Identifying absolute subjects: A systemic functional approach

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HIGHLIGHTS
• Absolute subjects can be either nominative or accusative.
• Absolute subjects can be used in non-finite adverbial clauses, appositive clauses, subject clauses and complement clauses.
• Absolute subjects in different types of non-finite clauses are different in independency.

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ABSTRACT
The absolute subject refers to the subject of absolute nominative clauses in traditional grammar. It can be either nominative or accusative. Corpora data show that the number of nominatives has been decreasing, and that of accusatives, increasing over time. Absolute nominative clauses of appositive, attendant circumstance and clausal adjunct in traditional grammar correspond to the non-finite clauses of elaboration, extension and enhancement with subject in the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics. In addition, absolute subjects can also be used in non-finite clauses of projection and embedding. The relationships between absolute subjects in different non-finite clauses and the primary clauses are different in independence. The tendency to be independent can be embodied in the dimension of the absolute subjects and that of the primary clauses. From either dimension, the tendency to be independent can form a cline. The primary clause based tendency is more in line with the characteristics of absolute subjects.

1. Introduction

Traditional grammar (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985) defines such constructions consisting of a logical subject and a logical predicate functioning as adverbials as absolute nominative clauses (or absolute clauses). For example:

(1) She shrank a little, the eyes dilating. (BNC_FIC)
(2) Introductions over, Nicholson motioned for his guests to sit down. (BNC_FIC)

The absolute nominative clause in (1) functions as an attendant circumstance, and that in (2), an adverbial of time. However, some absolute nominative clauses are difficult to be included into any type of adverbials; rather they can be ‘understood as explaining some notion ancillary to the meaning of the main clause’ (Stump, 1985, p. 335). According to Kortmann (1991, p. 99), most (four out of five) absolute nominative clauses are not adverbial clauses, but appositive or coordinate clauses. For example:

(3) They walked for some time, Stribling leading, Creed following. (COHA_FIC)

It can be seen from examples (1), (2) and (3) that it is problematic to define absolute nominative clauses as non-finite or verbless adverbial clauses with subject. This is because being adverbial is not a necessary requirement for forming absolute nominative clauses. They may also be non-finite or verbless appositive clauses. The subjects of absolute nominative clauses can be referred to as absolute subjects. This research intends to investigate the case of absolute subjects and what syntactic types of non-finite clauses may have an absolute subject. For this purpose, we will first carry out a corpus-based quantitative study of the case of absolute nominative clauses in Section 2. In Section 3 and Section 4, we will discuss in what syntactic types of non-finite clauses absolute subjects can occur and identify absolute subjects within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Section 5 will analyze the absolute subjects’ tendency to be independent from the primary clauses under the notion of cline.

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2. Absolute subject: the Case

Case is ‘a grammatical category used in the analysis of wordclasses (or their associated phrases) to identify the syntactic relationship between words in a sentence, through such contrasts as nominative, accusative, etc.’ (Crystal, 2008, p. 66) Absolute nominative clauses are so named because the subject of this construction is always nominative, or at least the subject of the English absolute nominative clauses is nominative. For example:

(4) a. They met on the Ponte Trinita, she seeing and calling out to him first. (BNC_FIC)
   b. His side ended with a total of 311, he having contributed 162. (BNC_MISC)
   c. They being agreed, one may as well go back to the “finger in the wind”! (BNC_FIC)

However, the case of the subject of absolute nominative clauses may also be accusative, some of which are obviously affected by Latin (Curme, 1931; Jespersen, 1937; Visser, 1972). For example:

(5) a. He knows how I feel, me being an only child... (BNC_FIC)
   b. How rare that was, him smiling. (BNC_FIC)
   c. I think it’s disgusting, him talking like that. (BNC_FIC)

