

The Cognitive Basis of Value in Grammatical Form: A Case Study of the Italian Verbs *vedere volere* and *avere*

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Abstract. The grammar rules of the modal and auxiliary verbs *vedere* (see), *volere* (want) and *avere* (have) in modern Italian reveal a cognitive scheme underlying the superficial linguistic structure that depends on a certain conceptualization of reality within the Western world cultural models. The article therefore puts forward a semantic approach to grammatical rules based on these conceptual and cultural motivations. The principles of structural European semiology, as introduced by Saussure, form the basis of the paper; particularly the understanding of signs as double entities (*signifier/signified*) whose arbitrary connections are assured by a system of socio-cultural values, so that the cultural value of historical linguistic association impacts upon grammatical rules, meaning and social understanding. Grammar enables the actualization of certain semantic meanings amidst the plurality of virtual values contained within a certain syntactic combination of units. The inclusion of certain values within a given discursive isotopy supports a mode of signification, but it does not annul the possibility of the others that might be anchored in alternative discursive isotopies. In other words, there is distinction between the function of a sign in a system (*langue*) and the function that the same sign possesses in the concrete act of its usage (*parole*). Thus, this paper revises Saussure's semiological model from a cognitive perspective, placing particular emphasis on the question of cultural values.

Keywords: modal verbs, grammar, conceptualization, semiotics, culture

INTRODUCTION

It is merit of Cognitivism to have rescued linguistics from the formal orthodoxy that dominated the discipline until the 1980s, and to have brought the study of grammar back to the cognitive dimension that pertains to it. Grammar is nothing but the form by means of which subjective human knowledge is communicated to other minds. For years, language has been considered a mental activity detached from the human existential sphere, deprived of cognitive implications, and projected in a parallel domain, functionally autonomous. In this domain, linguistic rules are not made of the same ideal substance of those by which any man conceptualizes the world to make it accessible to knowledge and perme-

able to the actions performed, but rather belong to a system whose reason is its own internal structure, and are calibrated on such structure because only it can confer them an intellectual justification in cognitive terms.

Within Generative Grammar, the human mind has a modular configuration with language as one of its modules (Fodor, 1983; Sadock, 2012). Compatibility between modules is guaranteed by a set of interpretation rules, which transfer data between finite systems, thus allowing the correct internal functioning of a specific mental structure. Similarly, grammar is centered on a set of computational rules which generate schemes of sentences, successively transformed in meaningful sentences by various accessory systems which replace the terminal symbols with phonemes, lexemes and morphemes of a spoken language (Chomsky, 1965). This process appears methodologically correct when it concerns the observational phase in the scientific description of the above phenomena. Conversely, it appears not justified out of that dimension, when trying to understand the cognitive reasons that make the observed “game of forms” a plausible version of the real world, enough to allow us to interact with the world itself, speaking of it in the terms of current language. Biologic specificity is not sufficient to explain how such conditions make human life livable in its actual forms, nor why they give us access to the knowledge that we believe we have. To achieve these goals, we have to explain the convergence, implicitly postulated by any speaking person, between the subject of a discussion and the words used to talk about it.

Early Formalism, that notoriously characterized American linguistics in the first half the 20th century, was modeled on formulations received from Bloomfield (1933). European linguistics aligned instead with Saussurian semiological principles that did not admit a form separated from meaning and independent of the value given to their otherwise arbitrary union by the community of speakers, in line with their beliefs and convictions. In Saussure’s terms:

The word *Apfel* is also able to designate the fruit known as *pomme* (apple). In the association of a sign to an idea, there is nothing that by itself binds that sign to that idea (...) Any semiologic system is made by a number of units (...) and the true nature of such units, which will prevent to confuse them with other things, is that they are values. The system of units, which is the system of signs, is a system of values (...) The value, in the different orders (...) is very difficult to define (...) Where does it exist, in any order, a system of values which is not supported by the commu-

nity? A single individual is unable to define one. At the same time, we see – and this again goes back to the idea of value – the incorporeal nature of signs appear (...) A sound, by itself, does not make a value (...) not even idea and sound are sufficient to constitute the semiologic value (...) Whatever is the place of language among the other semiologic systems, we will have defined it when we will have determined that language is a system of values. It will be necessary to find its basis in the community; it is the creator of value, which does not exist outside of it. (De Saussure, 1957: 22–31)

