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EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY CORRESPONDENCE LANGUAGE COURSES.

A CASE STUDY: *IL POLIGLOTTA MODERNO*

ABSTRACT. This paper will argue the pedagogical and prescriptivist value(s) of *Il Poliglotta* (1905-1907) as an example of early twentieth-century Italian correspondence educational courses for the teaching of, in particular, English, French and German. Through an in-depth analysis of the 'mail' section, and the evaluation of the metalanguage used by the instructor, it will take into consideration the advantages and disadvantages, and possibly the limits, of the new system, "facile and piano", as devised by Mr Da Nova and his team.

Keywords: correspondence courses, pedagogical prescriptivism, pronunciation, variation, English.

ABSTRACT Il presente lavoro analizzerà il valore pedagogico e prescrittivo de *Il Poliglotta* (1905-1907), corso per corrispondenza di inglese, francese e tedesco, pubblicato a Milano all'inizio del Novecento. Attraverso un'analisi della sezione "corrispondenza", e della metalingua utilizzata dal "maestro", si prenderanno in

considerazione i vantaggi e gli vantaggi del nuovo sistema, "facile e piano", ideato da Ernesto Da Nova e il suo team.

Parole chiave: corsi per corrispondenza, prescrittivismo pedagogico, pronuncia, variazione, lingua inglese.

1. Introduction

Il Poliglotta Moderno was a weekly magazine ("giornale settimanale") dedicated to the teaching and learning of the English language, published in Milan from May 1905 until December 1907. It was edited and directed by Ernesto Da Nova.

Together with English, *Il Poliglotta Moderno* first offered courses in French, but in later years the German, Spanish and Arabic courses also came out. As pointed out by Maroger (2001: 223), in her first study dedicated to the French version of the magazine, the method is traditional concerning the exercises and the global approach to the language, but it introduces innovations in communication with its users through mail correspondence (see also Maroger 2002). Originally planned as a weekly publication and available to subscribers, from 1906 all the issues, for English and French, were collected and printed as a three-volume course. It is in the three-volume edition that the subtitle "Imparare senza maestro la lingua inglese" (Learning without the help of a teacher) appeared for the first time. This edition was regularly reprinted until the second half of the twentieth century and also adopted, as a text book, in

Italian secondary schools. The newly devised system, defined as "facile e piano" or easy and plain, was based on "pochi vocaboli, pochissime regole, molta pratica" (*Il Poliglotta Moderno*: 1905: 1), that is, a few words, very few rules and a lot of practice. Each lesson contained sections on grammar (with explanations, examples and practice), translation (from and into the foreign language), reading exercises and examples of 'real conversations', pronunciation tips and correspondence where readers' (i.e. students') feedbacks were commented on and further instructions given. The course was perfectly in line with nineteenth-century grammar-translation course books with, to use Howatt's and Widdowson's words (2004: 153), its "stress on accuracy […], obsession with 'completeness', and the neglect of spoken language". They also suggest that "the high priority attached to meticulous standards of accuracy […] was a prerequisite for passing the increasing number of formal written examinations that grew up during the century" (Howatt & Widdowson 2004: 152) in Europe and the USA, as well (see Battistella 2009). In this paper, I will discuss the pedagogical and prescriptivist value(s) of *Il Poliglotta* as an example of early twentieth-century Italian correspondence educational courses for the teaching of, in particular, English, French and German, through an in-depth analysis of each grammar and 'mail' section and the evaluation of the metalanguage used by the instructor.

2. The *Poliglotta Moderno*

The *Poliglotta Moderno* was not the first correspondence method dedicated to foreign languages in Italy, clearly there were others. Maroger (2002:2) compared it with other methods published in Italy between the second half of the eighteenth and the first of the nineteenth century, both in manual form or in instalments. The driving force was a democratic principle, which promoted a cheap way of learning for everyone.

In the *Poliglotta Moderno,* the tutor's voice is present not only in each lesson, but also in the correspondence section. Moreover, in the introduction to the course, the guidelines on how to use of the instalments are given, so that it is very clear how the author wanted the method to be used.

First published in 1905 by Sonzogno (Milan) the course was edited by Ernesto Da Nova. Together with English, *Il Poliglotta Moderno* first offered correspondence courses in French, which has been investigated by Maroger (2001 and 2002), German and, in later years, Spanish and Arabic.

