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Disjunctive/conjunctive/whatever: the development of Italian *barra* ('slash') as a non-exhaustive connective

Ilaria Fiorentini & Emanuele Miola

Ilaria Fiorentini (University of Bologna)

Via Zamboni 32

40126 Bologna (ITALY)

Emanuele Miola (University of Bologna)

Via Zamboni 32

40126 Bologna (ITALY)

The paper investigates the use and functions of *barra* in Italian. *Barra*, the lexical realization of the punctuation sign </>, has recently come to be used also in online settings and in everyday speech. In written, formal contexts, this punctuation sign is mainly used for the expression of alternatives (also with an adjunctive sense). In contemporary Italian, however, it is developing a new function as a non-exhaustive connective. After describing the incipient grammaticalization of *barra*, the morphology and semantics of the constructions with *barra* are discussed. The paper also shows the possible development of a grammatical element from the verbalization of a punctuation sign. This eventuality has become more frequent in the Internet era, where – by virtue of the diffusion of visualized language – not only features of colloquial speech get into written language, but also, and somewhat unexpectedly, vice versa.

Key Words: *barra*; computer-mediated communication; non-exhaustive connectives; Italian; punctuation signs

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1. Introduction

The Internet has dramatically changed our way of life. At the time of writing, it is estimated that more than four billion people have a connection to the World Wide Web (see www.internetworldstats.com, accessed November 11, 2018) and may use it every day for shopping, for booking flights and planning holiday trips, or to search for a particular photo of their favourite singer, and, of course, to communicate with others. The analysis of computer-mediated communication has given rise to a huge body of research during the last two decades and contributed to point out and understand linguistic phenomena that were, and are, taking place online, and frequently made it into offline speech. For instance, it is plausible that the diffusion of computer-mediated communication accelerated the levelling of registers by blurring the usual distinction between written and spoken style, or even gave way to (a) new kind(s) of registers (Crystal 2006; Cerruti/Onesti 2013). The number of spoken features influencing the written variety of language is large (Baron 1984: 124; for Italian, see Fiorentino 2004, Berruto 2005, and Gheno 2009) and it seems to be evident even to lay-people. Newspapers' journalists, teachers and writers not only are well aware of informal spellings and phonetic orthographies (see the highlighted items in 1a-c) on web forums and social networks, they also usually consider them as prominent signs of the decadence of 'good language' (but cf. Crystal 2008: chapt. 8, Miola 2013: chapt. 3.4).

(1) a. English (Crystal 2008: 56)

<c u l8r>

Standard orthography: <see you later>

b. French (chat message, quoted from Strätz 2011: 139)

<paske elle va me harceler>

Standard orthography: <parce que [paʰskø] elle va me harceler> ('because she will bother me')

* This article is the result of a continuous exchange of ideas between the authors. However, for academic purposes, Author 1 is responsible for the writing of sections 2 and 3; Author 2 is responsible for the writing of sections 1 and 4. Section 5 was written jointly.

c. Italian (Facebook comment, Fiorentini/Sansò 2017: 59)

<C'è quindi ho capito bene?>

Standard orthography: <cioè [tʃ'] quindi ho capito bene?> ('so, I got this right?')

On the contrary, the influence of writing on speech seems to be less pervasive. For instance, Baron (1984: 123-124) discusses in this connection, for the English language, spelling pronunciations and so-called “air quotes”. These features have been noted also for other languages (see for Italian Pistolesi 2004: 32-33 for acronyms and spelling pronunciations, Canobbio 2009: 44, fn31 for air quotes). Other domains of spoken language that may undergo changes through the contact with the language(s) of the Internet are semantics, morphology and textuality (Pistolesi 2014). However, in the literature the osmosis between computer-mediated and spoken communication is more often than not conceived of as proceeding unidirectionally from the latter to the former, as illustrated e.g. by the examples in (1). Nonetheless, routines typical of dictating or of reading aloud written texts also got into spoken language: this is indeed what happened e.g. to English *period* or to its Italian counterpart *punto*, which are procedural items indicating that a point is no longer debatable, and that the communicative exchange on that topic is over (Cignetti 2008: 389).

The present paper deals with the verbalization of another punctuation mark, namely </>, realized as ['barra]¹ in neo-standard Italian, and with the subsequent scripturalization of ['barra] as <barra> in Italian computer-mediated-communication environments. As the analysis will show, ['barra] and its scripturalization <barra> appear to be grammaticalizing as non-exhaustive connectives.

1.1. *Barra* as a punctuation mark in neo-standard Italian

Neo-standard Italian (Berruto 2012 [1987]) is the variety of the official language of Italy that emerged, from 1980s onward, through “a process of *restandardization*, whereby the traditional standard is converging towards spoken, informal and regional varieties” (Cerruti/Crocchi/Marzo 2016: 4). Neo-standard Italian is also the written variety generally used in Italian books, newspapers, journals, and web sites. Its punctuation norms are less strict than orthographic norms, but are nonetheless mentioned, and enforced, in professional and school handbooks, and grammars (see, among others, Serianni 1989: chapt. 1, Mortara Garavelli 2003, Braga 2013). As regards the punctuation mark </>, the novelist Baricco (2001) argues for the use of </> in (sophisticated) novels in order to signal an abruptive pause longer than that of a full stop <.>, while Antonelli (2008) deepens the diachronic development of the </> sign from Latin through Medieval manuscripts up to today.

¹ In some idiolects, it may also be pronounced as [zɪf].

