Chronicling a Global Fetish: A Linguistic Analysis of the Pseudo-Italian Internationalism Stiletto

Cristiano Furiassi

Published: December 23, 2019

Abstract

Mostly based on lexicographic evidence—approximately seventy dictionaries were consulted—this contribution is an attempt to narrate the quincentennial transatlantic journey undertaken by the word stiletto, now referring to a globally-recognized emblem of femininity, eroticism and fetish. Occasionally, even the analysis of a single lexical item may in fact reveal unforeseen developments in the evolution of looks and styles and their attendant vocabulary: this enquiry indeed shows how in time stiletto may be interpreted as a false Italianism, as a reborrowing and as an internationalism. In spite of the fact that fashion lexicon, due to its close bond with the culture of mass consumption, is mostly short-lived, stiletto heels represent one of those rare instances where must-have cult objects, ladies shoes in this case, rightfully become members of the collective cultural and linguistic heritage, thus being permanently associated to the vogue of a certain époque.

Keywords: false Italianism; fashion; fetish; internationalism; reborrowing.

Cristiano Furiassi: Università di Torino (Italy)
cristiano.furiassi@unito.it

He is Associate Professor of English Linguistics at the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Modern Cultures of the University of Turin, Italy, where he gained a PhD in 2005. Dr Furiassi is the recipient of the 2006 Laurence Urdang EURALEX Award. His most recent volume, False Anglicisms in Italian (Polimetrica, 2010), prefaced by Manfred Görlach, received ‘honourable mention’ at the 2012 ESSE Book Awards. He also edited with Virginia Pulcini and Félix Rodríguez González The Anglicization of European Lexis (John Benjamins, 2012) and with Henrik Gottlieb Pseudo-English (De Gruyter Mouton, 2015).
Introduction

According to Catricalà, Segre Reinach and Reilly, the globalisation of fashion which materialized in the 21st century is a heterogeneous process marked by enduring cultural interactions—affecting both individuals and societies on an equal footing—and diversified mutual exchanges within a universal dimension. Due to the very nature of fashion, spread over ever-changing scenarios, creativity is inevitably embedded in its terminology: its lexical inventory indeed represents the artistry typical of this field as well as the evolution of trends over time, hence reflecting their modus operandi in the variegated contexts in which they develop. Regardless of the language under scrutiny, the word-stock of global fashion is geared towards reaching an international audience. Because of the multicultural plurality of codes employed therein, fashion jargon is, more often than not, influenced by various languages, all contributing to shaping its identity and reflecting both the visionary experience of influential stylists and designers and the innovative potential of clothing and accessories.

Preceded by an overview on fashion lexis, asserting its multilingual dimension, and an encyclopedic description of stiletto heels, which features their characteristics and explains why they eventually became an object of fetish and not just an item of fashion, this study aims at exploring and comparing the not always univocal definitions of stiletto provided in the current lexicographic landscape. By resorting to general monolingual dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias of fashion available in English, Italian and French, the pseudo-Italian status of stiletto is corroborated, its etymology is reconstructed and its date of first attestation is determined. Focusing on the false Italianism stiletto, this article tries to unveil the structural and socio-cultural features underneath its semblance of authenticity and seeks to determine its historical development from English, back to Italian and possibly into French. Moreover, typological issues will not be disregarded: stiletto may indeed be classified ab origine as a false Italianism, then as a reborrowing and eventually as an internationalism.

Words of Fashion: The Multilingual Dimension

Fashion is—or at least should be—of paramount interest for linguists and lexicologists in particular because its vocabulary is restless and volatile exactly like the glittering reality to which it belongs, always open to great inventiveness, highly permeable to foreign influences—thus inclined to a certain xenophilia—and sensitive to continual renewal. The specialized vocabulary of fashion has a complex inner stratification, whose essence is popularized by ad hoc media, namely magazines, catalogs, TV channels, websites and social networks.