The depletion of the innovative action created by Saussure's theory put European linguistics in a position subordinate to that of North-American linguistics made strong by the success of Generativism, and credited Formalism as the only scientifically defensible criterion of analysis. Generative grammar radicalized the opposition between form and meaning by means of algorithmic syntactic rules with automatic results, a role of implicit explanatory self-sufficiency that makes the obtained meaning absolutely marginal compared to its production. Language analysis was limited to the internal code structure, no longer feeling the need to explain the function of such code in the relationships of social communications. The area of mental and cognitive phenomena was considered scientifically not very usable – naturally, in a meaning of *scientific* that coincides with *formal*. Semantics, the linguistic discipline concern with the value of the meaning expressed by form within Saussure's model, was set aside because of the lack of compatibility of the issues raised with the formal models. In recent years, attention to the cognitive processes that justify formal outcomes has given semantics a new scientific momentum, returning to structural semiology its lost epistemological dignity. Indeed, cognitive and semiological linguistic debates now share interests and objectives and bring back the human mind to the linguistic debate.

THE DYNAMICS OF FORMS AND COGNITION

As theoretical attitude that prioritizes form over content and places it alone at the center of scientific interest, Formalism is, however, a remote legacy of linguistics. In the 19th century, the unexceptionable importance of phonetic laws instituted a mechanical application of linguistic transformations: self-governing principles, subject to rules and independent from the speaker's conceptual control. The principle of "exceptionlessness" of phonetic laws was notoriously stated by Brugmann in his pref-

ace to *Morphologische Untersuchungen*, published in Lipsia in 1878, and the only admitted correction was that of analogies within the system itself. This almost implies that a speaker does not understand the things he or she enunciates and only accommodates their grammatical form for a reason that is inherent to the form itself, not to its relevance to the outside world of occurred phenomena. Linguistics, writes, for example, in 1859, in *Die Deutsche Sprache*, August Schleicher,

is not a historical, but a natural discipline. Its topic is not (...) the free activity of the spirit – the history – but the language given by nature, subject to immutable constitutive rules, whose essence is out of the determination of a single individual as much as, for example, it is impossible for a nightingale to change his song. (qtd. in Bolelli, 1965: 121–122)

Inspired by good methodological reasons, which pertained to the 19th century debate within Indo-European studies, the principle of the dependence of phenomena on an internal law that governs their development and directs them without allowing any exception, ultimately prioritizes form over content and prelude to a similar interpretation of what happens in the linguistic conscience of the speaker.

While the formal aspect is an essential requisite in the execution of human activities, and combines the perception of forms with the projection of ideas induced by such interaction, the development of such aspect does not coincide with the explanation of its existence, nor replaces it. Linguistic form is a natural means of expression controlled by human rationality and, as such, subject to its performative conditions. The normal sequence of events that follows the occurrence of a phenomenon – incidental or intentional – in a system is a way, not a cause of occurrence. It is sufficient to describe the world of phenomena, but insufficient to explain it. Form belongs to the perceptive dimension of language, and, for this reason, represents its apparently most accessible aspect. Saussure already highlighted this characteristic, pointing out that language seems to be an immediately recognizable object, almost like “a lens with which and through which we get the other objects. This is an illusion” (De Saussure, 1957: 6).

A simple observation of facts is sufficient to notice some elementary circumstances that discredit the power of form to justify all changes. Unaware that a changed has occurred, the speaker’s use of a new arrangement merely replaces the previous one and creates a linguistic conform-

ism without altering code function, the only important prerequisite for a speaker. Indeed, speakers do not think about why a given form, and not another, is appropriate to express an idea, because the linguistic signs used have an arbitrary nature. Their only concern is the existence of a relationship between form and meaning authorized by code, which confers value to such an operation making it socially effective. Code achieves this goal by following changes and redistributing forms internally, until it reaches a new transitory equilibrium which foreshadows further changes without failing in its role. This role is, in fact, to ensure the fruition of meaning through linguistic signs, phonological watermarks devoid of a truth of their own, and having only the values that the speaker assigns to them. Such values match forms as suggested by code, but derive from the cultural dimension in which the experience of the speaker historically takes place. Various convictions about the world emerge from this dimension that make plausible semantic categories to which language gives morphological and grammatical appearance, thus determining their internal cognitive order. Thus, the way in which humans imagine the world defines the meaning of the words through which interpretation of living experience is carried out, and knowledge is acquired in order to interpret it.

