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## **Multi-word Expressions between Syntax and the Lexicon: the Case of Italian Verb-particle Constructions\***

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on multi-word expressions, i.e. lexical units larger than a word that can bear both idiomatic and compositional meanings. Multi-word expressions are a privileged domain for the study of the syntax-lexicon relationship, which is also the main concern of current theoretical approaches such as Construction Grammar. In particular, the paper provides a synchronic and diachronic analysis of a particular (and quite neglected) kind of multi-word expression, i.e. Italian verb-particle constructions. The synchronic part provides a syntactic and semantic analysis of these complex predicates: their syntactic and semantic behaviour will be taken as evidence of their structural cohesion. The second part deals with the development of verb-particle constructions in Italian and provides original diachronic data that will shed new light on the issue. Finally, we will draw some theoretical conclusions from the analyses and show how the findings seem to speak in favour of a constructional approach to verb-particle constructions and to multi-word expressions in general.

### **1. Introduction: multi-word expressions and the lexicon**

This paper focuses on multi-word expressions<sup>1</sup> (MWE), i.e. lexical units larger than a word that can bear both idiomatic and compositional meanings. MWEs have received more and more attention in recent years (cf. for instance Moon 1998 and Wray 2002). From a theoretical point of

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<sup>1</sup> Here the term *multi-word expression* is used as a pre-theoretical label to include the range of phenomena that goes from collocations to fixed expressions.

view, due to their double status as phrasal structures and lexical items (which are usually identified with words), MWEs are a privileged domain for the study of the relationship between syntax proper (intended as free combination of words) and the lexicon. This very issue is the main concern of current theoretical approaches such as Construction Grammar (cf. Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor 1988, Goldberg 1995, 2003), which claims that “constructions” (i.e. a form/meaning pairings) are the basic units of linguistic knowledge. In this framework, syntax and the lexicon are not strictly separated, but rather we have a *continuum* that goes from morphemes to general syntactic configurations (cf. Goldberg 2003).

In this paper we will bring evidence in favour of a constructional view of language and, more specifically, we will claim that certain phrasal constructions may functionally correspond to morphologically complex words. In particular, we will apply this view to the case of Italian verb-particle constructions.

The paper is divided into three main parts. The first part will provide a synchronic syntactic and semantic analysis of these complex verbs, in order to underline their peculiar structural and semantic behaviour. In the second part, we will discuss the question of the diachronic development of these verbs in the Italian language and provide new data that will shed new light on the issue. Finally, we will pass on to theoretical considerations and try to interpret the findings in a constructional perspective.

## 2. Italian verb-particle constructions

So-called verb-particle constructions are very common in Germanic languages and have inspired much work in recent years (cf. Dehé *et al.* eds. 2002, and Booij and van Marle eds. 2003).<sup>2</sup> In Germanic languages, we can distinguish two main patterns:

- ‘separable complex verbs’ in German and Dutch, which are formed by a verb and a separable prefix or preverb; the latter is separated from the verb under certain syntactic conditions, like for example verb second movement in main clauses (e.g. Dutch *opzoeken* lit. **up** search ‘to look up’: *dat Jan de informatie opzoekt* ‘that John looks up the

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<sup>2</sup> In Europe we can find a productive system of ‘separable complex verbs’ also in Ugro-Finnic languages such as Hungarian and Estonian (cf. Ackerman and Webelhuth 1998).

information' vs. *Jan zoekt de informatie op* 'John looks up the information');<sup>3</sup>

- ‘particle verbs’ or ‘phrasal verbs’ in English, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Danish, which are formed by a verb followed by a modifying particle (e.g. English *eat up*: *John ate the cake up* or *John ate up the cake*).<sup>4</sup>

These constructions do not, however, seem to be very popular among the major Romance languages. Although we can find sporadic examples in French (e.g. *jeter dans* lit. throw in ‘to throw in’) or Spanish (e.g. *echar abajo* lit. put down ‘to demolish’), the pattern does not seem to be productive in these languages.

In this general picture, Italian is an exception. Actually, Italian displays a quite productive and rich system of verb-particle constructions (VPC)<sup>5</sup> with the structure in (1):

(1) [ [Verb] [Particle] ]  
where Particle = locative adverb<sup>6</sup>

Some examples follow in (2):

(2) [mettere]<sub>V</sub> [giù]<sub>ADV</sub> lit. put down 'to put down'  
 [mandare]<sub>V</sub> [avanti]<sub>ADV</sub> (un')impresa lit. send forward 'to run (a business)'  
 [fare]<sub>V</sub> [fuori]<sub>ADV</sub> lit. make out 'to kill'

However, despite their great popularity in present-day Italian, VPCs were first acknowledged as a widespread (and neglected) phenomenon less than ten years ago by Simone (1997).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, linguists (and lexicographers) have devoted, for some reason, little attention to these constructions.

<sup>3</sup> The data are from Blom (2005: 6), to which we refer for a comprehensive study of the phenomenon in Dutch. As for German, cf. Stiebels and Wunderlich (1994), Lüdeling (2001) and Müller (2002).

<sup>4</sup> As regards English, the literature is vast. Cf. in particular Bolinger (1971), Fraser (1976), Dixon (1982) and, more recently, den Dikken (1995) and Dehé (2002). Besides, see Toivonen (2003) for Swedish and Jansen (2002) for Danish, as well as Haiden (2001) for an overview of the phenomenon in the various Germanic languages.

<sup>5</sup> Though it is by far less rich and productive than in English, for example.

<sup>6</sup> Here the term *particle* is used as a descriptive, atheoretical notion.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Schwarze (1985) and Venier (1996).

Nevertheless, they seem to be all but a marginal phenomenon in present-day Italian: according to Iacobini (2003, to appear), most of the new verbs with locative meaning in Italian are VPCs. This led us to investigate them more closely and to look for the reasons behind their development.

### 3. The synchronic analysis

Italian VPCs display specific syntactic and semantic properties that testify to the high cohesion of the pattern. First of all, the combination of verb (V) and particle (P) is not as free as the sequences formed by verb plus prepositional phrase (V+PrepP) or verb plus adverbial phrase (V+AdvP). This means that the P does not form a separate constituent and that V and P form a complex predicate. Section 3.1 will illustrate this point. Secondly, the semantic behaviour of VPCs is rather varied and the metaphorical bleaching many of them underwent is further evidence of their cohesion. Section 3.2 will provide a semantic classification of VPCs.