In fact, catwalk talk features a remarkably diversified jargon by mixing proper terms with less specific, more general words. It is perhaps its ability to penetrate everyday speech and, in turn, to be continuously pervaded by it that seldom renders the lexicon of fashion highly technical, monoreferential, exact and denotative, as would be expected from specialized terminology per se. When dealing with looks and styles, the denotative essence of lexis becomes subsidiary to its connotative intent. Therefore, the function of vocabulary in fashion media is mostly conative, phatic and emotive as its main purpose is


to persuade and encourage their users, that is buyers-to-be, to adjust to the latest trends by becoming actual consumers.4

Through multiple cross-linguistic contacts, contemporary fashion jargon is shared and enriched at an international level: traditional terms are recycled and slightly or substantially changed into proper neologisms, so that they can best highlight novelties and represent the continuous changes fashion undergoes.5 Because of its long reach, when compared to other specialized domains, the inherently multilingual lexicon of fashion is distinctly marked by a variety of genuine and pseudo-borrowings, hybrids and calques mainly from French and English, traditionally conceived as donor languages for “fashionese.”6

Throughout the 19th century and at least until the 1950s, the language of fashion was relentlessly permeated by French terms, namely Gallicisms, traditionally associated with the allure of Parisian quirks.7 Nowadays, thanks to the worldwide spread of English, which has acquired legitimate prestige as the global lingua franca par excellence, Londoners and New Yorkers imbue the fashion lingo with Anglicisms (and Americanisms).8 Inter alia, the Gallicism haute couture and the Anglicism leggings are cases of lexical borrowings that donor languages are most likely to lend to fashion. On the one hand, English may be viewed as a “fashionable language,” associated with modernity and vitality, both aimed at captur- ing the audience and targeted at a mass market; on the other hand, French may be seen as the proper “language of fashion,” linked to terminological specificity, accuracy and the exclusiveness craved for by elite segments of society.9

According to Lopriore and Furiassi, “French seems to affect the English language of fashion more than Italian, whereas Italian fashion language seems to be affected more by English than French.”10 In greater detail, French took over throughout the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, whereas English dominated Italian and world fashion lexis from the second half of the 20th century onwards.11


11. Further details on the diachronic shift in balance between French and English as donor languages affecting Italian fashion lexis are present in the analyses carried out by the following scholars, quoted in chronological order: Federica Fiori, “Parole di moda,” Italiano e oltre, vol. 3, no. 4 (September–October 1992): 114; Massariello Merzagora, “Diacronia e tipologia degli anglicismi di un lessico settoriale: il linguaggio della moda,” 77–8; Calligaro, “La lingua della moda contemporanea e i suoi

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/10041
Moreover, notwithstanding the considerable effort made by the Fascist regime between the 1920s and the 1940s in limiting the circulation of foreign words also in the Italian lexis of fashion, several Gallicisms and Anglicisms survived.12

Despite Milan ranking among the four contemporary fashion capitals,13 the presence of Italianisms in fashion terminology is not at all widespread:14 Italian, prototypically identified as a recipient language in this niche sector, does not seem to hold center stage, and only a limited number of Italianisms made their way into it, classic examples being ballerina and borsalino—a genericized trademark owned by the Piedmontese, Alessandria-based hat manufacturer Borsalino.15

It is nevertheless worth mentioning that the linguistic label ‘borrowing’ is hardly ever used appropriately. In fact, borrowed words are seldom returned and, in the rare event in which they are, they tend to acquire additional semantic nuances, connotations and uses in the recipient language, thus originating “false borrowings,”16 such as, among others, pseudo-Gallicisms, e.g. sabot, pseudo-Anglicisms, e.g. beauty case, and pseudo-Italianisms, e.g. stiletto.17

Stiletto Heels: A Fashion and Fetish Icon

Although not all shoes with high slim heels deserve to be called stilettos, this particular type, characterized by “its infamous bold arch,” is fitted with a needle-thin heel that may vary in length from 8 cm up to 25 cm—provided that a platform is attached to the sole—and usually has a diameter which ranges

---

from 5 mm to 1 cm at ground level, though “sometimes flared out a little at the tip.”18 In fact, “named for a type of dagger with a slender blade, the stiletto initially took its name from the narrow girth, rather than the height, of the heel.”19

