



Vagueness or ambiguity?

On the reflexive and reciprocal interpretation of Italian *si*-constructions

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Introduction

Italian conveys reflexive and reciprocal meanings using the same form:

- (1) Alex e Bob **si** criticano
Alex and Bob si criticize-3pl
i. 'Alex and Bob criticize themselves'
ii. 'Alex and Bob criticize each other'

Similar pattern attested in several unrelated languages; 29% of languages on a sample of 158 languages (Heine & Miyashita, 2008)

- What is the relation between reflexivity and reciprocity in such languages?

AMBIGUITY (= two different representations)

VAGUENESS (= one meaning covers both type of situations)

Content

1. Tests for vagueness or ambiguity
2. Proposal
3. Two types of reflexivity
4. The questionnaire
5. Discussion & Conclusion

Zeugma test: Italian reflexive/reciprocal is matter of ambiguity

♦ Zeugma test (Lakoff 1970, Tuggy, 1993, Cruse, 1999)

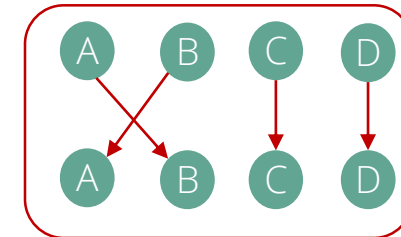
(2) #Mary is wearing a **light** coat, so is Jane
(If: Mary's coat is light-colored and Jane's coat is light-weight)
(Cruse 1999:106)

ambiguity

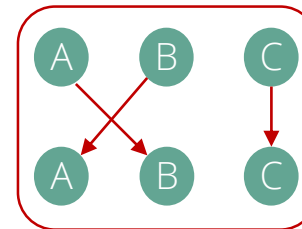
(3) Alex is a **child**, and so is Bob
(If: Alex is a girl and Bob is a boy)

vagueness

(4) #Alex e Bob **si** criticano, Carl e Dan anche
A and B si criticize-3pl, C and D too
(if: A and B criticize each other and C and D criticize themselves)



(5) #Alex e Bob **si** criticano, e Carl anche
A and B si criticize-3pl, and C too
(if: A and B criticize each other)



Identity test: Italian reflexive/reciprocal is matter of ambiguity

♦ **Identity test** (Zwicky & Sadock 1973, Cruse 1999)

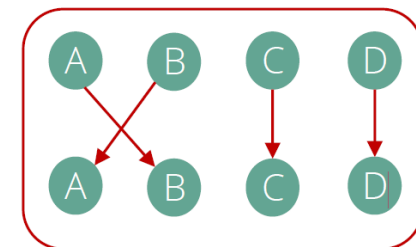
(6) #Mary and Jane are wearing a **light** coat
(If: Mary's coat is light-colored and Jane's coat is light-weight)

ambiguity

(7) Alex and Bob are **children**
(If: Alex is a girl and Bob is a boy)

vagueness

(8) #Alex, Bob, Carl e Dan **si** criticano
A B C and D si criticize-3pl
(If: A and B criticize each other and C and D criticize themselves)



Reflexivity and reciprocity: determining vagueness or ambiguity

Cheyenne:

(9) Ka'eškóne-ho é-axeen- **ahtse**-o'o
Child-pl 3-scratch-ahte- 3pl

'Some children scratched themselves/each other'

✓ true if some children scratched each other, some children scratched themselves

Murray (2008:464)

Reflexivity and reciprocity: determining vagueness or ambiguity

Italian:

- (10) I ragazzi **si** sono lavati
the boys si aux washed
'The students washed themselves/each other'
✓ true if some students washed each other and some students washed themselves
Cable (2014:15)
- (11) Gli studenti **si** sono dati i voti
The students si aux given the grades
'The students graded themselves/each other'
✓ true if some students graded each other and some students graded themselves
Cable (2014:18)

Proposal

(i) In certain cases, **'mixed' readings do emerge** in Italian *si*-constructions: they are available with verbs that have a lexical reflexive entry.

Verbs like *shave* or *wash* have an intrinsic meaning which does not require the agent and the patient to coincide, thus allowing a so-called 'mixed reading' with plural antecedents.

(ii) **'Mixed' readings are not available** in Italian with **transitive** verbs: *si*-constructions are *ambiguous* between reflexive and reciprocal interpretations.

Grammatical vs. Lexical reflexivity

◊ Grammatical reflexivity

English (12) Alex criticizes himself

Italian (13) Alex si critica
A si criticize-3sg
'Alex criticizes himself'

English (14) Alex, Bob and Carl criticize themselves

Italian (15) Alex, Bob e Carl si criticano
A B and C si criticize-3pl
'A, B and C criticize themselves/each other'

Grammatical vs. Lexical reflexivity

♦ **Lexical reflexivity** 'natural reflexives' (Kemmer 1993; Doron & Rappaport Hovav 2009)

English (16) Alex shaves

Italian (17) Alex si rade
A si shave
'Alex shaves (himself)'

x shaves A
If: A is collaborative

Passive collaborative
(P-Co)

English (18) Alex, Bob and Carl shave

Italian (19) Alex, Bob e Carl si radono
A B and C si shave
'A, B and C shave (themselves/each other)'

Grammatical vs. Lexical reflexivity

Grammatical and lexical reflexives have the same form in Italian:

grammatical

lexical

English (12) A criticizes himself (16) A shaves

Italian (13) A **si** critica (17) A **si** rade
A si criticize-3sg A si shave
'A criticizes himself' 'A shaves (himself)'

Grammatical vs. Lexical reflexivity

How do we identify lexical reflexivity in Italian?

