Caterina Mauri* and Ludovica Pannitto

Temporal, aspectual, and modal evaluation in nominal reference: the case of Italian

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Abstract: This paper investigates how Italian speakers evaluate nominal reference along temporal, aspectual, and modal dimensions. Drawing on large-scale corpora (ItWac, Repubblica, WikiCoNLL, itTenTen20), we show that Italian, despite lacking grammaticalized nominal TAM, displays a wide repertoire of evaluative constructions that recalibrate the validity of categorization in the noun phrase. Prefixes such as *ex*, *neo*, and *quasi*, compounds with *non* or *non più*, and adverbial modifiers such as *già*, *ancora*, or *forse* systematically encode reference as expired, incipient, continuous, potential, or otherwise non-prototypical. Our analysis demonstrates that these forms are not marginal lexical curiosities but constitute a productive subsystem of evaluative morphology. By foregrounding temporality, prototypicality, and stance, they turn categorization into a process open to negotiation. Approximation frequently emerges as a consequence of TAM-oriented evaluation, though it is not its only outcome. The Italian case thus contributes to the typology of evaluative strategies by highlighting the noun phrase as a key locus where reference, stance, and categorization intersect.

Keywords: evaluative morphology; nominal TAM; categorization; approximation; Italian

1 Introduction

Research on tense, aspect, and modality (TAM) has traditionally concentrated on the verbal domain, where dedicated morphology and auxiliary constructions locate events in time, describe their internal structure, and encode epistemic or deontic stance (Bybee et al. 1994; Comrie 1976). However, languages also provide ways of evaluating referents within the noun phrase along TAM-related dimensions. Italian,

***Corresponding author: Caterina Mauri**, Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Via Cartoleria 5, 40124, Bologna, Italy, E-mail: caterina.mauri@unibo.it. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8226-7846
Ludovica Pannitto, Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Via Cartoleria 5, 40124, Bologna, Italy, E-mail: ludovica.pannitto@unibo.it. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5760-6447

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in spite of the absence of grammaticalized nominal TAM marking, exhibits a remarkably rich repertoire of constructions that modulate the temporal, aspectual, and modal validity of referential categorization.

Our point of departure is the observation that speakers frequently qualify a referent not only by assigning it to a nominal category (e.g. *fumatore* 'smoker', *amicizia* 'friendship', *trentenni* 'thirty-year-olds', *lavoro* 'job', *padre* 'father'), but also by evaluating the degree and certainty of its membership. Expressions such as *ex-fumatore* 'former smoker', *un-tempo-amicizia* 'once-friendship', *appena-trentenni* 'newly-thirty-year-olds', *forse-lavoro* 'possible job', or *padre-non-più-padre* 'father-no-longer-father' do not simply label entities. They explicitly frame the categorization as ended, incipient, provisional, fragile, or uncertain. In doing so, they transform the noun phrase into a site of evaluation, where reference is negotiated against temporal anchoring, prototypicality, and speaker attitude.

Consider examples in (1) from Italian:

(1) Italian (ItTenTen20 Corpus)

a. *piccole soddisfazioni da **ex**-fumatore che i*
small:F.PL satisfaction:F.PL from **former**-smoker:M.SG that DEF.M.PL
***mai**-fumatori neanche si sognano*
never-smoker:M.PL not.even REFL dream:3PL
'Small satisfactions for an ex-smoker that never-smokers can't even dream of.'

b. *rompere il ghiaccio della nostra **un-tempo**-amicizia*
break:INF DEF.M.SG ice:M.SG of:DEF.F.SG our:F.SG **once**-friendship:F.SG
'Breaking the ice of our once-friendship.'

c. *gli **appena**-trentenni si trasformano in*
DEF.M.PL **just**-thirty-year.old:M.PL REFL transform:3PL in
*trentenni **a tutti gli effetti***
thirty-year.old:M.PL **to all**:M.PL DEF.M.PL **effect**:M.PL
'The newly-thirty-year-olds develop into full-fledged thirty-year-olds.'

d. *Si è creato quel magico **non**-equilibrio*
REFL AUX.3SG create:PST.PRT:M.SG that magical:M.SG **non**-balance:M.SG
*per cui è arrivato un **forse**-lavoro*
for which AUX.3SG arrive:PST.PRT:M.SG INDEF.M.SG **maybe**-job:M.SG
pagato poco e poco appagante ma che
pay:PST.PRT:M.SG little and little rewarding:SG but that
dovrebbe essere stabile
must:COND:3SG be:INF stable
'That magical non-balance has been created where a perhaps-job has come up, low-paid and unsatisfying but supposedly stable.'

e. *lui il padre-**non-più**-padre, ma padre in altro*
he DEF.M.SG father-**no-longer**-father but father in other:M.SG
modo cioè, ci siamo capiti
way:M.SG that.is REFL AUX.1PL understand:PST.PRT:M.PL
'He, the father-no-longer-father, but father in a different way, that is, you know what I mean.'

Each of these examples shows how categorization in Italian is systematically combined with an evaluative dimension. In (1a) and (1b) *ex-fumatore* 'ex-smoker' and *un-tempo-amicizia* 'once-friendship' anchor categorization retrospectively, identifying the referent by a property that once held but no longer applies. In (1c) *appena-trentenni* 'newly-thirty-year-olds' foregrounds incipient membership, construing entry into a category as fragile or provisional. In (1d) *forse-lavoro* 'maybe-job' hedges categorization through epistemic attenuation, presenting membership as uncertain and only tentatively endorsed. Finally, in (1e) *padre-non-più-padre* 'father-no-longer-father' encodes discontinuity within an identity, combining cancellation of membership with the persistence of the category label as the most economical means of reference.

This paper approaches these phenomena not primarily as instances of nominal TAM (Bertinetto 2020; Lecarme 2012; Nordlinger and Sadler 2004), but as evaluative strategies of nominal reference.

While evaluative morphology has long been recognized as encompassing a wide range of scalar deviations beyond size and affect (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994; Grandi 2002, 2017), its internal classifications have primarily focused on domains such as diminutive/augmentative meaning, intensification, approximation, and pragmatic stance. The present study does not propose to add a new isolated value to this inventory. Rather, it adopts a broader functional definition of evaluation as scalar recalibration of category validity. From this perspective, temporal, aspectual, and modal operators in the nominal domain can be understood as systematically modulating the validity conditions of categorization.

In particular, we argue that speakers deploy temporal, aspectual, and modal operators as evaluative devices that qualify how and to what extent a referent counts as an instance of a given category. Following Grandi and Körtvélyessy (2015: 10–13), we take there to be TAM evaluative semantics when a strategy:

(i) conveys a departure from a baseline along a semantic scale associated with TAM;

(ii) is characterized by the explicit presence of both the baseline and the evaluative operator;
(iii) communicates a descriptive viewpoint, in which the speaker evaluates the referent's status along the temporal and/or modal dimension (for instance, whether it has just entered a category or still belongs to it);
(iv) may convey a qualitative viewpoint, in which the evaluation conveys the speaker's subjective stance, including their degree of certainty, necessity, or desirability concerning the referent's categorization (cf. Prieto 2015).

Crucially, evaluation in this sense involves the explicit marking of deviation from a default or temporally stable categorization. We will show that some strategies clearly encode epistemic stance (e.g. *forse*-N 'maybe-N'), while others (e.g. *ex*-N 'former-N') primarily encode temporal displacement. What unifies them is the overt recalibration of category membership.

