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THE DEVELOPMENT OF PREPOSITIONAL *ABSENT* IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH: A CORPUS-BASED CONSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

SYLVAIN GATELAIS AND FABIENNE TOUPIN¹

Abstract:

We focus here on the use of *absent* in such utterances as *Absent any other facts, there arises an implied contract*. This usage is labelled “preposition” in dictionaries of English. The question we ask is whether *absent* really functions as a preposition in English nowadays. This would involve a change from a lexical category (that of adjective) to a grammatical one (preposition) – in other words, a grammaticalization process. After explaining how we collected the data used in this study (section 2), we consider how *absent* might possibly have grammaticalized into a preposition (section 3). We argue that the change is not so much about the grammaticalization of an individual item as about the emergence of a new construction, a process known as constructionalization. In section 4 other contemporary usages of *absent* are examined, and evidence that the item has acquired prepositional status is adduced. Finally, since we posit matching through analogy with the construction <without+NP> to be key in that process, a comparison between the prepositions *without* and *absent* is drawn in present-day English (section 5).

Key words:

absent, grammaticalization, constructionalization, constructions, semantic change, analogy, competition, preposition

1. Introduction

In this contribution we focus on the use of *absent* in such utterances as *Absent any other facts, there arises an implied contract*.² This usage, when recognized by dictionaries, is labelled “preposition”,³ and seems to be more typical of American English than other varieties of English. The question we ask here is whether *absent* really functions as a preposition in English nowadays. If such is the case, this would involve a change from a lexical category (that of adjective) to a grammatical one (preposition), in other words, this would imply a grammaticalization process.

After explaining how we collected the data used in this study (section 2), we will consider how *absent* might possibly have grammaticalized into a preposition (section 3). We will argue that the change is not so much about the grammaticalization of an individual item as about the coming into being of a new construction, a view known as constructionalization (Traugott & Trousdale 2013). In section 4 other contemporary usages of *absent* will be examined, and evidence that the item has acquired prepositional status will be adduced. Finally, since we posit matching through analogy with the construction <without+NP> to be key in that process, a comparison between the prepositions *without* and *absent* will be drawn in present-day English (section 5).

The prepositional use of *absent* has already been studied in a paper by Alan Slotkin published in *American Speech*. Yet, there are several reasons why it seems necessary to re-examine the evolution of *absent* here. For one, his relatively short paper was written in 1985, i.e. at a time when corpus linguistics was still in its infancy. The data Slotkin uses was mainly provided by the Editorial Director for Merriam-Webster Inc. and by a Professor of Law at UCLA (1985: 222 and 224). Although authentic and perfectly reliable, that data is quite limited, while the large corpora of English we have at our disposal today make it possible to collect and present in its natural

¹ Tours University (France) and Laboratoire Ligérien de Linguistique (UMR 7270, Universités d'Orléans et de Tours, CNRS, Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

² *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 24 Feb. 1945, source: W3.

³ Cf. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, the *Online McMillan Dictionary*, the *OED*, and W3, to name just a few.

Abbreviations used for dictionaries: MED: *Middle English Dictionary*; OED: *Oxford English Dictionary*; W3: Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

context as much data as we need. Additionally, since the evolution of *absent* studied here is a fairly recent phenomenon, it is not unreasonable to imagine that developments yet undescribed might have taken place in the last 40 years or so, and that these should be noticeable in data collected from large corpora. Finally, we approach the prepositional use of *absent* in the light of grammaticalization theory, while Slotkin does not. The word *grammaticalization* does not occur in his article, the author using such phrases as “a shift in the use of *absent* to a preposition”, or “the transference of *absent* from adjective to preposition” (1985: 225). In writing this, we are aware of the history of grammaticalization (it too can be described as being in its infancy in the 1980s), and of “the extent to which Meillet’s insights had become submerged by twentieth-century structuralism” (Hopper and Traugott 2003: 26). Therefore, in all these respects at least, the constructional perspective we adopt here can be expected to shed new light on the development of prepositional *absent*.

2. Data collection

The data for discussion have been drawn for the most part from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (henceforth COCA), a large-scale parsed corpus consisting of approximately one billion words of authentic present-day American English, available on Mark Davies’ website.⁴ *The British National Corpus* (BNC), the *Corpus of US Supreme Court Opinions*, the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), and the *Google News* website have also been consulted.

In the corpora we used, *absent* is not parsed as a preposition but as an adjective, which made our data collection process even trickier. To overcome this obstacle, specific queries had to be carried out. As our aim was to find as many tokens of prepositional *absent* as possible, we searched several corpora for the following syntactic sequences:

Query	Number of tokens / frequency (COCA)	Number of tokens / frequency (BNC)
absent DET	408 / 0,0004‰	3 / 0,000003‰
absent ART	841 / 0,0008‰	1 / 0,000001‰
absent ADJ	434 / 0,0004‰	2 / 0,000002‰
absent PRON	9 / 0,000009‰	0 / 0‰

Table 1: tokens and frequency of prepositional *absent* in two corpora representative of present-day American and British English

DET, ART, ADJ and PRON stand respectively for *determiner*, *article*, *adjective* and *pronoun*. We purposely discarded the string *absent* + N because this query inevitably yielded erroneous data, especially a number of utterances where *absent* functions as an attributive adjective. The data we had collected at that point required further processing, and a second manual sorting was thus necessary to remove the few remaining erroneous tokens. The takeaway from Table 1 is that the prepositional use of *absent* is mostly characteristic of American English.

