

The Diachrony of Progressives in Venetan: A Syntactic Analysis

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RoLinC - Romance Linguistics Circle

- The evolution of the progressive construction in Venetan.
- A "prepositional" infinitive construction.
- The change involves the reanalysis of a nominalized infinitive into a regular infinitive.
- The preposition is reinterpreted as an aspectual marker.
- Supporting the idea that minoritized languages may exhibit clearer patterns in diachronic change.

• **Historical Role of Venetan**

- Administrative and literary language of the Republic of Venice.
- Used in official documents, poetry, theater, and diplomacy across northeastern Italy and the Adriatic.
- Rich literary traditions (Venetian, Pavano) dating back to the Middle Ages.

• **Contemporary Sociolinguistic Status**

- Not officially recognized under Italian law, but partially recognized regionally in Veneto.
- No standardized form; considerable microvariation among local varieties.
- Italian and Venetan coexist in a diglossic situation.
 - Domain overlap, with both varieties used in a range of contexts, sometimes interchangeably (in some areas).

The Venetan progressive construction

- Venetan uses progressive constructions made up of a *be* form followed by an infinitive introduced by the preposition *drio* ('behind').

(1) Son drio lavor-ar.
be.PRS.1SG behind work-INF
'I am working.'

- I will preliminarily refer to this construction as a *prepositional infinitive*.
- The analysis will show a drastic change in the diachrony of the construction.
- Spoiler: The "prepositional" status of the infinitive is questioned.

Defining prepositional infinitives

- **Romance prepositional infinitives** involve an infinitive verb introduced by a preposition, typically *a* ("at") (Casalicchio 2013).
- Venetan uses *drio* ("behind").
- Used in many Romance varieties, most widely in Portuguese.
- **Diachronic development (not to be discussed)**
- Latin gerunds with prepositions (e.g., *ad clamandum*).
- Infinitives replace gerunds in some Romance varieties.
- This change is not attested for the progressive *drio* construction in Venetan.

Portuguese and Venetan: some parallels (cf. Raposo 1989)

- Comparable uses as complements of perception verbs (alternants to gerunds or pseudo-relatives) (2) and in progressive periphrases (3).

- (2) a. Eu vi os rapazes **a nad-ar**.
I see.PST.1SG the boys at swim-INF
b. Go vist-o i tosati **drio no-ar**.
AUX.PRS.1SG see.PTCP-SGM the boys behind swim-INF
'I saw the boys swimming.'
- (3) a. Está **a chov-er**.
be.PRS.3SG at rain-INF
b. Ze **drio piov-ar**.
be.PRS.3SG behind rain-INF
'It is raining.'

- **Venetan progressive constructions:**
- Parallel with Portuguese prepositional infinitives.
- Share distributional properties with pseudorelatives and gerunds.
- Progressive aspectual interpretation.
- Different preposition:
 - Across Romance varieties: *a*.
 - Venetan (and some closely-related Romance varieties): *drio*.

General questions and goals

- Does the *drio* + infinitive construction align with Portuguese (and Romance, in general) prepositional infinitives?
- What are the syntactic nature and the diachronic development of *drio* as a progressive marker?
- Establish the diachronic development of the construction.
- Propose an analysis of the syntactic changes that led to the configuration in modern Venetan.

Formal questions and goals

- Do we need to define the nominalization of infinitives as a real recategorization process?
- Is recategorization a computationally optimal and desired process?
- Analyze nominalization as the outcome of an agreement relationship.
- Minimize the role of categorial features in narrow syntax.
- Promote the idea of a syntactic computation built around operations on formal features.

- **Archivio Digitale Veneto** (Venetian and Pavano texts):
- A. Calmo, *Il Saltuzza*, 16th c.
- A. Calmo *Fiorina*, 16th c.
- Rime di Magagnò, Menon e Begotto, 16th c.
- Testamento de sier Perenzon, 16th c.
- A. Cornaro, *Pianto per la morte del Bembo*, 16th c.
- Ruzante, *L'Anconitana*, 16th c.
- Ruzante, *La Betia*, 16th c.
- Morello, *Lettera in lingua pavana*, 16th c.
- C. Goldoni, *Sior Todero Brontolon*, 18th c.
- C. Goldoni, *La Casa Nova*, 18th c.

