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On Italian past participles with -issimo: The superlative of events between intensification and pluractionality

In Italian, past participles may form the absolute superlative by adding the same suffix as adjectives, i.e. -issimo. However, when used as superlatives, past participles may still occur in passive sentences to denote events rather than simple properties. The aim of this paper is to examine the semantics of past participles with -issimo by using corpora of written Italian. The discussion will show how the different aspectual features of verbs, which are connected with the type of scale structure of corresponding participles (Kennedy and McNally 2005), may influence the meaning of these forms as superlatives: with past participles taken from telic verbs and encoding a closed scale -issimo may have the same function as an endpoint-oriented degree modifier, by emphasizing that the final state expressed by the participle is reached; with past participles taken from atelic verbs and encoding an open scale -issimo may have the same scope as a scalar degree modifier; by denoting a high degree (not necessarily the apical degree). It will be further suggested that when -issimo is applied to past participles sometimes we may observe a shift from a pure intensive meaning to a pluractional meaning. In other words, superlative participles may denote an action intensified not only in terms of quality but also in terms of quantity, more precisely an action which is represented as distributed over an unspecified set of participants (distributive reading) and/or as repeated in time (habitual/iterative/frequentative reading).

1. Introduction¹

Going back to the Greek grammatical tradition, participles have always been considered as non-prototypical part of speech because of their displaying verbal and adjectival features at the same time (Croft 1991). In

¹ The analysis of the use of Italian past participles as superlatives is based on a large corpus of journalistic prose, i.e. Corpus *La Repubblica* (henceforth Rep), which includes 326 million words of newspaper texts (available online at <http://dev.sslmit.unibo.it/corpora/corpora.php>). Superlative past participles found in this Corpus are 617 (max. frequency 1204). This analysis is supplemented by queries within another corpus of written Italian, the *Italian Web Corpus (ItWaC)*, ca. 2 billion words; <http://www.sketchengine.co.uk/>). In the examples the reader finds the number of occurrences of individual superlative participles taken from the *Corpora* among brackets. A statistical analysis of the data could be interesting, but is not relevant to the purposes of the present study. In this paper the

Italian, the category of past participles (henceforth PPs) belongs to the verbal paradigm but has the same inflectional properties as adjectives, showing two genders (masculine/feminine) and two numbers (singular/plural). As part of the verbal paradigm, PPs may occur: (i) in perfect periphrasis, with the auxiliary *avere* ‘to have’ for transitive verbs (1) and intransitive unergative verbs, with the auxiliary *essere* ‘to be’ for intransitive unaccusative verbs (2); (ii) in passive constructions, with the auxiliary *essere* ‘to be’ or *venire* ‘to come’ (3); (iii) in absolute participial constructions (4).

- (1) *Mario ha mangiato una mela*
Mario have-PRS.3SG eat-PP an apple
‘Mario has eaten an apple’
- (2) *Mario è partito*
Mario be-PRS.3SG leave-PP
‘Mario has gone’
- (3) *La mela fu/venne mangiata da Mario*
the apple be-PST.3SG come-PST.3SG eat-PP by Mario
‘The apple was eaten by Mario’
- (4) *Partito Mario, Anna mi telefonò*
leave-PP Mario Anna to.me call-PST.3SG
‘After Mario left, Anna called me’

Italian PPs may also form an inflectional superlative with the suffix *-issimo*², which is normally added to adjectival bases in order to form the absolute superlative³:

following abbreviations occur: 1/2/3 = first/second/third person; ABS = absolute; AOR = aorist; IMPF = imperfect; INF = infinitive; INS = instrumental; MULT = multiplicative; INT = intensive; PL = plural; PRS = present; PST = past; PP = past participle; REFL = reflexive; SG = singular; SUP = superlative.

² The classification of *-issimo* as an inflectional suffix has been a subject of debate: in particular, considering its extension to different bases (cf. § 4) as well as the semantic and phonological restrictions connected with its use, some scholars have proposed to classify it as a derivational suffix (the reader is referred to Gaeta 2003: 45-46 for a discussion and references). In this paper, I follow Gaeta (2003, 2011), who categorizes *-issimo* as an inflectional suffix (also for its high productivity), although a *non-prototypical* one: as the author recognizes, it occupies an intermediate position along the continuum between inflection and derivation (Gaeta 2003: 55).

³ Languages may distinguish between the absolute superlative (or superlative in gradation: *vir felicissimus* ‘very lucky man’) and the relative superlative (or superlative in comparison: *vir omnium felicissimus* ‘the luckiest man of all’): cf. Cuzzolin and Lehmann (2004: 1213). In Italian the relative superlative corresponds to an analytical construction in which the modifier *più* is preceded by the

- (5) *Questa norma, che è stata sempre*
 this norm which be-PRS.3SG be-PP always
odiatissima dai parlamentari... (105, Rep)
 hate-PP.SUP by.the members.of.Parliament
 ‘This norm, which has always been so hated by members of
 Parliament...’

In the relevant literature on Italian PPs, gradability – intended as the property of allowing a comparative and a superlative use – is normally taken as a reliable criterion to assume the *conversion* of participles into adjectives (cf. Guasti 2001² [1991]: 331). This is consistent with the following received opinion, frequently found in theoretical and typological studies: “quite generally it seems to be the case that morphological comparatives and superlatives combine with adjectives” (Doetjes 2008: 126, cf. also Hajek 2004). The gradability-criterion is generally included in every list of syntactic tests which verify the adjectival nature of a specific lexeme in Italian. Such a list is provided, among others, by Thornton (2004: 526, 531), according to whom a prototypical adjective is a lexeme which: (i) agrees with the modified noun in number and gender; (ii) is gradable; (iii) gives rise to an adverb in *-mente*; (iv) may occur in prenominal position. On the other hand, only a participle with a verbal function may be used with a clitic pronoun, may occur with the auxiliary *venire*⁴ and may take an agentive prepositional phrase. On the basis of this, a form like *festeggiatissima* in (6) should be categorized as an adjective: in fact, it takes a superlative marker and appears in prenominal attributive position, although it does not form any adverb⁵.

definite article and added to the adjective (*la più bella* ‘the most beautiful’). Although the use of superlative PPs with a past tense form as in (5) represents a recent development in the Italian language (cf. Renzi 2003: 50), it is worth noting that the extension of the superlative suffix to verbal forms comes back to Latin – where, however, *-issimus* was much more restricted in its use with PPs – and is attested since the time of Old Italian.

⁴ In general, *venire* is used as an auxiliary in passive sentences to convey a dynamic meaning, as opposed to the stative semantics of *essere*. Nevertheless, the choice between the two auxiliaries may be only a matter of stylistic preferences (Serianni 1988: 327). On the impossibility of using *venire* with superlative PPs, see Guasti (2001² [1991]: 331) and also La Fauci (2000: 133), who hypothesized that this impossibility could be accounted for by postulating the different morpho-syntactic nature of *SUM passive* as compared to *VENIO passive*. Cf., however, Loporcaro *et al.* (2004: 27) who critically reviewed La Fauci’s (2001) hypothesis.

⁵ Adverbs are not frequently derived from PPs: this is possible for those forms used with an extended meaning, like *apertamente* ‘openly’ (*aperto* ‘open’), *diffusamente* ‘extensively’ (*diffuso* ‘spread’), *perdutoamente* ‘madly’ (*perduto* ‘lost’), etc...

- (6) *Era una festeggiatissima debuttante* (119, Rep)
be-IMPF.3SG a fête-PP.SUP debutante
'She was a much fêted debutante'

What about *odiatissimo* in example (5)? It is gradable but occurs in a passive sentence with an agentive phrase: evidently enough, it is classifiable as an adjective and a participle, since it appears to be compatible with both tests verifying the adjectival and the verbal status, as well other PPs are (cf. Thornton 2004: 531). In other words, the relevant point is that Italian PPs do not have an homogeneous behaviour in terms of syntactic tests (cf. § 2)⁶. However, the picture is more complicated also from a semantic point of view.

As is well-known, the superlative is a strategy of modification, the function of which is, by definition, to describe a given property as being at its apical degree. In particular, the absolute superlative may represent not only *the highest degree* but also a *high degree* of the graded property. However, it must be observed that PPs do not necessarily represent “properties”, but they may still represent “events” also when used as superlatives (cf. note 9). Although it has been recognized that gradability is proper of all categories, i.e. adjective, noun and verb, and that “every quantifiable, whether existent (say *house*) or occurrent (say *run*) or quality of existent (say *red*) or quality of occurrent (say *gracefully*), is intrinsically gradable” (Sapir 1944: 94)⁷, the implications connected with the application of strategies increasing the *degree of an event* – and what this exactly means – are to be explored.

The aim of this paper is to investigate such implications in Modern Italian, by examining the different kinds of readings available with

⁶ According to Rainer (1989: 67), PPs more compatible with the tests verifying the adjectival nature of a lexeme are those which denote a resultative state, whereas, according to Bisetto (1994: 71-72), they are those derived from verbs denoting a change of state of the object-argument of transitive verbs (like *colorare* ‘to colour’, *educare* ‘to educate’, *preoccupare* ‘to worry’), and of the subject of intransitive verbs (like *morire* ‘to die’, *fiore* ‘to bloom’, *divorziare* ‘to divorce’). On the conversion of PPs into adjectives see also Ricca (2004).

