Binominal Constructions in Italian of the N-\textit{di}-N type

Towards a typology of Light Noun Constructions

Francesca Masini
fmasini@uniroma3.it
Roma Tre University

Workshop on \textit{Binominal syntagms}
SLE, Vilnius, September 2-5, 2010
Binominal Constructions

A number of works have investigated Binominal Constructions of the N1-of-N2 type in English


Much less attention has been paid to the corresponding constructions in Romance languages, and especially in Italian

- But see Mihatsch (this workshop)

In this talk I will offer an overview of Binominal Constructions (BC) in Italian of the N1-\textit{di}-N2 type, in which the preposition \textit{di} corresponds to the English \textit{of}
Binominal Constructions in Italian

- The variety of functions covered by the N1-\textit{di}-N2 Binominal Construction in Italian is pretty large
- Among them we find at least the following
  - Specification
  - Possession
  - Quantification
  - Identification
  - Approximation
  - Evaluation
    - Called "qualification" in the abstract
  - Aspect
Specification

- In this case we have a N1 which is modified by a PP
- The modification may be of different nature, with N2 covering a number of functions
  - E.g. N2 can be the material of which N1 is made (1) or the (geographical) origin of N1 (2)
  1. *la giacca di cotone* 
     - the jacket of cotton  
     - ‘the cotton jacket’
  2. *la gente di Roma* 
     - the people of Rome 
     - ‘the people from Rome’
Possession

Also in the case of possession we have a N1 which is modified by a PP, but here N2 has a more precise function: the possessor of N1.

(3) *il gatto* *di* *Maria*
the cat of Mary

‘Mary's cat’
Quantification

- In these constructions, N1 projects a quantitative framework on N2
  - These constructions are extensively studied in English grammars (e.g. Quirk et al 1973, Biber et al 1999)

- Under this class we can make at least one macro-distinction
  - **Partitives** take a part from a whole or create a whole from its parts
  - **Degree Modifiers** encode a degree within a scale

- As showed among others by Traugott (2007), partitives may develop into degree modifiers, due to a reanalysis process
  - \[[N1_{\text{HEAD}} [of N2]] \rightarrow [[N1 \text{ of}] N2_{\text{HEAD}}]\]
From Partitives to Degree Modifiers

Some examples from Traugott (2007: 532, 538)

(4) *It is a shred of an Italian Letany*  
    [= ‘a small piece of’] (1628)

(5) [...] *it has at least a shred of a chance of being accepted*  
    [= ‘it has at least some chances of …’] (1993)

The same happens for Italian over history

(6) [...] *un sacco di bellissime noci*  
    *a sack of beautiful walnuts*       (Novellino, 13th century)

(7) *Un sacco di bugie* [...]  
    *a sack of lies*       (Pirandello, La ragione degli altri, 1895)
Identification

- This function is performed by constructions in which N1 has the basic meaning of 'class', 'category', etc.
- These nouns are called in rather different ways in the literature: "class nouns", "species nouns", "taxonomic nouns", etc.
- Italian taxonomic nouns: classe 'class', forma 'form', genere 'kind', specie 'kind', qualità 'quality', sorta 'sort', tipo 'type'
- Their function is to split the whole extension of N2 into parts and to "identify" a hyponymic class of N2

\[(8) \text{un tipo di carta} \]

'a type of paper'
Approximation

- While the Identification construction is used to "identify" categories, the Approximation construction is used to identify a marginal and/or unstable element with respect to the category N2

(9) *una specie di casa*

a kind of house

‘a kind of house / kind of a house’

(10) *una sorta di indifferenza*

a sort of indifference

‘a sort of indifference'
Approximation

- As observed for English (Tabor 1993, Denison 2002), the approximating function originates diachronically from the identifying one via reanalysis
  - $[\text{N}_1 \text{HEAD} \ [\text{of} \ \text{N}_2]] \rightarrow [[\text{N}_1 \ \text{of}] \ \text{N}_2 \text{HEAD}]$

