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**Abstract:** *Darla* “be promiscuous, of women” and *darlo* “engage in sodomy” first appear in the sixteenth century; in the late twentieth century, *darlo* acquires the meaning of “have sex, of men” (same as *darla* but without the connotation of “easiness”). While *darla* is well established in the average speaker’s lexicon, *darlo* (in both meanings) remains highly marginal. These two verbs attest to a lexical asymmetry resulting from the misogynistic view ingrained in Western culture of women as inferior, inherently immoral and wanton, and the different “fortunes” of *darlo/a* show that sociocultural attitudes and stereotypes shape language change.

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# On the Different Fates of *darla* and *darlo* in Italian<sup>1</sup>

CINZIA RUSSI

## Introduction

This study investigates the differences in the distribution and usage in Italian of the verbs *darla* “*di donna, avere rapporti sessuali con qcn., specialmente con facilità*”<sup>2</sup> and *darlo*, to which two meanings are attributed, “*prestarsi a pratiche sessuali sodomitiche*”<sup>3</sup> and “*di uomo, possedere sessualmente una donna.*”<sup>4</sup>

Diachronically, *darla* is attested since (at least) the sixteenth century. In contrast, *darlo*<sub>1</sub> is essentially unattested and *darlo*<sub>2</sub> appears to have entered the language in the second half of the twentieth century. In modern Italian, *darla* shows a considerably wider distribution and higher usage frequency than *darlo*; this is evidenced by the fact that no occurrences of *darlo* are found in CORIS/CODIS, an extensive online corpus of written modern Italian which, in contrast, contains numerous instances of *darla*.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, an informal survey among native speakers of different age and socio-cultural background reveals that *darla* is well established in their lexicon, whereas *darlo*<sub>1</sub> is overall unknown and *darlo*<sub>2</sub> marginally recognized and restricted to younger speakers. The main questions this study addresses are the following: (a) What accounts for the overall absence of *darlo*<sub>1</sub> in Italian? (b) What factors are responsible for the unequal distribution of *darla* and *darlo*<sub>2</sub>? That is, why does *darlo*<sub>2</sub> continue to occupy such a marginal place in present-day Italian? Examining the dynamics of the developments of these two verbs sheds light on the role that socio-cultural attitudes and stereotypical prejudiced beliefs pertaining to the representation and perception of gender and sexuality can play in shaping language use as well as language change. *Darla* and *darlo*, I propose, embody a manifestation of linguistic sexism by attesting to a lexical asymmetry in terms of gender (women vs. men) and sexual practices (heterosexual or “normal” vs. homosexual or “deviant”), and *darlo*<sub>2</sub> has only cracked the asymmetry since it still lingers in the fringes of contemporary Italian lexicon.

After introducing and commenting on the definitions of *darla* and *darlo* found in dictionaries, I examine their first attestations as evidenced from dictionaries and literary sources. I then assess and discuss the status of *darla*, *darlo*<sub>1</sub> and *darlo*<sub>2</sub> in contemporary Italian. Next, I address the relevance of stereotypical socio-cultural attitudes and prejudices toward women and homosexuality/sodomy for the development and persistence of the asymmetry between these verbs. Finally, I point out the limitations of this study and offer suggestions for further investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> I am deeply grateful to Adria Frizzi, Chiara McCarty and Case McCarty for providing insightful comments. Any errors or misunderstandings remain of course my own.

<sup>2</sup> Tullio De Mauro, *Grande dizionario dell'uso*, vol. 2 (Torino: UTET, 1999–2000), 469.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 470; henceforth, *darlo*<sub>1</sub>.

<sup>4</sup> Valter Boggione and Giovanni Casalegno, *Dizionario letterario del lessico amoroso: metafore, eufemismi, trivialismi* (Torino: UTET, 2000), 152; Valter Boggione and Giovanni Casalegno *Dizionario del lessico erotico* (Torino: UTET, 2004), 166; henceforth, *darlo*<sub>2</sub>. *Darlo* without subscript is used to refer to *darlo*<sub>1</sub> and *darlo*<sub>2</sub> jointly.

<sup>5</sup> CORIS/CODIS is a corpus of modern written Italian developed at the CILTA (Centre for Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, University of Bologna). Presently, it contains 130 million words and consists of a collection of authentic and commonly occurring texts in electronic format, which are considered to be highly representative of modern Italian, and includes an assortment of diverse genres (press, fiction, academic and legal and administrative prose, miscellanea. Accessed January 2016, [http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris\\_ita.html](http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris_ita.html).

