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What qualifies as an elliptical noun phrase in Italian. Opinions of grammarians, lexicographers and native speakers

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1. Introduction

Often there is some clash between what grammarians and lexicographers label as elliptical NPs. Both, however, seem to see more elliptical NPs than native speakers do.

Native speakers, generally, do not see grammatical ellipsis at all. If they notice some omission, it is in connection with topic-comment ellipsis, or gapping, i.e. with rather showy types of deletions. Unless they are forced to draw their attention on the form of utterances, they are happy with what Meyer-Hermann (1990) calls interactive completeness and do not think of syntactic completeness¹.

Meyer-Hermann deals mainly with face to face conversations, but we will see that his key concept, interpretability, is at play also during linguistic experiments not involving conversation. To imagine a consistent context for an elliptical (i.e. incomplete according to syntactically based notions of completeness) isolated utterance implies giving to the utterance a meaning. Our interviewed subjects prove Meyer-Hermann (1990, 339) to be right, when he writes: "Un énoncé interprété par l'interlocuteur est 'complet' par le fait

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- I thank Bice Mortara Garavelli, Davide Ricca and Manuel Barbera for their observations on preliminary versions of this paper. Kathy Metzger kindly revised my English.

¹ For a detailed discussion of syntactically based definitions of ellipsis, see the article by Meyer-Hermann (1990) and the bibliography referred to in it, above all the contributes in Meyer-Hermann, Rieser (1985) and in Fuchs (1983).

d'être interprété, quelle que soit sa structure syntaxique" (An utterance understood by the interlocutor is complete just because it is understood, independently of its syntactic structure).

Native speakers feel that something is missing

a- because the meaning of the utterance cannot be easily understood without adding something;²

b- because in the text the elliptical expression follows a parallel non-elliptical expression.

In the following pages I am going to deal with instances of a-, that is to say with supposed elliptical NPs in utterances which do not contain parallel 'complete' NPs and with their interpretations by native speakers.

I am not dealing with b- cases above, because both Italian grammarians and Italian native speakers agree on when such types of omissions occur.

For instance, a second occurrence of *maglione* (jumper) could be considered missing between *il* and *giallo* in the following utterance³.

(1) Piero mi ha regalato il maglione blu che piaceva a lui, ma io
Piero to me has given the jumper blue which liked to him, but I
avrei preferito il giallo.
would have preferred the yellow
Piero gave me the blue jumper he liked, but I would have preferred the yellow one.

Giorgi (1988, 312), from whom we borrowed the example above (it is her 255a) calls expressions such as *il giallo* above "a partial NP with elliptical head".

Nor did I ask native speakers opinions about NP without N but with Spec such as *quello/questo* or with article *uno* followed by adjective or PP, because as we will see in the following paragraph up-to-date opinions of grammarians in such cases are too refined to be grasped not only by naïve native speakers, but also to be agreed upon by traditional grammarians.

2. Elliptical noun phrases in Italian. Opinions of grammarians

² Not necessarily single words, more often pieces of informations expressed by whole clauses.

³ The examples will be first translated word by word respecting Italian word order, then a true translation into English is given.

One of the most interesting points in the recent debate about elliptical heads in Italian NP concerns the role of Spec in utterances such as the variant of (1) above with the demonstrative *quello* in the place of the definite article,

(1a) Piero mi ha regalato il maglione blu che piaceva a lui, ma io avrei preferito quello giallo.
 that yellow.

or in utterances where we find the so-called pronominal use of the article⁴

(2) Ho visto un'automobile bianca e una azzurra.
Have(1st sing) seen a car white and a blue.
I saw a white car and a blue one.

In such cases we have an elliptical nominal head: the specifier does not become a head itself; it does not substitute the noun as a true pro-noun. The N is present as an empty category which comes between the Spec and the adjective. The evidence for such an interpretation is in the block of elision (*l'*, *un'*, *quell'*) or of truncated forms (*un*, *quell*).

(2a) * Ho visto un'automobile bianca e un'azzurra⁵.

(3) Ho visto un fiore bianco e uno giallo.
Have(1st sing) seen a flower white and a yellow.
I saw a white flower and a yellow one.

(3a) * Ho visto un fiore bianco e un giallo.

(4) Prendi la sedia! - Quale? - *L'alta / La alta⁶.

⁴ While in Renzi (1988) this problem is dealt with in more than one chapter, the essential reference grammar by Salvi and Vanelli (1992) deals with it rather completely in one place, § 2.2.6 under the heading "Pronominal use of Specificators".

