Che cazzo di articolo di merda!

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1 Introduction

This paper focuses on a few unexpected morphosyntactic properties of some expressive structures in Italian. These structures involve lexical items such as *cazzo* 'dick' and *merda* 'shit', which can occur in the so-called binominal *N-of-N* construction (Aarts 1998, Napoli 1989, Español-Echevarria 1998, Den Dikken 1998, 2006, Doliana 2015, 2016, Masini 2016). Such constructions convey an emotional attitude of the speaker toward the referent denoted by the NP they cooccur with. For instance, in order to express a negative evaluation of a paper, one might say something like (1-a) or (1-b):

(1)   a.   Che cazzo di articolo!
           what dick   of paper
      b.   Che articolo di merda!
           what paper   of shit
           'What a shitty paper!'

We refer to nouns like *cazzo* and *merda* as the expressive noun (henceforth ExprN) (Potts 2007), while *articolo* 'paper' is the referential noun (henceforth RefN). As we see in (1), in Italian the ExprN can either precede (1-a) or follow the RefN (1-b).

In this paper, we look at two different expressive nouns in Italian: *cazzo* 'dick' and *merda* 'shit'. These two nouns are representative of classes with more members, and they do not exhaust the typology of Italian ExprNs. For instance, ExprNs of the *cazzo*-type include *cavolo* 'cabbage', *minchia* 'dick', and *accidenti* 'curses'.[1] Other classes that can be identified include *coglione* 'asshole', *madonna* 'virgin', and *diavolo* 'devil'. These ExprNs show different behaviours, but we shall not discuss them here (see Giorgi and Poletto 2021b for discussion of these additional types).

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[1] We were not able to identify other members of the *merda*-type class, but we cannot exclude their existence.

An influential analysis of the binominal *N-of-N* construction takes the ExprN to be an underlying predicate. In this paper, we show that certain empirical properties of *cazzo* class of ExprNs do not follow from this analysis, suggesting that, at least for this class of ExprNs, the predicate analysis is incorrect. We discuss these properties in Section 2. The properties in question are the inability of *cazzo* to appear in predicative position (Section 2.1), its stacking properties when the two types of ExprNs are combined (Section 2.2), and its agreement properties (Sections 2.3 and 2.4). We propose an analysis in Section 3.

The data and acceptability judgements have been produced by Cavirani, or extracted from the web or the literature. The judgments on the constructed examples have been confirmed with other Italian speakers.

2 The data

2.1 Predicative position

Analyses of the binominal *N-of-N* construction in terms of predicate inversion take the ExprN to be an underlying predicate (Bennis et al. 1998, Den Dikken 1998, Español-Echevarria 1998; for an alternative analysis of Italian *N-of-N* constructions, see Napoli 1989 and Masini 2016). In this respect, it is surprising to find that not all ExprNs can occur predicatively. As shown in (2-a), whereas *merda*-type ExprNs can occur predicatively, the *cazzo* type cannot. The only way to use this item predicatively is to embed it in a construction headed by *testa* 'head', or to add a derivational suffix like *-on-*, which derives person-denoting nouns (2-b).

(2)   a.   Quel professore è una merda / *un cazzo!
             that professore is a   shit   / a   dick
             'That professor is a shit/a dick.'
       b.   Quel professore è una testa di cazzo / un cazz-on-e!
             that professore is a   head of dick / a   dick-ANIM-M.SG
             'That professor is a dickhead / bonehead.'

By adding the suffix *-on-*, *cazzo* shifts to the class of ExprNs to which also *cogli-on-e* 'asshole' belongs. This class is characterised by the presence of the suffix *-on-* in the ExprN. In line with the properties of this suffix, ExprNs with *-on-* need to refer to a human referent.

