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Christian values embedded in the Italian language: A semantic analysis of *carità*

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1. Christianity in Italian language

In an essay titled '*Perché non possiamo non dirci cristiani*' ('Why we cannot help calling ourselves Christians', 1942), the Italian philosopher and linguist Benedetto Croce contended that it is impossible to deny the Christian roots of Italian society and the influence of what he called 'the Christian revolution' on Italian history and culture:

The Christian revolution worked upon the very centre of the soul, upon the moral consciousness, and by emphasizing the inner essence of that consciousness, almost seemed to confer on it a new power, a new spiritual quality, which had hitherto been lacking in humanity. ... We must hold that those men most effectively carried on the advances both in thought and life. And, in spite of some superficial anti-Christianity, these were in fact the humanists of the Renaissance. (Croce 1949: 37)

One may or may not agree with Croce on the idea that Italian society and culture have inherently Christian roots. However, at least from a strictly linguistic point of view, Croce is no doubt right: the influence of Christianity on the Italian language is undeniable. Italian is rich in

words, fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions which reflect Christian values and are frequently used by speakers in discourse. Even the most fervent upholders of the secular nature of Italian society must have said *che peccato!* ('what a sin', meaning 'what a pity!'), *beato te!beati voi!* ('blessed you', meaning 'lucky you!'), *misericordia!* ('mercy!'), *Madonna mia!* ('my Madonna!') and *per carità!* ('for charity's sake') at least once in their lives.

The peculiarity of various Italian words and phrases expressing Christian values is that they are polysemous: in discourse, they are used both in their Christian meaning and in a phraseological meaning which may or may not be related to the Christian one. A glaring example of this kind of polysemy is the word *carità* (/kari'ta/, roughly 'charity', 'act of love'), which expresses both a Christian meaning and a series of distinct phraseological meanings which are only partly related or completely unrelated to the Christian one. The different meanings of *carità* coexist, but do not compete in the same contexts; therefore, it is possible to identify and distinguish these meanings clearly and precisely by analysing how *carità* is used in different contexts and by looking at specific collocations. Both the Christian and the phraseological meanings of *carità* are represented by prototypical collocations: *atto di carità* ('act of *carità*') for the Christian meaning and *per carità* (literally, 'for *carità*'s sake') for the phraseological meanings.

This chapter presents an analysis of the different meanings expressed by the word *carità* in different contexts and discusses the conceptual and semantic relation between these meanings. The analysis is made by adopting the methodology of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) (Wierzbicka 1992a, 1996, 1997, 2001; Goddard 2011, 2018; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014) from an exclusively synchronic perspective and is in line with Wierzbicka's (2001, 2019) semantic analysis of the core principles of Christianity as expressed in language. Separate semantic explications are presented for each meaning of *carità*. The body of data includes examples from the CORIS/CODIS corpus of contemporary written Italian, from contemporary novels and online material.¹ The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the relation between the polysemy of Italian words reflecting Christian values and the double-sided (Christian and secular) nature of Italian society.

1 CORIS/CODIS (n.d.) Corpus of Written Italian. Available at: corpora.dslo.unibo.it/TCORIS/.

2. The Christian meaning of *carità*

As Wierzbicka has demonstrated in her works on the semantics of Christianity (most notably 2001, 2019), it is impossible to elucidate the key principles of Christianity without analysing Christian keywords and their meanings. Language, Wierzbicka writes, has the ability ‘to express what Christians believe, and to do so clearly, intelligibly and truthfully’ (2019: 28). At the same time, Wierzbicka has often pointed out that the language of Christianity is not easy to analyse, both for reasons of style (e.g. the ubiquitous use of metaphors) and because of linguistic differences and translation inaccuracies characterising different versions of Christian texts (e.g. the Bible). For these reasons, a semantic analysis of words that are carriers of Christian values like *carità* needs to be scrupulously grounded in discourse and in texts. In *What Christians Believe* (2019), Wierzbicka has stressed the importance of sticking as close as possible to the texts not only for the sake of semantic accuracy, but also for the correct interpretation of the Christian values encapsulated in the meanings of Christian keywords like *carità*.² This can be done only by simplifying the often-abstruse language of metaphors and by identifying any translation inaccuracies. Following Wierzbicka’s analytical approach, in my analysis of the Christian meaning of the Italian word *carità* presented in this section I have kept the New Testament and other key texts of Christian thinking under close scrutiny.

