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Italian light verb constructions and definiteness

1 Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the morpho-syntactic flexibility and semantic properties inherent in Italian light verb constructions (LVCs), with a particular emphasis on the variation of determiners. It focuses on the use of definite and indefinite articles in conjunction with nouns representing events within LVCs. Illustrative examples include *fare una/ la doccia* ‘to take a/ the shower’ and *dare una/ l(a) opinione* ‘to give an/ the opinion’. Special attention is given to LVCs featuring the verbs *dare* ‘to give’ and *fare* ‘to make/ do’.

The analysis is conducted through the syntax-semantics framework developed by Role and Reference Grammar (RRG) (Van Valin and LaPolla, 1997, 317–440; Van Valin, 2005, 128–293), which provides a valuable theoretical perspective for describing the significant syntactic and semantic features crucial for understanding the LVCs in question and the event structure that the light verb (LV) and its noun phrase (NP) contribute to. The data for this study sourced from the itTenTen20 corpus, a web-based Italian dataset from 2020, accessible via the Sketch Engine corpus manager (Kilgarrieff et al., 2004).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2, along with its subsections 2.1 and 2.2, offers an overview of the semantic and syntactic properties of LVCs under investigation. Section 3 delves into the concepts of (in-)definiteness and the referentiality associated with Italian definite and indefinite articles. Section 4 presents the analysis of the data. Section 5 provides a succinct overview of Role and Reference Grammar (RRG). Section 6 addresses the syntax-to-semantics linking within both non-LVCs and LVCs according to the RRG framework, specifically focusing on the mapping between the syntactic roles in a sentence and the semantic roles of the participants in the event. Section 7 concludes the paper.

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2 Light verb constructions

The investigated Italian verb-noun constructions are considered a semantically compositional subtype of idioms, structured syntactically through the application of regular syntactic rules in the language (cf. Fellbaum, 1993, 271–295; Nunberg et al., 1994, 491–538; McGinnis, 2002, 665–672; Svenonius, 2005, 227–263; Everaert, 2010, 76–98; Stone, 2013, 1–22; Wittenberg, 2016; Fleischhauer, 2021b, 31–62, and others). Thus, they can be positioned between the constructions represented in (1):

- (1) a. *Il medico diede una penna a Tomàs.*
 the doctor give.3SG.PST INDEF.F.SG pen to Tomàs
 ‘The doctor gave a pen to Tomàs.’
 b. *tirare le cuoia*
 pull.INF DEF.F.PL leathers
 ‘kick the bucket’

In (1a), we observe a “free”, productive combination characterized by a lack of preconstruction, wherein the structure remains a semantically literal structure and the words retain their conventional meanings. In contrast, the construction in (1b) represents a preconstructed idiom that lacks semantic literalness. The connection between the NP *cuoia* ‘leathers’ and the semantics of the expression is not immediately apparent. The NP deviates from its typical reference within the discourse’s object universe and cannot be decomposed into components aligning with the lexical components of the expression. Consequently, such constructions are frequently perceived as both semantically and syntactically monolithic, stored as unified entities within the lexicon and resistant to numerous syntactic operations, as any modification could potentially induce a shift in meaning (Gibbs and Nayak, 1989, 133; Nunberg et al., 1994, 509; Horn, 2003, 249).¹ Consider instead the following examples:

- (2) *Il Presidente ha dato una risposta ai presenti in aula*
 the president give.3SG.PRS.PERF INDEF.F.SG answer to presents in chamber
 sulla situazione in corso.
 on.the situation ongoing
 ‘The President has given an answer to those present in the chamber on the ongoing situation.’ (marche.it)

¹ A good example of syntactic operations is passivization. Considering the idiomatic phrase *tirare le cuoia* ‘kick the bucket’, **le cuoia sono state tirate ieri da Gianni* ‘the bucket was kicked yesterday by John’ cannot mean that John died yesterday; the idiomatic phrase cannot be passivized.

- (3) *Il bagno minuscolo si allagava dopo aver fatto la*
 the bathroom tiny flood.3SG.PST after have.INF make.PST.PTCP DEF.F.SG
doccia (non c'era nessun divisorio tra i sanitari e la
 shower no there=be.IMPF no partition between the fixtures and the
doccia).
 shower
 'The tiny bathroom would flood after taking a shower (there was no partition
 between the fixtures and the shower).' (expedia.it)

It is evident that both constructions *ha dato una risposta* in (2) and *aver fatto la doccia* in (3) do not fall into the category of free combinations and are clearly distinct from idioms. The verbs *dare* 'to give' and *fare* 'to make/ do' are not used in their usual meaning, and they lack any idiomatic connotation. Their formation is idiosyncratic and constructional, meaning that the structure for specific patterns and the specific way they resolve their partial composition are stored in the lexicon. Let's reconsider example (1a). The verb *dare* 'to give' in this context means 'to hand over', involving the specific transfer of a tangible item (such as the pen) from one person (like the doctor) to another (like Tomàs). This specific transfer is absent in example (2). The verb *dare* 'to give' only denotes a general sense of transfer that involves a metaphorical meaning, while the NP *risposta* 'answer' encapsulates the action itself.

The examples provided in (2) and (3) represent a common verb-noun construction in Italian, referred to as 'light verb constructions' (LVCs). These LVCs typically comprises a light verb (LV) with a reduced semantic weight, in conjunction with a NP that carries the principal substantive meaning of the construction, often referred to as a deverbal noun (cf. von Polenz, 1963; Harris, 1968; Gross, 1976, 97–119; Gross, 1981, 7–52; Gross, 1984, 123–156; Gross, 1993, 16–23; Gross, 2010, 16–35; Elia et al., 1985, 311–325; Giry-Schneider, 1987, 27–28; Salvi, 1988, 79; Fellbaum, 1993; Nunberg et al., 1994; Elia and D'Agostino, 1998, 317; Cicalese, 1999, 450; Alba-Salas, 2004, 283 McGinnis, 2002, 669; Mastrofini, 2004, 383; Svenonius, 2005, 227–263; Everaert, 2010, 76–98; Huddleston and Pullum, 2010, 290–292; Stone, 2013, 1–22; Plante, 2014, 82; Wittenberg, 2016, 9–11; Fleischhauer, 2021b, 31–32; Fleischhauer, 2021a, 63, Pompei and Piunno, 2023, 99–100 and others). LVCs typically involve lexical restrictions triggered by the noun (e.g., *prendere*/ **fare una decisione* 'to take/ *to make a decision') that vary across languages, as seen in constructions such as *fare una doccia* (lit. 'to make a shower') in Italian and its English translation *take a shower*.

