

*Il segno e le lettere*

Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture moderne  
dell'Università degli Studi 'G. d'Annunzio'

*Saggi - 14*

# *Contatto interlinguistico fra presente e passato*

a cura di Carlo Consani

## IL SEGNO E LE LETTERE

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*Saggi*

-14-

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*Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture moderne  
dell'Università degli Studi 'G. d'Annunzio'*

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# THANKING FORMULAE\*

## The role of language contact in the diachrony of Italian

*Chiara Ghezzi*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is dedicated to the use of formulae for thanking across the diachrony of Italian. In particular it discusses the different factors at play in their use and development in the history of Italian.

Thanking is considered a prime example of polite verbal behavior and is thus often realized with the help of routine formulae. As suggested by Jautz (2013), such verbal rituals serve a function of relief in everyday interactions and are thus deeply rooted in conversation. Expressions of gratitude are speech acts that acknowledge some past act of an addressee which is positive for the speaker (cf. Searle 1969, 63), often resulting in praise of the addressee in which the social and illocutionary goals coincide. This is for instance the case of the Italian formulae *grazie* «thanks» and *ringrazio* «I thank you».

We believe that the thanking formulae in use today are well documented in vocabularies and manuals, are well established as discourse-pragmatic strategies, and have a centuries-long diachrony. Yet, as this study shows, the situation is not so well defined, since the thanking formulae in common use today are a rather recent development, while other less well attested forms are subject to different degrees of variation in their frequency over the history of Italian.

The first aim of this analysis is therefore to document this variation, from the 14th century up to the present day. It specifically investigates

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what types of Italian expressions of gratitude are more frequently attested in a certain genre of written texts, namely comedies, across the centuries (from the 14th to the 20th).

Cross-language contrastive studies of expressions of gratitude have a long tradition (Coulmas 1981; Held 1996), but analyses of different varieties of one language (Jautz 2013) are less frequent, while researches with a diachronic approach are a comparatively new area of research. This holds especially for studies oriented within the field of historical socio-pragmatics. This paper focuses on extending research into thanking formulae and, more generally, politeness formulae along these historical and social dimensions.

This study also aims at discussing which different factors are at play in the historical variation in the use of Italian thanking formulae and how such factors interrelate. The pragmaticalization of Italian thanking formulae, and more generally of other such politeness formulae as apologies and requests, is rooted in performative contexts codified through such locutions as (*dico/rendo*) *grazie* lit. «(I say/give) thanks» or verbs like *ringrazio* «I thank». Beginning with analysis of the properties of performative utterances where formulae appear, this study takes into consideration the role of language-internal factors in the routinization of expressions of gratitude, as is the case, for instance, of contexts where pragmatic values associated with politeness appear, the type of speech acts in which formulae functionally operate, and the semantic properties which their source lexemes share.

Other factors of an extra-linguistic nature are also considered in relation to the peculiarities of developments associated with Italian thanking formulae. The characteristics of socio-cultural reference frames in which formulae are used have also been shown to play a relevant role in the choice made by speakers in selecting more suitable forms in specific contexts. Furthermore, centuries-long linguistic and cultural contact with French also seems to have left traces in the repertoire of forms at the speakers' disposal.

In Section 2, the scene is set by examining the theoretical background and exploring issues relating to the act of thanking, to thanking routines, and, more generally, to other acts of politeness such as asking and apologizing. In Section 3, the methodological design of the study is presented, including a characterization of the data and its coding for the various aspects under investigation. Section 4 provides an analysis of different sets of data, integrating a qualitative study of different contexts of use with a more quantitative analysis of the frequency of Italian thanking formulae from the 14th to the 20th century. In Section 5 all the findings are reviewed against the background of the aims raised earlier.

2. THANKING FORMULAE AS POLITENESS FORMULAE:  
STATE OF THE ART

Thanking formulae, together with apologies, requests, and offers, can be considered expressions that have a politeness function. Their pragmatic value, however, is difficult to pinpoint.

These items have been described with a range of different labels, including discourse markers (Zwicky 1985), interactional signals (Stenström 1994, 59), discourse particles (Aijmer 2002, 2), pragmatic markers (Brinton 2006), etc.

Moreover, their pragmatic status remains ambiguous, as items can be «primarily used as interactional devices but may be used as clause elements in some environments» (Stenström 1990, 214-215). Aijmer (1996) considers forms such as Eng. *thank you* and *sorry* to belong to different classes of conversational routines. She refers explicitly to Eng. *please* as a «politeness marker» or as a request modifier within fixed patterns of indirect requests. However, she notes that the main features of *please* are similar to those of *thank you* or *sorry*, and as a result she suggests that *please* could also be regarded as a conversational routine.

In many Romance languages, such expressions have different degrees of pragmaticalization and routinization<sup>1</sup>. Politeness formulae include a variety of conversational rituals derived from performative utterances which have an illocutive value.

Such utterances can take the form of locutions, as in Fr. *je demande pardon*, Sp. *pido perdón*, and It. *chiedo scusa* «I apologize» (1).

- (1) It. vi **chiedo scusa** se faccio ancora un cenno all'encefalite (LIPRD8)  
«I apologize if I make one more allusion to encephalitis»

Polite conversational routines can also take the form of performative verbs, as in It. *ti prego*, Rom. *mă/vă rog* «please», Sp. *desculpe* «sorry» (2)-(3).

- (2) Rom. [...] **mă rog, ție**, de ce n-ai făcut ce ți-am spus? (Livescu 2014, 89)  
«I beg you/please, why have you not done what I told you?»
- (3) Sp. Bueno, perdón, **disculpá** el término, porque no sé qué cosa es (CREA, Oral)  
«Well, sorry, excuse the term, because they don't know what it is»

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<sup>1</sup> Pragmaticalization is intended here as a functional development that results in a procedural enrichment. For an overview of different properties of pragmaticalized items, theoretical approaches, and terminological choices, see Ghezzi 2014.

