THE ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTION:
SOME ENGLISH-BULGARIAN PARALLELS

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The aim of the present paper is to point out the presence of significant similarities between certain types of English absolute constructions and some Bulgarian structures functioning in present-day language, and to prove that there exists both structural and functional correspondence between them.

Key words: AC, absolute construction, detached parts of the sentence, functional equivalents, structural and functional correspondence

1. Introduction

The absolute construction (further referred to as AC) is a type of *dependent nexus construction* which has its own specific features distinguishing it from the other types of similar constructions. A *dependent nexus* is a structure which resembles a sentence in that i) the relations between the words are similar to those within the complete sentence, the basic nexus relation being the subject-verb relation holding between its nominal and predicative element, and ii) "each word retains its separate identity and combines with the others to form a thought or something like a thought" Mincoff (1958: 397). Jespersen (1954) views the AC as a special type of dependent nexus functioning as a tertiary, the latter being a term for what today would mostly be called an adverbial (which indeed is one of the most characteristic traits of the AC, along with its binary structure with an overt subject different from the one of the matrix clause).

The present paper marks some of the key points observed in the course of a synchronic contrastive analysis of the English AC and its Bulgarian functional equivalents. It should be noted that the term *absolute construction* (*абсолютна конструкция*) is not present in Modern Bulgarian and these structures are mainly to be found under the label *detached parts of the sentence* (*обособени части на изречението*) of a certain type. The

investigation revealed both structural and functional similarities between them which are summarized and presented in the paper.

When studying the English AC and its representation in Bulgarian, the Contrastive Analysis approach is applied to identify the differences and similarities between this English structure and its Bulgarian equivalents. Also, the corpus-based approach is applied throughout the study whenever relevant data and examples are needed to support and illustrate the results of the investigation.

The main corpora of examples needed for carrying out this research are two. The first of them contains examples excerpted from written and spoken English sources of various types. The written examples come from fictional, poetical, technical, scientific and popular texts by contemporary British and American authors, as well as from various kinds of personal blogs and websites. The spoken sources are films of various genres, interviews and news on TV. The second one is an English-Bulgarian corpus of examples which are translated by professional translators. The material is excerpted from written and spoken sources, such as fictional literature, films and interviews. In addition, a Bulgarian corpus of examples has been collected from colloquial speech, personal blogs and websites, etc., to illustrate the active use of constructions in contemporary Bulgarian structurally and functionally similar to the English AC.

2. Discussion and results

There is no English-Bulgarian contrastive study dedicated solely to the AC, but there are some Bulgarian linguists who subject to contrastive English-Bulgarian analysis either some type of this construction (Penakova 1987) or the more general case of the so called detached secondary parts of the sentence (Grancharov 1995, Molhova et al. 1965), a type of which is the AC itself.

Thus, in his paper *On the derivation of some detached parts of the sentence in English and Bulgarian,* Michael Grancharov (1995: 165) argues that "certain detached parts of the English and Bulgarian sentence originate from very similar deep structures and are generated by comparable transformational cycles" and notes that there are "striking similarities in the position, morphological realization and the semantics of such detached parts, especially concerning their adaptability to context and their ability to acquire a variety of meanings thereby". Although the AC is not in the focus of the author's study, his generative analysis within the framework of the Standard Theory of such detached secondary parts of the sentence as the apposition, the extrapositional attribute and the dangling

modifier, proving that these constructions in both languages have similar derivational history, gives grounds to suggest that the same could hold for the AC as well.

Jana Molhova (1965: 319) notes that since the traditional grammars of all modern languages more or less follow the model of Ancient Greek and Latin, the linguistic categories of these two classical languages are transferred to and can be found in the other languages as well. This, however, may not always prove justified and it is only through careful contrastive analysis that the in-depth character of such linguistic phenomena can be revealed successfully.

