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## Between error and new usage: recent paths of Italian words

### 1. Semantic change in its very happening

No language stays still, and movement concerns all its levels. Among these, the lexicon is especially prone to change, not only in the inventory of its forms, but also in their functions. Italian makes no exception: not only new words arise (Adamo – Della Valle 2003a, 2003b, 2008), but also existing words lose and add meanings.

Traditionally, linguists observe semantic change mainly *ex post*, when it has already happened: this has long been, and still is, the business of historical linguistics, and particularly etymology. However, in order to have happened, each semantic change must *happen*, i.e. there must be a period of time during which the change *is still happening*. In this period, the new meaning starts from being so new that almost nobody accepts it, and ends up being accepted by the whole *masse parlante* (Saussure 1972: 112).

In between, there are phases of partial acceptance, during which some speakers “do the new thing”, and others consider it wrong. In some cases the new meaning is ultimately rejected, and its occurrence remains at most as an error in the use of marginal speakers; in other cases what had begun as an error extends to more and more people and contexts, conquering the status of a new semantic option in the use of that word. It is interesting to monitor this process while it is happening. This is what we will try to do in this paper for some Italian words, whose new meanings we will analyze mainly from two perspectives:

1. The frequency reached by the new meaning in present-day use;
2. The cause for its being adopted by the speakers, i.e. the *semantic path* which has led to the new meaning.

In Lombardi Vallauri (2012, 2015 and 2016) I have signalled a number of Italian words which have recently acquired, or are on their way to acquire, non-canonical meanings, which are adopted not only by uncultivated speakers, but also by professional writers, such as journalists, editors of institutional websites, etc., so that they cannot be disposed of as simple errors (which actually led some dictionaries to record some of them as possible). Here, we will comment on some further cases of new meanings of Italian words, and we will point out what their frequency

is in two corpora of written language, namely the perfectly up-to-date *RIDIRE* web corpus (of about 2 billion words) and the years 1992–2001 of the newspaper *La Stampa* (about 300 million words).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, we will suggest the reason that may have triggered each change: (i) Semantic calque from a foreign word, (ii) Analogy with another Italian word, (iii) Semantic lightening or (iv) Syntactic conditions. This will also be the criterion by which the different cases will be classified in the next four sections.

## 2. Semantic calque from a foreign word

In many cases a new meaning is due to semantic calque, which in present-day Italian mainly involves the influence of English. This is the case of *sottomettere*, which has acquired the sense of eng. *submit*, in addition to its original sense of ‘subject, subjugate’; and it is the case of *consistente*, which used to mean only ‘solid, compact’, but now in almost 40% of its uses in the *RIDIRE* corpus means ‘logically coherent’, because of the influence of eng. *consistent*. Not by chance, this mainly happens in texts dealing with scientific matters, whose authors are likely to be frequently exposed to the English word:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) la massa dell’Higgs è **consistente** con un universo metastabile.
- (2) In particolare, per quanto riguarda i principî contabili, è previsto infatti che attività e passività. siano valutate a fair value, cioè in modo **consistente** con il mercato.
- (3) Quest’ultima evidenza si rivela **consistente** con l’ipotesi.

Similarly, the verb *finalizzare*, whose original meaning is ‘to aim, to direct’, has now acquired the meaning ‘to conclude’, clearly calqued from eng. *finalise* (*finalize* in the USA):

- (4) va vicina al gol almeno 6 volte, riuscendo a **finalizzare** le azioni in due sole occasioni, sempre con Pandev.
- (5) diverse occasioni da rete che purtroppo non siamo riusciti a **finalizzare**.
- (6) Si procura tre clamorose palle-gol e a turno Sacchetti, Dolcetti e Cambiaghi non riescono a **finalizzare** anche per la bravura di Cervellati.