2.2 Stacking

Another – hitherto underexamined – property of this construction is the fact that ExprNs are stackable, i.e. it is possible to combine two ExprNs with one

RefN, which has the interpretive effect of intensifying the negative evaluation:

(3)   a.   Che **cazzo** di articolo di **merda**!
              what dick   of article   of shit

       b.   Che **cazzo** di **merda** di articolo!
              what dick   of shit   of paper!
              'What a fucking shitty paper!'

In (3-a) the two ExprNs (bold) occur on either side of the RefN, whereas in (3-b), they are stacked in a position preceding the RefN.

    There is also the possibility of the two ExprNs following the RefN:

(4)   a.   ?Che articolo di **merda** del   **cazzo**!
              what article   of shit   of.the dick!
              'What a fucking shitty paper!'

       b.   *Che articolo del   **cazzo** di **merda**!
              what article   of.the dick   of shit!

The examples in (4) reveal an ordering restriction: despite its degraded status, the one in which *merda* is closer to the RefN (4-a), is better than that in which *cazzo* occurs between the RefN and *merda* (4-b). The same restriction holds when both ExprNs precede the RefN, as in (3-b), where the order of the ExprNs cannot be reversed.

    These cases of stacking, as well as the ordering restrictions we observe, arguably represent an additional problem for predicate inversion analyses. Assuming the ExprN to be an underlying predicate, we would need to assume a recursive structure, along the lines of (5):

(5)   [[articolo merda] cazzo]

Inverting the predicate *merda* with its subject *articolo*, and then *cazzo* with the complex of *articolo* and *merda*, could then lead to the word order of (3-b) above. The problem with such an approach is that (5) is not a very plausible underlying structure from a semantic point of view, since it corresponds to something like 'the fact that the paper is a shit is a dick'. This is quite different from the actual meaning of cases of stacking of ExprNs, which merely serve to intensify the strength of the emotion of the speaker. The second problem with this analysis is that it does not explain any of the ordering restrictions that exist when multiple ExprNs are stacked, since there is nothing that would prevent an underlying structure with a different order, i.e. [[articolo cazzo] merda].

2.3 Transparency

A property of the expressive *N-of-N* construction that has received some attention in the literature is that of the apparent (in)visibility of certain morphosyntactic features of the ExprN for syntactic agreement processes (Doliana 2015, Giorgi and Poletto 2021a,b, Saab 2022b). These features in certain cases appear to be either absent or syntactically inactive. In the following Spanish example (from Saab 2022b: 362), the F gender feature of the ExprN shows this behaviour:

(6) el   gallina   de Andrés
     the.M.SG chicken.F.SG of Andrés.M.SG
     'that chicken Andrés'

The M determiner *el* agrees with the M RefN *Andrés* rather than with the closer, F ExprN *gallina* 'chicken'. As a theory-neutral term, we shall use the concept of transparency to refer to this property of ExprNs. In Italian expressive constructions, *cazzo*-type ExprNs are typically transparent for agreement, while *merda*-type ExprNs are not. We discuss this separately for the features GENDER and NUMBER below.

2.3.1 GENDER

A GENDER mismatch can be observed in (7), where the GENDER feature of the DEM *quella* agrees with that of the F RefNs *lettera* across the ExprN *cazzo*.

(7) quella   cazzo   di lettera
     that.F.SG dick.M.SG of letter.F.SG
     'that fucking letter'

Thus, ExprNs of the *cazzo*-type are transparent for gender agreement. This is not the case for *merda*-type ExprNs, though, as the latter cannot be bypassed by the GENDER probing D. This is shown in (8-a) and (8-b).[2]

(8) a. quella   merda di articolo
         that.F.SG shit.F of paper.M.SG

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[2]Examples of transparent *merda* are marginally attested, as shown below with a string found on social media, where the M indefinite article *un* agrees with the M RefN bypassing F *merda*:

(i) un   merda   di video   da mettere su Istagram
     a.M.SG shit.F.SG of video.M.SG COMP put   on Instagram
     'a shitty video to put on Instagram'

The acceptability of structures with a transparent *merda* seems to correlate with a speaker's regiolect, and specifically with Northern Italian varieties. This will be investigated in future research.

