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Articoli

Stadler, von Hussard, and the Mevlevi *ayin*

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Abstract The early nineteenth-century notations, with piano accompaniment, of vocal sections of the Mevlevi ceremony made by Maximilian Stadler (1748-1833) have been dismissed by Turkish scholars as distorted beyond recognition. Contrary to this assessment, it is argued that, systematic inaccuracies notwithstanding, they correspond quite well to what may be assumed to be the performance norms of the Mevlevi repertoire at the turn of the nineteenth century, and that, far from being mere curiosities of interest solely to students of Orientalism, they are of value as historical documents indicative of stylistic change within the Ottoman tradition.

Keywords Historical ethnomusicology. Ottoman music. Mevlevi *ayin*. Turkish classical music. Orientalism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Toderini's Notation. – 3 Stadler and von Hussard. – 4 Stadler's Notations. – 4.1 The *ayin* in *hicaz*. – 5 Turkish Reactions. – 6 Reconsideration. – 6.1 Pitch. – 6.2 Duration. – 6.3 Melody. – 6.4 Rhythmic Cycles. – 7 The *ayin* in *nihavend*. – 7.1 The *ayin* in *bestenigar*. – 8 Conclusion. – 9 Afterword.



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1 Introduction

A significant and substantial contribution to the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European documentation of other musical traditions is the partial transcription, with added piano accompaniment, of the core vocal components (*ayin*) of the Mevlevi ceremony, in seven settings in different *makams*, made by Abbé Maximilian Stadler (1748-1833). It takes its place, alongside the evidence of British contact with Indian culture provided by the piano arrangements of ‘Hindoostani airs’ (Cook 2009), as an indication of a tentatively growing European interest in the musical traditions of Asia, the earlier documentation of which, largely confined to impressionistic accounts scattered through travel literature, was also beginning to be complemented towards the end of the eighteenth century by more analytical and theoretical investigations, as witnessed by the publication in 1779 of Amiot’s *Mémoire sur la musique des Chinois* and, a year later, of De la Borde’s *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*, containing a chapter on Persian and Ottoman music that shows a dawning awareness of the indigenous theoretical tradition,¹ followed, in 1792, by Sir William Jones’ (1746-1794) *On the Musical Modes of the Hindus*, publications which mark a trend towards more scholarly, if not always more dispassionate, enquiry, culminating over a century later in the Lavignac *Encyclopédie de la musique* of 1922, with its extensive coverage of Arab, Persian, and Turkish music alongside other Asian traditions.

However, for any of Stadler’s contemporaries who might have been curious about the nature of the Ottoman and other Middle Eastern art-music traditions, information remained sketchy at best. There had certainly been a lengthy, if intermittent, record of contacts and reactions to things heard, but they tended to downplay factual reportage in favour of subjective responses and unhelpful value judgments. Objective description might be available regarding instruments, their materials and construction (Mersenne 1627), but much less on how they were used. Overall, observers’ impressions tended to be negative, feeding into the caustic assessments of theorists such as Salomon de Caus (1576-1626) who, in the brashly Eurocentric conclusion of Part 1 of his *Institution harmonique*, brushes Ottoman music aside with disdain:

¹ For an evaluation, see Wright 2019.

En Turquie il y a aussi plusieurs sortes d'instruments, avec lesquels ils jouent le plus souvent avec confusion, sans user de consonnantes, sinon de celles qui viennent accidentellement, & se contentent seulement d'ouïr un grand bruit confus. (de Caus 1615, 24)

The available literature, then, was liable to discourage curiosity and further investigation,² although a partial and sometimes striking exception is to be found in the varied and more involved responses of those who witnessed the Mevlevi ceremony. A visit to the Galata *mevlevihane* had become an increasingly standard part of the itinerary of European visitors to Constantinople, and some duly recorded their impressions. Among the more perceptive and positive was one of the earlier visitors, Pietro della Valle (1586-1652), whose observations, from the first quarter of the seventeenth century, suggest certain differences in the dance by comparison with current norms. For the music, he mentions only the *ney*, and it is possible that at the time no other melody instrument was used. He is highly appreciative:

al suono di quattro o cinque flauti, fatti di canne, che con distinzione di tutte le voci, basso, tenore, contralto e soprano facevano una bellissima armonia, cominciarono a ballare: talora sonando senza ballare e talora sonando e ballando insieme a vicenda [...].

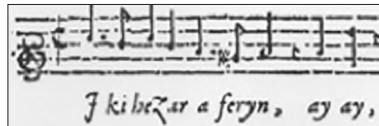
Però la musica che fanno è galante, e degna in ver d'essere sentita: e quei flauti che chiamano nai, ovvero più correttamente nei, che in persiano significa propriamente canna, come di canna son fatti, non si può credere quanto dolce suono rendano. (della Valle 1843, 47-8)

By *armonia* is perhaps to be understood here concord, incorporating reactions to a degree of heterophonic variation within an essentially monophonic idiom. In line with other early observers, he remarks on the gradual speeding up of the dance, from slow to finally becoming very fast, in contrast to the current preference for maintaining a regular tempo for much of the ceremony:

Nel principio cominciano con moto lento e soave, adagio adagio: ma poi, poco a poco riscaldati, lo vanno ogni ora più affrettando; finché al fine, cresciuto quasi in eccesso il fervore, si danno tanta fretta e si aggirano con tanta velocità, che appena gli arriva la vista di chi gli riguarda. (della Valle 1843, 47-8)

2 For general surveys, see Bohlman 1987; Clayton, Zon 2009; Stokes 2019. For travel literature, see especially Aksoy 1995, and, for reactions to the Mevlevi ceremony, De Zorzi 2019. For further visual representations see Ghirardini 2013. A survey of European reactions and attitudes to Ottoman music since the Renaissance is attempted in Wright 2013.

The general impressions conveyed by such descriptive accounts are occasionally supplemented by the inclusion of examples of notation, the earliest to represent explicitly Mevlevi material being the mid seventeenth-century recording, by Jean Antoine du Loir, of the conclusion of the third of the four *selâm* sections, a setting of the text *Ey ki hezar aferin* (du Loir 1654, 154), which begins:



But du Loir himself appears not to have been impressed, for after transcribing the text he offers a translation prefaced by the dismissive comment:

Voicy l'explication de cette Hymne, dont asseurement vous trouverez le sens meilleur que le chant.

A more substantial sample is provided early in the eighteenth century by Charles de Ferriol (1652-1722), who includes a lengthy and quite detailed representation of a melody, notated by le Sieur Chabert, entitled “Air sur lequel tournent les Derviches de Pera” (de Ferriol 1714, 17),³ and accompanied by the comment:

On a joint icy l’Air noté que les Musiciens jouënt pour faire tourner les Dervichs: ils tournent les bras ouverts, & paroissent extasiez: les jeunes tournent d’une vitesse incroyable. Le Superieur & les vieux tournent plus lentement; & quand ils sont las, ils se mettent à genoux le visage contre terre.

Once more, there is the impression of the revolutions of the dance, at least among the younger adepts, reaching great speed, added to which is a reference to tempo variations between the participants, another feature largely absent from the more uniform contemporary realizations. There is no further remark about the melody, but Chabert’s addition of a bass line to his notation can already be construed as a negative reaction in itself, a tacit normalization

3 The notation is reproduced in both De Zorzi 2019, 136, and Wright 2013, 154. On the presence of non-participating audiences at the Mevlevi *mukabele* see Behar 2014.

designed to remedy what was clearly perceived to be a deficiency.⁴ The changes of pace associated with the shift from 6/4 to 3/4 suggest that what is being represented might be a reflection of the two final instrumental sections, *son peşrev* and *son yürük semai*, but the former is normally in a duple metre (*düyek*, a cycle of eight time units), and there seems to be no melodic match among what are reputed to be the earliest surviving *ayins*. When performed as notated by a European violinist to an Ottoman audience towards the end of the eighteenth century, the melody certainly failed to be recognized; indeed, it provoked hilarity, as Giambattista Toderini (1728-1799) reports:

L'aria, sulla quale ballano li Dervis, vedesi riportata con note europee nell'opera illustre dell'Ambasciatore Ferriol. Sonata da valente Maestro sulle corde del violino non la riconobbero per dessa i Turchi uditori e bellamente ne risero. (1787, 241-2)

His immediately following explanatory comment demonstrates awareness of differences in intonation such that certain pitches cannot be rendered by the standard resources of Western notation ("alcuni tuoni sono inesprimibili affatto coll'usate note europee"), in effect anticipating the difficulties that Stadler would soon be faced with in producing a piano arrangement.

2 Toderini's Notation

Toderini was another of those who witnessed a Mevlevi ceremony, and in his brief descriptive comments, which mention only wind and percussion instruments, he once more stresses the speed of the whirling, likened to a spinning-top:

Usano stromenti da fiato, e timpani, come vidi trovandomi presente alle turbinose lor danze, ove celeramente s'aggirano quasi un palèo. (1787, 241)

He adds a full and detailed item of notation, once more related to the dance, an instrumental piece he entitles *Concerto turco nominato izia saz semaisi*. Hitherto, information on Ottoman music, apart from occasional mute inventories of musical instruments or representations of them within the growing orientalist provision of

⁴ This is spelled out more starkly in earlier notations (Schweiggeger 1964, 209; Donado 1688). The latter remarks on the lack of a bass line and simply add a blank stave beneath his notation of the melody (illustrated in Wright 2013), in effect inviting the reader to provide a suitable accompaniment.

multi-ethnic panoramas of Ottoman society in costume books and the paintings of artists such as Vanmour, had been scarce, largely confined to scattered remarks in travel literature, and generally expressive of negative attitudes, some quite vehement, while the occasional and generally brief samples of notation were insufficiently explicit and reliable. With the *Concerto*, however, we encounter at last a more extended example that, unlike Chabert's notation, can be related to a surviving composition, the *son yürük semai* in *hicaz* (whence Toderini's *izia*) that is common to three early *ayins*,⁵ and it is here that a musically perceptive European readership could come to grips with what is, to all appearances, a faithful representation of aspects of the contemporary Ottoman instrumental idiom.

Toderini thus provides the potential beginning of a counter-narrative to the musical representations of 'the Turk' that the educated Western public had become familiar with on the stage. One might cite as an early instance the inclusion of pseudo-Turkish elements in Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, staged in 1670 with music by Lully (Obelkevich 1977) which, however, was yet to hint at the emergence of the increasingly conventional codes, derived ultimately from recollections of the sounds of the *mehter*, the Ottoman military band, that would later be exploited selectively by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, normally in march-like episodes.

Like the Chabert example, Toderini's notation was readily available and, even if this could not be appreciated by its readership, had achieved a higher level of accuracy in its representation of an instrumental section of a Mevlevi *ayin*. However, there was nothing further to add to it or compare it with: the far fuller record of the Ottoman repertoire, including numerous comparable *yürük semai* compositions, notated in two large-scale collections in the mid seventeenth century by Ali Ufki (or Ufuki), had been deposited in European libraries, one in Paris (Haug 2019), the other in London (Elçin 2000 [including facsimile]; Cevher 2003 [transcription]), but although theoretically accessible they remained unknown, as did, inevitably, the plentiful but inaccessible notations of the instrumental repertoire made at the turn of the eighteenth by Demetrius Cantemir (Cantemir 1992; Kantemiroğlu 2001), and the handful of vocal and instrumental compositions notated by Charles Fonton in the mid eighteenth century had likewise remained unpublished,⁶ so that it was Toderini's *son yürük semai*, along with the Chabert transcription, that provided the European public with the most informative insights

⁵ Details in De Zorzi 2019. The latest is the *ayin in hicaz* by Abdürrahim Kunhi Dede (1769-1831), where it is clearly a pre-existing piece that has been co-opted, possibly as a replacement for an original *saz semaisi* felt to be less satisfactory.

⁶ Except for one that had been copied by de Blainville. See Behar 1987, 34.

into the Mevlevi repertoire prior to the 1822 publication of Stadler's notations.

When compared with the modern version of this composition,⁷ some quite striking differences emerge alongside the obvious similarities, as is clear already in ex. 1, which shows the initial section, with the modern equivalent below:



Example 1

Thus, although the melodic outline that survives today is present entire in Toderini's transcription (with just one pitch missing, the *a'* in cycles 4 and 7), it is there significantly embellished, typical being the elaboration *p* → *pqq*. The result is a level of melodic density that has the appearance of being twice that of the modern version, although the contrast would be reduced or even elided on the assumption that he was exposed to a more relaxed performance style, allowing the insertion of multiple grace notes, and a correspondingly more restrained tempo, as is suggested by the initial *andantino*. Indeed, it is perhaps to a tempo difference combined with a higher level of melodic complexity that may be attributed Toderini's perception of the original 3 + 3 *yürük semai* cycle, which would normally have a */düm tek tek düm tek Ø /* percussion underlay, as 2 + 2 + 2, although it would not be far-fetched to surmise, alternatively, that the misrepresentation of the rhythmic cycle could have been caused at least in part by the absence of a percussion instrument from the out-of-context renditions on which his notation may have been based. Nevertheless, in the quality of the musicological information it provides to supplement the existing impressionistic descriptions of the Mevlevi ceremony scattered through various ethnographic

⁷ The version quoted is that published online by neyzen.com (<https://neyzen.com/>). That in Heper 1974, differs somewhat, but not sufficiently to require comment here.

accounts, Toderini's notation constitutes a marked advance, and it serves as a useful term of reference in any attempt to contextualize and evaluate the much more extensive piano arrangements published over thirty years later by the Abbé Maximilian Stadler.

3 Stadler and von Hussard

A Benedictine monk and later prior and abbot before being secularized, Stadler received his musical training as a chorister and organist. Except for the years 1810-15, which he spent as a parish priest in Böhmischkrut (now Großkrut) in lower Austria, he resided from 1796 on mainly in Vienna, where he was active at the centre of musical life. A competent composer as well as a music scholar and historian, he knew Haydn, Mozart (and helped his widow Constanze organize his estate), Beethoven, and Schubert.⁸ His exposure to the Mevlevi repertoire was indirect, coming courtesy of Herr von Hussard, a former Secretary to the Austrian Imperial Legation and Interpreter at the Porte.⁹

In addition to Ottoman Turkish, von Hussard knew Persian well enough to have translated selections of Rumi's *Masnavi*, on which Mevlevi composers draw for the vocal sections of their *ayins*. Some idea of his style as a translator may be gained from his rendering of the first three verses:

Die Flöte höre, wie sie trauernd klagt
Bey ihrer Trennung seufzendem Gemälde:
"Seit sie mich schnitten aus des Rohres Garten
"Seufzt Mann und Weib bey meinem Trauerton;
"Ich such' ein Herz von Trennungsweh'n zerrissen,
"Das ich mit Sehnsuchtsbrunst entflammen kann.
(*Fundgruben des Orients* 1811, 162-4)¹⁰

More pertinently, he had memorized parts of some *ayins*, thereby making the Mevlevi repertoire accessible to Stadler. As to how this transfer of knowledge came about, we have conflicting narratives. According to Carl Engel, writing some forty years later, von Hussard had frequented the *mevlevihane* at Topkapı and:

⁸ For further biographical information see *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Personenteil 15) and *The New Grove*.

⁹ Biographical information on von Hussard is sadly lacking. He is absent from the *Digitale Edition von Quellen zur habsburgisch-osmanischen Diplomatie 1500-1918* and its *Modulare Prosopographische Registratur* and there is no entry for him in the *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon*.

¹⁰ See also Aksoy 1995, 233.

With care and perseverance, he succeeded in faithfully rendering the songs in our notation. Having on his return to Vienna placed the manuscript in the hands of the Abbé Stadler, well-known as a musician and as a friend of Mozart, Stadler wrote an accompaniment to the songs, contrived in his usual manner. (1878, 433)

‘In his usual manner’ is hardly meant as a compliment: Engel is rather sniffy about the quality of Stadler’s piano writing, continuing:

At all events, however well acquainted pianoforte-players may be with the so-called “Alberti-bass” and “Murky-bass”, so greatly favoured by the Abbé, to the Dervish it might very likely be puzzling.

And although Stadler’s publication is introduced as ‘very remarkable’, Engel’s final comments on the text allow his general disdain to show through:

Also the words of their songs are asserted to have a deep meaning full of profound wisdom. In the German translation they appear rather bombastic and non-sensical; but it is perhaps difficult for an uninitiated European observer to fathom the depth of such Oriental lore.

However, Engel provides no evidence to substantiate his version of events, and we may prefer to give credence to an earlier, indeed virtually contemporary account, published in 1822 in an anonymous article entitled “Die Chöre der Derwische”, which confirms that, gifted with an excellent musical memory (“durch ein glückliches Tongedächtniss”), von Hussard had learned the Mevlevi choral repertoire by heart ‘in the most faithful manner’ (“auf das getreueste”).¹¹ However, this claim to fidelity is once more made without supporting evidence, and as it can hardly have come from a Mevlevi source it presumably reflects von Hussard’s own estimate of his capabilities. Nor is there any reference to him notating the repertoire; on the contrary, we are told that he worked with Stadler during the winter and spring of 1821, supplying him with a translation and singing the material over repeatedly for Stadler to notate.¹² We are also informed that the transcriptions of all seven

11 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

12 “[Hr. von Hussard] vereinigte sich [...] mit Hr. Abbé Stadler zur Niederschreibung dieser Chöre, indem er sie ihm zu wiederholtenmalen genau vorsang [...] während Hr. Abbé St. dieselben auf das getreueste in Noten niederschrieb”. It is this more reliable account that is followed in Aksoy 1995, 233.

ayins (together with the piano accompaniment that normally also incorporates the vocal line) were ready to go to press. They are, it is claimed, indisputably the richest yield that the West has hitherto gained from the Orient (“Diese sieben Chöre [...] sind unstreitig die reichste Ausbeute, welche bisher das Abendland dem Morgenland abgewonnen hat”) and we are assured that they could expect a most favourable reception (“die günstigste Aufnahme”). As an appetizer, a two-page supplement (*Beilage*) containing brief excerpts of five of them is attached to the article.

4 Stadler’s Notations

The eventual publication of the complete set appears, however, to have passed unnoticed. Despite the widening of interest in folk traditions that provided a market sufficient for a publisher to attract Beethoven to make piano arrangements of Scottish, Irish, and Welsh folksongs (Cooper 1994, 93-101),¹³ Stadler’s arrangements do not seem to have inspired a review or other critical reaction, although they did attract the attention of Kiesewetter, who included samples of them as the concluding items in the supplement to his *Die Musik der Araber* (*Beilage*, 22-5). The only hint of how they might have been received by a wider public, or at least of how Stadler hoped they would be received, is provided by his own introductory notes in the article, which refer to the melodies as strikingly original and expressive of the spirit of the verse (“Die Melodien sind überhaupt von bedeutender Originalität, und gehen durchaus in den Geist der Dichtung ein”).

However, he is otherwise more concerned with what he perceived their structure to be, expressed as the number of ‘strophes’ they contain, a segmentation independent of the fourfold *selâm* division of the Mevlevi tradition with which, possibly, von Hussard had not familiarized him. The *ayin* in *hicaz*, for example, is said to consist of ten strophes, that in *bayati* of nine, and that in *nehavend* of seven. He further cites the fact that they were accompanied by the flute, playing the same melody, and, to mark the rhythm, by a (pair of) small kettle drum(s), as illustrated in Figure 1. The presence of players of *ney* and *kudüm* only confirms the impression conveyed by Toderini and others that the absence of melody instruments apart from the *ney* was the norm.

13 Cooper goes into considerable detail on the finances of Beethoven’s settings. Despite occasional quibbles and complaints in the correspondence, it seems clear that the level of his earnings from them must have been quite satisfactory.



Figure 1 Stadler, *Original-Chöre der Derwische Mewlewi*. s.d. After: D’Ohsson, *Danse des Derwischs Mewléwis* in *Tableau général de l’Empire Ottoman* (reproduced in Findley 2019, 256). Frontispiece with, in the gallery, three players each of *ney* and *kudüm*

As with Toderini previously, the absence of such percussion accompaniment during his sessions with von Hussard could help explain why his notations fail to provide accurate accounts of the various rhythmic cycles, none of which is mentioned by name, still less described in terms of its internal structure. They are sometimes notated in 6/8 but more frequently in 3/4 or 4/4 or combinations of the two, concerning which Stadler confidently asserts that the occasional change of time signature does not disturb and is always correctly positioned (“Die hie und da eingeschaltete Taktveränderung beunruhiget nicht und steht immer am rechten Orte”), but without giving any inkling of how the different measures might have been combined into a larger-scale recurring rhythmic framework.

There is, likewise, an absence of descriptive detail regarding the melodic idiom, which tends to be characterized affectively, individual sections being described as, e.g., graceful, elevated, or majestic. Each *ayin* has a *makam* label, but no mention is made of what that might imply in terms of pitch set or specific features of melodic articulation: the modes (*Tonarten*) are held to vary in type, some with the character of ancient church modes (“das Gepräge uralter christlicher Kirchengesänge”), while others sound wholly contemporary (“andere aber stimmen mit den jetzt gebräuchlichen ganz überein”), presumably a reference to a perceived alignment with major/minor tonality and, together with an initial descriptive adjective, it is in terms of time signature and key that Stadler’s brief

encapsulation of each strophe is couched. The final strophe of the first *ayin*, for example, labelled ‘restrained, yet solemn’ (*gemäßigt, doch feyerlich*), is notated in 6/8 and analysed as in G major, modulating to A minor, then to C major, and ending in A minor. Not surprisingly, this is the sequence of key changes that occurs in Stadler’s rather pedestrian piano accompaniment, occasionally with bare arpeggios but more usually incorporating the melody within the piano part, frequently doubled at the third or sixth, as in ex. 2:

Example 2

There is no reference to the fact that the pitch set of this concluding section is not the same as that of previous ones, nor is there any attempt, in relation to the *ayin* as a whole, to outline what, in modal terms, constitutes *hicaz*. As demonstrated by the arrangements, *makam* syntax is domesticated for Western consumption by being filtered through the lens of functional harmony.

Although already completed in 1822, the transcriptions and piano accompaniments were only to appear over ten years later, published posthumously by Pietro Mechetti q^m Carlo in Vienna. The fulsome prefatory note, although essentially a piece of advertising, is still worth quoting in full. It confirms the information given about their transmission in the 1822 article:

Manches ist wohl schon theoretisch über orientalische Musik erschienen, wenig aber min Bestimmtheit und Genauigkeit in Anwendung gebracht worden. Was wir hier den Musikfreunden

bieten, fließt aus reiner Quelle, und ist die Frucht langer Bemühungen eines bekannten Orientalisten, welcher nach vieljährigem Aufenthalt in Constantinopel und genauer Bekanntschaft mit den türkischen Mönchen nicht nur mehrere ihrer Choralgesänge gesammelt, sondern auch deren Melodie erlernt, und sie dann in verfaßter möglichst paßender Uebersetzung dem verewigten Abbé Stadler so lange beim Klavier wiederholte, bis dieser daran Interesse findende Compositeur sie in Noten setzte und mit Begleitung versah.

In Abbé Stadler's Nachlaße fand sich diese Ausbeute vor; sie dürfte auch für abendländische Musikkenner und Liebhaber nicht ohne Anklang sein. Wer je den Chorgesang der Derwische gehört, wird sich von der Treue des Nachhalles derselben zu überzeugen Gelegenheit haben.

In addition to emphasizing the experience and qualifications of the anonymous source (von Hussard being referred to as 'a well-known Orientalist'), it thus insists repeatedly on their authenticity and fidelity to the original, asserting, for example, that they 'flow from a pure source'.

The announcement on the title page likewise stresses the fidelity of the translation (if without identifying the translator) and its suitability to the melody [fig. 2].

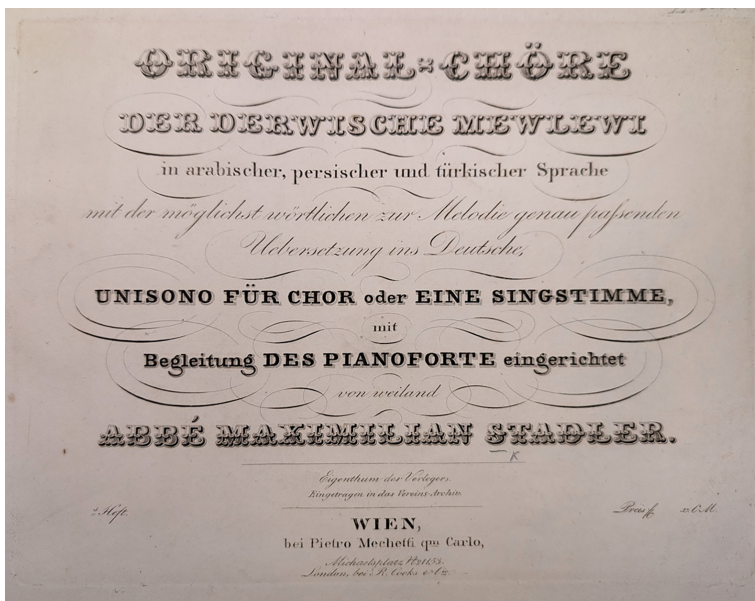


Figure 2 Stadler, *Original-Chöre der Derwische Mewlewi*. s.d. The title page of the collection, including mention of a London agent

The publication is undated. Engel (1878, 433) gives ‘around 1835’, which fits well with the explicit statements in the preceding note that Stadler was by then dead (*verewigt*) and that the arrangements formed part of his *Nachlaß*, thereby ruling out anything before 1833 and hence, it would appear, invalidating the claim put forward for 1822 (Çağman 2018). However, the earlier date is fully justified if understood to refer not to this posthumous publication but, without the connection being made, to the supplement of brief samples attached to the article of that year.

In addition to insignificant details in the piano accompaniment, the two differ in that occasional note durations are revised in the later version, which also adds a transliteration of the original text. But they may also differ in other respects, most obviously in extent: to consider just the first *ayin*, in *hicaz*, the earlier sample consists of two sections (*Strophe*) as against the ten of the full version. In addition, not everything in these two matches exactly the equivalent later material: the first sections of each correspond, but the 1822 version omits the final repeat; and its second section, which corresponds to the sixth of the later version, omits the second repetition of the first segment. The earlier samples are thus of some interest for the light they shed on what Stadler revised to arrive at his final text, but they need not be referred to further when attempting to evaluate his versions against the current notated forms of the *ayins*, which will therefore be compared only with the later, posthumous publication.

4.1 The *ayin* in *hicaz*

Such comparison, beginning with the first *ayin*, that in *hicaz*, is revelatory but also unsettling. Not, it seems, an instrumentalist, von Hussard had learned only the core vocal ensemble *selâm* material (there is no introductory solo *na’t*) but, as represented by Stadler, there are still substantial omissions by comparison with the current versions. Nevertheless, the first of the four *selâms* emerges relatively unscathed, as is demonstrated by the following full representation, in ex. 3, of the first part of section 1 of Stadler’s vocal score, shorn of its piano accompaniment and displayed above the most recent version,¹⁴ to which it corresponds quite straightforwardly, with Stadler’s *g* the equivalent of the modern Turkish *a*.

¹⁴ This and the following examples are taken from the online *neyzen.com* site. The differences between them and the earlier published versions (Konservatuar Tasnif ve Tesbit Heyeti 1934-39; Heper 1974) are, in the present context, insignificant.

Majestätisch.
(Persisch)

Ich bin der Falk des Him = mels, der Gei = sterwelt ent = nom = !
Men Scha = hi Fa = zi Kud = gem ez la mekian rex = si =

MEN ŞA HI BA ZI KUD SEM EZ LÂ ME KÂN RE SÎ

kläglich.

men ; o — Freund! o — Freund! See = le mein, Ge =
de ; hei — Jar! hei — Dost! dscha = ni men dscha =

DE HEY Yİ YAR HEY Yİ DOST CA NI MEN CA

lieb = ter mein! — der, um der Jagd zu fröh = nen, die Hül = le
na = ni men! — Beh = ri schi = kia = ri Sai = di der Ka = leb

NA NI MEN BEH Rİ Şİ KÂ Rİ SAY Dİ DE Rİ KA LE

all = ge = nom = men ; o — Freund! o — Freund!
a = re = mi = de hei — Jar! hei — Dost!

BA RE Mİ DE HEY Yİ YAR HEY Yİ DOST

See = le mein, Ge = lieb = ter mein!
dscha = ni men dscha = na = ni men!

CA NI MEN CA NA NI MEN

Example 3

The two exhibit consistent divergences, notably the absence in Stadler's account of the rhythmic division of time units, particularly in descent (where to his ↓ may correspond ٩٩), which may possibly reflect a simplification attributable to von Hussard, but otherwise there is an evident overall similarity between the two melodic contours. This continues (or resumes) in the repeated material that concludes the section, but is not sustained in the immediately ensuing passage, where there are changes of time signature, the first producing two identical measures equivalent to the first cycle, so that the $c' \ b \ c' (= d' \ c\sharp \ d')$ flexure appears twice, while thereafter,

although arriving at the same cadence, the modern version develops, in ex. 4, a melodic complexity that is wholly absent from Stadler's notation and, it may be surmised, rather than being mangled by von Hussard, was unlikely to have been present in the version with which he was familiar:

Example 4

There follow a further nine such 14/8 rhythmic cycles before we arrive, in ex. 5, at the material corresponding to Stadler's section 2, which begins:

Example 5

Here the parallels are of a rather different order. The initial resemblance yields, from the second cycle on, to a vaguer similarity of contour, realized in the modern version through an enlarged pitch set and, especially in the setting of *ma il lâ*, with increased melodic density.

Finally, to the beginning of Stadler's section 3 corresponds repeated material that, pitched a sixth higher and developing the d' - g' tetrachord of *hicaz*, resembles it only faintly in melodic direction, and where there is a later injection of fresh melodic material the resemblance hardly goes beyond the initial use of a sustained pitch for the setting of the first four syllables. Repeated material, a further seven cycles in the modern version and the equivalent in Stadler, again a sixth lower, then brings the first *selâm* to an end.

As the composer of this *ayin* in *hicaz* is Musahib Seyyid Ahmed Ağa (d. 1794), it probably dates to less than half a century before von Hussard heard it, making it reasonable to suppose that by then it would not have changed substantially (if at all) from its original form. Indeed, if we entertain the assumption that the Mevlevi *ayins* composed in the eighteenth and even earlier centuries have been preserved with some fidelity, maintained by a tradition of oral transmission in which a high value was placed on accuracy (see Behar 1992; 1996; 2012),¹⁵ to be eventually set down in Western notation by eminent twentieth-century Turkish scholars who were themselves often members of the order and hence intimately familiar with the Mevlevi repertoire, it follows that the current representation of this composition should correspond closely to the performance realizations to which von Hussard was exposed. That being the case, what remains to be explained is both the nature and extent of the differences between the two versions and the reasons for them. Those exhibited in exs. 3-5 are, it should be added, typical: Stadler's representations of all seven *ayins* differ in similar ways from their modern equivalents, and it is thus hardly surprising to find that modern Turkish scholars are highly critical of them.

5 Turkish Reactions

The first to address them was Hüseyin Sadettin Arel, who had seen the samples published by Kieswetter and, following the narrative of the 1822 article, attributed the transcriptions to 'a well-known orientalist', adding with characteristic bluntness that 'some priest called Max Stadler has added a poor-quality piano accompaniment beneath the melodies' ("Lâhinlerin altına Max Stadler isminde bir papaz kötü bir piyano refakati eklemiştir"). He follows this with a much more brutal overall assessment:

15 However, on the unreliability of the documentation for the Mevlevi repertoire during the seventeenth century see Behar 2008, 70-1; and see also Feldman 2001.

O parçalarda makamların mahiyetleri, lâhinlerin kıyafetleri bozulmakla iktifa edilmemiş; usuller bile en acemi bir musikiciye nasip olmayacak bir çupalıkla tahrif olunmuştur [...] Artık zavallı makamlarla lâhinlerin çektikleri işkenceleri sormayınız! (Arel 1990, 89)

It was not enough just to spoil the modal character and melodic form of those pieces: the rhythmic cycles have been distorted with a clumsiness beyond the capacity of even the most incompetent musician; and as for the tortures that have been inflicted on the poor *makams* and melodies, don't ask!

This passage was to be quoted by Bülent Aksoy, who adds to it a criticism of Kiesewetter's credulity in accepting as reliable Stadler's notations, 'which show no resemblance to the originals' ("asıllarıyla hiçbir benzerlik göstermeyen"). He gives credit to von Hussard for effort but finds the results unsuccessful and, even if couched in less vehement terms that Arel, his dismissal of the notations as lacking any resemblance to the originals is reiterated equally categorically: 'Their melodies as published in [Stadler's] score are so far removed from their original forms that no Turkish musician could accept them' ("Yayımladığı nota hiçbir Türk musikicisinin kabul edemeyeceği kadar ezgilerin asıl şekillerine uzaktır"), and 'No similarity can be established between Stadler's measures and the rhythmic cycles of Mevlevî music' ("Stadler'in ölçüleri ile mevlevî musıkisinin usûlleri arasında hiçbir benzerlik kurulamıyor"; Aksoy 1995, 198, 233).

More recently, they have also attracted the attention of Tahir Çağman and Ali Tan. The latter finds it inconceivable that von Hussard could have memorized the Mevlevî repertoire without having undergone a traditional master-pupil course of instruction ("bu melodilerin orijinallerinin ezberlenmesi - eğer meşk edilmediyse - mümkün değildir"; Tan 2016, 127), which implies either that his memorization was at best partial or, theoretically, that he had indeed undergone the rigorous *meşk* learning process, the logic of which would be to underwrite the accuracy of whatever he transmitted to Stadler: presumably, it is the former outcome that is intended. He observes, once more, that Stadler's versions are far removed from those of the *ayins* ("ayinlerin çok uzağında olduğunu gördük"; Tan 2016, 122) and in illustration of the distance between them he juxtaposes the beginnings of the respective versions of the *ayin* in *bestenigar*, with Stadler's, suitably transposed, represented as B in ex. 6:



Example 6

Note is then made of the discrepancies in the representation of both pitch and duration, presumably evidence of alleged distance, not to say inaccuracy. This is, however, more than a little surprising, as whatever local or indeed systemic imprecisions there may be, what is immediately apparent is how closely matched the two melodic contours are.

In the same vein, but more robust in expression, Tahir Çağman roundly rejects the confident claim for accuracy made on behalf of Stadler's versions in the 1822 article and reaches the diametrically opposite conclusion, namely that although his arrangements may be allowed the merit of being a reasonably successful attempt at expressing Mevlevi melodies in Western terms ("Mevlevî melodilerinin batı müziği orkestrasyonu ile ifade edilmeye çalışılması anlamında oldukça başarılı bir denemedir"), this is in spite, once again, of their complete lack of resemblance to the Mevlevi idiom ("Mevlevî müziğiyle bir benzerlik göstermemesine rağmen"; Çağman 2018, 311).¹⁶

¹⁶ Likewise in Çağman 2018, 305: 'No resemblance can be perceived with the melodies of the *ayin* in *hicaz*' ("Hicaz âyin-i şerifin nağmeleriyle [...] bir benzerlik hissedilmemektedir"). The paragraph ends with a resounding repeat: 'There is no resemblance to be found between the *ayin* notations presented here and Musahip Ahmed Ağa's Mevlevî *ayin* in *hicaz*' ("Burada yer alan âyin notalarıyla Musahip Ahmed Ağa'nın hicaz Mevlevî âyininin arasında herhangi bir benzerlik bulunmamaktadır").

6 Reconsideration

There is, then, a clear and damning scholarly consensus among Turkish musicologists: the Stadler transcriptions are worthless as testimony to the nature of the Mevlevi repertoire and, by implication, are to be dismissed as no more than an example of ill-informed and clumsy Western appropriation. However, while one may well understand and even sympathize with the ideological motivation behind such reactions, which could be regarded as ultimately a form of decolonial critique, it may be argued that the unrelentingly negative verdicts of inadequacy and gross misrepresentation are not merely harsh but, on the face of the evidence, difficult to justify, as we have seen that there are stretches where there is a consistent agreement between the two as to the broad melodic contour. At the same time, there are certainly striking flaws, concerning most immediately the fundamental structural frameworks, that is, the representation of the pitch set of *hicaz* and of the rhythmic articulation of the melody within the various rhythmic cycles employed. To be set aside as irrelevant, however, is the difference in pitch conventions whereby, as noted, corresponding to the modern Turkish use of *a* as the finalis of *hicaz*, Stadler has *g*.

6.1 Pitch

Staying with the latter, and assuming a necessary accommodation to keyboard equal temperament, one might have expected Stadler to represent *hicaz* as *g a^b b c' d' e' f' g'*, leading to the conclusion that his usual preference for *a* over *a^b* was an elementary, indeed inexplicable, blunder. Such would, however, be to project contemporary norms of intonation onto early nineteenth-century Ottoman practice. According to modern theory, the interval *g - a^b* is marginally larger than an equal tempered semitone, but it is likely that the interval von Hussard encountered was larger still, its upper note approximately midway between *a^b* and *a*, therefore presenting problems of both perception and representation to a Western ear. He may himself have adjusted the pitch, raising it to *a* in performing to Stadler but, if not, he would have left him with the awkward problem of how to represent a neutral, in-between intonation. For an unaccompanied vocal part, one could envisage inventing a new symbol to represent it, but the incorporation of a piano accompaniment forced the choice of either the lower or the higher adjustment. Stadler's (or von Hussard's) general preference for the higher has the effect of distancing his arrangements from the modern Turkish realization of *hicaz*, which reflects a development whereby the earlier neutral intonation has

drifted down, creating a central augmented second within what for Stadler was the g – c' tetrachord.¹⁷

6.2 Duration

As far as the rhythmic articulation is concerned, the first *selâm* is set to *devr-i revan*, a rhythmic cycle of fourteen time units now normally notated, as here in the modern version, as 14/8. It consists of two qualitatively distinguished halves, each of form 3 + 2 + 2, and the whole cycle, which in the Mevlevi ceremony is marked on the *kudüm*, a pair of small kettle drums, is represented by the following pattern of strokes of contrasting timbre:

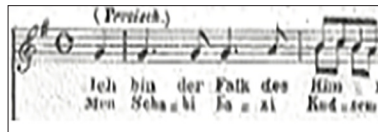
/düm Ø Ø düm Ø tek Ø: düm Ø Ø tek Ø tek Ø // ¹⁸

This articulation of the cycle was standard already at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Kantemiroğlu 2001) and is doubtless the one to which von Hussard was exposed. What is not clear, however, is whether he had interiorized the cycle sufficiently well to maintain it unaltered without instrumental reinforcement while performing for Stadler. In any event, the unfamiliar structure created problems of adjustment for one or both, especially as without the percussion underlay differences in dynamics would probably not have sufficed to clarify what was not already apparent from the pattern of attacks in the melody.

The ways in which *devr-i revan* was naturalized are clear from the beginning. Corresponding to the modern version of the first cycle:



Stadler has:



¹⁷ With the theoretical value of 12 commas (as against 9 for the whole tone). For further discussion of this change in intonation, which seems to have occurred during the nineteenth century, see Olley, unpublished.

¹⁸ See e.g. the description in Özkan 1984.

If his common time is represented as 8/8, we will have 2 + 8 + 4 corresponding to /3 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 /: the time-unit total is preserved but its internal distribution is radically changed.

Similarly, in the next two cycles:

The image displays two musical staves. The top staff features a melody with lyrics 'EZ LÂ ME KÂN RE Sİ' and 'E HEY Yİ YAR'. The bottom staff shows a more complex melody with lyrics 'İlahî, der Gei - sterwelt ent - nom - men o - Freund! ez İla mekân re - si - de İla İy!'. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and bar lines.

we have in both versions a total of 28 time units, but distributed differently in relation to the syllable onsets:

ayin /3+2+2+3+1+ 4/ 7+2+1+4/
ez lâ me kân re si de hey yi yar
Stadler 4/ 3+1+3+1 / 4+4/ 4+ 4/

The rhythmic map, in short, is once more transformed to accord with European norms, but without seriously affecting the melodic line, which maintains a contour akin to the current version, albeit in a rather simpler form, the total number of pitch changes being reduced from 15 to 8 by virtue of Stadler's version being devoid of the splitting of a time unit between two (generally neighbouring) pitches.

The relationship between the two versions in the continuation (Stadler's section 2), given that there is no change of cycle, is predictably similar, although here Stadler tries a different technique for reproducing the rhythmic structure: he begins with two measures of 4/4, followed by six of 3/4 and a further four of 4/4. Segmenting the first eight of Stadler's measures (placed above) and the corresponding five cycles of *devr-i revan* (below) according to the position of the syllable onsets, we have:

(3) +1+4 / 3+1+3+1/ 2+2+2 / 4+2/ 4+2/ 2+4/ 6/6/
A- teş ne ze ned der di li ma il lâ hu hu hu hu—
3+4+2+1+4 / 3+ 2+2+7 / 3+4+7 / 7+7/ 14/

There are thus occasional instances of seven time units being regularized as six, but the relationship is not maintained with any consistency. It would be reasonable to suspect a degree of flexibility in von Hussard's handling of duration, but wherever the responsibility lies there is a reduction in the total number of time units from 70

to 52, caused above all by the discrepancies in the treatment of the thrice-repeated syllable *hu* ('He').

6.3 Melody

As before, we also encounter a lower rate of melodic activity as quantified by the number of pitch changes within equivalent passages. Thus, in Stadler's first eight measures we find 28 pitch changes as against 43 in the current version, yet again without the general melodic contour being seriously distorted (and possibly with a nod towards intermediate intonation in the alternation of a^b and a in the last two measures).

The beginning of Stadler's section 3, the concluding part of the first *selâm*, is a setting of the very first phrase of Rumi's *Masnavi*: 'Listen to the *ney*, as it tells its tale'. It continues with a^b , presumably reflecting an intonation produced or perceived as lower, given that it occurs here in the environment of g and that the melody does not ascend further:



This corresponds to:



Here, after the perfect match of the first four notes is undermined by their being placed, unexpectedly, a sixth rather than a second lower,¹⁹ we are confronted by a marked difference in the melodic contour, with the settings of *hikâyet*, especially, being unrelated, despite the presence in both of an upward leap of a fourth (albeit in Stadler's case diminished). The contrast is such that, rather than assuming it to result from incompetence in transmission or notation, we might rather wonder, as indeed with other passages presented above, whether the version to which von Hussard had been exposed was,

¹⁹ This cannot be attributed to von Hussard finding the pitch uncomfortably high and taking it down, as the melody in section 2 rises to f (equivalent to the g of the modern setting of *hikâyet*).

at least at these points, at some remove from its modern descendant (or replacement).

In representing the rhythmic structure, Stadler sticks here to common time, with the result that pitches are generally, and somewhat awkwardly, sustained across bar lines (indicated by $\cup$):

$2 + 1^{20}/4 + 2 + 2 \cup 3 + 1 + 4 \cup 5 + 1 + 2 \cup 1 + 1 + 6 \cup 4$
Biş ne vez neyçün hi kâ yet mi kü ned
 $2 + 1 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 1 + 4 / 7 + 2 + 1 + 4 /$

and there is a marked difference between both the patterns of duration and their totals, Stadler with 38 time units this time exceeding the 28 of the two cycles of *devr-i revan*, which evidently proved rather difficult to capture.

This is followed, in Stadler's version, after another ten time units, by a repeat; and there is then, before the final recurrence of earlier material, a brief passage of nearly four measures. Similarly, the modern version continues for two and a half cycles before the repeat; and then, before the final recurrence of earlier material, sets the same text as in Stadler's brief insert, spaced over two and a half cycles, as shown in ex. 7:

geschwinder.
 Denn mit Blut er = fül = let sie der Lie = be Pfad = ; Weh !
 Nei Ra = dix = si Ra = hi jür chun mi = kü = ned = ; Wai !
 geschwinder.
 NEY HA Dİ Sİ RA Hİ PÜR HUN Mİ KÜ NED VAY I

Example 7

Again, Stadler's pitch is a sixth lower initially, but towards the end there is a convergence on the a to f# area, and both versions share the general features of an initial sustained pitch, a central descent, and a less pronounced final descent. However, the closer the focus, the fainter the melodic resemblance becomes: the number of pitch changes is halved, and there is no trace of the initial modulatory shift of the modern version.

The rhythmic disposition, in contrast, shows greater similarity at the level of note length, with Stadler's total of 30 time units

corresponding to 35 in the modern version, the higher figure caused primarily by the extended setting of one syllable, *hun*:

3 + 1 + 2 + 2 / 3 + 1 + 2 + 2 / 3 + 1 + 4 / 6
Neyha di si ra hi pür hun mi kü ned vay
 2 + 1 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 1 + 4 / 7 + 2 + 1 + 4 / 7

6.4 Rhythmic Cycles

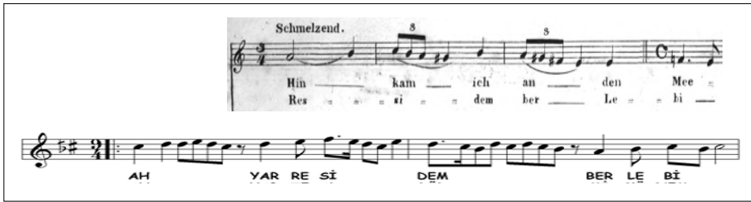
Analogous problems of rhythmic adjustment inevitably occur in the remaining *selâms*, as the third begins in *devr-i kebir*, a cycle of twenty-eight time units, before switching to *aksak semai*, of ten, while the second and fourth are both in the *evfer* cycle of nine time units.

6.4.1 *evfer*

Now generally given the time signature 9/4, *evfer* has an internal 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 division with the stroke pattern / *düm ø te ka düm ø tek tek ø //*, where the second *tek* is stronger than the preceding one. In the absence of a percussion underlay one might have anticipated that, in his version of the second *selâm*, Stadler would render *evfer* as three measures of 3/4. What we encounter, however, are groups consisting of three such measures followed by one of 4/4, to give a total of thirteen time units and, as a result, the two settings fail to map onto each other, as is shown most readily by doubling the totals to take account of half time-unit rests, indicated in square brackets. Stadler's equivalent (given above) of the first two cycles starts after the initial *Ah yar*, and contains a fermata, indicated here by $\frown$. We thus have:

———— 6 / 4 + 2 / 6 + 2 / 4 + 4 / 4 $\frown$ + 2 / 4 + 2 / 4 + 2 / 8 / 4
Ah yar re si dem ber le bi derya bi di dem hu vü ya men hu hu
 8 [1] + 2 + 1 + 6 / 8 [1] + 2 + 1 + 6 / [2] 2 + 7 + 1 + 6 / 8 [1] + 9 $\cup$ 2 + 2 + 8 + 6 / 8 + 10 /

Over the common stretch, there is a marked imbalance in the number of time units (28 in Stadler's version as against 48) and, not surprisingly, a lack of fit in the position of the longer durations which, in turn, is matched in the pitch contour, despite the resemblance, in ex. 8, of the sequential four-note descents, now a fourth lower, in the settings of *si dem ber*:



Example 8

That the original number of pitch changes might not have been accurately captured would hardly be surprising but, once more, it is difficult to think that Stadler's transcription can be explained away simply as a defective representation of performances closely resembling the modern version.

The same conclusion is suggested even more forcibly by the continuation in the repeat and conclusion, shown in ex. 9, where corresponding to Stadler's 18 pitch changes the modern version has no fewer than 39, and where, apart from the descent on *me* and the contour of the setting of *men*, melodic similarities are not to be found, Stadler beginning, for example, with *dem he* set to a rising fifth which has no counterpart in the modern version and ending with a single pitch for the final *Hu* to which correspond no fewer than 13 in the modern version:

Example 9

Confirmation, if confirmation were needed, that von Hussard's source version must have differed substantially from the modern one is provided by the fact that Stadler inserts further melodic repetition but setting a quite different text. Unfortunately, the nature of the relationship between the two versions of the second *selâm* cannot be illuminated further by comparing their settings of the fourth, also

in the rhythmic cycle *evfer*, as this is absent from Stadler's account of the *ayin* in *hicaz*.

6.4.2 *devr-i kebir*

His section 5 corresponds to the beginning of the third *selâm*, which starts in *devr-i kebir*, a slower counterpart of *devr-i revan* that, since the late eighteenth century, has been analysed as a cycle not of fourteen but of twenty-eight time units, with, again, a division into two equal parts, each articulated as 6 + 4 + 4, and with a more complex percussion underlay:

/düm Ø düm Ø tek Ø düm tek teke düm tek Ø tek Ø: tek Ø düm Ø düm Ø tâ Ø hek Ø
te ke te ke //

Stadler begins, in ex. 10, with a block of twenty-eight time units, divided into measures of 6 + 6 + 8 + 8. It is, however, the equivalent not of one *devr-i kebir* cycle but of two: each measure thus corresponds to half a cycle and contains the same number of syllables (making up one prosodic foot of the *remel* metre, which has the structure - ◡ - - / - ◡ - - / - ◡ - - / - ◡ - /). But if the distribution of the text is the same, the settings are marked by contrast: quite apart from the level of

Example 10

melodic elaboration (to the 54 pitch changes of the modern version, with its repeated scalar passages, correspond, for Stadler, a mere 14), they are different in layout, with Stadler's version containing nothing corresponding to the clear A B A C structure of the other. Something resembling this version can hardly have served as a model that

von Hussard distilled into the syntactically unrelated bare melodic outline recorded by Stadler.

There is then a brief injection of new material analogous to that introduced towards the end of the first *selâm*:



again consisting of a sustained pitch followed by a descent. The settings are, nevertheless, melodically (as well as modally) unrelated, with a more gradual and complex unfolding of the descent in the modern version.

6.4.3 *yürük semai*

There follows a repetition of previous material before a change of cycle back to *aksak semai* and an instrumental interlude, of which there is no reflex in Stadler's version, and then an extensive final passage to the beginning of which corresponds Stadler's section 6, shown in ex. 11. Here, rather surprisingly, we find 4/4 corresponding to the clearly-etched ternary 6/8 of *yürük semai*:

Example 11

Despite this rhythmic misprision, there are certain melodic gestures that suggest a connection, for example, in the first two measures and in the settings of *sultan olur* and *Husrev ü Hakan*. But the similarity is immediately undermined by a shift of register and/or melodic contour, suggesting less a direct line of transmission than a rather freely varied (at least in one case) derivation from a common source.

This passage is repeated (twice by Stadler), but again with each version using a different text, and after seven instrumental measures in the modern version the setting of a common text resumes, in ex. 12, in what for Stadler is section 7. Although the first eight (repeated) *yürük semai* measures are again rendered by four measures of 4/4, Stadler's melodic line, now a third lower, resembles its counterpart much more closely, and the disposition of the text is again an almost exact match. As memorized by von Hussard, it is clearly related to the corresponding passage as it survives in the modern version, but the similarity does not extend to modal identity: Stadler has a major scale from f, and there is no trace of the *hicaz* tetrachord that characterizes the other.

Freudig.
(Persisch.)

Ein Ohr, das immer im-mer nur der Wahrheit of-fen steht —
Gu-schi ki be-hakk has — hü-wed der — he-me dscha-i,

GO SI KI BE HAK BA ZI BÜ VED DER HE ME CAY

Ja wohl, Freund, ja wohl, Freund, See-leufreund, o weh!
he-li ja-ri, he-li dost — jar dschani men Wai!

BE LI VAR BE LI DOST VAR CA NI MEN VAY

Example 12

Before the final repetition comes an insert, shown in ex. 13, where Stadler begins with material that this time resemble the modern equivalent more closely, and the same degree of similarity between the two, again a third apart, is maintained thereafter.

BE LI YAR BE LI DOST YAR CA NI MEN VAY

Example 13

The continuation in the modern version is labelled section 8 by Stadler, for whom it consists of a repeated phrase of eight measures followed by a further phrase of twelve. As the beginning shows, in ex. 14, the resemblance in the melodic contour continues as before, even though Stadler's version now starts a fifth lower and slips further in the approach to the cadence to end a sixth lower:

RAB ZI DŮ KEV NĪ BĪ NĪ YA ZE MĪ GER DAN

Example 14

The relationship is maintained in similar fashion over the next four measures, although whereas Stadler then repeats from the beginning, with a different text, this is set initially in the higher register in the modern version, with the *hicaz* tetrachord introduced from *e'* to *a'*, before the two converge over much of the final stretch, with differences emerging only in the final cadential area.

The beginning of Stadler's section 9 links up with the modern version some sixteen measures later and adopts the same 6/8 *yürük semai* notation of the rhythmic structure. However, the rhythmic pattern / ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ / is often preferred to / ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ /, and melodic congruence is intermittent, even if in both cases reliant on elaboration of a

single pitch (in Stadler's version generally placed a fifth lower). The relationship between the rhythmic representations remains unchanged in the concluding part of the *selâm*, labelled by Stadler as section 10 but, as in section 9, the melodic relationship is, to say the least, fitful. Stadler's version, for example, contains no reflex of the gradual descent over a fifth in the first five measures of its modern counterpart. It only moves to the lower register later, where it contrasts with a jump to *g'* in the other, and to Stadler's final sequential descent corresponds an elaboration of finalis a.

Melodically, in short, there is so little to connect section 10 to the setting of the same text in the modern version that here it is indeed tempting to concur with the Turkish scholars and conclude that von Hussard and Stadler produced between them an echo of the 'original' (which, it is to be assumed, survives more or less intact and unaltered in the modern version) so distorted that no resemblance between them can be detected. But this conclusion cannot hold for the whole *ayin* and is to that extent suspect: elsewhere there are passages where resemblances are evident, demonstrating a capacity for faithful reproduction on their part, so that in the others, as in section 10, that are clearly unrelated, the differences are more persuasively explained by them having been channelled through separate lines of transmission; and while the absence from Stadler's arrangements of sections that occur in the modern version could readily be explained by von Hussard, for whatever reason, not having transmitted them, the occasional inclusion of different textual material indicates once more that the performances von Hussard was familiar with were not coincident throughout with an antecedent of the modern version that was largely congruent with it.

7 The *ayin* in *nihavend*

It would be excessively laborious as well as pointless to subject the remainder of Stadler's transcriptions to the same detailed scrutiny. A brief survey of one other *ayin* should serve adequately as a control, demonstrating whether the relationship to its modern equivalent is of the same general order as that exhibited by the *ayin* in *hicaz*. For this purpose, we may choose the one by the same composer, Musahib Seyyid Ahmed Ağa, and therefore from the same period and presumably equally as little changed from its original form in the performances that von Hussard was familiar with. As before, in the first *selâm* of this, the *ayin* in *nihavend*, Stadler uses a combination of triple and duple measures that fails to reproduce the structure of *devr-i revan* accurately, but in section 1 his melodic contour nevertheless resembles that in the modern version, which, however, continues for a further eight cycles that contain modulations and

are not included by Stadler. The continuation corresponds to his section 2, with its extensive repeats, where he begins by retreating to 4/4, each measure equivalent to a half cycle of seven time units. The melody begins a sixth lower, with again a broad initial similarity of contour over the first four repeated cycles, but in place of the following modulation in the modern version, which introduces the *hicaz* tetrachord from *d'*, the pitch is temporarily raised by a fifth.

Section 3, in contrast, is short, consisting of a mere twelve 4/4 measures, even if the tempo is slow. It shows a disturbance of the order of events in the *ayin*, for it corresponds not to material in the second *selâm* but sets the same text as a central section of the third. It also reverses the order of that part of the text that is repeated, and apart from the vaguest of parallels in the downward drift of the melodic line there is no resemblance that the substitution of 4/4 in place of the 6/8 of the modern equivalent might be thought to obscure.

SINGSTIMME.

Hör' die Flöte, wie sie tönend singt,
bis NEV TŪ Zİ NEV Ğİ HA Ğİ HA Mİ GŪ YED

Treu, dass ich nicht weiss, bin ich wohl du, bist du wohl ich, weh!
Wai! VAY (Saz) ES RA RI NŪ HŪF TE KİB Rİ YA Mİ GŪ YED VAY
VAY (Saz) KEN DER GA LA TAM Kİ MEN TŪ EM YA TŪ ME Nİ VAY

vom Ge-heim-niss Got-tes sie er klingt i
Ersarrı nı-ıhı-ftı Kİ-brıa mİ-ğın-jedı.
ES RA RI NŪ HŪF TE KİB Rİ YA Mİ GŪ YED

Example 15

Section 4 then reverts to the second *selâm*, at least to the extent that they set the same text. However, as the beginning shows, in ex. 16, the connection between the two versions is at first non-existent: not only do they have contrasting modal identities, but they also differ markedly in length and in melodic density. It is only in the setting of *ni meni* that one might discern commonalities in the *f g a^b g* vs. *c' d' e^b d'* phrase, and likewise in the final descent towards the cadence:

Lausam -
(Persisch.)
O Sul = tan mein
Sul = ta = ni meni

SUL TA NI ME NI

o Sul = tan mein
Sul = ta = ni = ü meni

SUL TA NI ME NI

Example 16

Within this brief passage, the modern version, despite sometimes sustaining the same pitch over a number of time units, contains 33 pitch changes within its 36 time units: the equivalent figures for Stadler are 15 and 14. However, as against the only faint and intermittent melodic resemblance in the first setting of *sultani meni*, the general contour of the second setting is quite similar in both, and here one could readily accept Stadler's notation as a slightly simplified rendering, a fifth lower, of a forerunner of the modern version – which, though, could equally readily be understood as an elaborated version of an earlier form akin to the one Stadler has recorded.

In the remainder, as ex. 17 shows, the quantitative differences are of a similar order:

in Herz und Sinn
en der dil u dahan

AH EN DER DI LÜ CAN

nen, Glau = be mein!
i = ma = ni me ni

i MA NI ME NI

Example 17

and it would be just as feasible, if not more so, to regard the relationship between the two forms as pointing to a development from simpler to more complex rather than to Stadler's version being a botched reduction.

Section 5 is both brief and swift, notated in 3/4 (with two interpolated measures of 2/4), and is in effect a faster version of section 3, its text that of the repeat of the modern equivalent of 3. The melodic line is similar, but by no means identical – and no nearer to that of the modern equivalent.

In the modern version, the third *selâm* begins with a melodically complex section in *devr-i kebir*, and then transitions, as in the *ayin* in *hicaz*, first to *ağır semai*, and then to *yürük semai* for a lengthy passage that begins with a setting of *ey ki hezar aferin* and only later contains the material corresponding to Stadler's sections 3 and 5. After a further extensive passage (consisting of seven instrumental cycles + 20 vocal + 17 instrumental) for which there is no reflex in Stadler's transcription, we arrive at the final vocal setting, to which his section 6 corresponds. Here, once more, Stadler has recourse to 4/4 in place of 6/8 to render *yürük semai*, and although elements of the melodic contour appear to correspond, the general effect is quite different, as is the modal identity, which resembles that of section 4.

Indeed, striking about both versions of this *ayin* in *nihavend* is the extent to which *nihavend* itself (F minor for Stadler) is relinquished. The pitch set in Stadler's section 1 is e f g a^b b^b c' d^b e^b f', with finalis f, expanded in parts of section 2 to include a transposition down to B^b. In section 3, however, it is replaced by D major (c[#] d e f[#] g a b c[#] d' e', with finalis d), but with c[#] in the central part harmonized as in A major, with g[#] introduced at the cadence. The pitch set of section 4 reverts to c e f g a^b b^b c' d^b, but with finalis e and a cadential harmonic resolution that moves from F minor to C major. Section 5 echoes 3, with D major alternating with A major, and 6 echoes 4, with the same final F minor to C major cadence. In the modern version of *selâm* 1 we encounter a modulatory area in the middle register, with the introduction, variously, of b-, c[#], e-, and e', and the *hicaz* tetrachord on d', while in *selâm* 2 and *selâm* 4, and also the first section of *selâm* 3, the pitch set changes to a[#] b- c' d' e- f[#] g' a' b^b (with finalis b-). We then have a further modal shift, the pitch set changing to a b- c' d' e' (f') f[#] g' a'; a return to *nihavend* with the cadence c' e^b d' c' b^b a g; but then a further modulation to *evic* and *segâh*. Given such complexity, it is hardly surprising that this material should fail to appear in Stadler's version.

7.1 The *ayin* in *bestenigar*

Nothing in the relationship between Stadler's transcriptions of the other five *ayins* and the modern versions differs in any significant way from that outlined above, which may therefore be regarded as representative. The same time signatures and combinations thereof are used for the various rhythmic cycles, but problems of intonation may recur in slightly different forms, as, for example, in the *ayin* in *bestenigar*, where in contrast to the modern mode signature  Stadler's equivalent for the pitches from a to e' is a b c' d' e' (but placed a fifth lower). Nevertheless, as has been seen in example 6, the melodic contour in his section 1 corresponds quite closely to the modern one, as it also does in sections 2 (now a fourth lower) and 3. Not so, however in section 4, equivalent to the beginning of the third *selâm*, where, as seen in ex. 18, to the 17 pitch changes in Stadler's first four measures correspond no fewer than 42 in the first two cycles of *devr-i kebir*:



Langsam.
(Persisch.)
Sieh, es kam der Menschen Liebbling,
A - med an mah - bu - hi in - san,
A ME DAN MAH BU Bİ İN SAN
Gott zum Gruss, Gott zum Gruss!
Mer - ha - ha - , Mer - ha - ha !
MER HA BA YAR DOST BE Lİ YA Rİ MEN

Example 18

The marked difference in density and contour is underlined further by the contrast in modal identity, the result being a complete lack of melodic match.

The remainder of the section is equally distant from the modern version. It presents us with another case of van Hussard having learned a different setting, quite possibly also in *devr-i kebir* but with a significantly lower pitch-change rate. Stadler has nothing corresponding to the following long stretch of vocal material (36 cycles of *yürük semai*, beginning with *ey ki hezar aferin*) before, in section 5, re-joining the third *selâm*, again with 4/4 in place of 6/8, a distortion that does not, however, disguise the melodic similarity. The modern version continues with an instrumental interlude followed by a final vocal setting where part of the text coincides with that of

Stadler's section 6 but without there being any comparable melodic congruence.

Similarly, section 7 sets, in ex. 19, the same text as the fourth *selâm* but is again sufficiently distinct melodically to rule out a derivational relationship:

Example 19 is a musical score featuring three staves. The top staff is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time, with a tempo marking 'Langsam.' and '(Persisch.)'. The lyrics are 'O Sul tan mein, o Sul tan mein' and 'Sul ta ni me ni, Sul ta ni me ni'. The middle staff is in G major and 2/4 time, with lyrics 'AH SUL DER TA MEN NI BI ME NI'. The bottom staff is in G major and 2/4 time, with lyrics 'NI SUL TA NI ME NI'. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests.

Example 19

Striking, here, is that the same passage appears in Stadler's section 4 of the *ayin* in *irak*, which corresponds to the beginning of the second *selâm*, with the same text: the difference between the two settings here is so great as to exclude any connection. It appears, further, now a tone higher, in section 9 of the *ayin* in *pençgâh* and, with minor changes to note durations, in section 9 of the *ayin* in *acem-buselik*, in both cases corresponding to the fourth *selâm*. The modern equivalents are again unrelated, and likewise to each other, so that there can be no question of convergence resulting from the serial mishearing of different versions: a more likely interpretation is that having learned this passage in one *ayin*, von Hussard repeated it in others when memory failed him.

8 Conclusion

Yet whatever its derivation, it is not readily relatable to any of the modern equivalents. The consequence is to undermine, rather than support, the argument that, whatever their incidental historical interest as a laudable attempt to make available selected parts of the Ottoman Mevlevi repertoire to a musically curious European public, the crippling defects of Stadler's notations are such that the distorted image they transmit signally fails to reflect the originals. To claim otherwise is not, though, to ignore a lack of accuracy in rendering both structural features of the rhythmic cycles and microtonal characteristics of the *makams*: they are transcriptions of their time.

Nor is it to exclude the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that at least some of the gaps in Stadler's coverage are attributable to an only partial memorization of the repertoire on the part of von Hussard.

What may be argued, rather, is that present within his scores are passages that resemble their modern equivalents sufficiently closely to exclude incompetence as the primary cause of the striking divergences that occur elsewhere. Consequently, such divergent passages are better accounted for as being derived from a different version, that is, from material current at the time that was later discarded and replaced or transformed. It follows that Stadler's notations of von Hussard's transmission of the *selâm* repertoire should not be dismissed so summarily and deemed valueless as historical testimony, for the conclusion that they do not just exhibit understandable and sometimes readily remediable quirks of misrepresentation but are in essence fatally flawed travesties of the originals to which they purportedly relate is dependent upon a fundamental but suspect premise, namely that we know what the originals are, that is, more precisely, we know what the realization of the Mevlevi repertoire was like at the time von Hussard was attending a *mevlevihane* in Istanbul, and we know that because it is taken as axiomatic that enshrined in the now authoritative mid twentieth-century Mevlevi *ayinleri* editions is the faithful preservation of a historical tradition parts of which, among them the *ayins* in *hicaz* and *nihavend* by Musahib Seyyid Ahmed Ağa, were composed at least two or three centuries before.

There may certainly be occasional errors of omission or misplacement in Stadler's scores, as with the replication of the passage in ex. 19 in other *ayins*, but for the extensive areas of disagreement other explanations need to be considered. One credible hypothesis is that the modern versions, the earliest of which appeared in the 1930s, may well embody the performance practice of the turn of the twentieth century, but are unlikely to be equally reliable records of the performance practice to which von Hussard was exposed at the beginning of the nineteenth, indeed that correlated with this temporal disjunction may be appreciable developments in both style and substance. Within the tradition itself, recognition of such change can occasionally be glimpsed through the editorial processes behind the İstanbul Koservatuvârı publications, which for the *ayin* in *suzidilara* by Sultan Selim III (1761-1808) juxtapose two versions, one derived from the notation made in 1795 by a contemporary of Stadler, Nasır Abdülbaki Dede (1765-1821), the other representing current, i.e. early twentieth-century, performance practice.²¹ The

21 For evidence that 'current performance practice' in the wider repertoire could itself encompass significant divergences see the examples in Behar 2012.

differences between them indicate that later norms as documented in the modern scores cannot be guaranteed to provide a satisfactory measure against which Stadler's publications are to be assessed (and found wanting), and in the absence of a reliable contemporary account of the performance practice of c1800 it would follow that no such measure exists – and therefore, one might argue, that it would be pointless to pursue any further this line of enquiry, or rather speculation.

Fortunately, however, the notation made by Nasır Abdülbaki Dede, himself a Mevlevi musician and composer, provides precisely such an account. It is an exceptional item of evidence and an appropriate term of comparison, its relevance underlined by the fact that the *ayin* it records,²² in *suzidilara*, is by yet another contemporary, Sultan Selim III (1761-1808). As *suzidilara* is not a *makam* represented in Stadler's corpus, this notation can obviously shed no further light on the degree to which Stadler captures or fails to capture the modal specifics of *hicaz*, *nihavend*, and the other *makams* represented in his arrangements, but it does provide a style of text setting, a representation of rhythmic structures and the disposition of the melody in relation to them, with which his notations can legitimately be compared. Unfortunately, not all the rhythmic cycles refracted in Stadler's notations are included: Selim III's first *selâm* is in *düyek* rather than *devr-i revan*, and his third begins in *frenkçin* rather than *devr-i kebir*, thus leaving only *evfer*, *aksak semai*, and *yürük semai* as the cycles common to all three sources. Nevertheless, Abdülbaki's notations still allow investigation of changes in melodic density as indexical of changing stylistic norms from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, and hence the possibility of evaluating the relationship of Stadler's notations to those norms and hence, up to a point, their reliability.

On the assumption that the tempo for a given cycle was not subject to major fluctuations, its overall melodic density may be quantified straightforwardly as the average number of pitch changes per cycle or, to facilitate comparisons between cycles, per time unit (identifying for this purpose the stretches of melody in Stadler's notations that correspond to a single cycle and dividing accordingly). The Stadler sample considered consists of 20 cycles for *yürük semai*, but only 5.6 for *evfer*, this being his total, while *aksak semai* is best ignored, as he includes only the equivalent of one cycle in each *ayin*. He does, though, present sufficient material in *devr-i revan* (the equivalent of 20 cycles) and *devr-i kebir* (the equivalent of 10 cycles)²³ for

22 Nasır Abdülbaki Dede, *tahririye*, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi MS Nafiz Paşa 1242.

23 Counting *devr-i kebir* for Stadler as consisting of 14 time units. If counted as 28, the rate would be halved and the contrast with modern levels doubled.

meaningful comparison to be made with the corresponding figures for the modern versions of the *ayins* in *hicaz* and *nihavend*, and to them may be added, for reference, the figures for the first *selâm* of the *ayin* in *suzidilara*, in *düyek*, and for the beginning of the third, in *frenkçin*. We thus have:

Table 1 Pitch changes per time unit

	Abdûlbaki	Stadler	modern
<i>evfer</i>	0.75	0.68	1.2
<i>yürük semai</i>	0.47	0.45	0.66
<i>devr-i revan</i>	–	0.4	0.55
<i>devr-i kebir</i>	–	0.41	0.83
<i>düyek</i>	0.4	–	0.8
<i>frenkçin</i>	1.6	–	1.9

As this shows, Stadler's figures for *yürük semai* are on a par with Abdûlbaki's, but marginally lower for *evfer*, the difference readily explicable by von Hussard having failed to internalize and replicate certain details of the performances he heard in this rather more complex cycle. In both, the modern version exhibits an increase of 40-50%, which in *devr-i kebir* and *düyek* rises to 100%, while it falls to 30% in *devr-i revan* and 20% in *frenkçin*. No obvious reason suggests itself for these discrepancies, although to be suspected are differences in tempo. For the two faster cycles, *devr-i revan* and *yürük semai*, the differences between the figures for Stadler's notations and those for the modern version are perceptible but not exceptional, while for the slower tempo *evfer* and *devr-i kebir* they are wider, pointing to an approximate doubling of melodic density taking place during the nineteenth century. This may be interpreted as the result of a gradual process of accretion that, in these slower sections, could take place independently of the tempo of the participants' rotations, neither affecting it nor being affected by it. Less easy to account for is the reduced level of change in *frenkçin* or, rather, its relatively much higher melodic density in Abdûlbaki's notation, suggestive of an earlier phase of accretion when compared with the 0.7 of the one piece in *frenkçin* notated by Cantemir, although for firmer conclusions a more substantial body of evidence would be required. Nevertheless, the data available, however limited, suggest that, for all their approximations and imprecisions, Stadler's notations may well reflect the norms of c1800 as they relate to the level of melodic activity not just in *evfer* and *yürük semai* but also more broadly, suggesting subsequent change of a similar order to that revealed by comparing Abdûlbaki's notation of the *ayin* in *suzidilara* to its various modern versions. In the brief excerpt from the first *selâm* shown

in ex. 20 (Dişiaçık, Uruş 2012, 434), version A is a transnotation of Abdülbaki's original, B the 1935 Darülelhân İstanbul Belediye Konservatuvarı version, C that of Ali Rifat Çağatay (d. 1935), and D Heper's 1974 version.²⁴

The image displays four staves of musical notation, each representing a different version of a melody. The staves are labeled 'A nüşası', 'B nüşası', 'C nüşası', and 'D nüşası' from top to bottom. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 8/4. Staff A shows a simple melody with 8 pitch changes. Staff B is more ornate, with 19 pitch changes. Staff C is also ornate, with 19 pitch changes. Staff D is the most ornate, with 19 pitch changes. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) to indicate pitch and rhythm.

