

ITALIAN TOPONYMY AND MINORITY LANGUAGES

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Italy is, by my estimates, up there with France in first place for the usefulness of toponymy (the study of place names) in Geoguessr rounds. From suffixes clustered in certain regions and geographically descriptive town names to abundantly used minority languages, a large percentage of Italy's municipalities have clues in their names and street signs that can be used to narrow them down, it's just a matter of learning them. Unfortunately, aside from the more well-known French and German-majority regions in the Alpine parts of Italy, little is known in the Geoguessr community about Italy's linguistic diversity, and even less about its toponyms. This document seeks to redress that.

2.0 PLACE NAMES

2.1 THE BASICS

Italian town names frequently incorporate a geographic element in their name, whether it be the local river, historical region, etc... however the most common and most basic element is the region or the province (provinces in Italy are almost all named after their largest city). It is therefore well worth learning the 20 regions, but also the 107 provinces as they come up often in place names, and give you an even spread of cities so that you're rarely lost at an intersection.

Regions of Italy quiz: <https://www.geoguessr.com/vgp/3092>

Provinces of Italy quiz: <https://www.geoguessr.com/vgp/3403>

A geographical specifier can be incorporated as an adjective (e.g. Carpintero Romano, near Rome) or as a preposition + noun (e.g. Gravina in Puglia). Sometimes the connection between the adjective and the place can be a little tricky (e.g. Ossano Lodigiano, near the town of Lodi) or the name will be directly incorporated (e.g. Borgosesia on the Sesia river).

In the case of the regions, there are two notable exceptions to watch out for:

- A large number of municipalities with Ligure in the name are in fact not in Liguria, but just to the north in the southeastern tip of Piedmont region.
- While you may find a couple of 'Lombardone's in Lombardy, there are three municipalities ending with 'dei Lombardi' way to the south in Campania region, as they were settled by Lombard migrants

Besides these basics however, the world of Italian toponymy goes much deeper...

2.2 PRE-ROMAN TRIBES

The most fascinating toponymic clue is the pre-Roman Italic tribe names which many towns still carry as a badge of honour. These are reliably geographically clustered in the former territory of these tribes.



Map of the pre-Roman tribes of Italy - in the south and central parts of the peninsula were many Italic peoples who spoke now extinct languages closely related to Latin - many of these, especially the Sabini and Samnites, are reflected in town names in their regions, regions which aren't reflected by any modern administrative boundary that would appear on maps.

This map represents place names associated with such tribes, leaving out those already associated with actual Italian regions like Etruscans, Apuli, Veneti, Umbrians, etc... (some of these are not shown on the map above)

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=19MfXLbNXlyl2Sq27APE4nypz1Abu7uE&ll=40.234829044726254%2C14.9964132999999983&z=6>

2.3 HISTORICAL/CULTURAL REGIONS

While pre-Roman tribes are a point of pride in South/Central Italy, the North is largely defined by historical or cultural regions, usually dating to the Middle Ages. Some were counties which have long since stopped existing but are still used colloquially as a point of reference, some are simple geographic regions with no specific history, either way, you won't learn them just from memorising the official regions and provinces, so I made this map to help you learn the ones which most commonly show up in town names:

https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1fqOoV3l9K66ODnkbT3xLk_08ECUrdwg&ll=45.03240234077782%2C8.498091960156247&z=8

2.3.1 WINE REGIONS OF TUSCANY

While grapes are grown in every region of the country, Tuscany is the most famous for its viniculture, and therefore there is great prestige associated with its different wine-growing regions, which are frequently included in town names. It is worth learning these so that if you suspect you're in Tuscany, you can try and find one of these names to narrow your guess down further. This maps shows these regions based off towns that carry their names:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=19PbQGj9CwpzLmwKyD4TMvu-AfiS2-As&usp=sharing>

