

# Deconstructing *what with* absolutes

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In this paper we examine the distribution, syntax and pragmatics of a relatively rare and previously neglected type of augmented absolute introduced by *what with*. Although *what with* absolutes initially come across as highly idiosyncratic form–meaning pairings, closer inspection reveals that they do in fact exhibit a high degree of compositionality. We propose that *what with* absolutes are projections of an abstract *Evaluative* head that forms part of the extended C-system, an analysis that is shown to account for both their syntactic and core interpretive properties. Like other ‘peripheral’ *wh*-constructions such as pseudo-interrogatives – to which they are argued to be related – *what with* absolutes help elucidate the extent to which pragmatic meaning may be represented syntactically.

## 1. Introduction

Absolutes have not featured very prominently in recent generative-transformational or minimalist research. The likely reason for this is that they seem fairly obvious candidates for being included in the (continuously growing) set of ‘peripheral’ phenomena rather than falling within the (continuously narrowing) domain of core or ‘narrow’ syntax. The two standard types of absolute found in Present-Day English (PDE) include unaugmented absolutes such as (1a) and absolutes augmented by *with* (or *without*) such as (1b) (examples from Kortmann 1991).

- (1) a. **The coach being crowded**, Fred had to stand.  
b. **With John driving**, we won’t have a lot of fun.

Along with idioms and other types of stylistically marked or peripheral structures, absolutes have been claimed to be ‘constructions’ representing arbitrary form–meaning pairings (Riehemann & Bender 1999). The particular subtype of absolute that the present paper deals with, comparatively rare and pragmatically restricted absolutes augmented by *what with*, would appear to lend themselves even more readily to this kind of treatment.

Absolutes introduced by *what with* are tenseless free adjuncts functioning as adverbial sentence modifiers. They can contain *V-ing* participles with accusative or

genitive subjects, *V-en* participial clauses, non-verbal small clauses, or subjectless *V-ing* constituents, as illustrated by the examples in (2).<sup>1</sup>

- (2) a. “Thoughtful too,” said Wexford, “**what with everyone in Kingsmarkham being bilingual.**” A73(1465)
- b. “And **what with his being half asleep,** too, really I don’t know what sort of a signature he’ll be able to make.” (Hardy, *Life’s Little Ironies*)
- c. **What with Mrs Clements and the girls also gone for the week,** I suppose I was very conscious of the fact that once I departed, Darlington Hall would stand empty for probably the first time this century... AR3(208)
- d. We might be able to make a bob or two between us there mate, **what with the old man on the pilot boat as well.** B3J(2964)
- e. It certainly was a good day today **what with climbing the mountain and having my tea cooked for me.** GXM(183)

Traditionally, a distinction is often made between absolutes, which contain an overt subject, and subjectless free adjuncts (compare e.g. Kortmann 1991, Stump 1985). As this terminological distinction will be largely irrelevant to the following discussion, we shall use the term ‘*what with* absolute’ (WWA) for all cases shown in (2), including those that lack a lexical subject.

*What with* is also used to introduce reason adjuncts containing (often conjoined) noun phrases, as in (3a,b) or derived nominals, as in (3c).

- (3) a. **What with her neat black suit, white blouse, rimless spectacles and greying hair,** Ella Shields looked more like a school teacher than a vaudeville and music hall celebrity, toast of two continents. B11(1619)
- b. It’s becoming increasingly clear that Class War’s gone soft, **what with the film and the book.** CAF(590)

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all examples quoted are taken from *The British National Corpus*, version 2 (BNC World), 2001. Distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. URL: <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>. All rights in the texts cited are reserved.

- c. I was impressed at the geselligheid, **what with their singing of the (then) latest hits.** (from the Internet)

Apart from lacking a predicate, this type of adjunct shares the distribution and semantic properties of *what with* absolutes such as those in (2a–e). For these and other reasons to be outlined in section 3 below, we will subsume both types under the label WWA.

Regarding their semantic relation to the superordinate clause, WWAs, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, typically function as ‘reason’ adjuncts implying something along the lines of ‘in consequence of’, ‘on account of’, ‘as a result of’, ‘in view of’, or ‘considering’. Kortmann (1991: 202) further notes that the use of WWAs is more restricted than the use of ordinary *with*-augmented absolutes in that the former are mainly found in colloquial speech and “are only appropriate if the matrix proposition denotes some non-event or negative state, or, more generally, some proposition which has certain negative implications (at least from the point of view of the speaker)”. The view is echoed by the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2003: 1450), which claims that *what with* is used “to talk about the reasons for a particular situation, especially a bad or difficult situation”. This pragmatic restriction does not necessarily apply, however, as can be seen from examples such as (2d) and (2e) above. We will attempt later to provide a unified analysis which can account for tokens with both negative and positive ‘implications’.

Because of their comparative rarity, their pragmatic restrictions and their tendency to occur with coordination, it is tempting to regard WWAs as some kind of constructional idiom, as suggested by the following quote from *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston & Pullum et al. 2002: 626 n.10):

One idiom that does not belong with any of the structural types considered above is *what with*, used to introduce a reason adjunct, as in [*What with all the overtime at the office and having to look after his mother at home,*] *he’d had no time for himself for weeks.* This idiom has developed out of an otherwise almost obsolete use of *what* to introduce lists or coordinations, especially of PPs – and indeed *what with* is characteristically followed by a coordination, as in the example given.

As Huddleston & Pullum et al. note, WWAs have developed from the use of *what* as a conjunction or adverb introducing two or more conjuncts. As least as far back as

since the Middle English Period, *what* has been used, according to the *OED*, in the now obsolete sense of ‘some...others’, ‘both...and’, ‘as well...as’, or ‘partly...partly’, introducing conjoined prepositional phrases as in (4), or to introduce prepositional ‘reason’ adjuncts as in (5) (all quotations taken from the *OED*).

- (4) a. **1393** GOWER *Conf.* III. 377 (MS. Harl. 3490) And may my selven nought bewelde, **What for sikenesse and what for elde.**
- b. **1531** TINDALE *Prol. Jonas* Wks. (1573) 28/2 All the noble bloud was slayne vp, and halfe the commons thereto, **what in Fraunce, and what with their owne sword**, in fightyng among them selues for the crowne.
- c. **1819** SCOTT *Ivanhoe* xxvi, I conceive they may be – **what of yeomen – what of commons**, at least five hundred men.
- (5) a. **c1386** CHAUCER *Sqr. 's T.* 46 The foweles..**What for the seson and the yonge grene** Ful loude songen hire affeccions.
- b. **1476** SIR J. PASTON in *Paston Lett.* No. 775 III. 161, I ame somewhatt crased, **what with the see and what wythe thys dyet heer.**
- c. **1603** SHAKES. *Meas. for M.* I. ii. 83 **What with the war; what with the sweat, what with the gallowes, and what with pouerty**, I am Custom-shrunke.

In PDE, reason adjuncts of this type almost exclusively involve the preposition *with*, as in the examples shown in (3) above. Presumably the usage of *what* as introducing prepositional reason adjuncts was only later extended to absolutes, which were comparatively rare until the Early Modern English period (compare Rio-Rey 2002).

