

Italian in English

kron

Italian

After French, Italian has had the greatest influence on English of all the modern European languages, but most of our borrowings have long been Anglicized beyond recognition. Though most Italian-Americans emigrated around the beginning of the twentieth century, the language probably had its greatest impact in the Renaissance, when Italian culture was at its height. It was so pervasive in England that several sixteenth-century writers complained about its corrupting influence on the language.

Many of the words that survive intact in the English vocabulary are musical, artistic, and architectural terms that reflect the Italian emphasis on refinement and good living. In addition, many French-appearing terms are barely disguised versions of the original Italian (*caricature, burlesque, carnival, buffoon, façade*). Other Italian importations are evidence of the love of intrigue shared by the descendants of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), the political philosopher whose surname has given us the highly descriptive term *Machiavellian* (“characterized by unscrupulous cunning, deception, or expediency”).

al fresco (al fres'kō) out-of-doors; in the open air.

bravura (brə vyōōr'ə, -vōōr'ə) a florid, brilliant style; a display of daring.

dolce far niente (dōl'chā fär nyen'tā) sweet inactivity.

focaccia (fō kā'chə) a round, flat Italian bread, sprinkled with oil and herbs before baking.

imbroglio (im brōl'yō) a confused state of affairs; a complicated or difficult situation; bitter misunderstanding.

inamorata (in am'ə rä'tə, in'am-) a female sweetheart or lover.

incognito (in'kog nē'tō) with one's identity hidden or unknown; in disguise.

la dolce vita (lä dōl'chā vē'tä) the good life.

manifesto (man'ə fes'tō) a public declaration of intentions, opinions, or objectives, as issued by an organization.

panache (pə nash', -näsh') a grand or flamboyant manner; flair; verve; stylishness.

punctilio (pungk til'ē ō') strict or exact observance of formalities; fine point or detail of conduct or procedure.

vendetta (ven det'ə) a prolonged or bitter feud or rivalry; the pursuit of vengeance.

chiaroscuro (kē är'ə skyōōr'ō, -skōōr'ō) the distribution of light and dark areas, as in a picture.

cognoscenti (kon'yə shen'tē, kog'nə-) those in the know; intellectuals; well-informed persons.

crescendo (kri shen'dō, -sen'dō) a steady increase in force or loudness; a climactic point or peak.

dilettante (dil'i tänt', dil'i tän'tā) dabbler; amateur; devotee.

diva (dē'və) an exalted female singer; any goddess-like woman.

impresario (im'prə sär' ē ō') a person who organizes public entertainments; an entrepreneur, promoter, or director.

pentimento (pen'tə men'tō) the reappearance of an earlier stage, as in a painting.

prima donna (prē'mə don'ə) the principal singer in an opera company; any vain, temperamental person who expects privileged treatment.

sotto voce (sot'ō vō'chē) in a soft, low voice, so as not to be overheard.

staccato (stə kă'tō) abruptly disconnected; disjointed; herky-jerky.

tempo (tem'pō) rate of speed; rhythm or pattern.

virtuoso (vûr'chōō ō'sō) highly skilled performer; a person who has special knowledge or skill in a field; highly cultivated person.

Italian

Many of the Italian words commonly used in English relate to Italian food and cooking. Examples include *al dente*, *calamari*, *cappuccino*, *ciabatta*, *espresso*, *gnocchi*, *lasagne*, *macchiato*, *mozzarella*, *pasta* (and the names of all its varieties), *pepperoni*, *pesto*, *pizza*, *ricotta*, *risotto*, *salami*, *saltimbocca*, *scampi*, and *tiramisu*.

Italian is indisputably the language of music. Historically this is because it was in Italy that sheet music was first printed during the Renaissance. Mostly dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, the following terms (and many more) form an essential part of all classical musicians' vocabulary: *a cappella*, *adagio*, *allegro*, *andante*, *aria*, *arpeggio*, *basso profundo*, *bel canto*, *cadenza*, *cantabile*, *cantata*, *coda*, *con brio*, *concerto*, *contralto*, *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *diva*, *falsetto*, *forte*, *fortissimo*, *glissando*, *intermezzo*, *largo*, *legato*, *lento*, *libretto*, *maestro*, *mezzo*, *moderato*, *obbligato*, *oratorio*, *pianissimo*, *piano*, *pizzicato*, *portamento*, *presto*, *prima donna*, *rallentando*, *rubato*, *scherzo*, *sforzando*, *sinfonietta*, *soprano*, *sostenuto*, *stretto*, *tanto*, *tempo*, *toccata*, *tremolo*, and *vibrato*.

Italian words are also widespread in art and literature, especially those associated with Renaissance painting and poetry, for example *canto*, *chiaroscuro*, *fresco*, *gesso*, *impasto*, *intaglio*, *Pietà*, *putto*, *scenario*, *stanza*, and *tempera*. *Cupola*, *portico*, and *stucco* are part of the vocabulary of architecture.

La dolce vita (literally 'the sweet life') is a life of pleasure and luxury. Other Italian borrowings that are used in the context of festivity and celebration include *confetti*, *gala*, and *regatta*.

