

Italian pronominal motion verbs

Abstract. In Italian, motion verbs (MVs) may combine with the reflexive clitic *si* and the clitic *ne*, yielding what I call *pronominal motion verbs* (PMVs). Since PMVs freely alternate with their non-pronominal counterparts, the semantic and syntactic contribution of these clitics remains poorly understood. I argue that *si* is a syntactic argument merged in the specifier of a high applicative head, which introduces a direct experiencer Theta-role, whereas *ne* is associated with a low applicative head with locative semantics. Building on and extending Martin & Arunachalam’s (2022) analysis of other Romance pronominal verbs, this study develops an analysis of PMVs that accounts for the Italian data. More broadly, it contributes to our understanding of many syntactic issues: the morpheme *si*, the argument structure of motion events, and the complementation patterns of semilexical verbs (MV *andare* vs. PMV *andar-se-ne* ‘go’).

Keywords: motion verbs, reflexive pronouns, applicatives, complementation, Italian.

1 Introduction

In some Romance languages such as Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Aragonese, and French, motion verbs (MVs) can be combined with reflexive clitics. I call these structures *pronominal motion verbs* (PMVs). An example from Spanish is given in (1-a). A parallel example from Italian is shown in (1-b); note that an additional clitic is present, the oblique ablative/source *ne*.¹

- | | | | | | |
|-----|----|-----------|-----------|----------------|---------|
| (1) | a. | <i>Me</i> | | <i>voy</i> | |
| | | | REFL.1 SG | go.PRS.1 SG | |
| | | | | ‘I go away’ | Spanish |
| | b. | <i>Me</i> | | <i>ne vado</i> | |
| | | | REFL.1 SG | NE go.PRS.1 SG | |
| | | | | ‘I go away’ | Italian |

Reflexivization of semantically non-reflexive verbs is a widespread and productive process in such languages, for instance with consumption verbs (e.g. Italian *ber-si un caffè* ‘drink-REFL a coffee’). The meaning and function

of the reflexive clitic with such verbs has been investigated by many previous approaches (Folli & Harley 2007; Cuervo 2014; MacDonald 2017; Martin & Arunachalam 2022; a. o.). The case of motion verbs described in (1) has received less attention, instead. There are several previous analyses of Spanish PMVs (Cuervo 2014; García Fernández 2015; Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino 2019; Pineda 2021; a. o.). To the best of my knowledge, there is no analysis of Italian PMVs except for Pineda (2021), a cross-linguistic study that touches upon Italian. The analysis in Pineda (2021) distinguishes non-pronominal motion verbs from PMVs by positing that the latter include a causative head (v_{cause}) and encode a resultant state (as in the structure in (2)), whereas the former merely denote a change-of-location process without implying any resultant state.

(2) [Voice [Appl]_{Locative/source} [v_{cause} [root [SC [PP]]]]]

Under this analysis, *si* realizes v_{cause} and signals that the subject is simultaneously the causer and holder of the new state; *ne* realizes a high applicative head (non-valency augmenting and emphasizing a directionality meaning), which requires presence of v_{cause} . Simple motion verbs do not contain v_{cause} (see also Cuervo 2014; Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino 2019).

Pineda’s (2021) analysis is based on Spanish. Nonetheless, Italian PMVs pattern slightly differently from Spanish (see section 2). Moreover, Italian MVs and PMVs do not exhibit any clear causative or resultative contrast (see again section 2). Consequently, the account proposed in Pineda (2021) appears inadequate for the Italian data. Moreover, a uniform resultative analysis for both bare and pronominal motion verbs is preferable, in line with recent studies (Folli & Harley 2020; Acedo-Matellán & Kwapiszewski 2024) that classify Italian as a verb-framed language in which the result is encoded in the verbal root.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the properties of Italian PMVs (section 2) and to propose an analysis of this phenomenon (section 3). In doing so, it addresses a gap in the literature and contributes to a deeper understanding of some key issues in morpho-syntactic theory and Romance linguistics, including the argument structure of motion verbs, the role of the morpheme *si*, and the nature of applicative heads. Crucially, the proposed

analysis also opens up discussion of a further issue in syntactic theory, namely the complementation of semi-functional verbs (section 4). In particular, it offers a promising perspective on the clausal complementation patterns of the PMV *andarsene* ‘go’.

2 Pronominal motion verbs in Italian

The use of PMVs in Italian is extremely wide-spread. A corpus search by Masini (2015: 98) shows that the reflexive clitic and *ne* can appear with virtually all motion verbs, including ‘go/come’, path verbs, manner verbs of motion, and also locative/stative verbs. This construction is characterized by optionality: PMVs freely alternate with MVs. The two verbal types also share more or less the same meaning. The focus of this section is the investigation of the semantic differences between the two versions. Previous literature has suggested that PMVs tend to highlight a resultant state characterized by either permanence in the goal location or a source-oriented interpretation (Pineda 2021: 268, 276). However, as will be shown below, this generalization does not hold for Italian: no difference emerges with respect to the resultant state (see sections 2.4, 2.5). It has also been proposed that PMVs convey an “emphatic” meaning, depicting the subject as actively involved in the motion event (Masini 2015; Pineda 2021: 273). This seems to hold for Italian (see sections 2.1–2.3). More specifically, the main distinction between MVs and PMVs lies in the interpretation of the subject, which is construed as more actively engaged in the event with PMVs than with their non-pronominal counterparts. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of Italian PMVs.

