Latin Accentual *Clausula* as Exemplified in 14th-Century Prose Texts by Dante and Boccaccio

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Abstract. This paper studies 14th-century Latin prose rhythm as exemplified by Dante and Boccaccio. The texts observed in this analysis are samples from *De Monarchia*, *De vulgari eloquentia*, *Quaestio de aqua et terra* and *Epistole* by Dante and *De mulieribus claris* and *De casibus virorum illustrium* by Boccaccio. In ancient rhetoric, rhythmical units were used at the ends of sentences and clauses in prose texts. These units were called *clausulae*, and the rhythm of classical prose was based on the quantity of syllables. Medieval Latin prose rhythm, however, was based on word stress and was called *cursus*. The aim of this paper is to study what kinds of *cursus* occur in the given text samples and their frequency. The research method used in this paper is comparative-statistical analysis. The distribution of *cursus* in these samples is also analysed by chapters and different types of *cursus* are distinguished.

Keywords: prose rhythm, *cursus*, *clausula*, Dante, Boccaccio

1. Introduction

In ancient rhetoric, rhythmical units were used at the ends of sentences and clauses in prose texts. In classical prose, these units were called *clausulae*, and the rhythm of classical prose was based on the quantity of syllables.[1] Medieval Latin prose rhythm, however, was based on word stress and was called *cursus*.

This paper focuses on 14th-century Latin prose as exemplified by Dante and Boccaccio. The texts observed in this analysis are samples from *De Monarchia, De vulgari eloquentia, Quaestio de aqua et terra* and *Epistole* by Dante and *De mulieribus claris* and *De casibus virorum illustrium* by Boccaccio. The use of *cursus* in the prose of Dante and Boccaccio has been studied before, and it has been said that the presence of *cursus* is obvious in both authors' texts.

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1   The use of *clausulae* is seen, for example, in the works of Livy, Sallust and Cicero. See, for example, Aili (1979), Albrecht (2003).

However, according to Paget Toynbee, the main researcher of Dante's prose, Dante did not use *cursus* regularly throughout the books. Instead, he employed them more in rhetorical and personal sections appearing mostly at the beginnings and at the ends of the books (1920: 231). Toynbee's studies, which date back almost a century (1918, 1920, 1923), do not include systematic statistical analysis. As regards Boccaccio, Parodi (1913) notes that his letters in Latin also follow the rules of *cursus*.[2] Previous studies have not examined the different types of *cursus* according to the chapters in which they occur but have instead compared the use of *cursus* with other structures used to end sentences.

The aim of this paper is to study the kinds of *cursus* and their frequency in the given text samples. The distribution of *cursus* in these samples is also analysed according to the chapters in which they occur, and different types of *cursus* are distinguished. Based on this, patterns are investigated, including rhythms that the authors seem to have preferred and those they avoided, whether certain types of *cursus* accumulate in particular sections of the texts, and what differences appear when comparing texts.

2. Prose rhythm: theoretical basis and methodology

Wilhelm Meyer (1905: 236–286) appears to have been the first to formulate a method for describing the accentual *cursus* of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, which has become fundamental in more recent scholarship on the subject. According to Meyer, the crucial factor is the number of syllables between the last two accents and after the last one, and the length of the last word is unimportant (Tunberg 1992: 126). A number of modern studies and reference works employ this kind of method of describing *cursus* (Tunberg 1996: 115). Medieval prose rhythm also allows *consillabicatio*, in which the last word is replaced by two or three short words that include the same number of syllables (Janson 1975, Lausberg 1960).

In the Middle Ages, there were four basic rhythmical units: *cursus planus, cursus velox, cursus tardus* and *cursus trispondaicus*. *Cursus planus* consists of a trisyllable word with stress on the penultimate syllable, which is preceded by a word with a similar stress (Xx#xXx – *fide servantur*). In addition to the regular *cursus planus,* the forms X#xxXx (*pars imperabant*) and Xxx#Xx (*tempore messis*) are also used. *Cursus velox* comprises a tetrasyllabic word with stress on the penultimate syllable preceded by a word with stress on

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2   See also the works of Vittore Branca (1967, 1975, 1983).

