

On Unattached Participles: a Discourse Perspective

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1. Introduction

Sentences such as (1) are sporadically found in certain varieties of written English:

- (1) a. *When dining* in the restaurant, a jacket and tie are required.
- b. *Being* Christmas, the government offices were closed. (Quirk *et al.* 1985)

The italicized parts are examples of an unattached (dangling or loose) participle, which is commonly judged to be an error and regarded as unacceptable.¹ Compare the following (2):

- (2) a. **While admiring* himself in the mirror, they kidnapped John.
- b. **Reading* a newspaper, a dog started barking.

The unattached participle differs crucially from the normal participial clause like (3) in one respect: while the understood subject of the latter is identical with the subject of the superordinate clause, the implied subject of the former is not; hence “unattached” or “dangling.”

- (3) a. *Though doing* his best, he failed.
- b. *Disappointed*, he slunk from the room.

It is generally claimed that the violation of the identical-subject rule is the key factor of the unacceptability of (2); the rule, however, is felt not to apply in certain exceptional cases such as (1) above.

In this paper, we will reexamine the general nature of unattached clauses by closely analyzing the examples collected from books and magazines. After briefly surveying the analysis currently prevailing in the literature which crucially relies on the notion of subject, we will propose a fresh approach to unattached clauses that takes into account the discourse in which they occur and the notion of “topic”. With this approach, it will be shown that several apparent “exceptions” to the identical-subject rule are in fact not an exception, but are the natural consequence of the discourse condition imposed upon the use of (unattached) participial clauses. This means that, if the discourse condition proposed in this paper is satisfied, an unattached participial clause will be fully acceptable in a given context.

Before entering the body of discussion, let us first define the constructions to be dealt with in what follows. By “unattached clauses” I refer to the following constructions:

(4) participial clauses

- a. *Being* Christmas, the government offices were closed.
- b. *Attached* now to his uncle, any separation was full of risk.

(5) participial clauses beginning with subordinators²

- a. *When dining* in the restaurant, a jacket and tie are required.
- b. *If left* to himself his instincts would have been either to return to King's Pyland or go over to Mapleton. (C. Doyle)

(6) verbless clauses

- a. *One of Japan's most prolific artists*, Terayama's works featured spectacular visual images and shock effects. (*Time*)
- b. *Face to face with Flicka*, it's easy to see why the music world loves her. (*Time*)

(7) verbless clauses beginning with subordinators

- a. *Although rich* in oil, the country's defense forces are considered toothless. (*Time*)
- b. Use deductible insurance *wherever feasible*. (Brown Corpus)

Though somewhat different in their respective forms, these clauses all have one characteristic in common: all of them do not have an explicit subject, so it is necessary to perceive the implied subject when interpreting them.³

In preparing this paper, I have collected 317 instances of unattached clauses, and their specification is given in the following table:

participial clauses (4)	188 (59.3%)
participial clauses with subordinators (5)	110 (34.7%)
verbless clauses (6)	9 (2.8%)
verbless clauses with subordinators (7)	10 (3.2%)
Total	317

2. Identical-Subject Condition

There is fairly general agreement that a participial clause obeys an attachment rule for identifying its subject, which we may call the Identical-Subject condition: the understood subject of a participial clause is assumed to be identical in reference to the subject of the main clause. A deviation from this condition is generally frowned upon or flatly rejected as unacceptable.⁴ In comprehensive and descriptive studies of English grammar such as Quirk *et al.* (1985) and Greenbaum (1996), however, it is stipulated that the Identical-Subject rule does not apply, or at least is relaxed, in certain cases. That is, under a few conditions, the

violation of the rule is more or less tolerated, and the resulting sentence is felt to be acceptable.

Let us now review these conditions in turn:

- (A) If the unattached clause is a style disjunct that has the speaker's *I* as the understood subject:

Putting it mildly, you have caused us some inconvenience.

- (B) If the understood subject refers to the whole of the host clause:

I would like it done on Wednesday *if possible*.

- (C) If the implied subject is an indefinite or generic pronoun (*you, we, or one*) or *prop it*, the construction is considered less objectionable:

When dining in the restaurant, a jacket and tie are required.

Being Christmas, the government offices were closed.

