

Action nouns between speech and writing: The case of Italian

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates how Italian language differentiates the use of nouns in order to package information between spoken and written language. This comparison has been realised by analysing the Mr. Bean Korpus (more details on the corpus in paragraph 3), which collects texts produced by university students while summarizing some videos in writing and in speech.

In order to focus the investigation, this paper applies a strong simplification to the problem, since the texts analysed correspond to just one type of text (narrative texts) and have been collected from within a specific setting (a classroom). The simplification clarifies the point that both spoken and written languages are an abstraction. In fact, there are different registers (formal, informal, planned, unplanned, etc.), different styles (technical, professional, spontaneous, colloquial, etc.) and different genres (exposition, instruction, narration, argumentation, persuasion etc.) within both varieties, depending on the production format. Stylistic choices in discourses and texts depend not only on registers and genres, but also on the contents, the aims, the recipient(s) and the structure (monologues or dialogues) of the communication. Although these generalisations we would like to emphasize that speakers and writers, even if involved in the same cognitive work (in this case, they summarize the same stimulus, a video) adopt different lexical choices, especially as relating to the category of nouns.

Within literature, analysis of the different distribution of nouns (that is, between speech and writing) is not new, at all. In fact, in what can be considered a 'classical' book on the differences between speech and writing – Halliday's *Spoken and written language* (1985) – the differing distribution of nouns and verbs (between spoken and written English) is the focal point for the breadth of Halliday's research.

In line with Halliday's perspective, this investigation compares spoken and written Italian, considering how speakers and writers decide to express the 'same concept or information unit' through

recurring of different percentages of verbs and nouns, and among the latter, the presence of that special group of nouns that are known as the action nouns (nouns derived from verbs by a morphological process of suffixation, i.e., *ragionare* ‘to reason’, *ragiona-mento* ‘reasoning’). Action nouns, in fact, typically occur in written texts because of their higher possibility of being realized as complex NP and because of the greatest amount of syntactic structure (argument structure) that they realize deriving from verbs (differences in structure and complexity of phrases as a relevant parameter in comparing written language with spontaneous spoken language has been widely discussed by Miller & Weinert 1998: 133-189). So the higher frequency of Action nouns in written texts (related to specific structural properties) seems to be especially favoured by the more general tendency of written texts to construct information in a more dense way. On the contrary, action nouns rarely occur in discourses, and when this happens, they rarely realize their full structural potentiality.

2. Nouns and verbs in speech and writing: a general overview

Nouns and verbs are commonly considered the two basic and universal word classes (Meillet 1920; Sapir 1921; Sasse 2001), and their opposition has been typically related to time. Givón (1979; 1984), for example, considers time stability as the significant criterion for differentiating between nouns and verbs. Nouns correspond to what has time stability while verbs represent entities that exist only during time (Givón 1979: 320).

Langacker (1987a; 1987b) defines nouns as a region of the conceptual space (Langacker 1987b: 58) based on “interconnectedness” and “density” (Langacker 1987b: 58), while verbs are characterised by time, and they happen through time.

Hopper & Thompson (1985) invoke “the diagrammatically iconic nature of linguistic categories” (Hopper & Thompson 1985: 151). They consider that nouns prototypically refers to things and objects, while verbs to actions and events; and this distinction is related to time stability again: in fact things and objects are time-stable entities while actions and events are time-unstable entities (see Hopper & Thompson, 1984: 705).

According to Halliday, the different distribution of the two major word classes, verbs and nouns, between spoken and written language is found in English, French, Italian, and German. Biber (1988) observes that a high percentage of nouns is found in highly

‘referential’ texts while a low percentage is associated to discourses (in English, Korean, Somali). According to Biber (1995) the frequency of nouns and verbs seems to be connected with two variables: the amount of dialogue and the amount of planning. Nouns are more frequent in monologues and planned texts while verbs are more frequent in dialogues and unplanned texts. As spoken language usually is made of spontaneous unplanned dialogues this explains why it counts less nouns than a written text.

Furthermore, the different frequency of nouns and verbs has to be put into relation with the wider context in which we produce a spoken or a written text. Spoken texts result in a progressive on-line construction, which is highly reliant on the hearer cooperation and on the context. The final product of this different way of constructing texts reveals the different process of creation: spoken texts are structurally discontinuous, highly elliptical, and strongly context dependent. Semantic and syntactic relationships are not necessarily expressed and constituents tend to be of a minimal degree of complexity (see below for the relative heaviness of noun phrases in spoken and written language).

