What is a Last Letter?
A Linguistic/Preventive Analysis of Prisoner Letters from the Two World Wars

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Abstract

English. This paper aims to draw some preliminary analysis from the analyses carried out so far on the corpora collected during the first period of the Marie Curie project *Last Letters from the World Wars: Forming Italian Language, Identity and Memory in Texts of Conflict*. The project explores the linguistic and thematic features of the last letters of people who were sentenced to death during the two world wars. Following the creation of a corpus of letters, written by prisoners in the two world wars, substantial differences in the language and contents of these documents were revealed. These differences are due to the nature of the texts themselves and allow us to make some interesting hypotheses about a possible definition of a 'last letter' genre.

Italiano. Questo paper ha l'obiettivo di trarre alcune analisi preventive in merito alle attività di ricerca sinora svolte sui corpora raccolti all'interno del progetto Marie Curie *Last Letters from the World Wars: Forming Italian Language, Identity and Memory in Texts of Conflict*. Tale progetto vuole approfondire gli aspetti linguistico-tematici delle ultime lettere dei condannati a morte delle due guerre mondiali. In seguito alla creazione di un corpus di lettere di prigionieri di queste due guerre, si sono palesate delle differenze sostanziali nella lingua e nei contenuti di questi documenti. Tali diversità sono legate alla natura degli stessi testi e permettono di porsi alcuni interessanti interrogativi rispetto ad una possibile definizione del genere 'ultima lettera'.

1 Introduction

This paper aims to report some of the first results of the Marie Curie project entitled *Last Letters from the World Wars: Forming Italian Language, Identity and Memory in Texts of Conflict*, which started in September 2018. The project analyses the linguistic and thematic features of the last letters of people sentenced to death during the two World Wars, and is conducted with digital humanities tools. The documents concerning the First World War have been collected mainly in the Central Archives of the Italian State in Rome and thanks to a kind donation by Professor Giovanna Procacci, who offered her letters of Italian prisoners (Procacci, 2000), published and unpublished, for analysis in the Last Letters project. The letters from the Second World War were collected in close collaboration with the Ferruccio Parri National Institute (ex INSMLI) and the Centre for Contemporary Jewish Documentation (CDEC), both in Milan. The majority of the Second World War texts were collected through these two organisations, although some also come from other Italian institutes of resistance connected to the Ferruccio Parri National Institute, which is the central organisation of the Italian Network of Institutes for the History of the Resistance and the Contemporary Age. Other letters were found thanks to the National Association of Ex-Deportees in the Nazi Camps (ANED), again in Milan. In other words, we were able to collect letters from Italian prisoners captured by the Austrian or German armies as far as the First World War is concerned, whereas we composed a corpus of letters from partisans and Jewish deportees for the Second World War. The total number of letters is 1203 for letters from WWII and 960 for WWI. I selected those documents, which were analysed for this paper, from a total of approximately 3500 letters collected in the first six months of my archival research.

2 Objectives

The objective of this paper is to display the main differences between these two corpora (WWI-WWII). In fact, as far as the Second World War is concerned, the prisoners who wrote those letters were mainly partisans who knew for certain that they were going to be executed, whereas for the First World War the writers did not have a precise notion of what their fate was going to be, despite the precariousness of their situation. This dichotomy between letters from prisoners who knew they were sentenced to death and prisoners who still believed in a chance of survival, is underlined by textual and extra-textual elements. These elements were made evident by a digital analysis that allowed a greater understanding of these letters. The purpose of this paper is not to provide a complete interpretation of the subject but to propose a framework for the genre 'last letter' in order to understand if it is possible to give a preliminary answer to such a question. The texts analysed were submitted to a first NLP analysis carried out with TreeTagger (Schmid, 1994, 1995). To conduct this

