
An extensive analysis of blends in Contemporary Italian

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1 Introduction

Blending is generally considered a scarcely productive mechanism in Italian word-formation, mostly exploited for the creation of names of companies or associations (e.g., *Polfer* ‘railway police’ < *pol(izia)* + *fer(roviaria)*; see Thornton 1993: 148). More recently, Cacchiani (2016) has shown that the significant transfer of English blends has led to their gradual increase in productivity, though mostly in specific domains where creativity is widely exploited, such as children’s literature and brand naming. Previous studies on Italian blends have been focused on both phonological and morphological properties shown by blend forms (cf. Thornton 1993, 2004; Bertinetto 2001). They have highlighted that Italian blends show a strong tendency to shorten only the first element, the second element remaining intact (e.g., *cantautore* < *cant(ante)* ‘singer’ + *autore* ‘author’). In Thornton (1993: 148), they are not considered as prototypical blends, but rather as *partial* (or *peripheral*) *blends*, in that the second constituent does not undergo modification, contrary to what can be frequently observed in English, where both source words undergo a shortening, and the initial part of the first word combines with the final part of the second word (e.g. *vog* < *v(olcanic)* + *(f)og*, *fanzine* < *fan(atic)* + *(maga)zine*). Although this tendency does not represent a strict rule: since the modification of the second constituent is also attested (e.g. *immigriano* ‘the variety of Italian spoken by immigrants’, *immigr(ato)* ‘immigrant’ + *(ital)iano* ‘Italian’, see Thornton 2004 for other examples), this implies that in Italian blends and neoclassical compounds containing a native combining form (henceforth, CF)¹ and an autonomous word frequently exhibit comparable formal features (e.g., *cinesaga* ‘film saga’, where *cine-* is a shortening of *cinema* ‘id.’). The boundaries between blend’s parts (or splinters) and other morphological elements (especially CFs and secreted affixes) have been thoroughly investigated in several studies (see, among others, Fradin 2000 and Fradin, Montermini & Plénat 2009 on French; Mattiello 2017, 2020 on English). According to the framework of Natural Morphology, blends are placed outside grammar due to their irregularity and unpredictability, which make them different from both grammatical word-formation mechanisms (such as compounding and derivation) and mechanisms placed at the boundaries between two subcomponents of morphology (belonging to so called “marginal morphology”, see Dressler 2000; e.g., CFs), which both allow a prediction of a regular output. Other scholars (among others, Plag 2003) have argued that blending can be considered as a rule-governed (i.e., grammatical) phenomenon, by virtue of the (language-specific) phonological regularities that they show. A tendency towards regularity (and productivity) in blending has been recognized also in Mattiello (2013, 2017), which highlighted the role of analogy in conferring regularity (and predictability) to English blends. In particular, it has been shown that blends significantly frequent in use can serve as model for the creation of new words and produce series through “analogy via schema” (e.g. *-(a)holic* ‘person addicted to’ in *shopaholic*, *sportsaholic*, *chocoholic*), thus moving closer to regular morphological elements, such as CFs and true affixes (e.g. *-zilla* ‘an overbearing person or an aggressive species’ in *mumzilla*, *brandzilla*, *teenzilla*, from *Godzilla*). The goal of this study is twofold. On the one hand, it aims at deepening the boundaries between

¹ Since neoclassical CFs do not represent the outcome of a process of shortening, our dataset does not include compounds containing Greek/Latin CFs (e.g., *cardiologia* ‘cardiology’, *cardiochirurgia* ‘cardiac surgery’ < *cardio-* ‘heart’ + *chirurgia* ‘surgery’). Similarly, we have left out words containing native CFs which have not undergone a shortening but just a modification (e.g., *mafiostruttura* ‘mafia structure’ where *mafio-* < *mafia*).

compounding with CFs and blending in Italian, identifying splinters that have acquired more regularity and morpheme status. On the other hand, we provide an updated description of Italian blending by analysing a sample of blends attested in the last two decades.

