

## The syntax of so-called absolute constructions in German

### 1. Introduction

This article deals with so-called *absolute constructions* in German, i.e. small clause adjuncts, consisting (minimally) of a nominative or accusative DP with an *absolute*, i.e. ungoverned, case and a predicative XP, cf. the general structure in (1):

- (1) [DP (...) XP]

According to Kortmann (1988), the head of the predicate XP can be verbal or non-verbal. A verbal predicate can, however, only be headed by a present participle (Part.1) or past participle (Part.2) and never by an infinitive. The head of a non-verbal predicate can be a nominal phrase (DP), an adjectival phrase (AP), prepositional phrase (PP) or an adverb phrase (AdvP). The brackets in (1) indicate that these structures may contain more than two constituents, such as dative objects and different kinds of adverbials (Skartsæterhaugen 2006, p. 34). Following Kortmann (1988), it is argued that there is only one absolute construction in German. This approach is based on the fact that only absolute nominative constructions can be analysed as the grammatical subjects of absolute constructions, i.e. a subject-predicate structure, cf. (2),

- (2) [Der Winter **fast vorbei**<sub>AdvP</sub>], galt es, den Garten auf den Frühling  
the.NOM winter almost over was-important it the.ACC garden for the spring  
vorbereiten.  
to-prepare  
‘With the winter almost over, it was important to prepare the garden for the spring’

The absolute accusative is not a grammatical subject with an absolute case, but rather the accusative object of the deleted verb in an elliptical structure. However, this structure also contains a grammatical subject, namely the phonetically unrealized PRO. Consequently, these structures are not absolute constructions, but rather free adjuncts (Kortmann 1988), cf. (3),

- (3) Wilhelm hatte, [den Kopf in die Hand **gestützt**<sub>Part2</sub>], nachdenklich zugehört.  
Wilhelm had the.ACC head in the hand held.PART.2 thoughtfully listened  
‘Wilhelm had listened thoughtfully, with his head leaning on his hand’

Based on these findings, I argue within the Principle and Parameter Theory (cf. Chomsky 1981 et seq.) that only the absolute nominative (i.e. not the absolute accusative) is an overtly realized, grammatical subject and as such part of an absolute construction, i.e. an overt subject-predicate structure in the sense of Kortmann (1988). However, both constructions are tenseless adjunct small clauses, albeit with different syntactic structures, cf. (4) and (5),

- (4) *Absolute Nominativkonstruktion*  
[SC DP<sub>nom</sub> (...) XP]

- (5) *Absolute Akkusativkonstruktion*  
 DP<sub>i</sub> (...) [SC PRO<sub>i</sub> [DP<sub>akk</sub> (...) XP]]

Both constructions are clause-like in that they denote a predication between either an explicit or an implicit subject and the predicate. However, the absolute nominative and accusative constructions differ syntactically with respect to their internal structure, distribution, syntactic function, adjunction sites, binding (principles A, B, and C), and comparative *wie*-phrases. In both constructions, however, we deal with small clause adjuncts, consisting (minimally) of a nominative or accusative DP and a predicative XP. Finally, we determine that the PRO subject of absolute accusative constructions is obligatorily controlled.

## 2. Main findings

This article's main contribution is that it presents novel syntactic evidence for the approach presented by Kortmann (1988), in which there is only one absolute case (construction) in German in the sense of an overt subject-predicate structure, namely the absolute nominative (construction) (but see Fabricius-Hansen/Haug 2012, p. 29 for the opposite perspective). The evidence includes different binding phenomena related to the principles A, B and C of the binding theory (cf. Chomsky 1981). The evidence presented not only suggests that these adjuncts have significantly different internal syntactic structures, but also that they are located in different syntactic adjunct positions. The differences regarding morphological case marking as nominatives and accusatives, respectively, can presumably be deduced from their different syntactic distributions in different adjunct positions. Finally, drawing on the criteria presented in Landau (2013), I argue that PRO in absolute accusative constructions is obligatorily controlled (= OC).

### 2.1 Binding data: Principle A and B

Data presented by Fabricius-Hansen/Haug/Sæbø (2012, p. 84) show that anaphora and personal pronouns are complementarily distributed in absolute nominative and accusative constructions, cf. (6)–(7),

- (6) Ilja<sub>i</sub> liegt auf einer Pferddecke, ein schmutziger Gedichtband vor ihm<sub>i</sub> / \*sich<sub>i</sub>.  
 Ilja<sub>i</sub> lies on a.DAT horse-blanket a filthy.NOM poetry-volume before him<sub>i</sub> / \*REFL<sub>i</sub>
- (7) Ilja<sub>i</sub> liegt auf einer Pferddecke, einen schmutzigen Gedichtband vor sich<sub>i</sub> /  
 \*ihm<sub>i</sub>.  
 Ilja<sub>i</sub> lies on a.DAT horse-blanket a filthy.ACC poetry-volume before REFL<sub>i</sub> /  
 \*him<sub>i</sub>

‘Ilja is lying on a horse blanket, with a filthy poetry volume before him’

I take this as evidence for the two different syntactic structures in (8) and (9), in which only the absolute nominative is analysed as an overtly realised, grammatical subject, whereas the absolute accusative construction contains a phonetically unrealised PRO subject.

