

# Stylistic functions of abrupt aspectual shifts.

Examples from  
Italian narrative texts

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# Rafael Alberti: *Se equivocó la paloma* (1941)

*Se equivocó (SP) la paloma, se equivocaba (C)*

*por ir al norte fue al sur  
creyó que el trigo era agua  
creyó que el mar era el cielo  
que la noche la mañana...*

*que las estrellas rocío  
que la calor la nevada  
que tu falda era tu blusa  
que tu corazón su casa...  
(ella se durmió en la orilla  
tu, en la cumbre de una rama.)*

The dove **was wrong, was wrong**  
To go North, it went South  
believed that wheat was water  
believed that the sea was the sky  
that night was morning...

that the stars were dew  
that heat was the snow  
that your skirt was your blouse  
that your heart was its house...  
(it fell asleep on the shore  
you, at the top of a branch.)

## Abbreviations

**SP** = Simple Past

**IPF** = Imperfect

**C** = continuous aspect

**CP** = Compound Past

**S** = stative verb

**H** = habitual aspect

**P** = progressive aspect

# Reference corpus

- 55 novels (in some case, collection of short stories) of Italian writers from end of 18<sup>th</sup> century to late 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Approximately, first 120 pages of each text.
- Already exploited for  
P.M. Bertinetto: *Tempi verbali e narrativa italiana dell'Otto/Novecento*,  
Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso 2003

# Canonical shift: fore- vs back-ground

- Canonical alternation of a **propulsive SP** and an **IPF with descriptive function** (i.e. background), particularly evident with stative verbs as used with imperfective tenses (Weinrich 1964).

Lombardi: *Barcelona* (1963)

*Vide (SP) la parete di fondo di una stanza e luccicare del metallo nell'oscurità. C'erano (C/S) delle targhette appese in una scansia, c'erano (C/S) delle chiavi e davanti l'ombra di una donna. La donna era (C/S) china, ed egli le stava (C/S) di fronte, in piedi.*

'He **saw (SP)** the back wall of a room and metal glistening in the darkness. There **were (C/S)** tags hung on a shelf, there **were (C/S)** keys and a woman's shadow in front of them. The woman **was (C/S)** bent, and he **stood (C/S)** in front of her, standing.'

# Canonical shift: perfective ~ progressive

- Equally canonical is, of course, the alternation of **SP** and **progressive IPF**:

Gadda: *La cognizione del dolore* (1963)

[...] *capí (SP) tuttavia che un qualcosa di orrido stava ribollendo (P) in quell'anima. Pensò di incanalare altrove le idee del malato, se idee eran quelle.*  
'[...] [however, he understood (SP) that something horrid was boiling (P) in that soul. He thought of channeling the sick man's ideas elsewhere, if they were ideas.'

# Canonical shift: perfective ~ habitual”

- ... and so is the alternation with the **habitual IPF**:

Vittorini: *Il Garofano rosso* (1948) [the figure who says “I” is writing a diary]  
*Ad ogni modo, eccomi qui, col mio diario. Dico: col mio vecchio Diario d'uno Stratega; che tanti anni fa ho cominciato (CP) quando ero bambino in quella campagna di cotone, e si andava (H) all'assalto dei fortilizi di fieno al di là delle siepi dei fichidindia.*

‘Anyway, here I am, with my diary. I say: with my old *Diary of a Strategist*; that many years ago I started (CP) when I was a child in that cotton campaign, and we went (H) to assault the strongholds of hay beyond the hedges of prickly pears.’

# 'Continuous' aspect (1)

A)

La festa *raggiunse* (SP) il momento culminante. Alcuni *cantavano* (C), alcuni *ridevano* (C), alcuni *saltavano* (C). La confusione *durò* (SP) a lungo.

The party *reached* (SP) its climax. Some people *sang* (C), some *laughed* (C), some *jumped* (C). The confusion *lasted* (SP) for a long time.

B)

La festa *raggiunse* (SP) il momento culminante. Alcuni *cantarono* (SP), alcuni *risero* (SP), alcuni *saltarono* (SP). La confusione *durò* (SP) a lungo.

