THE "ABSOLUTE" CONSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH

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The study on which the following results are based[1] involved 500 high frequency English verbs. In English, many verbs which are inherently transitive, e.g. *write, read, chew,* can occur without their objects, in sentences like

(1) John is reading
Joe chews.

Not all transitive verbs, however, occur in this "absolute" construction. The purpose of the investigation was to delimit the class of verbs which can, and to consider ways of handling this construction within a generative framework. An essentially Fillmorean case grammar was used for the description.

1 It is necessary first of all to distinguish the sentences in (1) from other superficially similar examples of transitive verbs occurring without objects.
(a) Objects may be deleted anaphorically, e.g.

(2) He's a fool. I know
I invited him to dinner and he accepted.

These involve deletion under identity, and the deleted constituent is always recoverable (though total identity is not required). With the "absolute" construction there is no identical constituent present. Generally, verbs which allow anaphoric deletion of their objects do not occur in the absolute construction. Most, if not all, verbs taking desentential objects allow anaphoric deletion. There appears to be a handful of verbs which may lose their objects either way, e.g.

(3) Barenboim conducts

(4) They sang the Brahms Requiem and Barenboim conducted.

Note that material deleted anaphorically is always specific, e.g. in (4), it must be *the Brahms Requiem,* or something similar; in the absolute construction this is not the case.

(b) Objects may also be deleted if they are situationally present, e.g.

(5) Shake well (on a bottle of medicine)

(6) I'll deal (when playing cards).

This is probably best regarded as a kind of anaphoric deletion, where the antecedent is found in the physical, rather than the verbal context. Again, the deleted material is specific. In both (a) and (b), if the antecedent is lost, the remainder is uninterpretable, (though the reader may be able to provide a suitable context, not a difficult task with fairly set phrases like those above). There appear to be very few verbs which could not occur with their objects deleted situationally, given the right situation and a large measure of shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

(c) Examples (1) are repeated to illustrate the absolute construction:

(1) John is reading
Joe chews.

These are interpretable whether or not they occur in a particular situation or context. The missing material here is not specific. This construction must therefore be treated separately from the above, though there are borderline cases, difficult to classify, and cases involving combinations of (a), (b), and (c). The ability of a verb to occur in the absolute construction is regarded by some (e.g., Lyons, 1968) as a lexical property of the verbs in question, whereas anaphoric deletion is a syntactic process. (It has been widely discussed; see, e.g., Grinder & Postal, 1971; Postal, 1969; Ross, 1969.) Situational deletion is presumably outside the scope of any current model of generative grammar altogether.

2 The absolute construction has been discussed briefly by a large number of writers on English grammar. In general, the comments have been rather sketchy, and little attention has been paid to the limits of the process. The discussion of some of these comments brings to light a number of interesting characteristics of this construction.

The following remark of Jespersen's highlights two important features of the absolute use of transitive verbs. He says (1927: 321):

> "The omission of an *obvious* object probably produces more intransitive uses of transitive verbs than anything else...Mr.Alphonse Smith...agrees with Bréal ...that an abundance of such intransitive verbs is a

'sign of civilization', or an effect of organization, as they will 'increase in number just as men become more closely banded together, or as civilization succeeds in diffusing a common fund of information.'"

The emphasis on *obvious* is mine: this is an important point which is not always adequately appreciated. The quotation is also interesting in the light of the fact that it proves necessary to look for communicative explanations for certain otherwise inexplicable facts about the absolute construction.

Poutsma has the following most insightful remarks (1926: 58):

"It is, perhaps, worth observing that some verbs in their intransitive application may be assumed to have absorbed some object, thus, for example, *to read*, *to sing*, *to speak*, and *to write*."

He adds (1926: 59):

"A great many transitive verbs are often used intransitively through having the object absorbed into them. The verb may then be said to be used in a *pregnant* meaning, more being meant than is actually expressed."

Poutsma's suggestion that the objects are "absorbed" is his most interesting contribution to the subject, and it proves to provide the most plausible solution to the treatment of these verbs in a generative framework (see discussion of Gruber's work in 3).

Lees (1960) has some incidental remarks on this topic, which are worth discussing because they express a number of common misconceptions. With his first point, there is no argument. He notes (1960: 33) that this construction (he calls it "pseudo-intransitive") must be distinguished from true intransitives, because attributive *-ing* adjectives can be derived from intransitives, but not from verbs in the superficially similar absolute construction. His examples are:

(7) The boy steals scissors
The boy steals
*The stealing boy.

