

THE DESCENDANTS OF THE LATIN VERBS *ESSE* AND *STARE* IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN : DRAFT FOR A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

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1 The etymons

1.1 The Latin etymons *essere* and *stare*

In Latin, the verb *esse* – which is substituted by the verb *essere* in vulgar Latin – declared state of being and the verb *stare* signified “to stand up”, “to be motionless”. These two verbs have generated two independent and competing verbs in Spanish: *ser* and *estar*, two Italian verbs: *essere* and *stare* and only one French verb: *être*. The two Italian verbs have unequal importance as regards their frequency and syntactic uses when the French verb *être* combines the formal and semantic features of the two Latin etymons: actually, *être* chooses either a paradigm derived from *essere* (i. e. *je suis*) or a paradigm from *stare* (i. e. *j'étais*).

Italian has kept the initial discrimination and has created two different verbs, *essere* and *stare*. The former has extended its numbers of uses much more than the latter, whose possibilities of discursive uses are fewer in number and more marginal: the only occurrence in which *essere* cannot compete with *stare*, is when *stare* is used as an auxiliary of the gerundious.

Spanish produced two different verbs too, *ser* and *estar*, which have a quite homogeneous partition of discursive uses. Nevertheless, this partition has been engendered after a period of competition with two other verbs, which were referring, as *stare*, to a precise corporal posture: *yacer*, “to lie”, and *seer*, “to sit”. Therefore, above all, the specified location in space was determinant for the discrimination of the declaration of existence:

(1) [...] *debe el rey seer muy apuesto, tambien en su andar como en estar en pie, et otrosi en seyendo et en cabalgando, et otro tal quando comiere o bebiere, et otrosi en su yacer, et aun quando dixiese alguna razon. Ca el andar non conviene que lo faga mucho apriesa nin muy de vagar ; otrosi estar mucho en pie non debe, sinon fuese en la iglesia [...]* (Las siete partidas del rey don Alfonso el Sabio, cotejadas con varios códices antiguos por la Real Academia de la Historia, Tomo II, Partida segunda, 1807, p. 27, en M. F. DELPORT 2009 : 123)

Gradually, the use of *estar* has been extended and the uses of *ser* have been diminishing until the actual situation.

Straightaway, we should say that *essere* and *stare* maintain the confusion in their conjugation in the compound tenses: indeed, it is impossible to differentiate the one from the other, being given that *stato* is the participle of both verbs. So, we can notice that from what can be first observed – the signifier –, the border between *essere* and *stare*, if not invisible, appears at least obscure and difficult to identify.

1.2 Principal uses

The five verbs *essere*, *ser*, *être*, *stare* and *estar* can be used as copula with a substantive or an adjective. They also operate in the formation of the passive and the aspectual periphrasis, excepting *ser* in the last occurrence. In compound tenses, *essere* alternates with *avere* in Italian, like contemporary French with *être* and *avoir* and like medieval Spanish with *aver* and *ser*, but not in the same way.

1.3 Theoretical model

If we focus on the concept of the descendants of the Latin etymons *essere* and *stare* as existence verbs, we verify that Italian and Spanish, with a different intensity, let two semiological treads of the two ways of “being” given to us by the experiential world that French language doesn’t distinguish: « L’être s’insère entre le devenir antécédent qui l’a créé, qui s’est accompli en lui, et le devenir conséquent et inaccompli que l’avenir lui destine.¹ » (G. GUILLAUME 1969 : 85). From this point of view, in notional chronology, the Italian *essere* would be prior to *stare*, like *ser* and *estar* in Spanish, as M. Molho (1969 : 92-93) indicated it:

La représentation assignée à ESTAR est celle d’une position acquise. Subséquent au devenir qui a apporté l’être (SER), le propre de ESTAR est de le situer dans la perspective d’un devenir ultérieur qui l’emporte [...]. [...] ESTAR s’adosse en espagnol à SER, dont il est, dans le champ de la notion d’« être » non quittée, l’immédiate ultériorité².