The party *reached* its climax (SP). Some people *sang* (SP), some *laughed* (SP), some *jumped* (SP). The confusion *lasted* (SP) for a long time.

## 'Continuous' aspect (2)

- The **frequency of usage** in literary texts of **progressive** and **habitual IPF** is definitely lower than that of the **continuous IPF**. This partly depends on the usage of stative verbs for descriptive purposes.
- What characterizes the **continuous IPF** is the **vague temporal boundaries of the event**. This makes it an ideal tense for background description.
- Various authors, however, have exploited the **proximity of SP (perfective)** and **continuous IPF (C)** to obtain **new stylistic nuances**.



# Narrative IPF

- What this paper is **NOT** about: **narrative IPF**, i.e. usage of an imperfective tense in a counterdetermining (perfective) context. This is a well-studied phenomenon.

*Svevo: Racconti* [the writer is describing the awakening from a nightmare]

Marianno *si mise* (SP) ad urlare dallo spavento e dalla vergogna. Berta pronta *si chinava* (narrative) a lui e per molti anni in famiglia *si rise* (SP) delle parole che Marianno aveva dette: «Aiuto! El remo me scampa de man!».

‘Marianno **began** (SP) to scream with fright and shame. Berta promptly **bowed** (narrative) on him and for many years in the family they **laughed** (SP) at the words that Marianno had said: «Help! The oar is escaping from my hand!»’

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- We are especially interested here on **abrupt aspectual shifts** between **SP** and **IPF**.

# Canonical focalization effect

- An abrupt shift **from IPF to SP** can suggest a sudden change of perspective, with an effect of **focusing**, or dynamic closure of a relatively static scene: from a wide-angled event, to one punctually placed on the sequence of events. This is particularly evident when the verbs are the same or have similar meanings:

Lombardi: *Barcelona* (1963)

*Si sentivano (C/S) i rumori del traffico, di passi, di voci; si udirono (SP) gli ululati di una sirena, dei colpi, un suono confuso e lontano.*

'One **could hear (C/S)** the sounds of traffic, footsteps, voices; one **heard (SP)** the howls of a siren, of the shots, a confused and distant sound.'

# Dialogues

- The alternation of SP and IPF finds a privileged field of application in **dialogue exchanges**. With *verba dicendi*, the IPF yields an **insistence emphasis**, as if it were a **repeated gesture** (a possible effect of continuous aspect). This livens up a potentially repetitive sequence.

Grossi: *Marco Visconti* (1834)

«Ah! adesso capisco» *diceva (IPF)* il Conte, e [...] *gli domandava (IPF)* «che cos'è che m'avete scritto [...]».

«E' fuor de' gangheri affatto» *diceva (IPF)* Ottorino

[... *mezza p. di battute di dialogo, senza verba dicendi*]

Ma Ottorino, senza dargli ascolto, *disse (SP)* al suo scudiere [...]

«No, no » *replicava (IPF)* il conte [...].

«Egli è mio scudiere » *rispose (SP)* Ottorino [...]

«Pensate una cosa» *tornava (IPF)* a dire il Conte [...]

«Ad ogni modo è meglio assicurare il partito» *replicava (IPF)* il giovane cavaliere.

«Così al buio, quel povero Lupo! fra quei precipizi!...» *insisteva (IPF)* pure il Conte.

«Di questo non vi pigliate pensiero», *entrò (SP)* a dire il figlio del falconiere [...]

# Coordinative juxtaposition

- A relatively frequent stylistic feature in modern Italian literature is the **coordinative juxtaposition of SP and IPF**. Although this is absolutely canonical, it **sort of reduces the distance between the propulsive and the descriptive function**.

Vittorini: *Il Garofano rosso* (1948)

«Dove l'hai vista?» *chiesi* (SP) ansioso, e vagamente *temevo* (C/S) che si trattasse di Giovanna.

'"Where did you see her?" I anxiously *asked* (SP), and vaguely *feared* (C/S) that it was Giovanna.'

- In such contexts one often gets a kind of **explicative flavor**, or at least a kind of **expansion** of the initial situation (in a way, this is the reverse of the focalizing contexts seen before)

# Asyndetic coordination (1)

- Similarly, one can find a light punctuation mark instead of a coordination marker.