The notion of 'light verb' originates from Jespersen's (1942) analysis of Modern English grammar, referring specifically to deverbal nouns paired with an "insignificant verb, to which the marks of person and tense are attached, before the really important idea" (Jespersen, 1942, 117). Various terms have been used in the literature to describe these constructions. In French and Italian, they are also known as 'con-

structions à verbe support’ or ‘costruzioni a verbo supporto’ (La Fauci, 1979, 39–40; Gross, 1981, 37; Elia et al., 1985, 311–312; Giry-Schneider, 1987, 2–3; Salvi, 1988, 79; De Angelis, 1989, 223; Stichauer, 2000, 37–38; Mastrofini, 2004, 388–389; Ježek, 2004, 189; Pompei, 2017, 109–110), emphasizing the syntactic perspective where the verb serves as a function word or operator facilitating the predication of another lexical item. In English linguistics, this concept is occasionally discussed (Danlos, 1992, 2; Dras, 1995, 451; Igor, 1996, 38; Krenn, 2000, 74; Fillmore et al., 2003, 243; Langer, 2004, 171). While ‘light verb constructions’ and ‘support verb constructions’ are widely accepted in Italian, English, and French literature, German literature presents a broader range of labels for similar constructions. These include ‘Verbaufspaltungen’ (‘verbal dispartments’, Lüger, 1995, 118), ‘nominale Umschreibungen’ (‘nominal paraphrases’, Keller and Mulagk, 1995, 577), and notably, ‘Funktionsverbgefüge’ (‘function verb constructions’, von Polenz, 1963, 11).

2.1 Semantic and syntactic properties of LVs

In LVCs, the verb typically carries a neutral and generic meaning because the semantic weight shifts from the verb to the noun phrase. This makes the verb “semantically light”, as its contribution to the overall meaning of the NP is limited. Specifically, the LV primarily provides (i) morphological features such as tense, number, aspect, and diathesis (which determines the syntactic roles of the nominal arguments), and (ii) an indication of the noun’s semantic role as determined by the verb’s subject. In examples (2) and (3), the verbs *dare* ‘to give’ and *fare* ‘to make/ do’ are used in a non-standard sense, contributing no additional meaning to their respective NPs *risposta* ‘answer’ and *doccia* ‘shower’. Moreover, given that the subject of the verb in (2) and (3) functions as a semantic argument of the noun, it is possible to construct an acceptable NP where the verb’s subject acts as a dependent, with the use of any preposition. Verb reduction for the LVC in (2) is represented in (4):

- (4) *Il Presidente ha dato una risposta ai presenti* → *La risposta del Presidente ai partecipanti*
 ‘The President gave an answer to those present’ → ‘The President’s answer to the participants’

LVCs only express valency complements that relate to the semantic participants of the noun. For instance, the noun *risposta* ‘answer’, derived from an intransitive two-argument agentive verbs *rispondere* ‘to answer’, carries two thematic roles. When combined with the ditransitive verb *dare* ‘to give’, which has three argument slots, *risposta* ‘answer’ fits naturally. In contrast, the noun *doccia* ‘shower’, derived

from the intransitive pronominal one-argument verb *doccia(r)(si)* ‘to shower’, has only one thematic role. It combines with *fare* ‘to make/ do’, offering two argument slots (Samek-Lodovici, 2003, 835–836). The underlying idea is that in LVCs, an argument transference (or a similar mechanism) allows the NP to assign its thematic-roles to the V (Grimshaw and Mester, 1988, 211–219). Therefore, broadening the scope of LVC analysis, any syntactic argument of the verb could potentially assume the semantic argument of the noun.

2.2 Semantic and syntactic properties of NPs

In LVCs, at least one semantic argument of the verb acts as a mandatory and specific participant in the event described by the noun, due to the noun’s predicative nature. Predicative nouns (predNs) are nouns that express predicates whose meaning is fully specified by their semantic arguments. For example, the predN *risposta* ‘answer’ in (2) denotes an event with two semantic arguments: who gives the answer and who receives it, as in example (4). In contrast, the predN *doccia* ‘shower’ in (2) denotes an event with one semantic argument ‘the one who takes a shower’.

Referring to the LVC in (3), the noun *doccia* ‘shower’ shares semantic features such as duration, dynamicity, and telicity that align with those of the verb *fare* ‘to make/ do’ (Grimshaw, 1990, 10). This is corroborated by the use of aspectual modifiers (IN/ FOR test) like the complement of duration *di dieci minuti* ‘of ten minutes’, that represents a natural beginning and end point, as illustrated in example (5):

- (5) *Così per fare una doccia di dieci minuti anziché consumare*
 thus to make.INF INDEF.F.SG shower of ten minutes instead consume
100 litri se ne usano circa la metà.
 100 liters one of.it use.3PL.PRS about the half
 ‘Therefore, to take a ten-minute shower instead of using 100 liters, about half is used.’

The verb *fare* ‘to make/ do’ provides a framework for the action described by the construction, but it does not specify the action in great detail. The noun determines the verb’s meaning and retains its meaning within the construction, as in other contexts. The more specific information in (3) and (5) comes from the count predN *doccia* ‘shower’ that gives clarity to the nature of the action (shower-making). It refers to inherently bounded situations, signifying occurrences delimited by specific spatial and temporal boundaries. In accomplishment terms, example (5) denotes an event progressing toward a terminus (Vendler, 1967, 101). The bounded nature relies

not only on the verb but also on the majority of the predicative nominal constituent (Verkuyl, 1972, 59).

In terms of syntax, the question arises whether the NP truly functions as the direct object or if it has more restricted distribution suggesting a different syntactic role. It is necessary to explore whether the noun in Italian LVCs behaves like an argument or if it has a distinct syntactic role. We argue that the NP holds the same syntactic status as any other NP in an object position. The hypothesis of semi-compositional construction appears well-founded for examples (2) and (3), as the complete meaning of these constructions cannot be fully deduced from the meanings of their individual parts. LVs and NPs essentially consist of distinct word-level lexical entries, encompassing a nominal and a verbal component.

