

Combinatorial patterns among Italian evaluative affixes

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This article is meant to investigate affix ordering and combinability in Italian, with special reference to evaluative /alterative affixes. This is a central issue among morphologists and is now receiving a renewed interest world-wide, especially directed at class-changing derivative affixes in typologically different languages. Evaluative affixes, however, are class-maintaining and their combinatorics shows extra elements of relevance, namely internal variability and mutual commutability. Affixes cannot be combined arbitrarily, but there seem to be certain restrictions at work that favour some and disfavour other combinations. I argue that their mutual selection and ordering cannot be attributed to a dominant principle but are variably motivated and constrained by phonological, morphological, semantic and pragmatic properties of both affixes and bases, often operating together. Etymology and processes of lexicalization, as well as the semiotic principles of iconicity and indexicality are frequently part of the explanatory frame of such phenomena and of their constraints. Sometimes, as we will see, the type of affix combinations may also be motivated by frequency and analogy.

Keywords: Italian word-formation, affix ordering, lexicalization, iconicity, indexicality

1. Introduction

There is a vast scientific debate concerning affix combinatorial properties, with a large number of cross-language studies (e.g. see *Morphology* 2010, n° 20, 1 and 2 and the bibliographies therein) aimed at finding general principles and rules governing affix combinations, within both inflection and derivation.

Relative to derivation, the focus is generally on category-changing affixes, whose combinatorics is primarily determined by the functions sequentially attributed to the added affixes. In a sequence like N. *Industria* → ADJ. *industri-ale* → V. *industri-al-izz-are* → N. *industr-ial-izz-azione*, the choice and combination of suffixes in the derivatives is clearly regulated by syntactic requirements. The semantic scope is predictable and transparent, i.e. every added suffix operates over the material on its left (Mithun 1999: 43).

In this paper, I analyse a special type of affix – evaluatives/alteratives – belonging to three semantic sets (diminutives, augmentatives and pejoratives) of the same paradigm, which are class-preserving and functionally equivalent. Predictably, a combination of such affixes is regulated by different principles, which we will try to identify and model. Variations in affix combination and mutual order are responsible for remarkable shifts in the semantic and pragmatic meanings/effects obtained. In Italian, the phenomena can be exemplified as:

Cumulation: (a) of synonymous suffixes, as in *bimb-ett-ino* ‘child-DIM₁.DIM₂’ or *tazz-in-etta* ‘cup-DIM₁.DIM₂, *tant-in-ello* -DIM₁.DIM₂, *figli-ol-etto*, ‘son-DIM₁.DIM₂’; (b) of antonymous suffixes, as in *port-on-c-ino* ‘door-AUG-(c/morphonological insertion)-DIM’, *birb-acci-one* ‘rascal-PEJ-AUG’ or *birb-on-accio* ‘rascal-AUG-PEJ’, *Gin-ett-accio* Gino-DIM-PEJ; (c) of synonymous prefixes, as in *super iper extra mega divertente* ‘enjoyable’; *che super arcì extra iper mega ultra incazzature* ‘what a...fucking nuisance’; (d) of antonymous prefixes as in *mini-maxi prototipo*; (e) prefix-suffix combination of similar semantics as *mini-abit-ino/uccio* ‘mini-dress-DIM’ or opposite semantics, as

in *maxi-cappott-ino* ‘maxi-coat-DIM’; (f) case: the special effect of augmentative *-one* combined with diminutive, as in *viol-on-c-ello*.

Recursiveness: a) sequential application of the same suffix (mainly DIM *-ino*) in regular root-based diminutive formation, as in *fett-in-ina* ‘slice-DIM-DIM’ vs. root/word-based repetition in *fett-ina-ina-ina*; b) sequential application of the same evaluative prefix, as in *mini-mini-prestito* ‘mini-mini-loan’ or *iper-iper-attivo* ‘hyper-hyper-active’, *micro-micro-appartamento* ‘micro-micro flat’, *maxi-maxi-vincita* ‘maxi-maxi-win’.

I will show that the mutual selection and ordering of evaluative affixes entail intricate interactions among multiple factors related to phonological, morphological, semantic and pragmatic properties of both affixes and bases. The approach entails some theoretical discussion on the selectional principles and the mutual constraints that regulate the combination of evaluatives. The analysis will show that the various criteria proposed in the literature for derivation in general need adjustments and specifications when applied to category-preserving, functionally equivalent affixes. I especially address the following questions:

- (i) how do category preserving affixes get linearized? What regulates their variability and permutability ?
- (ii) why do some affixes take prominence over others within the same set? And how does this fact modify the direction of scope?
- (iii) are the combinatorial restrictions base-driven or affix-driven? And how is compositional meaning affected?
- (iv) what is their combined effect in terms of discourse semantics and pragmatics?
- (v) to what extent is the combinatorics of Italian evaluatives language-specific?

I have checked the combinations of evaluative affixes in dictionaries (Sabatini–Coletti and Zanichelli) but also on the WEB and in corpora personally collected (mainly from TV talks and newspapers). All the examples cited in this article are attested and verified by some source.

