1

THE AC SO FAR

1.1 Why do we need another study of absolute constructions?

Most Western philologists first encounter absolute constructions (ACs) when they learn Latin.[1] At some point after the introduction of the conjunct participle, an apparently related participle construction is mentioned: a conjunct participle always agrees with its head. Yet if the head of the participle is not included in the main clause, both the participle and its head will stand in the ablative. They are to be translated as a finite subordinate clause, with the head noun as subject and the participle as verb.

> ***his confectis rebus conventibusque peractis*** *in citiorem Galliam revertitur.*
>
> 'When these matters were settled and the assizes conducted, he returned to Hither Gaul.' (Caes. *Gal.* 5.2.1)

Often, teachers of Greek who know that their students have already studied Latin will preface their explanation of the genitive absolute (GA) with the words that it is 'just like' the ablative absolute (AA) in Latin, but standing in a different case.

> ταῦτα εἰπόντος τοῦ κήρυκος λέγεται Κῦρον ἐπειρέσθαι τοὺς παρεόντας . . .
>
> '**When the herald had proclaimed this**, Cyrus is said to have asked those who were present . . .' (Hdt. 1.153)

The classes in which most of us are introduced to Latin and Greek (and thus to ACs) aim at allowing us to translate texts written in these old languages into the modern language that we speak ourselves. In many cases, there is only a small difference between understanding what a language is saying and understanding how

[1] See Sluiter 2000 on how the Latin ablative absolute has been taught throughout the centuries.

to translate this into our own language. At least if one's mother tongue is a member of the Indo-European family, there will be great overlap between the categories in its grammar and those in the grammar of Latin or Greek. Looking at finite verb forms, for example, we can say that there is a straightforward functional correspondence between the personal ending *-o* in forms such Latin *audio* and the personal pronoun *I* in forms such as English *I listen*: each marks a verb as a first person singular. Yet in ACs, there is no such one-to-one correspondence: their most idiomatic translation into e.g. English – often: finite subordinate clauses – is far removed from how they actually function.

Scholarly research on ACs has been conducted for about 200 years.[2] Yet too much of it appears to have been influenced by how Western academics first encounter ACs. Cicero and Caesar are usually read long before Plautus and Terence. Thus, our view of a 'typical' Latin AA actually focuses on a form of the construction in the Classical language that has likely been influenced by literary Greek. Statements on 'the nature of ACs' tend to falsely generalise across time periods and languages. Secondly, ACs are usually looked at in isolation (perhaps an unconscious effect of how the meaning of the word 'absolute' is perceived). Grammatically very similar phenomena such as the *ab urbe condita* construction (AUC), for example, are rarely discussed in studies of ACs,[3] and there is no systematic discussion of the two kinds of construction side by side. This has the effect that many scholars working on ACs never state what their definition of 'absolute' is, or in other words: what they see as the defining feature that makes absolute constructions absolute and that delineates them from other expressions. Instead of definitions, we find descriptions, many of which refer to how ACs are to be translated. Other descriptions are insufficient because they could equally well be applied to various other

[2] The oldest treatise I am aware of is Eduard Wentzel's 1828 dissertation *De genetivis et dativis linguae Graecae, quos absolutos vocant*. He in turn mentions others which I have not been able to identify.

[3] The exceptions here are Pinkster 1990: 132 (who mentions the AA in a discussion of the AUC, or rather of the 'dominant participle construction', a category that includes AA and AUC), Menge 2000: 717–18 and Ziegler 2002, who also refers to Pinkster. Bauer, who discusses AUCs at 2000: 236–48, briefly mentions them in her discussion of ACs at 2000: 277.

adverbial expressions. The definitions that we do find (such as Keydana 1997: 9–26)[4] may be seen as relying too heavily on the strongly verbal features of ACs that we find mainly in one language, namely Greek, which happens to have the furthest developed ACs from its earliest literary attestations on.[5] All these factors – a missing precise definition, insufficient attention to the differences between ACs in the single languages, lack of consideration of the environment of ACs – have furthermore impeded speculation about the diachronic question of how these constructions came to be.

