



LINGUISTIC BASIS OF TEACHING COMPLEX SYNTACTIC ENGLISH STRUCTURES AT HIGHER SCHOOLS

Nino Kirvalidze

Ilia State University, Georgia

Nino Samnidze

Shota Rustaveli State University, Georgia

One of the problematic tasks of TESL at higher schools is the teaching of complex syntactic structures, so called “absolute constructions”, abundant use of which creates genre-stylistic typicality of literary narrative texts. However, in university linguistic literature the teaching of absolute constructions has been limited so far to determining their grammatical status or syntactic functions in a sentence. We assume that among the essential issues, that should underlie the teaching of these constructions, is the revelation of their linguosemiotic essence via establishing their semantic types in narrative texts. This paper offers semantic typology of absolute constructions that has been carried out in the context of a container sentence. Our research has shown that in narrative texts absolute constructions function to designate mainly two types of situations or events of the textual world: either they qualify one of the components of the target situation reflected in the subject-predicate grammatical kernel of the sentence or expand the situation itself, making it more precise by creating panoramic background of events and situations against which the plot of the narrative develops.

Keywords: Absolute constructions, Proposition, Semantic typology.

Introduction

One of the problematic tasks of teaching English as a foreign language at higher schools is the teaching of complex syntactic structures, so called “absolute constructions”, abundant use of which creates genre-stylistic typicality of literary narrative texts. The analysis of empirical data shows that these constructions are of paramount importance in textbuilding too as, as due to their specific structure, they can be used successfully in a sequential order within the structure of one sentence which results in converting this sentence into a microtext, marked stylistically by syntactic parallelism that makes the narration emotional and expressive. To substantiate this statement we provide a microtext which unfolds with the help of six absolute constructions:

As Jessie stepped into the room she caught a picture: Lieutenant John Charles Fremont on a high stool leaning over the table, (1) **a heavy drawing pencil in his right hand**, (2) **the widespread fingers of his left hand holding down the pages of a journal**; (3) **his shirt sleeves rolled up high**, (4) **his plain Army shirt open at the throat**, (5) **his dark hair**

rumpled and falling slightly over his brow, (6) his face filled with the intensity of the man who is devoted to the job on hand.

(Stone, I. "Immortal Wife," p. 28)

However, in linguistic and methodical literature the study of absolute constructions has been limited so far to determining their grammatical status or syntactic functions in a sentence. As a result, a number of interesting problems have been left beyond the interest scope of scholars. Among the essential issues, that call for immediate attention and that should underlie the teaching of these constructions at higher schools, is the revelation and determination of the linguosemiotic essence and status of absolute constructions, as well as their functional-semantic types in English literary narrative texts.

The Problem of Defining Linguistic Essence of Absolute Constructions

In Anglistics the linguistic status of absolute constructions has not been defined yet as, due to their specific structure, some linguists, for instance, Leech (1989), Maclin (1996), Blokh (1983), Krylova and Gordon (2003; 2011), etc. consider them as word-combinations which perform the functions of an adverbial modifier in the syntactic structure of a sentence; others – Curme (1961; 1978), Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), Biber, Conrad and Leech (2010) treat them as adverbial clauses embedded in a complex sentence, and there are only very few scholars, like Poutsma (1980), Onions (1932) and Scheurweghs (1973), who regard these constructions as independent verbless sentences.

We don't share any of the above-mentioned viewpoints. On the one hand, we consider that it is impossible to equate absolute constructions with word-combinations since they differ from each other by a number of structural and semantic features. The comparative study of these lingual units has enabled us to point out some of them:

- a) First, absolute constructions have a propositional structure with its own subject-predicate logical relationship due to which they can designate and reflect extralinguistic situations or events in their structural configuration. For instance:

Bosinney having expressed the wish to show them the house from the copse below, Swithin came to a stop.

(Galsworthy J., "The Man Of Property", p. 141)

Unlike them, word-combinations are devoid of this ability since, instead of proposition, they are based on modifying semantic dependencies (Cf: *a lovely day, feel well, very tired*, etc).

- b) Second, the first component in absolute constructions can be represented by such dummy structural elements as *it* and *there* that is quite impermissible for word-combinations. E.g.:

I saw a large pub standing a little off the road. I went in; **it being Thursday**, it was nearly empty.