#### 3.1 The syntactic and morphological behaviour of Italian VPCs

In what follows, I shall present a set of syntactic criteria (3.1.1–3.1.3) for identifying Italian VPCs and distinguishing them from V+AdvPs and V+PrepPs.<sup>8</sup> Section 3.1.4 will examine the nominalization of VPCs.

##### 3.1.1 Insertion of material between V and P and object shift

Only light non-argumental constituents can be inserted between V and P. With transitive verbs (example 3), the direct object normally follows the whole VPC (3a), so object shift, like in (3b), is not possible.<sup>9</sup> Light

<sup>8</sup> The following criteria are partially based on Fraser (1976: 2–4) and Simone (1997).

<sup>9</sup> This feature distinguishes Italian VPCs from English VPCs, which are well-known for their object shift properties, e.g. *I looked the information up* vs. *I looked up the information* (cf. e.g. Dehé 2002). Of course, this generalization might face some counterexamples:

(I) a. *Metti su la borsa*  
 put.imperative up the bag  
 ‘Put up the bag’

b. *Metti la borsa su*  
 put.imperative the bag up  
 ‘Put the bag up’

constituents can be interposed between V and P, like *subito* ‘immediately’ in (3c), but heavy constituents (e.g. *con accanimento* ‘with tenacity’ in 3d) cannot. Note that order changing with PrepPs (4a,b) or AdvPs (5a,b) does not cause any grammaticality problems.<sup>10</sup>

(3) 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 via*  
 c. *Luca ha lavato subito via la macchia*  
 d. \**Luca ha lavato con accanimento via la macchia*

(4) a. *Luca ha lavato la macchia con il sapone*  
 Luca have.3sg wash.part.past the stain with the soap  
 ‘Luca washed the stain with the soap’

b. *Luca ha lavato con il sapone la macchia*  
 Luca have.3sg wash.part.past with the soap the stain

(5) a. *Luca ha lavato la macchia subito*  
 Luca have.3sg wash.part.past the stain immediately  
 ‘Luca washed the stain immediately’

b. *Luca ha lavato subito la macchia*

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However, this possibility seems to involve borderline cases in which the P can be interpreted both as a direction marker and as the goal of the motion, like in (I). In these cases, object shift seems to be a strategy to stress the latter interpretation, like in (Ib) (cf. also section 3.1.2).

Of course, information structure has a role here (cf. e.g. Lambrecht 1994). In this respect, one of the reviewers noticed that *la macchia* ‘the stain’ is the focused information and thus needs to occur in final position, which is also supported by the fact that, adding *dai jeans* ‘from the jeans’ to (3b), the example becomes perfectly acceptable:

(II) *Luca ha lavato la macchia via dai jeans*  
 ‘Luca removed the stain from the jeans’

However, *la macchia* is not necessarily the focused information in (3a). Further, and most importantly, there are reasons to think that *via da* ‘away from’ forms a separate construction. Italian actually seems to have a set of complex locative relators of different kinds formed by prepositions and adverbs (cf. e.g. Jansen 2004, who proposes to consider this set of constructions as a “syntactic space” à la Croft 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, there may be pragmatic differences between (4a) and (4b) on the one hand, and (5a) and (5b) on the other, but all of them are acceptable, whereas (3b) is not.

In our view, the limited separability of V and P testifies to the high cohesiveness of their relationship and to the non-independent nature of the particle. Of course, the adverbial constituent-like origin of the particle is still visible at certain levels and gives rise to borderline cases like those illustrated in note 9. This results in a scale of acceptability, which also applies to other tests, as we will see in the following sections.

### 3.1.2 Left dislocation and topicalization

Whereas PrepPs and AdvPs can normally undergo extraposition (cf. for example 9 and 10 below), particles cannot be freely dislocated with constructions such as *è... che...* 'it is... that...', as examples (6b), (7b) and (8b) show, and cannot be freely topicalized (cf. examples 6c, 7c and 8c).

(6) a. *È andato dentro*  
 be.3sg go.part.past inside  
 'He went in'  
 b. *??È dentro che è andato*  
 c. *??Dentro è andato*

(7) a. *Abbiamo messo su il caffè*  
 have.3pl put.part.past up/on the coffee  
 'We put the coffee on'  
 b. *\*È su che abbiamo messo il caffè*  
 c. *\*Su abbiamo messo il caffè*

(8) a. *Maria manda avanti l'azienda di famiglia*  
 Maria send.3sg forward the business of family  
 'Maria runs the family business'  
 b. *\*È avanti che Maria manda l'azienda di famiglia*  
 c. *\*Avanti Maria manda l'azienda di famiglia*

Examples (7) and (8) are rather clear and unproblematic. Of course, the metaphorical (7) and idiomatic (8) meaning of the VPCs involved plays a role here.

The examples in (6), on the other hand, are borderline cases between VPCs and proper V+AdvP combinations. Consider for example (9) below.

(9) a. *È andato là dentro*  
 be.3sg go.part.past there inside  
 'He went inside over there'

b. *È là dentro che è andato*  
 c. *Là dentro è andato*

The presence of the deictic *là* 'there' tells us that *dentro* is here a true adverb, hence the whole AdvP *là dentro* 'there inside' can be either dislocated (9b) or topicalized (9c). Thus, whereas in (9) the adverbial phrase (*là*) *dentro* unambiguously indicates the concrete endpoint of the process of going, in (6) *dentro* can have a double interpretation: of course it indicates the path of the generic verb of motion *andare* 'to go' (cf. also section 3.2), but the transparent semantics of the combination and the ambiguous categorial nature of the particle *dentro*<sup>11</sup> can favour the concrete endpoint interpretation, which is why (6b) and (6c) have a double question mark.<sup>12</sup> In order to see the difference to a *true* adverbial use, compare example (10), in which *dentro* can normally be topicalized (10b).

(10) a. *La casa dentro è pulita*  
 the house inside be.3sg clean  
 'The house is clean inside'

b. *Dentro la casa è pulita*

Summing up, the above considerations further support the idea of a *continuum* of constructions and of a scale of acceptability. The extraction of the particle is influenced not only by proper semantic reasons, but also by the ambiguous categorial status of some particles.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, the categorial ambiguity of Ps consists in their adverbial nature (cf. also section 3.1.1 and note 9). Moreover, most elements that function as particles have homonymous prepositional counterparts. The close diachronic connection between adverbs, prepositions and particles/prefixes/preverbs in Indo-European languages is pointed out, among others, by Lehmann (1995).

