

Josh Brown

11 Multilingual merchants: the trade network of the 14th century Tuscan merchant Francesco di Marco Datini

Abstract: This chapter considers the language choices as evidenced in letters exchanged between merchants employed in the service of the late 14th century Tuscan trader Francesco di Marco Datini. This correspondence survives and is held in the voluminous Datini Archive in Prato, Tuscany, and contains letters in Catalan, Latin, Provençal, French, Castilian, Flemish, as well as many vernaculars of Italy. Few studies have focussed specifically on the abilities of Italian merchants with foreign languages, and even fewer on whether these languages were ever used in writing. Although Tuscan was the principal vernacular for communication between merchants of the Datini company, the chapter shows which other vernacular(s) were used by employees living outside of Tuscany and who wrote them. A brief conclusion is offered, showing what implications these examples might have for our understanding of language change at this time.

1 Introduction

The need for Italian merchants in the middle ages to have some knowledge of foreign languages is often stated throughout the literature, as if it did not need to be verified. So far, few studies have sought to determine whether this was in fact the case, or which languages were used for trade.¹ The impression that merchants absolutely needed knowledge of another language is derived, in part, by the extraordinary distances over which they traded, dealing with fellow merchants across the Mediterranean and even further afield. Lazzarini (2015: 242) has noted that “within

Note: The author is grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggestions on an earlier version of this chapter.

¹ One recent exception is Weissen (2000). In describing diplomatic practices in the Mediterranean, Lazzarini (2015: 247) came to the conclusion that: “Ambassadors from both sides employed more or less professional ‘interpreters’, who normally accompanied them when the embassy came from the East, and were found locally when embassies went from Italy”.

Josh Brown, University of Stockholm

DOI 10.1515/9781501503542-011

the Mediterranean world, a whole ensemble of heterogeneous offshoots of “Italian” (mostly varieties of the Venetian language) or “French”, or a combination of the two dictated the daily contacts of merchants, clerics, soldiers, and sailors”. A recent investigation into the linguistic practices of Italian merchants, however, found little evidence of their foreign language abilities, noting that “the sources are not very rich in this respect” and that “even letters and *ricordanze* (memoirs) – where one would naturally expect to find some references – only show some rather short and sporadic hints of the problem” (Guidi Bruscoli 2014: 67).

The aim of this chapter is to ascertain which language(s) were used for communication by the company of one of the most successful merchants of the late Middle Ages – the 14th century Tuscan merchant Francesco di Marco Datini. Born in Prato in c.1335, Datini established trading warehouses around the Mediterranean, and in his later years even founded a bank. The need for information to be communicated as soon as possible, like prices, the weather, and details of ships and shipping, meant that an enormous level of written communication was exchanged between branches of the Datini company. The volume of correspondence that was sent and received between the various Datini employees has been described as reaching a “phenomenal degree” (Spufford 2002: 27). This correspondence has been kept in the voluminous Datini Archive in Prato, which houses over 150,000 items of written communication in many languages.²

The large geographical area over which the Datini company operated is one obvious but banal explanation of the existence of multilingual correspondence in the Datini Archive. What is of interest in this Chapter is the language choice of Datini employees: which vernaculars were used in writing, whether non-Tuscan vernaculars were used, and whether these vernaculars were ever adopted when both correspondents were employees of the Datini company. In his survey of Italian merchants’ knowledge of foreign languages, Guidi Bruscoli (2014: 71) concludes that “Italians used their native language for the company’s daily management: members of staff (with the exclusion of valets or servants) were all Italians and the internal activities were run in Italian”. This chapter tests this statement by considering which foreign languages, if any, were used for correspondence sent by Datini employees to merchants outside the Datini company (“external” correspondence) as well as letters exchanged between Datini employees (“internal” correspondence).

² All manuscripts referred to in this chapter are housed in the Archivio di Stato di Prato (ASPr), in the Archivio Datini (D). When referring to the location of a manuscript, firstly I provide the number of the folder (*busta*), then the number of the possible sub-section (*inserto*), followed by the number of the manuscript’s unique identifier (*codice*). The orthography adopted for transcriptions in this chapter has not been altered from that used in the manuscripts.

Before an assessment of which language(s) were used for communication can be given, a brief portrait of Francesco Datini himself and the *modus operandi* of his company will provide a useful context for the existence of these letters, and help to reveal the truly cosmopolitan nature of the environment within which the company functioned.

