

ITALIAN WORDS

A Practical Introduction to
the Italian Lexical System

ELIZAVETA KHACHATURYAN



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Italian Words: A Practical Introduction to the Italian Lexical System offers a detailed description of the Italian lexicon, explaining the organization of Italian words in a system and the function of this system.

What is a word, and what is typical of Italian words? How are words' meaning described and how are words assigned to objects? How are words (seen as lexical items) connected? How was the first dictionary of Italian created? What can we learn about the world and about the speaker through the words used? The book provides answers to these, and other similar questions.

Key features:

- words in a system: the book provides readers with a theoretical framework integrated with practical strategies and effective exercises to enhance readers' vocabulary acquisition and to develop analytic skills and linguistic competence;
- cross-linguistic comparisons: the book offers a broad perspective on language lexical system (in general) and highlights the specific features of the Italian words, comparing them with English, French, and Norwegian words;
- cultural insights: the book demonstrates the interconnectedness of language and culture and describes some features of Italian society through the lens of the words analyzed in the book.

This book is ideal for intermediate to advanced students of Italian and can be used alongside a grammar or textbook. It will also be a valuable read for anyone interested in or looking to learn more about the Italian language and culture.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about Italian words, their meanings, and their combinations; to use a more precise term, it is about the Italian lexical system; that is, it shows how Italian words are organized in a system.

The words of each language represent a system, but they are rarely imagined as a system when people learn new words in a foreign language. There are many grammar textbooks for different levels and different purposes, but there are extremely few books dedicated to vocabulary analyzed at the same level of a grammar: as a system, using a theoretical frame. This book is intended to fill this gap. This is a textbook of the Italian lexis.

People learn a language to communicate, to better understand the other's culture, and to discover something new about other people. Words play the main role in all these processes; they are tightly connected to the culture and to the people who use them in communication processes. This means that a description of Italian words leads to a discussion of topics related to Italian society and Italian culture (not only intellectual culture, but also material culture – the “small c” culture). Therefore, this book is addressed to readers who would like to learn more not only about Italian language (in particular, about the lexical system) but also about Italian culture, and at the same time enrich their vocabulary by learning new Italian words and expressions.

I imagine the readers of this book as people who belong to different generations but are nevertheless all members of a modern multilingual society, exposed to many languages and accustomed to comparing different objects and different issues on a daily basis (e.g., what to buy or what to read). Here, Italian words will be compared with other Italian words and with words from other languages. This cross-linguistic approach offers a wider perspective in discussing the Italian system of words. It will show some differences

and similarities with other systems (i.e., the Romance system versus the Germanic system) and discuss how another person can see the world through the lens of another language.

The aim of the book is to show how the lexis, “the total stock of words”, is structured, how the words are connected based on their meaning, how they describe the world and change together with the world, and finally, how one can see the world through the words. The main objectives can be synthesized in the following three verbs: learn, collect, and analyze. First: *learn*. The book helps enrich the reader’s vocabulary. Moreover, it introduces some interesting facts from Italian culture and history that are reflected in the language. Second: *collect*. For everyone interested in lexis and in a cross-linguistic approach to it, the book will show strategies that one can use to collect and classify the words that can help expand the vocabulary and describe new data that may lead to new research fields. Many topics discussed in the book can be developed and further details can be added. One of the purposes of the present description is to show the words in a new (maybe uncommon) perspective and to awaken the interest to this different vision of the world of words and to the surrounding world seen through the words. Third: *analyze*. The book will analyze how the words are used, what they mean, and how they can be interpreted (or [mis]understood) by the interlocutor. It will show the reader some strategies that can be further developed when analyzing new collected data.

This book describes the Italian lexical system. It discusses the following main topics, typically studied within lexicology and lexicography:

- The word as the main object of study, and the typical forms of Italian words (Chapter 1);
- Meaning; how it can be determined and described (Chapter 2);
- How the lexis changes with global social changes, e.g., loanwords, neologisms, and archaisms (Chapter 2);
- Relationships between words at two levels: the paradigmatic relationship (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, hypo/hypernyms, and geographical synonyms or *geosinonimi*) and the syntagmatic relationship (e.g., combinations of words and idiomatic expressions) (Chapter 3);
- Various dictionaries: what kind of information is provided by a dictionary, what role a dictionary plays in language standardization, and how the first dictionary of Italian, *Il Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, was created (Chapter 4);
- Words used by a speaker to describe the surrounding world, to interact with others, and to express emotions, and the challenges that can be experienced when trying to interpret or translate these words (Chapter 5); and
- Words as part of a speaker’s identity, and the role that language standardization played after the unification of Italy in 1861 (Chapter 5).

