Language in fifteenth-century Italian dance descriptions

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Introduction

Despite its title, this paper is not a philological study of the developing Italian language as seen in the second half of the fifteenth century. It is rather a consideration of how various words and phrases were actually used in the context of dance descriptions. How far can we trust what we read? How far is it legitimate to assign technical meanings to verbal expressions, even when (or especially when) they were in common use?

To describe dance movement and dance style in words is a challenge in any language. We can translate Italian words such as *maniera* (style) and *aere* (air), but their real meaning in practical terms is whatever the relevant dancing master chose to give them at the time. Other words, like *campeggiare*, we cannot even translate with any certainty. I myself favour the meaning 'emphasising' – relating it to colouring the background of panels of relief sculpture so as to set off the carved figures to better advantage. If this interpretation is correct, 'emphasis' is another typical dance term that has little practical meaning until it is expounded in detail by the dancing master. As for the word *tempo*, Barbara Sparti has listed eight distinct meanings that a reader would need to consider when encountering it in a dance treatise or dance description.[1]

This paper is not, however, concerned with these theoretical and stylistic terms, whose nuances will always be debatable. It is concerned with the down-to-earth details of the dances as described and with terms that we should like to think we already understood, such as *sempio*, *ripresa*, making a step 'with the left foot', or doing the dance 'a second time'. Such words and phrases do indeed carry a generally accepted meaning, but we should recognise that they can also be used more loosely. We can insist too stubbornly that a given word had a particular well-attested meaning to the exclusion of any other. For example, if we have difficulty in reconciling the steps with the music of some passage in a given dance, it is not necessarily our understanding of the music that is at fault; it may be that we have actually taken too much of the text for granted.

There is, in fact, an instructive comparison to be made between the notation of music and the language of dance in the fifteenth century.

We have difficulty in understanding the musical notation for the following reasons, amongst others.
1. It is different from modern notation.
2. It is not internally consistent. This kind of notation was still new and its conventions were not yet fixed. Different theorists advocated their own modifications as they tried to tune the notation to the needs of musicians,[2] so we find that we have no satisfactory standard to refer to.
3. Copyists made mistakes, so we are not necessarily looking at what the composer originally intended.

Our problems with the language of dance descriptions are not very different.
1. Fifteenth-century Italian is remote from us and unfamiliar.
2. It is not internally consistent, either in general or in its usage in describing dances. Italian as a national language had a long and slow evolution and its conventions varied from city to city.[3] As to dancing, this was going through an experimental phase in which new steps, step-combinations and manoeuvres were being developed; it is not surprising if the relevant vocabulary tended to lag behind and if some of the terms were improvised from whatever came conveniently to hand.
3. Copyists made mistakes, so we are not always looking at what the choreographer originally intended.

The consequence is that some words and phrases can both have been used as technical terms with quite a closely defined meaning and yet also have been used more loosely in a general sense.

The difference is easily illustrated with an English example. The word 'step' is used in both a technical sense and an ordinary sense. The technical meaning is 'unit of dance' or 'dance-step', whereas the ordinary meaning is 'placing one foot in front of the other'. Thus, the *passo doppio* was a step (dance-step) composed of three steps (stepping three times). Anyone who has tried it will know that it is no easy matter to put even this simple proposition across to a lay audience without leaving them confused. In relation to the Italian dance vocabulary of the fifteenth century we ourselves form a similar lay audience, unfamiliar with local usage and mostly unable to distinguish between different levels of meaning.

With this in mind, this paper will be drawing attention to a number of different ways in which words and phrases can be seen to have been used carelessly, inconsistently, loosely or ambiguously in the known dance descriptions.[4] These instances should give us pause before claiming that any given term carries a unique and consistent meaning.

Hackneyed phrases

Some phrases were used so often, even many times in the same dance, that they tended to be slipped in out of habit in places where they had little or no meaning, or where their meaning was thereby garbled. We cannot be sure if this happened during dictation of the original text or during subsequent copying.

Comenzando cum lo pe drito (starting with the right foot)

Individual steps were usually described as being made 'with' or 'on' the left or right foot. Groups or sequences of steps, on the other hand, were usually described (when appropriate) as 'starting with' the left or right foot, implying that alternate steps would thereafter be made on alternate feet. It was nevertheless not uncommon for individual steps also to be described as 'starting with' the left or right foot. This was not exactly untrue, but the expression was unneeded and inappropriate. It was most often applied to a single *doppio* (in at least fifteen dances)[5] and once, more bizarrely, to a single *sempio* (in 'Laltra fia guielmina').

