ON THE SEMANTIC INDETERMINACY OF THE ENGLISH ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTION

Nadezhda Todorova
St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia

The syntactic function the English absolute construction can have in the sentence is that of a modifier expressing various adverbial meanings. Because of the absence of standard subordinators explicitly indicating a given adverbial relation, the semantics of each individual case is to be interpreted within and determined by the pragmatic and linguistic context. This semantic indeterminacy of the English absolute construction is one of its most characteristic features. The present paper discusses the possible meanings of the various types of absolute constructions in English and reflects on some factors influencing their interpretation.

Key words: AC, absolute construction, semantic indeterminacy, factors influencing interpretation

1. Introduction

The English absolute construction (further referred to as *AC*), generally defined as "a constituent linked semantically and intonationally to the rest of its sentence, but lacking any overt expression of a syntactic linkage" (Trask 1999: 2), represents a detached secondary part of the sentence, whose structural and semantic specificity make it a quite controversial and challenging linguistic phenomenon. It is a type of nexus construction (non-finite or verbless clause) having its own overtly specified subject, different from the one of its matrix clause.

(1) [*A half smile on her lips*,] she went on downstairs. (ACr, 75)
(2) A policeman was beside us, [*his notebook in his hand.*] (ACD, ch. 3)

The ACs, being non-finite or verbless structures, are always in subordinate position in the sentence they belong to. Their function is defined to be that of adverbials (Mincoff 1958, Victoria 2010),

supplements (Biber et al. 2004, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Quirk et al. 1985) and sentence modifiers (Spasov 2001), all these more or less coming down to one and the same thing, i.e. adverbial subordinate relation expressing various meanings – manner, attendant circumstances, supplement, cause or reason, time, condition, concession.

Unlike the typical adverbial clauses, however, which are introduced with the help of subordinating words explicitly indicating the adverbial relation (*when, where, although, whether*, etc.), the ACs lack such subordinators and therefore the semantics of each individual case should be interpreted within the context. This ability of the AC "to play the role of a number of different sorts of adverbial clauses" (Stump 1985: 3) is one of its most characteristic and challenging properties. The author calls it *semantic variability* and argues that the possible interpretations of ACs depend on the inferences of language users which may be based on diverse factors including the semantic properties of the AC and the ones of its superordinate clause, as well as the knowledge of the world.

Kortmann, on his part, speaks about *semantic indeterminacy* and supports Stump's statement that, "semantic and pragmatic factors jointly determine the relation felt to hold between a free adjunct or absolute and its superordinate clause" (Stump 1985: 22). The semantic indeterminacy of the AC is enhanced by the absence of standard subordinators (*when, where,* etc.) overtly specifying adverbial relations. Thus, the adverbial semantics of a given AC in the sentence needs to be determined for each individual instance. "Identifying the semantic relation between two propositions, [...], especially in the absence of a subordinating conjunction or connective specifying some adverbial role, to a much higher degree draws upon the knowledge, experiences, convictions and even imagination of the language user as well as on his/her capabilities of retrieving and evaluating information that may be relevant for this relation from (not necessarily immediately) the preceding context" (Kortmann 1991: 105).

2. Factors influencing the semantic interpretation of the AC

Although practically the adverbial meaning brought to the sentence by an AC "needs to be determined for each individual case" (Kortmann 1991: 1), linguists try to provide some preliminary indicators with respect to the possible semantic representation of a given type of AC. Thus, for example, Mincoff (1958), Victoria (2010), Quirk et al. (1985), Swan (2005) point out the connection between the type of adverbial meaning expressed by an AC and such factors as its position in the sentence, its augmentation by the prepositions *with* and *without*, the aspect and voice of

its verbal predicative element. Stump (1985) and Kortmann (1991), on the other hand, focus on such semantic and pragmatic factors influencing the interpretation of the AC as augmentation, negation, idiomatization, word order and world knowledge.

That said, the factors influencing the semantic interpretation of the English AC can be classified in three main groups – *semantic*, *grammatical* and *pragmatic* – which are discussed in detail in the following sections[1].

