

Rhythmic Clausulae in Dante's Latin Prose Texts and in their Italian Translations Using Examples from De Vulgari Eloquentia and Monarchia

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Abstract. This paper studies Dante's Latin prose and its Italian translations. The texts observed in this analysis are the samples of *De Monarchia* and *De vulgari eloquentia*. In ancient rhetoric, rhythmic units were used at the ends of sentences and clauses in prose texts. Medieval Latin prose rhythm was based on word stress and was called *cursus*. Generally, it is believed that the most prevalent clauses during the Middle Ages were *cursus planus*, *cursus velox*, *cursus tardus* and *cursus trispondaicus*. The aim of this paper is to compare the frequency of *cursus* in the original Latin texts and in their Italian translations. The research method used is comparative-statistical analysis.

Keywords: Dante; *cursus*; *clausula*; prose rhythm

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on Dante's Latin prose and its Italian translations. The texts observed in this analysis are the samples of *Monarchia* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. The samples include the first eleven chapters of *Monarchia* and the first ten chapters of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, along with their Italian translations². The aim of this paper is to compare the frequency of *cursus* in the original Latin texts and in their translations.

The first research on the rules of the *cursus* dates to the last decades of the 19th century, but it is important to note that, to date, there is still no clarity or unanimity of thought about the *cursus* (Mondani 2019: 37). Generally, it is believed that the most prevalent clauses during the Middle Ages were *cursus planus*, *cursus velox*, *cursus tardus* and *cursus trispondaicus*.³

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² The translations used in this paper are Ronconi 1966 (*Monarchia*) and Mengaldo 1966 (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*).

³ For instance, Alfredo Schiaffini in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* provides descriptions and examples of *cursus* as follows (I added a rhythm scheme to each example): "Il *cursus*

The research method of this paper is comparative-statistical analysis. Initially, all clauses within the selected samples were examined. *Cursus* may appear both at the end of sentences and at the end of clauses. For the purposes of this study, all endings preceding punctuation marks were analysed⁴. Then all the analysed samples were organised into different databases. In each database, endings corresponding to the different types of *cursus* – *cursus planus*, *cursus trispondaicus*, *cursus tardus* and *cursus velox* – were classified as separate categories. Endings that did not conform to any of these types were grouped under the category “other endings”. Following this classification, a statistical analysis was conducted, and the data were subsequently compared and analysed.

In the process of determining the rhythm schemes, several issues related to prosody emerged. The syllabification of Italian words is not problematic when the syllable boundary occurs between a vowel and a consonant or between two consonants. However, complications arise when multiple vowels occur consecutively, as Italian often allows for two possible methods of syllabification in such cases (Menichetti 1993: 176–177). In instances of ambiguity, I consulted *Dizionario d'ortografia e di pronunzia* (1981). Another problem of prosody regarding the syllabification of Italian words is interverbal syllabification. The final vowel of one word and the initial vowel of the following word, when occurring in verse, often occupy a single syllable position, resulting in a synaloepha. In the natural language this interverbal syllabification can yield

planus è formato da un polisillabo parossitono (o piano che dir si voglia) seguito da un trisillabo pure parossitono, ed è esemplificabile con *vincla perfrégit, retributiónem merétur* (Xx#xXx), o anche *ópis est nóstrae* (Xx#x#Xx) (perché è legittima la soluzione del trisillabo in un monosillabo e in un bisillabo). Il *tardus*, detto anche *ecclesiasticus*, risulta da un polisillabo parossitono seguito da un quadrisillabo proparossitono (o sdrucchiolo): esempi, *vincla perfrégeret, felicitátis percípient* (Xx#xXxx), o anche, con l'ammesso scioglimento del quadrisillabo, *examinátis quae tángimus* (Xx#x#Xxx). Il *velox* consta di un polisillabo proparossitono seguito da un quadrisillabo parossitono, *vínculum fregerámus* (Xxx#xxXx), *consíliis et respónsis* (Xxx#x#xXx), e perfino *cándida nostra sígna* (Xxx#xx#Xx). Il *trispondaicus* è costituito da un polisillabo seguito da un quadrisillabo, ambedue parossitoni: *ésse videátur, (una) vóce clamavérunt* (Xx#xxXx)” (*Cursus* in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Roma, 1931).

See more about Medieval *cursus*, for example, in Clark 1910, Rajna 1932, Janson 1975, Lindholm 1963, Norberg 1968, Oberhelman, Hall 1984, Chiesa 2012.

⁴ In previous studies, researchers have typically focused on the ends of sentences or clauses. Toynbee (1920) observed that *cursus* forms are usually found at points of pause, though they can, in fact, appear at any position within a sentence. It can be assumed that punctuation marks indicate pauses in the text and thus serve as the most reliable reference points for intra-sentence analysis.

different outcomes depending on context, speaker and other variables, making it difficult to establish a definitive and objective syllabic division (Pazzaglia 1990: 42–43). In my analysis of Italian samples, the synaloepha was not considered, meaning that the final vowel of a word and the initial vowel of the following word were always treated as separate syllables.

In the analysis of the Latin examples, the problem of hiatus and elision appears. Generally, in the Middle Ages, collisions of vowels were avoided in Latin prose. Authors who cared about their style, both rhythmic and unrhythmic, very often kept whole texts almost completely free of such collisions, which, therefore, rarely appeared within cadences. When they did occur, scholars have assumed that there was a hiatus and not an elision (Janson 1975: 32; Parodi 1957: 401), and this is assumed in the present analysis as well.

2. Rhythmic *clausulae* and Dante

Dante adjusted the stylistic structures relying on classical rhetoric tradition (Malato 1999) and used *cursus* in his Latin prose. The regular use of *cursus* is evident in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Monarchia*, *Questio de Aqua et Terra*, and especially in *Epistole*. Scholars have observed (Malato 1999: 1035) that in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* *cursus planus* predominates, *cursus tardus* occurs frequently and *cursus velox* is often preferred at the end of periods. Paget Toynbee conducted extensive studies of Dante's use of *cursus* in his Latin prose (Toynbee 1918, 1920, 1923)⁵. He concluded that Dante did not employ *cursus* systematically throughout his works but tended to use it in rhetorical and personal sections, primarily at the beginnings and endings of texts (Toynbee 1920: 231). Other scholars have similarly noted that the distribution of rhythmic clauses in Dante's Latin prose is not uniform, often varying significantly even within the same work, from chapter to chapter (Mengaldo 1970: 292).

