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978-1-316-50968-5 - Italian Prose Usage: A Supplement to Italian Grammars

Walter Shewring

Excerpt

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I

VERBS

General importance of the verb

§ 1. The verb in general is more important in Italian than in English. Modern English, like modern French, throws more and more weight on nouns, on abstract nouns especially; Italian inherits from Latin a preference for more concrete expression through verbs. We shall return to this more than once [see especially §§ 20–1, 61–2, 92(f) (ii)]. Here meanwhile are a few examples:

They arranged a **meeting**.

*Stabilirono d' **incontrarsi**.*

What is the **price of admission**?

*Quanto **si spende per entrare**?*

Any **complaints**?

*C'è da **ridire**?*

His book is a **reflection** of... , an **epitome** of...

*Nel suo libro **si rispecchia**... , **si riassume**...*

In the **diffusion** of this knowledge Baretto's **influence** was important.

*Baretto molto **potè a diffondere** la conoscenza... (Praz.)*

The contrast made here is of course not absolute. In any given example one could probably use English verbs and Italian nouns. Nor has Italian quite escaped the modern international jargon of scientists, politicians and journalists in which ambiguous abstract nouns jostle each other from start to finish. But the BENT of Italian favours verbs; a normal passage of good Italian will contain more verbs than the corresponding English; and the student should learn to work through them rather than through nouns.

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Alternative forms of the verb

§ 2. (a) Sometimes, but not too often, one should make use of the ‘apocopated’ verb forms: *amar*, *vien*, *amavan*, etc. Such forms must never be used before a pause (unless one is writing verse); they require another word to lean on (*‘Così fan tutte!’* but *‘Tutte lo fanno!’*). And they are not much used before vowels; many of the best Italian writers favour the ‘hiatus’ (more strictly, synaloepha) of, for example, *andare ancora* as against *andar ancora*. The following points are a rough summary of modern usage, and concern those forms only which almost any writer might use. It will be understood that particular writers have their own preferences in these matters, and also that the shortened forms are in any case rarer than the full forms. I call *amar* a ‘very common’ form relatively to a form like *devon*, not to *amare*; e.g. the same writer might use *amare* three or four times for one *amar*, but *devono* twenty or thirty times for one *devon*.

- (i) The shortened infinitive is very common. In particular, *far* is generally used before another infinitive (*far venire* rather than *fare venire*); but the full form should be kept before *s* impure.
- (ii) In the present tense, *son* for *sono* (1st singular or 3rd plural) is very common indeed. *Par*, *vien*, *vuol* are all common, but other such 3rd singular forms are rare. The shortened 3rd plurals most used are those of common verbs whose shortening gives monosyllabic forms: *van*, *dan*, *fan*, *stan*, *san*; *devon*, *lascian*, etc. are much rarer. Shortened 1st plurals are used less and less, though *siam* and *abbiam* may still be found in some writers.
- (iii) In the imperfect, *avevan* and *eran* are not uncommon; *andavan*, *credevan*, etc. may be used cautiously.
- (iv) In the past definite, such forms as *andaron* are now rare.

N.B. Students should beware of imitating Manzoni’s very free use of apocopation; it was exceptional in his own time, and goes far beyond the practice of modern Italian.

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(b) 1st person imperfect in *-a*. Throughout his 'Grammar', Grandgent inexplicably prints *aveva, parlava*, etc. as the normal 1st person form; he then adds (p. 56) that *avevo, parlavo*, etc. are 'nearly always used in conversation, and occur often in the works of modern authors'. As the student will have discovered, this is an understatement. The form in *-o* is of course the normal modern form. In written as in spoken Italian, the form in *-a* is highly exceptional, and when used has probably to be eked out by *io*. It is best avoided altogether.

(c) Contracted *-ea, -ia* for *-eva, -iva*. This form, once very frequent, is now almost obsolete except in *avea*, which is sometimes used by writers who would never think of using, for example, *dovea* or *sentia*. The plural *-ean* is rarer than the singular; but Fogazzaro has *Ne avevan parlato, avean disputato molto*.¹

(d) To these points I may conveniently if loosely attach a note on the alternative position of pronouns after finite tenses of the verb (e.g. *trovasi* for *si trova*).

- (i) In the present tense, *Vendesi* and *Affittasi* are current in notices and advertisements. In literary Italian, this position may still be used with a few short and common verbs in the 3rd singular reflexive: *Trovasi, dicesi, leggesi*.
- (ii) In the imperfect, an occasional use of this position is or has been favoured in careful prose, especially in descriptive passages (more perhaps in the last generation than in this). Within these limits, it is common with *si* and 3rd person singular, considerably less common with *si* and 3rd plural; it is also still used at times with other pronouns and with adverbs (e.g. *trovavalo, andavanci*), but too rarely for imitation.