It is indeed well known that categorization assessment is achieved through modulation and adjustment to the context, as shown by research on fuzzy categorization and ad hoc categories (Barsalou 1983; Mauri 2017; Mauri and Sansò 2018, 2020; Rosch 1978; Taylor 2003). At the same time, the overt stance component aligns with research on subjectivity and stance-taking (Du Bois 2007; Englebretson 2007; Kärkkäinen 2006), as well as on indexical categorization and list-construction strategies (Barotto and Mauri 2018; Masini and Mauri 2020; Mauri 2021; Mauri and Masini 2024).

The central research question addressed in this study is: How do Italian speakers evaluate nominal reference along temporal, aspectual, and modal dimensions, and what does this reveal about the scope of evaluative morphology? More specifically, we investigate the range of strategies through which speakers recalibrate category membership along TAM-related dimensions in the noun phrase, the interpretive outcomes these strategies produce in terms of prototypicality and stance, and the theoretical implications of treating temporality, aspectuality, and modality as evaluative parameters within the nominal domain.

To address these questions, we adopt a corpus-based approach combining form-driven and function-driven searches in large-scale Italian corpora (ItWac and a dump of the Italian Wikipedia – WikiCoNLL – Baroni et al. 2009; Repubblica, Baroni et al. 2004; and itTenTen20, Jakubíček et al. 2013). We analyze a wide range of evaluative constructions, classifying them according to reference they build (ended, ongoing, circumstantial, potential, mixed), and interpreting them in relation to both the semantics of the base noun and the discursive context of occurrence.

By foregrounding evaluation rather than temporality, the present study complements existing work on nominal TAM (Bertinetto 2020; Lecarme 2012; Nordlinger and Sadler 2004) with a pragmatic perspective. Our contribution is twofold: empirically, we provide a systematic description of Italian evaluative strategies within the noun phrase; theoretically, we argue that TAM reference evaluation is a central case of how morphology and syntax encode stance, approximation, and prototypicality in the nominal domain, thereby expanding the scope of evaluative semantics.

2 Theoretical background: TAM as an evaluative dimension

The notion that TAM values may be expressed in the noun phrase has been well documented for a number of languages, including both inflectional nominal TAM and clitic/particle TAM on nominals (Nordlinger and Sadler 2004). Studies on nominal TAM describe systems in which nouns can carry morphological markers encoding tense, aspect, or modality (Bertinetto 2020; Lecarme 2012). For example, in Bolivian Guaraní, nouns bear suffixes distinguishing prospective from retrospective reference, while in Wayana two TAM markers can be simultaneously attached to the same noun. These patterns challenge the traditional view that TAM is exclusively a verbal domain, showing that languages can systematically extend temporal and modal anchoring to the nominal level.

Beyond these well-known cases, cross-linguistic research points to a broader spectrum of nominal TAM devices, including nominal clitics and affixes that encode temporal anchoring of referents and, in some systems, aspectual or modal values associated with nominal heads (see also Nordlinger and Sadler 2004; Aikhenvald 2022). What unites these phenomena is not a single morphological template but the grammaticalization of temporal/aspectual/modal indexing on nouns.

In addition to grammaticalized nominal TAM systems, some studies have pointed to nouns whose lexical meaning inherently encodes temporal or modal evaluation. Gosselin (2018) argues that certain human-denoting nouns contain internal value judgments concerning the referent's temporal status or social validation (e.g. roles that presuppose anteriority, discontinuity, or projected realization). These cases show that temporal or modal validity can be embedded in the semantics of the noun itself (see also Tonhauser 2008). However, they differ from the Italian patterns examined here, which do not rely on lexically inherent evaluation but on morpho-syntactic operators that explicitly recalibrate the validity of a category in discourse.

Italian lacks dedicated nominal TAM morphology. Yet speakers routinely mobilize lexical and morpho-syntactic resources – prefixes (e.g. *ex*-N, *neo*-N, *pre*-N), compounding strategies (e.g. *quasi*-N 'almost-N', *non-più*-N 'not-N-anymore'), and adverbial/adjectival modification (e.g. *futuro presidente* 'future president', *ancora studente* 'still student') – to locate or qualify nominal reference along temporal and modal dimensions. What we aim to argue is that these phenomena are best understood within the framework of evaluative morphology, usually defined as the set of morphological processes that add an evaluative dimension to a base, often but not only along scalar parameters such as size, intensity or degree (Grandi and Körtvélyessy 2015).

Within the evaluative-morphology tradition, deviation from a default is typically described along multiple parameters. In particular, Grandi (2002, 2017) distinguishes between quantitative evaluation (involving scalar modification, e.g. diminution/augmentation and related intensificational processes, see Rainer 2015) and qualitative evaluation (involving shifts in categorization, prototypicality, and speaker-oriented values). The Italian patterns discussed here interact with both domains: some operators primarily encode scalar deviation in terms of proximity or distance in time (e.g. *ex*-), while others encode qualitative recalibration of category membership by profiling its aspectual or modal status (e.g. *ancora* 'still', *forse* 'maybe'). In this sense, temporality and modality constitute a set of dimensions along which category validity can be explicitly recalibrated.

This approach is compatible with the general definition of evaluation as deviation from a standard: the relevant 'standard' is a temporally stable, unmarked categorization, while the evaluative marker introduces explicit information about when, how, or with what epistemic/deontic status the referent counts as a member of the category. Constructions such as *ex-fumatore* 'ex-smoker', *neo-attore* 'new actor', *ancora studente* 'still student', *già cliente* 'already customer', or *forse-lavoro* 'possible job' start from a default categorization and apply operators that recalibrate its validity along temporal, aspectual, or modal axes. These operators adjust the conditions under which the categorization is presented as legitimate, stable, or epistemically warranted, thereby encoding evaluation directly within the noun phrase.

Such recalibration depends on the speaker's judgment and perspective. While many evaluative markers overtly encode affective or axiological stance (e.g. pejoratives or intensifiers), other evaluative operations are primarily concerned with the speaker's perspective on the applicability and stability of categorization. In the present domain, judgment is not necessarily affective: it consists in making explicit that category membership is being assessed against temporal anchoring or modal validation. Thus, *ex*- may be used in a descriptively temporal way, yet it still performs

an evaluative operation insofar as it marks a deviation from the default assumption of current validity (and may become overtly stance-loaded depending on discourse context and noun class).

As will become clear throughout the discussion, TAM evaluation can yield different interpretive effects. In many cases, it primarily situates reference in time (retrospective, incipient, persistent). In others, it encodes epistemic stance (uncertainty, tentativeness, cancellation). Notably, in contexts where incipiency (*appena* 'just'), persistence (*ancora* 'still'), or attenuation (*forse* 'maybe') relativize the stability of category membership, approximative readings may arise as an interpretive outcome of evaluative operations that manipulate temporal, aspectual, or modal validity (cf. Masini et al. 2023; Norde et al. 2025).

