

## Chapter 2

# Absolute Clauses in the Literature

Absolute clauses form a category of absolute construction. “The term *absolute* derives from Latin *absolūtum*, meaning ‘loosened from’ or ‘separated’” (Wheelock and LaFleur 2005: 155–157), “standing out of the syntactic connexion” (Jespersen 1937: 126), “or abnormally connected to the rest of the sentence” (Crystal 2008: 2). For example, the adverb or adjective at the beginning of a sentence in English is an absolute constituent. See 2-1:

- 2-1a. *However*, it suffers from several disadvantages. (BNC\_MISC)
- b. *Alone*, Sara switched on her radio and did the washing-up. (BNC\_FIC)

However, an absolute constituent does not necessarily constitute an absolute construction, because an absolute clause has its own syntactic structure which is unnecessary for an absolute constituent. Absolute clauses are “referred to as ablative absolutes in Latin” (Wheelock and LaFleur 2005: 155), having conceptual meaning but “not dependent on the subject of the main clause” (Zandvoort 1972: 37), and “are self-contained in idea and not grammatically tied to the sentence” (Kane 1983: 754). They do not modify or connect with any single term but rather modify the entire idea expressed in the main clauses. In 2-1, *however* and *alone* are free from the clause in form. The former is a conjunctive adverb meaning adversative, but a conjunctive word itself has not its own syntactic structure; the latter can be seen as the reduction of a finite subordinate clause, or as non-finite clause *being alone* with *being* omitted, hence an absolute construction.

## 2.1 What Is Absolute Clause

Traditional grammar considers such constructions consisting of a logical subject and a logical predicate functioning as adverbials as nominative absolute clauses or nominative absolute participles. It is nominative because the subject of this

construction is always nominative, or at least the subject of the English absolute clauses is nominative; it is participle because the logical predicate is always participial. Jespersen (1937: 126) considers that the two names are both inappropriate and consequently uses the term “nexus tertiary.” This is because the case in absolute clauses may also be accusative (Curme 1931: 154; Jespersen 1937: 126; Visser 1972: 1148); in addition to present participles, infinitives, past participles, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases can also be used as the logical predicate. Among these types, “present participial clauses are the commonest” (Al-Hamash and Abdulla 1968: 176, 1979: 376) and are the standard absolute constructions (Reuland 1983: 127). Fowler (1965: 4) also refers to this construction as an absolute clause. However, absolute clauses defined by Fowler (1965) consist of a noun or pronoun that is not the subject or object of any verb or the object of any preposition in the main clauses. As we can see, the logical predicate of the absolute clause in this sense is the non-finite verb, which is equivalent to the absolute participle in the traditional sense, with verbless clauses not included. Non-finite adverbial clauses or verbless adverbial clauses with explicit subjects are referred to as absolute clauses (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973, Quirk et al. 1985; Watson 1976; Biber et al. 1999), and absolute clauses are not introduced by subordinators (Quirk et al. 1985: 1120; McArthur 1992: 6). They are independent from the main clauses in form, used to modify the rest of the sentence (Watson 1976: 758). They are the reduced finite clauses, hence belonging to the category of subordinate clauses (Curme 1931: 156–157; Quirk and Greenbaum 1973: 348–351; Shopen 1985: 200–201). The different names used by different grammarians are summarized in Table 2.1.

Among these names of absolute clauses, the gerund and the participle types are not appropriate, because the gerund includes only the -ing participles, thus excluding all verbless constructions, past participles, and infinitives, and the participle clauses consist of only the -ing verbs and the past participles, with the verbless constructions and infinitives excluded. There are some grammarians who do not distinguish free adjuncts from absolute clauses, referring to both as absolute clauses (e.g., Thompson and Longacre 1985) or gerundivized clauses (e.g., Talmy 1978).

Some of these names define the case of absolute clauses, such as nominative absolute construction, absolute nominatives, and nominative absolute; some others define the syntactic functions of absolute clauses, such as absolute adjuncts, nexus tertiary, and absolute free adjuncts. It can be seen that the names of absolute clauses may have two uncertainties: The case of absolute clauses is not necessarily nominative; the syntactic functions of absolute clauses are not necessarily adverbial. Nevertheless, there is one thing that is certain, namely “absolute.” “Absolute” is manifested from two aspects: One is that the subject is not co-referential with the subject of the main clause; the other is that it does not need a conjunctive expression. However, the subject of absolute clauses and that of the main clauses are sometimes co-referential. For example,

**Table 2.1** Names of absolute clauses

Grammarians	Name of the construction
Annema (1924)	Absolute structures
Annema (1924) Berent (1973, 1975) McCawley (1983) Mitchell (1985) Stump (1985)	Absolute constructions
Berent (1973, 1975) Stump (1985)	Absolutes
Beukema (1980, 1982) Kruisinga (1932) Scheurweghs (1969)	Absolute free adjuncts
Curme (1931)	Absolute nominatives
Fowler (1860) Poutsma (1929) Kruisinga (1932) Reuland (1983)	Nominative absolute
Grady (1972)	Simple absolutes
Fowler (1965) Watson (1976) Haiman and Thompson (1984) Quirk et al. (1985) Biber et al. (1999)	Absolute clauses
Jespersen (1949)	Nexus tertiary
Reuland (1983)	Nominative absolute construction
Talmy (1978)	Gerundivized clauses
Thompson and Longacre (1985)	Absolutive clauses
Visser (1972)	Absolute adjuncts
Zandvoort (1972)	Absolute participle construction

2-2a. *Our guest offering his assistance*, he was accepted among the number.  
(*The Vicar of Wakefield*, 1766)

- b. *The whole building being of wood*, it seemed to carry every sound, like a drum.  
(*Women in Love*, 1921)

The purpose of using absolute clauses is to avoid the subjects of the two clauses referring to the same person or thing, and the sentences in 2-2 are rare and uncommon (Onions 1905[2010]).

Latin ablative absolutes are usually translated as the “with + noun + participle” constructions in English. Influenced by ablative absolutes, traditional grammarians generally hold that absolute clauses are not introduced by a subordinate conjunction, but they are always introduced by *with*. Here “introduced by *with*” has two possible interpretations: One is that the logical subject-predicate constructions following *with* are absolute clauses; the other is that the *with* constructions themselves are absolute clauses.

