

Constructional Intensifying Adjectives in Italian

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Abstract

Grading is a primary cognitive operation that has an important expressive function. Information on degree is grammatically relevant and constitutes what Lazard (2006) calls a *primary domain of grammaticalization*: According to typological studies (Cuzzolin & Lehmann, 2004), many languages of the world have in fact at their disposal multiple grammatical devices to express gradation. In Italian, the class of superlativizing structures alternative to the morphological superlative is very rich and consists, among others, of adverbs of degree, focalizing adverbs and prototypical comparisons. This contribution deals with a particular analytic structure of superlative in Italian that is still neglected in the literature. This is what we will call Constructional Intensifying Adjectives (CIAs), adjectives which modify the intensity of other adjectives on the basis of regular semantic patterns, thus giving rise to multiword superlative constructions of the type: $ADJ_X + ADJ_{INTENS}$. A comparative quantitative corpus analysis demonstrates that this strategy, though paradigmatically limited, is nonetheless widely exploited: From a distributional point of view, some of these CIAs only combine with one or a few adjectives and form MWEs that appear to be completely lexicalized, while some others modify wider classes of adjectives thus displaying a certain degree of productivity.

1 Introduction

The functional category of degree formally expresses the intensity with which a property or, to a lesser extent, a state of affairs, applies to an entity.

Adjectives are gradable words *par excellence* and, indeed, all adjectival inflections in languages – except those expressing agreement with the head – have to do with grading (Croft, 1991: 134-135). Even when gradation is not realized through morphology, languages show numerous alternative analytical forms for expressing the extent to which the quality expressed by the adjective applies to an entity.

In this paper we will focus on a particular strategy of *absolute superlative* in Italian: The absolute superlative indicates that the quality expressed by the predicate is present at the highest degree, without making any comparison with other entities (1a), or at least to a very high degree on the scale of the corresponding values (Sapir, 1944), (1b):

- 1) a. *Questo libro è bellissimo.*
'this book is very beautiful'
- b. *Il tuo bambino è molto vivace.*
'your child is very lively'

Due to the “human fondness of exaggeration” (Bolinger, 1972), the array of processes employed to realize the superlative degree is very wide, both cross- and intralinguistically. As for morphological strategies, the highest grade is generally formed by means of reduplication or affixation; however, the most common process to form the superlative among the world’s languages is the use of an unbound lexeme. Indeed, “almost every language has a word meaning roughly *very* which, preposed or postposed, combines with the adjective” (Cuzzolin & Lehmann, 2004: 1215).

Section 2 briefly describes the most exploited analytical and synthetic superlative forms in Italian, which will be part of the quantitative comparison carried out in our research, and then focuses on CIAs, a multiword strategy still largely unexplored

1	Affixes	superlative suffixation	Adj + -issimo (or irregular superlative suffixes) <i>bellissimo</i> 'very beautiful', <i>acerrimo</i> 'very bitter'
2		superlative prefixation	stra-/ultra-/arci-/super-/... + Adj <i>straricco</i> 'very rich', <i>arcinoto</i> 'very famous'
3	Intensifiers	adverbs of quantity	<i>molto buono</i> 'very good', <i>troppo stupido</i> 'very stupid'
4		adverbs of degree	<i>terribilmente solo</i> 'terribly lonely'
5a		resultative adverbs	<i>particolarmente comodo</i> 'particularly comfortable'
5b		adverbs of completeness	<i>interamente solo</i> 'completely lonely'
6		indexical expressions	<i>così brusco</i> 'very abrupt'
7		multiword adverbs	<i>del tutto nuovo</i> 'totally new'
8		prototypical comparisons	NX+Adj+come+NPrototype <i>NX pieno come un uovo</i> 'full as an egg'

'Tab.1 Absolute superlative forms in Italian'

in the literature. In Section 3 the tools and the methodology used for data extraction and analysis will be introduced; the results will be presented and discussed in Section 4. The conclusion (Section 5) offers an overview of possible future developments of the present research.

