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THE DIACHRONIC EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS: A QUANTITATIVE-CORPUS PROTOTYPICAL APPROACH

V. V. Zhukovska*

This article studies the diachronic evolution of English absolute constructions (ACs) from the perspective of a quantitative-corpus approach, reconceptualizing these syntactic patterns as dynamic, frequency-sensitive structures that form flexible constructional networks. The study identifies the patterns of transformation in the prototypical and peripheral features of ACs across historical stages of English. The theoretical and methodological framework of the research combines diachronic analysis, quantitative-corpus research, and construction grammar.

The development of absolute constructions in Old, Middle, and Early Modern English is analysed through the interpretation of findings from previous historical-linguistic and corpus-based studies. The analysis of ACs in Modern English represents the author's quantitative-corpus research, conducted on the data from the British National Corpus. The empirical database comprises 35 morphosyntactic types of ACs, represented by 11,000 corpus realizations. The applied methodology of multiparametric linguo-quantitative profiling allowed for the verification of 13 parameters, including the morphological properties of the subject and predicate constituents, syntactic functions, syntactic connection, position within the sentence, and register distribution.

As a result, a hierarchy of prototypical features has been constructed, where the central position is occupied by the binary scheme [NP XP] with an explicit subject and a non-finite predicate. It is established that the frequency can serve a key factor determining the status of a construction in the network. The findings confirm the effectiveness of the quantitative-corpus approach for describing the dynamics of grammatical systems.

Keywords: *absolute constructions, diachronic evolution, corpus linguistics, quantitative-corpus approach, prototypical approach, constructional network.*

ДІАХРОНІЧНА ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКИХ АБСОЛЮТНИХ КОНСТРУКЦІЙ: КВАНТИТАТИВНО-КОРПУСНИЙ ПРОТОТИПНИЙ ПІДХІД

Жуковська В. В.

У статті представлено комплексне дослідження діахронної еволюції абсолютних конструкцій (АК) англійської мови з позицій квантитативно-корпусного підходу. Актуальність роботи зумовлена необхідністю переосмислення складних синтаксичних

* *Doctor of Philological Sciences, professor*
Department of Cross-cultural Communication and Foreign Language Education
(Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University)
zhukovska.victoria@zu.edu.ua
ORCID: 0000-0002-4622-4435

одиниць як динамічних, частотно-чутливих структур, що формують гнучкі конструкційні мережі. Мета дослідження – виявлення закономірностей трансформації прототипних і периферійних ознак АК на різних етапах історичного розвитку англійської мови.

Теоретико-методологічна база дослідження поєднує методи діахронного аналізу, квантитативно-корпусного дослідження та принципи конструкційної граматики. Еволюцію АК у давньо-, середньо- та ранньоновоанглійський періоди проаналізовано на основі узагальнення та інтерпретації результатів попередніх історико-лінгвістичних і корпусних досліджень. Аналіз АК на матеріалі сучасної англійської мови здійснено на основі власного квантитативно-корпусного дослідження авторки, виконаного на матеріалі Британського національного корпусу. Емпіричну базу становлять 35 морфосинтаксичних типів АК, репрезентованих у 11 000 корпусних реалізаціях. Застосована методика мультипараметричного лінгвоквантитативного профілювання дала змогу верифікувати 13 параметрів, зокрема частиномовну реалізацію суб'єкта і предиката, синтаксичну функцію, позиційний розподіл у реченні та дистрибуцію в різних регістрах мовлення.

У результаті дослідження вибудувано ієрархію прототипних ознак, де центральне місце посідає бінарна схема [NP XP] з експліцитним суб'єктом і нефінітним предикатом. Установлено, що частота вживання слугує важливим фактором визначення статусу конструкції в мережі. Отримані результати засвідчують ефективність квантитативно-корпусного підходу для опису динаміки граматичних систем.