According to the first interpretation, the preposition *with* is used to introduce the subject of non-finite verbless clauses (Quirk et al. 1985: 993), and the constructions following *with* are still absolute clauses. However, in addition to *with*, other prepositions can also introduce the subject of non-finite or verbless clauses, as in 2-13. If the subject–predicate constructions introduced by the preposition *with* are absolute clauses, then the other subject–predicate constructions in 2-13 are also absolute clauses, which, however, are not included in the category of absolute clauses by traditional grammarians.

The logical predicate of absolute clauses is the complement of the subject in grammar, but in the logical subject–predicate constructions introduced by the preposition *with*, the logical subject is the object of *with*, and the logical predicate is the complement of the object. However, the object–complement constructions are not at all absolute. Jespersen (1933: 309) refers to this kind of construction as simple nexus, which “may be the object not only of a verb, but also of a preposition..., as *with* often means virtually the same thing as *having*” (Jespersen 1933: 312). The simple nexus introduced by *with* has no direct grammatical relations with the main clause.

According to the second interpretation, the “with + noun + participle” construction is itself an absolute clause. In traditional grammar, *with* and the following simple nexus together form a prepositional phrase, functioning as the adverbial of the sentence, the same as nonfinite clauses headed by *having*. Since there is no conjunctive expression, they can be referred to as free adjuncts, with the logical subject being the subject of the main clauses. Therefore, the “with + noun + participle” constructions can be considered as absolute clauses from neither of the two interpretations.

## 2.2 Types of Absolute Construction

Absolute constructions in traditional grammar are included in the grammatical category of adverbial clauses, including free adjunct and nominative absolute. In addition, Stump (1985: 1) subsumes a third type of absolute construction, augmented absolute construction, headed by preposition *with*. For example,

- 2-3a. *Standing up*, she looked around the familiar room. (BNC\_FIC) (free adjunct construction)
- b. *Health permitting*, her early retirement would be out of character. (BNC\_NA) (nominative absolute construction)
- c. For months he had hung between life and death, *with a bullet in his spine*. (BNC\_FIC) (augmented absolute construction)

### 2.2.1 Free Adjunct Construction

Free adjunct constructions refer to the adverbial clauses with no explicit subject; they are not connected with the main clauses with conjunctive expressions and are usually separated by punctuation marks. The logical roles played by free adjuncts

are diverse, such as time, cause, attendant circumstance, manner, result, condition, or concession (Frank 1972: 312–213; Zandvoort 1972: 37; Kane 1983: 756; Stump 1985: 2). This construction “is native to English; examples can be found in abundance from Old English through Modern English” (Stump 1985: 37). Absolute adjuncts are structurally diverse, with the core components being non-finite verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and so on, hence nonfinite clauses in complex sentences. For example,

- 2-4a. *Walking home*, he goes through one large garden gate, only to see the other one fall down. (BNC\_MISC)
- b. *A carpenter*, he had a long record of hard work, and his family was dependent on his income. (BNC\_NEWS)
- c. *Unable to meet his eyes*, she stared at the garden, wondering vaguely why it looked the same when she felt so very different. (BNC\_FIC)
- d. *In his teens*, he learned to drink and swore an allegiance to the pint. (BNC\_FIC)

In free adjuncts with non-finite verbs as the core components, the non-finite verbs can be present participle, past participle, or infinitive. For example,

- 2-5a. *Glancing up at the sky*, she saw the storm clouds gathering on the horizon. (BNC\_FIC)
- b. *Published in 1941*, it influenced many biographers. (BNC\_MISC)
- c. *To tell you the truth*, we are a bit at a loss. (BNC\_FIC)

A free adjunct can also be embedded into another subordinate clause. See 2-6:

- 2-6 When the case, *sitting at Chichester Rents in central London's Chancery Lane*, opened nearly two months ago, Mr. Rook told the jury the fraud involved 219 m. (BNC\_NEWS)

The subjects of free adjunct constructions in the above example sentences are all controlled by the subjects of the superordinate clauses, hence “related free adjuncts” (Visser 1972: 1132). It is also possible that a free adjunct construction is not controlled by the subject of the superordinate clause; “in this case the adjunct is termed unrelated or (more prescriptively) misrelated” (Stump 1985: 7), or referred to as “dangling participle” (Visser 1972: 1132). For example:

- 2-7a. *Crossing the road*, a lorry knocked him down. (Baillie and Kitchen 1979: 294)
- b. *Playing backgammon and swapping jokes*, the evening passed very pleasantly. (Hodges and Whitten 1977: 254)

The free adjunct construction in 2-7a is syntactically related with *a lorry*, subject of the main clause. In other words, grammatically, it is *a lorry* that is crossing the road, but logically the subject of the free adjunct construction refers to *him*, object of the main clause. In 2-7b, the free adjunct construction has no reference in the main clause, that is, to say that the logical subject of the free adjunct construction is implicit in the main clause, where there appears only the grammatical subject, but this will not affect the effectiveness of communication.

Dangling construction has been used in all times throughout the history. Grammarians use different names for this construction, such as loose participle (Jespersen 1949; Vallins 1952), fused participle or sentry participle (Fowler 1965: 215, 438), unattached participle, unrelated participle, pendant participle or dangling participle (Quirk et al. 1985: 1121, 1123), and detached participle or murky participle (Kane 1983: 255, 761). Grammarians have long been concerned with dangling participles, such as Lowth (1762), Grant (1808), Cooper (1831), and Curme (1912). Dangling participles are accepted as grammatical without any criticism and “apparently not considered as irregular.” (Visser 1972: 1140).

It is Bain (1863) who first found fault in dangling construction. He “condemns the usage as an error arising from confounding the participle adjunct with the absolute construction” (Visser 1972: 1140). Many other grammarians (e.g., Onions 1905[2010]; Partridge 1949; Fowler 1965) also question this construction, for the logical subject and the grammatical subject of a dangling participle are not co-referential. Although this may not cause misunderstanding, most grammarians suggest avoiding this construction in language practice (e.g., Smart 1931; Hodges and Whitten 1977; House and Harman 1950).