Such polite utterances also frequently appear in the form of holophrases, as in Fr. *pardon* «sorry» (4), Rom. *mă/vă rog* «please» (5), Port. *obrigado*, Fr. *merci*, and It. *grazie* «thanks» (6)-(8).

- (4) Fr. Oh ma tante! **Pardon**. Pouvais-je imaginer... (Garat, *Pense à demain*, *Frantext*)  
«Oh, aunt! Sorry, had I known that...»
- (5) Rom. Stați, **mă rog** (Livescu 2014, 91)  
«Wait a minute, please»
- (6) Fr. **Merci**, monsieur, de nous avoir donné, à ma femme et à moi, des nouvelles du joyeux compagnon qui nous a tant fait rire dans un voyage à Dieppe l'an dernier (Barrès, *Le Voyage de Sparte*, *Frantext*)  
«Thank you, sir, for giving us, my wife and me, news of the cheerful companion who brought us so much laughter in a journey to Dieppe last year»
- (7) Port. «Bom, adeu. Estimo que sejas feliz» (CETEM Publico)  
«**Obrigado**»  
«Well, goodbye. I think you will be happy»  
«Thank you»
- (8) It. l'appuntamento è per domenica ventidue marzo sempre su Antennatre sempre alle ventidue e quarantacinque buonanotte **grazie** (LIPME12)  
«We'll meet again on Sunday, March 22nd, always on Antennatre, always at ten forty-five. Goodnight. Thank you»

It is therefore possible to gather in *Table 1* the more frequent forms through which politeness formulae are codified in some Romance languages.

As shown in *Table 1*, the repertoire of politeness formulae in many Romance languages is made up of performative verbs, performative locutions, and holophrastic formulae alike<sup>2</sup>. In all three groups, the notion of performativity is an essential reference frame for the analysis of properties of the formulae at issue here as well as for the study of the paths that led to their routinization.

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<sup>2</sup> These peculiarities are not an exclusive characteristic of Romance languages. Consider for instance Eng. *I thank you*, *thanks*, *I give my thanks*, or the religious ritualized formula *we give thanks* and *Thanksgiving*. Similar considerations are also true for German in such expressions as *Danke*, *ich sage danke*, *ich danke euch*. However, in this contribution the focus is on developments of these formulae in Romance languages, postponing to future analysis a typological survey of their distribution in other languages.

Table 1. – Politeness formulae in some Romance languages.

ACT	TYPE	ITALIAN	FRENCH	ROMANIAN	SPANISH	PORTUGUESE
Requesting	Performative verbs	<i>prego</i>	<i>je te/vous prie</i>	<i>te/vă rog</i>	<i>ruego</i>	<i>peço</i>
	Performative locutions	<i>rivolgo una preghiera</i>	<i>je fais un appel</i>	<i>amo rugăminte</i>	<i>hago una petición</i>	<i>faço um apelo</i>
	Holophrastic formulae	<i>prego</i>	<i>(s'il vous plaît) / je vous en/t'en prie</i>	<i>mă/bă rog</i>	<i>(por favor)</i>	<i>(por favor / se faz favor)</i>
Apologizing	Performative verbs	<i>mi scuso</i>	<i>je m'excuse / pardonne (moi)</i>	<i>mă scuzați</i>	<i>me disculpo</i>	<i>desculpe-me</i>
	Performative locutions	<i>chiedo scusa/perdono / faccio le mie scuse</i>	<i>je dis/demande pardon</i>	<i>îmi cer scuze</i>	<i>pido perdón/disculpas / ruego disculpe / ofrezco/prezento la disculpa</i>	<i>peço desculpas / peço perdão</i>
	Holophrastic formulae	<i>scusa/pardon</i>	<i>pardon</i>	<i>(îmi pare rău) / scuzati/scuzati-mă</i>	<i>perdón</i>	<i>desculpe/perdão</i>
Thanking	Performative verbs	<i>ringrazio</i>	<i>je remercie</i>	<i>mulțumesc</i>	<i>te lo agradezco</i>	<i>agradeço</i>
	Performative locutions	<i>dico grazie / rendo grazie (archaic)</i>	<i>je dis merci / je rends grâce</i>	<i>aduc mulțumiri</i>	<i>doy (las) gracias</i>	<i>dou graças</i>
	Holophrastic formulae	<i>grazie / gran mercé (archaic)</i>	<i>merci / mille grâces / grand merci (archaic)</i>	<i>mulțumesc</i>	<i>gracias</i>	<i>obrigadola</i>

First, performative expressions erase the boundary between utterance and enunciation, linguistically realizing the subjectivity of the speaker through the use of the first person<sup>3</sup>.

Second, such expressions underline the coincidence between «locutor», i.e. the subject of enunciation, and «enunciator», i.e. the person responsible for making a speech act. It follows from this property that the sources of politeness formulae are not simply lexemes (nouns or verbs), but speech acts, since performatives are typically used to «do something», not just to «say something»<sup>4</sup>.

The performatives in focus here have a double illocution. The first is declarative, while the second is determined by the more or less generic semantics of the verb that characterizes the performative formulae (Colella 2012, 24). Consider for instance the difference between forms like *ringrazio* «I thank», where the semantics of the performative verb is rather specific, and *dico grazie* lit. «I say thanks», where the semantics of the verb *dire* «to say» is rather generic.

Finally, the performative value of polite formulae is also connected with the highly productive mechanism of delocutive derivation. From polite formulaic locutions, which are units of discourse and not units of *langue* in Saussurian terms, verbs and nouns are delocutively derived. Delocutives involve both a morphological derivation and a semantic component, which, however, is based on a particular pragmatic use of the form. For instance, from the Italian locution (*rendere*) *grazie* «give thanks» is derived the verb *ringraziare* and in turn the noun *ringraziamento*<sup>5</sup>.