It is also worth noting that contrary to what is indicated in some dictionaries, this usage is not unique to legal (or quasilegal) contexts.⁵ Back in 1985, Slotkin pointed out that “many English instructors consider[ed] the [...] construction either awkward, stilted, or jargon” (Slotkin 1985: 222). An examination of the data collected in the COCA suggests a much wider range of use than strictly legal contexts, since we came across the prepositional use of *absent* in various text genres: academic writing, legal texts, news, magazines, blogs and even – to a lesser extent – fiction, all of them encompassing a variety of topics, as shown by the following examples:

- 1) A compound sentence comprises two independent clauses joined by one of the seven coordinating conjunctions (*for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so*... the mnemonic is FANBOYS), and a comma immediately

⁴ All the examples cited from that corpus are identified with the acronym ‘COCA’.

⁵ For instance, the following mention can be found in the OED entry: “Originally and chiefly U.S. Law.”

preceding the conjunction separates the clauses. Therefore, **absent the comma and coordinating conjunction**, the above sentence is not a compound sentence. (COCA, *Grammar Girl: Who Versus Whom - Quick and Dirty Tips*)

- 2) **Absent their traditional predator**, deer no longer feared to tread in heavily wooded areas. (COCA, *Christian Science Monitor*)
- 3) **Absent any hardware compatibility issues that might trigger performance slowdowns**, upgrading from Windows 98 to Windows 2000 should yield noticeably better performance in some types of tasks. (COCA, *PC World*)

In order to collect more detailed data, we used the CHART option of the COCA, whereby it is possible to retrieve the frequency of words and phrases by genre, sub-genre and/or year. By way of example, Table 2 shows the distribution of the string *absent + any*⁶ by genre and sub-genre:

	Total	Aca.	Arg.	Fiction	Inform.	Instr.	Legal	News	Pers.	Prom.	Rvw	Misc.
BLOGS	30	1	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	5
WEB	19	0	10	0	1	0	2	2	0	-	2	2

	Total	News	Financial	Sc./Tech.	Soc. Arts	Religion	Sports	Entertain.	Home Health	Children	Women Men
MAG.	18	5	1	3	0	2	2	1	3	1	1

	Total	Hist.	Educ.	Social Sc.	Law / Political Sc.	Hum.	Philos. / Religion	Science / Tech.	Medicine	Misc.	Business
ACAD.	24	3	6	2	7	2	0	2	1	1	0

Table 2: distribution of the string *absent + any* by genre and sub-genre (COCA)⁷

These figures bear out the fact that, although still present in legal texts, the prepositional use of *absent* has gained in popularity in all manner of domains.

In the next section we will deal with the historical mechanism that has made such success possible.

3. The grammaticalization of *absent*: from participle-adjective to preposition

English has a fair number of adpositions – mainly prepositions – deriving from nouns (e.g. *across, around, back, because of, despite, instead of, thanks to...*, not to mention such periphrastic prepositions as *at the top of*). Next to nouns, verbs are known to have given rise to prepositions: a few of them can indeed be traced back to participles, whether present (e.g. *during*) or past (e.g. *given*) forms. It is much less common for English prepositions to derive directly from adjectives; *below* and *opposite* are two such examples. Our aim in this section is to show that *absent* should be included in that list, having derived from a participle-adjective through a grammaticalization process.

3.1. An adjective is borrowed

Absent as a preposition goes back to the Anglo-Norman and Middle French adjective *absent*, ‘not present in a place or at an occasion’, (later of a thing or quality) ‘lacking’ (OED, s.v. *absent*, prep.). The adjective is first attested in English in written documents dating from the early 14th century; it derives from classical Latin *absens* ‘not present in person’, ‘not present in mind or

⁶ This query was chosen because it yielded the best results.

⁷ Abbreviations used: Aca.: academic, Arg.: argument, Educ.: education, Entertain.: entertainment, Hum.: humanities, Inform.: informational, Instr.: instructional, Mag.: magazines, Pers.: personal, Prom.: promotional, Rvw: review, Sc.: Science, Tech.: technology, Soc.: society.

spirit', 'non-existent', which is the present participle of the verb *abesse*, 'to be away' (OED, s.v. *absent*, adj.). Its inflectional ending must have prevented the loanword from participating in Middle English present participle forms;⁸ but, as we'll see, the fact that its etymon was a participle, and recognised as such by speakers of English conversant with Latin, was key to the further evolution of *absent*.

