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COREFERENTIALITY IN ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS IN LATE LATIN

Summary: The aim of the paper is to examine the types of coreferentiality that exist between implicit and explicit elements of absolute constructions and the constituents of the clauses in which these constructions are embedded. The question is analysed from a diachronic perspective. I argue that the problem of coreferentiality should be taken into consideration in discussions on the emergence of the *accusative* or *nominative absolute*, and in discussions about such phenomena as *nominativus pendens*.

Key words: ablative absolute, coreferentiality, *participium coniunctum*, *nominativus pendens*

“ABSOLUTENESS” OF ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS

When we think about Classical Latin, the only absolute construction that comes to mind is the *ablativus absolutus* (AA). The name of this construction itself hints at its twofold meaning: the form should be in ablative; and the place, or function, in the clause should be absolute, i.e. detached from the main structure. In other words, it should not be coreferential with any of the verb arguments. Therefore, its syntactical feature motivates its form. The ablative in Latin (or genitive in Greek) is the best case, as it is not associated with the subject nor the object, direct or indirect. In an ideal world the AA would always be, as its name indicates, a detached construction, not coreferential with any other element of the clause, and every detached construction in Latin would be in the ablative. But this is not always the case, even in Classical texts. This has already been noted by scholars. François Hoff¹ begins his paper, *Les ablatifs absolus irréguliers: un nouvel examen du problème*, (which remains the reference point on the subject) by enumerating grammarians’ rules for AA, and then

¹ HOFF, F.: *Les ablatifs absolus irréguliers: un nouvel examen du problème*. In CALBOLI, G. (ed.): *Subordination and Other Topics in Latin*. Amsterdam 1989, 401–423, here 402.

presents evidence that challenges those rules. He shows that even in Caesar's work there are, in fact, examples of AA in which the constituents are coreferential with the main clause's constituents. This problem with the absoluteness of AA in Classical Latin has also been noted and analysed by Paolo Ramat² and Carol Fry.³

The world of Late Latin is even less ideal. A new approach to the form and place of absolute constructions in Late Latin has been discussed by Max Bonnet.⁴ First, the morphological feature of absolute constructions is not always maintained. Along with the ablative, writers also use the accusative or nominative. As a result, scholars describe two new absolute constructions in Late Latin: *accusativus absolutus* and *nominativus absolutus*. In order to receive this label, constructions must be non-coreferential with the subject and/or the direct object. Otherwise we would be talking about simple attributes – and in case of participial attributes they would be labelled *participium coniunctum*.

Still, the choice of those forms is perplexing, since the nominative is usually associated with the subject, and the accusative with the direct object, of the verb. We may therefore wonder how a constituent in nominative or accusative can ever be detached.

These questions lead to other crucial issues. As we know very well, in Late Latin (but also in older vulgar) texts, the accusative form can be used instead of the nominative, functioning as the subject, or instead of the ablative, after such prepositions as *cum* or *de*. There is more than one possible explanation for examples of this type. We can consider them as orthographical errors (scribes writing the final -m through hypercorrectness), but orthographical errors assume the lack of a phonetical distinction (final -m no longer being pronounced), which means that the language no longer had distinctive forms for the accusative and nominative within some flexional paradigms, nor for the accusative and ablative within others. We speak however of the nominative absolute, accusative absolute, and of absolute mixed constructions. Such an approach presupposes that nominative and accusative forms were no longer perceived by users of Latin as dedicated exclusively to the subject and direct object respectively. If the forms marked by nominative or accusative endings could be part of an absolute construction (as the appellations *nominativus absolutus* and *accusativus absolutus* suggest), it means that they could have a different referent than the subject or direct object of the clause, although those endings would normally suggest otherwise.

In other words, when we call a construction “nominative absolute” we infer that the form of its elements is in the nominative, but at the same time, the whole construction is detached (i.e. non-coreferential with the subject of the clause).