⁷ As opposed to those who, following Sapir (1944), consider gradability as “a fundamentally important semantic property, whose influence extends beyond adjectives to other lexical categories” (Kennedy and McNally 2005: 348), others regard it as a *distinctive property* of adjectives (cf. Jackendoff 1977; Croft 2001). Independently of the position assumed, gradability cannot be regarded as the *defining property* of adjectives, because it does not extend to the class as a whole: indeed, apart from gradable adjectives, there are also non-gradable adjectives which lack the morphological category of comparison (cf. Bolinger 1972; more recently, Paradis 2001; Baker 2003).

superlative PPs. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 deals with some preliminary issues related to the adjectival or verbal nature of Italian PPs used as superlatives. Section 3 presents a sketch of the theoretical framework on the basis of which verbs are classified here; moreover, it introduces some key notions which are relevant to the analysis of Italian superlative PPs. In Section 4, the semantic-pragmatic functions of superlative PPs are examined, by presenting data from the corpora: in particular, it is shown how the value displayed by *-issimo* is not interpretable necessarily in terms of *intensity* but may imply the notion of *repetition*. Taking this observation as a starting point, in Section 5 the phenomenon of pluractionality is analyzed and the hypothesis is put forward according to which *-issimo* may be interpreted as a *pluractional operator*. Section 6 discusses this hypothesis and explores the connection between the processes of intensification and pluralization of verbal events. Finally, Section 7 provides some conclusions.

2. *To be (or not to be) gradable and to be (or not to be) an adjective*

In the present section, I will illustrate some data showing how the fact that a given PP appears as a superlative in Italian does not seem to be a sufficient condition to claim that this participle is converted into an adjective. First, as pointed out in § 1, the use of superlative PPs is not limited to prenominal position; on the contrary, their occurrence in postnominal position is equally possible. This is shown by the following examples, where superlative PPs occur with an agent phrase, as is typical of passive sentences:

- (7) *Il Veneto è amatissimo dalla famiglia reale*
 the Veneto be-PRS.3SG love-PP.SUP by.the family royal
 (1204, Rep)
 ‘The Veneto region is much loved by the royal family’

- (8) *Il risultato complessivo della sua collezione è stato lodatissimo da italiani e stranieri*
 the result overall of.the his collection be-PRS.3SG be-PP
 praise-PP.SUP by Italians and foreigners
 (33, Rep)
 ‘The overall results of his collection were highly praised by Italians and foreigners alike’

Second, significantly enough, the superlative form of a PP may also occur with punctual adverbs, generally associated with an event-reading. This is the case of the passive sentence in (9):

- (9) *Quando negli anni Trenta furono bruciati dei libri*
when in.the years thirty be-PST.3PL burn-PP some books
in parecchie città tedesche, la cosa fu immediatamente
in several cities German the fact be-PST.3SG immediately
biasimatissima, ricordata per decenni e
criticise-PP.SUP remember-PP for decades and
menzionata ancor oggi con orrore (7, Rep)
recall-PP still today with horror
‘When books were burnt during the Thirties in several German cities,
the fact was immediately sharply criticised, the memory of it lasted
for decades, and still today it is recalled with horror’

Finally, it is not impossible to find a superlative PP with the auxiliary *venire*, although this case is marginal and infrequent:

- (10) *L’Opera Aperta veniva chiusissima* (29, Rep)
the work open-PP come-IMPF.3SG close-PP.SUP
‘The Open Work was definitively closed’

Considering that superlative PPs do not react consistently across syntactic tests, for the purposes of the present analysis I propose to adopt rather a semantic distinction between adjectival PPs and verbal PPs: adjectival PPs are those lacking the relationship with a verbal content – whereas verbal PPs do not –, and designating the inherent property of entities. It is not surprising that PPs which lose the conceptual dependency from a verbal nuance are felicitous with tests verifying the adjectival nature of a lexeme, including gradability and, in particular, that they may easily take a superlative marker as regular adjectives do, because they are lexicalized as “regular adjectives”. For instance, this is the case of PPs derived from denominal verbs, as *coloratissimo* in the following example (see also note 6):

- (11) *I campi sono punteggiati da fiori coloratissimi* (607, Rep)
the fields be-PRS.3PL dotted by flowers coloured-SUP
‘The fields are dotted with brightly coloured flowers’

In (11), flowers are *coloratissimi* ‘brightly coloured’ not as a result of being coloured by somebody: the superlative PP does not have a real passive value, as shown by the fact that it is not possible to express any agent by means of a prepositional phrase (cf. Rathert 2006: 537-541).

Other Italian PPs may be employed under two different readings, verbal and adjectival⁸, as is illustrated below by *consumatissimo* (28, Rep) and *ricercatissimo* (149, Rep):

- (12) a. [*L'acqua San Benedetto*] è *anche consumatissima*
 the water San Benedetto be-PRS.3SG also consume-PP.SUP
dagli italiani
 by.the Italians
 ‘[San Benedetto water] is also widely consumed by Italians’
- b. *Il Barbiere di Siviglia richiede una consumatissima*
 the Barber of Siville require-PRS.3SG a consummate-SUP
arte mimica
 acting.skills
 ‘*The Barber of Siville* requires most consummate acting skills’
- (13) a. *Agnelli sembra ricercatissimo dai media americani*
 Agnelli seem-PRS.3SG seek-PP.SUP by.the media American
 ‘Agnelli appears to be most sought after by the American media’
- b. È *ricercatissimo nel vestire*
 be-PRS.3SG sophisticated-SUP in.the dress-INF
 ‘He is most sophisticated in his way of dressing’

These couples of examples show that in Italian the same PPs may occur with a verbal (passive) value (12.a, 13.a) or with a purely adjectival value (12.b, 13.b), depending on the context: obviously, only in the first cases they are compatible with a prepositional phrase denoting the agent.

⁸ In current analyses on passive participles, scholars have focused on the distinction between *verbal passives*, associated with an event reading, and *adjectival passives*, associated with a state reading (Bresnan 1982; Levin and Rappaport 1986; Kratzer 2000; Anagnostopoulou 2003; Loporcaro *et al.* 2004; Abraham 2006; Rathert 2006). The English examples below, taken from Bresnan (1982: 21), show a verbal passive and an adjectival passive derived from the same verb, without no formal distinction between the two categories (participle and adjective, respectively):

- (i) a. Margaret’s statement was **considered** profound
 b. That was a very **considered** statement

Also PPs which do not normally form lexicalized adjectives may occur under a metaphorical or extended meaning, in order to denote inherent qualities and properties. In (14.a.), the PP of the verb *ballare* ‘to dance’ is used to describe a video as being full of scenes in which people dance; in (14.b), *Cenerentola*, the opera by G. Rossini which was given at a certain theatre, is valued by a music critic as a performance in which acting plays an important and almost excessive role:

- (14) a. ...*il sofisticato e ballatissimo video* (2, Rep.)
the sophisticated and dance-PP.SUP video
‘...the sophisticated and dance-filled video’
- b. ...*una Cenerentola molto recitata, recitatissima* (2, Rep.)
a Cinderella much act-PP act-PP.SUP
‘...a very acted, extremely acted *Cenerentola*’

However, in principle, these forms may also allow a different reading: in the appropriate context, *ballatissimo* may be interpreted as ‘danced by many people’ or ‘danced many times’ (see ex. 33.c), and *recitatissimo* may be interpreted as ‘acted over and over, acted many times’ (cf. § 4.3).

In this paper I am not interested in discussing the case of PPs exclusively lexicalized as adjectives. I shall rather concentrate on those PPs still preserving a conceptual relationship with the verb from which they derive and expressing a state which is caused by a verbal event. I will continue to treat these forms as “participles” rather than as “adjectives”, considering that, as shown above, their appearing as superlatives is not a sufficient condition to claim that they are converted into adjectives.

3. *Classes of verbs*

This section is devoted to a brief presentation of some key notions concerning the classification of verbs at the semantic-syntactic interface, which are relevant to the analysis of superlative PPs in Italian. The approach to verbs followed in this paper is based on the framework of *event semantics*, within which “verbs are taken to be predicates of events; however, the linguistic units which describes specific events include the

verbs, its arguments, and various types of VP modifiers. The ultimate semantic properties of the event description encoded in particular sentences are determined by a complex interaction between the lexical semantics of the verb, the referential properties of temporal and locative adjuncts” (Rappaport Hovav / Doron / Sichel 2010: 2)⁹.

In studies on the *lexical aspect* (also called *Aktionsart* or *actionality*) of verbal predicates, the basic idea is that verbs may be grouped into well-defined classes depending on their *temporal properties*. I will adopt the classification proposed by Vendler (1957), which has served as the basis for most later work. However, I will also take into account more recent relabelling and classifications (cf. Croft 2012 for a synthesis and references). Table 1 displays the four Vendlerian classes and the defining-features on the basis of which these classes have been identified, i.e. *dynamicity*, *durativity* and *telicity*:

Verbal Classes	Dynamicity	Durativity	Telicity
States	–	+	–
Activities	+	+	–
Accomplishments	+	+	+
Achievements	+	–	+

Table 1. Vendlerian classes (based on Vendler 1957)

States and activities are atelic, i.e. they do not proceed towards an inherent end-point. They lack completive expressions of the type ‘in X time’, but take durative expressions, as in (15.a.) and (15.b.). Both states and activities are *homogeneous*: by following Dowty (1979), they are characterized by the so-called *subinterval property* (whenever a predicate is true at a time interval, it is true at any part of that interval). However, states describe a situation which is not characterized by internal changes, whereas activities describe a situation evolving through time. Unlike these two classes, accomplishments and achievements are telic, take completive

⁹ In the present paper, the label ‘event’ is to be intended as referring to what verbs typically express as a word class, in opposition to nouns, which denote types of *objects*, and to adjectives, which denote types of *properties* (cf. Croft 2001: 87).

expressions and are not homogeneous: if *Mary found the key in ten minutes* (15.d), this does not entail that **Mary was finding the key* during the period of ten minutes (Dowty 1979: 59).

