

Sticky pronouns and the so-called pronominal verbs

1. Introduction
2. Mechanics of the clitic pronouns
3. Dynamic possession and clitic pronouns
4. Reflexives and fake reflexives
5. Agreement of past participles
6. The so-called pronominal verbs

1 Introduction

One of the most interesting and distinctive features of Italian, as opposed to other Romance languages such as French, is the way in which certain pronouns—*clitic* pronouns, in linguists’ jargon—are used. I like to also call them sticky pronouns, because they are equipped with an invisible glue with which they can attach themselves to the end of certain verb forms and to each other. Their characteristic feature, however, is that—whether physically attached to the verb or not—they cannot stand alone; at the least they must be accompanied by a verb and adjacent to it. In addition to the direct/indirect object pronouns *mi/ti/gli/lo* etc. the sticky pronouns include the reflexive *si*, the partitive *ne* and the locative *ci* (where this last, one of the most overworked of many overworked words in Italian, also serves as a second person plural object pronoun). Just to make life more confusing, there is also an “impersonal” *si* distinct from the reflexive.

Reflexive verbs such as *lavarsi* form a grammatically distinct class, one characteristic being that they require *essere* as auxiliary in compound tenses. In many cases—e.g. *accorgersi*, *stancarsi*—there is nothing particularly reflexive about them; these I call “fake reflexives”. Some grammar books call *accorgersi* a “lexical” reflexive, since it has no non-reflexive counterpart, while *stancarsi* belongs to a class sometimes called the “intransitive pronominal verbs”.

Beyond the reflexive verbs there is another huge class of verbs, typical examples of which include *approffittarsene*, *prendersela*, *volercene*, that are also called “pronominal verbs”. But here the term is an illusion; all of these would better be called pronominal *idioms*. There is nothing grammatically novel about them; they are idioms pure and simple. What makes them difficult at times is the combination of idiomatic useage with the rather complicated rules governing the clitic pronouns. Another oddity is that the pronominal idioms are often presented as though there was something especially subtle and uniquely Italian about them. They do indeed have a unique and delightfully Italian flavor, partly because of the sticky pronouns and partly because Italian is delightful in general. But they are subtle only in the same way that idioms in any language are subtle; their proper use can be learned only by consulting native speakers, or through long experience. A detailed discussion of idiomatic useage will have to await a future chapter; for now I am mainly concerned with grammatical aspects of the so-called pronominal verbs, in particular their interaction with the clitic pronouns.

Other interesting aspects of the clitic pronouns include what I call (for lack of a better term) “possessive-action” use of the type *le aveva stretto la mano*, “he had shaken her hand”,

and the exasperating rules for gender/number agreement of past participles with clitics. One especially fascinating use of direct object clitics will be discussed later, in a forthcoming chapter on word order: They can act as a sort of substitute for the accusative case markers found in Latin, Hungarian and many other languages, thereby allowing a “left-marked word order” as it is called in [Maiden-Robustelli].

Note: Except where otherwise indicated, all examples below are taken from *La Bella Estate*, by Cesaro Pavese. The main characters in this novel are Ginia, Amelia, Guido, Rodrigues, and Severino.

2 Mechanics of the clitic pronouns

2.1 Cast of characters

2.1.1 Object and reflexive pronouns

In the first and second persons, the clitic object pronouns are the same in the indirect object, direct object, and reflexive cases: *mi, ti, ci, vi*. In the third person things get more complicated: the direct object pronouns are *lo/la/li/le* (in the order masculine/femine singular, masculine/femine plural), the indirect object pronouns are *gli/le/gli/gli*, and the reflexive is always *si*.

Two bizarre and confusing facts to watch out for: (1) *le* is both the indirect feminine third person singular clitic, and the direct feminine third person plural clitic; and (2) four of the third person clitics—*lo/la/gli/le*—are also definite articles.

2.1.2 *ne*

The clitic *ne* is usually associated with the preposition *di*, which in turn often (but just as often not) corresponds to English “of”. The basic partitive use is of this type, although English usually doesn’t repeat the “of”: *Poteva continuare a vederlo, solo se diventava la sua modella. Altrimenti, un bel giorno ne prendeva un'altra*, “She [Ginia] could continue to see him only if she became his model [i.e. modelled for him]. Otherwise, one fine day he [Guido] was going to take another [of them, i.e. another model].”

For present purposes, however, the case of interest is that of verbs that take *di*, for example, *vantarsi di* “to brag/boast about/of”: *Lo strano era che Guido se ne vantava...*, “The strange thing was that Guido bragged about it [being a farmer]...”

In certain cases *ne* can stand for the preposition *da*. For instance, there is an expression *staccare gli occhi da qualcosa*, used in: *...non si decideva a staccarne gli occhi...*, “...she couldn’t make up her mind to take her eyes off it [a painting]”. In others it’s not clear what preposition is being substituted. In my dictionary one finds only the expressions *far caso a* or *farci caso*, and yet: *...Guido e Rodrigues non ne avevano fatto caso*, “...Guido and Rodrigues had paid no attention to it [something Amelia had done]”. Interestingly, in English one can say the same thing with “of” in place of “to”: “they had taken no notice of it”. Perhaps there is a similar variant in Italian?