However, he focuses on the use of </> as a separator for verses in poetry (critics') books. It is possible that the spread of </> originated in commercial letters as a reduction of <e/o> ('and/or'). In turn, <e/o> might be an adapted borrowing from (managerial) English <and/or>. To the dismay of purists, from commercial letters, <e/o> entered in the lexicon of Italian scientific and, in rare cases, journalistic prose before 1990s (see Castellani Pollidori 1990: 247-253). Therefore, the 1990s may serve as the time reference for the emergence of </> in common, more informal writings. We may further speculate that the 1990s are also the time reference for the diffusion of ['barra] in spoken Italian.

In the existing scientific literature, some room is devoted to the discussion of the different uses of </> in common writings. For Fornara (2010: 96-97), Serafini (2014), and others, all depending upon Serrianni's (1989: 1 241) description, the punctuation mark </>, alternatively named *barra obliqua* or *sbarretta*, has two main functions. It can be a divider, separating different items on a list or, as already mentioned, verses of a poem without starting a new line; or it can function as a connective, indicating exclusive or inclusive disjunction, as in the following examples:²

(2) a. Italian (F.P. Marchesi, *Io scelgo, io sono, io voglio!*, Milano, Tecniche nuove, 2008, p. 35)

producendo emozioni dalle quali deduci poi ciò che ritieni essere **giusto/sbagliato**

'producing emotions through which you will deduce what you think it is right/wrong'

b. Italian (E. Besozzi, M. Colombo, M. Santagati, *Giovani stranieri, nuovi cittadini. Le strategie di una generazione ponte*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2009, p. 74)

La presenza di **fratelli/sorelle** in Italia implica un'immigrazione di lungo periodo

'The presence of brothers/sisters in Italy entails long-term immigration'

In (2a) </> separates two exclusive alternatives. Depending on the emotions they feel, the addressee of (2a) will decide what they think is either *right* or *wrong*, and *tertium non datur*. Nor may (2a) imply that the addressee thinks that something is at the same time good and wrong for them.

In (2b), on the other hand, </> functions as an inclusive disjunction, since *a long-term immigration* is entailed if there is presence of brothers and only brothers, if there is presence of sisters and only sisters, and if there is presence of brothers and sisters together. Note also that (2b) holds true even if there is the presence of a single female sibling, or of a single male sibling.

We may add that, in argumentative and scientific texts, </> may be used as a connective, e.g. in reference abbreviations such as *Ariel/Mauri 2018*, meaning the paper published in 2018 by Ariel *and*

² For a different terminology, see Ariel/Mauri (2018), and Section 2 below.

Mauri; or as a mathematic operator, e.g. in abbreviations like *50 km/h*, *livello 2/10* ('level 2/10') or *risposte giuste: 3/4* ('right answers: 3/4'). It is worth noting that if one were, for any reason, to read aloud the sentences that we just mentioned, the verbalization of </> would be as follows: [e] in *Ariel e Mauri 2018* ('Ariel and Mauri 2018'); [al(l(a))] in *cinquanta chilometri all'ora* ('fifty kilometers per hour'); [di] in *livello due di dieci* ('level two of ten'); [su] in *risposte giuste: tre su quattro* ('right answers: three out of four'). On the other hand, the phonetic realization of </> in the sentences in (2) would be Ø or [ˈbarra]. Given the massive use of </> on Internet forums, and informal and formal writings, recently [ˈbarra] has entered Italian colloquial speech. Moreover, the written form <barra>, with the functions illustrated under (2), has also emerged in computer-mediated communication, as (3) shows:

(3) Italian (katy.altervista.org/ritagli-della-mia-vita/la-dolce-nancy/)

Aveva capito che non ero pronta a scendere di due piani senza Daniele, aveva capito la mia sensibilità misto **paura barra angoscia** o cosa fosse, lei lo sapeva.

'She understood that I was not ready to get off two floors without Daniele, she understood my sensitivity fear **BARRA** anguish-blended or whatever, she knew.'

In the following Sections, we will investigate the function of [ˈbarra] and <barra> in a selection of corpora of spoken, written and online Italian. Section 2 provides a brief description of data and methodology. Section 3 describes the use of *barra* as a non-exhaustive connective. In Section 4 we will investigate the morphology and semantics of the constructions with *barra*. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Data and methodology

For the aim of the paper, we consulted written (*Corpus di Italiano Scritto* – CORIS, Rossini Favretti 2000), spoken (*Lessico dell'Italiano Parlato* – LIP, De Mauro et al. 1993; *Lessico dell'Italiano Televisivo* - LIT), and web-based corpora³ (ItTenTen corpus on SketchEngine, 2016 version) of contemporary Italian.

CORIS⁴ corpus is a collection of contemporary Italian written texts (130mln words) chosen by virtue of their representativeness. It is available online since 2001 and is updated every three years by means

³ Occasionally, we have also made use of examples from the Italian section of NUNC corpus (a multilingual collection of corpora based on the language of newsgroups; ca. 128mln word; http://www.corpora.unito.it/it/nunc1it_gen.php), and, to a lesser extent, from the web. For a discussion on the use of the web as a corpus, see Kilgarrif/Grefenstette (2003).

⁴ Available at: http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris_eng.html.

of a built-in monitor corpus (including texts extracted from the web). Consistently with its early stage of lexicalization, the only occurrence of <barra> (henceforth *barra*) was found in the in the monitor corpus (2016):

(4) Italian (CORIS corpus)

Se ti lamenti del fatto che in un pezzo magari uso espressioni tipo “devi sucare”, significa che di rap **non capisci, barra, non sai un cazzo**.

‘If you complain that in a song I may use expressions like “devi sucare”⁵, it means that you do not understand rap, **BARRA**, you do not know shit about rap.’

