Workshop FUTURE

Weak and strong epistemic meanings of the Future tense(s) in French and Italian.

Typical examples of epistemic readings of the Future tenses are:

(1)   [Doorbell rings]: *That will be the postman* (English)
(2)   *Ce sera le facteur* (French)
(3)   *Sarà il postino* (Italian)

In this talk, we claim that the Italian epistemic future (EF) differs from the French (and certainly from the English as well) EFs in that Italian EF is available to express the whole range of epistemic modalities (from mere possibility to epistemic necessity) whereas in French (and, we assume, in most languages with similar forms as English) EF allows only epistemic necessity meanings. We show a number of reflections of this difference and we conclude that the future tense in Italian, having grammaticized towards a conventional, not an implicit, way of expressing epistemic modality, may be further on the line of diachronic evolution than the French future tense, despite the typological proximity of these languages.

Basic differences between the two are the following: French EF is less frequent, however productive, than Italian EF, which is very frequent. French EF is disfavoured by some aspectual classes whereas Italian EF is not; French EF selects more often the Anterior Future, but not the Italian EF.

More interestingly, Italian allows concessive constructions in adversative structures with EF (as Catalan and Spanish) (*Sarà simpatico, ma non ha amici*), which are unavailable in French (**Il sera sympa, mais il n'a pas d'amis*). Berretta (1997) suggests that such constructions are only available with weaker modal meanings (mere possibility), not with stronger – probability / necessity – epistemic meanings. As a matter of fact, Italian EF does differ from French EF precisely in that the latter can only express hypotheses motivated by some stronger grounds allowing for probability readings:

(4)   - Où est Mario ?
        - ?? Je n'en ai aucune idée; il sera à la piscine.
(5)   - Dov'è Mario ?
        - Non ne ho idea ; sarà in piscina
(see Parisi, Antinucci & Crisari 1975 and Bertinetto 1979, Rocci 2000)

A third contrast emerges with EF in situations where necessity is pragmatically expected. Unsurprinsgly, French EF is available, as in (6), where a shop attendant anwers a customer's :

(6)   - Bonjour, je cherche des Geox.
        - Elles seront sur ce présentoir là-bas.

Strangely enough, the Italian equivalent is not possible, even though it is supposed to enter in all epistemic constructions:

(6')   - ?? Saranno sullo scaffale là in fondo.

The oddness of (6') however is purely pragmatic: the customer expect more than mere possibility, therefore a weak modal expression is lacking relevance in the context.

We link the above observations to classical views about the EF in French as involving a simulation of the deixis in a future time when the state of affairs is represented verified true (hence necessary), a component which is absent of the EF in Italian, as some adverbial restrictions show.

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