In the 14th and 15th centuries participial-adjectival *absent* is found to occur in predicative position (4), and less frequently in adjacent (mostly postmodifying) position to the noun (5-6):

- 4) Þe kyng was absent, for he was ȝit of tendre age.
 "The king was absent, for he was still at a tender age."
 a1387 Trev.Higd. (StJ-C H.1)7.35 (MED)
- 5) He knowiþ sensibil þinges present & absent by here owne material schappis.
 "He recognizes perceptible things, present and absent, by their own material shapes."
 a1398 *Trev.Barth. (Add27944)22a/b (MED)
- 6) Imagynacion is a miȝt þorow þe whiche we portray alle ymages of absent & present þinges.
 "Imagination is a faculty thanks to which we conjure up all the images of absent and present things."
 a1425 (?a1400) Cloud (Hrl 674)117/6,8 (MED)

More interestingly, *absent* also occurs in absolute constructions with expressed (7) or implied (8) copula. In absolute constructions an NP or a pronoun functions as the subject of the non-finite (implied or expressed) verb, and this subject is not co-referential with that of the finite verb in the main clause. Crystal defines *absolutes* as sentence constituents "which [are] isolated from or abnormally connected to the rest of the sentence" (Crystal 2008: 3). They are sometimes termed "free adjuncts" (Zandvoort 1977: 210) or "supplementive clauses" (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1123).

Unsurprisingly, these constructions are reminiscent of the Latin "ablative absolute" construction.⁹

- 7) **Þe saide aduersariis beyng absent**..þe tithis of þe hey..to þabbot and Couent..we haue i-jugged.
 "The said opponents being absent, [...] we have adjudged the tithes of hay to the abbot and to the convent."
 c1460 Oseney Reg. 63/6 (MED)
- 8) This Emperour..seide..ʋn-to the holy lond I wole..And for thy make I thee principally Of al thempyre,
me absent, lady.¹⁰
 "This emperor said, 'I want to go to the Holy Land [...] And consequently I place you, lady, at the head of the whole empire in my absence.'
 c1422 Hoccl. JWife (Dur-U Cosin V.3.9)28 (MED)

Our search within the quite extensive Middle English corpus (see References section) didn't yield a single occurrence of the loan construction with *absent* preceding the noun phrase (NP) that it modifies. In early Modern English the same construction is still observed, either with expressed (9) or with implied (10) copula:

- 9) **Any of which qualities being absent**, one may neverthelesse be a Worthy man.
 1651 T. Hobbes *Leviathan* i. x. 47 (OED)
- 10) With this she fell distract, And (**her Attendants absent**) swallow'd fire.
 a1616 W. Shakespeare *Julius Caesar* (1623) iv. ii. 208 (OED)

⁸ A new southern participle ending *-inde* spread into the Midlands in the 13th century, thus triggering a merger with the gerund ending *-inge*. In late Middle English *-ing(e)* encroached more and more on the range of present participle endings (Roger Lass in Hogg & Denison 2006: 80).

⁹ "The so-called Ablative Absolute is an Ablative combined with a participle, and serves to modify the verbal predicate of a sentence. Instead of the participle, a predicative substantive or adjective can be employed." Examples: *Xerxe rēgnante*; *Xerxe victō*; *Xerxe rēge*; *Patre vivō*. (Gildersleeve and Lodge 1968: §§409-410).

¹⁰ The oblique case of *me* might well be an imitation of the Latin ablative absolute, as in the Old English dative-inflected imitation. Alternatively, (8) being Middle English, it might be seen as an "oblique absolute, which is due rather to the influence of the Old French accusative absolute than to any tradition of the Old English construction" (Sweet 1898: 124).

3.2. Anteposition of the adjective and reanalysis

In late Modern English the anteposition of the adjective *absent* is first noticed in American English. Here is the earliest example given by the OED, the next one dating from 1933:

- 11) If the deed had been made by a stranger to the wife, then a separate estate in her would not have been created, **absent the necessary words**.
1888 *Southwestern Reporter* 8 898 (OED)

It is possible to maintain that despite the shift in the construction the NP *the necessary words* still functions as the subject of an implied copula, distribution alone not being evidence for constituency. But the new position of *absent* opens up another possibility, i.e. to see it as an introductory element which precedes an NP and forms with it a single constituent of structure called a preposition phrase (PP) (Crystal 2008, s.v. *preposition*). From that point on, syntactic reanalysis can take place for some speakers, but not necessarily for all of them: the NP previously subject in the absolute construction is then reanalysed as prepositional complement (*the necessary words being absent* ~ *absent the necessary words*). Reanalysis is reinforced by analogy with *without the necessary words*, in which *without* is a preposition.

In the words of Heine (2002), (11) and all similar examples represent a “bridging context”, i.e. a kind of context in which an inference gives rise to a new meaning. The new meaning (here, ‘without, in the absence of’) is foregrounded but does not replace the original one (here, ‘away, not present, non-existent’). Syntactically, in bridging contexts *absent* does not fit unambiguously into either category (adjective or preposition) but will be best seen as moving away from adjectival status in a grammaticalization cline. Such ambiguity is also noted by Slotkin:

Clearly, [...] *absent* can be interpreted as having prepositional status if one uses semantically overlapping boundaries as a basis for analogizing *absent* to prepositional *without*. Just as clearly, *absent* functions in **most** of the above-listed citations as the adjective element in an absolute construction, which function may ultimately lead to its being interpreted as a present participial form equated with *missing* or *lacking*. (1985: 226, emphasis ours)

Thus our hypothesis is that *absent* is on the way to achieving prepositional status in (11) and all similar instances,¹¹ and that the shift in question corresponds to a grammaticalization process. The latter involves recategorization from a lexical category (adjective) to a grammatical one (preposition). In that respect, the fact that in late Modern English adjectives had long become invariable (having lost all inflections of case, number and gender) can only have facilitated decategorialization.