The case of absolute nominative clauses has long been controversial. Absolute nominative clauses in different languages use different cases: locative in Sanskrit, genitive in Greek, ablative in Latin, accusative in French, nominative or accusative in Italian, and dative in Norman, etc. In Anglo-Saxon, the normal case of absolute nominative clauses was dative, just as ablative in Latin. From the historical and analogical perspective, absolute nominative clauses in Middle and Modern English should have been the oblique case. However, they were actually nominative. ‘About the middle of the fourteenth century the nominative began to replace the dative’ (Morris, 1886(2010), p. 103), and this process is completed at about 1420s (Ross, 1893(2012), p. 49). Grammarians in the 19th century give two different interpretations for the change of case of absolute nominative clauses from dative to nominative. One is that the reason why the absolute case changed from dative to nominative is the loss of case inflections, and ‘the dative was mistaken for the nominative’ (Kellner, 1892, p. 125). Another is that the use of a noun in the zero-form or a pronoun in the subject form is ‘a continuation of the Old English usage with the noun before the participle in the zero case, with later analogous introduction of the subject form of the pronouns’ (Visser, 1972, p. 1149). According to this interpretation, the subject of absolute nominative clauses should always be nominative, and it ‘is erroneous in making it the objective’ (Murray, 1808(2011), p. 201). ‘A Noun or a Pronoun is put absolute in the nominative, when its case depends on no other word’ (Brown, 1861), hence is called ‘nominative absolute’ (Fowler, 1860, p. 517).

However, due to the impact of the Latin grammar, many grammarians in the 19th century still hold that it is not correct for zero nouns or nominative pronouns to be the subject of absolute nominative clauses, and insist that the zero nouns or nominative pronouns before the absolute nominative clauses are dative or ablative because the loss of inflections will not change one case into another. Despite the use of the nominative forms of the personal pronouns, absolute nominative clauses are ‘historically the objective absolute’ (Bright, 1890, p.161).

Grammarians in the 20th century (e.g. Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999; Crystal, 2008) generally accept the fact that absolute nominative clauses are nominative, and sometimes they can also be accusative (e.g. Curme, 1931; Jespersen, 1949; Visser, 1972). Still there are people insisting that absolute nominative clauses whose subjects are oblique in case are generally regarded as unacceptable (Stump, 1985, p. 11). Fowler (1965, P. 4) tries to explain that the absolute nominative clause in (6) should be nominative.

(6) There being no evidence against him, and he (not him) denying the charge, we could do nothing.

Although traditional grammarians have paid full attention to the case of absolute clauses, they have not reached any agreement yet. To examine the case distribution of the subject of absolute nominative clauses, we extracted 62 occurrences of the case marked first and third personal pronoun subjects in BNC (British National Corpus) with relevant search queries, of which there are 33 nominatives and 29 accusatives. Using similar search queries, we extracted 289 occurrences from COHA (Corpus of Historical American English), of which there are 228 nominatives and 61 accusatives. However, the diachronic distribution of accusatives shows an increasing trend while that of nominatives, decreasing. Language change can be explained by the Piotrowski Law, according to which ‘the history of success of a new linguistic phenomenon always begins slowly, then speeds up and finally slows down again’ (Turenne, 2010). To test whether the decrease of nominative subjects and the increase of accusative subjects of absolute nominative clauses abide by the Piotrowski Law, we will use the following equation according to which the portion of accusative subjects increases over time:

$$ y = \frac{C}{1 + ae^{-bt}} $$

In this equation, \( y \) is the number of forms in question at time \( t \) which is an independent variable, and \( a, b, \) and \( C \) are coefficients, among which \( a \) is the integration constant and \( C \) is the limit of change. The point of analysis is to find how well the curve given by this equation can approximate the empirical data. The goodness of fit is typically measured by the adjusted \( R \) Square coefficient, with the perfect fit being the maximum value of 1.

To facilitate comparison, we will transfer the original frequency in each decade into the standard frequency of per 100 million words. See Table 1 and Figs. 1 and 2:

Nominative subjects do not show a trend of increase or decrease. The distribution is homogeneous (\( p = 0.63 > 0.05 \)) and does not abide by the Piotrowski Law (\( R = 0.01605 \)). Accusative subjects, however, show a general trend of increase over time. The distribution is homogeneous (\( p = 0.48 > 0.05 \)) and the degree of fitting is 0.57 104, basically abiding by the Piotrowski Law.