the third syllable from the end of the word (Xxx#xxXx – *animus gratuletur*). Another form of *cursus velox* is Xx#xxxXx (where the last word contains not four but five syllables: for example, *cedit utilitatem*). *Cursus tardus* includes a tetrasyllabic word with stress on the third syllable from the end of the word preceded by a word with stress on the penultimate syllable (Xx#xXxx – *divina custodiet*). An alternative form involves a proparoxytone followed by a trisyllabic proparoxytone, in which the caesura comes after the third syllable of the clausula (Xxx#Xxx – *omnia impleant*). *Cursus tardus* may also occur in the form X#xxXxx (*est inpossibile*). *Cursus trispondaicus* comprises a tetrasyllabic word with stress on the penultimate syllable preceded by a word with similar stress (Xx#xxXx – *declinare arbitratur*). *Cursus trispondaicus* can also occur as Xxx#xXx (*opere patrate*) or X#xxxXx (*pax universalis*).[3]

Each of the *cursus* forms can have its longer word units resolved by combinations of monosyllabic and disyllabic words as long as the rhythm is retained. For example, the final tetrasyllable of the *cursus velox* can be represented by a trisyllabic paroxytone preceded by a monosyllable (*rescribere non cessato*) or by two disyllables (*feliciter dici solet*). Alternatively, the second word component of the *tardus* can be resolved by a disyllabic paroxytone and a monosyllable (*oneri mihi sum*) or by a trisyllabic paroxytone and a monosyllable (*stellarumque contentus sit*) (Oberhelman, Hall 1984: 115).

The research method of this paper is a comparative statistical analysis carried out in stages. In the first stage, all clauses in the samples were analysed. *Cursus* may appear both at the ends of sentences and clauses and in this study, all endings before punctuation marks were analysed. In the second stage, all the analysed samples were collected into different databases for each author and each text. In each database, the endings corresponding to the *cursus* are treated as separate categories (*cursus planus, cursus trispondaicus, cursus tardus, cursus velox*); endings that are different from *cursus* are all grouped together under the category "other endings". The aim of this paper is to study the occurrence of *cursus*; therefore, the different rhythms under the category "other endings" are not distinguished. In the final stage, the data were compared (comparisons were made between the two authors, different texts by the same author, and different chapters of the same work) and statistically analysed.

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[3]   See more about medieval *cursus* in Clark 1910, Janson 1975, Lindholm 1963, Norberg 1968, Oberhelman, Hall 1984.

3. Dante Alighieri

Malato (1999) notes that Dante adapted with the stylistic structures relying on classical rhetoric tradition and that he used *cursus* in his Latin prose, therefore the regular use of *cursus* is obvious in *De Vulgare Eloquentia, Monarchia, Quaestio de Aqua et Terra* and especially in *Epistole*. According to Malato (1999: 1035), in *De vulgari eloquentia*, *cursus planus* is dominant, *cursus tardus* is frequent, and *cursus velox* is preferred at the end of a sentence.

Epistole aside, Dante's work in Latin prose consists of scholarly texts in which the use of *cursus* was not prescribed. However, even within these works, Dante does not disdain to apply the rules of rhythmic prose. For example, Chiesa and Tabarroni (2013: LXXXII–LXXXIV) note that rhythmic clauses also appear in the proemial parts and rhetorical sections of the *Monarchia,* and in the prologues, the *cursus* is used almost constantly.

According to Paget Toynbee (1918, 1920, 1923), who studied *cursus* in Dante's Latin prose, Dante did not use *cursus* regularly throughout a text but employed it in rhetorical and personal passages occurring mostly at the beginning and end of each book (Toynbee 1920: 231). Other scholars have also noted that the use of rhythmic clauses is not distributed uniformly and can oscillate considerably from chapter to chapter even within the same work. In *Epistole*, the use of *cursus* is more intense and regular (Mengaldo 1970: 292).

For this study, I analysed the occurrence of *cursus* in Dante's Latin books *De vulgari eloquentia, De Monarchia, Epistole* and *Quaestio de Aqua et Terra*.[4] The sample was formed from the first eleven chapters of *De Monarchia* (474 sentence and clause endings) and the first ten chapters of *De vulgari eloquentia* (474 endings). From *Epistole,* the sample was formed from the first six letters, which contributed 478 endings altogether. In addition, 500 sentence and clause endings from *Quaestio de Aqua et Terra* were analysed. Unlike Paget Toynbee's analysis, this study shows the proportions of the frequencies of different *cursus* types in each sample and, where possible, also analyses the distribution of *cursus* by chapters (including the distribution of different *cursus* types by chapters).

