The Sanskrit absolutive as a fuzzy form

Lars Martin Fosse, Oslo

The Sanskrit absolutive - or gerund – has presented a number of problems to the scholar for the last 150 years or so. The form has been the subject of much discussion. In this paper, I shall try to approach two of the aspects of the absolutive mystery to see if I can throw some more light on some of the problems. I shall discuss the voice of the absolutive seen in relation to its agent, and I shall also take a closer look at how the absolutive functions syntactically in the sentence.

According to Bertil Tikkanen, "*it appears that the gerund is partly indifferent to voice: it has basically active(-middle) vs. passive voice and construction, but it may have passive interpretation and construction when there is coreference of the promoted or topicalized Undergoer and/or the (demoted) Actor with the corresponding arguments of the main clause, which for that reason is also typically passive.*" Both Katyayana and Bhartrhari supported a similar interpretation, namely that the diathesis of the subordinate verb (the absolutive) depended upon the diathesis of the main verb. Against this interpretation, I shall claim that the absolutive is always active, and that the "passive" interpretation is simply due to a "trick of the light", or in more concrete terms, an effect produced by the fact that in these circumstances, the main clause and the absolutive clause not only share the same agent or subject, but also the same patient or object.

Subjects and objects

In the following, I shall refer to both absolutives and finite verbs as verbs or verbal elements. I shall first have a look at how subjects and objects behave in a sentence with an absolutive.

When analyzing epic slokas and padas, it is easy to show that there is a tendency to let an absolutive clause fill *either* a full pada *or* half a sloka *or* three padas *or* a full sloka. If we look at the examples I have given in the handout, we see that such an absolutive clause can contain both subject and object elements, in other words, they function almost like normal clauses with finite verbs. A particularly fine example of this style is no. (1). Here the verbs *saṃnivārya*, *pariplutya*, and *anayad* share the same subject, *bhīma*. Both *sa* and *mahābala* are coreferential with *bhīma*, and they are distributed on the two preceding half-ślokas: *sa* + *saṃnivārya*, *mahābalaḥ* + *pariplutya*, and finally *bhīmaḥ* + *anayad*. More common is the construction in example (2). The effect is to create the impression that there

is a separate subject for each verb, in other words, the AbsC behaves superficially like a clause rather than a phrasal expression. The same principle applies to shared multi-element objects, although examples of such are much more difficult to find. (3) is a good example of this construction. Here we see that nominal elements with reference to the same object are distributed on different verbal elements. More common is the case where two verbs (absolutives or finite verbs) share the same object, and where the object is only expressed once, such as in (4). Notice that *tyaktvā prāṇān* is subordinated to *abhikrudhya*, a rare case of an absolutive being subordinated to another absolutive.

In the next case, no. (5), we have a combination of the two phenomena: elements belonging to both the subject and the object are distributed on the various verbal elements. An interesting variety of the shared subject type is example (6) from the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa. A similar case is found in the Matsyapurāṇa (7). If we regard the AbsC as a transformation of a finite clause (or at least as derived from a finite clause) it is hardly surprising that the grammatical subject, which is usually identical with the agent or experiencer of the sentence, occasionally appears in the surface structure of the sentence. In fact, it does not even have to be explicitly expressed, as example (8) shows. Here the grammatical subject/agent for *śrutvā* must be supplied from context: "As [we] had heard this which was said by the tortoise, suddenly a divine wagon appeared from the world of the gods." In this case it is obvious that the underlying agent is a dative or genitive (e.g. *asmābhyaḥ*) that has been left out in the main clause.[1] Compare also (9): *vairasya gatam ānṛṇyam na sma vācyā vivakṣatām | jitvā mukto droṇaputro brāhmaṇyād gauraveṇa ca || 010016031*[2]. Here the underlying agent is an unexpressed *asmābhiḥ*. In the two next cases (10), the agent is expressed as the accusative object of the main verb. (10) is interesting also because the object of the main verb has been moved in front of the absolutive and thus out of its node. This is a focusing device. In the comparison in the second line of MBh 006073011, Mahendra (Great Indra) functions as the agent/subject of an absolutive in a sentence where the main verb has to be inferred from the previous line! We may assume that there is a syntactic slot for an agent/subject that belongs to the absolutive, and this is what we find in examples (11) and (12), where the absolutive agent/subject is coreferent with the main verb's patient/object. However, this does not become less bewildering if we look at passive sentences such as (13). Here *manuja* is the agent (and the subject!) of the absolutive, but the subject and

[1] This kind of agent is usually referred to as logophoric.