Gadda: *La cognizione del dolore* (1963)

*Il figlio si ricompose: parve ridestarsi da un'allucinazione: lo guardò (SP): lo fissava (P/C) come gli domandasse, a lui, «che cosa ho detto?».*

'The son composed himself: he seemed to wake up from a hallucination: he looked (SP) at him: he stared (P/C) at him as if he asked him, "what did I say?".'

Praga: *Memorie del presbiterio* (1887)

*[...] lo vinse un terribile parossismo: si buttò (SP) a terra, si contorceva (C), si mordeva (C) i pugni [...].*

'[...] a terrible paroxysm overcame him: he threw (SP) himself on the ground, writhed (C), he bit (C) his fists [...].'

# Tight adjacency (1)

- The coordination of competing aspectual values can be very tight:

Vittorini: *Il Garofano rosso* (1948)

*Ma subito ridiventato tetro: "Siete tutti così" **dissi (SP)** e **digrignavo (C)** i denti.*

‘But I immediately became gloomy: "You are all like this" I **said (SP)** and I **gripped (C)** my teeth.’

Pavese: *La luna e i falò* (1950)

*Lui **si grattò (SP)** dietro l'orecchio, **guardò (SP)** a terra e **masticava (C)** amaro.*

‘He **scratched (SP)** behind his ear, **looked at (SP)** the ground and **chewed (C)** bitterly.’

Rigoni Stern: *Il sergente nella neve* (1952)

***Rimasi (SP)** solo e **guardavo (C)** i reticolati a metà sepolti nella neve, [...]*

‘I **was left (SP)** alone and **looked at (C)** the wire fences half buried in the snow, [...]

## Tight adjacency (2)

Praga: *Memorie del presbiterio* (1887)

*Ci fe' segno di sedere vicino al letto: ci prese (SP) le mani e ci guardava (C) con grande tenerezza.*

'He made a sign for us to sit near the bed: he took (SP) our hands and looked (C) at us with great tenderness.

Tomasi di Lampedusa: *Il gattopardo* (1958)

*Maria-Stella dapprima non disse (SP) parola ma si faceva (C) una caterva di segni di croce.*

'Maria-Stella at first did not say (SP) a word but made (C) a lot of cross marks.

- Although most of these examples might allow the perfective view in both conjuncts, they do not look in any way deviant. The second conjunct presents a concomitant, somehow backgrounded event.

# Stylistic twist

- There are, however, not infrequent cases in which the IPF can be perceived as directly belonging to the **propulsive line** of the story:

Manzoni: *I promessi sposi* (1840)

«Sciagurato!» **gridò** (SP) il padre Cristoforo [...]; le gote **si colorivano** (C) dell'antica vita; e il fuoco degli occhi **aveva** (C) un non so che di terribile.

“‘You miserable man!’ **shouted** (SP) Father Cristoforo [...]; the cheeks **blushed** (C) from ancient life; and the fire in his eyes **had** (C) something terrible in it.’

- Here *aveva* (descriptive) contrasts with *si colorivano* (dynamic). But the imperfective value brings about even in the latter case a kind of temporal vagueness. We need not interpret it as strictly sequential: the degree of temporal overlap with the adjacent events is rather indefinite.



# Propulsive IPF (1)

- In the following coordinating structures, the IPF does not convey the canonical descriptive nuance, but is clearly **part of the propulsive line**. It could easily be replaced by a SP, at the cost, however, of **losing the effect of temporal vagueness** which is the distinctive brand of the 'continuous' aspect:

Calvino: *Il barone rampante* (1957)

*Quand'ecco la mongolfiera fu presa da una girata di libeccio; cominciò (SP) a correre nel vento vorticando come una trottola, e andava (C) verso il mare.*

'Suddenly, the hot-air balloon was caught by a wind turn; it began (SP) to run in the wind whirling like a top, and it went (C) towards the sea.

Bufalino: *L'uomo invaso* (1986)

*Infine sua madre venne (SP) e lo chiamava (C) dietro la porta.*

'Finally his mother came (SP) and called (C) him from behind the door.'

