

The semantic specialization of third person pronoun ‘esso’ as (-human) in Standard Italian

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Introduction

Extensive research has been carried out on personal pronouns in standard Italian (cf. Tables 1 and 2), in particular third person subject pronouns, from both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective.¹ This study, however, is concerned with an aspect of the diachronic development of third person tonic forms that has been surprisingly overlooked, namely the semantic specialization as (–human) of the M.SG form *esso* (in bold below).

Table 1. Tonic subject pronouns in Italian

	1	2	3	
			M	F
SG	<i>io</i>	<i>tu</i>	<i>lui</i> <i>egli</i> <i>esso</i>	<i>lei</i> <i>ella</i> <i>essa</i>
PL	<i>noi</i>	<i>voi</i>	<i>loro</i> <i>essi</i>	<i>loro</i> <i>esse</i>

Table 2. Tonic oblique pronouns in Italian

	1	2	3	
			M	F
SG	<i>me</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>lui</i> <i>esso</i>	<i>lei</i> <i>essa</i>
PL	<i>noi</i>	<i>voi</i>	<i>loro</i> <i>essi</i>	<i>loro</i> <i>esse</i>

Italian third person tonic pronouns, unlike first and second person pronouns, display multiple forms in both subject and oblique function. *Lui*, *lei*, *loro* are used in everyday speech, are both anaphoric and deictic, and can be employed in all syntactic functions. By contrast, *egli*, *ella*, *esso*, *essa*, *essi*, *esse* are stylistically marked, being largely restricted to written and formal

¹ For example Alinei (2003), Ambrosini (1978), Boco (1986), Boström (1972), Cordin & Calabrese (1988), Cappellaro (2013, 2016), D’Achille (1990, 2012), Durante (1970), Egerland & Cardinaletti (2010), Freedman (1983), Klajn (1976), Leone (2003, 2006), Palermo (1997), Renzi (1983, 2000, 2012), Rovere (2001), Sornicola (1997, 2001), and Vanelli (2003).

discourse, are extremely infrequent and syntactically constrained (cf. Maiden & Robustelli (2007, p. 116) and Vanelli (2003, p. 62)).²

Thus in the modern standard language, in the syntactic function of subject (cf. Table 1), *lui*, *egli*, and *esso* are in complementary distribution according to style (+/- formal register) and semantics (+/- human reference): *esso* can be schematically defined as (+formal, -human), *lui* as (-formal, +human) and *egli* as (+formal, +human). In the oblique function (cf. Table 2), *esso* and *lui* are also in complementary distribution and are not interchangeable.

This, however, has not always been the case. In past centuries *esso* could refer to both human and non-human antecedents, and *esso* and *egli* as subjects were therefore near-synonyms. The example in (1a) from Galilei's *Il Saggiatore* (1621) shows that *egli* and *esso* could be used interchangeably to refer to the same (+human) antecedent in the same sentence.

Besides, *lui* as subject was strongly condemned,³ thus *esso* and *lui* in the non-subject function were also near-synonyms. The example in (1b) from Alfieri's *Vita* (1790) illustrates, for instance, how they could be used by one and same speaker to refer to the same (+ human) antecedent within the same text.

- (1) a. “**(E)gli** mi fa dir quello che già mai non s'è detto né scritto; e mentre noi diciamo, che se la cometa si movesse di moto retto, ci apparirebbe muoversi verso il vertice e zenit, **esso** vuole che noi abbiamo detto ch'ella, movendosi, dovesse arrivare al vertice e zenit.” (Galilei, *Il Saggiatore*, 28.4)

[(...) **he (egli)** makes me say things that have never been said nor written; and while we claim that if the comet were moving in a straight line, it would appear as if it was moving towards the summit and zenith, **he (esso)** wants us to have claimed that it (the comet), by moving, should reach in fact the summit and zenith]

- b. “*Siccome io non lo avea mai conosciuto prima (essendomi egli fratello uterino soltanto), io veramente non mi sentiva quasi nessun amore **per esso**; ma siccome*

² This work focuses on the competition of *esso/egli* as subjects and *esso/lui* as obliques (particularly as complements of a preposition; in direct object function tonic forms are generally rarer and clitic pronouns tend to be preferred).

I will not discuss here the much investigated issue of the competition between *egli* and *lui* in subject position (cf. footnote 3). However, it is worth noting that *egli* and *lui* display different syntactic properties in modern Italian, *egli* behaving like a ‘weak’ pronoun in the sense of Cardinaletti & Starke (1999) (for a discussion see Cordin & Calabrese (1988), Vanelli (2003) and Manzini (2014)).

³ This is perhaps one of the better-known episodes in the history of Italian grammar (for a discussion see D’Achille (1990, p. 313f.). Up to the second half of the 19th century (for example Puoti’s grammar of 1860), grammars prescribed that *lui* should not be used in subject function: “l’uso di *lui*, *lei*, *loro* al nominativo è considerato come ‘gravissimo errore’”. In the first half of the 20th century (the 1951 grammar of Battaglia and Pernicone) one could still find that “le forme oggettive *lui*, *lei* e *loro* si vanno imponendo nell’uso vivo e familiare anche nella funzione soggettiva [ma] sarebbe opportuno evitar[le]” (both quoted in Leone (2006, pp. 161-162)).

egli andava pure un cotal poco ruzzando con me, una certa inclinazione per lui mi sarebbe venuta crescendo con l'assuefazione." (Alfieri, *Vita*, Epoca 1, 5.2)

[Since I had never met him before (he was just my natural brother), I did not feel love for **him** (*esso*); but then he would become playful with me, so a kind of tenderness for **him** (*lui*) would grow with the passing of time]

The semantic narrowing of *esso*, however, did not affect F.SG *essa* or the PL forms *essi* and *esse* (cf. (2) below). Consequently, in the 3.F.SG cell of the modern standard Italian paradigm the pronouns *ella* and *essa* are still near-synonymous.⁴

- (2) a. "*Egli e lui* si usano con riferimento alle persone (...); *esso* è usato per animali e cose (...). La stessa differenza non si riscontra tra *lei* ed *essa*; la forma *essa* è riferita anche a persone, ma il suo uso è sempre meno comune e ha un carattere letterario o regionale."

