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Italophony in Albania Today: Prospects and Critical Issues

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Article Type: Conceptual Paper

Received: March 2026 | Accepted: May 2026 | Published: June 2026

Abstract

Italophony in Albania today is facing a new reality. On the one hand, Italian is considered a cultural bridge and a linguistic contact associated with modernity, educational quality and the possibility of professional mobility; on the other hand, the English language is taking on an increasingly dominant role as the language of the global economy and technology. The younger generations today display asymmetrical bilingualism, with a passive or limited knowledge of Italian, which is often replaced by English in academic and work contexts.

This paper aims to present and analyze the current situation of Italian-speaking people in Albania and the reasons for its transformation from a language of “affection” and closeness to a language of opportunity and European partnership.

We will focus in more detail on the issues of the sustainability of italophony, which requires a rethinking of linguistic and cultural policies aimed at promoting Italian not only as a language of historical memory and emigration, but also as a contemporary resource for education, research and cultural tourism.

Keywords: *italophony, linguistic-cultural contact, linguistic and cultural policies.*

Introduction

Italophony in Albania is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that must first and foremost take into account the centuries-old history of relations between Italy and Albania ; a history of intense political, economic, cultural and social relations.

Conceptual Paper

Italian language and culture have penetrated Albania at various times in history.

The 1930s were a particularly significant period in which Italian and Albanian were in intense contact. During this period, Italian was taught in Albanian schools as a language of culture. In Albania's major cities, Italian was introduced as a compulsory subject in schools. Italian teachers were present in Albanian schools to teach language, culture, art and science. Students spoke Italian fluently. During this period, the Italian presence in Albania was particularly focused on economic development. Italy built roads, banks, aqueducts, government infrastructure, etc. in Albania. Many scholars, geographers, engineers and agronomists carried out missions in Albania during that period. Italian was the language of communication and dialogue. The first Italian-Albanian dictionaries, bilingual newspapers and radio broadcasts on Albania were issued.

A second historical moment concerns the period from 1945 to 1990. Albania severed all political and cultural ties with Italy and the Western world. It was a dark moment in Albanian history. In the 1980s, when I began a university course in Italian Language and Culture, Albania was politically, economically and culturally isolated. We were not allowed to travel and get to know Italy up close, we knew little about the country across the sea; however, for us young students, the interest was so great that the only educational resources were a few Italian grammar books.

For the Albanian population of large cities such as Tirana, Durrës, Vlorë and Shkodra, radio, cinema and television kept alive their interest in Italian language and culture. It is well known that, in communist Albania, the regime had severed all ties with Western culture. It had banned everything. It had also attempted to interrupt the RAI television signal, but in Albania people listened to Italian radio and, for those who were more fortunate, watched Italian television. Through Italian music, the language arrived and it was possible to speak and understand basic Italian. In cinemas, Italian films were the most widely distributed, especially neorealist works, films about the Mafia or those about mythological heroes. With the few

Italian books that circulated secretly, people learned Italian. The Italian language was considered the language of expression of a great culture. In return, classical Italian literature was among the most translated in Albania at that time. Italian radio and television, the only linguistic and cultural vehicle at that time, influenced the way Albanians thought and lived.

We have now reached the third moment. In the 1990s, thousands of Albanian families embarked on a journey and, in a thousand different ways, arrived in Italy. With the little Italian they knew and the dream of building a better life, many Albanians settled there. The Italian language was primarily the means of communication that helped Albanians to be accepted into Italian life. Language mastery allowed them to integrate quickly into society. On the other hand, Italian became not only the language of the host country, but also a bridge that reconnected the two peoples in a relationship of friendship and collaboration.

