

GUIDE — REAL ITALIAN

15 Italian expressions you can't translate word for word

Phrases Italians use every day — with the real meaning, a ready-to-use example, and the nuance you need to use them well.

Amos — Amos Easy Italian

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Why these expressions don't translate word for word

Every language has its own way of looking at reality, and Italian often does it through images: wolves, pigeons, clouds, dough. If you try to translate these phrases word for word, the meaning gets lost, or it just sounds strange.

In this guide you'll find 15 expressions Italians actually use, in everyday conversation: at the bar, at work, with friends. For each one you'll get the literal translation, what it really means, an example you can reuse as it is, and a short note on when and how to use it.

You don't need to learn them all at once. Pick one, try it in a real conversation, and move on to the next one when you're ready.

01 Come ti trovi?

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"How do you find yourself?"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Used to ask how something you recently started is going: a new job, a new city, a new course. It's not about where you physically are, but how you feel in that situation.

EXAMPLE

— *Come ti trovi nella tua nuova casa?*

— *Bene, mi trovo proprio bene qui.*

(How are you settling into your new place? — Good, I'm really happy here.)

Notice the verb is reflexive: mi trovo, ti trovi, si trova. Literally it's like saying "in what way do you find yourself (in this situation)".

02 Che fine hai fatto?

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"What end have you made?"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Said to someone you haven't seen or heard from in a while. It's not about death or anything serious — it simply means "where have you been, what happened to you".

EXAMPLE

Ehi, che fine hai fatto? Non ci vediamo da mesi!

(Hey, where have you been? We haven't seen each other in months!)

You can also use it for objects or people you've lost track of: "Che fine ha fatto quel libro che ti avevo prestato?" (Whatever happened to that book I lent you?)

03 Non vedo l'ora

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"I don't see the hour"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Means you're waiting for something impatiently, that you can't wait. It's the exact equivalent of "I can't wait".

EXAMPLE

*Non vedo l'ora di rivederti questo weekend.
(I can't wait to see you again this weekend.)*

Always built with "di" + infinitive: non vedo l'ora di partire, di mangiare, di sapere come va a finire.

04 In bocca al lupo

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"Into the wolf's mouth"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

The most common way to wish someone good luck, especially before an exam, an interview, or any important test.

EXAMPLE

— *Domani ho l'esame di guida.*
— *In bocca al lupo!*
(I have my driving test tomorrow. — Good luck!)

The traditional reply isn't "thank you" but "crepi" (may the wolf die), although today many people just answer "grazie".

05 Non ci sto

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"I don't stay there"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Means you don't agree with something, that you don't accept a condition or a proposal. It's stronger than a plain "no".

EXAMPLE

Se il piano è questo, io non ci sto.
(If that's the plan, I'm not okay with it.)

The opposite is "ci sto", which you'll see in the next expression: same verb, almost opposite meaning depending on context.

06 Ci sto

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"I stay there"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Means "I'm in", "count me in", "let's do it". Used when someone proposes a plan and you accept enthusiastically.

EXAMPLE

— *Ci vediamo sabato per una pizza?*

— *Ci sto!*

(Shall we meet Saturday for pizza? — I'm in!)

"Ci" here doesn't point to a specific place — it's a particle that makes the expression idiomatic. Don't try to translate it word for word.

07 Mi sa che...

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"It knows to me that..."

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Used to say "I have a feeling that", "I think that", when you're not fully sure but you have a fairly clear impression.

EXAMPLE

Mi sa che oggi piove, meglio prendere l'ombrello.

(I think it's going to rain today, better take an umbrella.)

Very common in spoken Italian, more informal than "penso che" or "credo che".

08 Non fa niente

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"It does nothing"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Used to say "it's fine", "don't worry about it", often as a reply to an apology.

EXAMPLE

— *Scusa il ritardo!*

— *Non fa niente, tranquillo.*

(Sorry I'm late! — It's fine, don't worry.)

You'll also hear "non importa" or "figurati" used the same way — they're almost interchangeable in this context.

09 Andare a genio

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"To go to genius"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Means that something or someone appeals to you instinctively, without needing much explanation.

EXAMPLE

*Quel ragazzo non mi va proprio a genio.
(I just don't take a liking to that guy.)*

Built like "piacere": mi va a genio, ti va a genio, gli va a genio.

10 Rompere le scatole

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"To break the boxes"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Means to annoy someone, to be pushy or bothersome. It's informal but very common, even between colleagues or family.

EXAMPLE

*Smettila di rompere le scatole, sto lavorando.
(Stop bugging me, I'm working.)*

There's also a more direct, vulgar version with a different word instead of "scatole": in everyday conversation "scatole" is the polite form.

11 Avere le mani in pasta

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"To have hands in the dough"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Means to be involved in something, to have influence or an active role in a situation, often work or power related.

EXAMPLE

*Se vuoi che il progetto vada avanti, devi avere le mani in pasta anche tu.
(If you want the project to move forward, you need to be hands-on too.)*

The image comes from making bread: whoever kneads the dough is directly involved in the final result.

12 Prendere due piccioni con una fava

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"To catch two pigeons with one bean"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

The Italian equivalent of "kill two birds with one stone": getting two results from a single action.

EXAMPLE

Se vado a prendere i bambini e faccio la spesa nello stesso viaggio, prendo due piccioni con una fava.

(If I pick up the kids and do the shopping on the same trip, I kill two birds with one stone.)

The image is a bird trap with a bean as bait: practical, a bit old-fashioned, but still very much in use.

13 Cascare dalle nuvole

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"To fall from the clouds"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Describes total surprise, when you find out something you really didn't see coming.

EXAMPLE

Quando mi hanno detto che si sposavano sono cascata dalle nuvole, non lo sapevo proprio.

(When they told me they were getting married I was completely floored, I had no idea.)

Similar to "avere la testa fra le nuvole", but that one means being distracted: here the meaning is surprise, not distraction.

14 Volerci

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"To want oneself"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Used to say how much time, effort, or patience something takes. It has nothing to do with "volere" in the sense of wanting.

EXAMPLE

Per imparare l'italiano ci vuole tempo, e va bene così.
(Learning Italian takes time, and that's okay.)

Only conjugated in the third person: ci vuole (singular), ci vogliono (plural). "Ci vogliono due ore per arrivare a Roma." (It takes two hours to get to Rome.)

15 Tenerci

LITERAL TRANSLATION

"To hold oneself to it"

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

Means that something matters to you, that you really care about a result, a person, or an occasion.

EXAMPLE

Non è obbligatorio venire, ma ci terrei molto ad averti alla mia festa.

(You don't have to come, but I'd really love to have you at my party.)

Different from "tenere" in the physical sense of "holding": here "ci" completely changes the meaning of the verb.

What now?

You don't need to memorize all of this at once. Pick one or two expressions from this list, try using them in a sentence of your own, and listen to how they sound when you say them out loud. That's how they actually become yours.

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