Ключові слова: *абсолютні конструкції, діахронічна еволюція, корпусна лінгвістика, квантитативно-корпусний підхід, прототипний підхід, конструкційна мережа.*

Research Problem and Its Relevance. The *corpus revolution* in linguistics [3: 21; 10: 28] at the beginning of the 21st century has fundamentally reshaped empirical language research by providing linguists with large-scale corpora of authentic language use and computational instruments for a quantitative analysis. The integration of corpus technologies with quantitative methods has given rise to the corpus-driven paradigm, which prioritizes usage-based evidence and foregrounds quantitative patterns as explanatory resources in linguistic analysis [14]. Within this paradigm, grammatical phenomena are increasingly examined not as static system-internal entities but as dynamic, frequency-sensitive structures emerging from actual language use.

Within this paradigm, particular attention has been paid to the analysis of complex syntactic patterns, particularly non-finite and non-verbal constructions with an overt subject, traditionally referred to as *absolute constructions*.

Absolute constructions occupy a specific niche in the syntactic system of English, revealing a number of idiosyncratic morphosyntactic, semantic and discourse-functional properties. Syntactically, *absolute constructions* are part of a minimally bi-clausal structure that consists of a matrix clause (MC) and a punctuationally or intonationally detached non-finite or non-verbal clause with its own explicit subject. This detached clause represents a syntactically independent non-finite secondary predication. Structurally, English *absolute constructions* display a fixed binary pattern [NP XP], where (XP) functions as a non-finite ($Pred_{NF}$)/ non-verbal ($Pred_{NV}$) predicate and NP serves as its explicitly expressed external argument – the subject (Subj). The predicate slot may be filled by participial, infinitival, adjectival, nominal, adverbial, or prepositional phrases, optionally introduced by an augmentor such as *with, without, despite,* or *what with*. (e.g., *times being hard, his eyes near wild, without onboard electronic constantly helping the pilot, despite some improvements having occurred in her problems, what with Mrs Clements and the girls also gone for the 264 week)* [2].

Literature Review. *Absolute constructions* have been extensively examined within traditional grammar, generative grammar, corpus linguistics, systemic-functional grammar, construction grammar, typology and translation studies [1; 4; 6; 7; 11; 17; 22, to name but a few]. Despite sustained

scholarly interest in *absolute constructions*, several issues remain insufficiently resolved. Most notably, the origin and development of these syntactic patterns in English still remain unclear, and a comprehensive quantitative corpus-based analysis of their prototypical morphosyntactic properties across historical stages of English is still lacking.

The present study aims to critically revisit existing accounts on the origin of *absolute constructions* in English by offering a systematic frequency-based analysis of their prototypical morphosyntactic and syntactic-functional properties on each stage of the language development. The diachronic stages prior to Present-Day English are analysed on the basis of previous corpus-based and historical studies, while the Present-Day English data are examined on the basis of the author's original corpus analysis. Drawing on corpus data and a quantitative prototype-theoretical framework, the study models central and peripheral features that shape their constructional network in Present English.

The study adopts a quantitative corpus-based approach to the analysis of English *absolute constructions*, combining frequency-based methods with a prototype analysis approach. Quantitative corpus data are used to distinguish prototypical and peripheral features of the construction across historical stages. The approach allows the diachronic development of *absolute constructions* to be modelled as gradient, frequency-sensitive constructional network rather than a set of discrete structural types. The novelty of the research lies in the systematic application of a corpus-based prototype model to the diachronic analysis of *absolute constructions*, enabling a quantitative distinction between prototypical and peripheral features across historical stages of English language development.

Results and Discussion.

1. **Absolute constructions in modern and early Indo-European languages.** *Absolute constructions* represent a well-attested syntactic pattern across a wide range of contemporary Indo-European languages [17], including Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Portuguese, Norwegian, and English. In contemporary Indo-European languages, *absolute constructions* display systemic variation with respect to the morphosyntactic realization of their core constituents, predicate types, and case marking. This variation is constrained by a stable underlying structural schema that consists of a nominal subject and a non-finite or non-verbal predicate forming a syntactically detached secondary predication.

For instance, in contemporary German, a prototypical *absolute construction* consists of a nominal phrase in the Accusative case combined with a participial predicate, yielding the so-called *Absolute Accusative*. Alongside this pattern, German also exhibits constructions labelled as *Absolute Nominative*, with the subject in the Nominative case. However, given the lack of typical features of unaugmented *absolute constructions*, the German *Absolute Nominative* is often conventionally interpreted as a complete sentence with an implicit finite predicate. In both German and Norwegian, adjectives do not function as predicates of such constructions, and unaugmented structures are absent in Norwegian [6: 26].

