

Topic Page: [Italian language](#)



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Summary Article: **Italian language**

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member of the Romance group of the Italic subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages (see Romance languages). The official language of Italy and San Marino, and one of the official languages of Switzerland, Italian is spoken by about 58 million people in Italy, 30,000 in San Marino, 840,000 in Switzerland, another 1 million in other European countries, and approximately 5 million in North and South America. Historically, Italian is a daughter language of Latin (see Latin language). Northern Italian dialects are the Gallo-Italian—including Piedmontese, Ligurian, Lombard, and Emilian—and Venetian. Further south, the major dialects are Tuscan and various others from Umbria to Sicily. Sardinian, spoken on the island of Sardinia, is sufficiently distinct from other dialects to be considered by some a Romance language in its own right. The Rhaeto-Romance forms, similar to the dialects of northern Italy, are spoken in the border region between Italy and Switzerland. It is not known exactly when Italian could be distinguished from its parent tongue; however, no text in Italian is recorded before the 10th cent. A.D.

The idiom of Florence, one of the Tuscan dialects of Italian, became dominant from the end of the 13th cent. to the middle of the 14th cent., largely owing to the growing prestige of the city of Florence and the literary works written in the Florentine dialect during that period. These literary works included Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the vernacular writings of Petrarch and Boccaccio. Thus, although Italian had—and still has—a great many dialects, it was the culturally important idiom of Florence that in time gave rise to modern standard Italian. The dialect of the Italian capital, Rome, also has influenced modern standard Italian. The Roman alphabet is used for Italian. The employment of diacritics is limited to the grave (̀) and acute (´) accents, which sometimes serve to make clear where the stress of a word is to fall (as in *caffè*=coffee); they also serve to distinguish between homonyms (as with *ne* = “of it” or “of them,” but *né... né* = “neither...nor”). The pronunciation of the language follows the spelling very closely. Italian is often described both as the language of art and music and as the language best suited to singing. Since the Renaissance its general cultural importance has been considerable.

See Jordan, I. et al., *An Introduction to Romance Linguistics* (1970);

A. L. Lepschy; G. C. Lepschy, *The Italian Language Today* (1977);

M. Harris; N. Vincent, *The Romance Languages* (1988).

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