

Semplicità: a Corpus-Based Study on Blending in Italian

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Abstract

In recent years, lexical blending, or simply blending, has captured the attention and curiosity of many authors, marking a significant gap with the past tradition in which it was simply referred to as an “oddity” or a “minor word formation process” (Aronoff 1976; Scalise 1984). Blends are similar to compounds, although in blending both constituents are fused to form new, often morphologically unanalysable lexemes (Bauer 1983; Beliaeva 2019). This study proposes an analysis of a corpus of 316 lexical blends collected from previous studies on blending in Italian. Each blend was double-checked in historical dictionaries (*Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* or GDLI and *Grande Dizionario Italiano dell’Uso* or GRADIT) and/or neological databases (*Osservatorio Neologico della Lingua Italiana* and *Dizionario di Neologismi Treccani*) and then tagged with different labels. The phonological, morpho-syntactic and semantic features of Italian blends in the corpus were analysed, in particular with regard to blending features such as: syllable length and stress position; lexical categories, structural types and series; semantic types and headedness. The study highlights some differences between Italian and English blends, as they seem to be subject to different structural constraints. However, there are also semantic similarities between the two categories, such as right-headedness, which in Italian contrasts with the left-headedness typical of compounding in Romance languages.

Keywords: word formation; blending; Italian

1 Introduction

Lexical blending, or simply blending, is a word formation process in which a new lexical unit is created by merging two (or more) lexical units, often in unexpected ways (Beliaeva 2019; Micheli 2020).¹ This merging operation consists of two basic functions: a combina-

1 From here on, the lexical bases of the blend, traditionally called *source words* (Algeo 1977), will be referred to individually as W1 and W2, collectively as SWs. The phonological segments of the constituents that make up the blend, traditionally called *splinters* (Berman 1961; Adams 1973), are underlined in the examples presented (as above). The operator < stands for ‘formed by’, the operator x stands for ‘blended with’. The examples given are always in Italian, except for *NATO* and *BBC* (see note 4).

tion of two forms, called “source words”; a truncation of both or at least one of them. For example, *impumone* ‘accused of a crime who is called to testify about a related crime’ was formed combining and clipping the two SWs *imputato* ‘accused’ and *testimone* ‘witness’, whereas *apericena* ‘aperitif with a buffet of appetizers that can replace dinner’ was formed by clipping only W1 *aperitivo* ‘happy hour’ and combining it with W2 *cena* ‘dinner’. Furthermore, another salient feature of blending is the *overlap*, i.e. the preservation of a phonological/graphemic string shared between the two SWs in the blend, as shown by the adapted loanword *flessicurezza* /fles:iku'ret:sa/ ‘flexicurity’ < *flessibilità* /fles:ibili'ta/ ‘flexibility’ x *sicurezza* /siku'ret:sa/ ‘security’. In terms of lexical and morphological analyses, the treatment of blending in the English language dates back to the beginning of the XXth century, but it is only in the last twenty years that evidence for blending as a non-arbitrary word formation process has been found (Bergström 1906; Pound 1914; Kubozono 1990; Kelly 1998; Gries 2004a-b; Arndt-Lappe & Plag 2013; Beliaeva 2016; Mattiello 2019). Two main reasons for the late recognition of blending as a (partially) non-arbitrary process are the following:

- it appears highly irregular due to the multifarious structural patterns with which it is attested
- it is marginal in the grammar of many natural languages, which makes it peripheral compared to other core word formation processes

The structural diversity (first bullet point) has determined another problematic aspect, namely the proliferation of often overlapping terms and labels, which has undermined its systematisation into a theory of grammar. In addition, both of these reasons have led to a certain reluctance to include blending in theories of word formation, especially in relation to generativist theories (Aronoff 1976; Scalise 1984). In lexicographical works on the English language, blending has been found to be an important source of neologisms. Gao (2023) highlights the increasing acceptance of blends in English dictionaries as reflected in the percentages reported in his study, summarising previous lexicographical work based on dictionaries (Simonini 1966; Algeo 1991; Gao 2009).² In Italian, Micheli (2022b) reports a percentage of blends within the Treccani’s neological database (2.5%), which is almost 1% lower than that reported two decades earlier by Iacobini & Thornton (i.e., 3.4%; 1992: 27; 2022b: 153). An emerging interest among lexicographers is also evidenced by the inclusion of a specific task dedicated to blending in Working Group 3 of the European Network on Lexical Innovation (ENEOLI), of which the author is a member.³ This paper presents some features of blending in Italian and it is structured as follows: in the next section, the relationship between blending and neighbouring categories such as compounding and initialisation is discussed (2); in the third section, the methodological choices behind this study

2 The increased acceptance of blends in dictionaries may also be due also to a deeper understanding of this word formation process in more recent times, as Cannon (1986) points out (1986: 731). Therefore, early studies of blending that rely on lexicographical sources such as dictionaries may be biased by what was defined as a blend at the time.

