

# **It's so easy to get words wrong**

by Sabine Eiche

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When I learned to speak English as a child, my main bugbear was pronunciation, not vocabulary. When I moved to Florence and learned Italian, my biggest problem was coming out with the right word at the right time. It required great concentration since some words are spelled the same except for the last letter, and that itsy-bitsy, final vowel has the power to change the meaning completely. Not that pronunciation doesn't have its perils as well – there are a few words that are spelled exactly the same, but whose sense depends on how you pronounce them.

Shopping was a nerve-wracking business at first. If a self-serve store didn't have what I wanted, I had to confront a salesclerk in a shop. Once I needed an outsize envelope, "busta" in Italian. I headed to via Condotta, where all the stationery shops used to be. As I walked, I kept repeating "busta" to myself. I did not want to get mixed up and put an "o" in place of the "a" at the end of that word. Of course, some mysterious impulse made me do just that, so instead of a "busta grande" I asked the stationer for a "busto grande" – in other words, a large girdle.

Utility bills were paid at the post office, which was always a jungle of queues. When I inquired where I had to queue to pay for my telephone bill – the "canone" – I pronounced the word with the stress on the second syllable, not the first, and thus effectively asked where I could pay for my big, bad dog.

Those kinds of kinks soon got ironed out, but they left the door wide open for others. Until I felt comfortably fluent in Italian, I would mentally form my

sentences in English and then translate them directly into Italian. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

One day I went to the butcher and requested a piece of meat. I emphasized that it had to be tender. The butcher struggled to suppress a laugh. Then, gathering up a piece of meat in his arms and rocking it as if it were a baby, he cooed, "This one is VERY tender." That almost brought the house down. I had, of course, used the wrong word – I'd said "tenera," which means tender, as in loving. In Italian, meat is not tender, but soft, "morbida."

Before moving to Italy, I knew pineapple only out of the can, in circular slices with a hole in the middle for whipped cream. So when I spotted real pineapples at the San Lorenzo market, I had no idea how they were to be eaten. "Come si mangia?" I asked the man at the stand. He looked startled. Just my luck that he was the kind of person who took everything literally. What I'd wanted was instructions about how to prepare the pineapple for eating. But in fact I'd omitted a pronoun and asked, "How does one eat?" His response was to motion two fingers towards his open mouth and say, "Si mette in boca," "One puts in the mouth."

Oh, well – if my blunders entertained the Italians, so their attempts to translate restaurant menus into English entertained me.