2. Combinatorial design

In the literature, various principles have been identified as governing general affix combinations in inflection and derivation. They are syntactic and semantic factors, phonological constraints, principles of variable ordering and morphological patterning (templatic), often language-specific and more generally referred to category-changing affixes. Each is recognized as accounting for some aspect of ordering, but hardly any principle is responsible for all aspects (Rice 2009), although, as we will see, some principles may dominate over others.

More specifically, Manova and Aronoff (2010) distinguish between grammatical and extra-grammatical (i.e. extra-linguistic) principles. Among the first group, they indicate syntactic, phonological, morphological and semantic principles. Among the extra-linguistic group, they indicate statistical, psycholinguistic, cognitive and pragmatic principles. When applied to category-preserving evaluative affixes, all of these are in some way pertinent, although differently modelled. Some have greater power in motivating or constraining their combinations. I will especially test those that could best help answer the questions anticipated above:

a. Semantic factors: affix ordering is attributable to the semantic property of scope and compositionality.

Among category-preserving affixes, this principle only partly applies. There are extra complications deriving from the different semantic power of synonymous affixes or from the meaning of the base.

For example, the principle applies in cases like *tant-in-ino* ‘small-DIM-DIM’, where the double diminutive conveys progressive diminution and has regular leftward scope direction (it complies with Mithun’s 1999 notion of scope, see also Rice 2006), but not in *tant-in-ello/etto* ‘much-DIM₁-DIM₂’, as DIM₂ *-ello* does not produce any shift from the denotational meaning of smallness conveyed by the first suffix *-ino*, which makes the direction of scope less transparent. Clearly, on a scale of diminution, *-ino* appears to have a more polar position than *-ello/etto* (cf. Tekavčić 1972: 183) and its semantic power takes priority (more in § 3.2). The suffix *-ino* seems to dominate over the other suffixes as a default (cf. the concept in Manova and Winternitz 2011). There are complications also in terms of compositionality between base and suffixes, also due to interfering pragmatic meanings. Compare *piccol-ino* ‘small-DIM’ (also *piccol-in-ino*, with double diminutive) with *piccol-etto* ‘small-DIM’ (also *piccolo-in-etto*), where the denotational meaning of smallness of the base is upgraded by *-ino*, but is downgraded by synonymous suffix *-etto* (*piccoletto* rather means ‘somewhat small, smallish’). Note the speaker’s reluctance to accept smallness in the following examples (taken from the WEB), where *-etto* is actually meant to attenuate it:

- 1) Michele ha 9 mesi e mezzo, è sempre *piccolinetto*, ma pieno, pieno di energia! (‘M. is 9 and a half-month-old, is small-DIM₁-DIM₂ but full full of energy!’)
- 2) ho un fisichetto abbastanza scolpito con pettorali e addominali e sono abbastanza *piccolinetto*. (‘my body-DIM is well-shaped with sculpted pectorals and abdominals and I’m a bit small-DIM₁-DIM₂’)

The base may itself be selective in terms of suffixes and can impact on their semantic behaviours. It may be neutral or indifferent to the feature of size (*libr-etto/one*) or contributory, (*piccol-ino*, *gross-one* ‘big-AUG’) or even contrary (*gross-ino/etto* ‘big-DIM’). The semantic principle of scope and compositionality is maximally relevant to affix linearization and is taken up again in § 3.2 in relation to cases of cumulation with augmentative suffix *-one*.

b. Pragmatic factors: contrary to Manova and Winternitz (2011), I take ‘expressive’ evaluatives, i.e. evaluatives used pragmatically, in special account, because, at least in Italian, the pragmatic use seems in fact more frequent than the mere denotational one (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994). A recourse to the explaining power of the pragmatic principle is motivated, for example, by the extra-meaning obtained by a combination like *besti-acc-ina* in (a mother asks her child to collect his toy-monster) *adesso, prendi la tua bestiaccina, che dobbiamo andare* ‘now, pick up your beast-PEJ-DIM, that we have to go’, where the apparent contradictory semantics of the suffixes is explained by the mother’s mixed feelings of disgust for the object, counterbalanced by the tender empathy toward the child, superseding any other meaning/effect. The meaning of the base can also impact on the pragmatic effects pursued by the suffix and again be indifferent (*firm-etta* ‘signature-DIM’, e.g. in *le dispiace mettere una firmetta qui, per favore?* ‘do you mind signing here, please?’, said with a humble attitude), or contributory (*car-uccia* ‘dearie’, *bimb-ol-ino* ‘child-INTERFIX-DIM’, said by a tender mother).

c. Phonological constraints: affix ordering may be conditioned by phonological factors.