(8) *The boy shivers scissors
The boy shivers
The shivering boy.

Lees suggests that in (7) we have an example of ellipsis, with the deleted material unrecoverable. This is doubtful. His example in (7) is not a good one. The object here cannot be deleted, preserving synonymy; the first sentence in (7) is not a suitable source for the second. He continues (1960: 33):

> "...many elliptic transformations are the origin of stylistic variants, or at least sentences related to their sources very much as stylistic variants are."

It is misleading to regard the absolute construction as a stylistic variant of the full transitive construction. A study of the absolute construction in texts showed that the two are not alternatives, but occur in different circumstances. The only possible cases where the two could be interchanged were the following:

> "For a writer of short stories writes them in the way he thinks best; otherwise he would write them differently."

cf. "For a writer of short stories writes in the way he thinks best; otherwise he would write differently."

(Maugham, 1958)

and

> "Now did you then have a really concrete idea of the sort of writer you wanted to be or did you just want to write everything and anything?"

cf. "Now did you then have a really concrete idea of the sort of writer you wanted to be or did you just want to write?"

(Priestley-Orr, n.d.: Part I)

Both cases are very special (and unusual). The first depends crucially on the information contained in the subject: what short story writers write is short stories; the subject appears to be of considerable importance in determining whether the absolute construction is possible. In the second, the object is two indefinite pronouns. This again is significant, considering the kind of features characteristic of deleted NPs in the absolute construction. In general, then, Lees' suggestion must be rejected.

Lyons (1968: 361), like Lees, calls the examples under discussion "pseudo-intransitive" and links them with reflexives (e.g. *John shaved*). He regards the possible absence of the object in such cases as a matter of the "lexical structure" of the language, rather than as a syntactic phenomenon. This suggests that the process is rather less regular than this study revealed.

Fillmore also presents this as an idiosyncratic transformation. He begins from a discussion of the "inherent" arguments associated with a predicate, (Fillmore, 1971: 378). Some of the "inherent" arguments may be "suppressed", i.e., may not appear

in deep structure. This is distinct from deletion: an argument is deleted when it appears in deep structure, but is absent from the surface structure. Discussing *cook*, Fillmore says (1968: 29):

> "An idiosyncratic transformational feature of the verb is that just in case the A[gent] is present and the O[bjective] is some NP representing a typical NP for the verb (that is, something like *food* or *a meal*), the O element may be deleted."

The interesting part of this remark is the comment that the object must be typical for the verb if deletion is to occur (cf. Jespersen's *obvious*). This is a very important feature of the absolute construction; it is what makes the construction communicative. It is perhaps as well to note here that the object must not only be typical for the verb, but typical for the subject as well (see 6).

Halliday is one of the few to give any attention to the limits of the absolute construction. He claims (1967: 49) that any verb of his Class 2 can occur without an object. Class 2 appears to be transitive verbs in a fairly traditional sense, but they are not listed, so his prediction is difficult to verify. The present study revealed that there are certain restrictions on the use of the construction within the class of transitive verbs.

One further discussion of this construction must be mentioned. Fraser and Ross (1970) suggest that it is necessary to distinguish between "habitual" and "non-habitual" uses, e.g.

A. Habitual: (9) Cecil murders (people)

(10) Max steals (things)

B. Non-habitual: (11) Max drank (something).

They claim that with habitual deletion, no progressive tenses are possible, and that with non-habitual deletion, progressives are possible, and simple tenses are not necessarily understood habitually. The distinction does not seem to me clear or necessary.

(12) Look, Mummy, that man's stealing!

seems quite acceptable, but *steal* is in their category A. Of the 500 verbs studied here, less than a dozen belonged to only one category, and often the restriction seems to depend on what are likely habits, rather than on any inherent restriction.

Note in passing, however, that in general, verbs which occur only dubiously in this construction are most probable in the habitual simple present, generally less acceptable with *can* (ability), and least acceptable in the non-habitual progressive.

They are also less likely in the past tenses:

(13) ? John damages
? John damaged
?*John can damage
?*John is damaging.