2 The Absolute Superlative in Italian

2.1 Adverbial Devices

Italian, like other Romance languages, forms the absolute superlative with the Latin-derived suffix *-issimo* (Tab.1 #1) or with some intensifying prefixes derived from Greek or Latin, limited to colloquial varieties (Tab.1 #2).

Adjectives can also be graded by means of lexical elements ('degree words' (Bolinger, 1972), 'degree modifiers' (Kennedy & Nally, 2005) or 'adverbs of degree') which intensify them by scaling upwards the property they express. As Klein (1998: 26-27) suggests, the class of intensifiers comprises elements that, from a crosslinguistic perspective, always seem to derive from the same sources. Consequently, in Italian as in many other languages, the prototypical intensifiers are represented by the closed class of adverbs of quantity (Tab.1 #3). Then we find derived adverbs of degree in *-mente* (Tab.1 #4), "implicitly grading" (Bosque, 1999) since they contain the feature of 'maximum' in their semantics. Similarly, resultative adverbs, which include the subset of those de-

noting completeness, assume a grading function after a "semantic bleaching" (Lorenz, 2002) of the original lexical motivation that their morphology would suggest (Tab.1 #5a,b).

Adverbs derived from indexical and comparative expressions are other common devices capable of attributing the highest degree (Bolinger, 1972) (Tab.1 #6), as well as the large class of multiword adverbs (Tab.1 #7), and the so-called prototypical comparisons (Guil, 2006) – formally similitive constructions relating two entities, one of which is prototypical with respect to a particular property, and in which the comparison with a prototype triggers a hyperbolizing, and thus superlativizing, interpretation (Tab.1 #8).

2.2 Constructional Intensifying Adjectives

Intensifiers forming the absolute superlative in Italian (cf. list in Tab.1) are generally adverbial and preferably occur in pre-adjectival position.

CIAs, on the other hand, are adjectives that intensify their adjectival head by placing themselves in the typical position of prepositional complements, as in (2):

$$2) [\text{ADJ}_X + \text{ADJ}_{\text{INTENS}}]_{\text{MW-AbsSup}}$$

There are about a dozen constructional adjectives that are employed to attribute the value of maximum degree to the adjective they combine with, leading to superlative MWEs:

3) *Bagnato fradicio*, ‘soaking wet’; *sudato fradicio* ‘very sweaty’; *ubriaco fradicio*, ‘dead-drunk’; *buio fitto*, ‘very dark’; *buio pesto*, ‘very dark’; *morto stecchito*, ‘stone dead’; *nuovo fiammante*, ‘brand new’; *incazzato nero*, ‘very pissed off’; *innamorato pazzo*, *innamorato cotto*, *innamorato perso*, ‘crazy in love’; *pieno zeppo*, ‘crammed full’; *ricco sfondato*, ‘very wealthy’; *sporco lurido*, ‘very dirty’; *stanco morto*, ‘dead tired’; *stufo marcio*, ‘sick and tired’.¹

While some of these CIAs can hardly be used to intensify adjectives other than the ones that normally select them lexically, there are others which show a certain degree of productivity. So CIAs can either be used to form a single, fixed MWE or to modify wider classes, as shown in (4):

- 4) a. X_{ADJ} + *perso* > *innamorato perso* ‘crazy in love’, *sbronzo perso* ‘dead-drunk’, ...
 b. X_{ADJ} + *marcio* > *ubriaco marcio* ‘dead-drunk’, *spocchioso marcio* ‘very arrogant’, ...
 c. X_{ADJ} + *fradicio* > *geloso fradicio* ‘very jealous’, *innamorato fradicio* ‘crazy in love’, ...²

The phenomenon of grading an adjective by using another adjective is also known to other languages – also limited to few adjectives. Evidence of similar constructions can be found in Spanish (5a), English (5b), German (5c), Afrikaans (5d) and Dutch (5e):

- 5) a. Sp. *histerica perdida*, ‘extremely hysterical’; *quieto parado* ‘extremely quiet’ (Guil, 2006);
 b. Eng. *dead-tired* (Bolinger, 1972); *bored stiff* (Cacchiani, 2010);
 c. Ger. *schwerreich*, ‘very rich’; *gesteckt voll*, ‘crammed full’;
 d. Afr. *dolgelukkig*, ‘very happy’; *malverlief*, ‘madly in love’;
 e. Dut. *doodmoeg*, ‘very tired’ (Klein, 1998).