Some interesting data also come from psycholinguistic research, revealing that there are differences in the processing of verbs and nouns even when they have not been presented in a syntactic context. This supports the claim that the distinction between nouns and verbs is grammatically driven in the mental lexicon of speakers (Laudanna & Voghera 2002).

Depending on the factors we have just mentioned we can make some prediction about the amount of nouns or verbs that can be found in texts. Indeed, there is some shared knowledge about the differences between speaking and writing especially relating to how differently they manage word classes. In particular, we know that in spoken language recur:

- a) more words (so spoken language is less concise than written language) (*bare quantitative parameter*)
- b) less lexical words than grammatical or functional words (*low lexical density*)
- c) among lexical words, more words of high frequency rank and low semantic specificity (*semantic vagueness*)
- d) among lexical words, more verbs and so more clauses (*grammatical complexity*)
- e) among nouns, more concrete nouns and less action nouns (*concrete reference*).

Properties a) - e), characterise the spoken dialect of English and, potentially, might characterise the spoken dialect of Italian too. In this paper we will only focus properties d) - e).

Regarding the other properties, we limit our observations to this, that the *quantitative criterion* relates to the using of more words for expressing the same concept, and that this feature has to do with the on-line processing and with the possibility of pauses, hesitations, changes of planning and similar facts. In example (1), the transcription of a spoken discourse, there are 4 cases where a word is repeated twice (examples in bold) and a case of change of planning (underlined words):

- (1) *di, di* bianchetto, ma all'improvviso arriva- l'inserviente e si trova costretto a chiudere *il, il* libro e così, sporca sia, entrambe le pagine, di bianchetto quindi decide *di, di* risolvere la situazione, e- simulando *dei, degli* sternuti, (Korpus Copenhagen, IMB7)
'of of whitebait, but suddenly the attendant arrives and he is forced to close the the book, and so he dirties both- both pages with the whitebait so he decides to to solve the situation and- by simulating a sneeze ...'

For *semantic vagueness* I mean the use of non-specific lexemes or expressions. Semantic vagueness in this sense (for a critical discussion of the notion of semantic vagueness see Eklund 2005) derives from the use of generic words (words with small *intension* and large *extension*) like *cosa* 'thing', *roba* 'stuff', *affare* 'deal', *faccenda* 'business', etc. Generic words usually rank very high in frequency so they must be highly available in the mental lexicon of a speaker. We would add that semantic vagueness in spoken language is also connected to the fact that spoken language has a less varied lexicon than the written language. Finally, the tendency not to use a varied lexicon also emerges in the avoidance of synonymous words and the preference for lexical repetition (even in anaphoric relations). It seems clear that speakers do not judge poorly the repetition of the same word in a short period of time. And in fact, this is a common way to construct cohesion in the oral texts (while written language tries to vary the choice of lexemes by using synonymic words, even in constructing anaphoric reference).

Lexical density is one of the features used as an indicator for medium, i.e. the dimension covering the spoken-written continuum. This ratio compares the number of content words with the number of all running words in a text (see Ure 1971). It gives an indication of how much lexical content is spread over how many words, under

the assumption that registers that are typical for spoken interaction exhibit a lower lexical density (and at the same time more grammatical intricacy, Halliday 1989, and Ventola 1996 with regard to academic writing). Lexical density also depends upon the quality of lexical words. Lower lexical density also is due to the use of more generic words in speech (see semantic vagueness). Spoken language is less dense than written language also because it rarely uses abstract nouns. In particular, among abstract nouns it does not use action nouns as frequently and, as we will see below, when it uses them this does not recur with all their syntactic richness. In conclusion, lexical density has to do with the quantity of information per unit and in this sense is also connected to the heaviness of the NPs (see below).

Table 1 summarizes the facts presented till now. A quantitative approach is intended in relative terms and not in absolute terms, e.g., spoken language commonly has less words per information unit than written language, it has less lexical words than grammatical or functional words per information unit, etc.

It is also clear that the criteria that I have considered in the first column are clearly interconnected. Lexical density depends on semantic vagueness and on concrete reference, too. The tendency of spoken language to realise not the whole potential argument structure of action nouns also can be considered a manifestation of less lexical density.