- Only some taxonomic nouns turned into approximating nouns
  - English
    - *kind*, *sort*
    - BUT NOT *type*
  - Italian
    - *specie* 'kind', *sorta* 'sort' and (to a lesser extent) *forma* 'form'
    - BUT NOT *genere* 'kind', *qualità* 'quality', *tipo* 'type', *classe* 'class'
Bridging examples

- The first clearly ambiguous examples with specie I found (in the LIZ, a collection of Italian literary texts) go back to the 18th century, to Goldoni's theatrical works.
  - In these examples N2 is an abstract noun (cfr. also sacco di bugie).
    11 [...] credo lo faccia per una specie di disperazione [...] 'I think she does it for a kind of desperation' (L'adulatore, 1750)
    12 [...] una specie di avversione, di antipatia, di contrarietà [...] 'a kind of dislike, of antipathy, of aversion' (Gli amori di Zelinda e Lindoro, 1764)

- The first bridging examples with sorta come later, in the 19th century, with D'Annunzio.
  13 [...] una sorta di furor cieco [...] 'a sort of blind rage' (Il fuoco, 1900)
Evaluation

- This construction is used to express an evaluation (conveyed by N1) on N2
- Here N1 belongs to a larger class of nouns with respect to previous types, although there are of course restrictions, which might have to do with subjective vs. objective evaluation

(14) *una larghezza di tavolo
    a largeness of table
    ‘a large table’

(15) una meraviglia di tavolo
    a wonderfulness of table
    ‘a wonderful table’
Aspect

While most of the previous functions are pretty well known, the aspectual function is not generally taken into consideration in the literature.

Simone & Masini (2009) talk about Binominal Constructions in Italian in which N1 is a "support noun" with a basically aspectual function.

- The terminology "support nouns" was chosen by analogy with "support verbs", which often have an aspectual value.
- Here I will use the more transparent term "aspectualizer".

Aspectualizers are generic event nouns that refer to punctual processes.

- E.g. *accesso* 'burst', *attacco* 'attack', *atto* 'act', *azione* 'action', *botta* 'blow/hit', *colpo* 'blow/hit', *crisi* 'crisis', *gesto* 'gesture', *scatto* 'burst', *scoppio* 'burst'.
### Aspect

#### Some examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(16)</th>
<th><em>colpo</em></th>
<th><em>di</em></th>
<th><em>telefono</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>blow</td>
<td>of</td>
<td>telephone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘ring’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(17)</th>
<th><em>botta</em></th>
<th><em>di</em></th>
<th><em>fortuna</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>blow</td>
<td>of</td>
<td>luck</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘stroke of luck’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(18)</th>
<th><em>attacco</em></th>
<th><em>d’</em></th>
<th><em>ira</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attack</td>
<td>of</td>
<td>anger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘fit of anger’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(19)</th>
<th><em>scoppio</em></th>
<th><em>di</em></th>
<th><em>pianto</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>burst</td>
<td>of</td>
<td>cry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘fit of crying’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
N1 turns N2 into a noun describing a **bounded event**, especially **short** and **abrupt**

Nouns in N2 position can belong to a variegated but limited set of semantic classes:

- **Generic events** (e.g. *sciopero* ‘strike’, *guerra* ‘war’)
  - Bounded and punctual events (e.g. derived nouns in *-ata* such as *bevuta* ‘drink’, or nouns such as *sorso* ‘sip’) **are banned**
- **Abstract (quality) nouns** (e.g. *sincerità* ‘sincerity’, *cortesia* ‘kindness’)
- **Physio- and psychological states/events** (e.g. *ira* ‘rage’, *riso* ‘laugh’)
- **Instruments** (e.g. *pistola* ‘gun’, *telefono* ‘telephone’)
- **Body parts** (e.g. *testa* ‘head’, *occhio* ‘eye’)
- **Natural forces** (e.g. *vento* ‘wind’, *sole* ‘sun’)