In line with recent work on evaluative morphology, approximation is treated here as an emergent interpretive effect that arises when evaluative devices encode deviation from a norm or prototype. In the evaluative literature, approximation is commonly understood as a functional domain in which explicit linguistic means blur the categorical limits of the linguistic element they modify, thereby weakening or problematizing full category membership while keeping the base as the relevant comparison point (Stosic and Amiot 2023). Within the morphological literature, approximation is often used as a cover term for meanings associated with attenuation, vagueness, non-prototypicality, resemblance and fakeness, all of which profile entities as only partially or marginally fitting the category expressed by the base (see Masini and Micheli 2020; Masini et al. 2023; Hüning and Schlücker 2023). Diachronic and cross-linguistic studies further show that approximative values typically emerge from more concrete scalar or spatial meanings (e.g. 'half', 'near') and come to occupy the segment of the evaluative space where the referent is close to, but not fully at, the prototypical standard of the category (cf. Micheli 2023). Adopting this perspective, the present analysis uses the term 'approximation' in a broad sense: it refers to those outputs of TAM evaluation in which temporal, aspectual or modal parameters (incipiency, persistence, tentativeness) are recruited to blur category boundaries and signal (non-)prototypicality.

A complementary perspective comes from research on ad hoc categorization in interaction (Mauri 2017; Mauri and Sansò 2018, 2020; Mauri 2021; see also contributions in Mauri et al. 2021). This line of work shows that speakers frequently construct categories on demand, tailored to local goals and contexts, i.e., categories that are assembled in discourse through locally relevant criteria (often made explicit by lists, reformulations, or descriptive labels, cf. Barotto and Mauri 2018), rather than retrieved as fixed lexical classes. Linguistic resources can simultaneously classify and comment on the appropriateness of the classification. In this view, nominal expressions serve not only to sort entities but also to index the speaker's orientation to the category – its fit, legitimacy, and degree of applicability in the given

interactional project (see also Mauri and Masini 2024 on the multi-layered indexicality of categorizing names). The Italian patterns examined in this study align with this account: they can be seen as packaging stance together with reference, in line with analyses of ad hoc categorization and on-line category building, because they signal temporal anchoring (*ex-*, *neo-*), phase profiling (*ancora* 'still', *già* 'already'), or epistemic positioning (*forse* 'maybe', *quasi* 'almost'), and thereby make the adequacy of the categorization part of what is said.

In sum, the theoretical backdrop we adopt integrates three ingredients: cross-linguistic nominal TAM (as grammatical expression on nouns), evaluative morphology (as a general mechanism of scalar deviation), and ad hoc/indexical categorization (as interactionally grounded category building and stance). Rather than treating the Italian formations as isolated lexical innovations or as incipient nominal TAM, we analyze them as part of a systematic evaluative repertoire in which TAM-related dimensions are mobilized to qualify reference and embed stance. This evaluative account provides the framework for the empirical analysis that follows.

3 Data and methodology

To address these questions, we adopt a corpus-based methodology that investigates both the productivity of recurrent evaluative markers and the emergence of less conventional, creative formations. The empirical basis of this study consists of corpus data from four major collections of contemporary Italian: ItWac, WikiCoNLL, Repubblica, and itTenTen20. Together these corpora cover multiple registers, from institutional writing to web discourse, thus capturing both routinized and innovative strategies.

Our analytical procedure integrates quantitative and qualitative perspectives. While we do not aim to provide exhaustive frequency counts, corpus searches enable us to establish the relative productivity and distribution of different strategies across registers. At the same time, close qualitative analysis of representative examples highlights the interpretive outcomes and pragmatic functions of evaluative reference, showing how speakers negotiate categorization in context. In this paper we will focus on the results of the qualitative analysis.

Data extraction combined bottom-up and top-down strategies. When we had full access to the resource (i.e., in the cases of WikiCoNLL, Repubblica and ItWac corpora), we ran search queries for prefixed nominal compounds (e.g. {prefix}-N), and Ngram-based extraction for the sequences [DET ADV NOUN] and [DET ADJ ADV NOUN]. From the resulting dataset, we retrieved constructions based on TAM-relevant elements, i.e. elements encoding a temporal, aspectual, modal dimension. The identification of TAM-relevant elements was guided both by prior literature on nominal

temporality and modality (Section 2) and by recurrent corpus patterns where the operator systematically encoded temporal anchoring, phase profiling, or modal validation of the referent. This methodology helped us to identify previously attested forms as well as to uncover new or marginal strategies in use.

From a morphological perspective, the constructions under investigation do not form a homogeneous class. Elements such as *ex-*, *pre-*, *post-*, and *neo-* are traditionally analysed as prefixoids or bound morphemes, while *quasi-* and *non-più-* may display properties closer to compounding or phrasal modification. In the present study, we adopt a functional rather than strictly morphological criterion: all constructions are treated together insofar as they involve a TAM-relevant operator that modifies nominal reference. The classification into prefixation, compounding, adverbial/adjectival modification, and dedicated constructions is therefore descriptive and intended to capture formal variation, not to impose a rigid morphological taxonomy.

Once we had identified and preliminarily validated the set of TAM-relevant elements in the bottom-up phase (WikiCoNLL, Repubblica, ItWac), we extended the search to itTenTen20, through a top-down query performed through the Sketch-Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) platform. In this stage, we focused on prefixed constructions and used regular expressions of the form ([a-z]+-)*{prefix}(-[a-z]+)+, where {prefix} was one of the selected TAM markers. Extracted sequences were then manually cleaned and validated to ensure they matched the intended interpretive patterns.

Each candidate expression was then subjected to manual annotation according to a set of analytical parameters designed to capture both its formal characteristics and contextual interpretation. This annotation process involved the following six dimensions:

1. Construction type: prefixation (e.g. *ex-fidanzato,* 'ex-boyfriend'), compounding (e.g. *quasi-partito,* 'almost-party'), adverbial or adjectival modification (e.g. *futuro presidente,* 'future president'), dedicated construction (e.g. *accordo di massima,* 'overall agreement').
2. Evaluative element: the specific marker conveying the temporal, aspectual, or modal evaluation (*ex*, *neo*, *quasi*, *ancora*, *forse*, etc.).
3. Lexical base: the bare noun being modified.
4. Semantic class of the base noun: kinship (*padre* 'father'), profession (*attore* 'actor'), social role (*presidente* 'president'), qualification (*laureato* 'graduate'), movement (*comunista* 'communist'), location/function (*ospedale* 'hospital'), process (*trattativa* 'negotiation'), entity (*azienda* 'company'), and event (*festa* 'party'). The semantic classification of base nouns follows broad conceptual domains commonly adopted in lexical-semantic studies (e.g. human roles, processes, entities, events),

and serves primarily as a heuristic device to observe possible distributional tendencies of TAM-oriented operators across referential types (loosely based on the ontological types proposed for T-PAS, Ježek et al. 2014).

5. Discourse context: the textual environment in which the evaluative form was used, with particular attention to argumentative or identity-related functions.
6. Evaluative value: the type of TAM-oriented evaluation applied to reference within context. Values include retrospective, inceptive, transitional, continuity, iterative, potentiality, epistemic, and non-prototypicality. These labels do not correspond to traditional evaluative "values" such as diminutive or pejorative, but identify functional subtypes of temporal, aspectual, and modal recalibration of category validity, which may intersect with qualitative and quantitative evaluation as discussed in Section 2.

The resulting dataset comprises several thousand occurrences distributed across all major evaluative strategies, as shown in Table 1. For the purposes of this article, we do not aim to provide an exhaustive quantitative description, but rather to illustrate the range of evaluative strategies and their pragmatic functions. Examples are selected to be representative of the different values identified, and to highlight the variety of ways in which Italian speakers negotiate the validity of nominal reference.