The following examples are typical, and may well be imitated in translating English of the same general tone:

Mentre l'alba si accendeva in aurora, la fronte di Franco venivasi irradiando di una luce interiore, gli occhi suoi ardevano, fra le lagrime, di vigor vitale. (Fogazzaro.)

¹ Cicognani uses these contracted forms with unusual freedom.

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L' ombra addensavasi, il vento urlava sempre più forte, con un continuo rombo di tuono. (Deledda.)

Lo spazio . . . era singolarmente lungo, vuoto, e quasi un deserto lucido e pauroso. La stoffa della vasta portiera agitavasi ancora dal basso in alto in tutte le sue pieghe, tanto violentemente ella l' avea traversata. (Bontempelli.)

Tenses of the indicative

PRESENT

§ 3. Present for past definite. This 'historic present' is commoner in Italian than in English, though probably rarer than in French. Its use needs no illustration.

§ 4. Present for future.

(a) In main clauses. When English allows a present in a future sense, Italian allows it too. 'I leave (I'm leaving) to-morrow', *Parto domani*. Notice the common phrase *E adesso come si fa?*, 'What do we do (shall we do) now?'

Italian is even a little freer in this respect than English. Thus one may say *Domani vengo a trovarvi*, 'I'll look you up to-morrow'; *Vo a vedere*, 'I'll go and see'.

(b) In subordinate clauses. English uses present for future in conditional and temporal clauses. Italian allows the present in conditionals, disallows it in temporals. Thus:

If he comes, I shall see him.

Se viene (or verrà), lo vedrò.

When } he comes, I shall see him.
As soon as }

Quando } verrà (or sarà venuto, but not viene¹), lo vedrò.
Appena }

¹ To be frank, the present does occur even in temporal clauses. Verga has: *Appena arriva la balia, non avrete più bisogno di me*. And Bontempelli: *Appena arrivano, li farete entrare qui* (though just after: *quando saranno arrivati, potete andare a dormire*). But this use of the present is exceptional; it might be called lax, and is certainly better left alone.

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FUTURE

§ 5. (a) The future may indicate probability. This idiom exists in English, but is much commoner in Italian. When an Englishman hears a clock strike, he may say 'That'll be ten', but he is as likely to say 'That must be ten' or 'That's ten, I expect'. The Italian formula is in each case: *Saranno le dieci*.

(b) A slightly different and un-English use: the future may indicate possibility or concession.

Sbaglierò, ma..., 'I may be wrong, but...'

Sarà vero, ma non lo dovresti spiattellare così. 'It may be true, but you shouldn't blurt it out like that.'

N.B. *Stare (essere) per* is a common periphrasis for the IMMEDIATE future. Its exact equivalent is 'to be about to'. Modern English prefers 'to be going to', but this formula is more flexible than the Italian. 'He is going to sing' may mean that the song will follow at once or that it is to be sung at a concert next month; *Sta per cantare* means the former only.

IMPERFECT

§ 6. Since Englishmen are often in doubt when to use the imperfect in any foreign language, it seems worth while to discuss the matter at some length.

English has three common forms of the imperfect tense:

I was talking.

I used to talk.¹

I talked.²

In translating the first two forms there is no difficulty whatever. If English has 'I was talking' or 'I used to talk', then the Italian equivalent is naturally *parlavo*.³ The question is: If English says 'I talked', are we to use imperfect or past definite, *parlavo* or *parlai*?

¹ With 'I would talk' as a rare variant.

² With of course the negative form 'I did not talk'.

³ It may sometimes be desirable to bring out the continuity of 'I was talking' by translating *Stavo parlando*; or the habitual quality of 'I used to talk' by translating *Solevo parlare* or *Parlavo di solito*.

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The general answer is this: If the action of the verb is thought of as repeated (habitual) or continuous, the imperfect is to be used; if the mere action is considered, the past definite is to be used.

An important distinction: the point is not whether the action WAS IN FACT continuous or repeated, but whether it is SO THOUGHT OF by the speaker or writer. Most actions take an appreciable time, and if all that mattered were the mere fact of continuity or repetition, verbs like 'continue' or 'persist' would never be used in the past definite at all. We may now consider some examples.

§ 7. In main clauses:

- A. He slept that night for ten hours.

Quella notte dormì per dieci ore.

- B. He generally slept for ten hours.

Dormiva di solito per dieci ore.

- A. Yesterday I lost my way several times.

Ieri perdei la strada a più riprese.

