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Stare-ing into aspect: Progressive and continuous periphrases in Ascolano

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Abstract

This study examines the periphrases *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive in Ascolano (Central-Southern Italo-Romance), where both occur with progressive-like meanings. Based on approximately twenty-one hours of spontaneous speech from 13 quasi-monolingual speakers and supplemented by elicited judgments, we argue that the two constructions encode distinct imperfective subtypes: *stare* + gerund expresses progressive aspect (events in progress), while *stare* + *a* + infinitive conveys continuous aspect (durative events). We propose the following diagnostics to support this contrast: (a) both co-occur with temporal adverbs (*mo* 'now'), (b) only *stare* + gerund is compatible with achievement predicates and (c) cannot appear with the frequentative adverb *sembrə,* (d) *stare* + *a* + infinitive allows stacking and coordination of infinitives but (e) disallows embedding of lower aspectual heads. These patterns suggest a division of labor within imperfectivity in Ascolano.

Keywords: Ascolano, progressive periphrasis, continuous periphrasis, Italo-Romance, gerunds, infinitives.

1. Introduction: *stare* + gerund vs. *stare*+*a* + infinitive in Italian

Periphrastic constructions involving the verb *stare* ('stay, be') have been widely discussed in the literature on Italian aspect, especially in connection with the expression of progressivity. Specifically, *stare* + gerund has been analyzed as a marker of progressive aspect, i.e., an event-in-progress interpretation anchored to a reference time (Bertinetto 1986, 1990; Squartini 1990). In contrast, the construction *stare* + *a* + infinitive has received much less attention, despite being attested in several Central Italian varieties (Squartini 1998; Amenta 2010; Ondelli 2022, 2025). Crucially, the semantic contribution of this infinitival construction remains less clear. Although it is often associated with durative or ongoing interpretations and therefore may appear superficially similar to the gerundial periphrasis, it is not obvious whether it instantiates a grammaticalized imperfective operator comparable to the progressive periphrasis, or whether it should instead be treated as a construction with a different aspectual profile. This raises a broader question concerning the internal structure of the imperfective domain in Italo-Romance, namely whether progressive-like meanings may be distributed across distinct periphrases with specialized interpretive values.
In Standard Italian, the contrast between the two periphrases appears as particularly sharp: *stare* + gerund unambiguously expresses the progressive aspect, that is, an event in progress at reference time, typically with dynamic predicates, as illustrated in (1a), while *stare* + *a* + infinitive is generally ungrammatical in the same contexts, as in (1b).

(1) Standard Italian
a. Paolo sta arrivando.
Paolo stay.PRES.3SG arrive.GER
'Paolo is coming.'
b. *Paolo sta a arrivare.
Paolo stay. PRES.3SG to arrive.INF
Intended as 'Paolo is coming.'

The restriction illustrated in (1b) shows that *stare* + *a* + infinitive is excluded in Standard Italian with punctual verbs such as *arrivare* 'to arrive' but it remains available with activities and states. As we show in §4, Ascolano, an upper southern Italo-Romance variety, replicates this restriction, and it is precisely this property that distinguishes the two periphrases in the variety we investigate.

Empirical evidence from Central Italian varieties (Regional Italian) shows that both constructions coexist but differ in their aspectual value. Squartini (1998:132–133) argues in favor of a complementary distribution of the two periphrases in Tuscan Italian where *stare* + gerund encodes a progressive interpretation, while *stare* + *a* + infinitive denotes continuous aspect, often involving extended or iterative events. Importantly, in Squartini's account, the notion of continuity is primarily descriptive and characterizes the extended durational profile of a situation, rather than corresponding to a formally defined aspectual operator. Following Comrie (1976:25-26), we use 'continuous' to refer to an imperfective subtype that presents a situation as a homogeneously ongoing event without necessarily highlighting its internal progress. This distribution is illustrated in the sentences below:

(2) Italian (Squartini 1998:132-133)

a. Paolo stava (ancora) a chiacchierare/ stava
Paolo stay.IMPF.3SG still to chat.INF stay.3SG
(ancora) chiacchierando con Luca
still chat.GER with Luca (activity)

b. Paolo è stato a parlare con Luca/
Paolo be.3SG stay.PTCP to chat.INF with Luca
*è stato parlando con Luca (perfective context)
be.3SG stay.PTCP chat.GER with Luca

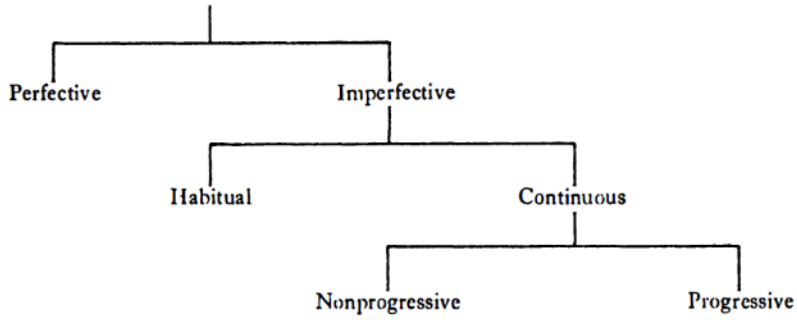
c. Paolo sta sempre a parlare/*sta sempre
Paolo stay.PRES.3SG always to speak.INF/stay.3SG always
parlando (uninterrupted duration)
chat.GER

As shown in (1) and (2) above, both constructions present a series of restrictions at the level of aspect and *Aktionsart*. For instance, *stare* + *a* + infinitive cannot occur with achievements such as *arrivare* 'to arrive'. On the contrary, *stare* + gerund is excluded from perfective contexts and is more restricted in expressing the potentially indefinite repetition of an event, as illustrated by *Paolo sta sempre a parlare* ('Paolo is always talking'), confirming some degree of complementarity in the distribution of the two periphrases in Tuscan Italian.

This distinction is consistent with the cross-linguistic tendency for imperfectivity to cover multiple subtypes, including progressive, continuous, and habitual readings, as shown in Figure 1 (Comrie 1976; Dahl 1985; Bertinetto 1986)[1]. Laca (2004a, 2004b) provides a crucial theoretical refinement of this picture, distinguishing between 1) 'syntactic aspect' periphrases, which express time-relational aspect in the sense of Klein (1994) and operate as genuine operators over the event-time relation, and 2) 'eventuality modification' periphrases, which modify the internal temporal structure of the eventuality description and display greater distributional 'freedom'. This distinction will be further developed in Section 5.

[1] The internal partition of imperfectivity is not treated uniformly in the literature. Indeed, the tripartition into progressive, continuous, and habitual subtypes is widely assumed in typological work, such as Comrie (1976) or Dahl (1985), a.o., however, the theoretical status of the continuous aspect is debated. Specifically, Bertinetto (1986, 1997) treats continuous aspect as a distinct imperfective subtype formally opposed to progressive aspect, whereas Squartini (1998) employs the label 'continuous' primarily as a descriptive characterization of durative or non-delimited readings associated with certain periphrastic constructions. For the purpose of this article, we adopt Bertinetto's distinction as a working hypothesis, not on purely theoretical grounds, but because it allows us to capture systematic empirical contrasts in distribution, compatibility with *Aktionsart*, and syntactic behavior between *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive in Ascolano. Our use of the term 'continuous' is therefore intended to reflect an aspectual value established by the diagnostics in §§4.3–4.5, *i.e.* the exclusion of punctual predicates, the admission of states, and transparency to frequency modification, rather than a purely descriptive label.

Figure 1. The aspectual oppositions, cf. Comrie (1976: 25)



The behavior of Standard Italian, however, is not exceptional within the broader Romance picture. Indeed, the Romance languages exhibit a diverse range of aspectual periphrases expressing different aspectual values (see, for instance, Bertinetto 1986, 1997, 2000; Squartini 1998; Laca 2004a,b; a.o.). Within imperfectivity and, in particular, the progressive domain, Romance varieties typically express progressivity by means of *(e)star(e)* + gerund, as illustrated in the examples below.

(3) Spanish
Estoy comiendo.
stay.PRES.1SG eat.GER
'I am eating.'

(4) Catalan
Estic menjant.
stay.PRES.1SG eat.GER
'I am eating.'

