What with Absolute Constructions: A Usage-based Approach

Okgi Kim and Jong-Bok Kim
okgi.kim@khu.ac.kr & jongbok@khu.ac.kr

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Absolute constructions

- There are two standard types of absolute: one is unaugmented absolutes and the other is absolutes augmented by \textit{with} (or \textit{without}).

  \begin{enumerate}
  \item a. The coach being crowded, Fred had to stand.
  \item b. With John driving, we won’t have a lot of fun.
  \end{enumerate}

- They function as an adverbial subordinate clause.

- They have the same form \([\text{NP} \ \text{XP}]\) except the presence of \textit{with}. The initial NP functions as a subject, and the following XP as a nonfinite predicative element.

  \begin{enumerate}
  \item a. \(\text{NP}[\text{The coach}] \ \text{VP}[\text{being crowded}], \ldots\)
  \item b. \(\text{With} \ \text{NP}[\text{John}] \ \text{VP}[\text{driving}], \ldots\)
  \end{enumerate}
The type of predicative expression is quite flexible.

(3) **Unaugmented absolutes**
   a. All our savings \( V_P[en][gone] \), we started looking for jobs. (Quirk et al. 1972)
   b. Job offers \( P_P[from three major companies] \), Stacey is happier than ever. (Yoo 2008)

(4) **With-augmented absolutes**
   a. With those two \( V_P[en][gone] \), the Devil Rays got younger quicker than they expected. (COCA 2001 NEWS)
   b. With eyes \( A_P[full of laughter] \), she pushed past my leg and tossed in the boat. (COCA 2002 MAG)
In unaugmented and *with*-absolutes, the meaning relation with the main clause they modify is ‘undefined’ because of lacking any sort of subordinating conjunction (*while, because, if*, etc.). (Stump 1985, Sakakibara 1982, among others)

(5) a. (With) my flesh creeping, I opened the door and passed into the doctor’s outer room.
(= *While* my flesh was creeping, ...)

(6) a. (With) the bus drivers on strike, we’ll have to walk to the place.
(= *Because* the bus drivers are on strike, ...)
What with absolute constructions (WWAC)

Typical examples:

(7) a. My life was pretty hectic what with the job and the writing. (COHA 2003 FIC)
    b. I am nearly dead, what with hunger, and thy cruel bonds, and the gag. (COHA 1910 NF)

- Tenseless free adjuncts functioning as adverbial sentence modifiers
- Describe reasons for failure, something unfortunate happening, or not happening.
Semantic properties

- functioning as ‘reason’ adjuncts (‘in consequence of’, ‘on account of’, ‘as a result of’, ‘in view of’, or ‘considering’)
- The matrix proposition denotes some non-event or negative state, or, more generally, some proposition which has certain negative implications.

(8) a. It wasn’t easy, **what with the muffled cries still leaking out of the bedroom.**
   (COHA 2003 FIC)

b. No one else is free to work on me, **what with the bug oven damaged and nobody sure how bad it is.**
   (COHA 2000 FIC)
Goals of this talk

- To look into real uses of the WWAC
- To figure out the grammatical properties of the WWAC with corpus data
- To sketch a construction-based analysis
**Adverbial sentence modifiers**

- WWAs canonically function as a modifier to the main clause. This modifying property can be seen from its distributional possibilities in sentence initial, medial, or final position:

  \[(9) \text{ a. } \textbf{What with Angela and his new book}, \text{ he had simply not noticed.} \]
  \[(\text{COHA 1975 FIC})\]
  
  \[(9) \text{ b. } \text{but the subsidiary rights, } \textbf{what with the TV and film}, \text{ could go as high as three million, Mrs. Williams.} \]
  \[(\text{COHA 1981 FIC})\]
  
  \[(9) \text{ c. } \text{None got killed which is more than I can say about what they want to do to him, } \textbf{what with all these weapons}. \]
  \[(\text{COHA 2001 FIC})\]
Complement as a syntactic constituent

The surface structure [NP XP] following *what with* form a syntactic constituent. (Geney 1994)

(10) a. What with [Carol out of work and all]*i*, which*i I didn’t know, they didn’t send any Christmas cards this year.
   b. What with [the prices being so high] and [my wife being out of work], I can’t afford to buy a new refrigerator.
Complement types

- A variety of constituent can combine with the *what with* as evidenced from the corpus examples (COHA: Corpus of Historical American English):

(11)  

**What with NP**

a. What with _NP_[these Alfas], they might be trying to blockade our coast.  
(COHA 1983 FIC)

