Anglicizing Italian

MARTIN GANI

A case of creative interplay

ITALIANS' zeal for lacing their language with English words is well-known and on-going. Both everyday conversation and the mass media make widespread use of English terms and expressions, but their unphonetic spelling and pronunciation – full of insidious traps round every syllable – can create misunderstanding, confusion, and much humour, because Italians often tend to pronounce these international imports as they are written, much as they do in their mother tongue: either that, or they over-generalize the rules they they've learnt. A TV programme may be interrupted to announce a *news flash* that however comes out meatier, as 'news flesh'. When giving business news, the phrase *fiscal drag* (whatever that may mean) becomes a truly obfuscating 'fiscal drug'. And fashion news informs us of an exclusive 'pullover' by Missoni, whose stress shift unfortunately turns it into an order (from policeman to motorist): 'pull over'.

Introduction

The latest developments in Anglo-American show business might be next on the list. We have been told, for example, that a new film starring 'William Art' has just been released – and, while we're wondering who *he* is, William Hurt appears on the screen. An adaptation of this kind is partly explained by the fact that the *h* is never pronounced in Italian (except in Tuscany). Teachers of English are often infuriated with this disrespect for *h*, but, on the other hand, if an English word begins with a vowel, Italians tend to emphasize it by preceding it with a profuse injection of *hhhh* that almost blows the word out the window. *H* can therefore be a problem generally, as when a simple act of eating can even raise the temperature: 'I like heating fish.'

Comparably, *ear* becomes 'hear', *air* solidifies to 'hair', and 'am' becomes edible: 'ham'. With the same breath, students will add insult to injury by insisting on *ooze* for 'whose', *is* for 'his', and 'She as dark air and grin highs.' By that point the teacher may be seriously considering a career change.

The next item a newsreader challenges us with may be: 'The latest effort by the wildly popular actor Tom Crew is...'. And we wait to see what Tom Crew (whoever *he* might be) has done, until a brief appearance by Tom Cruise saves us. But this is innocuous compared to Richard Gere becoming 'Richard Jeer' (no offence intended). And if Burt Reynolds, Penelope Cruz, Lou Reed, and Kirk Douglas were to introduce themselves on the phone, most Italians wouldn't recognise their names unless the actor knew how to do it the Italian way:

- 'Bart Reynolds here. How do you do?'
- 'Hi! I have a reservation. Keerk Dooglas is the name.'
- 'Room service? This is Miss Croots.'
- 'Hi, I'm Lurid.'

And if the film-maker Gus Van Sant were speaking to a potential Italian producer? To be recognised he'd have to say 'Call me Goose.'

MARTIN GANI is a British writer and teacher of English who has been based in Italy since 1985 and in full-time teaching since 1987. He is service manager (Director of Studies) for the Como branch of Wall Street Institute, a chain of English-language schools. He also publishes articles on travel, culture, and language in consumer and in-flight magazines worldwide. Many of his language pieces have appeared in the quarterly 'Verbatim' in the United States. He enjoys both teaching English and writing about it 'and my two jobs co-habit like a couple in a happy marriage'.

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Finally the bulletin is rounded off by apparently discouraging news for the contenders of the quiz show that is to follow: the announcement that it's a 'quits show'. But, as one presenter did actually say not long ago, when stressing that a programme would continue: 'The show must go home, as they say in English.'

Italians like to pronounce what they see written, all of it with equal weight. 'Why not?' they ask. 'If you don't want me to say it why do you put it there?' Fair enough, but the only snag is, unlike Italian, where virtually all words end in a vowel, many English words end in a consonant. This inconvenience has led to what is known as the 'phantom vowel' syndrome. Brad Pitt becomes 'Brada Pity', and if you ask (for clarification) 'Excuse me, but did you say *Brada Pity*?', the response is a no-nonsense *Yes* so emphatic that it metamorphoses into an overly polite *Yessir*. It's not an easy interface. Sometimes indeed, the effort is too great. For example, many Italians go mountain biking, but when they talk about it the result sounds nocturnal, but with a difference: 'moontan biking'.

Some of the vowel contrasts of English just don't survive. For example, the vowel differences in *fit* and *feet* are often overlooked by Italians, especially in the fast-paced north, where they hurry on to the next item and keep everything short. So, in an emotionally charged exchange, a jealous Romeo may accuse his Juliette of 'flirting with everybody at the bitch club' and of having 'no fillings'. And he might then add: 'I want to take you to my castle, throw away the kiss, sick comfort in front of the fire, smoke marry-you-anna and rid War and Piss.'

Italians love talking about food. If, say, Worcestershire sauce is one of the ingredients under discussion, the innocent additive will sound as though it has a belligerent origin, in a place called 'War Chester'. English-speaking guests may be offered some 'ploom cake' and 'Twinning tea'. You may also be asked how to make good 'rose biff' and how you feel about 'fuss food' in general and 'amboorgers' in particular: for best results, stress the second syllable and really roll the r's. You may be asked, 'Do you like carry?' and answer 'Um, I'm not sure.' Response: 'Perhaps I pronounced it wrong – coorry?' Still not sure. 'It is a spice from India.' 'Ah, *curry*! Yes, of course I do.' If the discussion moves on, say, to a particularly picturesque English city that one's host hopes to visit, *Gloucester* may become radioactive ('Glow Chester') or just plain sticky ('Glue Chester'), while the county of *Surrey* is usually knighted as 'Siry' while the town of Bournmouth is all heated up, as 'Burn Mouth'.

As any teacher of English will testify, getting beginners to reproduce that truly troublesome *th*-sound is hard graft, whether it's voiced as in 'this' or unvoiced as in 'path': one needs protective clothing and a visor. Italian students are no different from anyone else. If you say 'Look at the third picture and describe it', they are bound to check first, 'De turd picture?', and, after a deep sigh from the teacher, the undeterred learner will say something like, 'Well, it's a tin woman, about dirty-tree, width tick air.'

Somebody will always interrupt the lesson and enquire about such and such a movie title, as with 'What does *Tom Rider* mean?' And you say, 'Nothing. It's just somebody's name.' But the inquisitive learner insists, 'No, the character's name is Lara Croft.' And the penny drops, of course, with a loud thud that reverberates round the classroom. Yes, well, you have to admit (at least to yourself) *Tomb Raider* just ain't easy.

Ironically, Italians using English 'imports' have no trouble at all understanding each other. It's English speakers who are unfamiliar with Italian who get confused. Everybody in Italy is writing and sending 'miles' these days, which is none other than the brief messages *we* know as *e-mails* (adapted to 'mails'). Not so difficult really, is it?

But one last word of advice: If, when travelling in Italy, you hear what sounds like a rude four-letter verb in the third personal singular, don't get all disconcerted. The polite local gentleman or lady who uses it is just mismanaging the ubiquitous little word *fax* – not for a moment thinking about either sex or frustration. ■

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