It is the aim of this present study to arrive at a definition of ACs that applies across the Indo-European languages in which these constructions occur and that, in spite of the number of borderline cases in all languages involved, allows us to say clearly whether a specific expression is absolute or not. On the basis of this definition and the constructions it applies to, an attempt at reconstructing the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) origin of ACs will be made. This reconstruction will involve two steps: identifying first the source in the mother language from which ACs originally came to be, and then the ways by which they subsequently developed into the single daughter languages. When structurally similar linguistic phenomena occur in related languages, comparative philologists ascribe this to a shared origin in the language from which the languages in question developed. For ACs, a straightforward reconstruction to PIE is not possible as the cases in which they are attested (most notably the genitive in Greek, the ablative in Latin and the locative in Sanskrit) cannot be led back to one case in PIE. Most past studies have thus not offered a reconstruction of the exact PIE source of ACs. This study will attempt to do just that.

[4] 'Descriptive thing function', 'formally speaking, a participial nominalising operation' ('[D]eskriptive Dingfunktion', 'formal eine partizipiale Nominalisierungsoperation', 1997: 21).

[5] Cf. Keydana's justification of his approach: 'The following description is based on the intuitively perceptible link between ACs and independent finite sentences. There apparently is a direct connection between ACs and sentences as the former contain more or less the same constituents as the latter.' ('Die folgende Beschreibung geht von dem intuitiv wahrnehmbaren Zusammenhang zwischen ABS und unabhängigen finiten Sätzen aus. ABS stehen offenbar in einem direkten Zusammenhang mit Sätzen, denn sie enthalten in mehr oder minder großem Umfang dieselben Konstituenten wie diese', 1997: 9).

After an overview of the prior research on this subject (Chapter 1), one chapter each will outline the grammatical situation of ACs in the three old Indo-European languages in which they are attested without doubt and in numbers that allow any meaningful study: Greek, Latin and Sanskrit (Chapters 2–4). Chapter 5 will then attempt to combine the information and discussions presented in the previous three chapters and offer the reconstruction outlined above.

1.2 Prior research on ACs

The corpus of work on ACs is extensive,[6] and several authors have prefaced their work with an overview of research past.[7] Rather than repeat what they have done, I shall focus only on those elements which seem key to further advancing our understanding of ACs. Specifically, these are (a) our understanding of the meaning of the term 'absolute', (b) the definition of what makes ACs absolute, (c) theories on the points from which and means by which ACs developed and finally (d) the syntactic environment of ACs. Whenever a particular treatise merits it, I shall discuss it on its own in greater detail.

1.2.a The history of the term 'absolute'

The definition of ACs and our understanding of the term 'absolute' are two different matters, and yet the former often seems affected by the latter.[8] A look at the history of this technical term thus seems merited.

To my knowledge, past discussions of ACs have not paid attention to the first uses of *absolute* as a grammatical *terminus technicus*. Yet this early history is rather interesting. In late antiquity, the term ἀπολελυμένος was used by Dionysius Thrax (e.g. at 44.6) and Apollonius Dyscolus (e.g. at *Syntax* 97.20). Its Latin translation *absolutus* is found in Priscian (e.g. at 2.062: 'Absolutum est quod per se intellegitur et non eget alterius

[6] See Appendix 1 for a list of prior discussions in reference works, monographs and articles.
[7] See most recently e.g. Holland 1986, Keydana 1997 or Maiocco 2005.
[8] This is discussed e.g. at Keydana 1997: 1–8 or Sluiter 2000 *passim*.

coniunctione.').[9] It is used to denote e.g. intransitive as opposed to transitive verbs, cases such as nominative and vocative, or primary, i.e. non-derived adjectives (such as ἀγαθός). It thus is a rather general term meaning 'not linked' or 'not requiring a link' (for understanding) in very general syntactic and etymological terms.

The next attestations of the term *absolutus* that we find are discussed by Keydana (1997), Sluiter (2000) and Maiocco (2005). By the High Middle Ages, the term *absolutus* had been applied to the constructions that are still called *absolute* today. The earliest work in which this term is attested in the modern meaning is Alberic of Montecassino's eleventh-century *De dictamine*.[10] Contrary to what Maiocco says, we do not actually know whether this term was chosen 'with reference to [the construction's] syntactic looseness' (2005: 8), or with any other aspect of unconnectedness in mind.[11] For Alberic, whose *De dictamine* is a manual on good written style, the main condition for using an AA is a difference in subjects between the matrix clause and the participle.[12]

In other words: the term *absolutus* was not originally employed in the way in which we use it now, and we do not know for certain why it came to be used in this way later. As Keydana (1997: 6) points out, Alberic's words show that the name 'ablativus absolutus' must already have been a fixed technical term in his times. We thus know neither who first used *absolutus* in the modern sense, nor his motivations for doing so. Yet authors such as Hirt (1937: 92) seem to imply that we know what 'absolute' means: 'A noun stands linked to a participle without there being the possibility of construing it as dependent on a verb, *thus apparently absolute* [italics mine]'.[13] As Serbat (1979: 341) rightly points out, there seems

[9] A detailed list of attestations can be found at García Ramón and Gutiérrez Galindo 2001 *s.v.* '*absolut-*'. For editions of Dionysius Thrax and Apollonius Dyscolus, see Uhlig 1883 and Schneider and Uhlig 1873–1910, respectively.

