

*Phraseology,  
constructions  
and  
translation*

corpus-based,  
computational and  
cultural aspects

Edited by Jean-Pierre Colson

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# Intensifying constructions in Italian

*Types, function and representation*

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## Abstract

This investigation proposes a qualitative description of phraseological constructions playing the role of an intensifier and showing lexically empty slots. In particular, the analysis aims at identifying the set of *partially lexically specified intensifying constructions* of Italian, and at providing i) a general classification on the basis of different parameters (e.g. syntactic structure, lexical variability, degree of schematicity, productivity), and ii) a formal constructionist representation of their syntactic-semantic schemas. The investigation aims at demonstrating that the set of partially lexically specified constructional intensifiers is extremely variegated in Italian, and that new combinatory forms can be created from lexically empty patterns, and new abstract constructions and productive schemata can arise through frequency of use, routinisation and conventionalisation.

## Keywords

constructional intensifiers, partially lexically specified patterns, schematicity, Italian

## 1. Introduction

Intensification strategies are devices scaling a quality (Bolinger 1972: 17), which are used by speakers to signal an intensifying value. Intensification is a functional-semantic category encompassing several scales (Van Os 1989). The set of markers of intensity is not closed (Labov 1984) and may change according to language features and speaker's choices: “[i]ntensity is signaled by a large and miscellaneous class of devices [...]: verbal and non-verbal gestures; expressive phonology, including sudden changes in length, pitch, duration, and vowel quality; repetition; and the use of quantifiers” (Labov 1984: 48). In particular, syntactic intensification (e.g. cleft or dislocated sentences), phonological intensification (e.g. intonation), morphological intensification (e.g. prefixes, superlative suffixes, partial reduplication), and lexical intensification (e.g. full reduplication) are generally the most commonly used intensifying linguistic strategies.

Even though in Italian “intensifiers have neither exactly the same semantic and pragmatic properties [...] nor the same intensifying force” (Napoli and Ravetto 2017: 3), lexical

intensification is one of the most productive strategies. Lexical intensifiers typically attribute an intensifying meaning to the lexemes they co-occur with. The set of lexical intensifiers is mainly composed of co-occurrence patterns requiring an intensifier and an intensified. Co-occurrence patterns can be often associated to more general and abstract combinatorial schemas, which are closely related to each other in the mental lexicon and may be described as *constructions*, in the frameworks of Construction Grammar (among others, at least Fillmore *et al.* 1988; Goldberg 2003, 2006) and of Categories and Constructions Grammar (Simone 2007). Constructions are “stored pairings of form and function, including morphemes, words, idioms, partially lexically filled and fully general linguistic patterns” (Goldberg 2003: 219), conveying a specific ‘constructional’ meaning, which is not strictly predictable from its components (Goldberg 2003: 219) and is specifically associated to the construction and “fades away outside of it” (Simone 2007: 215). Through an increasing frequency of use (Bybee 2010) and routinisation, constructions fixed in both syntactic and semantic terms.

For the purpose of this analysis, we will consider a specific set of constructions of Italian, namely *constructional intensifiers* (hereinafter CIs). CIs are stable and recurrent combinations of lexical items conveying an intensifying value and showing variable degrees of predictability, schematicity and productivity. In particular, the set of *partially filled* (or *partially lexically specified*) *constructional intensifiers* (hereinafter PFCIs) will be described. These constructions are characterised by the presence of some empty slots from a lexical point of view. Semi-fixed pattern gives rise to different word combinations, with a similar semantic or functional value.

The paper is organised as follows: section 2 is devoted to the description of the notion of PFCIs; section 3 briefly presents the method of analysis and data classification; section 4 describes different types of PFCIs; section 5 contains the discussion of findings and the general conclusions.

## 2. Partially filled constructional intensifiers

PFCIs are represented by semi-fixed syntactic patterns, which are partially variable from the lexical point of view and are characterised by a constructional semantics. The construction in (1) is composed of the adjective *nero* ‘black’, preceded by a noun:

- (1) X<sub>NOUN<time unit></sub> + *nero* ‘black’  
 a. anno/epoca/fase/stagione *nero/a* ‘bad/difficult year/age/phase/season’

The construction has a fixed slot, represented by the adjective *nero*, which expresses the meaning of ‘very difficult’ in all the sequences. The nominal element is the slot subject to variation and has to be filled by a noun of a time unit. The constructional meaning is thus ‘very difficult X<sub><time unit></sub>’<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> As the anonymous reviewer properly points out, these units might be instances of collocations. However, this does not preclude the sequences from deriving from a specific constructional scheme. On the contrary, the high frequency of co-occurrence and lexical/semantic predictability prove the scheme’s entrenchment.