Studies of the *cursus* in Italian prose are not very frequent and scholarly opinion remains divided on whether Dante employed *cursus* in his vernacular prose. Some argue that Dante, being highly attuned to rhythm, probably paid close attention to sentence endings in his Italian prose and followed the rules of *cursus* when appropriate (Rajna 1932: 86; Terracini 1957: 256). Others, however, maintain that he did not apply *cursus* in his vernacular writing (Bertoni 1914: 41–42).

⁵ The *cursus* have been studied more extensively in Dante's *Epistole*; for more recent studies, see, for example, Ascoli 1997, Grevin 2020, Delle Donne 2020, Di Patre 2011, 2017, 2022.

In a previous study (Mikkel 2020) I analysed the occurrence of rhythmic *clausulae* in the Latin and Italian vernacular prose of Dante and Boccaccio⁶, including additional samples from Franco Sacchetti, Giovanni Villani, Pietro Bembo and Niccolò Machiavelli. The results of this study indicated that in the 14th century rhythmic units were present both in Latin and in Italian vernacular prose, though differences in usage emerged. In Latin samples there were more cases of *cursus planus*, *tardus* and *velox*; generally the *planus* was the most prevalent, while the *tardus* and *velox* occurred a little bit less. Italian prose samples across all analysed authors showed a similar pattern: *cursus planus* was most common, followed by *cursus trispondaicus*, with *velox* and *tardus* appearing less frequently. On average, rhythmic *clausulae* were present in 53–60% of the Italian prose samples.

This distribution can be partly attributed to the prosodic characteristics of the Italian language, in which stress commonly falls on the penultimate syllable. Both *cursus planus* and *trispondaicus* align naturally with such stress patterns, making their occurrence more likely, even in the absence of deliberate application by the author.

This paper studies, next to Dante's Latin samples, the translations of these samples into Italian, observing whether these translations tend to maintain the *cursus* patterns of the originals or if, consistent with broader trends in Italian prose, they reflect a predominance of *cursus planus* and *trispondaicus* due to the language's prosodic tendencies.

3. Rhythmic *clausulae* in *Monarchia* and in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*

I have analysed the occurrence of *cursus* in Dante's Latin works *Monarchia* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. The sample consists of the first eleven chapters of *Monarchia* (474 sentence and clause ends) and the first ten chapters of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (474 endings). This study presents the frequencies of different *cursus* types in each sample as percentages and examines the distribution of *cursus* by chapter (including the distribution of each *cursus* type by chapter)⁷.

The following chart presents the results of the analysis of *Monarchia*⁸:

⁶ About the *cursus* in Boccaccio's Italian prose see also, for example, Mondani 2020.

⁷ Since the aim of this paper is to compare the frequency of *cursus*, the rhythm schemes of other endings are not distinguished.

⁸ Charts 1–4, 10, 11, 17 and 18 in this paper also appear in my doctoral thesis (Mikkel 2020: 41–126)

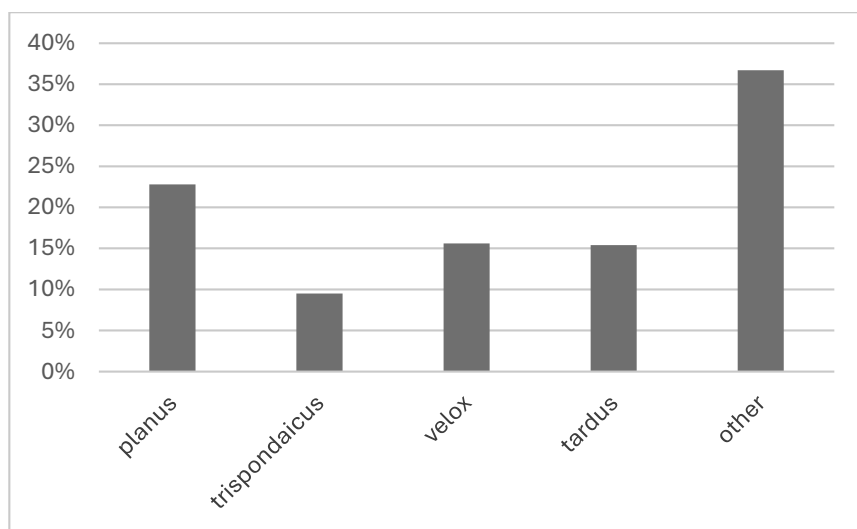


Chart 1. *Cursus* in *Monarchia*.

The results of the analysis show the presence of the *cursus* in this sample (63.3%) and the prevalence of *cursus planus* (22.8%), for example, *primi agentis, esse producit*. *Cursus velox* (15.6%), for example, *omnibus intemptata, opera ordinatur*, and *cursus tardus* (15.4%), for example, *intellectus possibilis, dicunt imperium*, are used quite equally. The last in frequency in this sample is *cursus trispondaicus* (9.5%), for example, *bone voluntatis, unam civitatem*.

I have also studied the occurrence of *cursus* within the sample by chapter, revealing significant variation in the frequency of certain *cursus* forms. In some chapters, the percentage of a particular *cursus* type is markedly higher or lower than the average. For example, in the opening chapter of *Monarchia*, the rhythmic structure is particularly prominent in comparison to the average found throughout the sample.

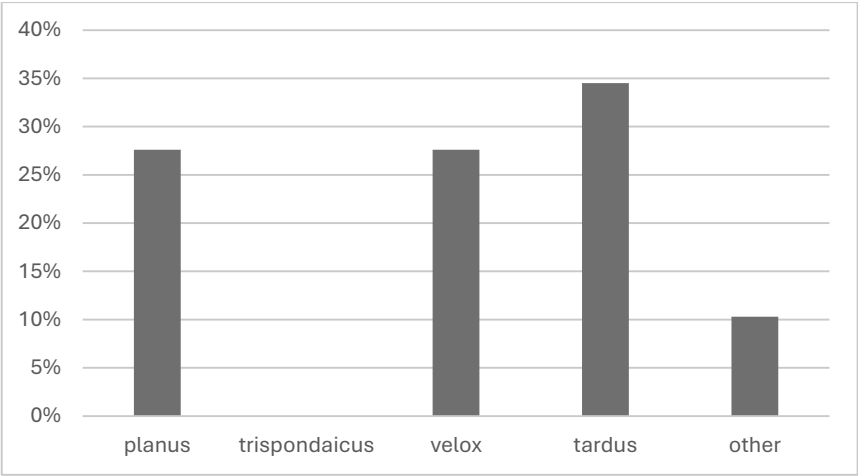


Chart 2. Cursus in Monarchia chapter 1.I.

