Ways to 'save'

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1 Introduction

In contemporary Italian it is possible to find the preposition *salvo* with two apparently contrasting meanings: 'except' (cf. 1) and 'provided', 'subject to' (cf. 2):[1]

(1)   I lavori si concluderanno a fine marzo o aprile, **salvo** maltempo e covid.
       'Construction work will be concluded at the end of March or April, except in case of bad weather and covid.'
       source: https://www.comune.pordenone.it/it/comune/comunicazione/comune-informa/notizie/villanova-a-pieno- regime-i-lavori-per-la-nuova-area-della-festa-in-piassa

(2)   Il finanziamento verrà concesso **salvo** approvazione della finanziaria in relazione alla sussistenza dei requisiti richiesti da quest'ultima.
       'The financing will be granted subject to approval of the budgetary law, in consideration of the existence of the requisites demanded by the latter.'
       source: https://www.cartucceplotter.it/it/452/nav/finanziamenti/servizi-finanziari.aspx

The meaning of *salvo* = 'except' in (1) corresponds to the English preposition *save* (which came to English through *sauf*, the Old French cognate of Italian *salvo*) and can be roughly paraphrased by means of a sentence introduced by 'if not': 'Construction will be concluded…if bad weather and covid do not happen'. The meaning of *salvo* = 'provided', 'subject to' in (2) can be roughly paraphrased by means of a sentence introduced by 'if': 'The financing will be granted if the budgetary law is approved'. That is, the same element can introduce a negative or a positive condition. Speakers are aware of this apparent ambiguity, discussed at the academic level (Bambi 2016 for the Crusca Academy) but also in informal blogs (cf. 3):

(3)   From the blog 'Cruscate – Discussion board on the Italian language'
       «In sintesi il messaggio è "Ti diamo quest'oggetto e puoi pagarlo in comode rate etc etc... salvo approvazione finanziariaditurno". Per me avrebbe più senso "salvo *dis*approvazione". Cioè, ti diamo questo servizio a meno che non ci sia una disapprovazione da parte della finanziaria. Interpreto il "salvo" come "a meno di" "a meno che".»
       'Put simply the message is "We give you this object and you can comfortably pay in instalments etc etc…*salvo* approval of the yearly budgetary law. For me it would make more sense "*salvo dis*approval". That is, we give you this service unless there is a disapproval on the part of the budgetary law. I interpret "salvo" as "unless".'
       source: https://www.achyra.org/cruscate/viewtopic.php?t=3543

Although ambiguity is intrinsic to the functioning of language systems, what is interesting in the case of Italian *salvo* is that the diachronic development yielding ambiguity seems to have reached a tipping point, with speakers consciously reacting to it. In what follows, I will try to reconstruct how this point was reached, and show that the use in (1), which is nowadays prevalent, arose as an innovation in the diachronic development from Latin to Italian, whereas

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[1] Examples taken from the web and from the CORIS and KiParla corpora have been slightly adapted with respect to orthographical conventions.

the use in (2) combines a conservative semantics with an innovative form. The case of Italian *salvo* is yet another witness to the theoretical and diachronic interest of exceptive constructions (cf. Traugott 1997, Breitbarth 2015, Jędrzejowski 2021).

2 The Latin origin of Italian *salvo*

The origin of Italian *salvo* is the Latin adjective *salvus* 'safe', 'secure', 'preserved'. The Latin noun *salus* 'safety', 'health', the Latin verb *salvere* and *salutare* 'to salute', 'to greet', as well as the English verb *save* (through Old French) derive from the same root. Already in Latin, the adjective *salvus* is used in ablative absolute constructions, which express adverbial circumstantial modification by means of a reduced clause where the predicate can be an adjective or a participle (according to the traditional analysis, here a copula is left unrealized).