Despite crosslinguistic variation, *absolute constructions* exhibit a number of universal properties that can be explained by their shared Proto-Indo-European origin [11: 163]. Such syntactic patterns are registered in many early Indo-European languages, including Ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Old Lithuanian, Old Church Slavonic, Old Bulgarian, Old Serbian, Gothic, Old English, and Old Armenian, among others [4; 8: 165]. Across these languages, *absolute constructions* demonstrate a marked structural similarity.

In early Indo-European languages, the predicative centre of *absolute constructions* is typically realized by a non-finite verbal form (mostly a participle), which functions as the logical predicate and agrees in gender, number, and case with the nominal subject. This nominal subject represents the agent of the action expressed by the participle and is obligatorily distinct from the subject of the matrix clause. Participles may appear in various tense forms, usually present or past, to indicate simultaneity or precedence of the action in the matrix clause. Each language adopts a fixed case marking for both the subject and the predicate of the construction: the Locative in Sanskrit *(Locativus Absolutus)*, the Ablative in Latin *(Ablativus Absolutus)*, the Genitive (and less frequently Dative or Accusative) in Ancient Greek, and the Dative in Germanic and Slavic languages *(Dativus Absolutus)* [15: 387-406]. Functionally, *absolute constructions* typically provide background information to the matrix clause and are semantically equivalent to finite subordinate adverbial clauses.

Thus, from a diachronic perspective, the crosslinguistic evidence suggests that *absolute constructions* constitute a stable inherited syntactic pattern whose later development is shaped by language-specific processes resulting in the gradual reorganization of the constructional network, including shifts in predicate types, reduction or reanalysis of case marking, and the emergence of new structural variants. This historical background provides the necessary typological and genetic context for analysing the diachronic evolution of *absolute constructions* in English and for identifying their prototypical and peripheral features within a quantitative corpus-based framework.

2. **The origin of Absolute Constructions in English.** The origin of *absolute constructions* in modern English is conventionally traced back to the Old English *Dative Absolute*. This construction typically consisted of a participle and an accompanying nominal or pronominal phrase, both marked by the Dative case and syntactically detached from the matrix clause. Alongside the Dative, early Old English also attests the Instrumental case, which gradually merged with the Dative, resulting in a unified case category.

The origin of *absolute constructions* in Old English has been extensively discussed in the literature [18]. While existing studies offer detailed descriptions of the construction's formal properties, the question of its origin remains contested, and no single account has achieved general recognition. At present, three major theories account for the origin of *absolute constructions* in Old English: 1) *absolute constructions* as syntactic or lexical calques from Latin; 2) *absolute constructions* as autochthonous Germanic formations; or 3) *absolute constructions* as the result of selective multiple calquing.

Proponents of the Latin calque theory [13; 19] state that *Dative Absolute constructions* in Old English represent syntactic borrowings from Latin, introduced through the intensive translation of Biblical texts. They note that such clauses are significantly more frequent in word-for-word Old English translations of the Latin *Ablativus Absolutus* than in more literary translations, and that these constructions are almost entirely absent from native Old English literary texts.

Other researchers challenge this view, highlighting alternative means available for early translators to convey the Latin *Ablativus Absolutus*. Most commonly, it was rendered by a subordinate clause, and occasionally by a coordinate clause. F. T. Visser considers it unlikely that translators would use syntactic patterns unfamiliar or incomprehensible to the readers. He argues that a foreign pattern can become incorporated into the target language if it aligns with that language's grammatical development and is compatible with its morphosyntactic structure [24: 1261].