Human ideation generates the values that human take as cognitive basis to explain the world. This system of values, the cognitive heritage of the humanity, is distributed across space and time, places and historical ages, and thus culturally determined. Communication, the perceptive aspect of such a process, converts these constraints into semiotic rules whose manifestation constitutes grammar, thus giving form to thoughts. As place for the location of meaning, grammar is also the privileged means to understand the semantics of language and recognize the cultural values implied by rules use in a given historical space and time. The dynamics of forms can be contemplated as an unmistakable sign of the conceptual processes that a universe of values acquired and delivered to the ideal praxis of a culture inspires and motivates.

VALUE SYSTEMS AND CULTURE

Ronald Langacker has affirmed “The relation between grammar and meaning is probably the most crucial issue in current linguistic theory” (Langacker, 2000: 1). He adds that’s his theory of cognitive grammar “takes the radical position that grammar reduces to the structuring and

symbolization of conceptual content and thus has no autonomous existence at all” (Ibid.). The principle of continuity between grammar and lexicon advocated by Cognitive Grammar follows along the basic semiological function of language, which is to allow the symbolization of conceptualizations by means of phonological sequences. Granted this function, language necessarily comprises semantic and phonological structures and symbolic links between the two based on phonological perception, its mental and linguistic projection, and determining cultural conditions. Instead of terms such as phonological structure, semantic structure and symbolic links, structural semiology uses signifier, signified and value, terms introduced by Saussure to distinguish the phonological and semantic aspects of language from the symbolic (cultural) ones. The structural mechanism is simple, recurrent and universal, and does not imply any preliminary division between grammar and lexicon, which are both resolved by signs that match a signifier with a signified through an operation guaranteed by the system in which it occurs.

The functional organization of the system is certainly one of the descriptive tasks of linguistics, partially unobserved by post-Saussurian structuralism. Cognitive Grammar undoubtedly has the merit of bridging this gap by proposing a model based on the same simple principles, transversal to lexicon and grammar, and able to reconcile “the structural organization of language with its semiological function” (Ibid.). Such goal is achieved through researched on the “constructional schemas” which act as a filter for the symbolic complexity of meaning, tracing the formal typology adequate to represent its conceptualization and modulate it in the linguistic continuum. However, the semiological dimension presented in Saussurian theory, in line with the European tradition, still has the potential to split linguistic space and explore a domain complementary to the internal one, outlined by signifiers, and whose implicit convergence is, nevertheless, the indispensable prelude to the rational exercise of semantic activity. This domain, generally overlooked by linguistics, is that of the potential of value as a cognitive factor. Originating in culture and responsible for the conceptualization of the signified in the proportions determined by the signifier and its uses, “value” is the factor that links knowledge and language within the flexible line of a threshold located in the mental dynamics of human cognition, making language the document of individual and social explanations of the perceived world and their linguistic versions. Recognizing the importance of

value allows the emergence of language beyond its role as semiotic manifestation of individual thought, and enables its relation to common knowledge and shared cultural heritage. From this point of view, language rules and grammar become the trace, both of persisting cultural imprint, and of changing inconsistencies, as the human world adapts to reality.

In descriptive terms, access to data has two traditional paths of investigation, which correspond to the schemes of synchrony and diachrony. In synchronic terms, *langue* (language), according to Saussurian terminology, is the system that implements the natural semiological ability of projecting a signified onto a signifier and vice versa by means of implicit metaphoric action (on this see Lakoff's theory of Conceptual Metaphor). *Langue* is the precondition for the selection of a number of sufficient forms, able to express a certain type of cognitive domain exerted by the historic civilization that authorizes the system, defining the way in which the world is rendered in linguistic meanings. It is in this domain that "grammatical semantics" is legitimized. Contemplated in its diachrony, *langue* is the depositary of the linguistic heritage accumulated within the system in the course of its social history; a complex combination of data, phenomena and events, witness to cognitive adaptations in the course of physiological and cultural constraints.

In the following section, I shall examine a grammatical phenomenon whose synchronic linguistic manifestations outline the path followed by human thought beyond its location in a particular time and space. The analysis of certain grammatical inaccuracies in Italian, confronted to current usage rules, will unveil the importance of value systems in language and thought, and will help justify the semantic outcomes despite the exception to regular schemes.