Dictionaries like *Gradit* and *Zingarelli* list this meaning, the latter as “rare”; but in the 1992–2001 years of *La Stampa* it represents no less than 13% of the occurrences of the verb and its derivatives, which obliges to consider it as one of the received senses of the verb. It is particularly frequent in sport pages, and – as one can see in the examples above – the typical things that are “finalised” are offensive actions in football. Sports is actually a field where the linguistic influence of English is strong; as it is in economics and business, the other main field of the new meaning, where typically negotiations and agreements are finalised:

<sup>1</sup> New meanings of less frequent words have been counted on the whole corpus, while for more frequent words the statistical incidence of the new meaning has been calculated on a subcorpus of 5.000 (or 1.000 in some cases) randomly selected occurrences of the word.

<sup>2</sup> When not specified, all examples are either from *RIDIRE* or from *La Stampa*.

- (7) Se questo accordo sarà **finalizzato** – ha detto l’ambasciatore.
- (8) procedere alla **finalizzazione** della trattativa per l’acquisto del pacchetto azionario di maggioranza.
- (9) La compagnia triestina ha **finalizzato** ieri l’annunciata vendita ad Axa del pacchetto [...].

### 3. Analogy to a similar word

In many cases, a less common word may acquire – by analogy – the meaning of a more common one, provided that they are similar enough, *both in form and meaning*, to allow the confusion. We have suggested many recent examples of this in Lombardi Vallauri (2015 and 2016), such as *anno luce* used in the sense of a very long time, *estrapolare* instead of *estrarre*, *innestare* for *innescare*, *lascivo* for *permissivo*, ‘che lascia fare’, *leggiadro* for *leggero*, *reticente* for *renitente*, *stentoreo* for *stentato*, *visualizzare* for *vedere*, and others. Here, due to space limitations, we can only point out a couple of interesting cases.

The verb *quantizzare*, used in the domain of quantum physics, originally means ‘to restrict some quantity to discrete values rather than to a continuous set of values’. So, its use with the same meaning as *quantificare* ‘to quantify’, probably analogical on it, should be regarded as a glaring error. But things are not that easy, because a careful exploration of the corpora reveals that this verb is used in the “wrong” meaning about 70% of the times in *RIDIRE*, while in *La Stampa* the figure is 40%. The difference may be due to the fact that journalistic writing is on the average more controlled than what one finds in a web corpus; but also to the fact that *La Stampa* reflects a situation which is about 15 years older. In any case, these are not the percentages of an error; rather, of a new use (actually pointed out by several dictionaries).

Here are some examples:

- (10) quindi alla multa andranno sommati la spesa del trasporto e la custodia del mezzo non ancora **quantizzati**.
- (11) sarebbero state trovate prove di avvenute sottrazioni ma, per ora, neanche il magistrato si sbilancia nel **quantizzare**.
- (12) un ingiusto supplemento di disagi, di frustrazioni, di sofferenze non sempre **quantizzabile** a livello individuale.

The Italian reflexive verb *schermirsi* literally means ‘to shield oneself’, and is typically used in the sense of acting so as to evade indiscrete questions or excessive praise. Its extreme similarity with *schernirsi*, the reflexive/pronominal form of *schernire* ‘to deride’, has caused analogical misinterpretation, leading to frequent substitution of the latter for the first. The results are frequent cases where some person *si schernisce* (canonically ‘derides him/herself’), although what the speaker wants to say is that the person *si schermisce* (protects him/herself from indiscrete questions or praise):

- (13) Per carità – **si schernisce** Carlo Azeglio, con la sua abituale, ritrosa discrezione – su questo non dico nulla, ogni dichiarazione potrebbe esser letta in chissà che modo.
- (14) Romiti, lasciando il ristorante con Geronzi, alla domanda su un suo possibile ruolo di mediatore nella tribolata vicenda, **si schernisce** dicendo “Non tocca a me...”, ma intanto infila il braccio sotto quello di Geronzi.
- (15) Il sindaco di Milano Gabriele Albertini, che invidiatissimo riesce a farsi fotografare insieme alla bellona australiana, **si schernisce**: “Cosa volete che dica? Non posso dire la mia su tutto”.
- (16) Non posso certo dire di aver convinto io quella donna – **si schernisce** ora il poliziotto – e lei mi ha spiegato che dando il suo assenso all’espianto si illudeva che il suo Armando potesse rivivere nel corpo degli altri.

