

The Genitive Absolute

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The *genitive absolute* in Greek is a phrase in the genitive, usually consisting of a noun and a participle, which is logically but not grammatically connected with the rest of the sentence.

The participle modifies the noun, which may have other modifiers as well (adjectives, prepositional phrases). The participle itself may have an object and may be modified by adverbs.

This is an extension of the circumstantial use of the participle, but whereas the normal circumstantial participle modifies a noun that is already in the sentence, the genitive absolute phrase does not modify anything else in the sentence. “Absolute” here means that this phrase is *absolved* of any grammatical connection with the rest of the sentence.

For example:

τοῦ ἀνδρός λεγομένου, ἡ γυνὴ ἄγγελον πέμπει.

While/because/although the man is speaking, the woman is sending a messenger.

As usual, the tense of the participle denotes *time relative to the main verb* as well as *aspect*. The relationship between the genitive absolute phrase and the main clause can be merely temporal (“while, when”), causal (“because”), or concessive (“although”); authors sometimes use adverbs to help make this clear.

Examples:

τοῦ ἀνδρός λεγομένου, ἡ γυνὴ ἄγγελον ἔπεμψε.

While the man was speaking, the woman sent a messenger.

τοῦ ἀνδρός εἰπόντος, ἡ γυνὴ ἄγγελον ἔπεμψε.

After the man spoke, the woman sent a messenger.

τοῦ ἀνδρός εἰπόντος, ἔπειτα ἡ γυνὴ ἄγγελον ἔπεμψε.

After the man spoke, the woman (then) sent a messenger.

τοῦ ἀνδρός εἰπόντος, ὅμως ἡ γυνὴ ἄγγελον ἔπεμψε.

After the man spoke, the woman nevertheless sent a messenger (or, she sent a messenger anyway).

καίπερ τοῦ ἀνδρός εἰπόντος, ἡ γυνὴ ἄγγελον ἔπεμψε.

Even though the man spoke, the woman sent a messenger.

ὡς τοῦ ἀνδρός εἰπόντος, ἡ γυνὴ ἄγγελον ἔπεμψε.

Because the man spoke, the woman sent a messenger.

Some literary examples:

τοῦτο δὲ λέγοντος αὐτοῦ πτάρνυται τις (Xen. Anab. 3.2.9)
While he (αὐτοῦ) was saying this (τοῦτο), someone sneezed.

οὐ τις ἐμεῦ ζῶντος καὶ ἐπὶ χθονὶ δερκομένοιο
σοὶ κοίλης παρὰ νηυσὶ βαρείας χεῖρας ἐποίσει (Hom. Il. 1.88-89)
No one, while I am alive and see the light on earth, will put heavy hands on you by the curved ships.

Χαιρεφῶντος γάρ ποτε ἐπερωτῶντος ἐν Δελφοῖς περὶ ἐμοῦ πολλῶν παρόντων ἀνείλεν ὁ Ἀπόλλων μηδένα εἶναι ἀνθρώπων... (Xen. Apol. 14)
When Chairephon inquired about me at Delphi, with many people present, Apollo answered that no one...

Here there are two genitives absolute in the same sentence, one telling what Chairephon was doing and one giving the circumstances of Apollo's reply.

Authors sometimes break the rules.

δὶς ἤδη ἐπιχειρήσαντός μου σκοπεῖν περὶ τῆς ἀπολογίας ἐναντιοῦται μοι τὸ δαιμόνιον. (Xen. Apol. 4)
Twice while I was preparing to put my defense in order, my divine sign opposed me.

Here Xenophon could have written ἐπιχειρήσαντι to agree with μοι, but he chooses to make an absolute phrase instead.

Appendix: Comparison with the Latin ablative absolute

Because Greek, unlike Latin, has a full set of participles — past, present, and future, active, middle, and passive — circumstantial participles can be much simpler. In particular, the absolute construction is not needed so often.

Compare:

Nuntiis missis, rex urbem relinquit.

ὁ βασιλεύς, ἀγγέλους πεμφάσας, πόλιν ἔλιπε.

Each means that the king first sent messengers and then left the city, but in the Latin sentence, the doer of the action in *missis* is not specified. If it were important to make clear that it was the king who had sent the messengers, you would not be able to use the ablative absolute but would need a clause:

Postquam nuntios miserat, rex urbem relinquit.

In Greek, because there is a past-tense active participle, it is easy to show that the king is the sender, and the genitive absolute need not be used.