

Caterina Mauri, Ludovica Pannitto

Shaping reference through temporality: the case of Italian nominals

(doi: 10.1418/121389)

Lingue e linguaggio (ISSN 1720-9331)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-giugno 2026

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

SHAPING REFERENCE THROUGH TEMPORALITY: THE CASE OF ITALIAN NOMINALS

CATERINA MAURI LUDOVICA PANNITTO

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates how temporality is encoded within the noun phrase in Italian, a language that lacks grammatical nominal TAM (Tense-Aspect-Modality) morphology. Drawing on data from large-scale corpora, we show that Italian speakers can evaluate the temporal status of referents through morphologically and syntactically productive constructions. Prefixes such as *ex-*, *neo-*, *pre-*, and *quasi-*, as well as ad hoc compound forms (e.g., *appena-laureato* ‘just graduated’, *quasi-marito* ‘almost husband’), enable fine-grained temporal, aspectual, and modal distinctions in nominal categorization. We argue that these constructions function as evaluative strategies, mapping referents onto a temporal continuum that includes entry, persistence, and exit from nominal categories. The analysis reveals a typology of nominal temporal and aspectual evaluation encompassing retrospective, inchoative, prospective, iterative, and imperfective readings. The study also highlights correlations between this type of evaluation and semantic noun classes, such as kinship terms, professional roles, and institutional labels, inviting a reconceptualization of temporality as a key dimension of referential categorization.

KEYWORDS: nominal temporality, evaluative morphology, tense–aspect–modality (TAM), Italian noun phrase, referential categorization.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

The capacity of natural languages to express tense, aspect, and modality (TAM) is a well-established grammatical domain, primarily encoded at the level of the clause (Bertinetto 1986; Bybee *et al.* 1994). TAM marking serves to position events in time (tense), depict their internal temporal structure (aspect), and convey the speaker’s stance toward the event’s factuality or necessity (modality). While these distinctions are commonly expressed through verbal morphology

¹ This article is the result of a continuous collaboration between the two authors. For the purposes of Italian academia, Caterina Mauri is responsible for Sections 1, 4 and 5, Ludovica Pannitto is responsible for Section 2. Section 3 is the result of joint work. We wish to thank the two anonymous referees for their useful comments on a first version of the article.

or auxiliary constructions, a growing body of typological research has highlighted that some languages can encode TAM values within the noun phrase (Nordlinger & Sadler 2004; Lecarme 2012; Bertinetto 2020). These so-called nominal TAM markers challenge conventional assumptions about the grammatical compartmentalization of temporal and modal reference.

In Bolivian-Guaraní, for example, TAM distinctions are encoded morphologically on the noun (example (1)).

- (1) Bolivian-Guaraní (Tupian, Tupí-Guaraní; Bertinetto 2020: 317)

- a. *A-echa che ro-rã*
1SG-see 1SG house-PROSP
'I see/saw my future house'
- b. *A-echa-ta che ro-kue*
1SG-see-FUT 1SG house-RETR
'I will see my old house'

In Wayana (example (2)), two markers can appear in combination on a single noun.

- (2) Wayana (Cariban, Guianan; Camargo 2008: 94)

- a. *kanawa-tpë-me*
canoe-RETR-PROSP
'the thing that could have been a canoe'

This study investigates the extent to which nominal TAM is attested in Italian, a language that does not grammatically encode TAM within the noun phrase in a systematic way, and whether it can be considered a semantic dimension of reference evaluation. Using large-scale corpus data, we focus on the marking of temporality and demonstrate that Italian speakers also evaluate the temporal and aspectual properties of referents, not only of predicates, through a set of morphologically and syntactically productive strategies.

These strategies, we argue, illustrate that even in the absence of grammaticalized morphology, languages like Italian offer rich resources for tracking how referents enter, maintain, or exit a nominal category, that is, when and how a referent qualifies as an instance of a given noun class, and whether that qualification is certain, prospective, retrospective, or otherwise gradable.

1.1 Nominal TAM and evaluative constructions

From a theoretical perspective, the marking of temporal and aspectual properties within the noun phrase aligns with two main domains of analysis: evaluative morphology and indexical categorization.

Evaluative morphology (Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015a) refers to morphological processes that encode a deviation from a prototypical value along a scalar dimension. In the case of nominal TAM, the scale pertains to time, aspect, or modality, and the evaluative expression explicitly encodes both the standard category (e.g., *fumatore*, ‘smoker’) and the value that locates the referent in relation to it (e.g., *ex-* or *appena-*).

Following Grandi & Körtvélyessy (2015b: 10-13), we propose to analyze nominal TAM as an evaluative phenomenon, because it is characterized by:

- a deviation from a standard along a semantic scale, in our case, a TAM-related scale;
- the explicit expression of both the standard and the evaluative mark;
- a descriptive perspective, in which the speaker assesses the temporal status of the referent (e.g., whether it has just entered, is still within, or has exited a category);
- a qualitative perspective, where the evaluation reflects subjective stance, including the speaker’s certainty, necessity, or desirability concerning the referent’s categorization (cf. Prieto 2015).

Closely related is the notion of indexical categorization (Mauri & Sansò 2018, 2020; Mauri & Masini 2024), which emphasizes that nominal reference is not a purely denotational process, but rather one that is dynamically shaped by the speaker’s perspective, contextual evidence, and expectations. Expressions such as *quasi-marito* (‘almost-husband’) or *forse-lavoro* (‘possible job’) do not merely assign a referent to a category; they simultaneously comment on the appropriateness, validity, or probability of that categorization in a given context.

Nominal TAM evaluation, in this sense, is not reducible to lexical enrichment or metaphorical usage. It constitutes what seems to be a rather systematic means of referential modulation, where temporal and modal dimensions are mapped directly onto noun phrases, often in compact and morphologically integrated ways. Although such strategies are semantically rich and morphologically visible in Italian, they do not amount to grammaticalized nominal TAM as found in languages like Guaraní or Wayana. However, as will become clear in the following sections, their high degree of conventionalization and formal regularity suggests that they are not idiosyncratic or merely stylistic, but rather a stable part of the Italian system. We can define nominal TAM evaluation as follows:

a referent X is identified as an instance of a nominal category N (e.g., *fumatore*, ‘smoker’) based on a property P (e.g., ‘habitually smokes’) that is considered prototypical of N within a given context (P_N). For this categorization to be valid, P_N must be modulated along

temporal, aspectual, or modal dimensions, depending on the speaker's assessment of *X*'s alignment with the standard category.

In TAM evaluative constructions, *X* is explicitly positioned in relation to the prototypical member of the category *N*, deviating from it along a TAM axis. For example, *ex-fumatore* 'former-smoker' encodes a retrospective shift, *appena-fumatore* 'just-started-smoker' signals incipience, and *mai-fumatore* 'never-smoker' marks categorical exclusion. Each form reveals how the referent's membership in the category is not taken for granted, but is rather situated in time, evaluated in its temporal development, and qualified by degrees of certainty or potentiality. Thus, the validity of referential categorization is evaluated according to:

1. the referent's TEMPORAL ANCHORING (e.g., past, present, or future),
2. its ASPECTUAL STRUCTURE (e.g., incipient, continuous, completed, iterative),
3. and the EPISTEMIC STATUS of the categorization (e.g., certain, probable, potential, counterfactual).

These dimensions interact to produce a dynamic model of reference, in which noun phrases not only classify but also contextualize and temporally locate the referent within a semantic continuum of categorization.