<sup>12</sup> This explanation in terms of categorial interpretation is just one of the possible viewpoints. Actually, the data might also be interpreted in terms of the "referential value" of the elements involved. As one of the reviewers noted, *là dentro* in (9) has a much higher referential value than *dentro* in (6). Indeed, this is a consequence of the shift from a pure adverbial function, which is syntactically free, to a modifying function, which is syntactically more bound.

### 3.1.3 Coordination

The third and last syntactic test we will adopt to measure the cohesiveness of VPCs is coordination. As we can see, PrepPs (11a) and AdvPs (11b) can be freely coordinated, since they behave like separate constituents.

(11) a. *Marco sta dietro a Giovanni e davanti a Sandra*  
 Marco stay.3sg behind to Giovanni and in front of to Sandra  
 'Marco is behind Giovanni and in front of Sandra'

b. *Marco ha pulito la casa dentro e fuori*  
 Marco have.3sg clean.part.past the house inside and ouside  
 'Marco has cleaned the house inside and outside'

On the contrary, it seems that particles cannot be coordinated as freely as PrepPs and AdvPs, as the examples in (12) illustrate. However, (12) also shows that things are rarely clear-cut. While (12a) seems completely out, (12b) is somehow more acceptable, and (12c) almost fine.

(12) a. \**Sara ha portato fuori la bici e poi su la spesa*  
 Sara have.3sg take.part.past out the bike and then up the shopping  
 'Sara took out the bycicle and then up the shopping'

b. ??*Sara ha portato fuori la bici e Luca dentro la spesa*  
 Sara have.3sg take.part.past out the bike and Luca in the shopping  
 'Sara took out the bycicle and Luca up the shopping'

c. ?*Sara ha messo dentro la bici e fuori la spazzatura*  
 Sara have.3sg put.part.past in the bike and out the trash  
 'Sara put the bike in and the trash out'

In conclusion, the coordination test confirms the peculiar status of particles and the existence of a scale of acceptability. Before passing on to the semantic properties of VPCs, we will briefly discuss their behaviour in relation to morphological operations such as nominalization.

### 3.1.4 Nominalization

Simone (1997) claims that Italian VPCs can be nominalized only by means of a nominal infinitive. Actually, in cases such as (13), in which the verbal

element is followed by a PrepP, the V can normally turn into either a nominal infinitive (13b) or a deverbal nominal (*corsa* ‘run’) (13c).

(13) a. *La gente è corsa fuori dallo stadio*  
 the people be.3sg run.part.past out from.the stadium  
 ‘The people ran out of the stadium’

b. *Il correre della gente fuori dallo stadio*  
 the run.inf of.the people out from.the stadium

c. *La corsa della gente fuori dallo stadio*  
 the run of.the people out from.the stadium

In contrast, with VPCs (like in 14), we cannot convert the V to the corresponding noun (14b), but we have to nominalize the whole VPC by means of the nominal infinitive (14c). Also note that the limited separability of V and P (cf. section 3.1.1) is also true of infinitives: as showed in (14d), it is not possible to insert the phrase *di Gianni* between the infinitive and the particle.

(14) a. *Gianni è corso via subito dopo la partita*  
 Gianni be.3sg run.part.past away immediately after the game  
 ‘Gianni ran away immediately after the game’

b. \**La corsa via di Gianni subito dopo la partita*  
 the run away of Gianni immediately after the game

c. *Il correre via di Gianni subito dopo la partita*  
 the run.inf away of Gianni immediately after the game

d. \**Il correre di Gianni via subito dopo la partita*

We must add that the vast majority of the verbal bases of Italian VPCs (which are basically motion verbs) present only one type of nominalization based on the feminine past participle of the verb, which can be both regular (*tenere – tenuta* ‘to keep – keeping’, *venire – venuta* ‘to come – coming’) or irregular (*mettere – messa* ‘to put – putting’, *correre – corsa* ‘to run – running/run’).<sup>13</sup> Hence, verbal bases already feature limited nominalizing

<sup>13</sup> The irregular type is a Latin legacy. However, there is a debate on the exact source of this form. For discussion cf. Gaeta (2002: 150).

possibilities. However, when occurring within a VPC, verbs seem to lose even that possibility, as (14) shows.<sup>14</sup>

In our view, this illustrates once more the cohesion of the construction. In fact, the formation of the deverbal noun seems to be blocked when the verb enters a VPC. One possible reason could be that the verb, becoming part of a new complex lexeme, does not inherit part of the information contained in its lexical entry, including the link to the correspondent derivational form that was associated with the verb alone. Consequently, the VPC will look for an alternative way of nominalization, and nominal infinitive, due to its applicability to any verbal entry, seems to be the best possible candidate.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2 A semantic classification of Italian VPCs

From a semantic point of view, Italian VPCs function as single lexical items. A sign of this semantic cohesion is the metaphorical bleaching which many of these constructions have undergone, as well as the presence of completely idiomatic forms.

We can identify three main semantic classes of VPCs:

- a. **intensification:** the particle may intensify a piece of information (i.e. the path or direction of motion) that is already contained in the verb itself, see the examples in (15):

(15) <i>uscire fuori</i>	lit. to exit out	‘to go out’
<i>entrare dentro</i>	lit. to enter in	‘to go in’
<i>scappare via</i>	lit. to escape away	‘to escape’

- b. **direction marking:** when added to generic (especially manner) verbs of motion, the particle may function as a direction marker:

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, one might come across some counterexamples in language use, and actually, a limited set of nominalizations such as *la venuta giù* ‘the coming down’ or *l’andata giù* ‘the going down’ sound weird but not completely unacceptable. However, we carried out an informal Google search and we found no results for these and also other examples.

<sup>15</sup> On the nominal infinitive cf. Simone (2004). It is worth noting that in English the most common ways of nominalizing particle verbs are also the more “neutral”, i.e. conversion or substantivized gerunds in *-ing*.