- (15) a. Mary **loved** John for three years/*in three years [state]
- b. Mary **ran** in the park for one hour/*in one hour [activity]
- c. Mary **wrote** a book in one year/*for one year [accomplishment]
- d. Mary **found** the key in ten minutes/*for ten minutes [achievement]

According to Vendler's approach, the semantic structure of verbs is identified by taking into account only the verbal lexical meaning. However, as other scholars later recognized (since Verkuyl 1972), it may depend also on the verbal phrase level. In particular, durative non-stative verbs, i.e. activities and accomplishments, may give rise to either an atelic or a telic reading depending on whether their direct object is a *non-count noun*, having a cumulative reference (mass nouns or indefinite plural nouns), or a *count noun*, having a quantified reference (singular nouns or definite plural nouns; cf., among others, Mittwoch 1982, Krifka 1989, Ramchand 1997). This is illustrated by the following examples:

- (16) a. Mary **wrote letters** for 30 minutes/*in 30 minutes [activity]
- b. Mary **wrote the letter** in 30 minutes [accomplishment]

For some of these predicates the definition of *incremental theme verbs* has been adopted: they have been analyzed as denoting an event which reaches its end-point only when the object argument (the theme) is completely affected by the action. For instance, with verbs like 'to write' and 'to drink' the event reaches its endpoint only when something has been *completely* written or drunk, respectively. In other words, the theme of incremental verbs puts boundaries to the duration of the event, the completion of which depends on the quantity of the object argument affected by the action. This also explains why these verbs denote an atelic action if used intransitively (ex. 17): no overt direct object implies that the verb lacks the element which may bound the event.

- (17) Mary **wrote** for 30 minutes/*in 30 minutes

Accomplishments and achievements may be coerced¹⁰ into an *iterative reading*, denoting the *repetition* of an event (in this case they are compatible with durative adverbials: cf. van Geenhoven 2004, Landman and Rothstein 2010: 249-250)¹¹. In (18.a), ‘to play the sonata’ corresponds to a telic action, but this action is represented as iterated, since the subject is plural; in (18.b), a bare plural is added as a direct object, which gives rise to an iterative interpretation of the achievement verb ‘to discover’:

- (18) a. Students **played** the sonata for two hours
b. John **discovered** fleas on his dog for six weeks

It is further useful to mention that the notions of repetition and iterativity are related to the concept of *plurality* as discussed by Cusic (1981: 77), who distinguished between two types of plural events (see also § 5): (i) *Event-internal plurality*, i.e. a single event made up of a set of *sub-events*¹² repeated in the same occasion (plurality *within* events: John is coughing; cf. Shluinsky 2009); (ii) *Event-external plurality*, i.e. a whole event repeated on a single occasion or on multiple occasions (plurality *of* events: John does his exercises every day).

The first type includes the coerced reading of those verbs, labelled *semelfactives* by Smith (1991: 55 f.; 1997: 29 f.) and others, which are dynamic, punctual and, unlike achievements, atelic: the event that they denote may be represented as a single occurrence or, as illustrated by the example above (‘John is coughing’), as a repetition of the event: “typical

¹⁰ In general terms, *coercion* is the phenomenon because of which a specific event reading is determined by the *pression* exerted by a certain element (or more elements) in the context, such as a word class, a temporal adverb, an aspectual marker, a construction (Lauwers and Willems 2011). In other words, the event reading determined by coercion is the result of the semantics of the coerced lexeme and the coercing element(s).

¹¹ In the literature, the label *iterative* is used to denote a situation repeated on a particular occasion (Bybee, Perkins, Pagliuca 1994: 127, 160-161; for a revision of this notion cf. Bertinetto and Lenci 2012). A further distinction is based on the approximate numbers of repetitions: to denote a situation repeated on frequent occasions in a certain period of time, the label *frequentative* should be preferred. Iterativity and frequentativity both belong to the domain of *pluractionality* (cf. § 5).

¹² Here the term ‘sub-event’ is used differently from the traditional meaning that it assumes in the theory of lexical decomposition, following which *processes* and *transitions* are the event types that may be represented as containing two *subevents*, in opposition to the event type *states*, corresponding to a *single event* (cf. Pustejovsky 1991). A detailed discussion of the complex issues concerning the semantics of verbs and the syntax of event structure is far beyond the scope of the present work. The reader is referred to Jezek (2003), who deeply examines these issues with special regard to the Italian language.

Semelfactives are events that occur very quickly, with no outcome or result other than the occurrence of the event. [...] These events often occur in repetitive sequences, rather than as single-stage events. Such sequences are multiple-event Activities” (Smith 1997: 29-30). Some scholars have proposed to consider semelfactives as a fifth class to be added to the four Vendlerian classes or, eventually, as a subclass of achievements. The second type of plurality described above may be expressed by different linguistic strategies and may also be contextually determined (in ‘John does his exercises every day’, it is the adverbial expression ‘every day’ which triggers a plural interpretation of the event of doing exercises). Following Bertinetto and Lenci (2012), I will use the notion of *micro-event* as indicating each of the singular events comprised in a plural event (cf. § 4.3).

To conclude, among the numerous current proposals for a revision of Vendlerian classes, it is worth mentioning those based on the notion of *scalar change*, i.e. an incremental change on a scale (cf., among others, Beavers 2008, Rappaport Hovav 2008, Kennedy and Levin 2008). As already stressed by Dowty (1979), “the most basic aspectual distinction is whether or not an event in the denotation of the verb involves change, i.e. whether a verb is dynamic or stative” (Rappaport Hovav 2008: 16). However, one may further distinguish between dynamic verbs denoting events of scalar change (e.g. ‘to warm’, ‘to ripen’, ‘to cool’, ‘to fall’) and dynamic verbs denoting events of nonscalar change (e.g. ‘to laugh’, ‘to rain’, ‘to scream’, ‘to play’):

Verbs which denote events of scalar change are those which lexically specify a scale. A scale is an ordered set of values for a particular attribute. A scalar change is one which involves an ordered set of changes in a particular direction of the values of a single attribute and so can be characterized as movement in a particular direction along the scale. In the case of the verb *warm*, the scale is composed of ordered values of the attribute *warm*, and a warming event necessarily involves an increase in the value of [warm] (Rappaport Hovav 2008: 17).

Scalar verbs may be subdivided into verbs with *two point scales*, having only two values for the attribute (e.g. ‘to die’), and verbs with *multi-point scales*, having many values for the attribute (e.g. ‘to wide’). The first class includes telic verbs (canonical achievements in Vendler’s

classification). The second class is made up of both atelic and telic verbs, corresponding to the so-called *degree achievements* (Rappaport Hovav 2008: 19-20). The increase along the scale of such verbs may lead to a maximal degree or not: in the first case, the verb denotes gradual approximation to the terminal point along the scale and is telic; in the last case, the verb is atelic.

Following Rappaport Hovav (2008: 17-18), many activities denote a change which is nonscalar: this means that the change is *potentially* associated with a scale even though is not a lexical property of the verb¹³. A particular case is represented by incremental theme verbs, generally classified as associated with event/volume scales. This type of scale is not lexicalized in the verb, but is provided by the physical extent associated with the object (Rappaport Hovav 2008: 24-26): such verbs may give rise to an incremental theme interpretation if used with a quantified object (a count noun: cf. above), “but are nonetheless not lexically required to take incremental theme” (2008: 25). In other words, they behave as nonscalar verbs, although they may relate to their direct object “incrementally” (Rappaport Hovav 2008: 39). As we shall see in the following pages, the notion of scalar change is particularly relevant to the analysis of Italian superlative PPs.

4. *The semantics and pragmatics of PPs with -issimo*

Scholars who have dealt with the Italian absolute superlative agree in considering it as a strategy of *intensification*: it intensifies the property denoted by the adjective, not necessarily implying that this holds at its highest degree¹⁴. As Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 504) pointed out, in Italian the absolute superlative seems suitable for expressing different kinds of intensification, including *extreme intensification*: this means that it may be used to “upgrade the strength of illocutionary force

¹³ Contra Beavers (2008), according to whom a scale is associated with all verbs of change. The discussion of this issue is far beyond the scope of the present work.

