

Chapter 1

I Say It How? Speaking Italian

In This Chapter

- ▶ Taking note of the Italian you know
 - ▶ Appreciating cognates
 - ▶ Looking at popular expressions
 - ▶ Starting out with basic Italian pronunciation
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You probably know that Italian is a Romance language, which means that Italian, just like Spanish, French, and Portuguese, is a child of Latin. Latin was once 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 that are still in use today.

If you know one of the Romance languages, you can often understand bits of another. Just as members of the same family can look similar but have totally different characters, so can languages. You find the same contradictions in the *dialects* (regional or local language differences) in Italy and in other countries.

If you visit Italy, you'll hear various accents and dialects as you travel the country. Despite the number of dialects, you may be surprised to discover that

everybody understands your Italian and you understand theirs. (Italians don't normally speak in their dialect with foreigners.)

We don't want to go into detail about these regional and local differences here. Language is a means of communicating with people, and to speak to people from other countries, you have to find a way to understand them and make your meaning clear. Because using gestures to make yourself understood can be tiring, this chapter presents some helpful expressions to make life easier, at least as far as Italian is concerned.

You Already Know Some Italian

Italians love to talk. Not only do they enjoy communication, but they also love their language, because it's very melodious. Opera is famous for a reason!

Although Italians are very proud of their language, they've allowed a flood of English words to enter it. They talk, for example, about gadgets, jogging, and shock; they often use the word *okay*; and since computers marked their lives, they say **clicare sul mouse** (*kleek-kah-reh sool mouse*) (to click the mouse). And Italians are like most others when they get TV remotes in their hands: Oftentimes, you find them **lo zapping** (*loh zap-ping*) (switching channels).

On the flip side, many Italian words are known in English-speaking countries, such as these famous food and beverage words:

- ✓ **pizza** (*peet-tsah*)
- ✓ **pasta** (*pah-stah*)
- ✓ **spaghetti** (*spah-geht-tee*)
- ✓ **tortellini** (*tohr-tehl-lee-nee*)
- ✓ **mozzarella** (*moht-tsah-rehl-lah*)
- ✓ **espresso** (*eh-sprehs-soh*)

- ✓ **cappuccino** (*kahp-poo-chee-noh*)
- ✓ **tiramisù** (*tee-rah-mee-soo*)

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

- ✓ **amore** (*ah-moh-reh*): That word *love* that so many Italian songs tell about.
- ✓ **Avanti!** (*ah-vahn-tee*): You use this word when you want to say “Come in!” or “Come on!” or “Get a move on!”
- ✓ **bambino** (*bahm-bee-noh*): A male baby or child. The female equivalent is **bambina** (*bahm-bee-nah*).
- ✓ **Bravo!** (*brah-voh*): You can say this word of congratulations properly to only one man. To a woman, you must say **Brava!** (*brah-vah*). To a group of people, you say **Bravi!** (*brah-vee*) — unless the group consists only of women, in which case you say **Brave!** (*brah-veh*).
- ✓ **Ciao!** (*chah-oh*): Means “hello” and “goodbye.”
- ✓ **Scusi.** (*skoo-zee*): This word stands for “excuse me” and “sorry.” You address it to people you don’t know and to those with whom you speak formally. You say **Scusa** (*skoo-zah*) to people you know and to children.

Words that sound familiar

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 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-tsee-oh-neh*) (attention)

- ✓ **comunicazione** (*koh-moo-nee-kah-tsee-oh-neh*) (communication)
- ✓ **importante** (*eem-pohr-tahn-teh*) (important)
- ✓ **incredibile** (*een-kreh-dee-bee-leh*) (incredible, unbelievable)

You probably understand much more Italian than you think you do, because Italian and English are full of cognates. To demonstrate, read this little story with some Italian words in it. They're so similar to the English words that you can easily understand them.

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 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** (*skool-too-reh*), and many **palazzi** (*pah-laht-tsee*). All this is very **impressionante** (*eem-prehs-see-oh-nahn-teh*). He knows that this is going to be a **fantastico** (*fahn-tah-stee-koh*) journey.

Popular expressions

Every language has expressions that are used so often that they become routine. For example, when you give someone something and he says, "Thank you," you automatically reply, "You're welcome." When you familiarize yourself with these expressions and how to use them, you're on your way to becoming a confident speaker.