The example is extracted from the transcription of an interview to an Italian rapper, and therefore actually represents an occurrence of *barra* in oral speech⁶. In this case, the sequence containing *barra* can be paraphrased as “you either do not understand or do not know anything about rap”; the two members (*non capisci* and *non sai un cazzo*) are alternatives that can both hold true (as in the case of *fratelli/sorelle* we have seen in example 2b).

Perhaps not surprisingly, little to no examples were found in spoken corpora. As already mentioned, we consulted LIP⁷ and LIT⁸ corpora. LIP corpus was collected in the early Nineties (1990-1992); it was recorded in four Italian cities (Milan, Florence, Rome, and Naples) and consists of 469 texts (approximately 490,000 words) (cf. De Mauro et al. 1993: 35ff). LIT corpus was collected in 2006, consists of 168 hours of audio-visual recordings (approximately 663,000 words), and aims to be a representative sample of the Italian spoken on television.

The only instances of *barra* in LIP (6 in total) are cases when speakers utter out loud telephone or bank accounts numbers, as in example (5):

(5) Italian (LIP corpus)

allora il conto corrente bancario diciamo subito è il numero **ventisette barra ventiquattro otto uno due**

‘So, the bank account, let’s say it now, it is number twenty-seven *slash* twenty-four eight one two’

⁵ Literally ‘you have to suck’; regional Italian expression.

⁶ Interestingly, direct quotations can be means by which spoken language phenomena enter in journalistic prose (cf. Antonelli 2007).

⁷ Available at: <http://badip.uni-graz.at/en/>.

⁸ Available at: http://www.italianotelevisivo.org/contenuti/36/banche_dati.

In this case, *barra* represents the mere phonetic realization of the punctuation mark and does not display any connective function. Since we have found no occurrences of this function in LIP, we hypothesize that the phenomenon under analysis has started to spread in spoken Italian after the date of collection of the corpus (early Nineties). Nonetheless, only two instances of *barra* are found also in LIT corpus (collected in 2006):

(6) Italian (LIT corpus)

io quasi quasi vi lascio / quasi quasi vi lascio a questo clima biscardiano / **biscardiano barra calcistico** / così / ridiamo

‘I am almost leaving you... I am almost leaving you to this “biscardiano” mood... “biscardiano” **BARRA** football mood... So that we are going to have a laugh’

Here⁹, *barra* is placed after a possibly obscure neologism, i.e. the adjective *biscardiano*¹⁰, that the speaker (a talk-show host) uses to describe the fact that show guests are losing their temper, as it used to happen in Aldo Biscardi’s shows. At the same time, *barra* signals that both *biscardiano* and *calcistico* concur to qualify the noun *clima* ‘mood’. Therefore, the two members are not alternatives, in the sense that they both hold true, forming some sort of contextualized binomial (see Section 4). Due to the scarcity of instances of *barra* in these corpora, our analysis will be mainly based on data retrieved on ItTenTen¹¹ (2016 version, 4.9bln words). This corpus consists of Italian written texts collected on the Internet (websites, forums, blogs, and so on) which are part-of-speech tagged. In order to extract the instances of *barra*, we ran a query (keyword: “barra”), using the “Concordance” tool of SketchEngine (last check was done on September 15, 2017). We found a total of 101 instances of *barra* connecting two or more elements, as reported in Table 1:

Part of speech	Tokens
VERB barra VERB	3
NOUN barra NOUN ¹²	73
ADJ barra ADJ	8
NUM barra NUM	17
Total	101

⁹ The other instance is, again, the mere phonetic realization of the punctuation mark:

(1) con la riforma universitaria / decreto legge **cinquecentonove barra novantanove**
‘with the reform of the university education, legislative decree five hundred and nine *slash* ninety-nine’

¹⁰ *Biscardiano* is an adjective derived from Aldo Biscardi, i.e. a famous Italian football broadcaster.

¹¹ <https://www.sketchengine.co.uk/ittenten-corpus/>.

¹² NP *barra* NP includes instances that in the ItTenTen corpus were erroneously indicated as NOUN *barra* VERB (3), NOUN *barra* ADJ (5), ADJ *barra* NOUN (2).

Table 1. Instances of *barra* on itTenTen¹³

Based on the examples presented so far, it is already possible to see that beside its original function (and form) as a punctuation mark, *barra* now has, both in written and oral text, a connective function. It appears to be alternatively conjunctive (see example 6) and (inclusive) disjunctive (see example 4). The following Sections of the paper will investigate the rise of these new functions.

3. *Barra* as a non-exhaustive connective

Constructions with *barra* (both as a punctuation mark and a verbalized form; henceforth *barra*-constructions) often have an exhaustive reading, which “asserts that the explicit alternatives are the only alternatives on the table” (Ariel/Mauri 2016: 31). In other words, exhaustive connectives signal that, given two exemplars X and Y, only X and Y are possible, whereas other options are ruled out. As noted by Ariel and Mauri, “exhaustive cases include cases that would be classified either as exclusive or as inclusive under the traditional analysis” (Ariel/Mauri 2016: 31). In (7a), the speaker commits to both the expressed alternatives, whereas in (7b) she commits to only one (Ariel/Mauri 2016: 31):

(7) a. English (SBC: 056)

JULIE: .. *It's a it's sport for either the brave or the stupid.*

b. English

But apparently it was either a heart attack or an aneurysm

As we have seen in examples (2a) (*giusto/sbagliato*) and (2b) (*fratelli/sorelle*), this also applies to *barra*. In (2a), the speaker commits only to one of the two (mutually exclusive) alternatives, whereas in (2b) commits to both. Furthermore, in some cases, the two elements, even when they are opposites, are not mutually exclusive, but are alternatives, as in (8). Here, both elements hold alternatively true according to external, objective conditions. Again, the speaker commits to both:

(8) Italian (<http://fumaseidue.blogspot.it/2013/01/severino-mio-severino.html>)

¹³ We found no instances of PRO *barra* PRO, ADV *barra* ADV, CLI *barra* CLI, INTERJ *barra* INTERJ, CON *barra* CON and WH *barra* WH.

