
False Italianisms in British and American English: A Meta-Lexicographic Analysis

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Abstract

Inspired by the existing literature on Italianisms, this work aims to investigate the presence of selected false Italianisms (or pseudo-Italianisms), that is *alfresco, bimbo, bologna, bravura, confetti, dildo, gondola, gonzo, inferno, latte, pepperoni, politico, presto, stiletto, studio, tutti-frutti, and vendetta*, in the English language through a meta-lexicographic analysis of the *OED* and the *Merriam-Webster*, authoritative dictionaries considered to be representative of British English and American English respectively. False Italianisms – which most English speakers believe to be purely Italian – are created when genuine lexical borrowings from Italian are so reinterpreted by a recipient language, English in this case, that native speakers of Italian would not recognize them as part of their own lexical inventory and would neither understand nor use. The creation of false Italianisms yields to new insights into the covert prestige attributed to the supposed donor language and culture.

1. Italianisms and false Italianisms

The phenomenon of Italianisms in the English language – a comprehensive account of which is provided in the *Dizionario di italianismi in francese, inglese, tedesco (DIFIT)* – has already been described by Lepschy and Lepschy (1999a, 1999b), Iamartino (2001, 2002, 2003), Pinnavaia (2001), and Cartago (2009). These scholarly works offer a detailed bird's eye view of Italianisms – both adapted and non-adapted – especially in British English and partly in American English, leaning towards a diachronic dimension and preferring a qualitative perspective. Inventories of Italianisms are mostly supplied by lexicographic resources and the key features of Italianisms are described by means of corpus-based queries.

Inspired by the existing literature on the topic, with particular reference to Lepschy and Lepschy (1999b: 191), Pinnavaia (2001: 106-107), Tosi (2001: 207), Iamartino (2002: 32, 2003: 215), Sanson (2002: 336), and Stammerjohann (2003: 94, 2008: xi), the present work aims to investigate the presence of false Italianisms – also labeled ‘pseudo-Italianisms’ (Birken-Silverman 2004: 97) – in the English language through a meta-lexicographic analysis of the *OED* and the *Merriam-Webster*, authoritative dictionaries considered to be representative of British English and American English respectively.

2. A definition of false Italianisms

False Italianisms – which most English speakers believe to be purely Italian – are created when genuine lexical borrowings from Italian, that is Italianisms, are so reinterpreted by a recipient language, English in this case, that native speakers of Italian would not recognize them as part of their own lexical inventory and would neither understand nor use. Interestingly, the creation of false Italianisms yields to new insights into the covert prestige attributed to the supposed donor language and culture.

Drawing on Furiassi (2010: 38-52), who devised a typology of false Anglicisms, it is assumed that false Italianisms are not just a sub-group of Italianisms, but independent lexical units generated by specific word-formation processes, either morphological or semantic. Morphological processes

include autonomous compounds (AC), for example *tutti-frutti* (*tutti* + *frutti*), autonomous derivatives (AD), for example *pepperoni* (*pepper* + *-oni*), compound ellipses (CE), for example *latte* (from *caffelatte*), and clippings (C), for example *dildo* (from *diletto*). Semantic processes mostly involve semantic shifts (SS), that is words which have a genuine Italian form but, once borrowed, acquire a new meaning in the English language (Pinnavaia 2001: 54), for example *stiletto*, and, to a lesser extent, toponyms (T), for example *bologna*.¹

3. False Italianisms in dictionaries

Since false Italianisms – and false borrowings in general – are not clearly identifiable due to the manifold labels assigned to them in dictionaries, the approach of this investigation is mostly qualitative and synchronic: this undertaking builds on the results of a previous analysis of false Italianisms in non-native varieties of English (Furiassi 2011) and expands on the results of a classification already made for false Anglicisms (Furiassi 2010). The list of false Italianisms included in Furiassi (2011: 454-455) and Furiassi (2010: 67) was extended and a total of 17 items, that is *alfresco*, *bimbo*, *bologna*, *bravura*, *confetti*, *dildo*, *gondola*, *gonzo*, *inferno*, *latte*, *pepperoni*, *politico*, *presto*, *stiletto*, *studio*, *tutti-frutti*, and *vendetta*, were looked up in the *OED* and the *Merriam-Webster*. The definitions provided by the *OED* and the *Merriam-Webster* were then checked against the definitions presented in the latest electronic editions of the following general dictionaries of the Italian language, that is *GDU*, *Treccani*, and *Zingarelli*, in order to verify that candidates are all used in English in a non-Italian sense.

