

# Italian Prepositional Contractions<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

- In Italian, when a preposition is immediately followed by a definite article, the two words will often contract to form a single word. This is similar to English contractions like *don't*, *he'll*, or *I've*.
- This presentation will cover the basic morphological phenomena found in nominal and prepositional phrases in Italian. The end goal is to develop a theory to account for the contraction of prepositions and definite articles.

### (1) Sample Contractions of Prepositions and Definite Articles:

ORTHOGRAPHIC:	IPA:	GLOSS:
le pagine di un libro	le padzine di un libro	the pages of a book
le pagine <i>del</i> libro	le padzine del libro	the pages of the book
con un marito	kon un marito	with a husband
<i>col</i> marito	kol marito	with the husband
<i>alla</i> festa	alla festa	at/to the party
<i>nell'</i> ospedale	nel ospedale	in the hospital
<i>dallo</i> studente	dallo studente	from the student (m)
le pagine <i>dei</i> libri	le padzine dei libri	the pages of the books

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- This contraction is mostly obligatory and optional in a few cases, but there are a few combinations where the contraction cannot occur:

(2) Example Exception to the Contraction Rule:

ORTHOGRAPHIC:	IPA:	GLOSS:
*colle ragazze	*kolle ragattse	
con le ragazze	kon le ragattse	with the girls
*tra i libri	*tra i libri	
tra i libri	tra i libri	between the books

- Two big questions:
  - Can we formalize the contractions that are seen with prepositions and definite articles?
  - Can we explain why the contraction is sometimes obligatory, sometimes optional, and sometimes forbidden?
    - Are these situations conditioned (morphologically, phonologically, or syntactically)?
    - Or are they simply lexicalized and memorized by the speaker?

Main points of this presentation:

- Establish basic morphophonological rules to explain the forms of Italian definite articles
  - There are 4 singular definite article forms: la, il, lo, l'
  - And 3 plural definite article forms: le, i, gli (IPA:  $\lambda i$ )
  - These forms are morphologically conditioned by gender and phonologically conditioned by the nature of the noun's initial onset (or lack thereof)
- Develop a theory to explain the obligatory contractions, working within morphology and some simplified phonology to arrive at the correct surface forms.
  - Some prepositions will use a different base in contractions than when standing alone
  - Some other phonological processes occur in the midst of contraction, like coda deletion and the reduplication of onsets to create geminates

- Discuss the forbidden contractions and amend our theory to account for them.
  - We will see that prepositions can be sorted into three categories:
    - Prepositions that always contract
    - Prepositions that never contract
    - Prepositions that contract optionally with a specific subset of definite articles ([i], [il])
  - Although syntactic, phonological, and morphological theories can be proposed to account for this data, we will find that a morphophonological approach is the most effective.

## 2. Definite Articles

- Italian has 7 definite article forms; 4 are singular and 3 are plural.

### 2.1 Singular Definite Articles

- The forms of the singular definite article are [la], [il], [lo], and [l-].
  - The last of these is slightly different in that it becomes the initial onset to vowel-initial nouns.

#### (3) Singular Definite Articles:

	ORTHOGRAPHIC:	IPA:	GLOSS:
[la]:	la mela	la mela	the apple
	la torta	la torta	the cake
	la studentessa	la studentessa	the student (fem.)
	la zia	la tsia	the aunt
	la sfilata	la sfilata	the fashion show
[il]:	il libro	il libro	the book
	il marito	il marito	the husband
[lo]:	lo scaffale	lo skaffale	the shelf
	lo studente	lo studente	the student (masc.)
	lo zio	lo tsio	the uncle
	lo spettacolo	lo spettakolo	the show
	lo sfondo	lo sfondo	the background
[l-]:	l'albergo	lalbergo	the hotel

l'ospedale  
l'amica

lospedale  
lamika

the hospital  
the friend (fem.)