	MVs	PMVs
(a) animacy restrictions	✗	✓
(b) unergative features	✗	✓
(c) subject engagement	✗	✓
(d) telicity	✓	✓
(e) resultativity	✓	✓

Table 1: Characteristics of Italian PMVs

The properties in Table 1 will now be illustrated using the motion verb *andare*, as well as path verbs and directed manner-of-motion verbs. Importantly, the

patterns discussed below should be understood as robust tendencies rather than strict grammaticality contrasts. Counterexamples can be constructed and do occur. This variability likely reflects the free alternation between PMVs and MVs: their general interchangeability may give rise to marginal uses in contexts where only one of the two versions should be possible.

2.1 Animacy restrictions

PMVs tend to require animate subjects, as shown in (3).

- (3) a. *Il fumo va / ???se ne va nella stanza.*
the smoke goes / REFL.3SG NE goes in.the room
‘The smoke goes into the room.’
b. *L’odore esce / ???se ne esce dalla finestra.*
the smell goes.out / REFL.3SG NE goes.out from.the window
‘The smell goes out of the window.’

The animacy restriction just illustrated is a strong tendency: inanimate subjects may also be found with PMVs. Nonetheless, these inanimate subjects tend to receive an animate/personified reading. This is the case of a sentence like *i migliori anni della nostra vita se ne sono andati velocemente* ‘the best years of our lives have flown by’. The intuition of native speakers about the animacy requirement is also confirmed by corpus data. A query performed on 27/11/2025 on *itTenTen* (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/ittenten-italian-corpus>) for the pronominal version of *rotolare* ‘roll’ (a non-agentive motion verb that tends to combine with inanimate subjects) returned 7 occurrences, of which 6 with animate or personified subjects, and 1 in emphatic context. An example of personification is given in (4).

- (4) *è il mio cuore in fiamme, che se ne rotola giù da un dirupo*
is the my heart in flames that REFL.3SG NE rolls down from a cliff
‘it’s my heart on fire, rolling down a cliff’ (itTenTen)

Other cases where inanimate subjects are acceptable exhibit a nuance of mirativity, unpredictability, deviation from the natural course. Otherwise, a neutral description of a motion event becomes infelicitous when an inanimate subject is combined with a PMV, as illustrated in (3).²

Note that the reflexive clitic *si* does not generally impose an animacy requirement. For instance, in *il mare si è mangiato la spiaggia* ‘the sea ate up the beach’, the presence of the clitic is in fact obligatory (Folli & Harley 2007: 210). As observed by Martin & Arunachalam (2022: 5–6), with consumption verbs *si* tends to be required when the subject is inanimate, whereas with other verb classes the combination with *si* typically presupposes an animate subject, as in *lavar-si le scarpe* ‘wash-REFL the shoes’.

2.2 Unergative features

The subjects of PMVs exhibit properties that are unusual for unaccusative subjects and instead pattern more closely with unergative subjects. For example, unaccusative verbs allow for postnominal bare subjects: *arrivano studenti* ‘students arrive’. This construction is excluded with unergative verbs: **lavorano studenti* ‘students work’. Looking now at PMVs, they pattern with unergative verbs in not allowing bare postverbal subjects (see also Cuervo 2014; García Fernández 2015). This is shown in (5).

- (5) a. *All’università vanno* / **se ne vanno*
 at.the university go.PRS.3PL REFL.3PL NE go.PRS.3PL
studenti.
 students
 ‘Students go to the university.’
- b. *Dalla scuola escono* / **se ne escono*
 from.the school go.out.PRS.3PL REFL.3PL NE go.out.PRS.3PL
studenti.
 students
 ‘Students come out of the school.’

Another test for unaccusative behavior consists of reduced relative clauses: *la ragazza, arrivata da poco, è Diana* ‘the girl just arrived is Diana’ vs. **la ragazza, lavorata da poco, è Diana* ‘*the girl just worked is Diana’. Reduced relatives built on PMVs are odd, as shown in example (6).

- (6) *La bambina andata* / **andata-se-ne* *a scuola da sola*
 the child go.PRTC go.PRTC-REFL.3SG-NE to school by alone
ha *gli occhi blu.*
 have.PRS.3SG the eyes blue
 ‘The girl who went to school alone has blue eyes.’

The same can be said for participial clauses (e.g., *andata/*andatasene a scuola Diana, Giovanni uscì di casa* ‘after Diana went to school, Giovanni left the house’).³

Unfortunately, other tests that are in general used as diagnostics for unaccusativity are not possible in this scenario. Auxiliary selection is not useful because the presence of reflexive clitics in Italian forces *essere* ‘be’. As for *ne*-cliticization, it is not possible to have two instances of *ne* in a clitic cluster. The formation of deverbal agent nouns is also not helpful because the same root is involved in both MVs and PMVs.