[*Egli* and *lui* are used to refer to humans (...); *esso* is used for animals and things (...). This difference is not found between *lei* and *essa*; the form *essa* can also refer to humans, although its use is becoming less and less common and has regional or literary connotations] (Dardano & Trifone, 2001, p. 236)

- b. "*Egli* is distinguished from *esso* in that the former refers only to humans but the latter predominantly to non-humans. Unlike *esso*, the pronouns *essa*, *essi* and *esse* can refer to humans and non-humans alike." (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007, p. 117)

When did the M.SG form *esso* come to assume the specialized function of referring to non-human antecedents? How did it happen? And why is there such an asymmetry between M.SG and F.SG? This paper addresses such questions by analysing data on the occurrences of *esso*, *essa*, *essi*, *esse* and the nature of their antecedents in a corpus of literary texts dating from the 13th to the 20th century.⁵ It claims the following:

- (i) data show that *esso*'s semantic narrowing occurred in the 19th century. This finding is in line with claims put forward by D'Achille (2012), who based himself on the treatment of *esso* in Italian grammars and observed that signs of *esso*'s specialization can be traced earlier (16th and 17th centuries), but that the crucial changes occur in the 19th century: '(...) alcune "premesse" della specializzazione di *esso* si possono individuare già in osservazioni del

⁴ Cappellaro (2013) analyses this inflectional near-synonymy in terms of 'overabundance' (Thornton 2011, 2012a, 2012b), that is the non-canonical (Corbett 2007) phenomenon in morphology whereby "a cell in a paradigm is filled by two or more synonymous forms which realize the same set of morpho-syntactic properties" (Thornton, 2011, 359). It also discusses possible factors which influenced the diachronic stability and preservation of such phenomenon (2013, p. 217-219).

⁵ The corpus details and the data collection methodology are provided in §2.1.

Trissino (1529), del Buommattei (1643) e dell'Amenta (1655). Certo, però, la regola si è andata progressivamente affermando solo dall'Ottocento in poi' (D'Achille, 2012, pp. 124-125).

(ii) as regards how it happened, I propose, contra Boström (1972), that the semantic narrowing of *esso* is one of the innovations promoted by Alessandro Manzoni and adopted in modern standard Italian. This is not surprising considering the central role played by Manzoni's linguistic ideology and literary practice in the re-standardization of the Italian language (see, for example, Serianni (1986, p. 51f.)). His novel *Promessi Sposi* became the most authoritative linguistic model in post-unified Italy, in particular the second edition (1840) which included corrections based on the actual usage of Italian by educated Florentine speakers of his time – a process that is often referred to in the literature with the metaphor *risciacquatura (dei panni) in Arno* (literally washing (one's clothes, i.e. one's language) in the Arno river, in Florence).

Data on *esso*'s semantics in *Fermo e Lucia* (an earlier version of the novel dating 1821-3) and in the two editions of *Promessi Sposi* (published in 1827, also known as *Ventisettana*; and in 1840, also known as *Quarantana*) show that Manzoni made the explicit choice of using *esso* with reference only to non-human antecedents before 1827 (before his trip to Florence and the beginning of the *risciacquatura*). This is an indication that this choice is not traceable directly to Manzoni's explicit policy of linguistic Tuscanization, but is rather linked to Manzoni's rationalistic approach to linguistic redundancy (in this case the existence of synonymous pronouns *esso* and *egli* as subjects and *esso* and *lui* as non-subjects).

If this analysis is correct, this phenomenon is yet another instance of the role played by prescriptivism in morpho-syntactic change (cf. Scott (2014)).

(iii) Why did not *essa* (and *essi*, *esse*) follow *esso*'s semantic narrowing in Manzoni's system? A detailed analysis of all pronominal changes in Manzoni's 1840 edition of *Promessi Sposi* (Boco 1986) can offer some insight into this question. Manzoni eliminated *ella* from the 1840 edition (only 6 occurrences out of 482 found in the 1827 edition remained) and *essa* was often chosen to replace *ella* (+human).⁶ In the system of standard Italian, however, *ella* has been

⁶ This is Boco's original finding (1986, p. 36).

preserved, thus causing the persistence in diachrony of inflectional synonymy or overabundance (cf. footnote 4).

The article has the following structure. In §1, I discuss previous studies which have dealt, although marginally, with the semantic specialization of *esso*. In §2, I present the data and offer a quantitative and qualitative analysis of *esso*'s semantics from the 16th to the 21st century. In §3 I discuss Manzoni's role in the development of *esso* within the system of third person forms in modern standard Italian, before offering my conclusions in § 4.

1. Previous studies

Among previous descriptive works on Italian personal pronouns conducted from a diachronic perspective, Boström (1972) and Renzi (2000) have dealt with the specialization of *esso*, although this was not the focus of their work.

Boström (1972) investigates the morpho-syntactic behaviour of third person subject pronouns with the aim of establishing diachronic parallels between standard Italian and Florentine. He claims that the specialization of *esso* relates neither to Bembo's nor to Manzoni's usage (see (3)).

- (3) *“[U]n'analisi del problema interessante che riguarda l'origine –non fiorentina?– di questa distinzione tra animato e inanimato richiederebbe uno studio approfondito, a cui abbiamo dovuto rinunciare in questa sede. Aggiungiamo soltanto che la distinzione non è da ricollegarsi né con l'uso del Bembo né con quello del Manzoni.”*

[An analysis of the interesting issue of the (non-Florentine?) origin of this distinction between animate and inanimate reference would require an in-depth study, which we were unable to carry out in the present work. We would like to add, however, that this distinction relates neither to Bembo's nor to Manzoni's usage] (Boström, 1972, p. 137)

His claim, however, is based on the misinterpretation of one occurrence of *esso* in *Promessi Sposi*:

- (4) *“ESSO è raro (FR 4); come risulta dal secondo esempio citato qua sotto, denota anche una persona. (...) «Chiedeva esso di continuo anche danari per supplire alle spese giornaliere».”*

[*Esso* is rare (...); as the example below shows, it can also refer to humans] (Boström, 1972, pp. 118-119)

The pronominal referent of *esso* in the given example is in fact non-human (*quel tribunale* ‘that tribunal’), as can be seen once the sentence is presented in context.

