

Teaching Italian as a foreign language. The experience at the University of Banja Luka

Danilo Capasso

Department of Italian Studies
Faculty of Philology, University of Banja Luka, BiH
danilocapasso@italianisticabl.eu

Abstract: The aim of the present article is to show how to organize, from the structural and didactic point of view, the study of a foreign language (FL), in this case the Italian language at some different private, university and school institutions where the foreign language had not been taught before. What are the difficulties for teachers in “making themselves accepted” by students, how to meet the needs of a student who wants to learn that specific FL, and what are the teaching methods allowing the student to learn according to his needs. As we will see, the teaching methods already in use to teach a FL very often do not match the ones of a new FL. This non-coincidence is not always a disadvantage, but it may become a challenge between method and learning, whose results do not only concern the learning of the FL, but they also offer a possible opening for the creation of a new “forma mentis” as well as a more adaptable “modus studendi” for the student.

Key Words: Italian as a foreign language- FL, old and new teaching methods, power to imagination, student expectations.

“я понял, что родина творчества — будущее. Оттуда дует ветер богов слова”
В. В. Хлебников

Introduction

Until 1998 the Italian language as a FL was not part of study plan and optional courses at the schools, University of Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its province.

The Italian language was not even part of evening-classes where the teaching of foreign languages was offered. Officially, the foreign languages taught were: English, German, Russian and French. In 1998 the introduction of Italian language as a FL is something new that has to be carried out by solving above all several organizing problems:

- 1) Where to introduce it? In the school system or only in the university one?
- 2) How to introduce it? As a study plan or simply as an optional one?
- 3) How to teach it? Which teaching methods must be used considering the lack of a large number of teachers and the total shortage of teaching equipment?

These are the three most important problems a teacher of Italian language had to face before starting the courses of Italian as a FL.

History

In 1998 the Italian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina offered the University of Banja Luka the opportunity to start the teaching of the Italian language by sending a mother-tongue teacher. The University of Banja Luka accepted and at the beginning of October 1998 the teacher met the Rector of the Bosnian University who pointed out the following situation concerning the teaching of foreign languages, particularly Italian:

- 1) At the Faculty of Philosophy there are only two working departments of Foreign Language and Literature: English and German; besides them, there are no other foreign language courses, having no reference department, but held by teachers teaching Russian and French as optional subjects.
- 2) The Italian language is not part at all of school and university system of Banja Luka and its province. There is neither a Chair of Italian language nor a culture able to train teachers. The Italian language course that should be in the study plan at high schools of music and at the Music

Academy (to get a degree in lyric singing) very often is not working due to the lack of qualified personnel. The started courses are very rare and they are held by teachers having a degree in Italian Language and Literature they got beyond the boundaries of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On the basis of this situation, the Italian language course can be structured only as an optional course to be organized in the classrooms of any Faculty, at the end of the ordinary lesson period, that is in the evening from about 19.00 to 22.00.

Being his range of action very limited, the teacher of Italian language decided to prepare a formative proposal of Italian language as FL as it follows:

- 1) To make inquiries about the presence of the Italian language within urban environment (names in Italian of clubs, bar, restaurants, different kinds of shops such as clothing, draper's shops, furnishing, tourist offers for Italy at tourist agencies).
- 2) To make inquiries about the presence of Italian language in the media (television, radio, internet websites).
- 3) To make inquiries about teaching methods of foreign languages at schools and universities (to attend lectures and schematize teaching methods).
- 4) To prepare a marketing activity of the Italian language (a course open not only to school and university students, but to the whole population as well who might be interested in learning the Italian language).
- 5) To carry out an information activity about the possibility of attending an Italian language course (ads at the Faculty entrance, a meeting with students following other FL courses, a meeting with the last-year high school students, meeting with different representatives of civil society: ONG dealing with culture, trade-unions, various citizen associations).