c.1. Phonology can affect the placement of an affix with respect to a root (Hyman 2006). For example, as noted by Serianni (1988) and Rainer (1990), in Italian there is a tendency to avoid homophony between word final strings and suffixes. For example, *-etto* suffix can hardly be added to a base ending in *-ettV-*, as in **lett-etto* ← *letto* ‘bed’, or *-trV-* as in **teatr-etto* ← *teatro* ‘theatre.’ A similar case is **vall-ella* ← *valle* ‘valley’, **sol-ello* ← *sole* ‘sun’, where the cacophonous effect is solved by the insertion of an interfix, as in *vall-ic-ella* and *sol-ic-ello* (Merlini Barbaresi 2004). But the tendency to avoid analogous sound sequences is not respected with *-inV-* + *ino*, as seen in *pettin-ino* ‘comb-DIM’, *cucin-ino* ‘kitchen-DIM’ or with *-acci-* + pejorative *-accio*, as in *facci-accia* ‘face-PEJ’

Also the mutual combination of suffixes may be responsive to phonological factors. For example, the sequence *-otto+etto* is dispreferred, as in **gamb-ott-ette* ‘leg-AUG/DIM-DIM’, whereas *gamb-ott-ine/one* are normal.

c.2. According to Rice (2006, 2009), prosodic factors can also affect the ordering of affixes. For example, in Athapaskan languages, prosodically ‘small’ affixes are closer to the root than are prosodically larger affixes (see also Manova and Winternitz 2011, on Polish and Bulgarian). In Italian, there are some cases of longer suffixes in sequences like *matt-acchi-one* ‘crazy-DIM-AUG’, or *furb-acchi-otto* ‘smart-DIM-AUG’ that disconfirm this tendency.

d. Grammatical and phonological constraints are also pertinent within a psychological/cognitive perspective. A receiver-oriented model has been proposed, called “complexity based ordering”, (Hay 2002), which explains mutual ordering as derived from different affix parsability. According to this, affixes that are less easily processed, i.e. less easy to decompose from the root, tend to occur internally with respect to easily parsed ones. In addition, due to their weak junctural boundaries, less parsable affixes are increasingly opaque and may incur being re-analysed as part of the stem (Caballero 2010). See also Hay and Plag (2004) and Plag and Baayen (2009).

I can add, in fact, that internal suffixes may also be re-analysed as part of the final suffix. The difficulty of decomposing multiple evaluative suffixes and of identifying their mutual boundaries has led some lexicographers to interpret a sequence of suffixes and interfix (cf. Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1989, Merlini Barbaresi 2004) as a unitary suffix. For example, the complex combination in *fium-ic(i)-att-olo* ‘river-INTERFIX-DIM₁-DIM₂’ is interpreted as *fium-iciattolo* ‘river-DIM’ (e.g. in *dizionari.hoepli.it*). Similarly, sequences of interfix *-ic-* plus one suffix, as in *tub-ic-ino* ‘pipe-INTERFIX-DIM’ is analysed as simple suffix *-cin(o)* in Napoli and Reynolds (1994: 164) (similarly in Dardano 1978).

Less productive (and less known) suffixes, like *-acchio* as in *lup-acchi-otto* ‘wolf- DIM₁-DIM₂’, *-acc-olo*, as in *donn-acc-ola* ‘woman-PEJ-DIM’ or *-igno* as in *nom-ign-olo* ‘name-DIM₁-DIM₂’, *-atto* in *pup-atto-la* ‘dolly- DIM₁-DIM₂’, may also represent obstacles to immediate recognition and processing of the suffixes involved (cf. Manova and Winternitz 2011).

Finally, the homophony between suffix *-olo* and interfix *-ol-* causes the two to overlap, with extra difficulty in perception, as in (*figlio* → *figli-olo* →) *figli-ol-etto* ‘son-DIM₁-DIM₂’, where the two diminutives double their effect, vs. *fogli-ol-etta* ‘leaf-INTERFIX-DIM’ with only one diminutive (← *foglia* but with no intermediate **fogli-ola*).

d.1. Variability/permutability in the order of affixes is possible but is not arbitrary; it normally entails meaning shifts, both in terms of semantics and in terms of pragmatics. For variability, compare, for example, *tant-in-ino* vs. *tant-in-etto/ello* as seen in §1.a above (but not **tant-ell-ino*). A reference to permutability is relevant in cases like *besti-acc-ine* ‘beast-PEJ-DIM, mentioned in §1.b above, vs. *besti-ol-in-acce*. The first combines pejorative denotation (*-acci-*) with morphopragmatic meaning (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994) of empathy and tenderness conveyed by *-ino*. By contrast, *besti-ol-in-acce* combines pragmatic irony in *besti-ol-ine*, apparently empathetic and tender but actually referred, in the text, to unpleasant microbes, and pejorative denotation with suffix *-accio*. See also the free permutability of certain prefixes, as in *super iper extra mega* vs. *mega extra iper super*, with the two sequences obtaining comparable effects. The oxymoronic combination *mini-maxi*, however, as in *mini-maxi shopper*, sounds more natural than rare *maxi-mini*, normally referred to comfortable Mini cars.