(Braine J., "Room at the Top", p. 293)

There being nothing eatable within his reach, Oliver replied in the affirmative.

(Dickens Ch., "The Adventures of Oliver Twist", p. 93)

- c) And finally, absolute constructions can be expanded reflecting in their structures the target situation whereas word-combinations do not permit such an expansion of their structures. For instance:

Before Archie could pick her up, Melanie fainted. Then a hubbub ensued, (1) Archie picking her up, (2) India running to the kitchen for the water, (3) Pitty and Scarlett fanning her and slapping her wrists.

(M. Mitchell, "Gone with the Wind," p. 671)

On the other hand, we can't define absolute constructions as independent verbless sentences or subordinate clauses embedded within the structure of a complex sentence. Different from a sentence, absolute constructions can't perform independently communication due to the fact that they do not contain a finite form of the verbal predicate in their structures. However, there are cases when absolute constructions become so detached that they are graphically presented as independent sentences. Cf.:

Disjointed pictures flashed, one by one through my bewildered mind. **Maxim sitting in the car beside me in the south of France.**

(Daphne Du Maurier, "Rebecca", p. 110)

We share the opinion of Mark Blokh who views a verbless type of sentences as language-in-use phenomena which depend on the context grammatically and semantically (Blokh 1983, p.112). Here is an example of a microtext in which absolute constructions are presented in the form of independent verbless sentences:

I remember every minute of our departure. (1) **Jasper, knowing something was wrong, as dogs always do.** (2) **Trunks being packed.** (3) **Cars being brought to the door.** (4) **Dogs standing with their drooping tails, dejecting eyes, wandering back to their baskets in the hall when the sound of the last auto dies away.**

(Maurier D.D., "Rebecca" p. 363)

We consider such mode of explication of thought as a syntactic marker of an author's individual style and communicative strategy with the help of which they make the narration, respectively the text, both static and emotionally coloured. We assume that this occurs when the author emphatically points out and directs the readers' attention to the events and situations of reality that are fixed in the narrator's memory like film shots as the life details of particular emotional significance (Kirvalidze 2006; 2013). Yet, we would like to highlight once again that such verbless sentences represent syntactically and stylistically marked language-in-use constructs only, and not the systemic units of language as, despite their graphic typography and intonation contour, they are completely dependent both grammatically and semantically on the context.

Linguo-semiotic Status of Absolute Constructions and Their Place in the Hierarchical System of Verbal Signs

The application of transformational analysis of empirical data enabled us to determine the linguistic status of absolute constructions and define them as language-in-use constructs created

by the act of nominalization. As a result, the predicate in absolute constructions loses modal and temporal characteristics of the finite verb that brings about the loss of communicative autonomy (that is, the ability of transmitting information independently), though the constructions retain the binary structure of semantic predication that of a proposition with appropriate intonation contour, reflecting in its structure the core semantic relations of a target situation or event. Therefore, absolute constructions occupy an intermediate position between the sentence and the phrasal levels in the hierarchical system of lingual signs.

Accordingly, we consider a sentence with absolute constructions as a polypropositional container sentence in which the kernel (head) proposition is represented by the grammatical subject-predicate combination while dependant propositions are represented by absolute constructions in which only logical-semantic predication, i.e. argument-predicate relations are realized. Below, we provide a polypropositional container sentence with six absolute constructions:

That purpose was accomplished. It should have been allowed to run down and then stop, (1) **the driver asleep at the wheel**, (2) **the passengers sitting docilely with their mouths wide open waiting for their bus to fly away**, (3) **the estate left unfinished**, (4) **the shops shuttered and overrun with rats**, (5) **the un milked cows lowing in agony with swollen udders**, (6) **the dogs and cats running wild and bloody-mouthed**.

(Braine J., "Room at the Top", pp. 241-242)

Structural Types of Absolute Constructions and Their Genesis

The analysis of empirical data has shown that in English narrative texts one can meet two structural types of absolute constructions: with the participle and without it.

