

# Superlative events. Intensifying verbs through the elative suffix *-issimo*

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## 1. Introduction

In Italian, the most prototypical affix for the expression of intensification is the elative suffix *-issimo* (Cacchiani 2011; Napoli & Ravetto 2017; for the widespread perception of *-issimo* as the prototypical Italian intensification suffix, see also Giacinti 2024; Zilg 2011; Montermini 2024). Such strategy is most typically used with adjectives (1a) (Merlini Barbaresi 2004: 448-449) but is also exploited with nouns (1b) (Grandi 2002: 177), where it conveys a positive or prototypical evaluation of the referent, and to adverbs (1c) (Gaeta 2011), where it expresses the maximal degree of a property.

- (1) a. *bell-issim-o* beautiful-ELAT-M.SG ‘very beautiful’  
b. *partit-issim-a* match.ELAT-F.SG ‘big match’  
c. *subit-issimo* immediately-ELAT ‘literally immediately’

Regarding verbs, research concentrated on past participles in adjectival function (Merlini Barbaresi 2004: 449; Napoli 2013). However, usage data show that the suffix also occurs in other verbal forms (such as the present progressive, infinitive, and present simple; see 2a-c), especially in playful and/or informal contexts such as social media posts.<sup>1</sup> Notably, *-issimo* had already been used as a testing ground for word-formation rules on the Internet (Rainer 2003; Berezowska 2017). In fact, the Internet constitutes an ideal environment for observing creative and non-standard morphological uses. It has been observed that such creativity does not primarily aim at expanding morphological paradigms, but rather at increasing the expressive force (Santiloni 2026: 114).

- (2)
- |    |               |                 |                     |              |
|----|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|
| a. | <i>Non</i>    | <i>ho</i>       | <i>visto</i>        | <i>mezzo</i> |
|    | NEG           | AUX.PRS.IND.1SG | watch.PTCP.PST.M.SG | half.M.SG    |
|    | <i>minuto</i> | <i>dell’</i>    | <i>Atalanta</i>     | <i>ma</i>    |
|    | minute.SG     | of.DET.M.SG     | Atalanta            | but          |

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<sup>1</sup> All the examples shown throughout the paper are social media posts, collected from X (formerly known as Twitter).

*sto* ***godend-issimo***  
 AUX.PRS.IND.1SG **enjoy.PROG-ELAT**

‘I didn’t even watch half a minute of Atalanta BC’s match but **I’m enjoying [the result] a lot**’

|    |                  |                  |                            |                 |
|----|------------------|------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| b. | <i>Non</i>       | <i>saprei</i>    | <i>dire</i>                | <i>con</i>      |
|    | NEG              | can.PRS.COND.1SG | say.INF                    | with            |
|    | <i>certezza,</i> | <i>ma</i>        | <i>mi</i>                  | <i>ha</i>       |
|    | certainty.SG     | but              | 1SG.DAT                    | AUX.PRS.IND.3SG |
|    | <i>fatto</i>     | <i>comunque</i>  | <b><i>rider-issimo</i></b> |                 |
|    | make.PTCP        | anyway           | <b>laugh.INF-ELAT</b>      |                 |

‘I couldn’t say for sure, but it made me **laugh a lot** anyway’

|    |                 |                               |                   |                 |
|----|-----------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| c. | <i>ma</i>       | <i>io</i>                     | <i>non</i>        | <i>ho</i>       |
|    | but             | 1SG.NOM                       | NEG               | AUX.PRS.IND.1SG |
|    | <i>capito</i>   | <i>la</i>                     | <i>differenza</i> | <i>ve</i>       |
|    | understand.PTCP | DET.F.SG                      | difference.SG     | 2SG.DAT         |
|    | <i>lo</i>       | <b><i>giur-issimo</i></b>     |                   |                 |
|    | 3SG.M.ACC       | <b>swear.PRS.IND.1SG-ELAT</b> |                   |                 |

‘but I didn’t understand the difference **I sincerely swear** to you’

These uses of *-issimo* are particularly interesting since evaluative suffixation in the verbal domain in Italian is rather unusual, and other means, e.g., prefixation or analytic strategies (3), are much more frequent (Napoli & Ravetto 2017: 339).

- (3) *Non **ultradrammatizziamo** queste circostanze*  
 ‘Let’s not over-dramatise these circumstances’ (Napoli & Ravetto 2017: 340)

Moreover, evaluative suffixation in verbs has been found to exclusively express meanings related to reduction (4a), attenuation (4b), pejoration (4c), speed (4d), and iteration (4e) (Grandi 2008: 28; Grandi & Iacobini 2008: 486).

- (4) a. *canti-cchiare*  
 sing-DIM  
 ‘to sing softly’  
 b. *mangiu-cchiare*  
 eat-DIM  
 ‘to eat a little/to snack’  
 c. *studia-cchiare*  
 study-DIM  
 ‘to half-study’  
 d. *becche-ttare*  
 peak-DIM  
 ‘to peck repeatedly’

- e. *salte-llare*  
jump-DIM  
'to hop'

Occurrences like (2a-c), instead, suggest that suffixation is indeed employed with verbs, at least in some communicative contexts, as a means to convey a proper “intensifying” semantics.

However, unlike its degree-modifying use with adjectival bases, the scope of the intensification in verbs is less clear: while in (2a) it possibly marks a stronger intensity, in (2b) the higher degree could also entail a higher duration; finally, in (2c) what is modulated is the illocutionary force of the utterance.

The goal of our study is thus twofold: on the one hand, we aim to offer a description of the use and distribution of *-issimo* with verbal bases in Italian, employing occurrences found on X posts; on the other hand, we attempt to understand *what* is intensified in such verbs, and if the intensifying sub-meaning depends on (or is influenced by) some semantic features proper of the verbal bases.