The results of the analysis of *De Monarchia* are shown in the following chart:[5]

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4   All samples of Dante's texts in this paper were taken from Fallani *et al.* 1993.

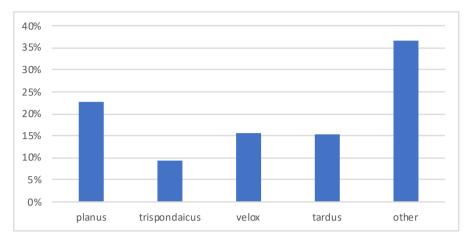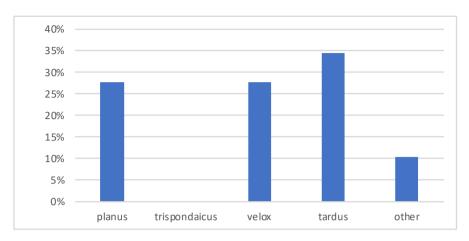5   Figures 1–25 in this paper also appear in Mikkel 2020: 41–126.

Figure 1. *Cursus* in *De Monarchia* (%%)

The results demonstrate the presence of *cursus* in this sample (63.3%) and the prevalence of *cursus planus* (22.8%) (e.g., *primo agentem, esse credendum*). *Cursus velox* (15.6%), (e.g., *opera ordinatur, hominum salutabat*) and *cursus tardus* (15.4%) (e.g., *intellectum possibilem, habet imperium*) are used nearly equally. The least frequently used form in this sample is *cursus trispondaicus* (9.5%) (e.g., *bone voluntatis, totum universum*).

The analysis of the occurrence of *cursus* by chapters in this sample shows that there are chapters in which the frequency of a particular *cursus* form is far higher or lower than the average. Closer study shows a higher presence of *cursus velox* in Chapters 1.I (27.6%) and 1.VIII (24.0%), while the average percentage of *cursus velox* in this sample is 15.6%. The first chapter also has the highest occurrence of *cursus tardus* (34.5%) in this sample. In Chapter 1.IX, *cursus tardus* does not occur at all. The percentage of *cursus planus* is highest in Chapter 1.IX (34.8%), and *cursus trispondaicus* occurs more in Chapters 1.VI (22.7%), 1.VIII (20.0%) and 1.IX (17.4%).

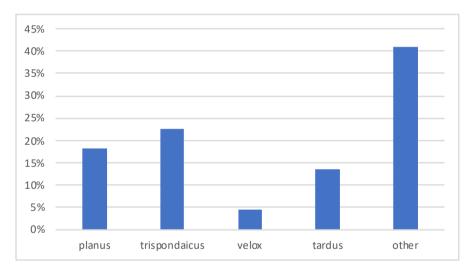Figure 2. *Cursus* in *De Monarchia* Chapter 1.I (%%)

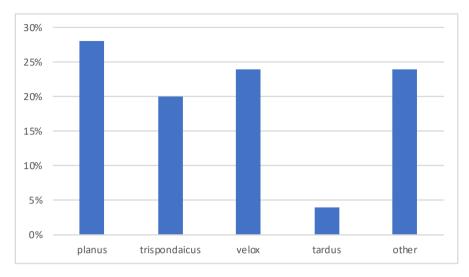Figure 3. *Cursus* in *De Monarchia* Chapter 1.VI (%%)

Figure 4. *Cursus* in *De Monarchia* Chapter 1.VIII (%%)

In *De Monarchia,* the rhythmic aspect of the initial chapter stands out. Compared to the average throughout the analysed sample, the occurrence of *cursus* in the first chapter is 89.7%.