Fraser and Ross evidently intend to suggest by the bracketed material in (9)-(11) that the deleted material is not the same for the two categories. Certainly, in A a generic NP is required, but this is imposed by the tense, not the verb, and is required also in the habitual use of B. In fact, their suggestions for the deleted material are not accurate. (10) requires that the object must be "things not the property of Max"; *something* is not a suitable candidate for the deleted object in (11) (cf. 3).

Nevertheless, the deleted objects do not always seem to be the same after a verb used habitually as after a verb used non-habitually. The clearest example is *drink: Max drinks* implies that he drinks alcoholic beverages, whereas *Max is drinking* need not. Similar distinctions are found with *paint* and *write*. In all cases, the habitual sense is more restricted, and I suggest that this is a reflection of people's habits, rather than a syntactic fact, requiring the establishment of two separate categories.

In this respect, the verbs most frequently used to exemplify the construction are not typical. With the majority of verbs, there is no difference between habitual and non-habitual (e.g. *read, mend, earn, bake*). However, an accurate account of the construction will involve marking a handful of verbs like *write, paint* and *drink* as idiosyncratically having different features on the NP deleted after a habitual tense and a non-habitual tense.

3 This section discusses treatments within a generative grammar.

Deletion is the most generally accepted method of handling the absolute construction within a generative grammar. The same mechanism is used for anaphoric deletion. With anaphoric deletion, the constituent deleted is identical (albeit sloppily) to some other constituent in the sentence and the deleted material is therefore recoverable. It has been proposed, with good reason, that deletion must always be recoverable. This creates a difficulty in handling the absolute construction by deletion: the deleted material here appears to be non-recoverable.

Grinder (1971) suggested that the absolute construction would require a "free" deletion transformation, one exempted

from the requirement that the deleted constituent should be identical to another. He suggests that this free deletion transformation will also remove the unspecified NPs (bracketed) from the following examples:

(14) Robbie was caught (by someone) (unspecified Agent)

(15) Judy mentioned (to someone) that she was ill (unspecified Indirect Object)

(16) Voy sent the letter (somewhere) (unspecified Locative)

(17) Becky hit the table (with something) (unspecified Instrument)

and (18) Paul is eating (something) (unspecified Object).

He notes that deletion is not possible in the following cases:

(19) Someone kissed Maxine

(20) Max completed something

and suggests that this depends on a distinction between "optional" and "obligatory" arguments. Grinder does not use these terms as Fillmore does; for Grinder, an optional argument is one which may or may not appear on the surface. His remarks seem to boil down to "what can be deleted can be deleted".

Sampson (1972) objects to Grinder's "free" deletion transformation. He argues that with such a rule, recoverability could only be guaranteed by deleting a particular item in all cases, one candidate being *something*. But any item suggested is unsuitable in some instances; any choice would involve an arbitrary decision. He proposes to introduce a rule (1972: 26) NP → Ø.

Both Grinder and Sampson assume that (14)-(18) above are all instances of the same phenomenon, unspecified NP deletion. It seems reasonable to regard (14)-(17) like this (see Fillmore, 1971: 380). In these cases, when the NP does not appear, no information remains about that NP beyond the knowledge of what case it was (and possibly certain information about, e.g., animacy imposed by that case). The information is irretrievable.

However, (18) is different. Grinder and Sampson fail to notice that although the object is not specific, neither is it entirely unspecified. How much is known about the object varies from verb to verb. (With *She is expecting* we have a good deal of information.) In every case, it must be something typical.

(21) Paul is eating something

is not equivalent to

(22) Paul is eating.

The only way to capture this fact is to allow certain features to be attached to the NP, and be available for the semantic interpretation, though the NP is deleted. Enormous difficulties arise. Suppose features are attached to the NPs. There are severe restrictions on the features of deletable NPs, which differ from verb to verb. The deletion transformation would then have to refer to individual verbs, and individual features on the NP. This is not an acceptable form for a transformation (see Lakoff 1970: 21). Although this might work within a generative model, it in no way accounts for the ability of a hearer to interpret such sentences. A hearer has access to deep structure only through surface structure; if the features are deleted, they are not recoverable from the surface. This seems then, a mistaken mode of treatment for the absolute construction.