- These forms are morphologically and phonologically conditioned.
- The morphological conditioning is gender based:
  - [la] is only used for feminine nouns
  - [il] and [lo] are only used for masculine nouns
  - [l-] is used for both genders, but is phonologically conditioned
  - There are no neutral gender nouns
- The phonological conditioning is based on onsets:
  - [l-] is used for vowel initial words of either gender
  - [lo] is used for masculine nouns beginning with specific consonant clusters: [sC], [ts], or [dz]
  - [la] and [il] are used elsewhere
- These forms can be explained by formal morphophonological rules, but that will be unnecessary for our purposes.

## 2.2 Plural Definite Articles

- The forms of the plural definite article are [le], [i], and [li].

### (4) Plural Definite Articles:

	ORTHOGRAPHIC:	IPA:	GLOSS:
[le]:	le mele le torte le studentesse le zie le sfilate le amiche	le mele le torte le studentesse le tsie le sfilate le amike	the apples the cakes the students (fem.) the aunts the fashion shows the friends (fem.)
[i]:	i libri i mariti	i libri i mariti	the books the husbands

*(data continued on page 5)*

[ʎi]:

gli scaffali	ʎi skaffali	the shelves
gli studenti	ʎi studenti	the students (masc.)
gli zii	ʎi tsii	the uncles
gli spettacoli	ʎi spettakoli	the shows
gli sfondi	ʎi sfondi	the backgrounds
gli alberghi	ʎi albergi	the hotels
gli ospedali	ʎi ospedali	the hospitals

- Like the singular forms, these forms are morphologically and phonologically conditioned.
- The morphological conditioning is gender based:
  - [le] is used for all feminine nouns
  - [i] and [ʎi] are used for masculine nouns
- The phonological conditioning for masculine nouns is again based on onsets:
  - [ʎi] is used for masculine nouns beginning a vowel or with the same consonant clusters that would have conditioned [lo] in the singular ([sC], [ts], or [dz])
  - [i] is used elsewhere
- Again, these forms could be formalized in morphological and phonological rules, but don't need to be for our purposes.
- To recap:
  - There are 4 singular definite article forms: [la], [il], [lo], and [l-]
  - There are 3 plural definite article forms: [le], [i], and [ʎi]
  - These forms are morphologically conditioned by gender and phonologically conditioned by the nature of the noun's initial onset (or lack thereof)

### 3. The Basics of Preposition Contraction

#### 3.1 Prepositions

- The prepositions that we will be looking at are listed in the following table.

(5) Prepositions:

ORTHOGRAPHIC:	IPA:	GLOSS:
in	in	in
di	di	of
su	su	on
da	da	from
a	a	to, at
con	kon	with
tra	tra	between
fra	fra	between
per	per	for

#### 3.2 An Introduction to Contractions

- The table in (6) shows the contracted form (in IPA) of each preposition with each of the seven definite articles.
  - A contraction in parenthesis indicates that the contraction is optional.
  - A contraction in italics indicates that the contraction can optionally be used in poetry, but never in conversation or other literature.
  - A blank square in the table indicates that there is no contraction of that preposition and that definite article that would ever be used.
  - All other contractions are obligatory.

(6) Table of Contractions Between Prepositions and Definite Articles:

	<b>in</b>	<b>di</b>	<b>su</b>	<b>da</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>con</b>	<b>tra</b>	<b>fra</b>	<b>per</b>
<b>la</b>	nella	della	sulla	dalla	alla				
<b>il</b>	nel	del	sul	dal	al	(kol)	<i>tral</i>	<i>fral</i>	<i>pel</i>
<b>lo</b>	nello	dello	sullo	dallo	allo				
<b>l-</b>	nel	del	sul	dal	al				
<b>le</b>	nelle	delle	sulle	dalle	alle				
<b>i</b>	nei	dei	sui	dai	ai	(koi)	<i>trai</i>	<i>frai</i>	<i>pei</i>
<b>ἄι</b>	neλλi	deλλi	suλλi	daλλi	aλλi				