My point is that, whatever we may call those constructions, and whatever inflected form they represent, the crucial issue is the presence or absence of coreferen-

² RAMAT, P.: On Latin absolute constructions. In HERMAN, J. (ed.): *Linguistic Studies on Latin. Selected Papers from the 6th International Colloquium on Latin Linguistics*. Amsterdam 1994, 259–268.

³ FRY, C.: L'ablatif absolu : une histoire de flou. In BODELOT, C. (ed.): *Éléments “asyntaxiques” ou hors structure dans l'énoncé latin*, Paris 2007, 55–74.

⁴ BONNET, M.: *Le latin de Grégoire de Tours*. Paris 1890.

tiality between their elements and the constituents of the main clause. What should we call a construction that is in the ablative, but has the same referent as the subject?

This question was crucial for me when I was working on the chronicle of Benedict, a monk of St Andrew's monastery (*Benedictus sancti Andreae monachus*).⁵ In this text there are phrases that could be considered examples of AA, as well as some examples of mixed absolute constructions. However, their absoluteness may be questioned. Let us see the following example:

- 1) *domno Carolo iterum a Papia uenientem ipsam ciuitatem cepit*.⁶ – Charlemagne coming again to Papia, took this city.

We find here a mixed construction (ablative singular with accusative singular) *domno Carolo uenientem*. Of course, the final -m of the participle could be (and this is the easiest explanation) a scribal error. In this case the whole construction would seem to be an example of AA. There is an important argument for this interpretation because, what we have here is a quote from the *Annales Regni Francorum*, a collection of royal annals, compiled between 794 and 829, about a century and a half before the composition of the chronicle of Benedict. And in *Annales Regni Francorum* (according to the edition by Georg H. Pertz⁷) the passage presents the ablative without scribal errors. It reads as follows:

- 2) *Et revertente domno Carolo rege a Roma, iterum ad Papiam peruenit, ipsam civitatem coepit*.⁸

The form of the phrase *revertente domno Carolo rege* raises no doubts, but its function does, because the subject of the participial phrase is coreferential with the subject of the main clause. Could we then consider it an example of AA?

I would argue that what we have here is a kind of hybrid construction, a mixture of the AA and *participium coniunctum*. In Classical Latin, a participle coreferential with the subject of the clause should be in the nominative. The example 2) presents either an “ablative non-absolute” or a *participium coniunctum* not in the nominative.

The use of coreferential (i.e. “non-absolute”) AA, or – if we prefer the other perspective, the use of *participium coniunctum* – in the ablative, however, is not an

⁵ In this chronicle the number of what could be interpreted as orthographic and other scribal errors is very high. For example, non-nominative forms quite often have the function of subject. Cf. SPIERALSKA-KASPRZYK, B.: *Summae Romanorum barbariei signum – Étude linguistique sur la “Chronique” de Benoît de Saint André*. Warsaw 2016.

⁶ Quoted from the manuscript BAV Chig.F.IV.75 f. 31r. Cf. ZUCCHETTI, G.: *Il Chronicon di Benedetto, monaco di S. Andrea del Soratte e il Libellus de imperatoria potestate in urbe Roma*. Rome 1922, 94.

⁷ PERTZ, G. H. – KURTZE, F. (eds): *Annales Regni Francorum* [Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum]. Hanovre 1895.

⁸ PERTZ (n. 7) 38.

original innovation of *Annales Regni Francorum*. In fact, some examples can already be found in the works of Gregory of Tours, and probably even earlier.

In Gregory's writings some examples present a type of coreferentiality that was strictly forbidden in Classical Latin, namely between the subject of an absolute construction and the subject of the main clause.

- 3) *illisque per sicca **gradientibus** et, ut Scriptura ait, murum aquarum undique **uallatis** in litus illud quod est contra montem Sina **inlaesi** prursus, demersis Aegyptiis, Moyse duce transgrediuntur*⁹ – and they walked on dry ground, and, as the Scripture says, they crossed unharmed under Moses' leadership, a wall of water on either hand, to that shore which is before Mount Sinai, while the Egyptians were drowned.

