

Two ways to be expressive

The case of Italian expressives *cazzo* and *merda*

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Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Conclusion

Introduction: the empirical focus

- ▶ **N-of-an-N** structures (Den Dikken 1998; Aarts 1998)
- ▶ **N1** encodes an **evaluation** by the speaker of the referent denoted by N2 (Potts 2007; Saab 2022a)

- (1) That **idiot** of a prime minister
- (2) What a **hell** of an article!

Introduction: the empirical focus

- ▶ Italian N-of-an-N structures
- ▶ N1 = *merda* 'shit' and *cazzo* 'dick'

(3) Quella *merda* di (un¹) primo ministro
That shit of (a) prime minister
'That shitty prime minister'

(4) Che *cazzo* di articolo!
What dick of paper
'What a fucking/extraordinary paper!'

¹Only with [+animate]

Introduction: the empirical focus

- ▶ *Merda* and *cazzo* are semantically and pragmatically similar
 - ▶ Highly expressive
 - ▶ No truth-conditional meaning
 - ▶ *Quella merda di (un) primo ministro = quel primo ministro*
 - ▶ *Che cazzo di articolo! = che articolo!*
- ▶ ... but their morphosyntax is different
 - ▶ Different agreement properties
 - ▶ Different distributional properties

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 - ▶ Different distributional properties

Introduction: main claims

- ▶ *Merda* and *cazzo* have different morphosyntactic structures
 - ▶ *Merda*
 - ▶ $\sqrt{\text{MERD}}\text{-a}_{\text{F.SG}}$
 - ▶ Merged in the fseq of a lower $n\text{P}$
 - ▶ Its root semantics contains a pejorative connotation
 - ▶ *Cazzo*
 - ▶ Monomorphemic \rightarrow no GEN and NUM features
 - ▶ Merged in J(P) at the edge of n (Biberauer 2018; Krifka 2020; Wiltschko 2021)
 - ▶ Purely functional item encoding expressive/evaluative content
- ▶ *Merda* and *cazzo* are different because they are in different stages of a grammaticalization path (Cavirani-Pots 2020)
 - ▶ See Poletto and Giorgi (2021) for a similar approach

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Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Number

Gender

Distribution

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Conclusion

Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Number

Gender

Distribution

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Conclusion

Morphosyntactic properties: number

► *Cazzo* is rigid for NUMBER

(5) Che *cazz-o* di pecoron-i!
what dick.M.(SG) of ram-M.PL
'What fucking rams!'

(6) *Che *cazz-i* di pecoron-i!
what dick.M.PL of ram-M.PL

► *Merda* is flexible for NUMBER

(7) *Che *merd-a* di pecor-e!
what shit.F.(SG) of sheep-F.PL

(8) Che *merd-e* di pecor-e!
what shit.F.PL of sheep-F.PL
'What shitty sheep(PL)!'

Morphosyntactic properties: number

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Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Number

Gender

Distribution

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Conclusion

Morphosyntactic properties: gender

- ▶ *Cazzo*'s GENDER is invisible

(9) Un-a *cazz*- \emptyset di serat-a
a-F.SG dick-M.SG of evening-F.SG

(10) ?Un *cazz*- \emptyset di serat-a
a-M.SG dick-M.SG of evening-F.SG
'A fucking evening'

- ▶ *Merda*'s GENDER is visible and intervenes

(11) Un-a *merd*-a di articol-o
a-F.SG shit-F.SG of article-M.SG
'A shitty article'

(12) *Un *merd*-a di articol-o
a-M.SG shit-F.SG of article-M.SG

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Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Number

Gender

Distribution

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Conclusion

Morphosyntactic properties: distribution (I)

- ▶ *Merda* but not *cazzo* can occur predicatively

(13) Questo articolo è una *merda*!

this article is a shit

'This article sucks!'