- B. He often lost his way several times in one day.

Spesso perdeva la strada a più riprese in un giorno.

In both sets of sentences we are actually told that the action was continuous or repeated; but in the A sentences we are only concerned with the action ('What did he do? What happened?'), whereas in the B sentences we cannot think of the action apart from its habitual or characteristic qualities ('What were his habits? What kind of man was he?').

In these examples, certain words give a clue to the tense—'that night' and 'yesterday' in the A sentences, 'generally' and 'often' in the B sentences. But if we take an example with no such clue—

He read 'Hamlet' with great enjoyment

—we can see that in a proper context the sentence would show itself as distinctly A or distinctly B. If all that matters is what the man did (he read 'Hamlet' for the first time, spent a particular evening in doing this), then we have an A sentence and 'read' is *lesse*. If we are thinking of the action as habitual or repeated or characteristic

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(he read 'Hamlet' every so often; that is how he felt about Shakespeare), then we have a B sentence, and 'read' is *leggeva*.

IN DESCRIPTIVE (as distinct from NARRATIVE) passages, the past tense is usually imperfect because the action of the verb cannot be thought of except as being continuous. Take for instance this: 'Dense fog **hung** over the city. People on foot **walked** gingerly, taxis **crawled**, policemen **seemed** to have lost their confidence.' All these verbs are B, for the writer recounts not just what happened but what was the state of things, what things looked like—and this cannot be thought of except as something continuous. Turn from description to narrative, and the verbs become A: 'Dense fog **covered** the south yesterday. Trains **arrived** hours late. The Channel service **was cancelled**.' Here the writer is concerned only with what happened.

In many sentences, the form 'I did' in English might be replaced by the form 'I used to do' or 'I was doing'. When this is so, the sentence is certainly B; but some B sentences do not allow of the substitution, for English idiom is somewhat elusive here. Thus in our first group of B sentences we could certainly write 'he used to sleep' and 'he used to lose his way' instead of 'he slept' and 'he lost his way'. In our second group we could write 'A dense fog was hanging'; we should be less likely to write 'people were walking' or 'taxis were crawling'; and 'policemen were seeming' is quite impossible. Yet all these verbs are equally B. The test is the question: Are we concerned only with the fact, with what happened, or must we consider also some characteristic or circumstances (what someone's habits were, what something looked like)—things that form the background against which more definite happenings occurred?¹

The translation of 'was' has particular difficulties; it is often hard to decide between *fu* and *era* because either makes good sense. Thus Boccaccio in his Life of Dante says (A): *Fu il nostro poeta di*

¹ An alternative test suggested to me is this. Is there any indication (explicit or implicit) when the action began or ended? If there is, use the past definite. If there is not, use the imperfect.

When repeated actions take place over a LIMITED period of time, even if it is a long one, the past definite is frequently used, e.g. *Durante tutto l'anno 1930 feci ogni domenica una passeggiata in campagna*.

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mediocre statura. Now we might well write (B): *Era di mediocre statura*, but with a slight difference of sense. The form *fu* indicates 'Here is a fact about Dante'; the form *era* indicates 'This is how Dante looked to his contemporaries', and a modern Italian writer would be more likely to take this point of view.¹

§ 8. In subordinate clauses. The principles are the same. A few examples should be sufficient:

When he came in, the others were asleep.

Quando entrò, gli altri dormivano.

When the cat was away the mice would play.

Quando non c'era il gatto, ballavano i topi.

The house was robbed while he slept.

Mentre egli dormiva la casa venne spogliata.

All the time he talked he made feverish gestures.

Man mano che discorreva, gesticolava febbrilmente.

§ 9. We have dealt so far with the NORMAL use of the imperfect—the only important use. There are two other uses of which something must be said, since the student will certainly meet with them in his reading, though he is not bound to use them himself. We may call them the conditional imperfect and the historical imperfect.

§ 10. The conditional imperfect. The imperfect indicative may be used in one or both halves of a conditional sentence, replacing the pluperfect subjunctive or the past conditional. Thus if we wish to translate the sentence 'If he hadn't come just then, I should have drowned', we have a choice of four forms:

(a) *Se non ci fosse capitato in taglio, io sarei affogato.*

(b) *Se non ci capitava, io affogavo.*

(c) *Se non ci capitava, io sarei affogato.*

(d) *Se non ci fosse capitato, io affogavo.*²

¹ Leaving *fu*, as a friend remarks, for the kind of facts that might figure on a tombstone.

