

Towards a unified constructional characterisation of the nonfinite periphery: On verbal absolutes and free adjuncts in English

CARLA BOUZADA-JABOIS & JAVIER PÉREZ-GUERRA

University of Vigo, Spain

This paper focuses on two extra-clausal verbal constructions: free adjuncts (FAs) and absolute constructions (ACs), in (1) and (2), respectively:

- (1) *Not feeling at first the Pain of the Stroke*, he wondered what was become of the Ball,
(DODDRIDGE-1747,10.72)
- (2) *Your Barrels being ready*, strow the Bottom with Salt: ...
(DRUMMOND-1718,32.359)

In broad outline, FAs and ACs comply with the defining characteristics of extra-clausal constructions (Haspelmath 1995, Dik 1997: 381, Huddleston and Pullum *et al* 2002: 1356, Kaltenböck *et al* 2011): (i) 'bracketed-off' status, (ii) lack of (full) integration in the syntactic structure of the clause, (iii) mobility, (iv) relatedness to the clause by coreference, and (v) expression of some kind of adverbial subordination.

Despite the controversy as regards the origin of FAs and ACs in English (native Germanic, Latin borrowing or convergent source), our standpoint is strictly synchronic and based on Modern and Present-Day (PDE) English. This allows us to treat FAs and ACs as constructions (*ie* sufficiently frequent compositional form-meaning pairings; see Goldberg 2006), more specifically, as two micro-constructions (involved in grammatical constructionalisation, using Trousdale's 2012 terminology) of a meso-construction which we call 'nonfinite-periphery construction'. The definition of the meso-construction would be:

- Syntax: [(Introducer) Subject_i NP/pronominal//∅ V_{nonfinite}]nonfinite periphery [i] [... X_i ...]_{(orthodox) clause}
(and reversed version)
- Semantics: [nonfinite periphery] R [clause], where R implies (specialised, unorthodox or even multiple) adverbial subordination)

The open slot or parameter [$\pm\emptyset$] in the subject of the nonfinite periphery determines the ascription of the construction to either the FA or the AC type.

In order to connect the results reported by Río-Rey (2002) for Early Modern English (EModE) and Kortmann (1991) for PDE, we have analysed c2,300 ACs and FAs from the Penn Parsed Corpus of Modern British English, a multi-genre parsed corpus of Late Modern English (1700-1914). We hypothesise that FAs and ACs deserve unitary constructional treatment in Modern and PDE, on the basis of:

- (i) the wider range of verbal predicates entering the nonfinite periphery in both constructions from Old English to the present (see van de Pol and Cuyckens 2013: 342-350): present and past participle clauses and infinitives
- (ii) the fixation of the set of introducers in Modern and PDE: a closed list of conjunctions/prepositions in FAs (*by*, *when* and *after* account for approximately 70 percent of the examples) and empty augmentors in ACs (*with* and *without* amount to c60 percent)

- (iii) the comparable proportions of ACs and FAs semantically 'related' to the clause: 99.44 and 89.47 percent, respectively, in LModE
- (iv) the statistically significant increase of sentence-final ACs and FAs
- (v) as a consequence of (iv), the adjustment of the semantic relations, same-time, cause, addition and manner now accounting for more than 70 percent of the ACs and the FAs in the database.

As an extra-clausal construction, the nonfinite-periphery construction is not alien to the process of syntacticisation common to other peripheral strategies (eg left dislocation) in English. This is shown by the decrease in the frequency of the micro-construction which most radically deviates from the SVX pattern, that is, the AC, from 13.3 and 12.4 instances per 10,000 words in, respectively, EModE (Río-Rey 2002) and LModE, to 6 instances in PDE (Kortmann 1991), the frequency of FAs being approximately 30 instances per 10,000 words in the three periods.

References

- Dik, Simon C. 1997. *The theory of Functional Grammar. Part 2: Complex and derived constructions*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Goldberg, Adele E. 2006. *Constructions at work. The nature of generalization in language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 1995. The converb as a cross-linguistically valid category. Eds. Martin Haspelmath and Ekkehard König. *Converbs in cross-linguistic perspective: structure and meaning of adverbial verb forms – adverbial participles and gerunds*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1-55.
- Huddleston, Rodney and Geoffrey K. Pullum et al. 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaltenböck, Gunther, Bern Heine and Tania Kuteva. 2011. On thetical grammar. *Studies in Language* 35: 848-893.
- Kortmann, Bernd. 1991. *Free adjuncts and absolutes in English: problems of control and interpretation*. London: Routledge.
- Río-Rey, Carmen. 2002. Subject control and coreference in Early Modern English free adjuncts and absolutes. *English Language and Linguistics* 6/2: 309-323.
- Trousdale, Graeme. 2012. Grammaticalization, constructions and the grammaticalization in constructions. Eds. Kristin Davidse, Tine Breban, Lieselotte Brems and Tanja Mortelmans. *Grammaticalization and language change*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 167-197.
- van de Pol, Nikki and Hubert Cuyckens. 2013. Gradualness in change in English (augmented) absolutes. Eds. Anna Giacalone Ramat, Caterina Mauri and Piera Molinelli. *Synchrony and diachrony: a dynamic interface*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 341-365.