Con la neve ho un rapporto di **amore barra odio** :) Amore se cade di sabato, domenica o nelle feste; odio se cade nei giorni feriali e mi devo alzare un'ora prima per spalarla dal piazzale e riuscire a uscire con l'auto

'I have a love **BARRA** hate relationship with snow. I love it if it falls on Saturday, Sunday or during holydays; I hate it if it falls on a weekday and I have to get up one hour earlier to shovel the yard and try to get out with my car'

In all the examples above, the exhaustive reading of *barra* asserts that there are no other alternatives in addition to the explicit ones. Nonetheless, in other cases *barra* (as well as </>) can signal that the two (or more) members are representative exemplars of a (potentially) larger class/set of elements (cf. Haspelmath 2007: 24), as in example (9):

(9) Italian (Nunc corpus)

Jeeg Robot era prima di tutto un cartoon, e poi dato il successo si decise di farne un pupazzetto, i **Digimon/Pokemon** eccetera partono dal discorso inverso

'Jeeg Robot was an anime at first, then, given its success, they decided to make an action figure out of it, Digimon/Pokemon et cetera have an opposite starting point'

In (9), the two alternatives (*Digimon* and *Pokemon*) are not mutually exclusive, nor do they cover all the set of possible elements the speaker is referring to. Rather, they represent two examples from a larger category that the hearer should infer based on the context, as also indicated by the presence of the general extender *eccetera* 'et cetera' (cf. Fiorentini 2018). In this case, the function of *barra* is similar to that of a non-exhaustive connective ('representative conjunction' in Haspelmath 2007: 24), i.e. a connective which occurs "only in open-ended lists, i.e. non-exhaustive sets" (Mauri 2017: 13) and can be used "when the speaker's aim is to name some potential exemplars of a non-exhaustive list" (Mauri 2017: 15). As stated by Mauri (2017: 13), the label 'non-exhaustive' is well established in the literature on East Asian languages (cf. Chino 2001, Zhang 2008). Examples of this class of connectives can be the correlative coordinators *-a...-a* in Mandarin Chinese, "which can only be used in non-exhaustive lists" (Mauri 2017: 14; cf. also Zhang 2008: 137), and Japanese *ya*¹⁴, which implies "that the linked items are examples taken from a larger group of items" (Mauri 2017: 14):

(10) Chinese (Mauri 2017: 149)

Shu-a, baozhi-a, bai-man-le zhengge shujia.

¹⁴ Japanese has a very rich set of non-exhaustive connectives. For an overview, cf. Barotto (2017).

‘Books and newspapers, AMONG OTHER THINGS, occupied the whole bookshelf.’

(11) Japanese (*ibid.*)

Watashi no heya ni wa, [konpyūtā ya sutereo ga] oite arimasu.

‘In my room there is a computer, a stereo AND OTHER SIMILAR THINGS.’

Recently, Italian has developed a specific non-exhaustive connective, i.e. *piuttosto che*, originally a preferential construction (‘rather than’) which nowadays is attested “both with its source value and with a disjunctive ‘or’ meaning” (Mauri 2017: 15, see also Mauri/Giacalone Ramat 2015). *Piuttosto che* is frequently used to connect equivalent non-exhaustive alternatives, evoking other elements which are not explicit, not specific, and often not even known to the speaker. Therefore, *piuttosto che* indicates that such elements belong to an open set which the hearer is invited to infer (Mauri/Giacalone Ramat 2015: 56). To sum up, *piuttosto che* is attested in free-choice contexts (cf. Zimmermann 2001) where it connects two (or more) non-specific exemplificative referents from an open set of alternatives, as in (12):

(12) Italian (Mauri/Giacalone Ramat 2015: 55)

[...] una serie di attività che le persone che lavorano non [...] possono sviluppare quindi non so dall’andare a fare le file alla posta eh *piuttosto che* avere una babysitter all’ultimo momento [...] *piuttosto che* non so organizzare ecco una festa per una mamma che lavora al suo bambino [...]

‘A range of activities that people who work cannot develop like, I don’t know, from standing in line at the post office **PIUTTOSTO CHE** finding a babysitter at the last minute [...] **PIUTTOSTO CHE**, I don’t know, arranging, okay, a party for the baby of a working mom’.

Similarly, *barra* can indicate that the explicit elements are exemplars from a larger set, as we have already seen in example (9). In example (13), exactly as in the case of *piuttosto che* (example 12), the speaker does not commit to any of the three options connected by *barra*. On the contrary, the last member of the list (*non si sa nemmeno noi cosa sia* ‘we don’t even know what it is’) indicates that s/he does not even know if they hold true (cf. also example 3), and that other options are equally acceptable:

(13) Italian (<https://lasciachesiavita.wordpress.com/2016/01/>)

sento che la nostra **amicizia barra amore barra non si sa nemmeno noi cosa** sia sta finendo

‘I feel that our friendship **BARRA** love **BARRA** we don’t even know what it is is over’

The non-exhaustive reading is particularly evident when *barra* connects more than two explicit exemplars, as in examples (14) and (15), where it enters two polysyndetic list constructions (Bonvino/Masini/Pietrandrea 2009):

(14) Italian (<http://www.fregole.com/tag/man/>)

[M]ezza tonnellata di uomini in ritardo e con ansia da prestazione sarà da qualche parte, sparpagliata per strada o su internet, alla disperata ricerca del regalo da fare alla propria **fidanzata barra compagna barra consorte barra non-moglie**.