2.1. Semantic factors

2.1.1. 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* (1), (2). The presence of certain linking words employed to introduce the AC is known as *augmentation* and according to Blokh (1983: 349) 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".

"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). Of them only *with* and *without* are most commonly used in speech and in writing as augmentors of ACs. Some linguists (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Wekker and Haegeman 1993) view the *with-* and *without-* augmented types of ACs as structures consisting of a preposition with a non-finite or verbless clause as its complement and functioning as adjunct to a clause. Semantically, *with* is similar to *have*, and *without* to *not have*. Thus, the sentences in (3a) and (4a) entail (3b) and (4b), respectively (see Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1267).

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[1] Although (strictly speaking) negation is considered a syntactic-semantic phenomenon, augmentation is both structural and semantic one, word order is syntactic and logical, etc., their classifying into the groups above is determined not by their nature itself, but rather by a certain aspect in their nature and/or use which influences the interpretation of ACs. (See also Kortmann 1991: 171, 177)

(3a)   They were standing against the wall **with** *their hands above their heads*.

(3b)   They **had** their hands above their heads.

(4a)   They were wandering around **without** *any clothes on.*

(4b)   They **didn't have** any clothes on.

Very generally speaking this is undoubtedly true, but the interpretations of *with*-augmented ACs, the latter being one of the most frequently observed types of ACs in present-day English, are much more. In fact *with*-augmented ACs, just like their unaugmented counterparts, can express all adverbial meanings typical of an AC, i.e. those of attendant circumstances, manner, cause or reason, time, condition, concession. That is why *with* "cannot serve as a device for marking a certain interpretation. For this purpose, other lexical items must be turned to, e.g. connective adverbs or, especially for concessive relations, the focus particle *even*" (Kortmann 1991: 202).

(5)   **Even** *with legal test cases pending*, there was every sign that the hold-outs, …, could fight a delaying action, … (Kortmann 1991: 202)

(6)   Luke won't work with Arcodas, though, **even** *with Iain gone*. (SK, 356)

Without-augmented ACs, on their part, also can express various types of adverbial meanings, e.g. attendant circumstances (7), manner (8), concession (9). However, being a marker of negation, *without* adds some such connotation to them.

(7)   Don't spend time in Google+, it's like Facebook **without** *your friends to give some action.* (CP)

(8)   I have never seen my mother **without** *clothes on* and she looks cold and small. (AJ, 24)

(9)   You think I'm pretty **without** *any make-up on*. (KP)

The other two possible augmentors of ACs – *what with* and *and* – are of limited use in present-day English and are associated with certain adverbial meanings: *what with* is an indicator of causal relation (10), while *and* introduces ACs expressing concessivity (11).

(10) ***What with*** *mother being sick and Ellen on holiday*, I don't know how to keep the children under control. (Kortmann 1991: 203)

(11) Like an old horse's hoofs they are – ***and*** *this fellow wearing gloves and rings*! (WC, 108)

A very interesting dependence concerning the *what with*-augmented ACs and their causal semantics is observed by Kortmann (1991: 202): "thus augmented absolutes, it seems, are only appropriate if the matrix proposition denotes some non-event or negative state, or, more generally, some proposition which has certain negative implications (at least from the point of view of the speaker)". The author claims that native speakers will not find difficulty with the sentence in (12a), but with the AC modifying the matrix clause in (12b).

(12a) ***What with*** *John as keeper*, we had no chance of winning the match.

(12b) ? ***What with*** *John as keeper*, we'll surely win the match.

2.1.2. Negation

Although the number of negated ACs in present-day English is not very big, negation deserves special attention because it undoubtedly influences the interpretation of ACs. If we compare sentences containing negated and non-negated ACs, it becomes clear that the semantics expressed by those having some negative marker – *not, no, without* – is in most cases limited to one possible interpretation, whereas the corresponding non-negated ACs can have more than one possible adverbial meaning. Thus, for example, the AC in (13a) expresses attendant circumstances, while the one in (13b) can be interpreted as indicating one of the following adverbial relations (depending on the context): concession, attendant circumstances, time, or cause or reason.

(13a) ***Without*** *the boy noticing*, she went into the room.

