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MEASURING THE STYLE OF ITALIAN LITERARY CRITICISM: A COMPARISON BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL AND NON-PROFESSIONAL BOOK REVIEWS

ABSTRACT

The paper presents the results of a series of computational analyses applied to professional and non-professional book reviews in the Italian language. A corpus of texts from the *aNobii* platform and from *La Domenica del Sole 24 Ore* is processed with a stylometric approach (Cosine Delta distance), confirming how 50 most frequent words are more effective in distinguishing the two sources than the usage of a specialized lexicon of literary criticism. Deeper linguistic investigations verify which words are the most important in determining the distinction and how their usage differ in the two content platforms. A closer analysis through word co-occurrence and keyword in context closes the paper, highlighting the more evaluative and subjective language used in non-professional book reviews.

KEYWORDS: book reviews, literary criticism, digital social reading, Italian language, stylometry

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the Web 2.0, one of the phenomena with the highest impact on literary studies is “Digital Social Reading” (DSR; Pianzola 2025), intended as the usage of digital tools and virtual environments to exchange ideas, opinions, and preferences about books and reading experiences. With the millions of reviews and comments hosted by platforms like *Goodreads* and *Wattpad*, DSR has come to the point of challenging traditional literary criticism (Salgaro 2022). As noted by Simone Murray, DSR “radically undercuts the cultural arbiter status of professional literary critics within an online context of mass amateur criticism” (Murray 2018: 20). As a consequence, an increasing amount of studies has been dedicated in recent years to the comparison between online, non-professional book reviews and offline, professional literary criticism, focusing both on the social and linguistic aspects distinguishing the two (Kellermann, Mehling 2017; Zhang, Cordell 2024) and frequently making use of computational methods (Hegel 2018; Martens et al. 2021).

This study builds upon previous research on the reviews hosted by the biggest DSR platform in Italy, *aNobii*, which were compared to the ones published in one cultural magazine, *La Domenica del Sole 24 Ore*, and in three scientific journals, *Between*, *Osservatorio critico della germanistica*, and *OBLIO* (Salgaro, Rebora 2019). The study showed how a basic stylometric analysis already allowed for a clear distinction between the three sources, with only very slight improvements when combining it with other measurements, like the usage of a specialized lexicon for literary criticism or the presence of emotionally-charged terms. As a preliminary conclusion, it was noted how, “[d]ifferently from what theoreticians have supposed so far, it seems that most of the distinction is played in the frequency of use of a few most frequent (function) words, and not in the higher-level features that [have been] operationalized” (Salgaro, Rebora 2019: 114). This study will deepen the analysis of such function words, trying to understand the reasons why stylometry works so efficiently in distinguishing the different “styles” of literary criticism.

STYLOMETRIC ANALYSES

As efficiently shown by Andrew Piper (2019), replication is one of the founding pillars of computational humanities research. Replication does not simply mean repeating an analysis or mirroring a procedure, but it also implies changing it and – wherever possible – improving it (Schöch et al. 2020). For these reasons, the present analysis starts from a partial replication of the previous study, with some slight modifications. First, as stark distinctions already emerged when comparing DSR reviews with the ones published on the scientific journals, the attention is here focused on the reviews that showed a lesser degree of separation, published on *aNobii* and *La Domenica del Sole 24 Ore* (from here on, *La Domenica*). This choice is made in order to better explore the threshold separating professional from non-professional reviews, also solving an issue due to the profoundly different nature of the reviews published in scientific journals, which are frequently dedicated to academic works instead of fictional and literary texts. Second, a possible additional bias is removed by excluding from the analysis extremely short reviews (falling in the first quartile of text lengths, between one and 29 words) which appear frequently in the *aNobii* platform. Such reviews can influence the stylometric analysis in unpredictable ways, due to their unique – or even absent – syntactic structure. The rest of the analysis is accomplished by replicating the procedure already put in place by Salgaro and Rebora (2019).

Table 1 shows an overview of the composition of the corpus used for the stylometric analysis. As evident when comparing the figures, the corpus is still unbalanced in terms of mean text length. For this reason – and in order to work with texts of a length sufficient to perform a reliable stylometric analysis (Eder 2013) – reviews were converted into 5,000-word long texts, by simply concatenating them one after the other.