Ernesto Da Nova seems largely unmentioned elsewhere in linguistics or foreign language studies. He was not a professional linguist, i.e. in its *Poliglotta Moderno* he is referred to as "ragioniere" that is an accountant. He was just an entrepreneur – a businessman whose success was in mass-marketing good English and in building a correspondence language school.

The first issue of the three languages, i.e. English, French and German, came out the 14th of May 1905 and, on the front page, the method and aims of the course were clearly described (*Il Poliglotta Moderno*: Anno I, i:14th of May, 1905):

> Il programma del *Poliglotta Moderno* si riassume in due parole: Poco e Bene. Non è quindi necessaria una delle solite introduzioni, una prefazione con molte premesse.
>
> Chi veramente desidera imparare la lingua inglese ci segue, si occupi un quarto d'oro al giorno con buona volontà, eseguisca gli esercizi proposti, studii i vocaboli e, senza alcun sforzo e quasi senza accorgersene, riuscirà perfettamente, non solo a comprendere la lingua studiata, ma bensì anche a scriverla e a parlarla correttamente.
>
> Basta leggere la presente lezione per avere ogni idea e dettaglio del nuovo sistema facile e piano, col quale vogliamo far imparare le lingue straniere: pochi vocaboli, pochissime regole, molta pratica. Ecco quanto faremo. Raccomandando allo studioso – costanza e buon volere – saremo sempre a sua disposizione per qualunque chiarimento.
>
> Senz'altro cediamo la parola al professore, che incomincerà il suo corso.
>
> LA DIREZIONE

The structure of the syllabus was characterized by two keywords, which were also to become the slogan of Mr. Da Nova's course: Poco (little, i.e. the essential) and bene (well, proficiently), and for this reason, in his view, a long preface with too many promises was not necessary.

Fifteen minutes a day of study and practice, obviously completing all the given exercises and studying the lexis, and the learner, without much effort, would be able to understand, write and speak the language proficiently and correctly.

The "new and easy" method consisted of few words (so an essential vocabulary), few rules and a lot of practice together with good will and constancy.

The *Poliglotta Moderno* contained 138 lessons distributed in 138 issues or weekly instalments. The table below shows the evolution of the course during the three years of publication.

Year	Issues	Lessons
1905	34	1-34
1906	52	35-86
1907	52	87-138

It was a typical product of the nineteenth-century grammar-translation method, both in structure and pedagogical content.

The cost was 10 cents per issue or 3.50 lire for an eight-month subscription.

The new formula promoted by the *Poliglotta* met the favour of the public and seemed rather revolutionary. It was sent to subscribers or sold at the newsagent's and in bookshops. Its editorial success was immediate as demonstrated by the various reprints and the ever-growing number of subscribers. Indeed, this is attested in an advertisement embedded in the last page of the issue dated the 3rd December 1905, in

which it is recorded the number of printed copies: 200.000. Moreover, it was also awarded with the "medaglia d'oro" (golden medal) in the exhibition that took place in Bruxelles in 1905.

The first two pages of each issue/lesson were generally dedicated to grammar rules and grammatical elements. They were usually followed by a "practice" section and a summary of the previous lesson. In the former, which dealt with new lexical elements, learners were always given indication of pronunciation though not by the use of IPA or diacritics but by means of respelling, the so called figurative pronunciation ("pronuncia figurata"). In addition, the practical activities also included translation exercises into and from the foreign language.

In the section entitled "Conversazioni" phraseological elements were presented. The key to the previous translation exercises usually preceded the illustrated dictionary, again with figurative pronunciation. Then, the issue concluded with the "corrispondenza".

On its utility and importance the team of the *Poliglotta* had no doubts as demonstrated by the reply to the subscriber V. R. from Marseilles: "Due sole classi di persone non saprebbero che farne [...] l'analfabeta e il bambino lattante [...] Grazie." (1905:22). That is 'everybody' should own the Poliglotta. However, it would result useless to two groups of people: illiterates and infants.

A very interesting fact, which emerges from a comparative analyses of the three languages, is that many "letters" were integrally published in the three courses.