**What with S[nonfinite]**

b. It was all Luke could do to keep up, what with _S[nonfinite ing][the suitcase banging against his ankles]._  
(COHA 2002 FIC)

c. Lamar had no more bags, what with _S[nonfinite en][his sister gone]._  
(COHA 1999 FIC)
Complement types

(12) **What with VP[ing]**
    
    a. What with VP[ing][tending to his father] it would be a rugged night.  
       (COHA 1956 FIC)

    **What with SC[NP XP]**

    b. No one will find one as cool as mine, what with SC[all the moose PP[on the shirt]]  
       (COHA 2003 FIC)

    c. it was all just a matter of love at first sight, what with SC[him so AP[dark and intense] by that painting of his], and her, so pale and blonde, and somehow sort of glowing.  (COHA 2000 FIC)
The subject NP can be either ACC or GEN, but not NOM.

(13) a. What with **him** threatening all the time to blow my head off!
   (COHA 1930 FIC)

   b. What with **my** being my father’s son, and all that, my father is going to suffer.
   (COHA 1896 FIC)
Clausal properties

All WWA types we have observed have sentential properties. (Felser & Britain 2007, Trousdale 2012, Geney 1994)

$$(14) \quad \textbf{Sentential adverb}$$

a. what with $S_{\text{nonfinite}}$[the votes \textit{actually} given and the proxies], the Opposition majority was immense. (COHA 1861 MAG)

b. We all asked one another where it was going to end, what with the picnic next day, and $S_C$[him \textit{always} at the Mission house]. (COHA 1921 FIC)

c. There has been quite a flurry of horses in our midst lately, what with $NP$[the Rodeo, the military tournament, and \textit{now} the Horse Show]. (COHA 1927 MAG)
Clausal properties

(15) **Passivization**
   a. I actually give a shit about hanging on to some privacy, what with $S_{\text{nonfinite}}[\text{Bree being damned near pathological about it}]$. (COHA 2008 FIC)
   b. Billy was exactly what I needed; my self-esteem had hit new lows, what with $VP[\text{being broke and unpublished and badly married}]$. (COHA 1999 FIC)

(16) **Sentential negation**
   a. what with $S_{\text{nonfinite}}[\text{men not daring to venture upon wedlock}]$, and what with men wearied out of it, all inordinate license might abound. (COHA 1869 FIC)
   b. What with stumbling over their lines and $VP[\text{never looking at the camera}]$, they were making such a bad impression that they feared people would not read them once they got back into print. (COHA 1966 MAG)
Coordination of likes

- In general, *what with* introduces coordinated XPs as its complements. (Felser & Britain 2007, Huddleston & Pullum 2002)

(17) **What with NP and NP**

a. What with \textit{NP}[the stack-ups] and \textit{NP}[the taxis], he’s probably not home yet.
   (COHA 1973 FIC)

**What with S[ing] and S[ing]**

b. I feel as creative as Leonardo da Vinci, what with \textit{S[ing]}[the baby going on inside] and \textit{S[ing]}[the house going up outside].
   (COHA 1952 FIC)
Coordination of likes

(18)  **What with S[en] and S[en]**

a. But you know my heart ain’t in it so much, Willard, what with $S_{[en]}$[Jimmy laid up] and $S_{[en]}$[the place shut down].

(COHA 1956 FIC)

**What with SC and SC**

b. There will be no Barrymores, what with $SC$[John and Lionel in the movies] and $SC$[Ethel on tour].

(COHA 1927 MAG)
Coordination of unlikes

With the assumption that all of the complement types have sentential properties, we can posit coordinations with each other.

\[(19)\]

**What with NP and S[nonfinite]**

a. but what with \( \text{NP[her relations here]}, \) and \( \text{S[ing][her bein’ known]}, \) she didn’t take. (COHA 1879 FIC)

**What with NP and SC**

b. We all asked one another where it was going to end, what with \( \text{NP[the picnic next day]}, \) and \( \text{SC[him always at the Mission house]}\). (COHA 1921 FIC)

**What with NP and VP[ing]**

c. but what with \( \text{NP[the coffee]} \) and \( \text{VP[ing][being scared out of her wits besides]}, \) she couldn’t possibly sleep. (COHA 1957 FIC)
Coordination of unlikes

(20) **What with VP[ing] and NP**

a. Up to that instant, what with \text{VP}[ing][chanting and singing the many services], and \text{NP}[the noise of talking and walking], there was a wild babel. (COHA 1872 NF)

**What with VP[ing] and S[nonfinite]**

b. what with \text{VP}[ing][driving the natives out] and \text{S}[en][the war waged with Mexico], they have cost us millions of treasure and thousands of lives. (COHA 1862 MAG)