The original lexical meaning, that of participial-adjectival *absent*, is maintained, a phenomenon referred to as “persistence” (Hopper & Traugott 2003: 96). This grammaticalization process also involves “divergence” (Hopper & Traugott 2003: 118-22): a form assumes two distinct functions, adjective and preposition.

Finally, the “principle of synchronic coexistence” (Faarlund 1990: 47-49), which states that a change from one form F to another form G cannot take place unless F and G can coexist as alternatives in a language, correctly predicts an intermediate stage during which both the initial structure (12) and the new one with anteposition of *absent* (13) coexist:

- 12) Similarly, it is distinguishable from instances, **Federal legislation being absent**, where a State imposes safety or other requirements on a contractor doing business for the United States (1957, *Procurement Legal Service*, Volume 2, Department of the Army pamphlet 715-50-2, pp.316-17)

¹¹ This is also Slotkin (1985)’s hypothesis, but not the only one he considered. The linguist, who had a more limited range of data than we do, indeed put forward three different descriptions of structures like *absent the necessary words* (1985: 225).

- 13) **Absent federal legislation upon the subject**, states may within the limits of reasonableness, regulate the use of their highways (1952, Penn. Greyhound Lines v. Bd. of P. U. Com'rs., 107 F. Supp. 521, 17; Slotkin's ex. 4)

3.3. The locus of change

4 of the 5 quotations found in the OED (s.v. *absent*, prep.) occur in legal documents. Back in 1985 Slotkin also noted that without exception, the earliest recorded uses of *absent* in a pattern like (11) are in quasilegal, legal, and governmental contexts. D. Mellinkoff, a Professor of Law then contacted by Slotkin, commented in a letter to the author that the prepositional usage was “a commonplace in a legal usage ..., [lawyers being] apt to say, e.g. ‘Absent malice there can be no recovery,’ ‘Absent fraud,’ etc.” (Slotkin 1985: 224).

Legal and quasilegal contexts are an argument in favour of our hypothesis that prepositional *absent* developed from an absolute construction. Indeed, lawyers and magistrates in the late 19th century formed a learned professional class who had a very good command of Latin. Thus they must have been familiar with such Latin absolute constructions as *lite pendente* (‘the lawsuit pending’) and fully aware that the inverted absolute *pendente lite* was equally well formed.

Where *absent* is concerned, F.C. Mish, Editorial Director for Merriam-Webster Inc., wrote to Slotkin that the standard law dictionaries recorded only one Latin phrase beginning with *absente*, viz. *absente reo*. He hypothesized that “[...] a person who had the mental habit of rendering this as “absent the defendant” instead of “the defendant being absent” or “in the absence of the defendant” [...] might easily extend the use of *absent* in the belief that it was a neat, concise (even elegant?) turn of phrase.” (Slotkin 1985: 223-24). In other words, the development of prepositional *absent* must have originated in the imitation of a Latin construction that first took place in a cultural context where Latin provided a desirable model.

3.4. A chronological sketch of the grammaticalization process

As regards the beginning of the process, 1888 is of course “a no-later-than date”. The process might very well have started before, but until further written evidence turns up, our reference point will have to be the late 19th century. Then, as shown in Table 3, it is not until the 1940s that the development of prepositional *absent* becomes noticeable, its frequency soaring in the 1970s:

	Up to the 1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Tokens	0	7	3	17	53	53	34	30	21
Frequency (per one million words)	0.00	1.05	0.64	2.22	4.43	3.68	3.71	3.98	3.42

Table 3: tokens and frequency of the string *absent + any* in the Corpus of US Supreme Court Opinions¹²

3.5. Grammaticalization as constructionalization

Let us now consider the possible causes of the grammaticalization process. As discussed in section 3.3, the anteposition of *absent* was most likely linked in the first place to the fact that people in the legal profession in the late 19th century were familiar with Latin absolute constructions, and aware that the two sequences <N+participle> and <participle+N> were both perfectly acceptable. So they may well have calqued the English sequence *absent the defendant* on Latin *absente reo*. And, as discussed in section 3.2, reanalysis could then take place.

And yet the shift from participial-adjectival to prepositional *absent* seems to belong to a more general pattern of change, as suggested by the case of French *pendant*: Bango (2016) demonstrates

¹² This query was made so as to allow comparison with Table 2.

how prepositional *pendant* arose out of inverted absolute constructions too (Middle French *le plait pendant / pendant le plait*). Both in French and in English today, a number of participles can act as the introductory item of a former absolute construction, cf. French *durant, moyennant, suivant ...* and English *barring, concerning, excepting ...*

This is where we turn to grammaticalization viewed as constructionalization.