Indeed, this last section of the course entirely dedicated to the correspondence was already announced from the very first issue dated 14 May 1905:

> Lo studioso, giunto a questo punto, avrà constatato che il sistema adottato dal *Poliglotta* per l'insegnamento dell'inglese è facilissimo. Però qualcuno dei Lettori potrebbe vedervi qua e là delle difficoltà, potrebbe essere colto da qualche dubbio, avere bisogno di qualche consiglio. In tal caso scriva direttamente alla Direzione del giornale che il *Poliglotta* sarà pronto a rispondere, a spianare ogni difficoltà, a risolvere ogni dubbio. Le risposte il Lettore le troverà sempre in questa rubrica nei numeri successivi. Noi siamo interamente a disposizione degli studiosi Lettori del nostro giornale e con esso ci tratterremo con vero piacere (1905:6).

Learners could address directly the "Direzione" when in doubt or in need of advice. This section constitutes the strength and the peculiarity of the course.

The replies to readers/learners' queries will be constantly published, though less so in the 1907 issues. The following table represents the distribution of the correspondence section in the three courses.

	English	**French**	**German**
1905	27/34 issues	25/34 issues	27/34 issues
1906	25/52 issues	24/52 issues	26/52 issues
1907	24/52 issues	24/52 issues	21/52 issues
Total	76/138 issues (55%)	73/138 issues (53 %)	74/138 issues (54%)

As the table shows, the correspondence section is present in almost 50% of the entire courses, but it is not distributed in a uniform way. Even though this section reproduces only the tutor's replies, and never the letter's queries, the corpus of the letters offers very interesting, precious data on various aspects. For the first time at the centre of the pedagogical support, and motivated by it, learners can express a multitude of feelings and needs: admiration or perplexity about the method or the entire project, complaints of any kind, doubts on their learning process, request and advice in general.

Moreover, names and surnames in the correspondence are useful to determine the percentage of male and female learners who were keen on "distance learning courses"; indication of place, instead, helps trace a geographical map of subscribers and readers and thus trace the need for self-access at the beginning of the twentieth century. Last but not least, indication of the profession will help trace a profile of the self-access learner interested in learning a foreign language.

3. Data analysis

First of all, from a general analysis of the correspondence section of the three languages, it emerges that the majority of the subscribers preferred not to sign with their full names, but with their initials, nicknames, professions or their surnames

only. On the contrary, very few subscribers decided not to indicate the name of the place from where they wrote.

The table below shows the different pieces of information which were given by the different subscribers.

	English	French	German
Gender	30%	35%	35%
Place	88%	92%	84%
Profession	8%	5%	10%
Total number of subscribers	581	468	516

As a consequence, it is very difficult to trace a complete picture of the situation and the data about gender and, especially, profession are the more uncertain.

In addition to that, sometimes there are replies to letters written by more than one subscriber ("Un gruppo di studenti", "Vari studiosi di lingue", "Alcuni concorrenti abbonati", etc.) and it is not easy to understand the exact number of people who wrote the queries together.

Another difficulty, that has been already pointed out, is the fact that many "letters" were integrally published in the three courses, probably for editorial reasons. Indeed, a great number of subscribers praised the new method promoted by the *Poliglotta* and these letters could have been used to consolidate its base of supporters among the subscribers.

Lastly, it should be noted that the *Poliglotta* allowed its subscribers to begin a parallel correspondence with their peers through the publication of a list of readers who were interested in exchanging letters in the language they were studying with the recommendation of talking about the topic explained in the *Poliglotta* and using the words given in the issues. An interesting fact that emerges from these lists is that there were readers who had subscribed to two or three language courses provided by the *Poliglotta.*