preliminary analysis, I used, in TreeTagger, the Italian parameter file of Professor Achim Stein (University of Stuttgart). I then scanned the text for potential errors. Several writers for example, especially during World War I, often write a group of words as a single word. An example of this is '*saperesezicarlo*' which means 'to know if uncle Carlo…' The transcripts of these texts normally respect the language and spelling of the original documents. This way of writing, combined with dialectal forms, could not be read by TreeTagger. In order to rectify the pos-tagging procedure, I decided to correct manually the repertories of tagged word so that the work could be more precise, considering that I had to divide those groups of words. Regarding the stop words, I decided to include them in the analysis because they represent another characteristic habit of the writers. As I explained, these texts often display groups of united words, and in some cases, this happens because the writers do not know the correct spelling of these phrases, nor the concept of collocating, for instance, a preposition and a noun. An example of this tendency is the recurring *intrincea* [in the trenches], which should be written in two separate words, or *aggorizia*, which is a case of syntactic gemination (Repetti, 1991), a typical phenomenon that occurs in spoken Italian. In three different cases, the writers wrote *aggorizia* instead of *a Gorizia* [to Gorizia], imitating the sound they reproduce orally. This example is typical of the main category of writers who are part of the two *corpora*, that is, partially literate people. They often write groups of words attached together, like *alacamba*, literally *alla gamba* [to the leg], with the palatalization of the velar consonant (Pellegrini, 1985: 272). Another interesting example is the assimilation of the verb 'have' to the following past participle. In 1,2% of the *passato prossimo* [present perfect] forms it is possible to read expressions like *oreclamato* [I reclaimed] or *oscrito* [I wrote]. Finally, a third kind of word grouping, which occurs quite rarely (0,02% of the tokens), consists in the writer attaching entire phrases in a unique form. Some examples of this tendency are to be found in cases like *nosischersa* [don't joke about it] that display the low level of education of the writer, who obviously does not know the correct spelling of the verb *scherzare*, in which there is no 's' before the final suffix. The preliminary analysis that I am proposing in this paper presents the very first results of my ongoing research, namely, the first comparison between WWI and WWII corpora.

3 Letters

So what is a 'last letter'? Is it the last text written by someone before his or her disappearance or should it have some precise characteristics in terms of language and contents? Can a prisoner who was ignorant of his/her fate really write a last letter? Can we consider a 'last letter' one written by a prisoner who is then pardoned? Traditionally in the history of epistolary memoirs, the last letter has always been vaguely described as the last message that remains to us from someone who died. However, there are several types of documents that fit this description, and yet also have other, distinct features. For example, the Jewish partisan Emanuele Artom (Aosta, 23/06/1915 – Torino, 7/04/1944) kept a diary (Artom, 1966) during his imprisonment by the Nazis. His spiritual testament is contained within this diary, but not at the end of the text. Could this message be considered Artom's last letter even though it is a diary page, simply because it contains the last message he wrote? Considering that the World War II corpus is mainly composed by attested last letters, and the World War I corpus comprises letters written by prisoners who were, in most cases, unaware of their possible execution, I will compare them in order to see what the main differences between these two corpora are. Then I will determine whether, among these differences, there are shared, distinctive features that can generally be attributed to a last letter genre, as people's final messages obviously present some recurring peculiarities. One of the main characteristics of last letters is the request to the family for forgiveness. An example of this, taken from the WWI corpus, is the famous letter by Fabio Filzi (Pisino, 20/11/1884 – Trento, 12/11/1916), an Italian volunteer and irredentist executed by the Austrians. In his last message to his parents, one can immediately recognise a request for forgiveness which is one of the common traits of letters in both WWI and WWII corpora.

> Cari genitori, prima di morire non posso fare a meno di esprimere il mio profondo rincrescimento, per il fatto che mi sovrasta, invero non per la mia esistenza, ma per voi che avete fatto tanto per me e che non approvaste i miei sentimenti italiani. Io ho sempre adempito il mio dovere con scrupolosità seguendo sempre l'impulso della mia coscienza. Prima di morire rivolgo il pensiero a voi e alla mia cara Emma, che si trova a Padova, e contro i cui consigli ho agito arruolandomi. Addio per sempre, baci ai miei fratelli. Fabio Filzi.[1]

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[1] Dear parents, before I die I cannot help but express my deep regret, for the fact that it overwhelms me, indeed not for my existence, but for you who have done so much for me and who did not approve of my Italian feelings. I have always fulfilled my duty with scrupulousness, always following the impulse of my conscience. Before dying I turn my thoughts to you and to my dear Emma, who is in Padua, and against whose advice I acted by enlisting. Goodbye forever, kiss my brothers. Fabio Filzi.