But while in Italian and Spanish the components of these MWEs tend to keep part of their morpho-

¹ We provide below the translation of the CAIs only:

Cotto, ‘cooked’, (*fig.*) ‘very much in love’; *fiammante*, ‘flaming’, (*fig.*) ‘new’; *fitto*, ‘thick’, ‘dense’; *fradicio*, ‘soaked’, ‘rotten’; *lurido*, ‘filthy’; *marcio*, ‘rotten’; *morto*, ‘dead’; *nero*, ‘black’, (*fig.*) ‘very angry’; *pazzo*, ‘crazy’; *perso*, ‘lost’; *pesto*, (*fig.*) ‘dense’; *sfondato*, ‘bottomless’, (*fig.*) ‘limitless’; *stecchito*, ‘skinny’, (*fig.*) ‘dead’; *zeppo*, ‘packed’.

² Even if these CIAs happen to modify similar classes of adjectives, there seem to be differences in their semantics, having *marcio* and *fradicio* a more negative connotation than *perso*.

syntactic and phonological autonomy (i.e. agreement and accent), in the other languages they rather give rise to compound words.

3 Data Extraction

3.1 Corpora and Tools

The data used in our analysis were extracted from two of the main corpora of written Italian, namely CORIS-CODIS (120 million tokens) and *LaRepubblica* (380 million tokens), both lemmatized and morphosyntactically annotated. Starting from these resources, a list of superlatives formed with CIAs was built and intensifiers able to modify more than one base adjective were isolated. The automatic identification was facilitated by the strong syntactic cohesion of the investigated structures: CIAs occur always in post-adjectival position and the resulting superlative MWEs never admit any insertion between the two composing elements.

We then cross-checked the data in GRADIT (*GRAnde Dizionario Italiano dell’uso*), used as a gold standard to verify the results and the lexicographical status of every combination.

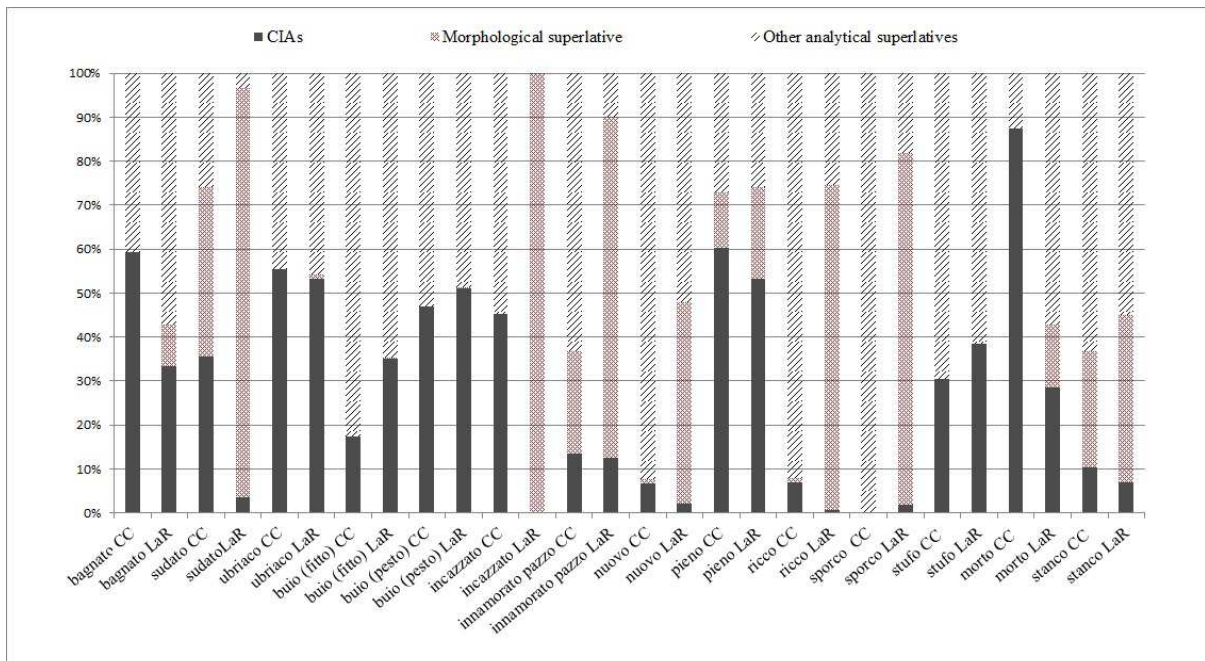
The objects of the present research mostly belong to colloquial Italian and, in general, to a non-standard variety. In order to verify their effective vitality in the Italian lexicon, we considered it worthwhile to exploit the web as a corpus in the case of intensifiers that were scarcely represented in the corpora.

Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2004) was also used as a basis for our comparative analysis: ‘Word sketch’ tables were in fact employed to verify the most frequent superlativizing strategies for each ADJ_X.

3.2 Methodology

Firstly, occurrences of each MW superlative in (3) were compared to the occurrences of the general intensifying strategies (cf. Table 1) applicable to the same adjective.

When useful and possible, such comparison was differentiated depending on ADJ_X and further extended to each one’s most typical intensification device – according to the data suggested by Sketch Engine tables – and to the superlative obtained by combining ADJ_X with the adverbial intensifier cor-



‘Tab.2 Data from CORIS-CODIS (here CC) and LaRepubblica (here LaR) standardized to 100%’

responding to the ADJ_{INTENS}. To give an example, occurrences of *pieno zeppo* were compared to those of *pienissimo*, *molto pieno*, *tanto pieno*, ... (cf. Tab.1) but also to those of *completamente pieno* and *pieno fino all’orlo*, which Sketch Engine indicates as the most typical modifications of this adjective; since an adverb derived from *zeppo* does not exist (>**zeppamente*), this last comparison was not possible in this specific case (cf. however *innamorato pazzo* ~ *innamorato pazzamente*).

4 Comparative Quantitative Analysis

4.1 Distribution

The comparative quantitative analysis showed that CIAs are generally much exploited as compared to their rival strategies, even though we mainly considered a written variety of Italian. As we can notice from Tab.2, MWEs as *buio pesto*, *pieno zeppo*, *stufo marcio*, *morto stecchito*, *bagnato fradicio*, *ubriaco fradicio* seem to be the most used strategies compared to other superlative devices for the same ADJ_x taken individually.

In other cases, (*buio fitto*, *incazzato nero*, *sudato fradicio*), this MW strategy seems to compete against the “canonical” means of intensification, i.e. morphological superlative and degree adverbs, or appears just slightly less frequently than those

(*stanco morto*). Cases where the CIAs are scarcely represented seem to depend on the fact that they belong to some particularly marked expression (as for the MWE *sporco lurido*, ‘very filthy’, which is diatopically marked). A comparison with web data suggests that they have however a pretty high number of occurrences in proportion to the other strategies.

These results appear of even greater interest if one considers that the analyzed corpora were written. Furthermore, while the occurrences we counted for the patterns in (3) reflect pretty accurately the effective number of uses (since they are fixed and easily identifiable), the margin of error for the alternative strategies is higher, since they have often been computed together with occurrences belonging to similar but not equal syntactic structures³.

It is also worth noting that in cases like *nuovo fiammante* or *ricco sfondato*, where the modified adjective is highly polysemic, the great differences with the alternative superlatives taken into account is mainly due to the fact that the intensifier here acts on the grade of ADJ_x only in one of its possible senses, while the traditional strategies appear

³ This is particularly true for the web data, where the search tools do not allow to automatically exclude some interfering constructions, such as the verbal MWE *essersi innamorato pazzo*, ‘to fall crazy in love’.

more “neutral” in this sense and tend to modify the ADJ_X’s degree in all or most of its senses.