1.2 Nominal TAM evaluation in Italian

Given the absence of dedicated nominal TAM morphology, Italian provides an ideal test case for investigating how speakers compensate for this gap through creative, productive constructions. The central question is not whether Italian has grammatical nominal TAM, but how it expresses temporal and aspectual evaluation of referents through alternative means. Consider the following examples from Italian corpus data (ItTenTen20, Jakubíček *et al.* 2013), which demonstrate different types of TAM-related evaluation:

- (3) *Rispetto ai mai-fumatori [...], i fumatori correnti e gli ex-fumatori [...] hanno avuto 4 e 3 volte più probabilità*
'Compared to **never-smokers** [...], current smokers and **ex-smokers** [...] were 4 and 3 times more likely, respectively, to die from bladder cancer'
- (4) *rompere il ghiaccio della nostra un-tempo-amicizia*
'breaking the ice of our *once-friendship*'
- (5) *gli appena-trentenni si trasformano in trentenni a tutti gli effetti*
'the **just-turned-thirty-year-olds** become fully-fledged thirty-year-olds'

- (6) *insomma, era un idiota e non era neanche un tipino tanto splendido, ma sapeva interpretare un... un forse-uomo forse-trentenne, quando gli diceva “sei carino”*

‘I mean, he was an idiot, and not even that much of a catch, but he knew how to play a... a **maybe-man maybe-thirty-something**, when she’d tell him “you’re cute” ’

- (7) *La poliziotta tosta, la magistrata affettuosa che forse dovrebbe bere di meno, la moglie-non-più-moglie che perde le staffe in continuazione*

‘The tough policewoman, the affectionate prosecutor who maybe should drink a little less, the **wife-no-longer-wife** who keeps losing her temper ’

In example (3), *ex-fumatore* ‘ex-smoker’ and *mai-fumatore* ‘never-smoker’ encode retrospective and negative habituality, respectively. In example (4), *un-tempo-amicizia* ‘once-friendship’ marks a past relational state. In example (5), *appena-trentenni* ‘just-turned-thirty-year-olds’ foregrounds the inception of a social age category. In example (6), *forse-uomo forse-trentenne* ‘maybe-man maybe-thirty-something’ encodes epistemic hesitation, while example (7) illustrates a reformulated kinship relation through *moglie-non-più-moglie* ‘wife-no-longer-wife’, combining negation, aspect, and relational semantics.

These examples highlight the functional equivalence of such constructions to grammatical nominal TAM in other languages: they enable speakers to temporally anchor referents, encode phase transitions, and express modality within the noun phrase. To account for the range of strategies attested in Italian, we propose a preliminary classification of TAM-evaluative constructions in the noun phrase, based on their morphosyntactic structure. These constructions can be grouped into three main types (I-III): prefixation, ad hoc compounding, and nominal modification. In addition, we identify a set of emerging constructions (IV), which will not be discussed in this paper, because they are the object of a separate study.

(I) PREFIXATION

Prefixation involves the attachment of a TAM-marked prefix directly to the noun. This is the most morphologically integrated strategy and includes highly productive forms such as *ex-fidanzato* ‘ex-boyfriend’, *neo-fidanzato* ‘new boyfriend’, which convey retrospective and inchoative reference to relational roles. These prefixes express aspectual or temporal deviation from a standard category. The referent is positioned in relation to the default instantiation of *N*, as either no longer included (*ex-*) or newly entered (*neo-*).

(II) AD HOC COMPOUNDING

Ad hoc compounds, or occasionalisms, are non-lexicalized ad hoc expressions that are coined for a specific occasion (cf. Downing 1977; Benczes 2005, 2006; Steddy 2019; Helmer 2023. Let us consider the following examples (attested in ItTenTen20):

- *forse-presidente* ‘maybe-president’, *forse-ex-ragazzo* ‘maybe-ex-boyfriend’: these examples convey epistemic modality over role membership, with different degrees of certainty and temporality;
- *quasi-adolescente* ‘almost-teenager’, *quasi-non-più-adolescente* ‘almost-no-longer-teenager’: in these cases we observe proximative and transitional reference, including layered TAM marking (e.g., *non-più* ‘no longer’ indicating exit, *quasi* ‘almost’ indicating potential re-entry);
- *appena-teenager* ‘just-turned-teenager’, indicating an incipient phase marking;
- *ex-e-sempre-comunista* ‘former-and-still-communist’: an ad-hoc compound encoding an apparent contradiction between both past and eternal membership.

Ad hoc combining allows speakers to adapt nominal structures to momentary communicative needs, creatively combining nominal bases with adverbial elements encoding TAM dimensions, to convey meanings related to temporal location, transition, persistence or uncertainty.

(III) NOMINAL MODIFICATION

Here, the TAM evaluation is encoded through the addition of an adverb or adjective outside the noun, maintaining syntactic independence.

Two common patterns include:

- [DET ADV N]: *l'allora Coppa dei Campioni* ‘the then European Cup’, *un quasi monopolio* ‘an almost-monopoly’;
- [DET ADJ N]: *il futuro presidente* ‘the future president’.

Ad hoc compounding and nominal modification represent two closely related strategies for encoding TAM-related distinctions in the nominal domain. Although structurally distinct, they operate along a gradient of morphosyntactic cohesion.

We here classify as ad hoc compounds cases that show hyphenation (*quasi-adolescente*, ‘almost-adolescent’, *forse-presidente*, ‘maybe-president’). The hyphen indeed marks the speaker’s choice to temporarily integrate adverbial

and nominal elements into compact labels, answering the local need for on-the-spot categorization. Nominal modification, by contrast, maintains full syntactic independence (*un quasi monopolio*, ‘an almost monopoly’, *il futuro presidente*, ‘the future president’), with no orthographic binding between TAM operator and noun. This configuration foregrounds compositionality and keeps the modifier external to the nominal core. The alternation between hyphenated and non-hyphenated forms, readily attested in corpora, is revealing of the permeability of the boundary between these two strategies.

(IV) SPECIFIC AND EMERGENT CONSTRUCTIONS

Some constructions defy easy classification but represent highly expressive means of marking referential evaluation:

- PROTOTYPICALITY IN TRANSITION, conveyed by a discontinuous temporal (*non più* ‘no longer’) reduplication having the schema [N1-TAM-N1]: *bambina-non-più-bambina* ‘girl-no-longer-girl’, marking a shift between stages with emphasis on the speaker’s evaluative stance (cf. discontinuous reduplication in Masini & Di Donato 2023);
- REFERENCE IN TRANSITION, conveyed by a discontinuous quasi-reduplication involving different nouns, having the schema [N1-TAM-N2]: *custodi-forse-parenti* ‘caretakers-maybe-relatives’, *attore-ormai-regista* ‘actor-now-director’, indicating some transition in the reference, with epistemic or temporal qualification;
- TEMPORARY REFERENCE, conveyed by the schema [N-PER-UN-NTEMP], whereby NTEMP consists of a unit of time (e.g. day, hour, etc.): *bambina-per-un-giorno* ‘girl-for-a-day’, highlighting the temporary and context-bound instantiation of a nominal role.

In what follows, we concentrate on prefixation, ad hoc compounding, and nominal modification, while the more complex or emergent constructions will be the object of a separate study.

While our research acknowledges the full range of TAM dimensions (i.e., tense, which locates events or referents in time; aspect, which captures their internal temporal contour; and modality, which encodes the speaker’s stance or degree of certainty), we specifically focus here on temporality, understood in the broad sense proposed by Bertinetto (2020). Following his typological definition, temporality refers to the linguistic means used to locate entities, events, or states on a time axis, including not only deictic positioning (past, present, future), but also relative temporal anchoring and phase distinctions. As Bertinetto (2020: 314) points out, temporality is not confined to the verbal domain: it can apply to any linguistic expression whose interpretation crucially involves

temporal location or temporal shifts. This opens the door to exploring how nominal expressions may participate in temporal reference through evaluative or scalar means.

We adopt this broader view of temporality and investigate how Italian noun phrases encode temporal properties of referents, particularly their entry, maintenance, or exit from nominal categories, via morphosyntactic strategies that resemble the role of tense and aspect markers in the verbal domain. By focusing on temporal evaluation, we set aside modal and epistemic readings and concentrate instead on how referents are temporally situated in relation to the nominal property they instantiate.²

This study seeks to understand not only how Italian speakers encode temporal and aspectual meanings within the noun phrase in the absence of dedicated grammatical morphology, but also (and mainly) what types of temporal evaluation emerge from corpus data. In particular, we examine whether these constructions correspond to identifiable semantic functions (such as prospective, incipient, iterative, or retrospective) and whether certain patterns of temporal evaluation are preferentially associated with specific nominal categories, such as professions, kinship terms, or institutional roles. By addressing these questions, we aim to contribute to a broader typological understanding of how natural languages distribute TAM marking across grammatical domains, and how referential categorization can interact with temporality and aspect.

In Section 2, we present the methodology adopted for extracting and annotating relevant data from large-scale Italian corpora. In Section 3, we examine the temporal and aspectual values found in the dataset and discuss how they relate to semantic-evaluative functions already described in the literature. Section 4 then explores the distribution of these strategies across different nominal classes, and Section 5 offers some concluding remarks and outlines directions for future research.

2. CORPUS DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methodological framework we employed to empirically investigate the strategies that shape nominal reference through temporality, detailing how the data were extracted, annotated, and categorized for analysis.