- (5) “(...) *principiarono a dare un po’ più orecchio agli avvisi, alle proposte della Sanità, a far eseguire i suoi editti, i sequestri ordinati, le quarantene prescritte da quel tribunale. Chiedeva esso di continuo anche danari per supplire alle spese giornaliere, crescenti, del lazzeretto, di tanti altri servizi (...).*”
[(...) they began to pay more attention to notices and to the advice of the Tribunal of Health, to implement its orders, and the quarantine prescribed by **that tribunal**. **It (esso)** asked for money on a regular basis to cover the increasing cost of the lazzeretto and many other services] (*Promessi Sposi* (1840), 31.25)

The claim I advance in this article is that Manzoni did in fact play a crucial role in the specialization of *esso*. The first edition of *Promessi Sposi* (1827) is indeed the first text to display the modern usage, and the data suggest that the semantic narrowing of *esso* is not an isolated phenomenon, but just one of several pronominal innovations promoted by Manzoni and incorporated into the standard language (cf. §3).

Renzi (2000), on the other hand, examines the continuation of Latin IPSE in Italo-Romance, and advances hypotheses on both the status of the form *esso* in Tuscan and its semantic specialization. Assuming the absence from modern Tuscan dialects of the pronominal continuants of IPSE, he claims that the personal pronoun *esso* is not indigenous to Tuscany, but is in fact a loanword from Rome, where the continuant of IPSE is the only form attested in medieval times, and where metaphony is absent (cf. (6) below).

- (6) “*Esso deve far parte invece di quella serie di prestiti colti che il Toscano ha accolto, seppur in maniera limitata, sia da Nord che da Sud. Per la sua forma e per il suo uso predominante esso deve essere quindi in toscano, e poi in italiano, un prestito da Roma, un romanismo.*”
[*Esso* must be one of those learned loanwords that have been borrowed by Tuscan, although not in large numbers, from the north or the south. Given its shape and its principal use, in Tuscan and hence in Italian *esso* must be a loan from Rome] (Renzi, 2000, p. 196)

Moreover, he puts forward the hypothesis that *esso* referring to non-humans was disseminated as a consequence of the gradual disappearance from Tuscan of the indigenous form *ello*, with *elli* being used only with human antecedents (cf. (7) below).

- (7) *“L’espansione dell’uso di esso nell’inanimato è stata certamente conseguente alla scomparsa progressiva dal toscano della forma indigena ello (elli, egli essendo riservato all’animato). (...) Per secoli, nell’architettura della lingua colta esso ha avuto una sua collocazione: quella di pronomi di III persona inanimato, per cui la continuazione di ILLE, perduto l’antico ello, presentava una lacuna.”*
 [The expansion of *esso* as (–animate) correlates positively with the gradual disappearance of *ello* from Tuscan (*elli, egli* being restricted to animate referents). For centuries, *esso* has had a specific place in the system of the cultivated language, that of third person pronoun (–animate), in order to fill the gap left by the old form *ello*] (Renzi, 2000, p. 196)

Both claims pose problems. Phonologically, *esso* is perfectly compatible with a Tuscan origin. It is a rare form, but its absence from modern Tuscan dialects does not necessarily imply that it is a loanword. For example, continuants of IPSE were present in Sicily in the Middle Ages but are absent from modern Sicilian dialects (see Sornicola (1992, p. 460)). Besides, as Renzi claims, reflexes of both ILLE and IPSE coexisted in a wide area of central and southern Italy, with no significant difference in syntactic or semantic terms (cf. (8) below).

- (8) *“Nella gran parte dell’area centro-meridionale coesistevano le forme pronominali da IPSE e da ILLE e avevano la stessa funzione. A quanto pare nel corso del tempo è avvenuta una selezione, ora a favore di un tipo ora dell’altro (...).”*
 [In the majority of central and southern Italy continuants of IPSE and ILLE coexisted with the same function. It appears that, over time, either one or the other has been selected] (Renzi, 2000, p. 194)

Furthermore, *ello* was dropped from Tuscan before the end of the 15th century at the latest, while *esso* did not undergo specialization until the 19th century. The three-century gap between the two events makes it difficult to support Renzi’s hypothesis. In addition, it is possible that *ello* disappeared from the system even earlier. The latest text in my corpus to display such a form is *Motti e Facezie del Piovano Arlotto*, published in 1490. *Ello* occurs once and appears to be a northern Italian feature, as (9) below shows.

- (9) *“Chi ‘l dise se smente falsamente per la gola, ch’ello istà in camera in el mio letto, e ogni notte lo tiegno a dormire miego in queste brasse.”*
 [Whoever claims this is lying through his teeth, because in fact he sleeps in my bedroom, and every night I keep him in my arms] (Facezia 69.10)

The sentence is uttered by the ambassador of the Duke of Ferrara in Florence, and *ello* is not its only observable northern Italian feature. Notice for example the voicing in *miego* [< MECUM] and the depalatalization in *dise* and *brazze*.

The status of *ello* as indigenous to Tuscany is equally controversial. Ambrosini (1978, p. 193), for example, suggests that *ello* might be a learned loanword from Sicilian. Egerland & Cardinaletti (2010) simply define it as a “forma non fiorentina”. On the other hand, Rohlf (1968, p. 133) suggests it is a Tuscan (old Italian) form.⁷

Finally, the data from my corpus do not support the claim that *ello* had the specialized function of referring to non-humans, as suggested by Renzi (and Ambrosini). As Table 3 shows, there is no clear tendency for *ello* to refer to non-human antecedents, especially in subject position.

Table 3. Distribution of *ello* in Tuscan texts (1281-1490) from Stoppelli & Picchi (2001).