3 More information on the ENEOLI Cost Action, coordinated by Prof. Tallarico (University of Verona), is provided in the following website <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA22126/>.

are clarified (3); subsequently, a corpus of 316 Italian blends is analysed (4); finally, conclusions are drawn (5).

2 Blend Types and Neighbouring Morphological Categories

The aim of this section is to discuss the labels given to different types of blends in order to bring up the discussion on the fuzzy boundaries between blending, initialization and compounding.⁴ This will enable us to clarify the structural typology applied in this study at the end of the section. As already mentioned, blending has not received much consideration in the past, mainly for the two motivations outlined above. Studies on blending before the Nineties have a taxonomical slant that has influenced the flourishing of an extensive and confusing metalinguistic terminology (Cannon 1986: 729-732; Gries 2004b: 640).⁵ Many treatments of blending have pointed to its proximity to compounding, others have emphasized its subtractive nature as being akin to initialization (López Rúa 2002; Mattiello 2021). Sometimes blending is considered to lie between the two processes (Beliaeva 2016: 38-39). There are different formal patterns in Italian, the examples in (1-3) highlight three of them:⁶

- | | | | | |
|------------------------|---|------------------|---|-----------------|
| (1) <i>ligre</i> | < | <i>leone</i> | x | <i>tigre</i> |
| /ˈligrɛ/ | | /leˈone/ | | /ˈtigrɛ/ |
| ‘liger’ | | ‘lion’ | | ‘tiger’ |
| | | | | |
| (2) <i>mandarancio</i> | < | <i>mandarino</i> | x | <i>arancio</i> |
| /mandaˈrantʃo/ | | /mandaˈrino/ | | /aˈrantʃo/ |
| ‘clementine’ | | ‘tangerine’ | | ‘orange’ |
| | | | | |
| (3) <i>mapo</i> | < | <i>mandarino</i> | x | <i>pompelmo</i> |
| /ˈmapo/ | | /mandaˈrino/ | | /pomˈpɛlmo/ |
| ‘tangelo’ | | ‘tangerine’ | | ‘grapefruit’ |

Thornton (1993) defines blends as “kind of compound words”, except that, quoting Bauer (1983), they “are formed from parts of two (or possibly more) other words in such a way that *there is no transparent analysis into morphs*” (1983: 234; 1993: 143, emphasis hers). In a later work, Thornton (2000) specifies the relationship between blending and compounding, observing that blends “are compounds whose members are not full words, but only parts of words, most often with no morphemic status” (2000: 116). Indeed, Thorn-

4 Initialization is here defined as the process whereby new lexical units are formed combining the initial letters of syntagms, maintaining the original designation of the input syntagm, e.g., *NATO* < *National Atlantic Treaty Organisation*; *BBC* < *British Broadcasting Company*.

5 A systematic and detailed review of the voluminous literature that has been published on blending in English is not the primary concern of this study, and is therefore not undertaken. However, a detailed account can be found in Mattiello (2013), Beliaeva (2019) and Renner (2023).

6 Each example has three levels: the graphemic realization in the first row, the phonological transcription in the second row, the semantic level in the third row. The overlap is underlined in the phonological transcription of the SWs.

ton (1993, 2000) defines: a *prototypical blend* as formed by an initial and a final splinter, e.g., *ligre* in (1); a *partial blend* as formed by a splinter and a full word, e.g., *mandarancio* in (2); an *acronym* as formed by splinters shorter than one syllable, e.g., *mapo* in (3) (1993: 149; 2000: 116). The latter example is also referred to as *fragment blend* in Ronneberger-Sibold (2006), although Cacchiani (2011) applies this label only to items with an AC structure, i.e., blends formed by initial splinters; setting them apart from blending as examples of *clipping* or *clipped compounds*, which are also formed by two SWs' beginnings (2006: 174-175; 2011: 113-114).⁷ Despite this apparent identity, some studies draw a distinction between fragment blends and clipped compounds (Beliaeva 2014; Mattiello 2021). In fact, for Mattiello (2021) “[...] unlike clipped compounds (e.g. *sitcom*), fragment blends (e.g. *cyborg*) are not attested as compounds before being shortened” (Mattiello 2021: 25; see also Beliaeva 2014: 51). Furthermore, in some studies, *ligre* would be labeled as a *contour blend* (Ronneberger-Sibold 2006; Cacchiani 2011). The peculiarity of this blend type is that one of the SWs (in our case W2) acts as a model lexeme into which a splinter or the full form of the other SW (i.e., W1) is inserted (Ronneberger-Sibold 2006: 170). More precisely, /'tigrə/ provides the contour of the blend, its stress and length in terms of syllables; within this model lexeme, the splinter / – of /le'one/ replaces the voiceless dental onset /t/ of W2, shaping the blend as /'ligrə/ (Castagneto & Parente 2020: 354). So far, only examples (1) and (3) are included in Thornton's (2000) definition of “blend”, and indeed, as stated by Mattiello (2021), partial blends such as *mandarancio* in (2) “are closer to compounds, in that one of the SWs is transparent”, in our case, W2 (*arancio*) being entirely present in the blend (2021: 25). However, patterns other than (1-3) do exist, for instance, blends formed by more than two SWs (4) and *overlapping blends* (5) (Mattiello 2021):

