ITALIAN VERB-VERB REDUPLICATIVE ACTION NOUNS

Anna M. Thornton

ABSTRACT: Italian has a lexeme-formation device that yields action nouns through the reduplication of a verbal base (which is homophonous to the morpheme used in compounding, and to the singular imperative form). This device originates from the lexicalization of reported speech acts, consisting of repeated imperatives. The first attestations of such speech acts, dating back to the 15th century, are found in contexts describing battles or stampedes, in which many people participate; the speech acts refer to orders uttered several times and by several speakers in such contexts. By the 19th century, the formation of VV reduplicative action nouns has become slightly productive. The twenty-some such nouns attested all require that their subject refer to a plurality of individuals. This is interpreted as a manifestation in Italian of the category known as “verbal number” (Corbett, 2000: ch. 8). Italian is peculiar in expressing verbal number through a category-changing device (i.e., deverbal nouns) rather than a category-preserving one (i.e., deverbal verbs).

KEYWORDS: Italian language; reduplication; plurality; verbal number; participant number; action nouns

1. INTRODUCTION

Italian has a small number of action nouns that appear to be formed by reduplication of a verb form. Examples are given in (1).

(1)  
  a. fuggifuggi ‘stampede’, lit. run_away.run_away  
  b. pigiapiglia ‘stampede’, lit. push.push  
  c. copia copia ‘generalized copying’, lit. copy copy

Italian seems to have gone further than other Romance languages in developing this kind of Verb-Verb compound. Although other Romance languages do have some compounds formed through the reduplication of verbs, these are usually

* Università dell’Aquila. The research has been funded by MIUR, within the PRIN 2005 project CompoNet. Versions of this paper have been presented at XXV CILPR (Innsbruck, September 2007) and at the Workshop on nominal and verbal plurality (Paris, November 2007). I wish to thank Paolo Acquaviva, Greville Corbett, Giuliana Fiorentino, Brenda Laca, Francesca Masini and Marianne Mithun for useful discussion, and the colleagues participating in the CompoNet project (particularly Marco Baroni, Maria Grossmann and Davide Ricca) for help in dealing with the la Repubblica corpus. Last but not least, thanks to Barbara Weiden Boyd for improving my English style. All shortcomings are of course my own.
not action nouns. For Spanish, Rainer (1993: 263) observes that nouns made up of “two identical verbs asyndetically strung together” refer mostly to plants, animals, children’s games or toys, or persons, and rarely to other categories (including action nouns).¹ Some of his examples are listed in (2):

(2) Spanish Verb₁-Verb₂ compounds
   a. Plants: *brincabrinca*, *pegapega*
   b. Animals: *duermeduerme*, *matamata*, *picapica*
   c. Games: *pasapasa*
   d. Toys: *chupachupa*
   e. Persons: *chapa chapa* (Argent.) < *chapar* ‘to get rich’
   f. Other: *correcorre* ‘ungeordnete Flucht’ = ‘disordered flight’

For French, Guilbert (1971: LVIIIb) lists only the few nouns in (3), that refer to tools or games (names of games being the only VV action nouns in French).

(3) French Verb₁-Verb₂ compounds

Italian has some compounds made up of two verbs that refer to entities of the categories already encountered for Spanish and French, as well as to entities of some other semantic categories. But to create compounds that refer to these categories, Italian employs two different verbs, as shown in (4):

(4) Italian Verb₁-Verb₂ compounds
   a. Persons: *portareca* lit. carry.bring ‘delivery boy’, *pappataci*¹ lit. eat.keep_quiet ‘happy cuckold’
   b. Animals: *pappataci*² lit. eat.keep_quiet ‘Phlebotomus papatasi’
   c. Instruments: *saliscendi* lit. go_up.go_down ‘latch’ *toccasana* lit. touch.cure ‘cure-all’
   d. Places: *bagnasciuga* lit. wet.dry ‘water-line, foreshore’, *montascendi* lit. go_up.go_down ‘sloping path’
   e. Games: *stacciaburatta* lit. sieve.sieve ‘name of a game’
   f. Processes: *dormiveglia* lit. sleep.wake ‘drowse’

¹ “Substantive [...] die aus zwei identischen, asyndetisch aneinandergereihten Verben bestehen [...] bezeichnen meist Pflanzen [...] Tiere [...], Kinderspiele bzw. – spielzeuge [...] oder Personen [...], aber auch anderes” (Rainer, 1993: 263).
² I do not offer an English gloss for this form, quoted by Guilbert (1971: LVIII), who defines it as “formation familière désignant une sorte d’aérateur” and does not include it in the dictionary.
g. Actions: *giravolta* lit. turn.turn, ‘pirouette; about face’, *parapiiglia* lit. shield. take ‘hubbub’

Compounds made up of two **identical** verb forms in Italian are for the great majority action nouns.³

2. THE CORPUS

The present study is based on a corpus of Italian action nouns formed by a sequence of two identical verb forms.⁴ The corpus has been collected from dictionaries, from the literature (notably Tollemache 1945) and from an electronic corpus containing sixteen years of issues of the daily newspaper *la Repubblica* (1985–2000) (cf. Baroni et al., 2004).

These action nouns are listed in Table 1, with some information concerning each type: the frequency of its spelling variants and its overall frequency in the *la Repubblica* corpus, and the date of its first attestation.

In Table 1 I have given only a literal gloss of the meaning of the base verbs. The meaning of the action nouns can be expressed by a formula such as the one proposed in Thornton (1996: 100): “the performance of the action referred to by the verb by a multitude of agents”. I will now describe in some detail how these action nouns arose and some of their characteristics, showing how the concept of verbal plurality comes into play to describe their meaning.

Verbal plurality is a phenomenon present in several languages from different areas (cf. Corbett, 2000: 245). One of its manifestations consists in the fact that certain verbs have two alternating (often suppletive) bases that distribute according to the number of participants in the event described by the verb. For example, in Shuswap the verb that means ‘to sit/dwell’ is *Ɂém* if one person sits, and *Ɂeq* if a group of people sit; similarly, ‘kill’ is *púl* if one person is killed, and *ʔikʷ* if more people are killed (data from Mithun, 1988: 213).