Table 1. Word classes (Nouns and Verbs) in Speech and Writing: General overview.

| | SPOKEN LANGUAGE | WRITTEN LANGUAGE |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| QUANTITATIVE CRITERION | | |
| number of words | + words per information unit | - words per information unit |
| LEXICAL DENSITY | | |
| type of words | grammatical words | lexical words |
| preferred lexical class | Verbs | Nouns |
| heaviness of the NPs/PPs | light NPs | heavy NPs |
| SEMANTIC VAGUENESS | | |
| generic or specific words | generic words | specific words |
| frequency factor | high frequency words | low frequency words |
| CONCRETE REFERENCE | | |
| concrete or abstract nouns | concrete nouns | abstract nouns |
| action nouns | few action nouns; poor syntactic structure in action nouns | many action nouns; rich syntactic structure in action nouns |

The remaining paper investigates the packaging of information in Italian considering three main aspects of the problem:

- distribution and function of nouns and verbs;
- distribution and function of action nouns;
- complexity and heaviness of noun phrases (both NPs and PPs) whose head is an action noun.

3. Data

The corpus explored for this research is the Mr. Bean Korpus (<http://frontpage.cbs.dk/MrBean-korpus/>), which was collected in 1995 at the University of Copenhagen and at the Copenhagen Business School, in order to compare Italian and Danish discourse strategies, both in writing and in speech. This study only uses the Italian part of the Corpus, which was collected at the University of Torino.

The corpus fits very well with the objectives of this research because it collects oral and written reports produced by two groups of students exposed to the same stimulus. Students watch two short movies (3 and 9 minutes respectively) and they are requested to summarize their contents: for the first short movie, group A produce the oral summary and group B the written summary, and for the second movie, group A makes the written summary and group B the oral one (oral texts have been transcribed immediately after by the researcher at Copenhagen). The total amount of texts is 27 transcriptions of oral interviews (actually they are monologues) where a researcher asks the student to summarize the movie just seen, and 27 written texts where students are requested to summarize the movie just seen. Accordingly, we can compare how the same stimulus and the same request (make a summary of what you watched on the screen) produce different discourse strategies in speech and writing.

The total length of the corpus is above 20,300 words, with the written texts amounting to 7,400 words and the oral texts amounting to 12,900 words. It is not surprising that oral texts are longer than written texts because of the online planning of discourses which implies hesitations, wrong starters, reformulations, etc. (see the *bare quantitative criterion*, paragraph 2).

We consider *at first glance* verbs and nouns in their quantitative distribution among speech and writing. First of all, we counted all noun phrases and all verb phrases (and there is a residual that has been put in a 'Other' line). Table 2 contains this raw quantitative result, referring to the whole corpus:

Table 2. Noun Phrases and Verb Phrases.

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Noun phrases | 3543 46.6% |
| Verb phrases | 2990 39.3% |
| Other | 1064 14.1% |

NPs can have a head which is a noun (with or without modifiers), a pronoun or an adjective used in a pronominal way, to say elliptically, without a noun, as in the case of *dall'alto* 'from up', *dall'interno* 'from the inside', where a noun like *lato* 'side' can be easily reconstructed.

Among verbs, Italian phraseological verbs (which combine with infinitives or gerunds to form a unique verb predicate) count as a single entry. This is the case of verbs like *continuare a* + infinitive 'keep on + infinitive', *cercare di* + infinitive 'try to + infinitive', *mettersi a* + infinitive 'put oneself on + infinitive', which all have an infinitive after them, or even causative constructions like *far fare* 'to make someone doing something', etc.

Nouns incorporated in compound verb phrases with an idiomatic value (e.g., *dar voce*, *mettere in campo*, *mettere in scena* 'to stage') are not separated from their verbal head (so they do not count as nouns).

Repetitions of words or phrases, due to planning difficulties, hesitations, etc., count as one single item.

In (2) I give an example of how the corpus has been analysed. Each numbered line contains a NP or a VP or an entry that has been classified as Other. Example (2) comes from IMA2 text:

(2)

a, allora la-, *il filmato* NP
 che OTHER (relative pronoun)
abbiamo visto, VP
 praticamente è VP
il racconto NP
di un signore, NP
 che OTHER (relative pronoun)
 entra- VP
in un supermercato, NP
in un grande magazzino NP
e viene attratto VP
 da-, *un presepe*, NP
un normalissimo presepe, NP
e inizia a divertirsi VP (phraseological verb)
 praticamente *dando voce* VP, (noun incorporated as an idiom)
a-lle varie statuette-, NP
animando praticamente VP

il, *le statuette* NP
 del presepe, NP
 e- *inizia-* appunto a-, ehm VP
mette in scena praticamente VP (noun incorporated as an idiom)
delle-, delle pecore NP
 e- *poi fa arrivare* VP (phphraseological causative construction)

Example (2) contains 11 NPs, 10 VPs and 2 Other phrases.

