

The encoding of irrelevance in discourse: *Tanto* between concession and justification

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Abstract. This paper sets out to investigate the linguistic expression of irrelevance in discourse, by focusing on the functions and uses of the marker *tanto* in present-day Italian. The marker encodes the irrelevance of a given condition, thus conveying a concessive meaning not distant from the value expressed by concessive conditionals or ‘no matter’ predicates. In the construction [*p, tanto q*], the marker *tanto* conveys the fact that *q* holds in any case, namely whether *p*, *non-p*, or any value of *p* is the case. After discussing how the notion of irrelevance has been treated in the literature on conditionals, concessives and predicates of indifference, we will discuss the results of a corpus-based study on spoken Italian, identifying and annotating all the occurrences of irrelevance-*tanto*. We will show that irrelevance may be expressed by a number of different discourse patterns, explicitly mentioning the irrelevant proposition, the null-effect and the motivation for irrelevance, or omitting one or more of these components. It will be argued that the cases in which speakers simply refer to the irrelevance of a given proposition are rare in our sample, whereas it is more frequent that they also mention the motivation underlying irrelevance, justifying their indifference and thus crucially acting at the intersubjective level. We will show that *tanto* may also be used alone as a discourse marker encoding the speaker’s attitude of indifference: in these cases, *tanto* is pronounced with suspensive intonation, and subsumes under its semantics the adversative, justificative, and indiscriminative value, activating meanings that speakers are supposed to share.

Key words: irrelevance; concession; connectives; alternatives; corpus-based study; *tanto*.

[it] La codifica dell’irrelevanza nel discorso: *tanto* tra concessione e giustificazione

Resumen: L’articolo si propone di studiare l’espressione linguistica dell’irrelevanza nel discorso e si concentra pertanto su funzioni e impieghi del marcatore *tanto* in italiano contemporaneo. Il marcatore codifica l’irrelevanza di una data condizione convogliando, in tal modo, un valore concessivo non distante dal valore espresso dai condizionali concessivi o dai predicati definiti ‘no matter’ (i.e., ‘non importa’). Nella costruzione [*p, tanto q*], il marcatore *tanto* esprime il fatto che *q* vale in ogni caso, cioè nel caso *p*, *non-p* o per ogni valore di *p*. Dopo aver discusso il modo in cui la nozione di irrelevanza è stata trattata nella letteratura sui condizionali, sui concessivi e sui predicati di indifferenza, discuteremo i risultati dello studio basato sui dati di italiano parlato. Ci occuperemo, quindi, di identificare e annotare tutte le occorrenze del marcatore di irrelevanza *tanto*. Mostreremo che l’irrelevanza può essere

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espressa per mezzo di vari pattern discorsivi. Tali pattern possono fare riferimento alla proposizione irrilevante, all'effetto nullo e alla motivazione di irrilevanza. Può altresì verificarsi che tali componenti (una o più) vengano omesse. Verrà argomentato che i casi in cui i parlanti si riferiscono semplicemente all'irrilevanza di una proposizione sono piuttosto rari. Per converso è invece più frequente menzionare la motivazione che rende il contenuto irrilevante giustificandone in tal modo l'irrilevanza. Tale azione agisce quindi in modo cruciale sul livello intersoggettivo. Mostriamo che *tanto* può essere impiegato in isolamento come segnale discorsivo. In tal contesto, esso esprime l'attitudine di indifferenza del parlante. Più in dettaglio, in tali casi *tanto* è pronunciato con intonazione sospensiva e assorbe nella sua semantica i valori avversativo, giustificativo e indiscriminativo. Inoltre, attiva dei significati che si suppone siano condivisi dagli interlocutori nel discorso.

Palabras clave: irrilevanza; concessione; connettivi; alternative; studio basato su corpus; tanto.

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1. Introduction and overview: the linguistic expression of irrelevance

The aim of this paper³ is to analyse the linguistic expression of irrelevance in discourse, focusing on the discourse uses of the connective *tanto* in present-day Italian (cf. Inkova / Manzotti 2021). The irrelevance meaning of *tanto* is exemplified in (1):

- (1) Non vengo, tanto è lo stesso
'I won't come to your place, tanto it's the same'

In (1) the speaker says that whether she comes or not at the interlocutor's place, things will not change, or, in other words, her coming to the interlocutor's place is irrelevant, because it will have no effect. In the literature, what we call here irrelevance has been termed in various ways, such as *indifference* (Leuschner 2005, 2006), and has been partly discussed within the domain of *free choice* (König 1986, 1992, Haspelmath / König 1998, Haspelmath 1997). The linguistic expression of irrelevance will be ar-

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gued to show many commonalities both with concessives, which by definition encode that a given consequent persists in spite of one or more antecedents, and with free-choice constructions, such as the ones involving indefinite free choice pronouns including *-ever* (Haspelmath / König 1998; Leuschner 2005, 2006).

The notion of irrelevance is closely intertwined on the one hand with the concept of *persistence in time*, because it is the persistence of a given state of affairs or speech act which makes the rest irrelevant and ineffective, and on the other hand with the concept of *indifference*, because the speaker is indifferent to the actual occurrence of the condition, given its irrelevance. While the former will be argued to play a role in the development of the irrelevance meaning of *tanto* out of the temporal adverb *intanto* ‘in the meanwhile’, the latter will be argued to play a role in the explanation of the discourse uses of irrelevance-*tanto*, which is overwhelmingly used to introduce the justification of the speaker’s indifference. The ability to express indifference is a universal prerogative of languages, according to Leuschner (2005: 291), because every language is equipped with strategies to point out that a given condition does not affect some other contextually determined state of affairs – which is instead explicitly argued to persist in any possible case. As will become clear throughout the paper, both the expression of irrelevance and indifference are crucial attitudes in discourse, affecting the speaker’s assertive authority and its positioning with the respect to the ongoing interaction (cf. Djenar *et al.* 2011; Haselow 2016).

In the field of post-Gricean pragmatics, several works addressed the property of relevance, to the point that the notion at stake motivated the framework of Relevance Theory (Wilson / Sperber 2012), where relevance is treated as a property of inputs resulting in a positive balance between contextual effects and cognitive efforts. The notion of irrelevance, instead, has not received much attention, especially with respect to the linguistic strategies expressing it in discourse. Although in the literature we find scholars recalling the notion of irrelevance in the discussion of concessives, conditionals and predicates of indifference (cf. § 2.1., § 2.2.), we find little (if any) discussion of how speakers convey irrelevance in discourse, that is, how they overtly indicate that what is being said is irrelevant for some specific, context-dependent aim.

In this paper we aim to fill this gap, by investigating the discourse uses of the connective *tanto* in spoken Italian, focusing (i) on the type of irrelevance it may encode between two clauses, and (ii) on the speaker’s aim underlying the communication of irrelevance. It will be shown that the notion of irrelevance is a complex one, involving a given proposition (P) which is explicitly argued to be irrelevant for a context-specific effect (E), based on some motivation (M). The analysis of spoken, interactional data will allow us to identify the latter as a central aspect in the communication of irrelevance, which will turn out to be closely connected to a justificative function, whereby speakers decide to verbalize irrelevance in order to justify their attitude of indifference.

The analysis of the discourse profile of the connective *tanto*, based on data extracted from the KIParla Corpus (Mauri *et al.* 2019), will show that speakers tend to motivate irrelevance and that they rarely state single contents without adducing the motivation of their irrelevance in discourse. Speakers are indeed prone to justify the (ir)relevance of a given state of affairs based on motivations which may be arranged on rhetorical scales, alerting the hearer about the absence of consequences. In other words, we will argue that the linguistic expression of irrelevance by means of *tanto* does not merely depict a condition as irrelevant for another one, but also introduces

the justification of such irrelevance at the argumentative level (Schwenter / Traugott 2000). We will further show that the expression of irrelevance may occur by means of a number of different discourse configurations (§ 3.3.), namely either making the irrelevant proposition (P), the motivation (M) and the effect (E) explicit (P-M-E pattern), or leaving some of these elements implicit (P-E pattern, P-M pattern, M pattern, *tanto* alone pattern).

We show that there are cases in which irrelevance is only alluded and *tanto* behaves as a discourse marker of indifference: the speaker hints at the irrelevance of a given P by referring to a motivation *in absentia*, whereby *tanto* marks an irrelevant content as known and shared between the interlocutors. In that case, *tanto* displays the status of a discourse marker, which occurs autonomously indicating the speaker's evaluation at the (inter)personal level and conveys a crucial intersubjective function such as the communication of indifference.

The paper is structured as follows: § 2 outlines the state of the art on the expression of irrelevance, with a brief survey on different approaches attested in the literature (§ 2.1., § 2.2.), and the methodological choices that underlie this study (§ 2.3.). The analysis of *tanto* in spoken Italian will be the object of § 3., where the various usage patterns observed and the attested functions will be exemplified and discussed. In § 4. we will draw some conclusions and prospects for future research.