In the following, we will take a closer look at the distribution and linguistic properties of present-day WWAs, which have received little or no attention in previous research on absolutes or related phenomena. Our primary goals are to show that despite their distinctly idiomatic flavour, reason adjuncts or absolutes introduced by *what with* do by no means defy conventional linguistic analysis, and that they can help inform the current debate concerning the extent to which pragmatic meaning may be grammaticalised.

## 2. The properties and distribution of WWAs in Present-Day English

### 2.1 The corpus

In order to examine the scope of WWAs in English, both written and spoken, formal and informal, and to examine whether different types of WWA were distributed evenly or not across these different channels and formalities, we developed a small corpus of tokens. Firstly, we extracted all examples of WWAs from the British National Corpus (BNC), a 100-million word bank of written and spoken British English. Around 89.5% of the corpus is from written sources, and of the remainder just under half is of informal conversation, the rest being recordings of meetings, lectures, TV broadcasts, medical consultations, etc. (Burnard 2007). This enabled us to compare written texts, spoken conversation and other, less informal spoken data. In all, 313 tokens were found in the BNC. To supplement this, we collected 300 further examples from the Internet, using British, Australasian and American search engines. The first 100 relevant examples of WWAs were extracted from each search engine – most tokens came from blogs and discussion groups but a wide range of web material was represented. This enabled us to contrast the BNC material with web language, which bears qualities of both written and spoken language. Table 1 below, first of all, shows the numbers of WWAs in the written, conversation and other spoken parts of the corpus.

**Table 1** Distribution of WWAs in the British National Corpus

	Number of WWAs	Number of words in BNC in each category	WWAs per million words
Written	283	87,953,932	3.22
Conversation	22	4,233,955	5.20
Other spoken	8	6,175,896	1.30

WWAs are more likely to occur in conversational data than in written, and this predominance for informal contexts is further highlighted by the fact that several of the WWAs in written data are found in representations of speech in novels. Because of their very low number, and their very different behaviour from informal

conversation, tokens from the ‘other spoken’ category will be excluded from the remaining analysis.

If we first examine the distribution of the different types of WWA in the corpora we analysed – see Table 2 below – it is apparent that the most frequently occurring types of WWA across all of the datasets are those without predicates, as in (3) above. Overall, these accounted for over 70% of the examples in our data. A further 20% of tokens were of the ACC-*ing* type, as in (2a) above. These two types account for more than 9 out of every 10 WWAs. In our main corpus, we did not find any examples of POSS-*ing* WWAs – although we did find a few examples from other literary or Internet sources.<sup>2</sup> There is, furthermore, a remarkable similarity in the distribution of these different types across the three data sources, conversation and writing, both from the BNC, and examples from the Internet.

## 2.2 WWAs and coordination

Note that many present-day WWAs still involve coordination, including the insertion of ‘dummy’ conjuncts such as *and all*, *and everything* (6a,b) – down to the use of the stereotypical expression *what with one thing and another* as in (6c) below, of which the BNC contains a total of 16 instances.<sup>3</sup>

- (6) a. Don’t think I’m hurrying you but we’re rather short-staffed **what with Christmas and everything**. CKB(2516)
- b. Personally I would advise you to give them your blessing, **what with the baby and all**. CR6(1041)
- c. Gradually she wheedled her way into the kitchen and began to learn the art of French cooking from Alain’s mother, and **what with one thing and another** she hardly noticed the days pass by. HGD(3154)

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<sup>2</sup> Both bare infinitives and infinitival clauses headed by *to* seem to be excluded from WWAs. While predicateless WWAs may contain infinitival postnominal modifiers as in (i) below, we have not come across a single instance of WWAs containing unambiguously clausal infinitival complements of *with*, either in the BNC or on the Internet.

(i) But what with Rose to think of and George’s drinking we just stayed the way we were. HD7(1914)

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the variation in form and function of these dummy conjuncts, see Cheshire (2007).

**Table 2** Distribution of different types of WWA across conversational, Internet and written data

	Conversation (BNC)			Internet		Written (BNC)	
	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in conversation BNC	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in Internet corpus	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in written BNC	
<i>ACC-ing</i>	5	23%	65	22%	51	18%	
<i>V-en</i>	0	0%	5	2%	3	1%	
Subjectless <i>-ing</i>	2	9%	28	9%	18	6%	
Predicateless	15	68%	202	67%	211	75%	

An analysis of the distribution of coordination in the WWAs in the corpus revealed some interesting differences between WWAs with predicates on the one hand and those without on the other. Table 3 shows the distribution of coordination in WWAs with predicates and Table 4 in WWAs without predicates. Given that language type (conversation, Internet, writing) does not seem to significantly affect the distribution of coordination patterns, the three types are combined, and predicates and non-predicates are contrasted in Figure 1.

Table 3 shows that a majority of the WWAs that do have predicates do *not* demonstrate a coordination of clauses. Table 4, on the other hand, highlights the preference for coordination in predicateless WWAs, particularly in the more formal, written styles. Conversational data nevertheless, in all types of WWA, prefers to avoid coordination, perhaps re-emphasising the relative tendency for conversation to avoid ‘heavy’ clauses in general. However, despite trawling through one of the largest existing corpora of spoken English conversation, we have too few examples to generalise with a greater degree of confidence.

### 2.3 Interpretive restrictions

Stump (1985) draws a basic semantic distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ absolutes, with only the latter able to function like conditional clauses restricting a modal or other binary operator in the matrix clause. The ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ readings of absolutes are illustrated by the examples in (7a) and (7b), respectively.

- (7) a. **With her children asleep**, Mary might watch TV.  
      (“If her children are asleep...”)
- b. **With her children asleep**, Mary watched TV.  
      (“While/because her children were asleep...”)

Stump notes that for an absolute to receive a ‘weak’ or conditional reading it must be derived from a stage-level predicate (in Carlson’s (1980) sense) and must be augmented by *with*.<sup>4</sup> Absolutes that contain an individual-level predicate such as *being a doctor* in (8) below are always ‘strong’.

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<sup>4</sup> However, Kortmann (1991: 199ff.) claims that *with*-augmentation is not in fact essential.