However, as observed in Tuscan Italian, some Romance varieties display competing periphrastic strategies for expressing progressive-like meanings. Portuguese provides a clear illustration of this type of microvariation, with Brazilian Portuguese generally preferring gerundial constructions, as in (5), and European Portuguese typically expressing ongoing situations through an infinitival periphrasis introduced by the preposition *a*, as in (6) (cf. Móia & Viotti 2004).

(5) Brazilian Portuguese (Móia & Viotti 2004: 116)
O país está mudando.
the country stay.PRES.3SG change.GER
'The country is changing.'

(6) European Portuguese (Móia & Viotti 2004: 116)
O país está a mudar.
the country stay.PRES.3SG to change.INF
'The country is changing.'

These attestations suggest that progressive-like meanings may be distributed across different periphrastic strategies even within closely related varieties, and that the choice of the non-finite complement (gerund vs. infinitive) may or may not correlate with distinct aspectual interpretations. In the remainder of this paper, we adopt this comparative perspective to investigate whether a similar division of labor

emerges between *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive within Italo-Romance, specifically, in Ascolano.

The article is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces the data concerning the distribution and aspectual properties of progressive periphrases with *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive in two southern Italo-Romance varieties: Neapolitan (Ledgeway 2009) and Conversanese (Lorusso 2019). These varieties show that the status of progressive periphrases, and of progressive aspect more generally, is not homogeneous across Italo-Romance, nor does it conform to the pattern attested in Tuscan Italian (cf. Squartini 1998). Crucially, the data from these two southern Romance varieties will lay the foundations for our analysis of the variety under investigation, i.e., Ascolano, spoken in the province of Ascoli Piceno, which will be presented in Section 2. In this variety, both periphrases are available and encode imperfective aspect, although their distribution suggests a division of labor between the two constructions. Section 3 outlines the methodology adopted for data collection, while Section 4 introduces the aspectual and structural diagnostics employed to identify the aspectual and syntactic properties of *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive. Finally, Section 5 discusses the findings and proposes a grammaticalization analysis that accounts for the distributional and aspectual differences between the two periphrases. Section 6 concludes.

1.1. Progressive periphrases in Italo-Romance: Neapolitan and Conversanese

Within Italo-Romance, progressive periphrases have been shown to display different aspectual and syntactic properties. In Neapolitan, both *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive are attested, as is also the case in Tuscan Italian; however, their distribution does not fully match the Italian data. In particular, Ledgeway (2009: 433–434) argues that in Neapolitan the progressive periphrasis with *stare* + gerund has lost its original progressive meaning and has instead acquired functions associated with the present tense, as illustrated in (7).

(7) Neapolitan, Ledgeway (2009:434)

a. Siente, io sto tenneno na pacienza,
look I stay.PRES.1SG hold.GER a patience
che nisciuno la tenarria (Scarpetta3 III.4)
that nobody CL would.hold
'Look, I have patience that nobody else would have'

b. È nu mese che sta jenno e
be.3SGa month that stay.PRES.3SG go.GER and
venenno d'Aversa.
come.GER from=Aversa
'He's been coming and going from Aversa for a month.'

In (7), *stare* + gerund is used to denote situations simultaneous with the moment of utterance, thus showing an overlap with the functions of the present. This extension of the periphrasis also results in its employment with statives and motion verbs, as shown in (7a) and (7b) respectively. In particular, Ledgeway (2009:639) argues that although both *stare* + gerund and *stare* + infinitive are largely indistinguishable in interpretation, they differ in the degree of desemanticization of the verb *stare*. As

visible in (7), in the gerundial construction *stare* seems to be fully grammaticalized, whereas in the infinitival construction it preserves to some extent its lexical meaning. This claim is supported by the fact that motion verbs, as illustrated in (7b), are acceptable only with the gerund (i.e. *steva ascènno* 'was going out'), but not with infinitives, as shown in (8).

(8) Neapolitan, Ledgeway (2009:639)
**Steva âscì
stay.IMPF.3SG to=go.out
Intended as 'He/she was going out'

Moreover, the infinitival construction shows greater morphosyntactic freedom, i.e., it can co-occur with the simple past (*stette a battagliare* 'he spent a long time fighting'), with the gerund (*stando a mangiare* 'while eating'), with another infinitive (*sta a sentì* 'is listening'), and even with the imperative (*state ad audire* 'stay and listen'), showing a less constrained distribution than its gerundial counterpart. These Neapolitan data show that, although *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive are both attested in the language, their distribution does not fully replicate the Italian pattern, as *stare* + gerund has extended beyond its original progressive interpretation and has gradually weakened its durative value. These observations, reflecting different degrees of grammaticalization across the two periphrases, motivate a broader discussion of their syntactic status. Given their divergent distributional properties, it remains unclear whether they should receive a unified syntactic analysis, or whether the observed aspectual contrasts correspond to distinct syntactic configurations.

Turning to Apulian varieties, Conversanese, spoken in the province of Bari, also displays two distinct progressive periphrases with *stare*: (i) an inflected progressive, illustrated in (9a), in which the lexical verb agrees with the subject, and (ii) an uninflected progressive, illustrated in (9b), in which the lexical verb remains infinitival.

(9) Conversanese, Lorusso (2019: 204-223)

a. Stək	a	mandʒə.		
stay.PRES.1SG	to	eat.1SG		
'I am eating'				
b. Stək	a	fɛ	u	pɛn.
stay.PRES.1SG	to	make.INF	the	bread
'I am making the bread.'				

As shown above, the existence of two progressive strategies is not unexpected, yet Conversanese displays a clear split in the semantic and distributional profile of the two constructions. Accordingly, although the two periphrases appear superficially similar, Lorusso (2019: 223) shows that their aspectual values do not overlap. As illustrated in (10), the inflected progressive is aspectually selective in that, following Vendler's (1957) aspectual classes, it is felicitous with activities (10a) and accomplishments (10b), but it is not felicitous with states (10c) and achievements

(10d), thus showing the general aspectual restrictions related to the progressive aspect[2,3] (cf. Comrie 1976; Dahl 1985; Bertinetto 1986).

(10) Conversanese, Lorusso (2019)

a. Stək	a	mandʒə			(Activity)
stay.1SG	to	eat.1SG			
'I am eating.'					
b. Stək	a	fattsə	la	kasə	(Accomplishment)
stay.1SG	to	build.1SG	the	house	
'I am building the house'					
c. #Stək	a	satʃə			(State)
stay.1SG	to	know.1SG			
'I am knowing'					
d. #Stək	a	kanəsçə	u	sennəkə	(Achievement)
stay.1SG	to	know.1SG	the	mayor	
'I am knowing [meeting] the mayor'					

On the contrary, the uninflected progressive is not aspectually restricted. It is compatible with states (11a) and achievements (11b) as well, where it normally bears an inchoative or ingressively-progressive reading ('I am coming to know').

(11) Conversanese, Lorusso (2019)

a. Stək	a	sapˈe			(State)
stay.1SG	to	know.INF			
'I am realizing' (= I am starting to know)					
b. Stək	a	kanəʃə	u	sennəkə	(Achievement)
stay.1SG	to	know.INF	the	mayor	
'I am getting to know the mayor'					

From a structural perspective, the two periphrases exhibit several differences in terms of (i) frequentative adverb placement and (ii) clitic climbing. Turning first to the placement of the frequentative adverb *sembə* 'always' (cf. Cinque 1999), the two periphrases show different distributional properties. As shown in (12b), in the

[2] Notice, however, that in Conversanese the inflected periphrasis is not available with 1st and 2nd plural persons. According to Lorusso (2019) this person restriction is due to the referential complexity of 1st and 2nd plural forms as opposed to their singular counterparts and 3rd persons.