The results of the meta-lexicographic analysis are summarized in Table 1. The first column lists the selected false Italianisms in alphabetical order, the second column identifies the word-formation processes which led to the creation of each false Italianism, the third and fourth columns show the non-Italian definitions extracted from the *OED* and the *Merriam-Webster* respectively, and the fifth column provides real Italian translation equivalents gathered from some authoritative Italian-English bilingual dictionaries, that is *Hazon*, *Oxford-Paravia*, *Picchi*, *Ragazzini*, and *Sansoni*. It is worth noting that in the *OED* column corresponding to the false Italianism *inferno* the label ‘n.f.’ (i.e. ‘not found’) is used since the *OED* records *inferno* only with its real Italian meaning, that is ‘hell; a place of torment or misery compared to hell’.²

Table 1. False Italianisms in the *OED* and the *Merriam-Webster*.

false Italianisms	word-formation processes	<i>OED</i> non-Italian definitions	<i>Merriam-Webster</i> non-Italian definitions	Italian translation equivalents
<i>alfresco</i>	SS	in the open air, open-air	in the open air, open-air	<i>all'aperto</i>
<i>bimbo</i>	SS	<i>slang</i> (orig. U.S.) a woman; esp. a whore; a young woman considered to be sexually attractive but of limited intelligence	<i>slang</i> : a woman of loose morals	<i>oca</i> (<i>giuliva</i>), <i>bambola</i>
<i>bologna</i>	T	= <i>baloney/boloney</i> : <i>slang</i> (orig. U.S.) humbug; nonsense	= <i>baloney</i> : <i>slang</i> pretentious nonsense; something false or insincere	<i>balle</i> , <i>frottole</i> , <i>fesserie</i> , <i>sciocchezze</i>
<i>bravura</i>	CE (from <i>pezzo di bravura</i>)	a passage or piece of music requiring great skill and spirit in its execution, written to task the artist's powers	florid brilliant virtuoso musical composition; the virtuosic execution of a musical composition or passage by a performer	<i>pezzo di bravura</i> , <i>virtuosismo</i>
<i>confetti</i>	SS	(in the U.K., U.S., etc.) esp. little discs, etc., of coloured paper thrown at the bride	tiny colored paper disks or paper streamers so made as to scatter readily when	<i>coriandoli</i>

		and bridegroom at weddings	thrown (as at carnivals, parties, weddings)	
<i>dildo</i>	C (from <i>diletto</i>)	an artificial penis used for female gratification	an object serving as a penis substitute for vaginal insertion	<i>fallo (artificiale), pene (artificiale)</i>
<i>gondola</i>	SS	the car attached to a ski-lift	an enclosed car suspended from a cable and used for transporting passengers; <i>especially</i> : one used as a ski lift	<i>cabinovia, funivia</i>
<i>gonzo</i>	SS	bizarre, crazy; far-fetched; a crazy person, a fool	= <i>far out</i> : marked by a considerable departure from the conventional or traditional	<i>bizzarro, pazzo, sciocco, stravagante</i>
<i>inferno</i>	SS	n.f.	intense heat, conflagration	<i>incendio (indomabile)</i>
<i>latte</i>	CE (from <i>caffelatte</i>)	= <i>caffè latte</i> : coffee made with more or less equal amounts of water and steamed milk; a drink of this	= <i>caffè latte</i> : espresso mixed with hot or steamed milk	<i>caffelatte, latte macchiato</i>
<i>peperoni (also peperoni)</i>	AD (<i>pepper + -oni</i>)	a kind of hard sausage originally made in Italy, consisting of beef and pork highly seasoned with pepper and other spices	a highly seasoned beef and pork sausage	<i>salame piccante</i>
<i>politico</i>	SS	politician: now chiefly <i>colloq.</i> and somewhat <i>derogatory</i>	= <i>politician</i> : one primarily interested in political offices or profits derived from them as a source of private gain often used disparagingly; one motivated by narrow (as group, sectional, or personal) and usually short-run interests as contrasted with the long-term welfare of the people as a whole	<i>politicante</i>
<i>presto</i>	SS	announcing the climax of a conjuring trick or a sudden transformation. Freq. in <i>hey presto</i>	in haste, quickly, immediately – used originally as a magician’s command	<i>ecco fatto, et voilà</i>
<i>stiletto</i>	SS	short for <i>stiletto heel</i> : a very narrow, high heel on women’s shoes, fashionable esp. in the 1950s; a shoe with such a heel	a high thin heel on women’s shoes that is narrower than a spike heel	<i>scarpa con tacco a spillo, tacco a spillo</i>
<i>studio</i>	SS	a flat containing a spacious room with large windows, which is or resembles an artist’s studio; more recently, a small one-roomed flat	an apartment having a room with high ceiling and large windows similar to or serving as an artist’s studio	<i>monocale</i>
<i>tutti-frutti</i>	AC (<i>tutti + frutti</i>)	a confection of mixed fruits; <i>spec.</i> a mixture of chopped preserved fruits, nuts, etc., used to flavour ice-cream; ice-cream so flavoured	a confection or ice cream containing chopped usually candied fruits	<i>con pezzettini di frutta fresca, secca o candita</i>
<i>vendetta</i>	SS	a family blood-feud, usually	blood feud, a prolonged	<i>faida</i>

		of a hereditary character, as customary among the inhabitants of Corsica and parts of Italy	feud marked by bitter hostility	
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4. Etymological notes