2.4 RIVERS

Just like France, Italian towns bordering a river often have 'sul/sopra' (meaning 'on') + the river's name at the end of the town name. This is especially common in the North. This map shows many of those worth learning as they have the most town names associated with them, however the map is by no means comprehensive, so I recommend looking for and learning your own rivers as well:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=16FavmOL6s8lfYU2NehphAIHAzhuO43E&usp=sharing>

2.5 NATURAL FEATURES

It is also worth learning the names of Italy's National Parks, as well as its numerous lakes, or other natural features such as the peninsular part of Puglia (called Salento) as these also frequently feature in town names as demonstrated on the map below. Some relatively obscure features have also gone on to give their name to numerous municipalities - these have also been added to the map:

https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1IpMxad92P-M2kUN_BTW9xCpRsv5T24Q&usp=sharing

2.6 SUFFIXES

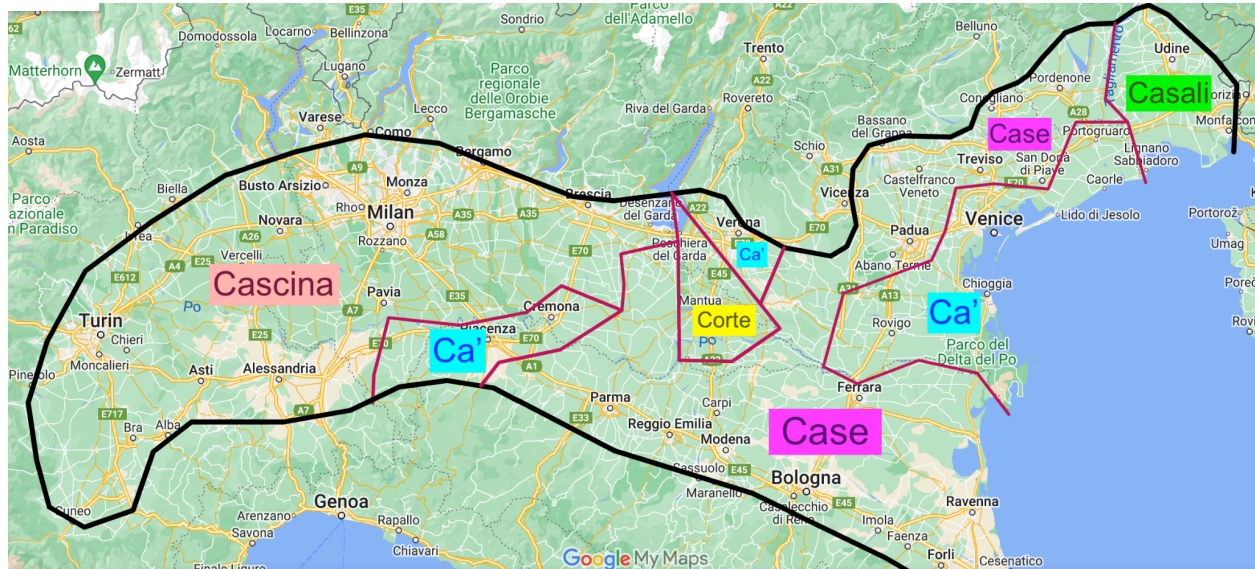
Aside from literally telling you its location, a town's name may give more subtle clues. Many European countries such as Sweden, Germany, Poland, etc... have endings which tend to correlate with different parts of the country, and Italy is no different. These are the most useful:

- -ate, -ago, -aco, -asco, -asca, -engo & -ezzo are all heavily clustered around Milan
- -ese is specifically clustered just west of Milan
- -etto & -ero are primarily found in Piedmont
- -edo is common around Verona (can also be found around Milan)
- -ana, -ello, -ico, -ino, -ole, -ona, -one, -ovo & -azzo have a wide spread, but are more indicative of the North, whereas -olo is a safe northern bet and -eve is exclusively in the North
- -eno is almost exclusively in Italian-speaking parts of the Alps
- -oli is generally found in Central Italy
- -ito, -ati & -anta are not super common, but are almost exclusive to the South

There are also many suffixes related to minority languages in Italy, but they will be dealt with in the minority languages section.