Finally, films such as *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* have familiarized English speakers with such examples of the arcane language of the *Mafia* as *consigliere*, *Cosa Nostra*, *Mafioso*, and *omertà*.

Make mine a cappuccino

The **Italian** loves of food, music, and the good life have injected bright colours into English usage. At the other extreme, the Italian language of crime, captured on film and TV, has infiltrated talk of murkier areas of life.

IF you want pasta cooked so that it is still firm when you bite into it, you should ask for it to be **al dente**, literally 'to the tooth'. Varieties of pasta include **fusilli** or 'little spirals' and **penne** or 'quills'—most were unknown in English until the 20th century, but **vermicelli** or 'little worms' and *MACARONI date back to the 17th century. A determined meat-eater might ask for **carpaccio**. This name for thin slices of raw meat comes from the surname of the medieval Italian painter Vittore Carpaccio (c.1460–1525/1526), because of his characteristic use of red pigments, resembling raw meat.

Baroness Frances Bunsen (1791–1876) was a diplomat's wife who travelled widely. A letter about one of her trips has given us the first mention of the **pizza**, in 1825: 'They gave us ham, and cheese, and *frittata* [a kind of omelette], and *pizza*.' The Italian word simply means 'pie'.

Some kinds of Italian food suggest their appeal rather than their look or shape, such as the veal dish **saltimbocca**, whose name means literally 'leap into the mouth'. The dessert **tiramisu** was unknown to English until the 1980s, since when the combination of coffee-and-brandy-soaked sponge

and mascarpone cheese has become irresistible. The name comes from *tira mi sù* 'pick me up'.

After the meal you might have the strong black **espresso**, whose name comes from *caffè espresso* 'pressed-out coffee', or the milder **latte**, from *caffè latte* 'milk coffee'. A **macchiato**, espresso with a dash of frothy steamed milk, is short for *caffè macchiato*, literally 'stained or marked coffee'. In Italian **cappuccino** means 'Capuchin monk', probably because the drink's colour resembles a Capuchin's brown habit. The Capuchins are a branch of the Franciscan order that takes their name from the sharp-pointed hood worn by the monks—*cappuccio* in Italian, which is from the same root as **cape**. It is now found on every high street, but cappuccino has been known in English only since the 1940s.

A life of heedless pleasure and luxury is a **dolce vita**, or 'sweet life', a phrase brought into English by the 1960 film *La Dolce Vita*, directed by Federico Fellini. A lazy person who likes the idea of pleasant idleness is attracted to **dolce far niente**, literally 'sweet doing nothing'.

The term **fresco** for a painting done rapidly on wet plaster on a wall or ceiling means 'cool, fresh' in Italian. The same word is part of **al fresco**, meaning 'in the open air'—in English this phrase tends to refer to eating outdoors, as in this example from *GQ* magazine: 'Open 7 days a week... with *al fresco* dining in fine weather'. The phrase dates back to the 1750s in English and was used by Jane Austen.

Sheet music was first printed during the Renaissance by Italians, which is why Italian is the language of musical terms, a number of which have moved into the wider language. We might talk of excitement reaching a **crescendo**, a word originally used to indicate gradually increasing loudness in a piece of music. Someone might be speaking **fortissimo**, 'very loudly', or **sotto voce**, 'in a quiet voice'—literally 'under the voice'. Italian has also given us the names for different ranges of singing voice, including **alto** 'high', **soprano**, from *sopra* 'above', and **baritone**, which is ultimately from Greek *barus* 'heavy' and *tonos* 'tone'. Many of the great opera singers have been Italian, and *OPERA itself is the Italian word for 'work'.

Films like *The Godfather* (1972) and *Goodfellas* (1990), and the more recent television series *The Sopranos*, have familiarized us with some of the enigmatic vocabulary associated with the *MAFIA. Members practise **omertà**, or a code of silence, which is a dialect form of **umiltà** 'humility'. Within the group the adviser to the leader, who resolves internal disputes, is known as the **consigliere**, literally 'member of a council'. Presumably it is only after his arts have failed that someone may reach for his **lupara**, or sawn-off shotgun, a slang term that comes from *lupa* 'she-wolf'. A high-ranking member of the Mafia is a **don**, a word also used for a British university teacher, which comes from Latin *dominus* 'master'.

See also CONFETTI, FIASCO, GHETTO, GRAFFITI, INFERNO, INFLUENZA, MALARIA, PANTALOONS, PASTE, TENOR

Italian words

Before the French took their crown, Italian cooks were considered the best in Europe, and **vermicelli**, 'little worms', and ***macaroni** were being eaten in Britain in the 17th century, while Samuel Pepys valued his **Parmesan** [E16th] cheese so highly that he paused to bury it in his garden to keep it safe before fleeing the Great Fire of London in 1666. However, Italian food only became really popular in the early 20th century when we get the first records of **fusilli** 'little spindles', **penne** 'quills', and **farfalle** 'moths', although **pizza** 'pie' was known in the 19th century, as was **lasagne**, the name of which unappetizingly goes back to the Latin for 'chamber pot', perhaps also indicating a cooking pot. **Ricotta** [E17th] cheese means 'cooked again' because it is made from the reheated, left-over whey from other cheesemaking. The etymology of **mascarpone** [E20th] is unknown. It is, however, a vital ingredient of **tiramisu** [1980s]. Who invented this dessert is much debated, but it does not appear in Italian recipe books before the 1960s. It is said to have been created as a hangover cure, hence its name which means 'pick me up'. The Italians are also famous for their coffee, giving us terms such as **espresso** [M20th] 'pressed out', **macchiato** [L20th] 'stained' with a dash of milk, **caffè latte** [M19th] 'milk', and **cappuccino** [M20th] named after the Capuchin monks because the colour is the same as their habits.

