

Lexicographic Treatment of Italian Phrasal Verbs: A Corpus-based Approach

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*Italian phrasal verbs—or verbi sintagmatici—have seen a growth of interest in the Italian linguistic panorama. However, a more systematic analysis is needed to clarify the theoretical status of these verb-particle constructions and to improve their lexicographic treatment, which is still inconsistent, as shown by an overall comparison between the major Italian monolingual dictionaries. Difficulties are related with both an unclear semantic classification of them and the lack of frequency and productivity data about their formation. Following the classification of Masini 2005 in terms of intensification, direction, metaphoric and actional meaning, the present paper carries out a case study aiming at frequency data in phrasal verbs with *via*, in particular about the presence of an *Aktionsart* contribution of the particle. The meaning of accomplishment seems to be clearly traceable in the newsgroup messages analyzed (corpus NUNC-It), although very few dictionaries record it. Further corpus data should offer schemes of regularity in the usage of other verb-particle constructions making their lexicographic treatment more effective.*

1. Italian *verbi sintagmatici*

Italian verb-particle constructions show some analogies with English phrasal verbs. The terminology of “*verbi sintagmatici*” suggested by Simone (1997) is an explicit calque of the term “phrasal verbs” and it has given rise in recent years to many linguistic investigations in the Italian linguistic panorama.

However, a more systematic linguistic analysis is needed in order to clarify the theoretical status of these constructions. Especially lexicographic treatment of Italian phrasal verbs is often sketchy and inconsistent within monolingual dictionaries.

Difficulties are related with two main questions concerning the dictionary-making process:

- 1) an unclear semantic classification of this still partly unexplored set of verbs;
- 2) the lack of frequency and productivity data about their formation: some verbs are recorded and other not, apparently with not enough awareness of their derivational restrictions.

2. Semantic classification of Italian phrasal verbs

I will follow here the theoretical studies of Masini (2005) as a solution to the first problem mentioned above. Masini (2005: 154-156) has proposed a semantic classification, identifying three main types of verb-particle constructions in terms of intensification, direction and metaphoric meaning:

- 1) intensification: having the function of intensifying a piece of information, for example the path or direction of motion, already contained in the base verb:

<i>uscire fuori</i>	lit. to exit out	“to go out”
<i>entrare dentro</i>	lit. to enter in	“to go in”

- 2) direction marking: the particle may function as a direction marker, when added to a generic verb of motion:

<i>mettere giù</i>	lit. put down	“to put down”
<i>tirare su</i>	lit. pull up	“to pull up(wards)”

3) metaphorical meaning, when the verb-particle construction assumes a metaphorical non-compositional meaning, with three possible subgroups:

a. transparent metaphors

buttare via lit. throw away “to throw away”/“to squander”

b. opaque ones (but with a still somehow recognizable relationship between the locative construction and its metaphorical counterpart)

portare avanti lit. bring forward “to bring forth”/“to run (a business)”

c. completely idiomatic forms

fare fuori lit. do out “to kill”

Masini (2005) adds to these three groups an “aspectual”, or rather, “actional meaning” too, which is also the main innovation in Iacobini and Masini (2005):

a. Luca ha lavato via la macchia

Luca have.3sg wash.part.past away the stain

“Luca removed the stain (by washing)”

b. Luca ha lavato la macchia

Luca have.3sg wash.part.past the stain

“Luca washed the stain”

In a. the particle *via* “seems to convey a meaning of *accomplishment*: the focus is on the result of the washing process. By contrast in b. the focus is on the process itself” (Masini 2005: 156).

Iacobini 2007 also remarks the possibility of particles bringing about an Aktionsart contribution to verbal bases, often telicizing or detelicizing them (see some examples collected in Table 1).