In mixed evaluative prefix-suffix combinations, like *maxi-cappott-ino* ‘maxi-coat-DIM’, as in *non vedo l’ora di mettermi il mio maxi-cappottino* ‘I’m looking forward to wearing my...’, the semantic denotation of *maxi* is not commutable with the morphopragmatic meaning of *-ino* (speaker’s expression of pleasure, tenderness). The alternative *mini-cappott-one*, not impossible, would sound contradictory, because both affixes convey mere denotational meaning of smallness

and bigness, respectively. A certain degree of lexicalisation in *maxi-* and *mini-cappotto* is partly responsible for constraints in permutability (more in § 3.1.1).

More generally, apart from the few phonological constraints, I would agree with Paster (2005, 2006) that semantic and pragmatic factors offer a better account of ordering and that normally they have priority over other conditioning factors.

3. Evaluative affixes: a closer analysis

This section is devoted to specific cases of affix cumulation and recursiveness.

3.1 Cumulation of suffixes

In Italian, more evaluative suffixes (theoretically, an unlimited number), both synonymous and antonymous, can be accumulated on the same base, as in *libr-ici-att-ol-uccio* ‘book-INTERFIX-DIM₁-DIM₂-DIM₃’, or *pall-ott-ol-ina* ‘ball-DIM₁-DIM₂-DIM₃, *polp-ett-on-c-ino* ‘meat-DIM₁-AUG-(-c/morphological insertion)-DIM₂, ‘small meatloaf’. The Italian paradigm of evaluatives is rich and each semantic set (diminutives, augmentatives and pejoratives) is represented by more than one suffix. Once the semantic category is chosen, both the selection and order of the suffixes may derive from a preference for phonologically smooth sound sequences (easiness of articulation). Suffixes, then, tend to establish a habit of co-occurrence and analogically recur in the same fixed order in various expressions. These recurring patterns may resemble a templatic order, but analogy seems a stronger motivation reinforced by phonological preferences.

The sequence of diminutives *-ici-att-olo*, for example, recurs in *verm-ici-att-olo* ‘worm-INTERFIX-DIM₁-DIM₂’, *febr-ici-att-ola* ‘fever’, *fium-ici-att-olo* ‘river’, *om-ici-atto-lo* ‘man’, etc. Similarly, the sequence *-ott/att/ett-ol-ino* recurs in *pup-att-ol-ina* ‘doll-DIM₁-DIM₂-DIM₃’, in partly lexicalised *vi-ott-ol-ino* ‘lane DIM₁-DIM₂-DIM₃’, *nan-er-ott-ol-ino* ‘dwarf-INTERFIX-DIM₁-AUG/DIM₂.DIM₃’ and agrees with words like *barattol-ino* ‘jar-DIM’, and *cutrettol-ina* ‘wagtail-DIM’, whose similar phonology probably reinforces the naturalness of the sequence. The mixed sequence *-ett-on-c-ino* (-DIM₁-AUG-c/insertion-DIM₂) recurs in *carr-ett-on-c-ino* ‘cart’, *cass-ett-on-c-ino* ‘chest of drawers’, etc. Analogy operates even in rare formations like *occhi-er-ugi-oli* (from Carlo Emilio Gadda’s novel *Er pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, Milano, Garzanti, 1991: 37), created on the model of the only exemplar in use in Italian having the same sequence of suffixes, *acqu-er-ugi-ola* (based on Latin double diminutive *aquerula* → *aquerucula*), synchronically analysable as ‘water-INTERFIX-DIM₁-DIM₂, ‘mizzle’. The frequent recurrence of the same combination is probably the reason why such sequences are often interpreted as unitary suffixes, as is the case of the above-mentioned *-iciattolo*.

Relative to such conglomerates, not all scholars agree on the autonomy of antesuffixal interfixes *-ic-*, *-e/ar-* and *-ol-*. Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1989, 1994) have isolated these particles from suffixes, for various reasons: they may or may not occur, as in *piant-ic-ine* vs. *piant-ine* ‘plants’, *top-ol-one* vs. *top-one* ‘sewer rat’, *om-ar-ino* vs. *om-ino* ‘man’. It would be uneconomical to identify three pairs of suffixes, i.e. pl. *-ine/-icine*, *-one/-olone* and *-ino/-arino*. Synchronically, interfixes are semantically empty, i.e. their insertion does not produce any semantic shift. The fact that they are remnants of meaningful suffixes is irrelevant synchronically. They may, however, contribute a pragmatic meaning in discourse, e.g. special affectivity with *piant-ic-ine* and jocularity with *top-ol-one/otto*, as in “*non potrei mai lasciare le mie pianticine per 2 settimane*” ‘I could never leave my plant-INTERFIX-DIM-pl’ vs. “*il giardiniere ha portato le piantine*” ‘the gardener has brought the plant-DIM-pl’. Moreover, interfixes may be functional in

distinguishing homophonous forms, e.g. *ris-ol-ino* ‘laugh-INTERFIX-DIM’ from *ris-ino* ‘rice-DIM’, or *tub-ic-ino* ‘pipe-INTERFIX-DIM’ from *tub-ino* ‘sheath dress-DIM’.