Our dataset includes prefixed nouns (e.g., *ex-fidanzato*, ‘ex-boyfriend’, *neo-laureato*, ‘newly graduated’), ad hoc compounds (e.g., *forse-presidente*, ‘maybe-president’, *appena-teenager*, ‘just-turned-teenager’, *quasi-non-più-adolescente*,

² The broader picture, including also modal values, is discussed in Mauri & Pannitto (2026). The annotation procedure described in Section 2 is thus not limited to temporal evaluation, but targets the dataset employed in the research at large.

‘almost-not-adolescent-anymore’), and nominal phrases involving scalar adverbials (e.g., *l’allora presidente*, ‘the then president’, *il futuro ministro*, ‘the future minister’). The goal was to identify and annotate naturally occurring noun phrases that exhibit temporal and aspectual evaluation through morphological or syntactic means.

We drew data from four major corpora of contemporary Italian:

- ItWac (Baroni *et al.* 2009)
- Repubblica (Baroni *et al.* 2004)
- WikiConLL (Baroni *et al.* 2009)
- itTenTen20 (Jakubíček *et al.* 2013, accessed via SketchEngine)

These corpora collectively comprise over 5 billion tokens and include diverse registers such as journalism, encyclopedic entries, and web-based discourse. Data collection was carried out using two complementary strategies, bottom-up and top-down extractions.

We started the bottom-up extraction by search queries for all the prefixed nominals ($\{\text{prefix}\}\text{-N}$), we then obtained a list of the prefixes attested and identified those that encode TAM relevant dimensions (e.g. *ex-*, *neo-*, *quasi*, *ancora*, *appena*). In parallel, we extracted Ngram sequences such as [DET ADV N] and [DET ADJ N], to retrieve all the constructions based on some TAM-relevant elements, including new or marginal strategies in use.

In the top-down extraction from itTenTen20, we used regular expressions of the form $([a-z]+)*\{\text{prefix}\}(-[a-z]+)+$, where $\{\text{prefix}\}$ was one of the TAM markers identified in the bottom-up phase. Extracted sequences were then manually cleaned and validated to ensure they matched the intended interpretive patterns.

Once extracted, each candidate expression was subjected to manual annotation (at type level) according to a set of analytical parameters designed to capture both its formal characteristics and contextual interpretation. This annotation process involved the following six dimensions:

1. Construction type: We distinguished among different structural formats through which TAM evaluation is encoded. These include PREFIX-BASED CONSTRUCTIONS (e.g., *ex-fidanzato* ‘ex-boyfriend’, *neo-ministro* ‘newly appointed minister’), which involve a bound morpheme attached directly to the noun; AD HOC COMPOUNDS with the hyphen between the TAM element and the noun (e.g., *appena-trentenni* ‘just-turned-thirty-year-olds’, *un-tempo-amicizia* ‘once friendship’); NGRAM-BASED CONSTRUCTIONS (e.g., *l’allora presidente* ‘the then president’, *un quasi monopolio* ‘an almost-monopoly’), where the TAM-related element functions as an adverb or adjective modifying the noun within a broader noun phrase; and

OTHER MORPHOSYNTACTIC FORMS, such as reduplications or compositional blends, which do not follow canonical morphological or syntactic patterns but still convey TAM-related evaluative meanings.

2. TAM element: This refers to the specific prefix, adverb, or modifier that conveys the temporal, aspectual, or modal evaluation. Examples include prefixes such as *ex* ‘former’, *neo* ‘newly’, *post* ‘post-’, and *pre* ‘pre-’, as well as adverbial or scalar modifiers like *appena* ‘just’, *quasi* ‘almost’, and *forse* ‘maybe’. The presence and type of TAM element is key to identifying the semantic orientation of the expression.
3. TAM value: This dimension captures the interpretive function of the TAM element within context. Values include, but are not limited to, RETROSPECTIVE (indicating a referent’s past membership in a category, e.g., *ex-marito* ‘ex-husband’), INCIPIENT (entry into a category, e.g., *appena-laureato* ‘just-graduated’), CONTINUATIVE (ongoing presence in a category, e.g., *ancora-studente* ‘still a student’), PROSPECTIVE (anticipated future membership, e.g., *futuro presidente* ‘future president’), and EPISTEMIC or MODAL values expressing uncertainty or , cf. approximation (e.g., *forse-lavoro* ‘possible job’, *quasi-non-più-adolescente* ‘almost-no-longer-teenager’).
4. Lexical base: This refers to the bare noun specified by the TAM element. Identifying the lexical base is crucial for understanding how the evaluative strategy operates over the semantics of the category - for example, whether it modifies a relational noun (e.g., *padre* ‘father’, *fidanzato* ‘boyfriend’) or a role-based label (e.g., *presidente* ‘president’, *ministro* ‘minister’).
5. Semantic class of the lexical base: In order to analyze potential correlations between TAM strategies and nominal categories, each lexical base was classified into one of the following semantic types:
 - KINSHIP (e.g., *padre* ‘father’, *zio* ‘uncle’),
 - PROFESSION (e.g., *insegnante* ‘teacher’, *ingegnere* ‘engineer’),
 - SOCIAL ROLE (e.g., *cittadino* ‘citizen’, *leader* ‘leader’),
 - QUALIFICATION (e.g., *laureato* ‘graduate’, *diplomato* ‘high school graduate’),
 - CULTURAL MOVEMENT (e.g., *comunista* ‘communist’, *fascista* ‘fascist’),
 - LOCATION OR FUNCTION (e.g., *ospedale* ‘hospital’, *ambasciata* ‘embassy’),
 - PROCESS (e.g., *sviluppo* ‘development’, *trattativa* ‘negotiation’),
 - DENOMINATION (e.g., *titolo* ‘title’, *nome* ‘name’),
 - ENTITY (e.g., *azienda* ‘company’, *partito* ‘party’),
 - EVENT (e.g., *festa* ‘party’, *manifestazione* ‘protest’).

6. Discourse context: Finally, each expression was contextualized with respect to its discourse function and domain of use. This parameter is intended to capture the pragmatic role of TAM evaluation, shedding light on why such categorizations are made salient in specific textual environments.

This methodological framework provides the basis for a systematic investigation of how Italian encodes temporal, aspectual, and modal evaluations within the noun phrase. The combination of broad corpus coverage, fine-grained annotation, and an integrated quantitative–qualitative approach allows us to identify not only the most frequent constructions, but also the functional distinctions they convey. In the next section, we apply this framework to the corpus data, illustrating the attested range of nominal TAM evaluations and analyzing the morphosyntactic and semantic patterns through which they are expressed.

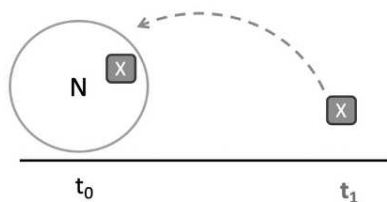
3. TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF TEMPORAL AND ASPECTUAL EVALUATIONS IN THE NP

The corpus data reveal a variety of constructions through which Italian speakers evaluate referents in terms of their position along a temporal or aspectual dimension. These constructions do not merely locate referents in time, but assess their relation to a category, i.e., whether they are entering it, fully occupying it, exiting it, or doing so in a partial or provisional way. In what follows, we classify and analyze these strategies according to the type of temporal–aspectual evaluation they express, identifying both formal regularities and semantic tendencies across different noun classes.

3.1 *Retrospective evaluation*

This function encodes the RETROSPECTIVE QUALIFICATION of a referent in relation to a nominal category. In such cases, the referent X is temporally anchored to a past moment t_0 , at which point they held the property P_N prototypical of the noun N . The implication is that this categorization is no longer valid at the moment of speech (t_1). This type of evaluation presupposes a diachronic shift: X no longer qualifies as N at t_1 , but did at t_0 , as represented in Figure 1.

This retrospective function is conveyed through a set of strategies including prefixation (*ex*-N, e.g., *ex-allieva* ‘ex-student’, *ex-ministro* ‘former minister’), adverbial modification (*allora* N, e.g., *l’allora presidente* ‘the then-president’) and ad hoc compounding (*ieri*-N, e.g., *ieri-precario* ‘yesterday’s precarious worker’; *un-tempo*-N, e.g., *un-tempo-amicizia* ‘once-friendship’; *non-più*-N, e.g., *non-più-studenti* ‘no-longer students’).

FIGURE 1: RETROSPECTIVE NOMINAL EVALUATION: *X* WAS *N* IN THE PAST.