3. 1 Gender

On average, less than 40% of the subscribers signed with their full names or indicated their profession. Looking at the graph below, the most impressive data is that the number of male subscribers is five times more than that of women.
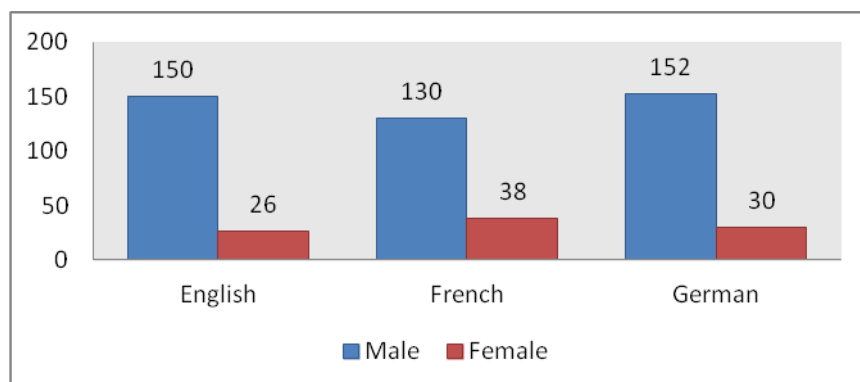
The French *Poliglotta* with 38 female subscribers seems to be the course preferred by women, but hidden behind the initials of their names hundreds of other potential female subscribers could have written to the *Poliglotta.*

Considering the general number of subscribers to the three courses and the gender data, it is interesting to see that English and German, as a whole, had the highest number of male subscribers. Whereas French, which was the most studied language in Italy at the time, registered, in general, the lowest number of subscribers and the highest number of women subscribers, in particular.

3.2 Place

As has already been said, place names are almost always indicated.

The *Poliglotta* publishing house, Sonzogno, was in Milan, for this reason the highest rate of subscribers came from Northern Italy: it was easier to receive instalments and probably the advertising campaign was more effective.

The towns with more subscribers were, in Northern Italy, Milan, Genoa and Turin (103/150 subscribers from Northern Italy came from Milan in the French edition); in central Italy, Rome and Florence; in Southern Italy, Naples and Palermo.

Rather interesting are the percentages referred to Central and Southern Italy for the English course. Comparing this data with the French and the German editions, it is possible to see that double the number of subscribers came from those areas. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were characterised by mass emigration towards the United States, especially from the Southern regions and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. A particular interest for the English language emerges also from the queries about American accent in the corpus of the correspondence section.

Finally, there were subscribers also from foreign countries: Switzerland, Austria, Germany and France, Brazil, United Kingdom to name but a few. Those subscribers wrote in Italian, therefore they were Italian immigrants abroad.

3.3 Profession

Profession is the least divulged of the personal details. Nonetheless, data can be here divided into different categories considering their working environment and their education.

- English course: 13 doctors and lawyers, 2 members of the clergy, 8 teachers, 4 from the army ("Regia Marina Italiana", "Scuderie Reali"), 15 from the middle class (accountants, engineers, employees of the private or public sector, etc.), 4 manual workers and a student.

- French course: 6 doctors, 1 priest, 8 teachers, 3 from the army ("Regia Marina Italiana", a captain and a marshal), 3 from the middle class (an engineer and two employees of the private or public sector), 2 manual workers and a student.

- German course: 14 from the high class (doctors, lawyers and a pharmacist), 2 politicians, 3 members of the clergy (a priest, a rabbi and a theologian), 6 teachers, 6 from the army ("Regia Marina Italiana", infantry, captains, etc.), 11 from the middle class (accountants, engineers, employees of the private or public sector, etc.), 6 manual workers and, finally, a journalist (Camera dei deputati – tribuna stampa), a scholar-businessman and a doctor-teacher.

4. The teacher's voice

From the very first issue a sometimes almost ironic and reproaching tone may be noted on the part of the teacher/master, as can be seen in the following reply to a certain Signor F.R. from Milan:

> Bene entrambi gli esercizî, senonchè Lei scrisse sempre il pronome personale *I* (io) colla lettera minuscola. Badi che gli inglesi tengono moltissimo all'Ego; e poi francamente, non le sembra che un minuscolo *i* tutto solo in mezzo a tante parole, farebbe una ben meschina figura? Del resto nei vocaboli e nel riassunto della lezione, avrà letto che questa parola va sempre scritta con la lettera maiuscola" (1905:14).

He receives some feedback on previously sent exercises which apparently were "well done" but is soon corrected on the misspelled 1st person singular subject pronoun which is always in capital letter because the English "care a lot about their

Ego [...] Don't you think that a small "i" all alone among such beautiful words would cut a poor figure?". On top of that, the teacher gets angry because that rule had already been explained.

