

Talking Italy

The Editors (June 02, 2008)



As a contribution to the celebration of Italy's National Day, i-Italy goes to print with a special issue dedicated to Italy's culture and language.

These days Italy is celebrating the 60th anniversary of its Constitution. We at i-Italy have decided to offer our contribution with this special print issue dedicated to Italy's culture and language.

For an online editorial and social network such as i-Italy, going to print is a special occasion. It is – if the parallel does not sound too impertinent – similar to the emigrant who returns to visit the old country. The smell of paper, the beautiful perfection of printed fonts – these things you cannot find in



the online world. The Republic's National Holiday seemed the ideal occasion for such a return.

This special issue contributes to a collective effort to promote the study of Italian language in the U.S., a primary means to reinforce the cultural and political identity of that vast nation we call Italian America. For a nation without a language is lost forever, unable to engage in what Robert Viscusi defines "authoritative discourse."



In this issue: Stefano Albertini, Maria Bartiromo, Ottorino Cappelli, Giovanni Castellaneta, Margaret I. Cuomo, Matilda Raffa Cuomo, A. Kenneth Ciongoli, Anna Luisa Depau, Josephine Gattuso Hendin, Fred Gardaphe, Katherine La Guardia, Silvana Mangione, Andrea Mantineo, Dominic Massaro, Dacia Maraini, Mariuccia Zerilli Marimò, Eleonora Mazzucchi, Renato Miracco, Aniello Musella, Daniel Nigro, Berardo Paradiso, Rodrigo Praino, Letizia Airos Soria, Alexander Stille, Riccardo Strano, Aileen Riotto Sirey, Louis Tallarini, Joseph Sciame, Francesco Maria Talò, Anthony J. Tamburri, Robert Viscusi.

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With this in mind, we have gathered a most authoritative group of contributors: the highest representatives of Italy's institutions in the U.S., top exponents of the Italian American community, prestigious academics, journalists, and writers. To each of them i-Italy asked the same questions: Why Italian? How can we motivate American citizens - be they of Italian origin or not - to learn Italian? And, why should we? We hope our special issue will stimulate curiosity and debate.

The language/identity issue is strongly felt - not only in the institutional and intellectual spheres but among the public at large. In these past few weeks, we also proposed a discussion forum to our community members entitled "Studying Italian: Why and Why Not". The response was amazing, as dozens of people began to debate, recount stories, offer their experiences and judgments (www.i-Italy.us).

We offer this special issue in English in order to reach all those Americans who either have some Italian ancestry or love all things Italian - but have no command of the language. This is also why i-Italy.org, our online editorial network, is mainly in English with an Italian-language section.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 15 million American citizens reported Italian as their first ancestry in 2000, yet only one million were able to speak Italian. Furthermore, the 2005 American Community Survey found that Italian was spoken by only 800,000 people, two-thirds of whom over 65 years of age. Among younger Americans (age 5-17,) only 55,000 speak Italian. Clearly, the ability to speak Italian is decreasing rapidly in the U.S. due to generational turnover and the modest diffusion of Italian among the youth.

All this tells us that something must be done to revive the study of Italian among the youth, before it is too late. i-Italy is trying to contribute to such an effort. This special issue is one step, and it is interesting to note that several of our contributors are the living products of the problematic, linguistic history of Italian America. Fiorello LaGuardia's granddaughter Katherine, and Joseph Sciame, a former President of the Order Sons of Italy in America, tell us they didn't have the opportunity to study Italian when they were younger; Justice Dominic Massaro was raised in a period when "speaking Italian would have been like speaking the language of the enemy." Aileen Riotto Sirey, Chairwoman of the National Organization of Italian American Women, has felt "handicapped" her whole life, not speaking Italian. And Daniel Nigro, FDNY Chief of Operations on 9/11, points to the heart of the matter: without the language, Italian Americans confront a heritage they "are so proud of, but sometimes don't fully understand."

Another step is the community discussion about "Studying Italian" that we just launched on our social network. It is gratifying to see how many points of contacts there are between the authoritative comments included in this special issue and the thoughts and opinions expressed by i-Italy's ordinary users. Just go to www.i-Italy.us and search under "Discussions and Viewpoints". You will find a long thread about the Italian-language issue, with dozens of posts. Second, third, and fourth generation Italian Americans, from all walks of life and from all over the U.S., are sharing their experiences with Italian language: their wish to know the language to better connect with their heritage; their frustration at the obstacles they encounter; their proposals to improve the situation.



But there is much more that i-Italy can do. We are planning a series of multimedia presentations where excerpts from classics of Italian fiction and non fiction will be read by professional speakers, with pictures and animations in the background. The original text and the English translation will also be provided as learning assistance tools. The first of these presentations is being prepared as we write, and will be dedicated to Italy's National Holiday; it will introduce the first 12 articles of Italy's Constitution, its "Fundamental Principles."

Through our daily activity, we shall assure that as many articles as possible be translated into Italian - both to make ourselves ever more accessible to Italians in Italy, and to offer our American readers yet another tool to practice their language skills. We shall also extend this bilingual approach to our WebTV and WebRadio experiments, which we are launching alongside our Magazine. We are also making every effort to facilitate the creation of a bilingual, cross-cultural social network in our community website, involving people who live on both sides of the ocean.

The results of our first months of existence are encouraging: with almost 140,000 page-views, and over 23,000 "absolute unique visitors" (a 500 per cent increase in six months,) i-Italy is growing daily. Our regular contributors now include not only 40 or so professional journalists, academics, and public intellectuals, but also about 500 active members of our social network, who air their opinions, exchange views, and engage in lively discussions. To date, they have activated 74 forums and 27 discussion groups, and they have shared 247 videos, 269 audio files and 1844 photos. It is a lively, rapidly growing community, and this is the very richness of i-Italy.

To be ever more successful, i-Italy now needs two things.

First, we need human resources, people - especially young people - who are willing to work with us on a voluntary basis to make i-Italy a success: young journalists, writers, photographers, and video-makers; and we need of course, translators and editors to help us keep our promise of an Italian American bi-lingualism. We are being helped greatly by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College/ CUNY, which is providing us with office space and has just circulated a call for internships at i-Italy among CUNY students. Internship are also forthcoming from NYU, thanks to the support of Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò. We are getting proposals for "online internships" from throughout the U.S., from Seattle to Florida!

The second thing i-Italy needs is financial support - so that all these energies that we are mobilizing may form a reasonable expectation to be somehow rewarded after a period of voluntary work. To this end, we have created a not-for-profit corporation, Italian/American Digital Project, Inc., and we have applied for tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, so we'll be eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions. We therefore end this note with an appeal to all prospective sponsors, donors, and advertisers who can help i-Italy live and grow. We like to believe that we need them at least as much as they need us!

Print Edition

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