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The role of diminutive suffixes in the Italian Time Nouns constructions: From approximation to focus?

Abstract: The time nouns (TNs), *minuto* ('minute'), *momento* ('moment'), *attimo* ('instant') can be part of constructions in which they keep all their categorial and syntactic properties, but also in constructions which seem to undergo a process of grammaticalisation: loss of categorial property of nominal inflection; the sequence DET+TN (*un attimo, un momento, un minuto*) can no longer be interrupted by modifiers nor have postnominal modifiers; semantic shift from the original temporal meaning to the more general meaning of a '(small) indefinite amount', to continue towards more properly grammatical values of quantifiers to pragmatic values of hedges, alerter and textual marker of focus. Interestingly, while the original temporal constructions do not occur in diminutive forms, the departure from temporal meaning makes the use of diminutive forms possible. The article explores in which cases they are allowed and the semantic and textual factors which contribute to their presence.

Keywords: evaluative morphology, diminutives, intentional vagueness, focalising constructions, time noun constructions, Italian

1. Introduction[*]

This article deals with some Italian constructions with time nouns (TNs), *minuto* ('minute'), *momento* ('moment'), *attimo* ('instant') that, besides expressing a temporal meaning, have developed functions and meanings ranging from intentional vagueness to focus, as it happens to many pragmatic markers (Underhill 1988; Miller & Weinert 1995; Mihatsch 2020; Voghera 2017, 2022, 2023; Voghera & Borges 2017). In particular, I investigate why the diminutive forms of the considered TNs are only allowed in some TN constructions (CxsTN).

The considered TNs can enter into constructions that play the role of temporal adjuncts either as NP or as prepositional complements within a PP (CxsTN[TEMP]). In this case they maintain their categorial features and original meaning, as in the following examples:

(1)   *Tutto è successo in un momento/attimo/minuto*
        'It all happened in a moment/instant/minute'

(2)   *Ti aspetto da sette minuti/*attimi/*momenti*
        'I've been waiting for you for seven minutes/instants/moments'

(3)   *Un attimo/momento/*minuto e il ladro è scappato*
        'One instant/moment/minute and the thief ran away'

(4)   *Tutto è successo in un momento/*attimo/*minuto complicato*
        'It all happened during a complicated moment/instant/minute'

As we can see, only in (1) the TNs are interchangeable. In (2), where the TN is preceded by the numeral *sette* ('seven'), only *minuto* ('minute') can occur because it is a "noms du référentiel chronologique" (Berthonneau 1989: 399), i.e., a measurable unit of time (Fillmore 2002), the meaning of which is gradable and segmentable in discrete units: saying *seven minutes* we mean a defined portion of time. On the contrary, *attimo* ('instant') and *momento* ('moment'), unlike *minuto*, have no definite relation to a specific referential class of temporal units; their meaning is non-gradable, and it is not possible to indicate a part of *attimo* or *momento*: one cannot say half an *attimo* or half a *momento*. This the reason why in (3) – where the speaker wants to express instantaneity as a whole – only *attimo* and *momento* are acceptable. Finally, in (4) only *momento* is acceptable because the presence of the adjective *complicato* ('complicated') leads to a durative interpretation and *momento*, differently from *attimo* and *minute*, can also mean 'period'.

Now let's see what happens if we use the same sentences with the TNs in the diminutive form. To test the acceptability of diminutive forms in the different constructions, I checked all the contexts in which the diminutives of the TNs occur in the two main corpora of spoken Italian, VoLIP and Kiparla, and the first thousand contexts in the corpus of digital

written Italian ItTenTen 2020[1], which represent colloquial and informal register of the language, albeit written.

(5)   *Ti aspetto da sette minutini*
             'I've been waiting for you for seven minutes.DIM'

(6)   *Un attimino/*momentino e il ladro è scappato*
             'One instant.DIM/moment.DIM and the thief ran away'

(7)   *Tutto è successo in un momentino*
             'It all happened in one moment.DIM'

(8)   *Tutto è successo in un momentino complicato*
             'It all happened during a complicated moment.DIM'

All the sentences result unacceptable, but (8), although I did not find any example of this type in the consulted corpora. Their unacceptability does not depend on the fact that TNs cannot be used in the diminutive form because indeed, as we shall see, diminutive forms are quite frequent. They occur, however, in constructions that no longer have their original temporal meaning, but acquire that of expressions of intentional vagueness or focusers. This difference in the use of diminutives in different types of constructions is, I believe, interesting in order to better understand their meaning and function.

In Section 2, I will briefly present the meanings and functions of diminutives in Italian and in particular of the TNs under analysis; in Section 3, I will analyse the meaning and the functions of TNs constructions that admit diminutives; in Section 4, finally, I will draw some conclusive remarks.

2. A look at diminutives

As is well known, evaluative morphology in Italian is very rich. To get an idea of the variety and number of suffixes that are used for diminutives, I report the list in Merlini Barbaresi (2004: 265–266):

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[1] The meaning of diminutive forms is subject to synchronic variation (see Section 2) and in Italian the acceptability of utterances is also strongly dependent on diatopic factors: in some dialects and regional varieties of Italian they are more frequent and therefore more acceptable. Thus, I am aware that the evaluation I present may have partially different degrees of acceptability in speakers with other regional backgrounds.