This letter stands out as one of the few examples of surviving letters written by Italian WWI soldiers who were executed. The red part shows the request for forgiveness to his parents for the pain that his own death will cause them. This sentence could also be easily contained in the letter of a partisan sentenced to death. On the contrary, the green part is something totally different compared to the letters of the Second World War. In the letters of this period there are no ideological clashes between the people sentenced to death and their families. The contrast is always linked to the desire of the condemned person's loved ones not to lose them. Another feature that differentiates the two corpora is that First World War letters were written only by adult men while in the WWII corpus there are several other categories of writers, like teenagers and women. An example is Renato Mantovani (Treviso, 16/12/1928 – Pieve di Teco (IM), 26/01/1945), one of the youngest partisans in the corpus, who was 16 years old.

> Notizia ai genitori. 'Sono accusato di appartenere alle bande comuniste, vi domando perdono, ora mi fucilano'. Renato.[2]

Again, as you can see in green, Mantovani apologizes to his family for the pain that his shooting will cause them, as in the previous case of Fabio Filzi. These two texts show that there are characteristics in common among the last letters, although these two texts were produced 20 years apart and were written by different profiles of writers. Another common feature of all these letters, even those not written with full awareness of certain death, is to entrust one's family to the care of the recipient of the message. This is because the writer thinks that they will never be able to see their loved ones again. An example from the First World War is the following excerpt from the letter of a soldier who is writing from a trench shortly before an assault, with an obvious fear of dying.

> […] e bacia i banbini ch'io sara dificile a poterli rivedere ancora una volta; mediante il mio scritto la lagrime cadono dalli occhi che una volta ti rimirava. adio. […]. (Procacci, 2000: 414).[3]

We only know the name of this infantryman, Beppe, and we cannot say with certainty that this is his last letter even if it is plausible to think so. In red, it is evident that the letter refers to never seeing one's loved ones again with the probable intention of exorcising the fear that this soldier had that this eventuality would actually occur. An example of a letter from World War II with the same kind of tone is that of Vanda Abenaim (Pisa, 6/05/1907 - Auschwitz, unknown), a Tuscan Jew who did not survive Auschwitz. The case of Abenaim is very interesting because it is one of the few that presents coded messages in a last letter. Based on her son's accounts, we know that the family had devised a coded means of communicating in case they should find themselves in a dangerous situation (Pacifici, 1993: 129).

Firenze 30/11/1943

> Gent.ma Signora, Mi farebbe tanto la gentilezza di consegnare a mio fratello la presente perché purtroppo sono ferita gravemente e non so quale destino mi sono destinata. Sono molto avvilita perché non so se potrò essere salva e rivedere più i miei cari. Già sono in camerata. Pregata tanto per me. I bimbi sono stati salvati. Per ora sono sempre a Firenze. Mando tanti baci al mio caro Carlo e mando baci alla mia mamma e chissà quando la rivedrò. Saluto tanto anche lei e pure la sua signorina. Sua aff.m a nipote Vanda.[4]

The letter is theoretically addressed to a woman, but in truth it is addressed to her brother. In red you can see the parts where the woman asks her brother in code to take care of the children because she fears she will never see them again. The Abenaim family had established a secret code if they were captured by the Germans (Abenaim, 2015). The examples in the text are in green. With the sentence *sono gravemente ferita e non so quale destino mi sono destinata* [I am seriously injured and do not know what fate I am destined for], she warns her family that she has been taken prisoner by the Germans. Moreover, with the expression *Già sono in camerata* [I'm already in my dormitory], she informs her brother that she is already on the train to the concentration camp. Considering that these texts have some common traits despite their many differences, I tried to keep the characteristic elements of the original documents to better underline the differences between

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[2] Notify the parents. I am accused of belonging to communist gangs, I ask your forgiveness, now they shoot me 'Renato'.

[3] And kiss the children as it will be difficult for me to see them again; through my writing the tears fall from the eyes that once gazed at you. Farewell.

[4] Dear Madam, could you be so kind as to bring this letter over to my brother because unfortunately I am seriously injured and do not know what fate I am destined for. I am very discouraged because I do not know if I will be saved and I will be able to see my loved ones again. I'm already in my dormitory. Please pray a lot for me. The children have been saved. For now I'm still in Florence. I send many kisses to my dear Carlo and I send kisses to my mother and who knows when I will see her again. I also greet you and your lady. Your affectionate nephew Vanda.

one corpus and the other, through a semantic and morpho-syntactic analysis of the two. I mainly used TreeTagger and I displayed some results through the use of the Links tool of Voyant-Tools. The next step of the project will consist in the comparative analysis of another group of texts carried out with TreeTagger and other lemmatizers such as Tint (tint.fbk.eu), UDPipe (http://ufal.mff.cuni.cz/udpipe) and T2K (http://www.italianlp.it/demo/t2k-text-to-knowledge/).