We will try to keep this theoretical stream aiming to understand in the best possible way what additional semantic weight the verb *stare* does carry with itself with regard to the verb *essere*.

¹ Personal translation from French : “The being inserts itself between the previous future which has created it, which has been achieved in it, and the consequent and unfulfilled future that the future sets aside for it.”

² Personal translation from French : “The representation attached to ESTAR is the one of an established position. Subsequent to the future which has provided the being (SER), the distinctive feature of ESTAR is to situate it into the prospect of a later future which takes it away [...]. [...] In Spanish, ESTAR leans against SER, of which it is, in the range of the “being” notion not left yet, the instantaneous ulteriority.”

2 Corpus analysis

2.1 Spatial location

Spatial location doesn't state a real problem in contemporary Spanish: if we exclude the specific occurrences in which *ser* is used to locate an event – *¿Dónde es la fiesta?* –, *estar* is always used to locate a subject in space: the sentence

- (2) *Detrás de la plaza, y por la parte de la casa de don Jesús estaba la parroquial con su campanario de piedra y su esquilón que sonaba de una manera que no podría contar [...].* (C. J. CELA [1942] 1999 : 27)

would result ungrammatical if *ser* was substituted for *estar*. In contemporary Italian, the phenomenon seems to be much more delicate and, above all, much less clear for who wishes to know on which conceptual pillars the semantic discrimination between *essere* and *stare* is based. Actually, how can we reject a priori the identical nature of the informative content given by the two following sentences?:

- (3 a) *La strada litoranea, sul capo, passava alta; il mare era laggiù a strapiombo e dappertutto intorno, fino all'orizzonte alto e sfumato.* (I. CALVINO [1970] 2002 : 83)
- (3 b) *Stavo là, seduto davanti alla casa di Ramutha, sotto il pergolato di rose, e guardavo la luna [...].* (S. VASSALLI 1999 : 152)

Two sentences in which the commutation of *stare* by *essere* is possible without resulting in any ungrammatical utterance.

What we immediately can infer from these three Italian examples is that the problem of *essere* or *stare*'s use for the location of someone or something in space doesn't lie in a correct or incorrect, compatible or incompatible syntactic predisposition with one or the other verb, but in *how* they assert the existence and the subject's location in space.

2.1.1 The uses with a prepositional syntagm

By now, let's have a look to the phenomenon of alternation between *essere* and *stare* followed by a prepositional syntagm like *in chiesa*, *in casa*, *a casa* or *in albergo*. In this sentence:

- (4 a) [...] *Nelle chiese la gente si annoia non si sa quanto. Guardali mentre stanno in chiesa, vedrai che non ce n'è uno solo che non si annoi da morire.* (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 309)

the subject of *stare* is "la gente", that is to say a general human entity which is considered as a whole, and the indicative present here employed remits to an action which is able to happen again. When observing the following example

- (4 b) [*Il vescovo*] *Nogaro è salito sul pulpito e ha preso la parola, sorprendendo anche tutti i presenti che erano in chiesa, almeno un migliaio di persone [...].* («La Repubblica Napoli» 15/12/2008)

we notice that “erano” remits to “tutti i presenti”, a subject to whom “particularizing” properties are added immediately after – “almeno un migliaio di persone” – and which, at the same time, is the object of *sorprendere*, a verb which strenghtens the punctual aspect of the action which is executed – at preterite time – by the bishop . All that imparts to the sentence a unique and exceptional nature and prevents it to happen again. In these two examples, *essere* or *stare* don’t seem to furnish us any different information as for the spatial notion: they only allow us to know that the people are in the church and nothing else.