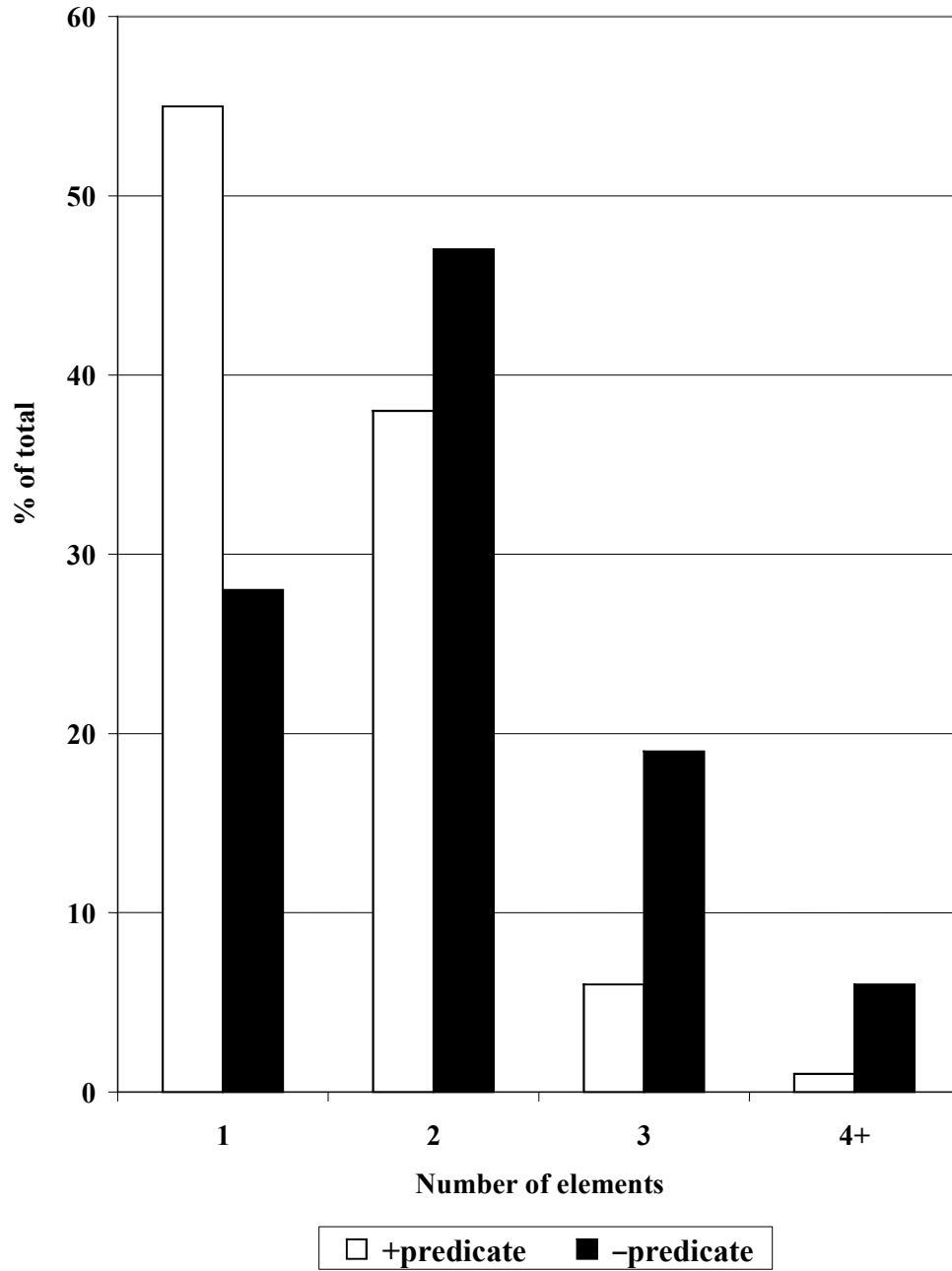
**Table 3** Coordination in WWAs with predicates

	Conversation (BNC)		Internet		Written (BNC)	
	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in conversation BNC	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in Internet corpus	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in written BNC
No coordination	4	—	58	59%	36	50%
Two coordinated phrases	3	—	34	35%	30	42%
Three coordinated phrases	0	—	4	4%	6	8%
Four or more coordinated phrases	0	—	2	2%	0	0%

**Table 4** Coordination in WWAs without predicates

	Conversation (BNC)		Internet		Written (BNC)	
	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in conversation BNC	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in Internet corpus	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in written BNC
No coordination	8	53%	65	32%	46	22%
Two coordinated phrases	4	18%	77	38%	119	56%
Three coordinated phrases	2	13%	44	22%	35	17%
Four or more coordinated phrases	1	6%	16	8%	11	5%

**FIGURE 1 Coordination in WWAs: Number of elements in WWA in tokens with and without a predicate**



- (8) **(With) his mother being a doctor**, John would know his way to the Med Center. (= “Because his mother is a doctor...”)  
(adapted from Stump 1985: 272f.)

Unlike *with*-absolutes such as those in (7) above, however, even WWAs containing stage-level predicates can only ever have a ‘strong’ reading, with the truth of the adjunct clause being entailed by the truth of the matrix clause. That is, WWAs cannot be interpreted as a conditional clause restricting a modal or other operator in the superordinate clause, as the examples in (9) below illustrate.

- (9) a. We might be able to make a bob or two between us there mate, **what with the old man on the pilot boat as well.** [= (2d)]  
(≠ “...if the old man is on the pilot boat as well.”)
- b. **What with mother being sick and Ellen on holiday**, I don’t know how to keep the children under control. (Kortmann 1991: 203)  
(≠ “...if mother is sick and Ellen on holiday...”)

In other words, the presence of *what* restricts an absolute’s interpretation in that it renders it factive. Note that our earlier example (2d), for instance, becomes ambiguous between a ‘strong’ (10a) and a ‘weak’ (10b) reading if *what* is omitted.

- (10) We might be able to make a bob or two between us there mate, **with the old man on the pilot boat as well.**
- a. “...because the old man is on the pilot boat as well.”
- b. “...if the old man is on the pilot boat as well.”

According to Katz (1993: 130f.), ‘strong’ adjuncts themselves fall into two subtypes, ‘strong-conjunctive’ and ‘strong-presuppositional’, illustrated by the paraphrases in (11a) and (11b), respectively.

- (11) **With her children asleep**, Mary watched TV.
- a. “Mary’s children were asleep and she watched TV.”
  - b. “Because her children were asleep, Mary watched TV.”

Unlike *with*-absolutes, WWAs appear to be restricted to the ‘strong-presuppositional’ reading, that is, they function essentially like *because* clauses.

As noted earlier, WWAs are also often reported as being associated with some negative state or implication, as in the examples in (12) below (from the Internet):

- (12)
- a. When Stephen came to see us, Alan was near breaking-point, **what with my drinking and the debts and everything**.
  - b. I just couldn’t take the rapping squirrel seriously, **what with that British accent and all**.
  - c. But **what with the myriad of carriages thumping and clanging about as they passed, pickpockets and goodness knows what else on the loose**, she couldn’t just leave him there.

Table 5 below shows the numbers of tokens in our corpus which were interpreted as being pragmatically ‘negative’ and those read as pragmatically ‘positive’. Just over 80% of tokens were interpreted as being pragmatically negative, supporting Kortmann’s (and others’) claims.

However, there remains a not insignificant number of tokens with positive readings, such as the examples in (13) below (also from the Internet):

- (13)
- a. **What with weblogs, online discussions, websites and other more traditional forms of publishing such as online journals**, Australian culture is well represented online.
  - b. As the second closest Alpine resort to Melbourne, Mt Buller is a great place to go for a day trip, **what with brilliant facilities and only 3.5 hours from the city**.
  - c. A quick listen to the CD, **what with Ives’ deep and meaningful lyrics, the understated accompaniment and his wonderful voice**, left me with shades of Counting Crows, REM and the Toothfairies.

d. **What with water wheels, worms and waste paper shredding,**

Golspie is bursting with green ideas.