The noun *carità* is conceptually, etymologically and semantically related to the adjective *caro* (‘dear’), which denotes an expression of good feelings towards someone (Faresse 2018a). More precisely, *carità* has always been used in the Christian tradition to talk about a specific form of ‘love’: God’s love of people above all things, the love which unites people with God. It was Jesus who preached this form of love in his commandment ‘*ama il prossimo tuo come te stesso*’ (‘love your neighbour as yourself’). In doing so, Jesus referred to God’s feelings for people, and this raises the much-debated question of whether or not ‘mental actions’ and anthropomorphic features like feeling

2 One glaring example of semantic misinterpretation discussed by Wierzbicka is that of the English word *almighty* and of the Latin *omnipotens* in contrast to the original Greek *pantokrator* used in relation to God in the Old Testament. Wierzbicka argues that the English *almighty* and the Latin *omnipotens* give a distorted idea of God as someone who can basically do whatever he wants. This, in her view, is very different from the actual idea of God reflected in the meaning of the Ancient Greek *pantokrator*, which is semantically much more focused on ‘happening’ than ‘wanting’. For Wierzbicka, the main component of the meaning of *pantokrator* is ‘if God wants some things to happen, after some time they will all happen, as God wants’.

(and wanting) are at all ascribable to God. Discussing this point in detail, Wierzbicka (2019) has shown that there is compelling evidence in Christian texts unambiguously proving that God ‘feels’, and more precisely that ‘God feels something very good towards people’. It is Jesus himself who speaks about God’s love (‘God so loved the world that he gave his only son ...’) in the New Testament. Moreover, Wierzbicka emphasises the fact that several times God himself speaks about Jesus in terms of his ‘beloved son’. Although there is no semantic equivalent for the Greek *agapao* used in the Bible to talk about God’s feelings towards Jesus and people, Wierzbicka contends that it is possible to capture these feelings in universal terms and proposes to do so by positing the components ‘God feels something very good towards people’ and ‘people feel something very good towards God’. This mutual expression of very good feelings between God and people constitutes the conceptual and semantic base of the Christian meaning of the Italian *carità*. Crucially, Wierzbicka contends that if all words (including *feel*) could not be attributed to God there could be no dialogue between God and people, and this would conflict with the very foundations of Christianity (2019: 36). Although the meaning of *carità* includes an expression of good feelings towards someone, this word is not an emotion term like, for example, *pietà* (‘pity’); in discourse, one does not say **provare/sentire carità per qualcuno* (‘to feel *carità* towards someone’) as one can say *provare/sentire pietà per qualcuno*. Italian speakers talk about *un atto/un gesto/un’opera di carità* (‘an act/a show/a work of *carità*’) and about actions inspired by a *spirito di carità* (‘spirit of *carità*’). In verb phrases, *carità* collocates with *domandare/chiedere* (‘ask’), *accettare* (‘accept’), *rifutare* (‘refuse’) and especially *fare* (‘do/make/perform’). The constructions *fare la carità a qualcuno* (‘to perform an act of *carità* for someone’) and *fare la carità di + N_{ph}/V_{ph}* (‘to make the *carità* of’) are by far the most frequent collocations in the body of collected data:

- (1) Papa Francesco ai ragazzi ambrosiani: ‘Testimoniate la vostra fede con **gesti di carità**’.³
Pope Francis to the Milanese teens: ‘Testify your faith through **acts of carità**.’
- (2) Mi domando: quanto si può chiedere a un uomo? A un essere di carne e sangue? Gli si può chiedere di non rubare, di lavorare con il sudore della fronte, di **fare la carità** ai poveri.