Table 1. Corpus statistics

	<i>aNobii</i>	<i>La Domenica</i>
Total number of reviews	3,781	1,247
Total number of tokens	609,514	665,185
Length of the shortest review	30	35
Length of the longest review	2230	1843
Mean length of reviews	161.2	533.4
Standard deviation of review length	182.5	349.6

Stylometric analyses were performed by using the *stylo* package (Eder et al. 2016) and all scripts have been made available through a dedicated GitHub repository (Rebora 2025). Figure 1 (sections a–c) shows the results of a series of analyses with the Cosine Delta distance (Evert et al. 2017) and most frequent words (MFW) ranging between 10 and 50. While clustering quality is already very high with 30 MFW, it reaches perfection with 50 MFW. When repeating the procedure with the 634 words in the specialized lexicon of literary criticism (Beck et al. 2007; translated to Italian), clustering remains imperfect (see Figure 1.d). It should also be noted how most of the clustering errors (19 out of 21)

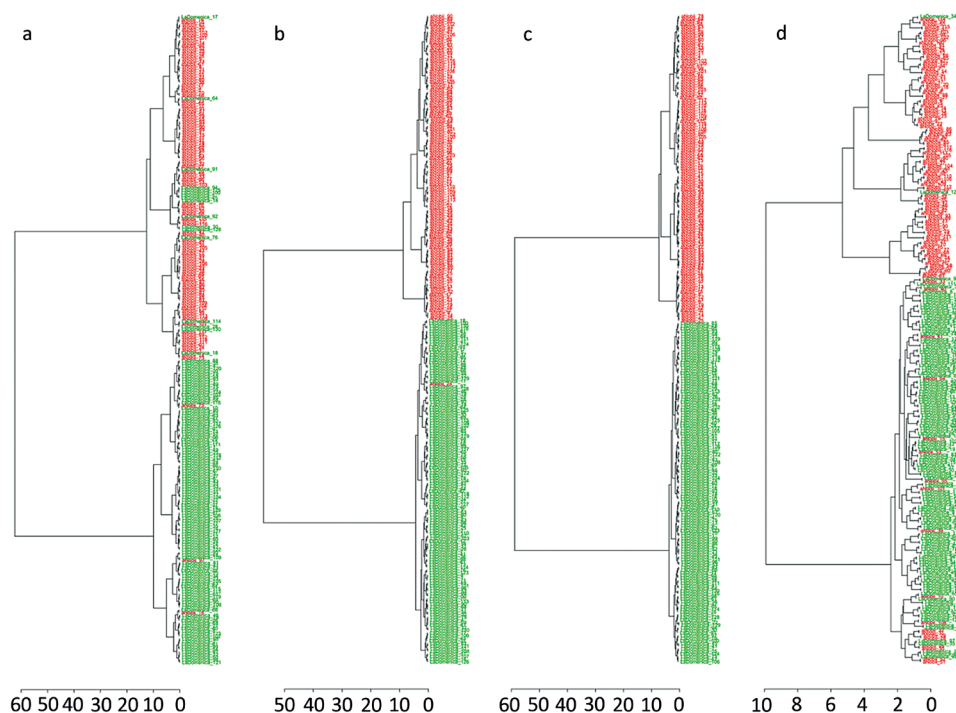


Figure 1. Stylometric analyses of the corpus (a–c: Cosine Delta distance with 10, 30, and 50 MFW; d: Cosine Delta distance with the lexicon of literary criticism); *aNobii* texts in red and *La Domenica* texts in green (author’s own elaboration)

consist of *aNobii* texts falling into *La Domenica* cluster, suggesting the possible presence of a consistent number of non-professional reviews using the specialized lexicon in a way comparable to that of professional reviews.

In conclusion, even after reduction and adaptation of the corpus, the distinction between professional and non-professional book reviews seems to be more a matter of form than a matter of content, thus confirming the results already obtained by Salgaro and Rebora (2019). The analysis that follows will try to confirm to what extent such a preliminary conclusion should be considered as valid, through a deeper investigation of the 50 MFW allowing the stylometric distinction between the texts.