2.1.3 *ci*

The clitic *ci* is one of the hardest to process in the beginning, because it has so many different uses. First of all it is the first person plural direct/indirect/reflexive pronoun as already discussed. Its second basic use is as a “locative”, i.e. indicating place: *Finì che ci andarono tutte e due...*, “In the end they both went there [to the studio].”

Another very common use is in existential statements that exactly parallel the English “there is”, “there are” etc. *Ci sono anche quelli che non dicono niente*, “There are also those who don’t say anything”; *Nel cielo c’era una nuvola gialla*, “In the sky there was a yellow cloud”. In both languages the “there/ci” is redundant from a logical standpoint. For example, in Hungarian one would simply say “Are also those who don’t say anything”.

It turns out that *ci* is used in many other ways, often in situations where English would use “it”. See the section below on verbs of type *-ci, cene*, etc.

2.2 Position and attachment for a single clitic

Clitics follow and are attached to infinitives, gerunds, and past participles, for example: *Cominciava a seccarmi*, “He was beginning to annoy me”; *Sfogliandoli, rivide quelli di Amelia...*, “Leafing through them [some portraits], she saw again those of Amelia...” According to [Kinder-Savini] the use with past participles is more common in formal writing: *vistolo* “having seen it”, *arrivatoci* “having arrived there”, and so on.

Clitics precede all non-imperative personal verb forms, e.g. *Ha trovato un amante che le fa dei regali*, “She’s found a lover who gives her presents”. [Incidentally, this points out a peculiar rule in English: “her” is the indirect object, “presents” the direct. If the order is reversed the “to” has to be left in, “gives presents to her”, while in the given order it is omitted.] Another example: *Ginia aveva sempre creduto che nei caffè si andasse per far Coppietta con un uomo, e non si capacitava che Amelia ci passasse i pomeriggi da sola...* “Ginia had always believed that one went to the cafes to hook up with a man, and couldn’t comprehend that Amelia would spend the afternoons there alone.” The first *si* is an impersonal, the second is a reflexive (a fake reflexive, in the classification discussed below), and the *ci* is the locative clitic “there” referring to the cafe.

With informal imperatives, clitics are attached: *Ginia senza fermarsi le disse: —Lasciami stare*. “Without stopping Ginia said to her, “Leave me alone”. Here *mi* glues itself to the imperative *lascia*. (Also, the reflexive *si* is attached to the infinitive *fermare*, while *le* precedes the non-imperative personal form *disse*.) In formal imperatives clitics precede the verb, and in negative imperatives there appears to be a choice. Textbook examples are *ne prenda pure [Lei]*, and either *non ne prendere* or *non prenderne*.

2.3 Some pronouns are stickier than others: ordering and attachment of double clitics

When two or more clitic pronouns are associated to the same verb, they must be ordered and attached according to certain rules, and undergo a number of mutations. I’ll list the basic rules first, with examples, then discuss the complications associated with impersonal *si* and related matters.

2.3.1 Basic rules and examples

Ordering: In general the ordering gets quite complicated; see for example the the eight-column table given in [Kinder-Savini], §16.3.¹ A simplified version of the ordering runs as follows:

(indirect) < (locative *ci*) < (reflexive *si*) < (direct) < (impersonal *si*) < *ne*

The most common cases to bear in mind are (1) indirect object clitics precede the direct object clitics; and (2) *ne* comes last. The impersonal *si* will be considered separately below. (There is yet another version of *si*, the so-called *si passivante*, but its ordering and mutation rules are, I believe, identical to those of the impersonal *si*.)

Mutation. Indirect object clitics *mi/ti/ci/vi* mutate to *me/te/ce/ve* when followed by a direct object clitic or by *ne*. Strangely, the third person indirect object clitics *gli/le* both mutate to *gli*. Reflexive clitics preceding a direct object clitic undergo the same mutation in the first and second person, as they are in any case identical to the object clitics. In the third person *si* mutates to *se*.

On the other hand, there is no mutation when the *following* pronoun is reflexive. For example, in *mi si è gonfiata la caviglia* “my ankle has swelled up”, *mi* is an indirect object clitic (used in the dynamic possession mode, see below) and does not mutate to **me si*.

Finally, there is a different kind of mutation that occurs with impersonal *si*, to be discussed below.

Attachment. Following an infinitive, gerund or past participle, or informal imperative, the indirect and following direct object clitics (or *ne*) are attached, for example *melo, telo, glielo, celo, velo*, and similarly *mene* etc. Preceding a verb, they do not attach to it and do not attach to each other *except* in the case of *gli*: *me lo, me ne* and so on, but *glielo, gliene*. Hence the motto: “Some pronouns are stickier than others.”