(16) *mettere giù*      lit. put down      ‘to put down’  
*tirare su*      lit. pull up      ‘to pull up(wards)’  
*saltare dentro*      lit. jump inside      ‘to jump in’

c. **metaphorical meaning:** the VPC may assume a metaphorical non-compositional meaning. Metaphorical VPCs often derive from correspondent locative VPCs (see i and ii, examples 17 and 18), though we can also find a few completely idiomatic cases (iii) that do not have a locative counterpart, like (19). Thus, we can identify three subgroups:

i. **transparent metaphors:** the relationship between the locative VPC and its metaphorical counterpart is transparent and well recognizable:

(17) *buttare via*      lit. throw away      ‘to throw away’ and ‘to squander/waste’

ii. **opaque metaphors:** the relationship between the two VPCs is more opaque, but still somehow recognizable:

(18) *portare avanti*      lit. bring forward      ‘to bring forth’ and ‘to run (a business)’

iii. **completely idiomatic forms:** the VPC has a completely idiomatic meaning:

(19) *fare fuori*      lit. do out      ‘to kill’

This threefold classification can be easily related to the notions of *encoding* and *decoding idioms*, originally found in Makkai (1972) and then adopted by Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor (1988). The former are (more or less interpretable) idioms that the speaker pronounces with no decoding effort (e.g. *answer the door*), while the latter are expressions that cannot be interpreted by the listener without previous knowledge of what it means (e.g. *kick the bucket*). Hence, all decoding idioms are also encoding idioms, but not vice versa. Going back to VPCs, it is quite clear that transparent metaphors are only encoding idioms and completely idiomatic forms are

also decoding idioms, whereas opaque metaphors stay somewhere in-between these two extremes.<sup>16</sup>

Besides this general semantic classification that underlines both the primary function of particles as locative modifiers and the metaphorical bleaching to which VPCs can be subject, it would appear that some particles have developed a particular aspectual meaning. Consider the example in (3), repeated here as (20a), and the corresponding sentence without the particle (20b).

(20) 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 (20a) the particle *via* seems to convey a meaning of *accomplishment*: the focus is on the result of the washing process. By contrast, in (20b) the focus is on the process itself. Therefore, while in the latter example we do not know if Luca succeeded in removing the stain or not, in (20a) it is clear that the stain is not there anymore. Iacobini and Masini (2005) have recently showed that some Italian Ps have in fact acquired an aspectual, or rather actional, meaning. The authors claim that the actional contribution of Ps is primarily related to the kind of path they express, so that we obtain an iconic relation between the spatial movement denoted by the P (and by the whole VPC) and the event structure. This of course stresses once more the close connection that exists between V and P.

### 3.3 *Interim conclusions*

The previous sections were meant to illustrate that Italian VPCs are not a simple juxtaposition of a verb and a locative adverb. In particular, the syntactic tests in 3.1 aimed at showing that V and P are not to be considered separate constituents, but rather parts of a unique verbal

<sup>16</sup> In a similar way, we could link our classification and the encoding-decoding notions to the distinction in Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994: 491) between *idiomatically combining expressions* (e.g. *take advantage*), "whose meanings – while conventional – are distributed among their parts", and purely *idiomatic phrases* (e.g. *kick the bucket*), "which do not contribute their meanings to their components".

construction where the V functions as the head and the P as a modifier, or ‘satellite’ in Talmy’s (1985) terminology. In fact, VPCs display extraordinary syntactic and morphological properties that set them apart from canonical V+AvdPs and V+PrepPs, i.e. restrictions concerning the insertion of material between V and P (cf. 3.1.1), the extraction of P through dislocation or topicalization (cf. 3.1.2), the coordination of Ps (3.1.3) and finally the nominalization of VPCs (3.1.4).

The scale of acceptability that seems to characterize the examples given in 3.1 is mainly due to the ambiguous categorial nature of particles, which are closely related to both prepositions and adverbs. Moreover, ambiguity and graduality also extend to the construction itself, since it seems to be but one particular instantiation of a more general pattern that involves a verb and a relational element, as also suggested by Jansen (2004).

Syntactic cohesion is also mirrored at the semantic level, which by the way contributes in a crucial way to the determination of the syntactic behaviour of VPCs (cf. examples 6–8). Ps mostly combine with motion verbs and their primary function is to express (or stress) the path of the motion. However, VPCs have developed metaphorical meanings that are different from the basic locative ones, and which seem to be derived from them (see point c in the semantic classification in 3.2). Besides, Ps seem to have undergone a further development from locative to actional meanings (cf. Iacobini and Masini 2005), which is also true of English phrasal verbs (cf. Brinton 1988). Finally, the semantic cohesion of these verbal constructions is also testified to by the fact that some metaphorical VPCs may happen to have synthetic quasi-synonyms, like for example *allevare* (synthetic form) – *tirare su* (VPC) ‘to bring up’. The main difference between the two is one of register: *tirare su* is in fact the colloquial variant of *allevare*.

These considerations lead us to think that VPCs are a well-established and widespread pattern in present-day Italian and that they cannot be considered a purely syntactic juxtaposition of two elements, but rather conventionalized constructions placed somewhere in-between syntax proper and the lexicon. In other words, they are *phrasal lexical items*.

A similar conclusion is reached by Booij (2002a,b) with respect to ‘separable complex verbs’ (SCV) in Dutch. Booij’s contributions are part of the lengthy discussion in the literature about the (morphological vs. syntactic) nature of particle verbs in Germanic languages. Of course, the

discussion refers to an architecture of the language faculty that is modular in nature.

The basic points of the debate are as follows.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, the separability of these combinations has been interpreted as a sign of their syntactic nature and has led some scholars to look for structural solutions, like the Small Clause analysis (cf. e.g. den Dikken 1995). On the other hand, their semantic/aspectual properties and their possibility to function as a base for morphological operations like nominalization (cf. section 3.1.4) or the formation of adjectives (e.g. *break in* → *break-in-able*, from Miller 1993: 132), were taken by other scholars as evidence for their word-like status.<sup>18</sup>

Booij (2002a,b) claims that we can do justice to the phrase-like and word-like properties of SCVs only if we consider them as intermediate structures between phrases and words. According to Booij, the creation of SCVs in Dutch can be referred to as a case of “periphrastic word formation”. This mechanism is an alternative (phrasal) means to derivational morphology for the creation of new lexical items, just as periphrastic constructions can realize functional categories like tense or aspect (cf. also Spencer 2001).

