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Parliamo Italiano!

Il Quaderno di Sandrino



USING ACCENTS IN ITALIAN SYLLABLES BY SANDRO CUCCIA

As I've mentioned before in class, proper Italian pronunciation is of utmost importance. Fortunately, in Italian it's easy when compared to those learning English as a second language. English is a language with as many rules as there are exceptions to them! Most Italian vocabulary words are pronounced phonetically. That is, in almost all cases, ALL vowels and consonants are pronounced. Where vowels are concerned, if there is a slight change to its pronunciation, you will find the word will include accents (also referred to as *diacritical marks*), which will guide you to the proper Italian pronunciation. And, unlike other romance languages, modern Italian only has two types of accents – the **grave accent** is the most common in Italian (` as in *papà*), and the **acute accent** is used less frequently (´ as in *ventitré*).

When you read Italian, you will find it easy to sound words out. You will be happy to discover that you can pronounce Italian quite well. However, learning the **phonology** of words is more difficult. Phonology is the way you speak the words of a language out loud. When you are learning Italian, the most difficult part of phonology is knowing which syllable to stress. As an aside, our textbook shows us phonetic spellings in the first five chapters. Additionally, the syllables that you stress are indicated with upper-case letters. For example, the word *bambino* spelled phonetically is *bahm-BEE-noh* indicating the stress on the syllable *-bee-*. To help you when reading my articles, I will occasionally underline the syllable or vowel you stress, such as *bambino*, *appartamento* and *attimo*.

Now... as for accents, the only letters in Italian that have accents are vowels. No consonants have diacritical marks. There are five vowels in the Italian alphabet: **a, e, i, o** and **u**. Accents are more commonly found adorning **a, e,** and **i**.

There are several rules on *when* to apply accents when writing Italian, but that's for a more advanced article for another time. However, I will relate to you a couple of general rules to understand about reading accented words:

1. **Any vowel that is the last letter of a word may have a grave accent, (for example, the [è] in *caffè*).**
2. **Only the letter [e] can have the acute accent [é], (for example, *benché*).**

Here are some examples of pronunciation of the Italian accents. Place emphasis on the underlined syllables:

- à – *papà* – pa-PA
- è – *caffè* – kaf-FEH
- é – *perché* – per-KEH
- ì – *venerdì* – ven-ehr-DEE
- ò – *però* – per-OH
- ù – *virtù* – veer-TOO

While most Italian verbs without accents place emphasis on the penultimate syllable, what do you notice about these – and almost all – accented words? The accents are placed on the final syllable! In these cases, the accents are present because the stress is placed on the last syllable. Accented letters, other than ones at the end can be found in very few examples where there are two identically-spelled words but with different meanings and pronunciation. The accent is used for disambiguation. For example: (ancora [again] → àncora [anchor]; principi [princes] → principi [principles])

The difference between the Italian accents is simply *how the vowel is pronounced*. The grave accent (`) indicates a closed sound, whereas the acute accent (´) indicates an open sound. However, the difference between open and closed vowels is very subtle. For this reason, and because there are regional differences in how they are pronounced, I wouldn't be overly concerned about this aspect of Italian pronunciation.

By the way, in speaking Italian all my life, I found that I have always had to pay attention to the difference between the accented [è] and the unaccented [e]. Not only is the pronunciation different (open versus closed), but the stress of the syllable varies and, more importantly, the meaning changes. The accented version [è] is a verb (**essere**) as in “*Lei è bella*” (“She **is** beautiful.”) The unaccented version [e] is the conjunction “and” as in “*zia e cugino*” (“aunt **and** cousin”).

The proper use of accents can be of great assistance when it comes to learning to speak Italian with ease and ensuring the correct pronunciation. It should be noted, however, that there are only a handful of Italian words in which the accent can change meaning of the word in question. One important example: the [e] (= and), and [è] (= 2is), as noted above.

For many native English speakers, mastering the correct sound of Italian vowels can be difficult at first. However, once you have mastered these sounds, you will find that your Italian accent is much easier to understand and more “authentic sounding” overall. Most speakers of English pronounce their vowels closed and with an emphasis on the throat and nasal cavity. When practicing Italian, concentrate on pronouncing your vowels across the top of your mouth with an open throat. It's a peculiar image to have in your mind, but many have found that this works for them.

While learning Italian, your phonology and pronunciation can be greatly aided by learning with a native speaker. Watching Italian movies or listening to radio shows are a couple of great ways of exposing yourself to the language.

Students: Remember that in my Italian examples on handouts and presentation slides, I will often UNDERLINE syllables or single vowels that must be emphasized when pronouncing the words. (as in ‘mangia’).