[10] Sluiter 2000: 394–5.

[11] After all, these expressions are no more 'syntactically loose' than other adverbial expressions of time.

[12] 'Ablativus absolutus presentis [sic] participii fiet, cum eiusdem temporis sed diversarum personarum vel numerorum verba sine retransitione ponuntur: *ego lego tu canis*: *me legente tu canis*, vel *te canente ego lego*'; text as quoted by Scaglione 1970: 136–7.

[13] 'Es steht ein Nomen mit einem Partizipium verbunden, ohne daß dieses von einem Verbum abhängig ware, scheinbar also absolut.'

to be a body of opinion that he refers to as a 'grammatical vulgate', which includes elements such as 'absolute' in the meaning of 'not attaching itself grammatically to the rest of the phrase'.[14] On this and similar received beliefs he comments that 'there is basically not a single term which cannot be attacked with legitimate suspicion. We here find unquestioned old dogmatic doctrines concerning ancient problems that are still unsolved.'[15]

Chapters 2–4 of this book will demonstrate why the term 'absolute' is misleading: taken in its literal and general meaning of *unconnected*, *loosened* or *loose,* or also as 'not attaching itself grammatically to the rest of the phrase', ACs are no more *absolute* than many other adverbial expressions of time or, with certain limitations, space (such as 'on Sundays, we go to the beach' or 'on a sinking ship, there are no atheists'). As the term is so memorable and has become so generally employed, it would be foolish to suggest altering it to something more correctly descriptive.[16] Nevertheless, it has to be stressed that we must not let it mislead us into making any assumptions about the grammatical nature of these 'absolute' constructions. It may seem excessive to discuss this issue at such length here, yet in the past, the term has led quite a number of scholars to attempts at identifying some way by which these constructions 'loosened' themselves out of some grammatical bond. We now know that we do not know the meaning of *absolute*, and thus should not allow ourselves to be influenced by what we may *assume* it might mean. Nor, having admitted our ignorance, should we feel that we do not need to define the object of our study.

[14] '"Absolu" est compris comme "ne se rattachant pas grammaticalement au reste de la phrase".'

[15] 'Il n'y a pour ainsi dire aucun terme qui ne puisse être frappé de suspicion légitime. On y décèle de vieux postulats dogmatiques, non remis de question, de très anciens problèmes toujours en suspens.' This *vulgate grammaticale* also includes the following: '1) une sorte d'unitarisme simplificateur: on met sur le même plan *partibus factis* et *Cicerone consule*; pour ce dernier il suffirait de sous-entendre un scolastique *ente*; 2) le qualificatif essentiel: "absolu" est compris comme "ne se rattachant pas grammaticalement au reste de la phrase"; 3) l'ablatif absolu est *toujours* défini comme l'équivalent d'une subordonnée circonstantielle, et, en premier lieu, d'une subordonnée de temps; 4) l'ablatif absolu ne doit pas s'employer lorsque son sujet est repris par un terme quelconque de la proposition régissante.'

[16] On this point, cf. also Costello 1982: 242–3.

1.2.b The definition of ACs

1.2.b.i No definition

The majority of scholars writing on ACs do not provide any definition or description of how they employ the term *absolute*.[17] This may seem understandable – after all, most Classical philologists are likely to have a good idea of what ACs are. Yet whenever either examples or a description (rather than a definition) are provided, it becomes clear that different scholars have different criteria for what qualifies as an AC, and a number give examples that cannot be considered absolute in any meaningful use of the word. Coleman (1989: 353), for example, gives no definition but lists as examples '*urbe capta*, *sole oriente*, and perhaps *Romulo rege*', making the reader wonder why he questions the absolute nature of the nominal AA *Romulo rege*. This question certainly is justified, but it would nevertheless be helpful to be told explicitly which criterion Coleman uses to differentiate between absolute and non-absolute expressions. In relation to the Sanskrit locative absolute (LA), one finds non-absolute examples being used to introduce the construction particularly frequently; see Brugmann (1903: 609–10)[18] and, all using the same (and, as we will see in Section 4.4, non-absolute) Sanskrit example, Delbrück (1888: 387), Lehmann (1974: 211) and Frauzel (1998:

[17] Draeger 1881 (instead, he offers a detailed discussion of large numbers of examples), Bennett 1910 and 1914, de Saussure 1881 (he provides an excellent description of the Sanskrit GA, giving numerous examples over several pages, but does not offer a definition as such; rather he seems to take for granted that we know what we mean when we speak of an AC), Wackernagel 1926: 292–4, Kunst 1923 (on p. 29, he only describes the AC as a 'loosely attached participle construction' ('locker angegliederte Partizipialkonstruktion')), Flinck-Linkomies 1929, Mugler 1936, Tarelli 1938, Wifstrand 1956, Thesleff 1958 (to be fair, he reacts to Kunst 1923, and may have felt it odd to define the common object of their research at that rather late stage), Holland 1986, Krisch 1988, Rosén 1988, Coleman 1989, Vasilaros 1993 and Menge 1999.

[18] He lists *sám asmin jā́yamāne āsata* (together he$_{\text{Loc.Sg}}$ being-born$_{\text{Loc.Sg}}$ sit$_{\text{3rd.Pl.Impf}}$) (*RV* 10.95.7), which he translates as 'als er geboren wurde, saßen sie dabei' ('as he was born, they were sitting nearby'). In almost all its usages, the verb √*ās* 'to sit' requires a locative complement indicating where someone is sitting, and the notion of sitting *at* or *near* something is fully included in the scope of the Sanskrit locative. Hence we can translate this line simply as 'they sat together next to/near him as he was being born', seeing *asmin jā́yamāne* (he$_{\text{Loc.Sg}}$ being-born$_{\text{Loc.Sg}}$) as a regular spatial locative. See Section 4.4 on this state of affairs.

105).[19] Again, this indicates that there is a gap in our understanding and that many are unaware of this gap.

1.2.b.ii Description instead of definition

Most other works on ACs offer a description that focuses on usually one, sometimes several noticeable features of these constructions. For the purposes of the works that fall into this category, this approach is usually sufficient. Grammars and reference works aim to explain how to recognise and translate ACs into our modern languages. Many articles are interested only in the ACs in one particular language (and as we shall see, the Greek GA in particular is a relatively clear-cut phenomenon that, for the most part, is easy to define, while the situation in Latin and Sanskrit is much less straightforward). Yet for our present goal – to arrive at a definition of ACs that works across languages and that allows us to understand borderline or unusual cases – more detailed work on the single languages, especially their oldest attested stages, and a more careful comparison of material between languages is required. Yet first we need to look at the different features suggested so far.

A large group of works on ACs explains what these constructions are by naming first their constituents in the original languages (usually a participle and a (pro)noun) and then their equivalent in the author's native language. A typical description can be found in Delbrück (1888: 386): 'The basis of a so-called absolute participle constructions is given by an ordinary locative or genitive [*Delbrück here discusses Sanskrit, which has a locative and later also a genitive absolute*, A.R.] to which a participle is added. Through the implicit perception of these two words as a kind of temporal or modal subordinate clause, the case loosens itself from what it is governed by, and such constructions can also be used where the case could not stand on its own.'[20] This description refers to Sanskrit, yet similar accounts are found relating to Latin or

[19] The example they use is *prayatí adhvaré* (forthgoing$_{\text{Loc.Sg}}$ ritual$_{\text{Loc.Sg}}$) 'during the ongoing ritual, while the ritual took place'.

[20] 'Die Grundlage einer sog. absoluten Participial-Construction bildet ein gewöhnlicher Localis oder Genitiv, dem ein Partic. zugefügt ist. Indem diese beiden Wörter innerlich als eine Art von temporalem oder modalem Nebensatz empfunden werden, löst sich der Casus von seinem regierenden Theile los, und es können solche Constructionen auch da gebraucht werden, wo der Casus allein nicht stehen könnte.'