### Definitions

The definitions of *darla* and *darlo* I take into consideration come from two general dictionaries, De Mauro and Battaglia, and the two dictionaries of erotic lexicon by Boggione and Casalegno and are given in (1) and (2), respectively:<sup>6</sup>

- (1) a. “*di donna, avere rapporti sessuali con qcn., specialmente con facilità;*”<sup>7</sup> the verb is marked *comune* in terms of usage and *gergale* in terms of register.<sup>8</sup>  
 b. “*concedersi carnalmente (una donna).*”<sup>9</sup>  
 c. “**Dare, darla, darne:** *concedersi sessualmente, il pronome dimostrativo [sic] allude per eufemismo all’organo femminile.*”<sup>10</sup>
- (2) a. “*prestarsi a pratiche sessuali sodomitiche;*”<sup>11</sup> the verb is marked *comune* in terms of usage and *volgare* in terms of register, and the synonym “*dare via il culo*” is provided.  
 b. “*di uomo, possedere sessualmente una donna.*”<sup>12</sup>

Before commenting on the definitions, it should be noted that *darlo* is not listed in Battaglia.<sup>13</sup> Also, *darlo*<sub>1</sub> is not reported in Boggione and Casalegno;<sup>14</sup> they only include *dare di dietro* under their entry for *dare* with the definition of “*sodomizzare*”<sup>15</sup> and *dare il culo* in their index of voices by semantic field under *Omosessualità e sodomia*.<sup>16</sup>

The definitions of *darla* are uniform and unambiguous as to the referents of its subject, a woman, and the clitic pronoun, ‘vagina’. In contrast, the definitions of *darlo* display some discrepancy and ambiguity regarding the referents of both the subject and *lo*. In De Mauro’s definition – where, in light of the synonym given, sodomy appears to denote both homo- and heterosexual anal intercourse – *darlo* is unrestricted in terms of subject (i.e., the referent of the subject can be either a man or a woman) but the referent of *lo* can only be ‘anus’. On the other hand, in Boggione and Casalegno’s definition the referent of *lo* is unequivocally ‘penis’, given the overt *di uomo*.

<sup>6</sup> De Mauro, *Grande dizionario dell’uso*; Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (Torino: UTET, 1961--); Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario del lessico erotico*; Valter Boggione and Giovanni Casalegno, *Dizionario del lessico amoroso*.

<sup>7</sup> De Mauro, *Grande dizionario dell’uso*, 469.

<sup>8</sup> “CO: *comune*; vocaboli che sono usati e compresi indipendentemente dalla professione e mestiere che esercitiamo o dalla collocazione regionale e che sono generalmente noti a chiunque abbia un livello mediosuperiore di istruzione.” Ibid., xx.

<sup>9</sup> Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, vol. 4, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario del lessico amoroso*, 150-51; Boggione and Casalegno *Dizionario del lessico erotico*, 165-66.

<sup>11</sup> De Mauro, *Grande dizionario dell’uso*, 470.

<sup>12</sup> Boggione and Casalegno *Dizionario letterario del lessico amoroso*, 152; Boggione and Casalegno *Dizionario del lessico erotico*, 165.

<sup>13</sup> Neither *darla* nor *darlo* appear in the online versions of the dictionaries of *Accademia della Crusca*, accessed January 10, 2016, <http://www.accademiadellacrusca.it>, or in *Il vocabolario Treccani* (Roma: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1997); *darla* is recorded in *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana moderna* (1998), with the same definition given by Battaglia. See Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> See Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario del lessico amoroso* and Boggione and Casalegno *Dizionario del lessico erotico*.

<sup>15</sup> Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario del lessico amoroso*, 152.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 681.

### First attestations

Battaglia reports *darla* as first attested in Pietro Aretino's *Dialogo nel quale la Nanna insegna alla Pippa* (1536) citing the following:

(3) *e se pure gliene dai talvolta, fatti pagare innanzì*<sup>17</sup>

The quotation in (3) features *darne*, not *darla*; however, *Sei giornate* includes numerous instances of *ne* standing for the third person singular feminine direct object pronoun *la*, independently of the meaning of its referent, for instance: “*ella ricolse la lettera ... , la lesse e rilesse mille volte; ... la mostrò a colui che mi mandò a portargnele.*”<sup>18</sup> The second example of *darla* provided by Battaglia is from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, precisely from Cesare Pavese's *Il mestiere di vivere*:

(4) *Tutto si riduce alla sacramentale astuzia della fidanzata che non deve 'dargliela' al morso, altrimenti lui la pianta*<sup>19</sup>

The earliest attestations of *darla* (again as *darne*) reported by Boggione and Casalegno<sup>20</sup> are also from the sixteenth century, one is from Aretino and one from Varchi's *La suocera* (1569), given in (5):

(5) *cotesta è una fantaccia sudicia, sporca, spilorcia, che è come la pila dell'acqua: pensa quando ella ne dà a te*<sup>21</sup>

De Mauro<sup>22</sup> does not provide examples of *darla*; he only gives the date of its first attestation, 1536, which he takes from Battaglia.<sup>23</sup>

I would now like to draw attention to a sentence from Giovanni Sercambi's *Novelle* (beginning of fifteenth century):

(6) *Ella n'ha che a tutti ne potrà dare*<sup>24</sup>

This sentence occurs in the following context: a monk is lured by a woman into a storeroom with the promise of sex. Once inside, he finds two fellow monks who had been similarly tricked by the woman (with the intention of exposing them). Upon discovering that his expectations are the same as the other two's, the monk speaks the line quoted in (6). Given such context, *darne* can be taken as

<sup>17</sup> Pietro Aretino is cited in Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, Vol. 4, 35. The other references to Aretino's text in this article are cited from Pietro Aretino, *Sei giornate. Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia (1534). Dialogo nel quale la Nanna insegna a la Pippa (1536)*, ed. Giovanni Aquilecchia (Bari: Laterza, 1969), 193, 18–20

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Pietro Aretino, *Dialogo*, 320, 34–321, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Cesare Pavese, *Il mestiere di vivere*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1952), 109.

