

## Functional structure and case in Italian absolute clauses

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**Abstract.** Italian absolute clauses have been treated as small clauses under previous analyses (Belletti, 1990; Bruno, 2011), meaning they have been claimed to feature reduced functional structure. Additionally, the way in case assignment within absolute clauses has been analyzed has not been uniform, featuring a range of case assignment mechanisms which are not independently motivated such as case assignment via C (Belletti, 1990) or AspP (Bruno, 2011). In the present study, we develop a non-small clause analysis of Italian absolute clauses, based on adverb and clitic placement, the presence of negation, and certain facts about the C-domain of these clauses. Crucially, under our account, these clauses project both CP and TP. Finally, we account for case assignment within these clauses via a default case mechanism (Egerland 2022; Caha, 2024), thus eschewing ad hoc case assignment mechanisms.

**Keywords.** Italian; absolute clauses; adjunct clauses; functional structure; default case

**1. Introduction.** A fundamental question when considering different types of adjunct clauses is their size. Often, adjunct clauses of various types have been treated as so-called *small* clauses, as they are claimed to have reduced functional structure, relative to matrix clauses. The present study examines the functional structure and case assignment mechanisms within Italian absolute clauses. We argue that these clauses are not in fact small clauses (*contra* Belletti, 1990; Bruno, 2011), rather that they project as much functional structure as matrix clauses, crucially claiming that they project both CP and TP. Our analysis is developed based on evidence from adverb and clitic placement, negation, and complementizers. We also simplify previous accounts of case assignment within Italian absolute clauses by employing a default case mechanism (Egerland 2022; Caha, 2024).

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we review the basic differences between Italian absolute clauses as compared to matrix clauses. In Section 3, we develop the claim that Italian absolute clauses project TP. In Section 4, we examine the Complementizer domain of absolute clauses, while in Section 5 we discuss case assignment within absolute clauses. In Section 6, we briefly discuss absolute clause *pro*. Finally, in Section 6 we offer concluding remarks.

**2. Absolute Clauses vs Matrix Clauses.** In contrast to matrix clauses, absolute clauses are a type of adjunct clause consisting of a verb in its past participial form, along with its internal argument and modifiers as shown in (1) (Bruno, 2011).

(1) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

Conosciuta	Maria, Gianni	ha	cambiato	il suo	stile di vita.
met	Maria Gianni	has	changed	his	lifestyle

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‘Having met Mary, Gianni changed his lifestyle.’

Absolute clauses have been claimed exhibit a number of syntactic restrictions which are not present for matrix clauses. First, while transitive verbs are allowed, only the internal argument can be overtly expressed, as in (1). Second, absolute clauses have been claimed to disallow unergative verbs, based on examples like (2) (but see Loporcaro, 2003).

(2) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

*Telefonato	Gianni, Maria	andò	all’	appuntamento.
telephoned	Gianni Maria	went	to the	appointment

‘Gianni having telephoned, Maria went to the appointment.’

Third, while unaccusative verbs are permitted, just as with transitive verbs, only the internal argument can be overtly expressed, when it is distinct from the matrix clause subject, as in (3).

(3) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

*Arrivata	Maria, Gianni	tirò	un sospiro	di	solievo.
arrived	Maria Gianni	heaved	a sigh	of	relief

‘Maria having arrived, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief.’

Beyond verb class, absolute clauses have also been claimed to differ with respect to matrix clauses in disallowing negation, based on examples like (4).

(4) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

*Non	arrivata Maria,	Gianni tirò	un sospiro	di	solievo.
NEG	arrived Maria	Gianni heaved	a sigh	of	relief

‘Maria not having arrived, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief.’

Despite the existence of examples like (4), we will see in Section 3, that this is not universally true, thus undermining the argument that absolute clauses fail to project TP because they disallow negation.

The final way in which absolute clauses have been claimed to differ from matrix clauses is in their case assignment possibilities, as well as in how case is assigned. In absolute clauses, case assignment possibilities vary by verb class. We begin with transitive verbs, as in (5) and (6).

(5) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

Conosciuta	te,	ho	cominciato ad	apprezzare	il	mare.
met	you,	have.1SG	begun	to	appreciate	the sea

‘Having met you, I began to appreciate the sea.’

(6) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

*Conosciuta	tu,	ho	cominciato ad	apprezzare	il	mare.
met	you,	have.1SG	begun	to	appreciate	the sea

‘Having met you, I began to appreciate the sea.’