To sum up, although the tests discussed in this section are not decisive in either establishing unergative behavior or ruling out an unaccusative analysis for PMVs, it can nonetheless be observed that PMVs display some sort of unergative traits.⁴

2.3 Enriched agency

The intuition of native speakers, also mentioned by Masini (2015); Pineda (2021), is that the subject of PMVs is more involved in the action than the subject of bare motion verbs. This fact has also been noted (for Spanish) for pronominal non-motion verbs such as *lavar-si* ‘wash-REFL’: *Mario si lava la macchina* ‘Mario washes his car’ means that Mario is washing his car himself, rather than having someone else wash it for him (MacDonald 2004; Martin & Arunachalam 2022). Similarly, in PMVs the subject is directly involved in the action, rather than merely undergoing a displacement event. If we take a sentence with a PMV and add a continuation specifying that the motion event is caused by another person, with the subject undergoing displacement without being its initiator, the result is infelicitous, as shown in (7).

- (7) a. *Marco è andato / ??se ne è andato a casa. Ce l’ha portato sua madre.*
 Marco be.PRS.3SG go.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
 go.PRTC at home there 3SG.M.ACC.have.PRS.3SG bring.PRTC
 his mother
 ‘Marco went home. His mother took him there.’

- b. *Marco è uscito / ??se ne è*
 Marco be.PRS.3SG go.out.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
uscito da camera sua. L'ha
 go.out.PRTC from room his 3SG.M.ACC.have.PRS.3SG
tirato fuori sua madre per un orecchio.
 pull.PRTC out his mother by a hear
 'Marco came out of his room. His mother dragged him out by the ear.'
- c. *Marco è corso / ??se ne è*
 Marco be.PRS.3SG run.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
corso a casa in macchina. Ha guidato sua
 run.PRTC to home by car have.PRS.3SG drive.PRTC his
madre.
 mother
 'Marco rushed home by car. His mother drove.'

Similarly, the subjects in (8) are incapable of moving by their own, so the use of PMVs is ruled out.

- (8) a. *Il paziente è andato / *se ne è*
 the patient be.PRS.3SG go.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
andato in sala operatoria in barella.
 go.PRTC in room operating in stretcher
 'The patient was taken to the operating room on a stretcher.'
- b. *Il bebè è uscito / *se ne è*
 the baby be.PRS.3SG go.out.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
uscito dalla camera in braccio a sua madre.
 go.out.PRTC from.the room in arms to his mother
 'The baby was carried out of the room in his mother's arms.'

Hence, the subject of PMVs must be directly involved as initiator of the action. The reading in which the subject is an undergoer of locative displacement brought about by someone else is not compatible with PMVs (although some counterexamples might be possible, given free variation of MVs and PMVs outside this specific context).

2.4 No change in telicity

Coming now to those properties that relate to the argument structure of these predicates ((d)–(e) in Table 1), pronominalization of motion verbs does not

trigger any change in telicity. The verb *andare*, path verbs and directed manner-of-motion verbs are already telic in the bare version, and remain as such in the PMV version.

The adverbial *in x-time*, which signals the presence of an end-point of the event, can be used as a test for telicity. As shown in (9), this is fine with both variants: telicity is not affected by the presence or absence of the clitics *se-ne*.

- (9) a. *Gianni è andato / se ne è andato a casa in 5 minuti*
 Gianni be.PRS.3SG go.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
 go.PRTC at house in 5 minutes
 ‘Gianni went home in 5 minutes.’
- b. *Gianni è uscito / se ne è uscito di casa in 5 minuti*
 Gianni be.PRS.3SG go.out.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
 go.out.PRTC from house in 5 minutes
 ‘Gianni left home in 5 minutes.’

Crucially, there is no change in telicity also with those motion verbs that are not telic in their bare version. In example (10), non-directed manner-of-motion verbs are shown to be atelic in both their bare and pronominal forms.

- (10) *Gianni cammina / se ne cammina tranquillo*
 Gianni walk.PRS.3SG REFL.3SG NE walk.PRS.3SG calm
*nel parco (*in 5 minuti)*
 in.the park in 5 minutes
 ‘Gianni walks calmly in the park (*in 5 minutes).’

This confirms that PMVs are not characterized by any increase in telicity: the telic profile of the bare verb is maintained in its pronominal version.

However, there is a case in which telicity becomes necessary in the pronominal form. Specifically, if a verb does not inherently select a PathP (as is the case for certain manner verbs that can also function as directed manner-of-motion verbs), it must do so when it appears in the pronominal version. In (11), we see that verbs such as *correre* ‘run’ and *rotolare* ‘roll’ are ambiguous between a directional/accomplishment reading, and a locative/activity reading.

- (11) a. *Corro in camera.*
 run.PRS.1SG in room
 ‘I’m running into/in the room.’
 b. *La gatta rotola in camera.*
 the cat roll.PRS.3SG in room
 ‘The cat is rolling into/in the room.’