Example 20

Thus, while the number of pitch changes in A is just 8, in B it has doubled, and in D has risen to 19.

Such contrasts, which are by no means exceptional, could be interpreted as caused by different attitudes to the function of notation, with Abdülbaki offering a skeletal outline, possibly a teaching version, to be amplified in performance, as contrasted with the capturing of the amplified form in the modern scores. Alternatively, they could be thought to result from performance habits during the nineteenth century tending gradually to incorporate and transmit successive embellishments,²⁵ and that the latter is the more likely explanation is suggested by the general alignment between Abdülbaki and Stadler, since what was transmitted to the latter by von Hussard was, in all likelihood, not just a bare teaching outline but a reflection of the instantiations heard during the Mevlevi ceremonies he witnessed.

From this it would follow that the performance tradition of the Mevlevi repertoire, despite the conservatism that might be associated with ensemble performance in a ritual context, had not remained static. It may readily be supposed that the gradual stylistic evolution of the Ottoman tradition more generally, manifested in the newly

²⁴ Heper 1974. The twenty first-century neyzen.com version follows this closely, but does, interestingly, exhibit microtonal differences of intonation.

²⁵ On these and other relevant hypotheses see Wright 1988; Olley 2018.

composed *ayins* that were constantly being added to the repertoire, had also impinged upon the realizations of those inherited from earlier composers, resulting in a gradual thickening of the melodic texture and, it may be conjectured, a compensatory retardation affecting, as example 20 suggests, *düyek* as well as the already slower cycles such as *devr-i kebir* and *evfer*, where this tendency was more apparent. In *evfer*, for example, the modern version of the beginning of the fourth *selâm* of the *ayin* in *suzidilara* – quite apart from hinting at the emergence of different lines of transmission, one with a rotation of the rhythmic cycle and a brief instrumental insert – demonstrates, as shown in ex. 21, the extent to which the melodic outline has been amplified: as against the 14 pitch changes of Abdülbaki's version, its modern descendant, placed beneath, has 42.



Example 21

Similarly, in the equivalents to this passage in section 4 of Stadler's *nihavend* and section 7 of his *bestenigar* we have 15 pitch changes, reflective therefore of a proximity to the level of melodic density that can be inferred for the end of the eighteenth century from Abdülbaki. The suggestion, therefore, is of a general trend towards an enrichment of the melodic texture that results from a gradual incorporation of what had originally been occasional embellishments into the line of transmission; and if the differences between Abdülbaki's version of the *ayin* in *suzidilara* and those in modern editions can be taken to substantiate this, it would be reasonable to conclude that, in parallel, the various *ayins* reflected in Stadler's arrangements had, in the performances which von Hussard attended at the turn of the nineteenth century, a melodic texture at some remove from that now current, one much closer, indeed, to that recorded by Abdülbaki.

However, a rather different and more complex picture emerges if we compare Abdülbaki's notations to the other significant Mevlevi notation of the period, Toderini's *semai* in *hicaz*. One might have expected this, by analogy, to be typologically akin to Abdülbaki's

contemporary *yürük semai* instrumental material, but it has, instead, a much denser melodic texture²⁶ and, as the juxtaposition in ex. 1 makes clear, the same holds when it is compared to the modern version of the *semai* in *hicaz*. Doubtless, the difference in the relationship between source and output in the two versions is worth emphasizing: in one, we have a prescriptive score, an unadorned distillation of what authoritative guardians of the repertoire deem to be correct, and in the other a descriptive notation derived, by an outsider to the tradition, from performance; but this still fails to account for the contrast in their melodic styles: it is not the case that the modern version is performed in a significantly slower and more embellished manner than the score suggests, and there is no immediate and compelling reason for thinking that Toderini's version represents one extreme of a stylistic range that also encompassed a much faster and melodically stripped-down option.²⁷ Unfortunately, nothing is known about who Toderini learned this composition from or, perhaps more important, how and in what social context, although the process doubtless took place during the years that he spent in Constantinople, 1781-86, as a member of the entourage of the Venetian ambassador.²⁸ Accordingly, it may not be possible to assess his *Concerto* for the accuracy with which it reflects performance norms, but it is certainly impressively precise, particularly in its recording of grace notes, and, apart from the 3 + 3 time units of *yürük semai* being rendered by three measures of 2/4, seemingly convincing. That it might include extra embellishments added by Toderini himself and designed to domesticate it further may be discounted, but the possibility cannot be excluded that it reproduces not the style encountered during the Mevlevi ceremony but a more ornate style associated with the performance norms favoured in a different milieu.

Whatever the interpretation, juxtaposition of Toderini's *Concerto* to its modern counterpart reveals quite clearly both the coincidence of the melodic outline and the greater degree of melodic complexity it captures. The increase in the pitch-change rate, from 0.66 to 1.66, may imply a more relaxed tempo – especially given Toderini's initial *andantino* marking – thus running counter to the suggestion elsewhere of a subsequent trend towards deceleration. Yet against such speculation may be urged that there is no slower feel to Abdülbaki's contemporary notations of the vocal sections in *yürük*

26 Even more pronounced is the contrast in melodic density with the *yürük semai* vocal setting of *Ey ki hezar aferin* in the third *selâm*.

27 A case for the coexistence of faster and slower (and more embellished) performance styles is, however, made in Olley 2018, and it is certainly tempting to view the characteristics of Toderini's notation not merely as according with but also as explained by this interpretation.

28 On Toderini see De Zorzi 2013 and 2018, in which the composition is reproduced.

semai, for which we may cite in illustration the beginning of the setting of *Ey ki hezar aferin*, with its much lower pitch-change rate:

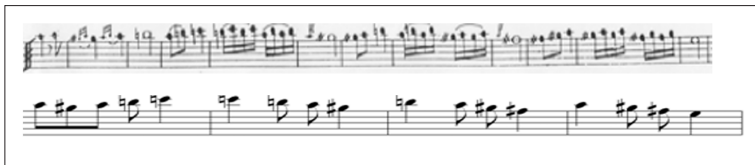


Not surprisingly, the nature of the relationship between the beginnings of Toderini's version and its modern counterpart continues unchanged for much of the remainder of the piece, as can be seen from the beginnings, shown in exs. 22 and 23, of the passages that move into higher registers, the first centred on $f\sharp$ and e :



Example 22

and the second initially on the $g\sharp$ to c' area and then descending sequentially through the *hicaz* tetrachord to e :



Example 23

However, the modern version is not tied as closely to Toderini's in other respects: the pattern of internal repetition differs somewhat and, more importantly, the first part of his final section, marked *adagio* leading to *primo tempo* and including a modulation, fails to survive. Yet if this is a clear indication of change over time, it is not to be denied that the contrasts in the remainder of the composition do not accord with the developmental model that can be inferred from comparing Abdlbaki's (and Stadler's) notations with their modern

equivalents: rather than indicating a trend towards increasing melodic density (possibly combined with deceleration), Toderini's score has a markedly denser melodic texture than the modern one, and even if it is possible that the twentieth-century guardians of the repertoire pursued a policy of virtuous restraint, providing a deliberately pared-down notation that would correspond to, or even encourage, a fast tempo for the *yürük semai*, the record provided by Toderini makes it clear that the melodically simpler to more complex model is not always valid: earlier realizations of sections in this rhythmic cycle at least were not necessarily always barer in their melodic outlines than later ones and characterized by brisker tempi.

This may raise yet further questions about the relationship between Stadler's notations and the performance norms of the time, yet without casting serious doubt upon their historical significance. In memorizing and transmitting parts of the complex and large-scale Mevlevi repertoire, von Hussard may have omitted extensive blocks of material, and he may have simplified melodically complex passages; and he and/or Stadler may have failed to capture certain characteristic nuances as well as structural features, resulting in reduction and, more broadly, in a certainly incomplete and in some respects out-of-focus representation. Nevertheless, what they have preserved between them is still, it may be argued, something much closer than has been supposed to the melodic texture of the Mevlevi *ayin* as we may imagine it performed c1800. Whether or not the resulting scores are to be understood and critiqued as harbingers of Orientalist appropriation, a possible but perhaps not particularly rewarding approach, they remain historical documents of considerable interest; and even if they are no more than an imprecise approximation, it may be argued with some confidence that it is one that still provides a less blurred picture than they have hitherto been given credit for. They constitute, therefore, a useful as well as interesting addition to the rather sparse historical documentation out of which the pre-modern history of the Ottoman vocal repertoire must be teased.

9 Afterword

Given the dour, plodding nature of the preceding section-by-section survey, a rather lighter note might be permitted in bringing matters to a conclusion. If it is accepted that the melodic texture of modern editions is likely to be at some remove from that of the performances von Hussard was fortunate enough to hear, one might reasonably conclude that the results of his and Stadler's collaboration have the potential to bring us somewhat closer to the stylistic norms of the beginning of the nineteenth century. One can certainly concur with Turkish scholars that they cannot be accepted as faithful

transcriptions of the Mevlevi repertoire as performed in the twentieth century, but that is beside the point: the crucial question to ask is how far removed they are from the style world of the source performances; and, depending on the answer, one might wonder whether, through a judicious revision of Stadler's notations, it might be possible to arrive at a yet closer approximation to them.

To stay with the *ayin* in *hicaz*, adjustments to the representation of the pitch set can readily be made to provide a better correspondence to Ottoman intonational norms of the period, and the indications of duration can likewise be modified to provide a more accurate representation of the rhythmic cycles as defined by Abdülbaki. Beyond that, however, there remains the crucial question of the nature of the stylistic gap between the realization of an *ayin* at the turn of the nineteenth century and how it was to be performed a century and more later. For the latter we have the comprehensive documentation of the *Mevlevi ayinler* notations, but despite there being no comparable earlier notation of the various *ayins* included in Stadler's publication we at least have a reliable witness to the Mevlevi style world of the end of the eighteenth century in Abdülbaki's notation of the *ayin* in *suzidilara* by Sultan Selim III. This therefore provides a crucial term of reference against which Stadler's notations, and any tampering with them, can be assessed.

The excerpts examined most closely in the above survey are the ten sections that correspond to the four *selâms* of the *ayin* in *hicaz*, and the following proposes a revision, necessarily tentative, of Stadler's version of just the first *selâm* of this *ayin*, designed to bring it closer to what might be conjectured to have been the performance norms with which von Hussard was familiar. Some of the changes, notably those concerning intonation, are unproblematic, indeed automatic, and hardly less so are the adjustments to duration. The principal aspect for which difficult and sometimes arbitrary editorial decisions need to be made concerns the melodic contour, most obviously in those stretches where the two are far apart. In some cases, adjustments have been proposed to reduce the gap, while for others, as discussed above, the conclusion must be that they represent separate and unrelated lines of transmission, and so no attempt has been made to coax Stadler's version of them in the direction of the current understanding of the repertoire.

The result does not pretend to be, and is certainly not to be taken seriously as, an accurate recreation of the melodic skeleton of part of a Mevlevi *ayin* as known at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it may be thought to provide a semblance, one that affords some insight into the nature of the gap between performance realization then and now and hence into the way the inherited repertoire continued to evolve before becoming immobilized as part of a classical canon enshrined in authoritative twentieth-century editions.

Transposed from g to a, the revision of Stadler's score is placed beneath the current version. The distribution of the text is largely coincident.

MEN ŞA HI BA ZI KUD SEM EZ LÂ ME KÂN RE SÎ

DE HEY Yİ YAR HEY Yİ DOST CA Nİ MEN CA

NA Nİ MEN BEH Rİ Şİ KÂ Rİ SAY DÎ DE Rİ KA LE

BA RE MÎ DE HEY Yİ YAR HEY Yİ DOST

CA Nİ MEN CA NA Nİ MEN SÎ MÖR Gİ KA Fİ KUR BEM

Cycle 11

EZ DA MI KEV Nİ CES TE HEY Yİ YAR

HEY Yİ DOST CA Nİ MEN CA NA Nİ MEN TA VU SÎ

BA ĞI AR ŞEM EZ A Şİ YAN PE Rİ DE

HEY Yİ YAR HEY Yİ DOST CA Nİ MEN CA NA Nİ MEN

After a further nine cycles in the modern version for which Stadler has no equivalent, we arrive at:

Cycle 28

A TEŞ NE ZE NED
KÜ TEH NE KÜ NED

DER Dİ Lİ MA İL LÂ HU
DER Dİ Lİ MA İL LÂ HU

HU HU HU

Cycle 33



There follow unrelated settings of *Ger alemiyan cümle tabiban başend*, over three cycles in the modern version and just over three 3/4 measures in Stadler's version, followed by a repeat of four cycles of earlier material, after which there is a very brief convergence:



followed by 15 cycles that repeat previous matter before a brief further passage of related material (which in Stadler's version is now a sixth lower):



However, the resemblance already fades towards the end of the second cycle, and there follow three cycles of repeated material before the onset of a similarly related passage:



after which, once more, the resemblance soon diminishes, although the versions converge again in the final repetition of cycles 33 and 34 that brings the first *selâm* to a close.

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Single-Sheet Engravings Depicting the Tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Early Modern Europe

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Abstract This article examines single-sheet engravings depicting the life and tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator printed in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Focusing on seven examples, it traces the formation and dissemination of a stable iconographic model through European workshops, Catholic missionary networks, patrons, and multilingual inscriptions. It also shows how later Armenian editions selectively adapted this model to emphasize the Christianization of Armenia, illuminating cross-cultural exchange between European print culture and Armenian Christian traditions.

Keywords Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Early modern Europe. European print culture. Armenian-European artistic exchange. Devotional prints. Confessional imagery. Catholic missions. Hagiographical iconography. Cross-cultural visual exchange. Armenian diaspora.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Earliest Known Single-Sheet Engraving Representing the Tortures of Gregory the Illuminator. – 3 The ‘Armenianization’ of the Engraving Cycle Depicting the Tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. – 4 The 1714 Engraving Commissioned by the Armenian Catholic Missionary Oxendio Virziresco and Its Confessional Context. – 5 The 1731 Engraving Commissioned by Hakob, Son of Mahtesi Hovhannes of Erzurum: Iconographic and Stylistic Developments. – 6 Later Engravings and the Iconographic Impact of the Single-Sheet Tradition on Other Media. – 7 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

Beyond the borders of Armenia, among various works of art, Saint Gregory the Illuminator is by far the most frequently depicted saint of the Armenian Church. This prevalence is conditioned by two fundamental factors. First, Gregory the Illuminator is the first Patriarch of the Armenian people and stands at the very origins of the Christianization of Armenia. Second, he is the only pan-Christian saint of the Armenian Church, whose feast is celebrated by both the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches (*Kristonya Hayastan. Hanragitaran* 2002, 222).

The widespread veneration of the Illuminator among Armenian communities that had distanced themselves from the Apostolic confession has its own national-psychological explanation. Armenian Chalcedonians, though ecclesiastically separated from their compatriots, continued to rely on their national origins through the figure of Gregory the Illuminator, emphasizing that, despite their adherence to the Orthodox creed, they remained heirs of so great an Armenian. Likewise, Catholic Armenians, who in ecclesiastical matters stood in opposition to their compatriots, expressed their consciousness of national belonging by referring to Saint Gregory as their ‘father in faith’ (Devrikyan 2016, 242-3).

On these grounds, between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, both Armenians and Europeans uninterruptedly published single-sheet engravings depicting the life and martyrdom of Gregory the Illuminator.¹ These works – poster-like, relatively large-format images printed on paper and occasionally on parchment – were often hand-colored and displayed on the walls of homes as well as of churches.

With the exception of the first engraving, the central scene in the remaining six compositions depicts the Baptism of the Armenian royal family – considered the most sacred and significant act attributed to Saint Gregory – while the surrounding frame contains medallions illustrating the saint’s twelve tortures together with several additional scenes from his life. In the first engraving, the central position is occupied by the reception of Pope Sylvester.

To date, these single-sheet engravings have not yet received rigorous scholarly attention and no systematic or comprehensive

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1 The iconographic type of so-called ‘hagiographical icons’ originated in Byzantium at the beginning of the thirteenth century (Popova 2002, 69). Typically, the most significant event associated with the saint was depicted at the center, while other episodes from the saint’s life were arranged around it within a surrounding frame.

study has been devoted to them. Owing to their practical use, they were naturally worn, damaged, or lost over time; moreover, they were never preserved in a single repository, which rendered an holistic approach to the study of this material particularly challenging. It took us nearly four years to locate these seven prints across various Armenian cultural centers and private collections both in Armenia and abroad.

In this vein, the aim of this article is to clarify what are the reasons for iconographic and stylistic variations in the single-sheet engravings that we identified, by applying historical-comparative analysis to critical art-historical inquiry. Moreover, we intend to demonstrate how their iconography eventually acquired a canonical form that served as model for the creation of successive artifacts related to the figure of the Saint.

2 The Earliest Known Single-Sheet Engraving Representing the Tortures of Gregory the Illuminator

Single-sheet woodcut engravings depicting saints and martyrs are known from as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century, produced primarily in monastic settings by monks (Linton 1884, 11, 14). These autonomous prints, illustrating scenes from the Life of Christ and the lives of the saints, functioned as instruments of religious instruction for those who were unable to read, as well as for literate individuals who were unable to purchase expensive manuscripts. Consequently, these widely disseminated prints – often issued in multiple copies and frequently accompanied by prayers or brief hagiographical texts – conveyed the core teachings of Christian doctrine and the exemplary lives of male and female saints through a visual language (Linton 1884, 11).

The earliest single-sheet engraving known to us depicting the tortures of Gregory the Illuminator (paper size with border approximately 60 × 35 cm) was created by the renowned Italian engraver Luca Ciamberlano, commissioned by the nuns of the Monastery of San Gregorio Armeno (Saint Gregory the Armenian) in Naples [fig. 1]. Indeed, these nuns played a significant role in shaping and disseminating the visual representation and cult of the Armenian Patriarch within the Italian cultural milieu.

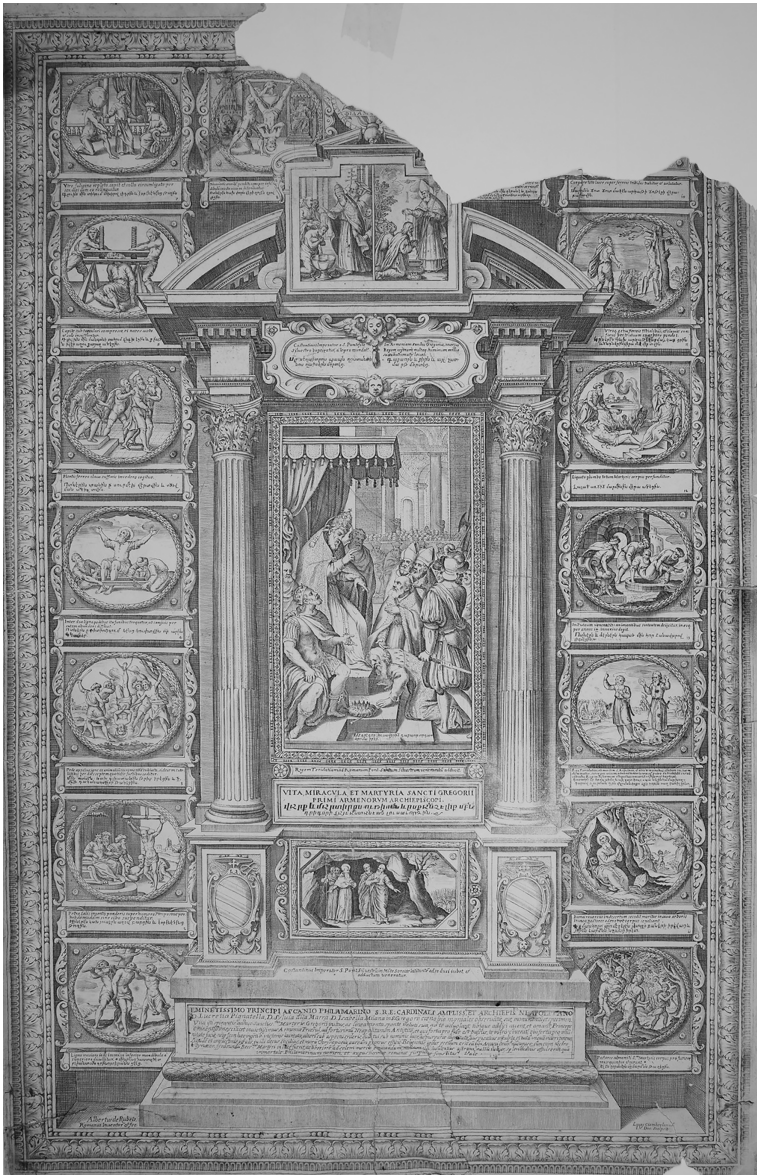


Figure 1 Luca Ciamberlano, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1641. Engraving on paper, approx. 60 × 35 cm. Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation. Commissioned by the nuns of the Monastery of San Gregorio Armeno in Naples. Photo by Father Hamazasp Vardapet Keshishian, © Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice

This engraving has remained outside scholarly circulation until very recently. We encountered it in the collection of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice.²

According to the signature in the lower right corner, the work is by the renowned Baroque-period Italian engraver and painter Luca Ciamberlano (Lucas Ciamberlanus). The precise year of Ciamberlano's birth is unknown; he was very likely born in the 1580s in Urbino, Italy. His earliest known work dates from 1599. From that point onward, he lived and worked primarily in Rome, where he eventually died in 1641 (Nagler, Andresen, Clauss 1871, 274). Consequently, it is evident that the engraving under consideration must have been executed before that date, though its exact year of creation is not specified on the print itself.

During the first decade of his artistic career, Ciamberlano devoted himself primarily to producing engraved reproductions after celebrated Italian masters – including Raffaello Sanzio, Federico Barocci, Annibale Carracci – as well as after his own paintings (Brockhaus, Efron 1903, 70). Until roughly 1620, he continued to refine his mastery of human anatomical proportions in engraving (Merz 2008, 7). His command of these skills is clearly manifested in the image under discussion.

In the first two lines of the inscription at the top of the engraving, there is a reference to the Archbishop of Naples, Cardinal Ascanio Filomarino:

EMINETISSIMO PRINCIPI ASCANIO PHILAMARINO S.R.E.
CARDINALI AMPLISS., ET ARCHIEPISPO NEAPOLITANO. D.
Lucretia Pignatella, D. Sylvia dlla Marra, D. Isabella Milana
in S. Gregorii cenobio moniales obseruatie sue monument, et
specimen.

To the most eminent Prince Ascanio Filomarino, illustrious
Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church and Archbishop of Naples. The
nuns of the Monastery of Saint Gregory – D. Lucretia Pignatella,
D. Sylvia della Marra, and D. Isabella Milana – offer this work as
a testament and demonstration of their devotion.³

The remainder of the inscription expresses the nuns' reverence for the cardinal and glorifies Saint Gregory, whom they describe as a living martyr who bravely endured tortures for the sake of the faith.

2 We express our sincere gratitude to Father Hamazasp Vardapet Keshishian of the Mekhitarist Congregation in Venice for his kind support.

3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Authors.

Ascanio Filomarino, originally from Naples, later moved to Rome, where he served as tutor to the young nephew of Pope Urban VIII (Moroni 1840, 303-4). In 1641 he was consecrated both cardinal and Archbishop of Naples. Like other members of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, he undertook active missionary efforts among non-Catholic populations – including Armenians – to advance the spread of Roman Catholic doctrine (Moroni 1840, 303-4).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Vatican began to show increasing interest in the peoples of the East, including the Armenians, with the aim of extending the influence of the Catholic confession across the Eastern Christian world. To this end, in 1622 Pope Gregory XV established, within the Vatican, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*), whose mission was to disseminate the Roman confession among all non-Catholic nations – among them the Eastern Christians – who, in the eyes of the Roman Church, were regarded as schismatic in a manner comparable to the Protestants (Ishkhanyan 1977, 327; Heyberger 2025, 49).

With regard to the Monastery of Saint Gregory mentioned in the inscription, tradition holds that the skull of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, preserved in Constantinople along with several other relics, was taken to the Italian port city of Naples at the end of the eighth century (Ashchyan 2000, 106), during the period of Iconoclasm, by a group of nuns. There, they deposited the relics in an already existing monastic community (Devrikyan 2016, 258-66). In the sixteenth century, the monastery's small medieval chapel was replaced by an elegant Baroque church (Spinosa, Pinto, Valerio 2013, 112), which not only survives to this day but also remains active (Devrikyan 2024b, 54-77).

Thus, the single-sheet ceremonial print discussed here appears to have been offered as a gift from the nuns of the monastery to the newly appointed Archbishop-Cardinal of Naples. It is worth noting that Filomarino enjoyed great respect and affection among the monastic communities of Naples, for he frequently found himself in conflict with secular authorities in his efforts to defend the privileges of the Church and the clergy (Spinosa, Pinto, Valerio 2013, 23).

Since, as noted above, Filomarino was consecrated Archbishop in 1641, and the engraver Luca Ciamberlano also died in the same year, it is reasonable to conclude that the engraving was produced in 1641.

The engraving is executed in highly ornate and elaborate Baroque style. The arches, columns, capitals, and pilasters evocative of Greco-Roman temples, together with the ornamental frames enriched with vegetal and geometric motifs, lend the engraving a monumental and celebratory character.

The individual scenes within the composition bear inscriptions in both Latin and Armenian, each enclosed within its own frame. The Armenian letters appear to be written with an unsteady and

unpracticed hand. It is evident that the engraver was unfamiliar with the language and merely copied the characters provided to him. The mistakes and irregularities within the Armenian words further suggest that the author – or authors – of these inscriptions did not possess a firm command of the language.

For this reason, we may hypothesize that the inscriptions were composed by the nuns of the Monastery of Saint Gregory themselves. It is well known that throughout the Middle Ages many Armenians made pilgrimages to this monastery in veneration of the Armenian Patriarch (Bonucci 1717, 134-5), and through their interaction with these visitors, the nuns likely acquired a conversational knowledge of Armenian. At the same time, however, their knowledge of the language does not appear to have been sufficiently deep or systematic to prevent the elementary spelling errors displayed in the inscriptions.

At the center of the engraving, within an ornamental frame, we read the solemn inscription:

VITA, MIRACVLA, ET MARTYRIA SANCTI GREGORII PRIMI
ARMENORVM ARCHIEPISCOPI.

Beneath it, in Armenian:

Վարք և մարտիրոսութիուն և ըսքանչելիք սրն. Գրիգորի
Հայեաստանեաց Լուսաւորչին.

The Life, Miracles, and Martyrdom of Saint Gregory the Illuminator
of Armenia.

Other inscriptions identify King Tiridates of Armenia, Gregory the Illuminator, Emperor Constantine, and Pope Sylvester.

Of particular interest is the central scene, where the inscription inside the frame reads:

Սբ. Գրեգոր Լուսավորիճ դաքսոր Տրդատ Հրոմա ի քեր.

Saint Gregory the Illuminator brought King Tiridates to Rome.

The narrative of these four historical figures meeting in Rome derives from the apocryphal document known as the *Dašanc' t'ult'* (The Letter of Love and Concord), a non-authentic text intended to symbolize the unity between the Armenian and the Catholic Churches (Poghossian 2010). According to this source, King Tiridates III and Gregory the Illuminator traveled to Rome, where they were received with great honor by Emperor Constantine and Pope Sylvester (Devrikyan 2024a, 135-49).

The document recounts that, upon hearing of Constantine's conversion, Tiridates III set out for Rome with Saint Gregory and a large retinue, seeking an audience with both Constantine and Pope Sylvester. In Rome, the monarchs and pontiffs of the two nations forged a covenant of love and brotherhood; Tiridates received lavish honors from the emperor, and Gregory, too, was venerated as a living martyr (Bartikyan 2004, 65-116).

This tradition was periodically revived – not only by Armenians, in difficult political circumstances when assistance from Rome was sought, but also by the papacy, which sought thereby to extend its authority in the East (Shirinyan 2006, 57). Thus, as noted, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when Rome renewed its efforts to bring Armenians into communion with the Catholic Church, the *Dašanc' t'utt'* once again acquired contemporary relevance (Hovhannisyan 1957, 74).

In the central scene of the engraving, Pope Sylvester, dressed in ornate vestments, is shown enthroned on the papal seat. To his right stands Constantine in imperial attire, wearing the cloak and crown characteristic of Roman emperors, while Saint Gregory, dressed in patriarchal garments, stands to his left. Tiridates is depicted kneeling before Constantine, who raises his hand in a gesture of blessing, while the Armenian king's crown and scepter lie on the ground nearby.

In a number of Armenian artworks depicting the Conversion of Armenia, Tiridates' crown is shown lying on the ground as a symbol of humility and the unconditional acceptance of the new faith. In this engraving, the royal crown and scepter are likewise placed on the ground; however, their placement at the feet of Constantine visually suggests that the symbols of Armenian sovereignty are subordinated to imperial authority. This was likely an intentional artistic decision intended to emphasize the supremacy of Rome for the viewer.

Below this scene is a medallion inscribed:

Costantinus Imperator S. Pont. Siluestru in Mote Soracte latitante
ad se duei iubet, et adductum ueneratur.

Emperor Constantine orders that Pope Sylvester – who was hiding on Mount Soracte – be brought to him, and venerates him when he arrives.

Here, the engraving represents the tradition according to which Saint Sylvester withdrew to Mount Soracte; meanwhile, Constantine, afflicted with a grave illness as punishment for his earlier cruelty toward Christians, sent messengers to summon the saint (Benham 1900, 69). The print depicts Pope Sylvester with the

imperial envoy, while another figure gestures toward the distant army escorting them.

Above the central composition is a decorative bipartite cartouche. The first section reads:

Սբ. Սեդակաորոս պապն Ղուստանսինոս զախսերն մկրտեց.

Saint Sylvester the Pope baptized Emperor Constantine.

The second states:

Դաքաորն և քիրն և այլ շատ մարթ մկրտեց.

[He] baptized the king, his sister and many other people.

Agathangelos (fifth-century Armenian historian) describes the miraculous column of light that descended during the baptism: “A wondrous miracle appeared from God, for the waters of the river stood still and turned back” (Thomson 1976, 367).

The cycle of tortures begins in the lower left corner. Each scene is accompanied by Latin and Armenian captions describing the specific torture, and these inscriptions correspond closely to the details transmitted by Agathangelos concerning the sufferings of the Illuminator. The Armenian captions, however, contain numerous errors and irregularities.

Agathangelos describes the first torture as follows: “He had his hands bound behind him, and a muzzle put in his mouth; and he had a block of salt hung on his back and a noose placed round his chest, and cords put round and tightened on him”.⁴ This torture is represented in two separate scenes. In the first, two attendants tighten a gag before Gregory, who is tied to a tree; in the second, he is shown suspended from a beam with a heavy sack of salt on his back, while the attendants struggle to lift and add two more sacks.

The remaining torments follow Agathangelos’s account with striking fidelity.

The second torture – “He was hung up-side down from one foot and beaten while dung was burnt beneath him” – depicts four robust attendants striking Gregory, whose head hangs near rising smoke and ash.

The third – “Blocks of wood were tightened around his legs” – shows the Illuminator with arms outstretched in prayer, while one attendant looks on in astonishment at his endurance.

⁴ All descriptions of the tortures are taken from Thomson 1976, 79-131.

The fourth – “Nails were driven through his feet and he was made to run” – illustrates two servants pushing Gregory forward, with Tiridates appearing in several of these scenes.

The fifth torture – “He was buffeted on the head” – depicts the saint constrained between wooden beams, his head unnaturally bent.

As noted earlier, Ciamberlano had mastered the rendering of accurate and harmonious human proportions; even in these small medallions the figures are muscular, balanced, and elegantly composed.

The sixth torture – “Salt, borax and vinegar were poured down his nose” – is omitted, likely to avoid exceeding the traditional number of twelve scenes, since the first torment had already been represented in two parts.

The seventh – “A bag of cinders was fixed over his head” – shows Gregory kneeling before the king, the large sack tied around his head.

The eighth – “He was held upside down while water was poured into his bottom” – is depicted according to the inscription.

Because the engraving is slightly torn at the top, the ninth torture (“He was torn with iron scrapers”) and the tenth (“He was rolled on iron thistles”) are now missing, though they were almost certainly included originally, corresponding to the captions.

The eleventh – “He was suspended with iron leggings on his knees and was struck with hammers” – shows Gregory hanging from a tree with iron attachments affixed to his legs.

Perhaps the most somber is the twelfth torture, described as “Molten lead was poured over his body”. In the medallion, a cauldron is placed over flames, and an attendant pours its contents over the saint while the astonished king looks on.

In the next scene, Gregory’s battered body is cast into the pit in the presence of Tiridates.

Another medallion unites two temporally distinct episodes: in the distance, a crowd is seen raising Gregory from the pit of Khor Virap; in the foreground, the saint stands before the swine-transformed Tiridates, gesturing toward heaven, as if indicating that the king’s affliction is a divine chastisement.

The final two medallions depict Gregory’s withdrawal to the cave of Manē on Mount Sepuh and his death. According to tradition, Gregory spent his last years in solitary asceticism. Movsēs Xorenac’i (fifth-century Armenian historian) recounts:

Saint Gregory lived in seclusion in the Cave of Mane for many years and on his death was transposed to the ranks of the angels. Shepherds found him dead and buried him in the same place without knowing who he was. (Thomson 1978, 249)

Another tradition relates that the shepherds, guided by divine will, found him seated as if alive, facing the East with his right hand raised in benediction. In the medallion, the heavenly Father appears from an opening in the clouds, directing the shepherds toward Gregory (Akinyan 1950, 15). The next scene reads: “The shepherds took the holy body and buried it”. The skull depicted in the ascetic’s cave suggests the saint’s soul has already passed into the heavenly realm and may have been included at the request of the nuns, alluding to the relic of the Illuminator preserved in their monastery.

The captions accompanying the medallions clearly demonstrate that the Italian engraver was familiar with Agathangelos’s *History* or with some hagiographical source recounting the life of Saint Gregory, for he adhered with remarkable precision to the narrative.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Gregory’s tortures shows evident parallels with depictions of the torments of other European martyrs, such as Saint Sebastian, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Saint Erasmus of Formia, and Saint Lawrence. It is reasonable to conclude that Ciamberlano drew upon established European iconographic models in shaping his cycle of Gregory’s tortures.

Thus, this engraving is the earliest datable example known to us and, as will be seen, its composition and iconography became the foundational model for subsequent single-sheet engravings representing the tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator.

3 The ‘Armenianization’ of the Engraving Cycle Depicting the Tortures of Saint Gregory the Illuminator

Chronologically, the next engraving known to us was printed in Venice in 1692 [fig. 2]. Information about this print comes from the volume *Hay girk’ə 1512-1800 t’vakannerin* (The Armenian Book in the Years 1512-1800) (Voskanyan, Korkotyan, Savalyan 1988). The Armenian-American collector Haroutun Kyurtian (1901-1976), having owned this engraving in his private collection (Ter-Vardanyan 2012, 70-117), sent its description to the editors in Yerevan; however, for a long time we were unable to locate the engraving itself.

Kyurtian’s testimony indicates that the composition followed the European artistic manner, while the Armenian inscriptions suggest a later adaptation or contextualization of the print for Armenian devotional use.



Figure 2 Unknown European engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1692. Engraving on paper. Armenia, private collection. Commissioned by the members of the Confraternity of Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Venice. Photo by Lusine Sargsyan

Lacking access to Haroution Kyurtian's collection, we searched for another copy of this engraving for nearly three years in numerous Armenian cultural centers: the Mekhitarist Congregations of Venice and Vienna, the archives of the Monastery of San Gregorio Armeno

in Naples, the libraries of the Armenian dioceses of Romania, Iran, and Lebanon, the Manuscript Library of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, various private collections, and digital repositories. Eventually, a copy was located in Armenia, preserved in a family collection.⁵ The lower half of the engraving had been attached to an Armenian manuscript as a protective cover.

Unfortunately, only one quarter of the engraving survives. Four of the medallions depicting the tortures are fully preserved, two appear partially, and three lines of the inscription survive only in half. The lower portion of the central medallion is also visible. Even this fragment, however, when compared with the earlier engraving, reveals that the cycle of tortures was reproduced almost exactly – yet with one essential modification. Whereas the central scene of the previous engraving depicted the meeting of Pope Sylvester and Emperor Constantine with Saint Gregory and Tiridates, here the central image represents the Conversion of Armenia – the baptism of the royal family by Gregory the Illuminator.

It is also clear that the decorative frame and some other ornamental elements differ from the prototype. A tendency toward iconographic stability combined with variations in decorative design is observable in other engravings of the cycle as well.

The inscription on the print reads in Italian:

SCUOLA DI S. GREGORIO LUMINATTOR DELLA NAZION
ARMENA 1692.

Below, an Armenian text states that the engraving was printed in honor of the Armenian Church of the Holy Cross in Venice, invoking Gregory the Illuminator's blessing and protection for Armenian merchants (Voskanyan, Korkotyan, Savalyan 1988, 786). The text further informs that the engraving was commissioned by representatives of the Armenian confraternity dedicated to Saint Gregory the Illuminator in Venice, and was likely offered as a gift to the Church of the Holy Cross – perhaps on the occasion of its renovation or reopening.

The Church of the Holy Cross is one of the oldest Armenian churches in Europe. For the sizable Armenian colony in Venice, the nobleman and doge Marco Ziani established a monastic residence in the mid-thirteenth century (Zekiyan 1978, 886-7). A chapel was erected there in 1434, and in 1688 the noble merchant Guerak Mirmān (Mirmanyan) received the permission to enlarge it and transform it into a full church, which subsequently became an important

5 The photograph of the engraving was kindly provided by art historian Lusine Sargsyan, to whom we express our sincere gratitude.

institution for the community (Lusso 2013, 64-5). The church has three altars and a small side chapel. The main altar is dedicated to the Discovery of the Holy Cross; the right altar to the Dormition of the Mother of God; and the left to Saint Gregory the Illuminator.

In the altar dedicated to the Armenian Patriarch, there is a painting depicting once again the tortures of Saint Gregory and the baptism of Tiridates III. According to its inscription, it was accomplished in 1714 [fig. 3]. Here, too, the tortures follow the same iconographic pattern, though the central scene, executed in a fully Baroque style, differs noticeably from our engravings: the figures are more dynamic and display more complex poses.



Figure 3
Painting of the Altar of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1714. Venice, Church of the Holy Cross (Santa Croce). © Church of the Holy Cross (Santa Croce), Venice

4 **The 1714 Engraving Commissioned by the Armenian Catholic Missionary Oxendio Virziresco and Its Confessional Context**

The next engraving known to us that follows this iconographic type (paper size with border: 58.5 × 48 cm) is dated 1714 and was commissioned by the Armenian Catholic missionary of Transylvania, Oxendio Vrzaryan (Virziresco) (1654-1715) [fig. 4]. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, Virziresco had undertaken efforts to convert the Armenians of Transylvania to Catholicism,⁶ efforts that were met with strong resistance from the local Armenian population (Nagy 2019, 101-21; Kovács, Pál 2013, 17-26).



Figure 4
Unknown engraver, scenes
from the Life of Saint
Gregory the Illuminator.
1714. Engraving on paper,
58.5 × 48 cm. Budapest,
Armenian Catholic Parish.
Commissioned by Oxendio
Virziresco (Vrzaryan).
© Armenian Catholic Parish,
Budapest

6 Oxendio's missionary activity continued the Catholic union movement previously initiated among the Armenians of Lemberg under Archbishop Nikol Torosowicz (1603-1681) (Kovács, Pál 2013, 19; Ouzounian, Stopka 2025, 68).

The papacy made strategic use of the idea that the Armenian Church ought to return to the ecclesial unity that had supposedly existed in the time of Pope Sylvester I and Gregory the Illuminator (Kovács, Pál 2013, 20). Within this ideological framework, Virziresco's commission of an engraving depicting Saint Gregory was logical: on the one hand, it emphasized that his actions did not signify a break with the Armenian Church and appealed to Armenian national sentiments; on the other hand, it underscored that, in seeking union with the Roman Church, he was continuing the mission of Saint Gregory himself (Devrikyan 2016, 272).

After decades of unsuccessful attempts, Virziresco departed for Vienna in the summer of 1712 to attend to property matters concerning the Armenian-populated city of Armenopolis (Gherla) (Kovács, Pál 2013, 25). There, in 1714, he published a single-sheet engraving reproducing exactly the iconography and composition of the previously discussed 1692 print. Thanks to this engraving, we are able to reconstruct the complete appearance of the earlier Venetian print: even the smallest visual details of the Venetian engraving are copied faithfully in the Viennese version.

The central scene once again presents the Conversion of Armenia, and the cycle of tortures follows the same order as before. Unlike the earlier version, however, here the medallions include both Latin and Armenian explanatory inscriptions. Moreover, the lower part of the print contains a ten-line Latin inscription summarizing the life of the Illuminator. It recounts that Saint Gregory, born into the Parthian royal line of the Arsacids and son of Anak, was saved from danger in his youth by a Christian nurse and brought to the Roman Empire, where he was baptized and educated in the Christian faith. Remaining steadfast in confession and preaching, he endured severe trials and sufferings under King Tiridates III – depicted in the engraving. Rescued by divine intervention, he ultimately converted the same king and, by the power of God, enlightened both Greater and Lesser Armenia with the light of faith, for which he is called the Illuminator of the Armenians.

The next part of the inscription, written first in Armenian and then transliterated into Latin script, refers to the *Dašanc' t'ult'*, stating that Gregory traveled with the Armenian king to Rome to meet Pope Sylvester I and the newly converted Emperor Constantine the Great. There, he confirmed ecclesiastical orders pertaining to himself and then returned to Armenia.

The inscription concludes by stating that Gregory baptized many people, performed miracles, and ordained bishops, for which reason

the Greeks called him Gregoros.⁷ He served thirty years on the patriarchal throne; then, in old age, leaving the catholicos see to his son, he withdrew to the cave of Manē on Mount Sepuh.

Below the Latin inscription appear the initials of Virziresco and the date of publication.

The engraving is executed with considerable artistic skill and refinement. While its iconographic scheme replicates the earlier examples, its stylistic features are distinct.

In the central medallion, we see several of the details mentioned in the inscription. Gregory the Illuminator, depicted in full patriarchal vestments and holding a cross-topped staff, appears comparatively large and occupies the central position in the composition.

Unlike the previous prints, the faces of Saint Gregory and King Tiridates here are individualized, with delicate features. Their expressions reflect Christian humility and unquestioning acceptance. This representation of the baptism of the Armenian royal family is borrowed from one of the two medallions above the central scene in Luca Ciamberlano's engraving, previously discussed in the first part of this article.

In the background of the composition, the Illuminator is also shown withdrawn in ascetic solitude within the cave of Manē. Above, a column of light appears, suffused with the radiant beams of the Holy Spirit, depicted in the form of a dove.

A comparison of this engraving with the preceding examples discussed in this article reveals that the scenes of the tortures repeat precisely those of Luca Ciamberlano's engraving. We may therefore conclude that the Italian master succeeded in devising an iconographic cycle that so accurately expressed the Life of the Illuminator that it was accepted, cherished, and ultimately canonized as the standard model for numerous subsequent representations of Saint Gregory.

7 The Greek equivalent of the name 'Gregory' derives from the verb *grēgoreō* (γρηγορέω), meaning 'to be awake' or 'to keep watch'.

5 **The 1731 Engraving Commissioned by Hakob, Son of Mahtesi Hovhannes of Erzurum: Iconographic and Stylistic Developments**

The artistic pinnacle of the single-sheet engravings under examination is the print published in Vienna in 1731 by Hakob, son of Mahtesi⁸ Hovhannes, an Armenian notable from Erzurum (paper size with border: 72 × 48.5 cm) [fig. 5] (Gharibyan, Yenokyan 2016, 114). Among all the works studied, it is the one that presents the greatest number of hagiographical details. The central scene and the cycle of tortures once again follow the established models; however, in accordance with medieval artistic convention, the background of the image juxtaposes several events from different periods on a single compositional plane. All medallions bear concise Latin inscriptions and more extensive Armenian explanatory captions.

In the upper-left corner of the central composition appears the martyrdom of the virgins Hrip'simē, Gayianē and their companions (generally called 'Hrip'simian Virgins') at the winepress of Vałaršapat. The young virgins, interwoven with green vine branches, undergo martyrdom by the order of the King. This striking collective martyrdom scene is, to our knowledge, the earliest known depiction of this subject in an artwork of this type.

Three churches are shown in the engraving; according to the inscriptions, the largest represents the Mother Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, while the other two correspond to the churches of Saint Hripsimē and Saint Gayianē. It should be noted that, like the creators of the earlier prints, the engraver – apparently European – was not familiar with Armenian ecclesiastical architecture and thus depicted the churches as European-style rotundas and basilicas.

On the right, the baptism of the Armenian people in the River Arac'ani by Gregory the Illuminator is shown. Those already in the water are unclothed, while their garments lie at the feet of those waiting their turn on the riverbank.

Another scene depicts Saint Gregory in ascetic retreat within the cave on Mount Sepuh, kneeling in prayer before a wooden cross.

⁸ *Mahtesi* refers to an Armenian Christian who has made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and prayed at the Holy Sepulchre. The title literally implies someone who has 'seen the holy places' and completed a sacred journey.



Figure 5 Unknown engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1731. Engraving on paper, 72 × 48.5 cm. Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation. Commissioned by Hakob, son of Mahtesi Hovhannes of Erzurum. © Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice

A novel element in this cycle is the inclusion of the episode in which Patriarch Hakob of Nisibis (Mc'binec'i) receives a relic of Noah's Ark. Two principal reasons may explain its addition. First, according to hagiographical tradition, Hakob belonged to the Parthian line and was a cousin of Saint Gregory (*Kristonya Hayastan. Hanragitaran* 2002, 521). Second, as Vardan Devrikyan observes,

The three principal sacred treasures of the Armenian Church are the relic of Noah's Ark, the Holy Lance bearing the life-giving blood of Christ, and the Right Hand of Gregory the Illuminator. A profound spiritual logic underlies this triad. (Devrikyan 2007, 27)

These objects represent, respectively, the renewal of human life after the Flood, the spiritual rebirth of humanity through Christ's Passion and Resurrection, and the national conversion of the Armenians under Gregory (Devrikyan 2007, 27).

This theological and symbolic condensation likely motivated the detailed rendering of the scene. Indeed, following the implications of Devrikyan's observation, we find all three symbols present within the composition: Gregory's baptism of the Armenians, the transmission of the relic of the Ark, and the divine Trinity manifested above – with Christ shown bearing His cross.

At the summit of Mount Ararat stands Noah's Ark. Below, an angel holds a plank from the Ark and delivers it to the sleeping Patriarch Hakob, along with the divine instruction never again to ascend the sacred mountain. According to P'awstos Buzand's (fifth-century Armenian historian) *History of the Armenians*, a spring of clear water miraculously burst forth at this spot through Hakob's prayer (Malk'hasyanc' 1987, 39); this detail, too, is depicted in the engraving.

The rays emanating from the Holy Trinity descending upon the dome of the Mother Cathedral of Etchmiadzin bear the inscription:

When the great light was revealed to Patriarch Gregory, he joyfully recounted it to the believing king. It is fitting that we build here the holy altar of light, for here the Only-Begotten descended in glory from the bosom of the Father.

These lines pertain to the vision of the foundation of Etchmiadzin, in which Christ appears to Gregory with a golden hammer and strikes the spot where the Mother Cathedral of the Armenian Church was to be built.⁹ Gregory recounts this vision to the king, who then orders the church's construction.

It is noteworthy that among the seven engravings studied, only this example includes verses referring to the divine revelation of the foundation of Etchmiadzin – a detail of clear ecclesiological and confessional significance.

These single-sheet prints, as we see, incorporate numerous episodes: the martyrdom of the Hripsimian Virgins, the tortures of Gregory, his casting into the pit, the conversion of Armenia, the baptism of the people in the Arac'ani River, Saint Gregory's ascetic

⁹ The figure of Divine Providence was later interpreted as Christ.

practices in the caves of Manē, the discovery of the relics, and more. Yet one of the most central episodes of Gregory's Life – the Vision of the foundation of Etchmiadzin – is absent in the other prints. Its omission is understandable: depicting this vision would have elevated the sanctity and authority of the Armenian Church and the See of Etchmiadzin – an emphasis not advantageous within non-Apostolic contexts (Devrikyan 2016, 267).

Beneath the entire composition, outside the frame, four columns of text are devoted to the Life of Gregory the Illuminator: two in Latin and two in German. The inclusion of Latin follows the canonical structure established by earlier engravings; the German text reflects the print's production in German-speaking Vienna and ensured accessibility for both locals and Armenians assimilated into the region.

Along the entire bottom margin we read the Armenian dedicatory inscription:

O victorious, long-suffering, valiant martyr and confessor of Christ, holy Gregory the Illuminator of the Armenians, pray for the believing Armenian people. I also entreat you, though unworthy and humble. I, Hakob, son of Mahtesi Hovhannes of Erzurum, caused this wondrous image of your tortures to be printed in this imperial capital of Vienna in the year of the Lord 1731 October 16, to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Between the upper and lower medallions depicting the tortures is a poetic encomium praising the saint. This engraving¹⁰ differs from the earlier one in a significant conceptual way. Based on the purely informative and laudatory nature of the Latin and German inscriptions, as well as the explanatory captions of Gregory's life episodes, we may conclude that it was created explicitly for the broad dissemination and didactic presentation of the Life of Saint Gregory. The composition thus brings together events from different periods in a manner not previously encountered in works of this kind.

10 In contrast to the three preceding engravings, of which only a single example of each is known to us, several impressions of this engraving have survived and are preserved in various Armenian and European cultural centers, as well as in private collections.

6 Later Engravings and the Iconographic Impact of the Single-Sheet Tradition on Other Media

Chronologically, the next engraving (dimensions with frame: 67 × 50 cm) was printed in 1749; however, it bears no indication of the printing house or place of publication [fig. 6]. We assume that it was likewise produced in Vienna, as it repeats the iconography of the preceding example almost exactly, though it is inferior to it in terms of artistic execution.



Figure 6 Unknown engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1749, probably Vienna. Engraving on paper, 67 × 50 cm. Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation. © Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice

The figures are characterized by coarser, heavier, and less harmonious facial features. Their bodies, modeled in dark tonalities, the garments articulated through deep and voluminous folds, and the dramatic expressiveness of their facial expressions are fully in keeping with the visual language of the late Baroque period.

Here the decorative frame reaches a new artistic level: it is conceived in imitation of a metal picture frame, with sculptural allegorical figures placed at the corners. In this engraving, Baroque aesthetics appear not in their earlier refined and balanced splendor, but rather in a densely charged and heavy form.

Unlike the earlier examples, this engraving contains no inscriptions in foreign languages; all texts are in Armenian. Beneath the scene of the tortures, the date of execution is recorded (1749). On either side appears a rhymed, two-stanza poem in Armenian in which the patron, while praising the Illuminator, implores his intercession on behalf of Armenians in distress:

Even the words of the wise are insufficient to praise you,
nor can the pens of rhetoricians fully describe you,
for heaven itself bears witness and proclaims the glory of your
[sufferings.

But we, your Armenian children, speak with our humble words:
ever-watchful Illuminator, your name truly befits you;
be the intercessor for your Armenian sons in their hardship,
O compassionate Father.

The next engraving (dimensions with frame: 72.5 × 49 cm) likewise bears no indication of the printing house, place of publication, or even the year [fig. 7]. On the basis of its stylistic features, we assume that it was produced toward the end of the eighteenth century, most likely in Italy. This image strongly recalls academic painting and, in comparison with the other works discussed, appears to be less directly influenced by the earliest engraving. Although the overall iconographic scheme remains essentially the same, a noticeable reduction in the density of details and a modification of the figures' poses are evident.



Figure 7 Unknown engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Probably late eighteenth century, probably Italy. Engraving on paper, 72.5 × 49 cm. Venice, Mekhitarist Congregation. © Mekhitarist Congregation, Venice

In all previous images, according to the inscriptions, Tiridates is accompanied by his sister Khosrovidukht; here, however, an additional female figure has been introduced – Queen Ashkhen. We therefore suggest that the newly introduced female figure represents

Khosrovidukht within the established iconographic scheme, while the crowned woman in elaborate attire should be identified as Queen Ashkhen. Unlike the earlier engravings, this print also includes several clerics attending Saint Gregory.

Beneath the central medallion appears the Armenian inscription:

Saint Gregory the Illuminator baptizes King Tiridates and the royal household.

Here, the column of light has been transformed into an actual architectural column, though the radiant beams of light and the Holy Spirit have been retained.



Figure 8
Unknown engraver, scenes from the Life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Probably late eighteenth century, Rome. Engraving on paper, 20.6 × 13.6 cm. Isfahan, Archive of the Holy Savior Monastery (Surb Amenap'rkē'i Vank'). Commissioned by Lebanese clerics. Photo by Tovma Galstanean, © Archive of the Holy Savior Monastery, Isfahan

In terms of structure and composition, our final engraving (dimensions with frame: 20.6 × 13.6 cm) is closely related to the preceding example. According to its inscription, it was printed in Rome by Lebanese clerics [fig. 8]. Although no date is indicated, we again assume that it dates to the late eighteenth century. This engraving is preserved in the archive of the Armenian Holy Savior Monastery

(Surb Amenap'rkč'i Vank') in Isfahan, Iran.¹¹ For this reason, the paper border of the engraving is decorated with animal and vegetal motifs characteristic of Persian art.

These single-sheet engravings, owing to their accessibility and portability, circulated widely across the world. They reached Armenia as well as various Armenian diasporic communities, and in subsequent centuries numerous other images based on this iconographic model were produced in books. The same model also served as the basis for other artistic media, including painted icons [fig. 9], church curtains and banners [fig. 10], as well as liturgical vessels and reliquaries [fig. 11].



Figure 9
Painted icon with scenes
from the Life of Saint
Gregory the Illuminator.
First half of the eighteenth
century. Gherla, Church of
the Holy Trinity. © Church of
the Holy Trinity, Gherla

11 The photograph of the engraving was kindly provided by Tovma Galstanean, archivist of the Holy Savior Monastery in New Julfa, to whom we express our sincere gratitude.



Figure 10
Church banner with scenes from the Life
of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1808.
Vienna, Mekhitarist Museum.
© Mekhitarist Museum, Vienna



Figure 11
Reliquary with scenes from the Life
of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. 1765,
Antakya. Antelias, Catholicosate of the
Great House of Cilicia. © Catholicosate
of the Great House of Cilicia, Antelias

In these works, Gregory the Illuminator is depicted wearing the hooded mitre (*mitra*), which became part of Armenian patriarchal and episcopal vestments from 1184 onward, when the pope presented Latin patriarchal insignia to Catholicos Gregory IV T'la (Ormanyan 1992, 87).

Each of these works, employing different artistic approaches and levels of execution, reiterates the same iconography of Saint Gregory's inhuman tortures. In these engravings, the faces of the persecutors are filled with intense energy, as if striving to inflict the utmost cruelty upon the saint. In contrast, in every scene the Illuminator is portrayed with a calm and detached expression, thereby aligning him with other pan-Christian saints – and with the Only-Begotten Son of God – who endured suffering through divine power.

7 Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the engravings discussed above, it becomes evident that the elaboration of this iconographic type was initiated by the Italian artist Luca Ciamberlano. The visual cycle he created adhered so closely to Agathangelos' account and presented the Life of Saint Gregory with such narrative precision that it soon acquired a canonical character and was transmitted across centuries.

As demonstrated, the single-sheet images depicting Saint Gregory – particularly through their inscriptions – were, in certain cases, commissioned by Catholic patrons and served explicit propagandistic and confessional purposes. By contrast, those produced within the Armenian Apostolic milieu primarily sought to glorify the saint, invoke his blessing, and present in an accessible visual form the life and sanctity of the first Patriarch of the Armenians. At the same time, given the complex political and confessional realities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Armenian communities were divided over the question of union with the Church of Rome, these engravings may also have conveyed an opposing confessional message, affirming the Armenian Apostolic tradition in response to pro-Catholic tendencies.

As noted above, unlike manuscripts, painted icons, or large printed volumes, these engravings were likely far more affordable and, due to their portability, easily transported by travelers. Consequently, they spread widely across Armenian-populated centers throughout the world and became iconographic foundations for new works created locally. At the same time, precisely because they were single-sheet prints, they were inherently more vulnerable; as a result, most of them have survived either in unique copies or in a damaged condition.

It is possible that further details regarding the production of these engravings and related issues will come to light in the future.

However, our primary objective has been to present these works in a systematic manner and to introduce previously unpublished images into scholarly circulation by situating them within their appropriate art-historical and historical contexts.

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Negation in Regional Varieties of Odia: Synchronic Patterns and Variations

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Abstract Odia, a major Eastern Indo-Aryan language, exhibits substantial internal diversity and forms a continuum of regional varieties. This paper synchronically analyses the patterns and variations in standard negation across eight Odia varieties, namely Katakai, Sambalpuri, Debagadia, Sundargadi, Singhbhumi, Baleswari, Desia, and Ganjami, focusing on the form, syntactic position, and functional properties of negative markers within the framework of (a)symmetry. The findings highlight synchronic variations by examining the pre-verbal and post-verbal negation strategies and their interaction with the components of the verbal complex in Odia.

Keywords Odia. Standard negation. Varieties. Typology. Synchronic variation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Methodology. – 3 Negation in Regional Varieties of Odia. – 3.1 Katakai Variety. – 3.2 Sambalpuri Variety. – 3.3 Debagadia Variety. – 3.4 Sundargadi Variety. – 3.5 Baleswari Variety. – 3.6 Singhbhumi Variety. – 3.7 Desia Variety. – 3.8 Ganjami Variety. – 3.9 Structural Variations and (A)symmetry in the Standard Negation of Odia Varieties. – 4 Discussion. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Variability has long been recognised as a fundamental property of human language, permeating all levels of linguistic organisation (Sapir 1921). This variability encompasses subtle phonological distinctions, variations in syntactic structure, and semantic interpretation. As a consequence, the study of linguistic variation has developed into several interrelated subfields that seek to capture the complex and dynamic nature of language. A central concern of variationist research is the identification, description, and explanation of the formal, functional, and structural patterns that differentiate linguistic systems across speakers and communities (Sapir 1921). Following Labov (1966), linguistic variation can be investigated in relation to the social context of language use and the factors that contribute to linguistic differentiation and language change. Subsequent research has demonstrated that linguistic variation manifests systematically across phonology, morphology, syntax, and the lexicon, reflecting the interaction of structural constraints and sociolinguistic conditions (Labov 1972; 1994; Trudgill 1986; 2000; Chambers, Trudgill 1998). Processes such as dialect contact, divergence, and convergence further contribute to this variation, reinforced by migration patterns, settlement histories, and community identities (Bell 1984, 145-204; Boberg 2010; Wolfram, Schilling 2015).

Odia, a major language within the Eastern Indo-Aryan subgroup, provides a particularly productive context for examining such variation. Spoken by approximately 35 million speakers in the state of Odisha (Census of India 2011), Odia exhibits extensive internal diversity, with distinct regional varieties distributed across the northern, southern, western, and coastal regions of the state (Masica 1991; Cardona, Jain 2003). The coastal variety, commonly referred to as Katakī Odia or Standard Odia, functions as the official language of the state and serves as the principal medium of administration and education. Alongside this standard form, Odia encompasses several regional varieties, including Sambalpurī, Sundargadi, Koraputia or Desia, Debagadia, Singhbhumi, and Baleswari; each shaped by distinct sociolinguistic histories and contact ecologies (Grierson 1903; Mahapatra, Sivashanmugam, Bhattacharya 2002). Although these varieties are mutually intelligible to a considerable extent, they display systematic differences across phonological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse domains.

Negation constitutes one of the most salient domains of morphosyntactic variation among Odia varieties. The expression of negation exhibits notable regional differentiation in both form and structure, making it a particularly revealing site for investigating grammatical variation within the language. This paper examines

the negative markers attested across selected Odia varieties and analyses their position and function in the negation of declarative verbal clauses. It focuses on the interaction between negators and the verbal complex and explores the structural variation that arises from the use of preverbal and postverbal negation strategies. The study further aims to investigate whether areal patterns exist in negative constructions across eight Odia varieties, namely, Katakī, Sambalpuri, Sundargadi, Baleswari, Singhbhumi, Debagadia, Desia, and Ganjami and, if so, to account for their distribution. It also examines the extent to which these varieties exhibit heterogeneous behaviour in their negation systems. The present study is synchronic and based on current areal patterns, and does not focus on any historical reconstruction. This research adopts a synchronic and areal perspective on Odia negation. While dialect studies often engage in historical reconstruction to explain divergence, the present analysis does not attempt to trace the diachronic evolution of negation patterns. Instead, it documents the structural and positional variation of negative markers across eight contemporary Odia varieties, highlighting symmetric and asymmetric patterns as they appear in the current linguistic context of Odisha.¹

Negation is one of the most prominent distinguishing features of these varieties in Odisha, which manifests structural variations in its form and morpho-syntactic features across regions of the state. In Payne's (1985, 197-242) typology of negation strategies, negative markers may be realised either as bound morphemes, i.e., morphological negation or as independent negative particles. The Odia varieties examined in this study exhibit both strategies. Some varieties employ postverbal negative suffixes, while others use preverbal negative particles. Katakī, the standard variety of Odia, primarily expresses negation through postverbal markers, including *-n*, *-ni*, *-nɔ*, *-nah*, and *-nahĩ*, which are used to negate finite verbs (Neukom, Patnaik 2003, 339). The Baleswari variety primarily employs the postverbal markers *-ni* and *-n*, whereas the Ganjami variety likewise attests postverbal negation through markers such as *-n*, *-ni*, and, in certain contexts, *naĩ*. In contrast, several regional varieties employ markedly different strategies. Speakers of Koraputia or Desia variety rely on the preverbal negative particle *na*, while the Sundargadi variety makes use of *ni* and *niha* in the same syntactic position. Further west and north-western regions, varieties such as Sambalpuri, Debagadia, and Singhbhumi predominantly employ *naĩ* as their primary preverbal negator. These forms differ not only in

1 Explanations regarding historical development, cognitive motivations, or functional drivers of variation lie beyond the scope of this study and warrant dedicated diachronic investigation.

their phonological shape but also in their morphosyntactic status, illustrating how negation in Odia ranges from affixal strategies to free standing particles depending on regional linguistic ecologies. Figure 1 illustrates the geographical distribution of these negative markers across the eight Odia varieties included in the study. By undertaking a comparative analysis of these varieties, the present study seeks to demonstrate how distinct negation strategies give rise to morphosyntactic variation within the Odia language.

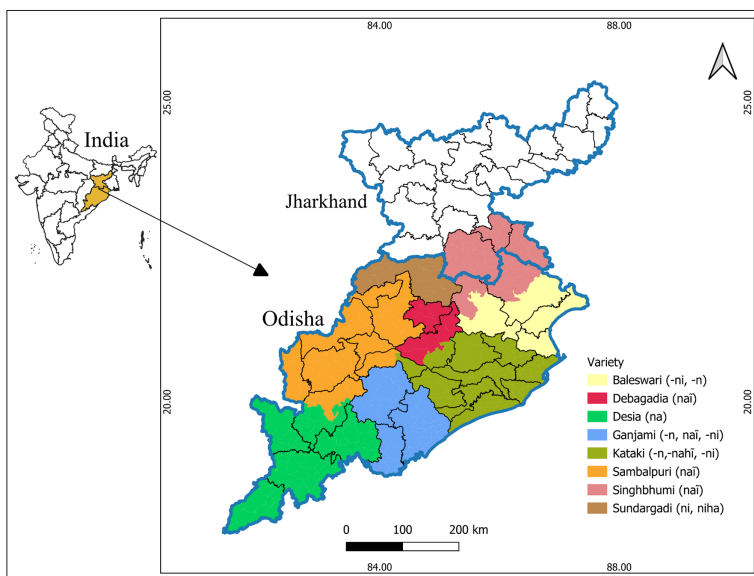


Figure 1 Geographical distribution of negative markers in Odia.
Source: Authors' own elaboration

The regional distribution of these varieties reflects well established sociolinguistic and areal patterns. Kataki Odia, spoken primarily in the coastal districts, functions as the standard and official variety used in administration and formal education. Sambalpuri is used predominantly in the western regions of Odisha and is characterised by distinct structural features shaped by prolonged language contact with Chhattisgarhi (Dasgupta 1964, 147-61). The Singhbhumi and Baleswari varieties extend across northern Odisha and into adjoining areas of Jharkhand and West Bengal, reflecting long standing patterns of migration and areal convergence (Grierson 1903). The Sundargadi variety is mainly spoken in the northwestern part of Odisha, while the Koraputia variety, also known as Desia, is spoken in southern Odisha and in parts of neighbouring districts of Andhra Pradesh. Desia functions primarily as an informal medium of communication

in southern Odisha, and exhibits features distinct from both coastal and western varieties. The northwestern Debagadia variety and the south-eastern Ganjami variety also demonstrate significant structural contrasts in their negative constructions.

Although earlier research has documented specific phonological and syntactic features of Standard Odia and Sambalpuri, comprehensive analyses of their morphosyntactic properties, particularly in the domain of negation, remain limited. Research on Odia and its regional varieties has developed gradually, beginning with early grammatical descriptions by Sutton (1831) and Hallam (1874), who recorded both standard and colloquial forms of the language. Later studies by Mahapatra (2007) and Dalei (2009) provided more detailed accounts of phonological, lexical, and morphological variation, yet did not offer systematic analyses of negation. Subsequent work has largely focused on the western variety, with studies examining the phonology and morphology of Sambalpuri.² More recent research has expanded the comparative scope, with Behera, Dash and Pattanayak (2021, 55-71) analysing lexical and syntactic differences between Standard Odia and Sambalpuri, and Kushal and Padra (2021, 50-9) describing agreement patterns in Sambalpuri. Nevertheless, systematic comparative research across multiple Odia varieties remains scarce. The functional behaviour, structural distribution, and typological significance of negative markers across these varieties have not yet been adequately explored. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates patterns of negation across eight Odia varieties using synchronic data from an areal-variation perspective based on the (a) symmetry framework by Miestamo (2005), highlighting the structural contrasts they produce and contributing to a broader understanding of morphosyntactic variation within the Odia negation system. In this paper, the term Standard Negation (SN) is used in the sense of Miestamo (2005) to refer to the negation of declarative verbal main clauses, which serves as the basis for comparing affirmative and negative constructions across the Odia varieties examined.

The organisation of the paper is as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodology and data sources used in the study. Section 3 presents the negation systems of eight regional varieties of Odia and examines the structural variation observed in their negative constructions, with particular attention to patterns of symmetry and asymmetry in standard negation. Section 4 discusses the implications of these findings in relation to typological and areal perspectives on negation. Section 5 concludes the paper by summarising the main findings and highlighting their significance for the study of negation in Odia varieties.

2 See Bahidar 1977; Dash 1990; Tripathy 1992; Panigrahi, Tripathy 2001.

2 Methodology

This study documents the forms and positional distribution of negative markers across selected Odia varieties and examines their interaction with affirmative constructions to determine whether the resulting negative structures are symmetric or asymmetric. The analytical framework is informed by Miestamo's (2005; 2007) typology of negation, which conceptualises Standard Negation (SN) as the basic structural operation used to negate declarative clauses. Within this framework, negation is classified as symmetric when the negative construction differs from its affirmative counterpart only by the presence of a negator, and as asymmetric when the introduction of a negative marker triggers morphosyntactic changes in the verbal structure. As illustrated in example (1b), the negative particle *nəhĩ* in Hindi does not bring any morphosyntactic modification to the affirmative construction in (1a), representing symmetric negation. On the other hand, Bagirmi exhibits a symmetric pattern of negation in examples (2a) and (2c). However, in the negative construction in (2c), the completive marker *ga* is absent, resulting in the neutralisation of the distinction between the affirmative forms shown in (2a) and (2b). Consequently, the construction is analysed as an instance of asymmetric negation.

Hindi (Indo-Aryan)

- (1a) *māṅ* *kiṭab* *likʰ* *rəha* *hũ*
1SG[NOM] book write PROG 1SG.PRS
'I am writing a book.'
[Data ID: HIN-S1]

- (1b) *māṅ* *kiṭab* *nəhĩ* *likʰ* *rəha* *hũ*
1SG[NOM] book NEG write PROG 1SG.PRS
'I am not writing a book.'
[Data ID: HIN-S1]

Bagirmi (Nilo-Saharan, Bongo-Bagirmi)

- (2a) *ma* *m-'de*
1SG 1SG-come
'I came.'
(Miestamo 2017, 10)

- (2b) *ma* *m-'de* *ga*
1SG 1SG-come CMPL
'I have come.'
(Miestamo 2017, 10)

(2c)	<i>ma</i>	<i>m-'de</i>	<i>li</i>
	1SG	1SG-come	NEG
	'I did not come.'		
	(Miestamo 2017, 10)		

Although Miestamo (2005) further subdivides asymmetric negation based on the locus of structural change, including alterations in tense-aspect-mood (TAM) or person-number-gender (PNG) marking, emphasis, or finiteness,³ the present study restricts the analysis to a binary distinction between symmetric and asymmetric negation. This delimitation is motivated by the primary aim of the paper, which is to describe variation in the form and position of negative markers and their interaction with verbal structure, and to highlight diversity in negation strategies across regional Odia varieties.

