

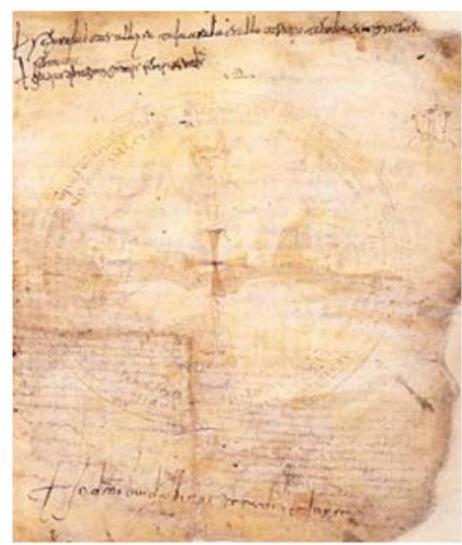
The Period Polyglot: Italian for Bards Who Don't Speak Italian

The Italian Language

Italian is an Indo-European language and belongs to the same large family of languages which includes languages as diverse as Gaelic, English, Russian, Greek, Persian and Sanskrit. In grammar and pronunciation, it is closely related to French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romansh, and Romanian.

Standard literary written Italian is based on the dialect of Florence, whereas common spoken Italian is very dialectal. There are six main Italian dialects : Gallo-Italian, spoken in the Northwest of Italy, Venetian, spoken in the Northeast, Tuscan (including Corsican), and three southern Italian dialects: the speech of Marche, Umbria, and Rome, that of Abruzzi, Puglia (Apulia), Naples, Campania, and Lucania, and finally the dialect of Calabria, Otranto, and Sicily.

It is important to note, that Italy itself, as a (mostly) unified country occupying the Apennine Peninsula and surrounding islands, has existed only since the mid-19th century. For the greatest part of its history since the fall of the Roman Empire, it was an amalgamation of various kingdoms, principalities, city-states, and Papal dominions. The dialects, customs, and traditions of those regions persist to this day in modern Italian communities, where loyalty to *mi paese*, is reflected in modern-day loyalties and allegiances.



A Brief History of the Italian Language

The earliest known Italian text dates from the late 8th century or early 9th century Verona. It is a riddle called *The Indovinello Veronese*, and was written by a Veronese Christian monk in a late Vulgar Latin / early Veronese Italian hybrid. It was discovered in 1924 on a parchment bearing a transcription of a Mozarabic (Andalusian Christian) oration.

*Se pareba boves
alba pratalia araba
albo versorio teneba
negro semen
seminaba*

He led oxen in front of him
He ploughed a white field
He held a white plough
He sowed a black seed

The answer to the riddle is the writer himself: the oxen are his fingers which pull a feather (the white plow) across the page (the white field), leaving a trail of ink (the black seeds).

The next oldest Italian texts are some 10th-century court documents from Montecassino. While legal documents were usually written in Latin, these documents show transcriptions of testimonies from

Montecassino in the regional dialect. , and then three central Italian texts from the 11th century. The first literary work are from 12th century Tuscany. Italian,

Dante Alighieri, the Father of the Italian Language

1265–1321). Dante Alighieri (1265 – 1321) is generally considered, along with Shakespeare and Goethe one of greatest poets in Western literature. His masterpiece, *La divina commedia* (The Divine Comedy), continues to be widely read and celebrated more than 650 years after his death.

Dante chose to write his masterpiece mostly in his own native Tuscan vernacular rather than in Latin. However, having traveled throughout the peninsula, he added to his work, words from other dialects and languages, choosing them for their sound, beauty and meaning nuances. His writing laid the foundation of modern literary Italian.

Italian Pronunciation

Italian is a phonetic language. In most cases, words are pronounced the way they are spelled. There are no silent letters in Italian except for **h** and the occasional **g**. But as the rules of Italian are constant and with very few exceptions (usually in the case of loanwords), you will know how to pronounce any letter you encounter in Italian words.

Italian intonation patterns follow simple rules: The stress is usually on the second to the last syllable. For example: ca-PEL-Lo, bam-Bi-ni. The exception is with words that have accent marks in the last letter, in which case the last syllable is emphasized, for example: città - Cit-TA

The Italian Alphabet

Italian uses the same alphabet as English. The pronunciation in most cases, is similar to that of Spanish. If you speak Spanish fluently, there's a good chance that you understand many Italian words, but can't quite speak the language.

