[Dative Absolute? (Monday with Mounce 82)](http://www.koinoniablog.net/2010/11/dative-absolute.html" \t "_blank)

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[Monday with Mounce](http://zondervan.typepad.com/.a/6a00e54fc7cbdb88340133f5adbc8c970b-pi)My son Tyler is learning Greek at Biola University. Not many dads get to spend Skype time helping their son translate Greek. And who says knowing Greek isn’t practical?

We covered a passage this week that had me scratching my head. In Matt 8:23 we read, “Then he got (εμβαντι αυτω) into the boat and his disciples followed him” (αυτω). Why is the first αυτω in the dative? The second αυτω is easy; ακολουθεω takes a direct object in the dative. By why the first?

One idea was that it was anticipating the case of the second αυτω. The disciples followed Jesus, and Jesus got into the boat.

Or, perhaps it had something to do with the dative of time when.

Since the “subject” of the participle is different from the subject of the main verb of the sentence, and since it is at the beginning of a sentence in narrative, you might expect a genitive absolute. But it isn’t genitive, and it really isn't absolute.

I checked one source that said it was a dative absolute. “What’s that?” I thought. There is no entry in Wallace for such a construction, nor could I find it in Smyth, my standard Classical Greek reference. The source cited the Expositors Greek New Testament, but where did they get it from?

Regardless of the specific reason for the dative, it does bring up an interesting point. Is grammar descriptive or prescriptive? The answer is, “Both.”

Grammar is prescriptive in that it contains the rules for how words are put together so there is meaning. Without following grammar, there is no way to know the meaning of the sentence, “Bill bit the cat.” Without grammar, it could be me headed for a tetanus shot.

But grammar is also descriptive. It tells us how a language group uses words. This is why grammar changes. It is why English is no longer inflected (for the most part) although Old and Middle English were inflected. Grammar describes how people use the language, how they differ in usage, and why eventually (no doubt) “they” will come back as an indefinite pronoun, and predicate nominative, are doomed and why we will be able to answer the phone “It is me,” and why we will be able, finally, to correctly split infinitives (just like that).

(I am holding on to the hope that prepositions will always require the objective case; it drives me nuts to hear something like “of I and Tom.” It is still “of Tom and me” and hopefully always will be. But I digress.)

Simply put, language cannot be simplified into hard and fast rules. Language is analog, not digital. It flexes, moves, varies, twists. And so ultimately grammar is descriptive, trying to explain how people actually speak.

So what is going on in Matt 8? Perhaps if I had time with my computer to search the Perseus database, I might find other writers doing the same thing that Matthew does here. Perhaps I would find that the construction is more common than its absence in Wallace and Smyth implies.

But ultimately, it doesn’t matter. The first αυτω is clearly functioning as the subject of the participle, and the participle is anticipating the case of the second αυτω. So what do we call it?

I don’t know. How about a “dative absolute”?

*[](http://zondervan.typepad.com/.a/6a00e54fc7cbdb88340133f5adbe8b970b-pi)*William D. [Bill] Mounce posts about the Greek language, exegesis, and related topics at  Koinonia. He is the author of numerous books, including the bestselling [Basics of Biblical Greek](http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Product/ProductDetail.htm?ProdID=com.zondervan.9780310287681&QueryStringSite=Zondervan), and is the general editor for [Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words](http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Product/ProductDetail.htm?ProdID=com.zondervan.9780310248781&QueryStringSite=Zondervan). He served as the New Testament chair of the English Standard Version Bible translation, and is currently on the [Committee for Bible Translation for the NIV](http://nivbibleupdate.com/?page_id=57). Learn more and visit Bill's blog (co-authored with scholar and his father Bob Mounce) at [www.billmounce.com](http://www.billmounce.com/" \t "_blank).