TAM-N TYPES indicate the number of distinct lexical formations containing the relevant TAM element (e.g. different base nouns combined with the same operator), while TAM-N TOKENS represent their total number of occurrences in the corpora. [det tam n] refers to constructions in which a determiner precedes an adverbial TAM operator modifying the noun (e.g. *il quasi partito* 'the almost party', *un forse-lavoro* 'a maybe-job'). Absolute frequencies are provided to give an overview of distributional tendencies, although the present study focuses primarily on qualitative analysis. A dash indicates that the relevant construction type is not attested or not structurally applicable for that specific TAM element (e.g. purely prefixal markers in determiner-based constructions).

4 Patterns of TAM-based evaluative reference

This section groups Italian TAM-based evaluative noun phrases into five recurrent clusters – ended, ongoing, circumstantial, potential, and mixed/creative reference – and, drawing on the corpus data introduced in §3, illustrates for each cluster the main constructions and interpretive outcomes. Where relevant, we explicitly relate the distribution of TAM-oriented operators to the semantic classes introduced in Section 3, in order to observe whether certain referential domains

Table 1: Dataset: absolute frequencies, based on WikiCoNLL, Repubblica and ItWac corpora.

TAM element	TAM-N types	TAM-N tokens	Det TAM N types	Det TAM N tokens
ex	2,804	31,982	–	–
non	2,459	21,305	1,547	43,409
pre	1,802	19,962	–	–
post	1,520	17,831	–	–
neo	1,515	12,792	–	–
ancora	6	7	96	182
sempre	16	42	98	312
mai	9	20	96	266
allora	0	0	541	14,727
quasi	737	1,674	502	10,485
appena	–	–	30	60
già	–	–	232	1,232
ormai	–	–	173	560

(e.g. social roles, professions, events) show a preference for specific types of evaluative recalibration.

4.1 Ended reference

A first cluster of evaluative strategies concerns ended reference, where a referent is categorized by virtue of a property it once held but no longer does. These constructions foreground the retrospective anchoring of categorization, framing it as valid at a past point in time but no longer applicable at the moment of speech.

The most frequent strategy is prefixation with *ex-*, which yields forms such as in (2):

(2) *piccole soddisfazioni da* ***ex****-fumatore che i*
small:F.PL satisfaction:F.PL from **former**-smoker:M.SG that DEF.M.PL
mai*-fumatori neanche si sognano*
never-smoker:M.PL not.even REFL dream:3PL
'Small satisfactions for an ex-smoker that never-smokers can't even dream of.'

Here, the referent is identified as member of a category N (i.e., as *smoker*) at some prior time t_0, but this categorization is explicitly marked as no longer valid at t_1 (the moment of speech). Still, the expired category remains the most salient anchor for reference.

A second strategy is adjectival or adverbial modification, as in (3):

(3) *rompere il ghiaccio della nostra* ***un-tempo-****amicizia*
break:INF DEF.M.SG ice:M.SG of:DEF.F.SG our:F.SG **once**-friendship:F.SG
'Breaking the ice of our once-friendship.'

The expression *un-tempo-amicizia* ('once-friendship') evaluates the category as temporally bounded: the relation held in the past but is no longer instantiated in the present.

A third group involves the negative construction *non-più* 'not anymore', as in (4) and (5):

(4) *Sei mesi fa era precario, oggi* ***non-più-****studente,*
six month:M.PL ago be.PST:3SG precarious:M.SG today **no-longer**-student:M.SG
ma ricercatore universitario
but researcher:M.SG of.university:M.SG
'Six months ago he was precarious, today no-longer-student, but a university researcher.'

(5) *la SEC intende allentare i criteri di*
DEF.F.SG SEC intend:3SG loosen:INF DEF.M.PL criteria:M.PL of
mark-to-market in questi ***non-più-****mercati*
mark-to-market in this:M.PL **no-longer**-market:M.PL
'The SEC intends to loosen the mark-to-market criteria in these no-longer-markets.'

These compounds explicitly cancel the current validity of the category (*student*, *market*) while still retaining it as the most economical anchor for identification. In logical terms, the referent was an N at t_0, ¬N at t_1, but N remains salient as the reference frame.

Importantly, the nouns that lend themselves most naturally to ended-reference strategies belong predominantly to the semantic classes of social roles, professions, kinship terms, and ideological identities (cf. Section 3), i.e. categories that encode properties with inherent duration and revocability, which can be acquired at a certain point in time, maintained for a period, and eventually lost (e.g. *student, minister, husband, father, communist*). In these cases, the defining property for the category N (i.e., P_N) is understood as temporarily valid, so that it can be reassessed and explicitly marked as expired.

Across these patterns, the common evaluative dimension is the reassessment of a categorization in light of temporal discontinuity. Speakers foreground the expired property as contextually relevant, even when it no longer applies. This highlights how evaluation in the noun phrase can modulate reference by anchoring it to the past phase of category membership.

4.2 Started and ongoing reference

A second cluster of evaluative strategies concerns cases where a referent is not simply included or excluded from a category, but is positioned along a temporal trajectory of membership. Speakers may present categorization as *incipient*, as recently *consolidated*, or as persistently or iteratively *maintained*. These subtypes together illustrate that being part of category N is construed as a process rather than through a static property, and that the noun phrase is a privileged site for highlighting the fragility, consolidation, or endurance of this process.

4.2.1 Inceptive

A first subtype of started and ongoing reference involves inceptive evaluation, where a referent is presented as just entering a category. These constructions foreground the fragility and provisionality of membership, emphasizing that the categorization has only recently begun and may not yet be fully stabilized.

One frequent strategy involves prefixation with *neo-* or modification with *appena* 'just', as in (6–7):

(6) ***neo-****attore* *non* *ancora* *riconosciuto* *dal* *pubblico*
new-actor:M.SG not yet recognized:M.SG by.DEF.M.SG audience:M.SG
'A new actor not yet recognized by the audience.'

(7) *gli* ***appena-****trentenni* *si* *trasformano* *in* *trentenni*
DEF.M.PL **just**-thirty-year.old:M.PL REFL transform:3PL in thirty-year.old:M.PL
a *tutti* *gli* *effetti*
to all:M.PL DEF.M.PL effect:M.PL
'The newly-thirty-year-olds develop into full-fledged thirty-year-olds.'

In these cases, the referent X is identified as an N at time t_1, although it was not an N at t_0. What is evaluated is precisely the incipiency of membership: X has just acquired the property P_N and has thus just entered the category N, so its status is presented as fragile or transitional.

As a consequence, this inceptive evaluation often shades into approximation. For instance, in (7), *appena-trentenni* 'just-thirty-year-olds' implies that the referent has technically reached the category but still retains traces of a borderline status, not quite yet fully belonging (cf. the contrast to full-fledged thirty-year-olds). In logical terms, the categorization $X \in N$ holds at t_1, but its validity is framed as partial or only recently acquired, hence liable to be perceived as approximate.

The evaluative dimension here lies in highlighting the *newness* and *potential instability* of the categorization. Speakers do not merely assert that the referent is a

member of the category, but they draw attention to the fact that such membership has just begun, is provisional, and may still lack full legitimacy.