Lyons (1977, 739) describes delocutive verbs like *ringraziare* as morphologically derived from *x* with the meaning «to perform the (illocutionary) act that is characteristically performed by uttering *x* (or something containing *x*)».

This property is particularly evident in (9), where the indefinite singular masculine article *un* supports the fact that the noun *grazie* is derived from the corresponding thanking act and not from the plural of the feminine noun *grazia* «grace», to which it is indeed etymologically related.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Benveniste's (1966, 273-274) notions of *modus* and *dictum*.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed overview of the notions of locutor and enunciator see Ducrot 1984, 119-120, while the properties of both in relation to the notion of performativity are discussed in Benveniste 1958 and 1966.

<sup>5</sup> The notion of delocutive derivation is analyzed in Benveniste 1958 and 1966; Anscombe 1985; Fruyt 1997; Larcher 2003, among others.

- (9) *Un grazie speciale a Marco*  
 ART.M.SG grace.F.PL special.SG to Marco  
 «A special thanks to Marco»

It is also interesting to note that such performative expressions encode illocutionary force in different ways. This is particularly evident in locutions and verbs. The former encode the act of thanking or apologizing through a semantically generic performative verb whose argument is an NP bearing the main semantic value of the act itself (10)-(13).

- (10) Sp. Bien, doctor Freixa **le doy las gracias** por la consulta gratuita que ha concedido usted a los pocos espectadores que debo tener (CREA, Oral)  
 «Well, Doctor Freixa, I thank you (lit. I give thanks) for the free advice you gave to a couple of my viewers»
- (11) Port. **Peço**, novamente, **desculpas** pelo adiantado da hora (CETEM Publico)  
 «I apologize (lit. I ask apologies) for the lateness of the hour»
- (12) It. **Chiedo scusa** ma non c'è il tempo del pronostico lo faremo dopo il servizio (LIPRE10)  
 «I apologize (lit. I ask apology) but we do not have time for the forecast, we will do that after the report»
- (13) Fr. De Milo, je vous **dis merci** (Echenoz, *Nous trois*, *Frantext*)  
 «De Milo, I thank you (lit. I say thanks)»

In polite forms encoded through verbs, on the other hand, the act itself is expressed through a semantically relevant performative (14)-(16).

- (14) Sp. Bueno, muchas gracias, te lo **agradezco** (CREA, Oral)  
 «Well, thanks, I thank you»
- (15) Rom. **Îți mulțumesc** pentru cadoul foarte frumos (Mihaela Popescu, p.c.)  
 «I thank you for the beautiful present»
- (16) It. **Mi scuso** per il disturbo  
 «I apologize for the intrusion»

Forms that codify polite expressions also show different degrees of pragmaticalization. While the performative locutions and verbs described above are still integrated within the morphosyntactic context of the sen-

tence, some forms appear as highly routinized holophrases (see 4-8 above). The routinization of these acts at the interactional and social levels generates formulae which involve no negotiation of meaning, but whose pragmatic function is procedural and serves to save the face of the interlocutor. Because of their nature, holophrastic formulae are here labelled «courtesy markers» and are considered a subclass of interactional pragmatic markers, i.e. markers motivated by politeness that index the speakers' social relationship with their interlocutors and have an (inter)subjective meaning (Ghezzi - Molinelli 2014).

Politeness formulae constitute «conventional» illocutionary acts which are successful not if the recipient understands the intention of the speaker, but if the act is in accordance with a convention that is socially and institutionally recognized (Bach - Harnish 1979).

As Coulmas (1981, 3) notes, in this type of formula the creativity of language is socially canalized according to successful solutions of recurring verbal tasks fixed by functional appropriateness and tradition. In turn, these acts constitute «interactional rituals», i.e. standardized ways of organizing interpersonal encounters, which are deeply embedded in a historical and socio-cultural context. Their use is organized according to socio-cultural norms established by each society that regulate the appropriate behaviour of its members. The function of the tasks is to maintain the congenial relationship between the interlocutors and thus to avoid or mitigate possible conflicts between them. In other words, such routines are used to reinforce social cohesion<sup>6</sup>.

Regarding requests and thanks in particular, it is relevant to note that together they form the polite basis of any type of exchange (Held 1996, 367). On the one hand, requests are face-threatening acts which are mitigated through specific verbal strategies<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, thanks are acts which are meant as beneficial for the interlocutors. Acts of thanking are strategic «remedies» rooted in the speaker's perception of owing some sort of «pragmatic debt» to the interlocutor<sup>8</sup>. Such acts are metaphorically

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of «interactional rituals» was first discussed in Goffman 1967. For a discussion of properties of politeness formulae see also Coulmas 1981; Held 2005; Ghezzi - Molinelli 2014.

<sup>7</sup> This term is used here in line with the principles of *Politeness Theory* as described in Brown - Levinson 1987.

<sup>8</sup> For detailed overviews of the conceptualization of the act of thanking in terms of debt see Graeber 2011.

encoded through a calculated transaction<sup>9</sup>, which results in a strategically remedial act for the temporary asymmetry between speaker and interlocutor. In order to be successful, such a transaction needs to be contextualized within peculiar situational, historical, and socio-cultural norms according to which it is balanced and compensated.

As for acts of thanking, it is possible to notice how similar acts, in response to a material gift, are managed differently in the 18th and in the 20th centuries. In (17), from Goldoni's comedy *La vedova scaltra*, one character is donating a pinch of snuff, while in (18), from Svevo's comedy *Il ladro in casa*, he is donating a book.

As it is clear from the two examples below, characters verbally manage thanks rather differently according to the socio-cultural norms in use in their respective societies. In the 18th century the act of thanks is «staged» through a rich inventory of fixed phrases and formulaic routines that enable participants to maintain a balance between social obligation and personal interest (Held 2005, 297). The situational appropriateness is obtained through formulae consciously varied depending on the context and the social importance of the act conveyed.