This happens too often to be simply considered an error: it is at least an error which is trying to find its way towards a more respected status. In fact, virtually all uses of the verb *schernire* in its reflexive forms *schernirsi* must have the new meaning, because the meaning ‘to deride oneself’ it is quite unlikely. In *La Stampa* they are 29, against 572 occurrences of *schernirsi*. This means that the concept ‘to evade questions or praise’ is expressed 5% of the times by *schernirsi* used in its new, analogical sense. These figures in a leading national newspaper are not just those of an error due to bare ignorance. At this point it is difficult to exclude that the innovation may be accepted in a near future. Not by chance, in *RIDIRE* the percentage is 11,5%. It can also be observed that the uses in the new sense represent a respectable percentage of the overall uses of the form *schernirsi*; namely, almost 20% in *La Stampa*, and 13% in *RIDIRE*; in other words, the new meaning is by no means marginal, and it strongly characterizes the image that speakers must have of this verb.

#### 4. Semantic lightening

Sometimes, the semantic environments in which a word is most frequently used allow for its misinterpretation in a different sense. Typically, where a more specific sense is meant, also a more generic one is possible. Listeners (and readers) exposed to the use of the word may catch the general meaning, but fail to detect some specific semantic trait. As a consequence, they will stock the word in their mental dictionary with the generic meaning, and use it accordingly. I propose to call this process “semantic lightening” because the list of semantic traits which compose the meaning of the word is reduced, some features are lost, and the semantic definition of the word becomes emptier.

In Lombardi Vallauri (2015 and 2016) I have proposed to interpret in this perspective the cases (some of which are at the same time analogical in nature, cf. section 3 above) of *aleatorio* when it means ‘vague’, *anno luce* ‘extremely long period of time’ *estrapolare* ‘to pull out’, *gustare* ‘to perceive a taste’, *reticente* ‘unwilling’, *specificatamente* ‘specifically’, *segreto* ‘decisive ingredient or procedure’, *visualizzare* ‘to see’, *diverso* ‘much’.

Another example is the recent use of the locutions *grazie a* and *in virtù di*, both devoid of their original positive connotation, and reduced to the more generic

meaning 'because of'. The percentages are not very high (for *grazie a* 2,5% of the occurrences in *La Stampa* and 1,5% in *RIDIRE*), but they are enough to say that the phenomenon is widely attested. If, as it is probable, this is due to its extreme recency, percentages may grow. Here are some examples, whose contexts make it clear that the positive connotation of a "welcome cause" contained in the original meaning of the locution cannot be present in the intention of the writer:

- (17) Noi combatteremo con tutti i mezzi che abbiamo a disposizione affinché i nostri figli possano vivere in pace in uno Stato sovrano democratico. E non, com'è stato imposto alla mia generazione, vivere in guerra e subire ingiustizie privandoci dei nostri diritti fondamentali, **grazie a** una politica internazionale ingiusta, che pratica due pesi e due misure nelle sue valutazioni, così continuando ad incoraggiare Israele come bambina viziata degli Usa.
- (18) Ma la preoccupazione di Silvio Berlusconi ha cause ben più profonde e tutt'altro che infondate. Dopo aver passato un mese difficilissimo **grazie al G8**, ora si trova fra l'incudine e il martello. Deve scegliere se offrire un'immagine di debolezza, insistendo sullo spostamento del vertice da Roma, oppure esporsi al rischio di nuove imprese di Tute nere.
- (19) Che le ragioni della Pirelli siano comunque state sottoposte a diffuse critiche non stupisce: il non ricorso al mercato crea la situazione della lettrice, che ha visto il management Pirelli distruggere e non creare valore per i suoi azionisti **grazie al** calo del valore dei titoli da 3,4 euro in luglio ai 2,5 euro in agosto, e che ha contemporaneamente assistito al tracollo delle quotazioni di Olivetti.

