THE MORPHOLOGICAL EXPRESSION OF APPROXIMATION:
THE EMERGING SIMIL- CONSTRUCTION IN ITALIAN
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Evaluative morphology is by now a well-establish domain in morphological studies (cf. Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015, Grandi 2017), although not all the semantic functions performed by evaluatives are equally investigated: diminution, augmentation or intensification, for instance, have been subject to more extensive research than approximation or non-prototypicality. Italian has a number of ways to express approximation with morphological means, many of which appear to be prefixes or prefixoids, e.g.:

(1)  a. pseudo- (pseudogiornalista ‘fake journalist’), quasi- (quasi-gol ‘almost a goal’)
    b. para- (parafilosofico ‘not really philosophical’), sub- (subsférico ‘roughly spherical’),
       intra- (intravedere ‘to catch a glimpse of’)

Prefixes in (1) occur both in specialized domains and in common language (cf. Iacobini 2004). Whereas prefixes in (1b) have primarily spatial value (eg. para- originally conveys spatial proximity), pseudo- conveys already in Greek the meaning ‘fake’ (e.g. gr. pseudoprophētēs ‘fake prophet’; cf. it. pseudomago ‘fake magician’), whereas quasi is an adverb meaning ‘almost’ which can be preposed to nouns and acquires an attenuative meaning. Both para- and pseudo- frequently occur in medical language, where they combine with nouns and adjectives denoting pathologies to create compounds meaning ‘that shows symptoms similar to those of X’ (e.g. sindrome parainfluenzale ‘flu-like syndrome’ or pseudoartrosi ‘pseudo-osteoarthritis’).

In common language, they refer to ‘something that is fake, lower in quality’ (e.g. para-/pseudo-letteratura ‘low quality literature’, para-/pseudo-scientifico ‘not really scientific’).

In this paper we investigate a new morphological construction expressing approximation that is not described in reference works such as Grossmann & Rainer (2004) (the only paper mentioning it, to the best of our knowledge, is Dardano 1997), neither recorded in lexicographic resources (with one exception: Treccani’s Vocabolario online). The construction is formed by the string simil- ‘-like/-ish’, from the adjective simile ‘similar, alike’, plus a base that is typically a noun (2a) or an adjective (2b), much more rarely a verb (2c):

(2)  a. [...] una torta simil-tiramisù, deliziosa e fresca.
       [...] a cake similar-tiramisu delicious and refreshing
       ‘[...] a tiramisu-like cake, delicious and refreshing’
    b. Oggi giornata fantastica, temperature simil-estive.
       today day great temperatures similar-summery
       ‘A fantastic day, today, summer-like temperatures.’
    c. Adesso scappo, vado a simil-lavorare...
       now run,PRES.1SG go,PRES.1SG to similar-work-INF...
       ‘I have to go now, I’m going to work, sort of / so to speak’

In all these examples, simil- is used to express approximation with respect to the meaning conveyed by the base word: in (2a) simil-tiramisù ‘tiramisu-like’ refers to a kind of cake that resembles tiramisu, but is not properly ascribable to the tiramisu class; in (2b) the temperatures are similar (but not identical) to those one finds in the summer; finally, in (2c) simil-lavorare conveys the information that lavorare ‘to work’ is not to be intended in the prototypical sense. In general, all these examples identify an intentionally vague concept, describable as a marginal / non-prototypical or unstable / unclear member of the category expressed by the base simil- attaches to, independently of the part of speech this base belongs to.

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1 All examples are taken from the itTenTen corpus searched through SketchEngine (www.sketchengine.co.uk).
Our hypothesis is that the construction has emerged quite recently through:

- the entrenchment of a limited number of exemplars, among which similoro (loanword from French similor ‘imitation gold’, first attested in 1745) and similpelle (first attested in 1973), which are the only forms with simil- recorded in average dictionaries such as Nuovo De Mauro dictionary (https://dizionario.internazionale.it/);
- the influence of medical specialized language: in medical vocabulary, simil- creates compounded adjectives referring to diseases or medicines which have symptoms or effects similar to those of a given disease or medicine. As noticed by Serianni (2006: 209), it can occur both as first (e.g. dolore simil-anginoso ‘angina-like pain’) and as second constituent (e.g. farmaci aspirino-simili ‘pills similar to aspirin’). Whereas the latter show the whole form (i.e. simile/l), the former display the phonological reduction (simil-) which occurs also in the construction under investigation.

We argue that both lexicalized forms and compounds used in the medical field played a role in the emergence of a new approximation construction that is at the present stage in-between compounding and derivation. This represents a partially lexically specified construction where simil- is specified and the base word is a variable. Within such a construction, the adjectival item simil- shows properties that are typical of affixoids (Hüning & Booij 2014). From a structural standpoint, it shows phonological reduction, i.e. it occurs as simil- and not in its whole form simile, and a prenominal position, which is the marked order in contemporary Italian. Both properties could be regarded as a clue of decategorialization (Van Goethem 2010). Semantically, simil- has developed an approximating function from its core similarity meaning and is used to express the non-prototypicality of the referent with respect to the category evoked by the base word.

By grounding our analysis on quantitative and qualitative data from corpora, we analyse the simil-construction within the framework of Construction Morphology (Booij 2010) and establish the inheritance hierarchy it develops. We will focus on the interaction between simil- and the semantic properties of the bases, as well as on the relationship between simil- and other approximating prefixes. In the light of this analysis, we hope to enrich the account of the morphological means through which Italian expresses the evaluative function of approximation.

References


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2 The phonetic reduction shown by simil- could have been favored by both the influence of French (cf. the already mentioned similor) and the regular apocope that in Italian affects adjectives ending with the vowel -e and preceded by a liquid consonant (e.g. gentile > gentil donna ‘kind woman’) when they are in prenominal position.