The same thing can be deduced from the examination of the occurrences in which the adverbial phrase of place *in casa* appears:

- (5 a) “*Ma quando studiate?*” *mi bisbiglia mia madre. Gliel’avevo detto di non venire, che lei non è una madre preparata, non sa niente delle innovazioni didattiche, è ferma a un tempo da antediluvio universale dove si stava in casa chini sui libri.* (P. MASTROCOLA 2004: 13)

In this example, *stare* is present with an impersonal form and the part of time implied by the imperfect tense doesn’t have precise limits. These limits are so hazy and uncertain that the narrator defines this period as a “universal antediluvian time”; whereas the following example

- (5 b) [...] *un maggiordomo tarchiato e calvo [...] mi informò che la "signora marchesa" era in casa.* (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 128)

manifestly signalizes us the person is in the house is from a determined social stratum, who is called “Madam” and whose title is put forward by means of the quotation marks. In this situation, it is a punctual fact too because in this moment, and only in this moment, the narrator can get in touch with “la "signora marchesa"”. However, it is clear that this fact can happen again in the experiential world but nothing in the sentence itself nor in the syntactic order engendered by the signs here present is able to let us assert with certainty that this event will happen again in an imminent or remote future.

Concerning the *stare a casa* group, the things seem to be the same: the sentence

- (6 a) [...] *sua moglie si è slogata una caviglia e da due mesi è a casa immobile [...].* (P. MASTROCOLA 2004: 204)

works under the same rules as the previous example: a precise period and a punctual event, and a subject whose corporal posture is clarified. In contrast, we have the example below:

- (6 b) [...] “*Ma insomma perché [papà] scappava di casa o, come dici tu, perché viaggiava? Perché non restava con te?*” “*Perché non gli piaceva stare a casa.*” “*E perché non gli piaceva stare a casa? Si annoiava?*” » (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 30)

The fact that the father doesn’t like being at home is timeless and we don’t know anything of the activities he applies in this place.

Paradoxically, as soon as it regards a wider place or an outside place, so when the place concerned is less tangible and gets less defined – or less definable – limits, things change. Actually, when the adverbial phrase which goes with *essere* or *stare* is formed by an adverb of place or a little bit more complex structure than the mere *preposition* + *substantive* combination, the constant we have found in all the former examples reverses itself. Now, let’s examine the following sentence:

- (7) *Mi misi al volante nel momento che l'altra macchina sbucava sullo spiazzo e vi si fermava. Mia madre, adesso, stava sulla soglia di casa in atto di chi si prepari a ricevere degli ospiti di riguardo»* (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 139)

The *adesso* adverb indicates a break between two distinct moments and in the second moment of them *stare* takes place (but only in this second moment). The adverbial phrase of manner “in atto di chi si prepari a ricevere degli ospiti di riguardo” implies a precise subject’s position, a pertinent corporal posture. Well, as it happened with the adverbial phrases of place added to *essere* and formed by *a* or *in* + *substantive*, *stare* appears in the same types of *particularizing* contexts, some contexts which furnish us information about the temporal surrounding and about the subject itself.

2.1.2 The uses with an adverb of place

Thus, the sentence we have just observed is representative of many other having an adverb of place showing a verb *stare* in an accidental, contingent context, and of which informative content must assume one of the following characteristics at least to receive this verb in its completeness: either a *temporal marker*, or a marker which expresses a specific subject’s posture that we could denominate *corporal marker*.

The presence of the adverb *via* seems us to be a relevant example regarding the presence or absence of temporal markers because they let the semantic discrimination between *essere* and *stare* appear clearly. From the semantic point of view, on the one hand the group *essere via* doesn’t receive any external information which is able to specify any temporal notion, while on the other hand a temporal precision is systematically added to the group *stare via*:

- (8) [...] *se Ross è via, di chi era il reggiseno sulla sedia in sala?* (A. INCORVAIA y A. RIMASSA 2006 : 9-10)

- (8 a) « *Guarda che sto via due giorni, mi mandano a Barcellona per lavoro. Ci vediamo venerdì [...].* » (A. INCORVAIA y A. RIMASSA 2006 : 17)

- (8 b) [...] *Quanto tempo dovrebbe stare via?* (WU MING 2008 : 4)

2.1.3 The uses with a prepositional phrase

The adverbial phrases of place formed by a prepositional phrase present an interesting manifestation of the presence or absence of the phenomenon that we have previously called the *temporal* and *corporal markers*.