Now we turn to consider Nouns and Verbs separately in each sub-part of the corpus (speech and writing). See Table 3:

Table 3. Noun Phrases and Verb Phrases distribution between speech and writing.

| | NOUN PHRASES | | VERB PHRASES | | Total |
|---------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------|
| WRITING | 1620 | 57.2% | 1211 | 42.7% | (2831) |
| SPEECH | 1923 | 51.9% | 1779 | 48% | (3702) |
| Total | 3543 | | 2990 | | |

Contrary to expectations, nouns exceed verbs both in writing and in speaking; anyway, while comparing the percentage of nouns and verbs in each sub-part of the corpus, we observe that in writing the nouns' percentage is a little higher than the nouns' percentage in speaking (57.2% vs. 51.9%).

The high number of nouns has to be connected to the types of texts. Both texts are descriptions of what happens in the movies, and movies are short narrations where lots of objects are manipulated by Mr. Bean and by the other characters.

Even if nouns are prevalent in both modalities, oral and written, for the reasons just mentioned, what is relevant to highlight is the specific semantic classification of nouns. See table 4:

Table 4. Semantic classification of nouns occurring in the corpus.

| Sub corpus | All nouns except action nouns | | Action nouns | | Sub-Types of Action Nouns |
|------------|-------------------------------|--------|--------------|-------|--|
| Writing | 1447 | 89,4 % | 173 | 10,6% | Concrete AN 93 54% Proper AN 80 46% |
| Speech | 1827 | 95,1 % | 96 | 4,9% | Concrete AN 60 63% Proper AN 36 37% |

Nouns in both sub-corpora are above all, concrete nouns, referring to objects and persons in the movies, or they are proper nouns

designating characters (column 2). Action nouns are a very small percentage of the total amount of nouns (column 3): they represent the 10.6% of nouns in writing and the 4.9% of nouns in speech. They are necessarily, better analyzed in two subgroups (see column 4 in Table 4, to which I will come in a few lines).

Semantic features of nouns occurring in our texts (concrete nouns, proper nouns, animated nouns, action nouns, etc.) reveal the typology of the texts, which are, essentially, descriptive – narrative texts, summarizing two short stories.

For the most part, nouns in our corpus are concrete or proper nouns, directly related to the activities that Mr. Bean realizes in both movies. In fact, nouns designate objects that are used or simply appear in the movies and the characters who act in them.

For example, concrete nouns occurring in the texts are: *presepio* ‘crib’, *dinosauro* ‘dinosaur’, *carro armato* ‘tank’, *elicottero* ‘helicopter’, *camion* ‘truck’ (especially in the first story) and *biblioteca* ‘library’, *libro* ‘book’, *pagina* ‘page’, *foglio* ‘sheet’, *borsa* ‘bag’ for the second story. Proper nouns occurring in the texts are: *Giuseppe*, *Maria*, *Gesù* and *Madonna*, in the first story.

Action nouns represent a relatively small percentage in both speaking and writing, but they recur in a higher percentage in written texts (10.6% of nouns in written texts are action nouns, and 4.9% of nouns in discourses are action nouns). This fact fits well with what we foresee, and in keeping with other research, on the distribution of action nouns in speech and writing.

Considering more carefully our data, we observe that action nouns must be considered in two ways. In fact, they can recur in a concrete sense, or as proper action nouns referring to events (see column 4 in Table 4). In the first case, action nouns designate a specific and concrete realization of an event: *singhiozzo* ‘sob’ (< *singhiozzare* ‘to sob’) is not the fact of *singhiozzare* but a single event related to the verb. The same happens for *starnuto* ‘sneeze’ (< *starnutire* ‘to sneeze’) which is a single act of *starnutire*. When used in a concrete sense, the action noun does not project its argument structure. See some examples in (3-5):

- (3) e non intervenissero oggetti estranei alla *rappresentazione* biblica (ISB1)¹
‘and (that) objects unrelated to the biblical performance did not intervene’
- (4) ha anche uno *sguardo* minaccioso (ISB4)
‘he also has a threatening eye’
- (5) di essere svegliato ancora una volta da un forte *colpo* di tosse (ISB12)
‘again to wake up because of loudly coughing’

3.1. Action nouns in speech and writing

Apart from Action nouns used as concrete nouns, let us consider now proper Action nouns. In absolute terms, they are more frequent in writing (80 cases over 173) than in speaking (36 cases over 96). In writing, proper action nouns are above half percent of action nouns (46%), while in speaking they represent the 37% of action nouns. So, we see that the action nouns a little more properly pertain to the written modality.