¹⁴ Following Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 416), intensification can be defined “as increase in quantity or quality (‘very/extremely X’). Related to increase in quantity is increase in precision or accuracy (‘really/properly X’)”. See also Rainer (1983a: 3), Gaeta (2003: 45, 51), Merlini Barbaresi (2004: 446), Cacchiani (2011: 759, 776, 786-789). In Italian, various strategies of intensification exist apart from the superlative: reduplication, degree adverbs (*molto, assai, bene, troppo, assolutamente, completamente*, etc...), prefixation (with *arci-, stra-, super-*, etc...) and so on.

in terms of speaker commitment”, by highlighting his/her emotional attitude. This is consistent with Wierzbicka’s (1986) characterization of the functional properties of the Italian absolute superlative, which “is not meant to convey accuracy” (1986: 320), and rather represents “a grammatical device which enables the speakers of Italian to perform a kind of expressive overstatement all the time, that is to say regardless of the nature of the qualities spoken of” (1986: 305).

This pragmatic function of *-issimo* is what explains why this suffix may be used also with non-prototypically gradable bases (cf. Rainer 1983a: 58, 1983b: 98; Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 499), including nouns (*partitissima* ‘game-SUP’) – although rarely: cf. Serianni (1988: 181), pronouns (*nessunissimo* ‘nobody-SUP’), adverbs (*subitissimo* ‘immediately-SUP’) and, indeed, PPs.

4.1. *Why morto ‘dead’ could be mortissimo*

Consistently with the semantic-pragmatics of the absolute superlative, the occurrence of PPs with *-issimo* in Modern Italian is often related to stylistic choices based on the search for emphasis, hyperbole, exaggeration: thus, it is not surprising that in newspaper articles we find PPs which are basically non-gradable used as superlatives. To give a paradigmatic example, I will briefly discuss the case of *morto* ‘dead’.

In literature on gradability – as well as in lexical semantic literature (cf. Cruse 1986: 198 f.) – ‘dead’ is normally taken as a typical member of the class of non-gradable deverbal forms. In Paradis’ (2001) approach, it is defined as belonging to *limit adjectives*, which are conceptualized in terms of “either...or” rather than in terms of “more-or-less”: as a rule, “they do not occur in the comparative or the superlative (*?deader, ?deadest*)” (Paradis 2001: 52-53; cf. also Paradis 2008: 7)¹⁵. Contrary to the prediction of the infelicity of ‘dead’ with the comparative and the superlative, in Italian *mortissimo* is attested since the eighteenth century and is documented also in my corpora:

¹⁵ The same assumption is common to other approaches which apply the notion of *scale* to the analysis of adjectives and deverbal adjectives (see § 4.2.): for instance, Beavers (2008: 8; 18-19) defines ‘dead’ as a “purely non-gradable scalar” in denoting a real-world binary opposition. A different opinion is expressed by Kennedy and McNally (2005: 359, note 12), according to whom “although dead is sometimes taken as a paradigmatic case of an ungradable adjective, the felicity of expressions such as *half dead* or *almost dead* indicate that it is, in fact, gradable, associated with a closed scale and an upper endpoint standard”.

- (19) a. *E la Bruges mortissima...* (1, Rep)
 and the Bruges die-PP.SUP
 ‘And the totally dead Bruges...’
- b. *Ho tenuto la mano*
 have-PRS.1SG hold-PP the hand
al mortissimo defunto (15, ItWaC)
 to.the die-PP.SUP departed
 ‘I held the hand of the stone-dead dear departed’

Given that degree expressions may have the effect of conveying a subjective evaluation, in the case of a bounded and contradictory form like *morto* the superlative coerces an objective reading – the reality is that somebody is alive *or* dead – into a subjective meaning. The speaker/writer adds emphasis to the fact that somebody is dead, by expressing not only an *information* but also, and mainly, an emphatic *evaluation* based on his personal emotions, attitudes, etc. This explains why the superlative is allowed also for apparently non-gradable bases, like antonym pairs: not because of their objective meaning, which in principle would exclude degrees, but because of the possible subjective force of intensifying expressions¹⁶.

4.2. Scale structures and the intensive use of Italian superlative PPs

In this section, I will introduce the notion of *scale structure* as associated to adjectival forms, which is useful to interpret two different kinds of entailments displayed by superlative PPs in Italian (although this notion is not sufficient to explain *other* types of readings to which the use of superlative PPs may give rise: cf. § 4.3.).

In Kennedy’s (1999, 2007) and Kennedy and McNally’s (1999, 2005) approach, adjectives and participles (deverbal adjectives, in their terminology) are interpreted as “relational expressions, specifically, as

¹⁶ A referee objects that evaluation is not restricted to subjectivity. In this paper, I follow Athanasiadou’s (2007) approach – based on R.W. Langacker’s works – on the basis of which markers of intensification are subjective by definition, in the sense that they express the speaker’s perspective/viewpoint/attitude. In my opinion, what makes *-issimo* ‘subjective’ in cases like *mortissimo* is the fact that it does not express a graded value (which is impossible for non-gradable forms), but it intensifies the property expressed by adding emphasis, which is a matter of stylistic/expressive choice. In this respect, see the recent analysis by Beltrama (2012), where *-issimo* is regarded not as a true degree modifier, but rather as an operator selecting *outstanding entities* – similarly to exclamatives –, and producing noteworthiness evaluation (then, *indirect* degree effects).

expressions that relate objects in their domains to degrees on a scale, where the particular scale is specified by the dimensional parameter of the adjective” (Kennedy 1999: 43). Adjectival scales are distinguished on the basis of one main parameter, i.e. whether they contain minimal and/or maximal elements, or not (Kennedy and McNally 2005: 352-353)¹⁷: a scale is (i) (totally) *open* if it lacks both a minimal and a maximal element (as for: long, expensive, old); (ii) (totally) *closed* if it has minimal and maximal elements (as for: full/empty, open/closed, visible/invisible); (iii) *lower closed* if it has a minimal but no maximal element (as for: quite, straight, unknown); (iv) *upper closed* if it has a maximal but no minimal element (as for: certain, pure, safe). The open/closed scale distinction is assumed to be relevant to the type of degree modifiers allowed by gradable adjectives. For instance, the adjectives in (20.a) have a closed scale and allow endpoint-oriented degree modifiers like ‘completely’, as opposed to adjectives with an open scale (20.b):

- (20) a. completely empty/full
b. ?? completely tall/short

Kennedy and McNally (1999, 2005) pointed out that the type of scale structure of participles is correlated with the type of event structure of the corresponding verb¹⁸. Participles taken from telic verbs are typically bounded, since they imply a terminal point and have a closed scale¹⁹. As a consequence, they do not generally allow modification by the modifier ‘much’, but are compatible with proportional modifiers such as ‘half’,

¹⁷ A deep discussion about this topic is beyond the scope of the present work. Cf. also Kennedy (2007: 32-35). Similar conclusions on scale structures have been reached by Rotstein and Winter (2004: 268-274).

¹⁸ “The dimensional parameter of the derived scale, like the structure of the scale, is also a function of the meaning of the source verb. Specifically, any of the various aspects of verb meaning that support measurement (temporal extent, number of occurrences, number of participant, intensity, etc.) can be used to fix the dimensional parameter of the derived adjective’s scale. We may assume that any particular adjectival form (*needed*, *admired*, etc.) is compatible with several dimensions, one of which must be settled upon in a context of utterance” (Kennedy and McNally 2005: 364).

¹⁹ According to Kennedy and McNally (2005: 362), deverbal adjectives with a closed scale mainly belong to the class of incremental theme verbs: the lower point of the scale corresponds to the “minimal (sub)event” involving a minimal part of the incremental theme (note that the term (sub)event is used as in Pustejovsky 1991: cf. note 12 in this paper), and its upper point corresponds to the “maximal event” involving all of the incremental theme. For a different interpretation of incremental theme verbs cf. Rappaport Hovav’s (2008) approach summarized in § 3. On these verbs, see also examples from (35) to (37) in my paper.

‘partially’ and endpoint-oriented degree modifiers like ‘fully’, ‘completely’ (Kennedy and McNally 2005: 363, 373):

- (21) a. ??The meat is much done
 b. ??The book is much written
 c. ??The glass is much filled
- (22) a. half eaten cookies
 b. a partially written novel
- (23) a. fully straightened teeth
 b. a completely traversed distance

This seems to be consistent with the semantics of Italian PPs from telic verbs like *morto* (19.a, 19.b) and like those illustrated below, with whom *-issimo* does not properly denote a high degree or the highest degree, but absolute completion, by assuming the same meaning as an endpoint-oriented degree modifier:

- (24) a. *Per la legge italiana, Serena è abbandonatissima*
 to the law Italian Serena be-PRS.3SG abandon-PP.SUP
 (1, Rep)
 ‘According to Italian law, Serena has been totally abandoned’
- b. *...chiusi, chiusissimi, i bar intorno allo stadio*
 close-PP close-PP.SUP the bar around.the football.ground
 (29, Rep)
 ‘The pubs around the football ground were shut, completely shut down’
- c. *Il sudore scompone i bottoni del colletto della stiratissima²⁰ camicia di Walter Veltroni*
 the sweat disarrange-PRS.3SG the buttons of.the collar
 of.the iron-PP.SUP shirt of Walter Veltroni
 (11, Rep)
 ‘Sweat disarranges the buttons on Walter Veltroni’s well-ironed shirt collar’

²⁰ A referee objects that the Italian verb *stirare*, from which *stiratissima* is taken, may be atelic – as well as other incremental theme verbs –, for instance when occurring without any direct object (*Ho stirato per ore* ‘I have spent hours ironing’). This is undisputable. However, on the basis of the compositional analysis of activities and accomplishments mentioned in § 3, the verb is to be interpreted as telic in ex. (24.c), where the theme of *stirare* is a count noun (definite and singular). The same is true for *restaurare* in (24.d).