<sup>20</sup> Boggione and Casalegno *Dizionario del lessico amoroso*, 150–51; *Dizionario del lessico erotico* 165–166.

<sup>21</sup> Benedetto Varchi, *La suocera*, vol. 3, 4 (Triste: Lloyd Austriaco, 1858) 22. *Essere come la pila dell'acquasanta* is a well-known Italian saying meaning “something that is touched by everyone” and, more specifically, “a woman of loose morals.”

<sup>22</sup> De Mauro, *Grande dizionario dell'uso*, Vol. 2, 469.

<sup>23</sup> Regarding his sources, De Mauro states that when the date of the first attestation of an entry is not followed by examples or comments, it comes from previous works, primarily Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* and Nicolò Tommaseo *Dizionario della lingua italiana* (1861–1879); given that Tommaseo's dictionary does not list *darla*, the date 1536 must come from Battaglia.

<sup>24</sup> Giovanni Sercambi, *Novelle*, edited by Giovanni Sinicropi, vol. XI, 17 (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1995), 165.

a variant of *darla*, just as in (3) and (5), suggesting that the verb was already attested over a century before Aretino.

Indeed, the verb *darsi* “give oneself” could be considered an even earlier precursor of *darla* since it is already well attested in the late thirteenth–early fourteenth century with a meaning quite equivalent to that of *darla*.<sup>25</sup>

- (7) a. *Una notte li venne in visione che li pareva vedere le dee della scienza a guisa di belle donne: e stavano al bordello e **davansi** a chi le volea*<sup>26</sup>  
 b. *ove femmina **si dà** così di lieve, che ivi non può essere amore, ma desidera molto d’usare con uno e con un altro per sodisfare alla sua luxuria*<sup>27</sup>

*Darsi* with women as subject is indeed robustly attested in OVI in contexts referring unmistakably to sexual intercourse and always characterized by an immoral connotation and censorious overtones (whereas *darsi* with men as subjects is practically absent), and it has endured in the language with the same connotation until today.<sup>28</sup>

De Mauro<sup>29</sup> gives 1536 as date of the first attestation of *darlo*<sub>1</sub> (i.e., the date of Aretino’s *Dialogo*), but again does not provide examples, leading us to assume that, as in the case of *darla*, he is following Battaglia (1961–) (see fn. 5). Yet, as noted above, *darlo* is not found in Battaglia (1961–), and no occurrences are found in Aquilecchia’s edition of Aretino’s work nor in the Barberi Squarotti’s edition (1988). De Mauro’s date, thus, appears disputable. Also, the screening of a sample of erotic/obscene literary classics from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century revealed no occurrences of *darlo*<sub>1</sub> (nor of *darlo*<sub>2</sub>), which would suggest that it was not a common verb in older stages of Italian, making one wonder about the viability of its characterization as *comune* (see (2a) above).<sup>30</sup>

Boggione and Casalegno<sup>31</sup> provide two examples of *darlo*<sub>2</sub>, both from contemporary writer Rossana Campo’s literary debut *In principio erano le mutande*, one of which is the following:

- (8) *mi fa l’elenco dettagliato delle posizioni e dei bellissimi romantici modi di come lui **gliel’ha dato***<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Battaglia’s (1961–: IV, 32) definition of *darsi*: “*acconsentire alle profferte d’amore, alle richieste di matrimonio, abbandonarsi all’essere amato con assoluta dedizione. In particolare ‘concedersi’ (una donna)*”.

<sup>26</sup> *Novellino*: 78, 307, OVI. The *Opera del vocabolario italiano* (OVI) database “contains 1960 vernacular texts (22.3 million words, 456,000 unique forms) the majority of which are dated prior to 1375, the year of Boccaccio’s death. The verse and prose works include early masters of Italian literature like Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, as well as lesser-known and obscure texts by poets, merchants, and medieval chroniclers.” See *The ARTFL Project*, accessed January 2016, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/ovi>.

<sup>27</sup> Andrea Cappellano, *De Amore volgarizzato*, I, 22, 211, OVI, accessed January 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario del lessico amoroso*, 152 provide several examples from modern Italian writers (e.g., Gabriele D’annunzio, Alberto Bevilacqua, Pier Paolo Pasolini) and list *darsi* in their *Indice delle voci per ambito semantico* under *Prostituzione, disponibilità sessuale*, 683.

