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***Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age.  
Memory, Humanities and Technologies***

edited by Daria Spampinato

ASSOCIAZIONE PER  
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# Measuring the “Critical Distance”. A Corpus-Based Analysis of Italian Book Reviews

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present a project that aims at testing, questioning, and eventually reshaping the most recent models of reading experience. After a brief survey of the theoretical debate, that shows the necessity of updating Eco’s proposal in light of the latest developments in neuroscience and cognitive studies, we describe an experiment carried out with the LIWC software on a corpus of Italian book reviews. The analysis was focused on the possible contrast/coherence of the cognitive, emotional, and physical aspects of reading experience. We divided the corpus into three subsets: reviews published in a social network (*aNobii*), in a paper magazine (*Il Sole 24 Ore*), and in two literary journals (*Osservatorio Critico della germanistica* and *Between*). This subdivision brought into consideration two main research questions: (1) how the medium shapes the descriptions of reading experiences and (2) if the detachment brought about by the paradigm of “critical distance” is still apt to fully grasp the phenomenon of literary reading. Results suggest a negative answer to the second question, evidencing a consistency in the increase of cognitive endeavors and emotional/physical aspects of language. However, a fine-grained analysis of the vocabulary referable to cognitive processes shows a significant difference in the three subsets: the dominant approach is more related to experiences of the self in the social network, to communicative needs in the magazine, and to analytical processes in the two literary journals. Possible developments of the project are discussed, both in terms of research methods and corpus composition, with the aim of expanding its scope to a more overarching theorization of reading experience and critical interpretation.

## KEYWORDS

Reader response, Literary criticism, Neurocognitive studies, Psycholinguistics, LIWC.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In light of the most recent developments in various fields of knowledge, Umberto Eco’s celebrated model of reading experience seems to necessitate a substantial updating. The “implicit reader” described in (Eco 1979) appears like an incorporeal being, whose “inferences” are driven by an unemotional process – not by chance, equated to a computing activity. However, neuroscientific research has shown how reading experience directly involves sensorimotor processes (see Gallese and Lakoff 2005; Aziz-Zadeh *et al.* 2008). Also, through the integration of psycholinguistics and cognitive studies, recent models and frameworks suggest the fundamental role of emotion in the act of reading (see Jacobs 2015; Mangen and van der Weel 2016).

With this project, we intend to show how DH tools, together with the increasing availability of reader responses in digitized format, can help testing, questioning, and even reshaping these models.

## 2. TOOLS, RESOURCES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With reference to the theoretical debate sketched above, an effective tool for the analysis of reader responses is the software *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count* (LIWC)<sup>1</sup>. The software is based on psycholinguistic research (see Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010) and it measures, among others, the presence of “Affect Words”, “Cognitive Processes”, “Perceptual Processes”, and “Biological Processes” inside the scanned texts. For our purposes, LIWC offers the possibility of ‘measuring’ the cognitive, physical, and affective dimensions of reading, in order to evaluate if they contrast or support each other.

The composition of the corpus, then, suggested at least two other research questions. Limiting the analysis to Italian language, we decided to compare book reviews written in social networks, paper magazines, and literary journals. This comparison brought into consideration the role of the medium in which reader responses are retrieved (i.e. how writing about reading experiences online, on paper, or in a selective environment changes the way we describe those experiences). Also, it implied the possible re-consideration of a dominant paradigm in literary criticism (i.e. if a detached, disembodied analysis of texts can actually lead to a full understanding of literary reading). Well conscious of the extreme delicacy of its implications, we tackled with the ever-open issue of evaluating the “critical distance”.

The construction of a representative corpus of Italian critical writing is currently under development, as it requires an extensive collection and normalization of texts published in multiple formats and with different access policies. For the sake of the present experiment, we limited our choice to a selection of HTML repositories and of open-access journals. To build a sample of “online social reading” (see Faggiolani and Vivarelli 2016), we scraped 5,000 reviews from the website *aNobii*<sup>2</sup> (all published between 2007 and 2017). As for paper magazines, we downloaded two years (2010-2011) of the

<sup>1</sup> <<http://liwc.wpengine.com/>> (accessed 27-09-2017).

