

## Absolute constructions in the Romance languages A grammaticalization path

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The topic of this paper are the so-called ‘absolute constructions’ in the Romance languages.

Two constructs – namely gerunds/gerundives and participles – were in Late Latin functionally interchangeable and formally very close to each other, so that in some Romance languages the gerund and the present participle merged together quite early. It is indeed often difficult to distinguish between participles in their adjectival use on the one side, and gerundial constructions on the other. We are confronted with constructions characterised by a certain degree of polyfunctionality, where the role of the context in order to disambiguate the meaning is crucial.

This polyfunctionality made the usage of these constructions very frequent in spoken language and led gerundial/participial forms to function as ‘generalized subordinate clauses’, with many possible different meanings. What meanings grammaticalized most, due to their pragmatical frequency? As can be seen from the following examples, there are similarities and differences in the grammatical and functional behaviour of the gerundial / participial constructions:

- (1) Sardinian *a vvistu pindendi un filu* vs. Italian *\*ha visto pendendo un filo*;
- (2) Rumanian *Peter nu aude copiii cântîndi* vs. Italian *\*P. non sente i bambini; cantando*;
- (3) Spanish *lo<sub>i</sub> vimos comiendo<sub>i</sub> en un restaurante* vs. Italian *\*lo<sub>i</sub> vedemmo mangiando<sub>i</sub> in un ristorante*;
- (4) French *Elle m<sub>i</sub>'a vu sortant<sub>i</sub> du cinema* vs. Italian *\*lei m<sub>i</sub> ha visto uscendo<sub>i</sub> dal cinema*;
- (5) Spanish *el niño se divertió rompiendo los libros* vs. French *\*l'enfant s'amusa rompant les livres* (we should say *en rompant*) ;
- (6) French *rue passante* (‘street where many pass’); *stationnement payant* vs. Italian *\*via passante, \*parcheggio pagante*;
- (7) Spanish *agua hirviendo* vs. Ital. *acqua bollente, cigno morente*.

These Romance constructions will be analyzed in a comparative perspective, both from a synchronic and a diachronic standpoint. We maintain that the French *-ant* ‘gérondif’ and the ‘gerunds’ of the other Romance languages are the endpoint of a grammaticalization process which has introduced in the verbal paradigm a new form with no time reference. Moreover, French ‘gérondifs’, just as infinitives, may be modified by articles, demonstratives, possessives or genitives, approaching – just as infinitives do – to the NOUN category.

Finally, on the basis of the large evidence we gathered, we will discuss whether the category ‘converb’, as defined by Haspelmath, (“a non-finite verb whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination” 1995: 3) and Nedjalkov (“As a first approximation, we can define a converb as a verb form which depends syntactically on another verb form, but is not its syntactic actant, i.e., does not realise its semantic valencies” 1995:97), applies to the Romance constructs exemplified in (1)-(7).

### References

Haspelmath, Martin. 1995. ‘The converb as a cross-linguistically valid category’, in Haspelmath / König (eds.): 1-55.

- Haspelmath, Martin / König, Ekkehard (eds.), *Converbs in cross-linguistic perspective. Structure and meaning of adverbial verb forms – adverbial participles, gerunds.* Mouton de Gruyter: Berlin & New York.
- Nedjalkov, Vladimir P. 1995. 'Some typological parameters of converbs', in Haspelmath / König (eds.): 97-136.