

*Medieval cursus in Italian prose  
by example of Dante Alighieri*

The role of *cursus* in Latin prose

In the most simple and general sense, every prose text has a certain rhythm. Narrowly defined, the term “prose rhythm” is used in antique rhetoric to denote rhythmical units at the end of sentences and clauses which in classic prose were called *clausulae*. In these cases, mostly the ends of sentences and clauses were patterned, and the rhythmical unit had to comprise at least two words.

*Cursus* in prose means harmonic setting of words at the end of the sentences or clauses, according to the given structure, – *artificiosa dictionum structura*, as it was defined by a 13th century author Buoncompagno di Firenze<sup>1</sup>. According to Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *cursus* is a rhythmic scheme which comprises at least two words and was used for ending sentences in medieval high prose (Mengaldo 1970: 290). The rhythm of classic prose was based on the quantity of syllables, i.e., conforming fluctuation of short and long syllables. In time, the system of *clausulae* was simplified and amongst quantity, word stress became significant (Norberg 1968: 87).

Prose rhythm where the quantity as well as word stress were significant was also called *cursus mixtus*. This, in turn, developed into Medieval Latin prose rhythm which was purely based on word stress and which was called *cursus* (Norberg 1968: 87, Clark 1910: 10–11, Tunberg 1996: 114). Therefore, medieval *cursus* could be considered the descendents of classic ways of patterning the ends of sentences where quantity was replaced by stress.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted Thurot 1868: 480: ‘*Appositio que dicitur esse artificiosa dictionum structura, ideo a quibusdam cursus vocatur, quia, cum artificialiter dictiones locantur, currere sonitu delectabili per aures videntur cum beneplacito auditorum.*’

In 11th century, cursus were accepted by the Roman Curia. Alberto di Morra systematized the rules of *ars dictandi*<sup>2</sup> in a book *Forma dicandi*. In 1187, he became Pope Gregory VIII and use of cursus became commonplace in pope's writings (Tempest 1930: 77–78). While in the earlier Middle Ages there were several ways of using cursus, during 12<sup>th</sup> century a process of further simplification and standardization took place in Italy and France. The method of cursus that prevailed had been used by French writers in books from the middle of 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was called the Roman System, and in 13<sup>th</sup> century this model was accepted also in Bologna (e.g. by Guido Faba). By the middle of 13<sup>th</sup> century the Roman cursus was standard almost everywhere in Europe (Tunberg 1996: 115).

Following Johannes de Garlandia's<sup>3</sup> teaching there are four medieval prose styles: *stilus romanus*, *tullianus*, *ilarianus* and *isidorianus*. He named the style of Roman Curia also Gregorian style (after Pope Gregory VIII) which typically illustrated prose with rhythmical clauses called cursus and that, above all, at the end of periods and their parts (Schiaffini 1943: 11). Cursus, belonging to the stylistic devices of Roman Curia was mainly a decoration element when it came to letters. Using cursus, however, soon became popular outside the Pope's correspondence and became generally accepted not only in letters but in the entirety of Latin prose. In these Medieval cases, prose rhythm depends completely on stress not quantity (Toynbee 1966: 227).

Therefore, there were four different rhythmic patterns in the late Middle Ages: *cursus planus*, *cursus velox*, *cursus tardus*, *cursus trispondaicus*<sup>4</sup>. Here, rhythmical units comprise at least two words and the last word must have at least 3 syllables. The number of syllables in the word preceding it is not important, only the stress is relevant. *Cursus planus* comprises a trisyllable word with a stress on the penult syllable preceded by a word with similar stress (Xx xXx).

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<sup>2</sup> *Ars dictandi* is a medieval teaching about writing in prose.

<sup>3</sup> See about Johannes de Garlandia and his book in Faral 1924: 40 and the following, 378 and the following

<sup>4</sup> *Cursus trispondaicus* has been treated as the second form of *cursus planus* (Toynbee 1966: 227).

*Cursus velox* comprises a tetrasyllabic word with a stress on the penult syllable preceded by a word with stress on a third syllable from the end of the word (Xxx xxXx). *Cursus tardus* comprises a tetrasyllabic word with stress on the third syllable from the end of the word preceded by a word with the stress on the penult syllable (Xx xXxx). It is thought that the fourth form of *cursus* – a *trispondaicus* that comprises a tetrasyllabic word with a stress on a penult syllable preceded by a word with similar stress (Xx xxXx) – is named so by the modern researchers (Janson 1975: 11). Roman rules also allowed *consillabatio*, i.e., replacing the last word with two or three short words that include the same number of syllables (Tunberg 1996: 115; Janson 1975: 28–29; Lausberg 1960: 504–505).

