The Antipassive as a Romance Phenomenon: a Case Study of Italian

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This study examines diachronic and synchronic evidence for the antipassive construction in Italian, using data from the 13th to 21st centuries and focusing on the distribution of a particular class of pronominal verbs and their transitive counterparts, namely: ricordar(si)/ricordare ‘remind; remember’, lamentar(si)/lamentare ‘pity; complain’, and vantar(si)/vantare ‘praise; boast’. They are characterized by the realization of the logical object as an oblique complement (1a), which contrasts with the direct object complement of the transitive verb in (1b).

(1) a. *Dopo aver cercato dappertutto, si ricordò del sogno e corse in giardino, vicino al fiume, dove dormendo, l’=aveva veduta.*

‘After having searched everywhere, he remembered the dream and ran into the garden, near the river where sleeping, he had seen her.’ (Collodi 1875)

b. *Chiunque ricordi la vita italiana al principio del secolo non potrà non sottoscrivere a questo apprezzamento.*

‘Whoever remembers the Italian life at the start of the century, cannot not subscribe to this comment.’ (Salvatorelli 1943)

The above pronominal verbs, which cannot be termed reflexive, reciprocal, or middle/passive, attest to the heterogeneous nature of the Romance reflexive SE. Analyses have been proposed to capture different aspects of the diversity of Romance pronominal verbs, such as Nishida (1994) for Spanish and Melis (1985; 1990a; 1990b) for French, and some have discovered elements indicative of the antipassive (AP) construction, such as Masullo (1992) and Medová (2009). To date, the historical work on the AP has been limited to non-Romance languages; for instance, Creissels (2012), Janic (2013), and Sansò (2017) identified the reflexive construction as one of several sources of the AP marker. These studies, however, do not look for supporting evidence from Romance; moreover, the current research on the Romance AP does not adopt a diachronic perspective.

The present study reveals that, in terms of the overall distribution of transitive (TR) and pronominal (PRO) verbs, PRO (69.3%) is more frequent than TR (30.7%). PRO verbs select finite and non-finite clausal complements more frequently than TR constructions do, while also selecting a
PP with NP complement. By contrast, TR verbs mostly select an NP complement or occur without a complement. TR and PRO differ most in the realization of their logical object. For transitive verbs, as in (1b) the logical object is realized as the direct object (NP); for pronominal verbs, as in (1a) it is realized as an oblique or, at the phrasal level, as a PP complement, headed by a preposition (di) and in which the logical object is embedded. The process involved can be described as the demotion or suppression of the logical object to an oblique, or a non-core argument, which is a defining property of the AP construction. Other AP properties are also observed, such as the presence of “verbal affixation” (Polinsky 2017:7), i.e., detransitivizing affixes, such as the reflexive si.

In the environment of a logical object, PRO lamentarsi is generally more common since the earliest texts of the corpus, while TR ricordare starts to dominate in the 19th century and TR vantare in the 18th century.

This study contributes to the discussion of the Romance reflexive SE, as well as to the work on AP constructions in accusative languages by proposing AP as a Romance phenomenon with chronological depth. The comparative and diachronic perspective, while still limited in its scope, enriches current studies of AP in Romance.

References


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