



**A Viewer's Glossary
for
Italian, Southern Italian and Sicilian Dialect
Phrases and Naughty Words**

by Greg Gagliano

A Guide for Midwesterners and other *Madigans* of Non-Italian Descent

This is the area of New Jersey where "The Sopranos" takes place.



Note that the Soprano family is not Sicilian given that Sicilians are most often associated with the Mafia.



A Quickie Guide to Italian Pronunciation

Vowels:

All vowel sounds are pronounced. No "silent e" as in English.

Vowels are pure e.g. - "I" sounds like the "I" in "Italian". They do not have a compound sound like the "I" in the English which has a "long I" followed by a "long E", that is, we don't say "Eye talian".

Diphthongs and Consonants:

ci, ce make the English "chi, che" sound (like "checkers")

gi, ge make the English "j" sound (like "jelly")

zz makes the English "tz" sound (like "pizza" or "pits")

s makes the English "z" if there is a vowel on either side of the "s", otherwise it makes the usual English "s" sound

ss makes the English "s" sound

sci, sce makes the English "sh" sound (like "she" and "shell")

gn makes the "nya" sound as in "Onion"

gli makes a sound similar to the "ill" in "Million"

chi, che make the English "k" sound (like "kiwi" and "ketchup")

ghi, ghe make the English "hard g" sound (like "giddy" and "get")

ho, ha have a silent "h" so only the vowel is heard (as in English "oh" and "ah")

Accent Marks:

Hey, this is just a quickie guide so let's not worry about these. ☺

GLOSSARY

Nota bene: Italian is a very expressive and subtle language. The exact meaning of a word is sometimes difficult to translate since meanings can change based on the context of the word and inflection of voice. The definitions presented here are generalizations.

A *fa Nabila* – (Southern Italian dialect) – literally "Go to Naples", generally used as "Go to hell" since Naples at one time was not considered a very nice place.

Abasta! – (Southern Italian dialect) – Enough!

Agita – (Southern Italian dialect) – heart burn, indigestion.

A *managia* – (Southern Italian dialect) – shucks, shoot, damn, darn, etc. Sometimes pronounced "manugia" or "manegia".

Antipasto – (Italian) – literally "before the meal", refers to assorted Italian appetizers generally consisting of roasted sweet red peppers; meats such as salami, cappicola, and prosciutto; cheeses such as provolone and gorgonzola; marinated artichoke hearts; seafood such as anchovies, squid and tuna; and Italian bread (or snack crackers). Oh, and wine... don't forget the wine.

Baccalà – (Italian) – salt cod, but often used by Southern Italians as an insult meaning fool, idiot.

Bizzuoca – (Southern Italian dialect) – bigoted woman.

Braccioni – (Italian) – thinly sliced flank steak which is rolled and filled with cheese, bread crumbs, parsley, garlic and sometimes *pignoli* (pine nuts). Served as a side dish with pasta, it is often pronounced "bra joel" in dialect form.

Buona fortuna – (Italian)– good luck.

Cagherone – (Southern Italian dialect) – dialect form of *chiacchierone* meaning big mouth, big talker, blow hard, babbler.

Calzone – (Southern Italian dialect) – a type of filled bread/pizza dough. Filling depends on the region, but most Americans are familiar with such fillings as sausage, peppers, cheese with tomato sauce.

Cannoli – (Italian) – pastry shell filled with flavored, sweetened ricotta cheese.

Capo regio – (Italian) – literally "head of a region" and gangster-speak for a boss.

Capitan – dialectized form of "capitano" which means captain. Gangster-speak for a boss.

Cappicola – (Italian) – spiced Italian ham, also dialecized as "cap i coal" or "capa gool".

Cavatelli – (Italian) – a type of pasta in the shape of small, smooth pea pods.

Cidrùle – (Southern Italian dialect) – cucumber or stupid (when used as an insult), pronounced "chi drool eh".

Ciuccio – (Southern Italian dialect) – jackass, often pronounced "chooch".

Come stai? – (Italian) – How are you?

Come zee bell. – (Sicilian dialect) – How beautiful.

Cumare – (Southern Italian dialect) – mistress, also pronounced as "coo mahd" or "goo mahd".

Faccia brutta – (Italian) – an insult literally meaning "ugly face."

Faccia questa cosi – (Italian) – literally "[You have] a face like this" where "this" is expressed via pointing to some object or using descriptive hand gestures.

Fenucca – (Southern Italian dialect) – gay, fag, often pronounced "fenook", and based on the Italian word for fennel ("finocchio") which can also be used, in context, to mean homosexual. Supposedly, the use of "finocchio" for "gay" has roots in the middle ages, homosexuals were burned at the stake and fennel seeds were sprinkled on the embers to help cover the stench.

Fiori – (Italian) - flowers.

Fungule – (Southern Italian dialect) – fuck. Usually pronounced "fung gool".

