Grammaticalization and prototype effects: A history of the agentive reflexive passive in Italian

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The grammaticalization path reflexive > middle > anticausative > passive (> impersonal) has long been recognized as a well-attested pattern in grammar evolution (Kemmer 1993, Cennamo 1993, Wehr 1995, Parry 1998, among many others). Yet, the history of individual constructions of reflexive origin in various Romance languages reveals a number of unexpected facts that call the directionality of this path into question. The article traces the history of Italian passive constructions in which a reflexive marker is used (the so-called *si*-constructions), and shows that the range of uses of *si*-constructions has contracted considerably from the first vernacular documents to present-day Italian. In particular, reflexive passives in which the agent is coded overtly were much more frequent in Old Italian than in later stages of the language, and have eventually disappeared in present-day Italian. While grammaticalization models are, strictly speaking, unable to account for this contraction (or, perhaps, are not concerned with it), the dynamics of the process are straightforwardly accounted for by diachronic models in which the notions of prototype and prototype effects play a role. The historical data discussed in the article reflect a process of polarization consisting in the functionalization of an (embryonic) formal and semantic contrast between the *si*-construction and another passive construction, the so-called periphrastic passive (formed with *essere*, ‘be’ + past participle). These two constructions are preferentially associated with two distinct constellations of semantic traits in present-day Italian, but not (or at least not so sharply) in Old Italian.

Keywords: grammaticalization, prototype theory, reflexive passive

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss a rather specific problem related to the grammaticalization of reflexive markers into passive markers. Based on a representative historical corpus of Italian, I discuss some facts which are not easily accounted for in terms of stages on the grammaticalization path reflexive > passive, and can be explained only in terms of a different model of the evolution of grammatical constructions, which has its roots in the notions of prototype and prototype effects.

The problem addressed in this article can be formulated as follows: the range of uses of passive constructions of reflexive origin appears to have narrowed noticeably in the history of Italian. Therefore, one might say that the reflexive passive\(^2\) in Old Italian\(^3\) was more grammaticalized than in present-day Italian, that is, it could be used in a wider range of discourse contexts, showing fewer syntactic and semantic restrictions than the corresponding construction of present-day Italian. As the developments by which the range of usage of the reflexive passive came to be restricted reveal, a process of polarization has taken place between this construction and another passive construction, the so-called periphrastic passive (formed with essere ‘be’ or venire ‘come’ + past participle). In present-day Italian these two constructions are preferentially associated with two distinct semantic configurations, but – as will be demonstrated below – this was not the case (or at least not so clearly) in Old Italian: while in present-day Italian the periphrastic passive usually gets a specific reading and the reflexive passive gets a generic interpretation, in Old Italian the area of overlap between the two constructions was larger, and reflexive passives/impersonals with specific reference were much more frequent than today.

The article is organized as follows: section 2 sketches the diachronic path of grammaticalization leading from the reflexive to the passive/impersonal via the anticausative. It also discusses common generalizations about the

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\(^2\) I will use the term reflexive passive, and occasionally also reflexive impersonal, in order to refer to passive and impersonal constructions stemming out from reflexive markers, but no theoretical relevance should be attached to these terms. This is a field in which terminologies dramatically differ, and thus other labels – such as indeterminate reflexive (Turley 1998), middle voice (Kemmer 1993), and middle construction (Abraham 1995: 7–10; Steinbach 2002) – would be appropriate as well. In the interlinear glosses si is always glossed refl.

\(^3\) The term Old Italian will be used to refer to the language of Tuscan documents of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Reflexive passives and impersonals in non-Tuscan vernaculars are not discussed in this article.
typical usage contexts of reflexive passives and impersonals, and highlights some problems connected to these generalizations. Section 3 shows that the Italian development can be understood as a case of retraction, a process by which a right-hand member of a grammaticalization chain becomes obsolete and eventually disappears. It also argues that retraction – which is not the opposite of grammaticalization – needs to be explained itself, and that prototypes and prototype effects may play a central role in such an explanation. The main facts about the history of the agentive reflexive passive in Italian are presented in section 3.1, where the history of parallel structures in a few other Romance languages is also briefly sketched. Finally, section 4 provides an overall interpretation of the development and discusses the usefulness of prototypes in diachronic linguistics.

2. From reflexive to passive

There is a common grammaticalization process whereby reflexive constructions, i.e. constructions involving some sort of co-referentiality between the subject and the (in)direct object of a verb, give rise to anticausative constructions and eventually to passive and impersonal constructions. This process is sketched, in a somewhat simplified manner, in (1): 4

4 There is a basic contrast between the reflexive and the middle (Kemmer 1993). Reflexives correspond to cases where the subject and the co-referential object can be differentiated in the event although they refer to the same entity in the real world. Middles, on the other hand, involve a lower degree of distinguishability among participants and consequently a lower degree of event elaboration: “grooming” situations (Kemmer 1993: 53) such as lavar-si, ‘to wash (oneself)’, pettinar-si, ‘to comb one’s hair’, etc., are typical cases of middle voice or middle constructions. Other middle-marked situations include translational (e.g. Spanish ir-se, ‘to go away’) and non-translational motion (e.g. Italian seder-si, ‘sit down’). Anticausatives represent cases in which the event occurs (or is construed as occurring) spontaneously. The passive and the anticausative differ in that, “even where the former has no agentive phrase, the existence of some person or thing bringing about the situation is implied, whereas the anticausative is consistent with the situation coming about spontaneously” (Comrie 1985: 326). The distinction between passive and impersonal has chiefly to do with syntactic properties: for the present purposes, I will label any construction as passive in which the patient takes on at least some subject properties (e.g. it controls agreement with the verb, as in example (4)). Constructions in which either there is no patient (e.g. when the verb is intransitive or the object can be deleted, It. si va, ‘one goes’, si mangia, ‘one eats’) or the patient retains object marking (e.g. It. si vede le stelle, ‘one sees the stars’, Sp. se fusiló a los hombres, ‘they shot the men/the men were shot’) will be labelled as impersonal.
Reflexive > middle > anticausative > passive > impersonal (Geniušienė 1987; Cennamo 1993: 34–35; Kemmer 1993: ch. 5; see also Michaelis 1998: 86; Haspelmath 2003: fig. 17).