In order to account for the semi-productivity of some SCVs, Booij proposes to consider them as “constructional idioms”, i.e. schemas consisting of a specific particle (*door* in the example below) followed by an open slot to be filled with a verb (21a).<sup>19</sup> The schema is also associated with a specific semantics (21b).

(21) a. [door [x]v]v  
 b. ‘to go on V-ing’

As Booij declares, his proposal is perfectly in line with the basic tenets of Construction Grammar. As is well known, constructional approaches advocate for a non-strict division between syntax, morphology and the lexicon, between grammar and idiosyncratic facts. In this framework, language entirely consists of constructions that differ in size, complexity, and productivity. Consequently, a constructional approach can easily

<sup>17</sup> For details cf. the introduction in Dehé *et al.* eds. (2002).

<sup>18</sup> Of course, the whole discussion originates from the erroneous assumptions that words coincide with lexical items and that everything which is phrasal in nature should be accounted for in purely syntactic terms.

<sup>19</sup> For the notion of *constructional idiom*, cf. also Jackendoff (1997, 2002) and Goldberg (1996).

account for the existence of lexical items that are phrasal in nature. Moreover, it can account both for idiomatic phrasal lexical items and for semi-productive, partially lexically-fixed patterns that give rise to new items.

In our view, a similar line of reasoning can also apply to Italian VPCs. For some reason, the general syntactic pattern [[Verb][Locative adverb]] has become a means for the formation of new complex predicates in Italian, i.e. has acquired a new (more lexical) function. If this is true, we might want to know the reasons for the emergence of this new function. This leads us straight into the next section, in which we will investigate the diachronic development of Italian VPCs. As we will see, the findings of the diachronic analysis will turn out to support the view just outlined.

## 4. The diachronic analysis

### 4.1 The development of Italian VPCs: comparing hypotheses

As already noted in section 2, Italian VPCs, contrary to their Germanic counterparts, are a quite neglected research topic, the most relevant contribution being Simone (1997).

In his work, Simone raises the question of the relationship between Standard Italian and Italian dialects and claims that VPCs do not seem to be an original Tuscan heritage, but rather might have entered the Italian language through North Italian dialects, where these constructions seem to be widely attested.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, according to this view, which we will call the *contact hypothesis*, the development of VPCs in Standard Italian is due not to an autonomous development but to a “loan” from dialectal varieties. Let’s discuss this hypothesis in more detail.

A noticeable feature of VPCs is that they especially seem to be used in the spoken language, due to the high frequency of the elements involved and to the small size and great “cognitive pregnancy” of the particle (cf.

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<sup>20</sup> Documentation of the occurrence of VPCs in North Italian dialects can be found in Schwarze (1985), where it is noticed that native speakers of Milan and Veneto dialects tend to realize verbs of motion by means of analytic forms, and especially in Vicario (1997), which is completely devoted to the study of VPCs in the Friulian dialect. According to my intuition as a native speaker of the Romagnolo dialect (spoken in the eastern part of the Emilia-Romagna region), VPCs are well attested in this variety.

Jansen 2004).<sup>21</sup> Jansen (2004) also notes that the establishment of Standard Italian as a spoken language goes back only to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf. De Mauro *et al.* 1993). Before then, people would mainly use dialect. Jansen therefore proposes that, during this process of establishment, features that were typical of the dialects passed on to regional varieties and from there finally entered the national standard variety. This thesis (which the author calls the *diamesic hypothesis*) is claimed to complete the contact hypothesis.

In conclusion, the contact hypothesis claims that Italian VPCs, which are typical of spoken language, are a product of the influence of North Italian dialects and entered the Italian language together with the (late) establishment of a standard spoken variety.

Even though this hypothesis is quite appealing, the high integration of VPCs in the linguistic system of Italian led us to look for possible internal reasons for their development.

It seems to us that a second hypothesis can be formulated, which we will call the *typological-structural hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, the emergence of VPCs is the result of an *autonomous* development internal to the Italian language, mainly due to both typological and structural factors.

The former factors consist in the consequences of the well-known typological change from Latin to Italian and can be summarized as follows:

- the passage from a modifier-head (MH) to a head-modifier (HM) order, which entailed:
  - the word order change from Latin (SOV) to Italian (SVO);
  - a general tendency towards postmodification;
- the loss of the Latin case system and the emergence of prepositions for the expression of syntactic relations, which entailed a higher degree of analyticity of the language.

As for structural factors, the emergence of VPCs appears to be related to the progressive decline of the Latin system of verbal prefixes, in particular

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<sup>21</sup> We must say that, even though it is generally acknowledged that VPCs are colloquial in style and are preferably used in the spoken language, there is, to the best of my knowledge, no specific study on the issue.

their locative meanings, as noticed by Iacobini (2003, to appear). Of course, this decline is accompanied by the gradual loss of transparency of Latin prefixed forms (cf. Vicario 1997: 129 and Tekavčić 1972: §948.3, §1345).

This view seems to be supported by a number of different sources. First, Tekavčić (1972: §1951–1952) states that Latin prefixed verbs such as *circumdāre* ‘to surround’ lost their productivity in neo-Latin languages and were superseded by “V+Adv compounds” such as the Italian forms *pensarci su* lit. think.about up ‘to think about’, *mettere addosso* lit. put on ‘to put on’, *venire incontro* lit. come towards ‘to come greet’, *mandar giù* lit. send down ‘to swallow’, *far fuori* lit. make out ‘to kill’, which were to become “the main substitute of prefixed verbs in Latin” (cf. also Tekavčić 1972: §948.3).<sup>22</sup> Second, the same kind of hypothesis is put forward by Vicario (1997) to account for the rise of VPCs in the Friulian dialect (spoken in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, in the north-eastern part of Italy). According to the author, the development of these verbs is mainly due to the typological change from Latin to Friulian, which prompted a change of verbal modifiers from prefixes to postverbal particles. Finally, we may note that the same sort of change from a prefixal system to a postverbal modification system also occurred in the passage from Old English to Middle English, when the old verbal prefixes gradually disappeared and postverbal particles emerged, giving rise to the phrasal verbs of contemporary English (cf. Brinton 1988).

