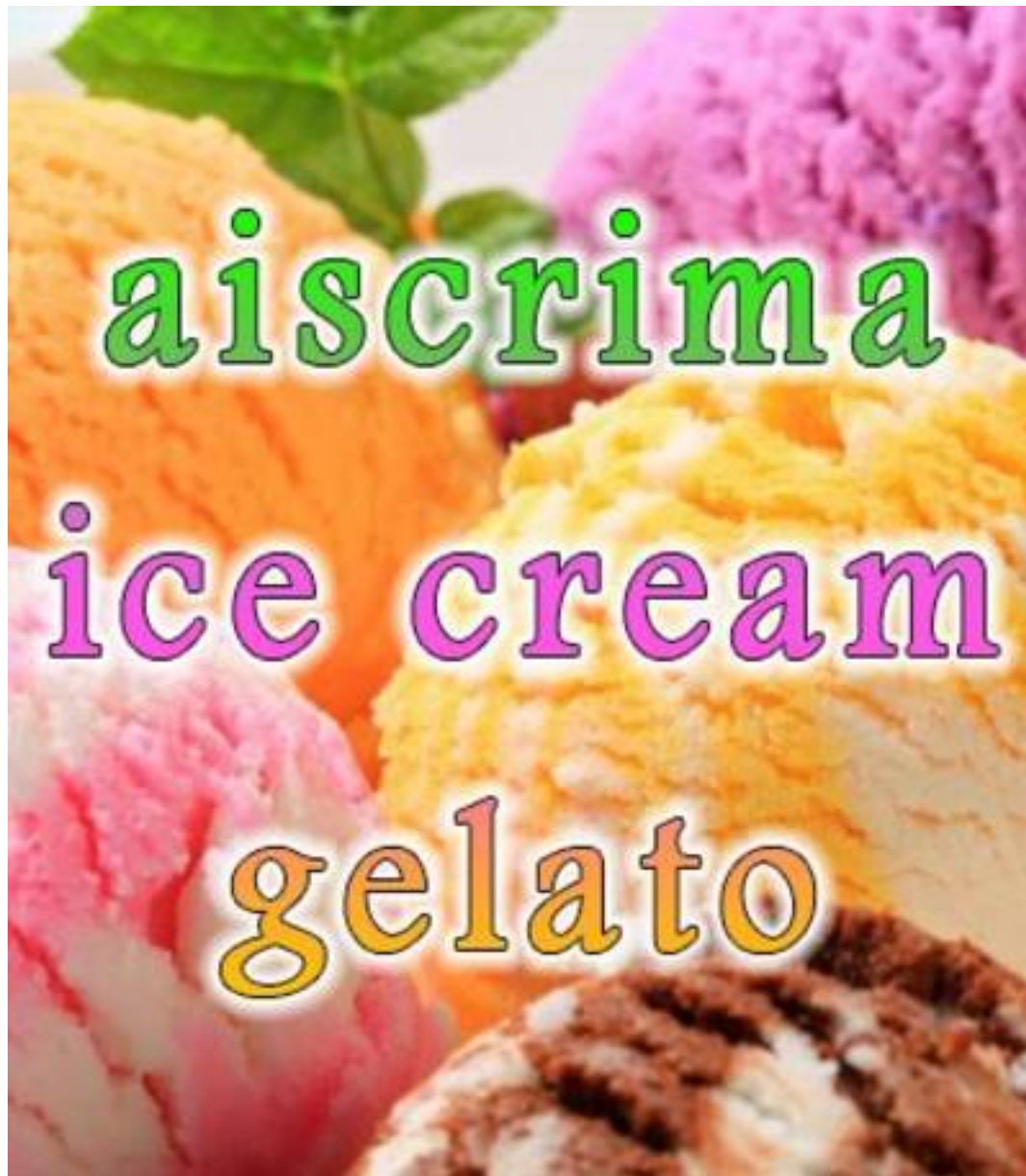




Italianese: It's Not Just for Immigrants Anymore

Traci Andrighetti (October 15, 2013)



As the use of italianese continues to increase in contemporary Italy, it's important to reflect on the humbler origins of this fascinating and often amusing language form.



The word *italiese* (*italiano* + *inglese*) was coined by Gianrenzo Clivio in 1975 to describe the mixture of Italian and English spoken by Italian immigrants in Canada. However, this term is also used to describe the Italianized English spoken in Italian immigrant communities in the United States, England, Australia and New Zealand. Adding to the general confusion about *italiese*, contemporary Italians residing in Italy use this term to refer to their own borrowings from English.

Made in Little Italy

Within the immigration context, *italiese* was the product of life in the Little Italies. These urban neighborhoods were largely populated by Southern Italian immigrants, most of whom spoke their local dialects and had little or no exposure to standard Italian. First-generation immigrants therefore faced two main linguistic obstacles: English and the often unintelligible dialects spoken by their Italian countrymen.

An Ethnic Dialect of Italian

Immigrants borrowed English words and phrases and incorporated them into their Italian speech whenever they were exposed to new objects and concepts for which there were no Italian-language equivalents. Some of the more well known examples include **checca** (Eng. cake; Ital. torta) and **storo** (Eng. store; Ital. negozio). They used these adopted terms within the family and in their communities. In the process, they created what [Marcel Danesi \(1985\)](#) [2] defines as an “ethnic dialect,” or “ethnolect,” of Italian that allowed immigrants from different towns and regions of Italy to communicate with one another.