The relevant stages of this process are exemplified below by examples from Italian: the true reflexive and the middle in (2a) and (2b), the anticausative in (3), the passive in (4), and the impersonal uses of the reflexive marker in (5) to (7):

(2) a. Mario si uccise.
   M. refl kill:pst.3sg
   ‘Mario killed himself.’

   b. Maria si è pettinata.
   M. refl is[aux] comb:ppt.f
   ‘Maria combed her hair.’

(3) La porta si aprì.
   art.def door refl open:pst.3sg
   ‘The door opened.’

(4) a. Qui si leggono molti libri.
   here refl read:prs.3pl many:pl book:pl
   ‘Many books are read here.’

   b. Si è evitata una tragedia.
   refl is[aux] avoid:ppt.f art.indef.f tragedy[f]
   ‘A tragedy(f) was avoided(f).’

(5) Si è evitato una tragedia. (Florentine)
   refl is[aux] avoid:ppt.m.sg art.indef.f tragedy[f]
   ‘A tragedy was avoided.’

(6) Si mangia.
   refl eat:prs.3sg
   ‘One/we/they eat(s).’

(7) Si parte.
   refl leave:prs.3sg
   ‘One/we/they leave(s).’

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5 In Modern Italian, reflexive passives and impersonals may sometimes acquire an interpretation in which the agent is identified as an unspecified set of people including the speaker (cf. Cinque 1988). An account of this peculiarity is beyond the scope of the present article (the reader is referred to Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2011: 212ff.).
This path represents “an instance of semantic bleaching” (Haspelmath 1990: 44). The step reflexive > anticausative involves the dropping of the restriction of reflexives to agentive/volitional arguments: if the only argument of the reflexive construction cannot be interpreted as agentive, the anticausative sense of spontaneous occurrence arises (e.g. Spanish el vidrio se quebró, ‘the glass shattered’). The step anticausative > passive involves the dropping of the restriction to spontaneously occurring processes, i.e. to processes in which no agent is implied.

Reflexive passives may further develop into reflexive impersonals. The passive > impersonal development typically involves two steps (Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2011): (i) the reflexive/passive marker gets reinterpreted as a marker of generic human agency in specific discourse contexts favouring such a reinterpretation (e.g. when the passive clause is in the atemporal present tense, or when there is a locative phrase favouring an interpretation of the agent as a spatially determined group of people; see Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2011: 197–199); (ii) the construction starts being used with intransitive verbs, while a new pattern emerges with transitive verbs in which the patient does not agree with the verb (Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2011: 199; see also Frajzyngier 1982: 275; Siewierska 1988: 266).

2.1. The reflexive passive: domains of use

The reflexive passive has attracted considerable attention in linguistic theory, and several generalizations have been formulated concerning its use and the differences between reflexive passives and passives of different origins, such as for instance periphrastic passives (i.e. constructions formed by means of an auxiliary verb – often ‘be’ or ‘become’ – and a passive participle). A common assumption is the one represented in (8), but no doubt similar statements are found in almost all studies concerned with the reflexive passive in various languages.

in Norwegian and Danish [. . .] there is an ordinary periphrastic passive construction that often contrasts with the m( iddle) m(arker) construction with regard to specific vs. generic events. In the periphrastic construction, e.g. Norwegian lysene blir lyset ‘the lights are lit’, the event referred to is a specific one. With the corresponding mm construction, on the other hand, lysene lyser ‘the lights are lit’, the implication is of a recurrent state of affairs, which can be made explicit with the addition of a habitual temporal modifier such as hver kveld ‘every evening’. Also, in languages with a passive
The most salient dimension of contrast between reflexive passives and other passive constructions is usually considered to be the genericity of the event. Genericity is taken to be a multifaceted notion comprising at least the following prototypical features:

(a) the construction expresses a gnomic proposition;
(b) there is a generic human agent which is not explicitly mentioned and can only be identified generically (people in general, people in a given location, etc.);
(c) the predicate has imperfective aspect and is atelic;
(d) the state of affairs depicted by the clause is irrealis (in the sense of Hopper & Thompson 1980), i.e. it does not correspond directly with a contingent real event.

In many European languages, periphrastic constructions are usually associated with specific states of affairs, whereas the reflexive passive is usually associated with recurrent/generic states of affairs, or is characterized by modal (deontic, potential) overtones, even in the absence of overt modal operators or verbs. These two configurations have been sometimes treated as prototypes. According to Turley (1998), for instance, the aforementioned features are clustered together in the prototypical instances of the Spanish reflexive passive, as in example (8), where the construction has deontic overtones (but habitual nuances are also possible), the state of affairs is irrealis, the agent is generic, etc.

(8) Spanish

\[ \text{No se camina a solas de noche en esa zona.} \]

\[ \text{neg refl walk:prs.3sg alone:f.pl at night in this area} \]

‘One[f] does not walk alone at night in this area/One[f] shouldn’t walk alone at night in this area.’

