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Identifying absolute subjects: A systemic functional approach

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Absolute subjects can be either nominative or accusative.
- Absolute subjects can be used in non-finite adverbial clauses, appositive clauses, subject clauses and complement clauses.
- Absolute subjects in different types of non-finite clauses are different in independency.

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ABSTRACT

The absolute subject refers to the subject of absolute nominative clauses in traditional grammar. It can be either nominative or accusative. Corpora data show that the number of nominatives has been decreasing, and that of accusatives, increasing over time. Absolute nominative clauses of appositive, attendant circumstance and clausal adjunct in traditional grammar correspond to the non-finite clauses of elaboration, extension and enhancement with subject in the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics. In addition, absolute subjects can also be used in non-finite clauses of projection and embedding. The relationships between absolute subjects in different non-finite clauses and the primary clauses are different in independence. The tendency to be independent can be embodied in the dimension of the absolute subjects and that of the primary clauses. From either dimension, the tendency to be independent can form a cline. The primary clause based tendency is more in line with the characteristics of absolute subjects.

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1. Introduction

Traditional grammar (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985) defines such constructions consisting of a logical subject and a logical predicate functioning as adverbials as absolute nominative clauses (or absolute clauses). For example:

(1) She shrank a little, *the eyes dilating*. (BNC_FIC)
(2) *Introductions over*, Nicholson motioned for his guests to sit down. (BNC_FIC)

The absolute nominative clause in (1) functions as an attendant circumstance, and that in (2), an adverbial of time. However, some absolute nominative clauses are difficult to be included into any type of adverbials; rather they can be 'understood as explaining some notion ancillary to the meaning of the main clause' (Stump, 1985, p. 335). According to Kortmann (1991, p. 99), most (four out of five) absolute nominative clauses are not adverbial clauses, but appositive or coordinate clauses. For example:

(3) They walked for some time, *Stribling leading, Creed following*. (COHA_FIC)

It can be seen from examples (1), (2) and (3) that it is problematic to define absolute nominative clauses as non-finite or verbless adverbial clauses with subject. This is because being adverbial is not a necessary requirement for forming absolute nominative clauses. They may also be non-finite or verbless appositive clauses. The subjects of absolute nominative clauses can be referred to as absolute subjects. This research intends to investigate the case of absolute subjects and what syntactic types of non-finite clauses may have an absolute subject. For this purpose, we will first carry out a corpus-based quantitative study of the case of the subject of absolute nominative clauses in Section 2. In Section 3 and Section 4, we will discuss in what syntactic types of non-finite clauses absolute subjects can occur and identify absolute subjects within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Section 5 will analyze the absolute subjects' tendency to be independent from the primary clauses under the notion of cline.

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2. Absolute subject: *the Case*

Case is 'a grammatical category used in the analysis of word-classes (or their associated phrases) to identify the syntactic relationship between words in a sentence, through such contrasts as nominative, accusative, etc.' (Crystal, 2008, p. 66) Absolute nominative clauses are so named because the subject of this construction is always nominative, or at least the subject of the English absolute nominative clauses is nominative. For example:

(4) a. They met on the Ponte Trinita, *she seeing and calling out to him first*. (BNC_FIC)
b. His side ended with a total of 311, *he having contributed 162*. (BNC_MISC)
c. *They being agreed*, one may as well go back to the "finger in the wind"! (BNC_FIC)

However, the case of the subject of absolute nominative clauses may also be accusative, some of which are obviously affected by Latin (Curme, 1931; Jespersen, 1937; Visser, 1972). For example:

(5) a. He knows how I feel, *me being an only child*... (BNC_FIC)
b. How rare that was, *him smiling*. (BNC_FIC)
c. I think it's disgusting, *him talking like that*. (BNC_FIC)

The case of absolute nominative clauses has long been controversial. Absolute nominative clauses in different languages use different cases: locative in Sanskrit, genitive in Greek, ablative in Latin, accusative in French, nominative or accusative in Italian, and dative in Norman, etc. In Anglo-Saxon, the normal case of absolute nominative clauses was dative, just as ablative in Latin. From the historical and analogical perspective, absolute nominative clauses in Middle and Modern English should have been the oblique case. However, they were actually nominative. 'About the middle of the fourteenth century the nominative began to replace the dative' (Morris, 1886(2010), p. 103), and this process is completed at about 1420s (Ross, 1893(2012), p. 49). Grammarians in the 19th century give two different interpretations for the change of case of absolute nominative clauses from dative to nominative. One is that the reason why the absolute case changed from dative to nominative is the loss of case inflections, and 'the dative was mistaken for the nominative' (Kellner, 1892, p. 125). Another is 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' (Visser, 1972, p. 1149). According to this interpretation, the subject of absolute nominative clauses should always be nominative, and it 'is erroneous in making it the objective' (Murray, 1808(2011), p. 201). 'A Noun or a Pronoun is put absolute in the nominative, when its case depends on no other word' (Brown, 1861), hence is called 'nominative absolute' (Fowler, 1860, p. 517).