The origin of stiletto heels and the name of the inventor have long been object of debate. For example, Kelly holds that “some say Salvatore Ferragamo is the mastermind behind the iconic heel”;20 conversely, Semmelhack considers that “the earliest narrow all-steel heel, the precursor to the invention of the stiletto, was designed by André Perugia in 1951.”21 On the whole, while their predecessors peeked out on the Western world of fashion in the early 1930s,22 stiletto heels took proper shape in 1953 thanks to the inventive effort of French shoemaker Roger Vivier, “the Fabergé of Footwear”23 and “father to the Aiguille stiletto,” who “allowed women all over the world to achieve new heights.”24 As a result of post-war technology, “that allowed designers to use metal-reinforced shafts that would support a thinner heel,”25 stilettos, first launched on catwalks in the fall of 1954, were commercialized by the house of Christian Dior.26

Both a blessing and a curse for women, the “dangerous” but “deliciously smug” stilettos marked the “return to frivolity” associated with “postwar style.”27 As trends come and go, especially on the fashion scene, even stiletto heels, very popular in the late 1950s, especially in Italy,28 “went out of fashion for a while, but have made a comeback on the ramps since the turn of the new century,”29 with early revivals in the 1970s and 1990s.30 Actually, stiletto heels are now also known as “needle heels.”31 Possibly after Manolo Blahnik introduced the stiletto-like “Needle” in 1974.32

The unrivalled success of stiletto heels is probably ascribable to their being able to satisfy women’s ancestral appetite for uniqueness and sameness simultaneously, or, in Simmel’s words, “the desire for change and contrast” and, at the same time, “the demand for social adaptation.”33 From the onset, stiletto heels were seen as “the epitome of style”34 and immediately became a symbol of “sex appeal,” “status,” “lux-

23. Bergstein, Women from the Ankle Down: The Story of Shoes and How They Define Us, 76.
27. Bergstein, Women from the Ankle Down: The Story of Shoes and How They Define Us, 64–70.
30. Semmelhack, Shoes: The Meaning of Style, 206, 212.
34. Alex Games, Balderdash & Piffle: One Sandwich Short of a Dog’s Dinner. The Stories behind our most Intriguing Words and Phrases (London: BBC Books, 2007), 49.

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/10041
Yet, they have also been defined by Steele as “the classic ‘bitchy’ shoe,”\textsuperscript{36} by Paglia as “modern woman’s most lethal social weapon”\textsuperscript{37} and by Semmelhack as “hypersexualized items of dress that specifically reference fetish and the sex trade.”\textsuperscript{38} Being seductive to the extreme, hence a fetish “meant for admiring, \textit{not} walking,”\textsuperscript{39} stilettos have been—and still are—often linked to the archetype of the “femme fatale”\textsuperscript{40} and the iconicity of the “dominatrix.”\textsuperscript{41}

On the one hand, fetish, as a concept, should be conceived both as “a force, a supernatural property” and as “a fabrication, an artifact, a labor of appearances and signs.”\textsuperscript{42} On the other hand, the connection with domination is explained by Paglia, who refers back to the stiletto as a weapon employed by bloodthirsty assassins in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

The stiletto’s historic association with deception and treachery thus gives an aura of sadistic glamour to the modern high heel, whose stem contains a concealed shaft of steel. Woman as seducer or seduced can also lance and castrate.\textsuperscript{43}

A different perspective on the relationship between weaponry and stiletto heels is adopted by Semmelhack, who suggests that the word \textit{stiletto}, which appeared in a caption on a 1952 American issue of \textit{Vogue}, did not specifically denote the stiletto heel but generally referred to the “sleek, modern, elegant design in the early 1950s” inspired by the name of a US Air Force experimental jet aircraft, indeed called Douglas X-3 Stiletto, whose first flight took place on October 15, 1952.\textsuperscript{44}

Undeniably, not only are stilettos objects of fashion but they are also items of fetish deeply pleasurable for both sexes, this apparent interrelation being illustrated by Steele, who states that “[t]he shoe combines masculine and feminine imagery on many levels, from the stiletto heel penetrating the fetishist’s body to the foot sliding into an open shoe.”\textsuperscript{45} On a final note, it is worth considering that at the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century stiletto heels, “a supremely eroticized form of footwear” deserving a “place in men’s pornography,” came to be identified also with transsexuality and cross-dressing.\textsuperscript{46}