The results of this work that took 20-30 days to be accomplished, are the following:

- 1) In the urban environment of Banja Luka about 80% of restaurants has Italian names and/or names of Italian places: pizza-shop, the corner, belvedere, San Remo, Rome, Modena etc... 75% of clothing, draper and furnishing shops has Italian names: beautiful house, Italian style, leather sofas etc. ..
Italy is present in tourist offers with the most traditional and geographically the closest destinations: Venice, Garda Lake etc..but also in shopping tours arranged for Trieste.
- 2) The presence of the Italian language in the media is mainly linked to music and sport. The Italian melodic music (Ramazzotti, Pausini, Nek, Zuccherò) is often broadcast by the radio or Tv (by videoclips); the Italian sport is remarkably present and words like calcio (soccer) Ferrari, Formula Uno, are heard very often.
- 3) The inquiring interviews about the Italian language course as FL turned out to be useful and 200 people enrolled themselves for the course whose beginning was scheduled by the first days of November. Among these people there were:
High school students
University students
Working people
Jobless people
Retired people

The age of enrolled people was in a range going from 15 to 65 years.

- 4) Considering the number of enrolled people, the teacher decided to organize the optional Italian course as FL as it follows:
Ten groups of about 20 students each;
Lessons take place twice a week and each lesson can last from 45 to 60 minutes; the students are divided into groups by age.

Method of the study

Obviously, it goes without saying that the organization of the Italian language course as FL at the University of Banja Luka, is a unique case though the organizing method can be taken as an adaptable example for other experiences, it is now important to assess the scientific quality of principles for the teaching methods of a FL; here the contextualization of this case is not important. Before teaching a FL I think it is unavoidable to use two criteria a teacher must comply with in an exhaustive way:

- the reasons why a student decides to learn that specific FL,
- what are his expectations, that is to say, what he expects to get from learning that particular FL.

Though the first principle may seem aversive to the school system where the student has to learn the FL and the teaching method is bound to the pre-arranged rules, (to the question why do you want to learn a FL the student might answer "I do not want to learn it, but I have to") this principle, apart from obligation, takes into consideration the way the student approaches the FL. These two criteria allow to assess one or different teaching methods to learn a FL starting from the student's point of view instead of the FL's one.

Let us go into details of the teaching method according to the above mentioned criteria:

Questionnaire made out in the local language LL for the students, in our case 200 people (Capasso 2001).

Sampling

- 1) Name and Surname
- 2) Sex
- 3) Age
- 4) University/school/work
- 5) Do you come from Italy?
- 6) What other foreign languages do you speak?
- 7) Level of knowledge of other spoken foreign languages:
 - a) beginner
 - b) intermediate
 - c) advanced
- 8) What do you know about Italian culture:
 - a) Literature
 - b) Art (painting, sculpture)
 - c) Geography
 - d) History
 - e) Cinema
 - f) Music
 - g) Sport
 - h) Gastronomy
 - i) Fashion
 - j) Other (specify)
- 9) In your opinion the Italian language is:
 - a) Easy
 - b) Difficult
 - c) Interesting
 - d) Useful
 - e) Important
- 10) Why do you want to study Italian:
 - a) Personal reasons
 - b) Work
 - c) Out of curiosity
 - d) Other reasons (specify)
- 11) Do you know the Italian language?
 - a) Not at all
 - b) A little
 - c) so so
 - d) well
- 12) Have you ever studied Italian?
- 13) If yes, where and how long?
- 14) Have you ever been to Italy?
- 15) If yes, where and why?
- 16) Which Italian words do you already know? (write them down)
- 17) Which teaching method for the Italian language would you like?
 - a) Grammatical
 - b) Communicative
 - c) Supported by audio-visual equipment
- 18) Express what do you expect from the Italian language course.

Among the answers, there are some which very interesting

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Question 6

English 100% (16-30 yrs of age)

German 54% (25-50 yrs of age)

Russian 32% (25-65 yrs of age)

Question 7

70% unable to assess their own level of knowledge of FL

Question 8

Fashion 100%

Sport 90%

Gastronomy 90%

Other 90%

Music 83%

Cinema 54%

Geography 36%

Art 21%

History 15%

Literature 7%

Question 9

Easy 92%

Interesting 86%

Useful 55%

Difficult 37%

Important 5%

Question 10

Personal reasons 95%

Curiosity 90%

Other 77%

Work 48%

Question 11

A little 90%

Nothing at all 85%

So so 15%

Well 2%

Question 14

No 100% (16-24 yrs of age)

Yes 85% (25-65 yrs of age)

Question 15

North (Trieste) 92%

Shopping 100%

Business/work 65%

Tourism 39%

Question 16

Trousers

Jacket

How much does it cost

Numbers (from 1 to thousands)