There are a few articulation differences between the way consonant sounds are formed in Italian when compared to those same consonants in English. Certain English consonants are articulated with an extra little puff of air. These plosive consonants, most notably **b**, **p**, **t,d**, **k** are articulated farther forward on the lips and in the mouth in English than they are in Italian. **L** sounds in Italian are articulated closer to the top teeth in Italian than they are in English. The Italian **R** is slightly rolled as it is in Spanish.

Note: As we will see on the next page, words beginning with **J**, **K**, **W**, **X**, and **Y**, are rare in Italian and are almost always loanwords.



The Italian Alphabet			
A	ah	Always pronounced like the ah sound in the word bar .	<i>albero</i> - tree
B	bi	As in English, without the plosive, as in banana .	<i>barca</i> - boat
C	ci	C – If followed by an e, or an i, c is pronounced like the ch in cheese . If followed by an a, u, o, or an h' it will sound like the c in cut , and is slightly plosive.	<i>Cioccolato</i> - chocolate, <i>chiaro</i> –clear <i>cane</i> (dog)
D	di	As in English, without the plosive,	<i>dadi</i> - dice
E	eh	It can be open (like the e in net) or closed (like the a in say), depending on its location in the word. It can also vary slightly depending on the regional accent of the speaker.	<i>elefante</i> – elephant
F	effe	As in English.	<i>fiore</i> - flower
G	gi	If followed by an l , g is pronounced like the j in jumble . If followed by an n , it is pronounced like the ni in the word 'onion'. If followed by l (usually in the middle of a word), it is silent. If followed by any other letter, 'g' is pronounced the same as in the English words game or go .	<i>giorno</i> – day <i>gnocci</i> - dumpling), <i>figlio</i> – son <i>gatto</i> -cat
H	acca	Only ever used to define the pronunciation of c , g or silently.	<i>hotel</i> – hotel <i>spaghetti</i> - spaghetti
I	i	Always pronounced like the ee in see .	<i>imbuto</i> - funnel
J	I lunga	Interestingly, most J-words in Italian are leftovers from Latin or loanwords from other languages. In the case of Latin words, J is pronounced as a long i or the same as in the source languages.	<i>Juventus</i> - youth <i>jazz</i> <i>jabot</i>
K	cappa	As in English without the plosive.	<i>karaté</i> - karate
L	elle	Almost the same as in English, but articulated closer to the top teeth, as when one sings <i>Fa-la-la</i> .	<i>leone</i> - lion
M	emme	As in English.	<i>mela</i> - apple
N	enne	As in English.	<i>nave</i> - ship
O	o	Always pronounced as the o in home .	<i>orologio</i> - clock
P	pi	As in English, without the plosive.	<i>pera</i> - pear
Q	Cu	Always pronounced like the k in the English word make	<i>quadro</i> -painting
R	erre	Slightly rolled as in Spanish.	<i>ruota</i> - wheel
S	esse	As in English.	<i>sole</i> - sun
T	ti	As in English, without the plosive.	<i>tavolo</i> -table
U	u	Always pronounced like the oo in boot .	<i>uva</i> -grape
V	vi	As in English	<i>vaso</i> – vase, jar
W	vi doppia	As in English	<i>whisky</i>
X	Ix	As in English	<i>claxon</i> – horn, siren
Y	ipsilon	As in English	<i>yen</i>
Z	zeta	Always pronounced like the 'ts' in the English word mats .	<i>zebra</i> - zebra

A Period Italian Song by Giovanni Gastoldi (ca. 1554 – 4 January 1609)

Questa dolce Sirena

Questa dolce Sirena
Col canto acqueta il mar (bis)

Un suo leggiadro riso
Puo l'aria serenar. (bis)

Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la

Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la

Chi mira il suo bel viso,
Resta prigion d'Amor, (bis)

Chi, i suoi bei lumi vede,
Sente legarsi il cor. (bis)

Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la

Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la

This Sweet Siren

This sweet siren
Whose singing calms the sea.
With one of her lovely, laughing smiles
She can calm the air.

He who looks upon her beautiful face
Remains a prisoner of love,
He who beholds her own fair light
Is forever heart-bound to her.

Questa Dolce Sirena

Giovanni Giacomo Gastoldi (1554-1609)

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