Gruber provides an alternative proposal, incorporation. This proposal is reminiscent of Poutsma's comments, quoted above. This alternative to deletion avoids the problems raised by Grinder's and Sampson's proposals. As Gruber's work (Gruber, 1965) is not readily available, and therefore not widely known, it is necessary to explain what he means by "incorporation". I shall use an example not relevant to the absolute construction for the sake of clarity. Consider the following sentences with *climb*:

(23) John climbed up the ladder

(24) John climbed down the ladder

(25) John climbed the ladder.

Gruber points out that if no preposition is present in the surface structure, then it must be understood to be *up*. He claims that in the underlying structure (prelexical in his model), *climb* always has a preposition. If that preposition is *up*, it may optionally be "incorporated" into the verb, so that *climb* becomes equivalent to *climb up*. This accounts neatly for the syntactic and semantic facts of (23)-(25). Gruber goes on to suggest that *eat*, for example, when it occurs in the absolute construction, has incorporated FOOD (not the lexical item *food*, but something with its features). In other words, what is incorporated here is the superordinate term for edible things. In general, the problem of what is to be incorporated for each verb remains to be solved: the incorporated object of *write*, for instance, is not the superordinate term for writable things. Gruber's proposal, however, successfully captures the partially-specified nature of the "understood" objects. There are difficulties in combining this with a case grammar or Chomskyan model,

but these are beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it provides an argument for the adoption of a prelexical underlying structure.

4 The verbs that occur in the absolute construction and their characteristics are discussed in this section.

A preliminary analysis suggested that the subjects in such sentences could be in one of four cases: Agent (A), Instrument (I), Force (F) and Neutral (N). (Neutral is equivalent to Fillmore's Objective. Neutral is preferred here to avoid possible confusion with the term Object. It is borrowed from Stockwell et al., 1973.) For example:

A:	(26)	John is packing Bill smokes
I:	(27)	These scissors won't cut Safety belts protect
F:	(28)	Fire burns Fruit juice can mark
N:	(29)	Cadbury's apple pie satisfies The present pleased.

In (26)-(28), the deleted material is in the Neutral or Result (R), cases, in (29) it is an Experiencer (E).

On closer scrutiny (26)is seen to be rather different from (27)-(29). The difference lies in the specificity of the understood object. (27)-(29) are in this respect far more like the other examples of deleted unspecified NPs discussed by Grinder and Sampson (see (14)-(17) above). They are far more general processes than the type with Agentive subject; any verb able to occur with the case combinations specified above can lose its object with at least one subject. The term "absolute", therefore, should be reserved for those with Agentive subjects. (Further comments on those with I, F, and N subjects can be found in Boagey, 1973: 97-101.)

It should perhaps be pointed out that some verbs with Agent subjects have objects which are not N or R. Such verbs do not occur in the absolute construction (e.g., *visit*, which takes a Goal). In addition, not all verbs which occur in the case frames A___N or A___R occur in the absolute construction. There is no clear-cut division between those which do and those which do not. Several groups of verbs which are borderline in this respect are discussed briefly in the following paragraphs.

(a) Cognate Object Verbs, e.g. *dream, fight, laugh, live, pray, sigh, sleep, smile, sing, dance*. The difficulty is this: when these verbs have no object, are they in fact intransitive (Lees'

Goal seems to preclude occurrence in the absolute construction, e.g.

(34) *He put on the table
*He put.

This is a strange restriction, and its formulation is very tentative. The restriction "surface" Locatives (using Locative temporarily to include Source and Goal) seems necessary, because if the Locative is optional on the surface, even if obligatory in deep structure, the verb seems just able to occur in the absolute construction. *Give*, for instance, probably has an obligatory deep structure Goal, but it can be deleted from the surface:

(35) John gives expensive presents

and we also find examples of the absolute construction with *give:*

(36) John gives to charity.

It is extraordinarily difficult to decide which verbs have obligatory deep structure Locatives, so facts in this area are very difficult to verify.

Fillmore (1970) suggests that *put* should be derived from an intransitive causative structure (1970: 253-5), i.e.:

(37) Peter put the book on the floor

is derived from

(38) Peter cause (the book be on the floor).

(38) could, however, be the deep structure for sentences like (37) but with *dropped, placed, stood, laid, threw, left* etc. instead of *put*. This does not seem satisfactory semantically, and not all the verbs accounted for by the restriction (b) can be handled in this way, (e.g., *base* in *Joan based her essay on the lectures*). It should be noted, though, that Anderson also implies (1971: 84) the presence of a causative in such sentences:

> "However, the occurrence of locative verbs seems to be limited to clauses which either lack an ergative or are causative..."