[3] As an anonymous reviewer correctly points out, this generalization has been shown not to hold categorically, as achievements and states are not always incompatible with the progressive. De Swart (1998), for instance, formalizes such cases in terms of coercion. She argues that, in certain contexts, predicates can be coerced into different aspectual interpretations on the basis of the linguistic context and world knowledge. Drawing on English, she shows that, in a sentence such as 'Susan is liking this play a great deal', the stative predicate is coerced into a dynamic interpretation by means of a coercion operator, which then provides the appropriate input to the progressive operator. See also the more recent study by Rautionaho & Fuchs (2021) on the spread of the progressive with stative verbs in British English. We are aware of these facts and intend the generalization here only as a description of the data reported in Lorusso (2019) for Conversanese, where *Aktionsart* plays a role in the distribution of the two periphrases.

uninflected periphrasis, *sembrə* can appear either between the auxiliary *stare* and *a* or after the infinitive. Conversely, as illustrated in (12a), in the inflected construction, the frequentative adverb is only allowed to appear after the inflected verb.

(12) Conversanese, Lorusso (2019:228)

a. Marie	stɜ	(*sembə)	a	(*sembə)	mandʒə (sembə)
Mary	stay.3SG	always	to	always	eat.3SG always
b. Marie	stɜ	(sembə)	a	(*sembə)	manˈdʒɛ(sembə)
Mary	stay.3SG	always	to	always	eat.INF always’

‘Mary is always eating’

A second structural difference concerns clitic climbing, Lorusso (2019) argues that in inflected constructions the clitic climbs to a preverbal position, as shown in (13a), while with the uninflected infinitive the clitic may remain in the lower position, as in (13b).

(13) Conversanese, Lorusso (2019:221-224)

a. (U)	stek	a	*(u)	mandʒə
CL	stay.1SG	to	CL	eat.1SG

‘I am eating it.’

b. Stek	a	mandga-llə
stay	to	eat.INF-CL

‘I am eating it’

Overall, then, the two periphrases in Conversanese exhibit both aspectual and structural differences, as was also observed for Neapolitan above.

Taken together these facts suggest that Italo-Romance varieties may adopt similar strategies to express progressive aspect through the use of the auxiliary verb *stare*. However, its combination with either the infinitive (inflected or uninflected) or the gerund shows sensitivity to the aspectual properties of the lexical verb, suggesting that the distinct aspectual distribution may correlate with underlying structural differences.

In the following sections, we will contribute to the discussion on progressive periphrases by focusing on Ascolano, an understudied Italo-Romance variety. In doing so, we will argue that the two periphrases contribute aspectual information at different levels and that they differ in whether *stare* lexicalizes a functional aspectual head. We establish these two results independently of one another, and we return in section 5 to the question of what they imply, and do not imply, for the clausal architecture of the two constructions.

2. Progressive Periphrases in Ascolano

Ascolano is an Upper Southern Italo-Romance dialect spoken in the Marche region, and it belongs to the Abruzzese dialect group, within the subgroup of Marchigiano Meridionale, i.e., 1a, as shown in Figure 2 from Pellegrini (1977).

Figure 2. Southern Italo-Romance dialects



Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialetti_dell%27Abruzzo#/media/File:Neapolitan_languages-it.svg

As also observed in Tuscan Italian and Neapolitan, Ascolano employs two periphrastic constructions to express the progressive aspect, namely *stare* + gerund and *stare* + infinitive. Both periphrases are formed with the auxiliary verb *stare* followed by either a gerund (14a) or an infinitive (14b), as illustrated below:

(14)[4] Ascolano

a. Sta	a	ddərmì	su	u	liettə	
stay.PRES.3SG	a	sleep.INF	on	the	bed	
'She/he is sleeping on the bed'						
b. Chesta		c'avié		tandə	operaiə	chə
this.one.F.SG		CL=have.IMPF.3SG		many	workers	that
stava		facennə	a	strada		
stay.IMPF.3PL		make.GER	the	road		
'She had many workers who were building the street'						

As argued for Italian (Squartini 1998), the distribution of these periphrases in Ascolano displays distinct characteristics in aspectual and structural domains. For instance, in (14a), the activity verb 'to sleep' appears with *stare* + *a* + infinitive, while in (14b) the accomplishment verb *fà*, *'to build',* occurs with *stare* + *gerund*. In light of this, in the next sections we aim to account for the distribution of *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive in Ascolano, assessing whether they occur in complementary distribution and identifying the aspectual contexts that may allow their co-occurrence. The analysis will further determine the aspectual constraints governing their distribution and explore the structural properties that may reveal a syntactic distinction between the two periphrases.

[4] The examples in (14) are drawn from our corpus as specified below in §3.

3. Methodology

The data discussed in this article were collected through fieldwork between April 2024 and September 2024. We recruited a total of 13 (quasi-)monolingual speakers of Ascolano, namely speakers who use Ascolano as their primary language of communication and resort to Italian only in specific or formal contexts. To achieve this, we recruited mostly participants who were born and/or raised in the villages near the town, namely Montadamo (4), Venagrande (3), Gimigliano (1), Cerreto (1), Portella (1), and San Pietro (1). Additionally, we also recruited two speakers who were born and/or raised in town. The mean age of the participants is 76 years, with ages ranging from 64 to 94. All participants were interviewed in small groups of two or more speakers in order to encourage spontaneous speech and foster natural conversation. The recordings amount to approximately twenty-one hours of spontaneous speech. We identified 93 sentences containing progressive periphrases, comprising 37 instances of *stare* + gerund and 56 instances of *stare* + *a* + infinitive. For the purposes of the quantitative analysis, we subsequently annotated each relevant verbal predicate occurring in these sentences and classified it according to both the periphrasis in which it occurred and its *Aktionsart* properties. This resulted in a total of 101 predicate tokens. A complete list of the annotated predicates, together with their *Aktionsart* classification is provided in the Appendix.

All examples discussed in the next section are drawn from this corpus unless otherwise specified. Moreover, since the corpus data provide positive evidence only, the diagnostics in Section 4 combine two sources of evidence. Attested configurations are drawn from the corpus, while the unavailability of a given configuration was verified by two native speakers of Ascolano.

4. Diagnostics

To determine whether *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive are in free variation or express distinct aspectual values, we employ a set of diagnostics that target both semantic and structural properties. These are organized around the following three questions:

(i) Can both constructions present a situation as ongoing at a reference time and what aspectual restrictions distinguish them? (Sections 4.1-4.3 and 4.5)

(ii) How do the two constructions differ in their syntactic properties? (Sections 4.4 and 4.6)

(iii) Can these aspectual and structural differences be accounted for in terms of different degrees of grammaticalization of *stare*? (Section 5)

This selection of diagnostics is not exhaustive, and is not intended as such. The diagnostics in Section 4 address the first two questions, while the third is taken up in Section 5, where the empirical findings are brought together. Some of the tests are standard in the literature on Romance verbal periphrases, i.e., compatibility with perfective morphology (Squartini 1998), embedding of lower aspectual heads (Ledgeway 2016), and clitic placement (Rizzi 1976, 1978; Cardinaletti & Giusti 2001),

while others emerge from the distributional properties of our corpus and are data-driven. The aspectual properties of the two periphrases are examined in Sections 4.1-4.3 and 4.5, while their structural properties are investigated in Sections 4.4, 4.6, and 4.7. The two sets of results are then brought together in Section 5 to assess their implications for the grammaticalization and syntactic status of *stare*.

4.1. Temporal anchoring with mo 'now'

The first diagnostic tests whether both periphrases can be temporally anchored to the moment of speech. To test this, we examine the compatibility with the adverb *mo* 'now'. Temporal adverbs of this type fix the reference or topic time to the moment of speech, thereby favoring interpretations in which the described situation is ongoing at speech time (Dahl 1985; Klein 1994; Smith 1997). Although Altshuler (2010) shows that English *now* is not necessarily anchored to speech time and may also occur in past-tense contexts with a non-deictic interpretation, we consider here only those examples in which *mo* is clearly anchored to speech time, as shown in (15).

(15) Ascolano

a. Issə **mo** mə sta səndennə
he now CL stay.PRES.3SG hearing.GER
'Now he is hearing me'

b. **Mo** stenghə pənzennə
now stay.PRES.1SG think.GER
'Now I was thinking'

c. U sta stədiennə **mo** l'italianə quillə!
CL stay.PRES.3SG study.GER now the=italian that.one
'He is studying Italian now!'

d. **Mo** stenghə a dì malə d'u sanguə mié
now stay.PRES.1SG to say.INF bad of=the blood mine
'Now I am saying bad things about my relatives'

e. **Mo** tə lu stenghə a dì in dialettə.[5]
now CL CL stay.PRES.1SG to say.INF in dialect
'Now I am saying this to you in dialect.'