2 Language choice, merchants and the Datini trade network

Language and language choice were of essential importance for success in the merchant world. The mercantile spheres of activity were characterised by a high degree of multilingualism in broader European society, but this was often the case at the individual level as well. Merchants were part of large networks of traders, transgressing modern-day borders and boundaries. Their work either required them to travel abroad for extended periods of time or, as with employees of the Datini company, were sent to foreign outposts to be permanently stationed there. Merchants would have not infrequently found themselves faced in situations where one or more competing varieties of a language were spoken or read. As Lazzarini (2015: 241) has noted when two parties did not share the same code, “mutual comprehension was the ideal: the reality was often a total or partial incomprehension”. In the case of written merchant correspondence, language choice becomes an important factor in assessing how communication was successfully negotiated. The decision to select a vernacular for correspondence with foreign traders would have transcended questions solely of mutual comprehension. Indeed, language choice would have been a strategic decision by both parties. Communication in the vernacular of one’s trading partner was seen as a form of accommodation, a linguistic and social *rapprochement*, and could have been negotiated strategically to curry favour and improve one’s chances of a favourable deal.³ Guidi Bruscoli (2014: 79) notes that language was an “active choice”, which “might have had a positive effect: dealings with local merchants could become easier and exchange could go beyond a simple business relationship”. In her study of three letters from a Calabrian merchant to the Datini company, Librandi (2006) found that the merchant’s language,

³ Lazzarini (2015: 245) suggests similar practices also for diplomatic language: “Sometimes strategic choices suggested the use of a non-vehicular language, favoured also by the growing multilingualism of medieval society, as on the occasion of a famous embassy sent by Florence to France in the winter of 1461–2 to congratulate the new king, Louis XI”.

“shows a tendency to reduce marked phenomena, due perhaps to the normal accommodation shown in mercantile letters towards the linguistic variety of the addressee” (2006: 26–27).⁴ In a commercial company as large as Datini’s, selecting the “correct” vernacular was crucial to communicate in an appropriate way and achieve a favourable trade deal. The Datini trade network covered a vast geographical terrain, meaning a wide gamut of vernaculars characterised the space within which the company operated.

Francesco Datini’s “meteoric career” meant he was “one of the most successful self-made ‘multi-millionaires’ of the later Middle Ages” (Spufford 2002: 133).⁵ At the height of his activity, Datini had established trading warehouses in Avignon, Prato, Florence, Pisa, Genoa, Barcelona, Valencia and Majorca, with sub-branches in San Mateo (near Peñíscola, in Spain) and Minorca. These were all staffed by his business partners who first worked in other parts of the Datini network before venturing to new cities with the aim of opening up a new branch. The cosmopolitan and diverse image of these places of business is well captured by Origo’s (1963: 126) observation that it was in the warehouses that “Datini’s Tuscan partners jostled with Moorish and Spanish merchants and Venetian and Genoese rivals, with Flemings and Frenchmen, Jews and Levantines and Greeks”. In describing merchant networks more broadly, Lazzarini (2015: 39) notes that “the local networks also built up complex and variable relationships with the host communities and their governments, and in many cases they ended up by representing the potential terminals for every preliminary, occasional, or even regular interaction”. In places where Datini did not have a branch of his own, he had correspondents working on a commission basis who were “sometimes, as in Venice, agents who carried out his instructions, sometimes (as in Bruges, Paris, and London) one of the Italian trading-companies already established there” (Origo: 1963: 113).⁶

Despite the multicultural environment in which Datini’s company operated, metalinguistic comments about the vernacular used for communication, either in an oral or written context, are rare.⁷ Nor is there much mention made of the

⁴ *tende a un’attenuazione dei fenomeni marcati, forse anche per il consueto adeguamento da parte delle lettere mercantili alla varietà linguistica dei destinatari.*

⁵ For the most recent scholarship on Francesco Datini and his activities, see the volumes by Nanni (2010), Nigro (2010) as well as the contribution by Orlandi (2014).

⁶ On the commercial and linguistic relations between London and Italy during this time, see the contributions on the Gallerani family by Cella (2003, 2007, 2010) and Trotter (2012). On contact between Anglo-Norman and Italian in merchant documents see Tiddeman (2012) and the bibliography there.

⁷ For some examples of metalinguistic comments in medieval Romance, as well as how similarities and differences between Romance vernaculars were perceived in the Middle Ages, see Tomasín (2015).

necessity to learn a foreign language. In his description of the correspondence from Avignon, Hayez (1993: 134) notes that “or n’y figure aucune mention relative à l’apprentissage d’une langue seconde” [there is no mention of learning a second language] and, in describing Tuscan merchants who had migrated to Avignon, he comments that these traders “ne spécifient pas, en dépit de la diversité des groupes régionaux représentés au sein de la population avignonnaise (...) le nom de l’idiome utilisé” [do not specify, despite the diversity of regional groups represented within the Avignon population (...) the name of the language used] (p.135). Datini’s popular biographer, on the other hand, took the employees knowledge of a foreign language for granted, writing that a merchant abroad “had to speak one or more foreign languages (in particular, French) to make himself familiar with foreign currencies, to be capable of reporting on the prices of commodities, the rates of exchange, and the fluctuation of the markets” (Origo 1963: 120).

