

Chapter 1

Saying It Like It Is

In This Chapter

- ▶ Taking note of the little Italian you know
- ▶ Looking at popular expressions and cognates
- ▶ Learning basic Italian pronunciation
- ▶ Using gestures

You probably know that Italian is a Romance language, which means that Italian, just like Spanish, French, Portuguese, and some other languages, is a “child” of Latin. There was a time when Latin was the official language in a large part of Europe because the Romans ruled so much of the area. Before the Romans came, people spoke their own languages, and the mixture of these original tongues with Latin produced many of the languages and dialects still in use today.

If you know one of these Romance languages you can often understand bits of another one of them. But just as members of the same family can look very similar but have totally different personalities, so it is with these languages. People in different areas speak in very different ways due to historical or social reasons, and even though Italian is the official language, Italy has a rich variety of dialects. Some dialects are so far from Italian that people from different regions cannot understand each other.

Despite the number of different accents and dialects, you will be happy to discover that everybody understands the Italian you speak and you understand theirs. (Italians don’t usually speak in their dialect with people outside their region.)

You Already Know Some Italian!

Although Italians are very proud of their language, they have allowed some English words to enter it. They talk, for example, about gadgets, jogging, feeling and shock; they often use the word okay; and since computers have entered their lives, they say “**clicare sul mouse**” (kleek-kah-reh soohl mouse)

(to click the mouse). Finally, there's **lo zapping** (loh *zap*-ping), which means switching TV channels with the remote. These are only a few of the flood of English words that have entered the Italian language.

In the same way, many Italian words are known in English-speaking countries. Can you think of some?

How about . . .

- ✓ **pizza** (*peet-tsah*)
- ✓ **pasta** (*pahs-tah*)
- ✓ **spaghetti** (*spah-geht-tee*)
- ✓ **tortellini** (*tohr-tehl-lee-nee*)
- ✓ **mozzarella** (*moht-tsah-rehl-lah*)
- ✓ **espresso** (*ehs-prehs-soh*)
- ✓ **cappuccino** (*kahp-pooh-chee-noh*)
- ✓ **panino** (*pah-nee-noh*): For one sandwich: for two or more, the word is **panini** (*pah-nee-nee*)
- ✓ **biscotti** (*bees-koht-tee*) (cookies): One cookie is a **biscotto** (*bees-koht-toh*)
- ✓ **tiramisù** (*tee-rah-mee-sooh*)

Incidentally, did you know that tiramisù literally means “pull me up”? This refers to the fact that this sweet is made with strong Italian espresso.

You may have heard words from areas other than the kitchen, such as the following:

- ✓ **amore** (*ah-moh-reh*): This is the word “love” that so many Italian songs tell about.
- ✓ **avanti** (*ah-vahn-tee*): You use this word as “come in!” and also “come on!” or “get a move on!”
- ✓ **bambino** (*bahm-bee-noh*): This is a male child. The female equivalent is **bambina** (*bahm-bee-nah*).
- ✓ **bravo!** (*brah-voh*): You can properly say this word only to one man. To a woman, you must say “**brava!**” (*brah-vah*), and to a group of people, you say “**bravi!**” (*brah-vee*) unless the group is composed only of women, in which case you say “**brave!**” (*brah-veh*).
- ✓ **ciao!** (*chou*): **Ciao** means “hello” and “goodbye.”

- ✓ **scusi** (*scooh-zee*): This word stands for “excuse me” and “sorry” and is addressed to persons you don’t know or to whom you speak formally. You say “**scusa**” (*scooh-zah*) to people you know and to children.

You’ve heard at least some of these words, haven’t you? This is just a little taste of all the various words and expressions you’ll get to know in this book.