\section*{A Lexicographic Analysis of \textit{Stiletto}}

The approach adopted to study \textit{stilettO} is almost exclusively lexicographic. Primarily in order to trace the semantic transformation of \textit{stiletto}, from \textit{dagger} to \textit{heel}, hence to a unique type of female shoes, which is supposedly ascribable to English, monolingual dictionaries of the English language were initially consulted. Besides contributing to ascertaining its etymology, English monolingual dictionaries proved helpful in providing synonyms or, more appropriately, quasi-synonyms, of \textit{stiletto}, alongside showing orthographic variants. Then, with the purpose of verifying whether \textit{stilettO} reentered Italian with a new meaning assigned to it in English, monolingual dictionaries of the Italian language were investigated.\textsuperscript{47} Additionally, keeping in mind that stiletto heels are widely recognized as a French invention,

---

\textsuperscript{35.} Bergstein, \textit{Women from the Ankle Down: The Story of Shoes and How They Define Us}, 68–70.


\textsuperscript{37.} Paglia, “Feminist Camille Paglia on the Allure of the Stiletto Heel.”


\textsuperscript{39.} Bergstein, \textit{Women from the Ankle Down: The Story of Shoes and How They Define Us}, 76.

\textsuperscript{40.} Elizabeth Semmelhack, \textit{Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Shoe} (Reading: Periscope, 2008), 48; Bergstein, \textit{Women from the Ankle Down: The Story of Shoes and How They Define Us}, 55.

\textsuperscript{41.} Steele, \textit{Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power}, 113.

\textsuperscript{42.} Jean Baudrillard, \textit{For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign} (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 91.

\textsuperscript{43.} Paglia, “Feminist Camille Paglia on the Allure of the Stiletto Heel.”

\textsuperscript{44.} Semmelhack, \textit{Shoes: The Meaning of Style}, 197.

\textsuperscript{45.} Steele, \textit{Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power}, 113.

\textsuperscript{46.} Semmelhack, \textit{Shoes: The Meaning of Style}, 201, 220.

\textsuperscript{47.} I would like to express my gratitude to Carla Marello for her precious suggestions on invaluable lexicographic material.

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/10041
monolingual dictionaries of the French language were analyzed. Lastly, a comparison between monolingual and specialized dictionaries, inclusive of fashion encyclopedias, in all the languages considered was carried out to prove that stiletto is not relegated to domain-specific lexis but has de facto enjoyed larger circulation in the general language; Italian-English, French-English and Italian-French bilingual dictionaries were also examined in pursuance of plausible translation equivalents of stiletto.  

**Monolingual Dictionaries**


Although it was not found in *WDFWE, WNCD and WTNID*, stiletto, the shortening of the compound *stiletto heels*, is included in all the remaining English monolingual dictionaries and defined as follows:49 “a shoe or boot with a stiletto heel” (AHD), “a woman’s shoe with a narrow, high heel” (CALD), “a very high heel on a woman’s shoe, tapering to a very narrow tip” (CED), “women’s shoes that have high, very narrow heels” (CÖBUILD), “a woman’s shoe that has a very high thin heel [...] the heel of a stiletto shoe” (LDOCE), “a thin high heel on a woman’s shoe […] a shoe that has a thin high heel” (MDO), “a shoe with a stiletto heel [...] a high thin heel on women’s shoes that is narrower than a spike heel” (Merriam-Webster), “a woman’s shoe with a very high narrow heel; the heel on such a shoe” (OALD), “a very narrow, high heel on women’s shoes, fashionable esp. in the 1950s; a shoe with such a heel” (OED), “spike heel” (WNWCD4) and “a high, very thin heel on a woman’s shoe” (WNWCD5).

As regards possible English synonyms of *stiletto heels*, English monolingual dictionaries propose *spike heel* (CED, OALD, OED, WNWCD4), *spike shoes* (CÖBUILD) and *spikes* (AHD, Merriam-Webster). *COBUILD* data also adduce that *spike* is typical of American English usage as an alternative to *stiletto heels*, more widespread in British English (CED). Additionally, it is important to consider that *COBUILD, OALD* and *WNWCD4* view *stiletto*, the shortening of *stiletto heels*, as characteristic of British English.

