English loanwords in Italian IT terminology

Originally published as a comment to [Denglisch, Franglais, Spanglish, Swenglist and the like](#), a guest post by Ivan Kanič in BIK Terminology.

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The use of English words in **Italian** is variously described as *itanglese, itangliano* or *anglitaliano*. Unsurprisingly, assorted pundits regularly voice their concern about the "invasion" of English words, and bemoan the lack of an Italian language authority that might provide guidelines on neologisms and terminology standardization, yet, according to [recent data](#), use of loanwords is not yet widespread in everyday speech (anglicisms amount to only about 0.7% of basic vocabulary) and it is mainly restricted to specialized domains, such as information technology, economics, finance, politics, sports and fashion.

As an [Italian terminologist](#) working mainly in the IT field, when working with new concepts – and the Italian terminology that should be associated to it – I take into account different variables, such as **end user** (e.g. consumer or professional?), **type of product** and its penetration (influential market leader or newcomer, mainstream or niche?), **origin of the term** (IT-specific or transdisciplinary borrowing?), its **usage** (industry-wide or producer/product-specific?), **users' familiarity** with the term (is it known only to early adopters and/or subject matter experts or also to standard users?).

Additionally, there are some **linguistic trends** that help identify the type of words that are more likely to be borrowed from English. A few examples:

- **Semantic neologisms** (cf *BIK Terminology* on [terminologization](#)) cannot always be reproduced easily in Italian; generally speaking, metaphors associated with living beings, their features or actions tend to be rejected by Italian speakers and loanwords are used instead (e.g. *mouse, bug, spider, worm*, *piggyback* but also *cookie, sandbox*)

- **Portmanteau words** tend to be retained because of their conciseness and uniqueness, e.g. *codec, widget*, *camcorder, podcast, webinar.*

- **Foreign nouns** keep their spelling and do not inflect for number; there might be some "gender issues" as there is no rule to determine whether a loanword should be masculine and feminine and sometimes both genders co-exist (e.g. *il font* and *la font*), but overall foreign nouns are easily assimilated into the language.

- **Verbs** are harder to integrate as they require conjugation; usually they are formed by adding the relevant inflections from the first conjugation (-*are*) to the English word which serves as the stem, e.g. *to format – formattare.* However, this process appears to work only with words that can conform with Italian spelling – forms like *downloadare, chattare, linkare, backuppare* are used colloquially but tend to be rejected in standard Italian because they include characters or grapheme combinations that conflict with Italian spelling conventions. In such cases, we tend to opt for expressions like "to do/make" + noun, e.g. *fare il download*, *fare il backup* etc.

- **Conciseness** is a key factor in preferring loanwords over fully viable, yet much longer, Italian alternatives, e.g. *email* vs *posta elettronica.* Lack of ambiguity balances against having to learn a new word, provided the loanword is easy to remember and pronounce, cf. *link* (short and monosemous) vs *collegamento* (long and polysemous).

Similarly to what is described for other European languages, also Italian terminology is affected by scenarios where better native designations need to be discarded because the market has already opted for a loanword. Moreover, sometimes various alternatives for a new concept are coined at the same time and it can be quite difficult to foresee which will eventually prevail. A typical example is the English verb *scan* (image acquisition) which initially was variously rendered in Italian as *scandire, scansire, scannerare, scannerizzare, scansionare* and *scannare;* only several years later is *scannerizzare* emerging as the preferred form. In such cases one might need to look into alternative solutions, e.g. as Microsoft's Italian terminologist working on *scan* at the time*,* I opted for a slightly more generic term*, digitalizzare* – cf English *digitize* – which worked fine in all relevant contexts and avoided using "unestablished" terminology that might soon become obsolete.

Italian speakers can find additional information in my blog, [Terminologia etc.](#)
A few examples:

- Terminologization and semantic neologisms are covered in detail in [iPad, "flick" e terminologizzazione](#) and other posts tagged [terminologizzazione](#);
- The gender of loanwords is discussed in [Font è maschile o femminile?](#);
- A few notes on verbs as loanwords are made in [Io puffo, tu puffi, noi effettuiamo](#);
- The several co-existing Italian calques that convey the meaning of the English verb *scan* are reviewed in [scansionare, scansire, scandire, scannerizzare…](#) and […ancora sull'uso dello scanner](#);
- Conciseness and monosemy of loanwords are described in [Alternative a blog, chat, newsletter, spamming? – 1;](#)
- Examples of English corporate speak as used by Italians can be found in [itanglese](#).