## 2. Data and Methods

Our study involved three separate steps: verb choice, verb annotation, and annotation of the type of intensification.

Regarding the selection of the verbs, to create the dataset, we extracted all the verbs from the fundamental vocabulary of Italian (De Mauro 2003) and ranked them by their frequency in the VoLIP corpus (Voghera *et al.* 2014), a corpus of spoken Italian. Considering the first 300 verbs of the so-obtained frequency ranking, we checked for the use of *-issimo* with each of these verbs, searching the Italian section of X for specific verbal forms, following Grandi's (2008) approach. The forms searched included the first- and third-person singular of the present simple (5a), the first- and third-person singular of the imperfective (5b), the first- and third-person singular of the present perfect (5c), as well as the infinitive (5d) and the gerund (5e). The past participle form was intentionally excluded, as its frequent adjectival uses could have obscured the distinction between verbal and adjectival intensification, thereby introducing noise into the analysis. It should be noted that the *-issimo* forms were constructed by the authors on the basis of their native-speakers' intuition and subsequently used as search strings for data retrieval.

(5)

- a. *CIAO MARIA IO ME NE VAD-ISSIMO*  
bye MARIA 1SG SI from.here **leave.1SG.PRS.IND-ELAT**  
'Bye Mary I'm immediately leaving'
- b. *Verso sera, ieri, l'affluenza mi aveva fatto ben sperare, per un momento. Ci vedevo la possibilità che indicasse una reazione al timore per un esito dato per scontato.*  
*Mi sbagliav-issimo e per*  
*SI be.wrong.IPFV.IND.1SG-ELAT and for*  
*questo, ho ancora gli*  
*this.M.SG AUX.PRS.IND.1SG still DET.M.PL*  
*occhi sbarrati*  
*eyes.PL wide.open.PL*

'Towards evening yesterday, the turnout had given me some hope, for a moment. I thought I could see the possibility that it reflected a reaction to the fear of a taken-

for-granted outcome. **I was so very wrong**, and partly for that reason I'm still in shock.'

|    |                |                 |                 |                             |
|----|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| c. | <i>io</i>      | <i>non</i>      | <i>ho</i>       | <b><i>capit-issimo</i></b>  |
|    | 1SG            | NEG             | AUX.PRS.IND.1SG | <b>understand.PTCP-ELAT</b> |
|    | <i>il</i>      | <i>monologo</i> | <i>della</i>    | <i>Leotta,</i>              |
|    | DET.M.SG       | monologue       | of.F.SG         | Leotta                      |
|    | <i>proprio</i> | <i>come</i>     | <i>logica</i>   |                             |
|    | quite          | as              | logic           |                             |

'I **didn't completely understand** the logic behind Leotta's monologue'

|    |                 |           |                   |                              |
|----|-----------------|-----------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| d. | <i>Perché!?</i> | <i>Io</i> | <i>volevo</i>     | <b><i>dormir-issimo.</i></b> |
|    | why             | 1SG       | want.1SG.IPFV.IND | <b>sleep.INF.ELAT</b>        |

'Why!? I wanted to **sleep in**'

|    |       |           |                 |                             |
|----|-------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| e. | [...] | <i>ti</i> | <i>sto</i>      | <b><i>legend-issimo</i></b> |
|    | [...] | 2SG.ACC   | AUX.1SG.PRS.IND | <b>read.GER-ELAT</b>        |

'[...] I'm **reading** your work **so often**'

We expect *-issimo* to occur with non-finite forms (past participles, gerunds, and infinitives), due to the marked and creative nature of such suffixation, also since these forms can display adjectival properties and thus provide a natural locus for the extension of an adjectival superlative suffix.

## 2.1 Annotation workflow

Given the technical limitations of X, which prevent systematic scraping and frequency extraction, our workflow involved the manual check of the availability of *-issimo* forms across different verb forms. Each form was treated as a distinct type, and only the existence (as opposed to the frequency) of each form was recorded. The resulting counts, therefore, reflect the presence/absence of patterns rather than token counts.

A second step of our analysis consisted of annotating the verbs obtained according to (a) Aktionsart, and (b) semantic class, information for which was retrieved from Open Multilingual Italian WordNet's SemFields (Pianta *et al.* 2002). Manual labeling was necessary because of the possibility, for each verb, to display more than one sense, leading it to belong to multiple SemFields.

Annotation of Aktionsart was manually carried out by the two authors, each on one half of the dataset. The annotation of both the semantic class and the actional class of the verbs allowed us to distinguish multiple senses for each verb, resulting in a final dataset of 350 verbs.<sup>2</sup>

The diagnostic tests used to determine the Aktionsart of the verbs are reported in Table 1.

<sup>2</sup> For the complete list of verbs, and their annotation, see below Section 5.

**Table 1.** Tests employed for the Aktionsart of the verbs

| Test            | Value                                                                      | Implication                                                                      |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>is X-ing</i> | 1 = yes, 0 = no                                                            | Compatibility with progressive/gerundive form; indicates dynamic/durative nature |
| <i>for T</i>    | 1 = yes, 0 = no, 2 = if iterated, semelfactive interpretation is triggered | Compatibility with “for + duration”                                              |
| <i>in T</i>     | 1 = yes, 0 = no, 2 = culminative if telic                                  | Compatibility with “in + duration”                                               |

Table 1 summarizes the main verbal properties annotated in our dataset and their operationalization. Aktionsart categorizes each verb according to the type of event it denotes, distinguishing between State, Punctual (Telic and Atelic), Activity, and Resultative verbs. The *is X-ing* test indicates whether the verb can appear in a progressive or gerundive form, serving as a measure of dynamicity and durativity. The columns *for T* (= time period) and *in T* assess temporal compatibility. Notably, the value 2 carries a specific semantic interpretation: in *for T*, it signals that iterativity points to a semelfactive interpretation, whereas in *in T*, it signals that a telic verb leads to a culminative interpretation when combined with *in T* structures. Values of 1 indicate compatibility without these additional properties, and 0 denotes incompatibility.

