

THE GENITIVE ABSOLUTE IN DISCOURSE: MORE THAN A CHANGE OF SUBJECT

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For generations of scholars the genitive absolute in Classical and Koine Greek has been a well attested literary device parallel to the “ablative absolute” in Latin. It effects cohesion in discourse and has been viewed as giving background information as well as indicating a change of subject or “switch reference.” This paper disputes the latter as being the predominant function of this participial construction and discusses its role in the New Testament, Xenophon, and the papyri with reference to a modern theory of cognition which claims to give principles for the way in which humans communicate with one another.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are, broadly speaking, two approaches to the analysis of discourse. First, there is **a descriptive approach** which catalogues the uses of “discourse features,” analyses the criteria for paragraph breaks or topical units, and generally examines what are the constituent properties of a “text.” This approach may identify “background” information and contrast it with what is foregrounded or in focus. It relies heavily on charting text and identifying structure. Of course there will be structure to a text, but one cannot deduce from such a structure the way in which the speakers of a language organise their thoughts. Second, there is **a cognitive approach** which might question the reality of much of the above or suggest that all these are decided not by intrinsic features but by the pragmatics of the context. Such an approach would expect there to be procedural instructions given to a reader or hearer to support what has gone before, or to deny previous assumptions in order to help her¹ to navigate the text.

I want to suggest that both these approaches have their place but that the second is the one that will take us furthest in attempting to discover the communicative intention of the author or speaker. Sixteen years ago I worked on

¹ In this paper the speaker or writer will be referred to as “he,” and the hearer or reader as “she.”