Italian seems to give expression to this potentially universal distinction by having developed a lexeme formation device that forms action nouns requiring that their subject refer to a plurality of individuals. The formal side of this lexeme formation process, i.e., reduplication, is often associated with the expression of plurality: in this case, it can be analyzed as iconically signalling the fact that the action referred to by the noun is performed by several agents.

³ A minority is represented by nicknames of the kind in (i), while a noun like *leccalecca* ‘lollipop’ (ii), attested since 1959, is a true exception, and possibly also a calque from Spanish *chupachupa* lit. suck.suck ‘lollipop’, attested since 1891.

(i)  *Sebastiano Di Luciano detto “Spara Spara”*
    ‘Sebastiano Di Luciano a.k.a. “Shoot Shoot”’
    (nickname of a Mafia killer, documented in *la Repubblica* corpus)

(ii)  *leccalecca* (1959) lit. lick.lick ‘lollipop’

⁴ On the nature of the verb form appearing in these nouns, cf. section 4.3. below.
3. ORIGIN OF VERB-VERB REDUPLICATIVE ACTION NOUNS

Action nouns formed through the reduplication of verbs seem to have a de-locutive origin. Italian, like other Romance languages, has a syntactic device that Spitzer (1918, 1951–52) dubbed “descriptive imperative”. It consists in using a series of two or more imperatives to describe actions. Spitzer observes that the imperatives are those which the agents of the described action address (or could address) to themselves or to each other⁵, and that the action actually performed is presented by means of the order which it would be necessary to utter in the situation.⁶ Spitzer also observed that often instances of descriptive imperative are commands or exhortations used to direct sailing or battlefield maneuvers. Some of these utterances have then been lexicalized, becoming

---

⁵ “Les impératifs sont ceux que s’adressèrent (ou auraient pu s’adresser à eux-mêmes) les agents de l’action décrite” (Spitzer, 1952: 16–17).

⁶ “L’action exécutée en fait est présentée sous forme de l’ordre qui aurait été nécessaire dans la situation” (Spitzer, 1952: 22).
action nouns. These action nouns refer to the situation in which it would be appropriate to utter the command, or to the maneuver that the imperative orders to perform.

Folena (1958) has identified some contexts, found in Neapolitan prose writers of the 15th century, which contain the first instances of descriptive imperatives in Italian. I list these contexts in (5) and (6):

(5) Loise de Rosa, Ricordi (written between 1452 and 1471, ed. by Vittorio Formentin, Roma, Salerno editrice, 1998)
   a. Como lo re fo a lo Capo, esseno ly catalane colle valestre / parate, cala cala, et foro pigliate tutty (66v.2)
      ‘As the king arrived at the Cape, the Catalans come out with their crossbows ready, lower lower, and they were all caught’
   b. Co//mo foro passate le bandere, et passavano ly fante, isso esse, dà sop/re ly fante et amaccza amaccza (70v.19-21)
      ‘As soon as the flags had passed, and the soldiers passed, he comes out, attacks the soldiers and kill kill’
   c. le gente che erano trasute e / ly napoletane stavano alle Corree: piglia piglia, para para, tutty foro prise (70v.23-24)
      ‘the people who had come in and the Neapolitans were at the Corree: catch catch, shield shield, everybody was caught’

(6) Masuccio Guardati [Masuccio Salernitano], Il novellino (written around 1450, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, Firenze, Sansoni, 1957)
   La calca grande andava di continuo costoro seguendo con gridi, cifolare e urlare; e in ogne luoco gridandosi: “Para! Piglia!”, e cui loro sassi traendo, e quali con bastoni lo stallone percoteano, e ciascuno da la impresa separarli se ingegnava…(I.47)
      ‘the big mob followed them crying, whistling and shouting; and everywhere the cry was “Shield! Catch!”, and some threw stones at them, and some beat the horse with sticks, and each one tried to divide the two of them…’

As we can see, all the contexts in (5) refer to sailing or battlefield maneuvers. The context in (6) refers to a situation of confusion, due to the fact that a horse runs among a crowd with no clear direction, because the man on horseback is dead. In all of these contexts, many people are present: the singular imperative form is used to utter commands or exhortations, and it is repeated to signify that these commands have been uttered several times, possibly by several speakers and to several addressees.

Some of these repeated imperatives, in the course of time, have lexicalized as action nouns, used to refer to the kind of situation in which it would be appropriate to utter the imperatives. This is the case of parapiglia, first attested
as a noun around 1600, but attested as a direct speech quotation a century and a half earlier, as shown in (5c) and (6). *Parapiglia* is atypical among Italian Verb-Verb (henceforth, VV) action nouns because it is formed by a sequence of two different verbs: the majority of Italian VV action nouns are formed by the repetition of a single verb, and only this type is slightly productive, as the hapaxes in Table 1 show.

Not all the attested sequences of repeated imperatives have become action nouns, and not all the action nouns formed by reduplicated verb forms are preceded by an attestation of the same verb used as descriptive imperative or as direct speech quotation. The repeated imperatives that are attested as direct speech quotations before the corresponding action noun are listed in (7):

(7) corri corri, fuggi fuggi, piglia piglia, scappa scappa, serra serra, tira tira

The occasional lexicalization as an action noun of some of these sequences has established a model after which other action nouns have been created. In terms of lexical morphology, we could say that a lexeme formation rule has been established. In the following, I will outline the main formal and semantic characteristics of these nouns in as neutral a manner as possible with respect to theoretical frameworks.

4. PROPERTIES OF THE BASES OF VERB-VERB REDUPLICATIVE ACTION NOUNS

4.1 Disyllabicity of the verbal base

From the phonological point of view, it is noticeable that the action nouns formed by a reduplicated verb seem to obey a prosodic constraint demanding that the verb base be disyllabic (as already observed in the very preliminary survey of Thornton, 1996: 100).

As can be seen from inspection of the data in Table 1, all the verb forms that are reduplicated are disyllabic, except the first one. It is also noteworthy that the only trisyllabic base (*arraffà*) is vowel initial, and its belonging to the set of possible inputs for the formation of reduplicated action nouns could be explained by appealing to Plenat’s principle of “extrametricality of initial vowels”:

(8) Extramétricité des voyelles initiales:

“Une voyelle initiale peut ne pas entrer dans le décompte des syllabes d’une forme et ne pas compter comme l’extrémité gauche de cette même forme” (Plénat, 1994: 239).7

7 ‘[A]n initial vowel may not be counted in the syllable count of a form, and may not count as the leftmost element of this same form’.