Now let’s look at examples: 1. *Che mani freddi,—disse ancora.—Perchè non vieni a scaldartele?* “What cold hands, he said again. Why don’t you come warm them up?”

Here *scaldarsi* is a reflexive; *scaldarsi le mani* is a possessive-action use of it. Thus *ti* and *le* are attached to each other and to the infinitive, in that order since *ti* is the indirect and *le* the direct object of *scaldare*, and *ti* mutates to *te*. In this scene Rodrigues is talking to Ginia, and he has more in mind than warming up her hands.

On the other hand, indirect objects precede the reflexive *si*, with no mutation. An example from Calvino’s short story *L’avventura di un miope*:

2. *Ma non è tanto questo: è che basta che cominci a insinuartisi il dubbio che tutto ciò che ti riguarda è puramente accidentale...*

“But it’s not just that; it’s that it’s enough that the doubt begins to creep into your mind that everything about you is purely accidental...” Literally, *insinuartisi*=insinuate to you itself.

¹For mathematicians only (and just for fun): The clitics form a ranked partially ordered set with rank function $1 + 2t + 2t^2 + t^3 + t^4 + 4t^5 + t^6 + t^7$. The unique minimal and maximal elements are *mi* and *ne* respectively.

3. *Allora parlarono dei paesi di Guido e, senza esserci mai stato, Rodrigues glieli descrisse per burla come fatti di porcili e pollai...* “Then they talked about the villages Guido came from, and, despite never having been there, as a joke Rodrigues described them to her as made up of pigsties and chicken coops...”

Since *descrisse* is a personal non-imperative, the clitics *gli* and *li* precede the verb (in that order since they are respectively the indirect and direct objects of *descrisse*) and are not attached to it. On the other hand, the extra-sticky *gli* mutates to *glie* and attaches to *li*.

4. *...se lo immaginava come un coscritto...*, “...she pictured him as a conscript...”

Here the basic verb is the fake reflexive *immaginarsi*. The direct object *lo* (namely Guido) therefore comes after *si*, which mutates to *se*. These come before the non-imperative personal *immaginava* and are not attached to it, nor is *se* sticky enough to attach itself to *lo*.

2.3.2 Impersonal *si*

Several complications arise in connection with the impersonal *si*. First of all direct objects now come before *si*, and do not mutate. An example from *L'avventura di un miope*:

Aveva un cappotto rosso, perciò la si poteva avvistare da distante.

“She had a red coat, so one could spot her from a distance.” Note the *la si* instead of *se la*.

When a reflexive verb is used impersonally, the unsightly *si si* that would result is replaced by the better sounding but more confusing *ci si*. The confusion stems from the fact that the *ci* could also be a locative *ci*, and both constructions are common. The next example, from *L'avventura di un miope*, has two instances of the mutated *si si*:

Si sa com'è quando ci si stacca da un ambiente in cui s'è vissuto a lungo: a tornarci a lunghi intervalli ci si ritrova spaesati...

“One knows how it is when one moves away from an environment in which one has lived for a long time: returning after a long absence one feels disoriented...”

Here the reflexive verbs *staccarsi* and *ritrovarsi* are used impersonally, hence the *ci si*.

An example with locative *ci* and several other interesting features, again from *Miope*:

Ai suoi tempi, la sera, là ci si arrivava con la ragazza a braccetto, chi aveva una ragazza, oppure se si era soli ci si andava per stare più soli, a sedersi su una panca e a sentir cantare i grilli.

“In his day, in the evening, one would arrive there arm in arm with a girlfriend, those who had a girlfriend, or if one was alone one would go there to be even more lonely, to sit on a bench and listen to the crickets chirping.”

In the case of *ci si andava*, “one would go there”, it seems clear that the *ci* is locative. I would have thought the same for *ci si arriva*, except that then *là* seems redundant. This kind of redundancy is common in Italian, but seems out of place here. The other possibility (which seems less likely) is that *arrivarsi* exists as an intensifier reflexive, in which case the *ci* is reflexive; hence the need for *là*.² One more point to note is the plural *soli*. This

²As usual, if anyone out there knows the answer, I'd be delighted to hear from you.

reflects a general, very peculiar rule: adjectives used with impersonal verbs get pluralized. The present example certainly demonstrates the peculiarity; *si era soli*, “one was (plurally!) alone”. This aspect of impersonal *si* will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

Finally, here’s an interesting example from *La luna e i falò*, involving both types of *ci si* but with the locative *ci* used figuratively. It seems hard to translate and I don’t like what I came up with here.

Lui purtroppo aveva un morto recente al cimitero del paese...Non un morto com’è umano averne, un morto che ci si rassegna, che ci si pensa con fiducia.

“He, unfortunately, had a [recently passed away loved one; how else to translate this?] in the town cemetery...Not a death of the ordinary kind, a death to which one resigns oneself, that one deals with through faith.”