Telicization	tirare	-TEL	tirare <i>fuori</i>	+TEL
	tirare	-TEL	tirare <i>giù</i>	+TEL
	saltare	-TEL	saltare <i>dentro</i>	+TEL
	volare	-TEL	volare <i>via</i>	+TEL
	passare	-TEL	passare <i>via</i>	+TEL
	passare	-TEL	passare <i>su</i>	+TEL

Table 1. Actional contribution of verbal particles (Iacobini 2007)

3. Lexicographic treatment of Italian phrasal verbs: Aktionsart meaning ignored?

The current treatment of “verbi sintagmatici” in Italian monolingual dictionaries shows a more and more conscious handling of the question in the last decade: almost complete absence and unawareness of the matter in the editions of the early nineties, gradual integration in more recent ones. The treatment remains nevertheless quite heterogeneous and it does often not include a real semantic classification as the one proposed by Masini 2005 (§ 2).

Phrasal verbs are recorded sometimes under the verb-headword and sometimes under the adverbial particle, not always with systematic or consistent choices throughout the dictionary-making process.

Since there would be no opportunity to analyze the entire set of *verbi sintagmatici* for obvious lack of space, a case study follows about a specific Italian particle with adverbial function (“*via*”).

Let us first consider an overall comparison between the major Italian monolingual dictionaries.

Starting from the *DIB Dizionario di base della lingua italiana* we can see that the adverb *via* corresponds to “lontano da un posto (usato con verbi di moto o di stato)”: *Sono fuggito via dalla città perchè c’era troppa afa* (DIB 1996), with the meaning of “to run away, to escape”.

The reference to movement verbs is quite constant in our review, we find it in the *Vocabolario della lingua italiana* by Zingarelli (2007), which does not offer an explicit theoretic explanation but supplies many example sentences (*portare via, levare via*).

No mention is made of the fourth meaning proposed by Masini instead, the actional one. I will devote this paper in particular to the analysis of this point, which is neglected in many lexicographic works, also for example in the good dictionary of De Mauro (GRADIT 2003):

via² avv. **FO** indica allontanamento, spec. in unione con verbi di moto: *correre, fuggire v.*; con valore raff.: *cacciare v. qcn*

remarking the semantics of ‘going away’ or, secondly, the intensifying value (*rafforzativo*) of the particle (which is a *FO*, i.e. belonging to the fundamental, basic vocabulary of Italian language).

The same is valid for *Novissimo Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* by Palazzi/Folena (1992):

II. avv. che unito ai verbi di moto serve ad aggiungere loro forza

The *Dizionario della lingua italiana* by Devoto/Oli (2000-2001) does not consider the Aktionsart contribution of a particle like “via” as well, and the same for the edition *Devotino* (2007):

via¹ avv. **I.** Indica allontanamento (*gettar via, andar via, va' via*) o assenza (*esser via*)

The *Dizionario della lingua italiana Sabatini Coletti* (2006) adds more detailed specifications:

via² avv. **I.** Con v. di moto esprime l’allontanamento, ma può esprimere, con altri v. e in molte locuzioni particolari, la lontananza, il distacco, l’eliminazione e altri sign. ricavabili dal contesto: *correre, fuggire, venire, volare v.*; *Leva v. quella sedia dal corridoio!*

marking not only the idea of “moving away”, distance and separation, but also the meaning of removal and other meanings derivable from the contexts. Also De Felice/Duro in the *Vocabolario Italiano* have taken note already in 1993 of “eliminazione, mancanza” (removal, absence). These notions bring back to our attention cases like *lavare via* and the like, showing the basic scheme of:

V via → to remove s.thing by *V*-ing

as illustrated by verbs like: *spazzare via, pulire via, spazzolare via, raschiare via, grattare via*, etc.

4. Corpus data in the dictionary-making process: the case of *via*

What concerns the second problem I mentioned at the beginning of the present paper—the lack of frequency and/or productivity data about phrasal verbs formation—I will briefly expose some interesting corpus data in order to establish the frequency of the Aktionsart contribution in phrasal verbs with the particle “via”.

The research is based on Italian online written language, in particular on newsgroup messages collected in the corpus NUNC-It (Newsgroup UseNet Corpora), a suite of corpora built at the University of Turin¹.