As partially lexically specified constructions, PFCIs are characterised by i) a regular syntactic pattern showing a fixed order and presenting both filled and empty slots from the lexical point of view (e.g. in (1) the order *X+nero* is fixed, and *X* is the position subject to variation); ii) lexical restrictions: the flexible portion may admit only a restricted set of lexical fillers (e.g. in (1) the fillers belong to the semantic class of <time unit>); iii) different degrees of productivity may be associated to the pattern (Barðdal 2008, Traugott and Trousdale 2013): the number of new forms that can originate from the schema differs from one construction to another (e.g. (1) is not truly productive, since only admits a selected range of fillers); iv) a constructional meaning, which is predictable from the morphosyntactic/semantic pattern and is shared by different sequences responding to the same restrictions (e.g. sequences in (1)).

With respect to prototypical multiword expressions, PFCIs are not completely lexicalised, since they are characterised by different degrees of fixedness. Nevertheless, PFCIs can be considered as *constructions*, since they belong to the regular area of the lexicon, where pairings of forms and meanings can emerge. Furthermore, as constructions, i) they “have to be learned separately as individual whole facts” (Fillmore *et al.* 1988: 504), ii) they may be idiomatic in the sense that they may convey a semantic or pragmatic value which is different from its single components (Fillmore *et al.* 1988: 501), and iii) they are partially schematic constructions.

The interest in word combinations showing flexible slots dates back to the studies by Saussurian structuralism and by the functionalist approach; they have also been the interest of many German studies of phraseology<sup>2</sup>. However, it is with the constructionist analysis made by Fillmore *et al.* (1988) that this kind of word combinations attracted the attention of more recent European phraseological studies<sup>3</sup>. As far as Italian is concerned, different works have been recently devoted to PFCIs<sup>4</sup>. These works are generally inspired to a broad constructionist perspective, that is also the one taken into account for this study.

### 3. Method of analysis

This investigation is driven on a corpus-informed approach. The *ITTenTen16* web-based corpus has been retrieved to extract CIs, by means of the Sketch Engine platform<sup>5</sup>. Actually,

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Piunno (in press) for an overview on the literature devoted to this issue.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. among others, Mellado Blanco (2020a), Ziem and Lasch (2013), Schafroth (2015, 2020), Steyer (2018), Piunno (2018a).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. superlative constructions (Berlanda 2013); *sì che* construction (Schafroth 2015); multiword PPs with adjectival/adverbial functions (Piunno 2018a); comparative constructions (Mollica and Schafroth 2018); obligatory negated patterns (Piunno 2018b); coordinated intensifiers (Piunno 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Sketch Engine is an online text analysis tool able to extract lexical chunks and syntactic word clusterings from corpora (website: <https://www.sketchengine.eu>). By means of this platform, sequences of part-of-speech tags in a specific word order (i.e. PoS-grams patterns such as Verb+Prep+Noun, Adj+Noun, etc.) have been extracted through the simple concordance query and the CQL advanced query, combining the research of lexical and PoS patterns. PoS-gram patterns seem to be very useful for the automated identification of such sequences, which represent a significant challenge to the computational field, due to their difficulty in being identified using the current computational resources available, at least for Italian.



PFCIs are very difficult to identify in corpora: on the one hand, the presence of empty positions in the construction does not allow for precise queries (some empty positions may even be very large, containing entire sentence structures); on the other hand, these constructions are extremely variable in syntactic terms, and cannot be traced back to specific and stable patterns. It is worth noting that for the purpose of this analysis, the corpus has been only used for qualitative investigation.

CIs have been first classified on the basis of their morphosyntactic structure and their function in context. Subsequently, their degrees of lexical specification and semantic predictability have been discussed.

#### 4. Types of partially filled constructional intensifiers

Intensifying constructions can operate at the phrasal level, such as single phrases, or at the syntactic level, such as whole and more complex sentence structures.

