

Preface

The destiny of our language is a strange and fascinating one.

On the one hand, Italian is the object of recurrent, ominous prophecies that suggest it is destined to deteriorate, impoverish and degrade relentlessly before finally succumbing to the immense power of the English language. On the other hand, however, it continues to shine and flourish, expanding its contexts of use and attracting new groups of learners.

To casual observers, who are perhaps influenced by reading research in the press that is hardly ever carried out by experts, the whole thing could be very confusing and they wouldn't know what to believe.

In reality the Italian language, like every other world language for that matter, is a language in continuous evolution. The feature that distinguishes it, as it were, from other great cultural languages is the pace of the change given that Italian is subject as never before to relentless pressure and new trends. This pressure and these trends derive from what could be defined, without fear of exaggeration, as a revolutionary phenomenon of momentous proportions in how Italians use language.

For the first time since Italy's unification, in fact, we can say that Italian is no longer merely the language of officialdom or the one used to communicate in writing and in formal situations, but that it is now also a language used with friends, family, and in all situations whether formal or not. In other words, we can use Italian to order coffee in a bar or to put the world to rights with friends and still be understood, anywhere in Italy and regardless of the regional provenance of the person we are talking to.

At the same time, our achievement of a standard language continues to coexist alongside strong centrifugal forces that ensure that the use of dialects persists (especially in certain communication situations and with family and friends). Equally, the presence of foreign languages is increasingly visible due to the globalisation of communication (Internet, foreign language satellite television broadcasts that reach us wherever we are, etc.) and to the presence of immigrants with their languages (over a thousand of them) that echo through the streets and squares of every one of our cities. These are phenomena that, rather than undermining the very foundations of Italian, enrich it and prepare it for the linguistic challenges that modern life puts before us.

As you can see, the picture is a very complex one. And, perhaps, it is this very complexity that disorients most people and leads to the formation of controversial opinions as to the state of health of the Italian language.

As for us, we believe that it is this very complexity, this intertwining of different uses, this emergence of new forms in response to new communication demands, that is the unequivocal measure of the excellent state of health of our language. This is also supported by the fact that our language appeals strongly to foreigners.

But it is also this very complexity that makes teaching Italian to foreigners tough. Rather than conveying a picture that is stable and consolidated, we need to transmit 'a work in progress' whose finished state is, in some cases, unknown and uncertain.

These difficulties become even more evident when one sets about producing teaching materials that need to work in harmony with the transformations underway. In other words, materials that are capable of providing an up-to-date and reliable picture of language use as can be heard or read in our conversations or in our writing. In order to achieve this, ideas are needed for the sort of teaching that is not afraid to confront the changes, that is not afraid to travel the line between the rules and usage – a line that is always difficult to find and, above all, difficult to negotiate. At the same time the teaching needs to incorporate the most current second-language acquisition theories and theories from all those disciplines that study how a foreign language is learned.

Finally, the teaching needs to be capable of engaging learners by offering activities that are not only pertinent and with targeted learning outcomes, but also captivating and stimulating.

In short, a difficult task, but one that *L'italiano all'università* handles pretty well.

Indeed, the author has created the sort of material that best facilitates the teaching approach described; namely, one that conveys the structures and uses of Italian that have developed over recent years and, at the same time, passes them on to students by inspiring them, thus making the path towards our language as trouble-free as possible.

It's a teaching approach that the author has managed to develop through his studies and his work at the University for Foreigners of Siena and that he himself has already put into practice as part of the numerous courses of Italian as a foreign language that he has been involved with in recent years.

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