The following chart presents the results of the analysis of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*:

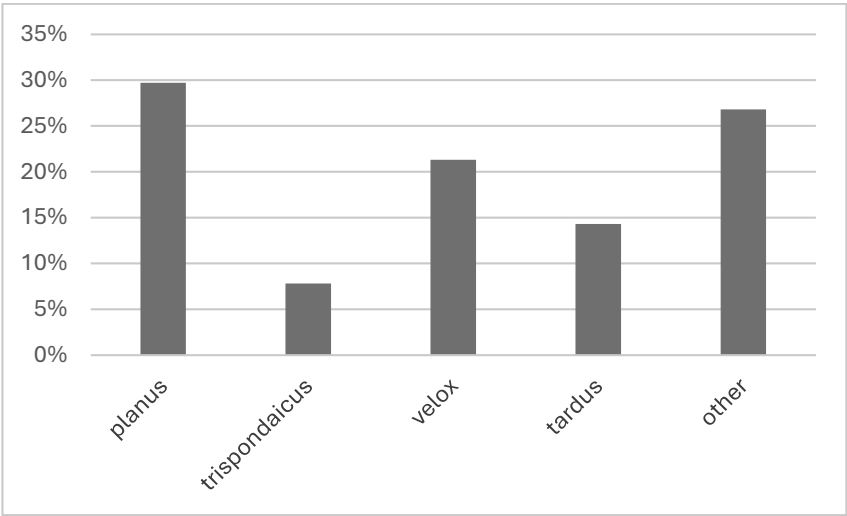


Chart 3. Cursus in De Vulgari Eloquentia.

The results of the analysis indicate that the percentage of the *cursus* in this sample is 73.2% and that there are more *cursus planus* (29.7%), for example, *natura permittit, vidit adultam*. *Cursus velox* is present in this sample with 21.3%, for example, *inferius ostendemus, hominum variantur*, and *cursus tardus* with 14.3%, for example, *prima locutio, multis conveniunt*. The least frequently used in this sample is *cursus trispondaicus* (7.8%), *tantum sensuale, sermo variatur*.

I also studied the occurrence of *cursus* by chapter within the sample of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, revealing also here significant variation in the frequency of certain *cursus* forms. For example, in the opening chapter of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* the presence of *cursus* is 93.3% and the frequency of *velox* and *tardus* is higher compared to the average found throughout the sample.

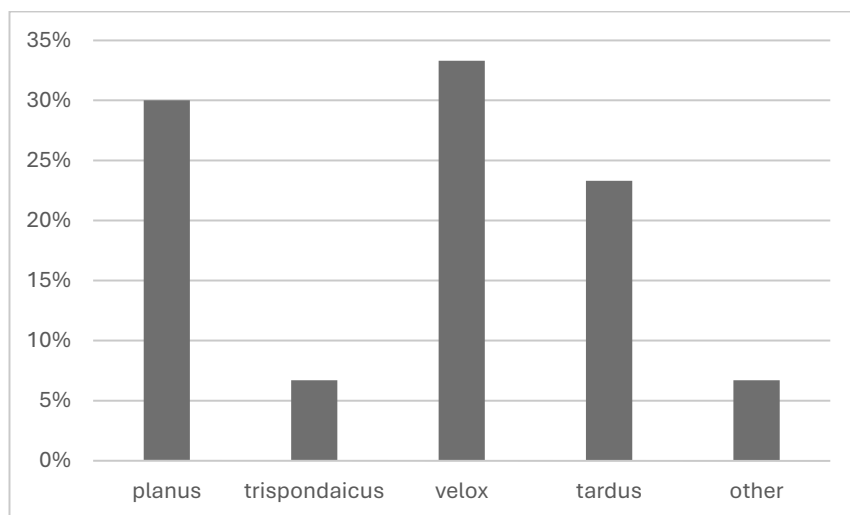


Chart 4. *Cursus* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* chapter 1.I.

4. Rhythmic *clausulae* in Italian translations of *Monarchia* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*

The following chart presents the results of analysis of the translation of *Monarchia*:

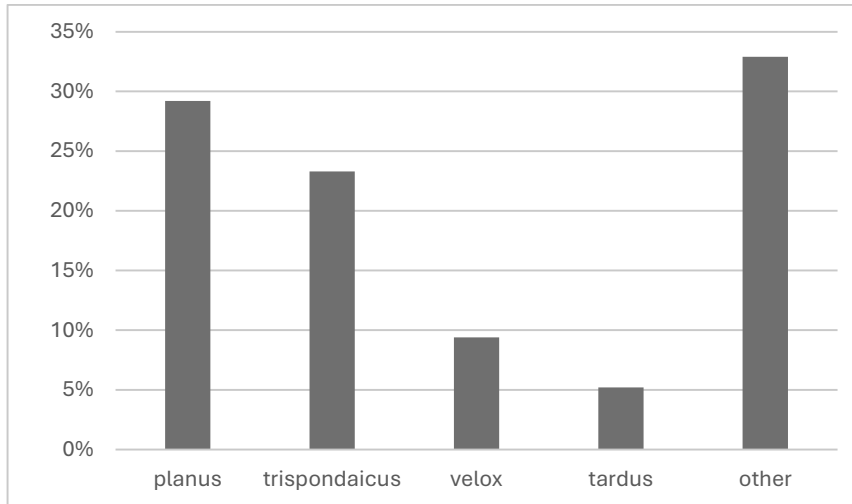


Chart 5. *Cursus* in *Monarchia* (translation).

The results of the analysis indicate the presence of *cursus* in this sample (67.1%) and the prevalence of *cursus planus* (29.2%), for example *nostra ricerca*. Next in frequency in this sample is *cursus trispondaicus* (23.3%), for example, *dimensione temporale*. The occurrence of *cursus velox* is 9.4%, for example, *possa desiderare*, and of *cursus tardus* 5.2%, for example, *senso pragmatico*.

In the Latin sample the first chapter showed a notably high occurrence of rhythmic endings, approximately 90%. For comparative reasons I also present data from the first chapter of the translated text, where the frequency of *cursus* is 60% and their distribution is similar to the average of the translation sample of *Monarchia* with *cursus planus* being the most prevalent (30%), followed by *cursus trispondaicus* (16.7%). *Cursus velox* and *tardus* appear less frequently, both 6.7%.