---

48. For reasons of space, all the dictionaries referred to in this analysis and listed in the following sections are quoted in the main text by means of acronyms or abbreviations widely recognized in the lexicographic literature; their complete details are specified in the reference section.

49. The entry *stiletto*, indicating female shoes, is missing from *WNCD*: this may be due to the fact that this dictionary was published in 1977 and, possibly, by that date *stiletto*, as the elliptical form of *stiletto heel*, had not yet made its way into American English dictionaries. Similarly, *WTNID*, published in 1961, includes neither *stiletto* nor *stiletto heel*, referring to a type of shoe: this might suggest that *stiletto* was still a recent coinage in American English even in the 1960s.
With respect to its earliest written attestation, according to the *OED*, the compound *stiletto heel* was encountered in the *Vidette-Messenger*, based in Valparaiso, Indiana, on April 20, 1931; instead, the form *stilettos* surfaced in the American press in an advertisement published in the Ohio-based *Newark Advocate* on March 8, 1953. As far as the British press is concerned, Bergstein maintains that *stiletto heel* made its debut in *Picture Post*, a photojournalism magazine based in London, in 1953; nonetheless, Games claims that *stilettos* made its first appearance in London’s magazine *New Statesman* in 1959.

As far as Italian monolingual dictionaries are concerned, *stiletto*, denoting *stilettos heels*, is only recorded in GDI, as “tacco a spillo; anche, scarpa con questo tacco,” GDU, as “tacco a spillo [...] estens., calzatura con tale tipo di tacco,”

and Zingarelli, as “(ext.) Tacco a spillo.”

The remaining dictionaries, with the notable exception of *TLIO* and *Tommaso-Bellini*, where *stiletto* is not found, only record the original Italian meaning of *stiletto*, that is, *dagger*.

Considering French monolingual dictionaries, except for *Games*, as a genuine Italianism, *Eric Partridge*, the compound *stiletto* as “[c]haussure dont le talon est très effilé et dont la hauteur dépasse 10 centimètres,”

no other dictionary includes the entry *stiletto* in its wordlist.

Derived from Latin *stilus* and, subsequently, Italian *stilo* with the addition of the diminutive suffix *-etto,*

*stiletto* first appeared in written Italian in 1416 to denote a “[s]pecie di pugnale, con ferro a sezione quadra o triangolare, molto aguzzo” (Zingarelli),

as a genuine Italianism,

it then entered British English in 1611 to refer to “[a] short dagger with a blade thick in proportion to its breadth” (*OED*).

More than three hundred years later, exactly in 1931, American English witnessed the appearance of *stiletto* as part of the compound *stiletto heel*, meaning, via metonymy, “a very narrow, high heel on women’s shoes” (*OED*); two decades down the line, in 1953,

the compound *stiletto heel* was shortened and pluralized to *stilettos* (or *stiletto*) to identify, via synecdoche, “a shoe with such a heel” (*OED*).

In 2004, with a fifty-year delay, *stileto* was eventually restituted to the Italian language, where it initially belonged, though with this unexpectedly new, English-inspired semantic shade (Zingarelli).

### Bilingual Dictionaries


---


52. En. “spike heel; also, a shoe with this type of heel.”

53. En. “spike heel [...] ext., footwear with such a heel.”

54. En. “(ext.) Spike heel.”

55. The absence of the entry *stiletto* from *Tommaso-Bellini* is justified by the fact that the dictionary wordlist itself stops at letter G.

56. En. “a shoe with a very thin heel whose height exceeds 10 centimeters.”

57. The absence of *stiletto* from *DAF* is motivated by its wordlist ending at the entry *Savoir*.


59. En. “[t]ype of very sharp dagger whose blade has either a square or triangular section.” According to *GDU*, *stiletto*, meaning “arma bianca simile a un pugnale con lama molto sottile e acuminata,” En. “stabbing weapon similar to a dagger with a very thin and sharp blade,” is first encountered in Italian in 1932.