Table 1-1 shows you some of the most popular expressions in Italian.

Table 1-1 Popular Expressions

<i>Italian</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Accidenti!	ahch-chee- <u>dehn</u> -tee	Wow! (positive); Bummer!; What a drag!; Damn! (negative)
Andiamo!	ahn-dee- <u>ah</u> -moh	Let's go!
Che bello!	keh <u>behl</u> -loh	How nice!
Che c'è?	keh cheh	What's up?
D'accordo? D'accordo!	dahk- <u>kohr</u> -doh	Agreed? Agreed!; Okay? Okay!
Dai!	<u>dah</u> -ee	Come on!; Go on!; Hurry up!
E chi se ne importa?	eh kee seh neh eem- <u>pohr</u> -tah	Who cares?
È lo stesso.	eh loh <u>stehs</u> -soh	It's all the same; It doesn't matter.
Fantastico!	fahn- <u>tah</u> -stee-koh	Fantastic!
Non fa niente.	nohn fah nee- <u>ehn</u> -teh	It doesn't matter. (You use this phrase when someone apolo- gizes to you for something.)
Non c'è di che.	nohn cheh dee keh	You're welcome.
Permesso?	pehr- <u>mehs</u> -soh	May I pass?; May I come in?
Stupendo!	stoo- <u>pehn</u> -doh	Wonderful!; Fabulous!
Va bene!	vah <u>beh</u> -neh	Okay!



Italians use the expression **Permesso?** every time they cross a threshold when entering a house or when passing through a crowd. A more familiar equivalent for “May I?” is **Posso?** (*pohs-soh*) (May I?; Can I?).

Mouthing Off: Basic Pronunciation

Italian provides many opportunities for your tongue to do acrobatics. In this section, we give you some basic pronunciation hints that are important both for surfing through this book and for good articulation when you speak Italian. (If you tried to read and pronounce Italian words in the English manner, Italian speakers would have problems understanding you, just as you may have trouble understanding Italians when they speak English.)

We'll start with the tough ones: vowels. Vowels are difficult because you have to cope with new sounds. Well, the sounds aren't that new, but the connection between the written letter and the actual pronunciation isn't 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 them.

The vowel “a”

When foreigners try to learn English, they are shocked to discover how many different sounds the English **a** can have. In Italian, the letter **a** has just one pronunciation: Think of the **a** sound in the English word **far**. The Italian **a** sounds just like that.

To prevent you from falling back to the other **a** sounds found in English, we transcribe the Italian **a** as (*ah*), as in **casa** (*kah-zah*) (house).

The vowel “e”

Forget all you know about the English *e*. 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, we transcribe the *e* sound as (*eh*), as in **peso** (*peh-zoh*) (weight).

The vowel “i”

The Italian *i* is pronounced (*ee*), as in the English word **see**. Here are a couple of examples:

- ✓ **vita** (*vee-tah*) (life)
- ✓ **cinema** (*chee-neh-mah*) (cinema)

The vowel “o”

The Italian *o* is pronounced as in the English (from the Italian) **piano**. Therefore, we list the pronunciation as (*oh*), as in **dolce** (*dohl-cheh*) (sweet).

The vowel “u”

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

- ✓ **tu** (*too*) (you)
- ✓ **luna** (*loo-nah*) (moon)

Consonants that sound the same in Italian as they do in English

Italian has the same consonants that English does. You pronounce most of them the same way, but a few have noteworthy differences. We 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)
- ✓ **v**: As in **vino** (*vee-noh*) (wine)

Some consonants don't 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**.
- ✓ **k**: The same as **j**; you find it in words like **okay**, **ketchup**, and **killer**.
- ✓ **w**: You find it in some foreign words (for the most part English words), like **whiskey**, **wind-surf**, 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**.

The consonant "c"

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

- ✓ When **c** is followed by **a**, **o**, **u**, or any consonant, you pronounce it as in the English word **cat**. We transcribe this pronunciation as (*k*). Examples include **colpa** (*kohl-pah*) (guilt) and **cuore** (*koo-oh-reh*) (heart).

- ✓ 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, we give you the pronunciation (*ch*). Examples include **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 don’t pronounce it. Examples include **ciao** (*chah-oh*) (hello; good-bye), **cioccolata** (*chok-koh-lah-tah*) (chocolate), and **ciuccio** (*choo-choh*) (baby’s pacifier).
- ✓ 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** (*kee-eh-zah*) (church), and **chiave** (*kee-ah-veh*) (key).

