

Inside the Words of Tullio De Mauro

Joelle Grosso (January 06, 2017)



One of Italy's most prominent linguist, Tullio De Mauro, passed away this week at the age of 84. He is known not only for being a distinguished linguist but also for being a public intellectual, professor, and politician.

Italy has recently lost one of their top scholars, [Tullio De Mauro](#) [2], the individual who is credited for introducing linguistics to the Italian people. Born in 1932 in the town of [Torre Annunziata](#) [3] near [Naples](#) [4], De Mauro would grow up to make monumental strides in the field of linguistics, a discipline that was little known at the time. He wrote his most important work at the age of 31 entitled "Linguistic History of Unified Italy," which explores the numerous Italian dialects and the standardization of the Italian language as we know it today. It doesn't aim to recount the history of the language but rather the history of the Italian people as a whole.

Most people don't realize that thousands of dialects originating from Latin were spoken long before the official [unification of Italy](#) [5] in 1861. The dialects of the Italian Peninsula are actually Romance languages in themselves alongside French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, etc. De Mauro described it best when he said that "the Italian language had to be taught as a second language given that most people spoke dialects." Standardized Italian is a relatively new phenomenon that was not ubiquitous prior to the unification and the rise of the Rai television network. Learning Italian was a drastic transition for all those who only spoke a dialect.

Today, most Italians are "bilingual" because they still know their local dialect, but it's without a doubt that many of these precious languages are quickly being lost. A popular quote of De Mauro that perfectly demonstrates his view on this reality is "the destruction of language is the premise for all future destruction."



Another topic that he spoke about frequently was "functional illiteracy" in Italy, a troubling problem that surprisingly still afflicts a fairly large part of the population. Unlike being completely illiterate, functional illiteracy is when a person has the ability to read and write in their native language but very poorly in terms of grammatical correctness and style. De Mauro thought the issue didn't have much to do with the educational institution itself but instead he was primarily concerned about what was going on outside of school and how language was treated in society.

On top of all of De Mauro's insightful written work, he was also a professor of general linguistics for the Humanities department at the [University of Rome "La Sapienza."](#) [6] and he held the position of Minister of Education from 2000-2001 under the government of [Giuliano Amato](#) [7]. Current President, [Sergio Mattarella](#) [8], remembered De Mauro as a "passionate intellectual, a fine scholar, and an Italian who never hesitated when asked to use his experiences and abilities to serve the institutions of the Republic."

His research was also appreciated outside of Italy as he frequently gave seminars in every corner of the world – from Japan to Argentina. Within Italy, he received several high honors throughout his lifetime including the Prize of the President of the Republic which was awarded to him in 2006 by then Italian President, [Giorgio Napolitano](#) [9]. He also accepted the Medal Meritorious of Science and Culture in 2007 as well as receiving many honorary degrees internationally. De Mauro will certainly be missed, but his work will live on forever through the complex study of language.

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