Cognates

In addition to the words that have crept into the language directly, Italian and English have many cognates. A cognate is a word in one language that has the same origin as a word in another one and may sound similar. You can get an immediate picture of what cognates are from the following examples:

- ✓ **aeroporto** (*ah-eh-roh-pohr-toh*) (*airport*)
- ✓ **attenzione** (*aht-tehn-tsyoh-neh*) (*attention*)
- ✓ **comunicazione** (*koh-mooh-nee-kah-tsyoh-neh*) (*communication*)
- ✓ **importante** (*eem-pohr-tahn-teh*) (*important*)
- ✓ **incredibile** (*een-kreh-dee-bee-leh*) (*incredible*)

You understand much more Italian than you think you do. Italian and English are full of cognates. To demonstrate, read this little story with some Italian words and see how easy it is for you to understand.

It seems **impossibile** (*eem-pohs-see-bee-leh*) to him that he is now at the **aeroporto** (*ah-eh-roh-pohr-toh*) in Rome. He always wanted to come to this **città** (*cheet-tah*). When he goes out on the street, he first calls a **taxi** (*tah-ksee*). He opens his bag to see if he has the **medicina** (*meh-dee-chee-nah*) that the **dottore** (*doht-toh-reh*) gave him. Going through this **terribile traffico** (*tehr-ree-bee-leh trahf-fee-koh*), he passes a **cattedrale** (*kaht-teh-drah-leh*), some **sculture** (*scoohl-tooh-reh*), and many **palazzi** (*pah-laht-tsee*). He knows that this is going to be a **fantastico** (*fahn-tahs-tee-koh*) journey.

Popular expressions

Every language has expressions that you use so often that they almost become routine. For example, when you give something to somebody and he or she says, “Thank you,” you automatically reply, “You’re welcome!” This

type of popular expression is an inseparable part of every language. When you know these expressions and how to use them, you're on the way to really speaking Italian.

The following are some of the most common popular expressions in Italian:

- ✓ **Accidenti!** (ahch-chee-dehn-tee) (*Wow!/Damn it!*)
- ✓ **Andiamo!** (ahn-dyah-moh) (*Let's go!*)
- ✓ **Che c'è?** (keh cheh) (*What's up?*)
- ✓ **D'accordo? D'accordo!** (dahk-kohr-doh) (*Agreed? Agreed!*)
- ✓ **E chi se ne importa?** (eh kee seh neh eem-pohr-tah) (*Who cares?*)
- ✓ **È lo stesso.** (eh loh stehs-soh) (*It's all the same; It doesn't matter.*)
- ✓ **Fantastico!** (fahn-tahs-tee-koh) (*Fantastic!*)
- ✓ **Non fa niente.** (nohn fah nee-ehn-teh) (*Don't worry about it. It doesn't matter.*) You say “**Non fa niente**” when someone apologizes to you for something.
- ✓ **Non c'è di che.** (nohn cheh dee keh) (*You're welcome.*)
- ✓ **Permesso?** (pehr-mehs-soh) (*May I pass/come in?*) Italians use this expression every time they cross a threshold entering a house or when passing through a crowd.
- ✓ **Stupendo!** (stooh-pehn-doh) (*Wonderful!; Fabulous!*)
- ✓ **Va bene!** (vah beh-neh) (*Okay!*)

Mouthing Off: Basic Pronunciation

Italian provides many opportunities for your tongue to do acrobatics. This is really fun, because the language offers you some new sounds. In this section, I give you some basic pronunciation hints that are important both for surfing through this book and for good articulation when you speak Italian. First, I'd like to make a deal with you. Next to the Italian words throughout this book you find the pronunciation in parentheses. In the following sections, I give you some helpful hints about how to read these pronunciations — that is, how to pronounce the Italian words. The deal is that you and I have to agree on which letters refer to which sounds. You have to follow this code all through this book.

In the pronunciations, I separate the syllables with a hyphen, like this: **casa** (*kah-zah*) (*house*). Furthermore, I italicize the stressed syllable, which means that you put the stress of the word on the italicized syllable. (See the section “Stressing Words Properly,” later in this chapter, for more information about

stresses.) If you learn the correct pronunciation in this chapter, starting with the alphabet, you may even forego the pronunciation spelling provided, and read it like a real Italian.