3 Available at: www.chiesadimilano.it/news/chiesa-diocesi/papa-francesco-ai-ragazzi-ambrosiani-testimoniate-la-vostra-fede-con-gesti-di-carita-212987.html.

I wonder: how much can one ask of a man? To a being of flesh and blood? One can ask him not to steal, to work with the sweat of his brow, to **make the *carità*** to the poor. (CORIS/CODIS corpus, narrativa)

- (3) Dovrei ringraziarti in ginocchio? Per **avermi fatto la *carità*** della tua attenzione?

Am I supposed to go down on my knees and thank you? For **having made me the *carità*** of your attention? (CORIS/CODIS corpus, narrativa)

The discourse on *carità* clearly indicates that conceptually and semantically this word is related to ‘doing’ before being related to ‘feeling’; the word does express the idea of feeling something good towards someone, but these good feelings are manifested through actions. An act of *carità* consists in doing something good for someone who needs help and suffers, and is inspired by the good feelings that the helper expresses towards the sufferer. The characteristic of these good feelings and their associated way of thinking is that they are instilled in people as a value. Christians are taught that it is good to feel something good and to do good things for people who suffer as they would feel and would do for their brothers and sisters, the underlying assumption being that all people are sons and daughters of God. The idea of ‘brotherly love’ and of belonging to the same family of God is reflected in the collocation *carità fraterna* (‘brotherly *carità*’) used in Italian discourse. Like other words expressing Christian values, the semantics of *carità* does not just encapsulate a particular way of thinking about other people, but also serves as a moral and ethical code for people’s conduct. *Carità* denotes a way of thinking that has implications both for people’s feelings towards other people and for people’s actions: more precisely what people do to other people. Its semantics synthesises thinking, feeling and doing, and ultimately relates to ‘how people can live well with other people’ and ‘how people can live well with God’, to use Wierzbicka’s words (2019).

There are significant semantic differences between acts of *carità* and acts of *gentilezza* (‘kindness’) or *solidarietà* (‘solidarity’), which also consist in doing something good for someone. Differently from acts of *carità*, acts of *kindness* are not triggered by someone’s suffering. As pointed out by Travis (1997), the *kind* person does something good for someone because he/she does not want this person to feel something bad, but not because this person is suffering or because he/she cares for this person. An act

of *solidarietà* is performed towards people to whom something bad has happened recently and who suffer because of this (Faresè 2018b), whereas disgraces or calamities are not triggers of *carità*.

The performer of an act of *carità* does something good for someone whose current life conditions do not permit him/her to live well and who suffers because of this. The helper witnesses this person's suffering and decides to offer his/her help, both because he/she was taught to feel and to do something good for people in need and because he/she does not want this person to suffer. The helper knows that what he/she can do won't permit the sufferer to live well and that he/she can only alleviate the suffering momentarily. However, the helper can at least satisfy an immediate necessity of the sufferer and can bring momentary relief from sorrow, as stated in Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*:

Following the example given in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Christian charity is first of all the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick, visiting those in prison, etc. (Benedict XVI 2005)

An act of *carità* can be defined as such if it satisfies four conditions related to the helper's attitude: (i) the helper does not expect to receive anything in return for his/her good actions; (ii) the helper does not expect that something good will happen to him/her because he/she offered his/her help; (iii) the act is not performed to attract people's respect and admiration; (iv) the helper does not consider the person in need 'someone below me'. The fourth condition is related to the fact that sometimes an act of *carità* can be refused because it can be perceived as a way of highlighting the social differences (in power, life conditions and opportunities) between the people involved in the act:

- (4) Il fabbro appoggia le due nocche sul tavolo e mi dice a voce diversa, ora bassa come un ringhio: **Non ci serve la tua carità**. Ci serve che scendi dall'altare'.