	SBJ (+human)	SBJ (-human)	C.PREP ⁸ (+human)	C.PREP (-human)	DIR.OBJ (+human)	DIR.OBJ (-human)
NOVELLINO		1				
TRISTANO RICCARDIANO	1					
CONVIVIO	4	8				
REGGIMENTO E COSTUMI DI DONNA	30	4		2	1	
CRONACA VILLANI	1					
TRECENTONOVELLE	4	2				1
MOTTI E FACEZIE DEL PIOVANO ARLOTTO	1					
Total	41	15	0	2	1	1

2. Data presentation and discussion

2.1 Methodology

⁷ This issue is still unresolved and requires a detailed analysis, which is however beyond the scope of the present study. As an anonymous reviewer observes, in addressing this question it would be necessary to assess whether *ello* is attested in earlier texts than the *Novellino* (1301). Since the *Novellino* displays non-Tuscan elements, the occurrence of *ello* in this text could be interpreted as a sign of a non-Tuscan origin. A preliminary investigation of the OVI corpus shows that out of the 239 occurrences of *ello* in pre-1300 texts, 99 occurrences are from Tuscany and 140 are from northern Italy. But in order to interpret such figures a fine-grained textual analysis is required.

⁸ Complement of preposition.

The data presented here on third person pronouns *esso*, *essa*, *essi*, *esse* and the nature of their antecedents have been collected from a corpus of forty-eight texts dating from the 13th century to the first decades of the 20th century (full list in Appendix). The texts were selected from the *LIZ 4.0 - Letteratura Italiana Zanichelli 4.0* (Stoppelli & Picchi 2001) and belong to different genres, from treatises, tales, comedies and novels to autobiographies and letters. The early texts considered are mostly Tuscan, particularly Florentine, while later texts dating from the 16th century onwards include works by authors from different areas of the peninsula. A number of texts were considered essential to the corpus for their significance in the history and development of the Italian language. Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua*, and Manzoni's *Fermo e Lucia* and *Promessi Sposi*, for example, have received special attention. The data I present and discuss in the following section focus on M.SG *esso* from the 16th to the 20th century, and are both quantitative (§2.2) and qualitative (§2.3) in nature.

2.2 Quantitative data (1525-1923)

As Table 4 illustrates, between 1525 (*Prose della Volgar Lingua* by Bembo) and 1817 (the date of the latest text in my corpus that precedes Manzoni's *Fermo e Lucia*) *esso* refers to human and non-human antecedents both in Tuscan and non-Tuscan authors.⁹

The total number of occurrences of *esso* subject (+human) is greater than that of *esso* subject (–human), namely 93 versus 25, and this would be the case even if we disregarded the 44 occurrences found in Vico (cf. footnote 9). *Esso* as the complement of a preposition shows a tendency towards reference to non-human antecedents, with 138 occurrences versus 64, while the only occurrence of *esso* as direct object is (+human).

Table 4. Occurrences of ESSO (+/–human) between 1525 and 1817.

author, year	SBJ (+human)	SUBJ (–human)	C.PREP (+human)	C.PREP (–human)	DIR.OBJ (+human)	DIR.OBJ (–human)
BEMBO, 1525	22	12	7	9		

⁹ This does not entail that the author's geographical origin is irrelevant to his/her pronominal usage (choice of forms, in particular). For example, the high number of occurrences of *esso* in Vico could be explained by his Neapolitan origin. In 16th-century Neapolitan *isso*, the continuant of Latin IPSE, was in fact the unmarked pronominal form for the third person (cf. Ledgeway 2009: 277). But what is relevant to the present discussion is the fact that the use of *esso* with respect to humanness is generalised and does not appear to correlate with the author's origin. Following a similar line of reasoning, a Latinizing style (which, as an anonymous reviewer observes, could be ascribed to Vico and Bembo for example) could also motivate a higher number of occurrences of *esso* as IPSE and its semantics as both (+human) and (–human).

(*) ¹⁰ GRAZZINI, 1550			4	4		
DONI, 1555	2		4	6		
(*)CELLINI, 1558-65	1	1	9	31		
MARINO, 1614		2	3	24		
(*)GALILEI, 1621	7	6	7	19		
BRIGNOLE, 1636		2	4	9		
PALLAVICINO, 1641	1		1	3	1	
GRAVINA, 1708			1	8		
VICO, 1725-8	44	1	3	1		
(*)CRUDELI, 1730-45	1					
GIANNONE, 1736-7	2			1		
VERRI, 1763	2			7		
ALFIERI, 1790-	1		21	16		
FOSCOLO, 1817	10	1				
Total	93	25	64	138	1	0

Table 5 displays the occurrences of *esso* (+/-human) in *Fermo e Lucia*, in the two versions of *Promessi Sposi*, and in eight subsequent texts. We can observe that *esso* (+human) occurs in *Fermo e Lucia* as a complement of prepositions but disappears in the *Ventisettana* and is equally absent from the *Quarantana*. Moreover, it is significant that we can observe a marked tendency for *esso* to refer to non-human antecedents in all syntactic functions in texts produced after 1840. The data suggest therefore that *esso*'s specialization is linked with its use in Manzoni, but not with the '*risciacquatura dei panni in Arno*', which takes place between 1827 and 1840.

Table 5. Occurrences of ESSO (+/-human) between 1821 and 1923.

author, year	SBJ (+human)	SBJ (-human)	C.PREP (+human)	C.PREP (-human)	DIR.OBJ (+human)	DIR.OBJ (-human)
MANZONI, 1821-3		6	4	13		
MANZONI, 1827		8		16		
MANZONI, 1840		8		17		
VERGA, 1869	1	4		1		
SERAO, 1884		8				
(*)PRATESI, 1885	1	6	1	3		
FOGAZZARO, 1901		2	3	4		

¹⁰ (*) indicates a Tuscan author.

PIRANDELLO, 1904		18		13		
SLATAPER, 1912		4		2		
D'ANNUNZIO, 1921		2		1		
(*)TOZZI, 1923				1		
Total	2	66	8	71	0	0

2.3 Qualitative data (1525-1827)

The data presented in this section show that *esso* is treated as near-synonymous with *egli* in the period between 1525 and the early 19th century. The quotations in (10) illustrate how *esso* and *egli* (10a-c), and *esso* and *lui* (10d-f)¹¹ are used interchangeably by the same author in the same text.

