

The locative absolute

The locative absolute is a construction used in a sentence to represent a subordinate clause with a subject *different from* the subject of the main clause, performing an action or undergoing a process different from that of the main clause. In such a construction the subject of the subordinate clause—usually a noun or pronoun—is set in the locative case, and the subordinate subject’s action or process is represented by a past participle or present participle also in the locative case, as are any other modifiers of the subordinate subject. The past participle is generally used when the subordinate activity precedes the action of the main clause, the present participle when the two occur more or less concurrently.

The distinction between the absolutive and the locative absolute should be carefully noted. Both may be used to describe an action that occurs prior to the main action of the sentence. If the prior action is done by the subject of the main verb, the absolutive of that action is used; if the prior action is done by someone or something else, the locative absolute with the past participle is used.

The following statement uses the locative absolute with the present participle to describe a situation in which the subordinate action (the discourse being spoken) occurs concurrently with the action described in the main clause (the liberation of the monks’ minds):

Imasmiñca pana veyyākaraṇasmim bhaññamāne pañcavaggiyānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ anupādāya āsavehi cittāni vimuccimsu.

“And while this discourse was being spoken, through non-clinging the minds of the monks of the group of five were liberated from the influxes.”

The locative subject of the subordinate clause here is *imasmiṃ veyyākaraṇasmim*, “this discourse”; the process undergone by this subject is described by the passive present participle in the locative case, *bhaññamāne*, “being spoken.” In the main clause, the subject, *cittāni*, the minds (of the monks), is nominative plural, and the process the subject undergoes is specified by the aorist passive verb, *vimuccimsu*, “were liberated.”

The following sentence has a locative absolute construction with the past participle:

Āditte, bhante, cele vā sīse vā, tass’eva celassa vā sīsassa vā nibbāpanāya adhimatto chando ca vāyāmo ca ussāho ca ussoḥī ca appaṭivānī ca sati ca sampajaññañca karaṇīyaṃ.

“When, Bhante, one’s turban or head is ablaze, extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, enthusiasm, persistence, mindfulness, and clear comprehension should be practiced for the extinguishing of that [fire on one’s] turban or head.”

The abstract statement of the principle of conditionality includes a locative absolute in both its positive and negative formulations: positively, *imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*, “this existing, that occurs”; and negatively, *imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti*, “this not existing, that does not

occur.” Here *sati* is the locative singular present participle of *atthi*.¹ The locative absolute recurs in statements that flesh out the process of origination and cessation thus: *jātiyā sati jarāmaṇaṃ hoti; jātiyā asati jarāmaṇaṃ na hoti*, “When there is birth, old age-and-death occurs; when there is no birth, old age-and-death does not occur.” It should be noted that the masculine singular locative present participles *asati* and *sati* are used even when the locative subjects they qualify are feminine nouns, here *jāti* and later in the formula *taṇhā, vedanā, and avijjā*; this is probably done simply to maintain uniformity. Again, the singulars *asati* and *sati* are used even when the corresponding locative noun is the plural *saṅkhāresu*.

Occasionally the locative absolute of a verb or verbs may be used without an explicit subject, but with the adverb of manner *evaṃ* taking the place of the subject. The most common examples are *evaṃ sante*, “such being [the case],” and *evaṃ vutte*, “when such was said.” We also see this in the clause *evaṃ ācikkhiyamāne desiyamāne paññāpiyamāne paṭṭhapiyamāne vivariyamāne vibhajiyamāne uttānīkariyamāne*, “When it is being thus pointed out, taught, made known, established, disclosed, analyzed, and elucidated”. Here the implicit subject is already clear from the context.

Besides the locative absolute, the Nikāyas occasionally employ a genitive absolute, which appears much less often. No occurrences of the genitive absolute are found in the reading passages in this volume, but an example is at MN I 13,36–37: *āyasmā Sāriputto acirapakkantassa bhagavato bhikkhū āmantesi*, “Not long after the Blessed One had left, the Venerable Sāriputta addressed the monks.” The genitive absolute often, but not always, has the nuance of “despite” or “although,” as when the Buddha describes his renunciation (at MN I 163,27–31): *so kho ahaṃ ... akāmakānaṃ mātāpitūnaṃ assumukhānaṃ rudantānaṃ ... agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajim*, “Though my mother and father were unwilling, weeping with tearful faces ... I went forth from home to homelessness.”

¹ Needless to say, this *sati* has nothing to do with the word usually translated as “mindfulness.”