

A labeling approach to the ambiguity of absolute construction in English

Keywords

Labeling Algorithm, Ambiguous Labeling, absolute/participial clauses, fused relative clauses, syntactic change

Abstract

This study analyzes the structure of English absolute construction, as in (1), along the lines of Chomsky's (2013, 2015) Labeling Algorithm towards further simplification by third factor principles. Despite its identical disguise, the DP-*ing* sequence is interpreted ambiguously: either as an adverbial in (1), or as a nominal in (2). Based on grammarians' view of the construction as reduced finite clauses (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985), its underlying structure has often been characterized (and even taught) to be full-fledged CP, deriving (1) and (2) by the partial deletion as shown in (3a) and (3b), respectively.

My proposal is to deduce the ambiguity of English absolute construction in a simpler, bottom-up manner by adopting Ambiguous Labeling (Mizuguchi 2019). Under Ambiguous Labeling, XP-YP structure can be labeled either X or Y if X and Y are equally detectable through minimal search. Given the derivation (4), the above DP-*ing* sequence "the boy whispering ..." has DP-*ing*P structure. Since D and -*ing* are equally minimal-searchable with no shared prominent feature (see (5)), it is ambiguously labeled either DP or *ing*P without causing labeling failure. To be properly interpreted as an adverbial for (1), it is labeled *ing*P and ruled in at the CI interface, otherwise ruled out as gibberish.

Ambiguous Labeling is not an ad hoc solution for the absolute construction only. This line of analysis can be applied to other kinds of A-bar movement bringing about ambiguous outputs. For example, clauses headed by *whoever* are interpreted ambiguously: as an adverbial in (6a) or a nominal in (6b). Given single and phrasal *wh*-elements (e.g. *who*, *what*; *who-ever*, *which book*), *wh*-movement of *whoever* to CP yields NP-CP structure, which is labelable as NP or CP(<Q, Q>) under Ambiguous Labeling (see (7) for the simplified representation). If labeled as NP, the structure allows a nominal interpretation, and thus it is properly ruled in at the CI interface for (6b), not for (6a). Another example (8) from the web further supports the validity of this analysis: the bracketed clause headed by a moved phrasal *wh*-element *whoever* is labeled as NP, so that the clause as a whole can be suffixed by a possessive D-head, 's.

My proposal (4) differs from the previous underlying structures (3) in that it lacks the C-domain on its top. This assumption is supported by the syntactic change of nominative absolutes in English (Tanaka 2021). While the evidence of C-domain (e.g. V-to-C movement (9a) and *wh*-fronting (9b)) abounds in the Middle and Modern English periods, nominative subjects of participial clauses have become rare in present English as the consequence of the gradual loss of C-domain beginning in the 18th century. Remaining issues include how to assign case to DP and license null subjects in participial clauses, which will be explored to further refine the present proposal.

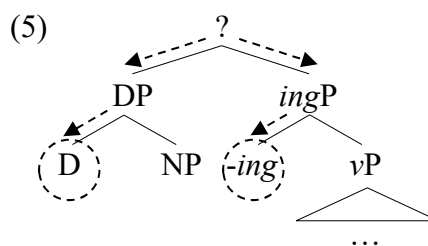
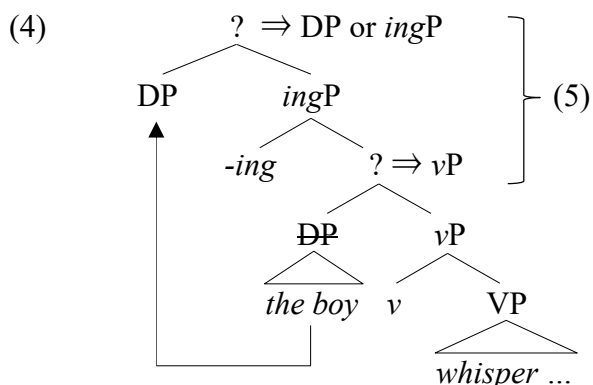
463 words

(1) They drove mostly in silence, *the boy whispering* directions to the father.

(2) *The boy whispering* into my ear looks to be around my age.

(3) a. [CP **while** [TP the boy **was** whispering ...]]

b. [DP the boy [CP **who** [TP ___ **was** whispering ...]]]



(6) a. *Whoever*/**Who* we recommend, they will appoint Jones.

b. They can appoint *whoever* they like.

(Huddleston and Pullum 2002:987)

(7) [? *whoever*_{NP[Q]} [CP C_[#Q] [TP ... *whoever*]]] : ? ⇒ NP or CP

(8) You just closed your eyes and guessed the amount of cash you put into [*whoever* you bought it from]'s hand?

(9) a. *Seyng* Iuly this fals fortunite, The soroes greate in hym so multiplied (Visser 1966:1154)

b. and on the sodaine within two hours after dyed; *of whom* the sexton telling, hee was buried there indeed. (Tanaka 2021:56)

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