- (10) a. *“Perciò che venendomi, non ha guari, vedute alcune carte scritte di mano medesima del poeta, nelle quali erano alquante delle sue rime, che in que’ fogli mostrava che **egli**, secondo che **esso** le veniva componendo (...).”*

[(...) having seen some rhymes handwritten by the poet himself, because in those pages he showed that, as **he** (**esso**) was composing them, he (**egli**) (...)].
(Bembo, *Prose della Volgar Lingua*, Libro 2.6)

- b. *“(...) **egli** mi fa dir quello che già mai non s’è detto né scritto; e mentre noi diciamo, che se la cometa si movesse di moto retto, ci apparirebbe muoversi verso il vertice e zenit, **esso** vuole che noi abbiamo detto ch’ella, movendosi, dovesse arrivare al vertice e zenit.”*

[(...) **he** (**egli**) makes me say things that have never been said nor written; and while we claim that if the comet were moving in a straight line, it would appear as if it was moving towards the summit and zenith, **he** (**esso**) wants us to have claimed that it (the comet), by moving, should reach in fact the summit and zenith]
(Galilei, *Il Saggiatore*, 28.4)

- c. *“A capo di altro poco tempo seppe **egli** ch’era salita in pregio la fisica sperimentale, per cui si gridava da per tutto Roberto Boyle; la quale, quanto **egli** giudicava esser profittevole per la medicina e per la sparigica, tanto **esso** la volle da sé lontana, tra perché nulla conferiva alla filosofia dell’uomo e perché si doveva spiegare con maniere barbare, ed **egli** principalmente attendeva allo studio delle leggi romane.”*

[After some time **he** (**egli**) heard that experimental physics had gained in prestige and everybody was talking about Robert Boyle; but as regards experimental physics, while **he** (**egli**) thought it would benefit medicine and spagyria, **he** (**esso**) also wanted to distance himself from it, on the one hand because it did not benefit

¹¹ (10b) and (10f) have already been mentioned in the Introduction where they are referred to as (1a) and (1b) respectively.

human philosophy and on the other because it had to be explained in barbaric ways, and **he (egli)** was mainly interested in the study of Roman law]
(Vico, *Vita*, 19)

d. “(...) *e sempre piacevolmente ragionando mi condussono dal Governatore di Roma, il quale era chiamato Megalotto. Giunto **allui**, insieme **con esso** si era il Procuratore fiscale, li quali mi attendevano (...).*”

[(...) and while discussing pleasantly, they led me to the Governor of Rome, whose name was Megalotto. I reached **him (lui)**, and with **him (esso)**, was the Attorney, and the two were waiting for me (...)]

(Cellini, *Vita*, Libro 1.61)

e. “*Duro le sembrava da una parte il rimanersi senza il suo caro (...). Pensava che **senza esso** il mondo diverrebbe tutto mestizia, ma pensava ancora che **con lui** sarebbe il cielo tutta allegrezza (...).*”

[On the one hand, it seemed hard to her that she should live without her darling (...). She was thinking that the world would be sadness without **him (esso)**, and also that with **him (lui)**, the sky would be happiness]

(Brignole Sale, *Maria Maddalena*, Libro 2.59)

f. “*Siccome io non lo avea mai conosciuto prima (essendomi egli fratello uterino soltanto), io veramente non mi sentiva quasi nessun amore **per esso**; ma siccome egli andava pure un cotal poco ruzzando con me, una certa inclinazione **per lui** mi sarebbe venuta crescendo con l’assuefazione.*”

[Since I had never met him before (he was just my natural brother), I did not feel love for **him (esso)**; but then he would become playful with me, so a kind of tenderness for **him (lui)** would grow with the passing of time]

(Alfieri, *Vita*, Epoca 1, 5.2)

Moreover, it is also significant to observe (see (11)) the entries for *egli* and *esso* in the Vocabolario della Crusca (1612), which is likely to have been a crucial work of reference for both Tuscan and non-Tuscan authors alike. *Egli* is defined as ‘the same as *esso*’ and vice versa.

- (11) a. “**egli** (...) primo caso del pronome corrispondente al Lat. *Ille*. e vale quegli, colui, esso, e dicesi tanto nel singular quanto nel plurale, quantunque si dica anche nel plurale *eglino* (...)”

[First case of the pronoun continuing Lat. ILLE and equivalent to *quegli, colui, esso*; used for both singular and plural; however, in the plural the form *eglino* can also be employed]

- b. “**esso** Lo stesso, che EGLI. Lat. *ipse, ille*: e nel femm. ESSA, lo stesso, che ELLA (...)”

[The same as *egli*, from Lat. IPSE, ILLE: in the feminine *essa* is equivalent to *ella*]

3. Manzoni

I have claimed that Manzoni had a central role in the semantic narrowing of *esso* in standard Italian, on the basis of his usage of *esso* in the three versions of his novel. Traditionally, research has focused on the analysis of the two editions of *Promessi Sposi*, and particularly on the linguistic innovations in the *Quarantana* (1840). However, as far as the semantic specialization of *esso* is concerned, the comparison between *Fermo e Lucia* (1821-3) and the *Ventisettana* (1827) has proved to be especially fruitful.

In *Fermo e Lucia* there are four occurrences of *esso* as the object of a preposition referring to human antecedents:

- (12) a. “‘Io parto’, diss’egli, ‘da questa città dove ho sparso il sangue d’un uomo, e vi lascio i congiunti di **esso** e un fratello (...)’”.
[I am departing, he said, this town where a man’s blood has been shed because of me, and I leave **his** (di **esso**) relatives and brother in your care]
(Manzoni, *Fermo e Lucia*, 1, 4.25)
- b. “Finalmente Don Rodrigo si alzò e con **esso** tutta la rubiconda brigata.”
[Don Rodrigo got up at last, and with **him** (**esso**) the whole merry brigade]
(Manzoni, *Fermo e Lucia*, 1, 5.73)
- c. “Il nostro autore dice che il Conte andò ogni giorno ad abboccarsi col Cardinale finchè durò la visita di **esso** in quei contorni.”
[The author claims that the Earl would go to see the cardinal in private every day, as long as **his** (di **esso**) visit in the area lasted]
(Manzoni, *Fermo e Lucia*, 3, 2.59)
- d. “(...) avanzando, scorse un uomo seduto sul limitare, lo guardò, durò fatica a riconoscerlo, travisato com’era dal male; ma non fu riconosciuto da **esso** (...).”
[(...) while he was walking, he saw a man seating towards the edge; he looked at him, but struggled to recognize him, given how his looks were altered by suffering; but he was not recognized by **him** (**esso**) (...)]
(Manzoni, *Fermo e Lucia*, 4, 5.35)

In the 1827 edition of *Promessi Sposi*, however, all instances of *esso* (+human) disappear, and in the 1840 edition *esso* continues to refer only to non-human antecedents. This is evidence to suggest that the specialization of *esso* is indeed linked to Manzoni’s usage. Thus, Boström’s claim (cf. §1) that “questa distinzione tra animato e inanimato (...) non è da ricollegare né

all'uso del Bembo né con quello del Manzoni" (1972, p. 137) has proved to be incorrect and unsupported by the data.