From the perspective of interpreting the *Dative Absolute* as an indigenous Germanic syntactic formation, N. van de

Pol rejects the view of its translational origin and argues in favour of its autochthonous Germanic nature. To support this claim, the scholar offers a number of arguments. First, *absolute constructions* are registered not only in glosses but also in numerous Old English and Early Middle English texts. Based on the empirical analysis of *absolute constructions* in a large corpus of Latin translations and Old and Early Middle English texts, the researcher demonstrates that their frequency in English texts does not align with the typical linguistic behaviour of syntactic borrowings. If the *Dative Absolute* were a syntactic borrowing, then in the case of successful assimilation, its usage would initially be absent or minimal, followed by a significant increase and stabilization. In the case of unsuccessful assimilation, the construction's frequency would gradually decrease until it disappeared. However, empirical data demonstrate that the *absolute construction* had the highest frequency in the texts of the Old English period and then steadily decreased which contradicts the expected behaviour of syntactic borrowings. Instead, the rapid decline in the frequency of the construction reflects the natural tendency within ancient Indo-European languages to gradually lose *absolute constructions* over time [21].

The alternative account proposed by van de Pol [21] explains the emergence of *absolute constructions* in Old English through the mechanism of selective frequency copying within the framework of Johanson's code copying theory [12]. According to this view, the Proto-Indo-European *absolute construction* was inherited by Old English through Proto-Germanic. However, already at these early stages of Old English, *absolute constructions* were on the verge of disappearing, which was a natural diachronic process observed across many ancient Indo-European languages. The high frequency of *absolute constructions* in Latin source texts led to their increased use in Old English translations, to such an extent that this construction reappeared in English texts – usually in an amount proportional to the translator's familiarity with Latin [21]. This interaction between inherited grammatical patterns and contact-induced frequency effects provides a historical and theoretical foundation for applying a corpus-based prototype analysis to the development of *absolute constructions*.

3. **Quantitative-corpus approach to prototype.** The development of non-finite constructions with overt subjects in English can be examined from the perspective of prototype theory, which conceptualizes linguistic categories as networks of partially overlapping subcategories linked by relations of "family resemblance" [16; 5]. Within this framework, the prototypical member of a category is the one that exhibits the highest degree of category representation in quantitative terms. Less quantitatively represented members are considered non-typical, characterized by idiosyncratic features, diverging structurally and functionally from the prototype. The prototype theory proves particularly effective not only in modelling semantic categories, but also in accounting for syntactic categories, especially from a diachronic perspective [9]. Diachronic change thus can be interpreted as a gradual reorganization of the internal structure of a constructional category, involving shifts in the relative salience of its features. In this sense, frequency is not merely a descriptive measure but a key explanatory factor in identifying category centrality and peripheralization. According to E. Traugott and G. Trousdale, partially sanctioned extensions of a particular conventionalized construction may eventually become fully sanctioned instantiations of a more general, schematic construction as a result of the speaker's/listener's experience with the language [20: 25]. This mechanism is relevant to the diachronic development of *absolute constructions*. In each period of English language development, the prototypical type of *absolute*

constructions can be identified based on the analysis of the dynamics of quantitative changes in their structural-morphological and syntactic-functional properties, the emergence and disappearance of specific subtypes, and the consolidation of the most represented features. Drawing on data from corpus-based studies that address the genesis of these syntactic patterns [7; 21; 22: 23], together with the data obtained in the author's research [1], the present study offers a quantitative corpus-based account of the diachronic evolution of the prototypical structural, morphosyntactic and functional properties of *absolute constructions*, covering the periods from Old English to Present-Day English.

4. **Prototypical absolute constructions: a corpus-quantitative analysis from Old English to Modern English.** In the Old English period, *absolute constructions* display a limited range of structural types. The typical case marking is Dative, with occasional instances of the Instrumental case. The most frequently attested subtype is an unaugmented construction with Participle I or II, typically performing an adverbial (temporal) function. In the late Old English period, Participles I and II continue to function as the prototypical predicates of *absolute constructions*. However, occasional instances also appear with infinitival, adjectival, or prepositional predicates, suggesting expanded syntactic possibilities. The adverbial temporal function remains dominant, although there is a slight increase in the number of *absolute constructions* that realize the additive syntactic function, expanding the matrix clause proposition with additional accompanying details. The primary type of connection to the matrix clause remains asyndetic, but occasional instances of *with-* and *after-*augmentation begin to emerge [5; 7; 21; 22; 23].