THE CASE OF *VEDERE* (SEE), *VOLERE* (WANT) AND *AVERE* (HAVE)

In Italian, it is possible to observe a peculiar construct of the verbs *vedere* (see), *volere* (want) and *avere* (have), whose syntactic behavior is sometimes not justified by their grammatical typology. The verb *Avere* indicates possession, and transferred to the class of auxiliary verbs, is used to form compound tenses in the active conjugation of verbs, particularly transitive ones. *Volere* belongs to the class of modal verbs, that is, verbs that

are added to the infinitive of another verb and complete its sense.¹ *Vedere* indicates perception and refers to a sensitive action with an autonomous lexical and semantic condition. However, the use of these three verbs reveals unexpected functional coincidences that rule out unintentional errors or chance, and whose expressive circumstances disprove the possibility that they are contaminations due to poor language control or because of the linguistic register used. Indeed, the following sentences have been taken from Italian television programs and found in Italian newspapers, and therefore are included in a rather accurate communicative situation, given the diffusion of the above media and the level of attention paid to them.

Let us consider the following series of sentences together with their references:

1. (Gheddafi) Avrebbe maggiori garanzie *d'aver salva* la vita (*News of Italian TV Channel 1*, 9am – August 25, 2011)
((Gheddafi) Would have more guarantees of having his life saved)
2. Sollecito, che di anni *ne ha avuti inflitti* venticinque (*News of Italian TV Channel 5*, 8pm – October 2, 2011)
(Sollecito, who has been inflicted twenty-five years of prison)
3. Il governo chiede *di aver confermata* la fiducia perché profondamente consapevole dei rischi che corre il paese (*Il Foglio*, Italian newspaper – October 13, 2011)
(The government requests to have trust confirmed, deeply aware of the risks that the country is taking)
4. Coloro che *volevano scomunicato* Berlusconi (*Qui Radio Londra*, Italian TV program – September 26, 2011)
(Those who wanted Berlusconi excommunicated)
5. I sindacati *vogliono rispettato* l'accordo stipulato con l'azienda (*Sicilian TV news* - November 29, 2011)
(Unions want the agreement signed with the company honored)
6. Chi ha già una pensione non *la vedrà toccata* (*News of Italian TV Channel 1*, 13,30pm – August 24, 2011)
(Who already has a pension will not see it touched)
7. (Walter Bonatti) Ebbe la soddisfazione *di veder ristabilita* la verità dopo molti anni (*News of Radio Channel 1*, 7am – September 15, 2011)
((Walter Bonatti) Had the satisfaction of seeing the truth established after several years)
8. Ha atteso cinquant'anni per *vedersi pagata* una cambiale di 100 lire (*News of Italian TV Channel 5*, 8pm – October 10, 2011)
(He waited fifty years to see a bill of exchange of 100 lire paid to him)

All the above sentences have a similar grammatical profile, with *volere*, *vedere* and *avere* used as auxiliary verbs. Such role is adequate for *avere*, less adequate for *volere* and totally inappropriate for *vedere*. These constructs are placed in the active form and with a similar type of clause, which otherwise would have had a different syntactic structure, using preferentially finite modality and conjugation with the auxiliary verb *essere* (to be).

Comparison of these sentences with their prescriptive versions is sufficient to notice the changes that have taken place:

- 1a. (Gheddafi) Avrebbe maggiori garanzie *che gli fosse salvata la vita*.
((Gheddafi) Would have more guarantees that his life will be saved)
- 2a. Sollecito, *cui sono stati inflitti* venticinque anni
(Sollecito, to whom twenty-five years have been inflicted)
- 3a. Il governo chiede *che gli sia confermata* la fiducia
(The government asks that trust is confirmed)
- 4a. Coloro che volevano *che Berlusconi fosse scomunicato/volevano scomunicare* Berlusconi
(Those who wanted Berlusconi to be excommunicated/wanted to excommunicate Berlusconi)
- 5a. I sindacati vogliono *che sia applicato* l'accordo/*vogliono applicare*
(Unions want that the agreement is honored/want to honor the agreement)
- 6a. Chi ha già una pensione non *la vedrà toccare*/La pensione *non sarà toccata* a chi ne ha già una
(Who already has a pension will not see anyone touch it/Pension will not be touched for those who already have one)
- 7a. Ebbe la soddisfazione di *vedere ristabilire* la verità/*che la verità fosse ristabilita/che era stata ristabilita*
(He had the satisfaction of seeing the establishing of truth/that truth was established/that truth had been established)
- 8a. Ha atteso cinquant'anni per *vedersi pagare* una cambiale/*vedere che fosse pagata* una cambiale
(He waited fifty years to see a bill of exchange getting paid/to see that a bill of exchange being paid)

The alternation between the version with *essere* and that with *avere*, which differentiates the sentences in the first group from their normative versions, is mainly attributable to the middle nature of the verbal action, whose agent is undefined, while the subject plays the role of a participant in, or user of, the action itself. Since the middle function of the verb has not its own morphology in Italian, its grammatical expression is shared between active and passive voice.

