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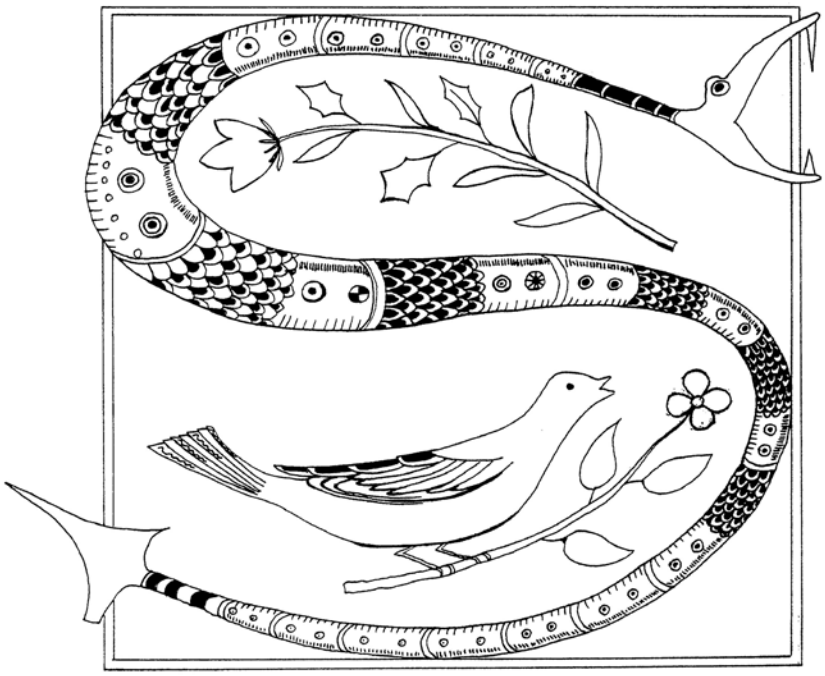

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# ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS IN THE OLD ENGLISH GOSPELS: A CASE-STUDY[1]

*Abstract*

This article pays attention to absolute constructions in the Old English Gospels. Although the origin and formation of such type of structures have been investigated in many ways, there is no general agreement as regards these aspects and only a few contrastive studies on the subject have been done. The article is organized as follows: first, the state of the art is discussed; then a contrastive analysis is carried out, taking as the starting point the Gospels in Latin and comparing them to the West-Saxon and Lindisfarne versions. The data analysed are presented and discussed. Finally, the conclusions drawn from the study are offered. **Keywords:** ablative absolute, dative absolute, West-Saxon Gospels, Lindisfarne glosses, Latin.

*Resumen*

El presente artículo trata las construcciones absolutas en los Evangelios anglosajones. Aunque se ha investigado el origen y formación de este tipo de estructuras, no hay consenso general al respecto y únicamente se han realizado unos cuantos estudios contrastivos sobre la materia. El artículo se organiza como se señala a continuación: tras presentar el estado de la cuestión, se ha llevado a cabo un análisis contrastivo que toma como punto de partida los Evangelios en latín y los compara con las versiones en sajón occidental y en Lindisfarne. A continuación, se presentan y comentan los datos analizados. Finalmente, se ofrecen las conclusiones a las que se ha llegado con el estudio. **Palabras clave:** ablativo absoluto, dativo absoluto, Evangelios anglosajones, glosas de Lindisfarne, latín.

## 1 State of the art

There are several studies on absolute constructions in English (Callaway: 1889; Chase: 1893; Hunter: 1893; Helming: 1930; Liuzza: 2000; Amati, in Liuzza: 2000), albeit only the last two deal with the Old English Gospels. The origin

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and formation of absolute structures have been investigated in many ways but the available literature confirms a lack of consensus.