WORD FREQUENCY ANALYSIS

As originally shown by John Burrows (2002) and confirmed by recent studies, Delta is a procedure that builds upon patterns of under- and over-representation of words in texts (Evert et al. 2017), effectively uncovering the stylistic fingerprint of authors through their subconscious linguistic choices (Kestemont 2014), but even extending its applications to matters like chronology (Eder 2017), gender (Rybicki 2016), and genre (Schöch 2014). Such flexibility is due to the fact that the frequencies of use of most frequent words encode many different phenomena by indirectly modeling them (Rebora 2022). One issue hindering the interpretability of the whole procedure, however, is that a multidimensional information is reduced to a single distance measure, thus making it hard to understand which piece of that information (either the under-representation of a single word, or the over-representation of many others) determines that specific result. To solve this issue and try to open the “black box” of Delta distance, a simple procedure was developed that works through the deletion of single words from the Delta procedure, measuring the effects of such deletion on clustering quality. As the current goal is that of understanding what allowed the stylometric distinction between professional and non-professional reviews with just 50 MFW, the following analyses will be limited to this small word list. However, the procedure could also be extended to much broader selections, addressing more general questions about the efficiency of stylometric methods.

Preliminary analyses were carried out using metrics like the Adjusted Rand Index (Everitt et al. 2010: 264), but they proved ineffective as the deletion of just one word had a minimal impact on cluster dendrograms like the ones presented in Figure 1. To get a more fine-grained measurement, sensitive also to slight changes in the distances between texts, the following procedure was adopted by using just Cosine Delta distances. First, the attribution strength of each text to its correct cluster was measured using 50 MFW, by subtracting its distances from the two main clusters (i.e., distance from *aNobii* cluster minus distance from *La Domenica* cluster for *aNobii* texts; distance from *La Domenica* cluster minus distance from *aNobii* cluster for *La Domenica* texts). Second, the same calculations were repeated by removing in turn each one of the words in the MFW list. Third, the variation between the first and the second measurement was calculated and averaged for each word. This procedure allowed to measure the effect of the deletion of