     'That fucking paper'
  b. ?*quel merda di articolo
    that.M.SG shit.F.SG of paper.M.SG
    'That shitty paper'

On the other hand, when the ExprN follows the RefN, a gender mismatch between ExprN and RefN is always unproblematic, both for the *cazzo* and the *merda* type.

(9) a. quel professore di merda
    that.M.SG professor.M.SG of shit.F.SG
    'that shitty professor'
  b. quella professoressa del cazzo
    that.F.SG professor.F.SG of.the dick.M.SG
    'that dick of a professor'

We conclude that the ExprNs of the *cazzo* class are generally transparent for agreement.

2.3.2 NUMBER

The same picture as with GENDER is found with NUMBER. The *cazzo* class is transparent (10-a), unlike the *merda* class (10-b). In both cases, the D head and the RefN are PL, whereas the ExprN is SG.

(10) a. quei cazzo di articoli
    those.M.PL dickM.SG of paper.M.PL
    'those shits of letters'
  b. *quelle merda di lettere
    those.F.PL shit.F.SG of letter.F.PL
    'those shits of letters'

We return to a way of resolving the number mismatch in (10-b) in Section 2.4 below.

The NUMBER of the *cazzo* class ExprNs is invisible for the agreement of the determiner:

(11) *?quel cazzo di articoli
   those.M.SG dickM.SG of paper.M.PL
   'those shits of letters'

Summarizing the findings of this section on transparency, we have seen that the *cazzo* type nouns are invisible for agreement processes, whereas the *merda* nouns are not. This difference is not expected under the predication inversion

analysis of this construction (nor under any other analysis that we are aware of).

2.4 Rigidity

In the previous section, we examined cases where the ExprN could fail to agree with *phi*-features of the RefN and the determiner. An example of a number mismatch with *cazzo* was given in (10-a) above. Now one could imagine the number mismatch of (10-a) being solved by changing the number of the ExprN from SG to PL, but this leads to ungrammaticality, as (12) shows.

(12)   *quei   cazzi   di articoli
       those.M.PL dickM.PL of paper.M.PL

We call this property the rigidity of the ExprN, pointing to the fact that it cannot inflect for number. The rigidity of *cazzo*-type ExprNs also holds when the ExprN follows the RefN, as shown in (13).

(13)   a.   quegli   articoli   del   cazzo
            those.M.PL paper.M.PL of.the.SG dick.M.SG
     b.   *quegli   articoli   dei   cazzi
            those.M.PL paper.M.PL of.the.PL dick.M.PL
            'those fucking letters'

ExprNs of the *merda*-type behave like the *cazzo*-type when they follow the RefN, i.e. they are rigid and cannot inflect for number (14-a). However, when they precede the RefN, *merda*-type ExprNs are flexible, i.e. they can inflect for number to match the NUMBER value of the following RefN (14-b).

(14)   a.   quelle   lettere   di merda   / *merde
            those.F.PL letter.F.PL of shit.F.SG / shit.F.PL
            'those shitty letters'
     b.   quelle   merde   di lettere
            those.F.PL shit.F.SG of letter.F.PL
            'those shitty letters'

3 Analysis

In our view, the different positional, transparency, rigidity, and emotive content properties of the two classes of ExprNs we examined in the previous section reflect the fact that the relevant lexical items have a different internal structure. This difference in internal structure in turn reflects a difference in the

grammaticalization stage they have reached. In other words, along a lexical-to-functional continuum, *merda*-type lexical items are closer to the lexical end, while *cazzo*-type items are closer to the functional end. As such, our approach draws upon some recent analyses of the phenomenon of semilexicality and syntactic recycling, like the ones proposed by Corver (1998), Klockmann (2017), Cavirani-Pots (2020), Saab (2022b).