A great deal of attention has been given to the pronominal variants in the two editions of *Promessi Sposi*¹² and it appears that the semantic specialization of *esso* is only one of several pronominal innovations promoted by Manzoni to have been incorporated into the standard language. The most (in)famous¹³ and widely investigated change involves the use of *lui* in subject position (see Durante 1970, for example), but there are other changes in Manzoni's pronominal usage which, crucially, are consistent with a wider strategy of semantic narrowing in terms of the feature (+/- human).

According to Boco (1986), for example, there was one occurrence of *egli* referring to non-human antecedents in the 1827 edition, which was later replaced by the demonstrative *questo*¹⁴ in the 1840 edition, anticipating the modern usage:¹⁵

- (13) a. "*Lecco, (...), giace poco discosto dal ponte, alla riva del lago, anzi viene in parte a trovarsi nel lago stesso, quando **egli** ingrossa (...).*"
[Lecco, (...), lies at a short distance from the bridge, on the side of the lake, in fact it is partially located on the lake itself, when **it (egli)** gets bigger]
(Manzoni, *Promessi Sposi* (1827), 1.4)
- b. "*Lecco, (...), giace poco discosto dal ponte, alla riva del lago, anzi viene in parte a trovarsi nel lago stesso, quando **questo** ingrossa (...).*"
[Lecco, (...), lies at a short distance from the bridge, on the side of the lake, in fact it is partially located on the lake itself, when **this (questo)** gets bigger]
(Manzoni, *Promessi Sposi* (1840), 1.4)

In the 1840 edition, therefore, *egli* no longer referred to non-humans. A similar development affected *ella*. In general, *ella* experienced a dramatic quantitative decrease in the *Quarantana*,

¹² See for example D'Ovidio (1895), Durante (1970), Boström (1972), and the thorough analysis by Boco (1986).

¹³ See Renzi's (1983, p. 237) critique of Manzoni with regard to this point: "si vede che il Manzoni sembra non aver avuto il coraggio di scelte nette. Non ha (...) del tutto imposto i pronomi soggetto di origine obliqua. (...) Il sistema italiano moderno risente ancora della mancata riforma manzoniana." [Clearly, Manzoni appears not to have had the courage to make clear-cut choices. He did not impose the oblique forms [*lui, lei, loro*] as subject pronouns (...). The (pronominal) system of modern Italian is still suffering from this missed opportunity for reform by Manzoni].

¹⁴ There is also an example of *ella* (-human) being replaced by *quella* (see Boco (1986, p. 130)) and anticipating the modern usage.

¹⁵ See for example Maiden & Robustelli (2007, p. 84): "[W]hat pronominal forms serve to represent 'non-persons' in ordinary discourse? In fact extensive use is made of *questo* and *quello*."

almost being dropped from Manzoni's system altogether.¹⁶ But what is especially significant is that *ella* was no longer employed with reference to non-human antecedents in the 1840 version. When *ella* was replaced by another subject pronoun, it was substituted for by *lei* (cf. (14)) and *la* (cf. (15)) but also, in a number of cases, by *essa* (cf. (16)) which could refer to both human and non-human antecedents.

- (14) a. “[V]edete che bei pareri mi sa dar costei! Viene a domandarmi come farò, come farò; quasi fosse **ella** nell’impiccio.”
[You see how well she can advise me! She asks how I will manage, how I will manage; as if **she** (**ella**) were the one in trouble]
(Manzoni, *Promessi Sposi* (1827), I 74)
- b. “[V]edete che bei pareri mi sa dar costei! Viene a domandarmi come farò, come farò, quasi fosse **lei** nell’impiccio.”
[You see how well she can advise me! She asks how I will manage, how I will manage; as if **she** (**lei**) were the one in trouble]
(Manzoni, *Promessi Sposi* (1840), I 74)
- (15) a. “Il parlare che, quivi, s’era fatto di Lucia, buon tempo prima ch’**ella** vi arrivasse.”
[What they said about Lucia there, before **she** (**ella**) arrived there]
(Manzoni, *Promessi Sposi* (1827), XXXVIII 54)
- b. “Il parlare che, in quel paese, s’era fatto di Lucia, molto prima che **la** ci arrivasse.”
[What they said about Lucia in the village, much before **she** (**la**) arrived there]
(Manzoni, *Promessi Sposi* (1840), XXXVIII 54)
- (16) a. “Ma la religione, quale era stata insegnata alla nostra poveretta, e quale **ella** l’aveva ricevuta, non proscriveva l’orgoglio.”
[But religion, as it had been taught to our poor (girl), and as **she** (**ella**) had understood it, did not involve pride]
(Manzoni, *Promessi Sposi* (1827), IX 59)
- b. “Ma la religione, come l’avevano insegnata alla nostra poveretta, e quale **essa** l’aveva ricevuta, non bandiva l’orgoglio.”
[But religion, as it had been taught to our poor (girl), and as **she** (**essa**) had understood it, did not involve pride]
(Manzoni, *Promessi Sposi* (1840), IX 59)

Other forms, such as *eglino*, *elleno*, and *elle*, and the phonologically reduced form *ei*¹⁷ were completely dropped from the system.

¹⁶ It survived in 6 occurrences in the 1840 edition. In *Fermo e Lucia* there were 591 occurrences of *ella*, and 482 in the 1827 edition of *Promessi Sposi*.

¹⁷ Only two occurrences of *e*’ survive in the *Quarantana*.