Considering the AC, which is in the focus of this study, we can see that it has its parallels in many of the ancient Indo-European languages: in Latin it is the ablative absolute (ablativus absolutus), in Ancient Greek the genitive absolute (genitivus absolutus), in Sanskrit the locative absolute (locativus absolutus), in Gothic and Old Church Slavonic the dative absolute (dativus absolutus), etc., their names indicating the case in which the subject of the corresponding construction occurred (see Holland 1986, Ruppel 2013).

The English AC is said to originate from the Latin ablative absolute (ablativus absolutus), a construction consisting of a noun or pronoun in the Ablative, with a noun, or an adjective, or a participle in agreement, and its function is to define the time or circumstances of an action (Mahoney et al. 2001: 254). Into English it was introduced by early modern authors heavily influenced by Latin, such as John Milton, for example, whose *Paradise Lost* was observed to abound with ACs.

In Old Bulgarian the dative absolute is a construction consisting of a noun or pronoun in the Dative, or an adverb, and a related participle in agreement in the Dative as well. It should be pointed out that here the logical subject of the construction is not necessarily different from the subject of its matrix clause as it is in Ancient Greek and Latin, for example. The function of this syntactic structure was to express a complex thought and to serve for the reduction of subordinate finite clauses. There are two standpoints regarding the origin of the dative absolute: some linguists consider it a syntactic calque of the Greek genitive absolute while others hold that it is an original Slavic construction observed in Old Bulgarian literary texts and borrowed from Old Bulgarian by other Slavic languages, such as Russian, Czech, etc. (see Pozsgai 2010: 366-7).

However, since the aim of the research is not to discuss historically the development of the AC into its current status, I will focus on the significant similarities observed between the English AC and some

Bulgarian structures functioning in present-day language, pointing out the structural and functional correspondence between them.

Structural correspondence

The structure of the English AC is binary. It consists of a nominal element generally expressed by an NP and a verbal or non-verbal predicative element realized respectively by the present or the past participle of a verb or the to-infinitive, or an NP, PP, AP or AdvP. The AC may be unaugmented or have as its augmentors *with, without, what with* or *and*, the latter not to be considered part of its internal structure.

Similar patterns can be observed in the structure of some detached and non-detached adverbial modifiers in Bulgarian. The following sentences show examples of the overlapping structural cases in English and Bulgarian.

- *(with) + NP + past participle*

In English, the past participle has passive nature. Depending on the type of the verb – transitive or intransitive – the participle will denote imperfective or perfective activity (see Molhova 1965: 104). When expressed by a past participle, the predicative element of the English ACs can be either unextended (1) or extended, i.e. containing one or more optional constituents (2), (3).

(1) Afterwards they walk back *with their arms linked* and they guide and steer each other as if they are both blind. (AJ, 15)

(2) Luke puts his head round the study door, *his phone wedged under his chin*. (SK, 71)

(3) Miss Marple, *her lips pursed together*, stared down at the photograph. (ACr, 220)

In Bulgarian, the observed corresponding structures are of the type **(preposition 'c', meaning 'with') + NP + past passive participle**. Like the English ACs, the Bulgarian structures can have their predicative element unextended (5) or extended (4), (6).

(4) Разхождайте се в хола от 5 до 10 вечерта, носейки мокра торба, тежаща приблизително 4-6 кг на ръце, *с радио пуснато*

на празен шум (или друг монотонен неприятен звук), усилено до дупка. (BG: UE)

Razhozhdayte se v hola ot 5 do 10 vecherta, noseyki mokra torba, tezhashta priblizitelno 4-6 kg na ratse, *s radio pusnato na prazen shum (ili drug monotonen nepriyaten zvuk), usileno do dupka*.

(5) Той се усмихва *с горната устна разтегната,* така че да се вижда част от предните му зъби. (BG: ZAJ)

Toy se usmihva *s gornata ustna raztegnata,* taka che da se vizhda chast ot prednite mu zabi.

(6) *Двама извадени от строя*, оставаше още един. (EK, 268)

Dvama izvadeni ot stroya, ostavashe oshte edin.