4 Part-of-Speech analysis

It is the first time that such an analysis is applied to these texts, despite the fact that in some cases these letters have already been studied and analysed, both for the WWI corpus (Spitzer, 2016) as well as the WWII one (Bozzola, 2013), but in any case, this is the very first *digital* analysis that has been applied to these texts. The possibilities given by digital tools have enabled us to clearly see the differences between World War I and World War II, and to establish some of the characteristics of the last letter genre. The result of the pos-tagging and the following manual corrections enabled me to gain a better understanding of the language of these letters. The following table summarises all the characteristics of these texts.

	World War I	World War II
Letters	960	1203
Tokens	63.637	134.103
Types	9.953	12.912
Lemmas	6122	8031
Type-Token Ratio (TTR)	0,156	0,096
Lemma-Token Ratio (LTR)	0,96	0,6
Average Words Per Sentence	19,2	32,3
Accuracy	89,8%	95,5%
Corrected Tokens	6505 (10,2% of the total)	6044 (4,5% of the total)

The data concerning the accuracy are very interesting, and are linked to the linguistic nature of the two corpora. As a matter of fact, the World War I corpus is linguistically more problematic, and Treetagger had a harder time analysing it. As you can see, on World War I texts, it had an index of accuracy of 89,8%, which is 5.7 percentage points less than the accuracy score it had on World War II letters. A manual correction confirmed these data, but I also noticed, thanks to a close reading approach to World War I letters, some linguistic peculiarities that I did not think were canonical peculiarities, such as local and dialectal traits. As I explained in the introduction, World War I writers were not confident about the spelling of Italian, owing to their education and their being dialect speakers. These characteristics, which TreeTagger cannot tag, are extremely representative of the World War I corpus, but totally absent from the other one. Moving from these general comments about parts of speech to a more detailed analysis, it is possible to verify the differences between the two corpora in terms of what grammatical categories are used, and where TreeTagger struggled the most.

World War I	Corrected		TreeTagger		Accuracy
	Occurrences	Percentage	Percentage	Occurrences	
Abbreviations	308	0,48%	0,07%	45	0,413%
Adjectives	4843	7,61%	8%	5093	0,392%
Adverbs	5842	9,18%	8,65%	5504	0,531%
Conjunctions	4268	6,7%	6,5%	4141	0,199%
Articles	4283	6,73%	7,84%	4988	0,568%
Nouns	12038	18,91%	21,95%	13970	3,03%
Proper Names	1550	2,43%	1,91%	1217	0,523%
Punctuation	5263	8,27%	1,99%	1269	6,276%
Prepositions	9674	15,20%	13,12%	8349	2,082%
Pronouns	9078	14,26%	13,11%	8347	1,148%
Verbs	15890	24,97%	20,10%	12792	4,868%

Accuracy	TreeTagger		Corrected		World War II
	Occurrences	Percentage	Percentage	Occurrences	
0,055%	84	0,063%	0,12%	159	Abbreviations
0,118%	10809	8,06%	8,18%	10968	Adjectives

0,428%	11213	8,36%	8,79%	11787	**Adverbs**
0,051%	8629	6,43%	6,49%	8698	**Conjunctions**
0,040%	8806	6,57%	6,6%	8860	**Articles**
2,427%	26940	20,09%	17,66%	23685	**Nouns**
1,191%	3237	2,41%	3,61%	4835	**Proper Names**
0	3515	2,62%	2,62%	3515	**Punctuation**
0,255%	16990	12,67%	12,41%	16647	**Prepositions**
0,548%	19935	14,86%	15,41%	20670	**Pronouns**
9,994%	27154	20,25	30,19%	40485	**Verbs**

The biggest differences between the two *corpora* lie in the use of verbs. If the present, the most common tense of the indicative, appears in both corpora with almost the same frequency (WWI: 7,82 – WWII: 8%), the same cannot be said of the past tenses. The use of the past – simple past, imperfect, and present perfect – in World War II letters is more than twice as frequent (11,41%) as in WWI texts (4,9%). Combining these data with a close reading approach, it is possible to affirm that this linguistic trait is one of the peculiarities of the last letter genre. As I said, WWI letters were written by prisoners who wanted to tell their families about their everyday lives. On the other hand, WWII letters were written by people sentenced to death, who often used the memories of their past experiences as a way of exorcising the fear of capital punishment and entrusting their loved ones with the memories of happy times when they were together. The use of parts of speech being so meaningful, I decided to highlight the correlation between these grammatical elements by using a graphic tool. Then I submitted these tagged texts to Voyant-tool. The application then showed which parts of speech are the most common (blue rectangles) and which combinations they form (orange rectangles).