One factor that is likely to have impacted on which vernacular(s) were used for the company’s internal correspondence is Francesco Datini’s strict and personal hiring practice. Almost all of Datini’s business partners were Tuscan, and known to him personally.⁸ Origo likens the structure of each branch’s personnel to that of a family unit, where the senior partner “held the position of the head of a great family” (1963: 110). Each branch had its own entourage of salaried employees, *fattori*, notaries, accountants or cashiers, and messengers. Origo explains that “at the bottom of the ladder were the unlettered *garzoni* (shop-boys, office-boys, and messengers)”, followed by “the scribes and accountants or cashiers, sometimes called *fattori-scrivani* or *contabili* or *chiavai* – the men who kept the ledgers and held the keys of the safes and boxes of petty cash” (1963: 114). The most senior figures in the branch, however, were the “*fattori* proper, the men who carried out instructions and often became the managers of foreign branches” (1963: 117). This family-like structure, composed almost entirely of Tuscans, meant that use of Tuscan for communication within the company was standard practice, though we will see that, at certain times, foreign languages were also adopted.

⁸ The list of all Datini employees in Melis (*prospetto XIV*, after p.305) shows that non-Tuscans were also employed in his company, though only in small number. In the Avignon branch, these included *Beltramo di Niccolao* from Carpentras; a merchant named *Gentile* from Bourg-en-Bress; two merchants from Milan, *Giannino di Iacopo* and *Giannino di Marchese*; a merchant named *Giletto* from Bruges; *Giletto di Croco* from France; *Giovanni di Niccolò* from Burgos; *Giuffrè dal Fante* from Istres; *Piero di Piacenza* from Piacenza. The only other non-Tuscan worked in the Majorca branch, *Giovanni Bufil*, who was from Majorca.

3 The multilingual nature of the Datini Archive

Previous scholars have described the range of languages used in the Datini company and the number of foreign language letters currently housed in the Datini Archive. The multilingual nature of the Archive has been observed since the first description of its organisation was provided by the historian Enrico Bensa. In a brief passage on languages, he remarked that “from Venice, one wrote in dialect: from Genoa in a barbaric Latin, notably worse than what was used by notaries and in merchant documents from that time in the Archives of that city. Some Florentines who had resided for a while in Genoa embellished their Tuscan with dialectal Genoese locutions” (1928: 6).⁹ Federigo Melis comments that the language of the texts is, in most cases, Tuscan vernacular,¹⁰ but that one also finds, “the vernaculars of Venice, Bologna, Milan, Genoa, Umbria, the Marches and Sicily: as well as Latin, which is dear to the Piedmontese, the Ligurians and Lombards, as well as some French companies” (1962: 26). Among “foreign languages”, he lists Catalan, Provençal and Castilian, as well as Arabic and Hebrew.¹¹ More recently, Brambilla (2010: x) has described the letters in the Datini Archive as “provenienti dalle località più disparate e scritte nei dialetti e nelle lingue più diverse” [coming from the most disparate locations and written in the most diverse dialects and languages].

How many letters in foreign languages are in the Datini Archive? The online database¹² of the Datini Archive lists six foreign languages and the number of items of correspondence in each language. In descending order, these are:

- Catalan 2,678 letters
- Latin 937 letters
- Provençal 86 letters¹³

9 *da Venezia scrivevasi in dialetto: da Genova in un latino barbaro, notevolmente peggiore di quello che vedesi usato dai notai e nelle carte mercantili del tempo negli Archivi di quella città. Qualche fiorentino residente da tempo a Genova infiora il suo toscano di locuzioni dialettali genovesi.*

10 Bensa’s biography of 1928 had also noted that the majority of the Datini correspondence was “held in Italian” and that the *carteggio* is “per lo più in lingua italiana” [for the most part in the Italian language] (p.6).

11 This list is also found in Cecchi Aste (2008: 4), who quotes Melis but adds that the letters in Arabic and Hebrew are only present in a “numero ridottissimo” [very reduced number].

12 This database is available at <http://datini.archiviodistato.prato.it>. The number of letters in each language given here must only be used as an estimate, since, as Tomasin (2015: 16) has stated, whether the language of any one manuscript can be assigned to any particular vernacular should be verified on a case by case basis.

13 For a linguistic analysis of some letters sent by a Provençal merchant in Sicily to the Datini company, see the contributions by Finazzi Agrò (1973) and Donati (1979).

- French 3 letters
- Castilian 1 letter
- Flemish 1 letter¹⁴

In total, this database lists 3706 letters written in foreign languages. To the languages listed here, Guidi Bruscoli (2014: 70) also adds English, but does not say which documents these are.¹⁵

The question of how successful communication was negotiated among correspondents of such diverse linguistic backgrounds is not immediately obvious. Guidi Bruscoli (2014: 70) has recently suggested that if letters in foreign languages were sent to the Datini headquarters in Prato or Florence or to some of the other branches, “someone must have been able to understand and/or translate them”. But the hierarchical nature of the Datini company, and the establishment of overseas branches staffed almost entirely by Tuscan employees, meant that Francesco Datini’s personal contact with foreign languages would have been minimal. Orlandi (2014: 93) remarks that “letter-writing contacts with external companies were mainly dealt with by the individual companies of the group and not by Datini himself. The letters sent directly to Datini, with very few exceptions, were from individuals linked to him in various ways.” The contact between foreign languages and Tuscan must have occurred between the *external* merchant and the Datini employee, who then wrote back to Datini, in Tuscan.