Here *ci si rassegna* is the reflexive *rassegnarsi* used in impersonal form “one resigns oneself”, hence *ci si*. On the other hand *ci si pensa* does not involve a reflexive; it is the idiomatic *pensarci* “to deal with/handle/take care of” used in impersonal form, so again *ci si*.

2.3.3 Triple clitic pronouns

Opportunities abound for three clitic pronouns in a row: For example, one could take any fake reflexive that takes the preposition *di* and hence the clitic *ne*—e.g. *accorgersene*, *pentirsene*—and then use it impersonally, thereby producing *si + si + ne*, combined with suitable mutation. But in practice this seems to occur very rarely. In fact, up to now I’ve only come across three examples in my novel-reading (well, in the early days I may have just passed over an example or two). The first example is from Cassola’s *La ragazza di Bube*, and is exactly of the type just described, the verb in this instance being *fidarsi*. The discussion concerns the lawyer chosen to defend Bube; “il padre” is the father of Mara, “la ragazza”.

Il padre obiettò timidamente se lo aveva scelto il Partito, ci se ne poteva fidare.

“The father objected timidly that if the Party had chosen him, one could have faith in him [their choice].” Here there is a double mutation *si + si* → *ci si* and *si + ne* → *se ne*.

The next example is from *Il Quartiere* by Pratolini.

...sentivo scorrermi nella mano il millipiedi che mi ci si era allora posato.

“I felt the millipede that had just settled there running along my hand.” In this case we have a reflexive *posarsi*, a locative *ci* (“there”) and a possessive-action *mi*. In a literal word-for-word translation the phrase reads: “I felt running to me in the hand the millipede that to me there itself had then settled.”

The last example, from Pratolini’s *Le ragazze di Sanfrediano*, is a puzzle. Some context is needed to make any sense of it. Silvana is the latest girl to be ditched by the nefarious “Bob”, whose nickname comes from the American film star of the 40’s and 50’s, Robert

Taylor (who apparently was quite popular in Italy; he is mentioned also in *La ragazza di Bube*). Silvana is an expert embroiderer whose work is highly valued by her clients. The quote is one long sentence, with the pronominal punchline at the end.

La Contessina Ginori, sapendo di doverle lo splendore della sua parure di nozze, le ha inviato fino a casa la bomboniera dei confetti, e siccome Silvana, nel leggere “oggi sposi”, ha sentito la proprio piaga ancora aperta, il dono gentile è volato dalla finestra, giusto nel momento in cui passava, bello, scoperto, con la sua aureola di mosche, un camion dell'immondizia, la bomboniera vi ci s'è adagiata.

“The young countess Ginori, knowing that she owed to her the splendor of her wedding linens [? unsure of translation], sent the box of wedding sweets directly to her house, and since Silvana, upon reading “married today”, felt her own wounds reopened, the kind gift flew out the window, just in the moment when the lovely, uncovered garbage truck was passing by with its halo of flies, and the box of sweets settled itself comfortably there.”

One meaning of *adagiarsi* is “to make oneself comfortable”, and this seems to fit best with the humorous tone of the sentence. But I would have expected simply *ci s'è adagiata*, with locative *ci*. What is the role of the extra *vi*? Two native Italian consultants have suggested, independently, that *vi* is just a repetition of the locative *ci*, to add emphasis.

3 Dynamic possession and indirect object pronouns

As does French, Italian uses indirect object pronouns to indicate possession in situations where something intimately related to the possessor, most often a part of the body or an item of clothing, is being acted upon: *Ginia si ricordava di quando le aveva stretto la mano con un sorriso incoraggiante*. “Ginia remembered when he had shaken her hand with an encouraging smile.” Literally, “to her he had shaken the hand”. (It is grammatically possible to use a similar construction in English, although in a different word order and in a way no one would say it in real life: “He had shaken the hand belonging to her”.) I call this construction “dynamic possession”, since the action as well as the possession are key ingredients.

An example from *Milioni e Milioni* by Marco Malvaldi: *Piergiorgio lesse più volte la lettera, e mano a mano che la leggeva sentiva un senso di trionfo invadergli il petto...* “Piergiorgio read the letter several more times, and as he read it he felt a rising sense of triumph [literally, a sense of triumph flooding his chest]”. Thus “flooding his chest” becomes “flooding-to-him the chest” (although in Italian a gerund could not be used here; see the chapter (to appear) on uses of verbs).

A different kind of example, without a transitive verb (from *La Luna e i Falò*, by Pavese): *Sapevo ch'era vedovo, gli era morta la moglie nella cascina prima di questa...* “I knew he was a widow; his wife had died in the farmhouse before this one...” Literally: “to him had died the wife”.

Finally, here's a nice example with multiple uses of clitics, including the dynamic possession form:

Mentre aspettavano il tram, si misero a parlare di biciclette. Ma Guido le [a Ginia] venne accanto e le disse piano:—Guai a te se cambi idea. Non ti farei più il ritratto—. Ginia gli fece un sorriso e gli tenne la mano.