On the grounds of its origin, in the first place, there is disagreement about whether it is a native structure or, on the contrary, it is a linguistic calque taken from Latin and adopted through translations. In this vein, Callaway points out that some writers such as Grimm or Koch accepted the idea that the absolute construction was a native Germanic expression and therefore native to Old English, whereas other authors, including Hofer and Flamme, thought that the dative absolute in Old English was a Latin borrowing (Callaway: 1889). To this idea, Visser (1984:1261) argues that it was somewhat improbable for translators to include structures which, to a broader extent, were not fully comprehensible to their readers. Callaway (1889: 344-345), in turn, comments that, although it is apparently frequent in closer Anglo-Saxon translations from Latin, it is less frequent in less literal ones, and practically unknown in independent literature. In general, it is agreed that absolute constructions are most common in prose texts based on the original Latin ones (Mitchell 1998: 921).

As for its form, Callaway (1889: 317) suggests that the absolute participle is easily distinguished from the appositive participle insofar as the latter has no subject of its own (agent or patient), but it agrees with the subject of the verb or with any other word in government. Likewise, Kellner (in Mitchell 1998: 914) points out that the absolute construction is one of the several constructions which imply detachment from the main sentence. He also remarks that this construction was originally a case used in a free way which at first implied an instrumental meaning, and then the grades of cause and time were included. According to Visser (1984: 1259), the person or object denoted by the (pro)noun forming a syntactic unit with the past participle is not identical with the person or object denoted by the subject of the main syntactic unit. Matsunami (in

Mitchell 1998: 915) also holds this view and argues that a participle is absolute when its subject is grammatically independent from the rest of the sentence.

In Contemporary English, the structure is found with non-finite and verbless adverbial clauses which have an overt subject but are not introduced by a subordinator nor are they the complement of a preposition. They are designated *absolute* clauses because they are not explicitly bound to the matrix clause syntactically. Absolute clauses may be *-ing*, *-ed*, or verbless clauses, but not infinitive clauses. They tend to be formal and infrequent (Quirk *et al*. 1985: 1120). These authors provide the following examples for this type of clause (in italics): "*No further discussion arising*, the meeting was brought to a close"; "*Lunch finished*, the guests retired to the lounge". It has also been pointed out that absolute clauses do not share any element with the main clause, even on a semantic level (Quirk *et al*. 1972: 760). This last view stands in opposition to those expressed by Callaway (1889: 317) when he remarks that the "clause stands in close relationship to the rest of the sentence" and by Metlen (1938: 631) who, in spite of refusing any grammatical connection, allows for a logical one.

This being the state of the art, the definition of a dative absolute construction according to the criteria considered in the analysis will be proposed in the next section. Section 2 covers the definition, the objectives and the methodology of the study; in section 3 the analysis is carried out; the conclusions are offered in section 4, and finally the references are included.

## 2 Definition, objectives and methodology

From the perspective employed in this study, the dative absolute construction is composed of a participle in the dative case followed by a (pro)noun or (pro)nouns in the same case functioning as the subject, being both independent elements from the rest of the sentence. If the participle and the noun are governed by a preposition, then such a construction is not considered to be a proper dative absolute construction.

The authors mentioned above coincide in emphasizing the independence of the construction with respect to the main sentence. This line has also been chosen for the analysis of the examples. See, for instance, some cases following the morpho-syntactic criteria mentioned above. For the sake of clarity, Latin, Old English and Contemporary English renderings are shown (following that order).

(1) *ianuis clausis*
*belocenum duron*
the doors were locked[2] (Jn, XX, 26)

(2) *procurante pontio pilato*
*begymendum þam pontiscan pilate*
When Pontius Pilate was governor (Lk, III, 1)

(3) *fracto alabastro*
*tobrocenum sealfboxe*
[she] broke the jar (Mk, XIV, 3)

(4) *conuentione* autem *facta*
*gewordenre gecwydrædene*
[he] agreed (Mt, XX, 2)

[2] The translations provided in Contemporary English are taken from the Bible's New International Version as found in the website <http://www.biblegateway.com> [15 November 2006].