Both the *OED* and the *Merriam-Webster* indicate that Italian is the language that originated the false Italianisms included in Table 1 except in three cases, that is *bimbo*, *dildo*, and *gonzo*. As to *bimbo*, its Italian origin is specified only in the *OED*, while the *Merriam-Webster* indicates that the etymology is ‘unknown’. As far as the etymology of *dildo* is concerned, it is labeled ‘obscure’ in the *OED* and ‘unknown’ in the *Merriam-Webster*. However, Harper (2012) recognizes that *dildo* (dated 1590s) is ‘perhaps a corruption of It. *deletto* “delight”’, that is, more specifically, a medial clipping of the Italian word *diletto* (from 16th-century Italian *deletto*), which means ‘delight’, ‘enjoyment’ or ‘pleasure’ in English. This is the reason why *dildo* was considered for analysis and thus included in Table 1. Finally, the etymology of *gonzo* is ‘unknown’ according to the *Merriam-Webster*, although its Italian origin is recorded in the *OED*.

The candidate items *cello* and *terrazzo* – both attested in dictionaries of the Italian language and therefore not included in Table 1 – deserve further attention. The former, *cello*, the compound ellipsis of *violoncello*, is labeled in the *GDU* as ‘non com.’ (i.e. ‘not common’); the latter, *terrazzo*, is tagged in the *GDU* as ‘arch.’, (i.e. ‘archaic’). However, the fact that the English meanings of *cello* (i.e. ‘violoncello’) and *terrazzo* (i.e. ‘mosaic flooring’) provided in the *OED* and the *Merriam-Webster* are either rare or obsolete in Italian and that native speakers of Italian are not likely to recognize the English meanings of *cello* and *terrazzo*, unless further explanation or contextualization is provided, does not seem to be enough to consider them as false Italianisms, especially from a diachronic perspective.

5. Qualitative considerations

Following the typology described above, illustrative examples of selected prototypical false Italianisms will now be provided.

The autonomous compound (AC) *tutti-frutti* is coined by joining the content words *tutti* and *frutti*, which exist as independent lexical units in Italian. Although the meaning of the English compound, that is ‘a confection [...] containing chopped [...] fruits’ (*Merriam-Webster*), may be rather transparent to a native speaker of Italian, the phrase *con pezzi di frutta* (*Oxford-Paravia*) is the true lexicalization of the concept.

The autonomous derivative (AD) *pepperoni*, also spelled *peperoni* (*OED*, *Merriam-Webster*), is made by adding the Italian suffix *-oni* to the lexical item *pepe* (from Latin *piper*). In Italian *peperoni* is the plural of *peperone*, that is (sweet) *pepper* (*Oxford-Paravia*) in English. What makes *pepperoni/peperoni* a false Italianism is the fact that in English it means ‘a highly seasoned [...] sausage’ (*Merriam-Webster*), in which the seasoning is possibly made mostly of chili peppers. In fact, the real Italian equivalent is *salame piccante* (*Sansoni*).

The compound ellipsis (CE) *latte* derives from the Italian compound *caffelatte*, also spelled *caffellatte*, which is defined as ‘bevanda calda a base di latte con l’aggiunta di un po’ di caffè’ (*GDU*) in Italian. However, in Italian *latte* simply means ‘milk’, hot or cold, without any coffee in it, which contrasts the English definitions provided, that is ‘coffee made with more or less equal amounts of water and steamed milk’ (*OED*) and ‘espresso mixed with hot or steamed milk’

(*Merriam-Webster*). The real Italian equivalent of *latte* is *caffelatte* (*Picchi*), usually made with steamed milk, or *latte macchiato* (*Oxford-Paravia*), usually prepared with non-steamed milk.³

The medial clipping (C) *dildo*, from Italian *diletto* (Harper 2012), is in fact found in the *GDU* as an Anglicism (i.e. labeled ‘ingl.’) that entered the Italian vocabulary in 1997 and defined as ‘oggetto a forma di fallo usato per pratiche sessuali’. This would grant *dildo* the status of a false Italianism originally created in the English language and then reborrowed in Italian, as happened with the false Anglicism *slow food*, initially coined in the Italian language and later reborrowed in English.⁴ Italian translation equivalents of *dildo* are *fallo artificiale* (*Oxford-Paravia*) or *pene artificiale* (*Picchi, Ragazzini*).

