

The Italian Language Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Catia Santi interviews Claudio Manella

Claudio Manella is regarded as one of the main authors of textbooks for students of Italian as a second language. A linguist, a creative writer, and a contemporary historian, he has published extensively on cooperation movements and Italian diaspora between the late XIX century and World War I; among his books on these last two topics are *La grande avventura* (Locarno: Dadò, 1993) and *Le bande svizzere* (Milan: Mur-sia, 1998). On learning Italian as a second or third language, he has written and edited many texts, such as *Ecco! Grammatica italiana, Sì! L'Italiano in mano, Come&perché, Italiano plus*, all of which have been published by Progetto Lingua Edizioni; most of them are now regarded as “classics” by both students and teachers of Italian.

For more than twenty years Professor Manella has been teaching and researching in this field of study. In addition to founding and coordinating a number of associations and clubs on literature and film studies, he is President of AILA (Accademia Italiana di Linguistica Applicata). After several years of work, he published *Amico. Dizionario italiano* in 2019, the first Italian language dictionary specifically conceived for non-Italian users. This work has been widely praised by experts in this field. Professor Manella lives and works in Florence

Professor Claudio Manella, could you please tell us about your first book and why you wrote it?

My first book was on Italian verbs. As such, it was titled *Guida ai verbi italiani* and it filled a gap among reference books. It turned out to be very successful, so much so that the publishing house immediately printed a second edition; eventually, many more followed. Significantly, this book is still in print, like all my other books of this kind.

I'm curious to hear about your passage from author to publisher, when you launched Progetto Lingua Edizioni back in 1998.

Yes, Progetto Lingua Edizioni was born on February 14th (Valentine's Day), 1998. In a sense, it had to happen. The books I wrote were selling so well that it became necessary to "protect" them against excessive photocopying, as is often the case with publications of this nature. And so, I thought of setting up an official structure to that purpose. A book like *Ecco! Grammatica italiana* (which has been printed no fewer than 40 times and is now available in five different languages) had to be protected this way. Only a real publishing house can do this. This is just one among many examples I could give. That is why Progetto Lingua Edizioni started. It currently has more than thirty books in print (which can be purchased both online and in bookstores), all of them on learning the Italian language.

Why writing more than thirty books on the Italian language?

I think it is necessary. Only by providing good books (that is, texts by teachers who have decades of hands-on experience) can one satisfy a request that today comes from literally all over the world. Let's not forget that Italian is one of the most-studied languages; as such, it is becoming a true "bridge language." For this reason, Italian deserves to be presented and taught in the best way possible to those who wish to learn it.

Today everything is becoming virtual and digital. How are your books reacting to this crucial change?

We should not consider books as something obsolete. That would be a huge mistake. More specifically, books without drawings, photos, and colored images of any sort are meant to emphasize the written text and draw the readers' attention to it. It is the written text that they must understand and learn. Clearly, that does not mean that images of various

kinds cannot serve as visual aids; yet, they are not supposed to be the 'essence' of a language book, thus replacing its words.

So, do you think that paper books have a future in the language-learning field?

Recent scientific research shows that studying on paper books vs. e-books is more effective and less stressful. My in-class experience confirms this. It is a fact. So, long live paper books!

How would you sum up your ten-year-work on *Amico*, the dictionary you published in 2019? And why did you choose this title?

Amico. Dizionario di Italiano is an act of love to this beautiful language. I must admit that writing it was far from easy. There were no previous models to rely on. This is the first dictionary ever designed for students of Italian as a second language. It also takes a good deal of courage and, maybe, folly to write a traditional (that is, paper, not online) dictionary today. To me, writing it was a challenge, a sort of fascinating trip through words, a trip, I'd like to add, that I decided to share with my students and the broader, international community of all those who wish to learn Italian. Every single word in the dictionary is explained in a simple, direct, and clear way, as a good teacher would do in class. This is what the title alludes to: a true friend, a classmate (maybe a little nerdy, if you will) who explains in simple words what we do not know or have a hard time understanding.

Based on your experience, why do most people wish to learn Italian?

There can be many reasons. Yet, what is common to all learners is in my opinion the pleasure one feels when speaking Dante's language. This is good news for all; if so many people study this language *just* because it

is beautiful (instead of necessary, useful in the job market or for any other practical reasons) it means there is hope for the future. I mean, a future in which joy, pleasure, and beauty play a leading role, instead of anxiety, suffering, and war. Trust me when I say that only beauty can save a world in crisis. I'd like to add that studying Italian in Florence is an extraordinary experience, that I sincerely recommend to all those who wish to enjoy the Italian language while immersing themselves in this city's dazzling beauty.

Who studies Italian today?

Everyone studies Italian. My students' age range is between 15 and 90. And they all approach this language with the same enthusiasm, happy to learn something that is good for them, both mentally and physically.

We now live in a global, homogeneous culture. What future do you see for the Italian language in a context like that?

Italian has a great future, like anything that is not standardized by a kind of globalization that tends to obliterate differences, leveling everything off and suppressing originality. I think all forms of Italian excellence will play a crucial role in the world to come. We are ready to do our part. So, I wish a good Italian language experience to all!