The adjective *reciproco*, used in the plural *reciproci*, is often meant to mean just 'respective', which represents the loss of a semantic trait (from 'of each and to each other' to just 'of each'):

- (20) L'odio dissacrante di una figlia verso i genitori e i loro **reciproci** amanti.
- (21) Ma i soli a resistere parlando di coppie e matrimonio, amore e confetti, fiori d'arancio e vita in comune restano loro due, Marta Flavi e Mengacci, ben saldi con le loro **reciproche** trasmissioni.
- (22) Davvero difficile disegnare i contorni di un rapporto iniziato 36 anni orsono e via via calibrato sulla base delle **reciproche** carriere, forse anche delle legittime ambizioni.

One can wonder where this semantic lightening comes from, because the two meanings are similar but distinguishable. In fact, once again, we can notice that there are contexts where the word, though used by the speaker in the canonical sense of 'reciprocal' (respective and oriented to each other), may also be understood as meaning just 'respective' by the addressee, who may then go on using the word in the new, lighter sense. We will call them "bridge contexts". Some are given here. The roles, autonomies or positions mentioned in the following contexts could in fact be reciprocal, but also simply respective:

- (23) È il cambiamento, il grande spauracchio dei genitori: confrontarsi con il figlio che cresce, si stacca, non è più quello di prima. E quindi, con le parole o i comportamenti, chiede continuamente di ridefinire i **reciproci** ruoli.

- (24) La giunta ha deciso di aprire subito il confronto con le segreterie dei poligrafici per costruire un percorso comune, rispettoso delle **reciproche** autonomie ma anche finalizzato ad impedire che le vertenze vengano contrapposte strumentalmente.
- (25) Credo che una riunione dell'ufficio politico, convocata a tamburo battente, possa ancora chiarire le **reciproche** posizioni, rasserenando gli animi.

As we have suggested, where the more specific sense is meant and appropriate, very often also the more generic one is possible. From this kind of contexts, speakers who are not completely aware of the original meaning of the adjective may have understood and “extracted” just the simplified one. Then, they have applied it in other contexts (like 20, 21 and 22 above), where only the lighter sense is possible. The result is that in *La Stampa* as much as 9% (and in *RIDIRE* 8%) of the occurrences of *reciproci/reciproche* mean just ‘respective’.

Interestingly, in most cases, although the meaning of the verb as such has lost the feature of reciprocity, its use is still bound to contexts where – factually – some reciprocity holds. This is made evident by the linguistic material underlined in the following examples:

- (26) sia io che mio marito non ci occupiamo del **reciproco** lavoro.
- (27) Partecipano, naturalmente, coppie. Che rispondono a domande sul **reciproco** passato, recitano scenette, si scambiano vestiti.
- (28) virus inattivati, cioè privati della loro carica infettiva, ma ancora capaci di arrivare al cuore della cellula e mescolare i **reciproci** geni.
- (29) In tono minore sono iniziate ieri le punzecchiature fra gollisti e giscardiani. L'intesa che i **reciproci** leader encomiano a ogni passo lancia udibili scricchiolii.
- (30) Si capiscono bene fra di loro, e conoscono i **reciproci** peccati.
- (31) Poi Fiamma attacca Fabio e Fabio attacca Fiamma con uno dei loro celebri battibecchi in cui si rinfacciano i **reciproci** difetti.

For instance, in ex. (31), the faults (*difetti*) as such cannot be reciprocal, but what is said is that the two people *reciprocally* throw *at each other* the respective faults. In sum, the new, lighter meaning of “*reciproci X*” is mostly not just ‘the respective Xs’, but more precisely ‘reciprocally the respective Xs’. Speakers have lightened the meaning of the word, but go on using it in the same kind of contexts.

## 5. Syntactic conditions

Some terms can occur in syntactic conditions that tend to influence their interpretation in a way which not always leads to correct use. A typical recent example of this is the case of *piuttosto che*, whose occurrence in negative and conditional, non-referential contexts allowed for its drift from the meaning ‘preferably/better than’ to the recent, often stigmatized use as an equivalent of inclusive “or”. The phenomenon has been described extensively as concerns its actual instantiations by Bazzanella – Cristofoli (1998), then by De Santis (2001) and Castellani Pollidori (2002). Brucale (2012) proposes its interpretation as a reanalysis path,

like Lombardi Vallauri (2012) and Mauri – Giacalone (2015), who suggest the same kind of explanation, but develop it more in detail and relate *piuttosto che* to the category of *general extenders*.