Concretely, we shall defend the following claims:

(15)   a.   ExprN *cazzo* lacks any referential content
       b.   ExprN *cazzo* is not morphologically complex, and lacks GENDER and NUMBER features
       c.   RefN *cazzo* is morphologically complex, and has GENDER and NUMBER features

We shall show that (15-a) leads to an explanation for the inability of *cazzo* to occur in predicative position (Section 3.1), whereas (15-b) explains its invisibility to syntactic agreement processes (Section 3.2). We discuss the reasons for assuming (15-c) in what follows.

By implication, since the *merda*-type nouns empirically differ in all these respects from the *cazzo* type, we shall take them to be morphologically complex, and the suffix following the nominal root to be an exponent expressing gender and number features (as it does in any other feminine noun to which it attaches).

3.1 Predicative position

As observed by Saab (2022a), ExprNs may behave differently in the predicative position when compared with the prenominal position. This is shown by the minimal contrast in (16) (Spanish; from Saab 2022b: 360):

(16)   a.   Andrés es puto.
            Andrés is homosexual
            'Andrés is a faggot.'
       b.   el   puto   de Andrés …
            the homosexual of Andrés
            'That damn Andrés … '

Both of these examples involve (pejorative) expressive content, which is associated with the ExprN *puto*. However, only in (16-a), where *puto* is in predicative position, does it also have truth-conditional (referential) meaning, i.e. it is part of the assertion of the sentence that Andres is a homosexual. In contrast, in (16-b), there is no implication that Andrés is homosexual, and *puto* is reduced to being solely expressive. Saab's conclusion is that the prenominal position

can be exclusively expressive. In contrast, the predicative position cannot be a purely expressive position, i.e. it necessarily carries with it referential meaning. He formulates this as as follows.[3]

(17)   *Saab's Criterion* (Saab 2022b: 367)
    All predicates that appear in copular position must have predicative
    force at the truth-conditional level.

Assuming that the ExprN *cazzo* has lost all referential meaning, we can explain why it cannot appear in predicative position, since that position requires a noun with referential meaning. In other words, the impossibility for ExprN *cazzo* to occur in the predicative position follows from the assumptions in (18):

(18)   a.   The predicative position requires an element with truth-conditional
      content (=Saab's Criterion).
   b.   ExprN *cazzo* lacks truth-conditional content, i.e. it is a pure ex-
      pressive.

Confirming this line of thought is the existence of cases where the noun *cazzo* can appear as a predicate, i.e. in copular position, as in the examples in (19).

(19)   a.   Questo è un cazz-o.
     this   is a   penis.PEJ-m.sg
     'This is a penis.'
   b.   Questi sono cazz-i   miei.
     this.PL are   business-PL mine.PL
     'These are my business.'

Here the noun *cazzo* does have referential meaning: it can be a low register word that means 'penis' (19-a), or one that refers to a generic thing or things (19-b), which we also find in (20).

(20)   Dammi quel cazzo lì!
    give.me that thing there
    'Give me that thing there.'

It is therefore not surprising that this *cazzo* with referential content occurs in predicative position, i.e. these examples confirm the correctness of Saab's Criterion. In fact, *cazzo* is like Spanish *puto*, which is a pure expressive in adnominal position, but has referential content in predicative position. The difference

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[3]Saab calls this *Pott's Criterion*, it being based on (Potts 2007: 194), who assumes that all predicates that appear in copular position must necessarily fail to be expressive. However, since Saab's formulation deviates crucially from the one in Potts (2007), we refer to it as Saab's Criterion.

is that the referential meaning of *puto* ('homosexual') is compatible with an animate RefN, whereas the RefN *cazzo* ('thing') refers to inanimate objects only. As a result, we find *puto* in predicative position with animate subjects (as in (16-a)), but not *cazzo* (see (2-a) above).