Notably, the NP functions as the semantic head of the construction, while the LV serves as the syntactic head. Each element contributes specific meaning and function to the overall construction. The semi-compositional LVCs demonstrate enhanced syntactic flexibility, influenced by the interaction between the syntactic verb head and the semantic noun head. This hypothesis finds support in various syntactic tests used as diagnostics for mobility (cf. Machonis, 1985, 299; Nunberg et al., 1994, 501). Returning to the example of *dare una risposta* ‘to give an answer’ in (2), this flexibility is evident in the results obtained from passivization in (6a), relativization in (6b), topicalization in (6c), and modification in (6d):

- (6) a. *La risposta è stata data dalla giurisprudenza, cioè da*
 DEF.F.SG answer give.3SG.PST.PASS by case law namely by
quei magistrati, in primo luogo quelli della Cassazione [...].
 those judges primarily those of the Court of Cassation [...]
 ‘The answer was provided by case law, namely by those judges, primarily
 those of the Court of Cassation [...].’ (laleggepertutti.it)
- b. *Le vorrei chiedere un altro chiarimento su una*
 you like.1SG.COND ask.INF a further clarification on INDEF.F.SG
risposta che ha dato un lettore.
 answer that give.3SG.PRS.PERF a reader
 ‘I would like to ask you for further clarification on a response you gave
 to a reader.’ (repubblica.it)
- c. *Come dicevamo, la vera risposta la darà Google alla fine*
 as say.1PL.PST DEF.F.SG real answer it give.3SG.FUT Google at end
del corrente mese, [...].
 of current month [...]
 ‘As we were saying, the real answer will be provided by Google at the end
 of this month, [...].’ (altervista.org)

- d. *Dopo 4 ore di esami, i medici legali hanno
 after 4 hours of examinations the doctors forensic give.3PL.PRS.PERF
 così dato la prima risposta agli interrogativi sospesi sulla
 thus DEF.F.SG first answer to_the questions lingering on_the
 fine del primo cittadino.
 end of_the first citizen
 ‘After 4 hours of examinations, the forensic doctors thus provided the
 initial answer to the lingering questions about the mayor’s condition.’
 (ristretti.it)*

In (6a), the NP *la risposta* ‘the answer’ shifts to become the subject of the passive sentence, with the verb immediately following it. For both (6b) and (6c), the NP precedes the LV, and in (6c), it acts as the antecedent for an anaphoric pronoun. In (6d), the LV and the NP are separated by an adjective.

Therefore, the LVCs are typically defined as “combinations of predicative nouns and semantically weak or reduced verbs, where the noun subcategorizes semantically and the verb subcategorizes syntactically” (Langer, 2004, 173).

3 (In)definiteness

Most linguists would concur that a definite NP presupposes that the speaker assumes the addressee is able to identify the specific entity being referenced, based on the sentence itself, previous discourse, the current context, the addressee’s general knowledge, or other pertinent sources. Conversely, an indefinite NP indicates that the speaker assumes the hearer lacks this specific knowledge (cf. Lyons, 1999, 1–2; Birner and Ward, 1994, 93–94).

The complexity of the situation becomes apparent upon closer examination. Different forms of definiteness and indefiniteness exist, influencing levels of specificity and implying varied assumptions about existence. In this context, Prince (1981, 233, 245) observes that both definite and indefinite NPs reveal different ways of referring. Without engaging with the intricate discussions from various theoretical perspectives, including logical semantics, functionalism, psycholinguistics, and computational linguistics, the concept of (in)definiteness is frequently explained through factors such as uniqueness, identifiability and inclusiveness (Russell, 1905, 481; Christophersen, 1939, 72; Hawkins, 1978, 167; Hawkins, 1984, 649; Löbner, 1985, 299; Kadmon, 1990, 283; Neale, 1990; Lyons, 1999, 7–11; Lambrecht, 2000, 613–616), familiarity (Christophersen, 1939, 75; Karttunen, 1976, 364; Kamp, 1981, 279; Heim,

1982, 193–196; Lyons, 1999, 2–7), or salience (Lewis, 1979, 178; von Heusinger, 1997, 18–22).

The distinction between familiarity/ anaphoricity and uniqueness closely parallels the distribution of strong and weak definites in German (Cieschinger, 2006, 30; Puig-Waldmüller, 2008, 148; Schwarz, 2009, 22–32; Schwarz, 2019, 3–5). The weak/strong distinction, first introduced by Milsark (1977, 8) and revisited among others by Diesing (1992, 8–11), has been examined in terms of cardinality, symmetry, or existentiality (cf. Keenan, 1987, 291; Blutner, 1993, 134; Poesio, 1994, 284–286; Zucchi, 1996; McNally, 1998, 3; Carlson and Sussman, 2005, 75; Carlson et al., 2006, 2013; Klein et al., 2013, and others). Based on this assumption, definite and indefinite articles may each have a weak and a strong form. Strong definites are mostly used in anaphoric contexts, reflecting familiarity. In contrast, weak definites mainly occur in immediate and larger-situation contexts, indicating uniqueness in Hawkins' terms. Unlike regular (strong) definites, weak definites do not refer to uniquely identifiable individuals.

Additionally, specificity and referentiality play significant roles across various theories (cf. Quine, 1960, 141–156; Kripke, 1977, 257; Givón, 1978, 293–294; Hawkins, 1978, 167–168, 203–209, 215; Fodor and Sag, 1982, 355; Lazard, 1984, 283; Croft, 1988, 161; Croft, 2003, 130–132; Enç, 1991, 21; Ludlow and Neale, 1991, 176; Farkas, 1995, 119; Farkas, 2002, 229; Larson and Segal, 1995, 334–342; Haspelmath, 1998, 95–98; Lyons, 1999, 58; Aissen, 2003, 438; von Heusinger, 2002; Leonetti, 2004, 76–79; de Swart, 2007, 135). Specificity relates to elements already established in the discourse. A specific noun phrase presupposes the existence of a uniquely identified entity, indicating that the speaker has a particular referent in mind. In contrast, a non-specific NP signals that the identity of the entity is not established and no specific referent is intended. Only unidentifiable expressions can have a non-specific interpretation. According to von Heusinger (2002, 252), specificity is a 'referential property' of NPs, which transcends the definite versus indefinite distinction and is akin to genericity (cf. Krifka and Gerstner-Link, 1993, 966–978). Both specificity and non-specificity can apply to indefinite NPs or to NPs marked by definite markers or definite articles, but with a generic reading.²

In Italian, the masculine and feminine definite articles *il/ la* 'the' and the indefinite articles *uno/ a* 'a' are used to highlight or distinguish a discourse referent that the speaker believes may or may not be uniquely identifiable to the hearer. This concept of definiteness is tied to the determiner system, which reflects scalar or hierarchical values depending on the type of determiner used (Croft, 1988, 166).

² The theoretical discussion on definiteness has been revisited by see Reimer and Bezuidenhout (2004); Schwarz (2009); Coppock and Beaver (2015), and Aguilar-Guevara et al. (2019).

However, not all NPs in Italian include an article. For instance, expressions like *fare attenzione* (lit. ‘to make attention’) ‘to pay attention’ or *dare retta* (lit. ‘to give reason’) ‘to listen to (someone)’ lack articles. This study will not address LVCs that omit articles, as they typically function as idiomatic or fixed expressions. In these instances, the noun often refers to a general or abstract concept, which in Italian does not always require an article. Such expressions are usually understood as cohesive semantic units.