The pattern in (15) is unambiguous: both *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive are fully compatible with the temporal adverb *mo* and receive a present-anchored imperfective interpretation in all attested instances. This shared property constitutes baseline evidence that the two constructions belong to the same broad functional domain of imperfectivity, both encoding an ongoing situation at the moment of speech. Crucially, however, the shared compatibility with *mo* does not entail that the two constructions are semantically identical or aspectually undifferentiated. As the

[5] Interestingly, among the occurrences of *stare* + *a* + infinitive in our corpus, the adverb *mo* 'now' appears only three times, whereas it occurs ten times within *stare* + gerund.

subsequent diagnostics will demonstrate, the two periphrases diverge systematically in their sensitivity to predicate type, structural iteration, and adverb placement, indicating that temporal anchoring constitutes a necessary but insufficient condition for their characterization. The significance of the present diagnostic is therefore primarily classificatory, as it establishes that both constructions are imperfective in the broad sense.

4.2. Actional restrictions

The first diagnostic that distinguishes the two periphrases concerns the actional classes they admit. This test is relevant because the two aspectual values impose different requirements on the eventuality they present. Indeed, both progressive and continuous aspect present a situation as ongoing at a reference time, and both therefore require that the situation have internal temporal extension. In other words, a predicate which denotes an instantaneous transition offers no interval to present as ongoing. If *stare* + *a* + infinitive denotes a continuous value, we expect it to be incompatible with punctual verbs, while *stare* + gerund, as a progressive viewpoint operator, may accommodate such predicates through an ingressive interpretation.

Both constructions exclude genuine stative predicates, such as *amare* 'to love' and *odiare* 'to hate', which must be distinguished from continuative predicates such as *abitare* 'to live' (cf. Bertinetto 1986; Squartini 1998). Among non-stative predicates, those with internal temporal extension are admitted by both constructions. Activities occur freely in either, and the same holds for accomplishments and for gradual processes:

(16) Ascolano

a. Stava a lavərà/ Stava
stay.IMPF.3PL to work.INF/ stay.IMPF.3PL
work.GER
lavərennə (activity)
'They were working'

b. Stava a fà la strada/ stava
stay.IMPF.3PL to make.INF the road/ stay.IMPF.3PL
facennə a strada (accomplishment)
make.GER the road
'They were building the road'

c. Gghiə sə sta a cascà u pelə/
CL REFL stay.PRES.3SG to fall.INF the hair/
sta caschennə u pelə (accomplishment)
stay.PRES.3SG fall.GER the hair
'His hair is falling out'

Both *stare* + *a* + INF and *stare* + gerund in (16) are attested and (16b) shows that the two constructions are not distinguished by actional class as such. Indeed, the same accomplishment predicate occurs with both. However, the overall picture changes with punctual verbs, where only the gerundial periphrasis is available:

(17) Ascolano

a. Ffianghə	a	me,	i	stié		**sərpassennə**,	
beside	to	me,	I	stay.IMPF.1SG		surpass.GER	
ié	che	nu	motorì				
go.IMPF.1SG	with	a	scooter				
‘Beside me, I was surpassing, I was on a scooter’							
b. ??I	stié		(a)	**ssərpassà**			
I	stay.IMPF.1SG	to	surpass.INF				
‘I was surpassing’							
Intended as ‘s/he is arriving’							
c. Nu	stemə	iennə	jo	u	cəmətərə		
we	stay.PRES.1PL	go.GER	down	the	cemetery		
‘We are going to the cemetery’							
d.*Nu	stemə		a	ì	jo	u	cəmətərə
we	stay.PRES.1PL	to	go.INF	down	the	cementery	
Intended as ‘We are going to the cementery’							

On the one hand, the restriction has nothing to do with motion. The verb *cascà* ‘to fall’ in (16c) denotes a change of location and is allowed by both periphrases, whereas *ì* ‘to go’ in (17d) is excluded under the infinitival periphrasis although it belongs to the same broad semantic field. What (17b) and (17d) have in common is not spatial displacement but punctuality. Indeed, both denote a transition without internal temporal extension. On the other hand, the restriction is not lifted by an ingressive coercion. A punctual predicate embedded under an operator requiring duration may in principle be reinterpreted as denoting the preparatory phase leading up to the transition, and this is what happens in Conversanese (Lorusso 2019), where the uninflected periphrasis allows achievements on precisely this type of reading (11b). In Ascolano, this is not available. Indeed, (17d) is rejected both on the punctual reading and on an ingressive one (along the lines of ‘is about to arrive’). Therefore, we observe the following aspectual picture:

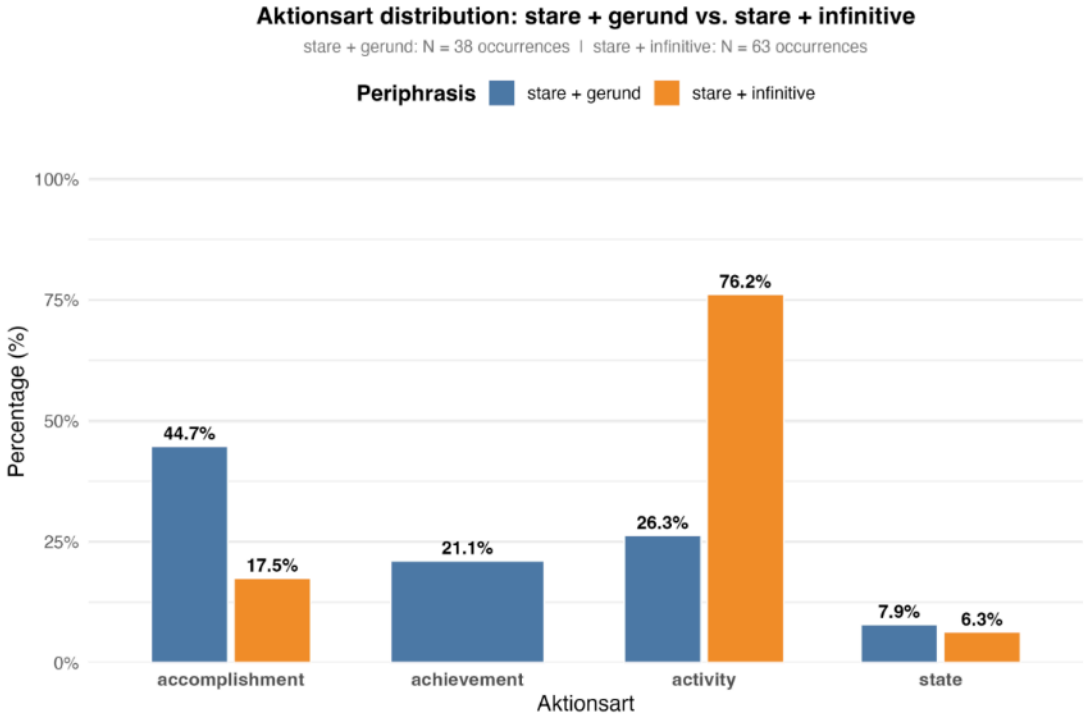
Table 1. Actional restrictions

	***Stare* + gerund**	***Stare* + *a* + infinitive**
activities (*lavərà*, *arà*, *guardà*)	✓	✓
accomplishments (*fa la strada*)	✓	✓
gradual processes (*cascà u pelə*)	✓	✓
achievements (*ì, sərpassà*)	✓	✗

The asymmetry in the bottom row is what our diagnostic establishes. *Stare* + *a* + infinitive requires an eventuality with internal temporal extension and is incompatible with predicates that lack one, whereas *stare* + gerund can accommodate punctual events through an ingressive interpretation. This is the defining property of continuous aspect in the sense of Comrie (1976: 25–26) and Bertinetto (1986, 1997), i.e., a situation which is presented as homogeneously ongoing. The properties reported

in Table 1 are also empirically supported by the quantitative analysis of our data, as shown in the graph below[6]:

Figure 2. *Aktionsart* distribution



As shown in Figure 2, achievements are not attested with *stare* + a + infinitive, while they are compatible with *stare* + gerund provided that they receive an ingressive reading. Further evidence for this contrast also comes from the verb *ddərmissə* 'to fall asleep', which can occur in a sequence with both constructions but gives rise to two different interpretations.