Returning to my personal experience, in the 1990s I found myself teaching Italian language and culture in Albania's most "Italian" city: Vlorë. The history of the city of Vlorë recognises the historical fact of Italian presence since the 1920s. Fishermen from Puglia, Italian workers, technicians, engineers, military personnel, etc. lived and worked in Vlorë, coming into contact with the local population. During this period, there was a spontaneous Italian-speaking community in Vlorë. Then, in the 1930s, an Italian primary school was established in Vlorë, which aimed to teach all subjects in Italian. All this heritage was passed on to the people of Vlorë, who loved Italian and spoke it too. It is the most important city in southern Albania and the country's second largest port after Durrës. Geographically, it is the Albanian city closest to Italy. Italians feel at home in Vlorë. Italian visitors never tire of talking about its natural beauty, archaeological sites and landscapes, the authenticity of its cuisine, the proud reserve of its people and the incredible linguistic skills of its young people, especially in Italian. Franco Romano At the aforementioned university, as well as at various foreign institutions, he

Conceptual Paper

has held numerous courses for teachers of Italian as a second language, professor of Italian language and culture at the University for Foreigners of Perugia, recounts his first visit to Vlora:

When I first arrived in Vlorë twenty years ago, alone and disoriented, it was already evening. I wanted to let my family know I had arrived, but mobile phones were not yet commonplace—in fact, they were undoubtedly considered quite alien devices—so I wandered around the semi-deserted streets of the city centre in the hope of finding a public telephone. I hadn't been able to call from the hotel: there were no phone boxes and the reception didn't have a system for counting calls. Just as I was beginning to lose hope of getting in touch with my family, I met a group of men walking along the main street. I plucked up my courage and asked them where I could make a phone call. As if by magic, one of the group, who understood Italian even without speaking it, took a mobile phone out of his pocket, dialled the number for me, let me talk and then, with extreme naturalness, put his tiny, rounded rectangular device back into his pocket, not without revealing a hint of haughty and at the same time smug self-importance. Needless to say, the Albanian “man with the telephone” not only refused to be paid, but also declined my invitations to have a drink together. And so did his friends. Instead, he greeted me cordially, joined his companions and disappeared with them into the evening mist and the dust of the road beaten by the November wind.

Let us now turn to the present day. Italian is a daily tool of communication and work for Albanians. Italians have been among the first foreign investors in Albania. The country is open to Italians in all sectors and fields, particularly in business. It should be noted that the vast majority of businesses, shops and various establishments already trade with Italian companies, sourcing various types of products from Italy, ranging from food to household appliances, technology and industrial machinery.

In recent years, there has been a large ‘migratory’ flow of Italian citizens to Albania's largest cities,

such as Tirana, Durrës and Vlorë. These are entrepreneurs who have chosen to relocate their companies and business models to Albania. Thirty-five years ago, no one would have imagined that Italian citizens, particularly business-people, would turn their attention to Albania not only to visit its cultural attractions, beaches and natural beauty, but also to live and work there. But what are the reasons for this? For those doing business, Albania offers great opportunities. Albania is one of the non-EU countries (not belonging to the European Union, although negotiations are ongoing) where it is most convenient to relocate the Italian business system. Take, for example, the call centre sector. Attracted by a favourable tax system and a workforce composed mainly of young people who speak Italian — almost always less expensive and less protected by trade unions — there are now numerous call centres run by Italians in Albania.

In Albania today, you find not only entrepreneurs, but also doctors, technicians, builders, architects, chefs, etc. I have contacted some of them who work and live in Vlorë. When asked “how do you feel in Vlorë”, they immediately reply with a smile that they have adapted well and that “Vlorë is a simple city to live in”. Some feel like they are “in Italy in the 1980s” because Vlorë has “an energy that is no longer found in Italy”. Others say they “came for a challenge” but ended up enjoying themselves. “You really feel loved here,” says another. “I have bought a flat here.” ‘The landscape is almost similar to Italy's’.

Italian is one of the most widely studied languages in Albanian schools. The teaching of the Italian language has been and continues to be supported by the Illiria Programme, an Italian government project that has been promoting and developing the teaching of Italian as a first foreign language in Albania since 2002. Through this programme, Albanian students have the opportunity to learn about Italian language and culture almost from the beginning of their school career. In the New Memorandum of Understanding between the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the Albanian Ministry of Science and Education on the “Illiria

Conceptual Paper

Programme for the teaching of Italian in the Albanian school system" NOTA 5, it has been agreed to extend and strengthen the teaching of the language through the aforementioned programme, which 'in promoting and strengthening the teaching of the Italian language, will refer to European policies, using available tools such as the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), the European Language Portfolio, the PEFIL (European Portfolio for Language Teacher Education) and the Albanian Qualifications Framework'. NOTA 6

The Illiria programme has proven effective and has improved the quality of teaching. According to data from the Italian Language Portal in the World, created by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 'Albania is the country with the highest number of Italian language students, distributed in particular in local schools thanks to the Illiria Programme, which since 2002 has led to the establishment of bilingual Italian-Albanian sections and Italian language courses in the curriculum in compulsory schools (primary and lower secondary) and upper secondary schools.'