In combining with suffixes, interfixes have their own preferences and restrictions. They precede evaluatives and preferentially *-ino* and *-ello*, more rarely, *-otto -olo -ozzo -atto, -one, -accio*, with the exclusion of *-etto* and *-uccio*. By contrast, the homophonous diminutive suffix *-olo*, produces such regular formations as *-riv-ol-etto* ‘brook-DIM₁-DIM₂’ and *figli-ol-etto* ‘son-DIM₁-DIM₂’. In the rare cases in which interfixes combine with augmentative *-one*, they produce marked forms that especially occur in pairs with more natural diminutive forms, as in *top-ol-ini* ‘mice’ and *top-ol-oni, corp-ic-ini* ‘bodies’ and *corp-ici-oni, cagn-ol-ini* ‘dogs’ and *cagn-ol-oni, pap-ar-ino* ‘dad’ and *pap-ar-one*, etc. Combinations with pejoratives *-accio, -astro, -ucolo* are not attested, but, especially with *-accio*, they are not impossible (e.g. playful *?top-ol-accio*). Of course, dispreferred suffixes can re-appear in longer combinations, as in *libr-ic(i)-att-olo* ‘book-INTERFIX-DIM₁-DIM₂, pazz-er-ell-one-’ ‘mad-INTERFIX-DIM-AUG’.

Interfixes normally select the suffix they precede. For example, *-er/ar-* prefers *-ello, -olo* and *-ozzo* as in *fatt-er-ello* ‘fact’, *gatt-ar-ola* ‘cat door’ and *bac-ar-ozzo* ‘worm’, and more rarely *-ino; -ol* preferentially precedes *-ino*, as in *magr-ol-ino* ‘thin’ and *prat-ol-ina* ‘daisy’, whereas *-ic(i)-* combines well with both *-ino* and *-ello*, as in *part-ic-ina* ‘part, role’ and *part-ic-ella* ‘particle’. There is a general restriction concerning bases: interfixes are not attached to bases having more than two syllables (compare *serp-ic-ella* ‘snake-DIM’ vs. *serpent-ello* ‘snake, serpent’).

Expectedly, preferences and restrictions may also affect the mutual combinations of suffixes, more precisely their internal variability and permutability. The single suffixes within the combination are functionally different, in terms of both semantic and pragmatic effects and may not be freely commutable (as seen in *besti-acc-ine* vs. *besti-ol-in-acce* in §1.e).

Strong motivations for choosing one suffix, instead of others, may be its wider base applicability, greater semantic efficiency and transparency. These properties make *-ino* a favourite choice (see § 1.a above) (Merlini Barbaresi 2004: 281). It modifies all types of morphological word categories, it escapes phonological constraints, as it can combine with any final phoneme of base or suffix. It is not even dispreferred in case of homophonous sound sequences (as seen in §1. c1 above); to the contrary, it admits recursiveness of the type *fett-in-ina* and even *fett-in-in-ina*. No other diminutive suffix can compete with *-ino* in terms of applicability and efficiency. Some experiments have shown that *-ino* is perceived as diminutivising more than other diminutive suffixes (Bates and Rankin 1979: 50, Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 140).

The only other suffix that shares some of these properties is augmentative *-one*, as in *panci-on-one* ‘abdomen-AUG-AUG’ (e.g. in *Quella non è una panciotta bensì un pancionone* ‘that one is not a... but rather a...’). Due to their polarity, both *-ino* and *-one* are semantically and morphotactically most efficient and transparent. When they combine, they may, in fact, be in competition (see § 3.2 below).

In combination with other diminutives, suffix *-ino* tends to collocate as final, but it does not prevent subsequent suffixation (cf. the notion of closing suffix in Aronoff and Fuhrhop 2002) and always obtains extra diminution of a complex diminutivised base, exerting retroactive scopal influence. When, instead, it precedes other diminutives, it is often the case that it has become an element of a lexicalised combination and has become more opaque in terms of its morphosemantic meaning. Compare, for example, *tazz-ett-ina* ‘cup’ or *tazz-in-ina* with *tazz-in-etta*. In the first two, the suffixes obtain double and progressive diminution. In *tazz-in-etta*, the smallness of lexicalised *tazzina* ‘coffee cup’ is not diminished by *-etto*. To the contrary, final *-etto* rather blurs, i.e. seems to attenuate, the residue of smallness conveyed by the opacified *-ino*, as can be seen in the following examples (from the WEB), where the content of each *tazz-in-etta* clearly indicates a larger quantity than would be contained in an Italian coffee cup (i.e. *tazzina*):

- (i) mentre del buon rosso verrà versato in un *tazzin*, e, se il caffelatte del mattino si prende in una *tazzinetta*, il caffè nero si beve da un *tazzinin*. ... ‘good red wine will be poured into a cup-DIM and, if the morning cappuccino is drunk in a cup- DIM₁-DIM₂, black coffee is drunk in a cup-DIM-DIM’ (taken from the history of Richard Ginori porcelain Factory).
- (ii) Versateli in una *tazzinetta* e aggiungetevi una cipolla affettata sottilmente, conditeli con olio, aceto, sale, pepe e prezzemolo tritato. ... ‘pour them into a cup- DIM₁-DIM₂ and add a finely sliced onion, season with oil, vinegar, salt and pepper and minced parsley’

