

Constructing judgments: the interaction between adjectives and clausal complements in Italian

Abstract

Speaker's commitment toward a proposition may be codified by specific grammatical means or by lexical choices, but also by specific constructions correlated to distinctive lexical items. Therefore, modality can be fruitfully analysed by constructional theories of grammar (e.g. Goldberg 1995, Langacker 2003) that consider grammatical structures as meaningful linguistic elements.

We propose a corpus based analysis (*La Repubblica* corpus, 380M tokens, newspaper text) of Italian constructions with *sembrare*, *parere*, *apparire* (all of them roughly meaning 'to seem'), followed by an adjective, and with a subject clause. In particular, we are interested in a specific alternation, infinitive (1) vs. clausal (*che*-clause) subject (2):

(1) *Sembrava improbabile convincere tutti gli italiani d'un colpo ad adeguarsi.*

'It seemed unlikely to persuade all of the Italians to adapt themselves suddenly'.

(2) *Sembra improbabile che i Cobas possano decidere di sospendere lo sciopero.*

'It seems unlikely that the Cobas may decide to call of the strike'.

Some adjectives occur in both of these constructions, which may lead us to assume that the two constructions are similar. However, analysing the data with the distinctive-collexeme analysis (that identifies the words that distinguish between semantically or functionally near-equivalent constructions, Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004), it appears that the two constructions are clearly differentiated: each construction may be characterised by the collocational associations with epistemic and evidential adjectives (the latter being not always easy to disentangle from the former, cf. Nuyts 2001: 57) or with evaluative adjectives.

Sembrare/parere/apparire+ADJ+infinite *giusto* ('right') 27.67, *facile* ('easy') 22.72, *opportuno* ('opportune') 14.82, *lecito* ('right') 7.34

Sembrare/parere/apparire+ADJ+*che* *chiaro* ('clear') 29.71, *improbabile* ('unlikely') 17.84, *evidente* ('evident') 17.63, *probabile* ('likely') 14.88

No matter which of the three verbs is considered, epistemic (e.g. *probabile*) and evidential (e.g. *chiaro*) adjectives show a stronger association with the *che*-clause, while the infinitive shows a strong association with evaluative (e.g. *giusto*) adjectives. Moreover, within the *che*-clause construction the presence of an experiencer (expressed by means of a clitic pronoun in our data) shows a stronger association with evaluative adjectives. *Sembrare+che* exhibits the same preference in comparison with *essere+che*.

Clitic+ *sembrare/parere/apparire*+ADJ+*che* *giusto* ('right') 32.98, *logico* ('logical') 5.29, *assurdo* ('absurd') 4.11, *importante* ('important') 4.06

Sembrare/parere/apparire+ADJ+*che* *probabile* ('likely') 10.10, *improbabile* ('unlikely') 6.03, *scontato* ('expected') 5.89, *chiaro* ('clear') 4.78

Essere+ADJ+*che* *vero* ('true') 184.09, *probabile* ('likely') 27.44, *chiaro* ('clear') 17.16, *possibile* ('possible') 12.86

Sembrare+ADJ+*che* *strano* ('strange') 72.22, *impossibile* ('impossible') 61.20, *incredibile* ('incredible') 29.39, *giusto* ('right') 19.38

Even if it is possible to isolate epistemic adjectival constructions that are prototypical, different choices of lexical items cause a shift from epistemic judgments to evaluative judgments. Through corpus analysis and distinctive-collexeme analysis the epistemicity of a sentence emerges as a gradable property dynamically determined by the interaction of elements (verb, adjectives and clitics) in constructions.

References

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