“While they were waiting for the tram, they got to talking about bicycles. But Guido came up next to her and said to her softly: ‘Too bad for you if you change your mind. I wouldn’t do your portrait anymore.’ Ginia gave him a smile and held his hand.”

Here we see (1) the reflexive *si*, literally “they put themselves to talking”; (2) the indirect *le* (twice), as in “to her”; (3) *gli* “to him” used twice, once as an ordinary indirect object and once in dynamic possession; (4) *ti* used in dynamic possession form “not to you would I do anymore the portrait”. The dynamic possession uses are typical; in (4) a direct translation from English back to Italian would be **Non farei più il tuo ritratto*, but that ain’t the way they say it. Notice also the “stressed” pronoun occurring in *Guai a te*. It stands alone, exactly what a clitic pronoun can *not* do.

The possessive-action construction also works reflexively, as will be discussed shortly.

4 Reflexives and fake reflexives

What constitutes a “true” reflexive verb is just a matter of terminology. For my purposes it means one of the following two types, in which the subject is acting on itself:

1. Transitive verbs with the subject acting on itself. *vestire* → *vestirsi*: *Mi vesto* = “I dress myself” (literally) or “I get dressed”.

2. Reflexive variant of possessive-action. *lavare* → *lavarsi*: *Si lava le mani*, “To him he washes the hands” i.e. “He washes his hands”. Not to be confused with *Gli lava le mani*, which would mean “He washes his [someone else’s] hands”.

The fake reflexives (more technically known as “intransitive pronominal verbs”) are verbs which behave grammatically as reflexives, but do not involve the subject acting on itself:

3. Transitive verbs made intransitive via reflexive. *girare* → *girarsi*: *Si gira verso lui*, “She turns [herself] toward him”. Often the reflexive verb changes meaning slightly, but usually in a quite logical way. For example *gonfiare* “to inflate” [e.g. a balloon] and *gonfiarsi* “to swell up” [e.g. an injured ankle; it inflates itself].

4. Verbs which exist only in a reflexive form, for instance *accorgersi* “to notice” and *pentirsi* “to regret”.

5. Intensifiers (to borrow a term from [Kinder-Savini]) or “verbi con uso intensivo” [Jezek]. Examples from [Jezek] include *farsi una mangiata*, *leggarsi un romanzo*, *bersi una birra*. These are essentially idiomatic in that the reflexive pronoun serves to “intensify” the degree of personal involvement. I won’t attempt to make this explicit, other than to say that *mi sono bevuto una birra* on more than one occasion. A distinguishing feature of intensifier reflexives is that the reflexive pronoun can be omitted without violating any grammatical rules, and indeed the meaning remains roughly the same.

5 Agreement of past participles

Sometimes past participles agree in gender and number with the subject, sometimes with the object, sometimes with neither. And unfortunately, Italians don't always agree with each other. This can make life difficult for the learner, but let's proceed boldly ahead anyway. For present purposes we are considering agreement mainly as it relates to clitic pronouns.

1. *Direct object clitics, 3rd person case.* In compound tenses the clitics precede the auxiliary, which in the direct-object case would usually be *avere*. *Se avessi fatto come Amelia, li avrei stupiti tutti.* “If I had acted like Amelia, I would have amazed them all.” Here the verb *stupire* has past participle *stupito*, but it has to agree with the masculine plural *li*. Or in *Vi ha portate in collina?*, the *vi* refers to Ginia and Amelia, hence the feminine plural in *portate*.

2. *Direct object clitics, 1st and 2nd person cases.* According to the grammar books, agreement is either “optional” ([Graziani], [Maiden-Robustelli] or more precisely, dependent on register [Kinder-Savini]. For example, Graziani gives *Maria, non ti ho visto* and *Maria, non ti ho vista* as equally viable options.

3. *Reflexives.* Here agreement is with the subject: *Luciano si è alzato; Mirella si èalzata.* This is true also with dynamic possession use of a second pronoun, e.g. *Gli si è gonfiata la caviglia*, “His ankle swelled up”; the agreement is with the subject *caviglia*.

4. *Direct object clitics trump reflexives.* One can have a reflexive verb that simultaneously takes a direct object. When the direct object occurs as a clitic pronoun, rules 1 and 3 conflict head-on. The convention is that rule 1 wins. One common and initially confusing way in which the situation arises is with pronominal idioms of type *-sela* (see below), for example *cavarsela* “to manage [it] or get by”. Despite being male, I have to say *Me la sono cavata* as *cavata* has to agree with the arbitrarily feminine “it”=*la*. But the rule applies in general. Taking a variant on a grammar book example: *Volevo la torta, ma i ragazzi se la sono presa.* “I wanted the cake, but the boys took it for themselves”. Here *la* stands for the cake, and as the direct object it trumps the masculine plural subject; i.e. we don't have **...i ragazzi se la sono presi*.