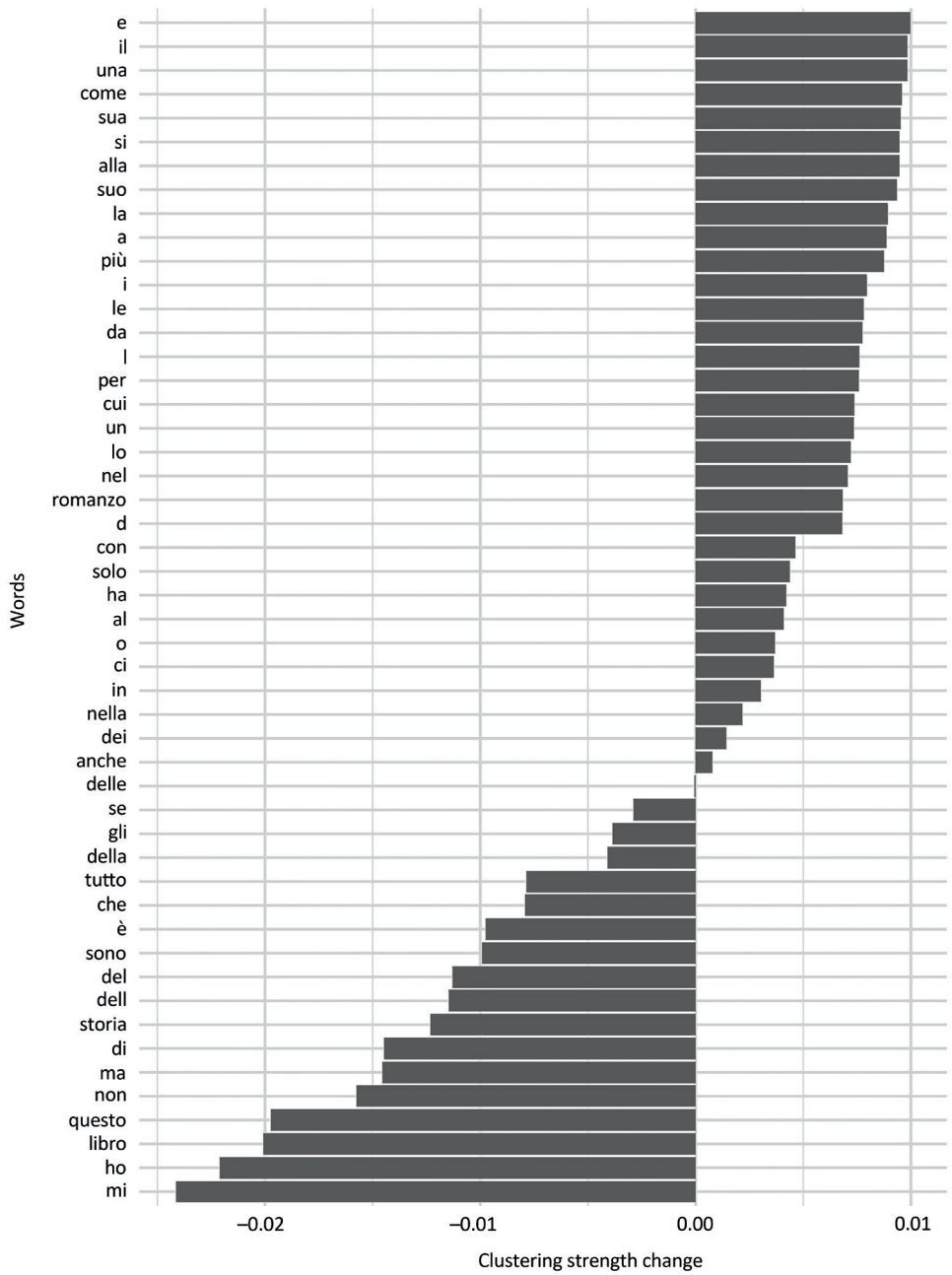


Figure 2. Word deletion effect (author's own elaboration)

each word on the strength of the correct clustering. As shown by Figure 2, the deletion of most words caused even an improvement in the clustering strength, with just 18 words causing a decline.

Figure 2 also provides an overview of the 50 MFW used for the stylometric analysis. It should be noted how they are all function words apart from three nouns, strongly connected to the very practice of book reviewing: “libro” (book), “storia” (story), and romanzo (“novel”). While the last one does not contribute to the attribution (as its deletion even improves clustering strength), the first two contribute quite substantially to the distinction between professional and non-professional book reviews. The words that contribute the most, however, like “mi” ([to] me) and “ho” ([I] have), seem to suggest the fundamental role of perspective. One could easily argue, in fact, that non-professional book reviewers privilege a more subjective stance, opposite to the typically detached approach of professional literary critics. However, the information provided by Figure 2 would be insufficient to reach such a conclusion if not complemented by another key ingredient in the Delta procedure.

As already noted, in fact, Delta distance is based on a comparison between the usage of a word in a text and its overall usage in a corpus, measured by a metric called “zeta score”, which indicates to what extent a word is over- or under-used. Following a procedure already defined in a previous study (Rebora 2023), the zeta scores were then compared across the two groups (*aNobii* vs. *La Domenica*), identifying the ten words which showed the lowest variance. As the Delta procedure looks for patterns in the zeta scores, in fact, low variance could be one of the strongest driving forces in the attribution. It is not by chance, then, that the words identified through this procedure (see Figures 3 and 4) correspond largely to the ones already identified in the lower section of Figure 2.

Figures 3 and 4 also allow verifying the previously presented hypothesis on the subjectivity of non-professional book reviews, as the words “mi” and “ho” are consistently under-represented in *La Domenica*, while over-represented in *aNobii*. It becomes also evident how, with just one exception, words with the lowest variance in zeta scores are always under-represented in *La Domenica*, suggesting how the style of professional reviews is characterized by stricter constraints, advising against the usage of certain terms. The situation of *aNobii* appears as much more varied, with only four out of ten terms consistently underused, and much higher variance scores. This confirms the supposition of a much higher linguistic freedom in the reviews published by non-professionals.

