (1991: 85) observes that the stylistic influence of French and Latin during this period enhanced the use of verbal ACs in legal and literary texts since they valued brevity and elegance.

The Early Modern English period (1500–1700 CE) represents the peak of verbal absolute constructions (ACs) usage. It is an era marked by linguistic standardization as well as the flourishing of literary works. Among other phenomena, this led to ACs becoming a staple of sophisticated writing. Take, for example, the following exert from Shakespeare: ‘His glory not extenuated, wherein he was worthy, nor his offenses enforced, for which he suffered death’¹. The AC demonstrates the concise and elegant style associated with Shakespeare’s prose. Jespersen (1933: 274) highlights how Early Modern English writers embraced verbal ACs for their ability to condense complex relationships into compact, stylistically pleasing phrases. These constructions were particularly favoured in dramatic and poetic works, where economy of expression was vital. They were the ideal tools for legal and scientific writing during this period owing to their precision and conciseness

The frequency of verbal ACs has declined in Modern English (1700 CE–present), particularly in spoken registers, due to the preference for explicit subordinators. However, verbal ACs remain prevalent in formal, academic and narrative writing. Even though they are concise and elegant, these constructions are now more common in formal prose than in everyday conversation. There are several causes which can account for this tendency. One such factor is the shift toward overt subordination, as already mentioned above. The rise of explicit conjunctions like *because* and *since* in conversational English has reduced the need for compact ACs. Another factor of impact is the colloquial preference for simpler syntax. In spoken English, speakers tend to avoid syntactic detachment and rather favour straightforward clauses for the sake of clarity. Despite the decline of verbal ACs in colloquial use, they play an important role in academic and literary texts due to the fact that they enhance stylistic sophistication and textual economy.

2. Structural characteristics of Nominative absolute participial constructions

NAPCs are syntactically detached from the main clause, but remain closely connected to it in meaning, typically serving as adverbial modifiers. The characteristic feature of verbal ACs is their binary structure, which consists of a noun phrase (NP) and a non-finite verb form, mainly a participial phrase, be it present or past. The NP acts as the logical subject of the AC, providing the construction with semantic stability. The non-finite verb

¹ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

functions as the predicate in the construction and specifies the action or state described in relation to the NP. The general structure can be represented as:

[NP + PartP], [Main Clause]

even though the linear order in which the constructions appear is not sequentially fixed. Take, for instance, the following examples:

- a) The storm intensifying, the soldiers sought shelter.
- b) The project finalized, the team celebrated their success.
- c) Vlad could go out to play, his homework completed,

In a), the AC operates as a causal modifier to the main clause. The NP *the storm* assumes the subject position in the AC, while the present participle functions as the predicate, describing an ongoing action. The Nominative absolute participial construction in b) indicates a temporal sequence, suggesting that the team's celebration occurs after the completion of the project. In c), the past participle *completed* signals a resultant state or condition, which is a common feature of past participles. The absence of a finite verb in the AC is a key structural characteristic. Verbal ACs cannot stand alone as complete sentences, independent clauses do. However, they retain full semantic independence within the context of the larger sentence. This duality, namely their syntactic detachment coupled with semantic integration, has been discussed in the works of Kortmann (1991) and Quirk et al. (1985), who describe ACs as 'syntactically isolated but contextually cohesive'. George O. Curme (1931) notes that 'the absolute construction stands apart from the main sentence structure, offering additional information without being syntactically integrated into the main clause'.

The noun phrase in a verbal AC serves as the logical subject of the construction, even though it is not grammatically tied to the finite verb of the main clause. Take, for instance, the sentence:

Her voice trembling, she delivered the speech.

The NP *her voice* is independent of the main clause's finite verb *delivered*, but it forms the semantic anchor of the AC. The logical relationship is clear: *her voice* is trembling, not *she*.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) classify the NP in verbal ACs as functioning within the Experiential Metafunction, specifically as the Carrier in a relational process. According to this perspective, it is highlighted the crucial role of the noun phrase in encoding participants in the process described by the AC.

The non-finite verb form in verbal ACs serves as the predicate of the construction, i.e. it describes the action, condition, or state associated with the NP. The main forms of non-finite verbs found in verbal ACs are:

Present participles (*-ing*): they indicate simultaneity or ongoing actions.

Past participles (*-ed/-en*): they denote completed actions or resultant states.

Infinitives (*to*-infinitive)²: they express purpose, impossibility, or potentiality.

The choice of non-finite verb form determines the semantic role of the AC in the sentence (e.g., temporal, causal, descriptive). For example:

Present participle: The wind howling, they pressed on.

