



10 Reasons to Fall in Love with Italian

1. Italian is “beautiful, fun and sexy.” That’s how people perceive Italy and its language, observes Stephen Brockman, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, in an essay called “In Defense of European Languages.” “Why not?” he adds. “I can’t see anything wrong with that.” Neither can I.

2. No other language is more romantic. All the Romance languages evolved from the *volgare* (vernacular) of ancient Rome. Yet none may have so many seductive ways of expressing *amore*: *Ti amo, mio tesoro* (I love you, my darling) for *l’amore della tua vita* (the love of your life). *Ti voglio bene* (for all others). *Voglio soltanto te* (I want only you). *Vieni qui e baciami* (Come here and kiss me.) *Non posso vivere senza te* (I can’t live without you).

3. Everything sounds better in Italian. An ordinary towel becomes an *asciugamano*; a handkerchief, a *fazzoletto*; a dog leash, a *guinzaglio*. Garbage isn’t mere trash. In Italian, it’s *spazzatura*. Italian’s linguistic pantry is stuffed with words delicious enough to eat, such as *cappellacci di zucca* (pumpkin-stuffed pasta shaped like caps), *ciambellone* (ring cake), *sospiri di monaca* (a

nun's sigh), *tiramisù* (pick-me-up) and *lacrime d'amore* (tears of love), candy sugar pearls filled with sweet syrup.

4. You can use your hands—a lot! In Italian speaking without gestures is like writing without punctuation. Hands become commas, exclamation points and question marks. Who even needs words when a tug at a bottom eyelid translates into "*Attenzione!*" ("Watch out! Pay attention!"), a straight line drawn in the air as "*Perfetto!*" and fingers flicking upward from the neck past the tip of the chin as "*Che me ne frega*" ("I don't give a *&#@!").

5. Italian has become the new French. With only an estimated 60 to 63 million native speakers (compared to a whopping 1.8 billion who claim at least a little English), Italian barely eclipses Urdu, Pakistan's official language, for nineteenth place as a spoken tongue. Yet Italian ranks fourth among the most studied languages—after English, Spanish and French, which Italian now rivals as a language of culture and refinement.

6. You can immerse yourself in an Italian masterpiece. You can't sculpt like Michelangelo, paint like Leonardo or design like Giorgio Armani. But you can read and speak the language that 14th century poets—Dante first and foremost—crafted from the effervescent Tuscan vernacular. Handpicked by writers and scholars in the first official *Vocabolario* for any Western tongue, Italian words represent "*i più bei fiori*" (the most beautiful flowers) in the language.

7. Speaking Italian may be the closest many of us get to singing. What makes Italian so musical are its vigorous *vocali* (vowels): An Italian "a" slides up from the throat into an ecstatic "aaaah." Its "e" (pronounced like a hard English "a") cheers like the hearty "ay" at the end of hip-hip-hooray. The "i" (which sounds like an English "e") glides with the glee of the double e in bee. The "o" (an English "o" on steroids) is as perfectly round as the red circle Giotto painted in a single stroke for a pope demanding a sample of his work. The macho "u" (deeper, stronger and longer than its English counterpart) lunges into the air like a penalty kick from Italy's world-champion soccer team, the *Azzurri* (Blues).

8. Italian may be our universal mother tongue. Dating back almost three millennia, its primal sounds—virtually identical to those that roared

through Roman amphitheaters thousands of years ago—strike a chord in our linguistic DNA. According to some scholars, Italian may come closer than any other idiom to expressing what it means to be human.

9. You're never too young—or too old—to learn Italian. As brain scans have shown, groping for even the simplest words in a different language ignites new clusters of neurons and synapses. Within weeks in an all-Italian class, preschoolers understand everything happening around them. It takes longer as we get older, but learning a second language later in life provides a different advantage: It helps stave off dementia.

10. Italians. The more you know of their language, the more you'll realize how right the British author E.M. Forster was when he urged visitors to drop “that awful tourist idea that Italy's only a museum of antiquities and art.” His advice: “Love and understand the Italians, for the people are more marvelous than the land.” Indeed they are. And if you're of Italian descent, cherish Italy's language as a marvelous part of your heritage.

Let me add a bonus reason for falling in love with Italian: *La Bella Lingua: My Love Affair with Italian, the World's Most Enchanting Language* is now available in paperback.

Visit Dianne Hales online at:

Website: www.becomingitalian.com

Blog: www.becomingitalianwordbyword.typepad.com

Column: <http://thefastertimes.com/italianlessons/>

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