2.7 HAMLETS

In the flat parts of northern Italy, besides towns and villages you also get hamlets or individual farmhouses, and signs pointing to them are not uncommon on rural roads. This is important as these farmhouses go by different names in different regions, as demonstrated on this map:



All these words are related to 'casa' ('case' is just the plural), simply meaning 'house'. 'Ca' is just a shortened form, likely dialectal, whereas Cascina refers to a larger farmhouse specifically, likely a specific type more common in the west. Meanwhile 'corte' means 'courtyard'. Note that while these generally refer to isolated farmhouses or hamlets, they can sometimes broaden in scope to entire villages.

Here are examples of signs for these in the wild:



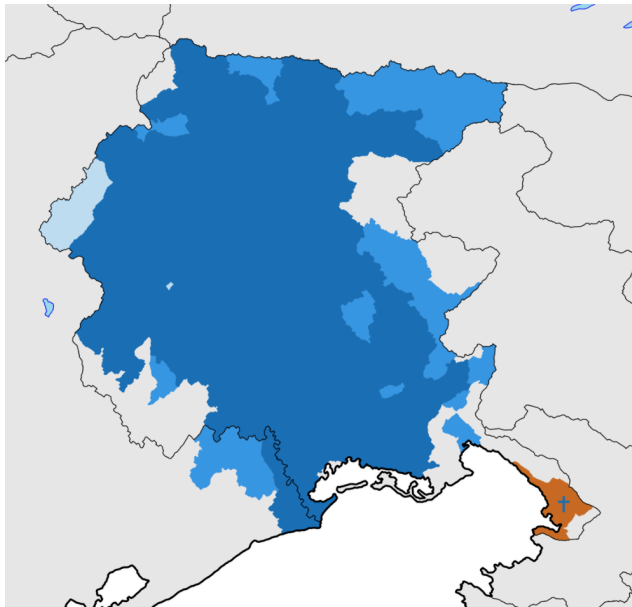
Cascinas are the only ones that will appear in the top corner of a road sign like that, a very good indication of the western Po valley. Also note the Friulian language (more on that later) for the Casali sign. 'Case' are rarely indicated and the name is more of a filler, whereas Cortes are more private and thus also rarely indicated. Note also that Ca' are found dotted throughout the area marked 'Case', but they are mainly concentrated in the indicated areas.

3.0 MINORITY LANGUAGES

3.1 FRIULIAN

Friulian is a Rhaeto-Romance language spoken in most of Friulia-Venezia Giulia region (with the notable exception of the Trieste panhandle). It is a very important one to know as many municipalities in the region have bilingual road signs. It is also very easy to recognise, the following are good indicators of Friulian:

- The consonant cluster 'cj'
- The consonant 'ç'
- Circumflex accents (â, ê, î, ô, û)
- Grave accents (à, è, ì, ò, ù) (these exist in Italian too but are much less common)
- Consonant clusters at the end of words (it's worth noting that Italian only allows the letter 'n' at the end of syllables, and even then it's still quite uncommon at the end of words, so any place name ending in a consonant should raise eyebrows)



Friulian has also left a mark on local place names. A lot of towns in the region end in 'n' which is uncommon in Italian, or 's' which never occurs in Italian. Town names usually do not incorporate the more obvious distinguishing features of Friulian orthography, but if you see somewhat French looking town names in a non-mountainous region, you could well be in Friulia.

3.2 LADIN

Ladin is also a Rhaeto-Romance language spoken further up in the Alps. Its speakers are concentrated in a few municipalities in the Fassa valley (which shows up in a few place names) either side of the border between South Tyrol and Trentino provinces. The language has few distinguishing features, however all Ladin municipalities are also officially recognised as German-speaking areas, if you see trilingual road signs with a non-descript Latin language followed by German followed by Italian, then you know you're in Ladin territory.