2 Methodology

This study is based on a sample of neologisms extracted from the Treccani Neologism Dictionary, which includes Italian new words (both nonce words/occasionalism and true neologisms) attested in a period ranging from around 2004 to March 2020.² The selection of words to be analysed has been carried out manually. The analysis provided in this paper consists of two parts. In the first part, we have extracted words where at least one of the two constituents has undergone a shortening and classified them into the categories illustrated in Table 1; the classification has been based on parameters identified by previous studies.³ The first parameter deals with the presence of morphological series,⁴ that is typical of CFs or secreted affixes, in contrast with blends which are generally type hapaxes (see Mattiello 2020; Fradin, Montermini & Plénat 2009); moreover, an increase in terms of type frequency can be considered as a cue that a splinter is gradually acquiring morpheme status. From the phonological point of view, previous studies have noted that prototypical CFs tend to show the structure of the minimal prosodic word (see Thornton 1996), while in blends the shortening occurs in many different patterns and can lead to a significant reduction of the source word (see the already mentioned case of *vog*). Moreover, it should be taken into account that overlap (both local and global) of constituents as well as a certain similarity/assonance between the source words are frequently found in blends, not in CFs. From the semantic standpoint, the emergence of a new, more abstract/specialized meaning can be considered as a clue that a splinter is gradually acquiring the status of secreted affix (being thus the word closer to derivation than compounding).

	Series	Significant reduction of the source word	Overlap	Semantic change
Words containing a secreted element	√	X	X	√
Compounds with shortened CFs	√	X	X	X
Blends	X	(√)	(√)	X

Table 1 Parameters of analysis

In the second part of the study, we focus on Italian blends and provide a description of their features according to the parameters proposed by Gries (2004: 646), i.e., shortening of source words, linearization, and overlap. The whole analysis is supported by a corpus investigation based on a corpus of Contemporary Italian, i.e., Timestamped JSI web corpus 2014-2020 (7.6 billion tokens), searched through the SketchEngine interface. This resource will provide quantitative data to verify the presence of morphological series and to distinguish nonce blends (i.e., occasionalisms) from blends accepted in the lexicon (i.e., neologisms).

3 Preliminary results

The sample extracted from the Treccani Neologism Dictionary consists of 743 words, including 67 adjectives (9%), 501 nouns (67.4%), 144 (agent) nouns that can also function as adjectives, 24 names (3.2%), and 6 verbs (0.8%). Figure 1 summarizes the results of our analysis.

² The collection of neologisms is available at the following link (accessed: 29/06/2021): https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/neologismi/.

³ Parameters in brackets are not strictly binary: they represent trends, e.g., the significant reduction of the source word is frequent in blending but does not necessarily occur in all blends, while morphological series represent a clear indication that a splinter has acquired a morpheme status.

⁴ Conventionally, we consider a series as a set of at least 15 types attested within corpora.