Often, in a sentence with a prepositional phrase, *essere*, the same way as the *preposition* + *substantive* constructions, is preceded by a *temporal marker* which divides the sentence period into two distinct and opposite periods: the upsurge of the group *essere* + *prep. phrase* + *substantive* turns on the second period, as we can infer from these three sentences:

- (9 a) *La notizia che Mecenate stava ritornando ad Arezzo ci aveva preceduto di villaggio in villaggio ed era arrivata a destinazione un po’ prima di noi. Ce ne rendemmo conto quando fummo davanti alle mura di quella città e vedemmo un corteo che usciva per venire a incontrarci [...].* (S. VASSALLI 1999 : 151)

- (9 b) *La tela incompiuta non poteva essere che quella sulla quale Balestrieri stava ritraendo, poco prima di morire, la giovanissima amante; confesso che ora mi pungeva la curiosità di vedere come ella fosse fatta. Ma come fui davanti alla tela provai un senso di incredulità e di delusione.* (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 77)

Unlike this pattern, the *stare + prep. phrase. + substantive* group's linearity frequently finds itself truncated by the addition of a *corporal marker* which remits to the subject's position, to his or her posture (sitting down, standing up, lying) and inserts itself in the middle of the structure:

- (10 a) *La porta della cucina era aperta e la madre, in cappotto e con il cappello sulla testa, stava in piedi davanti ai fornelli [...].* (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 189)

- (10 b) “[...] Lasciami la vita, e condannami a stare seduto in cima a un palo...”. (S. VASSALLI 1999 : 206)

2.1.4 *Essere / Stare in piedi*

The alternance *essere in piedi / stare in piedi* is a special case. Let's examine the following sentences :

- (11 a) « *Torno a sedere* » *ella disse stando in piedi, a gambe larghe [...].* (A. MORAVIA [1944] 2002 : 335)

- (11 b) *Zia Elsa sta in piedi al fondo del letto. Mi guarda. Lei mi guarda e basta.* (P. MASTROCOLA 2004 : 107)

Considering the examples in which *stare* appears, what strikes first is the systematic contribution of a spatial piece of information furnished by the context: suppose space refers to the global utterance or to the subject's posture, it may vary; the main thing is that there isn't any structure *stare in piedi* without an outside semantic contribution which places the subject into a space or which carves his or her body into a posture. Regarding the combinations with *essere*, if it is possible to find *temporal markers* – like in the combinations with *stare* –, we never find *spatial markers* in the sentences in which this verb appears and, unlike the combination with *estar*, when a precision completes the subject's posture, this one compares it with the one or the other person whom the utterance refers or with another entity:

- (12) *Quando l'applauso finì, il padrone di casa, che era in piedi come la maggior parte dei suoi ospiti, si rivolse all'erede di Cesare.* (S. VASSALLI 1999 : 45)

2.2 Temporal location

2.2.1 The *operative* passive

Above all, it is appropriate to say we will differentiate the *operative* passive, which gives us the representation of an event in progress, from the *resultative* passive, which gives us the representation of a completed event. Consequently, we will adopt the

distinction between *past participle* and *participial adjective*, according to the Marie-France Delpont's terminology³.

Operative passive's formation is the *essere*'s prerogative and never *stare*'s one, the same way of contemporary Spanish:

(13 a) *Avremmo voluto andarcene, ma non riuscivamo a muoverci perché eravamo stretti dalla folla che anzi ci spingeva in avanti [...].* (S. VASSALLI 1999 : 89)

(13 b) *[...] sul punto di scegliere il disco, questo pensiero mi paralizzava: qual è la musica che può essere ascoltata nei momenti di noia?* (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 21)