-ino/a, *-etto/a*, *-ello/a*, *-uccio/a*, *-uzzo/a*, *-otto/a*, *-(u)olo/a*, *-icci-*, *(u)olo/a*, *-iolo/a*, *-acci-olo*, *-olo/a*, *-àtt-olo/a*, *-onz-olo/a*, *-usc-olo*, *-agn-olo*, *-ign-olo/a*, *-occ-olo*, *-isc-olo*, *-ùgi-olo/a*, *-icola/o*, *-occhio/a*, *- occio/a*, *-ozzo/a*, *-atto/a*, *-acchio/a*, *-icchio/a*, *-ulo/a*, *-iggine*, *-iglio*, *-ecchio*, *-ischio*, *-ottero/a*

Most of the literature on diminutive suffixes agrees on their polysemy (Jurafsky 1996; Delhay 1999; Grandi & Körtvelyéssy 2015; Prieto 2015) and on the fact that they can have scope over different domains (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994). Grandi and Körtvelyéssy (2015: 10) distinguish between two perspectives: descriptive and qualitative. The former "relies on real and objective properties of an item", the latter "assumes a subjective evaluation: personal feelings or opinions and, often, the influence of extra-linguistic context becomes the crucial factor". This distinction is intuitively very convincing, but not always easy to apply. In fact, any non-metrical evaluation implies, in my opinion, always subjectivity, after all the semantic primitives, 'small' and 'big', to which we refer to identify the basic meaning of diminutives or augmentatives are vague predicates and therefore their meaning is always valid only in respect to a reference parameter.

The proposal in Grandi (2017) seems more effective, where it is stated that the basic value for all evaluative affixes is that of 'deviation', in various possible directions, from the meaning expressed by the base form. According to Grandi, diminutives approximate by defect, augmentative by excess.[2] In this perspective, 'small' for diminutives and 'big' for augmentatives are only two of the possible dimensions of approximation and not the primary ones. This proposal, also supported by diachronic data (Grandi 2017: 148–151), eliminates the primacy of the dimensional meaning and has the advantage of being applicable also to meanings that are not inherently gradable.

The most interesting point, from my perspective, is that Grandi's proposal can eliminate the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' deviation. In fact, it seems more convincing to claim that the different meanings expressed by diminutives are always expressions of speaker's attitude but can be arranged along a continuum that goes from a shared intersubjectivity to a highly subjective meaning. In considering the value of diminutives, therefore, two elements intersect: on the one hand, the semantics of the base that certainly

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[2] For a different opinion about augmentatives see Stosic & Amiot (2023).

pushes the interpretation of diminutives towards some specific dimension of approximation and, on the other, the degree of shared subjectivity.
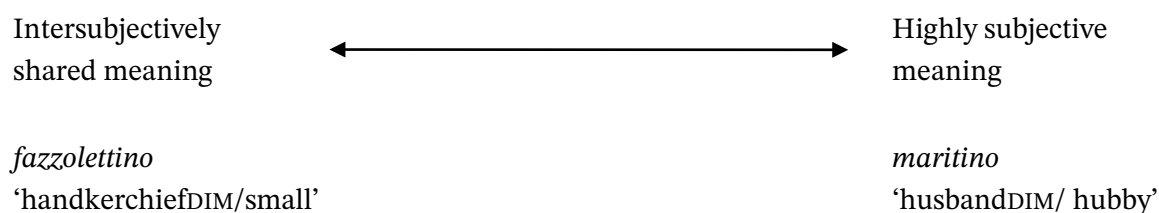
Intersubjectively
shared meaning

← →

Highly subjective
meaning

fazzolettino
'handkerchiefDIM/small'

maritino
'husbandDIM/ hubby'

Fig. 1: Continuum of deviation values expressed by diminutives

If Italian speakers use the word *fazzolettino* ('handkerchief.DIM'), we can reasonably assume that they have a shared representation 'small handkerchief', but if we use the word *maritino* ('hubby', lit. husband.DIM), it is much more difficult to establish a shared representation, if there is a shared representation at all, also because in this case the diminutive can have both positive and ironic connotations.

The continuum between shared intersubjectivity and high subjectivity avoids having to identify a unique feature for all non-lexicalised diminutives, such as [non-serious] proposed by Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994), which, according to the authors, is a combination of [fictive] and [non-important]. In fact, it seems that this feature would not apply to diminutives such as *fazzolettino*, *pezzetto* ('piece.DIM') and many others.

Another point in favour of Grandi's (2017) proposal is the consideration of diminutives as approximate meanings of the base, which emphasises the comparison that underlies the meanings expressed by evaluative suffixes (Grandi & Körtvelyéssy 2015: 13; Tovena 2015: 118). Even more explicit is the position of Delhay (1999: 80):

> En effet, on peut considérer que l'opération dérivationnelle "diminutive" met en jeu un couple X / Xd et que le formant d, généralement un suffixe "diminutif", pose l'existence d'un écart sémantique entre la dénomination X et la dénomination Xd, écart que j'ai propose d'appréhender par la paraphrase "Xd n'est pas un vrai X". On constate que les dénominations Xd [...]comportent toutes un composant sémantique d'ordre relationnel (sorte de, espèce de, analogue à, qui ressemble à, en relation avec, fait de, partie de, etc.).