Although it is basically adequate and corroborated by a great amount of cross-linguistic data, this generalization is seriously challenged by the facts of Old Italian. In Old Italian there is indeed some correlation between generic situations and the reflexive passive, but no real contrast as in present-day Italian. In (9), for instance, the event depicted by the reflexive passive is specific, i.e. it takes place at a given point in time, and its agent is a specific group of people (la famiglia, ‘his family’). In (10) the periphrastic
passive (fu coronato) and the reflexive passive (corono-ssi) are used in the same passage to refer to the same specific event, namely the coronation of Frederick the First:

(9) La notte vegnente essendo egli coricato con una sua amanza, lieto e seco no ne-ll’ atto de-l pecato ne-l quale lungo tempo era vivuto, of-ART.DEF sin in-REL.M long time was[aux] live:PPT morendo perdé la vita, e quegli che lieto e dying lose:PST.3SG ART.DEF.F life and DEM REL happy and sano la sera era ito a·lletto, la healthy ART.DEF.F night was[aux] go:PPT to bed ART.DEF.F mattina si trovò da-lla famiglia morto. morning refl find:PST.3SG by-ART.DEF.F family dead ‘The night after, while lying on the bed with one of his lovers, happy and self-confident in committing that sin in which he had lived for a long time, he died and lost his life; and this is how this man, who had gone to sleep happy and healthy, was found dead by his family the morning after.’ (Passavanti, 12; 1355 ca)

(10) Federigo primo dexto Barbarossa imperò anni xxxvij, et Frederick first call:PPT B. rule:PST.3SG years 37 and corono-ssi ne-lla chiesa di Sam Pietro ad Roma . . . crown:PST.3SG-refl in-ART.DEF.F church of Saint Peter at Rome E’lli fu coronato da papa Adriano il di he was[aux] crown:PPT by pope Adrian ART.DEF day medesimo ch’elli giunse ad Roma. same REL he arrive:PST.3SG to Rome ‘Frederick the First, called Barbarossa, was emperor for 37 years, and was crowned in the church of St Peter in Rome . . . He was crowned by pope Adrian on the very same day he arrived in Rome.’ (Cronica Fiorentina, 102, 21, 1; early 13th c.)

Plenty of similar examples in which the reflexive passive has a specific interpretation can be found in the earliest stages of the Italian language. This will be discussed in section 3.1. Another piece of evidence of the different behaviour of reflexive passives in Old and present-day Italian with respect to specificity/genericity concerns the correlation between tense/aspect and reflexive passives. It is well-known that tense and aspect are correlated with the genericity of an event in that only some tense and
aspect types favour generalized interpretations of events: while the perfective aspect and the past tense entail a specification of the chief participants in the event, the imperfective aspect and the present tense are more compatible with generic readings. However, while reflexive passives and impersonals occur only rarely with past time reference or with the perfective aspect in present-day Italian, in Old Italian reflexive passives and impersonals seem to have combined freely with tenses/aspects suggesting factual/specific interpretations. In a random sample of Old Italian reflexive passives one instance of this construction out of four displays perfective aspect or is in the past tense (see Table 1).

2.2. Agentive reflexive passives

Temporal and aspectual properties are not the only difference between the reflexive passive in Old Italian and the corresponding construction in present-day Italian. The most obvious structural difference between the two constructions lies in the possibility of coding the agent overtly as a syntactic oblique. While the reflexive passive is said to be agentless in present-day Italian,6 Old Italian seems to allow overt agent coding with almost no restrictions (cf. §3.1, and Salvi 2010), and agentive reflexive passives are relatively frequent (see below). The possibility of coding the agent as a syntactic oblique is considered by some authors to be indicative of the “com-

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6 The agentless character of the reflexive passive in Modern Italian is not only pointed out by normative grammars, but also corroborated by corpus evidence. The overt expression of an agent is never attested in the large corpus of contemporary written Italian used in Sansò (2003). In fact, the latest attestations of the agentive reflexive passive appear to be from the beginning of the 20th century: Reichenkron (1933: 65) quotes an example from Pirandello (Sono tutte cose che si dicono dagli altri, “These all are things that are said by the others’); a few other examples are quoted by Wehr (1995: 215).
plete" grammaticalization of a given source marker into a passive marker. Michaelis (1998: 92) goes even one step further and speaks of “eine weitere Grammatikalisierung der $si$-Passivkonstruktionen”, in other words, he considers the emergence of agentive reflexive passives as marking a distinct stage on the grammaticalization path reflexive $>$ passive:

$\text{Die letzte Position auf der Skala [i.e., the grammaticalization path of reflexives, AS] wird von Passivkonstruktionen ausgefüllt, in denen der Agens nicht nur semantisch in der Ereignisstruktur vorhanden ist, sondern auch syntaktisch als Präpositionalphrase ausdrückbar ist. Hier sind also die Beschränkungen der vorangehenden Stufen aufgehoben, es können zudem neben generischen und unspezifizierten Agentes auch maximal individualisierte Agentes angeschlossen werden (Michaelis 1998: 88, my emphasis).}$

Whether or not agentive reflexive passives should be considered as marking a distinct stage on the grammaticalization path in (1) is mostly a representational issue, and will not be discussed any further here. What is relevant to the present discussion, however, is that the reflexive passive in Old Italian was a fully grammaticalized construction, directly competing with the periphrastic passive in many, if not all, contexts of usage. Corpus evidence confirms that even though the rate of agentive reflexive passives appears to be somewhat lower than the rate of agentive periphrastic passives, the difference is not statistically significant. This is shown in Table 2, where the rate of overt agent phrases is computed for a sample of 2000 randomly extracted passive clauses (1000 periphrastic and 1000 reflexive passives) in texts ranging from 1350 to 1450.

In present-day Italian, the use of reflexive passive and impersonal constructions appears to be severely constrained, and centred around a prototypical configuration of semantic and pragmatic features (cf. Sansò 2003, 2006): the agent, which is never overtly expressed, is generic, and repre-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reflexive passive</th>
<th>Periphrastic passive</th>
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<td>Overt coding of the agent</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
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$\chi^2 = 1.72$, df. = 1, $p$ between .20 and .10. Yate’s correction applied; the non-null hypothesis that there is a difference in the possibility of coding the agent overtly depending on the construction type must be rejected.
sents virtually all humanity (or an unspecified sub-group), the patient (if present) is characterized by low salience, and the state of affairs portrayed by the clause is irrealis/generic. The bulk of evidence discussed in this article will help clarify the dynamics and the history of this process of contraction and eventual loss of the agentive reflexive passive, and will shed light on the interaction between the grammaticalization process and a process of polarization which crucially involves the notions of prototype and prototype effects.