This pronunciation scheme sounds terribly complicated, but it really isn’t. Here we present it in another way:

casa	colpa	cuore	che		chiave	=	k
cena	cibo	certo	cioccolata	ciao		=	ch

The consonant “g”

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

- ✓ When **g** is followed by **a**, **o**, **u**, or any consonant, you pronounce it as you pronounce the **g** in the English word **good**. We transcribe this pronunciation as (*g*). Examples include **gamba** (*gahm-bah*) (leg), **gomma** (*gohm-mah*) (rubber), and **guerra** (*goo-eh-rah*) (war).
- ✓ When **g** is followed by **e** or **i**, you pronounce it as you do the first sound in the English word **job**; we write the pronunciation as (*j*). Examples include **gentile** (*jehn-tee-leh*) (kind) and **giorno** (*johr-noh*) (day).

- ✓ 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-geh-ttee*) (spaghetti), **ghiaccio** (*gee-ahch-choh*) (ice), and **ghirlanda** (*geer-lahn-dah*) (wreath).

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: to change the sound of *c* and *g* before the vowels *e* and *i*, as described earlier in this chapter. 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 there 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 (*koo*). Examples include **quattro** (*koo-ah-t-troh*) (four), **questo** (*koo-eh-stoh*) (this), and **quadro** (*koo-ah-droh*) (picture).

The consonant “r”

You don’t pronounce the Italian *r* with your tongue in the back, as you do the English *r*; rather, you trill it at your *alveolar ridge*, which is the front part of your palate, right behind your front teeth. 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)
- ✓ **rumore** (*ruh-moh-reh*) (noise)

The consonant “s”

S is sometimes pronounced as the English **s**, as in **so**. In this case, we give the pronunciation (*s*). In other cases, you pronounce it like the English **z**, as in **zero**; in these cases, we list (*z*) as the pronunciation. Examples include **pasta** (*pah-stah*) (pasta), **solo** (*soh-loh*) (only), **chiesa** (*kee-eh-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 **zio** (*dzee-oh*) (uncle). When the **z** is doubled, you pronounce it more sharply, like (*ts*), as in **tazza** (*taht-tsah*) (cup; mug).

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 you don't 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, we write the first consonant at the end of one syllable and the second 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)

Don't worry too much about your pronunciation of double consonants, though, because in a conversation, the context helps people understand you.

Consonant clusters

Certain consonant clusters have special sounds in Italian:

- ✓ **gn** is pronounced as the English “ny.” The sound is actually the same as in the Spanish word **señorita** (*seh-nyoh-ree-tah*) (miss).
- ✓ **sc** is pronounced as in the English **scooter** when it comes before **a**, **o**, **u**, or **h**— as in **scala** (*skah-lah*) (scale), **sconto** (*skohn-toh*) (discount), and **scuola** (*scoo-oh-lah*) (school). When it comes before **e** and **i**, you pronounce it 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. In this book, we underline the syllables to stress.

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

- ✓ **caffè** (*kahf-feh*) (coffee)
- ✓ **città** (*cheet-ta*) (city)
- ✓ **lunedì** (*loo-neh-dee*) (Monday)
- ✓ **perché** (*pehr-keh*) (why; because)

- ✓ **però** (*peh-roh*) (but)
- ✓ **università** (*oo-nee-vehr-see-tah*) (university)
- ✓ **virtù** (*veer-too*) (virtue)

In Italian, only vowels have accents. All vowels at the end of a word can have this accent (˘), but only the *e* can have both (˘) and (˙). The difference lies only in the pronunciation. That is, *è* is pronounced very open, as in **hell**, whereas *é* is more closed, as in **gourmet**.

If a word doesn't feature an accent mark, you're on your own. A rough guideline is that Italian tends to stress the next-to-last syllable. But there are too many exceptions to list them all here!



Sometimes the inclusion of an accent changes a word's meaning. Fortunately, only a few words have the same spelling with only an accent to distinguish them, but the distinction can be very important. For example, *é* (*eh*) (and) and *è* (*eh*) (he/she/it is) are distinguished only by the accent on the vowel.