However, some of the trends identified here remain difficult to interpret. The already-mentioned importance of the word “libro” in attributing the texts, as well as the role of function words like “non” (not) and “ma” (but), which all show opposite trends in the two groups (i.e., over-usage in *aNobii* and under-usage in *La Domenica*), cannot be easily reconducted to the habits of professional and non-professional reviewers. An even deeper investigation is required here, which will close the circle of the computational analysis by getting back to the texts themselves.

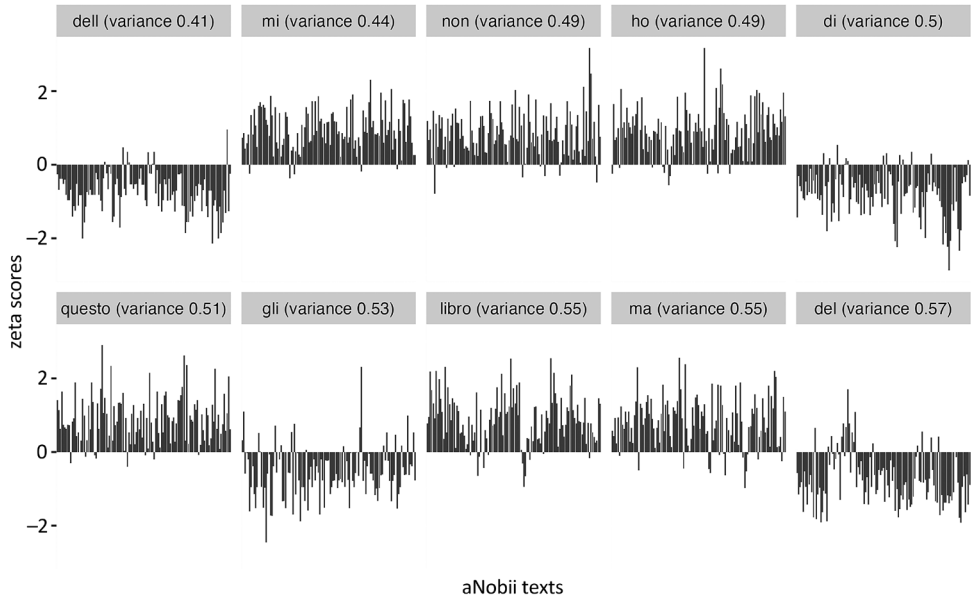


Figure 3. Zeta scores in *aNobii* texts (words ordered by increasing variance) (author's own elaboration)

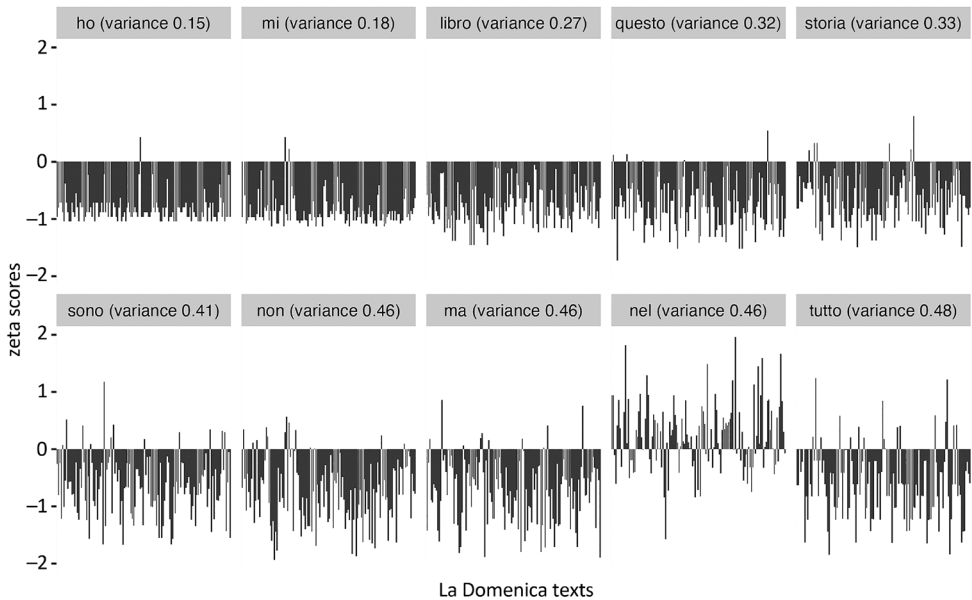


Figure 4. Zeta scores in *La Domenica* texts (words ordered by increasing variance) (author's own elaboration)