Above, we also discussed two other cases where *cazzo* (or a noun derived from it) occurred in predicative position, namely the ones in (2-b) above, with *testa di cazzo* 'head of dick' and with *cazz-on-e* 'asshole'. These can be understood as following from the fact that *testa* 'head' and the suffix *-on*, which derives person-denoting nouns, provide the necessary referential content.

The examples in (19) therefore involve not the ExprN *cazzo*, but a homophonous RefN *cazzo*. We conclude from this that in Italian there are (at least) two homophonous lexical items *cazzo*, a referential one seen in (19) and (20), and a purely expressive one, as in (1-a).[4]

The absence of any referential content in ExprN *cazzo* is further evidenced by the fact that it can be used as an NPI (21-a), as an interjection (21-b), and as an expletive with *wh*-items, as in (21-c) (examples from Doliana 2015: 3).

(21)   a.   Non ho   fatto un cazzo oggi.
                 not have.1sG done a   dick today
                 'I have done fuck all/nothing today.'
        b.   Ma mi lasci   in pace, cazzo!?
                 but me leave.2sG in peace, dick
                 'Fuck! Will you just leave me alone?!'
        c.   Ma dove   cazzo vai?!
                 but where dick   go.2sG
                 'Where the fuck are you going?!'

In its use as an NPI, *cazzo* has acquired quantificational meaning, in the manner described by Postma (1995) under the label 'zero semantics'.

The analysis that would take ExprNs to be predicates faces the problem of accounting for the fact that ExprNs have different properties when they appear adnominally from when they appear following a copula. According to our analysis, pure expressives like ExprN *cazzo* cannot be predicates, since predicates are subject to *Saab's criterion*, i.e. they are required to have truth-conditional content, which they lack. If they do appear in predicative position, they cannot be pure expressives, but must be referential nouns. This provides an argument against the predicate inversion analysis of *N-of-N* constructions, at least when purely ExprNs are involved. Note, however, that this argument

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[4]The alternative to homophony would be to assume that this a case of syncretism. We shall not here attempt to address the question what is the better analysis of the relation between the ExprN and the RefN *cazzo*, since we do not see which alternative is preferable, and on which grounds.

against a predicational analysis does not hold for the *merda* class, since it has quite different properties, as we have shown. In particular, *merda* shows no difference in properties when used adnominally or in copular position.

3.2 Transparency

We now turn to our second assumption, which holds that ExprN *cazzo* is not morphologically complex (15-b). The idea we would like to explore is that the grammaticalisation process by which a lexical noun becomes a functional item involves, alongside the loss of conceptual meaning, the loss of morphological complexity, whereby a morphologically complex noun is reanalysed as consisting of a single morpheme. This gives us a handle on dealing with both the rigidity and the transparency of ExprN *cazzo*.

The transparency of the ExprNs of the *cazzo* class could in principle be accounted for in two different ways. The first assumes that the gender and number features of the ExprN are present but invisible for the syntactic computation, while the second approach assumes that they are absent. Most existing analyses assume some form of invisibility (e.g. Doliana 2015, Giorgi and Poletto 2021a,b). We shall here defend the alternative view, according to which the ExprN *cazzo* lacks person and gender features.

An apparent problem with assuming that the features are absent is that the nouns of the *cazzo* class are, at least on the face of it, morphologically complex, consisting of a root and a suffix marking gender and number, as shown in the overview in (22).

(22)

ExprN	SUFF	GENDER	NUMBER
cazzo	-o	M	SG
minchia	-a	F	SG
accidenti	-i	M	PL

This fact at first blush stands in the way of assuming that gender and number features are lacking, since the features are clearly associated with the suffixes, and not with the root, and we would not want to say that there are two homophonous suffixes, one with and another one without gender and number features. While one could deal with this problem for *cazzo*, under the assumption that the *-o* ending is the default that is inserted when the relevant features are absent, such an approach is hard to extend to the *-a* and *-i* endings, since these cannot be also the defaults. If, on the other hand, we assume that all three ExprNs of (22) are morphologically simplex and lack gender and number features altogether, this problem does not arise: a c-commanding probe such as D will find nothing to agree with in the ExprN, and hence must agree with the RefN.