- (8) Ilja<sub>i</sub> liegt auf einer Pferddecke, [ein schmutziger Gedichtband vor ihm<sub>i</sub> / \*sich<sub>i</sub>].  
 (9) Ilja<sub>i</sub> liegt auf einer Pferddecke, [PRO<sub>i</sub> einen schmutzigen Gedichtband vor sich<sub>i</sub> / \*ihm<sub>i</sub>].

2.2 Adjunction sites: Principle C effects, morphological case marking, and control

Another interesting finding relates to the adjunction sites of the absolute nominative and absolute accusative constructions. When tested for principle C effects, only the absolute accusative constructions are affected with respect to grammaticality/acceptability. A referential expression occurring in the matrix clause can be repeated in an absolute nominative construction, cf. (10), but not in an absolute accusative construction, cf. the ungrammaticality of (11),

- (10) Endlich so kommt der Graf<sub>i</sub> hergefahren, [der Wagen des Grafen<sub>i</sub>  
 Finally then comes the.NOM count driving the.NOM wagon the.GEN count  
 schwer bepackt, voraus kein Reiter].  
 heavily loaded in front no horseman  
 ‘Finally, the count comes driving, with the count’s wagon heavily loaded and no horseman in front’

- (11) \*Neben ihn saß der dünnhaarige Pianist<sub>i</sub>, [den Kopf des  
 Next-to him sat the.NOM sparsely-haired piano-player the.ACC head the.GEN  
 Pianisten<sub>i</sub> im Nacken].  
 piano-player in-the neck  
 ‘The piano player was sitting next to him, with the piano player’s head tilted to the side’

This indicates that the absolute nominative constructions are higher adjuncts than the absolute accusative constructions, adjoined at least above the subject position. This supports the view proffered by Czepluch (1986, pp. 334f.) that the absolute nominative construction is a small clause constituent adjoined to CP with the nominative assigned by default. Further evidence for this approach is that absolute nominative constructions only occur clause initially (i.e. in the German prefield) or clause finally (i.e. in the German postfield), but never clause medially (i.e. in the German midfield). Absolute accusative constructions, on the other hand, are affected by principle C effects, i.e. within the c-command domain of the matrix subject (or object). Furthermore, they do not only occur clause initially (in the prefield) and clause finally (in the postfield), but also clause medially (in the midfield).

Interestingly, the absolute accusative constructions display the following OC properties described by Landau (2013, pp. 226, 232ff.), i.e. 1) the controller must be an argument of the matrix clause (usually, but not always, the subject); 2) long-distance and arbitrary control are ruled out; 3) OC PRO only allows a sloppy reading under ellipsis, cf. (12),<sup>1</sup>

- (12) Peter<sub>i</sub> saß geistesabwesend auf dem Boden, [PRO<sub>j</sub>/\*k/\*arb den neuen Roman von Jo  
 Peter sat absent-minded on the floor the.ACC new novel by Jo  
 Nesbø vor sich<sub>i</sub>] und das tat auch seine Frau<sub>j</sub> geistesabwesend auf dem Boden sitzen;  
 Nesbø before REFL and so did also his wife absent-minded on the floor sit.INF  
 {PRO<sub>j</sub>/\*i den neuen Roman von Jo Nesbø vor sich<sub>j</sub>/\*i}.  
 the.ACC new novel by Jo Nesbø before REFL  
 ‘Peter was sitting absent-minded on the floor, with the latest novel by Jo Nesbø before him’

<sup>1</sup> According to the fourth OC property described by Landau (2013), OC adjuncts freely allow inanimate PRO. To my knowledge, however, this has never been attested for absolute accusative constructions (cf. Gadourek 2006, p. 75).

Assuming these adjuncts to be left- and right-adjoined to a projection of vP (= subject control) and VP (= object control), OC can be analysed as upward multiple *Agree* between T or v, the antecedent subject or object, and PRO (Høyem to appear).

### 3. Final remarks

The findings summarized above show that the so-called absolute nominative and accusative constructions in German syntactically differ in many respects (such as internal structure, case marking, binding relations, and adjunction sites) and should therefore be analysed differently. Only the absolute nominative turns emerges as an overt grammatical subject and is, therefore, the only absolute case (construction) in German (cf. Kortmann 1988). Both constructions are, however, clause-like in that they denote a predication between either an explicit or an implicit subject and the predicate, and therefore are both analysed as small clause adjuncts. The absolute accusative construction, however, appears to implicate a more complex structure containing an implicit, obligatorily controlled PRO subject. The question of how the internal structure of the absolute accusative should be analysed remains unanswered, i.e. whether the accusative DP is an object of an elided verb (like ‘to have’) or the DP subject of a complement small clause.

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