Another common assumption about agentive reflexive passives is that only non-prototypical agents can be overtly coded in this construction. In a discussion of Modern Spanish, for example, Österreicher (1992) defines prototypical agents as carrying the features <human>, <immediate cause>, <clear intention>, <clear control>, and <expectable>, and argues that in reflexive passives only such agents get overtly expressed which have markedly different properties on one or more of these dimensions:


Thus, agents that are overtly realized in reflexive passives are usually non-prototypical and include, for instance, unbounded masses (*por todos*), social groups and geographical communities (*por los esclavos, por los asturianos*), or institutions (*por el Ministerio de Hacienda*). Österreicher (1992: 251) gives the following Spanish examples:

(11) *Así se afirma por todos.*
    ‘This is asserted by everybody.’

(12) *Las pirámides se edificaron por los esclavos.*
    ‘The pyramids were built by the slaves.’

(13) *Romances que se cantan por los asturianos.*
    ‘Songs that are sung by the Asturians.’

(14) *Por el Ministerio de Hacienda se dictarán las órdenes oportunas.*
    ‘The appropriate instructions will be issued by the Ministry of Industry.’
Importantly, this generalization is only partly true for other languages or language stages. For instance, even though agents in Modern Spanish reflexive passives are certainly low on the scale of prototypical “agenthood”, textual data suggest that the situation was much less straightforward in Old Spanish (see section 3.1), as Österreicher (1992: 254) himself admits. – As far as the history of Italian is concerned, this article will demonstrate that the types of agents that can be overtly coded in reflexive passives have come to be more and more restricted over time. To the extent that contractions of this kind are also characteristic of other Romance languages, the history of the agentive reflexive passive in Italian may be interesting from a comparative Romance perspective as well.

3. The reflexive passive in Italian: a case of retraction

The history of the agentive reflexive passive in Italian can be described as an instance of what Haspelmath (2004: 33ff.) calls retraction. Retraction occurs when the right-hand member in a grammaticalization chain becomes obsolete. One such case is the development of the verb *wotte* in Pennsylvania German, which had grammaticalized into a modal auxiliary, but nowadays appears to be “making its way back from what was a highly

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7 This is perhaps partly due to normative pressure. García (1975: 16), for instance, views Spanish sentences such as *se alquilan pisos por los vecinos*, ‘flats are rented by the neighbours’, as “not characteristic of a careful style of speech”. It is however debatable whether these prescriptions actually caused the contraction of the agentive reflexive passive. It is perhaps more plausible that these statements mirror the “anomalous” status of agentive reflexive passives at a stage in which the polarization between reflexive passives and periphrastic passives was already advanced. More interestingly, in Italian no such prescriptions are found in normative grammars of the 19th and 20th centuries: instead, the possibility of realizing the agent syntactically is explicitly mentioned, and even suggested, in a period when the agentive reflexive passive was already bookish, obsolescent – or even obsolete (see e.g. Bertrand 1940: 135; Battaglia and Pernicone 1951: 312).

8 Before turning to the increasing restriction and eventual loss of the agentive reflexive passive, a clarification is necessary: the overt expression of agents is generally rare in passive constructions across languages, and even constructions that allow the overt expression of the agent, occur without the agent in the vast majority of cases (Shibatani 1988: 93). Therefore, process of change described in this article could be thought of as affecting a rather limited domain of passive usage. However, as will be clarified below, the eventual loss of the agentive reflexive passive is just one facet of a more general process of change by which the contexts of usage of the reflexive passive came to be significantly reduced throughout the history of Italian.
grammaticalized stage” (Burridge 1998: 28). Other cases in point are the indefinite use of the noun man, which was widespread in Old English, but has disappeared in the modern language (cf. Los 2002, 2005; the same holds true for parallel constructions in Italian and Spanish, cf. Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2007), and the development of the English verb dare from a lexical verb to an auxiliary and back (Haspelmath 2004: 34 and references therein). According to Haspelmath (2004), retraction is not to be considered as counterevidence to the hypothesis of unidirectional grammaticalization. Rather, it is a case of obsolescence of a linguistic structure, and does not fall, strictly speaking, within the scope of grammaticalization itself. Yet, cases of retraction are an intriguing issue on a broader historical linguistics agenda and the question of why retractions occur is not trivial.

As will be argued, the retraction of the agentive reflexive passive in Italian is just one facet of a more general process by which two passive constructions, the reflexive and the periphrastic one, have undergone a functional reorganization. That reorganization involved an increasing differentiation between the two constructions from both a syntactic and a semantic point of view. From the syntactic point of view, the reflexive construction has increasingly adopted impersonal features, while from a semantic point of view it has come to signal generic human agency. The periphrastic construction, on the other hand, has lost its impersonal features and has reinforced its resultative character, resulting in a fully promotional passive construction, used when the patient is a discourse-salient entity. The impersonal syntactic features acquired by the reflexive passive include its early extension to intransitive verbs (second half of the 13th century; Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2011: 200–202) and the development of optional agreement of the verb with patient NPs (end of 13th century; Giacalone Ramat & Sansò 2011: 203–206). The Old Italian periphrastic construction, on the other hand, was still possible with intransitive verbs, and in some cases (e.g. with patients low in topicality) there was no agreement between the verb and the patient NP; both possibilities are definitely ruled out in present-day Italian (Giacalone Ramat and Sansò 2011: 225).

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe in detail the whole process of functional reorganization which drove the parallel development of the reflexive and the periphrastic constructions. For such a detailed account see Giacalone Ramat and Sansò 2011. What matters for the present discussion is that the impossibility of coding agents as oblique generally tends to distinguish syntactic impersonals from passive constructions
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(Blevins 2003, Siewierska 2008, among many others). This should be taken into account when trying to understand the loss of the agentive reflexive passive.