The locksmith puts his two knuckles on the table and with a different tone of voice, now low as a growl, says to me: **We don't need your carità**. We need you to get down the altar.' (CORIS/CODIS corpus, MON2014_16)

Essentially, an act of *carità* is inspired by a genuine expression of good feelings towards someone with no ulterior motives or personal interests in mind, as stated by St Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians (13: 4–7):

La carità è magnanima, benevola è la carità; non è invidiosa, non si vanta, non si gonfia d'orgoglio, non manca di rispetto, non cerca il proprio interesse, non si adira, non tiene conto del male ricevuto, non gode dell'ingiustizia ma si rallegra della verità. Tutto scusa, tutto crede, tutto spera, tutto sopporta.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

The Christian meaning of *carità* used in Italian discourse is captured in the following explication. It is divided in two big cognitive scenarios: the first captures how the helper thinks, whereas the second captures how the helper does not think. The explication captures the conceptual relation between living, feeling and doing, the idea of ‘brotherly love’, the immediacy and momentariness of the helping act and the idea ‘I know that I can do it’. Wanting to help is only one aspect of the act of *carità*; the helper also needs to be able to help and most of all, he/she acts following his/her conscience. Knowing that one can help excludes any hesitations and emphasises the awareness that *carità* is a matter of moral duty. The final component captures the fact that *carità* is a value:

[A] *la carità verso il prossimo (carità towards the neighbour)*

a. it can be like this:

b. someone thinks like this about someone else:

‘this someone can’t live well now if someone else doesn’t do something good for this someone

because of this, this someone feels something bad

when I think about this, I feel something good towards this someone like I can feel towards some people if it is like this:

these people are part of something, I am part of the same something

- I don't want this someone to feel something bad
because of this, I want to do something good for this someone in this
moment, I know that I can do it'
- c. because this someone thinks like this, this someone does something
good for this other someone
- d. when this someone does it, this someone doesn't think like this about
this other someone:
'this someone is someone below me
I want to do it because if I do it people will think something good
about me
I want to do it because if I do it something good will happen to me
if I do something good for this someone now,
this someone can't not-do something good for me after this'
- e. it is good if it is like this

3. The meanings of *per carità*

The phraseological meanings of *carità* emerge in the idiomatic prepositional phrase *per carità*, which is highly polysemous. Only in the construction *fare qualcosa per carità* ('to do something for *carità*') *carità* retains its Christian meaning. In this construction, the preposition *per* performs the function of 'purpose' and the phrase expresses the idea of an action inspired by the Christian spirit of *carità* and performed to help someone who suffers:

- (5) 'Ebbene, si tratta di questo. Ieri mi trovavo nei paraggi, vicino alla riva del mare. Un uomo **mi aveva offerto per carità** un tozzo di pane, e io lo gustavo lentamente.'

'Well, it is about this. Yesterday I was around here, near the seashore. A man **had offered me a crust of bread for carità** and I was enjoying it slowly.' (CORIS/CODIS corpus, narrativa)

In various other contexts, *per carità* is used as an additional, indented fixed phrase in different positions in an utterance. The insertion of *per carità* does not add content to the utterance, which already makes sense without this phrase. Its semantic contribution consists either in emphasising the speaker's feelings or in clarifying the speaker's position

on a statement, an intention or an opinion. The fixed phrase *per carità* is no longer a simple prepositional phrase, but an interjection expressing a series of distinct meanings (cf. Ameka 1992; Wierzbicka 1992b); for this reason, it seems plausible to consider *per carità* used in specific contexts as the result of a process of grammaticalisation.

Various dictionaries of Italian (including Treccani, Nuovo De Mauro and Zanichelli) ascribe a generic meaning 'rejection/refusal' to *per carità*, as well as the more specific meanings 'scorn/disdain' and 'of course/surely'. However, the contexts in which this fixed phrase is used as an interjection in Italian discourse are too different to posit an invariant meaning 'not'. This 'not' means different things in different contexts—in NSM terms, 'I don't say', 'I don't want' or 'it can't be like this'. It is impossible to produce a single explication which would be valid for all the contexts in which *per carità* is used. Therefore, it is necessary to produce separate semantic explications for the different phraseological meanings of *per carità* expressed in different contexts, not only for the sake of semantic accuracy and clarity, but also for the sake of accurate language teaching and translation. In addition to the Christian meaning, *per carità* expresses six different phraseological meanings; their numbering in the present analysis is based on their similarity to the Christian meaning, *per carità*_c being the least similar. The main semantic difference between the Christian and the phraseological meanings of *per carità* is the shift in perspective from 'someone else' ('doing something good for someone else') to 'I' ('I don't say/'I don't want'). The Christian and the six phraseological meanings of *per carità* cannot overlap because they are expressed in different contexts; however, it is also possible to express different meanings of *per carità* in the same turn.