Causative construction (Doron & Rappaport Hovav, 2009:96)

- (20) a. Ho fatto (*si) criticare (*si) Alex
aux made criticize Alex
'I caused Alex to be criticized'
- b. Ho fatto (*si) radere (*si) Alex
aux made shave Alex
i. 'I caused Alex to be shaved'
ii. 'I caused Alex to shave'

...back to the proposal

(i) In certain cases, **'mixed' readings do emerge** in *si*-constructions: they are available with verbs that have a **lexical reflexive** entry. Verbs like *shave* or *wash* have an intrinsic meaning which does not require the agent and the patient to coincide, thus allowing a so-called 'mixed reading' with plural antecedents.

Reflexive interpretation without *si* in causatives (e.g. *radere* 'to shave')
= lexical reflexive entry
→ mixed interpretation available

(ii) **'Mixed' readings are not generally available** in Italian with **transitive verbs**: *si*-constructions are ambiguous between reflexive and reciprocal interpretations.

No reflexive interpretation without *si* in causatives (e.g. *criticare* 'to criticize')
= lack of lexical reflexive entry
→ mixed interpretation unavailable

Questionnaire

two types of verbs:

- transitive verbs
- lexical (L) reflexive verbs

two types of reading:

- P-Co reading (= singular subject)
- mixed reading (= plural subject)

	L-reflexive	transitive
P-Co		
mixed		

Questionnaire

◊stimuli

5 transitive verbs:

- *Votare* (=to vote)
- *Ammirare* (=to admire)
- *Criticare* (=to criticize)
- *Punire* (=to punish)
- *Premiare* (=to give prize to)

5 lexical reflexive verbs:

- *Lavare* (=to wash)
- *Depilare* (=to epilate)
- *Vestire* (=to dress up)
- *Truccare* (=to put on make up)
- *Pettinare* (=to comb)

▪ TVJT: Participants were presented written stories accompanied by a sentence with one of the verbs, to be judged as TRUE or FALSE.

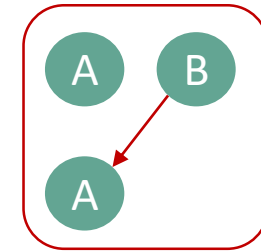
▪ Each verb was tested in mixed and P-Co scenarios.

Questionnaire

♦stimuli

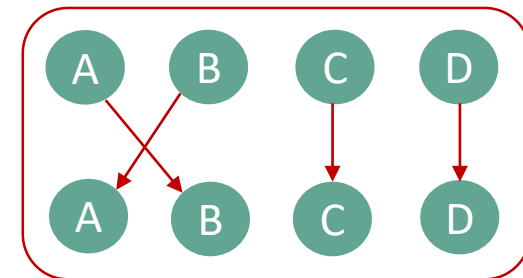
- P-Co scenario: a story with an individual A who has an action performed on herself by another individual B, while being collaborative. The story is accompanied by a sentence of the following form:

'A *si* verb'.



- 'mixed' scenario: a story with four individuals A, B, C and D. A and B are carrying out an action on each other, while C and D are carrying out an action on themselves. The story is accompanied by a sentence of the following form:

'A, B, C & D *si* verb'.



Questionnaire

♦ procedure

- Run online with LimeSurvey;
- The questionnaire lasted around 10 minutes;
- Each session contained 5 target and 10 filler items;
- Between participants design. Two versions (each divided in two sub-versions):
 - version 1 = transitive verbs in P-Co and L-reflexives in mixed scenarios
 - version 2 = transitive verbs in mixed scenarios and L-reflexives in P-Co.