---

(7) corri corri, fuggi fuggi, piglia piglia, scappa scappa, serra serra, tira tira

The occasional lexicalization as an action noun of some of these sequences has established a model after which other action nouns have been created. In terms of lexical morphology, we could say that a lexeme formation rule has been established. In the following, I will outline the main formal and semantic characteristics of these nouns in as neutral a manner as possible with respect to theoretical frameworks.

4. PROPERTIES OF THE BASES OF VERB-VERB REDUPLICATIVE ACTION NOUNS

4.1 Disyllabicity of the verbal base

From the phonological point of view, it is noticeable that the action nouns formed by a reduplicated verb seem to obey a prosodic constraint demanding that the verb base be disyllabic (as already observed in the very preliminary survey of Thornton, 1996: 100).

As can be seen from inspection of the data in Table 1, all the verb forms that are reduplicated are disyllabic, except the first one. It is also noteworthy that the only trisyllabic base (*arraffà*) is vowel initial, and its belonging to the set of possible inputs for the formation of reduplicated action nouns could be explained by appealing to Plenat’s principle of “extrametricality of initial vowels”:

(8) Extramétricité des voyelles initiales:

“Une voyelle initiale peut ne pas entrer dans le décompte des syllabes d’une forme et ne pas compter comme l’extrémité gauche de cette même forme” (Plénat, 1994: 239).7

7 ‘[A]n initial vowel may not be counted in the syllable count of a form, and may not count as the leftmost element of this same form’.
Plénat (1994) has found that in several phenomena of French prosodic morphology vowel-initial trisyllabic words are treated as disyllabic words. The same seems to be true in the case of Italian reduplicative action nouns, and of other Italian phenomena investigated in Thornton (2007).

Of course, to be sure that disyllabicity of the input is a genuine constraint on the lexeme formation process that yields VV reduplicative action nouns, one should check the statistical distribution of disyllabic verb bases in Italian. The data in Table 2 show that the frequency of disyllabic verb bases in VV reduplicative action nouns is significantly higher than expected: over 95% of their bases are disyllabic, while in the Italian Basic Vocabulary only 30% of the verbs have a disyllabic base (and even fewer verbs have disyllabic bases among Italian verbs overall – it is well known that word length increases as frequency decreases). The data in Table 2 show that the tendency to select disyllabic verb bases as input is shared by other verb-based compounds of Italian, but in VV reduplicative action nouns this tendency is stronger than in verb-based compounding in general.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of V base</th>
<th>Vs in VV reduplicative action nouns</th>
<th>Vs as first members of compounds in GRADIT*</th>
<th>Vs in the Italian Basic Vocabulary**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 syllable</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 syllables</td>
<td>95,7%</td>
<td>82,3%</td>
<td>30,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 syllables</td>
<td>4,3%</td>
<td>17,7%</td>
<td>52,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 syllables</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>15,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 syllables</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1,8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Length in syllables of the verbal base in several sets of data. * Data from Ricca (2005). ** Data computed using BDVDB (Thornton, Iacobini, Burani, 1997).

The verb bases are all stressed on the penultimate and end in a vowel: therefore, they have all the characteristics of Italian minimal prosodic words, which are disyllabic trochees ending in a vowel (as shown in Thornton, 1996).

### 4.2 Inflectional class of the base

A second point worth mentioning is the selection of the verbal bases with respect to their inflectional class. Italian verbs belong to different inflectional classes. It is a matter of some debate whether one should recognize three main classes, based on the three different thematic vowels that appear between the verb’s root and the inflectional ending in some forms of the paradigm (such as the second person plural of the present indicative, all forms of the imperfect indicative, and most infinitives (the regular ones)), or just two macroclasses,\[^8\]

\[^8\] The Italian Basic Vocabulary (De Mauro, 1980) contains 1478 verbs (Thornton, Iacobini, Burani, 1997: 68).
i.e., the traditional first conjugation and a second class which comprises all other classes and subclasses (this position is taken by Dressler & Thornton, 1991). This is not the place to defend one or the other position. In the following analysis, I will adopt the traditional tripartition, recapitulated in (9), in keeping with most of the literature on Italian verbs.

(9) Italian verbal inflectional classes (conjugations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Infinitive ending (citation form)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1(^{st})</td>
<td>-are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2(^{nd})</td>
<td>-ere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3(^{rd})</td>
<td>-ire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 1\(^{st}\) conjugation is regular and productive (adapted loanwords and all productive verbal suffixes belong to it); the 2\(^{nd}\) is unproductive and extremely irregular (Dressler et al., 2003); the 3\(^{rd}\) has two subclasses: a minority of verbs do not take the -isc- infix, while the majority of verbs take the -isc- infix in certain cells of the paradigm; this subclass is slightly productive (neologic parasynthetic verbs can be assigned to it) and regular. Table 3 shows the inflectional classes of the bases of VV reduplicative action nouns, of the verbal elements in other verb-based lexeme formation processes of Italian, and of Italian verbs overall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Vs in Zingarelli minore*</th>
<th>Vs in VN compounds**</th>
<th>Vs in VV action nouns</th>
<th>V1 in VeV lexemes***</th>
<th>V2 in VeV lexemes***</th>
<th>16 top rank verbs in LIP and LIF ****</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-are</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>81.4%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ere</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ire</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Inflectional classes of verbal bases in several sets of data. * Zingarelli minore is a usage dictionary containing about 45,000 types; data computed from more detailed data in Thornton, Iacobini & Burani (1997: 75). ** Data from Ricca (2005). *** Data from Masini & Thornton (2007). **** Data from Giordano & Voghera (2002); LIP is a frequency dictionary of spoken Italian, and LIF is a frequency dictionary of written Italian (each based on a 500,000-tokens corpus).

As can be seen, among the verbal bases of reduplicative action nouns the 1\(^{st}\) conjugation is underrepresented, and the 2\(^{nd}\) conjugation (the totally unproductive one) is overrepresented, with respect to the distribution of inflectional classes in the Italian lexicon overall, shown in the second column of Table 3.
Reduplicative action nouns share this property with other verb-based lexemes of Italian, i.e., VeV lexemes, that can be action nouns or adjectives.\(^9\)

Both VV reduplicative action nouns and VeV lexemes originated as lexicalizations of verbs used in speech in their imperative form. This may explain why the distribution of inflectional classes among these types’ verbal bases is closer to the token frequency of inflectional classes in speech (shown in the last column of Table 3) than to the type frequency of inflectional classes in the lexicon.