62. It must be observed that *GDI*, at the entry *microtunica*, shows an example of *stiletto*, within the phrase *tacchi a stiletto*, appearing in *La Repubblica*, one of the best-selling Italian newspapers, on January 25, 1991.
Among Italian-French bilingual dictionaries, only Il Boch – Dizionario francese-italiano italiano-francese (Boch), Dictionnaire français-italien Larousse en ligne (Larousse-IT), Dizionario Hoepli francese (Bowier), Grande dizionario di francese (GDF) and Il nuovo Hachette-Paravia – Il dizionario francese/italiano italiano/francese (Hachette-Paravia).

In the English-Italian section of the bilingual dictionaries interrogated, the lemma *stilettos* is provided with the following translation equivalents, hence reinforcing its standardness in the English language: *tacco a spillo* (CEID, CID, Hazon, Oxford-Paravia, PASSWORD-IT, Picchi), *tacchi a spillo* (CEID, Sansoni), *scarpa con tacco a spillo* (CID, Hazon, Oxford-Paravia, PASSWORD-IT), *Picchi*, *Ragazzini* and *scarpe con i tacchi a spillo* (Sansoni). As a further matter, it is worth mentioning that in the Italian-English section of all the bilingual dictionaries consulted only the original meaning of *stilettos* is maintained, hence English translation equivalents are limited to *dagger*, the ‘true’ Italianism *stilettos* itself and *stylet*:\(^{63}\) this finding testifies to the rarity of *stilettos*, designating female shoes, in the Italian language.

The lemma *stilettos*, referring to an item of footwear, is found in the English-French section of all the bilingual dictionaries consulted, thus corroborating its English origin: the suggested translation equivalents are *talon aiguille* (Collins-Robert, GDT, Larousse-EN, Oxford-Hachette, PASSWORD-FR), *talons aiguilles* (Larousse-EN), *chaussure à talon* (PASSWORD-FR) and *chaussures à talons* (Larousse-EN). Vice-versa, *stilettos*, relating to a type of knife, is included only in the English-French section of Larousse-EN, Oxford-Hachette and PASSWORD-FR, which indicate *stylet* as the French equivalent; the entry *stilettos* is never encountered in the French-English section of the above-mentioned dictionaries.

Among Italian-French bilingual dictionaries, only Boch, GDF and Hachette-Paravia include the entry *stilettos*, solely meaning *dagger*, in their Italian-French section and provide *stylet* as the French translation equivalent. Moreover, *stilettos* is never listed in the French-Italian section of the dictionaries inspected, validating the hypothesis that *stilettos* does not exist as an Italianism in French.

It must be remembered that English *spike heel*, *spike heels* and *spikes*, Italian *tacco a spillo*, *tacchi a spillo*, *scarpe con tacco a spillo* and *scarpe con i tacchi a spillo* as well as French *talon aiguille*, *talons aiguilles*, *chaussure à talon* and *chaussures à talons* are nothing but near-synonyms of *stilettos*, unable to fully render their specificity and rather precise characteristics. Only *Merriam-Webster* emphasizes the difference by specifying that *a stiletto heel* is “a high thin heel on women’s shoes that is narrower than a spike heel.”

Finally, by merging the data retrieved from English monolingual dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries, a few remarks on the orthographic variants of *stilettos* can be made. As for the plural of the noun *stilettos*, originally a modifier in the phrase *stilettos* heels, *AHD*, *LDOCE*, *Merriam-Webster*, *OALD*, *ODFWP*, *PASSWORD-FR*, *PASSWORD-IT*, *Ragazzini*, *WNCD*, *WNWCD4* and *WNWCD5* attest to the existence of both *stilettos* and *stilettos*. Perhaps due to its more normative approach, *OED* exclusively acknowledges the plural *stilettos*; alternatively, *CALD*, *CEID*, *COBUILD* and *Larousse-EN* only provide *stilettos* as the acceptable English plural.

**Specialized Dictionaries and Encyclopedias of Fashion**

and in En. “a heel with a very narrow heelpiece [or heel seat].”

112 Morton, The DICO MODE – La mode de A à Z

En. “1. very thin spike heel […]; 2. female court shoe [or pump] with a thin pointy heel, whose minimum height is 5 cm.”