In some researches, a different way of describing *cursus* is used, where the length of the last word is not considered important, but only the number of syllables between the last two stresses and after the stress of the last word is considered (i.e., the last word may be a two-syllable word) (Tunberg 1996: 115). Therefore, next to the usual *cursus planus*, *planus* may also exist where the last word is a tetra- or disyllabic one (with schemes X xxXx and Xxx Xx). Furthermore, next to the usual *cursus velox* a form Xx xxxXx (where the last word contains not four but five syllables), *cursus tardus* may occur in a form of X xxXxx or Xxx Xxx and *cursus trispondaicus* in a form of Xxx xXx or X xxxXx (Lindholm 1963: 40–51). In Latin prose, *cursus velox* was the most popular rhythmic pattern and it was used often at the end of the sentences (and also books)<sup>5</sup> (Toynbee 1966: 229). According to Toynbee, *velox* is the most frequent *cursus* in Dante's Latin book *Letters (Epistolae)* (ib. 242).

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<sup>5</sup> Dante, for example has at the end of *Monarchia* a *cursus velox* '*temporalium gubernatur*', at the end of IV (III) *Epistolae* a '*praesentium requiratis*', at the end of X *Epist.* a '*in saecula saeculorum*', at the end of VII *Epist.* a '*in gaudio recolemus*', at the end of VIII *Epist.* a '*posteris in exemplum*'; even his *Vita Nuova* ends with a Latin *velox* '*saecula benedictus*'.

## From Medieval Latin prose to Italian prose

Although the use of *cursus* was more popular in Latin prose, they could also be found elsewhere, including in Italian prose. The occurrence of *cursus* in English prose has also been studied<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, the occurrence of *cursus* in medieval Italian prose by the example of Dante Alighieri is treated.

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), considered the father of Italian language and its first theoretician (see *De vulgari eloquentia*), gave directions for the development of literal Italian language. The writers of this era actually lived in a bilingual society, pending between literal Latin and popular language (*lingua volgare*). In order to write in popular language, it was necessary to be able to do so in Latin as well (D'Agostino 1995: 527). The prose of 13<sup>th</sup> century was, above all, educational, consisting rather of the translations of important Latin books into popular language (e.g., on the topics of rhetoric and philosophy) more than the penning of original texts (Bonfantini, Gervasoni 1940: 31). In comparison to poetry, prose was at the beginning of its independence at the end of 13<sup>th</sup> century. But it was apparent that popular language was ready for it, waiting for writers (Brand, Pertile 1996: 36).

Two Guido Faba's books could be considered the birth of Italian prose – *Gemma purpurea* and *Parlamenta et epistulae* (Dotti 1993: 34). Guido Faba lived and worked in Bologna during the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He also authored several Latin books concentrating on rhetoric. In *Gemma purpurea* (which concentrates on the technique of literature), the directions are in Latin but he illustrates his visions in popular language in addition to Latin. This way he placed popular language at the same level as Latin and provided writers with models how to write in that new language. In the popular language passages of *Parlamenta et epistulae*, the figures of speech and Latin *cursus* could be seen (Brand, Pertile 1996: 29). Guido Faba brought the *cursus* over from Medieval Latin (Serrianni, Trifone 1993: 458, Segre 1963: 21).

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<sup>6</sup> See Tempest 1930, Kuhn 1972.

Dante used new popular language instead of Latin also in his significant books. Without doubt, his most well-known book is *The Divine Comedy* (*La Divina commedia*), but Dante's prose books in Italian are *The New Life* (*Vita Nuova*), written in his youth (during the period from 1290–1293), and a philosophical tractate entitled *The Banquet* (*Convivio*). In the first, the poetry alternates with prose, there are 31 poems on the book around which the frame of prose is settled. The assignment of prose is to bind the poems by describing Dante's life, while also explaining the meaning of the poems.

Medieval awareness of linguistics and stylistic structures relies on classical rhetoric tradition. *Ars dictaminis*<sup>7</sup> gave exact directions about requirements given for all Latin books and adapted also the form of classical *clausula* to *cursus*. Dante adjusted carefully with the dictations of *ars dictaminis* (Malato 1995: 1034–35); therefore, it is clear Dante used *cursus* in his Latin prose<sup>8</sup> although there is also opinion that there is no point in searching for them in his Latin books. Still, admittedly at least *Vita Nuova* seems to have accepted most types of the regular *cursus*, and that Dante uses *cursus* also in *Convivio* (Schiaffini 1943: 118).