This interpretation of diminutives' meaning is of particular interest because in various studies it has been shown that more or less explicit comparative processes are the basis for the development of many vagueness expressions (Voghera 2014, 2022, 2023).

The TNs taken into consideration here all admit the diminutive with the suffix *-ino*, which is also the most frequent and productive one in Italian. As we have already seen, *-ino* approximates the meaning of the base in different ways not necessarily related to the concept of smallness (*fazzolettino* vs. *maritino*). However, it has an inherent meaning of smallness/diminutive, which is made evident in cases where *-ino* can be used as a free-standing word to intensify also diminutives with other suffixes:

(9) A: *Vuoi della torta?*
'Do you want some cake?'

B: *Sì, un **pezz+etto**, ma **ino***
'A little piece.DIM, but really little'

In this case the use of *ino* means 'really small' and has the function of intensifying the meaning 'small' already expressed by the suffix *-etto* in *pezzetto*.

The possibility of using diminutives with bases denoting metric measures, *minutino* ('minute.DIM'), *chiletto* ('kilo.DIM'), *settimanella* ('week.DIM') etc., is from a certain point of view, a paradox. In such cases it is difficult to find a single meaning for the diminutive forms and the context is a decisive key, as we shall see. What can be said, however, is that neither *minutino* nor *settimanella* nor *chiletto* necessarily indicate an approximation by defect, since they can be interpreted as '±base's meaning'. In these cases, it is questionable whether they can be always considered hyponyms of the base.

3. From CxsTN[TEMP] to intentional vagueness

The three TNs can enter in constructions that express intentional vagueness. We have intentional vagueness when the speaker more or less consciously makes linguistic choices with low discriminating power in relation to the situation:

un'espressione è vaga quando non possiamo decidere in base a considerazioni formali se, noto il referente e nota l'espressione, essa è applicabile sempre o non è applicabile mai al referente (De Mauro 1982: 99)[3]

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[3] Translation MV: 'an expression is vague when we cannot decide on the basis of formal considerations whether, given the referent and the expression, it is always applicable or never applicable to the referent'.

Intentional vagueness consists of constructions that do not necessarily depend on systemic factors (Voghera 2012, 2013, Voghera & Collu 2017), as in the following example:

(10)   You know, John is bald, something like that

Bald is a vague predicate, the vagueness of which depends on the linguistic code, but the speaker adds more vagueness to the utterance with the Vagueness Expressions (VEs) *you know, something like that.*

Intentional vagueness responds to different communicative needs, on the basis of which I proposed to distinguish three kinds of vagueness (Voghera 2017, 2022; Voghera & Collu 2017):[4]

a.   informational vagueness, the domain of which is the propositional content, depending on lack of information:

(11)   *la terrazza sarà_ tre o quattrocento metri quadri* (VoLIP)
         'the terrace must be three or four hundred square meters'

b.   relational vagueness, the domain of which is the pragmatic relation between speakers and the propositional content, depending on difficulty or reluctance to establish a clear relation with the content of the utterance or the addressee:

(12)   *siamo un po' imbarazzati* (VoLIP)
         'we are a bit embarrassed'

c.   discourse vagueness, the domain of which is the textual construction, depending on exigencies due to online programming and production processes both in speech and in not prepared writing, such as notes:

(13)   A: oh you mean I know like I know every, I know. so many people now this
         year (Jucker et al. 2003: 1754)

The approach presented here has a lot in common with Caffi's view (2007) because of the holistic view of this kind of phenomena and because of the distinction between different kinds of vagueness (*mitigation* in Caffi's terms). Intentional vagueness, however,

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[4] As pointed out by Masini, Norde and Van Goethem (2023) in the introductory section, many terms have been used to cover these kinds of phenomena. One of the most popular is vague language (Channel 2004; Cutting ed. 2007), which I find misleading because it leads one to believe that the terms or constructions used in these cases are vague per se, whereas on the contrary many VEs become such only in the specific context.

differs from mitigation in that it concerns both the expression of content and of form, manifested for example through hypoarticulation (Linbloom 1990), which I will not discuss here. Moreover, the use of the term mitigation seems to inevitably imply downgrading of some kind which is not always present in VEs.

The three types of intentional vagueness can combine and overlap in several contexts and a VE can convey different types of vagueness: for instance, *diciamo* in Italian or *sagen wir mal* in German ('let's say') can be used to convey all three kinds of vagueness (Caffi 2007; Mihatsch 2010; Voghera & Collu 2017).

It is not possible to reduce intentional vagueness to a limited set of linguistic-cognitive operations, but from the studies carried out in recent years (Channel 1994; Jucker et al. 2003; Mihatsch 2010, 2016, 2020; Overstreet 1999, 2011), three operations, with large areas of overlapping, seem to be highly recurrent: generalisation, approximation, attenuation.

(14)	A*: Cosa vuoi che ti porto stasera?* B*: Gin, robe del genere…*	Generalisation
	A: What shall I bring tonight? B: Gin, stuff like that…	
(15)	A: *Quante persone c'erano?* B: *Tre quattro*	Approximation
	A: How many people were there? B: Three four	
(16)	A: *A che ora vengo a cena?* B: *Mah, otto? nove?*	Attenuation
	A: What time shall I come for dinner? B: Well, eight? nine?	