4.2.2 Transition

Unlike inceptive forms, which foreground the fragile entry into a category, transitional evaluations present categorization as already achieved but framed in relation to a preceding state. These constructions emphasize that the referent has crossed into the category and is consolidating its membership, often by highlighting the contrast with an earlier phase when the categorization was not valid. The evaluative focus lies not on the fragility of membership, but on the perception of movement and consolidation within the category.

One frequent strategy involves the adverb *già* 'already', as in (8):

(8) *rivolgendosi non alla platea definita e consolidata*
addressing:GER.REFL not to:DEF.F.SG audience:F.SG defined:F.SG and established:F.SG
dei ***già-clienti,*** *ma a quella tutta da costruire*
of:DEF.M.PL **already**-customer:M.PL but to that:F.SG all:F.SG to build:INF
dei ***non-ancora-clienti***
of:DEF.M.PL **not-yet**-customer:M.PL
'Addressing not the defined and established audience of already-customers, but the yet-to-be-built audience of not-yet-customers.'

Another frequent marker is *ormai* 'by now, now', which profiles the transition as completed and situates the referent in its stabilized state, as in (9):

(9) *mentre cenavo con i miei* ***ormai-amici***
while have.dinner:PST:1SG with DEF.M.PL my:M.PL **now**-friend:M.PL
'As I had dinner with my now-friends.'

In these cases, the referent was not an N at t_0 but is evaluated as N at t_1, with the focus on the accomplished shift of membership. However, the evaluative operator highlights the *processual nature* of this shift: $X \notin N$ at $t_0 \rightarrow X \in N$ at t_1, with the transition itself being made salient as a relevant property of the categorization: *già-* and *ormai-*constructions do not merely assert category membership, but present it as the result of a recent and relevant shift. This makes the passage from non-membership to membership part of the categorization, foregrounding the fact that the referent has now fully crossed the threshold into the category.

Importantly, the nouns that most naturally lend themselves to transition evaluation are those encoding social and relational categories (e.g. *clienti* 'customers', *famiglia* 'family', *amici* 'friends'). These are group-based roles that can be newly

acquired and stabilized over time, so that the very passage into the category becomes salient enough to be foregrounded by the speaker.

4.2.3 Continuity

Reference can also be evaluated based on its continuity: a referent is presented as maintaining a property without interruption from an earlier point in time up to the present. These constructions highlight *persistence*: the categorization held at t_0, still applies at t_1.

One recurrent marker is *ancora* 'still', as in (10):

(10) *procura ai suoi potenziali **ancora**-interlocutori il*
give:3SG to:DEF.M.SG his/her:M.PL potential:PL **still**-interlocutor:M.PL DEF.M.SG
labile legame
tenuous:SG link:M.SG
'[He/She] gives to their potential still-interlocutors the tenuous link.'

Here, *ancora-interlocutori* 'still-interlocutors' evaluates the interlocutors as persisting in a category that they have not yet lost, even if their position may be fragile or temporary. The emphasis is on the continuity of validity: X was N at t_0, remains N at the present time. In some cases, as in (11), marking continuity as salient implicitly projects the possibility of its interruption:

(11) *Incompresa nel suo desiderio per un*
Misunderstood:F.SG in:DEF.M.SG his/her:M.PL desire:M.PL for INDEF.M.SG
*"dopo" di **ancora**-vita*
"after" of **still**-life:F.SG
'Misunderstood in her desire for an "after" of a still-life.'

Example (12) provides an instance of *sempre* 'always/ever', where *sempre-amici* 'ever-friends' presents membership as stable and uninterrupted over time, underscoring the enduring loyalty of the group. The emphasis is not only on persistence but also on the ideological or moral value of unbroken continuity.

(12) *desidera conformarsi al decoro dei **sempre**-amici*
wish:3SG conform:INF:REFL to.the decorum:M.SG of:DEF.M.PL **ever**-friend:M.PL
del principe
of:DEF.M.SG prince:M.SG
'[He/She] wishes to conform to the decorum of the prince's ever-friends.'

Across these patterns, the evaluative force arises from the fact that continuity is made explicit, either to underline its fragility (*ancora-*), its durability (*sempre-*), or the speaker's expectation that it may eventually come to an end. This subtype therefore

differs from inceptive and transitional reference by presenting categorization not as a boundary event but as an unbroken line of persistence, whose very stability becomes an object of evaluation.

4.2.4 Iterative and renewal

Categorization is not simply initiated or continued, but can also be *resumed or reconfigured* after a break, through strategies that foreground the temporality of categorization as discontinuous or cyclic, presenting membership as something that can return or be renewed.

One pattern involves the marker *di nuovo* 'again', which encodes discontinuous iteration, as in (13).

(13) *sfiducia dei suoi **di-nuovo**-alleati della Lega*
distrust:F.SG of:DEF.M.PL his/her:M.PL **again**-ally:M.PL of:DEF.F.SG League
'Distrust of his allies-again from the League (Italian party).'

Here, the referent is construed as belonging to the category *alleato* 'ally' both at a past stage and at the present, but not continuously: the alliance was interrupted in between. Formally, $X \in N$ at t_0, $X \notin N$ for $0 < t < 1$, and $X \in N$ again at t_1. What is made salient for reference evaluation, in this case, is precisely *discontinuity*: the return to membership is not neutral, but marked as noteworthy or problematic.

A related but distinct process is captured by the prefix *neo-*, which encodes *renewal* rather than repetition, as in (14) and (15):

(14) *Con il **neo**-capitalismo è ritornato in vita, in*
with DEF.M.SG **neo**-capitalism:M.SG AUX.3SG return:PST.PRT:M.SG in life:F.SG in
forma sottile, il sistema coloniale (il neo-colonialismo).
form:F.SG subtle:SG DEF.M.SG system:F.SG colonial:SG DEF.M.SG neo-colonialism:M.SG
'With neo-capitalism, the colonial system (neo-colonialism) came back to life in a subtle form.'

(15) *Il video arriva nelle mani dei **neo**-marxisti*
DEF.M.SG video:M arrive:3SG in:DEF.F.PL hand:F.PL of:DEF.M.PL **neo**-marxist:M.PL
che, montandolo adeguatamente, lo mandano in TV.
who editing:it.OBJ properly it.OBJ send:3PL to TV:F
'The video gets into the hands of neo-Marxists who, properly editing the video, send it to TV.'

In these cases, the category (capitalism, Marxists) is not simply repeated but reinterpreted under new conditions. The property P_N is revisited and renewed as P'_N, reflecting a shift in its historical or ideological anchoring.

4.3 *Circum* reference (before/after)

A further set of evaluative strategies involves what we call *circum reference*, whereby categorization is framed not as fully instantiated in the present, but as located at its temporal margins. The most productive device in this domain is the prefix *pre-*, which displays a range of values depending on the type of noun it modifies. In its phasal uses, *pre-* encodes incipient categorization, situating the referent in an early stage of the category:

(16) *dichiarato lo stato di **pre**-allarme e grave*
declare:PST.PRT:M.SG DEF.M.SG state:M of **pre**-alarm:M.SG and severe:SG
pericolosità dal 14 luglio
danger:F from:DEF.M.SG 14 july
'A state of early-warning and severe danger was declared since July 14.'

