

Losing in Translation

Jerry Krase (December 20, 2007)



Potentially amusing linguistic reflections on Ian Fisher's New York Times article on Italy's "funk" and responses to the article by some in the Italian press

Unlike most third-generation hyphenated-Americans, who are barely monolingual, I am not fluent in many other languages as well; Italian being only the best of a large collection of them. At 7 AM every weekday morning I stroll down the street to "Dizzies Finer Diner" where I read all the New York City daily newspapers, placing them carefully back in the rack when I am finished. So when, last Thursday (December 13, 2007), I perused [Ian Fisher's "In a Funk, Italy Sings an Aria of Disappointment" in \[2\]The New York Times](#) [2] I was more than a bit amused. His opening paragraph set the tone for the next two-thousand-five-hundred words: "All the world loves Italy because it is old but still glamorous. Because it eats and drinks well but is rarely fat or drunk," (devoutly to be wished?)... "But these days, for all the outside adoration and all of its innate strengths, Italy seems not to love itself." The funk was "--summed up in a recent poll: Italians, despite their claim to have mastered the art of living, say they are the least happy people in Western Europe." Even



Rome's mayor, Walter Veltroni, was quoted as saying something Jimmy Carter might have said better -- "There is more fear than hope." Because not understanding Italian, Italians, and Italy is not unusual in even the most exulted of American journals, I thought nothing more of it. After all, to be Italian is to be as was my Sicilian-American mother, pessimistic. That is until later that day.

My usual Thursday evening habit is making dinner for my wife, three daughters, occasionally their spouses, and always my grandchildren. After dinner, while they go upstairs to visit my wife's ninety-something parents it gets marvelously quieter. So, I put in my hearing aid and watch-listen to the evening news in a few of my bad languages. For the first ten minutes of RAI's evening news program, a long list of important persons seemed to be much less amused than I was about Ian's funky article. They sounded as though they were insulted, but then again perhaps it was I, and not The Times that misunderstood Italians.

On weekends, Dizzies opens late for brunch so I go to Jimmie's to get the papers (Newsday and Nowy Dziennik on Saturday and The New York Times and La Repubblica/Oggi on Sunday). Then I cross the street to Connecticut Muffin for coffee and quality reading time. There was nothing about Italy (Wloch) in Nowy Dziennik that I noticed. However, on the front page of La Repubblica, left bottom corner I found La Polemica. There, Vittorio Zucconi wrote something cleverish about America "seeing itself in the mirror of Italy" which segued on page nine to what looked like "sinking dollar, weak economy, and ghosts of "fatto in America." Vittorio's first paragraph was an even worse mirror image of America than Ian's was of Italia, as well as more sarcastic. There was also a word there for which I couldn't find another, "mucillagine" but I assume it wasn't nice. Facetiously he concluded with, "Courage, America, keep your head up and don't listen to newspapers and polls."

Knowing that there will be some out there who will claim that either Fisher and/or The Times, is biased against things Italian, I searched the Times website archive for Ian Fisher's 2007 articles on Italy and found in order: Romanian Premier Tries to Calm Italy After a Killing; Italy Struggles Under Truck Strike; 701 Planned Expulsions And 141 Arrests in Security Sweeps; Migrants Drown Off Sicily; 6 More With C.I.A. Sought in Kidnapping; For Italy's Premier, Endurance Pays Off, for Now; Italian President Visits Pope; Germany: Denial From Suspect in Italy, and Italy: U.S. Will Not Hand Over C.I.A. Suspects. Minus the calcio, not much different from La Repubblica. At least it's better than when a previous Times correspondent on Italy, Alessandra Stanley, seemed to think that reporting about the Vatican was the same as reporting about Italy.

I can't end this linguistic excursion without a note about Oggi, where I found an interesting piece on the recent establishment of a [Fiorello LaGuardia Day in New York City](#) [3]. Among the usual suspects at such events (ex-NYC Mayor Ed "I" Koch and current NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg), were La Guardia impersonator Tony Lo Bianco, La Guardia's great-granddaughter Katherine, and Gay Talese. Talese when asked replied that the contemporary figure, he thought most like LaGuardia was Rudolph Giuliani. Katherine Gabriela LaGuardia D'Addario seemed to me to demure as she offered that among the presidential candidates, Barak Obama might be a "little" like him. Perhaps it's the African connection. Were I asked, in Italian, for a political comparison for Rudy it would be with Silvio Berlusconi (minus the cosmetic surgery of course). If the question were asked in American, it would be Hillary Rodham, vis-à-vis married men fooling around while in public office. Then again my American is not perfect either.

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