- d. ...*nel bar del prestigioso e restauratissimo Hotel Baglioni*
in.the bar of.the prestigious and refurbish-PP.SUP Hotel Baglioni
(7, Rep)
'...in the bar of the prestigious, completely refurbished Hotel Baglioni'

As demonstrated by examples in (24), the superlative of PPs derived from telic verbs culminating into a new state (both achievements and accomplishments) may be an emphatic means to express that the result state is reached and, as a consequence, it is irreversible²¹.

On the contrary, PPs taken from atelic verbs typically have an open scale: "since atelic verbs describe situations with no natural endpoint, there is no obvious maximal event or state that could correspond to an upper endpoint of the corresponding adjectival scale. The scale should thus be open on the upper hand" (Kennedy and McNally 2005: 364). This explains why these PPs allow modification by 'much' but do not combine with endpoint-oriented degree modifiers (ex. 25); the same behaviour is shared by PPs from telic verb denoting "a change in property that is necessarily mapped into an open scale", as in (26) (Kennedy and McNally 2005: 363):

- (25) a. ??a completely hated/loved/envied/admired neighbor [sic, M.N.]
b. ??fully needed/wanted rest
c. ??a completely looked for reaction
- (26) ??a fully worried mother

Consistently, the superlative of Italian PPs derived from atelic verbs does not measure the degree of completion of the state in which the event results, because there is no such a final state. What is intensified is the state determined by the event in its occurring (the target state: cf. note 21):

- (27) a. ...*salamandre accuditissime dai nostri pazienti* (1, Rep)
salamanders look.after-PP.SUP by.the our patients
'...salamanders carefully looked after by our patients'

²¹ It is useful to mention the distinction proposed by Parsons (1990) between *target state* and *resultant state*: every event which culminates produces a state that is irreversible and holds forever after (resultant state). This type of state must be distinguished from the target state, which may or may not be long lasting: "for a large number of verbs, there is a 'typical' independently identifiable state that its object is in after the verb is true of it" (Parsons 1990: 235).

- b. *La partita è stata combattutissima*
 the match be-PRS.3SG be-PP fight-PP.SUP
fino alla fine (51, Rep)
 up.to.the end
 ‘The match was a real struggle to the very end’

I shall also comment on the PPs below, taken from *guarire* ‘to recover’ and *invecchiare* ‘to grow old’, which are degree achievements (cf. § 3):

- (28) a. *Per la sua nazionale è malato,*
 for the his national.team be-PRS.3SG ill
per la Juve è guaritissimo (3, Rep)
 for the Juventus be-PRS.3SG recover-PP.SUP
 ‘He is ill for his national team, but perfectly recovered for Juve’
- b. *Tra vent’anni, il mio libro sarà invecchiatissimo*
 in twenty years the my book be-FUT.3SG grow.old-PP.SUP
 (6, Rep)
 ‘In twenty years’ time, my book will be well out-of-date’

As pointed out in § 3, degree achievements may be telic or atelic, depending on whether the incremental change denoted by the verb leads to a maximal degree or not. Consistently, PPs taken from such verbs may have a closed scale or an open scale. This is reflected in the two different readings available in Italian with the superlatives of PPs in (28): *guaritissimo* encodes a closed scale, while *invecchiatissimo* encodes an open scale. Somebody may not get well indefinitely, since there is a maximal degree of recovery to reach in order to be recovered. On the contrary, there is no a maximal degree of change to reach in order to be old: somebody may go on to age as long as he undergoes some increase in the process of growing older, or, in other words, may become older and older until he dies²². This is why *guaritissimo* has to be interpreted as ‘completely recovered’ rather than ‘?much recovered’, while *invecchiatissimo* may be interpreted as ‘much aged’.

To sum up, data from the *Repubblica Corpus* show that the superlative

²² As a referee rightly observed, it is relevant that *invecchiare* is a deajetival verb derived from *vecchio* ‘old’, which is a gradable adjective with an open scale. This obviously influences the behaviour of the verb and the corresponding PP (cf. also Rappaport Hovav 2008: 20).

suffix *-issimo* basically has a pure intensive meaning when applied to PPs, with different nuances depending on their scale structure. More precisely, with PPs having a closed scale *-issimo* generally emphasizes that the final state denoted by the verb is reached, and covers the same function as an endpoint-oriented degree modifier. When applied to PPs with an open scale, the same suffix describes the temporary state derived from the event as being at a high degree (not necessarily the apical degree), and has the same scope as a scalar degree modifier. Although the approach based on the notion of scale structure and illustrated here can throw new light onto the parameters determining the semantics and the distribution of *-issimo* with Italian PPs, it does not explain all the different types of scenarios revealed by corpus data, as I will try to show in the next section.

4.3. *Superlative PPs denoting plurality of participants and/or plurality of events*

As pointed out in § 4.2., the cases examined till now have shown that the dimension along which what expressed by superlative PPs is measured out is one of intensity. This is well illustrated by the PP of a stative verb of emotion (already quoted in (7)):

- (29) *Rex è amatissimo dai bambini*
Rex be-PRS.3SG love-PP.SUP by.the children
'Rex is very much loved by children'

Evidently enough, in (29) *amatissimo* implies that somebody is 'loved to the highest possible degree', i.e. is the object of an 'intensive love' by somebody else (in this specific case, by children). However, when the agent is not explicitly encoded, an inferred reading is possible on the basis of which *amatissimo* may be interpreted as 'loved by many people'. This is the case of the example in (30), where the presence of an adverbial phrase of the 'since X time' type strengthens the idea that the event of loving lasted for a long time:

- (30) *Il film [...] fu amatissimo fin dal 1952*
the film be-PST.3SG love-PP.SUP since from.the 1952
'The film [...] has been very much loved (= loved by many people) ever since 1952'

Similarly, the fact that the programme is *ascoltatissimo* in (31) seems to imply that it is ‘listened to by many people’ (i.e., the programme has many listeners) and, as a consequence, that it is ‘listened to many times’:

- (31) *Il programma è ascoltatissimo* (64, Rep.)
 the programme be-PRS.3SG listen.to-PP.SUP
 ‘The programme is very much listened to (= listened by many people)’

On the basis of this, we could say that *-issimo* may have a (secondary) argument-pluralising effect: it denotes repetition distributed over an unbounded set of different participants, i.e. it assumes a *distributive reading* (cf. Dressler 1968).

By definition, the distributive form of a verb conceptually entails the representation of the event as composed of a plurality of micro-events (cf. § 3), performed by multiple agents or on multiple objects. This is illustrated by the following case (Quileute, Chimakuan; from Dressler 1968: 66):

- (32) *kwe-‘tsa’* *kwe-‘k^utsa’*
 ‘He is hungry’ ‘Several people are hungry’

As we will see below by means of various examples, in Italian a distributive reading is available with superlative PPs taken from atelic verb as well as from telic verbs. This means that telicity is not the crucial factor in determining the type of reading assumed by the superlative PP. As a referee pointed out, what seems to be relevant is the notion of scalar change (cf. § 3): it appears that PPs from verbs which do not denote a change measurable along a scale, i.e. non gradable PPs, get the distributive reading as the most natural one. I will come back to this point in § 6.

For the time being, let us consider some Italian cases where the event expressed by the superlative PP is not conceived of as a single one, since it is made up of different micro-events: more precisely, as many micro-events as the agents separately performing the same action. In (33), for instance, *giocatissimo*, *compratissima*, *ballatissima* and *osservatissimi*, derived from verbs of nonscalar change, denote multiple micro-events of betting, buying, dancing and watching, respectively. In all these cases, the

superlative form of the PP may be substituted by its simple form plus an agentive phrase denoting the plurality of agents (such as *da molte persone* ‘by many people’):

- (33) a. *Il numero centenario era stato*
the number centenarian be-IMPF.3SG be-PP
giocatissimo a Napoli (3, Rep.)
bet-PP.SUP in Naples
‘The number, which had failed to come out more than 100 times,
had attracted an enormous number of bets in Naples’
- b. *La Pirelli Spa è stata in questa settimana*
the Pirelli Inc be-PRS.3SG be-PP in this week
compratissima (4, Rep.)
buy-PP.SUP
‘There has been a great demand for Pirelli shares this week’
- c. ...una cantilena [...] ora *ballatissima*²³ in versione disco
a jingle now dance-PP.SUP in version disco
(2 Rep)
‘...a jingle [...] now very much danced to in its disco version’
- d. *Non è così: sono osservati, osservatissimi*
non be-PRS.3SG so be-PRS.3PL watch-PP watch-PP.SUP
(2, Rep.)
‘It is not so: they are being watched, very closely watched’

In example (34) what is pluralized is the indirect argument of the nonscalar verb *vendere* ‘to sell’ (the mineral water is sold *to many people*):

- (34) *La nostra minerale è vendutissima in Canada*
the our mineral-water be-PRS.3SG sell-PP.SUP in Canada
(85, Rep)
‘Our mineral water sells very well in Canada’

²³ In (33.c), *ballatissima* denotes the action of dancing as distributed over an unspecified set of participants, i.e. it implies that many people dance the disco version of a specific jingle. Clearly enough, its value is different from the value of *ballatissimo* in example (14.a), where the PP has an adjectival meaning: it describes a property of the video mentioned, is used in prenominal attributive position and could not be virtually modified by an agentive phrase.

