The K Factor

NIGEL J. ROSS

Most disciplines seem to have their "K factors", though linguistics has so far been an exception. Now a language-related K factor has surfaced, kindled by Italian text messages and the influence of English.

THE TERM "K factor" is used in a range of specialised fields to refer to a wide range of measurements, elements and amounts. For a chemist or a biologist, the K factor often has to do with potassium (the chemical symbol for potassium being K). For a nuclear scientist, it is a measure of gamma ray energy; for artillery specialists, it is used to determine firing range; for graphics experts, it is the ratio between the base and height of stereoscopic photographs. For an Italian soccer fan, however, it is the Korea factor (the South Korean team having caused serious setbacks for Italy in the World Cup on more than one occasion). For some computer experts, it is an alternative way to refer to the "millennium bug". For physicists, it is another name for "clearing factor" or the time required for sediment in a solution to clear from the top of a solution to the bottom. And for some political scientists, the K factor was a cold-war way of referring to the "communist threat" in countries such as Italy.

Just recently, however, a new language-related definition for the K factor has emerged in Italy. The K factor, or "*fattore K*", refers to newfangled Italian spellings using the letter K. The Italian alphabet is made up of 21 letters, the "missing" letters (compared with the 26-letter English alphabet) being J, K, W, X and Y. Until just a short time ago, only borrowed words and foreign names might include these "alien" letters, as in *John*, *weekend*, *Volkswagen*, *box* or *sherry*. In recent years, however, thanks to various effects – not least a wider knowledge of English in Italy – these extra "English" letters have been making inroads into Italian orthography. And the most striking example is the letter K, used quite widely by the younger generations. This is the latest K factor to be added to the world of scholarship.

"What can I do about it if a K slips out every so often?" asked a 16-year-old high-school student interviewed recently by the prominent Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (24th Sept. 2002). Students explain that they even find themselves writing *amiko* (instead of *amico*, friend), *ki* (instead of *chi*, who) and *kiave* (instead of *chiave*, key) in school work – mistakes that a generation ago would never had appeared. In their jottings, notes, letters and messages, the young generation tend to use K all the time: it's fun, it's chic, it's English. To some extent, there is a linguistic logic behind this appearance of the letter K. In Italian, the letter C can be pronounced either hard, as in *Campari*, *cannelloni*, *Carla*, *casa*, *Como*, *scherzo*, *stucco*, *maccheroni*, or soft (like the English "ch"), as in *cello*, *ciao*, *vermicelli*, *Vinci*. The use of the letter K for the hard pronunciation can help to differentiate between the two, making Italian spelling even simpler.

The younger generation who are using the K seem to have little regard, however, for the

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niceties of Italian phonetics. The letter K is popular because it is "Englishly" modern and because it is short. Yes, short! *Ki* instead of *chi* saves one letter, *skerzo* instead of *scherzo* is also a letter shorter. As any youngster knows, every letter counts when it comes to sending text messages on mobile phones. In text messages with a maximum of just 160 letters and spaces, linguistic economy is essential.

English and American text messages are likewise full of shorter forms of words: "text" becomes "txt", "be" is often simply "B", "you" is "U", and so on. Numbers are also pressed into service, hence "to/too" is often "2", "for" becomes "4", "date" becomes "d8", "late" is "l8", etc. Text messages and Internet website names have helped to make such letter-number combinations more commonplace. And in mobile phone messages, emoticons – symbols created from combinations of punctuation marks and usually expressing emotions, such as ;) or :(and other variations on smileys – are yet another example of a shorthand texting device.

Italian text messages use emoticons and have various similar shortened forms. A text message is simply an *sms*. *Comunque* (meaning "however") becomes *cmq*; *quando* (when) is simplified to *qd*, *di* (of) is replaced by the capital letter D, *sei* (are) is often written with the figure 6 (a homonym), *se dici* (if you say) becomes the number 16 (*seidici*), and so on. Mathematical signs are commonly used: + is a shorthand form for *più* (more), *x* replaces *per* (meaning "for" or "by"). Combinations with *x* are also frequently found, such as *xò* (nevertheless) instead of *però*, and *xké* (why/because) shortened from *perché*, where the K factor comes into play once again.

The younger generation in Italy today seems to favour something of a linguistic mix as the *villaggio globale* encroaches. Unlike previous generations, younger people tend to have a fair command of a foreign language or two, consequently a smattering of foreign words may punctuate their speech and informal writing. Alongside a *bacio*, they might promise a *kiss* or a *beso*. Mixing English word roots and Italian suffixes, teenagers love to *cliccare* with their mouse or *chattare* on the Internet, and they are always looking for the latest *jeanseria* or *gadgetteria*. The letter "J" is no longer called "*I lunga*" (long I), its English name "jay" now being favoured by just about all under 30s. And another element in this linguistic mix is the K-factor: *amiko* is so much younger, friendlier and more cosmopolitan than an *amico*, and *skerzo* is younger, funnier, shorter and somehow a bit more English than *scherzo*.

Some Italian linguists are predicting that the K factor is on the verge of revolutionising Italian spelling, even within the next decade or so. Whatever, it seems that the letter K and other text-message spellings are going to be around for quite some time, at least among the younger generation, and to the desperation of their teachers. The development is being debated by people in various walks of life in Italy, even making the front page of top-selling newspapers: the K factor, is it revolution or kaos? ■

Reference

Di Stefano, Paolo. 2002. '"Caro amiko ti scivo". E il fattore K entra a scuola.' In *Corriere della Sera*, 24 Sept 2002, Milan, Italy.

A WAY WITH WORDS 3

Getting beyond 9/11

[From James Carney and John F. Dickerson, 'Bush Lights Up', *Time*, 18 Nov 02]

'They rolled the dice, they won, and now Bush has a huge mandate,' marvels Tony Coelho, who served as chairman of Al Gore's 2000 campaign. 'It's not about 9/11 any more. He is the legitimate president.'

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