Sentence-level CIs present empty positions of a phrasal or sentence nature, and varying degrees of schematicity. In Italian, such sequences have been first analysed in Schafroth (2015, 2020), where they are defined as “syntactically fixed prefabs with a lexically open slot to be filled by an inflected transitive or intransitive verb” (Schafroth 2015: 327). They are characterised by the presence of a conventionalised pragmatic value, which is kept in all the sequences deriving from the same schema. Note, for example, the following sentences, where the pragmatic value of intensification is conveyed by the *non fare che* construction (Piunno, 2022).

- (2) Mio figlio *non fa che* parlare di me ‘my son constantly (*lit.* not does that) talks about me’  
 (3) *non faccio che* pensare a te ‘I constantly (*lit.* not does that) think of you’

The *non fare che* construction is characterised by the presence of i) the negation marker, ii) the verb *fare* ‘do’, and iii) the subordinating conjunction. Despite the presence of the negation marker, the *non fare che* sequence does not show any negative polarity: false negative polarity is a common feature of several multiword phenomena showing different degrees of lexicalisation (cf. Piunno 2018b). The construction contains two empty slots: the first is represented by the noun phrase having the role of the subject of the main predicate, and the second is filled by a verb phrase, which has to contain a dynamic verb. In such cases, the construction acquires an intensified meaning of ‘doing something a lot and constantly’<sup>6</sup>. Sentence-level constructions of Italian very frequently convey intensifying values. This happens by means of several kinds of intensifying devices (e.g. the presence of specific discourse markers, reduplicated verb phrases; cf. Piunno 2022). Sentence-level constructions of Italian still deserve much attention, since they lack a homogeneous classification and of a comprehensive description.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, this construction can also convey other semantic values that will not be considered for the purpose of this analysis, being related to specific lexical constraints involving the subject and the predicate. Cf. Piunno (2022) for an in-depth analysis of all the values of the *non fare che* construction.

The class of phrase-level CIs is rather heterogenous as well. It includes several types of phrases, whose function varies based on the context of use. Figure 1 shows some phrase-level CIs identified in the literature:

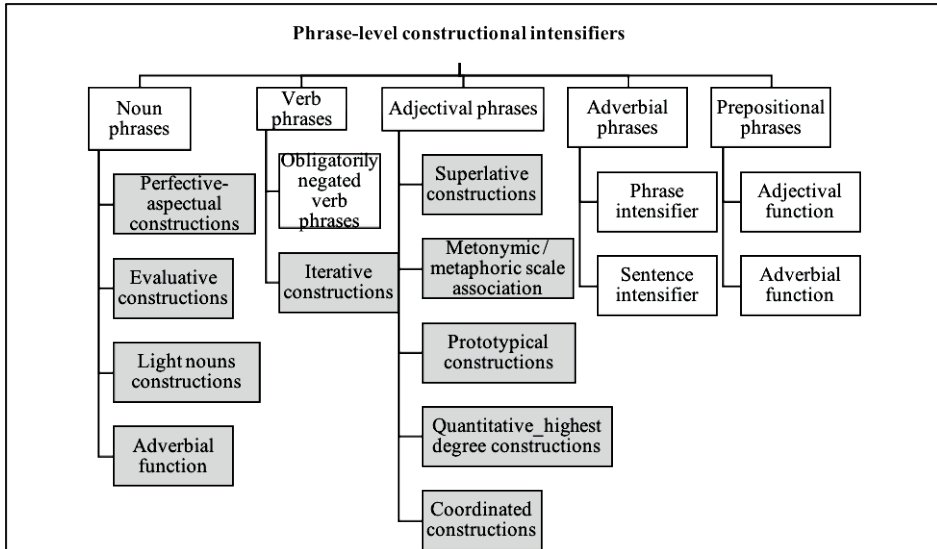


Figure 1. Types of phrase-level CIs

For lack of space, only the constructions in grey have been considered for the purpose of this study.

Among phrase-level combinations, such as single phrases, noun phrases are the most productive sequences employed in Italian to convey intensified meanings. The value of this kind of intensification strategy varies in nature, depending on the specific construction. For example, they can be distinguished among i) perfective-aspectual constructions, ii) evaluative constructions, iii) light noun constructions, iv) nominal constructions with an adverbial function.