<sup>2</sup> Reviews are the first 5,000 in the list: <<http://www.anobii.com/groups/01f13b41479ff6d9a0#collezione>> (accessed 15-09-2017).

literary section “Lettere” from the magazine *Il Sole 24 Ore*<sup>3</sup>. As for literary journals, we downloaded all the reviews published in the first twelve issues of *Osservatorio Critico della germanistica*<sup>4</sup> (1998-2001) and *Between*<sup>5</sup> (2011-2016). The analysis of the corpus was carried out through the LIWC Italian dictionary (see Agosti and Rellini 2007).

### 3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Results of the analysis are shown in Table 1.

| Subset                    | Word Count | Affect Words | Perceptual Processes | Biological Processes | Cognitive Processes |
|---------------------------|------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| aNobii (5,000 reviews)    | 646,964    | 4.74         | 1.2                  | 0.97                 | 5.85                |
| aNobii (1,000 reviews)    | 149,156    | 4.18         | 1.05                 | 0.96                 | 5.65                |
| Il Sole                   | 704,242    | 3.29         | 0.83                 | 0.95                 | 4.15                |
| Il Sole (2010)            | 353,545    | 3.31         | 0.85                 | 0.97                 | 4.14                |
| Osservatorio +<br>Between | 404,692    | 2.42         | 0.54                 | 0.41                 | 4.58                |
| Osservatorio              | 213,095    | 2.3          | 0.57                 | 0.39                 | 4.39                |
| Between                   | 191,597    | 2.55         | 0.51                 | 0.44                 | 4.8                 |

**Table 1.** LIWC analysis of the corpus

As evident, *aNobii* dominates in almost all the considered indices. As for “Affect Words”, it totalizes 44% more than *Il Sole* and 95% more than *Osservatorio* and *Between* (pooled together). As for “Perceptual Processes”, 44% more than *Il Sole* and 122% more than the two journals. As for “Biological Processes”, there is no substantial difference compared to *Il Sole*, but still 136% more than the two journals. The most significant output, however, is about “Cognitive Processes”, where *aNobii* scores 27% more than the two journals and 40% more than *Il Sole*. These results suggest how there is no interference between cognitive and emotive/biological/perceptual processes. Indeed, the last can support the first. Also, results show how, while the “critical distance” is achieved by an inhibition of emotion and physicality (gradually increasing from magazines to journals), it may not enhance cognitive activity. In addition, Table 1 presents the results obtained by segmenting the subsets into smaller portions, to confirm that the scores do not depend on the different size of the subsets. However, a more refined analysis calls for caution in the interpretation of the results. First, *aNobii* shows higher values in the majority of the 102 indices calculated by LIWC. A phenomenon that can be explained through the “collective intelligence” (Lévi 1997) of thousands of reviewers, whose vocabulary is inevitably richer than those of dozens of cultivated critics. Second, a comparative analysis of the vocabulary in the three subsets shows how the cognitive processes individuated by LIWC are significantly differentiated: more related to experiences of the self in the social reading platform, to communicative needs in the magazine, and to analytical processes in the literary journals (see Figure 1).

### 4. FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The results here obtained should be validated through a wider analysis, involving more languages and sources. Particularly delicate is the choice of journals, both for technical reasons (few are available in free, plain text/HTML format) and for the consistency of the corpus. Most reviews, in fact, are dedicated to critical studies and not to narrative works (that are dominant in social networks and magazines). We decided to keep this inconsistency in order to preserve the evaluative, engaged language of reviews, but the corpus can be expanded to critical studies, manuals, et al.

Finally, also the adopted methods may be developed further. For example, by choosing more advanced software in sentiment analysis (such as SEANCE, see Crossley *et al.* 2017), or by adopting vocabularies more specifically focused on the description of aesthetic experiences (see Knoop *et al.* 2016).

With this project, we hope to have cast the groundwork for a research that may change the way we study and perceive the experience of reading, together with the act of critical interpretation. Until now, in fact, most of the research in empirical studies and in the esthetic of reception has distinguished professional and common readers based on external information, but not on the texts they produced, while evidence confirms that there is a substantial difference in reading experiences when carried out for pleasure or for the purpose of interpretation (see Fialho *et al.* 2011).

<sup>3</sup> <<http://archiviadomenica.ilssole24ore.com/#>> (accessed 27-09-2017).

