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The Distribution of *Esse* in Julius Caesar's *Bellum Civile* Book I

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THE DISTRIBUTION OF ESSE IN JULIUS CAESAR'S BELLUM CIVILE BOOK I

Anton Rytting

1. Introduction: The Merits of Caesar’s Text as a Sample of Clear Latin

Both by his contemporaries and by modern critics, Caesar is praised for his clarity and elegance of style. Cicero writes of Caesar’s Commentaries, “They are simple, straightforward, and charming, stripped of all figures of speech as [a statue is stripped] of clothing... for there is nothing sweeter in pure narrative and clear conciseness” (Cic. Brut. 262, this and following translations mine). Aulus Hirtius, who completed Caesar’s Gallic War, notes in his preface to the eighth book how difficult it is to match Caesar’s style: “For among all men it is undisputed that nothing has been completed by any others, however great their effort, which is not surpassed by the elegance of these commentaries” (Hirtius, B. G. VIII preaef 4).

Modern critics of Caesar have typically concurred with the received opinions of ancient critics. Sir Frank Adcock notes that, although Caesar’s style becomes freer in its grammatical structure and seems to flow faster in his later works, “the precision in the use of words, the pura et illustris brevitas [i.e., pure and clear conciseness] which Cicero praises in Caesar’s writings is a constant phenomenon” (Adcock 1956:64-65). P. T. Eden observes that Caesar’s style is influenced both by contemporary orators and historiographers, on the one hand, and by the annalistic commentaries of previous generals, on the other. Nevertheless, he claims that in creating his own style, “Caesar avoided both extremes: neither meretricious adornment nor rugged illiteracy was to his taste” (1962:74). Eden thus suggests that Caesar played a “middle ground” in his writing, aiming (among other things) at maximum readability.

H. C. Gotoff points out that Caesar’s apparent simplicity may be more feigned than genuine: “behind the specious objectivity and straightforwardness of the Commentaries lies calculated — and extremely successful — propaganda of self-aggrandizement” (1984:2). However, in order for this “calculated propaganda” to be successful, Caesar must be readily accessible to a wide cross-section of Rome, not just the well-educated elite. W. V. Harris credits Caesar with this type of broad-based intelligibility: “Caesar’s Commentaries on his Gallic and civil wars performed the remarkable feat of simultaneously expanding the audience for propagandistic texts... and demonstrating great sophistication in the works themselves” (1989:211-12). To be accessible to an expanded audience as Harris suggests would require a certain simplicity of style, at least on the clausal level.

2. Caesar’s Apparent Ellipsis of Esse

It may be inferred, then, from the judgements of ancient and modern critics, that Caesar’s style was (for a Roman) clear, straightforward, and easy to read. Nevertheless, Caesar has a particular grammatical peculiarity that often proves troublesome to the non-native reader, for it
is not the strictly grammatical construction taught in Latin grammars. In statements which seem to require the copulative infinitive esse (to be) to complete their meaning, Caesar very frequently omits it.

In particular, verbs of saying, thinking, knowing, etc., in Latin usually indicate the statement or thought being expressed by putting the subject in accusative case and the verb in an infinitive form. This construction, called “Infinitive with (Subject) Accusative,” is the most common way of indirectly quoting speech or expressing thoughts.

1a. Caesar intellegat populum Romanum divisum esse in partes duas.
1b. Caesar.NOM knows people.ACC Roman.ACC divided.ACC to-be-INF in factions two.
1c. “Caesar knows that the Roman people are divided into two factions.”

However, with these same verbs of saying, knowing, etc., Caesar will often omit the infinitive of the “Infinitive with Accusative” construction if that infinitive is the copula esse (to be). In the following examples, the esse is placed in parentheses where it would be expected to appear, but does not in Caesar’s text.

2a. Domitius pronuntiat
Pompeium (esse) celeriter subsidio venturum. (Bellum Civile 1.19.1.1)
2b. Domitius.NOM announces
Pompey.ACC (to be) quickly reinforcement.DAT about-to-come.ACC.
2c. “Domitius announces that Pompey is about to come as a reinforcement.”