2. Irrelevance from concessives to no matter-predicates: some theoretical premises

2.1. Irrelevance within the domain of concession: conditionals, concessive conditionals, concessives

In discourse studies, conceding is deemed as a strategy that speakers employ for carrying out an act of potentially disruptive disagreement (Couper-Kulhen / Thompson 2000: 382). In interaction, generally, conceding is made up of three parts: (i) stating something, (ii) acknowledging the validity of such a statement, (iii) going on to assert the validity of a probably contrasting statement or point (Couper-Kulhen / Thompson 2000: 382). Conceding can be thus considered as a manner to display contrast on the argumentative ground. The operation of concession has been addressed in the studies on concessive clauses (see König / van der Auwera 1988; König 1986, 1992; Leuschner 2006 *inter alia*) and in the framework exploring textual relations in discourse (Thompson 1987). Notably, in conversational studies the operation of 'show concession' is considered as a way through which speakers recognise some vulnerability in their opening claim and achieve the final rhetorical effect of *fortifying* their own main argumentative position by an operation of admitting a presumable fallacy (Antaki / Wetherell 1999; Couper-Kulhen / Thompson 2000: 383). Conceding thus regards the domain of argumentation and justification. We will return to such an issue later in § 3.

As a first step towards understanding how *tanto* works in discourse, we will contextualize irrelevance in the framework of conditionals and concessives. Irrelevance is in fact a key-notion used to describe the concessive conditionals like the ones in (2) below (a, b, c):

(2) Scalar concessive conditionals (SCCs)

a. Even if we do not get any financial support, we will go ahead with our project / Even if you drink (only) a little, your boss will fire you / Even if he was it to fight you now, he cannot be here, you know that. (Stewart, WD, 203 - König 1986: 230, 1992: 424)

Alternative concessive conditionals (ACCs)

b. Whether we get any financial support or not, we will go ahead with our project / Whether he is right or not, we must support him / [...] whether they like their commanders or not, they'll have no fields to till, nor families to till them for, unless thru fight (Stewart, HH, 183 - König 1986: 230, 1992: 424)

Universal concessive conditionals (UCCs)

c. No matter how much (/however much) financial support we get, we will go ahead with our project / However much advice you give him, he does exactly what he wants to do / Whatever he did in D. out of enmity to your father King Lot, you are his son [...] (Stewart, WD, 95 - König 1986: 230, 1992: 424)⁴

As argued by Haspelmath and König (1998: 565), different labels were employed to identify one or all the three constructions when grouped in (2a) through (2c): 'concessives', 'conditional concessives' (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1099), 'exhaustive conditionals' (Huddleston / Pullum 2002: 761), 'hypothetical concessives', 'irrelevance conditionals', 'unconditionals', 'concessive relative clauses', 'clauses of indifference' (Visser 1972: 699), 'clauses of open concession' (Kruisinga 1932: 417), 'semi-factuals' *inter alia* (Gazdar 1979: 60; Levinson 1983: 136; Leuschner 2006).

Even if the three types in (2a)-(2c) do not share (at least in English and in some Romance languages) formal properties, their similarity is essentially traceable on the semantic ground. Undeniably, all the three structures display a type of conditional relation between a proposition *p* and a proposition *q*. The only difference lies in the type of protasis they include. Contrarily to canonical conditionals, we may assert that the speaker refers to a set of protases (see König 1986, 1992). This variability of protases may be specified by (i) some quantification over a variable in the protasis (UCCs), (ii) by a conjunction between a protasis *p* and its negation (ACCs) or (iii) by portraying the protasis as an extreme value for the relevant conditional sentence form (i.e., the case of SCCs, Haspelmath / König 1998: 565, 566).

Crucially, one reason why concessive conditionals have so often been grouped together with typical concessives is the fact that they too may carry an implication of *incompatibility*: indeed, concessive *although*, *even though*, *in spite of*, *nevertheless* are used to put two propositions against the background assumption that the relevant situations *do not generally or normally occur together*. To put it otherwise, the situation which is described in one of the clauses is an adverse condition with respect to the situation described in the other (i.e., if *p*, normally $\sim q$ – Haspelmath / König 1998: 566). Given that such conditionals relate a series of antecedents to a consequent, one of those antecedent propositions will normally be considered as being in *conflict* with the proposition expressed by the consequent. As recognised by König (1986: 233), this implication may be part of the conventional meaning of such

⁴ See Haspelmath / König (1998) for a comprehensive survey on the three types of such conditionals.

constructions. Alternatively, it may arise from conversational maxims in discourse. Another property shared by these two sets of constructions is the *factuality* of the main clause. Sentences including concessive clauses entail both the main and the subordinate clause (Haspelmath / König 1998: 567). Concessive conditionals are semifactual in the standard case, namely they typically entail the apodosis (cf. Barker 1991; Haspelmath / König 1998: 567).

Along with being similar to conditionals and concessives as underlined so far, concessive conditionals can be considered parallel to *non-specific free relative clauses* and *embedded interrogative clauses* (Haspelmath / König 1998: 577). Actually, the taxonomy into three different types outlined above in (2) is mirrored in the traditional distinction between constituent interrogatives and alternative interrogatives and polar interrogatives (Haspelmath / König 1998: 578).

2.2. A focus on predicates of irrelevance

After undertaking a brief clarification of the main properties defining irrelevance conditionals, in what follows we will provide a brief survey on those structural patterns and lexical predicates used to convey indifference (Leuschner 2005: 291).

By ‘expression of irrelevance or indifference’ it is meant ‘X does not matter’ (Leuschner 2005: 292; Horn 1986: 180f). In some Germanic languages and in Italian, predicates of indifference can be ascribed to two main functional patterns: one pattern is realised with an element of negation (*it is no matter, it makes no difference, I don’t care*); the other one is realised with an element denoting identity of equality (such as *it’s all the same, it comes (down) to the same (thing)*, Leuschner 2005: 292). Some of these predicates are defined by Baker (1968: 115) as matter-predicates; the class is similar to Karttunen (1977: 6)’s class of relevance predicates, that is, affirmative forms like *matter, make a difference, care, give a damn*. The predicate of indifference denies the existence of a relation of dependency between some sets of antecedents and a set consisting of two or more distinct consequences (Baker 1968: 114; Leuschner 2005: 293). In the following example, the alternative interrogative embedded in *it doesn’t matter* raised two different values, namely X_1 and X_2 for the salient variable at stake ‘type of weaver’, and the whole is followed by a statement throwing light upon S, i.e., the state of affairs which persists independently of the identity of the referent in X_n . In order to confirm that the different instantiation of X will really lead to the same S under any circumstance, an evaluation is relinquished making reference to a particularly extreme instantiation for X_1 (Leuschner 2005: 294):

- (3) No other manufacturer makes such a wide variety of shirts as the CWS. Society shirts are made to please all types of wearer, from the artisan to the executive, and for all occasions. *It doesn’t matter whether* you are a giant or a dwarf, your Co-operative society can fit you out with a CWS shirt. The Broughton was recently called upon for a shirt with a 22 ½ in. collar and a 66 in. chest measurement. (LOB – cf. Leuschner 2005: 294)

Speakers often conceive of a given S first and then they generally introduce the issue of (in)dependency deliberately as a way of strengthening the former. This hap-

pens through a specific mechanism which Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (2000: 398) call *partitioning*. The embedded interrogative sets up a distinction between several kinds of instantiations for the variable ‘types of wearer’. By means of the predicate-complement construction, the speaker introduces into the text a pragmatic presupposition *if X, then S* thus suggesting that different instantiations X_1, X_2, \dots for the variable could lead to dissimilar consequents and immediately she denies that this is indeed the case (Leuschner 2005: 294). Moreover, predicates of indifference are often followed by accounts or elaborations which in spoken interaction tend to justify the *disaligning* speech act as an instance of cooperative and relevant behaviour (Leuschner 2005: 300), as we will plainly argue in § 3.

In Germanic languages – as claimed by Leuschner (2005) – the refusal to choose from a set of propositions as defined by different instantiations of a variable can be expressed in two ways: *from the point of view of S*, saying that S is identical or equal irrespectively of X, or alternatively *from the point of view of X*, denying that each X leads to a different S. The selected sources involve similar *schemata* (Leuschner 2005: 301), possibly mediated by metaphor, in terms of material (English *matter* < Old French *matere*), direction either downward (Dutch *het komt op hetzelfde neer* ‘it comes down to the same’) or outward (German *es läuft auf dasselbe hinaus* ‘it comes out onto the same’, and so forth, Leuschner 2005: 301).

Among the constructions of irrelevance, we can find the form *I don’t care* and the more subjective form *I couldn’t care less*. Moreover, we can see other forms like *it does not matter*, *it is of no matter*. *It is no matter* is the oldest expression and nowadays it mostly occurs as a quantificational prefix (*no matter*) in concessive conditionals or, in a further step of grammaticalization, as a preposition whose meaning can be accounted for as concessive-conditional (Leuschner 2005: 302). As anticipated, a variant is *it is of no matter*, which gives rise to *it makes no matter*.