Colours (green, red, white, blue, grey)

Mafia

Boss of the bosses

Pizza

Lasagna

Spaghetti

Car

Shoes

Vespa (motorcycle)
Ferrari
Armani
Versace
Soccer
Totti
Del Piero
Godfather
Mussolini
Fascism
Dante
Michelangelo

Question 17
More than 80% cannot answer

Question 18
To learn the Italian language 100%

From the answers obtained we can assume the following specific situations:

1. The Italian language is basically more related to the country image than to its culture, as we mean it in the classical sense. The Italian language is the idiom of made in Italy, of some status symbol concerning fashion, car industry and gastronomy;
2. It is a melodic language, easy to reproduce as for the sound, it is neither seen nor experienced from the grammar point of view and its pronunciation is easy to acquire.
3. It is a “nice” language because it is strictly related to the image of the Italian people who enjoy life, always seeking for beautiful and elegant things.
4. From the methodological point of view the most interesting answers are 7 and 17;
The inability to assess one’s own level of knowledge of a FL, as well as the lack of competence in assessing one’s own preference to the learning methods of a FL, are clear signs of how the study of a FL takes place without considering the student’s expectations, risking the results of the learning itself.
The student does not realize how much he actually knows and does not take active part in the teaching method, he simply experiences it since he thinks and they make him believe that this teaching method is the only one available.

In the present work I will put in evidence the reasons and risks for this situation.

The predominant model in teaching foreign languages in schools

Attending school lessons and lectures of a FL is very important in some cases and in this one it is unavoidable in order to note the student’s approach to the FL. As for Banja Luka, the teaching methods of a FL can be summarized as follows: FL (English and Russian)

- An exclusively grammar approach
The teacher explains grammar rules writing them on the blackboard and he asks the students to repeat them in a loud voice. In this way, students learn the rules only passively, extranging them from a context and so they become abstract concepts.
- Inductive method
The students open their textbooks and servilely apply the rules read before on the blackboard and learnt by heart. The exercise sequence follows the order the students are arranged in, so that the third student already knows he has to do the third exercise and, worried by its solution, he does not pay any attention to the others.
- Total lack of any communicative structure
The teaching method is always the same. It is divided into two parts: 1. The teacher explains the grammar rules and 2. He makes the students apply them in a methodical way by exercises in the book that very frequently concern sentence transformation, according to the explained

rule. The student making a mistake misses his turn and the exercise is given to the next student. There is no communication between the teacher and the students: the former never checks his students' learning level (he never asks if there are any doubts), the latter very seldom tell the teacher about their difficulties.

- Relationship between student and teacher
This relationship is univocal, to the teacher's advantage. It is he who inductively offers the students some grammar rules that must be applied, denying the students any possible communication in the FL.
- The last is the DEUS EX MACHINA
The teacher is the deus ex machina who explains and solves the "difficult matters" in learning a FL, his opinion as well as his explanations are final. He is a teacher in the etymologic sense of the term, "magis" because he is above students, but he is not at all a teacher in the sense of someone who simplifies, advises and can be maieutic, tutor and organizer. (Balboni 2008)

The above given picture shows and explains the backwardness and uselessness of the teaching methods used to teach and learn a FL in schools and University.

The roles

The FL is a subject strictly related to a role relationship: the student plays the role of a silent learner, while the teacher is the only learned person. The student has no other role but that of getting data passively without any possibility of selecting them; only the teacher has an active role that sets him as the sole source of knowledge, with a student merely seen as an empty vase to be filled up.

Teacher vs. Student

The relation between the two roles is the antagonist (the uneducated-the "bad" one) versus the protagonist (the learned person-the "good" one). This relation completely undoes the results of learning that is based on the pair receiving-producing. The receiving is a totally overlooked aspect: if the student learns it depends on him, while production turns out to be a mere mechanical repetition of grammar rules without any communication.

Language vs. culture (Valdes 1986, Byram 1989, Lavinio 1992, Kramsch 1993, Bugarski 2005)

The FL is taught within a context that is totally torn off from the culture of origin: the student knows about English language that it is mother-tongue in GB and the U.S.A, and it is the predominant foreign language but he does not absolutely know the reasons for that, what is the cultural and social background flowing from this predominance. Tearing off the foreign language from the culture of origin not only impoverishes the language itself, but it reduces its reception degrading it to a number of grammar rules learnt by heart.