Absolute participial constructions are produced as a result of the deverbalization-nominalization of the verbal predicate during which it loses the categories of person-number, tense and mood of grammatical predicativity though the participle retains the function of a logical predicate with its lexical-semantic meaning that predetermines the structural configuration of the construction. Cf.:

There were crowds in front of every other counter but theirs, **girls chattering, men buying**.
(Mitchell M., "Gone with the Wind", p 152)

For weeks upon end they would camp, here and there, **the dogs loafing and the men burning holes through frozen muck and gravel and washing countless pans of dirt by the heat of the fire**.

(London J., "The Call of the Wild", p. 82)

Absolute constructions without participle are created by the full reduction of the predicate in their surface structure while it is always implied in the semantic structure.

St. Louis was a lighthearted town in the French tradition, **with a fiddle in every house**.
(Stone I., "Immortal Wife.", p. 101)

They walked without hats for long hours in the gardens attached to their house, **books in their hands, a fox terrier at their heels**, never saying a word and smoking all the time. (Galsworthy J., “The Man of Property.”, p. 249)

The research has shown that in Modern English only two verbs, BE and HAVE can be subjected to full implication-reduction (Bach 1967; Thorne 1973). However, they can be easily reconstructed in case of necessity, as it is illustrated in the examples given below:

St. Louis was a lighthearted town in the French tradition, a fiddle in every house. > St. Louis was a lighthearted town in the French tradition, there was a fiddle in every house.

They walked without hats for long hours in the gardens attached to their house, books in their hands, a fox terrier at their heels, never saying a word and smoking all the time. > They walked without hats for long hours in the gardens attached to their house. They had books in their hands and a fox terrier at their heels. ...

Methodology and Results of Semantic Typology of Absolute Constructions

We have carried out semantic typology of absolute constructions in the context of a container sentence (i.e., a sentence which incorporates an absolute construction/constructions) on the basis of those core semantic relations that exist between the subject-predicate kernel of the sentence and absolute constructions. This enabled us to reveal those structural-semantic peculiarities that serve as parameters for the semantic classification of absolute constructions. The application of contextual-semantic and componential analyses made it possible to define linguosemiotic peculiarities for each semantic type that are predetermined by the variety of target extralinguistic situations and events reflected in the propositional structure of absolute constructions. For the structural analysis of absolute constructions we employ the methodology of symbolic logic, worked out by Fillmore (1968: 45-47], according to which the organizing kernel of the proposition is represented by a predicate whose semantics determines its argument configuration, while each argument is characterized by its semantic role (i.e., “deep case”) in relation to the predicate.

The research has shown that in English literary narrative texts absolute constructions function to designate two types of situations or events of the textual world. Authors use these constructions, first of all, to qualify one of the components of the target situation reflected in the subject-predicate kernel of the sentence. For instance:

Swithin sat down by the oak tree, in the sun; square and upright, (1) **with one hand stretched out resting on the knob of his cane**, (2) **the other planted on his knee**, (3) **his fur coat thrown open**, (4) **his hat, roofing with its flat top the pale square of his face**, (5) **his stare, very blank, fixed on the landscape**.

(Galsworthy J., “The Man Of Property”, p. 141)

Secondly, authors employ absolute constructions in narrative texts to expand the target situation itself, making it more precise by creating panoramic background of events and situations against which the plot of the narrative develops. Here is a microtext built by the successive use of such kind of absolute constructions:

They remembered how Washington had treated them when they left, (1) **with few people calling**, (2) **the army wanting no part of their indicted brother**, (3) **the Cabinet**

officers remaining away for fear of embarrassing the administration, (4) the congressmen unwilling to take sides.

(Stone, I., "Immortal Wife", p. 300)

Accordingly, we differentiate between qualifying and event-designating absolute constructions.

Qualifying Absolute Constructions

Qualifying absolute constructions define the subject matter contained in the kernel of the sentence by its external features or inner state. On this basis, we have subdivided qualifying constructions into extensional and intensional subtypes that are structurally realized in locative (a), action-process (b), qualitative (c) and existential (d) predications. Cf.:

(a) June stood at the fireplace, **with a foot on the fender and an armon the mantelpiece.**
(Galsworthy J., "The Man of Property", p. 135)

I liked sitting there, **with my head against the sofa back.**
(Maurier D. D., "Rebecca", p. 431)

(b) By late afternoon he came up the trail, **histawny hair blowing in the breeze.**
(Stone I., "Immortal Wife", p. 416)