The first meaning of *per carità* as an interjection is expressed when the speaker asks the interlocutor to do something good for him/her as people would do for someone they care for.

This can mean either doing or not doing something to save the speaker from feeling something bad. The speaker's bad feelings are associated with a specific thought and are intentionally emphasised by uttering *per carità*. The speaker rejects these bad feelings and 'begs' the interlocutor to help him/her. In (6) the speaker asks the interlocutor to do something, whereas in (7a) and (7b) not to do something (e.g. not to kill him):

- (6) Adesso il piccolo Ambrogio, svegliato dal rumore e dal caldo, gridava come un'aquila attaccato alle sbarre del lettino. Sua madre, che faceva la cassiera nella pasticceria di fronte, era arrivata di corsa e adesso gridava: **'Fate qualcosa, per carità! Qualcuno vada a salvare il mio bambino!'**

By now the little Ambrogio, who had been woken up by the noise and the heat, was shouting like an eagle hanging on the bars of his tiny bed. His mother, who worked as a cashier in the patisserie on the other side of the road, had run back home and now was screaming: **'Do something, per carità! Somebody go save my child!'** (CORIS/CODIS corpus, narrativa)

- (7) a. Fazio si fece vivo che erano le dieci passate. 'Come mai avete fatto così tardo?' **'Dottore, per carità, non me ne parlasse!'** Prima abbiamo dovuto aspettare il sostituto del Sostituto!

Fazio didn't turn up until after 10. 'Why so late, Fazio?' **'Please, Chief, I don't want to hear about it.'** First we had to wait for the assistant prosecutor's assistant.'

- b. Il professore si era susuto addritta e Montalbano, lento lento, isò la pistola e gliela puntò all'altezza della testa. Allora capitò. Come se gli avessero tranciato l'invisibile cavo che lo reggeva, l'omo cadì in ginocchio. Mise le mani a preghiera. **'Per carità! Per carità!'**

The doctor was now standing up, and Montalbano ever so slowly raised the gun and pointed it at his head. Then it happened, as if someone had cut the invisible rope holding him up, the man fell to his knees. He folded his hands in prayer. **'Have pity! Have pity!'** (Andrea Camilleri, *La Gita a Tindari*, 2000)

The meaning *per carità*₁ can be explicated as follows. It is the idea of someone doing something good for someone else and of this good action being inspired by good feelings towards a sufferer that makes this first phraseological meaning of *per carità* the closest to the original Christian meaning. The component 'I can't not say it' captures the idea that the speaker cannot refrain from expressing his/her bad feelings in discourse:

[B] *per carità*₁

- a. I say: 'when I think about this, I feel something bad

I can't not say it

I don't want to feel something bad

because of this, I want you to do something good for me now, like
people can do something good for someone if they feel something
good towards this someone'

As an interjection, *per carità* can also be used to express the meaning 'I don't want to do this'. In this case, too, the refusal is caused by the thought of something that generates bad feelings. This is the kind of bad feelings prototypically associated with the thought 'something bad can happen to me if I do this'. Thus, by uttering *per carità* it is as if the speaker 'protected' themselves from potential dangers by stating clearly that he/she is not going to do something. In this case, not only does *per carità* emphasise the speaker's feelings, but also what the speaker does not want to do. Sometimes, the refusal can be emphasised even more by raising one's arms and hands in the air to make a sort of 'not me' or 'send-away' gesture. The meaning *per carità*₂ can be explicated as follows:

[C] *per carità*₂

- a. I say: 'I don't want to do this, I want you to know it
when I think about it, I feel something bad'

A good example of *per carità*₂ can be found in the dialogue between the Neapolitan brothers Capone and their friend Mezzacapa in the famous comical film *Totò, Peppino e la Malafemmina* (1956).⁴ The brothers need to go to Milan for the first time and ask their friend, who has been there before, for advice. Mezzacapa scares the two brothers and warns them against the dangers of a big city like Milan with a lot of dangerous traffic and fog. By uttering *per carità*, each of the brothers makes clear that he is not going to do something:

4 Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2V0av8ypY4, uploaded 28 October, 2006.