This study adopts a synchronic approach, examining the current distribution and structural properties of negative markers across Odia varieties based on their areal occurrence. In this respect, the analysis aligns partially with recent typological work on negation in South Asian languages, such as Peterson and Chevallier (2022), which examine the structural properties of negative markers and classify languages according to their symmetric or asymmetric negation systems. While such studies group languages into typological clusters according to shared negation strategies, the present paper adopts a more narrowly focused comparative approach. It concentrates exclusively on the position of negative markers and patterns of symmetry and asymmetry between affirmative and corresponding negative constructions in Odia varieties, without attempting broader typological classification beyond the language.

A deductive approach was employed for data collection and analysis. While the dataset includes negation data from a wide range of TAM categories of each variety, only representative examples relevant to the analysis of symmetric and asymmetric negation are discussed in the present study. The heterogeneous dataset comprises speech data from 125 native speakers. Data were collected from speakers in the northern, eastern, western, and southern regions of Odisha, as well as from native Odia speakers residing in Jharkhand, in order to capture regional variation. Specifically, 18 participants were drawn from the Cuttack and Khordha districts for the Kataki or Standard variety; 16 participants from Baleshwar and eastern Mayurbhanj for the Baleswari variety; 14 participants from the Singhbhum region of Jharkhand for the Singhbhumi variety;

3 For a comprehensive understanding of the subtypes of asymmetry, consult the typological dataset and its analysis by Miestamo (2005).

16 participants from Koraput, Nabarangpur, and Rayagada districts for the Desia variety; 15 participants from Sundargarh district for the Sundargadi variety; 13 participants from Debagarh district for the Debagadia variety; 15 participants from selected areas of Ganjam and Gajapati districts for the Ganjami variety; and 18 participants from Sambalpur, Bargarh, and Jharsuguda districts for the Sambalpuri variety. One Hindi example cited in the study was obtained through telephonic elicitation with a native Hindi speaker. Table 1 presents the distribution of speakers across the eight Odia varieties, including the field sites, number of participants, and gender composition of the dataset. Although both male and female speakers were represented in the dataset, gender was not observed to affect the morphosyntactic encoding of negation in the varieties examined.

Table 1 Composition of the Speaker sample by variety, field site, and gender

Variety	Location(s)	Number of Speakers	Male	Female
Kataki	Cuttack and Khordha	18	10	8
Baleswari	Baleswar and eastern Mayurbhanj	16	9	7
Singhbhumi	Singhbhum region, Jharkhand	14	8	6
Desia	Koraput, Nabarangpur, and Rayagada	16	9	7
Sundargadi	Sundargarh	15	9	6
Debagadia	Debagarh	13	7	6
Ganjami	Ganjam and Gajapati	15	10	5
Sambalpuri	Sambalpur, Bargarh, and Jharsuguda	18	9	9

Data collection was guided by the negation questionnaire developed by Miestamo,⁴ which was adapted to the objectives of the present study. The questionnaire served as a reference framework for conducting semi-structured interviews and eliciting negation data across the selected varieties. The dataset comprises both elicited responses and spontaneous conversational speech collected during fieldwork. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years and represented diverse educational backgrounds, including peasantry, masonry, weaving, teaching, and cooking, and included both formally educated and less educated speakers. To ensure traceability while

⁴ *Questionnaire for Describing the Negation System of a Language*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306039181_Questionnaire_for_describing_the_negation_system_of_a_language.

maintaining speaker anonymity, each participant was assigned an anonymised identification code indicating the variety and speaker number. These codes accompany the examples presented in the paper, allowing readers to determine whether examples originate from the same or different speakers. The examples discussed in the analysis are illustrative of the major negation patterns attested in the corpus and are drawn from both elicited and spontaneous speech data. Although some regional and register-based differences were observed, these were largely restricted to phonological variation and lexical choice. The core morphosyntactic patterns of negation remained remarkably consistent across speakers and varieties. Consequently, such sociolinguistic factors had minimal impact on the structural encoding of negation examined in the present study. All interviews were recorded using a Sony wireless recording device to ensure clarity and accuracy. The recorded data were subsequently verified, transcribed, and annotated. Interlinear morphological analysis was conducted following the Leipzig Glossing Rules, which were consistently applied throughout the transcription and annotation process.

3 Negation in Regional Varieties of Odia

Patterns of standard negation in Odia exhibit considerable regional variation, with each variety drawing on a distinct inventory of negative markers (cf. § 1). The sections that follow offer a detailed examination of these patterns across individual varieties. Each subsection analyses the negative markers attested in a given variety and explores their interaction with the verbal complex, with particular attention to their syntactic position, scope, and effects on person, number, tense, aspect, and mood marking within the domain of SN.

3.1 Katakī Variety

Katakī Odia has traditionally been regarded, both in popular perception and in earlier linguistic descriptions, as the basis of Standard Odia, and it is the variety employed in formal education, media, and administrative communication. The Katakī variety is predominantly spoken in the formerly undivided Cuttack region, encompassing the districts of Cuttack, Jajpur, Kendrapara, and Jagatsinghpur, as well as other eastern districts such as Khordha, Puri, Nayagarh, Dhenkanal, and parts of Angul. The prominence of Katakī Odia can be attributed to the longstanding political and cultural dominance of the undivided Cuttack region, which

historically functioned as the administrative nucleus of Odisha and as a central hub of eastern Odisha. The concentration of literary production, bureaucratic activity, and urban elite culture in Cuttack facilitated the preservation, codification, and dissemination of the local speech variety, which subsequently acquired prestige and came to shape the standard norm of the language (Dalei 2009).

In Katak Odia, SN is expressed through suffixal markers such as *-n*, *-nahĩ*, and *-ni*, which attach to the main verb across different TAM categories, functioning as postverbal negators. As shown in examples (3b) and (3d), adding the negative markers *-nahĩ* or *-ni* does not change the morphosyntactic structure of the affirmative constructions in any way other than adding the negator itself. Consequently, negation in Katak Odia in these examples conforms to the pattern of symmetric negation.

- (3a) *mũ* *Odisha* *dʒa-e*.
1SG.NOM Odisha go-1SG.PRS
'I go to Odisha.'
[Data ID: KAT-S2]
- (3b) *mũ* *Odisha* *dʒa-e-nahĩ/-ni*
1SG.NOM Odisha go-1SG.PRS-NEG
'I do not go to Odisha.'
[Data ID: KAT-S2]
- (3c) *mũ* *kamɔ* *kar-i-l-i*
1SG.NOM work do-PERF-PST-1SG
'I did the work.'
[Data ID: KAT-S5]
- (3d) *mũ* *kamɔ* *kar-i-l-i-nahĩ/-ni*
1SG.NOM work do-PERF-PST-1SG-NEG
'I did not do the work.'
[Data ID: KAT-S5]

However, in the Katak variety, certain tense-aspect categories, notably the present perfect and present progressive, also exhibit instances of asymmetric negation. As illustrated in examples (3f) and (3h), when the postverbal negator *-n* is applied to the corresponding affirmative constructions, the verbal structure undergoes a morphosyntactic change whereby the present auxiliary *-c* is omitted.

- (3e) *mũ cakiri kar-u-c-i*
1SG.NOM job do-PROG-AUX.PRS-1SG
'I am doing a job.'
[Data ID: KAT-S5]
- (3f) *mũ cakiri kar-u-n-i*
1SG.NOM job do-PROG-NEG-1SG
'I am not doing a job.'
[Data ID: KAT-S5]
- (3g) *mũ b^haṭṭo k^ha-i-c^h-i*
1SG.NOM rice eat-PERF-AUX.PRS-1SG
'I've eaten rice.'
[Data ID: KAT-S8]
- (3h) *mũ b^haṭṭo k^ha-i-n-i*
1SG.NOM rice eat-PERF-NEG-1SG
'I've not eaten rice.'
[Data ID: KAT-S8]

In these contexts, the negator *-n* assumes the functional role of a negative copula rather than behaving as a simple suffixal marker.⁵ This pattern contrasts with the behaviour of negation in other TAM categories in Kataki Odia, where negation remains structurally symmetric, thereby highlighting internal variation within the standard variety itself.

3.2 Sambalpuri Variety

Sambalpuri functions as the primary informal medium of communication in the western region of Odisha. Speakers typically use Sambalpuri in informal and intra-community contexts, while switching to the standard variety in formal domains such as education, administration, and official communication. The Sambalpuri variety is predominantly spoken in the districts of Sambalpur, Bargarh, Sonepur, Jharsuguda, Nuapada, Balangir, and Boudh, and is used by approximately 2.63 million speakers according to the Census of India (2011).

⁵ Neukom, Patnaik (2003, 342-3) analyse *-n* as a shortened form of the negative copula *nahī*. The analysis adopted here is consistent with their interpretation.

Sambalpuri exhibits notable morphosyntactic variation in the expression of negation, with patterns that differ systematically across tense and aspectual categories. The preverbal negative particle *naĩ* frequently triggers structural changes within the verbal complex, resulting in the loss of specific grammatical features. These changes include the omission of tense markers, auxiliaries, aspectual markers, and agreement morphology, as illustrated in examples (4b), (4d), and (4f).

For instance, in example (4b), the insertion of the preverbal negative particle *naĩ* leads to the omission of the present tense marker *-es* found in the corresponding affirmative construction in example (4a). The absence of a one-to-one structural correspondence between the affirmative and negative clauses shows that SN in this context is asymmetric.

- (4a) *ʈume Sambalpur-ke dʒa-es-ʃ*
2SG.NOM Sambalpur-DAT go-PRS-2SG
'You visit Sambalpur.'
[Data ID: SBP-S2]
- (4b) *ʈume Sambalpur-ke naĩ dʒa-ɔ*
2SG.NOM Sambalpur-DAT NEG go-2SG
'You do not visit Sambalpur.'
[Data ID: SBP-S2]

Similarly, in examples such as (4d), the Sambalpuri variety exhibits the omission of multiple grammatical features following the application of the negative marker. When the preverbal negative particle *naĩ* is introduced into the affirmative construction, the verbal complex loses the aspectual marker *-u*, the auxiliary marker *-c*, and the agreement morphology, resulting in an infinitival form of the verb in the negative clause. Likewise, in example (4f), the insertion of the preverbal negator *naĩ* leads to the omission of the past tense marker *-l* present in the corresponding affirmative construction in example (4e). The negative construction instead consists of the verbal root *dʒa-* followed by the perfective aspect marker *-i* in (4f).

- (4c) *muĩ Sambalpur-ke dʒa-u-c-ẽ*
1SG.NOM Sambalpur-DAT go-PROG-AUX.PRS-1SG
'I am going to Sambalpur.'
[Data ID: SBP-S10]

- (4d) *muĩ Sambalpur naĩ dʒi-bar*
1SG Sambalpur NEG go-INF
'I am not going to Sambalpur.'
[Data ID: SBP-S10]
- (4e) *ame Sambalpur-ke go-l-ũ*
1PL.NOM Sambalpur-DAT go-PST-1PL
'We went to Sambalpur.'
[Data ID: SBP-S10]
- (4f) *ame Sambalpur-ke naĩ dʒa-i*
1PL.NOM Sambalpur-DAT NEG go-PERF
'We did not go to Sambalpur.'
[Data ID: SBP-S10]

These patterns indicate that Sambalpuri systematically exhibits asymmetric negation across TAM categories when negation is realised through a preverbal particle.

3.3 Debagadia Variety

The Debagadia variety is a northwestern regional variant of Odia and remains relatively underdescribed in the existing literature. It is predominantly spoken in the Debagarh district of Odisha, which has an estimated population of approximately 312,000 according to the Census of India (2011), and is also used in the Bonai region, the Redhakhol subdivision of Sambalpur, and the Athmallik area of Angul district. Employing the preverbal negative particle *naĩ*, Debagadia exhibits a symmetric pattern of SN. As illustrated in examples (5b) and (5d), the negative particle *naĩ* precedes the main verb but does not trigger any morphosyntactic alterations in the verbal complex. The absence of structural changes in the negative construction indicates that negation in Debagadia remains symmetric.

- (5a) *se ambɔ kʰa-e-l-a*
3SG.NOM mango eat-PERF-PST-3SG
'He ate the mango.'
[Data ID: DBG-S1]

- (5b) *se* *ambɔ* *naĩ* *kʰa-e-l-a*
3SG.NOM mango NEG eat-PERF-PST-3SG
'He did not eat the mango.'
[Data ID: DBG-S1]
- (5c) *muĩ* *ekʰni* *ambɔ* *kʰa-u-dʒ-i*
1SG.NOM now mango eat-PROG-AUX-1SG
'I am eating mango now.'
[Data ID: DBG-S4]
- (5d) *naĩ* *gɔ,* *muĩ* *ekʰni* *ambɔ* *naĩ* *kʰa-u-dʒ-i*
NEG EMP, 1SG.NOM now mango NEG eat-PROG-AUX-1SG
'No, I am not eating mango now.'
[Data ID: DBG-S4]

Furthermore, as shown in examples (5c) and (5d), Debagadia employs the auxiliary marker *-dʒ*, which represents a phonological variant relative to other Odia varieties, where the present auxiliary is typically realised as *-cʰ*. This phonological variation, however, does not affect the symmetric nature of negation in the Debagadia variety.

3.4 Sundargadi Variety

The Sundargadi variety is primarily spoken in the northwestern region of Sundargarh in Odisha. Geographically contiguous with Sambalpur speaking areas, Sundargadi has been shaped by sustained contact with neighbouring languages, most notably Sadri and Kharia, the latter belonging to the Austro-Asiatic language family (Grierson 1903). These contact influences are evident not only in the lexicon but also in patterns of everyday communication, intonation, and certain grammatical choices that distinguish Sundargadi from adjacent Odia varieties.

Sundargadi employs the negative markers *ni* and *niha*, with *ni* being the more frequently attested form. Examples (6a) to (6d) are representatives of the major SN patterns attested in this variety. Sundargadi consistently exhibits asymmetric negation, with negators occurring in preverbal position. As illustrated in example (6b), the insertion of the preverbal negative particle *ni* triggers morphosyntactic changes in the verbal complex, including the omission of the aspectual marker *-u*, the auxiliary *-cʰ*, and the agreement marker *-ẽ* present in the corresponding affirmative construction in example (6a). The resulting negative construction consists of the preverbal negator *ni* followed by an infinitival verb

form. Notably, this asymmetric negation pattern is structurally identical to that observed in examples (4c) and (4d) in Sambalpuri, involving the same morphosyntactic reorganisation of the affirmative construction under negation.

- (6a) *muĩ* *ek^hen* *kɔɖil* *k^ha-u-c^h-ẽ*
1SG.NOM now banana eat-PROG-AUX.PRS-1SG
'I am eating a banana now.'
[Data ID: SDG-S3]

- (6b) *muĩ* *ek^hen* *kɔɖil* *ni* *k^hae-bar*
1SG.NOM now banana NEG eat-INF
'I am not eating a banana now.'
[Data ID: SDG-S3]

- (6c) *Ramesh* *America* *dʒa-i-c^h-e*
3SG.NOM America go-PERF-AUX.PRS-3SG
'Ramesh has been to America.'
[Data ID: SDG-S11]

- (6d) *Ramesh* *ek^hen* *ʈɔk* *America* *niha* *dʒa-e*
3SG.NOM now till America NEG go-3SG
'Ramesh has not visited America till now.'
[Data ID: SDG-S11]

Likewise, in example (6d), the use of the preverbal negator *niha* leads to the loss of perfective aspect and auxiliary markers found in the affirmative construction in example (6c). The systematic omission of grammatical features in these instances of SN provides clear evidence that Sundargadi exhibits an asymmetric negation pattern.

3.5 Baleswari Variety

Baleswari Odia is the predominant variety in the northern region of Odisha, encompassing the districts of Balaswar, Bhadrakh, and many parts of Kendujhar, as well as the eastern areas of Mayurbhanj. The variety shares a border with West Bengal, where Bengali is the dominant language, and consequently retains several features resembling Bengali, such as the use of *-tẽ* in non-finite constructions, e.g., *kɔr-tẽ* (to do).

In terms of negation, Baleswari employs *-ni* and *-n* (see 7b and 7d), and these markers function as postverbal negators, attaching as suffixes to the verb stem. Furthermore, the standard past tense

marker *-l* in other Odia varieties undergoes a phonological change to *-n* in Baleswari exclusively in affirmative contexts (7a), which should not be mistaken for a negation marker.

- (7a) *tume mɔʔte k^hai-ʔe kɔh-u-t^hi-n-ɔ*
2SG.NOM 1SG.ACC eat-NONF tell-PROG-AUX.NPRS-PST-2SG
'You were asking me to eat.'
[Data ID: BLS-S5]
- (7b) *tume mɔʔte k^hai-ʔe kɔh-u-t^hi-l-ɔ-ni*
2SG.NOM 1SG.ACC eat-NONF tell-PROG-AUX.NPRS-PST-2SG-NEG
'You were not asking me to eat.'
[Data ID: BLS-S5]
- (7c) *mũ Baripada-re rɔh-u-c^h-i*
1SG.NOM Baripada-LOC live-PROG-AUX.PRS-1SG
'I am staying in Baripada.'
[Data ID: BLS-S9]
- (7d) *mũ Baripada-re rɔh-u-n-i*
1SG.NOM Baripada-LOC live-PROG-NEG-1SG
'I am not staying in Baripada.'
[Data ID: BLS-S9]

When the negative marker *-ni* is applied, as in example (7b), it does not induce any morphosyntactic changes in the affirmative verbal complex, indicating symmetric negation. In contrast, example (7d) illustrates an instance of asymmetric negation, where the present auxiliary is omitted in the negative construction and the negative marker *-n* acts as a negative copula. Thus, the Baleswari variety exhibits both symmetric and asymmetric patterns of negation.

3.6 Singhbhum Variety

Singhbhum is a historical region in present-day Jharkhand state, encompassing East Singhbhum, West Singhbhum, and Seraikela-Kharsawan. Traditionally, it was inhabited by tribal communities, including the Ho and Munda, under various local chiefdoms (Roy 1912, 42-113; Singh 1978). In Odisha, the region is sometimes referred to as *Bichhinanchala* (separated region), because a significant population of Odia speakers resides there, despite the area not being incorporated into modern Odisha due to historical

and political factors. According to Acharya (1935, 18), Odia speakers formed the predominant linguistic community in Singhbhum.

The Singhbhum variety, the northernmost Odia variant, has also influenced the western hilly regions of present-day Mayurbhanj and Kendujhar in Odisha, particularly through its negation strategies. This area historically belonged to a princely state and shares a border with Singhbhum. Singhbhum uses the preverbal negative particle *naĩ*. The insertion of pre-verbal *naĩ* in Singhbhum does not trigger any morphosyntactic changes in the verbal complex. Consequently, SN in the Singhbhum variety is symmetric, as illustrated in examples (8b) and (8d).

- (8a) *mɔ-r* *nɔna* *mɔʔe* *bul-ʔe* *dak-l-a*
1SG-GEN elder brother 1SG.ACC roam-NONF call-PST-3SG
'My elder brother called me to roam around.'
[Data ID: SNB-S10]

- (8b) *mɔ-r* *nɔna* *mɔʔe* *bul-ʔe* ***naĩ*** *dak-l-a*
1SG-GEN elder brother 1SG.ACC roam-NONF NEG call-PST-3SG
'My elder brother did not call me to roam around.'
[Data ID: SNB-S10]

- (8c) *semane* *Chakulia-re* *ruɦɔ-n*
3PL.NOM Chakulia-LOC live-3PL
'They live in Chakulia.'
[Data ID: SNB-S11]

- (8d) *semane* *Chakulia-re* ***naĩ*** *ruɦɔ-n*
3PL.NOM Chakulia-LOC NEG live-3PL
'They do not live in Chakulia.'
[Data ID: SNB-S11]

3.7 Desia Variety

Desia, also referred to as Koraputia or Desia Odia, is spoken in the southern parts of Odisha, specifically in the former undivided Koraput region, which includes the present-day Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, and Nabarangpur areas, as well as the southern parts of Kalahandi district. This variety differs from other Odia varieties in phonology, lexicon, and morphosyntax, displaying features characteristic of a transitional or mixed linguistic zone (Grierson 1903). It exhibits simplification of verbal morphology, distinct case-marking tendencies, and a rich array of regional lexical

items reflecting both tribal and Odia influences. Although generally intelligible to speakers of other Odia varieties, Desia occupies a unique linguistic ecology, functioning as a lingua franca between Odia-speaking groups and the multilingual highland communities of southern Odisha (Anderson 2008).

Negation in Desia is realised through the invariant preverbal negative particle *na*. The insertion of *na* triggers morphosyntactic changes across TAM categories. For instance, as illustrated in examples (9b) and (9d), the negative particle induces the loss of grammatical features present in the corresponding affirmative clauses. In example (9a), the affirmative structure contains the verb root *dʒi* (go), the future tense marker *-b*, and the agreement marker *-i*. In the negative counterpart (9b), the future tense marker *-b* is omitted following the application of *na*. Similarly, in example (9d), the past tense marker present in the affirmative (9c) is deleted in the negative construction.

(9a) *muĩ koraput dʒi-b-i*
1SG.NOM Koraput go-FUT-1SG
'I will go to Koraput.'
[Data ID: DSA-S7]

(9b) *muĩ koraput na dʒa-i*
1SG.NOM Koraput NEG go-1SG
'I will not go to Koraput.'
[Data ID: DSA-S7]

(9c) *aʒe kɔbɔrkagɔdʒ pɔd-l-a*
3SG.NOM newspaper read-PST-3SG
'He read the newspaper.'
[Data ID: DSA-S9]

(9d) *aʒe kɔbɔrkagɔdʒ na pɔd-a*
3SG.NOM newspaper NEG read-3SG
'He did not read the newspaper.'
[Data ID: DSA-S9]

These patterns demonstrate that the Desia variety systematically exhibits asymmetric negation when forming SN.

3.8 Ganjami Variety

The Ganjami variety of Odia is spoken in the south-eastern region of Odisha, primarily encompassing the districts of Ganjam, Gajapati, and Kandhamal. Gauda (1989) has documented the grammatical characteristics of Ganjami, with particular attention to its phonological and morphological features. Situated in a transitional zone between Odia- and Telugu-speaking regions, Ganjami reflects influences from both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages, as well as interactions with Munda-speaking communities. Its distinctiveness is particularly evident in intonation patterns and lexical choices, which differentiate it from other Odia regional varieties (Gauda 1989).

In Ganjami, non-finite verb forms, such as *dz-ibarɔ* (to go), are used to mark habitual actions, a feature not commonly observed in the affirmative constructions of other Odia varieties. Negation is primarily expressed through the postverbal markers *-n* and *-ni*. The postverbal negative particle *naĩ* is also attested in the Ganjami data (see 10b); the same form occurs preverbally in several other Odia varieties discussed in this study (see §§ 3.2, 3.3, 3.6).

- (10a) *pila-ta* *ɔɔbudine* *skulu* *dz-ibarɔ*
boy-CL everyday school go-NONF
'The boy goes to school everyday.'
[Data ID: GJM-S13]

- (10b) *pila-ta* *muɽe* *skulu* *dz-ibarɔ* ***naĩ***
boy-CL everyday school go-NONF NEG
'The boy does not go to school everyday.'
[Data ID: GJM-S13]

- (10c) *ʈanke* *kali* *mence* *ambili* *gemp^h-i-c-i*
3SG.NOM yesterday a lot sour eat-PERF-AUX.NPRS-3SG
'He has eaten a lot of sour food yesterday.'
[Data ID: GJM-S12]

- (10d) *ʈanke* *kali* *ambili* *gemp^h-i-n-i*
3SG.NOM yesterday sour eat-PERF-NEG-3SG
'He has not had any sour food yesterday.'
[Data ID: GJM-S12]

Structurally, Ganjami exhibits both symmetric and asymmetric negation patterns: symmetric negation is illustrated in example (10b), where the negative marker does not alter the affirmative verbal complex, whereas asymmetric negation is demonstrated in example

(10d), where the insertion of the negator triggers morphosyntactic changes by omitting the auxiliary *-c*. In this respect, Ganjami demonstrates postverbal negation strategies and variability in (a)symmetry across TAM categories.

3.9 Structural Variations and (A)symmetry in the Standard Negation of Odia Varieties

Across the eight Odia varieties studied, negative markers in declarative clauses occupy two primary structural positions: postverbal and preverbal [fig. 2]. Postverbal negation is characteristic of the Kataki variety of eastern Odisha, the Baleswari variety of northern Odisha, and the Ganjami variety of southeastern Odisha. Baleswari is also in contact with the eastern Kataki variety, resulting in numerous structural similarities, though many lexical distinctions persist. In Kataki, the suffixes *-nahĩ*, *-ni*, and *-n* attach to the verbal stem. Baleswari and Ganjami employ *-ni* and *-n* suffixes; also *naĩ* in some cases of Ganjami as post-verbal negative particle. In these varieties, as illustrated in Figure 3, postverbal negators exhibit symmetric negation for most TAM categories. However, instances of asymmetric negation are attested in Kataki, Baleswari, and Ganjami, particularly in the present perfect and present progressive, where the auxiliary may be lost, revealing context-dependent structural variation. Preverbal negation is observed in the remaining five varieties: Singhbhumī, Sambalpuri, Sundargadi, Debagadia, and Desia/Koraputia [fig. 3]. Preverbal negators constitute a pervasive feature in Odia-speaking regions, extending from northwestern Odisha and the Odia diaspora in Jharkhand to the southern districts of the state. Lexically, the Singhbhumī variety differs from its neighbouring Baleswari variety, and it also contrasts in negation marking. While Baleswari employs postverbal negation, the negative particle *naĩ* in Singhbhumī precedes the verb without inducing morphosyntactic changes, resulting in consistently symmetric negation across TAM categories. By contrast, Sambalpuri and Sundargadi display preverbal negation that is systematically asymmetric. In Sambalpuri, *naĩ* triggers the omission of tense and aspect markers, auxiliary verbs, and person-number agreement features, producing a negative construction that diverges structurally from the affirmative. Sundargadi exhibits a comparable asymmetry with the preverbal particles *ni* and *niha*, where SN similarly entails the loss of aspectual and auxiliary markers. Compared to neighbouring varieties such as Sambalpuri, Sundargadi, and Kataki, Debagadia is primarily distinguished by lexical differences, while sharing several structural features with these varieties.

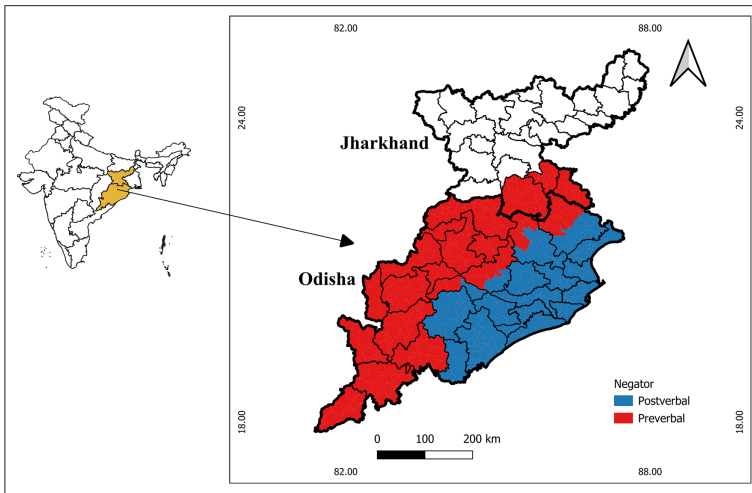


Figure 2 Distribution of preverbal and postverbal negators in Odia varieties.
Source: Authors' own elaboration

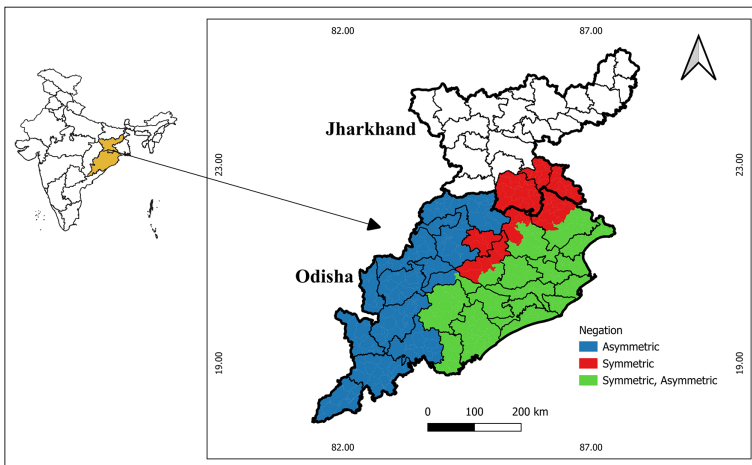


Figure 3 Symmetric and asymmetric negation in the regional varieties of Odia.
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Debagadia presents an intermediate pattern (cf. § 3.3). Although it employs the preverbal particle *naī* akin to Sambalpuri and Sundargadi, its negation remains symmetric, without morphosyntactic alterations to the affirmative. This pattern likely results from its unique sociolinguistic and geographical positioning: bordered by the majorly symmetric Katakī and Singhbhūmi varieties, yet in contact with the

asymmetric varieties to the west and south. Debagadia appears to have retained symmetric negation under the stabilising influence of its neighbouring standard and symmetric varieties. The Desia/ Koraputia variety of southern Odisha similarly employs a preverbal negative particle *na*, but exhibits asymmetric negation. Here, the application of the negative particle leads to the systematic omission of tense markers in the negative construction, aligning it typologically with Sambalpuri and Sundargadi. Table 2 provides an overview of the distribution of negator type, position, and (a)symmetry across the Odia varieties analysed in this study, and Figure 4 offers a visual representation of the observed patterns.

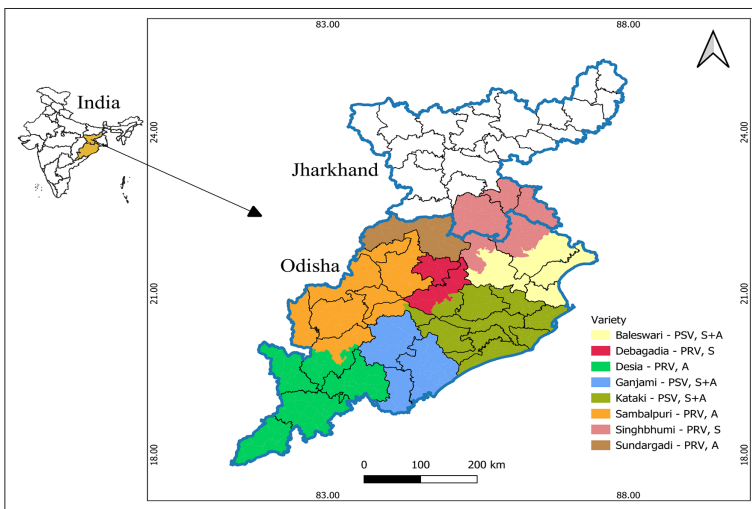


Figure 4 Representation of (a)symmetry in Odia varieties. Source: Authors' own elaboration.
(PRV= Pre-verbal, PSV=Post-verbal, S= symmetric, A= Asymmetric, S+A= both symmetric and asymmetric)

Table 2 Negator type, position, and (a)symmetry across Odia varieties

Variety	Negator type	Position	(A)symmetry
Kataki	Suffix	Postverbal	Symmetric, Asymmetric
Baleswari	Suffix	Postverbal	Symmetric, Asymmetric
Ganjami	Suffix, Negative particle	Postverbal	Symmetric, Asymmetric
Debagadia	Negative particle	Preverbal	Symmetric
Singhbhumi	Negative particle	Preverbal	Symmetric
Sambalpuri	Negative particle	Preverbal	Asymmetric

Variety	Negator type	Position	(A)symmetry
Sundargadi	Negative particle	Preverbal	Asymmetric
Desia	Negative particle	Preverbal	Asymmetric

As mapped in Figure 4, these patterns reveal a complex interplay of structural, areal, and contact-driven factors in shaping negation across Odia varieties. Symmetric and asymmetric negation exhibit distinct patterns of distribution across the Odia varieties examined, with variation observed in the form, position, and morphosyntactic behaviour of negative markers. The distinction between postverbal and preverbal negation, alongside the emergence of asymmetry in specific TAM categories, highlights the typological diversity within Odia and underscores the influence of both internal morphosyntactic tendencies and external sociolinguistic pressures. The patterns observed across the Odia varieties are consistent with Miestamo's (2005; 2007) typology of symmetric and asymmetric negation, demonstrating that negation may either preserve the structure of the corresponding affirmative construction or involve morphosyntactic restructuring. Overall, the findings contribute to a broader understanding of linguistic variation in South Asian languages, demonstrating how regional varieties negotiate the interface between structural uniformity and areal differentiation.

4 Discussion

Negation constitutes a central and diagnostically significant feature across the regional varieties of Odia, revealing both structural diversity and areal differentiation. In the eastern and northern regions of Odisha, located on the eastern side of the Eastern Ghats, speakers predominantly employ postverbal negators. In contrast, communities on the western side, including the northwestern zones of Singhbhum and Sundargarh and extending to the western and southern districts, primarily use preverbal negative particles. This contrast establishes negation as a key distinguishing characteristic among colloquial Odia varieties. Understanding these patterns requires a typologically informed approach that integrates morphosyntactic structure, geographical distribution, and the influence of language contact.

Foundational typological studies of South Asian languages, including Bloch (1934), Emeneau (1956, 3-16), and Masica (1976), have demonstrated that linguistic features can vary independently of genealogical affiliation. This variation has given rise to heterogeneous linguistic areas rather than uniform linguistic zones. Subsequent

research on language contact and areal typology⁶ has reinforced the view of South Asia as a region of sustained linguistic diversity and dynamic interaction. Within this framework, Peterson and Chevallier (2022) provide a systematic account of negation in South Asian languages. Their classification is based on a set of formal binary features of negation, from which four typological clusters emerge, allowing genealogical and areal tendencies to be observed. They argue that the similarities and differences in negation strategies across these clusters emerge from long-term contact, demonstrating the critical role of areal factors in shaping morphosyntactic patterns.

The present study situates the variation in Odia negation within the broader dynamics of regional contact, historical interaction, and areal diffusion. Odisha is home to numerous Austroasiatic tribal languages, particularly in the northern, western, and southern regions, as well as several Dravidian languages in select areas. Sustained interaction between Odia-speaking populations and speakers of these languages has persisted for centuries. The observed differences in negation, including postverbal strategies in Katakī, Baleswari, and Ganjami, and preverbal strategies in Singhbhumi, Sambalpuri, Sundargadi, Debagadia, and Desia/Koraputia, likely reflect both historical influence and contact-driven adaptation, as inferred from the synchronic analysis of the data.

This study represents an initial effort to examine such syntactic convergence and divergence in Odia negation. It highlights the interaction between internal structural tendencies and external sociolinguistic pressures. The coexistence of symmetric and asymmetric negation patterns across the Odia varieties suggests that multiple factors may underlie the morphosyntactic realisation of negation. While the present study identifies and describes these patterns, it does not attempt to determine the historical or contact-induced mechanisms responsible for their distribution. In particular, the question of why certain varieties employing preverbal negators maintain symmetric negation whereas others exhibit asymmetry requires a more detailed investigation of language contact and influence of linguistic area. Such an analysis lies beyond the scope of the present study and constitutes an important direction for future research of the authors. Future research will investigate how prolonged contact with neighbouring Austroasiatic, Dravidian, and other Indo-Aryan languages has shaped negation strategies in Odia. Such work will advance understanding of both the typology of negation and the processes of linguistic variation in South Asia,

⁶ See Abbi 1997, 131-48; Peterson 2010, 56-86; 2015, 149-62; 2017, 211-57; Ebert 1993, 83-110; 2006, 557-64; Saxena 2015; Osada 1991, 99-119; Bickel 2017, 40-54; Matras 2020.

illustrating how regional varieties balance structural uniformity with areal differentiation.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of eight Odia varieties demonstrates that negation strategies are systematically distributed across the state, shaped by both structural tendencies and areal factors. Eastern and northern varieties, including Katak, Baleswari, and Ganjami, predominantly employ post-verbal negators, which largely preserve the morphosyntactic structure of affirmative clauses, resulting in symmetric negation. Instances of asymmetric negation in these varieties occur primarily in specific tense-aspect-mood contexts, such as the present perfect and present progressive, where auxiliary loss is observed. In contrast, pre-verbal negation is dominant in the remaining varieties, Singhbhum, Sambalpur, Sundargarh, Debagarh, and Desia/Koraput, though its structural consequences vary. Singhbhum and Debagarh retain affirmative verbal morphology, exemplifying symmetric negation, whereas Sambalpur, Sundargarh, and Desia exhibit asymmetric negation, with the application of pre-verbal particles triggering systematic loss of tense, aspect, auxiliary, and agreement markers. The findings reveal variation in the form, position, and morphosyntactic properties of negative markers across the eight Odia varieties examined. In particular, the distribution of preverbal and postverbal negators and the occurrence of symmetric and asymmetric negation patterns exhibit distinct regional tendencies. Importantly, this study adopts a synchronic, areal perspective, documenting the contemporary distribution of negation strategies without reconstructing historical development. By focusing on present-day regional patterns, the analysis provides a synchronic account of the diversity of negation strategies across Odia varieties and the structural variation underlying symmetric and asymmetric negation. By systematically mapping symmetric and asymmetric negation across multiple regional varieties, this research contributes to the typological study of negation in Eastern Indo-Aryan languages, a domain that has received relatively limited attention. The findings underscore that negation in Odia functions as a significant marker of underlying linguistic convergence, divergence, and prolonged language contact. This work therefore advances our understanding of areal variation in South Asian languages and establishes a foundation for further comparative and contact-driven studies, illuminating how morphosyntactic structures interact with regional and social factors to shape language variation.

Abbreviations

1	1 st person
2	2 nd person
3	3 rd person
ACC	accusative
ASP	aspect
AUX	auxiliary
BLS	Baleswari
DAT	dative
DBG	Debagadia
DSA	Desia
FUT	future
GJM	Ganjami
IA	Indo-Aryan
INF	infinitive
KAT	Kataki
LOC	locative
NEG	negation
NOM	nominative
NONF	non-finite
NPRS	non-present
SBP	Sambalpur
SDG	Sundargadi
SNB	Singhbhumi
PERF	perfective
PL	plural
PNG	person-number-gender
PROG	progressive
PRS	present
PST	past
SG	singular
SN	standard negation
TAM	tense-aspect-mood

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Chinese Object Focus VdeO Cleft Sentences: A Corpus-Based Investigation

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Abstract This paper offers the first corpus-based study of the underexplored Chinese object-focus VdeO clefts (OFCs), which encode narrow focus on the object within a realized event. Using two large-scale corpora, we investigated their distribution with the 20 most frequent Chinese dynamic verbs, examining subject and object referents as well as focus patterns. Analyses show asymmetries in animacy, concreteness and referentiality, challenging earlier claims about object definiteness. OFCs predominantly convey non-contrastive focus, highlighting objects or supporting anaphoric recovery, while contrastive readings are infrequent and mostly implicit.

Keywords Chinese narrow-focus clefts. Object focus clefts. Focus realization. Semantic features. Corpus-based analysis.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Chinese VdeO Cleft Sentences: Theoretical Background. – 3 The Object Focus Cleft. – 3.1 How the Adjacency Effect Relates to Focus in OFCs. – 3.2 Syntactic and Semantic Constraints on OFCs. – 3.3 Definiteness and Referential Properties of the Object. – 3.4 How *shì* and *de* Shape the OFC. – 3.5 Focus Realization and Discourse Functions of OFCs. – 4 The Present Study: Research Questions. – 4.1 Data and Methodology. – 4.2 Data Coding. – 5 Data Analysis and Interpretation. – 5.1 Frequency and Distribution of OFCs. – 5.2 Object and Subject Types. – 5.3 Correlation Between Verbs and Focus Types in OFCs. – 5.4 Focus Interpretation and Discourse Contexts of OFCs. – 6 General Discussion and Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

Chinese “proper clefts” (Paul, Whitman 2008, 424) with VdeO order (henceforth PCs) have drawn considerable attention in Chinese linguistics because of their distinctive structural properties.¹ These sentences are not fully parallel to clefts in other languages, such as English (Hole, Zimmermann 2013), and exhibit language-specific constraints (Hole 2011) that give rise to unique restrictions on their distribution and use.

PCs are used to establish narrow focus by highlighting a specific constituent that conveys new information within an event that is presupposed in the discourse (Iurato 2024a). In these syntactically marked constructions, focus is signaled by the morpheme *shì* 是, typically positioned adjacent to the focused element, and by *de* 的, which occurs postverbally immediately before the object (Hole 2011; Liu 2023).

PCs can be classified into three main types, depending on which constituent carries the focus: subject focus clefts, adjunct focus clefts, and object focus clefts (OFCs), in which the subject, a preverbal adjunct, or the postverbal object is highlighted, respectively, as illustrated in (1) (Paul, Whitman 2008; Liu 2023).² The most salient difference among the three types is that, in OFCs, the focused constituent occurs postverbally rather than in the canonical position adjacent to *shì*, a distribution shaped by specific syntactic constraints (Luo 2009).

- 1 a. 我们是骑自行车去的图书馆。
women shì qí zìxíngchē qù de túshūguǎn
 1PL SHI ride bike go DE library
 ‘It was *by bike* that we went to the library.’
 (Zhao 1979, 58)

Both Authors contributed equally to the present work. In accordance with academic conventions, the specific contributions of each Author are detailed below. A. Iurato is responsible for Sections 1, 2, 3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.5.1, 3.5.2, 5.4. L. Locatelli is responsible for Sections 4, 4.1, 4.2, 5, 5.1, 5.2, 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.3, 6. Both Authors contributed to the writing, revision, and editing of the manuscript to an equal extent.

1 In this paper, the term ‘Chinese’ serves as a conventional abbreviation for ‘Standard Mandarin Chinese’. The glosses adhere to the guidelines of the Leipzig Glossing Rules, with the inclusion of *SP* = ‘structural particle’, *SHI* = ‘copular verb *shì* functioning as a focus marker’, *DE* = ‘sentence-final *de* in *shì...de* proper clefts’, *SFP* = ‘sentence final particle’.

2 Although the categories subject and object are theoretically problematic in Chinese (see Morbiato, Arcodia, Basciano 2020), this study adopts these labels following conventional descriptions of PCs. The term subject therefore refers to the preverbal, thematic constituent that functions as the participant initiating or carrying out the action, while object designates the postverbal element that undergoes or is affected by the event, whether direct, indirect, or locative in nature.

b. 是我去借的车。

shì wǒ qù jiē de chē
SHI 1SG go borrow DE car

‘It was *me* who went to borrow the car.’

(Zhao 1979, 59)

c. 张三是写的诗。

Zhāngsān shì xiě de shī
Zhangsan SHI write DE poem

‘It was *poems* that Zhangsan wrote.’

(Hole 2011, 1710)

Despite being a widely discussed topic in the literature, Chinese PCs remain notoriously challenging to analyze (Shyu 2015). Most studies conducted so far have adopted a generative approach (Cheng 2008; Paul, Whitman 2008; Hole 2011; Hole, Zimmermann 2013), while corpus-based research remains scarce. One notable exception is Xu (2014), who offered a general analysis of all studies involving the *shì...de* pattern, encompassing not only clefts but also copulative sentences with nominalization. Research from a pragmatic perspective is even more limited (e.g., Li 2008; Jing-Schmidt 2017).

What is clearly missing, then, is a comprehensive corpus-based perspective addressing focus realization within information structure and discourse contexts. Of the three main types of cleft constructions, existing literature focuses almost exclusively on adjunct-focus clefts, with only occasional attention to subject-focus clefts (e.g., Cheng 2008; Shyu 2015). OFCs, however, remain largely neglected: they are briefly mentioned in passing (e.g., Hole 2011; Long 2013), relegated to footnotes (e.g., Paul, Whitman 2008), and often absent from major reference grammars (Iurato 2024c). OFCs are the least explored cleft type both syntactically and in terms of information-structural interpretation, which contributes to difficulties in their recognition, comprehension, and use by both linguists and L2 learners of Chinese.

The present study addresses these gaps by offering the first large-scale corpus-based analysis of OFCs, examining their syntactic structure and the realization of focus within information structure and discourse contexts. As one of the few corpus-driven studies on Chinese clefts more broadly, it provides a systematic overview of this understudied construction. Based on large corpora of naturally occurring written data from L1 Chinese speakers, the study maps the distribution and usage patterns of OFCs, including verb-object co-occurrences, types of focus realized, and their potential correlations.

2 Chinese VdeO Cleft Sentences: Theoretical Background

Cleft constructions are widely regarded as a cross-linguistic strategy for signaling focus (Reeve 2013). They serve as tools for structuring information, typically exhibiting non-canonical word order and closely reflecting discourse-pragmatic organization (Hartmann, Veenstra 2013). In terms of information structure, clefts partition a sentence into a focused element, which introduces new information, and a presupposition encoding shared background knowledge (Halliday 1967; Lambrecht 1994; 2001). In English, this bipartition is realized in biclausal copular constructions, e.g., ‘It was in Paris that he fell in love’, where the cleft phrase (‘in Paris’) highlights new information against a presupposed event (‘he fell in love’) (Prince 1981). Across languages, clefts reorganize information structure in contrast to canonical orders, which rely on default syntax or prosody to encode focus (Lambrecht 2001; Hole, Zimmermann 2013).

In Chinese, this bipartite structure is implemented in VdeO clefts, usually organized as [NP1 *shì* Adv V-*de* NP2]. In this construction, *shì* serves both as a copula and as a focus marker, while the presupposed event is realized through a nominalized V-*de* clause (Hole, Zimmermann 2013). The constituent immediately following *shì* carries the cleft focus, highlighting new information, whereas the V-*de* headless relative clause represents presupposition, referring to information already established in the discourse (Long 2013).

By explicitly partitioning focus and presupposition, clefts represent a marked strategy for focus in Chinese, contrasting with canonical SVO sentences, where new information tends to appear clause-finally and receives default “end focus” (LaPolla 1990, 96). In unmarked SVO clauses, objects introducing new information generally occupy the sentence-final position, aligning naturally with this pattern. It is generally agreed that Chinese focus is associated with the postverbal domain: topical or presupposed elements occur preverbally, while focal elements appear postverbally (96-7). Thus, in canonical SVO sentences, focus gravitates to the clause-final slot and is highlighted prosodically, whereas clefts achieve prominence through structural partitioning. As a *wh*- and focus-in-situ language, Chinese also allows narrow focus to surface preverbally when a *wh*-element appears there, with presupposed material following the verb (Hole 2011; Paul 2015).

Within VdeO clefts, narrow focus can be syntactically realized only on NPs and PPs (Hole 2011). Focus is signaled by *shì*, which immediately precedes the focused element, while *de* appears postverbally before the object; their exact functions remain debated (see § 3.4). *Shì* can be omitted in some contexts, whereas *de* is obligatory (Cui, Sung 2021; Iurato 2024c). In terms of information structure, this construction allows the speaker to foreground a

constituent – in OFCs, the object of an event that has reached its endpoint in the past – against a presupposed background, making it a highly context-sensitive focus strategy (Iurato 2026).

3 The Object Focus Cleft

The following sections outline the key properties of OFCs. While some general features of PCs apply across all types (Paul, Whitman 2008; Hole 2011; Long 2013), the discussion here examines these phenomena from the perspective of OFCs, highlighting what is unique to this construction.

3.1 How the Adjacency Effect Relates to Focus in OFCs

Cross-linguistically, focus markers generally appear immediately before the constituent they highlight (Long 2013, 438). In Chinese, this generalization holds for subject and adjunct focus clefts, but it does not extend to OFCs. In the OFC pattern, the object – although it is the element that receives focus – remains in its postverbal position and is not fronted to a preverbal slot adjacent to *shì* (Hole 2011). The object's prominence is instead achieved prosodically rather than through linear adjacency to *shì* (Cheng 2008; Hole 2011).³

This differs from English *it*-clefts, where the phrase following the copula is normally the focus, typically a noun phrase (Reeve 2013). Chinese clefts – and OFCs in particular – exhibit a completely distinct structure. Long (2013) argues that PCs are biclausal copular constructions containing a headless relative clause nominalized by *de*. In such structures, the relative clause precedes the nominal head and occupies the position immediately adjacent to *shì*, while the focused object appears in its canonical postverbal slot. As a result, it is typically a subject or adjunct that appears next to the copula, providing the interpretive features needed to delimit the head noun. The adjacency effect in Chinese therefore targets a different syntactic domain from that of English clefts. Focus in OFCs is best conceived of as structurally, rather than linearly, encoded: the object may be embedded within the clause, while other constituents satisfy the adjacency condition. Long's account further underscores how cleft

³ One might tentatively suggest that the object is syntactically marked differently, being preceded by *-de* and no longer in the canonical verb-adjacent position. This is a plausible hypothesis, but it goes beyond the scope of the present study and is left for future investigation.

focus interacts with prosody and with the internal organization of relative clauses.

3.2 Syntactic and Semantic Constraints on OFCs

OFCs are subject to several types of restrictions. First, OFCs are subject to a series of TAM-related constraints. With respect to tense, they are incompatible with future-oriented temporal expressions or adverbials, since such elements would conflict with the presupposed nature of the event – an event understood as preceding the speech act (Iurato 2024c). Regarding aspect, the presuppositional component cannot host perfective markers (Liu 2023). Finally, as for modality, modal verbs are likewise excluded from the construction (Paul, Whitman 2008). Additionally, there are limitations on the semantic class of verbs: only dynamic verbs are allowed (Iurato 2024a).

Second, OFCs obey specific syntactic limitations. In Chinese, elements occurring in postverbal position, including objects, are resistant to clefting (Luo 2009). As a result, OFCs necessarily contain a postverbal object that itself cannot be clefted (Paul 2005; Hole 2011). According to Hole (2011, 1712), object focus arises through a postponed LF movement of the cleft-focus phrase after spell-out, which produces the characteristic configuration of OFCs.

3.3 Definiteness and Referential Properties of the Object

A key feature of OFCs is the requirement that the postverbal object be definite and specific in reference. Indefinite expressions such as the [one-CLF] pattern or combinations with the quantifier *jǐ* 几 (some) plus classifier are not acceptable in this context; the object requires clear definiteness marking, typically through a demonstrative (Cui, Sung 2021; Liu 2023). Long (2013) further argues that the object is not only definite but uniquely identifiable to both interlocutors, since it is anchored to a previously completed and discourse-accessible event. This anchoring to a completed, contextually recoverable situation ensures the object's strong referentiality, as it necessarily points back to a realized event preceding the speech time (Iurato 2024c). As a result, OFCs systematically encode events that are presupposed, completed, and temporally located prior to the utterance time.

3.4 How *shì* and *de* Shape the OFC

The functions of *shì* and *de* have been the subject of extensive debate. *Shì* is typically analyzed as a copula (Ross 1983; Cheng 2008; Paul, Whitman 2008), though some scholars treat it as an intensifying adverb (Han 2005) or a modal verb (Shi 1994). Following Hole (2011), Hole and Zimmermann (2013), Liu (2023), and Xu (2014), this study treats *shì* as a copula that also serves as a focus marker.

The role of *de* is even more contested. Since OFCs refer exclusively to past events, some studies (e.g., Song 1978; Simpson, Wu 2002) have proposed that *de* is an enclitic past-tense marker. However, this analysis is disputable, given that Chinese lacks a grammatical category of tense and instead relies on aspectual marking (Liu 2015). Others (e.g., Sugimura 1999; Liu 2023) interpret *de* as an aspectual marker, specifically as the anaphoric variant of the perfective marker *-le*. This study follows Iurato (2024c), who rejects this account on the grounds that the perfective interpretation of OFCs does not arise from *de* itself, but rather from the fact that the events described are already completed and presupposed, and therefore naturally precede the speech time.

The most widely endorsed view treats *de* as a nominalizer or relativizer of a headless relative clause (Hole 2011; Hole, Zimmermann 2013). In line with this perspective, we analyze OFCs as biclausal structures in which *de* nominalizes the presupposed event clause, while *shì* functions as a focus-marking copula. Although the object frequently appears post-*de* in these constructions, this ordering does not conflict with the nominalizing role of *de*: the post-*de* object contributes to the clause's referential content rather than serving as its internal head, reflecting the focus-driven reordering typical of cleft constructions (Long 2013). This analysis explains the perfective interpretation of OFCs by highlighting their characterization of completed and presupposed events; it also accounts for their past-time reading, since such events necessarily occur prior to the moment of utterance (Iurato 2026).

3.5 Focus Realization and Discourse Functions of OFCs

To date, no studies have provided a systematic or theoretically grounded account of the information-structural and discourse properties of OFCs. Since OFCs represent a subtype of PCs, the present discussion necessarily draws on the broader, albeit still limited, literature on PC focus interpretation. Existing accounts are heterogeneous and often only loosely connected to established focus-theoretical frameworks. Some studies (e.g., Shi 1994; Jing-Schmidt 2017) argue that PCs exclusively convey contrastive

focus, typically used to correct or clarify a prior assumption. Others (e.g., Li 2008) maintain that PCs may express either contrastive or non-contrastive focus. Xu (2014) proposes a more general emphatic function, suggesting that PCs serve as epistemic devices through which speakers signal stance or evaluation based on personal knowledge.

Following Iurato (2024c), this paper adopts the view that PCs, including OFCs, may express either contrastive or non-contrastive focus, consistent with the claim that clefts do not inherently encode contrastiveness (Rochemont 1986; Kiss 1998). The interpretation assigned to a cleft also depends on the notion of focus adopted, which varies considerably across theoretical frameworks. Given the lack of a coherent and empirically grounded account of focus realization in OFCs, the present study first establishes a working definition of focus for the purposes of this study and specifies the focus types guiding the subsequent analysis.

3.5.1 Defining Focus from an Information-Structure Perspective

Defining focus has long been a challenge, and no single account has gained universal acceptance. Within the information-structure literature (e.g., Jackendoff 1972; Rochemont 1986; Lambrecht 1994), focus is generally understood as the part of an utterance that conveys new or non-presupposed information. It corresponds to the element that the speaker chooses to highlight or foreground in order to direct the interlocutor's attention to it (Callies 2009). As such, the focal element represents the most salient piece of information in the communicative context – precisely the information through which the speaker pursues their communicative goals (Dik 1997).

Lambrecht's (1994, 213) pragmatic framework provides one of the most influential definitions of focus. According to him, focus is “the semantic component of a pragmatically structured position whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition” (Lambrecht 1994, 213). In Lambrecht's (1994, 52) words, the pragmatic assertion is “the proposition expressed by a sentence which the hearer is expected to know or take for granted as a result of hearing the sentence uttered”, whereas the pragmatic presupposition is “the set of propositions lexicogrammatically evoked in a sentence which the speaker assumes the hearer already knows or is ready to take for granted at the time the sentence is uttered”. Consequently, focus is defined as complementary to the presupposition, representing the portion of the utterance that conveys new or non-recoverable information to the listener. Crucially, focus cannot always be identified with a single constituent. As emphasized by Lambrecht (1994) and

Nikolaeva (2001), focality is not an inherent property of a referent but a relational category: it arises from the interaction between the utterance and its discourse context.

Focus can be further classified according to the scope of the focus domain. It is typically distinguished into three types: narrow focus, where the focus domain targets a single constituent (e.g., an object or an adjunct); predicate focus, where the focus domain encompasses the entire predicate; and sentence focus, where it extends to the whole clause (Lambrecht 2001). In the case of object focus clefts, given the intrinsic properties of PCs, the focus is necessarily narrow and targets only the object.

3.5.2 Contrastive and Non-Contrastive Focus

Focus has traditionally been considered contrastive (Garassino 2016, 192). However, numerous studies have shown that focus does not necessarily imply contrast, suggesting that contrast is not an inherent feature of focus (Halliday 1967; Kiss 1998; Rochemont 1986; Rooth 1992). Different taxonomies have been proposed to classify focus types (e.g., Vallduví, Vilkuna 1998). Among the most widely cited is the distinction between ‘information focus’ and ‘identification focus’ (Kiss 1998). For simplicity, this paper uses the general terms ‘contrastive’ focus and ‘non-contrastive focus’, depending on whether the focused element contrasts with other discourse-determined options. Contrastive focus involves a limited, identifiable set of alternatives, while non-contrastive focus involves an open set of potential referents (Callies 2009; Garassino 2016).

The concept of contrastiveness is central but debated. Halliday (1967, 206) defines contrastive as “contrary to some predicted or stated alternative”, while Chafe (1976) argues it requires: (i) background knowledge of the discourse, (ii) a limited set of plausible alternatives, and (iii) selection of one candidate to the exclusion of others. Repp (2010) similarly defines contrastiveness based on a closed, identifiable set of alternatives. However, as Kenesei (2006) points out, these conditions alone do not guarantee true contrastiveness. For a focus to be truly contrastive, it must satisfy the Exhaustiveness Condition – the focused constituent constitutes the complete set of entities determining the proposition’s truth – and the Exclusiveness Condition – only the focused entities determine the proposition’s truth, excluding all others (Chafe 1976; Declerck 1984; Kiss 1998). Sentences not meeting these conditions are non-contrastive.

Cleft sentences have traditionally been regarded as prototypically contrastive constructions (Declerck 1988; Lambrecht 2011). However, several studies have shown that they do not necessarily encode contrast (Prince 1978; Declerck 1984; König 1991; Kiss 1998;

Givón 2001). As noted by Miller (2006), cleft sentences may be either contrastive or non-contrastive, depending on the discourse context. This variability highlights the difficulty of determining when a focus should be analyzed as genuinely contrastive.

Contrastive focus is not merely a syntactic phenomenon: following Zimmermann (2008, 348), its interpretation depends on the speaker's assumptions about what the hearer considers likely or unlikely. Alternatives are therefore not only semantic (cf. Chafe 1976; Repp 2010) but also discourse-related, highlighting elements unexpected or in contrast with the hearer's presumed knowledge (see also Vallduví, Vilks 1998). Contrastive foci express a contrast between the information conveyed in asserting a constituent α and the hearer's assumed expectations, often using non-canonical grammatical forms to direct attention and update the common ground.

Contrastive focus can be explicit, occurring when syntactic or prosodic cues signal alternatives that are restricted and clearly defined within the communicative context (Biber et al. 1999; Garassino 2016), or implicit, when an identifiable set of alternatives is suggested but not overtly provided (Krifka 1999; Garassino 2016), or when the contrast arises purely from pragmatic inference and discourse context (Zimmermann 2008). Even when a focused element is syntactically identifiable, its contrastive interpretation may depend on background information, the alternatives the speaker assumes the hearer expects, or the speaker's intended emphasis (Zimmermann 2008). This aligns with Lambrecht's (1994, 58) principle that "focality is not a property of a referent as such but rather a relational category", emerging from the interaction between utterance and discourse context.

The interaction between contrastive focus and wh-questions illustrates these principles. In wh-questions and in their ordinary, informative answers, contrastive marking is typically absent, since the requested information is simply supplied and no contrast is intended. Contrastive focus emerges only in marked responses, such as corrections or unexpected answers, where the speaker explicitly challenges or revises the hearer's assumptions (Zimmermann 2008). In such cases, even answers to wh-questions can display contrastive marking, for instance to reject likely expectations, to signal that only a single individual satisfies the predicate, or to contrast the actual referent with an alternative previously assumed by the hearer (Zimmermann 2008).

In this study, we follow Zimmermann (2008), according to which contrastive focus targets information that is unexpected or that stands in contrast to the hearer's presumed knowledge, whether this contrast is made explicit in the discourse or only implicitly inferred.

Whenever the focused element does not activate such a contrastive interpretation, it is classified as non-contrastive focus.⁴

To account for non-contrastive focus, we adopt Korzen's (2014, 232) proposal, according to which it fulfils the basic function of marking the "original" focus. Its role is to direct the listener's attention to a specific piece of information concerning an event, which is completed in the OFC, without introducing any contrast.

Drawing on the literature (Berretta 1994; Zimmermann 2008), completive, anaphoric, and information-seeking functions are identified as key manifestations of non-contrastive focus in cleft constructions: (i) completive, to highlight a relevant aspect in order to complete or refine the set of information available to the interlocutor; (ii) anaphoric, to reintroduce previously mentioned information and restore it to discourse prominence; and (iii) information-seeking (typically in *wh*-questions), to request specific information about an event or element whose properties are not fully known.

In the present study (see § 5.4), these distinctions are not treated as independent theoretical categories, but are operationalized in the corpus analysis as three recurrent discourse contexts of OFCs: narrative-descriptive contexts (broadly corresponding to completive uses), anaphoric contexts, and *wh*-question contexts (corresponding to information-seeking uses).

The classification adopted in this study therefore integrates both focus interpretation and discourse context, allowing us to determine whether a given OFC instantiates contrastive or non-contrastive focus on the basis of its full contextual environment.

4 The Present Study: Research Questions

Given the aims and rationale outlined in Section 1, and in light of the existing literature and remaining gaps, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How are OFCs distributed across the 20 most frequent Chinese dynamic verbs, and which text type emerges as the dominant for their occurrence?

⁴ A full understanding of communicative purposes and focus often requires attention to the prosodic level. Many studies of clefts have examined prosody, as pitch accent and intonation provide key cues, signaling a contextually salient set of alternatives (Bolinger 1961; Rooth 1992) and helping distinguish contrastive from non-contrastive focus, especially when syntactic or morphological markers are absent. However, this aspect lies beyond the scope of the present study, which is based on written data and does not analyze prosodic features.

- RQ2: What semantic and referential properties characterize the object and subject found in OFCs, and how do these features correlate with the verbs that occur in the construction?
- RQ3: Are OFCs predominantly used to convey contrastive or non-contrastive focus, and is there a correlation between the type of focus realized and the verbs used?

4.1 Data and Methodology

Before examining which dynamic verbs can occur in OFCs, we identified the 20 most frequently used dynamic verbs in Chinese.⁵ Frequency information was obtained from two sources: the Wiktionary frequency lists (1-1,000 words),⁶ based on consolidated corpora (Bajčetić, Declerck 2022), and the Chinese Toolbox, which generates frequency data from the Sinica Balanced Corpus of Modern Chinese.⁷ Combining these sources allowed us to identify a representative set of high-frequency dynamic verbs that reflect common usage in naturally occurring Chinese texts.

The selected verbs were then classified according to the semantic verb classes identified by Levin (1993). In a few cases, the classification was slightly adjusted to better reflect the verbs' meaning and usage in contemporary Chinese. Specifically, verbs of creation such as *zuò* 做 (make/do) were retained in their original category, whereas verbs like *xiě* 写 (write) and *chàng* 唱 (sing), originally listed under message transfer or manner-of-speaking verbs in Levin's framework, were reclassified as creation verbs, as they involve producing a concrete output (Chang, Chen, Huang 2000). Likewise, *zuò* 坐 (take a vehicle), which Levin (1993) categorizes as a verb of motion using a vehicle, was reassigned to instrumental locomotion verbs, following Chang, Chen and Huang (2000), since the agent undergoes motion while the object denotes the instrument enabling the movement. Table 1 presents the 20 selected verbs along with their adapted taxonomy used in this study.

5 The decision to limit the analysis to a controlled set of 20 high-frequency dynamic verbs was motivated by methodological considerations. A broad corpus query using a general pattern such as '是 V 的 O' would have generated a large number of heterogeneous and often irrelevant results, including constructions that fall outside the operational definition of OFCs adopted in this study. To avoid this noise and ensure analytical consistency, we therefore opted for a restricted, frequency-based selection of verbs rather than a fully corpus-driven extraction.

6 For the Wiktionary frequency lists, see: <https://www.wiktionary.org/>.

7 For the Chinese Toolbox, which provides frequency data from the Sinica Balanced Corpus of Modern Chinese, see: <https://asbc.iis.sinica.edu.tw/>.

Table 1 Dynamic verbs selected for OFC analysis

Verb	Semantic verb class
1. <i>chī</i> 吃 (eat)	Verbs of ingesting
2. <i>hē</i> 喝 (drink)	
3. <i>zuò</i> 做 (make/do)	Verbs of creation
4. <i>xiě</i> 写 (write)	
5. <i>chàng</i> 唱 (sing)	Verbs of transfer of message
6. <i>wèn</i> 问 (ask)	
7. <i>mǎi</i> 买 (buy)	Verbs of change of possession
8. <i>mài</i> 卖 (sell)	
9. <i>gěi</i> 给 (give)	Learn verbs
10. <i>xué</i> 学 (study)	
11. <i>kàn</i> 看 (read)	Verbs of perception
12. <i>tīng</i> 听 (listen)	
13. <i>ná</i> 拿 (take/hold)	Verbs of carrying
14. <i>dài</i> 带 (carry/bring/take along)	
15. <i>lái</i> 来 (come)	Verbs of motion
16. <i>qù</i> 去 (go)	
17. <i>zǒu</i> 走 (walk)	
18. <i>jìn</i> 进 (enter)	
19. <i>zuò</i> 坐 (take a vehicle)	Instrumental locomotion verbs
20. <i>zhǎo</i> 找 (search/look for)	Verbs of searching

After selecting the verbs, we isolated the sample using two large-scale, annotated, genre-balanced Chinese corpora, comparable in size and diversity, supporting robust cross-corpus comparison. On the one hand, the BCC corpus offers multi-genre materials, including academic texts, newspapers, literature, and social media,⁸ while the zhTenTen Simplified Chinese corpus, available on Sketch Engine, provides web-based language from forums, commercial sites, and social media.⁹

For each of the 20 verbs listed above, we extracted a sample of 600 sentences from each corpus, using queries targeting the verb within a OFC, such as *shì chī de* 是吃的. We intentionally excluded more complex queries with part-of-speech tags in which the construction is immediately followed by a noun, as is commonly the case in OFCs, since this would have limited our ability to observe a wider range of structural patterns. When fewer than 600 sentences were available for a given verb, the full set of available sentences was included.

⁸ The BCC corpus is accessible at: <https://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/>.

⁹ The zhTenTen Simplified Chinese corpus is accessible at: <https://www.sketchengine.eu/zhtenten-chinese-corpus/>.

The final dataset therefore comprises 13,176 sentences in total, also including their immediate context, with 2,209 from the BCC and 10,967 from the zhTenTen.

The next step consisted of an in-depth data cleaning process. During this stage, we independently isolated only those instances that qualified as OFCs, reaching an inter-rater agreement of $\kappa = .93$. The resulting cleaned dataset, which forms the basis of the analyses presented in this study, includes 4,585 sentences, with 1,653 from the BCC and 2,932 from the zhTenTen.

4.2 Data Coding

For the analyses, the final dataset was fully annotated along four main dimensions: object, subject, focus, and text type. Regarding the first two, NPs functioning as objects and subjects in each OFC were annotated for animacy and concreteness, two semantic properties that capture, respectively, the extent to which a referent is perceived as alive and sentient (Comrie 1989), and the degree to which it can be experienced through the five senses (Brysbaert, Warriner, Kuperman 2014). Following Locatelli (2026), both properties were treated as continuous, rather than categorical. In particular, animacy was calculated as the mean of four components: ‘being alive’, ‘looking like a human’, ‘having mobility’, and ‘having agency’, each coded on a binary scale, with 1 indicating the absence and 2 the presence of the feature. For example, *shípín* 食品 (food) scores 1 on all four factors, yielding an average of 1, which corresponds to complete inanimacy. By contrast, *rénmen* 人们 (people) scores 2 across all dimensions, reflecting not only full animacy, but also humanness. Similarly, concreteness values were derived from the mean ratings in Brysbaert, Warriner and Kuperman (2014), which range from 1 (highly abstract) to 5 (highly concrete). Each subject and object referent in our sample was assigned the rating of its English lexical counterpart.¹⁰ For instance, the object NP *niúnnǎi* 牛奶, corresponding to the English term ‘milk’ in the dataset, received a concreteness rating of 4.9, indicating a highly concrete entity.

In addition, since previous research has shown that referentiality plays a crucial role in Chinese clefts (see Hole 2011; Iurato 2024a), each object and subject was also annotated for this property.

10 As discussed by Locatelli (2026), while translation-based annotation is not without its limitations, it was adopted here because no comprehensive Chinese datasets are available that are comparable to the English norms by Brysbaert, Warriner, and Kuperman (2014). Accordingly, each NP was translated for annotation with attention to maintaining its contextual meaning, thereby minimizing potential ambiguities deriving from polysemy.

Following Chen (2009), linguistic referentiality is understood as not only a semantic notion but fundamentally a pragmatic one: beyond signaling the existence of an entity in its decontextualized meaning, referential expressions are primarily used speaker-dependently to track or identify an entity within the universe of discourse. Therefore, annotation proceeded in two stages. We first assigned referential values on the basis of grammatical form, relying on categories commonly treated as referential, and consequently definite or indefinite, or non-referential in the literature (see Chen 2004; Jiang 2015). Proper names, personal pronouns, and NPs introduced by demonstratives were classified as definite (*def*), while numeral constructions – including those with *yī* 一 (one), *xiē* 些 (some) – as well as bare NPs were provisionally classified as indefinite (*indef*). In a second step, we examined each OFC in its immediate discourse context to identify cases in which expressions that appeared indefinite based on form alone in fact referred to a specific, discourse-presupposed entity. These instances were therefore reclassified accordingly.

As for the focus dimension, each sentence in the corpus was analyzed individually within its full discourse context to determine whether it conveyed contrastive or non-contrastive focus, according to the notion of contrastivity outlined in Section 3.5.2. In addition, for each instance, we coded whether the focus was explicit, signaled by syntactic or morphological markers, or implicit, inferred from the pragmatic and contextual cues in the discourse.

Finally, each concordance line was annotated for text type, understood as the genre in which the OFC occurs. The annotation followed a combined top-down and bottom-up procedure. When available, we first relied on the genre labels supplied in the corpora metadata – academic (A; *xuéshù* 学术), literary (L; *wénxué* 文学), newspaper (N; *xīnwén* 新闻), and social media (S; *shèjiāo méitǐ* 社交媒体). These initial categories were then refined and expanded to include administrative-institutional (AD; *xíngzhèng guāngfāng* 行政官方) and informational-technology (IT; *xìnxī jìshù* 信息技术) texts.

5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents the results of the analysis of OFCs. It begins by describing their overall frequency and distribution. The analysis then examines the distribution of object and subject types, followed by the relationship between verbal categories and focus types. Finally, it considers the discourse contexts in which OFCs occur and their contribution to focus interpretation.

