Detached Participles in English Discourse

The focus of the present paper is the function of present participial absolute clauses in English discourse. These clauses are in fact the only -ing constructions in English that are "detached", i.e. they are set off by pauses, exhibit a clause-final falling intonation contour characteristic of independent clauses, or are preceded by a clause ending with a clause-final falling contour. These intonational signals of detachment are virtually without exception marked by commas in writing.

Taking all these features into consideration and following the tradition of Russian grammar, we shall refer to the present participial absolute clauses as "detached participles". Excluded from consideration here are participial forms in clauses beginning with the subordinators *after, before, by, with, without, while,* and *in.*

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Thus the detached participle can be characterized in the following way:

1. It serves as a device that allows the speaker/writer to present certain material as background against which certain other material can be put forth as "figure" in the Gestalt sense. That is, the detached participle is not just a background, but it is a background specifically for the main clause with which it is associated. By "background" we mean material that serves to further explicate, amplify, or elaborate what is in the main clause, or that represents an event occurring simultaneously with or providing a comment on or motivation for the event in the main clause.

In the example, the detached participle *hacking at the logs with axes* provides a detail that functions to amplify and elaborate the report that the infantry hurled themselves against the palisades.

The Spanish infantry desperately hurled themselves against the palisades, hacking at the logs with axes.

A clause so backgrounded refuses, as it were, to allow the exposition to advance while some ancillary material is presented. The fact that the detached participle provides background of a very local sort, predicts a certain set of grammatical properties.

2. This background material is furthermore presented as "pure" background, with no explicit relationship being designated to hold between it and the material that forms the figure. The fact that the detached participle does not explicitly express any logical or temporal relationship with the material for which it is the background, predicts the detached participle's distribution in discourse.

The first point to make about the occurrence of the detached participle in discourse is that, as is intuitively obvious to anyone who knows English, and as is noted by Jespersen, it is found much more commonly in formal written than in informal spoken English.

The analysis has shown that the detached participle is most compatible with a discourse whose purpose is to describe events rather than to state temporal or logical relationships among them. Actually, we found that the descriptive discourse has a high frequency of detached participles, whereas the discourse whose primary function is non-descriptive exposition contains relatively few instances.

In fact, the type of discourse in which detached participles abound can be characterized with even greater precision: it is a discourse that attempts to describe by creating an image. To this function the detached participle is well suited, precisely because of its unspecified relationship with the main clause. The type of discourse whose purport is to evoke an image can be termed depictive.

To illustrate the contrast between depictive and non-depictive discourse, we compared texts taken from various types of discourse for an average number of detached participles per 10,000 words. As can be seen from the table below, the differences are dramatic.

Detached participles per 10,000 words

Depictive

Severin T. *Explorers of the Mississippi*	74
DeLillo D. *Underworld,* novel	60
Salter J. *Burning the Days*, memoir, travel narrative	49

Non-depictive

Kazin A. *God and the American Writer*, literary criticism	18.9
Tannahill R. *Food in History*	14.7
David J. *Electrodynamics*	8.5
Goth A. *Medical Pharmacology: Principles and Concepts*	5.0

One of the richest of the texts examined was Severin's *Explorers of the Mississippi*. This text is a detailed historical account of the early explorations of the Mississippi River. Here is a typical paragraph, which gives the flavour of the depictive style – note that there are three detached participles in this paragraph alone:

> *De Soto's life was saved but his negligence was still to prove the ruin of his expedition. During the skirmish in the town, the Indians in the baggage train had seized their opportunity to escape. They broke ranks and streamed into Mobila, **taking with them all the Spanish supplies including the spare weapons, sacraments, tents, pearls, and gunpowder**. By the time the main body of the Spanish army arrived, the situation was desperate. They had only their weapons, while on the other side of Mobila's palisades lay all the*

equipment they needed to survive the march down the coast.
Already the ramparts were lined with newly-liberated slaves,
jeering and holding up their booty to mock the white men.

In *Explorers of the Mississippi* there is an average of 74 detached participles per 10,000 words. At the opposite end of the scale is *Medical Pharmacology*, in which 10,000 words yield only 5 detached participles. The striking difference between these two texts in frequency of detached participles is an accurate illustration of the tendency for these clauses to occur in depictive genres. Some other examples of depictive writing are travel narratives and novels, where the authors attempt to portray the images, sights and sounds so vividly as to conjure up in the reader's imagination what actually experiencing them would be like.

Writing that intends to spark the visual imagination, then, tends to abound in detached participles. Herein lies one clue to explaining the very low frequency of detached participles in ordinary conversational English: conversation simply offers relatively few opportunities for the sort of planning that produces effective and evocative depictions of scenes. What are the characteristics of non-depictive writing, where detached participles are rare? The only essential property shared by the wide range of discourse styles that can be called non-depictive is obviously the following: their communicative goals are not conducive to the leisurely scene-painting for which the highly durative, temporally non-committal detached participle is so well suited.

News analysis and commentary, for example, are typically devoid of detached participles. The backgrounding in this type of writing is generally aimed at characterizing participants rather than describing them (hence a large number of full and truncated relative clauses), and at providing motivation, concessive or sequentially relevant facts and hypothetical conditions, rather than depictions of scenes.