- (17) ALVARO    Eccovi una presa del mio tabacco. «Here you are, a pinch of my snuff»  
         ROSAURA    **Veramente prezioso.** «This is really precious»  
         ALVARO    Questo l'ebbi ieri, con una staffetta speditami dalla Duchessa mia madre. «I received it yesterday through a courier sent to me by my mother, the Duchess»  
         ROSAURA    **Certo non può essere migliore.** «Of course it couldn't be better»  
         ALVARO    Eccolo al vostro comando. «Here it is, at your service»  
         ROSAURA    **Non ricuserò l'onore** di metterne un poco nella mia tabacchiera. «I will not refuse the honour of putting some in my snuffbox»  
         ALVARO    Servitevi della mia. «Use mine»  
         ROSAURA    Non permetterei che doveste restarne senza. «I would not allow you to stay without one»  
         ALVARO    Ebbene, datemi in cambio la vostra. «Well, give me yours in exchange»

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<sup>9</sup> Consider for instance the archaic Italian form *rendo grazie* lit. «I return graces», which explicitly codifies this metaphorical transaction.



- ROSAURA Ma la mia è d'argento e la vostra è d'oro. «But mine is silver, yours is gold»
- ALVARO Che oro! Che oro! Noi stimiamo l'oro come il fango. Fo più conto di una presa del mio tabacco, che di cento scatole d'oro. Favorite. «What gold! What gold! We value gold as mud. A pinch of snuff is more valuable than a hundred gold boxes. Please help yourself!»
- ROSAURA **Per compiacervi.** «To please you» (Goldoni, *La vedova scaltra*, II, 2)
- (18) CARLO [...] Lei mi porta la sua opera nuova! «You're bringing me your new work»
- EMILIO Bravo! (*Allegramente, porgendo il libro.*) Eccolo. Ne faccia l'uso che crede. «Right! (*Cheerfully giving him the book.*) Here you are. Do with it as you like»
- CARLO È straordinariamente grosso. Le mie congratulazioni! «All'amico Carlo Almiti. L'autore.» **Mille grazie.** «This is extraordinarily big. My congratulations. 'To my friend Carlo Almiti. The author.' Thanks!»
- EMILIO Non c'è di che. «You are welcome» (Svevo, *Il ladro in casa*, III, 6)

Similar considerations are also true for requests. According to Held (2005), in 14th century Italian, request acts had to be interpreted within the system of Christian values that required the employment of submission strategies on the one hand and of honorifics on the other. The metaphorical exchange of modesty *topoi*, and corresponding compliments, increases depending on social hierarchy, which also establishes the linguistic forms to be used. The deferential verbosity characterizing this socio-cultural context is based on linguistic strategies which frequently include the use of elements that mitigate the illocutionary force of speech acts, as in (19).

- (19) Per che umilmente vi priego che quello che a Dio e che a me è piaciuto sia a grado a voi, e la vostra benedizione ne doniate, acciò che con quella, sì come con più certezza del piacere di Colui del quale voi sete vicario, noi possiamo insieme all'onore di Dio e del vostro vivere e ultimamente morire (Boccaccio, *Decameron*, II, 3)
- «Wherefore I humbly pray you that God's will and mine may also be yours, and that you pronounce your benison thereon, that therewith, having the more firm assurance of the favour of Him whose vicar you are, we may both live together, and, when the time comes, die to God's glory and yours»

In the 18th century, the system of request speech acts was rather different, though considerations similar to those discussed above for thanks hold true. In an attempt to define their social position, speakers strengthen and intensify utterances, which progressively become semantically bleached. This is what emerges from Goldoni's plays, which are the reference texts for this investigation (see 20-22, from Held 2005, 298-299).

Request from a superior to an inferior:

(20) Ditemi, vi dà l'animo di darmi un caffè, ma buono? (Goldoni, *La bottega del caffè*, I, 8)

«Pray, would you be so kind as to give me a coffee, a really good one?»

Request between individuals of the same social level:

(21) Vi prego dirmi che cosa ha impegnato (Goldoni, *La bottega del caffè*, I, 18)

«I beg you to tell me what he has pawned»

Request from an inferior individual to a superior:

(22) Intanto le supplico, illustrissime signore, favorirmi il loro riverito nome per la consegna (Goldoni, *La locandiera*, I, 19)

«May I just ask you, illustrious ladies, to be so good as to favour me with your noble names for the register»

Thus pragmatic situational appropriateness is obtained through formulae that speakers consciously vary depending on the context, the social hierarchy, and the perlocutionary value of the intended speech act.

### 3. CORPUS

The nature and specifics of the focus of this research, thanking formulae and the frequency of more common forms in different reference points in the history of Italian, deserve the integration of qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Qualitative analysis takes into consideration the contexts of use and the types of different formulae as described in the previous section, and also consults historical dictionaries. Quantitative analysis requires the choice of a specific textual genre to allow comparison of formula frequency through the centuries.

The chosen genre, necessarily from written literature given the nature of the analysis, is characterized by mimesis of spoken language, but more

importantly by the simulation of interactions between speakers of different social classes, which presumably codified acts of thanking through different forms.

A number of sub-corpora have been built accordingly. Each one gathers a selection of plays at regular intervals of approximately 200 years. Corpora were gathered starting from the earliest records, from the 13th-14th centuries. But since no plays are known from that time, prose was analyzed instead, in particular fiction, as it often contains instances of reported speech.

The corpora are enumerated in *Table 2*.