### 4.3 Form of the base

A further point that deserves discussion concerns the form that the verbal base takes in reduplicative action nouns. The discussion of this point must be addressed against the background of a centuries-long discussion about the verbal element in Italian (and Romance) compounds.

Romance verb-based compounds have been an object of investigation for almost two centuries. Research has focused mainly on Verb-Noun compounds, while compounds containing two verbs have been less studied, probably because they are much less numerous than Verb-Noun ones. However, the verbal elements appearing in the two types are homophonous; therefore, discussion about the verbal element in Verb-Noun compounds is significant also for Verb-Verb compounds.

Scholars have been divided over the nature of the verbal element in Verb-Noun compounds into three main parties:

- a first party, maintaining that the verbal element is the imperative, as diachronic evidence shows that the compounds originate in imperative sentences;
- a second, minority party, including the Italian scholars Tollemache and Merlo, maintaining that the verbal element is the 3rd person singular of the present indicative;
- a third party, maintaining that the verbal element is a verb stem.

The definition of what counts as verb stem has been in turn subject to some debate; Scalise (1983 and further work) has defined the verb stem as the string that remains when the inflectional morpheme /re/ is subtracted from the infinitive citation form.

Table 4 shows how the three hypotheses fare with respect to VV reduplicative action nouns from verbs of the three different conjugations.

As can be seen, first conjugation verbs do not discriminate between the three hypotheses: all three make the same prediction, which is borne out by

---

\(^9\) VeV lexemes are investigated by Masini & Thornton (2007), to which I refer for details. An example is *mordi e fuggi* lit. bite and run away, which means ‘extremely quick’ when used as an adjective, and ‘quick action’ when used as an action noun.
the data; third conjugation verbs are sufficient to exclude the hypothesis that
the verbal element is the 3rd person singular of the present indicative, while
the Scalisian stem and the imperative coincide in the isc-less third conjugation
verbs employed as bases of VV reduplicative compounds; finally, second con-
jugation verbs show that also the Scalisian stem is untenable: the only form
that coincides with the verbal element in VV reduplicative action nouns (as
well as with the verbal element in verb-noun compounds and other verb-based
compounds) is the imperative.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that the verbal element in VV action nouns
and in other verb-based compounds of Italian is the imperative as an inflected
form. This point was already the subject of discussion as early as half a century
ago, and was settled with balanced positions such as the ones expressed by
Migliorini and Folena and quoted in (10):

(10)  a. “Formalmente, si tratta d’imperativi; concettualmente, oggi
questo carattere è molto meno avvertito” (Migliorini, 1957: 82)  

10  b. “la valutazione sincronico-semantic va […] distinta da quella
diacronico-etimologica” (Folena, 1958: 104)  

11

In a more recent theoretical framework, that of Morphology by Itself es-
tablished by Aronoff (1994), it can be proposed that VV reduplicative action
nouns, as well as other verb-based compounds of Italian, display a specific
morphemic stem, which is homophonous with the imperative singular form,
but not co-essential with this form, as it is a stem, a “pure sound form” in
Aronoff’s words, and not a specific inflectional form with specific P/N and
has established the existence and the range of usage of this stem in Italian
morphology.

However, a last small point deserves notice. The requirement that the stem
used in compounding be homophonous with the imperative singular can be
marginally violated in Verb-Noun compounds, because it conflicts with an-
other requirement, the tendency to have disyllabic first members in compounds

---

10 ‘Formally, they are imperatives; conceptually, today this property is much less felt’.
11 ‘The synchronic-semantic evaluation is […] to be distinguished from the diachronic-
etymological one’.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb-Verb action noun</th>
<th>Base verb citation form (infinitive)</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>3rd ps.sg.</th>
<th>Scalisian stem (infinitive minus /re/)</th>
<th>Imperative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>copia copia</td>
<td>copiare ‘to copy’</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>copia ✓</td>
<td>copia ✓</td>
<td>copia ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fuggifuggi</td>
<td>fuggire ‘to run away’</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>fugge!</td>
<td>fuggi ✓</td>
<td>fuggi ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corri corri</td>
<td>correre ‘to run’</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>corre!</td>
<td>corre!</td>
<td>corri ✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 4: The form of the verbal bases.**
(Thornton, 2007). With a third conjugation verb that takes the -isc- infix, such as *pulire ‘to clean’, there is variation in the kind of stem selected for compounding with a noun: the stem homophonous to the imperative, *pulisci, is trisyllabic, and so is sometimes replaced by the disyllabic stem used in derivation, *puli (appearing in words such as *pulitura ‘cleaning’). The data in Table 5 shows the extent of the variation for some examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form 1</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Form 2</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pulisciorecchie</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>puliorecchie</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>lit. clean-ears ‘cotton swab, Q-tip’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pulisciscarpe</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>puliscarpe</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>lit. clean-shoes ‘shoe-shining machine’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pulisciunghie</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>puliunghie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>lit. clean-nails ‘tool for cleaning nails’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>puliscivetri</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>pulivetri</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>lit. clean-glass ‘window cleaner’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5:** Frequency of VN compounds doublets with -isc- and -isc-less stems.

Frequency counts from a Google search. Data from Thornton (2007).

Note that this strategy seems not to be available for VV reduplicative action nouns. In this case, the only strategy available to comply with disyllabicity requirements is not to select as bases third conjugation verbs taking -isc-. These are the majority of third conjugation verbs, but they do not appear in our data. My native speaker intuition judges that a form like *puli puli* in (11a) is ungrammatical:

(11) a. *puli puli* lit. ‘clean-clean’ (stem used in derivation)
    b. *pulisci pulisci* lit. ‘clean-clean’ (stem homophonous with the imperative)

But *pulisci pulisci* in (11b) is ungrammatical too, due to the disyllabicity constraint. The fact that (11a) is not a good enough repair, while the Verb-Noun compounds with *puli* in Table 5 are a possible repair, could be interpreted as indicating that homophony with the imperative is a stronger constraint for the verb stem used in reduplicative action nouns than for the stem used in

---

12 *Bolli bolli* ‘tumult, commotion’, from *bollire* ‘to boil’, is an old formation, not attested in our contemporary corpus, and it is based on a verb that can have a double conjugation, with and without -isc-. The stem without -isc- is selected for this formation.