(4)   idem illam proscriptionem capitis mei contra salutem rei publicae, sed [**salvis**$_{ABL.N.PL}$ auspiciis$_{ABL.N.PL}$] rogatam esse dicebant (Cic. *prov*. 45)
        'but they also declared that the outlawry of myself, although it injured the interests of the State, was proposed without any infringement of the auspices.' ('the auspices (being) preserved')

(5)   tamen [me$_{ABL.M.SG}$ **salvo**$_{ABL.M.SG}$] cito aquam liberam gustabunt (Petr. 71.1)
        'however, if I am [= my will is] preserved, soon they [the slaves] will taste free water'.

In this construction the adjective maintains its original meaning, and agrees in case, gender and number with the element it refers to (its subject). The meaning can be paraphrased as: 'saving', 'preserving', hence 'without violation of'.

Already in Latin, the construction tends to become idiomatic in technical registers: besides *salvis auspiciis* in (4), we routinely find *salva lege* 'respecting the law', *salvo officio* 'respecting the duty', *salvo iure* 'preserving the rights' ('without prejudice to one's rights', Fellmeth & Horwitz 2011, s.v.). In later legal language, it is found in the combination *salvo eo, ut…*, meaning 'with this reservation or proviso that', which introduces a condition that must be respected. This original Latin use is continued in idioms still attested in technical registers of modern languages, like *salva veritate* 'preserving the truth value', *salvo errore* 'errors excepted' (German: *Irrtum vorbehalten* 'subject to errors'). The latter foreshadows the origin of the innovative meaning 'except' seen in (1): the highly elliptical idiom means 'preserving the possibility of errors'; it introduces a proviso according to which what has been said or written could inadvertently contain errors, hence it is valid *excluding* those errors.

The 'provided', 'subject to' meaning seen in (2) for Italian hence derives from the conditional interpretation of the Latin circumstantial ablative absolute construction (cf. 5), whose meaning was underspecified as for the adverbial modification conveyed (temporal, causal, concessive, conditional). The meaning in (2) is confusing for a contemporary Italian speaker (cf. 3), but is closer to the original Latin one. However, while in Latin we find it with an agreeing adjective, we will see in Section 3 that in Italian the situation is more complicated.

The conditional interpretation of the ablative absolute construction containing *salvus* amounts to setting a limit to the validity of the situation described in the main clause. Applying the Lewis / Kratzer / Heim restrictor analysis of conditionals, I treat the conditional ablative absolute clause as expressing the restriction of a (covertly) quantified statement: thus for (5) 'all the situations in which my will is preserved are situations in which the slaves will be free'; and for Italian (2) 'all the situations in which the budgetary law is approved are situations in which the financing will be granted'.

3 Meaning change with *salvo*

Contemporary Italian continues the adjective *salvo* with the meaning 'safe', 'preserved' (6). As an adjective, *salvo* can still occur, in formal legal language, in conservative absolute participial constructions on the model of the Latin ones seen in (4)–(5). In this use, it agrees in gender and number with its associated noun (7) and it means 'provided', as in the Latin conditional interpretation.

(6)   La polizia ci ha comunicato che gli ostaggi sono **salvi**
        'The police told us that the hostages are safe.'

(7)   I beni appartenenti agli enti pubblici non territoriali sono soggetti alle regole del presente codice, **salve**$_{F.PL}$ le $_{F.PL}$ disposizioni $_{F.PL}$ delle leggi speciali (art. 830 cod. civile)
        'The goods belonging to non-regional public authorities are subject to the regulations of the present code, provided the dispositions by special laws are respected.' (from Bambi 2016)

Much more frequent, however, is a prepositional use of *salvo*, diachronically deriving from the Latin ablative singular masculine / neuter form, which becomes grammaticalized as a preposition.[2] In this use the preponderant meaning is 'except', 'unless', as in (1). Also this use is found in formal legal language (8), but it is not exclusive to it, differently from the absolute construction seen in (7). It is current in colloquial Italian as well (cf. 9).

(8)   **Salvo**$_{INVARIANT}$ diverse$_{F.PL}$ norme$_{F.PL}$ di legge, la locazione non può stipularsi per un tempo eccedente i trenta anni (art. 1573 cod. civile) (from Bambi 2016)
        'Unless other legal norms apply, the lease cannot be stipulated for a time that exceeds 30 years.'