Table 2 summarizes the main patterns in the interaction between Aktionsart and the temporal/dynamic properties of verbs, as captured by the tests presented above.

**Table 2.** Implications of the tests on the Aktionsart of the verbs

| Aktionsart                   | <i>is X-ing</i> | <i>for T</i> | <i>in T</i> | Example                                                            |
|------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stative                      | 0 / 1           | 1            | 0 / 2       | <i>ricordare</i> ‘to remember’, <i>dimostrare</i> ‘to demonstrate’ |
| Atelic punctual              | 0 / 1           | 0 / 2        | 0           | <i>citare</i> ‘to cite’, <i>colpire</i> ‘to hit’                   |
| Telic punctual (Achievement) | 0 / 1           | 0 / 2        | 2           | <i>chiamare</i> ‘to call’, <i>creare</i> ‘to create’               |
| Activity                     | 1               | 1            | 0           | <i>dormire</i> ‘to sleep’, <i>ridere</i> ‘to laugh’                |
| Resultative                  | 1               | 0 / 1        | 1           | <i>sostituire</i> ‘to substitute’, <i>consegnare</i> ‘to deliver’  |

The last step consisted of annotating (c) the semantics of the intensified feature, that is, the aspect of the event intensified by the suffix, based on the annotation schema illustrated below. For this purpose, the authors were assigned half of the dataset that they had not annotated before, in order to prevent the influence of prior analyses of verbal properties on the interpretation of intensification.

## 2.2 Intensified feature(s) annotation

For the purpose of identifying the intensified aspects, we employed an original annotation schema (partly based on previous works about evaluation in the verbal domain: see Portero Muñoz 1997; Fleischhauer 2016; Napoli & Ravetto 2017; Audring *et al.* 2021), including both values intensifying the extension and the intensity of an event (cf. Bolinger 1972). The potentially intensified categories are INTENSITY, DURATION, COMPLETION, ARGUMENT QUANTITY, REITERATION, MANNER, and ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE, as described in Table 3. Based on this schema, we annotated the verbs to be found on X in the *-issimo* form, specifically obtaining sometimes more than one intensified aspect per verb. Operationalization relied on paraphrasing strategies, compatibility with temporal expressions or adverbs, and contextual inference (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Tagset and tests for annotation of intensified aspect

| Category            | Explanation                                                                         | Test / Operationalization                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| INTENSITY           | Increase in the degree or force of the event compared to a neutral use of the verb  | Paraphrase with <i>molto/tantissimo</i> ‘a lot’; substitutability with degree adverbs (e.g. <i>fortemente</i> ‘strongly’, <i>intensamente</i> ‘intensely’) |
| DURATION            | Temporal extension of the event without necessarily implying a higher degree        | Compatibility with <i>a lungo/per molto tempo</i> ‘for a long time’; inference of prolonged duration                                                       |
| COMPLETION          | Emphasis on achieving the final point or outcome of the event                       | Compatibility with <i>completamente/del tutto</i> ‘completely’; inference that the result is fully achieved                                                |
| ARGUMENT QUANTITY   | Increase in the number or quantity of participants or objects involved in the event | Paraphrase with <i>molti/tanto</i> referring to objects or participants (e.g. <i>mangiare tantissimo</i> ‘eat a lot’)                                      |
| REITERATION         | Multiplication of occurrences of the event over time                                | Paraphrase with <i>ripetutamente/più e più volte</i> ‘again and again’                                                                                     |
| MANNER              | Emphasis on the way the action is carried out (energy, accuracy, emphasis)          | Paraphrase with manner adverbs (e.g., <i>con forza, con enfasi</i> ‘with strength, with emphasis’)                                                         |
| ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE | Emphasis on the speaker’s commitment or the pragmatic force of the speech act       | Paraphrase with <i>davvero</i> ‘really’/ <i>te lo giuro</i> ‘I swear’/ <i>assolutamente</i> ‘absolutely’                                                   |
| AMELIORATION        | Action is performed in a better way.                                                | Paraphrase with <i>meglio</i> ‘better’                                                                                                                     |

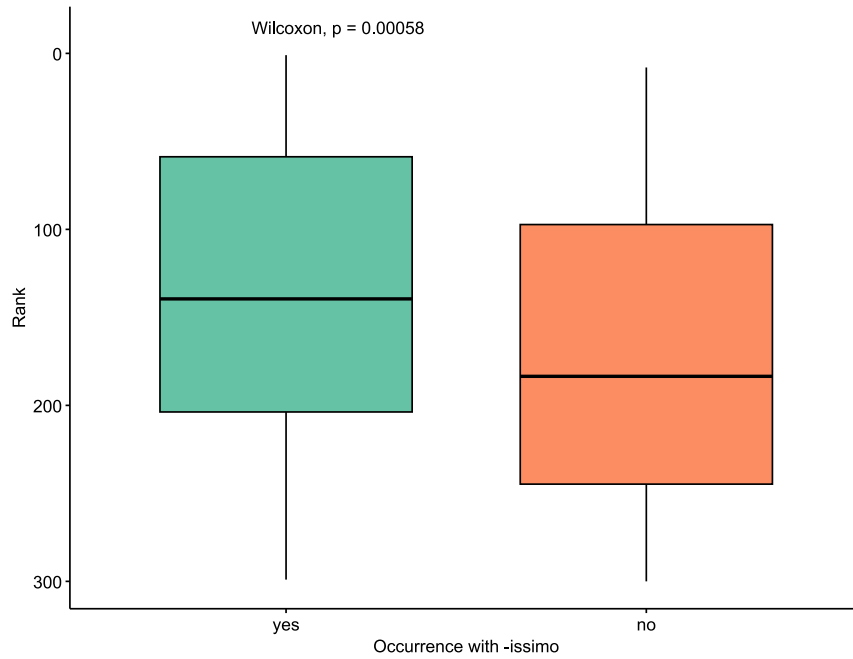
Using this schema, we annotated the types attested with *-issimo*, occasionally identifying more than one intensified aspect for a single verb. Each category captures a distinct dimension of intensification.