Concerning the *no difference type*, it includes the fuzziest and most varied forms, as also happens in Italian (see § 3.3.4.). An example is the form *it makes no difference* and cognates in other languages. Phrases like these show a relatively simple main verb followed by a direct object structure that is even used in German.

In Dutch we can find similar forms meaning *it can’t differ to me*, *it doesn’t give*, *it makes me nothing out* (Leuschner 2005: 303).

As anticipated, the *indiscriminative* status of a given referent (or more than one) may also be expressed through a pattern exploiting the notion of identity / equality giving rise essentially to two subtypes (Leuschner 2006: 304). One subtype involves the verb *to be* and as nominal predicate some adjective that may be paraphrased as *equal* or contain an element of similar meaning such as the German *gleich* ‘equal’ (see Belgian Dutch *gelijk* or French *egal*, cf. Leuschner 2005: 304 or the Argentinean Spanish *igual*, cf. García Negroni / Marcovecchio 2013). The Dutch *even* is an instantiation of the type at issue, it means *equally*, *smooth*, *regular*, *undisturbed*. It is an instantiation of the identity / equality type, as indeed is the dialectal Dutch form *het is (mij) om het is (mij) eender*, the *eender* being derived from the genitive of *een* (‘one’, Leuschner 2005: 304).

The other subtype contains a lexical verb and usually expresses the notion of equality through a nominalized adjective or pronoun, as in English *it comes down to the same thing*, similar to the Dutch *het komt op hetzelfde* (lit. ‘it comes down on the same’) and variants (Leuschner 2005: 304).

2.3. Methodology: object of analysis, corpora and parameters

This survey is the result of a usage-based analysis. We queried the KIP module included in the KIParla Corpus of Spoken Italian. The Corpus includes two modules, namely, KIP and ParlaTO⁵ (Mauri *et al.* 2019). In the KIP module we individuated 119 occurrences of the irrelevance-*tanto*, including occurrences as connective and discourse marker.

First, we considered the parameter concerning the explicitness of the three components P(roposition), M(otivation), and E(ffect). We monitored whether such components are overtly realized and to what extent: P refers to a proposition or act which is deemed to be irrelevant; M stands for the motivation which justifies the irrelevance of the content P (eventually on a par with its alternatives); E refers to the verbalization of the zero or null effect, that is the effect of indifference of the realization of P with respect to the speaker's contextual effects.

Second, we employed distributional parameters, monitoring the co-occurrence of *tanto* with (i) causal connectives (such as *perché* 'because'), (ii) adversative and concessive elements (like *ma, però* 'but', *comunque* 'however'), further irrelevance discourse markers (such as *vabbé*, shortened form of *va bene* 'it's OK, whatever') and the co-occurrence with negative polarity items (e.g., *mai* 'never').

Third, we analysed the reality status (realis, potential, irrealis, cf. Elliott 2000; Mauri 2008) of the proposition P preceding or following *tanto*. In this way, we could monitor how reference is made to further alternatives, beyond P: speakers may indeed refer more or less explicitly to the irrelevance of a given P but also to the irrelevance of its potential alternatives. Crucially, as we will see, *tanto* may accompany either contents on the propositional ground or speech acts placed on the concrete sphere of action, hence the alternatives may concern the speech act level of concrete actions.

3. Irrelevance in discourse: *tanto* from connective to discourse marker

A very recent study on *tanto* is provided by Inkova and Manzotti (2021), which forms a crucial point for the present research. According to Inkova and Manzotti (2021), *tanto* has different connective values; in some cases, it establishes (or contributes to establish) a connection between propositions *p* and *q* as an operator on the level of measure. In other cases, *tanto* acts on the illocutive level. It can act as relativizer of the weight of an assertion, of a proposal, and of a question. Interestingly, in some cases, *tanto* may encode the substantial equivalence between two alternative behaviours with respect to another content. The marker can convey irrelevance or indifference⁶. In the structure of the form «*p, tanto q*», *tanto* acts as a relativizer of a situation (*p*). The content *p* is regarded as having no effect on a given content *q*. To put it otherwise, according to the authors, by virtue of *tanto*, *q* can be disregarded

⁵ The Corpus is freely accessible at www.kiparla.it.

⁶ We used the terms rather interchangeably, but we appreciate a possible distinction, as suggested by one of the external reviewers. S/he suggests that irrelevance is a (non)relation between propositions, contents, or segments of discourse, whereas indifference could be treated as a (non)relation between the speaker and his / her utterance. Hence, the latter could be addressed as a matter of attitude.

by *p*, by relativizing or nullifying the scope of *p*, and at the same time it can justify such a nullifying effect. An example of the usage of *tanto* as irrelevance marker can be seen in the stretch *Lasciala parlare, tanto io faccio quello che voglio* ('leave her express her opinion, tanto I do what I want' / 'her talk is useless since I will do what I want'). In Inkova / Manzotti (2021) the authors claim that such value of *tanto* is linked to the concession relation in the form «anche se *p*, *q*», «per quanto *p*, *q*», however, the value cannot be barely reducible to such a relation. Finally, *tanto* may act as an equivalence marker (Inkova / Manzotti 2021).

As already argued with respect to concessive conditionals, there are many ways of indicating that a consequent holds for a series of antecedents and that one of those conditions is normally incompatible with the consequent (König 1982: 237). In what follows we will address a similar situation. Following Inkova / Manzotti (2021), we will properly argue that *tanto* refers to the expression of the irrelevance of a given P (either $\sim P$, or ^{any}P) with respect to a situation which is not affected by the former, in that in the universe of discourse some motivations block P from acting on the persistence of some conditions (Haspelmath / König 1998), and, implicitly of another state of affairs, which we may call Q (i.e., a consequent).

In most cases *tanto* introduces M, i.e., a motivation which nullifies the import of the utterance occurring with *tanto* (which is often in the imperative form). M cannot be directly identified with Q. However, it shares with Q of concessives its persistence and factuality, nullifying the positive import or changing ability of the preceding (or, more rarely, subsequent) content. In other words, M is an unfavourable circumstance (eventually known to both the speakers) justifying the irrelevance of either P, $\sim P$ or ^{any}P. As outlined in the previous section, *no matter/it's the same* structural patterns deny the existence of a relation of dependency between some sets of antecedents and a set consisting of two or more distinct consequences (Baker 1968: 114; Leuschner 2005: 293). *Tanto* is mobilised to motivate such an independence with the (frequent) underlining of the motivation M.

3.1. Irrelevance: the *equilibrium* between cognitive efforts and contextual effects

In § 2.1. we surveyed the literature on irrelevance conditionals as linguists started to work on irrelevance with respect to concessive conditionals or 'irrelevance conditionals'. Indeed, irrelevance (or 'indifference' in Leuschner's terms) has been mainly addressed with respect to conditional and concessive constructions. Languages dispose of various strategies ranging from concessive connectives to reduplication and lexical predicates to express independence between state of affairs or actions (Haspelmath / König 1998; Leuschner 2005, 2006 *inter al.*). In what follows, by applying the premises of the approaches addressed so far, we will study how the notion of irrelevance may be applied to discourse level phenomena through the marker *tanto* functioning like a complex connective of irrelevance and finally, in some occurrences, as a discourse marker expressing the speaker's stance of indifference (Schiffrin 1987). With a view to describing irrelevance, we should first address relevance. In the framework of Relevance theory (henceforth RT, cf. Wilson / Sperber 2012, Wilson 2012), relevance is considered as follows:

Relevance is treated as a property of inputs to cognitive processes and analysed in terms of cognitive effects and processing effort. When an input (e.g., an utterance)

is processed in a context of available assumptions, it may yield some cognitive effect (e.g., by modifying or reorganizing these assumptions). Other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effects achieved, the greater the relevance of the input. However, the processing of the input, and the derivation of these effects involves some mental effort. Other things being equal, the smaller the processing effort required, the greater the relevance of input (Wilson 2012: 238).

Specifically, according to the RT account, human cognition is regulated by the cognitive and by the communicative Principle of Relevance. According to former, human cognition tends to be organised in a way that is suitable for the maximisation of relevance. According to the latter Principle, utterances can be deemed as a type of cognitive input since they yield expectations of relevance. Typically, an utterance creates both a general presumption of *optimal relevance* (that the utterance is at least relevant enough to be worth the hearer's processing effort, and that it is considered the most relevant one compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences) and more context-specific expectations about where the relevance of the utterance will lie (what sort of contextual implications it can yield, cf. Wilson / Sperber 2012). The factors determining the property of Relevance are then the *processing efforts* and the *cognitive effects*. The former pertain to cognitive efforts in processing an input; the latter refer to modifications or reorganization of speaker's assumptions, by generating positive contributions to the speaker's knowledge, that is, cognitive, contextual effects.