13 Of course, *pulisci pulisci* is ungrammatical as an action noun; it is perfectly grammatical as a sequence of two imperatives used as exhortations or as descriptive imperatives. This is probably the reason why an anonymous referee observes that one of the two items in (11a-b) is “much better” than the other: if linguistic competence is partly shaped by usage, the fact that the sequence *pulisci pulisci* does occur, with a different meaning, will make it more familiar than the completely unattested *puli puli*, and speakers will be more ready to accept it also as an action noun. But I do wish to stress that *pulisci pulisci* does not occur (in any meaning) in the Repubblica corpus, despite its semantic plausibility. Attestations of *pulisci pulisci* used as a descriptive imperative can be found on the Internet; my thanks to Franck Floricic for pointing out two of them.
Verb-Noun compounds. This might be due to the fact that, while both lexeme formation processes originate in the lexicalization of sentences containing an imperative form, Verb-Noun compounds established themselves as a lexeme formation process much earlier than reduplicative action nouns, and so their connection with imperatives has been completely severed by now.  

4.4 Syntactic and semantic properties of the bases

Most bases of VV reduplicative action nouns are transitive verbs, but unaccusative verbs are also represented, by the three non-prototypical unaccusative verbs *fuggire* ‘run away’, *scappare* ‘run away’ and *correre* ‘run’ (and the most frequent type, *fuggifuggi*, is based on an unaccusative verb); three bases are unergative verbs (*parlare* ‘to speak’, *sparare* ‘to shoot a gun’, *piangere* ‘to cry’). The fact that most base verbs are transitive reflects the distribution of transitive vs. intransitive verbs in the Italian lexicon.

As far as actionality is concerned, all bases are dynamic, as expected (stative verbs do not yield action nouns). Further distinctions are difficult to establish, as often the distinction between, e.g., activity and accomplishment verbs depends on syntagmatic factors, such as the number and/or definiteness of the object NP. Therefore, specific contexts of occurrence should be analyzed if one wishes to check for this factor. This in turn is not viable because, as we shall see below, objects are in most cases not expressed in the context of occurrence of these action nouns.

A generalization is possible in terms of the semantic role of the subject. Bases are verbs whose subject is high on an agentivity hierarchy. Verbs with an Experiencer subject are excluded. There are three unaccusative verbs, whose only argument is usually considered to have the semantic role of patient; but the argument of the unaccusative verbs in our corpus is clearly higher on an agentivity hierarchy than prototypical patients: *fuggire* ‘to run away’, *scappare* ‘to run away’ and *correre* ‘to run’ are voluntary actions, the movement is self-propelled, only humans and higher animals can perform the action, etc.

5. SEMANTICS OF VV REDUPLICATIVE ACTION NOUNS

Several VV reduplicative action nouns are near synonyms, and cluster around a couple of specific frames, as shown in (12a-b), while about a third of the nouns are isolated, and do not (yet?) belong to any specific semantic frame; these isolated nouns are listed in (12c):

---

14 The earliest examples of Verb-Noun compounds in Romance date back to the 8th century (Spitzer 1952:44), and are well-established by the 15th century, while reduplicative action nouns are first attested in the 16th century (see Table 1 above), and became productive only at the middle of the 19th century.
(12) a. The STAMPEDE frame
bolli bolli, pigia pigia, serra serra, spingi spingi, fuggifuggi, scappa scappa
lit. boil boil, push push, serry serry, push push, run_away run_away, run_away run_away
b. The (ILLEGAL) APPROPRIATION frame
rubia rubia, mangia mangia, arraffa arraffa, copia copia, piglia piglia, ciappa ciappa, compra compra, tira tira
lit. steal steal, eat eat, snatch snatch, copy copy, take take, take take, buy buy, pull pull
c. Isolated action nouns
batti batti, corri corri, firma firma, parla parla, piangi piangi, sgozza sgozza, spara spara, spendi spendi, vendi vendi
lit. beat beat, run run, sign sign, talk talk, cry cry, slit_the_throat slit_the_throat, shoot shoot, spend spend, sell sell

The fact that several of the oldest nouns belong to the STAMPEDE frame is interesting. Indeed, the English verb *stamped* is often quoted as an example of a verb that expresses lexically a kind of verbal plurality, demanding participant plurality. For instance, Corbett (2000: 253) observes that “the difference between the intransitives *run* and *stamped* involves among other things the number of subject participants” (Corbett, 2000: 253), in that *run* can take a subject referring to a single individual (*Poor John ran away*), while *stamped* demands a subject referring to a plurality of individuals (*the crowd stamped*).

We have already observed that some of the first attestations of repeated imperatives used as direct speech quotations or as descriptive imperatives occurred in contexts of stamped, such as the one in (6) above. So it is not surprising that the nouns in (12a) select a subject referring to a plurality of individuals (i.e., a plural or a collective noun). What is interesting, though, is that the requirement of a plural subject seems to extend to all the action nouns formed by reduplicated verbs, not just the ones belonging to the STAMPEDE frame. That is, even nouns belonging to the (ILLEGAL) APPROPRIATION frame, which in principle has no requirement as to the number of participants, or the isolated nouns in (12c), require a subject referring to a plurality of individuals.

That is, the lexeme formation process of Italian that yields VV reduplicative action nouns seems to be an instance of an unusual way of expressing the category of verbal number, and particularly of what Corbett calls “participant number”. These verb-based nouns denote actions performed by multiple agents.

15 *Eat* here is metaphorical for ‘appropriate public money’.
In order to prove this claim, I have analyzed the contexts of occurrence of the nouns in Table 1 in the *la Repubblica* corpus, examining the arguments that accompany them.

