



## Wrestling the Bear: Reflections of a life-long language learner - Part I.

The circuitous path of my journey into the study of languages, and German in particular, begins in the old tourist hilltop town of Perugia, Italy. It is July 1990 and I had arrived to spend three months among the paesani, the warm stone walls and RAI television blaring out of cafes and pizzerias. Together with a couple of hundred other foreign students, I had signed on to learn Italian at the Università per Stranieri, fall in love with any girl bearing a resemblance to Sophia Loren (circa 1950), and have a good time.

I grew up in the inner-west of Sydney, a part of the city with a big Italian community: old men playing cards in the rear of cafes, Azzuri football tragics, ragazzi sporting gold chains, crucifixes and wearing red Ferrari jackets, and ragazze with lots of make-up and head turning outfits. In this local incubator of all things red, white and green, I decided I had to see Italy for myself.

Up until my Italian sojourn I'd had little exposure to language studies; having managed to bypass the high school French, which was the only second language on the curriculum. My most significant exposure to foreign languages came via foreign films at the cinema and television. In particular, the excellent multicultural channel SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) which broadcasts mostly foreign language programs with subtitles (no dubbing). Late at night SBS screened a lot of European erotic art house cinema that I was able to justify, in my own mind, as highbrow cultural experience. In preparation for the course I tried putting black masking tape over the bottom of the screen where the subtitles appeared when the Italian programs came on. I don't know if it worked, however I suspect it didn't.

The language course comprised the usual staple of learning strategies: written and spoken exercises working from a set text book, together with an Italian - English dictionary and a book of Italian verb conjugations. The motivations of the students ranged from those who needed to grasp a solid understanding in order to reside in Italy to those, such as myself, who wanted to know how to order a meal in Italian with confidence. The first important lesson I learnt was that the idea of living in the target language 24/7 as a sure-fire way of effectively acquiring the language is a bit of a furphy. Whether you are in a classroom setting trying out phrases with your fellow students, or asking for some olives and mozzarella from the lady behind the counter at the delicatessen, the range of conversation topics tends to be limited and, quite frankly, banal.

One trick that did work for me was to listen in on conversations between the locals and capturing those snippets of dialogue that were of interest; playing them over in my head and looking for opportunities to use them in my own conversations. For some reason I still remember sitting in a train carriage next to a man talking into his brick of a mobile phone (this was 1990 remember) and saying "Spero proprio di si". This is a strategy that is as appropriate today as it was back then (or at least I hope so).