This book had two sources of inspiration. The first source was the course that I have been teaching at the University of Oslo since 2010. The course is called Italian Vocabulary and Dialects, because terms like *lexicology* and *lexicography* seemed less familiar to students at the bachelor's level. This is a course about the Italian lexical system. During all these years, the main structure of the course has remained almost the same, whereas the more practical part, which contains examples analyzed during the lectures and exercises for independent work, has changed a lot. The first reason for this is that changes have taken place in society and have resulted in the introduction of new words and the development of new meanings used to name new objects, new notions, and new phenomena. The second reason is the questions and comments by my students. They led me to further reflect on specific aspects of the lexical system. This reflection was extremely interesting because it showed how much one can learn about the world through analyzing words, when looking at them from a different perspective and comparing them to the words of another language. I am grateful for all these questions and comments; many modifications and additional explanations are due to them.

Another source of inspiration was my children, who during these years passed through several phases in the process of early simultaneous trilingual language acquisition and finally became fluent trilingual speakers. Their questions and errors often made me think about words, meanings, and constellations of words. Perhaps when they read this book they will recognize some of the words that we talked about.

However, many examples were not included in this practical introduction. One reason for this is spatial limits, and another reason is the main idea of this book. Its main goal is to provide tools that can be used to collect, observe, learn, and interpret words. By applying these tools, each speaker can create his or her own personal collection of words.

1

WORDS

To begin with, it is important to describe the main object of this study: words, the approaches that linguists can use when studying words, and in particular the approaches relevant for the perspective of this book – that is, an introduction to Italian words, seen as lexical units. This chapter has three sections. Each section answers one of the following questions:

- 1) What is a word?
- 2) What is important to learn about words?
- 3) What is typical for Italian words?

1.1 What is a word?

There are at least two answers to this question. One is a kind of definition for everyday use that speakers employ, and the other is an official definition provided by dictionaries and linguists. The answer depends on the situation and to whom the question is addressed.

Imagine playing a word game, such as Scrabble, in which it is necessary to build a word with the letters available, or a game for small children that involves finding words starting with the same letter; for instance, with *m*: *mamma*, *mela*, *moto*, and *mano*. You do not need to give any definition of the word. All the players of the game know that they have to find a sequence of letters that has a meaning in the language of the game. When playing in Italian, nobody will say *mo* or *mu*, but maybe somebody will say *mi* or *me* or *ma* – words whose lexical meaning may be difficult to explain. This means that even small children have an idea of what a word is. This idea is based on a definition that takes into account non-linguistic knowledge of the world; it is a user's definition.

It can be formulated as follows: a word is a sequence of letters bounded by spaces; this sequence of letters should have a meaning; or, to avoid the word *meaning* (which is discussed in Chapter 2), one can say that this sequence of letters is used by speakers communicating in the same language and is usually interpreted in the same or a similar way by them. This condition of “using the same language” is important because the same letter sequence may be used very differently in various languages. Many Italian words will not be considered words in English, but only as a combination of letters because they don’t have any meaning and cannot be used to communicate. On the other hand, many similar combinations of letters can be interpreted in different ways depending on the language. For example: the English word *pure* means ‘clear’ or ‘unmixed’ (e.g., *pure water* or *pure sound*), whereas in Italian *pure* is a synonym of *anche* (*Andiamo al cinema. Vengo pure io*). Can you find another example of this kind with English and Italian words?

However, this “working definition” of *word* has some weak aspects. The main problem is that the graphic criterion (which seems so evident) is not sufficient. Of course, a word is a sequence of letters bounded by spaces, but what about *macchina da cucire*, *buttare giù*, *dimmelo*, or *spiegaglielo*? How many words are there in these sequences? What is so particular about these sequences (or words)?