The early stages: until the 16th century

- This structure is independently attested with progressive readings in the diachrony of Venetan (both in Venetian and Pavano).
- Ambiguous nominalized / non-nominalized infinitive until the 16th century
 - Optional definite article

(4) Et **dreo** **disn-ar** elo me dis-e
and behind eat-INF he me say-PRS.3SG
'(...) and while eating, he tells me (...)'

Commemoriali, 14th c.

(5) A ve trover-ò **drio** **el** **disn-are**
I you find-FUT.1SG behind DEF eat-INF
'I will find you while eating'

Saltuzza, 16th c.

The 18th century

- The progressive construction no longer allowed for definite articles
- It still retained some nominal-like properties:
 - pronominalization of the infinitive
 - replacement with a DP
 - *drio* functioning as a regular locative preposition

- The infinitive could be pronominalized via a dative clitic *ghe*.

- (6) a. A-ve-u feni-o de mett-er zo la scrittura?
AUX-2PL-you finish-PTCP of put-INF down the writing
'Are you done writing?'
- b. Ghe son drio.
it.DAT be.PRS.1SG behind
'I am doing it.' (lit.: 'I am behind it.')

Sior Todero, 18th c.

- *Drio* could take a (nominalized) infinitive as its complement, as well as a DP.

(7) Xe debotto do mesi che sè **drio sta fabbrica.**
be.PRS.3 almost two months that be-2PL behind this work
'You have been working on this for almost 2 months.'

La Casa Nova, 18th c.

- Outside the progressive context, *drio* could be used as a real locative preposition.

(8) Chi xe **drio** **quella portiera?**
who be.PRS.3 behind that door
'Who is there behind that door?'

Sior Todero, 18th c.

- Modern Venetan (Trevigiano) does not allow for any type of definite markers.

(9) Son drio (*el) lavor-ar.
be.PRS.1SG behind DEF work-INF
'I am working (lit. I am behind work).'

Modern Venetan: Pronominalization and Replacement

- Pronominalization and replacement are not possible in Modern Venetan (Trevigiano).

- (10) (*Ghe) son drio.
it.DAT be.PRS.1SG behind
'I am doing it (lit. I am behind it).'
- (11) Son drio lavor-ar / *el lavoro .
be.PRS.1SG behind work-INF / DEF job
'I am working (lit. I am behind work).'

Modern Venetan: the nature of *drio*

- *drio* no longer functions as a locative preposition (or a preposition, in general).
- The complex PP *da-drio de* is used for locative meanings, but not in progressives.

- (12)
- a. *Sè drio sta fabrica.
 be.PRS.2PL behind this factory
- b. Sè da-drio de sta fabrica.
 be.PRS.2PL from-behind of this factory
 ‘You are behind this factory.’

The analysis in a nutshell

- Old Venetan exhibited a wide range of nominalized infinitive forms.
- Modern Venetan lacks nominalized infinitives altogether.
- The optional overt marking of D triggered instability and opacity, finally leading to the reanalysis of nominalized infinitives as regular infinitives.
- *Drio* is not a real preposition, therefore the Venetan structure cannot be analyzed on a par with Portuguese prepositional infinitives.

A digression on nominalized infinitives

- DM approaches distinguish two types of nominalized infinitives (Alexiadou, Iordăchioaia, and Schäfer 2010; Iordăchioaia 2020).
- **The full nominalized infinitive (nominal type):**
 - It has an internal nominal syntax contingent on an nP layer with valued gender and number features.
 - It can be combined with all types of determiners.
 - It takes only prepositional complements.
 - It is modified by adjectives.
- The defective nominalized infinitive (verbal type)

A digression on nominalized infinitives

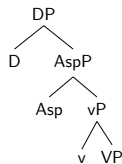
- DM approaches distinguish two types of nominalized infinitives (Alexiadou, Iordăchioaia, and Schäfer 2010; Iordăchioaia 2020)
- The full nominalized infinitive (nominal type)
- **The defective nominalized infinitive (verbal type):**
 - It lacks *nP*, so D fails to value its gender and number features and receives a default value.
 - It exhibits argument structure (ex.: direct objects).
 - It is modified by adverbs.
 - It can take negation.
 - Only definite determiners can be used (as they represent default morphological exponence following *failed agreement*. (Preminger 2014); other lexical determiners are incompatible with default values).

The structure of full and defective nominal infinitives

- A syntactic representation (building on Alexiadou, lordăchioaia, and Schäfer 2010; lordăchioaia 2020).