### 3. Results and discussion

In the following subsections, we briefly present the results of the annotation. First, we describe the occurrence of *-issimo* in our dataset, in relation to verb forms and semantics (Section 3.1). Next, we show how the annotated formal and functional categories intersect with the different types of intensified meaning (Section 3.2).

#### 3.1 Distribution of *-issimo* among verbs

The query carried out on X shows that *-issimo* does not occur with all verbs in our dataset. Specifically, out of 350 verb lemmas (including relevant sense distinctions), only 201 (57.4%) are attested with *-issimo*. Interestingly, intensified forms with *-issimo* appear to occur more consistently with verbs characterized by a higher frequency (as recorded in the VoLIP corpus): testing the presence of *-issimo* against verb frequency rank using a Wilcoxon rank-sum test indicates a tendency for more frequent verbs to undergo intensification.



**Figure 1.** Frequency rank of the verb versus its occurrence with *-issimo*

In the following subsections, we address whether (and how) formal and semantic factors shape the distribution of *-issimo* in the dataset.

### 3.1.1 Verb forms

Not all verbal forms were found consistently in the dataset (Table 4). In fact, the most frequent forms are the Present Simple and the Present Perfect, attested for 60% and 62% of the verbs, respectively. By contrast, the Gerundive and the Imperfective appear to be the forms in which *-issimo* occurs least frequently, displayed only by 16% and 6% of the verbs.

**Table 4.** Number of verbs in which each form was found

| Form            | n. of verbs |
|-----------------|-------------|
| Present Simple  | 125         |
| Present Perfect | 121         |
| Infinite        | 67          |
| Gerundive       | 33          |
| Imperfective    | 14          |

As already mentioned (Section 1), we expected Present Perfect to be the most available verb form for suffixation in *-issimo*, due to its formal features. In fact, Present Perfect is an analytic tense made up of the auxiliary and the past participle. Thus, since *-issimo* is already employed productively with past participles functioning as adjectives, Present Perfect might have constituted a trigger for the analogic extension of this suffix from adjectival bases to verbal ones.

By contrast, the frequent use of *-issimo* with the Present Simple is unexpected, also because of its idiosyncratic behavior with respect to verbal inflectional morphemes. Generally, in non-finite forms, *-issimo* follows the last consonant of the verb form, whether the truncated vowel is morphemic or not (6), repeated from (2) above.

(6)

|                 |                             |                 |              |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>Non</i>      | <i>ho</i>                   | <i>visto</i>    | <i>mezzo</i> |
| NEG             | AUX.PRS.COND.1SG            | see.INF         | half.M.SG    |
| <i>minuto,</i>  | <i>dell'</i>                | <i>Atalanta</i> | <i>ma</i>    |
| minute.SG       | of.DET.M.SG                 | Atalanta        | but          |
| <i>sto</i>      | <b><i>godend-issimo</i></b> |                 |              |
| AUX.PRS.IND.1SG | pleasure.PROG-ELAT          |                 |              |

‘I haven’t watched half a minute of Atalanta’s match, but **I am strongly pleased** by the result.’

However, it may be the case that *-issimo* is inserted between the verb stem and the inflectional morpheme(s). This happens only in the case of participles, as shown by unaccusative verbs, where it allows the expression of gender and number (7).

(7)

|                      |                |              |                 |                              |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| <i>La</i>            | <i>ship</i>    | <i>ormai</i> | <i>è</i>        | <b><i>partit-issim-a</i></b> |
| DET                  | (relation)ship | already      | AUX.PRS.IND-3SG | start.PTCP-ELAT-F            |
| <i>Date-mi</i>       |                | <i>gioie</i> |                 |                              |
| give.IMP.2PL-1SG.DAT |                | joy.PL       |                 |                              |

‘The (relation)ship **has already powerfully started**. Give me joy’

In finite forms, overt person marking is often missing and is to be inferred from the context. However, sometimes it can be marked either before (8a) or after (8b) *-issimo*, but this last strategy is quite rare.

(8)

- a. *Lo* ***s-o-issimo*** *che tu lo sai*  
 PRON know.PRS.IND-1SG-ELAT COMP 2SG.NOM PRON know.2SG  
 ‘**I know very well** that you know’
- b. *La lontananza aiuta.* ***Aiut-issim-a***  
 DET distance help.PRS.IND.3SG help.PRS.IND-ELAT-3SG  
 ‘Distance helps. **It helps a lot**’

It is evident, thus, that the fact that the use of *-issimo* often obscures verbal inflection does not constitute a relevant constraint.

### 3.1.2 Semantic factors

Beyond formal factors, it is interesting to take into consideration the distribution of *-issimo* across verbs in relation to their semantic properties. First, we can consider the Aktionsart of the verb. As shown in Table 5, our dataset contains verbs from all Aktionsart classes, and all Aktionsart classes are modified by *-issimo*.