During the Middle English period, *absolute constructions* with Participle I become the most frequent, while constructions with Participle II decline in use. At the same time, there is a notable increase in constructions with adjectival, infinitival, and prepositional predicates, alongside the emergence of new predicate type expressed by adverbial and nominal phrases. The adverbial function remains the normative use of *absolute constructions* in this period, but additive functions increase markedly in number. The Dative case disappears, and the Nominative becomes the default case for the subject of *absolute constructions*. In instances where the case marking is ambiguous, the Nominative is recognized as the conventional case marking. At the same time, the Accusative case is also occasionally attested [5; 7; 21; 22; 23].

In the Modern English period, the distribution of predicate types in *absolute constructions* becomes more balanced, although the Participle I remains the prototypical form. Notably, a new predicate type emerges in this period – the Perfect Participle [5; 7; 21; 22; 23].

The dominant function of *absolute constructions* remains adverbial temporal, but other types of adverbial functions show a quantitative decline, while the additive function becomes more common. Pronominal subjects expressed by personal pronouns become rare, making it difficult to establish case marking of constructions. The accusative case remains productive; its use is infrequent. *With*-augmentation becomes the primary type of relational connection between the *absolute construction* and the matrix clause; however unaugmented constructions remain the most frequent. Table 1 summarizes the prototypical and peripheral properties of English *absolute constructions* from Old English to Modern English [5; 7; 21; 22; 23].

Table 1

Prototypical and Peripheral features of Absolute Constructions (Old English – Modern English)

Period/ Grammatical Features		**Old English**	**Late Old English**	**Middle English**	**Modern English**
Case Marking	prototypical	**Dative**	**Dative**	**Nominative**	**Nominative**
					undefined
		Instrumental		*Accusative Dative*	*Accusative*
Type of Predicate		**Participle I = Participle II**	**Participle I = Participle II**	**Participle I > Participle II**	**Participle I Prepositional phrase**
				Adjectival phrase Infinitive Prepositional phrase	**Participle** II Noun phrase Infinitive Adverbial phrase Adjectival phrase
			Adjectival phrase Infinitive Prepositional phrase	*Adverbial phrase Noun phrase*	*Perfect Participle I*
Syntactic function		**adverbial**	**adverbial**	**adverbial**	**adverbial (temporal reference)**
				additive	additive
			additive		*adverbial (condition, cause, concession)*
Type of augmentation	peripheral	**unaugmented**	**unaugmented**	**unaugmented**	**unaugmented**
				'with' – augmented	'with' – augmented
			'with', 'after' – augmented	*'after', 'at', 'though' – augmented*	other augmentors

5. **Prototypical absolute constructions in Present-Day English.** The development of *absolute constructions* continues into Present-Day English. The linguo-quantitative and corpus-based parameterization of their prototypical features in contemporary English has been carried out in the author's research [1]. The empirical material for the study of prototypical *absolute constructions* in Present-Day English comprises 35 types of English *absolute constructions*, instantiated by 11 000 constructional tokens extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC). These constructions instantiate 35 morphosyntactic types distributed across two intersecting dimensions: (1) augmenter specification {Ø, *with*, *without*, *what with*, *despite*}, and

(2) predicate specification, including non-finite verbal predicates (VPPI, VPPII, VPInf) and non-verbal predicates (NP, AdjP, AdvP, PP). This distribution constitutes the empirical basis for the subsequent parameterization of prototypical features.

The formal properties of *absolute constructions* were analysed within a linguo-quantitative parameterization framework aimed at verifying their morphosyntactic, relational, referential, syntactic-functional, positional, and distributional characteristics. In total, 13 parameters were defined, operationalized through 34 factors and 56 factor values. These parameters include the part-of-speech realization of the subject, case marking of pronominal subjects, subject determiners, part-of-speech realization of the predicate, type and voice of the non-finite predicate, type of syntactic relation between the *absolute construction* and the matrix clause, coreferential relations, syntactic function, position in a sentence, and patterns of distribution across discourse modes, corpus registers, and text types. Using the linguo-quantitative corpus parameterization, prototypical formal features of *absolute constructions* were identified and a multiparametric linguo-quantitative protomodel of their constructional network was constructed. Prototypicality was established by modelling a generalized frequency hierarchy of feature realizations in the corpus material. Feature values with the highest frequency of occurrence were interpreted as central (prototypical), while less frequent realizations were treated as peripheral. The quantitative distance from the most frequent value thus serves as an empirical indicator of a feature's degree of remoteness from the prototype. Table 2 presents a generalized corpus-based frequency hierarchy of properties realizations of *absolute constructions* in Present-Day English.