We should mention that *essere* shares this possibility with *venire*, to highlight the action, according to a few grammars (« *Venire* remplace souvent *essere* et met l'accent sur l'action subie : *Venne condotto in carcere*⁴ » : O. y G. ULYSSE 1988 : 105) or to insist on progressive aspect (« *Venire* [...] ha un leggero valore aspettuale di progressività : *La guerra venne vinta dai romani*⁵ » : P. D'ACHILLE 2003 : 116)... As we see it, it is necessary to study these assertions cautiously when observing sentences like the following one, which doesn't provide any proof of the two theoretical positions:

(14) *Chiamai: "Pronto, pronto," domandai più volte: "chi parla?" e alla fine sentii che, dall'altro capo del filo, il ricevitore veniva abbassato. Rifeci rabbiosamente il numero, mi fu risposto di nuovo con il silenzio e con quel misterioso respiro e di nuovo, alla fine, fu abbassato il ricevitore.* (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 146)

2.2.2 The *resultative* passive

Whereas the *resultative* passive's formation is the only *estar*'s prerogative, contemporary Italian presents an interesting competence occurrence:

(15 a) *La madre era già seduta a tavola.* (A. MORAVIA [1944] 2002 : 405)

(15 b) *Oggi mia madre quando entro è seduta al tavolo e se ne sta senza far niente, cosa molto rara.* (P. MASTROCOLA 200 : 53)

(15 c) *Sul piccolo tavolo di Guido sono allineati i libri della sua vita [...].* (A. TABUCCHI [1985] 2006 : 64)

In these examples with *essere*, the action is seen in its course and the few *temporal markers* don't allow us to know when it had begun. If we are able to discover which action the subjects are executing ("se ne sta senza far niente") or which part they are playing (in (15 d), Guido's books are the ones of "his life"), we fail to learn details about the posture they adopt or in which they are. In fact, in these contexts, the participial adjective only indicates that the subject is in a given position but doesn't provide any assistance out of itself to complete the declaration of this corporal posture. By means of its semantic properties, the participial adjective declares but doesn't clarify.

³ In French, Marie-France Delpont uses the terms *participe* (for *past participle*) and *adjectif participial* (for *participial adjective*).

⁴ Personal translation from French : « *Venire* often substitute *essere* and brings out the undergone action: *Venne condotto in carcere* ».

⁵ Personal translation from Italian : « *Venire* [...] possesses a light aspectual value of progressivity: *La guerra venne vinta dai romani* ».

Know, let's observe the examples with *stare*:

(16 a) *Il Saro stava disteso con la testa appoggiata al sedile [...].* (A. MORAVIA [1944] 2002 : 371)

(16 b) *[...] il cielo non si era ancora pulito: nuvole nere [...] stavano sospese in strati immobili sopra questa verdura ancora primaverile.* (A. MORAVIA [1960] 2002 : 298)

(16 c) *Tutti in fila contro la stessa parete, stavano allineati la vasca da bagno, il bidé, il lavandino e la tazza.* (A. MORAVIA [1960], 2002 : 185)

Here, the participial adjective's semantism continue to describe the posture and doesn't say anything else than what the examples with *essere* do. But the difference lies in the supplementary information given by the construction which begins with. This information doesn't affect the constructions with *essere*: the precise and located part of a body position ("con la testa appoggiata al sedile") for animated objects, and the posture in comparison to the others for the animated objects, followed or preceded by a *spatial marker* ("in strati immobili sopra questa verdura", "Tutti in fila contro la stessa parete"). In this occurrence, the *spatial marker* precises if this posture is a vertical one or a horizontal one.

3 Hypothesis

3.1 Corporal posture and subject's attitude

Following what we have just noted, the phrase *essere/stare in piedi* raises the issue of the subject's corporal posture and reappraises the questions about it. The prepositional group signifies yet in itself a very precise corporal posture and it is necessary to be particularly careful not to mix the *stare*'s semantic contribution with the group *in piedi*'s one when both appear in concomitance. It would be necessary to try to find what does the one means and what the other does not mean: actually, this combination *stare in piedi* is quite redundant and superfluous but it is the one which appears the most compared to the combination with *essere*.