All B utterances in the preceding dialogues have a low discriminating power due to the use of the implicit analogy expressed by the general extender *robe del genere* 'stuff like that' in (14), the unresolved alternative expressed by the construction with the number pair *tre quattro* 'three four' in (15) (Voghera 2019) and by the answer given in interrogative form in (16), which is a courtesy attenuative strategy because the speaker, instead of giving a straight answer, apparently leaves the decision on the time of dinner to the recipient.

Most VEs are polyfunctional. As noted in studies based on Italian, English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and German corpora, from a diachronic point of view, there is a path

of development, according to which expressions that originally express informational vagueness can evolve towards the expression of relational vagueness and subsequently towards the expression of discursive vagueness (Jucker et al. 2003; Mihatsch 2020; Ghezzi 2013; Voghera 2014, 2022; Voghera & Borges 2017; Voghera & Collu 2017). In other words, the expression of relational and discursive vagueness is expressed by refunctionalising constructions originally used to vehiculate information vagueness. Thus, the well documented diachronic path from the expression of propositional meanings to pragmatic-discursive meanings, works for the VEs as well (Traugott 1995, 1982, 2003; Davidse, Vandelanotte & Cuyckens (eds.) 2010; Diewald 2011; Ghezzi & Molinelli (eds.) 2014). The CxsTN$_{[TEMP]}$ seem to follow the same path, although a diachronic investigation is required to confirm it.

3.1 The approximative constructions: CxsTN$_{[APPROX]}$ and CxsTN$_{[QUANT]}$

All three TNs can be part of two different but strictly related approximative constructions, which admit the diminutive form in most cases.

CxsTN$_{[APPROX]}$ function as temporal approximators, in which the temporal meaning is completely indeterminate both from a semantic and an aspectual point of view, and their meaning can be paraphrased as '(small) indeterminate portion of time'. *Momento* and *attimo* occur only in the singular form with the indefinite article (*un attimo*, *un momento*), while *minuto* can occur in the plural form accompanied by small numerals which are used with an undetermined value, such as one, two, five (Voghera 2019). It is very frequent that they occur followed by PP specifiers, as in (18) and (20).[5]

(17)   *ecco io la blocco un attimo/momento/minuto perché mi dicono che c'è la pubblicità* (VoLIP)

    'here I'm stopping you for an instant/moment/minute/because they tell me there is advertising'

(18)   *calmo e fermo, solo un po' arrossato, mai un momento/attimo/minuto* [*di smarrimento o esitazione*]$_{PP}$ (VoLIP)

    'calm and steady, just a little flushed, never a moment's/instant's/minute's disorientation or hesitation'

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[5] In all examples I put firstly the TN found in the corpus followed by the two other TNs marked by their degree of acceptability.

In these examples the CxsTN can reasonably mean '(small) indeterminate portion of time', but through a metonymic interpretation also '(small) indeterminate amount/a bit'. This second interpretation becomes the most probable if we change the semantic frame in which the construction is needed:

(19)   *vieni Nino mettiti un attimo/momento/minuto serio* (VoLIP)

'come Nino be a little bit serious' (lit. stay an instant/moment/minute serious)

(20)   *scusa c'è stato un momento/attimo/?minuto* [*di di di intrecci di fili del telefono*]$_{PP}$ (VoLIP)

'sorry there was a bit of intertwining of telephone wires (lit. sorry there was a moment/instant/minute of intertwining of telephone wires)

(21)   *quindi mi andrebbe di fare qualcosa un attimo/ *momento/ *minuto di attivo* (KI-Parla)

'so I'd like to do something a bit active (lit. something an instant of activity)'

Examples (19)–(21) show uses of different TNs, which go from temporal to quantity approximation. If we use *un minuto*, the temporal meaning always remains active and its insertion both in (19) and (20) would lead to interpret the construction as temporal approximation; where temporal interpretation is excluded, as in (21), the construction with *un minuto* is completely unacceptable.[6] The constructions with *un momento* are ambiguous because they can be both interpreted as meaning temporal approximation in (19) and quantitative approximation in (20). However, in (21), where TNcxs can only mean quantitative approximation, *un momento* is unacceptable. *Un attimo* is acceptable in all examples with a still possible temporal interpretation in (19) and a clear quantitative interpretation in (20)–(21). This means that *un minuto* has not shifted from temporal to quantitative approximation, *un momento* can only be used in contexts where both temporal and quantitative approximation are possible, while in the sentences with *un attimo* the distinction between the two kinds of approximation is blurred.

These constructions of quantificational approximation (CxsTN$_{[APPROX]}$) triggered a path similar to the one already studied for other complex and degree modifiers originating from the NP of NP, on which there is an abundant bibliography (Traugott 2008; Masini 2012,

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[6] As native speaker I could accept *minuto*.DIM also as quantitative approximator in some case, but no such example is present in the consulted corpora.

2016; Mihatsch 2010, 2016; Giacalone Ramat 2015; Voghera 2013). Italian examples are: *un sacco di* ('a sack of'), *una marea di* ('a tide of') and several others, which nowadays mean 'a lot'. In these kinds of constructions formed by NP of NP the meaning of the head of the first NP is bleached and loses all the categorial features of a noun. The path of reanalysis that thus allows the transition of the initial NP to quantifier is illustrated in Figure 2.