As can be seen via the contrast between (5) and (6), transitive verbs allow only accusative case, while nominative case (as in a passive construction) is disallowed. With unaccusative verbs, in contrast, the subject of the absolute clause bears nominative case, as in (7), while accusative case is disallowed, as in (8).

(7) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

Arrivata	io,	Gianni	tirò	un sospiro	di	solievo.
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- arrived I, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief  
 ‘I having arrived, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief.’  
 (8) Italian (Belletti, 1990)  
 \*Arrivata me, Gianni tirò un sospiro di sollievo.  
 arrived me, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief  
 ‘I having arrived, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief.’

Importantly, nominative case assignment is often linked to the presence of T°. Therefore, while absolute clauses lack an overt T head, the appearance of nominative case in these constructions hints at greater functional structure than what has been argued for previously. We take up the issue of the functional structure of these clauses in greater detail in the following section.

**3. Functional Structure and Word Order in Absolute Clauses.** In this section, we provide evidence that absolute clauses in Italian have more functional structure than has been assumed in the existing literature. Authors such as Belletti (1990) and Bruno (2011), for example, have maintained that these clauses lack a Tense (T°) node. In contrast, we argue that this node is projected despite not being overtly realized. Evidence for our proposal comes from adverb and clitic placement as well as from the presence of negation in some absolute clauses.

3.1. ADVERBS. As D’Alessandro and Roberts (2008) show, past participles in absolute clauses move above certain low adverbs like *bene* (*well*), a position compatible with movement to T°. Moreover, notice that placing the verb after the adverb (thus in a lower position) results in an ungrammatical ordering.

- (9) Italian (D’Alessandro and Roberts, 2008)  
 Imparata bene la scala pentatonica, ...  
 learned well, the scale pentatonic  
 ‘Having learned the pentatonic scale well,’  
 (10) Italian  
 \*Bene imparata, la scala pentatonica, ...  
 well learned the scale pentatonic  
 ‘Having learned well the pentatonic scale’

This observation does not, *per se*, demonstrate that the verb raises to a position as high as T°. It does however hint at a rich functional spine in absolute clauses and suggests that the verb does not remain within the VP.

A more thorough investigation into the position of past-participial verbs relative to other types of adverbs in absolute clauses requires looking into the finer structure of the adverbial domain. Our starting point is Cinque’s (1999) proposal, according to which adverbs occupy the specifier position of different heads according to their semantics. Moreover, the position of these adverbs relative to one another is fixed, so they represent an ideal testing ground. Our argument here is twofold. On the one hand, we propose that the expression of temporal adverbs in absolute clauses is highly consistent with the idea that Tense is expressed in this class of clauses. On the other hand, we also argue that the position of the verb relative to these temporal adverbs may be explained in terms of the V° head (or, possibly, a complex head formed at least by V° and Asp°) moving to T°. Consider the following example:

- (11) Italian (<https://notizie.tiscali.it/politica/articoli/meloni-ue/>)  
 Anche i toni di Sholtz, una volta arrivato ieri al Consiglio...  
 Even the tones of Sholtz, once arrived yesterday to the Council...

‘Even Sholtz’s tones, having arrived at the Council yesterday...’

The presence of temporal adverbs is highly consistent with the view that Tense is expressed in absolute clauses. Sentences like (11) can also tell us more about the height of the verb in absolute clauses. Suppose that *una volta* (*once*) in (11) is an adverb in the specifier position of a Tense head in Cinque’s hierarchy. Simplifying somewhat for the purposes of the present discussion, we adopt the ordering in (12), which is consistent with the hierarchy presented in Cinque (1999).

- (12) Italian (Based on Cinque, 1999)  
*once > then > perhaps*

Since the verb cannot precede *una volta* (\*arrivato una volta ieri), this suggests that it only reaches a lower position. On the other hand, as we see in (13), the verb precedes the irrealis mood adverb *forse* (*perhaps*), suggesting the verb reaches a higher position.

- (13) Italian  
Arrivato forse ieri, ...  
arrived perhaps yesterday...  
‘Having perhaps arrived yesterday...’