This ambiguity disappears when these verbs are combined with the reflexive clitic and *ne*. As shown in (12), only the directional/accomplishment reading is now available.

- (12) a. *Me ne corro in camera.*
 REFL.1SG NE run.PRS.1SG in room
 ‘I’m running into the room.’
 b. *La gatta se ne rotola in camera.*
 the cat REFL.3SG NE roll.PRS.3SG in room
 ‘The cat is rolling into the room.’

Thus, the pronominal version of verbs that can be telic but do not have to be so is necessarily telic. This is the only difference between MVs and PMVs in terms of telicity. It is not the case that the clitics *se-ne* always introduce telicity, as illustrated in (10). They do so only with verbs that are optionally telic, as shown in (12).

2.5 No difference in resultant state

Turning now to the resultant state, the relevant diagnostics reveal no difference between MVs and PMVs, indicating that a resultant state is present in both variants and is represented in a comparable way in the syntax. This point is especially significant in light of previous literature, which has claimed that only PMVs entail a resultant state due to v_{cause} (see section 1).

The first test concerns the adverbial *for-x-time*, which modifies the post-event state indicating the duration of the permanence in the end location identified by the verbal event. In (13), this adverbial is fine with both variants: the resultant state is also present in the bare version of motion verbs (as expected under recent theories of motion verbs, cf. Folli & Harley 2020), and the *for*-adverbial refers to the permanence in this end location.

- (13) a. *Gianni è andato / se ne è*
 Gianni be.PRS.3SG go.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
andato in camera per 15 minuti.
 go.PRTC in room for 15 minutes
 ‘Gianni went to the room (and stayed there) for 15 minutes.’
- b. *Gianni è entrato / se ne è*
 Gianni be.PRS.3SG go.in.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
entrato in camera per 15 minuti.
 go.in.PRTC in room for 15 minutes
 ‘Gianni went into the room (and stayed there) for 15 minutes.’

Another test concerns the restitutive reading with the adverbial *di nuovo* ‘again’, which diagnoses the presence of a resultant state. Consider example (14). The context here is ‘I carried Teresa into the room in my arms’. In the sentence in (14), the repetitive reading means that Teresa went already out of the room before she was brought back inside by me carrying her in my arms. The restitutive reading, instead, indicates that Teresa was already out of the room before I brought her back inside (for example, because Marco carried her out of the room in his arms, but not because she went herself out of the room). The important point is that both readings are equally available in both types of verbs, including non-pronominal motion verbs.⁵

- (14) *Dopo 5 minuti, è uscita / se ne*
 after 5 minutes be.PRS.3SG go.out.PRTC REFL.3SG NE
è uscita di nuovo dalla stanza.
 be.PRS.3SG go.out.PRTC again from.the room
 ‘After 5 minutes, she left the room again.’

A third test consists of negation of the result. As shown in (15), the attainment of the end location can be negated in both versions, and the pronominal form is not less acceptable than the bare form.⁶

- (15) a. *Gianni è andato / se ne è*
 Gianni be.PRS.3SG go.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
andato a casa, ma non è lì.
 go.PRTC to home but not be.PRS.3SG there
 ‘Gianni went home, but he’s not there.’

- b. *Gianni è corso / se ne è*
 Gianni be.PRS.3SG run.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG
corso a casa, ma non ci è ancora
 run.PRTC at home but not there be.PRS.3SG yet
arrivato.
 arrive.PRTC
 ‘Gianni ran home, but he hasn’t gotten there yet.’

As reaching the end location can be negated independently of pronominalization, remaining in the end location can also be negated in both versions. After a PMV, a continuation such as ‘but s/he didn’t remain there’ is claimed to be odd in Spanish (Pineda 2021), but it is perfectly well-formed in Italian, as (16) illustrates. The same applies to path verbs and directed manner-of-motion verbs.

- (16) *Gianni è andato / se ne è andato*
 Gianni be.PRS.3SG go.PRTC REFL.3SG NE be.PRS.3SG go.PRTC
in camera, ma non c’è rimasto.
 in room but not there be.PRS.3SG remain.PRTC
 ‘Gianni went to the room, but he didn’t remain there.’

To conclude, these tests suggest that a resultant state is present but not salient in the PMV version (contrary to Spanish judgments, where negating the result leads to lower acceptability in the pronominal form, Pineda 2021).

2.6 Against v_{cause} in PMVs

Italian PMVs do not exhibit any causative meaning that might justify the adoption of v_{cause} . Among the diagnostics used for introducing such a functional head in previous literature, we mainly find the role of the subject, which is a causer in the presence of v_{cause} , and an agent with v_{do} . Causer subjects can be inanimate and non-agentive. We have already seen in section 2.1 that inanimate subjects tend to be combined with bare MVs rather than PMVs. This goes against the idea that the subject of PMVs should be a causer. Agentivity tests also suggest the same conclusion. For instance, adverbs such as ‘deliberately, intentionally’ are fine with both versions, and especially with PMVs, given that their subject is highly engaged in the event (see section 2.3). This rules out the idea of causer subjects, which can also be non-agentive. Control into purpose clauses, which should not be possible with v_{cause} , is also fine with

both versions (e.g., *Gianni se ne è andato a casa a spengere il gas* ‘Gianni went home to turn off the gas’).