**Table 5.** Occurrence of *-issimo* by Aktionsart of the verbs

| Class        | Found      | Not Found  | Total      |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Achievement  | 61         | 39         | 100        |
| Activity     | 46         | 28         | 74         |
| Atelic       | 27         | 26         | 53         |
| Punctual     |            |            |            |
| Resultative  | 31         | 34         | 65         |
| State        | 36         | 22         | 58         |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>201</i> | <i>149</i> | <i>350</i> |

Chi-square test does not reveal any statistically significant differences between the Aktionsart classes in the presence of intensification with *-issimo* ( $p = 0.27$ ). Analysis of the standardized residuals shows that classes characterized by the [-durative] feature (i.e., Resultative and Atelic Punctual) tend to occur less frequently. This is coherent with the observation made in the literature that evaluation is generally less felicitous with telic verbs or verbs used in their telic sense, i.e., resultatives and punctuals (Iacobini 2004; Grandi & Iacobini 2008; Napoli & Ravetto 2017). However, the differences are not pronounced enough to yield significant results.

Similarly, verbal semantics does not appear to constrain the presence of *-issimo* (Table 6). In this case as well, the chi-square test did not reveal a significant relationship between semantic classes and the possibility of intensification with *-issimo* ( $p = 0.08$ ).

**Table 6.** Occurrence of *-issimo* by semantic class of the verbs<sup>3</sup>

| Class                                   | Found      | Not Found  | Total      |
|-----------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Change                                  | 14         | 13         | 27         |
| Communication                           | 27         | 25         | 52         |
| Mental (cognition, perception, emotion) | 46         | 22         | 68         |
| Motion                                  | 30         | 16         | 46         |
| Object Related (consumption, creation)  | 16         | 20         | 36         |
| Physical (body, contact)                | 13         | 5          | 18         |
| Possession                              | 10         | 12         | 22         |
| Social (social, competition)            | 27         | 14         | 41         |
| Stative                                 | 18         | 22         | 40         |
| <i>Total</i>                            | <i>201</i> | <i>149</i> | <i>350</i> |

It thus appears that the semantic distinctions considered do not constitute a real constraint on the distribution of *-issimo*, which is fairly generalized across quite diverse types of verbs.

### 3.2 Type of Intensification

In our dataset, all the Types of Intensification included in the classification (see Table 3) are attested. Table 7 shows how many types (i.e., individual verb-form combinations) are associated with each intensification subclass.

<sup>3</sup> Semantic classes were lumped together in order to avoid sparseness due to low-frequency classes. We retained the original WordNet class labels in cases where no lumping was necessary, while for composite classes, we indicate in parentheses the WordNet semantic fields that compose them.

**Table 7.** Type frequency of the intensification subclass in the dataset

| <b>Intensification</b> | <b>n. types</b> |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE    | 121             |
| INTENSITY/DEGREE       | 70              |
| MANNER                 | 62              |
| COMPLETION             | 36              |
| QUANTITY               | 29              |
| REITERATION            | 19              |
| DURATION               | 12              |
| AMELIORATION           | 4               |

As can be seen, the most frequent class is by far ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE, suggesting that the primary function of *-issimo* with verbs may be pragmatic rather than semantic. Nevertheless, semantic values such as INTENSITY/DEGREE and MANNER are also well represented, whereas AMELIORATION, DURATION, and REITERATION occur only marginally.

To assess whether the type of intensification is influenced by any formal or semantic properties of the annotated verb forms, we cross-tabulated the intensification types in Table 7 with the variables annotated (Verb Form, Aktionsart, and Semantic Class). We then applied chi-square tests of independence, using simulated p-values in R, to assess significant associations. Since multiple tests were performed, we applied a Bonferroni correction to control for family-wise error rate, adjusting the significance threshold to  $\alpha = 0.0167$  ( $0.05/3$ ). In addition, we examined standardized residuals in order to identify which categories contribute most strongly to any observed associations. Finally, we computed Cramér's *V* to assess the strength of association between intensification type and each of the variables considered.

### 3.2.1 Type of intensification and verb tenses

The first variable considered is Verb Form. Table 8 shows the cross-tabulation between Verb Form and Type of Intensification. The chi-square test showed a weakly significant association ( $p = 0.01$ ). Figure 2 shows the standardized residuals of the test:<sup>4</sup> cells with values greater than 2 are likely to contribute to the significance of the test, indicating a positive association, whereas those with values lower than  $-2$  indicate that they are likely to contribute as a negative association.

**Table 8.** Intensification Type by Verb Form

|                      | <b>Gerund</b> | <b>Infinitive</b> | <b>Imperfective</b> | <b>Present Perfect</b> | <b>Present</b> |
|----------------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| AMELIORATION         | 0             | 2                 | 0                   | 1                      | 1              |
| COMPLETION           | 3             | 2                 | 1                   | 25                     | 5              |
| DURATION             | 4             | 2                 | 0                   | 4                      | 2              |
| ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE  | 6             | 16                | 5                   | 29                     | 65             |
| INTENSITY/<br>DEGREE | 12            | 8                 | 6                   | 25                     | 19             |
| MANNER               | 15            | 5                 | 2                   | 15                     | 25             |
| QUANTITY             | 3             | 7                 | 0                   | 16                     | 3              |
| REITERATION          | 1             | 4                 | 0                   | 6                      | 5              |

<sup>4</sup> Cross-tables for all the investigated variables can be found at the online repository.



**Figure 2.** Standardized residuals for the chi-square test between Verb Form and Type of Intensification

Some relevant associations can be observed, in particular: on the one hand, the Present Simple (9) is strongly associated with ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE, while the Present Perfect (10) is associated with intensification understood as COMPLETION, consistently with the boundedness of the event expressed by this tense. Nonetheless, Cramér's  $V$  indicates a rather low correlation between Verb Form and Types of Intensification ( $V = 0.14$ ).