## Propulsive IPF (2)

Calvino: *Il barone rampante* (1957)

*Già stava per perderla di vista, quand'ella voltò (SP) bruscamente il cavallo e adesso tagliava (C) il prato in un'altra diagonale [...]*

'He was already about to lose sight of her, when she abruptly turned (SP) the horse and she now cut (C) the lawn in another diagonal [...]

Tomasi di Lampedusa: *Il gattopardo* (1958)

*Voltatosi, si alzò (SP) sulla punta dei piedi e con l'indice mostrava (C) un lontano gruppetto di case [...]*

'He turned himself, stood up (SP) on tiptoe and pointed (C) with his forefinger to a distant group of houses [...]

Pavese: *La luna e i falò* (1950)

*Poi Nuto entrò (SP) nella stanza, e le voltava (C) i fogli e discutevano (C) e Irene suonò (SP) ancora.*

'Then Nuto entered (SP) the room, and turned (C) the pages and they discussed (C) among themselves and Irene played (SP) again.'

## Propulsive IPF (3)

Praga: *Memorie del presbiterio* (1887)

*La simpatia, ispiratami da questa somiglianza di gusti, mi vinse (SP) e indugiavo (C) guardando il curioso lavoro di quello sconosciuto [...]*

*'The sympathy, inspired by this similarity of tastes, won (SP) me and I lingered (C) watching the curious activity of that unknown person [...]*

Manzoni: *I promessi sposi* (1840)

*Nello stesso tempo, s'aprì di nuovo la finestra, e quella medesima sgarbata di prima ci s'affacciò (SP) questa volta, e gridava (C) anche lei [...]*

*'At the same time, the window opened again, and the same rude person as before appeared (SP) another time, and she too shouted (C) [...]*

Praga: *Memorie del presbiterio* (1887)

*Il dibattimento si fece (SP) due mesi dopo alle Assise di Novara, ed io assistevo (C).*

*'The trial took place (SP) two months later in Novara, and I took part (C) in it.'*

## Propulsive IPF (4)

- Sometimes, the effect is attenuated by the intermission of other materials:

Calvino: *Il barone rampante* (1957)

– Ah, sí! – *esclamò (SP)* Enea Silvio Carrega battendosi una mano sulla fronte. – Bacini! Dighe! Bisogna fare dei progetti! – *e scoppiava (C)* in piccoli gridi e saltelli d'entusiasmo [...]

‘– Oh yes! – *exclaimed (SP)* Enea Silvio Carrega, clapping his hand on his forehead. – Basins! Dams! We need to make plans! – *and burst (C)* into small cries and leaps of enthusiasm [...]

Grossi: *Marco Visconti* (1834)

*V'entrò (SP)* dentro *e*, scostandosi dalla spiaggia, *volgea (C)* gli occhi indietro a guardar Limonta, *e bestemmiava (C)* e *malediceva (C)* la faccia del sole [...]

‘He *stepped (SP)* inside *and*, moving away from the beach, *turned back (C)* his eyes to look at Limonta, *and swore (C)* and *cursed (C)* the face of the sun [...]

# Propulsive IPF (5)

Vittorini: *Il Garofano rosso* (1948)

*Intanto il suo sguardo venne (SP) a posarsi su di me come un moscone che era ronzante, ronzante, e me lo trovavo (C) addosso d'improvviso.*

'Meanwhile, his gaze came (SP) to rest on me like a buzzing big fly, and I found (C) him suddenly on me.'

Grossi: *Marco Visconti* (1834)

[...] *parve (SP) che facesse studio di lasciar cadere ogni altro soggetto di ragionamento, e rispondeva (C) asciutto e freddo [...]*

'[...] he seemed (SP) to pretend to drop any other topic of reasoning, and answered (C) dry and cold [...]

Svevo: *Racconti*

*Mamma Berta infuriò (SP) contro il piccolo sfacciato concorrente di sua figlia e con la sua lingua viperina confermava (C) le teorie dei Menina.*

'Mother Berta got angry (SP) against her daughter's cheeky little competitor and with her treacherous tongue confirmed (C) the Meninas theories.'