Some examples, however, have been rejected in the light of the case in which they appear. Accordingly, the following instance in the nominative case is not considered an absolute construction because the subject of the participle is the same as that of the main sentence (*tu*, elided in Latin, and *þu* in Old English):

(5) ne uidearis hominibus *ieiunans*
Þæt *þu ne sy gesewen* fram mannum *fæstende*
So that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting (Mt, VI, 18)

For the same reason, the ensuing two examples have been rejected. Example (6) in the accusative case is not considered a construction of this type, as *frumcennedan*, apart from its adjectival function, agrees with *sunu,* which is the direct object of *cende*; example (7) in the genitive case is also rejected because it forms part of the subject:

(6) peperit *filium suum primogenitum*
Heo cende hyre *frumcennedan sunu*
she gave birth to a son (Mt, I, 25)
(7) flumina de uentre eius fluent *aquae uiuae*
*lybbendes wætres* flod flowaþ of his inoðe
streams of living water will flow from within him (Jn, VII, 38)

The present study, which is mainly based on the editions of the Old English Gospels done by Skeat (1871–1887) and Liuzza (1994), focuses on the analysis of the West-Saxon version because it was the standard dialect of the period. However, for complementary purposes the Lindisfarne versions of each Gospel are also taken into consideration.

In relation to this, the aim of the study will be to widen on the translator's attitude when dealing with these structures, that is to say, whether he has followed the Latin text closely by reproducing

the absolute constructions or, on the other hand, he has used them even though they did not appear in the original text. This contrastive methodology would be helpful inasmuch as it would validate the hypothesis of the relevance of the construction in Germanic.

The contrastive approach has been followed since studies of this kind are scarce. The original Latin text was firstly taken for comparison with the West-Saxon version in order to find out how the scribe interprets absolute constructions from Latin. It is important to take into account that, from a morphological perspective, the Latin ablative absolute does not correspond with the West-Saxon counterpart, where the dative case is used.

Once the definition of absolute constructions and the purpose of the study have been explained, the chronological stages of the research will be described. First, the electronic corpus (Moreno Olalla: 1999; Esteban Segura: 2004; Obegi Gallardo: 2004; Marqués Aguado: 2005) under analysis was annotated by means of *MAOET* (*Morphological Analyser of Old English Texts*) (Miranda García *et al*. 2000) so that it would allow to retrieve the morpho-syntactic information automatically with the *Old English Concordancer* (Miranda García *et al*. 2006), a programme for the handling of Old English text corpora. Moreover, this annotation contained the lemmatization, the morphological tags, the meanings, the marks of punctuation, and the references. As the *OEC* is both word and lemma-based, it is able to solve any kind of query, regardless of its complexity, by means of Boolean filters.

In a further stage, the total number of occurrences of present and past participles in the West-Saxon Gospels was obtained from the tagged corpus. Obviously, not all of them fitted into the concept of absolute datives; therefore, some examples had to be rejected.

Subsequently, the output thus generated was saved with an Excel file format, so that most of the instances could be easily classified.

In this way, more than half of the instances were automatically sorted, the remaining ones having to be manually classified. In addition, some detailed information could also be added such as the type of subjects (nominal/pronominal) or of verbs (passive/active, transitive/intransitive...), etc. More importantly, the patterns when looking for specific words and a particular context could be selected, for example, a verb preceded by a noun in nominative case and followed by an adverb and the latter followed by a prepositional phrase.

## 3 Analysis

In this section the elements which make up the absolute construction are analysed, the casuistry exposed and, finally, their order considered. Apart from this, the Lindisfarne version is examined and the evolution of the structure in the different periods of the English language considered.

### *3.1 Composition*

The West-Saxon dative absolute construction consists of a participle and its corresponding subject (indicated in the examples by means of italics), whose structure shows different variants as the following:

1. One-word noun phrase/pronoun in dative:

(8) gebigedum *cneowum*
and begged him on *his knees* (Mk, I, 40)

(9) *þysum* gecwedenum
After Jesus had said *this* (Lk, XIX, 28)

In (9), the subject of the participle is a pronoun whereas in (8) a one-word noun (phrase) is employed.