A tricky point with the Bulgarian past participles is the fact that, when preceded by NPs, they generally serve the attributive function of modifiers of these NPs. The rule is that they be separated by comma, which is obviously not the case in the examples above. Thus, the absence of comma between the participle and the NP preceding it underlines the nexus character of the italicised structures in these Bulgarian examples. This, combined with the adverbial function they have in the sentence – attendant circumstances (4), manner (5), cause/reason (6) – may be considered quite a reliable proof for their structural and functional equivalence with the corresponding type of English AC.

- *(with) + NP + PP*

In English this structural type of AC is the most widespread one among the four subtypes of non-verbal ACs.

(7) Mr. Nathan would speak to us, however, when we said good morning, and sometimes we saw him coming from town *with a magazine in his hand*. (HL, 12)

(8) "Let me just have a little look! I don't know how she can sleep *with all those packages on her pram…*" (SK, 112)

(9) "Wrong in it?" Miss Griffith paused, *her hand on the dial of the telephone*. (ACr, 5)

(10) I hurried back along the way we had come, *my torch in my hand.* (ACD, ch. 11)

This type of construction has a pretty high frequency of occurrence in Bulgarian, too.

(11) Обожавам да заспивам *с носа в книгата*, заровен дълбоко в миризмата на стара хартия, лека влага, мастило, дървен шкаф. (BG: IT)
Obozhavam da zaspivam *s nosa v knigata*, zaroven dalboko v mirizmata na stara hartiya, leka vlaga, mastilo, darven shkaf.

(12) Вчера гледа филма *с лаптопа пред себе си*. (BG: MT)
Vchera gleda filma *s laptopa pred sebe si*.

(13) Да правиш блог *с дете на ръце* не е лесна работа. (BG: NG)
Da pravish blog *s dete na ratse* ne e lesna rabota.

It is with this type of constructions that I have observed full structural and functional correspondence between the two languages. The examples below which are excerpted from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking-Bird* and its Bulgarian version are an illustration of this full translation equivalence.

(14) He came to the middle of the room and stood *with his hands in his pockets*, looking down at Dill. (HL, 141)

(15) Той застана в средата на стаята *с ръце в джобовете* и погледна Дил. (TsSt, 191)
Toy zastana v sredata na stayata *s ratse v dzhobovete* i pogledna Dil.

- *(with) + NP + AdvP*

The second preferred form of the predicative element of non-verbal ACs in English is the AdvP.

(16) They tied us up – the fellow who handled me could tie like a bosun – and there we lay *with our toes up*, beneath a tree... (ACD, ch. 13)

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(17) John Dowling runs *with his head low* under the amber lights. (AJ, 131)

(18) Boo had drifted to a corner of the room, where he stood *with his chin up*, peering from distance at Jem. (HL, 277)

In Bulgarian, too, there can be observed structures of the same pattern. Another similarity worth to be noted here is that, both in English and Bulgarian, the AdvPs can be either unextended (16), (18), (21), or extended with PPs in postmodifying function (17), (19), (20).

(19) Връща се баща му в спалнята, отваря гардероба – *Гошо вътре между дрехите* – и му казва: ... (BG: VIC)
Vrashta se bashta mu v spalnyata, otvarya garderoba – *Gosho vatre mezhdu drehite* – i mu kazva: …

(20) За това е добре тя да разказва как е прекарала деня си *с бебето вътре в нея*, съветва психоложката. (BG: LEK)
Za tova e dobre tya da razkazva kak e prekarala denya si *s bebeto vatre v neya*, savetva psiholozhkata.

(21) Хелерът ми плува *с главата надолу*... (BG: AQUA)
Helerat mi pluva *s glavata nadolu*…

As it has been noted above, in English, ACs can be both unaugmented and augmented, the augmented ACs being considered more integrated in the structure of the sentence. In Bulgarian, the observed corresponding structures are generally of the type: **preposition 'с' (meaning 'with') + NP + PE**. In fact, only two examples not introduced with a preposition were found in Bulgarian – (6) and (19).