In what follows, I first discuss the dynamics involved in the increasing restriction and eventual loss of the agentive reflexive passive over the centuries (Section 3.1). In Section 4, I propose to model this development in terms of a frequency-driven process, which created and reinforced two prototypical feature constellations, each associated with one of the two constructions in question. I argue that a model based on prototype and prototype effects can explain the dynamics of this instance of change in a more fine-grained way than a discrete grammaticalization path such as the one sketched in (1). It can also do better justice to the complexity of factors involved in the "ecology" of grammatical constructions, i.e. their behaviour within the system of coding options for a given functional domain that are available in a language at a given point in time.

3.1. The data

The retraction and eventual loss of the agentive was by no means an abrupt process. On the contrary, it appears to be a gradual development in which some types of agents ceased being attested before other types, which were more resistant to loss. In this section the dynamics of this process are inspected through the lens of a historical corpus of Italian including literary and non-literary prose texts ranging from the late 13th century to 1860. The list of the texts analyzed (and their editions) is given in the references. Somewhat arbitrarily, I subdivided the time-span into sub-periods corresponding to the main seasons of the Italian literature.9 For each period the

9 The first period considered (1250–1350) includes the earliest attestations of literary and non-literary Tuscan prose (notices of entries and expenses, translations and adaptations of French texts, moral and ascetic works, narratives, statutes of religious fraternities) up to Dante Alighieri's Convivio and Vita Nuova. Documents of the second period (the Golden Age of Florentine and Tuscan literature, ranging from 1350 to 1450) include a variety of genres: religious and moral works, private letters, narratives, as well as works by Giovanni Boccaccio (whose Decameron provided the model for the Italian prose of the 16th century and beyond) and by the earlier humanists (Leon Battista Alberti, Lorenzo the Magnificent, etc.). In the third period considered (1450–1600), purists like Pietro Bembo attempted to confer 14th and 15th century Florentine the status of a classical literary language. As a result, Italian prose in this period does not globally undergo radical changes, and remains quite stationary in form, although writers such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini introduced many popular features in their works, and their speech appears closer to
occurrences of the reflexive passive were counted, and the cases in which the agent was overtly coded were singled out. Finally, all instances in which the agent was specific and referential were counted. This distinction could clearly not be made in absolute categorical terms, since that would have meant breaking the continuum of referentiality (as described, for instance, by Givón 1984: 387ff.). Therefore, the following criteria were adopted: agents representing virtually all humanity (e.g. *da tutti*, ‘by all’; *dagli uomini, dai mortali*, ‘by all mankind’) or an undifferentiated subgroup thereof (e.g. *dagli antichi*, ‘by the ancients’, *dagli italiani*, ‘by the Italians’) were counted as generic agents, whereas specific individuals or specific and identifiable groups (e.g. *dalla famiglia*, ‘by his family’ in example (10)) were taken to represent instances of specific agents. The agents labelled by Myhill (1997: 807–808) as *organizational agents* (i.e. agent phrases referring to one or more members of an organization acting as a group, for which “it is typically impossible to figure out from the context whether more than one person was literally involved in the action”; see (15) and (16)) were also counted as generic agents.11

(15) Inprimieramente ordiniamo et fermiamo che, per Sancta Maria di agosto, si debbiano chiamare dalla Compagnia due capitani, li quali debbiano durare da ivi a Sancta Maria di febraio.

contemporary Florentine usage. The fourth period considered (1600–1800) was a period of literary experimentalism and innovation, in which a new standard prose progressively emerged and emancipated itself from Boccaccio’s authority and from purist prescriptivism: the variety of genres of 17th and 18th century prose, including political and philosophical writing, scientific treatises and essays, novels, travel literature and autobiography, is well-represented in the corpus. Finally, in the first half of the 19th century, a new literary standard based on contemporary educated Florentine gains ground, mainly forged by writers such as Alessandro Manzoni and Giacomo Leopardi, and paves the way for the present-day standard literary prose.

10 The absolute figures discussed in this section should be taken with a pinch of salt, because all the cases in which the agentive nature of the syntactic adjunct was uncertain (e.g. when the agent phrase contains a non-human referent: *per la guerra*, ‘by the war’ but also ‘because of the war’) were removed from the counts, in order to minimize arbitrariness. Dubious cases amount to less than 2% of all agentive reflexive passives.

11 Whenever there was uncertainty about the classification of a given agent, the example has been excluded from the statistical counts reported on in this section. The number of uncertain cases amounts to less than 1.5% of all agentive reflexive passives in the corpus.
‘In the first place we dispose and decree that **two Captains must be called by the Company** on St Mary’s day in August, and they should remain in charge until St Mary’s day in February.’ (S. Gilio, I, 1; c.1284)

(16) *qualunque huomo non si trovasse scritto in su* whichever man *neg* refl *find:cond.3sg write:ppt on*
i *quaderni de-la* Company, *o per erro* either by mistake
*o per altre cagioni, non vi si debbia scrivere*
or by other:*pl reasons neg there refl *should:3sg write:inf*
*né per camarlinghi né per altra persona sança parola* neither by chamberlains nor by other person *without word*
de’ *capitani che saranno allora.* of:*art.def.pl captains rel be:fut.3pl then
‘any man who does not appear in the records of the Company, be it because of a mistake or for other reasons, shouldn’t be registered there by the chamberlains nor by anyone else without the approval of the Captains in charge.’ (Carmine, §18; 1280–1298)

In the period ranging from the first vernacular documents to 1350, agentive reflexive passives are widely attested, and both generic and specific agents are syntactically coded. In the following examples, the agent is a specific person:

(17) *Anche fue ordinato la seççaia domenica di*
*giennaio, per Ghese e per Bonaguida capitani e per*
*li loro consiglieri, che si dovesse bandire la nostra*
*processione la primaia domenica di ciascheuno*
*mese per Angnello banditore.*
‘The last Sunday of January the Captains Ghese and Bonaguida and their councillors ordered that **our procession should be announced publicly by Agnello, the town-crier** , the first Sunday of each month.’ (Carmine, §26)
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They are reclaimed by the Great Khan, but they do not pay any tribute to him because they are so far away that the Great Khan’s people could not go there.’ (Milione, 162, 4; early 14th c.)