It remains to be verified, then, who *did* write letters in the languages listed above, and whether Datini employees ever adopted anything other than Tuscan to correspond with each other. Since the aim of this chapter is to investigate whether non-Tuscan vernaculars were used by Datini employees in written correspondence, and whether these vernaculars were ever adopted for use when both correspondents were employees of the Datini company, I will be rarely concerned here with a description of the so-called “external” correspondence – that is, correspondence sent and received by merchants not working for the Datini company.

14 This document, first published by Bensa (1928: 342) as document n.47 in his corpus, is described as a receipt (*quitanza di cambio*) sent by Hans Sclatter to Francesco Datini. In the database of the Datini Archive, however, the sender is listed as *Hans Sciacce* (ASPr, D. 1147, Codice: 9303139). The same document is also included in another database known as *Gattoweb* (an online software that contains transcriptions of material published in hard-copy), where the document is described as being in German! Access to the *Gattoweb* software is available at: gattoweb.oivi.cnr.it.

15 A cursory glance at the 274 letters sent from London shows them to be all in Tuscan, and almost all from the Mannini family, who were also Tuscan. The only letter in the Datini Archive addressed to London was sent by *Gori Vieri di Francesco* from Gaeta to the Mannini family on 3 August 1394 (ASPr, D. 1116 (inserto 113), Codice: 132247). This letter also appears to be in Tuscan.

Rather, my focus will be on the language(s) of the letters sent *between* employees of the Datini company. For reasons of brevity, I deal only with the first three languages in the list above that contain most documents in the Archive: Catalan, Latin and Provençal.

4 Foreign languages in the Datini Archive

4.1 Catalan

With 2,678 letters, Catalan is the language with the largest number of letters in the Datini Archive. Similarly to other merchants who established themselves abroad for long periods, the managers of the Datini companies in Barcelona, Valencia and Majorca would have rapidly learnt the local language (Orlandi 2014: 103). At least one merchant from Majorca, Giovanni Bufil, was employed within the Datini system (Melis 1962, *prospetto* XIV). Some evidence for the language competencies of members working for the Datini company is offered directly in letters written by the merchants themselves. Datini's partner in Barcelona for example, Simone Bellandi, was chosen at least in part for linguistic reasons, and was able to write to a Catalan correspondent in Catalan (Melis 1962: 118). On the other hand, Jacopo Rog, a Catalan merchant, wrote to the Datini company of Pisa in "Italian", that is, Tuscan (Melis 1962: 26). This is also the case for Prato-born Tuccio di Gennaio, who had been chosen by Datini to move to San Mateo in 1397 to become directly involved in the trade of Maestrazgo wool. The decision to choose him was based on his knowledge of both the language and the location:

- (1) *E perché costui è uxo di qua e intende bene la lingua e à 'ssai praticheza per tutto e per molti caxi posono adivenire, non potrei avere miglore compagnia: ché, facendo ora venire uno fanciulo di costà o da Pixa, starebe 6 mesi anzi intendese il parlare o lla conoscenza.*¹⁶

[And since he is used to this place and understands the language well and is well-versed in everything and in many situations that can arise, I could not have better company: for, bringing a young boy here now from there or from Pisa, it would take 6 months before he understood the language or became familiar with it.]

Given these traders' knowledge of Catalan and the extended periods they spent in the area, the question arises of whether Catalan was eventually adopted for

¹⁶ Melis (1962: 256). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

internal communication. Of the 2,678 letters in Catalan, the majority were sent by external merchants writing to the Datini company. Nevertheless, 33 were sent by Datini employees. Of these 33 letters, 20 were sent to external merchants and 13 were sent to other Datini employees, who were also all Tuscan. Therefore, Catalan became, at least for certain correspondents, a language for internal communication. Table 1 below shows who the senders of this correspondence were, the number of letters they sent in Catalan, and the subset of these which were sent to merchants also working for the Datini company (listed according to total number of letters sent in Catalan).

