

## There's No Such Thing as Awkward Coluccio Salutati

It was a Tuesday evening and we had just sat down to a weekly session of Spazio Conversazione, where Italian and American students come together to learn each other's languages and cultures. Having no prior experience in Italian before my arrival, I quickly exhausted my limited list of conversational phrases, which included gems that could be translated as, "I am from the United States. I like to ride my bicycle." From this point, the conversation started to slow and we looked to a box of provided conversational prompts.

"First kiss?" I blindly drew the probing card from a stack of potentially less embarrassing conversation starters. Soon after, I found myself abashedly sharing a story with a table of strangers whose only knowledge of me now included my country of origin, my penchant for bicycle riding, and now, one of my less graceful personal moments. It was now that the word "awkward" had been introduced, and the Americans around the table could not think of a more appropriate word to describe my anecdote, but it was a term with which our new Italian friends were unfamiliar.

"Awkward? It's sort of like 'uncomfortable,' I guess, but it's more than that." A handful of us sat around a table in the garden of Villa Rosa, trying to explain a word that could summarize that tense, nervous feeling that adolescence in America had taught us too well. Our new Italian friends blinked, puzzled.

Somehow, it seems representative of my time here that there is no true Italian word for "awkward." After sharing what could have been an otherwise "awkward" moment with my new Italian friends that night, I felt like I had cemented new friendships. Claudia, a Florentine, invited me to meet her friends that weekend. She introduced me to a broad

array of Florentines who each welcomed me with open arms. When the language barrier was too great, Claudia translated. Each new friend had a helpful tip about living in Florence.

When I first arrived here, I was timid, doing my best to camouflage into Italian crowds. Everyday places like the supermarket became my greatest source of anxiety. While I could appear Italian enough, the second I had to open my mouth, the illusion was shattered. My new Italian friends helped me to see past my irrational fears and to open up to the world around me.

What I found when I did were proud and understanding people who were excited to share their culture. Nobody thought it was awkward when I had difficulty communicating. Instead, I was met with patient smiles and help. I was no longer afraid to make mistakes and to learn. As my Italian improved, I became more adventurous. I no longer felt like an outsider in Florence and the fear of “awkward” was gone.

I thank my Italian friends for their openness, their patience, and their caring. It is to them I owe the incredible experience these few months have given me. They showed me that while things could be “uncomfortable” or “embarrassing” for me, it was clear that no one would laugh or mock my blunders, but only provide help and guidance. I have learned much this semester in Italy, but the thing that I will remember forever is that there is no such thing as “awkward.”