In conclusion, the typological-structural hypothesis claims that the development of VPCs in Italian is mainly due to structural changes that took place in the passage from Latin to Italian. The basic reason for the emergence of VPCs would lie in the loss of the locative values of Latin verbal prefixes (Iacobini 2003, to appear), which led Italian to find an alternative means to prefixation for the expression of directional meanings. At the same time, the emergence of a postverbal element functioning as a modifier was made possible by the typological change from MH to HM and the greater analyticity of the Italian language.

<sup>22</sup> A similar statement can be found in Durante (1981: 66), who argues that, as the SVO word order took on, prefixed verbs (like for example *subeo* ‘to pass under’) were no longer in accordance with the new structure of the language and thus stopped being productive. That was why prefixed verbs were superseded by analytic forms like e.g. *ire susu(m)* for *subire* ‘to go from below upwards’. Further still, the postverbal particle solution seems to have been the only way out. As noticed by one of the reviewers, the MH → HM change might have entailed a passage prefix → suffix, but this was in fact blocked by the rich inflectional morphology of the verb, which is entirely suffixal.

## 4.2 The diachronic analysis: methodology and findings

In order to find evidence of an autonomous development of VPCs internal to the Italian language, we decided to look for VPCs in Ancient Italian texts. The corpus used is Dante's *opera omnia*, which dates back to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, we made use of tools such as the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (henceforth ED) and the OVI textual database.<sup>23</sup>

The first step was identifying the set of locative adverbs to be found in Dantesque texts. Next, we examined the single entries of the adverbs in the ED in order to find their verbal occurrences, and finally we checked the type and number of occurrences in the OVI database.<sup>24</sup>

The search gave the following results: all in all, we found 121 VPCs (with 216 token occurrences), with a total of 68 verbal bases and 21 particles. The particles occurring with the highest number of bases are *giù* 'down' (occurring with 19 verbs), *su* 'up' (18) and *via* 'away' (10), while the bases occurring with the highest number of particles are generic verbs of motion such as *andare* 'to go' (occurring with 12 particles), *mettere* 'to put' (7), *venire* 'to come' (7), *trarre* 'to pull/grab' (4) and *portare* 'to take/bring' (4). Overall, the picture is similar to contemporary Italian, in which the most frequent bases are either simple verbs of motion (such as *andare* 'to go', *mettere* 'to put'), or verbs with a generic meaning (e.g. *essere* 'to be').

The most frequent VPCs found in the corpus are motion verbs in which the P either functions as a direction marker or as an intensifier: *andare suso/su* lit. go up 'to go up(wards), to turn up(wards)' (10 occurrences), *tòrrre via* lit. remove away 'to destroy, to eliminate, to exclude' (8), *andare via* lit. go away 'to go away, to leave' (8), *cadere giuso/giù* lit. fall down 'to fall down, to drop, to vanish' (7), *tornare suso/su* lit. come back up 'to come back up(wards), to rise' (5), *scendere giù/giùe/giuso* lit. descend down 'to go down(wards), to fall' (5), *montare*

<sup>23</sup> Available on the website: <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/OVI/>.

<sup>24</sup> The identification of VPCs was conducted in accordance with two basic syntactic criteria: obligatory V+P order and no insertion of material between V and P. As for VPCs separated by very light constituents (such as adverbs or clitic pronouns), they were included only if there was at least another non-discontinuous example of the same VPC.

*su* lit. mount up ‘to mount up, to go upwards’ (5). These VPCs are exemplified in Table 1.<sup>25</sup>

VPCs	Glosses and translations	Examples
<i>andare suso/su</i>	go up(wards) ‘to go up’	Purgatorio IV 114 <i>Or va tu sù che se’ valente!</i> ‘Then you go on up who are so sturdy! ’
<i>tòrre via</i>	remove away ‘to destroy’	Inferno X 91–92 <i>Ma fu’ io solo, là dove sofferto / fu per ciascun di tòrre via Fiorenza</i> ‘[B]ut I was alone there where all agreed to make an end of Florence’
<i>andare via</i>	go away ‘to go away’	Purgatorio XIV 124 <i>Ma va via, Tosco, omai</i> ‘But, Tuscan, go on your way now’
<i>cadere giuso/giù</i>	fall down ‘to fall down’	Inferno XXV 121 <i>l’un si levò e l’altro cadde giuso</i> ‘the one rose upright and the other fell down’
<i>tornare suso/su</i>	come back up ‘to rise’	Inferno XXI 46 <i>Quel s’attuffò, e tornò sù convolto</i> ‘The sinner sank under and rose again, rump up’
<i>scendere giù/giùe/giuso</i>	descend down ‘to fall’	Paradiso I 136–138 <i>Non dei più ammirar, se bene stimo, / lo tuo salir, se non come d’un rivo / se d’alto monte scende giuso ad imo</i> ‘You should not wonder more at your rising, if I deem aright, than at a stream that falls from a mountain top to the base’
<i>montare su</i>	mount up ‘to mount up’	Purgatorio XVI 49 <i>Per montar sù dirittamente vai.</i> ‘For mounting up you are going aright.’

**Table 1.** The most frequent VPCs found in Dantesque texts.<sup>26</sup>

From a semantic point of view, the situation resembles the present-day classification (cf. section 3.2). Besides the purely locative meaning

<sup>25</sup> As one may notice from the translations just given, a number of VPCs proved to be polysemic. In Table 1, the meaning refers to the specific example in the right column.

<sup>26</sup> The free translations of the examples are taken from *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Charles Singleton.

expressed by the majority of VPCs (e.g. *correre via* lit. run away ‘to run away’ or *gittare giù* lit. throw down ‘to throw down’), we found completely idiomatic cases (such as *disporre giù* lit. place down ‘to leave aside’ or *porre giù* lit. put down ‘to give up’) and polysemous examples conveying both a concrete and a more metaphorical meaning (such as *andare dietro*, that can mean ‘to follow’ – in a concrete or abstract sense – and ‘to aim at’).

In conclusion, our study showed that VPCs were not only present, but also well-established in Dante’s writings. However, even if Dante is regarded as the father of the Italian language, one might argue that a great part of his works is not in prose and, therefore, data might be affected by metrical reasons. In order to counter such doubts, we also conducted an informal search of Boccaccio’s texts, which are mostly in prose. The study revealed that VPCs are well represented also in Boccaccio’s prose, thus demonstrating that these constructions were a well-known resource in Ancient Italian texts. By way of illustration, we provide in (22) the list of VPCs found in the *Proemio*, the introduction and the first novella of the *Decameron*.

