

Lost and embarrassed in translation

The dog was scratching. She had been scratching for days. Gently, I parted her soft fur and noted the red, flaking skin. Her whole body was aflame and she looked miserable. I reached for my Italian dictionary with a knotted dread in my gut. Everything is just so much more difficult in Italian.

I looked up the special language that I would need and headed out of the door. I repeated the new vocabulary in my head, *graffiare* – to scratch; *pruriginoso* – itchy; *pelle* - skin. It was easier to pop in and book an appointment than risk a phone call. I always avoided the phone. I knew from painful experience that I needed faces and gestures to understand - and be understood.

We were living and working in mighty, moneyed Milan: city of wealth, opera, art and fashion. Like tourists, we had explored her beautiful, ancient heart. We had gazed at her Renaissance paintings and had been soothed by Verdi. We had fallen in love with the spikily gothic Duomo, started to drive like Italians and had eaten lots of pizza. We had learnt that December is the panetone season and that it goes very well with Prosecco – preferably for breakfast! But we were not on holiday; it was not all bubbles and Botticelli. We had to go to work. We had to go to school. And we had to function in Italian.

On the day of the appointment the dog and I practised our vocabulary and jumped in the lift. My lovely collie had learnt that she could not just tumble out of the kitchen door and on to the grass. I wondered whether she still missed her cool green home and freedom to roam. Her Milanese neighbours grew up in these towering, glitzy blocks. Busting with pent up energy and aggression and often under-socialised, they burst out of their apartment buildings ready to take on the world. ‘*É maschio?*’ the owner would call, as a blizzard of teeth and fur charged towards us. ‘No, she’s female and very timid’, I would mutter, carefully. Once, a huge German Shepherd Dog, with a pink, metal-studded collar, pinned my dog to the ground. Its teeth were around her throat. I looked around desperately for the owner. Clad in the ubiquitous black quilt coat, she was tilting around the far edge of the meadow, all vertical heels and dark glasses, shouting into her phone and looking the other way. Fear and something primeval bubbled up inside me and I heard myself roar as I charged towards the dogs, stamping my solid boots on the ground. The other dog did not look back; she tore away across the field, yelping. Nothing was lost in translation.

So, we made a wary progress to the vet a few blocks away.

In the surgery, I explained with care. 'She has a problem with her *pelle*, it is red and sore and she never stops scratching and licking it. And she smells really bad'. The vet looked confused, but offered no English, so I tried again.

He interrupted, 'Signora, is it a boy? *É maschio?*'

I was fairly sure I had got my pronouns right, 'No, she's a girl'.

He frowned, 'but *Signora*, you said she had a problem with her *pene...?*'

I thought back to what I had said and blushed, mortified. '*No, Signore, con la sua pelle* – with her skin – she hasn't got a *pene!*'

My consonants had tripped me up. Once we had established that we were dealing with the skin and not the genitals, everything proceeded satisfactorily and I concentrated carefully to the instructions for the medicine and special baths that she would need. The simplest tasks become so complicated in someone else's language.

It couldn't get any worse or more embarrassing, so I broached the subject of our forthcoming journey home. Under the Pets Travel Scheme the dog needed to be seen and given a tapeworm treatment no less than 24 hours and no more than 120 hours before she arrived in the UK. We had to cross the mountains, drive up through Germany and France and arrive at the Pet Control Point in Calais in time to be checked, not too soon and not too late. I blathered on breathlessly, sprinkling my explanation with a random selection of tenses and modals, designed to add nuance and clarity to my message but doing neither: 'we are going, we will arrive, we might, she should, could you ...?'

He stopped me with a blistering Italian smile and waved his official stamp. 'So, what date and time shall we put on her passport, *Signora?*'

I breathed a sigh of relief. Some things are just so much easier in Italian.