Moral grammar vs. immoral grammar (De Benedetti 2009)

The grammatical approach is considered the only possible and moral one. What do we mean by moral? It means that it is the right, perfect approach. Grammar is considered as a close structure, geometrically perfect, with rules and exceptions leaving no room for doubts, different solutions or possible mistakes. It is just for this reason that grammar does not provide for solutions like "you can also say in that way" "it is not correct, but it is used", it works like a perfect mechanism so it cannot be immoral.

Monophonous communication vs. polyphonous one (Ponzio 2001)

During the teaching and learning of a FL communication is exclusively monophonous, the sole voice is the teacher's one; the other voices repeating and applying mechanically rules to exercises are followers of the teacher's messages. There is a complete lack of a polyphonous register.

On these premises, the reasons why the student cannot assess by himself his level of language knowledge and he is also unable to express preferences about the teaching methods, are clear. The student thinks he cannot assess his level of knowledge because this is not up to him, but it is up to his teacher who must not only apply the sole possible method, but determine the student's competence level as well: it is he who says whether his student is clever or not. From this analysis it appears that sometimes the student has a good grammar knowledge of the FL, but he is totally unable to apply it at any other level but a passive one.

The useful methods: power to imagination (Munari 2009)

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The method used to teach the Italian language as FL starts from the need of making the student competent and persuading him that his role is not a passive one, antagonist, but protagonist as well as his teacher or even more so. We must prove the student that the teaching method of a FL, in this case Italian, starts from his needs and expectations. Here below I propose some teaching methods whose aim should be to do away with the student's incompetence turning him into a competent one:

From the questionnaire it is evident that

1. The Italian language is linked to culture which is the motive power, as we said before, the made in Italy. The student already has some knowledge about the Italian culture and consequently about the language: his knowledge of words like caffè, cappuccino, pantaloni, pizza, lasagna etc... makes him able to express a basic communication in Italian.
2. Melody and sonority of the language can be a very good basis to structure an auditory approach of the FL, since its pronunciation is not considered difficult, the phonemic repetition of sounds will certainly give the student a feeling of language competence, to be confirmed afterwards. The teaching methods used to teach the Italian language as FL at the University of Banja Luka have been an upsetting newness, compared to the previous ones, as for the FL.

I will report here below a list of some methods used and the results of their application.

Levels A1-A2³⁹

Power to imagination: from the structural grammar to the situational sounds

- Presenting the Italian language as a group of phonemes easy to reproduce. To make students repeat the sounds using "alfabetiere" by Bruno Munari⁴⁰.
- Avoiding any grammar approach, the student must listen to the sounds of the language and then repeat them, reading them in the given text without wondering about the meanings and their role within the text.
- Afterwards, the teacher will show the student some images (video), some situations where those sounds helped by images become meaningful (basic communication scenes: introducing oneself, basic exchange of information "What is your name?" "Where are you from?" "What do you do?" etc...)
- Information exchange among students: they will have to reproduce the sounds/meanings inside the scenes they have already seen, in order to confirm the production of the received messages.

Levels B1-B2

- The lexical enrichment and written production develop through the correlation of images and writing. The examples given to students by the "tavoleparolibere" by Pino Masnata⁴¹ are an incitement to use the learnt words as well as a search for the production of new ones. The fact that some terms are unknown is replaced by image, and then the words are learnt with teacher's help.
- Writing film dialogues: the teacher shows a selection of some known film scenes without the audio and the student, after seeing the scenes several times, (3-4) tries to picture a dialogue between the protagonists and put it in writing; then he will read it when the scenes are broadcast again.
- Forbidden words (Rodari 1997) The teacher, by dialogues and images, informs the students about the forbidden words in the FL such as: coarse language, vulgar interjections, the allusions to genitals, and he will then exhort them to produce dialogues where they have to use coarse words. The learning of coarse language and its practice by dialogue allows the student to feel more competent in the FL and it offers greater fluency in the speaking, since embarrassment and shame that might be felt by students in expressing with coarse words in their own language disappear completely while speaking in the FL. (Tartamella 2006)

Levels C1-C2

- The written and oral production by using hypotyposis and epiphraisis (Eco 2010), that is to say the oral and/or written description of an event, an object, a person, an image such as a work of art (painting, sculpture) allows students to use the acquired words and to be spurred to learn further terms so that he will be able to use circumlocutions necessary to make descriptions take shape.