Larifaccino unaltra volta dachapo (let them do it again a second time from the top)

Three Florentine manuscripts[6] of Guglielmo's treatise make frequent use of the above phrase or variants of it to indicate that a dance should be repeated. In an earlier study[7] I argued that in general these instructions made sense (and agreed with other evidence) and were not to be discounted. In the case of Domenico's Ballo 'Mercantia', however, all three manu-

scripts indicate merely that the dance should be done a second time, when the manuscript of Domenico's treatise as well as the structure of the dance both make clear that it should be done three times in all. The Florentine manuscripts correctly stipulate repetition, but by using their accustomed phrase they miss the fact that repetition is to occur twice.

Luna insulpie mancho et laltra insulpie ricto (one upon the left foot and the other upon the right foot)

The routine use of standardised expressions can nevertheless sometimes work to our advantage. The above phrase is so consistently used in relation to a pair of *riprese*, and to no other step, that when we find a pair of *continenze* described in the Bassadanza 'Corona' as 'starting with the left, the other on the right' we can see at once that certain words are missing. In full, the text should read: 'starting on the left foot, [and two *riprese*, the one on the left foot,] the other on the right'.[8]

Names and combinations of steps

Our difficulty over technical terms in fifteenth-century Italian dance largely reflects a problem that they seem to have had at the time themselves. There were accepted names for the basic traditional steps, like *sempio*, *doppio*, *ripresa*, etc, but as new variants and combinations of steps were developed, there was at first no accepted vocabulary in place to describe them. There is indeed a certain makeshift quality about some of the names encountered.

One common expedient was simply to refer back to the dance in which a particular step was first used and described. Thus, the *doppio* or *passo della tangielosa*, found in two dances in early-sixteenth-century sources ('La graziosa' and 'Lipitier') evidently refers back to the near-contemporary Balletto 'Tangelosa'. Similarly, the early-sixteenth-century dancing master Giovannino used two novel forms of *volta tonda* that he called respectively the *volta di Lasso* and the *volta di Tromboni* after the two dances in which he first used them.[9]

In a number of the sources containing versions of Guglielmo's treatise we find the *volta del gioioso*, which looks like a similar coinage – although it is not clear if this sort of *gioioso* is equivalent to the contemporary Spanish Ioyoso or is (less probably) in some way linked with the Ballo 'Rostiboli gioioso'. The *volta del gioioso* took the place of what Domenico called *voltatonda de bassadanza*; the constituent steps apparently remained the same, but the manner of performance may have varied.

Dupii suso elpe drito (*doppi* on the right foot)

In the dance descriptions appended to Domenico's treatise there is a clear distinction between sequences of *doppi* described as being made 'on the left (or right) foot' and those 'starting with the left (or right) foot'. This is very plain where *doppi* made in these two manners actually follow one another (in 'Belriguardo [vechio]', 'B. nouo' and 'Verçepe'). Domenico provides no explanation of this convention, but it can be seen from their context that when successive *doppi* were made on the same foot, they acquired accelerated timing. Domenico's usage in this respect appears to be wholly consistent, so a reader who has the key to it need not become confused; but such an arcane convention is less than helpful. It left Domenico himself in an awkward position when, in 'Corona', he wanted two normal *doppi* to be made succes-

sively on the same foot. He had then to describe the *doppi* separately as individual steps and insert between them a *cambiamento* (change of foot). This is admirably explicit but still a clumsy expedient.

It is hardly surprising that Domenico's successors adopted a special name for the accelerated *doppio*, namely *contrapasso*. *Doppi in su un pe* (*doppi* on one foot) are still occasionally found (*e.g.* in late versions of 'Mignotta [vechia]'), but there is no longer any reason for them not to have had the normal timing.

Due continenze sul pe sinestro (two *continenze* on the left foot)

Although there are a few examples of single or triple *continenze*, they typically occur in twos and fours, always described by Domenico as 'starting with the left (or right) foot'. They were most often used in positions where they obviously correspond to the *branle* of French Basse Dance, and this correspondence is confirmed by similar Spanish use of *dos continencias* in place of a *branle* in the Spanish version of the Basse Dance.