(c) Verbs which take only desentential complements in the Neutral case have the requisite case frame (A___N), but do not occur in the absolute construction. As a sentence cannot have the characteristics required for deletion in the absolute construction, i.e., typicality and partial specification, this restriction seems entirely predictable.

(d) The type of object found at N does not seem to affect the ability of the verb to appear in the absolute construction. It

is not at all clear how many types of objects can be distinguished, but a small sample indicated that this line of approach was fruitless. For instance, among resultatives, *write* and *build* occur absolutely, *make* and *form* do not. Among patients, *kill* does, while *pick* (flowers) does not. Prediction on these grounds is obviously impossible.

(e) It has been suggested (Mittwoch, 1971; Browne, 1971) that completiveness is the crucial factor in determining whether a verb can occur in the absolute construction. However, there are very few verbs, if any, which are always completive, and it is not the case that any incompletive verb can occur in the absolute construction, e.g.

(39) Lois gathers flowers

is incompletive, but we cannot have

(40) *Lois gathers.

What can be said is this: the features on the incorporated object can not be those which render the verb completive. This restriction may at least partially account for the somewhat smaller number of past tense occurrences of the absolute construction.

6 When all these restrictions are taken into account, there are still quite a large number of verbs with Agentive subjects and Neutral objects which do not occur in the absolute construction (or perhaps occur only very marginally). No syntactic explanation for this restriction seems possible. Among these verbs are *fix, obtain, refuse, recover, spoil, want, make*. It seems to me that one factor which may play an important part in determining whether or not the verb may occur in the absolute construction is how restricted a range of objects the verb may take. Though obviously infinite in number, the possible range of objects of *write* is more restricted than that of *make* for example. In other words, if a set of semantic features was available, either fewer or more specific features would be required to characterize the possible objects of *write* than would be required to characterize the possible objects of *make*. The fact that *write* but not *make* occurs in the absolute construction can be explained at least in part by this, in conjunction with the fact that whatever is deleted or incorporated must be in some way restorable. With a sentence like *John writes*, the missing object is restorable in part because the possibilities are fairly limited; with **Bill makes*, the possibilities for the missing object are so varied and numerous that restoration is virtually impossible. (If *make* should have, within a

tightly-knit social group, say, a special meaning, e.g. *dress-make*, then within the confines of that group, *make* could be used absolutely: *Mr Jones makes for me.*)

If this is anything like a correct account of the process of understanding such sentences, then one might postulate that someone confronted with *John wrote* and asked to supply a suitable object will be more likely to supply one that falls within the category "literary composition" or "letter" than any of the other possibilities, e.g., *his name*. This hypothesis was tested. Subjects were given 80 sentences of the form

Proper Name + Verb (past tense) + _____

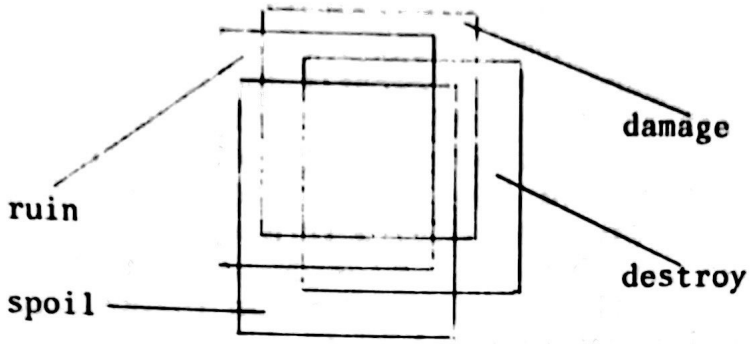
and asked to complete the sentence briefly with the first appropriate thing they thought of. (Detailed discussion of the experiment can be found in Boagey, 1973: 124ff.) The replies given were then grouped semantically. As the name chosen seemed likely to influence the responses, four verbs appeared twice, with different names. The following are typical of the results: *Mrs Fowler mended.....* elicited socks and clothing in over half the replies, but *Mr Lake mended.....* elicited a wide variety of vehicles and appliances, and only three instances of clothing. In assessing the results, such factors were taken into account. 48 verbs out of 80 elicited results predicted by the above hypothesis. Only 12 had results contrary to those predicted, and for 2 of these, other syntactic explanations have already been put forward. For the remainder the data was unclear, either because too many replies were adverbial, or because the semantic classification of the responses was indecisive or impossible.