In Cinque’s hierarchy, *then* is an adverb linked to a head expressing future tense, but absolute clauses do not express events happening after the event expressed by the main clause. We can therefore disregard this temporal head for the purposes of this argument. The fact that the verb consistently precedes the temporal adverb *ieri* but follows the temporal adverb *una volta* may be explained via movement of the past participle to the T° position of which *una volta* is a specifier, following Cinque (1990). Crucially, then, the presence of temporal adverbs presupposes the presence of a head expressing temporal information; since the verb can land in a position between *perhaps* and *once*, and given that no other heads should exist between the heads linked to these two adverbs, we may conclude that the verb can raise to the head of which the temporal adverb *once* is a specifier.

3.2. CLITICS. A second piece of evidence for the presence of TP comes from the position of clitics with respect to the past participle in absolute clauses. In matrix clauses, clitics in Italian are proclitic on the auxiliary as in (14), where the accusative feminine singular clitic *la*, proceeds the auxiliary. Note that the clitic *la* is realized as *l’* before a vowel.

- (14) Italian  
L(a)’ ho imparata bene.  
ACC.F.SG have.1SG learned well  
‘Having perhaps arrived yesterday...’

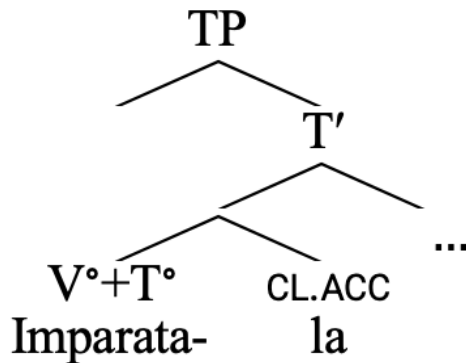
In contrast, clitics in absolute clauses are enclitic on the past participle as in (15).

- (15) Italian  
Imparata-la bene, ...  
learned.F.SG-ACC.F.SG well,  
‘Having learned it well...’

The positioning of clitics in absolute clauses is highly compatible with the idea that the past participle raises to T° (Pinto, 1997). In order to account for this observation, we start from the assumption that clitics are adjoined to the T° head. They may be right-adjoined, with the past

participle undergoing head movement and forming a complex head with  $T^\circ$ . The resulting structure is indicated in (16).

(16) Italian



In principle, nothing prevents the verbal head(s) from moving even higher, but what is relevant for the purposes of the present discussion is the following: if temporal adverbs and clitics can appear in absolute clauses, and if both are structurally related to  $T^\circ$  (a widely accepted assumption), then their presence presupposes the presence of  $T^\circ$ . The position of the verb relative to these elements further corroborates this view.

3.3. NEGATION. We now consider another element which has often been associated with TP, namely, negation. Despite previous accounts (Belletti, 1990), negation is, in fact, sometimes present in absolute clauses. This has been shown by Dini (1994) and Loporcario (2003) for Italian. Consider the following examples.

(17) Italian

Non accorto-si della ruota bucata, il conducente continuò a guidare.  
 NEG noticed-REFL of.the tire pierced, the driver continued to drive  
 ‘Not having noticed the pierced tire, the driver kept on driving.’

(18) Italian

Non ottenuti i risultati sperati, il presidente esonerò l’ allenatore.  
 NEG obtained the results hoped the president sacked the coach  
 ‘Not having obtained the hoped for, the president sacked the coach.’

If negation depends on the structural presence of TP as argued by Pollock (1989) and Zanuttini (1997), then to the extent to which negation is available, as in (17) and (18), TP must be available as well. Therefore, other syntactic/semantic factors must rule out examples like (19), which have been taken as evidence for the lack of TP in absolute clauses.

(19) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

\*Non arrivata Maria, Gianni tirò un sospiro di sollievo.  
 NEG arrived Maria Gianni heaved a sigh of relief  
 ‘Maria not having arrived, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief.’

The analysis we propose to account for the ungrammaticality of such examples is based on a crucial distinction between absolute clauses that modify a matrix clause constituent and absolute clauses that report an event preceding the main clause event, following the classification pro-

posed by Dini (1994) and Loporcaro (2003). In the latter class of absolute clauses, a temporal precedence requirement is in place: the adverbial clause event must precede the main clause one. To be more specific, the endpoint of the absolute clause event must precede the starting point of the main clause event. In (20), Maria's arriving must be understood as taking place before Gianni's heaving a sigh of relief.

(20) Italian (Belletti, 1990)

arrivata Maria, Gianni tirò un sospiro di sollievo.  
 arrived Maria Gianni heaved a sigh of relief  
 'Maria having arrived, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief.'