3a. ta saepius rem frustra temptatam Caesar (esse) aliquando dimittendam sibi iudicat (Bellum Civile 1.26.6.1)
3b. thus too-often thing.ACC in-vain attempted.ACC Caesar.NOM (to be) sometime to-be-abandoned.ACC himself.DAT judges.
3c. “Thus Caesar judges that the matter, attempted too often in vain, must be abandoned by him sometime.”

Two explanations for this apparent deletion of esse seem possible. First, Caesar could be omitting the verb esse because it is easily understood from the surrounding context. If so, we would expect him to omit esse in those cases where it is most easily supplied by context and to retain it when its absence would cause ambiguity. I will call this viewpoint the “recoverability” theory. Secondly, it could be that when Caesar omits esse, the verbs themselves that govern these clauses do not govern “Infinitive with Accusative” clauses only, but also subcategorize for construction known as a small clause. The esse is not deleted, but was not present in the construction in the first place. If this is the case, we would expect Caesar to use small clauses either with certain verbs only, or to achieve a desired rhetorical effect. I will call this explanation hereafter the “subcategorization” theory. These two explanations will be considered in more detail below and compared with data from the first book of Caesar’s Bellum Civile.

3. Ellipsis and Recoverability
In an attempt to describe the basic principles of human communication, H. P. Grice developed four “maxims” which describe the sort of information which speakers
generally give and hearers expect to receive. One of these is Grice’s Maxim of Quantity: as helpful and informative speakers, we include just enough information to be understood — not more, not less. It follows from this maxim that whatever information can be fully and unambiguously recovered from the context need not be stated explicitly.¹

In fact, ellipsis is often defined as “information which is deleted for reasons of economy, emphasis, or style, but which is completely recoverable from linguistic context” (Baltes, 1993: 50, quoting Crystal (1991), Quirk et al. (1985)). The term may be extended to include not only deletion, but contraction and abbreviation of the material made clear by context. To illustrate the notion of recoverability as it applies not only to deleted but to abbreviated material, I cite an example from the third book of Caesar’s Bellum Civile:

4a. Caesar superius institutum servans X legionem in dextro cornu, nonam in sinistro collocaverat, . . . et huic sic adiunxit octavam ut paene unam ex duabus efficeret . . . (Bellum Civile, 3.89.1.1)

4b. “Caesar, keeping to his previous design, had assembled his 10th legion on the right flank, his ninth on the left, . . . and joined to it the eighth, as if, almost, to make one legion of the two . . .”

Roman numerals in Latin prose can stand for any form of the number shown. For example, the “x” on line one can be read either as decem, (ten) or decatam, (tenth). However, the third-declension accusative singular ending on legionem makes the intended meaning of “x” unambiguous: to agree with legionem, it can only be read as decatam (tenth).² Conversely, in the next clause, the feminine accusative singular endings on nonam and octavam indicate the implied legionem with sufficient clarity that the noun can be omitted. However, these two numbers could not have been abbreviated “ix” and “viii” without the specifier legionem without creating ambiguity between the cardinal and ordinal readings. While it is likely that “legion(s)” could still be understood from the context, there would be no marker of singularity to prevent the reading “nine (legions)” instead of “the ninth (legion).”³

This example shows that the term “information” may refer not only to the actual (extra-linguistic) information we express by language, but also to grammatical “information” such as gender and number. As we saw, the same principle that governs the omission of a word or a phrase also governed the abbreviation of “decatam” to “x,” with subsequent its loss of grammatical information (in this case, [+ordinal], [+feminine], [-plural]). The omission of an “empty” or “connecting” word such as the copula esse, “to be,” which carries primarily grammatical rather than lexical information, may also follow the same principle of recoverability.

The copulative esse links two concepts together in a relationship of equivalence, yet also keeps them distinct by “marking the boundary” between the subject and predicate. In main clauses, it also assigns (nominative) case to the subject and predicate. However, if esse is found in an infinitival clause governed by another verb, the governing verb assigns (accusative) case to both subject and predicate. So if the boundary between the subject and predicate
is clear from the context (i.e., the predicate position is “recoverable” from context), then the esse is superfluous and optional.

4. Esse ellipsis in Indirect Statement constructions

As I mentioned previously, the most common method in Latin of reporting sentences that are said, known, believed, or perceived by someone is the “Infinitive with Accusative” construction, consisting of an accusative subject (and sometimes accusative predicate) and an infinitive verb within the predicate of the main verb. English also possesses this construction, but in a more restricted domain. According to the recoverability theory, when this verb is (or includes as part of a compound) the copulative infinitive esse or to be, either in English or in Latin, the copulative can be safely omitted if the context clearly distinguishes between the subject and the predicate.