⁵ In spoken Italian (2a) is acceptable because there is assimilation of the ending *a* of *una* and of the beginning one in *azzurra*.

⁶ Renzi writes (1988, 423) that in such cases the demonstrative *quello* is to be used (instead of the masculine article *lo*) in front of an adjective beginning by vowel. The full form *lo* is wrong, but also the elision *l'* does not always work. For the feminine *la*, Renzi excludes the elision. Mortara Garavelli observes (oral communication) that the block of the elision is context-dependent. See for instance:

Take the chair - Which - The tall
Take that chair! - Which one? - The tall one.

These examples from different chapters in Renzi (1988) respectively from the chapter devoted to NP and from the chapter dealing with the article, show that the N is there though not visible and not lexically expressed. If it were expressed, it would appear exactly between the Spec (or article) and the adjective⁷: *una automobile azzurra, un fiore giallo, la sedia alta*.

Demonstratives which are the true heads of their NPs, which really take the place of a noun (as for instance *qualcuno, qualcosa, chiunque, ognuno* which can be only pronouns) do not allow an expressed N.

(5) Ho invitato molti amici, ma solo qualcuno (*amico) è venuto.
Have (1st sing) invited many friends, but only some friend is (3rd sing) come
I invited some friends, but only some of them came.

Schwarze (1988, 284 and 293) is another grammarian who remarks the block of *quel, quest'* (though not of *l', un*) in (pro)nominal uses, but he does not give an explanation⁸.

The block of elision (*l', un', quell'*) or of truncated forms (*un, quel*) in the forementioned cases is not dealt with by traditional grammars.

Dardano and Trifone (1997, 249) argue against those linguists who prefer to speak of *substantivised possessive adjectives* instead of *possessive pronouns* for *del tuo* in utterances such as

(5) Mio figlio è più studioso del tuo.
My son is more studious of the your

Ecco i due sedili: uno di legno e uno imbottito. - Quale vuoi? - L'imbottito.

Verrà la sorella giovane o l'anziana? (?la anziana) - L'anziana.

Corteggerà la sorella esperta o l'ingenua? - Io dico l'esperta. - No, io credo l'ingenua.

⁷ *Altro* and *ultimo*, which are prenominal adjectives, admit of course *quell'* and *un* since with them the N comes **after** the adjective when expressed.

⁸ In the introduction Schwarze (1988) says that he was constantly informed by Renzi about the progress of the *Grande grammatica italiana di consultazione*, whose first volume appeared in the same year 1988. Schwarze's grammar belongs to that type of grammars which cannot be considered "traditional" and which are intended for linguists or university students of languages and linguistics.

My son is more studious than yours.

In so doing they touch upon the problem of the head in a partial NP. Their true aim, however, is to claim that beside possessive adjectives we can have also possessive pronouns, because we can use them as anaphoric pronouns: *del tuo* is anaphoric of *mio figlio*, under conditions of sloppy identity. Their claim is true, *del tuo* is anaphoric, but an ellipsis is also anaphoric. To be anaphoric or cataphoric is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for pronominalisation.

Thus the problem is whether to take the possessive as the head of the (preposition+) article + possessive group, and therefore consider it a pronoun, or to think of the group as an elliptical NP.

Substantivised possessive adjectives seem to me to fit better different uses of possessive forms, such as those summarized by Bach and Schmitt Jensen (1990, 205)⁹ under § 130, a paragraph devoted to possessive pronouns in fixed expressions or by Cordin (1988, 615-616): *i miei* 'my family', *dire la sua* 'to express one's opinion', *pagare del suo* 'to pay with one's own money'

In any case, this is really a matter of a label and not of an explanation: even Salvi and Vanelli (1992, 82), after showing that there is a difference between ellipsis and pronominalisation in the block of elision or of truncated forms, at a certain point admit: "Apart from the structure of these phrases, we use the generic term pronoun to mean that such elements (i.e. possessive, demonstrative) are used without the N to whom they refer".

Bach and Schmitt Jensen (1990, 210-211) under §138 discuss the two utterances

a) Ti è più simpatico il direttore nuovo o **quello vecchio**?

Do you like the new director or the old one more?

b) Ti è più simpatico il direttore nuovo o **quel vecchio**?

Do you like the new director or the old man more?

