Nominal Aspect in the Romance Infinitives

Monica Palmerini

Among the parts-of-speech, a special position is occupied by the infinitive, a grammatical category which has generated a rich debate and a vast literature. In this paper we would like to propose a semantic analysis of this subtype of part-of-speech, halfway between a verb and a noun, based on the notion of Nominal Aspect proposed by Rijkhoff (1991, 2002).

To capture in a systematic way the crosslinguistic variability in the types of interpretations available to nouns, Rijkhoff proposed the concept of Nominal Aspect as a nominal counterpart of the way verbal aspect encapsulates the way actions and events are conceptualized. He individuated two dimensions of variation, namely divisibility in space and boundedness, dealing with the way referents are formed in the dimension of space. Encoded by the two binary features \([\pm \text{structure}]\) and \([\pm \text{shape}]\), these parameters define four lexical kinds of nouns.

\[
\begin{align*}
&+ \text{structure} \quad + \text{shape} \quad \text{collective nouns} \\
&+ \text{structure} \quad - \text{shape} \quad \text{mass nouns} \\
&- \text{structure} \quad + \text{shape} \quad \text{individual nouns} \\
&- \text{structure} \quad - \text{shape} \quad \text{concept nouns}
\end{align*}
\]

We argue that the infinitive, as it appears in romance languages such as Spanish and Italian, can be said to match very closely the aspeccual profile of the so called concept nouns, those that, typically in classifier languages, refer to “atoms of meaning” (types) that only in discourse become actualized lexemes: similarly, in abstraction from the context, the infinitive is neither a verb nor a noun.

If we consider that the first order noun, the default nominal model in the majority of Indo-european languages has the aspect of an individual noun, the infinitive appear to be, as Sechehaye noticed (1950: 169), an original and innovative lexical resource, which displays in the grammatical system of the romance languages a great variety of uses (Hernanz 1999; Skytte 1983).

Apart from the nominal aspect we have highlighted, the infinitive, more traditionally, is said to contain a verbal aspectual component, dealing with the temporal structure of the action, as it captures the pure processuality of an event (Gaeta 2002, Simone 2003, Simone 2004). Using the two binary features often cited in the literature
on aspect, namely [+processuality] and [+telicity], we can thus build a double aspectual representation of the infinitive, which takes into consideration the way it conceptualizes the dimension of time and of space.

The discrimination of these parameters allows us to describe in a different way the process of aspectual modulation involved in the passage from the domain of predication (Verb) to that of designation (Noun) (Simone 2003), which the romance infinitive can cover with a high flexibility. We will define a typology of infinitives based on the functions it can have in discourse and then we will analyze it considering the modulation of the different aspectual features. These analysis will bring us to formulate, on aspectual grounds, a possible explanation of the marginality of the nominal infinitive in French, opposed to the vitality of this strategy of nominalization in Spanish and Italian.

**Bibliographical references**


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