Gaguzza – (Southern Italian dialect) – squash or zucchini (or the flowers of these which are fried and used in omelets), often used as a term for butt, behind, rear end. Often pronounced "ga gootz" or "ca gootz" or "goo gootz".

Gavone – (Southern Italian dialect) – idiot, lazy good-for-nothing; sometimes pronounced "cavone" or "cafone".

Giamope – (Southern Italian dialect?) – idiot, lame brain, half-wit. Sometimes pronounced "ja mook".

Goomba – (Southern Italian dialect) – dialect form of "compaesano" meaning compatriot, fellow countryman, comrade.

Madigan – (Southern Italian dialect) – literally "American," used to describe any American of non-Italian descent. Often pronounced "Merigone".

Malocchio – (Italian) – rhymes with Pinocchio, literally means "the evil eye" and is an Italian curse. Sometimes dialecized as "mal oik" or "mal oak".

Mangia – (Italian) – [You] eat; a common command in Italo-American households.

Marone – (Southern Italian dialect) – literally "Madonna" (i.e. – the Blessed Virgin Mary, not the pop star), generally used as "damn" or "damn it". Sometimes pronounced "ma don".

Mulignon – (Southern Italian dialect) – a black person, sometimes used in the same context as "nigger"; pronounced "mool in yon", often shortened to "moolie".

Musciada – (Southern Italian dialect) – usually pronounced "moosh ahd", meaning mushy, as in over-cooked pasta (yuck!).

Napoleon – (French) – cream-filled, filo dough pastries topped with white and chocolate icing in a zigzag pattern. Although these are of French origin, they are almost always found in Italian pastry shops.

Paesano - (Italian) - form of *compaesano*; see **goomba**. Often pronounced "pie zan" and commonly used by Italo-Americans.

Pastina – (Italian) – the smallest pasta, shape like little stars, used in soup or served plain with a little milk and butter; fed to kids, sick people and really old people since it doesn't require chewing and is easily digestible. "Pasteen" in dialect.

Pazzo – (Italian) – crazy, often dialecized as "obatz" or "ubatz" when meaning "you're crazy".

Poveretta – (Italian) – unfortunate one, pauper.

Principessa – (Italian) – princess.

Puttana – (Italian) – whore.

Puzzi – (Sicilian dialect) – stink, bad smell, sometimes used as "shit".

Ricotta – (Italian) – soft, re-cooked cheese, often pronounced "ri gawt" in dialect.

Salsiccia – (Italian) – sausage.

Salute a cent'anno – (Italian) – traditional Italian toast meaning "health for 100 years." Often pronounced as "saloot a chin don".

Scecco (Sicilian) – jackass, also *scecchino* (little jackass).

Schifosa (Southern Italian Dialect) – dirty, or dirty, lousy, rotten when referring to a person.

Sfacime – (Southern Italian dialect) – literally "sperm of the devil", used loosely to describe somebody as a bum, but much, much worse. A really naughty, bad word. Often pronounced "fa cheem".

Si – (Italian) – yes. And *no* means no. No glossary would be complete without them.

Spostata – (Southern Italian dialect) – jerk, retard.

“Stoo gatz” – (Southern Italian dialect) – dialect form of “questo cazzo” literally meaning “this dick” but often used as “yeah right,” or “forget it,” or “fuck it.” Note that Tony’s boat is named “Stugotz”.

Stunade - (Southern Italian dialect) – stupid, often pronounced as "stoo nod."

Sta ta zee – (Sicilian dialect) – be quiet, shut up.

Svogliatelle – (Italian) – type of pastry made of thinly layered dough (like filo) that looks like a clam shell, often pronounced as "svolia tell".

Tizzuna – (Sicilian dialect) – dirty, generally used as a derogatory term for a black person, sometimes pronounced "tit soon".

Va fungool – (Southern Italian dialect) – go fuck [yourself].

“Whyos” – (American slang) – the Whyos (“Why-oh’s”) were one of five of five major gangs in New York City, specifically Manhattan, in the late 19th Century. Though not an Italian-based word, it was used frequently in the show beginning in the third season.

Zabaglione – (Italian) – a very soft wine custard usually served over fruit or pound cake.

Unknown Terms (possibly from an unfamiliar dialect or "made up")

Borabila

Sinuce ("sinooch")

Other interesting tidbits...

Note that the Sopranos occasionally use Sicilian dialect although their roots are in Avellino (near Naples) which means their native dialect is Campano. The use of a dialect other than their own is unusual. Most of the expressions used on the show are found in the Campano, Pugliese, Lucano, Salentino, and Calabrese dialects. Sicily, in essence, has a language all its own.

THE ITALIAN DIALECTS



The use of hereditary family names (surnames) in Italy is relatively recent (about 400 years). Most names are descriptive and often have roots in the names of people, places or things.

Soprano is an uncommon Italian surname. Oddly, it is not derived from the Italian word "soprano" which is the highest singing voice of a woman or young boy. It may take meaning from the root word, "sopra" means "over" as in "over the top".