*Table 2. – Corpora.*

CENTURY	TEXTS	SOURCE
1200-1300	<i>Novellino</i> , Boccaccio's <i>Filocolo</i> and <i>Decameron</i>	<i>Corpus OVI</i> <a href="http://gattoweb.ovi.cnr.it/">http://gattoweb.ovi.cnr.it/</a>
1500	Selections of comedies by Aretino, Ariosto, Belo, Grazzini, Machiavelli, Bruno, Ruzante, Bibbiena	<a href="http://www.liberliber.it">http://www.liberliber.it</a>
1700	Selections of comedies by Goldoni and Maffei	<a href="http://www.liberliber.it">http://www.liberliber.it</a>
1900	Selection of comedies by Giacosa, Svevo, Pirandello, De Filippo	<a href="http://www.liberliber.it">http://www.liberliber.it</a>

#### 4. THE DIACHRONY OF THANKING FORMULAE IN ITALIAN

Among the mechanisms that underlie the historical development of Italian thanking formulae are the performative context in which they are used and the frequency of different forms. Performative contexts represent the starting point of the development of the pragmatic functions associated with thanking formulae; the frequency of use of an expression is directly responsible for the erosion of the literal meaning, which often leads to an idiomatic usage.

Turning to performative contexts, qualitative analysis shows the different structures with performative value in which formulae appear: performative locutions, performative verbs, and holophrastic formulae. Regarding frequency of use, quantitative analysis of different sub-corpora examines the frequency of occurrence of forms over the centuries.

Over Italian diachrony, at least two different types of expression are attested. One includes expressions associated with the Latin etymon *gratia* lit. «favor»; the other consists of expressions related to the etymon *merces* «salary».

It is interesting to note that descendants of Lat. *gratia* can be used in Italian speech acts of request and thanks alike. Consider for instance expressions like *accordare una grazia* «grant a grace», *domandare una grazia* «ask a favour», *di grazia* «pray/prithee» (for requests); and *mille grazie* «many thanks», *ringraziare* «to thank», *rendere grazie* «to give thanks» (for thanks). As this shows, the meaning «favor, good will» is a key cultural element in the social process of exchange discussed in Section 2.

The economic import of such an exchange is at the origin of another holophrastic formula, which is today the unmarked formula for thanks in French (i.e. *merci*) and which was in the past also used in Italian (i.e. *mercede* and *mercè*, especially in such locutions as *rendo mercè* lit. «I return a reward» or *gran mercé* lit. «big reward»). The forms in both Italian and French derive from Latin *mercede(m)* «price paid for a commercial product», which is in turn the accusative form of *merces* (cf. Cortelazzo - Zolli 1979, s.v.).

It is relevant to discuss briefly which formulae were frequent in acts of thanks in Latin. Various formulae are attested which are derived from the adjective *gratus* «dear, beloved, grateful», such as the noun *grates* «thanks, thanksgiving» and *gratia(m)* «favor, good disposition» (De Vaan 2008, s.v.). These formulae can be used in a concrete sense, to refer to an act through which one buys gratitude, or in the abstract sense to indicate a service rendered.

The unmarked, and more frequent, Latin thanking formula is *gratias (tibi) ago* «I do thanks (to you)», while variants derived from the adjective *gratus* are also attested, such as *grates ago*, which is directed to divinities and people of high rank and is described as having an «archaic colour»<sup>10</sup>. In the example below, from Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, the king Massinissa, at the time already an old man, thanks the gods for the visit of Scipio, using *grates ago*.

- (23) Ad quem ut veni, complexus me senex conlacrimavit aliquantoque post suspexit ad caelum et «**Grates**» inquit «**tibi ago**, summe Sol, vobisque, reliqui Caelites, quod, ante quam ex hac vita migro, conspicio in meo regno et his tectis P. Cornelium Scipionem [...]» (Cic. *Rep.* 6, 9)

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<sup>10</sup> See Ernout - Meillet 2001, s.v., and Panagl 2003.

«As soon as I came to him, the old man folded me in his arms and wept over me; and after some time he looked up to heaven and said: 'I give you thanks, O Sun most high, and you, you other heavenly beings, for that, before my departure from this life, I behold in my realm and in this my home Publius Cornelius Scipio'»

Conversely, the second etymon considered here, *mercede(m)*, is not attested in thanking formulae in Latin.

Let us now turn to the analysis of thanking formulae in the history of Italian.

#### 4.1. *Thanking formulae and performative contexts in the history of Italian*

Unlike the situation described above for Latin, in Old Italian the descendants of both *gratia* and *mercede(m)* are attested in thanking formulae.

An initial qualitative analysis of such expressions shows that these forms appear in performative locutions, performative verbs, and holophrastic forms alike. Renzi (2010) describes different types of thanking formulae as rather common and frequent.

- (a) forms of the transitive verb *ringraziare* «to thank»
- (24) **Ringrazzo** voi, di fin cor merzé rendo: / merzé, mia donna (Chiaro Davanzati, *Rime*, canz. 7, vv. 49-50, OVI)  
«I thank you with a pure heart, I give thanks, thanks milady»
- (b) the locutions *fare/rendere molte grazie/mercé* (25)-(26)
- (25) I' le dissi: «Madonna, **grazie rendo** / a voi» (*Fiore*, 202, vv. 1-2, OVI)  
«I told her: 'Madonna, I give thanks to you'»
- (26) Signor mio, di ciò che voi mi dite io **vi rendo grande grazie e mercié**, sì della promessa e ssi del consiglio (*Libro della distruzione di Troia*, 153, 9, OVI)  
«My Lord, for what you tell me I give great thanks and mercies, both for the promise and for the advice»
- (c) the holophrastic formulae *merzé* «thanks», *gran/molte mercé* «thanks a lot» (27)-(28)
- (27) Dice il sere che, **gran mercè**, e che voi gli rimandiate il tabarro [...] (Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 8, 2)  
«My master thanks you and bids you return the cloak [...]»

- (28) «[...] e io vi dono questo.» «Signore» disse la donzella «**molte marcé**» (*Palamédes pis.*, pt. 2, cap. 54, 111, 3, OVI)  
«‘[...] and I give this to you.’ ‘Sir’ said the young girl ‘Thank you so much’»

It is relevant to note that the use of *gran mercé* in 14th-century Italian is considered a loan from Fr. *grand merci* (Hope 1971, 106), which at the time was widespread in French literature and is well attested in the French language since the 12th century (see *Trésor*, s.v.).