The distributive reading is available also with incremental theme verbs, which, according to Kennedy and McNally (2005), typically give rise to PPs with a closed scale (cf. § 4.2 and note 19). However, as already shown in § 3, incremental theme verbs basically belong to the group of nonscalar verbs (Rappaport Hovav 2008): they are not lexically associated with a scale, although a scale can be provided by the appropriate incremental theme. Interestingly enough, in Italian the superlative form of PPs derived from incremental theme verbs does not necessarily indicate that something is ‘completely X-ed’, but that the action of ‘being X-ed’ is/was performed by many people. In (35), for instance, the superlative PP of a typical incremental theme verb like *bere* ‘to drink’ implies that a certain kind of drink is largely consumed²⁴:

- (35) È *bevutissimo* il caffè corretto con crema al whisky
 be-PRS.3SG drink-PP.SUP the coffe laced with whisky.cream
 o con la sambuca (1, ItWaC)
 or with the sambuca
 ‘Coffee laced with whisky cream or sambuca is widely drunk’

Similarly, the superlative form of the PP of *leggere* ‘to read’ does not mean ‘intensively read’, neither in the sense of ‘fully/completely read’ nor in the sense of ‘read passionately’. *Lettissimo* rather means ‘read by many people’. For instance, the sentences in (36.a) and (36.b) imply that many people read Hesse’s books and the newspaper *Eco*, respectively²⁵:

²⁴ It is worth mentioning that in the *Repubblica corpus bevutissimo* occurs once with the adjectival meaning of ‘completely drunk’, as referred to the subject of the drinking event (i.e., with an unaccusative reading).

²⁵ On the basis of the analysis proposed by Rappaport Hovav (2008: 24-26, 33), ‘to read’ does not denote a change in its object, which means that it is not associated with a result state of the theme even in its telic reading. The only change that this verb denotes is a nonscalar change in its subject. In this respect, it differs from other incremental theme verbs which lexicalize a change in the theme argument, like, for instance, ingestion verbs as ‘to eat’, denoting that the theme is ingested (2008: 25). Obviously, the same is true for the verb ‘to drink’. The idea that the event of reading does not culminate into a result state of the object seems not unproblematic to me: if we accept this, we should admit that every event which does not determine a *physical change* in its object does not produce a result state. However, we could say that something is changed in the book that I read: by achieving the state of being read, the book is changed at least with respect to its relation to me, its reader. The discussion of this complex issue is far beyond the scope of this paper. What is relevant from the viewpoint of my investigation is that the PP of both ‘to read’ and ‘to drink’ has a distributive reading (see also § 6).

- (36) a. [*Herman Hesse*] è un autore **lettissimo**,
 Herman Hesse be-PRS.3SG a author read-PP.SUP
eppure nelle università è dimenticato (7, Rep.)
 yet in.the universities be-PRS.3SG forget-PP
 ‘[Herman Hesse] is a widely read author, and yet in universities
 he has been forgotten’
- b. *Descriveva “l’Eco” come un giornale*
 describe-IMPF.3SG the Eco as a newspaper
che è lettissimo (14, ItWaC)
 which be-PRS.3SG read-PP.SUP
 ‘He described “l’Eco” as a widely read newspaper’

To conclude, *bevutissimo* and *lettissimo* denote an unbounded plurality of drinking and reading micro-events. Replacing the superlative PP with the corresponding positive form preceded by the modifier *molto* shows that the two constructions are semantically equivalent, i.e. the superlative of PPs may have the same scope as *molto*, by implying a distributive reading (examples from ItWaC):

- (37) a. *Vini di nome ‘Frascati’ sono molto bevuti*
 wines of name Frascati be-PRS.3PL much drink-PP
in America
 in America
 ‘Wines labelled *Frascati* are very widely drunk in America’
- b. *Il blog è molto scritto – da un*
 the blog be-PRS.3SG much write-PP by a
gruppone fisso più alcuni saltuari
 large.group regular plus some occasional
– ma è soprattutto molto letto
 but be-PRS.3SG mainly much read-PP
 ‘The blog is very frequently updated – by a large group of regular contributors, as well as a few occasional ones – and is especially rich in readers’

As is self-evident from examples like (31), (34), (35), (36), the distributive value of *-issimo* may take place in association with *habituality*, which “presupposes a more or less regular iteration of an event, such that

the resulting habit is regarded as a characterizing property of a given referent” (Bertinetto and Lenci 2012: 852)²⁶. In (38), *seguitissimo* and *applicatissimo* describe characterizing properties of the corresponding referents which are determined by the regular repetition of the event:

- (38) a. *Il suo talk show è seguitissimo* (175, Rep)
 the his talk show be-PRS.3SG follow-PP.SUP
 ‘His talk show is widely followed’
- b. *Per anni nel nostro paese è stato funzionante*
 for years in.the our country be-PRS.3SG be-PP operative
e applicatissimo il cosiddetto manuale Cencelli (4, Rep.)
 and apply-PP.SUP the so-called manual Cencelli
 ‘The so-called Cencelli manual has been operative and widely applied in our country for years’

This habitual meaning of *-issimo* may occur also with reference to *kinds*: they are noun phrases which do not refer to individuals, but to a class considered in its entirety, as made up of elements sharing some features which distinguish them from members of other classes (cf. Chierchia 1998: 347). An example is (39):

- (39) *I computer non sono utilizzatissimi nel pubblico*
 the computers not be-PRS.3PL use-PP.SUP in.the public
impiego (2, Rep.)
 sector
 ‘Computers are not widely used in the public sector (= by many people/for long hours)’

As pointed out till now, in denoting repetition distributed over participants superlative PPs may also denote repetition in time. More specifically, they may assume an *iterative/frequentative reading* (on these notions cf. § 3, note 11):

- (40) a. *Domenica colera e acqua e sapone*
 Sunday cholera and water and soap

²⁶ As is well-known, habituality has been considered as a form of pluractionality (Xrakovskij 1997: 58): cf. § 5.

- sono state parole usatissime* (44, Rep)
be-PRS.3PL be-PP words use-PP.SUP
'Cholera, water and soap were words heavily used on Sunday'
- b. *A proposito della parlatissima legge 142,*
with.regard to.the discuss-PP.SUP law 142
ci sono pareri contrastanti (13, ItWaC)
there be-PRS.3PL opinions conflicting
'As regards the much discussed Law n° 142, there are conflicting opinions'
- c. *Ruoli obbligati in copioni storici già vissutissimi...*
roles forced in dramas historical already live-PP.SUP
(2, Rep.)
'Must-be roles in historical dramas already so often enacted...'

PPs in (40) involve a plurality of agents and, at the same time, explicitly trigger a temporal interpretation: *parole usatissime* are words used many times on a specific occasion, *la parlatissima legge* is a law that has been talked about many times, *copioni vissutissimi* refers to something which has been enacted repeatedly. It is not surprising that this particular semantic implication of *-issimo* is especially available with PPs from atelic verbs, which are by definition “pluractional predicates” (van Geenhoven 2004: 161): indeed, we can regard “the inherent unboundedness expressed in the lexical content of activity (and state) verbs as a case of inherent pluractionality” (van Geenhoven 2004: 167). I quote one more example, where the context suggests that the scale along which the state of being repeated is measured out is one of frequency (cf. the prepositional phrase *come frequenza* ‘in terms of frequency’):

- (41) *...cori irripetibili per il bon ton*
choruses unrepeatable for the good.manners
ma ripetutissimi come frequenza (7, Rep)
but repeat-PP.SUP as frequency
'...choruses unrepeatable in polite society, yet most frequently repeated'

PPs from verbs allowing internal plurality (cf. the definition in § 3) may also be ambiguous between a pure intensive reading and a repetitive reading in terms of a continuous extended action:

- (42) a. ...*la Jugoslavia fischiatissima per tutta la partita* (69, Rep.)
 the Yugoslavia boo-PP.SUP for all the match
 ‘...Yugoslavia, continually booed throughout the match’
- b. *Lo ha avuto ospite ricercatissimo*
 him have-PRS.3SG have-PP guest seek.after-PP.SUP
e ascoltattissimo per alcuni giorni (149, 64, Rep)
 and listen-PP.SUP for some days
 ‘For a few days he was his guest, and was continuously sought after and attended to’
- c. *Hanno ballato applauditissimi per oltre un’ora*
 have-PRS.3PL dance-PP clap-PP.SUP for over an hour
 (528, Rep)
 ‘They danced for over an hour, amid continual applause’

Superlative PPs in (42) clearly represent a series of micro-events as distributed within a certain amount of time, denoted by a temporal adverbial of ‘for X time’ type. Obviously, the presence of this adverbial coerces the temporal interpretation of the PP, since it entails repetition by itself.

Finally, what is particularly relevant is that *-issimo* may produce a repetitive reading also with telic predicates, explicitly triggering an interpretation of the event in terms of iteration. I quote three more examples confirming the idea that PPs with the suffix *-issimo* may be used under an iterative or frequentative reading in denoting multiple instances of the same action: *citattissimo* clearly means ‘mentioned many times’; the participle *intervistatissima* implies that Lilly Wust was interviewed frequently in the last days (and probably by many different journalists); the *interrottissima rappresentazione* is a representation continually interrupted on a single occasion.