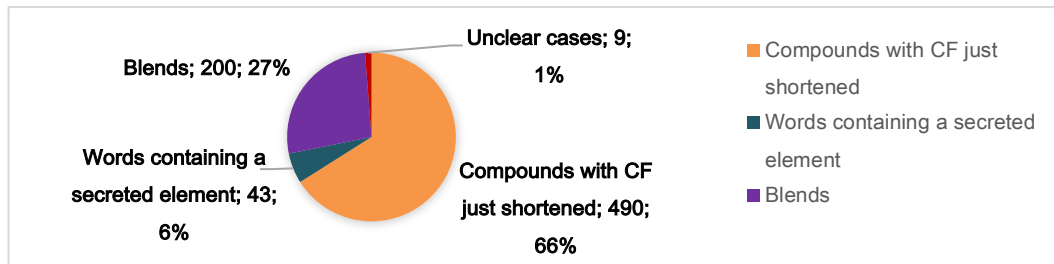


Figure 1 Classification of the dataset

Our dataset mostly includes compounds with CFs, while blends represent about one-third of the sample. More specifically, compounds with CFs just shortened represent the most attested category (i.e., 490 types), which includes both CFs already identified by previous studies (e.g. *cine-* < *cine(ma)* ‘cinema’, *catto-* < *catto(lico)* ‘Catholic’, etc.) and a set of morphological elements which have been previously considered as blend’s parts, e.g., *risto-* (< *risto(rante)* ‘restaurant’), *panta-* (< *panta(loni)* ‘trousers’), *aperi-* (< *aperi(tivo)* ‘happy hour’). They now occur in morphological series well attested in corpora and have acquired a certain degree of regularity; they mostly represent the leftmost constituent, but some cases where they are the rightmost element are attested, e.g., *-fonino* < (*tele*)*fonino* ‘mobile’. From the semantic point of view, this kind of CFs do not show a semantic abstraction or specialization but reflect the original meaning of the source word. On the other hand, our dataset also contains a limited number of words (closer to derivation than compounding) containing secreted elements, i.e., elements that have undergone a semantic change. In particular, a process of abstraction can be found in *nazi-* (< *nazista* ‘nazist’), when it refers to ‘a person that takes radical positions, hard-liner’ (e.g. *nazivegano* ‘radical vegan’; cf. Eng./It. *grammarnazi*), and in *turbo-* (< *turbina* ‘turbine’), which conveys the idea of speed (e.g., in *turbo-vacanza* ‘short holiday’) or intensification (e.g., *turbo-buonista* ‘super feel-good’) when it combines with adjectives. A case worthy of particular attention is represented by *-iota* (e.g., *destriota* ‘typical member or sympathizer of right parties’; originally a splinter from (*id*)*iota* ‘idiot’), in that it has developed a new more specific meaning (i.e., ‘idiot’ > ‘typical member of a given group characterized by obtuseness’), which always entails an evaluative (i.e., pejorative) value: as we will show in more detail, the emergence of this new meaning is related to the dissemination of the word *italiota* ‘typical average Italian’ as used in political discourse. Finally, we have found some unclear cases, namely words made up of a CF as leftmost constituent and a segment of a word, e.g., *anglioliano* ‘mix of Italian and English’ (< *anglo-* + (*ita*)*liano*), *cybertariato* ‘proletariat of digital workers’ (< *cyber-* + (*prole*)*tariato*).

As far as blends are concerned, our dataset contains 200 blends, which have been analysed according to the three parameters discussed in the previous Section (i.e., shortening, linearization, overlap). The quantitative results for each parameter are illustrated in the following Table and will be discussed in more details during the presentation.

Shortening	Word1	Word2	Word1Word2	-
	61	31	76	33
	<i>cimitour</i> ‘cemetery tour’ < <i>cimi(tero)</i> ‘cemetery’ + <i>tour</i>	<i>mielenoso</i> ‘both sweet and toxic’ < <i>miele</i> ‘honey’ + (<i>vele</i>) <i>noso</i> ‘toxic’	<i>acqumba</i> ‘Zumba in the water’ < <i>acq(ua)</i> ‘water’ + (<i>Z</i>) <i>umba</i> ‘id.’	<i>blogorroico</i> ‘prolific blog writer’ < <i>blog</i> + <i>logorroico</i> ‘loquacious’
Linearization	+		-	
	195	6		
	<i>genobiltà</i> ‘genetic aristocracy’ < <i>gen(etica)</i> + <i>nobiltà</i> ‘aristocracy’		<i>sprecheurare</i> ‘to waste European funds’ < <i>sprecare</i> ‘to waste’ + <i>euro</i> ‘id.’	
Overlap	124	77		
	<i>narcisindaco</i> ‘narcissist mayor’ < <i>narcisi(sta)</i> ‘narcissist’ + (<i>si</i>) <i>ndaco</i> ‘mayor’	<i>erogossip</i> ‘erotic rumors’ < <i>ero(tico)</i> ‘erotic’ + <i>gossip</i>		

Table 2 Italian Blends: Results

4 Discussion

The analysis has provided a classification of words where at least one constituent has suffered a shortening. It has been shown that elements such as *risto-*, *panta-*, *-fonino* are ascribable to the category of CFs (rather than to that of splinters), in that they occur in series and are well attested within corpora. We have also identified the case of *-iota* that demonstrates that a splinter can develop a new meaning, which makes it comparable with true affixes. On the other hand, the analysis of Italian blends has highlighted that all types of shortening identified by Gries (2004) are well-attested in Italian, including cases where the source words are not shortened. As far as linearization parameter is concerned, although most blends are made up of splinters arranged one after the other, some cases where a splinter is inserted within the other are attested. Finally, the analysis of overlap in Italian blending has confirmed that it represents a factor that favours blend formation, together with phonological resemblance.

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