A dominant function of WWAs, therefore, appears to be as an account of a claim made in the matrix clause, whether 'good' or 'bad', with the higher frequency of negative assessments following from the fact that, particularly in spoken interaction, they routinely demand justification more than positive ones. The idea that WWAs function to account for a claim is nicely exemplified by a number of tokens which justify counter-assessments, such as those in (14) and (15) below. Note that in (14) the WWA supports a positive assessment, while in (15) it is negative.

- (14) a. While this might not be as cool as it would have been a few years ago, **what with the Wii Virtual Console and emulation all the rage these days**, I still think I would have done pretty much anything to have one of these things in the early 90s.
- b. I am not, it must be said, noted for my desire for self-publicity, nor indeed any particular *stropmy princess* streak of behaviour. But I thought, **what with the current Tranniesphere expansion**, I thought I'd get this one in early...
- c. I know this blog is popular **what with all the visits from various people and employees of big major companies visiting on their company Internets**. But the thing that is starting to nark me off, is the fact that I am not getting any recognition for doing this blog.
- d. **What with the enormous amounts of high quality clones on the market**, more and more players are turning to these to increase their arsenal, but what happens if you want trades?
- e. Okay, I would be paying quite a lot per month but in the same note I will be saving lots on my BT landline phone bill **what with the free weekend calls included that includes calls to mobiles**.

**Table 5** Distribution of WWAs with a ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ interpretation  
(Totals do not add up to 100% because, for a very small number of tokens, it was not possible to satisfactorily assign positive or negative readings)

	Conversation (BNC)		Internet		Written (BNC)	
	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in conversation BNC	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in Internet corpus	N° of examples	Proportion of total WWAs in written BNC
Negative interpretation	20	91%	223	74%	232	82%
Positive interpretation	1	5%	66	22%	45	16%

- (15) a. Of course, although it provides the emotional center of the fight, you know, **what with the massacre being the point of the movie**, it can't end well.
- b. Being me, I thought about going to the doctor, but **what with one thing and another (twins' birthday, house guests, etc)**, I didn't.
- c. I suppose I could go to the clinic, but **what with the traffic the way it is**, and it always takes so long, etc.

So rather than providing justification for negative statements, WWAs provide one frame (among many, of course) for the justification of accountable assessments in general. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995: 1629) manages to capture this observation reasonably well when it states that *what with* is “used to introduce a list of reasons that have made something happen or have made someone feel a particular way”.

#### 2.4 WWAs as ‘constructions’?

Absolutes are among the growing number of structures that have been claimed to be ‘constructions’ in the sense of arbitrary form–meaning pairings (Riehemann & Bender 1999). We saw above that unlike ordinary absolutes, WWAs not only have a penchant for coordination but are also pragmatically more constrained in that they are necessarily factive, and restricted to a ‘reason’ or ‘account’ interpretation. Together with the observation that they also imply a lack of neutrality on the part of the speaker, or speaker evaluation (compare e.g. Kortmann 1991: 202), WWAs come across as a highly idiosyncratic subtype of absolute indeed.

As Kay & Fillmore (1999: 4) point out, postulating an independent construction needs to be justified by showing that (i) “there are specific interpretations associated by convention with just such sentences [...] that are neither given by ordinary compositional processes nor derived from a literal meaning by processes of conversational reasoning”, and (ii) sentences carrying such interpretations share certain formal properties. As regards (ii), the formal properties shared by WWAs include the presence of *what with* and the absence of any overt tense marker in its coda. With constructions, or constructional idioms, being conceived of as word, phrase or sentence-level templates with one or more slots unfilled, WWAs would thus seem to conform to the general (simplified) template



[*what with* + XP ], where XP can be of either of the types shown in (2) and (3) above.<sup>5</sup>

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to showing that WWAs are structurally more uniform than they might seem and to calling into question the applicability of criterion (i), the lack of compositionality.

### 3. The internal structure of WWAs

#### 3.1 Overtly clausal WWAs

WWAs containing a noun phrase plus a verbal or non-verbal predicate appear to be further augmented variants of absolutes augmented by *with*, which have previously been analysed as clausal constituents by McCawley (1983), Reuland (1983) and Hantson (1992), among others. Let us first consider WWAs containing ACC-*ing* gerunds. Evidence that *what with* does indeed introduce clausal V-*ing* constituents includes the facts that like *with* absolutes, WWAs allow passivisation (16a) and quantifier float (16b), and admit expletive and pleonastic subjects (16c,d), as well as the fact that the entire subject–predicate unit can be in the scope of clausal negation or negative adverbs (16e,f).

- (16) a. **What with health budgets being pruned and cut back** I'm asking the health board if staff shortages perhaps were a contributory factor here. K5D(1272)
- b. [...] I said look I apologize for I'd completely forgot that you were coming to collect he said I know I can see that, he hadn't really **what with the kids all running around...** KC8(1008)
- c. Admittedly, ER is slightly handicapped in the plot area, **what with there being only a few medical afflictions that can play on prime time.** (from the Internet)
- d. All of a sudden it seemed to be the wrong time and the wrong way to go about it, **what with it being the day of the old man's funeral** and everything... HWP(1667)

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<sup>5</sup> Using HPSG-type attribute-value matrices should allow for a proper formalisation of the descriptive properties of WWAs, along the lines suggested by Riehemann & Bender (1999: 484) for *with* absolutes.

- e. Anyway, **what with you not being around** and that, I felt constricted to give them a crack of the whip. BMR(1296)
- f. So you see, **what with the Church never keeping adequate records** and relying on the personal network all the time [...], we're all rather in the dark. HA2(2308)

ACC-*ing* gerunds have recently been analysed, *inter alia*, as nominalised inflection phrases (Abney 1987), verbal 'small clauses' (Harley & Noyer 1998) or tense phrases (Pires 1999). Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of the syntactic status and function of *what*, and given the arguments presented by Hantson (1992) in favour of analysing *with* in standard *with*-augmented absolutes as a prepositional complementiser, let us assume that the V-*ing* clauses in (16) are non-finite tense phrase (TP) complements of the prepositional complementiser *with*. The WWA in (16b), for instance, then has the internal structure shown in (17), with the floating quantifier *all* stranded in the subject's VP-internal base position.<sup>6</sup>

(17) what [C with ] [TP the kids [T'  $\emptyset$  [VP *all* [V' running around ]]]]

In addition to ACC-*ing* gerunds, *what with* also licences V-*ing* predicates with genitive subjects (also known as POSS-*ing* gerunds) as well as subjectless V-*ing* predicates. Although more 'nominal' in character than ACC-*ing* gerunds (compare e.g. Abney 1987, Wasow & Roeper 1972), POSS-*ing* WWAs share with the former a number of clausal properties including the possibility of quantifier float, as shown by the examples in (18) (from the Internet).<sup>7</sup>

- (18) a. The comparison with Major isn't bad when it comes to Hutton, **what with their both** coming across as bloodless (and dreary) technocrats.
- b. The black-white design of the site is simple and pleasant with nice headings, but the links are somewhat confusing, **what with their being all squeezed together and obscurely titled.**

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<sup>6</sup> The distinction between V and 'small' *v* (Chomsky 1995, and later) is irrelevant to the present discussion.