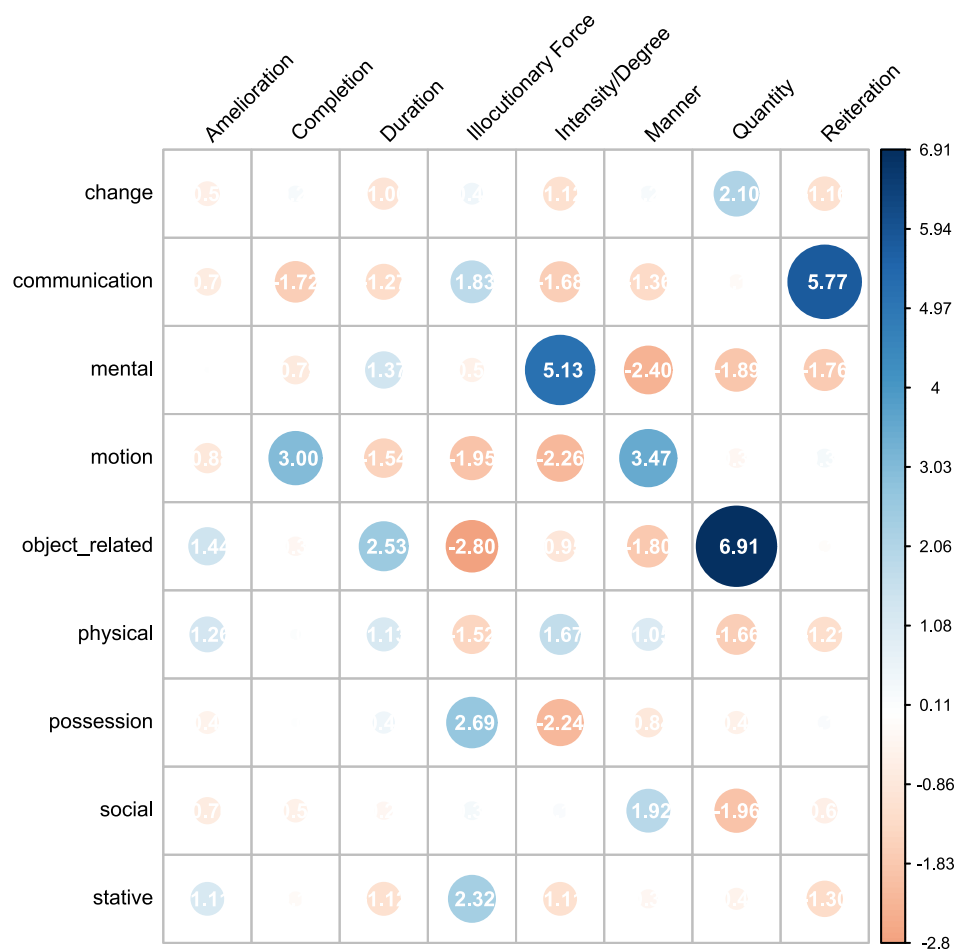
- (9) *e quando troverò una donna ossessionata da questa canzone come lo sono io avrò fatto scacco matto ve lo **giurissimo***  
 ‘and when I’ll find a woman obsessed with this song as much as I am I’ll have checkmated I **sincerely swear**’
- (10) [...] *Solo altri quattro giorni di scuola E HO **FINITISSIMO***  
 ‘[...] just four more school days and I **AM DONE FOREVER**’

### 3.2.2 Type of intensification and semantic classes

The second variable tested is the semantic class of the base. The contingency table crossing Semantic Class and Types of Intensification is shown in Table 9. In this case, the chi-square test yields a significant result ( $p = 0.001$ ), and Cramér's  $V$  points to a higher association than with Verb Form (0.27). Figure 3 shows the standardized residuals of the test.

**Table 9.** Intensification by Semantic Class

|                     | change | communication | mental | motion | object related | physical | possession | social | stative |
|---------------------|--------|---------------|--------|--------|----------------|----------|------------|--------|---------|
| AMELIORATION        | 0      | 0             | 1      | 0      | 1              | 1        | 0          | 0      | 1       |
| COMPLETION          | 3      | 1             | 7      | 12     | 2              | 3        | 2          | 3      | 3       |
| DURATION            | 0      | 0             | 5      | 0      | 3              | 2        | 1          | 1      | 0       |
| ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE | 10     | 19            | 28     | 13     | 2              | 6        | 12         | 14     | 17      |
| INTENSITY/DEGREE    | 3      | 4             | 34     | 5      | 3              | 9        | 0          | 8      | 4       |
| MANNER              | 5      | 4             | 8      | 19     | 1              | 7        | 2          | 11     | 5       |
| QUANTITY            | 5      | 3             | 3      | 4      | 11             | 0        | 1          | 0      | 2       |
| REITERATION         | 0      | 9             | 1      | 3      | 1              | 0        | 1          | 1      | 0       |

**Figure 3.** Standardized residuals for the chi-square test between SemField and Intensification

Indeed, not all classes display particularly strong associations. There are, however, some exceptions: verbs belonging to the object-related class (which was in turn based on the

SemFields of consumption and creation) are associated with intensification intended as ARGUMENT QUANTITY augmentation. For instance, in (11), what is intensified (i.e., augmented) is the amount, or the length, of the hair chopped off.

- (11) *Ho tagliatissimo i capelli [...]*  
‘I cut a lot of hair [...]

Mental verbs (including the emotion, cognitive, and perception classes) show an association with INTENSITY/DEGREE (12), while communication verbs appear to be associated with a REITERATION interpretation (Y).

- (12) *vi amissimo*  
‘I love you so much’

- (13) *Magari lo avete già dettissimo, ma [...]*  
‘Maybe you already **talked about it over and over**, but [...]