³⁹ In order to explain the required competences of levels A1,A2,B1,B2,C1,C2, see the following website: <http://www.languagepoint.eu/>

⁴⁰ In the article appendix you can find some compositions by the lyricist Bruno Munari.

⁴¹ In the article appendix you will find some compositions of tavole parolibere by Pino Masnata.

- Creation of apophenic situations: the image screened offers the students the opportunity to describe both orally and in writing comments disjointed by image reality. In this case, the student's imagination spurs the lexicon in order to describe the image according to his own interpretation, regardless the image reality itself⁴².

Conclusions and Recommendations

“La fantasia è quella facoltà umana che permette di pensare a cose nuove non esistenti prima”⁴³ (Munari 2009).

I would like to underline that the methods proposed and used do not replace the previous ones (Balboni 1994-1998, Bettoni 1998). The proposal for the above mentioned methods is to be considered as a scientific model applicable to specific cases of teaching and learning a FL, where there are the same difficulties met, as in our case, at the University of Banja Luka. The scientific value of these methods is confirmed by the results obtained by their application:

- The student is a co-protagonist of the couple teaching-learning, because his needs and expectations are the starting point for acquiring the necessary competences (Rodari 2006).
- The language competence obtained at the end of each level is definitely greater than the competence (or incompetence) acquired by using traditional methods. The student is aware of his own level of knowledge, his capability of communicating, his written and oral production. Moreover, he will be able to determine the learning process pointing out his gaps as well as his progress within the formative path.
- Being aware of his own capabilities and competences makes the student a co-protagonist in evaluating the teaching methods, that are not imposed a priori, but decided together with the teacher considering the student's expectations.

At the end of each level the students were given the following questionnaire:

1. What do you think about the teaching method applied to your course?
2. At the end of the course how do you consider your knowledge of the FL, compared to the beginning?
3. Do you think you will get on with the course attending an upper level? (Question put at all levels except C2)
4. What do you think about your teaching relationship with your teacher?
5. At the end of this course, do you feel that your expectations and/or needs have been fulfilled?

These are five questions written in the local language that go together with the usual standards evaluation by institutional school organs, and they do not obviously provide for multiple answers but spur the student to express his ideas and to judge himself. The answers are really enlightening:

1. To the first question the student answers critically facing the problem of teaching methods in a positive way and very seldom in a negative one. He expresses his ideas and preferences about the method used, showing the teacher which teaching path has to be changed or continued.
2. In the second question the student is able to judge his own linguistic competence, proving that he is able to put his knowledge into practice.
3. In the third question he can determine his linguistic needs so that he can realize if they are suitable for his purposes or have to be improved.
4. In the fourth question the student does not consider the teacher as a “deus ex machina” anymore, but he sees him as a co-protagonist whom he must apply to, to put questions and get explanations. The student is now aware that his teacher proposes a teaching method that takes into account his needs and expectations.
5. The fifth question is not an abstract concept anymore, but it shows the student's awareness of his aims.

Clearly, the examples reported in this study, the teaching of Italian language as a FL at the University of Banja Luka⁴⁴ has the purpose to be a solution to students' learning problems within schools and universities that are

⁴² In the appendix you can find some apophenic images.

⁴³ Imagination is the human power allowing to think of new things that did not exist before

⁴⁴ In order to complete the history of the teaching of Italian language as FL, at the University of Banja Luka, we must say that at first the FL was optional in evening-classes, but in 1999 it became part of the study plan in the degree of touring science. In 2000 the FL became also part of study plan at the Faculty of Philosophy and in 2003 at the Faculty of Philosophy (today Faculty of Philology) the Italian language was acknowledged by inaugurating the Dept. of Italian Language and Literature that is the only one in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

regulated by a pre-existing structure. In our case, the teaching methods presented are adaptable and for this reason they can, up to a certain point, co-exist with the previous ones. The case of Banja Luka puts in evidence that the pre-existing teaching methods had to make way for the new ones. The reason for this change is that the teaching methods of the Italian language as FL shift the heart of their action from teacher to student.