There are many opinions about whether and how much Dante used *cursus* in his Italian books, since for that purpose Dante's Latin books have been studied more systematically. For example, Giulio Bertoni claims that Dante rejects almost all rules of rhetoric in his prose in popular language, being intolerant by nature of established categories, and being the creator of other, personal categories<sup>9</sup>. According to Benvenuto Terracini, Dante was very sensitive towards rhythm, and therefore had to be very observant about the ends of sentences, in composing which he was probably influenced by the rules of ends of sentences of Latin prose (Terracini 1957: 256).

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<sup>7</sup> Medieval teaching about writing letters.

<sup>8</sup> Regular usage of *cursuses* is obvious in Dante Alighieri's books *On the Eloquence of Vernacular* (*De vulgari eloquentia*), *Monarchia*, *A Question of the Water and of the Land* (*Questio de Aqua et Terra*) and especially in *Epistolae*. In the book *De vulgari eloquentia*, *cursus planus* is dominant, also *cursus tardus* is frequent, at the end of the period *cursus velox* is preferred (Malato 1995: 1035).

<sup>9</sup> Bertoni 1914.

Dante was certainly familiar with the rules of cursus, and seemed to follow them where he found appropriate (Rajna 1932: 86).

In Toynbee's opinion, Dante did not use cursus forms regularly throughout the book, but more in rhetoric and personal places, mostly at the beginning and end of the book (Toynbee 1966: 231). Dante's Latin letters (*Epistolae*) were an exception, as in the case of the letters constant usage of cursus was a rule.

### About the occurrence of cursus in Dante's *Vita Nuova*

In my research I have analyzed the occurrence of cursus in Dante's Italian book *Vita Nuova* with the purpose of finding the incidence and patterns of prose rhythm. The sample was formed from all the ends of the sentences and clauses in the book (i.e., the ends before punctuation marks). All together, 1703 ends' rhythms were analyzed using statistical scientific method.

In determining the rhythm schemes of sentence ends the problems of Italian prosody, more specifically syllabication, became apparent. The syllabication of Italian words is not problematic when the syllable line is between a vowel and a consonant or between two consonants. The situation is more complicated when there are several vowels alongside, the language then often allows two ways of syllabication (Menichetti 1993: 176–177)<sup>10</sup>. The situation is especially complicated when one of the juxtaposed vowels is an unstressed *i* or *u*, as in Italian those phonemes could be half-consonants (accordingly *j* or *w*). In case of doubt, Aldo Menichetti suggests to consult the dictionary *Dizionario d'ortografia e di pronunzia* compiled by Bruno Migliorini, Carlo Tagliavini and Piero Fiorelli. This recommendation has also been followed for this analysis.

The results of the analysis are summarized in the following table:

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<sup>10</sup> Menichetti has given the word *beatitudine* as an example, the word could be a pentasyllabic or a hexasyllabic word, the choice depends often on the context, speed of speech, also there may occur differences in regions.

**Table 1.** The occurrence of *cursuses* and other rhythmical ends of sentences in the book *Vita Nuova*

	Frequency	%%
Cursus planus	554	32.5%
Cursus velox	127	7.5%
Cursus tardus	49	2.9%
Cursus trispondaicus	274	16.1%
Other	699	41.0%
Total	1703	100.0%

The results of the analysis show that the percentage of the cursus in the given book is 59%, there, in turn *cursus planus* (32.5%) has prepotency, for example: *alcuna parola, altra persona, certe parole, donna gentile; cursus trispondaicus* (16.1%) follows, for example: *certe tavolette, cosa da udire, essere gentile; cursus velox* (7.5%), for example: *debole condizione, dolcissimo salutare, spirito naturale* and *cursus tardus* (2.9%), for example: *ancora dividere, colore rettorico, posso intendere*. *Cursus planus* and *trispondaicus* are the most natural in popular language as many of the words of this language have stress on the penult syllable and these two types of cursus include such words.

The research also observed the occurrence of cursus in the given book by chapters, summary of that analysis could be seen in the following tables:

**Table 2.** The occurrence of cursus and other rhythmical ends of sentences in different chapters

	Cursus planus	Cursus velox	Cursus tardus	Cursus trispondaicus	Other	Total
I	2				4	6
II	12	10	2	5	19	48
III	28	4	2	10	31	75
IV	4	3	1	3	4	15