Consider the examples presented in (7) :

- (7) a. *Gianni ha comprato una macchina questa mattina.*
 John buy.3SG.PRS.PERF INDEF.F.SG car this morning
 ‘John bought a car this morning.’
 b. *Gianni ha comprato la macchina questa mattina.*
 John buy.3SG.PRS.PERF DEF.F.SG car this morning
 ‘John bought the car this morning.’

In (7b), the NP *la macchina* ‘the car’ is more definite and specific compared to *una macchina* ‘a car’. However, as previously mentioned, *una macchina* ‘a car’ still refers to a particular car from the speaker’s perspective. The key difference lies in the fact that the reference of *la macchina* ‘the car’ is assumed to be clear to both the speaker and the hearer. In contrast, the car mentioned in (7a) is not yet established in the hearer’s mental context. This distinction supports the familiarity hypothesis. Example (7b) illustrates a situational use of *la* ‘the’, indicating that the context is immediate, identifiable, or relatively close, even if the specific referent is not physically present. The presupposition of identifiability suggests that the speaker believes the referent is already represented in the hearer’s long-term memory during the conversation. Additionally, the definite article implies uniqueness, signaling that only one entity fits the given description. On the other hand, the indefinite article *una* ‘a’ allows for a similar interpretation while also suggesting that the car could be one of several options.

However, several factors beyond the noun and determiner can influence reference. These include linguistic and non-linguistic context, the salience of the referent, world knowledge, and the syntactic position and information status of the noun phrase. In example (7a), the indefinite NP *una macchina* ‘a car’ can be interpreted in two ways: with a stronger specific reading (indicating that the speaker has a particular car in mind) or with a weaker non-specific reading (referring to any car). A noun phrase achieves a referential interpretation within an utterance if it not only “refers to an entity in the world” (Bennett, 2002, 167) but also ensures that, as a consequence of hearing the noun phrase, both the speaker and the listener can identify and fully recognize the same entity in “the world” (Lyons, 1999, 254).

Definite articles can exhibit various types of referentiality. They typically refer to something that uniquely satisfies their predicate within a general or specific context. For example, a bridging definite refers to an object that is uniquely identified in relation to another specified object, as illustrated in example (7b). In addition to this, definite articles can refer to a specific NP that does not necessarily imply familiarity or uniqueness. For instance, in the sentence in (8):

- (8) *Gianni legge il giornale tutti i giorni.*
 John read.3SG.PRS DEF.M.SG newspaper every the days
 ‘John read the newspaper every day.’

The definite article *il* here does not refer to a particular newspaper. Instead, it refers to the activity of reading newspapers in general. This usage illustrates a weak definite construction, where the focus is on the familiar activity rather than a specific newspaper. In the context of weak definites, familiarity helps to explain why certain noun phrases, like *andare all’ospedale* ‘go to the hospital’, do not refer to a unique entity but instead evoke a stereotypical activity, like receiving care.

To address this issue, various LVCs were collected and analyzed, alternating between the use of definite and indefinite articles, and vice versa.

4 Data analysis

This section examines the alternation between definite and indefinite NPs in Italian LVCs to analyze the nuanced meanings shaped by context, with a particular focus on the role of definite and indefinite articles. The attention is focused on constructions that can be manipulated syntactically and semantically only in accordance with the speaker’s grammatical competence and the pragmatic conditions in a given discourse without involving a change of meaning.³

³ The definiteness/ indefiniteness alternation allows us to distinguish two main types of verbo-nominal constructions: on the one hand, those that do not involve a change of idiomatic meaning, and on the other hand, those that do so. Consider the following example in (i):

- (i) *Sono andata a fare la spesa per papà.*
 go.1SG.PRS.PERF to make DEF.F.SG grocery shopping for dad
 ‘I went grocery shopping for Dad.’

The components of *fare la spesa* have a literal connection to the overall idiomatic meaning. They identify normally decomposable idioms (Gibbs and Nayak, 1989), in which *spesa* refers to an actual ‘grocery’. The idiomatic use of the definite article corresponds to its standard use to establish

The analyses and reflections are based on examples taken from the itTenTen20 corpus, an internet-based Italian Web 2020 dataset accessible via the Sketch Engine corpus manager (Kilgarrieff et al., 2004). The selected examples primarily focused on the most frequently collocates of the verbs *fare* ‘to make/ do’ and *dare* ‘to give’ used as definite or indefinite direct objects in constructions with denotative meaning. Examples with connotative implications are intentionally excluded from this study. Each collocate is examined to illustrate the alternation between definite and indefinite determiners, along with their respective occurrence counts in the corpus. This approach highlights how the choice of determiner influences the interpretation of LVCs in Italian, shedding light on the subtleties of meaning that arise in different contexts.

Consider examples (3), repeated for convenience in (9). Corpus data reveal that the LVC *fare la doccia* is the most common, with a total of 17,118 occurrences, compared to 9,057 for the LVC *fare una doccia*:

- (9) a. *Il bagno minuscolo si allagava dopo aver*
 the bathroom tiny flood.3SG.PST after have.INF make.PST.PTCP
fatto la doccia (non c’era nessun divisorio tra i
 DEF.F.SG shower no there be.IMPV no partition between the
sanitari e la doccia).
 fixtures and the shower
 ‘The tiny bathroom would flood after taking a shower (there was no
 partition between the fixtures and the shower).’ (expedia.it)

situational reference. Commonly, always in singular form, *spesa* means the purchases that are made every day, or almost every day, of foodstuffs or household products that are necessary for the sustenance of a family or a community (the combination of *spesa* with the definite article also means ‘cost’, ‘price’, ‘amount’). This construction is a highly conventional and fixed expression. In example (ii), *fare una spesa* means, instead, ‘to buy something (very expensive)’:

- (ii) *Non è pensabile che papà abbia fatto una spesa del genere da*
 NEG be.3SG.PRS thinkable that dad make.3SG.PRS.PERF INDEF.F.SG expense like this
solo.
 alone
 ‘There is no way that Dad did all of this shopping by himself.’

The difference between *fare la spesa* (lit. ‘make grocery’) and *fare una spesa* (lit. ‘to make expense’) comes from a difference in the meanings of *spesa*, not from the definiteness/ indefiniteness alternation.

- b. *Appena arrivato a casa ho fatto una doccia ghiacciata.*
 as soon as arrive.PST.PTCP.1SG.M to house make.1SG.PRS.PERF INDEF.F.SG
 shower frozen
 ‘As soon as I got home, I took an icy shower’ (lemieorobie.com)

The definite NP *la doccia* ‘the shower’ in (9a) suggests that the action of taking a shower is implied to be something one does regularly. However, it does not refer to an individuated entity, but to an entity that is representative of its kind, or for a general concept. Consider example (10):

- (10) *Luca ti ha chiesto di comprargli il giornale.*
 Luca 2SG.OBJ ask.3SG.PRS.PERF to buy.INF.3SG.OBJ DEF.M.SG newspaper
 ‘Luca asked you to buy him the newspaper’.