5.1 Frequency and Distribution of OFCs

The distribution of OFCs exhibits clear verb-level asymmetries. Across both corpora, *zǒu* emerges as the most frequent verb, followed closely by *zuò* in the zhTenTen and *mǎi* in the BCC. In the BCC, besides *zuò*¹¹, which ranks fifth overall, other high-frequency verbs include *kàn*, *qù*, *chàng*, and *xiě*. A similar pattern is observed in the zhTenTen, with all these verbs occupying top positions in the frequency ranking. Notably, *lái* is entirely absent from OFCs in both corpora, distinguishing it sharply from its motion counterpart *qù*, which appears consistently in both datasets. Other verbs are also generally infrequent in OFCs across both corpora, including *tīng* and *wèn*. Conversely, several display more divergent patterns, like *jìn* and *dài*, which appear rarely in the zhTenTen, whereas *xué* and *zhǎo* are scarce or absent in the BCC. In particular, *zhǎo* is unattested in the BCC but ranks as the fourth most frequent verb in the zhTenTen, suggesting corpus-specific differences in the deployment of certain verbs. However, a Spearman correlation analysis of verb-wise OFC frequencies revealed a significant positive association between the two corpora ($\rho = .647$, $p = .002$), indicating that the relative ranking of verbs is largely consistent despite overall frequency differences. This suggests a stable distributional pattern of OFCs, with high-frequency items primarily associated with verbs of motion and creation, while verbs denoting perception or change of possession display greater variability across corpora. Table 2 presents the normalized frequencies of OFCs by verb.¹²

Table 2 Frequency of OFCs by verb

Verb	BCC	zhTenTen	Verb	BCC	zhTenTen
1. <i>chàng</i> 唱	0.776	2.3464	11. <i>ná</i> 拿	0.339	0.8408
2. <i>chī</i> 吃	0.533	2.0865	12. <i>qù</i> 去	1.163	3.0377
3. <i>dài</i> 带	0.194	0.5941	13. <i>wèn</i> 问	0.097	0.8609
4. <i>gěi</i> 给	0.097	0.8592	14. <i>tīng</i> 听	0.145	0.6337
5. <i>hē</i> 喝	0.582	0.9602	15. <i>xué</i> 学	0.097	2.2031
6. <i>jìn</i> 进	0.145	0.2844	16. <i>xiě</i> 写	0.679	2.3315

11 Since the characters 做 and 坐 share the same pinyin and tone, they are distinguished in the text as *zuò1* and *zuò2*, respectively. In the figures, due to technical limitations in R Studio (ver. 2025.09.1+401) that prevent tone-marking, the two verbs appear simply as *zuo1* and *zuo2*. The same applies to *mǎi* 买 and *mài* 卖 which, despite differing in tone, are shown in the graphs in atonal pinyin as *mai1* and *mai2*.

12 The frequencies reported represent estimated occurrences, calculated based on the cleaned sample of OFCs and adjusted proportionally to reflect the total number of concordances in the corpus. To enable comparison across corpora of different sizes, all frequency values were normalized to a standard base of 1,000,000 tokens.

Verb	BCC	zhTenTen	Verb	BCC	zhTenTen
7. kàn 看	1.260	2.5305	17. zuò 做	1.018	6.1719
8. lái 来	0.000	0.0000	18. zuò 坐	0.436	2.5165
9. mǎi 买	1.309	5.9415	19. zǒu 走	1.939	6.8845
10. mài 卖	0.145	1.0216	20. zhǎo 找	0.000	3.2909

Despite the positive correlation between verb rankings in the two corpora, OFCs' normalized frequencies differ substantially. A paired t-test on verb-wise frequencies confirms this tendency, showing that OFCs occur significantly more often in the zhTenTen than in the BCC ($t(19) = 4.83$, $p < .001$), with a mean difference of 1.72 per million (95% CI: 0.98-2.47). Verb-specific z-scores reinforce this pattern: *zuò1* ($z = 1.92$), *zǒu* ($z = 1.66$), *zhǎo* ($z = 1.81$), and *mǎi* ($z = 1.72$) are strongly overrepresented in the zhTenTen, whereas only a few verbs, including *hē*, *jìn*, and *dài*, show minimal divergence ($z < 1$). These findings indicate that, although the relative rank of verbs is largely preserved, the larger size and greater diversity of the zhTenTen contribute to systematically higher frequencies. Unlike the BCC, which is smaller and less varied, the zhTenTen encompasses a broad range of web-based texts – forums, commercial sites, social media, and IT/informational registers – enhancing the likelihood of capturing OFCs. This pattern is also evident in Figure 1, which clearly shows that the distribution of OFCs by verb across different text types is markedly more heterogeneous in the zhTenTen compared to the BCC.

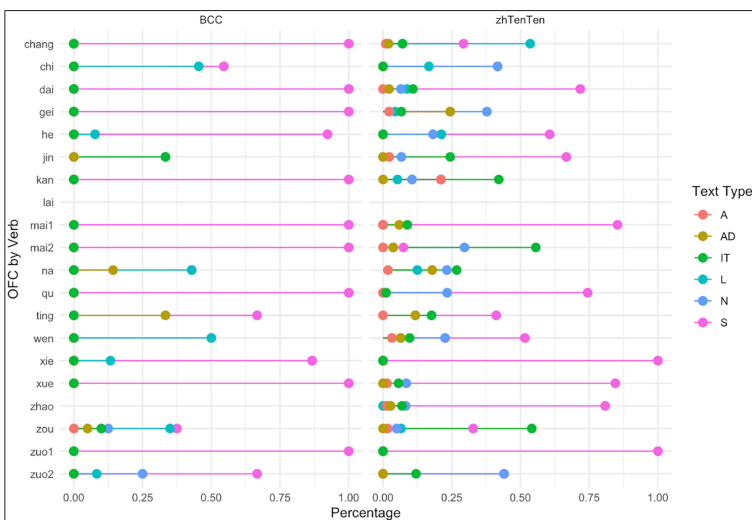


Figure 1 Verb-wise distribution of OFCs across text types. Chart created by the Authors

Although OFCs show greater overall dispersion in the zhTenTen, text-type analysis points to a clear similarity between the two corpora. In both datasets, OFCs are primarily attested in social media (S), reflecting their preference for more colloquial and informal registers. This pattern is confirmed by a chi-square test on the overall distribution of text types, which revealed no significant differences between the corpora ($X^2 = 5.17$, $df = 5$, $p = .396$), and further reinforced by a chi-square comparison contrasting social media with all other text types (S vs. NonS), which also showed no significant difference ($X^2 = 1.59$, $df = 1$, $p = .21$). These results indicate that, despite differences in absolute frequencies and the broader coverage of the zhTenTen, OFCs for most verbs are predominantly found in genres resembling spoken, informal communication, thereby underscoring a core characteristic of this structure and supporting previous research on Chinese PCs (see Iurato 2024b; Mai, Yuan 2016).

5.2 Object and Subject Types

To assess the semantic and referential properties of both subjects and objects in terms of animacy, concreteness, and referentiality, descriptive statistics – including means, standard deviations, and ranges – were computed for each parameter. While verb-specific variability is analyzed in the following subsections, this section focuses on potential differences between the two arguments across the three annotated parameters.

Results show a clear asymmetry: subjects are overwhelmingly animate, mostly human (mean animacy = 1.89, $SD = 0.21$), moderately concrete (mean = 3.35, $SD = 0.28$), and highly referential (mean = 1.00, $SD = 0.02$), indicating highly identifiable discourse entities. Objects are largely inanimate (mean animacy = 1.06, $SD = 0.11$), slightly more concrete on average (mean = 3.96, $SD = 0.58$), and exhibit greater variability in concreteness and referentiality (mean reference = 0.83, $SD = 0.28$). All differences are statistically significant, confirming systematic semantic and referential distinctions between NP1 and NP2 in OFCs.

Importantly, these patterns are consistent across corpora. In both the zhTenTen and BCC, subjects remain highly animate, moderately concrete, and strongly referential, whereas objects are inanimate, concrete, and moderately referential. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests confirm that differences between NP1 and NP2 are statistically significant for all three parameters in both corpora.

A preliminary verb-level analysis further clarifies these patterns. Some verbs, including *hē*, *mǎi*, *mài*, *qù*, *tīng*, and *zuò2*, show nearly uniform NP1 animacy, whereas others, like *jìn*, *xiě*, and *zǒu*, display higher variability (SDs 0.36-0.57, ranges up to 0.8). Object properties

are generally more variable, especially for referentiality and concreteness, as seen with verbs like *gěi*, *tīng*, and *xué*, whereas verbs such as *chàng* and *zǒu* select NP2s that are more consistently concrete and low in referentiality. Figure 2 illustrates these subject-object differences across all three parameters for each verb.

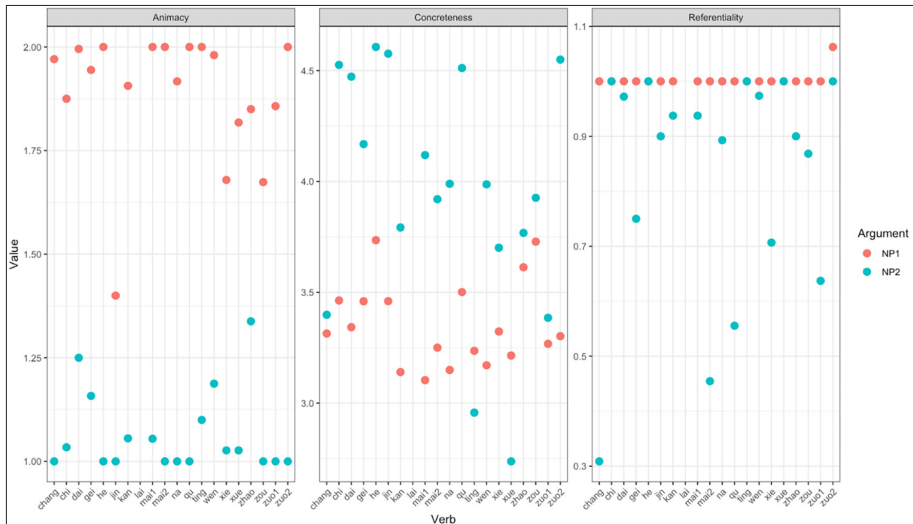


Figure 2 Animacy, concreteness, and referentiality of subjects and objects in OFCs per verb. Chart created by the Authors. As described in Section 4.2, the values for animacy and concreteness represent mean scores, ranging from 1 to 2, and 1 to 5, respectively. For referentiality, the figure depicts the proportion of referential entities for each verb, scaled from 0 to 1

5.2.1 Object Types in OFCs

We begin the verb-level analysis from the object, the core argument in an OFC. A series of ANOVAs reveals that the nature of the object differs significantly across verbs for two of the three annotated parameters. Concreteness ($F = 22.64$, $p < 2e-16$) and referentiality ($F = 9.718$, $p < 2e-16$) show strong verb-dependent variation, whereas animacy does not ($F = 1.204$, $p = .273$). This indicates that, although verbs differ markedly in the kinds of entities they select with respect to abstractness and referential status, they tend to select objects with comparable levels of animacy.

As the only parameter that does not vary significantly across verbs, animacy shows a remarkable degree of stability within OFCs, with values consistently cluster around 1, corresponding to fully inanimate entities. Most verbs exhibit no internal variability ($SD = 0$), underscoring the uniformity of this dimension. Examples

(2) and (3) clearly illustrate this pattern.¹³ In (2), the verb *hē* selects the inanimate object *zhè-kuǎn nǎifěn* 这款奶粉 (this formula/milk powder), while in (3), the verb *zuò* similarly takes the inanimate NP2 *huǒchē* 火车 (train), aligning perfectly with the general tendency of OFCs to feature entities that completely lack animacy as their objects.

- 2 推荐英国牛栏奶粉, 我家宝宝段奶后一直都是喝的这款奶粉, 在百儿母婴商城网站代购的。(zhTenTen)

wǒ	jiā	bǎobao	duànnǎi	hòu	yīzhí	dōu
1SG	family	baby	wean	after	always	all
shì	hē	de	zhè-kuǎn	nǎifěn		
SHI	hē	DE	this-CLF	formula		

‘I recommend Cow & Gate milk powder from the UK. Ever since my baby was weaned, it has been this formula that he has always drunk, which we bought through the Bai’er Mother & Baby online store.’

- 3 这辈子还没坐过飞机, 就连玩意大利也是坐的火车。(BCC)

jiù	lián	wán	Yìdàlì	yě	shì	zuò	de	huǒchē
ADV	even	play	Italy	also	SHI	take	DE	train

‘I’ve never flown in my life; even when I went to Italy, it was the train that I took.’

However, a small subset of verbs allows for animate NP2s. One notable example is the verb *dài*, which can take humans as objects when the action involves physically accompanying or guiding someone. In (4) the speaker uses *dài* to indicate that they brought two professors along on a tour, selecting a fully animate and human object, i.e., *liǎng-ge jiàoshòu* 两个教授.

- 4 导游李萍是个非常不错的小姑娘, 讲解很熟练, 历史知识也非常丰富, 我是带的两个教授去的, 教授对小李的讲解都竖大拇指, 非常好。(zhTenTen)

wǒ	shì	dài	de	liǎng-ge	jiàoshòu	qù	de
1SG	SHI	bring.along	DE	two-CLF	professor	go	SFP

‘The tour guide Li Ping is a really excellent young lady. Her explanations are very skilled, and her knowledge of history is extremely rich. It was two professors that I brought along, and they both gave Li a thumbs-up for her explanations – absolutely fantastic.’

¹³ From this point onward, examples present the OFCs together with their immediate surrounding context. For the sake of clarity and economy of presentation, interlinear glosses are provided only for the OFC itself.

A similar pattern is observed with dative verbs such as *wèn* and *gěi*, which, in addition to taking a direct object, typically include an indirect object representing the recipient of the action (Chin 2010). Unlike the direct NP, which commonly denotes the thing being acted upon, the indirect object in ditransitive constructions is typically animate, as only sentient entities are able to receive. In (5) illustrates this, with *shūshu* 叔叔 (uncle) satisfying the semantic requirement of the verb for a sentient recipient. Interestingly, *Siri* – though not biologically animate – is also treated here as capable of receiving the action, acquiring animacy for the speaker.

5 你是问的叔叔还是Siri啊? (BCC)

nǐ shì wèn de shūshu háishi Siri a
2SG SHI ask DE uncle or Siri SFP
'Is it your uncle or Siri that you asked?'

In contrast to animacy, verbs exhibit considerable variability in the concreteness of their objects. Some verbs show strong internal homogeneity, such as *chàng* (SD = 0), *xiě* (SD = 0.174), and *xué* (SD = 0), whereas others permit a much broader range of object types, including *chī* (SD = 1.89), *mài* (SD = 2.12), and *zuò* (SD = 1.47). Across all verbs, mean concreteness values span from 2.6 to 4.8, indicating that objects in OFCs vary from relatively abstract to highly concrete. The verb *xué* consistently selects the least concrete objects (mean = 2.6 in the BCC; 2.8 in zhTenTen), immediately followed by *tīng* (mean = 2.6 in the BCC; 3.2 in zhTenTen). Examples are provided in (6) and (7).

6 省长很宽容地笑了笑, “我也是学的物理专业, 但以后这三十年, 我都差不多忘光了”。(BCC)

wǒ yě shì xué de wùlǐ zhuānyè
1SG also SHI study DE physics major
'The governor smiled tolerantly. "It was physics that I also majored in, but over the past thirty years, I've pretty much forgotten it all".'

7 刚好教练以前是4S店上班的, 所以当时每次选的几款车也是听的他建议。(zhTenTen)

yě shì tīng de tā de jiànyì
also SHI listen DE 3SG SP advice
'Coincidentally, my instructor used to work at a 4S dealership so, when selecting a few models, it was his advice that I followed.'

While verbs such as *zuò1*, *xiě*, *kàn*, and *chàng* tend to select NP2s of moderate concreteness in OFCs, a small subset of predicates stands out for their strong preference for highly concrete objects. Among these, the motion verbs *qù* and *jìn* (mean = 4.4 and 4.8 in the BCC; 4.5 and 4.3 in zhTenTen, respectively), as well as the instrumental locomotion verb *zuò2* (mean = 4.6 in the BCC; 4.5 in zhTenTen), typically combine with locative objects denoting physically bounded places or tangible means of transport. As such, these NP2s consistently show a high degree of concreteness, as in (8).

- 8 汪永富第一次找尤金是去的办公室, 这一次求人心切, 等不及尤金上班, 直接闯到他的家里去。(BCC)
- Wāng.Yǒngfù dìyī-cì zhǎo Yóujīn shì qù de bàngōngshì
Wang.Yongfu first-time look.for Youjin SHI go DE office
- ‘The first time Wang Yongfu went to look for You Jin, it was in his office that he went. But this time, anxious to ask for help and unable to wait for You Jin to go to work, he went straight to his home.’

By contrast, the other motion verb *zǒu* exhibits a more heterogeneous profile. Although it does select relatively concrete objects – such as *qiánmén* 前门 (the front gate) (BCC) or *zhè-tiáo lù* 这条路 (this road) (zhTenTen) – it also occurs frequently in figurative uses where the NP2 denotes not a physical location but a metaphorical path or conceptual orientation. Representative examples include *shèhuìzhǔyì dàolù* 社会主义道路 (the socialist path) (zhTenTen) and ROCK *fēnggé* 风格 (a rock style) (BCC).

The final parameter, referentiality, demonstrates a pronounced preference for definite and discourse-identifiable NP2s, with an internal proportion often exceeding 80% of total occurrences for a given verb. While personal pronouns are nearly absent in the dataset, some NP2s appear as proper names, which unambiguously signal an identifiable referent shared by both interlocutors, as illustrated in (9).

- 9 认识钟医生11年了, 生大宝的时候产检, 生产都是看的钟医生。(zhTenTen)
- chǎnjiǎn shēngchǎn dōu shì kàn de Zhōng Yīshēng
check.up delivery all SHI look.for DE Zhong doctor
- ‘I have known Dr. Zhong for eleven years. When I had my first child, it was Dr. Zhong that I saw for all my prenatal check-ups and the delivery.’

A frequent case of explicit semantic definiteness is also represented by NP2s introduced by demonstratives. For verbs such as *chī*, *hē*, *mǎi*, *wèn*, *zuò2*, and *jìn*, demonstrative-marked NP2s account for between 25% and 70% of all occurrences. As Chen (2004) argues, a demonstrative functions as a determiner of definiteness, often serving

a deictic role by locating and identifying entities with respect to the spatio-temporal context of the discourse. Example (10) illustrates this pattern, where the object *zhè-ge chá* 这个茶 (this tea) provides a specific, identifiable referent for the action of drinking.

- 10 《铁齿铜牙纪晓岚4》乾隆到柳树沟找梅香姑娘就是喝的这个茶。(zhTenTen)

jiù shì hē de zhè-ge chá
ADV SHI drink DE this-CLF tea

‘In “Iron Teeth Bronze Teeth Ji Xiaolan 4”, when Emperor Qianlong goes to Liushu Gou to look for the girl Meixiang, it is this tea that he drinks.’

Most objects, however, do not fall into explicit categories that unambiguously signal definiteness, as discussed in Section 4.2. Nevertheless, 43% of NP2s are still annotated as definite because they consist of nouns modified by nominal determiners that uniquely or specifically identify the referent in context. These modifiers function similarly to demonstratives by restricting the reference of the noun to a single entity or type within the discourse. In (11), the object *pèngpèngchē zhuānyòng jiàzhào* 碰碰车专用驾照 (bumper car license) is interpreted as definite, because the modifiers preceding *jiàzhào* 驾照 (car license) restrict its reference to a single, contextually identifiable type of license, known to both the interlocutors.

- 11 车都冒烟了还不停, 难道这哥们是拿的碰碰车专用驾照?(BCC)

nándào zhè gēmen shì ná de pèngpèngchē zhuānyòng jiàzhào
could.it.be this guy SHI bring DE bumper.car special license

‘The car was smoking and still didn’t stop, could it be that this guy actually got a bumper car license?’

In instances where the object is realized as a bare NP, contextual information was essential for annotating it as definite, indefinite, or non-referential. In research on Chinese language, it is well-known that bare NPs are typically non-identifiable when appearing postverbally (see Chen 2004). However, Cummins (1998, 578) argues that bare nouns in sentence-final positions are generally interpreted as definite only when the entity is “at hand in context or in memory”. In the vast majority of cases examined in this study, bare NP objects were annotated as definite, because the discourse context rendered the referent uniquely identifiable. For example, the OFC in (12) introduces the object *mǐxiàn* 米线 (rice noodles), establishing a clear discourse anchor, in which (i) the noodles in question are those served at that specific restaurant on that morning, (ii) they are already familiar to the speaker or listener within the ongoing narrative, and (iii) no other competing referents exist within the local discourse context. In this

case, the bare NP object achieves definiteness through pragmatic and contextual cues.

- 12 点了在旅游书上面介绍的几个凤凰的特色菜，还比较喜欢那个“血粑烧鸭”，他们那的糍粑都是黑黑的，好像是用鸭血裹了的！早上在那里当然是吃的米线，感觉没有以前学校旁边的“湖南米线”够味，不过他们的“马子”好多。
(zhTenTen)

zǎoshang zài nàlǐ dāngrán shì chī de mǐxiàn
morning at there of.course SHI eat DE rice.noodle

‘I ordered several of Phoenix’s specialty dishes featured in the travel guide, and I especially liked the ‘blood rice cake roasted duck’. Their rice cakes are all dark in color, as if coated in duck blood! In the morning, of course, it was rice noodles that we had there. They didn’t taste as flavorful as the ‘Hunan rice noodles’ near my school, but they had plenty of ‘mazi’ (a type of topping).’

However, despite the overwhelmingly high proportion of definite objects – a pattern broadly consistent with theoretical accounts describing PC objects as typically definite and uniquely identifiable in discourse – the presence of a non-negligible subset of indefinite or non-referential NP2s complicates this picture. Rather than supporting an absolute definiteness requirement, our data suggest that object definiteness in OFCs constitutes a strong but not obligatory tendency, subject to verb-specific and discourse-pragmatic variation. Notably, a smaller group of verbs, including *chàng* (SD = 69.7%), *mài* (69.2%), *xiě* (69.7%), and *ná* (69.9%), displays more balanced distributions across referential categories, indicating that, alongside definite objects, a substantial number of NP2s are indefinite or non-referential. This is particularly evident where the object is realized as a numeral construction, as in (13), where the verb *ná* introduces a quantity-denoting NP2 that refers to portions of money rather than a specific, identifiable entity:

- 13 那边的条件是：两个人一百元，伙食在外。我一直是拿的六十，那个人拿四十。
(BCC)

wǒ yīzhí shì ná de liùshí
1SG always SHI take DE sixty

‘The conditions over there were: two people, 100 yuan, with meals eaten outside. It was 60 that I always took, and the other person took 40.’

Numeral constructions are attested across nearly all verbs analyzed, albeit representing only a small proportion of NP2s. More striking, however, is the relatively high frequency of objects containing question words such as *shénme* 什么 or *nǎ* 哪 both in the meaning of ‘which’. The objects they select are not a specific, identifiable referent within the discourse; rather, they function to query or highlight a

class of possible entities without committing to a particular one, thereby designating non-referential entities. As Li and Thompson (1989) note, such interrogative pronouns stand for an NP that is unknown to at least one of the interlocutors, a type of object whose existence is presupposed but whose identity is not uniquely specified, in Karttunen's (1977) terms. Examples (14) and (15) illustrate this behavior. In (14), the verb *chàng* takes *nǎ yī-chū* 哪一出 (which act) as its object, leaving the referent underspecified, as the speaker does not know the exact act being performed. Similarly, in (15), *xiě* selects *shénme hútu shī* 什么糊涂诗 (which foolish poems), whereas again *zuò* selects *shénme hútu shì* 什么糊涂事 (which foolish deeds), with both cases referring to objects that are not uniquely identifiable in the discourse.

- 14 其实, 车云菌刚拿到该文时也是一头雾水, 不知魏建军这次又是唱的哪一出?
(zhTenTen)

bù	zhī	Wèi	Jiànjūn	zhè-cì	yòu	shì	chàng
NEG	know	Wei	Jianjun	this-time	again	SHI	sing
de	nǎ	yī-chū					
DE	which	one-CLF					

'Actually, when Cheyunjun first received the article, they were completely baffled and didn't know which was the act that Wei Jianjun was performing this time.'

- 15 只怜云外客, 泪里画红笺.....我那是写的什么糊涂诗, 做的什么糊涂事啊!
(zhTenTen)

wǒ	nà	shì	xiě	de	shénme	hútu	shī	zuò	de	shénme
1SG	there	SHI	write	DE	which	foolish	poem	do	DE	which
	hútu	shì	a							
	foolish	deed	SFP							

'I can only pity the guest from beyond the clouds, painting red notes with tears... What foolish poems was it that I wrote there, what foolish deeds was it that I did!'

Figure 3 visualizes the variability of referentiality in OFCs. While definite objects clearly predominate, a notable proportion of NP2s are found to be indefinite or non-referential, revealing that object behavior in these constructions is more flexible than often assumed and therefore challenging prevailing theoretical accounts that treat PCs' objects as uniformly definite.

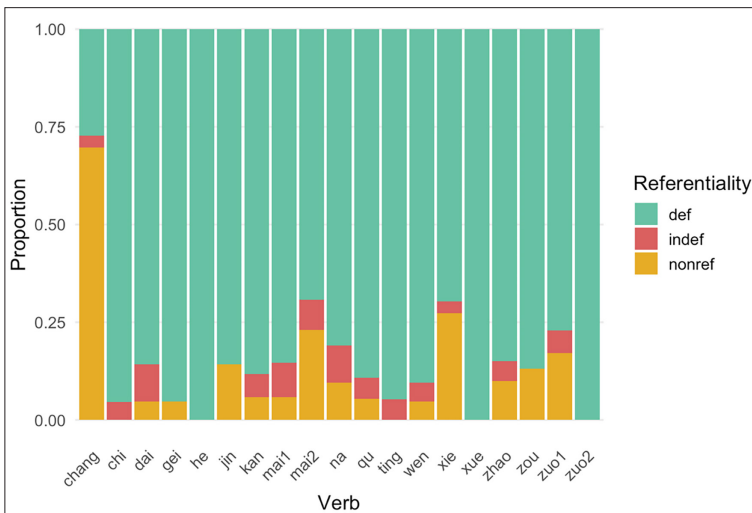


Figure 3 Distribution of NP2 referentiality in OFCs per verb. Chart created by the Authors

5.2.2 Subject Types in OFCs

While previous research has mainly focused on objects as the most interesting argument in PCs, less attention has been devoted to the semantic and referential characteristics of subjects. A series of ANOVAs reveals that concreteness varies significantly across verbs ($F = 3.579$, $p < 1.26e-06$), whereas NP1 animacy and referentiality remain comparatively stable ($F = 1.456$, $p = .169$; $F = 1.357$, $p = .148$, respectively).

In terms of animacy, many verbs display a high degree of internal homogeneity, reflecting the canonical role of the subject as an agentive participant. Although a few verbs – such as *chàng*, *kàn*, *xiě*, and *zhǎo* – show some internal variation ($SD > 0$), the majority consistently select highly animate NP1s. Verbs such as *hē*, *mǎi*, *mài*, *ná*, *qù*, *tīng*, and *zuò2* show no internal variation at all ($SD = 0$), invariably taking human subjects, as in (16).

- 16 如果你是买的新车, 在当地已买购置税就必须要在购买附加税所在地上牌。(zhTenTen)

rúguǒ nǐ shì mǎi de xīn chē
if 2SG SHI buy DE new car

‘If it is a new car that you have bought, and you have already paid the purchase and additional taxes locally, you must register the vehicle in the place where the taxes were paid.’

Overall, 92% of all overt subjects are personal pronouns referring to human participants. Only a small number of tokens involve non-pronominal subjects, typically proper nouns or other NPs, such as *wǒ jiā bǎobao* 我家宝宝 (my baby) in (17). Even in these cases, however, NP1 still denotes human participants.

- 17 我家宝宝一直都是喝的贝因美冠军宝贝奶粉, 很好的。(BCC)

<i>wǒ</i>	<i>jiā</i>	<i>bǎobao</i>	<i>yízhí</i>	<i>dōu</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>hē</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>Bèiyīnměi</i>
1sg	family	baby	always	all	SHI	drink	DE	Beingmate
<i>Guànjūn</i>	<i>Bǎobèi</i>	<i>Nǎifěn</i>						
Champion	Baby	Formula						

'It is Beingmate Champion Baby Formula that my baby has always been drinking. It's really good.'

The tendency for an animate, actor-like NP to appear in subject position in OFCs can be attributed to its greater topic-worthiness. Animate elements are more likely to emerge as topics because they typically carry out actions, making them central to what speakers choose to comment on and suggesting that agentivity plays a crucial role in representing the 'who' in 'who did what' (Chafe 1976; García, Primus, Himmelmann 2018; Hopper, Thompson 1984). Nevertheless, a small subset of cases includes subjects with lower animacy, as in (18). In this example, the NP *zìběnzhǔyì guójiā* 资本主义国家 (capitalist countries) does not exhibit the same level of animacy as the subject in (17), yet it gains agentive status metonymically, with the institution standing for the people acting on its behalf.

- 18 社会主义医疗保障体系远远好于资本主义, 资本主义国家现在做得比较好的都是学的社会主义。(zhTenTen)

<i>zìběnzhǔyì</i>	<i>guójiā</i>	<i>dōu</i>	<i>shì</i>	<i>xué</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shèhuìzhǔyì</i>
capitalism	country	all	SHI	learn	DE	socialism

'The socialist medical security system is far superior to the capitalist one. It is socialism that the capitalist countries now performing relatively well have learned from.'

Concreteness, by contrast, shows much greater variability both within and across verbs. Only *mǎi* approaches internal homogeneity (SD < .20), while the remaining verbs select NP1s ranging from medium to highly concrete referents. Since most subjects are personal pronouns, their concreteness tends – by convention (see Brysbaert, Warriner, Kuperman 2014) – to be mid-level rather than fully concrete, as in (19), where the subject *tāmen liǎ* 他们俩 (the two of them) is clearly less concrete than the subject in (18).

- 19 他们俩一个星期全是吃的榆树叶, 连红薯、胡萝卜都没有舍得吃上一口。
(BCC)
tāmen liǎ yī-ge xīngqī quán shì chī de yúshù yè
3PL two one-CLF week entire SHI eat DE elm leaf
'It was only elm leaves that the two of them ate for a whole week, not even
daring to take a bite of sweet potatoes or carrots.'

Turning to referentiality, all NPs in the sample are uniformly definite, regardless of the verb involved. This complete stability contrasts with the variation observed for concreteness but parallels the consistency found for animacy. Just as animate, agentive participants tend to occupy subject position because speakers naturally refer to human agents performing actions, definite NPs are more likely to occur in topic position (Xu 1995; Zhang 2016; Morbiato 2018). This tendency reflects the fact that definite referents encode given information – material assumed to be known, accessible, or recoverable for both interlocutors. This pattern emerges not only in the high frequency of personal pronouns but also in the substantial number of subjects expressed as proper names, as in (20). Here, the subject *Lǎo Ān* 老安 (Lao An) is a definite and identifiable human participant, familiar to both speaker and hearer.

- 20 这次京九通牢采访, 老安是走的人民铁道记者的“后门”。(BCC)
Lǎo.Ān shì zǒu de Rénmín Tiědào bàojìzhě de hòumén
Lao.An SHI walk DE People Railway reporter SP back.door
'For this Jingjiu Tonglao interview, it was the 'back door' of a People's Railway reporter that Lao An went through.'

5.3 Correlation Between Verbs and Focus Types in OFCs

This section explores whether focus type in OFCs is associated with specific verbs or whether it is largely determined by the construction itself, regardless of the verb. To address this, we first tested whether corpus membership affects focus distribution. A logistic regression model was fitted with focus as the dependent variable and both verb and corpus as predictors, estimating the probability of each focus type while controlling for frequency differences. An analysis of deviance revealed that corpus has not significant effect ($Df = 1$, Deviance = 0.003, $p = .959$), indicating that focus patterns are consistent across the zhTenTen and BCC and suggesting a stable, homogeneous behavior of OFCs with respect to this variable.

By contrast, verb as a variable emerged as a highly significant predictor of focus ($Df = 18$, Deviance = 143.27, $p < 2e-16$), showing that different verbs vary systematically in their likelihood of

co-occurring with a particular focus type. Logistic regression quantifies these differences, revealing clear patterns: verbs such as *hē*, *tīng*, and *chī* display moderate probabilities of also co-occurring with contrastive focus (~25-35%), whereas verbs like *chàng* and *zǒu* have a strong to absolute preference for non-contrastive focus (~96-100%). Binomial tests further confirm these patterns, showing that for most verbs, non-contrastive focus is statistically dominant, with the exceptions of *chī* and *tīng*, where neither focus type reaches significance. Figure 4 illustrates these results, with asterisks (*) marking verbs whose dominant focus type is statistically significant.

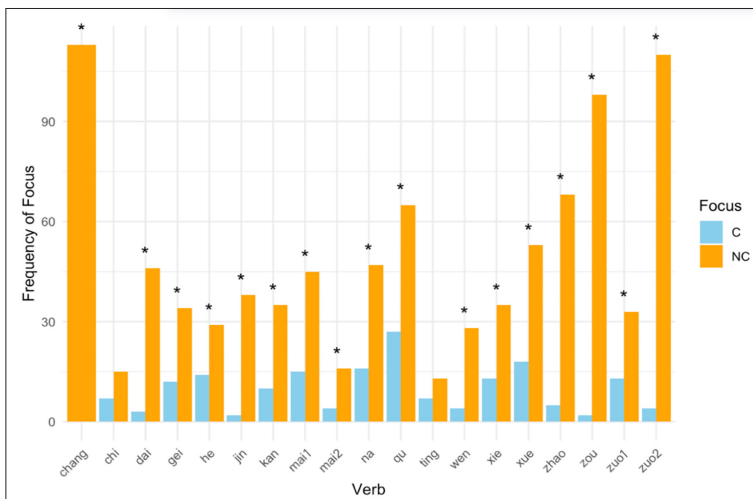


Figure 4 Distribution of focus type in OFCs by verb with statistical significance.
Chart created by the Authors

5.4 Focus Interpretation and Discourse Contexts of OFCs

The qualitative analysis enables a precise identification of the discourse contexts in which OFCs are used to realize focus, either in non-contrastive or contrastive interpretations. Non-contrastive interpretations of focus – by far the most frequently attested across all verbs occurring in OFCs – can be further differentiated into three main discourse contexts: (i) narrative-descriptive contexts, in which OFCs present information about completed events without evoking alternative sets; (ii) wh-question contexts, where OFCs provide information about a previously established event without any contrastive intent; and (iii) anaphoric contexts, in which OFCs reintroduce a previously mentioned referent, promoting it from the background to the foreground and ensuring discourse continuity.

The narrative-descriptive context is observed across all verb classes. It typically occurs when speakers recount habitual practices, travel experiences, childhood stories, or other memories from the past, specifying the object involved in the realized event. In this context, the object is in focus. This use does not imply contrast with alternative elements; rather, it serves to explicitly identify the object as the salient element of the event, making clear what was actually being done. In this way, OFCs bring the object into attention and support a detailed, scene-building description of past experiences and practices.

For example, in (21), the object *zǎoyóuwán* 藻油丸 (algae oil) is in focus, as it specifies which capsules were taken at that particular moment. The discourse context is narrative, situating the event within a past habitual setting. In this context, OFCs present information about the object involved in the event without implying opposition to alternative items. This use introduces information that is new to the listener and presents the event in a detailed and explicit way, without any intention of creating contrast or implying that the focused element is unexpected.

- 21 我一般在早晨吃饭后服用, 我当时是吃的香港美赞臣的DHA藻油丸, 吃起来很方便。(zhTenTen)

wǒ dāngshí shì chī de Xiānggǎng Měizhànrén de
1SG then SHI eat DE Hong Kong Mead Johnson SP
DHA zǎoyóu wán
DHA algae.oil capsules

'I usually take it after breakfast in the morning. At that time, it was DHA algae oil capsules from Mead Johnson Hong Kong that I was taking. They are very convenient to take.'

OFCs can also occur within wh-questions, both direct and indirect, when the object is a wh- element. In such cases, one important function of OFCs is to obtain information about an event that has already occurred, without implying any contrast. For example, in (22), the object is *shénme jiǎnchá* 什么检查 (which test). Here, the doctor is asking purely to gather information; the OFC does not imply contrast with other tests or possibilities, nor does it presuppose anything contrary to the hearer's expectations or prior knowledge. Instead, it serves to establish a general picture of the patient's health, which is necessary for prescribing appropriate care.

- 22 如果您担心复查是阳性, 也可以立刻做一个疗程的正规治疗。您当时是做的什么检查呢? 建议做个TPPA检查, 明确自己的情况。(zhTenTen)

nín dāngshí shì zuò de shénme jiǎnchá ne
2SG then SHI do DE what test SFP

'If you are concerned that the follow-up test might be positive, you can also immediately start a regular treatment course for the child. Which test was it that you had at the time? It is recommended to take a TPPA test to clarify your situation.'

Finally, regarding the anaphoric context, OFCs are used to reintroduce previously mentioned or known elements, allowing the speaker to maintain reference continuity and ensuring that the listener can track entities or events already established in the discourse. This context is particularly frequent with verbs such as *qù* and *xué*.

For example, in (23), the object 4S *diàn* 店 (dealership) following *shì bù shì qù de* 是不是去的 serves to recall an element previously introduced, namely the same dealership:

- 23 去哪里维修保养都无所谓了, 当然咱自己的车, 图个安心, 去4S店也行.....因为 是二手车, 我们不知道以前是不是去的4S店做保养.....(zhTenTen)

wǒmen bù zhīdào yíqián shì bù shì qù de 4S
1SG NEG know before SHI NEG SHI go DE 4S
diàn zuò bǎoyǎng
dealership do maintenance

'It doesn't really matter where you go for maintenance or repairs. Of course, for our own car, just for peace of mind, going to a 4S dealership is also fine. Since it's a used car, we don't know whether it was a 4S dealership that one went to for maintenance.'

Here, the OFC brings a previously mentioned element from the background to the foreground. The construction does not imply contrast; rather, it redirects the listener's attention to this specific entity, emphasizing precisely which workshop the maintenance might have occurred at. In other words, the OFC highlights a known element from the prior context, ensuring that the listener connects the current statement to what has already been introduced, thereby maintaining discourse coherence.

Regarding contrastive focus, both explicit and implicit contrastive cases are observed in OFCs. Explicit contrastive focus is rare in the corpus – about 25% of contrastive OFCs – and mainly occurs with verbs of possession change and instrumental locomotion. In some cases, these OFCs can also convey corrective contrast. For example, in (24), the first OFC marks a contrastive focus that rejects the hearer's assumption that the acquired item was a yogurt maker. The second OFC in the same sentence then functions as a corrective

focus, specifying the actual item acquired and setting it in opposition to the previously rejected, incorrect assumption.

- 24 哈哈, 是我买过的店铺, 不过不是买的酸奶机, 是买的一套托玛琳的护腰三件套。 (zhTenTen)
- | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| <i>bùguò</i> | <i>bù</i> | <i>shì</i> | <i>mǎi</i> | <i>de</i> | <i>suānnǎijī</i> | <i>shì</i> | <i>mǎi</i> | <i>de</i> |
| but | NEG | SHI | buy | DE | yogurt-maker | SHI | buy | DE |
| <i>yī-tào</i> | <i>tuǒmǎlín</i> | <i>de</i> | <i>hù yāo</i> | <i>sān-jiàn</i> | <i>tào</i> | | | |
| one-CLF | tourmalines | SP | lumbar. | three-CLF | set | | | |
| | | | support | | | | | |
- ‘Haha, this is the shop I bought from before, but it wasn’t the yogurt maker that I bought; it was a three-piece tourmaline lumbar support set that I bought.’

Implicit contrastive focus, on the other hand, accounts for the majority of the contrastive focus cases observed in the analyzed OFCs and is especially common with verbs of ingestion or carrying. For example, in (25), the sentence conveys an implicit contrast – not between two types of food as objects, but between expectations and reality regarding the effect of the food. The object *gǒuliáng* 狗粮 (dog food) is in focus using the OFC construction, drawing attention to the specific type of food the puppy has been eating. This illustrates an implicit contrast, which can emerge both from an imaginable set of alternatives and from the pragmatic and discourse context: one would expect that switching to proper dog food would eliminate bad breath, yet the puppy’s breath still smells unpleasant despite the dietary improvement. The focus does not juxtapose two different objects directly; rather, it emphasizes the salient object central to the event while allowing the listener to perceive the unexpected outcome. This contrast is further reinforced by the temporal coordinates, contrasting a ‘before’, when the puppy had just arrived at home, with a more recent time.

- 25 狗狗买回来的时候嘴里就特别的臭, 那时候才两月, 最近都是吃的狗粮, 可是嘴里还是臭的。 (zhTenTen)
- | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|------------|-------------|------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|
| <i>zuìjìn</i> | <i>dōu</i> | <i>shì</i> | <i>chī</i> | <i>de</i> | <i>gǒuliáng</i> | <i>kěshì</i> | <i>zuǐ-lǐ</i> |
| lately | all | SHI | eat | DE | dog.food | but | mouth-inside |
| <i>hái</i> | <i>shì</i> | <i>chòu</i> | <i>de</i> | | | | |
| still | SHI | stinky | SFP | | | | |
- ‘When we bought the puppy, its mouth already smelled really bad, and it was only two months old at the time. Lately, it’s only dog food that it’s been eating, but its mouth still smells bad.’

6 General Discussion and Conclusions

The combined statistical and qualitative analyses presented in this study offer a clearer understanding of a relatively understudied subtype of Chinese PCs, i.e., the OFCs. The distributional patterns of the 20 most frequent Chinese dynamic verbs show that, with the exception of *lái*, most verbs do occur in this construction. Notably, verbs such as *zǒu*, *mǎi*, *zuò*², *qù*, and *kàn* are particularly frequent, strongly mirroring the discourse environments in which OFCs typically arise. Text type analysis further indicates that the OFC is particularly common in social media, a genre that has recently attracted growing attention in linguistic research due to its rich and creative linguistic repertoire and its proximity to spoken language (Zhang, Ren 2022). As Lomborg (2011) notes, content generated by ordinary users reflects everyday personal lives, so the language employed closely resembles informal, conversational speech. This context therefore likely favors verbs describing dynamic, agentive, and concrete actions, which aligns with the high frequency of the verbs identified in the corpora.

The analysis of the construction's semantic arguments further reveals systematic asymmetries between subjects and objects. Subjects are consistently animate and predominantly human, whereas objects are almost uniformly inanimate. This configuration aligns with well-established cross-linguistic tendencies in role prototypicality, according to which animate entities are preferentially construed as actors, and inanimate entities as patients (García, Primus, Himmelmann 2018; Primus 2011). Prior research on Chinese, including Xu (1995), Philipp et al. (2008), and Wu, Kaiser and Andersen (2011), has demonstrated that animacy exerts strong effects on word order, whereby more animate NPs tend to occupy subject position and display higher topicality, while inanimate NPs cluster in object position, due to the 'animate first' preference. This general tendency also helps explain why NP1s in OFCs are almost exclusively definite and discourse-identifiable, given the strong association between sentence-initial position, topichood, and given information (Morbiato 2018).

NP2s, by contrast, show more variable referential behavior. While objects in Chinese may be definite or indefinite (Chen 2004), the literature on PCs typically assumes that the object in these constructions must be definite. The present data, however, complicate this assumption. Although many NP2s are indeed definite, a substantial portion are found to be indefinite or even non-referential. These results indicate that the object of an OFC – although canonically described as uniquely identifiable – can in fact display verb-dependent flexibility, sometimes appearing with numeral-classifier constructions or even question-word forms.

Regarding focus interpretation, the analyses indicate that OFCs predominantly encode non-contrastive focus, with only a small set of verbs deviating from this tendency. This pattern suggests that focus behavior is largely construction-driven rather than verb-driven.

Non-contrastive OFCs can be observed in three main discourse contexts: (i) narrative-descriptive contexts, in which they present information about specific objects in relation to completed past events, typically in memories, travels, or routine experiences; (ii) wh-question contexts, where the object is unknown and OFCs provide purely informational content without contrastive implications; and (iii) anaphoric contexts, in which they reintroduce a previously mentioned object and bring it back into the discourse foreground, maintaining reference continuity and allowing the listener to track discourse-relevant entities.

By comparison, contrastive OFCs are infrequent, contrary to previous theoretical claims (see Jing-Schmidt 2017). The most common type is implicit contrast, arising from contextual inference rather than explicit opposition. Explicit contrast, including corrective focus, is rarer and tends to cluster with verbs of transfer, ingestion, and locomotion, where clear alternatives are expressed or corrected.

This study has several limitations, which also suggest directions for future research. First, intended as a preliminary corpus-based overview of Chinese OFCs, the analysis provides only an initial account of focus interpretation. Future research could develop a more fine-grained taxonomy of object focus realization in OFCs and its discourse contexts, mapping the full range of contrastive and non-contrastive focus types across these contexts, and extending the analysis to other types of PCs. Second, since cleft interpretation is often influenced by prosody, particularly pitch accent and stress patterns (Zimmermann 2008), future studies should incorporate spoken data to examine how prosodic prominence interacts with focus interpretation. Elicited judgments and interviews could further clarify speakers' communicative intentions, for instance whether object focus is intended as contrastive or whether contrastive readings emerge from discourse context. Finally, the findings suggest that reference grammars and pedagogical materials would benefit from a more accurate description of OFCs, which could help learners and teachers better understand their use in authentic discourse beyond prescriptive accounts.

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Chinese as a Second Language and Dyslexia: A State-of-the-Art Review

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Abstract Globalisation has increased the number of Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) learners worldwide. In this context, many learners face reading difficulties driven by differences between their native language background and the orthographic, morphological, and phonological nature of Chinese – features whose challenges can overlap with developmental dyslexia. This paper reviews the latest international research into the intersection of CSL acquisition and dyslexia, aiming to highlight critical research gaps and evaluate teaching implications. Ultimately, it proposes a forward-looking agenda for the development of inclusive CSL literacy instruction.

Keywords Developmental dyslexia. Chinese Second Language Acquisition. Cross-linguistic Studies. Inclusive Linguistic Education. L2 Literacy Acquisition.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 1.1 Scope and Methodology of the Review. – 1.2 Originality and Innovative Contribution. – 2 Theoretical Framework: Acquiring L1 Literacy in Different Languages. – 2.1 L1 Reading Acquisition Across Different Languages. – 2.2 Reading Acquisition in L1 Italian. – 2.3 Reading Acquisition in L1 Chinese. – 2.4 Literacy Education in Chinese Societies and Main Challenges for L1 Learners. – 2.5 How Do Dyslexia and Literacy Impairments Manifest Across Different Languages? – 2.6 Dyslexia in the Italian Context: Clinical Profile, Legislation, and L2 Implications. – 2.7 Chinese Developmental Dyslexia: Main Features and Variations. – 2.8 Dyslexia and L2 Reading Acquisition. – 3 CSL Acquisition, Teaching, and Dyslexia: The State-of-the-Art. – 3.1 Studies on CSL Reading. – 3.2 Studies on CSL and Dyslexia: The Global Landscape. – 3.3 Mapping the National Response: The Italian Context. – 4 Conclusions. – 4.1 Discussion and Limitations of Current Research. – 4.2 Future Directions and Pedagogical Implications.



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1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, CSL teaching and acquisition has experienced extraordinary global growth, driven by economic, cultural, and educational factors, with official data indicating hundreds of millions studying the language outside China (Chen, Zhao 2022; Zhang, Han, Zhang 2023a). While CSL teaching has historical roots in Europe, its didactic and methodological approaches are still considered a relatively young discipline under development (Rossi 2021).

This expansion is mirrored in Italy, where the teaching of Chinese is steadily increasing across secondary schools and universities (Gabbianelli, Formica 2017; Rossi 2021; Buchetti et al. 2025). Due to the unique features of the language, this growth has led to extensive research in Chinese Second Language Acquisition (CSLA), particularly focused on CSL literacy acquisition, i.e. learning to read and write characters (Gong, Lai, Gao 2020; Ke 2012; 2018). However, despite this progress, pedagogical approaches remain under construction, underscoring the necessity for further research into personalised and individualised teaching approaches targeting diverse learning needs (Rossi 2021; Verzi 2023; 2026a).

The core topic of this paper is exactly this: what happens when a person with a literacy impairment (namely, a difficulty in reading and/or writing in their first language), or with diagnosed developmental dyslexia, embarks the journey of learning CSL? First of all, it's necessary to briefly define and introduce dyslexia and literacy impairments, which will be also further discussed in the next sections.

Drawing from the latest definition, released in October 2025 by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterised by persistent difficulties in achieving accurate, rapid word reading and spelling. These difficulties, which occur across a continuum of severity, are commonly associated with weaknesses in phonological and/or morphological processing. Crucially, the manifestation and severity of these core challenges vary depending on the orthography of the language, often leading to secondary consequences such as reduced reading comprehension and limited written output, among others.¹ While acknowledging these formal clinical definitions, the present state-of-the-art review prioritises a focus on the diverse challenges encountered within real-world educational settings, where the

1 All supporting material related to the 2025 updated definition is available at the International Dyslexia Association's project page: <https://dyslexiaida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/>.

absence of a formal diagnosis of dyslexia often obscures a student's underlying difficulties. In the Italian context, for instance, the official identification of dyslexia remains a significant issue: a national study by Barbiero et al. (2019) found that the actual prevalence of dyslexia (3.5%) is more than double the administrative data (1.5%), indicating that approximately two out of three cases remain undiagnosed in primary school children. Despite the legal mandate of the Italian Law 170/2010 (the regulatory framework of which will be discussed in detail in Section 2.6), this critical evidence of underdiagnosis necessitates a wider investigation. Therefore, the term 'literacy impairments' (or reading and writing impairments) is employed in this paper to encompass difficulties shown by both officially diagnosed dyslexic students and those with uncertified but persistent reading and writing difficulties in their first language (L1).

The complexity of addressing literacy-based learning difficulties extends critically into the domain of L2 acquisition and teaching. When a learner with an L1 literacy impairment approaches an L2, the resulting difficulty is modulated by several interacting factors, including: the individual's underlying cognitive abilities, the level or type of literacy impairment, the specific orthography of the L2, and the typological distance between the L1 and L2 orthographies (Łodej 2016). Orthographic distance is precisely one of the main aspects that guide the present investigation into a very extreme typological contrast: the acquisition of morphosyllabic L2 Chinese by L1 Italian learners.

Italian, on the one hand, is a language based on an alphabetic writing system and characterised by a transparent (or 'shallow') orthography, in which there is a regular correspondence between graphemes and phonemes. Chinese, on the other hand, is based on a morphosyllabic writing system (Shu, Anderson 1997), where characters are the smallest meaningful orthographic units and correspond to entire spoken syllables, not to individual phonemes, as happens in alphabet-based languages (Mattingly 1987; Leong 1997). Chinese is also defined as an opaque (or 'deep') orthography, as opposed to Italian, because the orthography-to-phonology mapping is not consistent (Wydell, Butterworth 1999; Wydell, Fern-Pollak 2012; Ijuin, Wydell 2018; Wydell 2023).²

2 Although the literature from Wydell and colleagues often prioritises the Japanese *kanji* script, their work also extensively discusses the Chinese language. These studies are cited here because *kanji* are based on Chinese characters, and thus share the same core morphosyllabic principle and the same underlying challenge of inconsistent orthography-to-phonology mapping that defines Chinese as an opaque script for reading acquisition.

1.1 Scope and Methodology of the Review

In line with its objective, this paper is structured as a state-of-the-art review, conceived specifically as a narrative overview of a still emerging and fragmented field. Maintaining an analytical focus on the cross-linguistic relationship between Italian as an L1 and Chinese as an L2, its primary objective is to critically review existing contributions on the acquisition of L2 Chinese by learners with L1 literacy impairments or diagnosed developmental dyslexia, systematically mapping, integrating and synthesising them. To this end, the review draws on literature from several related fields, including second language acquisition and teaching, applied linguistics, and cross-linguistic neurocognitive studies of both first and second language acquisition. A purposive and iterative sampling strategy was adopted, informed by a comprehensive body of literature compiled during a multi-year doctoral research project focusing on inclusive educational linguistics and specific learning difficulties in second language acquisition. To ensure methodological transparency, the selection of sources was limited to peer-reviewed international and national publications, critical theoretical frameworks and empirical studies. Sources were systematically evaluated based on their methodological rigour, relevance to research on dyslexia and SLA, and direct contribution to CSL acquisition settings. Specifically, the selection and evaluation of sources were executed across a sequential, three-stage thematic architecture:

1. Comparative profiles of typical and impaired literacy acquisition across languages and orthographies (specifically contrasting the transparent alphabetic orthography of L1 Italian with the morphosyllabic orthography of L1 Chinese);
2. The intersection of SLA and developmental dyslexia, with a specific focus on CSL research both globally and within the Italian higher education landscape;
3. Potential evidence-based pedagogical adjustments, future directions, and instructional accommodations for literacy-impaired learners in the CSL classroom.

By critically synthesising empirical research, clinical profiles, and recent pilot classroom studies across these three domains, this state-of-the-art review bridges foundational cognitive-linguistic research with actionable, context-specific classroom practices for CSL teaching and learning.

1.2 Originality and Innovative Contribution

While previous literature reviews have mostly separately explored L1 Chinese dyslexia, typical CSL reading and writing acquisition, and dyslexia in alphabet-based second languages, the present review offers two main distinct innovative contributions to the existing scholarship:

- **Theoretical Decentring of Alphabetic-Biased Dyslexia Models**
The vast majority of second language dyslexia research is based on alphabetic-to-alphabetic transfer. This paper challenges universalist, alphabetic-biased assumptions of reading difficulties by critically synthesising the transition from a highly transparent, phonology-dependent L1 (Italian) to a morphosyllabic, visually, spatially and orthographically demanding L2 (Chinese). This synthesis shows how cognitive-linguistic deficits can be affected by extreme typological distance: rather than treating the acquisition of L2 Chinese reading and writing strictly as an additional hurdle for dyslexic learners, this paper proposes a novel theoretical perspective, investigating whether the non-alphabetic nature of Chinese enables learners with severe phonological decoding deficits (typical of L1 Italian dyslexia) to use their intact visual-spatial and morphological pathways as a form of cognitive compensation. This defines a critical yet currently under-researched paradigm that future empirical studies of dyslexia and SLA should systematically address.
- **A Pioneering Global Map of CSL and Dyslexia Research and Its Future Directions**

To the author's knowledge, this review provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date synthesis of CSL and dyslexia research to date, bringing together early seminal studies and the latest cutting-edge literature within a unified framework. By providing this state-of-the-art baseline, the paper is intended to serve as an essential foundational gateway and primary reference for future researchers entering this emerging field. Furthermore, by highlighting critical gaps in the current literature, it acts as a strategic guide for future empirical work. Ultimately, this review provides an essential starting point for researchers and education authorities as they design inclusive guidelines and learning support for the growing number of secondary school students navigating Chinese literacy challenges.

2 Theoretical Framework: Acquiring L1 Literacy in Different Languages

This section sets out a comprehensive theoretical framework to address two key questions: 1) How does the process of literacy acquisition occur in a learner's L1? and 2) How do literacy impairments and dyslexia manifest themselves across different languages?

2.1 L1 Reading Acquisition Across Different Languages

For people all over the world, learning to read is the key to participating in society. As they acquire this ability, learners also implicitly become aware of how writing systems work and how written words reveal meaning through their graphic forms. In order to analyse this process systematically across diverse languages, Perfetti et al. (2007) established a triadic taxonomy that distinguishes between the writing system (the structural level of language encoded; for example, alphabetic versus logographic),³ the script (the specific graphic format; for example, Latin versus Cyrillic) and the orthography (the standardised spelling rules and mapping conventions within a given script), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Understanding how these three dimensions interact is essential, as the specific properties of a writing system directly dictate how reading acquisition unfolds. Specifically, reading development depends on how graphemes map onto phonology and which linguistic constituents (morphemes, syllables, or phonemes) form the core unit of visual representation (Verhoeven, Perfetti 2017).

Over the past two decades, extensive cross-linguistic research has explored how these mapping variations influence reading development. By investigating seventeen different writing systems, Verhoeven and Perfetti (2017, 12) have shown that, although “learning to read means learning how a writing system encodes language”, this process is guided by universal operating principles that cover linguistic awareness, word identification and comprehension (for a detailed overview of all the operating principles, cf. Verhoeven, Perfetti 2017; 2022). Neurocognitive research corroborates these universal foundations: across all languages, reading acquisition recruits an emergent neural network that strongly overlaps with spoken language processing areas (Paulesu et al. 2000; Rueckl et al. 2015). This neural convergence confirms two fundamental laws of literacy:

3 This classification defines the Chinese writing system as ‘logographic’. However, for the purposes of this paper, and as will be elaborated on further in Section 2.3, the Chinese writing system will be referred to primarily as ‘morphosyllabic’.

first, that writing ultimately represents spoken language; and second, that reading inevitably involves phonology.

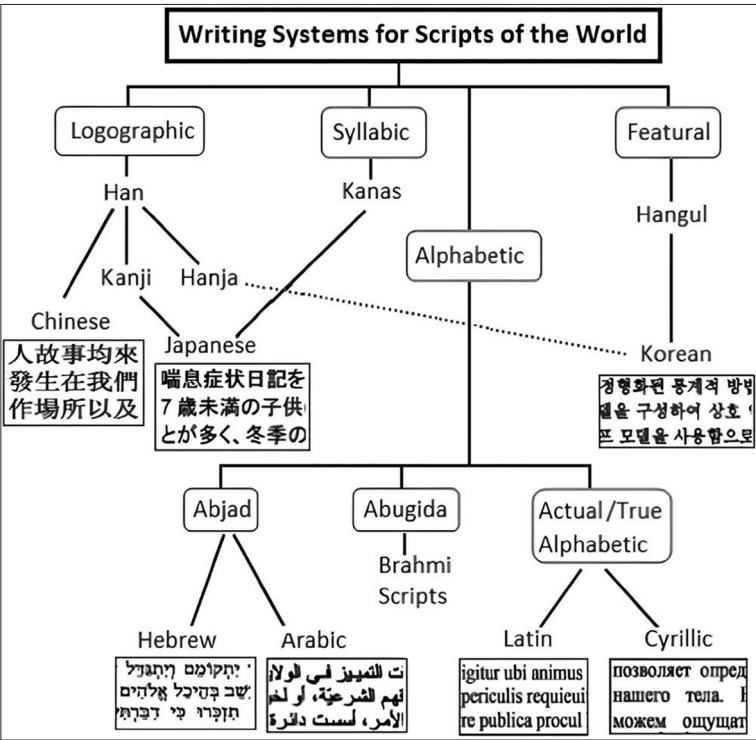


Figure 1 Classification for writing systems of the world and their scripts (Singh, Sharma, Chauhan 2023, 3006)

Within this universal framework, word recognition is fundamentally governed by the Orthographic Depth Hypothesis (ODH), which asserts that the transparency or opacity of a writing system dictates the specific cognitive-linguistic processes required for written decoding (Katz, Frost 1992; Ziegler, Goswami 2005). In transparent (shallow) orthographies like Italian or Spanish, highly consistent grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences allow learners to decode novel words with rapid accuracy using simple, rule-based conversion. Conversely, in opaque (deep) orthographies like English, inconsistent mappings force greater reliance on lexical memory and whole-word recognition strategies (e.g., 'food' vs. 'blood'; 'dear' vs. 'bear'; 'low' vs. 'now'). However, extending this model beyond alphabetic scripts reveals a fundamental structural shift: in non-alphabetic morphosyllabic systems, such as Chinese, phonemes are not the

primary mapping unit. Instead, characters directly represent morphemes, which requires extensive visual-spatial processing and intricate knowledge of stroke combinations and radical structures (Wydell, Fern-Pollak 2012). Taken together, these universal principles and their orthographic variations provide a baseline framework for identifying cross-linguistic reading impairments such as developmental dyslexia (Verhoeven, Perfetti, Pugh 2019).

2.2 Reading Acquisition in L1 Italian

The discussion in this chapter and throughout the section on cross-linguistic reading acquisition (§§ 2.2-2.4) is primarily based on the aforementioned seminal volume, *Learning to Read Across Languages and Writing Systems*, edited by Verhoeven and Perfetti (2017). This book has served as an authoritative core resource throughout this paper. Specifically, the following information on Italian is drawn almost entirely from the chapter “Learning to Read Italian” by Burani, Thornton and Zoccolotti (2017).⁴

The Italian writing system, classified as a transparent alphabetic writing system with mostly consistent letter-to-phoneme correspondences, can be considered “an (almost) pure phonemic system, where the phonological structure of base words rarely changes with derivational morphology” (Burani, Thornton, Zoccolotti 2017, 218). A “fairly regular pattern of phoneme-grapheme correspondences” is exhibited (Vincent 1988, 285), though a few non-univocal correspondences are present. Most cases where more than one letter or letter sequence can map to the same phoneme or phoneme sequence primarily cause difficulty in spelling (encoding) rather than in reading (decoding). Formal instruction in reading and writing begins in primary school when children are six years old, with reading and spelling mainly taught through phonics by training sound-letter and letter-sound correspondences. Evidence confirms the relatively fast acquisition of accuracy in reading Italian, similar to other transparent orthographies. Because of the high degree of regularity, accuracy asymptotes early, and by the end of Grade 1, children make relatively few reading errors, typically reading correctly over 90% of content and function words.

By contrast, optimal reading speed (fluency) is obtained slowly through the whole school curriculum. This parameter proves more

⁴ Reading acquisition in L1 Italian is presented concisely here to allocate greater analytical space to L1 Chinese in subsequent sections. This structural choice reflects the distinct cognitive demands of non-alphabetic reading, as the morphosyllabic architecture of Chinese involves intricate processing at the character, radical, and stroke levels that warrants a far more extensive investigation.

sensitive than accuracy for tracking the developmental trajectory of reading; since decoding accuracy reaches a ceiling level very early in transparent orthographies, speed becomes the primary metric to observe how learners transition from letter-by-letter decoding (sublexical processing) to the retrieval of larger lexical or morphological units.

2.3 Reading Acquisition in L1 Chinese

Standard Chinese, alternatively known as Mandarin or *Pǔtōnghuà* 普通话 (common language) and hereafter referred to as ‘Chinese’, is the official language of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan. It is important to note that despite the existence of various Chinese dialects and varieties, Standard Chinese is the most consistently used variety in L2 Chinese teaching and learning contexts worldwide. This language is characterised by unique features across its writing system, phonology, orthography, and morphology. As previously mentioned, taking into account the correspondence between characters, morphemes, and syllables, as well as the non-biunivocal relationship between characters and syllables, the Chinese writing system is recognised as being morphosyllabic (Shu, Anderson 1997). However, it can also be described as logographic, since it employs graphemes that are made up of meaningful syllables (Abbiati 2012). Among the more than 40,000 existing characters, approximately 3,500 are required for functional literacy (Taylor, Taylor 1995). Chinese is characterised by a number of unique and distinctive features that have a big role for the process of literacy acquisition. These factors are outlined below.

- Chinese is a tonal language with a relatively simple syllable structure. It consists of approximately 400 basic syllables which, when accounting for the four tones, result in roughly 1,300 tonal syllables (Duanmu 2007). Tone awareness is a critical component of phonological processing (Li, Ho 2011), and this is because tones distinguish meanings, e.g., *cháng* 尝 (to taste) vs. *chàng* 唱 (to sing).
- Together with tone awareness, syllable awareness is a more prominent predictor of reading success in Chinese than phoneme-level awareness (McBride-Chang, Ho 2005). These skills are intrinsically linked to the challenge of high homophone density; because a single tonal syllable, such as *shì*, can correspond to dozens of different characters (e.g., 是, 事, 市, 世, 式), the reader cannot rely on phonological decoding alone to access meaning. Consequently, syllable awareness acts as the gateway to morphological awareness, allowing the reader to

map a specific sound to the correct character based on lexical and contextual cues.

- The Chinese script is composed of visually complex characters written within a uniform, imaginary square area. Unlike alphabetic systems, Chinese text lacks interword spacing. For instance, a standard sentence appears as *dàjiā dōu xǐhuān xuéxí Zhōngwén* 大家都喜欢学习中文 (everyone likes studying Chinese). If this sentence used word-level spacing as found in alphabetic scripts, it would appear as: 大家 都 喜欢 学习 中文. In the absence of these visual markers, characters are spaced equally, making word segmentation a significant cognitive task for the reader, as they must mentally group characters into lexical units based on context and grammatical knowledge (Yang 2021).
- A Chinese morpheme usually corresponds to one syllable and one character, e.g. *shū* 书 (book). According to Packard's (2000) classification, morphemes can be either free, appearing as independent words such as *yú* 鱼 (fish), or bound, appearing only in combination, such as *mín* 民 in *rénmín* 人民 (people). At the word level, another key feature of Chinese morphology is compounding, the process through which approximately 80% of modern Chinese words are formed (Packard 2000; Arcodia, Basciano 2018; 2021). Compounds are generally defined as words formed by combining two or more roots – whether free or bound – and are categorised based on the specific syntactic and semantic relationships between their components (Arcodia, Basciano 2021). Given this structural prevalence, awareness of compounds and their internal logic represents the strongest predictor of Chinese reading proficiency (Tong et al. 2009).
- At the character level, between 80% and 95% of modern Chinese characters are phonetic-semantic compounds, *xíngshēng* 形声 (Arcodia, Basciano 2016; 2021). These consist of two functional components: a semantic radical providing meaning information and a phonetic radical providing pronunciation clues. For example, in the character *cái* 材 (material), the semantic radical *mù* 木 (wood) indicates the conceptual category, while the phonetic radical *cái* 才 provides the sound (Shu 2003) [fig. 2].

The reliability of these radicals varies significantly. According to research by Shu et al. (2003), approximately 58% of characters taught in elementary school are semantically transparent, where the radical directly represents the character's category (e.g., *chī* 吃 [eat], where the left radical *kǒu* 口 [mouth] relates to the action of eating). Another 30% are semi-transparent (e.g., *liè* 猎 [hunting], where the left radical refers to animals), while 9% are opaque, providing no semantic clues (e.g., *lüè* 略 [brief], where the left radical *tián* 田 [field] is unrelated to the meaning). Regarding phonetic components, roughly 39% of characters are

regular, meaning the phonetic radical is a trustworthy guide to pronunciation (e.g., *liáng* 粮 [grain], which contains the right radical *liáng* 良). About 26% are semi-regular, providing only partial information (e.g., *jī* 积 [accumulate] with the right radical *zhī* 只), and 15% are irregular, offering no clues to the sound (e.g., *lù* 路 [street] with the radical *gè* 各). The chart shown in Figure 3 below illustrates these varying levels of radical reliability for reading.



Figure 2 Anatomy of a semantic-phonetic compound. Based on Shu 2003

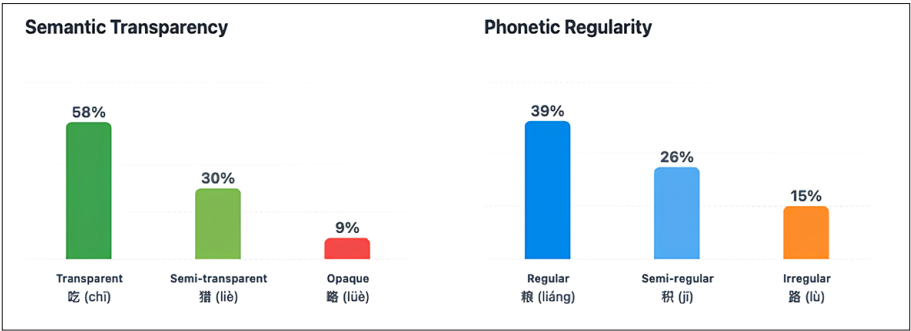


Figure 3 Distribution of semantic transparency and phonetic regularity in compound characters. Based on Shu et al. 2003

Given these unique features, reading acquisition in Chinese relies on a specific set of metalinguistic and cognitive skills. These include phonological awareness, morphological awareness, visual-orthographic awareness, and RAN (Li et al. 2012). A comprehensive understanding of these skills is fundamental to the development of frameworks for diagnosing and treating literacy impairments (McBride, Wang, Cheang 2018). This will be discussed in detail in relation to the specific profile of Chinese dyslexia in Section 2.7.

2.4 Literacy Education in Chinese Societies and Main Challenges for L1 Learners

Reading instruction across Chinese-speaking regions, frequently defined as ‘Chinese societies’ (Zhang, McBride-Chang 2011), is characterised by a high degree of diversity in educational methodology, timing, and the primary spoken language used in the classroom. In Mainland China, Mandarin Chinese (*Pǔtōnghuà* 普通话) is the primary medium of instruction. Also other terms are used across the Chinese societies to refer to Mandarin: for instance, it is known as *Guóyǔ* 国语 (the ‘national language’) in Taiwan, and *Huàyǔ* 华语 in Singapore (Gong, Lai, Gao 2020). While Mandarin is the dominant spoken language in schools in both Mainland China and Taiwan, Hong Kong maintains a distinct linguistic landscape. There, Cantonese remains the primary spoken language and principal medium of instruction; however, the region aims for a ‘tri-lingual’ (Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, and English) and ‘bi-literate’ (Chinese and English) society (Li, Rao 2005). Consequently, most students in Hong Kong also receive L2 Mandarin and L2 English instruction as part of their schooling (Pan et al. 2024). Singapore presents an even more special linguistic environment: it recognises four official languages (English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil), where English serves as the primary language of instruction, whereas the child’s respective mother tongue is taught as a compulsory second language (Li, Rao 2005). Given that children of Chinese descent constitute the majority of the student population, Chinese is the most widely studied second language within the Singaporean education system (Lee, Poon 2014).