The following examples illustrate how retrospective evaluation is expressed in corpus data. What is interesting to note is that membership to the category conveyed by *N* is still felt as the most effective way to identify the discourse referent, even if it is no longer valid: by adding the temporal specification of such validity, the speaker may continue to use membership to *N* as a strategy to identify *X*. In other words, the referent is framed as no longer belonging to the noun's extension, yet their past inclusion remains crucial to identify it in discourse, as shown in examples (8)-(13):

- (8) *Una **ex-allieva** della Scuola Sant'Anna racconta la sua storia di emigrazione nella Silicon Valley Anni Novanta.*
'A **former student** of Sant'Anna School recounts her story of emigrating to Silicon Valley in the 1990s.'
- (9) *Il primo confronto risale al 1960, nell'**allora Coppa dei Campioni**.*
'The first match dates back to 1960, in the **then European Cup**.'
- (10) *Il club fu messo in vendita per 5 sterline dall'**allora presidente** Tony Wood.*
'The club was put up for sale for 5 pounds by the **then president** Tony Wood.'
- (11) *[...] non supera la precarietà, non mette una linea di demarcazione tra l'**ieri-precario** e l'oggi-precario.*
'[...] it doesn't overcome precariousness, it doesn't draw a line between the **precariousness of yesterday** and today.'
- (12) *Stefano, che vorrebbe vederci come un tempo, a fare da moderatore e a rompere il ghiaccio della nostra **un-tempo-amicizia**.*
'Stefano, who would like to see us as before, moderating and breaking the ice of our **once-friendship**.'
- (13) *Non le offriranno alle aziende per cui questi **non-più-studenti** lavoreranno.*
'They won't offer them to the companies for which these **no-longer students** will work.'

The counterpart of retrospective evaluation is anticipated inclusion, whereby a given referent is categorized on the basis of a future membership. An expression like *il futuro presidente del consiglio* ‘the future prime minister’ encodes PROSPECTIVE REFERENCE, whereby X is not currently N , but is expected to become so in a specified or implied future frame. In Italian, the adjective *futuro* (‘future’) is employed for this function, whereas in English we find an expression like *N-to-be*.

Both retrospective and prospective forms are semantically compatible with nouns denoting roles, occupations, or social categories with clear temporal boundaries (e.g. *presidente*, ‘president’, *fidanzata*, ‘girlfriend’, *studente*, ‘student’). In these contexts, TAM evaluation operates on a bounded timeline and supports contrastive or narratively anchored reference.

Quantitative data from itTenTen20 confirms the high frequency of *ex-*, *allora-*, and *futuro-* formations, with *ex-* alone accounting for over 4,000 distinct types. These forms offer a rich testing ground for exploring the temporal dimension of nominal categorization.

In the next section, we turn to aspectual evaluations, that is, cases where the referent is not situated in the past or future, but evaluated in terms of initiation, continuation, or recurrence.

3.2 Proximal evaluation

The entity X is not yet fully identifiable as an instance of the category N , but it exhibits partial or incipient features of N . The prototypical property P_N is therefore only PARTIALLY APPLICABLE to X . This implies a form of approximative categorization, where X is perceived as an incomplete, near-member of the category (cf. Masini *et al.* 2023). This construction suggests that the transition from X to N is possible, expected, or underway, but not yet accomplished (Figure 2).

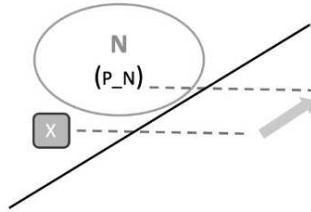


FIGURE 2: PROXIMAL NOMINAL EVALUATION: X IS CLOSE TO N .

This type of evaluation implies that X displays some features of N and may become N in the near future, but the categorization is not complete or definitive.

It is commonly conveyed in Italian through hyphenated *quasi*-*N* constructions (cf. Cappelle *et al.* 2023), as shown by the following examples from the corpora, illustrating how these constructions function in context:

- (14) *Questo porterebbe troppe persone a stare bene, un **quasi-suicidio** per medicina e farmacologia.*
‘This would make too many people feel good, a **quasi-suicide** for medicine and pharmacology.’
- (15) *L’unica via d’uscita a una **quasi-catastrofe** ambientale e d’immagine.*
‘The only way out of a **quasi-catastrophe**, both environmental and reputational.’
- (16) *Alle elementari che frequentano il figlio del **quasi-marito**.*
‘At primary school with the son of her **almost-husband**.’
- (17) *Il presagio ha assunto praticamente i connotati della **quasi-certezza**.*
‘The omen has taken on the traits of **quasi-certainty**.’
- (18) *Mira alla creazione di una **quasi-religione** antifumo.*
‘It aims at the creation of an **almost-religion** against smoking.’
- (19) *È pur vero che nell’Italia tribale di oggi ogni giornale è un **quasi-partito**.*
‘It is true that in today’s tribal Italy, every newspaper is a **quasi-party**.’

This construction allows for the expression of incipience and approximation in categorization. It introduces a scalar and temporally sensitive qualification of the referent, often implying that the transition into the category *N* is foreseeable or expected, but not (yet) realized. The form *quasi*-*N* is employed in contexts involving uncertain affiliation, initial states, or partial fulfillment of prototypical features of *N*, indicating approximation and incipient categorization, i.e. *X* is not yet *N* at full right. It often co-occurs with nouns denoting roles (*marito*, ‘husband’), abstract states (*certezza*, ‘certainty’), or institutional entities (*partito*, ‘party’, *religione*, ‘religion’), allowing the speaker to downgrade the assertiveness of the referential categorization. The construction thus expresses epistemic caution, while still suggesting a strong contextual relevance of the category *N*.

3.3 Initial-stage evaluation

This set of constructions encodes the early phase of referent categorization with respect to *N*. While the referent *X* is not (yet) a fully licensed instance of *N*, it is temporally or logically situated at an early point on a scale that leads to *N* (Figure 3).

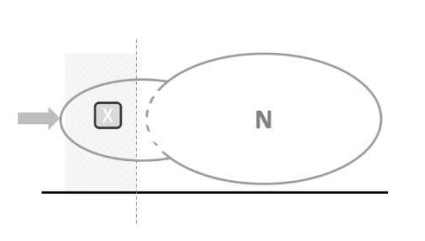


FIGURE 3: INITIAL-STAGE NOMINAL EVALUATION: X IS IN THE EARLY STAGES OF BEING N .

We identified a set of occurrences where the noun's prototypical property (P_N) is attributed to X only partially, with the implication that X may soon become a full instance of N . This is conveyed through the prefix *pre-*, attached to nouns denoting roles or situations, such as *pre-amicizia* 'pre-friendship', *pre-gioco* 'pre-game'. These constructions are typically used to signal developmental or anticipatory phases, as in (20)-(21):

- (20) *Ho instaurato un rapporto di amicizia con alcuni e di **pre-amicizia** con altri.*
'I developed a friendship with some and a **pre-friendship** with others.'
- (21) *Come confermato dagli autori, è solo un **pre-gioco**, il gioco vero è l'avanzato.*
'As confirmed by the authors, it is only a **pre-game**; the real game is the advanced one.'

In these examples, the referent is not yet N in full but is conceptually framed as 'on its way' to becoming N . The prefix *pre-* acts as a scalar operator, expressing proximity to category inclusion and often carrying a predictive or approximative nuance.

Incipient status may convey different degrees of epistemic and modal commitment to the referent's inclusion in the category. Incipient and partial inclusion may indeed lead to a provisional evaluation, whereby X is attributed the status of N only temporarily or tentatively. The same *pre-* prefix is used, but the interpretation shifts towards an attenuated commitment: X may or may not ultimately qualify as N . These constructions often appear in administrative or legal language, where the distinction between preliminary and definitive status is crucial, as shown in (22)-(25):

- (22) *UCapital24 ha presentato oggi domanda di **pre-ammissione** a Borsa Italiana.*
'UCapital24 submitted today a **pre-admission** request to the Italian Stock Exchange.'
- (23) *Sarà possibile inviare **pre-progetti** solo fino al 31 marzo 2015 e inviare progetti solo fino al 15 settembre 2015.*

‘It will be possible to submit **pre-projects** only until March 31, 2015, and full projects only until September 15, 2015.’

- (24) *Avevo portato all’attenzione il **pre-accordo** di massima tra Telecom Italia e Apple.*

‘I had presented the **preliminary agreement** between Telecom Italia and Apple.’

- (25) *Si invita [...] a verificare attraverso una **pre-analisi** se la banca ha superato i tassi.*

‘You are invited [...] to verify through a **preliminary analysis** whether the bank exceeded the rates.’

Here, the referent is positioned as potentially within *N*, but the speaker withholds full commitment to its categorical status. The prefix *pre-* introduces an epistemic hedge: the categorization is plausible but not guaranteed, and ultimately *X* could not be confirmed as *N*.

Finally, in normative discourse, where goals or conditions are structured as sequences of obligatory stages, an initial stage may be evaluated as necessary or preparatory. In these cases, the referent *X* is not just prior to *N* in temporal or logical terms, but is presented as a prerequisite, i.e., a step that must occur in order for *N* to be realized. The same prefix *pre-* thus acquires a clear deontic force, as in (26) and (27):

- (26) *Un coordinamento nazionale come **pre-condizione** per la cooperazione internazionale.*

‘A national coordination as a **pre-condition** for international cooperation.’

- (27) *Un **pre-requisito** indiscutibile per una società inclusiva è la solidarietà.*

‘An indisputable **pre-requisite** for an inclusive society is solidarity.’

In such expressions, *X* is presented as a necessary and prioritized element, without which the realization of *N* is impossible. The meaning of *pre-* here no longer hinges solely on temporal sequencing, but also on the logical and conditional relation between elements in a process or system.

Despite sharing a single formal strategy (*pre-* prefixation), the meanings described in this section range from developmental (incipient), to contingent (provisional), to presupposed (necessary), reflecting distinctions in the speaker’s stance toward the referent’s status as *N*.

3.4 Incipient evaluation

This function captures the very onset of category membership. Unlike the initial-stage evaluations discussed in the previous section, where the referent *X* is still

external to the category N or tentatively associated with it, in incipient evaluation X has already entered the category, albeit very recently. The construction marks the moment of transition into the category, placing emphasis on the newness of the referential status (Figure 4).

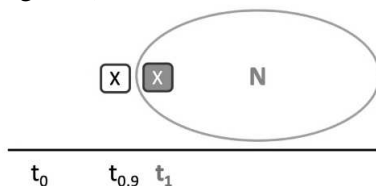


FIGURE 4: INCIPIENT NOMINAL EVALUATION: X HAS JUST BECOME N .

The temporal profile of this function suggests a recent acquisition of the property P_N . The referent X is thus understood as having just become a member of the class denoted by N . This positioning is visually represented in Figure 4 as a shift across a temporal threshold ($t_{0.9} \mapsto t_1$), where the point of entry into the category lies very close to the present moment (t_1), highlighting the recency of the change.

In Italian, this evaluative meaning is typically expressed through *neo-N* ‘newly- N ’ or *appena-N* ‘just- N ’. These constructions convey both the inchoativity of the transition and the possibility that X may still be perceived as not fully established in their new role, thus carrying an implicit approximation. Consider the following examples:

- (28) *Il neo-campione del mondo Neil Hodgson ha ottenuto il terzo posto.*

‘The **newly-crowned world champion** Neil Hodgson placed third.’

- (29) *Il neo-presidente è stato votato al secondo turno.*

‘The **newly elected president** was voted on the second ballot.’

- (30) *Qualcosa era cambiato nell’aria, gli appena-trentenni si trasformano in trentenni a tutti gli effetti.*

‘Something had changed in the air; the **just-turned thirty-year-olds** were becoming full-fledged thirty-year-olds.’

In each of these cases, the referent has technically entered the class denoted by N , be it world champion, president, or thirty-year-old, but the speaker highlights their incipient status. There is an evaluative hesitation about whether the referent qualifies as N ‘in full’, possibly due to lack of experience, legitimacy, or recognition. In other words, while X has acquired the label, their full alignment with the prototypical properties of N is not yet fully realized or acknowledged. This function proves especially frequent in discourse contexts where transitions

into roles, life stages, or statuses are marked and socially significant, e.g. careers, achievements, age-based identities. Inceptive evaluation tracks category acquisition as a process, rather than a binary yes/no state, bridging the semantic space between non-membership and full prototypicality.

3.5 (Im)perfectivity evaluation: transition and continuity

The evaluation of referents in terms of (im)perfectivity captures two complementary perspectives on aspectual progression: the completion of a transition into a category (perfective), and the ongoing persistence within that category (imperfective). Both perspectives frame the referent not just as an instance of N , but as situated within a temporal trajectory of becoming or remaining.

In the perfective view, the speaker evaluates a referent as having recently acquired a status or role, which is now fully actualized. The implication is that the property P_N is now acquired, as a result of a prior transition. This presupposes a significant temporal shift: at a prior time t_0 , X was not yet N , but at t_1 – the current or a reference time – X has reached that status, as shown in Figure 5.

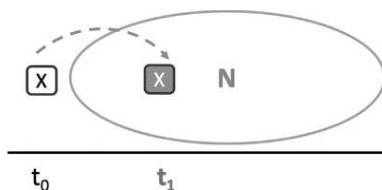


FIGURE 5: EVALUATION OF COMPLETED TRANSITION: X HAS BY NOW/ALREADY BECOME N .

This function is typically marked by adverbs such as *già* ‘already’ or *ormai* ‘by now’, which imply that the transition has taken place by a certain reference point. When modifying a nominal head, these adverbs act as aspectualizers, asserting that the referent has entered the category N and that this transition is relevant at t_1 . Examples (31)-(33) illustrate this clearly.

- (31) *I già-clienti riceveranno anche uno sconto del 20%.*
 ‘Existing customers will also receive a 20% discount.’
- (32) *Anche se non siamo ancora ormai-amici, per me è come se lo fossimo.*
 ‘Even if we are not quite already friends, to me it feels like we are.’
- (33) *Siamo già-interlocutori, nel senso che non possiamo ignorarci.*
 ‘We are already interlocutors, in the sense that we cannot ignore each other.’

These examples show that the referent is not in the process of becoming *N*, but has already crossed the threshold: the categorization is treated as complete and currently valid. This evaluative function is associated to social or institutional transitions (e.g., becoming a customer, a partner, a stakeholder), where legitimacy or role acquisition is discursively salient.

In contrast, the imperfective perspective foregrounds the continuity of a categorization over time. Here, the speaker marks that the referent was already *N* at some earlier time and still is at t_1 . The focus is not on change, but on persistence and temporal durability: *X* has continuously held the property P_N over a time span $t_0 \dots t_2$, without any interruption (Figure 6).

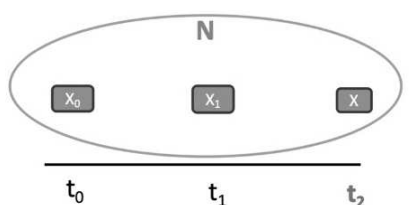


FIGURE 6: EVALUATION OF CONTINUITY: *X* IS STILL/ALWAYS *N*.

This type of evaluation assumes temporal persistence: the referent continues to meet the conditions that qualify them as *N*, and there is often an underlying concern that this state may change. Aspectual continuity is typically conveyed through *ancora* ‘still’ and *sempre* ‘always’. The speaker’s expectation that this continuity might change at some point is especially associated with *ancora-N* ‘still-*N*’, as in (34).

- (34) *L'ancora-vita della madre è affidata ai ricordi.*
 ‘The **still-life** of the mother is entrusted to memory.’
- (35) *I sempre-interlocutori di quell'epoca non sono più gli stessi.*
 ‘The **always-interlocutors** of that period are no longer the same.’
- (36) *I nostri ancora-nemici restano determinati.*
 ‘Our **still-enemies** remain determined.’

In these cases, the categorization is not newly acquired, nor is it called into question, rather, it is enduring, potentially even outdated or residual. This creates space for ironic or nostalgic uses, where the stability of identity (e.g., as *nemici* ‘enemies’, *interlocutori* ‘interlocutors’, *vita* ‘life’) is emphasized despite the passage of time or contextual change. The function has both descriptive and attitudinal weight, especially when paired with emotionally or socially salient categories.

While aspectual distinctions are canonically associated with the verbal domain, particularly in the contrast between perfective and imperfective viewpoints (Comrie 1976; Bertinetto 1986), the data presented here show that similar temporal perspectives can be mapped onto nominal structures. In this view, perfectivity corresponds to the completed realization of a category transition, as in *già*-N ‘already-N’ and *ormai*-N ‘now-N’, while imperfectivity corresponds to ongoing, habitual, or persistent categorization, as in *ancora*-N ‘still-N’ and *sempre*-N ‘always-N’. What is typically an event-based temporal framing is thus repurposed to convey subjective evaluations of referents: not simply whether someone or something is *N*, but when, for how long, and with what degree of certainty or stability they are considered as such, indexing the speaker’s stance toward the category.

3.6 Iterative evaluation: discontinuity and renewal

A further set of evaluative strategies involves the iteration of a property over time. In this case, what is evaluated is the re-applicability of P_N to an entity *X* that had previously held it. Two different scenarios can be distinguished: (i) reapplication after a period of interruption (discontinuity); and (ii) reapplication in a renewed, temporally re-anchored fashion. These two interpretations are captured, respectively, by the prefix *di-nuovo* ‘again’ and by forms such as *neo*-N and *post*-N.

The first case is illustrated by expressions like *di-nuovo-alleati* ‘again-allies’, as in (37), which implies that *X* was considered *N* at some previous time t_0 , then ceased to be *N*, and is now again considered *N* at t_1 . The property P_N is thus applicable to *X* in a discontinuous way, as shown in Figure 7.

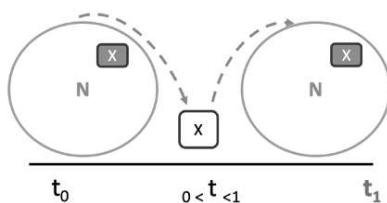


FIGURE 7: ITERATIVE EVALUATION OF DISCONTINUITY: *X* IS *N* AGAIN.

In example (37), the evaluative force lies in the re-applicability of the category *alleato* ‘ally’, despite the interruption of the status: the subject had ceased to be an ally and has once again acquired the role.

- (37) *Sfiducia dei suoi di-nuovo-alleati della Lega.*

‘A no-confidence vote from his **again-allies** in the Lega party.’

A different kind of iteration is conveyed by forms like *neo-N* and *post-N*, which do not encode a return to a prior state but rather the reactivation of a familiar property in a novel form. In this case, X was N at some earlier time t_0 , and is still N now at t_1 , but the property has undergone conceptual renovation. The implication is not merely that X has ‘become N again’, but rather that the meaning of N itself has evolved. The resulting interpretation is one of renewed or updated instantiation of the same category: P_N is applied to X in a different way from its original temporal anchoring, it has been revisited and renewed, giving rise to P'_N (Figure 8).

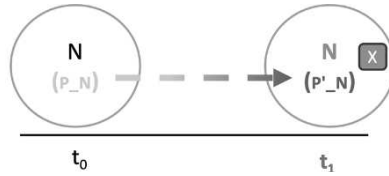


FIGURE 8: ITERATIVE EVALUATION OF RENEWAL: X IS N IN A RENEWED WAY.

This function is illustrated by the following examples:

- (38) *Con il **neo-capitalismo** è ritornato in vita, in forma sottile, il sistema coloniale (il **neo-colonialismo**).*

‘With **neo-capitalism**, the colonial system (**neo-colonialism**) has returned to life in subtle form.’

- (39) *Il video arriva nelle mani dei **neo-marxisti** che, montandolo adeguatamente, lo mandano in TV.*

‘The video ends up in the hands of **neo-Marxists** who, after editing it appropriately, broadcast it on TV.’

These expressions do not evaluate X as simply returning to a past condition, but rather as embodying a transformed or updated version of it. *Neo-capitalismo* ‘neo-capitalism’ and *neo-marxisti* ‘neo-marxists’, for instance, evoke a historical continuity with their original referents, while simultaneously asserting conceptual innovation or adaptation.

4. PHASES, BOUNDARIES, AND SHIFTS: THE TEMPORAL SHAPING OF NOMINAL EVALUATION

Temporal evaluation of nominal referents in Italian not only hinges on the dimension of time per se but also crucially intersects with the way referents are situated along various types of temporal trajectories. These trajectories,

often implicit in nominal categorization, become overt through TAM-evaluative strategies that make visible the speaker’s perspective on where a referent stands in relation to a prototypical phase, a relevant boundary, or an anticipated shift. The result is a dynamic mapping of nominal reference, whereby belonging to a category is not simply affirmed or denied, but qualified in terms of onset, persistence, interruption, resumption, or potential change.

In what follows, we analyze how different types of nouns interact with six markers: retrospective evaluation *allora-* and *ex-*, phasal *quasi-N* and *pre-N*, incipient *neo-* and iterative *post-*. By examining the correlation between evaluative markers and the semantic class of the noun (e.g., kinship, profession, event, role, etc.), we identify tendencies in the ways speakers shape reference through temporal lenses. Table 1 provides the observed distributions, which will be separately discussed in the next sections.

4.1 Retrospective status: *allora-N* and *ex-N*

The evaluative constructions *allora-N* (‘then-*N*’) and *ex-N* (‘ex-*N*’) offer insight into the retrospective framing of nominal properties, by encoding a perspective anchored in a temporally bounded past. Both constructions presuppose that the property P_N is not inherently permanent, but rather acquired at a specific time and susceptible to change. The evaluation they encode is thus grounded in a temporal anchoring that allows for delimitation: *X* has been *N* for a certain period, and this is no longer necessarily the case.

This delimitation relies on the nature of the nominal category: the noun *N* must denote a property or role that is not immutable but temporally bounded. Typical *N* types in these constructions allow for entrance and exit from the category: *X* can become *N* at a given point, ceases to be *N* later, and remain *N* for a definable span of time. The property P_N is therefore understood as both acquired and potentially transient, rather than essential or lifelong. This explains the high concentration of *ex-* and *allora-* with roles, professions, and institutional positions, where category membership is phase-based and socially negotiated, as shown in Table 2.

In the case of *allora-N*, the interpretation emphasizes the temporal framing of the referent’s status: the use of *allora* anaphorically situates P_N at a past reference time (t_0), whose identification is accessible to both speaker and hearer, either from previous context or from shared knowledge. Temporal anchoring is thus specific and indexically conveyed. This construction tends to occur with *N* types that denote roles (46%), qualifications (19%) and job/career nouns (17%), according to the Wikicoll and Repubblica corpus data ($F(x) > 2$, 550 types). The high concentration in these semantic domains reflects the dynamic

Noun class	<i>allora</i> -N Repubblica and Wiki- CoNLL, $f(x) > 2, V = 550$	<i>ex</i> -N Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and iRWaC, $f(x) > 4, V = 711$	<i>quasi</i> -N Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and iRWaC, $f(x) > 4, V = 113$	<i>pre</i> -N Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and iRWaC, $f(x) > 4, V = 342$	<i>neo</i> -N Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and iRWaC, $f(x) > 4, V = 428$	<i>post</i> -N Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and iRWaC, $f(x) > 4, V = 250$
KINSHIP	2%	3%	3%	0%	4%	0%
JOB OR CAREER	17%	23%	1%	0%	10%	0%
ROLE	46%	17%	4%	1%	16%	0%
QUALIFICATION	19%	27%	54%	21%	21%	5%
RANK	5%	2%	5%	0%	3%	1%
MOVEMENT	1%	7%	1%	1%	41%	19%
PLACE OR FUNCTION	2%	16%	0%	1%	0%	0%
PROCESS	0%	0%	0%	19%	0%	5%
DENOMINATION	8%	4%	0%	0%	1%	0%
ENTITY	0%	1%	13%	9%	4%	2%
EVENT	0%	0%	18%	14%	0%	1%
NO TAM EVALUATION	0%	0%	0%	35%	0%	67%

TABLE 1: SEMANTIC CLASSES OF THE EVALUATED NOUNS: DISTRIBUTIONS WITH *allora*-, *ex*-, *quasi*-, *pre*-, *neo*- AND *post*-. TOTALS CAN RANGE FROM 99% TO 101% DUE TO ROUNDING.

Noun class	allora-N	ex-N
	Repubblica and WikiCoNLL, $f(x) > 2, V = 550$	Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and itwac, $f(x) > 4, V = 711$
KINSHIP	2%	3%
JOB OR CAREER	17%	23%
ROLE	46%	17%
QUALIFICATION	19%	27%
RANK	5%	2%
MOVEMENT	1%	7%
PLACE OR FUNCTION	2%	16%
PROCESS	0%	0%
DENOMINATION	8%	4%
ENTITY	0%	1%
EVENT	0%	0%
No TAM EVALUATION	0%	0%

TABLE 2: SEMANTIC CLASSES OF THE EVALUATED NOUNS: DISTRIBUTIONS WITH *allora*-, AND *ex*-.

and phase-based nature of such nominal properties. A politician may have been *allora-presidente* (‘then-president’), or a public figure may be referred to as *allora-Papa* (‘then-Pope’), pointing to a phase that, while meaningful, is now located in a completed past.

Similarly, *ex*-N constructions convey the loss or discontinuation of a previously held P_N , often with an evaluative stance that signals detachment or transformation, but in this case temporal anchoring is left unspecific. The structure is highly productive and frequent ($F(x) > 4$, 711 types), with dominant associations to job/career (23%), qualification (27%), and place/function (16%) classes. The itTenTen20 corpus confirms this frequency with types such as *ex-presidente* (‘ex-president’), *ex-marito* (‘ex-husband’), and *ex-compagni* (‘ex-comrades’), reflecting a wide range of relational and institutional roles (17%).

4.2 Approaching and anticipated status: *quasi*-N and *pre*-N

While *allora*-N and *ex*-N look backward to a concluded phase, *quasi*-N and *pre*-N orient the evaluative perspective toward an incipient or anticipated phase. These constructions articulate the speaker’s assessment of a referent X in relation to a property P_N that is not yet fully realized but lies within the horizon of expectation or proximity. The evaluation they convey is prospective, often uncertain, and anchored in phase-based temporality. The construction *quasi*-N

‘almost-N’ encodes a gradient notion of acquisition: P_N is viewed as partially, temporarily, or provisionally applicable to X . The property is not fully instantiated but sufficiently close to warrant mention. This evaluative stance is particularly suited to cases where the noun denotes a property with delimitable duration, an event, or a role that can be only partially attained. The referent is evaluated as being in an intermediate or provisional state, with P_N not yet verified at time t_1 . Corpus data confirm this pattern, as shown in Table 3.

Noun class	<i>quasi</i> -N	<i>pre</i> -N
	Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and itwac, $f(x) > 4$, $ V = 113$	Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and itwac, $f(x) > 4$, $ V = 342$
KINSHIP	3%	0%
JOB OR CAREER	1%	0%
ROLE	4%	1%
QUALIFICATION	54%	21%
RANK	5%	0%
MOVEMENT	1%	1%
PLACE OR FUNCTION	0%	1%
PROCESS	0%	19%
DENOMINATION	0%	0%
ENTITY	13%	9%
EVENT	18%	14%
NO TAM EVALUATION	0%	35%

TABLE 3: SEMANTIC CLASSES OF THE EVALUATED NOUNS: DISTRIBUTIONS WITH *quasi*- AND *pre*-.

In the Wikicoll and itWac corpora ($F(x) > 4$, 113 types), *quasi*- predominantly occurs with qualifications (50%), events (17%), and entities (12%). Examples such as *quasi-monopolio* ‘almost monopoly’, *quasi-morte* ‘near death’, or *quasi-marito* ‘almost-husband’ illustrate how the prefix encodes proximity to a threshold that is not (yet) crossed. In formal terms, P_N is approaching applicability, but remains incomplete or unconfirmed. This allows the speaker to invoke a phase-based, provisional, or low-certainty evaluation, relevant in contexts where identity or categorization is emerging.

The construction *pre*-N ‘pre-N’ similarly marks a preliminary phase, but its logic is often more structurally temporal than gradient. Unlike *quasi*-N, which emphasizes resemblance or approximation, *pre*-N encodes sequencing: X is located in the timeframe preceding the activation of P_N . This type of evaluation typically applies to nouns with an intrinsic temporal anchoring, such as events, processes, and qualifications, where the acquisition of P_N is understood to be situated after a definable point. Wikicoll and itWac data ($F(x) > 4$, 342 types)

confirm this distribution: *pre-N* occurs with processes (19%), events (14%), and entities (9%). Examples such as *pre-crisi* ‘pre-crisis’, *pre-produzione* ‘pre-production’, and *pre-iscrizione* ‘pre-enrollment’ point to referents that are not yet part of P_N , but are evaluated in light of their temporal proximity to a phase onset. In many of these cases, N denotes situations with punctual aspect or temporally anchored ranks that can be entered and exited. We also observe 35% of the occurrences that do not encode TAM evaluation, but denote a referent located before N .

In both *quasi-N* and *pre-N*, the property P_N is construed as not yet acquired, but the referent is evaluated as being on a path toward acquisition, or as being temporally contextualized by the upcoming phase. Formally, this entails reference to a *pre- P_N* frame, in which X is assessed as resembling, approximating, or anticipating the full acquisition of P_N . The evaluation is thus incipient and often provisional, conveying an interpretive stance that foregrounds temporal directionality toward possible future states.

4.3 Entering and exiting phases: *neo-N* and *post-N*

If *quasi-N* and *pre-N* locate a referent at the threshold of a property, *neo-N* and *post-N* shift the perspective to referents that have either just entered or have moved beyond a given category. These constructions are inherently temporal and align with aspectual distinctions (inchoative for *neo-N*, and post-phase for *post-N*), allowing speakers to frame a referent’s status as dynamically evolving.

The construction *neo-N* marks a recent entrance into a category. The referent X is presented as newly acquiring the property P_N , though often without full assimilation. This inchoative evaluation presupposes that the property is acquired at a specific point in time, it is therefore not inherent, but shows a delimitable duration. The construction typically encodes the acquisition of a role, function, or social status, whose anchoring in time frames the referent’s identity as still emergent and potentially unstable. Corpus data confirm the tight correlation between this temporal framing and the semantics of the nouns involved, as shown in Table 4.

Among the 428 types retrieved ($F(x) > 4$), the most frequent categories are movement (41%), qualification (21%), role (16%), and job/career (10%). Examples such as *neo-fidanzato* ‘new boyfriend’, *neo-laureato* ‘new-graduate’, and *neo-assunto* ‘newly-hired’ point to social or institutional statuses recently entered. These categories share the property of being acquired, often through a clear event or transition (graduation, hiring, relationship), and of being temporally segmentable. As argued in Section 3.6, *neo-N* is also attested with a renewal function, just like *post-N*: in these cases, the two prefixes identify

Noun class	neo-N	post-N
	Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and itwac, $f(x) > 4, V = 428$	Repubblica, WikiCoNLL and itwac, $f(x) > 4, V = 250$
KINSHIP	4%	0%
JOB OR CAREER	10%	0%
ROLE	16%	0%
QUALIFICATION	21%	5%
RANK	3%	1%
MOVEMENT	41%	19%
PLACE OR FUNCTION	0%	0%
PROCESS	0%	5%
DENOMINATION	1%	0%
ENTITY	4%	2%
EVENT	0%	1%
NO TAM EVALUATION	0%	67%

TABLE 4: SEMANTIC CLASSES OF THE EVALUATED NOUNS: DISTRIBUTIONS WITH *neo*- AND *post*-.

referents in a stage following the prototypical instantiation of P_N . This function encodes completion or transformation, often with a sense of aftermath, consequence, or residual identity. Like *neo*-, *post*- applies to nouns that are temporally anchored, but from the opposite end of the phase trajectory: instead of entry into N , it marks an exit. P_N is no longer valid, yet its effects may persist. Examples include *post-infanzia* ‘post-childhood’, or *post-produzione* ‘post-production’, indexing a phase shaped by a completed N but still keeping features characteristics of N .

This legacy-based evaluation is grounded in the interpretation of N as a bounded, anchored property associated with a specific reference time. What is evaluated is not the presence of P_N but its legacy, its ability to still contextualize or influence the referent. The frequency distribution of *post*-N (250 types, $F(x) > 4$) shows a strong preference for movement (19%), process (5%), and qualification (5%), with a great majority of occurrences (69%) in which *post*-N refers to a referent that occurs after N , thus falling out of our object of analysis (e.g. *post-guerra* ‘after war’). These values confirm that *post*- applies to nouns whose temporal reference can be delimited and situated, often tied to life phases or procedural events.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to investigate how Italian modified nouns encode temporality, aspect, and modality, dimensions traditionally associated with verbal predicates, within nominal constructions. By analyzing a broad range of prefixal and adverbial modifiers (such as *ex-*, *quasi-*, *pre-*, *appena-*, *già-*, *ormai-*, *ancora-*, *sempre-*, *neo-*, *post-*, *di-nuovo-*), we have shown that nominal categorization is not a static operation. Rather, it is a temporally situated and evaluative act. Referential categories are not only named but also modulated with respect to their temporal anchoring, the phase of their development, the expected evolution, and the speaker's degree of epistemic or affective commitment.

At the core of this process lies what we have defined as TAM evaluation of reference. This refers to a set of strategies through which speakers explicitly or implicitly evaluate the validity, stability, and epistemic certainty of referential categorization over time. Unlike verbal TAM marking, which targets the occurrence of events or the realization of actions, this form of evaluation modulates the status of the referent (*X*) with respect to the category *N* in light of past, current, or projected conditions. The overall system involves not only temporal location, but also aspectual configuration (such as inchoativity or iteration) and modal stance (such as approximation, intensification, and prototypicality), thereby producing a rich array of meaning effects.

The descriptive taxonomy proposed throughout Sections 3 and 4, which includes retrospective evaluations, initial-stage assessments, transitions, iterations, and discontinuities, demonstrates that these expressions follow coherent semantic patterns. These patterns can be schematized in terms of referential phasehood. Elements such as *pre-* and *quasi-* mark anticipatory or preparatory phases; *appena-* and *neo-* denote incipient or newly entered roles; *già-*, *ormai-*, and *ancora-* capture intermediate and transitional stages; *sempre-* encodes permanence; *di-nuovo-* signals re-categorization after interruption; *post-* and *ex-* mark phases that follow the termination or transcendence of a given category. These forms articulate what we may call a temporal grammar of nominal reference, in which the speaker positions the referent not only along a timeline but also in relation to its relevance, typicality, and validity in the present moment of speaking (t_1).

Moreover, our findings point to important correlations between TAM-evaluative forms and nominal classes. Nominals with structured internal temporality, including institutional roles (*presidente* 'president', *ministro* 'minister'), social statuses (*fidanzato* 'boyfriend', *pensionato* 'retired person'), life stages (*neonata* 'newborn', *laureato* 'graduate'), and phase-defined processes (*progetto* 'project', *trattativa* 'negotiation'), tend to attract evaluative marking.

These nouns naturally lend themselves to phase-based interpretations and are therefore more likely to be modified by forms that express e.g., incipency, permanence, or discontinuity. By contrast, nouns that are less temporally structured or are inherently stable (for example *tavolo* ‘table’, *zio* ‘uncle’, *triangolo* ‘triangle’) tend to be less prone to TAM evaluation or accommodate only broad approximative readings (as in *quasi-macchina* ‘almost-car’).

Crucially, the temporally anchored evaluative constructions examined in this study also encode meanings that reflect the speaker’s epistemic and modal stance. The use of modifiers such as *quasi-*, *pre-*, *neo-*, and even *già-* or *appena-* does not merely indicate when a referent belongs to a category. These forms also convey how securely or convincingly the categorization is held, whether it is tentative, partial, uncertain, or contextually modulated. They interact with interpretive domains of approximation and temporariness, which are closely linked to modality.

These findings suggest a broader theoretical claim: TAM is not confined to predicative structures but is instead a general cognitive-pragmatic resource for organizing meaning in time and across perspectives. Extending TAM to the nominal domain invites a reconceptualization of temporality and modality as resources not only for situating actions but also for modulating reference with respect to speaker stance and categorical boundaries. This proposal aligns with recent approaches in semantics and pragmatics that emphasize the scalar, gradable, and evaluative nature of nominal meaning, especially in socially embedded and discourse-sensitive contexts.

The present study opens a range of empirical and theoretical avenues. From an empirical point of view, we intend to proceed with a systematic annotation of the dataset, coding each occurrence according to its TAM-evaluative type, the class of the modified noun, and the temporal profile of the referent. This will allow for a broader quantitative analysis and for the testing of hypotheses regarding frequency, distribution, and productivity.

Further work is also needed to examine how TAM-evaluated nominals function within larger grammatical constructions, which may show varying degrees of entrenchment and conventionalization (see Section 1.2): an analysis of how these forms operate in predicative structures, attributive modifiers, or discourse framing expressions could unveil the role of TAM-evaluation in constructional semantics and its contribution to processes of grammaticalization.

Finally, the approach proposed here may be extended in a cross-linguistic perspective. Languages differ in their strategies of nominal evaluation, and a typology of referential TAM systems would contribute significantly to the study of temporal semantics, reference, and categorization in a typological and functional framework.

REFERENCES

- Baroni, M., S. Bernardini, F. Comastri, L. Piccioni, A. Volpi, G. Aston & M. Mazoleni (2004). Introducing the La Repubblica Corpus: A Large, Annotated, TEI (XML)-Compliant Corpus of Newspaper Italian. In *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC'04)*. Lisbon.
- Baroni, M., S. Bernardini, A. Ferraresi & E. Zanchetta (2009). The wacky wide web: A collection of very large linguistically processed web-crawled corpora. *Language Resources and Evaluation*, 43(3). 209–226.
- Benczes, R. (2005). Creative noun–noun compounds. *Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 3(1). 250–268.
- Benczes, R. (2006). *Creative Compounding in English: The Semantics of Metaphorical and Metonymical Noun-Noun Combinations*, *Human Cognitive Processing*, volume 19. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Bertinetto, P.M. (1986). *Tempo, aspetto e azione nel verbo Italiano: il sistema dell'indicativo*. Firenze: Accademia della Crusca.
- Bertinetto, P.M. (2020). On nominal tense. *Linguistic Typology*, 24(2). 311–352.
- Bybee, J.L., R. Perkins & W. Pagliuca (1994). *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Camargo, E. (2008). Identidade e alteridade em wayana: Uma contribuição linguística. *CAMPOS - Revista de Antropologia Social*, 9(2).
- Cappelle, B., R. Daus & S. Hartmann (2023). The english privative prefixes near-, pseudo- and quasi-: Approximation and “disproximation”. *Zeitschrift für Wortbildung / Journal of Word Formation*, 7(1). 52–75.
- Comrie, B. (1976). *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Downing, P. (1977). On the creation and use of english compound nouns. *Language*, 53(4). 810–842.
- Grandi, N. & L. Körtvélyessy (eds.) (2015a). *Edinburgh Handbook of Evaluative Morphology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Grandi, N. & L. Körtvélyessy (2015b). Introduction: Why evaluative morphology? In N. Grandi & L. Körtvélyessy (eds.) *Edinburgh Handbook of Evaluative Morphology*, 1–20. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Helmer, H. (2023). Ad-hoc-compounds in spoken german. *Interactional Linguistics*, 3(1–2). 67–92. <https://doi.org/10.1075/il.22007.he1>.
- Jakubčíek, M., A. Kilgarrieff, V. Kovář, P. Rychlý & V. Suchomel (2013). The ten-ten corpus family. In *Proceedings of the 7th International Corpus Linguistics Conference (CL 2013)*. Lancaster, 125–127.
- Lecarme, J. (2012). Nominal tense across languages. In R. Binnick (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Tense and Aspect*, 695–720. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Masini, F. & J. Di Donato (2023). Non-prototypicality by (discontinuous) reduplication: The N-non-N construction in italian. *Zeitschrift für Wortbildung / Journal of Word Formation*, 7(1). 130–155.

- Masini, F., M. Norde & K. Van Goethem (2023). Approximation in morphology: A state of the art. *Zeitschrift für Wortbildung / Journal of Word Formation*, 7(1). 1–26.
- Mauri, C. & F. Masini (2024). Multi-layered indexicality: When proper names become categories. In P.J. Nielsen & M.S. Sansiñena (eds.) *Indexicality: The Role of Indexing in Language Structure and Language Change*, 171–196. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Mauri, C. & L. Pannitto (2026). Temporal, aspectual, and modal evaluation in nominal reference: the case of Italian. *Folia Linguistica*. Forthcoming.
- Mauri, C. & A. Sansò (2018). Linguistic strategies for ad hoc categorization: Theoretical assessment and cross-linguistic variation. *Folia Linguistica*, 52(1–2). 1–35.
- Mauri, C. & A. Sansò (2020). Ad hoc categorization and languaging: The online construction of categories in discourse. *Language Sciences*, 81. 101312.
- Nordlinger, R. & L. Sadler (2004). Nominal tense in crosslinguistic perspective. *Language*, 80(4). 776–806.
- Prieto, V.M. (2015). The semantics of evaluative morphology. In N. Grandi & L. Körtvélyessy (eds.) *Edinburgh Handbook of Evaluative Morphology*, 21–31. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748681754-006>.
- Steddy, S. (2019). Compounds, composability, and morphological idiosyncrasy. *The Linguistic Review*, 36(3). 453–483.

Caterina Mauri

University of Bologna

Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

Via Cartoleria 5 – 40124 Bologna

Italy

e-mail: caterina.mauri@unibo.it

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8226-7846>

Ludovica Pannitto

University of Bologna

Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

Via Cartoleria 5 – 40124 Bologna

Italy

e-mail: ludovica.pannitto@unibo.it

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5760-6447>