(14) *Questo articolo è un *cazzo*!

this article is a dick

Morphosyntactic properties: distribution (II)

- ▶ *Merda* can embed higher projections (e.g. POSS), whereas *cazzo* can only embed RefN

- (15) a. Quella tua *merda* di amica
that your shit of friend
- b. Quella tua *cazzo* di amica
that your dick of friend
'That fucking/shitty friend of yours!'
- (16) a. Quella *merda* della tua amica²
that shit of.the your friend
'That shitty friend of yours!'
- b. *Quella *cazzo* della tua amica
that dick of.the your friend

²Only with [+animate]

Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Conclusion

Theoretical prerequisites

Two theoretical prerequisites

- ▶ The formalization of grammaticalization paths into four stages (Cavirani-Pots 2020)
- ▶ Expressive meaning can come about by merging material in “expletive positions” (Saab 2022*b*; Tsiakmakis and Espinal 2022)

Theoretical prerequisites: grammaticalization

Four stages of grammaticalization (Cavirani-Pots 2020)

▶ **Stage 0 - lexical:**

a \surd is associated with a lexical item with conceptual content

▶ **Stage I - semi-lexical I:**

a \surd is first merged with a **categorizing** head, and then inserted into the functional superstructure of a lower root

▶ **Stage II - semi-lexical II:**

a \surd is first merged with a **functional** head, and then inserted into the functional superstructure of a lower root

▶ **Stage III - functional:**

the \surd is lost, and only the functional feature from Stage II remains

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Theoretical prerequisites: grammaticalization

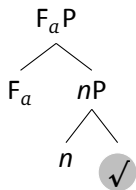
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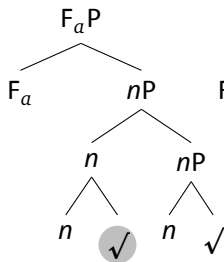
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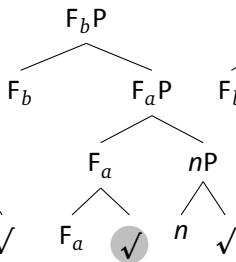
Stage 0



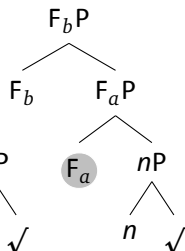
Stage I



Stage II



Stage III



Theoretical prerequisites: expressive meaning

Saab's proposal for expressive meaning

- ▶ Expressive meaning comes about by merging material in “expletive positions” (Saab 2022*b*: 2)
- ▶ Expletive positions host purely expressive nouns, which have reached **Stage III** of the lexical-to-functional trajectory
- ▶ Expressive nouns are “mere syntactic indexes”; they have no other content than an expressive one

Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Our proposal

Merda 'shit'

Cazzo 'dick'

Locating expressivity

Conclusion

Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Our proposal

Merda 'shit'

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Locating expressivity

Conclusion

The analysis: our proposal

- ▶ $\sqrt{\text{MERD-a}}$ is a **semi-lexical I** item
 - ▶ First merged with n , thus licensing GEN and NUM
 - ▶ ...then inserted into the fseq of RefN (between D and POSS)
 - ▶ Its NUM agrees with RefN's NUM (as if it were an Adj)
 - ▶ Its GEN is agreed with by higher projections (D)
 - ▶ Expressive due to its root content and non-canonical position (Corver 2016)

The analysis: our proposal

- ▶ **cazzo** is a **functional** item
 - ▶ Merged in J(P) at the edge of n (Biberauer 2018; Krifka 2020; Wiltschko 2021)
 - ▶ It does not merge with n , thus no GEN and NUM
 - ▶ Its NUM doesn't vary
 - ▶ Its GEN is not agreed with by higher projections
 - ▶ Expressive due to its functional nature and syntactic position

*“Nominal expletives **tend to lack some of the phi features they are expected to have** [e.g.] they lack morphosyntactic number or have a default singular number”*

(Tsiakmakis and Espinal 2022: 5)

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Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Our proposal

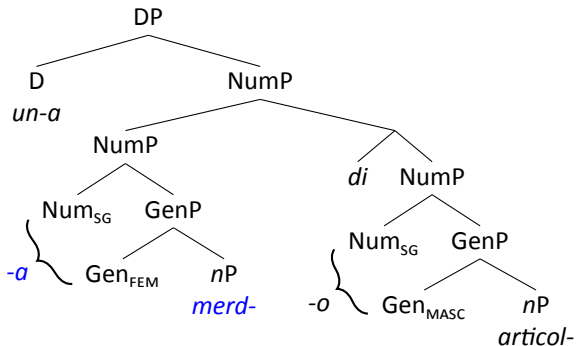
Merda 'shit'

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Locating expressivity

Conclusion

The analysis: *merda* 'shit'



- ▶ *Merd-a* is flexible for NUM because NUM (and GEN) is a separate morpheme, therefore, it can pluralise
- ▶ *Merd-a*'s GEN is visible and intervene because probing D will find it before RefN's features
- ▶ Both D and *Merd-a* inherit the value of NUM from the RefN