Very early on, the importance of the type of syntactic context and of the syntagmatic relations of a grammaticalizing item has been stressed: “Grammaticalization does not merely seize a word or morpheme [...] but **the whole construction** formed by the syntagmatic relations of the element in question.” (Lehmann 1995: 406, emphasis ours). In that perspective the evolution of *absent* has to be seen as the development of a new grammatical function (that of preposition, cf. section 3.2), but even more importantly, as the development of a new construction: “[...] the result of the process is the formation of a construction as a new piece of grammar, rather than a new grammatical status of an individual item.” (Fried 2013: 309).¹³

The new construction here is <absent+NP>. If we follow Traugott (2008), constructions are included in hierarchically organized networks, in which three levels correspond to *types* of constructions, and one to *tokens*. Concerning prepositional *absent*, we suggest inclusion in this network:

<p>a) MACRO-CONSTRUCTIONS: these are the highest-level constructions. The macro-constructions in this case include all syntactically detached constructions in present-day English, whether they are formally subjectless supplementive clauses (e.g. <i>Discovered almost by accident, this vaccine...</i>), absolute supplementive clauses (e.g. <i>The war over; The lecture finished; There being no way of escape, we decided to...</i>), or disjuncts¹⁴ (e.g. <i>Frankly, I am tired; To my regret, she did not ...; Without some indication of his approval, how can you possibly...?</i>).</p>
<p>b) MESO-CONSTRUCTIONS:¹⁵ these are sets of micro-constructions having the same syntactic behaviour. The meso-constructions here are disjuncts of the type <preposition+NP>; the preposition should not be syntactically dependent on any item (whether verb, noun, or adjective) in the main clause.</p>
<p>c) MICRO-CONSTRUCTIONS: these are individual types of construction. The micro-constructions in this case are <without+NP>, <in the absence of+NP>, <lacking+NP>,¹⁶ and <absent+NP>.</p>
<p>d) CONSTRUCTS: these are empirically attested tokens of micro-constructions; they are the locus of innovation. The constructs correspond here to all the attested occurrences of disjuncts with introductory prepositional <i>absent</i>, such as (11) when reanalysed.</p>

Table 4: the hierarchically organized network of constructions to which prepositional *absent* belongs, after Traugott (2008)

The constructions in such networks are a source of analogic motivation: a conventionalized construction, i.e. one that represents a routinized chunk of language that is stored in the speakers’ memory, may act as a model to which another, emerging construction may be matched. If similar comparisons are often made by enough people, the emerging construction then in turn becomes conventionalized. With respect to *absent*, we suggest that analogy¹⁷ with the micro-construction

¹³ Construction Grammar adopts the Saussurian conception of the linguistic sign as an arbitrary pairing of a form (a signifier) and a meaning (a signified) and extends it: it is proposed that such pairings are found at all levels of grammatical description. Therefore morphemes, words, idiomatic expressions as well as abstract syntactic patterns are all referred to as ‘constructions’.

¹⁴ In Quirk *et al.* (1985)’s terminology, disjuncts are adverbials which imply the attitude of the speaker to the form or content of the rest of the clause/sentence. They fall into two broad categories: style disjuncts and content disjuncts. The latter make observations on the actual content of the utterance and its truth conditions. For instance, adverbial clauses of condition – but also verbless or nonfinite clauses introduced by *with(out)* – are classified as content disjuncts.

¹⁵ In Traugott (2015) macro- and meso-constructions are referred to as schemas and subschemas respectively.

¹⁶ If we follow Slotkin (1985: 226), *lacking any unexpected developments* and even *missing any unexpected developments* can substitute for *absent any unexpected developments* in the first example quoted in his paper.

¹⁷ *Analogy* here is understood as *analogization*: “I take the position that it is important to distinguish the process of analogical thinking from the mechanism of analogy, better called “analogization,” to avoid the ambiguity between the enabling motivation and

<without+NP>¹⁸ was key to the reanalysis of anteposed *absent* as a preposition and to the emergence of a new construction. More or less conscious comparison between constructs like *absent a valid confession* and *without a valid confession*, *absent the Supreme Court getting involved in...* and *without the Supreme Court getting involved in...* must have been made often enough by language users before <absent+NP> eventually became “a conventional pattern of speakers' understanding” (Fried 2013: 306) matched to <without+NP>.

Working with construction grammar from a historical perspective focuses attention on alignment and matching of micro-constructions with each other, resulting in their incorporation into meso-level constructions, and eventually reconfiguration of macro-constructions. Alignment and matching are analogical processes. (Traugott 2008: 170)

If our hypotheses are valid, the rise of prepositional *absent* is best accounted for not as the grammaticalization of an individual item, but as constructionalization, that is to say “the creation of a form_{NEW}-meaning_{NEW} pairing through a sequence of small-step reanalyses of both form and meaning.” (Traugott 2015: 54). The new form is *absent* + NP and the new meaning is ‘without, in the absence of NP’.

Our concern in the next section is to substantiate our claim by showing that things have got one step further, precisely, by comparison with (11), and that prepositional *absent* now shares all the syntactic and distributional properties of English prepositions.