Melanie was pink with anger, **her gentle eyes snapping fire, her nostrils quivering.**
(Mitchell M., "Gone with the Wind", p.718)

(c) She lay in bed in her night-gown, **her slender body hideous and distorted.**
(Mitchell M., "Gone with the Wind", p. 291)

She swept into the reception room of Miss English's Academy, **her hazel eyes bright with anger.**
(Stone I., "Immortal Wife", p. 1)

(d) The same look was on the faces of all the women as the song ended, **tears of pride on cheeks, smiles on lips, deep hot glow in eyes.**
(Mitchell M., "Gone with the Wind", p. 145)

He would hold steadily on up Cheapside, **a thought more of dogged purpose in his gait.**
(Galsworthy J., "The Man of Property", p. 79)

Qualifying absolute constructions are semantically and grammatically dependent on the subject-predicate kernel of the sentence since the semantic relations existing between them reflect "part-whole" logical relations. This implies, that the subject matter is represented in absolute constructions by so called "argument-partitive" explicated in the surface structure by the names of different parts or organs of the target object, whereas the subject matter as a "whole" figures in the grammatical kernel of the sentence. In linguistic literature this kind of "part-whole" relations represent so called "split semantic subject" (Lyons 1977: 311- 317).

Event-Designating Absolute Constructions

Different from the qualifying ones, event-designating absolute constructions expand the target situation itself, either depicting further development of events or making it more precise by creating panoramic background of situations and events against which the plot of the narrative develops. The analysis of the empirical data showed that in English narrative texts event-designating constructions can be subdivided into agentive and panoramic (background) semantic subtypes.

In agentive absolute constructions the semantic subject of the proposition is an active doer of an action or a person or some other living being in some psychological-emotional state. Accordingly, they can be represented by such identifiers as proper names (a), common nouns (b), substantivized adjectives (c), quantifiers (d) or metaphorical phrases (e), whereas the semantic predicate in these constructions is always explicated by the present participle denoting some action or process. For instance:

- (a) They parted at St. Paul's, **Soames branching off to the station, James taking his omnibus westwards.**
(Galsworthy J., "The Man of Property", p. 299)
- (b) In the midst of cheering from the East India ships in the river, **the band playing "God save the King", the officers waving their hats, and the crews hurrahing gallantly,** the transports went down the river and proceeded to Ostend.
(Thackeray, W.M., "Vanity Fair", p. 92)
- (c) The animals had been frightened, cold, ravenous, wild as forest creatures, **the strong attacking the weak, the weak waiting for the weaker to die so that they could eat them.**
(Mitchell, M., "Gone with the Wind," p 399)
- (d) The devoted maiden friends came now from their rooms, **each wearing a differently coloured frock.**
(Galsworthy, J., "The Man of Property", p. 189)
- (e) They had made short work of the snowshoe rabbit, these dogs that were ill-tamed wolves; and they were now drawn up in expectant circle, **the two devils fighting desperately.**
(London, J., "The Call of the Wild", p. 49)

Panoramic (background) absolute constructions are used to designate different natural phenomena or situations against the background of which the plot of the narrative develops. The main peculiarity of these constructions lies in the fact that the subject member in their propositional structure is represented by, so-called, "argument-elementive" indicating an unanimate active doer of some action, or a thing in some state. Accordingly, the semantic subject in this kind of constructions is represented by the nouns denoting different natural forces or phenomena, celestial bodies, parts of the universe (such as: the sun, the moon, the sky, rivers, oceans, etc.). For instance:

The creeks crook their way down into the little river, **the river crawling through the woods like a green alligator.**

(Capote T., “The Grass Harp,” p. 58)

On the opposite slope of the watershed they came down into a level country and ran steadily hour after hour, **the sun bright overhead.**

(London J., “The Call of the Wild”, p. 85)

She went on deck in time to watch the tropical sunrise, the sun bursting above the horizon as though it were shot out of a cannon, day breaking with the same roar with which the sea was breaking on the white beach of Chagres.

(Stone I., “Immortal Wife”, p. 247)

Like giants they toiled, days flashing on the heels of days like dreams as they heaped the treasure up.