Many contemporary grammarians (e.g. Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973; Quirk et al., 1985; Watson, 1976; Haiman and Thompson, 1984; Biber et al., 1999) prefer to use ‘absolute clauses’ to name absolute nominative clauses to avoid the case problem. To some extent, they accept the fact that the subject of absolute nominative

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**Fig. 1.** Fitting the diachronic distribution of nominative subjects of absolute nominative clauses.
Table 1
Diachronic distribution of nominative and accusative subjects of absolute nominative clauses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Nominative</th>
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<th>Accusative</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Original Frequency</td>
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<td>Original Frequency</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</table>

Fig. 2. Fitting the diachronic distribution of accusative subjects of absolute nominative clauses.

clauses can be either nominative or accusative. Therefore, the so-called absolute nominative is itself improper. No matter whether it is nominative or accusative, the personal pronoun functions as the subject of the logical predicate, and hence can be referred to as absolute subject.

3. Syntactic functions of non-finite clauses with absolute subject

Absolute subject can be defined as an overt subject of non-finite and verbless clauses which are not introduced by a subordinator and are not the complement of a preposition. That is to say, the subject of an absolute nominative clause is not related to the matrix clause. According to Curme (1931, pp. 154–157), absolute subjects can be identified in adverbial clauses, appositive clauses, and subject clauses. For example:

(6) a. I can picture her now sitting at the harmonium in her black lace gown, me standing beside her as we sang together. (BNC_MISC)
b. We quarreled, I incoherent with fear, he growing furious, until he backed me up against the harebell bank. (COHA_FIC)

c. You sitting on the sofa is as bad as letting the dog on it. (BNC_FIC)

The subject + non-finite predicate construction in (6a) is an absolute nominative clause of adjunct, and the two in (6b) are absolute nominative clauses of appositive in the traditional sense, while that in (6c) is not an absolute nominative clause; it is a non-finite subject clause. None of the subjects of the non-finite elements in (6) is a direct participant of the matrix clause, and hence they are all absolute subjects. Absolute subjects are so termed because they do not assume syntactic functions in the matrix clauses. SFL developed by Halliday (1985, 1994) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, 2014) is meaning based; it analyzes the functional structures of clauses from the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions and has constructed a complicated network of clause complexes. However, SFL does not refer to absolute nominative clauses nor absolute subjects, only mentioning that “there may be an explicit Subject in the dependent clause” (Halliday, 1994, p. 229; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p. 404) when discussing non-finite clauses.

According to SFL, the internal structure of a clause is a multi-functional construct. Two clauses can be connected to form a clause complex, one of which is the primary clause and the other, secondary. The relationship between the two clauses constituting a clause complex is determined by the interdependent relationship and the logico-semantic relationship. The former can be further classified into parataxis and hypotaxis, and the latter, expansion and projection. In expansion, the secondary clause elaborates, extends or enhances the primary clause, and in projection, the primary clause projects a locution or an idea. The interdependent and the logico-semantic relationships intersect to form a relation network of clause complexes.

A sequence at the semantic stratum is congruently realized by a clause complex at the lexicogrammatical stratum; it can also be realized by two independent simple clauses which are linked together by some cohesive devices, or even by a finite clause and a non-finite clause, or a group or phrase realizing circumstance through rank-shift. These lexicogrammatical forms form a cline: a simple clause at one end and two independent clauses at the other, with the clause complex in the middle, which contains two areas, one being close to the end of circumstance, where one of the two clauses depends on the other, realizing hypotaxis, the other being close to the end of sequence, where two clauses depend on each other, realizing parataxis.
SFL does not confine the functions realized by a lexicogrammatical item. This opens up a large syntactic function potential for absolute subjects. Non-finite clauses have the potential to elaborate, extend or enhance the primary clauses in clause complexes of expansion, to be projected by the projecting clauses in clause complexes of projection, and to function as participants or modifiers of participants in simple clauses. All these functions of non-finite clauses have the potential to have an explicit subject. If the subject is not a direct participant of the primary clause, it is an absolute subject. See Fig. 3:

Absolute nominative clauses belong to the category of non-finite clauses. In Halliday's thinking, a non-finite clause can only realize hypotaxis. The three syntactic functions of absolute nominative clauses, i.e., appositive, attendant circumstances and clausal adjuncts in traditional grammar correspond respectively to the non-finite clauses of expansion with subject, i.e., elaboration, extension and enhancement in SFL. For example:

(7) It kept them apart, kept them foreign to each other, him unhaveable, her unhad. (BNC_FIC) (elaboration)

(8) Rosie came marching in early Monday, head up, eyes flaming. (COHA_FIC) (extension)

(9) a. The excitement having passed, he felt almost exhausted. (COHA_FIC) (enhancement of time)

b. The war coming on, he enlisted in the Richmond Howitzers and served during the whole war. (COHA_FIC) (enhancement of cause)

c. Weather permitting, they would all breakfast at twelve on the yacht. (COHA_FIC) (enhancement of condition)

4. Identifying absolute subjects

Since absolute subjects are not confined in clauses of certain syntactic functions, they have the potential to function in any kind of clauses. For example, the subject in both People smoking in public is prohibited and People smoking in public will be punished is constituted by a noun People and a non-finite element smoking in public. However, the two elements constitute a subject–predicate construction embedded in the finite clause to function as the subject in the former, but do not constitute a subject–predicate construction in the latter where smoking in public is embedded in the core noun People to function as its post-modifier. The same construction in People smoking in public, the alarm will be switched on automatically functions as a circumstance. In the three sentences, only the noun People in the second sentence realizes a participant, that is, being the subject of the verbal group will be punished, hence not an absolute subject. The noun People in both the first and the third sentences functions as the subject of non-finite elements and has nothing to do with the verbal groups in the matrix clauses, hence is in agreement with the definition of absolute subjects. They are absolute subjects in the subject clause and in the adverbial clause respectively. See (10) and (11):

(10) a. Dan starts off, the soldiers following. (COHA_FIC)

b. Then, the sun having set, they went into the glow and welcome of the lighted lamps. (COHA_FIC)

(11) She could hear voices ahead, a girl squealing, a man laughing. (BNC_FIC)

It is obvious that the secondary clauses in (10a) and (10b) are typical absolute nominative clauses in traditional grammar, functioning as attendant circumstance and clausal adjunct of time respectively. In SFL, they realize hypotactic extension and enhancement. The second secondary clauses in (11) function as appositives in traditional grammar. They realize hypotactic elaboration in the Hallidayan sense. The subjects of the absolute nominative clauses in (10) and (11) are all absolute subjects. From the perspective of participant, the subject of an absolute nominative clause of extension or enhancement is not co-referential with that of the primary clause, and the subject of an absolute clause of elaboration is completely or partially co-referential with that of the primary clause. Whether or not co-referential, the subject of an absolute nominative clause does not directly function as a participant of the primary clause syntactically. Neither the soldiers in (10a) nor the sun in (10b) is a participant of the verbal group of the primary clause. In (11), the subject a girl and a man of the absolute nominative clauses of elaboration can be seen as the complement of the verbal group of the primary clause semantically, but neither of them is the direct participant of the verbal group of the primary clause. From this point of view, nominal groups in non-finite clauses other than absolute clauses can also be absolute subjects. For example:

(12) a. Tom flying planes badly can be dangerous. (Yang, 2003, 111)

b. Straw burning will be outlawed altogether after the 1992 harvest. (BNC_NEWS)

(13) a. He heard footsteps passing his door as someone made their way home. (BNC_FIC)

b. We consider withdrawal to be the fairest option. (BNC_MISC)