“Nowadays, in ‘literary’ English the idiom is avoided” (Visser 1972: 1140), except occasionally appearing in premeditated spoken English, because although it is ambiguous in structure, it is seldom misunderstood. Participles in some dangling constructions have been being fixed with the gradual weakening of the requirement of subjects, as in 2-8a, and some even are grammaticalized into prepositions, as in 2-8b.

2-8a. *Strictly speaking*, I’ve no role here any more. (BNC\_FIC)

- b. *Considering the interest rate blows*, the market turned in a resilient performance. (BNC\_NEWS)

According to Quirk et al. (1985: 1122–1123) and Greenbaum (1996: 337–338), the dangling construction is acceptable if it is a style disjunct that has the speaker’s *I* as the understood subject, if the understood subject is a generic *you*, *we*, or *one* or if it refers to the whole of the host clause, or in scientific usage, if the understood subject refers to the *I* or *we* of the speakers or writers. For example,

2-9a. *Putting it mildly*, you have caused us some inconvenience. (Quirk et al. 1985: 1122)

- b. *To check on the reliability of the first experiment*, the experiment was replicated with a second set of subjects. (ibid.: 1123)
- c. *Being Christmas*, the government offices were closed. (ibid.: 1122)
- d. *Unknown to his closest advisers*, he had secretly negotiated with an enemy emissary. (ibid.: 1122)

## 2.2.2 Nominative Absolute Construction

Absolute clauses are “nonfinite and verbless adverbial clauses that have an overt subject but are not introduced by a subordinator and are not the complement of a preposition” (Quirk et al. 1985: 1120); they are also known as “adverbial participle clauses and adverbial verbless clauses” (Greenbaum 1996: 338). The people or thing conducting the action of the non-finite verb is not co-referential with the people or thing as the subject of the main clause, so it is likely to be confused with a dangling construction. The major difference between the two is that an absolute clause consists of a logical subject and a logical predicate, while a dangling construction has no subject. Like free adjuncts, absolute clauses are also various in structure, and their syntactical structures can be distinguished from two dimensions, i.e., types of subject and types of predicate. Modern grammarians generally accept that the subject of an absolute clause may be a zero case noun or a nominative pronoun. They categorize the syntactic types of absolute clauses mainly from the core component of the logical predicate, which can be a non-finite verb or a verbless component. Non-finite verbs include present participles, past participles, or infinitives; and verbless components include nouns, adjectives, adverbs, or prepositional phrases. These structural types are shown in Fig. 2.1.

- 2-10a. She lay for a long while, *the tears falling*. (BNC\_FIC)
- b. *Fish done, spuds on*, she got out the asparagus and found they were plastic! (BNC\_MAG)
  - c. He also gave advance information about an evening meeting...and a one-day conference..., *both events to take place in London*. (BNC\_ACAD)
  - d. Her parents, *Dad a solicitor and Mum a former Welsh international*, are watching with her brother as she beats Jennifer Santrock. (BNC\_NEWS)
  - e. *He dead, and you dying*, he gave you the kiss of life. (BNC\_SPOK)
  - f. Exhausted and confused, I came, *cap in hand*, busking for help and half sang, half cried. (BNC\_MISC)
  - g. *Episode over*, put it out of your mind. (BNC\_FIC)

Grammarians generally hold that absolute clauses are not popularly used in Modern English, “apart from a few stereotyped phrases, absolute clauses are formal and infrequent” (Stump 1985: 10; Quirk et al. 1985: 1120). For example,

- 2-11a. *Weather permitting*, the big helicopters will place them between the flows and the town. (BNC\_NEWS)
- b. *All things considered*, she would be better married. (BNC\_FIC)

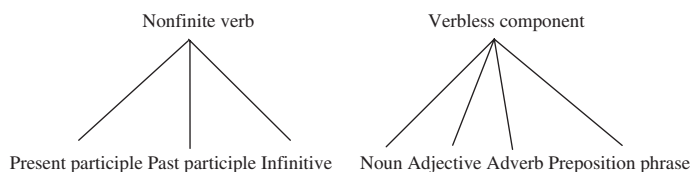


Fig. 2.1 Core component of predicate of absolute clauses (Kortmann 1991: 10)

- c. *There being only one way to get out of here*, she went to find Felipe. (BNC\_FIC)
- d. *It being Ten o'clock*, the debate stood adjourned. (BNC\_MISC)

### 2.2.3 Augmented Absolute Construction

In Modern English, absolute clauses are usually not introduced by subordinators (Visser 1972: 1158; 1271–1277; Quirk et al. 1985: 1120; McArthur 1992: 6), but may be introduced by the subordinators *with* and *without* (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973: 723, 726; Quirk et al. 1985: 1003; Biber et al. 1999: 137), forming augmented absolutes. For example,

- 2-12a. But for the next decade or more, nearly all orchestral and instrumental music was issued in cut-down form, *without any warning being given*. (BNC\_MISC)
- b. *With time running out*, they desperately need points to avoid relegation. (BNC\_NEWS)

Some other prepositions can also introduce absolute clauses, but not as popularly used as *with* and *without*. For example,

- 2-13a. *By women being open about sex*, it made life much easier for men. (BNC\_NA)
- b. They gave us some time back afterward, *because of the brain having an operation*. (BNC\_NA)
- c. *Despite turnover being virtually flat at 13,242 m*, Vallance said that BT had been successful in controlling operating costs. (BNC\_NA)

Free adjuncts can also be introduced by subordinators which can be a conjunction or a preposition, forming augmented free adjuncts. When a free adjunct construction is introduced by a subordinating conjunction, the verbal element heading the adjunct is participial (Curme 1931: 276; Jespersen 1949: 407); but when a free adjunct construction is introduced by a preposition, the verbal element must be a gerund (Stump 1985: 12). For example,

- 2-14a. *After leaving the magazine*, Caroline worked for a short time in the Cardiff newsroom. (BNC\_MISC)
- b. *On leaving school*, he worked in a chemist's shop. (BNC\_MISC)

### 2.2.4 Differences and Similarities

The absolute constructions, i.e., free adjuncts, nominative absolutes, and augmented absolutes, are all reduced finite clauses (Curme 1931: 156; Quirk and Greenbaum 1973). The reason why they are called absolute construction is that



there are two important similarities among them: All of them have their own tone and are separated by a pause from the main clause, or by a comma in writing; all of them are non-finite or verbless adverbial clauses, hence no tense or mood marks.