NP of NP	CxsTN$_{[QUANT]}$	Examples
[*un attimo/momento*] NP *di* [NP]	[[*un attimo/momento di*]$_{QUANT}$]NP	*un attimo/momento di intrecci di fili*
'an instant/moment of [NP]'	'a little bit, a bit of NP'	'a bit of intertwining of telephone wires '
	[[*un attimo/momento*]$_{QUANT}$A]A	*un attimo/momento serio*
	'a little bit A'	'a little bit serious'

Fig. 2: Process of re-analysis of the sequence NP of NP

The diminutive is always acceptable in both Cxs$_{[APPROX]}$ and Cxs$_{[QUANT]}$ and its use affects neither their propositional meaning nor their function, but rather the diaphasic level because the diminutive brings a trait of greater informality, as already pointed out by Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994). In fact, in the corpora consulted, diminutives are mainly present in exchanges between people who are in a relationship of familiarity or when the speaker wants to show informality. As Caffi (2007: 100) says, diminutives are in fact accelerators of intimacy that stress "the in-group membership" (Blum-Kulka, 1992: 267):

(22)   *Capisco che tu sia molto impegnata, e questo è anche giusto, ma ogni tanto trova un momentino* (ItTenTen20)

'I understand that you are very busy, and that is fair enough, but every now and then find a moment.DIM'

(23)   *Ciao, ciao, care signore, sono emerso un attimino, per dar acqua ai miei fiori invasati* [...] (ItTenTen20)

'Hello, hello, dear ladies, I have emerged a little (lit. 'an instant.DIM'), to water my potted flowers [...]'

As we can see, in (22) and (23) we have respectively a Cxs$_{[APPROX]}$ and Cxs$_{[QUANT]}$ in which the diminutive forms perfectly fit the informal register used by the speakers.

3.2 From quantitative constructions to interactional functions: CxsTN[HEDGE] and CxsTN[ALERT]

In this Section we deal with CxsTN which behave as discourse markers and have procedural meaning, which consists in giving instructions to the recipient about the structure of the text or about how to interpret it.

The first kind of construction functions as a hedge, as we can see from the comparison between an utterance with and without the TN.

(24)   a.   *allora lo guardiamo scusate lo ascoltiamo un momento/attimo/minuto okay no pe ho fatto bene perché è troppo importante lo ascoltiamo un momento guardando la parte va bene ascoltiamo solo il tema è una ballad* (VoLIP)

'so we'll watch it sorry we listen to it for a moment ok no I did well because it's too important we listen to it for a moment looking at the part all right we just listen to the theme it's a ballad'

b.   *allora lo guardiamo scusate lo ascoltiamo Ø okay no pe ho fatto bene perchè è troppo importante lo ascoltiamo Ø guardando la parte va bene ascoltiamo solo il tema è una ballad*

'so we'll watch it sorry we'll listen to it Ø ok no I did well because it's too important we'll listen to it Ø looking at the part all right we'll just listen to the theme it's a ballad'

The example is taken from a lecture during which a professor says to his students that they are going to listen to a ballad and quite clearly, he is not proposing to listen to it for just a moment. In fact, he says in the previous utterance: *ho fatto bene perché è troppo importante* ('I did well because it is too important'). The CxsTN[HEDGE] rather signals to the addressees how the quality of the event is to be interpreted: the original meaning of brevity becomes a metaphor for reduction of effort, levity. In other words, the professor could say "we're going to listen to it without analysing it in depth". This is a case where Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi's (1994) label of [fictive] [non-serious] in its [non-important] component is appropriate. In other words, these constructions delimit the boundaries of the interpretative space of predication and function as hedges (Lakoff 1972). Moreover, the reduction of the scope of predication has consequences on the pragmatic-discursive level, which manifests itself in the attenuation of the force of the illocutionary act (Caffi 2007; Overstreet 2011). The speaker, in fact, reduces his commitment with respect to the truth of the locutionary act from which a manifestation of clear relational vagueness results, also towards his/her addressee.

These constructions can occur with the TNs' diminutive forms, without changing their basic function; and in these cases, the diminutives introduce a meaning of effort's reduction, levity, or proximity between the interlocutors, according to the meaning of predication, as we can see in the following examples:

(25)   *in tarda mattinata e tutto il pomeriggio se mi puoi fare un colpo di telefono così ne parliamo un attimino/momentino/minutino* (VoLIP)

'late morning and all afternoon if you can give me a call so we can talk about it for an instant.DIM/a moment.DIM /a minute.DIM'

(26)   *va avanti un pezzettino dove trova via Larga gira un attimino/momentino/?minutino a destra poi sulla sinistra in via Pantani* (VoLIP)

'go ahead a little bit where you find via Larga turn right an instant.DIM/a moment.DIM /?a minute.DIM then left into via Pantani'

In (25) *ne parliamo un attimino* ('we can talk about it for an instant.DIM') indicates an informal way of talking without a particular commitment by the speakers; in (26) *gira un attimino a destra* ('turn right an istant.DIM') cannot have the same meaning of (25), but indicates a sort of effort's reduction.