- (D) In formal scientific writing, the construction has become institutionalized where the implied subject is to be identified with the *I, we*, and *you* of the writer (s) or reader (s) :
Concentrations of substances below ten to the seventh cannot be measured *using* these radioactive-based methodologies.

The condition (A) allows such set phrases as “seriously speaking”, “generally speaking”, “speaking of the devil”, and “judging from the weather”. These style disjuncts are perfectly established in English, so I haven't included these “unattached” clauses in my data. Similarly, certain participles have become prepositions or conjunctions and are not open to criticism: *considering, barring, granting, failing, allowing for, provided, owing to, assuming*, etc. These are also excluded in this study.

Among my data of 317 unattached clauses, 75 examples (23.7%) can be explained by one of the above conditions (B)-(C). In the following, the sentences in (9)-(11) are supposed to be accounted for by the conditions (B)-(D), respectively.

- (9) a. *If desired*, the diskette size in 1Kb blocks can be specified to speed up mke2fs operation. (*The Linux Bible*)
b. But *unknown* to the 1,042 men aboard the Argentine warship, the cruiser was being watched. (*Time*)
- (10) a. The show is best watched *while chewing* a sugarless gum. (*Time*)
b. *When stalking* one's prey, it is best to take one's time. (H. Lee)
c. *Being* the seventh of January, we have very properly laid in the new almanac. (C. Doyle)
- (11) a. *Comparing* the data received from the caesium unit at Michigan, it appears that it probably does apply. (LOB Corpus)

b. *Using* a white Shorthorn bull this became more or less the practice. (LOB)
The remaining 242 examples (76.3%), however, don't fall under any of the conditions, and, since these numerous examples are the sentences actually used by native English speakers, it won't do to explain them away as a mere slip of the pen. Rather, we should look for an alternative analysis that can account for these data as well.

3. Unattached Participles in Discourse

3.1. Identical-Topic Condition

As an alternative approach to the standard analysis of unattached clauses mentioned in the previous section, I will propose the following condition imposed upon the use of unattached clauses:

- (12) The Identical-Topic Condition on unattached clauses:

The violation of the identical-subject rule is permitted if the understood subject of the unattached clause is identical with the topic of the discourse.

The gist of this condition is that an unattached clause may occur in a discourse context where the understood subject refers to the topic of the discourse in which the clause is embedded. This is a natural consequence of the fact that non-finite or participial clauses are typically used as a topic continuity device (cf. Narita 1981, Givón 1983). It may of course be argued that such clauses are totally 'grammaticalized' in English and the notion of "subject", not "topic", is sufficient to explain them. Notice, however, that non-finite or participial clauses do not have an explicit subject, which not accidentally is marked by zero, and the total predictability of the identity of the subject is "clearly an example of the coding of high topical continuity" (Givón 1983, p.24). Participial clauses, whether attached or unattached, tend to be used, often in long clause chains, as a typical topic continuity device. As an illustration, consider the following discourse fragments:

- (13) With fear as the spur, she leapt up the stairs, the madman at her heels. She paused for a split second, and then *seizing* a large Chinese vase that stood at the turn of the stairs, she pulled it over and sent it rolling down.

It caught him across the thighs, and man and vase crashed in a heap at the foot of the stairs. *Not waiting* to see the results, Jenny dived for the bedroom and slammed the door, *turning* the key. *Gasping*, she leaned back against the door. *Looking* wildly around the room, her eye fell on the chest of drawers. It was heavy and made of oak.

She went across and slowly began to push it over the floor. *Hearing* the noise, the baby stopped crying.

At last the chest was in position. *Panting*, she pushed her hair off her forehead and went over to the baby's cot. She lifted him and laid him on the bed. (LOB Corpus)

- (14) Sir Charles, as is well known, made large sums of money in South African speculation. *More* wise than those who go on until the wheel turns against them, he realized his gains and returned to England with them. It is only two years since he took up his residence at Baskerville Hall, and it is common talk how large were those schemes of reconstruction and improvement which have been interrupted by his death. *Being* himself childless, it was his openly expressed desire that the whole countryside should, within his own lifetime, profit by his good fortune, and many will have personal reasons for bewailing his untimely end. His generous donations to local and county charities have been frequently chronicled in these columns. (C. Doyle)

In the passage (13), which is narrated from the point of view of Jenny, there are seven participial clauses in use, and all of them are used to refer to her, except *Hearing* in the third paragraph, which describes her baby. Particularly interesting here is the use of *Looking* in the second paragraph, as this is a clear example of an unattached participle that serves to continue the main topic in the whole passage. The passage (14) is clearly a description of Sir Charles, and the verbless clause in the second sentence and the unattached participle in the fourth sentence both refer to him, in accordance with the Identical-Topic Condition.