2.7 Summary

To sum up, MVs and PMVs do not differ with respect to telicity, resultativity, or causativity: the two classes pattern alike. Nor do PMVs place any special emphasis on the end location, since denying attainment of the end location or indicating a lack of permanence there does not affect their acceptability.⁷

However, when the argument structure of a verb can include an end location, as with manner verbs that allow a manner-of-motion reading such as *correre* ‘run’, this path/goal must be syntactically present with the pronominal motion verb (see (12)). Apart from this path-requirement, the main difference between MVs and PMVs lies in the more engaged interpretation of the subject in the latter. The next section proposes an analysis that captures these two properties.

3 Proposal

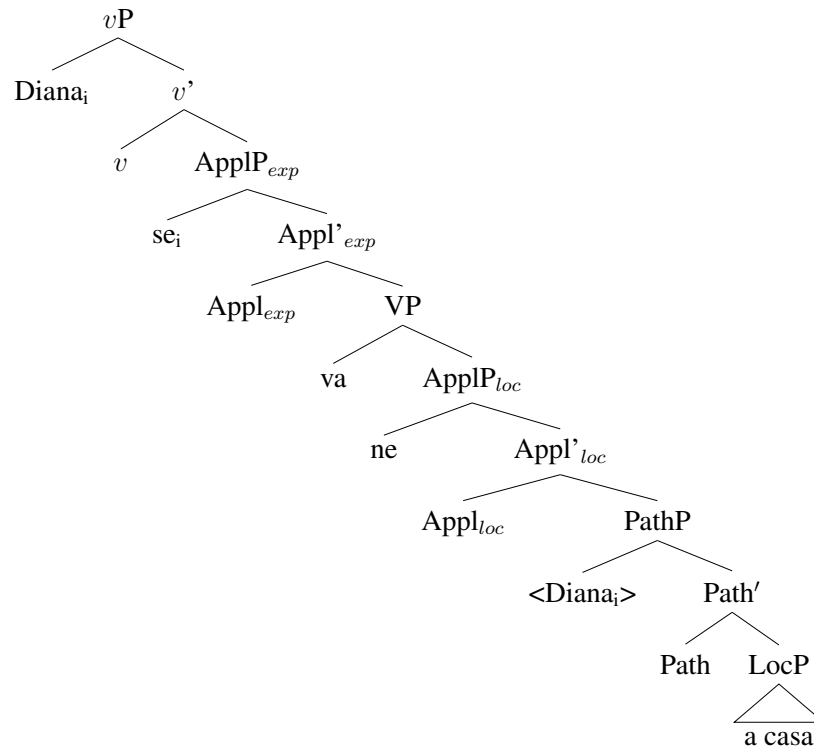
In this section, I sketch a new analysis of PMVs based on Martin & Arunachalam’s (2022) approach to pronominal verbs other than motion verbs. In a nutshell, I suggest that the two main properties just identified for PMVs, namely the path-requirement and the subject engagement, can be explained by means of two applicative heads: a low locative applicative head, requiring a PathP in its complement, and a high applicative head, enriching the subject involvement via an experiencer Theta-role. The clitic *ne* is introduced by the former, and the reflexive pronoun *si* by the latter. Since there is no causative/resultative difference between bare motion verbs and pronominal motion verbs, no Voice/*v* alternation is adopted.

Martin & Arunachalam (2022) discusses non-reflexive transitive verbs combined with reflexive clitics, such as *ber-si un caffè*, *lavar-si le scarpe* ‘drink-REFL a coffee, wash-REFL the shoes’. It is proposed that such verbs, although similar on the surface, enter different syntactic structures. Consumption verbs (e.g., *ber-si*) combine with Appl_{loc}, a low applicative head with incorporation/locative semantics. Appl_{loc} introduces the reflexive clitic, which

is co-referential with the subject. In this structure, the verbal event causes the resultant state, which is a possessive relation between the reflexive clitic and the theme DP (Campanini & Schäfer 2011). Non-consumption verbs (e.g., *lavar-si*), instead, have a different syntax and semantics. Such verbs combine with Appl_{exp}, a high applicative head, which contributes to an increased engagement of the subject in the action. Appl_{exp} introduces a ‘direct’ experiencer of the event (i.e., experiencing the verbal event first hand), which is assigned to the reflexive clitic (co-referential with the subject).

Building on Martin & Arunachalam (2022), I suggest that PMVs require both applicative heads.⁸ Positing two applicative heads aligns with the empirical observation that these structures contain two distinct morphemes (*se*, *ne*) and give rise to two salient interpretations: subject engagement and a focus on the end location (in the sense of a path requirement). The structure for *Diana se ne va a casa* ‘Diana goes home’ is given in (17).