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	Cursus planus	Cursus velox	Cursus tardus	Cursus trispondaicus	Other	Total
V	6		1	3	14	24
VI	4	1		2	5	12
VII	6	1	3	2	10	22
VIII	8	1		6	16	31
IX	15	1		9	14	39
X	2	4		3	5	14
XI	4	7		5	8	24
XII	29	8	3	15	35	90
XIII	17	1		13	16	47
XIV	33	5		12	27	77
XV	11	2	2	9	23	47
XVI	7	2		4	10	23
XVII	1	2		1	4	8
XVIII	23	3	2	6	26	60
XIX	28	3	2	7	29	69
XX	13		1	2	7	23
XXI	7	2		4	20	33
XXII	17	5	1	14	32	69
XXIII	38	13	3	28	64	146
XXIV	23	3		9	24	59
XXV	39	13	5	13	26	96
XXVI	21	2	4	20	21	68
XXVII	5	1		2	3	11
XXVIII	9	1	3	1	12	26
XXIX	13	3	4	8	14	42
XXX	6	2		4	6	18
XXXI	8	1		7	22	38
XXXII	9	3		3	11	26
XXXIII	8			2	14	24
XXXIV	15	4		7	12	38
XXXV	7			6	13	26
XXXVI	7		1	2	3	13

	Cursus planus	Cursus velox	Cursus tardus	Cursus trispondaicus	Other	Total
XXXVII	7	2		6	14	29
XXXVIII	19	3	1	9	25	57
XXXIX	11	3	1	3	14	32
XL	19	2	3	5	14	43
XLI	11	5	4	2	22	44
XLII	2	1		2	6	11
Total	554	127	49	274	699	1703

**Table 3.** The occurrence of cursus and other rhythmical ends of sentences in different chapters %%

	Cursus planus	Cursus velox	Cursus tardus	Cursus trispondaicus	Other	Total
I	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	100.0%
II	25.0%	20.8%	4.2%	10.4%	39.6%	100.0%
III	37.3%	5.3%	2.7%	13.3%	41.3%	100.0%
IV	26.7%	20.0%	6.7%	20.0%	26.7%	100.0%
V	25.0%	0.0%	4.2%	12.5%	58.3%	100.0%
VI	33.3%	8.3%	0.0%	16.7%	41.7%	100.0%
VII	27.3%	4.5%	13.6%	9.1%	45.5%	100.0%
VIII	25.8%	3.2%	0.0%	19.4%	51.6%	100.0%
IX	38.5%	2.6%	0.0%	23.1%	35.9%	100.0%
X	14.3%	28.6%	0.0%	21.4%	35.7%	100.0%
XI	16.7%	29.2%	0.0%	20.8%	33.3%	100.0%
XII	32.2%	8.9%	3.3%	16.7%	38.9%	100.0%
XIII	36.2%	2.1%	0.0%	27.7%	34.0%	100.0%
XIV	42.9%	6.5%	0.0%	15.6%	35.1%	100.0%
XV	23.4%	4.3%	4.3%	19.1%	48.9%	100.0%
XVI	30.4%	8.7%	0.0%	17.4%	43.5%	100.0%
XVII	12.5%	25.0%	0.0%	12.5%	50.0%	100.0%
XVIII	38.3%	5.0%	3.3%	10.0%	43.3%	100.0%
XIX	40.6%	4.3%	2.9%	10.1%	42.0%	100.0%

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	Cursus planus	Cursus velox	Cursus tardus	Cursus trispondaicus	Other	Total
XX	56.5%	0.0%	4.3%	8.7%	30.4%	100.0%
XXI	21.2%	6.1%	0.0%	12.1%	60.6%	100.0%
XXII	24.6%	7.2%	1.4%	20.3%	46.4%	100.0%
XXIII	26.0%	8.9%	2.1%	19.2%	43.8%	100.0%
XXIV	39.0%	5.1%	0.0%	15.3%	40.7%	100.0%
XXV	39.6%	13.5%	5.2%	13.5%	28.1%	100.0%
XXVI	30.9%	2.9%	5.9%	29.4%	30.9%	100.0%
XXVII	45.5%	9.1%	0.0%	18.2%	27.3%	100.0%
XXVIII	34.6%	3.8%	11.5%	3.8%	46.2%	100.0%
XXIX	31.0%	7.1%	9.5%	19.0%	33.3%	100.0%
XXX	33.3%	11.1%	0.0%	22.2%	33.3%	100.0%
XXXI	21.1%	2.6%	0.0%	18.4%	57.9%	100.0%
XXXII	34.6%	11.5%	0.0%	11.5%	42.3%	100.0%
XXXIII	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	8.3%	58.3%	100.0%
XXXIV	39.5%	10.5%	0.0%	18.4%	31.6%	100.0%
XXXV	26.9%	0.0%	0.0%	23.1%	50.0%	100.0%
XXXVI	53.8%	0.0%	7.7%	15.4%	23.1%	100.0%
XXXVII	24.1%	6.9%	0.0%	20.7%	48.3%	100.0%
XXXVIII	33.3%	5.3%	1.8%	15.8%	43.9%	100.0%
XXXIX	34.4%	9.4%	3.1%	9.4%	43.8%	100.0%
XL	44.2%	4.7%	7.0%	11.6%	32.6%	100.0%
XLI	25.0%	11.4%	9.1%	4.5%	50.0%	100.0%
XLII	18.2%	9.1%	0.0%	18.2%	54.5%	100.0%
Total	32,5%	7.5%	2.9%	16.1%	41.1%	100.0%