In some contexts, as in (29) and (30), the use of *grazia* and its variants can be considered a bridging context for holophrastic thanking formulae<sup>11</sup> where the literal interpretation of the word as «favour» and as «thanks» can also be considered appropriate. In such contexts the form often co-occurs with *mercede*.

- (29) **Grasia** a te, **grasia**, amico e **mersede tutta** di tanto grasioza benivoglienza, de sì orrata discreta discessione! (Guittone, *Lettere in prosa*, 29, 348, 17, OVI)  
«Thank you, thanks my friend, and many thanks for so much gracious benevolence and for such a kindly delicate discretion»
- (30) **Grasia e mersede** a voi, Signor dibonaire, che grasia e onore tanto fatto m’avete [...] (Guittone, *Lettere in prosa*, 26, 323, 7, OVI)  
«Thanks to you, Lord Dibonaire, that you have given me so much grace and honour [...]»

One last comment relates to the influence of French on the Italian repertoire of thanking formulae. In texts belonging to the 13th and 14th centuries within the OVI *Corpus*, eight occurrences of the verb *merciare* «to thank» are attested. Such uses appear exclusively in texts written in Tuscan and Venetian (see 31). It is interesting to note that such texts are translations or adaptations of courtly literature of French inspiration and consequently more susceptible to the influence of the French language, where the verb *mercier* was well attested (Ghezzi in press).

- (31) «El me plaxe molto ben» ciò dixè lo re Galleodin «e sì ve ne **mercio** fortemente de çò che vuj aviti dito» (*Tristano Cors*, 84, 35, OVI)  
«‘I really like it’ thus said King Galleodin ‘and therefore I thank you deeply for what you have said’»

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<sup>11</sup> The notion is intended here as in Heine 2002.

By the second half of the 15th century, the development of thanking formulae had gone further, as Savonarola (III, 181) notes:

- (32) **Grazia** si chiama il **ringraziamento** che facciamo ad uno quando lo **ringraziamo** che ci ha fatto qualche beneficio, [...] cioè che **rendiamo grazia** idest **ringraziamo** (Battaglia 1971, s.v.)

«Grazia is called the gratitude that we do for somebody when we thank him/her for doing us some benefit, [...] i.e. that we give thanks, i.e. that we thank»

The first attestations of *ringraziamento* date to around the same years (33).

- (33) Dopo assai **ringraziamenti** fatti e lor commemorazione date al Piovano, gli donò braccia XXX di panno di mellina (Piovano Arlotto, 14, Battaglia 1971, s.v.)

«After expressing so many thanks and after having given their commemorations to Piovano, he gave him thirty arm-lengths of Malines cloth»

In the first edition of the *Vocabolario degli accademici della Crusca*, which dates to 1612, the holophrastic formula *gran mercé* is described as *modo di ringraziare, che talora s'usa anche dagl'invitati, per ringraziamento* «way of thanking that is sometimes used by guests for an act of thanking». This use is exemplified in (34) and (35), from a comedy and a letter respectively.

- (34) CALLIMACO Non mi sono a Parigi affaticato tanti anni per imparare per altro, se non per poter servire a' pari vostri. «I only toiled in Paris for so many years just so as to be able to serve men like yourself»

MESSER NICIA **Gran mercé.** «Thank you indeed» (Machiavelli, *La mandragola*, I, 2)

- (35) **Gran mercé** d'il caviale. Et la Marietta dice che alla tornata tua li porti una pezza di giambellotto tané (Machiavelli, *Lettere*, Lett. 49, 248, A G. Vernacci, 25 gennaio 1518)

«Thank you very much for the caviar. Marietta asks if you can bring her a piece of cloth of tawny camel's hair when you come back»

In the same period, locutions with *grazie* (in the plural form) and with *mercé* are also attested (36 and 37 respectively). Along similar lines, *mercede* is described in the *Vocabolario degli accademici della crusca* as *ringraziare, guiderdonare* «to thank, reward» (38).

- (36) Io **rendo grazie** al signor Paolo de gli uffici fatti per la mia liberazione a la corte di Sua Maestà (Tasso, *Lettere*, G500, A don Angelo Grillo, 1595)  
«I give thanks to Mr. Paolo for what he has done to free me at Her Majesty's court»
- (37) Sia qui fornito il male, ch'io **dico gran mercè** a la provvidenza del signor Scipitone (Tasso, *Lettere*, G33, A Luca Scalabrino, 1595)  
«Be here supplied the evil for which I give thanks to the providence of Mister Scipitone»
- (38) Io son qui per **renderti mercede** / del beneficio che mi festi allora (Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, 45-103)  
«I am here to give you thanks for the benefit that you did to me then»

In the course of the 18th century, a new wave of French cultural and linguistic influence affected Italian. A few words on this influence are necessary, because of its pervasiveness in different social classes. The 18th century was cosmopolitan *par excellence*, and French was the prestige language throughout Europe. Italy was no exception. French influence operated on a political level, as French dynasties settled in Florence and Parma; on a cultural level, as admiration of the new rationalist philosophy was widespread; and on a literary level, as French literature was in vogue<sup>12</sup>.

In social interactions, exchanges with French-mother-tongue speakers were common. Many such people lived in Italy in cities under French dominion (Migliorini 1987, 474). Very frequently, those speakers belonged to specific professional classes: cooks, hairdressers, dressmakers. Along similar lines, commercial activities gave rise to different types of exchanges with people of French tongue.

Many Italian members of intellectual elites used French as a *lingua franca* while travelling in Europe, and sometimes they also settled down in France. Some of the writers among them left writings in French (such as Goldoni), including letters, not only to people of other nations, but even to Italians.

On a cultural level, the nobility and the middle class of Italian society adopted without hesitation the French fashions and trends of the time, including language. Some critics of the new wave of linguistic Gallicisms blamed elegant young men for the ridiculous introduction of new words from France, as it is clearly expressed by Corticelli, who warns,

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<sup>12</sup> For an overview of the phenomenon see Devoto 1953; Migliorini 1987, 449-526; Marazzini 2004.