It is well known that deverbal action nouns can inherit the arguments of their base verb. In Italian, both arguments of a transitive verb can be inherited by a derived action noun and expressed as its arguments by PPs introduced by the preposition *di* ‘of’, as shown in (13b), where the action noun *descrizione* ‘description’ is derived from the transitive verb *descrivere* ‘to describe’ of (13a):

(13) a. Gianni ha descritto Maria
   Gianni.SBJ describe.PRF.3SG Maria.OBJ
   ‘Gianni described Maria’

   b. La descrizione di Maria di Gianni
   The description GEN Maria GEN Gianni
   ‘Gianni’s description of Maria’

   c. La descrizione di Maria da parte di Gianni
   The description GEN Maria by Gianni
   ‘Gianni’s description of Maria’

   d. La sua descrizione di Maria
   ART.F.SG POSS.F.SG description.F.SG GEN Maria
   ‘His [i.e., Gianni’s] description of Maria’

   e. La sua descrizione da parte di / *di Gianni
   ART.F.SG POSS.F.SG description.F.SG by / *GEN Gianni
   ‘Her [i.e., Maria’s] description by Gianni’

   (data adapted from Giorgi, 1988: 281–282)

As two *di*-phrases in a single sentence may cause trouble in decoding the role of the two arguments, the subject can also be introduced by the complex preposition *da parte di*, as shown in (13c); moreover, the subject can be expressed by a possessive, as in (13d), or the object may be expressed by a possessive, but in this case only if the subject is introduced by *da parte di*, as in (13e).

When only one *di*-phrase is present with a noun derived from a transitive verb, its role may be ambiguous, if semantics doesn’t help: in *La descrizione*

---

16 Sentence (13b) is offered by Giorgi (1988: 281), who maintains that the empty preposition *di* can mark both arguments of a noun derived from a transitive verb. Other authors, such as Puglielli & Frascarelli (2008: 152), maintain on the contrary that “grammar excludes” two PPs introduced by *di* in the same sentence. It is not easy to settle the matter, because in real usage most deverbal nouns occur in contexts in which only one of their arguments is overtly expressed by a PP. I suspect that varying degrees of acceptability of different instances of a construction with two arguments introduced by *di* depend on several factors, among which is the position of the argument NPs on the Animacy Hierarchy.
di Maria ‘The description GEN Maria’, Maria can be interpreted both as the describer and the described entity.

With these facts in mind, let us now proceed to examine whether and how the arguments are expressed in the contexts of occurrence of VV reduplicative action nouns.

I have analyzed about 150 tokens: that is, all the tokens of the 17 low-frequency types, all tokens of the fairly frequent type pigia pigia, and 50 tokens of the high frequency type fuggifuggi.

In some cases, such as the ones in (14), no argument is expressed in the immediate syntactic context (while circumstantials or attributes are more commonly found).

(14) a. Poi c’è stato lo spara spara. Non si è salvato nessuno.
   ‘Then the shoot-shoot took place. Nobody survived.’

   b. Una specie di copia copia tanto per far vedere che non si è da meno degli altri
   ‘A kind of copy-copy, just to show that one’s not less worthy than anyone else’

In many cases, however, arguments are expressed. Some examples are in (15):

(15) a. schiacciati […] dall’arraffa arraffa dei miliardi stanziati per i restauri
   ‘overwhelmed […] by the grab-grab of the billions budgeted for restoration works’

   b. una privatizzazione che […] i russi chiamano “l’arraffa arraffa” dei più forti
   ‘a denationalization that Russians call the “grab grab” of the strongest ones’

In (15a) the object argument is expressed, through a di-phrase, while in (15b) the subject is expressed, again through a di-phrase.

We do not find in the corpus examples such as (16), with both subject and object overtly expressed, but while (16) is rare, it is not ungrammatical. Fiorentino (2008) shows that the expression of two arguments (and even three arguments, as in (17)) on derived deverbal action nominals is rare but attested, and that indeed its frequency has increased in the course of the history of the Italian language.

(16) l’arraffa arraffa dei miliardi da parte dei più forti (constructed)
   ‘the grab grab of the billions by the strongest ones’

(17) la cessione, da parte di Filippo V di Spagna, al figlio di ogni suo diritto
   ‘the transfer, by Philip V of Spain, to his son of all his rights’
   (Fiorentino 2008: 17)
In our corpus, the expression of the object argument is very rare. This is partly due to the fact that most tokens of VV reduplicative action nouns are based on intransitive verbs – even if, as we have seen, most types are based on transitive verbs. Syntactic expression of the object is limited to the two examples in (18):

(18) a. l’arraffa arraffa **dei miliardi** stanziati per i restauri (= (15a) above)  
   ‘the grab-grab of the billions budgeted for restoration works’  
   b. Alla fine è tutto un firma-firma **di dediche**  
   ‘At the end, it is all a sign-sign of dedications’

Syntactic expression of the subject through a PP introduced by *di* or a possessive is quite frequent. In (19) I list all the examples found with low-frequency nouns, and a selection of the ones found with the frequent *pigia pigia* and *fuggi fuggi*.

(19) a. un problema che riguarda i partiti romani e il loro “mangia mangia”  
   ‘a problem concerning the parties in Rome and their eat-eat’  
   b. Si vuole evitare che il 97, anno di elezioni amministrative, si trasformi in una corsa allo spendi-spendi **di sindaci e giunte regionali**  
   ‘The goal is to avoid that 1997, a year in which local elections will take place, become a rush to spend-spend by mayors and regional governments’  
   c. C’è il corri corri **di tutti gli opportunisti**  
   ‘There’s a run-run of all the opportunist’  
   d. in un pigia pigia **di sedicenni, trentenni, quarantenni, cinquantenni.**  
   ‘in a push-push of 16-year-olds, 30-year-olds, 40-year-olds, 50-year-olds’  
   e. tra il pigia pigia **dei banchieri** in uscita  
   ‘in the push push of the bankers coming out’  
   f. nel pigia-pigia **dei giornalisti**  
   ‘in the push-push of the journalists’  
   g. un pigia pigia **di armati**  
   ‘a push push of armed people’  
   h. c’era un gran pigia pigia **di ragazzi**  
   ‘there’s a big push push of young people’  
   i. nel pigia-pigia ronzante **di fotografi e curiosi**  
   ‘in the buzzing push push of photographers and curious people’
There are several problems that need discussion.

First, examples involving overt expression of arguments of reduplicative action nouns from transitive bases are very rare. Not considering the case of pigia pigia, to which we will return presently, only the four examples in (18a-b) and (19a-b) were found, in which expression of the object and expression of the subject occur twice each. Fiorentino (2008: 19) found that in her corpus “With no exceptions, in the case of transitive deverbal nouns the only expressed argument is the object”, while in our data subject and object seem to have 50% each of the chances to be expressed – but our figures are too small to prove anything.