Table 1: Letters sent by Datini employees in Catalan

	Name of sender¹⁷	Total number of letters sent by sender in Catalan	Subset of letters sent as internal correspondence
1	Datini Francesco di Marco	1	0
2	Luca del Sera	1	0
3	Rocchi Ambrogio di Messer Lorenzo di Siena (anche Lorenzi)	1	0
4	Rosso di Andrea da Gambassi	1	0
5	Datini Francesco di Marco e Bellandi Simone di Andrea e comp.	1	1
6	Datini Francesco di Marco e comp.	2	0
7	Agnolo di Iacopo di Michele da Firenze	2	1
8	Bellandi Simone di Andrea	6	1
9	Datini Francesco di Marco e Luca del Sera e comp.	8	2
10	Tecchini Tommaso di Piero	10	8
Total		33	13

A reading of this table brings out several peculiarities concerning the linguistic dynamics of the Datini company in Catalonia. Firstly, their bilingualism in Tuscan and Catalan emerges more clearly, as does their confidence in using both vernaculars for written correspondence in a formal, business context, even with native users. The fact that all ten merchants listed above sent at least some letters to non-Datini employees provides some evidence of their ability not only to write Catalan, but may have important implications for language choice in merchant writing. The decision to adopt Catalan in correspondence towards

¹⁷ I have listed the names in the table below as they appear in the online database on the website of the Archivio Datini.

merchants outside the Datini system may indicate their willingness to accommodate to their trading partners' native tongue. Secondly, the 13 letters written *between* employees of the Datini company shows that Tuscan was not the only language used for internal communication, but that Catalan had been adopted as a second language between non-native speakers. Finally, the geographical area over which Catalan was employed in the Datini system is relatively restricted, when one considers that all 33 letters were sent from just one of Datini's branches in Catalonia to one of the other three branches (apart from one letter sent to Pisa and one to Peñiscola). In other words, Catalan was never used to write back to the Datini headquarters on the Italian peninsula. Rather, its scope was restricted to those employees already working in Catalonia and who would have had an intimate economic and personal relationship with each other.

4.2 Latin

Lazzarini has stated that “in the Middle Ages, Latin had turned into a language ‘without a speech community’ or ‘in search of a community’” (2015: 242). In commenting on the language practices of diplomats, she notes how “different forms of medieval / macaronic Latin could circulate and were possibly spoken and surely read and understood on a more basic level in various less educated professional milieux” (2015: 242). Although the majority of correspondence in the Datini Archive is in vernacular, the second highest volume of non-Tuscan letters is in Latin. One merchant writes that Latin “viene a punto molte volte” [often comes in handy] (Guidi Bruscoli 2014: 69). The education that merchants received gave them “un usage passif et limité du latin, qui leur permet tout juste de déchiffrer une expédition d’acte notarié” [a passive and limited use of Latin, which allowed them simply to decipher a notary act] (Hayez 1993: 138). Francesco Datini himself, it appears, knew very little Latin. Evidence of his inability to use it with confidence is provided by two letters, both indicating he required assistance to read a letter in Latin and to write one in it. The first of these was sent from Prato to Florence in 1387. The sender is simply indicated as *Datini Francesco di Marco* and the letter is addressed to *Datini Francesco di Marco e comp.*:

- (2) *Nondimeno fatti dire tutto quello che vole che sia fatta e sarà fatto. Iscrivilo di tua mano per non dare loro tanta faticha. E semmi charo [che] e noi l'intendesemo melglo che noe facessimo i[n] latino non ti porre faticha, mettecci uno pocho di tempo quando puoi.*¹⁸

¹⁸ ASPr, D. 695 (inserto 8), Codice: 309504.

[Nevertheless, say everything that you want done and it will be done. Write it in your hand in order not to give them too much work. And if it is clear to me that we understand what we do better in Latin, do not spend too much effort, spend some time on it when you can.]

The second letter was sent by one of Francesco Datini's most trusted employees, Tommaso di ser Giovanni, from Avignon to Florence in 1402. In this letter, Tommaso writes to Francesco that he is enclosing another letter along with his own, but the enclosed letter is in Latin, and Francesco will need his longstanding friend and notary ser Lapo Mazzei to interpret it:

- (3) *Fatevi rispondere per la prima e perché in latino vi bisognerà ser Lapo e per lo simile gli risponderà in latino e sia buona lettera*¹⁹

[Respond straight away and since it is in Latin, you will need ser Lapo and similarly he will respond to you in Latin and make sure it is a good letter]

Other Datini employees also used Latin to write to merchants outside the company, but only rarely. Hayez (2005: 250) notes that Andrea di Bartolomeo's correspondence adopts Latin formulae towards the end of his letters, but that these formulae are "very rare". In her edition of the 810 letters sent from Milan, Frangioni (1994: 25) comments that, with regard to the language used by Milanese and Florentines, it is "Latin for the former", but that the vernacular is "systematically adopted by the latter in commercial correspondence and for accounts".²⁰ The preference for northern merchants to write in Latin rather than vernacular is confirmed further when one considers that 38 % of all the 937 documents in Latin in the Datini Archive were sent from just two locations, Genoa and Castelnuovo Scivvia. In certain instances, this difference in language preference increased the chances for miscommunication. For example, the Milanese merchant Giovannino da Dugnano, not a Datini employee, admits his lack of literacy in vernacular when he makes the following request to his Tuscan counterparts in a letter of 21 January 1398, sent from Milan to the Datini branch in Genoa:

- (4) *E perché eyo no sonto da uxo lezere le vostre letere, ve piaze di scrivere pyù intelegibelle per me chi potiti.*²¹

[And since I am not used to reading your letters, may it please you to write in the most intelligible way that you can for me.]