Italianized English

In general, *italiese* consists of English that has undergone a process of nativization, or Italianization, which means that it has been morphologically and phonologically adapted to Italian. To put it more simply, *italiese* is English that has been made to look and sound like Italian. Nouns and adjectives therefore tend to reflect the standard Italian endings: -o and -e in the masculine singular, -a and -e in the feminine singular. Verbs almost exclusively feature the standard Italian -are ending.

Nouns

ciso (Eng. cheese; Ital. formaggio)

battirummi (Eng. bathroom; Ital. bagno)

pinabarra (Eng. peanut butter; Ital. burro d'arachide)

sonamabiccia (Eng. son of a bitch; Ital. figlio di puttana)

stritto (Eng. street; Ital. via)

Adjectives

api (Eng. happy; Ital. contento)

attrattivo (Eng. attractive; Ital. attraente)

bisi (Eng. busy; Ital. occupato)

cippe (Eng. cheap; Ital. economico)

smarto (Eng. smart; Ital. intelligente)



Verbs

beccappare (Eng. to back up (a car); Ital. fare marcia indietro)

frizare (Eng. to freeze; Ital. congelare)

casciare (Eng. to cash (a check); Ital. riscuotere)

leoffare (Eng. to lay off; Ital. licenziare)

squizare (Eng. to squeeze; Ital. spremere)

Other Forms

Italiane is also comprised of loanshifts, calques and approximations. Loanshifts are borrowings of Italian words that look like English but have very different meanings in Italy. Calques are simply word-for-word translations of English phrases into either Italian or Italiane. Some of the most entertaining examples of Italiane are the approximations, which are English words that have been spelled as they would appear in Italian.

Loanshifts

gioco (Eng. joke; Ital. game)

messa (Eng. mess; Ital. mass [in church])

principale (Eng. principal; Ital. main or chief)

soportare (Eng. to support [financially]; Ital. to withstand or bear)

tronco (Eng. trunk [for travel]; Ital. tree trunk)

Calques

aspetto per (Eng. I'm waiting for; Ital. aspetto)

fa senso (Eng. it makes sense; Ital. ha senso)

guardi bene (Eng. you look well [good]; Ital. stai benissimo)

io sono sette anni (Eng. I am seven years old; Ital. ho sette anni)

una capa di caffè (Eng. a cup of coffee; Ital. un caffè)

Approximations

ai calla iu becca (Eng. I'll call you back; Ital. ti richiamo)

ariappa (Eng. hurry up; Ital. sbrigati)

donguori (Eng. don't worry; Ital. non ti preoccupare)

taimanahaffa (Eng. time and a half (pay); Ital. straordinario)

tencsalotto (Eng. thanks a lot; Ital. grazie mille)



Regional Variants

The linguistic situation in the various Little Italies was somewhat similar to that of the Italian peninsula. While there was no standardized form of *italiese*, as is the case with the Italian language, there was a generalized form of the ethnolect with regional variants corresponding to the Italian dialects. [Danesi \(1985\)](#) [2] contends that it is therefore more correct to characterize the Italianized English spoken in Little Italies as Sicilian *italiese*, Friulian *italiese*, Calabrian *italiese*, and so forth. For example, the English word for a restaurant bill, which is *conto* in standard Italian, is *billo* in the general form of *italiese* but *billu* in the Calabrian *italiese*.

Italiane in the Bel Paese

In Italy, meanwhile, an Italian-born variant of *italiese*, also known as *itanglese*, has existed alongside its immigrant relatives for more than a century. However, the Italian *italiese* is not a product of immigration but rather of cultural exportation, particularly of the British and American cultures. And, despite the protests of linguistic purists who want to preserve the Italian language from further encroachment by English, the use of *italiese* is gathering momentum in Italy owing primarily to American advancements in technology and social media. Although Italians are more likely to borrow English words and phrases in their intact forms, for instance, *drink* and *coffee break*, Italian dictionaries such as Zingarelli and Garzanti now contain hundreds of Italianized English terms. Recent entries include:

Nouns

processore (processor)

seniore (sensor)

Verbs

bloggare (to blog)

bookmarkare (to bookmark [a website])

googlare (to Google)

sharare (to share [a file])

twittare (to tweet)

upgradare (to upgrade [software])

zippare (to zip [documents])

The Effects of Assimilation

Italiane united dialect-speaking immigrants abroad in much the same way that standard Italian united dialect-speaking Italians after the unification of Italy in 1861. Italians from different regions who couldn't communicate forged a common language, and consequently, a common identity. However, the tendency of Italian immigrants to successfully assimilate into their English-speaking communities has resulted in the near demise of *italiese* abroad. Ironically, Italians in Italy also show the same willingness to assimilate—into a global community dominated by English—which is the very reason that the Italian variant of *italiese* is thriving.

Author's Note: Most of the *italiese* in this article was taken from the [G.P. Clivio Online Dictionary of Italiane](#) [3], which is compiled by the University of Toronto's [Frank Iacubucci Centre for Italian](#)



[Canadian Studies](#) [4].

If you're interested in the Italianese of New York's Little Italy, please read [my post](#) [5] on the prize-winning novel [Vita](#) [6] by Melania G. Mazzucco.

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