There are also weaker but still meaningful associations, such as those between motion verbs and the two classes of MANNER and COMPLETION.

### 3.2.3 Type of intensification and actional classes

Table 10 shows how Types of Intensification intersect with Actional Classes in our dataset. The chi-square test yields a significant association ( $p = 0.001$ ). Figure 4 shows the presence of many significant associations between Actional Classes and Types of Intensification, as reflected in the correlation coefficient ( $V = 0.34$ ), which proves to be the highest among the variables investigated in our dataset.

**Table 10.** Intensification by Aktionsart of types

|                     | Achievement | Activity | Punctual_atelic | Resultative | State |
|---------------------|-------------|----------|-----------------|-------------|-------|
| AMELIORATION        | 1           | 1        | 1               | 0           | 1     |
| COMPLETION          | 20          | 3        | 3               | 6           | 4     |
| DURATION            | 0           | 12       | 0               | 0           | 0     |
| ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE | 47          | 10       | 24              | 10          | 30    |
| INTENSITY/DEGREE    | 14          | 27       | 2               | 4           | 23    |
| MANNER              | 15          | 20       | 8               | 15          | 4     |
| QUANTITY            | 3           | 8        | 1               | 12          | 5     |
| REITERATION         | 4           | 5        | 6               | 0           | 1     |

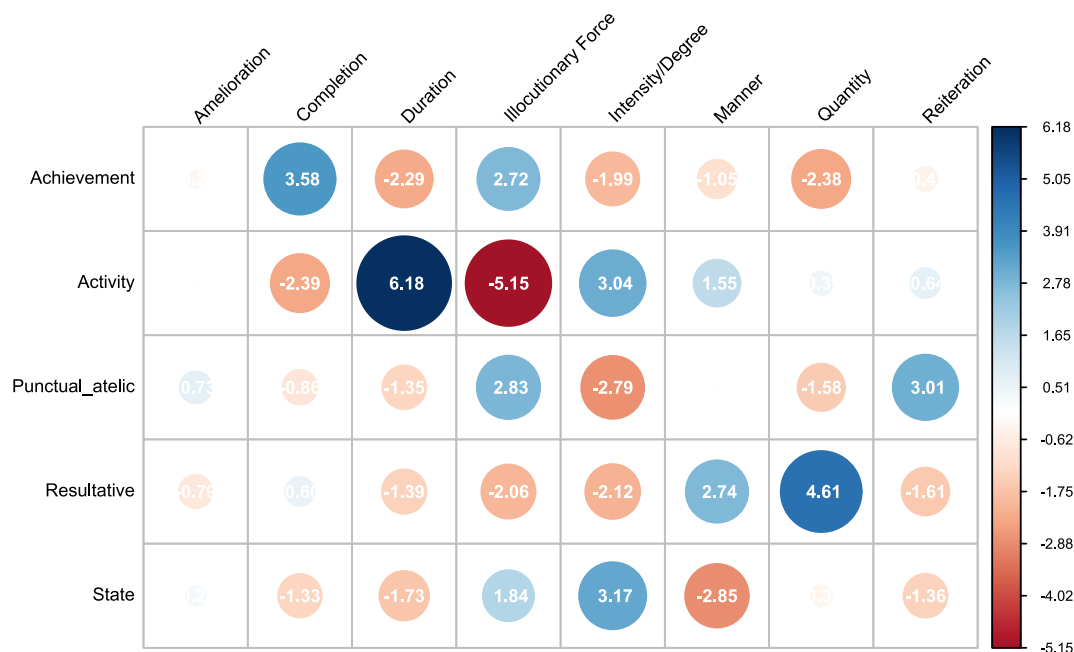


Figure 4. Standardized residuals for the chi-square test between Aktionsart and Intensification

As already observed, ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE is the most frequent type of intensification and is expressed across all actional classes. In (14), *-issimo* modifies a Resultative (6a) verb, a State verb (6b), and an Achievement verb (6c).

- (6) a. *Vabbè mi lancissimo [...]*  
 ‘Anyway now **I go and throw myself out**’  
 b. *[...] Ci sta! Ci staissimo!*  
 ‘[...] I agree! I **totally agree!**’  
 c. *Non approvavo Holland in generale, ma ho cambiatissimo idea*  
 ‘I didn’t approve of Holland in general, but **I totally changed** my mind’

In these occurrences, *-issimo* functions as a way of strengthening the speaker’s statements, either signaling a higher commitment to the assertion made or by emphasizing its emotional content. Thus, because of the inherent underspecification of this category, it may need a finer-grained subdivision of the pragmatic functions performed. Nonetheless, the widespread presence of this class in the data is hardly surprising, considering that *-issimo* has been described as a marker that strengthens illocutionary force (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 509) or, more generally, as carrying expressive and emotional functions (Wierzbicka 1986). In the literature regarding adjectival evaluation, such pragmatic values arise secondarily from semantic intensification. In the case of verbal bases, it is quite true that pragmatic values are also present in occurrences in which *-issimo* performs other, more clearly semantic intensifying functions, but, in occurrences in which such semantic shades are not clear, the resorting to its pragmatic functions remains available.

Activity verbs constitute the only class showing some resistance to purely pragmatic uses, as shown by the negative association with ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE, and, on the contrary, by the strongly positive association with DURATION. Nonetheless, this association should not lead us to the assumption that most types of activity verbs express this semantics: in fact, these are only 12, but they run counter to the general trend of the other actional classes, which cannot intensify DURATION. Likewise, the negative association with ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE indicates that Activity verbs express this meaning less frequently than the others when evaluated with *-issimo*.