3.1.1 The cumulation of augmentative *-one* and diminutive *-ino* (but also *-etto*, and *-ello*) creates extra complications (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 2010). In formations like *port-on-c-ino* (← *porta*) ‘door-AUG-(c/morphonological insertion)-DIM’, and similar *scarp-on-c-ino* (← *scarpa*) ‘trekking boot’ and *sal-on-c-ino* (← *sala*) ‘hall’, the opposite morphosemantic meanings of the two suffixes might be expected to neutralize each other. In reality, the semantic force of the first suffix appears stronger than that of the second suffix (and blurs the notion of retroactive scope). One might think that augmentative *-one* is in itself stronger than diminutive *-ino*, (or *-etto*, *-ello*, etc.) but, in combinations with inverted suffixes (DIM+AUG), as *pazz-er-ell-one* ‘mad-interfix-DIM-AUG’ or *sciocch-er-ell-one* ‘foolish-interfix-DIM-AUG’, it is again the first suffix that dominates semantically and, for example, causes both *pazz-er-ell-one* and *sciocch-er-ell-one* to be still less mad and foolish than their simplex noun bases *pazzo* and *sciocco*, i.e. the meaning of the augmentative suffix does not neutralize the diminutivising meaning of the first suffix. The semantic opaqueness of the first suffix, as it occurs in lexicalisations, for example, in *port-on-c-ino* and *scarp-on-c-ino* above, does not change its semantic prominence over the second suffix. Typically, lexicalised diminutives or augmentatives preserve a trace of their size meaning and this size effect of smallness or bigness is greater than the size meaning conveyed by the second, semantically opposed, suffix (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 2010: 2). And this is true for recent or potential neologisms as well, as seen in *telefon-in-one* from *telefon-ino* ‘mobile phone’ (e.g. in *Che telefoninone, non è comodo!* ‘what a big (portable) phone-DIM-AUG, it’s not comfortable’).

It is no easy task to find explanations for this asymmetric behaviour of the two suffixes. Di Sciullo (2005: 85) claims that in morphology all relations are asymmetric, but this is not enough to explain the directionality of the asymmetry, i.e. the fact that the first suffix is semantically stronger than the second. This fact is also evidence that evaluative suffixes are not full heads (Scalise 1988: 233-237). If they were, the final suffix would be semantically stronger, which is not the case. The limited head properties that are identified for Italian suffixes (changes into the most stable flectional class, e.g. *poema* → *poem-etto* and gender change, as in f. *scala* ‘stairs’ → m. *scal-one* ‘staircase’) (Merlini Barbaresi 2004) do not cause the suffix sequence to change the semantic effect, i.e. *scal-on-c-ino* is still bigger than a *scala*.

The stable pattern established between first and second suffix is perhaps better explained by recourse to the semiotic principles of general and morphological iconicity and indexicality (see Dressler et al. 1987: 111). Extending Bybee’s relevance principle (1985) and Rice’s notion of semantic scope (2000/2006), we can propose: If a suffix X is semantically more relevant for the meaning of the lexical root of a word than a suffix Y, then there is a strong tendency for suffix X to be closer to the lexical root than suffix Y (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 2010). This is clearly an iconic tendency for an analogous distance between meaning and form relations (Merlini Barbaresi 1988:106, Givón 1985, Dressler 1989: 8, Kilani-Schoch and Dressler 2005: 58). For the iconic explanation, though, a further step would be required, because analogy between form and meaning relations does not guarantee that the meaning of the first suffix should be stronger than that of the second. A parameter of indexicality (cf. Dressler et al. 1987: 111, Merlini Barbaresi 1988: 111, Kilani-Schoch and Dressler: 2005: 57-66), can be more explanatory. A suffix has primarily an indexical reference to its base, a following suffix to its preceding suffix (cf. the principle of local

dependency in Rice 2000: 2), whereas its reference to the more distant lexical root is much weaker. The first evaluative suffix modifies the meaning of the lexical base directly, the second only modifies directly the meaning of the lexical base plus first suffix. Therefore the first suffix affects the meaning of the base more strongly than the second suffix (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 2010: 5). This general law might seem to contradict what I said of suffix *-ino* (§ 3.1), at the same time most efficient and preferentially final when combined with other diminutives, as in *bimb-ett-ino* ‘child-DIM₁-DIM₂’. I specified, in fact, that *-ino* is more efficient than any other diminutive suffix placed in the same final position, as it obtains a further diminution, which a final *-ello/etto*, as in *tant-in-ello/etto*, would not obtain. On the other hand, if we compare the diminution obtained by the first diminutive (whatever suffix) with that obtained by the second (even *-ino*) in the same word, the greater efficiency of the first seems undeniable, as confirmed by an experiment carried out in Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (2010) with 26 Italian doctoral students. In our test, all 26 participants rated the size distance between the simplex and its first diminutive as bigger than that between the first diminutivised form and the second derived from it, as in the example *casa* ‘house’ → *cas-etta* → *cas-ett-ina*. Another type of apparent contradiction is discussed in the following section.