If we consider only *types* we have to manage with 48 action nouns in the written texts and 24 action nouns in the spoken texts. 12 nouns overlaps between speech and writing, while 12 nouns are exclusively found in the spoken texts and 36 nouns are exclusively found in the written texts.

Here is the complete list of action nouns occurring in the corpus, followed by the position they occupy in a list of lexical frequency (the list is based on the LIP corpus, a corpus of spoken Italian):

Table 5. List of Action Nouns and their position in a frequency list of Italian spoken language.²

| <i>Action Nouns in written texts (80 tokens / 48 types)</i> | <i>Action Nouns in spoken texts (35 tokens / 24 types)</i> |
|---|--|
| Aiuto (4) 1226 | |
| | Ammissione (not found) |
| Ammonizione (not found) | |
| Apparizione (not found) | |
| Arrivo (5) 2134 | Arrivo (3) 2134 |
| Attacco 2091 | |
| Attesa (4) 1789 | Attesa |
| Ausilio (<i>non c'è</i>) | |
| Chiusura (3) 1674 | Chiusura (3) 1674 |
| Comparsa (not found) | Comparsa |
| Consegna 3297 | |
| Consultazione (5) 4518 | Consultazione (4) |
| Consultazioni | |
| Controllo (2) 796 | |
| | Decisione 1320 |
| Difesa 1431 | |
| | Disattenzione (not found) |
| Disperazione (not found) | |
| Distrazione (3) (not found) | Distrazione |
| Distruzione (3) 4792 | |

Action nouns between speech and writing

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Disturbo 2498 | |
| | Domanda 249 |
| | Entrata 1784 |
| Esecuzione 3651 | |
| Fuga 1763 | |
| Gioco 632 | Gioco (2) |
| Inquadratura 2901 | |
| Interesse 436 | |
| Intervento (3) 438 | Intervento |
| | Introduzione 1350 |
| | Invio (not found) |
| Lettura (4) 883 | Lettura |
| | Mantenimento (not found) |
| Oliata (not found) | |
| Oliatura (not found) | |
| | Opera 810 |
| Pianto (not found) | |
| Presenza 958 | |
| Proiezione 3800 | |
| | Ricerca 597 |
| Ricevimento 3297 | |
| Richiesta 548 | Richiesta (1) |
| Ricostruzione 2413 | |
| Rimprovero (not found) | |
| Riso (2) 3216 | Riso (2) |
| Rispetto 306 | |
| Saluto 982 | |
| Salvezza 6505 | |
| | Scambio 1803 |
| Scampo (not found) | |
| Scompiglio (not found) | |
| Sfasciamento (not found) | |
| Singhiozzo (not found) | |
| Soccorso (2) (not found) | |
| | Strappo 4812 |
| Studio (3) 342 | |
| Timore 3426 | |
| Tracopiatura (not found) | |
| Uscita (2) 2060 | Uscita |
| Uso 1608 | |
| Visione 1341 | |

From a lexical point of view, we observe that action nouns occurring in the data can range from a very low position in the LIP list of frequency (6505, *salvezza* ‘salvation’) or to a very high position in the same list (249, *domanda* ‘question’). There are some action nouns in our list, which do not occur in the LIP corpus. We do not observe in the corpus very strong differences between spoken and written texts, and in fact, in both we find rare or very frequent lexemes.

The analysis of action nouns now takes into consideration some morpho-syntactic parameters (morphological parameters refer to number and suffixes). We also will consider some characteristics of complex NPs, having an action noun as their head: the presence and type of the determiner, and the presence and type of modifications. Then some syntactic and semantic parameters are evaluated: the syntactic function of the action noun in the clause, the type of the verb (transitive, unaccusative, unergative) on which the action nominal is based, the argument structure. Syntactic parameters will prove to be the most relevant in the present discussion.