In Mainland China, children are taught through Mandarin immersion in school, regardless of their home dialect. Formal reading instruction begins in Grade 1, with an intensive ten-week introduction to *Pīnyīn* 拼音⁵ (Pan 2000; Chen, Pasquarella 2017). Children in Taiwan follow a similar path, but using *Zhùyīn fúhào* 注音符号. In contrast, those in Hong Kong often begin learning characters as early as age three in kindergarten, through a ‘look-and-say’ approach without using any phonetic bridge. Traditional pedagogy in these regions relies heavily on rote learning: a typical class involves dictation tasks, and homework requires children to copy new characters repeatedly in order to master their complex visual

5 *Pinyin* is a romanisation system that uses the Latin alphabet to represent the sounds of Chinese characters, helping students to associate characters with their correct pronunciation, acting as a phonetic bridge during the first stage of literacy acquisition (cf. Norman 1988). *Zhuyin fuhao*, also known as *Bopomofo*, is a unique phonetic script for Mandarin Chinese that uses a series of symbols to represent the sounds of the language (cf. DeFrancis 1984).

structures and stroke sequences (Chen, Pasquarella 2017). Despite these regional differences, the ultimate objective remains consistent: children are expected to master 2,500-3,000 characters by the end of Year 6 (Shu et al. 2003).

In Singapore, instead, the educational approach to Chinese literacy is distinct from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Simplified characters and *Pinyin* are still used, but literacy instruction is specifically designed to address the challenges of a non-immersion environment. Unlike children in China or Taiwan who are surrounded by Chinese daily, many Singaporean students come from households where English is the primary language, leaving them with only six hours of Chinese exposure per week (Lee 2012). Moreover, to prevent these students from becoming overwhelmed or discouraged by the demands of traditional instruction of characters, the Ministry of Education introduced some reforms in 2007. These changes shifted the focus away from the exhaustive, high-pressure mastery of character writing and towards 'functional literacy'. This means the curriculum now prioritises the ability to speak, listen, and read in real-world contexts, ensuring that the language remains a practical and accessible tool for communication rather than a purely academic hurdle (Shen et al. 2014).

Regardless of the Chinese-speaking region involved, the path to literacy in Chinese presents unique cognitive challenges that differ significantly from alphabetic systems. Because the writing system lacks direct grapheme-phoneme correspondences, children cannot simply 'decode' new words; they must memorise thousands of visually complex characters, which is a really gradual and laborious process. Literacy development is further complicated by the high homophone density of the spoken language, which often leads to 'homophone substitutions' in spelling (i.e., writing a phonetically correct but semantically incorrect character) and a general difficulty in distinguishing meanings between identical syllables. Given the morphosyllabic nature of the script, the contribution of phonological awareness is relatively limited compared to the critical roles played by morphological awareness and orthographic processing (Chen, Pasquarella 2017). By comparison, since this study is primarily focused on Italian and Chinese learners, while an Italian child might achieve decoding accuracy in months (Seymour, Aro, Erskine 2003; Burani, Thornton, Zoccolotti 2017), Chinese children add only 200 to 700 characters to their sight vocabulary annually, making literacy a decade-long undertaking (Shu et al. 2003).

To address these challenges, research increasingly advocates for instructional activities that move beyond rote memorisation to focus on metalinguistic awareness. While traditional classrooms rarely include phonological activities, games involving syllable and onset-rime manipulation can be highly beneficial in early grades,

and the use of systems like *Pinyin* inherently strengthens this phonetic foundation. Furthermore, explicit morphological instruction is necessary to help children navigate homophones by identifying morpheme meanings and manipulating word structures more systematically. Finally, a more deliberate focus on orthographic processing, specifically the internal structure of compound characters, is essential. While semantic radicals are already taught for dictionary use, systematic instruction of phonetic radicals is often overlooked due to their perceived unreliability. However, since skilled readers are better able to utilise phonetic radicals to predict pronunciation, teaching these components more systematically could significantly improve the efficiency of character memorisation and reading acquisition (Anderson et al. 2003).

2.5 How Do Dyslexia and Literacy Impairments Manifest Across Different Languages?

Reading and writing are two of the most significant achievements of humankind. However, while most children reach a skilled level of literacy within five to six years of education, others struggle significantly despite receiving adequate teaching. This can ultimately lead to a diagnosis of developmental dyslexia (Verhoeven, Perfetti, Pugh 2019; Wydell, Fern-Pollak 2012).⁶

To understand the nature of this struggle, it is necessary to look at the most recent clinical consensus. According to the International Dyslexia Association's latest (2025) definition:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties in word reading and/or spelling that involve accuracy, speed, or both and **vary depending on the orthography**. These difficulties occur along a continuum of severity and persist even with instruction that is effective for the individual's peers. The causes of dyslexia are complex and involve combinations of genetic, neurobiological, and environmental influences that interact throughout development. **Underlying difficulties with phonological and morphological processing are common but not universal**, and early oral language weaknesses often foreshadow literacy challenges. Secondary consequences include reading comprehension problems and reduced reading and writing experience that can impede growth in language,

⁶ A distinction must be made between developmental dyslexia and acquired dyslexia, which refers to reading impairments caused by brain damage in individuals who had already achieved typical literacy skills prior to the incident (Wydell, Fern-Pollak 2012).

knowledge, written expression, and overall academic achievement. Psychological well-being and employment opportunities also may be affected. Although identification and targeted instruction are important at any age, language and literacy support before and during the early years of education is particularly effective. (emphasis added)⁷

Historically, the primary theoretical models explaining the mechanisms behind these difficulties include the Magnocellular Theory (Livingstone et al. 1991; Stein 2001; 2019), the Phonological Deficit Hypothesis (Snowling 2000; Ramus et al. 2003), the Psycholinguistic Grain-Size Theory (Ziegler, Goswami 2005), and the Double-Deficit Hypothesis (Wolf, Bowers 1999).

The Magnocellular Theory, proposed by neurocognitive studies, suggests a dysfunction within the visual and auditory pathways that impairs visuo-motor perception and temporal sensitivity (Stein 2019), which ultimately exerts a negative influence on reading fluency (Livingstone et al. 1991).

According to the Phonological Model, phonology is encoded in all writing systems. There is a universal consensus among researchers that phonological impairments encompassing awareness, memory and decoding are central to reading difficulties and dyslexia. These deficits hinder a student's ability to accurately map graphemes to phonemes, creating significant obstacles to reading (Snowling 2000; Vellutino et al. 2004).

However, Psycholinguistic Grain-Size Theory suggests that the manifestation of phonological deficits varies across scripts depending on a language's 'grain size', which refers to how graphic units map onto phonological units (Ziegler, Goswami 2005). In alphabetic systems (e.g., Italian, English), graphic units map onto phonemes. Consequently, phonological awareness is more important at the phoneme level, therefore becoming a critical predictor of success and a primary risk factor for dyslexia. Another crucial aspect that influences the manifestation of phonological problems among alphabetic orthographies is the level of transparency of the orthography involved. In transparent orthographies like Italian, where spelling-to-sound mappings are highly predictable, readers can rely on small 'grains' (single grapheme-phoneme relations). Consequently, dyslexia in Italian primarily presents as a deficit in reading speed and fluency, while decoding accuracy remains remarkably stable (Barbiero et al. 2012). In contrast, opaque orthographies such as English involve inconsistent mappings that force children to

7 The definition is available at the International Dyslexia Association's project page: <https://dyslexiaida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/>.

simultaneously process multiple grain sizes, from individual letters to larger lexical patterns. This structural complexity often results in a more severe clinical picture, where dyslexic readers struggle significantly with both accuracy and speed (Ziegler, Goswami 2005).

It is important to note that these theoretical models were predominantly developed through the study of alphabetic orthographies. Moving beyond alphabetic systems to syllabic and morphosyllabic systems (e.g. Japanese and Chinese), mapping occurs at the syllable level. Therefore, for these scripts, phoneme awareness is less essential (though still relevant) for acquiring reading skills. In scripts such as Chinese, however, phonological awareness is more important at the syllable and onset-rime level. However, phonemic awareness remains relevant in non-alphabetic scripts too, as phonological deficits are universal. When diagnosing dyslexia, phoneme-level tests are often more effective than simpler syllable-level evaluations, which may not be sensitive enough to reveal impairment (see the research of McBride-Chang et al. 2004; Siok, Fletcher 2001; Xu, Tan, Perfetti 2019).

While early theoretical frameworks of dyslexia primarily relied on the Phonological Deficit Hypothesis as the most relevant and universal predictor of dyslexia, the field is increasingly shifting towards a multifactorial perspective. A recent Delphi study of dyslexia experts (Carroll et al. 2025) highlighted the consensus that developmental dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental disorder whose key feature, in all languages, is the difficulty in acquiring reading and writing fluency. This is not caused by a single, isolated deficit but rather by the cumulative effect of multiple, interacting cognitive weaknesses. Consequently, as highlighted by the Delphi study, a comprehensive evaluation of potential reading difficulties should be based on “converging evidence from multiple risk factors” rather than a single criterion (Carroll et al. 2025, 8).

Right after phonological awareness, RAN (or ‘naming speed’) is the second universal indicator of dyslexia. Regardless of the writing system, the inability to quickly retrieve a name for a visual symbol (digits, colours, or characters) is a marker of a fluency problem (Landerl 2019). This observation is theoretically grounded in the Double Deficit Hypothesis, which posits that phonological awareness deficits and RAN deficits represent two distinct and independent causes of reading difficulties. While phonological deficits primarily impact decoding accuracy, naming speed deficits affect the fluency and automaticity of word recognition (Wolf, Bowers 1999).

This broader understanding of the interacting factors that influence the manifestation of dyslexia raises a fundamental question in cross-linguistic studies: which aspects of developmental dyslexia are language-specific, and which are universal across all writing systems?

The latest definition from the International Dyslexia Association (2025) addresses this issue, highlighting two elements that are central to the present research. The first is the explicit recognition that manifestations “vary depending on the orthography”; the second is the acknowledgement that phonological and morphological difficulties are “common but not universal”.⁸

Verhoeven, Perfetti and Pugh’s (2019) work further contributes to the effort to answer this question. In an attempt to identify evidence of universals, the authors compared the main characteristics of both reading acquisition and developmental dyslexia across nine languages and four major writing systems. Their findings suggest a “deceptively simple” connection (Verhoeven, Perfetti, Pugh 2019, 443): the cognitive factors essential for learning to read are the same factors that, when impaired, define reading difficulties across all languages and writing systems.⁹ Moreover, the authors explain how universal cognitive-linguistic factors are ‘filtered’ through the specific requirements of different writing systems. Recognising that the ‘face’ of dyslexia is a product of the interaction between universal cognitive constraints and the specific demands of a given orthography provides a fundamental framework for comparing specific linguistic profiles. Consequently, it is essential to first examine how the unique structure of a writing system influences the manifestation of dyslexia during the development of a native language. Evaluating the distinct behavioural profiles of native Italian and Chinese readers establishes a clear baseline: this is necessary in order to understand what happens when these two completely different writing systems interact with a learner in a CSL classroom.

8 To facilitate the reader’s comprehension, emphasis has been added in bold to these two clauses cited in the IDA’s 2025 definition of dyslexia, which is available at the International Dyslexia Association’s project page: <https://dyslexiaida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/>.

9 For a more detailed breakdown of the specific generalisations concerning language awareness and word identification, see the original summary in Table 20.1 (Verhoeven, Perfetti, Pugh 2019).

2.6 **Dyslexia in the Italian Context: Clinical Profile, Legislation, and L2 Implications**

Due to the highly transparent nature of the Italian orthography, the developmental trajectory of an Italian reader differs sharply from that of readers of more opaque scripts. As previously mentioned, the primary clinical marker for L1 Italian dyslexia is not a lack of accuracy, but a significant deficit in reading speed and fluency (Tressoldi, Stella, Faggella 2001). To compensate for their difficulties with phonological processing, these learners often adopt a laborious serial decoding approach that prioritises precision. While this strategy enables them to achieve high levels of accuracy, it lacks the automation necessary for fluency. Consequently, they experience a persistent deficit in reading speed compared to their peers.

This slower word recognition can impede the shift from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’, as cognitive resources are exhausted by the decoding process rather than being available for comprehension (Barbiero et al. 2019).

Research has also shown that dyslexia can have a significant impact on learning foreign languages, particularly when the target language requires the use of complex phonological and orthographic skills. In the case of L1 Italian learners, empirical evidence confirms that while a highly transparent native orthography allows for successful cognitive compensation, transitioning to an opaque foreign language, such as English, reveals underlying word recognition and decoding struggles similar to those experienced in their native language (Palladino et al. 2013; Daloiso, Costenaro, Favaro 2014).

In line with the theoretical perspective proposed in Section 1.2, it can be hypothesised that encountering a morphosyllabic script fundamentally alters the reading strategy of the learner. Since Chinese characters map directly onto morphemes rather than phonemes, learners are compelled to bypass their impaired L1 mechanism of slow, serial phonological assembly of linear graphemes. This typological shift may enable learners to utilise their intact visual-spatial and morphological pathways as a compensatory mechanism. However, this reliance on visual-spatial decoding introduces a distinct cognitive disadvantage: the complex architecture of Chinese characters necessitates the rapid identification of radicals and holistic spatial processing, placing greater demands on visual-spatial working memory and processing speed. Consequently, it is posited that, while the transparent phonological scaffolding of L1 Italian is no longer usable (or necessary), learners’ ultimate success in L2 Chinese depends on whether their morphological and orthographic awareness can compensate for their deficits in RAN and visual processing speed. Although direct empirical testing across L1 Italian CSL cohorts remains an area for future research, this conceptual model highlights

both the compensatory potential and the unique cognitive demands of non-alphabetic reading.

Highlighting how these cognitive vulnerabilities intersect with a non-alphabetic layout reveals a significant shortcoming in institutional support systems, which are almost exclusively designed for alphabetic remediation.

The institutional management of these cognitive vulnerabilities is governed by a distinct national legal framework. Within the Italian education system, learners with dyslexia are formally recognised as part of a broader category of students with specific learning disorders (SLDs; It. *Disturbi Specifici dell'Apprendimento*, DSA), which also encompasses dysgraphia, dysorthography and dyscalculia. This categorisation is defined in Article 1 of Law 170/2010, landmark legislation that addresses the rights and support of students with SLDs specifically, and formally recognises dyslexia as a neurodevelopmental condition that can significantly impact academic achievement despite adequate cognitive abilities and instruction. According to the latest report by the Italian Ministry of Education, students with certified SLDs represented around 6% of the school population during the 2022-23 academic year. Dyslexia was the most frequently diagnosed condition, accounting for 36% of all SLDs diagnoses. Prevalence rates also show regional variability, peaking in northern Italy and remaining markedly lower in the south.¹⁰ Article 3 of Law 170/2010 establishes the right of students with SLDs to personalised educational strategies and equal opportunities. Diagnostic procedures for dyslexia are usually carried out after the second year of primary school, which is typically around the ages of 7-8. These must be conducted by public health services or accredited private specialists, and once diagnosed, students are entitled to a Personalised Didactic Plan (It. *Piano Didattico Personalizzato*, PDP) that outlines compensatory tools and dispensational measures in accordance with national and regional guidelines. The law also mandates teacher training, early identification protocols, and close collaboration with families.¹¹ This legal right to targeted accommodations extends to the study of foreign languages within the secondary school curriculum. However, a major pedagogical obstacle arises in practice: the foreign language sections of standard PDPs are highly generic and uniform. They are traditionally designed

10 For official data on specific learning disabilities in Italy, refer to the report published by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM) in September 2024. Available online at: https://www.mim.gov.it/documents/20182/8938897/Focus_Alunni+con+DSA+aa.ss.202122_202223.pdf/ed651f1c-4a5c-a42e-d9a0-2ac407ebc269?version=1.0&t=1737467257075.

11 For the full text of the law, see <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2010/10/18/010G0192/sg>.

around the needs of Western European, alphabetic languages – such as English, French, or Spanish – and fail to account for variations in writing systems. Consequently, these standardised documents do not take into consideration the extreme typological distance and unique morphosyllabic orthography of Chinese. By prescribing identical accommodations for radically different linguistic environments, current PDP frameworks overlook the specific visual-spatial and orthographic hurdles faced by dyslexic learners in the CSL classroom. This systemic mismatch highlights a profound gap between the legal mandate for inclusivity and the cognitive-linguistic realities of non-alphabetic second language acquisition. Ultimately, this institutional deficit creates a critical barrier to CSL instruction – a policy and pedagogical challenge that is systematically addressed through proposed structural realignments in Section 4.2.

2.7 Chinese Developmental Dyslexia: Main Features and Variations

Theoretical models of dyslexia have traditionally been developed primarily through the lens of alphabetic languages. However, research over the last few decades has shifted this paradigm, confirming that dyslexia can manifest across all languages and writing systems. In native Chinese populations, the prevalence of Chinese Dyslexia (or Chinese Developmental Dyslexia, CDD) is estimated to be between 2% and 12%, figures that are notably comparable to those observed in Western, alphabetic-speaking populations (Li et al. 2012; Xu, Tan, Perfetti 2019; Zhang et al. 2023).

Chinese presents a unique set of cognitive demands that contrast sharply with the ‘shallow’ transparency of Italian or the ‘opaque’ nature of English (Perfetti, Harris 2013), including the high graphic complexity of characters requires sophisticated visual-spatial memory for recognition and the polysemic and homophonic nature (Ho et al. 2002). In fact, in Chinese the correspondence between phonology and semantics is often indirect or polysemic (one sound mapping to many meanings/characters), placing a higher burden on lexical retrieval (Perfetti, Harris 2013).

To explain the origin of these difficulties, researchers generally operate within two primary theoretical frameworks: the Linguistic Deficit Theory, which focuses on impairments in language-specific processing, such as phonological, orthographic, morphological, and semantic awareness; and the Non-Linguistic (Cognitive) Deficit Theory, which highlights ‘lower-level’ sensory or general cognitive deficiencies, such as RAN awareness, visual processing, visual attention, visual-motor integration, and working memory (Xin 2026).

The categorisation and analysis of linguistic deficits in CDD presented in this subsection are primarily based on the comprehensive theoretical synthesis of developmental dyslexia in Chinese populations established by Xin (2026). Within this overarching framework, linguistic deficits are conceptualised as systemic impairments in the metalinguistic skills required to process the sounds, structures, and meanings of the morphosyllabic writing system.

In terms of phonological awareness, the ability to manipulate the sounds of the language is especially critical during the early stages of literacy instruction, when children use the *Pinyin* phonetic transcription system (McBride 2016). Children with CDD exhibit significant deficits in the awareness of syllables, onsets, rimes, and tones (Li, Ho 2011; McBride, Wang, Cheang 2018). In particular, these learners struggle with the perception and discrimination of tones compared to typically developing peers. This manifests as difficulty in reading single characters or pseudo-characters, often stemming from an inability to recognise phonological components, such as the phonetic radical in semantic-phonetic compounds. Such impairments compromise the accurate representation of the lexicon and the mastery of phonological rules, thereby hindering overall reading development (Tong et al. 2017).

Furthermore, the acquisition of orthographic awareness presents a distinct challenge because, unlike alphabetic languages, the structural units of Chinese are strokes and radicals, and this requires sophisticated visual-orthographic skills (Ho et al. 2002). Deficits in this area cause significant delays in character recognition and writing. Specifically, as detailed in Xin's (2026) study, children with CDD face distinct challenges in visual discrimination, which manifests as difficulty distinguishing between visually similar 'orthographic neighbours' (e.g., *mù* 目 vs. *rì* 日). Additionally, they experience impaired visual memory, showing difficulty memorising the specific stroke order required for complex characters, alongside deficits in visuo-spatial attention, characterised by an inability to quickly focus on relevant components or exclude irrelevant graphic information (Zeng, Zhou, Meng 2003).

Beyond these visual-orthographic challenges, the profile of Chinese dyslexia is also deeply rooted in morphological and semantic awareness. In light of the close orthography-meaning relationship in Chinese, morphological awareness, the ability to manipulate meaning units (morphemes), is a primary predictor of reading success (Shu et al. 2006; Zhang et al. 2023), and it often explains more variance in reading ability than phonological or orthographic skills (McBride, Wang, Cheang 2018). Moreover, research indicates that morphological awareness is the strongest factor in discriminating dyslexic readers from age-matched controls (Shu et al. 2006). Notably, 76% of children with CDD exhibit morphological deficits, a

significantly higher prevalence than those with phonological (43%) or naming speed (41%) deficits (Xin 2026). These weaknesses often lead to poor semantic comprehension, where students struggle to deduce word meanings from context or master the comprehension of full sentences and paragraphs (Lei et al. 2011). Deficits in this area are all a hallmark of CDD and can be detected as early as during the preschool years (Kalindi, Chung 2018).

In addition to language-specific skills, CDD is characterised by ‘non-linguistic’ deficits affecting general processing speed and sensory integration.

A primary component of this profile involves RAN awareness, a consistently strong predictor of reading fluency and accuracy in both alphabetic (Lervåg, Hulme 2009) and Chinese contexts (Tan et al. 2005; Ho et al. 2004).

Children with CDD perform significantly more slowly in RAN tasks (Ho, Lai 1999; Ho et al. 2002), for instance, identified RAN deficits as a dominant characteristic among Chinese dyslexics, reflecting an impairment at the intersection of general processing speed and rapid visual-orthographic mapping. Eye-tracking data provides a clear physiological explanation for this slowness, revealing that dyslexic children have a significantly reduced perceptual span when reading or performing rapid naming tasks (Yan et al. 2020). In reading research, fluency relies on the seamless coordination between two visual processes: foveal processing, which involves sharp central focus to recognise and decode the character being looked at, and parafoveal processing, which uses peripheral vision to preview and gather basic information about the next character to the right (Rayner et al. 1981). Children with CDD struggle with efficient orthographic decoding and must therefore allocate a disproportionate amount of their limited cognitive and attentional resources to foveal processing to resolve the character under their immediate central focus. This excessive foveal load effectively ‘blinds’ their parafoveal preview window, severely limiting their ability to pre-process subsequent characters (Sun et al. 2026). This restricted perceptual span consequently narrows their ‘preview window’, disrupting the natural flow of reading and the planning of progressive saccades (the rapid, voluntary eye movements that advance across the text). It also forces the eyes to make frequent backward movements (regressions) to re-analyse characters, severely hindering overall reading fluency (Yan et al. 2020).

The impact of these deficits extends to visual and visual-motor integration, where basic visual processing is often impaired. Dyslexic learners typically possess a higher visual discrimination threshold, resulting in lower resolution and slower processing of visual stimuli (Stein 2023), which manifests as longer fixation times (Sui et al. 2018).

These behaviours result in frequent word omissions or skipping, which severely compromises reading fluency (McBride-Chang, Ho 2005).

Finally, working memory and visual attention act as the 'engine' for reading. Working memory is essential for retaining the complex graphic information of a character while simultaneously retrieving its meaning and sound (Yang 2021). Visual attention allows the reader to efficiently navigate the 'visual search' required to locate target components within the high-density environment of a Chinese text (Liu, Chen, Chung 2015).

The diagnostic criteria for CDD are fragmented and vary considerably across Sinophone regions, depending on local educational policies and instructional scripts (McBride, Wang, Cheang 2018; Pan et al. 2024). In Hong Kong, for example, a diagnosis requires an IQ within the normal range alongside a performance deficit of at least one standard deviation (SD) across three literacy tasks (Chung, Ho 2010). In Taiwan, dyslexia is identified if a student scores below the 3rd to 5th percentile nationally in character identification, despite remedial intervention (Cheah et al. 2025). In contrast, Mainland China lacks a uniform clinical framework, partly due to cultural tendencies to view reading difficulties as a matter of personal effort or general academic achievement, rather than a neurodevelopmental condition (McBride, Wang, Cheang 2018). Research criteria in Beijing require an IQ within the normal range alongside character recognition at least 1.5 SD below the norm (Lin, Wang, Meng 2013). These inconsistencies across regions emphasise the urgent need for standardised, uniform diagnostic criteria to facilitate cohesive research and equitable intervention paradigms across Chinese societies (Cheah et al. 2025). Establishing a precise profile of how dyslexia manifests itself in native speakers of Chinese provides a crucial comparative baseline for CSL research. To examine whether CSL learners draw upon the same cognitive-linguistic pathways and potentially experience the same core deficits when acquiring L2 Chinese literacy, or whether they recruit alternative compensatory routes, a detailed understanding of the script-specific demands is required.

Synthesising the preceding analysis of L1 Italian and L1 Chinese profiles, Table 1 clarifies the linguistic, cognitive, and diagnostic frameworks that characterise the manifestation of the disorder in each language.

Table 1 Comparative analysis of literacy acquisition and dyslexia manifestation in L1 Italian and L1 Chinese

Feature	L1 Italian	L1 Chinese (Mandarin)
Writing System Type	Alphabetic (Latin-based); highly transparent orthography; nearly pure phonemic system.	Morphosyllabic (logographic/morphemic); derives from the Sino-Tibetan family; complex orthography-phonology mapping.
Orthography Type and Orthographic Load	Graphemes (21 letters) used to build all words. Spaces provide clear word boundaries.	Morphemes/Characters composed of strokes and radicals. Standard Functional Inventory of > 6,000 characters; 80-90% are phono-semantic compounds (few characters retain clear pictographic properties). Fixed spacing between characters, no explicit cues for word boundaries.
Phonology and Morphology	23 consonants, 7 vowels; no long-short contrast. Inflectional morphology (gender/number).	Tonal language (4 tones); 21 initials, 3 glides, 6 vowels. Derivational morphology through compounding.
Predictors of learning to read	Phonological and morphological awareness; lexical knowledge	Syllable-level awareness; visual-orthographic skills; morphological awareness (specifically compounding).
Reading Development and Primary Manifestation of Dyslexia	Rapid acquisition; 90% accuracy by Grade 1. Mastery of sublexical and lexical paths.	Gradual acquisition; heavy reliance on visual-spatial memory and morphological knowledge.
Primary Manifestation of Dyslexia	Deficit in reading speed and fluency; accuracy is usually mastered early. Dysorthography (persistent spelling hurdles) is a frequently associated impairment.	Deficits in character recognition, tone discrimination, and reading fluency.
Core Cognitive-Linguistic Predictors	Phonological awareness, Lexical and morphological knowledge.	Orthographic processing, RAN, phonological awareness, and morphological awareness

Feature	L1 Italian	L1 Chinese (Mandarin)
Legislative and Diagnostic Context	Standardised via Law 170/2010; focus on speed/accuracy SD thresholds.	Variation of diagnostic criteria across different Chinese-speaking regions.

Source: Verhoeven, Perfetti 2017, 468

2.8 **Dyslexia and L2 Reading Acquisition**

From a developmental perspective, reading and listening share similar processing requirements. Phonological skills, for instance, are fundamental for decoding and reading acquisition in both the L1 and the L2, and they represent a critical challenge for learners with reading difficulties (Harrison, Krol 2007; Lipka, Siegel 2007). While typically developing children transfer oral comprehension skills to reading without difficulty, in children with literacy impairments this process is frequently obstructed by insufficient decoding efficiency. In this sense, decoding serves as a ‘threshold’ for reading comprehension (Łodej 2016). When shifting from L1 to L2 reading, a central question arises: “Is L2 reading a language problem or a reading problem?” (Alderson 1984, 24). Two major variables traditionally help explain the variance in L2 reading ability: the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis and the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis. The former suggests that a certain level of L2 proficiency is a prerequisite to effectively use L1 reading strategies, noting that if a reader struggles with L2 decoding, their cognitive resources are entirely consumed, preventing fluent comprehension (Bernhardt, Kamil 1995). The latter, conversely, posits that L2 competence is largely determined by the L1 capabilities developed prior to L2 exposure.

Furthermore, the manifestation of reading difficulties is heavily influenced by the ‘orthographic depth’ of a language, i.e. the consistency of its letter-to-sound relationships (Seymour, Aro, Erskine 2003; Ziegler, Goswami 2005). A crucial contribution that has enriched this theoretical framework is the Hypothesis of Granularity and Transparency (HGT), introduced by Wydell and Butterworth (1999). The HGT posits that developmental phonological dyslexia depends on the transparency of the orthographic system and the granularity of the phonological units represented, such as the phoneme, syllable, or character.¹²

12 According to Wydell (2023), granularity refers to the level of detail of the smallest sound one can produce in a language, ranging from ‘fine’ (phonemes) to ‘highly granular’ (syllables, characters, or whole words).

According to this hypothesis, phonological dyslexia is significantly less prevalent in transparent orthographies where grapheme-phoneme correspondence is regular, such as Italian, as well as in opaque orthographies if the minimum orthographic unit representing sound is highly granular, such as whole characters in Chinese or Japanese *kanji*.

An emblematic case is the English-Japanese bilingual studied by Wydell and Butterworth (1999), who demonstrated excellent reading skills in Japanese (both the syllabic *kana* and morphosyllabic *kanji*) but significant difficulties in English, an opaque orthography (Wydell 2023).¹³

As hypothesised in Section 2.2, and based on these theoretical premises, a compelling mechanism emerges regarding the acquisition of Chinese as a second language by native speakers of transparent alphabetic orthographies. While the highly granular, morphosyllabic nature of Chinese orthography could potentially compensate for deficits in L1 phonological assembly, it also places unprecedented demands on visual-spatial processing, orthographic memory, and rapid naming (RAN).

However, it is not possible to determine whether a non-alphabetic target script would mitigate or exacerbate a learner's pre-existing reading impairment through theoretical deduction alone. Empirical evidence is necessary to understand how L2 learners navigate this radical shift in cognitive architecture. A critical review of the literature is therefore required to firstly map how typical CSL learners master the complex mechanisms of reading and secondly evaluate how these processes break down when confronted with developmental dyslexia. The following sections systematically analyse these empirical findings, tracing the evolution of global CSL research and highlighting critical gaps regarding neurodivergent populations.

13 Japanese orthography comprises *kanji* (characters of Chinese origin) and *kana* (moraic syllabic systems). For a detailed analysis, see Wydell, Butterworth 1999.

3 CSL Acquisition, Teaching, and Dyslexia: The State-of-the-Art

Over the past two decades, there has been a massive global increase in the number of CSL learners, driven by a diverse array of cultural, economic, technological, and educational factors. Consequently, the teaching of Chinese as a second language or foreign language has experienced extraordinary growth and rising importance during this period (Zhang, Han, Zhang 2023a). According to official data from the Chinese Ministry of Education, the Chinese language had been incorporated into the national education systems of 76 countries by the end of 2021, bringing the total number of individuals who have received formal training to nearly 200 million.¹⁴

To understand the current scale of this field, it is necessary to examine the foundational milestones of its development.

The learning and teaching of CSL has a long history. In the 1950s, CSL instruction primarily served China's foreign diplomacy, playing a vital role in helping the country establish international relations with socialist nations and the third world. The first academic article regarding CSL teaching was "Jiao fei hanzu xuexue Hanyu de yixie wenti" 教非汉族学生学习汉语的一些问题 (Some Issues in Teaching Chinese to Non-Chinese Students) (Zhou 1953), published in China and using Chinese (Zhao, Huang 2010).

Later on, with China's reform and opening up policies in the late 1970s, the number of studies on CSL education increased steadily (Gong, Lai, Gao 2020).

Research on second language acquisition in China subsequently saw a shift in the 1980s, as scholars in the field of language sciences began to focus on the configuration of the linguistic-communicative systems of L2 learners (Buchetti et al. 2025). Within the European educational context, Rossi (2021, 14) captures this evolution by noting:

Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) has the double valence of being, at the same time, ancient and young. Ancient because it had already become the object of academic research and teaching back in the 19th century in Europe, and has gained over the years a more and more institutional recognition and a solid position in higher and secondary education. On the other hand, it can be also considered a relatively young discipline if viewed from

14 For official data regarding international Chinese language education, see The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Education Ministry: Over 25m Foreigners Learning Chinese by End of 2021" (29 June 2022), available at https://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202206/29/content_WS62bba005c6d02e533532ce5e.html.

the perspective of teaching and learning, since its processes, approaches and methods are in an ongoing phase of construction in the West.

With the beginning of the 21st century, in fact, there has been an explosion of interest in Asian languages worldwide, with a particular interest in modern Chinese. This language has gained a relevant position in several learning environments, predominantly in secondary schools, colleges, and universities. Despite its relatively recent introduction into many educational systems, modern Chinese has globally become the first non-European language included in high school and university curricula (for further details, refer to Rossi 2021). Outside of Europe, according to the 2021 Modern Language Association (MLA) report, Chinese is now the sixth most studied language in the United States.¹⁵

A critical factor in this global expansion was undoubtedly the establishment of the Confucius Institute network, beginning with the first launch in South Korea in 2004 (Gong, Lai, Gao 2020). According to recent news reports from late 2025, the network has expanded to include 510 Confucius Institutes operating across 164 countries and regions worldwide.¹⁶

As the number of learners grew, so did the intensity and diversity of CSL education research. Over the last 15 years, there has been a significant rise in publications in this field, alongside the development of new, emerging perspectives. While the majority of research on CSL education has been conducted by Chinese scholars and published in Chinese journals, international scholars and publications in English have also made notable efforts to meet the increasing global demand, especially in Western countries (Gong, Lyu, Gao 2018).

Scholars within and outside China exhibit different research foci regarding CSL instruction. Drawing on the comparative analysis by Gong, Lai and Gao (2020), studies published in Chinese journals are often concerned with instructional practices and teacher education and development. Conversely, studies published in international English-language journals usually concentrate on student learning outcomes and pedagogical approaches to facilitate language skill development, as well as students' intercultural competence and language learning in cross-cultural encounters. Furthermore,

15 See the full report *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in US Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2021*, by N. Lusin, T. Peterson, C. Sulewski and R. Zafer (2023) at <https://www.mla.org/content/download/191324/file/Enrollments-in-Languages-Other-ThanEnglish-in-US-Institutions-of-Higher-Education-Fall-2021.pdf>.

16 See the full article "Confucius Institute Continues Expansion with New Projects" by S. Zou, published in *China Daily* (17 November 2025), at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202511/17/WS691b147fa310d6866eb29f01.html>.

a significant body of work among these various research foci has centred on the challenges and factors influencing the acquisition of reading skills in Chinese as a second language. This focus stems from the premise that Mandarin Chinese presents idiosyncratic hurdles for learners, e.g., tone acquisition and the high complexity of its morphosyllabic writing system (Ke 2020), features that have been discussed throughout the preceding sections of this work. These investigations examine a wide spectrum of cognitive and linguistic variables in various educational settings.¹⁷ Findings from such studies range from the discovery of neural and cognitive mechanisms to the practical improvement of language teaching practices; accordingly, scholars and experts in the field highlight the need for further research into the complexities of language learning, cross-linguistic transfer, and neurocognitive processes in different linguistic contexts (Zhang, Han, Zhang 2023a).

In Italy, the interest in the Chinese language and the consequent spread of its teaching and learning have grown steadily, a trend evident in both schools and universities (Buchetti et al. 2025). While Chinese studies enjoy a long academic tradition in Italy, dating back to the first chair of Far Eastern Languages inaugurated in 1864 in Florence, the discipline has recently undergone a process of interrogation and consolidation, reaching the status of a “scientific discipline” (Favaloro 2017, 98).

At the school level, particularly within secondary education, the number of students choosing Chinese as part of their regular curriculum is increasing significantly (Gabbianelli, Formica 2017). Following a period of autonomous curricular experimentation starting in 2004, a major milestone was reached in 2016 with the adoption of the Syllabus of Chinese Language (It. *Sillabo della lingua cinese*).¹⁸ This ministerial document, developed through collaboration between institutional and academic representatives, officially integrated Chinese into the national secondary school system and provided a standardised ‘framework of reference’ for the discipline nationwide (Antonucci, Zuccheri 2010; Favaloro 2017; Gabbianelli 2020). Recent analyses derived from ministerial reports highlight a significant

17 This body of literature specifically addresses early reading challenges, cross-linguistic transfer, and metacognitive monitoring, alongside the impacts of idiomatic expression processing, thematic relations, and semantic memory. Research also extends to linguistic distance, code-switching costs, sentence structure processing, context predictability, and the influence of heritage language exposure on L2 reading proficiency (Zhang, Han, Zhang 2023a).

18 For the full framework, see Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), *Il Sillabo della lingua cinese. Quadro di riferimento unitario per l'insegnamento della lingua cinese nella scuola secondaria di secondo grado* (Rome, 2016), available at <https://scuole.vda.it/images/news/sillabocinese.pdf>.

upward trend: between the 2014/15 and 2020/21 school years, the number of institutes offering curricular Chinese (including boarding schools and non-state schools) grew from 108 to 179, representing a remarkable increase of approximately 66%. This confirms its status as the most widely studied non-European language in the Italian school system, with a consolidation of its presence particularly in the *Licei Linguistici*, i.e., specialised high schools with a core curriculum focused on modern foreign languages and cultures (Buchetti et al. 2025).

At the university level, this expansion is evidenced by the growing number of institutions offering Chinese language and culture courses. According to census data by Antonucci and Zuccheri (2010), 40 Italian universities were offering Chinese courses in 2010. By 2016, reports from the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) indicated that out of 82 active universities, 47 (approx. 55%) offered curricular or extracurricular Chinese language programs (Buchetti et al. 2025). Again, this growth is often supported by the consolidated presence of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms integrated within Italian universities, complemented and reinforced by academic agreements that include approximately 80 active joint double-degree programs between Italian and Chinese universities (Buchetti et al. 2025).

This institutional progress has transformed the perception of Chinese from an ‘exotic’ subject into a core component of the Italian educational landscape (Favaloro 2017; Gabbianelli 2020). However, despite these advancements, pedagogical approaches in Italy remain in a ‘phase of construction’ (Rossi 2021). Challenges persist regarding the solidification of teaching methodologies and the development of adequate didactic resources. Moreover, there is a pressing need for dedicated research into personalised teaching approaches that address the diverse learning needs of CSL students, including those with literacy impairments, to ensure truly equitable and effective instruction (Verzì 2023; 2026a).

3.1 Studies on CSL Reading

Before narrowing the focus to dyslexia, it is essential to review the existing international literature on the acquisition of reading in CSL. Understanding how typical developing learners master this morphosyllabic system provides the necessary benchmark for identifying where the reading process ‘breaks down’ for learners with literacy impairments.

The structural distance between alphabetic L1s and the Chinese script creates a unique set of challenges for CSL learners, a theme that has dominated the research landscape over the last two decades

(Zhang, Han, Zhang 2023a). Although there is a substantial body of research focused on native Chinese speakers, the number of studies investigating the reading acquisition of CSL is comparatively limited. However, this area of research has received increasing attention in recent years and is gradually expanding.

This rising international attention is most prominently consolidated in the landmark collection edited by Zhang, Han and Zhang (2023a; 2023b): *Reading Acquisition of Chinese as a Second/Foreign Language* (volumes 1 and 2). Comprising thirty combined empirical investigations and systematic updates, these volumes represent the most extensive contemporary mapping of the cognitive, linguistic, and neurocognitive mechanisms underlying CSL literacy development. As articulated in their respective opening editorials (Zhang, Han, Zhang 2023c; 2023d), this extensive body of research attempts to isolate the ways in which L2 learners confront the distinct complexities of a logographic script, ranging from its intense visual and spatial demands to its complete lack of inter-word boundaries. This marks a significant turning point in the field.

In order to fully understand the structural evolution that led to this current milestone, it is necessary to examine the systematic reviews and meta-analyses that formed the foundation immediately prior to it. Before this modern synthesis, Ke (2020) conducted a critical review that systematically outlined the structural landscape of L2 Chinese reading research, identifying 92 empirical studies published in international English-language journals between 1976 and 2018. Ke observed that the field had historically prioritised technology-assisted learning and mechanical character instruction over comprehensive reading assessment or the systematic evaluation of individual learner differences, a critical gap highly pertinent to the objectives of the present work. Li and Li (2020) corroborated this institutional imbalance by reviewing 142 Chinese-language and 72 English-language articles published between 2005 and 2019. Specifically, Li categorised the global research output into four dominant paradigms: pedagogy and teaching strategies (the primary focus of researchers in mainland China); recognition and writing studies, exploring the mechanics of character retention; the investigation of internal character knowledge and radical awareness; and computer-assisted character learning (the most heavily researched theme among scholars working outside China).

Finally, Chen and Zhao (2022)'s meta-analysis statistically quantified the precise metalinguistic factors driving CFL literacy acquisition through a comprehensive meta-analysis of 42 effect sizes from a sample of 1,103 subjects. They found that phonological, orthographic and morphological awareness, as well as rapid automatised naming (RAN), all maintain significant, moderate relationships with CSL word reading. Crucially, they identified a

distinct sensitive period for phonological learning, proving that the reliance on phonological processing is significantly stronger for beginning learners before fading as students advance.

Collectively, the body of global literature published over the last two decades has converged on several critical avenues for future research, with the aim of bridging the persistent gap between theoretical models and classroom realities. Ke (2020) proposes shifting towards word-level reading and conducting coordinated, cross-border research involving diverse CSL learner populations. Similarly, Zhang, Han and Zhang (2023a) point out that it is still unclear how learners from different linguistic backgrounds manage to master the complex Chinese orthography, syllable-character correspondence and word segmentation without inter-word spacing.

The research gap concerning individual learner differences mentioned by Ke (2020) is particularly evident when considering neurodivergent populations; specifically, the study of how dyslexia manifests in the L2 Chinese classroom remains one of the least explored dimensions of this global research landscape. In fact, there is a notable absence of empirical data regarding learners whose cognitive profile is already characterised by a reading impairment in their L1.

A synthesis of this extensive global pool of literature yields a clear analytical conclusion: despite the impressive scope of these studies, which span hundreds of empirical investigations and major systematic reviews involving thousands of diverse second language learners, learners with developmental dyslexia or underlying literacy impairments are completely absent from the empirical record: in other words, current CSL reading acquisition research implicitly assumes neurotypicality. By bypassing the structural and cognitive realities of neurodivergent students, the field lacks the empirical tools necessary to understand how deficits in L1 reading skills are affected by a non-alphabetic writing system.

3.2 Studies on CSL and Dyslexia: The Global Landscape

Research on dyslexia within the CSL context remains exceptionally scarce from a global perspective, with only a few geographic hubs contributing significant empirical data. To date, the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) has been the primary global contributor to this specialised field. Given the multicultural and multilingual context of Singapore, DAS has conducted extensive research through its own peer-reviewed publication, the *Asia Pacific Journal of Developmental Differences* (APJDD). Launched to address a wide range of special educational needs – including dyslexia, autism, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and ADHD – within the Asia-Pacific context,

the journal began publishing dedicated research on the intersection of CSL learning and dyslexia in 2014. This comprised a landmark study that, to the author's knowledge, stands as the first formal publication investigating English-Chinese bilingual children learning Chinese as a second language (Lee, Poon 2014). This institutional focus is inherently tied to the specific linguistic environment of Singaporean society – previously discussed in Section 2.4 – where the requirement for students to navigate the bilingual demands of English and Chinese has necessitated the development of specialised intervention models and substantial empirical work.

In the European context, a significant contribution to understanding these cross-linguistic challenges is provided by Kuester-Gruber et al. (2023), who investigated German-speaking children with and without dyslexia as absolute beginners learning Chinese. Their research used eye-tracking technology to observe how these learners processed characters. The findings showed that dyslexic children did not differ significantly from the control group in terms of their eye movements when naming Chinese characters. However, their overall accuracy in naming these characters was significantly lower. These results imply that a morphosyllabic script like Chinese may not offer a simple compensatory advantage against underlying phonological deficits. According to Kuester-Gruber et al.'s study, despite the employment of alternative visual processing strategies, core phonological and naming difficulties can still significantly hinder accurate L2 performance.

Complementing these findings within Europe, the Italian context has emerged as a major centre of research activity, offering a unique linguistic perspective due to the stark contrast between the Italian transparent alphabetic system and the morphosyllabic nature of Chinese. As Italy has established itself as a key contributor to the investigation of SLDs within Chinese second language acquisition, the following section details the specific findings of Italian scholars and the broader national response to dyslexia in the CSL classroom.

3.3 Mapping the National Response: The Italian Context

Within the European landscape, Italy has distinguished itself as one of the most dynamic hubs for research into the teaching and learning of Chinese as a Second Language for students with SLDs. This interest has been driven by the rapid expansion of Chinese as a curricular subject in Italian secondary schools and the parallel necessity of ensuring inclusive educational pathways for all learners, in accordance with national legislation (Scibetta, Wang, Francolino 2026).

Italian research in this field has evolved from an exploratory phase based on daily teaching experiences towards a more systematic experimental stage. Early contributions were provided by Formica (2018), who shared operational models aimed at facilitating Chinese instruction in the high school classroom. Similarly, Cai and Piccioni (2017) analysed the intrinsic difficulties related to the morphosyllabic nature of Chinese writing for high school learners of L2 Chinese, highlighting the importance of targeted pedagogical adaptations to compensate for decoding deficits. A fundamental step towards academic inclusion was marked by the work of Giaconi et al. (2019) and Gesù (2019) at the University of Macerata, Italy. Their project represented a pioneering initiative aimed at making university-level Chinese instruction more accessible, promoting the creation of specific teaching materials and the identification of support strategies for dyslexic students.

Recently, the debate has been enriched by studies employing advanced investigative methodologies. Verzi (2023; 2026a) and Verzi and Roccaforte (2024) used eye-tracking techniques to examine the reading patterns of Italian CSL university students with dyslexia, providing new evidence on the visual processing of characters and suggesting that iconic representations can serve as strategic supports. Complementing this experimental approach, the work of Cirola (2026a; 2026b) fits into this framework, addressing the critical need for standardised assessment tools. Through the development of an experimental battery designed for high school learners of L2 Chinese with and without L1 literacy impairments, her research aims to identify the cognitive-linguistic predictors of success in L2 Chinese reading and writing. This research is closely linked to the intervention study by Bianchi and Novelli (2024; Novelli 2026), which puts into practice evidence-based techniques, such as multisensory learning and visual association, to reduce learning obstacles for all students, both with and without dyslexia.

The edited volume by Scibetta, Wang and Francolino (2026)¹⁹ represents the most recent and complete synthesis of the national literature on this topic. The primary added value of this work lies in its promotion of a significant paradigm shift: moving away from 'compensatory' adaptations for individual students and advancing towards the proactive design of accessible, inclusive, and sustainable learning pathways for the entire class. By bridging the gap between theoretical research and daily classroom practice, the volume fosters

19 Several of the works cited in this Section (e.g., Verzi 2026b; Cirola 2026b; Novelli 2026) are included as chapters within this volume (Scibetta, Wang, Francolino 2026), alongside various other significant contributions to the field of CSL inclusive education. For a comprehensive overview of these studies, readers are encouraged to refer directly to the full volume.

a synergy between the university and secondary school contexts. It addresses accessibility not merely as a set of dispensatory measures, but as a universal pedagogical requirement that benefits all learners by adapting to a plurality of cognitive styles.

In conclusion, Italy has established itself as an excellent scientific laboratory for studying dyslexia within the context of the CSL educational system. This has laid the foundations for a national body of literature based on robust theoretical frameworks. However, there are still some critical gaps, particularly with regard to the generalisability of empirical data across larger cohorts. These gaps will be discussed further in Section 4.

4 Conclusions

The present literature review has mapped the evolution of Chinese as a Second Language from a niche academic pursuit to a global educational phenomenon, while concurrently examining the robust body of cross-linguistic research regarding L1 literacy acquisition and the diverse manifestation of literacy impairments, such as developmental dyslexia, in acquiring both an L1 and an L2. Within this landscape, the specific intersection of dyslexia and CSL acquisition has emerged as a critical, albeit underexplored, field of inquiry. This final section provides a synthesis of the central themes and evidence identified in the literature, discusses the inherent limitations of the current research state, and outlines future directions for the discipline.

4.1 Discussion and Limitations of Current Research

This consolidation of evidence reveals that orthographic depth, phonological awareness, and the typological distance between languages play a significant role in the manifestation of dyslexia. Contrasting the Italian and Chinese contexts shows that dyslexia is not a monolithic difficulty, but rather a dynamic interaction between cognitive deficits and the specific demands of a writing system. In the Italian context, where the alphabetic script is highly transparent, dyslexia primarily manifests as deficits in phonological awareness, reading fluency and speed; however, decoding accuracy remains relatively intact. In contrast, in the Chinese context, the nature of the impairment is quite different: the morphosyllabic nature of the script places greater emphasis on orthographic and morphological awareness, as well as visual-spatial processing and RAN awareness. Consequently, while Italian learners struggle with the automaticity of phoneme-to-grapheme mapping, Chinese learners, as well as those

in Singapore's bilingual environment, have particular difficulty with character recognition, awareness of radical position, and distinguishing between visually similar orthographic neighbours.

This cross-linguistic comparison underscores a fundamental shift in the scientific understanding of dyslexia – moving from a single-deficit phonological model towards the multifactorial perspective supported by recent consensus (Carroll et al. 2025). As discussed in Section 2, the 'face' of dyslexia is effectively filtered through the orthography. For the Italian L2 learner of Chinese, this creates a 'double burden'. These learners must not only manage their existing L1 deficits – likely centred on processing speed and phonological retrieval – but must also develop entirely new cognitive strategies for a script that provides no inherent alphabetic cues to phonology except for the initial temporary support of *Pinyin*. While *Pinyin* remains a necessary lifelong reference for acquiring new vocabulary, the ultimate goal of CSL literacy – the direct recognition of characters – represents the primary cognitive hurdle for all learners; however, further empirical research is specifically needed to confirm if recognising and reading characters is truly the exact stage where the CSL reading process fails for students with dyslexia.

The most significant limitation identified in this study is the extreme scarcity of empirical data, with research currently concentrated in a few geographic hubs, primarily Italy and Singapore. While these regions provide invaluable both longitudinal and cross-sectional insights, the global applicability of their findings is limited by several factors that remain unresolved in the broader literature. Most notably, the influence of the native language on the acquisition of the second language, often referred to as cross-linguistic transfer, remains a critical gap, as the majority of studies focus exclusively on English-Chinese or Italian-Chinese learners. Consequently, there is a lack of data regarding how learners from other diverse linguistic backgrounds experience dyslexia in the CSL classroom, particularly those coming from other opaque alphabetic systems like Danish or Swedish, different script families such as Arabic or Cyrillic, or systems involving different levels of granularity like Japanese, where the highly granular morphosyllabic *kanji* contrasts with the transparent syllabic *kana*. Understanding whether an opaque L1 background provides a different 'transfer effect' compared to a transparent L1 background is essential for building a truly universal theoretical framework for dyslexia in CSL acquisition.

Furthermore, the generalizability of existing research is hindered by small sample sizes, as many studies are either qualitative case studies or involve cohorts that are too limited to represent the broader CSL population. This issue is further complicated by a lack of standardised assessment tools for identifying dyslexia specifically in CSL learners, which leads to persistent methodological

discrepancies. The result is that researchers and practitioners often have to rely on L1 diagnoses and pedagogical suggestions that usually work for other L2s (e.g., English), but do not necessarily work for Chinese. Such borrowed frameworks may fail to capture the full scope of L2-specific difficulties, as they tend to ignore the unique orthographic and morphological demands of a non-alphabetic script. Finally, regarding the exhaustiveness of this survey, it must be acknowledged that while the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS) and the Italian scholarly community have been identified as the primary global hubs for pedagogical research thanks to their organised and institutionalised approaches, the rapid globalisation of CSL suggests that smaller research clusters or localised clinical studies may exist beyond these regions. Although a rigorous search by the author did not reveal further formal empirical publications of comparable scale, future researchers may discover other niche studies as the field continues to transition from an experimental phase to a broader pedagogical discipline.

4.2 Future Directions and Pedagogical Implications

In order to advance the field, research must shift its focus from merely identifying deficits to developing validated pedagogical interventions and robust empirical methodologies. To guide this transition, future scholarly efforts should be directed along two primary axes.

1. **Technology-Enhanced Teaching and Learner Corpus Research**

The expansion of multisensory instructional models represents one of the most promising avenues for non-alphabetic reading instruction. In their review of multisensory interventions for dyslexic learners, Lim, Yeo and Handayani (2023) highlight how Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Tactile (VAKT) techniques, such as the Orton-Gillingham (OG) approach, Fernald methods, and tactile symbol tracing, consistently improve oral reading, word recognition, and letter-reversal errors across various writing systems. This multisensory approach has recently received direct empirical support also within the Italian CSL dyslexia literature (e.g., Novelli 2026), proving that tactile stroke-tracing and visual association significantly reduce learning obstacles for L2 Chinese learners with reading impairments.

Within the fields of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and Assistive Technology (AT), researchers must design and validate digital strategies targeted at non-alphabetic scripts. As Pothuri and Kumar's (2025) systematic review demonstrated,

interactive, multisensory and teacher-supported CALL and MALL tools significantly improve reading, spelling and engagement for dyslexic learners. In the field of L1 Chinese literacy, recent technological innovations provide promising solutions: interactive character-learning applications (Fan et al. 2025) offer dynamic radical decomposition to support young readers with dyslexia, and adaptive, AI-driven digital tutoring environments (Wang, Kuo 2026) provide personalised support that significantly increases intrinsic motivation and problem-solving skills among native Chinese primary school students with dyslexia. However, Fan et al. (2025) and Wang, Kuo (2026) both focus strictly on the native L1 Chinese population. Therefore, the direct efficacy of these models as formal compensatory mechanisms for CSL dyslexic readers requires further empirical testing.

Furthermore, a highly promising but currently untapped resource is the compilation of specialised learner corpora for CSL and dyslexia. For instance, Radar and Gilquin (2024) demonstrated the power of process-oriented corpus research by using keystroke logging to analyse real-time pause and revision behaviours in dyslexic university students learning a second language. While research at the intersection of learner corpora and dyslexia has begun to take shape within alphabetic SLA, this methodology has yet to be systematically applied to non-alphabetic second language acquisition. Compiling such specialised CSL corpora would make it possible to empirically track interlanguage development, pinpoint cognitive challenges during character production, and design evidence-based pedagogical interventions.

2. Institutional Policy Realignment and Language-Specific Accommodations

To bridge the gap between academic theory and classroom reality, future research should actively drive institutional policy reform, particularly within highly structured educational environments like the Italian secondary school system. As exposed in Section 2.6, the standardised foreign language sections of Personalised Didactic Plans (PDPs) suffer from a severe alphabetic-centred bias. They prescribe uniform accommodations designed for Western European alphabetic languages, completely failing to address the visual-spatial and morphosyllabic hurdles unique to the Chinese writing system. Consequently, future empirical findings must be translated into systemic policy updates. Researchers, educational planners, and technology developers must collaborate to redesign PDP templates, moving away from cross-language uniformity and towards language-specific guidelines. To make

this policy transition possible, future research must prioritise experimental, classroom-based studies that rigorously test and prove new compensatory tools specifically designed for dyslexic CSL learners. Only once these non-alphabetic interventions have been empirically validated on CSL student populations can they be formally legitimised and integrated into customised PDP frameworks.

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Le tribolazioni di un americano in Cina

Traduzione indiretta e transtestualità nella novella «Qie ming bo» 妾命薄 (1906) di Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876-1973)

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Abstract From the end of the Qing dynasty through the early Republican period, the translation of world literature played a crucial role in shaping China's modern commercial publishing and literary cultures. Such translations were frequently produced as indirect translation. Within this context, the novelist Bao Tianxiao, with a limited knowledge of foreign languages, carried out most of his translations through Japanese intermediaries. This paper analyses the translinguistic trajectory of Bao's short story «Qie ming bo» (1906). Through a comparative reading, the study reconstructs how a short sketch by Mark Twain was rendered into Chinese via Hara Hōitsuan's translation (1903) and examines the extent to which Bao creatively reworked the source material.

Keywords Bao Tianxiao. Hara Hōitsuan. Mark Twain. Indirect translation. Creative translation.

Sommario 1 Introduzione. – 2 Quadro teorico. La traduzione indiretta. – 2.1 I *translator studies*. – 2.2 La riscrittura. – 3 Bao Tianxiao traduttore. – 3.1 Pratiche traduttive di Bao Tianxiao. – 3.2 Alcuni esempi di traduzione da parte di Bao Tianxiao. – 4 Il caso studio: «Aurelia's Unfortunate Young Man»; «Jogen» 助言; «Qie ming bo» 妾命薄. – 4.1 Il Source Text. «Aurelia's Unfortunate Young Man» di Mark Twain. – 4.2 Il Mediating Text. «Jogen» 助言 di Hara Hōitsuan. – 4.3 Il Target Text. «Qie ming bo» di Bao Tianxiao. – 5 Conclusioni.



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1 Introduzione

La traduzione costituisce spesso un canale privilegiato per l'introduzione di innovazioni formali e contenutistiche all'interno di un sistema letterario e culturale. Nel contesto cinese del periodo tardoimperiale e protorepubblicano (*Qingmo minchu* 清末民初), ossia i decenni a cavallo tra Ottocento e Novecento, essa svolse pienamente questa funzione non solo in ambito tecnico e scientifico, in cui operavano traduttori esperti, ma anche nell'ambito della letteratura e della stampa. Qui i protagonisti erano frequentemente letterati formati secondo il curriculum tradizionale, dotati di flessibilità e versatilità, sensibili ai gusti di un pubblico in espansione e aperti alle innovazioni che potevano emergere dal confronto con altre tradizioni letterarie, ma talvolta privi di una solida competenza nelle lingue straniere. Tra questi, uno dei principali autori-traduttori fu Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876-1973), giornalista e scrittore attivo a Shanghai nella prima metà del Novecento. Pur avendo solo una competenza modesta della lingua giapponese, Bao si affidava spesso alle versioni giapponesi di opere occidentali per tradurre in maniera indiretta in cinese, oppure collaborava con autori che conoscevano l'inglese per tradurre a quattro mani. In questo contesto la traduzione indiretta era considerata valida quanto quella diretta e rappresentava anzi un mezzo fondamentale per facilitare la ricezione della letteratura straniera in Cina. Da questa prospettiva, l'attività traduttiva di Bao offre un caso interessante per comprendere le dinamiche culturali del periodo, nella misura in cui anche la traduzione diviene per l'autore parte della sua produzione letteraria, fortemente orientata al pubblico, spingendosi così verso originali interventi creativi non estranei ad un'ibridazione con forme e temi della tradizione classica cinese.

Il presente articolo è diviso in una prima parte teorica sulla traduzione indiretta e la riscrittura; una parte di natura storico-biografica sulla figura di Bao Tianxiao come traduttore e un corpo principale dedicato al caso studio in esame, ovvero il racconto «Qie ming bo» 妾命薄 (Il mio infelice destino; Bao 1906), che è una versione in cinese dello sketch di Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835-1910), «Aurelia's Unfortunate Young Man», attraverso la precedente traduzione giapponese. Esaminando il metodo traduttivo di Bao Tianxiao, evidenzieremo gli elementi originali della sua traduzione altamente creativa.

2 Quadro teorico. La traduzione indiretta

Utilizzeremo in questo articolo il termine ‘traduzione indiretta’ seguendo la sistemazione metodologica e terminologica data da Assis Rosa, Pięta e Bueno Maia (2017) e la intenderemo come «translation of a translation» (113).¹ Sempre in base alla stessa formulazione metalinguistica useremo i termini Source Text (ST) e Source Language (SL) per il testo e la lingua di partenza; Mediating Text (MT) e Mediating Language (ML) per il testo intermedio (la prima traduzione) e la sua lingua; infine, Target Text (TT) e Target Language (TL) per il testo di arrivo (la traduzione della traduzione) e la sua lingua.

Fra le possibili ragioni della traduzione indiretta vi sono la mancanza di traduttori, le limitate competenze linguistiche nella SL, la difficoltà nel reperire il testo originale,² costi relativamente più alti di una traduzione diretta. Secondo Assis Rosa, Pięta e Bueno Maia «historically ITr [i.e. indirect translation] appears to decrease when adequacy or source-orientedness prevails, but increase when *acceptability* or target-orientedness prevails» (2017, 114; corsivo aggiunto). Sottolineiamo qui il termine *acceptability*, che Toury oppone all'*adequacy* (Toury [1995] 2012, 69-70),³ come fattore di legittimazione socioculturale della traduzione intermedia. Esistono altre ragioni per questo tipo di traduzione: oltre ad esigenze pratiche o consapevoli scelte editoriali e di mercato (Špirk 2014, 139), vi è talvolta una funzione censoria sul TT (Ringmar 2012). La scelta di un medium linguistico intermedio, che riflette impliciti o espliciti rapporti di potere, può essere compiuta in base al suo prestigio relativo o anche per semplice prossimità culturale, che può stemperare l'estraneità di un testo straniero (cf. Ringmar 2012). Quest'ultimo è sicuramente il caso del giapponese come ML nel caso delle prime traduzioni indirette in Cina.

1 Un altro termine usato nei *translation studies* è «relay translation» (Ringmar 2012).

2 È il caso, ad esempio, del romanzo di Lao She 老舍 (1899-1966) *The Drum Singers*, scritto dall'autore negli USA e tradotto in inglese da Helena Kuo assistita dallo stesso autore contemporaneamente alla stesura in cinese; quando il manoscritto cinese andò perduto al rientro dell'autore in Cina rimase solo la sua versione in inglese, che fu pubblicata nel 1952 e poi (ri)tradotta in cinese nel 1980 da Ma Xiaomi 馬小彌 come *Gushu yiren* 鼓術藝人 (Lyell 2007, 91).

3 *Acceptability* e *adequacy* sono definiti nei termini dei due principi che determinano il valore di una traduzione: «the production of a text in a particular culture/language which is designed to occupy a certain position, or fill a certain slot, in the host culture, while, at the same time, constituting a representation in that language/culture of a text already existing in some other language, belonging to a different culture and occupying a definable position within it» (Toury [1995] 2012, 69). Secondo Toury non è possibile soddisfare entrambi i principi: «a translation will never be either adequate or acceptable» (70).

Fra la fine dell'Ottocento e i primi decenni del Novecento, la traduzione intermedia era molto utilizzata in Cina, principalmente per urgenza e in mancanza di strumenti immediati. Molte delle prime opere letterarie straniere introdotte in Cina furono infatti tradotte utilizzando versioni precedenti in giapponese o in inglese. La traduzione intermedia forniva inoltre il vantaggio di poter conoscere e far conoscere letterature diverse e periferiche rispetto ai canoni internazionalmente dominanti all'epoca, quello anglofono e francofono. Anche gli intellettuali più cosmopoliti e consapevoli del Quattro Maggio vi fecero ricorso – fra questi anche Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898-1958) e Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) – e, nonostante fossero consapevoli dei limiti di tale strumento, ritenevano che potesse comunque essere utile (Chen 2018, 137). I problemi che emergevano da questo genere di traduzione erano però gli stessi del telefono senza fili o, in inglese, dei «Chinese whispers» (Chen 2015): il rischio di commettere o trasferire errori ed equivoci di traduzione e interventi arbitrari ad ogni passaggio. È da considerare inoltre che in generale in questi casi il traduttore finale subisce la duplice dipendenza dal traduttore intermedio (anche solo per la selezione dei testi) e dall'editore intermedio.⁴

2.1 I *translator studies*

In base alla classificazione di Holmes ([1972] 2000), l'analisi qui condotta si inserirà soprattutto nel campo «puro» e «descrittivo»⁵ dei *translation studies*, relativamente al prodotto (i testi), al processo (il traduttore e in particolare il passaggio indiretto dal ST al TT) e alla funzione (il contesto) della traduzione, considerati come interdipendenti (Toury [1995] 2012). In effetti, esamineremo in termini prevalentemente empirici e storici l'autore Bao Tianxiao nella sua veste di traduttore e quindi tratteremo la sua attività traduttiva come parte della sua produzione e dei suoi principi critici e poetici. A partire dal focus sul processo seguiamo parzialmente anche il sottocampo dei *translator studies* (Chesterman 2009; Pym 2009), che sottolineano le variabili culturali, cognitive e sociologiche dell'attività

4 Secondo la *relevance theory* di Gutt (2000), relativa alla funzione di trasmissione del messaggio originario, la traduzione indiretta è la scelta che permette di comunicare rapidamente il messaggio, a scapito della fedeltà al significato autentico dell'originale. In molti casi però questa strategia traduttiva è costretta a includere molte informazioni aggiuntive e interventi da parte del traduttore, proprio per rendere comprensibile il messaggio; diversamente la traduzione diretta evita ogni interpolazione e al massimo utilizza introduzioni, note e glossari (Shuttleworth, Cowie 2014, 41).

5 Ove non diversamente indicato, tutte le traduzioni dall'inglese e dal cinese sono degli Autori.

traduttiva, senza però trascurare i testi, che analizzeremo in termini comparativi, procedurali e causali. In particolare, da Chesterman (2009, 17) accogliamo l'aggiunta del termine 'telos' per indicare la motivazione personale del traduttore, accanto allo 'skopos', l'effetto desiderato della traduzione, come anche l'attenzione alle fasi e alle norme del processo traduttivo. Da Pym (2009), accogliamo l'attenzione sulla storia della traduzione come strada per comprendere i contatti interculturali e l'azione degli attori coinvolti in questo scambio. Gli agenti della traduzione saranno da noi considerati come variabili soggettive e attive del contesto, all'interno di una prospettiva principalmente storica, letteraria e sociologica. Questo atteggiamento è necessario se consideriamo che nel presente studio il TT è in parte una traduzione intermedia e in parte una creazione originale, che mescola il MT e fonti classiche cinesi. Per questo occorre approfondire sia le motivazioni del traduttore-creatore sia l'ambito della ricezione. Di particolare rilievo è l'*habitus* traduttivo, che può spiegare la scelta di determinate strategie traduttive e spiegare il testo tradotto come il risultato di compromessi storicamente definiti (Wolf 2014): se normalmente il traduttore sente di dover rispettare le norme della traduzione e adeguare quindi il proprio comportamento, i traduttori cinesi di inizio Novecento come Bao Tianxiao provavano meno soggezione nei confronti del ST: si sottraevano alla posizione subalterna del traduttore nei confronti dell'originale e cercavano autorevolezza, soprattutto di fronte ai loro lettori, a scapito della fedeltà al testo.

Pym (2009), contro approcci eccessivamente quantitativi, propone una rinnovata attenzione agli aspetti umani dell'atto traduttivo, spostando l'accento sull'*agency* del traduttore e sulla comunicazione fra culture, oltre che sulla centralità del contesto socioculturale.⁶ Seguendo alcuni dei suoi principi analitici, vediamo come essi si possono applicare a Bao Tianxiao, che come traduttore rientra in un «multidiscursive involvement»: egli infatti non era solo traduttore, ma era anche scrittore, editore, giornalista e spesso questi ruoli si sovrapponevano, in particolare quando le sue traduzioni erano anche creazioni; da ciò discende il fatto che il Bao traduttore rispondeva ad una «multiple allegiance», perché la sua attività non era compiuta solo nell'interesse della cultura ma anche per interessi materiali e di sussistenza.

Diviene interessante a questo punto la classificazione di Robyns (1994) sulla traduzione come «migration and transformation of discursive elements between different discourses» (408) e sul suo potere di integrare o violare norme discorsive esistenti.

6 In continuità con gli studi di Pym, segnaliamo sul tema Kaindl, Kolb, Schlager 2021 e ringraziamo l'anonimo revisione per il suggerimento bibliografico.

Robyns pone l'accento sulla «interference between discourses and discursive structures and strategies» (406) utilizzata dagli attori per reagire agli elementi estranei e alle diseguali relazioni di potere fra discorsi. La traduzione, quindi, può andare dalla ripetizione letterale all'intertestualità. Prendendo i due criteri del riconoscimento degli elementi estranei e della loro ammissione nel discorso di arrivo, Robyns identifica quattro atteggiamenti della traduzione: «imperialist» (in cui l'alterità è negata); «defensive» (in cui l'alterità è trasformata); «trans-discursive» (in cui non si oppone resistenza all'alterità) e «defective» (in cui gli elementi estranei sono esplicitamente riconosciuti come tali) (408-9). L'atteggiamento imperialista tende ad assimilare l'estraneità del discorso importato e, sottolineando la specificità della propria identità, universalizza i propri valori; l'atteggiamento difensivo parte da un concetto relativamente negativo di traduzione per trasformare gli elementi estranei secondo le convenzioni del discorso di arrivo; l'atteggiamento transdiscorsivo riconosce pari importanza agli elementi locali e a quelli importati in termini molto cosmopoliti; l'atteggiamento difettivo parte da un concetto relativamente positivo della traduzione e riconosce il contributo del discorso di partenza nell'adattare e aggiornare il discorso di arrivo: in questo caso gli elementi estranei sono esplicitamente presentati come stranieri. Quest'ultimo è il caso per Robyns delle pseudotraduzioni ma, secondo noi, aiuta a comprendere anche alcuni aspetti delle traduzioni creative. Robyns ammette comunque che nessun caso specifico può corrispondere solo ad una delle sue quattro coordinate di ricerca. Le cose si complicano quando questo schema si applica alla traduzione intermedia perché occorre considerare anche il MT come una traduzione compiuta per adattare il discorso del ST ad un discorso di arrivo; ciò che avviene nuovamente nel passaggio dal MT al TT.

La svolta culturale del *translation studies* ha chiarito quanto la traduzione non sia mai neutrale e anzi doppiamente contestualizzata, nel contesto di partenza e in quello di arrivo (Bassnett 1998) e grazie alla sociologia della traduzione possiamo quindi ancor più considerare situata una traduzione attiva e impegnata (Wolf 2014; Simon 2005, 11). Tale può apparire la traduzione degli autori cinesi nel periodo *Qingmo minchu*, che – forse senza averne piena coscienza – agivano in termini anticoloniali sul testo di partenza. Essi accoglievano le novità culturali dai testi stranieri ma con la lingua classica e con un orizzonte culturale cinese e tradizionale, che spesso li portava a sinizzare il contenuto del ST o del MT (o di entrambi). È in questo contesto che la traduzione rivela la sua ulteriore dimensione di riscrittura.

2.2 La riscrittura

Come scrive Lefevere, la riscrittura (come traduzione o intervento editoriale) è tradizionalmente uno strumento di trasmissione della cultura 'alta' verso il lettore non-professionista. Lefevere stabilisce che la riscrittura non ha solo motivazioni ideologiche ma anche poetologiche, cioè l'esigenza da parte di un riscrittore di adeguare lo stile e la forma del testo di partenza al modello dominante nel suo tempo e spazio:

[R]ewriters adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of the time. Again, this may be most obvious in totalitarian societies, but different 'interpretive communities' that exist in more open societies will influence the production of rewritings in similar ways. [...] Rewriting manipulates, and it is effective. [...] The same basic process of rewriting is at work in translation, historiography, anthologization, criticism, and editing. (Lefevere 2017, 6-7)

Per Lefevere patroni e poetica sono i due pilastri del sistema letterario: ne definiscono i limiti e le possibilità di espressione. I patroni (istituzioni o persone potenti), più interessati alla difesa dell'ideologia che della poetica, si servono di professionisti come critici, traduttori, editori, insegnanti per stabilire i confini del canone e far rispettare le sue costrizioni, distribuendo vantaggi o punizioni, economici o di status. Il canone che si crea è essenzialmente conservatore e si può sfidare apertamente – come avverrà nel Quattro Maggio – oppure tentare di aprirlo a novità graduali, come fecero gli autori del periodo *Qingmo minchu*, usando anche le traduzioni – intermedie, creative e pseudotraduzioni – per ampliare la visione del mondo e universalizzare valori tradizionali che non erano considerati in conflitto con la modernità e per arricchire la letteratura, soprattutto in un genere, quale la narrativa, il cui status relativamente basso garantiva da secoli la libertà di sperimentare e riscrivere, come già avvenuto in epoca Ming 明 (1368-1644).