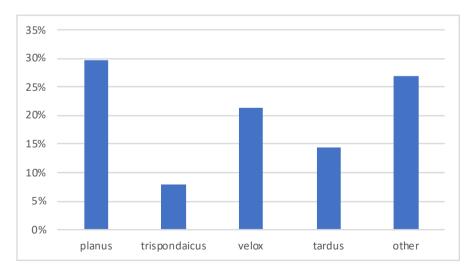The results of the analysis of *De vulgari eloquentia* can be seen in the following chart:

Figure 5. *Cursus* in *De vulgari eloquentia* (%%)

The results show that the percentage of *cursus* in this sample is 73.2% and that the most frequently occurring type is *cursus planus* at 29.7% (e.g., *aves locuntur, rationem portare). Cursus velox* is present in this sample with 21.3% (e.g., *medium sensuale, operantium deridebant)*, and *cursus tardus* with 14.3% (e.g., *esse flexibile, pauci perveniunt*). The least used type in this sample is *cursus trispondaicus* (7.8%) (e.g., *sermo variatur, versus orientem)*.

Examining the occurrence of *cursus* in the given sample by chapters reveals a higher percentage of *cursus velox* in Chapters 1.I (33.3%), 1.VII (27.3%), 1.VIII (32.6%). The average percentage of *cursus velox* in this sample is 21.3%. In Chapter 1.VIII, the percentage of *cursus trispondaicus* is the highest (10.9%), while the average in this sample is 7.8%.
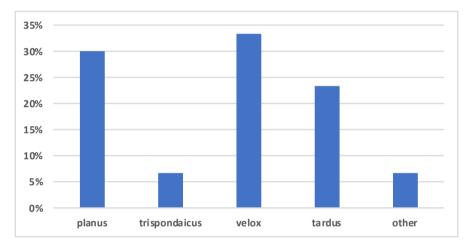

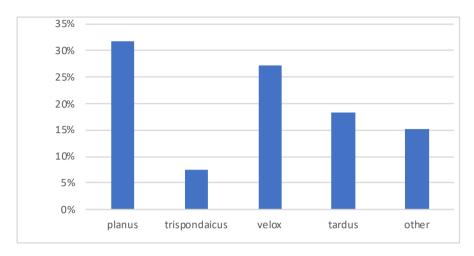Figure 6. *Cursus* in *De vulgari eloquentia* Chapter 1.I (%%)

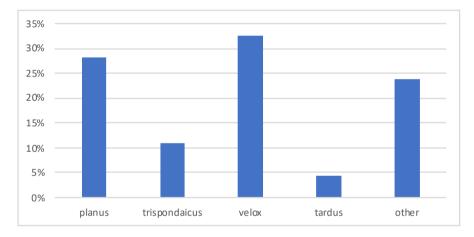Figure 7. *Cursus* in *De vulgari eloquentia* Chapter 1.VII (%%)

Figure 8. *Cursus* in *De vulgari eloquentia* Chapter 1.VIII (%%)

In Chapter 1.I, it is possible to observe the accumulation of *cursus tardus* (23.3%, while the average percentage is 14.3%), and Chapter 1.VIII contains the lowest percentage of *cursus tardus* (4.3%) in this sample. Like in *De Monarchia*, in *De vulgari eloquentia,* we can also see a very high occurrence of *cursus* in the first chapter (93.3%).

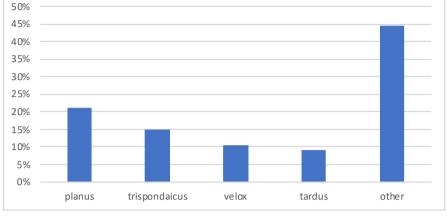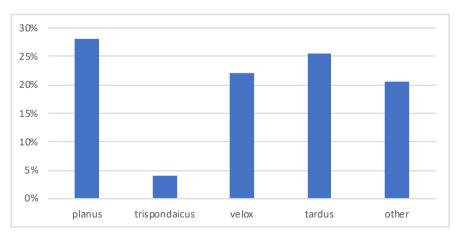The results of the analysis of *Quaestio de aqua et terra* are summarized in the following chart:

Figure 9. *Cursus* in *Quaestio de aqua et terra* (%%)

The results show that the percentage of the *cursus* in this sample is 55.6%, and *cursus planus* (21.0%) is predominant (e.g., *veritatis amore, esse videntur*). Next in frequency is *cursus trispondaicus* (15.0%) (e.g., *centrum universi, membrum declarandum*), followed by *cursus velox* (10.6%) (e.g., *omnibus confirmatur, ordine discendorum*), and finally *cursus tardus* (9.0%) (e.g., *verum ostendere, esset concentrica*).

It is interesting to note the quite high frequency of *cursus trispondaicus* in *Quaestio* in comparison with Dante's other Latin texts and, at the same time, the less frequent use of *cursus velox* and *tardus*.