However, there are also significant differences among them. Free adjuncts and absolute clauses are not introduced by an explicit subordinator and are not dependent on the main clause. This is the indicator of difference between these two and augmented absolutes. Quirk et al. (1985: 1123) refer to these two types of absolute constructions as *supplementive clauses*.

Moreover, there are two differences between free adjuncts and absolute clauses. First, the subject of a free adjunct is implicit, and the implicit subject can be co-referential with the subject of the main clause, hence related free adjunct or unrelated free adjunct. However, the subject of an absolute clause is explicit, and this explicit subject is not co-referential with the subject of the main clause. Second, free adjuncts can be introduced by a subordinator which can be a conjunction or a preposition, while an absolute clause cannot be introduced by a conjunction, but can by a preposition, such as *with*, forming an augmented absolute. From this perspective, a free adjunct is called absolute construction because there is not a subordinator connecting it with the main clause. An absolute clause is called absolute construction, for it has not a subordinator to connect with the main clause, nor a co-referential subject with the main clause. Free adjuncts are non-finite clauses without explicit subordinators, and augmented absolutes are logical subject-predicate constructions with explicit subordinators.

## 2.3 Logical Roles of Absolute Clauses

Traditional grammarians focus on the syntactic structures and logical roles of absolute clauses in their studies. In this section, we will review the logical roles of absolute clauses and their determiners.

Many traditional grammarians have carried out researches on the logical roles expressed by free adjuncts and absolute clauses. For example, Curme (1931: 154–157) distinguishes the following six logical roles: time, cause, condition and exception, attendant circumstance, manner proper, and concession. Since Curme (ibid.: 158) considers free adjuncts as reduced absolute constructions, he does not distinguish free adjuncts from absolute clauses in his classification of logical roles of absolute clauses.

Kruisinga (1932: 274–275) subsumes all logical roles assumed by free adjuncts under the notion of attendant circumstances, including the following four types:

- (i) reason or cause: *Shy, reserved and proud*, I would have died rather than have breathed a syllable of my secret.
- (ii) difference of time: *Finding Blanche determined*, Father Andre presently took his leave.

- (iii) contrast: *Like all craftsmen of the kind*, he is at the mercy of his material.
- (iv) alternative circumstances: *Genuine, or a joke of the enemy*, it spoke wakening facts to him.

Although Kruisinga (1932: 280) has not listed the logical roles of absolute clauses, he considers absolute clauses themselves as free adjuncts. Absolute clauses differ from free adjuncts only in that they have their own subjects, so the logical roles assumed by free adjuncts are the same as those assumed by absolute clauses in his understanding.

Jespersen (1949: 61–64) thinks that it is not always easy or even impossible to draw a clear line between several applications, but he suggests four logical roles of absolute clauses:

- (i) cause or reason: The wise men of antiquity...were afraid that—*men being what they are*—their discoveries might be put to bad or futile uses.
- (ii) condition: *Conciliation failing*, force remains; *but force failing*, no further hope of reconciliation is left.
- (iii) time: *And the meal being over*, he took Mr. Kaye into the other room.
- (iv) descriptive circumstances: He remained in town, *his idea being that he wanted everything settled before his departure*.

Visser (1972: 1054–1056; 1132–1139; 1149–1158; 1252–1255; 1266–1271) discusses the range of logical roles played by free adjuncts and by absolute clauses separately. He distinguishes four logical roles of absolute clauses: attendant circumstances; reason, ground, cause, or motive; time; and condition.

According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1972: 762), except for the attendant circumstances asserted by Kruisinga (1932), free adjuncts and absolute clauses have a more specific sense in context. They suggest three logical roles played by absolute clauses:

- (i) cause: *All our savings gone*, we started looking for jobs.
- (ii) time: *Cleared*, this site will be very valuable.
- (iii) circumstance: *A case in both hands*, Mabel stalked out of the house.

The above classifications of logical roles played by absolute clauses are represented in Table 2.2.

Adverbial clauses in traditional grammar can play the logical roles of time, cause, place, condition, concession, manner, and comparison. However, there are no adverbial clauses of attendant circumstance. Attendant circumstances are

**Table 2.2** Logical roles of absolute clauses

	Time	Cause	Circumstance	Condition	Concession	Manner
Curme	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kruisinga	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Jespersen	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Visser	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Quirk et al.	✓	✓	✓			

usually introduced by prepositional phrases, and all can be introduced by *with* or *without* (Quirk et al. 1985: 1003). For example,

- 2-15a. *Without you to consult*, I would be completely lost.  
 b. *With the mortgage paid*, they could afford to go abroad for their vacation.  
 c. Don't walk around *with your shirt hanging out*.  
 d. *With you as my friend*, I don't need enemies.

It should be noted that “grammars traditionally classify adjuncts on the basis of meaning ...rather than grammatical form, it is inevitably open-ended and the boundaries between the different kinds are often quite fuzzy” (Huddleston and Pullum 2005: 79). This is why grammarians distinguish types of logical roles played by absolute clauses quite differently. The reason why the boundaries between different logical roles are fuzzy is that absolute clauses do not need an explicit coordinator. In fact, even a subordinating clause with an explicit subordinator, no matter whether it is finite or nonfinite, may have multiple interpretations. “They have the chameleon-like semantic quality of adapting to context” (Quirk and Greenbaum 1972: 760). One conjunction can introduce subordinating clauses of different semantic roles. For example, the conjunction *since* can introduce a clause of time or reason. In addition, some clauses may be a combination of two or more semantic roles. For example, some temporal clauses may imply relationships of condition and concession, and some clauses of place may imply contrast (Quirk et al. 1985: 1087).