Another interactional use of CxsTNs has the function of alerting the interlocutor to what will follow verbally or factually (Bazzanella 1995, Sansò 2020).[7]

(27)   *no no no// un attimo/momento/minuto// voglio vedere chi è* (VoLIP)
'no no no no an instant/moment/minute I want to see who it is'

(28)   *//un attimo/momento/minuto// prego* (VoLIP)
'one moment please'

(29)   *//ah un momento/attimo/minuto// qui la Germania deve essere ancora divisa* (talking about a geographical map) (VoLIP)
'ah one moment/instant/minute here Germany still has to be divided'

(30)   *//aspetta un attimo/momento/minuto// scusa c'è qualcosa che non torna aspetta fermo lì ah fermo ci sei* (VoLIP)

'wait an instant/moment/minute sorry there is something wrong wait there stop there ah stop you are there'

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[7] The double slash indicates the boundary of a tone unit.

In examples (27)–(30) the CxsTNs clearly have the function of warning, alerting the addressee and soliciting his/her attention. For this reason, these usages are often combined with imperatives: *aspetta* ('wait'), *scusa* ('excuse'), *ascolta* ('listen') which are semantically and discursively equivalent, even though the verb *aspettare* ('wait') covers 50% of all occurrences of this construction in the VoLIP.[8] These constructions, which I label CxsTN[ALERT], are most of the time coextensive with a tone unit, i.e. they are prosodically separate from what precedes and follows.

These constructions are mainly found at the beginning of turns because they have the function of signalling the opening of new discursive developments and thus assume a cataphoric position that introduces textually new elements. This would also seem to confirm that elements expressing subjectivity tend to be in the left periphery of utterances (Traugott 2012: 60). Often these constructions can be used to indicate a change of topic or to introduce a counterargument (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) with which the speaker wants to signal that the reasoning done up to that point must be changed or has a flaw, e.g. (29)–(30).

CxsTN[ALERT] with diminutives would be entirely acceptable to my native speaker intuition, yet they are not found in the consulted corpora. A tentative explanation for this absence can be derived from the fact that, if the diminutive is an intimacy accelerator or, in any case, signals a desire to get closer to the addressee, it is not suitable for a situation in which a speaker wants to counter-argue or warn his/her addressee about something. In this case the speaker does not feel appropriate to stress the in-group membership.

3.3 Textual uses: CxsTN[FOC]

From a textual point of view, the introduction of a counterargument or the warning that something is going to happen are equivalent to the introduction of a new topic. And indeed, I found cases where CxsTNs seem to have exactly this function. Let's look at this dialogue taken from an oral examination at the university:

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[8] For the purposes of the present reasoning, it is sufficient to exemplify the construction using always the second person singular of the imperative, but in the corpora, there are also occurrences of the first and second plural and forms with clitic pronouns: *scusami* ('excuse me'.IMP.2PER.SING.CLIT.ACC), scusatemi ('excuse me'.IMP.2PERS.PLU.CLIT.ACC).

(31)   P(rofessor): *bene allora qual è il tema che ti è interessato di più nel secondo modulo*
         P: 'well then what is the topic that interested you most in the second module'

         S(tudent): *allora mh che mi ha che mi è particolarmente piaciuto mh la valutazione e il testing*
         S: 'well mh that I particularly liked mh the evaluation and testing'

         P: *mh mh*

         S: *e mh il discorso riguardante eh mh il laboratorio linguistico il passaggio da eh alt er er e il dalia*
         S: 'and mh the discussion regarding eh mh the language lab the passage from eh alt er er and the dalia'

         P: *ah il mio articulo quello ah d'accordo*
         P: 'ah my article that ah ok'

         S: *sì sì*
         S: 'yes yes'

         P: *va bene senti parliamo un attimo di valutazione*
         P: 'all right listen let's talk *un attimo* about evaluation'

(KIParla)

In the last turn the professor firstly uses the discourse marker *va bene* ('all right') to both acknowledge and close the student's speech and then makes a request that interrupts the student and introduces a new topic *senti parliamo un attimo di valutazione* ('listen let's talk *un attimo* about evaluation') putting it in focus. The focus is a resource available to the speaker which activates the attention of the recipient (Ghesquière 2017), because it represents the point of maximum information or newness or salience and, as such, can only be considered, following Givón (1989), as the extreme of an information continuum whose opposite extreme is the topic. However, there is not a universally accepted definition of focus. Furthermore, Matić and Wedgwood (2013) reveal that the various constructions to which the function of focusers have been attributed show very different meanings and discursive effects (Sturt et al. 2004; König 2007; Ghesquière 2017). However, in Miller's words (2006: 122):

> every concept of focus has to do with giving prominence to constituents and the information they carry, albeit for different reasons – the introduction of new entities or new propositions, the contrast of one entity with another, "exhaustive listing" (one particular entity and no other), or noncontrastive prominence.