Greek.[21] To quote a more recent example, Keydana (1997: 6) speaks of the 'intuitively perceived link between ACs and independent finite clauses'.[22]

What is the nature of this link, and who is it supposed to be felt by? If used in an argument concerning the development of ACs, the link must presumably be perceived by the speakers of the original language. If used towards a synchronic definition of ACs, it apparently appeals to the speakers of the language in which the treatise, grammar etc. is written. We can only guess how the speakers of Latin, Greek and Sanskrit themselves perceived ACs.[23] It is a fact that ACs are nominal phrases, not verbal clauses. Even instances of actual parallels between an AC and an equivalent finite clause do not give us any conclusive evidence. Compare, for example, *Il.* 1.88–9 and 18.442–3:

οὔ τις ἐμεῦ ζῶντος καὶ ἐπὶ χθονὶ δερκομένοιο
σοὶ κοίλῃς παρὰ νηυσὶ βαρείας χεῖρας ἐποίσει

'**while I am alive and see the light on earth**, no one will lay his heavy hands on you by the hollow ships'
(*Il.* 1.88–9; similarly at *Od.* 16.438–9)

ὄφρα δέ μοι ζώει καὶ ὁρᾷ φάος ἠελίοιο,
ἄχνυται

'**and long as I have him with me, still alive, looking into the sunlight,** he is racked with anguish' (*Il.* 18.442–3)

The GA ἐμεῦ ζῶντος καὶ . . . δερκομένοιο could be described as the absolute equivalent (or rephrasing?) of the recurring finite phrase ὄφρα δέ μοι ζώει καὶ ὁρᾷ.[24] Yet even this does not automatically imply that ἐμεῦ ζῶντος was perceived as any more 'verbal' than the possible English translation 'in my lifetime' (a more verbal

[21] See Classen 1867: 184, Bombe 1877: 27, Spieker 1885: 311 (note his very detailed account), Delbrück 1897: 494, Weihenmajer 1891: 2, GrGr II.307, Horn 1918: 13, Oertel 1926: 7, 101, Berent 1973: 147, Lehmann 1974: 210, Costello 1982: 242, 249, Cooper 1998: 156 and in great detail 2002: 2015–16, Frauzel 1998: 105, Bauer 2000: 261 and Menge 2000: 718.

[22] 'Die folgende Beschreibung geht von dem intuitiv wahrnehmbaren Zusammenhang zwischen ABS und unabhängigen finiten Sätzen aus. ABS stehen offenbar in einem direkten Zusammenhang mit Sätzen, denn sie enthalten in mehr oder minder großem Umfang dieselben Konstituenten wie diese.'

[23] See Section 4.7 on the perspective of Sanskrit grammarians.

[24] Also at *Il.* 18.61–2; similarly at *Il.* 24.558, *Od.* 4.50, 4.833, 10.498, 14.44, 20.207.

alternative to which would be 'while I am alive'). It is true that the parallel GA (ἐμεῦ) ἐπὶ χθονὶ δερκομένοιο is more 'verbal' in that there is a prepositional complement of the participle; it nevertheless remains a nominal expression. Modern readers may perceive it as more akin to a verbal clause because we cannot render this exact expression into an idiomatic nominal expression (*'in my beholding (of) the earth' *vel sim.*) in English. Yet again, this says more about English than about Greek. Also, if we do want to make reference to English to gain a better understanding of what this expression may have 'felt like' for a speaker of Greek, we may point out expressions such as 'in my travels across the sea'. There, we do have a dependent prepositional phrase, and we do have an idiomatic way of phrasing this expression as a verbal clause ('while I was travelling across the sea'). Yet that does not change that this expression in itself is a nominal phrase, not a verbal subordinate clause. There are various ways of referring to time. Finite verbs are only one of them, and ACs do not make use of finite verbs.

'Explaining' ACs to a modern reader by depicting them as equivalent or linked to verbal clauses is problematic. It is a good approach in a grammar or textbook that has the purely practical aim of allowing us to understand the meaning of a text. Yet knowing what an AC is equivalent to in e.g. English does not necessarily help us understand the original construction. To take an example from two modern and closely related languages, the German preposition *bei* (+ dat.) 'close to, near, at' can be used together with an adjective and a noun to mean 'when that noun has the quality of that adjective'.[25] *Bei schönem Wetter* (lit. 'at/in nice weather'), for example, is best translated into English as a temporal clause: *Bei schönem Wetter bin ich viel draußen* corresponds to English *When the weather is nice I am outside a lot*. Yet this idiomatic correspondence of a nominal phrase and a verbal clause means neither that the German phrase actually is a verbal clause, nor that the English clause somehow is a nominal phrase.

In relation to Latin, the nominal character of ACs has been pointed out before: Serbat (1979: 353) stresses very rightly that

[25] This kind of expression, as we shall see, actually is rather close to how ACs function.