The definite NP *il giornale* ‘the newspaper’ is understood to be specific, strong, and referential, meaning it is uniquely identifiable within the relevant discourse domain. This domain can be considered the common ground shared by the speaker and the hearer, which encompasses their mutual knowledge (Stalnaker, 1979, 321; Clark and Marshall, 1981, 16–21). Conversely, *la doccia* ‘the shower’ in example (9a) illustrates a non-specific (generic) definite NP. The definite article *la* ‘the’ does not refer to a specific, pre-established event, as seen in (10). Rather, *la doccia* allows for a weak interpretation typical of weak definite NPs. While it is not directly connected to the immediate linguistic or non-linguistic context, it retains a unique status within the broader situational framework. Lacking a concrete referential anchor, this weak definite NP serves as a generic term, indicating a category rather than an individual (Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts, 2011, 180–182).

In contrast, the indefinite NP *una doccia* ‘a shower’ in example (9b) refers to a specific entity within a particular context, making it a strong indefinite NP. The modifier *ghiacciata* ‘frozen’ specifies a type of showering that lies outside the speaker’s usual experience. This differs from non-specific indefinite NPs, which refer to any member of a category without particular reference. The indefinite NP *una doccia* ‘a shower’ does not introduce a new discourse referent like regular indefinites; rather, it restricts the range of a variable that has already been introduced in the discourse.

Consider other examples in (11) and (12). Similar to examples (8) and (9a), the corpus data show that the LVC *fare la spesa* is the most frequent, with a total of 83,985 occurrences, compared to 2,772 for *fare una spesa*:

- (11) *Allora quando vai a fare la spesa per te,*
 so when go.2SG.PRS to make DEF.F.SG grocery shopping for yourself
per la tua famiglia, ricordati di chi ha fame e non
 for your family remember.2SG.IMP of who have.3SG.PRS hungry and no
ha nulla.
 have.3SG.PRS nothing
 ‘So when you go shopping for yourself, for your family, remember those who
 are hungry and have nothing.’ (asdolr.it)
- (12) *Come al solito nel weekend, hai fatto una*
 as usual in_the weekend make.2SG.PRS.PERF INDEF.F.SG
spesa abbondante per l'intera settimana.
 grocery shopping big for the-whole week
 ‘As usual on the weekend, you did a big grocery shop for the whole week.’
 (altervista.org)

In these contexts, *spesa* in its singular form typically denotes a ‘grocery’. In the LVC *fare la spesa* in (11), the definite NP indicates regular purchases, often daily, of food or household essentials necessary for sustaining a family or community.⁴ In contrast, example (10) operates similarly to example (9b), as it refers to a particular grocery item recognized by the speaker or hearer in that context. Similarly to examples (9a) and (9b), the LVCs in (11) and (12) consist of a weak non-specific definite NP and an indefinite NP that denotes a specific entity.

Now, consider the following examples in (13a) and (13b). The indefinite NP *fare una passeggiata* is the most common in the corpus, with 39,488 occurrences, while *fare la passeggiata* appears 2,705 times:

- (13) a. *Anche se sono numerosi coloro che regolarmente*
 even though be.3PL.PRS numerous who that regularly
fanno la passeggiata domenicale attorno il Lago di
 make.3PL.PRS DEF.F.SG walk Sunday around the Lake of
Poschiavo [...].
 Poschiavo [...]
 ‘Even though many people regularly take a Sunday walk around Lake
 Poschiavo [...]’ (toltedalcassetto.it)

⁴ Additionally, using *spesa* with the definite article conveys meanings such as ‘cost’, ‘price’, ‘amount’.

- b. *Giocano a basket, fanno una lunga passeggiata*
 play.3PL.PRS basketball make.3PL.PRS INDEF.F.SG long stroll in
nei boschi con il cane Ketti.
 the woods with the dog Ketti
 ‘They play basketball and take a long walk in the woods with their dog
 Ketti.’ (menteinpace.it)

The LVC *fanno la passeggiata* in (13a) refers to a specific walk that occurs on Sunday, often as a weekly tradition. This activity is generally well-known and anticipated. The definite article and the modifier *domenicale* ‘Sunday’ emphasize the particular nature of this walk, providing a strong specificity to the LVC. In contrast, the indefinite NP in (13b) highlights a specific entity within a given context. Here, the modifiers *lunga* ‘long’ and *nei boschi* ‘in the woods’ denote a more general, indefinite reference that exists outside of one’s usual experience.

Here are some examples of LVCs formed with the LV *dare* ‘to give’. Let’s start from example (2), repeated in (14), along with example (15). The indefinite NP *dare una risposta* is the most prevalent in the corpus, with 91,505 occurrences, whereas *dare la risposta* appears only 20,286 times:

- (14) *Il Presidente ha dato una risposta ai presenti in aula*
 the president give.3SG.PRS.PERF INDEF.F.SG answer to presents in chamber
sulla situazione in corso.
 on_the situation ongoing
 ‘The President has given an answer to those present in the chamber on the
 ongoing situation.’ (marche.it)
- (15) *I giocatori gridano a gran voce le loro risposte e il*
 the players shout.3PL.PRS a loud voice their answers and the
Presentatore assegna i punti a ogni giocatore che ha dato
 Host award.3SG.PRS the points to each player who give.3SG.PRS
la risposta esatta [...].
 DEF.F.SG answer correct [...]
 ‘The players shout their answers loudly, and the Host awards points to each
 player who gives the correct answer [...].’ (wikipedia.org)

In example (14), *una risposta* ‘an answer’ serves as a non-specific indefinite NP that refers to any member of a category without specifying a unique referent. This is similar to example (16) below:

- (16) *Voglio comprare una bicicletta.*
 want.1SG.PRS buy.INF INDEF.F.SG bicycle
 ‘I want to buy a bicycle.’

In this case, the indefinite NP *una bicicletta* ‘a bicycle’ is also non-specific, indicating any one entity from the category of ‘bicycle’, rather than a specific one. In contrast, the weak definite NP *la risposta* ‘the answer’ in (15) implies a specific, known entity that both the speaker and hearer identify.