The results of the analysis of *Epistole* are summarized in the following chart:

Figure 10. *Cursus* in *Epistole* (%%)

The results show that the percentage of *cursus* in this sample is 79.5%. *Cursus planus* (28.0%) is predominant (e.g., *forma conformis, signetur intentum*). Next in frequency is *cursus tardus* (25.5%) (e.g., *fecit exilium, nobis consilia*) followed by *cursus velox* (22.0%) (e.g., *persolvere attentabit, vitia repellentem*), and finally, *cursus trispondaicus* (4.0%), (e.g., *arbitrato carceratum, declinare arbitrator*).

Examining the occurrence of *cursus* in the given sample by letters (see, for example, Figures 11 and 12) reveals that, in the first letter, we can see a higher frequency of *cursus*, 91.8%. In *Epistole,* there is a very low frequency of *cursus trispondaicus* and, on the other hand, equal presence of all three other *cursus* forms. In the third letter, the percentage of *planus* is 10.7%, *tardus* is present with 30,4%, and the occurrence of all types of *cursus* is 71.4%.
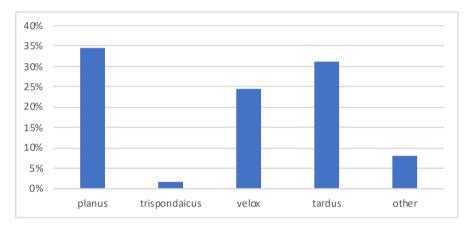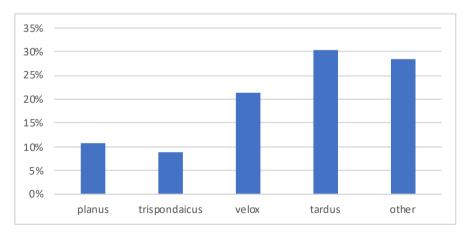

Figure 11. *Cursus* in *Epistole* I (%%)

Figure 12. *Cursus* in *Epistole* III (%%)

4. Giovanni Boccaccio

Of Boccaccio's Latin writings, the first that can be dated with certainty are some letters written from Naples around 1339. All these letters follow the rules of *cursus*. According to Ernesto Parodi, one of Boccaccio's main models was Dante, and only from him could he learn the respect for the rhythm (Parodi 1957: 480).

I have analysed the occurrence of *cursus* in Boccaccio's Latin texts *De mulieribus claris* and *De casibus virorum illustrium*.[6] The sample was formed from *proemio* and the first five chapters of *De mulieribus claris* (472 sentence and clause endings) and from *proemio* and the first six chapters of *De casibus virorum illustrium* (478 endings). The results of the analysis of *De mulieribus claris* are summarized in the following chart:
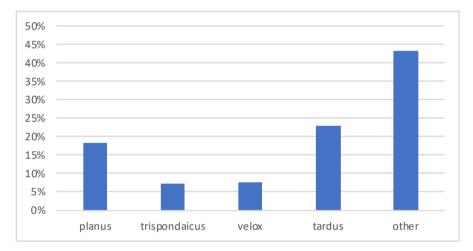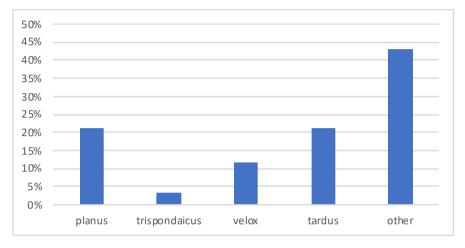

Figure 13. *Cursus* in *De mulieribus claris* (%%)

The percentage of *cursus* in the analysed sample of *De mulieribus claris* is about 56%. The most frequent form in this sample is *cursus tardus* (23.1%) (e.g., *agitata laboribus, insignis splendoribus*) followed by *cursus planus* with 18.4% (e.g., *viros illustres, legem agentes*), then *cursus velox* (7.8%) (e.g., *publice salutare, memoria celebranda*), and finally, *cursus trispondaicus* with 7.2% (e.g., *votum advocasset, silvas incolentem*).