In example 3) the explicit subject of *gradientibus* and *uallatis*, namely *illis*, is also the subject of *transgrediuntur*. Therefore, it is coreferential with *inlaesi*. Within the same clause, forms marked by two different inflexional endings (ablative and nominative) have the same referent. Let us see more examples:

- 4) *Sed **illis** parvam adhuc aedificandi facultatem **habentibus**, **cives** cuiusdam domum, de qua ecclesiam faciant, expetunt*.¹⁰ – But as they had little means for building as yet, the citizens asked for the house of a certain man to use for church.

Here the subject of *expetunt* is *cives* in the nominative, having the same referent as the ablative *illis*, unless we consider *cives* to be in the genitive (written in such way instead of *civis*). In this case, the implicit subject of *expetunt* would be coreferential with *illis*.

- 5) *Talia **eo dicente**, ad locum, ubi iam sacerdos tabernaculum erexerat, **turbolentus** advenit*.¹¹ – Saying this he comes, agitated, to the place, where the priest had erected the tabernacle.

In this example, again, the ablative (*eo dicente*) has the same referent as the nominative (*turbolentus*).

- 6) ***Depositis** ergo super altare **sacrosanctis reliquiis**, vigilata nocte, cum grande psallentio ad antedictam deferebantur basilicam*.¹² – Having placed the sacrosanct relics on the altar, the night having been passed on watch, they (i.e. the relics) are transported to the afore mentioned basilic.

⁹ KRUSCH, B. – LEVISON, W. (eds): *Gregorii episcopi Turonensis libri historiarum X* [Monumenta Germaniae Historica; Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum]. Hanover 1951, 12.

¹⁰ KRUSCH–LEVISON (n. 9) 24.

¹¹ KRUSCH, B. (ed.): *Gregorii episcopi Turonensis miracula et opera minora* [Monumenta Germaniae Historica; Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum]. Hanover 1969, 128.

¹² KRUSCH (n. 11) 128.

Here we find the ablative functioning as the subject of *deferebantur*.

Eusebia Tarriño-Ruiz,¹³ who has examined 900 examples of absolute constructions in selected works by Gregory of Tours, identified 16 examples of the ablative absolute with its subject coreferential with the subject of the main clause. These are therefore examples of something that could be called the “ablative non-absolute”.

Tarriño-Ruiz compares these statistics to the study by François Hoff,¹⁴ who found in book seven of Caesar’s *Gallic War* only one such example among 290 analysed:

- 7) *Coactis equitum milibus VIII et peditum circiter CCXL, haec in Haeduorum finibus recensebantur*.¹⁵ – ...and collected eight thousand cavalry, and about two hundred and forty thousand infantry. These were reviewed.

In this example the subject of *recensebantur* is *haec*. It is coreferential with *milibus*, but by repeating it, Caesar avoids the situation when the subject of the main clause is in the ablative. In example 6) we see that Gregory may have simply omitted the subject, because – being coreferential with the subject of the participial phrase – it has already been given. Either way, all the examples quoted above show a not-exactly absolute AA, as it has the same referent as the subject of the main clause.

Does this conclusion mean that the change from the ablative absolute to a kind of ablative “absolute-ish” occurred sometime before Gregory of Tours? Not necessarily. To investigate this phenomenon more closely we should return to the “rules of coreferentiality” implied by Classical Latin texts.

RULES OF COREFERENTIALITY

I would like to draw the reader’s attention here to the fact that the examples quoted above are not all of the same type. While in examples 2), 3), 4) and 5) we have the **active** ablative absolute, in examples 6) and 7) we find the **passive** ablative absolute. And, in fact, these two constructions, while similar, have some important differences.

The nominal element in an active absolute construction represents both the subject and the agent of the action described by an active participle. When the participle is passive, the nominal element represents the subject of the phrase and the patient of the action. As with all phrases or clauses in the passive voice, the agent of the action may remain unknown, but quite often the agent is known to the audience. Besides situations when the agent is impersonal (sickness, weather, time passing), there are numerous cases when the implicit agent of the action described by the passive participle is coreferential with an element of the main clause, particularly with its subject.