CO-OCCURRENCE AND CONTEXT

In computational literary studies, the concept of “scalable reading” (Mueller 2012) has been introduced as a possible combination between the “distant” perspective of algorithmic analyses (Moretti 2013) and the “close reading” approach which characterizes traditional literary studies (Jänicke et al. 2015). Scalable reading shows all the advantages of mixing quantitative and qualitative methods (Herrmann 2018), letting the two support each other and developing a research path which generally starts from a distant perspective and finally zooms into the texts. The analysis developed in this paper presents itself as an ideal field of application for such an approach, as the identification of the elements distinguishing professional from non-professional reviews cannot be made by relying uniquely on word frequencies.

A first step from frequency lists towards texts is allowed by co-occurrence analysis, intended as the study of the occurrence of two words in the same context. The above-mentioned word “libro” can be analyzed in this perspective, in order to identify the semantic contexts where the word is most frequently used. The analysis is here accomplished by using the Udpipes R package, a natural language processing software developed in a multilingual framework, able to work also with the Italian language (Straka 2018). Co-occurrences were calculated on the level of the sentence, by reducing the selection to just content words (i.e., nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and interjections) and converting them to lemmas. Figure 5 shows the terms characterized by the highest difference in co-occurrence with the word “libro”, when comparing *aNobii* and *La Domenica* reviews.

It is immediately evident how the only three terms showing a higher co-occurrence in *La Domenica* are the ones highlighting an interpretation of the book intended as an object, seen from an external perspective. Defining features are therefore the year of publication (“anno”), the publisher (“editore”), and the writer (“scrittore”). An internal, quasi-narratological perspective becomes instead dominant with the terms co-occurring more frequently in *aNobii*. Terms like “storia” (story) and “parte” (part, or section) seem to highlight a higher attention to structural elements of the narrative, even if the repeated references to the finale (“finale”, “fine”, “finire”) confirm the cliché of the amateur reader interested mostly in how a story ends. A hedonic perspective therefore appears as even more dominant, with terms like “piacere” (pleasure), “bello” (beautiful) and “leggere” (reading). The last term, in particular, confirms how in a platform like *aNobii* the very experience of reading remains the first and most central focus of the reviewing activity, which frequently takes the form of a report of an impactful experience (Koolen et al. 2022).

Finally, it should be noted how also one of the already-mentioned distinguishing words (“non”) appears in the list. But to investigate its usage, a further step towards the “close reading” paradigm is necessary, by making use of a technique known as Keyword in Context (KWIC).

KWIC analysis is one of the simplest approaches in computational literary studies, extracting the passages where a specific term appears and allowing a “transversal” reading of a large textual collection. A KWIC analysis of the word “non” in the *aNobii* reviews, accomplished with the Quanteda R package (Benoit et al. 2018), revealed at least two main