Furthermore, observe the following difference:

- (15) A: What did John do next?

B: Thinking that Mary was a spy, he reported the incident to the FBI.

- (16) A: Who reported the incident to the FBI?

B: # Thinking that Mary was a spy, John reported it to the FBI.⁵

Kuno (1975) cites these instances of participial constructions to show that his "backward subject deletions" are subject to a constraint similar to the Predictability Requirement for Backward Pronominalization. According to Kuno, the difference in acceptability between (15) and (16) arises from the fact that in (15) B the underlying subject of the participle is predictable from Speaker A's question, while in (16) B it is not. It should be noted here that without the context, (16) B is perfectly acceptable, but that in this particular context, it is not a natural utterance. This shows that the obedience to the identical-subject rule doesn't necessarily ensure the acceptability of a participial construction in a particular context, and that the notion topic is relevant to its use.

Let us now turn to the actual examples of unattached clauses, and see how the Identical-Topic Condition fares with them. It would have been desirable to quote a longer

context to fully examine the examples, but the length of each quotation is here minimized for want of space.

- (17) a. He peered out to the right. It was a difficult light. The sun was on the point of setting, and, *looking* straight into it, it was hard to see anything distinctly. (Christie)
- b. He was about fifty yards offshore when, as he paddled with his feet, he felt a searing, stinging sensation in his thigh. *Surprised*, his impulse was to shout or curse, but he clamped his mouse shut. A jellyfish, he told himself. Or some tiny stinging seabug. (Benchley)
- c. Hart could not believe it. He had expected some final speech, some last thoughts with which they would wrap themselves in the years ahead. *Watching* the old professor shuffle his papers together and then tuck his notes and book under his arm, Hart's insides ached with a lonely jabbing pain. (Osborn)
- d. She was either a traitor or she wasn't. *Confronted* with that alternative, it didn't take her long to decide. (Stout)
- e. "My son reached a decision," Billings went on. "It was not a commendable decision, but, nevertheless, *having* reached it, it was irrevocable and we must deal with it as an acceptable fact." (A.A. Fair)
- f. By the time Tracy came to take him back to his hotel three days later, he had decided. *Looking* back upon his past, it seemed to him the calmest and healthiest period of his life had been the months after graduation from Stanford which he had spent as a ski instructor at the little town of Green Hollow in Vermont. (I. Shaw)
- g. He had not, therefore, expected to find a woman on Great Gable; but, *having* encountered one who seemed to need masculine help, it was even more terrifying that she should turn the tables by helping him. (Hilton)
- h. The profile of Simpson and Bruckheimer is not flattering, but hardly devastating. *Although portrayed* as busybodies on the set (Top Gun director Tony Scott recounts how they pressured him to make co-star Kelly McGillis look less "whorish"), their main sin is fuzzy-minded self-importance. After calling themselves a "right brain-left brain" team, they trade sappy compliments. (*Time*)
- i. The PLO fighters will be allowed to leave Beirut with their light weapons, but sooner or later many will be disarmed by their host countries ... or kept under tight control in army units. *Armed or not*, the dangers they pose to their hosts are not military. (*Newsweek*)
- j. He got up and began pacing, seeking to redirect his energy elsewhere. It would not be

- redirected. Stopping at the window, he observed that a bright three-quarter moon had risen. It bathed the garden, beaches, and the sea in white ethereal light. *Watching*, a long-forgotten phrase returned to him: The night was made for loving ... by the moon. He paced again, then returned to the window, standing there, erect. (A. Hailey)
- k. The heads of the lambs are considered great delicacies and go first. *When roasted*, the unbounded joy of the native cracking the skull and picking out the tasty bits is nauseating in the extreme. (LOB)
- l. She stared at us with defiant eyes, and then, *suddenly recognizing* me, an expression of absolute astonishment came over her face. (C. Doyle)

All of the participles above are not attached to the subject in the main clause, and yet they are felt to be quite natural and spontaneous in their respective discourse contexts. This is because, even though unattached, they are all related to the topic of the discourse and therefore serve to contribute to the cohesion of the text by explicitly continuing the discourse topic. These examples amply demonstrate the validity of the Identical-Topic Condition proposed above, and it would be difficult to uniformly explain these “ungrammatical” sentences without postulating such a condition.