The Italian Cultural Institute in Tirana organises Italian language and culture courses and certifications for all levels. Currently, the Institute's courses are divided into the various levels of proficiency set out in the CEFR. The number of students per class ranges from a minimum of 8 to a maximum of 18. An entrance test is required to place students; at the end of each level, students take an exam that allows them to progress to the next level. A certificate of attendance is issued upon request. In agreement with the University for Foreigners of Perugia, the Institute organises the CELI (European Certification of Italian Language) diploma exams every year. In agreement with the University for Foreigners of Siena, it organises the CILS (Certification of Italian as a Foreign Language) and DITALS (Certification of Competence in Teaching Italian) diploma exams. The challenges of contemporary Italian language use: a critical analysis

Despite its historical prestige, the Italian language in Albania is currently undergoing a rather critical structural reconfiguration dictated by globalisation. While English has established itself as a global language, Italian has not disappeared, but has undergone a paradigm shift: from an "idol language" it has become a functional and technical language. This means that many young people learn Italian purely out of necessity for work, limiting its use to an operational code confined to specific sectors such as marketing or low-cost customer care. This transition risks weakening the language, reducing it to a purely instrumental commercial or technical interface, a "fast" and "dry" Italian language devoid of its deep original cultural content or its emotional and libertarian value. It is necessary to promote Italian as a code for high value-added sectors such as industrial design, architecture, archaeology, quality tourism, culinary expression and medicine, areas in which many Italian professionals operate successfully in Albania.

Ultimately, this transformation highlights three fundamental issues. First of all, the dominance of English and the weakening of Italian, which risks becoming a "second-class" language, used only in informal contexts or in low-skilled jobs such as call centres, losing importance in universities and high-level professional sectors. Secondly, incomplete bilingualism, which allows young people to understand the spoken language well, especially through the internet and social media, but also means that they do not know how to write or use it correctly in formal contexts, in high-level professional or scientific fields. Finally, there is an instrumentalism that reduces Italian from a "language of the heart" or culture to a working tool, a simple technical code for marketing or call centres, ultimately losing all its cultural richness and soul.

Conclusion

Systemic perspectives and new language policies

The sustainability of italophony requires a radical rethinking of cultural policies. It is no longer sufficient to rely on historical memory or ties linked

Conceptual Paper

to emigration in the 1990s. Italian must be presented as a language of opportunity and European partnership. At a time when Albania is engaged in negotiations for EU accession, proficiency in Italian becomes a strategic competitive advantage. Programmes such as the Illiria Programme are essential because they institutionalise Italian in schools, using European tools such as the CEFR to ensure certified quality. The challenge is to extend these standards to the entire education system in order to train a bilingual ruling class. Cases such as Vlorë, where there has been a spontaneous Italian-speaking community since the 1920s, show that Italian is an integral part of the local identity. This natural linguistic propensity should not be seen merely as a historical curiosity, but as a contemporary resource for cultural tourism. Italians visiting Vlorë feel “at home” thanks to the extraordinary linguistic skills of the locals. Exploiting this link can transform Italian into the driving force behind elite tourist hospitality, based on cultural proximity and quality of services.

Italian as a bridge to the future

To paraphrase David Benedetti, there is a silent paradox that runs through Albanian classrooms: ‘English is everyone’s subject, but it is no one’s language’. Italian, on the other hand, has been the language of many in Albania, and for this very reason the challenge is not to prevent the advance of English in educational institutions, but to ensure that Italian maintains its share as the language of modernity and educational quality. The transition must be clear: Italian must move from being the language of the “country across the way” that was watched on television to being a strategic resource for training, research and the economy of the future. Only through strategic transformation.

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Conceptual Paper

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