I also analysed this sample by chapters (see, for example, Figures 14 and 15). There is a high percentage of *cursus tardus* and, at the same time, a lesser

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6   The samples of Boccaccio's texts in this paper are taken from Branca 1967 and Branca 1983.

presence of *cursus velox*, which was more common in Latin medieval prose rhythm. We can see a higher percentage of *velox* in the *proemio*.

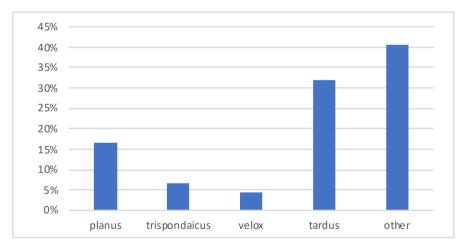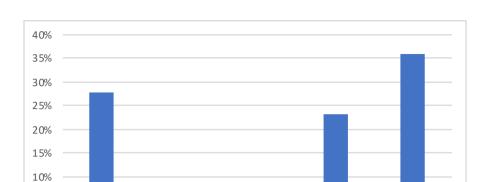Figure 14. *Cursus* in *De mulieribus claris, Proemio* (%%)

Figure 15. *Cursus* in *De mulieribus claris* Chapter V (%%)

The results of the analysis of *De casibus virorum illustrium* are summarized in the following chart:

Figure 16. *Cursus* in *De casibus virorum illustrium* (%%)

Here we can see that the percentage of *cursus* is 64% and the favoured form is *cursus planus* with 27.8% (e.g., *rapte sororis, genus humanum*). Next in frequency is *cursus tardus* (23.2%) (e.g., *hostium viribus, volatus longissimus*), then *cursus velox* (6.7%) (e.g., *veteri civitate, incola paradisi*), and finally, *cursus trispondaicus* (6.3%) (e.g., *eventus novitate, ipsos ignoratis*).

   In the analysis of this sample by chapters (see, for example, Figures 17 and 18), we can again note a relatively low presence of *cursus velox*. Only in Chapter II is the percentage somewhat higher at 12.7% (while the average use of *velox* in this sample is 6.7%). *Cursus planus* and *tardus* are represented more or less equally.
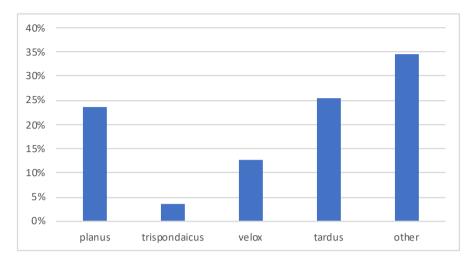
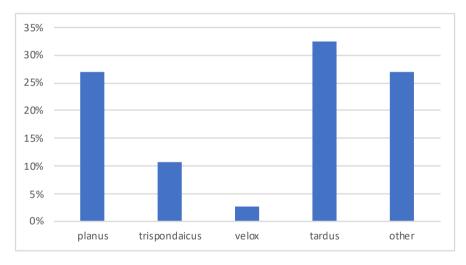Figure 17. *Cursus* in *De casibus virorum illustrium* Chapter II (%%)

Figure 18. *Cursus* in *De casibus virorum illustrium* Chapter VI (%%)

5. Comparison and analysis

The results of the analysis of all samples from Dante's texts are compared in the following chart:
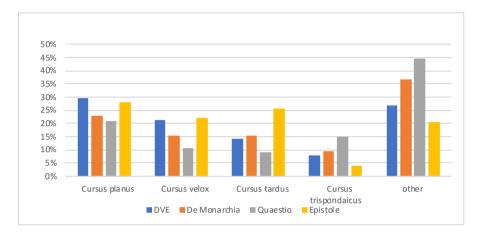

Figure 19. *Cursus* in all samples of Dante (%%)

As shown in the chart, *cursus planus* appears more often than other *cursus* types in all samples. In *Epistole*, the presence of *cursus* was usual and expected, including a nearly equal occurrence of *planus*, *velox* and *tardus* and a lower frequency of *trispondaicus*. The percentage of other endings in this sample is 20.5%. Compared to the *Epistole*, in *De vulgari eloquentia,* the frequency of *planus* and *velox* is similar, but the frequency of *tardus* is slightly decreased. In the sample from *De Monarchia*, *planus* still the most preferred ending, but *velox* has been used less and *trispondaicus* more. *Quaestio de aqua et terra* is different in that the frequency of *planus* is comparable, for example, to the sample from *De Monarchia*, but there are fewer occurrences of *velox* and *tardus* in *Quaestio.* A higher rate of *trispondaicus* can be seen instead. The percentage of other endings in this sample from *Quaestio* is also higher at 44.4%.