# Propulsive IPF (6)

- The same effect can be obtained by means of light punctuation marks:

Rigoni Stern: *Il sergente nella neve* (1952)

Mi *chiese* (SP) della ragazza, *si parlava* (C) di cose belle e gentili, *e poi chiamò* (SP) l'attendente a fare il caffè.

'He *asked* (SP) me about the girl, we *talked* (C) of beautiful and nice things, *and* then he *called* (SP) the attendant to make coffee.'

Tommaso: *Fede e bellezza* (1840)

*Fece* (SP) a Giovanni sul primo accoglienza fredda: saputo letterato, *si buttava* (C) via.

'At first, he *made* (SP) cold reception to Giovanni: knowing that he was a writer, he *threw* (C) himself at his feet.'

# Greek antecedents (1)

- Interestingly, similar examples can be found in **Medieval Greek** (De Santis, *forthc.*). Hence, rather than an idiosyncrasy of modern Italian writers, this is a **permanently latent possibility of aspectually rich systems**:

*Life of Saint Theodore, 152 (7<sup>th</sup> century)*

[...] ἀνῆλθεν (Aor) πρὸς τὸν ὅσιον καὶ ἰκέτευεν (C) αὐτὸν εὔξασθαι αὐτῷ [...]  
'[...] he went up (Aor) to the saint and asked (C) him to pray for him [...].'

*Life of Saint Symeon, 53 (7<sup>th</sup> century)*

[...] καὶ παραχρῆμα ἀνέβλεψεν (Aor) ὁ παῖς καὶ ἐδόξαζε (C) σὺν τοῖς γονεῦσιν αὐτοῦ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ [...]

'[...] And immediately the boy saw (Aor) [= could see] again and glorified (C) the Son of God together with his parents [...].'

# Dependent clause + propulsive IPF

- The propulsive effect is even more striking when a main clause based on the **IPF is preceded by a dependent clause with a non-finite tense**. In such case, one perceives a kind of **shift of the propulsion burden** onto the imperfective tense:

Tommaso: *Fede e bellezza* (1840)

*Poi balbettando (Gerund), mostrava (C) d'aver qualcos'altro sul cuore .*

'Then stuttering (Gerund), he showed (C) to have something else in his heart.'

Capuana: *Profumo* (1882)

*Ma Giulia non dava retta (C) ai richiami di Angelica; e aperto (Participle) a fessura l'uscio dello studio e spiato (Participle) con un occhio, domandava (C).*

'But Giulia paid no attention (C) to Angelica's calls; and having slit open (Participle) the door of the study and having spied (Participle) inside with one eye, she asked (C).'



## Greek antecedents (2)

- Once again, Medieval Greek offers similar examples (De Santis, forthc.):

*Life of Saint Symeon, 46 (7<sup>th</sup> century)*

[...] παραχρῆμα ἀνακάμψας (Participle) πρὸς τὸν ἅγιον ὕμνους ἀνέπεμπε (C) τῷ Θεῷ [...].

‘[...] having immediately returned (Participle) to the saint, he raised (C) hymns to God.’.

## Conclusion (*incipit*)

- The above examples are but a small window over the vast territory of tight alternation between **SP** and **IPF**.
- The reported examples show that in modern Italian literature the **aspectual peculiarities of the IPF** (with particular regard to the 'continuous' value) have been intentionally exploited **also in a purely propulsive function**.
- The writers have transferred onto the plot line the **potential of temporal vagueness typical of the 'continuous' IPF**, thus obtaining a sort of 'sfumato' that could be compared to the 'overflowing' brushstroke typical of so much modern painting. What is lost in image sharpness is gained in allusive strength.

## Conclusion (*explicit*)

- It is important to keep in mind that this kind of abrupt aspectual shifts is **genre-related** (van Krieken, Sanders & Sweetser 2019). It would indeed be unexpected in nonfictional news narratives. Thus, although easy to connect with some standard semantic values conveyed by the relevant aspectual viewpoints (i.e. continuous IPF), such shifts presuppose a **fictional narrative perspective**.
- Presumably, one needs to activate a specific type of '**mental state**' (Fauconnier 1985) in order to justify this sort of deviation from the sharp rendering of a real life sequence of events.

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the (happy?) end