(London J., “The Call of the Wild”, p. 83)

There are moments when Nature reveals the passion hidden beneath the careless calm of her ordinary moods – (1) violent spring flashing white on almond-blossom through the purple clouds, (2) a snowy, moonlit peak, with its single star, soaring up to the passionate blue, or (3) against the flames of sunset, an old yaw-tree standing dark guardian of some fiery secret. (Galsworthy, J., “The Man of Property”, p.196).

We associate the use of absolute constructions with an author’s communicative competence and strategy in explicating his/her subjective aesthetic-cognitive modality in a most effective and expressive way. The analysis of English literary narrative texts has revealed that the successive use of nominalized absolute constructions expands the sentence to such a degree that it converts the sentence into a polypropositional microtext, which is stylistically marked by syntactic parallelism that makes the narration rhythmical and emotional-expressive.

Conclusion

These are the main results of our research. We think that the revelation and determination of linguistic essence of absolute constructions with their functional-semantic, stylistic and textual peculiarities are of considerable importance from the point of applied linguistics. In our opinion, they form the linguistic basis for working out effective and relevant methods that will make the teaching of both – absolute constructions and literary narrative texts much easier and comprehensible at higher schools.

References

1. Bach E. (1967). HAVE and BE in English syntax. In *Language*, vol. 43, #2, pt.1: 462-485, Baltimore.
2. Biber, D., Conrad, S. and Leech, G. (2003). *Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Longman.
3. Blokh, M. (1983). *A Course in Theoretical English Grammar*. Moscow.
4. Braine J. (1981). “Room at the Top”, Moscow: “Progress Publishers”.

5. Canale, M. and Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing. In *Applied Linguistics* 1(1), pp. 1-47.
6. Capote T. (1974). "The Grass Harp", Moscow: "Progress Publishers".
7. Curme, G.O. (1961). English Grammar. Barnes & Noble Books.
8. Curme, G.O. (1978). A Grammar of the English Language. Volume II: Syntax. Verbatim Books: New edition.
9. Dickens Ch. (1994). "The Adventures of Oliver Twist", Penguin Popular Classics.
10. Fillmore, C. J. (1968). The Case for Case. In: Bach E. and Harms R.T. (eds.) *Universals in Linguistic Theory*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 1-80.
11. Galsworthy J. (1974). "The Man of Property", Moscow: "Progress Publishers".
12. Greenbaum, S. and Quirk, R. (1990). A Student's Grammar of the English language. Harlow, Essex, England: Longman.
13. Kirvalidze N. (2006). The Author's Modality and Stratificational Structure of a Literary Text in Modern English. In *BSU International Refereed Multidisciplinary Scientific Journal, Volume 1 (January – June)*, pp. 195-200.
14. Kirvalidze N. (2013). Syntactic-Stylistic Aspect of Teaching English Narrative Texts at Higher Schools. In *EDULEARN13 Proceedings*, Barcelona, Spain, pp. 4027-4035.
15. Krylova, I.P. & Gordon, E.M. (2003). The English Verbals. M.: Higher School Publishing House.
16. Krylova, I.P. & Gordon, E.M. (2011) The Grammar of Contemporary English. M.: Higher School Publishing House.
17. Leech, G. (1989). An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage. London-Melbourne-Auckland.
18. London J. (1978). The Call of the Wild. White Fang. Moscow: "Progress Publishers".
19. Lyons, J. (1977). Semantics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
20. Maclin, A. (1996). Reference Guide to English: A Handbook of English as a Second Language. Washington, D. C.: United States Information Agency.
21. Maurier D.D. (1995). Rebecca, Penguin Books.
22. Mitchell M. (1995). "Gone with the Wind", Penguin Books.
23. Onions, S.C. (1932). An Advanced English Syntax. London, Routledge, Kegan Paul.
24. Poutsma, H. (1980). A Grammar of Late Modern English. Groningen: P. Noordhoff.
25. Scheurweghs, G. (1973). Present-Day English syntax: a survey of sentence patterns. London: Longmans.
26. Stone I. (1962). Immortal Wife, N.Y.: Pocket Books Inc., Cardinal Edition.
27. Thackeray W.M. (1994). Vanity Fair, Penguin Popular Classics.
28. Thorne J.P. (1973). On the grammar of existential sentences. In *Proceedings of the 4-th International Congress for Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*. Bucharest 1971. North-Holland Publishing Company, Warszawa-Amsterdam-london, pp. 863-881.