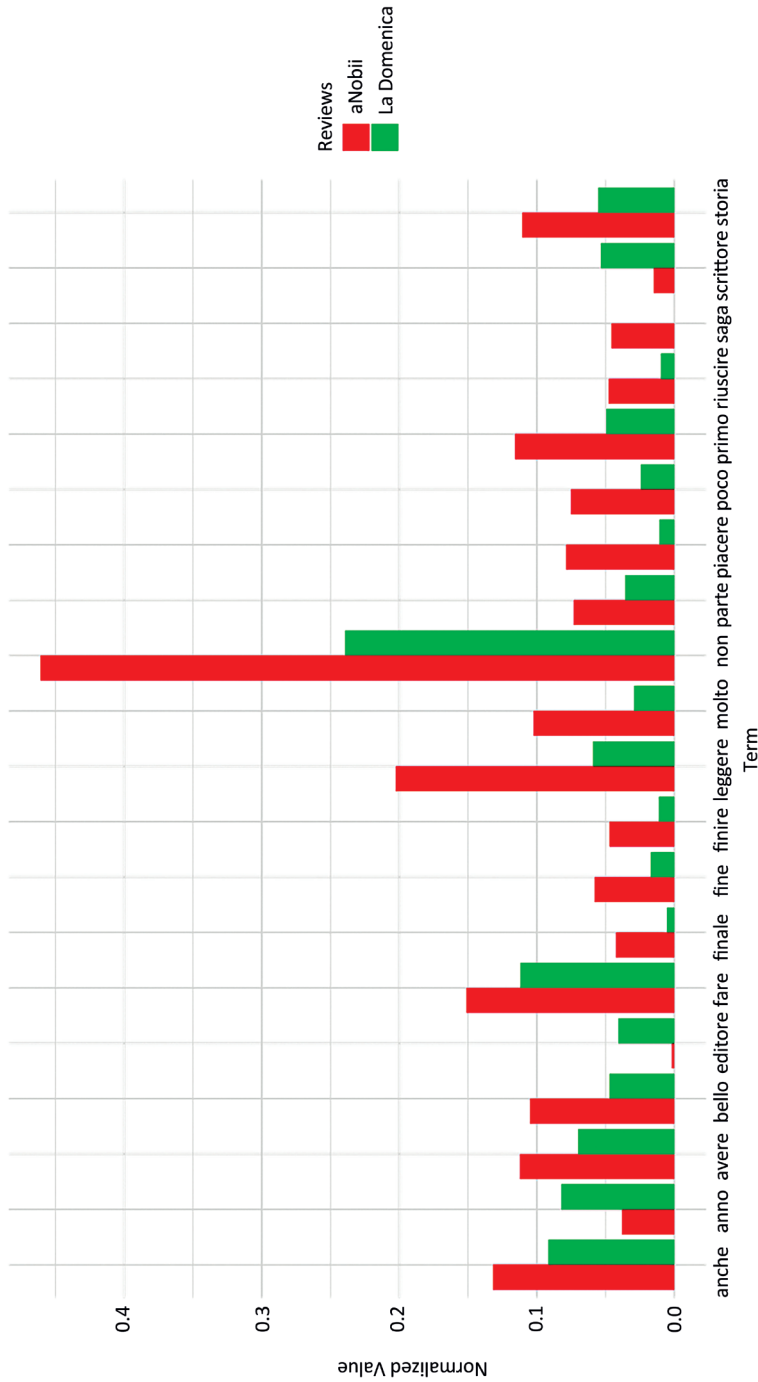


Figure 5. Co-occurrence analysis (values normalized by total occurrences of the word “libro”) (author’s own elaboration)

tendencies. First, the negation is frequently used to express negative evaluations, like when a reviewer states: “Ho apprezzato il tema dello sfruttamento di bambine nell’Inghilterra del 1730, ma non sono riuscita a farmi piacere il personaggio di Isabel, viziata, un pò [*sic*] arrendevole e annoiata” (RobinH (ceci tuera cela) 2014). This citation also highlights the frequent use of the negation “non” together with the conjunction “ma” – another of the above-mentioned distinguishing words. This connection highlights also another tendency in the usage of negations, frequently adopted to express uncertainty. When a reviewer writes: “Tantissime cose succedono in questo romanzo. Tante che non saprei da dove cominciare, o a cui non potrei neanche accennare” (Sanguet 2013), negations are used to develop a frequently-adopted rhetorical strategy in *aNobii*, which expresses a (very positive) judgement by recognizing the inability to talk about the reading experience itself – an experience which left the reviewer literally “speechless”. Negation is much less used in *La Domenica* (6,432 occurrences, against the 9,840 in *aNobii*), and rarely adopted to express negative judgements, which are in themselves an uncommon phenomenon in the magazine. Many are even the cases where the negation is rhetorically used to express the quality of a book, like when a reviewer states that a collection of poems “non è solo un bellissimo libro di un poeta sugli alberi. È un libro visione” (Rondoni 2010). Overall, no specific trends seem to emerge, with negations appearing frequently in passages summarizing the book content, where the contribution of the reviewer is limited and guided by the reviewed book itself.