But apparently the rule is reversed when the direct object occurs as a noun following the verb. Or is it? In [Jafrancesco] we find *[Paolo] si è misurato la temperatura*, “Paolo took his temperature”; the subject is masculine, the object is feminine, and the subject wins. But in *La Bella Estate, Ginia s'era già tolto il cappello...*, “Ginia had already taken off her hat”. The subject is feminine, the object is masculine, and the object wins (although sexism does exist in Italian grammar, that is not the explanation here). In both examples the reflexive is of the possessive-action type, yet the concordance of participles is different. Why?

5. *Agreement involving ne.* For present purposes I'm mainly interested in *ne* as it is used with verbs taking *di/da*. In that case agreement is not required; indeed it is not allowed and often wouldn't even make sense without arbitrarily assigning a gender/number to the phrase being substituted by *ne*.

On the other hand, when *ne* is used in its partitive function “some of”, “three of” and so on, it is required to agree in number and gender with noun it replaces (example from [Jafrancesco]): *Quanti errori hai fatto? Ne ho fatti molti.* Simple enough, except that this rule can conflict with other rules, with confusing results. For example (from [Kinder-Savini]) suppose the question is *Hai comprato delle pesche?* and you wish to answer “Yes, I bought two kilos [of them]”. Since *pesca* is feminine and *chilo* is masculine, there are two options: *Sì, ne ho comprate/comprati due chili.* According to [Kinder-Savini], agreement with the following noun *chili* is more common, but agreement with *ne*, i.e. with *pesche* is also possibile. It gets worse when reflexives are involved, since these require agreement with the subject: *Elena ha comprato delle pere? Sì, se ne è X due chili,* “She bought herself two kilos”, where in order of empirical frequency we can have $X=comprati$ (agreement with the following noun), $X=comprate$ (agreement with *ne*, since *pere* is feminine plural), or $X=comprata$ (agreement with the subject, Elena). Ah, how much simpler life would be if all past participle agreement laws were repealed. But it is too late for that.

6 The so-called pronominal verbs

There really is no such thing as a pronominal verb. There are only idioms that happen to use a verb and one or two clitic pronouns. The term could be justified for reflexive verbs, but why introduce a new term when a perfectly good one—“reflexive”—already exists? A better term for *piantarla, cavarsela, ripeterselo, accorgersene* and their many cousins would be *pronominal idiom*. Even the modifier “pronominal” could be questioned—they are just idioms, after all—but if they have one distinctive feature among idioms in general, it is the clitic pronoun use, not the verb. As a way of cataloging the idioms, the (infinitive + pronouns) format is extremely useful (any guide to Italian idioms that doesn’t do this, such as Barron’s, is useless). But regarding any of the non-reflexive clitics *la/lo/ne/ci* as part of the verb itself is a mistake.

The distinction is not only of abstract grammatical interest; it is of practical importance for Italian learners too. In what follows I’ll explain in more detail, type by type, how I view the pronominal idioms from a grammatical standpoint, and in comparison with English. Discussion of the actual useage of these colorful, fun, delightfully Italian idioms will have to await another chapter—a chapter that could take a lifetime.

6.1 Verbs of type -la

In English there are dozens of idiomatic expressions with “it”: to take it out on someone, to cut it out or knock it off, to not get it (i.e. not understand), to ask for it, etc. Usually the pronoun “it” refers to something definite and understood: “Why are you taking it [your frustration over losing your job] out on me? Cut it [your annoying banging on the back of my chair] out! I don’t get it [why so-and-so left his wife, how step 3 of the proof works], and so on. Or it can have no literal significance, as in “That’s it! I’ve had it with you!”

Italian too has many expressions of this kind, but there’s one little problem: the lack of a neutral third person direct object pronoun “it”. Instead one must choose between feminine *la* and masculine *lo*, and although *la* for some reason is by far the more popular,

the choice appears to be arbitrary. Moreover, the choice has secondary consequences since past participles must agree in gender with the “la” or the “lo” as the case may be.

The simplest case consists of the verbs of type *-la*, for example *piantarla*, *prenderla*, *capirla*. The first is roughly the same as “cut it out!”, “stop it!”: *Piantala!* The second is apparently used exactly as in English, according to Centro Studi Italiano: *Quella persona ha perso il posto di lavoro? E come l’ha presa?* “That person lost his job? How did he take it?” And the third³: *Ah, proprio questa non la capisco!*, which I would translate as “Oh, this I really don’t get!” Frequently the verb in question fits into a set phrase: *saperla lunga*, *dirla lunga*, *metterla giù*, etc.

The important thing to realize is that these are simply idioms, nothing more and nothing less. *Piantare* normally means “to plant”, in which case *Piantala!* is literally *Plant it!*—a nice analogue of “Cut it out!”. *Piantare*, *prendere*, and *capire* are transitive verbs and as such can take *la* as their direct object. Calling these pronominal verbs is like taking the English expressions “to take it” or “to get it” and classifying *them* as pronominal verbs. The only difference is that Italian has to assign a gender to “it”—thereby forcing a corresponding concordance for past participles, as in *presa* above—and that the sticky *la* can be attached to the end of infinitives, gerunds and so on.