<sup>29</sup> De Mauro, *Grande dizionario dell’uso*, Vol. 2, 470.

<sup>30</sup> It may be worth noting that *darlo*<sub>1</sub> is unattested even in texts where homosexuality and sodomy are at center stage, such as Aretino’s *Sonetti sopra i ‘XVI modi’* (1526), Francesco Berni’s *Rime* (early sixteenth century), or Antonio Rocco’s *L’Alcibiabe fanciullo a scola* (1630), to name a few.

<sup>31</sup> Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario del lessico amoroso*, 152; *Dizionario del lessico erotico*, 166.

<sup>32</sup> Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milano, Feltrinelli: 1992), 15.

To conclude, tracking the first attestations of *darlo*<sub>1</sub> appears to be quite challenging and *darlo*<sub>2</sub> seems to be a recent addition to Italian. In contrast, tracing the emergence of *darla* is quite straightforward.

### ***Darla* and *darlo* in contemporary Italian**

*Darla* is undoubtedly well established among Italian speakers (independently of age and socio-cultural background) and widely attested in the language, as evidenced by abundant examples from both recognized literary works (9) (see also (4) above) and non-literary texts (10) (from CORIS/CODIS; see fn. 2):

- (9) a. *sempre in mezzo a fimmine che appena lo vedevano gliela davano subito*<sup>33</sup>  
 b. *Vanno con tutti; la danno a chiunque*<sup>34</sup>  
 c. “E **gliela dai?**” Erica si mette in piedi e si stiracchia. “Che domande fai? No. Di solito no. Però lui insiste e così ogni tanto, alla fine ... **Gliela do**”<sup>35</sup>
- (10) a. *Drim ti mette a disposizione ragazze che te la danno subito*<sup>36</sup>  
 b. *era stato esiliato da Caligola a causa della relazione che aveva avuto con la sorella dell'imperatore, Giulia Livilla (una che la dava un po' a tutti)*<sup>37</sup>  
 c. *Ho visto TEP perché sennò la mia ragazza non me la dava più per un mese*<sup>38</sup>

A remarkably enlightening manifestation of the prominent status (and impact) of *darla* in contemporary Italian is the phrase in (11), a pun based on the name of the celebrated songwriter Lucio Dalla.<sup>39</sup>

- (11) **Dalla.** *Non è un cantante ma un consiglio*  
*Dalla.* It's not a singer but an advice

The earliest reference to this phrase I was able to uncover comes from a short article on the opening concert for the sixth anti-AIDS campaign in Rome, published in *Repubblica* on December 2, 1999.<sup>40</sup> The article mentions a sixteen-year-old boy, Raffaello, who wears a t-shirt featuring the aphorism quoted above and explains it saying, “*Ma è anche importante lasciarsi andare con la giusta leggerezza e ironia.*” Four years later, the journalist and anchor woman Alda D'Eusanio caused quite an uproar when she wore a t-shirt with this phrase on her TV show broadcasted on RAI. T-shirts and various other merchandise displaying the phrase are available for sale by street vendors and online (see Figure 1), and the phrase is included in Stefano Bartezzaghi's book *Non se ne può più* (2012)

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Camilleri, *Il corso delle cose* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1987), 101.

<sup>34</sup> Alberto Bevilacqua, *L'eros* (Milano: Mondadori, 1999), 68.

<sup>35</sup> Niccolò Ammaniti, *Ti prendo e ti porto via* (Milano: Mondadori, 2000), 30.

<sup>36</sup> CORIS/CODIS, STAMPAPeriodici, [http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris\\_ita.html](http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris_ita.html), accessed November 2015.

<sup>37</sup> CORIS/CODIS, PRACCVolumi, [http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris\\_ita.html](http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris_ita.html), accessed November 2015.

<sup>38</sup> CORIS/CODIS, EPHEMOpuscoli, [http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris\\_ita.html](http://corpora.dslo.unibo.it/coris_ita.html), accessed November 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Many thanks to Giuseppe Lagani for pointing out this to me.

<sup>40</sup> Pietro D'Ottavio, “Musica anti-Aids,” *la Repubblica.it Archivio*, December 2, 1999,

<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1999/12/02/musica-anti-aids.html?ref=search>

where he discusses “*tormentoni linguistici*” (i.e., words/expressions used thoughtlessly because perceived as fashionable, to the point, humorous, “cool,” etc.).<sup>41</sup>



Figure 1. *Dalla* t-shirt on Amazon.com<sup>42</sup>

As for *darlo*, *darlo*<sub>1</sub> is unattested and *darlo*<sub>2</sub> appears to hold an overall marginal status in contemporary Italian. Neither is attested in CORIS/CODIS; native speakers (of any age) do not recognize *darlo*<sub>1</sub>, and adult speakers recognize *darlo*<sub>2</sub> only if they know Rossana Campo whose works feature it regularly (also in the form *darne*) as well as *darla*.