English typically shows the distinction between attributive and predicative modifiers by the position of the modifier in the sentence. In the following English sentences, the to be copula is optional because the predicate is already marked by its position after the subject (whereas attributive adjectives come before the noun).

5a. I believe the innocent man. (“Innocent” is here an attributive adjective.)
5b. I believe the man (to be) innocent. (“Innocent” here can only be predicative.)

In Latin, unlike English, word order does not clearly mark the boundary between subject and predicate. However, since Caesar does omit esse after verbs of speaking and thinking (verbs which typically take the “Infinitive with Accusative” construction), there must be other ways of implicitly marking modifiers as predicative, besides the explicit copula esse. Since Latin provides most of its syntactic information through inflections on the words themselves, instead of through word order, it seems most reasonable to look next at the grammatical information contained in the words. Just as the “singular” marker on legionem facilitated the reading of “x” as the ordinal “tenth” rather than the cardinal “ten,” the inclusion of certain verbal information on predicate modifiers may facilitate their reading as predicative, rather than attributive or appositive, even without esse to mark them explicitly as such.

5. Ellipsis and Recoverability in the Bellum Civile

The data collected from Caesar’s Bellum Civile Book One lend some credence to this possibility. Caesar omits esse quite frequently, but his omissions seem to follow a pattern.

The following examples illustrate Caesar’s use of the “Infinitive with Accusative” construction without the infinitive esse (here supplied in parentheses). The predicate is underlined, and the governing verb is in bold.

6a. Lentulus consul senatui re publicae se (esse) non defuturum pollicetur ... (B. C. 1.1.2.2)
6b. “Lentulus, as consul, promised to the senate himself (to be) not (about to be) remiss in his duty to the state . . .”
7a. Iam vero eo magis illi
maturandum (esse) iter
existimabant. (B. C. 1.63.1.1)
7b. “But in fact, they thought the road (to be) (necessary to be) hurried along so much the more.”
8a. Itaque se (esse) victos confiteri; orare atque obsecrare, siqui locus misericordiae relinquatur, ne ad ultimum supplicium progredi (esse) necesse habeant. (B. C. 1.84.5.1) 8b. “And so they admitted themselves (to be) defeated, and begged and pleaded, that perhaps there might remain room for mercy, so that they not consider it (to be) necessary to mete out the most severe punishment.”

As in these examples, most of the omissions of esse in Caesar’s text involve participles—what would have been compound (periphrastic) verbs in direct statements. The following statistics illustrate this tendency:

- The future active participle (as in example 6) appears 18 times without the esse, with esse only 3 times (86% ellipsis).
- The future passive participle (as in example 7) appears 10 times without esse, and only once with esse (91% ellipsis).
- The perfect passive/deponent participle (as in example 8) appears without esse 25 times; with esse 4 times (86% ellipsis).

However, other parts of speech, such as adjectives, nouns, and prepositional phrases, seem unable to mark themselves as predicative without an explicit verb esse. The following sentences illustrate Caesar’s use of esse with these types of predicates:

9a. conclamant legionis xiii, quae aderat, milites . . . esse paratos esse imperatoris sui tribunorumque plebis injurias defendere. (B. C. 1.7.8.1)
9b. “The soldiers of the 8th legion, which was present, proclaimed . . . themselves to be ready to beat off the injustices to their commander and to the tribune of the plebs.”
10a. renuntiant: . . . principes vero esse earum partium Cn Pompeium et C. Caesarem, patronos civitatis (B. C. 1.35.4.1)
10b. “They reported: . . . the leaders of their factions to be indeed Gnaeus Pompey and Gaius Caesar, the patrons of the citizenry.”
11a. in eandem sententiam loquitur Scipio: Pompeio esse in animo rei publicae non deesse, si senatus sequatur. (B. C. 1.1.4.1)
11b. “Toward that same end spoke Scipio: for Pompey, it was in his heart not to fail the republic, if the senate would follow him.” (In the Latin, rei publicae non deesse is the subject.)