4. Is *absent* a preposition in its own right? Evidence of change

Back in 1985, when Slotkin discussed whether *absent* truly functions in English as a preposition, he suggested that this prepositional usage label might be “a misinterpretation of an inverted absolute construction with deleted copula” (Slotkin 1985: 222). At the end of the day, the author acknowledged that each interpretation falls within the realm of plausibility, but also conceded that “each has its problems”. Ultimately, he came to the following conclusion:

Whether or not the prepositional usage label granted *absent* in both Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* and Webster's *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* is an accurate assessment of its current status may remain uncertain until additional examples appear of its use in contexts where it cannot be interpreted as an element in an absolute construction. (Slotkin 1985: 226)

It is possible nowadays to trace examples where *absent* cannot be regarded as “an element in an absolute construction” and to ascertain that in present-day English, it *has* become a preposition in its own right.

Absolute constructions (defined in section 3.1) are classified by Grady, in a transformational approach, into several broad categories, including the so-called “English nominative absolute” and what he terms “the simple absolute”. According to him, the latter is merely “the resultant of the deletion of the auxiliary together with *be* when that verb is the main verb of the VP” (Grady 1972: 5). In the case at hand, as Slotkin argued, the constituent containing *absent* can similarly be rephrased by adding a deleted copula, as in (14) (Slotkin's ex. 3):

- 14) Absent such a reservation, only the Court of Claims has jurisdiction to hear and determine claims for compensation brought by employees of the United States.... → Such a reservation **being absent**, only the Court of Claims has jurisdiction...

If we follow Slotkin's line of reasoning, then *absent* could be regarded as an adjectival element, which could in turn be interpreted as a present participial form akin to *missing* or *lacking*. The question is all the more relevant since similar inverted absolute constructions involving a

the mechanism of change (see further Traugott & Trousdale 2010). Analogical thinking matches aspects of meaning and form; it enables, but may or may not result in change. By contrast, analogization is a mechanism or operation of change bringing about alignments and matches of meaning and form, i.e. similarities, that did not exist before.” (Traugott 2015: 64).

¹⁸ For a recent, in-depth study of *without*, see Gatelais (2021).

preposition (or what looks like a preposition) have been discussed by grammarians. For instance, Huddleston and Pullum point out that such items as *considering*, *notwithstanding*, *aside*, etc. sometimes occur after the NP they are supposed to introduce. As noted by the authors, those PPs are quite reminiscent of subject-predicate structures:

- 15) **Fame and fortune notwithstanding / Notwithstanding fame and fortune**, Donna never forgot her hometown.

Yet, none of those items can be used predicatively, and the authors prefer treating them as “exceptional PP constructions in which the complement precedes the head” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 631).

With respect to the syntactic status of *absent*, what our corpus shows is that it can be followed by any type of complement functioning as an NP, ranging from pronouns to non-finite clauses, as shown in Table (5) below. *Absent* is therefore subject to the same distributional constraints as most prepositions, especially its near-synonym *without*.

Constituent type	Example(s)
Noun phrase	16) Absent any bombshells , Democrats insist they just want Mueller to speak the words he wrote on paper in April. (COCA)
Personal pronoun	17) What seems to be missing is faith. Absent it , some daily stylists don't just get bored silly with their jobs. (COCA)
Demonstrative pronoun	18) The emulsion can get eaten by small buggy things, just like other gelatin emulsions. But absent that , they won't fade nor deteriorate. (COCA)
Relative pronoun	19) Improvement by persuasion, however, has certain prerequisites, absent which a society cannot even cohere enough to set the advancement process in motion. (COCA)
Non-finite nominal clause	20) You know, absent finding the airplane and having physical evidence to look at; absent finding and analyzing what's on the recorders , they have to look in every other way, an old-fashioned detective work, trying to piece together this really puzzling situation. (COCA) 21) Absent the Supreme Court getting involved in this , gay marriage will be banned in many, many states for a long, long time. (COCA)
Free relative clause	22) Absent what Johnson did a half century ago , there would have been no “New South” - at least certainly not so soon. (COCA)

Table 5: list of constituent types found after *absent*

If some of these constituents can be rephrased by means of a clause with expressed copula (this concerns (16)-(18) only), the majority of them cannot, and to these Slotkin's suggestion of an adjective in an inverted absolute construction cannot be applied. If we consider (19) for instance, *absent* directly precedes a relative pronoun in a non-restrictive relative clause, a syntactic position which can be typically occupied by a preposition, but never by an adjective or a participle. Here is another example:

- 23) That's not just some minor technicality, **absent which** Robert Mueller's prosecutors would have had Don Jr. in shackles while revelers in cat-eared pink hats danced in the streets. (www.foxnews.com)

Absolute constructions are sentence-level adverbials which cannot be syntactically or semantically attached to any single constituent in the sentence (hence the term “free adjunct”). Therein lies the rub: our corpus abounds in examples where the constituent introduced by *absent* is syntactically dependent on another item. In (24) and (25) for instance, it modifies a noun:

- 24) I think that [an America **absent these institutions in the provision to social services to the needy**]_{NP} will be a flatter, more homogeneous, less interesting and dynamic place. (COCA)
- 25) In [a world **absent politics and biology**]_{NP}, they'd be chasing Tammy Mercer to do Kool-Aid commercials in a couple of years. (Slotkin's ex. 12)

Without or *lacking* could be substituted for *absent* here. The constituents in bold type above cannot be analysed as adjective phrases postmodifying a noun, because it is impossible for an adjective to thus take a direct complement.