How can this distribution be explained? In the case of Activity verbs, intensification (or, more broadly, the evaluation) is more natural (i.e., frequent) than that of other actional types, as observed in previous studies (Grandi & Iacobini 2008; Napoli & Ravetto 2017). Consequently, the interpretation may be more straightforward, also because of the actional traits of this class of verbs. In particular, DURATIVITY emerges as a salient trait in these cases and is readily conceptualized, providing a clear basis for the intensifying effect of *-issimo* (15).

- (15) [...] *questa è dura, ci devo **pensarissimo***  
 ‘[...] that’s hard, I need to **think about it a lot**’

However, in some cases, even when such an interpretation would be possible, the highlighted aspect is rather the greater INTENSITY with which the action is performed (16).

- (16) *Qui ho **risissimo***  
 ‘Here I **laughed a lot**’

The fact that other actional classes lack more prototypically gradable features does not necessarily imply that the relevant occurrences are automatically interpreted in terms of ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE. In fact, all classes display significant associations with other types of intensification, which, although not the most frequent, are the most distinctive for each class.

For instance, State verbs display a high association with INTENSITY/DEGREE. This pattern is particularly pronounced when the semantic class of a certain verb is Mental, to which many State verbs belong, as we see in (11). In such cases, *-issimo* seems to denote a higher intensity of the psychological state experienced.

- (17) *Se succedesse, e io **sperissimo** di no, ci sarà da piangere e da mandare giù parecchi rospi*  
 ‘If that happens, and I **wholeheartedly hope** it doesn’t, we’ll have to cry and swallow the bitter pill’

An interpretation overtly connected to actional traits is often triggered by Atelic Punctual verbs, which, when combined with the elative, are characterized, on the one hand, by their resistance to intensification in terms of INTENSITY/DEGREE, and on the other, by a tendency to convey the REITERATION of the event (18).

- (18) *mizzica lo **usissimo** anche quando parlo [...]*  
 ‘I **use mizzica very often** also when I speak [...]

Some correspondence with the most salient trait is also found in the case of Achievement verbs, which seem to get intensified for COMPLETION: in (19), for example, the spike of “being done” corresponds to “being done *forever*”, to not have to step into a school anymore in the future. The highlight is, then, the definitiveness of the fact.

- (19) [...] *Solo altri quattro giorni di scuola E HO **FINITISSIMO***  
 ‘[...] just four more school days AND I AM **DONE FOREVER**’

Lastly, unlike these cases, Resultative verbs do not display an immediate connection to the aspect they get intensified by, but instead, their compatibility with the ARGUMENT QUANTITY class is better understood in terms of semantic class (see Section 3.2.2).

To sum up, *-issimo* displays the ability to express a wide range of intensification meanings. While it is true that its use with verbs that are not typically gradable tends to trigger primarily pragmatic interpretations, Aktionsart and certain semantic classes nonetheless appear to

contribute significantly to determining (or further specifying) which aspect of the event is being intensified. Table 11 summarizes some observations regarding the connections between Aktionsart, semantic class and intensified features.

**Table 11.** Schematization of intensification type based on Aktionsart and Semantic Class

|                       |   |                       |   |                              |
|-----------------------|---|-----------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Activity verbs        |   | →                     |   | activity is <b>PROLONGED</b> |
| State verbs           | → | <i>mental</i>         | → | state is <b>INTENSIFIED</b>  |
| Atelic punctual verbs |   | →                     |   | action is <b>REPEATED</b>    |
| Achievement verbs     |   | →                     |   | action is <b>COMPLETED</b>   |
| Resultative verbs     | → | <i>object-related</i> | → | result is <b>INCREASED</b>   |

#### 4. Limitations and future outlook

In the previous sections, we investigated a creative verbal evaluation strategy, primarily employed in online and playful contexts, and proposed a preliminary schema of the possible aspects that may constitute the scope of intensification for verbal bases. Our results confirm the relation between some actional classes and some intensification values already noticed in the literature (Napoli & Ravetto 2017). While, as we saw, some recurrent tendencies emerged, our analysis also shows that intensified features are largely unpredictable when relying exclusively on verbal classes. Consequently, the meaning of the suffix *-issimo* remains underspecified when occurrences are considered out of context.

More generally, classifying evaluation in the verbal domain proves to be a non-trivial task, as the traditional oppositions BIG-SMALL and GOOD-BAD do not map transparently onto verbal semantics. This difficulty becomes particularly evident when considering categories such as MANNER and AMELIORATION. With respect to the latter, the (few) attestations (20) raise the question of whether a corresponding PEJORATION class of verbal evaluation may exist, or whether both phenomena should instead be subsumed under a broader QUALITATIVE evaluation type. Notably, PEJORATION was not attested in our dataset, likely due to the semantics of the suffix under investigation, despite being among the evaluative values previously identified for verbal morphology (see above, Section 1).

- (20) [...] sanno *suonarissimo*.  
 ‘[...] they can **play very well**’

By contrast, the distribution of MANNER intensification appears less problematic (21): its strong association with motion verbs, and its absence with stative predicates can plausibly be accounted for in terms of the semantic compatibility between manner-related scaling and eventive structure.

- (21) *Scappissimo dall'afa romana ciao*  
 ‘I’m immediately running away from Roman heat byeeee’

Finally, it should be acknowledged that the informal and playful nature of the environments from which our data were drawn may have influenced both the frequency and the functions of the evaluative strategies observed. For this reason, the proposed classification should be regarded as preliminary and open to further validation. Future research could test its robustness by extending the analysis to other verbal intensification strategies in Italian, such as prefixal formations, and by considering a wider range of registers and communicative contexts.

## Data availability statement

Data, including the annotation, verb list, and complete outcomes of the investigation are available through the Github repository: <https://github.com/fla-pi/verb-issimo>.

## Abbreviations

DIM = diminutive

ELAT = elative

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