This kind of data shows a high degree of interest because of richness of neologisms and of their nature of quite spontaneous linguistic data, representing a valuable source of information about actual tendencies of Italian language.

Findings of this work aim at cast some light on the controversial handling of more or less productive processes in lexicography (generally omitted because of transparency and compositionality criteria, see Cowie and Dalton-Puffer 2002). Italian phrasal verbs show in general different degrees of productivity: both idiomatic and fully transparent constructions do exist, as showed above (see Masini 2005).

¹ Searchable online at: www.corpora.unito.it/index_nunc.php (last access: March, 28th 2008); 237.401.299 tokens.

Frequency and productivity data could help improving the lexicographic treatment of the phenomenon, making it more consistent and effective. Specific features of particles and possible recurrent restrictions in new verb formation would call for possibly different lemma selection and for possible addition of more particles as main entries, in order to define some specific roles in phrasal verb formation.

We have also to remember that these verbal particles are able, as already noted by Simone (1997), to “re-semanticize” existent verbal bases: new lexicographic specifications would be necessary in this case.

As we have observed in the previous section, this type of entry word is listed alternatively under the verb-headword or under the particle; importance is given mainly to directionality and partially to intensification function, but not to actional meaning which is however not so rare. Corpus data have demonstrated this aspect.

Considering the results of the query [pos=‘VER.*’][word=‘via’]² in NUNC-Generic and limiting ourselves to an easily verifiable sample of 250 occurrences, the sentences interesting for our goal³ show the following subdivision of results:

portare via	19,23 %
andare via	17,94
buttare via	10,25
mandare via	6,41
cacciare via	5,12
dare via	5,12
spazzare via	5,12
venire via	5,12
gettare via	2,56
lavare via	2,56
scappare via	2,56
tirare via	2,56
volare via	2,56
correre via	1,28
fuggire via	1,28
mettere via	1,28
sciacquare via	1,28
scivolare via	1,28
scorrere via	1,28
soffiare via	1,28
spazzolare via	1,28
svolazzare via	1,28
trascinare via	1,28

Table 2. Frequency list of *verbi sintagmatici* with *via*

The meaning of removal and *accomplishment* we had analyzed in “Luca ha lavato *via* la macchia” is clearly traceable in the lemmas marked in italics in Table 1—see the traditional test with “in X time” and its incompatibility with atelic verbs:

c. *fumo le mie sigarette, aspiro e *soffio* in pochi secondi⁴

d. fumo le mie sigarette, aspiro e *soffio via* in pochi secondi

² Searching for every occurrence of a verb (pos = part of speech) followed by the word “via”.

³ Note that we had to discard many cases of adverbs as “via via”, i.e. *gradually*, or “via e-mail”, *by means of*.

⁴ With the same context (cigarettes) occurring in authentic corpus data, as reported in the following example.

These meanings almost reach a quarter of the total results, also with some *hapax legomena* such as *soffiare via* (NUNC-It II):

sono morto un mese e mezzo fa , eppure fumo le mie Marlboro lights , aspiro e **soffio via** , una boccata dopo l'altra

The amount of hapaxes is not meaningless in this context, since it is symptomatic of possible productive tendencies in Italian language (compare the quantitative approach based on this kind of counting in Gaeta/Ricca 2003).

Therefore it is desirable to consider the Aktionsart meaning as well in a dictionary-making process and to insert it in entry words, not neglecting the concept of telicization and detelicization already underlined by Iacobini.

5. Conclusions

Further and more detailed corpus analysis is needed in order to confirm contemporary usage of other verbal particles and phrasal verbs in general. In particular the need for up-to-date linguistic data claims more and more for exploitation of corpus linguistics techniques, especially of present-day language as the newsgroups' one, which was not investigated yet.

In this way a dictionary could record frequency remarks and offer schemes of regularity in the usage of verb-particle constructions, in particular regarding actional information, which take advantage of real word contexts occurring in corpora.

This practice could be usefully applied in learners' dictionaries too (see also De Cock 2005): learners of Italian as a second language are in many cases not able to distinguish subtle differences such the ones shown above.

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