(17)



In (17), the high applicative head Appl_{exp} introduces the direct experiencer Theta-role, which is assigned to the reflexive clitic *si*, as proposed by Martin

& Arunachalam (2022: 3) for non-consumption verbs. The reflexive clitic is bound by the subject of the motion verb when this moves to the subject position.⁹ Given that the argument coindexed with *si* is associated to the experiencer Theta-role, this argument must be animate or personified. Hence, the animacy restriction noted in section 2.1 follows.¹⁰ The enriched agency (see section 2.3) instead arises as an inference from the subject's bearing two Theta-roles.¹¹ In PMVs, the subject is base-merged as a theme (these verbs are unaccusative, i.e. they do not have an external argument). Moreover, since it is also a direct experiencer (via co-referentiality with *si*), it is directly involved in the event to a greater extent than a pure unaccusative subject that does not bear this extra Theta-role. In other words, it is interpreted “more agentively” than the subject of bare MVs (see also footnote 4).

The low applicative head Appl_{loc}, instead, establishes a resultant state of locative inclusion of the theme DP (the locatum) within the argument introduced by the applicative (the container), as proposed by Martin & Arunachalam (2022: 2) for consumption verbs. This head introduces the oblique clitic *ne*, which is a locative argument anaphoric to the end location in the complement of Appl_{loc}. The complement of Appl_{loc} is the whole PathP, which contains the theme DP (i.e., the subject) and the end location (LocP). Hence, this applicative head establishes a relation between the whole eventuality encoded by PathP and the end location itself (referred to by *ne*). Given the type of Path head, different semantic flavors arise: for instance, emphasis on the source, permanence in the location, or away-semantics (this is the case of *andarsene* ‘go away’: the andative Path is anaphorically emphasized by the clitic *ne*). The anaphoric nature of *ne* explains why PMVs require a Path when possible. In fact, the clitic *ne* combines with directed motion verbs, overtly referring to the goal location already present in the verbal root (assuming that directed motion verbs in Italian incorporate Path, see Folli & Harley 2020). With manner-of-motion verbs that can express directed motion (e.g., *correre* ‘run’, see (11)), *ne* requires that they have a PathP, selecting the achievement/directional version of the base verb (see (12)). Hence, the requirement for a directional syntactic component (a PathP) to be present in the structure follows from the anaphoric nature of *ne*.¹² Co-occurrence of the two clitics *se-ne* may also stem from this path-requirement: an end location is necessary for *ne* to appear (establishing the salience of the resultant state), and for *si* to

take the experiencer Theta-role (experiencing the salient resultant state).

Thus, the interpretation of (17) is as follows: Diana goes (as an agentive experiencer, expressed by the overt subject and *si*) to the end location (expressed by the PathP, the verbal root, and *ne* in Spec,Appl_{loc}) that “includes” her. This results in the emphasis on the verb meaning (source/permanence in the location/away-semantics), the inference of enriched agency, and the animacy restriction.

4 Further evidence: complementation

The suggested analysis has an interesting implication for the complementation of semi-functional verbs. In Standard Italian, some motion verbs (*andare, venire, tornare, ritornare, passare* ‘go, come, come back, come back, pass by’) allow for non-finite complementation with the linker *a* (e.g., *Tommaso va a prendere il pane* ‘Tommaso goes to fetch the bread’). This is considered a case of restructuring, as indicated by the possibility of clitic climbing (Cinque 2006: 36). Similarly, PMVs can select a non-finite clause introduced by *a*. This is possible mainly for *andare, venire, tornare* ‘go, come, come back’ (see the following example from itTenTen, query on 03/03/2026).

- (18) a. *La loro sorella Anna se ne venne a stare*
the their sister Anna REFL.3SG NE come.PST.3SG to stay
con me.
with me
‘Their sister Anna came to stay with me.’
- b. *Quasi quasi me ne torno a lavorare.*
almost almost REFL.1SG NE go.back.PRS.1SG to work
‘I’m almost tempted to go back to work.’ (itTenTen)

Interestingly, when PMVs take a non-finite complement, clitic arguments are degraded, in contrast to MVs. This is shown in (19).

- (19) a. *??Tommaso se ne va a prender-lo.*
Tommaso REFL.3SG NE go.PRS.3SG to fetch.INF-3SG.M.ACC
- b. **Tommaso se ne lo va a prendere.*
Tommaso REFL.3SG NE 3SG.M.ACC go.PRS.3SG to fetch.INF
‘Tommaso goes to fetch it.’

The sentence is fully ungrammatical in case of clitic climbing, as (19-b) illustrates. This fact can be independently explained because the clitics *si*, *ne*, and an accusative/dative clitic cannot be combined in Italian (Cardinaletti 2008). Clitic placement on the lexical verb, as in (19-a), is also not well-formed (although not fully ungrammatical).¹³ This piece of data (gone unnoticed so far, to the best of my knowledge) is quite surprising. Under a biclausal account, which considers the PMV as a pure lexical verb, the clitic is expected to stay on the verb that selects it, i.e., the lexical V_2 . Under a restructuring account, the clitic should be fine in both positions (on either the motion V_1 or the lexical V_2). The latter scenario might be unavailable if the clitics *se-ne* signal the lexical (rather than functional) use of the verb. Nonetheless, the clitic should show up on the embedded verb, as in a normal biclausal structure.