Grammarians have also discussed the factors determining the syntactic logical roles. According to Curme (1931: 155–156), the inversion of the subject and predicate constituents occurs occasionally within absolute clauses expressing a causal, conditional, circumstantial, or concessive relation, within which the concessive relation appears more common. “This inversion is limited to a small number of participles, some of which have taken on a prepositional value: *except (excepted)*, *granted*, *given*, *during*, *pending*, *notwithstanding*; or the value of a subordinating conjunction, when the subject of the absolute is a clause: *given that*, *granted that*, *provided that*” (Stump 1985: 19). See example 2-16:

- 2-16a. *Given the School's rapid rate of growth*, more part-time tutors are needed across the full range of management activities. (BNC\_MISC) (cause)  
 b. *Given sufficient advance notice*, we'll also be happy to carry collapsible wheelchairs on any of our flights. (BNC\_MISC) (condition)  
 c. *Given the nomenclature of his position*, he will prima facie be held out as one of the members of the firm. (BNC\_ACAD) (concession)

“The predicative constituent of a nominative absolute phrase expressing attendant circumstances is commonly adverbial or prepositional” (ibid). For example,

- 2-17a. Richard went ahead, *hands in pockets*. (BNC\_FIC)  
 b. He held out his hand to me, *palm up*. (BNC\_MISC)

According to Jespersen (1949), the causal relationship is most usual with absolute clauses having present participles, especially *being* in their predicates, as in

2-18a, and the relationship of time is most possible with absolute clauses having past participles, adjectives, or adverbial phrases in their predicates, as in 2-18b–c. Absolute clauses of time and condition usually precede the superordinate clauses, as in 2-18b–d, and those expressing attendant circumstances are “generally added after the main part of the sentence” (1949: 63), as in 2-18e–g. Like Curme (1931), Jespersen (1949) also indicates that predicates of absolute clauses expressing attendant circumstances are usually adverbial or prepositional phrases, some of which are, in Jespersen’s terms, the “condensed constructions”, such as *hat in hand*, *head first*, and *face down*. See the following examples:

- 2-18a. *The terrain being flat*, the wind tore across scrub and heathland unimpeded. (BNC\_FIC) (cause)
- b. *Dishes done*, I return home to find my bucket full of ‘slime’ which I pour into the washing machine. (BNC\_NA) (time)
- c. *Introductions over*, Nicholson motioned for his guests to sit down. (BNC\_FIC) (time)
- d. *Weather permitting*, the big helicopters will place them between the flows and the town. (BNC\_NEWS) (condition)
- e. She rushed from the shop, *hat in hand*. (BNC\_ACAD) (circumstance)
- f. Then she dragged the body to the workbench and pushed it into the cupboard, *head first*. (BNC\_FIC) (circumstance)
- g. Bissell’s body had been found lying on a pile of rubbish, *face down*. (BNC\_FIC) (circumstance)

“Both semantic and pragmatic factors may determine the logical role which adjuncts and absolutes are felt to play” (Stump 1985: 22); Quirk and Greenbaum (1972: 762) have discussed the pragmatic factors determining the logical roles of absolute clauses. For example, the absolute clause in 2-19a may express the relationship of cause or time and that in 2-19b, condition or cause. “For the reader or hearer, the actual nature of the accompanying circumstance has to be inferred from the context” (Quirk et al. 1985: 1124). For example:

- 2-19a. *Vanity overcoming discretion*, Sherman phoned the Newark Evening News to boast of his own treasure trove. (COHA\_MAG)
- b. *Such being the case*, a few remarks will be made on each kind separately. (COHA\_NF)

Quirk and Greenbaum (1972) also offer an explanation of semantic correlate of absolute clauses. For example, “in—ing clauses, dynamic verbs typically suggest a temporal link, and stative verbs a causal link” (Quirk and Greenbaum 1972: 762). This can be taken as the third factor, the semantic factor that determines the logical relationship between the absolute clause and the main clause. For example,

- 2-20a. *Money being scarce*, Belen’s people don’t buy but barter. (COCA\_FIC) (cause)
- b. *Sanity returning*, he ran after her. (BNC\_FIC) (time)

Syntactic, pragmatic (reasoning), and semantic factors together determine the logical roles of absolute clauses. These factors help readers make a determination on the most appropriate role from several possible logical roles.

Logical roles distinguished by grammarians can be classified into two categories: adverbial clauses and attendant circumstances. The difference between the two is that the former can be expanded into clausal adjuncts introduced by subordinating conjunctions and the latter, prepositional phrases introduced by *with* or coordinating clauses linked by conjunction *and*. For example,

- 2-21a. Dexter turned to Emma, *eyes blazing an apology*. (CLOB\_P) (circumstance)
- b. *There being no bridge*, the master had to stop at the shore. (BROWN\_E) (cause)
- c. This done, she contemplated with dismay the solitary hours that lay before her. (LOB\_P) (time)
- d. *The unexpected weather aside*, it had been a good day. (CLOB\_N) (concession)
- e. *All things considered*, the highway commissioners would seem to be elected. (BROWN\_C) (condition)

The absolute clause in 2-21a is an attendant circumstance, and those in 2-21b–e play the relations of cause, time, concession, and condition, respectively. Due to the absence of explicit conjunctive expressions, the logical roles expressed by absolute clauses are always fuzzy. Grammarians such as Curme (1931), Jespersen (1949), and Quirk and Greenbaum (1972, Quirk et al. 1985) have discussed on the factors determining the logical relations assumed by absolute clauses, but clear distinctions can hardly be attained in many cases. For example,

- 2-22a. *Her fears somewhat lulled*, she began to read. (LOB\_N)
- b. It was a very English sort of day, the air still, the sky a uniform white. (CLOB\_L)
- c. The family circle was a tight one, the discipline strict. (FLOB\_G)
- d. That's twice he did it, twenty years apart, two pregnancies ending in nothing, nothing. (FLOB\_K)

The absolute clause in 2-22a can be interpreted as expressing the relation of time or cause. No matter which of the two relationships it expresses, it belongs to the category of adverbial clauses. The distinctions between different types of logical roles are also fuzzy. For example, the absolute clause in 2-22b can be considered as an adverbial clause expressing the relationship of cause or as an attendant circumstance. It is grammatically acceptable that the preposition *with* can be added to such absolute clauses as time, cause, and condition to form augmented adjuncts. Some absolute clauses may have more interpretations, as in 2-22c, the absolute clause can be taken as an adverbial clause of cause or an attendant circumstance or neither of the two. Rather, it is the explanation to the main clause. Although traditional grammar does not distinguish the explanation type of absolute clauses, the absolute clause in 2-22d is hard to be included in the categories

of clausal adjuncts or attendant circumstances. In fact, the absolute clauses in 2-23 “uniformly resist paraphrase by means of any sort of adverbial clauses” (Stump 1985: 334); they “are understood as explaining some notion ancillary to the meaning of the main clauses” (ibid.: 335).