- (12) a. *lo vedo che è cambiato e già scopavamo poco prima e adesso non **me ne dà** quasi più*<sup>43</sup>  
 b. *L'ho fatto per te, ... , per essere in forma e **dartene** tanto*<sup>44</sup>

A Google search conducted in May 2016 yielded two attestations of *darlo*<sub>2</sub> from two songs by two Italian hip-hop/rap singers and songwriters, J-Ax (13a) and Sfera Ebbasta (13b):

- (13) a. *La ragazza mi guarda in tasca. Io non **te lo do**/ La tua malia su di me si è esaurita. Io non **te lo do**/ Sono diverso dagli uomini là fuori. Io non **te lo do***<sup>45</sup>  
 b. *Basta che chiedi, baby, vieni e **te lo do**/ So cosa cerchi, baby, vieni e **te lo do**/ Ho tutto quello che vuoi, vieni e **te lo do**/ Non preoccuparti, baby, vieni e **te lo do**/ So che lo vuoi, io **te lo do***<sup>46</sup>

Although the meaning of *darlo* in (13b) may be ambiguous because, technically, two overt referents of *lo* are identifiable in *cosa cerchi* and *tutto quello che vuoi*, the hint to the sexual meaning is certainly plausible. In (13a), on the other hand, the meaning of *darlo* is rather unequivocal given the absence of an overt referent of *lo* and the subject of the song: a young man is addressing a former

<sup>41</sup> Worthy of note is also the Facebook page “Dalla non è un cantante, ma un consiglio!” featuring the photo of the worldwide famed porn star Rocco Siffredi, accessed May 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/-Dalla-non-%C3%A8-un-cantantema-un-consiglio--120653937990249/>.

<sup>42</sup> Amazon, accessed May 28, 2016, [https://www.amazon.it/T-shirt-uomo-Dalla-cantante-consiglio/dp/B00W56RX5M?ie=UTF8&\\*Version\\*=1&\\*entries\\*=0](https://www.amazon.it/T-shirt-uomo-Dalla-cantante-consiglio/dp/B00W56RX5M?ie=UTF8&*Version*=1&*entries*=0).

<sup>43</sup> Rossana Campo, *Lezioni di Arabo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2010), 110.

<sup>44</sup> Rossana Campo, *Fare l'amore* (Milano: Ponte alle Grazie, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> J-Ax, *Io non te lo do*, 2009, accessed May, 2016, [http://testicanzoni.mtv.it/testi-J-AX\\_261397/testo-Io-Non-Te-Lo-Do-8578962](http://testicanzoni.mtv.it/testi-J-AX_261397/testo-Io-Non-Te-Lo-Do-8578962).

<sup>46</sup> Sfera Ebbasta, *Te lo do*, 2015, accessed May, 2016, <http://genius.com/Sfera-ebbasta-te-lo-do-lyrics>.



girlfriend who has become “easy,” saying that he will not “give it” to her because he has understood what true love is and has found a “good” (i.e., respectable) and beautiful girl (besides, the woman is looking at his pocket).

The results of the Google search lead me to consult Ambrogio and Casalegno’s dictionary of youth language,<sup>47</sup> where *darlo*<sub>2</sub> is indeed listed and defined “*possedere sessualmente*.” In addition to the same two examples from Campo (1992) cited in Boggione and Casalegno, three more examples are given:<sup>48</sup>

- (14) a. *Oggi ho chiavato come un dio, te lo darò tutto e ancora un pezzzo se mi avanza*<sup>49</sup>  
 b. *Quella più figa è un po’ brilla/ la cozza è ‘na pazza scatenata/ non sta mai ferma/ ora è di là che dorme/ prima che si mettesse quieta/ ha massaggiato tutti/ uno per uno/ con la speranza che qualcuno glielo dava*<sup>50</sup>  
 c. *Probabilmente Carter ne aveva già rimorchiata qualcuna e glielo stava dando nel deposito bagagli*<sup>51</sup>

It can thus be concluded that in present-day Italian *darlo*<sub>2</sub> is strongly represented in Campo’s work and fairly established in the lexicon of younger speakers.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, it seems unquestionable that, as for degree of visibility and distribution as well as in terms of register, a noticeable asymmetry distinguishes the two verbs.