I suggest that the complementation pattern of PMVs is explained by the association of two Theta-roles to their subject (see section 3). In particular, I propose that this configuration is an instance of clause union (CU), and not of restructuring. In CU (typical of causative and perception verbs; Renzi, Salvi, & Cardinaletti 1995; Casalicchio & Sheehan 2025), there are two events with two Theta-roles, in general associated with two distinct participants. With PMVs, the same argument bears the two Theta-roles (experiencer and undergoer), and the two events are the resultant state and the motion event. This is similar to the reflexive use of perception verbs, e.g. *mi sono sentito arrivare* ‘I heard myself arriving’. Crucially, clitic climbing is obligatory in CU. Hence, this explains the puzzling data in (19), which otherwise remains unclear under a restructuring or biclausal account. The syntactic structure of the complement, a clause union configuration, forces clitic climbing (degrading (19-b)); the climbing position, however, is unavailable, given that no other clitic can be combined with *se-ne* (ruling out (19-a)).

5 Conclusion

This paper has investigated Italian pronominal motion verbs such as *andar-se-ne* ‘go away’. These constructions have received relatively little attention, especially in Italian. While previous work has either described these forms as largely idiomatic (Masini 2015) or analyzed them in parallel with their Span-

ish counterparts (Pineda 2021), the Italian data reveal important differences that call for a distinct account. Hence, I have developed a syntactic analysis capable of capturing their properties.

It is suggested that PMVs involve two applicative heads: a low locative applicative head selecting a PathP complement, and a high applicative head introducing a direct experiencer Theta-role associated with the subject. This configuration accounts for the two main properties of PMVs: the requirement for a path projection and the subject's involvement in the event. More specifically, the path-requirement licenses the presence of *ne* (which marks the salience of the resultant state), and indirectly also the presence of *si* (encoding the subject's participation in the event that brings about that salient state). Due to the attribution of two Theta-roles to the referent of the subject, this analysis also sheds light on the complementation pattern of PMVs: when PMVs select non-finite clauses, they enter a clause union configuration. This helps explain both the semi-lexical status of these verbs and the (otherwise puzzling) behavior of clitic arguments in this construction.

PMVs present several complexities: the co-occurrence of *si* and *ne*, the interpretation of these clitics, lexical restrictions on verbal roots, the role of depictives, and apparent free variation. Although not all of these questions have been fully resolved here, the present study aims to advance our understanding of this phenomenon. More broadly, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions on alternations that appear as free variation, the syntax and semantics of reflexive clitics, the structural representation of motion verbs, and complementation patterns of semi-lexical verbs. Future research will test the proposed analysis against cross-linguistic evidence.

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Notes

¹Unless stated differently, the examples in this paper are constructed by the author, a native speaker of Standard Italian from the province of Lucca (Viareggio). The data have been verified with ten additional native speakers from the same area.

²An anonymous reviewer suggests that this restriction may concern not animacy, but rather “teleological capability” (Folli & Harley 2007, 2008). The reviewer provides examples attested on Google such as *se perdeva [...] un tubo il gas se ne usciva nel giro di due mesi* ‘if a gas pipe leaked, the gas would escape within two months’, *con l’effetto camino tutto il fumo se ne esce senza lasciare fantasmi dietro di sé* ‘with the chimney effect, all the smoke goes out without leaving any ghosts behind’. In these cases, the inanimate subjects are teleologically capable as their physical properties naturally give rise to the event denoted by the verb, despite lacking biological animacy. I do not rule out this possibility and will return to it in footnote 10. That said, even in these examples there appears to be personification or unexpectedness (e.g., gas is not normally expected to escape from a pipe; smoke is not typically associated with leaving “ghosts”), in line with the observations made in the main text. Moreover, teleological capability does not explain why inanimate (but teleologically capable) subjects tend to be disfavored in PMVs (cf. (3)).

³There might be a general problem with the string *se-ne* on past participles. If we take the same phonological string but with another function (e.g., an inherently reflexive verb with the partitive clitic *ne*), participial forms are not always well-formed. For instance, the form *vantato-se-ne* sounds ungrammatical as a reduced relative, but fine as a participial clause in (20). We leave this issue to future work.

- (20) *Vantato-se-ne* *con tutti, Marco uscì* *di casa.*
brag.PRTC-REFL.3SG-NE with everyone Marco go.out.PST.3SG of house
‘After bragging to everyone about it, Marco left the house.’

⁴It should also be noted that the unaccusative behaviour of both PMVs and MVs is independent of agentivity. Although the subjects of motion verbs are unaccusative themes in the sense that they undergo the motion event and originate in a structurally lower position than unergative subjects, they have agentive properties. For instance, the subject of *andare* passes standard agentivity diagnostics: it can combine with agent-oriented adverbs, comitatives, purpose clauses, and allows adjunct control. Motion verbs are therefore agentive (i.e., dynamic, telic, and volitional) unaccusatives (i.e., lacking an external argument). Beside agentivity, the non-prototypically unaccusative behaviour of MV subjects may be related to the fact that their base position is not the complement of the verb, but rather the specifier of PathP (see Cuervo 2014; Folli & Harley 2020). As for the subjects of PMVs, in section 3 I will argue

that their enriched agency follows from the presence of an additional Theta-role assigned to them.