(4) <i>italma</i>	< <i>italiano</i>	x <i>alluminio</i>	x <i>magnesio</i>
/i'talma/	/ita'ljano/	/al:u'minjo/	/ma'ŋ:esjo/
'alloy composed of 96.2% aluminium, 3.5% magnesium, and 3% manganese'	'Italian'	'aluminium'	'magnesium'
(5) <i>eroicomico</i>	< <i>eroico</i>	x <i>comico</i>	
/eroj'kɔmiko/	/e'rɔjko/	/'kɔmiko/	
'mock-heroic'	'heroic'	'comic'	

The example in (4) has been labeled *extended acronym* by Thornton (1993), while the one in (5) *overlapping blend* in Mattiello (2021), or *complete blend* in Ronneberger-Sibold's (2006) typology (1993: 149; 2006: 168; 2021: 8-9). If one regards blending as a non-discrete morphological category, both types could be viewed as opposite poles on a *continuum* ranging from opaqueness to transparency (for a similar view see Thornton 1993; López Rúa 2002; Ronneberger-Sibold 2006; Beliaeva 2016), i.e., *italma* is formed by small phonological segments of three lexical items, similar to instances of initialization like acronyms, whereas *eroicomico* retains both SWs in full, overlapping the last syllable of *eroico* with the first one

7 It should be noted that the original definition in Ronneberger-Sibold (2006) is not exclusive in this sense, as fragment blends can be composed of medial and final splinters as well (2006: 174-175).

of *comico* by means of haplogy (Adams 1973: 150; Thornton 1993: 147).⁸ This terminological revision of blend types has highlighted different viewpoints on blending held in the literature. It is now possible to present the formal typology to which this study will refer to, adapted from Ronneberger-Sibold (2006). It distinguishes 4 main types: complete blends (*eroicomico*), semi-complete blends (*mandarancio*), contour blends (*ligre*) and fragment blends (*mapo*, *italma*). In principle, the process of blending could be sketched as projected on a *continuum* of morphotactic transparency ranging from a pole of extreme opaqueness (initialization), closer to fragment blends like *italma*, which is formed by more than two SWs; and moving towards a pole of extreme transparency (compounding), closer to complete blends like *eroicomico*. This *continuum* is represented in figure 1 below:⁹

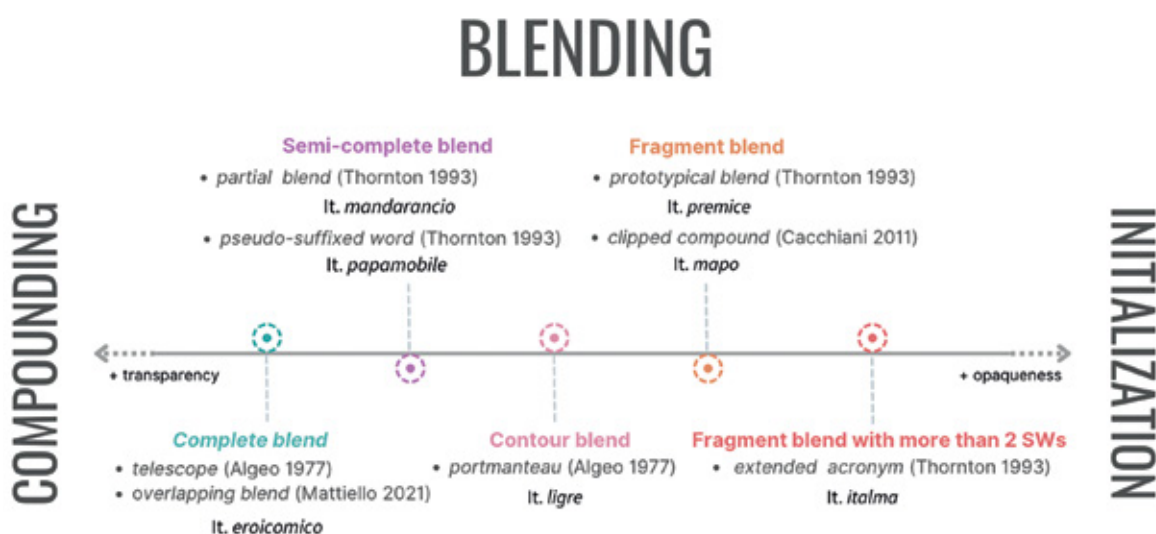


Figure 1: morphotactic transparency continuum of blend types.

