Italian is a Romance language spoken mainly in Europe: Italy, Switzerland, San Marino, Vatican City, by minorities in Malta, Monaco, Croatia, Slovenia, France, Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia,[3] and by immigrant communities in the Americas and Australia.

According to the Bologna statistics of the European Union, Italian is spoken as a mother tongue by 59 million people in the EU (13% of the EU population), mainly in Italy, and as a second language by 14 million (3%).[2] Including the Italian speakers in non-EU European countries (such as Switzerland and Albania) and on other continents, the total number of speakers is more than 85 million.

Italian is descended from Latin.

The earliest surviving texts of Italian that can definitely be called Italian are legal formulae from the Province of Benevento that date from 960–963.

Italy has always had a distinctive dialect for each city, since the cities, until recently, were thought of as city-states. Those dialects now have considerable variety. As Tuscan-derived Italian came to be used throughout Italy, features of local speech were naturally adopted, producing various versions of Regional Italian. The most characteristic differences, for instance, between Roman Italian and Milanese Italian are the pronunciation of "e", and of "s"; e.g. "all right": is pronounced [va ˈbːɛne] by a Roman (and by any standard-speaker), [va ˈbene] by a Milanese (and by any speaker whose native dialect lies to the north of La Spezia–Rimini Line); "at home" is [a ˈkːasa] for Roman and standard, [a ˈkaza] for Milanese and generally northern.

Italian is also widely spoken in Malta, where nearly two-thirds of the population can speak it fluently, making it the most spoken non-official language.[13] It served as Malta's official language until

1934. Italian is also recognized as an official language in Istria County, Croatia and Slovenian Istria where there are significant and historic Italian populations.

Due to heavy Italian influence during the Italian colonial period, Italian is still widely understood in the countries of Libya and Eritrea.[3] Although it was the primary language since colonial rule, Italian greatly declined under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi, who expelled the Italian Libyan population and made Arabic the sole official language of the country.[16] Nevertheless, Italian remains an important language in the education and economic sectors in Libya. In Eritrea, Italian is a principal language in commerce and the capital city Asmara still has an Italian-language school.

Although over 17 million Americans are of Italian descent, only a little over one million people in the United States speak Italian at home.[20]

In Canada, Italian is the second most spoken non-official language when Chinese dialects are not combined, with over 660,000 speakers (or about 2.1% of the population) according to the 2006 Census.[22]

In Australia, Italian is the second most spoken foreign language after the Chinese languages, with 1.4% of the population speaking it as their home language.[23]

Italian immigrants to South America have also brought a presence of the language to the continent. Italian is the second most spoken language in Argentina after the official language of Spanish, with 1.5 million speaking it natively, and Italian has also heavily influenced the dialect of Spanish spoken in Argentina and Uruguay.[3] Small Italian-speaking minorities on the continent are also found in Uruguay, Venezuela and Brazil.

Education

Italian is widely taught in many schools around the world, but rarely as the first foreign language; in fact, Italian is considered the fourth- or fifth - most taught foreign language in the world.[24]

According to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, every year there are more than 200,000 foreign students that are learning Italian language