‘Half a ton of late and anxious men will be somewhere scattered on the streets or on the internet, desperately looking for a present to take to their fiancée **BARRA** partner **BARRA** spouse **BARRA** non-wife [AND/OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT].’

(15) Italian (<http://podcastoro.blogspot.it/2007/09/perfetto.html>)

Un altro amico deve venire in visita e rimane bloccato in aeroporto causa **ritardi aerei barra pioggia barra discussioni con le consorti barra eccetera eccetera**

‘Another friend has to come to visit and he gets stuck at the airport due to flight delays **BARRA** rain **BARRA** arguments with spouses **BARRA** etcetera etcetera.’

Again, in both cases, *barra* is inserted in a free choice context where the alternatives are equivalent, in the sense that the speaker is indifferent to which one of them is true. Other alternatives are possible as well, as long as they belong to the higher-level category which is necessary to exemplify speaker’s point of view (Mauri/Giacalone Ramat 2015: 56). More specifically, in (14), *barra* connects a list of co-hyponyms (cf. Bonvino/Masini/Pietrandrea 2009), whose semantic relation suggests *per se* the existence of a higher-level category which comprises all the members (cf. Ariel/Mauri 2016). The non-exhaustivity is also conveyed by the fact that the last member (*non-moglie* ‘non-wife’) can be considered both a co-hyponym and a hyperonym for *fidanzata* ‘fiancée’ and *compagna* ‘partner’ (but not for *consorte* ‘wife’), and therefore entails the existence of other possible members of the category. On the other hand, the non-exhaustive reading of example (15), where *barra* functions as an inclusive disjunction (cf. example 2b), is also favoured by the presence of the general extender *eccetera eccetera* (as in example 6). In this case, *eccetera eccetera* is placed after *barra*, and acts as another member of the list, further indicating the possibility of other alternatives to the explicit ones.

In other cases, the last member of the list has no semantic relation with the other members, as in example (16):

(16) Italian (ItTenTen)

Inoltre voglio tranquillizzarti perché non dirò tutto questo ai tuoi **compagni barra amici barra colleghi barra genitori barra parenti barra gattini**, lo terrò per me
'Furthermore, I want to reassure you, because I will not tell any of this to your classmates **BARRA** colleagues **BARRA** parents **BARRA** relatives **BARRA** kittens [AND THE LIKES], I will keep it for myself'

In (16), *gattini* 'kittens', which is placed after a list of co-hyponyms, is not in any way semantically related to the previous members, and it is ironically used to stress the non-exhaustivity of the (already quite redundant) list (for a fine-grained analysis, see Section 4).

In sum, the non-exhaustive reading of *barra* suggests that the speaker may want (i) not to commit to either of the alternatives ('possibly X, possibly Y'; cf. example 13) or (ii), on the contrary, commit to all the options, although subject to different conditions (cf. example 8). In case (i), as Ariel and Mauri (2016: 14) point out, the (non-exhaustive) options the speaker raises "are certainly possible, but it's also possible that none of the alternatives is true":

(17) Italian (<http://www.fotolog.com/theshinigirl/14354138/>)

saluti a lei e alla sua famiglia e al **cane barra gatto** se esistono e anche alla nonna certo
'Greetings to you, and to your family, and to the dog **BARRA** cat if they exist, and to your grandmother too, of course'

In example (17), both *cane* 'dog' and *gatto* 'cat' can be true. This is also indicated by the third-person plural verb *se esistono* 'if they do exist' (cf. the equally plural verb in example 9, *versus* the singular verb in example 13, where the exemplars are not necessarily true). Nevertheless, it is also possible that only one of them is true, as well as none of them, or even an alternative to them (for instance, a bird). Thus, *cane* and *gatto*, rather than bearing independent reference (cf. Barotto 2018), are two examples representative of a larger set, which can include more members, all sharing a common property (i.e. they are all pets; cf. Mauri 2017), as we have seen also in examples (14-16).

Since it provides a set of actual options (similar to exemplification strategies; cf. Barotto 2016: 197), *barra* can signal a "lack of commitment to either the full semantic membership of an expression or to the full commitment of the speech act being conveyed" (Fraser 2010: 22). Therefore, it can function

as a vagueness marker, and it is employed to signal to the hearer that the expression used lacks the expected precision, also implicating “semantic indeterminacy at the syntagmatic level, approximating the meaning of (...) whole sequences in which [it is] contained” (Ghezzi 2013: 38). Such use “may result in an approximation of the speaker’s evaluation of a situation or in a hedged propositional attitude (i.e. the speaker’s level of commitment to a claim)” (Ghezzi 2013: 39), thus weakening the illocutionary force of an expression (cf. also Prince et al. 1982, Fraser 2010):

(18) Italian (ItTenTen)

Quindi mangio l’ultima **chiacchiera barra cencio barra frappa**... insomma come la volete chiamare voi, e mi infilo sotto il mio piumone rosso a quadretti bianchi

‘So I am eating the last chiacchiera **BARRA** cencio **BARRA** frappa... I mean, whatever you want to call it, and I am getting underneath my red and white checkered duvet’

In example (18), the speaker lists three terms, i.e. *chiacchiera*, *cencio*, and *frappa*; two of them (*chiacchiera* and *frappa*) represent different regional Italian variants of Tuscan *cencio* (a typical carnival sweet). Here, the use of *barra*, besides indicating that the three elements are equally acceptable, lowers the degree of commitment of the speaker to any of them, as it is also indicated by the following segment (*come la volete chiamare voi* ‘whatever you want to call it’).