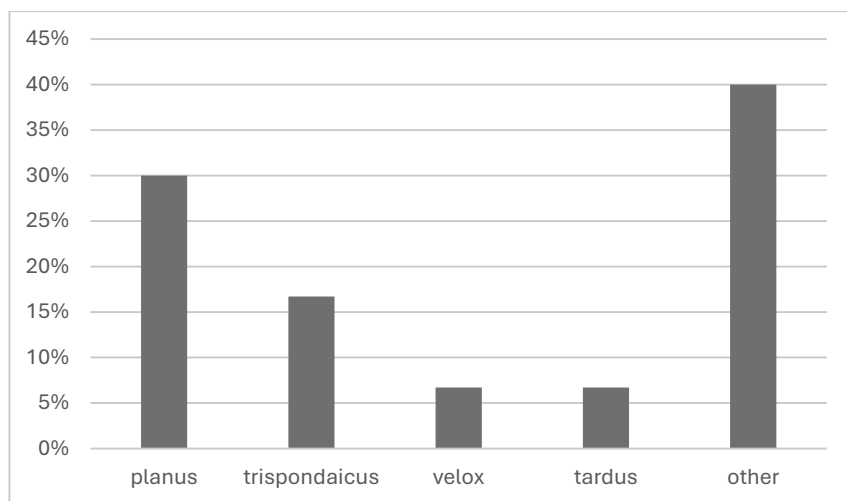


Chart 6. *Cursus* in *Monarchia* chapter 1.I (translation).

The following chart presents the results of the analysis of the translation of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*:

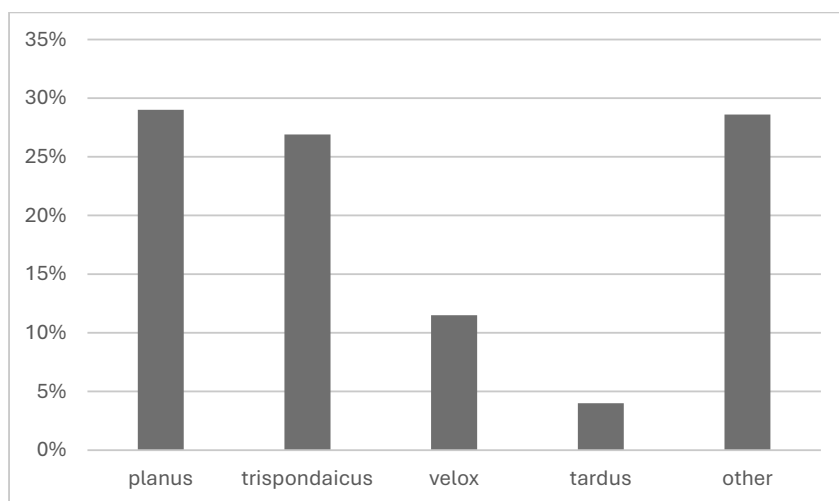


Chart 7. *Cursus* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (translation).

The results of the analysis reveal the presence of *cursus* in this sample (71.4%) and the prevalence of *cursus planus* (29%), for example *corpo mortale*. The next most frequent type in this sample is *cursus trispondaicus* (26.9%), for example, *lingua precedente*. The occurrence of *cursus velox* is 11.5%, for example, *essere razionale*, and of *cursus tardus* 4%, for example, *segno linguistico*.

In the case of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, I also present the distribution observed in the first chapter of the translated text, where *cursus* occur in 69.4% of instances. This distribution closely reflects the average found in the overall translation sample of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, with *cursus trispondaicus* (30.6%) and *cursus planus* (27.8%) being the most prevalent types.

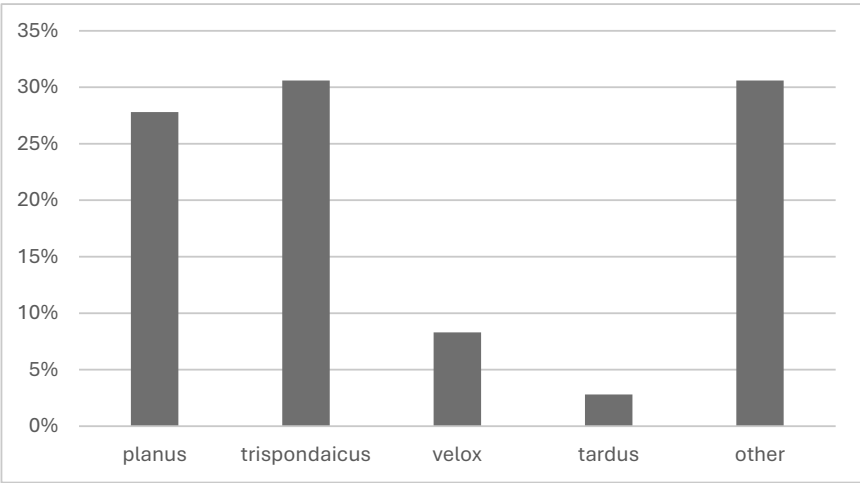


Chart 8. *Cursus* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* chapter 1.I (translation).

5. Comparison of results

The following chart indicates the comparison of the results of *Monarchia* in both languages:

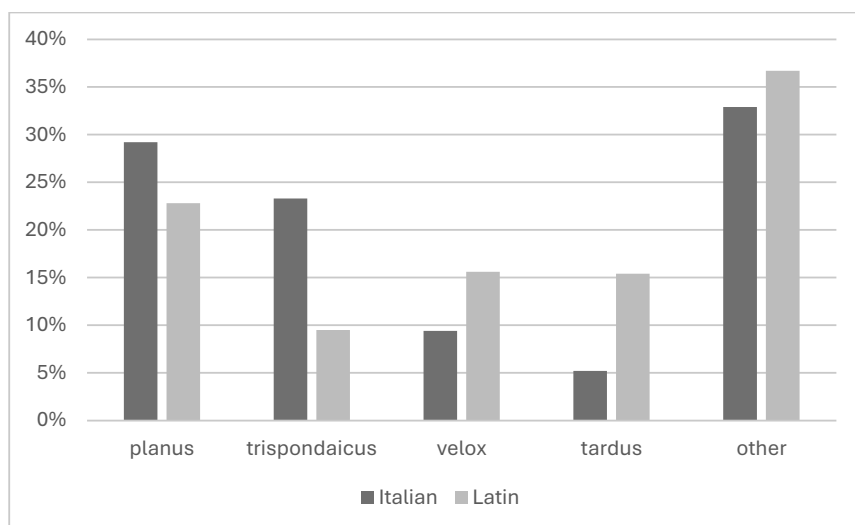


Chart 9. *Cursus* in *Monarchia* (Italian and Latin).

