

La Lingua È Bella

Uno studio della Lingua Italiana

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Introduction

Being one of the most spoken languages in the world, Italian is regarded by many as the most beautiful language¹. Nowadays, there is a vast population of 60 million people speaking Italian all over the world². It is the official language of Italy and San Marino, one of the official languages in Switzerland and the Vatican, and is also spoken widely in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Canada, the USA and the UK.

As the transmitter of the great culture of the Renaissance, its influence on the other languages of Western Europe has been profound. For instance, a considerable number of English words are of Italian origin. To name a few, *umbrella*, *spaghetti*, *macaroni*, *balcony*, *casino*, *fresco*, *volcano*, *lava*, *gusto*, *studio*, *regatta*, *malaria* and *bandit* are all good examples, not to mention the many words in the field of music which are familiar to every music lover.



Fig.1: Italian speaking countries

History of the Italian Language

Italian derives mainly from vulgar Latin, which was the language spoken by the ordinary, less educated citizens of ancient Rome. It first started to appear in written documents during the 10th century in the form of notes and short texts inserted into Latin documents such as lawsuits and poetry. For a long time there was no standard written or spoken language in Italy and writers tended to write in their own regional

¹ Kenneth Katzner, (2002), *The Languages of The World*, London: Routledge, p.62.

² ditto.

dialects. In northern Italy, which was often ruled by the French, French and Occitan were used as literary languages.

During the 13th century such writers as Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Petrarch and Boccaccio were influential in popularizing their own dialect of Italian - the Tuscan of Florence (*la lingua Fiorentina*) - as a standard literary language. By the 14th century the Tuscan dialect was being used in political and cultural circles throughout Italy, though Latin remained the pre-eminent literary language until the 16th century.



Fig.2: Dante Alighieri

The first grammar of Italian with the Latin title *Regule lingue florentine* (Rules of the Florentine language) was produced by Leon Battista Alberti in 1495.

During the 15th and 16th centuries both Latin and Italian were used for technical and scientific texts. The Italian used was full of Latin words and over time Latin was used less and less as Italian became increasingly popular.

Today the Tuscan dialect is known as Italian (*Italiano*) and is the official language of Italy. It is the main language of literature and the media. Each region of Italy also has its own dialect, some of which are so distinct from standard Italian that they are mutually unintelligible. The Sicilian dialect for example, is sometimes regarded as a separate language and has a literary tradition older than Italian itself.

Italian ABC

The Italian alphabet is not foreign to speakers of English at all, as basically all its letters are contained in the English one, except that an accent can be added to the vowel (à, è, ì, ò, ù) at the end of a word to represent a final stress and sometimes to distinguish between words having the same spelling but different meanings (e.g. *si* and *sì*, *e* and *è*). To put it more precisely, Italian uses only 21 letters, namely

a b c d e f g h i l m n o p q r s t u v z,

the letter **j, k, w, x, y** are used in words borrowed from other languages only.

Phonologically and grammatically speaking, Italian is a very neat language, which in many cases makes it very easy for a foreigner to learn. Italian words are pronounced as their spellings suggest, making remembering the pronunciation of words less a headache. Italian words are famous for having a lot of vowels (e.g. *aiuto*), especially a and o; in addition, it lacks consonant clusters like sch- and -ch as in German and other languages, which gives it a very pleasing rhythm as the speaker speaks.

Inflection and declension in Italian are relatively regular. Despite of its Latin origin, Italian is, like English, almost caseless. Inflection of nouns is generally used to mark number and gender only, whereas case is marked just in pronouns. Italian has two genders, namely masculine and feminine, yet the gender of words causes much less confusion than in many other languages, as it can generally be predicted by their ending vowels.

Italian Dialects

Due to Italy's historical background, different regions all have their own dialects, and they can be further subdivided into the following categories³.

- *italiano commune* or 'standard italian', which is the Tuscan dialect and is the language used for official purposes, administration, education, etc.
- *italiano regionale*, which is peculiar to each individual region and has differences in pronunciation and some vocabulary from the standard Italian
- *dialectto regionale*, the dialect of the region as a whole, e.g. *siciliano*. The differences between dialects can be illustrated by the example in Fig. 3.



Fig. 3: The expression 'playing truant' in different regions (Source: Telmon, 1993)

³ Derek Aust (2000), *Teach Yourself Italian Languages, Life & Culture*, Chicago: NTC, p.26.

- *dialetto locale*, which is limited to smaller geographical areas and their inhabitants. In other words, within the same region the regional dialect subdivides into other dialects. The bigger the area, the greater the number of dialects. There are many similarities between the regional dialect and the local variations but there are also many differences.

Nowadays, Italians can generally be able to understand the standard Italian well, yet they tend to use their dialects for everyday purposes. This can be illustrated by a survey done by the Doxa:

| At Home | 1974 | 1982 | 1988 |
|-----------------------------|------|------|-------|
| dialect with every one | 51% | 47% | 40% |
| dialect with some | 24% | 24% | 26% |
| Italian with every one | 25% | 29% | 34% |
| With Friends and Colleagues | | | |
| always dialect | 29% | 23% | 23% |
| more often dialect | 13% | 13% | 10% |
| both dialect and Italian | 22% | 22% | 19.5% |
| more often Italian | 13% | 15% | 16% |
| always Italian | 27% | 27% | 31% |

Fig.4: The Doxa survey on the frequency of using dialects of Italian adults

This survey shows a gradually increasing usage of the standard Italian after the unification, yet dialects are still an important part of Italians' everyday life.

Speaking Italian without words

One very spectacular feature of the Italian language (or more precisely the Italian people) is that a lot of sentences can be spoken without words. The language of *i gesti* (gestures) is a very effective and communicative mean to express simple everyday sentences. Generally, the southerners are purported to use gesture far more than northerners⁴. Once this art is perfected, one will be able to communicate with Italians without actually saying anything! Below illustrates some of these gestures used by Italians.



Un momento.



Mi dà un passaggio?



Che peso!



Intesa.



Scusi, devo andare al bagno.

⁴ Derek Aust (2000), *Teach Yourself Italian Languages, Life & Culture*, Chicago: NTC, p.37.

Conclusion

Italian is one of the four official languages of the European Union, and Italy is one of the leading industrial nations in the world. The importance of Italian thus can never be underestimated. Moreover, Italian is very accessible to speakers of French, Spanish or even English. It is a very beautiful and rhythmic language, for lovers of opera and music there is even no need to mention this. For the time to come, while organizations such as Società Dante Alighieri are doing a nice job in promoting Italian, whether the language can be spread further still depends largely on the Italian government's policies and motivations in encouraging more learners of Italian.

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