They use the contrast to explain that in (a) there is a contextual passage of *vecchio* from adjective to noun and that *quello* can be replaced by *il*, while in (b) there is a true substantivisation of *vecchio* meaning 'old man'. (We shall come back on this aspect of contextual vs. "permanent" substantivisation in §§ 3 and 4.).

⁹ Bach and Schmitt Jensen (1990) in my opinion is the most detailed Italian grammar appeared before the three volumes edited by Renzi, Salvi and Cardinaletti (1988-1995).

The remarks of the Danish grammarians add one more piece to the puzzle. This attention for contextual vs. permanent substantivisation is not totally absent from Italian grammars written by Italian grammarians, but non-native speakers pay more attention to it in their grammars and in dictionaries.

In traditional Italian grammars when an NP has a demonstrative and no expressed N such a demonstrative is considered a pronoun, and therefore, a head. If there is no N but a demonstrative and a possessive adjective are present, then the demonstrative is considered a suppletive form of the article and the possessive becomes the (head) pronoun. The indefinite article not followed by a noun as in (2) and (3) above, *una azzurra*, *uno giallo* is considered a pronoun and therefore a head. The only case in which traditional grammars and grammars inspired by generative syntax, such as Renzi (1988) and Salvi and Vanelli (1992), agree is when we have a definite article not followed by a noun as in (1). In such a case they all say it is an ellipsis of the (head) noun.

3. Lexicographic descriptions

Italian dictionaries follow the traditional grammar interpretations because the article in Italian lexicographic production is generally organised according to homonymic principles. When the entry belongs to more than one part of speech, we find first all the meanings of the adjective (possessive, demonstrative, indefinite, or interrogative), then all the meanings of the pronoun, then, if there are such expressions, permanent substantivisations.

When the entry is an adjective of a different type (not possessive, demonstrative, indefinite or interrogative) then possible parts of speech are usually adjective and noun, or better, permanently substantivised uses of the adjective.

Unless they are particularly frequent, the substantivised uses which correspond to 'the X man' or 'the X thing/aspect' (where X is an adjective, such as *young*, *old*, *rich*, *poor*, etc.) are not registered in dictionary articles. They are when these substantivised uses are polisemous: *il bello* 'the handsome man', 'the nice aspect', 'the idea of beauty'; *la bella* 'the beautiful woman', 'the decider'.

A non-native speaker of Italian would need not only the recording of the existence of substantivised uses, but some more pieces of information about their morphological behaviour: can they have a plural, be modified by alterative suffixes, etc.? For the moment Italian monolingual (and of course bilingual) dictionaries do not cope with such needs, or do it in a non systematical way.

Permanent substantivised uses of adjectives (which are not possessive, demonstrative, indefinite or interrogative) are often dealt with in Italian monolingual dictionaries as elliptical expressions. Zingarelli 1999 is certainly the most ready to label substantivised uses of adjectives as *ellitt.*, i.e. elliptical)¹⁰. When the head noun remains and the adjective or the PP are dropped, dictionaries speak of *absolute* use, literally 'use of the word free (from its specifications)'¹¹. It is a process of omissions of details because the community knows such details and can do without. It is also a fact of antonomasia.

Here some examples with *ellitt.* (from Zingarelli 1999, unless differently specified).

ultimo agg. s. m.

(fam.) Ciò che chiude una successione, una classificazione, una serie e sim. (per ellissi di un s.): *l'ultimo (giorno) del mese, dell'anno; l'ultima (donna) della famiglia; questa è l'ultima (birichinata) che mi fai*

¹⁰ In the CD-ROM version of Zingarelli 1999 *ellitt.* can be found in 423 items, and the research of (*ellitt.* and part of speech: adjective) gives as a result 268. In the selected group a great part of *ellitt.* is due to the fact that the adjectival phrase *alla X* (where *x* is a feminine adjective) is considered elliptical of *maniera*, 'manner'. See, for instance, the entry **cinese**:

agg. Della Cina: arte, lingua, letteratura cinese | *Alla cinese*, (*ellitt.*) alla maniera dei cinesi | *Padiglione alla cinese*, chiosco

Another great part of *ellitt.* labels is due to the entries related to number which indicate distance in competitions. Remark that in such a case it is said that they are *i cinquemila* in the plural.

