



Saving the AP in Italian. Is it just a question of money?

Anthony Julian Tamburri (July 12, 2009)



Some not-too-random thoughts on the current situation of the Advanced Placement Program in Italian and who else might be able to come to the rescue...

What follows, then, is a brief history of the outcomes of the Advanced Placement Exam in Italian that was only recently approved in 2005 and launched in 2006—yes, only four years ago—as the fourth of seven language exams that were offered this past spring by the College Board. It is also an implicit call to arms, if we are to rescue the AP in Italian from its current state of suspended animation.



What one sees is a dramatic increase over the first four years that, many of us would contend, is due to the greater work by the Italian-American community at large (teaching and non-teaching) to get the word out, so to speak; and there is no reason to believe that this will not continue, especially since this is uncharted territory for Italian language studies. The numbers clearly speak for themselves. From year to year, there has been a dramatic rise, especially from year two to year three (plus 17.5%), and from year three to year four (plus 25.7%). From year one to year four, the growth has been even more dramatic, a numerical increase of 830 exams taken, which translates into an aggregate percentage increase in three years of what can only be considered an outstanding 51.9%.

AP Italian Language and Culture Examination Volume Changes

Year
Number of Exams
Annual Percent Change
Aggregate Percent Change
2009
2,427*
+25.7%
+51.9%
2008



1,930

+17.5%

+20.9

2007

1,642

+ 2.8%

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2006

1,597

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*Unofficial number furnished by a member of the exam committee.

In January 2009, the College Board decided that the exam was no longer economically feasible, and the figures that were presented to reinstate the exam were overwhelming; for one year, \$1,500,000, only if, as some have understood, this constituted the beginning of a larger amount that would be raised annually in order to reach an eventual sum total of \$11,500,000. The requisite number of exams originally expected by the College Board for Italian, as I have understood it, was 10,000; and because that number, or something vaguely close to it, has not materialized, outside funding is thus obligatory. Yet, the numbers of those taking the exam for German average around 5,000, give or take a few hundred. As we understand it, outside funding is not obligatory. The obvious question is, Why is Italian being held to a different standard? There has been no response forthcoming.

At a meeting held with the College Board this past April 20, 2009 (present also were representatives



of the Italian Embassy, the NY Consulate, and COPILAS), we found out that the 2,400-plus exams ordered at that time were equal to the CB's projections for 2014. At that same meeting, we had asked if the costs could then be recalculated, given this change. I had also requested at the April meeting that the 2010 exam not be cancelled precisely because, I underscored, we needed to see if this significant rise in numbers over a two-year period (2007-2009: 785 students, 47.8%) does in fact constitute the beginning of a trend.

After our April meeting I did indeed receive a response with regard to funding, which underscored (1) the need for \$11.M, as the increase in students for this spring's exam, in the CB's opinion, has very little to no consequence in reducing funds, (2) a contract with an entity or individual who guarantees the full amount of \$11.5, (3) and until these first two conditions are met the exam will not be re-instated.

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A number of things thus stand out at first blush. In addition to the obvious "Why is Italian being held to a different standard?," one might indeed ponder how an organization that relies so much on statistical data can use only three years as a measuring stick. I suspect that in this case independent statisticians might argue otherwise, that more time and, indeed, more data (read, sittings and grades of the exam) are necessary. Another issue that comes to mind is that there seems to be no one within the College Board administration (i.e., the national Board of Trustees) who might readily argue—namely, who might possess the requisite knowledge and thus be prepared to argue—for the continuation of the Advanced Placement Program in Italian. This is a question of cultural awareness and sensitivity, something that we as individuals acquire according to our life-long, quotidian existence, which is rooted in both the social and the professional.

The Italian language has always been a cultural vehicle, though in the United States for, perhaps, close to a century, if not longer, it was considered primarily—and in this regard I would say unfortunately—an ethnic language by mainstream thinking and organizations (yes, in spite of Dante et alii). The significant cultural valence of Italian has never been more obvious than over the past thirty-plus years, with the advent of Italian cinema and fashion first and foremost, the creation of the various "enti gestori" funded by the Italian government, and a rebirth in the translation of contemporary Italian writers and essayists such as Italo Calvino, Oriana Fallaci, Umberto Eco, and Dacia Maraini, among others. The individual who possesses such social, professional, and, I would now, add cultural acumen and insight does not seem to occupy a place on the national Board of Trustees of the College Board. This is, to be sure, part and parcel of the challenge that lies ahead. Such a lack of cultural, ethnic, and racial discernment and mindfulness lies at the base of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; similar comprehension and acknowledgement eventually led to the classification of Italian Americans as a "protected class" within the CUNY system for comparable reasons, a situation very much still unresolved.



Thus, it should not seem a stretch to consider the absence of such ethnic and cultural sensitivity as yet a further stepping stone in this struggle to save the Advanced Placement Program in Italian—a language and culture that have given to Civilization the roots of modern western poetry (Dante and Petrarca), the template for what we call Modernity (the philosophy and art of the Italian Renaissance), and the matrix for our own modern-day legal philosophy (Cesare Beccaria), should simply not be cast aside because of a budget that has yet to be explained in great detail and/or any other reasons unbeknownst to the public discourse thus far articulated.

This is a struggle in which we all must engage; it is not the right of any one person or entity to do so. Instead, we need to move as a collective. Furthermore, we need to reach out to our elected officials on all levels—national, state, and local. They, more than most of us, are in a strategically, strong position to put pressure on such monolithic, and dare I say monopolizing, entities, such as the College Board. A not-for-profit should not be concerned primarily with profit when deciding the future of an exam that was given only three years to develop, all of which raises doubts to the commitment to the project in the first place. Various financially successful AP exams do indeed fund others; that said, Italian should not be excluded without the requisite opportunity (read, time) to develop. This should be totally unacceptable to all of us, and the Italian/American community needs to express it/our indignation in as many venues as possible, beginning with those in the more influential positions to do so.

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