In the same issue, in the same page a certain S.A. from Verona added a final –*e* to a qualifying adjective to mark the feminine probably due to possible French interference. This is soon marked as a terrible mistake:

> Perché ha aggiunto un *e* finale agli aggettivi qualificanti un nome femminile? Lei si è confuso colla grammatica francese. Prima di fare la traduzione degli esercizî Le consiglio di studiare perfettamente le regole grammaticali. È un errore gravissimo il suo, poiché, come venne spiegato, l'aggettivo qualificativo in inglese è invariabile (1905:14).

In most of the correspondence sections replies related to readers' queries on pronunciation have a prominent presence. What is more, no reference books, such as pronouncing dictionaries or manuals, are clearly mentioned or quoted, but from the various adverts printed in the English course, one can infer that the team of the *Poliglotta* ("la Direzione") may have well used the two most recent and influential bilingual dictionaries of that time, i.e. Millhouse-Bracciforti's *New English and Italian Pronouncing and Explanatory Dictionary* (1886-1920) and Melzi's *Nuovo dizionario inglese-italiano e italiano-inglese* (1913):

> Il Melzi è di più recente pubblicazione, ma anche il Millhouse è un buonissimo dizionario (*Il Poliglotta Moderno,* 1905: 94).

Both dictionaries were influenced by eighteenth-century orthoepists and in particular they used John Walker's dictionary (1791) as a model. Walker had favoured as a reference accent that of educated south-eastern English speakers, so he had consolidated the "English is English" tradition or propaganda which had stigmatized and marginalized other regional accents (see Beal 2010, Hickey 2009, Sturiale 2012 and 2014).

Da Nova's penchant for simplification was also evident in the pronunciation and spelling rules he gave. In the reply to "Un assiduo" ("a regular") from Perugia (1905: 32), he claims that:

> Poiché, dato il motto del giornale, Poco e bene, occorrerebbero almeno dieci lezioni per dare tutti i differenti suoni delle lettere colle eccezioni, e tutti i segni convenzionali per i diversi casi di pronuncia, in capo alle quali dieci lezioni il paziente studioso non si raccapezzerebbe più per la confusione formata nella mente, e abbiamo trovato molto più opportuno mettere direttamente la pronuncia quanto più precisa, semplice e chiara ci fu possibile dopo ogni vocabolo. Se desse ad ogni lettera il suono alfabetico e non avesse l'ajuto di una pronuncia figurata vicino al vocabolo, Ella commetterebbe spropositi enormi di pronuncia in inglese. Che vuole, l'alfabeto dei biondi Albioni è originale come gli inglesi stessi, quindi meglio un pochino di pazienza e meno spropositi; non le pare? (1905: 32) [1]

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[1] Given the motto "little and well" (i.e. quality not quantity), it would be preferable to have at least ten lessons in order to cover all the different pronunciations of the letters including the exceptions and all the different conventional/standard symbols for the various types of pronunciation(s). Following these ten lessons, the patient student would suffer mental confusion, so we have found it more helpful to write pronunciation as precisely, simply and clearly as possible directly after each word. If each letter were not given its alphabetic sound without the help of a figurative pronunciation the student would make serious errors with the pronunciation of English. Saying that, the alphabet of the blond Albion is as original as the English themselves. Therefore better a little more patience and fewer mistakes, wouldn't you agree? (1905:32)

In short, in this reply two key issues of the *Poliglotta* come to the fore: figurative pronunciation and no room for linguistic variation.

That pronunciation was the most difficult obstacle for Italian learners is a recurrent theme to be found in the prefaces to dictionaries and courses. Melzi, for example, refers to it and he claims that "the only correct pronunciation is that of English people or that of a good teacher":

> La più grave difficoltà per chi impara l'inglese è la pronuncia. Chi se ne intende un po', sa quali siano gli ostacoli che continuamente si affacciano nell'insegnarlo, perché sola *retta pronunzia* è quella degli Inglesi stessi, o d'un buon maestro. Ciò dipende perché numerose parole inglesi non hanno suoni corrispondenti a quelli della nostra lingua. Riuscii, per altro, e non con lieve fatica, ad indicarla nel più approssimativo modo possibile. Vi segnai tutte le *gradazioni foniche* e quelle degli accenti. I due suoni *aspro* e *dolce* del *th*, sono chiaramente distinti (Melzi 1913: v. Italics in original).