Past participle: Her hair done, she could leave for the wedding.

Infinitive: With no alternative to consider, they postponed the vote.

Langacker (1987) argues that the non-finite verbs in ACs represents a 'compressed conceptualization' of the event. They encode dynamic or static relationships with the NP and emphasize their efficiency and compactness as linguistic devices.

Verbal ACs are classified based on the type of non-finite verb form they employ. Each form brings temporal, aspectual, or modal nuances to the construction. The most frequently encountered ones are present participle ACs. These constructions describe actions which occur simultaneously with the main clause or as part of its broader temporal framework.

The rain pouring steadily, the hikers trudged through the forest.

The fire spreading rapidly, the residents evacuated the building.

As already stated above, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) categorize present participle ACs as Enhancing Clauses, where the adjunct clause extends or elaborates on the process described in the main clause. Present participle ACs add experiential richness, often by depicting concurrent or background activities. Jespersen (1933) observes that present participle ACs 'paint vivid pictures of motion and immediacy', making them invaluable in narrative and descriptive writing. Their dynamic nature allows them to capture ongoing events with a level of immediacy that cannot be achieved by static constructions.

Past participle ACs describe completed actions or resultant states. Usually, they convey a sense of precedence or causal dependency and link the AC to the main clause in terms of sequence or logic.

The argument settled, she decided to break up with the guy.

In such instances, the AC signals the completion of one task as a prerequisite for the action in the main clause. The past participle emphasizes a resultant

² Even though not under the scope of this study, infinitives are briefly mentioned due to their potentiality of being used, although infrequently, in absolute constructions. Pop (2022: 168) notes that 'when employed in an absolute infinitive construction, the infinitive is part of a structure which consists of a noun in the nominative case followed by an infinitive'.

state, aligning with the typical use of the construction in formal writing. Past participle ACs also imply passivity or a resultant state, as in:

The most puzzling technical problem resolved, the engineer could now go back to sleep.

Quirk et al. (1985) highlight the ‘compactness of past participle ACs in summarizing prerequisites or completed states’. These constructions are particularly effective in formal or technical writing, where they streamline descriptions of conditions or sequences. Past participle ACs are frequently used in procedural and academic texts:

The data collected, the researchers proceeded to analyse the results.

Infinitive ACs, while rarely employed, bring unique modal and purposive dimensions to the construction. In the vast majority of situations, they rely on prepositional augmentation (*with*, *without*) to clarify their relationship with the main clause. They are employed in formal writing, where precision and conciseness are prioritized.

With no time to lose, they hurried to the airport.

Without any alternative to propose, the committee postponed further discussions.

These types of constructions emphasize possibilities, hypothetical scenarios, or conditions and add flexibility to formal registers. Langacker’ (1987) posits that infinitive ACs represent hypothetical or unrealized actions, and, at the same time, bring an element of abstraction to the construction.

Verbal ACs can appear in two structural forms: augmented or unaugmented. Augmentation involves the addition of prepositions like *with* or *without*, while unaugmented forms omit such markers. Pop (2022: 220) notes that ‘when the Absolute Participial Construction is introduced by means of a preposition, it is coined Prepositional Absolute Participial Construction.

With her husband being abroad for a while, and her daughter commuting, the apartment seems rather deserted’.

Augmented forms are more explicit and are typically favoured in formal writing.

With the sun setting, they decided to return to camp.

Unaugmented forms are more concise and stylistically elegant, making them common in narrative and literary writing.

The sun setting, they decided to return to camp.

Even though the preposition is absent, the meaning remains clear due to the semantic coherence of the AC with the main clause. Kortmann (1991) argues that augmentation enhances clarity in contexts where the semantic connection between the AC and the main clause may be ambiguous.

However, unaugmented forms still retain their stylistic appeal due to the fact that they rely on inferential logic.

It is also possible, however, as Pop (2022: 221) shows, ‘to have Nominal absolute constructions which drop the participle, even though it is easily inferred from the context. When this is the case, the following situations may exist: the noun or pronoun is used in combination with a

a) predicative, and then the structure is called Nominative Absolute Construction.

His jaw clenched, the man kept gazing at the bones sticking through the torn trousers. (His jaw being clenched, the man kept gazing)

b) preposition, in a Prepositional Absolute Construction.

With the chalk still in his hand, the teacher could not believe his ears’.

Chomsky (1981) describes absolute constructions as ‘peripheral adjuncts’ that operate outside the core syntax of the sentence. This peripheral status allows them to add supplementary meaning which is achieved without altering the syntactic structure of the main clause.