While I’m on the subject of *piantarla*, I must take issue with the claim in [Jezek]:

...per es., mentre piantare è un verbo transitivo, piantarla è un intransitivo con un argomento oltre al soggetto. Il clitico non ha valore argomentale: (8) *piantala di lamentarti*, (9) *adesso piantala con questa storia*”.

What could be clearer than that *la* is the direct object of *piantare* in this idiom? The verb is not *piantarla*, it is *piantare*. “In una situazione nota,” continues Jezek, “il secondo argomento può rimanere inespresso”, and then gives the example “Basta, piantala!”. Appunto. Quit it! Stop it! Cut it out! Enough already with the over-grammaticizing of these idioms!

6.2 Verbs of type *-sela*

On the surface, the situation is complicated further by the prevalence of reflexives. With a pronominal verb of type *-sela*, even a fake reflexive *se* forces *essere* as auxiliary in compound tenses, and in and of itself calls for agreement of the past participle with the subject. But as we’ve seen, direct objects trump reflexives in the participle-concordance game, so the past participle is feminine singular regardless of the gender/number of the subject. Thus if I want to say “I took it out on you”, then it becomes *Me la sono presa con te*. For a guy, the feminine *presa* is a bit jarring here. More jarring still is “Luciano se l’è presa con Marco”, as now even the feminine *la* has been hidden in the elision *la è* → *l’è*.

But there is no “pronominal verb” *prendersela*. There is a fake reflexive *prendersi* (not to be confused with the genuine reciprocal reflexive *prendersi*), used for instance in idioms such as *prendersi gioco di qualcuno* and as an intensifier. *Prendere* can also take a direct object in normal use, and all three ingredients can then be combined: *prendere + si + la/lo*. For example, *Volevo la torta, ma i ragazzi se la sono presa*. “I wanted the cake, but the boys

³This is example is taken from Percorso Italiano

took it for themselves.” This is an intensifier reflexive with *la* occurring as a direct object that could just as well be masculine or plural, e.g. *Volevo i biscotti, ma i ragazzi se li sono presi*. Similarly in Silone’s *Vino e pane* we find: *La libertà bisogna prendersela, ognuno la porzione che può*. “It’s necessary to take freedom for oneself, each as much as he can.”

Now compare this with nine year-old Michele’s lament in *Io non ho paura* by Ammaniti:

Era la terza volta che rompeva gli occhiali da quando era finita la scuola. E ogni volta con chi se la prendeva mamma?

“It was the third time that she [his little sister] broke her glasses since school had let out [for the summer]. And every time, who did Mom take it out on?”

To sum up: The verb is a fake reflexive *prendersi*. In this last example it happens to have a direct object *la*, the idiomatic “it”. In the previous example it has a non-idiomatic direct object *la*, the cake. Punto e basta.

6.3 Verbs of type -selo

The masculine form *lo* of “it” can be used to refer to entire clauses or phrases, the most common application being with *sapere*. To take two examples from [Maiden-Robustelli]: 1. *Oggi è festa, non lo sapevi?* “Today’s a holiday, didn’t you know [it]?” 2. *La pianura era spesso avvolta nella nebbia, ma quel giorno per fortuna non lo era*. “The plain was often shrouded in fog, but luckily that day it wasn’t [so].” In both examples *lo* isn’t translated in the English version. In example 2 *lo* corresponds to a missing “so” as in “it was not so” (conversely, the English subject “it” of example 2 is untranslated in Italian, being implicit in the verb conjugation *era*).

In verbs of type -selo, the *lo* tends to play a similar role, referring to a specific clause or phrase. The idiomatic interpretation resides mainly in the *se*, which in turn usually corresponds to a fake reflexive variant of some transitive verb. For instance, *immaginare* can be used in a perfectly normal transitive way as “to imagine” or “to suppose”. But now consider: *Severino innamorato di qualcuno non riusciva di immaginarselo...*, a non-literal translation of which might be “She could scarcely imagine Severino in love with someone...”; alternatively “she couldn’t even imagine”. The *lo* refers to the entire clause *Severino innamorato di qualcuno*. In English an analogous “it” would appear only in a reformulation such as “Severino in love with someone? She couldn’t even imagine it.” The *se* acts as an intensifier, that I’ve tried to capture with “scarcely” or “couldn’t even”.

Other idiomatic uses of *immaginarselo* also have direct parallels in English. For example, I could say “With 8 2-year-olds at the party, it was total chaos”, and you might reply “I can imagine [it]”; in Italian *Me lo immagino*. Another example: *Dovevo immaginarmelo*, “I should have known [it]”.