3.3 SARDINIAN

The island of Sardinia has its own language which is widely spoken. In fact it has several languages, with three varieties of Sardinian as well as several varieties of Corsican spoken in the far north. With the exception of the largest cities, place names on the island are always of Sardinian origin and spelt as such. Peculiarities to look out for are:

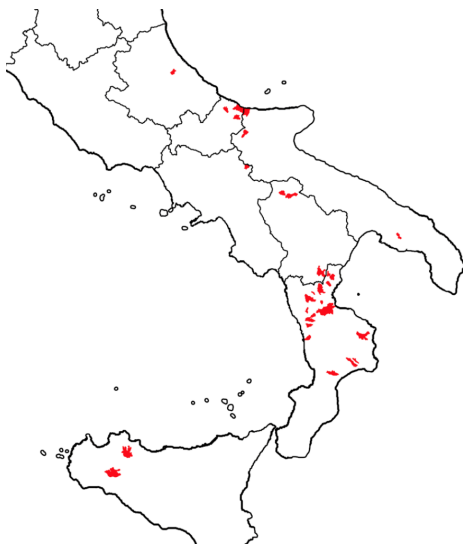
- 'u' at the end of words (it is possible to find place names ending in 'ù' in the rest of Italy, but towns ending in 'u' without an accent are unique to Sardinia (e.g. Pittulongu)
- 'Tz' and 'x' (e.g. Aritzo, More Corraxè)
- Names ending in 's' (as discussed previously, this never happens in Italian - unlike other minority languages of Italy, Sardinian generally looks like Italian, so if you see an Italian looking language with 's' at the end of words, it may well be Sardinian)
- Doubled consonants are much more common, particularly 'dd' (e.g. Berchidda, Serramanna)
- 'Ei' is common at the end of place names, and the letter 'i' itself is far more common at the end of place names here than in the rest of Italy
- Vowel combinations that would look out of place in Italian (e.g. Ploaghe, Gairo, Mamoiada)



3.4 ARBËRESHË

The Arbëreshë are Albanian Catholics who fled to Italy during Ottoman occupation. They generally live in their own villages in the South of Italy, particularly northern Calabria, and they still speak Albanian to this day. Signs in these villages are usually bilingual (this is not the case with more northern Arbëreshë villages in Molise/Pulia, only those in Calabria and Sicily). Furthermore, many of these villages have 'Albanese' in their name, adding a helpful toponymic clue to the mix.

Albanian can easily be identified by the abundance of 'ë' as well as 'j', 'k', 'dh' and 'q' preceding anything other than a 'u', all absent in Italian (as well as final consonants of course).





Note the street named after Albanian national hero Skanderbeg

3.5 GRIKO

Even older than the Albanian community in southern Italy is the Greek community. They exist in two places: Grecia Salentina, a collection of 9 municipalities in Puglia, and Bovesia, also a collection of 9 municipalities but on the southern tip of Calabria. Unfortunately I couldn't really find any evidence of the Greek presence in Puglia, but some of the villages in Bovesia have clues as to their Greek heritage, including Greek translations of touristic signs (although these are written in the Latin alphabet). Some of these villages also have distinctly Greek-style houses.



Note: the main village of the bunch is Bova.

3.6 MOLISE CROATS

In the Campobasso province of Molise there are three municipalities populated by Croats, also catholics who moved to Italy during Ottoman occupation of their homeland. All three of these municipalities (Acquaviva Collecroce, Montemitro, San Felice) have bilingual signs. Note that the variety of Croatian used here is slightly different to that in Croatia, but it still retains the distinguishing š, č and ć characters.



3.7 GUARDIA PIEMONTESE

In one single village in Calabria - Guardia Piemontese, you can find a community of Occitan speakers far from home. Occitan can be hard to distinguish from Catalan, but fortunately this village has completely the opposite vibe from the next item on our list.



3.8 ALGHERESE CATALAN

The port city of Alghero in Sardinia has a large Catalan speaking population. In the old town you can find bilingual Catalan-Italian street signs.



If you have any questions regarding this document feel free to contact me on discord:
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