In this connection, we may briefly mention a common explanation proposed in the traditional studies. In Fowler & Fowler (1931), for example, it is suggested that unattached participles are “half justified” when they are attached not to the main subject but to a possessive pronoun like *my*, *your*, *his*, or *their* in the main subject position or other position in the main clause. This observation is quite correct, as seen in some of the above examples, but it is like putting the cart before the horse and doesn’t provide us with any illuminating ideas of the nature of unattached clauses. It is not the case that unattached clauses become acceptable because they are related to some item in the non-subject position in the main clause. Rather, the fact that the implied subject is often repeated in the main clause in the form of possessive pronouns is a corollary of it being the topic of the discourse; it is quite natural that the topic item, being the topic of the discourse, should appear frequently in the main clause in various forms such as possessives or objects. Thus Fowler & Fowler’s suggestion in fact constitutes another evidence in favor of the Identical-Topic Condition. The same is true of Fowler & Fowler’s comment that “an unwary writer sometimes attaches a participle to the subject of a previous sentence, assuming that it will be the subject of the new sentence also, and then finds himself mistaken.” Such a writer is not “unwary” at all; he fully knows the organizational principles of the discourse and makes the most of the resources available to construct a natural and coherent text. Compare the following:

- (18) Mrs. Reese baked her cookies for only the third time in the Bake-off finals. And the third time was the charm. She dreamed up the cooky recipe, tried it, liked it and entered it in the contest. The second baking was for photographing *when told* she was a finalist.
(Brown Corpus)

Here the use of the unattached *when told* is, it seems, not due to the writer's unwariness but because the force of topic is so strong that it overrides the main subject.

3.2. Identical-Subject vs. Identical-Topic

Participial clauses have the structure with its subject and finite verb deleted, and are defined as a kind of elliptical construction. In general, elliptical constructions serve to reduce informational redundancy in the sentence by omitting those parts of the information evident to the hearer and recoverable from the context. With the reduction of redundancy, it becomes possible to minimize the reference to the given/topical item, and to maximize the reference to the information newly introduced on the item, thereby letting the hearer concentrate upon the new information.

A normal participial clause is commonly regarded as an intra-sentential phenomenon, and the notion topic and the discourse context in which the clause occurs are generally not taken into consideration, since it is grammaticalized and its understood subject is deduced from the main clause subject. Kuno's examples above clearly show, however, that even a normal participial clause is constrained in its use in a particular discourse context and it sometimes obeys the Identical-Topic Condition. Thus, with a participial clause, the Identical-Subject Condition is structurally obligatory, while the Identical-Topic Condition is optional; in the latter case, the participial clause serves to function as a topic continuity device.

In the case of an unattached clause, on the other hand, its understood subject is, by the very nature of unattachedness, not guaranteed an explicit and precise interpretation that a normal participial clause receives. In the absence of any explicit source of the identification of the deleted subject, the Identical-Topic Condition is the only principle that helps to identify the understood subject of an unattached clause; otherwise it would be impossible to interpret it in any principled and non-arbitrary way. In this way, an unattached clause is closely connected with the notion topic, and it typically functions as a topic continuity device by taking over the preceding topic. In fact, as many examples cited in this paper clearly show, it is just this function that unattached clauses serve in their discourse context.

To recapitulate, the unattached participial clause helps to guide the attention of the reader, by signaling, within the portion of the text in which it occurs, how the reader is expected to

associate the material contained in and following the participial clause with the material preceding it. In Hallidayan terms, the difference could be stated by referring to the three functions of language: ideational, textual, and interpersonal. While normative participial clauses mainly serve at the ideational level, unattached participial clauses operate simultaneously at the ideational and at the textual levels.

3.3. "Topic" and Implied Subjects

At this point, a word concerning the term topic may be in order. The basic assumption underlying the notion topic is that in a communication a sentence is used to make predication about something and that we can intuitively identify what a particular sentence is about. To capture this intuition concerning the "aboutness," the notion of topic is introduced into the theory of language. Unfortunately, this intuitively appealing notion has never received a satisfactory and integrated characterization so far that would enable a working linguist not only to invoke it but to actually put it to use. In this paper, however, space doesn't allow us to discuss the notion further, and we define the topic loosely as "what a particular sentence/discourse is about." Thus our use of the term topic is rather vague, though we hope it is intuitively clear enough.