---

*15*
Interestingly, there seems to be a mechanism of selection or collocation between N1 and N2

- *attacco* ‘attack’, *scoppio* ‘burst’, *accesso* ‘burst’, *scatto* ‘burst’
  - Abstract quality nouns (*attacco di debolezza* ‘weak moment’)
  - Physio-/psychological states/events (*accesso di gelosia* ‘fit of jealousy’)

- *colpo* ‘blow’ most typically occurs with
  - Physiological states/events (*colpo di tosse* ‘fit of coughing’)
  - Instruments (*colpo di spazzola* ‘brush’)
  - Body parts (*colpo di glottide* ‘glottal stop’)
  - Natural forces (*colpo di sole* ‘sun-stroke’)

Aspect Semantics
Aspect

Crosslinguistic comparison

- Aspectualizers are not exclusive to Italian
- French (Gross 1984)
  
  (20) *coup de fil*
  
  blow of wire/line
  ‘ring’

- Spanish (Bosque 2006)
  
  (21) *golpe de suerte*
  
  blow of luck
  ‘stroke of luck’

- English (Oxford Collocations Dictionary 2002)
  
  (22) *fit of anger*

  (23) *burst of enthusiasm*

  (24) *stroke of genius*
So far...

- We have seen that the N-*di*-N pattern in Italian can convey a wide array of meanings.
- However, despite their similar superficial structure (namely, a NP followed by a PP introduced by the preposition *di*), not all the above mentioned constructions behave alike.
- In particular, some of them deviate, to different extents, from the behaviour of canonical NPs followed by a PP.
Tests

I will illustrate this point by presenting the results of a series of tests applied to the various Binominal Constructions

- Semantic headedness
- Agreement
- Constituency
  - Anaphora
  - Replaceability by a pronoun
  - Dislocation
Semantic headedness

- In order to detect the semantic head of the construction, we applied the ISA test (cf. Zwicky 1985, Aarts 1998)

- Specification

(25)  *la giacca di cotone*  ISA  *giacca*  (N1)

  the jacket of cotton

  ‘the cotton jacket’

- Quantification (partitive reading)

(26)  *un sacco di riso*  ISA  *sacco/riso*  (N1/N2)

  a sack of rice

  ‘a sack (full) of rice’

- Approximation

(27)  *una sorta di indifferenza*  ISA  *indifferenza*  (N2)

  a sort of indifference

  ‘a sort of indifference’
Semantic headedness

*Results*

- **N1 is the semantic head**
  - Specification
  - Possession

- **N2 is the semantic head**
  - Quantification (degree modifier reading)
  - Identification
  - Approximation
  - Evaluation

- **Not always easy to identify the semantic head**
  - Quantification (partitive reading)
  - Aspect
Agreement

- Between the whole construction and other constituents
  - Is it N1 or N2 that governs the agreement in number and gender?

- Possession
  
  (28)  \( I \text{ gatti di Maria sono carini} \) (*è carina)
  
  the.\text{M.PL} cat.\text{M.PL} of Mary.\text{F.SG} are nice.\text{M.PL} (*is nice.\text{F.SG})
  
  ‘Mary's cats are nice’

- Quantification (degree modifier reading)
  
  (29)  \( Una \text{ manciata di secondi non basteranno} / \text{ basterà} \)
  
  a.\text{F.SG} handful.\text{F.SG} of second.\text{M.PL} not be\_enough.\text{FUT.SG} / be\_enough.\text{FUT.PL}
  
  'A handful of seconds [='very few seconds'] won't be enough'

- Evaluation
  
  (30)  \( Per \text{ fortuna questo schifo di vacanza è finita} \) (*finito)
  
  for luck this.\text{M.SG} disgust.\text{M.SG} of vacation.\text{F.SG} is finished.\text{F.SG} (*finished.\text{M.SG})
  