Table 2

Generalized Corpus-Based Frequency Hierarchy of Absolute Constructions in Present-Day English

Parameter	Factor	Factor Value
SubjPOS	SubjN > SubjPrn	*NCmn* > *NProp* *PrnPers* > *PrnInd* > *PrnDem* > *PrnRefl* > *PrnNeg*
SubjPrnCASE	CaseSubj > CaseObj	*CaseNom* > *CaseAcc*
SubjDET	ØDet > DetDef > DetIndef	*NPl* > *NSing* *PrnPoss* > *ArtDef* > *PrnDem* *ArtIndef* > *PrnIndef*
PredPOS	PredNF > PredNV	*PredPI* > *PredPII* > *PredInf* *PredP* > *PredAdjP* > *PredAdvP* > *PredNP*
SynREL	RELAug > RELNonAug	*AugWith* > *ØAug* > *AugDespite* > *AugWithout* > *AugWhatwith*
SentPSN	SentFin > SentInit > SentMid > SentSplt	
FSYN	Extn > Enhnt > Elbn	

The quantitative results confirm that *absolute constructions* in Present-Day English are complex morphosyntactic units characterized by a stable binary structure [NP XP], where NP functions as the explicit external argument (the (pro)nominal subject) and XP as the non-finite or non-verbal predicate. The predicate slot may be realized either by a non-finite verbal form (Participle I, Participle II, Infinitive) or by a non-verbal phrase (NP, AdjP, AdvP, PP). *Absolute constructions* form part of a minimal two-clause configuration consisting of a matrix clause and a syntactically detached secondary predication with its own explicit subject, introduced either syndetically by an augmenter or

asyndetically.

In Present-Day English, *absolute constructions* instantiate 35 morphosyntactic types, representing five augmentation patterns – unaugmented (Ø-augmented), *with-*, *without-*, *despite-*, and *what with-*augmented constructions each realized across three non-finite verbal predicate types (VPPI, VPPII, VPInf) and four non-verbal predicate types (NP, AdjP, AdvP, PP).

The establishment of prototypical and non-prototypical properties was achieved through the construction of a frequency-based hierarchy of linguistic features. Central features occupy the upper levels of this hierarchy, while peripheral features are positioned at progressively lower levels as their frequency decreases. This hierarchy constitutes a multiparametric linguo-quantitative protomodel of the formal properties of *absolute constructions* in Present-Day English and provides an empirical basis for interpreting their internal stratification.

Conclusions and Prospects for Future Research. This study has examined the diachronic evolution of English *absolute constructions* within a quantitative-corpus prototype framework. The diachronic reconstruction shows a reorganization of prototypical features across historical stages. Old English is characterized by a restricted set of absolute types with Dative (and marginal Instrumental) case marking and predominantly participial predicates functioning as temporal adverbials. Middle English introduces a major shift: Dative case disappears, Nominative becomes default, the inventory of predicate types expands beyond participles, augmentation increases in productivity, and additive functions become more entrenched. In Modern English, the Perfect Participle emerges as a productive predicate type, while augmentation gradually consolidates around a smaller set of augmenters.

The corpus-based prototype perspective provides an empirically grounded way of identifying what is central in the constructional network at each stage. In Present-Day English, the construction is modelled as a fixed binary schema [NP XP] with a non-finite or non-verbal predicate and an overt subject, functioning as a syntactically detached secondary predication optionally introduced by an augmentor. The feature hierarchy indicates that the prototypical core favours a nominal subject and a non-finite verbal predicate (with Participle I remaining especially prominent), while alternative predicate types and augmentation strategies occupy more peripheral positions. This quantitative stratification allows to be described the construction not as a single uniform structure but as a network organized around frequency-defined central features. The obtained results are valid for the analysed empirical material and open up prospects for further research by extending the corpus-based prototype model to other construction types in English and across languages, enabling a more systematic quantitative mapping of prototypical and peripheral features within constructional networks.

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