In sources containing versions of Guglielmo's treatise pairs of *continenze* are described differently. In the two Paris manuscripts[10] they are described as being made 'with the left foot'; other sources do not normally mention the feet at all. Should we conclude that this is a new way to describe former practice, or does it mean that the manner of performance had actually changed? The discussion about *doppi* in the previous section emphasised that there was a real distinction to be made between making steps 'with' a particular foot and 'starting with' it. This led me formerly to suggest that there might have been a real change in the manner of performance.[11] The case is not, however, as strong as I then supposed: it was Domenico that made a point of distinguishing step-sequences that started with a particular foot, but it is not Domenico's usage that is here in question. Besides, *doppi* can reasonably be regarded as a special case, not necessarily paralleled in the description of other steps.

On the other side of the argument, it looks seriously perverse to argue that all *continenze* in the late fifteenth century were unidirectional when they went on being made on alternate feet throughout the sixteenth century. Furthermore, sequences of *continenze* all to the left cause improbable distortions in the symmetry of a number of dances. The distance travelled by one *continenza* is so small as to be negligible, but when two sets of dancers face one another (as in 'Legiadra' and 'Voltati in ça Rosina') and make four *continenze* all to their own left, the amount by which they are displaced from their previous formation is multiplied by eight and is no longer negligible. It is difficult to believe that such effects were intended in the original choreography. A final observation is that in 'Borges' the Italian description of a French Basse Dance uses '*doi continencie col pie sinestro*' or '*sul sinestro*' (with or on the left foot) to represent the French *branle*. Since the very word *branle* is understood to mean 'going first one side and then the other', this seems to confirm that two *continenze* 'with the left foot' were actually made successively to left and right.

This last equivalence helps to explain what was going on. Although Domenico was meticulous in describing two *continenze* as being made with alternate feet, the later usage evidently treated a pair of *continenze* as forming a single unit (called simply *le continenze* in the early sixteenth century), to

be made 'with' a named foot. It is even possible that the occasional appearance of a single '*continenza*' in the Siena manuscript of Guglielmo, in places where we should expect a pair, is actually meant to refer to the same unit,[12] a usage that is seemingly echoed in the early-seventeenth-century Catalan source known as *Tarragó*.[13]

The timing of steps

The timing of individual steps is the one function that received attention in the treatises of Domenico and Cornazano and in the memorandum *Che cosa e ballare* that was inserted into some versions of Guglielmo's treatise. For the basic steps these sources are in agreement: *doppio*, *ripresa* and *riverenza* all take a full *tempo*, while *continenza* and *sempio* each take one half of that. This timing, backed by such authority, can easily be felt to form part of the definition of the step.

Ripresa, *riverenza* and *sempio* all have diminutive forms, taking less time than standard: these include *ripresetta*, *riverenzetta*, *passetto*, *passettino*. This should take care of the need to describe steps that were quicker and smaller than normal, but in fact it does not do so. Perhaps this was because diminutive steps acquired novel characteristics, such as moving rapidly on the toes, that distinguished them from the parent step and were not always wanted, or perhaps it was because all step-names were used somewhat loosely and the timing of steps had to be understood in relation to the relevant music (as in Italy throughout the sixteenth century).

Riprese

The Italian *ripresa* was made sideways, unless described as *franzese*, and normally took a full *tempo*. When a brisker step was required, the usual formula was *meza ripresa* (half-*ripresa*), generally done in a half-*tempo* like a *sempio*, but sometimes as a component of *quadernaria* further reduced to a quarter-*tempo*.

There are nevertheless a number of shortened *riprese* (without epithet), performed in only half of one *tempo*. In the *saltarello* section of 'Spero' there is a pair of *riprese* that have only one *tempo* of music between them. Similarly, in 'Petit Riense', which is composed in *piva*, there are two *riprese* timed as if they were *sempi*. Near the end of 'Mercantia' a diagonal *ripresa* and a *mezavolta* are performed simultaneously in a time seemingly equivalent to a half-*tempo* of *bassadanza*.

By the early sixteenth century this shorter timing seems to be becoming standard. In the dances of Giovannino most instances of *riprese* can be seen from their context to take only half of one *tempo* (to continue using fifteenth-century terminology). When Giovannino required a full-length *ripresa* to follow the *volta di Tromboni,* he described it as *ripresa lunga*.

Sempi

Ordinarily, a *sempio* took a half-*tempo* of *bassadanza* or *quadernaria* or a full *tempo* of *piva*. But the same term could also be used to describe one of the component steps of a unit of *quadernaria*, occupying just a quarter of one *tempo*. The word *passo* was available in this sense and was used by Domenico in describing a particular variety of *quadernaria* at the beginning of 'Jupiter', but *sempio* was used more frequently. Thus, a *sempio* occurring in *quadernaria* could be worth either one half or one quarter of a *tempo*, and the same sequence of steps identically described could be performed at different speeds according to the amount of music available.