¹³ TARRIÑO-RUIZ, E.: *Construcciones participiales absolutas en Gregorio de Tours*. Salamanca 2000.

¹⁴ HOFF (n. 1) 405.

¹⁵ Caes. BG 7. 76. 3.

Therefore, what is important for a study of coreferentiality is the following question: When is it possible for the subject **and/or agent** of a participial phrase to be coreferential with a constituent (especially with the subject) of the clause in which the phrase is embedded?

As was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in Classical Latin the subject of the ablative absolute should not be coreferential with the subject of the clause.¹⁶ On the other hand, any element in the nominative refers normally to the subject. In the case of a participial element, we call it *participium coniunctum*. It seems, however, that there is no similar rule concerning the agent of participial clauses, when this agent is not the subject, i.e. when the participle is in the passive voice. But in the absence of a rule, we can, through a thorough analysis of classical texts, reveal a tendency. It is, in general, to allow coreferentiality between the agent of the participial phrase and the subject of the main clause.

The table below illustrates this situation:

	active absolute construction	passive absolute construction
subject	coreferentiality forbidden	coreferentiality forbidden
agent		COREFERENTIALITY ALLOWED

This leads to the following questions: do these preferences really correspond to data from Classical Latin? What about data from Late Latin? What exactly where the changes between, for example, Caesar’s language and Gregory’s?

As Hoff has shown in his study of coreferentiality in Caesar’s work,¹⁷ in almost two-thirds (60%) of cases the implicit agent of the passive absolute construction is coreferential with the subject of the main clause.

In examples where this is not the case, the agent is often explicitly named:

- 8) *Qua re per exploratores nuntiata Caesar legiones, quas expeditas esse iusserat, portis incensis intromittit*¹⁸ – When this circumstance was announced by scouts, Caesar, having sett fire to the gates, sends in the legions, which he had ordered to be ready.

In other cases, we are dealing with impersonal actions:

- 9) *Iam prope hieme confecta (...) legati ad eum principes Haeduorum veniunt oratum*¹⁹ – The winter having almost ended, (...) some noblemen of the Aedui came to him as ambassadors to entreat.

¹⁶ “The NP forming AA has no syntactic relation with other elements of the finite sentence.” RAMAT (n. 2) 262.

¹⁷ HOFF (n. 1) 407.

¹⁸ Caes. BG 7. 11. 8.

¹⁹ Caes. BG 7. 32. 2.

This means that in most cases the potential of the passive voice (which is to hide the agent) is not utilised.

Another conclusion from these statistics is that we are dealing with a kind of asymmetry between two types of ablative absolute: an active one having a strict rule forbidding coreferentiality, and a passive one sharing this rule with its active counterpart – but at the same time allowing coreferentiality between the implicit agent and the subject of the main clause. I would add that, in my opinion, the difference between the two concepts, subject and agent, is quite subtle. This is clear for linguists, and in fact, anyone who strives to understand the system of the Latin language, but it is certainly not intuitive for the average user of the language. I would argue therefore that such asymmetries may lead to confusion (as in modern languages), illustrated quite well by the situations we witness in Late Latin texts.

For the works of Gregory of Tours, the statistics mirror those from *Gallic War*. I have found that 69% of absolute constructions exhibit coreferentiality between the participial and principal agents.

My statistics differ slightly from those presented by Tarriño-Ruiz. According to her, 60% of ablative absolutes exhibit such coreferentiality. But this difference is easily explained: I counted all absolute constructions, both ablative and accusative.

The following example illustrates this coreferentiality.

- 10) *Chlogio autem, missis exploratoribus ad urbem Camaracum, perlustrata omnia, ipse secutus, Romanus proteret, civitatem adpraehendit.*²⁰ – And Chlogio sent spies to the city of Cambrai, and they went everywhere, and he himself followed and overcame the Romans and seized the city ...

It is clear that the subject of *proteret* and *adpraehendit*, i.e. Chlogio, is at the same time the agent of *missis*. It is he who has sent the spies.