La traduzione può essere un 'atto di violenza' nell'inserire novità aliene nella letteratura di un Paese, ma anche nel realizzare un gesto politico di sovversione delle norme letterarie esistenti: la narrativa straniera nel periodo *Qingmo minchu* fu spesso manipolata per accontentare i lettori, ancora legati a forme e contenuti tradizionali (Wong 1999). In questa fase storica – grazie al magistero di Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) – si attribuì alla narrativa, per la sua ampia e crescente diffusione fra la borghesia urbana, una funzione sociopolitica i cui fini si distinguono progressivamente da quelli del potere istituzionale e mirano ad un trasferimento della

legittimazione politica al ‘popolo’, aumentandone la consapevolezza e il senso di comunità, nella direzione di un moderno Stato nazione e di una comunità di sentimenti unita da valori condivisi (con un’enfasi particolare sulla famiglia; cf. Lee 2007). Fin dal 1901, con la fondazione del suo giornale in lingua parlata a Suzhou (il *Suzhou baihuabao* 蘇州白話報) e poi con la sua attività di insegnante e ancora come giornalista e scrittore nelle riviste di Shanghai, Bao Tianxiao dimostrò di capire che istruire e informare i lettori fosse un’attività politica, oltre che strettamente economica. Proprio per questo, però, anch’egli doveva fare attenzione a non perdere lettori facendo una violenza estetica e culturale ai testi che potevano veicolare un messaggio riformatore, utilizzando una traduzione libera ed ‘editoriale’ e una lingua anticata per sminuire tutti gli elementi troppi sovversivi della letteratura straniera (Wong 1999).

La poetica, altro pilastro del sistema letterario per Lefevere, è non solo un insieme di strumenti linguistici e retorici ma anche la selezione, attraverso la distribuzione di fama e di censura, di quanto può essere considerato letterario attraverso la critica e la ricezione. Anche in questo modo si crea un canone di opere e di autori il cui stile diventa un modello da seguire. Nell’epoca *Qingmo minchu* non solo si differenzia il sistema del patronato (non più solo l’accademismo legato alla corte e al potere imperiale) ma si amplia la poetica (non più solo la lingua classica e i modelli nazionali): iniziano a formarsi, cioè, modelli e canoni alternativi, anche solo per tentativi ed esperimenti. La poetica, comunque, agisce soprattutto attraverso temi specifici, che hanno una funzione innovativa sul sistema letterario e che fanno sentire quanto il sistema letterario sia influenzato dalla realtà esterna, sociale. La componente stilistica invece è relativamente conservatrice: non solo la lingua classica resiste, pur adeguandosi lentamente ai tempi, ma così fanno anche i generi tradizionali. Ogni poetica, pur essendo storicamente determinata, tende cioè a concepirsi come assoluta e lotta per difendere sé stessa e questo si nota soprattutto dove il conflitto è maggiore, come nei sistemi letterari non occidentali di fronte all’influenza occidentale (Lefevere 2017, 27). A questo punto la riscrittura contribuisce a modificare la poetica e a ridefinire l’appartenenza al canone, che si differenzia a sua volta. In questo modo traduzioni considerate eccellenti in un momento possono poi essere ritenute pessime o quanto meno poco affidabili in seguito. Si può aggiungere che il sistema letterario cinese in epoca *Qingmo minchu* non fosse del tutto stabile e che cercasse ancora un equilibrio, incubando già il proprio ‘controsistema’. La riscrittura svolge un ruolo fondamentale in questa situazione e le traduzioni in particolare danno la misura delle novità o delle resistenze, sia nell’ambito ideologico che nell’ambito poetico (Lefevere 2017). In quest’ottica si può leggere lo sforzo degli autori dello *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報, che per introdurre, con traduzioni e articoli, la

letteratura mondiale in Cina e poter trasmettere la letteratura dei Paesi ‘piccoli e deboli’ ricorrevano spesso alla traduzione intermedia, anche dall’Esperanto, ma paradossalmente più spesso attraverso le lingue delle nazioni ‘grandi e potenti’, anche se Chen (2018, 134) riduce la posizione egemonica di queste lingue e quello alternativo dell’Esperanto, ricordando – attraverso Shih (2001) – che già il Giappone forniva un intermediario nel confronto fra Occidente e Oriente, come Paese asiatico già modernizzato e occidentalizzato.

Quando sono dei letterati e dei grandi autori a compiere traduzioni eretiche il risultato può in qualche modo giustificare i mezzi adottati. Il fine letterario non è il fine tecnico e una traduzione letteraria, per quanto infedele, acquista il suo valore dalla collaborazione di due autori, quello del testo originale e quello del suo riscrittore in una lingua diversa. Possiamo qui citare la teoria di Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910-1998) sulla traduzione come «rinascita del testo», simile all’idea di «trasformazione» del testo proposta da Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), per sottolineare allo stesso modo l’autonomia del testo tradotto (Chan 2004, 9) e – nel caso del filosofo francese – per sottolineare la prevalenza dell’autorità testuale sull’originalità (Wong 1999, 39).

Le traduzioni, inoltre, erano funzionali alla produzione originale degli autori cinesi, perfino le pseudotraduzioni rispetto alle loro traduzioni e alle loro esperienze personali (Liu 2024): furono, cioè, un utile esercizio per gli autori per acquisire o diffondere temi e stili nuovi, e servirono anche alle opere straniere per poter essere ammesse nel canone del tempo.⁷

3 Bao Tianxiao traduttore

Bao racconta nelle sue memorie, *Chuanyinglou huiyi lu* 钏影樓回憶錄 (Ricordi del padiglione dell’ombra del braccialeto; Bao [1971] 2008),⁸ che, ancora giovane studente a Suzhou, non avendo i mezzi per studiare all’estero ma attratto dalla nuova cultura proveniente dall’estero, decise di studiare le lingue straniere. Tentò lo studio di tre lingue presso docenti e scuole private: in ordine di successo nell’apprendimento il giapponese, l’inglese e il francese. Il giapponese, in particolare, gli sembrava un mezzo veloce per acquisire la cultura occidentale, anche perché il largo uso dei *kanji* nelle traduzioni del periodo le rendeva maggiormente accessibili per i cinesi. Per sua ammissione, Bao raggiunse un livello elementare che gli permetteva di leggere testi che utilizzavano i *kanji*, ma aveva grosse difficoltà

⁷ Sulle pseudotraduzioni si vedano anche Hu 2003 e Liu 2018.

⁸ Per una traduzione parziale si veda Boittout 2021.

con la lingua parlata. Con l'inglese e con il francese i suoi risultati furono peggiori: studiò per sei mesi l'inglese e per otto il francese ma con scarsi risultati in entrambi i casi (Bao [1971] 2008, 156-60). Guo (1997) conferma che la sua comprensione del giapponese non fosse molto elevata e che laddove non capiva del tutto il testo per tradurre tendeva a inventare, colmare e riscrivere. Dei tre principi enunciati da Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921) per una buona traduzione: *xin* 信 (fedeltà), *da* 達 (scorrevolezza) e *ya* 雅 (eleganza) (Chan 2004, 4) Bao predilesse certamente il secondo e il terzo.

Pur rilevando la sua innegabile libertà nel tradurre, molti critici concordano su quanto la lingua utilizzata da Bao fosse una combinazione di elementi del cinese classico e di quello più colloquiale, che la rendeva elegante e accessibile (Shen, Kong 2011). Guo (1997, 429) parla di «*ban wen ban bai de yuyan* 半文半白的語言» (lingua per metà classica, per metà parlata) mentre Wang (2021, 261) la definisce «*qianjin de wenyanti* 淺近的文言體» (cinese classico semplice).

Con le sue traduzioni, Bao ebbe il merito di introdurre molte novità letterarie, sociali e culturali, rendendole accettabili al pubblico del tempo. Lo stesso procedimento di domesticazione (*guihua* 歸化) era ritenuto legittimo da Bao, poiché notava che anche gli autori giapponesi adattavano culturalmente le storie tradotte (Bao [1971] 2008, 173-4, 384). Nelle sue memorie ([1971] 2008, 546) ammette che traduceva in modo indiretto la letteratura occidentale attraverso quella giapponese e creava una storia cinese. Riprendendo la classificazione di Robyns (1994) menzionata più sopra, possiamo identificare l'atteggiamento traduttivo di Bao come in parte 'imperialista' e in parte 'difettivo'. Forse possiamo utilizzare la via di mezzo proposta da Robyns, l'atteggiamento 'transdiscorsivo'. Nel caso delle sue traduzioni intermedie questo è ancor più vero, se accogliamo quanto scrive Hadley (2017) ad integrazione della teoria di Robyns: prendendo in esame in particolare il caso della traduzione intermedia, egli nota una generale proclività all'atteggiamento imperialista nei confronti dell'alterità in quella tendenza che lui chiama «concatenation effect» con cui i traduttori si influenzano a vicenda: in particolare è il traduttore intermedio (che tuttavia si pensa come traduttore finale, non presupponendo una successiva traduzione dal proprio testo) a stabilire quanto del ST venga conservato nel TT. Come vedremo nel caso in esame, questa influenza fra MT e TT appare anche nel paratesto. Solo nel caso in cui entrambi i traduttori (del MT e del TT) adottino un atteggiamento difettivo si può sperare di rintracciare non solo la natura straniera del testo, ma anche le sue peculiarità culturali (Hadley 2017, 185). Fra gli esempi di migrazione discorsiva, Hadley menziona il caso della traduzione delle favole dei Grimm in giapponese attraverso l'inglese. Il traduttore giapponese, Suga Ryōhō 菅了法 (1857-1936),

nella sua versione del 1887 non esplicita che si tratta di una traduzione, ma si limita a riferire che si tratta di storie occidentali. Partendo dalla strategia «difensiva» della versione inglese (1868), il traduttore giapponese traduce anche la morale delle favole passando dal contesto cristiano a quello confuciano (Noguchi 2005, citato in Hadley 2017, 191). Il TT riecheggia, per effetto di concatenazione, un atteggiamento 'pseudoimperialista' (Hadley 2017, 195), proprio per la somma di un atteggiamento 'difensivo' nel MT e di un atteggiamento 'transdiscorsivo' nel TT, adattando il tono moralistico delle storie al contesto di arrivo.

A Bao interessava soprattutto difendere e diffondere valori morali positivi (relativamente conservatori), in linea con la visione pedagogica e sociopolitica della narrativa di Liang Qichao. La sua in effetti era una letteratura rivolta soprattutto al lettore ed è per questo che è annoverato fra gli autori commerciali, o delle 'Anatre Mandarine e delle Farfalle' (etichetta che Bao non accettava del tutto).⁹ Di certo Bao era molto abile a comprendere e seguire i gusti e i desideri dei lettori e questa è una delle ragioni che elenca per spiegare il successo dei romanzi educativi da lui tradotti, fra cui soprattutto *Cuore* (1886) di Edmondo De Amicis (1846-1908),¹⁰ per la sua esaltazione della morale tradizionale (Bao [1971] 2008, 385). In realtà, il suo atteggiamento non era reazionario ma moderatamente progressista: voleva coniugare la morale confuciana con i valori occidentali per l'emancipazione degli individui (Li 2023). Tuttavia, Bao non poteva che innovare con cautela, difendendo comunque alcuni valori a lui molto cari, come la pietà filiale e la fedeltà coniugale. Il suo fine, quindi, era principalmente illuminare i lettori difendendo i valori tradizionali ma sostenendo anche la necessità di una nuova consapevolezza (Shen, Kong 2011). Gli autori come Bao pensavano in questa fase che il canone cinese tradizionale potesse essere rinnovato e riconfermato con innesti da altre culture.

9 «人將呵我為純是鴛鴦蝴蝶派作風，不過我只是紀實而已» («Si dice che il mio stile appartiene completamente alla Scuola delle Anatre Mandarine e delle Farfalle, ma io non faccio altro che scrivere la verità»; Bao [1971] 2008, 506) e anche prima: «我所不了解者，不知哪部我所寫的小說是屬於鴛鴦蝴蝶派» («Quello che non capisco è: quale dei romanzi che ho scritto appartenerrebbe alla Scuola delle Anatre Mandarine e delle Farfalle?»; Bao [1960] 1980, 126). Si veda però Liu 2017, 48 nota 7: Bao sembra accettare con riluttanza di appartenere alla Scuola delle Anatre Mandarine e delle Farfalle.

10 Dalla versione giapponese *Gakudou nisshi* 學童日誌 (Diario di uno studente, 1902) di Sugitani Daisui 杉谷代水 (1874-1915), cf. Chen 2013; 2015. La traduzione fu pubblicata sulla rivista *Jiaoyu zazhi* 教育雜誌, fra il 1909 e il 1910 (Lian 2009, 114). Prima di allora Bao aveva pubblicato nel 1905 la novella «San qian li xun qin ji» 三千里尋親記 («La storia della ricerca dei genitori per 3.000 miglia», ossia «Dagli Appennini alle Ande»; cf. Sibau 2016, 22-3). Bao confessa di aver non solo sinizzato *Cuore*, ma di averci inserito particolari della sua storia familiare: il titolo cinese del romanzo, *Xin'er jiaoxue ji* 馨兒就學記 (Diario di scuola di Xin'er), è un tributo al figlio Kexin 可馨, morto prima dei tre anni e prima che la traduzione fosse completata (Bao [1971] 2008, 383-5).

3.1 Pratiche traduttive di Bao Tianxiao

Oltre alla traduzione indiretta (*zhuanyi* 轉譯),¹¹ a Bao sono ascritte anche altre pratiche traduttive eterodosse: dalla traduzione creativa o trasformativa (*gaiyi* 改譯; Chen 2022), alla *mistranslation* (*wuyi* 誤譯, *huyi* 胡譯 o *luanyi* 亂譯; Wang 2021; Shen, Kong 2011), sulle quali domina il più ampio termine *yi* 意譯 (traduzione del senso; Li 2023; Shen, Kong 2011). Quest'ultima è tradizionalmente definita anche *bianyi* 編譯 (traduzione con adattamento) o *yishu* 譯述 (narrazione traduttiva; Jiao 2009, 77), ma anche *jianyi* 簡譯 (traduzione semplificatrice) e *tianyi* 添譯 (traduzione con aggiunte), ed è spesso giustificata con la volontà del traduttore di modificare le scelte diegetiche e di focalizzazione e avvicinare la forma narrativa ai modelli cinesi (Shen, Kong 2011, 210-11).¹² In alcuni casi gli errori compiuti da Bao nelle sue traduzioni sono dovuti ad una errata interpretazione del giapponese: egli conosceva il significato dei *kanji* ma a volte non capiva il seguito grammaticale in *kana*. Nonostante i suoi errori di traduzione non fossero pochi, egli è ancora considerato un grande traduttore di narrativa nel periodo considerato (Wang 2021). Molto spesso però l'errore era dovuto ad una posizione ideologica: la sua pratica di rendere liberamente il testo di partenza era una scelta, per avvicinare più facilmente il lettore a contenuti poco familiari; in questi casi non esitava a inserire commenti, aggiunte o modifiche per assimilare i testi tradotti a produzioni originalmente e tradizionalmente cinesi, ad esempio riducendo le digressioni psicologiche o le descrizioni paesaggistiche (Li 2023, 45).

Considerando quindi che il primo interesse di Bao era di trasmettere idee, è comprensibile che la fedeltà al testo per lui passasse in secondo piano; questo non toglie comunque che Bao fosse molto perspicace nella scelta di opere di grande valore artistico (Shen, Kong 2011). Gli 'interventi editoriali' sulla traduzione avevano una funzione ideologica: servivano a mostrare come le virtù confuciane fossero condivise anche da Paesi moderni e 'vincenti', esse erano introdotte o sottolineate nelle opere straniere tradotte. Ad esempio, Lin Shu 林紓 (1852-1924) modificò i romanzi *Montezuma's Daughter* (1892) di Henry Rider Haggard (1856-1925) e [*Jimmy Brown*] *Trying to Find Europe* (1889) di William Alden (1837-1908) proprio per enfatizzare il valore della pietà filiale (Wong 1999, 34): la storia di Jimmy Brown ricorda molto quella di Marco, protagonista di «Dagli Appennini alle

11 Altri termini, *chongyi* 重譯 e *fuyi* 複譯 si riferiscono soprattutto alla doppia traduzione o alla traduzione ripetuta (Chen 2015, 274; She, Chen 2004).

12 Un'altra pratica traduttiva sperimentata da Bao era la *heyi* 合譯 o *tongyi* 同譯, una traduzione compiuta da almeno due persone in cui Bao interveniva in seconda battuta modificando (*xiugai* 修改) o abbellendo il testo (*runci* 潤詞).

Ande», novella mensile del romanzo *Cuore* (Chen 2015).¹³ La stessa enfasi sulla pietà filiale si nota in novelle presentate come traduzioni ma che a volte si rivelano delle pseudotraduzioni (*weiyi* 偽譯), ad esempio in quelle di Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鵬 (1895-1968) pubblicate fra il 1912 e il 1913, come «Mai hua nǚlang» 賣花女郎 (La fioraia; Zhou 1912), presentata come traduzione da un autore italiano (*Laimangtuo* 賴莽脫) ma che è in realtà una creazione originale (Liu 2024).

Oltre a valori già noti, come la pietà filiale, era importante però diffondere anche nuovi concetti attraverso nuovi generi, come la narrativa di indagine (*zhentan xiaoshuo* 偵探小說), la fantascienza (*kehuan xiaoshuo* 科幻小說) e il romanzo educativo (*jiaoyu xiaoshuo* 教育小說). Bao quindi tradusse anche opere di fantascienza e di indagine: in particolare alcuni racconti di Maurice Leblanc (1864-1941), della serie di Arsène Lupin (Shi 2014).¹⁴ L'intento generale era di contribuire a diffondere una mentalità scientifica e razionale per modernizzare la Cina.

3.2 Alcuni esempi di traduzione da parte di Bao Tianxiao

Bao fu un traduttore molto prolifico: Lian (2009, 113) stima che fra la sua prima traduzione del 1901 (la seconda parte del romanzo *Joan Haste* di Rider Haggard) e il Quattro Maggio si possono contare più di ottanta traduzioni, compiute da solo o insieme ad altri, soprattutto Zhang Yihan 張毅漢 (1895-1950). Ricordiamo qui alcuni esempi significativi delle sue traduzioni indirette dal giapponese. Bao tradusse «Palata nomer shest» (Reperto n. 6, 1892) di Anton Čechov (1860-1904) come «Liu hao shi» 六號室 (Stanza numero 6; Čechov 1910) nel 1910 sullo *Xiaoshuo shibao* 小說時報, l'inserito di narrativa del quotidiano *Shibao* 時報 (Eastern Times), di cui Bao fu uno dei maggiori autori e redattori. Il racconto era così presentato da Bao: «*Eguo wenhao Qihuofu yuanzhu, Wumen Tian Xiao sheng yi* 俄國文豪奇霍夫原著, 吳門天笑生譯» (Opera del grande autore russo

13 Anche i titoli scelti sono indicativi fin da subito di questa intenzione ideologica: il titolo scelto da Lin Shu per il romanzo di Rider Haggard è *Ying xiaozhi huoshan baochou lu* 英孝子火山報酬錄 (La vendetta di un devoto figlio inglese, 1905), mentre per il libro di Alden scelse *Meizhou tongzi wanli xunqin ji* 美洲童子萬里尋親記 (La storia di un ragazzo americano alla ricerca dei genitori per 10.000 miglia, 1905) (Wong 1999, 34). Bao inizialmente scelse per la sua traduzione della novella mensile di *Cuore* «Dagli Appennini alle Ande» un titolo simile: «San qian li xunqin ji» (cf. *supra*).

14 Bao partecipò anche all'introduzione e alla 'sinizzazione' di Sherlock Holmes sulle pagine dello *Shibao* fra il 1905 e il 1907 (Wei 2020, 150): insieme a Chen Lengxue 陳冷血 (Chen Jinghan 陳景韓, alias Leng Xue 冷血, 1877-1965), Bao sarà infatti fra i primi a realizzare delle versioni 'locali' e parodistiche di Sherlock Holmes ambientate a Shanghai, l'ultima delle quali sarà pubblicata nel 1923, in cui ancora prevale la critica del presente, come la denuncia del consumo di oppio in Cina (Zhan 2023).

Čechov, tradotta da Tianxiao di Wumen); tuttavia, la versione da cui Bao partì è molto probabilmente quella della traduttrice giapponese Natsuka Kaminuma 瀨沼夏叶 (1875-1915), che nel 1906 la rese già con il titolo «Roku-gōshitsu» 六號室 (cf. Wang 2013). In seguito Bao tradusse anche una novella di Lev Tolstoj (1828-1910), «Mnogo li čeloveku zemli nužno» (Di quanta terra ha bisogno un uomo?, 1885) come «Liu chi di» 六尺地 (Sei piedi di terra; Tolstoj 1914). Anche in questo caso la presentazione del testo è simile alla precedente: «*Eguo wenhao Tuo'ersitai yuanzhu, Tianxiao sheng yi* 俄國文豪託爾斯泰原著, 天笑生譯» (Opera del grande autore russo, Tolstoj, tradotta da Tianxiao) ma anche in questo caso si tratta di una traduzione indiretta, molto probabilmente dalla versione di Roan Uchida 内田魯庵 (1868-1929) e Omuro Saganoya 嵯峨の屋お室 (1862-1947), che tradussero la novella come «Ningen no yōsuru tochi ikubaku zo» 人間の要する土地幾許ぞ (Di quanta terra ha bisogno un uomo?) nel 1911. Secondo Li (2023) Bao fu più fedele nella traduzione di testi il cui significato sociale era più profondo, fra cui appunto «Liu hao shi» e «Liu chi di». Roan Uchida aveva inoltre tradotto il romanzo di Tolstoj *Voskresen'e* (Resurrezione, 1899) come *Fukkatsu* 復活 (1905). Lo stesso romanzo ispirò il racconto di Bao «Bu Guo» 補過 (Espiazione; Bao 1916), una pseudocreazione (*weizhu* 偽著). Bao in particolare fu ispirato dalla traduzione cinese di *Resurrezione* di Tolstoj compiuta da Ma Junwu 馬君武 (1881-1940) nel 1914 come *Xin yu* 心獄 (Prigione del cuore; Yuan 1998, 290) e Li (2023) conferma che Bao aveva letto già nel 1914 questa traduzione. «Bu Guo» è il risultato evidente di questa lettura: il suo racconto è infatti un adattamento alla realtà cinese contemporanea.

Bao tradusse anche da Morita Shiken 森田思軒 (1861-1897), fra cui il romanzo di Jules Verne (1828-1905) *Les Cinq Cents Millions de la Béguin* (1879) come *Tie shijie* 鐵世界 (Mondo di ferro, 1903), attraverso la doppia mediazione della traduzione inglese di W.H. Kingston, *The Begum's Fortune* (1879) e di quella giapponese di Morita (Ji, *Begamusu, forutyun* ギ、ベガムス、フォルテュン del 1887), compiuta dalla versione inglese (Chen 2016). Tradusse inoltre da Kuroiwa Ruikō 黒岩涙香 (1862-1920; Guo 1997, 428): un esempio è il romanzo inglese *Diavola* (noto anche come *Nobody's Daughter*, 1866-67 nella versione a puntate sul *London Journal*, poi pubblicato in volume come *Run to Earth*, 1868) di Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915), tradotto da Kuroiwa come *Suteobune* 捨小舟 (Piccola barca, 1895) e poi da Bao come *Meihualuo* 梅花落 (Cadono i fiori di pruno), uscito tra il 1908 e il 1909 sullo *Shibao* e poi in volume nel 1910 (Chen 2022).

Bao riconosce nelle sue memorie che i romanzi in giapponese che traduceva per lo *Shibao*, fra cui appunto *Meihualuo* e *Kong gu lan*

空谷蘭 (Orchidea in una valle vuota),¹⁵ erano a loro volta tradotti da lingue occidentali (Bao [1971] 2008, 546). Passò volutamente attraverso le traduzioni giapponesi: voleva infatti tradurre testi occidentali ma sapeva di poterlo fare solo con l'aiuto della ML giapponese e soprattutto utilizzando testi giapponesi che facessero largo uso dei *kanji*. Bao aggiunge nelle sue memorie che in seguito, nei primi anni della Repubblica, la traduzione giapponese era molto diversa e ormai fuori dalla sua capacità di comprensione.

Per giungere a Mark Twain, Bao tradusse il racconto «The Million Pound Bank Note» (1893), reso come «Bai wan bang» 百万磅 (La banconota da un milione; Bao, Xu 1912), probabilmente dalla versione giapponese «Sen man-en» 千万円 (Dieci milioni di yen, 1909) di Sasaki Kuni 佐々木邦 (1883-1964). Anche in questo caso Bao non dichiara le sue fonti, pur essendo il testo presentato come una traduzione (a due mani con Dai 呆 [Xu Zhuodai 徐卓呆 (1881-1958)]) e interviene aggiungendo una formula di apertura tipica della narrativa tradizionale (Shen, Kong 2011, 211) per accogliere il lettore nella maniera più familiare.

Altri autori negli stessi anni si cimentarono con la traduzione di testi di Twain. Ricordiamo a questo proposito la traduzione di «The Czar Soliloquy» (1905) da parte di Yan Tong 嚴通 con il titolo «E'huang duy» 俄皇獨語 (Il soliloquio dello zar, Twain 1905), e la traduzione della novella «The Californian's Tale» (1892) ad opera di Qian Tangwu 錢塘吳 e Tao Zhongyan 譚重演 con il titolo «Shanjia qiyu» 山家奇遇 (Incontri straordinari di gente di montagna; Twain 1906), dalla versione giapponese in stile classico di Hara Hōitsuan 原抱一庵 (nome d'arte Hōitsuan shujin 抱一庵主人, 1866-1904)¹⁶ «Yamaga no koi» 山家の戀 (Amore tra persone di montagna, 1903), e in seguito direttamente dalla versione inglese per mano di Zhou Shoujuan con il titolo «Qi» 妻 (Moglie; Twain 1915). Nelle varie versioni il nome dell'autore americano è reso come *Make Quheng* 馬可曲恆, *Make Duohuai* 馬克多槐 (Li 2020, 40) e infine *Make Tuwen* 馬克吐溫.

15 Per quanto riguarda la traduzione di *Kong gu lan* 空谷蘭 (1910) e l'origine del ST si rimanda a Beltrame 2023, 276 nota 23.

16 Fin dal titolo il testo cinese riconosce la paternità del prototesto attribuendolo a Mark Twain e la prima traduzione a Hara, indicato come 抱一庵主人.

4 **Il caso studio: «Aurelia's Unfortunate Young Man»; «Jogen» 助言; «Qie ming bo» 妾命簿**

Oggetto del presente studio sono tre testi. Il primo è un breve sketch di Mark Twain «Aurelia's Unfortunate Young Man» (inizialmente pubblicato sul periodico *The Californian* nel 1864 e poi in volume nel 1875) che rappresenta il ST, la cui SL è l'inglese. Il testo intermedio (MT) è la sua traduzione in giapponese (ML) da parte di Hara Hōitsuan come «Jogen» 助言 (Consiglio, pubblicato il 30 marzo del 1903 sul *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun* 東京朝日新聞 e poi nello stesso anno in un'antologia di racconti occidentali). Infine, il TT è la traduzione in cinese (TL) compiuta da Bao Tianxiao dal testo di Hara intitolata «Qie ming bo» e pubblicata nel 1906 sulle pagine dello *Shibao*.

Vedremo come, oltre a poter definire il TT una traduzione intermedia, potremo anche definirla come una versione, oppure, secondo la definizione di Lefevere, una 'riscrittura', ossia una forma molto libera di resa del testo nella TL per specifici obiettivi da parte del traduttore e per adeguare il TT al suo gusto e a quelli del pubblico di destinazione. In questo caso possiamo anche parlare di una parziale trasposizione culturale poiché, se il contesto geografico e i nomi propri del ST sono mantenuti fino al TT, il tono del racconto, i valori e la caratterizzazione dei personaggi nel TT sono adattati al contesto di arrivo, per ridurre l'effetto straniero e straniante del testo di partenza.

Jaroslav Špírk (2014) parla di «pseudo-original» o «concealed translation» per un testo che si finge originale ma che in realtà è una traduzione. Egli definisce la traduzione indiretta in senso stretto come traduzione di seconda mano, in senso lato però, con maggiore accuratezza, afferma che

an indirect translation may be the result of various combinations of texts other than the original. [...] (in)directness is not a binary opposition, but rather a continuum, raising questions of the *degree* of (in)directness. (137-8; corsivo in originale)

Di certo il testo di Bao è anche una 'traduzione creativa': egli ammette che si tratti di una traduzione, pur omettendo i dati dell'originale, e la modifica consapevolmente rispetto al MT, soprattutto nel finale.

4.1 Il Source Text. «Aurelia's Unfortunate Young Man» di Mark Twain

Il testo di partenza è un articolo di Mark Twain del 22 ottobre 1864, pubblicato sulla rivista *The Californian*. L'articolo si intitolava «Whereas» (Twain 1864), ed era diviso in due parti: «Love's Bakery» e quella che in seguito sarà poi pubblicata in forma indipendente in *Sketches New and Old* (Twain [1875] 1903), ossia «Aurelia's Unfortunate Young Man». I due sketch sono accomunati dal tema amoroso e si può capire che l'intento di Twain, evidentemente ironico, fosse di parodiare la 'posta del cuore' dei giornali. La Love's Bakery è un immaginario negozio/scuola di San Francisco, in cui viene 'cotto' l'amore coniugale, per evitare le seccature del corteggiamento e le incognite delle differenze di carattere, dove i giovani e le giovani sono educati e preparati ad un perfetto coniugio attraverso una gestione razionale dell'amore. La seconda parte invece riporta la richiesta di aiuto di una lettrice, Aurelia Maria, che scrive al giornale dalla città di San José per sapere se deve o no sposare il suo fidanzato. Twain riferisce la sua triste storia come dice di averla conosciuta dalla lettera della giovane: a sedici anni si innamorò di un giovane del New Jersey di nome Williamson Breckinridge Caruthers, di sei anni più vecchio. Si fidanzarono con il consenso delle famiglie e degli amici, ma dopo l'iniziale felicità la ruota della fortuna girò a loro sfavore: ad ogni vigilia delle nozze – che Aurelia insiste, contro il parere di amici e parenti, a rinnovare e rinviare – Caruthers è colpito da una nuova disgrazia che compromette la bellezza, l'integrità fisica e la salute del poveretto: per prima cosa prende il vaiolo e la sua faccia rimane butterata; in seguito, mentre osserva un pallone aerostatico cade in un pozzo e deve così subire l'amputazione di una gamba sopra il ginocchio per la gravità delle ferite; poi perde un braccio durante i fuochi del Quattro Luglio e l'altro gli viene strappato da una cardatrice; quindi perde l'uso di un occhio a causa dell'erisipela; poi si rompe l'altra gamba e durante l'operazione subisce ulteriori amputazioni; infine, poco prima dell'ennesimo rinvio delle nozze si ritrova anche senza scalpo. La sequela delle sfortune del giovane è espressamente e visibilmente paradossale e caricaturale, per cui ad un pubblico avvezzo allo stile di Twain non c'erano dubbi sulla finalità satirica del pezzo. Per avere una prova di quanto fosse comprensibilmente ironico il racconto basta leggere queste poche frasi:

She could not but be deeply grieved to see her lover passing from her by piecemeal, feeling, as she did, that he could not last forever under this disastrous process of reduction, yet knowing of no way to stop its dreadful career, and in her tearful despair she almost regretted, like brokers who hold on and lose, that she had

not taken him at first, before he had suffered such an alarming depreciation. [...] She felt that the field of her affections was growing more and more circumscribed every day. (Twain 1864, 1)

Qui vediamo bene come il matrimonio sia equiparato ad un investimento su cui Aurelia continua a scommettere, nonostante parenti e amici tentino di dissuaderla da un affare sempre più in perdita. L'oggetto del suo amore alla fine si riduce ad essere «nearly two thirds of a man». La ragazza, quindi, scrive al giornale (in realtà al narratore) per sapere come comportarsi e avere un consiglio sulla decisione da prendere: ama ancora Breckinridge Caruthers («she still loves what is left of him») ma i suoi genitori si oppongono perché lui non ha beni e non può lavorare. Ecco infine come il narratore-giornalista risponde alla domanda «Now, what should she do?»:

It is a delicate question; it is one which involves the lifelong happiness of a woman, and that of nearly two-thirds of a man, and I feel that it would be assuming too great a responsibility to do more than make a mere suggestion in the case. How would it do to build to him? If Aurelia can afford the expense, let her furnish her mutilated lover with wooden arms and wooden legs, and a glass eye and a wig, and give him another show; give him ninety days, without grace, and if he does not break his neck in the meantime, marry him and take the chances. It does not seem to me that there is much risk, any way, because if he sticks to his infernal propensity for damaging himself every time he sees a good opportunity, his next experiment is bound to finish him, and then you are all right, you know, married or single. If married, the wooden legs and such other valuables as he may possess, revert to the widow, and you see you sustain no actual loss save the cherished fragment of a noble but most unfortunate husband, who honestly strove to do right, but whose extraordinary instincts were against him. Try it, Maria. I have thought the matter over carefully and well, and it is the only chance I see for you. It would have been a happy conceit on the part of Caruthers if he had started with his neck and broken that first, but since he has seen fit to choose a different policy and string himself out as long as possible, I do not think we ought to upbraid him for it if he has enjoyed it. We must do the best we can under the circumstances, and try not to feel exasperated at him. (Twain 1864, 1)

Si tratta sicuramente di un pezzo satirico, considerando lo spirito di Mark Twain e la natura paradossale del testo. Anche la critica è concorde nel ritenere lo sketch un esempio dello stile umoristico dell'autore (Emerson 1984, 24; Chinn 1993, 46; Gerber 1983, 135). Come parodia era intesa anche dai lettori più accorti del tempo: si

veda una lettera indirizzata a Twain nel numero del 17 giugno 1865 della stessa rivista *The Californian* in cui la lettrice scrive che durante una lettura di gruppo dell'articolo sulla Love's Bakery e su un giovane

who was engaged to be married, and who had the small-pox, and the erysipelas, and lost one eye and got both legs broken, and one arm, and got the other arm pulled out by a carding-machine, and finally got so damaged that there was scarcely anything of him left for the young lady to marry, [...] they all laughed. (*The Californian*, 17 June 1865, 4)

4.2 Il Mediating Text. «Jogen» 助言 di Hara Hōitsuan

Il MT è la traduzione giapponese di Hara Hōitsuan, allievo del traduttore Morita Shiken. Da Hara Bao aveva tradotto il racconto «Zao ren shu» 造人述 (La creazione di esseri umani; *Shibao*, 20 maggio 1906), con lo stesso titolo usato nella versione giapponese: si tratta di un racconto di Louise J. Strong («An Unscientific Story», 1903) tradotta anche da Chen Jinghan nel 1904 e poi da Lu Xun nel 1906 (Guo 2020).¹⁷ Anche la già citata novella mensile dal libro *Cuore* tradotta da Bao, «San qian li xunqin ji», deriva dalla versione giapponese «Sanzenri» 三千里 (3.000 miglia) di Hara, che a sua volta la tradusse dalla versione inglese di Isabel F. Hapgood (1850-1928) (Chen 2015; Sibau 2016).¹⁸

Hara, che già aveva tradotto racconti e articoli da Twain (Levy 2011), pubblicò lo sketch in giapponese firmandolo come Hōitsuan shujin. La traduzione giapponese, però, tradisce il tono originale del pezzo di Twain, perché ne perde del tutto il senso dell'umorismo. Levy (2011), correttamente, giustifica questo equivoco di Hara sottolineando come l'umorismo sia una delle vittime più frequenti della traduzione, soprattutto laddove manca o si riduce la condivisione fra autore (o traduttore) e pubblico di quei codici che l'umorismo rovescia.

Per rafforzare ancor più la distanza dal testo originale americano, poi, Hara tradusse in uno stile molto elevato definito *kanbun*

¹⁷ È molto probabile che tutti costoro avessero tratto il testo dalla raccolta di narrativa straniera curata da Hara, *Taisei kibun: Shōsetsu* 泰西奇文: 小説 (Testi curiosi dall'Occidente: narrativa, 1903).

¹⁸ Bao, del resto, continuò a pescare da *Cuore* anche in seguito: nel 1915 pubblicò sulla colonna patriottica *aiguo congfan* 愛國叢談 nella sezione *ziyoutan* 自由談 del quotidiano *Shenbao* 申報 un racconto mensile del romanzo di De Amicis intitolato «Yidali shaonian» 意大利少年 (Gioventù italiana; Bao 1915): si tratta de «Il tamburino sardo», anche se la fonte non è dichiarata; cf. Mao 2021, in cui si cita questo racconto ma senza riuscire a identificare il ST di De Amicis. Ricordiamo che la traduzione inglese, «The Little Sardinian Drummer», era contenuta nell'antologia *Short Story Classics* a cura di William Patten (1907, 375-84).

kundoku 漢文訓読, che consiste nel rendere il cinese più accessibile con l'inserimento della grammatica giapponese (Levy 2011, 342) o un misto di *kanbuntai* 漢文体 («Chinese writing style») e *Ôbun chokuyakutai* 欧文直訳体 («the style of literal translation of Western writing») noto come «detailed style», creato da Morita Shiken (Li 2020, 31-2). I testi di Twain, invece, spesso creavano un effetto umoristico proprio trasgredendo i codici linguistici e mescolando stili diversi in modi incongruenti e facendo largo uso dell'inglese colloquiale. Solo con il giapponese colloquiale (*genbun itchi* 言文一致) sarà poi possibile tradurre anche l'umorismo di Twain in modo fedele (Levy 2011). Lo stile usato da Hara qui è definito anche *bungotai* 文語体, uno stile classico e letterario di fine Meiji 明治 (1868-1912). In ogni caso lo stile è sicuramente ricercato, più che nel testo inglese di partenza: il che dimostra quanto Hara non fosse consapevole dello stile e delle intenzioni di Twain; nel 1904 infatti ammetterà di aver frainteso la «reale essenza della sua scrittura» (Li 2020, 34).

Nel paratesto della sua traduzione Hara descrive con scarsa stima due autori: Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) e Mark Twain, che lui considera quasi illetterati, autori per gente poco colta e indegni del «sacro regno delle lettere», la cui unica particolarità risiedeva nella loro relativa «stranezza». Per Hara il russo Gorky e l'americano Twain si contraddistinguono per la loro originalità ma non per una scrittura raffinata: lo stile di Gorky è definito cupo e tormentato, mentre quello di Twain vivace, impetuoso ma infantile. Sfogliando alcune opere di Twain in un momento d'ozio, aveva infine trovato un racconto semplice ed elegante da tradurre a vantaggio degli scrittori del suo Paese. Il paratesto non fornisce ulteriori valutazioni di tipo critico o morale che indirizzino il lettore; tuttavia, la scelta del tema e l'interpretazione da parte del traduttore sembrano indicare una certa attenzione per la difesa della famiglia e della morale tradizionale nel Giappone dell'epoca. La presentazione del testo sicuramente condizionò poi il traduttore cinese.

Il racconto sembra essere tradotto da Hara in maniera fedele e letterale rispetto al ST di Twain: inizia la narrazione in prima persona e l'autrice della lettera è sempre Maria. Non c'è una chiusura da parte del traduttore: le conclusioni sono ancora quelle del testo originale di Twain. Tuttavia, Hara sintetizza il testo con una progressione schematica, elencando con numeri ordinali i vari rinvii del matrimonio per scandire i 'capitoli' della vicenda. La sua versione appare piuttosto un riassunto del testo originale; in particolare, le speculazioni di Twain sono sintetizzate o tagliate. Priva dell'ironia del testo originale, la versione di Hara è più concentrata sul contenuto e sui fatti che sullo stile e sul tono.

Hara, infatti, travisò del tutto l'intento umoristico di Twain. Yamagata Isō 山縣五十雄 (1869-1959), studioso esperto di letteratura anglosassone, rimproverò a Hara di non aver compreso il senso dello

humour di Twain a partire dalla sua traduzione del racconto «The Killing of Julius Caesar Localized» il 6 aprile del 1903 come «Gaisatsu zansatsu jiken» 該撒殘殺事件 (Il caso dell'omicidio di Cesare, raccolto anche nell'antologia *Taisei kibun: Shōsetsu* del 1903). Ne seguirà un acceso scambio di lettere fra i due noto come «mistranslation debate» che provocherà anche il discredito di Hara, che dopo un presunto tentativo di suicidio morirà in manicomio - o in ospedale, a seconda delle versioni - nel 1904 (Levy 2011; Li 2020). In ogni caso Hara continuerà ancora a tradurre da Mark Twain: le sue traduzioni di «The Story of the Bad Little Boy» e «The Double-Barreled Detective Story» uscirono rispettivamente nell'aprile e nel dicembre 1904; a riprova della sua idiosincratia comprensione e presentazione delle opere di Twain, Levy (2011, 339 nota 44) ricorda che anche quest'ultima novella fu introdotta come una tragedia e non come una parodia del genere di indagine (cf. Baetzhold 1993).

Non era strano che le prime traduzioni in giapponese rendessero la finzione come fatti reali: ne è un caso il *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) di Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), fra le prime opere di letteratura straniera tradotte in giapponese nel 1857 come *Robinson hyōkō ki ryaku* 魯敏遜漂行紀略 (Racconto abbreviato dei viaggi del naufrago Robinson) come esempio di una vicenda realmente accaduta ad un naufrago, utile per il valore istruttivo e pratico del testo (Clements 2015, 217-18). All'inizio del Novecento, però, la conoscenza delle letterature straniere in Giappone era notevolmente aumentata e quindi le critiche mosse da Yamagata a Hara erano sicuramente legittime e giustificate.

4.3 Il Target Text. «Qie ming bo» di Bao Tianxiao

È difficile stabilire con certezza se Bao utilizzò la versione giapponese di Hara pubblicata sul *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun* (Hara 1903a) o quella compresa nell'antologia *Taisei kibun: Shōsetsu* (Hara 1903b). Considerando il 1903 come termine *a quo* e la pubblicazione della novella «Qie ming bo» (1906) come termine *ad quem* possiamo collocare l'incontro con il testo di Hara nel periodo, ricordato dallo stesso Bao, in cui andando da Suzhou a Qingzhou per il suo incarico come preside di una scuola media, dopo il capodanno del 1904 (Luan 1999, 64-5, 72), faceva tappa a Shanghai e si recava spesso alla *Hongkou Riben Shudian* 虹口日本书店 (la Libreria Giapponese di

Hongkou, quartiere di Shanghai) a cercare materiali in giapponese da tradurre (Bao [1971] 2008, 383).¹⁹

Il metodo di composizione usato da Bao in «Qie ming bo» è grosso modo lo stesso *ban yi ban zhu* 半譯半著 (metà traduzione, metà creazione) utilizzato da Su Manshu 蘇曼殊 (1884-1918) nel suo *Beican shijie* 悲慘世界 (Mondo crudele, 1912), un adattamento cinese de *Les Misérables* (1862) di Victor Hugo (1802-1885) (Guo 1997, 424; cf. Li 2022; Liu 2017).

Seguendo le categorie di Liu (2017) possiamo definire «Qie ming bo» una «creative translation», poiché, pur essendo una traduzione dal giapponese, contiene consistenti interventi creativi da parte di Bao, come anche elementi fuorvianti inseriti nel paratesto. Il più importante riguarda la nazionalità dell'autore, definito «grande autore francese» (*Faguo wenhao* 法國文豪), laddove invece Hara aveva correttamente attribuito il ST all'americano Twain. Bao deriva alcuni elementi del suo paratesto da quello di Hara, ad esempio dichiara di aver letto per caso (*ouyue* 偶閱) un pezzo dell'autore del ST: questo è soprattutto effetto della «indirect reception» di cui parla Špirk.²⁰ Il cambiamento di nazionalità da parte di Bao forse è dovuto al desiderio di nobilitare il testo e il suo autore: da un lato Hara considera Twain e Gorky come autori di second'ordine anche per la loro origine, dall'altro gli autori francesi erano molto apprezzati all'epoca, soprattutto per il successo di *Bali chahua nü yishi* 巴黎茶花女遺事 (Memorie della signora delle camelie di Parigi, 1899), la traduzione di Lin Shu di *La Dame aux camélias* (1848) di Alexandre Dumas figlio (1824-1895). Inoltre, Bao nelle sue memorie, scritte molti anni dopo, sembra condividere un relativo disprezzo per la letteratura americana dell'epoca: «很少有美國出版的書，實在美國那時沒有什麼文學家，寒儉得很，日本文人，也不向那裡去搜求了» («Vi erano pochi libri americani pubblicati: in verità all'epoca in America non vi erano grandi autori, era un quadro davvero desolante, tanto che nemmeno i letterati giapponesi vi ricercavano [dei materiali]»; Bao [1971] 2008, 174). Possiamo anche ipotizzare che Bao volesse sfuggire al dibattito in corso in Giappone sullo humour di Twain.

19 Sappiamo da Bao che dopo la traduzione parziale di *Joan Haste* (1901) tradusse una serie di opere straniere attraverso le versioni giapponesi che alcuni amici gli portarono dal Giappone, fra cui il già citato romanzo *Tie shijie*, che uscì nel 1903 (Bao [1960] 1980, 126).

20 Paradossalmente, la scelta e la presentazione del testo da parte di Hara contraddicono l'assunto di Toury ([1995] 2012, 167-8) in base al quale il testo da tradurre viene scelto in base alla «proven recognition» nel «mediating system» (nel caso da lui studiato, le traduzioni in ebraico attraverso il tedesco): come abbiamo visto, infatti, Hara non stima granché l'opera di Twain ma sceglie comunque di tradurlo. È Bao piuttosto che eleva nuovamente lo status del testo e del suo autore fittizio, sfuggendo in parte alla «indirect reception» e alla «self-imposed 'colonisation'» (Špirk 2014, 144) creata dalla traduzione indiretta.

Shen e Kong (2011) elencano le caratteristiche ricorrenti delle traduzioni di Bao, inserendole nelle abitudini traduttive dell'epoca tardo Qing; un difetto tipico, ad esempio, è la penuria di informazioni sugli autori (nome e nazionalità) e sui testi originali. È quasi solo nelle pubblicazioni sullo *Shibao* che Bao gratifica il lettore di qualche dato sulle fonti, nel testo o nel paratesto. Questo avviene soprattutto nei casi di grandi autori (*wenhao* 文豪) come Čechov e Tolstoj, o molto popolari all'epoca come Verne o Conan Doyle e autori le cui opere avevano un significato sociale, politico o educativo. In questi casi il livello di fedeltà al testo aumenta sensibilmente (cf. anche Li 2023). Nel caso qui in esame però vediamo delle deviazioni rispetto a tale descrizione: l'autore è definito un *wenhao* ma ne viene volutamente modificata la nazionalità; inoltre, la fedeltà al testo è piuttosto discutibile, quanto meno nell'ultima parte del testo. Anche il genere viene modificato nei suoi vari passaggi: dallo sketch di Twain alla narrazione cronachistica di Hara fino al racconto sentimentale di Bao. Fu quindi quest'ultimo a trasformare l'articolo in una fiction, rielaborando completamente la parte finale, di cui conserva solo il consiglio rivolto da Twain ad Aurelia Maria.

Nel racconto di Bao, Maria, dopo aver sposato il suo amato contro il parere di amici e parenti, trova lavoro in una scuola femminile e mantiene il marito, a cui compra degli occhiali scuri (per la sua cecità), un toupet per la calvizie e degli arti di legno. Non può però impedire che egli muoia e, ormai giovane vedova, Maria canta il suo lamento («Qie ming bo») accompagnandosi con un liuto. Se le traduzioni, anche indirette, contribuivano all'ampliamento dei generi nella letteratura cinese, in questo caso si ha la prevalenza del canone cinese e il testo straniero viene assorbito con successo, per un primo intervento del traduttore giapponese, che ne aveva eliminato le sfumature umoristiche, e poi con le aggiunte creative di Bao. Quindi, in parte a causa dell'incomprensione del testo da parte di Hara e in parte per volontà dello stesso Bao, nella versione cinese ritorna il genere che Twain voleva parodiare, ossia la narrativa sentimentale. Possiamo immaginare che l'operazione di Bao rientri nella generale elevazione e sopravvalutazione della narrativa straniera, iniziata con Liang Qichao, che ne faceva una delle ragioni della forza ideologica e materiale dell'Occidente. Bao non solo accoglie di buon grado l'eliminazione dell'umorismo originale operata da Hara, ma toglie ogni possibile equivoco sull'interpretazione del testo intervenendo pesantemente sulla conclusione: fra «autenticità e autorità» (Wong 1999, 26) Bao predilige l'autorità sul testo. Oltre al finale riscritto, infatti, nel racconto di Bao vi è anche una personale valutazione morale e sociale sulla vicenda. Secondo Wong (1999), infatti, i commenti dei traduttori-narratori erano una strategia tipica degli autori tardo-Qing.

La scelta del testo da parte di Bao rispondeva a precise esigenze socioculturali e pratiche: egli prese i contenuti che potevano essergli utili, ossia un'ambientazione americana e l'essenziale della trama, per poi concludere con una variazione sul tema della 'donna sfortunata ma fedele', molto tradizionale ma dotato della forza di un testo occidentale. La vicenda gli rendeva disponibile una serie di sventure melodrammatiche adatte ad una pubblicazione a puntate, e che avrebbero tenuto viva l'attenzione dei lettori per quattro numeri dello *Shibao*. Alla fine, Bao diede ai lettori una chiusura che poteva soddisfarli: non una svolta comica, né una parodia del giornalismo, ma un finale tragico che esalta il sacrificio femminile e un canto altrettanto teatrale che esprime a voce alta il sentimento e i pensieri dell'eroina. Se fino alla conclusione Bao è molto onesto, il finale è pura invenzione e rivela l'intento ideologico dell'autore-traduttore con un distacco netto dalla versione di Hara.

Vediamo ora quale potrebbe essere la fonte di ispirazione di Bao per la sua conclusione creativa. Nella sua famosa novella del 1909, «Yi lü ma» 一縷麻 (Un filo di canapa; Bao 1909),²¹ Bao utilizza in modo intertestuale il racconto «Qie ming bo». Il padre della protagonista, destinata contro la sua volontà ad un matrimonio combinato, cita il racconto per convincerla che anche in Occidente le donne sanno sopportare grandi dispiaceri in nome della fedeltà coniugale e delle virtù femminili. Nel fervore della sua concione, il padre utilizza però anche argomenti tradizionali, fra cui una citazione dal *Lie nü zhuan* 列女傳 (Biografie di donne) di Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-76 a.C.), tratta in particolare dall'exemplum della «Moglie dell'uomo di Cai» («Cairen zhi qi» 蔡人之妻), che rimane fedele al marito nonostante egli sia malato e contro il consiglio della madre, che vorrebbe che divorziasse (Kinney 2014, 71). È a questo testo che si può ricondurre l'origine della riscrittura del finale e del suo mescolamento con il testo di Twain. Possiamo quindi pensare ad una fusione di materiali moderni e stranieri con contenuti tradizionali e cinesi.

Anche il titolo è un elemento di differenziazione molto sinizzante: Bao ignora il titolo usato da Hara e sceglie piuttosto una formula molto più tradizionale. La poesia che chiude la storia, cantata dalla protagonista accompagnandosi con un liuto, reca lo stesso titolo del racconto. Anche nel successivo *Meihualuo* Bao inventa una poesia aggiunta al testo per enfatizzare il tono drammatico e anche in questo caso egli riprende dalla tradizione cinese: come «Qie ming bo» è un titolo spesso utilizzato nella poesia *shi* 詩 o *yuefu* 樂府, così

21 Nel racconto originale, scritto in *wenyan* 文言, non si fa menzione della paternità della novella «Qie ming bo», ma nella riscrittura del racconto pubblicata da Bao nel 1944 in *baihua* 白話, molto più prolissa, la vediamo descritta come «traduzione di un racconto europeo dell'inizio dell'Ottocento» («是翻譯的歐洲小說 [...] 歐洲十九世紀初期的一則故事»; Bao 1944, 28).

Meihualuo è il titolo ricorrente nello *yuefu*. Questo proprio perché il titolo costituisce il primo richiamo alla cultura popolare, alla simbologia e alla tradizione estetica del lettore cinese (Chen 2022, 103-4).²² L'unico elemento che invece è fedele al testo giapponese è la traslitterazione di Twain, per quanto idiosincratica: Bao sceglie i caratteri 脱浑, la cui pronuncia nel dialetto di Suzhou è /T'əʔfuen/ (cf. Li, Ye 1993), foneticamente prossima al *katakana* トワエン /To-wa-e-n/ usata da Hara. La pronuncia di Suzhou deve essere considerata come riferimento – come già fatto da Chen (2015; 2016) per altre traduzioni di Bao – per spiegare la traslitterazione di nomi di persona e di luogo. Ad esempio, il nome del fidanzato di Maria, «Caruthers», che nella versione giapponese è «カリューサース» /Kariyūsāsu/ e in Bao diventa «加里士» /kalizɿ/; «City of San José» diventa nel MT di Hara «サン、ジョセ[村]» /San Jiyose [mura]/ e nel TT di Bao «聖迦瑞[村]» /Sən tɕiaze [ts'ən]/; infine, «New Jersey», in Hara è reso come «新ジャン» /Shin jiyashi/ e in Bao «新迦西» /sin tɕiasi/.²³

5 Conclusioni

In epoca *Qingmo minchu* la traduzione intermedia era sfruttata con diverse finalità. Da un lato permetteva di introdurre elementi di novità piuttosto rapidamente e al tempo stesso lasciava lo spazio per intervenire creativamente. Il caso di «Qie ming bo» rivela come essa si applicasse non soltanto al testo ma anche al paratesto, e quindi come la presentazione e la ricezione intermedia potessero influenzare quelle del TT. Mostra inoltre come il sistema letterario di arrivo in Cina in quel momento, maggiormente tollerante nei confronti di operazioni di adattamento culturale e di riscrittura, e abbastanza consapevole e orgoglioso delle proprie possibilità di assimilazione, fosse permeabile a forme di ibridazione e permettesse di accogliere molte innovazioni nella tradizione letteraria cinese.

«Qie ming bo» è un esempio di come un'interpretazione arbitraria e funzionale della letteratura straniera fosse indirettamente e ulteriormente impiegata, come osservato da Liu (2017, 32), «[to] integrate foreign understandings of sentimentality into the Chinese

22 Curiosamente, possiamo notare come il titolo scelto da Bao operi inconsapevolmente come un chiasmo rispetto alla titolazione di Twain, laddove il destino sfortunato del giovane uomo diventa per Bao quello della protagonista femminile.

23 Notiamo una netta differenza nelle traslitterazioni utilizzate fra i due caratteri 迦 e 加 (pronunciati allo stesso modo in cinese standard) proprio con la diversa realizzazione fonetica nel dialetto di Suzhou rispettivamente come /jia/ e /ka/ (Zhang, Shi 1987) per rendere i due suoni in *katakana* ジ + vocale (*jīyo* e *jīya*) e カ (*ka*). Possiamo così attribuire al toponimo «加里步尼耶» (presente in giapponese come «カリホルニア» /Karihoruniya/ ma assente nel testo di Twain) una lettura più riconoscibile: /kalibun,i'ia/, ossia California.

context». Del resto, le traduzioni creative, le pseudotraduzioni e le creazioni traduttive come derivazioni da testi precedenti (singoli o multipli) possono rientrare nella più generale categoria dell'intertestualità e come tali anche nel flusso 'transtestuale' con ulteriori inserimenti (meta)finzionali e funzionali al genere di appartenenza.

Abbiamo osservato come, in questo caso, la traduzione intermedia abbia favorito l'ingresso di un autore e di un genere nel nuovo contesto culturale a danno però dell'ironia originaria che risulta essere perduta lungo la catena di mediazioni, anche per effetto del testo intermedio, mentre l'impianto di genere viene riorientato dall'intervento del traduttore cinese. Il caso in esame evidenzia dunque, con particolare chiarezza, la duplice natura della traduzione intermedia: da un lato la sua efficacia come dispositivo di circolazione e legittimazione letteraria; dall'altro i rischi strutturali che la accompagnano, quali equivoci interpretativi, tagli, aggiunte e trasformazioni arbitrarie, che possono interessare sia il piano testuale sia quello paratestuale. In questo quadro si colloca la riscrittura di Bao, che appare soprattutto come adattamento di contenuti, in una fase precedente alla riforma radicale della lingua avviata con il Quattro Maggio: più che una resa puntuale, il suo testo assume i tratti di una versione divulgativa finalizzata a trasmettere con chiarezza una storia o un tema. Si tratta di una diegesi, semplice e onesta, attraverso cui Bao seleziona, sintetizza e chiarisce i materiali narrativi orientandoli ad un possibile fine didattico. Nella sua operazione convergono traduzione, intervento editoriale, invenzione e commento: strumenti differenti ma complementari, impiegati per rendere accessibile un nucleo narrativo ritenuto degno di circolazione e discussione, adattandone al contempo la cornice linguistica e diegetica alle forme di fruizione familiari al pubblico di riferimento.

Occorre però stabilire anche l'intenzione dell'autore Bao: probabilmente intendeva presentare un testo a metà fra la traduzione e la creazione, e questo può spiegare il suo paratesto fuorviante. Quindi nel suo caso prendere da una traduzione intermedia gli elementi di base della trama era solo un espediente per velocizzare la produzione di un racconto 'di bottega', utile a riempire le colonne del suo giornale. Al tempo stesso però resta fedele alla sua missione e alla sua formazione scrivendo in un ricercato cinese classico e fornendo una morale molto conservatrice. Si tratta quindi di una traduzione creativa in cui l'autore mette soprattutto la propria poetica e quella della cultura di arrivo, inserendo i dettagli di trama di uno sketch umoristico in un'opera tragica per metà originale, tradendo non solo Twain ma anche il traduttore giapponese. Se Hara però fu crocifisso per il suo travisamento di Twain, Bao non solo la fece franca ma ripropose «Qie ming bo» come inserto intertestuale – in particolare

in forma meta- o ipodiegetica – della successiva novella «Yi lü ma» (Bao 1909).

Il tema della novella, infine, può anche essere letto attraverso la ‘metafora nazionale’: Aurelia rappresenterebbe così il letterato-intellettuale, attento al destino politico del proprio Paese e fedele ad esso nonostante questo fosse continuamente indebolito e perfino mutilato dalle potenze coloniali. In questo modo, con la scelta di questo testo, l'autore poteva agevolmente richiamare l'attenzione di un lettore sensibile alle formule ideologiche tradizionali che spesso traducevano il rapporto tra funzionario e governo nell'immagine della donna fedele al proprio amato. Anche in questa prospettiva interpretativa si rivelerebbe il ruolo di Bao come divulgatore e adattatore culturale di temi e formule tradizionali in una cornice più moderna e cosmopolita nell'ottica di una universalizzazione dei valori cinesi, erede dello spirito riformista tardo Qing impegnato a conservare il più possibile l'essenza (*ti* 體) nazionale.

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The Perception of Number and Gender in the Japanese Language

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Abstract This article investigates how native speakers of Japanese interpret number and gender in a language lacking obligatory morphological marking for either category. Based on a questionnaire completed by 47 native speakers, it analyses the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors guiding interpretation. The findings show that number is primarily determined by contextual and grammatical cues, whereas gender is largely shaped by cultural stereotypes and world knowledge. The study demonstrates that Japanese nominal interpretation relies on contextual inference rather than morphological encoding.

Keywords Japanese language. Number interpretation. Gender perception. Bare nouns. Plural markers. Contextual inference.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Singular and Plural. – 3 Pluralising Suffixes. – 4 The Use of Pluralisers. – 5 Unmarked 'Plurals'. – 6 Results of the Survey on Number Discernment. – 7 Perception of Grammatical Gender. – 8 Results of the Survey for Gender Discernment. – 9 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

It is well established that Japanese nouns do not exhibit morphological distinctions for number or gender. Nevertheless, constituents within an utterance that lack such formal marking may still be interpreted as singular or plural, or as masculine or feminine.¹ This paper examines the mechanisms that lead native Japanese speakers to construe nouns in these terms. The primary objective is to identify the factors that trigger a particular construal, while also considering instances in which interpretation remains ambiguous according to native-speaker intuitions. To this end, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of 47 native Japanese speakers, recruited primarily² from undergraduate and postgraduate university populations. The examples presented in the questionnaire were drawn from the BCCWJ (*Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese*),³ selected directly from Japanese novels, or, where authors are cited, sourced from previous academic studies.

2 Singular and Plural

As noted above, Japanese, unlike languages such as Italian, French, German, or Russian, does not morphologically distinguish between singular and plural. For example, if we say:

1 This article uses the current version of the Hepburn transcription system to romanise texts. When examples are taken from other studies, the morphosyntactic markers follow the form found in the quoted sources, which may differ from those adopted independently for this study. All abbreviations used are listed at the end of the article.

2 The questionnaire was administered anonymously to students at Waseda University and the University of Tokyo. With only one exception, the sample consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the humanities, aged between 18 and 26, enrolled in B.A., M.A. and PhD programmes; however, given the age distribution of the respondents, it is plausible that a small number (5) of university faculty members – namely those involved in distributing the questionnaire – also participated in the study. Of the 47 respondents, 26 identified as women, 20 as men, and one did not report their gender. Not all respondents answered every item. The percentages presented in the response graphs therefore represent the proportion of respondents who answered each individual question. I wish to thank Professor Yada Tsutomu (University of Tokyo) and Professor Moriyama Takurō (Waseda University) for their cooperation in distributing the questionnaires; I am also grateful to Professor Moriyama for the opportunity to discuss various aspects of this research project.

3 National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (2025). *Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese*, v.2.7.2. <https://chunagon.ninjal.ac.jp/bccwj-nt/search>.

- (1) *koko=ni inu=ga iru*
here=LOC cat=NOM be
'Here there is a dog/there are dogs.'

the word *inu* could be interpreted as either 'dog' (singular) or 'dogs' (plural). Similarly, in (2), *neko* could be interpreted as a single cat or multiple cats:

- (2) *kōen=de neko=ga ason-de-iru*
park=LOC cat=NOM to play-CVB-PROG-NPST
'A cat/some cats is/are playing in the park.'

The same applies to the word *kodomo*, which means 'child/children' and can today be interpreted as either singular or plural. From a morphological perspective, however, it consists of a semantic nucleus, *ko*, which means 'child/children', followed by the 'pluralising' suffix *-domo* (which, in this case, is no longer perceived as plural):

- (3) *kōen=de kodomo=ga ason-de-iru*
park=LOC child/children=NOM to play-CVB-PROG-NPST
'A cat/some cats is/are playing in the park.'

In fact *kodomo* can be combined with another 'pluralising' suffix, *-tachi* to mark plurality overtly yielding the word *kodomo-tachi*, as in (4):

- (4) *ima=no kodomo-tachi=wa hon=o yoma-naku-nari-mashi-ta*
now=GEN child-PL=TOP book=ACC read-NEG become-POLITE-PST
'Children today no longer read.'

Japanese nouns have been described as 'transnumeral' in the sense that they denote a general concept rather than carrying information about number. As Downing (1996, 219) observes, "they may be used not only to refer to specific, identifiable individuals, but also to refer to nonspecific members of the category denoted by the noun". When necessary, the number – singular or plural – can be specified by means of appropriate numeral classifiers.

3 Pluralising Suffixes

As previously noted, unlike in Italian (for example *can-e/i* ‘dog/s’, *gatt-o/i* ‘cat/s’), Japanese does not form the plural directly by modifying the noun. Instead, ‘pluralising’ suffixes – such as the already mentioned *-tachi* in *kodomo-tachi* – can be attached to the noun and, as we will see later, in some cases, must be. These plural suffixes are attached to personal pronouns (*watashi* ‘I’, *watashi-tachi* ‘we’; *kare* ‘he’, *kare-ra* ‘they’), but they may also occur with nouns (*gakusei* ‘student’, *gakusei-tachi* ‘students’), and demonstratives (*kore* ‘this’, *kore-ra* ‘these’) among other categories. In some cases, it is possible to reduplicate a noun to express a variety (rather than a ‘plural’ in the strict sense) of entities (e.g. *kami* ‘god’ > *kami-gami* ‘a variety of deities’, *hito* ‘person’ > *hito-bito* ‘several different persons’). Similarly, the prefix *sho-*, which precedes words of Chinese origin (so called *kango*), functions as a ‘variety’ marker. Examples include *sho-koku* ‘several countries’, *sho-jijō* ‘different conditions’, *sho-hōgen* ‘different dialects’, *sho-rei* ‘different examples’, etc. The most common are listed in Table 1.⁴

Table 1 Common pluralising suffixes

Form	Main function	Example
<i>-tachi</i>	standard/polite pluraliser	<i>josei-tachi</i> ‘girls’; <i>kodomo-tachi</i> ‘children’
<i>-domo</i>	humble (formal) pluraliser; derogatory pluraliser	<i>watashi-domo</i> ‘I-PL’=‘we’; <i>akutō-domo</i> ‘villains’
<i>-ra</i>	standard/humble pluraliser; derogatory pluraliser	<i>boku-ra</i> ‘I-PL’=‘we’; <i>kare-ra</i> ‘he-PL’=‘they’; <i>omae-ra</i> ‘you-PL’
<i>-gata</i>	respectful pluraliser	<i>anata-gata</i> ‘you-PL’; <i>sensei-gata</i> ‘professor-PL’;
<i>sho-</i>	variety pluraliser	<i>sho-mondai</i> ‘PL-problem’

Owing to semantic restrictions – most notably, the distinction between human and non-human, or animate and inanimate referents – or simply to conventional lexical collocations, not all pluralisers can be attached to all types of noun, nor do they share the same distribution.⁵ The choice of one form rather than another may also vary according

⁴ Others, less common, pluralisers include suffixes such as *shū* (*kodomo-shū* ‘child-PLURAL’) and *renchū* (*minarai-reinchū* ‘apprentice-PLURAL’, slightly derogative).

⁵ For more information on the combination of pluralisers with personal pronouns see Irwin, Zisk 2019, 148-50; Fujimoto 2022, 32; Jung 2001, 60-3.

to diatopic variation, gender differences, and linguistic register (Jung 2001; Shimoji 2022, 515-16; Fujimoto 2022, 41).

Moreover, the use of different suffixes has undergone diachronic change, both with respect to the words to which they are attached, and in terms of linguistic register. This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of the subject, however, for example, *-tachi*, unlike its present-day usage, originally functioned as a honorific plural suffix, attached to nouns referring to deities, nobles and other socially elevated referents, and was not used with animals and inanimate objects (Murahata, Murahata 2023, 905-7).

In addition to its specific function as a pluraliser (e.g. *gakusei* 'student' vs. *gakusei-tachi* 'students'), *-tachi* may also indicate that the marked noun belongs to a set of entities sharing a salient property, thereby functioning as an associative plural (e.g. *Tanaka-san* 'Mr Tanaka' vs. *Tanaka-san-tachi* 'the Tanakas/Mr Tanaka and his family/Mr Tanaka and his colleagues', etc.).

4 The Use of Pluralisers

Although nouns marked by pluralisers express plurality, this does not necessarily mean that forms without pluralisers should be understood as singular. In many cases, an unmarked form can be interpreted as either singular or plural, but in others – as noted above – a plural marker is required. According to Moriyama, the need for a marked plural form that distinguishes the plural from the singular (*genmitsu na fukusū*, 'precise plural' in his terminology) may depend on several factors: a. In the case of personal pronouns and kinship terms, where the unmarked form cannot be interpreted as plural and therefore the use of a pluralising suffix is obligatory (*watashi* 'I' vs. *watashi-tachi* 'we'); b. When a demonstrative refers anaphorically to several elements belonging to different types (rather than to distinct units), as in a list (see (5)); c. When several actions are described within the same text and/or reference is made anaphorically to a plural entity (see also Nemoto 2005, 399; Downing 1996, 181), as in (6).

More generally, personal pronouns behave differently from other nouns with respect to plural marking. In particular, some varieties spoken in the Ryūkyū archipelago exhibit a trichotomic system comprising singular, plural and dual forms (Shimoji 2022, 505).

- (5) *Akai bara=no kafun.* *Kuroi agehachō=no* *hane=no fun.*
 red rose GEN pollen. black swallowtail butterfly GEN wing GEN powder.
Murasakizuishō hito-kakera. *Shiro-nezumi=no o* *hoshi-ta mono.*
 amethyst one-piece. white mouse GEN tail dry-PST thing
Sono hoka hon=no *shiji-suru mono=o* *atsume-te,*
 that other book GEN indicate-do thing ACC gather-CVB
sorera=o *komaka-ku kudaki,* *maze-awase,*
 that-PLUR ACC small-ADV crush-COORD mix-join-CONJ
asa-ito=no wa=no *naka=ni* *maki-chirashi-te-ita.*
 hemp-thread GEN inside LOC scatter-scatter-CVB-CONT ASP-PST
 ‘Red rose pollen. Black swallowtail butterfly wing powder. A piece
 of amethyst. Dried white mouse tail. I gathered other items listed in the book,
 crushed **them** into small pieces, mixed them together, and scattered them
 inside a circle of hemp thread.’
 (adapted from Moriyama 2015, 340)

- (6) *Kinō* *san-nin=no* *gakusei=ga* *tsuredat-te*
 yesterday three-CL:human=GEN student=NOM go-together-CVB
shitsumon=ni ki-ta. *Hanashi=ga hazun-de*
 question-DAT come-PST talk=NOM lively-CVB
sono *gakusei-tachi=ni* *kēki=to* *o-cha=o*
 that student-PLR=DAT cake and PFX-tea=ACC
gochisō shi-te *age-ta.*
 treat do-CVB give-PST
 ‘Yesterday, three students together came to ask questions. We had a lively
 conversation and treated **them** with cake and tea.’
 (adapted from Moriyama 2015, 345)

In both (5) and (6), nouns lacking plural markers are unacceptable, even in (6) where an unmarked plural form (*gakusei-Ø*) appears in the first sentence. In cases of anaphoric reference, as in example (6), the pluralising suffix conveys a connotation of ‘definiteness’ that is absent from the unmarked form. Several authors (Nakanishi, Tomioka 2004, 114-16; Kurafuji 2004, 215 among others) have observed that the use of *-tachi* may impart a connotation of ‘definiteness’ to the noun to which it is attached. A noun with a plural marker (as in example (7b)) is interpreted as denoting individuals known to both speaker and listener, in contrast to example (7a) in which a pluralising suffix is absent (Kurafuji 2004, 215).