The Alphabet

What better way is there to start speaking a language than to familiarize yourself with its alphabet! Table 1-1 shows you all the letters as well as how each sounds. It's essential to learn how to pronounce the Italian alphabet so that you'll be able to pronounce all of the new words you will be learning. Listen to and repeat the CD as many times as you need to in order to get down the right sounds. In the long run, this will help you be understood when you communicate in Italian. Note that there are only 21 letters in the Italian alphabet: missing are j, k, w, x, and y (which have crept into some Italian words now used in Italy).

Table 1-1 The Italian Alphabet (ahl-fah-beh-toh)

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Letter</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>
a	ah	b	bee
c	chee	d	dee
e	eh	f	ehf-feh
g	jee	h	ahk-kah
i	ee	j	
k		l	ehl-leh
m	ehm-meh	n	ehn-neh
o	oh	p	pee
q	kooh	r	ehr-reh
s	ehs-seh	t	tee
u	ooh	v	vooh
w		x	
y		z	dzeh-tah

Vowels

I'll start with the tough ones: vowels. The sounds are not that new, but the connection between the written letter and the actual pronunciation is not quite the same as it is in English.

Italian has five written vowels: a, e, i, o, and u. The following sections tell you how to pronounce each of them.

The vowel “a”

In Italian, the letter a has just one pronunciation. Think of the sound of the a in the English word father. The Italian a sounds just like that.

To prevent you from falling back to the other a sounds found in English, I transcribe the Italian a as (ah), as shown earlier in **casa** (*kah-sah*) (*house*). Here are some other examples:

- ✓ **albero** (*ahl-beh-roh*) (*tree*)
- ✓ **marmellata** (*mahr-mehl-lah-tah*) (*jam*)
- ✓ **sale** (*sah-leh*) (*salt*)

The vowel “e”

Try to think of the sound in the French word gourmet (you don’t pronounce the t). This sound comes very close to the Italian e. In this book, I transcribe the e sound as (eh). For example:

- ✓ **sole** (*soh-leh*) (*sun*)
- ✓ **peso** (*peh-zoh*) (*weight*)
- ✓ **bere** (*beh-reh*) (*to drink*)

The vowel “i”

The Italian i is simply pronounced (ee), as in the English word see. Here are some examples:

- ✓ **cinema** (*chee-neh-mah*) (*cinema*)
- ✓ **bimbo** (*beem-boh*) (*little boy*)
- ✓ **vita** (*vee-tah*) (*life*)

The vowel “o”

The Italian o is pronounced as in the English (from the Italian) piano. I therefore list the pronunciation as (oh). Try it out on the following words:

- ✓ **domani** (*doh-mah-nee*) (*tomorrow*)
- ✓ **piccolo** (*peek-koh-loh*) (*little; small*)
- ✓ **dolce** (*dohl-cheh*) (*sweet*)

The vowel “u”

The Italian u sounds always like the English (ooh), as in zoo. Therefore, I use (ooh) to transcribe the Italian u. Here are some sample words:

- ✓ **tu** (tooh) (*you*)
- ✓ **luna** (looh-nah) (*moon*)
- ✓ **frutta** (frooht-tah) (*fruit*)

Pronunciation peculiarities

You will come across some sounds and spellings that are not so familiar, for example:

- ✓ oi as in oink: **noi** (noi) (*we*)
- ✓ ahy as in ice: **dai** (dahy) (*you give*)
- ✓ ee as in feet: **diva** (dee-vah) (*diva*)
- ✓ ey as in aid: **lei** (ley) (*she*)
- ✓ ou as in out: **auto** (ou-toh) (*car*)

Consonants

Italian has the same consonants that English does. You pronounce most of them the same way in Italian as you pronounce them in English, but others have noteworthy differences. I start with the easy ones and look at those that are pronounced identically:

- ✓ **b**: As in **bene** (beh-neh) (*well*)
- ✓ **d**: As in **dare** (dah-reh) (*to give*)
- ✓ **f**: As in **fare** (fah-reh) (*to make*)
- ✓ **l**: As in **ladro** (lah-droh) (*thief*)
- ✓ **m**: As in **madre** (mah-dreh) (*mother*)
- ✓ **n**: As in **no** (noh) (*no*)
- ✓ **p**: As in **padre** (pah-dreh) (*father*)
- ✓ **t**: As in **treno** (treh-noh) (*train*) Make certain to exaggerate the **t** when it's doubled, like in the word **spaghetti** (spah-geht-tee) as in the last name Getty.
- ✓ **v**: As in **vino** (vee-noh) (*wine*)

Finally there are some consonants that do not really exist in Italian except in some foreign words that have entered the language.

- ✓ **j**: Exists mostly in foreign words such as jogging, junior, and jeans, and sounds like the **y** in **yam**.
- ✓ **k**: The same as **j**; you find it in words like **okay**, **ketchup**, and **killer**.
- ✓ **w**: As with **j** and **k**, you find it in some foreign words (for the most part English words), like **whisky**, **windsurf**, and **wafer**.
- ✓ **x**: As with **j**, **k**, and **w**, **x** doesn't really exist in Italian, with the difference that "x words" derive mostly from Greek. Examples include **xenofobia** (kseh-noh-foh-bee-ah) (*xenophobia*) and **xilofono** (ksee-loh-foh-noh) (*xylophone*).
- ✓ **y**: The letter **y** normally appears only in foreign words, like **yogurt**, **hobby**, and **yacht**.

Now, on to the consonants that are pronounced differently than they are in English.

The consonant "c"

The Italian **c** has two sounds, depending on which letter follows it:

- ✓ **Hard c**: When **c** is followed by **a**, **o**, **u**, or any consonant, you pronounce it as in the English word **cat**. I transcribe this pronunciation as (k). Examples include **casa** (kah-sah) (*house*), **colpa** (kohl-pah) (*guilt*), and **cuore** (kwoh-reh) (*heart*).

To obtain the "k" sound before **e** and **i**, you must put an **h** between the **c** and the **e** or **i**. Examples include **che** (keh) (*what*), **chiesa** (kyeh-zah) (*church*), and **chiave** (kyah-veh) (*key*).

- ✓ **Soft c**: When **c** is followed by **e** or **i**, you pronounce it as you do the first and last sound in the English word church; therefore, I give you the pronunciation (ch). Examples include **cena** (cheh-nah) (*dinner*), **cibo** (chee-boh) (*food*), and **certo** (chehr-toh) (*certainly*).

To obtain the "ch" sound before **a**, **o**, or **u**, you have to insert an **i**. This **i**, however, serves only to create the "ch" sound; you do not pronounce it. Examples include **ciao** (chou) (*hello; goodbye*), **cioccolata** (chok-koh-lah-tah) (*chocolate*), and **ciuccio** (chooh-choh) (*baby's pacifier*).

This pronunciation scheme sounds terribly complicated, but in the end, it's not that difficult. Here I present it in another way, which you can take as a little memory support:

Follow a scheme like this:

C + i, e = “ch”

C + h, o, u, a, cons = “k”

The consonant “g”

The Italian **g** behaves the same as the **c**. Therefore, I present it the same way:

- ✓ **Hard g:** When **g** is followed by **a**, **o**, **u**, or any consonant, you pronounce it as you pronounce the **g** in the English word good. I transcribe this pronunciation as (g). Examples include **gamba** (gahm-bah) (*leg*), **gomma** (gohm-mah) (*rubber*), and **guerra** (gweh-rah) (*war*).