### “Sexist” asymmetry

The “concrete” asymmetry that differentiates *darla* and *darlo*, I propose, originates from a semantic asymmetry which manifest itself on three levels. The first two clearly transpires—from the dictionary definitions; in the case of *darla* and *darlo*<sub>2</sub>, it is evidenced by the use of the verb *concedersi* (< Latin *concedere* “retreat, withdraw, give up, concede”)—which entails the notions of giving/allowing as a favor, agreeing to someone’s desire—for *darla* vis-à-vis *possedere* (< Latin *possidere*, a compound of the root of *potis* “one who possesses, an owner; one who has power” and *sedere* “sit, stand”) for *darlo*<sub>2</sub>.<sup>53</sup> In the case of *darla* and *darlo*<sub>1</sub>, the asymmetry arises from De Mauro’s differentiation in terms of register, whereby *darla* is marked as slang and *darlo*<sub>1</sub> as vulgar, which suggests that overall *darla* is proper, while confining *darlo*<sub>1</sub> to a lower offensive domain.<sup>54</sup> From a socio-cultural perspective, (i.e., in terms of shared views of conventional behaviors and customs) what *darla* refers to (women engaging easily in “orthodox” heterosexual activity) is less contemptible than what *darlo*<sub>1</sub> refers to (“deviant” sodomitic-sexual practices).

<sup>47</sup> Renzo, Ambrogio and Giovanni Casalegno, *Scrostati gaggio! Dizionario storico dei linguaggi giovanili* (Torino: UTET, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1992), cited in Boggione and Casalegno, *Dizionario del lessico amoroso* (Torino: UTET, 2000), 152; *Dizionario del lessico erotico* (Torino: UTET, 2004), 166.

<sup>49</sup> Cesare Garelli, *Il linguaggio murale* (Milano: Garzanti, 1978), 145.

<sup>50</sup> Francesco Apolloni, *Passo e chiudo. Diario di un giovane violento* (Roma: Minimum Fax, 1997), 156.

<sup>51</sup> John King, *Fuori casa*, tran. M. Bocchiola (Milano: Guanda, 1999), 28.

<sup>52</sup> I found the following occurrence of *darlo* in Aldo Busi’s *Sodomie in corpo 11* (1988): *arrivederci, Busi, e buon soggiorno in Kenya e mi raccomando: sia casto, e soprattutto eviti di andare con le bianche! Non lo dia in bocca al lupo!* (255). The sentence *eviti di andare con le bianche* signals a heterosexual context, indicating that this is an instance of *darlo*<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>53</sup> Note that *Vocabolario Treccani* defines *concedersi* as “*darsi, consentire a un rapporto sessuale*”, and illustrates with the sentence “*si è concessa al suo amante*” (<http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/concedere/>; my emphasis).

<sup>54</sup> The wide and varied distribution of *darla* would indicate that the label *gergale* is accurate only in the extended sense of “allusive, indirect,” not in the main meaning of “characteristic of a specific social group.”



The third level of the asymmetry is evinced by the fact that *darlo*<sub>2</sub> does not entail a negative connotation of its subject (i.e., it has not become fully equivalent to *darla*), not even in Campo's works, as shown by the comparison between (15) and (16):

- (15) a. *Lei dice, Guarda quello ha un modo di **darmelo** che mai nessuno in vita mia **me l'ha dato** così*<sup>55</sup>  
 b. *lei lì che si sbava e **lui che non gliel'ha mai dato***<sup>56</sup>  
 c. *A questo punto mi sembra di essere venuta al mondo per questo: per farfugliare parole insensate, per inarcare la schiena, muovere i fianchi e **farmelo dare** da questo russo di Pigalle*<sup>57</sup>
- (16) a. *un uomo si scoccia se **la vai a dare** in giro, se non sei solo per lui*<sup>58</sup>  
 b. *Lui mi ha detto che fra di voi era già finita da un po', che non scopavate mai, che **gliela davi** una volta ogni due tre mesi*<sup>59</sup>  
 c. *lo so che è un bel ragazzo e le zoccole arrapate che passano dall'officina sono pronte a **dargliela***<sup>60</sup>

Far from connoting men as sexually “loose,” *darlo*<sub>2</sub> carries the same negative connotation as *darla* (and perhaps it even reinforces it); that is, it still hints at women's loose sexual habits. This is evidenced particularly well in (17), where *darne* replaces *darlo*<sub>2</sub> due to the quantified contexts and co-occurs with *darla*.

- (17) *Eh, però te **ne ho dato proprio tanto**, vero? Te **ne ho dato un bel po'**, così quando sei a Parigi non vai a **darla** subito a qualche negrone o qualche francesino*<sup>61</sup>

By overtly referring to a large quantity, *darne tanto* “give a lot of it,” *darne un bel po'* “give quite a bit of it” underscore women's sexual “insatiability” just like *darla subito* “give it right away” does.

In conclusion, although through their never-ending chats and cogitations about love and intimate relationships Campo's women may be “reasserting their fundamental independence from [men],”<sup>62</sup> it appears that concerning their sexual lives they remain anchored to conventional views of women and the traditional construction of femininity whereby women are encouraged to cede agency and give in to men.

### Socio-cultural factors

Linguistic asymmetries pertaining to the representation of women and men reflect women's and men's perceived values and status in society; they are sexist because they are centered on the notion “that woman is a sexual being dependent on men.”<sup>63</sup> The asymmetry between *darla* and *darlo*

<sup>55</sup> Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> Rossana Campo, *Mai sentita così bene* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1995), 34.