(8) Mezzacapa: ‘Ma c’è un traffico enorme. Anzi, vi dovete stare accorti, eh? Là attraversare una strada è una cosa pericolosa assai.’

Antonio: ‘**E chi attraversa? E chi si muove, per carità.**’

Mezzacapa: ‘There’s a huge traffic there. In fact, you’ve got to be careful, okay? Crossing the road is very dangerous there.’

Antonio: ‘**Not me ... I’m not crossing, I’m not moving, per carità.**’

Mezzacapa: ‘A Milano, quando c’è la nebbia non si vede ...’

Antonio: ‘Ma dico se i milanesi a Milano quando c’è la nebbia non vedono, come si fa a vedere che c’è la nebbia a Milano?’

Mezzacapa: ‘No, ma per carità, ma quella non è una cosa ... che si può toccare ...’

Peppino: ‘Aaah, ecco.’

Antonio (al fratello): ‘Non si tocca.’

Peppino: ‘Io adesso ... a parte questa nebbia, **non la tocco, per carità ...**’

Mezzacapa: ‘In Milan, people can’t see when there is fog ...’

Antonio: ‘But I mean, if the Milanese in Milan can’t see when there is fog how can one see that there is fog in Milan?’

Mezzacapa: ‘No, but *per carità*, that’s not something ... one can touch.’

Peppino: ‘Right, I see.’

Antonio (to his brother): ‘Don’t touch it.’

Peppino: ‘What I’m wondering now ... apart from this fog, **I won’t touch it, per carità ...**’

Another prototypical context of *per carità*₂ is when someone refuses to have more food or drinks. The speaker fears that he/she will feel bad if he/she eats or drinks more and utters *per carità* to express a clear refusal:

(9) *Vuoi ancora un po’ di pasta?*

Per carità!

Would you like some more pasta?

Per carità! (‘No way!’)

In the dialogue in (8) there is another instance of *per carità* uttered by Mezzacapa when he states that fog is not something one can touch. In this case, *per carità* expresses the meaning ‘it can’t be like this, I know it well, I want you to know it well now’. The context of this meaning of *per carità* is when a speaker considers a specific scenario emerged from the discussion with the interlocutor and totally excludes that it can be the case. The speaker sounds extremely confident and convincing by talking with the didactic tone typical of the ‘*sapientone*’ (‘the know-it-all, clever-clogs’, Farese 2019), the omniscient narrator who knows or claims to know the facts in question well thanks to first-hand or reported experience. At the same time, the speaker emphasises the statement with an expression of feelings. This specific meaning, labelled here *per carità*₃, can be explicated as follows:

[D] *per carità*₃

- a. I say: ‘it can’t be like this, I know it well, I want you to know it now when I think about it, I can’t not feel something’

*Per carità*₃ can be easily identified and distinguished from the other meanings of this phrase because only in this context *per carità* can be preceded by *ma* (‘but’), which emphasises the speaker’s statement and feelings even more:

- (10) ‘Mia moglie non mi capisce ...’ ‘Tra noi non c’è dialogo.’ ‘Tra noi non c’è nessun afflato spirituale.’ ‘Tra noi non ci sono più rapporti sessuali ...’ ‘Con altri? Mia moglie? **Per carità, è pazza di me ...**’
 ‘My wife doesn’t understand me ...’ ‘There’s no dialogue between us.’ ‘There’s no spiritual impulse.’ ‘We don’t have sexual intercourses anymore ...’ ‘Sleeping with someone else? My wife? **Per carità, she’s crazy about me ...**’ (CORIS/CODIS corpus, narrativa)
- (11) L’esercito per le strade di Napoli? **Ma per carità.** Non credo che la semi-militarizzazione della città sia la soluzione del drammatico problema criminalità.
 The army around the streets of Naples? **But per carità.** I don’t think that the semi-militarization of the city is the solution to the dramatic problem of criminality. (CORIS/CODIS corpus, MON2005_07)