(18) Ascolano

a. Mə stenghə ddərmennə
REFL stay.PRES.1SG fall.asleep.GER
'I am about to fall asleep'

b. Mə stenghə a ddərmì
REFL stay.PRES.1SG to fall.asleep.INF
'I am staying here to sleep'

In (18a), the verb *ddərmissə* appears with *stare* + gerund and gives rise to an ingressive interpretation, namely 'I am about to fall asleep'. In (18b), by contrast, no corresponding aspectual interpretation is available. The sentence must instead receive a locative interpretation in which stare retains its lexical meaning, with the speaker staying somewhere in order to sleep, i.e., 'I am staying here to sleep'. The contrast is particularly informative because it involves the same lexical predicate, suggesting that

[6] The graph in Figure 1 was generated in R (R Core Team 2025) with the assistance of AI tools which were used to assist in writing the plotting scripts. The authors reviewed, tested and accept full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the generated graph.

the availability of the ingressive interpretation depends on the construction rather than on the lexical semantics of the verb alone.

4.3. Perfective morphology

This second diagnostic examines the compatibility of each periphrasis with perfective morphology on *stare*. Here we build on Squartini (1998) who argues that a periphrasis that operates on the relation between event time and topic time, in the sense of Klein (1994), cannot itself be located in a perfective context, since the two viewpoint specifications would be in conflict. A periphrasis that instead modifies the internal temporal structure of the eventuality description imposes no such conflict and should be free to occur under perfective morphology.

Recall that, as shown in §1.1, tense restrictions are also discussed in Ledgeway (2009: 639) for Neapolitan, where he argues that the status of *stare* in the two periphrases differs in terms of the degree of desematicization of the verb. Indeed, while in *stare* + gerund the lexical meaning of the verbs is bleached, in the construction with the infinitive it is still preserved. This claim is supported by the incompatibility with motion verbs as argued above, and also by the compatibility of *stare* + *a* + infinitive with the perfect as illustrated in (19).

(19) Neapolitan Ledgeway (2009: 639)

stette	una	grossa	ora	a	battagliare (Ferraiolo 130r.25)
stay.PST.3SG	a	big	hour	to	fight.INF

'He had been fighting for an hour'

Similarly, in his analysis of progressive periphrases in Italian and Spanish, Squartini (1998) also argues that in Italian, the Progressive is an imperfective marker and it does not display the actional restrictions that, on the other hand, are displayed by the Spanish progressive. In Italian, the imperfective function of the periphrasis affects aspect rather than actionality; therefore, this periphrasis is limited to a situation that is ongoing at a particular time and is incompatible with perfective contexts, as shown in (20) below:

(20) Italian and Spanish

a. Maria sta/*stette parlando
Maria stay.PRES.3SG/*stay.PST.3SG speak.GER
'Mary is speaking/had been speaking'

b. Maria está/estuvo hablando
Maria stay.PRES.3SG/stay.PST.3SG speak.GER
'Mary is speaking/had been speaking'

This contrast is also visible between *stare* + gerund and *stare* + infinitive in Ascolano, as shown in the examples below:

(21) Ascolano

a. So statə a lavərà
be.PRES.1SG stay.PTCP to work.INF
'I have been working'

b. Stessəmə	a	lavərà	chə	na	fabbrəca
be.PST.1PL	to	work.INF	in	a	factory

'We had been working in a factory'

c. *So	statə	lavərennə		
be.PRES.1SG	stay.PTCP	work.GER		

Intended as 'I have been working'

c. *Stessemə	lavərennə	chə	na	fabbrəca
be.PST.1PL	work.GER	in	a	factory

Intended as 'We had been working in a factory'

Similar to Italian, in Ascolano *stare* + gerund can appear neither with the present perfect, as in (21c), nor with the simple past, as in (21d). Such restrictions, on the other hand, do not apply to *stare* + *a* + infinitive, which can freely occur with both forms. This contrast supports a difference in the aspectual distribution of the two periphrases, although it does not by itself establish the precise level at which they contribute aspectual information.

4.4. Multiple non-finite predicates

The third diagnostic examines a structural property of the two periphrases that may shed light on their underlying syntactic organization. Although the structural contrast does not by itself determine their aspectual interpretation, it contributes to the broader picture developed in this section, where structural and aspectual differences are shown to pattern together. Crucially, it involves testing the availability of iterating and coordinating the non-finite complement within the scope of a single instance of the auxiliary *stare*. In other words, the test evaluates whether one instance of *stare* can take multiple gerunds or infinitives as 'complements' simultaneously. This is represented in (22), where *stare* + infinitive freely allows complement iteration. Indeed, multiple infinitival complements can appear under a single instance of the auxiliary, as shown in (22a), while iteration of the gerundial construction provides a markedly degraded result.

(22) Ascolano

Stava[7]	a	chiacchiarà,	a	fa,	a	bevə,
stay.IMPF.3PL	to	chat.INF	to	do.INF	to	drink.INF

[7] The paradigm of the imperfect tense in Ascolano displays two different forms for the first person singular and the third person singular and plural. The full paradigm for the verbs *stà* 'to stay' is reported in (i) below:

(i)

ië stié / stava
tu stivə
issə stié /stava
nu stavamə/stemmə
vu stavatə
lorë/ iscə stié / stava

Both forms are productive and attested in our corpus as shown in the examples above and they can be used interchangeably with both constructions.

a fassə li partitə
to do.INF=REFL the games
b. ??Stava chiacchiarennə, facennə, bəvennə,
stay.IMPF.3PL chat.GER, do.GER drink.GER
facennə li partitə
do.GER the games

It could be argued, however, that the contrast between (22a) and (22b) might at first sight be attributed to a more general restriction on sequences of gerunds, independently of the progressive construction itself. However, this possibility is ruled out by constructions involving *andare* + gerund. With *andare*, sequences of multiple gerunds are fully acceptable, as in (23a)[8]. By contrast, the same sequence is unacceptable under *stare*, as shown in (23b). This indicates that the restriction cannot be attributed to the gerund per se but is specific to its combination with *stare*.

(23) Ascolano
a. Iava bəvennə, magnennə, schərzennə nda li
go.IMPF.3pl drink.GER eat.GER joke.GER as the
mattə
crazy
'They were drinking, eating, joking as crazy people'
b. *Stava bəvennə, magnennə, schərzennə nda li
stay.IMPF.3PL drink.GER eat.GER joke.GER as the
mattə
crazy
'They were drinking, eating, joking as crazy people'

Nonetheless, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the sentence in (22a), which occurs in our corpus of naturally occurring data, is structurally complex and may independently affect its acceptability. To control for this possibility, we also tested the sentences reported in (25) below, involving the coordination of only two gerunds or infinitives.

(24) Italian
Stavano bevendo e chiacchierando
stay.IMPF.3PL drink.GER and chat.GER
'They were drinking and chatting'

(25) Ascolano
a. *Chigghiə stava/stié bəvennə e chiacchiarennə
those.people stay.IMPF.3PL drink.GER and chat.GER
Intended as 'Those people were drinking and chatting'

[8] We include examples with *andare* + gerund for comparative purposes, as a useful tool to illustrate differences between the three periphrases. However, a detailed analysis of this specific periphrasis falls beyond the scope of this paper.

b. Chigghiə stava/stié a bevə e a
those.people stay.IMPF.3PL to drink.INF and to
chiacchiarà
chat.INF
'Those people were drinking and chatting'

As shown in the Italian example in (24), coordination of two gerunds is not problematic in the progressive construction. However, in Ascolano, only the construction with the infinitive appears to allow coordination, as illustrated in (25b), while the corresponding gerundial construction in (25a) is unacceptable. This contrast between Standard Italian and Ascolano is particularly informative, as it suggests that, in Ascolano, the combination of the auxiliary *stare* with the gerund involves a more restrictive structural relation than the corresponding construction in Standard Italian.