Although **Renaissance** [M19th] 'rebirth' is a French word derived from Latin *nasci* 'to be born', it started in Italy and the country has influenced the arts for centuries. In painting we get **fresco** [L16th], originally in Italian *al fresco* 'in the fresh or cool' because it was painted on fresh, damp plaster (**al fresco** is first recorded for eating outdoors in English in 1717). **Chiaroscuro** [M17th] means 'bright-dark'. **Cartoon** [L17th] comes from the 'thick paper' (also found in the cardboard **carton** [L18th]) that preliminary drawings were done on, with the comic drawing sense M19th. **Graffiti** [M19th] means 'scratchings' in Italian. In sculpture we have the **torso** [L18th] 'stalk, stump', the similar **bust** [M17th] from *busto* from Latin *bustum* 'sepulchral monument', and the **Madonna** [L16th] 'my lady' for the Virgin Mary. In architecture we get the ***balcony, dome** [E16th] from Italian *duomo* 'cathedral, dome', and less obviously ***grotesque** [M16th] from *pittura grottesca* 'painting resembling that found in a grotto'. **Grotto** [E17th] is Italian, from Greek *kruptē crypt* [LME]. Such paintings were perhaps felt to be **bizarre** [M17th], which the French used in the sense we use, but which comes from Italian for 'angry'.

Italy is also the home of the **opera** [M17th] from 'labour, work', which also gives us **alto** [L16th] 'high', **soprano** [M18th] from *sopra* 'above', and **baritone** [E17th], which is ultimately from Greek *barus* 'heavy' and *tonos* 'tone'. It was also the first country to print music, so is the language of musical terms such as the **aria** [E18th] 'air', **serenade** [M17th] 'serene', **cadence** [LME] and **cadenza** [M18th] from 'fall', **tempo** [M17th] 'time', and instructions such as **accelerando** [L18th] 'get faster', **piano** [L17th] 'softly', **forte** [E18th] 'loudly', which together give us the **pianoforte** [M18th], now usually just a piano, which got its name from its innovative ability to be played with gradation in sound.

The plays known as the *commedia dell'arte* which flourished from the 16th century have given us **zany** [L16th] from the Venetian form of the name Giovanni, given to the clowning servant traditional in the plays. **Pantaloons** [L16th] get their name from the baggy trousers traditionally worn by the foolish old-man character called Pantalone, while the hook-nosed, humpbacked character known as

Punchinello [L17th] in the *commedia* and in puppet plays rapidly got shortened to **Punch** [L17th] in Punch and Judy shows.

Another fictional character who has become a word in English is **Paparazzo**, a photographer in Fellini's 1960 film *La Dolce Vita*, 'The Sweet Life', which also introduced that phrase to English (**dolce far niente**, 'sweet do nothing, idleness', is E19th). Other films have focused on the **Mafia** [M19th], which goes back to a Sicilian dialect word meaning 'bragging', and terms such as **don** [M20th in the mafia sense] from Latin *dominus* 'master, lord' and his **consigliere**, 'council member, adviser', found in English from 1615 for a legitimate councillor, but only in 1963 in the Mafia sense. But much earlier Italian ne'er-do-wells gave us **bandit** [L16th] from *bandito* 'banned' or outlaw as well as **ruffian** [L15th], which seems to have come, via French, from Italian dialect *rofia* 'scab, scurf'.

See also ALERT, ALTER, ANTIQUITY, ATTACK, BALCONY, BANK, BIMBO, BRIGADIER, CAMOUFLAGE, CANNON, CANTEEN, CAPER, CAPRICE, CARPET, CASINO, CAULIFLOWER, CHARLATAN, CHIP, COMPLETE, CONFETTI, CONTRABAND, CROSS, DISASTER, DITTO, EXTRAVAGANT, FAGGOT, FIASCO, GAZETTE, GHETTO, GUSTO, HARLEQUIN, INCOGNITO, INFANT, INFERNO, INFLUENZA, LAUNDRY, LIDO, MALARIA, MANIFEST, MARZIPAN, MASCARA, MUSKET, NOVEL, ORC, PAGE, PALACE, PANDER, PARAGON, PARAPET, PASTE, PERGOLA, PISTON, PORTER, QUAIN, QUARANTINE, RACE, ROCKET, ROTATION, SALOON, SAP, SCARPER, SEQUEL, SPADE, SQUARE, TANTAMOUNT, TRIAD, VENDETTA, VOGUE, VOLCANO, WASP.