4.2 Productivity

At a second stage, we tested whether CIAs in (3) could extend their grading function to other adjectives. As a result, the intensifiers in (4) were isolated. In cases like *nero* and *fradicio*, the intensifier combines with the synonyms of the main bases (for example, *arrabbiato* and *incavolato*, both synonyms of *incazzato*, can occur with *nero*). Furthermore, regarding *fradicio*, its use can not only be extended metaphorically and metonymically to the whole semantic field of *bagnato* (cf. its bases in 3) but it can also be employed with adjectives denoting emotions or behaviours (maybe for one of its senses’ synonymy with *marcio*, which already modifies the same category): *Geloso/emozionato/... fradicio*.

4.3 CIAs as Constructions: Semantic Models

CIAs are primitive or participial modifiers denoting a quality which triggers the intensity of the modified adjective’s quality according to two main abstract semantic schemes:

a) *Semantic feature copying* (Lorenz, 2002). The two adjectives of the construction share the same property and are thus associated to the same grading scale; but ADJ_{INTENS} is on a higher position, since it represents the implicit superlative of ADJ_X. See *bagnato fradicio*, *innamorato cotto*, *pieno zep-po* among others. This highly iconic pattern gives rise to completely specified constructions which often appear as already registered in the lexicon.

b) *Metonymic/metaphoric scale association*. The extreme degree of intensity is here expressed by the contiguity between two scales that are normally associated to different semantic fields. Thanks to a semantic shift, the property of one scale is perceived as designating the maximum grade of a property which actually identifies a different scale of values. A typical example is the metaphorical process “NEGATIVE FEELING - DARK COLOUR”, according to which *nero* represents the highest expression of being *incazzato*. Other examples are *buio pesto*, *buio fitto*, *stufo marcio*. A subclass of this group is formed by couples of adjectives which display a metonymical “CAUSE – EFFECT” relation. If we talk about an *innamorato*

pazzo, we intend somebody who is so much in love to become/look like crazy.

The origin of these modifiers, which especially in this latter case seem to be very productive, is clearly propositional (Bosque, 1999): Their status of intensifiers is fulfilled by means of a formerly “consecutive” interpretation (*stanco morto*, ‘dead tired’ indicate somebody who is so tired that she is/looks as if she was dead).

5 Conclusions

We focused on CIAs as lexical elements which contribute to the creation of superlative constructions. As revealed by the distributional analysis, this strategy, though paradigmatically limited, is nevertheless extremely interesting given its large exploitation if compared to its competing strategies. As for the productivity, semantic regularities where noticed in the relation between the components of each MWE, and the schemas which underlie the most productive patterns were identified.

As this kind of word formation seems to function through analogy or semantic contiguity (Siller-Runggaldier, 2006), it is legitimate to think that it appears firstly in the *discourse* space and then into the *system* (in Coseriu’s sense; cf. Coseriu, 1962). That’s why a direct follow up of this research could be that of extending the analysis to other corpora representative of those language varieties which are more sensitive to experimentation.⁴

Moreover, the computational comparison between competitive superlative constructions could be deepened in order to understand which kind of syntactic or pragmatic constraints influence the use of different strategies: In this perspective a collostructional analysis (Stefanowitsch and Gries, 2003) ought to be more informative of the data extracted so far. Such a method could also profitably be extended to the analysis of analogous intensification strategies applied to different parts of speech. Indeed, many nouns show intensification patterns comparable to the one presented here (*freddo polare*, *idiota completo*) and also some verbs exist which are often intensified by means of oblique uses of some particular adjectives (*studiare duro*, *lavorare sodo*).

⁴ First experiments with the web-derived corpus Paisà (250 million tokens) showed however that this corpus is considerably closer to written than to spoken language.

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Corpora and Tools

- CORIS-CODIS – CORpus di Riferimento di Italiano Scritto. <http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/TCORIS>.
- LaRepubblica Corpus. <http://sslmit.unibo.it/repubblica>.
- Paisà. Corpus. <http://www.corpusitaliano.it>.
- Sketch Engine. <http://www.sketchengine.co.uk>.