4.5. Compatibility with the frequentative adverb *sembrə*

The fourth diagnostic is aspectual rather than structural in nature and it tests the compatibility of each periphrasis with the frequentative adverb *sembrə* 'always', (cf. Bertinetto & Lenci 2012, Moia 2024). Because pure progressive aspect presents an event as ongoing at a reference time rather than encoding repetition itself, compatibility with frequentative modification may help distinguish the interpretations available with the two periphrases.[9] Thus, the availability or unavailability of *sembrə* within each construction provides evidence about the aspectual value the construction encodes.

The data in (26) confirm this expectation. Indeed, *stare* + infinitive in (26a) is compatible with *sembrə*, suggesting a compatibility with habitual readings. On the other hand, (26b) shows that the habitual dimension is semantically incompatible with the aspectual value of the gerundial construction, which is in line with the well-attested cross-linguistic tension between progressive and habitual aspect (Comrie 1976; Bertinetto 2000; Lenci & Bertinetto 2000, Ferreira 2016). Furthermore, this contrast seems to mirror Laca's (2004a,b) proposal in the sense that the progressive operator encoded by *stare* + gerund is a time-relational operator that cannot be modified by a frequentative adverb without a type mismatch, since it presents a single event as ongoing at reference time rather than describing a recurring pattern. The continuous operator in *stare* + *a* + infinitive is compatible with frequentative modification because it describes the intrinsic temporal profile of the eventuality rather than its relation to a specific reference time.

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[9] Interestingly, in Sardinian Regional Italian, periphrases with *stare* + gerund allow the frequentative adverb to appear between *stare* + gerund as shown in (i) below taken from Caddeo (2019:98).

(i) Sto sempre correndo da una parte all' altra
stay.PRES.1SG always run.GER from one part to.the other
'I am constantly going from one place to another'

The use of *sempre* in this construction points to the realization of continuative aspect. In Ascolano, however, the sentence above would require the use of the auxiliary *go*, as also attested in our corpus and shown in the examples in (27), rather conveying habitual aspect.

(26) Ascolano
a. Sassù sta **sembrə** a lavərà
up.there stay.PRES.3PL always to work.INF
'Up there, they are always working'
b. *Sassù sta **sembrə** lavərennə
up.there stay.PRES.3PL always work.GER
Intended as 'Up there, they are always working'

Interestingly, as also noted for the stacking and coordination of infinitives discussed in Section 4.4, the behavior of the periphrases with *andare* can provide crucial insight into the differences between *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive. Indeed, unlike *stare* + gerund, *andare* + gerund allows the frequentative adverb *sembrə* to appear both between the auxiliary and the gerund (27a–c) and after the gerund (27 b), as illustrated in the examples below:

(27) Ascolano
a. Prima ié **sembrə** piagnennə
before go.IMPF always cry.GER
'Before, I would always cry'
b. Zia è ita **sembrə** rrəbbennə
aunt be.3SG go.PTCP.F.SG always steal.GER
sembrə
always
'My aunt would always steal'
c. Ecchə vadə **sembrə** currəcchiennə
here go.PRES.1SG always run.GER
'I am always very busy'

From an aspectual point of view, the compatibility of the frequentative adverb with *andare* + gerund is consistent with the habitual interpretation expressed by this periphrasis. Thus, both *stare* + *a* + infinitive and *andare* + gerund allow the occurrence of *sembrə*, as the adverb is compatible with the aspectual interpretations available in these constructions, whereas *stare* + gerund does not allow it in the relevant contexts.

4.6 Structural Properties: Embedding of lower aspectual heads

The fifth diagnostic targets the structural properties of the periphrases under examination. Following Ledgeway (2016), and assuming that the use of *stare* in periphrastic constructions lexicalizes the aspectual head AspDurative/Progressive proposed by Cinque (1999, 2006) in his cartographic analysis of the modal and aspectual fields, as represented in (28), taken from Ledgeway (2016:174), *stare* should not be able to embed higher functional heads like perfective *have*/*be,* but it should be able to embed functional heads located lower in the hierarchy.

(28) (Ledgeway 2016:174)
[ModEpistemic/Alethic *dovere/potere* 'must/can' [TP *avere/essere*
'have/be' [AspHabitual *solere* 'be wont' [AspPredispositional *tendere*
'tend' [AspRepetitive *tornare* 'return' [ModVolition *volere* 'want'

[AspTerminative *smettere* ‘cease’ [AspContinuative(I) *continuare* ‘continue’ [**AspDurative/Progressive *stare*** ‘STAND’ [ModObligation/Ability *dovere/potere* ‘must/can’ [AspFrustrative/Success *riuscire* ‘manage’ [ModPermission *potere* ‘may’ [AspConative *provare* ‘try’ [Voice active/passive [Causative *fare* ‘do’ [AspInceptive *cominciare* ‘begin’ [AspAndative *andare* ‘GO’ [AspContinuative(II) *andare* ‘carry on’ [AspCompletive *finire* ‘finish’ [*v*-VP V…

This prediction is borne out by our data, as shown in (29a). In (29a), the auxiliary *stare* embeds the lower AspInceptive head lexicalized by *nghəməngià* ‘start’ when it combines with a gerund. However, when combined with *a* + infinitive the sentence is no longer acceptable, as illustrated in (29b),

(29) Ascolano

a. Ecchə	stié	**nghəməngennə**	a	fabbrəcà	
here	stay.IMPF.3PL	start.GER	to	build.INF	
b. *Ecchə	stié	a	**nghəməngià**	a	lavərà
here	stay.IMPF.3PL	to	start.INF	to	work.INF

‘Here they were starting to build’

The impossibility of embedding AspIncentive with the construction *stare* + *a* + infinitive seems to point to a syntactic difference between the two periphrases. While the combination of *stare* + gerund allows the embedding of the verb ‘*nghəmengià*, ‘to start’, and, therefore, signals its placement in the same aspectual field, *stare* + *a* + infinitive does not allow the corresponding configuration.

It should be noted, however, that the ungrammaticality of (29b) could be argued to result from independent constraints on the stacking of two *a* + infinitive sequences, rather than from the structural properties of stare itself. To control for this possibility, we also tested the completive predicate *fənì də* ‘finish’, which does not introduce a second *a* + infinitive sequence. This allows us to exclude the possibility that the unacceptability of (29b) is simply due to the repetition of *a*. As shown in (30), embedding AspCompletive, the lowest aspectual head in the hierarchy in (28), results in the same contrast: *stare* + gerund is fully acceptable, whereas *stare* + *a* + infinitive is not.

(30) Ascolano

a. Ecché	stié	fənennə	də	fabbrəcà	
here	stay.IMPF.3PL	finish.GER	of	build.INF	

‘Here they were finishing to build houses’

b. *Ecché	stié	a	fənì	də	fabbrəcà
here	stay.IMPF.3PL	to	finish.INF	of	build.INF

Intended as ‘Here they were finishing to build houses’

Taken together, these data reveal a robust structural asymmetry between the two periphrases: the gerundial construction is compatible with at least two aspectual

predicates located below AspDurative/Progressive in the functional hierarchy, namely AspInceptive and AspCompletive, whereas the corresponding infinitival construction is not. As noted by an anonymous reviewer, several structural analyses could in principle account for the asymmetry, including a difference in the functional position lexicalized by the two constructions or restrictions on the size and internal organization of the infinitival complement. Establishing which of these alternatives is correct would require independent diagnostics and lies beyond the scope of the present article.

4.7 Structural Properties: Clitic placement

As our sixth diagnostic, we introduce a highly debated topic that has been extensively discussed in the literature, namely clitic climbing. Starting from the seminal works by Rizzi (1976, 1978), clitic climbing has been argued to be associated with restructuring, i.e., a rule proper to certain modal, aspectual, and motion verbs that transforms a complex structure into a simpler one, thus creating a single complex predicate (Rizzi 1976: 8). In this respect, phenomena like the ones observed for Italian in (31), where the clitic can either occupy a lower or a higher position, are explained as a result of restructuring.