### 3.2.1 Three Types of Prepositions

- As can be seen in (6), the prepositions we have discussed here can be separated into three distinct groupings:
  - The prepositions *in*, *di*, *su*, *da*, and *a* must always contract with all definite articles.
  - The preposition *con* can optionally contract with the definite articles *il* and *i*, but cannot contract with any other definite articles.
  - The prepositions *tra*, *fra*, and *per* can only contract with *il* and *i*, and even those contractions can only happen in poetry.
    - Poetry can utilize rather special and unconventional forms of language, and thus it is reasonable for us to disregard these contractions.
    - Henceforth, we will regard this set of prepositions as ones that cannot contract with any definite article, which is how they behave in conversational language.
- Thus, we have a group of prepositions that must contract, a single preposition that can optionally contract in a few cases, and a set of prepositions that can never contract.
- The contractions that have here been deemed as solely poetic, as well as some other contractions of *con*, such as *colle* and *colla*, have been documented historically in speech, but they have fallen out of use. It is likely that contractions involving *con* are not actually different from those involving *tra*, *fra*, and *per*, but are actually just taking longer to phase out of modern usage.

### 3.2.2 Surface Forms of Contractions

- For now, we will focus on how the contractions arrive at their surface form. In §4, we will discuss why not all contractions are possible.
- The data in (6) shows us that:
  - Two of the prepositions have alternate bases forms that are used in contractions.
    - [in] is realized as [ne]
    - [di] is realized as [de]
  - When the resulting contraction is bisyllabic, the initial consonant of the definite article is reduplicated. For instance:
    - [da] + [la] → [dalla]
    - [ne] + [li] → [ne    - li]

- [il] becomes [l] in contractions. This could potentially be conditioned by a dispreference for diphthongs.
- In cases where there is not a secondary base form, stem-final consonants on prepositions are deleted in the contraction. For instance:
  - [con] + [i] → [coi]
  - [per] + [i] → [pei]
- Having briefly discussed the formation of the contractions between prepositions and definite articles, we can now examine the potential reasons why some contractions are obligatory, some are optional, and some are forbidden.

## 4. Contractions

### 4.1 Potential Explanations

- There are many possible reasons for the divide amongst prepositions. The conditioning for these groupings could be syntactic, phonological, or morphological. If none of these options provide the conditioning factor, the different sets could also just be memorized lists that the speaker sorts prepositions into.
- In comparing the potential conditioning factors, we want a theory that will explain both:
  - what conditions the different preposition classifications and
  - why the definite articles *il* and *i* contract more easily and more frequently than all of the other definite articles

## 4.2 Syntactic Conditioning

- It is possible that the difference between the groups of prepositions lies in whether they are behaving as functional or lexical heads. For instance, in (7), *di* is clearly functional, while in (8), *tra* is lexical.

(7) *Hai bisogno **dei** libri?*

Do you need (have need **of**) the books?

(8) *È **tra** le pagine.*

[It] is **between** the pages.

- The prepositions that always contract, *in* (in), *di* (of), *su* (on), *da* (from), and *a* (at/to), mostly behave as functional words. They are sometimes required after certain verbs and can be somewhat devoid of meaning in some case.
- The prepositions that never contract, like *fra* and *tra* (between), are generally lexical.
- The main issue with the theory that contraction is based on whether a preposition is functional or lexical is that when *in*, *di*, *su*, *da*, or *a* behave lexically, they still must obligatorily contract, as in (9):

(9) *Ho trovato il libro **sullo** scaffale.*

I found the book **on** the shelf.

- A completely syntactic theory would also not explain why *il* and *i* contract more frequently than other definite articles, as they behave in a manner that is identical to all other definite articles syntactically.
- Thus, we cannot rely on a syntactic theory.