¹⁹ ASPr, D. 630 (inserto 15), Codice: 9291727.

²⁰ *il latino per i primi, il volgare ormai sistematicamente adottato dai secondi nella corrispondenza commerciale e nella contabilità.*

²¹ Letter 691 in Frangioni (1994: 495–6).

In the following letter, sent five days later, Giovannino reminds the recipient of his request and it is repeated:

- (5) *E anchora ve scrisse, perché eyo no sono da uxo lezere le vostre letere in vorgalle, che me le voliati scrivelle più intelegibelle che se poy per me.*²²
 [Once again I wrote to you, since I am not used to reading your letters in vernacular, may you write them in the most intelligible way that you can for me.]

In a few instances, Latin was also used by Datini employees. Out of the 937 items in Latin in the Datini Archive, six were sent by Datini employees. These six letters, their senders and their recipients, the number of letters sent and where they were sent from and to, are listed in table 2 below, in chronological order:

Table 2: Letters sent by Datini employees in Latin

	Name of sender	Name of recipient	Sent from	Sent to	Date sent
1	Andrea di Bonanno di ser Berizo	Andreolo da Prato	Genoa	Portofino	23/5/1392
2	Luca del Sera	Grasso Domenico	Genoa	Castelnuovo Scrvia	11/6/1392
3	Datini Francesco di Marco e Luca del Sera e comp.	Calvo Cristoforo	Valencia	Peñiscola	1/8/1393
4	Andrea di Bonanno di ser Berizo	Grasso Domenico	Genoa	Castelnuovo Scrvia	14/10/1394
5	Datini Francesco di Marco e Luca del Sera e comp.	Squarciafico Luchino	Barcelona	Valencia	17/4/1397
6	Andrea di Bonanno di ser Berizo	Grasso Domenico	Genoa	Castelnuovo Scrvia	21/12/****

As with Catalan, the majority of letters in Latin were not sent by Datini employees, but written *to* the Datini system. This raises the question of how much Latin merchants actually knew, and whether its use in commercial letters was confined to a particular geographical area of traders in north Italy. It is significant that all letters listed above were sent from Genoa, the same location where many letters in Latin were sent from by non-Datini employees. Second, the six letters were written by only three senders – two if we count *Datini Francesco di Marco e Luca del Sera e comp.* as being sent by Luca del Sera, given that it was a common practice to add Francesco Datini's name if sent on behalf of his company. In any case,

²² Letter 692 in Frangioni (1994: 496–7).

from the above we see that Latin was not widely used by the Datini company, and was a language that would have been read more than written. Unlike Catalan, Latin was never used for internal communication, but was used to write to external merchants, of whom some had by this time acquired reputations as significant traders.

4.3 Provençal

The information concerning Francesco Datini's early trading activities in Avignon is vague. Much of the literature makes general references to the approximate time period in which he started to engage in trade himself, as well as the type of produce he bought. Since Datini moved to Avignon in 1350 at roughly 15 years of age, and left some 32 years later in December 1382, his lengthy stay would have meant that he acquired an excellent knowledge of Provençal. As Guidi Bruscoli (2014: 68) has said of merchants in general, they often relocated, and "this relocation took place at an early age, and this made the learning of a foreign language easier". According to Melis, "nothing is known about operations in Avignon" (1962: 47) and "it is futile to insist on attempts to clarify Francesco Datini's activities in the period before 1363: when, that is, we are without documents in the Archive"²³ (ibid.: 142). Spufford notes that Datini "started by selling Italian armour in Avignon as a young man and went on dealing in it along with so much else, all through his life" (2002: 265).

Although dominated by Tuscans, Datini's branch in Avignon also employed so-called "foreign" merchants. Those described as French are Beltramo di Niccolao da Carpentras, Beltramo detto «Fraglione», Beltre da *Rega*, Gentile da Bourgen-Bresse, Giletto di Croco, Micheletto di Piero da Parigi. From Holland came Avignone Giletto and Anichino, both from Bruges, and from Spain, Giovanni di Niccolò from Burgos (Melis 1962: 158). Also included here are the Milanese Giannino di Iacopo, Giannino di Marchese and Donato di ser Giovanni from Arezzo, and others from Florence (ibid.: 158). It would not have been difficult, therefore, to have letters in foreign languages sent to the Avignon branch to be interpreted into Tuscan. After all, "the main international marketplaces were obviously full of interpreters in order to facilitate commercial transactions undertaken by foreigners" (Guidi Bruscoli 2014: 71).