3 Methodology and Tools

In this study, a traditional linguistic methodology has been employed to obtain a sample of Italian lexical blends, namely, a collection of blends from past and recent studies on blending in Italian (Milani 1975; Thornton 1993; Bertinetto 2001; Bombi 2015a-b, 2016;

8 Another peripheral type of blend is the *intercalative blend*, a blend in which the SWs are not aligned properly (Kemmer 2003: 3). For instance, in *itangliano* /itan'gljano/ 'Italian language heavily influenced by English' the central phonological string of W2 (i.e., *inglese* /in'glese/ 'English') is inserted into the prosodic structure of W1 (i.e., *italiano* /ita'ljano/ 'Italian'). There are only 4 intercalative blends in the corpus of this study, *itangliano* has been considered as a contour blend, in which W1 acts as the model lexeme.

9 The *continuum* could also be viewed as a scale of transparency with reference to Natural Morphology (see Dressler *et al.*, 1987).

Cacchiani 2011, 2016; Castagneto & Parente 2020; Micheli 2022a).¹⁰ Blends found in the studies highlighted above have been excluded if they met one of the criteria below:

- the SWs of the blend could not be recovered, e.g., *pintex* in Thornton (1993)
- the meaning of the blend was unclear, e.g., *Condoleema* in Micheli (2022a)
- the lexeme was a derivative of a blend rather than a proper blend, e.g., *renzusconiano* in Micheli (2022a)¹¹

The most salient feature of this sample is its heterogeneity. Indeed, all the studies considered were published in different years, even very distant from each other. Furthermore, in some of the studies that were revised to collect the sample, blending is not precisely the main focus (Milani 1975; Bombi 2015a-b, 2016).¹² Table 1 highlights the author, the year of publication, the number of items retrieved and three examples from each study:

Author	Year	n items	3 examples
Milani, C.	1975	11	<i>Bibepront, gengidentifricio, intellighiotto</i>
Thornton, A. M.	1993	46	<i>acmonital, cantautore, duralluminio</i>
Bertinetto, P. M.	2001	17	<i>Alitalia, Confcommercio, Eurasia,</i>
Cacchiani, S.	2011 2016	54	<i>Berluscotti, Casarredo, Dicloream</i>
Bombi, R.	2015a-b 2016	27	<i>burkini, domotica, freemium</i>
Castagneto, M. Parente E.	2020	62 ¹³	<i>idrosoccorso, militassolto, positrone</i>
Micheli, M. S.	2022a	99	<i>acronimato, cognonomastica, fotorroico</i>

Table 1: studies revised and items collected therein.

- 10 I am sincerely grateful to Prof. Valentina Gasbarra for her invaluable suggestion regarding the methodology employed in this study. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers and to Prof. Vincent Renner for their insightful comments and feedback on this work. Any errors are the sole author's responsibility.
- 11 The lexeme *renzusconiano* is derived from the blend *Renzusconi* (< *Renzi* x *Berlusconi*) (Micheli 2022a: 13). The original, ironic blend denotes 'proximity in the political choices and visions between Matteo Renzi and Silvio Berlusconi' (see also note 21 below).
- 12 Milani (1975) discusses the phonological and syntactic aspects of the language of advertising, here blends are understood as a phenomenon pertaining to "microsyntax" (1975: 562). The three studies by Bombi (2015a-b, 2016) analyse the lexical consequences of language contact between Italian and English, here the examples come from different jargons.
- 13 The item *fantastilione* (< *fantastico* x *milione*) was not discussed in the study, but it was included because it was listed after *fantastiliardo* (< *fantastico* x *miliardo*; see below) in the GDLI (Battaglia 1961-2002; Castagneto & Parente 2020: 365).

The sample can be considered only relatively representative for two reasons. Firstly, the total number of blends listed in dictionaries is difficult to estimate due to the inaccurate labelling of blends, as noted by Castagneto & Parente (2020: 348-349). Secondly, the selection of studies was subjective and therefore fallible. The sample may be considered representative in terms of heterogeneity, as it includes different percentages of items from previous studies, and as it is currently the largest sample of Italian blends. The entire corpus of 316 blends was labelled into an Excel file according to the following parameters:

- morphosyntactic parameters, i.e., lexical category of the blend and of its SWs, structural type, linearization of the SWs (Gries 2004b: 645)
- prosodic parameters, i.e., number of syllables, stress of the blend and of its SWs
- semantic parameters, i.e., meaning of the blend, grammatical relation between the two SWs, semantic interpretation (see Fradin 2000, 2015), headedness, position of the semantic head
- lexicographic parameters, i.e., etymological note given in dictionaries, if any, study in which it was retrieved, date of attestation, document in which the item was attested, attestation of the blend in historical dictionaries, neological databases or Italian corpora
- sociolinguistic parameters, i.e., the label of usage extracted from the online version of the GRADIT (De Mauro 2000), if any, origin from a foreign language diverse than Italian

The database was then analysed using both Excel and RStudio (RCore Team 2022). Some findings are discussed in the next section.