Our search in large corpora also yielded several utterances where the constituent introduced by *absent* is used predicatively after a linking verb, as illustrated in (26) and (27):

- 26) Berman, whose office has prosecuted and investigated several of President Donald Trump's allies, had no interest in leaving to make way for the president's favored replacement – current SEC Chairman Jay Clayton, whose resume **is absent any previous experience as a prosecutor**. (Kevin Johnson, *USA Today*)
- 27) Thirty-five percent of all voters -- and 40% of white voters -- said those connections bother them. This **is absent any candidate or party** pressing hard on those themes, which Republicans have hinted they may start to raise more aggressively in the campaign's closing days. (Michael Dobbs, *The Washington Post*)

In both examples, the constituent featuring *absent* is syntactically dependent on the VP. What is more, it expresses a property of the subject and is therefore semantically linked to that constituent. It also stands to reason that the *be* copula cannot be inserted when the phrase occurs in that syntactic position (**Most villages are solutions being absent*). All of this goes to show that it cannot be analysed as an elliptic inverted absolute construction. In the words of Heine (2002), (19)-(27), and all similar examples, represent a “switch context”, i.e. a kind of context in which the former meaning and syntactic status of an item can no longer be accepted.

We come to the conclusion that the prepositional status of *absent* in present-day English is underpinned by a body of syntactic evidence, and that the constituent introduced by *absent* is unquestionably a preposition phrase. The inclusion of *absent* in a standard list of English prepositions is not “most probably in the offing”, as Slotkin (1985: 227) writes despite his ex. 12: it is actual and it has been so since examples like (19)-(27) first appeared in the language.

Drawing a parallel between some of those structures and absolute or “supplementive” constructions (to use Quirk *et al.* (1985)'s terms) is not fanciful or farfetched, as will be shown by some of their semantic properties (cf. section 5.1 below). But since absolutes have a subject while PPs don't (the NP then functioning as complement to the preposition), we have decided to use the term *disjunct* (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 612 sq) to describe the constituents introduced by *absent* in such examples as (16)-(27).

5. Semantic development: is *absent* a mere synonym for *without*?

All the dictionaries we have consulted equate *absent* and *without* as mere synonyms. Both express an “abessive relation”¹⁹ (i.e. the meaning of absence (Crystal 2008, s.v. *abessive*)). And yet, despite a certain degree of semantic overlap between the two prepositions, it would be stretching it to say that *absent* and *without* are totally equivalent or interchangeable.

5.1 *Absent* in disjuncts

A closer look at our corpus reveals that a substantial majority of occurrences of prepositional *absent* are used to express complex logical relationships. As a matter of fact, it is most often possible to replace the PP introduced by *absent* with an adverbial clause containing a negative element (*not*, *no*, *unless*). Thus, many of them can be rephrased by means of an *if*- or *unless*-clause and accordingly express hypothetical or contrary-to-fact conditions:

- 28) **Absent such a law**, many physicians **would** be reluctant to administer a test. (= **If** such a law **didn't** exist, many physicians...)
- 29) **And absent an agreement**, he **will not** be released tomorrow. (= **Unless** an argument is reached...)

¹⁹ The word refers to a case used in some Finno-Ugric languages such as Estonian or Finnish.

- 30) **Absent a warrant**, authorities **can still conduct** a search in defined circumstances. (= **Even if no** warrant is issued, authorities can still...)
- 31) **Absent people**, the memories die, and the reality that once was is no more. (= **When / If** people are absent...)

More rarely do occurrences of prepositional *absent* imply a causal relationship, and then they can be reworded by means of a subordinate clause introduced by *as* or *because*:

- 2) **Absent their traditional predator**, deer no longer feared to tread in heavily wooded areas. (= **As / Because** their traditional predator was **not** around...)

All in all, it appears that those PPs headed by *absent* do not signal specific logical relationships. On the contrary, these relationships have to be inferred from the context. For instance, the presence of a modal auxiliary such as *would* or *will* (or any word or verbal form expressing doubt or futurity) in the matrix clause will make the addressee lean towards a conditional interpretation.

Such inexplicitness is reminiscent of what Quirk *et al.* call “supplementive clauses”, i.e. verbless or participial clauses which are not introduced by subordinators. The authors describe the semantic interpretation of these constructions as ambiguous or inexplicit, inasmuch as according to context, the speaker “may wish to imply temporal, conditional, causal, concessive, or circumstantial relationship”. In short, the authors label this inexplicitness “an accompanying circumstance to the situation described in the matrix” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1124). For that reason, most PPs introduced by *absent* share a number of semantic properties with participial clauses; this might go along with Slotkin’s comparisons with *lacking* and *missing*. They also bear a certain resemblance to some disjuncts introduced by *with* or *without* as in (32):

- 32) **Without anyone noticing**, I slipped out of the room. (Quirk *et al.*)

From a historical perspective, it is noteworthy that the earliest recorded examples of this structure are to be found in conditional or hypothetical contexts:

- 11) If the deed had been made by a stranger to the wife, then a separate estate in her would not have been created, **absent the necessary words**. (OED, 1888)
- 33) As we have seen there is no objection to the Authority’s operations by the states, and, if this were not so, the appellants, **absent the states or their officers**, have no standing in this suit to raise any question under the amendment. (*Corpus of US Supreme Court Opinions*, 1939)
- 34) **Absent such power**, the Commission would encounter similar difficulties in the administration of other sections. (*Corpus of US Supreme Court Opinions*, 1941)

There is therefore little doubt that *absent* was originally used to introduce supplementive clauses expressing an implied logical relationship of causality or of hypothetical condition rather than the mere absence of something.