Caesar is more wary of omitting esse with these types of predicates:

- Predicate adjectives (as in example 9) appear 10 times with esse, without esse only 6 times (38% ellipsis).
- Predicate accusative nouns (as in example 10) appear twice with esse, and once without esse (33% ellipsis).
- Prepositional Phrases (as in example 11) appear with esse 3 times; without esse only once (25% ellipsis).

Why would Caesar, who is striving for clarity, feel so free to omit esse? As I mentioned earlier, whatever is deleted by ellipsis must be fully recoverable from context (be it semantic or syntactic). The participle itself carries with it enough of a verbal “sense” to suggest its predicative use,
without the need for an infinitive to make that use explicit with esse. Furthermore, the participle, when taken together with the subject accusative, already carries such grammatical information as the person, number, tense, and voice. The esse carries only the infinitive mood, which is clearly recoverable from context. It therefore seems reasonable that Caesar will, for the sake of a concise and fast-paced narrative, generally delete these instances of esse, seeing them as superfluous to the meaning and tending to slow the reader.

Non-participial phrases, on the other hand, are harder to recognize as predicative without esse. Adjectives and nouns do not carry the same verbal “information” as participles, and consequently can be recovered as predicative only by the semantic context. Prepositional phrases, since they do not agree with their subjects in case and number, carry even less information, and therefore would be even more difficult to recognize as predicative without being clearly marked by esse. Hence Caesar seldom omits an esse with non-participial predicates. This explanation matches with the general trend we have observed in the data shown above. Whereas Caesar omits the esse before participles of all types in 87% of the “Infinitive with Accusative” constructions with participial predicates, in constructions with other types of predicates (nouns, adjectives, etc.), Caesar omits the esse only 31% of the time.

In summary, the recoverability theory depends on two premises: first, that Caesar, when writing the Bellum Civile, is aiming for maximum readability among as broad an audience as possible; and secondly, that the verb-form esse is easier to “recover” from participles than from nouns, adjectives, and other types of predicates because of the extra syntactic “information” (i.e., tense and voice) which it carries. From these two premises it seems reasonable — even expected — that Caesar omit the “superfluous” esse with participles (and thus obtain a greater sense of speed and brevity), but retain it for other forms with which the esse would not be easily recoverable if omitted.

6. Small Clauses and Subcategorization
The recoverability theory readily explains the general tendency of esse-distribution throughout Caesar’s text. However, it does not explain the exceptions. If adjectives are difficult to “recover” as predicates without esse, then why do they appear without esse at all? Yet they appear without esse six times. Conversely, if participles provide enough information on their own for esse to be understood, why is it not omitted all the time, rather than 87% of the time? Another theory is required to explain these “holes” in the data. This theory relies on the subcategorization properties of the governing verbs. It assumes that, in those instances where esse appears to be missing, it was never there in the first place. Rather, the governing verb in these sentences does not subcategorize for the “Infinitive with Accusative” construction only, but also for a construction known as a small clause.

In his recent textbook Principles and Parameters, Culicover defines a small clause as “a phrase that has a clausal (or propositional) interpretation, but lacks the full inflectional morphology of a sentence” (1997). In other words, a small clause is a clause or a phrase that contains a subject, a predicate, but no explicit verb (or inflection) to link them.
Within that broad definition fall several types of clauses which are structurally and thematically distinct. For example, the term “small clause” has been applied to clauses where the predicate shows the result (or intended result) of the verb on its object, or the condition of the object at the time of the verb’s action (see Aarts 1989, Rosemblat 1990). The following sentences illustrate these types of clauses:

12a. *She hammered the nail, flat, (=until it became flat)
12b. *He carried the box, empty, (=while it was empty)

However, since this type of small clause appears only with verbs of action, and never with verbs of saying or thinking, we will not consider it further.

Another type of small clause combines the object of a verb of saying, knowing, thinking, or perceiving with a predicate that shows what is being said, believed, etc., about that object. This type of small clause could be termed a “propositional” small-cause, since the clause as a whole receives from the main verb an internal theta-role of “proposition.” With some verbs, the same sentiment can be expressed with an infinitival clause, by adding the infinitive copulative to be, or by means of a subordinate clause beginning with that:

13a. *He believes his friends, very loyal.
13b. *He believes his friends; to be very loyal.
13c. *He believes that his friends are very loyal.