2. Two-word noun phrase (determiner + noun) in dative:

(10) *twam fixum* onfangenum
He also divided *the two fish* (Mk, VI, 41)

3. Three-word noun phrase (determiner + noun/adjective + proper noun) in dative:

(11) begymendum *þam pontiscan pilate*
When *Pontius Pilate* was governor (Lk, III, 1)

No occurrence of a one-word noun phrase consisting only of a proper noun has been attested. As for the participles, the absolute construction may consist of a present/past participle which implies an agent/patient subject respectively. In the examples of present participle (12), (13) and past participle (14), (15), the Latin version appears first and then the Old English one (the subject appears in italics):

(12) *eo* cogitante
*him* ðencendum
But after he had considered *this* (Mt, I, 20)
(13) *eo* loquente
*him* sprecendum
While *he* was still speaking (Mt, XVII, 5)
(14) facto *sabbato*
gewordenum *restedæge*
When *the Sabbath* came (Mk, VI, 2)
(15) ruptis *vinculis*
toborstenum *bendum*
He had broken *his chains* (Lk, VIII, 29)

### *3.2 Count and casuistry*

The number of absolute ablatives in Latin and datives in Old English compiled by Liuzza (2000) and that of absolute datives selected for this study are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. *Absolute constructions and their normalized frequency (Biber 1998: 14-15)*

| *Gospel** | John | Luke | Mark | Matthew |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Latin* (Liuzza) | 12 | 69 | 49 | 77 |
| *Old English* (Liuzza) | 1 | 27 | 23 | 15 |
| Normalized frequency ($10^5$) with respect to running words | 5.85 | 129.19 | 186.23 | 74.14 |
| *Old English* (Our study) | 1 | 23 | 19 | 14 |
| Normalized frequency ($10^5$) with respect to running words | 5.85 | 109.58 | 153.84 | 69.20 |
| *Old English* (Our study) | 1 | 23 | 19 | 14 |
| Normalized frequency ($10^5$) with respect to verses† | 11.36 | 202.46 | 280.64 | 130.84 |

It is worth commenting the fact that even in Latin there are differences as John's Gospel is longer than Mark's but it has only a quarter of the absolute constructions. Although Luke's and Matthew's Gospels have more or less the same number of words, the total number of absolute constructions varies greatly. By contrast, Mark's and Luke's Gospels show a similar amount of absolute datives, notwithstanding the different size of their vocabulary, this representing a stylistic feature which could point out to a different authorship.

The number of absolute datives in Old English which are consistent to the definition suggested has been reduced from that of

Liuzza. In fact, several of the instances proposed by him have been rejected as they do not fit into the criteria selected for the study. Several examples would be:

(16) sedentibus in regione
sittendum on earde
those living in the land (Mt, IV, 16).

In this case, there is not an explicit subject in dative.

(17) *domino* cooperante
*drihtne* mid wyrcendum
and the Lord worked (Mk, XVI, 20).

Here, the occurrence of the preposition *mid* invalidates the construction as a dative absolute one, unless *mid* is taken as verbal prefix of *wyrcendum*. As for the casuistry of absolute constructions in West-Saxon, the following cases have been found:

1. A construction of ablative absolute in Latin is rendered with a dative absolute construction in West-Saxon:

(18) relicta *ciuitate nazareth*
forlætenre *þære ceastre nazareth*
Leaving *Nazareth* (Mt, IV, 13)
(19) clauso *ostio tuo*
*þinre dura* belocenre
when you [...] close *the door* (Mt, VI, 6)
(20) ut adryfenum *þam deofle*
eiecto *daemone*
when *the demon* was driven out (Mt, IX, 33)
(21) acceptis *quinque panibus et duobus piscibus*
*fif hlafum and twam fixum* onfangenum
Taking *the five loaves and the two fish* (Mk, VI, 41)

(22) *hymno* dicto
gecwedenum *lofe*
when they had sung *a hymn* (Mk, XIV, 26)
(23) consummatis-que *diebus*
gefylledum *dagum*
After *the Feast* was over (Lk, II, 43)

2. The ablative absolute construction in Latin is not translated with a dative absolute; thus, instead of finding a dative absolute in Old English, sentences expressing time with *þa* (24, 25), *þonne* (26), finite-verb constructions (27) or prepositional phrases (28) are used.