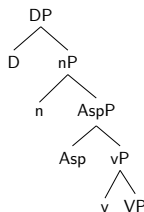
- Defective type:

(13)



- Full type:

(14)



Nothing against nominalizers, but...

- φ -agreement alone does not entail a syntactic category shift.
 - Agreement with D could be licensed by a φ -probe on a functional head.
 - No need to postulate an nP layer if φ -agreement can be independently licensed.
- Categorical vs. Non-Categorical Features in Syntax
 - **Categorical features** are only used to build syntactic structure (in External Merge).
 - *n* determines the syntactic category of a syntactic object.
 - Each syntactic constituent (or lexical item) has exactly one categorical feature, represented as a pair.
 - Ex.: $\langle \text{read}, V \rangle$, where *read* is the root and *V* is the category.
 - Introducing a nominalizer implies a process of recategorization.
 - **Non-categorical features** (ex.: φ features) express morphosyntactic properties or trigger Agree.

Labels vs. Categories and the Labeling Algorithm

- Chomsky 2013: LF needs a label that makes a syntactic object interpretable, but not necessarily a categorial one (V/N/A).
- The Labeling Algorithm (LA) computes which feature (e.g. [φ], [Asp], [v]) will serve as the label at phase edge.
- Once LA supplies a label, the syntactic object is legible for LF: category per se is not required for interpretation.
- Practically: merging a φ -head above AspP is sufficient, LA labels the syntactic object as [φ], and LF can interpret it using that label.
- φ can provide the label necessary for LF, so recategorization to nP is not necessary.
Takeaway: Labels are needed to make syntactic objects legible to LF, but they do not have to be categorial.

The cost of changing categories

- Changing the syntactic category of an object is computationally more demanding than merging functional projections.
- In Minimalism, Merge is a cost-free operation used to build structure (Chomsky 2013).
 - Categorical labels are assigned only at the CI interface, not in narrow syntax.
- Type-shifting operations involve non-syntactic reinterpretation of category linked to semantic complexity (Partee et al. 1987).
- Processing errors (e.g., garden-path effects) often arise from temporary misclassification of category, reflecting the processing cost of ambiguity.
- Recategorization is costly in real-time parsing in that it requires an increased cognitive load (Frazier and Rayner 1982; Pritchett 1988).

Nominalized Verbs and Garden-Path Effects

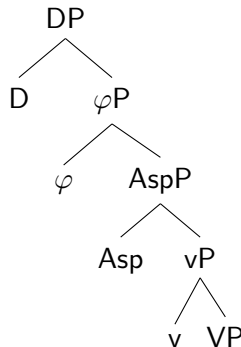
- When a form can be both a **verb** and a **noun**, readers often interpret it as a verb first.
- If later context forces a noun reading, the parser must reanalyze the structure, which can create a garden-path effect.
- In Old Venetan, the infinitive can function as both:
 - **Verb**: *disnar* (“to eat”)
 - **Nominalized**: *el disnar* (“the eating”, “mealtime”)
- Psycholinguistic studies (Trueswell, Tanenhaus, and Kello 1993; Ferreira, Bailey, and Ferraro 2002; Hale 2001) show that ambiguous verb–noun forms are usually syntactically parsed as verbs.
- If later context requires a **noun**, readers must revise their interpretation → processing cost typical of garden-path sentences.
- This supports the idea that nominalizations may cause a temporary misinterpretation.

Recategorization does not come for free

- Recategorization involves greater cognitive and structural effort than Merge, justifying systems that delay or minimize it in syntax (Chomsky 2013; Manzini 2025).
- It may be explained in terms of lexicalization.
 - Ex.: the loss of internal verbal structure and the relabeling of upper layers as nominal.
- If we have no principled reason to assume a categorial change (the form is the same, it appears in contexts that can be captured via narrow syntactic tools), then we have no need to assume a new category.
- It is easier to assume a different extent of functional heads.
- No need to assume a new category when structural tools suffice.

Going back to Venetan...

- A minimalist representation of nominalized infinitives.
- The *n* head on full nominalizations is interpreted as a functional head with valued φ -features (a φ -head) which values φ -features on the DP.
- The φ -head is optional. When it is absent, the nominalization is defective.