(17) *come confermato dagli autori, è solo un*
as confirm:PST.PRT:M.SG from:DEF.M.PL author:M.PL be.3SG only INDEF.M.SG
***pre**-gioco, il gioco vero è l' avanzato*
pre-game:M.SG DEF.M.SG game:M.SG true:M.SG be.3SG DEF.M.SG advanced:M.SG
'As confirmed by the authors, it is only a pre-game, the real game is the advanced one.'

In example (16) and (17), the category is presented as not-yet fully realized: the referent can be partially identified as an N, but lacks the defining features of the full category. In logical terms, X ≈ N but not fully N, hence evaluatively construed as "almost N".

A second set of uses shows a more explicitly modal value of *pre-*, encoding temporariness and provisionality, as in (18):

(18) *UCapital24 ha presentato oggi domanda di*
UCapital24 AUX.3SG present:PST.PRT:M.SG today application:F.SG of
***pre**-ammissione a Borsa Italiana per la*
pre-admission:F.SG to Stock Exchange:F.SG Italian:F.SG for DEF.F.SG
quotazione delle proprie azioni ordinarie
listing:F.SG of:DEF.F.PL own:F.PL action:F.PL ordinary:F.PL
'UCapital24 today submitted a pre-admission application to the Italian Stock Exchange for the listing of its ordinary shares.'

In this case, the referent is categorized as an N, but only tentatively and with the expectation of later confirmation. The property P_N is valid in principle, but its legitimacy is not yet secured: X is N tentatively at t_1, with the possibility of full confirmation at t_2.

Finally, *pre-* also encodes necessity and condition, particularly with nouns such as *condizione* 'condition' or *requisito* 'requirement', as exemplified in (19): the referent is construed as indispensable for the realization of subsequent categories. Evaluation here foregrounds not temporal phasing but deontic force: X must hold as a necessary condition for N to emerge.

(19) *Un* ***pre****-requisito* *indiscutibile* *per* *una* *società*
INDEF.M.SG **pre**-requisite:M.SG indisputable:SG for INDEF:F.SG society:F.SG
inclusiva *è* *il* *principio* *della* *solidarietà*
inclusive:F.SG be.3SG DEF.M.SG principle:M.SG of:DEF.F.SG solidarity:F
'An indisputable pre-requisite for an inclusive society is the principle of solidarity.'

Complementary to *pre-N* is *post-N*, which evaluates categorization as renewed after a historical anchor point:

(20) *Con* *i* *Depeche Mode* *in* *Germania* *Est,* *alla* *ricerca*
with DEF.M.PL Depeche Mode in Germany:F east to.DEF.F.SG search:F.SG
della *scena* ***Post****-Punk* *e* *New Wave*
of:DEF:F.SG scene:F.SG **Post-**punk:M and new wave
'With Depeche Mode in East Germany, in search of the Post-Punk and New Wave scene.'

In (20), the category *Punk* is reframed as *Post-Punk*: not simply expired, but reinterpreted as a renewed version (P'_N) anchored to its previous instantiation. In logical terms, P_N is reapplied in a modified way, giving rise to a new but related categorization.

Taken together, *pre-* and *post-* strategies highlight the circumstantial positioning of reference. Rather than locating membership in the core of the category, they foreground its margins: incipient, provisional, or necessary conditions (*pre-*), or renewed and historically reframed memberships (*post-*).

4.4 Potential reference

This cluster gathers evaluations that suspend full membership, presenting the referent as possible, approximate, or explicitly non-prototypical. TAM-oriented operations (aspectual proximity, epistemic possibility, and modal exclusion) recalibrate the validity of P_N and, as a frequent outcome, license approximative readings (without turning approximation into a value of TAM). From the perspective outlined in Section 2, these cases instantiate quantitative evaluation when proximity to membership is profiled (*quasi-*), and qualitative evaluation when epistemic or prototypical recalibration is foregrounded (*forse-*, *non-*).

4.4.1 Proximity

A first subtype of potential reference involves an evaluation of proximity to category membership, where the referent is presented as close to, but not fully within, the category. The construction with *quasi*-N encodes this evaluation by situating the referent at the threshold of N, highlighting its borderline or incipient status. In terms of TAM-based evaluation, P_N is represented as incipiently valid at t_1: it is about to be instantiated or partially instantiated, but not yet stabilized as full membership.

In example (21), *quasi-monopolio* conveys that the *South* held an overwhelmingly dominant position in olive oil production, but without reaching the categorical extreme of 'true monopoly'. The categorization [X = *monopoly*] is thus evaluated as threshold-valid: the property $P_{monopoly}$ is almost satisfied but not fully instantiated.

(21) *In realtà il Sud italiano, parecchio più che la*
in reality:F.SG DEF.M.SG South Italian:M.SG much more than DEF.F.SG
Spagna, ebbe per l' intero secolo XIX un
Spain:F have.PST:3SG for DEF.M.SG whole:M.SG century:M.SG XIX INDEF.M.SG
quasi-monopolio per la produzione di olio
near-monopoly:M.SG for DEF.F.SG production:F.SG of oil:M.SG
'In fact, southern Italy, much more than Spain, had for the entire 19th century a near-monopoly for olive oil production.'

A similar interpretation holds for *quasi-marito* 'near-husband' in (22), where a man is presented as a partner who resembles a husband in social or relational terms but does not fully instantiate the institutional category: $P_{husband}$ is partially met (emotional or social closeness) but not fully sanctioned.

(22) *alle elementari che frequenta il figlio del*
at.DEF.F.PL primary.school:F.PL that attend:3SG DEF.M.SG son:M.SG of:DEF.M.SG
quasi-marito
almost-husband:M.SG
'at the primary school that the son of the almost-husband attends'

In both cases, TAM evaluation can yield approximative readings (see Amiot and Stosic 2022; Masini and Micheli 2020 for a detailed discussion on approximation). The incipiency of the acquisition of P_N produces a representation of membership as *borderline*, not quite yet or close but not complete (cf. *disproximation* in Cappelle et al. 2023 terms).

4.4.2 Epistemic potentiality

Reference can be evaluated as potential through *epistemic hedging*, whereby categorization is presented as possible but uncertain. The marker *forse-* 'maybe' signals that P_N is epistemically possible, but the speaker withholds commitment to its validity, as in (23) and (24):

(23) *aspetto una risposta dal **forse**-relatore*
wait:1SG INDEF:F.SG answer:F.SG from:DEF.M.SG **maybe**-supervisor:M.SG
'I am waiting for an answer from the maybe-supervisor.'

(24) *Si è creato quel magico non-equilibrio*
REFL AUX.3SG create:PST.PRT:M.SG that.M.SG magical:M.SG non-balance:M.SG
*per cui è arrivato un **forse**-lavoro*
for which AUX.3SG arrive:PST.PRT:M.SG INDEF.M.SG **maybe**-job:M.SG
pagato poco e poco appagante ma che dovrebbe essere stabile
paid:M.SG little and little rewarding:SG but that should:3SG be:INF stable:SG
'That magical non-balance has been created where a maybe-job has come up, low-paid and unsatisfying but supposedly stable.'

In such cases, the categorization is explicitly marked as tentative: the property P_N may or may not hold for the referent at issue. The noun *relatore* 'supervisor' still provides the most relevant frame in the discourse context, but the epistemic hedge foregrounds the speaker's doubt. Similarly, *forse-lavoro* 'maybe-job' points to a professional position that the speaker hesitates to recognize as a legitimate job: the epistemic hedge evaluates the categorization as uncertain or provisional, turning the noun into a vehicle of stance-taking.