To obtain the “g” sound before **e** or **i**, you must put an **h** between the letter **g** and the **e** or **i**. Examples include **spaghetti** (spah-geht-tee) (*spaghetti*), **ghiaccio** (gyahch-choh) (*ice*), and **ghirlanda** (geer-lahn-dah) (*wreath*).

- ✓ **Soft g:** When **g** is followed by **e** or **i**, you pronounce it as you do the first sound in the English word job; therefore, I write the pronunciation as (j). Examples include **gentile** (jehn-tee-leh) (*kind*), **giorno** (johr-noh) (*day*), and **gelosia** (jeh-loh-zee-ah) (*jealousy*).

To obtain the “j” sound before **a**, **o**, or **u**, you have to insert an **i**. The **i** serves only to indicate the proper sound; you do not pronounce it. Examples include **giacca** (jahk-kah) (*jacket*), **gioco** (joh-koh) (*game*), and **giudice** (joooh-dee-cheh) (*judge*). Here’s another little pattern to help you remember these pronunciations:

gamba	gomma	guerra	ghiaccio	spaghetti	= g
gentile	giorno	giacca	gioco	giudice	= j

The consonant “h”

The consonant **h** has only one function: namely, to change the sound of **c** and **g** before the vowels **e** and **i**, as described earlier. It also appears in foreign expressions such as *hostess*, *hit parade*, and *hobby*, and in some forms of the verb **avere** (ah-veh-reh) (*to have*), but it’s always silent.

The consonant “q”

Q exists only in connection with **u** followed by another vowel; that is, you always find **qu**. The **q** is pronounced like (k), and **qu** is, therefore, pronounced (kw). Examples include **quattro** (kwaht-troh) (*four*), **questo** (kwehs-toh) (*this*), and **quadro** (kwah-droh) (*picture*).

The consonant “r”

The Italian **r** is not pronounced with the tongue in the back, as it is in English, but trilled at the alveolar ridge, which is the front part of your palate, right behind your front teeth. You have to practice it. In the beginning, you may not find this pronunciation manageable, but practice makes perfect!

Here are some words to help you practice:

- ✓ **radio** (*rah-dee-oh*) (*radio*)
- ✓ **per favore** (*pehr fah-voh-reh*) (*please*)
- ✓ **prego** (*preh-goh*) (*you’re welcome*)

The consonant “s”

S is sometimes pronounced as the English **s**, as in *so*. In this case, I give you the pronunciation (*s*). In other cases, it’s pronounced like the English **z**, as in **zero**; in these cases, I list (*z*) as the pronunciation. Examples include **pasta** (*pahs-tah*) (*pasta*), **solo** (*soh-loh*) (*only*), **chiesa** (*kyeh-zah*) (*church*), and **gelosia** (*jeh-loh-zee-ah*) (*jealousy*).

The consonant “z”

A single **z** is pronounced (*dz*) — the sound is very similar to the English **z** in *zero*, with a **d** added at the beginning, as in **zero** (*dzehr-oh*) (*zero*). Just try it. When the **z** is doubled, you pronounce it more sharply, like (*t-ts*), as in **tazza** (*taht-tsah*) (*cup; mug*). Furthermore, when **z** is followed by the letter **i**, it also has a *ts* sound, like in the word **nazione** (*nah-tsyoh-neh*) (*nation*).

Double consonants

When you encounter double consonants in Italian, you have to pronounce each instance of the consonant or lengthen the sound. The difficult part is that there’s no pause between the consonants.

