TRANSLATION AND LANGUAGE HISTORY PARTICIPIAL CONSTRUCTIONS FROM OLD TO EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

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1. AIMS AND SCOPE

Throughout the medieval period, translation from Latin played a pervasive role in the literary development of most European vernacular languages. New standards of spelling, lexis and syntax grew under the influence of translation, which involved the faithful imitation of classical patrons.[1] In the case of the English language, Partridge[2] has argued that "the genesis of modern English, and the diversity of its vocabulary, were made possible by several centuries of painstaking translation, first from the Gospels, then of the major Latin and Greek classics".

This paper first of all aims to provide more insight into the so-called *participial constructions*, which have traditionally been considered the most quintessentially Latin calque in the English language.[3] On the diachronic axis, this paper seeks to show how these constructions have developed in three different periods of the history of English: firstly in early Old English, as a native development whose origin is to be found in the oral language; secondly in late Old English, as a consequence of massive translation from Latin; and thirdly in early Modern English, as a calque of the classical construction.

The discussion on the Old English dative absolute is based on data from the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts: Diachronic and Dialectal,*[4] which enables a systematic survey of participial constructions in different periods and in different textual categories, such as English texts, Latin translations and glosses.

2. PARTICIPIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND PARATAXIS

The type of construction we are dealing with here is characterized by the presence of a verbal participle (which can be either present or past) and an NP in subject or object relation, forming a nonfinite clause which typically expresses temporal location. It

[1] Ernst Curtius: *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, New York, Pantheon, 1953.

[2] A. C. Partridge: *English Biblical Translation*, London, Deutsch, 1973, p. 1.

[3] R. Quirk and C. L. Wrenn: *Old English Grammar*, London, Methuen, 1955, p. 111.

[4] For more information on the corpus see Merja Kytö: *Manual to the diachronic part of the Helsinki Corpus pf English Texts. Coding Conventions and Lists of Source Texts,* Helsinki, Univ. of Helsinki, 1996.

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has been recently argued that Indoeuropean made little or no use of finite subordinate clauses, preferring instead nonfinite constructions.[5] Participial absolute constructions are documented in most old IE languages, although the morphological evolution experimented by each particular linguistic family contributed to produce further divergences in their formal representation, so that the original locative expressions adopted different forms.

The following chart[6] shows the varying degrees of success with which morphological syncretism affected the case system of four IE languages. As can be seen here, the IE locative has been maintained only in Sanskrit, whereas the other languages have opted for collapsing it into a more general case, that embraces a wide number of functions/senses:

	Sanskrit							*Latin*						*Greek*				*Old English*			
IE	nom	acc	gen	dat	abl	**loc**	inst	nom	acc	gen	dat	**abl**		nom	acc	**gen**	**dat**	nom	acc	gen	**dat**
nom	x							x						x				x			
acc		x							x						x				x		
gen			x							x						x				x	
dat				x							x	x					x				x
abl					x							x				x					x
loc						x						x				x	x				x
inst							x					x					x				x

Fig. 1. Patterns of syncretism in four IE languages

The diachronic correspondences between these languages become fully evident from the following examples, that illustrate the results of syncretism on the expression of participial absolute constructions:

(2.1) Sanskrit locative absolute
uchánty#m usáṣi
shining-loc/sg the dawn-pres.part/loc/sg
"when the dawn shines"

Greek genitive absolute
Kónonos strategoOntos
Konon-gen/sg being-general-pres.part/gen/sg
"while Konon was general"

Latin ablative absolute
hostibus fugatis
the enemies-abl/pl put-to-flight-past.part/abl/pl
"after the enemies had been put to flight"

Old English dative absolute
gewunnenum sige
won-past.part/dat/sg victory-dat/sg
"after the victory had been gained"

[5] B. Comrie: "La famiglia linguistica indoeuropea: prospettive genetiche e tipologiche", in A. Giacalone Ramat and P. Ramat (eds.): *Le lingue indoeuropee*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993, pp. 95-121.

[6] Adapted from Roger Lass: *Old English. A Historical Linguistic Companion*, Cambridge, CUP, p. 232.

