

A Study on the Function of the English Participial Phrases

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This paper presents an analysis of the function of participial phrases in English as a result of having a controversy regarding this issue. Besides the adjectival value of participial phrases that is commonly claimed by many linguists, an adverbial character is distinguished by others who argue that the function of the participial phrase is determined by its position within the sentence. The study aims to give better insight on the use of the participial phrases. The study is qualitative in nature drawing mostly upon books, articles, and websites for data. Through examining some grammarians' viewpoints, it becomes clear that participial phrases have two functions as an adjective and as an adverb determined mainly by their structural distribution.

Keywords: adjectival participials, adverbial participial phrases, participial phrases, participial relative clause, participials

Introduction

Participial phrases are among the syntactic structures that have generally been viewed by linguists. However, the function of these phrases seems to lack thorough research since the use of participial phrases as adjectives or adverbs has not been agreed upon and is still controversial. This paper, thus, aims to investigate how participial phrases are used and what function they perform. Grammarians adopt different viewpoints concerning this issue. The first viewpoint deals with participial phrases as adjectives only whereas another viewpoint claims that participial phrases can be used to serve both adjectival and adverbial function.

Literature Review

Participial Phrases as Adjectives

For some grammarians, participial phrases have only one function as adjectives. They even call them adjectival participials. Sanford (1979) provided a definition of participial phrases in his book *Using English Grammar and Writing Skills* as “a unit that is made up of a participle and its related words working as an *adjective*” (p. 83). This definition postulates one function for participial phrases, namely, adjectives.

Emery, Kierzek, and Lindblom (1987) adopted the same viewpoint and discuss it in their book *English Fundamentals: Form C*, calling attention to the similarity between participial phrases and adjective clauses. Such idea gives an indication that participial phrases and adjective clauses are similar in function. Emery et al. (1987) observed the participial phrase as a “describing unit” (p. 78). They use some examples to show that participial

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phrases and adjective clauses are “obviously similar”:

- (1) A man *who was carrying a gun* mounted the platform. (an adjective clause that modifies “man”)
- (2) A man *carrying a gun* mounted the platform. (a participial phrase that modifies “man”)

Examples 1 and 2 indicate one similarity between the two syntactic structures as a modifier and show that the participial phrase in (2) is a reduced form of the adjective clause in (1).

The only difference pinpointed by Emery et al. (1987) between adjective clauses and participial phrases is the amount of freedom the latter enjoy—they can be used initially in the middle of the sentence or at the end of it whereas adjective clauses follow as closely as possible the words they modify (p. 147).

In his turn, Schibbye (1970) argued for the adjectival character of both the past and present participle. He differentiates between two structures in which the participle is used adjectivally: normal constructions where the participial phrase refers to or modifies the subject of the main clause, i.e., it is connected to the subject, and absolute constructions in which the participial is unattached to the subject of the sentence. This relationship between the participial phrase and the subject of the main clause has been indicated by Quirk and Greenbaum (1995). Quirk and Greenbaum (1995) described unattached clauses as “‘pendant’ or ‘dangling’ that are frowned on, and are totally unacceptable”, as the following example shows:

- (3) *Reading the evening paper, a dog started parking (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1995, p. 329).

Relying on Chomsky’s analysis of the participial phrases (1957a; 1965b), Sleeman (2017) observed participial phrases as relative clauses that contain a present participle or a passive/past participle with no relative pronoun and no finite verbs. Sleeman calls them participial relative clauses. To prove the similarity between participial relative clauses (participial phrases) and relative clauses (full ones) in modifying the preceding nouns and in being restrictive or non-restrictive, the author uses the following examples taken from Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985, pp. 1263, 1327):

- (4) The person *writing reports* is my colleague.
- (5) The car *repaired by that mechanic*...
- (6) The spy *carefully hiding in the bushes* kept watch on the house. (restrictive participial phrase)
- (7) The spy, *carefully hiding in the bushes*, kept watch on the house. (non-restrictive participial phrase)

Sleeman states that “only post-modifying participial phrases can correspond to full relative clauses introduced by a subject relative pronoun” (2017, pp. 3-4):

- (8) The person *who is writing reports* is my colleague.
- (9) The car *that is repaired by that mechanic*...

According to the Academic Support Center in the American University (2009), participial phrases, occupying various positions in their sentences, function as adjectives and use participles to replace and shorten clauses that describe the main subject of the sentence. The article calls attention to the confusion and misinterpretation that may result when participial phrases are used introductorily in a structure that contains more than one noun as shown in the example given below. Because the participial phrase occupies the initial position, and the main clause has two nouns, it would be hard to identify the noun being modified.

- (10) *Landing at the airport*, the reporters surrounded the president’s plane.