(24) nauigantibus autem *illis*
Þa *hig* reowun
As *they* sailed (Lk, VIII, 23)
(25) audito *herodes*
Þa *herodes* þæt gehyrde
But when *Herod* heard this (Mk, VI, 16)
(26) te autem faciente *elemosynam*
þonne þu þine *ælmessan* do
But when you give to the needy (Mt, VI, 3)
(27) inclinato *capite*
he ahylde *his heafod*
he bowed *his head* (Jn, XIX, 30)
(28) *mane* autem *iam* facto
Witodlice *on ærnemergen*
*Early in the morning* (Jn, XXI, 4)

3. There is one instance of an absolute construction in West-Saxon but not in Latin.

(29) exiens *Iesus*

*þam hælende* utgangendum
*Jesus* went out (Mt, XIII, 1)

### *3.3 Word order*

With regards to the order of elements in the Latin absolute construction, the subject can precede (30, 31) or follow (32, 33) the participle as in the following instances. The subject, as in the previous examples, is indicated by means of italics.

(30) *quo* cognito iesus ait illis
þa se hælend *þæt* wiste he cwæð
Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them (Mk, VIII, 17)

(31) *conventione* facta
gewordene *gecwydrædene*
He agreed (Mt, XX, 2)

(32) egressis autem *illis*
Ða *hig* wæron soþlice ut agane
While they were going out (Mt, IX, 32)

(33) et timuerunt intrantibus *illis*
and hi ondredon *him* gangende
and they were afraid as they entered (Lk, IX, 34)

As a whole, the data in Latin point to the direction that the order "subject + participle" is somewhat more common than the order "participle + subject" but the distribution is not balanced if each Gospel is considered separately. The former is more frequent in Mark and John, whereas the latter is more common in Matthew, and both are balanced in Luke. The same tendency is observed in West-Saxon as the order "subject + participle" predominates in Luke, Mark and Matthew. The conclusion that can be drawn is directly linked to the opposite trends found.

Table 2. *Word order*

| Participle + Subject | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *John* | *Luke* | *Mark* | *Matthew* |
| *Latin* | 4 (12) | 36 (69) | 22 (49) | 40 (77) |
| *West-Saxon* | 1 (1) | 4 (23) | 8 (19) | 6 (14) |

### *3.4 The Lindisfarne version of the Holy Gospels*

As pointed out in the introduction, some authors consider that these constructions are more frequent in closer translations than in less literal ones. For this reason, an analysis of the Lindisfarne glosses to the Old English Gospels has been carried out. Concerning the casuistry, as with that already presented for West-Saxon, Latin has been taken as the starting point. Thus, a construction of ablative absolute in Latin is rendered in the glosses with:

1. A dative absolute construction:

(34) *uento magno* flante
*winde miclum* forblauene
A *strong wind* was blowing (Jn, VI, 18)

(35) eleuatis *manibus*
ahefenum *hondum*
he lifted up *his hands* (Lk, XXIV, 50)

2. A finite verb:

(36) orto iam *sole*
was arisen *gee sunna*
just after *sun*rise (Mk, XVI, 2)

(37) auditis *his* discipuli
weron gehered *ðas word* ða ðegnas

When the disciples heard *this* (Mt, XIX, 25)

3. Both a dative absolute and a finite-verb construction:

(38) transeunte *iesu*
geongende + ða ge-eode *ðe hælend*
As *Jesus* went on (Mt, IX, 27)

(39) proficiscende *eo*
miđ ðy foerde *he* + *hine* færende
[As *Jesus* and his disciples] [...] were leaving (Mk, X, 46)

In Table 3, the number of absolute constructions in Latin, West-Saxon and the Lindisfarne glosses for each Gospel is provided, as well as the number of constructions employed in West-Saxon and the glosses instead of the absolute ones.