(9)   mentre invece la Jugoslavia // eh otteneva diciamo così la Dalmazia // **salvo**$_{INVARIANT}$ la$_{F.PL}$ città$_{F.PL}$ di Zara // a maggioranza linguistica italiana (KiParla_TOD1017)
        'whereas Jugoslavia obtained, so to say, Dalmatia, except the town of Zara, with an Italian linguistic majority.'

The conservative absolute adjectival use 'provided' in (7) is attested in Italian since the medieval documents; nowadays it is residual and belongs to the technical register of legal language. Under the restrictor analysis, we can paraphrase (7) as: 'All the situations in which dispositions by special laws are preserved are situations in which the rules in the present code (that is, the general civil code) apply'. In (7) we see how we can reach the innovative interpretation 'except' by way of pragmatic inferencing: the rules of the general civil code apply *unless* they are blocked by more specific special laws, that is: 'All the situations except the situations covered by special laws are situations in which the general civil code applies'. Put differently, the condition in (7) requires compatibility between the general civil code and

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[2] The analysis as preposition is probably over-simplifying, considering that English *except*-phrases are best analyzed as elliptical clausal constituents, as shown by Vostrikova (2021). Italian has an additional use of *salvo* as complementizer followed by an infinitival verb, or element of a complex complementizer *salvo che* 'except that', *salvo quando* 'except when' followed by a finite verb form (i), which is interesting on its own right but which I will leave aside here:

(i)   ci ha sempre trattato con freddezza, **salvo quando** ha avuto bisogno di qualcosa (CORIS1980_2000_STAMPA)
        'He always treated us with coldness, except when he needed something.'

the special laws. An inference is licensed that if special laws apply, the general civil code will not apply, in order to preserve compatibility. Hence, compatibility requires exclusion.

By moving from potential compatibility to actual subtraction by way of pragmatic inferencing, the diachronically innovative exceptive meaning in (1) and (8)–(9) is obtained. According to the semantics of exceptive conditionals under the restrictor analysis (von Fintel 1992, 1993), the *salvo*-phrase restricts the quantification over the state of affairs in the main clause, by subtracting a set of situations from the domain of quantification. Hence (1) can be paraphrased as: 'all the situations except those in which there is bad weather and covid are situations in which construction work ends by March/April'.

Exceptive 'salvo' is an early innovation: it is already found in Medieval documents, especially as the complex complementizer *salvo che* (rendering Latin *salvo eo, ut…* seen above), but also as preposition (e.g. with masculine singular: *salvo messer Iacopo Gabrielli* 'except sir Iacopo Gabrielli', Matteo Villani, Cronica, 4.13.1; with masculine plural: *salvo dì sollepni* 'except on religious festivities', Breve di Villa di Chiesa 1.6; examples from OVI). Further corpus research will have to assess the specific details of this historical development.

As seen in Section 1, prepositional *salvo* is additionally found in a sort of 'blended' construction, exemplified by *salvo approvazione* 'subject to approval' in (2), in which it has an invariant non-agreeing form (*approvazione*, a feminine noun, would have *salva* as an agreeing form), but, at the same time, it requires the non-exceptive interpretation of the adjectival (agreeing) absolute construction seen in (7). This conservative meaning is required also by idiomatic expressions of legal and financial language such as *salvo buon fine* 'subject to successful outcome', *salvo incasso* 'subject to collection'. The latter two cases, however, are syntactically ambiguous between an adjectival (agreeing) interpretation and a prepositional (invariant) one, since they involve masculine singular nouns. This ambiguity may well have triggered a diachronic reanalysis, from an agreeing adjective to an invariant preposition. The construction blend derives its old meaning from fossilized absolute adjectival constructions, but innovates the form, by treating *salvo* as an invariant preposition. The possibility of coexistence of the two contradictory meanings 'provided' and 'except' for prepositional *salvo* is to be explained by the noticeable sociolinguistic difference in the registers that allow them: while the exceptive meaning is current in colloquial language, the 'provided' meaning is restricted to idiomatic expressions of technical registers.

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