Perfective-aspectual constructions include an indefinite article and a past participle as fixed slots, such as in (4):

- (4) Indefinite Article +  $X_{\text{NOUN|ADJ}}$  + Past Participle
- uno sportivo nato* 'a very good sportsman', *lit.* a sportsman born
  - un attore finito* 'a dead actor', *lit.* an actor ended
  - un uomo arrivato* 'a satisfied man', *lit.* a man arrived

On the one hand, the variable slot may be either a noun or an adjective, without any particular semantic restrictions. On the other hand, the paradigmatic range of past participle intensifiers is limited to few lexical items. The meaning of the construction may vary according to the past participle, but a perfective aspectual value is conveyed by all the sequences.

The second group includes evaluative constructions, showing two fixed and two variable slots, as (5) shows:

- (5)  $quel/un+X_{\text{NOUN}}+di+Y_{\text{NOUN} <\text{individual identity}>}$   
 a. *quel/un mostro/tesoro di donna* ‘bad/kind woman’, *lit.* that/a monster/treasure of woman

Determiner and preposition represent the fixed elements of the pattern, while the nominal elements fill the two empty slots. The first noun (in the first variable slot) is the intensifier, which may vary within a limited set of nouns (positively or negatively connotated); this noun always conveys an evaluative meaning expressing a quality. The second noun represents the entity to which the quality is associated. Several attributive (intensified) values can be codified by this construction, such as appreciative, pejorative, diminutive.

Another interesting issue which deserves special attention is the group of *light nouns* constructions. As Simone and Masini (2014) point out, these nouns typically provide a quantitative information about the noun they precede. They may be used as quantity intensifiers, (metaphorically) referring to the highest degree of a certain quantity, as in (6):

- (6)  $\text{Det}+X_{\text{NOUN} <\text{collective/concrete}>}+\text{Prep}$   
 a. *un/una mondo/esercito/folla di* ‘many’, *lit.* a/an world/army/crowd of  
 b. *un/una sacco/montagna/barca di* ‘many’, *lit.* a bag/mountain/boat of

Light noun intensifying constructions may include a collective/concrete noun. In both cases they codify an intensified value referring to a quantity.

The last class of this group is represented by constructions having the form of a noun phrase and an adverbial function, as (7) shows:

- (7)  $\text{Indef.article}+X_{\text{NOUN}}$   
 a. *un/una mondo/sproposito/fortuna* ‘a lot’, *lit.* a world/blunder/fortune

In all cases, the noun phrase modifies the predicate as an adverb, and acquires the meaning of ‘a lot’. The determiner is fixed, and the intensifying element belongs to a limited set of lexemes, which are mainly lexicalised entities. This means that only few lexical elements can occur in this intensifying function, depending on the verb they accompany, and that the construction is not productive.

The second group of intensifiers includes verb phrases. Among verb phrases CIs, it is possible to include constructions with double negation (cf. Piunno 2018b, Mellado Blanco 2020b), as well as iterative constructions. The latter, in particular, deserves special attention. In (8), the verb is the intensifier and is necessarily followed by the preposition *di* ‘of’:

- (8)  $X_{\text{VERB}}+di+Y_{\text{NOUN plural}}$   
 a. *riempire/ubriacare/sommergere di parole* ‘talk a lot’, *lit.* fill/get drunk/submerge of words

In such cases, the preposition is the only fixed element, and verb and noun the variable ones. While the number of verbs that can occur in this construction is rather limited, the nominal slot is not subject to particular semantic restrictions. What is interesting about this structure is that the verb only conveys the intensified/iterative value, while the predicative value depends on the nominal element, which has to be expressed in the plural form. In this case, the intensifier is generally a transitive verb and, apparently, no semantic preferences can be identified.

The last group that has been considered for the purpose of this analysis is represented by adjectival phrases. This group includes different kinds of word combinations having an adjective as head of the phrase. Among them, the so-called superlative constructions, i.e. sequences of two adjectives or past participles (Berlanda 2013), are noteworthy. These units are composed of two adjectives: the first one is the intensified lexeme, while the second one is employed as an intensifier (it attributes a scalar quality to the adjective it co-occurs with, and it intensifies the degree of the quality to the maximum value). Two groups can be distinguished: synonymous lexical superlative and metonymic/metaphoric scale association. In the first case the two adjectives are synonymous, but the intensifier is on a higher position in the scale, since it represents the lexical superlative of the first adjective.

