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


(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)

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

(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)

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

(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-axeén- **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)’

If: A is collaborative

$x$ shaves A
Passive collaborative
(P-Co)

(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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>grammatical</th>
<th>lexical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English</strong></td>
<td>(12) A criticizes himself</td>
<td>(16) A shaves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Italian** | (13) A *si* critica  
A *si* criticize-3sg  
‘A criticizes himself’ | (17) A *si* rade  
A *si* shave  
‘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)
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>L-reflexive</th>
<th>transitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P-Co</td>
<td>vers. 1</td>
<td>vers. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>vers. 2</td>
<td>vers. 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

◊ results (acceptance in %)

[Bar chart showing acceptance rates for various actions: vote, admire, criticize, punish, give prize, wash, epilate, dress, put on makeup, comb. The chart compares acceptance in 'P-Co' and 'mixed' categories.]

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## Questionnaire

◊ **results** (acceptance in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>verb</th>
<th>P-Co</th>
<th>mixed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>transitive</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>votare</em> (=to vote)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ammirare</em> (=to admire)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>criticare</em> (=to criticize)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>punire</em> (=to punish)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>premiare</em> (=to give prize to)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average:</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Lexical reflexive         |      |       |
| *lavare* (=to wash)       | 78   | 97    |
| *depilare* (=to epilate)  | 83   | 98    |
| *vestire* (=to dress)     | 98   | 96    |
| *truccare* (=to wear make up) | 87 | 92 |
| *pettinare* (=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