Given such premises, we can treat irrelevance, by contrast, as a property of inputs characterized by an extremely low number of contextual/cognitive effects. Irrelevant is a proposition which under any circumstance may affect a given proposition Q – which persists (see notion of Q's entailment in König 1986) eventually by virtue of a given motivation justifying such an independence. As emerges, the essential property of human cognition is the research of relevance, that is, the search for those *stimuli* which allow human beings to apply significant modifications to their world representation (Bianchi 2009: 105; Wilson / Sperber 2012). Therefore, irrelevance is typical of *stimuli* which cannot yield positive effects to the speakers' cognitive environment.

The notion of irrelevance as pursued in this paper has been described in the literature with respect to irrelevance or concessive conditionals (cf. § 2.). All these studies focus on conditional and concessive subordinate clauses encoding the fact that the content of the subordinate clause is irrelevant in relation with the state of affairs of the main clause (Rudolph 1996: 222-224). In spite of its being deeply connected to such structures on the notional ground, *tanto* expresses irrelevance in discourse through the explicit acknowledgment by the speaker of the extremely low number of contextual effects that a given proposition P_1 produces, with respect to its alternatives (Inkova / Manzotti 2021) P_2, P_3, \dots to the negation of P, which can also be alluded. Irrelevance of P conveyed by *tanto* may be schematized as follows (where P stands for proposition, E for effect and M for motivation):

- P_1 leads to the contextual effect E
- also P_2, P_3, \dots would lead to the contextual effect E
- $P, \sim P$ and the whole range of possible P_{any} , would in principle lead to the same contextual effect, namely E, by virtue of a conflicting, blocking M

When a speaker explicitly asserts the irrelevance of a given P in discourse, it means that P does not lead to modifications or reorganizations of the speaker's assumptions, that is, P leads to no contextual effects from the speaker's perspective, hence $E \cong 0$. Still, in discourse, speakers tend to motivate irrelevance. P is irrelevant because of the existence, or persistence, of a specific motivation M.

Along with interpreting our data as instances of irrelevance in terms of positive balance between effects and costs, moreover, as anticipated, we will treat the pattern instantiated by *tanto* as an example of cooperative behavior, where the null effect is often put on the level of implicatures in RT terms. What is rather expressed is (more often than not) the motivation which activates assumptions and conclusions without explicitly stating the indifference value. In fact, *tanto* generally co-occurs with a motivation which activates some inferential mechanisms as to draw the proposition including the context-based indifference effect through a dynamic, mutual adjustment of explicatures, contextual assumptions and implications (or implicatures) in order to satisfy the expectations of relevance raised by the utterance (Wilson / Sperber 2012). In what follows we will start by explaining through some examples what irrelevance of P and $\sim P$, or $\text{any } P$ actually means.

3.2. Irrelevance of alternatives: P, $\sim P$, $\text{any } P$

Speakers may refer more or less explicitly to the irrelevance of a given P but also to the irrelevance of its alternatives, negation included. Let us start from an example of irrelevance of P.

- (4) TO052: *mi sa che mi comprerò un telefono:: (al cinque percento xx.)*
 'I think that I will buy a smartphone at five percent xx'
 TO048: *tanto ti si romperà tra due giorni (tranquilla[mente].)*
 'tanto it will break in two days surely'
 TO048: *xx ti sei comprato qualcosa: tipo di elettronico xx xx ti si era rotto.*
 'xx (when) you bought something of electronic stuff xx xx it broke immediately' (TOA3008)

The example may be paraphrased as 'whether you buy a phone or not, it is the same since if you buy it, you will destroy it into two days with the result that you will be without a phone after two days as well'. In this case, we can notice a *joint construction* of the pattern of irrelevance. Indeed, speaker TO052 says she is going to buy a new phone. Immediately after, the interlocutor communicates that it is useless by adducing the qualified cause of such indifference, i.e., that – without any doubt – the speaker will break it immediately after buying it (for instance, because she is not very accurate, because the same happened in past times as for other technological devices and so forth). The notion of irrelevance of P is communicated by the connective *tanto* which, although not expressing the effect (E) explicitly, introduces the motivation of the irrelevance of P ('to buy a new phone'). The action expressed by P is potential, therefore we can claim that *tanto* introduces a justification to advise the hearer *not* to buy the phone by implicitly referring to the justification of the indifference of the potential act. Conversationally it would imply that P would lead to the same contextual effect of its contrary ('not buying it at all'). In any case, the speaker would not have a phone. In

reinforcing the motivation of irrelevance, the hearer provides a proof in the terms of a reflected evidence (Plungian 2001) and adducing additional evidence of that (see the additional proof referring to past similar experience). The inferential future expressing the hearer's motivation of irrelevance refers to a qualified cause which is construed as a given and known fact, therefore we can argue that *tanto* acts on an argumentative scale (cf. Moeschler / de Spengler 1982) and provides evidence for the zero-effect of the action expressed in the first section (P). This is done by introducing the justification of its irrelevance, thus ultimately fortifying the speaker's rhetorical stance (see Couper-Kulhen / Thompson 2000). Let us consider the following occurrence:

- (5) BO046: *me ne andrò a studiare a casa sperando di non mangiarmi tutta la dispensa, ma tanto non ho un cazzo in dispensa*
 'I'll go to study home hoping not to eat the whole pantry, but **tanto** I don't have a cock in the pantry' (BOA3004)

In this occurrence the hoping of not eating all the food contained in the pantry when getting home is useless since the pantry is empty, that is, to hope or not won't change the speaker's situation in a crucial way, given that the pantry is empty. Likewise, the (zero-)effect E is not expressed but it is activated on the level of the explicature (Wilson / Sperber 2012). In this case, the motivation 'my pantry is empty' yields the conclusion that 'hoping to eat an empty pantry is useless'. This is obtained conversationally by activating the following reading 'whether the speaker hopes or not, nothing will actually change'. We may assert that the communicated concept is more specific than the encoded one. Hence, the speaker nullifies the relevance of P by adducing by herself the motivation M of the former. In what follows, we will provide other examples of reference to P's irrelevance:

- (6) BO054: [*>cioè< perdevi i tuoi amici] se ti spostavi cento metri? [...]*
 'I mean if you had moved a little, would you have lost your friends?'
 BO056: *poi dopo ma in realtà non è per quello perchè tanto avevo dieci anni >cioè< se loro si volevano spostare lo facevano*
 'then later but actually it is not for that because **tanto** I was ten years old I mean if they really had wanted, they would have moved' (BOD2009)
- (7) ????: *volevo seguire comunque questo corso perchè mi interessava il programma, però formalmente non potrei darlo quest'anno.*
 'I wanted to attend this course anyway because I was interested in its contents, but formally I could not do the exam this year'
- TO068: *okay.*
 'okay'
 ????: [*ci sarebbe un problema per darlo l'anno prossimo?*]
 'would there be a problem to do it next year?'
- TO068: [*non è un problema, perchè tanto l'anno prossimo.*] [...]
 'it's not a problem, because so **tanto** next year'
- TO068: *io spero e credo di essere qui,*
 'I hope and I believe to be here' (TOD1014)

In (6), the speaker demolishes the relevance of the first utterance through its explicit negation (*no non è per quello*, ‘it was not for that’ → ‘it was irrelevant’). More specifically, the speaker is asking why the hearer’s parents didn’t want to move on another place. He supposes it was for their son (the hearer of conversation at hand), because otherwise he would have lost all his friends. The hearer negates the relevance of such a possibility by providing its motivation referring to the fact that he (the son) was only ten (*non è per quello, avevo dieci anni, se volevano spostarsi lo facevano tranquillamente*, ‘I was only ten years old (and ten years old guys generally have not a defined network of friends), hence if they really had wanted, they would have moved without any problem’). We can see an inversion of polarity making possible the reference to the indifference of P, through the explicit negation of its relevance.

Conversely, in examples like the following one, the reference is specifically made to the opposite of P, that is $\sim P$ (as happens normally with respect with the irrelevance conveyed by the pattern designed by *tanto*). What we observe is a foregrounding of the irrelevance of $\sim P$ through an operation of implicit backgrounding of the congruent import of P and its alternative(s) with respect to the production of contextual effects and efforts⁷. In the following occurrence, P or $\sim P$ are claimed to lead to the same contextual effect:

- (8) BO054: *mia mamma (.) l’ha portata a casa, [l’ha messa] in camera sua*
 ‘my mother brought it her home, she put it in her room’
 BO056: *[okay]*
 ‘okay’
 BO056: *ovviamente quindi è diventata la sua tivù*
 ‘obviously now it is her personal TV’
 BO054: *°esatto° no ma >cioè < va bene >perchè [tanto io<]*
 ‘exactly no but I mean it’s okay because tanto I’
 BO056: *[tanto] tu non la guardi esatto*
 ‘**tanto** you don’t watch it exactly’
 BO054: *non la guardo [...]*
 ‘I don’t watch it’ (BOD2009)
- (9) TO065: *poi ricordi che mi deve scrivere per chiedermi aiuto nel contatto con [mariano] neri,*
 ‘then just remember that you have to send to me a message to ask me for help for the contact with Mariano Neri’
 TO061: *[con ne-]*
 ‘with ne-’
 TO065: *cosa che ripeto faccio (.) perchè tanto gli devo scrivere anche per altre questioni,*
 ‘thing which I repeat I do because **tanto** I have to write to him also for other issues’ (TOA1003)

⁷ In other cases, even though they share their inability to alter the persistence of the conflicting motivation, the two (or more) alternatives do not always dispose of the same status (or degree) of irrelevance being one alternative more relevant than the other one(s) in terms of dynamic balance between costs/effects for one or more speakers when one considers relevance globally, not only with respect to the speaker’s zero-effects.