Apparently, the final turn in (31) is very similar to examples with CxsTN[HEDGE] (ex. (25)–(27)), yet if we look at the position of the constructions, we can see some differences. CxsTN[HEDGE] are usually at the end of the utterance, which in the examples of the corpora coincide with the end of the predication, taking scope over the whole utterance and thus affecting its illocution. In contrast, in (32) the construction occurs between the verb (*parliamo* 'let's talk') and its argument (PP *di valutazione* 'about evaluation'), putting it in foreground. The difference can be seen if we compare the same utterance with the construction in two different positions:

(32) a. *parliamo un attimo* CxsTN[FOC] *di valutazione*

      b *parliamo di valutazione un attimo* CxsTN[HEDGE]

The different position of *un attimo* produces in (32a) a focus on *di valutazione*, while in (32b) it indicates a more informal way of talking, as in example (24).

Potentially also *momento* ('moment') and *minuto* ('minute') could occur in the same position of *attimo* in (32a), but I did not find any such example in the corpora. In these constructions diminutives are also allowed and frequent, but here their use seems to have a double function:

(33)   *vi volevo aggiornare un attimino* CxsTN[FOC] *su questo disegno di legge che è in discussione* (VoLIP)

           'I wanted to update you an instant.DIM on this draft law that is being discussed'

In (33) *un attimino* has a twofold function: on a textual level, it focuses the element that follows it (*questo disegno di legge* 'this draft law'), with the effect of drawing attention on it, but on pragmatic level it mitigates the force of the illocutionary act and thus allows the speaker to present what she is proposing as something not overtly demanding. Although paraphrases are always misleading in explaining pragmatic and textual meanings, a try could be 'let's focus on this draft law, but quickly and without too much pedantry'. In other words, while asking those present to focus on the draft law, the speaker is also conveying a low degree of commitment on her part and thus a certain informality.

These two functions expressed by *attimino* produce a clash typical of the rhetorical figure of the antiphrasis which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "a figure of speech by which words are used in a sense opposite to their proper meaning". Antiphrases

are considered to be the juxtaposition of words whose meaning is opposite such as: *What a lucky day!* to mean the exact opposite. In defining antiphrasis, Mortara Garavelli (1988) quotes Mizzau (1984), according to whom antiphrasis is "la forma più aggressiva ed esplicita dell'ironia" ('the more aggressive and explicit form of irony') and is often used just to highlight a comment or a statement, as in the following example: [9]

(34) *assessore oggi a palazzo Valentini c'è aria un attimino tesa forse una crisi alle porte (VoLIP)*

'councillor today there is *un attimino* tense atmosphere at palazzo Valentini (offices of the regional governor of Lazio) perhaps a crisis is just around the corner'

On the one hand, in (34) *un attimino* focalises the constituent *aria tesa* that the speaker considers the sign of a possible political crisis, while, on the other hand, it attenuates the illocutionary force of the statement. This produces an ironic effect, which in actual fact does not mitigate the speaker's remark as a whole.

Other diminutive forms, such as *filino* ('a little', lit. string.DIM) or *tantino* ('a little bit', lit. much.DIM), *pochino* ('a little bit', lit. bit.DIM) can be used as quantitative approximators with an attenuative function and occur in similar contexts with an ironic effect:

(35) B: *senti ma io comunque non posso fare affari con te*
      B: 'listen but I can't do business with you anyway'

      A: *perchè?*
      A: 'why?'

      B: *perchè tu sei un tantino* [risata] *un tantino*
      B: 'because you are a little [laughter] a little'

      A: *un tantino?*
      A: 'a little?'

      B: *psicolabile*
      B: 'psycholabile'   (VoLIP)

In (35) the antiphrastic effect is, if possible, increased by the juxtaposition of the diminutive *un tantino*, which attenuates the illocutionary force of the utterance, and *psicolabile* ('a

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[9] The antiphrastic figure described here must be distinguished from the ironic meaning linked to some diminutive forms, such as maritino ('hubby'), very common in different languages: Merlini Barbaresi (2015), Gregová (2015).

little.DIM psycholabile'), which is a quite formal technical medical term to define an important pathology. The combination produces again a sort of semantic disorientation, similar to that one of irony.

These uses seem to outline a pattern characterized by the combination of an approximate quantifier in the diminutive form, *un attimino*, *un filino*, *un tantino, un pochino*, and an adjective, whose combination produces an antiphrastic effect. The greater the distance between the attenuation of the diminutive and the meaning of the adjective in that particular semantic frame, the better the effect.

The same antiphrastic effect can be produced by using prosody. In Section 1 we marked the sentence *Ti aspetto da sette minutini* ('I' have been waiting for you for seven minutes.DIM') as unacceptable. In this sentence a definite cardinal numeral *sette* ('seven') is combined with a noun indicating a temporal approximation *minutini* ('minutes.DIM'), producing a semantic clash that would make the sentence unacceptable as an assertion. However, it would become acceptable if the speaker emphasised the word *minutini* by increasing the pitch value and slightly the duration of the syllable carrying the pitch accent *-ti-* (Gili Fivela & Bazzanella 2014: 111). By exaggerating the modulation of fundamental frequency, the speaker can produce a deliberately antiphrastic effect between the numeral *sette* and *minutini*, that in turn produces an ironic utterance.

(36) a. *//ti aspetto da sette minuTIni//*   statement

  b *//ti aspetto da sette minu T I ni//*   ironic utterance

This pattern is in line with the fact that in Italian irony can be expressed by prosodic patterns alone or together with other linguistic strategies (Gili Fivela & Bazzanella 2014: 118). In (36) the ironic sense is conveyed by both the prosodic form and the marked use of the diminutive form in a context in which it would not normally be acceptable. In this way, the utterance is anything but a neutral assertion and it rather expresses a reproach or a complaint.