- (39) Certi giovanotti leziosi hanno introdotto nella lingua italiana tante maniere oltramontane, che muovono a sdegno, ed a riso le persone di buon gusto (Corticelli, *Della Toscana Eloquenza*, in Migliorini 1987, 475)  
«Some mushy young men introduced in Italian many Transalpine manners that move to anger and laughter people of good taste»

Several comedies of the time show stereotyped characters of young bourgeois males frequently using French words or expressions to make an impression on their lovers. In such a wealth of Gallicisms, thanking formulae are no exception, as shown by the integrated loan *rendere un million di grazie* in (40), from Maffei's comedy *Raguet*.

- (40) [...] Ed io mi do l'onore signor, di **rendergli un million di grazie** (Maffei, *Raguet*, II, 3)  
«[...] And I am very pleased Sir, to give him a million thanks»

The reflections of a contemporary, Veneroni, also indicate the relevance of this influence, as he notes in the *Maître italien* (1729, 217) that the Italian expression of gratitude *gratie*. *Infinite gratie* corresponds to the French *Je vous rend grace*.

For other such formulae, it is important to mention that the fourth edition of the *Vocabolario degli accademici della Crusca* (1729-1738) retains the lemma *mercé*, under which *render mercede* and *ringraziare* are considered synonyms, while the holophrase *gran mercé* (or similar) is still considered a thanking formula.

Moreover, Baretti (1760) in the Italian-English dictionary under *grazia* (*il ringraziare per segno di gratitudine* «Thanking in sign of gratitude») writes «*thanks, vi rendo grazie I thank you*». The English-Italian volume has «*Thanks: grazie s.f., ringraziamenti s.m.*».

In the texts analysed, the holophrastic formula *grazie* appears, as in (41) from one of Goldoni's plays.

- (41) Oh co bello! **grazie**, sior Momoletto (Goldoni, *L'uomo di mondo*, II, 12)  
«Oh, how beautiful! Thanks, Mr. Momoletto»

Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, the holophrastic formula *grazie* also appears in dictionaries as an independent lemma (Lepschy - Lepschy 2007, 127-128), although, as (41) demonstrates, it had actually entered the language earlier.

During the same century, other attested thanking formulae include *mercè* or *gran mercè*, *grandissima mercè*, *rendo grazie*, which are considered synonymous with the holophrastic formula *grazie* and with the performa-

tive verb *ringrazio* (Boerio 1829, *s.v.*). Such forms are more frequent, however, in stylistically higher registers, as in the Introduction to D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere*, published in 1888 (42).

- (42) Questo libro, composto nella tua casa dall'ospite bene accetto, viene a te come un **rendimento di grazie**, [...]. Se nel mio libro è qualche pietà umana e qualche bontà, **rendo mercede** al tuo figliuolo. [...] Ave, Giorgio. Amico e maestro, **gran mercé** (D'Annunzio, *Il Piacere*, Introduzione)  
 «This book, composed in your house by a welcomed guest, comes to you as a thanksgiving, [...]. If in my book there is some human compassion and some goodness, I give thanks to thy son. [...] Good bye, Giorgio. Friend and teacher, thank you»

#### 4.2. Thanking formulae and quantitative frequency in the history of Italian

As regards the distribution of formulae for thanking in the history of Italian, some interesting insights come from the quantitative analysis of their frequency for the centuries and the corpus considered here<sup>13</sup>.

The analysis of frequency takes into consideration the occurrences of the more common forms of thanking formulae analysed so far (performative verbs, performative locutions, and holophrastic formulae) derived from both the Latin etyma, *gratia* and *merces*. The analysis is based on the selection of texts described in Section 3.

The frequency of occurrence of forms is shown in *Table 3*.

Table 3. – Frequency of thanking formulae in the history of Italian.

	HOLOPHRASTIC FORMULA				LOCUTION		VERB		OTHER		TOTAL	
	<i>grazie</i>		<i>gran mercé</i>		<i>rendo grazie/a</i>		<i>ringrazio</i>		<i>obbligato</i>		af	rf
	af <sup>14</sup>	rf	af	rf	af	rf	af	rf	af	rf	af	rf
1300	0	0	6	1	29	4	6	1	0	0	41	6
1500	4	1	21	3	9	1	29	4	3	0	64	9
1700	74	8	5	1	17	2	103	12	54	6	253	29
1900	171	33	0	0	0	0	36	7	0	0	207	40

<sup>13</sup> The frequency of distribution of formulae has been normalized to make the quantitative analysis comparable for the centuries considered and for the different types of work analyzed. Frequency has always been normalized for the occurrence of thanking formulae per 10.000 words.

<sup>14</sup> Both absolute frequencies (af) and relative frequency per 10.000 words (rf) are given in the *Table*.

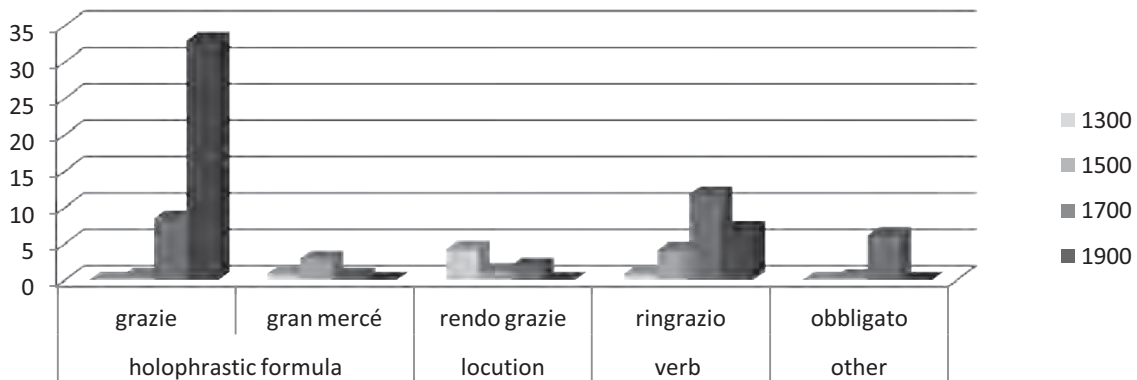


Figure 1. – Frequency of thanking formulae in the history of Italian.