- (7a) *Kono ie-ni kodomo-wa i-masu ka?*
 this house-in child-TOP exist-PRES Q
 ‘Is there a child in this house?’

- (7b) *Kono ie-ni kodomo-tachi-wa i-masu ka?*
this house-in child-PL-TOP exist- PRES Q
'Are the children in this house?'

At the same time, it has been observed that when a noun is marked with the suffix *-tachi*, the definite interpretation is only a tendency, and that its use cannot be uniformly analysed as definite:

- (8) *Kono kooen-de-wa itsumo kodomo-tachi-ga asonde-iru*
this park-LOC-TOP always child-TACHI-NOM play-PROG
'In this park, there are always children playing.'
(Nakanishi, Tomioka 2004, 121)

- (9) *Inoue-sensei-no ie-ni kodomo-tachi-ga*
Inoue-Prof.-GEN house-at child-TACHI=NOM
atsumatta-to-kiita-kedo watashi-wa dono
gathered-COMP-heard-while I-TOP which
kodomo-tachi-ka shira-nai.
child-TACHI-Q know-NEG
'(I) have heard that children gathered at Prof. Inoue's house, but I don't know which children.'
(Nakanishi, Tomioka 2004, 123)

Here, in both (8) and (9), *kodomo-tachi* cannot be interpreted as definite ('the children'); rather, it denotes a generic plurality of 'children'. According to the same Tomioka himself "the fact remains, however, that it is more commonly interpreted as definite, and the associativity presents a clue for this tendency" (Tomioka 2021, 480).

5 Unmarked 'Plurals'

On the other hand, there are many cases in which, despite the plurality of the objects or actions mentioned, it is possible to refer to them without overt plural marking. This is typically the case when the objects, or actions, can be regarded as belonging to the same type or as forming a conceptual 'set'. For example, in (10), although the demonstrative *sore* is not pluralised (even though the form *sore-ra* would also be acceptable in the same sentence), it refers to two buttons (distinct from one another but belonging to the same category):

- (10) *Kōto=o katta-ga, botan=ga niko tore-te i-ta.*
 coat-ACC buy-PST but button-NOM two-CL come off-CVB ASP-PST
Soko=de o-mise=de sore=o tsuke-te morat-ta
 there LOC HON-shop-LOC that-ACC attach-CVB receive-PST
 ‘I bought a coat, but two buttons were missing. So I had the shop sew **them** on for me.’
 (adapted from Moriyama 2015, 341)

The same applies in (11), where different objects (a knife and a fork) are referred to as belonging to the same category (i.e. cutlery):

- (11) *O-iwai=ni naifu=to fōku=o morat-ta.*
 HON-celebration-DAT knife-CMP fork-ACC receive-PST
Nanto, sore=wa ginsei dat-ta
 EXC that-TOP made of silver COP-PST
 ‘I received a knife and fork as a gift. Surprisingly, **they** were made of silver.’
 (adapted from Moriyama 2015, 342)

The use of pluralisers is not inherently obligatory in all contexts involving a plural situation. Rather, the situation described may be interpreted as either ‘plural’ or ‘singular’. The elements that favour one interpretation over another may be lexical or logic in nature. Consider, for example the following sentence:

- (12) *Kōtei=ni gakusei=ga atsumat-te iru*
 school grounds=LOC student=NOM gather-CVB-RES
 ‘Students gathered in the school grounds.’
 (adapted from Moriyama 2015, 339)

Here *gakusei* ‘student/students’ can only be interpreted as plural, since the verb *atsumaru* (‘to gather’-INTR) logically requires a plural subject; the suffix *-tachi* is therefore unnecessary.

In other cases, such as (13), the form *gakusei* is not marked by a plural suffix, but it tends to be interpreted as plural (‘students’) because the action described is construed as collective, rather than individual.

- (13) *Daigaku=no gakuhi-neage=no hōshin=ni gakusei=ga*
 university=GEN tuition fees-increase=GEN policy=DAT student/s=NOM
hanpatsu-shi-ta. Undō=no chūshin=to nat-ta
 protest-do-PST movement=GEN center=CMP become-PST
gakusei=wa kyōshitsu-senkyo=to iu
 student/s=TOP classroom-occupation=CMP say
shudan=de taikō-suru koto=ni shi-ta ga
 tool=INS resistance-do NMLZ=DAT do-PST but
jikkō-shi-ta gakusei=wa tadachi=ni taiho-sare-ta.
 implement-do-PST student/s=NOM immediately=ADV arrest-do-PASS-PST
 ‘Students protested against the university’s policy of raising tuition fees.
 The students who led the protest decided to occupy classrooms as a means
 of resistance, but those who carried out the protest were immediately
 arrested.’*
 * It is also possible to have the marked form *gakusei-tachi* in the first
 sentence, which means that the second and third occurrences, if interpreted
 as plurals, must also be marked with *-tachi*. For example, if only the third
 occurrence is unmarked (*gakusei-Ø*), this suggests that a single student
 carried out the protest and was arrested (Moriyama 2015, 344).
 (adapted from Moriyama 2015, 344)

As noted by Nomoto (2013, 6), citing Nakanishi and Tomioka (2004), there are several contexts in which the pluraliser *-tachi* does not occur and cannot even be used. Nomoto observes that first, *-tachi* plurals cannot serve as the internal argument in the relational possession construction. Whereas (14a), with a non-plural form, can express Mrs Inoue’s motherhood, (14b), containing the corresponding *-tachi* plural, cannot. Indeed, the sentence (14b) can only mean that Mrs Inoue has the children (to rely on, to live for, etc.).

- (14a) *Inoue-san-ni-wa kodomo-ga aru/iru.*
 Inoue-Mrs-DAT-TOP child-NOM exist
 ‘Mrs Inoue has a child/children. (= Mrs Inoue is a mother.)’
 (14b) *?*Inoue-san-ni-wa kodomo-tachi-ga aru/iru.*
 Inoue-Mrs-DAT-TOP child-PL-NOM exist
 ‘Mrs Inoue has the children.’
 (from Nakanishi, Tomioka 2004, 116)

Second, *-tachi* plurals cannot be used as predicates. Non-plural forms are used instead:

- (15) *Karera=wa gakusei(*-tachi) da.*
they=TOP student-PL COP
'They are students.'

Third, *-tachi* plurals are incompatible with generics. Only (15a), which contains a non-plural form, can express a generalisation about citizens of Italy. By contrast, (15b), with the *-tachi* plural, is acceptable only with the meaning 'A particular group of Italians are cheerful':

- (15a) *Itariajin=wa yōki-da.*
Italian-PL=TOP cheerful-COP
'Italians are cheerful.'
- (15b) ?? *Itariajin-tachi=wa yōki-da.*
Italian-PL=TOP cheerful-COP
?? 'Italians are cheerful.'

From the above observations, it can be inferred that, given their 'transnumeral' characteristic (Downing 1996, 199 ff.), Japanese nouns are not normally accompanied by plural suffixes – even when they refer to a plural situation – in the following cases: a. when they occur within a sentence for the first time; b. unless they are used to emphasise the definiteness of the subject of the sentence (i.e. a specific rather than generic subject); c. when the plurality denotes to a 'set' of similar entities; d. when the noun functions as the internal argument of a relational possession construction; e. when the noun is used as a predicate; f. when the noun, serving as the topic of a sentence, is used as a generic.

6 Results of the Survey on Number Discernment

The questionnaire comprised a series of sentences containing the main elements that may differentiate between singular and plural interpretations in Japanese. These included the cases discussed above, as well as instances in which plurality is expressed through the use of pluralising suffixes. The aim of the survey was to investigate speakers' perceptions of this phenomenon and, where possible, to identify additional morphosyntactic or semantic factors that may influence number interpretations. In many cases involving bare nouns, the respondents' interpretations varied between singular, plural, or both. This section outlines the principal motivations

reported by respondents for their interpretative choices, drawing on a selection of examples from the survey.

When a noun can be construed as ‘generic’, as in the following sentence, there is a strong tendency to interpret it as ‘plural’, since it is understood as a ‘generic noun’, comparable to English plural generics (e.g. *violins are string instruments*). This explanation was also provided by participants who selected the ‘both’ option.

- (16) *Ningen-chūshin=no ondo-settei=ni suru=to*
human being centre=GEN temperature setting=DAT do=COND
inu=ni totte=wa hie-sugi=to nari,
dog=DAT take-CVB=TOP chill-exceed-CMP become
reibōbyō=ya kaze=o
air-conditioning sickness=COM cold=ACC
hika-seru gen'in=ni naru-node chū-shi-mashō.
catch-CAUS cause=DAT become-CAUSL attention-do-VOL
‘When using a human-centred temperature setting, it may be too cold for **dogs**, causing them to catch a cold or develop air-conditioning sickness, so let us be cautious.’

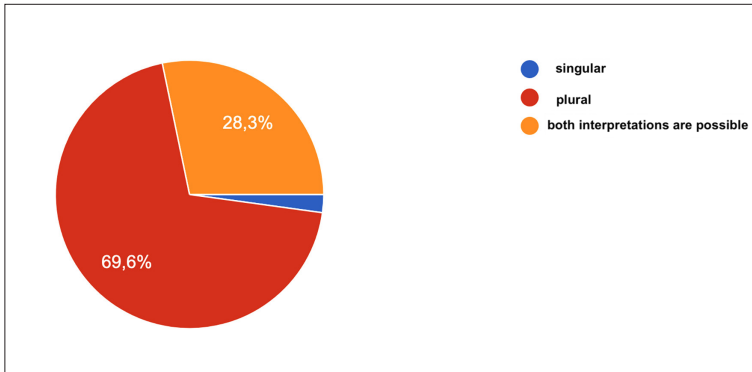


Figure 1 Respondents' responses for (16)

Even in the case of sentences such as (17), in which the noun *kodomo* ‘child’ is marked by the plural suffix *-tachi*, some respondents interpret the noun as plural not primarily on the basis of the suffix itself, but because they construe it as referring to a general ‘category’, or because they imagine the speaker to be a teacher addressing a large group of children:

- (17) *Heta-na hito=wa masumasu heta=ni na-tte-ikimasu.*
 unskilled person-TOP increasingly unskilled=DAT become-CVB-go
Kono shinjitsu=o shikkari=to wakimae-tara, kanarazu
 This truth-ACC properly=ADV understand-COND certainly
uma-ku naru=to kodomo-tachi=ni=wa kuchi=o
 skilfull-ADV become=CMP child-PL=DAT=TOP mouth=ACC
suppa-ku-suru hodo tsutae-te-imasu.
 sour-ADV-make extent tell-CVB-PROG
 ‘Those who are unskilled only become increasingly so. Once this truth
 is properly understood, I repeatedly impress upon children – until I am
 hoarse – that they will inevitably improve’.

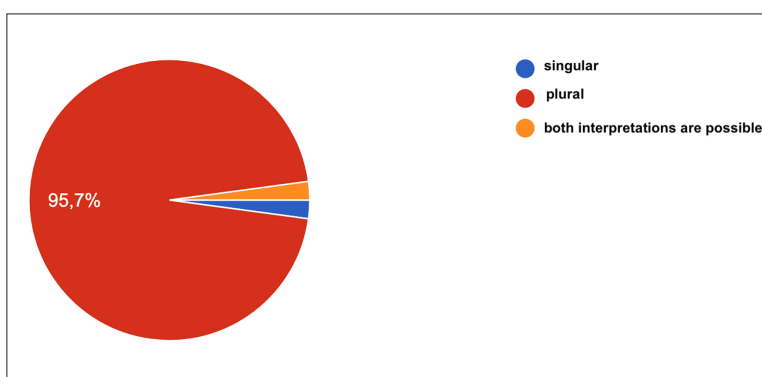


Figure 2 Respondents' answers for (17)

In other cases, such as (18), respondents' opinions were divided between a singular interpretation and the opinion that both interpretations are possible. Their choices were motivated by various considerations:

- (18) *Kodomo=o hasan-de, fūfu=wa, ikanimo sore-rashii*
 child=ACC to sandwich-CVB husband and wife=TOP just that-like
kata=ni hama-tte-i-ta. Aa, kore=ga fūfu na=no da.
 form=LOC fit-CVB-PRG-PST Ah, this=NOM husband and wife COP-GEN-COP
 ‘With **a child/children** between them, the couple was in a form that suited
 them perfectly. Ah, this is what it means to be husband and wife.’

In this case, respondents who opted for the ‘singular’ interpretation by arguing that the pluraliser *-tachi* or a numeral would have been required if the plural had been intended. Others observed that the verb *hasamu* (‘to sandwich s.o./s.t.’) evokes the image of a child lying between two parents, an image also expressed by the

Japanese phrase *kawa no ji* (lit. ‘the character of river’ 川, composed of three graphic strokes). By contrast, those who considered both interpretations possible argued that: a. *kodomo* can mean either the singular or plural of ‘child’, but can also mean ‘offspring’ in general; b. the number is not specified; c. it is not possible to determine the number. No one selected the option ‘plural’.

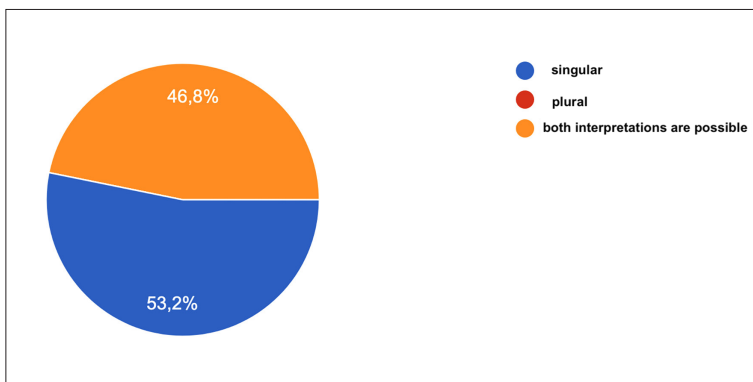


Figure 3 Respondents' answers for (18)

The interpretation of *inu* ‘dog/dogs’, which in (16) was predominantly plural, is conversely interpreted as singular by a large majority of respondents in (19):

- (19) *Chiisa-na, kabe=o shiro-ku nu-tta ie=no shūraku=o*
 small-ADN wall=ACC white-ADV paint-PST house=GEN village=ACC
sugiru. Ikken=no nōka=no soba=de jōriku-suru=to
 pass one-CL:building=GEN farmhouse=GEN near=LOC landing-do=COND
inu=ga oe-ta.
 dog=NOM bark=PST
 ‘I passed the village with small houses with white-painted walls. **A dog/Dogs**
 barked as I went ashore near a farmhouse.’

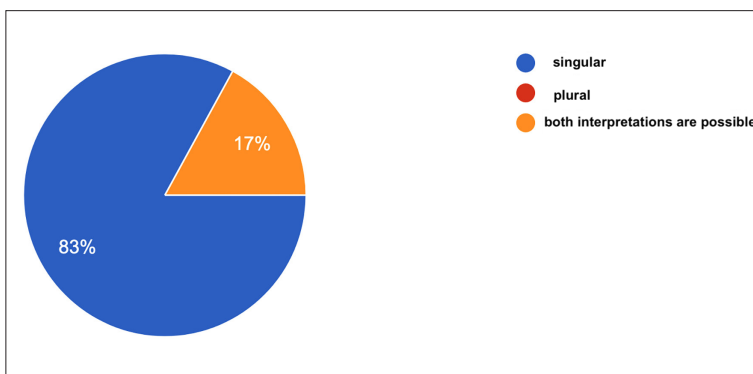


Figure 4 Respondents' answers for (19)

Leaving aside the minority of responses that allowed for a double interpretation, those who opted for the singular interpretation cited largely impressionistic or clearly subjective reasons, such as “it is easier to imagine a single dog in the scene”, “the scene is solitary”, or “in a farmhouse it is more likely that there is only one dog”. These explanations were sometimes also accompanied by grammatical considerations, such as the absence of pluralisers (*-tachi*, *-ra*) or the lack of a numeral. Unlike (16), where the predominantly plural interpretation was triggered by the generic use of the noun *inu* ‘dog’ as a category, here the singular interpretation is based on the factual context (a “solitary scene”) or “personal experience”. None of the respondents chose the plural option. The minority who selected the “both interpretations” option (8 out of 47) cited primarily the absence of a numeral or the fact that, “in principle”, *inu* may be either singular or plural (although some consider the singular reading more probable).

Let us now consider the following two sentences:

- (20) *Kōen=de otoko=no ko=ga ason-de-iru.*
 park=LOC male=GEN child=NOM play-CVB-PROG
 ‘A boy/Boys is/are playing in the park.’

- (21) *Otoko=no ko=ga ason-de-iru aida, heya=no sōji-shiyō.*
 male=GEN child=NOM play-CVB-PROG while room=GEN cleaning-do=HORT
 ‘While the boy/the boys are playing outside, let’s clean the room.’

While a clear majority of respondents opted for the singular interpretation in (20), the singular and ‘both interpretations’ options

received identical percentage in (21), with the plural option also registering a non-negligible proportion.

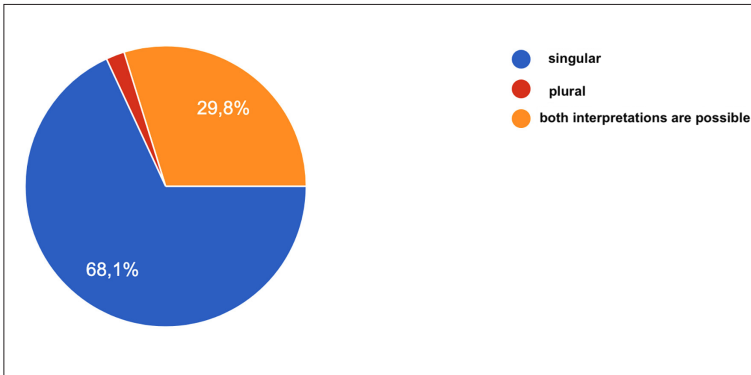


Figure 5 Respondents' answers for (20)

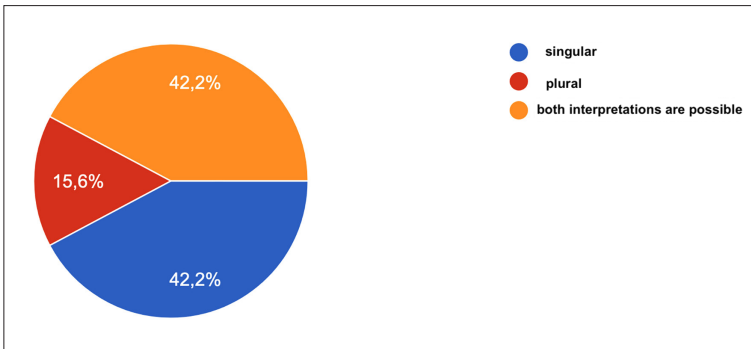


Figure 6 Respondents' answers for (21)

In (20), the singular interpretation is mainly justified by the absence of pluralising suffixes, whereas the 'both interpretations' option is supported by the impossibility of determining whether the referent is singular or plural. A similar motivation underlies the singular interpretation in (21). By contrast, respondents who selected the 'both interpretations' option in (21) invoked 'logical' considerations ("it depends on the meaning of *heya*: if it is a hospital room, a single child; if it is a room in a kindergarten, several children"; "the situation is unclear and therefore both interpretations are possible"). Those who supported the singular interpretation exclusively offered various additional arguments. Some maintained that the phrase *okoto no ko* cannot refer to a specific child. Others observed that, if a specific

child were intended, a personal name would normally be used, followed by an honorific suffix such as *-kun*.

The following two sentences were presented consecutively in the questionnaire. The first is taken from Nakanishi, Tomioka (2004, 114), and the second is a modified version in which the demonstrative *kono* and the subject particle *ga* have been added:

- (22) *Itariajin wa yōki da.*
Italians=TOP cheerful-COP
'Italians are cheerful.'
- (23) *Kono itariajin wa yōki da.*
This Italian=NOM cheerful-COP
'This Italian is cheerful.'

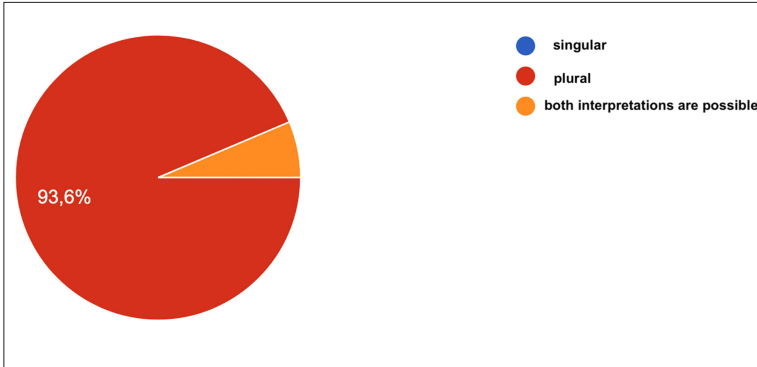


Figure 7 Respondents' answers for (22)

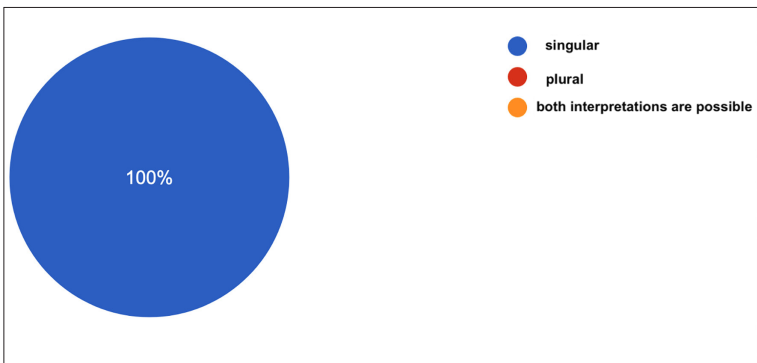


Figure 8 Respondents' answers for (23)

In (22), a striking majority of respondents interpret *Itariajin* as plural, in the sense that the noun is taken to denote a generalisation about Italian people as a group. By contrast, in (22) 100% of respondents interpret the demonstrative *kono* to mark a specific, singular ‘Italian’. The English equivalent of (23) should therefore be rendered as ‘This Italian is cheerful’. To express the plural (a specific group of ‘Italians’), a plural suffix such as *-tachi* should be added. The feature of ‘definiteness’, discussed in § 4, may also be extended to cases in which a demonstrative precedes a bare nouns. When a bare noun is modified by a demonstrative (*kono*, *sono*, *ano*), and no pluraliser is present, the noun is generally interpreted as singular.

Nakanishi and Tomioka (2004) provide the following example (24),⁶ which is used here to test respondents’ singular/plural interpretation:

- (24) *Hikkoshi=no tetsudai=ni gakusei=ga iru.*
moving=GEN help=DAT student-PL=NOM need
‘I need **a student / students** who can help me move.’

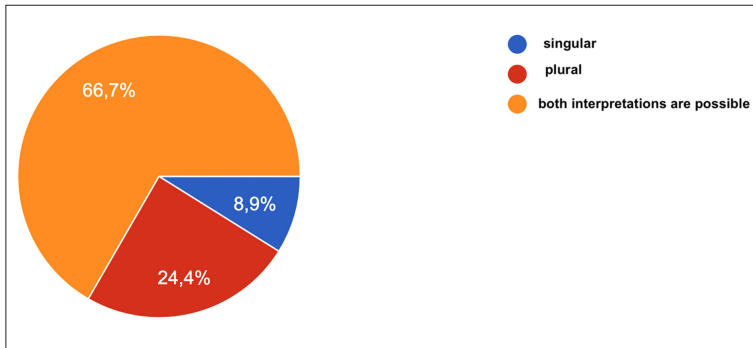


Figure 9 Respondents’ answers for (24)

First of all, at least three of the four respondents who opted for the singular reading interpreted the verb *iru* as the existential verb (‘to be’) rather than as its homophone meaning ‘to need’. In the questionnaire, the verb *iru* was written in *kana* rather than *kanji*, which would have disambiguated its meaning more clearly.

⁶ Tomioka and Nakanishi use this example, as well as its counterpart with the plural suffix *-tachi*, to discuss how the scope of the bare noun *gakusei* can be interpreted as either narrow or wide, depending on whether or not it is accompanied by *-tachi* (Tomioka, Nakanishi 2004, 115).

The ‘both interpretations’ and plural options require further analysis. The motivations underlying the ‘both interpretations’ choice may be summarised as follows. First, some respondents interpreted *gakusei* as a collective noun (understood as denoting a category and therefore as a plurality), while still granting that it could indicate a single subject. Second, others focused on the entity *gakusei*, in relation to the requirements of a move, arguing that the entity itself could be either singular or plural. Third, some respondents invoked personal experience and the scale of the move: for a small move, a single student would be enough, whereas for a larger move, many students would be required. Within the ‘both interpretations’ option, a further distinction was drawn depending on the meaning attributed to the verb *iru*: ‘to be’ or ‘to need’. A single interpretation was considered more plausible when *iru* was interpreted as an existential verb (‘there is *one student* among the other people helping with the move’), whereas the plural reading was regarded as more likely when *iru* was interpreted as ‘to need’ (‘*several students* are needed to help with the move’).

Finally, the plural option is primarily supported by factual considerations. Most respondents argued that a move typically requires the assistance of several people. Others added that, if reference had been made to a single student, this would likely have been specified by means of a numeral (e.g. *hitori no gakusei*, ‘one student’), especially given that the plural suffix *-tachi* is not required.

The following example (25) is sentence (14a), adapted from Nakanishi and Tomioka (2004, 116). It was read in a uniform manner, with respondents considering both readings possible:

- (14a) *Inoue-san=ni=wa kodomo=ga iru.*
Inoue-Mrs/Mr=DAT=TOP child=NOM exist
‘Mrs/Mr Inoue has a child/children. (= Mrs Inoue is a mother / Mr Inoue is a father.)’

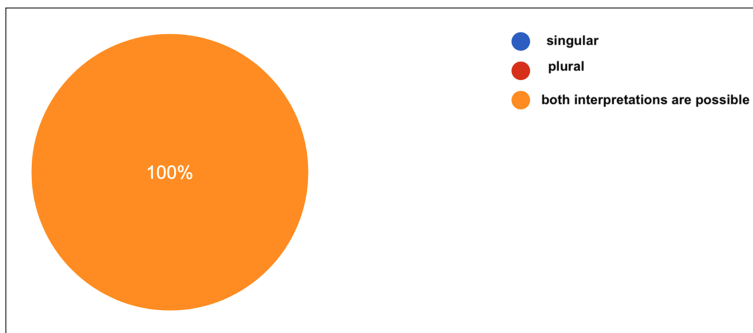


Figure 10 Respondents' answers for (25)

The general reasoning underlying the acceptance of both interpretations is that the sentence focuses on the existence or non-existence of children, rather than on grammatical number. Some respondents argued that, had the intention been to express the number, it would have been specified.

One respondent observed that if the phrase *kodomo-tachi* (with a pluraliser), had been used in this sentence, it would suggest that the children were not Mr Inoue's own. Rather, it would imply that Mr Inoue was, for example, responsible for several children. This observation lends support to the hypothesis formulated by Nakanishi and Tomioka that the sentence containing *-tachi* does not assert Mrs Inoue's motherhood. However, it does not support the general statement that a relational *CN+ -tachi* cannot function as the internal argument of the possession verb *iru* (Nakanishi, Tomioka 2004, 116, 138 note 3).

By contrast, in the following sentence (26), the vast majority of respondents (44 out of 46) interpreted the noun *gakusei* 'student/students', as plural because the verb 'to gather-INTR', appears:

- (26) *soko=ni atsumat-ta gakusei=wa ryūgakusei desu.*
there=LOC gather-PST student/s=TOP foreign-student COP
'The **students** gathered there are international students.'

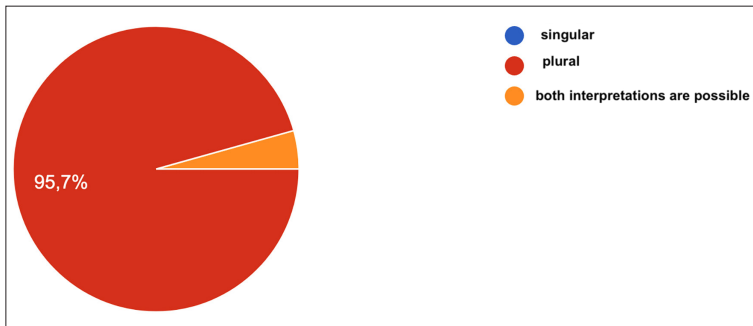


Figure 11 Respondents' answers for (26)

In this case, the factor triggering the interpretation is solely the intransitive verb, which, in its perfective aspect, entails the participation of multiple agents. Therefore, *gakusei* must be interpreted as a plural.

By contrast, in the following example (27), the subject was interpreted either as ambiguous between singular and plural, or as singular.

- (27) *Kokkyō-naki ishi-dan=no ishi=ga yūkai-sa-re-ta.*
 borders-NEG doctor-group=GEN doctor=NOM kidnap-do-PASS-PST
 ‘(A) Médecins Sans Frontières **doctor/doctors** has/have been kidnapped.’

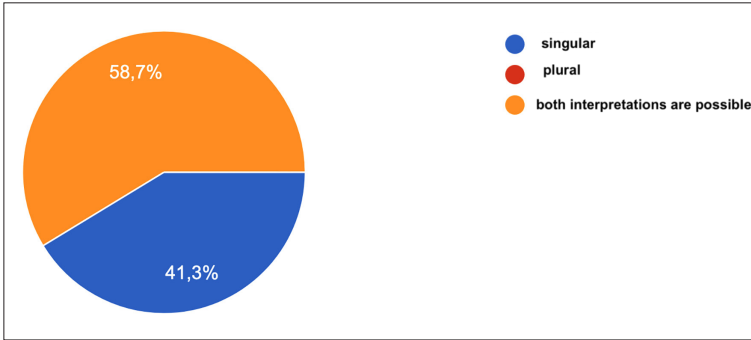


Figure 12 Respondents' answers for (27)

The ‘both interpretations’ option was selected because many respondents judged the utterance to be “natural” under either reading, or pointed to the absence of a numeral. Someone noted that *ishi* ‘doctor’ may refer to a professional category and can therefore also be used as a plural (i.e. one doctor or several doctors within the broader humanitarian organisation). Others observed that a kidnapping (unlike the ‘singular’ reading) could involve more than one person.

By contrast, the singular option was supported by mere factual assumptions (“kidnapping usually involves one person”) or by the perceived logical contrast between the organisation (a group of people) and the kidnapped doctor (one person). Here again, the term *fukusū* ‘plural’ was used by some respondents to define *ishidan* (lit. ‘group of doctors’). It was also been suggested that if *ishi* referred to several doctors, a numeral would likely have been added. Alternatively, given the extraordinary nature of the event, to specify the involvement of more than one doctor, the word *ishi* would have been used with a pluraliser like *-ra*.

A striking majority of respondents opted instead for the singular interpretation in case of (28):

- (28) *Doa=o ake-tara shira-nai hito=ga ta-tte i-ta.*
 door-ACC open-COND know-NEG person=NOM stand-CVB-PROG-PST
 ‘When I opened the door, a **stranger** was standing there.’

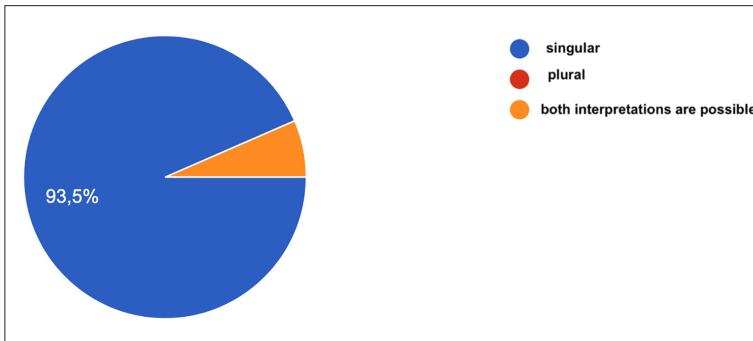


Figure 13 Respondents' answers for (28)

The subject of the phrase *shiranai hito*, lit. 'a person [I] do not know' was interpreted as singular by almost all of the respondents. Only three respondents allowed for both interpretations, although they acknowledged that the singular reading was more likely.

Respondents argued that, had a plural interpretation been intended, the pluraliser *-tachi* would have been required. Alternatively, the singular reading was justified by the absence of a numeral or a modifying expression preceding *hito*, such as *nannin ka no* 'a certain number of'. Some maintained that the crucial information in this context is that the person is unknown; if more than one had been involved, this would have been made explicit.

Finally, the following passage, taken from Matsumoto Seichō's novel *Zero no shōten* (1959), was used to investigate respondents' perception of the number associated with three different nouns.

- (29) *Tachikawa=no eki=ni ori-ta=no=wa ichiji-kan bakari nochi dea-tta.*
Teiko=ni=wa hajimete=no machi da-tta. Gaikokuhei=ga hiroi tōri=o arui-ta.
Akai shikisai=o tsuke-ta Nihon=no wakai onna=ga ude=o ku-nde i-ta. Sugu
atama=no ue=o, bikkuri-suru-yō-na oto=o hajika-se-te ōki-na gun'yōki=ga
jōshō-shi-ta. Arui-te-iru hito=wa nare-te-iru=no=ka, mimi=o ōi-ta-ku-naru
kurai=no bakuon demo, ue=o miru mono=mo naka-tta.

'It was only about an hour later that I got off at Tachikawa station. It was a town that Teiko was visiting for the first time. (A) foreign **soldier/soldiers** walked along the wide streets, while young Japanese **woman/women**, dressed in bright colours, walked arm in arm. Immediately overhead, a large military aircraft ascended with a startling roar. The **pedestrian/pedestrians** seemed accustomed to it; even with the deafening noise, no one looked up.'

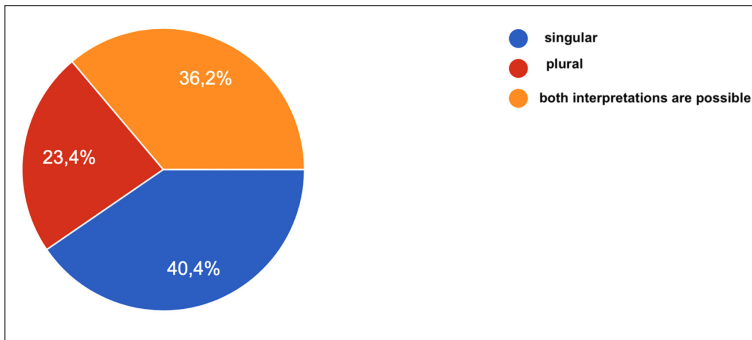


Figure 14 Respondents' answers for *gaikokuhei* in (29)

First of all, consider the case of the noun *gaikokuhei* 'foreign soldier(s)'. Respondents who favoured the singular interpretation associated the soldier with the young Japanese woman, who was likewise interpreted as singular. One interviewee who supported this reading stated that she had, initially, understood the noun as plural, but, upon inferring that there was only *one* girl, revised her interpretation accordingly. Another respondent added that, given that the passage it is taken from a novel, it is plausible that the narrative focuses on a single couple.

By contrast, respondents who opted for a plural interpretation relied primarily on contextual and logical considerations. For instance, one respondent observed that it is difficult to imagine only one soldier in a foreign city, and that *gaikokuhei* as representative of a foreign army, is therefore naturally perceived as plural. Soldiers typically operate in groups, and there is no specific rendering the noun definite – unlike *onna*, which is modified by the phrase *akai shikisai o tsuketa Nihon no wakai* 'young Japanese woman dressed in bright colours'.

The 'both interpretations' option combines elements of the two preceding lines of reasoning. In the absence of numeral specification, many respondents considered both interpretations acceptable. In the case of *onna*, as can be inferred from the explanations offered in relation to *gaikokuhei*, the main reason why the vast majority of respondents interpret it as singular lies in the 'definiteness' conveyed by the modifying phrase, which singles it out. In addition, the peculiarity of the clothing makes it difficult to imagine that the description refers to more than one woman. Only four respondents – two opting for a plural interpretation and two for the 'both interpretations' option – allowed for the possibility of multiple women with the same characteristics, or suggested that, depending

on whether *gaikokuhei* is interpreted as singular or plural, readings other than the singular one would be possible.

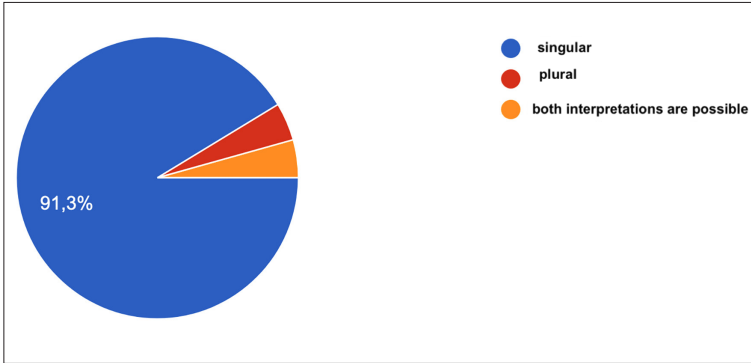


Figure 15 Respondents' answers for *onna* in (29)

The interpretation of *hito* in the phrase *aruite iru hito* 'walking person/people' is likewise concentrated on a single option, namely the plural reading, as only four respondents either of the other two possibilities.

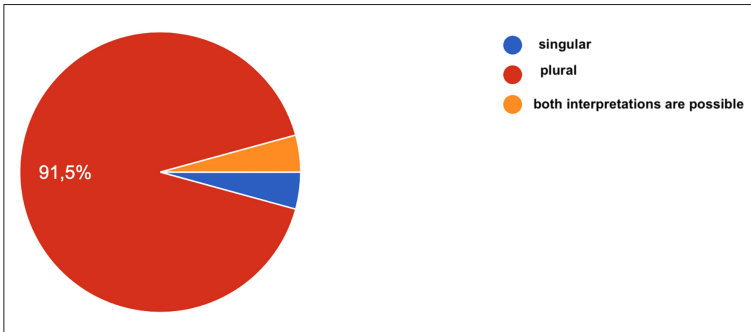


Figure 16 Respondents' answers for *hito* in (29)

The plural interpretation of *hito* arises primarily from its interaction with other elements in the sentence, and from pragmatic inferences about the extralinguistic context. In particular, the final clause *ue o miru mono mo inakatta* ('no one looked up') favour a distributive interpretation, implying the presence of multiple individuals walking down the street, none of whom looked up. Other respondents argued that it is unlikely for a single person to be walking alone down a wide street. Alternatively, given that other characters have already been

introduced, it was deemed improbable that the reference could be to a lone passer-by.

7 Perception of Grammatical Gender

As mentioned in the introduction, Japanese does not encode gender distinctions morphologically. Consequently, there is no requirement for morphological agreement – one of the defining criteria of grammatical gender (see Corbett 1991, 4) – between syntactically related elements, such as a noun and its modifiers. Nouns that are semantically specified for natural gender are therefore interpreted as masculine or feminine on the basis of their inherent lexical semantics. With the exception of cases in which gender attribution is grounded in semantic criteria directly linked to biological sex (e.g. *onna* ‘woman’ = feminine; *otoko* ‘man’ = masculine), gender does not constitute a salient grammatical or semantic property of Japanese nouns denoting inanimate entities (‘chair’, ‘bread’, ‘mountain’, etc.), which are not conceptualised as gendered (by contrast, nouns such as *otoko* ‘man’ and *onna* ‘woman’ are lexically specified for gender). In the absence of such semantic specification, and where no modifying element provides gender-related cues, a noun remains underspecified with respect to gender and may be interpreted as either masculine or feminine depending on contextual or pragmatic factors.

- (30) *Sūpā=no yasai-uriba=de o-kyaku-sama=ga*
 supermarket=GEN vegetables-counter=LOC HON-(he/she)customer-HON=NOM
nani-ka koma-tte-iru yō deshi-ta
 WH-Q be in trouble-CVB-PROG EVD COP-PST
 ‘At the supermarket’s vegetable counter, a (male/female) customer seemed to be having some difficulty.’

The Japanese word *o-kyaku* ‘customer’ is not gender-marked and, as in English, may be interpreted as either masculine or feminine. This contrasts with Romance languages such as Italian (*un/una cliente*; see (31)) or German (*ein/eine Kunde/Kundin*; see (32)), in which gender must be morphologically specified. This contrast is illustrated in the following two translations of the Japanese sentence:

- (31) *Al banco della verdura del supermercato, un/una cliente sembrava avere qualche difficoltà.*
 (32) *An der Gemüsetheke des Supermarkts schien ein Kunde/eine Kundin Schwierigkeiten zu haben.*

On the other hand, in Japanese in order to specify the gender in the sentence (30), a modifier such as *josei no* ‘woman=GEN’ or *dansei no* ‘man=GEN’, should be added: *josei no o-kyaku-sama/dansei no o-kyaku-sama*.

In contrast to number, which has received some attention in the linguistic literature – partly owing to the existence of pluralising suffixes – grammatical gender in Japanese has, to my knowledge, been the subject of very few academic studies, such as the classic work by Nomoto K. (1978). Accordingly, our survey, included questions on gender perception in order to investigate the principal factors that guide gender interpretation. Respondents were asked to indicate their initial impression of the target noun’s gender upon reading each example.

8 Results of the Survey for Gender Discernment

In the questionnaire, alongside sentences (30), (33)-(37), brief examples were also included in which the target noun was modified by an adjective hypothesised to influence gender interpretation.

Sentence (30), presented above, elicited a range of responses, as illustrated in Figure 17.

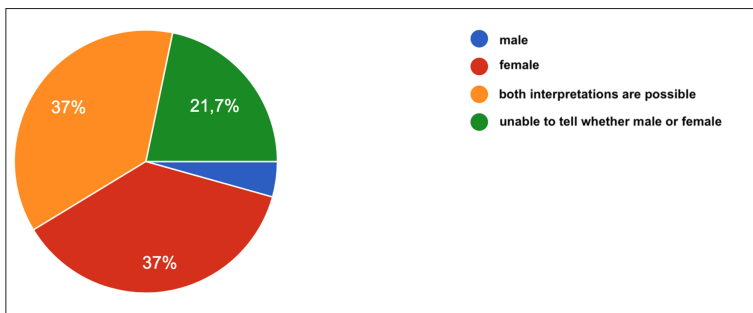


Figure 17 Respondents’ answers for *o-kyaku sama* in (30)

Responses indicating either that both interpretations were possible or that the noun’s gender could not be determined constituted the clear majority. The reasons provided by these two groups were largely similar, ranging from factual considerations (e.g. both men and women shop in supermarkets) to linguistic factors (gender is not specified; the expression *o-kyaku sama* may refer to either gender), as well as to perceptions concerning the informational focus (i.e. the reference is to ‘a customer’ in general rather than to the customer’s gender), with no gender-specific image emerging at first impression.

Those who selected the ‘woman’ option – a proportion equal to that of respondents who chose ‘both genders’ – justified their choice by arguing that women are more numerous in supermarkets, or by explicitly invoking the stereotype that women are primarily responsible for household tasks, a view also expressed by several female respondents.

The only two respondents (one man and one woman, out of 38) who selected the ‘man’ option justified their choice by stating that the phrase *o-kyaku sama* somehow evokes a male referent, or that it simply brought to mind a *sararīman* (‘an employee’).

However, the percentage distribution across the different options shifted when respondents were asked to reconsider the gender distinction, as illustrated in Figure 18:

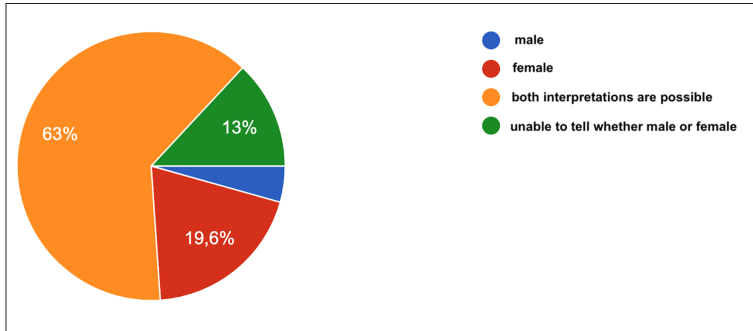


Figure 18 Respondents' answers for (30) reconsidered

As is evident from the results, there is an increase in the percentage of respondents who considered both options possible when asked to reflect explicitly on the gender of the target noun – particularly at the expense of the ‘female’ option. This trend was also observed in case (31)-(35):

- (33) *Jidōsha=no* *shōrūmu=de* *o-kyaku-sama=ga*
 automobile=GEN showroom=LOC HON-(he/she)customer-HON=NOM
koma-tte iru *yō deshi-ta.*
 be in trouble CVB-PROG EVD COP-PST
 ‘At the car showroom, a (male/female) customer seemed to be having difficulty.’

In this instance as well, cultural bias appears to have exerted a strong influence on gender perception. Unlike in (30), none of the respondents selected the ‘female’ option, whereas the ‘both genders’ and ‘male’ options accounted for the highest percentages. A non-negligible

proportion of respondents also reported being unable to determine the gender of the target noun. As in (30), when respondents were asked to reconsider their gender assessment, the proportion selecting the ‘both genders’ option increased. Nevertheless the ‘female’ option remained unselected.

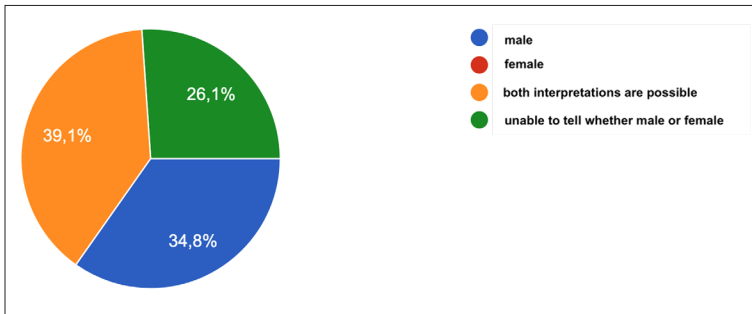


Figure 19 Respondents' answers for *o-kyaku sama* in (33)

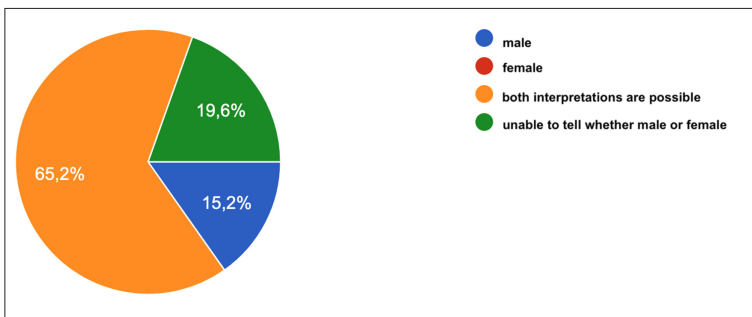


Figure 20 Respondents' answers for (33) reconsidered

In both (30) and (33), gender choice displays a clear polarisation that largely reflects the respondents' cultural beliefs or assumptions. In the case of (30), since the activity is associated with shopping in a supermarket, the percentage of respondents selecting the ‘male’ option is negligible. By contrast in (33) the opposite pattern emerges, with no respondents choosing the ‘female’ option.

Apart from a small number of grammatical justifications (e.g. “the gender is not specified” or “there are no lexical elements related to gender”), those who selected the gender they considered most representative (women in the supermarket context, men in the car showroom context) explained their choice on the basis of personal experience or culturally shared assumptions.

In (33), the cultural considerations, appear to constitute the main factors driving the interpretation of the noun's gender. In fact, the choice of 'mother' is motivated by the belief that women spend more time at home caring for the household and children; moreover, several respondents who opted for the 'both interpretations' option reported that their initial impression had been 'mother'.

- (34) *Yūjin=no jikka=no kodomobeya=ni iru toki=ni,*
 friend=GEN family home=GEN children's room=LOC be TIME=LOC
totsuzen oya=ga nokku=mo nashi=ni doa=o ake-te
 suddenly parent=NOM knock=ITO without=ADV door=ACC open-CVB
heya=o nozoi-te ki-tara dō omoi-masu-ka
 room=ACC peer-CVB come-COND how think-POL-INT-Q
 'What would you think if, while you were in the children's room at your friend's family home, their parent suddenly opened the door without knocking and peered in?'

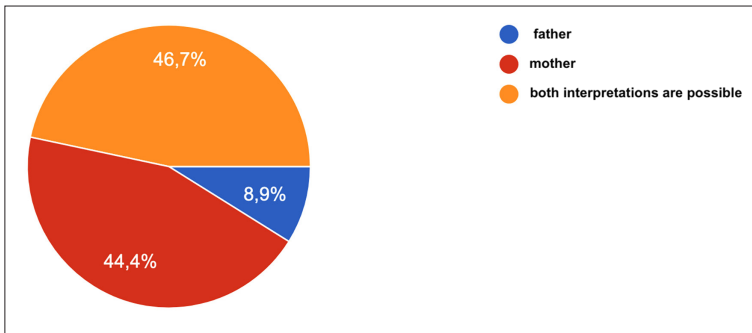


Figure 21 Respondents' answers for *oya* in (34)

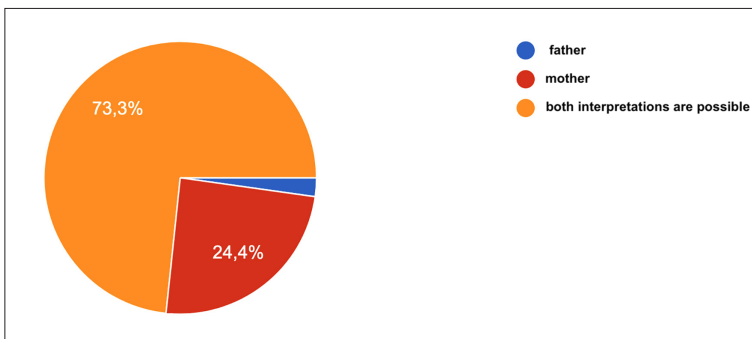


Figure 22 Respondents' answers for (34) reconsidered

In (35) both cultural and situational elements are important to guide the respondents' choices.

- (35) *Piasu, kinpatsu=no gakusei=mo imasu.*
 piercing blond hair=GEN students-ITO be-POL
odorokimashita ga chokusetsu=ni kii-te miru-to
 surprise-POL-PST but, direct-ADV listen-CVB try-COND
jibun nari=no kangae=ga ari, "kanja=no
 self in.one's.own.way=GEN thinking-NOM exist patient=GEN
mae=de=wa shi-masen"=to wakimae-te-i-mashi-ta.
 in front=LOC=TOP do-POL-NEG=CMP discern-CVB-PROG-POL-PST
 'There are students with piercings and dyed blonde hair. I was surprised,
 but when I asked them directly, they had their own reasons and understood
 the need for discretion, stating, "We don't do it in front of patients".'

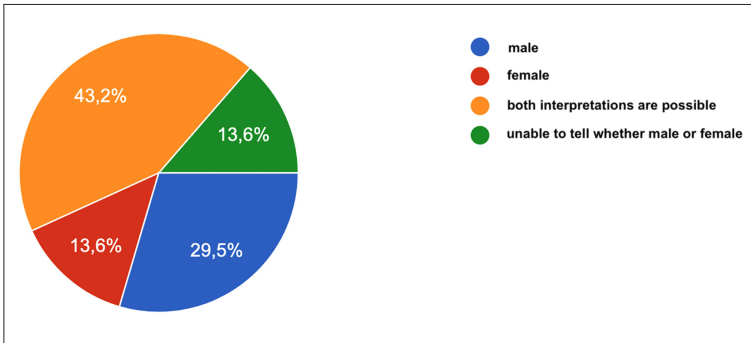


Figure 23 Respondents' answers for *gakusei* in (35)

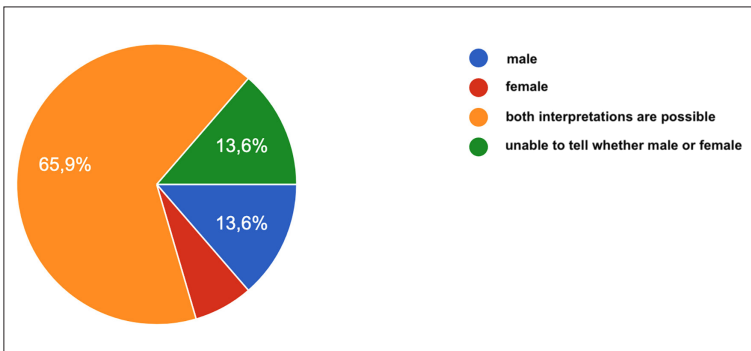


Figure 24 Respondents' answers for (35) reconsidered

Here, gender assignment for the noun *gakusei* exhibits considerable variability, largely due to divergent interpretations of the information conveyed by the modifying phrase *piasu*, *kinpatsu no* ('piercings, blond hair=GEN). These interpretations led some respondents to construe the referent as male – interpreting *piasu* as 'piercing' and *kinpatsu* as a conspicuous blond hairstyle stereotypically associated with certain young men – while others construed it as female, understanding *piasu* as 'earrings' and associating the description with attention to physical appearance. A further group considered the properties expressed by the modifier to be compatible with either genders.

- (36) *Soko=de=wa, suwaru futari=no josei=to*
 there=LOC=TOP sit two-CL:human=GEN woman=COM
aso=nde-iru kodomo=ga i-masu
 play-CVB-PROG child=NOM be-POL
 'There is a child playing with two women there.'

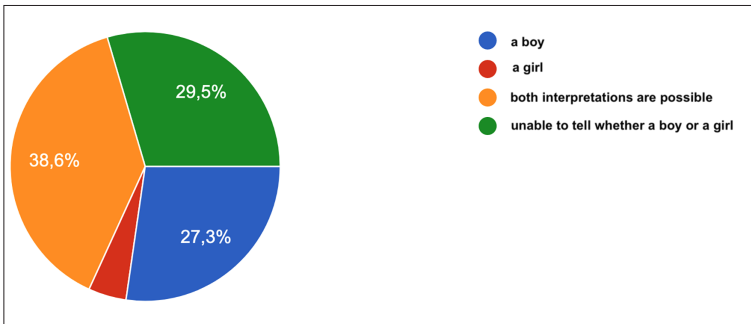


Figure 25 Respondents' answers for *kodomo* in (36)

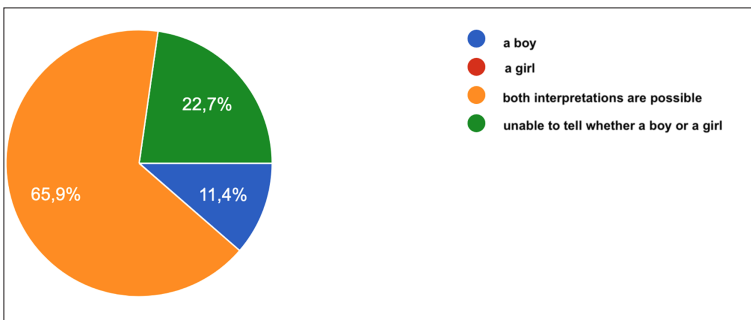


Figure 26 Respondents' answers for (36) reconsidered

In the case of *kodomo* (36), the responses were based either on logical reasoning – namely that both boys and girls may play in a park and that, therefore, both interpretations are possible and gender cannot be determined – or, among those who selected the ‘male’ option, on a perceived contrast with the two women, whose gender was explicitly specified.

In the following example (37) the majority of respondents – both those who selected the ‘both interpretations’ option and those who were unable to choose between the two genders – stated that, in the case of an animal (*inu* ‘dog’), specifying gender is not particularly relevant. In this instance, gender distinction was not considered salient to the overall meaning of the utterance. In a limited number of cases, the ‘male’ option was selected either on the basis of impressionistic judgement or because it was regarded as representative of dogs in general, in a manner analogous to the use of the generic masculine in gendered languages such as Italian.

- (37) *Shōgakusei=no koro, kinjo=ni totemo*
 primary school student=GEN time neighbourhood=LOC very
kawaisō-na inu=ga i-mashi-ta. Esa=mo roku=ni
 pitiful dog=NOM be-POL-PST feed=ITO hardly=ADV
atae-rare-naka-tta yō de, karada=wa garigari.
 give-PASS-NEG-PST apparently COP-CVB body-TOP skinny
 ‘When I was in primary school, there was a very pitiful dog in the
 neighbourhood. It seemed to be barely fed at all, its body was skin and
 bones.’

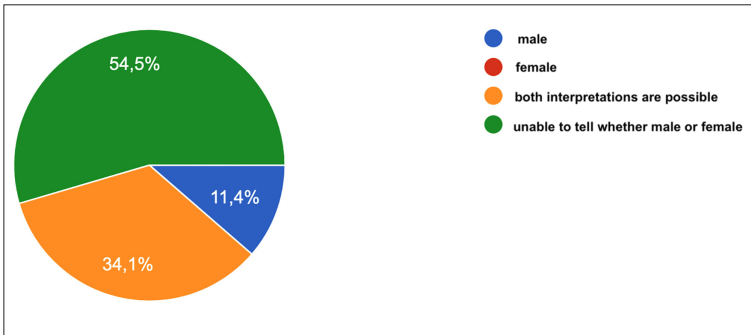


Figure 27 Respondents' answers for *inu* in (37)

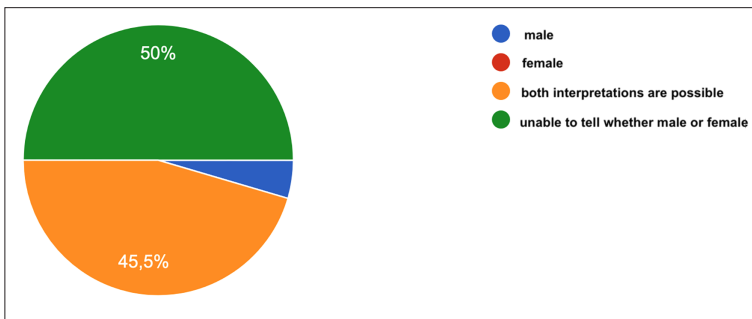


Figure 28 Respondents' answers for (37) reconsidered

Interestingly, in the case of a generic term (*hito* 'person', 'man/woman'), in a context devoid of specific cues favouring one gender over the other – such as that presented in (28) – the noun is predominantly perceived as masculine, while the feminine option is not selected at all. This pattern suggests the presence of what Braun defines as “covert gender” in Turkish, in the sense that “Turkish terms for person reference are not semantically neutral” (Braun 1999, 194).

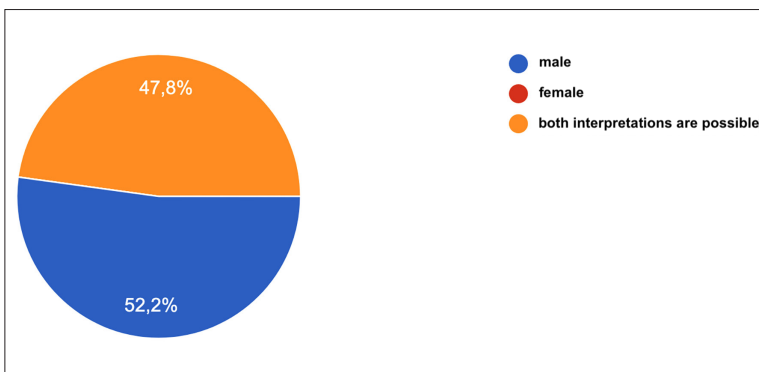


Figure 29 Respondents' answers for (28) reconsidered

Given that differences in gender perception appeared to be heavily influenced by cultural factors, the questionnaire also included a series of simple adjectival phrases (ADJ-N) in which *ko* 'child' served as the noun. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they imagined the referent to be a boy or a girl in each case. The combinations employed together with their respective results, are presented below:

- (38) *sono ko wa tsuyoi ko desu* 'that child is a **strong** child' (both possible 65.1%; boy 34.9%)
- (39) *sono ko wa yasashii ko desu* 'that child is a **kind** child' (both possible 89.4%; girl 18.6%)
- (40) *sono ko wa kirei-na ko desu* 'that child is a **pretty** child' (girl 69.8%; both possible 30.2%)
- (41) *sono ko wa majime-na ko desu* 'that child is a **serious** child' (both possible 88.4%; girl 9.3%; boy 2.3%)
- (42) *sono ko wa ganko-na ko desu* 'that child is a **stubborn** child' (both possible 72.1%; boy 23.3%; girl 4.7%)
- (43) *sono ko wa kayowai ko desu* 'that child is a **delicate** child' (both possible 60.5%; girl 34.9%; boy 4.7%)
- (44) *sono ko wa hiyowa-na ko desu* 'that child is a **frail** child' (both possible 74.4%; boy 20.9%; girl 4.7%)
- (45) *sono ko wa kashimashii ko desu* 'that child is a **noisy** child' (girl 47.5%; both possible 40.0%; boy 12.5%)
- (46) *sono ko wa kimuzukashii ko desu* 'that child is a **difficult** child' (both possible 81.4%; boy 16.3%; girl 2.3%)
- (47) *sono ko wa mukuchi-na ko desu* 'that child is rather a **taciturn** child' (both possible 90.7%; boy 7.0%; girl 2.3%)
- (48) *sono ko wa muteppe-na ko desu* 'that child is a **reckless** child' (both possible 53.5%; boy 46.5%)
- (49) *sono ko wa isamashii ko desu* 'that child is a **brave** child' (both possible 51.2%; boy 48.8%)
- (50) *sono ko wa sunao-na ko desu* 'that child is a **docile** child' (both possible 86.0%; boy 7.0%; girl 7.0%)

As expected, attributes such as 'kindness', 'docility', or 'prettiness' lead respondents to perceive the referent as female, whereas 'bravery', 'strength', and 'recklessness' are associated with males. In certain instances, gender polarisation is so pronounced that one gender is entirely excluded, although the 'both' option is still considered possible. This is evident in the cases of *tsuyoi* and *isamashii*, where the female option is excluded, and conversely, *yasashii* and *kirei* which are not attributed to males. These findings appear to reflect cultural stereotypes that closely resembles those documented in many Western societies.

9 Conclusions

As the foregoing discussion has shown, the linguistic perception of number and gender in Japanese operates through mechanisms in which morphological marking does not play a central role. The factors guiding distinctions of number and gender therefore appear to differ substantially from those found in languages that rely on morphological markers for these nominal properties.

Responses to our questionnaire reveal a clear asymmetry between the perception of number and that of gender in Japanese.

With regard to number, as emerges both from the discussion in the studies cited above and from the analysis of our data, a noun is unambiguously interpreted as plural when it is accompanied by an explicit plural marker, as one would expect. In other cases, the interpretation as singular or plural depends on syntactic factors (such as the presence of a demonstrative, as in (23), where 100% of respondents interpreted the noun as singular), on the co-occurrence of lexical items that constrain semantic interpretation (as in (26), where the verb *atsumaru* requires a plural subject), or, alternatively, on contextual information alone (as in *aruite iru hito* in (29)). In many instances – particularly where no decisive syntactic cues are available – the perception of number varies across speakers, depending on cultural or experiential factors and on pragmatic inferences about the extralinguistic situation, as evidenced by the responses to the questionnaire.

A factor contributing to the perception of a noun as singular is the presence of elements that specify or delimit its reference. These may include, as in (23), a demonstrative, or alternatively a modifying phrase as in (29) (*akai shikisai o tsuketa wakai Nihon no onna* ‘young Japanese woman dressed in bright colours’). Such elements tend to favour a singular interpretation (in this example *onna* ‘woman’), since they restrict the referent to a specific individual, as indicated in the explanations provided by the respondents.

As for the plural, the categories of ‘plural’ and ‘generic’ appear to coincide in speakers’ perception. This is evident in (15a), where respondents describe *itariajin* as ‘plural’ because it refers to Italians in general, in contrast to the ‘plural’ of the form *itariaji-tachi* cited by Nakanishi and Tomioka (2004, 429).

Likewise, in (27) some respondents interpret *ishi* ‘doctor’ as singular, insofar as it is contrasted with *ishidan* ‘group of doctors’, which they explicitly define as ‘plural’ (*fukusū*) because it denotes a multiplicity of individuals.

Finally, there are also cases in which all respondents selected the option ‘both interpretations are possible’, as in (11a) (an example adapted from Nakanishi, Tomioka 2004, 116). In this instance, the sentence is very short and, in addition to lacking a plural marker,

contains no syntactic or contextual elements that would guide interpretation in one direction or the other. As already repeatedly noted, in the absence of a morphological marker for number, in sentences such as the one above – where no other logical or syntactic elements are present – the speaker is unable to perceive a mental image characterised by a specific number.

With regard to gender, however – and in contrast to number – syntactic factors do not appear to play a role in the differentiation between masculine and feminine interpretations.

In general, it is instead the speaker's own biases or prior experiences that appear to influence the gender attribution. Therefore, a 'customer' may be perceived as female when contextualised within a supermarket, but as male when situated in a car showroom. It should be noted that, when asked to reconsider their assessment, respondents may revise their evaluation (on the basis of theoretical reasoning), while the general trend remains unaltered in cases where there is a polarisation of choices (see (31)).

In processing of linguistically conveyed information, the speaker does not appear to treat gender as a structurally determining factor in constructing the communicative semantic framework. This is especially true in the case of animals, as opposed to human referents. In this respect, the situation is reminiscent of that found in languages, such as Italian, which are morphologically marked for gender: in a generic sentence such as *c'è un cane per strada* ('there is a dog in the street'), the noun *cane* is a generic masculine that may denote either a male or a female 'dog'.

Ultimately, in Japanese, information appears to be constructed through addition. With respect to both number and gender, the speaker processes the information conveyed in the first instance without it being fully defined. This is similar to the case of gender in Italian in a sentence such as *c'era una persona nella stanza* ('there was a person in the room'), where – apart from the grammatical gender (*persona* is feminine in Italian) – the recipient cannot infer whether the person is a woman or a man. This observation also applies to number when there are no markers (such as pluralisers or demonstratives) to attribute definiteness to the noun. Finally, as far as the questionnaire results are concerned, the interpretation of number and gender does not appear to be influenced by differences in the respondents' gender or age, nor by their contact with foreign languages. The acquisition of languages in which gender and number are morphologically marked did not give rise to any discernible interpretative tendencies.

Abbreviations

ACC	accusative
ADV	adverbial form
ADN	adnominal
ASP	aspectual
CAUS	causative
CAUSL	causal
CN	common noun
CL	classifier
COM	comitative
COND	conditional
COP	copula
CMP	complementiser
CVB	converb
DAT	dative
EVD	evidential
EXC	exclamative
GEN	genitive
HORT	hortative
HON	honorific
INTR	intransitive
INS	instrumental
ITO	inclusive topic
lit.	literally
LOC	locative
NEG	negative
NMLZ	nominaliser
NOM	nominative
NPST	non past tense
PASS	passive
PFX	prefix
POL	polite
PRES	present
PL	plural
PROG	progressive
PST	past tense
Q	question marker
RES	resultative
TOP	topic
VOL	volitional

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Unearthing War Trauma in Oda Kaori's *Gama* (2023) and Creating Cultural Memory

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Abstract *Gama* is a 2023 documentary by Oda Kaori, a voyage in the underground unearthing the memories of victims' families and survivors of the 1944 Battle of Okinawa. After briefly exploring other representations of Okinawa, this article analyses Oda's approach to its reality and identity, focusing on oral narration as not just the main cinematic device, but also as the symbol of the importance of a transgenerational consciousness of history. In addition, this study aims to reveal her vision of the underground by examining the features which characterise *Gama* as expository and primarily realistic, along with the contrasting allegorical elements.

Keywords Japanese cinema. Documentary film. Okinawa. Battle of Okinawa. Trauma. Memory.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Visions of Okinawa: Surface Visions. – 3 Representing Death and the Places of Memory. – 4 The Spectre of History in the Underground. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Oda Kaori is a documentary filmmaker known for centering underground atmospheres from various parts of the world in her works, leading her to be one of the major representatives of contemporary transnational documentary auteurs. After setting two of her major works, *Aragane* 鰐 (Ore, 2015) and *Cenote* (2019) in foreign territories such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Yucatán peninsula in Mexico, Oda Kaori decided to return to her native Japan and focus on its southernmost border, the Ryūkyū archipelago, unearthing personal memories of victims of the 1944 Battle of Okinawa, hidden in the *gama* ガマ (caves).¹

As Oda has explored the underground of two very different and far apart corners of the world, it is not much of a return, as much as it is a discovery of a place with a history and a society that shares very little with those of 'mainland' Japan. She explains that as an individual born and raised in Ōsaka at the end of the 1980s, understanding Okinawa and the reality of the *gama*, was not different from understanding Maya communities in Yucatán or the environment of Bosnian mines, as it is a reality that she never had to personally confront (Idonuma, Oda 2025).

Nonetheless, the Okinawan reality and its complexity are part of the history and society of Japan, and it must be recognised as such. This is why the filmmaker seems to have felt a call upon her to shed light on such a marginal, yet crucial part of her own homeland. Indeed, approaching Okinawan society as a Japanese individual appears to be even more difficult than societies distant in space and time from our own, due to historical events, political rulings and social distancing that all concur to present the islands of the Okinawa prefecture as 'different', as some kind of 'Other' of mainland Japan (Hook, Siddle 2003; Gerow 2003).