Furthermore, the non-exhaustive reading and low degree of speaker’s commitment correlate with *barra* position in the information structure of the sentence. In our corpora, *barra* never occurs in topic position; on the contrary, it is usually placed in comment position, often as a noun or verb phrase modifier (example 19, see Table 1). This is probably due to the fact that the topic often displays a high degree of identifiability, definiteness, and referential givenness (cf. Chafe 1994), whereas *barra*-constructions represent new information, with a low degree of identifiability and definiteness. Therefore, they are asserted, rather than presupposed (cf. Lambrecht 1994: 77-78):

(19) Italian (ItTenTen)

Come una qualsivoglia casalinga **disperata barra ormonata**, mi sono ritrovata a guardare la Barbarona naziùnal durante una pausa dalla scrittura della Tesi

‘Like any desperate **BARRA** hormonal housewife, I found myself watching national Barbarona¹⁵ during a break from my dissertation writing’

¹⁵ The (ironic) reference is to Barbara D’Urso, a famous Italian talk-show host.

In (19), where indefiniteness is also conveyed by the indefinite adjective *qualsivoglia*¹⁶ ‘any’, the two adjectives connected by *barra* seem to form a new adjectival binomial phrase (similarly to example 6; cf. Biber et al. 1999: 1030-31), i.e. *disperata barra ormonata* ‘desperate *barra* hormonal’, whose meaning is compositional, and which modify the NP *una qualsivoglia casalinga* ‘any housewife’.¹⁷

4. *Barra*-constructions: make-up, semantics and morphology

Based on the examples drawn upon Italian corpora (see Section 2 and Table 1), *barra*-constructions (i.e. constructions in which *barra* functions as a non-exhaustive connective) can be schematized as follows:

(exemplar ₁)	link)	exemplar ₂	link	(exemplar ₃)	(other link(s) + exemplar(s))	(general extender)
X	∅ e/o o <i>barra</i> , ...	Y	<i>barra</i>	Z	...	<i>o quello che siete eccetera non si sa, ...</i>
meaning: ‘Y(, X, Z) and/or such things’						

Table 2. A schematization of *barra*-constructions.

The data we are going to discuss in the followings may be biased by the fact that online corpora, and computer-mediated communication in general, are characterized by a higher degree of informality, playfulness and expressivity (see Danet 2001, Herring 2001, Cerruti/Corino/Onesti 2011, Fiorentini 2015). However, we argue that they represent well colloquial usage of Italian.

As shown in Table 2, *barra*-constructions need at least one exemplar to be instantiated, and, in this (rare) case, are necessarily followed by a general extender, in order to signal that the list of exemplars is open (cf. example 20a). In the examples we collected, the maximum number of exemplars that can be coordinated is six (see 16). However, the average number of exemplars involved in a *barra*-construction is two or three (20b). We found only three cases of *barra*-constructions with four exemplars.

¹⁶ Univerbation of *qual si voglia*, roughly ‘whatever you want’.

¹⁷ An anonymous reviewer points out that indefiniteness, vagueness and/or lack of commitment may be a feature of both the exhaustive and non-exhaustive uses of *barra*-constructions.

(20) a. Italian (ItTenTen corpus)

Ci son più **biemvù barra salamadonna** tagliate, accorciate, cimate, in giro oggi che negli anni 70/80

‘Today, arranged, shortened or part-replaced BMWs **BARRA** themotherofgodknows around are more than in the Seventies/Eighties’

b. Italian (ItTenTen corpus)

E invece della solita **canzone barra citazione barra fotografia**, stavolta scrivo qualcosa di mio.

‘And instead of the usual song **BARRA** quote **BARRA** photo [AND/OR THE LIKE], this time I write something myself’

Note that in (20a) the general extender is made of an inflected form of the verb *sapere* (‘to know’) followed by a taboo word (*la Madonna*, ‘Virgin Mary, the mother of God’), syntactically the subject of *sapere*, taking on a negative nuance, i.e. a meaning similar to English ‘I don’t know; God knows’, and the like. This meaning, nonetheless, indicates that the list instantiated by the exemplar plus *barra* is non-exhaustive. The non-exhaustive meaning is (more) clearly conveyed when the coordinated exemplars are more than two (cf. 20b), because the alternative-choice reading is somewhat less suitable when the coordinates are more than two, and the invited meaning, for the addressee, is that of a non-exhaustive list. The same cognitive process seems at play for lists in general (Jefferson 1991: 63ff), as well as for the incipient grammaticalization of Italian *piuttosto che* as a non-exhaustive marker (Mauri/Giacalone 2015: 64).¹⁸

As already noted (cf. Table 1 and fn. 12), not every part of speech can get into a *barra*-construction. *Barra* usually links noun, adjectival, or verb phrases. Noun phrases, however, are much more frequent as exemplars than the other Phrases in our corpus (this could be due to the fact that nouns are more frequent than verbs, and much more frequent than adjectives, at least in written texts, see Voghera 204). Moreover, in our data *barra* cannot link adverbs or adverb phrases, although adverbs are content words just as nouns, adjectives and verbs. This apparent inconsistency needs further investigation, which is not possible to provide here.

As for the semantics of the exemplars that *barra* can link in *barra*-constructions, generally they are quasi-synonyms, quasi-related items, co-meronyms, or items related by a consequence relation (see 21a-d respectively, all taken from the ItTenTen corpus):

¹⁸ Ariel (2015) shows that a similar process is involved in the interpretation of *or*-constructions in English. Ariel, however, maintains that a list reading may be evoked also when an *or*-constructions has two conjuncts, and not only when they are three or more.