A similar context is when a speaker does not exclude that something can be the case, but at the same time cannot say that it can be the case either. In this context, *per carità* is typically followed by *ma* or *però* ('but/though'), which express a contrast between the first and the second part of the statement. In the first part, the speaker makes clear that he/she does not exclude something; in the second part, the speaker adds that something cannot be the case unless the circumstances change or anyway, not *a priori*:

- (12) Berlusconi torna alla carica con il documento politico. Quello, almeno, Follini potrebbe sottoscriverlo. **Per carità, nessun problema**, risponde il segretario dell'Udc, **però** ... la mia priorità riguarda la necessità che questo governo sia più attento al suo profilo istituzionale.

Berlusconi insists on the political document. Follini could sign that, at least. **Per carità, no problem at all**, replies the UDC [Unione di Centro: the Union of the Centre political party] secretary, **but** ... my priority is the necessity that this government pays more attention to its institutional profile. (CORIS/CODIS corpus, MON2001_04)

- (13) 'Contro la Danimarca, vi basta perdere per 1-0.' 'Non ci passa per la testa. **Si può anche perdere, per carità. Ma non certo per principio.** Vogliamo vincere e vincere bene.'

'Against Denmark, it is sufficient for you to lose 1-0.' 'That's out of the question. **Losing is possible, per carità. But certainly not in principle.** We want to win and win well.' (CORIS/CODIS corpus, stampa)

*Per carità*₄ is added to let the interlocutor know well what the speaker's position is. This specific meaning can be explicated as follows:

[E] *per carità*₄

- a. I don't say: 'it can't be like this'
- b. at the same time, I don't say: 'it can be like this'
- c. I want you to know it

Per carità as a fixed phrase can also express the speaker's way of thinking about something. Like the context of *per carità*₄, *per carità*₅ is followed by *ma* in a statement which contains two contrasting ways of thinking: in the first part of the statement, the speaker denies that something is bad, whereas in the second part the speaker states that it is not good either:

- (14) **Per carità, il film è bellissimo**, Ferrara è bravissimo, un grande regista che fa commuovere, **ma** in Sicilia donne come Teresa non esistono.

Per carità, the film is great, and Ferrara is excellent, a great director that makes people cry, **but** there are no women like Teresa in Sicily. (CORIS/CODIS corpus, ephemera)

- (15) Segno evidente che l'imputato si interessò per le due pratiche. **Nulla di illecito, per carità: ma**, allora, perché hanno mentito dicendo di aver avuto frequentazioni superficiali?

This is the unmistakable sign that the accused dealt with the two cases. **Nothing illicit, per carità: but**, then, why did they lie saying they only knew each other superficially? (CORIS/CODIS corpus, miscellanea)

Stating first that something is not bad before stating that it is not good is a specific discursive strategy on the part of the speaker not to sound hypercritical of something and to 'mitigate' the criticism expressed in the second part of the statement. *Per carità*₅ expresses the speaker's evaluations and its meaning is clearly distinct from the other ones because it is based on the primitive concepts GOOD and BAD, which are not inherent in the other meanings of this phrase. *Per carità*₅ is explicated as follows:

[F] *per carità*₅

- a. I don't say: 'I think about it like this: "this is bad"'
- b. at the same time, I can't say: 'I think about it like this: "this is good"'
- c. I want you to know it

Finally, the interjection *per carità* is also used to protect oneself from the risk of passing for someone who does not know the facts well, which is countercultural and potentially dangerous for one's public image in Italy (Farese 2019). In this context, *per carità* expresses the meaning 'I don't

say: it is not like this, I want you to know it'. By clarifying that he/she is not denying something, the speaker demonstrates that he/she knows the facts well and, in this way, saves him/herself from making statements which could be perceived as superficial or potentially offensive:

(16) Caro signor Manganaro, per quel che riguarda i documenti d'archivio stranieri, tutte le carte dei servizi segreti americani e sovietici venute alla luce quarant'anni dopo quell'estate del 1964 (**da prendere con le molle, per carità**) ci dicono che—diversamente da quel che all'epoca si suppose—la Cia non solo non favorì ma, anzi, si preoccupò moltissimo del possibile deragliamento del nostro convoglio democratico.