It is immediately evident that the texts from the First World War give greater attention to textual construction. For instance, they display a greater use of punctuation. As Spitzer (2016: 108) noticed, this use is often made incorrectly (Cortelazzo, 1972: 119-123). Nevertheless, the writers demonstrate awareness of the fact that punctuation must be there as an indispensable element of the text, (Restivo: 2018, 249), while in the Second World War letters, due to the strong emotionality of the moment, language becomes mimetic of speech. First World War morpho-syntactic chains highlight a higher number of nouns, prepositions and adverbs with an indirect relationship between substantives and adjectives. Analysing the letters with a close reading approach, I can suppose that sentences are more complex and present a higher number of indirect objects. On the other hand, the Second World War corpus, with a higher number of nouns and adjectives, displays a more prominent use of direct objects or nominal sentences.[5] Indeed texts of the First World War show a greater hypotaxis, therefore complexity, in comparison to those of the Second, precisely because of the different emotional conditions of writing but not only. In fact, the writing of the last letters of deportees and condemned to death of the resistance is very often clandestine and can literally be visualised on the page as a stream of consciousness, as the writers were trying to make the most of every moment in which they could find time to write. In a possible definition of the last letter, it will therefore be necessary to consider the morphological construction of the discourse as one of the discriminating factors in the reflection on genre.

5 Most Frequent/ Characteristic words

In order to better display the use of the lexicon, I used Voyant as a tool to visualize collocations and links within the texts. The representation of the connections of the most frequent words (blue rectangles) with the others (orange rectangles) is the following:

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[5] In any case, in the next phases of the project I will go further in the syntactic analysis using tool like Coh-Metrix (http://terence.fbk.eu/services/api/computeReadability/v2/).
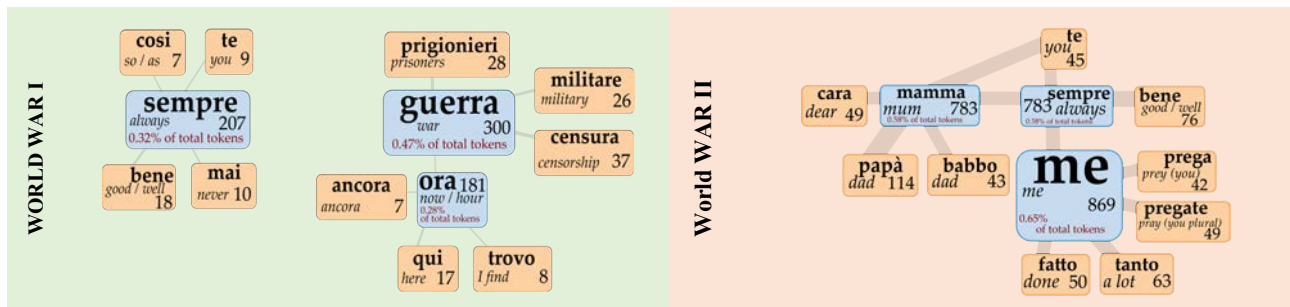
On the green background is the corpus of the First World War while on the red one is the corpus of the Second.[6] This analysis is surprising because it clearly shows what the nature of the two corpora is. The words *sempre*, *ora* and *guerra*, on the left, show a descriptive lexical approach to war writing, which aims to tell the stories of the front to the families of the writers. On the contrary, the most frequent words in the last letters corpus of the Second World War illustrate a familiar lexicon that reveals the emotional character of this writing. All this information allows us to say more about the generic features of the last letter. In fact, both corpora, WWI and WWII, are texts written in a tragic moment and, if we bracket the substantial differences between a person condemned to death and a soldier in prison, the condition of deportees of the Second World War can in fact be compared to that of prisoners of the First World War. The substantial difference lies in the codification that the subject makes of the reality he or she is living. A soldier learns to experience the daily realities of war as part of a group of like-minded people; imprisonment and death become a codified consequence of a tragic but commonly accepted situation. Those sentenced to death, on the other hand, find themselves alone before death, in some cases feeling incredulity, such as the case of fourteen or fifteen-year-old boys who do not expect to be shot or tortured; in other instances, they cling onto the hope that their comrades can make an exchange for a Fascist or a Nazi prisoner. On the other hand, deportees, especially for racial reasons, are faced with the unknown while in chains, considering that their imprisonment is not the result of their actions but of their personal identity, and they are kept in the dark as to their fate. The letters of many deportees also contain appeals to hope. A very interesting fact is that this concerns the lexicon in its entirety. If we observe in fact the lemma/token ratio (Jurafsky, Bell, Girand, 2002) it is evident that the WWI corpus is more lexically varied (0.96) than the WWII corpus (0,6). This is due to the fact that the letters written a few hours before execution with the certainty of having to die, are characterized by a basic lexicon that often returns. I preferred lemma-token to type-token because it is better suited to treat inflected forms of a word as the same type (McCarthy, 1990: 73). To give an example of how the lexicon of these texts works, we can for example cite the use of the word *dolore* [pain] which is often used in phrases in which the writer apologizes for the pain that death will cause his/her loved ones as in the previous case of Filzi and Mantovani. In the corpus of the First World War there are 43 occurrences of the word *dolore* and in no case is it collocated with adjectives. By contrast, in the corpus of the Second World War, the word 'pain' appears 185 times, 57 of which are accompanied by a demonstrative adjective such as: *grande* [big], *immenso* or *immane* [immense], *tremendo* [tremendous], *profondo* [deep], *accorato* [heartfelt], *straziante* [heartbreaking] or *ultimo* [last]. The language in these last letters is therefore more descriptive, especially when it describes the feelings and therefore distinguishes the story of imprisonment or of life in the trenches from an inner narrative that must condense a greater communicative intent into a few lines. It should also be noted that of the 57 occurrences of the noun *pain* with these adjectives, 7 have the adjective post-placed to the noun while 50 have it placed before the noun (Serianni, 1989: 199-205). This is typical of the syntactic structures commonly found in literary texts (Scarano, 2000: 5). It is no wonder that there should be a similar lexicon as well as sentence construction in the letters, given that their authors learnt how to write in Italian through the example of literature, for instance Dante. These letters are as diverse as the materials on which they were written. During my research in the archives, I never found a single letter from a soldier on the front of the First World War that was written on a precarious medium. In contrast, the partisans and deportees wrote their last messages really wherever they could (Bozzola, 2013: 26). There are also, for instance, 'letters' composed of three words on the edge of a book or even a list of names engraved on a loaf of dry bread. These letters represent in essence what the two wars were, and testify to their differences. Thanks to the function 'oppose' of the R package Stylo, I identified the most characteristic words of each of the *corpora*. For World War I it found *austriaci* [Austrians] (34), *macello* [slaughterhouse] (21),

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[6] In the rectangles the numbers are the occurrences of the given word. An English translation is provided in italics. The blue rectangles contain the most frequent words, or parts of speech, and the orange the ones those that appear most frequently in connection with them.

licenza [license] (19), *francesi* [French] (19), *stanchi* [tired] (18). On the other hand, for World War II, *muoio* [I die] (212), *sii* [be] (117), *chiedo* [ask] (105), *perdonatemi* [forgive me] (51), *non piangete* [don't cry] (45), *ricordatevi* [you remember] (43). It is interesting to note how, even in these few cases, the most characteristic words of World War I are related to the conflict, describing it as a slaughterhouse, its protagonists – the Austrian enemies and the French allies – the authors' desires to escape the war while on leave and to one of the most common feelings of the soldiers: tiredness.

6 Conclusion

These 'last' letters focus on the content of the message, whereas World War II letters are most concentrated on the emotive and conative functions because the language focuses on the sender and the addressee (Jakobson, 1960). The sentenced to death ask to be remembered by the people they love. They want to be forgiven and for their families to be happy. We could therefore assume that one of the most salient peculiarities of a last letter is when the message mainly focuses on the sender himself/herself and on the addressee. The last letters aim to describe emotions rather than facts, and to tell about the past more than about the present, because there is no future for the sentenced to death. In the next future, I will include other letters in the corpus and I will cross the analysis done until now with TreeTagger with the use of other lemmatizers and tools. The analysis I have conducted revealed some problems in comparing World War I and World War II letters but it also highlighted changes in the writing of Italian. Most importantly, this phase of my research proved that a 'last letter' was thematically, linguistically and pragmatically definable.

Acknowledgements

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