Table 3. *Absolute constructions in the Gospels and their translations in the West-Saxon and Lindisfarne versions*

| | John | | | Luke | | | Mark | | | Matthew | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Lat*‡ | *WS* | *LG* | *Lat* | *WS* | *LG* | *Lat* | *WS* | *LG* | *Lat* | *WS* | *LG* |
| *AA* | 12 | | | 69 | | | 49 | | | 77 | | |
| *DA* | | 1 | 8 | | 23 | 26 | | 19 | 15 | | 14 | 36 |
| *FVC* | | 4 | 2 | | 22 | 38 | | 16 | 30 | | 32 | 29 |
| *D* | | | 2 | | | 2 | | | 4 | | | 12 |
| *PP* | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | | | |
| *þa* | | 6 | | | 20 | 1 | | 12 | | | 30 | |
| *þænne* | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | |
| *þar* | | | | | 1 | | | 1 | | | | |
| *þonne* | | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | 1 | |

It could be inferred that the glosses (since they represent a close or literal translation) would contain more absolute constructions than the West-Saxon version. The results of the analysis do confirm this initial hypothesis. Thus, the only Gospel which has less absolute constructions in the Lindisfarne version is the one according to Saint Mark, as opposed to the other three which have a higher count of these constructions in the glosses.

### *3.5 Evolution*

The use of this type of construction in subsequent stages of the English language has been briefly examined by looking at its evolution in the Middle English version (Wycliff Bible), the Modern English one (King James' Bible) and, finally, in Contemporary English. The Gospel according to Saint Luke has been selected for that purpose for two main reasons; the first of these has to do with the fact that this Gospel contains a higher number of absolute constructions in West-Saxon, whereas the second reason has a more practical motivation, as there was the possibility of consulting a volume with the aforesaid four versions together.[3] The number of absolute constructions is provided in Latin, West-Saxon, the Lindisfarne glosses, Middle English, Modern English and Contemporary English in the following table.

Table 4. *Evolution of absolute constructions in the Gospel according to Saint Luke*

| Luke | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Latin* | *West-Saxon* | *Lindisfarne gloss* | *Mid. E.* | *Mod. E.* | *Cont. E.* |
| 69 | 23 | 26 | 20 | 6 | 0 |

[3] This volume was downloaded from <http://138.87.135.33/bibl-eng/luke8.htm> [6 May 1998].

The data compiled suggest that dative absolute constructions in the Holy Gospels become less frequent from the Modern English period onwards, being their presence non-existent in Present-Day English.

## 4 Conclusions

From the analysis carried out in this study, different possibilities were available for the scribe when translating these structures into Old English. On the one hand, he could strictly follow the Latin text, conveying the ablative absolute by means of a dative absolute, thus showing more fidelity to the original text or, on the other hand, he could adapt the Latin text and express the absolute construction in other ways by means of sentences with *þa*, *þonne*, etc., or with finite verbs, among many other choices. The data show that the translation of the ablative absolute by a dative absolute in West-Saxon does not reach fifty per cent in any of the Gospels and, sometimes, not even ten per cent.

Secondly, there are important differences as far as the distribution of absolute constructions in each Gospel is concerned, which may indicate a multiple authorship for the Gospels. In order to corroborate this hypothesis, a further study on authorship attribution would be required.

Moreover, the pronominal character of the subject in the absolute constructions in Latin seems to have had an influence on its West-Saxon counterparts, which have favoured other variants, such as adverbial clauses of time or coordinated sentences. Nevertheless, as it has been previously suggested, dative absolute constructions stand out by the contradiction regarding their origin and conception. This study has a preliminary character since a bigger corpus would be needed in order to obtain more reliability and corroborate the data obtained.

Finally, the study of the absolute datives in the Gospel according to Luke in the Middle English version (Wycliff), in Modern English (King James) and in Contemporary English shows that the English language favours the alternative constructions mentioned above (adverbial, coordinated, etc.).

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ENDNOTES

* The number of words for each Gospel is the following: John, 17,076; Luke, 20,989; Mark, 12,350; Matthew, 20,230.

† Since normalization with clauses or sentences could be ambiguous owing to punctuation, it has been done taking into account the number of verses.

‡ *Lat*: Latin; *WS*: West-Saxon; *LG*: Lindisfarne glosses. *AA*: Ablative absolute; *DA*: Dative absolute; *FVC*: Finite-verb construction; *D*: Double; *PP*: prepositional phrase.

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