

## Isabel Miller, Grinnell College Coluccio Salutati Essay

One night at dinner, I held up a little spoon that my host mother had given to me for the fruit Macedonia.

“Che cos’è?” I asked.

“Un cucchiaino,” she said, and this was a revelation.

What fascinated me was not the precision of adding a diminutive suffix to an existing word and thereby creating a new word, it was instead how overlooked this phenomenon is. The specificity with which we name small, insignificant objects is astounding to me, and its importance dangerously overlooked.

I encountered word after word that I’d always considered trivial that became, in an instant, the crux of a conversation in Italian. In English, they were unobtrusive and easily ignored, but they were daunting in Italian because, without a dictionary or at least a makeshift game of Pictionary, I had no way to say them. *Puddle*, for example. A pool of water in the ground, I thought I said as I pulled off my soaked shoes, and my host mother squinted suspiciously at me until I realized I’d used the word for swimming pool.

There were simple ways to explain bigger concepts through circumlocution. School words were easy. “I have so many papers I must need to compose this week. Tomorrow we shall walk around the church.” I would say when I had exams or a site visit. Emotions could be communicated with a facial expression. “I am...” I would say, frowning or laughing, and instantly be given the words for anger or amusement. Expressing desire or liking something was easily accomplished with reflexive verbs and direct objects, all of which I acquired in a classroom. It was the tiny things; they tripped me up every single time.

Not knowing the word for *bottle-opener*, I spent ten minutes directing a shopkeeper as she pointed at objects in her store’s window.

“Un po’ più sinistra,” I murmured apologetically over and over as she tried to figure out what I’d meant by “small thing that is for open.”

It wasn’t that I was embarrassed to refer to a pastry as “that little chocolate sandwich you have there” or ashamed to learn that the way I’d been saying *camera* actually meant, “photograph room.” These little words that I didn’t know were menacing to me because they robbed me of a certain alacrity that I’d taken for granted in my native language for probably my whole life. Instead of an easy linguistic glide between *coat-hanger* or *squeegee* and their respective sentences, I was forced into a set of verbal gymnastics hell-bent on messy approximation. While describing both a toothpick and a thumbtack as “a very tiny sharp knife” lent a measure of drama to a kitchen or home-office situation, the direness of the words I had to use was exhausting. Without my permission, events I described became full of dastardly doings.

“The fork has thrown itself off the table,” I announced at dinner, and my host family regarded the suicidal utensil lying by my feet. It seemed that ninety percent of my working Italian vocabulary described people or things bigger than people. Jobs, machines, streets, classes—all of these I could talk about without sounding theatrical. Anything small or simple just became the diminutive version of something more distinguished. A field trip became a short journey, ice-skates were shoes that could cut. My attempts had the freakish result of making me sound both idiotic and Chaucerian, but I came to quietly realize that language is very seldom about conjugations and tenses in practice. No matter how gorgeously formed my past participle, nothing could save me from a door hinge with its unfathomable Italian name. I am resolved instead to embrace these eccentric little words with their improbable monikers, I am determined to devote myself to each and every one of them. They, more than food or history, separate me from the Italian culture. With every one of them I learn, I come one step closer to Nirvana, where I can walk through the Italian streets, smile at the people, and proudly murmur *man-hole cover*.