<sup>57</sup> Rossana Campo, *Più forte di me* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007), 54.

<sup>58</sup> Rossana Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, 90.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>60</sup> Rossana Campo, *Lezioni di Arabo*, 111.

<sup>61</sup> Rossana Campo, *Fare l'amore*, 42.

<sup>62</sup> Giancarlo Lombardi, “Campo, Rossana (1963–),” in *The feminist encyclopedia of Italian literature*, edited by Rinaldina Russel (Westport, CT; London, UK: Greenwood Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>63</sup> Anne Pauwels, “Linguistic sexism and feminine linguistic activism,” in *The handbook of language and gender*, edited by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003), 553.

represents an instance of linguistic sexism because the moral discriminatory connotations these verbs inherently carry devalue women and embody a prejudiced stance toward gender and certain types of sexual practice: when it comes to sex life, women relent because they are innately weak, submissive, powerless, easily conquered by men's charm and physical strength (as well as intrinsically immoral and loose, and sexually greedy,) whereas men possess since they are strong, assertive and dominant. Furthermore, "normal" heterosexual intercourse is not vulgar, while sodomy is.

The development and persistence of the asymmetry between *darla* and *darlo* can be linked to enduring dominant socio-cultural beliefs and deep-rooted prejudicial views of women and 'normative' (heterosexual) vs. "deviant" sexual behaviors (homosexuality and sodomy). Misogyny and homophobia have permeated male dominated Western societies and cultures since antiquity but they differ crucially in that the former carries no stigma, it is socially and culturally accepted even among women, whereas the latter does. And it is precisely this difference, I suggest, that accounts for the asymmetry between these verbs.

The impact and incidence of misogyny on (Western) societies is strongly evidenced by proverbs, which express truth based on common sense or experience and describe basic rules of conduct. Proverbs about women abound across languages and cultures consistently that consistently reflect a marginalized, trivialized and demeaned view of women: "[L]a donna è certamente il tema più trattato dai proverbi. [...] Questo ci fa capire il peso che riveste nella visione popolare del mondo, dove però la sua straordinaria importanza e il suo potere sono arginati da diffidenze, avvertimenti, analisi spietate, malignità, spesso vere cattiverie."<sup>64</sup> Women are greedy ("Il gioco, il letto, la donna e il fuoco, non si contentan mai di poco,")<sup>65</sup> dangerous and wicked ("La donna è la rovina dell'uomo," "Una buona donna è sempre una cattiva bestia,")<sup>66</sup> and must please men ("La donna deve essere brava in casa, seria in strada, santa in chiesa e matta a letto.")<sup>67</sup>

Though it may seem that Italian women have attained equality, they actually continue to hold an inferior position within the family, in the work place and public life in general<sup>68</sup> and to be sexualized and objectified considerably, both privately and publicly. The sexualization and objectification of women that pervade Italian society is clearly attested in the mass media and is cleverly illustrated by Beppe Severgnini in his *La bella figura. A field guide to the Italian mind* (2006). In the chapter *Television, where the Semi-Undressed Signorina acquires a cloak of significance*, Severgnini writes:

The new Italian icon is the Semi-Undressed Signorina. We ought to put her on coins and stamps. Her face is interchangeable, but from the neck down everything stays the same. She turns up in every TV show program, wiggles her hips, and every so often gets to speak, especially when she has nothing to say.<sup>69</sup>

He then continues by remarking that Italian television advertising has made sex its "mechanism of choice,"<sup>70</sup> since either explicitly or allusively sexual references are employed in advertisements for

<sup>64</sup> Carlo Lapucci *Dizionario dei proverbi italiani* (Firenze: le Monnier, 2006). See also Frank, Nuessel. "The depiction of women in Italian proverbs." *Romance Languages Annuals XI* (2000): 288–94. and Valter Boggione, *Chi dice donna ... 3587 proverbi sull'amore, il matrimonio, il tradimento, la gelosia* (Torino: UTET, 2005), among others.

<sup>65</sup> Fortunato Bellonzi, *Proverbi toscani* (Milano: Aldo Martello Editore, 1968), 9.

<sup>66</sup> Carlo Lapucci, *Dizionario dei proverbi italiani*, 350.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth L. Krause "Italy" in *The Greenwood encyclopedia of women's issues worldwide Vol. 3, Europe*, edited by Lynn Walter (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 341-42; Monica Pasquino "Femminismo e femminismi dagli anni Ottanta al XXI secolo" in *Identità e differenze. Introduzione agli studi delle donne e di genere*, ed. Maria Serena Sapegno (Milano: Mondadori, 2011), 183-185.