- 2-23a. ...the orchestra played some blues, a gospel piece, and “I got Rhythm,” *sometimes in unison, sometimes in harmony, and sometimes free*. (Stump 1985: 334)
- b. The tombstones were spaced out on the floor in long rows, *each stone about six feet long and covered with carving in relief*. (ibid.: 334)
- c. To confront another person with one’s head uncovered was a grave insult, *the only exception being Taoist recluses and Buddhist priests*. (ibid.: 334)

Most absolute clauses (about 80 %) are not typical adverbial clauses, but appositive or coordinate clauses (Kortmann 1991: 99). Appositive (or coordinate) absolute clauses can be considered as the explanation of the main clause or part of the main clause, as in example 2-24:

- 2-24a. The city was alive in daylight, *the Elves busy at their work, the streets bustling with activity*. (FROWN\_N)
- b. The MacGregors were there, *Tim lounging on the piano stool, Susan on the floor, Mrs. MacGregor upright and expressionless on the sofa*. (LOB\_L)

The two absolute clauses in 2-24a are the explanations of the main clause, while the three in 2-24b are the explanations of the nominal group *The MacGregors*. There is a clear difference between these absolute clauses and the absolute clause *eyes blazing an apology* in 2-21a. The absolute clause in 2-21a is an attendant circumstance of the verb in the main clause and can be augmented with a preposition *with* to form a prepositional phrase, and those in 2-24 are not attendant circumstance because both verbs in the main clauses are not action verbs, but linking verbs which cannot introduce attendant circumstances. Even if the verb in the main clause is an action verb, the absolute clauses in 2-25 cannot be considered as attendant circumstances either.

- 2-25a. There they continued their studies at the university, *she in art, he in architecture*. (BROWN\_A)
- b. For nearly forty years she and Sir Edwin Lutyens worked together—he *as architect of the house, she designing the garden*—culminating in the Viceroy’s House in New Delhi. (FLOB\_G)

The predicate constituents in the two absolute clauses in 2-25a are a further explanation of the main clause, which can be seen as finite clauses with *continued her study* and *continued his study* omitted. The first absolute clause in 2-25b can also be seen as a clause with *worked* omitted, and the predicate *designing* in the second absolute clause is a hyponym of *worked*. Therefore, all the four absolute clauses are not actions or state of affairs occurring accompanying the verbs of the

main clauses. There is a clear distinction between 2-25 and 2-26 although they appear the same in structure.

- 2-26 The Benbergs stood by, *he clasping his hands and watching her closely, she wiping a plate round and round with a sodden cloth.* (Visser 1972)

According to Visser (1972), the absolute clauses in 2-26 are attendant circumstances. In fact, the relationships expressed by these two absolute clauses are also to some extent fuzzy. From the perspective of predicate, the verbs in the two absolute clauses are both accompanying the verb *stood* in the main clause. However, from the perspective of subject, the two absolute clauses can both be seen as the explanation of the nominal group *the Benbergs*, subject of the main clause. Even so, if the main verb *stood* is interpreted as a state of affairs, as *The Benbergs were there*, the two absolute clauses are more inclined to function as explanation.

## 2.4 The Case of Absolute Clauses

There are two different interpretations for the case of absolute clauses to change from dative to nominative. One believes that absolute clauses originated from dative absolutes in the Old English, which were borrowed from Latin ablative absolutes. According to this interpretation, the dative case in Anglo-Saxon is the origin of the absolute clauses in English, and the absolute case changed from dative to nominative owing to the loss of case inflections. “The inflections having decayed, the dative was mistaken for the nominative” (Kellner 1892: 125). On the change of absolute case from dative to nominative, Bright (1890: 159–162) wrote the following:

Let us look at the history of the absolute construction in English. We begin with the dative absolute in Anglo-Saxon (in origin a translation of the Latin ablative absolute); as inflections break down we come upon the transition or ‘crude’ type, in which the pronoun remains dative in form while the participle has lost all signs of inflection. But all nouns, as well as the participle, came to lose the inflectional sings of the dative case; we then obtained the ‘crude’ type, in which both noun and participle, though absolute, were without any trace of inflection. The final act in this history was the admission of the nominative forms of the personal pronouns into this crude absolute construction – a dative absolute in disguise.

Another interpretation believes that the use of a noun in the zero form or a pronoun in the subject form is “a continuation of the Old English usage with the noun before the participle in the zero case, with later analogous introduction of the subject form of the pronouns. This latter phenomenon took probable place as early as the middle of the fourteenth century” (Visser 1972: 1149). According to this interpretation, the subject of absolute clauses should always be nominative because they evolved from the Old English. An absolute clause “is erroneous in making it the objective” (Murray 1808[2011]: 201), and Lowth (1762: 116) warned against dative absolute in disguise “forcing of the English under the rules



of a foreign language”. “A Noun or a Pronoun is put absolute in the nominative, when its case depends on no other word” (Brown 1861), hence called nominative absolute (Fowler 1860: 517; Tipping 1961: 184).

However, due to the impact of the Latin grammar, many grammarians in the nineteenth century held that it is not correct for zero case nouns or nominative pronouns to be the subject of absolute clauses and insisted that the zero case nouns or nominative pronouns before the absolute clauses are dative or ablative. For example, in Modern English as well as in the Old English, absolute words are always in the dative case. “The meaning conveyed by these absolute words cannot be expressed by a true nominative” (Adams 1858[2010]). Pronouns cannot change the characteristics of absolute clauses. Despite the use of the nominative forms of the personal pronouns, absolute clauses are “historically the objective absolute” (Bright 1890: 161). “The ablative absolute may be translated by the English objective absolute, which is a close equivalent” (Gildersleeve 1888: 137–157). Although the nominative has taken the place of the dative, “yet it is right to parse the so-called nominative absolute as ‘a dative absolute in disguise’” (Ross 1893: 294).