The following example from my Italian lessons (the translation is mine): *Me lo sono ripetuto tante volte di andare dalla zia, ma purtroppo...* “I kept telling myself to go visit my aunt, but unfortunately...” The basic verb is *ripetere*, to repeat. From this one can form a reflexive *ripetersi*, to repeat oneself (as well as a fake reflexive *ripetersi*, to recur or to happen again). Since *ripetere* is a transitive verb, it can take a direct object pronoun *lo*. So once again, *ripeterselo* is not a “pronominal verb”, it is the reflexive *ripetersi* being used idiomatically in combination with *lo*.

6.4 Verbs of type *-ne/-sene*

If a verb takes the preposition *di*, the corresponding prepositional phrase can be substituted by *ne*. If it happens to be a reflexive, then *verb + se + ne* is possible. For example, there is the fake reflexive *accorgersi*—to notice—which has no corresponding non-reflexive form. But there is no “pronominal verb” *accorgersene*, and in fact there isn’t even a pronominal idiom. There is one verb, *accorgersi*, into which *ne* can be incorporated in the standard way: *Me ne sono accorto*, which need not be in the least idiomatic. Similarly *pentirsi* is just a fake reflexive *pentirsi* of the same type; again the clitic *ne* can accompany it: *Te ne pentirai!* “You will regret it!” (In both cases the English useage happens to be transitive, although somewhat awkward intransitive reformulations are possible: “to take notice of”, “to repent of”.)

In the case of intensifier reflexives we do get a pronominal idiom, but it still makes no sense to regard the *ne* as part of the verb itself. For example, *approffittarsi (di qualcosa)* is an intensifier, meaning “to take advantage of” in a sense that may have negative connotations, as in English. Since it takes the preposition *di*, naturally *ne* gets involved as well. But the verb is *approffittarsi*, not *approffittarsene*. Similar remarks apply to intransitivized fake reflexives such as *meravigliarsi*.

One of the most commonly used pronominal idioms of all is *andarsene*, which is derived from the intensifier reflexive *andarsi*. For example (again from *La Bella Estate*): *La stanza si andava spegnendo...* In mundane terms this translates to “the room was getting dark”, but (so I am told) the use of *andarsi* renders it more poetic. Or it can be used in a more straightforward intensifier mode, e.g. *Mi vado a fare un massaggio* as opposed to the more neutral *Vado a fare un massaggio* or *Vado a farmi un massaggio*. On the other hand *andarne* is also possible, where the *ne* again arises from *di*, the latter being used in a combination such as *di qui* “from here” or *di lì* “from there”. Combining the two leads to *andarsene*, “to leave” but with more personal involvement. In many examples this intensified interpretation seems redundant. For instance [Jafrancesco] writes *Me ne sono andato presto=Sono andato via di lì presto*. In context the appropriate English translation is often simply “I left early”, where the *ne=di lì* “from there” is understood and “I left” is sufficiently “intense” in itself. But the proper interpretation of the idiom is best left for another time.

Similar examples include *partirsene* and *ritornarsene*. Another very common example is *starsene*, although in this case the *ne* is harder to interpret. Sometimes it is used almost literally (taking a dictionary example): *Stasera me ne sto a casa*, “I’m staying home tonight.” Often, however, it is used more idiomatically than *andarsene*, as in *starsene zitto*, “to keep quiet or shut up”, or *non startene lì seduto, fa’ qualcosa!*, “Don’t just sit there, do something!”.

6.5 Verbs of type *-ci/-cela/-cene/-cisi*

In many of the pronominal idioms with *ci*, the *ci* once again corresponds effectively if not literally to “it” in English. For example *ci vogliono due ore* “it takes two hours”, *non c’entra niente* “[that] has nothing to do with it”. In the second example a more literal translation would be “that does not enter into it at all”, which helps to explain the choice of the locative clitic *ci* (although no explanation is necessary since we’re talking about an *idiom*). Similarly

passarci sopra is literally “to pass over [a place]”, but the useage is roughly “to overlook it” or “to let it go”.

In idioms with *-cela* the *ce* is generally redundant from an English perspective, or at any rate the combination *-cela* is replaced with “it”. An example from *Percorso Italiano*: *Ce l’ha messa tutta e alla fine ce l’ha fatta!* “He gave it his all and in the end he did it!” In fact *mettercela tutta* could be rendered as “to put everything *into* it”, again echoing the locative *ci*, but I can’t think of an analogous interpretation of *farcela*. In some cases *-cela* has no corresponding pronoun at all in English, for instance *avercela con qualcuno*: “to be angry with someone”. There are related English idioms “to have had it with someone”, and “to have it in for someone”, although their meanings don’t appear to be the same as *avercela*.

There are also pronominal idioms with *-cisi*, such as *mettersisi*. In any event, none of these expressions deserve to be called “pronominal verbs”. They involve verbs. They involve pronouns. And clitic pronoun grammar dictates that the pronouns get attached to the infinitives: *mettercela*, *farcela*, etc. But they are simply idioms, nothing more.