

# THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE AND ITS DIALECTS



Dante is considered the father of the Italian language and one of the greatest poets of the Western world. His major work is *La divina commedia*.

The Italian language stems directly from Latin. As the authority of ancient Rome fragmented, its language, Latin, also broke apart and formed several European idioms. In the same way, numerous linguistic varieties, or dialects, took form within the Italian peninsula. They were the expressions of different centres of civilisation within the larger Italian world.

The dialect of Tuscany was assured linguistic supremacy by the political importance and geographic position of its principal city, Florence, and above all by the authority of the thirteenth-century Tuscan writers Dante, Petrarca, and Boccaccio. Each of these men wrote works of major literary significance in their native Tuscan dialect. Eventually, the Tuscan dialect became recognised as the official Italian language.

For many centuries, however, the Italian language remained an exclusively literary mode of expression, used only by learned people. The different dialects continued to be spoken, a situation favoured by the historical and political fragmentation of Italy, which remained divided into many separate city-states until the second-half of the nineteenth-century. The local dialect was often the official language of the court of that particular city-state. This was the case in Venice, a republic renowned for the skill of its diplomats. The eighteenth-century playwright Carlo Goldoni, who has been called by critics the Italian Molière, wrote many of his plays in Venetian. For example, in his dialect we find the word **schiao**, meaning *your servant*, which is derived from the Latin word for “slave”, *esclavum*. This is the origin of the international greeting **ciao**.

Today Italy has achieved political as well as linguistic unity, and with few exceptions, everyone speaks Italian. The dialects, however, remain very much alive. Indeed, most Italians may be considered bilingual because, in addition to speaking Italian, they also speak or at least understand the dialect of their own region or city.

The Italian language has a much more limited vocabulary than the English language. For example, the word **signore** is translated as *sir*, *mister* (Mr.), *gentleman* and *lord*. Similarly, the word **signora** corresponds to *lady*, *madam* and *missus* (Mrs.). The word **bello** means both *beautiful* and *handsome*; **casa** is both *house* and *home*.

The Italian language itself continues to evolve, reflecting the Italians' interchange with the world on a global basis and, in particular, with North America. Many words from English or derived from English have found their way into the everyday language of Italy. For example, the following words are common: **shopping**, **fast food**, **quiz** and **hamburger**. And you will immediately recognise new computer-related terms, such as the following: **mouse**, **clickare**, and **formattare**.