3. Semantic roles of verbal Absolute constructions

Absolute constructions involving verbal elements are notable for their semantic versatility, providing a range of adverbial meanings that clarify how events or states relate to each other. By functioning as adverbial modifiers, these constructions enrich the main clause by conveying information about the temporal context, causality, conditions, concessions, or attending circumstances. Their syntactic economy allows them to encode complex relationships without relying on explicit subordinating conjunctions, such as *because*, *although*, *when*, etc.

Among the primary functions of verbal ACs is their capacity to establish temporal links between the absolute construction and the main clause. These temporal connections may signify simultaneity, sequential order, or a broader temporal framework, making them especially effective for narrative purposes.

The sun rising, they prepared to begin their journey.

In this instance, the participial phrase *the sun rising* operates as a temporal backdrop to the action in the main clause, emphasizing that the two events occur concurrently. The participle *rising* adds a sense of dynamism, highlighting the ongoing nature of the described events. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 382), temporal verbal ACs function as part of the experiential metafunction, where they encode the time-bound context of the clause’s action. Langacker (1987: 423) posits that temporal ACs utilize ‘construal’ to compress two temporally linked processes into a single syntactic unit. This compression reduces redundancy while preserving the

temporal linkage between events. Jespersen (1933: 232) highlights the elegance of temporal ACs in literature, noting that they ‘capture the flow of time with minimal structural interference’, making them invaluable in descriptions of concurrent actions and adding narrative clarity and rhythm as in:

The clock striking midnight, the guests began to leave.

Due to the fact that they succinctly explain the motivation or reasoning behind the main clause, it is eliminated the need for subordinating conjunctions. They provide concise explanations, which makes them invaluable in academic and technical writing.

The weather being unfavourable, the outdoor event was cancelled.

The evidence being insufficient, the charges were dropped.

Causal ACs align with Halliday & Matthiessen’s (2004: 387) classification of Enhancing Clauses as mechanisms for expressing logical relationships. They condense causality into an adjunct phrase, which augments the logical structure of the discourse without burdening it with additional conjunctions. Quirk et al. (1985: 1116) discuss causal ACs as a subclass of non-finite adverbial clauses and emphasize their functional economy and their ability to clarify inferential relationships without explicit markers. Langacker’s (1987: 445) further supports the idea that causal ACs leverage inferential logic, requiring readers to bridge the implied connection between the AC and the main clause. Causal ACs are frequently used in legal, academic, and technical writing to condense explanations:

The results being inconclusive, the researchers called for further studies.

Descriptive absolute constructions, also called Attendant Circumstances (cf. Quirk et al. 1985, Pop 2022, etc.) are employed to introduce sensory, atmospheric, or environmental detail into a sentence. They create vivid imagery and situate the main clause within a richly textured contextual backdrop.

The waves crashing against the rocks, she stood silently on the shore.

The wind howling, the rescuers pressed forward against the storm.

These constructions often appeal to the reader’s senses and set the stage for the main action without overloading the sentence. Jespersen (1933: 237) refers to descriptive ACs as a writer’s ‘painter’s brush’, enabling the depiction of dynamic imagery or atmospheric detail in a concise and fluid manner. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) place descriptive ACs within the category of Circumstantial Enhancers, highlighting their function as contextual frames

that augment the main clause. This circumstantial function enables writers to add depth and dimension to their narratives. Descriptive ACs are common in literary works, where they enhance narrative engagement and situate the main action within a dynamic and immersive auditory environment.

Conditional absolute constructions introduce hypothetical scenarios or stipulate conditions under which the action in the main clause may occur. These constructions frequently appear in formal or rhetorical discourse, where they lend sophistication to argumentation or exposition.

Weather permitting, the ceremony will proceed according to the initial plan.

All parties consenting, the agreement will be finalized tomorrow.

Quirk et al. (1985: 1117) describe conditional ACs as adverbial adjuncts that create a ‘prototypical dependency’, meaning that the fulfilment of the main clause depends on the condition articulated in the AC. Langacker (1987: 456) conceptualizes these constructions as cognitive simulations, where readers mentally evaluate the hypothetical scenario and its implications.

Concessive ACs emphasize contrasts or qualifications and often highlight surprising outcomes or exceptions to expectations.

The evidence being inconclusive, the court ruled in favour of the plaintiff.