Consider the examples provided in (17) and (18):

- (17) *In ogni caso resta l'impegno dei volontari per dare*
 in any case remain.3SG.PRS the=commitment of_the volunteers to give
un aiuto a chi soffre.
 INDEF.M.SG help to who suffer.3SG.PRS
 ‘In any case, the commitment of the volunteers to provide help to those who are suffering remains.’ (agira.org)
- (18) *La comunità internazionale forse non sta dando l'aiuto*
 the community international maybe not give.3SG.PRS.PROG DEF.M.SG=help
che servirebbe.
 that serve.3SG.PRS.COND
 ‘The international community may not be providing the help that is needed.’
 (m.famigliacristiana.it)

In example (17) is similar to example (14). The indefinite NP refers to an action within a given context, even though it is not definitely identifiable. In (18), the definite NP serves a non-anaphoric function, pointing to something not explicitly mentioned but assumed to be known by the hearer. This assumed knowledge may arise from general awareness or inferences that the hearer can reasonably make within the context. This reflection can be extended to the following two examples:

- (19) *Ogni tanto andate a dare un'occhiata per controllare la*
 from time to time go.2PL.IMP give.INF INDEF.F.SG=look to check out the
pubblicazione di nuove proposte [...].
 publication of new proposals [...]
 ‘From time to time, visit to check out the publication of new proposals [...].’
 (lannaronca.it)
- (20) *Prima di iniziare, però, diamo la consueta occhiata*
 before to begin however give.PL.IMP DEF.F.SG usual look
all'etimologia della parola regina di questo articolo.
 at_the=etymology of_the word central of this article
 ‘Before we begin, let’s take a look at the etymology of the word central to this article.’ (marinaatzori.it)

In example (19), the indefinite NP denotes a non-specific action within a given context, while the definite NP in (20) connects to the hearer's prior knowledge of the action. This last type of construction is rarely encountered in the corpus, with only 53 occurrences, compared to 111,014 for the definite NP.

Another key aspect of the collected examples is the role of NPs modifiers within the LVCs in (11), (12), (13a), (15), (18), and (20). Analyzing these constructions reveals that modifiers in indefinite constructions provide general qualities or characteristics, indicating a type of entity or event. In contrast, modifiers in definite constructions specify known items or previously mentioned entities, often serving a contrastive function that distinguishes them from others. For instance, the adnominal modification *ghiacciata* 'frozen' in *ho fatto una doccia ghiacciata* 'I took an icy shower' in (9b) defines a kind of shower, and makes the indefinite NP specific, whereas *la passeggiata* 'the stroll' in (13a) is a familiar LVC triggered by the adjective *domenicale* 'Sunday'.

5 Theoretical framework: Role and Reference Grammar (RRG)

Role and Reference Grammar (RRG), developed by Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) and further elaborated by Van Valin (2005), is a monostratal theory of syntax. It proposes a direct connection between syntactic and semantic representations without relying on abstract syntactic structures. Instead, RRG employs a linking algorithm that includes a set of rules governing the syntax-semantics interface. Additionally, discourse-pragmatics may influence the relationship between syntactic and semantic representations.

The RRG linking algorithm operates bidirectionally: it maps semantic representations to syntactic structures (semantics-to-syntax) and links syntactic representations back to their semantic counterparts (syntax-to-semantics). Characterized as a "projectionist" theory, RRG posits that the semantic representation of a clause emerges from the lexical representation of the verb, significantly influencing the clause's syntactic structure (Van Valin, 2013, 68).

The syntactic units within the layered structure of a clause, specifically the nucleus, core argument, periphery, core, and clause, are linked to a corresponding set of semantic elements: the predicate, semantic arguments of the predicate, non-arguments, the combination of predicate and argument, and the combination of predicate, argument, and non-argument.

Operators are closed-class grammatical categories that modify various layers of the clause, such as aspect, negation, and tense. They are represented in a distinct

projection of the clause. The syntactic relationships among units in a complex construction, known as nexus relations, can occur at the nuclear, core, or clause level (Van Valin, 2005, 188).

In RRG, the semantic representation is based on the lexical features of predicates in the nuclei, utilizing an Aktionsart-based decompositional approach (Van Valin, 2013). These representations, known as Logical Structures (LSs), describe the semantic and argument structure of predicates. They integrate features from Vendler's Aktionsart classes (1967, 149), States, Activities, Achievements, and Accomplishments, and Dowty's decompositional system (1979, 33). The general linking schema in RRG is represented in Figure 1.

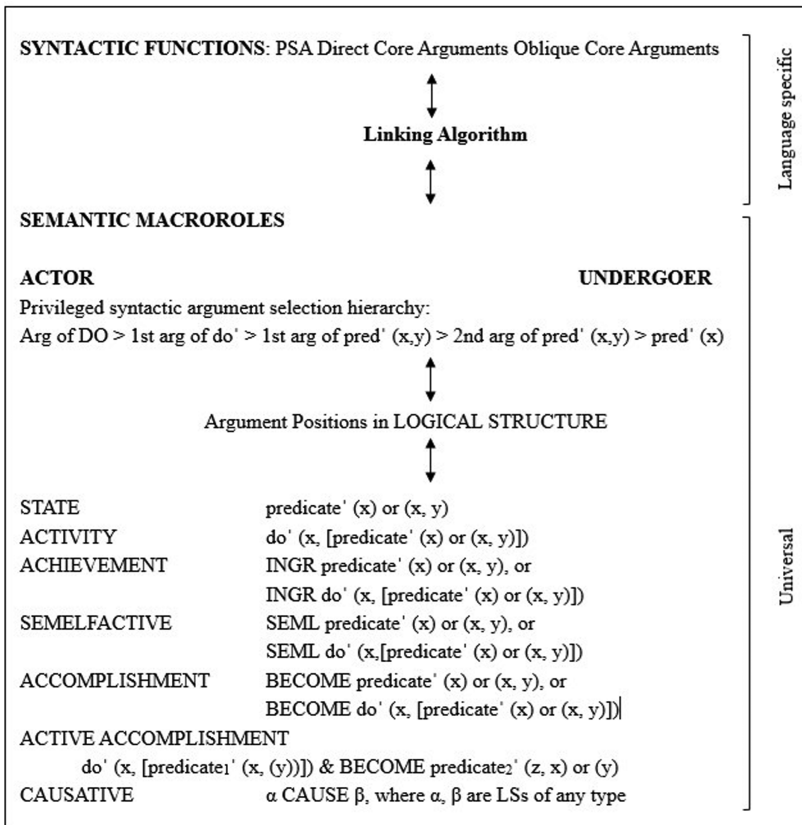


Fig. 1: Summary of RRG linking system (revisited from Van Valin, 2005, 129.)

In RRG, the theory of semantic roles identifies two primary macroroles: actor and undergoer (Van Valin, 2004, 62; Van Valin, 2005, 60). These macroroles are the main arguments in transitive predications, while intransitive verbs can have either an actor or an undergoer as their single argument, depending on their semantics. The selection of actor and undergoer in a Logical Structure (LS) is determined by the Actor-Undergoer Hierarchy (AUH). According to the AUH, for a given transitive verb, the leftmost argument in the LS is designated as the actor, and the rightmost as the undergoer (Van Valin, 2005, 61).