(13b) (***With***) *the boy noticing her*, she went into the room.

König (1988: 150, quoted by Kortmann 1991: 174) states that "the content of a negative adjunct or absolute is normally perceived as a cause or reason for the main proposition". However, my observations on the corpus of examples showed that, although the negated ACs predominantly

express causal adverbial meaning (14), (15), (16), this is not their only domain of interpretation.

(14) I'm in no state to see anyone right now. ***Not*** *with my face all pink and my eyes still teary*. (SK, 253)

(15) The current of the river is a slight one, *the drop being **not** greater than eight inches in a mile*. (ACD, ch. 7)

(16) I can't believe it's Alexandra Bergson come to this, *with **no** head about anything*. (WC, 206)

Thus, the following sentences are examples of ACs of manner (17), attendant circumstances (18), and condition (19).

(17) "Yes, sir," said Sergeant Hay, ***not*** *a muscle of his face moving*. (ACr, 197)

(18) As we arrive, the waiting room is pretty empty *with **not** a celebrity in sight*, but I don't mind, I'm so psyched up. (SK, 120)

(19) She shakes her head. "No way, ***not*** *with Lulu around…*" (SK, 111)

2.1.3. Idiomatization

There is a number of ACs – the so called fossilized NPs, such as *side by side*, *face to face*, *back to back*, *hands in pockets*, *head over heels*, etc. (see Mincoff 1958: 376, Huddleson and Pullum 2002: 1268) – that have come to be perceived as phrasal units with time, and as such are always associated with a certain adverbial meaning. The following classification (not pretending to be exhaustive but rather informative one) of the idiomatic ACs in English can facilitate their interpretation to a great extent. It should be borne in mind, however, that some of the listed ACs can have more than one interpretation depending on the context.

i) ***Manner:*** *side by side, face to face, back to back, head over heels…*

(20) You see, I can talk *face to face* with – with the station-master. (ACD, ch. 1)

(21) They rode along *side by side*, amicably, both heavy, legs efficiently working. (BNC: FET 492)

(22) Chairs must be placed down the room, *back to back*, one less in number than the players who gallop round them in time to the music. (BNC: C8P 915)

(23) In fact, they have so much power behind that they find going downhill awkward, and sometimes, in flight down a steep place, they may actually go *head over heels*. (BNC: EWC 3330)

ii) **Condition:** *weather/time permitting, all (things) considered…*

(24) Bar snacks are served at lunchtime and in the evening, either in the bar or, *weather permitting*, in the garden. (BNC: CJK 549)

(25) It's an interesting point Dominic, and although the poor performance of the pound against the dollar did effect many of our advertisers, we agree with you that – *time permitting* – the advertised prices should be kept up-to-date. (BNC: FT8 429)

(26) The arguments for the abolitionist position are the best arguments, *all considered*. (BNC: B04)

iii) **Time/sequence:** *that/this (being) said, all (things) considered…*

(27) *That being said*, here are the images of me making the fluffy vanilla cake recipe in hope that it answers some of the questions you've been asking about making the batter. (SWEET)

(28) I had no great difficulty in convincing De Courcy, when we were alone, that I was perfectly justified, *all things considered*, in desiring the match; and the whole business seemed most comfortably arranged. (JA, ch. 22)

iv) **Concession/contrast:** *that/this (being) said…*

(29) Unfortunately, it becomes too light at higher speeds, and it's also too keen to self-centre. Combine that with the pronounced body lean, and it's not as much fun to drive as the class best. *That said*, the handling is always stable and predictable, and the ride is comfortable. (WhC)

v) **Cause/reason:** *with this in mind…*

(30) *With this in mind*, a general guide to the assessment and control of such risks has been published by the HSE. (BNC: ALV 898)

vi) ***Attendant circumstances:*** *with this in mind…*

(31) *With this in mind*, he is painting a picture of the disaster that would follow if either of the two main parties formed a minority government without a firm agreement with the Liberal Democrats. (BNC: AHN 818)

2.2. Grammatical factors

2.2.1. Aspect and voice

Since the AC is either non-finite or non-verbal, it lacks tense markers and modal auxiliaries. Nonetheless, it is possible to recover meanings associated with tense and mood from the context. The knowing of the model of derivation of ACs (their deep structure) can also be of certain practical use for determining their semantics as Blokh (1983: 349) suggests.