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Broadly speaking, participial absolute constructions reflect a syntactic type of IE origin, and respond to the asindetic paratactic syntax of the spoken register (characterized by the preference for nominal, case-bound strategies for expressing circumstantials, and the limited use of subordinate clauses) rather than to the full subordinating style of the classical literary languages.[7] In fact, the Latin ablative absolute was still felt as *sermo infumus et cottidianus* in the 1st century BC, and very probably its development as a literary device did not take place until the end of the Imperial Period.[8]

3. THE DOUBLE NATURE OF THE OLD ENGLISH DATIVE ABSOLUTE

As a language, Old English is basically paratactic in its organization and relatively poor in subordinating conjunctions.[9] However, a clear tendency towards hypotaxis is visible in most Anglo-Saxon texts, whose origins are to be found both in the pressure to create a more elevated style on emulation of the Latin patrons and in the progressive collapse of the old case system. Although it is obvious that the Old English dative absolute resembles the Latin ablative absolute (which may have been its source, especially in translated texts), its use in native texts suggests that it was not a Latin borrowing, but an inherited IE construction.

A first observation about the Old English dative absolute is that it is a quite uncommon construction. A total of 58 occurrences were found in the 413,250 corpus, which means that the relative frequency per 100 words was 1.403. Table 1 gives the frequencies of the dative absolute in the different subperiods of the Old English corpus for four textual categories:

[1] Old English glosses on Latin texts
[2] Translations from Latin
[3] Old English prose
[4] Old English verse

Date of MS	*gloss.*	*transl.*	*OEprose*	*OEverse*
- 850:	-	-	-	-
850- 950:	-	8	7	-
950-1050:	7	15	5	25
TOTAL	7	23	12	25
%	10.45%	34.33%	17.91%	37.31%

Table 1: The dative absolute on Old English (Helsinki Corpus)

[7] Paolo Ramat: "I costrutti assoluti nelle lingue indoeuropee", in P. Ramat (ed.): *Studia Linguistica...*, Enzo Evangelisti, Milan, UNICOPLI, pp. 341-364; P. Ramat: "On Latin Absolute Constructions", in J. Herman (ed.): *Linguistic Studies on Latin*, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 1993, pp. 259-268.

[8] See G. Serbat, "L'ablatif absolu", *Revue des Etudes Latines* (1979) 57, pp. 340-354 and G. Calbioli: "The expansion of one Latin NP into two clauses: from Indoeuropean to Romance", in G. Calbioli (ed.): *Papers on Grammar III*, Bologna, CLUEB, pp. 129-145.

[9] Norman Blake: "Translation and the history of English", in Matti Rissanen et al. (eds.): *History of Englishes: New Methods and Interpretations in Historical Linguistics*, Berlin-New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 1992, pp. 17-22.

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The data given in Table 1 proves that, contrary to previous statements on this topic,[10] the use of the dative absolute was more frequent in Old English texts (55.22%) than in translations from Latin (44.78%). Moreover, Old English poetry is the most represented category, with a 37.31% of the total. Interestingly enough, most of the Anglo-Saxon poems included in these 10th century manuscripts were composed several centuries before, and show all the characteristics of oral style.[11] Obviously, influence from Latin syntax cannot account for the massive use of this absolute construction in oral poetry, so that the Old English dative absolute can confidently be considered a native feature of Anglo-Saxon syntax.

Structurally, the 25 examples found in Old English verse texts can be divided into two main groups, illustrated by the following:

(3.1) *Duru sona onarn,* fyrbendum fæst, *syþðan he hire folnum æthran* (*Beowulf* 721)
(3.2) *God ana wat hwæt* him weaxendum *winter bringaþ* (*The Fortunes of Men* 154, 8)

In the first type, exemplified by (3.1), the participle can appear either alone or together with an adverb,[12] whereas in the second, illustrated by (3.2), it is accompanied by a noun or an adjective in the role of subject of the participial construction. The use of the first type, which is historically older, seems to be restricted to the most archaic texts (mainly epic poetry) and is relatively frequent in *Beowulf*, whereas the second type found its way into Anglo-Saxon literature only during the ninth century, coinciding with the development of the Mercian written tradition. The use of this type of dative absolute is relatively frequent in the work of individual poets as Cynewulf, where these constructions usually take the form of lexicalized expressions, as in the following example:

(3.3) *...þæt þu miltsige* me þearfendum, *þæt unsælig eall ne forweorþe* (*Juliana*, 125)

It should be noted here that a parallel development took place in the history of Latin, where participial constructions with a nominal subject did not become common until the classical period:

> *De Palute à l'époque impériale, l'A[blativ] A[bsolut] a donc subi un changement formel important: il ne se présente plus que rarement avec un second terme nominal (nom ou adjective) [...]; en revanche, les participes présent et passé ont très largement ouvert leur emploi, au point de représenter la seule réalisation vivante pour le second terme du AA.*[13]

Whether the Old English change from type 1 to type 2 was the result of the natural evolution of the language or a consequence of the growing Latin influence on the de-

[10] R. Lass, o. cit., p. 239.
[11] M. Alexander: *The Earliest English Poems*, London, Penguin, 1966, p. 14.
[12] In this case, the subject of the participle construction is the same as the subject of the main clause, whereas in Latin it can be used with any constituent. Cf. M. Görlach: *Introduction to Early Modern English*, Cambridge, CUP, 1991, p. 128.
[13] G. Serbat, o. cit., p. 345.

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veloping written standard is undoubtedly a rather thorny question. What is clear here is that the oral character of these constructions was being progressively lost, which permitted their diffusion as a written device and the enlargement of their syntactic forms.

According to Table 1, the frequency of the dative absolute in Old English prose is rather low. Furthermore, it started to be used in prose texts only during the subperiod 850-950, which probably indicates that the type of participial construction found in prose emerged independently from its counterpart in Old English verse, and is to be associated with the Latinate syntax found in the works of Alfred and Wærferth, which very probably reflects an aspiration towards high style.[14] Finally, the relative decline of this construction during the subperiod 950-1050 may be interpreted as an indication of the search for a more authocthonous diction that characterizes the works of Ælfric, Æthelwold and other 10th century writers.[15]

Consequently, whereas the dative absolute found in oral poetry is to be related to the spoken language of the early settlers of England, the new participial constructions that sprinkle the Anglo-Saxon prose from the 9th century onwards are to be seen rather as a foreign calque, and it is translation from Latin which would hold it up as a model to be emulated.

4. THE RESURGENCE OF PARTICIPIAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

The Middle English period marked the progressive decline of the Anglo-Saxon case system; as case distinctions became neutralized, participial constructions of the type described for example (3.1) developed into appositive complements, as in the following example:[16]

(4.1) *O Bussh unbrent,* brennynge in Moyses sighte,... (CT VII.468)

Only personal pronouns were able to maintain the old distinction between the nominative and the oblique case, so that participial constructions with dative subjects continued to be used throughout the Middle English period:

(4.2) *Ful benyngly...he suffered hir to say hir entent & 3af a fayr answer,* hir supposyng *it xuld ben þe bettyr* (MKempe A 37.11-12)

However, these dative subjects began to be supplanted by the corresponding nominative forms in late Middle English, as in:

(4.3) *What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse / To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse, / And* he continuynge *evere in sturdinesse?* (CT IV.698-700, *c*)

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[14] M.Godden: "The literary language", in R. Hogg (ed.): *The Cambridge History of the English Language I: The Beginnings to 1066*, Cambridge, CUP, pp. 523-524.

[15] M. Godden, ib., p. 529.

[16] This construction survived into the early Modern English period, where, in very exceptional cases, the subject of the main clause is not the subject of the participial construction: "that *sleeping in mine Orchard* / A Serpent stung me" (*Hamlet,* I, 4, 120).

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It is precisely this variant, traditionally known as nominative absolute, that became more common in early Modern English, in imitation of Latin and French structures:

(4.4) Our pastimes done, *posses a golden structure* (TAndronicus II.3.26)

Moreover, Elizabethan authors developed a prepositional participial construction, on the model of the Latin *post bellum confectum* type, that became "particularly frequent in classically-inspired authors such as Spencer and Milton":[17]

(4.5) *Sir knight with-hold,* till further triall made (Faerie Queene I.1.12)

Interestingly, complex verb forms of the type *having been said*, with no formal equivalent in Latin, became common in early Modern English Latinized texts. Many of these constructions became lexicalized expression in the written language, e.g. *which being understood* (lat. *quibus rebus cognitis*).

5. SUMMARY

This being a preliminary study, many assumptions are still based on inadequate evidence. Closer study on the evolution of participial constructions in the history of English, Latin and French would give a fuller picture of their development. Nevertheless, some preliminary conclusions may be drawn here.

Firstly, adverbial participial clauses formed part of the spoken system, which favoured their frequent use in the oral poetry of the Anglo-Saxons. Translation from Latin, where the ablative absolute had become a literary device, played a decisive role in the development of new types of participial absolute constructions in Old English prose, which became less frequent as case distinctions collapsed. Only in late Middle English and early Modern English influence from Latin and French encouraged the creation of new participial constructions, the so-called nominative absolute, which were typical of the literary language.

[17] N. Blake, o. cit, p. 21.

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