The comparison reveals that the distribution previously noted (Mikkel 2020) also emerges in the Italian translation of this sample: *cursus planus* appears most frequently, followed by *cursus trispondaicus*. *Cursus velox* and *cursus tardus* are less common. In both languages, *cursus planus* predominates, while other endings occur in relatively similar proportions – 32.9% in the Italian sample and 36.7% in the Latin sample.

In both languages it is noteworthy to observe the presence of *cursus velox* and *tardus*, given that in Latin prose the *velox* was considered the most elegant and was frequently used at the end of sentences and even in the conclusions of works (Toynbee 1920: 229). Conversely, Italian prosody does not favour the use of *velox* and *tardus* and my previous analysis (Mikkel 2020) indicates their low frequency in Italian text samples.

A closer examination of the Latin sample from *Monarchia* reveals a higher occurrence of *cursus velox* in chapters I (27.6%) and VIII (24.0%), compared to the average of 15.6% in the sample. Chapter I also displays the highest occurrence of *cursus tardus* (34.5%), while in chapter IX, *cursus tardus* is entirely absent.

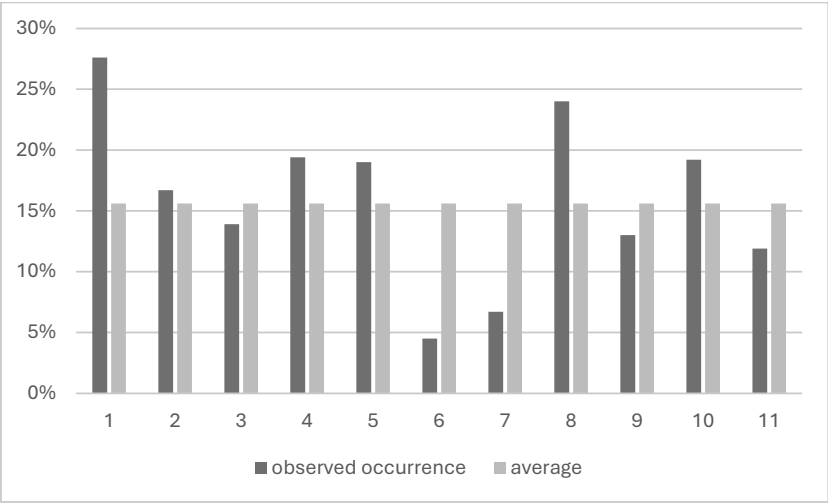


Chart 10. *Cursus velox* in *Monarchia* (Latin).

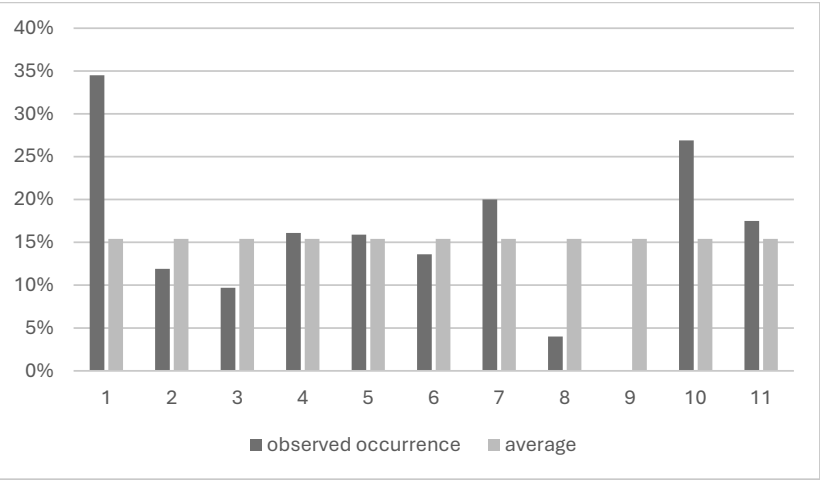


Chart 11. *Cursus tardus* in *Monarchia* (Latin).

A closer examination of the translated samples reveals a higher occurrence of *cursus velox* in chapters II (15%), III (12.9%), and XI (13.6%), while it is entirely absent in chapters VII and X. The average frequency of *cursus velox* in the translated sample is 9.4%. Similarly, a higher incidence of *cursus tardus* is observed in chapters IV (10.8%), VII (15.4%) and VIII (11.1%), whereas it does not appear at all in chapter IX. The average frequency of *cursus tardus* in the translation is 5.2%.

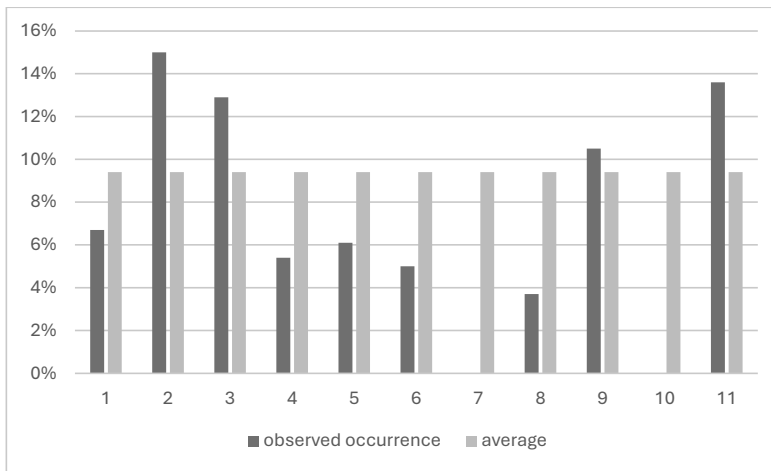


Chart 12. *Cursus velox* in *Monarchia* (Italian).

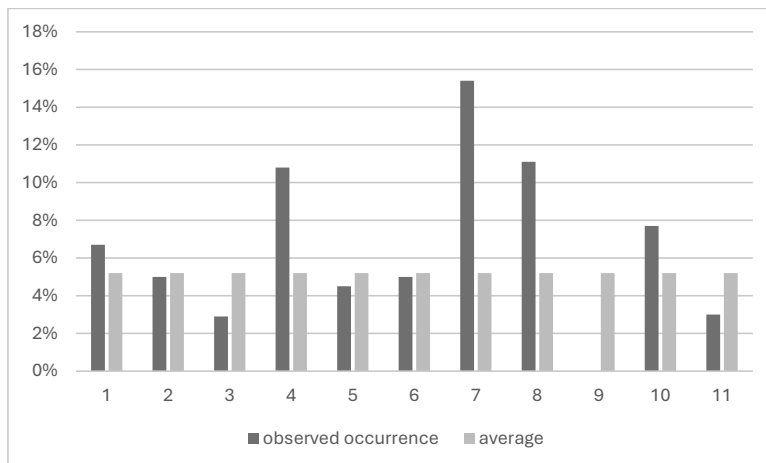


Chart 13. *Cursus tardus* in *Monarchia* (Italian).