Grammarians in the twentieth century generally accepted that absolute clauses are nominative (e.g., Jespersen 1933), but there are still grammarians who believed that absolute clauses can also be accusative (e.g., Curme 1931). Such clauses include only a small number, some of which are obviously affected by Latin. However, “among speakers of standard English, absolutes whose subjects are oblique in case are generally regarded as unacceptable” (Stump 1985: 11). Fowler (1965: 4) tries to explain that absolute clauses should be nominative by using example 2-27.

2-27 *There being no evidence against him, and he (not him) denying the charge, we could do nothing.* (Fowler 1965: 4)

Recent grammarians (e.g., Quirk et al. 1985; Biber et al. 1999; Crystal 2008, etc.) not only think that absolute clauses are nominative, but also accept that sometimes absolute clauses can be accusative. Therefore, they use the term “absolute clauses” instead of “absolute nominative clauses” to avoid the case problem to some extent.

We are not sure whether absolute clauses (e.g., *he liked*) have evolved from the dative absolute (e.g., *him likade*) of the Old English, or we should take them as a continuation of the Old English usage with the noun before the participle in the zero case. Although many grammarians of the nineteenth century held that it is not correct for zero case nouns or nominative pronouns to be the subject of absolute clauses, there are many absolute clauses with nominative pronouns as subject in the works of this period. For example,

- 2-28a. *There would he kneel to me in the snow..., he shivering with cold, and I with apprehension.* (1774)  
 b. *Meanwhile both suffered, she not knowing why.* (1888)



- c. With a new formality and silence she led the way into the hall, *he following*. (1894)
- d. She had turned back to the drawing-room, forgetting the other guests, *he walking beside her*. (1894)
- e. The Benbergs stood by, *he clasping his hands and watching her closely, she wiping a plate round and round with a sodden cloth*. (1894)
- f. *She being down*, I have the placing of the British crown. (1894)

It is noteworthy that accusative pronouns as subject of absolute clauses completely disappeared after the fifteenth century and reappeared in informal English in the nineteenth century (Visser 1972: 1147). There are two possible interpretations: One is that absolute clauses with accusative pronouns as subject existed in spoken English in this period of time; the other is that the use of accusative pronouns in Modern English is the same as that of such expressions as *it is me*, *that's him*, etc. in origination. According to Burn (1766[2010]: 61), despite the fact that 2-29 is not correct in grammar, it is still necessary to speak like that.

2-29 *Him watching*, all the rest went to repose themselves. (1766)

Bain (1904: 273) found that the accusative form corresponding to the dative form in the oldest English is not unusual until recently. For example,

- 2-30a. But you see, *him being here*, in the room—I had to be careful. (1926)
- b. It made me so tired, it did. *Him worshipping the ground she trod and her not caring a snap of the fingers for him*. (1932)
- c. You've had a disappointment, I Know, *her being away*. (1933)

Grammarians have paid full attention to the case of absolute clauses, but they have not reached any agreement so far. In actual language use, absolute clauses can be nominative, as in 2-31, or accusative, as in 2-32.

- 2-31a. Of course he was thirteen years older than her, *she being but twenty*. (BNC\_FIC)
- b. Some twenty thousand people attended to hear him speak, *I being one of them*. (BNC\_MISC)
- c. *He whispering endearments in his lover's ear*, the joy of lying in each other's arms... (BNC\_FIC)
- 2-32a. She was surprised he lived so poorly, *him being a successful man*. (BNC\_FIC)
- b. Boys pouring into the room below, laughing, chattering, *me seeing them through the crack*. (BNC\_FIC)
- c. You asked her if she would like to have the bairn, *her being a minister's wife*. (BNC\_FIC)

## 2.5 Stylistic Effects of Absolute Clauses

Gildersleeve (1888: 137–157) studied the stylistic features of absolute clauses in Greek. Inspired by Gildersleeve, Callaway (1889: 46–51) studied the stylistic features of the Anglo-Saxon absolute clauses. The result shows that the stylistic effect of the absolute clauses in Anglo-Saxon is much the same as that of Greek:

It gave movement to the sentence; it made possible flexibility and compactness. But, owing to the artificial position of the absolute construction in Anglo-Saxon, its stylistic value was reduced to a minimum, was indeed scarcely felt at all. The absolute participle rejected as an instrument of style, the Anglo-Saxon had no adequate substitute therefore. The two commonest substitutes, the dependent sentence and the co-ordinate clause, as used in Anglo-Saxon, became unwieldy and monotonous. Brevity and compactness were impossible; the sentence was slow in movement and somewhat cumbersome. The language stood in sore need of a more flexible instrument for the notation of subordinate conceptions, of such an instrument as the absolute dative seemed capable of becoming but never became.

In the first half of the Middle Ages, absolute clauses were practically non-existent. As Ross (1893: 296) states:

Its prevalence in Chaucer is due largely to Italian influence, in part also to French influence, and the occurrence of the participle in the works of Chaucer's contemporaries and of the fifteenth century writers is to be traced to the same French influence. But the construction was avoided as much as possible, and in its stead the various shifts that were resorted to in Anglo-Saxon were used. The absolute participle here cannot be spoken of as "a norm of style"... During the fifteenth century, however, just before the awakening caused by the Revival of Learning, the absolute participle became, as we have seen, somewhat prevalent and was more felt in the style. (Ross 1893: 296)

In the Modern English period, absolute clauses have assimilated and developed into a style and were used by all writers. In fact, early in the second half of the seventeenth century, absolute clauses became completely natural. They became thoroughly fixed as a style in the eighteenth century. At this time, the appearance of the novel as a style makes the use of absolute clauses very popular.