- (10) BO007: *e quando gli arrivano [(per) nata]le?*
 ‘and when do they arrive? At Christmas?’
 BO010: *[mille anni.]*
 ‘a thousand years’
 BO010: *io ci devo andare sì.*
 ‘I have to go there yes’
 BO007: *>e vabbè li [prendi dopo dai] tanto prima che arrivino [in norvegia sei] comunque in ritardo.<*
 ‘and OK take them after, come on **tanto** before they arrive in Norway anyway you are late’ (BOA3002)

In the examples, reference is made to the irrelevance of $\sim P$. In the first of the examples, the speaker says that a TV which was not used has been given to the mother of the first speaker. The hearer answers saying that this does not provoke changes or problems since the former speaker did not use such TV.

Therefore, we are faced with P (with *tanto* alluding to the irrelevance of $\sim P$), E (the zero effect) and M, that is, all the three variables. The fact that the speaker refers to a motivation is specified by the causal connective *perché* (‘because’) prefacing *tanto*⁸. Once again, what hosts the item *tanto* is a motivation which is known to both the interlocutors - which would be in conflict with $\sim P$ (leaving the TV home without actually watching it). In fact, both the speakers express exactly the same justification motivating the indifference of $\sim P$ given the holding of some circumstances⁹ through an overlapping move followed by a marker of agreement (Wang *et al.* 2010). Moreover, the zero effect from the part of the TV owner is explicitly verbalised through the expression *va bene*, ‘alright’ (‘it does not provoke problems’, see Leuschner 2005 on *no matter* and similar expressions). This form triggers a conceding value with respect to the persistence of the indifference.

Let us briefly consider the last example of the list. The speaker wants to convince the hearer that sending some stuff to Norway before a certain threshold would be useless since *however / in any case* the speaker will be in a hurry. The reference to the concession is made explicit through the item *comunque* (‘however’, Haspelmath 1997), which refers to the persistence of a conflicting circumstance which sustains the speaker’s argumentative position in advancing the hearer not to do P before a given date¹⁰ (i.e., reference to irrelevance of $\sim P$). A similar example is given below:

- (11) BO153: *no [incominci da tutti] i ristoranti di bolo[gna,]*
 ‘no just start from all the restaurants in Bologna’
 BO152: *[tanto]*
 ‘**tanto**’
 BO152: *[al mass]i[mo non ti] considera ne[ssuno]*
 ‘if anything no one will consider you’ (BOA3020)

⁸ In 14,8% of the occurrences *tanto* is preceded by the causal connective *perché*.

⁹ See the similar marker *mek e* in Armenian.

¹⁰ Once again, both sending the stuff before and after a threshold is irrelevant, however, if we consider the global calculation of costs/benefits, sending the stuff before the given threshold is ‘more irrelevant’ than the reverse.

In (11), the hearer justifies the zero effect of the action required through the hortative form to the interlocutor. To a certain extent, the speaker wants to retract by weakening the import of the request made to the hearer. He thus alludes to the last element of a scale to describe the extreme consequence of a given action using the focus particle *al massimo* ('at most' / 'at the latest'). A set of antecedents is specified by asserting a conditional relationship for an extreme (unlikely) value on a scale of possible values (König 1986). By implication, this relationship can also be assumed to obtain for other, more likely, values belonging to the same scale. The last element of the class ('nobody would care about you') is the extreme option. By indicating that the extreme effect is close to nothing, it is meant that the action required will not change the speaker's status in any case (it would imply no effort). In other words, the worst thing which could happen is that nobody answers to his requests, that is a nullification. Given the near-null effort of P, its negation would be useless (i.e., deemed to imply more or less the same costs of P).

In spite of its being not frequent, reference can be made to more than one alternative (_{any}P) as in the following examples compatible with the value of universal concessive conditionals:

- (12) BO145: *[fr]assinago è: basilibò [...]*
 '(In) Frassinago (is) Basilibo'
 BO145: *basilibò è: un posto che fa le pi- la pizza*
 'Basilibo' is a place that makes the the pizza
 BO146: *oddio quindi abbiamo scoop [solo per xx]*
 'oh my God, so we have scoops only for xx'
 BO147: *[ma non è vasiniko]*
 'but it's not Vasiniko'
 BO145: *[mh mh]*
 'yes yes'
 BO145: *no no [è (un) altro in via frassinago]*
 'no no it's (an) other in Frassinago Street'
 BO139: *[>vabbè < tanto (sei censu[rata])] ((ride))*
 'it's OK **tanto** you are censored ((she laughs))' (BOA3017)

In (12), thinking about the name and identity of the restaurant(s) at stake through a process of specification is useless since in the final stage, all corpus names and references will be obscured. In this type of occurrences, the target of irrelevance is in a way metadiscursive since *tanto* alludes to the following paraphrase: specifying or thinking of the real references is useless given that, however, all the names will be obscured. *Tanto* occurs in a universal concessive-like context (see the category of UCCs, Haspelmath / König 1998). The alternatives are provided by the two speakers BO145 and BO147, to which utterances, speaker BO139 answers relinquishing *tanto* before the *ad hoc* motivation. Hence, it communicates that *whatever* the name is, specifying it is irrelevant since every name will be obscured.

3.3. *Tanto*: the meaning of irrelevance and its usage patterns in spoken Italian

In what follows, we will show that speakers may express irrelevance in discourse by actuating different patterns, depending on which elements between proposition P, effect E and motivation M are made explicit.

3.3.1. P-M-E pattern: the highest degree of explicitness

To have an idea of the most transparent patterns, i.e., patterns in which the null effect is verbalised, we can see that *tanto* in our sample may occur with P, M, and E (12,6%). Let us have a look at the data, which can be organised according the two patterns of indifference/zero-effect recognised by Leuschner (2005: 293), i.e. identity-type and no-matter-type:

- (13) TO030: *cioè che tu dici, arrotondamelo a ventotto. no no. [quel punto] sette, e quindi cioè **tanto valeva** che io, avessi preso tutti anche de venti- perché **tanto** alla fine se me lo arrotondi a ventisette, (.) cioè.*
 ‘I mean that one can say, round it to me to twenty-eight no, no. that point seven, and so **it was the same** that I, I had taken all even of twenty because **tanto** in the end if you round it to me to twenty-seven, that is’ (TOA3006)

The example instantiates the identity pattern through the expression *tanto valeva* ‘it was the same’ making reference to the null effect provoked either from P or its alternatives. Specifically, the speaker is a student who is complaining about the evaluation of her exams given by her professor. Given that the professor at stake rounded up the student’s mark (27.7) to 27 (and not to 28), studying hard to get some 28 and 29 resulted to be useless and hence judged the same (in terms of effects) as taking also 20 in the course of the academic career. In other words, the professor’s action nullified all the student’s efforts. The following examples instantiate the other pattern of negation (see Leuschner 2005: 293):

- (14) TO036: *[ma **tanto**] è a numero chiuso **non ci servono** abbiamo già: il numero massimo di persone*
 ‘but **tanto** the number is limited **we do not need anyone**. We already have all the people’ (TOA3003)
- (15) TO085: *ah beh allora te la te la rido’*
 ‘ah well then I will give it back to you’
- TO094: *[sì]*
 ‘yes’
- TO085: *[quando] mi arriva la lampada ti ridò quella li’ [...]*
 ‘when I get my lamp I give you back the one there [...]
- TO085: *[ma no::]: ma va:::*
 ‘but no but come on’
- TO093: *mo [era sicuro che andavo e tornavo]*

- TO085: 'now it was sure I would have gone and come back'
 [ma **tanto cosa mi serve** ades]so torno il trenta
 'but **tanto I don't need it**. Now I will be back on thirtieth of the month' (TOA3013)

In the above mentioned two examples, the speakers use the negation of the verb *servire* ('need') to refer to the zero-effect (E). In (14) E is referred to through the expression *non ci servono* ('we don't need them'); in (15), E is referred to as *cosa mi serve* ('I don't need it now'); specifically, such indifference is due in (15) to the motivation M of the form *adesso torno il trenta* ('now I will be back on thirtieth of the month'). P refers to the holophrastic expression *no* recalling the proposition *ti ridò quella lì* ('I give you back the one there'). Specifically, the speaker asserts that the hearer's will to give the light back is useless since she is abroad when uttering the stretch above (therefore holding the lamp would be useless). In the following example, the form *a me non importa niente* ('I don't care', cfr. Inkova / Manzotti 2021), instantiating the negation pattern, is employed:

- (16) ????: *lo vado a stampare in cartoleria sì tanto costa tipo due centesimi a pagina*
 'I'm going to print it in a copy point yes tanto it costs like two cents per page'
 BO013: *cioè quanto costa in tutto?*
 'that is, how much does it cost in sum?'
 ????: *tipo tre euro tre quattro euro rilegato e tutto e già stampato*
 'like three euros three four euros bound and all already printed'
 BO013: *sì?*
 'really?'
 ????: *ma sì tanto così si va.: avanti*
 'but yes **tanto** this is the way it goes on'
 BO013: *no no ma a me non mi importa niente tanto sai non è che Camilleri diventa povero*
 'no no but **I don't care about anything tanto** you know it's not that Camilleri becomes poor'
 ????: *sì sì infatti esatto*
 'yes yes indeed exactly' (BOD1001)

Specifically, E is referred to as *a me non importa niente* ('I don't care about anything'). M is referred to as *non è che Camilleri diventa povero* ('it's not that Camilleri becomes poor'). P is referred through the form *così si va avanti* ('this is the way it goes on'). More specifically, in the example, the speakers allude to the students' habit to print Camilleri's volume on their own in a copy point without buying the original copy of the book. The speakers say that this a common praxis and that it is not a problem since the famous writer Camilleri won't become poor for that students' habit.

Summing up, throughout all these examples, we can notice the verbalisation of the zero effect: *non ci servono* ('we don't need them'), *tanto valeva* ('it was the same'), *cosa mi serve* (lit., 'what could I do with it now', id. 'I don't need it now'), *è inutile* ('it is useless'), *non m'importa niente* ('I don't care', lit. 'I don't give a damn'). The examples above may be schematised as follows:

- (17) P-M-E pattern:
 $P/\sim P/_{\text{any}} P$ lead to **same E=0 tanto M** → Either P, or $\sim P$, or $_{\text{any}} P$ is useless/
 does not lead to changes/effects because of M

The pattern of irrelevance may also be co-construed by the speakers, as in the following example instantiating the ‘no-matter’ pattern:

- (18) BO021: *se hai open office, ti posso dare una mano. se già usi altri programmi.*,
 ‘if you have Open Office on your PC, I can help you, if you use other programs...’
 BO046: *userò open office ((ride))*
 ‘I will use Open Office ((she laughs))’
 BO046: *(signorina) è sconsigliato l’utilizzo di open office*
 ‘Lady, using Open Office is not recommended’
 BO046: *frega il cazzo.*
 ‘(I) don’t care’
 BO021: *no ma tanto poi va cambiata in pi di effe*
 ‘no but **tanto** then it must be converted into .pdf format’
 (BOA3004)

In the example, speaker BO046 utters both the P and the E (*frega il cazzo*, ‘I don’t care’), the former being an echoic (and ironic) usage of a potential critic. After the speaker’s utterance of P and E, the addressee (BO021) utters the motivation explaining why P is indeed irrelevant. Hence, the interlocutors display agreement and alignment (Wang *et al.* 2010). Once again, *tanto* demolishes a given potential action (see the occurrence of the future), by providing the justification of the irrelevance through a qualified cause (‘you are required to convert into pdf in the end, therefore you can use whatever program you want’: Open Office, Microsoft Word and so forth). As anticipated, in all these cases, the motivation is highly filtered from the speaker’s angle, therefore M should be better accounted for in terms of a justification placed on the argumentative level.

3.3.2. P-M pattern: the most frequent irrelevance pattern

In roughly 70% of occurrences, *tanto* introduces the motivation M explaining why P (either $\sim P$ or $_{\text{any}} P$) should be considered irrelevant; the scheme at issue is by far the most frequent pattern. In such cases, *tanto* encodes that P and its alternatives ($_{\text{any}} P$) are indifferent because of M, which provides the pragmatic justification nullifying another action. In such cases, the zero effect (E) is not verbalised, hence the meaning is ‘absorbed’ by the connective *tanto* linking conceptually P (or $\sim P$) to M. In discourse, as previously anticipated, speakers tend to motivate irrelevance, often with the purpose of blocking a potential action.

As underlined before, asserting that a fact expressed by a preceding utterance is irrelevant for a fact mentioned subsequently amounts to emphatically asserting the truth of the second statement or the emphasis attached to it (König 1982: 242) and eventually inducing the dismissal of the act expressed in the previous stretch of discourse (cf. P). When using *tanto* speakers do so by providing the motivation sus-

taining the abovementioned truth and the persistence of a given circumstance which will not evolve irrespectively of either P or ~P. Let us consider some examples:

- (19) BO147: *ma quanti minuti: devono essere(?)*
 ‘but how many minutes must they be?’
 BO139: *mh*
 ‘mh’
 BO139: *quel che capita*
 ‘whatever’
 BO139: *l'altra volta tipo ho registrato la (>mia<) coinquilina [x]*
 ‘last time like I registered my roommate x’
 BO147: *[ma tanto devi (f)fare duecentocinquanta ore puoi (farle) anche (di:) sessanta: ore x audio*
 ‘but **tanto** you have to record two hundred and fifty hours you can also record sixty hours per audio’ (BOA3017)

In this example, P is postponed to M. Specifically P is referred to as the form *puoi farle anche di sessanta ore x audio* (‘you can also record sixty hours per audio’). M is the content *devi fare duecentocinquanta ore* (‘you have to record two hundred and fifty hours’). The speaker utters that the recordings may be of whatever length given that the hearer is required to record a lot of hours. Specifically, we underline that in this case, we notice the occurrence of the focus particle *anche* (‘even’), which poses P on the extreme value of a scale. Hence, the value expressed is perfectly compatible with the meaning conveyed through the scalar concessive conditionals (Haspelmath / König 1998). In other words, also the last (conflicting or unlikely) member of a list will not alter the speaker’s assumptions, given the existence of M. Let us consider the following cases:

- (20) BO115: *[non sai] neanche quando inizi.*
 ‘you don’t even know when you start’
 BO114: *[no.]*
 ‘no’
 BO114: *no però spero il prima possibile [francamente.]*
 ‘no but I hope as soon as possible frankly’
 BO115: *[beh magari] inizi anche già,*
 ‘well maybe you can already start’
 BO115: *vabbe’, tanto avrai già tutti i materiali e le informazioni immagino.*
 ‘oh well, **tanto** you will already have all the materials and information I guess’
 BO114: *sì ho già: una bibliografia provvisoria, diciamo così.*
 ‘yes I already have a provisional bibliography, let’s say so’ (BOD2015)
- (21) TO071: *[>la porta la chiu]do?< quindi?*
 ‘can I close the door then?’
 TO065: *s:i, può chiuderla*
 ‘yes you can close it’
 TO065: *[tanto] (.) qualunque cosa accada viene registra[ta.]*
 ‘**tanto** whatever happens is recorded’ (TOA1003)

- (22) TO065: *allora io adesso proverei velocissimamente a (.) leggere*
 ‘then now I would try very quickly to read’
 TO065: *vado solo un momento in bagno e poi*
 ‘I just go to the toilette for a moment and then’
 TO065: *[tan]to ci mettiam dieci minuti,*
 ‘**tanto** it will take us ten minutes’
 TO061: *[si?]*
 ‘really?’
 TO065: *a leggere (.) queste cinque pagine che mi ha mandato*
 ‘to read these five pages that you sent to me’ (TOA1003)

The examples share some analogies: P is an act of request and subsequently the hearer provides the justification of the irrelevance of ~P without explicitly referring to it. In (20) P refers to the content *magari inizi anche già* (‘maybe you can already start’) and M justifies the irrelevance of ~P through the expression *avrai già tutti i materiali e le informazioni* (‘you will already have all the materials and information’). More specifically, in (20) the speaker intends to assert that starting to work on the thesis does not seem to imply particular problems for the hearer given that *allegedly* the student has already all the materials at her disposal, therefore the attempt to start writing the thesis will not lead to important changes or efforts. It means that not starting would be useless, i.e., irrelevant in the efforts / effects ratio. P includes the focus particle *anche* (‘even’) which puts the alternative *iniziare* (‘to start working on the thesis’) on the extreme value of a scale – which could imply something surprising or unlikely to occur (given that it is a Face-threatening act – FTA). Nonetheless, such surprising value is “nullified” by the occurrence of a subsequent stretch expressing the M sustaining why P could not be considered surprising or threatening. Once again, the M involves an inferential future (*avrai*) pointing to a kind of reflected evidence enhancing the speaker’s utterance of P.