To avoid such confusion about the subject, the article suggests placing the subject immediately after the participle phrase as in the following sentence:

(11) *Landing at the airport on time, the president's plane* was surrounded by the reporters. (the participial phrase and the subject are in italics)

Gehring (2014) and Nordquist (2017), in their articles entitled “Using Effective Participle Phrases” and “Understanding Participial Phrases” respectively, as well as Warriner, Treanor, and Laws (1965), asserted that participial phrases always function adjectivally. Even Nordquist emphasizes that participial phrases can be used in one of three positions, and “no matter where they are, they always modify a subject” (2017, p. 1).

On its website, The Capital Community College Foundation treats participial phrases as units “always acting as adjectives” (p. 6) and considers the mid-positioned participial phrase as an adjectival parenthetical element that has to be set off by commas.

Participial Phrases as Adjectives and Adverbs

On the other hand, some grammarians view participial phrases as units that have various syntactic functions. This group of grammarians argue that participial phrases may have either an adjectival or adverbial character. Frank (1972) stated that most participial phrases function as adjectives because they are similar to the adjective clauses with which they alternate, and thus, they may be restrictive (R) or non-restrictive (NR). The author supports her idea with the following examples:

(12) Students *arriving late* will not be permitted to enter the lecture hall.

(*arriving late* is a restrictive participial phrase because it limits the reference of *students*)

(13) Henry, *arriving late*, was not permitted to enter the lecture hall.

(*arriving late* is a non-restrictive participial phrase because it doesn't limit the reference of *Henry*)

Frank (1972, p. 307) added that “some grammarians classify non-restrictive participial phrases as adverbials because of their ability to occupy the three adverbial positions and to denote some of the adverbial meanings modifying either the verb or the entire sentence”. Not only this, but also the author believes that there are some constructions that have participial phrases “whose function is hard to define”. These phrases are usually used in final position referring back to the subject of the main verb or to the object. Since it is agreed upon that the subject of the main verb is the subject of the participial construction, Frank notices that such structures use -ing participles which are considered to have a function intermediate between adverbial and adjectival.

On an article retrieved from the website <http://www.grammar.com>, participial phrases are deemed to have a dual function according to their position in the sentence. The article uses some example sentences (given below) to prove that by manipulating the place of the -ing phrase and the structure of the sentence, one can produce different sentences with distinct functions of the -ing participial phrase:

(14) The woman *running five miles a day* improved her health. (an adjective that modifies “woman”)

(15) *Running five miles a day*, the woman improved her health.

(an adjective that modifies “woman”)

(16) The woman improved her health *running five miles a day*.

(an adverb that modifies “improved”)

Participial phrases can have both adjectival and adverbial function. Yet, what makes it difficult to identify the function of the phrase is the fact that it sometimes adds information without specifying the exact relationship between that information and the main clause. In this case, the reader has to figure out the relationship to

understand the writer's intention (*Participial Phrase Functioning As An Adverb*, 2012)

Norman Stageberg (1977) claimed that what determines the function of the participial phrase is its position in the sentence. With the following examples, his viewpoint becomes even clearer:

- (17) The girl *eating the sundae* is a freshman. (an adjective that modifies the noun *girl*)
- (18) The girl sat *eating the sundae*. (an adverb that modifies the verb *sat*)
- (19) The sonata *played at the recital* was Beethoven's 32nd. (an adjective that modifies *sonata*)
- (20) He returned *defeated by the weather*. (an adverb that modifies the verb *returned*)

Additionally, it is noticed that when Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, sets forth the function of participial phrases, it depends on where the phrase is placed in the sentence. The examples given by the encyclopedia lean toward the fact that participial phrases function adjectivally when they immediately follow the nouns they modify as seen in the following examples:

- (21) The man *sitting over there* is my uncle.
- (22) The chicken *eaten by the children* was contaminated.

Both participial phrases follow immediately the nouns modified (*man* and *chicken* respectively). From another perspective, the adverbial use of the participial phrases appears when the phrase is used in an introductory position, at the end of the sentence or in the nominative absolute construction as in the following examples:

- (23) *Looking at the plans*, I gradually came to see where the problem lay.
- (24) He shot the man, *killing him*.
- (25) He and I *having reconciled our differences*, the project then proceeded smoothly.

Leech et al. (1982) considered participial phrases equivalent to clauses and present two functions of participial clauses under the headings: non-finite adverbial clauses and non-finite relative clauses (adjectives).

Findings and Discussion

Since participial phrases have raised a controversy with regard to their syntactic function as have been illustrated in the previous section, this section presents a descriptive and analytical account of some examples in which participial phrases are used by investigating and identifying their function depending on their structural distribution.

Post-modifying Participial Phrases

- (26.a) The girl *eating the sundae* is a freshman.
- (27.a) We talked to the peasants *working in the rice fields*.
- (28.a) The chicken *eaten by the children* was contaminated.
- (29.a) The sonata *played at the recital* was Beethoven's 32nd.