The analysis: *merda* 'shit'

(17) Quell-a *merd-a* di articol-o
that-F. SG shit-F. SG of article-M. SG
'That shitty article'

(18) Quell-e *merd-e* di articol-i
that-F. PL shit-F. PL of article-M. PL
'Those shitty articles'

- ▶ *Merd-a* behaves like an Adj (McCawley 1987; Ross 1972; 2004)
 - ▶ Its NUM agrees with the RefN's one
 - ▶ ... but not its GEN
- ▶ Two adjacent NUMPs
- ▶ OCP violation → *di*-insertion (Richards 2010)

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Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Our proposal

Merda 'shit'

Cazzo 'dick'

Locating expressivity

Conclusion

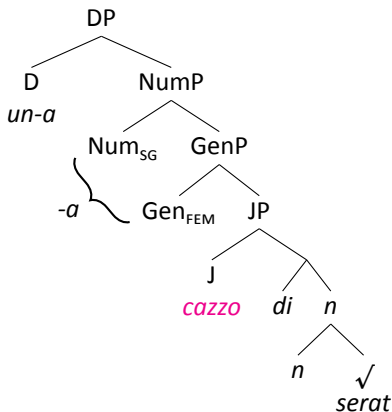
The analysis: *cazzo* 'dick'

- ▶ *Cazzo* is a monomorphemic functional item
- ▶ It has no GEN and NUM, therefore
 - ▶ Probing D skips *cazzo* and agrees with RefN
 - ▶ *Cazzo* is rigid for NUM
- ▶ *Cazzo* attaches right above the RefN; no D, Poss, Adj elements can intervene
- ▶ We take this to mean that *cazzo* is the left hand member of an relative compound with RefN

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The analysis: *cazzo* 'dick'



- ▶ We build on the analysis of nominal compounds by Eik (2019), and on Krifka's (2020) JP (Judgement Phrase)
- ▶ *Cazzo* is adjoined at the word level as left hand member of the compound (with zero semantics, see Postma 1995)
- ▶ *Di* is a linker (Zwart 2006; Philip 2013)

The analysis: *cazzo* 'dick'

- ▶ Recall: *cazzo* cannot be used predicatively, whereas *merda* can

(19) Questo articolo è una *merda*!
this article is a shit
'This article sucks!'

(20) *Questo articolo è un *cazzo*!
this article is a dick

- ▶ This can be explained by the fact that expressive *cazzo* is no longer a noun

Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Our proposal

Merda 'shit'

Cazzo 'dick'

Locating expressivity

Conclusion

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Cazzo

- ▶ Adjoined to the edge of the n of the RefN
- ▶ This position is the N-domain correlate of Krifka's (2020) JP (cf. expletive position for expressive nouns of Saab 2022*b*)
- ▶ *Proposal*: the Act, CommitP and JP are recurrent positions in three domains n , v , and C (see also Biberauer 2018)

Merda

- ▶ Expressive meaning comes about via its pejorative root content, and its non-canonical syntactic position (cf. Corver 2016)
- ▶ It's not bleached enough (yet) to be merged in J(P)
- ▶ Merged high in the fseq of the RefN

There are (at least) two ways to be expressive

Locating expressivity

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Outline

Introduction

Morphosyntactic properties

Theoretical prerequisites

The analysis

Conclusion

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- ▶ *Cazzo* and *merda* are two expressive nouns, with different morphosyntactic properties
- ▶ *Cazzo*
 - ▶ Fully grammaticalized functional item, without GEN and NUM
 - ▶ Lefthand member of an relative compound, merged in J
 - ▶ *Di* is a linker
- ▶ *Merda*
 - ▶ Semi-lexical item with pejorative root content, with GEN and NUM
 - ▶ Merged in the fseq of the RefN, behaving like an adjective
 - ▶ *Di*-insertion is an OCP repair strategy

Grazie, cazzo³!

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Appendix

- ▶ Extra supporting evidence:
 - ▶ *merda* always has pejorative meaning, whereas *cazzo* can also express a positive evaluation by the speaker (*'che cazzo di macchina!'*)
 - ▶ *cazzo* but not *merda* can be used as a fragment answer (Florici and Milioni 2021) (*'Cosa hai fatto oggi?' 'Un cazzo'*)
 - ▶ *cazzo* but not *merda* can be used as an expletive with *wh*-items (Doliana 2015) (*'Ma dove cazzo vai?'*)