The following example allows us to conduct a contrastive analysis of both verbs within few time of each other in two consecutive sentences:

(18 a) *È in piedi, rigida come il Destino, circondata da tre sbirri [...]. Intorno, la Polizia Giudiziaria dà prova di un attivismo da formicaio [...]. Insomma, se ne sta in piedi nel misero ufficio, la mia Thérèse, tutta gomiti e ginocchia, troppo alta per la sua età, e nel vederla lì [...], mi piglia una botta d'amore.* (D. PENNAC [1991] 2004 : 162)

We notice that in the first sentence Thérèse "è in piedi", is standing up, with the precision that she is rigid, but this attitude is revealed to us by the comparison with destiny (what's more, the subject is surrounded by three policemen). In the last sentence, the narrator's sister "se ne sta in piedi" – in order to strengthen the rigid attitude –, is standing up again, but in the study and "tutta gomiti e ginocchia". It is interesting to compare this translation into Italian with the original French text:

(18 b) Elle **est debout**, rigide comme le Destin, entourée de trois flics [...]. Tout autour, la P.J. déploie une activité de ruche [...]. Bref, elle **se tient debout** dans ce bureau miteux, ma Thérèse, toute en coudes et genoux, trop grande pour son âge, et de la voir là [...], ça me fout un choc d'amour. (D. PENNAC 1985 : 230).

Apparently, French language decides to resort to the verb *être* to translate *essere*, whereas it prefers to translate *starsene* – with the adverbial pronoun *ne* and the reflexive pronoun *s[e]* – by *se tenir*, which indicates clearly a corporal posture too.

By the means of this example of the *essere in piedi* and *star(sene) in piedi* concomitance we come to the conclusion that the two groups remit to the same subject's posture and attitude, but in a different way: *essere in piedi* refers to a standing up subject without any other precision; *stare in piedi* refers to a standing up subject in the concluded moment of this standing action itself and then allows that later information like *corporal* or *attitude markers* strengthen the subject's physical fixity. This partition in two times indicated by the two verbs seems to play a relevant part in the process of the passive voice in Spanish and Italian.

3.2 From beginning to end

The *resultative* passive whose *stare* is at the head is frequently strengthened by the details about the subject's corporal posture or about his or her physical attitude, details which seem to confirm the finished aspect of the action contained in the combination *stare + participial adjective*. On the contrary, the resultative passive with *essere*, by the means of the adverbs of time, clearly indicates that the action is considered from the point of view of the actual moment of its course, and even though there can be a spatial precision in the context in which it appears, this precision never seems to be as clear as in the contexts in which *stare* takes place.

Then, if we focus on the signifier of the past participle, the identification of an *operative* or *resultative intention* within an utterance becomes impossible: completing the auxiliary *ser/essere* or the auxiliary *estar/stare*, this one varies morphologically according to the patient's number and gender, unlike the constructions in which it gets in contact with *haber* or *tener* in Spanish (“*estos poemas, los he escrito*” / “*estos poemas, los tengo escritos*”). Therefore, it falls to *essere* or *stare* to mark one or the other intention out. In the Middle Ages, *ser* had all the possibilities *essere* and *être* have nowadays: the semantic extension of *ser* has been limited to the benefit of *estar*. The latter became gradually for the *resultative intention* and *stare* owns semantic properties less extensive than the ones of the contemporary *estar*, since it has to share the *resultative intention* with *essere*.

To sum up, we could have an increase of the event observed from its starting point – the less concluded and morphologically more verbal point – until its final point – the more concluded and morphologically more nominal point – illustrated in the board below:

- × —————▶ ×			
+			
OPERATION	OPERATIVE PASSIVE	RESULTATIVE PASSIVE	
ITALIAN	<i>Essere</i> + past part.	<i>Essere</i> + participial adj.	<i>Stare</i> + participial adj.
SPANISH	<i>Ser</i> + past part.	<i>Estar</i> + participial adj.	
FRENCH	<i>Être</i> + past part.	<i>Être</i> + participial adj.	