4 Analysis

In the sample only 36 items are attested before the 1950, these blends come mostly from the studies of Thornton (1993), Bertinetto (2001) and Castagneto & Parente (2020). Among them we find many names of clubs, companies and firms (e.g., *Sampdoria* 'name of a Genoa football team' < *Sampierdarenese* 'id.' x *Società Ginnastica Andrea Doria* 'id.', 1946), alloys and/or chemical substances (e.g., *terilene* 'terylene' < *acido tereftalico* 'terephthalic acid' x *etilene* 'ethylene', 1949), multifunctional instruments, places and professions (e.g., *metalmecanico* 'steelworker' < *metallurgico* 'metallurgic' x *meccanico* 'mechanic', 1942) (see also Thornton 1993: 150-151). There are also 5 examples whose first attestation is dated before the XXth century, such items mostly come from Castagneto & Parente (2020), namely *eroicomico* (see above, 1620), *guattire* 'to make a high or shrill cry' (< *guaire* 'to yelp' x *squittire* 'to squeak', 1723), *patatucco* 'stupid, clumsy, simpleton' (< *patata* 'clumsy, stupid, simpleton' x *mammalucco* 'foolish, dumb, stupid', 1884), *pelletica* 'silver skin' (< *pelle* 'skin' x *cotica* 'pork rind', 1863), *premise* 'sth. that crumbles under finger pressure' (< *premere* 'to press' x *soffice* 'soft', 1804).¹⁴ These examples somehow prove that instances of

14 A diachronic study on blending in Italian does not exist, although it would be a stimulating topic to pursue. Attestations of blends before the XXth century exist, as is clear from the examples above, however, ideally, it would not be an easy task to discern blends from contaminations

blending as a word formation device exist before the XXth century (see also Cannon 1986: 725; Bertinetto 2001: 3). In any case, it seems reasonable to think that blending has been exploited more frequently only in the past century. The sample includes loanwords as well (74 items, 23.4%), more precisely, adaptations (e.g., *adultescente* ‘adultescent’ < *adulto* ‘adult’ x *adolescente* ‘adolescent’), non-integrated loanwords (e.g., *brunch* < *breakfast* x *lunch*), and, less frequently, calques (e.g., *archistar* ‘starchitect’ < *architetto* ‘architect’ x *star* ‘id.’) (see Cacchiani 2016: 312). In the following sections, some phonological, morphosyntactic and semantic features of the sample are highlighted and discussed.

4.1 Phonological Features

Lack of space does not permit an exhaustive review of all the phonological issues of blending in Italian, therefore this section deals solely with the quantitative analyses of length and stress. The length of blends has been computed in terms of syllables, whose range goes from 1 to 8. Looking at the variance within this range, 81.3% of items have a length between 3 and 5 syllables, and in particular many blends are quadrisyllabic (124 items; 39.24%) (*Mdn* = 4; *M* = 4.04; *SD* = 1.16). This can be seen in the violin plot below (figure 2), in which “violins” represent different blend types, i.e., complete, contour, fragment and semi-complete blends.¹⁵

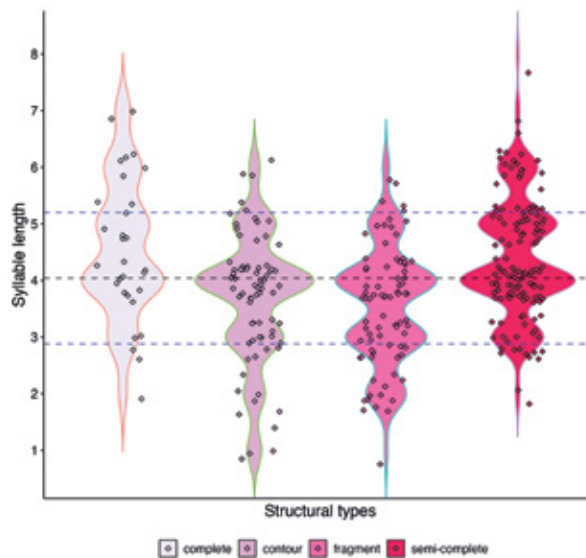


Figure 2: syllabic length of Italian blend types. *M* = 4.04 (black line), *SD* = 1.16 (blue lines)

between synonym words (Paul 1880: 132).

- 15 There are also 68 trisyllabic blends (21.5%) and 65 pentasyllabic blends (20.5%). From now on, a syllable boundary is signaled by means of a dot placed between syllables, as in *me.la.fo.ni.no* ‘Apple smartphone’ < *me.la* ‘apple’ x *te.le.fo.ni.no* ‘cellphone’. The data points in the figure 2 are not aligned on y-axis ticks, as this makes more data points visible.