Previous Dante researchers have noted that the use of rhythmic clauses is not distributed uniformly and can oscillate considerably within the same work. In earlier studies, different *cursus* types have not been distinguished in favour of a more general observation on the concentration of *cursus*. The analysis of samples of *Epistole, De vulgari eloquentia* and *De Monarchia* by chapter, which separately observes the frequencies of every *cursus* type, also demonstrates a clearly uneven distribution of different rhythmic clauses.

In general, *cursus planus* is distributed through the samples more or less equally, but at the same time, the percentages of *velox*, *tardus* and *trispondaicus* are very different in different chapters. In the *Epistole*, both *velox* and *tardus* occur throughout the sample.

Analysing by chapters, *cursus* occur more in the first chapters of the books: in the first chapter of *De vulgari eloquentia* (93.3%), in the first chapter of *De Monarchia* (89.7%) and even in the first letter of *Epistole* (91.8%).
In the sample from *De Monarchia*, there are also chapters in which certain *cursus* types do not appear at all. For example, in Chapter 1.I, *trispondaicus* does not occur, and in Chapter 1.IX, *tardus* is not present. The presence of *cursus tardus* in this sample is higher in the first chapter (34.5%), but at the same time, there is no *trispondaicus*. However, in the samples from *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Epistole*, all *cursus* types are present in every chapter.

As an example, we can see here in the sample from *De Monarchia*, the occurrence of *cursus* by chapters compared to the average percentage of *cursus* in the whole sample.
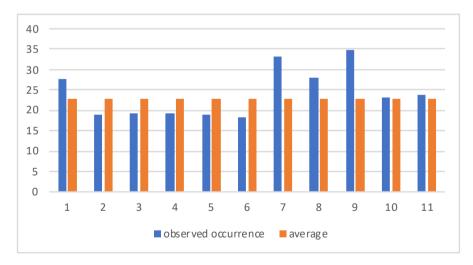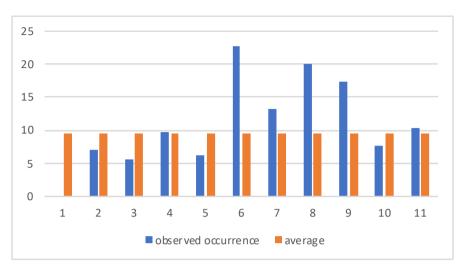

Figure 20. *Cursus planus* in *De Monarchia* (%%)

The frequency of *cursus planus* remains nearly the same in all chapters. The presence of *planus* is a little higher at the beginning of the book and in Chapters 7–9.

Figure 21. *Cursus trispondaicus* in *De Monarchia* (%%)

Cursus trispondaicus shows rather big differences from the average: in the first chapter, the percentage of *trispondaicus* is 0%, but in Chapter 6, it is 22.7%. The presence of *trispondaicus* is also greater than the average in Chapters 7–9.
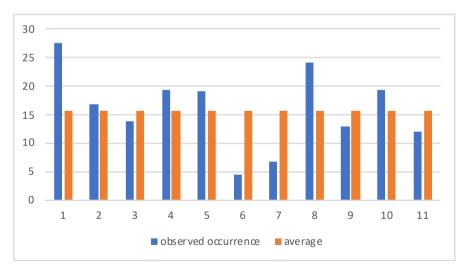

Figure 22. *Cursus velox* in *De Monarchia* (%%)

With *cursus velox*, we can see higher occurrence in the first chapter (27.6%) and in Chapter 8 (24%). At the same time, there are chapters with a lower presence of *velox*, for example, in Chapters 6 (4.5%) and 7 (6.7%).

Figure 23. *Cursus tardus* in *De Monarchia* (%%)

Also, in the case of *cursus tardus,* there is a higher occurrence in the first chapter (34.5%) and Chapter 10 (26.9%). There are some chapters in which the percentage of *tardus* is not so different from the average percentage of this sample, and in one chapter, this *cursus* does not occur at all (Chapter 9).