Both the two sentences in (12) contain the construction of ‘noun + non-finite element’, but in (12a) this construction functions as the subject of the verbal group can be, and in (12b), the noun Straw functions as the subject of the verbal group will be and the non-finite element burning functions as its post-modifier. Therefore, the noun Tom in (12a) is an absolute subject, but the noun Straw in (12b) is not. The non-finite clauses in (13) are projected non-finite clauses, and grammatically they function as the complement of the primary clauses (Vandelanotte, 2008; Vandelanotte and Davidsie, 2009). In the case of (13), the nominal group lies in between the projecting verbal group and a non-finite element. It is unclear whether the nominal group belongs to the projecting verbal group or the non-finite element. However, ‘in either case, if it is a pronoun it is in the objective case’ (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 350). Or in the sense of formal syntax, it is the finite verb that assigns case to the noun because non-finite verbs cannot assign case. In the case of projected finite clauses, the nominal group functioning as the subject of the projected clause is assigned the nominative case by the finite verb of the projected clause. Therefore, (13a) is a clause complex of projection, in which footsteps passing his door as someone made their way home is a non-finite clause with subject, the whole construction functioning as the complement of the main verb heard. In this construction, footsteps functions as both the complement of the projecting verbal group and the subject of the non-finite element. Therefore, the whole construction is a combination of two clauses. In this sense, the subject footsteps is not independent from the projecting verb. However, semantically, what He heard is the sound of footsteps passing, rather than footsteps itself. The subject footsteps of the non-finite clause cannot be separated from the non-finite element; they together construe a phenomenon of the mental verb heard.
Jespersen (1933, p. 309) refers to the structure that can form a complete piece of communication as independent nexus, which ‘forms only a part of a sentence, and thus may be either a primary in a sentence (subject or object), a secondary (an adjunct) to a primary in a sentence, or a tertiary in a sentence’. Jespersen (1933, p. 310) explains the simple nexus in (13) more clearly through (14). It is very clear that in (14) what I found is her gone. I did not find her because she was gone.

(14) I found her gone.

(13b) is similar to (13a) in form, but their syntactic structures are obviously different. In Halliday's thinking, the construction consider withdrawal to be a verbal group realizing the relation of cause, hence cannot form a clause complex. However, Yang (2003) holds that both footstoes passing his door in (13a) and withdrawal to be the fairest option in (13b) are projected non-finite clauses, the former being a macro-phenomenon, construing an act, and the latter, a meta-phenomenon, realizing a fact. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) try their effort to prove that withdrawal in (13b) is the object of the verbal group consider, and to be the fairest option is the complement of withdrawal, their reason being that the whole construction will no longer be an acceptable sentence when withdrawal is removed. The complement of an object in the traditional sense is not an essential component of a sentence. Since to be the fairest option is a complement of an object in traditional grammar, it is not indispensable. For example, He heard footsteps is acceptable, but We consider withdrawal is not. The finite equivalent of the non-finite clause in (13b) is We consider (that) withdrawal is the fairest option, from which it can be seen clearly that withdrawal is a part of the hypotactic clause. In fact, withdrawal is not indispensable to consider, but is indispensable to to be the fairest option. In addition, the reason why the nominal group withdrawal following consider cannot be omitted is that the subject of the non-finite clause is not co-referential with that of the primary clause and requires an explicit subject of its own. However, even if the two subjects are co-referential in such a construction, the subject of the non-finite clause is still indispensable, and then a reflexive pronoun is required to fill the subject slot. Despite the fact that reflexive pronouns have always an antecedent, they themselves always carry an extra meaning of emphasis, which prevents them from being completely co-referential with the antecedent. Nominative or accusative pronouns can be completely co-referential with the antecedent, so they are grammatically acceptable and cannot form absolute subjects. The projected non-finite clause can be a fact or an act. If it is a fact, even if the subject of the non-finite clause can be the complement of the main verb of the projecting clause, it can still form an absolute subject. This is because a verb projecting a fact and a verb having a nominal group functioning as its complement are different in meaning. For example, the main verb believes in (15) means ‘to accept as true’, which is different from that in she believes Nathan, meaning ‘trust’.

(15) She believes Nathan to be a fine young man. (COCA_FIC)

Structurally, (15) is closer to (13a) than (13b) is. The difference between (13a) and (15) lies in that the projected clause in the former is a projected act, while that in the latter, a projected fact. This can be tested by changing the non-finite clauses into relative clauses. For example, (13a) can be changed into He heard footsteps, which is passing his door as someone made their way home, without changing the meaning. However, if (15) is changed into She believes Nathan, who is a fine young man, the meaning also changes. When a projected non-finite clause construes an act, it is always not clear whether the nominal group between the projecting verbal group and the non-finite element is attached to the projecting clause or the projected clause. A way to test the attribution of the nominal group is to change the position of the non-finite clause with that of the primary clause. If the nominal group can be transpositioned together with the non-finite element, it can be affirmed that the nominal group is attached to the non-finite element, hence is an absolute subject; if not, it is attached to the primary clause, hence is not an absolute subject.