In the second example of the list P refers to *sì, può chiuderla* (‘yes, you can close the door’) and M refers to the content *qualunque cosa accada viene registrata* (‘whatever happens is recorded’). We underline that the motivation for the irrelevance involves in turn a universal concessive conditional. More specifically, to leave the door open (i.e., make the record of each event open to other people as a form of witness) would be useless given the fact that, however, a camera will record everything; therefore, there is no need to leave the door open *to control what happens inside the room*. Once again *tanto* is related to the justification of the expected (un)realization of a (potential) speech act. Crucially, we found out that in a number of occurrences *tanto* occurs with potential, or semifactual, situations (41%), i.e., with a situation which is not real yet and whose realization (or whose lack of realization) would not affect in any way a given status, given the existence of some circumstances rendering the former useless.¹¹

¹¹ As suggested by one of the external reviewers, there are several studies that outline the possibility of factual protasis for concessive conditionals, which otherwise become a way to explain the increase of irrelevance in these constructions. The distinction between hypotheticality and non-assertion becomes crucial here. For more discussion, see Schwenter (1999), Rodríguez Rosique (2008, 2012), Cortés Parazuelos (1993), and Pérez Saldanya / Salvador (2014).

In (22), the speaker utters a P (*proverei a leggere* ‘I’d try to read the pages we were supposed to give a look at’) – which is a form of hortative – and then immediately provides the motivation with a view at achieving a weakening effect. *Tanto* introduces the motivation justifying the speaker in uttering the request. It conveys that the contrary of P would be useless and without contextual effects since it only takes ten minutes, therefore whether the speakers do it or not, it does not lead to real consequences in terms of efforts. This is equivalent to say that not to try would be very useless with respect to the speakers’ assumptions and, from hence, it would relinquish few contextual effects. The status of the stretch following *tanto* (M) is clearly depicted in the following example, in which the marker at stake co-occurs with a causal connective:

- (23) BO087: *[lu] xun ecco [qui.]*
 ‘Lu Xun here we are’
 BO089: *[si:::]*
 ‘yes’
 BO087: *e il nome reale, lei non l’ha proprio messo perché tanto [lui non ha pubblicato nulla col nome reale.]*
 ‘and concerning the real name, you didn’t really put it because **tanto** he didn’t publish anything with his real name’ (BOC1002)

The example may be paraphrased as an alternative concessive construction of the form ‘whether she put the real name or not, nothing would have changed since Lu Xun did not publish any play with his real name’. This is achieved by foregrounding the irrelevance of ~P.

All in all, in the excerpts above, *tanto* introduces the motivation justifying irrelevance in actual discourse. The formulation is equivalent to say that several behaviours would lead to the same contextual effect, therefore different alternatives are given the same status of indifference, given the existence of a conflicting, known circumstance or motivation (see Haspelmath / König 1998; Leuschner 2005). Furthermore, as anticipated, strategies of indifference are often followed by accounts or elaborations which in spoken interaction tend to justify the disaligning speech act as an instance of cooperative behaviour (Leuschner 2005: 300). In this case, consistently with the premises set out in the RT account, we could hypothesise that M is an indirect answer which should explain the possible disruptive behaviour of the speaker, which could be considered unpolite and uncooperative. Hence, being implicit with respect to previous content, it activates contextual premises and contextual conclusions to be drawn.

3.3.3. M pattern: towards ellipsis

Probably due to the properties of spoken mode, i.e., the simultaneity of speech production and copresence between the speakers, sometimes the speaker leaves the P implicit and utters only the Motivation (10%), as in the following examples:

- (24) TO030: *[si ma vaffanculo ma lo compri ma]-ma c’è il bara:::tolo [xxx]*
 ‘yes but fuck it but you buy it but but there is the jar’

- TO032: *[e c'è] il barattolo certo costa::: costa molto di meno se lo fai tu*
 'and there is the jar certainly it costs it costs much less if you
 make it by yourself'
- TO030: *tanto tu pensi solo a quello*
 'tanto you only think of that' (TOA3005)
- (25) TO074: *e::h inizia a leggerti 'sta cosa, a cercare un po': di libri, e a pensare:*
 'eh just start to read this stuff, to look over a little of books, and
 to think'
- TO074: *come fare: la ricerca, ma tanto abbiamo molto tempo [quindi]*
 'how to do the research, but tanto we have a lot of time so'
 (TOA1004)
- (26) BO016: *[raga, (,) allora, (,) prima che andiate via,] in pace,*
 'well guys, then, before you go'
- BO016: *non, state, ad impazzire, perché non ne vale la [pena.]*
 'don't go crazy because it's not worth it'
- BO019: *[tanto stiamo già impazzendo.]*
 'tanto we are already going crazy'
- BO018: *[ele, (,) tanto, cio]è, è facile parlare dopo un esame*
 'Ele, tanto I mean, it is easy to be OK after an exam' (BOA3003)

In the first example of the list the speaker utters only the motivation of something like '[discussing of cuisine with you] is useless since your arguments are exclusively anchored to the economic need'. Specifically, M in (24) is the following utterance: *tu pensi solo a quello* ('you think only of that'). In this case, P is easily inferable from the co-text and prominence is given to the motivation of the speaker's attitude of indifference on the meta-textual level. In the second example (25), the speaker says that the hearer should start searching for some books but in forthcoming stretch of discourse she refers to the motivation of a P not explicitly mentioned and probably referring to something like 'worrying now is useless'. However, neither P nor E are expressed, but easily retrievable from the co-text.

3.3.4. P-E pattern: not worth motivating irrelevance

Quite rarely (4%), the speaker simply utters the zero-effect of a given P without specifying further. More crucially, as we will point out in the next paragraph, in some occurrences the speaker comes to utter *tanto* in isolation without any accompanying utterance, hence it shows to have acquired plain discourse functions.¹² Let us start from the former case, namely instances of P and E explicit.

As cognitive agents, speakers are immersed in a plenty of inputs all of which are relevant and in competition between them; relevance may be considered a blurred and non-clear-cut property which can change in the course of interaction and speakers' experience (Bianchi 2009: 111). In other words, relevance is a matter of degree,

¹² See Rodríguez Rosique (2020) for the acquisition of discursive mitigating functions of *auque sea* in Spanish.

therefore, conversely, irrelevance of specific inputs may change over time. This rationale may explain why sometimes speakers do not utter the motivation of irrelevance: it is likely that speakers do not motivate the irrelevance of a given P since also the contrary of either P or _{any} P loses relevance in terms of contextual benefits. Let us consider the following example:

- (27) BO026: *[ah (.) quin- e non ve] l'hanno detto [in portineria, va]bbe' devo [mettere il=m:h post]it.*
 'ah so- and they didn't say it to you at the entrance, OK I have to put the mh note'
- BO045: *[e::h no.]*
 'eh no'
- BO045: *[no ma °fa niente°.]*
 'no but it does not care'
- BO045: *tanto alla fine,*
 '**tanto** in the end'
- BO045: *allora e:h=non so se si ricorda: io:[:=sto facendo la tesi esat tame]nte sì.*
 'then eh I don't know if you remember I'm doing the thesis exactly yes'
- BO026: *[dei due bambini di: new york.]nome*
 'of the two children from New York name' (BOA1015)

In this case, E can be reconducted to *fa niente* ('it does not care') and P refers to the possibility to put the note at the entrance (*devo mettere il post it* 'I have to put the note'). More specifically, the professor (Speaker BO026) announces the possible need to put a warning behind the door given that the students were not advised by the ushers at the entry on the professor's delay. To this point, the student (speaker BO045) utters that P is useless without adducing the motivation of the former stretch's irrelevance. Crucially, after the utterance of *tanto*, the speaker changes the topic of discussion, as we can notice from the occurrence of the opening-boundaries marker *allora*. Given that P (~P included) cannot affect the speaker's status, the irrelevance is not worth specifying from the speaker perspective in the context at hand. The same mechanism acts in subsequent stretch:

- (28) BO082: *[ah è possibile] io sarei curioso di vedere,*
 'ah it's possible I would be curious to see'
- BO082: *anche per capire cosa lei ha scritto e cosa le hanno risposto,*
 'also to understand what you wrote and what they answered'
- BO082: *perché in effetti se le hanno rispos-, se lei aveva scritto una mail diciamo,*
 'because in fact if they answered you, if you had written an e-mail let's say'
- BO082: *sufficientemente dettagliata e chiara quindi non come quella che ha mandato a me,*
 'sufficiently detailed and clear therefore not like the one you sent to me'
- BO082: *loro hanno risposto sì,*

- ‘they answered yes’
 BO082: *hanno evidentemente sbagliato.*
 ‘they were obviously wrong’
 BO085: *xxxx posso tirargliela [xxx nel senso cioè,]*
 ‘xxxx I can take it (i.e., I can show it to you) xxx I mean that is’
 BO082: *[no ma si figuri] tanto ormai cambia poco.*
 ‘no but just imagine **tanto** now little changes’ (BOA1018)

The speaker (a student) would like to re-send an email exchange to her professor in order to justify her past behaviour. Hence, the professor (BO082) answers saying that P (*no*, referring to the lack of importance of re-sending the email from the part of speaker BO085) would be irrelevant without adducing a clear motivation and simply uttering the zero-effect sentence (E) *ormai cambia poco* (‘at this point it does not matter’). Once again, without clarifying the cause of irrelevance, the speaker changes the thread of discourse (see the marker *comunque* ‘however’, a topic-shifter).