‘and he persecuted the Christians who followed a heresy that was initiated in Constantinople by a man called Arius.’ (Villani, Cronica, 2, 22, 3; after 1330)

In the first period, 271 agentive reflexive passives out of 1894 occurrences of the reflexive passive (14.31%) were found. In 55 cases (2.90% of all reflexive passives; 20.3% of agentive reflexive passives) the agents are specific.

In the next period, ranging from 1350 to 1450, the possibility of coding agents overtly is still available, but the rate of agentive reflexive passives strongly decreases. Example (21) shows that also specific agents may be syntactically coded in this period. To be sure, the rate of agentive reflexive passives with a specific agent within the overall population of reflexive passives is approximately the same as in the first period:

‘It was workday, there were a few people and [the place] was not guarded by anybody.’ (Grasso legnaiuolo 16; 15th c.)
(21) Né si poté tanto tener-lo secreto che non si sapessi per qualcuno e ancora per il parsh.priest Arlottò
‘And this fact could not be kept so secret as to pass unnoticed by anybody and in particular by Arlottò, the parish priest.’ (Piovano Arlottò 157, 7; early 15th c.)

One hundred and fifty-eight agentive reflexive passives out of 2,231 occurrences of the reflexive passive (7.08%) were found for the period between 1350 and 1450. In 62 cases (2.77% of all reflexive passives; 39.24% of agentive reflexive passives) the agents are specific.

The proportion of specific agents tends to decrease quite strongly in the subsequent period, ranging from 1450 to the dawn of the 17th century. One of the rare examples is given in (22). Agentive reflexive passives with generic agents are still a widely available possibility (cf. (23)), though not to the same extent as before:

(22) Per la qual cosa primieramente da quelli d’ Egitto infinite
for which thing firstly by dem.pl of Egypt unfinished
 cose si scrissero, infinite poscia da’ things refl write:pst.3pl unfinished afterward by.art.def Fenici, da gli Assirii, da’ Caldei e Phoenicians by art.def Assyrians by art.def Chaldeans and da altre nazioni sopra essi by other peoples besides them
‘Therefore plenty of things were first written about them by the Egyptians, and then by the Phoenicians, by the Assyrians, by the Chaldeans and by other peoples.’ (Bembo [Prose] 2, 1; 1525)

(23) molte altre cose di questa maniera si sarebbono potute
many other things of this sort refl would.be[aux] can:ppt tralasciar da-lui senza biasimo omit:inf by-him without blame
‘Many other things like that could have been omitted by him with no blame.’ (Bembo [Prose] 2, 5)
In the fourth period (1600–1800), specific agents are very rare (one case is given in (24)), but the possibility of encoding generic agents is still available (cf. (25)).

(24) *la monarchia di Persia si rovesciò da Alessandro*  
    ART.DEF monarchy of Persia refl overthrow: PST.3SG by Alexander  
    (Vico, 33; 1725)  
    ‘The Persian monarchy was overthrown by Alexander.’

(25) *Mi dimenticava di dire che per la festa della lunazione di febbraio si fanno per tutti alcune stiacciate*  
    refl.1SG forget:IPFV.1SG of say:INF comp by ART.DEF feast of ART.DEF lunation of February refl make:PRS.3PL by everybody some pies  
    ‘I was forgetting to say that by the lunation festival in February some pies are made by everybody.’ (Magalotti 112; 1697)

One hundred and four agentive reflexive passives out of 1,982 occurrences of the reflexive passive (5.24%) were found in this period. In only five cases (0.25% of all reflexive passives; 4.81% of agentive reflexive passives) the agents are specific. Finally, in Italian prose of the first half of the 19th century (which is the latest period considered in the present analysis), the eventual obsolescence of the agentive reflexive passive is strikingly evident: only a restricted set of generic agents is possible: *da tutti ‘by all’; da molti ‘by many’; dagli altri ‘by the others’; dagli uomini ‘by all mankind’; dagli antichi ‘by the ancients’; dai moderni ‘by today’s people’* (see example (26)). Only 19 agentive reflexive passives were found out of 1885 occurrences of the reflexive passive (1.01%); in none of them the agent is specific:

(26) *s’è dubitato da-gli antichi, e si dubita da-i moderni.*  
    refl is[aux] doubt:PRF by-ART.PL ancients and refl doubt:PRS.3SG by-ART.PL modern.pl  
    ‘it was doubted by the ancients, and it is doubted by today’s people.’  
    (Leopardi [Poesia]; 1818)

The diachronic development described in this section is charted in Figure 1. Agentive reflexive passives with specific agents clearly began to be lost earlier than agentive reflexive passives with generic agents, but the frequency of both structures tended to decrease progressively.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\) It is remarkable that in contemporary Italian it is possible to code the agent overtly in
In Figure 2 the main stages of the retraction of the agentive reflexive passive in Italian are viewed synoptically.

As indicated above, the history of the reflexive passive in Italian appears to have significant parallels in other Romance languages. The agentive reflexive passive seems to have been quite widespread in the earliest stages of many Romance languages, but it tended to be lost in the development of the single languages. In Piedmontese, for example, agentive reflexive passives, which are already attested in the earliest documents of the language, continue to appear until the eighteenth century, as in (27) (quoted from Parry 1998: 97).