(31) Standard Italian
a. Voglio vederlo
want.PRES.1SG see.INF=CL
'I want to see it'
b. Lo voglio vedere
CL want.PRES.1SG see.INF
'I want to see it'

In particular, Rizzi argues that restructuring can turn an originally bi-clausal construction in (31a) into a mono-clausal construction, as in (31b). Clitic climbing thus becomes available once restructuring takes place and follows from the fact that the higher position of the clitic becomes available once the matrix and infinitival predicates form a single complex predicate.

Cardinaletti & Giusti (2001, 2003), for instance, show that clitic climbing provides a possible diagnostic for mono-clausality in Marsalese. In their analysis of Marsalese periphrases with *andare* + *a* + inflected verb, Cardinaletti & Giusti (2001) show that clitic climbing is obligatory in these constructions, whereas it remains optional with *go* + *a* + infinitive as illustrated in (32) below:

(32) Marsalese (Cardinaletti & Giusti, 2001: 388-389)
a. *Vaju a pìgghiulu
go.1SG to fetch.1sg=CL
'I go and fetch it'
b. U vaju a pigghiu
CL go.1SG to fetch.1SG
'I go and fetch it'
c. ?Vaju a pigghiàllu
go.1SG to fetch.INF=CL
'I go to fetch it'

d. U vaju a pigghiàri
CL go.1SG to fetch.INF
'I go to fetch it'

The obligatoriness of clitic climbing with *andare* + *a* + inflected verb as opposed to its optionality with *andare* + *a* + infinitive indicates that these periphrases might differ in their underlying syntactic structure. Specifically, Cardinaletti & Giusti take obligatory clitic climbing to signal a mono-clausal analysis of *andare* + *a* + inflected verb in which the motion verb *andare* is introduced in the structure as a functional head in the same extended projection as the verb (Cardinaletti & Giusti, 2001: 390). A similar pattern emerges in Ascolano, where the periphrases with *stare* + *a* + infinitive permit the clitic to remain in a lower position, as shown in (33a), or to cliticize onto *stare* (33b).

(33) Ascolano
a. Stava a chiacchiarà, a fa, a bevə,
stay.IMPF.3PL to chat.INF to do.INF to drink.INF
a fas**sə** li partitə
to do.INF=REFL the games
'They were chatting, doing, drinking, playing cards'
b. Sə stava a fa li partitə
REFL stay.IMPF.3PL to do.INF the games
'They were playing cards'
c. *Stava facennə**sə** li partitə
stay.IMPF.3PL do.GER=REFL the games
Intended as 'They were playing cards'
d. Sə stava facennə li partitə
REFL stay.IMPF.3PL do.GER the games
'They were playing cards'

Conversely, as shown in (33c-d), *stare* + gerund obligatorily triggers clitic climbing. As argued for Marsalese, the impossibility of the clitic to remain in a lower position, as in (33c), suggests that *stare* + gerund should receive a mono-clausal analysis as argued for the periphrases with *go* + *a* + inflected verb analyzed by Cardinaletti & Giusti (2001), and for *stare* + gerund by Casalicchio & Migliori (2018), among others. Conversely, *stare* + *a* + infinitive allows the clitic to either climb and cliticize onto the auxiliary *stare* or remain low. This piece of evidence, however, does not necessarily correlate with a mono-clausal vs. bi-clausal distinction. Cinque (2006), for instance, argues that, in cases of optional clitic placement such as those shown in (33a–b), the absence of clitic climbing does not prevent these constructions from receiving a mono-clausal analysis, on a par with structures displaying obligatory clitic climbing, as in (33c–d). In his view, the absence of clitic climbing does not by itself provide conclusive evidence for bi-clausality**.** Conversely, in his analysis of clitic positions in Conversanese introduced in §2, Lorusso (2019) argues that the availability or unavailability of clitic climbing does not constitute a reliable diagnostic for the mono-clausal vs. bi-clausal status of these constructions. Indeed, Manzini, Lorusso and Savoia (2017), as well as Lorusso (2019), argue that treating clitic climbing as evidence for mono-clausality creates significant problems when considering cross-

linguistic variation. In particular, they claim that it would be theoretically undesirable to posit two distinct derivations for the same construction on the basis of whether clitic climbing happens to be available in a given variety. Instead, they propose that the presence or absence of clitic climbing correlates with other, independent parameters and should therefore not be taken as direct evidence for the mono-clausal versus bi-clausal status of these constructions.

In this article, we restrain from arguing in favor of a mono-clausal analysis for *stare* + gerund and a bi-clausal analysis for *stare* + *a* + infinitive, instead, we wish to show that, on the basis of the diagnostics outlined so far, the two periphrases display different behavior in both aspectual and structural terms, possibly pointing to an underlying structural difference.

4.8. Summary

Overall, we have shown that, from both an aspectual and a structural perspective, the constructions *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive do not exhibit the same properties. As summarized in Table 2, from an aspectual point of view, both *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive allow temporal anchoring with *mo* 'now', but they diverge in terms of their compatibility with the frequentative adverb *sembrə* 'always' and with perfect and simple past morphology, in that only *stare* + *a* + infinitive can appear with these forms. In terms of compatibility with aspectual classes, *stare* + gerund is less restrictive and can also appear with achievement predicates. From a structural point of view, the two constructions differ substantially with respect to the availability of multiple non-finite predicates, the embedding of lower aspectual predicates, and, to a lesser extent, clitic climbing.

Table 2. Aspectual and structural properties: Summary

	Stare + gerund	**Stare + a + infinitive**
Temporal anchoring with *mo*	+	+
Compatibility with achievements	+	-
Perfective morphology	-	+
Multiple non finite predicates	-	+
Compatibility with *sembrə*	-	+
Embedding under lower aspectual heads	+	-
Clitic climbing	+	+/-

In the next section, we will analyze these results by combining both the aspectual and structural considerations and propose an explanation for the different distribution of *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive in Ascolano.

5. Progressive periphrases: a grammaticalization account

In order to explain the aspectual and syntactic differences displayed by *stare* + *gerund* and *stare* + *a* + *infinitive*, we adopt here a grammaticalization-based analysis (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994; Squartini 1998, Hopper & Traugott 2003; Ledgeway 2016,

a.o). It has been widely observed in the literature (Comrie 1976; Traugott 1978; Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994; Mateu & Amadas 1999; Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarria 2000, *a.o.*) that progressive constructions often originate from locative structures, typically involving locative prepositions of central coincidence (Hale 1986), i.e., prepositions that indicate correspondence between a place and an entity, such as *in*, *at*, or *on*, or verbs denoting location or posture, such as *be*, *stay*, or *live* (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca, 1994). These observations seem to be typologically robust, as shown by Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca's (1994) survey of 38 languages, which consistently demonstrates that the progressive aspect usually requires the presence of a locative element.[10] This is evident, for instance, in the examples below from Basque, Welsh, and Dutch, as cited in Mateu & Amadas (1999:161), where the progressive is conveyed by the presence of a prepositional element.

(34) Basque

a.Miren liburua irakur-tze-**n** dago
Miren-ABS book-ABS read-NOM-LOC be.3SG.ABS
'Miren is reading the book'

b. Welsh

Mae Rhiannon **yn** cysgu
is Rhiannon in sleep.INF
'Rhiannon is sleeping'

c. Dutch

Ik ben **aan** het/'t werken
I am ON the work.INF
'I am working'

As we have argued above, in the Romance languages, this development is particularly evident in the use of the verb *stare*, derived from Latin *STARE* 'to stand', in combination with the gerund to express progressive aspect.[11] The periphrasis *stare* + *gerund* thus constitutes an interesting case of grammaticalization, since both the

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[10] However, see Cinque (2017) for examples of progressive periphrases that do not involve a locative element. This is for instance the case of 'Hold' progressives of the type found in the Abruzzo-Molise dialects as shown in the example below from Cinque (2017:217):

(i) Teném a mmagnà
hold.1PL to eat.INF
'We are eating'

[11] Interestingly, there are some Romance languages that do not express progressive aspect with the periphrasis *stare* + gerund but use locative periphrases instead. This is for instance the case of French (i) but also of Paduan (ii) and Gardenese (iii) (taken from Casalicchio & Migliori 2018:258).