- (9) Synonymous Lexical superlative  
 a. pieno *zeppo* 'very full', *lit.* full packed  
 b. fermo *impalato* 'totally still', *lit.* still impaled

This pattern gives rise to lexicalised constructions which are nowadays part of the Italian lexicon. In the case of metonymic/metaphoric scale association, we have again two adjectives. In this case the intensifier precedes the intensified. The two adjectives belong to different semantic fields, and the intensifier, through a metaphorical association, designates the highest degree of the scale of the first item (cf. Berlanda 2013):

- (10) Metonymic/metaphoric scale association  
 a. stanco *morto* 'dead tired', *lit.* tired dead  
 b. innamorato *pazzo* 'smitten', *lit.* in love mad

In the group of prototypical / highest degree constructions, the two subgroups differ between each other in terms of type of semantic relation encoded. In the first group, intensification is based on a relation of similarity involving semantic prototypicality and categorisation of the intensified item by prototypes, as in (11):

- (11) Prototypical intensifying constructions  
 a. *perfetto/vero/emerito* imbecille 'totally idiot', *lit.* perfect/true/emeritus idiot

In such cases the first adjective is the intensifier, while the second one represents the intensified lexeme: the construct  $X_{ADJ1\_INTENS} X_{ADJ2}$  represents the most prototypical value of  $X_{ADJ2}$ . The intensifier is used to underline the proximity to the prototypical value. The group concerning quantity intensification includes an adjective or an adverb in the first position and an adjective in the second one.

- (12) Quantitative\_highest degree intensifying constructions  
 a. *tutto matto* ‘completely mad’, *lit.* all mad  
 b. *totale demente* ‘completely idiot’, *lit.* total idiot

In such cases the first element makes the intensified item in the second slot gradual. It (metaphorically) refers to the highest degree of a certain quantity.

The last group of adjectival phrases is represented by coordinated adjectives (cf. Piunno 2021). This group generally includes two lexical units which have a similar meaning and are coordinated by a conjunction. In this case, the second adjective often reduplicates the meaning of the first one. This group includes both fully lexicalised phraseological constructions and partially lexically specified ones. The former (13) are syntactically invariable and also semantically fixed, the latter (14) are flexible to lexical variation.

- (13)  $X_{ADJ}+e+Y_{ADJ}$   
 a. *vivo e vegeto* ‘alive and kicking’, *lit.* alive and healthy  
 b. *grande e grosso* ‘big and strong’, *lit.* great and big/robust

- (14)  $puro+e+X_{ADJ}$   
 a. *puro e semplice/santo/naturale/sincero* ‘pure and simple/saint/natural/sincere’

In (14), the Italian CI *puro e X<sub>ADJ</sub>* (*lit.* pure and) represents the fixed slot; the variable slot can be filled with adjectival lexemes having a qualifying meaning, as the examples show. The construction acquires the peculiar meaning of ‘totally/extremely X<sub>ADJ</sub>’ in combination with this class of adjectives.

## 5. Conclusions

CIs include several kinds of phenomena, which need to be analysed according to different parameters. Among them, PFCIs in particular can be considered. These groups of constructions represent only a small set of possible intensifying strategies of Italian. They are partially schematic constructions having the same status as morphological intensifiers. Even though PFCIs are language specific, the phenomenon is not peculiar to a particular language, and would need further investigation from a broader typological perspective. An in-depth analysis of the set of Italian PFCIs is needed in comparative terms.

PFCIs are a challenge for computational and lexicographic works: they are difficult to detect in corpora, and they are also an under-represented phenomenon in lexicography. Due to their schematic nature and the lack of lexical units, it is often difficult to reconstruct them to a lexical entry (Dobrovól’skij 2022). However, the different classes of PFCIs would deserve the inclusion in lexicographic works, and lexicographic layouts and categories should be refined in order to take into account these combinatorial units.

Finally, this also has implications language teaching: it has been shown that the teaching of this type of word combination would be very useful not only in fostering comprehension, but also in developing an active competence of the learner (Imperiale and Schafroth 2016).

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