4. Conclusive remarks

Tab. 1 summarizes the analysis so far described, based on the consulted corpora.

Tab. 1: Description of the main features of CxsTN

CxsTN	TNs	Syntax	Functions of diminutive forms	Intentional vagueness
CxsTN[TEMP]	all	NP or PP adjuncts	-	-
CxsTN[APPROX]	all	NP adjuncts	brevity, informality	informational vagueness
CxsTN[QUANT]	?*minuto*	N, A, V modifiers	accelerator of intimacy	informational vagueness
CxsTN[HEDGE]	all	clausal modifier, DM	accelerator of intimacy	relational vagueness
CxsTN[ALERT]	all	clausal modifier, DM	-	-
CxsTN[FOC]	*attimo* only	DM, V/A modifier	antiphrastic effect	-

The analysis of the CxsTNs has confirmed some known facts and highlighted some less known ones. The three TNs can be part of temporal constructions in which they keep all their categorial and syntactic properties. However, they can also be part of constructions in which they lose the categorial property of nominal inflection and the sequence DET+TN (*un attimo*, *un momento*, *un minuto*) can no longer be interrupted by modifiers nor have post-nominal modifiers.

Although I have not carried out a diachronic study and the sequence in which I have presented the CxsNT does not necessarily reflect their temporal development, the synchronic variation I registered in their use presents some of the most common features of the outcomes of grammaticalisation processes (Hopper & Traugott 2002). The TNs can appear in constructions in which they do not have the original temporal meaning but rather a more general meaning of a '(small) indefinite amount', more properly grammatical values of quantifiers or pragmatic values of hedge and alerter.

Constructions with *un attimo* are the only ones that in the consulted corpora occur as focuser (CxsTN[FOC]). Those with *un momento* and *un minuto* may occur in both approximating and hedge constructions, although *un minuto* remains the most anchored to temporal meaning.

Some new CxTNs are expressions of intentional vagueness because they convey informational vagueness, affecting the propositional content of the utterance through temporal (CxsTN[APPROX]) or quantitative approximation (CxsTN[QUANT]) or relational vagueness, affecting the relation between the speaker and/or the illocutionary force of the utterance (CxsTN[HEDGE]).

While the original temporal constructions do not occur in diminutive forms, the departure from temporal meaning makes the use of diminutive forms possible and frequent. As proposed by Grandi (2017), diminutive forms express a deviation by defect from the default values of the base and as far as the TNs considered here are concerned, this results unavoidably in an indeterminate expression. In fact, it is not clear what to consider as the referent of *attimino* ('instant.DIM'), *momentino* ('moment.DIM'), which are not measurable units of time, but also of *minutino* ('minute.DIM'): half minute, a quarter of a minute? This explains why diminutives are admitted in CxsTN[APPROX], [QUANT], [HEDGE], which vehicle intentional vagueness and express by definition subjective meanings and attitudes.

In the consulted corpora, diminutives are not found in CxsTN[ALERT] which express neither informational nor relational vagueness, but on the contrary draw the attention of the interlocutor or introduce a counter argument. Probably the association between a sort of warning and a form that usually attenuates is pragmatically ineffective.

A separate and interesting discussion is needed for CxsTN[FOC] in which, as I said, only *un attimo* and *un attimino* occur. In these constructions there is a clash between the attenuative function of the diminutive and the focalising outcome. The result is an antiphrastic effect that is often used to produce strongly ironic comments.

It is difficult to attribute a constant and unique meaning to diminutives in all the CxsTN because the dimensions of deviation from the base are of different types and depend on the construction in which they occur (Delhay 1999: 83). However, something interesting can be deduced from the use in constructions that allow them as well as from constructions where diminutives are not possible. Diminutives are allowed in all constructions expressing intentional vagueness and their presence conveys a set of semantic values: attenuation, intimacy, informality, desire by the speaker to be closer to the addressee as a courtesy strategy or to make him/her more involved in the conversation. Their meaning, therefore, tends towards the pole of greater subjectivity rather than that of shared intersubjectivity and

precisely because of that it is strongly related to the specific context. In these cases, what Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994) call the fictiveness of diminutives is revealed "which implies reference to the component of the speaker's attitude in the speech event and which naturally inheres in and conforms to the fuzziness of subjective evaluations" (Merlini Barbaresi 2015: 36). If the set of these semantic values does not seem suitable to alert one's addressee, it seems instead very appropriate to create a strong contrast with a meaning that in a given context expresses the opposite of these values. Hence the antiphrasis or irony of certain combinations.

All these considerations suggest further research at both diachronic and synchronic level. A diachronic study is necessary to understand whether the different constructions developed in different periods of time and whether their different semantic and morphosyntactic aspects can be actually attributed to a grammaticalisation process. From a synchronic point of view, it would be useful to assess more in depth, on the one hand, the part played by the subjectivity, for instance eliciting judgements of a sample of speakers, considering also sociolinguistic variables and, on the other, by the context, analysing the semantics of the elements modified by the various constructions.

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