5.2 *Absent* vs. *without*

In all the above examples, it is always possible to substitute *without* for *absent*. Is it always the case, though?

In previous research (Gatelas 2021), we pointed out that *without* could take on various meanings closely related to those expressed by *with*. This comes as no surprise since *without* is often regarded as “the negative of *with*” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 702). It appears that as negative prepositions, *absent* and *without* share a number of distributional properties:

- Neither *without* nor *absent* can be followed by an absolute negator such as *not*, *no*, *never*... Nor are they compatible with such *positively-oriented polarity-sensitive items* (PPIs)²⁰ as *few*, *little* or *already*, which are to be found in affirmative sentences. The COCA yielded no such examples.

- By contrast, both prepositions are sometimes followed by *negatively-oriented polarity-sensitive items*¹⁹ (NPIs) such as *any* (131 tokens in the COCA), *much* (6 tokens) or *many*.²¹

Without and *with* being closely related, it stands to reason that *without* denotes the same semantic relationships as *with*, notably instrumental, manner, comitative or a part/whole relation – or more accurately the negation thereof. Table 6 shows that the *absent/without* interchangeability may to some extent depend on these semantic subtypes:

Semantic relationship	Contextual constraints	<i>without</i>	<i>absent</i>
Negation of a part /whole relation, “not having”	- when in postnominal position - in predicative position	a cat without claws	(a) She is a cat absent claws. Yet fangs remain. (COCA, <i>Spartacus</i>)
Absence of instrument	when followed by a concrete inanimate complement	He opened the door without a key .	NO
“Unaccompaniment”, negation of a comitative relation	when followed by an animate noun	He went shopping without his mother .	(b) NO
Manner	when followed by an abstract mass noun denoting a feeling	He smiled without embarrassment .	NO

Table 6: Meanings of *without*

The above table calls the following remarks:

(a) As previously said, in postnominal and predicative positions, the <absent+NP> construction seems to be firmly attested and well established. This development is however fairly recent, (Slotkin cited an example in postnominal position dating back to 1977).

(b) In adjuncts, the substitution is unidiomatic, if not ungrammatical. By way of illustration, unlike *without*, *absent* cannot seemingly be used to express the negation of a comitative relation (in a comitative relation, the accompanier normally takes part in the action or event denoted by the verb). Incidentally, very few examples featuring an animate complement have been found in the COCA, (35) is one of them:

- 35) It took me back to the day when my older brother, **absent our mother** and free from the attention of our father, made me walk up.... (COCA)

Absent our mother only implies that the mother was not physically present when the event took place. By contrast, *without our mother* would imply that she did not help the speaker’s brother make him walk. *Without* and *absent* are therefore not equivalent in this context.

6. Conclusion

In this contribution we have proposed a scenario for the grammaticalization of *absent*. Two aspects in particular stand out.

- From a syntactic viewpoint, *absent* can now be said to have undergone a full recategorization process from adjective to preposition, first triggered by reanalysis in absolute constructions, and to possess all the distributional properties of prepositions.

²⁰ Those categories were identified by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 823).

²¹ The COCA yielded no example containing *many*. Nonetheless, the following example has been found in *The Wall Street Journal*: *This summer, absent many opportunities to have fun inside, the 23-year-old and two equally indoorsy friends went a few steps outside their comfort zone.*

- From a semantic perspective, the <absent+NP> construction was originally used as a supplementive clause, now better described as a disjunct, expressing a vague and inexplicit negative “accompanying” circumstance, which can – depending on context – be interpreted as a relationship of causality or a contrary-to-fact condition. More recently, it took on the meaning of “not having” in postnominal or predicative position.

The fact that *without* can also be used disjuncts with a similar meaning may have triggered the whole process by enabling language users not only to conceptualize a match (through analogical thinking, to use Traugott’s terms), but also to use *absent* in other environments in which it functions as a preposition (through analogization). In that respect, the <without+NP> construction may function as an exemplar, i.e. “an entrenched item stored in memory, typically a construction, to which another with partially similar properties is compared” (Traugott 2015: 64). This might explain why and how *absent* came into use in postnominal and predicative constructions. Nevertheless, at this point, we assume that the whole process is incomplete or unfinished: unlike <without+NP>, the <absent+NP> construction cannot be used as an adjunct nor express the negation of an instrumental or comitative relation for instance.

Another interesting (and rather unexplored) field of investigation is the part played by technolects in language change: in that respect the evolution of *absent* is a case in point, exemplifying the ability of “mainstream” English to tap into a highly technical jargon, namely legal English.

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- The Corpus of US Supreme Court Opinions* (<https://www.english-corpora.org/scotus/>)