Since *cursus planus* and *cursus trispondaicus* are the most natural in popular language, their occurrence in every chapter is not surprising, except the first chapter that is a short introduction to the book. If we take a closer look at the occurrence of *cursus velox* and *tardus* we recognize their abundance in two chapters – XXVIII and XLI. In chapter XXVIII Beatrice dies, therefore making this one of the more epochal chapters in the whole book. In Latin prose, *cursus velox* was

thought as one of the most elegant and was used above all at the end of the sentences, and often at the end of the book. A Latin *cursus velox* is also at the end of this book: *secula benedictus*. The accrual of *velox* in certain chapters is also noticeable, as chapter II (where Dante first meets Beatrice), chapter IV (Dante describes what influence love has on him), chapter X (Beatrice does not respond to Dante's greetings), chapter XI (the influence of Beatrice's greetings on Dante), chapter XVII (Dante decides to work with different materials in the future), where approximately one-quarter of the ends are *cursus velox* (in chapter X 28.6%, in chapter XI 29.2%); furthermore, in chapters X, XI and XVII *cursus velox* exceeds *cursus planus* as well as *trispondaicus*.

Taking a closer look at the *cursus*-forms occurring in book *Vita Nuova*, it can be seen that Dante, in cases of *planus* and *trispondaicus*, preferred to use regular forms (i.e., with the scheme Xx xXx and Xx xxXx). Also over half of the incidences of *cursus tardus* follow the regular scheme of Xx xXxx, while in the case of *cursus velox*, the preferred scheme is Xx xxxXx and the regular form Xxx xxXx is occurring less.

In *Vita Nuova*, 41% of the cases consist of other rhythm schemes that do not fit under *cursuses*. Amongst them, trochaic rhythm XxXx that is used in 57.1% of cases, is dominant. Usually, it is a disyllable word, for example, *altre donne, certe cose, fosse corpo, molte volte*. It could also be a disyllable word preceded by a trisyllable word, for example, *secondo altro, sonetto sono, persona detta*. XxxX (13.2%) follow, for example, *apparve a me, desse di sé, XxXxx* (7.3%), for example, *alquante lagrime, questa camera, pure femmine, XxxxXxx* (5.6%), for example, *questa gentilissima, anima bellissima, essere risibile*.

**Table 4.** Other rhythmical ends of sentences in *Vita Nuova*

Scheme	Frequency	%%
XXxX	25	3.6%
XXXx	5	0.7%
XxxX	92	13.2%
XxXx	399	57.1%
XXxx	2	0.3%
XXxX	1	0.1%
xxXXx	2	0.3%
XxxxX	28	4.0%
XxXxx	51	7.3%
XxXxX	5	0.7%
XxxxxX	4	0.6%
XxxxxxX	1	0.1%
XxxxXxx	39	5.6%
XxxxxxxX	1	0.1%
XxxxxxXx	29	4.1%
XxxxxXxx	9	1.3%
XxxxxxxXx	2	0.3%
XxxxxxxXxx	1	0.1%
XxxxxxxxXx	2	0.3%
XxxxxxxxXxx	1	0.1%
Total	699	100.0%

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be said that Dante is not indifferent towards rhythm and uses cursus in his prose works in popular language but he adjusts them according to the requirements of natural language. In Latin, the word stress may be on the penult or the third syllable from the end, and in Latin prose, *cursus velox* that comprises words with such stress, was mostly used. Many words of popular language have the stress on penult syllable, and the results of the analysis showed that Dante used mostly *cursus planus* and *trispindicus* which comprises words with stress on the penult

syllable. Also in cases of *cursus velox* Dante preferred to use the form Xx xxxXx rather than Xxx xxXx which is more characteristic to Latin. The importance of rhythmical endings of sentences in Dante's prose in popular language is also shown by accrual of *cursus velox* in certain chapters and the fact that *Vita Nuova* ends with *cursus velox* as is characteristic to many of the Latin books.

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