<sup>69</sup> Beppe Severgnini, *La bella figura. A field guide to the Italian mind*, trans. Giles Watson (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 77.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

basically any kind of product. Quite revealing for our purposes is how Severgnini explains Italian women's acceptance of the sexualization of which they are victims, namely that they tolerate it "out of habit, resignation, and a lack of awareness. Thirty years ago, feminists complained if anyone reminded them they were women. Today women watch programs with scantily clad Barbie Doll lookalikes, bemoaning the fact that they cannot look like them."<sup>71</sup> The pervasiveness of sexism in contemporary Italy is, perhaps, even more tangibly attested by episodes involving high-profile public figures, particularly politicians, such as Silvio Berlusconi's *bunga bunga* parties or Beppe Grillo's Facebook post about Laura Boldrini.<sup>72</sup>

Women's subordinate role in the sphere of sexual life and sexuality persists widely in the Western world (hence Italy), where "it is the socially sanctioned role of boys to encourage girls to let them sample the fruit, and the role of girls to resist the 'harvest'"<sup>73</sup> and, although girls are expected to show some resistance not to appear overly "easy" or "loose," excessive resistance is also a problem since "[g]irls who do not go all the way may be viewed as 'frigid' or 'cock teases.'"<sup>74</sup> Moreover, "[n]ormative heterosexuality and the normative heterosexual act define young people in relation to each other: him as actor, her as acted upon; his agency, her subordination; her body for his pleasure. His body for his pleasure too."<sup>75</sup>

In sum, in the domain of sexual "conduct," women are still seen as easily lured; men's "romantic," enticing manners are aimed at making women fall. Women are well aware of this but accept it so to conform to sanctioned socio-cultural norms. Therefore, I would propose that misogyny has played a decisive role in the diffusion and entrenchment of *darla* in Italian, on the one hand, and promoted the emergence of *darlo*<sub>2</sub> on the other.

Let's now tackle the issue of the highly negligible distribution of *darlo*<sub>1</sub> in Italian. The ghost of homophobia has forever hunted Western societies. In medieval Europe, sodomy (which comprised both homo- and heterosexual anal intercourse as well as any type of non-vaginal intercourse) was considered the vilest of sexual sins<sup>76</sup> and was prosecuted until the nineteenth century (think of Oscar Wilde, to give but one example). The stigma associated to homosexuality and sodomy continues to live in contemporary Western societies, in particular among Christians; as Johansson and Percy aptly summarize, "[f]rom St. Paul onward, Christians deemed sodomy sinful and, once they gained hegemony over governments, criminal as well" and "[t]he sodomy delusion remained in full vigor until the 1960s and only now is being challenged."<sup>77</sup> In (popular) Western cultures, then, sodomy has remained the most "deviant" of sexual acts, and the strong stigma attached to it may have contributed to hinder the diffusion of *darlo*<sub>1</sub> in Italian.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>72</sup> For the latter and other episodes of sexism on the web see Ombretta Frau and Juliet Guzzetta. "Il blog è mio e lo gestisco io: Dominio di genere nel web italiano." *gender/sexuality/Italy* 2 (2015), accessed May 2016. <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/il-blog-e-mio-e-lo-gestisco-io-dominio-di-genere-nel-web-italiano/>

<sup>73</sup> Judith Daniluk *Women sexuality across life span. Challenging myths, creating meanings* (New York; London: The Guildford Press, 1998), 108.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>75</sup> Janet Holland, Caroline Romazanoglu, Rachel Thomson, and Sue Sharpe "When bodies come together: power, control and desire" in *Sexuality and society. A reader*, ed. Jeffrey Weeks Janet Holland and Matthew Waites (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 87.

<sup>76</sup> James A. Brundage "Sex and canon law" in *Handbook Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 43.

<sup>77</sup> Warren Johansson and William A. Percy "Homosexuality" in *Handbook of Medieval sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 176; see also Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe. A twentieth century history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Giovanni Dall'Orto, *Tutta un'altra storia. L'omosessualità dall'antichità al secondo dopoguerra* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2015).

Regarding the asymmetry between *darla* and *darlo*<sub>2</sub>, for *darlo*<sub>2</sub> to become truly equivalent to *darla* (hence for the asymmetry between the two to be leveled out), the subject of *darlo*<sub>2</sub> would have to acquire the same negative connotation of easiness, promiscuity as the subject of *darla*. But associating men to sexual easiness or promiscuity is a socially and culturally accepted, ingrained stereotyped view, which does not carry a negative, prejudiced connotation; rather, it is the “normative standard:” men are to seduce and conquer, while women are to be seduced and conquered. Of course it could well be the case that *darlo*<sub>2</sub> will catch up with *darla* in terms of distribution and frequency of use, the sexist asymmetry will most likely live on.

### Further research

This study has only scratched the surface. The most pressing questions to address are un-clouding the mystery surrounding the “fate” of *darlo*<sub>1</sub> and properly assess the status of *darlo*<sub>2</sub> in contemporary Italian. To answer these questions, the careful analysis of a comprehensive corpus of erotic literature from (at least) the fifteenth century to the present is needed, as well as an in-depth scrutiny of queer and “urban” literature and culture to assess if the sexist asymmetry between *darla* and *darlo* can be better (or differently) defined if analyzed against these scenarios.

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