⁵This test also works with *andare* ‘go’. Instead, the restitutive reading does not seem possible with the verb *correre* ‘run’. We have already seen in section 2.4 that manner-of-motion verbs behave a bit differently from path verbs and ‘go’. Perhaps this has to do with the available activity reading of such verbs. The investigation of this aspect is left to future research.

⁶The comparable example with a boundary-crossing path verb such as *uscire* ‘go out’ may be unacceptable for some speakers due to lexical knowledge. Nonetheless, if accepted, it receives the same judgment with both the bare motion verb and the pronominal version.

⁷According to previous literature (Cuervo 2014; García Fernández 2015; Jiménez-Fernández & Tubino 2019; Pineda 2021; a. o.), PMVs in other Romance languages show properties that differ from those observed in Italian in this work. Whether there is cross-linguistic variation not only in the morphology of PMVs (e.g. the presence or absence of *ne*) but also in their function remains an open question. A closer examination of the data, however, may indicate that the difference between languages such as Spanish and Italian is not substantive. For instance, Cuervo (2014: 55) discusses a restitutive reading under ‘again’ (cf. (14)), but the relevant examples do not form a minimal pair: the subjects differ (inanimate with MV, animate with PMV), and the verb *bajar* is used with different meanings (‘to drop’ with MV, ‘to get off’ with PMV). Hence, claims based on examples like these might require additional support and carefully designed diagnostics.

⁸Motion verbs are not discussed in Martin & Arunachalam (2022). The possibility of combining two applicative heads of different flavors is already envisaged by Martin & Arunachalam (2022), although they do not consider the combination of these two specific heads.

⁹This configuration is reminiscent of *lethal ambiguity*, i.e. ungrammaticality that arises from the interaction of A-movement and binding, which, for example, rules out reflexive clitics in Italian passive and unaccusative clauses (McGinnis 2004). The absence of lethal ambiguity effects in (17) may suggest that the verb patterns like an unergative verb (cf. section 2.2). Note that lethal ambiguity does not systematically arise even in configurations where it would be expected. For such cases, McGinnis (2022) proposes that reflexive clitics instantiate functional heads rather than pronouns. While this specific proposal does not cover the present case, it nonetheless indicates that alternative explanations for the lack of lethal ambiguity may be at play.

¹⁰ In footnote 2, I discussed an anonymous reviewer’s suggestion concerning teleological capability. The reviewer further proposes that, although Appl_{exp} may encode direct involvement, the agent-like interpretation of the subject originates higher in the structure, possibly through a *v_{do}* head (Folli & Harley 2007, 2008). Such an approach could explain the unergative-like behavior of PMVs while also accounting for the requirement of teleological capability. I acknowledge the plausibility of this alternative analysis, which builds on the present proposal, and I thank the reviewer for this insightful suggestion.

¹¹For a similar reasoning, see the derivation of the “obligation effect” in Italian causatives proposed in Folli & Harley (2007). Obligation is not directly encoded in the syntactic struc-

ture via a dedicated head or feature. Instead, it comes about when v_{do} heads the vP in the complement of *fare*. As v_{do} takes an intentional agent subject, the only way to cause an agent to intentionally do something is to oblige it to do so.

¹²Non-directional manner-of-motion verbs can also be pronominalized (see (10)). In this case, no PathP is present in the structure, since these verbs are always interpreted as activities with a locative PP. Interestingly, the pronominal version of such verbs tend to require a depictive phrase (e.g., *tranquillo* ‘calm’ in example (10)). This intuition from native speakers finds confirmation in corpus data. A query on itTenTen performed on 26/02/2026 for the verb *camminare* ‘walk’ returned 17 occurrences, all of which with depictives.

I suggest to interpret these data as evidence that PMVs require a state. With path verbs or directional manner-of-motion verbs, this requirement is satisfied by the presence of a PathP (including a LocP). By contrast, with other manner-of-motion verbs, a PredP (depictive) must be introduced to supply the relevant state, thereby licensing the appearance of *ne*. The core idea of this analysis (otherwise left for future work) is sketched in (21).

- (21) a. *Diana_j se_j ne_i corre* [_{PathP} $-_j$ *Path_i* [_{LocP} *in camera*]]
 Diana REFL.3SG NE run.PRS.3SG in room
- b. *Diana_j se_j ne_i cammina* [_{PredP} $-_j$ *Pred_i* [_{AdjP} *tranquilla*]]
 Diana REFL.3SG NE walk.PRS.3SG calm

¹³There might be some speaker variation in the acceptance of sentence (19-a). Since *andare* is often used as a restructuring verb, such examples, if accepted, could be the blend of two structures. Interestingly, reflexive clitics are more easily acceptable than non-reflexive ones (?*Tommaso se ne va a lavar-si* ‘Tommaso goes to wash himself’). The reason for this asymmetry needs to be investigated in further research.