Figure 1 enables us to visualize the frequency of occurrence of forms in the centuries considered.

The thanking formulae considered and their frequencies deserve some comment. Performative locutions are regularly attested up to the 18th century but have disappeared from the comedies considered in the 20th century. All the attested locutions are based on the word *grazia* or, more frequently, on its plural form *grazie*.

The most frequently attested verb is always *ringraziare*. Interestingly, its frequency increases during the 18th century, only to decrease in the 20th century.

The quantitative analysis of holophrastic formulae also gives some interesting insights. The two most frequent formulae are *gran mercé* and *grazie*. The former is the only one attested during the 14th century; it increases in frequency in the 16th century, to decrease only in the 18th. The formula is no longer attested in the comedies analyzed for the 20th century.

The latter, *grazie*, shows rather consistent behaviour as it progressively increases in frequency beginning in the 16th century, with a particularly marked trend in the comedies written during the 20th century.

One last remark regards the use of the holophrastic formula *obbligato*<sup>15</sup>: it is rather frequent in 18th-century comedies.

<sup>15</sup> In contemporary portuguese the formula *obrigado/a* is the unmarked holophrastic formula used in thanks (cf. Table 1 in Section 2), see Carreira Araújo 2005.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the history of Italian, the types of thanking formulae, their distribution, and their frequency show that what we consider today the prototypical thanking formula, *grazie*, has acquired this status only recently.

Different language-internal factors seem at play in the development of the thanking formulae considered here, and more generally of politeness forms.

The pragmatic values of apologies, requests, and thanks develop out of performative verbs and performative locutions in many Romance languages. Some of these also pragmaticalize into holophrastic formulae like It. (*rendo*) *grazie*.

As for semantic sources of thanking formulae, while in Latin the unmarked, and more frequent, formula makes use of the word *gratia* (*gratias ago*), in Italian two different forms are attested, namely *grazia* and *mercè*. For the centuries and texts considered here, the two forms co-exist and perform similar functions associated with politeness, albeit with individual shades of semantic and functional content. The prevalence of one form over the other can be accounted for in terms of:

- a. frequency of use, in relation to sociolinguistic parameters (for instance *gran mercè* is characteristic of higher registers in 20th-century Italian);
- b. degree of pragmaticalization (formulae with a higher degree of pragmaticalization behave like holophrases);
- c. existence of delocutive units (*dico grazie / grazie* > *ringraziare* > *ringraziamento*).

Analysis of the historical development of more pragmaticalized forms associated with thanking in Italian shows cyclic and highly productive processes in which the delocutive derivation is central. This derivation proves to be a historically important, generalized mechanism which presupposes the existence of a routinized, frequent expression, presumably perceived as unmarked, then reinterpreted as a holophrastic formula. Such a mechanism can give insights into the distribution of forms in time, and into their status within the perception of speakers.

In the centuries and texts considered here, *grazia* is consistently used in both locutions and verbs of delocutive origin (*ringraziare*). However, in the 14th century the more frequent holophrastic form is not *grazie* but *gran mercè*, presumably a borrowing from French *grand merci*. It seems therefore that during this century, at least in the data analysed, the mechanism of delocutive derivation in thanking formulae is obscured and confused by the borrowing of a French holophrase and, more generally, by the influence of French.

Such behavior indicates that different motivations associated with external factors might have had a role in the development of Italian holophrastic formulae. Specifically, contact with French might be one of these.

The thanking formula *grand merci* has a long history in French, first being attested in the early 12th century (*Trésor, s.v.*) and still in use today. In the 14th century texts analyzed, *gran mercé* is the only holophrase attested. This leads us to believe that it might have been introduced into Italian via contact with French, as a form concurrent with other common thanking formulae such as *rendo grazie* and *ringrazio*. It is relevant to note that in the Italian of the early centuries, both *mercede* and *mercé* are attested, but they are used either with different meanings or, especially *mercé*, less frequently in locutions of thanking, mostly co-occurring with *grazie*. This latter is by far the most frequent unmarked form for locutions.

Although it is very difficult to distinguish an autonomous development from a conditioned one, especially between two Romance languages, we may hypothesize that *gran mercé* might have been introduced into Italian during the Middle Ages thanks to the socio-cultural influence and salience of French.

It is impossible here to make any claims or generalizations regarding the path followed by this loan from French into Italian, considering the multiple contacts between the two languages and societies. It might have entered through the Norman dominion; or contact with French crusaders in the Middle East, pilgrims, or merchants; or literary usage. Surely some aspects of life and culture in Italy at the time were ordered according to the French model, which was highly salient and continuously present in different socio-cultural domains. This is particularly true for feudal institutions and the life of chivalry, where the acts of paying tribute and, presumably, of thankfulness had a specific symbolic role. Given the social importance of these acts in social life, it might not be surprising that they would also have been reflected sociolinguistically on a number of levels.

It is possible, therefore, to hypothesize that the use of *gran mercé*, especially in the 14th century, may represent a case of pragmatic borrowing, where pragmatic and discourse features of a source language are incorporated into a recipient language. The meaning of pragmatic phenomena, as in the case of expressions of gratitude, is notoriously hard to pin down, describe metalinguistically, or translate; nevertheless – or perhaps precisely therefore – they are commonly borrowed between languages<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed overview of the notion of pragmatic borrowing and of different results identified in a number of studies, see Andersen 2014.



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