

LATIN GRAMMAR

Wheelock 24: Ablative Absolute Participles, Passive Periphrastics, Dative of Agent

1. Ablative Absolute Participles

1.1. In grammar, an “absolute” construction is one that has no syntactic dependencies within the core/main clause. That is, it is not syntactically dependent upon (governed by) something else in the clause. Let’s take the idea of an ablative noun. Why are the ablative nouns in the following sentences in the ablative case?

- Caesar eōs servitūte liberāvit. Caesar freed them from servitude. (Abl of sep)
- Caesar ab Rōmā vēnit. Caesar came from Rome. (Abl object of prep)

1.2. Latin has a participial construction called the “Ablative Absolute.” There are several features of this construction:

1.2.1. The PTC will be in the ablative case (but not due to any syntactic dependency requiring the ablative case!), and its overt subject noun or pronoun will likewise be in ablative case.

1.2.2. The subject of the PTC will not be linked to any other participant in the main clause. Note: normally, the PTC’s case/gender/num is determined by the case/gender/num of the noun in the main clause that it modifies. But not with an ablative absolute PTC!

1.2.3. The participle in function is adverbial and provides the circumstances (a circumstantial frame) within which the main clause situation occurs.

1.3. Contrasting participial constructions (see Wheelock p. 193).

PTC TYPE	LATIN SENTENCE	MEANING
NORMAL PTC	Rōmam videntēs, virī gaudēbant.	<i>Seeing Rome, the men were rejoicing.</i>
ABLATIVE ABSOLUTE PTC	Rōmā vīsā, virī gaudēbant.	<i>Rome having been seen, the men were rejoicing.</i>

1.4. Translating Ablative Absolute PTCs: As with the ex. above, you can render it in a more woodenly literal way, or (if the context clearly warrants it), you can use a subordinate (or dependent) clause with a subordinating conjunction and a finite verb with the appropriate relative tense (given the tense of the main clause verb).

1.4.1. An example using the Abl Abs above:

SENTENCE	Rōmā vīsā, virī gaudēbant.
LITERAL	<i>Rome having been seen, the men were rejoicing.</i>
SUBORD. CLAUSES	
(TEMPORAL)	<i>When/after Rome had been seen, the men were rejoicing.</i>
(CAUSAL)	<i>Because/Since Rome had been seen, the men were rejoicing.</i>
(CONCESSIVE)	<i>Although/even though Rome had been seen, the men were rejoicing.</i>

1.4.2. Note, if the main verb is appropriate, the circumstantial Ablative Absolute PTC could also be conditional:

Eō imperium tenente, ēventum timeō. *If he holds the power, I fear the outcome.*

(Note: other options for translating the participial expression are “When he holds the power,” “Since he holds the power,” “Although he holds the power,” etc. Again, the choice of which conjunction to use depends on the context and the semantic relationship between the main clause and the participial phrase.)

1.4.3. Ablative Absolute constructions without an overt PTC: Sometimes the Abl. Abs. expression consists of a Noun/Pronoun along with another Noun or Adjective (all of them in ablative case). In such expressions, there is an implied but unwritten (null) Present Participle of *sum* (‘to be’), joining the S(ubject) of unstated BE-verb to the S(ubject) C(omplement)/predicate. In normal clauses, the S and SC are nominative, but in ablative absolute constructions, both are ablative!

Caesare duce, nihil timēbimus. *Caesar (being) the commander, we will fear nothing.*
Because/Since Caesar (is) the commander. . . .
When Caesar (is) the commander. . . .
If Caesar (is) the commander. . . .
Although Caesar (is) the commander. . . .

2. The Passive Periphrastics

2.1. Simply put, these are passive constructions using a form of *sum* (‘to be’) along with the gerundive (= the future passive ptc¹) functioning as the SC or predicate (matching the case/gend/num of the S).

Haec fēmina bella (PRED ADJ) est. This woman is beautiful.
Haec fēmina laudanda (PRED PTC) est. This woman is to be praised.

2.2. Important: The gerundive (the form of the fut pass ptc) is not merely indicating what will be done or is about to be done, but what *should* or *must* be done. As Wheelock says,

¹ Remember that Fut Passive PTCs use the Present-stem + **-ndus, -nda, -ndum**.

“The gerundive often conveys an idea of necessary, obligatory, or appropriate action” (194). As such, one might gloss the gerundive (in a wooden way, initially) with ‘to be ____d/ed’:

The patient is to-be-treated. = The patient has to be treated (must be/ought to be treated).

In the following chart, we provide the same passive periphrastic sentence in three ways (differing only in the tense of *sum*), along with a literal rendering as well as a more natural English rendering:

LATIN SENTENCE	LITERAL RENDERING	NATURAL RENDERING
Id faciendum est.	<i>It is to be done.</i>	<i>It has to be done (or should/must/ought to be done).</i>
Id faciendum erat.	<i>It was to be done.</i>	<i>It had to be done.</i>
Id faciendum erit.	<i>It will be to be done.</i>	<i>It will have to be done.</i>

3. Dative of Agent

With passive periphrastic clauses, the agent of the gerundive is indicated by a *dative of agent* (rather than the ablative of agent). If translating both the passive verb and the agent sounds awkward, you can transform the clause into an active construction in English.

LATIN SENTENCE	LIT. PASSIVE RENDERING	ACTIVE RENDERING
Hic liber <u>mihi</u> cum cūrā legendus erit.	<i>This book will have to be read <u>by me</u> with care.</i>	<i>I will have to read this book with care.</i>
Illa fēmina <u>omnibus</u> laudanda est.	<i>That woman should be/has to be praised <u>by everyone</u>.</i>	<i>Everyone should praise/has to praise that woman.</i>