Example 1.1. *Macchina da cucire* or *macchina da scrivere*: the words *macchina*, *cucire*, *scrivere*, and *da* can be used independently, but they refer to something different from what the entire combination refers to. In the sentence *Mia nonna ha comprato la macchina da cucire*, it is not possible to leave out one of the elements:

- a) *Mia nonna ha comprato la macchina da*: the phrase will be incomplete.
- b) *Mia nonna ha comprato la macchina*: another thing will be imagined.

Example 1.2. *Buttare giù*: *Ho buttato giù una bozza del progetto*. In this case as well, the space between the sequence of letters is an insufficient criterion. *Buttare giù* has another meaning if compared to the verb *buttare*. If *giù* is omitted in the example, the meaning of the entire phrase changes: *Ho buttato una bozza del progetto* (which means ‘to throw away’).

These are examples of words called *parole sintagmatiche* or *parole polirematiche*. Although there is a space in between, they function as if they were one word: the nouns (see Example 1.1.) can be replaced by a pronoun (like in a), change position in a sentence (like in b), or used separately (in c): (a) *Mia nonna l’ha comprata*. (*l’* = *la macchina da cucire*); (b) *La macchina da cucire, l’ha comprata mia nonna*; (c) *Che cosa ha comprato?* – *La macchina da cucire*.

Example 1.3. *Dimmi*, *fammelo*, or *spiegaglielo*: these sequences are probably familiar from a grammar course. These particular pronoun forms added

to the verbal form are called clitics, or atonic personal pronouns (they are opposed to tonic personal pronouns – e.g., *lui*, *lei*, *noi* – which are used with prepositions or for emphasis; cfr. *Ho incontrato lui ma non suo fratello* – *L’ho incontrato*). One of the main features of clitics is that they depend on the verb and cannot be used independently. The question *Chi hai incontrato?* can be answered with *Lui* (a tonic pronoun), but not with *Lo* (a clitic/atic pronoun). However, clitics change their place depending on the verb form. When used with nonfinite verb forms (i.e., gerunds, infinitives, or past participles) or with an imperative form addressed to the second-person singular (like in the previous sequences), clitics are postposed and are attached to the verb – that is, written without a space, as though it were one word. In this case, it can be argued that several words are written together: two words in *di’+mi* or even three in *fa+me+lo*, *spiega+gli-e+lo*. At the same time, there is a long discussion in linguistic studies about the status of Italian clitic pronouns. This example confirms that a graphic criterion is insufficient to define what a word is.

Take a look at the definition of the word *word* in dictionaries. A dictionary is the first source and the only source to use if the meaning of a word is not understood. Here are some definitions of the English word *word*: “a speech sound or series of speech sounds that symbolizes and communicates a meaning usually without being divisible into smaller units capable of independent use” (Merriam & Webster dictionary); “a single distinct meaningful element of speech or writing, used with others (or sometimes alone) to form a sentence and typically shown with a space on either side when written or printed” (Google definition, accessed on the 6th of April 2024).

All these definitions distinguish almost the same features that we mentioned in the definition for everyday use. It can be reformulated as follows: a word is a combination or sequence of letters (in written language) or sounds (in spoken language) that can be used in communication because it has a meaning shared by the speakers of the same linguistic community. For example, in spoken Italian one hears the combination of sounds [bo], and in a written text one sees the combination of letters *boh*, and so it is known how to interpret it. It can be reformulated as *non lo so*. However, if it is used when communicating in another language, it will probably make no sense to the interlocutor. Take any Italian word and think whether the same combination of sounds can have a meaning in another language.

Here is a dictionary definition of the Italian word *parola*: “Nella teoria linguistica moderna, minima unità isolabile all’interno della frase, composta da uno o più fonemi, dotata di un significato autonomo fondamentale o di una funzione sintattica; anche, la sua rappresentazione grafica. Sinonimi: termine, vocabolo, voce” (Sabatini & Coletti’s Dictionary).

In the Italian definition, three parameters are used to describe a word: the form (*composta da uno o più fonemi*), its content (*dotata di un significato autonomo fondamentale*), and its role in a phrase (*una funzione sintattica*). Three questions can be formulated around these three parameters: 1) *What*