Similarly:

- 11) *Aduenit autem ad hoc opus abbatum atque monachorum magnus numerus, uigilataque nocte, accepto sarculo fodere coeperunt.*²¹ – The great number of abbots and monks came to take part in this work, and, having spent the night on vigil, and having taken the pickaxe, they started to dig.

The great number of monks and abbots, that is, the subject of *coeperunt*, is also the agent of *uigilata* and *accepto*: they have passed the night and taken pickaxes.

As for the accusative absolute:²²

²⁰ KRUSCH-LEVISON (n. 9) 58.

²¹ KRUSCH (n. 11) 115.

²² One should not hastily dismiss another possible explanation of this phrase, namely that it is an example of AA, with a neuter plural *munera* perceived as feminine singular. Such confusions, albeit not frequently represented in Gregory's works – according to BONNET (n. 4) 350 – are however attested in Late Latin texts and throughout the evolution of French language.

- 12) *Cui rex qui praeerat, oblata munera, tamquam maiorem sibi suppliciter deprecabatur*.²³ – The king who reigned then, having given him gifts, was begging him humbly, as someone greater than himself.

The subject of the deponent verb *deprecabatur* is the king, and it is also the king who have given gifts.

Another scholar has studied this phenomenon using data from several sources, including Gregory's works. The statistics presented by Maryse Gayno²⁴ differ slightly from mine and from those given by Tarriño-Ruiz, but the likely reason for this is that these scholars did not study the same texts (second book of *Historia Francorum* and *Vita Martini* for Gayno; the two first books of *Historia Francorum* and two first books of *Liber miraculorum* for Tarriño-Ruiz). In my work, I examined examples taken from the books two and nine of *Historia Francorum*.

According to Gayno, 81.1% of the examples she studied in *Historia Francorum* met what she calls "the coreferentiality criterion".²⁵ Evidently, in Tarriño-Ruiz's study the data from *Miracula* lowered the final count.

It is interesting to look at other statistics presented by Gayno. According to her, 78% of ablative absolutes in the first book of *Gallic Wars* have their agent coreferential with the subject of the main clause. This figure is 71% in the first book of Livy, 81.4% in Tacitus (first book of *Annals*), 71.4% in Ammianus Marcellinus (book 22), 95.2% in Anonymus Valesianus, and 84.9% in Fredegarius.²⁶

All in all, if the data is to be believed, we see that in Classical texts as well as in Late Latin texts, the agent of a passive absolute construction is most often coreferential with the subject of the main clause. I would argue that even in Classical Latin absolute constructions in their most frequent form, i.e. with a passive participle, are semantically "attached" to the main clause constituents (specifically to the agent). But it is not possible to observe this feature on the morpho-syntactic level because the constituent in question is implicit.

In Late Latin, however, coreferentiality, as we have seen, is also possible between the explicit subject of an absolute construction (active or passive) and the subject of the main clause. We are therefore dealing with an expansion of coreferentiality. In my opinion it first became prominent within the passive type: already in Caesar's work we can find one example that may be interpreted as the "ablative non-absolute", a passive participle in the ablative having its explicit subject (and not the agent) coreferential with the subject (in the nominative) of the superordinate clause (example 7). In later texts this coreferentiality penetrates even to the active type (examples 1–5).

²³ KRUSCH (n. 11) 93.

²⁴ GAYNO, M.: *Le participe en latin aux VI^{ème} et VII^{ème} s. ap J.-C. Syntaxe et sémantique*. Paris 2015.

²⁵ GAYNO (n. 24) 205.

²⁶ GAYNO (n. 24) 205.

NOMINATIVUS PENDENS

Example (12) is quite an interesting case. Here there is a participial clause in the accusative (or the nominative: the plural neuter endings being the same for both cases), but it does not function as the direct object (nor as the subject), nor is it coreferential with the direct object (nor with the subject). Thanks to the specific context the participial clause could safely be considered absolute, even if, being in the passive voice, it presents the same kind of coreferentiality as most passive AA, namely its implicit agent is coreferential with the subject.

