Affix ordering in Italian: a psycholinguistic approach

Anonymous

In this paper we try to address the problem of affix ordering by a psycholinguistic perspective, testing the Complexity-Based Ordering (hence CBO) hypothesis in Italian.

The issue of how affixes can be ordered in the complex word has been addressed in Morphology several times; we can sum the different positions in two approaches, (i) the existence of a formal order for affixing, (ii) the exclusive role of specific, affix-demanded restrictions. A sort of in-between approach is described by Fabb1988, which tries to arrange English suffixes in four groups, considering their position in the complex word.

The (i) approach traditionally coincides with the stratalist theory (from Siegel 1974 to Giegerich 1999): both this approach and the in-between one are not to be followed in Italian morphology as is sanctioned by Scalise 1994, which claims the sole existence of selectional restrictions for the combinations of the Italian affixes.

The CBO hypothesis, originally proposed by Hay 2002 and tested in a handful of languages (English: Hay and Plag 2004, Plag and Baayen 2009, Zirkel 2010, German: Zirkel Hilkenbach 2011, Bulgarian: Manova 2010 and Italian: Gaeta 2005), falls under the (i) approach: the matter of how complex words are processed is central in this hypothesis, which claims that external affixes are easier to process than internal affixes. Given that, a hierarchy based upon the easiness of processing can be built; this leads to the possibility of restraining the combinations of affixes: if we order affixes in a hierarchy such as ABCDE, we can foresee affixes combinations like BASE-A-C or BASE-B-E, but not, say, *BASE-C-B or *BASE-E-C.

A previous application of the CBO hypothesis to Italian was carried out in Gaeta 2005: considering the combinations yielded by a 16 suffix set in a 75 million tokens-running corpus, this author finds a hierarchy with 17 exceptions i.e. combinations of suffixes which violate the hierarchy. According to Gaeta, these exceptional combinations are justified by morphotactic and semantic opacity: thus, Italian affixes can be ordered in a hierarchy.

In the present paper, we double the original suffix set and we search for combinations both in the largest Italian dictionary (GRADIT) and in LA REPUBBLICA corpus (Baroni *et al.* 2004), which is nearly four time bigger than the previous used corpus: starting from the combinations found, we eventually manage to find a hierarchy computationally, as described in Plag and Baayen 2009.

Our final claim is that the likelihood of describing a hierarchy based on affix processing for Italian are few: in such a task, many exceptions are to be found; we therefore have to revert to (ii) approach.

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