[2] "We have paid off the debt we owed to our enemy. People, while talking, will not be able to censure us any longer. Having vanquished Drona's son, we have st him free for the sake of his being a Brahmana and of the respect that should be shown to our deceased preceptor". (Ganguli's translation, p. 38, Sauptika parva).

patient, not the agent, of the main verb *pramucyate*. The same applies to the next verse, (14). In other words, the agent of the AbsC does not have to be the agent of the main verb, but can instead be its patient/subject. As we see, these two examples are really the inverse of ŚB 11.6.1.7 quoted above. Compare also (15) RV 10.34.11a *striyaṃ dṛṣṭvāya kitavaṃ tatāpa*, which according to the pattern given in 012258070 could have been written *[sa] striyaṃ dṛṣṭvāya kitavas taptaḥ*.[3]

The problem becomes starkly evident when we have a passive verb the subject of which (i.e. the patient) is *not* coreferent with the agent/subject of the absolutive. I can transform the sentence

(16) *rāma odanaṃ paktvā bhuṅkte* into

(17) *rāmeṇa odanaḥ paktvā bhujyate*

meaning that porridge has been cooked and is being eating by Rama, but

(18) *rāma odanaṃ paktvā bhujyate [vyāghreṇa]*

would only mean that Rama was eaten by someone or something after cooking porridge, for instance by a tiger. But in example 18, Rama is the agent and subject of the active absolutive, whereas the main verb has a different agent and a different patient/subject. A sentence like

(19) ***rāma odanaḥ paktvā bhujyate vyāghreṇa*

is not possible.

So, in sentences where the subject/agent of the absolutive is *not* the agent of the passive main verb, we find that the agent of the absolutive remains in the nominative, whereas the patient - if different from the object of the main verb - remains in the accusative and seems to answer to an active verb. When, however, both the absolutive and the finite verb share the same patient, it almost invariably occurs in the nominative as the grammatical subject of both the absolutive and the main verb, or so it seems. How is this contradicting behaviour possible? The ancient solution, that the absolutive gets its voice or diathesis from the main verb, does not work, because if that were the case, the grammatical object of the absolutive would be in the nominative also when it is different from the grammatical object of the main verb. The most reasonable solution would rather seem to be *that all arguments common to both the main verb and the absolutive are governed by the main verb*. It would therefore seem that we are dealing with a raising - or deletion - rule. This conclusion is, unfortunately, not unproblematic in the view of transformational grammar.

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[3] "When the he saw his wife, it pained the gambler" as against "When he saw his wife, the gambler was pained."

The examples given here would seem to suggest that both the absolutive and the finite verb have the ability to assign agenthood or subjecthood to an NP. However, this ability appears to be hierarchical. The absolutive is inherently active and cannot assign the instrumental as the theta-role for the agent. Therefore, if there is a conflict between the theta roles of the absolutive agent and the main verb agent, the main verb gains the upper hand. Thus, as long as the main verb is active, the absolutive behaves like a finite verb, although the same NP is not normally repeated in both the AbsC and the main sentence. With a passive main verb, the main verb assigns theta-roles to all coreferent agent/patient elements. The result is a hybrid syntax, a paradoxical mixing of constructions with active subordinated clauses in combination with a passive main verb.

Clause-chaining and unbalanced coordination

An agent may on occasion perform a series of actions. Such actions may be connected by conjunctions (whether overt or empty)[4], or by the use of absolutives for all actions but the last in a linear chain (so-called unbalanced coordination, UBC, where order is relevant). This type of subordinate construction, the so-called *clause-chaining* construction, is neither argumental nor adnominal, nor is it clearly adverbial, according to HASPELMATH.[5] This raises the question whether the Sanskrit absolutive can be regarded as a medial verb *as well as* a converb. In many languages, medial verbs are used as a means of clause-chaining. Such verbs cannot be used in isolated independent sentences but have to be used with another verb on which they depend in that they share (at least) the mood and tense of the controlling verb, and in that the reference of their subject is often determined by the controlling verb.[6] According to HASPELMATH, "sequences of medial verbs and a final verb generally express sequential or simultaneous events without further specification of the nature of the semantic link between the two events. The nearest equivalent in European languages is generally coordination by means of 'and…'.[7] Languages where such constructions are prominent are referred to as *clause-chaining languages*. Clause chaining is divided into two main types: clause chaining where the final clause contains an independent verb, so-called *anterior clause chaining*, and clause chaining where the initial clause contains an independent verb, the rest of the verbs being medial, so-called *posterior clause chaining*.[8] In such languages as Sanskrit and Pali, we are clearly dealing with the first type. This is typologically associated

[4] For empty conjunctions, see [Johannessen, 1998 #62, p. 84f].
[5] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 7].
[6] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 20].
[7] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 21].
[8] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 22].

with OV basic order[9], and Sanskrit and Pali, in spite of their claim to a free word order, are basically SOV languages. The key difference between converbs and medial verbs, according to HASPELMATH, is "that prototypical converbal clauses are *subordinate* (in the sense of 'embedded'), while prototypical medial clauses in clause-chaining constructions are not subordinate, but *cosubordinate*..."[10] For instance, in contrast to subordinate adverbial clauses, medial clauses cannot appear in clause-internal position, i.e. in between immediate constituents of the main clause, and unlike subordinate adverbial clauses, medial clauses cannot contain cataphoric pronouns.[11] HASPELMATH uses the distinction between subordination and cosubordination to define *converb* and *medial verb*: "A converb is a verb form that is used primarily in (adverbial) subordinate clauses, and a medial verb is a verb form that is used primarily in cosubordinate clauses."[12] Let us have a closer look at action chains in Sanskrit before we proceed with this discussion.