(i) Je suis en train de manger
I be.1SG in process of eat.INF

(ii) So drio magnare
be.1SG after eat.INF

(iii) Son tl lëur de maië
be.1SG in.the work of eat.INF
"I am eating"

lexical verb *stare* and the gerund could be argued to preserve a locative component in their semantics. In this respect, the construction can be viewed as the outcome of a grammaticalization process in which the locative meaning of both elements is reinterpreted in aspectual terms, a development further supported by the widely held view that gerunds themselves historically derive from locative elements (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994; Mateu 2002; Gallego 2010).

In their analysis of progressive constructions, Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca (1994) outline the fundamental steps that these structures undergo. Crucially, the locative meaning of progressive constructions originates as "the subject is located in the midst of doing something" (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca, 1994:136). The locative component, therefore, encodes both a locative and a temporal meaning, specifying the circumstances under which the event is taking place. It follows then that these constructions are more frequent with activity verbs and generally are not compatible with states (cf. Comrie 1976; Squartini 1998; Ramchand 2018, among others) if not under coercion. Indeed, as also argued by Squartini (1990, 1998:85), progressive constructions tend to appear with activity verbs first and then extend to telic aspectual classes, such as accomplishments and achievements. For Italian, for instance, Bertinetto (1986, 2000) shows that the extension of the progressive periphrasis to achievements represents a gradual broadening rather than a proper categorial shift, albeit still showing restrictions with stative verbs. This extension of the periphrasis to other aspectual classes is compatible with the idea that the lexical verb *stare* undergoes a process of grammaticalization whereby the locative meaning is gradually bleached. From a broader Romance perspective, Squartini (1998) has shown that progressive periphrases can exhibit varying degrees of grammaticalization. Taking into account Italian and Spanish, he argues that while Italian imposes tense restrictions on *stare* + gerund, as also illustrated in §4.3, Spanish does not, thus allowing perfective morphology to surface with *estar* + gerund. In Squartini's (1998: 75) view, this is due to the fact that, while in Italian the progressive periphrasis is restricted to contexts in which the situation is presented as ongoing at a specific time, thus acquiring a more specialized aspectual value, in Spanish *estar* + gerund can also occur with perfective morphology because it still retains a durative value.

From a grammaticalization perspective, this amounts to saying that the Italian progressive periphrasis represents a more advanced stage of grammaticalization than its Spanish counterpart, having become more specialized as an imperfective aspectual marker. A similar remark is also made in Ledgeway (2009) concerning the difference between *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive in Neapolitan. Recall that, as anticipated in §1.1, in Neapolitan both periphrases are in use, although they differ in the degree of desemanticization of *stare*: *stare* + gerund shows a higher degree of grammaticalization and freely occurs also with stative predicates, while *stare* + *a* + infinitive displays stricter distributional properties in terms of aspectual classes, since it is not compatible with motion verbs like 'to go out', but it also shows a higher degree of morphosyntactic freedom, since it is compatible with perfective tenses. In this paper, we wish to argue that in Ascolano the two periphrases show similar properties to those already outlined for Neapolitan, albeit with some differences, most notably the use of *stare* + gerund in present-tense contexts, which appears to be restricted to Neapolitan. Indeed, the diagnostics outlined so far have shown both aspectual and syntactic differences that can be traced back to the different degree of desemanticization of the posture verb *stare*. From an aspectual point of view, the

compatibility of *stare* + gerund with all *Aktionsart* classes, the impossibility of appearing with perfective tenses, and its categorical exclusion of the frequentative adverb seem to point to a more highly grammaticalized status in which the lexical verb *stare* has been stripped of its original locative semantics, thus acquiring a purely functional status. This claim is also supported from a syntactic perspective in that *stare* + gerund exhibits a lower degree of freedom concerning the possibility of stacking and coordinating predicates and with respect to clitic climbing. *Stare* + *a* + infinitive, on the other hand, imposes aspectual restrictions in that it is not compatible with achievements, which require a punctual reading, but it allows the frequentative adverb to appear freely either between *stare* and *a* or after the lexical verb. Finally, in this periphrasis, as shown in § 4.3, and similarly to Spanish, *stare* can appear in perfective tenses. These aspectual observations seem to suggest that in the infinitival periphrasis *stare* has not been completely bleached of its lexical meaning and might still retain, to a certain extent, a locative semantics. Syntactically, this is also implied by the greater structural flexibility that this periphrasis displays in terms of stacking and coordinating infinitives and the optionality of clitic climbing.

Crucially, the grammaticalization analysis that we have proposed also aligns with Laca's (2004a,b) distinction presented above. Recall that Laca (2004a,b) argues in favor of a distinction between two types of aspectual periphrases, i.e., syntactic aspect periphrases and eventuality modification periphrases. Syntactic aspect periphrases pattern with grammatical aspect in that they do not modify the temporal structure of the eventuality itself but rather impose a particular viewpoint on it. On the other hand, eventuality modification periphrases are more subtle because they map an eventuality with a specific temporal structure onto a new eventuality which, in turn, might display a different temporal structure. From this it follows that these periphrases might impose semantic restrictions on the predicates they combine with.

Given our Ascolano data we follow Laca (2004a,b) in arguing that *stare* + gerund patterns as an expression of syntactic progressive aspect, whereas *stare* + *a* + infinitive overlaps with eventuality modification periphrases, which are consistent with their greater distributional 'freedom' and compatibility with frequentative adverbs.

It remains nonetheless open why *stare* + *a* + infinitive imposes severe constraints on the embedding of lower function heads as opposed to *stare* + gerund. Indeed, as also pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, this result should predict that, by virtue of displaying a lower grammaticalized status, the infinitival periphrasis should be able to embed lower functional heads without any restrictions. One possible explanation for this restriction is semantic rather than purely structural, in the sense of Laca (2004b). In other words, the embedding of the two aspectual heads tested above, namely AspIncentive and AspCompletive would force a sort of bounded/punctual interpretation similar to achievement predicates which, as we argued extensively in this paper, is not compatible with *stare* + *a* + infinitive. This is predicted precisely by the nature of these constructions as eventuality modification periphrases.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we have examined the distribution and the properties of two progressive periphrases in Ascolano, namely *stare* + gerund and *stare* + *a* + infinitive, with the aim of determining whether they are in free variation or encode distinct

aspectual values. From a broader perspective, we have argued that the two constructions are not straightforwardly interchangeable and that their distribution is consistent with a division of labor within the imperfective domain.

The diagnostics presented here converge on a relatively coherent picture. *Stare* + gerund exhibits the canonical properties of a progressive aspect marker with a more grammaticalized syntax, while *stare* + *a* + infinitive is consistent with continuous or durative aspect situating itself on a lower position in the grammaticalization scale. From an aspectual point of view, we argued that this contrast can be captured by Laca's (2004a,b) distinction between syntactic aspect and eventuality modification periphrases. *Stare* + gerund appears as a time-relational operator, while the *stare* + *a* + infinitive pattern with eventuality modification.

These findings have potential implications for our understanding of the imperfective domain in Italo-Romance and for grammaticalization research more broadly. They suggest that apparent synonymy between competing periphrases within a single variety may often conceal a principled division of labor, recoverable through careful diagnostic testing. Several questions, however, remain open. For instance, the precise semantic relationship between continuous and progressive aspect in this variety deserves further investigation as well as a detailed aspectual and structural analysis of *andare* + gerund, which we have only hinted at in relation to iteration and coordination of infinitives and the compatibility with frequentative adverbs. Future work should also examine whether the pattern attested in Ascolano extends to neighboring varieties of the Marche and Abruzzo regions, and whether the structural parameters identified here hold more generally across the Central-Southern Italo-Romance continuum.

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Author contributions statement

V.G./J.Z: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing (Original Draft).
V.G.: Data Curation (Review & Editing).
V.G./J.Z: Formal Analysis, Writing (Review & Editing).

Disclosure of AI Use

AI tools were used primarily to assist with the generation of the plot shown in Figure 1 and with manuscript editing.
Claude Sonnet 5.5 was used to assist in generating the script used to produce the plot in Figure 1. The resulting script was subsequently reviewed by the authors.

Grammarly (integrated into Google Docs) and ChatGPT were used to improve the manuscript's spelling, grammar, clarity, and overall coherence.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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