Here we will signal that even words belonging to the very core of the language system, such as pronouns and prepositions, may undergo interpretation on the part of speakers, due to their prevalent kind of syntactic function, which may lead to some sort of non canonical usage. In particular, we will focus on some uses of the prepositions *a* and *da* and the pronoun *ne*, “wrong” in principle, but by this time quite diffused.

The preposition *da* overwhelmingly expresses parting and separation. As a consequence, when these values are expressed most speakers feel that the preposition to be used is *da*, which is thus extended also to contexts where the grammar (on etymological grounds) prescribes *a*, whose typical value is opposite, namely approach. For example, eng. *due to* should be expressed by it. *dovuto a*; but most speakers prefer to say and write *dovuto da* “due from”, which – to them – seems to better express the idea of some consequence “coming out” from its cause:

- (32) A San Sebastiano Po e a Casalborgone, sulla collina di Chivasso, come se non bastassero le difficoltà **dovute dalla** massa di schede multicolori da catalogare, ci si è messo anche un black-out dell’Enel.
- (33) Rialzi **dovuti da un lato dal** riaccendersi dell’inflazione, dall’altro **dalla** ripresa economica che spinge in alto il costo del danaro.
- (34) Sono un fan di Paolo Conte, ma a prescindere dai gusti, sono convinto che tutto sia **dovuto da** una mancanza di questi veri Musicisti, piuttosto che da un’abbondanza di canzonettari.
- (35) Ogni anno 3000 adulti non fumatori muoiono per cancro del polmone **dovuto dal** fumo delle sigarette altrui.
- (36) Il valore del progetto è anche **dovuto dalla** collocazione della villa che si trova a due passi dal Museo di Arte Contemporanea.

What these facts reveal (about the new internal grammar of the speakers) is not only the “forcing” of *da* as the obligatory mark to express parting (as it regularly happens in other expressions, such as *causato da*), but also the reinterpretation of *a* as obligatorily expressing approach and nothing else.

As for the pronoun *ne*, it canonically substitutes for prepositional phrases introduced by *di* or *da*:

*sono amico di Carlo* → *ne sono amico*  
*provengo da Cracovia* → *ne provengo*

Substitution for phrases introduced by *a* is wrong, in principle:

*penso a Francesca* → *\*ne penso*  
 → *ci penso*

Still, this is what happens, with increasing frequency, with the prepositional phrases introduced by complex verbs made of *dare*, *prendere* or *fare* + N. For example, *dare diffusione a X* becomes *darne diffusione* (instead of *dargli diffusione*); *prendere parte a X* is replaced by *prenderne parte* (instead of *prendervi parte*), and *fare riferimento a X* becomes *farne riferimento* (instead of *farvi riferimento*). Here are some examples, from our corpora and from some websites of Italian administrative institutions, with many different nouns:

- (37) sarà possibile **darne accesso** a terzi.
- (38) le amministrazioni hanno ommesso di **darne attuazione** per carenza di finanziamento.
- (39) si riserva il diritto di non **darne corso**, senza che le Aziende istanti possano accampare alcuna pretesa.
- (40) Vi chiediamo la cortesia di **darne diffusione** tra le scuole primarie delle Vostre Province.
- (41) è una maniera per **darne importanza**, facilitare la consultazione della norma in caso di dubbio.
- (42) qualora Ella ed il Governo della Repubblica decidessero di **darne luogo**, è mia preghiera che ciò avvenga dopo le mie esequie.
- (43) artisti che, debuttando in una produzione della sua Stagione Lirica, contribuiscano a **darne lustro**.
- (44) allego il pdf dell'invito e anche il comunicato stampa, in modo che possa **darne rilievo** nella Sua testata.
- (45) Con orgoglio desidero quest'oggi **darne risalto** perché trattasi di un prezioso caso di imprenditoria giovanile.
- (46) troviamo un modo per **darne visibilità**, anche per il tramite di FT.
- (47) immancabilmente sotto la minaccia della sanzione disciplinare, ma senza mai **farne ricorso**, pretende dal D. S. G. A. la corresponsione di finanziamenti.
- (48) sarà interessante osservare – indipendentemente dalla scelta di **prenderne parte** – come si svolgerà questa consultazione nella nostra città.