See, for instance the entry **cinquemila**: 3 (sport, *ellitt.*, al pl.) Nell'atletica, distanza di cinquemila metri piani su cui si sviluppa una gara di fondo | (est.) La gara stessa: *correre, vincere i cinquemila*

Another small group is that formed by entry which are ordinal numbers. In this case the missing word is *potenza* 'power'. See for instance at the entry **diciassettesimo**: *tre alla diciassettesima*, (*ellitt.*).

¹¹ Though sometimes we find *elliptical* where we should expect to find *absolute*:

verderame s.m. Verderame cristallizzato, (*ellitt.*) *verderame*, acetato neutro di rame, usato in tintoria e come anticrittogamico

cervicale agg. s.f.

· (fam., ellitt.) Artrosi cervicale.

coronaria s. f.

· (anat., ellitt.) Arteria coronaria.

cellulare agg. s. m.

1 (ellitt.) Furgone o vettura cellulare

bianco agg. s. f.

3 (edit., ellitt.) Cronaca bianca

proporzionale agg.

(polit.) Sistema, rappresentanza proporzionale, o (ellitt.) *il proporzionale*,

stabile agg. s.m

2 (ellitt.) Teatro stabile: *lo Stabile di Torino*.

straordinario agg. s.m.

1 (ellitt.) Lavoro straordinario | Compenso per tale lavoro, maggiorato rispetto alla retribuzione ordinaria.

2 (f. -a) (ellitt.) Impiegato, professore, straordinario.

personale agg. s. f.

Esposizione delle opere di un singolo artista vivente.

siamese agg. s.m.

(ellitt.) Gatto siamese.

transiberiano agg.

Ferrovia transiberiana, o (ellitt.) *transiberiana*,

Devoto-Oli 1990

Che passa attraverso la Siberia; *ferrovia t.* (o *la Transiberiana* s.f.) **elementare** agg.

Scuola elementare (ellitt.) *le elementari*

Devoto-Oli 1990 *matematica e.; istruzione e.; scuola e.* (anche s.f.pl.: *ha fatto solo le e.*), quella destinata ai bambini dai sei agli undici anni **portatile** agg. Devoto-Oli 1990 s.m. o f.

macchina da scrivere, computer, radio, televisore p. (anche *un, una portatile* s.m. o f.).

And consider now some cases of ass. (assoluto, 'absolute')¹²

stazione

2 (ass.) Stazione ferroviaria:

sfera

2 (est.) Corpo, oggetto, strumento, a forma di sfera: *sfera di metallo* | *Sfera di cristallo*, usata dagli indovini per prevedere il futuro | *Sfera di cuoio*, (ass.) *sfera*, nel calcio, il pallone |

¹² For more details about the use and misuse of the label 'absolute' in dictionaries, see Marellò 1997a and 1997b.

spacciatore

s. m.; anche agg. (f. -trice)

· Chi (o Che) spaccia (spec. cose illecite): *spacciatore di moneta falsa* | (ass.) Chi spaccia droga: *arrestato uno spacciatore.*|

It should be said that such elliptical NPs with the peculiar meaning illustrated sometimes have problems in the plural: *le cervicali*, *?le bianche*, *?i proporzionali*.

It is very difficult to admit that *i proporzionali* has the meaning 'three types of proportional electoral system'. It is as if one understood word could go (*systems*), but not two (*types of system*). On the other hand both the 'types' and the 'quanta' plural seem acceptable for *le cervicali*¹³:

Il mio fisioterapista dice che in autunno le cervicali aumentano di numero.

My physiotherapist says that in autumn the cases of cervical osteoarthritis increase.

Il mio fisioterapista dice che ultimamente le cervicali sono più conosciute.

My physiotherapist says that recently we know different types of osteoarthritis better.

There are not any problems in interpreting *i portatili*, *i cellulari*, *gli straordinari*, *gli stabili*, *le personali* as two or more "x". On the other hand, it is important to stress that *le elementari* is pluralia tantum¹⁴.

These last remarks lead to the conclusion that we can predict that elliptical NPs which contain permanent substantivised uses of adjectives derived from dropping countable head nouns have a normal plural. Permanent substantivised uses of adjectives derived from dropping uncountable, or head nouns which are not easily countable, should be treated in a more detailed way by dictionaries, above all by dictionaries which want to help non-native speakers.

¹³ Obviously beside the substantivised use for *le (vertebre) cervicali*.