Dr. Melfi's surname is a derivative of the name La Malfa which comes from the Arabic word for "port" (*al-marfa*). Names derived from Arabic are most common in Sicily and

extreme southern Italy since these areas were invaded and ruled by the Byzantines (~500 AD) and the Saracens from Africa (827 AD) until they were expelled by the Normans (who were on their way to the Crusades) in 1046 AD.

Christopher Moltisanti has an occupational surname (ecclesiastical) meaning "many saints". His character needs help from as many saints as he can get.

Pussy Bompensiero's surname means "good thinker". A bit of comic irony for this character! It would be far more interesting to know how he got his first name.

Artie Bucco's surname is a derivation of *bocco* meaning "simpleton". The name seems to fit his character pretty well.

Uncle Junior's given name, Corrado ("Conrad" in English), is more commonly found as a surname derived from Spanish. Names with Spanish origins are somewhat common in southern Italy since these areas were invaded by Charles V of Spain in 1515 as part of a division of the Italian peninsula with Valois Francis I of France. Spain ruled over southern Italy until the War of Spanish Succession (1701 - 1714) when the region fell under the control of Austria.

Dr. Cusimano's name has Spanish origins where "Cusi" is patronymical and "Mano" refers to "the hand". Interestingly, *mano* = hand is the same in Italian and Spanish, yet it is a word taken from the Greek language.

Like Uncle Junior and Dr. Cusimano, Greg Gagliano's surname is derived from a Spanish name (Gallo). Gagliano is a variation of the name Galliano which refers to "rooster" in the sense of strutter, bully, or lady-killer. Apparently, one of his ancestors loved to strut his stuff... or maybe he was simply a chicken farmer.

The Newark Star-Ledger (referred to on the show as "the Star Ledger") is New Jersey's largest newspaper and serves the northern half of the state (though many people simply get the NJ edition of the NY Daily News or NY Times).

Glassboro State - Tony's daughter, Meadow, jokes that she'll end up at Glassboro State which is one of several state colleges in New Jersey. Glassboro is located in the southwestern part of the state and is pretty much considered a school of "last resort". Interestingly, Glassboro State College was given a \$100 million donation by Henry and Betty Rowan in 1992 and the college was renamed Rowan University in their honor (hell, I'd change my name for \$100 million!). Apparently, like me, the show's writers didn't know about the name change and used Glassboro State in the script.

Bloomfield - Tony negotiates with Uncle Junior to get control of the union in Bloomfield in return for Junior becoming the *padrone* (head) of the "family business". Bloomfield is a heavily populated, industrial, blue collar town about 5 miles north of Newark. It wasn't such a bad place to live in the '50s and '60s until the race riots of 1968.

Pork store - the Soprano gang is always hanging out at a pork store. In ethnic, inner-city Italian neighborhoods (those populated originally by immigrants), there were no supermarkets, but rather specialty stores. There was the pork store for pork products, a butcher for beef, a poulterer for chicken, ducks, geese, and turkeys (and occasionally pigeons), a dairy store (*latticino*), a fish market (*pescivendolo*), a green grocer, a pasta store, a bread bakery (*panettiere*), and a pastry bakery (*pasticceria*) for pastry and cookies. Before the days of pizzerias (pre-1950s), pizza was made and sold at bread bakeries (and only Italian-Americans knew about it).

Peppers and Eggs - during one scene in Uncle Junior's office, lunches are delivered and one guy got a peppers and eggs sandwich. Peppers and eggs is a very common, very delicious, southern Italian *frittata* (omelet) made with sautéed or roasted sweet peppers (and sometimes onions). It is typically served on Italian bread (or a hard roll... which you can't get in the Midwest for some reason) for lunch or as a side dish with dinner. Interestingly, this dish as well as the other common *frittata*, namely, potatoes and eggs, is rarely found in restaurants.

Vinyl slip covers - during a flashback to Tony's childhood, the scene clearly showed all the living room furniture covered with vinyl slip covers. I'm not sure why, but the use of these furniture protectors" was very typical of Italian-American households in the 1960s. Thankfully, my parents didn't have them, but my sister and my aunt did. The thought of my thighs sticking to the seat cushion remains vivid.

Internet site - in one episode Meadow (Tony's daughter) shows Anthony Jr. a mobster web site which has their father's rap sheet. In fact, such a [web site](#) exists!

About the author: *Though very proud of his Italian ancestry, Greg Gagliano will tell you that he is first and foremost an American. He speaks and writes just enough Italian to get into trouble and/or make a fool of himself. A Rutgers University alum (as is James Gandolfini), Mr. Gagliano is an environmental toxicologist by profession and a writer/guitarist by avocation. In addition to "The Sopranos: A Viewer's Glossary", he has written numerous articles for [20th Century Guitar Magazine](#) where he is a Senior Contributing Editor. He also served as technical editor for the book **Ampeg: The Story Behind the Sound**. [A full bibliography](#) can be found at [his website](#).*

Saluti a tutti!