In addition to the morphological and semantic changes under discussion, another important syntactic innovation regarding the personal pronouns has been attributed to Manzoni, namely the disappearance of post-verbal personal pronouns in interrogative sentences. As Patota (1990, pp. 325, 332) claims:

- (17) a. “(...) nel secondo cinquantennio dell’Ottocento (...) la struttura interrogativa con pronomi postposto al verbo si fa molto rara, parallelamente al crescere dell’incidenza del modulo interrogativo privo di soggetto.”
 [(...) in the second half of the 19th century the interrogative structure with postverbal subject pronoun becomes rare, in parallel with the rise in frequency of the interrogative construction without overt subject pronoun]
 b. “(...) l’esempio manzoniano, decisamente orientato per l’interrogativa a soggetto zero, semplicemente anticipa la nuova tendenza o piuttosto la determina? Sono propenso a collocare anche questo, come tanti altri tratti di sintassi tipologica, fra quelli che si sono affermati nell’uso comune per influsso determinante di Manzoni.”
 [Is Manzoni’s model, which strongly favours the interrogative structure with zero pronoun, simply anticipating the new tendency or is it instead causing it? I am inclined to believe that this feature, like many others of a syntactic typological nature, was incorporated in the everyday language due to the crucial influence of Manzoni].

These observations converge in showing that, in the restructuring of the pronominal system implemented by Manzoni, the semantic specialization of *esso* was not an isolated phenomenon.

To summarize, the main changes to the paradigm of third person pronouns as discussed above are represented in Table 6.

Table 6. Innovations proposed by Manzoni

M.SG	F.SG	M.PL	F.PL
<i>egli, ei</i> <i>esso</i> <i>lui</i>	<i>ella</i> <i>essa</i> <i>lei</i>	<i>eglino</i> <i>essi</i> <i>loro</i>	<i>elle, elleno</i> <i>esse</i> <i>loro</i>

The asymmetry between M.SG *esso* and F.SG *essa* in Manzoni is a consequence of the asymmetrical treatment of *egli* (preserved) and *ella* (almost entirely eliminated).

In the modern standard language, however, in formal registers, *essa* and *ella* (+human) have been preserved, as mentioned in the introduction. The strong presence of *ella* in the literary tradition must have played a role in its post-Manzoni survival. As regards the diachronic

persistence of *ella/essa* as (+formal +human) in the modern system (cf. footnote 4), I have proposed in previous work (Cappellaro 2013) that two factors might be at work: (low) token frequency and that fact that *ella* and *essa*, as all (+formal) forms, are acquired later by native speakers of Italian and not at an early stage as part of their basic vocabulary, when, as showed by studies in language acquisition (see Clark, 1987, 1993), synonymy is not tolerated by children.

3.1 Esso's specialization and Manzoni's linguistic ideology

The relative chronology of *esso*'s specialization (pre-1827, before the *risciacquatura in Arno*) and the nature of the linguistic phenomenon under consideration (near-synonymous *egli/esso* morphological opposition) suggest that Manzoni's choice was not as much inspired by the Florentine usage of the early 19th century,¹⁸ but rather by his well-known aversion to linguistic redundancy (cf. Vitale (1992, pp. 17, 31) and Serianni (1986, p. 14f.)). We can see this from Manzoni's own words in quotation (18) below.

- (18) “Aver modi diversi di significar molte cose diverse, è la ricchezza delle lingue; aver più modi di significar una cosa stessa, non è ricchezza, ma sopraccarico, non è libertà, ma impaccio; e impaccio tale, che l'uso tende naturalmente e di continuo a liberarsene” (quoted in Renzi (1983, p. 237) and Vitale (1992, p. 50)).
[Having different ways to express different notions is a richness in language; having several ways to indicate the same notion does not involve richness, but overload; nor freedom but rather nuisance; and it is such a nuisance that usage tends to eliminate it naturally]

This aspect of Manzoni's linguistic ideology is to be linked to the influence of French rationalism (Port-Royal Grammar), mediated in particular by the thinking and work of Francesco Soave. Soave's grammar was very influential in Lombardy¹⁹ (see Fornara (2001, 2004)) where Manzoni was born and raised, and curiously, according to Stoppani (1923, pp. 38-39), Soave himself was Manzoni's teacher in Lugano for two-years (1796-1798).

¹⁸ Little is known about the presence and usage of *esso* in the repertoire of educated speakers in Florence in the 19th century. Boström (1972, p.155) suggests that *esso* was not found in the literary language of late 18th and early 19th century Florentines, and a preliminary analysis of Imbriani's *La novellaja fiorentina* shows no trace of *esso*. (29.000 words, tales I, II, III, IV, XII, XV, XXVII, XXVIII, L, XLVIII).

¹⁹ In 1786, for example, Soave was asked to write books for students and supervise their adoption in elementary schools in the whole of Austrian-governed Lombardy (cf. Rossi Iachino (1977, p. 169f.)).

It is well known in fact that Soave's *Gramatica ragionata della lingua italiana* (1771) explicitly followed the Port-Royal ideology (see for example Castellani-Pollidori (1985, pp. 95-96) and Fornara (2001, p. 18)). The Port-Royal grammarians' preoccupation with morphological contrast on the basis of humanness is also known. See for example the evolution imposed on the French clitics *lui* and *y* based on the feature (+/-human) by 17th-century French grammarians (Dumas 2000).

In both the *Gramatica ragionata* (1771)²⁰ and the *Grammatica delle due lingue italiana e latina ad uso delle scuole* (1818 edition),²¹ *esso* and *essa* are defined as synonymous with *egli* and *ella*, although they are described as being more frequently used in non-subject position (cf. [18]), which is consistent with Manzoni's usage of *esso* as complement of prepositions in *Fermo e Lucia*.

- (19) “*Esso, e essa* che hanno il medesimo significato di *egli, e ella* s’adoprano indifferentemente e nel caso retto, e negli obliqui, se non che nel retto si dice piuttosto *egli, e ella*.”

[*Esso* and *essa* have the same meaning as *egli* and *ella*; they are used in both subject and non-subject position, although in subject functions *egli* and *ella* are more appropriate]

However, in a third text, the *Grammatica italiana: ad uso delle scuole normali* (1818 edition, the only edition available on *Biblioteca Digitale Accademia della Crusca*²²) *esso* is described as being more frequently used with reference to non-humans (cf. (20)).

- (20) “*Esso ed essa* comunemente valgono lo stesso che *egli ed ella*, colla differenza che *egli e ella* si usano più frequentemente allorchè trattasi di persona, ed *esso ed essa* allorchè trattasi di cosa.”