6 The RRG analysis of definiteness in Italian LVCs

Analyzing definiteness in Italian LVCs from an RRG perspective entails a thorough examination of how syntactic structures, such as the use of articles, map onto semantic roles and logical structures. By examining both the syntactic positions and the semantic implications of definiteness, we can better understand how Italian LVCs express specificity and generality in meaning. To begin, it is essential to examine the syntactic positions and semantic implications of the heavy verbs *fare* ‘to make/ do’ and *dare* ‘to give.’ This initial analysis will provide a foundation for comparing these findings with the structures of LVCs.

The connection between syntax and semantics is governed by the ‘Completeness Constraint,’ which posits that every specified argument in a sentence’s semantic representation must be mirrored in its syntactic structure (Van Valin, 2005, 129). Conversely, each syntactic element must have a corresponding component in the semantic representation to ensure accurate interpretation. Consider the non-LVC examples (21) and (22), where the verb functions as a heavy verb and the noun has a concrete interpretation:

- (21) *Han fatto il bagno nuovo nella casa vecchia.*
 make.3PL.PRS.PERF DEF.M.SG bathroom new in_the house old
 ‘They put the new bathroom in the old house.’ (lettiseparati.it)
- (22) *Mi date le risposte: io le posso consegnare, prima*
 me give.3PL.IMP DEF.F.PL answers I them can.1SG.PRS submit.INF before
della fine del mese.
 the end of_the month
 ‘Give me the answers: I can submit them before the end of the month.’ (atma-o-jibon.org)

The process of linking syntax to semantics during comprehension unfolds in three stages. The initial stage involves extracting all available information from the overt morphosyntactic form of the sentence, which includes the verb's voice (if applicable), case markings, word order, and adpositions. The second stage entails retrieving the logical structure of the clause from the lexicon and assigning macroroles where possible. The final stage involves mapping the arguments onto semantic relations.

The Layered Structures of the Clause (LSC) depicted in Figure 2 effectively represent the syntax-semantics linking for example (21). The essential components of the LSC in Figure 2 are the nucleus, which includes the verb predicate *fare* 'to make/ do', and the core, which contains both the nucleus and the arguments of the predicate within the nucleus: the null subject \emptyset core argument and the direct core argument *il bagno nuovo* 'the new bathroom'. In terms of the AUH, the leftmost subject core argument in the LS (the null subject \emptyset) is selected as Actor, while the rightmost direct core argument is identified as the Undergoer (i.e., *il bagno nuovo* 'the new bathroom'). In the framework of RRG's lexical decomposition system (Van Valin and LaPolla, 1997; Van Valin, 2005), the general semantic representation for the predicate *fare* 'to make/ do' is illustrated in (23):

(23) [**do'** (x, \emptyset)] CAUSE [BECOME **predicate'** (y)]

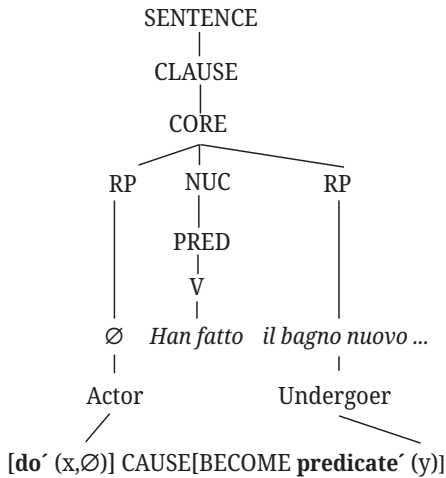


Fig. 2: From syntax to semantics for (21).

Han fatto il bagno nuovo is an Accomplishment predicate involving the unstructured activity of constructing and a culmination. These components are connected through

a BECOME event, which incorporates an incremental structure. The BECOME event associated with this scenario is BECOME-BUILT/ PUT, culminating when the bathroom (the theme) ‘becomes built’.

Following the same general procedure outlined in the algorithm, the layered structures in Figure 3 represents the syntax and semantics linking of example (22). The components of the LSC illustrated in Figure 3 include the nucleus that contains the verb predicate *dare* ‘to give’, and the core, which incorporates the nucleus along with the predicate’s arguments: the null subject \emptyset core argument, the direct core argument *le risposte* ‘the answers’, and the receiver *mi* ‘me’. According to the AUH, the leftmost subject core argument in the LS (the null subject \emptyset) is designed as the Actor, while the rightmost direct core argument is classified as the Undergoer (*il bagno nuovo* ‘the new bathroom’). The theoretical label for the third argument in a ditransitive construction within the RRG framework is ‘non-macrorole direct core argument’ (NMR) (Van Valin, 2005, 64). In the RRG’s system of lexical decomposition the general semantic representation for a three-place predicate is expressed in (24).

(24) [do’ (x, \emptyset)] CAUSE [BECOME **predicate**’ (y, z)]

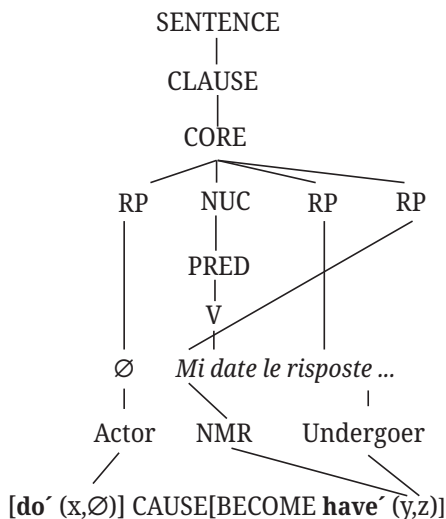


Fig. 3: From syntax to semantics for (22).

The verb *dare* ‘to give’ in this context means ‘to hand over’, specifically referring to the transfer of a tangible item (*le risposte*) from one individual (the null subject) to another (the recipient *mi*). In this scenario, the initiator of the action is represented

by the null subject \emptyset core argument, the recipient is denoted as the first argument of BECOME (y, z), which is *mi* ‘me’, and the transferred object is the second argument, *le risposte* ‘the answers’. Consider the LVCs in (25) and in (26):

- (25) *Dopo cena poi Daniele e il suo corrispondente hanno fatto*
 after dinner then Daniele and his correspondent make.3PL.PRS.PERF
il bagno in una vasca di acqua caldissima.
 DEF.M.SG bath in a tub of water very hot
 ‘After dinner, Daniele and his correspondent took a bath in a tub of very hot water.’ (quinewsvaldera.it)
- (26) *Il Presidente ha dato una risposta ai presenti in aula*
 the president give.3SG.PRS-PERF INDEF.F.SG answer to presents in chamber
sulla situazione in corso.
 on_the situation ongoing
 ‘The President has given an answer to those present in the chamber on the ongoing situation.’ (marche.it)

As discussed in Section 2.1, LVCs have a simple nucleus where the verb serves as the sole lexical head. This verb supplies morphological features such as tense, number, aspect, and diathesis, which in turn determine the syntactic roles of the nominal arguments. For instance, the NP *il bagno* ‘the bath’ naturally pairs with the transitive verb *fare* ‘to make/ do’, which requires two argument slots. Conversely, the NP *la risposta* ‘the answer’ is better suited to the ditransitive verb *dare* ‘to give’, which accommodates three argument slots. Syntactically, only the verb serves as the head of the core, while the noun typically acts as a core argument, most often the direct object. As a result, LVCs exhibit a semi-productive and semi-compositional nature, which is best analyzed through a system of lexical decomposition.