The verbs in the test deliberately included some where an alternative syntactic reason for their non-occurrence in the absolute construction has already been suggested. As the results show, the "restricted object range" hypothesis cannot explain the facts about these verbs, and therefore cannot replace the syntactic hypotheses. However, the results certainly suggest that this hypothesis may at least partially account for a number of otherwise unaccountable cases.

One further extension of this hypothesis suggests itself. Verbs like *damage, destroy* and *spoil* are, in general, rather doubtful candidates for the absolute construction. However, many people when asked find them considerably more acceptable in a list, e.g.:

(41) Tom damages, he spoils, he ruins, he destroys.

I suggest that the object "understood" here is the set common to all four verbs, which is smaller than that for each verb individually, as the following diagram illustrates, where the squares represent the fields of possible objects:



(The overlap may be greater than the diagram suggests.) Thus one can spoil or ruin children, but not damage or destroy them in the same sense. The result for the whole list is a more restricted range of objects than for each verb individually, and this is an intuitively appealing reason for the otherwise puzzling fact of the greater acceptability of the absolute construction with these verbs in a list.

One may well ask, if **He makes* is too vague to be understood or to communicate, then why is *He makes things* any better? The answer to this probably lies in the fact that when the absolute construction is used, the object is implied to be partially specified. It is necessary to supply the indefinite object *things* in order to be indefinite; the difference between the two constructions is clear for example in *Mrs Fowler mends* and *Mrs Fowler mends things*.

It is probably true that the experiment discussed here actually provided a measure of the semantic specificity of the verbs, as well as of the possible objects, since the two appear to be interdependent: because *build*, for example, refers to a more specific activity than *make*, the possible range of objects is narrower for *build* than for *make*. The verbs which can occur in the absolute construction are called "process-oriented" by Halliday (1967: 47), and "vague" processes are less likely to be the focus of attention.

It is interesting with this in mind to consider the Prague School analysis of English sentences in terms of Communicative Dynamism (CD), or the distribution of information in a sentence. According to this theory, the basic pattern of information in a transitive sentence in English is this: the subject is the "theme" of the sentence and has low CD, the verb is the "transition" and has medium CD, and the object of the sentence is the "rheme", and has the highest CD, or, carries the most information. They point out (e.g., Firbas, 1959) that if there is an object, even one with little inherent CD (like *things*), it prevents the verb from becoming the rheme of the sentence. Only if there is no object can the verb become the rheme and carry the highest information load. This perhaps suggests why the absolute construction should occur at all in English, and

reinforces the suggestion that certain verbs may not occur in the construction for communicative rather than syntactic reasons - i.e., because they have inherently low CD, to use the Prague School term. In addition, this may provide some sort of explanation for the fact that the present progressive is less probable than the simple present in borderline cases of the absolute construction. Consider a verb like *damage*, whose inherent CD is probably not very high. The act of damaging is less likely to be the focus of attention in the case of a single such act (which might elicit a sentence like *Johnnie is damaging the wallpaper*), but if such acts are habitual, the process itself is more likely to become the focus of attention, and hence the verb is more likely to occur in the absolute construction.

In conclusion, the work discussed here shows the inadequacy of the mainstream of generative attempts to account for the absolute construction. It is not possible to handle it by the deletion process normally proposed. It has been a principal concern here to delimit the absolute construction more closely than in previous accounts, so that its character might be more clearly seen, as well as to consider a far greater variety of examples than are usually discussed. It would appear that some process like Gruber's incorporation is the only adequate way of accounting for the facts.

Although the absolute construction might at first sight appear to be a purely syntactic phenomenon, the results of the investigation indicate that it is only partly syntactic, and that is is necessary to resort to semantics to explain many of its characteristics. It is necessary also to consider communicative factors, in particular, information distribution. This indicates that no existent generative grammar could hope to account in a non-arbitrary way for which verbs may occur in the construction and which may not.

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NOTE

1 This article is based on an unpublished M.Litt. thesis, University of Edinburgh.