In other words, the absoluteness of the participial clause in question is undeniable, even if its form puts it at risk of being attached to the direct object at the morpho-syntactical level. In such cases, therefore, there is a potential gap between semantics and morpho-syntax, consisting in the fact that semantic (non)coreferentiality may not be reflected on the morphosyntactic level: words having the same referent may have different forms; or, *vice versa*, words with the same form may have different referents.

In the latter case it is possible for a participial clause in the nominative to not be coreferential with the subject of the main clause:

- 13) *Vereor, ne, nimium progredi praesumens, obsoletet a paginam sermo rustior.*²⁷ – I’m afraid, that endeavouring to go further, my uncultivated language may damage the page.

Here, what would seem to be a *participium coniunctum* (*praesumens*) cannot be labelled as such, since it doesn’t have the same referent as the subject. The participle refers, of course, to the author, Gregory himself, and we would expect it to be an attribute of the subject. But the subject of the main clause is *sermo*. The language is not “endeavouring” anything. It is the author who endeavours, and, as a result, his speech may damage his work. Where coreferentiality is expected (between the subject of the main clause and the subject-agent of the participial phrase) there is none. The same feature characterises *nominativus pendens*. And if in the example (13) the elements in the nominative are placed parenthetically in the middle of the sentence, and not at the beginning, it is nevertheless possible to consider them *nominativus pendens*. They are, in fact, at the beginning of the subordinate clause.

CONCLUSION

In both cases – the expansion of coreferentiality beyond its classical limits; and its disappearance in structures where it had been previously required – we are dealing with a breaking of the rules of coreferentiality, which, in my opinion, is a larger-scale phenomenon. Such evolution was possible, in my opinion, because Latin speakers were inclined to treat participial phrases as subordinate clauses. Max Bonnet has stated

²⁷ KRUSCH (n. 11) 160.

previously that in the prose of Gregory of Tours “l’ablatif absolu était devenu véritablement une proposition”²⁸ (the ablative absolute truly became a clause). This statement is repeated by Tarrío-Ruiz: “Si nos situamos en la perspectiva del propio GT, éste no sería ya un autor en el que abundan los AA ‘irregulares’, sino un autor que utiliza el AA como una estructura subordinante similar a otras, p. ej. las subordinadas introducidas por conjunción”²⁹ (if we place ourselves in the perspective of Gregory of Tours, he is no longer an author in which the “irregular ablative absolutes” abound, but an author who uses the ablative absolute as a subordinating structure, similar to others, e.g. subordinate conjunctive phrases). I find this statement quite insightful. If an absolute construction, or, for instance, a *participium coniunctum*, becomes a regular subordinating structure, it has its own subject, which can (but doesn’t have to) be the same as the subject of the main clause.

But there is more. The examples of participial phrases used in violation of coreferentiality rules clearly result from a tendency to replace subordinate clauses with more succinct constructions. The same phenomenon is observed in modern languages: for example, so-called “dangling” or misplaced participles in English. Users often don’t respect the rules of coreferentiality, forming sentences like “Walking down the cliff, his smile grew brighter”. Even if such sentences seem grotesque, they are intelligible. Commonly observed in modern languages, this same tendency is not surprising in Latin, especially in the works of less careful or less educated authors.

Another possibility for the evolution of absolute constructions is for them to become an adverb or a conjunction – this is known as the process of grammaticalization, which has been studied and described by Piera Molinelli.³⁰ I find it particularly intriguing that this same breaking of the rules of coreferentiality occurs in modern languages – but this question is beyond the scope of this paper.

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²⁸ BONNET (n. 4) 559.

²⁹ TARRÍO-RUIZ (n. 13) 61.

³⁰ MOLINELLI, P.: Da ablativi assoluti a preposizioni: storie di grammaticalizzazioni (im)perfette. In FABIAN, Z. – SALVI, G. (eds): *Semantica e lessicologia storiche. Atti del XXXII Congresso internazionale di Studi della Società di Linguistica Italiana (Budapest, 29-31 ottobre 1998)*, Roma 2001, 281–295.