Table 6 summarizes all the results, which I will comment on in the rest of the paragraph.

Table 6. Proper action nouns in speech and writing.

| | WRITING 80 ANs | Speech 36 ANs | TOTAL 116 |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1. suffix | zione 9 mento 2 anza/enza 1 participle/ ATA 8 zero: 20 ezza: 1 ura: 5 others: 2 | zione 4 mento 1 --- participle/ ATA 6 zero: 9 --- ura: 2 others: 2 | zione 13 mento 3 anza/enza 1 participle/ ATA 14 zero: 29 ezza: 1 ura: 7 others: 4 |
| 2. determiner | zero 25 def art 49 indef art 6 | zero 7 def art 26 indef art 3 | zero 32 def art 75 indef art 9 |
| 3. modification | zero 73 adjective 7 | zero 34 adjective 2 | zero 108 adjective 9 |
| 4. type of the verbal basis | TR 51 UNACC 23 UNERG 6 | TR 18 UNACC 14 UNERG: 4 | TR 69 UNACC 37 UNERG 10 |
| 5. argument structure | arg 0: 34 arg 1: 44 arg 2: 2 | arg 0: 15 arg 1: 20 arg 2: 1 | arg 0: 49 arg 1: 64 arg 2: 3 |
| 6. syntactic function | SU 7 DO 12 OBL 60 Other 1 | SU 5 DO 13 OBL 17 Other 1 | SU 12 DO 25 OBL 77 Other 2 |

Regarding the suffix, we observe that both in writing and in speaking ANs are above all realized with the zero suffix, which is very common in modern language (*fuga* ‘escape’, *interesse* ‘interest’, *studio* ‘studies’). The ATA form (or a participle) (*oliata* ‘put oil’ *uscita* ‘exit’, *entrata* ‘entry’) and the *-zione* suffix (*ricostruzione* ‘reconstruction’, *introduzione* ‘introduction’) are the other two more frequently used ways to create ANs in the corpus. In written language there are two more suffixes (*-enza* and *-ezza*: *presenza* ‘presence’, *salvezza* ‘salvation’) that we do not find in the spoken ANs.

We observe that when used in spoken discourse, more frequently ANs occur in ‘collocations’ or fixed expressions, examples in (6-7), and in this case they usually have no determiner:

- (6) *quando eh chiede in consultazione un manuale* (IMB8)
‘when he asks for a manual to be consulted’
- (7) *ora di chiusura* (IMB4)
‘closing time’

ANs even occur after a generic verb (the so-called *verbi supporto*), instead of a semantically correspondent and more specific verb (see examples (8-10)):

- (8) *Dando così un’ammissione* (> *ammettendo la ...*) *della, della sua colpa* (IMB7)
‘so giving an admission of his being guilty’
- (9) *Dà un’oliata* > *oliare* (ISA1)
‘he passes oil on things’
- (10) *Mettere in imbarazzo* (ISA4) > *imbarazzare*
‘to embarrass’

Most part of proper ANs occur with the definite article (65%), but we also find 28% of cases of zero determiner and some cases where the determiner is the indefinite article *un, uno, una* ‘a, an’:

- (11) *Nell’attesa* *sembra imbarazzato* (ISA7) (*the* determiner)
‘while waiting he looks embarrassed’
- (12) *In un attimo di distrazione* (ISA9) (zero determiner)
‘in a moment of inattention’
- (13) *Successivamente fa arrivare un invio* *di soldatini* (IMA9) (*a* determiner)
‘Then, he makes arrive a shipment of toy soldiers’

Most parts of proper ANs recur without any modification, as the texts appear very simple in their linguistic organisation. Only 8% of them are modified by an adjective. Adjectives may function as simple

qualifiers, as in the example (14), or, in two cases, they express verbal properties (time). In (15) the adjective allows the ordering of events on the time line:

- (14) *Inizia la sua disastrosa lettura* (ISA10)
‘he starts his reading disastrously’
(15) *La successiva apparizione di un primitivo dinosauro permette ...*
(*ISB1*)
‘the subsequent appearance of a dinosaur makes it possible ...’

In sum, from a morphological point of view, ANs appear in a kind of canonical form, just the determiner and the AN, not exploiting all the structural possibilities they could use (see Fiorentino 2004, 2008).