If we compare the relationship between the length of the blend and the length of its SWs, it emerges that in 142 cases (45.8%) there is no identity among the syllabic lengths of W1, W2 and the blend, as in *ri.ce.tra.smet.te.re* ‘to transceive’ < *ri.ce.ve.re* ‘to receive’ x *tra.smet.te.re* ‘to transmit’.¹⁶ In 79 cases (25.48%) the length of the blend is identical to W2’s length, as in *tap.po.net.to* ‘eco-friendly dumpster for caps’ < *tap.po* ‘cap, stopper’ x *cas.so.net.to* ‘dumpster’. Another remarkable tendency is the case in which blends retain the length of W1. This is observed in 62 cases (20%), e.g., *pan.ta.ven.to* ‘windproof trousers’ < *pan.ta.lo.ni* ‘trousers’ x *ven.to* ‘wind’; whereas the most marginal pattern is the case in which the length of the blend and that of its SWs coincide (27 items, 8.7%), as in *glo.ca.le* ‘glocal’ < *glo.ba.le* ‘global’ x *lo.ca.le* ‘local’. It is worth noting that the percentage of loanwords can affect the distributions seen above. For instance, 11/27 items with identical length between blend and SWs are loanwords (40.7%). This is the most affected pattern.¹⁷ In relation to blends’ stress, it must be noted that the analysis here reported does not focus on which SWs’ stressed syllable is retained in the blend. What is taken into account instead is the stress pattern of the individual lexemes, so, similarly to the previous analysis, whether blends’ stressed syllable is in the same position as in one of the two SWs, in both, or in neither (a similar analysis for English blends is done in Gries 2004a). In this respect, table 2 highlights the 4 possible patterns:¹⁸

Pattern	Example	Frequency (%)
W1 ≠ blend ≠ W2	<i>fantastiliardo</i> < <i>fantastico</i> x <i>miliardo</i> /fan.ta.sti.'ljar.do/ < /fan.'ta.sti.ko/ x /mi.'ljar.do/ 'zillion' < 'fantastic' x 'billion'	104 items (39.4%) 20 loans (19.2%)
W1 = blend ≠ W2	<i>Eurasia</i> < <i>Europa</i> x <i>Asia</i> /εw.'ra.zja/ < /εw.'rɔ.pa/ x /'a.zja/ 'id.' < 'Europe' x 'id.'	68 items (25.7%) 4 loans (10.3%)
W1 ≠ blend = W2	<i>semplessità</i> < <i>semplice</i> x <i>complessità</i> /sem.ples.si.'ta/ < /'sem.pli.tʃe/ x /kom.ples.si.'ta/ 'simple complexity' < 'simple' x 'complexity'	54 items (20.4%) 19 loans (35.1%)
W1 = blend = W2	<i>democrisia</i> < <i>democrazia</i> x <i>ipocrisia</i> /de.mo.kri.'zi.a/ < /de.mo.kra.'tsi.a/ x /i.po.kri.'zi.a/ 'deceiving democracy' < 'democracy' x 'hypocrisy'	38 items (14.4%) 18 loans (47.3%)

Table 2: stress patterns of source words and blends

- 16 The sample used for this and the following analysis consists of 310 blends as the 6 blends with more than 2 SWs were excluded from the analysis.
- 17 Of course, structural types play the lion’s share in this kind of analysis. For instance, all contour blends by definition follow the length pattern of W1 (22.58%), of W2 (64.5%), or of them both (51.8%).
- 18 The sample used in this analysis excludes 6 multi-word blends (see note 16 above) and 46 cases for which it was impossible to recover or reconstruct the pronunciation of the item. The sample amounts then to 264 items. Loanwords’ percentages are calculated on the basis of the sum of items per pattern.

Gries (2004a) observes that the main pattern of English blends is to be as stressed and as long as W2 (2004a: 425-426). Although his sample is much larger than the present one, it is evident that Italian blends tend to differ from their SWs in both length (45.8%) and stress (39.4%). Looking at the distribution of loanwords among the different patterns, W2 seems to weigh less than W1 as far as the stress pattern is concerned. It is also noteworthy that the highest percentage of loanwords is found in the fourth, less influential stress pattern. Although more evidence is needed to confirm this, a comparison between this sample and the English one in Gries (2004a) leads to conclude that W2 is less influential as model for the blend in Italian, both in terms of stress and length patterns.

4.2 Morphosyntactic features

This section is devoted to some morphosyntactic and structural features, with a particular focus on lexical classes, structural blend types, and lexical series. The 316 Italian blends pertain to various lexical classes. As expected, the most represented class is that of nouns (177; 56%), followed by proper nouns (93; 29.4%), nouns/adjectives (20; 6.3%), adjectives (15; 4.7%), verbs (8; 2.5%), and interjections (3; 0.9%). A comparison with the two referent scales elaborated for English (Mattiello 2019) and Italian (Micheli 2022a) reveals that our sample is still very similar to both, but closer to the English referent scale than Italian's one (2019: 7; 2022a: 7). Indeed, the cline distribution precisely follows that of Mattiello (2019), with the exception of two missing steps in hers: nouns/adjectives and interjections.¹⁹ The prevalent blend type is the semi-complete blend (133; 42%), followed by fragment (80; 25.3%), contour (74; 23.4%) and, finally, complete blends (29; 9.1%). This corroborates the centrality of the semi-complete type in Italian, as previous analyses have confirmed as well (see Thornton 1993: 153; 2004: 571). Another reason for the high number of semi-complete blends is the inclusion of items formed by "lexical series", i.e., a series of lexemes in which the same splinter of a blend re-occurs, eventually, in a reduced form. Lexical series are sometimes excluded from discussions on blending, in view of similarities with other word formation processes, such as composition with combining forms or secreted affixation (Fradin 2015: 406-407; Castagneto & Parente 2020: 356-357; Mattiello 2021: 21-24; Micheli 2022a: 3).²⁰ In this study, lexical series are seen as an example of how blending may approach grammaticality and productivity, as observed by Mattiello (2021: 25). Lexemes were counted as belonging to a lexical series if at least 5 lexemes presented the same (eventually reduced) splinter. These are presented below, ordered per number of lexemes:

-
- 19 The lexical class of nouns/adjectives is documented in Micheli (2022a), but here it outnumbers that of proper nouns. In both studies the class of interjections is absent.
 - 20 Fradin (2015) states that "the part of a blend may occur only in one form" (2015: 406). Micheli (2022a) adopts a similar view, arguing that "blends [...] are generally type hapaxes", yet she proposes to take into account the frequency of the splinter involved in the series (2022: 3). Mattiello (2019, 2021) regards lexical series as a "regular and productive" outcome of analogy and schemas in blending, arguing that grammaticalness is not an adequate reason to discard them from discussions on blending (2021: 22). In this study, this latter view on lexical series has been followed.

- *-ita(li)* – (< *italiano* ‘Italian’): *acmonital, Cambital, Italcasse, Italcementi, italenglish, Italgas, italglish, italiесе, italma, terital* (10 items)
- *eli* – (< *elicottero* ‘helicopter’): *eliambulanza, eliapprodo, eliparco, eliplano, eliscalo, elisoccorso, elitaxi, elitrasportare* (9 items)
- *Fin* – (< *finanziaria* ‘holding company’): *Finconsumo, Findomestic, Finedil, Fininvest, Finmare, Finmeccanica* (6 items)
- *Conf(eder)* – (< *confederazione* ‘confederation’): *Confagricoltura, Confcommercio, Confederterra, Confedilizia, Confesercenti, Confindustria* (6 items; see also Thornton 2004)
- *Berlus(co)* – (< *Silvio Berlusconi* †): *berluscong, Berluscotti, Berluscozy, Berlusconi, Berlusvalter* (5 items)
- *panta* – (< *pantaloni* ‘trousers’): *pantacalze, pantacollant, pantagonna, pantajazz, pantavento* (5 items)
- *-(lusc)oni* (< *Silvio Berlusconi* †): *Dalemoni, Grilloni, Renzusconi, Sarlusconi, Veltrusconi* (5 items)²¹

Although series could be viewed as a “more” grammatical device of blending, in the series reported above splinters may: 1) appear either as W1 or W2, e.g., *ital* – in *italma* vs. – *ital* in *terital*; 2) pack two meanings into the same form, e.g., *ital* – ‘Italian’ in *Italcasse* ‘name of an Italian credit institution’ vs. *ital* – ‘Italian language’ in *italenglish* ‘Italian variety imbued with English lexical and syntactic elements’; 3) display variable length, e.g., *Confederterra* vs. *Confcommercio*. When splinters in lexical series display such properties, they could be conceived as less grammatical members along the grammaticality continuum of blending discussed in Mattiello (2021: 25).

4.3 Semantic features

On the semantic level, blending is akin to compounding. Traditional classifications based on the grammatical relationship between the SWs propose a main distinction between *subordinative* and *coordinative* blends.²² Subordinative blends are characterised by a *determinans-determinatum* structure, whereas in coordinative blends such hierarchy is not identifiable, rather SWs are on equal semantic footing.²³ Both types are presented in (6) and (7) below:

- 21 The coinage of neologisms by blending proper nouns (often surnames), especially of politicians, is a phenomenon that has become a trend in Italian journalese. Many of these designate close political positions between the two politicians, of course, in the moment of coinage. For a more comprehensive discussion on blending in Italian as a means to coin new proper nouns, see Cacchiani (2011).
- 22 This traditional classification was proposed by Algeo (1977), who subdivided associative and syntagmatic blends (1977: 55-57). Since then, these two semantic categories have been adopted in the majority of studies, although often readapted with different terminologies.
- 23 This is not entirely true. As Bauer (2012) cleverly remarks: “[c]onsider the range of mock language names such as *Frenglish, English, Japlish* [...] nobody seems to suggest that these are 50-50 hybrids with neither taking the priority [...] it seems probable that (at least most of the time) these are headed blends” (2012: 18).