In this way, the division between the two passive's types precisely illustrates the link between time and space. What's more, the examples we have analyzed here reveal us that anything remitting to time has to be studied without the resort of space: when *essere* or *stare* locates a subject into the space, the choice of one or the other verb seems to be made in accordance with what the *temporal markers* are stating.

3.3 The choice's moment

In spite of the regularity we have found in the uses with prepositional phrase, sometimes *essere* and *stare* are in competition and the part that *essere* usually plays in this kind of sentences, *stare* can play it too and vice versa. Thus, in the following example:

- (19) *Quando riuscivamo a scambiarci le nostre confidenze senza che Quinzione ci ascoltasse, o quando lui, per castigo, ci costringeva a stare un'intera giornata dentro agli stanzini dei maiali, bassi e sudici, la fantasia ci portava lontano da quel luogo e dalla nostra condizione di schiavi [...].* (S. VASSALLI 1999 : 14)

we realize that in the group *stare* + *prep. phrase* a temporal precision is inserted, as in to the *temporal markers'* three examples with *essere*. So, we face an occurrence of competition in which the commutation of *essere* by *stare* would be possible at first sight. But at first sight only, because if we go near to the observation of the *endochrony* contained in the marker “un'intera giornata”, we see that this temporal unit cannot be divided into two different periods, as it happens with the group *essere* + *prep. phrase* preceded by a distinctive *temporal marker*: on the contrary, this temporal unit lets unchanged the thread of the period, which keeps its unity. At this point, maybe there would be another way to follow to go nearer to an unequivocal description of the discrimination between the two studied verbs. But as our researches stand at the moment, the only thing we can be certain of is that the use of *essere* or of *stare* in these combinations with prepositional phrases depends on the meaning effect the speaker, consciously or unconsciously, wants to product in the moment of the speech: in this case, the tongue keeps containing *essere* and *stare* undistinguished and available, so it is still the speaker who has to make a choice, despite some setting in contemporary Italian which lets be identified, as we have just made it in our corpus analysis. This leads us to assume that with the time, this choice will not be possible anymore and the speaker will be obliged to use *essere* or *stare* according to the temporal or the corporal requirements, that is to say that the tongue will have made the choice instead of him yet.

4 Conclusion : what does the signifier reveal to us?

The conclusion we propose here is mostly a question for a point of view from which it would be interesting to carry on with our researches. In his Italian grammar, Lorenzo Renzi asserts, regarding the progressive periphrasis:

Una caratteristica della perifrasi progressiva è la sua natura intrinsecamente "locativa". Ciò è ben visibile nella morfologia, in cui una forma verbale indefinita si combina con un modificatore indicante "esistenza (in un luogo o in una condizione)" come *stare* o, in altre formulazioni [...], *essere*⁶. (L. RENZI, G. SALVI y A. CARDINALETTI [1991] 2001 : 131)

Consequently, according to the same author, before the materialization of the periphrasis *stare* + *gerundious*, a loss of the verb *stare*'s semantism would be necessary so that its semantism be not in contradiction with the temporal movement generated by the construction (*i. e.*, *stare andando*). On the contrary, we believe that *stare* doesn't have any reason to adapt itself to the syntactic situation by modifying its semantism: its semantism states yet something. Something which, when combined with other signs playing their part in the construction, promotes the arrival of the progressive aspect: "something" the *essere*'s signified does not seem to be able to state in this occurrence. What is this "something *else*", this difference between *essere* and *stare*? We still don't know it, but we keep searching with the conviction that these two verbs are not synonymous and with the intuition that they declare much less than we usually believe or want them to say, but that each one of both verbs always and everywhere declares the same thing, without any alteration of its signified.

⁶ Personal translation from Italian : "One of the distinguishing features of the progressive periphrasis is its intrinsically "locative" nature. This lets observe itself in the morphology, in which an indeterminate verbal form is combined with a modifier which states the "existence" (in a place or in a condition) like *stare* or, in other words [...], *essere*."

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CORPUS : WORKS AND NEWSPAPERS ARTICLES USED FOR THE EXTRACTION OF THE EXAMPLES

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