**What with VP[ing] and SC**

c. What with \text{VP}[ing][seeing him again], \text{SC}[his kindly face behind its glasses], the cheerful faith in me which was his contribution to our friendship, – even the way he shook his own hand in default of mine, – my throat tightened. (COHA 1975 FIC)
Coordination of unlikes

(21) **What with S[nonfinite] and NP**
    a. But he has had a bad time of it lately, what with \( S[\text{ing}] \)[The Rainbow being banned] and \( N_P[\text{no money}] \). (COHA 1979 FIC)

**What with SC and NP**

b. What with \( S_C[\text{the ringing in my ears}] \) – and \( N_P[\text{the dizziness}] \)...(=21(d))(COHA 1914 FIC)

**What with S[nonfinite] and VP[ing]**

c. ... who was in such a pickle, what with \( S[\text{en}] \)[my clothes torn to shreds], and \( V_P[\text{ing}] \)[dripping with water],... (COHA 1839 MAG)

**What with SC and VP[ing]**

d. What with the ringing in my ears – and the dizziness – and \( \text{SC}[\text{his face so dark with anger}] \) – and \( \text{VP}[\text{ing}] \)[digging my heels in the ground to keep my knees from folding up under me] – I – I thought I should go quite mad, quite mad, my dear. (COHA 1914 FIC)
What with is not a single lexical unit

- The *what with* is not a single unit, since an adverb is intervened between *what* and *with*. (Felser & Britain 2007)

(22) a. Besides, **what now with** funds looking as if they are net short again, the path of least resistance seems likely to be higher.

b. I thought we need a change, **what just with** Bush.

c. While Motoi Sakuraba’s soundtrack may not exactly be on par with his other works, **what primarily with** its painful instrumentation throughout the game...

(23) a. **what too with** the dark eyes of the young Emir fixed upon her, and watching every movement of her trembling fingers, it is not surprising that she dropped almost every third stitch in her web,... (COHA 1846 FIC)

b. **What though with** perfidy I take the field. (COHA 1831 FIC)
A minimalist approach (Felser & Britain 2007)

- non-finite tense phrase (TP) complements of the prepositional complementizer *with*

(24) a. [...] I said look I apologize for I’d completely forgot that you were coming to collect he said I know I can see that, he hadn’t really what with the kids all running around...

b. what \[C with \] [\(TP\) the kids \(T', \emptyset[VP\) all \(V', running around ]]]

(25) a. It must be such a difficult decision to make, what with the little one, and Ben just about to start school...

b. what \[C with \] [\(TP\) pro \(T', \emptyset[VP\) \(V', \emptyset[DP\) the little one ]]]

- This approach can account for various sentential properties of complements in WWACs, but it is not enough to capture a constructional relation with general absolute constructions, unaugmented and *with*-absolutes.
Construction Grammar: constructions, pairings of form with meaning, are the basic units of language (see Goldberg 2006 and references therein) and linked as form or inheritance hierarchies (network).

Developing Rudanko’s (2006) and Goldberg’s (2006) analyses, we assume that the transitive into ing construction is a combination of several constructions such as ditransitive argument structure, caused-motion construction, and resultative construction, inheriting the constructional properties of these supertypes.
## Constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morpheme</td>
<td><em>pre-, -ing</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td><em>avocado, anaconda, and daredevil, shoo-in</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex word</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Complex word (partially filled)</td>
<td><em>[N-s] (for regular plurals)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiom (filled)</td>
<td><em>going great guns, give the Devil his due</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiom (partially filled)</td>
<td><em>jog (someone’s) memory, send (someone) to the cleaners</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convariational conditional</td>
<td><em>The X-er the Y-er (The more you have, the better you are.)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditransitive</td>
<td><em>He gave her a fish taco.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td><em>The armadillo was hit by a car.</em></td>
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</tbody>
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**Table:** Examples of constructions, varying in size and complexity (Goldberg 2006)
The types of absolute constructions

This type hierarchy can tell us that WWACs (*what-with-aug-abs-cx*) will inherit its syntactic properties from its supertype *with-aug-abs-cx* and semantically (or pragmatically) specify its own properties in addition.
A sketch of constructional constraints

- The *with*-augmented absolute inherits the headed-structure, such that the prepositional head *with* combines with a nonfinite S as its complement.
- With respect to semantics, the meaning relation with the main clause they modify is not overtly specified.
The element *what* combines with a prepositional phrase by means of inheriting syntactic properties from *with-aug-abs-cx*.

This construction is only talking about the reasons for a particular situation, especially a negative situation.
The uses of the WWAC display quite distinctive properties, different from typical absolute constructions.

Our corpus-based research reveals the construction’s idiosyncratic properties, while sharing some properties with general absolute constructions.
Selected References