<sup>7</sup> See Williams (1975) for further arguments in favour of analysing POSS-*ing* gerunds as clausal rather than nominal constituents.

WWAs containing a noun phrase plus a V-*en* participle or non-verbal predicate also function like clausal (i.e., subject–predicate) units semantically, and pattern with DP-*ing* WWAs in that they permit quantifier float, as in (19a), and can support clausal negation, as in (19b) (both from the Internet).

- (19) a. It was a lucky time for a call, **what with the girls all out** and just an old dour lady like me left.
- b. “Yeah, Thomas said it was pretty ironic, **what with her not even able to be in the same room with a tea cup poodle.**”

Let us assume, then, that the internal structure of both POSS-*ing* and non-verbal ‘small clause’ complements of *what with* is essentially the same as those of ACC-*ing* complements, except that small clauses lack an overt verb or auxiliary. That is, example (19a) above has the structure shown in (20).<sup>8</sup>

- (20) what [<sub>C</sub> with ] [<sub>TP</sub> the girls [<sub>T'</sub> ∅ [<sub>VP</sub> all [<sub>V'</sub> ∅ [<sub>P</sub> out ]]]]]

In the remainder of this section, we will consider two types of WWA whose clausal status is rather less obvious.

### 3.2 Subjectless WWAs

While the presence of *what* may be optional in WWAs containing a lexical subject, its presence is required in subjectless absolutes, as illustrated in (21).

- (21) a. It certainly was a good day today **\*(what) with climbing the mountain and having my tea cooked for me.** [cf. (2e)]
- b. **\*(What) with being so uncoordinated and all,** I haven’t decided exactly how I’m going to increase my physical activity...
- (from the Internet)

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<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, non-verbal small clauses may involve an abstract ‘predicate’ head in the sense of Bowers (1993).

The fact that subjectless WWAs can also contain passives, as shown in (22), and support clausal negation, as illustrated by the examples in (23), suggests that they too form clausal constituents.

- (22) a. KIWI referee David Bishop has had an exciting year, **what with being ‘congratulated’ in the Parc des Princes tunnel by Daniel Dubroca...** CHW(206)
- b. The soldiers’ nerves are probably stretched a bit taut, **what with being shot at and exploded at and stuff...** (from the Internet)
- (23) a. [...] my brain was a bit dozy **what with not having been in school for close on 3 months.**
- b. I’m pretty sure I managed to alienate people nicely over the past weekend, **what with not returning phone calls or going out...**  
(both from the Internet)

Following generative-transformational tradition, we will assume that WWAs lacking an overt subject do in fact contain a null pronominal subject, which, as indicated in (25) below, can serve as the required local antecedent for reflexive pronouns as in (24a,b) (from the Internet).

- (24) a. **What with holding myself out as an expert on Magic and so forth,**  
I find for some reason that people are often writing to me for advice.
- b. But I barely have time to help with anything Internet wise, **what with drowning myself in gameplay and moderating a chat.**
- (25) a. what with [<sub>TP</sub> **PRO<sub>i</sub>** holding **myself<sub>i</sub>** out ...]
- b. what with [<sub>TP</sub> **PRO<sub>i</sub>** drowning **myself<sub>i</sub>** ...]

A question that immediately arises here, though, is why null subjects should be possible in WWAs while being excluded from standard *with*-augmented absolutes. According to Hantson (1992: 86f.), given that PRO is normally barred from occurring in case-marked positions, the assumption that the prepositional

complementiser *with* assigns objective case to the absolute's subject accounts for the ill-formedness of examples like (26).

(26) \***With driving slowly**, we won't have a lot of fun.

On closer inspection, however, it turns out that it is *with*-augmented absolutes rather than WWAs that behave oddly with respect to the availability of null subjects. Note that null subjects are perfectly possible, for example, in 'negative' absolutes augmented by *without*, as witnessed by (27a,b) below (from the BNC).

- (27) a. Ohly, **without being absolutely sure**, thought that US foreign policy was wrong and was at least in need of urgent re-examination.  
EFA(806)
- b. **Without calling for one's whole attention**, it so persistently demands a small part of it that concentration on anything else is ruled out. EBR(1343)

The same is true for *with* absolutes modified by focus particles such as *even* or by an adverb, as shown by the examples in (28) (from the Internet).

- (28) a. I cropped it down because **even with reducing the pixels count** I couldn't get it small enough for upload.
- b. I didn't want to be typecast, **especially with being** a native Yorkshire girl.

Thus, it appears that null subjects are possible in augmented absolutes that are introduced by a conjunction or complementiser other than *with*, or whenever some kind of additional augmentation is present. The real question, then, is why null subjects should be disallowed in standard *with* absolutes given that they are licensed in other types of absolute – as well as in *V-ing* complements of prepositional *with*, as in (29) below (from the Internet).

(29) It's ok to be secretly happy **with eating banana boats and fried twinkies**.

One possibility is that covert subjects are excluded from *with*-augmented absolutes on prosodic grounds, given that their subjects tend to attract focal stress, but for lack of space and because the current study focuses on WWAs, we will not pursue this matter any further here.

The alternation of lexical and null subjects is not, of course, unique to WWAs but is also seen, for example, in clausal gerunds serving as complements of verbs like *remember*:

(30) I remember {**him** / **his** / **PRO**} cutting down the tree.

Previous proposals to account for the above alternation include those assuming that PRO-*ing* and DP-*ing* gerunds differ with respect to their transparency for case assignment by an external governor (e.g. Johnson 1988) and those which assume that the subject of gerunds is case-marked internally (e.g. Reuland 1983). Again, space limitations prevent us from discussing the merits and drawbacks of these proposals in any detail here. We merely note that adopting a more recent claim by Pires (1999) to the effect that the subject of PRO-*ing* gerunds is actually ‘small’ *pro* – which occurs in case-marked positions – would render PRO-*ing*/DP-*ing* alternations far less problematic than they have traditionally been thought to be, no matter whether case is taken to be assigned to the subject directly by *with* (or verbs such as *remember*), or by some functional head within the gerund phrase.

### 3.3 ‘Predicateless’ WWAs

Let us finally consider WWAs containing a nominal (i.e., DP) coda. Noting that *with* + DP absolutes such as (31a,b) below (from McCawley 1983) have an understood possessional *have* or existential *there be* interpretation, as illustrated by the paraphrases in (32), McCawley argues that this type of absolute also contains clausal constituents.

(31) a. **With job offers from three major universities**, Ann is feeling great.  
b. **With this bad weather**, we had better stay home.

(32) a. With *her having* job offers from three universities...  
b. With *there being* this bad weather...