(32) *Everything being settled*, Moyra felt relieved.
     = As everything was settled...

(33) *Two days having elapsed*, the travellers set out on their way.
     = When two days had elapsed...

(34) *With all this work waiting for me*, I can't afford to join their Sunday outing.
     = As all this work is waiting for me...

Although ACs are unmarked for tense and mood, they can have aspect and voice. Quirk et al. (1985: 994) state that "except for the *-ed* clause, which is inherently passive, all types of non-finite clauses have both active and passive forms". An interesting observation is also made by the authors concerning the aspect in the non-finite clauses. "When *not* is inserted, there is often some aspectual marking:

(35) *The purse* ***not*** *having been found*, we went to the police.
(36) *The purse* ***not*** *yet found*, we went to the police." (Quirk et al. 1985: 994)

Both aspect and voice can influence the interpretation of ACs. The analysis of sentences containing ACs whose verbal predicative element is expressed by some of the previously mentioned participial forms showed that, provided no other factors are in force, the semantics of such ACs can be of two main types – temporal and causal, the choice between them depending on the context. In addition, some shades of meaning can be discerned such as simultaneity and attendant circumstances (37), anteriority (38), (39), priority in the correlation of two events (41) and resultative process (40).

(37) Dubois stared at him, *his jaw dropping*. (ACr: 136)
(Active present participle – time/simultaneity/attendant circumstances)

(38) *That being said*, the journal will favor empirical research. (ESSE)
(Passive present participle – cause/reason/time/anteriority)

(39) He had burned his bridges in Hollywood and took off for the seclusion of Taos to hide away, *his life having come to another dead end*, cursed by his own self-destructiveness and sheer bad luck. (BNC: AP0 1486)
(Active perfective participle – cause/reason/time/anteriority)

(40) The enemy batteries *having been put* out of action, our troops continued to push on the offensive. (Blokh 1983: 180)
(Passive perfective participle - cause/time/result)

(41) *The preliminary talks completed*, it became possible to concentrate on the central point of the agenda. (Blokh 1983: 114)
(Past participle – cause/time/priority in the correlation of two events)

2.2.2. Type of predicate

According to Stump (1985), ACs can be divided into weak and strong depending on the type of predicate[2] they derive from. Weak ACs are those which derive from stage-level predicates [3], and strong ACs – from

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[2] The seminal work of Greg Carlson (1977) distinguishes between types of predicates according to how a predicate relates to its subject.
[3] A *stage-level predicate* is **true of a temporal stage of its subject**. For example, if John is 'hungry', then he typically will eat some food, which lasts a certain amount of time, and not his entire lifespan.

individual-level predicates[4]. A very interesting peculiarity observed by Stump is that a weak AC can restrict the interpretation of a modal in the manner of an ***if***-clause but only if it is augmented by *with* or *without*. Thus, to the ACs in (42a) and (43a), although they are of marginal acceptability, can be assigned any kind of interpretation, but, as Stump (1985: 273) claims, the sentences in (a) "lack an interpretation wherein the absolute functions as an ***if***-clause".

(42a) *The children asleep*, Mary might watch TV.
(42b) ***With*** *the children asleep*, Mary might watch TV.
(43a) *The truck in first gear,* we would coast gently downhill.
(43b) ***With*** *the truck in first gear,* we would coast gently downhill.

The augmented ACs in (42b) and (43b), on the other hand, "can easily be understood as the first argument of accompanying modal" (Stump 1985: 273). So, (42b) can be interpreted as '***if*** *the children were asleep*, Mary might watch TV', and (43b) as '***if*** *the truck were in first gear,* we would coast gently downhill'.