Doubling the consonant usually changes the meaning of the word. So, to make sure that your Italian is understandable, emphasize doubled consonants well. To make you pronounce words with double consonants correctly, I write the first consonant at the end of one syllable and the other one at the beginning of the following one, as in these examples:

- ✓ **nono** (*noh-noh*) (*ninth*)
- ✓ **nonno** (*nohn-noh*) (*grandfather*)
- ✓ **capello** (*kah-pehl-loh*) (*hair*)
- ✓ **cappello** (*kahp-pehl-loh*) (*hat*)

Try it once again:

- ✓ **bello** (*behl-loh*) (*beautiful*)
- ✓ **caffè** (*kahf-feh*) (*coffee*)
- ✓ **occhio** (*ohk-kyoh*) (*eye*)
- ✓ **spiaggia** (*spyahj-jah*) (*beach*)

Consonant clusters

Certain consonant clusters have special sounds in Italian. Here they are:

- ✓ **gn** is pronounced as the English “ny.” The sound is actually the same as in a Spanish word I’m sure you know: **señorita** (*seh-nyoh-ree-tah*) (*miss*), or better yet, an Italian word like **gnocchi** (*nyohk-kee*).
- ✓ **gl** is pronounced in the back of the throat like the English word million in words like **gli** (*lyee*) (*the*) and **famiglia** (*fah-mee-lyah*) (*family*.) You should not say anything like the English *g*.
- ✓ **sc** follows the same rules of the soft and hard “c” from the previous section. It is pronounced as in the English scooter when it comes before **a**, **o**, **u**, or **h** — that is, as in **scala** (*skah-lah*) (*scale*), **sconto** (*skohn-toh*) (*discount*), and **scuola** (*scwoh-lah*) (*school*). Before **e** and **i**, it is pronounced like the **sh** in **cash**. Examples of this pronunciation include **scena** (*sheh-nah*) (*scene*), **scesa** (*sheh-sah*) (*descent*), and **scimmia** (*sheem-mee-ah*) (*monkey*).

Stressing Words Properly

Stress is the audible accent that you put on a syllable as you speak it. One syllable always gets more stress than all the others. (A reminder: In this book I *italicize* the syllable to stress.)

Some words give you a hint as to where to stress them: They have an accent grave (˘) or acute (˙) above one of their letters. Here are some examples:

- ✓ **caffè** (*kahf-feh*) (*coffee*)
- ✓ **città** (*cheet-tah*) (*city*)
- ✓ **lunedì** (*looh-neh-dee*) (*Monday*)
- ✓ **perché** (*pehr-keh*) (*why*)
- ✓ **però** (*peh-roh*) (*but*)

✓ **università** (ooh-nee-vehr-see-tah) (*university*)

✓ **virtù** (veer-tooh) (*virtue*)

Only vowels can have accents, and in Italian all vowels at the end of a word can have this accent (˘). If there's no accent in the word, you're unfortunately left on your own. A rough tip is that Italian tends to have the stress on the penultimate (the next-to-last) syllable. But there are too many rules and exceptions to list them all here!

✓ The accent tells you where to stress the word.

✓ Fortunately, only a few words have the same spelling and only an accent to distinguish them. But it can be a very important distinction, as in the following example:

e (eh) and è (eh) (*he/she/it is*) are distinguished only by the accent on the vowel.



Using Gestures

Italians love to emphasize their words with gestures. For example, there are gestures to express the following feelings: **Ho fame** (oh fah-meh) (*I'm hungry*), **Me ne vado** (meh neh vah-doh) (*I'm leaving*), and **E chi se ne importa?** (eh kee seh neh eem-pohr-tah) (*Who cares?*). Needless to say, a flood of rude gestures exist as well.

Unfortunately, describing the gestures in words is too difficult, because Italian body language is a science and is hard for non-Italians to copy. You also have to make the right facial expressions when performing these gestures. These gestures generally come naturally and spontaneously, and you're sure to see some as you observe Italian life. Still, I won't let you go off without some of the practical, useful gestures that you might make when with Italians. Greeting and saying goodbye, for example, are accompanied by a common gesture — hugging and kissing. Italians seek direct contact when greeting one another. When you're not very familiar with a person, you shake hands. But when you know a person well or you have an immediate good feeling, you kiss cheek to cheek; that is, you don't really touch with your lips, but only with your cheek.