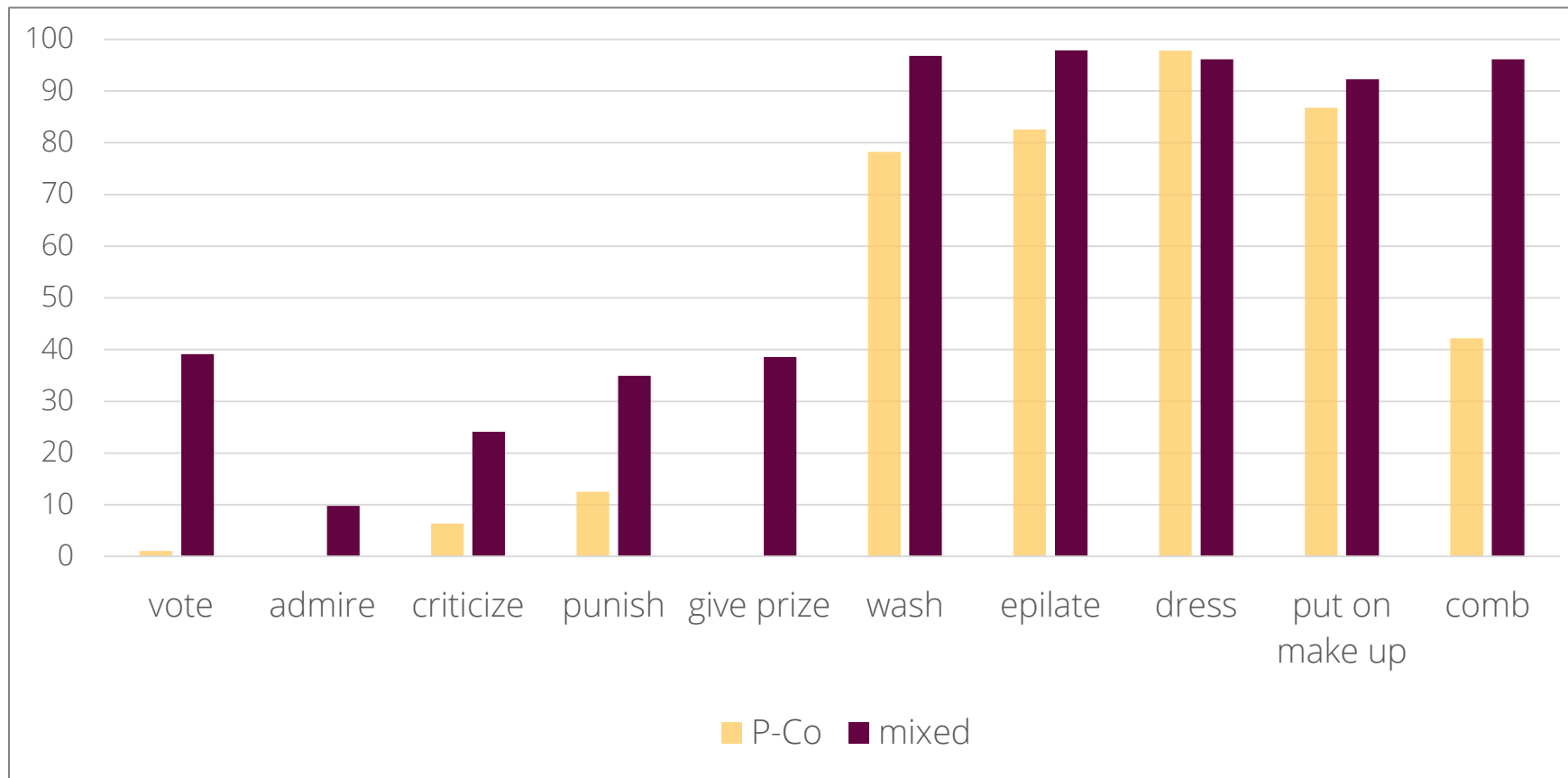
	L-reflexive	transitive
P-Co	vers. 1	vers. 2
mixed	vers. 2	vers. 1

♦ participants

527 participants in total, **373** selected according to (100%) accuracy on the fillers

Questionnaire

♦ results (acceptance in %)



Questionnaire

♦ **results** (acceptance in %)

	verb	P-Co	mixed
transitive	<i>votare</i> (=to vote)	1	39
	<i>ammirare</i> (=to admire)	0	10
	<i>criticare</i> (=to criticize)	6	24
	<i>punire</i> (=to punish)	13	35
	<i>premiare</i> (=to give prize to)	0	39
	Average:	4	29
Lexical reflexive	<i>lavare</i> (=to wash)	78	97
	<i>depilare</i> (=to epilate)	83	98
	<i>vestire</i> (=to dress)	98	96
	<i>truccare</i> (=to wear make up)	87	92
	<i>pettinare</i> (=to comb)	42	96
	Average:	78	96

Discussion

♦ The mixed interpretation of *si*-constructions with transitive verbs is not completely ruled out.

critical difference between transitive and lexical reflexive verbs.

speculation: the methodology might have somehow favored the acceptance of a mixed reading.

Discussion

- ♦ To what extent can this pattern be generalized to other (Romance) languages?
 - There are no data allowing a comparison or a generalization;
 - P-Co interpretations in principle available also in French and Hebrew (Doron & Rappaport Hovav 2009), as well as in English. The effect of lexical reflexivity on the availability of P-Co or mixed interpretation could hold across different languages, so its potential effect should be taken into consideration;
 - next steps: Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese.

Conclusions

- ♦ Italian *si*-constructions are ambiguous between reflexivity and reciprocity.
- ♦ The availability of a 'mixed' interpretation in some Italian *si*-clauses should not be taken as support for vagueness between reflexivity and reciprocity, but rather as a property characterizing lexical reflexive verbs.
- ♦ The effect of lexical reflexivity could hold cross-linguistically, so it should be taken into account in further research.

References

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