²³ *nulla si sa dell'operosità sua ad Avignone (...) è vano insistere nei tentativi di chiarire l'attività esercitata da Francesco Datini nel periodo anteriore al 1363: quando, cioè, siamo privi di documentazione, nel suo Archivio.*

The online database of the Datini Archive lists 86 items of correspondence in Provençal, sent between 1384 and 1410.²⁴ The evidence from the correspondence in Provençal shows that it was only ever a language that external merchants used to write to the Datini company – not one letter was written by a Datini employee in the language. The 86 items of correspondence were sent by 37 different senders.²⁵ Provençal was not therefore a language used for written correspondence by the Datini company.

5 Conclusion

This brief chapter has shown which language(s) were used for internal communication between merchants working for the Datini company around the Mediterranean. Although the Datini Archive contains correspondence in many languages, the bulk of communication was carried out in Tuscan. Almost all merchants working for Datini were from Tuscany, and many had spent long periods overseas at Francesco's request. The few metalinguistic comments contained in their correspondence reveal that at least some of them had acquired an excellent working knowledge of the local vernacular and, as in the case of Simone Bellandi and Tuccio di Gennaio, were employed in part for their linguistic knowledge.

For the languages surveyed here, there is evidence that at least some Datini employees gained enough linguistic competency to use Catalan and Latin for written correspondence. In the case of Catalan, they had acquired sufficient ability to write it with confidence. Catalan is unique in that it was the only vernacular that infiltrated into the Datini company's internal correspondence. Use of Latin, on the other hand, was more limited and was employed by only a few of the very highest level Datini employees. Most of the correspondence in Latin was addressed to recipients in the north of Italy. This finding supports the suggestion that Latin was used more in this geographical area than in central or south Italy, and so location may have been a determining factor in language choice.

Unlike the Gallerani accounts that are “very often, multilingual, in the sense that they mix languages with a careless abandon to which many traditionally-trained academics react with distrust and even distaste” (Trotter 2012: 87), the letters in the Datini Archive seem to be, with very few exceptions, monolingual, despite the presence of a large number of letters in many vernaculars. Code-switching, at least at the sentential level, is highly rare. In her analysis of diplomatic practices in the

²⁴ Twelve items are listed without a year.

²⁵ One item (ASPr, D. 346 (inserto 5), Codice: 9291337) is listed as being without a sender.

Renaissance, Lazzarini (2015: 246) found that “the symbolic value of the linguistic choice was more important than the primary goal of being understood”. In the case of merchants working for the Datini company surveyed here, a similar process appears to be occurring. The symbolic value of writing to merchants outside the Datini system can be seen as a form of accommodation towards their non-Tuscan counterparts. In this sense, language choice can be seen as a strategic device in order to achieve a favourable trade outcome. At the same time, the fact that the Datini employees accommodate to merchants outside their system also has a practical value, since they are communicating in a language that the “outsiders” can understand.

What implications might the observations made in this chapter have for language change in late medieval Italy? The fact that Tuscan was the operational language of the Datini empire throughout the Mediterranean and beyond bears witness to the economic strength of Tuscany during the 14th and 15th centuries. In addition to Tuscany’s political power and its literary prestige, its economic strength lent the region further weight during the so-called *questione della lingua* in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. The *questione della lingua* refers to a series of debates about whether Latin or vernacular should be chosen for a written, literary standard and, if it should be vernacular, which vernacular of Italy should be chosen. The *questione* was ultimately resolved during the Renaissance, with the publication of Pietro Bembo’s *Prose della volgar lingua* in 1525. The *Prose* advocated old Tuscan as a standard – not the contemporary vernacular of Bembo’s time, but the language of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio of two centuries earlier. Although merchant writing is removed from this literary context, the use of vernacular, and the prominence of Tuscan traders in particular, lent further weight to old Tuscan as a contender for a standard.²⁶

For non-literary writing, the question of language choice was far from obvious, even when correspondents shared a mutual code. The fact that Tuscany had developed into the economic powerhouse of the Mediterranean meant that Tuscan was becoming more and more an unofficial standard for non-literary correspondence, at least in business writing. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Datini network of companies. Although the Datini Archive contains many documents in foreign languages and many vernaculars of Italy, these are dwarfed by the sheer volume of correspondence in Tuscan. The evolution of what would come to be called “Italian” in the Renaissance owes much, therefore, to the multilingual competencies of Italian merchants, who helped to spread Tuscan around Italy and the Mediterranean.²⁷ It is hoped that the observations reported

²⁶ Stussi (1982).

²⁷ On this point in particular, see Tomasin (2010).

here provide a useful starting point for our understanding of the vicissitudes of language and language choice in late medieval Italy, and the varieties with which Tuscan interacted before its codification two centuries later. The history of multilingualism in Italy is yet to be written, but when Italian was “born” in the Renaissance, it already had a long history of multilingualism, not least because of the contribution of the languages of traders.