The degree of logical detachment can be expressed with the help of intonation in speech and punctuation in writing. Thus, in (1), (7), (8), (14), (16), (17), (18) no punctuation is used to separate the English *with*-augmented ACs from their matrix clauses, while in (2), (3), (9) and (10) the unaugmented ACs are felt to be more detached, this detachment being highlighted by the separation of the AC from the rest of the sentence with the help of a comma.

In Bulgarian, by definition, detached sentence elements should always be marked intonationally which is graphically indicated by punctuation (Boyadjiev et al. 1999: 561, Pashov 2011: 376). However,

such are only the examples in (4), (6) and (19), while those in (5), (11), (12), (13), (15), (20), (21) contain non-detached adverbial modifiers.

Syntactic function

If we look back at the Bulgarian examples in the previous section, we can see that the italicized structures in all of them fulfill an adverbial function: one of manner in (3), (5), (11), (12), (13), (15), (21) and of attendant-circumstances in (4), (19), (20). These, in fact, are the most typical semantic interpretations of the adverbial relations holding between the English ACs and their superordinate clauses. Another frequently expressed adverbial meaning of this construction in English is that of cause or reason, examples of which in Bulgarian are the sentences in (6) and (22).

(22) Първоначално след раждането започнах с упражнения в къщи – но нямах много време за това *с бебе на ръце* и още едно малко дете. (BG: TEDI)
Parvonachalno sled razhdaneto zapochnah s uprazhneniya vkashti – no nyamah mnogo vreme za tova *s bebe na ratse* i oshte edno malko dete.

Strictly speaking, however, not all of these Bulgarian examples are detached parts of the sentence. In Bulgarian unlike English, the detachment is always signalled by punctuation, which is the case in (4) and (19) only. Nevertheless, the function of adverbial modifiers (detached or not) displayed by the italicised constructions in all Bulgarian examples cannot be questioned, which is another striking similarity shared by the structures under observation in English and Bulgarian.

In addition, if we change the direction of analysis following Danchev's (1991, 2001) expanded model of contrastive analysis and apply translation from Bulgarian to English, we can see that the AC will undoubtedly be the first and most logical choice of English translation equivalent of the corresponding Bulgarian structure.

(23) След кратка пауза отново се завръщаме в кухнята *с камера в ръка*. (BG: RM)
Sled kratka pauza otnovo se zavrashtame v kuhnyata *s kamera v raka*.

(24) After a short break we are back in the kitchen again *with a camera in hand*.

(25) Обикновено готвя *с баба на телефона*. (BG: JEN)
    Obiknoveno gotvya *s baba na telefona*.

(26) I usually cook *with my Granny on the phone*.

The semantic interpretation of manner and attendant circumstances expressed by the italicised constructions also coincide in the two languages.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, when subjected to test through the three crucial criteria for English ACs, some Bulgarian constructions of the types discussed in this paper are observed to satisfy all these requirements, i.e. i) the binary structure consisting of ii) an NP as head-element and a verbal or non-verbal predicative element of a certain type, and iii) the adverbial function in the sentence.

Also, when investigating the Bulgarian functional equivalents of the English augmented *-ing* participial ACs, Penakova (1987: 58) says that in Bulgarian, the adverbial modifiers functioning as translation correspondents of this type of ACs are build analogously to the original structure – preposition '*c*' (meaning '*with*') + NP + participial phrase, the latter element becoming bearer of the potential predicativity brought by the English AC.

This, together with the analyzed examples and the summarized results presented so far in the paper, makes it quite relevant to suggest that the Bulgarian structures of the three types: **preposition '*c*' (meaning '*with*') + NP + participial phrase/PP/AdvP** can be considered Bulgarian counterparts of the corresponding types of English ACs both structurally and functionally.

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