¹⁴ As we can see from the above reproduced articles, Devoto-Oli says **s.f.pl** and Zingarelli 1999 conveys the message through the article *le*, but both do not say that *la elementare* in the singular is much less used as a permanent substantivised use. *?All'elementare facevo molti errori di ortografia*. The singular is more acceptable as a contextual substantivised use *?Mio fratello frequenta la scuola media e la mia sorellina l'elementare*, but also in such cases the plural is preferred *Mio fratello frequenta la scuola media e la mia sorellina le elementari*.

We also face morphological problems tied to elliptical NPs made up of N+PP, or by N+N, where the second N is used as an adjective. In such cases frequently it is not the head which is left, but rather the second one (the adjectival N or the N inside the PP).

See for instance

medaglia d'oro, oro (literally medal of gold, gold)

Facoltà di Lettere, Lettere, (literally Faculty of Humanities, Humanities).

aereo da caccia, caccia (literally: plane for fighting, fighting 'fighter')

ragazza squillo, squillo (literally girl call, call 'call girl')

cerniera lampo, lampo (literally zipper flash, flash 'zip')

In the above cases it is clear that the second noun has inherited either the number (*Lettere*) or countability (*oro*) or the gender (*caccia, squillo, lampo*) of the dropped head.

Lettere era la mia facoltà fino a un anno fa
Humanities (plural) was (3rd sing.) my faculty till last year.

Tomba ha vinto tre ori e due argenti alle Olimpiadi.

Tomba won three gold (plural) and two silver (plural) at the Olympic Games
Tomba won three gold and two silver medals at the Olympic Games.

Il caccia, la squillo, la lampo are NPs whose Ns have the gender of the dropped heads, but maintain the invariability they had in the non-elliptical NPs, as Ns used as adjectives. They do not accept the morpheme of plural: *i caccia, le squillo, le lampo*. Here again should we say that the N is present as an empty category not lexically expressed? Are *caccia, squillo, lampo* heads or are the articles the heads?

We cannot expect that dictionaries take an explicit position¹⁵, but we can expect them to adopt a consistent way of dealing with permanently lexicalised partial NPs and to record morphological peculiarities of such partial NPs.

¹⁵ This is in principle the grammarians' job; actually since here we have not closed sets as for articles and possessive or demonstrative, grammarians think that it is the lexicologists' job and a matter of idiosyncratic use. This is partially true, because as I have tried to show there are some features (countability, difference in

Different dictionaries adopt different strategies. See for instance the mirror-like treatment of *Wassermann* in DISC 1997 and Zingarelli 1999 respectively.

Wassermann DISC 1997

Wassermann /'vaserman/ s.m. ted. (pl. *Wassermänner*); in it. sostantivo f. inv. (iniziale minusc.)

med. Esame sierologico del sangue per diagnosticare la sifilide

• Anche in funzione di aggettivo: *reazione w.*

Wassermann Zingarelli 1999

agg. e s. f. inv.

· (med.) Reazione Wassermann, (ellitt.) *Wassermann*, esame ecc.

It appears in any case that dictionaries are influenced by stereotypes and the frequency of the elliptical use and by the fact that the label *ellitt.*, is the minimum effort to explain such passages.

4. Opinions of native speakers

When a linguist has to elicit native speakers' opinions about metalinguistic topics, (s)he faces great problems. It is important not to suggest, though unwillingly, the answer.

If you ask someone "Do you think that something is missing in this utterance?" you alert the interviewee, and his/her answer will not be spontaneous. After some unsuccessful attempts, I chose to ask "Renda più chiare le seguenti frasi, cambiandole IL MENO POSSIBILE" (Make the following utterances more understandable, changing them as little as possible)¹⁶. The second part of the task 'changing them as little as possible' was introduced with the aim of eliciting full NP in place of the partial ones and avoiding a total change in the syntax of the utterances.

1- Un bicchiere di minerale gasata!

A glass of mineral fizzy

gender between the head noun and the second noun) which predictably impair the morphological behaviour of elliptical NPs.

¹⁶ I left the original numbering in order to show that syntactically similar partial NPs were far from one another. Utterances (2), (8) etc. were given in order to inquire about supposed deletions in VP (cf. Marengo in print) and therefore they are not reported here..

A glass of sparkling mineral water!

3- Grave incidente sulla Torino-Savona.

Serious accident on the Torino-Savona

4- L'operaio ha rischiato di recidersi le dita della sinistra.

The worker has risked to cut the fingers of the left
The worker almost cut his left hand fingers.

5-Tracciare una retta lunga dieci centimetri.