The extra φ -head

- The full and defective nominal infinitives are built from identical syntactic material and differentiated solely by the presence or absence of an additional φ -head.
- The φ -head is an independent head that functions as a goal for D.
- D probes downward for a goal; by virtue of its valued φ -features, it allows agreement and results in the spell-out of the full nominal form (inspired by previous works on additional agreement heads: Coon and Preminger 2012; Halpert 2015; D'Alessandro 2017; Van der Wal 2022).
- Conversely, the absence of the φ -head yields the defective form.

Full nominalized infinitives in Old Venetan

- Properties:

- Combination with different determiners (15)
- PP complements (16)
- Adjective modification (17)

(15) Sto camin-ar
this walk-INF
'This walking

Anconitana, 16th c.

(16) El cria-re de la chioca
DEF cry-INF of the hen
'The cry of the hen'

Lettra, 16th c.

(17) Tal parl-ar desmesurà
such speak-INF immeasurable
'Such immeasurable speaking'

Betia, 16th c.

Defective nominalized infinitives in Old Venetan

- Properties:

- Direct object (18)
- Adverb modification (19)
- Negation (20)

(18) El cant-ar na canzon
DEF sing-INF a song
'Singing a song'

Rime, 16th c.

(19) Per lo bev-ere tropo
for the drink-INF much
'For too much drinking'

Testamento, 16th c.

(20) Fieoli dal pianto e dal no magn-are
children of cry and of no eat-INF
'Children of cry and lack of food'

Pianto, 16th c.

The instability of defective nominalized infinitives

- Why does modern Venetan no longer allow them?
 - Venetan only retains some highly lexicalized full nominal infinitives.
 - Ex.: *el magnar*, 'the food' (not 'the act/event of eating').
 - Neither the full nor the defective types are productive in modern Venetan.
- Since the 18th century, the definite determiner is no longer realized.
- Morphological trigger for the change (Roberts and Roussou 2003).
 - If there is no overt DP, speakers will treat the structure as if the DP was not there.

The loss of the D-layer

- **A hypothesis for acquisition:**
- The presence of DP is often detected via morphological exponents (e.g., articles, demonstratives).
- If a functional head lacks overt realization, its structure becomes opaque, resulting in syntactic reanalysis and loss of DP projection.
- Language learners rely on **cues** in the input to set parameters (Clark and Roberts 1993).
- Morphological realization of D is a key cue for the DP layer.
- When this cue is missing, the learner defaults to simpler structures.
- Optional DP expression creates instability, reduces cue reliability, enabling loss of DP (Roberts and Roussou 2003).

The loss of the D-layer

- **A hypothesis for syntax:**
- The φ -head is lost first.
- Without φ , there is no feature valuation on D.
 - Only the default value remains available for D.
- D becomes unstable and is often not realized.
- The reduction in overt D is therefore observed after the loss of φ .
- Defective nominalizations resist longer (in the progressive construction).
- At this point, I do not propose that the two facts (φ and D loss) are necessarily related.

A parallel with Old French

- Old French: Buridant 2008; Rochette 1988; Sleeman 2010.
 - Old French used to have both full and defective nominalized infinitives.
 - Only full nominalized infinitives survive in modern French (at a high register).

- (21)
- a. del al-er ensemble
of-the go-INF together
'Of going together.'
 - b. du non ten-ir
of-the not keep-INF
'Of not keeping.'
 - c. son beau chant-er
his beautiful sing-INF
'His beautiful singing.'

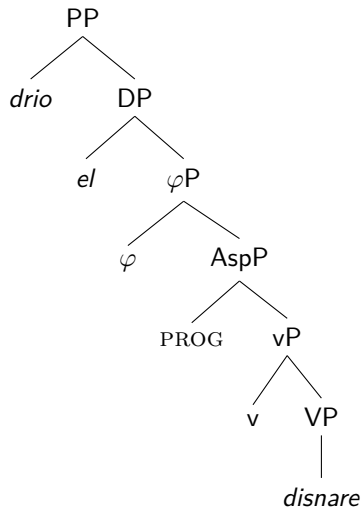
(in Buridant 2008)

Interim conclusion on nominal infinitives

- French and Venetan exhibit the same type of tendency.
 - Nominal infinitives are diachronically unstable and tend to be lost.
- The tendency seems to be stronger in Venetan.
- Modern Venetan no longer uses nominal infinitives.
- Some full nominalized infinitives got lexicalized.
- The defective nominalized infinitive disappeared.
- The progressive construction resists as a trace of the defective type.
- The lack of a high register in Modern Venetan favored the change.