Syntactic evidence in favour of a clausal analysis of *with* + DP absolutes includes the possibility of conjoining a DP complement of *with* with an unequivocally clausal constituent, the possibility of adverbial modification, and the fact that the absolute rather than the matrix clause serves as the scope for negation. All of these diagnostics test positive for WWAs as well, as shown by the examples in (33)–(35) below.<sup>9</sup>

- (33) a. It must be such a difficult decision to make, **what with the little one, and Ben just about to start school...** ASD(2557)  
b. **“What with all this, and Ken still lying in that bed –”** ; She broke off and Tina intervened. BPD(1395)  
c. We shouted but **what with the noise of the water and not knowing their language** of course it wasn't any use and then we were in the water... G1X(1496)
- (34) a. **What with my wedding as well in October**, it is really turning into some exciting year, isn't it? CH7(535)  
b. And **what with her heart and now her leg**, she felt fully excused from all effort in that area. HA2(2439)  
c. **What with the heat, the fiddly bit and then him**, I was ready to blow my top. CGU(164)
- (35) a. I'm pretty bored though, **what with nothing to do but sleep all day**.  
b. I thought this game would turn out pretty crap, **what with no combat**.  
(both from the Internet)

Observe also that unlike negative PPs as in (36a), but like negative *with* + DP absolutes such as (36b) (examples from Liberman 1975, cited by McCawley 1983: 278), negative WWAs as in (36c) fail to trigger auxiliary inversion.

- (36) a. **With no job** would Sam be happy.  
b. **With no job**, Sam is happy.

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<sup>9</sup> The coordination argument on its own, of course, is not very strong as coordination of unlike constituents is not particularly uncommon (compare e.g. Sag et al. 1985).

- c. [...] **what with no tenants and no furniture** you may have done this  
to save some money... (from the Internet)

In the light of the above arguments in favour of a clausal analysis of (*what*) *with* + DP absolutes, and given that they share the semantic and pragmatic properties of overtly clausal absolutes, let us assume that the DP in this kind of absolute is the complement of a null verbal head, as indicated in (37) (but see footnote 8 above).

(37) what [<sub>C</sub> with ] [<sub>TP</sub> *pro* [<sub>T</sub>  $\emptyset$  [<sub>VP</sub> [<sub>V</sub>  $\emptyset$  [<sub>DP</sub> the little one ]]]]]

In summary, we have shown that WWAs admit a range of non-finite clausal constituents including ACC-*ing*, PRO-*ing* and POSS-*ing* gerunds, V-*en* clauses, as well as adjectival, prepositional and nominal small clauses. We argued that, diverse as they may seem, the various types of WWA all share the same basic structure, with the prepositional complementiser *with* selecting a non-finite TP complement. Next, we will examine the syntactic status and function of *what*, whose presence seems to give rise to the interpretive restrictions noted earlier.

#### 4. What about *what*?

##### 4.1 Preliminary observations

Given our assumption that *with* in standard augmented absolutes is a prepositional complementiser located in C, it would appear that *what* must be one of the following: (i) part of a single (grammaticalised) prepositional complementiser *what with* heading the absolute, (ii) a derived *wh*-operator originating within the complement domain of *with*, or (iii) a base-generated *wh*-operator.

Evidence that option (i) cannot be correct is fairly easy to come by. The following examples (all from the Internet) show that *what* and *with* can be separated by an adverb, indicating that they do not form a single lexical unit:

- (38) a. No wonder that, what with the charms of the quiet rural landscape and the “purer air,” **what also with** the charm of the “still air of delightful studies,” of the atmosphere of culture, lettered ease and refinement, [...] Princeton should have been becoming increasingly popular...



- b. As you can probably tell by now, *Final Fantasy VIII* is very different from its predecessors, **what especially with** the drastic innovations in its battle system.
- c. While Motoi Sakuraba's soundtrack may not exactly be on par with his other works, **what primarily with** its painful instrumentation throughout the game...
- d. Besides, **what now with** funds looking as if they are net short again, the path of least resistance seems likely to be higher.
- e. I thought we need a change, **what just with** Bush.
- f. **What, therefore, with** Carter's commands, the seaman's calls, and the violent flinging down of ropes upon the deck, there was a very considerable uproar going on upon deck...

Notice further that *what* can be expanded to *what all*, as shown by the examples in (39) below (from the Internet).

- (39)
- a. So... **what all with** this desk job, it seems I have such various job tasks as data entry, switchboard operation, and signing someone else's name on letters.
  - b. The Kid was in heaven, **what all with** the sunny day, just a little wind, the San Francisco [*sic*] skyline at his back, and the ball going through the hoop time and time again.

Since, according to McCloskey (2000), *what all* in sentences such as *What all did you get for Christmas?* is a phrasal constituent (a DP headed by the quantificational determiner *all*), *what all* in the examples above must be located in a non-head position.

As to option (ii), the fact that that *what* is not associated with any argument position within the WWA coda strongly argues against a movement analysis. Unlike argumental *what* in standard *wh*-interrogative structures, *what* in WWAs has no obvious base position other than its surface position. The fact that it cannot be modified by *else*, illustrated in (40b), further indicates that it is non-referential.

- (40) a. **What else** did you buy?  
 b. \*And **what else with** his being half asleep... [cf. (2b)]

This would seem to leave us with option (iii), the assumption that *what* in WWAs, like the interrogative adverb *whether*, is some kind of *wh*-operator base-generated in its surface position. The possibility of intervening adverbs illustrated in (38) above suggests that unlike what is normally assumed for the base-generated *wh*-adverb *whether*, *what* in WWAs cannot be located in the specifier position of the CP headed by *with*, however. Pre-modifying adverbs have either been claimed to be adjoined to the projections they modify (e.g. Haider 2000) or to occupy the specifier positions of separate functional heads (Alexiadou 1997, Cinque 1999). Assuming that multiple specifiers (or multiple adjunction to the same projection) are ruled out (Kayne 1994), the data in (38) thus leads us to conclude that *what* is located in the specifier of some functional projection above CP, as indicated in (41).

- (41) [XP what [X' ∅ [CP [C' with [TP ... ]]]]]

This conclusion is compatible with the growing amount of cross-linguistic evidence suggesting that the C-system involves multiple functional layers. If CP is permitted to be recursive (Watanabe 1993, Zanuttini & Portner 2003), the constituent labelled 'XP' in (41) above might be a second CP dominating the first; if CP recursion is ruled out, it must be a separate functional category forming part of the extended C-system (compare e.g. Rizzi 1997).

Given their historical origin and the fact that WWAs in PDE also frequently occur with coordination, it is tempting to analyse *what* as a correlative adverb (also called 'initial conjunction' or 'correlative conjunction'). The fact that unlike *with*-augmented absolutes as in (42a), WWAs cannot be further augmented by correlative adverbs such as *either* would seem to support this assumption.

- (42) a. ?**Either with** John away or with his doorbell not working, no one  
 could get into his apartment. (McCawley 1983: 272)  
 b. \***Either what with ...**/\***What either with** John away or (what) with  
 his doorbell not working...