Sentences 4a and 5a are examples of the two grammatical behaviors of *volere*, which is joined to the infinitive of the following verb when acting as a modal verb, while holding an objective proposition when not playing the modal role; sentences 6a-8a show that *vedere* shares syntactic properties with *volere*, as both can act as full or auxiliary verbs. These observations on form and superficial syntactic arrangement of sentences are generally suggested by descriptive practice. However, the classification of *vedere* as a modal verb is a circumstance that formal description of grammar does not explain. This means that subsidiarity of some verbs in relation to others is not an implicit characteristic of the functional class of modal verbs, but is rather implicit in the semantics of a verb. The latter really guides the grammatical behavior of the verb and makes it plausible, in the use of a speaker, for the kind of linguistic comprehension to which it wants to give communicative access, not vice versa. Thus, it depends on the cognitive dimension of which semantics is the semiotic projection on a linguistic plan, and its grammatical reasons are located exclusively in this dimension.

Indeed, “values” culturally attributed to specific actions or phenomena in the universe of knowledge owned by a society that credits them as an appropriate explanation of the world and existence determine the linguistic semantics of such actions and phenomena, motivating their rendering in defined grammatical paths and fixing them in normative stereotypes. It is in this sphere where the search for the semantic reasons of grammatical rules must take place, for these can explain why they can make reality appreciated in the terms in which a certain culture imagined it before delivering it to the semiotic metaphor of words, sentences and linguistic rules where, successively, they become expressive stereotypes.

In this respect, it must be noted that, among modal verbs, *dovere* (must) and *potere* (can) have not the same possibility of forming specific syntactic clauses as *volere*. The sentence *voglio mettere le note in fondo alla pagina* has an equivalent, more colloquial: *le note, le voglio messe in fondo alla pagina*. However, it is not possible to do the same when the modal verb used is *dovere* or *potere*:

Voglio mettere le note in fondo alla pagina/Le note, le voglio messe in fondo alla pagina
(I want to place the notes at the bottom of the page/the notes, I want them placed at...)

*Devo mettere le note in fondo alla pagina/*Le note, le devo messe in fondo alla pagina*

(I must place the notes at.../*the notes, I must them placed at...)

Posso mettere le note in fondo alla pagina/**Le note, le posso messe* in fondo alla pagina

(I can place the notes.../*the notes, I can them place at...)

A similar situation can be observed with the following variations:

**Le note vogliono essere messe* in fondo alla pagina/*Voglio* che le note siano messe

(*The notes want to be placed at.../I want that the notes are placed at...)

Le note devono essere messe in fondo alla pagina/**Devo* che le note siano messe

(The notes must be placed at.../*I must that the notes are placed at...)

Le note possono essere messe in fondo alla pagina/**Posso* che le note siano messe

(The notes can be placed at.../*I can that the notes are placed at...)

As it can be easily noticed, when the typology of a sentence is correct for *volere*, it is not correct for the other two verbs, and vice versa. The anomaly of *volere* in the class of modal verbs makes evident a cognitive property of these verbs, implicit in their meaning and perfectly recorded in the syntactic bond imposed by grammar. *Volere* is a transitive verb, that is, a verb whose action is directed to an object. For this reason, it implies the expressive support of a textual relationship, real or virtual. Conversely, *dovere* and *potere* are not transitive. The syntax of the above sentences reflects this difference, rendering it in terms of textual cohesion. The admissibility of such sentences depends, in fact, on compliance with a parameter of alternative foricity that regulates their use, in perfect semantic symmetry between conceptual value and grammatical rule. The grammar of *volere* allows sentences whose syntactic track shows, in the arrangement of elements and in their dependencies, a *cataphoric* property of the verb, which resolves its action in the consequential acts and explicitly declares such fact, by predicating a quality of the subject that is fulfilled in the object which it preludes to, and whose ideal complicity it depends on. This causes a syntactic inversion, with prolepsis of the object and its pronominal reiteration in a proclitic position. The grammar of *dovere* and *potere* shows an *anaphoric* property of these verbs, whose action reverts to the subject and predicates its quality towards a series of possible complements, arranged as a virtual corollary. What can or must be done is not necessarily done; action stays suspended, pending in fulfillment.