(22) *andare attorno*      lit. go around      ‘to wander around’  
*entrare dentro*      lit. enter in      ‘to go in’  
*mandare fuori*      lit. send out      ‘to oust’  
*togliere via*      lit. remove away      ‘to eliminate’  
*uscire fuori*      lit. exit out      ‘to go out’

In general, we can say that the findings of the diachronic study shed new light on the origin of Italian VPCs and speak against the contact hypothesis as illustrated in section 4.1: VPCs were already attested in Ancient Italian texts and, therefore, are indeed part of the Tuscan heritage of the Italian language. In our view, the findings also speak in favour of the typological-structural hypothesis: the presence of VPCs in Dante and Boccaccio supports the view of the autonomous development of these constructions in Italian. Further still, the high number of VPCs expressing locative meanings might be an indication of the need to compensate for the loss of Latin prefixed verbs with locative meaning.

Given that VPCs date back to the origins of the Italian language, i.e. 13<sup>th</sup> century Tuscan, another interesting issue arises. Although nowadays VPCs are generally considered to be a widespread analytic resource in Standard Italian as well as in Northern and Central dialects, they seem to be

less productive in Southern dialects.<sup>27</sup> If this proved to be true, one might think that VPCs emerged in the northern-central part of Italy due to the contact with Germanic populations and languages in the Middle Ages, a hypothesis that we might call *Germanic hypothesis*.

For instance, Rohlfs (1969: §916) suggests that the item *via* ‘away’ in Italian constructions such as *buttar via* lit. throw away ‘to throw away’ or *portar via* lit. take away ‘to take away’, could be a calque from German. However, Durante (1981: 89) argues against this hypothesis and says that *ire viā* was already attested in Prisciano (5<sup>th</sup> –6<sup>th</sup> century AD).<sup>28</sup>

Also Vicario (1997), in his book on Friulian VPCs, takes this hypothesis into consideration, due to the close contact of the Friuli region with the German speaking area. However, he claims that the influence of neighbouring languages such as German, Slovene, Croat and partly Hungarian, might have played a role in the establishment of VPCs, but cannot be considered the main cause of their emergence; rather, their development is mainly due to the typological change from Latin to Friulian.

We might add that the typology of particle verbs to be found in the Central European area is quite different from the one we find in Italian. As we already noticed in section 2, German and Dutch present the ‘separable complex verb’ pattern,<sup>29</sup> whereas Italian VPCs are much more similar to the English type.<sup>30</sup> Besides, as already noticed, the similarities with English go even further: both English and Italian feature the emergence of postverbal particles and the decline of verbal prefixes, and in both languages particles seem to have developed aspectual values out of locative ones. This similarity, which cannot of course be due to contact reasons, is better understood if we trace it to a more general explanation in structural and typological terms.

In conclusion, we do not deny that the influence of Germanic languages might have played a role in the establishment of these

<sup>27</sup> There are no specific studies supporting this assumption, but only intuitions I collected from some native speakers of the Southern varieties. A survey of the presence of these constructions in the various dialects of the Italian peninsula is still missing, and certainly desirable.

<sup>28</sup> A search by means of the OVI database revealed that examples of VPCs with *via* and few other particles can also be found in 13<sup>th</sup> century southern Italian texts such as the sonnets by the Sicilian poets. However, these data are not completely reliable, as the texts are quite restricted in number and they are all sonnets, and, moreover, many poets of the Sicilian school were not from Sicily.

<sup>29</sup> The same pattern occurs in Hungarian as well.

<sup>30</sup> I owe this observation to Geert Booij (p. c.).

constructions, since there is too little evidence to decide whether this hypothesis is right or not. Incidentally, if this hypothesis proved to be right, it would not necessarily be in stark contrast to the typological-structural hypothesis supported here, since there might have been a concurrence of circumstances. However, we think that at present the typological-structural hypothesis is the best answer and that the typological and structural reasons illustrated above take priority over areal factors.

## 5. Theoretical implications

In this section we will try to give a theoretical account of VPCs. We propose that VPCs (and MWE in general) can be optimally accounted for in a Construction Grammar (CxG) framework.<sup>31</sup> In particular, we will try to interpret the findings of the synchronic and diachronic analyses in the light of some of the basic tenets of the CxG theory.

Firts of all, as we anticipated in the introduction, CxG claims that the ‘construction’ is the basic notion of linguistic knowledge and can be defined as a form/meaning pairing that can differ in size, complexity and abstractness. This entails that constructions include words as well as more abstract patterns. The consequence is that “[t]he totality of our knowledge of language is captured by a network of constructions: a ‘construct-i-con’” (Goldberg 2003: 219). Of course, this is a non-modular view of language that implies a non-strict division between syntax, morphology and the lexicon. Given this, the presence of *phrasal lexical items*, intended as intermediate constructions with phrasal structure and lexical meaning and function, is not only allowed, but even predicted by CxG.

Secondly, CxG is a full-coverage theory, which means that it does not posit any principled distinction between idiomatic and fully productive phenomena. Again, this accounts for both completely idiomatic VPCs (like e.g. *far fuori* lit. make out ‘to kill’), and for semi-productive cases, such as

<sup>31</sup> It is well-known that, nowadays, *Construction Grammar* is a cover term that hosts many different, though basically similar, approaches. Apart from the traditional current headed by Charles Fillmore and his colleagues (Fillmore, Kay and O’Connor 1988, Kay and Fillmore 1999), we should at least mention Adele Goldberg’s approach (Goldberg 1995, 2003), which derived from the Fillmorean tradition but has been greatly influenced by Lakoff’s studies, Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 2003) and Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001). We refer to Croft and Cruse (2004) for a survey of the different constructional approaches and to Östman and Fried (eds.) (2005) for an overview of the possible theoretical extensions of CxG. Here we will adopt the terms *Construction Grammar* and *constructional approach* in their broader acception and we will refer to the basic tenets presented in Goldberg (2003).

verb-particle patterns in which the P position is lexically specified and the V position is an open slot to be filled with a limited set of verbs that fulfil certain conditions (cf. Booij's proposal for Dutch in section 3.3, example 21). Let us consider for example the case in (23). Here the particle *via* 'away' conveys a constant meaning of 'accomplishment',<sup>32</sup> which contributes to the general semantics of the construction (23c), while the V position remains open, though subject to some restrictions (23b). Some exemplifications are given in (23d).