  'Luckily enough, this horrible vacation is over'
Agreement

Results

- N1 clearly governs agreement
  - Specification
  - Possession
  - Aspect

- N2 clearly governs agreement
  - Approximation
  - Evaluation

- The situation is fuzzy
  - Quantification
  - Identification
Constituency

- Proper constituents should be able...
  - to be part of anaphoric chains (31)
  - to be replaced by a pronoun (32)
  - to be dislocated (33)

  **Specification**
  (31) *Sono stato a un seminario di filosofia. L’ho trovato interessante*
  'I attended a seminar on philosophy. I found it interesting'

  **Aspect**
  (32) *Stamattina mi è venuta una crisi di pianto, dopo quella di tosse*
  '?This morning I had a fit of crying, after that of coughing'

  **Identification**
  (33) *Era di seminario il nuovo tipo a cui sono stato stamattina*
  '*It was of seminar the new type I attended this morning'
Constituency

_results_

- We are in front of true constituents
  - Specification
  - Possession
- We are **not** in front of true constituents
  - Quantification (degree modifier)
  - Identification
  - Approximation
  - Evaluation
- The situation is fuzzy
  - Quantification (partitive)
  - Aspect
The behaviour of Binominal Constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPECIFICATION POSSESSION</th>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>QUANTIFICATION (PART.)</th>
<th>QUANTIFICATION (DEG. MOD.) IDENTIFICATION</th>
<th>APPROXIMATION EVALUATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External agreement</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>±</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic head on N1</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituent status of N1 / N2</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The behaviour of Binominal Constructions

- The Specification and the Possession BCs behave as canonical NPs followed by a PP in which N1 is the head of the construction and N2 the complement of P
  - N2 can be regularly preceded by an article
    (34) la gente della capitale
        the people of the capital
        ‘the people from the capital’
    (35) il gatto della ragazza
        the cat of the girl
        ‘the girl's cat’

- The other BCs present a "deviating" picture, which is more marked for the Approximation and Evaluation BCs and less so for the Aspect BCs (with Quantification and Identification BCs staying in between), thus forming a gradience
Light Noun Constructions

Simone & Masini (2010) define these "deviating" constructions Light Noun Constructions, featuring the following characteristics:

- They are BCs of the [N1 \textit{di} N2] type in which:
  - N2 is a \textit{bare noun}.
  - N1 is a "\textit{light noun}" in that it:
    - displays a \textit{lower referentiality} with respect to N2.
    - tends \textit{not} to act as the head of the construction.
    - tends \textit{not} to have a lexical meaning but takes on a \textit{grammatical meaning} (quantification, approximation, aspect, etc.).
    - typically belongs to a \textit{given} (limited) \textit{semantic class} of nouns.
Light Noun Constructions

- In other words, Light Noun Constructions are "nominal chains" in which the first noun has lost its full lexical meaning and has acquired a more grammatical function.
- This is true of all the deviating BCs (Quantification, Identification, Approximation, Aspect) except for the Evaluation BC, which does not fulfil the last requirement.
  - "N1 typically belongs to a given (limited) semantic class of nouns".
- Indeed, the N1 slot in the Evaluation BC is much more open than in the other BCs: we may have nouns denoting properties (e.g. *bellezza* 'beauty'), but also other kinds of nouns that are endowed with a particular connotation to be transferred onto N2 (e.g. *incubo* 'nightmare')
  - We do have a limited set of nouns that occur more often than others in the N1 slot (e.g. *schifo* 'disgust') and that might form a new semi-specified construction, but this is due to entrenchment mechanisms.
A constructionist view

- This overall picture of Italian Binominal Constructions can be accounted for rather straightforwardly within a constructionist approach (CxG), which allows to encode different levels of abstractions and specification.
  - In particular, it seems quite fruitful to adopt the hierarchy of constructions adopted by Traugott (2007):
    - Constructs
    - Micro-constructions
    - Meso-constructions
    - Macro-constructions
Constructs