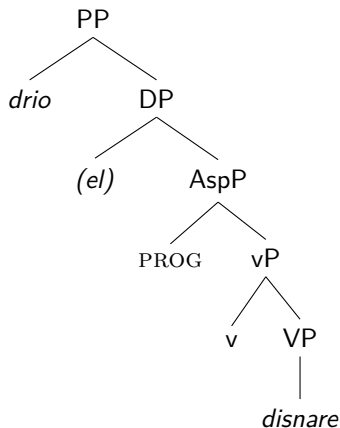
The structure of Old Venetan progressive constructions

- In Old Venetan, the infinitive was nominalized (either fully or defectively) and it was embedded under a PP headed by *drio* (see Raposo 1989).
- The verbal part of the structure maximally contained an AspP carrying a progressive feature.

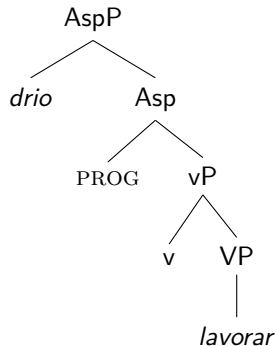


The 18th century

- The φ P is missing, so the structure qualifies as a (residual) defective nominalized infinitive.
- It still exhibits some nominal-like features (pronominalization, DP-replacement...)
- DP lacks overt realization, resulting in syntactic reanalysis and loss of DP projection.
- Optional DP expression (e.g., variable article use, silent D) creates instability.
- Optionality reduces cue reliability, enabling loss of DP.



- *drio* has been reinterpreted into a progressive aspectual marker (Duarte 1992; Barbosa and Cochofel 2004)
- *drio* occupies Spec-AspP, the infinitive moves to Asp, blocking pronominalization/replacement.



A note on the preposition *Drio*

- *Drio* was both a preposition and a progressive marker (in phrasal verbs) from a very early stage.
- Non-transparent phrasal verbs - their meaning is not a compositional function of the two components, the P does not retain its locative meaning (Benincà and Poletto 2008).
- When the D layer was lost, the preposition *drio* was simply reinterpreted as a progressive marker.

(22) And-è drio, pare me bello.
go-IMP.2PL behind father my good
Continue, my good father.

Betia, 16th c.

A cross-linguistic parallel: Danish progressives

- The same analysis can be extended to the progressive construction *være ved at + infinitive* in Danish.

(23) Han var ved at skrive et brev.
he be.PST with to write.INF a letter
'He was writing a letter'.

- Like Venetan, Danish generally lacks nominalized infinitive forms.
- The preposition *ved* in the progressive construction behaves as an aspectual marker, on a par with *drio*.

Innovation in Venetan infinitive periphrases

- Some Venetan speakers exhibit an innovative periphrasis expressing the ingressive aspect.
- An infinitive introduced by preposition *vanti* ('before').
- In this construction, *vanti* behaves as a marker of ingressive meaning.
- Less "grammaticalized" than the *drio + infinitive* construction:
 - it is limited to atelic predicates of perception verbs;
 - it is **subject-oriented**.

(24) La Maria ga visto Luca *vanti* ndar casa.
DEF Mary have.3SG see.PTCP Luke before go.INF home
'Maria saw Luca before going home.'

- Unattested in diachronic corpora of Venetan.
- Possibly based on the *drio*+infinitive model.

- The nominalization of infinitives does not necessarily imply a real recategorization process
- In view of the idea that recategorization is not a computationally optimal and desired process in narrow syntax
- Nominalization is analyzed as the outcome of a regular agreement relationship.
- Categorical features exist in narrow syntax, but their role in the syntactic computation is minimal.
- Syntactic computation is built (mainly) around operations on formal features.

- **Analysis**

- The *drio* + infinitive construction does not align with Portuguese (and Romance, in general) prepositional infinitives.
- The Venetan structure evolved from a nominalized infinitive that subsequently lost its nominal layers.

- **Generalizations**

- Optional DP expression creates instability and reduces cue reliability, leading to syntactic reanalysis and loss of DP.
- The lack of a high register in Venetan allows to clearly identify a change path, whereby nominalized infinitives were lexicalized or lost.

Thank you!

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