The following charts compare the occurrence of *cursus tardus* and *velox* in both Latin and Italian samples from *Monarchia*.

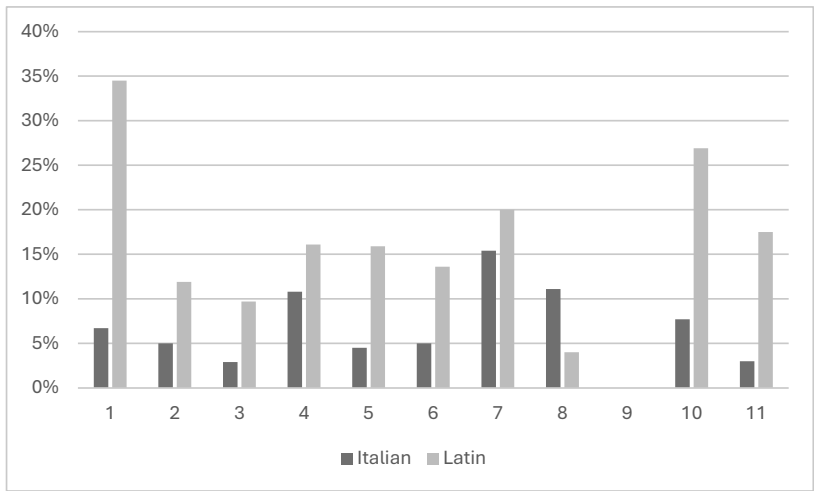


Chart 14. *Cursus tardus* in *Monarchia* (Italian and Latin).

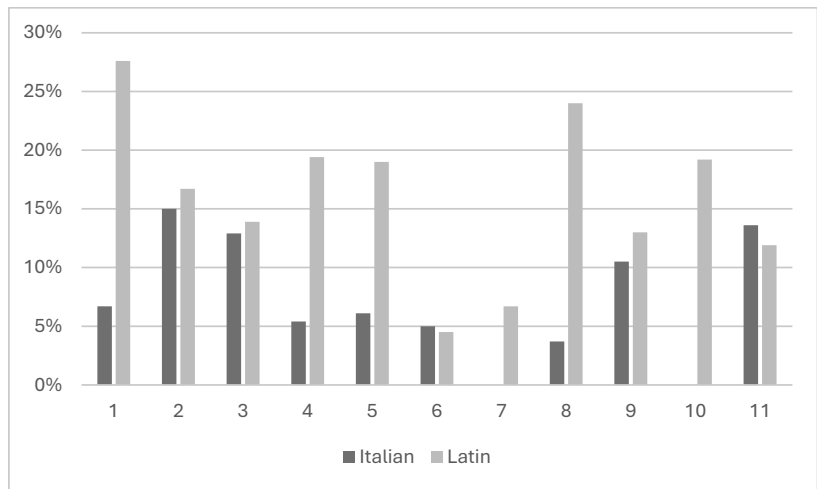


Chart 15. *Cursus velox* in *Monarchia* (Italian and Latin).

Although both *tardus* and *velox* occur more frequently in the Latin text, in certain chapters their distribution is similar in both languages, for instance *velox* in chapters II, III, VI and XI. In the case of *cursus tardus*, chapter VIII shows a higher occurrence in the Italian translation (11.1%) than in the Latin original (4%). While the Latin sample exhibits an above-average presence of both *cursus tardus* and *velox* in the first chapter, this pattern is not mirrored in the Italian translation.

The following chart indicates the comparison of the results of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* in both languages:

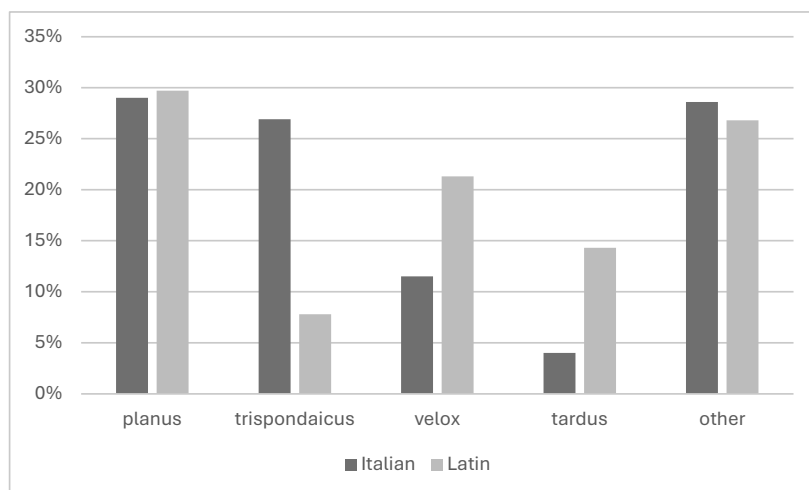


Chart 16. *Cursus* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Latin and Italian).

In the sample from *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, a distribution of *cursus* similar to that found in the sample from *Monarchia* sample can be observed. In the Italian translation, *cursus planus* is the most frequent form, followed by *cursus trispondaicus*, while *cursus velox* and *tardus* appear less frequently. In both languages, the frequency of *cursus planus* is nearly identical (29% in Italian and 29.7% in Latin), and rhythmic schemes other than the *cursus* occur at comparable rates (28.6% in Italian and 26.8% in Latin).

I have analysed the occurrence of *cursus* by chapters also in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, observing the presence of *cursus velox* and *tardus*. A closer examination of the Latin sample of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* reveals a higher frequency of *cursus velox* in chapters I (33.3%) and VI–VIII (26.8%, 27.3%, 32.6%), compared to the overall average of 21.3% of *velox* in this sample. Chapter I also has the highest

occurrence of *cursus tardus* (23.3%) in this sample. The frequency of *tardus* is also relatively high in chapters II–V but decreases in chapters VI (4.9%) and VIII (4.3%). The average percentage of *cursus tardus* in the entire sample is 14.3%.