In Vedic Sanskrit, the finite verb in a principal sentence is unaccented, whereas a number of such actions in a row lead to accenting of the other verbs. Accent can thus indicate subordination, but also coordination, e.g. *téṣāṃ pāhi, śrudhí hávam "drink of them, hear our call."* A verb can also be accented if it begins the sentence or if it coincides with the beginning of a pāda or foot (shown by the slants). A classic Ṛgvedic example would be (20). In this case of asyndetic parataxis, there are no conjunctions, yet we have an action chain reciting the main deeds of Indra in their chronological sequence. At a later stage of the language this would be a clear candidate for an absolutive chain.

In fact, early Sanskrit shows quite a few examples of paratactic constructions with or without conjunctions (syndetic or asyndetic action chains). But gradually, absolutives make their way into the narrative stream. For instance, the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa offers us an example of a simple action chain (20). In this example, there are no conjunctions either, only a terse series of sentences, derived from (22). The same thing happens in the *Mahābhārata* prose, see example (23).

Where conjunctions are used, the RV has *áthā* and *ca*. In the Brāhmaṇas we find *ha* and *u* as well. However, early prose remains conservative, whereas Middle Indic shows the end station of the development: compare the two passages below, the first from the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa and the second from the Kusajātaka, (24) og (25).

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[9] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 23].
[10] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 23].
[11] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 24, 25].
[12] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 26].

With the exception of *abhisuṣāva*, which stands asyndetically after *dadarśa*, all verbs in example (24) are syndetically connected by means of *atha* or *ha*. There are no absolutives. Therefore, the Pali text (25) forms an almost perfect contrast to the Sanskrit passage. Admittedly, this passage is asyndetic, but it shows how a complex action chain can be created at a later stage of India's linguistic history without other finite verbs than the one that ends the chain.

Similar long collocations of absolutives are not often met with in the Epic. An epic action chain normally consists of two – three verbs. Absolutives may be connected with *ca*, but *ca* is normally not used to connect an abs. with a main verb. In such cases, *atha* is used. The following passage from the MBh. – I have not found anything similar in the *Rāmāyaṇa* – shows that such long chains of absolutives may occur there too, although they would seem to be rare (26). Here, co-referent subject elements are in italics, whereas the absolutives are bold. The main verbs are in bold and italics. Similar examples are also available from the *Brahmapurāṇa*, although they don't seem to be very frequent. This kind of clause-chaining was also used in art prose, as the following section from the *Harṣacarita* shows (27).

If we now return to HASPELMATH's distinction between converbs (subordinate) and medial verbs (cosubordinate) it is difficult to see the Sanskrit absolutive as fitting neatly into his definitional system. (Unlike the typical medial verb, the abs. may not necessarily share the mood of the main verb, although this is usually the case). HASPELMATH himself admits that the proposed definitions do not imply that there is no overlap between converbs and medial verbs.[13] He says: "Like many other grammatical distinctions, the subordinate/cosubordinate distinction is probably not always clear-cut and intermediate cases exist." If the absolutive as described here does not qualify as a medial verb, it certainly behaves like one, or like a narrative converb as described by NEDJALKOV. According to V. NEDJALKOV, who discusses the semantic typology of converbs, "we can distinguish three main types of converbal constructions on the basis of purely semantic criteria: (i) *specialized converbs* are associated with only one or two circumstantial ("adverbial") interpretations regardless of the context; (ii) *contextual converbs* may have a wide variety of circumstantial interpretations depending on the cotext and context and (iii) *narrative converbs* merely express a "coordinative connection", typically between more than two events, such that the plot is advanced."[14] It is hardly surprising that such narrative converbs are found not only in Turkic languages, Mongolian, and Manchu, but also in Tamil. Dravidian languages may in

[13] See [Haspelmath, 1995 #66, p. 26].
[14] [König, 1995 #67, p. 58]

fact have influenced the development of Indo-Aryan languages in this respect as well as in others. I therefore suggest that we may regard (subordinate) 'converb' and (co-subordinate) 'medial verb' as *roles* played by the absolutive, but at the same time generated in different manners: subordinate absolutives are generated under the VP (verb phrase) or TP (tense phrase), whereas cosubordinate absolutives are generated throught a different transformational process under CoP (the coordination phrase). Thus, the absolutive is not only a fuzzy form in the semantic sense of the word, which is well known, but it is also syntactically fuzzy, or, in slightly different language, highly flexible and with few restrictions. It is the syntactic wildcard of the Sanskrit verbal system, a role it appears to have kept also in the later Indo-Aryan languages. The terms "converb" and "medial verb" may then be considered functions rather than verbal forms, and these functions may or may not be associated with morphologically distinct forms in the verbal system. In the case of Sanskrit and other Indo-Aryan languages, one morphological category serves both functions.