In 'Lionzello uechio' four *sempi* in *quadernaria* take two *tempi*; in the equivalent passage in 'Lionzello nouo' four *sempi* take one *tempo*. Other examples could be quoted.[14] Similarly, in *piva* the *sempio* can be reduced from a full *tempo* to one half, as at the end of 'Verçepe', where there are two full-turns each of three *sempi* (and an unmentioned close) made on two *tempi* of *piva*.

A shortened *sempio* was also to be found in *bassadanza* when it was performed *in vuodo* (on the upbeat) on the end of a *doppio* ('Corona', 'Mignotta vechia', 'M. noua') or *ripresa* ('Corona'). A similar shortened *sempio* seemingly has to be placed on the end of a *riverenza* in *saltarello* in 'Spero'.

Moving back

When dancers were to go back, fifteenth-century dance descriptions usually left it ambiguous whether this was to be done by turning to the rear and proceeding forwards in that direction, or by making steps directly backwards while facing the front. The modern Italian idiom for 'going backwards' is *dare addietro* or *indietro*, but this is not a phrase that is found anywhere in our sources. We can only determine which sort of backward movement to make by careful examination of its context in the dance. This is easiest in dances by Domenico, as he was normally careful to indicate the presence of any turns that might be required. The descriptions of dances in later sources were not so scrupulous and the turns needed to introduce and conclude a particular sequence may be merely implicit. The longer the sequence of steps involved in a particular context, the less likely it is that they should be taken literally backwards.

Tornino indirieto (let them return back)

Some phrases are found relatively often in relation to going back; *tornino indirieto* is one of them. The verb *tornare* does not in itself carry the literal meaning of 'turning', but more often than not it is appropriate to make an unmentioned turn as a preliminary to 'returning'. In Guglielmo's Bassadanza 'Principessa', for example, this phrase is found three times: once it is preceded by a *mezavolta* (half-turn), twice it is not, but a turn seems to be needed each time. This is because the dancers always make a further turn to bring them round to face the front again. By contrast, *tornino indirieto* is also found in 'Borges': at the point where a French Basse Dance would feature one or three *desmarches* we read 'let them return back with three *sempi* starting with the right foot'. Whether these *sempi* are to be seen as an Italian substitute for French *desmarches*, or just as the Italian way of describing French *desmarches*, in this context we should certainly expect them to be going backwards.

Our conclusion must be that the phrase '*tornino indirieto*' and its variants simply implies that the dance, after going forwards for a time, is now going to retreat. How that is to be achieved is something you have to work out for yourself.

Si tirano indrieto (they draw back)

A similar conclusion applies to this phrase, although the starting point is different. *Tirarsi* and *retirarsi* (to draw yourself back) do look as if they should be verbs that indicate that a step is to be made backwards. There is, for example, a sequence in which a *riverenza* is followed by two *passettini* drawn back (*e.g.* in 'Chastelana' and 'Chorona gentile' for 8), in which no other interpretation would be plausible. We may compare the ending of 'Colonese', in which six dancers in a

longways set 'draw back with a *doppio*, setting out with the right foot, and come towards each other with a *doppio*, setting out with the left foot, so as to make a complete turn every one of them'. In an earlier publication[15] I rendered this sequence anachronistically as 'Fall back a Double on your sides, meet again, all turning Single.' It is, however, not only the language that is anachronistic here, but the movement. The *misura* is *piva*. It is incredible that the three women should be expected to perform these manoeuvres at this speed while wearing dresses with trains. Thus, the complete turn should not be understood as an embellishment of the second *doppio*, but, as perceived by Sparti,[16] must refer to the function of the two *doppi* taken together. This has the further advantage of explaining why the dancers were to start with the right foot: Guglielmo wanted them to begin the sequence by turning right. Here, then, *tirarsi* means 'to retreat' by turning towards the dancer's rear, not by backing away from the opposite line of dancers.

Once again we find that a commonly used phrase simply states that the dancer is to retreat, but the method will depend on circumstances, which have to be evaluated on each occasion.

Conclusion

The vocabulary of fifteenth-century dance was not an official glossary authorised by the governing body of Lombard dance. It was just a collection of generally accepted conventions that various dancing masters tried to adapt to the evolving manner in which the dances were being performed. If in doubt, it is safest to interpret any word or phrase at first in quite a broad sense, until such time as you are able to define it more narrowly in its context.

References

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