As Loporcaro (2003) notices, however, negation has the effect of making events atelic. If this is the case, Maria's not arriving in (19) is an event without an endpoint. Thus, the requirement illustrated above is violated. Absolute clauses that modify main clause constituents (most frequently subjects), instead, are not bound by a precedence requirement. This can explain why negation can appear in this type of clause. Of course, on the assumption that negation is tied to TP, the fact that Tense can be expressed in this subclass of ACs is a further piece of evidence in favor of the view that absolute clauses have more functional structure than previously thought. Most importantly, the lack of negation in the other subclass of ACs is not a sufficient argument in favor of a reduced functional spine. If anything, the fact that a temporal precedence relation is expressed between the absolute clause event and the main clause event suggests that temporal interpretation must be encoded at both levels. We leave the details of such encoding to further investigation.

The evidence reviewed so far is incompatible with a small clause hypothesis whereby TP (as well as additional functional structure) is absent in absolute clauses. Word order observations (on the position of adverbs and clitics) are consistent with a structure in which TP is present. The impossibility of negation in a subclass of ACs may be explained by independent factors, i.e., requirements related to temporal interpretation. However, if the evidence suggests that TP may be projected in absolute clauses, what remains to be explained is why preverbal subjects never appear in Modern Italian absolute clauses (though see Egerland, 2022 for a comparison with Old Italian). Before answering, we consider an additional theoretical argument for the presence of TP.

**4. The Complementizer Domain.** The C-domain has been argued to host a variety of different elements such as *wh*-elements, topics, foci, and adverbs among others. (Rizzi, 1997). Given this understanding, if absolute clauses can host some of these elements, this supports the claim that absolute clauses have a C-domain. Indeed, as the example in (21) demonstrates, at least some absolute clauses allow some kinds of left-peripheral elements.

(21) Italian

francamente pagato troppo, il computer si ruppe subito.  
 frankly paid too much the computer REFL broke immediately  
 'Having frankly paid too much, the computer broke immediately.'

In (21), the absolute clause, which modifies a matrix constituent, hosts the speaker-oriented adverb *francamente* (*frankly*). Such speaker-oriented adverbs have been argued to attach quite high in the structure, within the C-domain (Ernst, 2009; Zagana, 2013). Additionally, while not all absolute clauses may allow speaker-oriented adverbs, they may allow complementizers like *ap-pena* (*as soon as*) as in (22).

- (22) Italian  
 Appena arrestato tu, la banda si dissolse.  
 as soon as arrested you the band REFL dissolved  
 ‘Once you were arrested, the band dissolved.’

The existence of examples such as (21) and (22), which provide evidence for the presence of a C-domain within absolute clauses, also support an additional theoretical argument in favor of the presence of TP within absolute clauses. Namely, Cecchetto (2013) argues that CP consistently selects TP. Therefore, if CP is projected, then TP must be projected as well.

While we have argued thus far that CP is projected in absolute clauses, not all left peripheral elements can appear. For example, fronted foci and left-peripheral topics are disallowed.

- (23) Italian  
 \*MARIA conosciuta, ho cominciato ad apprezzare il mare.  
 Maria met have.1.SG begun to appreciate the sea  
 ‘Having met MARIA, I began to appreciate the sea.’

However, that certain left peripheral elements are disallowed in absolute clauses is not surprising when we consider that they are adverbial clauses, which have been independently argued to have a reduced left periphery (Haegeman, 2004).

Finally, the absence of left-peripheral topics may also help to explain the lack of preverbal subjects in absolute clauses. Following Frascarelli (2007), we take preverbal subjects to be left dislocated topics doubled by *pro*. If absolute clauses, being a type of adverbial clause, have a reduced left periphery, then left-peripheral topics may be disallowed for structural reasons, even if T° projects. However, we leave a more detailed exploration of this line of reasoning for future research.

**5. Nominative Case Assignment.** The final issue we consider in our analysis of Italian absolute clauses is the issue of case assignment. Recall that with transitive verbs, the object bears accusative case, while nominative case is disallowed as can be seen in (24) and (25) respectively.

- (24) Italian (Belletti, 1990)  
 Conosciuta te, ho cominciato ad apprezzare il mare.  
 met you, have.1.SG begun to appreciate the sea  
 ‘Having met you, I began to appreciate the sea.’
- (25) Italian (Belletti, 1990)  
 \*Conosciuta tu, ho cominciato ad apprezzare il mare.  
 met you, have.1.SG begun to appreciate the sea  
 ‘Having met you, I began to appreciate the sea.’