In a clause complex, the relation between clauses is ‘a relation between processes’ (Halliday, 1994, p. 216), and ‘the study of clause complexes, especially those which contain non-finite clauses, should focus on “the relation between processes”’ (Yang, 2003, p. 50). This is also true for absolute nominative clauses. For example:

(16) One was knitting, the other sucking a mint. (COCA_FIC)

In (16), the string the other sucking a mint is also a nominal group + non-finite element construction. The nominal group the other is not a direct participant of the primary clause, but it is not an absolute subject. This is because (16) is a paratactic clause complex, the finite element in the secondary clause being omitted. That is, the other is the subject of a finite clause.

5. Tendency to be independent

According to the discussion in the previous sections, absolute subjects can appear in four functional types of non-finite clauses: adverbial clauses, appositive clauses, subject clauses and complement clauses. Absolute subjects in different types of non-finite clauses are different in independence. The tendency to be independent is embodied in the independence of the absolute subjects and that of the primary clauses.

5.1. Independence of the absolute subject

In clauses composed of nominal groups, verbal groups and adverbial groups, the adverbial groups realize circumstances, hence are relatively loosely connected to the verbal groups realizing process. Absolute nominative clauses have no formal links with the primary clauses and they are not indispensable in meaning. They are usually separated from the primary clauses with a comma and are also flexible in position. Therefore, absolute subjects in adverbial clauses tend most to be independent from the primary clauses. However, absolute subjects in adverbial clauses of extension and those in adverbial clauses of enhancement are different in independence. Extension means that ‘one clause extends the meaning of another by adding something new to it’ (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p. 405). According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), non-finite clauses can only realize hypotaxis. However, recent researches, such as Verstraete (2007), argue that some non-finite clauses are actually foregrounded; they describe an important event in the development of the discourse (reflected in the non-possibility of clause reversal). These, he argues, involve coordinate uses of non-finite clauses. Two clauses of hypotaxis are more closely tied together than two clauses of parataxis. Two clauses of parataxis can both be free from each other, but of the two clauses of hypotaxis, only the primary clause is free and the secondary clause is dependent.

Appositives are different from adverbs in that they are not the direct elements of clauses. Therefore, absolute clauses of appositive are even more loosely connected with the verbal groups than absolute clauses of adjunct. According to Huang (1998), the interdependency between an appositive clause and its primary clause is paratactic, because ‘in parataxis, only the order 1 is possible’ (Halliday, 1994, p. 220). For example, none of the absolute clauses of appositive in (11) can be transpositioned with the primary clauses. Absolute subjects in subject and complement clauses are different. Complement clauses are projected clauses. For example, the complement clause in (13a) is a macro-phenomenon. Since
the non-finite element passing his door as someone made their way home as the complement of the object footsteps in traditional grammar and the complement is not obligatory, then He heard footsteps is syntactically acceptable. From the perspective of SFL, footsteps functions as the subject of passing his door. They form a subject–predicate construction which as a whole functions as the complement of heard. In this sense, the independence of the absolute subject in the complement clause footsteps passing his door is relatively weak.

In (13b), the verbal group consider in consider withdrawal and that in withdraw to be the fairest option are different in meaning. The projected non-finite clause is an idea. Compared with (13a), (13b) is more independent. Since withdrawal is not the complement of consider, then why can the nominal group withdrawal following considers not be omitted? There are two reasons. One is that the subject of the non-finite element is not co-referential with that of consider, so it requires an explicit subject. Even if the subject of the non-finite element is co-referential with that of consider, the non-finite element still requires an explicit subject. The other is that what the verb consider projects is a fact, but not an act. However, infinitives are perfective and cannot construe a fact. It is only when they have their own subject that they can construe a complete proposition of fact. For example:

(17) a. He considered taking his brothers back to the forest with him. (COCA_ACAD)

b. *He considers to take his brothers back to the forest with him.

