

More Than a Dictionary

by Daniel A. deStefano

Adolph Caso's *"The Ka'SO English to Italian Dictionary:"* is not the usual book of this type, partly because its intended audience is not entirely human, and partly because his goal is not to tell his readers the meanings and origins of words.

Professor Caso states his purpose as desiring to establish a one-to-one relationship between sounds, or phonemes, and letters of the alphabet, or graphemes, in both Italian and in English, in his attempt to "facilitate a practical and consistent use of languages in this multifaceted digital age."

By simplifying and standardizing spelling in Italian - Caso notes that Italian possesses no verb "to spell" - and by establishing but a single sound for each letter, in both tongues, "Italian would achieve the one-to-one relationship between the sounds and their corresponding letters, and could serve as a prototype to effect similar changes to Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, French, English, and others.

Caso also attempts the same feat with English, and adds accent marks to his proposed standardized spelling in both languages. Some of his changes have been proposed before: always spelling a pronounced "hard c" sound with the letter "k," for example. All together, he proposes eight such changes to Italian spelling.

Why should we do this? Why spell "culture" (cultura) as "ku'lture" (ku'l'tura)? Because, says the author, there is a need "to achieve a single phonological system that can be incorporated in languages based on the Latin alphabet system and allowing those languages to

retain their national characteristics . . . Instead of entering data with a keyboard, or by trained voice or other device, as a natural progression, individuals would be able to enter data in the language of their choice."

True synthetic speech, guided by an equally artificial intelligence, has been a goal of medicine, cybernetics and robotics since ancient times. Case's system might provide a useful steppingstone in creating the underlying programming that would allow communication between human and cybernetic intelligences.

Adolph Caso himself is a man of varied interest, whose works demonstrate his eclecticism. His most recent book (2002) before the *Dictionary* was *Water and Life: Photos and Poems in English and Italian*.

He has also written *The Known But Unknown Pilot* (1999), about the voyages of Christopher Columbus, and *America's Italian Founding Fathers* (1975). While all the books named so far have an Italian connection, Caso also edited (1998) *Abenaki Warrior*, about an Englishman who lived as a Native American in Maine.

Caso is a graduate of Northeastern University and of Harvard University, holding degrees in Romance languages and literatures. He also has taught at Harvard, and at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. He created and administered the bilingual department in the Waltham Public School system.

A vast amount of work is invested in *The Ka'SO English to Italian Dictionary*," not merely the monumentally detailed task of re-spelling

tens of thousands of words in two languages, but also the foundation of thought upon which Caso has built his philosophy of a more unified linguistic basis for communication between people - and between humans and machines.

In the end, it is up to the programmers and others who business is the creation of artificial speech and intelligence to decide how useful is Case's work. One must ask if it is practical to ask American technological specialists to learn Italian in order to build a machine that will speak English. After all, the Europeans say that a person who speaks three languages is trilingual; one who speaks two is bilingual; one who speaks but a single language is an American. Perhaps Europe, rather than the United States, would be a better choice to host to this author's ideas.

The success of Adolph Caso's dictionary is that it makes us think about a more unified and civilized world, a goal which could be realized at least in part by establishing universal standards in the digital world which would encourage meaningful communication between people. Caso's effort, and his philosophy, are a truly welcome addition to our divided planet, and the author here has accomplished a most worthy and lofty purpose.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Daniel A. deStefano who serves as Nahant's Library Director, is a graduate of Simmons College and holds a Master of Science in Library Sciences. deStefano is the author of two books, and is currently working on another book.'