The fact that the phenomenon presents itself with complex verbs containing a noun suggests that some syntactic conditions are responsible for it. More precisely, the influence of the corresponding nominal constructions: *dare importanza a X* and *dare diffusione a X* correspond to *l'importanza di X* and *la diffusione di X*, where the preposition is *di*, which counts among those that permit substitution by *ne*. This syntactic environment may have triggered the change.

## Conclusions

As already said, when an error gains high and qualified diffusion, i.e. when it has some frequency in diastatically and diaphasically high linguistic habits, one has to consider the hypothesis that is no longer just an error, but some new element of the language struggling for its place in the sun. The examples of Italian words we



have shown occur with percentages that are perfectly comparable to those of completely canonical meanings: as it is obvious, some undisputable meaning of a words may appear even less than in 1% of the uses of that word, but its being minority does not make an error of it.

Now, the “errors” we have accounted for range from 2% to 10% to even 70% of the occurrences of the word, and what is very important, in corpora representing quite authoritative varieties of the language, such as web pages and, especially, a leading national newspaper. This should suffice to accept that they cannot be disposed of as the result of scattered ignorance, but they are probably strong tendencies that may install themselves permanently in future usage.

The explanations (interlinguistic, syntactic, semantic and contextual in nature) that we have proposed for the coming into being of these new meanings further confirm that such phenomena are not the result of casual variance, rather the consequence of forces that are permanently at work in the language, and contribute to determining its continuous drift.

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**Fra errore e nuovo uso: recenti percorsi di parole italiane**

Il mutamento semantico, inteso come l'insorgere di nuovi significati di parole esistenti, può essere studiato mentre avviene. Si presentano qui alcuni casi di parole italiane per le quali recenti significati non canonici e in linea di principio erronei stanno acquisendo tale frequenza anche in contesti d'uso diastraticamente e diafasicamente abbastanza alti, da non permettere più di considerarli semplici errori. Se ne fornirà una descrizione basata su esempi da corpora, con qualche indicazione della frequenza e la proposta delle cause, presenti nel sistema lingua e nei contesti d'uso, che possono avere messo in moto il cambiamento.

**Parole chiave:** Neosemie, Neologismi, Lessico italiano, Contesti ponte, Rianalisi, Analogia, Errori e nuovi usi, Senso alleggerito

**Between error and new usage: recent paths of Italian words**

Semantic change, conceived as the rise of new meanings for existing words, can be studied while it happens. We present here some cases of Italian words whose recent non-canonical and in principle incorrect meanings are gaining such a high frequency also in diastratically and diaphasically high contexts, that it is no longer possible to consider them as bare errors. We will describe them by using examples from written language corpora, adding information on their frequency and proposing the causes, in the language system and in discourse contexts, that may have triggered the changes.

**Keywords:** New meanings, Neologism, Italian Lexicon, Bridge contexts, Reanalysis, Analogy, Errors and new usage, Semantic lightening

**Między błędem a nowym zastosowaniem – najnowsze ścieżki włoskich słów**

Zmianę semantyczną, rozumianą jako powstanie nowych znaczeń istniejących słów, można badać w czasie gdy się wydarza. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono przykłady włoskich słów, dla których nowe znaczenia niekanoniczne – i w zasadzie błędne – pojawiają się także w kontekstach użycia, z punktu widzenia diastratycznego i diafazycznego, stosunkowo wysokiego tak często, że nie jest już możliwe uznanie ich za zwykłe błędy. Słowa te opisane zostaną na podstawie przykładów zaczerpniętych z korpusów, wraz z informacjami na temat częstotliwości ich występowania oraz propozycjami przyczyn, obecnych w systemie językowym a także w kontekstach użycia, które mogły spowodować zmiany.

**Słowa kluczowe:** neologizmy znaczeniowe, neologizmy, włoskie słownictwo, konteksty pomostowe, reanaliza, Analogia, Błędy i nowe użycia, znaczenie poszerzone

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