(23) a. [ V [via]<sub>P</sub>]<sub>VPC</sub>  
 b. V = agentive verb of removing  
 c. 'to remove by V'  
 d. *raschiare via* lit. scrape away 'to scrape away/off'  
*lavare via* lit. wash away 'to remove by washing'  
*grattare via* lit. scrape away 'to scrape away/off'

Thirdly, according to CxG, the constructicon is not a mere list of constructions, but an organized network whose elements are linked by inheritance hierarchies. This view allows for the existence of *families of constructions*,<sup>33</sup> in which similar though different patterns are at the same time linked to one another (in order to obtain the highest level of generalization) and separated (in order to grasp their more specific or even idiosyncratic properties). This view, together with the gradual vision of the grammar-lexicon distinction, enables us to explain the high number of cases in which it was necessary to introduce a scale of acceptability in section 3.1. In a constructional perspective, VPCs and V+AdvP/PrepP combinations are set along a *continuum* that is identified by two extremes: completely free combinations vs. completely fixed combinations. The historical relationship between particles and adverbs/prepositions gives grounds for this assumption. Moreover Italian, as many other languages, presents a set of complex relational elements mainly formed by prepositions and/or adverbs (e.g. *via da* lit. away from 'away from', *dietro a* lit. behind to 'behind'), which seem to be related to proper Ps. Jansen (2004), following Croft (2001), proposes that they might identify a

<sup>32</sup> Iacobini and Masini (2005) analyse these examples as a case of telicization of the verbal base by means of the particle. Cf. also section 3.2.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. e.g. the account of resultatives in English as a family of constructions proposed by Goldberg and Jackendoff (2004).

“syntactic space” (cf. note 9), i.e., in our terms, a family of constructions.<sup>34</sup> The exact determination of this network of constructions constitutes an interesting issue for future research.

Overall, we can say that the synchronic properties of VPCs as outlined in the paper can be easily interpreted in constructional terms. However, also the diachronic findings illustrated in section 4 seem to support this view.

CxG has a single level of representation and only one notational system. This means that all linguistic units, be they syntactic or lexical, are represented in the same way, i.e. as constructions or instantiations of constructions.<sup>35</sup> Of course, such a unified model allows for a comparison and a cooperation of these units on a functional basis. The development of VPCs in Italian seems to speak for this unified view of the traditional modules of the grammar, in that it entails a cooperation between morphological and phrasal means in the realization of a particular function or category. In fact, if the typological-structural hypothesis is true, VPCs took over the expression of locative meanings in the verbal system, thus compensating for the loss of Latin verbal prefixes (cf. also Iacobini and Masini 2005).

Finally, the diachronic analysis tells us something more about the possible *motivations* behind the emergence of new patterns or constructions. In our case, it seems that VPCs emerged under the drive of a functional motivation, i.e. to fill a gap in the system. Of course, this was made possible by a set of typological and structural conditions, such as those illustrated in 4.1. In our view, originally it was exactly that functional motivation that gave the V+P sequence the necessary cohesive force to become a construction. Afterwards, as it acquired more and more independence, the construction allowed for the emergence of new metaphorical meanings, thus becoming a productive source for the formation of new phrasal lexical items in Italian.

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. also Masini (2005) for a tentative overview of some verbal constructions related to proper VPCs.

<sup>35</sup> Of course, this does not mean that there is no difference between the word *cat* and general syntactic patterns like ditransitives. As we know, constructions differ in terms of size, complexity and level of abstractness. The crucial point here is that the word *cat* and the ditransitive construction are only the extremes of a scale. Therefore it is no longer necessary, and not even auspicious, to posit a *principled* and clear-cut distinction between what belongs to one module and what belongs to another one.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper we focused on a particular kind of MWE that has been scarcely studied in the literature, i.e. VPCs in Italian.

The structural analysis aimed at illustrating the peculiar syntactic and morphological behaviour of VPCs with respect to free V+PrepP or V+AdvP combinations. The semantic analysis showed that VPCs have both a primary, locative meaning and a series of metaphorical, idiomatic and even aspectual meanings. The presence of more abstract meanings, mainly derived from the locative ones, confirms the high cohesion of the pattern. The structural and semantic properties of VPCs were then taken as evidence of their status as phrasal lexical items.

The second part of the paper dealt with the reasons for the development of VPCs in Italian. We compared three hypotheses: the contact hypothesis, the typological-structural hypothesis and the Germanic hypothesis. The diachronic analysis showed that VPCs were already attested in Ancient Italian texts, which speaks against the contact hypothesis and in favour of the typological-structural hypothesis. As regards the Germanic hypothesis, there is circumstantial evidence that this is not the right track. However, further research is certainly needed to understand if and to what extent Germanic influence might have played a role in the establishment of VPCs. The typological-structural hypothesis, which we support, claims that the basic reason for the development of VPCs might be traced back to the loss of locative values of Latin verbal prefixes, together with typological factors such as the passage from a modifier-head (Latin) to a head-modifier (Italian) order and the increase in analyticity of Italian due to the loss of cases and the emergence of prepositions. In this view, VPCs are an analytic resource that emerged in the passage from Latin to Italian to fill a gap in the system. As one would expect, VCPs then acquired more abstract meanings due to their high cohesion.

Finally, we tried to give a theoretical interpretation of the results of the synchronic and diachronic analyses and we showed how the picture outlined can be easily explained and accounted for in terms of a constructional theory.

First, we showed how the presence of phrasal lexical items is perfectly in line with the tenets of Construction Grammar, since this theory advocates for a non-strict separation between syntax and the lexicon. Second, the existence of VPCs of different degrees of productivity is easily

accounted for, as Construction Grammar is equally committed to both idiomatic and fully productive phenomena. Third, the fact that VPCs seem to be related to other similar constructions can be explained by referring to the notion of a family of constructions.

Moreover, we showed that the development of Italian VPCs supports a constructional view of language, in that it implies a cooperation between morphological and phrasal means in the realization of the functions of the language. Besides, we briefly addressed the question of the motivations that cause the formation of new constructions and concluded that, in our case, the drive was a functional motivation, i.e. the need to fill a gap in the system.

In conclusion, it seems to us that a constructional approach to language like the one adopted here is not only an optimal solution for VPCs, but can also be easily applied to multi-word phenomena in general.

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