Let us now turn to the topic status of understood subjects of unattached clauses. In the preceding sections, we have seen that the use of unattached clauses in discourse depends crucially on whether their implied subject can be deduced from the discourse topic. Among the 317 examples of unattached clauses I have collected, 168, or 53%, are those with topic as their implied subject. Some unattached clauses, however, appear to have an implied subject that is not related to the notion topic. These include 64 (20.2%) examples where the implied subject is a generic one, 74 (23.3%) examples where the implied subject refers to the speaker/hearer, and 11 (3.5%) examples where the implied subject refers to the whole of the main clause (thus realized as an "anticipatory" *it*) or to the vague situation (thus realized as a "prop" *it*). It will be recalled that these cases are commonly dealt with as exceptions to the Identical-Subject Condition in the currently prevalent descriptive grammars of English (cf. Section 2 of this paper). I would suggest, however, that the implied subjects in these examples are also related with the notion topic, and they can be readily accounted for in terms of the Identical-Topic Condition proposed above.

The unattached clauses in (19) are the examples where the implied subject refers to the speaker/hearer, and those in (20) are the ones where the implied subject can be paraphrased as a generic *one*, *we*, or *you*:

- (19) a. I won't say I actually enjoyed what happened next, but I appreciated being there to see it. *Having* seen him walk out on people I don't know how many times, say a hundred, it kind of evened up to see him once as the walkee instead of the walker. (Stout)
- b. *Being* a veteran of arguments around the breakfast table my instinct told me that it was useless to scratch further. (Kohner)
- c. While no one wanted the invasion in the first place, *having* had it, let's get the best we can from it. (*Time*)
- d. I don't think he sounds like Johnny Cash, but *just listening* to this particular track he did a couple of phrases that sounded like "Give My Love to Rosalie," a country soul brother, too. (*Rolling Stone Interviews*)
- e. *Being* on the assembly line, my leisure time is very precious. (Terkel)
- f. *Being* a male, it's important you must have this ego. (Terkel)
- g. I worked in a white area on the West Side — briefly, *being* black, in plain clothes, people might mistake me for a burglar and shoot me. (Terkel)
- (20) a. The show is best watched *while chewing* a sugarless gum. (*Time*)
- b. *When considering* prisons, it should be kept in mind that every inmate is there by choice. (*Time*)
- c. Unlike less sophisticated prosthetic hands, this one can be used *when sipping* wine from stemware. (*Newsweek*)
- d. At Harvard one has one's share of glory, but *working* at the White House there is that scintilla of power. Which I confess I quite enjoy. (Segal)

First of all, it is important to note that the speaker and the hearer themselves are regularly treated as given and salient information in the discourse (hence invariably pronominalized as *I, you, or we*), so that they always have the potentiality of becoming the topic of discourse (cf. Chafe 1976). In other words, the speaker and the hearer are, due to their direct participant roles in the discourse, always assigned the status of potential topic, and, unlike any other items, they can behave like a topic even though they are not actually mentioned in the previous discourse context. A similar explanation is possible for generic subjects in (20), since they too are regularly pronominalized as *one, you, or we*, and can be regarded as potentially topical. Thus, here too, the Identical-Topic Condition is definitely relevant to the use of unattached clauses.

Let us next consider the following:

- (21) a. But *unknown* to the 1,042 men aboard the Argentine warship, the cruiser was being watched. (*Time*)

- b. He has decided it must be that way: it is December 1981, when, *unknown* to the three laborers, the Polish government has imposed martial law. (*Time*)
- c. *Though by no means an ideal procedure*, a red wine may similarly be brought from the cellar to the dining room and opened twenty minutes or so before serving time. (Brown Corpus)
- d. Use deductible insurance *wherever feasible*. (Brown Corpus)
- (22) a. *Being* the seventh of January, we have very properly laid in the new almanac. (C. Doyle)
- b. *Being* Christmas, the government offices were closed.