From a syntactic point of view we observe that most parts of ANs are derived from transitive verbs (*vedere, distruggere, leggere* ‘to see, to destroy, to read’), secondly from an unaccusative basis (*chiudere, distrarsi, intervenire* ‘to close, to intervene, to distract oneself’), and we just have a few nouns deriving from unergative verbs (*ridere, giocare* ‘to laugh, to play’).

Regarding the argument structure, the canonical case in the corpus is an AN realized with just one argument (see table 6 line 5).

In the case of a transitive basis, the only argument expressed is, with a few exceptions, the Object – patient. So the ‘omission of the agent’ is actually realized and the ANs derived from a transitive basis can function in the texts as equivalents of passive or impersonal constructions (and they obtain in the discourse the same effects as passive and impersonal constructions, i.e. referring to a generic or unknown agent). See the examples in (16-18):

- (16) *Interessante è anche l'introduzione di un carro armato* (IMA9) ‘it is also interesting, the introduction of a tank’
(17) *Aprire il libro e comincia la sua consultazione* (IMB5) ‘he opens the book and starts consulting it’
(18) *Quindi lui dà un'oliata alla cerniera dell'astuccio* (ISA1) ‘then he gives some oil to the case’s zipper’

Notice in (17) that the possessive adjective recurs as the argument of the AN.

But we also have a very few examples where the only argument realized with a transitive basis is the subject:

- (19) *E il protagonista esce sano e salvo dal controllo del custode* (ISA4)
‘and the protagonist comes out safely from the janitor’s control’

For ANs deriving from unaccusative verbs, the only argument realized is the subject. See some examples in (20-22):

- (20) Abbiamo anche *l'intervento di un dinosauro* che poi verrà ucciso da da due carri armati (IMA11)
'then we have the intervention of a dinosaur which will be killed by two tanks'
- (21) Dopo *la comparsa di un piccolo robot* (ISB13)
'after the appearance of a small robot'
- (22) *L'arrivo di un poliziotto* rende ancora più ridicola la scena (ISB13)
'the arrival of a policeman makes even more ridiculous the scene'

Unergative verbs rarely recur in the corpus as a verbal basis for ANs. In (23) the action noun *riso* < *ridere* 'to laugh' occurs with one argument, the subject *pubblico*:

- (23) ... la scena, sempre accompagnata *dal riso* del pubblico (ISB13)
'the scene, always accompanied by public laughter'

It is also possible to have more than one argument realized. We just found a very few examples in our data (see (24-26)):

- (24) Questo sketch si apre con *l'entrata di del protagonista in una biblioteca* (IMB7)
'this sketch opens with the arrival of the protagonist in a library'
- (25) Dopo aver consegnato il foglio con *la sua richiesta al bibliotecario* (ISA9)
'after he gave the form with his request to the librarian'
- (26) Giunge a portare *il suo saluto al Bambino* (ISB10)
'he finally brings his greeting to the Holy Baby'

Sometime the argument can also be a whole sentence (see (27-29)) both with a nonfinite (27-28) or a finite verb (29):

- (27) Quindi ci va *la decisione drastica praticamente di tagliare via la pagina* (IMB8)
'then there is the drastic decision to cut off the page'
- (28) Perché nel frattempo si è volto al suo vicino *nel timore di averlo disturbato* (ISA4)
'because in the meantime he turned to his neighbor, fearing that he disturbed him'
- (29) Mentre è *in attesa che gli portino il libro* (ISA5)
'while he is waiting for them to bring him the book'

Regarding the syntactic function of the ANs (see table 6 line 6), we observe that ANs are mostly realized as PPs, which means that they represent a circumstantial or oblique constituent in the sentence in which they occur. In other words, if we paraphrase a PP containing an AN as its head, it corresponds more frequently to a subordinate clause than to a main clause:

- (30) La situazione si aggrava *con l'arrivo* di un dinosauro (ISB11)
'the situation becomes more difficult because of the arrival of a dinosaur'
(31) Nell'atto *della consegna* il guardiano controlla i libri (ISA10)
'in the act of delivering (books) the guardian controls the books'

The last point is of some interest. If we had found that ANs recurred more frequently as Subjects or Objects, we might have interpreted this as proof that the most frequent function of ANs is a pragmatic function, and specifically the function of putting actions in topic position, making them the subject (32) or the object (33) of the main sentence in which they appear:

- (32) Di lì in poi inizia *l'esecuzione* di una serie di improbabili espedienti (ISA10)
'then it starts the execution of a series of implausible events'
(33) Eh successivamente abbiamo anche *la comparsa* di un dinosauro (IMA3),
'then subsequently we have the appearance of a dinosaur'

But this is not the case, confirming, in our opinion, that in the AN construction there is a 'syntactic' primacy over the pragmatic implications: the syntactic function is above all to realize a more dense connection of events (34-35) or to evocate in a very short way a sentence (36-37):

- (34) Il bibliotecario anche tutto- lo ammira *per il buon mantenimento del libro* (IMB11)
'the librarian even admires him for well-preserving the book'
(35) In un attimo *di distrazione del suo compagno di tavolo* (ISA9)
'in a moment when his neighbor distracts'
(36) *E nell'attesa* naturalmente gli viene il singhiozzo (IMB12)
'while waiting, obviously he starts sobbing'
(37) *In sua difesa* arrivano un piccolo esercito di carrarmati e il robot (ISB9)
'to defend him a small army made of tanks and a robot arrives'

Interestingly in the spoken texts half ANs are in oblique position and half are Subjects or Objects of the main clause. These last ones typically have a pragmatic function and introduce new referents in the discourse or new events presented as nouns, that is to say as facts more than as processes with the event *in se* becoming the focal point of the sentence (38-39):

- (38) *Si vede l'arrivo di di un signore vestito con la giacca e la cravatta* (IMB13)
'There can be seen the arrival of a man dressed in jacket and tie'
(39) *La disperazione sale* (ISA4)
'desperation increases'

This main pragmatic function of ANs can be observed even in written texts and with an AN being a PP (40-41):

- (40) *La scena si apre con l'arrivo di uno strano e simpatico personaggio* (ISB12)
'the scene opens with the arrival of an odd and nice character'
(41) *Si conclude il filmato con l'arrivo di un- probabilmente del sorvegliante o di un commesso del supermercato* (IMA9)
'the video ends with the arrival of probably a guardian or a shop assistant'

4. Conclusion

ANs appear as non-prototypical nouns that, thanks to their verbal properties, can be a good substitute for other verbal forms, both finite and non-finite. This structural property makes it possible for them to be in complementary distribution or sometimes in free distribution with the other finite or non-finite verbal forms (to say with subordinate clauses) in order to realize backgrounded information.

Data show that ANs reflect two specific discourse functions: the first has to do with the possibility of a synthetic view on complex events, which represents one event as a noun and as background information and the main one as a proper verb and foreground information; the second function is to introduce for the first time an event, so a kind of 'presentative' function for new information, which allows focusing exactly of the event and not of the arguments.

A third result of the analysis has to do with the structural complexity of NPs or PPs with an AN as their head. In some respect, all ANs in the corpus do not exploit so much the potentiality of the AN constructions (that we can observe, for example, in other varieties of

the language, e.g. legal and bureaucratic language). In this respect, written and spoken texts in our corpus do not diverge too much.

On these bases we can finally conclude that Action Nouns in speech and writing differ above all for a quantitative criterion. Furthermore, they can be more or less complex from a structural point of view, and some more complexity is consistent with the written planning of texts. But the main result in our data concerns the different function that ANs cover in speech and writing. In spoken texts ANs seem to be used especially for pragmatic reasons, in order to introduce events as focal points in the discourse and when they are new information. In written texts ANs also recur as a strategy to construct more intricate and synthetic texts. The possibility of recurring ANs as a synthetic strategy probably has to do with cognitive differences in online planning of oral discourses vs. the possibility of planning texts without time pressure in writing.

The different quantitative distribution of nouns and verbs and of particular nouns, Action Nouns, between speech and writing and the different use of both word classes in these two varieties of Italian confirm Halliday's intuition that spoken language prefers to express and 'package' actions and events as verbs and things and objects as nouns. In other words, it seems that spoken language keeps as much separate as possible between the two word classes. This has to do also with some cognitive relevance of the two word classes (see Voghera & Laudanna 2002a; 2002b). On the contrary, in writing nouns and verbs are not necessarily so separate and the two lexical classes exhibit a strong tendency to overlap.

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Notes

¹ The letters identify each text in the corpus: IS is used for written texts while IM refers to 'oral' texts, that is to say, texts that have been transcribed from oral presentations.

² Each lexeme is followed by a number in round brackets, which refers to the tokens in the corpus. The number in bold characters is the rank of frequency in the LIP corpus.

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