3.1.2 Prefixes have fewer selectional restrictions than suffixes and are more flexible in their combinatorial behaviour (cf. Zirkel 2010). In prefix cumulation, as in *è un hotel ultra, super lussuoso* ‘luxury’, the two synonymous prefixes are not constrained in their collocation and are in fact mutually exchangeable. But, in accordance with what observed in suffix cumulations, the modification obtained by the prefix that is closer to the base-word, *super*, is stronger than the effect of intensification produced by *ultra*. A similar meaning pattern obtains in *il detective ultra super eroe che ferma l'assassino cattivo e disinnescia le bombe* ‘the ultra, super hero that stops cruel murderers and defuses bombs’, where, however, the two prefixes are not mutually exchangeable, because *super eroe* (and *super hero*) is very close to being a lexicalised unit. Zirkel (2010: id) discusses patterns of prefix combination in English using the complexity-based ordering (Hay 2002), whereby affixes should be ordered according to their parsability (more external more parsable and vice versa), and therefore she indicates as more predictable the following order: *more parsable prefix + less parsable prefix + base*. It is a fact that in both cumulation of prefixes and cumulation of suffixes, the most internal affix is less perspicuous, at least phonologically, but also undeniable is its semantic prominence over the more external one.

3.2 Affix recursiveness

This refers to a sequential application of the same suffix (*-ino* and more rarely *-one*) in regular root-based diminutive formation, as in *fetta* ‘slice’ → *fett-ina* → *fett-in-ina* or *piatto* ‘plate’ → *piatt-ino* → *piatt-in-ino*. Secondly, it refers to the consecutive application of the same evaluative prefix, as in *iper-iper-attivo* ‘hyper hyper active’, or *mini-mini-prestito* ‘mini-mini-loan’, *extra extra piccolo* ‘small’.

3.2.1 A formation with *-in-ina* (and even *-in-in-ina*) is regularly root-based, as are all Italian suffixed forms, i.e. it complies with ordinary derivational rules in Italian word formation. A word-based diminutive formation is also possible, though, using the same sequence of *-ino* suffixes, as in *fett-ina-ina-ina* and *piatt-ino-ino-ino*, where the first *-ino* suffixation is regularly root-based (*fett-ina*, *piatt-ino*), whereas, in the other two occurrences *-ino* is attached to word bases (*fettina*, *piattino*). These cases favour a type of autonomy of the suffix, i.e. it acquires a word status, as in *Ne vorrei un piattino, ma proprio ino ino* ‘I’d like just a small plate of it, but a really small one’.

The same type of formation is possible with the augmentative *-one*, as, for example, in *fett-on-ona* vs. *fett-ona-ona-ona* and respective extension in *Ne vorrei una fett-ona, ma proprio ona ona*. No other evaluative suffix admits this use. The diminutive *-uccio* only admits the autonomous use, as in (from a well-known fairy-tale) *ucci, ucci sento odor di cristianucci* ‘DIM DIM pl., I smell Christian-DIM pl.’, the Italian for ‘Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman’ and *è un vestit-uccio proprio uccio* ‘it’s a dress-DIM, really DIM’ (‘it’s just a cheap dress’).

Root-based recursive formations do not interpose interfixes as, for example, **piant-ic(i)-in-ina* or **part-ic-in-ina* ‘role (in a play)’, but root/word-based diminutives may, as in *part-ic-ina-ina-ina*, *libr-ic(c)-ino-ino-ino*. Obviously, the different behaviour is coherent with the word status of the first diminutive base (*part-ic-ina*). Expectedly, the interfix can only precede the first suffix (**part-ic-ina-ic-ina-ic-ina*). The behaviour of interfix *-ol-* may raise doubts, as its homophony with the diminutive suffix *-olo* blurs the difference, for example, between regular *bambol-in-ina* ‘dolly-DIM-DIM’ (← *bambola*), and (said by a tender mother to her child) *?bimb-ol-in-ina* ‘child-INTERFIX-DIM₁-DIM₂’ (← *bimba*).

Root-based vs. word-based recursive formations behave differently also in relation to the semantic and pragmatic effects in discourse. While root-based *piatt-in-ino* can express both diminution (*un piattinino di pasta con il sugo* ‘a teeny-weeny plate of pasta with sauce’) and speaker’s affection (e.g. *in questa stagione non rinuncerei mai al mio piattinino di ciliegie* ‘in this season I would never do without my nice little plate of cherries’), word-based diminutives only express semantic smallness, as in *sì, ma solo un piatt-ino-ino-ino, sono a dieta* ‘yes, please, but only a really small plate, I’m dieting’.