In (21), the implied subject refers to the whole of the host clause, and might be pronominalized as (anticipatory) *it*.⁶ The implied subject in (22) might also be pronominalized as (prop) *it*, though, in this case, it doesn't refer to any particular entity, and is semantically almost empty. Despite the possibility of being realized as the pronoun *it*, however, it is not certain whether these implied subjects in the above examples can be regarded as topic. It might be argued that the prop *it* has the potentiality of becoming topic since it has generalized reference to the environment in a given context, mainly signifying time, atmospheric conditions, or distance. Though plausible, this explanation doesn't seem to hold good in the case of the anticipatory *it*. Alternatively, it might be suggested that unattached clauses functioning as content disjuncts as in (21) are exempt from the Identical-Subject condition, just like those functioning as style disjuncts such as "frankly speaking," and are not to be counted as "unattached." Anyway, I cannot go into the detail here, and will leave the question open.

4. Unattached Participles in Relative Clauses

Our analysis of unattached participial clauses in terms of the notion topic can be also applied, with slight modification, to their occurrence in relative clauses. Consider the following:

- (23) a. The Shah did have a gallstone that *untreated* would have been extremely serious. (*Time*)
- b. Iraq came up with its own demands, which *if met*, it said, could end the hostilities. (*Time*)

We could explain these instances by stipulating that the underlying subject of the participle must be identical with the subject of the relative clause in which it occurred. Note, however, that such an explanation doesn't always hold, as shown in the following:

- (24) a. The results have been divisive conflicts that, *mirrored* in a multitude of ineffectual

political parties, the remolded nation has found almost impossible to resolve. (*Time*)

b. A girl fell on a pen, which pierced her eyes, and, *causing* meningitis, she died.

(Fowler 1965)

In (24) a, the understood subject of the past participle *mirrored* is identified not with the subject of the relative clause, *the remolded nation*, but with the antecedent of the relative clause. In (24) b, the understood subject of *causing* is not *she*, but the pen and its piercing her eyes. In view of these facts, we might argue that the understood subject of the unattached participial construction used in a relative clause may be identical with the antecedent of the relative clause. This is a corollary of the Identical-Topic Condition proposed above and Kuno's Thematic Constraint on Relative Clauses (Kuno 1976). Kuno's constraint requires that a relative clause should be a statement about its head noun, and it naturally follows that the item to be relativized must be the topic/theme of the underlying sentence.

Based upon this observation, we can readily stretch the effect of the Identical-Topic Condition. This condition stipulates that the understood subject of the unattached clause should be identical with the topic of the discourse, and this means that the content of the unattached clause must be a statement about the topic of the discourse in which it occurs. If this condition is to be applied to the unattached participle appearing in a relative clause, then it follows that the unattached clause must be the topic of the relative clause. Now, as Kuno claims, the antecedent of the relative clause is the topic of the relative clause, so it is no wonder that the unattached clause in a relative clause should function as a statement about the antecedent and its understood subject should be interpreted as identical with the antecedent of the relative clause.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have reexamined the various uses of unattached clauses in their contexts and attempted to show that, far from being slipshod or unacceptable, they are to be regarded as legitimate constructions if used properly in a particular discourse. It is shown here that the unattached participial clauses are a topic continuity device, and that the primary factor deciding their acceptability in a discourse is whether their implied subject is identical with the discourse topic or not. Almost all of the actual examples of unattached clauses found in my corpus turn out to be in accordance with this discourse condition.

This paper is written in the spirit, not of providing any final answers, but of presenting suggestions for profitable lines of further research, and it is my hope that any further studies will provide us with much profound insight into many residual problems concerning English

unattached clauses and the discourse conditions governing them.⁷

Notes

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1. Thompson (1983) uses the term “detached” to refer to what are traditionally called adverbial participial clauses, but this terminology is rather misleading, since the term may mean “disconnected; separate, unattached” (OED s.v. “detached”).

2. When *after* / *before* / *since* are followed by an *-ing* form, it can be possible to analyze them not as “conjunction + *-ing* participle” but as “preposition + *-ing* gerund.” To be sure, *after* / *before* / *since* are different from other conjunctions such as *when* and *though*, in that they cannot introduce past participle clauses or verbless clauses:

(1) a. *After published, the book caused a remarkable stir.

b. *Before at school, he spoke two languages fluently.