<sup>4</sup> <<http://web.unin.it/lettere/14961/osservatorio-critico-della-germanistica>> (accessed 27-09-2017).

<sup>5</sup> <<http://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/index>> (accessed 27-09-2017).

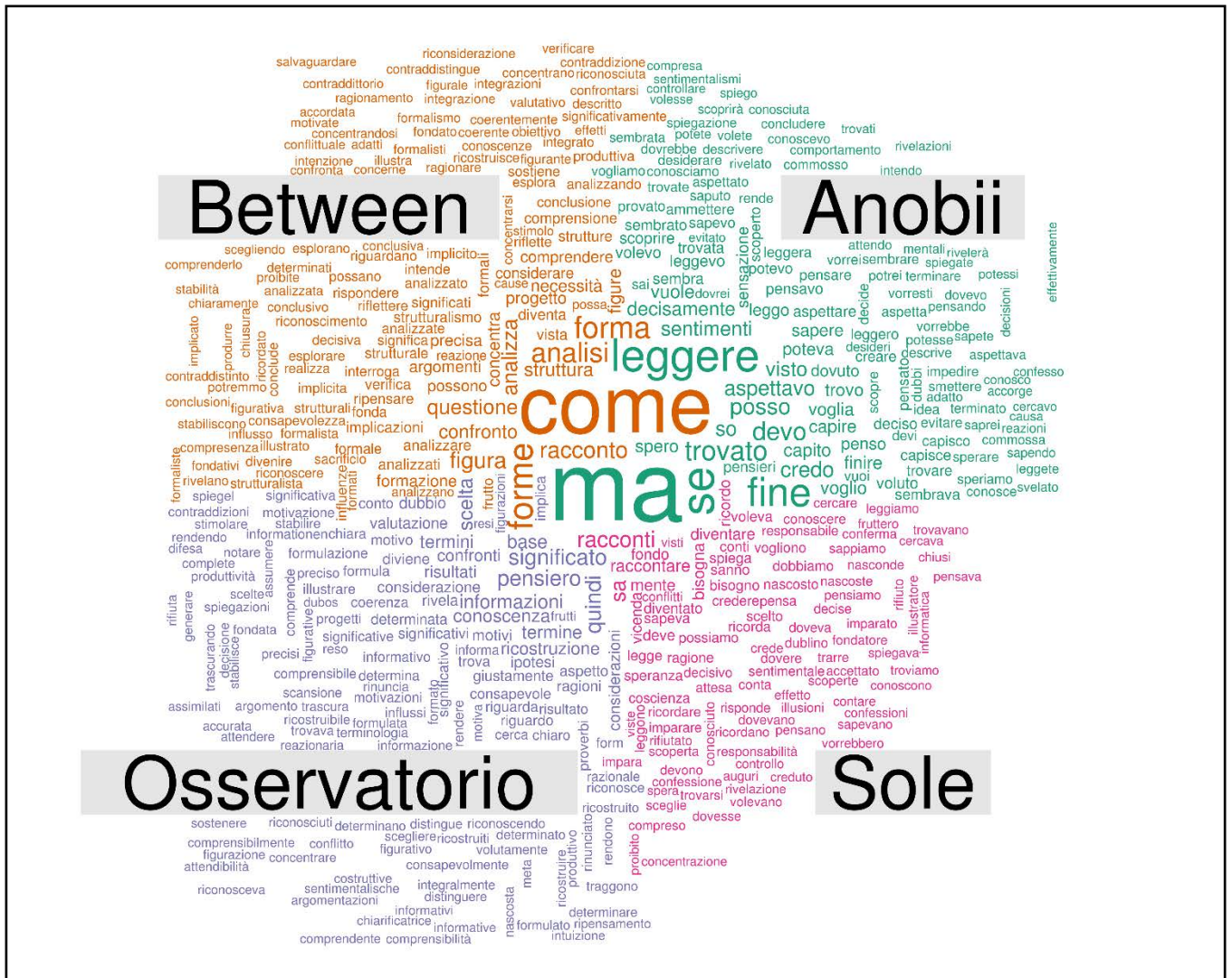


Figure 1. Comparative wordcloud of the terms tagged by LIWC as “Cognitive Process”.

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