- (43) a. *Ruggeri è stato citattissimo* (62, Rep)
 Ruggeri be-PRS.3SG be-PP mention-PP.SUP
 ‘Ruggeri was mentioned many times’
- b. *Lilly Wust, una delle protagoniste della vicenda,*
 Lilly Wust one of.the protagonists of.the story
ha ottantacinque anni e vive
 have-PRS.3SG eighty-five years and live-PRS.3SG

- a Berlino, **intervistatissima** in questi giorni (8, Rep)
in Berlin interview-PP.SUP in these days
'Lilly Wust, one of the protagonists of the story, is eighty-five years old and lives in Berlin; she was interviewed many times in these days'
- c. ...febbre e **interrottissima** rappresentazione
frenzied and interrupt-PP.SUP representation
dell' atto unico di Cechov (1, Rep)
of.the act single of Cechov
'...a frenzied, continually interrupted representation of the one-act play by Cechov'

In previous research on Italian superlative PPs, it had been noted that *-issimo* may introduce a scale measuring not necessarily intensity: more precisely, Rainer (1983b: 97) postulated the existence of a “variante frequentativa di *-issimo*” (a frequentative variant of *-issimo*; see also Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 494, Merlini Barbaresi 2004: 449). However, the label “frequentative” turns out to be too generic in order to explain the different readings shown by superlative PPs, as demonstrated by the data in this section. Moreover, one could ask what determines these different readings with Italian PPs. To answer this question and to provide a unified and more accurate analysis of the Italian data is possible, in my opinion, if we deal with the notion of *pluractionality*. In order to pursue this point, in the next section I will briefly sum up relevant findings from typological research on this notion.

5. *Pluractionality*

Pluractionality is an actional category – rather than an aspectual category²⁷ –, the main characteristic of which is, by definition, “almost always plurality or multiplicity of the verbs’ action” (Newman 1990: 53-54). From a cross-linguistic point of view, it is mainly expressed by reduplication and by inflectional or derivational affixes. The English term pluractionality was coined by Newman (1980). He dealt with Chadic

²⁷ However, “aspectual markers proper may produce pluractional interpretations by coercion” (Wood 2007: 12). On the notion of coercion, cf. note 10.

languages, whose pluractional verbs have been described as denoting *plurality of arguments* (subjects, objects and, more rarely, other types of arguments) and *plurality of actions*: to give a few examples (from Newman 1990: 54-58), in Bidiya pluractionality corresponds to “the plurality of subject or object, or durative, habitual, frequentative or iterative action”; in Bole – and, similarly, in Gude –, pluractionals (traditionally called *intensives*) may denote an action performed several times by one subject, several subjects performing the same action, one subject performing an action on several objects or iteratively on the same object.

Typological studies have tried to give a unified account of the variety of meanings exhibited by pluractional markers. Among others, Dressler (1968) identified four main types of plural events: *iterative* (various kinds of repeated actions), *continuative* (continued or prolonged actions), *intensive* (proper intensified actions/attenuated actions) and *distributive* (already illustrated in § 4: see ex. 32). Two examples are quoted below (Dressler 1968: 63, 81):

[Iterative; Quileute, Chimakuan]

- | | | |
|------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| (44) | <i>xálatšli</i> | <i>xá'alatšli</i> |
| | ‘I cut it’ | ‘I cut it often, repeatedly’ |

[Intensive; Nahuatl, Uto-Aztecan]

- | | | |
|------|---------------|-----------------------|
| (45) | <i>tlaqua</i> | <i>tla-tlaqua</i> |
| | ‘He eats’ | ‘He eats plentifully’ |

In general terms, it can be assumed that a pluractional event represents the occurrence of multiple micro-events. More precisely, pluractionality is based on the presupposition that an event counts as plural if it is plural at least in one of three dimensions, i.e. participants, times, locations, although not necessarily in a single one²⁸:

Pluractional markers attach to the verb to indicate a multiplicity of actions, whether involving multiple participants, times or locations [...]. We seem to have an analog in the domain of events to the more familiar phenomenon of plurality in the domain of individuals (Lasersohn 1995: 240).

²⁸ I will leave the issue ‘plurality of locations’ out of the discussion, since it does not seem to be relevant to Italian superlative PPs.

A more recent classification is that based on Cusic (1981) – already mentioned in § 3 –, according to which pluractionality is possible at two different levels (cf. Garrett 2001 and the discussion in Wood 2007: 16; 89, Tovena 2010b: 44 f.): (i) *Event-internal pluractionality* (typical of semelfactives); (ii) *Event-external pluractionality*. As shown by Wood (2007: 142-146), Yurok has two different pluractional categories expressing repetition in time: an iterative infix *-eg-* specialized for event-external pluractionality, and a form of verbal reduplication specialized for event-internal pluractionality. Whereas not all actional classes are compatible with the reduplicative form, there are no similar restrictions on the use of the iterative infix, which may occur with all actional types to express event-external pluractionality (Wood 2007: 176):

- (46) *tegenpewihl* [Activity]
rain-3SG
'It rains a lot'
- (47) *tegeloye 'w* [Achievement]
tell.a.lie.-3SG
'S/He [tells] lies all the time'

Although pluractionality as a grammaticalised category – expressed by specific morphological means – is especially productive in Africa and in North America (Wood 2007: 34), obviously this does not mean that other languages, such as the European languages, do not express pluractional meanings by using other strategies²⁹.

5.1. *Pluractional events and intensive meaning*

In dealing with pluractional verbs, what seems to be particularly relevant to our case-study is the connection between pluractionality and intensive meaning, emphasized by various scholars, and due to the fact that “they both indicate increase (one of number, one of degree)” (Wood 2007: 192). Already Cusic (1981: 74-75) pointed out that a wide range of

²⁹ Cf. Beck and von Stechow (2007), Tovena and Donazzan (2008), Beck (2012), Bertinetto and Lenci (2012). On Italian see the interesting works by Lucia Tovena, in particular Tovena (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011), where she analyzes diminutive verbal morphology as expressing event-internal pluractionality of the *decrease type* (cf. Italian *mordicchiare* ‘to nibble several times’, *dormicchiare* ‘to drowse’: from Tovena 2010b: 44).

plural meanings may be expressed by verbs and that intensity is one of them, since “repetition expresses increased effort in or increased quantity of the action” (1981: 84). It is also worth quoting Lasersohn (1995: 246):

Perhaps a little paradoxically, pluractional markerks also often carry readings which imply *increased* size, effort, result, etc... An example here is the *intensive* reading [...], as in Nahuatl *tlatlania* ‘to ask insistently’, as compared to *tlania* ‘to ask’. [...] A second reading in this class is the *augmentative* reading: “the amount of activity increases, and possibly also the amount of ‘substance’ implied as being acted upon” (Cusic p. 85), as in Luiseño *corii*, ‘to cut a lot of wood’ (i.e. do a lot of wood-cutting’, as opposed to *cori*, ‘to cut’).

To give some more examples, in Lamang pluractional verbs primarily show an intensive value and, only to a lesser extent, an iterative function (Newman 1990: 56); in Mofu-Gudur pluractionality corresponds to the expression of frequentative, repetitive and also intensive processes (Newman 1990: 57). In Chukchee (Chukotko-Kamchatkan), the *multiplicative* suffix *-j(i)wə* is generally used with an iterative meaning, but may also assume an intensive reading (from Nedjalkov, Muravjova and Raxtilin 1997: 318):

- (48) *tilm-e* *waarale-jwə-nen* “orawel”*a-n*
 eagle-INS attack-MULT/INT-AOR.3SG man-ABS.SG
 ‘The eagle attacked the man (several times/violently)’

In this respect, an interesting case is represented by Yurok. As already shown in § 5, the iterative infix is usually employed to denote repetition in time, especially with a frequentative or habitual value, in order to say that something happens repeatedly or habitually (Wood 2007: 143-144):

- (49) a. *krtk-* *krgrtk-*
 ‘to fish for trout’ ‘to fish habitually/repeatedly’
 b. *new-* *nuuw-*
 ‘to see’ ‘to see repeatedly’

However, the same infix may occur with an intensive meaning (Wood 2007: 168):

- (50) a. *kaam-oksim-* *kegaam-oksim*
 ‘to dislike’ ‘to really dislike’

- | | | |
|----|----------------------|------------------------|
| b. | <i>t-oksim</i> | <i>teg-oksim</i> |
| | ‘to admire’ | ‘to praise’ |
| c. | <i>wa š-ok(sim-)</i> | <i>wega š-ok(sim-)</i> |
| | ‘to be sorry for’ | ‘to be very sorry for’ |

It is worth noting that all the examples above involve stative verbs of emotions: to quote from Wood (2007: 193), “the emotion verbs are a possible bridging context to get from plural event meaning to intensification. Any action which when repeated has a cumulative effect could possibly lead to an intensification meaning”.

To conclude, all these cases not only show that “plurality, duration and intensity can interact” (Xrakovskij 1997: 8), but, more specifically, they also suggest that an intensive reading may result from a pluractional meaning. Now, one could address the following question: is the opposite phenomenon possible? Or, in other words, may a pluractional reading result from an intensive meaning? In my opinion, this is exactly what the use of the superlative suffix with PPs demonstrates.