As for the conjunction “ma”, its role in the *aNobii* reviews confirms the tendency of reviewers to express their doubts, or even contradict themselves. Getting back to the already-mentioned review by RobinH, a spoiled and bored character is not appreciated by the reviewer, “ma forse era proprio così che voleva renderla l’autrice” (RobinH (ceci tuera cela) 2014). Reviewers frequently revise or balance their opinions with opposite evidence, without renouncing personal judgment, but also without presenting it as inappellable. In *La Domenica*, the coordinating conjunction is more frequently used in an opposite way, profiting from its contrastive nature to strengthen reasonings and judgements. When looking for a term of comparison to judge a book, a reviewer states: “alcune pagine ricordano il Walter Benjamin di *Infanzia berlinese*, il Luigi Meneghello di *Libera nos a Malo*, l’Ermanno Olmi dell’*Albero degli zoccoli*. Ma nel libro di Luisito Bianchi c’è molto di più: realtà e poesia in una sintesi personalissima” (Carnero 2010). Such a rhetorical usage is quite widespread, but it cannot be overused without damaging the stylistic quality of the reviews. Overall, the more assertive tone of *La Domenica* reviews makes the conjunction “ma” much underused (with 3,480 occurrences, against the 5,076 of *aNobii*).

CONCLUSION

While uncovering some preliminary knowledge about the aspects distinguishing professional from non-professional book reviews in the Italian language, this research has just scratched the surface of a complex phenomenon, which will require a much more extensive and detailed investigation. Apart from the methodological improvements which will be made possible not only through the adoption of more advanced tools like Large

Language Models, but also through a detailed annotation of the reviews (for a preliminary implementation, see Rebora, Vezzani 2024), one necessary step will be the expansion of the corpus to a much wider selection of sources. Indeed, the results obtained through a comparison between *aNobii* and *La Domenica* cannot be extended to the whole context of book reviewing in Italy, let alone to a worldwide perspective. One issue hindering such a development is copyright: even if most of the materials analyzed here are openly available on the web, their copyright lies with their (millions of) authors, together with the platforms and magazines hosting their texts. This is an issue that is frequently faced by DSR research (Rebora et al. 2021), which can leverage the many exceptions for research purposes set into place by international legislations, like the *European Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market* (European Union 2019), allowing the analysis (but not the re-publication) of such materials. Finally, a further improvement can be made possible through an empirical investigation of reviewing activities. The analyses performed here are in fact based on the texts of the reviews, but there are many factors (social, psychological, or anthropological) informing reviewing practices which can only be measured by actively interrogating the reviewers. Such analyses are still almost absent (for a limited exception, see Kraxenberger, Lauer 2022), but they can also be fruitfully integrated to computational research.

As for the limited goals of this paper, an answer has been provided by raising a further question. Through a deeper linguistic analysis of the reviews published in *aNobii* and *La Domenica*, the stylometric distinction between professional and non-professional reviews has been connected to conscious linguistic choices which can be influenced by social factors, as well as by the expectations raised by the content platforms themselves. As recent research has shown, in fact, reviews published on DSR platforms are substantially shaped by their expected audience (Kuijpers 2022). Therefore, the question can be raised if the identified distinction is a matter of style or a matter of genre. In particular, if we follow the tradition considering “style as an expression of individuality, subjectivity, or emotions of the author” (Herrmann et al. 2015: 42), a stylistic distinction would have even been excluded by the results presented here. Even if theoretical research has also provided a possible solution to this conundrum, describing style as “a property of texts constituted by an ensemble of formal features” (Herrmann et al. 2015: 44) and consequently suggesting that “genre can cause style” (Herrmann et al. 2015: 46), the issue at stake here is even more abstract, as it asks if the distinction between professional and non-professional reviewers can be identified at an individual or at a social level. The results presented here have at least shown how these two levels are strictly interconnected, advising for a more holistic and interdisciplinary study of the subject.

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