Fashionpedia – The Visual Dictionary of Fashion Design

ABOLARIO – Le parole della moda

All English fashion-specific publications, except for FD, include the entry stiletto: DFH, under the entry stiletto heels, refers to it as “[t]he high, tapered heel of a shoe or sandal, thought to resemble the sharp narrow blade of an Italian dagger known as a ‘stiletto’”; EF describes stiletto as “[h]igh, narrow heel which originated in Italy during the 1950s. It was made of nylon and plastic, which often covered a steel core.” More detailed definitions are provided in Fashion A-Z and Fashionpedia respectively:

Stiletto heels are high and slender, tapering to a sharp point on women’s shoes and boots. Their creation was tied to the advent of technology that allowed designers to use metal-reinforced shafts that would support a thinner heel. The phrase was first associated with shoes in the 1930s (they were named after the stiletto dagger), and conjures up an image of the femme fatale, a cocktail of fetish and feminine.64

Named after the stiletto dagger, owing to the resemblance in its silhouette, the stiletto heel refers to a type of thin, narrow heel usually found on women’s boots and shoes. Favoured for the optical illusion it gives—longer and more slender legs, tinier feet, greater height and more flattering proportions—the stiletto is often featured in popular culture partly due to its seductive image.65

Considering Italian specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias, stiletto, which is absent from DITM, DdM1, EdM and VOGUE-ABOLARIO, is in fact recorded in Modabolario, under the entry tacco, as “[u]n tacco con il soprattacco molto piccolo”66 and in PdM as “1. tacco a spillo, sottilissimo […]; 2. scarpa femminile decolleté [sic] con tacco sottile, appuntito e con un’altezza minima di 5 cm.”67 The English-Italian section of DdM2 lists stiletto heel—but neither stiletto nor stilettoes/stilettoes—and provides tacco a spillo as its Italian equivalent; in the Italian-English section of DdM2, from which the lemma stiletto is excluded, the entry tacco a spillo is inserted and stiletto heel, spike heel and spikes are suggested as English equivalents.

The French reference works on fashion taken into account do not record stiletto, with the due exception of DICO MODE, which defines it as follows:

Chaussure de femme dont la caractéristique est le talon fin et assez haut, sur lequel se juchent les belles élégantes. Il peut s’agir d’escarpins ou de bottes, la qualification étant en rapport avec la forme du talon.68

In conclusion, stiletto, alongside stilettoes, stilettoes, stiletto heel and stiletto heels, seems widely attested in English lexicographic sources, hence confirming that either the British or the American variety is the metaphorical well from which the neologism stiletto was drawn by Italian and—only very recently—French. As for the former, Italian dictionaries are reluctant to attest stiletto but still show its presence, with Zingarelli being the pioneer in recording it for the first time in the 2004 edition. Likewise, in this respect, GDU also acted as a trailblazer in the Italian lexicographic tradition: stiletto, which is not present

64. Morton, Fashion A-Z.


66. En. “[a] heel with a very narrow heelpiece [or heel seat].”

67. En. “1. very thin spike heel […]; 2. female court shoe [or pump] with a thin pointy heel, whose minimum height is 5 cm.”

68. DICO MODE – La mode de A à Z, (2019), http://www.dico-mode.com. En. “A type of female footwear featuring slender and rather high heels on which elegant women stand. It could equally be a pair of shoes or boots, as their denomination solely depends on the shape of the heel.”
in the 2000 edition with the meaning “tacco a spillo,” En. “spike heel,” is in fact included—though marked as a low-frequency item and labeled “BU,” i.e. ‘basso uso’—in the 2007 edition. Differently, GDI only attests stiletto with this nuance in the 2010 edition.

As for the latter, with only few exceptions and in spite of their acclaimed French origin, stiletto heels are hardly ever referred to by the name of stiletto in the French lexicographic tradition. In this regard, it is striking that Aiguille, with capital A, and Aiguille stiletto are accounted for in the English version of the official Roger Vivier website, even though the French version substitutes them with Aiguille and talon aiguille. All in all, the juxtaposition of Aiguille and stiletto on the Roger Vivier website, the French definitions provided by DICO MODE as well as lintern@ute and the existence of a French fashion magazine called STILETTO, founded in 2004 by Laurence Benaïm, could be signs that the word itself is beginning to gain ground even in France.