A further problem is the nature of the argument expressed with pigia pigia. Pigia pigia, lit. ‘push push’, refers to a situation in which each member of a crowd pushes against any other member (to get in or out of somewhere): the pushing is reciprocal. Therefore, in a sense, the arguments expressed in (19d-m) refer to both the subjects and the objects of the action expressed by the deverbal noun.
Let us also consider the text in (20):

(20) Il pigia pigia di persone con i vestiti e i capelli in fiamme che uscivano dal treno e cercavano di precipitarsi fuori, calpestandosi, camminandosi addosso

‘The push-push of persons with their clothes and hair in flames that got out of the train and tried to rush, trampling on each other, walking over each other’

Here the people (persone) are both agents and patients of the pushing: witness the three tokens of the pronoun si which are coreferent with persone: the first si in precipitandosi refers to the subject of the intransitive verb precipitarsi ‘to trample’, while the other two refer to the objects of the verb calpestare ‘to trample’ and of the preposition addosso ‘over’.

Another point to notice is that often no di-phrase expresses the subject argument, but the noun is modified by the adjective generale ‘general’ (or generalizzato ‘generalized’), which expresses the fact that a plurality of subjects is involved. In (21) I give some examples; it must be observed that as many as 46.6% of the tokens of fuggifuggi (131/281) in the Repubblica corpus are immediately followed by the adjective generale; besides, in other cases generale appears as a predicate of fuggifuggi.

(21) VV reduplicative action nouns modified by generale or generalizzato

a. C’è stato un fuggifuggi generale per evitare i resti dell’aereo, proiettili infuocati che arrivavano dal cielo

‘There was a general run away to avoid the relics of the plane, flaming bullets that came down from the sky’

b. la grande volta ha fatto da moltiplicatore dell’ effetto terremoto e il fuggi fuggi è stato generale

‘the big vault has multiplied the earthquake effect and the run away has been general’

c. Ma la trama si presta a una presa in giro del mondo letterario, quello degli scrittori (un “copia copia generale”), degli editori (“prima di tutto vendere, non importa che cosa”) e dei critici [. . .]

‘But the plot lends itself to mocking the literary world, the world of writers (a “general copy copy”), of publishers (“first of all sell, no matter what”), and of literary critics’

17 As observed by both anonymous referees, generale does not incorporate an argument of the deverbal action nouns in the same way in which relational adjectives could be said to incorporate an argument of deverbal nouns in constructions such as decreto rettorale ‘decree issued by the Rector’. The relevance of generale in expressing the plurality of participants in the action designated by the VV action noun it modifies is semantic rather than syntactic. I thank the two referees for helping me to clarify this point.
d. Sono tornato a Pompei con grandi speranze, anzi con la certezza, indotta da un parla-parla generale che molto per quelle rovine nel frattempo era stato fatto
‘I came back to Pompei with great hope, or rather with the conviction, induced by a general talk-talk that much had been done for those ruins in the meanwhile’

e. il pogo, danza grunge, nata come un salto a destra ed uno a sinistra per urtare il vicino, diventa ben presto uno spingi-spingi generale, che impone indumenti e scarpe comode.
‘the pogo, a grunge dance, born as a jump towards the right and a jump towards the left to bump into your neighbour, soon becomes a general push-push, which requires comfortable clothes and shoes’

f. Penso che stiamo dando l’impressione di raschiare il fondo del barile. Sembra un arraffa, arraffa generale. Che ne dice, verrebbe quasi voglia di votare per le Leghe.
‘I think we are giving the impression of scraping the bottom of the barrel. It looks like a general grab, grab. What do you say, one almost feels like voting for the Leagues’.

g. È un vendi-vendi generalizzato. Nelle sale cambi delle banche milanesi, che hanno vissuto giornate febbrili […] si inizia a tirare il fiato.
‘It is a generalized sell-sell. In the stock exchange of Milan banks, that have experienced difficult days […] people start to breathe again.’

Finally, it is important to observe that even when no argument is syntactically expressed in the same clause to which the action noun belongs, the fact that a plurality of agents is involved is easily recoverable from the inspection of a larger context. A few examples, given in (22), will suffice to prove this point.

(22) a. Oltre cinquecento persone, le autorità, prefetto e sindaco in testa accompagnati dalla giunta, fotoreporters nella solita sgomitante ressa, giornalisti cineoperatori, familiari, amici, semplici curiosi hanno atteso tra spingi-spingi […] l’uscita dal cunicolo dello speleologo
‘Over five-hundred people, the authorities, the prefect and the mayor with the members of the local government, press photographers in the usual jostling crowd, journalists, cameramen, family members, friends, and simply the curious waited among push-push […] for the coming out of the speleologist from the tunnel’
b. Il corri corri alla firma non risparmia neanche i liberali: è di ieri la notizia dell’annuncio che anche il segretario Renato Altissimo, dopo i tanti suoi compagni di partito, sottoscrive la richiesta di mitigare la presenza dei partiti nello Stato.
‘the run run to sign doesn’t spare the liberals either: it was announced yesterday that the secretary [of the liberal party] Renato Altissimo too, after many of his party fellows, is signing the request to reduce the presence of parties in the State’

c. Alla fine è tutto un firma-firma di dediche: una copia in particolare viene premurosamente fatta circolare affinché raccolga l’autografo di tutti gli autori: è per Gianni Agnelli.
‘At the end it is all a sign-sign of dedications: a single copy in particular is carefully circulated in order to collect the signature of all the authors: it is for Gianni Agnelli’

All the data examined so far prove, I think, that there is a restriction requiring that Italian action nouns formed by a reduplicated verb have a subject referring to a plurality of individuals.

At first sight, these Italian data are odd with respect to a commonly observed property of verbal number systems, stated in (23) in Corbett’s words:

(23) “Verbal number operates on an ergative basis: if the number of participants is relevant it will be that of the most directly affected argument of the verb (the absolutive)” (Corbett, 2000: 253)

The Italian data we have seen conform in most cases to this generalization, but in at least a couple of cases they deviate: in (19a-b) the plural argument expressed in the context corresponds to the subject of a transitive verb, not to its object. With pigia pigia, subject and object refer to the same entities. All other examples with syntactically expressed arguments involve intransitive verbs, where there is only one argument, so they do not help us discriminate.