The prerogative of foricity with respect to the object – which releases *volere* from its class in terms of textual cohesion – is the same require-

ment that determines the grammatical correctness of the sentences which use *vedere* as a modal verb, and demonstrates in this way that it is the textual parameter that allows attraction of a verb in the same functional class:

Vedo mettere le note in fondo alla pagina/*Le note, le vedo messe* in fondo

(I see the notes being placed at/the notes, I see them placed at...)

**Le note vedono essere messe* in fondo alla pagina/*Vedo* che le note sono state messe...

(*The notes see being placed at.../I see that the notes have been placed...)

In sentences 1–3 of the first list, the auxiliary verb *avere* goes in the same syntactic position where *volere* and *vedere* are placed when they are used as modal verbs, and confirms this function, presenting with the morphology of a full verb added to support another verb of indefinite mode. Also in this case – despite the clause showing a middle voice, that gives the role of subject of the sentence to the one who undergoes the action² – the verbal starting point directs towards the bottom of the sentence and is placed on the person or thing involved in the event. *Avere* declares this cataphoric link when it condensates such link in a single form, because its use in the place of *essere* – the pertinent auxiliary verb in this case – shows that “possession” is the semantic track of the middle grammatical solution adopted. Indeed, the possessive meaning of *avere* denotes evident textual cataphoricity, particularly in the full sense, when the verb is used alone.

Other modal verbs are mostly stylistic variants, in different forms and degree, of the three traditional prototypes (Rosch, 1978). It is sufficient to apply the test of the contraction of the modal construct into a single synthetic clause, as above, to observe the systematical distribution of all such verbs in the three prototypic classes created by *dovere*, *volere*, *potere*.

Osa mettere le note in fondo alla pagina/**le osa messe* in fondo alla pagina

(He dares to place the notes at.../*he dares them place at...)

Suole mettere le note in fondo alla pagine/**le suole messe* in fondo alla pagina

(He usually places the notes at.../*he them usually places at...)

Sa mettere le note in fondo alla pagina/**le sa messe* in fondo alla pagina³

(He knows how to place the notes at.../*he knows them place at...)

Preferisce mettere le note in fondo alla pagina/*le preferisce messe* in fondo alla pagina

(He prefers to place the notes at.../he prefers them place at...)

This proof demonstrates that, in the deep grammar of a speaker, the semantic sphere of a verb – intended as cognitive value of the conceptualized meaning – takes precedence over the formal practice that regulates its execution, although this latter is an indispensable functional corollary, because it plays the mnemonic role of signifier of the expressed idea. Indeed, these circumstances require further cultural considerations on the cognitive value of the phenomena considered, which concerns the three verbs discussed, and suggest some additional, less partial side notes to the presentation of their linguistic traits.

CONCLUSIONS: COGNITIVE TRACES OF VALUE IN GRAMMATICAL FORM

In particular, the above considerations make us think about the conceptual type by which language demonstrates that the world – and the relationship that man has with it – has been brought to the knowledge of a certain historical society, and about the value that such type of cultural imprint plays in the definition of collective thinking, exercising its binding power of which it is the implicit ideological reason both on individual and social behaviors.

The first thing to notice is that human will is perceived and conceptualized as an act addressed to the exterior sphere of an individual actor, to actions and events on which he or she operates without identifying him/herself with them. Will is an external reflex of an internal process that would not exist without a practical outcome for the actor involved. It is different from duty, which concerns only an individual and his/her own interiority. The different constructions of sentences with *volere* and *dovere* record this cognitive constraint in the syntactic rule observed, taking place in the class of transitive and intransitive verbs, respectively, and lending itself to otherwise inadmissible variants.

The action of *vedere* clearly participates in the same kind of cognitive conceptualization. The grammatical rule affirms that what is outside an individual is perceptible to the eye and reaches right into the space in between, while remaining outside the individual. It is something of which an individual cannot get possession. When the individual transforms what he/she sees into mental images, which trespass in the immaterial dimension of mental vision, *vedere* borders on *sapere* and overlaps with it in more than one occasion, losing any concrete connotation and becom-

ing a subjective idea. This is the path followed, for example, by the Latin verb *video* and the ancient Greek verb *oïda*, which to the original value of “seeing” add the metaphoric meaning of “knowing.” The English verb ‘to see’ and the Italian verb *vedo* used in the meaning of “capisco” (I understand) show a trace of a similar phenomenon.