- (21)
- a. qualsiasi **folia barra capriccio** dei propri insaziabili genitori
‘any craziness **BARRA** whim [OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT] of their insatiable parents’
 - b. non dirò tutto questo ai tuoi **compagni barra amici barra colleghi barra genitori barra parenti barra gattini**
‘I will not tell this to your classmates **BARRA** friends **BARRA** colleagues **BARRA** parents **BARRA** relatives **BARRA** kittens [OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT]’
 - c. dimenticato nel **sottoscala barra cantina**
‘forgotten in the understairs **BARRA** basement [AND/OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT]’
 - d. chi ha subito i maggiori **incidenti barra disagi**
‘who suffered the greatest accidents **BARRA** discomforts [AND/OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT]’

The former categorization relies upon Cruse’s (1986) and Masini’s (2006: 220). However, crucially, two categories are lacking: that of synonyms and that of opposites. Indeed, on the one hand, the meaning of the exemplars must not be too similar in order to invite the addressee to infer the higher-level category and, thus, the openness of the list construction. On the other hand, must the exemplars be intended as antonyms or felt as opposites in the context at issue, the invited reading would be that of a full-fledged disjunctive construction. In fact, such readings are possible with some of *barra*-constructions found in the ItTenTen, but they are marginal and they will not be further discussed here since they are not the focus of this paper.

Three qualifications are still in order in relation to the exemplars involved in *barra*-construction. Firstly, in a good amount of occurrences, *barra* links two numerals. If the numerals are consecutive, the meaning of the construction is plainly disjunctive (22a). If they are not consecutive, the *barra*-construction takes on an approximate meaning with the two exemplars at the high and low edge, respectively, of the continuum. Numerals in between the edges, i.e. items that share a common property with the exemplars, are also included in the intended meaning (see 22b). It is possible to speculate that the latter usage, which is frequent in managerial correspondence and jargon, helped develop the function of *barra* as an approximator and, subsequently, as the non-exhaustive connective which is under scrutiny here (see also example 18).

(22) a. Italian (ItTenTen corpus)

ma nei primi due erano **1 barra 2** ad album ed erano immersi in una mare di rabbia
‘but in the first two [albums] there were 1 **BARRA 2** [i.e., one **or** two] per album and
were inserted in a lot of anger’

b. Italian (ItTenTen corpus)

pure a me un medico una volta m’ha dato **10 barra 15 anni** di vita
‘a doctor once told to me too I had 10 **BARRA 15** [i.e., **approximately 10 to 15**] years
left’

Secondly, by virtue of the playfulness that seems to be one of the core characteristics of today’s (online) communication, in *barra*-constructions there is a tendency for one of the exemplar (usually the last) to be expressive, uncommon, ironic or non-prototypical in relation to the list it belongs to (see also example 16). Such non-prototypicality, however, helps build the sense of approximation and openness of the list in that particular context, since it gives the addressee a hint as to non-precise referentiality of the list. At the same time, it invites them to recover the common property of the list, as well as the higher-level category intended in that specific context. Moreover, the position of the non-prototypical exemplar is consistent with the “unmarked-before-marked” principle suggested by Sobkowiak (1993) (cf. also Cooper/Ross 1975, Gustafsson 1976): “the first conjuncts refer to those factors which describe the prototypical speaker” (Cooper/Ross 1975), that is, an adult male speaker, living here and now, positive and friendly, agentive and powerful, patriotic and at home.

In (23), for instance, the first exemplars point to professional roles related to music, while the third, last exemplar is an insulting word that can be used, in substandard register, as a (somewhat disparaging) *passe-par-tout* word for humans, as is for the etymon of English ‘dude’. Thus, the former exemplars show a positive and friendly attitude of the speaker, while the latter does not:

(23) Italian (ItTenTen corpus)

se un qualsiasi **cantante barra musicista barra deficiente**, OGGI, pensasse di incidere un brano come questo, verrebbe altamente e immediatamente spernacchiato da tutti.

‘if any singer **BARRA** musician **BARRA** idiot [i.e. whatever guy], today, thought they would hit a song like this, everyone would immediately and hardly mock them’

In (24), the second exemplar is an extemporaneous neologism. It follows the phrase ‘desperate housewife’, which was popularized by a tv series. The second exemplar is therefore more expressive than the set phrase in first position.

(24) (=19) Italian (ItTenTen corpus)

Come una qualsivoglia casalinga **disperata barra ormonata**, mi sono ritrovata a guardare la Barbarona naziunal durante una pausa dalla scrittura della Tesi

‘Like any desperate **BARRA** hormonal [OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT] housewife, I found myself watching national Barbarona during a break from my dissertation writing’

Thirdly, when exemplars are noun or noun phrases, determiners appear only before the first exemplar¹⁹ (see 25a and b vs 25c, which is fabricated). Adjectival and adverbial modification of exemplars, on the other hand, is rare.