3.3.5. *Tanto* alone: when irrelevance is left implicit

In conversational exchanges with a high degree of dialogicity, *tanto* is attested parenthetically in the right-hand periphery of the utterance. We underline that, despite its high frequency in spoken discourse, the pattern is rarely attested in the corpora, probably due to the recent emergence of such a phenomenon.¹³ Let us consider the following occurrence:

- (29) BO147: *e vabbè x che cosa s’aspettava la gente che stavo zitto*
 ‘and oh well x what did people expect that I was silent?’
 BO146: *no capito però capito*
 ‘no you know but you know’
 BO146: *magari martina sì visto che l’aveva detto solo al coinquilino e poi noi stavamo tutti a guardare (lui) fa vabbè ve (lo) dico*
 ‘maybe Martina yes (i.e., she was supposed to be silent) since he had said it only to the roommate and then we were all watching him so he said oh well I say it to you’
 BO145: *[vab]bè ma tanto (.) >cioè<*
 ‘OK but **tanto** I mean’
 BO147: *vabbe’*
 ‘okay’
 BO146: *no ma sì*
 ‘no but yes’ (BOA3017)

In this example the speaker utters *tanto* without any accompanying forthcoming context. The speakers are dealing with the questionable validity of reveal some piece of reserved information to some friends. Speaker BO145 nullifies the need to keep the news apart without adducing further information and thus implicitly communicating that each motivation is not worth mentioning because it would not change things in any case.

¹³ Given the exiguous number of occurrences, the rationale should be considered with caution.

As pointed out in previous sections, generally, *tanto* accompanies M (§ 3.3.3.) and, less frequently, E (§ 3.3.4.). Therefore, in such case, the speaker simply *alludes* to the possible motivation(s) or to the zero-effect of a given P which may be more or less easily inferable from the co-text. What is noteworthy is that in the example, the interlocutors perfectly understood the content alluded to in the text. Both the hearers, BO147 and BO146, utter two markers of agreement (*vabbe'* and *ma sì* both meaning 'yeah'). The feedback markers hence contribute to enhance social cohesion in conversation even in the absence of plain verbalization. Hence, we can argue that *tanto* may act as a discourse marker enhancing social cohesion in conversation and recalling the speaker's common ground without the need of overtly verbalizing such piece of contextual evidence. The speaker invites the hearer to draw all the common knowledge or context-driven inferences connected to the co-occurring utterance. In other words, when the formulation is covert, and *tanto* appears in utterance-final position, a procedural instruction is given to the hearer, who is forewarned that the speaker has decided not to add anything about a given topic (despite having more to say about it), because this content (or set of assumptions) is (assumed to be) part of mutual shared knowledge (Fiorentini / Sansò 2017: 65, 70).

Arguably, this usage is plainly discursive and interpersonal. It englobes both M and E and it is insinuating (Fiorentini / Sansò 2017). As observed, in these cases, the marker occurs in the right periphery of utterance, that is the positional slot that more easily attracts modal meanings pertaining to the speaker's (inter)personal and interactive stance (Djenar *et al.* 2011; Haselow 2016). *Tanto* could also be considered a marker of consensual truth (Schiffrin 1987) and an impositional marker, through which the speaker aims at imposing a rhetorical effect on the part of the hearer with a nuance of contrast. The speaker alludes to a given motivation, thus leaving it to the inference and common ground between interlocutors; therefore, *tanto* displays the acquisition of discourse functions related to the interpersonal level and on the creation of common ground (Ziv / Jucker 1998).

3.4. *Tanto* between connection and discourse (marking)

Why can we ascribe *tanto* to the category of discourse markers and connectives? Although the clauses correlated by *tanto* are connected on the pragmatic level, they are not semantically related except for some anaphoric element contained in the M (generally subsequent) segment. Moreover, no morphosyntactic link occurs between P and M. The two parts may in fact occur on their own as happens in cases of some concessive conditionals mentioned by König (1986) and as exemplified through the occurrence of specific patterns. However, despite the unrelatedness of the two segments, *tanto* may be claimed to behave like a complex connective expressing both concessive and justificatory meaning. More specifically, it often expresses the indifference of the realization of a given potential and conceptually intertwined fact (see the occurrence of P's *irrealis*) from the speaker's perspective. Hence, we can claim that *tanto* is endowed with an argumentative power, since it often provides the justification blocking the realization of a possible act. In doing so, it often eclipses the Q (un)affected by P and makes the hearer derive it from the explicit reference to the introduced justification.

In some more advanced steps of development, *tanto* functions as a discourse marker conveying irrelevance in discourse on the speech act level, albeit less frequently. At the discourse level, irrelevance markers express a *procedural meaning* by providing the hearer with instructions on how to interpret a logical relation, namely a relation of irrelevance between an utterance and the motivation of its irrelevance on the speech act level; *tanto* conveys the speaker's attitude of indifference towards what is said, thus being placed on the argumentative/rhetorical level. In short, *tanto* may be considered a discourse marker; as Brown and Yule (1983: 106) note, structural markers as *tanto* «represent optional cues which writers and speakers may use in organising what they want to communicate». *Tanto* constrains interpretation by encoding the irrelevance of P (and ~P) given that there must exist a condition M preventing them from affecting an E (see Brinton 1996, Rouchota 1998: 100). It is multifunctional and may select scope on an utterance which can also extend to the discourse or context as a whole (Brinton 1996: 33-36). It is increasingly associated with the speaker's attitude, given that it is gradually acquiring pragmatic significance and subjective expressiveness: from a temporal meaning of persistence (in time) it came to acquire the abstract value of logic persistence of some conditions in discourse despite some other premises (see Traugott 1997).

4. Towards a multilayered analysis of irrelevance: some concluding remarks

We hope to have contributed to the study of the emerging marker *tanto* conveying a complex irrelevance meaning, combining both concession and justification at the discourse level. We observed that generally speakers feel the necessity to motivate the irrelevance or indifference of a given proposition or of a given speech act. In the latter case, as we saw, irrelevance is crucially related to the interpersonal management of conversation, whereby the property is related to the concrete sphere of actions of interlocutors in on-line speech production. Motivating the zero-effect of some alternatives turns out to be the most frequent pattern showing that speaker tend to justify their stance of indifference in discourse to reinforce their argumentative stance with respect to the evaluation of relevant acts in the speakers' universe of discourse.

We showed that starting from a complete schema P, E, M, more implicit values may be expressed often with respect to scales of relevance based on the speakers' choices and qualified rhetorical scaling. Hence, analysing such schemata provides a rich way of accounting for the linguistic properties of this interactional, frequent and basic activity – which in turn combines complex values.

Then we observed the possibility of occurrence of *tanto* as discourse marker. In fact, *tanto* may occur in isolation in the right periphery of utterance, where it alludes to a possible motivation M justifying the indifference of a given P eventually judged on a par with some alternatives with respect to the yielding of contextual effects. Hence, *tanto* acts as a complex marker of insinuation with respect to the communication of irrelevance and englobes complex meanings to be drawn by the hearer(s). The notion of incompatibility and persistence we tackled with respect to concessives and predicates of irrelevance can thus be given as a matter of common ground. From connective, *tanto* is transiting towards the status of discourse marker on the argumentative and interpersonal level.

We argued that irrelevance in Italian conversation can be understood in terms of a complex relation which involves the justification and argumentation level (rhetorical relations); the fact that in more than one third of occurrences P is unreal (potential), is a clue on the argumentative potential of *tanto* in introducing a conflicting / blocking motivation (i.e., contrasting circumstance). Crucially, we underline that *tanto* – on a par with predicates of indifference – is often followed by accounts or elaborations which in spoken interaction tend to justify the disaligning speech act as an instance of cooperative behaviour (Leuschner 2005: 300) motivated by the need to make a useful contribution to the conversation (Cognitive Principle of Relevance). The reference to qualified causes showed that the scales of (ir)relevance are based on contextual needs and inputs (i.e., utterances) whose status can change in the course of interaction. Remarkably, we observed that the interactional aspect is fundamental to point out as the marker works, with several cases of collaboration in the configuration of the schemata of irrelevance portrayed by *tanto*. Furthermore, we grasped some markers testifying symmetry between the interlocutors also with respect to non-expressed contents, therefore *tanto* may be considered a marker of insinuation and agreement. More evidence is needed to wholly explore the discursive potential of the marker.

Summing up, we can claim that *tanto* may be added to the heterogeneous category of concessive items displaying irrelevance and indifference discussed in § 2. What we intend to analyse in depth in future research is the diachronic path whereby a marker of persistence (in time) can give rise to contrastive meanings and, finally, to (complex) concessive values.

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