Regarding how Oda found herself filming the depths of the Ryūkyū islands, in an interview she states that *Gama* (Caves, 2023) started as part of the *Underground* project that was commissioned to Oda from the Sapporo Cultural Arts Exchange Center, consisting of the filming of four underground spaces. At the same time, Oda received a research grant from the Toyonaka City Cultural Arts Center to conduct research in Toyonaka. After finding out that Toyonaka and Okinawa were 'sister cities', she was able to film in Okinawa (Erikawa, Oda 2023). With the *gama* becoming the main part of the

¹ The term *gama*, in Okinawan language, refers to the natural caves in the limestone soil of the islands. These are most known for being civilian shelters during wartime, as well as places where tragic episodes occurred at the hands of both the Japanese and the US army, such as forced mass suicides and bombings.

project, the film emerged as a standalone project. In particular, upon meeting 'peace guide' Matsunaga Mitsuo, Oda and her production team felt that there needed to be a special focus on *gama* and the weight of the Battle of Okinawa on the islanders (Eguchi, Oda 2025).

As for the approach Oda used while handling a reality as complex as the Okinawan one, in a 2025 interview with Idonuma Kimi, in occasion of the release of her latest work, *Underground*, she declares:

even in films [I've made] until now, I was fundamentally participating as a foreigner, and I can say the same about Okinawa. Aside from being a foreigner with respect to Okinawa, I also recognise I am on the offender side. Maybe 'offender' is an extreme word, but I lived in Ōsaka, outside of Okinawa prefecture, and while working I am the party that is pushing things [on others]. (Idonuma, Oda 2025)²

Thus, after *Aragane*, a silent and observational immersion in one of the most prominent Bosnian mines along with the workers, and the experimental and non-linear *Cenote*, a work that embodies the complexity of Yucatec Mayans' cultural memory through a number of voices, portraits, testimonies, music tracks, *cenote* immersions, cultural practices and dances, one could speculate what techniques would be employed in *Gama*, the voyage Oda Kaori undertakes in Okinawa.

Setting *Gama* in the Okinawa prefecture opens up to the discussion of the complex issues of identity and representation that have marked the last eight decades of the Japanese and Okinawan history. However, rather than focusing on popular television shows and fiction films made by mainland Japanese directors set in the archipelago, I will narrow the discussion down to the transmission of war trauma and its weight on present day Okinawan culture, in order to better understand how Oda Kaori moved in a space so dense with history and memory. With this, I will introduce three native Okinawan filmmakers and artists, Takamine Gō, Yamashiro Chikako and Okuma Katsuya, along with their perception of Okinawan identity and history. Through the concepts emerged from the discussion of their works, I will also try to interpret how Oda envisions history and identity in current Okinawa, while showing that *Gama* shares much of their visions and principles, becoming part of a larger narrative of Okinawan war memory.

This is where examining the representational style Oda decides to employ in *Gama* becomes extremely significant. By pushing towards an explicitly expository technique and focusing on the weight of the spoken word, Oda reinforces the communal aspect of sharing

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

experiences, of listening, which is crucial to the concept of cultural memory which will be later discussed. Its complementary point is the value of materiality, which will be explored in the last section. Tangible elements, namely *gama* themselves, stones, bones and objects in which the history of the Ryūkyū islands circulates, are emphasised through the *mise en scène* and through the corporeality of the woman in blue portraying the spirit of history.

2 Visions of Okinawa: Surface Visions

Representing Okinawa as a Japanese individual carries several issues tied to the complex relationship between Okinawa and mainland Japan and the historical and political identity attributed to the islanders in the context of production of discourses and cultural products. In contemporary times, this phenomenon appears in products that emerged during the period of the so-called 'Okinawa boom' of the 1990s, that contributed to directing more and more mainlanders towards the islands.

Here, I do not want to merely discuss the representation of Okinawa inside the Japanese film landscape, rather I want to focus on the transmission of Okinawan war memories through the film medium. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to address, although partially, the intricate issue of the Okinawan identity. Mika Kō (2010, 66) asserts that the troubles in giving the Ryūkyūan identity a dimension directly depends from the modernisation and assimilation (Kō also names this a 'Japanisation') that Okinawa has witnessed at the hands of the Japanese; and then from the US occupation, with its promises of freedom and development soon replaced by repressive policies on the local populace, such as the claim of the best lands for military purposes, suppression of local sovereignty, environmental pollution, social and legal neglect and sexual assault (McCormack 2016; Saeki 2008). For this reason, it is not surprising to see islanders wishing to find their own identity in the past of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, rather than the modern Okinawa, as it is far from the two main political entities that in the last couple of centuries have tried to politicise the figure of the Okinawan local (Kō 2010, 70). However, recurring to the ideal of the glorious past of the Ryūkyū Kingdom has its risks, Kō explains, because the very same history of the kingdom is marked by violent acts, oppressive policies and exploitation of not just underprivileged subjects, but also residents of territories far from capital city Shuri, creating dynamics not far from those the Japanese empire was enacting upon Okinawa. So, attempts to build a 'purely' Okinawan identity are perceived to be problematic as well, as they would be inherently based upon dominating, tyrannical practices aiming to

cancel out various forms of diversity, creating several 'others' amidst the same archipelago (Kō 2010, 70-1).

In fact, the peripheral position from which Okinawans express their voices does not guarantee and has never guaranteed any uniformity in discourses emerged from events that exclusively concern the islands. For instance, feminist movements organised in Okinawa demonstrate a multiplicity of internal identities that can collide or coincide in certain points, and in them it is possible to find the seed of a tendency that would later spread largely in popular culture, that is to say, referencing Okinawan identity in terms of hybridity. In Kō's vision, it is called *chanpurū bunka* チャンプルー文化 (champloo culture),³ and it "allows Okinawa's stigma of foreign occupation or 'impurity' to be transformed into cultural creativity and positive dynamism" (Kō 2010, 72). Despite the noble intention to pay homage to the various roots that come together to create the rich cultural substrate of the Ryūkyū archipelago, this ended up generating a popular representation of the island as a *locus amoenus*, exotic and comforting, and of its inhabitants as perpetually happy islanders who enjoy relaxing on the beach with songs and dances, while erasing the hard past of the island and the identity issues tied to the complicated relationship with both Japan and the United States.

In a seemingly opposite way, in public consciousness, the representation of Okinawa is associated to events such as the Himeyuri tragedy, examined by Linda Angst in a 1997 article, along with the collective perception of it within local residents.⁴ According to Angst (1997, 100-1), these girls have become the main symbol of postwar Okinawa, further adding that several movies have been made about the event, and that most Japanese of the postwar generations are solely aware of the Battle of Okinawa as a consumer would be, through the romanticised and sensationalised image both of the girls

3 *Chanpurū* is a typical Okinawan dish featuring a mix of tōfu with various types of vegetables, meat or fish. Its name comes from a Malay word, *campur* (mix), pronounced 'chanpoor'.

4 In March 1945, more than two hundred students and eighteen teachers of the Okinawa Women's Normal School and the First Prefectural Girls High School in Shuri received order by the Japanese military to join the medical unit in Haebaru Army Field Hospital and other hospitals in the area, in order to take care of injured soldiers, remove soldiers' corpses from the caves and generally carrying supplies in and out of the caves. Despite being given distressing tasks at such a young age, the girls dutifully performed what was expected of them. In May, the Japanese left Shuri, and the students followed them even when the army was ready to surrender. However, soon the girls were left to defend themselves, while soldiers continued to hide in the caves even prohibiting access to civilians. Many girls were victims of an attack in the Kyan peninsula, others were bombarded while hiding amidst the debris, others were killed on the beach, and only five out of a group of fifty-one women survived the bombing of a cave where they had found refuge. The term 'Himeyuri' refers to all the girls involved in this tragic episode, with respect to the purity and innocence represented by the lily.

and the war (Angst 1997, 103). However, in this case it appears that the historical and political consciousness has been modelled exclusively by products that promote an idealised and romanticised – and quite flattened – image of the victims. So, for Hook and Siddle (2003, 12), popular memory on the one hand focuses on the victims, symbolised by the young Himeyuri nurses, while on the other hand, it opens to perturbing questions about the Japanese military atrocities towards the islands' civilians.

It is this comprehensive concept of popular memory at the base of Matsunaga's work, and it constitutes the core of the narrative through which Oda guides the camera inside the *gama*, bringing to light places that had never been shown in prior representations of Okinawa. Similarly, I intend to center this exploration of the films on Okinawan transmission of war memories through films that draw inspiration from some kind of personal connection to the war trauma, not limited to documentary modes of expression, but generally anchored in reality.

Amidst the various representations and personal re-elaborations of Okinawan history, one worthy of mention belongs to Okinawa-native filmmaker Takamine Gō, born in Ishigaki and raised in Naha. According to Ma Ran (2019, 174), he develops a 'theory of landscape' that she describes as

one that seeks to configure 'a self-speaking island' by turning away from the representational tropes consisting of, for instance, 'the base, the blue sea, and the market', in order to resist the imaginary of a 'symbolized Okinawa', namely the consensual articulations apropos Okinawa-on-screen, such as those of the nationalist and the tourists (including the leftist intellectuals).

This is indeed what seems to be the core principle which Takamine follows in the making of his debut work, *Okinawan Dream Show* オキナワン・ドリーム・ショー (1974), a documentary film shot in 8mm throughout several years, that Ma describes as a compound of long takes and long shots of mundane daily life where women, men, children and elderly people are nothing but passing figures. The environments that Takamine shoots, both urban and rural, do not show any specific sign that might remind the spectator the geopolitical conditions and historical and social transitions occurring in Okinawa in those years (Ma 2019, 176). Aaron Gerow (2003, 297) states that Takamine's work is valuable because it "successfully challenges the dominant representations of Okinawan identity [...], using representational strategies to contest and reshape definitions of that identity". What Takamine aimed to achieve in *Okinawan Dream Show* is a sort of cleansing, as he admits in an 2003 interview with Nakazato Isao. He states

I did not want to be a passerby while I was staring at the landscape with my 8mm camera, I wanted to try to take in the smell of death of the landscape. The 8mm camera is a visual medium, but just by looking at it I wanted to smell it. I mean, during the war, the soil of Okinawa was almost completely covered by corpses, and after the war, with the reconstruction, many things were sorted out, such as the Himeyuri tower. But those bodies were normally in the scenery too... And the stories I heard from my parents felt so real, normal, when they trampled on those dead bodies while they were running, escaping. So, I thought that the souls of the dead, rather than the spirits of the dead, were wandering around without having been tidied up. With that, with my camera I wanted to suck up all of that scenery. I think I used that camera like a vacuum cleaner back then. I wanted to film that landscape, not just giving meaning to it, but like a vacuum cleaner, I wanted to take in that smell. For that reason, you film for as long as possible. (Nakazato, Takamine 2003)

Therefore, in Takamine's nostalgic documentary, the recent history of Okinawa feels somehow tangible, yet invisible, lying beneath the surface of the sceneries Takamine decides to shoot, and in the later sections of this article I will explain how Takamine's vision of filmmaking as a 'cleansing' tool can be found in the concept *Gama* is based upon.

Another artist that focuses on reinterpreting the past of Okinawa is Yamashiro Chikako, who has also worked as art designer in Takamine Gō's 2016 work, *Hengyoro* 変魚路 (Queer Fish Lane). In her work, it is possible to perceive the complexity of Okinawan reality from a different perspective. Born in 1976, Yamashiro Chikako belongs to a generation that came later than that of Takamine, fairly distanced from war memories and the reversion to Japanese sovereignty. Yamashiro notably focuses her artistic endeavour on the memory of the Battle of Okinawa, exploring and 'appropriating', as Ma Ran notes, "how Okinawa's war memories and experiences could be passed down and shared not only transgenerationally but also translocally and transregionally" (Ma 2019, 189).

Ma analyses two works where Yamashiro deals with memory, *Anata no koe wa watashi no nodo wo tōtta* あなたの声は私の喉を通った (Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat, 2009) and *Tsuchi no hito* 土の人 (Mud People, 2016). *Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat* is a seven-minute long video where the spectator is faced with the artist's face at a three-quarter angle. Yamashiro mimes the words that are being pronounced by a man, in a voice-over. He says that at age nine, during the Saipan battle, he witnessed his own family's suicide. The face of the man is now projected on Yamashiro's face, and the artist is taking longer and longer breaks, as she hears the man's

voice breaking down at the pain of going through such a harrowing memory. When the man says he saw them jumping into the ocean, she stops as well, and starts crying, unable to proceed with the act of miming (Ma 2019, 190). Joshua Chambers-Letson finds that this is the point where Yamashiro recognises the impossibility of feeling the sense of loss he felt at that time. He also adds that this moment of non-equivalence is productive precisely because it reveals the “the tenuousness of our links to those who have come before, links that are structured by incommunicable caesura in our experiences” (Chambers-Letson 2014), which I will demonstrate to be a crucial matter in Oda Kaori's work as well.

In her analysis of this work, Ma focuses on the projection of the man's face on that of the artist and, coming to the same conclusion as Chambers-Letson (2014), she circles back to the concept of ‘appropriation’, and states that her performance,

staging the process of appropriation, is about the split roles of the ‘self/selves’ that registers the perpetual, fluid position/role-shifting in between that of an enunciating subject and that of an embodied spectator, between not-knowing and knowing, moving in between the past, the present, and the future. (Ma 2019, 191)

In a similar fashion, a 2024 documentary by Naha-native Okuma Katsuya, called *Hone wo horu otoko* 骨を掘る男, known internationally as *Close to the Bone*, grapples with the ‘inheritance’ of memories, but through the perspective of someone personally involved in the search for remains of the victims of the Battle of Okinawa (Okada 2025). Okuma, alongside Gushiken Takamatsu, a volunteer *gamafuyā*,⁵ is searching for the remains of his grandmother's sister, a war victim, but also for her image in various video archives, facing the question of whether it is possible to mourn a person that one has never met. Okada Yumiko, in her article on *Close to the Bone*, points out two main themes that emerge in the film which I believe to be at the core of *Gama* as well: one is the supposed impossibility of representation, and the other is the transmission of war memories. Her analysis touches on Okuma's attitude towards the representation of death, trenches, archived video footage, and also on Gushiken's behaviour, which she defines as ‘incredibly restrained’, mentioning how during the recovery of some bones, he carefully examines the information he had gathered, expresses observations regarding the nature of the bone, hypothesising whether other pieces of bone are missing, or the reasons for the individual's death, always adding reservations and

5 In Okinawan language it translates to ‘cave digger’, and it is the term Gushiken refers to himself with.

stating that it is only possible to imagine, as he continues digging in the earth. This is, in fact, not an abstract process, but a very active one, as for Okada (2025, 122), it

highlights the importance of continuous practice, standing before the (im)possibility of representation, it does not focus on whether representation is possible or impossible, but rather on continuing to look at what is before our eyes.

The second point, concerning the transmission of memories, is based on Yakabi Osamu's concept of 'relearning' expressed in his book *Okinawasen, beigun senryōshi wo manabinaosu: kioku wo ika ni keishō suru ka* 沖縄戦、米軍占領史を学びなおす：記憶をいかに継承するか (The Battle of Okinawa and Re-learning the History of the US Military Occupation: How to Inherit Memories), which the director himself claims to have read multiple times during the five years of preparation for the film (Okada 2025). For Yakabi (2009, xii), 'inheriting' means 're-learning', and according to Okada, the director structures the film around Yakabi's points of sharing and commemorating the stories of the Battle of Okinawa, the perspective of 'becoming' Okinawan, and the fusion of the 'big narrative' of the world history and the 'small narrative' of personal family history (Okada 2025, 123). Indeed, Okuma's work responds to Yakabi's question of "how we, while acknowledging of our position of non-experiencers, can acquire a sense of connectedness with the Battle of Okinawa through collaboration with those who did experience it" (Yakabi 2009, ii). Okuma meshes the 'big narrative' of the Battle of Okinawa with his own family history, listens to the 'voices' from the bones of the victims, the archived experiences, so that the very act of filmmaking allows him to come into contact with other people's stories (Okada 2025, 123), and this very 're-learning' of the history of Okinawa through collaborative work makes him an Okinawan in Yakabi's perspective. In fact, this foregrounds the discussion of *Gama* as a work focused on unearthing war memories through the exposure to a number of experiences which, in their own way, blend 'big' and 'small' narratives, offering a similar perspective on representation, the meaning of filmmaking and mourning the death of strangers.

3 Representing Death and the Places of Memory

While discussing the style, I will try to address the issue of representation of the unrepresentable, as well as how Oda Kaori deals with death and sites of traumatic memory in this work. Oda Kaori notably employs a different modality of representation for each reality she immerses herself into, as we see with the richly visionary and experimental style that characterises *Cenote*, in striking contrast with the observational, minimalist techniques displayed in the previous work, *Aragane*. *Gama* represents another shift for Oda, who goes in the direction of a historical documentary, with a more distinctly informative and expository fashion than the previous works. This time, Oda makes use of a guide, to whom she leaves the responsibility of telling the stories of islanders and their families that, in order to escape bombings and American attacks during the Asia-Pacific war, found refuge in *gama*. As the background of these stories, shot mostly in one take, there are the rocky surfaces of the cave standing behind the man who is telling these stories, Matsunaga Mitsuo, the only character in the film along with a silent woman with a blue dress. The study will now focus on Matsunaga's role and the value of oral narration of such histories and lives in a documentary, while examining the humanity of Oda's approach.

As a matter of fact, it is necessary to clarify that despite looking plainly expository, this documentary has a deeply subjective and creative angle that, in its simplicity, characterises the reality Oda Kaori engages with. She steps back and lets the guide speak, she hardly intervenes, and gives complete attention to the narration Matsunaga engages in. This unassuming and humble attitude, while not extraordinary for Oda, feels particularly careful, possibly due to discussing a historical tragedy more directly than ever before. It is not the first time Oda faces the reality of death: in *Cenote* we listen to accounts about people and children disappearing into *cenotes*, we see sequences of rituals of Día de los Muertos, we see graphic images of cattle being slaughtered for a meal, in *Aragane* we hear workers talking about having risked their lives in tunnel explosions. However, in *Gama*, the idea of death seems to intimidate the director, as she probably sensed the inherent impossibility to directly grapple with others' trauma.

Gama opens with a visually evocative scene, that is an overexposed image of the sea, appearing white in colour, followed by a slow zoom-out, which reveals the rocky internal surfaces of a cave and the shape of a woman looking at the sea [fig. 1]. She is standing in front of an opening, from which all that light effuses, giving life to a vivid contrast with the deep, dark hues of the inside of the cave. Already from this point, Oda's style appears as dry and minimalistic, with a propensity for fixed shots and limited camera movements and generally avoiding

close-up shots and point-of-view shots. This already seems to suggest the way Oda will face the stories guarded in the *gama*, a way in which it is also possible to read the importance of the time in which she sets the film, that is to say a dynamic present that gives prominence to the act that characterises *Gama*, the act of narrating. This is where the issue of representation becomes crucial, wondering how those events, those people and that pain are shown or told in a film, and how the experience of this trauma reaches the spectator.

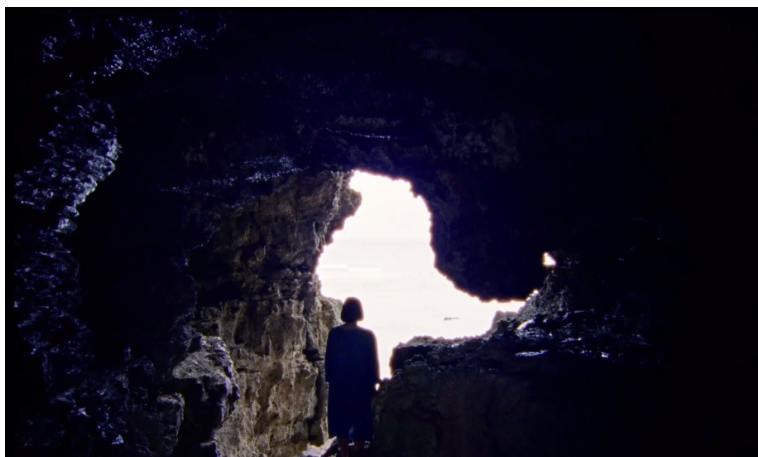


Figure 1 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

The role of narrator, as previously mentioned, is bestowed upon Matsunaga Mitsuo, who self-describes as a *heiwa gaido* 平和ガイド (peace guide), as he has been working as such since 1988. In his personal site, Matsunaga explains that he became a peace guide after participating in an operation of recovery of human remains. He claims to have been invited by a former head nurse of the Third Surgery Cave of the Okinawa Army Hospital, who had the intention of passing down to the next generations the memory and the experience of the Okinawa battle.⁶

Gama, then, is a film that presents itself not only as a way to tell and convey the stories and memories of war victims, but also as a way to problematise the relationship between history and the activities that we associate to it in the present. Without making use of archive footage, and only leveraging the imaginative power of words and storytelling, in *Gama* Oda manages to center both human

⁶ *Okinawa no gama, senseki annai* 沖縄のガマ・戦跡案内 (The *gama* of Okinawa, War Sites Information). <https://www.heiwa-guide.net/>.

resilience and fragility. In *Gama* there are no reenactments of the events Matsunaga talks about, and how to design its representation in documentary becomes a central issue. According to what Bill Nichols states in *Representing Reality*,

The mortality of the body presents a continual challenge to documentary. It eludes all strategies of representation. It is, in the crucial moment of its occurrence, unrepresentable. Vital signs, representations, provide us with a boundary across which life can pass surreptitiously, but they remain indifferent to the fate of the values we assign or the feelings we attach to it. Death is the deduction or cessation of something within, unseen. (Nichols 1991, 236)

The body referred to in *Gama*, the body of victims, is represented in its absolute absence, and the reenactment only happens in the mind of the spectator, calling upon their active participation, similarly to what Okuma, alongside Gushiken, does in *Close to the Bone*, where the oral narration of factual events, reading aloud soldiers' names, "opens up a dimension where a new imaginative power unfolds" (Okada 2025, 132). Death and its representation are generally avoided in documentary, as Vivian Sobchack explains in an essay called *Inscribing Ethical Space*, documentaries are "indexical in code and function, they observe the social taboos surrounding 'real' death and generally avoid reference to it" (Sobchack 1984, 286). For Sobchack, who faces the different modes of representation in documentary focusing on the ethical issues,

documentary space is indexically constituted as the perceived conjunction of the viewer's life-world and the visible space represented in the text; the agency of this conjunction is the viewer's gaze, informed by cultural and ethical knowledge, and inscribed as ethical and subjective action. (Sobchack 1984, 294)

In the first place, the spectator's participation is activated from the place where the film is set, and from which the film takes its title. *Gama* could be defined as what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, that is to say "remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it" (Nora 1989, 12).

In an article analysing the work of peace guides, Kitamura Tsuyoshi (2006, 56) explains that *gama* are often defined as a *shukuzu* 縮図 (microcosm), *ikishōnin* 生き証人 (living testimony) or even *kataribe* 語り部 (narrator) of the battle of Okinawa, and that today they have become pilgrimage destinations, with the aim of remembering history and reflecting on the concepts of war and peace. For Pierre Nora (1989, 12), *lieux de mémoire* are envisioned with the

feeling that spontaneous memory, that makes us able to remember organically these fragments of history, will wane. Without setting up anniversaries, celebrations, archives that allow these memories to crystallise, they would either disappear or be irremediably damaged and transformed by the eternal flux of time, and this very necessity to protect them, materialise them and take these fragments away from the 'movement of history' is what gives birth to *lieux de mémoire*.

In the *gama* as *lieux de mémoire*, we have access to not only a narrative, but to an experience where the Okinawan subject becomes protagonist, as opposed to the hegemonic tendency in Japanese politics to overlook the islanders' lived experience. I suggest that Oda's choice to place the narrator [fig. 2] perfectly centered in a wide shot inside a *gama*, enhancing his figure precisely in the illuminated portion of the cave background, alludes to the central role that she confers to the experiences of families and victims.

Ilona Hongisto in her work *Soul of the Documentary*, states that in social or political documentaries shot composition is to be considered highly meaningful because "the frame regulates the relationship between the body and its environment, and thus plays a part in how that relationality is experienced in the documentary" (Hongisto 2015, 123). Immediately following this shot, there is a shot focused on some stones on the ground, with some names written on the surface, and after ten seconds, the screen cuts back to Matsunaga. Sobchack too, pays attention to shot composition and the *mise en scène*, as that is the place where the ethical gaze of the documentary shines through, stating that the image "is inscribed by the mark of a steady camera, placed in a generally measured distance from its visual object, and by smooth technical and physical activity" (Sobchack 1984, 297).



Figure 2 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

Next, Matsunaga is shot in a different environment, his whole body is shown slightly decentered in the illuminated cave. Like the previous one, the shot is fixed and the light pours over his figure making the rough edges of the cave stand out. He starts talking about the events that occurred in Chibichirigama, in the Yomitan village: the United States Army arriving in Chatan and in Yomitan, the islanders taking refuge in Chibichirigama. Among these residents there was a woman named Chibana, who went outside so as to prepare food for her family after the attack, but soon came back after the sighting of some American soldiers on hill, to alert the other refugees. Upon hearing this, those who were hiding in the cave armed themselves with bamboo sticks, went outside and started their counterattack. Matsunaga adds that there were mothers encouraging their kids to attack, arming them with sticks. But then, the American response: a machine gun attack that instantly killed two people, whose bodies were to be carried again inside the cave. The United States commanded them to surrender, but everybody refused. At that point, those hiding in the *gama* came up with the idea of a mass suicide, that actually took place the following day, 2 April. Matsunaga tells that out of the hundred and fifty people hiding in that *gama*, eighty-three died by suicide. Some of the survivors state that they did not really want to die, but were too ashamed to admit it.

This is the first example of narration we see in *Gama*. Matsunaga keeps a plain expression, has a laconic style, a neutral tone, and relates the events in a factual manner, sometimes adding details like the American landing taking place at eight thirty in the morning, and a comment uttered by the American journalist and war correspondent Ernie Pyle, who supposedly joked that Americans could keep a camera in their hand even while turning their back to the enemies. Therefore, as much as his chronicles are uttered in a rather plain tone, Matsunaga does not hide some of his personal observations in specific points. For example, after reporting Pyle's remark that they could film the Japanese army even with their backs turned to them, he adds a personal judgment calling him *gōgō shiteru shinbun kisha* 轟々してる新聞記者, a "journalist who spoke so clamorously" (05'17"). Or, after relating the Chibichirigama mass suicide, he comments, as if with regret, that if only someone had had the courage to admit that they did not intend to die like that, maybe all of them would have survived.

So, it appears clear from the very beginning that in *Gama* there is no claim to tell history from a purely objective point of view, but to bring forth a collection of experiences that have long been disregarded by the official history that the Japanese and the United States government have organised surrounding the war discourse.

For Stella Bruzzi (2006, 17),

the fundamental issue of documentary film is the way in which we are invited to access the 'document' or 'record' through representation or interpretation, to the extent that a piece of archive material becomes a mutable rather than a fixed point of reference.

In *Gama*, spectators are invited to access the historical material hidden in the underground through interpretation of the stories and experiences that Matsunaga narrates, reworking them through their personal imaginative power aided by Oda's stylistic choices. It is in this hidden space that the memories of a community whose voice has long been silenced are preserved, memories that Matsunaga, along with Oda, wants to bring back to light. The spectator, faced with *Gama*, approaches the film primarily as a collection of individual experiences and stories, creating a connection with history and a portion of history they had probably never had the opportunity to face before. In fact, the significance of orality in *Gama* is strictly linked with the power of the collective, and the process through which diverse generations come together, from survivors to the younger people for whom war is nothing but distant imagination. In this sense, Roxana Waterson discusses the anthropologic importance of the transmission of personal memory through film, stating that

if memory, at the moment of sharing, is an event, linking teller and listeners, the sharing of memories simultaneously promises them a longer, collective life. The event, then, is also the starting-point of a trajectory that has a chance to endure in collective memory. (Waterson 2007, 66)

However, rather than the term 'collective memory', in this case it would be pertinent to use the term 'cultural memory', following Jan Assmann's framework. According to Assmann, cultural memory is one of the two dimensions that constitutes collective memories, along with communicative memory. While communicative memory is based exclusively on daily interactions, cultural memory is characterised by a certain distance from the ordinary and by fixed points that stay intact with the passage of time, in other words, events of the past. Also, he observes that the memory of such fixed points is maintained through a certain cultural education that comprises production of texts, rites or monuments, and institutional communications, in which are included recitation, practice or observance (Assmann 1995, 126-9).

In this context, the work of Matsunaga Mitsuo – and more largely, of peace guides – is definitely relevant. Kitamura Tsuyoshi (2006, 59) affirms that starting from the late 1980s, such peace guides have

contributed to the diffusion of new courses regarding battlefields. Their role consisted in accompanying students on school trips in battlefields or cemeteries. According to Kitamura (60), the most interesting point is that in most cases these guides belong to a generation born in the postwar period, and we find that this is Matsunaga's case. As for the emergence of peace guides, he explains that guides started naming themselves as such in the late 1980s, but their activities around military bases and major war sites had started in the previous decade. Between 1986 and 1987, local governments started the implementation of a campaign aimed at encouraging as many residents as possible to become peace guides, offering courses on the study of military bases and strategies, with not just theoretical classes on the Battle of Okinawa, but also practical work on US bases, where also journalists and veterans participated. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, tourism and school trips from mainland Japan towards Okinawa sensibly increased, to the point that the number of guides was not sufficient for the demand (Kitamura 2006, 59-60). As previously stated, Matsunaga himself started working as a guide in those same years, specifically for mainland Japanese tourists.

While watching the movie, there is the feeling that Matsunaga is doing nothing far from his own work, with the difference that he is now in front of a camera: it must be noted that he speaks only Japanese, addressing his usual target audience of mainland Japanese. In his way of standing before the camera, we could read the intention of addressing an audience that has never visited Okinawa or has never had any meaningful connection with that part of the archipelago, unable to tackle episodes that define the identity and the society of a land that Japan, as a State, has such a complex relationship with. Therefore, it is possible to say that working as a peace guide for over three decades, Matsunaga feels compelled to act as a mouthpiece for these individuals' stories, highlighting his role in the larger contemporary society, traceable to Pierre Nora's concept of a new historian, who emerges so as to "confess the intimate relation he maintains to his subject. Better still, he is ready to proclaim it, deepen it, make of it not the obstacle but the means of his understanding" (Nora 1989, 18).

Indeed, it is interesting to notice that what connects Matsunaga so deeply to the Battle of Okinawa is not some family knowledge or a direct experience to the 1944 events. In a specific section of the film, from 37'40" to 42'34", inside a *gama* Matsunaga tells his own story to presumably three archaeologists, and the woman in blue is there too. He introduces himself in a simple fashion, saying that he was born in 1953, and that he came into contact with these historical events while he was working as a taxi driver. There, he met Ishigaki-native Gushi Yae, who had been head nurse of the Third Surgery Cave of the Okinawa Army Hospital, and who had been mainly dealing with

recovery of bodies. As previously mentioned, he tells the women in front of him that after participating in recovery activities following her suggestions, a kind of emotional connection had formed. In that same occasion, he was also introduced to Yamauchi Heizaburō, a *gama* expert, member of the Speleological Society of Japan, and also one of the individuals who collaborated in this film. In this sequence, he also narrates the only time he had been able to return the remains of a victim to their family, through the cooperation with several organisations that managed to track them down. Matsunaga seems to have found his peace guide vocation within Yamauchi and Gushi's words, who thought that these guides had the duty of restoring dignity to the victims and their families through the remains.

In the depiction of Matsunaga's activities of recovery of remains and oral transmission of experiences and memories, we can read the concrete, physical and continuous practice as a *kōdōteki irei* 行動の慰霊 (active memorial service), as Okada Yumiko (2025, 122) designates Gushiken's bone recovery efforts. Correspondingly, this is at the base of how the postwar generations can achieve a sense of personal connection with the historical matter for Yakabi: by proactively attempting to piece together fragments of memories and trying to objectively understand the events that marked it (2009, xi).

In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols (1991, 252) affirms that "oral histories tend to function in historical documentaries as pieces of argumentation rather than as primary source material still in need of conceptual organization". Yet, in *Gama* oral histories are the primary subject insofar as they show the connection they have with the present and younger generations, specifically because the narrator himself shows a certain degree of emotional closeness with them. Oda Kaori herself reveals her vision of Matsunaga as a man who, despite not having any direct or personal tie to the Battle of Okinawa, "like a *kami*-possessed object, [he] bequeaths people's stories and memories" (Idonuma, Oda 2025).

At this point, it is possible to draw a comparison between Matsunaga's work and her own, because Oda lies, in parallel, in the same position as the guide. Oda sees Matsunaga as a product of constant collaborative work, of the countless interactions with survivors, victims' families and others engaged in activities of recovery, such as Gushi Yae and Yamauchi Heizaburō, in the same way she is, as a filmmaker for whom collective action is invaluable. Hence, *Gama* appears as a reinterpretation of Matsunaga's knowledge, one that comes from memories and practical activity, in a way that

highlights the hypermediacy of the remediation process.⁷ According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999, 47),

the new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized. The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged way.

Indeed, Oda structures the entire film around his historical accounts, depending considerably on them in order to convey her message. By doing this, she also accords him the responsibility that comes from the weight of the spoken word, as a symbol of the circulation and exchange of experiences between individuals in the present, but also of transmission in the future.

Therefore, we can establish that while Matsunaga is the speaking body, the spectators are the listening body. According to Shinjō Ikuo (2012, 575), the act of listening

requires the abandonment of one's own narrative identity or consistency as a narrator [...] [it] is an act of being consumed by the memories of others [...], it is a constant recomposition of my sense of personal connectedness perceived as known.

That is to say, for a long time Matsunaga has been the listener of these stories and experiences, and the very act of listening has shaped his consciousness of Okinawan history, and this is what allows him to be in a position of power (as the speaker), not only in the film but also in his regular activity as a guide.

So, it is possible to assume that either before or during the filming, Oda was the listener. Only then, with that active listening process, she was able to echo Matsunaga's work through remediation of these stories. While Matsunaga is the one that decides what to say, Oda is the one that designates how to say it. In this sense, Oda's sober and collected style may be due to her respect for the history she is tackling. Oda discusses her respect for the spaces and the stories that inhabit them, saying

I always wondered if I could create something without consuming

⁷ According to the authors, hypermediacy offers "a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as 'windowed' itself - with windows that open on to other representations or other media" (Bolter, Grusin 1999, 33-4). The space of the *gama* is where the film, through the reproduction of the spoken word, opens windows to personal imagination and interpretation, so as to "reproduce the rich sensorium of the human experience" (34).

or exploiting the history of Okinawa. [...] I thought that as long as it was 'Okinawa through Matsunaga', 'Okinawa presented by Matsunaga', maybe there was something I could do. (Idonuma, Oda 2025)

The profound respect that Oda feels for the Okinawan reality and identity, tied both to its history and to its present, appears clear from the repeated mention in other interviews as well, such as the one with Tsukinaga Rie (2024), where she once again states that she has no intention of consuming this place, seeing it merely as a product for a film. This concern is what Vivian Sobchack names 'humane gaze', which is the angle that characterises *Gama*, stating that it appears particularly interesting because the identification of its humanity is determined by the nature of the death before it, by the magnitude or quality of the event that it is observing (Sobchack 1984, 297).

Going deeper into the theme of representation, according to the historian Robert Rosenstone (1988, 1180), the documentary, compared to written history, is hardly a reflection of an objective reality, but a work that comes to exist inspired by a specific narrative, which is what gives meaning to the final material. However, he recognises that it is actually easy to ignore how much written history, specifically narrative history, have also been influenced by genre and language conventions (Rosenstone 1988, 1184-5). In order to evaluate any type of representation, whether it is a written text or a film, Roxana Waterson finds it necessary to imagine that there are subtle lines separating accuracy and verisimilitude, picking up the potential emotional truths carried by the mode of exposition. She further explains that

none of this, in my view, cancels out the potential importance of film, both in multiplying the available points of view on the historical record, and in working against either the kind of heedless forgetting that comes about through indifference, or the active political suppression of memories considered to be uncomfortable by those in positions of power. (Waterson 2007, 56)

The variety of experiences and places that Matsunaga presents in his narration, such as the Shimukugama episode and the story of

Asato Toshie,⁸ are always handled with intense compassion, not only expressed by Matsunaga's comments, but also by Oda's aesthetic techniques shaping these stories to show respect and restore dignity. As previously stated, Oda's style is formally sober and demure, close to the observational style exhibited in *Aragane*, sometimes vanishing behind the main subject: the words of those who have much to tell and that she feels like picking up (Idonuma, Oda 2025), leaving space to Matsunaga's storytelling. In this way, he addresses the audience and directly calls for the spectator's personal involvement, inviting them to be fully present, as if they were in the *gama* with him. A moment in the film where we see this is when Matsunaga warns that he will now be showing a *kurayami taiken* 暗闇体験 (experience of total darkness), in which both back lights and front lights are turned off, and the screen turns pitch black. By negating the spectator's ability to see, the focus is now on the acoustic dimension, making sounds the protagonists of the scene before Matsunaga starts speaking again. Among ambient sounds being heard, are birds' chirps and the water flow, also while the guide narrates what *kurayami taiken* consisted of. Matsunaga explains that these experiences of complete darkness were the living conditions of those who, making an effort to resist the American threat, sought refuge in the *gama* until they heard signs of foreign soldiers moving away, and tried to find a way out through any light source. This segment is particularly poignant as we can read it also as a way to immerse the spectator in a part of the traumatic reality the victims experienced, allowing them to have a deeper contact with what would be only a horrifying tale. Susannah Radstone (2010, 334) believes that

trauma films have the potential to provide a cultural 'working through' of traumatic memories – that they might enable some remembrance of events that, due to their shocking nature, have left only scars rather than memories.

8 The Shimukugama episode is known for its positive outcome: thanks to the mediation of two Okinawans who had lived in Hawaii during part of the Meiji and the Taishō era, all of the people who were seeking shelter there survived. Next, Matsunaga introduces Asato Toshie as one of the survivors of Todorokigama, who entered the *gama* with her children. Facing hunger and threat of being killed, she went to look for food, but many times went back to her family empty-handed. Not all of her children were able to survive the hunger, and some eventually died, with the youngest being nine months old. When Asato and the other Todorokigama refugees were caught by Americans, they were sent to a concentration camp in Tomishiro. Matsunaga reports that she first talked about this experience in 1977 in occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, and he met her when she joined the 'Article 9 Society', accompanying her in multiple activities and remembrance events.

Radstone then criticises the assumption that the emotional connection that comes to exist between spectator and subject during the film is strong enough to erase social and historical differences, which is at the base of the concept of 'prosthetic memory' theorised by Alison Landsberg. Radstone (2010, 334-5) argues that this idea fails to consider the complexity of the connection between spectator and cinematic text, and also that it confers an immense power to cinema, that is to say the power to transform identity through the memories that define it. As Landsberg (2003, 149-51) defines them, 'prosthetic' memories become personal as they are internalised through experience with mass media's various technologies to represent memory, and they are called 'prosthetic' because they are indeed not authentic. She appears to give this kind of memories enough power to overcome any type of distinction, opening up the possibility "for collective horizons of experience and [...] unexpected political alliances" (Landsberg 2003, 149).

However, this cannot be conceived as a universal theory that allows for the interpretation of cinematic texts. It is possible to admit though, that it better fits *Cenote*, as it is a work characterised by a striking imaginative effort, mainly achieved through the 8mm camera usage, which invokes a sense of nostalgia and familiarity that potentially any member of the audience could tap into. In *Gama* instead, there is no sense of familiarity being invoked. Rather, the intention lies in the gathering of several stories, experiences and episodes that concur to the creation of a real cultural memory, bringing them to light and studying them through the tools of the current era. Although this could be said about *Cenote* too, the distinctive features in *Cenote* were the succession of underwater sequences and surface sequences – particularly invoking the familiarity of the images of what Manuel Cuellar (2022, xi) defines as *lo Mexicano*, popular images that constitute the common ideal of Mexican culture –, the overlaying of various voices, various texts, various images and various sound tracks, as the expression of a lively culture that developed around a sense of spiritual respect for the underwater.

In *Gama* there is no such alternation or multiplicity of medial sources, the only environment the spectator can focus on is the inside of the cave, and only in rare instances, which will be later mentioned, the outside. Also, there is no sense of nostalgia that Oda wants to invoke within the general audience, focusing almost exclusively on the *gama*. Therefore in my opinion, this concept of prosthetic memory cannot work fully in *Gama*, not only because the spectator's engagement can only be limited to a sense of basic empathy, but also because, as I will demonstrate later, total identification with trauma victims and full comprehension of their pain is impossible. As for empathy, it is conveyed by Oda's gaze, avoiding close-up shots and point-of-view shots, highlighting silences or ambient noises,

lingering on rocks and bone fragments, on the glimpses of nature surrounding the cave entrances, giving prominence to lights and shadows inside the caves. Indeed, reducing the visual weight of the human figures in the shot creates a sense of distance between the spectator and the subject, but only because this gaze intentionally avoids hinting at how the spectator should feel. By representing the unrepresentable, bodies in material absence, it actively engages the spectator to reflect as it is “inscribing the intimacy and respect and sympathy it feels with those who die in its vision” (Sobchack 1984, 297). Paula Rabinowitz, discussing the power of documentary film and its relation with history, argues that “the historical documentary not only tells us about the past, but asks us to do something about it as well – to act as the Angel of History and redeem the present through the past” (Rabinowitz 1993, 132).

Gama is a work which, like every other feature film directed by Oda, aims to lead the spectator deep into hidden or distant spaces, as well as to analyse in a more or less direct way the history preserved inside them, and in this case its most prominent feature is the ability to establish a bond with the spectator's historical consciousness. Oral narration taking place inside the cave is the most efficient way to guarantee audience participation and imagination not only while watching the film, but also after, in the creation and circulation of discourses around the theme, aiming for the emergence of new and aware subjectivities. *Gama* are fully considered *lieux de mémoire* by Pierre Nora's own definition, places “of refuge, sanctuaries of spontaneous devotion and silent pilgrimage, where one finds the living heart of memory” (Nora 1989, 23).

They are places which are subject at the same time of sensorial experience and abstract elaboration, and are *lieux de mémoire* “in three senses of the word, material, symbolic and functional” (18-19), generated in the constant interaction between history and memory, triggered by the very act of remembering.

4 The Spectre of History in the Underground

Within the framework of Oda's usual interest for history hidden in the underground, this work appears as aiming to develop a certain sensitivity around current sociopolitical issues not just regarding Okinawa, but regarding the relationship between the State and this polychrome reality, through images that gain relevance in their own visual absence.

Similarly to how Yamashiro Chikako, born and raised in Okinawa prefecture, expresses her closeness in works like *Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat*, Oda Kaori, born and raised in Ōsaka, touches Okinawa's open wounds through survivors' experiences, passed on

from one generation to the other. In the interview with Eguchi Yūmi, it emerges that Oda Kaori's primary interest was to descend into the depths of the islands, and meeting Matsunaga catalysed her intention to show human memory inside the cave. Oda admits that for her the film is *ningen no kioku* 人間の記憶 (human memory), and that memory is made up of other people's traces that we hold inside, as proof that someone has lived somewhere until that moment, and will keep on living even in the future. Oda believes that if we go back in time, we will reach a point beyond which we cannot go, and in this base there will be someone's voice (Katada, Miura, Huang 2024, 21). This is why, in *Gama* and *Cenote*, the main works focused on the theme of memory, sound is so distinctly relevant and the voice has such a leading and symbolic role. The voice is the medium through which narration is always handed down, but in *Gama* this happens in front of a camera, and narration is the core of a cinematic product that guarantees a potentially wider diffusion in time and space. The relevance of this act, of preserving memories and stories of this past, is also emphasised by Matsunaga: after telling the Shimukugama episode, he lets out a personal comment about the meaning of life and peace.

So, in the crevice between Matsunaga's factuality while recounting these stories and his own subjective considerations, I maintain that it is plausible to read a political stance, one that claims Okinawans' place in recent history: a place hanging between two governments, two systems of thought, where different realities and identities coexist, and that because of this complexity have never been adequately handled. For this reason, according to Hook and Siddle (2003, 11), in Okinawa historical storytelling has always been inextricably tied with a political activity because of Okinawa's context of subordination.

In fact, in cases like Yamashiro Chikako's *Your Voice*, it is nearly impossible to overlook the political aspect if we remember that in the same year, 2007, the Ministry of Education announced an order to delete from history textbooks any reference to coercion of Okinawans to commit mass suicide by the Japanese military during the Battle of Okinawa (Aniya 2008, 2). It is in contexts like these that oral testimonies, and therefore the voice, acquire relevance not only on a personal level, but on a collective and political one.

Oda's choice to convey these values through acoustic dimension is particularly meaningful in the context of 'postmemory', conceptualised by Marianne Hirsch in her book *The Generation of Postmemory*. For Hirsch, being a descendant of a family that lived through the Holocaust, 'postmemory'

describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who

came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (Hirsch 2012, 5)

It is interesting to notice how also in the case of peace guides like Matsunaga, they are usually individuals who have no direct remembrance of the war, and one-third of guides also comes from other prefectures (Kitamura 2006, 60). So it is natural to wonder what pushes people who are not directly involved in this portion of history to actively enter those stories, telling them and propagating them. For Oda,

there is something we all share, and I think that [in this] there are lost memories, memories we cannot recognise. It has been called in many ways, collective memory, or collective subconscious. But I want to seek out what this is for me, what this shared something is. (Katada, Miura, Huang 2024, 21)

Oda then starts her quest towards this universal subconscious through two main devices: Matsunaga’s narration and the emphasis on the physicality of history, which she represents on the one hand in a concrete way, with several shots focusing on the remains, fragments and pebbles found in the underground, and on the other hand in a metaphorical way, with the figure of the woman in blue, played by actress, dancer and director Yoshigai Nao. Oda refers to her as a ‘shadow’, an embodiment of collective memory (Eguchi, Oda 2025). This ‘shadow’ is filmed roaming in the *gama*, touching the rough edges of the cave surfaces, often appearing in the same shot as Matsunaga while he is talking, but always at a certain distance: either in the background or next to the margins, sometimes anticipating or following Matsunaga’s movements, even echoing them, as shown in Figure 3, where she stands in the same position as the guide in Figure 2. In other cases, the camera only focuses on her walking between the rocks or entering narrow tunnels, while Matsunaga’s narration is left going.



Figure 3 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

However, it is possible to point out that the physicality of history is not only conveyed by the 'shadow': the scenery, too, has a strongly symbolic and evocative power. The scenery has a leading role precisely because it is a *lieu de mémoire*. *Gama*, as spectral caves where horrors and tragedies occurred and whose memories are inextricably linked with wartime dread, seem to absorb the characters, their actions and their words. By never using medium shots, close-up shots, and rarely using detail shots, she gives limited room to human presence. She focuses on the natural element, as those surfaces are the ones imbued in historical significance. The natural landscape looms over the characters not just in the scenes where they are walking on the rock-strewn trails in the underground, but also in shots like in Figure 4, where Matsunaga and the young woman are shown to be talking, although the dialogue is inaudible. Here we see the two standing behind a seemingly flimsy fence, a rope delimiting the access tracks, under a dark stony roof-like formation, where the camera embraces the intricacy of the tree branches and of the banisters, and the light that filters from the green leaves.



Figure 4 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

This inclination to tell stories, lives and experiences and reviving them through landscape is what brings Oda close to Takamine Gō. Regarding *Okinawan Dream Show*, Takamine had likened the camera to a vacuum cleaner that had to absorb the smell concealed under those landscapes, so as to finally give dignity to those who died in those streets and fields. In a certain sense, it can be associated to Martin Pollack's concept of 'contaminated landscapes', that is to say "landscapes that were places of mass killings committed covertly and out of plain sight, often under strict secrecy" (cited in Frach 2022, 101). In a study of Polish director Paweł Pawlikowski's 2013 film *Ida*, a film facing the hardships tied to the memory of the Second World War in Poland, which emerge through wide shots where sceneries and landscapes become particularly poignant, Sylwia Frach (2022, 101) argues that "the term 'contaminated' implies that the landscape is dirty, poisoned, infested and/or tainted by the crimes committed there".

This is what both Takamine Gō and Oda Kaori see in Okinawa. Although not all *gama* are locations where tragedies like the Chibichirigama mass suicide took place, these caves are still the shell for traumatic experiences whose transmission, as freeing as it can be, ends up renewing the pain. After all, Pierre Nora (1989, 22) claims that memory "attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events".

In addition, Hirsch's vision of the value of landscape appears relevant as well. She holds that memory is mediated, cultural, but also silently permeates the present landscapes, thus reconfiguring private and public spaces of the postgeneration (Hirsch 2012, 25).

In *Gama* Oda's effort is focused on the exploration of subterranean passages where the memories of survivors have sedimented, and where those of the next generations have settled as well, because these generations share that pain according to the structure of postmemory, a "transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove" (Hirsch 2012, 6).

To balance out the sense of loss and emptiness and to the apparent intangibility of memory that Oda focuses on at first, there is the actual effort to give a material dimension to history, not just through the physicality of the 'shadow', but also through an emphasis, in the second half of the film, on the archaeological work Matsunaga oversees. There is a detail shot where a pair of gloved hands are separating stones from bone, ceramic fragments and bullets, and a full shot where the 'shadow' is watching Matsunaga and an archaeologist searching for human remains [fig. 5], and one with a strong evocative power, where the Shadow caresses these bones and takes one between her fingers. The emphasis on the material remains can be explained with Takenaka Akiko's analysis about the current idea of wartime in Japan, as she believes that while it is possible to come to terms with loss, it is never possible to overcome an absence, "thus, I suggest, the drive to fill the gap with ever-growing collections of war stuff, a surfeit of which piles up in the storerooms of museums across Japan" (Takenaka 2015, 153). However, she recognises that in many occasions, early museums or display rooms were more focused on collecting and displaying archaeological finds rather than offering an exhaustive portrait of the Japanese war experience (145). But recovering material finds as an act is fundamental for memory, as confirmed by Matsunaga's words in one of the following sequences.

Indeed, when Matsunaga introduces himself to the archaeologists, recounting the beginning of his work as a guide, he mentions the experience of recovering human remains as impactful and formative. It was the *kikkake* きっかけ (trigger) for him, emphasising that to him remains speak more than words, and that since those remains belong to people who died during the war, their duty as guides was to remember them. Then, working in the *gama* is an activity where, as Jay Winter (2010, 322) argues in his study about sites of memory, "people affirm their faith that history has a meaning".



Figure 5 Oda Kaori, *Gama*. 2023. Film still. © Toyonaka Performing Arts Center; trixta

In *Gama* the visible and the invisible, the material and the abstract blend within each other, the stories that resist through several generations thanks to the oral transmission have the same value of tangible remains, that need a support that enables the full expression of its meaning, particularly in the construction of a complete historical memory. The material element, both for Matsunaga and for Oda, is the driving force of an interest that leads to a metaphorical as well as physical descent into the depths of the invisible, and it acquires meaning thanks to the intrinsic value of the traumatic experience.

Discussing trauma literature, Kalí Tal writes that “trauma is enacted in a liminal state, outside of the bounds of ‘normal’ human experience, and the subject is radically ungrounded” (Tal 1996, 15). It is possible to draw a comparison between this concept of ‘liminal state’ and the cave as they are represented in Oda’s work, ‘hidden’ places where it is impossible to differentiate present and past. Oda Kaori, leading the spectator in such a spectral place, opens a communication channel between the living and the dead, no matter their generation or native community, as they all belong to the human race. For Oda, there is something lying in the bottom of each one of us, and that we all share as we are part of mankind. The way Oda chooses to put this welding power on screen, visualising it in *Gama* for the first time, is by expanding, through the introduction of the ‘Shadow’ character (Erikawa, Oda 2023), the question of consciousness and collective memory that she commenced with *Cenote*. The ‘shadow’ performs a katabasis in order to feel the sense of death and loss, attending Matsunaga’s accounts and infiltrating in the narrow passages of the caves. Ambient sounds reinforce the sense of dismay

she feels wandering in a dark, unknown dimension, even when she follows Matsunaga's movements. And lastly, in the scene where the Shadow delicately touches a bone and holds it between her fingers while Matsunaga is talking about his remains recovery experience, it is possible to read the reality of where peace guides operate, that Kitamura (2006, 63) describes as

not 'narrators' based on their own war experience [...] not historians who aim to tell objectively and empirically the history of the Battle of Okinawa, and they do not locate their activity as a mechanical, routine work, simply 'inheriting' copies of original testimonies. *Heiwa gaido* is a role that tries to face the uniqueness of the events that occurred in the *gama*.

Therefore, it is a person that returns dignity and identity to the victim, approaching the historical experience from a realistic, but not unemotional, perspective.

As a matter of fact, this is the same approach Oda had throughout the entire film, standing right between a historical account of the Battle of Okinawa and the personal experience of survivors or the victims' families. Through the 'shadow', Oda wants to express her idea of memory, continuing the work she started with *Cenote*. For the director, historical memory presupposes a collective dimension, and by virtue of that, it never fades out and constantly flows from one generation to the other, ensuring the preservation of an immaterial heritage that comprises images, memories, voices and sounds that anybody can access, even if they do not share the same culture or history. Rather, that part of humanity is called to help protecting, recognising, discussing and legitimising that heritage, as it is an integral part of a historically subaltern identity. Marianne Hirsch elaborates a similar reflection, explaining that

As a form of counter-history, 'memory' offered a means to account for the power structures animating forgetting, oblivion, and erasure and thus to engage in acts of repair and redress. It promised to propose forms of justice outside of the hegemonic structures of the strictly juridical, and to engage in advocacy and activism on behalf of individuals and groups whose lives and whose stories have not yet been thought. (Hirsch 2012, 15-16)

In a certain sense, Oda shows that there is an unbridgeable fracture between the direct memory of survivors and the one belonging to people who can indirectly access that memory, exclusively through testimonies and recovered objects. Similarly to what can be read in Yamashiro Chikako's *Your Voice*, in *Gama* we can find that it is impossible for an individual who is far in space and time to understand

the pain someone else has been through. Yamashiro expresses this impossibility in only seven minutes, through the lip synchronisation detaching more and more, and Joshua Chambers-Letson defines this as the 'incommensurable'. For him, "the staging of the work has as much to do with the transmission of memory across time as it evidences the incommensurable break that exists between the previous generation and the present one" (Chambers-Letson 2014). *Your Voice* precisely reveals the impossibility to fill in this rift, despite the intention to use one's own body as a vessel to channel transgenerational memory. Yamashiro Chikako shows that full comprehension can only occur until a certain point, with no possibility to fully achieve it. Like Yamashiro, Oda Kaori faces this rift, but with a different approach. For Oda, mankind shares a core that activates understanding and empathy, and in social relations it gains consciousness of the 'incommensurable', of incommunicability of certain stories and experiences, and in the present we are just left with words and remains of the past. Although these are live matter and circulate between members of the same generation or belonging to different generations, cannot fill that gap. She starts the exploration of the soul of history from the underground, the metaphorical bottom of a soul that is common to the entire humanity. This is not just an effort to fill that gap, but to retrace the position of those stories and lives in that depth, so as not to let them go overlooked or forgotten. So, once we acknowledge the impossibility of perfectly capturing that suffering, it is possible to redirect our efforts to what Walter Benjamin (1968, 264) defines as a "weak Messianic power" so that the hopes of past generations can be the ground for a better future. On this line Oda closes *Gama*: Matsunaga is a clear expression of the peace guides, volunteers and archaeologists' work, while the Shadow walks towards the surface, shown as a blinding light. The succession of static shots in the final sequence depicts a nearly desolated Okinawa, where the only human presence is the Shadow. In the images of the woods, the houses, the sea, and the beach where the Shadow is shown sitting at the very end, under a thunderous airplane noise, there is the light. It is History walking in the present, on the streets of Okinawa, eighty years after the end of the war, and the islands show wounds that determine their complex and fragmented identity.

5 Conclusion

In the context of Oda Kaori's filmography, *Gama* is the most strikingly expository and educational documentary, despite keeping a few phantasmal elements that signal the intention to go beyond the mere informative purpose.

In fact, in *Gama* the spectator faces the reality of the Battle of Okinawa of 1944, that has been fairly overlooked both by the Japanese and the Americans, especially of the postwar generations. Even though Oda returns to her native Japan after two feature films shot in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Mexico, this is not a familiar theme or reality for her, leading her to approach the Okinawan history and identity in the same way she approached the miner community in Bosnia and the Mayans in Yucatán, like a foreigner. Despite sharing the 'apolide' approach with the two preceding works, *Gama* differentiates itself as it has a single distinct leading character recounting the episodes that happened during the battle, 'peace guide' Matsunaga Mitsuo. He leads Oda into the caves, where he tells stories about bombing survivors, mass suicides, and escapes, sometimes revealing people's identities, as they lived long enough to tell their own experiences. The choice of leading the spectator into the cave is not just due to the fact that peace guides usually show the visitors around, but also to establish these caves as *lieux de mémoire*.

Gama can also be considered a relevant work in the context of the representations of Okinawa. It does not just raise questions about the connection between history, documentary and narration, but it also problematises that history in the current visions of Okinawa. In the first place, as it is based on a series of historical and traumatic events, it raises the issue about the representation of death and trauma in documentary, resorting to original and indirect renditions of those events. Regarding the issues of objectivity in documentary, many agree that history is always narration, whether it is oral, written or visual, and that for this very reason, it is always influenced by a vision that characterises its angle, to a certain degree. Secondly, and linked with the first point, *Gama* is a documentary which relies heavily on the use of narration, therefore creating a symbolic link with the oral tradition of handing down knowledge, experiences and stories that shape the identity of a community, this time with the means of cinema. Thirdly, in *Gama* the focus is collective history, the cultural memory that has affected the entire Okinawan people even in the following decades, and that has profoundly marked its identity. Also, Matsunaga does not hide his own view of certain issues, such as the idea of peace and the value of life, despite always keeping a plain and laconic style of storytelling. It is this radical value of such historical events that strengthen the sense of community, also on

a transgenerational perspective, aiming to raise discussions about Okinawan identity both within the Okinawan community and outside.

Whereas fictional and cultural products set in Okinawa do not generally produce critical observations about the specificity of the Okinawan reality, as a mere depiction of the islands closer to an exotic paradise in the Pacific Ocean, native artists and directors, such as Takamine Gō, Yamashiro Chikako and Okuma Katsuya immediately stand out in the context of films and videos that address the transmission of war memories. The plurality that characterises Okinawa has a prominent role both in the characters' identities and in the variety of media that Takamine Gō presents in his films, giving space to indigenous people whose artistic visions could contribute to a collage that emphasises the ethnic, historical and cultural complexity of the archipelago.

While Takamine's cinema faces the island's past only to the extent of 'capturing the smell of death' in the streets, Oda's activity can be likened to that of his 'vacuum-cleaner camera' during the shooting of *Okinawan Dream Show*: capturing the invisible in the underground and restoring dignity to those souls. Also, with *Gama*, Oda evokes the poetic vision of historical trauma of Yamashiro Chikako, highlighting at the same time the effort to empathise with the survivors and victims, but also the impossibility to reach full identification. *Gama* also mirrors some elements of Okuma Katsuya's 2024 documentary *Close to the Bone*: not only the presence of a guide-like figure who is engaged in bone recovery activities, but mostly reflections on the relevance of physical practice, sharing and circulation of experiences in order to gain a sense of personal involvement and connection with history, within the present communities and with the dead as well.

Oda keeps a minimalistic style, with mostly fixed wide shots and minimal camera work, but never cold. On the contrary, Oda participates emotionally in the tragedy, enters the *gama* in a respectful way. She also has a phantasmal yet corporeal figure enter the *gama*, a figure that symbolises memory, and where it is possible to find her idea of a collective consciousness that belongs to the entire humankind. The woman that descends into the cave, follows Matsunaga's paths, and touches remains that were found in caves, stones and bones, highlights the materiality of history and the contact between past and present.

Her final anabasis is symbolic: the Shadow walks towards the surface, visually marked by a powerful blinding light. She walks through the streets, the trees, the houses, and eventually she is shown sitting on the shore. She brings a message of hope for the future, a message that Oda shares with Yamashiro. Oda recognises and accepts the immense distance between individuals, which makes complete identification with trauma victims impossible. However, that does not mean that listening to this pain and acknowledging it

is useless. Rather, it creates understanding and cohesion within a community, it promotes bonding with strangers and victims of the past, and this empathy is what foregrounds future efforts to protect ourselves and other communities from potential analogous threats.

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Recensioni

Leila Karami (a cura di) ***Da Tehran alla Mecca. Il diario di viaggio di Mehrmāh Khānum nobile persiana (1880-1881)***

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Recensione di Karami, L. (a cura di) (2025). *Da Tehran alla Mecca. Il diario di viaggio di Mehrmāh Khānum nobile persiana (1880-1881)*. Prefazione di S. Cristoforetti. Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, xlviii-150 pp. Donne Fedi Culture 256.

Da Tehran alla Mecca è il diario di viaggio di una nobildonna persiana della dinastia cagiara. Mehrmāh Khānum 'Eṣmat os-Saltāne, nata negli anni Venti dell'Ottocento, il 30 agosto 1880 lascia la capitale Tehran per intraprendere il pellegrinaggio alla Mecca, adempiendo a uno dei doveri cui ogni musulmano deve attenersi, se non vengono meno le condizioni fisiche o economiche. Il viaggio di Mehrmāh Khānum dura circa dieci mesi e segue due itinerari diversi, uno per l'andata e uno per il ritorno, passando, prima di raggiungere Mecca e Medina, per le città sante di Kerbala e Najaf, importanti luoghi di culto dei musulmani sciiti, gruppo con cui si identifica anche la nostra pellegrina. Il resoconto della nobildonna, molto efficace nella semplicità arguta della scrittura, è ricchissimo di informazioni relative ai luoghi attraversati, alle loro mutevoli caratteristiche climatiche, alle tribù che li popolano, alle diverse norme che regolano i passaggi da una giurisdizione a un'altra, ed è al contempo puntuale nella registrazione degli eventi, con fini digressioni sui personaggi di diverso rango e con diversi ruoli che incontra lungo il cammino che ella compie trasportata su di una, non sempre comoda, lettiga. Questo *Diario* quindi non è solo il resoconto di un pellegrinaggio, non è solo



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la narrazione di una fondamentale esperienza di devozione religiosa, esso è, prima e più di tutto, il racconto degli ostacoli affrontati dai viaggiatori, nella fattispecie da una viaggiatrice, fra dazi, tributi, discriminazioni etnico-religiose, e pericoli di vario genere, dagli eventi atmosferici alle malattie.

Come infatti osserva Cristoforetti nella prefazione,

Anche quando non particolarmente pregevoli dal punto di vista stilistico-letterario, questo tipo di testimonianze costituiscono un patrimonio di particolare valore, perché contengono informazioni altrimenti irrimediabili sugli itinerari, la toponomastica, i tariffari, il commercio, i luoghi di culto [...] il diario di Mehrmāh Khānum non fa eccezione e si caratterizza per una particolare attenzione alle tipologie di piante selvatiche, alle condizioni dell'acqua disponibile, ai nomi dei luoghi e alle particolarità del clima.

Il puntuale resoconto della viaggiatrice ci informa, grazie all'alto rango a cui appartiene e che la mette in relazione con le élite politiche e amministrative dei territori che attraversa, delle relazioni fra potere centrale e i suoi rappresentanti più periferici, delineando la situazione molto complessa della gestione dello Hijaz alla fine del XIX secolo. E non mancano gli accenni alla crescente influenza colonialista dell'impero britannico che al tempo aveva il monopolio delle rotte marittime del Mar Rosso e dell'Oceano Indiano e di cui la nobildonna non manca di ammirare, con tratti anche ingenui, l'efficienza:

Nelle sere di mercoledì 24 e giovedì 25 c'è stato [49b] un vento molto forte. Il capitano di notte sta sveglio. Gli occhi di questi [stranieri] non conoscono il sonno. In terra persiana chiunque passi la notte insonne si lamenta e si accascia come morto dove capita, mentre questi qui neanche si siedono a riposare, figurarsi se si accasciano da qualche parte. Sono sempre attivi. (75)

A questo e a molti altri temi ci avvia la dettagliata introduzione della curatrice (xiii-xlviii), che tocca tutti gli aspetti, relativi ai rituali religiosi e alle pratiche del pellegrinaggio, che servono al lettore per comprendere e valorizzare al meglio la lettura del *Diario*. In particolare il paragrafo dedicato a *Le rotte del ḥajj* (xviii-xx) colloca il viaggio di Mehrmāh Khānum all'interno di un complesso e interessantissimo intrecciarsi di percorsi e di deviazione che caratterizzavano i pellegrinaggi dell'epoca. Il paragrafo 5 su *La letteratura del ḥajj* (xxv-xxxiii) ci illustra con precisione la complessità tematica di questo corpus di testi di cui il paragrafo 6 su *Il ritrovamento dei manoscritti del ḥajj in Iran* (xxxiii-xxxiv) racconta in sintesi una storia

di occultamento, sottrazione e ritrovamento di testi ancora in larga parte da pubblicare in affidabili edizioni critiche.

«Questo è il diario di un viaggio alla sacra Mecca che con l'aiuto dell'Onnipotente scrivo, se la salute me lo consente»; così esordisce Mehrmāh Khānum, forse consapevole che il suo diario si inserisce nel fortunato e ampio filone di testi dello stesso genere che conobbero in epoca cagiana un periodo di notevole sviluppo (xxv-xxxiv), anche grazie all'incoraggiamento dato da Nāṣer od-Dīn Shāh (1848-1896), entusiasta viaggiatore, il quale con i propri *Safarnāme* (resoconti di viaggio) e i propri *Ruznāme* (diari), appunto, diede un forte impulso al genere.

Mehrmāh Khānum non viaggia ovviamente da sola, ma si muove senza la presenza di un parente maschio e questo rende la sua testimonianza molto preziosa in un panorama letterario in cui gli scritti femminili (e non solo i diari dello *hajj*) sono pochi. Questo diario si distingue dunque per le caratteristiche di intelligenza, attenzione e cultura della sua autrice, oltre che per la particolarità dell'itinerario di cui ci offre il resoconto. La prospettiva è quella di una donna aristocratica di ottima educazione, cui non mancano mezzi economici e conoscenze; tuttavia la sensibilità descrittiva, la sintassi essenziale, il linguaggio scarno e privo di retorica – il *Diario* sarebbe circolato al massimo in famiglia o nei salotti femminili, dopo il suo ritorno – aspetti senz'altro legati a una penna femminile, fanno della lettura di questo testo un'occasione di indagine storica, religiosa e sociale di grande spessore. La nobildonna non entra nelle questioni politiche, ma le sfiora e le registra con un'acutezza e un'obiettività piuttosto rare nelle righe di viaggiatori maschi, più conformisti nello stile, nonché preoccupati delle possibili ricadute dei testi che compilavano.

Di notevole e imprescindibile utilità i due indici che chiudono il volume: quello dei nomi (135-8) e quello dei luoghi (139-143), che insieme alla ricca bibliografia permettono al lettore di ricostruire con precisione i contesti storico-geografici a cui si fa riferimento nel *Diario*. Rispetto a questo aspetto, va sottolineata l'inesausta attenzione e competenza storica con cui, nelle note alla traduzione, la curatrice identifica – ogni volta che ciò risulti possibile – il luogo e il tempo degli eventi descritti dalla pellegrina, nonché i dati bio-bibliografici dei personaggi, siano essi personalità di rilievo o anche minori. In relazione a tali identificazioni, vale la pena di soffermarsi su un dettaglio importante: i personaggi femminili, com'era consuetudine al tempo, sono menzionati unicamente attraverso titoli o appellativi: la curatrice precisa nella sua introduzione che

in Persia, fino ai primi decenni del Novecento, non era consuetudine chiamare una donna per nome. L'usanza prevedeva che ci si riferisse a loro con espressioni che riflettevano la classe sociale

di appartenenza [...] Per una donna appartenente all'élite [...] il nome proprio era celato e sostituito dalla menzione del *nasab* (genealogia) paterno e, talvolta, materno. (xliii)

Di fatto, i personaggi femminili incontrati dalla pellegrina, peraltro numerosi, restano in parte non identificati/identificabili, visto che la pratica messa in atto da Mehrmāh Khānum si adegua rispettosamente a quella consuetudine. Lei stessa, all'interno della copertina del manoscritto, viene definita *dokhtar-e Mo'tamed od-Dowle*, ovvero figlia di Mo'tamed od-Dowle.

Per la traduzione qui pubblicata, la curatrice ha lavorato, con notevole attenzione filologica, sulla trascrizione del diario fatta da Rasul Ja'fariyān, e pubblicata nel 1996 nella rivista *Miqāt-e ḥajj*,¹ al contempo però ha proceduto al confronto con il manoscritto (la cui scansione è disponibile online), per «integrare le indicazioni delle pagine e risolvere eventuali incomprensioni».

La scelta traduttiva della curatrice, di fronte a un manoscritto la cui stesura «presenta un flusso continuo di scrittura, privo di interruzioni, punteggiatura o spaziature che distinguano le diverse giornate», di dividere il testo in «tredici capitoli [...] concepiti per introdurre una distinzione tra le varie tratte del viaggio» (xliv), rende la lettura scorrevole e scandisce con accuratezza il percorso di Mehrmāh Khānum, menzionando all'inizio di ogni capitolo le tappe principali del percorso e facilitandone l'individuazione sulla mappa (105).

Una nota necessaria anche sulle scelte dei traduttori, sempre appropriate, estremamente rispettose del testo, prive di integrazioni stilistiche, in cui vengono segnalate accuratamente le parole o i sintagmi la cui comprensione non sia assolutamente certa. La lettura è piacevole e 'autosufficiente', può prescindere dalle note al testo, ricchissime di approfondimenti, precisazioni e digressioni storiche, geografiche, letterarie, ecc., e questo fa del *Diario* un testo istruttivo in senso lato, e godibile da qualunque lettore interessato a immaginare una donna persiana in viaggio sulla sua lettiga nel Medio Oriente di fine Ottocento, fra esattori e beduini, incontri mondani e disavventure, valicando montagne o attraversando i deserti e il mare.

¹ Ja'fariyān, R. (1996). «Safarnāma-ye Mekke-ye dokhtar-e Farhād Mirzā» (Diario di viaggio a Mecca della figlia di Farhād Mirzā). *Miqāt-e ḥajj*, 17, 57-117.

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