Dear Mr. Manganaro, as far as the foreign archive documents are concerned, all the documents about the American and Soviet secret services which came to light forty years after that summer of 1964 (**to be taken with a pinch of salt, per carità**) tell us that—differently from what was believed at that time—not only did the CIA encourage, but it was also deeply concerned about the derailment of our democratic train. (CORIS/CODIS corpus, MON2001_04)

(17) Solo l'Argentina ora come ora mi sembra abbia qualcosa in più di tutti, anche di noi. La Francia no. **Per carità, è forte, affidabile**, ma con loro voglio giocare ...

Right now, it seems to me that only Argentina have something more than the other teams. Not France. **Per carità, France are strong and reliable**, but I don't want to play against them ... (CORIS/CODIS corpus, MON2001_04)

The speaker's self-defence is complemented by the idea that the interlocutor does not think well if he/she thinks that the speaker does not know the facts well. This sixth meaning of *per carità* can be explicated as follows:

[G] *per carità*₆

- a. I don't say: 'it is not like this', I want you to know it
- b. if you think about me like this: 'this someone doesn't know well how it is', you don't think well

4. Concluding remarks

The semantic analysis of *carità* presented in this chapter has highlighted one of the most striking cases of polysemy which characterises Italian words expressing Christian values. The parallel shift in function and context of use (from a word expressing a Christian value to an interjection expressing the speaker's feelings and way of thinking in discourse) and in semantic perspective (from 'someone else' to 'I') reflects a significant semantic change of *carità* which should be investigated in diachronic perspective. Unfortunately, this kind of analysis could not be made here for reasons of space. One of the main aims of the present analysis was to emphasise the unparalleled benefits and contributions that the Wierzbickian NSM methodology has brought to the understanding of the foundations and principles of Christianity and its undisputed influence on everyday discourse in many European languages, including Italian. Adopting the NSM framework, it is possible to

convey the essentials of Christian faith accurately, making every word count and be justifiable from a theological and historical, as well as linguistic point of view ... An explication couched in simple and universal words can help us to identify that intended meaning and to articulate ... faith more accurately and more authentically, as well as more cross-translatably, for a global world. (Wierzbicka 2019: xiv)

The copresence of Christian and phraseological meanings of Italian words expressing Christian values is relevant to the analysis of the influence of Christianity on Italian language and culture and, at the broader level, to the relationship between meaning, culture and society. A parallel could be drawn between the polysemy of Italian words expressing Christian values and the dual nature of the Italian society, which is traditionally characterised by a constant tension between Christianity and secularism. Article 7 of the Italian Constitution sanctions the secular nature of the Italian State and the juridical separation from the Vatican. Yet, in Article 8, the Catholic religion is given a privileged position over the other faiths because it is the only religion that is recognised at constitutional level (Farese 2018b). One of the most significant and controversial events in contemporary Italian history was the so-called *compromesso storico* ('the historical compromise'), the political alliance between the Christian Democratic Party and the Communist Party. The tension between Christianity and secularism is not a contradiction, but a well-known and accepted fact in Italy; they are two

sides of the same coin. The huge popularity of the TV series *Don Camillo e Peppone* (1952) and later *Don Matteo* (2000–present), where priests are in constant conflict with politicians and with the police, confirms that the Italians like this tension, as they somehow recognise themselves and their society in those fictional characters. The Italian society is both Christian and secular and the language needs to have words that express both Christian and phraseological meanings. As in the case of *carità*, if a word originally expresses a Christian meaning, it is very likely that over time it will be shaped and changed by speakers so that new, phraseological meanings develop and become regularly used in discourse.

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