Draw a straight long ten centimeters
Draw a straight line ten centimeters long.

6- Vuole le mille?

Wants (3rd sing.) the thousand
Would you like a thousand lira?

7- Carlo viaggia sempre in seconda.

Charles travels always in second
Charles always travels in second class.

11- Una mezza bionda!

A half blond
A half pint of beer please.

14- Tira col destro, ed è goal!

Kicks with the right, and it is goal
He kicks with the right, and it's a goal!

15- Elevare cinque alla quarta.

Raise five to the fourth

16- Frequento la prima.

Attend (1st sing) the first
I am in the first grade/I am in the first year

17- Lucia porta la terza.

Lucy wears the third
Lucy wears size three

20- Vorrei una bottiglia d'acqua gasata.

Should want (1st sing.) a bottle of water fizzy.
I would like a bottle of sparkling water.

I avoided asking opinions of ellipsis in parallel or topic-comment constructions as the ones in examples 1 to 5 above, § 2. The answers would be choral and predictable. I was more interested in discovering to what extent contextual or permanent substantivisations were felt as 'defective' by native speakers. Above all I was interested in giving no antecedent parallel 'complete' constructions and a very poor linguistic context, in order to see how the people tested reacted to the task¹⁷ and what they thought had to be added in order to reach better interpretability.

About 150 Italian university students of foreign languages were tested. The test also contained other utterances meant to see students' opinions about the opportunity of adding something to extranuclear adjectives or past participles in utterances such as

Stanca, Maria si sedette sul divano

Tired (adj. fem.sing.), Mary sat down on the sofa
Being tired, Mary sat down on the sofa.

Arrivato Gianni, la festa si animò.

Arrived (past participle, masc. sing.) John, the party livened up.
Once John had arrived, the party livened up

(4), (5) and (16) were left as they are by almost everyone, because they are rich in context and unambiguous. *La sinistra* as *the left hand* in *le dita della sinistra* in (4) is perfectly understandable through the meronym-holonym relationship finger-hand. The only *retta* that you can draw is the straight line

¹⁷ I am also aware that the task I gave, though less 'suggestive' than the others, was putting subjects in a 'test' situation in which a native speaker does not behave spontaneously.

and certainly not the one which means 'tuition'. *Potenza* 'power' in (15) was so evidently suggested by the verb *elevare* 'to raise', that no one felt the utterance defective. *Tracciare una retta* 'Draw a line', *elevare un numero a potenza* 'raise a number to a power' are restricted collocations.

(17) was not often integrated. When it was, only in some cases did students add the noun head *taglia*, *misura* 'size', and more often, the much more revealing PP *di reggiseno*, literally: 'of bra'.

Similarly (16) was integrated not with the noun head *classe* 'class', but with *elementare*, *media*, *superiore*, i. e. with adjectives conveying the degree of school attended.

(14) could be considered very similar to (4) because here the missing word is *piede* 'foot'. However students were more attracted by the fact that this utterance looks either like a title of soccer news or like a fan's prompt, and they engaged in making the relationship between the two clauses clearer, for instance changing *è* 'is' with *fa* 'makes' or *fai*, *fa*' (imperative 2nd sing) and/or giving an explicit subject to the verb *tira* 'kicks', when interpreted as a 3rd sing present indicative and not as an imperative.

(7) was integrated in order to disambiguate it: the great majority added *classe*, 'class', interpreting that Charles always travels by train in second class; a small number of students thought of *marcia* 'gear'.

In (3) a really restricted number of students felt *la Torino-Savona* as defective of *autostrada* 'motorway': most of the students integrated with a verb, for instance *è accaduto*, 'it occurred', *c'è stato*, 'there was', and the article *un* 'a'.

(1) contains a partial NP *minerale gasata* deriving from the full NP *acqua minerale gasata*, but the great majority of students added the verb *mi porti* 'bring me', *vorrei* 'I would like' and/or a polite *per favore* 'please', ignoring the missing *acqua* 'water'. (20), which had the verb and the noun *acqua*, was left as it is.

