

Binominal Constructions in Italian of the N-*di*-N type

Towards a typology of Light Noun Constructions

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Workshop on *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
 - ▶ E.g., among others, Aarts (1998), Akmajian & LehreKay (1997), Denison (2002, 2005), Kay (1997), Tabor (1994), Traugott (2007, 2008)
- ▶ 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-*di*-N2 type, in which the preposition *di* corresponds to the English *of*

Binominal Constructions in Italian

- ▶ The variety of functions covered by the N1-*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
 - ▶ $[N1_{\text{HEAD}} [of\ N2]] \rightarrow [[N1\ of]\ N2_{\text{HEAD}}]$

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

'a sack full of beautiful walnuts' (Novellino, 13th century)

(7) *Un **sacco** di bugie [...]*

a sack of lies

'a lot of/many 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) *un tipo di carta*
a type of paper
'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
 - ▶ $[N1_{\text{HEAD}} [\textit{of} N2]] \rightarrow [[N1 \textit{of}] N2_{\text{HEAD}}]$
- ▶ 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 meraviglia di tavolo*
a wonderfulness of table
'a wonderful table'

(15) **una larghezza di tavolo*
a largeness of table
'a large 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

- | | | | |
|------|------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| (16) | colpo | <i>di</i> | <i>telefono</i> |
| | blow | of | telephone |
| | 'ring' | | |
| (17) | botta | <i>di</i> | <i>fortuna</i> |
| | blow | of | luck |
| | 'stroke of luck' | | |
| (18) | attacco | <i>d'</i> | <i>ira</i> |
| | attack | of | anger |
| | 'fit of anger' | | |
| (19) | scoppio | <i>di</i> | <i>pianto</i> |
| | burst | of | cry |
| | 'fit of crying' | | |

Aspect

Semantics

- ▶ 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')

Aspect

Semantics

- ▶ 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

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 gatti di Maria sono carini* (*è carina)

the.M.PL cat.M.PL of Mary.F.SG are nice.M.PL (*is nice.F.SG)

'Mary's cats are nice'

- ▶ Quantification (degree modifier reading)

(29) *Una manciata di secondi non basteranno / basterà*

a.F.SG handful.F.SG of second.M.PL not be_enough.FUT.SG /
be_enough.FUT.PL

'A handful of seconds [= 'very few seconds'] won't be enough'

- ▶ Evaluation

(30) *Per fortuna questo schifo di vacanza è finita* (*finito)

for luck this.M.SG disgust.M.SG of vacation.F.SG is finished.F.SG (*finished.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**_i di filosofia. L_i'ho trovato interessante*

'I attended a seminar_i on philosophy. I found it_i interesting'

- ▶ Aspect

(32)? *Stamattina mi è venuta una **crisi**_i di pianto, dopo **quella**_i di tosse*

'?This morning I had a fit_i of crying, after that_i 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

	SPECIFICATION POSSESSION	ASPECT	QUANTIFICATION (PART.)	QUANTIFICATION (DEG. MOD.) IDENTIFICATION	APPROXIMATION EVALUATION
External agreement	+	+	±	±	-
Semantic head on N1	+	±	±	-	-
Constituent status of N1 / N2	+	±	±	-	-



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 *di* N2] type in which
 - ▶ N2 is a **bare noun**
 - ▶ N1 is a "**light noun**" in that it
 - displays a **lower referentiality** with respect to N2
 - tends **not** to act as the **head** of the construction
 - tends **not** to have a lexical meaning but takes on a **grammatical meaning** (quantification, approximation, aspect, etc.)
 - typically belongs to a **given** (limited) **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
 - ▶ Cf. Croft (2001), Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor (1988), Fried & Östman (2004) Goldberg (1995, 2006), Traugott (2007), etc.
- ▶ 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 construction 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 di* N2]
⇒ [A SUBPART OF TAXONOMIC NOUNS *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*]
⇒ [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 = abstract N | 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

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