However, due to the impact of the Latin grammar, many grammarians in the 19th century still hold that it is not correct for zero nouns or nominative pronouns to be the subject of absolute nominative clauses, and insist that the zero nouns or nominative pronouns before the absolute nominate clauses are dative or ablative because the loss of inflections will not change one case into another. Despite the use of the nominative forms of the personal pronouns, absolute nominative clauses are 'historically the objective absolute' (Bright, 1890, p.161).

Grammarians in the 20th century (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999; Crystal, 2008) generally accept the fact that absolute nominative clauses are nominative, and sometimes they can also be accusative (e.g. Curme, 1931; Jespersen, 1949; Visser, 1972). Still there are people insisting that absolute nominative clauses 'whose subjects are oblique in case are generally regarded as unacceptable' (Stump, 1985, p. 11). Fowler (1965, P. 4) tries to explain that the absolute nominative clause in (6) should be nominative.

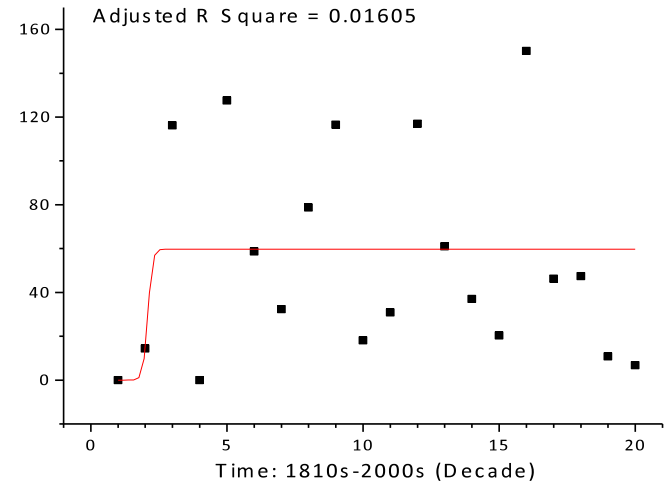

Fig. 1. Fitting the diachronic distribution of nominative subjects of absolute nominative clauses.

(6) There being no evidence against him, and *he (not him) denying the charge*, we could do nothing.

Although traditional grammarians have paid full attention to the case of absolute clauses, they have not reached any agreement yet. To examine the case distribution of the subject of absolute nominative clauses, we extracted 62 occurrences of the case marked first and third personal pronoun subjects in BNC (British National Corpus) with relevant search queries, of which there are 33 nominatives and 29 accusatives. Using similar search queries, we extracted 289 occurrences from COHA (Corpus of Historical American English), of which there are 228 nominatives and 61 accusatives. However, the diachronic distribution of accusatives shows an increasing trend while that of nominatives, decreasing. Language change can be explained by the Piotrowski Law, according to which 'the history of success of a new linguistic phenomenon always begins slowly, then speeds up and finally slows down again' (Turenne, 2010). To test whether the decrease of nominative subjects and the increase of accusative subjects of absolute nominative clauses abide by the Piotrowski Law, we will use the following equation according to which the portion of accusative subjects increases over time:

$$y = \frac{C}{1 + ae^{-bt}}$$

In this equation, y is the number of forms in question at time t which is an independent variable, and a, b, and C are coefficients, among which a is the integration constant and C is the limit of change. The point of analysis is to find how well the curve given by this equation can approximate the empirical data. The goodness of fit is typically measured by the adjusted R Square coefficient, with the perfect fit being the maximum value of 1.

To facilitate comparison, we will transfer the original frequency in each decade into the standard frequency of per 100 million words. See Table 1 and Figs. 1 and 2:

Nominative subjects do not show a trend of increase or decrease. The distribution is homogeneous ($p = 0.63 > 0.05$) and does not abide by the Piotrowski Law ($R = 0.01605$). Accusative subjects, however, show a general trend of increase over time. The distribution is homogeneous ($p = 0.48 > 0.05$) and the degree of fitting is 0.57104, basically abiding by the Piotrowski Law.

Many contemporary grammarians (e.g. Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973; Quirk et al., 1985; Watson, 1976; Haiman and Thompson, 1984; Biber et al., 1999) prefer to use 'absolute clauses' to name absolute nominative clauses to avoid the case problem. To some extent, they accept the fact that the subject of absolute nominative

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