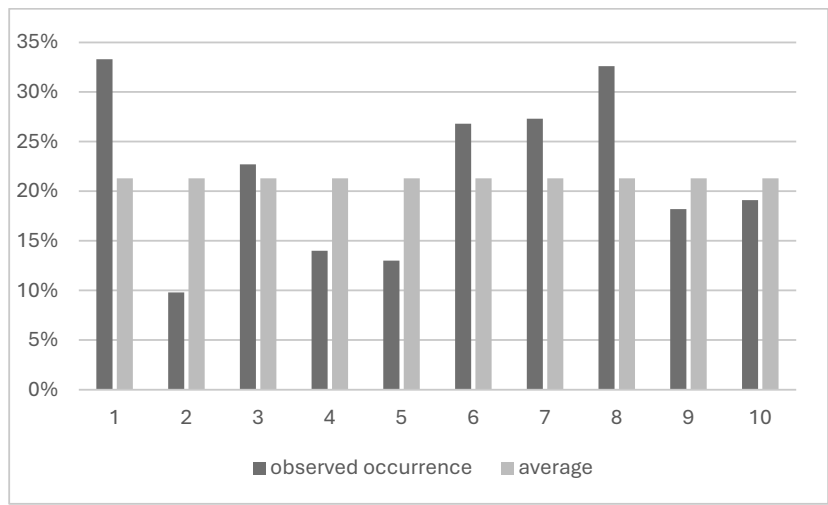


Chart 17. *Cursus velox* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

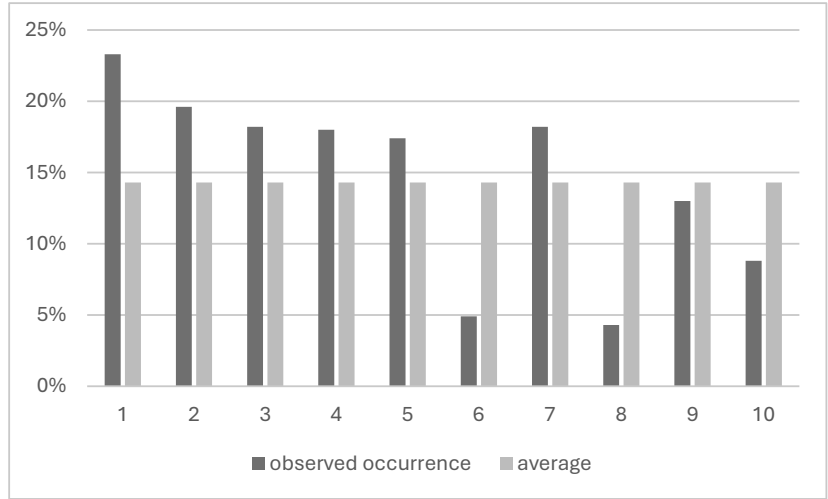


Chart 18. *Cursus tardus* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

A closer study of the translated sample reveals a higher occurrence of *cursus velox* in chapters VI (14%) and X (17.5%), while in chapter II, for example, its frequency is 5.4%. The average percentage of *cursus velox* in the translated sample is 11.5%. At the same time, a higher occurrence of *cursus tardus* is observed in chapter II (10.3%), while in chapters IV and V *tardus* is entirely absent. The average percentage of *cursus tardus* in the translated sample is 4%.

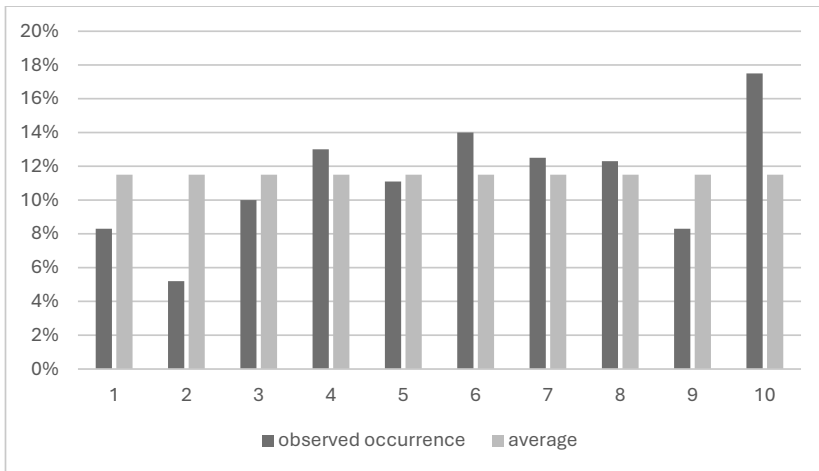


Chart 19. *Cursus velox* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Italian).

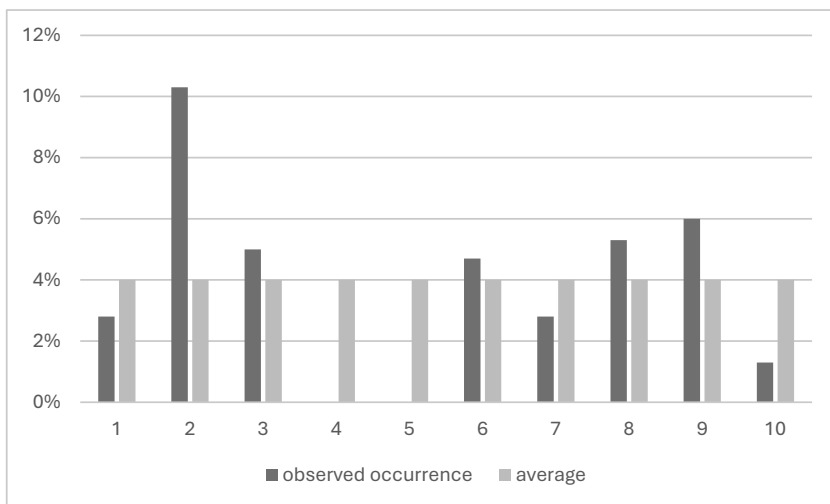


Chart 20. *Cursus tardus* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Italian).