A strong argument for assuming (15-b) is the rigidity effect that we observed earlier, i.e. the fact that the *cazzo* ExprNs do not inflect for number. If they were run-of-the-mill complexes of a root and an ending, it is hard to see why this ending could not change (and as we have seen, in the case of the *merda* class the ExprN does show this flexibility).

A potential obstacle in the way of analysing *cazzo* as morphologically simplex is the fact (observed in Doliana 2015: 3) that various types of derivational morphemes may attach to the root *cazz-*, as already shown in (2-b) above for the suffix *-on*, and for *-at* in (23).

(23)   Questa è   proprio un-a bell-a   cazz-at-a!
       this.F is.3SG really a-F.SG INTS-F.SG dick-EVENT-F.SG
       'This is really a fuck-up!'

We want to argue that these cases are derived from the RefN *cazz-o*, rather than the ExprN *cazzo*. Recall that we took the RefN *cazz-o* to be a morphologically complex noun, homophonous with the ExprN (15-c). In contrast to ExprN *cazzo*, the referential noun can pluralise, be modified, and occur in predicative position (24-a), and so can the *cazz*-derived nouns (24-b).

(24)   a.   Questi   sono due be-i   cazz-i.
            this.M.PL are two beautiful-M.PL penis.PEJ-M.PL
            'These are two beautiful penises.'
       b.   Quei   professori   sono proprio de-i be-i   cazz-on-i!
            that.PL professor.PL are really a-PL INTS-PL dick-PSN-PL
            'Those professors are really boneheads!'

Moreover, when the *cazz*-derived nouns occur prenominally, they also lose the transparency property of the purely ExprN *cazzo*, i.e. they must agree with the RefN:

(25)   de-i   be-i   cazz-on-i/*e   di professor-i
       of-M.PL INTS-M.PL dick-PSN-M.PL/M.SG of professor-M.PL
       'some really bonehead professors'

3.3 Stacking

The empirical finding of Section 2.2 above was that ExprN *merda* is always closer to the RefN than ExprN *cazzo*, regardless of whether it precedes or follows the RefN. This fact confirms our earlier analysis, in so far as it also makes a distinction between the two classes of ExprNs. In this section we provide a tentative account of this finding by connecting it to the morphologically impoverished nature of the *cazzo* class. The idea is that *merda* is a normal noun

as far as gender and number marking is concerned, and as such, it is topped by the normal nominal extended projection. The latter has a position where Evaluative or speaker-oriented material may be hosted, and this is where *cazzo* can be merged. Conversely, since *cazzo* lacks gender and number projections, it does not project the nominal extended projection either, so that *merda* cannot be merged higher than *cazzo*. The evaluative position hosting *cazzo* could either be an expletive position (as proposed in Saab 2022b), or (part of) a DP-internal dedicated interactional layer for speaker and hearer related content, as proposed in Ritter and Wiltschko (2019). This layer would also host deictic demonstratives, honorific pronouns, as well as potentially other elements. Admittedly, this analysis leaves many details to be worked out. However, we take one of the main findings of this paper to be the fact that there is no uniform analysis for the ExprNs of the *cazzo* class and those of the *merda* class, as the word order and other facts we have discussed show.

4 Conclusion

In this paper we argued that Italian provides evidence for two classes of expressive constructions, the *cazzo* class and the *merda* class. These were argued to represent various stages in the evolution from a lexical noun to a functional vocabulary item, with ExprN *cazzo* have gone further in that process. This is reflected in their internal structure, in that ExprN *cazzo* has lost its internal morphological complexity, as well as gender and number features. These properties of the *cazzo* class ExprNs were shown to account for its inability to occur in predicative position, its invisibility to agreement, and its inability to pluralise. We also offered a tentative account of the stacking properties of the two classes of ExprNs.

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