(6) is an utterance Italians usually say when the cashier has some difficulties in making change: for instance, you have to pay Lit. 6,000, you give a banknote of Lit. 10,000 and then (seeing that the cashier has not four banknotes of Lit. 1,000) you offer to help him with a banknote of Lit. 1,000 in order that he can give you one of Lit. 5,000. Actually the 'full' utterance *Vuole le mille lire?* was not suggested by as many students as could be expected. They were right, because the complete NP sounds unnatural to

native speakers that in such an interaction do say *Vuole le mille?* and also *Vuole un mille?* (understood *biglietto da* 'banknote of'). Therefore students either left the utterance as it was or changed it more, proposing *Vuole una banconota/ un biglietto da mille?*

Finally the most problematic utterance appeared (11) *Una mezza bionda*. I had given such an ambiguous expression on purpose in order to see what would happen. Here students had to imagine a context. Some decided that it meant a half-blond girl, some others half a cigarette of light tobacco, the majority interpreted it as a mug of draught light beer¹⁸. At this point an additional problem was constituted by the fact that *mezza* must precede the noun, while *media*, as a measure of quantity¹⁹, has to follow it. Anyway *una mezza birra bionda* would have completely satisfied syntactic requirements as a short form for *una mezza bottiglia di birra bionda*. Unfortunately such a reconstruction clashes against pragmatic constraints. In Italian bars and restaurants we do not sell beer in half-liter bottles as we do with mineral water or wine. As a result many did not add *birra* or anything else and asked for supplemental information.

5. Concluding remarks

This small experiment reinforced my previous opinion that native speakers feel that something is missing mainly when a verb is missing. If you do not prepare a sort of syntactical priming when a parallel full form is used in the same utterance (or in the topic-comment couplet), native speakers are content with semantic completeness. Even though we drop the syntactic heads such as *(su) la (autostrada) Torino-Savona, la quarta (potenza), la (mano) sinistra, il (piede) destro, la (acqua) minerale gasata*, they do not really notice that they are missing, because their syntactic role is redistributed over the remainder of

¹⁸ In Italy we sell draught beer in three different quantities called respectively *birra piccola, media* and *grande*. Ordering it we usually say *una birra chiara media/piccola/grande*. The adjective denoting quantity must follow the noun (and also the adjective denoting the type *chiara/scura/rossa*, when *birra* is expressed or the proper name of a brand). When the noun *birra* is not expressed, speakers are divided. Some would say *una media scura, una piccola chiara* and some *una chiara piccola, una media scura*.

¹⁹ As an adjective referred to quality it could precede the noun. *Una media birra bionda* means 'a light beer of average quality'.

the NP and their meaning can be supplied by the native speaker starting from the rest of the utterance and/or pragmatic knowledge.

If they add some noun it is because the context is ambiguous without it, not because it is syntactically defective. When in front of a puzzling NP, such as *una mezza bionda*, they are not satisfied with syntactic completeness, (represented for instance by *una mezza birra bionda*), because it is not fitting their frame of 'ordering beer', it does not make easier to interpret the NP.

Grammarians and lexicographers stick to a notion of syntactic head when they have to consider an utterance elliptical; they signal as elliptical any functionally exocentric constituent. Since Italian is dependent-marking any time they find a lone dependent they mark it as elliptical; they mark lone heads as absolute use. Native speakers on the contrary seek a complete and possibly unambiguous utterance meaning, indifferent to what Nichols (1993, 165) calls structural centrality and more attentive to functional centrality.

Nichols adds: " functional centrality is not part of the grammar of any of the languages. (...) Functional centrality is a convergence in the effects or outputs of rules none of which necessarily refer to heads or non-heads. It is the kind of construct that is appropriate to cross-linguistic work, but one which probably has no place in the formal description of individual languages"(1993, 183-184).

Italian is dependent-marking and has both head-removing and dependent-removing processes among its syntactic rules. As for elliptical NPs, we notice that contextual and permanent substantivization of dependent adjectives is more frequent than similar head-removing processes in NPs formed by N+N or N+PP. These too are increasing, however.²⁰

While agreeing with Nichols about the fact that such a trend has little impact on the formal description of languages, in our case Italian, I hope that in the future they will receive more attention in corpus linguistics and in text analysis: permanent substantivizations and other lexicalised partial NPs recorded in dictionaries are but the tip of the iceberg, and when recorded their morphological peculiarities are not fully described.

²⁰ One of the more recent I happened to hear is *ascolto* literally 'listening', made countable and used in place of *alto indice di ascolto* 'high rate of listening' (with both ellipsis of *indice di* and use of *ascolto* absolute, 'free' of *alto*) in an utterance like *La RAI non deve inseguire gli ascolti* 'RAI Italian Broadcasting Corporation must not pursue high ratings'.

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