The situation of *avere* is even clearer. Possession, which has in *avere* its main linguistic expression, does not act on nor modifies the personal sphere of the subject. The grammatical form demonstrates that to possess something, the subject must move out of him/herself and attract it towards his/her domain. However, the destiny of this domain is to remain in the margins of the individual, since it cannot trespass the physical boundary of the person becoming part of him/her. *Avere* is not *essere*. The two dimensions do not coincide: they can amalgamate, creating the middle voice of a verb, which indicates an active circumstance taken passively, or vice versa; however, these are syntactic resolutions which imply the existence of two grammatical entities from which their morphology is borrowed.⁴

I would like to add yet another remark. Between *vedere* and *avere* exists a peculiar relationship of interchangeability, testified by sentences such as the following ones where *avere* could be used in place of *vedere*:

Le banche si aspettano di *vedere/avere* riconosciute le commissioni (*News of Italian TV Channel 5*, 8pm - March 14, 2012)

(The banks expect to see/ have the charges acknowledged)

Gli imputati sono sicuri di *vedere/avere* prescritto un processo quando i tempi sono lunghi (*Omnibus, Italian TV program* – March 14, 2012)

(The defendants are sure to see/ have a trial expired when times are long)

If we assume that in the speaker’s linguistic competence substitution is plausible because of ‘value’ reasons rendered in grammatical terms, an assumption that underlies the rationality of this paper, we must acknowledge that, in the conception that such a speaker has of the world, possession is a visual phenomenon that passes through eyes and ends in the perceived appearance of things. However, it does not trespass the sensory surface, which becomes a place of accumulation where possession is manifested and comes true. It readily disappears when the circumstances that allowed it vanish, since it lies outside the perceiving subject. This fact can also be appreciated in the psychological effects of

advertising, which insists on visual appearance in order to stimulate imagination and desire.

To conclude, the aim of this paper has been to show the narrow connection between grammatical uses and questions of cultural value in order to broaden the field of structuralist semiology and linguistics. We have made use of contemporary theories of cognitive grammar and conceptual metaphor and explore the case of the Italian verbs *vedere volere* and *avere*, whose uses unveil the path of cultural ideas, concepts and beliefs, presented in linguistic form. The case study presented has tried to show words as signs or semiotic actors of a cultural heritage, which both enables and dictates thinking patterns on which shared knowledge and meaning depend.

Notes

¹ Grammar defines as “modal” the verbs which are associated to another verb in infinitive mode, to complete its meaning. The verbs *dovere* (must), *potere* (can) and *volere* (want) are modal, and they mainly play this role while maintaining a separate predicative function. This class includes other verbs, such as *solere* (to be used), *osare* (to dare), *sapere* (to know), *desiderare* (to desire), *preferire* (to prefer), with similar syntactic properties (Serianni, 2006: 395–397).

² This implies overlap between the active and passive form of the verb, because neither of the two is sufficient to cover its grammatical expression: “Il canone è stato aumentato/ha avuto un aumento” (The licence fee has been increased/had an increase). Use of *avere* in this alternative construct makes the verb a functional hybrid between auxiliary and modal, making it share the peculiarities of both.

³ *Sapere* shows a double function, which gives the verb the role of modal directly supporting infinitive, like in the example, and modal supporting participle when it derives from a complementary sentence: “Sa che le note sono state messe in fondo alla pagina” (He knows that notes have been put...). In the first case, the subject of the two verbs is the same and, consequently, the semantic field of action of *sapere* is internal to the subject; in the second case, instead, it is external, because *sapere* acquires its meaning only in relation to the successive action. *Sapere* is therefore, in the semiotic conceptualization of the world, a prerogative internal to the subject, almost a personal characteristic, or an external prerogative, which consists in knowledge of data and objective aspects.

⁴ This happens in the Italian language, where middle voice is created through the improper use of the auxiliary verb *avere*, as shown in some of the previous examples. In classical languages, middle voice comes along with active and passive voice, with its own morphology, hinting a conception of the relationship between subject and verbal action that can even escape individual will.

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