By contrast with weak ACs, augmentation does not influence the interpretation of strong ACs in modal context[5]. Thus the sentences in both (a) and (b) examples below do not have conditional meaning such as '***if*** *the water were cold,* the children must stay on the beach' or '***if*** *his arm were in cast*, Bill might not be asked to participate'. They rather express causality, i.e. '***since*** *the water is a little cold…*' and '***as*** *his arm is in a cast…*'. Or, in Stump's words (1985: 272), the sentences below "uniformly entail the truth of their absolutes".

(44a) *The water being a little cold*, the children must stay on the beach.
(44b) ***With*** *the water being a little cold*, the children must stay on the beach.
(45a) *His arm being in a cast*, Bill might not be asked to participate.
(45b) ***With*** *his arm being in a cast*, Bill might not be asked to participate.

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[4] An *individual-level predicate* is **true throughout the existence of an individual**. For example, if John is 'smart', this is a property that he has, regardless of which particular point in time we consider.
[5] According to Stump (1985: 42), an AC is "said to be in modal context if its superordinate clause is headed by a modal auxiliary verb", as for example, '*His mother being a doctor*, John **would** know the way to the Med Center'. (Stump 1985: 272)

Therefore, it can be concluded that the interpretation of an AC in modal context is determined by two factors: i) whether it derives from a stage-level or an individual-level predicate, and ii) whether it is augmented or not by *with* or *without*.

2.3. Pragmatic factors

2.3.1. 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 least frequent position respectively.

Although word order is considered a syntactic/grammatical phenomenon, the choice of positioning an AC in some of the above listed positions is governed by such pragmatic factors as the intention and will of the speaker to highlight some fact rather than is it an indicator of his/her grammatical knowledge.

The position of an AC in the sentence may turn out to be crucial for its semantic interpretation especially in such cases where specification is required whether the temporal relation between the situations involved is one of anteriority or posteriority. Logically, an AC preceding the matrix clause will be felt to express an action antecedent to the one of the main verb (46), whereas an AC following its superordinate clause will represent an action that is subsequent to the action of the main verb (47).

(46) *Pride and defiance turning her eyes a stormy grey,* Isabel lifted her chin.
(47) Isabel lifted her chin, *pride and defiance turning her eyes a stormy grey as she stared back at fitzAlan coldly*. (BNC: HH1 1648)

Another case of position-sensitive interpretation is with ACs of supplement as in the example below. The sentences in (48) express different adverbial relations depending on their place in the sentence they belong to. The AC in (48a) adds supplementary information to the NP 'windows', thus modifying it and focusing the attention to the details provided by it.

(48a) On the second day of her visit they all three sat in the drawing-room whose three splendid sash windows, *their panes filled with the clear, delicately coloured evening sky*, made a decoration with which the room needed no other.

The interpretation of the same AC placed in final position as in (48b) is different and the AC is felt as explaining why 'the three splendid sash windows made a decoration with which the room needed no other', thus realising a causal relation.

(48b) On the second day of her visit they all three sat in the drawing-room whose three splendid sash windows made a decoration with which the room needed no other, *the panes filled with the clear, delicately coloured evening sky*.

2.3.2. World knowledge

The role of the world knowledge is not crucial for drawing inferences about the relation between the AC and its matrix clause but it must not be underestimated. The latter holds true especially "for those aspects of world knowledge which, due to their complexity, resist more specific studies from the point of view of the linguist" (Kortmann (1991: 172). These are: i) knowledge of the normal course of events; ii) knowledge of the role distribution in interactive scenarios; iii) knowledge of the likelihood that two situations hold simultaneously, or rather consecutively; iv) knowledge of the likelihood that the semantic relation between two situations is more informative than just a temporal one.

(For more details on this topic, see Kortmann 1991: 61 – 2, 171 – 2, and Stump 1985: 321.)

3. Conclusion

Although the factors influencing the semantic interpretation of the ACs are viewed one by one here, in language it is a combination of two or more of them that simultaneously determines the nature of relation meant to hold between an AC and its matrix clause.

Thus, in Stump's words (1985: 328), "the interpretation of an absolute construction requires a cooperative effort between speaker and hearer: in determining the logical role of a free adjunct or absolute, the hearer must attempt to judge the speaker's intentions; the speaker,

however, must see that the intended relation is one which can be inferred reasonably easily under the circumstances at hand".

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