Writing in the sciences and social sciences does not appear to be fertile ground for detached participles either. Here are two examples taken from David's *Electrodynamics* and Goth's pharmacology textbook to give the flavour of their function in this kind of writing:

Our intention will be correct provided the set of orthonormal functions is complete, the completeness being defined by the requirement that there exists a finite number. (p.68)

The binding of bilirubin to albumin may be inhibited by a variety of drugs such as sulfisoxazole or salicycates, the freed bilirubin thereby becoming ultrafiltrable. (p.20)

Tannahill's *Food in History* registers slightly higher at 14.7 detached participles per 10,000 words; this higher incidence is correlated with the fact that there are occasional depictive passages interspersed in the purely informative historical exposition.

Alfred Kazin's *God and the American Writer* is a sample of literary criticism, which

as essentially non-depictive writing is low in detached participles, but not as low as scientific writing, since some images are evoked.

Although the comparison between the depictive and non-depictive texts clearly reveals the skewing in the distribution of detached participles, it is only when we examine the detached participles themselves that we find the key to the explanation for this distribution. The detached participles that do occur in non-depictive writing share one interesting property: they tend to be stylistic alternatives to other coordinate and subordinate clauses in a way in which the detached participles in depictive writing are not. As an illustration, consider an example taken from the pharmacology textbook:

> *Even the pharmacist has very little to do with the preparation*
> *of drugs,* ***most of them being manufactured by large companies.***
> *(p.l)*

The detached participle in this example could very easily be replaced by a subordinate clause with *as*, with virtually no violation of the intended message:

> *... as most of them are manufactured by large companies.*

Similarly in the following example from *Food in History*, the detached participle is extremely close in expressive content to the non-restrictive relative clause:

> *Of these seven magical oceans,* ***representing the staple needs***
> ***of mankind in India*** *(other than grain), no less than three were of*
> *dairy products.*
> *…, which represent the staple needs of mankind in India ...*

Strikingly enough, however, this type of paraphrasability is much less characteristic of the detached participles in highly depictive passages. No obvious paraphrase comes to mind for these three examples, for instance:

> *She listened,* ***marveling at the discernment in each name for***
> ***the complex illness of malaria...*** *(Underworld, p. 87)*

> *The Indians stayed out of their way,* ***leaving mute offerings of***
> ***food, deerskins, and feathered cloaks in the path of the ferocious***
> ***invaders.*** *(Explorers of the Mississippi, p.36)*

> *Shopkeepers, dressed in white shirts and sarong-like skirts,*
> *with embroidered skull caps over their sharp Arabian faces, sat on*
> *string beds, outside their cavernous shops,* ***talking slowly and***
> ***smoking tall water-pipes.*** *(Burning the Days, p. 26)*

The unavailability of apt paraphrases for the detached participle in the depictive texts is related, of course, to their high frequency: there are no other options at hand for conveying what they convey, and their functional load is thereby increased. But why are they difficult to paraphrase? The answer might lie precisely in the non-committal relationship they bear to the main clause, which makes them so well suited to scene depiction.

The point of depictive writing is to create scenes, and background material in depictive discourse contributes to scene creation in an additive way, temporal and logical relationships being essentially irrelevant. The point of non-depictive writing, on the other hand, is to analyse situations, propose and support claims, and enhance understanding by relating pieces of information. Background clauses are called upon to participate in this endeavour and must, to a much greater extent, bear explicitly labelled relationships with the main clause. As suggested earlier in non-depictive writing there is simply less opportunity for the luxury of detached participles, whose relationship with the main clause is so unspecified. Those that do occur are paraphrasable as certain other types of clauses because the non-depictive context imposes interpretations on them of precisely the logical and temporal relationships explicitly expressed by those other types of clauses.

Thus, the examination of the distribution of detached participles among various types of written English has revealed a striking contrast between depictive and non-depictive writing in the frequency with which these clauses occur. It has been claimed that the explanation for this contrast lies in the suitability of the detached participle – given its indeterminate relationship with the main clause – for discourse whose purpose is to evoke images, and its concomitant unsuitability for discourse whose background information must be much more explicitly related to the figure material. To sum up, the present analysis once again demonstrates the heavy reliance of grammar on the goals of the communicative event. That is, understanding grammar is inseparable from understanding the principles by which language users decide how to package an entire discourse.

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Անկախ դերբայական դարձվածները
ժամանակակից անգլերենում

Հոդվածի խնդրո առարկան անկախ դերբայական դարձվածների գործա-ռույթի ուսումնասիրությունն է դիսկուրսի կազմավորման տեսանկյունից ժա-մանակակից անգլերենում: Փորձ է կատարվում բնութագրել վերոհիշյալ կա-ռույցների գործառությունը խոսքում, ցույց տալ, թե որքանով է այն պայմանա-վորում անկախ դերբայական դարձվածների տեղաբաշխումը դիսկուրսի տարբեր տիպերում, ինչպես նաև վեր հանել տվյալ կառույցների որոշակի քե-րականական առանձնահատկությունները:

Հոդվածում կրկին անգամ ընդգծվում է, որ քերականական այս կամ այն կառույցի կիրառումը խոսքում պայմանավորված է հաղորդակցական իրադ-րության նպատակով: Այդ է պատճառը, որ քերականության ընկալման գոր-ծընթացն անբաժանելի է այն սկզբունքներից, որոնցով տվյալ լեզվով խոսող-ները կազմավորում են իրենց խոսքը որպես մեկ ամբողջություն: