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# The new *ne*: an incipient restandardization process in contemporary Italian

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with an ongoing change in the clitic paradigm of contemporary Italian, namely the incipient overextension of functions of the clitic *ne*.

In the standard variety *ne* can only stand for prepositional phrases consisting of *di* + [noun phrase] and *da* + [noun phrase], such as those found in genitival, partitive, and locative constructions or in passive ‘by’-phrases. In contemporary Italian, on the other hand, *ne* is increasingly appearing as a substitute of *a* + [noun phrase] when used as the second argument of intransitive bivalent verbs, such as *accennare (a)* ‘to mention’, *appassionarsi (a)* ‘to get passionate (about)’, and *sopravvivere (a)* ‘to survive’. The latter use has not received much attention in the literature.

This overextension is observed in a number of verbs, drawing on data from four corpora of written and spoken Italian, and is discussed as an incipient change from above, originating in formal styles of Italian and moving downwards into the neo-standard and (albeit rarely) colloquial varieties.

The change seems to have been triggered and favored by the fact that the standard variants for that slot of the paradigm, namely locative *vi* and *ci*, are avoided because they are considered too obsolete or low-prestige respectively, and also by the fact that these clitics, when combined with others, especially in pronominal verbs, might be judged agrammatical by some speakers.

**Keywords:** Italian clitics, *ne*, restandardization processes

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# 1 Introduction: Italian between standard, neo-standard and further restandardization

Along with a set of stressed personal pronouns (*io, tu, noi* etc.), Italian exhibits a set of clitics, i. e., unstressed forms of pronouns and of adverbs of place that can precede (if proclitic) or follow (enclitic) the verb.<sup>1</sup>

From the diachronic point of view, clitics were grammaticalized in all Romance languages from former stressed pronouns (e. g., French 3rd singular masculine subject clitic *il* < Latin *ille* ‘that’; Italian 1st singular direct and indirect object clitic *mi* < Latin *me/mihi* ‘1SG.ACC/1SG.DAT’) and locative adverbs (Italian locative *vi* < Latin *ibi* ‘there’; Italian *ne* < Lat. *inde* ‘from there’, for *ne*’s functions see below, Section 2). The emergence of clitics is a process that took place in all Romance languages as far as direct and indirect object clitics are concerned; clitics for subjects and other obliques are less widespread (Vincent 1997, Heap et al. 2017, Ramat and Ricca 2016: 59–60).

Standard Italian does not have subject clitics, but nonetheless it displays a very rich, and intricate, clitic microsystem (Berruto 2017: 44–45). Given its richness, this paradigm has been involved in a number of restandardization processes since the 1960s (Berruto 2017: 43–47). This paper deals with an incipient overextension of functions of the clitic *ne*, a process that has been noticed, and seems to have started, only in recent years, and only in some varieties of the language, as we will see.

Before delving into the phenomenon, and in order to understand its sociolinguistic correlates, it is important to also bear in mind that today’s Italian witnesses the co-existence of two different standard varieties (Cerruti 2021, Cerruti and Vietti 2022). On the one hand we have the variety described in prescriptive (school) grammars, which is (ideally) taught in schools by teachers, is characterized by the presence of literary features typical of the works of Alessandro Manzoni, Gabriele d’Annunzio and the like, and is nowadays restricted only to few, usually very formal, communicative domains. This variety is usually labelled standard Italian (as opposed to neo-standard Italian, see below), *italiano scolastico* (‘school Italian’, Antonelli 2011) or ‘old’ Standard (Ballarè and Miola 2021). On the other hand, the variety normally spoken and written in mid-highly formal contexts by educated speakers now includes originally sub-standard (or, better, non-standard) features. This variety was observed and described by linguists and sociolinguists only since the middle 1980s and is variously labelled *italiano tendenziale* (‘tendential Italian’, Mioni 1983), *italiano dell’uso medio* (‘average Italian’, Sabatini 1985), neo-standard

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<sup>1</sup> Finite verb forms have proclitics; imperative and non-finite forms have enclitics (in compound tenses, enclitics follow the auxiliary).

Italian (especially after Berruto 1987), *italiano giornalistico* ('journalistic Italian', Antonelli 2011).

The functions of *ne* we will concentrate upon in the following Sections are only very cursorily mentioned in Ballarè's (2020) detailed account of the research concerning the neo-standard and its features (p. 483), and in De Santis (2021: 82). Nor is the development of what we might call a 'new *ne*' a feature of standard Italian: it might rather be regarded as a "traiettoria di variazione" [trajectory of variation] (Ballarè 2020: 482) or as a change in progress that might eventually lead to a further restandardization of the clitic paradigm.

The aim of this work is to offer evidence for the use of the new *ne* and to discuss this ongoing change from the internal-linguistic and sociolinguistic point of view. What follows will be organized in three Sections. In Section 2 we describe the clitic paradigm of standard Italian and the restandardization processes in which this paradigm has been involved with the emergence of neo-standard Italian. Different functions of *ne* will also be tackled, including those that, according to the existent literature, are displayed by the clitic in standard, neo-standard and contemporary Italian. In Section 3 new cases of the overextension of *ne* are presented and discussed, drawing on data from four corpora of contemporary Italian. Section 4 briefly concludes the paper.

## 2 The clitic paradigm in Italian

Table 1 illustrates the clitic paradigm of standard Italian. It consists of thirteen different exponents, many of which are polysemic:

**Table 1:** Clitic paradigm of standard Italian

	1sg	2sg	3sgm, f	1pl	2pl	3plm, f	3refl
Accusative	mi	ti	lo, la	ci	vi	li, le	si
Dative	mi	ti	gli, le	ci	vi	loro	si
Genitive			ne			ne	
Locative			ci/vi			ci/vi	
Other			ci/vi			ci/vi	

Some further qualifications are in order. Locative *vi* is stylistically more elevated than locative *ci*; while *loro* exhibits a different syntactic behavior with respect to all other exponents of the paradigm so that it is usually considered a weak (rather than a proper clitic) pronoun (Cardinaletti 1991, Cardinaletti and Starke 1999). More-

ver; almost all clitics have allomorphs that have to be used when they appear in a cluster, but this does not hold for *ne*, which is the focus of the present paper: therefore, these issues will not be deepened further in this Section (see Wanner 1977, Evans et al. 1978, Lepschy and Lepschy 1981: 181–182).

After the 1960s, with the spread of Italian over all other local languages as the everyday-spoken variety and the subsequent development of neo-standard Italian (see previous Section), the actual use of clitics varied and the paradigm underwent a number of innovation processes that ultimately led to its reduction and simplification (Berretta 1985: 209). In particular, *loro* has dropped out of oral (and perhaps also written) use and *gli* is normally overextended for plural (feminine and masculine) datives. *Gli* is also used instead of feminine singular dative *le*, although in casual speech and in journalistic prose the occurrence of the former instead of the latter is less pervasive (cf. Cerruti and Vietti 2022: 274). Locative (adessive/allative) *vi* has virtually disappeared (Berretta 1985: 200, Russi 2008: 59), *ci*, on the other hand, is well attested as a locative, and may also be used to pronominalize instruments, comitatives, non-human datives (Pescarini 2015: 497), and also dative accusatives (i. e., the second valency of intransitive bivalent verbs introduced by the preposition *a*, see below). Furthermore, it is very frequently fixed, as a desamantized particle, on verbs (when functioning as the so-called *ci attualizzante*, ‘actualizing *ci*’, see Berretta 1984, Sabatini 1985: 160–161, Berruto 1987: 76).

These changes can be visualized in Table 2, which shows the clitic paradigm utilized in neo-standard (spoken) Italian, restandardized along the lines sketched above.

**Table 2:** Clitic paradigm of neo-standard Italian

	1sg	2sg	3sgm, f	1pl	2pl	3plm, f	3refl
Accusative	mi	ti	lo, la	ci	vi	li, le	si
Dative	mi	ti	gli, (le) <sup>2</sup>	ci	vi	gli	si
Genitive			ne			ne	
Locative			ci/(vi)			ci/(vi)	
Other			ci			ci	

The items put in parentheses are out, or virtually out, of the system, i. e. are scarcely, if at all, used in the variety at issue.

<sup>2</sup> *Ci* is systematically used by some speakers to refer to [- Animate] datives (Cordin and Lo Duca 2003: 55 fn.4, but cp. Lepschy and Lepschy 1981: 108–109)

## 2.1 Functions of *ne* in standard and neo-standard Italian

Nonetheless, some items of the paradigm maintain roughly the same functions in standard and neo-standard Italian. *Ne*, the clitic form which we will henceforth discuss, is one of these items.

Canonically (see Cordin 2001, Maiden and Robustelli 2013: 96, 106–110), *ne* stands for prepositional phrases consisting of *di* + [noun phrase] and *da* + [noun phrase]. These prepositional phrases – as shown in Table 1 and Table 2 – may serve the function of a genitive, see (1), a partitive (2), and an ablative (i. e., separating) locative (3).

1. *Sono stanca di questa città e non so ancora quando  
be.PRS.1SG tired.F of this.F city and NEG know.PRS.1SG yet when  
ne scoprirò i lati piacevoli.  
NE discover.FUT.1SG the sides pleasant.MP*  
'I am tired of this city and I don't know yet when I will discover its pleasant sides  
(lit.: the pleasant sides **of it**).'  
(Cordin 2001: 647)
2. *Volevo comprare una bicicletta, ma non ne avevano in vendita.  
want.IPFV.1SG buy.INF a bicycle but NEG NE have.IMPF.3PL in sale*  
'I wanted to buy a bicycle but they didn't sell any (lit.: **of them**).'  
(Maiden and Robustelli 2013: 107)
3. *Abitò a lungo a Palermo. Ne partì nel 1909.  
leave.PST.3SG at length at Palermo NE depart.PST.3SG in.the 1909*  
'He lived for a long time in Palermo. He left (lit.: departed **from it**) in 1909.'  
(Cordin 2001: 649)

In addition, *ne* can also pronominalize 'genitival accusatives', i. e. the second valency of some intransitive bivalent verbs introduced by the preposition *di* (such as  *approfittare di qualcuno/qualcosa* 'to take advantage of someone/something', see (4)), and the so-called 'by'-phrases (i. e., agent or force phrases) in passive constructions (5). The latter function may include cases of extended reference (6).

4. *Ottenne finalmente la patente e ne approfittò  
get.PST.3SG finally the driving.license and NE take.advantage.PST.3SG  
subito.  
immediately*  
'He finally got his driving license and immediately took advantage **of it**.'  
(Cordin 2001: 647)

5. *I tulipani furono distrutti dal vento.* → *I tulipani ne furono distrutti.*  
 the tulips AUX.PST.3PL destroy.PP by.the wind The tulips NE  
 furono distrutti.  
 AUX.PST.3PL destroy.PP  
 ‘The tulips were destroyed by the wind.’ → ‘The tulips were destroyed **by it** (i. e., the wind).’  
 (Maiden and Robustelli 2013: 110)
6. *Menocchio, venuto=ne a conoscenza, ne rimase talmente scosso da espor=la diffusamente.*  
 M. come.PP=of.it to knowledge NE remain.PST.3SG so  
 affect.PP as expound.INF=it diffusely  
 ‘Menocchio, having come to learn of it, was so affected **by it** (i. e., this story, this fact) as to expound it far and wide.’<sup>3</sup>  
 (Maiden and Robustelli 2013: 110)

*Ne* does not exhibit any difference as far as number and gender are concerned: it can refer to singular and plural, human and non-human referents. However, when *ne* appears as a ‘by’-phrase’s pronominalizer, given that it refers to ‘a fact’ or a portion of the preceding co-text, it always substitutes non-humans.<sup>4</sup>

As regards *ne*’s frequency, comparing her data collected for neo-standard spoken Italian and a 1971 corpus of written Italian (Bortolini et al. 1971), Berretta (1985: 203) finds that *ne* is “solo lievemente meno frequente che nello scritto” [‘only slightly less frequent than in writing’]. However, in the neo-standard variety, only the partitive and the genitival accusative functions are well represented. All other-functions of *ne* are absent or virtually absent (Berretta 1985: 204). The form [verb+clitic] may eventually be lexicalized with a meaning slightly different in comparison to the bare verb form, as is the case for *tornarsene*, emphatic variant of *tornare* ‘to come back’; *risponderne*, ‘to be responsible for entrusted persons or for the things of others for any damage suffered by them’, one of the various meanings displayed by *rispondere*, generically ‘to answer’; or (youth slang) *saperne* ‘to be skilled’ vis à vis *sapere* ‘to know’. It must also be noted that in the case of genitival accusatives *ne* can also appear juxtaposed to the verb form as “a redundant anaphoric element, comparable to an agreement morpheme” (Berruto 2017: 46, see (7)).

<sup>3</sup> Note that the first *ne*, that of *venutone*, is an example of genitival *ne*.

<sup>4</sup> For a throughout discussion of the peculiar syntax of *ne* see Belletti and Rizzi (1981), Maiden and Robustelli (2013: 106–110).

7. *è una cosa di cui se ne discute ormai*  
 be.PRS.3SG a thing of which REFL.3 NE discuss.PST.3SG by.now  
*da quindici giorni.*  
 since fifteen days  
 ‘it is a thing people have been discussing for the last two weeks now.’  
 (Berruto 2017: 46)

However, the functions *ne* can serve in today’s Italian are apparently increasing. Lombardi Vallauri (2015) was the first to notice that *ne* is used as a substitution for prepositional phrases consisting of *a* + [noun phrase] “with increasing frequency, with the prepositional phrases introduced by complex verbs made of *dare*, *prendere* or *fare* + N” (Lombardi Vallauri 2017: 139, see (8)). Prepositional phrases made of *a* + [noun phrase] usually have a dative function in Italian.

8. *allego il pdf dell’ invito [...], in modo che possa*  
 attach.PRS.1SG the pdf of.the invitation in way that can.SBJV.3SG  
*dar=ne rilievo nella Sua testata.*  
 give=NE emphasis in.the POSS.HON newspaper  
 ‘I am attaching the pdf of the invitation, so that You can emphasize it on Your newspaper.’  
 (Lombardi Vallauri 2017: 139)

In (8), the antecedent of *ne* is the noun *invito*, and the canonic realization of the relevant part of the sentence with a full prepositional phrase should be *dare rilievo all’invito* (literally, ‘give emphasis to the invitation’) and not *dare rilievo dell’invito*. Canonically, the only possible clitics selected in these cases in standard and neo-standard Italian should be *vi* or *ci* (Cordin and Lo Duca 2003: 55, cf. the row ‘Other’ in Table 1 and 2).

This usage is still expanding in contemporary Italian and it is actually not limited to complex verb constructions of the type [light verb] + [noun]. In fact, the new *ne* also appears with some bivalent (non-transitive) verbs whose second argument is a ‘dative accusative’, i. e., a prepositional phrase whose head is the preposition *a*. More data, examples, and possible explanations for the phenomenon are provided in the following Sections.

### 3 Data set and methodology

In order to assess the extent of the further overextension of *ne*'s use in contemporary Italian, we selected a number of bivalent non-transitive verbs and tested their occurrence with an argumental *ne* in different corpora of Italian. The verbs have been chosen among the list of bivalent verbs with an “*a*-Objektoid” (i. e., what we call here a dative accusative for the sake of simplicity) provided by Siller-Runggaldier (1996: 389–390). From this list, only verbs belonging to the Italian *Vocabolario di Base* (‘basic lexicon’, De Mauro 1980: 149–183) have been put under scrutiny. Therefore, the results will involve the most used items of the list. The total number of tested verbs was 70.<sup>5</sup>

Four corpora for contemporary Italian were selected, namely CORIS, Repubblica Corpus, RIDIRE, and KIParla. The main criterion that guided the selection was to capture as much as diaphasic/diamesic variation as possible. CORIS and La Repubblica Corpus represent written Italian: in particular, CORIS is a POS-tagged, monitor corpus started in 1998 and consisting of six subsections whose registers range from academic prose to fiction books to private letters (see Rossini Favretti et al. 2002); La Repubblica Corpus also is POS-tagged and consists of texts published between 1985 and 2000 on the prominent Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* (Baroni et al. 2004). They contain more than 150 and 380 million tokens respectively. RIDIRE contains 1.5 billion tokens extracted between 2009 and 2013 from the Italian web.

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5 They were: *abbonarsi* ‘to subscribe’, *accedere* ‘to access’, *accennare* ‘to mention’, *acconsentire* ‘to consent’, *accudire* ‘to care for’, *aderire* ‘to adhere’, *alludere* ‘to allude’, *annuire* ‘to nod’, *appassionarsi* ‘to be passionate about’, *appoggiarsi* ‘to lean on’, *arrendersi* ‘to surrender’, *arrivare* ‘to arrive’, *aspirare* ‘to aspire’, *assistere* ‘to assist’, *(as)somigliare* ‘to look like’, *attenere* ‘to comply with’, *attentare* ‘to attempt to’, *attingere* ‘to draw’, *badare* ‘to take care of’, *buttare* ‘to throw’, *cedere* ‘to yield’, *collaborare* ‘to collaborate’, *concorrere* ‘to concur’, *consentire* ‘to allow’, *contribuire* ‘to contribute’, *convenire* ‘to agree’, *corrispondere* ‘to match’, *decidersi* ‘to decide’, *elevarsi* ‘to rise up’, *equivalere* ‘to equal’, *fallire* ‘to fail’, *giungere* ‘to arrive’, *guardare* ‘to look at’, *insistere* ‘to insist’, *intendere* ‘to intend’, *intervenire* ‘to intervene’, *limitarsi* ‘to limit oneself’, *mancare* ‘to miss’, *mirare* ‘to aim at’, *ovviare* ‘to remedy’, *partecipare* ‘to take part in’, *passare* ‘to pass’, *pensare* ‘to think of’, *pervenire* ‘to pervene’, *procedere* ‘to proceed’, *puntare* ‘to aim at’, *rassegnarsi* ‘to resign oneself to’, *reagire* ‘to react’, *reggere* ‘to hold up to’, *resistere* ‘to resist’, *ricorrere* ‘to resort’, *rimediare* ‘to remedy’, *rinascere* ‘to be reborn to’, *rinunciare/rinunziare* ‘to renounce’, *rinviare* ‘to refer to’, *riparare* ‘to repair’, *ripensare* ‘to rethink of’, *risalire* ‘to go back to’, *rispondere* ‘to answer’, *ritornare* ‘to come back to’, *scendere* ‘to get off’, *servire* ‘to serve’, *sforzarsi* ‘to strive’, *sommare* ‘to sum up’, *sopravvivere* ‘to survive’, *stare* ‘to stay’, *tendere* ‘to tend to’, *tenere* ‘to hold on to’, *tirare* ‘to pull to’, *tornare* ‘to come back’.

The verb *(as)somigliare* was not in the original list but was added to the items under scrutiny by virtue of its frequency in Italian.



It is POS-tagged and annotated, and has twelve sub-domains that are meant to “sufficientemente rappresent[are] l’italiano nell’insieme delle sue varietà d’uso” (‘sufficiently represent Italian in all of its varieties’, Moneglia and Paladini 2010: 21), at least in its written, online use. Lastly, KIParla (Mauri et al. 2019) is a corpus of spoken Italian containing more than one million tokens subdivided in more than 100 hours of conversations collected in Bologna and Turin from a various range of speakers. The main goal of KIParla is to capture diatopic and diaphasic variation in today’s Italy. Given their nature and the text they include, the corpora we utilize will be representative of the following varieties: CORIS and La Repubblica mainly represent standard and neo-standard Italian, since a large part of them consists of journalistic prose or other formal written genres. RIDIRE will be more prone to show data of the variety used on the web (so-called *italiano digitato*). Spoken Italian, a variety generally regarded as less formal than those previously mentioned, will be preferably accessed through KIParla data.

Every basic lexicon verb on Siller-Runggaldier’s list has been tested in relation to the occurrence with a datival accusative pronominalized with *ne*. All occurrences were manually scrutinized and annotated for the function served by *ne*. When at least one occurrence of datival accusative *ne* in at least one corpus was found, we also tested the occurrence of *vi* and *ci* as clitic pronouns for datival accusatives. Again, all occurrences were manually annotated and scrutinized. When the occurrences of the datival accusative function for a single clitic were more than 100, the number 100 is reported in Table 3.

Occurrences have been extracted for finite mood verbs, and infinitives and gerunds. For finite mood verbs all occurrences with up to three words separating the proclitic and the verb form have been extracted. Italian indefinite moods have enclitics only and the construction [verb form + enclitic(s)] is graphically written as a single word, so that no separating words can be found in between. For pronominal verbs, only forms involving the clitic *se* have been counted in Table 3, for reasons that will be discussed in Section 3.2.

The comparison of occurrences of the three items might nonetheless give an idea of the extent to which *ne* is used as one of the clitics (or the only clitic) that may pronominalize the second argument of any of the verbs at issue.

### 3.1 Results of the interrogation of the corpora

A first finding of the interrogations was that the new *ne* is virtually absent in everyday spoken Italian: KIParla contains only two occurrences of it, both with the verb *accennare*, both coming from the same registration of an academic lecture and both uttered by the teacher (*ne avevo già accennato [...] io già ne avevo accennato in altre*

*lezioni* ‘I had already mentioned it [...] I already mentioned it in other lectures’, KIParla Corpus TOD1017, see Section 3.2 for further discussion).<sup>6</sup>

As for written corpora, of the 70 verbs tested, 9 exhibit at least one occurrence of *ne*-pronominalization for a dative accusative, as shown in Table 3 (abbreviations: C = CORIS; Re = La Repubblica corpus; RI = RIDIRE).

**Table 3:** Occurrences of *ne*, *vi* and *ci* as dative accusatives with some basic lexicon verbs.

	C ne	C vi	C ci	Re ne	Re vi	Re ci	RI ne	RI vi	RI ci
accennare	30	37	0	89	100	0	70	78	1
aderire	0	100	0	0	100	0	2	100	0
alludere	0	20	0	0	25	0	2	38	0
appassionarsi	3	3	6	11	6	9	9	5	13
badare	0	22	100	0	15	100	1	10	81
partecipare	1	100	0	1	100	22	7	100	13
rassegnarsi	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	11	2
rinunciare	0	100	100	1	100	100	0	100	100
sopravvivere	1	5	1	2	5	0	5	6	0

As is partly expected in incipient changes some constructions appear rarely or very rarely. However, the occurrences of *ne* as a dative accusative range from 2% to 30% of the total for many of the verbs on Table 3 (with a peak of more than 45% for the construction with *accennare*). These figures are extracted from authoritative varieties of the language, such as those of a leading national newspaper and of webpages discussing sophisticated and learned topics: “[t]his should suffice to accept that they cannot be disposed of as the result of scattered ignorance, but they are probably strong tendencies that may install themselves permanently in future usage” (Lombardi Vallauri 2017: 140).

With *badare* and *rassegnarsi*, for instance, only one occurrence of *ne*-pronominalization has been found on the corpora.

9. *Si sono entrambi macchiati di qualche intingolo, ma non*  
 REFL.3 AUX.PRES.3PL both stain.PP of some sauce but NEG  
*ne badano.*  
 NE look.after.PRES.3PL  
 ‘They are both stained with some sauce, but they don’t care.’  
 (RIDIRE)

<sup>6</sup> This might partly be due to the smaller size of the KIParla corpus with respect to the other corpora used for this study.

In (9) the usual pronominalization of *badare*'s dative accusative with *ci* (cp. La Repubblica and RIDIRE's data) is avoided. It is perhaps worth noting here in the first place that *ne* refers to the fact of being stained (i. e., extended reference). In fact, with *badare ci* usually refers to a [+Animated], and especially to a human, referent, such as a child and the like; however *ci* may also function, with *badare*, as a cataphoric or anaphoric device for [- Animated] referents and also for extended reference.

For other verbs, on the other hand, the pronominalization with *ne* is clearly in competition – as far as written corpora are concerned – with that with *ci* and *vi*, sometimes being almost as frequent as the most common clitic in the construction. This holds among the verb tested, e. g. *accennare*, *appassionarsi* and *sopravvivere* (see (10)-(12)).

10. *Quell' esperienza gli apparteneva. Ne*  
 that experience to.him belong.IPFV.3SG NE  
*accennò* [= accennò a quell'esperienza] *una volta con me con un*  
 mention.PST.3SG one time with me with a  
*lambo di commozione.*  
 flash of emotion  
 'That experience belonged to him. He mentioned it once with me with a flash of emotion.'  
 (La Repubblica)
11. *Alla fine degli anni Novanta si era imbattuta nei*  
 at.the end of.the years Nineties REFL.3 AUX.IPFV.3SG come.across.PP in.the  
*romanzi di Alexander McCall Smith e se ne era*  
 novels of A.M.S. and REFL.3 NE AUX.IPFV.3SG  
*appassionata* [= si era appassionata ai romanzi di Alexander McCall Smith]  
 get.passionate.PP  
*subito.*  
 immediately  
 'In the late 1990s she came across the novels of Alexander McCall Smith and she was immediately passionate about it.'  
 (CORIS)

12. *capisce* *l' ingiustizia della propria esistenza, ma non*  
 understand.PRS.3SG the injustice of.the own existence but NEG  
*può far altro che cercare di*  
 can.PRS.3SG make.INF other than try.INF of  
*sopravviver=ne* [= sopravvivere **all'**ingiustizia]  
 survive.INF=NE  
 'He understands the injustice of his own existence, but he can do nothing besides trying to survive it'  
 (RIDIRE)
- The new *ne* is spreading also to verbs that are not in the Italian basic lexicon (see (13) and (14)), and is found, with both basic and non-basic verbs, also on other corpora of Italian as well as in other texts ((15) and (16)).
13. *Aderisce a un modello o se ne sottrae* [= *si sottrae a un modello*]  
 adhere.PRS.3SG to a model or REFL.3 NE withdraw.PRS.3SG  
*per un altro.*  
 for one other  
 'it adheres to a model or withdraws from it for another.'  
 (RIDIRE)
14. *Coniugare approfondite riflessioni teoriche a una pratica artistica*  
 combine.INF in-depth.FPL reflections theoretical.FPL to a practice artistic.FSG  
*che non ne soccombe* [= *soccombe alle riflessioni teoriche*].  
 that NEG NE succumb.PRS.3SG  
 'to combine in-depth theoretical reflections with an artistic practice that does not succumb to them.'  
 (RIDIRE)
15. *Un sentimento che, se non si può chiamare ammirazione, ne*  
 a feeling that if NEG REFL.3 can.PRS.3SG call.INF admiration NE  
*assomiglia* [= *assomiglia all'*ammirazione] *molto.*  
 look.like.PRS.3SG a.lot  
 'a feeling that, if it cannot be called admiration, is very similar to it.'  
 (ItTenTen20)

16. *Eredità: predisposto l' inventario non sarà possibile*  
 Inheritance prepare.pp the inventory neg be.fut.3sg possible  
*rinunciar=ne* [= rinunciare all'eredità] *successivamente.*  
 renounce.INF=NE later  
 'Inheritance: once the inventory has been prepared, it will not be possible to  
 renounce it later.'  
 (<https://www.altalex.com/documents/2018/11/22/eredita-predisposto-l-inventario-non-sara-possibile-rinunciarne-successivamente>)

### 3.2 Discussion of the data

For all verbs, the pronominalization with *ne* is in competition with pronominalization with *vi* or *ci*. Although the occurrences with the verbs at issue are not always numerous, for some of the verbs *ne* appears even in up to 30–50 % of the relevant occurrences. The trend seems to be confirmed also by other corpora and by other written and online resources. From the grammatical viewpoint, all the referents that are pronominalized with the new *ne* in the data extracted from all corpora are semantically [- Animate] – as can also be grasped from the examples offered throughout this paper.

*Ne* is therefore a variant that recently entered the slot of clitics that, along with *vi* and *ci*, can pronominalize dative accusatives when the referent is [- Animate].

Sociolinguistically speaking, this overextension of *ne*'s function is clearly an incipient change from above (Labov 1994: 78). The change originated in written, cultured varieties: examples are found in newspaper and academic articles (from the La Repubblica corpus and CORIS) and even when one takes into consideration online occurrences, such as those from RIDIRE, the topics covered by the texts under scrutiny are law (see (16)), literature (9), art and literary criticism (14), and the like, that is texts that are representative of diaphasically and diastratically high varieties. This is also confirmed by the lack of spoken occurrences in non-formal domains, since the two examples found in the KIParla corpus come from educated speech utilized during an academic lecture (see Section 3.1).

The reasons triggering and favoring this change are diverse. The main responsible of the new *ne*'s usage is perhaps the exclusion of the oblique clitic *vi* from the neo-standard variety. In common speech oblique *vi* was substituted by *ci*, but this gave rise to some issues when it came to more formal styles, because *ci* is felt by speakers/writers as too low-prestige to appear in academic writings, journalistic prose, and formal spoken Italian. Moreover, *gli* is odd, or even agrammatical, for the majority of speakers for [- Animate] referents (see e. g. Lepschy and Lepschy

1981: 108, Cordin and Calabrese 2001: 573). *Ne* is therefore the only possible choice in the paradigm for [- Animate] referents, since it does not bear any low-prestige stigma.

Also, clitic clustering may have favored the spread of the new *ne*. Albeit not agrammatical strictly speaking (cf. Schwarze and Cimaglia's 2010 Table 3 visualizing all possible Italian clitic clusters), native speakers will judge clusters *mi vi* and *vi ti* as odd or agrammatical,<sup>7</sup> and replace it consistently with *mi ci* and *ti ci* in colloquial speech. In formal styles, on the other hand, when a dative accusative must be cliticized the cluster *me ne* and *te ne* have become possible variants, *ci* being regarded as stylistically inadequate.

With *accennare*, when a dative/recipient is expressed via a clitic or a full prepositional phrase, the argumental structure virtually obligatorily changes so that the second argument becomes a genitival accusative introduced by *di* (and canonically cliticized by *ne*), while the recipient remains a dative (see (17) and (18)).<sup>8</sup> This construction is displayed by the very common *verbum dicendi parlare* 'to speak'. Also *alludere* seems to be attracted by this construction.

- |     |    |                              |                |                 |              |
|-----|----|------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 17. | a. | <b>**mi</b>                  | <i>vi/ci</i>   | <i>accenna.</i> |              |
|     |    | IOCL.1SG                     | VI/CI          | hint.PRS.3SG    |              |
|     |    | 's/he mentions it to me.'    |                |                 |              |
|     | b. | <i>me</i>                    | <b>ne</b>      | <i>accenna.</i> |              |
|     |    | IOCL.1SG                     | NE             | hint.PRS.3SG    |              |
|     |    | 's/he mentions it to me.'    |                |                 |              |
| 18. | a. | <b>**/? vi/ci</b>            | <i>accenna</i> | <i>a</i>        | <i>Marco</i> |
|     |    | VI/CI                        | hint.PRS.3SG   | to              | M.           |
|     |    | 's/he mentions it to Marco.' |                |                 |              |
|     | b. | <b>ne accenna</b>            | <i>a</i>       | <i>Marco</i>    |              |
|     |    | NE hint.PRS.3SG              | to             | M.              |              |
|     |    | 's/he mentions it to Marco.' |                |                 |              |

<sup>7</sup> *Vi ti* is apparently agrammatical for Cordin and Calabrese (2001: 604), but not e. g. for Wanner (1977: 105). Schwarze and Cimaglia (2010) indicate that locative *vi* is a free variant of *ci* and list as a possible clitic sequence *ti ci*, implying that *ti vi* belongs to the neo-standard.

<sup>8</sup> Only *ne*-cliticizations that did not co-occur with full prepositional phrases were counted in Table 1 for *accennare*, *alludere* and the like.

<sup>9</sup> *Ne* here does not refer to Schopenhauer himself, but rather to the reading of his books and to his philosophical ideas. Therefore, (19a) is not a counterexample to the finding that the new *ne* substitutes [- Animate] referents.

By way of analogy with *mi vi*, *vi ti/ti vi*, in pronominal verbs such as *appassionare*, also *vi si* can be replaced by *se ne*, compare (19a) and (b).

19. a. *leggono Schopenhauer, se ne appassionano.*<sup>9</sup>  
 read.PRS.3PL S. REFL.3 NE get.passionate.PRS.3PL  
 ‘they read Schopenhauer and get passionate about it’  
 (La Repubblica)
- b. *gli argomenti che possono fare notizia sono pochi e  
 the topics that can.PRS.3PL make. INF news be.PRS.3PL few and  
 anche quelli che s’interessano ad essi raramente vi si  
 also those that get.interested.PRS.3PL to them rarely VI REFL.3  
 appassionano.  
 get.passionate.PRS.3PL  
 ‘the topics that can make news are few and so are those who are interested in  
 them rarely become passionate about them.’  
 (La Repubblica)*

In addition, analogy or similarity of the [*ne* + verb] construction with other canonical constructions might also have favored the spread of *ne* in contexts where it did not belong. As suggested by Lombardi Vallauri (2018: 98), nominal constructions exhibiting *ne* as a substitute for a prepositional phrase with *di* might have been replicated in quasi-homophonous compound verb forms (see 20).

20. *è un sopravvissuto della Grande Guerra > ne è un sopravvissuto > ne è soprav-*  
*vissuto*  
 ‘he is a survivor of WWI’ > ‘he is a survivor of it’ > ‘he survived it’

Furthermore, some of the tested verbs may have (bookish, obsolete and anyway less frequent) senses displaying a *di*-phrase in the argument structure and thus canonically selecting *ne* as a pronominalizer for this argument, e. g. *partecipare di* ‘to become a participant, to have as a characteristic of one’s own nature’ vs *partecipare a* ‘to participate in’. Given that the varieties where the new *ne* originated are educated and formal, it might also be possible that the clitic of less frequent senses are replicated onto the most frequent sense’s structures in order to elevate the style.

## 4 Conclusions

The data offered here accounted for an incipient restandardization process involving the clitic *ne* in contemporary Italian. *Ne* may today be utilized, along with ‘more (neo-)standard’ variants *vi* and *ci*, as a substitute for dative accusatives, that is second verbal arguments introduced by *a*. The variant is still marginal but its spread is apparently continuous. It originated in refined and educated varieties and has moved ‘downwards’ into journalistic prose and also into formal speech. We speculated about some of the reasons favoring the spread of the new function of *ne*, mainly due to the ousting of locative *vi* from the clitic paradigm – considered too obsolete – and of locative *ci* – considered too low-prestige – from the formal styles. The ongoing change at issue here is then to be regarded as one of the examples of change from above taking place in today’s Italian (see also on this issues Renzi 2012, Cerruti et al. 2017).

As further developments for the present research, we may suggest exploring the fixation of the new *ne* on other verbs, and especially its use as a substitute and pronominalizer not only for dative accusatives, but also for other complements, as illustrated by (21), involving a comitative, and (22), involving a second argument introduced by *per* with the complex verb *provare attrazione* ‘to be attracted’.

21. Ju-on [...] *Coloro che ne entrano in contatto perdono la vita.*  
 Ju-on those that NE enter.PRS.3PL in contact lose.PRS.3PL the life  
 ‘Ju-on (Japanese: The Grudge): those who come into contact with it lose their lives.’  
 (RIDIRE)

22. *Non ho mai proposto ai miei genitori di andare in*  
 NEG have.PRS.1SG never propose.PP to.the my.PL parents of go.INF in  
*uno di questi luoghi [= acquari o zoo], forse perché non ne*  
 one of these places perhaps because NEG NE  
*ho mai provato attrazione.*  
 have.PRS.1SG never feel.PP attraction  
 ‘I have never suggested to my parents to go to one of these places [i. e., aquariums or zoos], perhaps because I have never been attracted to them’  
 (Middle school student’s paper)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I owe this example to Eleonora Zucchini (p.c.). An anonymous reviewer points out that *non ne ho mai provato attrazione* can be influenced by *non ne sono mai stato attratto*, ‘I have never been attracted to them’, which canonically displays *ne* as pronominalizer of *essere attratto da* + [noun phrase].



Finally, also delving into the diachrony of Italian might be of interest: it might be possible that the new uses of *ne* discussed in this paper appeared before the development of the neo-standard variety. However, no example of 3rd person dative *ne* has been found in Cardinaletti's (2010: 429–431) examination of oblique clitics in Ancient Italian.

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