In any case, when the subject is overtly expressed, it refers to a group of humans (the only exception is un pigia-pigia di progettoni e progettini (19m), which is only an apparent exception, as progettoni e progettini must be interpreted as a metonymy for “people presenting projects”: witness the fact that in the context progettoni e progettini stand in line).

An extreme testing ground is represented by sgozza-sgozza, lit. ‘slit_the_throat slit_the_throat’: this noun is a very good candidate for discriminating between requirement of plurality of the object, which is definitely the most affected argument, or of the subject. In theory, a single agent can slit the throats of many patients. The immediate syntactic context in which the hapax sgozza-sgozza occurs does not contain any of the arguments. But the wider textual context shows that both the agents and the patients are meant to be numerous: (24) lists the phrases used to refer to them in the text.
Agents and patients of *sgozza-sgozza* mentioned in the wider textual context

a. Agents: *gruppi islamici armati* ‘armed Islamic groups’; *le bande che fanno del Corano un pretesto di morte* ‘gangs that use the Quran as a pretext for killing’

b. Patients: *il bersaglio è la popolazione civile algerina* ‘the target is the Algerian people’

As we can see, both the Agents and the Patients of *sgozza-sgozza* are represented as groups of people. The same is true for most or all of the agents referred to by syntactically expressed arguments, listed in (19) above, or described in the contexts, as in (22) above.

It is possible to conclude, therefore, that Italian action nouns formed by reduplicated verbs denote activities performed by groups of people. This is not an unprecedented case in the realm of facts relating to verbal number. Durie concluded his seminal (1986) paper on verbal number with the following observation:

(25) “Verb stem suppletion appears to invariably select for the number of the absolutive argument. However more productive morphologies show considerable variation in their semantic linking. [...] Many imply group activity, and select the number of the Agent or Actor [...] The two commonest patterns, details aside, seem to be absolutive (plural affect) and nominative (group activity). Presumably these are the most natural ways of linking Number morphology to verbal argument structure.” (Durie, 1986: 363; emphasis mine).

So the Italian case of deverbal reduplicated action nouns seems to be an instance of an independently observed phenomenon. The unusual aspect of the Italian data resides in the fact that a facet of verbal number is expressed not on verbs, but on deverbal action nouns. This might be classified as an instance of the “more productive morphologies” mentioned by Durie.

The fact that verbal number is usually not an inflectional category, but a derivational category, has been observed repeatedly in the literature. What is peculiar about these Italian data is that the lexeme formation process that gives expression to verbal number is category changing, while verbal number systems usually have deverbal verbs, not deverbal nouns.

Another interesting crosslinguistic parallel can be observed. Mithun (1988), in her beautiful survey of verbal number in North American languages, observes that in those languages in which verb stem alternation is used to express participant number, very few verbs participate in the alternation, from only two or three up to “a few dozens” at most (Mithun, 1988: 213). The limited number of verbs involved in the derivational expression of participant
number in North American languages has a parallel in the limited number of verbs yielding VV reduplicative action nouns in Italian.

Mithun also lists the kind of verbs that exhibit verbal number alternations in North American languages. Her list is given in (26):

(26) Semantic classes of verbs that have stem alternation according to participant number in North American languages (Mithun, 1988: 213, 232)

a. Verbs of position: ‘sit’ ‘stand’ ‘lie’

b. Verbs of handling: ‘take’ ‘pick up’ ‘carry’ ‘put’ ‘drop’ ‘throw’

c. Basic motion verbs: ‘go’ ‘walk’ ‘run’ ‘fly’ ‘swim’

d. Killing and dying: ‘kill’ ‘die’

e. Social activities: ‘eating’ ‘conversing’ ‘crying’

If we compare the few Italian verbs that yield reduplicative action nouns, we observe that many of them fit into the very same categories, as shown in (27):

(27) a. Verbs of position: *

b. Verbs of handling: *arraffa arraffa, ciappa ciappa, piglia piglia, tira tira* (‘grab’ ‘take’ ‘take’ ‘pull’)

c. Basic motion verbs: *corri corri* (‘run’)

d. Killing and dying: *sgozza sgozza, spara spara* (‘slit_the_throat’, ‘shoot’)

e. Social activities: *mangia mangia?, parla parla, piangi piangi* (‘eat (metaphorically)’ ‘talk’ ‘cry’)

Verbs of position are not represented because the Italian lexeme formation process yields action nouns, which cannot take as base stative verbs such as verbs of position, but all other categories are well represented. And the classification in (27) is conservative: one could argue that verbs such as *fuggire* ‘to run away’ and *scappare* ‘to run away’ are Basic motion verbs in a verb-framed language such as Italian, or that verbs like *comprare* ‘to buy’ and *vendere* ‘to sell’ refer to salient social activities, thus enlarging the number of Italian verb bases that fit into the categories observed by Mithun for North American languages.

6. CONCLUSION

I have shown that Italian has a previously unobserved lexeme formation pattern, VV reduplicative action nouns, whose most interesting feature is a semantic restriction on the output: the subject of these action nouns refers to a plurality of individuals. This restriction can be analyzed as involving the category of participant number. The formal side of this process, reduplication, is frequently associated with the expression of different aspects of plurality in the languages of the world, and can be interpreted as a means of iconically
signalling the repetition of an action by several agents. Participant number as a restriction on the meaning of a lexeme formation device is usually found, in languages that exploit this category, in the formation of deverbal verbs; most languages that employ the category of participant number have two different verb stems (related to each other derivationally or by means of suppletion) that refer to the same kind of action but distinguish whether it is performed by one or more agents, or undergone by one or more patients. Italian doesn’t make such a distinction by morphological means in verbs (although participant number can be encoded in the lexical meaning of certain verbs, as in English and other languages), but it does in deverbal action nouns. VV reduplicative action nouns imply a multiple subject, while other deverbal action nouns do not: one can talk about una fuga solitaria ‘a solitary flight’ (a very common collocation used to describe a possible event in bike races and other sports competitions), but never of a *fuggifuggi solitario ‘a solitary stampede’: a fuggifuggi is always generale ‘general’, as I have demonstrated in this paper.

REFERENCES