Note, however, that the preposition + gerund construction may have its subject explicitly expressed, as in (2), while the conjunction + present participle construction may not do so, as in (3):

(2) a. because of them being so careless

b. on my coming downstairs

(3) a. *after him cooking dinner

b. *since John leaving school

c. *when the authorities having arrived

d. *though him knowing the truth.

In this respect, *after* / *before* / *since* + *-ing* can be treated on a par with the constructions like “when dealing with such a topic” or “though doing his best.”

3. *Though*, *although* and *if* are sometimes used as a sort of coordinators (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985: 929), linking adjectives, adverbs, etc.:

a. The admiral walked clumsily, if with dignity.

b. One is that there sometimes are real although inadequate compensations in growing old.
(Brown Corpus)

c. He judged her to be a woman of some pride, though not much sense. (Brown)

These constructions are different from the verbless clauses, and are not counted as unattached clauses in the present study.

4. Generally speaking, popular (and often unacademic) guides to English usage, usually

written for the general public in a prescriptive manner, are totally against the use of unattached participles discussed here. What is amusing, however, is that the very writer of such a guide does sometimes use an unattached participle unwittingly, thus revealing the wide prevalence of the phenomenon among the English writers. For example, in Nurnberg (1972), several pages after discouraging the reader from using a loose participle, the author writes in the text:

- (1) AMBIGUOUS, EQUIVOCAL: *Though generally used* interchangeably to mean having two or more possible interpretations, the nice distinction made is that while ambiguity is always unintentional, equivocation may be purposeful, intending to deceive. (Nurnberg 1972, 87)

It is not “the nice distinction made” but the words *ambiguous* and *equivocal* that are generally used interchangeably. Note, however, that the unattached clause in (1) should not be discarded merely as a slip of the pen. On the contrary, (1) is a full-fledged English sentence and we can readily understand its meaning given the context. Though “ungrammatical” in the strict sense of the word, the sentence sounds quite natural and spontaneous in this particular discourse.

The following comical quatrain from Evan Esar’s *Humorous English* (R05 of the Brown Corpus) also shows the permeation of unattached clauses:

- (2) A verse familiar to all grammarians:

I saw a man once beat his wife
When on a drunken spree.
Now can you tell me who was drunk-
The man, his wife, or me?

5. The “#” indicates that the utterance in question is well-formed in itself, but is unacceptable in the particular context.

6. Verbless clauses headed by conjunctions like *when*, *if*, and *as soon as* followed by *possible*, *necessary*, *desired*, etc. are not counted as unattached clauses in this paper, since they are rather common and seem to be nearly established in English:

- a. I would like it done on Wednesday *if possible*.
- b. Any nation that detests war so intensely but does not shrink from it *when necessary* is indeed a light to the world. (*Time*)
- c. *If desired*, the diskette size in 1Kb blocks can be specified to speed up mke2fs operation. (*The Linux Bible*)

7. In an article titled “The Decline of Editing” (*Time* 9/1/1980), the writer criticized Gay Talese’s *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* and wrote: “The book is littered with grammatical outrage and

wrong usage. 'After completing high school in 1949, his sister wrote that she had arranged for him an appointment to Annapolis.' It is of course the brother, not the sister, who completed high school in 1949. The same type of mistake sprouts throughout the text; one must finally conclude that the author does not know what a dangling modifier is."

I obtained a paperback copy of this book a few years later, and I was much surprised to find the sentence in question changed into "After he completed high school in 1949, his sister wrote that she had arranged for him an appointment to Annapolis." Apparently the article in *Time* exerted such great influence upon the editor/author of the book that he was forced into rewriting when the book was reprinted in paperback. The rewrite was far from complete, however, since there were more than ten examples of unattached participles left intact in the whole book.

What is important here is that the original sentence condemned by *Time* is, according to my analysis presented in the present paper, totally acceptable in its broader context:

- (1) While there were farm girls nearby that he occasionally slept with, and one who allowed him to photograph her in the nude, Williamson was never seriously involved, and his fantasies focused mainly on his solitary escape from all that he had known in the rural South. *After completing* high school in 1949, his sister wrote that she had arranged for him an appointment to Annapolis.

The topic of this discourse is a man named Williamson, and it is easily interpreted as the understood subject of "completing high school in 1949" in this context. Thus it is not Talese but the author of the above article that does not know what a dangling modifier really is.

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