

Insights into Michelangelo's Epistolary Language; or, How Digital Humanities Should Promote Themselves in the Public Debate

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The sixteenth-century Florentine linguistic system had several pairs of phonetic and morphological features in diastratic and/or diaphasic opposition: indeed, for each literary, written form (also called 'golden form'), there was a popular, spoken equivalent (also called 'silver form'). For example, the m.pl. form ending with *-lli* (*alberelli*) had its spoken counterpart in the one ending with *-gli* (*albergli*); for the first conjugation, the indicative present VI p. *-ano* (*[essi] lavano*) was often replaced by *-ono* or *-eno* (*[essi] lavono, laveno*), and so on.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), born and raised in Florence, lived in this era of linguistic uncertainty. Nevertheless, all studies focused on the artist's handwritten documents suggest that the literary model did not influence him and that he constantly wrote according to the popular system. However, those conclusions do not take into consideration that, in his life, Michelangelo immensely raised his social status: from being a simple 'garzone' in Ghirlandaio's studio, he became one of the most influential and powerful people of his time. It is hard to believe that—in step with his growing reputation—he did not do any effort to smooth his language. A major obstacle to this interpretation is that, up to now, nobody has justified these assumptions with a major quantitative statistical analysis.

In the first part of my talk, I explore Michelangelo's use of the language through his entire epistolary corpus (about 500 letters),¹ focusing on the diachronic evolution. After dividing all the letters into documents representing time intervals, and counting the occurrences of each pair of linguistic features, I did the chi-squared test, and subsequently I performed correspondence analysis on the collected data. This allows me to show an interesting evolution over time in Michelangelo's use of the language, to which I also provide a historical explanation.

Indeed, the results show a clear cut-off date around 1530: values consistently diverge before and after this date, and display a strong separation between popular forms, mostly used before 1530, and literary forms, mostly used after 1530 (see Fig. 1 below).² This outcome is of extreme interest, because the most important Italian grammar book of that time—the *Prose della volgar lingua*, written by the renowned humanist Pietro Bembo—was published in 1525. In that book, Bembo prescribes the use of the literary language as a common language for all Italian people. Thus, thanks to the use of statistical methods applied to the study of historical documents, I call into question the common belief that Michelangelo was unaware of the grammar rules prescribing the use of the Florentine literary language.

The last few minutes of the talk will be devoted to explain why and how those results could be exploited in order to enhance the social and political discussion on Digital Humanities. Indeed, I

¹ Michelangelo's letters are available online, at the address: <http://www.memofonte.it/autori/michelangelo-buonarroti-1475-1564.html>.

² In the biplot, the red elements with an S at the end represent the silver (popular) forms, while the red elements with a G at the end represent the golden (literary) forms.

argue that in such cases, we should put more emphasis of the fact that the same method used to find linguistic patterns in Michelangelo's letters is being used also in other fields, some of them—such as the molecular biology—perceived as more 'scientific' than the humanities.

The example of Michelangelo's linguistic analysis allows me then to illustrate how DH should promote themselves in the public debate, and foster among the population the use of digital tools and quantitative analyses to do research in all the fields of human knowledge.