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reflexive passives by means of a complex prepositional phrase introduced by da parte di ‘on the part of’. This structure is occasionally attested throughout the history of Italian, but the vast majority of examples comes from twentieth-century prose. Moreover, it appears to be limited to a small set of generic, non-referential agents (da parte di tutti, ‘by everybody’, etc.).
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(27) 
que o sea reputà e se pòssa apeler
de tuit treitor e rebel.
that he be:SBJV.3SG consider:PPT and REFL can:SBJV.3SG call:INF
by everyone traitor and rebel

‘that he be considered and called traitor and rebel by everyone. (18th-C. Piedmontese)’

In Spanish, the earliest occurrences of overt agent phrases in reflexive passives are as late as the fifteenth century (Monge 1955). Agentive reflexive passives with specific agents are attested from this time onwards (see examples (28) and (29)), but tend to disappear in Modern Spanish (both written and spoken), where most overtly expressed agents are generic (see (30)):13

(28) 
a la prudencia vuestra e de toda persona
discreta la determinación e la enmienda de quanto
por mí se dirá.
(I commit) to Your Prudence and to any judicious person the decision and the punishment concerning what I’m going to say [lit. what will be said by me]. (Juan Rodríguez del Padrón, Triunfo de las donas y cadira de onor, 15th century)

(29) Este discurso se ha hecho por el fraile que
primeramente descubrió aquellas tierras y gentes, y
dio noticia de ellas.
This speech has been made by the Friar who first discovered those lands and people and reported about them. (Jerónimo de Mendieta, Historia eclesiástica indiana, 1564)

(30) El uso de la Ley Antiterrorista causa que este juicio se vea por la comunidad internacional con mucha preocupación.

13 The Spanish examples have been retrieved from the online collection Corpus del Español created by Mark Davies (http://www.corpusdelespanol.org/).
'Because of the application of the law against terrorism to this trial, it is attended with much concern by the international community.'
(20th c., written)

The history of the Spanish agentive reflexive passive thus appears to be significantly different from the history of the corresponding construction in Italian: it arises later than its Italian counterpart and seems to be quite stable even today. Despite this difference, the situation in Modern Spanish reflects an analogous process of polarization, in that the agents that are overtly coded as obliques in the reflexive passive are mostly non-prototypical.

4. Grammaticalization, retraction and prototype effects

Clearly, a mono-dimensional model of grammatical change such as the grammaticalization path in (1) cannot explain why the set of contexts in which the reflexive passive was used in Old Italian has narrowed in the course of time. In this section I propose that such a case of retraction can be accounted for by resorting to the notions of prototype and prototype effects.

As already pointed out, the historical process sketched above can be described as one facet of a more general process of polarization of two constructions, the periphrastic passive and the reflexive passive, which belong to the same functional domain of agent defocusing (Myhill 1997; Sansò 2003, 2006). In present-day Italian each of the two constructions is prototypically associated with a different constellation of semantic properties characterizing the agent, the patient, and the event. Table 3 schematizes the associations between semantic properties and construction types in Modern Italian.

The constellations of semantic properties sketched in this table are conceptualized as situation types in the sense of Kemmer (1993: 7), i.e. as “sets

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14 *Polarization* must be interpreted here as a process whereby two alternative constructions end up being preferentially associated with the expression of two different situation types, as a result of the emergence and functionalization of a contrast between the two. As such, it is fundamentally different from Hopper and Traugott’s *specialization*, i.e. “the process of reducing the variety of formal choices available as the meanings assume greater grammatical generality” (Hopper & Traugott 2003: 116). It is also different from the loss of a form which occurs “whenever two or more competing forms exist for the same function, and one is eventually selected at the expense of the others” (Hopper & Traugott 2003: 172).
Table 3. Semantic variables and their associated prototypical values in present-day Italian periphrastic and reflexive passives (based on, and extending, Sansò 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Reflexive passive</th>
<th>Periphrastic passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGENT (A)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animacy</td>
<td>−Animate</td>
<td>+ Animate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genericity</td>
<td>+Generic: agent represents virtually all humanity or an undifferentiated subpart thereof (e.g. people in a given location)</td>
<td>−Generic: a specific, identifiable person, well anchored in both space and time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for defocusing A</td>
<td>Agent is generic</td>
<td>Agent is less topical than the patient/irrelevant/inferrable/unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EVENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>Present (atemporal)</td>
<td>Past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>Imperfective</td>
<td>Perfective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality status</td>
<td>Irrealis (deontic, potential, etc.)</td>
<td>Realis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PATIENT (P)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animacy</td>
<td>±Animate</td>
<td>+Animate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genericity</td>
<td>Generic/specific</td>
<td>Specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Singular/plural</td>
<td>Singular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Reality status “refers to the distinction between ‘realis’ and ‘irrealis’ encoding of events. An action which either did not occur, or which is presented as occurring in a non-real (contingent) world, is obviously less effective than one whose occurrence is actually asserted as corresponding directly with a real event” (Hopper & Thompson 1980: 252).

of situational or semantic/pragmatic contexts” that are susceptible to linguistic coding, and likely to be “systematically associated with a particular form of expression”. As the data suggest, the prerequisites for the polarization between the two constructions were already given in Old Italian. Already then (i.e. in 13th-14th-century Italian), each the two constellations of semantic traits in Table 3 was associated with one of the two constructions, but only loosely so: most periphrastic constructions already encoded specific situations (involving one or more specific agents), possibly due to the inherently resultative meaning of the past participle, whereas the majority of reflexive passives encoded generic situations. The long-term development sketched in the preceding section can thus be understood as
a process which reinforced the associations between two configurations of features and the two constructions in question.

Therefore, what has changed over time is merely the ratio between prototypical and non-prototypical instances of the two constructions. A calculation based on a sample of 500 reflexive passives (250 examples drawn from works in prose comprised between 1350 and 1450; 250 examples drawn from the corpus of contemporary written Italian used in Sansò 2003) provides the ratio prototypical against non-prototypical instances of reflexive passives in both Old and present-day Italian. That ratio is 1:2.62 for Old Italian and 1:7.93 for Modern Italian.

Now, the destiny of the agentive reflexive passive seems to be an integral aspect of this process of polarization: as the polarization proceeds, the number of agentive reflexive passives tends to decrease, as highly generic agents (potentially coinciding with all humanity) need to be overtly encoded to a much lesser extent than specific and referential agents. At the same time, when the range of agents that can be overtly expressed narrows, agents that are more peripheral to the construction (i.e. specific, referential agents) are lost first.