Even in a sequence of identical suffixes, it is again the first suffix that dominates (also confirmed by the experiment mentioned in § 3.1.1). The size distance between the simplex *piatto* and its first diminutive *piatt-ino* is bigger than that between *piatt-ino* and the other forms derived from it, both *piatt-in-ino* and *piatt-ino-ino-ino*.

Recursive prefixes, as in *maxi-maxi progetto* ‘project’, *mini-mini prestito* ‘loan’, *mini-mini abito* ‘dress’ obtain a comparative pattern of meaning. Expectedly, the prefix closer to the base is semantically stronger, the second prefix only obtains an intensifying effect.

4. Final remarks

By way of summarising and concluding, I will resume the questions anticipated in the Introduction and try to answer them.

Relative to affix linearization. The choice and mutual ordering of affixes of the same paradigm, not constrained by category and functional changes, is organized and constrained by various principles, mainly semantic and pragmatic and rarely phonological (e.g. **-ott-etto*, **-ol-ello*). Cumulations (of different affixes) and recursions (of identical affixes) are flexible, e.g. you may find both *besti-acc-ine* ‘beast-PEJ-DIM and *besti-ol-in-acce* ‘beast-INTERFIX-DIM-PEJ’, but the internal order is not arbitrary, i.e. it is motivated semantically and pragmatically (§ 2e). Similarly, recursive root-based *fett-in-ina* may be selected in order to pursue a pragmatic effect, which word-based *fett-ina-ina-ina* would not achieve, as it only obtains extra semantic diminution (§ 2b). In terms of affix variability within the same semantic set and permutability within a sequence, a relevant phenomenon is, for example, the greater efficiency of suffix *-ino* and its tendency to occur as final in a sequence. In *quadr-ett-ino* ‘painting-DIM₁-DIM₂’, *-ino* obtains extra progressive diminution, whereas with inverted order *-in-etto/ello*, as in *tant-in-etto*, the final suffix would rather obtain attenuation of the first diminution (§ 2a). Selection of suffix may also be sensitive to and constrained by the presence of interfixes (§ 2).

Relative to affix prominence. Apart from the semantic polarity of *-ino* and *-one* on their respective scales of smallness and bigness, which makes them more transparent and efficient, an interesting and important phenomenon has been discussed, both relevant within cumulations and recursions, whereby the closer affix to the base word is semantically more salient over the other affixes, owing to its greater indexical efficiency. This fact may act as a constraint on the direction of scope (§ 3.1.1).

Relative to base-driven vs. affix-driven restrictions. The semantic/pragmatic reasons for affix selection and combination are much stronger than the few base/affix phonological restrictions, exemplified in **teatr-etto*, **tett-etto* and **vall-ella* (§ 2c). What is also important is the compositional impact of the affix on the base and vice versa, which I have identified as indifferent (*libr-etto*), contributory (*piccolo-ino*, *gross-one*) and contrary (*gross-ino*) (§ 2b and 2e). In *piccol-ino* ‘extra-small’, for example, the suffix contributes to the base meaning of smallness by conveying extra diminution, whereas in *piccol-etto* ‘rather small, smallish’, the semantics of *piccolo* is instead attenuated by *-etto*. Compositional meaning is also constrained by different orderings of the same affixes, which offer different readings, as seen for example in *besti-acc-ine* vs. *besti-ol-in-acce* (§ 2b).

Semantic and pragmatic effects of the combination. The size and focus of the present study has not allowed us to go deep into the strategic use of evaluatives in discourse, this would have required a much greater scope, but, by contrasting the different nuances of meaning obtained by the various formations, some intuitions on their applications in discourse have been possible, especially in terms of denotational vs. pragmatic effects.

Combinatorics in Italian. The analysis has shown that the combination of Italian evaluative affixes is less constrained than in other scrutinized languages, e.g. Polish and Bulgarian (see Manova and Winternitz 2011), Slavic (Manova 2009), German and English (see Aronoff and Fuhrhop, 2002 and Hay and Plag 2004), Greek (Melissaropoulou and Ralli 2010). Italian affixes combine more freely, both within semantically homogeneous sets and across sets. For the majority of cases, restrictions seem to derive from preferences rather than prescriptions. The morphological constraints are also rather loose: both affixes and bases can exert preferences relative to which affixes are better suited to a certain base and vice versa, but these preferences are often determined by analogy, i.e. a tendency of affixes to repeatedly choose certain sound sequences instead of others, also legitimate. There are some general rules for the position of evaluatives, always preceding inflective suffixes and for interfixes preceding evaluatives. In terms of syntactic constraints, there are very few obstacles determined by the syntactic category of the base. The semantics of the base is also hardly constraining.

The vast cross-linguistic research that is being carried out on affix ordering relies on very general principles, which seem to apply almost universally, at least as criteria for approaching the issue, but these are too general for actually saying something predictive and explanatory of a language in particular. On the other hand, the language-specific analyses show important discrepancies, which make comparisons scarcely rewarding and, more importantly, which often challenge current theories. Perhaps, having less ambitious *tertia comparationis* and more limited and well-defined targets might allow us to achieve a closer understanding and some more stable generalisations.

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