In this case, English is to be interpreted as in England and not as a simplification for British, as we shall see in later examples.

For the *Poliglotta* just one recognized standard variety of English existed and that was the British variety, or to be precise the well-educated English variety. The accent of the "colonies" are stigmatized and marginalized since in America people speak English with a far less correct and nice accent:

> In America si parla inglese con un accento molto meno corretto e … meno simpatico che in Inghilterra; così pure nelle altre colonie l'inglese, benché ben parlato, non potrà mai conservare l'accento puro che possiede nella terra madre. Ecco la diversità di pronuncia. Quanto al non saper parlare, nonostante si comprenda e si possa leggere, non deve impressionarla: ciò

dipende più dal timore di dire spropositi che dalla ignoranza della lingua straniera. Non bisogna essere timidi: le prime volte dovrà ripetere la frase perché l'abbiano a comprendere, poi ogni difficoltà si appianerà. Lo stesso se Lei per i primi giorni non comprende gli *Inglesi autentici*, come Lei dice, non si sgomenti, e con un gentile: *I beg your pardon?* Accompagnato da un'espressione interrogativa si fa ripetere la domanda. Certamente che alcune lezioni orali prima di slanciarsi in una conversazione puramente inglese, sono utilissime. No, l'inglese è dolce e non richiede nessuna alterazione della voce. Ora che è quasi al termine del corso inglese può incominciare il francese (1907: 30).

In other English colonies, though well spoken, English cannot retain the pure accent it has in the mother country:

Noi cerchiamo d'insegnare, per quanto ci è possibile, la fonetica orale giusta, non basandoci sui dialetti, ma sulla vera lingua parlata nella madre patria. (1905: 248).

Moreover, a negative attitude towards American English pronunciation is widely shown and it is often referred to as wrong ("scorretta").

Other interesting examples where American English is stigmatised as wrong can be found in the following extracts:

"Avvisiamo l'Abbonato 1298 che la pronuncia dell'amico abitante in America è troppo aperta e in alcune parole scorretta" (1905:70)

and

" Avv. Alfredo Barbaro, Folco – Noi diamo la vera pronuncia inglese: quella cui accenna Lei è usata in America. Se desidera parlare correttamente l'inglese segue la nostra fonetica [...]" (1905:112)

or

"G.A. Palermo – Sì, la pronuncia degli americani è diversa e piuttosto scorretta" (1905:142).

To conclude, Italian mass migration, especially from the southern regions, towards the United States, could explain the interest in learning a language, or a variety of a language, that, at the time, was not the official foreign language it is today.

5. Concluding remarks

Listening and speaking activities were certainly lacking in self-learning methods at the beginning of the twentieth century and the editor of *Il Poliglotta* was well aware of this (see Pedrazzini 2016). However, the reply printed both in the English (issue 98 dated March 1907) and the French editions (issue 96 1907) shows how De Nova and his teams had thought of improving their language courses, with the help of 'new techonologies':

> Grazie infinite del suggerimento. La di Lei idea fu da noi sino dall'anno scorso ventilata, ma molte difficoltà si affacciarono … Ora esiste una grammatica con esercizî che si ripetono anche sui dischi del grammofono e da quanto sappiamo, questo sistema è applicato all'Università Bocconi in Milano; solo però per la lingua inglese (1907: 95).

Other projects, announced in the correspondence sections, but never realised, included a "buon prontuario in varie lingue" (French edition issue n. 37, 1906) to help learners with the most frequent phrases in different languages. Probably *Il*

Poliglotta aimed to renew the tradition of multilingual manuals, but the following year the project seemed to have been abandoned: "Pel manuale di conversazione in quattro lingue, vedremo in seguito il da farsi; ma ce ne esistono già tanti" (edizione francese n. 87).

To sum up, and in this I fully agree with Maroger (2001: 222), *Il Poliglotta* draws heavily from tradition but with a new advertising language and style, boasting the novelty and simplicity of use of the method. Ernesto Da-Nova was an accountant, the *Poliglotta* a commercial product, the autodidact a client.

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