All participial phrases in the Examples (26-29) can be expanded to adjective clauses in syntactically and semantically well-formed structures as follows:

- (26.b) The girl *who is eating the sundae* is a freshman.
- (27.b) We talked to the peasants *who were working in the rice fields*.
- (28.b) The chicken *that was eaten by the children* was contaminated.
- (29.b) The sonata *that was played at the recital* was Beethoven's 32nd.

All phrases say something about the nouns preceding them, and all of them answer the question of "which":

Which girl is a freshman? “Who is eating the sundae”

Which peasants did you talk to? “Who were working in the rice fields”

Which chicken was contaminated? “That was eaten by the children”

Which sonata was Beethoven’s 32nd? “That was played at the recital”

Introductory Participial Phrases

(30) *Running five miles a day*, the woman improved her health.

Following the conventional way in characterizing the participial phrase in this sentence as an adjective (as claimed by the website <http://www.grammar.com>) results in having the following interpretation:

i. Logically speaking, the phrase fails to expand into an adjective clause if we maintain the order of the units in the sentence (the participial phrase and the main clause) because it is known that adjective clauses have little freedom of movement within the sentence, and they usually follow the words they modify as closely as possible. Therefore, it seems unreasonable to have the adjective clause before the noun it modifies:

*Who was running five miles a day, the woman improved her health.

ii. The phrase does not say anything directly about the subject of the main clause (woman).

iii. The phrase rather describes conditions under which the woman improved her health. Consequently, it can answer one of the interrogative words “when or how” and correspond to an adverbial clause, such as:

- *When* did the woman improve her health?

After running five miles a day, the woman improved her health.

- *How* did the woman improve her health?

By running five miles a day, the woman improved her health.

(31) *Speeding down the highway*, Bob did not notice the police car.

The same interpretation seems applicable to the above sentence. The participial phrase carries an adverbial aspect more than the adjectival one, and it can be rewritten as:

- *While* he was speeding down the highway, Bob did not notice the...
- *Because* he was speeding down the highway, Bob did not...

“While and because” are subordinators that start adverbial clauses. Both adverbial clauses here tell what Bob was doing at the time when he did not notice the police car, and the reason that led Bob not to notice the police car, respectively.

Final-Position Participial Phrases

Participial phrases in this position reasonably correspond to adverbial clauses more than to adjective clauses. They seem to give more information about the verb or the conditions under which the action takes place:

(32) He stood in front of the mirror, *watching his image closely*.

There are two nominal units in the main clause of this sentence (He & mirror). It sounds illogical for any of them to be modified by the participial phrase at the end of the sentence if the order of the words is maintained:

*He stood in front of the mirror *who was watching his image closely*.

*He stood in front of the mirror *that was watching his image closely*.

Assumingly, the first adjective clause modifies “He” whereas the second one modifies “mirror”. It would make much more sense if the participial phrase is treated as an adverbial that tells what he was doing when he stood in front of the mirror.

(33) He returned *defeated by the weather*.

This sentence has one pronoun which cannot reasonably be modified by the participial phrase taking into account the order of the units of the sentence. Otherwise, the participial phrase would be regarded as misplaced. It would be more convincing to call the participial phrase an adverb that answers the question: "How did he return?"

Participial Phrases in Absolute Constructions

In absolute constructions, there are nouns or pronouns preceding the participles as their subjects. The participial phrases are not connected with any element in the main clause (i.e., unattached). They add to the whole situation rather than to a specific unit, i.e., they function as sentence adverbs. This means that they explain the circumstances under which the action in the main clause happens.

(34) *The chicken eaten*, we returned home.

Conclusion

In this article, we have been introduced to the linguists' viewpoints concerning the function of participial phrases as adjectives and adverbs. Grammarians who see participial phrases as adjectives believe that the position of the participial phrase in the sentence makes no difference in determining its function since it has only one function as a noun modifier. On the other hand, another group of linguists leans toward the fact that participial phrases may have both adjectival and adverbial characteristics depending on the position of the participial phrase related to the main clause. They observe participial phrases as adjectives when they immediately follow the nouns they modify, justifying their viewpoint by stating that post-modifying participial phrases can easily be expanded into full relative clauses with relative pronouns. On the other hand, participial phrases that are regarded as adverbs are those used initially or finally because these phrases can be expanded into adverbial clauses with appropriate subordinators. Furthermore, participial phrases in the absolute construction are treated as adverbs for their modification of the whole main clause (a sentence adverb).

Based on the analysis in the present study, the researcher concluded that participial phrases can be used as adjectives and as adverbs according to their position in the structure and according to the possible equivalent clause to which the participial phrase can be expanded provided that the order of the units in the sentence (the participial phrase and the main clause) is maintained.

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