Absolute clauses are used differently in different styles of works. "In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it belonged largely to didactic and philosophical prose, but now its province is distinctively narration and description...Next to this stand biography, history, and the essay" (Ross 1893: 297–298). In the Anglo-Saxon and medieval English, absolute clauses were nearly used only in prose, rarely in poetry. Chaucer is an exception. This is because Chaucer imitated Boccaccio in whose poems there are a large number of absolute clauses. In Shakespeare's poems absolute clauses are rarely seen, but very popular in the poems of Dryden and the poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Absolute clauses were severely inveighed by grammarians of the nineteenth century. "Even such forms as '*Herod being dead*, the angel warned Joseph' seem rare in the best recent English" (Mcelroy 1885: 105). "The participial construction is a convenient means of condensation... Being, however, a subordinated construction, it needs careful adjustment to the principal assertion on which it depends"

(Genung 1885[2010]: 117). “This construction belongs to literary style rather than to colloquial speech” (Jespersen 1933: 313).

In general, absolute clauses are a good choice which can give sentences life and movement and make sentences free and diverse. “Because nonfinite clauses lack tense markers and modal auxiliaries and frequently lack a subject and a subordinating conjunction, they are valuable as a means of syntactic compression. Certain kinds of nonfinite clause are particularly favoured in written prose” (Quirk et al. 1985: 995). In Modern English, absolute clauses have become an important part of English syntax, forming a particular style. They are used in the works of all writers, both in literary works and in oral conversation, even though mainly confined to some fixed expressions, such as *all things being equal* and *all things considered*. However, Modern grammarians (e.g., Quirk et al. 1985) generally hold that absolute clauses are normal and infrequent, mainly used in formal works and seldom in spoken or informal texts. Jespersen (1949: 62) illustrates the situations of application of absolute clauses through 2-33 as follows:

- 2-33a. He stood, *hat in hand*.
- b. He stood, *his hat in his hand*.
- c. He stood, *with his hat in his hand*.

Obviously, a search of similar phenomenon in corpora reveals that 2-33b is rarely seen, 2-33c is commonly used in spoken language, while 2-33a is relatively common in literary works.

## 2.6 Questions to Be Answered

In spite of the subject–predicate structure, absolute clauses are not sentences in the true sense. They are “so termed because they are not explicitly bound to the matrix clause syntactically” (Quirk et al. 1985: 1120). In other words, absolute clauses do not need to have a conjunction or preposition to express the relationship between absolute clauses and the main clauses. However, as subordinate clauses, the relationship does exist. Although *with* is an explicit conjunctive expression, it cannot make explicit the implicit logical roles of absolute clauses. That is why augmented absolutes belong to the category of absolute construction, and all nonfinite clauses with subject “except for that of the bare infinitive clauses may be introduced by the subordinators *with* and *without*” (ibid.: 1003). However, grammarians have not explained why the absolute clauses in 2-34 cannot be introduced by *with*.

- 2-34 There’ll be these terrible noises coming out of the woods, *cars crashing, elephants screaming*. (COHA\_MAG)

According to Kortmann (1991), the absolute clauses in 2-34 do not function as adverbials, but as appositives; they express the relationship of explanation. Adverbial clauses and appositive clauses are both subordinate clauses, but they are

different from the main clauses in position. Quirk et al. (1985: 1123) distinguish the positions of attributive clauses and adverbial clauses with their main clauses.

- 2-35a. Jason, *told of his son's accident*, immediately phoned the hospital. (Quirk et al. 1985: 1123)
- b. Jason, *who was told of his son's accident*, immediately phoned the hospital. (ibid)

The position of adverbial clauses is arbitrary. They can be positioned initially, medially, and finally, while the most typical position of attributive clauses is immediately after their antecedent. If subjectless nonfinite clauses occur in that position, they may be indistinguishable from the participle clauses functioning as post-modifiers or noun phrases in apposition. See 2-36 below:

- 2-36a. This substance, *discovered almost by accident*, has revolutionized medicine.
- b. This substance, *which was discovered almost by accident*, has revolutionized medicine.
- c. *Discovered almost by accident*, this substance has revolutionized medicine.

The non-finite clause in 2-36a can be interpreted as a post-modifier, as in 2-36b, or as a subjectless non-finite adverbial clause, as in 2-36c. The absolute clauses in 2-34 are positioned after the antecedent and they cannot be positioned before the main clause, hence not adverbial clauses but appositive clauses. The same is true for the absolute clauses in 2-26.

According to the analysis above, it is problematic to define absolute clauses as non-finite and verbless adverbial clauses with an explicit subject but without an introducing subordinator, because being adverbial is not the necessary requirement for constituting absolute clauses. Absolute clauses are not always non-finite or verbless adverbial clauses with an explicit subject; they may also be non-finite or verbless appositive clauses with an explicit subject. Accordingly, at least three questions in research available need to be answered.

- Question One     Since being adverbial is not the necessary requirement for forming absolute clauses, then what are the identification criteria for absolute clauses?
- Question Two     Since appositive clauses with an explicit subject can form absolute clauses, then can other function types of nonfinite or verbless clauses with an explicit subject form absolute clauses?
- Question Three    What are the characteristics of historical, stylistic and case distribution of absolute clauses?

Many grammarians believe that absolute clauses are formal in style and are decreasing in actual use, but the stylistic distributions of absolute clauses or the function types of absolute clauses have not been explored in detail. Scholars distinguish different logical roles played by absolute clauses, but many problems still remain. Deficiencies of current studies are obvious. In SFL, absolute clauses are

almost totally ignored too. Only when discussing non-finite clauses are absolute clauses mentioned, i.e., “there may be an explicit Subject in the dependent clause” (Halliday 1994: 229; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 404). See 2-37 below:

2-37a. John went off by himself, *the rest of us staying behind*.

b. It’s a much bigger house, *for the children to have their own rooms*.

We may simply say that, the non-finite clause in 2-37a, *the rest of us staying behind*, has an explicit subject which does not refer to the subject of the primary clause, hence is an absolute clause; and the nonfinite clause in 2-37b, *for the children to have their own rooms*, has also an explicit subject, but it has an explicit conjunctive preposition, hence is not an absolute clause. This is far from SFL analysis. More importantly, it is not readily applicable to many other instances.

In the next chapter, we will first offer a sketch of systemic functional theory, and then discuss the SFL approach to absolute clauses.

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Functional Perspective  
A Corpus-Based Study

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