Like correlative adverbs, *what* in WWAs is uniquely associated with a specific conjunction – that is, it never introduces conjuncts linked by any other conjunction than *and*.<sup>10</sup> For the sake of concreteness, and following the analysis of correlative adverbs proposed by Johannessen (2005), let us consider the possibility that *what* is located in the specifier of a correlative phrase (CorP), as shown in (43).<sup>11</sup>

(43) [<sub>CorP</sub> what [<sub>Cor'</sub> ∅ [<sub>ConjP</sub> CP [<sub>Conj'</sub> and CP ]]]]

Analysing *what* in WWAs as a correlative adverb is problematic, however, given that *what* also patterns differently from correlative adverbs in a number of respects. First, recall that coordination, although on the whole preferred, is not in fact obligatory in WWAs. What, then, is the status of *what* in the absence of coordination, assuming that the presence of CorP is contingent upon the presence of ConjP? Secondly, unlike correlative adverbs, *what* (or *what with*) is not limited to introducing only initial conjuncts:

(44) [...] some women held wine to their mouths that they might drink; and **what with** dropping blood, and **what with** dropping wine, and **what with** the stream of sparks struck out of the stone, all their wicked atmosphere seemed gore and fire. (Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)

Thirdly, unlike other correlative adverbs, which tend not to be selective about the type of constituents they conjoin, ‘correlative’ *what* in PDE is used exclusively to

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<sup>10</sup> Except for occasional instances of ‘through to’ or ‘not to mention’, as in (i) below (from the Internet):

(i) What with the plagiarism debacles of Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose [...] and the ongoing debate over whether Michael Bellesiles is guilty of fraud or incompetence (not to mention the earlier mad if temporary rush to originalism as liberal historians raced to the defense of Bill Clinton in his impeachment troubles), the history profession has not looked very good lately.

<sup>11</sup> In order to account for the close association between the correlative adverb and its conjunction, Johannessen (2005) assumes that correlative adverbs start out adjoined to ConjP and subsequently raise to (Spec,CorP). The syntax of coordination is still controversial, though – see Borsley (2005) for some arguments against conjunction phrases.

conjoin non-finite clausal constituents introduced by the prepositional complementiser *with*.<sup>12</sup> In view of these observations, an analysis along the lines of (43) does not seem tenable after all. The alternative possibility that *what* could be a (non-correlative) focus particle similarly fails to account for the restricted distribution of ‘focus’ *what* compared with other focus particles, and for the fact that WWAs can themselves be modified by the concessive focus particle *even*, or by focussing adverbs such as *especially* or *just*, as shown by the examples in (45) (from the Internet).<sup>13</sup>

- (45) a. Not as many people can afford to eat out, these days, so it seems, **even what with** working two jobs.
- b. I never really understood how people could like Paris Hilton, **especially what with** her being such a whorish tramp and all.
- c. **Just what with** all the listing, shopping, hiding, wrapping and decorating, and shuttling young’uns hither and yon for lessons, winter rehearsals, recitals and concerts, time’s flown.

If *what* is neither a correlative adverb or conjunction, nor a focus particle, then what is it? In the following, we will reconsider the status of *what* in the light of the idea that certain aspects of pragmatic meaning or discourse function may be represented syntactically.

#### 4.2 *What* as an evaluative operator

Recall from section 2 above that besides their ‘reason’ interpretation, the principal semantic and pragmatic properties of WWAs include factivity and the implication of an evaluation on the part of the speaker. Note that factivity and (implied) speaker evaluation, as well as the presence of an initial *wh*-element, are properties that WWAs share with, for example, exclamatives such as (46a) and interrogatives involving the ‘secondary’ adjunct *wh*-phrase *how come* such as (46b).

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<sup>12</sup> What is more, *with* is typically absent from non-initial conjuncts, suggesting that we are dealing with TP rather than CP coordination here.

<sup>13</sup> As König (1991: 16) notes, the possibility of combining focus particles is extremely restricted in English.

- (46) a. **What** a nice guy he is! (Zanuttini & Portner 2003: 40)  
 b. **How come** when Clark Kent decides to run at super speed, his clothes don't burn up from Friction? (from the Internet)

Recent proposals arguing that certain interpretive and discourse-related properties of sentences may be encoded syntactically by corresponding functional categories have rekindled formal linguists' interest in these and other 'peripheral' structures. Elaborating or extending Rizzi's (1997) 'split-CP' hypothesis, several authors have proposed that discourse-level properties such as factivity, evidentiality or evaluation are represented in the syntax (see, among others, Ambar 1999, Cinque 1999, Di Sciullo 2006, Munaro & Obenauer 1999, Speas 2004, Speas & Tenny 2003, Zanuttini & Portner 2003).<sup>14</sup> Based on Watanabe's (1993) analysis of factive declaratives, Zanuttini & Portner, for example, argue that exclamatives such as (46a) contain an abstract factive operator (here labelled 'OP<sub>FACT</sub>') that is located in the specifier of an additional C head, as shown in (47).<sup>15</sup>

- (47) [CP [DP what a nice guy]<sub>i</sub> [C' ∅ [CP OP<sub>FACT</sub> [C' ∅ [TP he is *t<sub>i</sub>* ]]]]]

Like WWA-*what*, *how come* in sentences such as (46b) has been argued to be a non-head base-generated in the specifier of a functional category within the C-system (Conroy 2006, Fitzpatrick 2005, Ochi 2004). Similarly to Zanuttini & Portner's analysis of exclamatives, Fitzpatrick (2005) claims that *how come* in interrogatives such as (46b) occurs with a factive complementiser that may itself introduce a covert (factive) operator, as illustrated in (48).<sup>16</sup>

- (48) how come [CP OP<sub>FACT</sub> [C' C<sub>FACT</sub> [TP ... ]]]

<sup>14</sup> Clearly there are many aspects of pragmatics that cannot feasibly be represented grammatically. For some discussion of how the grammatical representation of discourse-related properties might be constrained, see Speas (2004) and Speas & Tenny (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Two CP layers are required here because a separate specifier position is needed for hosting the fronted *wh*-phrase.

<sup>16</sup> Following an earlier suggestion by Melvold (1991), Fitzpatrick calls this an *iota* operator.

Extending Fitzpatrick's analysis, Conroy (2006) proposes that *how come* merges with the abstract factive operator and thus effectively takes on this function itself. Applying Conroy's suggestion to the analysis of WWAs, and taking into account the evidence noted earlier for the presence of at least two functional layers within the CP-domain of WWAs, leads us to analysing *what* as a factive operator located in the specifier of a corresponding functional head (provisionally labelled 'X<sub>FACT</sub>' in (49) below).

(49) [XP what [X' X<sub>FACT</sub> [CP [C' with [TP ...]]]]]

Note, however, that the assumption that X in (49) encodes factivity does not provide any account for the observation that *what* (similar to evaluative sentence adverbs such as *unfortunately*, *luckily*, etc.), also seems to imply some kind of evaluation on the part of the speaker. According to Cinque (1999), evaluative adverbs are located in the specifier of an 'evaluative' mood phrase that forms part of the extended IP-domain. The existence of 'evaluation phrases' as part of the inflectional or C-system has also been argued for by, among others, Ambar (1999), Di Sciullo (2006), Munaro & Obenauer (1999), Speas (2004) and Speas & Tenny (2003). Note that like WWA-*what* or *how come* in (46b), evaluative adverbs are also factive, that is, the truth of the proposition they modify is presupposed (compare e.g. Geuder 2002: 111). If the presence of lexical elements signalling discourse or speaker evaluation necessarily implies factivity, then there would seem to be no need for assuming that evaluation and factivity are encoded by independent functional heads here. In short, we suggest that WWAs are best analysed as *Evaluative Phrases* (EvalPs) along the lines shown in (50), with *what* functioning as an evaluative operator.<sup>17</sup>