² Further examples of (b), (c), (d): (b) *Se non facevo così, ci arrivavo io solo quassù e la facevano a me la pelle* ('they would have killed me'). (Borgese.) (c) *Se non mi tenevo alla maniglia della porta, sarei andata in terra quanto son lunga* ('I should have fallen full length'). (Tozzi.) (d) *Se il facchino non l'avesse sostenuta, cadeva.* (Fogazzaro.)

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(English has an incomplete parallel in such phrases as ‘I was a dead man’, common in certain conversations of fiction.)

The same use occurs fairly often in independent conditional sentences with *dovere*, *bisognare*, etc.; *dovevano*, *bisognava* may replace *avrebbero dovuto*, *sarebbe bisognato*.

§ 11. The historical imperfect. This is a kind of vivid substitute for the past definite, and is used where the past definite might in fact be used. It occurs most often in historical narrative, and generally in a group of similar sentences, e.g.: *Nello stesso anno 1789 succedevano eventi di scopo assai diverso; l'orientalista Jones metteva in luce la prima traduzione di un classico indiano; Mozart creava il più squisito dei quintetti; scoppiava la rivoluzione francese*. The imperfects here are not descriptive; they mean, not that these things were in process of happening, but that they happened; in fact, they correspond to the A sentences, not to the B sentences, of § 7.

It is difficult to distinguish the force of this imperfect from that of the past definite itself. We may say perhaps that it expresses something of this kind: ‘If we look at the happenings of this year, we find Sir William translating, Mozart composing, the Revolution breaking out.’¹

This explanation seems to the writer unsatisfactory; if to the reader it seems no explanation at all, he is advised to leave the idiom altogether, to cling firmly to the distinctions made in § 7, and in such a sentence as this to write: *successero, mise, creò, scoppiò*. The past definites will be correct.

PAST DEFINITE AND PAST INDEFINITE

§ 12. The main difference between *feci* and *ho fatto* is that between English ‘I did’ (past definite of the A form in § 7) and ‘I have done’. This is not the whole truth. Italian sometimes uses a past indefinite where English would not, in reference to the *recent* past, e.g. *Ho fatto una gita ieri*, ‘I went for a ramble yesterday’; this is fairly common

¹ French has the same idiom; in historical writing especially, *naissait, mourait* may have practically the sense of *naquit, mourut*.

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in speech. And on the other hand, *lessi* in written Italian has sometimes the force of 'I have read'.¹ Nevertheless, English usage is a safe enough guide, and it would be correct to say *feci* in the one case and to write *ho letto* in the other. French usage is different, and the student should not be influenced by it. For although, as has been said, the Italian past indefinite in conversation is sometimes an alternative to the past definite, it is not a necessary substitute as in French.² Italians have no feeling against the use of the past definite in speaking, just as they have none against the use of the imperfect subjunctive.

N.B. The past definite of certain verbs has sometimes a stronger meaning than other tenses: *Ebbi*, I got;³ *fui*, I went;⁴ *conobbi*, I met (made the acquaintance of); *seppi di* . . . , I was told of. . .

PAST ANTERIOR

§ 13. The past anterior is used much as in French.

(a) In subordinate clauses. After *appena (che)*, *subito che*, *tosto che*, *quando*, *dopo che*, *poi che*, when the main verb is PAST DEFINITE.

As soon as I'd got in, I saw what had happened.

<i>Appena</i>	} <i>fui entrato,⁵ m' accorsi dell' accaduto.</i>
<i>Tosto che</i>	
<i>Subito che</i>	
<i>Quando</i>	

¹ Two modern examples. *Come un vecchio forzato che espiò* ('has expiated') *largamente la sua colpa ed è in pace con sè.* (Cecchi.) *Le parole hanno un potere proprio e una tentazione; e chi non ebbe ad arrossire d' averne abusato* ('has never had an occasion to blush')? (Bacchelli.) But this use is much rarer now than it was in the last century; cf. the past definites in Foscolo's preface to his '*Gazzettino del Bel Mondo*' (*intitolai. . . posi. . . disposi*—all past indefinite in sense).

² More exactly: In conversation and letters the past indefinite is preferred when one names a time which has not yet elapsed: *Ho fatto una gita oggi, stamane, questa settimana.* But if the time named has elapsed (by at least one clear day), Tuscans prefer the past definite even in conversations and letters: *Feci una gita ieri, la settimana passata, il mese passato.*

³ *Scese all' Albergo del Sole, ebbe una stanza dove non c'era nè sole nè fuoco.* (Fogazzaro.)

⁴ *Con un grido d' amore angoscioso Iride fu a lui* ('rushed up to him'). (Bacchelli.) *Fuggì, e fu nella stanza del figliuolo* ('entered his son's room'). (Panzini.)

⁵ Often abbreviated to *Entrato che fui*.