The results of the analysis of Boccaccio's texts are compared in the following chart:
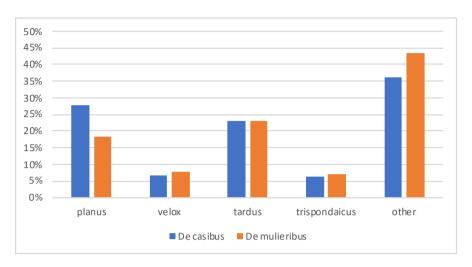
Figure 24. *Cursus in De mulieribus claris* and *De casibus virorum illustrium* (%%)

The chart shows that *cursus planus* and *cursus tardus* occur most frequently in the Boccaccio samples. In the sample from *De mulieribus claris*, the presence of *tardus* even exceeds *planus*, but at the same time, *velox* occurs less often, at a similar rate to *cursus trispondaicus*. In the sample from *De casibus virorum illustrium, planus* and *tardus* appear to be the preferred types, and there is a nearly equal distribution of *velox* and *trispondaicus*.

The analysis of those samples by chapters does not show that Boccaccio used more *cursus* in some chapters and less in others.

Comparing the works of Dante and Boccaccio, we can conclude the following:

1) In Dante, there is a higher occurrence of *cursus* in the first chapters of the books. This is not the case in the samples from Boccaccio.[7]

2) The two authors use *cursus planus* more often and *cursus trispondaicus* the least. The exception is the *Quaestio de aqua et terra* by Dante, where a high frequency of *trispondaicus* is apparent.

3) Comparing the use of *cursus velox* and *tardus* by both authors, there is a clear preference for *tardus* and lower presence of *velox* in the samples from Boccaccio, while in the samples from Dante, they tend to be used nearly equally.

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7   See, for example, Figure 14; in the *proemio* of *De mulieribus claris,* the percentage of *cursus* is 56,8%.
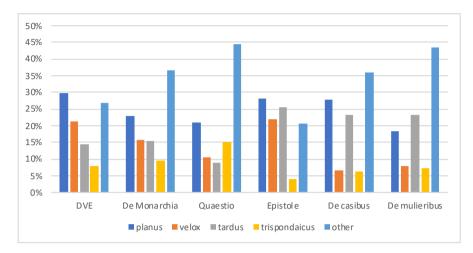
Figure 25. *Cursus* in all samples from Dante and Boccaccio (%%)

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, *cursus* occur in all samples from both analysed authors, and there are more *cursus planus*, *tardus* and *velox* and less *trispondaicus*. Comparing Dante's Latin works, *planus* is the most used *cursus* form, and *tardus* and *velox* appear less often. The exception is Dante's *Epistole,* where *planus*, *tardus* and *velox* are nearly evenly present. The presence of all three *cursus* types in *Epistole* is predictable, as constant usage of *cursus* was a rule in letters. However, in *De vulgari eloquentia* and in *De Monarchia,* it also appears that the presence of *planus* and *velox* is not significantly lower than in *Epistole*, the proportion of *tardus* has decreased, and the proportion of *trispondaicus* has slightly increased. Both in the samples of *De vulgari eloquentia* and *De Monarchia,* the percentage of *cursus* is higher than average in the first chapter of both works, which may indicate that for the author, *cursus* is one of the stylistic elements to be presented to the reader at the beginning of a book. *Quaestio de aqua et terra* differs from the three works mentioned above: here we can see more modest use of *cursus velox* and *tardus* and a greater presence of *cursus trispondaicus*.

In his Latin samples, Boccaccio clearly prefers *cursus tardus* and *cursus planus*. *Cursus velox*, generally considered the most elegant form of *cursus* in Latin prose, is less present in his samples.

Previous researchers have claimed that Dante does not use *cursus* evenly throughout his works: they occur more frequently at the beginnings and ends

of works, and their occurrence may be very different within the same book. In previous studies, analyses made by chapters did not distinguish between different types of *cursus* and simply examined the presence of *cursus* versus other sentence endings. The results of the present research confirm that Dante's samples have a very high incidence of *cursus* in the first chapters (for example, 93.3% in *De vulgari eloquentia*). Analysis by chapters ascertained that *cursus planus* is distributed evenly, but the presence of *velox*, *tardus* and *trispondaicus* varies to a great extent in different chapters.

The results of this analysis are certainly not definitive, but they offer several directions for future analyses.

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