The subject of the non-finite element and that of the main verb of the projecting clause are co-referential in (17). The gerund in (17a) is imperfective and can construe a proposition of fact, functioning as the complement of the main verb considers. The infinitive in (17b) is a projected act, and so it cannot construe a proposition of fact or function as the complement of the main verb considers. This further shows that, although a projected act can also have an absolute subject, the absolute subject of a projected fact is more independent. Subject clauses are fact clauses. The reason why they are more independent than complement clauses is that although complement clauses can also be projected facts, their subjects are still influenced on (assign case) by the main verbs in the projecting clauses to some extent. For example, if withdrawal in (13b) is a personal pronoun, it should be accusative. The subject of a subject clause is not influenced by the main verb in the matrix clause; it can be nominative, hence more independent.

According to this analysis, we can make this conclusion: seen from the tendency to be independent of absolute subjects, the four syntactic function types of non-finite clauses form a cine:

appositive clauses [elaboration] > adverbial clauses (extension > enhancement) > subject clauses (fact) > complement clauses (fact > act).

5.2. Independence of primary clauses

In constructions containing absolute subjects, the constructions can realize circumstances and participants as well. 'The configuration of process + participants constitutes the experiential center of the clause.' (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p. 176) Circumstances are peripheral and they are not involved in the processes. The interdependency between adverbial groups realizing circumstances and verbal groups realizing processes is relatively weak. The absence of the circumstance will not affect the integrity of the clausal structure. Similarly, in a clause complex of parataxis, each of the two clauses has its own syntactic structure, so double transitivity analysis is not allowed and the primary clauses in clause complexes with absolute nominative clauses of appositive are more independent than those in clause complexes with absolute nominative clauses of adjunct. Absolute nominative clauses of extension can be transformed into continuing clauses, so the primary clauses are less dependent on the absolute nominative clauses than those in clause complexes containing absolute nominative clauses of enhancement. Absolute nominative clauses of enhancement can be transformed into hypotactic finite clauses, and the whole construction can be double analyzed in transitivity. Removing the absolute nominative clauses will affect the basic configuration of the primary clauses. Therefore, the primary clauses are still dependent on the absolute nominative clauses.

Compared to circumstances, participants are more closely tied to processes. In the unmarked cases, participants are closely bound to the processes and hence are indispensable. From the perspective of the requirement of participants by the main verbs, the constructions with subject clauses are less independent than those with complement clauses. Here is the reason. Although the subject and complement of a verbal group are both indispensable, in the same syntactic structure, the same constituents can be omitted. This is to say that both the subject and the complement can be omitted. However, the omission of subject is structural, which can only be realized in paratactic clause complexes, while that of complement may be cohesive. This shows that a verbal group requires a subject more intensely than a complement, and so a clause without a complement is more independent than that without a subject. When the omitted element is obvious, a clause without a complement can be used alone, but a clause without a subject cannot. Form example:

(18) a. He stopped and took off his watch. (COCA_FIC)

b. Millions of people watch the event (Sun., March 21, 8 p.m., ABC) on TV around the world. Who will win and who deserves to win? (COCA_NEWS)

(18a) is a paratactic clause complex. The subject of the second clause is co-referential with that of the first clause, hence omitted. (18b) consists of two separate sentences, the second sentence being a paratactic clause complex. The complement the event in both clauses in this clause complex is omitted. Ellipsis is a cohesive device at the textual level (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Seen from the tendency to be independent of different kinds of primary clauses, the four syntactic function types of non-finite clauses with absolute subject can also form a cine: appositive clauses (elaboration) > adverbial clauses (extension > enhancement) > subject clauses (fact > act) > complement clauses (fact).

6. Summary

Different from absolute nominative clauses, which can function as clausal adjuncts, attendant circumstances and appositives, absolute subjects can function in non-finite adverbial clauses, appositive clauses, subject clauses and complement clauses. Absolute subjects are not direct participants of the matrix clauses. The subject of a clause with an omitted finite is not an absolute subject. Absolute subjects in different types of non-finite clauses are different in independence. The tendency to be independent can be embodied from the dimension of absolute subjects and that of the primary clauses. It can form a cine from either dimension. Of the two dimensions of independent tendencies, the primary clause based tendency is more in line with the characteristics of absolute subjects.

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