Of course, retraction phenomena may not be a concern of grammaticalization theory per se. Nevertheless they clearly are an important issue on the broader historical linguistics agenda, and the mechanisms governing them need to be understood. One of these mechanisms has been described in this article. This mechanism might be considered as a process of competition among constructions which encode similar functions in a given language or language stage. In the case of the competing passive constructions discussed here, it has lead to an increasing differentiation, both in syntactic and in semantic terms.

Since prototypes and prototype effects have played a central role in our account, their status in historical linguistic explanations requires to be discussed. In particular, it needs to be examined what role prototypes play in the categorization of exemplars of syntactic constructions, and in processes such as the polarization described above. Prototypes are no doubt a fashionable concept in contemporary linguistic thought, but the risk of

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15 A reflexive passive is considered as prototypical if it encodes a generic event, defined on the basis of the temporal and aspectual features listed in Table 3, and on the basis of the nature of its agent.

16 Ratios of frequency are expressed in terms of the number of instances of concurrent constructions, reducing the lower frequency to 1.
using prototypes as waste-baskets whenever something goes wrong with other models is always there. Even more significant is the risk of reifying an abstract notion that might exist only in the observer’s mind and not in the reality of data. Therefore, in order to understand how and why the association between the two constructions and the two prototypical configurations in Table 3 came into existence, we need both a principled way of determining the relative prototypicality of particular instances of syntactic constructions, and, most importantly, a way of modelling frequency effects.

To cope with these problems, we must address two issues:

(i) in order to qualify as prototypes, the two constellations schematized in Table 3 must convey notions which are highly prominent in human experience;
(ii) the role of frequency in establishing the two prototypes must be explicitly accounted for and modelled.

With regard to point (i), I propose that the two constellations of features in Table 3 do indeed represent two cognitively basic ways of conceptualizing a state of affairs. The first constellation, usually associated with reflexive passives, is basic in that it allows to represent a situation in which an agent, usually human, is understood to exist, but is defocused because of its genericity. The second constellation is also basic in that it allows the speaker to represent a two-participant event from the perspective of the patient. The conceptual basicness of the two feature constellations is also demonstrated by the fact that the difference between them is highly susceptible to linguistic coding (see Sansò 2006, for a cross-linguistic analysis of the functions of periphrastic and reflexive passives in a sample of European languages).

Issue (ii) is somewhat more complicated. The drawbacks of prototype theory are not new to linguists. Although the psychological reality of prototypes has been repeatedly confirmed by a great deal of experimental work, at least since the classical writings by Eleanor Rosch (e.g. Rosch 1978), the use of prototypes as cultural universals in cognitive linguistics (see Dirven 2005: 17ff. for a discussion) has reinforced the misleading idea that prototypes display “conceptual purity uncontaminated by the vagaries of usage” (Hopper & Jacob 2005). Only recently, new frameworks are emerging in which the notion of prototype is combined with the insights and practice of corpus linguistics (e.g. Gries 2003). One such framework is the theory of the best exemplar, as applied, for instance, to phonology
Grammaticalization and prototype effects

by Pierrehumbert (2001; see also Hopper & Jacob 2005; Croft 2007). This theory makes the notion of prototype (and the notion of clustering of features) compatible with diachronic change and accounts for gradual, long-term developments such as those described in this article. In this theory, each category/construction “is represented in memory by a large cloud of remembered tokens” (Pierrehumbert 2001: 140) of that category/construction: the prototypical instances of a construction are thus represented by numerous tokens, while infrequent, less prototypical instances are represented by less numerous tokens. The difference in token count is the main ingredient in explaining frequency effects such as those visible in the historical data discussed above. Frequency itself is not explicitly represented in this model; rather, it is intrinsic to the representations of categories and constructions: the prototypical reflexive passive emerges from repeated occurrences of instances of this construction displaying the features listed in Table 3. These occurrences cluster together and reinforce one another in the speaker’s observation. The same process can be invoked to explain the establishment of the other prototype, the one usually associated with periphrastic constructions in Modern Italian. The polarization between the two constructions is the final outcome of the competition between the two prototypes in the same functional space: highly similar instances are close to each other and easier to categorize and memorize, whereas idiosyncratic instances tend to decrease as a result of economy and because they are more difficult to process and categorize.

To sum up, significant insights into the nature of grammatical change can be gained from a mature version of prototype theory such as the exemplar-based model sketched above: however, these insights can be obtained only if one regards constructions as constituents of grammatical eco-systems – that is, of systems of grammatical options – rather than by looking at their etymologies and developments in isolation, as traditional – and highly useful – models of change, such as grammaticalization theory, tend to suggest. More generally speaking, the developments discussed in this article demonstrate in an exemplary manner that the evolution of grammatical constructions may involve a complex and multi-stranded set of developments. Grammaticalization paths are certainly useful tools for capturing and describing individual strands of such developments, but as we have seen, other mechanisms, which are not a concern of grammaticalization theory, need to be taken into account as well and remain essential on the broader historical-linguistics agenda.
Abbreviations

1, 3 1st, 3rd person  
ART article  
AUX auxiliary (essere or avere)  
COMP complementizer  
COND conditional  
DEF definite  
DEM demonstrative  
F feminine  
FUT future  
INDEF indefinite  
INF infinitive  
IPFV imperfective  
M masculine  
NEG negation  
PL plural  
POSS possessive  
PPT past participle  
PRS present  
PST past  
REFL reflexive  
REL relative pronoun  
SBJV subjunctive  
SG singular

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1250–1350
Milione = Marco Polo, Milione (versione tosc. del ’300), edited by V. Bertolucci Pizzorusso, Milan, Adelphi, 1975.

1350–1450
1450–1600
Andrea Sansò


1600–1800


1800–1850


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