References

- Bensa, Enrico. 1928. *Francesco di Marco da Prato: notizie e documenti sulla mercatura italiana del secolo 14. Con 7 illustrazioni*. Milano: Fratelli Treves.
- Brambilla, Simona. 2010. “Padre mio dolce”. *Lettere di religiosi a Francesco Datini*. Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali.
- Cecchi Aste, Elena. 2008. *Introduzione all’Inventario*. Available from: <http://datini.archiviodistato.prato.it/www/pdf/CecchiAste.pdf>: Archivio di Stato di Prato (01 January, 2015).
- Cella, Roberta. 2007. Anglismi e francesismi nel registro della filiale di Londra di una compagnia mercantile senese (1305–1308). In M. Bastiansen, M. Caniato, W. Geerts, G.P. Giudicetti, S. Gola, I. Lanslots, C. Maeder, S. Marzo, G. Mavolo, I. Melis, F. Musarra & B. Van den Bossche (eds.), *Identità e diversità nella lingua e nella letteratura italiana, 189–204*. Firenze: F. Cesati.
- Cella, Roberta. 2003. Le carte della filiale londinese della compagnia dei Gallerani e una Ricordanza di Biagio Aldobrandini (ottobre 1305). *Bollettino dell’Opera del Vocabolario Italiano* 8. 403–414.
- Cella, Roberta. 2010. *Prestiti nei testi mercantili toscani redatti di là dalle Alpi. Saggio di glossario fino al 1350*. Pisa-Roma: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali.
- Donati, Cesarina. 1979. Lettere di alcuni mercanti provenzali del ‘300 nell’Archivio Datini. *Cultura neolatina* 39. 107–161.
- Finazzi Agrò, Ettore. 1973. Lettere di un mercante provenzale del ‘300. *Cultura neolatina* 33. 161–205.
- Frangioni, Luciana (ed.) 1994. *Milano fine Trecento. Il carteggio milanese dell’Archivio Datini di Prato*. 2 vols. Firenze: Opus Libri.
- Guidi Bruscoli, Francesco. 2014. Creating networks through languages: Italian merchants in late medieval and early modern Europe. In Andrea Caracausi & Christof Jeggle (eds.), *Commercial networks and European cities, 1400–1800*, 65–79. London: Pickering and Chatto.
- Hayez, Jérôme. 1993. *La stanza di Vignone: identité et migration entre la Toscane et Avignon au XIV et XV siècles*. Paris: Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne PhD Thesis.
- Hayez, Jérôme. 2005. Un facteur siennois de Francesco di Marco Datini. Andrea di Bartolomeo di Ghino et sa correspondance (1383–1389). *Bollettino dell’Opera del Vocabolario Italiano* 10. 203–397.
- Lazzarini, Isabella. 2015. *Communication and Conflict. Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350–1520*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Librandi, Rita. 2006. Tre lettere di un mercante calabrese della fine del Trecento. *Contributo di filologia dell’Italia mediana* 20. 25–50.

- Melis, Federico. 1962. *Aspetti della vita economica medievale (Studi nell'Archivio Datini di Prato)*. Siena: Monte dei Paschi.
- Nanni, Paolo. 2010. *Ragionare tra mercanti: linguaggio e concezioni nelle relazioni di Francesco Datini (1335ca – 1410)*. Pisa: Pacini.
- Nigro, Giampiero (ed.) 2010. *Francesco di Marco Datini. The man, the merchant*. Florence: Florence University Press.
- Origo, Iris. 1963. *The merchant of Prato: Francesco di Marco Datini*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Orlandi, Angela. 2014. Networks and Commercial Penetration Models in the Late Medieval Mediterranean: Revisiting the Datini. In Andrea Caracausi & Christof Jeggle (eds.), *Commercial networks and European cities, 1400–1800*, 81–106. London: Pickering and Chatto.
- Spufford, Peter. 2002. *Power and profit: the merchant in medieval Europe*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Stussi, Alfredo. 1982. Il mercante medievale e la storia della lingua italiana. *Studi e documenti di storia della lingua italiana e dei dialetti italiani*, 69–72. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Tiddeman, Megan. 2012. Mercantile multilingualism: two examples of Anglo-Norman and Italian contact in the fourteenth century. In David Trotter (ed.), *Present and future research in Anglo-Norman*, 91–99. Aberystwyth: The Anglo-Norman Hub Online.
- Tomasin, Lorenzo. 2010. *Sulla diffusione del lessico marinaro italiano*. *Studi linguistici italiani* 36. 263–292.
- Tomasin, Lorenzo. 2015. Sulla percezione medievale dello spazio linguistico romanzo. *Medioevo Romano* 39 (2). 268–292.
- Trotter, David 2012. Italian merchants in London and Paris: evidence of language contact in the Gallerani accounts, 1305–08. In Dominique Lagorgette & Tim Pooley (eds.), *Mélanges pour R. Anthony Lodge*, 209–226. Chambéry: Presses de l'Université de Savoie.
- Weissen, Kurt. 2000. *Ci scrive in Tedesco!* The Florentine Merchant-Banker Tommaso Spinelli and his German-Speaking Clients (1435–72). *Yale University Library Gazette* 74 (3/4). 112–125.