Additionally, recall that with unaccusative verbs, the subject of the absolute clause bears nominative case, as in (26), while accusative case is disallowed as in (27).

- (26) Italian (Belletti, 1990)  
 Arrivata io, Gianni tirò un sospiro di sollievo.  
 arrived I, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief  
 ‘I having arrived, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief.’
- (27) Italian (Belletti, 1990)  
 \*Arrivata me, Gianni tirò un sospiro di sollievo.  
 arrived me, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief

‘I having arrived, Gianni heaved a sigh of relief.’

Previous approaches to absolute clauses which do not assume that TP is projected argue that that case is assigned by C° after V-to-C movement (Belletti, 1990), by AspP (Bruno, 2011), or they link case assignment to focus (Egerland, 2022). However, we argue that the first two of these approaches are not independently motivated and appear *ad hoc* in character, and that case is not necessarily associated with focus.

In contrast to previous approaches, we claim that overt postverbal subjects receive default nominative case, in this way not resorting to mechanisms which may not be independently motivated. In developing this idea, we begin from Egerland (2022)’s idea of default case, which he based on examples such as (28) and (29).

(28) Italian (Egerland, 2022)

Una volta pronta la pasta, bisogna lasciar-la asciugare.  
 once ready the dough (is) necessary leave-it to dry  
 ‘Once the dough is ready, you need to leave it to dry.’

(29) Italian (Egerland, 2022)

Una volta in mano il decreto esecutivo, le strade sono due...  
 once in hand the decree executive the ways are two  
 ‘Once you have the decree in your hand, there are two ways to go...’

Egerland argues that in these examples, the NPs *la pasta* and *il decreto esecutivo* are licensed via default case. He takes default case to be assigned when NPs are not in an environment to receive structural case and when they are part of the focus of a clause. However, this second requirement runs into empirical problems. This is because postverbal subjects which receive nominative case are not always part of the focus. For example, they may be *marginalized*, i.e., de-stressed in situ (though they are neither left- nor right-dislocated), if they are discourse-given and part of the background (Cardinaletti, 2018). This can be seen below in (30).

(30) Italian

[Context: Arrivata Maria, siete usciti?]  
 Having Maria arrived, did you go out?

No. [PARTITA]<sub>F</sub> Maria, siamo usciti  
 No left Maria be.1PL gone out  
 ‘No. Maria having LEFT, we went out.’

We claim that in Italian absolute clauses, T° assigns structural nominative case to a silent *pro*, which is present regardless of the presence of an overt postverbal subject. Finally, other overt, non-accusative-marked arguments, i.e., postverbal subjects, receive the default case, which is nominative in Italian (Caha, 2024).

**6. A Note on Absolute Clause *pro*.** Similarly to what has been claimed by Camacho (2011) for Spanish, Italian absolute clause *pro* demonstrates properties which only partly align with matrix clause *pro*. Like matrix *pro*, absolute clause *pro* requires a local antecedent, which can be provided by a topic in the matrix clause. However, unlike matrix clause *pro*, it cannot be identified deictically. The inability of absolute clause *pro* to be deictically identified suggests that the subject of an absolute clause cannot simply have any referent but must satisfy a *familiarity* requirement, i.e., it must be present in the discourse. The fact that we sometimes do not see an overt argument can be best explained by the presence of a silent pronominal, as shown in the



(31), where the first *pro* is assigned structural nominative case, while the second is the verb's internal argument.

- (31) Italian  
 Appena *pro* arrivata *pro*, Maria...  
 as soon as arrived Maria...  
 'As soon as she arrived, Maria...'

While what we have claimed in this section accounts for the behavior of overt arguments in absolute clauses in Italian, many questions still remain relating to the finer grained syntactic and discourse related properties of absolute clause *pro* in Italian and more generally, which we leave for future research.

**7. Conclusion.** This study undertook to analyze Italian absolute clauses in terms their functional structure and how case is assigned within them. We have argued, contrary to previous analyses, that Italian absolute clauses project TP (as well as CP) and license nominative case on overt postverbal subjects via a default case mechanism. Given our analysis, it is clear that these are not greatly reduced *small* clauses. The fact that Italian absolute clauses project TP, rather than being unexpected, in fact aligns well with recent account of different types of participial clauses, including absolutes, in both German and English, which have been argued to project as much structure as matrix clauses (Brodahl, 2022).

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