- The concrete actualization of any construction into the discourse
  - E.g. … *una specie di casa*… '…a kind of house…'
  - E.g. … *un colpo di telefono*… '…a ring…'
Micro-constructions

- The lowest constructional level in the hierarchy
  - It should encode every single construction in which the N1 slot is specified
    - E.g. [specie di N2] 'kind of N2', [sorta di N2] 'sort of N2'
    - E.g. [colpo di N2] 'blow of N2', [attacco di N2] 'attack of N2'
  - However, this level might be expanded
  - In particular, we might need to encode in the constructicon also fully specified constructions that are instantiations of micro-constructions that are either very frequent or lexicalized
    - E.g. [colpo|botta di fortuna] 'stroke of luck'
Meso-constructions

- This level accounts for all micro-constructions that present the same class of N1 and behave in a similar way
  - E.g. \[specie|sorta|forma \textit{di N2}\]
    \[
    \Rightarrow \text{[A SUBPART OF TAXONOMIC NOUNS \textit{di N2}]} 
    \]
- However, in our view also this level might be expanded, since we might need more than one level of abstraction if we want to grasp all possible generalizations
- Let's see for instance the case of Aspectualizers
Meso-constructions

- Aspectualizers are generic event nouns that refer to punctual processes, therefore we expect a Meso-construction like the following:
  - \([attacco|gesto|colpo|... \ di \ N2]\)
  - \(\Rightarrow [\text{GENERIC PUNCTUAL EVENT NOUNS } \ di \ N2]\)

- However, not all aspectualizers occur with any \(N2\), but rather we have a selection in terms of semantic classes, so we need more refined Meso-constructions to account for this kind of sub-generalization:
  - E.g. \([attacco|scoppio|accesso|scatto \ di \ N2]\)
  - in which \(N2 = \text{abstract N} | \text{physio-/psychological state/event N}\)
Macro-constructions

- The most schematic pattern related to a given function
  - E.g. [N1 di N2] <Approximating function>

- Why do we need this level of representation?
  - It is presumably the trait d’union with a maximally abstract BC
  - But it is also useful to account for certain coercion effects

(36) *una montagna di debiti*

  ‘a mountain of debts’

- Montagna 'mountain' is not a typical quantifying noun, but it acts like a degree modifier here

- This effect cannot be accounted for at the Meso-construction level, which specifies the semantic sub-class of elements to be found in the N1 slot (among which we do not find a noun like *mountain*), so in fact we do need another a macro-level of representation
  - Of course, once [*montagna di N2*] becomes entrenched enough, it will be also encoded at some level of representation
Still another constructional level?

- As a conclusion, I would like to explore the hypothesis that still another constructional level is to be added to this picture.
- This level would generalize over the various Macro-constructions identified - which have different grammatical meanings but similar structural properties - and therefore it would be even more schematic.
- We might call the constructions at this level Meta-constructions.
  - A Meta-construction might be added that would coincide with a (very abstract) Light Noun Construction that features the properties mentioned before and that is instantiated by the various macro-constructions that comply with the requirements.
    - Quantification-Partitive, Quantification-Degree Modifier, Identification, Approximation, Aspect.
The case for Meta-constructions

- Why should we need Meta-constructions?
  - First of all, they are another piece of generalization regarding the language
    - In our case, the presence of a Light Noun Meta-construction licenses the occurrence in the language of nominal chains of the [N1-*di*-N2] type in which the N1 has the role of projecting a grammatical meaning on N2 rather than being the head of a phrase
  - Secondly, since they generalize over a set of macro-constructions, they may have or may have had a role in the emergence of other structurally similar macro-constructions
    - But of course this hypothesis is to be checked and supported by diachronic data
  - Next time...
Thank you
Ačiū
References

- Akmajian, A. & A. Lehrer (1976), *NP-like quantifiers and the problem of determining the head of an NP*, in “Linguistic Analysis” 2 (4), 395-413.