In both cases, the approximative effect stems from epistemic weakening: the categorization is neither fully denied nor affirmed, but suspended in a space of possibility.

4.4.3 Negation of prototypicality

A third subtype relies on negation, often via compounds such as *non*-N. These forms explicitly cancel the prototypical property P_N, while still invoking N as the anchor for identification in the discourse context (cf. also example (1d)): negation-based evaluative constructions have been extensively discussed for French by Dugas (2016), whose analysis of *non-* as cancelling prototypical category properties is also applicable to Italian data.

(25) ***Non**-rapporto di lavoro, ma sfruttamento legalizzato*
non-relationship:M.SG of work:M.SG but exploitation:M.SG legalized:M.SG
'Not an employment relationship, but legalized exploitation.'

In (25) the categorization [X = *employment relationship*] is cancelled, while the frame 'relationship of work' remains relevant. The effect is evaluative: the situation is measured against the prototype but dismissed as failing to meet it. Negation is combined with reduplication in (26), underlining the loss and redefinition of identity. The category '*father*' is denied in its canonical sense, but retained as a frame for reinterpreting the role (see also discussion in Section 4.5).

(26) *lui il padre-**non-più**-padre, ma padre in altro*
he DEF.M.SG father:M.SG-**no-longer**-father:M.SG but father:M.SG in other:M.SG
modo, cioè ci siamo capiti
way:M.SG that.is REFL AUX.1PL understand:PST.PRT:M.PL
'He, the father-no-longer-father, but father in a different way, that is, you know what I mean.'

Negated forms therefore foreground exclusion and contrast: categorization is presented as invalid, but the rejected category remains the reference point. The evaluative dimension lies in measuring entities through what they fail to be, emphasizing deviation from prototypicality.

4.5 Mixed and creative cases

Across clusters, the distributional tendencies observed confirm that TAM-oriented operators interact differently with distinct semantic domains (e.g. social roles, relational nouns, events, institutional categories), supporting the relevance of the semantic classification introduced in Section 3. Beyond the more regular strategies, Italian also displays a wide range of mixed and innovative constructions, where speakers combine multiple TAM-related operators or manipulate nominal structure in creative ways. These patterns are revealing because they make the evaluative dimension of categorization overt, often foregrounding its transitional, unstable, or approximative nature.

4.5.1 Chained operators

A first type involves the linear chaining of two or more evaluative markers before the noun, according to the schema [TAM_1–TAM_2–N], as in (27) and (28):

(27) ***quasi-non-più**-adolescente*
almost-not-more-teenager:SG
'almost-no-longer-teenager'

(28) ***neo-forse**-sposo*
new-maybe-groom:M.SG
'new-maybe-groom'

In (27) *quasi-* marks approximation, while *non-più-* encodes expired membership. Together, they construct a categorization in which X is framed as unstable: no longer a full adolescent, but still close enough to be referenced as such. The form in (28) combines *neo-* (incipient membership) with *forse-* (epistemic tentativeness), yielding a categorization that is both new and uncertain, highlighting fragility of status.

4.5.2 Discontinuous reduplication

We already observed the strategy involving the repetition of the noun with a TAM operator intervening, foregrounding transition or redefinition: [N_1–TAM–N_1] (cf. Masini and Di Donato 2023). We saw this strategy in (26), example (29) provides another case in point:

(29) *bambina-**non-più**-bambina*
child:F.SG-**no-longer-**child:F.SG
'girl-no-longer-girl'

The structure explicitly encodes the shift from one phase to another: X was N at t_0, is ¬N at t_1, yet is still referred to through the same category N for economy and salience.

A variation involves quasi-reduplication with *different nouns*, according to the schema [N_1–TAM–N_2]. This case is exemplified in (30), where the construction marks a re-categorization: X was N_1 (*actor*), but at t_1 is N_2 (*director*), with *ormai* anchoring the transition.

(30) *attore-**ormai**-regista*
actor:M.SG-**now-**director:SG
'actor-now-director'

4.5.3 Temporary role assignment

A further group relies on explicit temporal delimiters, as in [N–*PER-UN*-TIME_UNIT]. This schema highlights ephemeral membership: X counts as N, but only for a bounded interval Δt. The evaluation lies in making temporariness the defining feature of categorization, as in (31):

(31) *presidente-**per-una-notte***
president:SG-**for-one-night**:F.SG
'president-for-one-night'

4.5.4 Projected membership

Prospective reference is realized through the compounding with the adjective *futuro-* 'future-' as in (32). The adjective is mainly used in its canonical modifying function, though. Here, categorization is projected: X is not yet N at t_1, but is expected to be N at t_2:

(32) ***futuro**-papà*
future-dad:M.SG
'dad-to-be'

4.5.5 Provisional categorization

Finally, the construction [N-di-massima], exemplified in (33), encodes tentative or partial validity. This construction qualifies reference as valid only in general or preliminary terms, foregrounding the incompleteness of membership (cf. *pre-* values discussed in 4.3).

(33) *accordo* ***di massima***
agreement:M.SG **of maximum**
'agreement in principle'

What unites the constructions is that they make categorization itself visible as a process, rather than a simple yes/no assignment. By chaining markers, repeating nouns, delimiting reference temporally, projecting it into the future, or hedging it provisionally, speakers foreground the instability of category membership. At the same time, these formations illustrate the high degree of creativity available in the noun phrase, where TAM-related evaluation can be combined in complex designs to negotiate identity, stance, and reference in discourse.

5 Evaluative TAM: dimensions, functions, and implications

The results presented in Section 4 allow us to move from descriptive patterns to broader interpretive issues. In this section, we discuss what TAM-based nominal

evaluation reveals about the nature of categorization, the role of stance, and the discursive functions of evaluative reference. We also consider the implications for typological work on nominal TAM and for theories of evaluative morphology more generally.

5.1 Phases and prototypicality in reference

One of the clearest outcomes of the analysis is that categorization in Italian is rarely construed as a strict in/out operation. Rather, the use of evaluative markers situates the referent on a scale of prototypicality, allowing speakers to represent membership as expired (*ex-ministro* 'former minister'), incipient (*neo-attore* 'new actor'), partial (*quasi-marito* 'almost-husband'), or uncertain (*forse-lavoro* 'possible job').

This graded model of categorization resonates with cognitive theories of prototypes and fuzzy boundaries (Rosch 1978; Taylor 2003). For example, *quasi-marito* 'almost husband' presents a referent who displays some, but not all, features of the prototypical husband role. Similarly, *non-più-studente* 'no-longer student' encodes the diachronic loss of prototypical features, while still treating 'student' as the most economical anchor for identification. Even temporal and aspectual operators such as *appena-* 'just' or *ancora-* 'still' contribute to this scalar model, by situating membership as fragile, emergent, or provisional rather than absolute. Importantly, these distinctions are not idiosyncratic or stylistic. They show different degrees of conventionalization, but the mechanism appears to be productive, as shown by the high frequency of types in corpora (e.g. several thousand distinct types across the most productive markers in Table 1, including *ex-, non-, pre-, post-*, and *neo-;* cf. also Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994). This suggests that speakers expect and recognize categorization as dynamically and subjectively construed in time, and that the recalibration of category validity is not peripheral but structurally available in the nominal domain.

