'I'm just feel*ing* like it'. On the relationship between the use of the progressive and sentiment polarity in Italian

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Abstract

The study of the progressive construction has fascinated linguists for a long time; this is probably due to the various functions it performs as well as its continuing changing nature. As it escapes a single-level taxonomy, several mappings have been suggested across languages, mostly based on the progressive's internal characteristics of aspectuality, imperfectivity, and incompleteness. More recently, however, the progressive has started to be explored through the lens of pragmatics and discourse; these observations suggest that this chameleonic form can also function as a marker of non-aspectual pragmatic or subjective meanings, for example to signal politeness and discontent (Traugott and Dasher 2001; Levin 2013; Pfaff, Bergs, and Hoffmann 2013).

In this study, it is precisely this subjectification dimension of the use of the progressive that I want to explore. Drawing on Natural Language Processing techniques, namely emotion and sentiment analysis detection, and using contemporary Italian as a case study, the aim is to determine whether correlations can be found between the use of the progressive and subjective attitudes. Specifically, I use FEEL-IT (Bianchi, Nozza, and Hovy 2021), a state-of-the-art transformer-based machine learning model for emotion and sentiment classification in Italian which employs the Italian BERT model UmBERTo trained on Commoncrawl ITA (Parisi, Francia, and Magnani [2020] 2021). For the analysis, I will use the language data provided by ISDT (Italian Stanford Dependency Treebank) released for the dependency parsing shared task of Evalita-2014 (Bosco et al. 2014). This corpus contains language samples from various sources (e.g., legal texts, news articles, Wikipedia articles) collected from 2011 to 2014 and it totals up to 298,344 words.

The results show that in 67% of the sentences that include a progressive form, the sentiment was found negative, with the prevailing emotion being either anger or sadness. When tested for significance, the chi-square p-value was found to be 0.0359, thus disproving the null hypothesis. Although these are preliminary investigations, the results suggest that subjective attitudes such as discontent and anger may indeed mark the use of the progressive.

References

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