In forming LVCs, the verb takes an event-denoting noun as its argument. This predicative noun combines its meaning with part of the meaning provided by the verb. For LVCs that denote activities, such as those examined here, these constructions do not incorporate the entire [do’(x, \emptyset)] CAUSE [BECOME ...] segment of the LS of *fare* ‘to make/ do’ or *dare* ‘to give’. Instead, they include only the portion pertaining to the activity do’(...). This representation for the NP fills the second position in the LS. This gives rise to the representations in (27a) for the LVC (25) and (27b) for the LVC in (26):

- (27) a. **do’**(Daniele e il suo corrispondente, [**bath’**(Daniele e il suo corrispondente)])
 b. [**do’**(Presidente, [**express.as.answer’**(Presidente, situazione)])] CAUSE [BECOME **aware.of’**(presenti, situazione)]

The NPs *bagno* ‘bath’ and *risposta* ‘answer’ with heavy verbs and light verbs derive parts of their meaning from different aspects of their qualia (Pustejovski, 1991, 418; Pustejovski, 1995, 76; Pustejovsky, 1998, 330; Pustejovsky, 2001, 91; Van Valin, 2005, 50–52; Van Valin and LaPolla, 1997, 183–184). The meaning of nouns consists of information concerning the type of entity (i.e., whether it is a physical object, information, etc.), its components, and the eventualities associated with those entities. The examples in (21) and (22) refer to concrete entities, while those in (25) and (26) refer to activities. The LS in (25) represents qualia indicating a bath-taking event. The event is conventionalized and often culturally embedded. The LS in (24) illustrates qualia indicating an answer that can be communicated and created (presumably by writing it). Thus, the sentence in (22) implies that an individual received a physical object containing the answer, while the example in (26) suggests that an individual was informed by receiving the answer through communication.

Both the PredN and the LV function as co-predicators, contributing to the LS (cf. Rappaport-Hovav and Levin, 2001, 782). Therefore, the LS is the result of the co-composition of the LS for the verb and the LS for the noun (Van Valin, 2013, 98–104). The verb provides the lexical template, either in whole or in part, and the qualia structure of the nominal replaces a portion of the lexical template provided by the verb; specifically, the nominal should supply the predicate in the logical structure (predicate’(x) or predicate’(x, y)). Consequently, the argument structure of the resulting LVC is not directly licensed by either the noun or the verb alone; rather, it emerges from the integrated LS.

This section concludes with final reflections on the domain of weak referentiality within LVCs, a phenomenon wherein definite or indefinite NPs lack their typical referential force. As elucidated in Section 4, the potential for weak interpretations is contingent upon information stored within the lexicon and shared by the speakers. The linkage of an entity with an activity in the verb’s core meaning is explicitly incorporated into the NP’s lexical entry, specifically within its functional qualia structure (Pustejovski, 1995, 76).

The defining characteristics of weak readings is that the verb-core denotes a prototypical activity. Consequently, the definite and indefinite articles in LVCs, such as those here examined in this study, contribute their conventional semantics not by combining with the RP but with the verb-argument relations in the clause. According to this analysis, Carlson et al. (2013, 17–19), building upon the work of Klein et al. (2013), suggests that weak definites and indefinites could be interpreted similarly, giving both incorporated interpretations following the compositional structure ARTICLE(V(N)). Therefore, the semantic composition in (25) and (26) can be integrated as in (28a) and (28b):

- (28) a. DEF < **do'**(x, [**bath'**(x)])
 b. DEF < **do'**(x, [**express.as.answer'**(x, y)] CAUSE [**BECOME aware.of'**(z, y)])

The definiteness operator DEF is not linked to the NP itself, but rather to the resulting verb-argument combination. This assumes a close relationship between the LV and the NP such that both seem to form a semantic predicate. For instance, the definite article in (25) does not combine with the noun, rendering the noun semantically indefinite. This accounts for the apparent violation of the uniqueness requirement and the familiarity condition in cases with weak referentiality. It may function more like a Carlsonian weak definite which presupposes neither uniqueness nor prior mention (Carlson et al., 2006). The DEF operator denotes a familiar type of activity, one whose cultural significance is independently established and encoded within the grammar, thereby presumed as known.

7 Conclusion

Focusing on the semantic-pragmatic functions of definite and indefinite articles in NPs has given rise to some reflections on the concepts of (in-)definiteness and referentiality within Italian LVCs and non-LVCs. The findings reveal that the alternation between definites and indefinites influences the specificity of the event-denoting noun, thereby affecting the overall semantics of the LVC. For example, the distinction between *fare una doccia* 'to take a shower' and *fare la doccia* 'to take the shower' shows how definiteness modifies the focus and context of the event. Likewise, variations in the use of *una* and *la* in LVCs like *dare una risposta* 'to give an answer' versus *dare la risposta* 'to give the answer' underline the implication of article choice in determining the referentiality and scope of the NP.

The analysis of the LVCs carried out using the syntax-semantics interface developed by Role and Reference Grammar (RRG) has provided a useful theoretical perspective that is able to represent the verb meaning and definite and indefinite argument realization in LVCs and non-LVCs. The definiteness operator DEF, associated with the resulting verb-argument structure information, accounts for the hypothetical deviation from the uniqueness requirement and from the familiarity condition typically related to weak referentiality in LVCs. Its presence in the logical structure of the LVC suggests that the NP form a particularly tight unit with the LV of which it is argument. The NP appears as part of a "pseudo-incorporated" structure (cf. Massam, 2001, 157). In discussing how NPs are integrated into the verb's argument structure, it is noteworthy that while NPs in LVCs appear to be closely linked to the

LV, they do not completely align with the traditional notion of incorporation. Unlike full incorporation, where the NP become an integral part of the verb, in LVCs the NP retains its status as distinct element in the sentence. This means that although the NP and the verb are closely related, the syntactic and structural changes typically associated with complete incorporation are not fully present in LVCs.

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