5.2 Stance and subjectivity

Another central dimension is that evaluative reference makes the speaker's stance explicit. By employing forms such as *già-clienti* 'already customers' or *ormai-amici* 'by-now friends', the speaker foregrounds their evaluation of a transition as completed, thereby taking a stance on the legitimacy of the categorization. Conversely, *ancora-interlocutori* 'still interlocutors' highlights continuity, but also implies that this continuity could end, revealing an expectation of possible change.

Stance becomes even more prominent in potential reference. *Forse-presidente* 'maybe-president' openly encodes the speaker's epistemic hesitation, while *non-romanzo* 'non-novel' frames categorization through cancellation, implying that the prototype is unsuitable. Approximation thus emerges as a recurrent interpretive outcome of stance-sensitive recalibration: speakers present referents not as straightforward category members, but as entities whose membership is qualified, hedged, or only partially instantiated. These examples demonstrate that reference is not a neutral descriptive act, but a positioning move: speakers place themselves with respect to the categories they invoke, signaling irony, caution, commitment, or distance.

This finding aligns with the broader theory of stance-taking in interaction (Du Bois 2007; Kärkkäinen 2006), where utterances simultaneously evaluate an object, position the speaker, and align or disalign with others (cf. Levinson 2006; Deppermann and De Stefani 2023).

The pragmatic functions of evaluative reference extend beyond individual stance to broader discursive purposes. Retrospective forms such as *ex-allieva* 'former student' or *l'allora presidente* 'the then president' are indeed crucial in structuring narratives, since they situate events historically, providing listeners with temporal coordinates and legitimizing the use of a category that is no longer valid at present. Moreover, mixed forms such as *custodi-forse-parenti* 'caretakers-maybe-relatives' or *presidente-per-una-notte* 'president-for-one-night' show that the noun phrase can become a site of metapragmatic play and intentional extravagance (cf. Eitelmann et al. 2020; Frankowsky 2022; Van Goethem and Norde 2020), foregrounding the negotiability of categories and exploiting evaluation for humorous or ironic purposes.

5.3 Dimensions of TAM-based nominal evaluation: implications for evaluative morphology

Even without grammatical nominal TAM, Italian shows that TAM-oriented evaluation in the noun phrase forms a coherent subsystem of evaluative morphology, organized along temporal, aspectual, and modal dimensions that can be typologized alongside more familiar size-, intensity-, and affect-based evaluations.

A useful way of synthesizing the results is to view evaluative TAM operations in the noun phrase as structured along three intersecting dimensions (see Figure 1). Each dimension captures a different aspect of how categorization is modulated, and together they provide a typological map of the Italian strategies discussed above.

The TEMPORAL dimension answers the question WHEN DOES X BECOME N? Constructions such as *ex-allieva* 'former student', *non-più-studente* 'no-longer student', or *futuro-marito* 'future husband' anchor categorization to a specific temporal

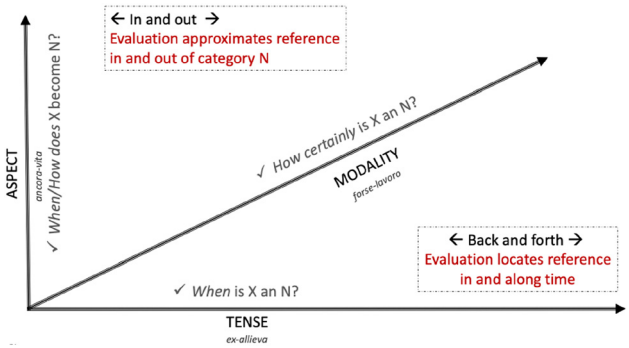


Figure 1: The TAM dimensions of nominal evaluation.

phase – past, present, or future. Evaluation here consists in locating reference within or across phases, marking categorization as expired, incipient, or prospective.

The ASPECTUAL dimension highlights HOW DOES X BECOME N? Prefixes and modifiers like *neo-* 'new', *appena-* 'just', *già* 'already', *ormai* 'by now', *ancora* 'still', or *di nuovo* 'again' frame categorization as inceptive, consolidated, continuous, or renewed. The focus is on the internal profiling of membership: whether it begins, persists, or re-emerges. Crucially, aspectual evaluation often foregrounds fragility or instability, making it a fertile ground for approximative interpretations.

Finally, the MODAL dimension targets HOW CERTAIN IS IT THAT X IS N? Constructions with *quasi-* 'almost', *forse-* 'maybe', *non-* 'non-, not', or *pre-* (in its tentative/conditional readings, alongside its phasal uses discussed above) explicitly encode the speaker's stance toward categorization. They do not simply locate reference, but qualify its legitimacy, epistemic status, or conditionality. Approximation emerges here as a recurrent outcome: referents are presented as borderline, tentative, or deviating from a prototypical instantiation.

Taken together, these three dimensions show that evaluation in the NP operates at the intersection of time, aspect, and modality, systematically turning reference into a site of negotiation (as argued by Calaresu 2022). The Italian data thus provide evidence that TAM-oriented evaluation constitutes a coherent subsystem of evaluative morphology, with approximation as one – but not the only – possible interpretive result.

6 Conclusive remarks

This paper has examined how Italian speakers evaluate nominal reference through a wide range of strategies that qualify when, how, and to what extent a referent counts

as a member of a given category. By analyzing data from large corpora, we have shown that Italian exhibits a systematic repertoire of constructions that encode ended, ongoing, circumstantial, potential, and mixed evaluations of reference.

Rather than treating these forms as marginal lexical curiosities, we have argued that they constitute a systematic and non-marginal part of evaluative semantics, alongside more familiar dimensions such as size, intensity, or affect. Prefixes like *ex-* and *neo-*, compounds with *quasi-* or *non-*, and adverbial modifiers such as *già, ormai*, or *ancora* all serve to modulate categorization in scalar, temporal, and modal terms. In doing so, they make categorization explicitly negotiable, turning the noun phrase into a site where speakers embed their stance, highlight prototypicality or its absence, and situate identities within broader discursive processes.

A crucial insight of this study is that approximation frequently emerges as one of the outcomes of these evaluative strategies. This is evident not only in potential forms such as *quasi-* or *forse-*, but also in temporal and aspectual operators like *appena-* or *ancora-*, which represent membership as fragile, emergent, or temporary. Yet approximation is not the only result: more broadly, our data show that temporality, aspectuality, and modality themselves must be recognized as core evaluative dimensions, systematically encoded in the noun phrase.

Future research could explore two avenues: a cross-linguistic perspective, to test whether similar evaluative repertoires emerge in unrelated languages, and a closer look at Italian interactional data, to examine how evaluative categorizations are constructed and negotiated in discourse.

By foregrounding its evaluative dimension, this study complements typological work on nominal TAM. It suggests that, independently of whether TAM is grammaticalized on nouns, speakers in different languages mobilize their lexical and morphosyntactic resources to evaluate reference against time and stance. In this sense, TAM-oriented evaluation should be viewed not as an accidental overlap between temporality and evaluation, but as a structurally coherent dimension of nominal meaning.

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Abbreviations

1, 2, 3	person
AUX	auxiliary
COND	conditional
DEF	definite
F	feminine
GER	gerund
INDEF	indefinite
INF	infinitive
M	masculine
OBJ	object
PL	plural
PRS	present
PRT	participle
PST	past
REFL	reflexive
SG:	singular

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