- (6) *ginfiocco* < *ginestra* x *fiocco*
 /dʒin'fjɔk:o / /dʒi'nɛstra/ /'fjɔk:o/
 'wad obtained from the fibres of broom branches' 'broom' 'wad, flock, tuft'
- (7) *diabesità* < *diabete* x *obesità*
 /diabezi'ta/ /dia'bete/ /obezi'ta/
 'coexistence of diabetes and obesity in the same individual' 'diabetes' 'obesity'

In the sample, subordinative blends outnumber coordinatives (225, 71.2% vs. 91, 28.8%). This is in line with other recent studies on blending in Italian (see Castagneto & Parente 2020: 364; Micheli 2022a: 10). In Germanic languages, such as English, the semantic head of a compound is typically located on the right constituent, whereas, in Romance languages, there is rather the opposite tendency, that is, to place the semantic head on the left.²⁴ In a cross-linguistic study on French and English blends, Renner (2019) found that, among the 66/97 French subordinative blends, 40 were right-headed, while only 26 items placed the semantic head on the left (2019: 39). Figure 3 illustrates the subdivision between coordinative and subordinative blends, with differently-coloured bars indicating the semantic head position:²⁵

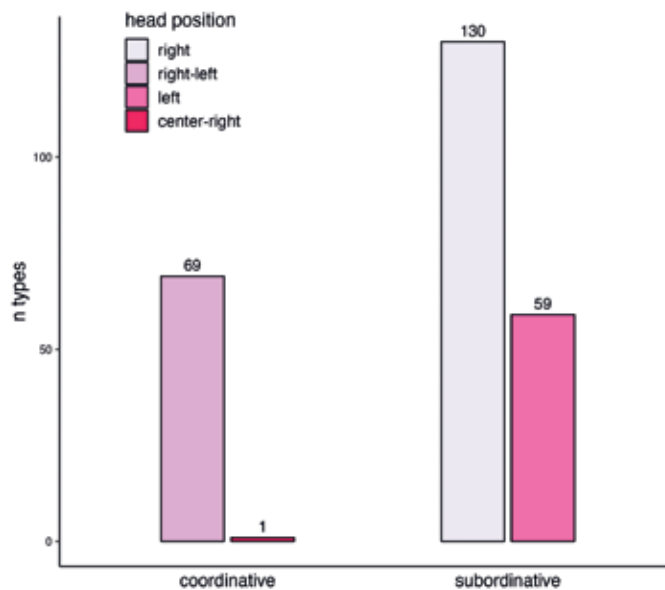


Figure 3: position of the semantic head in coordinative and subordinative Italian blends.

24 Recent studies on Italian registered the emergence of right-headed compounding as well (Iacobini 2014).

25 In figure 3, 57 exocentric items have been removed.

As shown in figure 3, coordinative blends are associated with double headedness, so that neither W1 nor W2 assumes the function of semantic head. There is only a single instance of the multi-word blend *italma* (see above), in which the double headedness function is covered by the central and right constituent, as the blend refers to an alloy of two metals, that is, *alluminio* ‘aluminium’ and *magnesio* ‘magnesium’. An analysis of Italian subordinative blends with a semantic head in the sample reveals a sharp preference for Right Headedness (130/189, 68.78%), whereas left-headed blends are only 59 (31.2%). In terms of headedness, therefore, the situation seems comparable with the small sample of French blends analysed in Renner (2019). While in this sample a small influence of loanwords among right-headed blends can be found (42 items, 32.3%), it does not seem reasonable to conclude that right-headedness preference is caused primarily by loanwords.

5 Conclusions

This study has focused on the word formation process of blending from the system-specific perspective of the Italian language. Firstly, a discussion on blend types, clipped compounds and acronyms was conducted to ascertain the position of blending among neighbouring morphological categories. The different blend types were represented as degrees placed on a continuum of morphotactic transparency, ranging from complete transparency (compounding) to complete opaqueness (initialization). Although the sample of 316 Italian blends employed in this study could be considered only relatively representative, the analysis has added interesting insights on this word formation process in Italian that would need further exploration. Phonologically, it seems the primary pattern for Italian blends is to not conform to the length and stress of neither W1 nor W2. In Italian, this preference could be explained by the high number of semi-complete blends like *ricetrasmettere*, in which the length (82/142 items) and stress (60/104 items) of the blend differ from those of the SWs. On the morphosyntactic level, seven lexical series generated by blends’ splinters have been identified. It has been highlighted how the recurring splinter in the series can (still) display extra-grammatical features, which could depend on whether it has been completely reanalysed as a combining form/affixoid or not (see also Kemmer 2003). Finally, on the semantic level, subordinate blends have been found to be more frequent than coordinative ones, as other recent studies have highlighted (Renner 2019; Castagneto & Parente 2020; Micheli 2022a). More interestingly, in this work, as in Renner’s (2019) for French blends, Italian blends display a preference for Right Headedness which is in contrast to compounding in Romance languages. Considering that semi-complete blend is also the most represented type in Renner (2019), he proposed that this factor could depend on the tendency to clip W1 and to leave W2 intact, i.e., the only transparent, recoverable element (2019: 33, 39). It is also noteworthy that the tendency to assume headedness on the right constituent reflects the extra-grammatical nature of blending, which does not conform strictly to either typological or system-specific restrictions (Dressler 1994: 22). Indeed, the preference for right-headed blends in Romance languages is in line with the universal principle of figure-ground, according to which it is preferable to place the semantic head on the right (Dressler 2005: 35). An interesting issue that, like many others, deserves deeper investigations.

6 References

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