6. *From intensity to repetition: Italian -issimo with PPs as a pluractional operator*

The Italian data discussed in this paper seem to indicate a shift in meaning of the superlative suffix *-issimo* from *increase in quality* to *increase in quantity*, i.e. from intensity to repetition. When *-issimo* is applied to PPs, it may display two distinct, although related, functions: (i) it increases the degree to which somebody/something possesses a specific property-state (intensive value); it increases the degree to which somebody/something possesses a specific property-state by increasing, together, the event which caused this property-state (pluractional value). The last case is proper to PPs in § 4.3., which describe events made up of micro-events by involving multiplicity of participants (distributive reading) and, possibly, of times (habitual, iterative, frequentative readings). As a consequence, such superlative PPs are incompatible with the representation of the event as a single occurrence. This incompatibility is what they have in common with pluractionality (on the basis of the definition by Lasersohn 1995, among others).

I propose to classify *-issimo* as a pluractional operator when occurring

with PPs precisely for its shifting from a pure intensive reading to a repetition reading, and, then, for displaying the same kinds of meanings usually covered by pluractional markers across languages. Although, as a rule, the intensive meaning appears to be a secondary development from a basic pluractional meaning, as in Yurok, “there are also instances in which an apparent pluractional meaning seems to be secondary to an intensification meaning, as in Korean (Sohn 1999: 255)” (Wood 2007: 259). This seems to be the case also in Italian.

Indeed, given that the absolute superlative indicates the highest degree or a high degree of the graded property, it should be taken into account that to increase the *degree* of the property-state of events may have an effect of increasing the event itself: this means to increase the *number* of those elements that are central to the event, i.e. participants, time, locations. In particular, the distributive value assumed by superlative PPs, which consists in an increase of the number of participants, may imply an increase of extension in time: this is perfectly understandable since, following Cusic (1981: 87), “the increased quantity of action becomes an increase in the time it occupies”. Vice versa, an increase of the event in terms of participants, time and locations may have the effect of intensifying it, as is the case of the intensive use of pluractional markers in some languages. This may happen because degree and number are the different, but interacting, dimensions along which intensification and plurality hold, respectively: as a consequence, they give rise to a gradient space rather than to a polar opposition.

On the basis of the material examined in this paper, some provisional conclusions can be drawn on the distribution of *-issimo* as a pluractional operator. First of all, as concerns the transitive vs. intransitive (unaccusative or unergative) nature of verbs from which PPs are taken, data from my corpora show that superlative PPs from unaccusative verbs generally have a pure intensive value, whereas superlative PPs from transitive verbs also allow a pluractional reading. The use of *-issimo* with PPs taken from unergative verbs is quite rare: in this case, the PP always has a pluractional meaning, as in (40.b). Another example is the following, which shows the superlative of the unergative PP *dormito*³⁰ (it is taken from the Italian novel *Angela prende il Volo*, by E. Palandri, Feltrinelli, 2000, p. 98):

³⁰ A referee points out that *dormito* is ‘unaccusativized’ here. However, the result is a pluractional reading of the PP rather than a pure intensive reading.

- (51) *Ci carezziamo nel nostro dormitissimo letto...*
we-REFL pet-PRS.1PL in.the our sleep-PP.SUP bed
'We pet each other in our bed where we slept so many times'

Although cases like these are marginal and, maybe, hardly acceptable by some speakers, they clearly presuppose that *-issimo* extends its scope to the verbal action, i.e. they presuppose the use of this suffix as a pluractional operator.

The data analyzed here also suggest that PPs with a pluractional meaning are taken both from stative verbs (belonging to the class states) and from dynamic verbs (belonging to the class activities, accomplishments or achievements). In the last case, a pluractional reading of superlative PPs preferentially arises if the verb denotes a *nonscalar change*. The first implication of these generalizations is that telicity does not influence the distribution of *-issimo* with an intensive or a pluractional value, respectively, since both atelic and telic verbs allow these two readings. However, as shown in § 4.2., the fact that the PP has an open or a closed scale, which is deeply related to telicity, determines its assuming the function of a scalar degree modifier or an endpoint-oriented degree modifier when used in its superlative form with an intensive value.

The second significant implication is that the notion of scalar change seems to be the relevant parameter. Nevertheless, the fact a verb does not entail the notion of degree in its semantics does not imply that *-issimo* necessarily triggers a pluractional interpretation of the PP. As illustrated by some cases, the same PP may assume a pure intensive meaning and a pluractional meaning: see, for instance, the different readings of *ballatissimo* in (14.a) and (33.c) and the case of *bevutissimo* (cf. ex. 35 and note 24). Another example is the following, where *ascoltatissimo*, taken from a verb of nonscalar change, does not give rise to a pluractional reading (as in 31 and 42.b), but it appears to have a pure intensive meaning:

- (52) *Riccardo Muti, che è ascoltatissimo*
Riccardo Muti who be-PRS.3SG listen.to-PP.SUP
dall'orchestra (64, Rep.)
by.the orchestra
'[The music director] Riccardo Muti, who is very much listened to
by the orchestra'

In (52), *ascoltatissimo* does not mean ‘listened to by many people’ or ‘listened to repeatedly/for a long time’, but it simply means ‘intensively listened to’, in the sense that the orchestra obeys Muti’s suggestions to a very great extent.

In order to understand the pluractional use of *-issimo* with PPs in depth, more research is certainly needed on the relationship between this use and the scalar/nonscalar structure of verbs. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine how this correlates with the fact that the verb culminates into a result state or not (cf. note 21 on Parsons’ distinction between *target state* and *resultant state*). The state of being loved exists because the action of loving goes on. On the other hand, a broken window is a window which has entered into a new irreversible state – the state of being broken – because the action of breaking has been accomplished. Intuitively, it is in the first case that the intensification of the state more easily implies at the same time the intensification of the event determining the state and – as noted above – of its main components, since the existence of the state depends on the occurrence of the event and not on its culmination. On the other hand, if the PP denotes a result state, its culmination may be more easily emphasized by a morphological strategy which basically expresses the highest degree, as the superlative. I will leave a deeper analysis of all these issues on the relationship between *superlative pluractionality* and the syntax and semantics of verbs for future investigation.

To conclude, I would like to point out that queries with Google confirm the occurrence of *-issimo* with PPs under the different meanings observed in this paper. Moreover, they show the unexpected and non-standard use of superlative PPs from unergative verbs as in (53), where the PP occurs with the auxiliary ‘have’ in perfect active periphrasis:

- (53) *Il giorno del mio compleanno ho
 the day of the my birthday have-PRS.1SG
 nuotatissimo
 swim-PP.SUP
 ‘I went for a good long swim on my birthday’
 ([http://community.fondali.it/forum/viewtopic.php?f=74&t=8538&
 start=0](http://community.fondali.it/forum/viewtopic.php?f=74&t=8538&start=0)), Aug 22 2009*

Clearly, this is a further development of the use of *-issimo* as a verbal intensifier, which could also be the subject of future research.

7. Conclusions

The approach proposed in this paper, which implements scale models in the framework of pluractionality, can account for the different meanings shown by PPs used as superlatives in Italian. Adjectival scale models such as those proposed by Kennedy and McNally (2005) are based on the assumption that the dimension to which intensification applies concerns the properties denoted by adjectives. Moreover, they focus on the polar opposition between an initial state and a final state, a minimal and a maximal element, a lower end and an upper end. However, when we are dealing with PPs which still preserve their conceptual relationship with the source verb, intensification potentially applies to all the elements involved in the verbal event (participants, time, locations). As a consequence, to increase the degree of the state caused by the event may increase all these elements at the same time. This leads to the shift in meaning of *-issimo* from intensity to repetition, which determines its function as a pluractional operator.

The case of Italian PPs inflected as superlatives is clearly an instance of *linguistic creativity*, i.e. “a generative ability to extend the expressive possibilities of a language in a potentially infinite number of ways” (Bouillon and Busa 2001: XIII). In light of the foregoing, the fact that some of the forms mentioned in this paper are found only once in my corpora, i.e. the fact that they are *unique creations*, is not surprising: this is one of the consequences of the application of a suffix normally related to the expression of adjectival properties to the expression of verbal properties obtained as a product of events. Property-states related to events may certainly be superlative. However, thanks to linguistic creativity, the superlative of events is equally possible in Italian.

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Acknowledgments

I presented some preliminary results of this research at the 43rd Annual Meeting of the *Societas Linguistica Europaea* (Vilnius University, September 2-5 2010): I am grateful to the audience for useful questions and remarks. Special thanks are due to two anonymous referees of *Linguistica e Filologia* for their very thorough reading of an earlier version of this paper and for insightful comments. I would like to thank also the following people for valuable feedback and suggestions: Philip Baldi, Giorgio Banti, Marina Benedetti, Marina Castagneto, Anna Giacalone, Willem Hollmann, Alessandro Lenci, Michele Loporcaro, Claudio Marazzini, Giovanna Marotta, Carita Paradis, Paolo Ramat, Andrea Sansò and Mario Squartini. Sergio Knipe and Ronald Packam helped me with the English translation of the Italian examples quoted here: many thanks to them. This paper is based upon research financially supported by the Italian Ministry of Research and Education under the PRIN project “Contact and Change in the History of Mediterranean Languages” (Research Unit of the *Università per Stranieri di Siena*).

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