(50) [EvalP what [Eval' Ø [CP [C' with [TP ... ]]]]]]

On the assumption that the functional head labelled *Eval* in (50) above is neutral with respect to how exactly the proposition in its scope is evaluated, this analysis accounts for our earlier observation that depending on contextual and other non-syntactic

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<sup>17</sup> We follow Di Sciullo (2006) (rather than e.g. Cinque 1999) in assuming that the evaluative head in question takes CP complements.

factors, WWAs can have either positive or negative ‘implications’. A similar analysis has been proposed by Munaro & Obenauer (1999) for ‘pseudo-questions’ introduced by Bellunese *cossa* ‘what’ or German *was* ‘what’, as in (51a,b) below, both of which are used to express a degree of surprise and/or disapproval (as well as implying the truth of the question’s propositional content – see *ibid.*: 247).<sup>18</sup>

- (51) a. **Cossa** parle-li de che?!  
 what speak-CL of what  
 ‘What on earth are they speaking of?’  
 (Munaro & Obenauer 1999: 220 n. 21)
- b. **Was** schaut du mich so an?  
 what look you me so at  
 ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ (ibid.: 213; our glosses)

Bellunese is a North-Eastern Italian dialect that lacks obligatory *wh*-fronting, and the co-occurrence of *cossa* and the in-situ *wh*-pronoun *che* in (51a) demonstrates that *cossa* must be non-argumental. Like evaluative adverbs or the non-argumental *wh*-pronouns in (51), WWA-*what* does not contribute to the absolute’s propositional content but instead expresses speaker evaluation. Since the presence of evaluative *what* also signals factivity, a ‘weak’ or conditional reading of WWAs (compare section 2.3 above) is necessarily precluded, even for WWAs containing stage-level predicates.<sup>19</sup>

### 4.3 Underspecified *what*

We saw earlier that the principal function of WWAs is to provide an account of a (positive or negative) claim made in the matrix clause. That the *wh*-pronoun *what*

<sup>18</sup> Similar pseudo-interrogatives are attested in French (Munaro & Obenauer 1999) and Hungarian (Ochi 2004).

<sup>19</sup> On the assumption that *to*-infinitives express an ‘unrealised future tense’ (Stowell 1982), their factivity may render WWAs incompatible with infinitival clauses (see footnote 2 above). Even though not all speakers find examples like (i) acceptable, infinitival clauses do not seem altogether excluded from absolutes augmented only by *with*.

(i) With there (probably) to be a meeting at 1:00, we’d better have a quick lunch. (McCawley 1983: 275)

should give rise to such an interpretation is by no means unique to WWAs, however – and probably no coincidence, either. Note that diachronically, the many uses of *what* include its use as an interrogative reason adverb meaning *why*, as in the examples in (52) below (from the *OED*).

- (52) a. **1579** FULKE *Heskins' Parl.* 148 But **what** stand we trifling about this testimonie?
- b. **1667** MILTON *P.L.* II. 329 **What** sit we then projecting Peace and Warr?
- c. **a1677** BARROW *Serm.* I. 7 **What** should I mention beauty; that fading toy?

In PDE, *what* is still used in this sense in the expression *what do you care if...* (Ochi 2004) and in the *What's X doing Y?* construction discussed by Kay & Fillmore (1999), both of which are illustrated in (53) below.

- (53) a. **What do you care if** a Democrat doesn't see the White House for a generation? (from the Internet)
- b. **What is** this scratch **doing** on my table? (Kay & Fillmore 1999: 3)

As we saw above, non-argumental *what* is also used colloquially in the sense of *why* in, for example, Bellunese and German.

Given that cross-linguistically, the equivalents of *what* tend to be extremely versatile elements that can be either argumental or non-argumental, occur in different clause types and give rise to different interpretations, Munaro & Obenauer (1999) have proposed that non-argumental *what* is deficient or 'weak' in Cardinaletti & Starke's (1996) sense and semantically underspecified. Unlike clitics, weak pronouns can carry stress and occur in positions normally occupied by maximal projections, but unlike strong pronouns they are excluded from theta-marked positions and are unable to introduce new discourse referents. Munaro & Obenauer argue that deficient or 'why'-type *what* lacks the semantic restriction [+thing] that restricts argumental *what* to being interpreted as quantifying over a set of things, and that its 'reason' interpretation then results from the interplay of various factors including the presence of EvalP, factivity, and a sentence's informational content. We suggest that WWA-



*what* is underspecified in the same way as *what* in pseudo-interrogative structures and moreover lacks an interrogative feature.<sup>20</sup>

That coordination should tend to be preferred in WWAs might then follow from the assumption that although semantically underspecified, *what* has retained its basic semantic function as an operator quantifying over sets (but see Ginzburg & Sag (2000) for a different view). ‘Why’-type *what* in pseudo-interrogatives such as those in (51)–(53) above could then be described as an operator quantifying over a set of possible reasons. We suggest that WWA-*what* shares with pseudo-interrogative *what* the property of quantifying over sets of reasons (rather than over sets of things, like argumental *what*). Although there is no formal requirement that WWAs should contain reason sets whose cardinality is higher than one, coordination of several ‘reasons’ might often be felt to be more felicitous – especially, as we saw above, in more formal, written styles. From a pragmatic perspective, conjoining two or more ‘reasons’ – including the use of dummy conjuncts such as *and everything*, *and all*, etc. – moreover serves as a stylistic means for strengthening the justification that WWAs are supposed to provide.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Our corpus analysis revealed that absolutes augmented by *what with*, whose existence is often barely acknowledged in learner dictionaries or other reference works, are used productively across different varieties and registers of PDE and occur in both written and spoken texts. Although pragmatically more constrained than ordinary absolutes, WWAs are not, as has sometimes been implied, restricted to pragmatically negative contexts but instead provide a (non-neutral, from the point of view of the speaker) justification of accountable assessments in general. We proposed a unified analysis of WWAs as non-finite clausal constituents with *what* being a base-generated, non-interrogative *wh*-operator located in the specifier of a functional projection within the extended C-system. Following Munaro & Obenauer’s (1999) analysis of pseudo-interrogatives, which share with WWAs a

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<sup>20</sup> Underspecified *what* may be far more ubiquitous than we are able to demonstrate here. Underspecified *what* may also occur in exclamatives such as example (46a) above (Munaro & Obenauer 1999), serve as a ‘*wh*-scope marker’ in languages such as German and Hungarian (ibid., but see Felser 2001 for an alternative analysis) or be used as a parenthetical (Dehé & Kavalova 2006).

number of properties including factivity, implied evaluation and a ‘reason’ or ‘account’ interpretation, we suggested that WWAs are best analysed as projections of an abstract *Evaluative* head. While other core interpretive properties of WWAs, notably their factivity, directly follow from the proposed analysis, other aspects of their pragmatic meaning or function such as whether a given token has positive or negative ‘implications’ are determined purely contextually. In short, we hope to have shown that treating WWAs as entirely arbitrary form–meaning pairings is not doing them justice, and that a systematic investigation of WWAs and other ‘peripheral’ clause types can help advance our understanding of the nature of the syntax–pragmatics interface.

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