The following charts compare the occurrence of *cursus tardus* and *velox* in both Latin and Italian samples of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

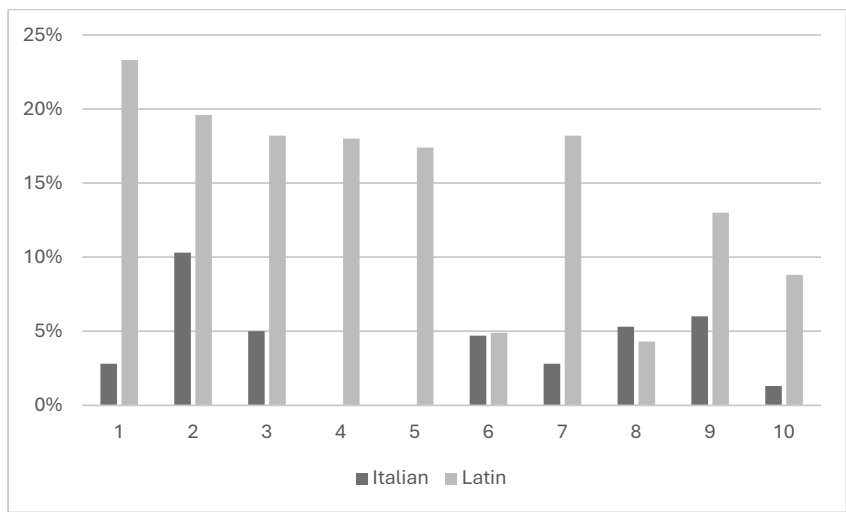


Chart 21. *Cursus tardus* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Italian and Latin).

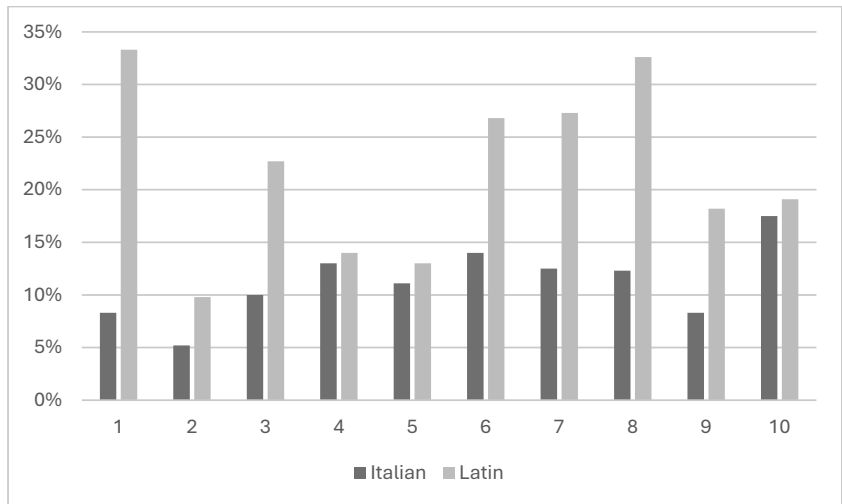


Chart 22. *Cursus velox* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Italian and Latin).

Although both *tardus* and *velox* are generally more frequent in the Latin text, certain chapters show a comparable distribution in both languages. For instance, *tardus* appears at similar rates in chapters VI and VIII, while *velox* shows comparable frequencies in chapters IV, V, and X. In the Latin sample, both *cursus tardus* and *velox* occur at above average rates in the first chapter, a pattern not reflected in the Italian translation.

The following charts present a comparison of the occurrence of *cursus* in the first chapter of both samples in both Latin and Italian.

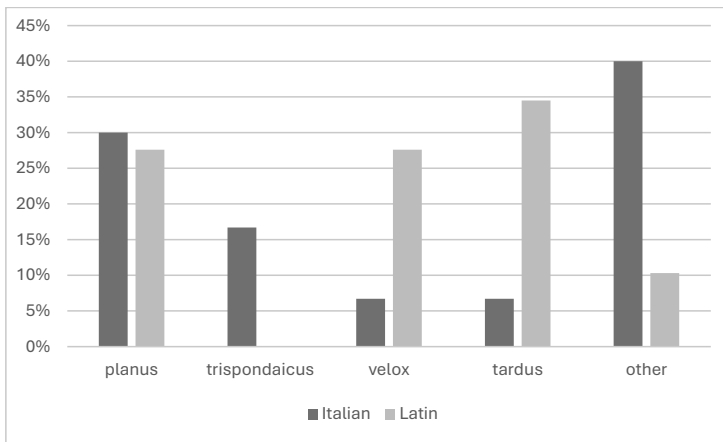


Chart 23. *Cursus* in *Monarchia* chapter 1.I (Italian and Latin).

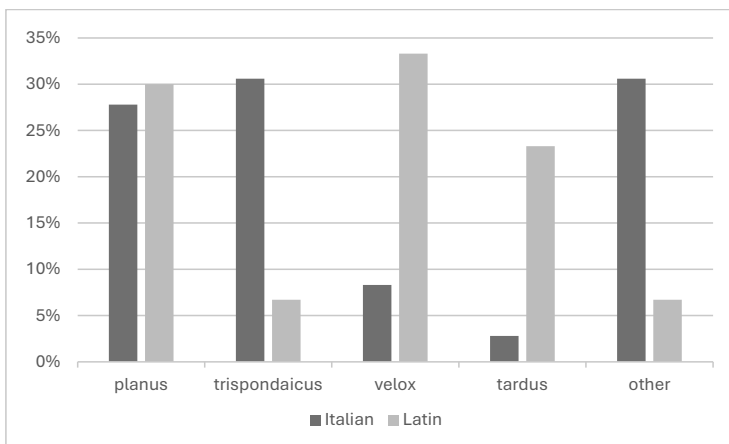


Chart 24. *Cursus* in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* chapter 1.I (Italian and Latin).

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, *cursus* occur in all analysed text samples. In the Latin texts *cursus planus*, *tardus* and *velox* appear more frequently, while *trispindaicus* is less common. Generally, *cursus planus* is the most frequently used form and *tardus* and *velox* occur slightly less often. In both *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and *Monarchia*, the proportion of *cursus* is higher than average in the first chapter of each work at 89.7% in *Monarchia* and 93.3% in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. This suggests that the author may have deliberately employed *cursus* as a stylistic element to be presented to the reader at the beginning of the book. Analysis by chapter reveals that while *cursus planus* is relatively evenly distributed, the presence of *velox*, *tardus* and *trispindaicus* varies significantly across chapters.

In the Italian samples, *cursus planus* is again the most common form, followed by *cursus trispindaicus*. *Cursus velox* and *tardus* are less frequently observed in both Italian translations. Given that Italian words are often stressed on the penultimate syllable, and that both *planus* and *trispindaicus* contain such stress patterns, the prosody of the Italian language appears to favour the occurrence of these forms. Unlike the Latin originals, the first chapters of the Italian translations do not exhibit an above average frequency of *cursus*. This suggests that, in translation, the distribution of *cursus* does not reflect that of the Latin texts and is instead more strongly influenced by the prosodic characteristics of Italian.

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