[*Esso* and *essa* have the same meaning as *egli* and *ella*; with the difference that *egli* and *ella* are used more frequently to refer to people, while *esso* and *essa* are used more frequently to refer to things]

The existence of two synonymous forms for the same syntactic function showing no contrast in meaning or style, namely *egli* and *esso* for the subject function and *esso* and *lui* for non-subject functions, would certainly be perceived as a nuisance (*‘impaccio’*) by Manzoni, as

²⁰ Fornara's (2001) edition.

²¹ Published in Venice by Francesco Andreola.

²² Available at the following link: <www.bdcrusca.it>.

well as by prescriptive grammarians in tune with the Port-Royal ideology such as Francesco Soave. The issue that remains to be addressed is whether Manzoni was simply following the latest indications on the usage of *esso* in a later edition of Soave's grammar²³ or making independent choices.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, I provide a brief summary of the claims put forward in this paper. (i) I hope I have showed in this study that *esso* comes to assume the specialized function of referring to non-human antecedents in the 19th century and not before as was suggested by Renzi (2000). (ii) The phenomenon is linked with Manzoni's usage, despite the claims in Boström (1972), and this is not surprising. As Serianni (1986, p. 52) claims "(l)a maggior parte delle varianti manzoniane coincide con forme usuali nell'italiano d'oggi" [most of Manzoni's choices among variants coincide with the forms used in the modern language today]. (iii) The specialization of *esso* as (–human) is not directly linked with the *risciacquatura in Arno*. Manzoni's usage of *esso* (–human) is better understood in the light of his aversion to linguistic redundancy, which was in turn influenced by French rationalism (the Port-Royal Grammar) mediated by the works of Francesco Soave.

²³ It is legitimate to question whether the observation in (20) was written by Francesco Soave himself or by the editor of the edition of this posthumous *Grammatica*, given the practice described by Fornara (2004, p. 253).

APPENDIX. CORPUS (from Stoppelli & Picchi (2001))

Author	Title	Year	Location
Latini, Brunetto	<i>Rettorica</i>	c. 1260	Florence
Giamboni, Bono	<i>Libro de' vizi e delle virtudi</i>	c. 1270	Florence
---	<i>Novellino</i>	1281-1300	Tuscany
---	<i>Tristano Riccardiano</i>	end 1200	Tuscany
Alighieri, Dante	<i>Convivio</i>	1304-7	Florence
Francesco da Barberino	<i>Reggimento e costumi di donna</i>	1318-20	Toscana
Villani, Matteo & Filippo	<i>Cronaca</i>	1348-64	Florence
Boccaccio, Giovanni	<i>Decameron</i>	1348-53	Florence
Caterina da Siena	<i>Lettere</i>	c. 1360-80	Tuscany
Sacchetti, Franco	<i>Trecentonovelle</i>	1390	Florence
Morelli, Giovanni	<i>Ricordi</i>	1393-1411	Florence
Gherardi, Giovanni	<i>Il Paradiso degli Alberti</i>	1426	Tuscany
Alberti, Leon Battista	<i>Libri della famiglia</i>	1433-41	Florence
Macinghi Strozzi, Alessandra	<i>Lettere</i>	1447-70	Florence
Poliziano, Angelo	<i>Detti Piacevoli</i>	1477-82	Florence
---	<i>Motti e facezie del piovano Arlotto</i>	1490	Florence
Machiavelli, Niccolò	<i>Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio</i>	1513-7	Florence
Firenzuola	<i>Ragionamenti</i>	1523-5	Florence
Bembo, Pietro	<i>Prose della volgar lingua</i>	1525	Veneto
Gelli, Giovan Battista	<i>I Capricci del Bottai</i>	1546	Florence
Grazzini, Anton Francesco	<i>Le Cene</i>	c.1550	Florence
Doni, Anton Francesco	<i>I Marmi</i>	1555	Faenza
Cellini, Benvenuto	<i>Vita</i>	1558-65	Florence
Marino, Giovan Battista	<i>Dicerie sacre</i>	1614	Campania
Galilei, Galileo	<i>Il Saggiatore</i>	1621	Tuscany
Brignole Sale, Anton Giulio	<i>Maria Maddalena peccatrice e convertita</i>	1636	Liguria
Pallavicino, Ferrante	<i>Il Corriero svaligiato</i>	1641	Emilia
Gravina, Gian Vincenzo	<i>Della ragion poetica</i>	1708	Calabria
Vico, Giovan Battista	<i>Vita scritta da sé medesimo</i>	1725-8	Campania
Crudeli, Tommaso	<i>Arte di piacere alle donne e alle amabili compagnie</i>	1730-45	Tuscany
Giannone, Pietro	<i>Vita scritta da lui medesimo</i>	1736-7	Puglia
Verri, Pietro	<i>Sull'indole del piacere e del dolore</i>	1763	Lombardy
Alfieri, Vittorio	<i>Vita scritta da esso</i>	1790-	Piedmont
Foscolo, Ugo	<i>Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis</i>	1817	Veneto
Manzoni, Alessandro	<i>Fermo e Lucia</i>	1821-3	Lombardy
Manzoni, Alessandro	<i>Promessi Sposi</i>	1827	Lombardy
Manzoni, Alessandro	<i>Promessi Sposi</i>	1840	Lombardy
Leopardi, Giacomo	<i>Lettere</i>	1810-37	Marche
Verga, Giovanni	<i>Storia di una capinera</i>	1869	Sicily
De Sanctis, Francesco	<i>Storia della letteratura italiana</i>	1870-1	Campania
Serao, Matilde	<i>Il ventre di Napoli</i>	1884	Campania
Pratesi, Mario	<i>L'Eredità</i>	1885	Tuscany
Fogazzaro, Antonio	<i>Piccolo Mondo Moderno</i>	1901	Veneto
Pirandello, Luigi	<i>Il fu Mattia Pascal</i>	1904	Sicily
Slataper, Scipio	<i>Il mio Carso</i>	1912	Ven. Giulia
D'Annunzio, Gabriele	<i>Notturmo</i>	1921	Abruzzo
Tozzi, Federigo	<i>Gli Egoisti</i>	1923	Tuscany

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