The semantic shift (SS) *stiletto* refers to ‘arma bianca simile a un pugnale con lama molto sottile e acuminata’ (*GDU*) in Italian, that is *dagger* (*Oxford-Paravia*) in English. Conversely, in English *stiletto* – short for *stiletto heel* (*OED*) – refers to ‘a high thin heel on women’s shoes [...]’ (*Merriam-Webster*), that is *scarpa con tacco a spillo* (*Oxford-Paravia*) in Italian. However, *stiletto*, which is not recorded in the 2000 edition of the *GDU* with the meaning of ‘tacco a spillo’, that is *spike heel* (*Oxford-Paravia, Ragazzini*), is in fact present – though marked as a low-frequency item and labeled ‘BU’ (i.e. ‘basso uso’) – in the 2007 edition. Consequently, as in the case of *dildo*, *stiletto* is another false Italianism created in English that has been recently reborrowed in Italian.

The toponym *bologna* (T) is used in Italian – and in English – to refer to ‘a town in Italy’ (*OED*), with a capital letter, or to *mortadella* (*GDU*), that is *Bologna sausage* (*Oxford-Paravia*) in English. In English, although the preferred spelling is *baloney* or *boloney*, *bologna* is also used as a ‘slang’ (*OED, Merriam-Webster*) synonym of *humbug* (*OED*) or *pretentious nonsense* (*Merriam-Webster*), that is *frottole* or *fesserie* (*Oxford-Paravia*) in Italian.

6. Conclusion

As a sign of lexical creativity in present-day English, false Italianisms run concurrently to the phenomenon of real lexical borrowings from Italian, that is Italianisms, which are widespread in the semantic fields of classical music, food, and architecture (Furiassi 2011: 454). In addition, the present work has shown that the coinage of false Italianisms is so dynamic that, in cases such as *bimbo*, *dildo*, and *gonzo*, their transient nature makes it difficult for the lexicographer to pin down their origin and evolution over time.

It goes without saying that this type of research is constantly in progress since new false Italianisms are being coined – some of which may either rapidly disappear or gain a long-lasting status in the English vocabulary. Although quantitatively limited – false Italianisms indeed constitute a very small portion of English lexis – the inventory presented in this article is still to be considered symptomatic of the complex phenomenon of false Italianisms at large, which further confirms the influence of Italian on the English language and culture.

Finally, the following set of desiderata, once met, may enrich the meta-lexicographic analysis carried out so far. On the one hand, it would be interesting to verify whether the list of false Italianisms selected could be expanded by means of a more accurate analysis of lexicographic resources. On the other hand, a further investigation of false Italianisms in British and American English could be carried out by checking their usage patterns and frequency of occurrence in the *British National Corpus (BNC)* and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*. The data gathered through the analysis of the *BNC* and the *COCA* would be particularly useful in shedding light on the quantitative differences in the use of false Italianisms in the two varieties of English taken into account. Finally, examples of false Italianisms in English could be extracted from the corpora considered in order to show authentic usage contexts.

All in all, being aware of the existence of false Italianisms on the part of English speakers would help avoid misunderstandings, such as ordering a *pepperoni* pizza and a *latte* in an Italian restaurant and being served a pizza with sweet peppers and plain hot milk.

Notes

¹ The semantic classification devised by Furiassi (2010: 44-52) also includes eponyms (E) and generic trademarks (GT). However, no instances of false Italianisms created through eponymy or genericness have been found in English.

² The following dictionaries were consulted on line: *Hazon* at <http://garzantilinguistica.sapere.it>, *Merriam-Webster* at <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com>, *OED* at <http://www.oed.com>, *Picchi* at <http://dizionari.hoepli.it>, *Ragazzini* at <http://www.dizionari.zanichelli.it>, *Sansoni* at http://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario_inglese, *Treccani* at <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario>, and *Zingarelli* at <http://www.dizionari.zanichelli.it>. Special thanks are due to Massimo Sturiale (*Università degli Studi di Catania*) for precious suggestions on the retrieval of material.

³ It is curious to notice that the *Ragazzini* provides *caffè espresso con uno schizzo di latte schiumoso* as the Italian translation equivalent of *latte*. This translation seems to refer to what in Italian is commonly known as *caffè macchiato*. However, *caffè macchiato* in Italian corresponds to *espresso macchiato* (or just *macchiato*) – not to *latte* – in English.

⁴ See Furiassi (2010: 70-71) for further details on the status of *slow food* as a false Anglicism created in Italian and reborrowed in English.

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