### 4.3 Phonological Conditioning

- It is also possible that the prepositions are separated into categories based on phonological reasons.
- *Fra* and *tra* are the only prepositions (in this study) with complex onsets.
- *Con* and *per* are the only prepositions (in this study) with both an onset and a coda.
- By contrast, *su* and *da* as well as bases *ne* and *de* have only simple onsets and no codas, while *a* has neither an onset nor a coda.
- As was previously stated, it is not the case that all contractions involving *con*, *tra*, *fra*, and *per* have always been forbidden. They are being slowly phased out of the language. It is possible that the system for creating contractions in Italian is slowly showing a preference for the most simple prepositions. This would lead to prepositions that have consonant clusters or codas (multiple moras perhaps) being slowly weeded out of the contraction system entirely.
- A phonological approach could also potentially explain why *il* and *i* are preferred for contraction.
- These are the only two vowel-initial definite articles, which means that they do not have an onset that would have to undergo reduplication to become a geminate. In cases like *con* and *per*, the contraction process already prefers to delete consonants that occur in the middle of the contraction, so perhaps the lack of an onset in these two definite articles is a desirable feature.
- This theory does run into a snag though, when we also consider the definite article *l'*.
  - For prepositions that have a contraction with both *il* and *l'*, the contractions are always identical phonologically, because the [i] in [il] is always deleted.
  - One might think that perhaps *l'* functions as the onset of the next word, as it does when no preposition is present, and that it might not ever contract. However, we know that the contraction does occur, because the contraction-only bases *ne* and *de* are used when immediately preceding *l'*, creating [nel] and [del], just as with [il].
- Thus, phonological conditioning does not offer a reason why [il] contracts with some prepositions while [l] does not, and so we cannot rely on a solely phonological theory.

#### 4.4 Morphological Conditioning

- Morphological conditioning could only explain the preposition groupings if we assigned each preposition some sort of morphological marker. For example, those that could contract would have some [+contraction] feature.
  - Unfortunately, using such a theory, it would be hard to explain why some prepositions, like *con*, can optionally contract with just two of the definite articles.
  - Also, this hardly seems to be any sort of step up from a theory in which the speaker just has 2-3 memorized lists of prepositions based on their ability to contract.
- However, it does make sense to explain why *il* and *i* stand apart using morphological reasons.
  - *Il* and *i* are default masculine forms of the singular and plural definite article, respectively.
  - I propose that Italian has a preference for default masculine forms and that it gives them a sort of privileged position to be considered for contraction, even when phonological reasons outlaw all other contractions.
    - Default masculine forms could be given a feature that will mark them as preferred. (This could simply be the same markers that identify them as the masculine default forms.)
    - When phonological rules block other contractions from occurring, this feature can optionally override that block.

#### 4.5 A Morphophonological Blend

- Earlier, to explain how the different forms of the definite article were conditioned, we established a need for both morphological and phonological rules.
- Here, we also need both morphological and phonological rules.
- We can best explain the separation of prepositions into sets based on phonological conditioning.
- We can best explain why *il* and *i* can contract in situations where no other article is able to based on morphological conditioning.
- A morphophonological blend will thus account for more than any other theory would be able to.

## 5. Conclusion

- In conclusion, we have established that:
  - we need morphophonological rules to account for the 7 definite article forms, based on gender and onsets
  - In the contraction process between prepositions and definite articles:
    - some prepositions revert to a different base form
    - there are several phonological processes that occur, including vowel deletion and gemination
  - Contraction is sometimes obligatory, sometimes optional, and sometimes forbidden
  - [il] and [i] are allowed to contract with prepositions in the “optional” category, while no other articles are
  - Although syntactic, phonological, and morphological theories can be proposed to account for this data, we have seen that these situations are morphophonologically conditioned
    - The separation of prepositions into sets where contractions are obligatory, optional, or forbidden is phonologically based
    - The preference for [il] and [i] to contract when other articles do not is based on a morphological preference in the language for the default masculine forms