(25) a(=21b). Italian (ItTenTen corpus)

non dirò tutto questo ai tuoi **compagni barra amici barra colleghi barra genitori barra parenti barra gattini**

‘I will not tell this to **(the) your** classmates **BARRA** friends **BARRA** colleagues **BARRA** parents **BARRA** relatives **BARRA** kittens [AND/OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT]’

b. Italian (ItTenTen corpus)

un must per tutti i **chitarristi barra batteristi**

‘a must-have for **all the** guitarists **BARRA** drum-players [AND THE LIKE]’

c. Italian (fabricated)

** l’**imbarazzo barra l’incredulità barra la timidezza**

‘the embarrassment **BARRA** the incredulity **BARRA** the shyness [AND/OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT]’

Given the features discussed above, *barra*-constructions collocate intermediately between contextualized bi-/polynomials and hyperonymic coordinating compounds. Contextualized binomials

¹⁹ Adjectival and verbal *barra*-constructions in our data are never determined by any determiners. An anonymous reviewer points out that (25c) may sound not completely unacceptable to a speaker of Italian. As native speakers of Italian ourselves, we may say that s/he is right, even though (25c) sounds at least odd, as somewhat acknowledged by the reviewer her/himself. This consideration seems to be in line with the lack of occurrences of examples like (25c) in our corpus. As is for compounds, the whole construction may be determined, while the constituents shall remain undetermined.

are constructions consisting of couples of items linked by a connective. Contrary to other binomials, contextualized ones are not fixed phrases or formulas, but are only motivated by context, “refer to a temporary frame, and have no existence beyond it” (Masini 2006: 211, Lambrecht 1984). Hyperonymic coordinating compounds (Arcodia/Grandi/Wälchli 2010; also approximate co-compounds, Wälchli 2005: 151), on the other hand, are formed by parts that have a coordinate relationship and are juxtaposed without any linking connective. Furthermore, they refer to referents with a higher-level meaning. In a sentence like Italian *faccio colazione con latte e caffè* (‘I have milk and coffee for breakfast’) *latte e caffè* is a contextualized binomial. It is not a compound word (like the existing *caffelatte* and *caffelatte*, ‘white coffee, latte’) since, for instance, it is reversible (*caffè e latte*) and one can add linguistic material into the binomial without making the sentence ungrammatical (e.g. *faccio colazione con latte e poco caffè*, ‘I have milk and a little bit of coffee for breakfast’). A hyperonymic co-compound like Modern Greek *maxero-piruna* ‘cutlery’ (Nicholas/Joseph 2009: 1) is literally formed by *knife* + *fork*, but does not refer only to those two items, rather to a larger set of things that are similar to or that share some particular property with the parts of the compound. The meaning of a hyperonymic co-compound is thus that of a hyperonym of the words it is made up with.

Like contextualized bi-/polynomials, *barra*-constructions have the items they are compound with linked by a coordinator (i.e. *barra*), and live shortly, which is typical for strategies that construct novel categories that are forgotten once the goals relevant in the current situation are achieved (ad hoc categories, Barsalou 2010). On the other hand, *barra*-constructions also resemble compounds since they can be determined by articles and the like. Moreover, as is for hyperonymic co-compounds, they refer to a set of items larger than those indicated by the sum of the meanings of its constituent parts. The properties shared by *barra*-constructions, contextualized bi-/polynomials and hyperonymic co-compounds are summarized in Table 3.

<i>Barra</i> -constructions	Contextualized bi-/polynom.	Hyperonymic co-compounds
items linked via conjunction	items linked via conjunction	no connective
non-lexicalized	non-lexicalized	fully lexicalized
preceded by DET (if nominal)	not preceded by DET	preceded by DET
refer to a larger set of items than its constituents	mainly compositional meaning	refer to a larger set of items than its constituents
usually formed by 2 or 3 items	formed by 2 or 3 items	usually formed by 2, rarely 3, items

Table 3. Properties of *barra*-constructions, contextualized bi-/polynomials, and hyperonymic co-compounds

From the morpho-semantic point of view, *barra*-constructions share features with contextualized binomials and co-compounds. *Barra*-constructions, thus, could be labelled as an approximate/hyperonymic disjunctive-inclusive bi-/polynomials that have in Italian the function realized in other languages with hyperonymic co-compounds. Since these are relatively rare in Standard Average European languages (Arcodia/Grandi/Wälchli 2010), *barra*-constructions realize a possibility of the system (i.e., referring with a word-like construction to a set of items larger than its constituent parts) that is still not grammaticalized or expressed in any way in the standard variety.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have described the emerging function of *barra* in Italian as a connective, more specifically a non-exhaustive one. When used with the latter function (as indicated also by the occurrence with general extenders like *eccetera* ‘et cetera’; see example 15) *barra* often signals that the elements it connects are only two exemplars from a larger set of elements that share some property. Moreover, *barra*-constructions (as in the case of example 19) can be used as a strategy to convey complex and composite meanings, similar to contextualized bi-/polynomials. Therefore, these constructions are a clear example of real-time construction of referential meaning by the speakers, in the sense that they can construct a category “without directly importing a set from long-term memory” (Mauri 2017: 323).

Furthermore, like *piuttosto che* (Mauri/Giacalone Ramat 2015), *barra* fills a functional gap in the system, insofar as standard Italian does not have any non-exhaustive connective whatsoever. Therefore, it realizes new possibilities and leads to the rise of constructions that may find their place in Italian. Such functions have emerged from written texts (i.e. from the punctuation mark </>) and have become more and more frequent in spoken Italian. This use has become more frequent in the Internet era, where – by virtue of the diffusion of visualized language – not only features of colloquial

speech get into written language, but also, and maybe unexpectedly, *vice versa*. Interestingly, similar (yet not identical) uses of *slash* as a connective are developing in present-day spoken English (cf. for instance Pullum 2010, Curzan 2013). Given the language contact situation that involves English as a global lingua franca and Italian, the development of *slash* may be considered responsible for the incipient grammaticalization of *barra*.²⁰

Further investigations on actual usage of *barra* in conversation are needed to deepen and dis/confirm the analysis that we have sketched in this paper.

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²⁰ Nonetheless, according to Ariel (2015: 57), *slash*-constructions are restricted to higher-level category disjunctions, whereas *barra* apparently has wider functions.

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