However, not all verbs are so flexible in their ways of expressing indirect statements. Some verbs seem to prefer the small clause, and others to accept it exclusively:

14a. *He declared his mother, a hero.
14b. *He declared his mother; to be a hero.
14c. *He declared that his mother was a hero.

7. Small Clause Subcategorization in Caesar’s Bellum Civile

In Caesar’s text, also, some verbs of saying or thinking subcategorize for small clauses, but not for indirect discourse with the infinitive esse. For example, the verb habeo “hold, consider,” never appears with esse in Caesar:

17. illi omnibus abundant rebus (*esse) superioresque habentur.
(cf. B. C. 1.52.3.3)

This verb alone accounts for half the “exceptions” to the prediction that adjectives should not appear without the infinitive esse. In three of the six cases where an adjective appears in a small clause, the adjective is governed by the verb habeo. However, videor, “be seen, seem,” another verb which governed an adjectival predicate without esse, also appears with esse:
18a. ex propositis consiliis duobus explicitius (esse) videbatur Ilerdam reverti (B.C. 1.78.2.2)  
18b. “Of the two proposed plans, it seemed (?) to be easier to return to Ilerda.”  
19a. nihil citra Capuam tutum esse omnibus videtur. (B.C. 1.14.4.2)  
19b. “Nothing on this side of Capuam seems to be safe to all.”

Despite this exception, the subcategorization theory shows promise. The great majority of the verbs with which Caesar uses esse, are not used without esse, and vice versa. Ten verbs appear only with esse, such as renuntio, “report, announce,” respondeo, “answer,” and intellegere, “perceive.” Fourteen verbs appear only without esse, such as polliceor, “promise,” puto, “think,” and queror, “complain.” Only four verbs appear both with and without esse. Furthermore, there is no single verb which always omits esse with participles and retains it with other types of predicates.

However, verbs like polliceor, puto, and queror do not prove the subcategorization theory over the “ellipsis and recovery” theory. Although they only appear without esse, they also only appear with participles. Polliceor invariably has a future active participle in the predicate of the clause it governs, puto a future passive participle, and queror a perfect passive participle. If these are instances of subcategorization, it is narrow subcategorization indeed. The only verb that clearly subcategorizes for a small clause, no matter what is in the predicate, is habeo.

So based on Caesar’s data alone, there is no clear-cut preference between these two theories. We may, however, adopt a tentative preference for the subcategorization theory, since the subcategorization theory explains the behavior of the verb habeo, which the recoverability theory cannot. However, the subcategorization theory cannot explain the behavior of verbs like videor any better than the recoverability theory, nor can it explain the general tendency for participles to appear without esse, and other predicates to require esse.

Nevertheless, to prove the recoverability theory valid, a verb would need to be found which always omits esse with participial predicates but retains it with non-participial predicates. No such verb was found in the Caesar data. Conversely, in order to prove the subcategorization theory superior, one would expect to find verbs which appear without esse with participle and non-participle predicates alike. Of the twenty-eight verbs of saying, thinking, or perceiving examined here, only habeo fulfills this requirement. It is a slight edge, but an edge nonetheless.
Table A: Number of Infinitival Clauses with *Esse* in *Bellum Civile*, Book I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(+esse)</th>
<th>Indirect discourse</th>
<th>Implied I.D.</th>
<th>Knowledge/Belief</th>
<th>Volition</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
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Table B: Number of Small Clauses (clauses without *Esse*) in *Bellum Civile*, Book I

<table>
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<th>(-esse)</th>
<th>Indirect discourse</th>
<th>Implied I.D.</th>
<th>Knowledge/Belief</th>
<th>Volition</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Knowledge/Belief</td>
<td>Volition</td>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perf. Pass/Dep De</td>
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Works Cited


End Notes


2There is one manuscript (codex Nepotianus) which has *x legiones*, showing that even here the ambiguity is not completely resolvable. But the reading *legionem* is still preferred by the vast majority of manuscripts (see A. Klotz, ed., *Caesar II: Bellum Civile* (Leipzig, B.G. Tevbnner Verlegsgesellschaft 1969)).

3*Unam ex duabus*, perhaps, but that comes sufficiently far afterwards, that it would not resolve the ambiguity on the first reading, but only force a subsequent re-analysis.