Concessive ACs align with Halliday & Matthiessen’s (2004: 392) notion of Adversative Enhancement, where the AC functions as a counterpoint to the main clause. This adversative relationship adds complexity and nuance to the sentence. Quirk et al. (1985: 1120) emphasize the rhetorical power of concessive ACs in argumentative writing, where they serve to acknowledge counterarguments or challenges that, in turn, reinforce and underscore the main proposition.

4. Applications in discourse

Verbal absolute constructions retain an important function in written English, especially in formal and creative writing. Although they are rare nowadays in everyday speech, these constructions are widely utilized in contexts where precision, conciseness, and stylistic sophistication are valued. That entails they are mainly employed in literary, academic, and technical writing due to their capacity to encode complex relationships succinctly. Their concise structure allows for the seamless integration of background details, environmental context, or simultaneous occurrences, all without interrupting the progression of the narrative. They often heighten sensory and atmospheric elements and draw readers into vivid and engaging narratives.

- a) His glasses slipping to the tip of his nose, he peered over them at the children.³
- b) The wind howling outside, Harry tightened his cloak and hurried along the path.⁴

The AC in a) vividly portrays a physical detail that complements the main action. The participial phrase adds depth to the character's action, creating a dynamic and relatable moment. The absolute construction in b) provides a descriptive backdrop, heightening the tension of the scene and situating the character's actions within an evocative setting.

Jespersen (1933: 236) describes verbal ACs as 'painterly tools', noting their capacity to convey vivid, instantaneous impressions without the verbosity of subordinate clauses. Their use in these contexts often reflects the need for clarity, economy, and logical coherence.

Verbal ACs are frequently employed to summarize prerequisites, conditions, or results in scientific and technical writing.

The samples analysed, the researchers proceeded to compile their findings.

Such constructions enhance readability in dense, process-oriented writing.

Causal ACs are commonly used in formal arguments to link evidence or observations with conclusions.

The evidence being inconclusive, the court dismissed the case.

Verbal ACs may also be employed in fixed expressions, where their compactness and stylistic elegance contribute to their rhetorical impact. Several idiomatic phrases in English retain the structure of verbal ACs, which reflects their historical persistence in the language.

All things considered, it was a success.

Weather permitting, the event will proceed.

God willing, we will succeed.

While verbal ACs are rare in spoken English, their persistence in written registers highlights their stylistic versatility.

5. Conclusion

As Quirk et al. (1985) posit, 'absolute constructions, while less common in modern colloquial English, retain their utility in formal and literary contexts, offering a means to succinctly convey circumstantial information'. Despite their reduced frequency in everyday speech, Nominative absolute participial constructions remain a valuable tool in English syntax. In the vast majority of situations, they are employed by writers who aim to convey

³ Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

⁴ J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

complex ideas succinctly and elegantly. Their ability to condense intricate relationships into concise but rich phrases underscores their value in formal and literary contexts.

References

- Fischer, Olga 1992. *Syntax of Early English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- George O. Curme. 1931. *Syntax (A Grammar of the English Language)*. D.C. Heath.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and Matthiessen, Christian. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Routledge.
- Héja, Enikő and Kata Gabor. 2007. 'Extracting information from participial structures' in *Anuario del Seminario de Filología Vasca "Julio de Urquijo"*. Vol 41, p. 121-130.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1933. *Essentials of English Grammar*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Kortmann, Bernd. 1991. *Free Adjuncts and Absolutes in English: Problems of Control and Interpretation*. Routledge.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 1987. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Volume I*. Stanford University Press.
- Maiocco, Marco. 2005. *Absolute Participial Constructions: A Contrastive Approach to the Syntax of Greek and Latin*. Alexandria: Edizioni dell'Orso
- Mitchell, Bruce, and Fred Robinson. 1992. *A Guide to Old English*. Oxford University Press.
- Pop, Ioan-Beniamin. 2022. *Grammar of the English Verb: from (Primary) Auxiliaries to Past Participles*. Alba Iulia: Aeternitas.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman.
- Reishaan, A. 2003. *Absolute Constructions in English: A Syntactic Study*. [Online] Available: <http://www.arts.kufauniv.com/teaching/e/reishaan/Paper1.html>
- Ross, Charles Hunter. 2021. *The Absolute Participle in Middle and Modern English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Todorova, Nadezhda P. 2013. 'Types of Absolute Constructions in Modern English' in *B.A.S. British and American Studies*. Editura Universității de Vest din Timișoara.

Sources of the excerpted material

- Shakespeare, William. 1987. *Julius Caesar*. Longmeadow Press.
- Lee, Harper. 1980. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. McIntosch and Otsi, Inc.

Rowling, J.K. 2002. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.
Bloomsbury.