Appendix

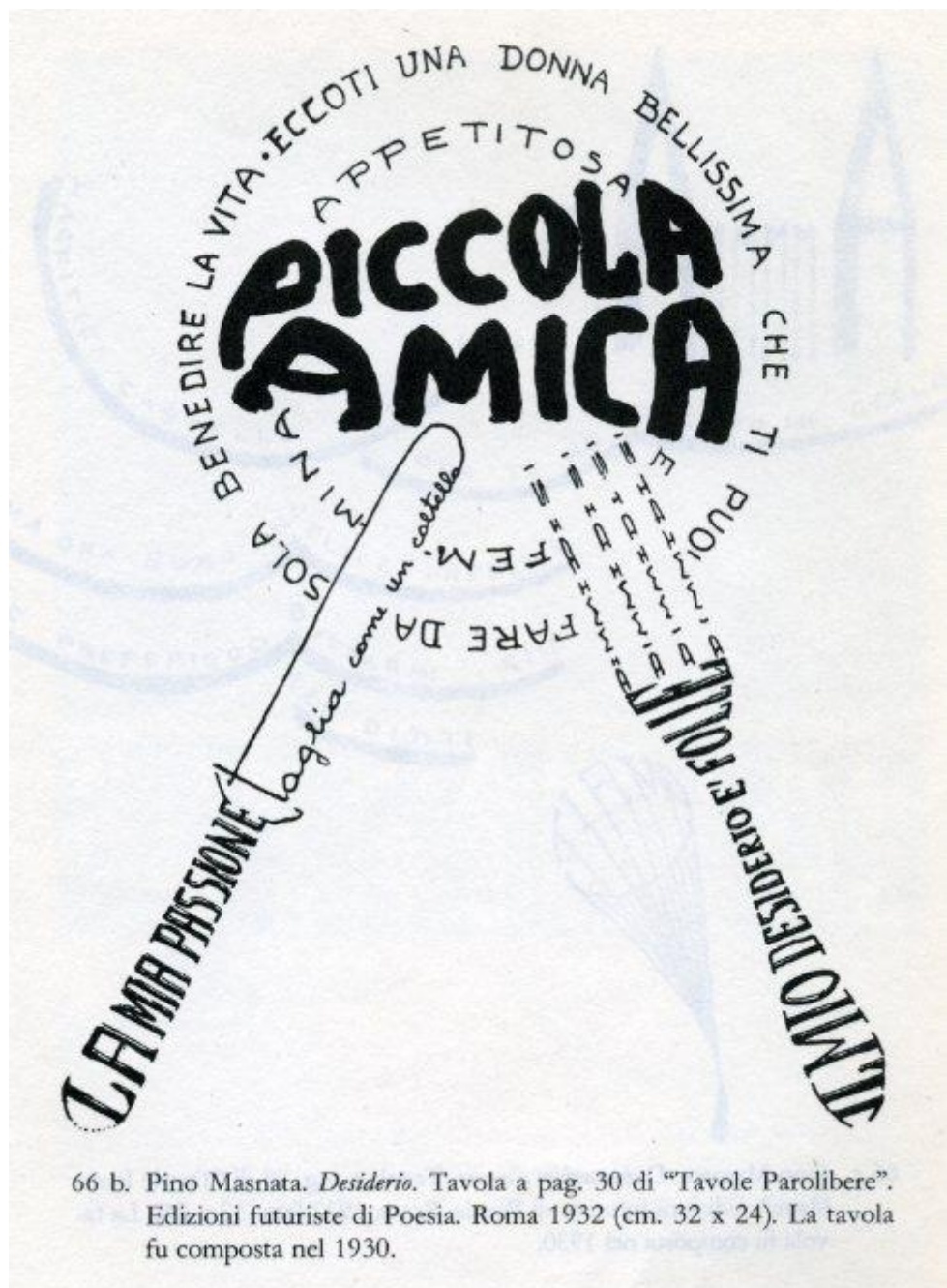
Alfabetiere by Bruno Munari





fanghi finti
e ferolate
oltre Foffo alle farfalle
fure fette di affettato
foco e faschi nella muffa
fichi soffici e soffiretti
fra le franche della fiera
fra le effimere fanfare
soltre Foffo
a far affari









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