Classifying Stiletto in Linguistic Terms

At the outset an Italian word derived from Latin, stiletto emerges on the contemporary international lexicographic scenario as an Italianism in the English language; it then develops into a false Italianism, when the fashion-related meaning is added across the Atlantic, and eventually reappears in Italian—through English—as a reborrowing of quite recent discovery. Finally, again thanks to the intervention of the universally-acknowledged status of English, stiletto succeeds in entering other European and world languages as an internationalism.

False Italianism

False Italianisms are independent lexical units generated by specific word-formation processes, either morpho-syntactic or semantic, created by non-Italian speakers in a non-Italian context. The following definition by Furiassi, initially conceived for false Italianisms in the English language, can therefore be extended to false Italianisms in any (allegedly) recipient language:

\[\ldots\] false Italianisms, which formally mirror Italian orthographic patterns and do not comply with the orthographic norms of the English language, are Italian-looking words, i.e. words constituted by sequences of graphemes which are typical of the Italian language. From the perspective of morphology, false Italianisms should not be classified as adapted Italianisms since they are not morphologically adapted to the structure of the English language and maintain genuinely Italian features. Finally, from the semantic standpoint, unexpectedly new meanings—not present in Italian—are added to existing Italian words: the extension of meaning acquired inevitably jeopardizes comprehension for an Italian speaker, thus fostering the coinage of false Italianisms.

Although stiletto may also be used in English—but apparently not in French—as a proper Italianism referring to “[...] a slender dagger with a blade thick in proportion to its breadth [...]” (Merriam-Webster), semantic extension, expansion or widening is at play in turning stiletto into a false Italianism. Without doubt, the false Italianism stiletto is a word which has a genuine Italian form; however, once borrowed

---

72. For a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of false Italianisms in English, see Furiassi, “False Italianisms in English Dictionaries and Corpora.”
73. Furiassi, “False Italianisms in English Dictionaries and Corpora,” 49.
into English, the fashion-related nuances attached to it make it acquire a new meaning, (conspicuously) distant from the meaning or meanings of its Italian etymon.

Reborrowing

A reborrowing is a word which migrated from one language into another and eventually returned to the originating language, in which it maintained the original form but acquired a new meaning, different from the initial one. Though not frequently, both authentic and false borrowings may be reinstated in their original donor language, hence giving birth to reborrowings.

The reborrowing of made-in-English false Italianisms into Italian is indeed restricted to few cases, namely dildo, gondola and stiletto itself. The notion of stiletto as a reborrowing is also put forward by Sergio:

L’it. stiletto ‘arma bianca simile a un pugnale’ è passato all’inglese stiletto heel ‘tacco a spillo; scarpa con tale tipo di tacco’ (1959) per diffondersi in questo significato in tutto il mondo e anche, come ripresto, in Italia, dove si mostra di considerarlo come anglismo: su alcuni recenti numeri di «Vogue Italia» compare infatti in corsivo e al plurale prende la -s inglese (stilettos, non stiletti).

Therefore, as a lexical innovation coined in English by exploiting pseudo-Italian and later restored into ‘real’ Italian, stiletto is a quintessential example of reborrowing and, to the author’s knowledge, the only one occurring in the semantic field of fashion.

Internationalism

Although it is mostly Anglophone fashion terms which tend to spread globally, the false Italianism stiletto has now become a fully-fledged “internationalism,” that is a word which has the same (or a similar) form and the same meaning in various languages of different language families.

In fact, it is through the medium of English that stiletto managed to circulate all over the world. For instance, data retrieved from the DIFIT confirm that stiletto, for ladies shoes, entered German via English. Furthermore, Sergio asserts that, in addition to German, the English language contributed to the proliferation of the internationalism stiletto even in so-called ‘exotic’ languages—at least from a Eurocentric perspective—such as Chinese and Japanese.

Conclusion

By emphasizing the multilingual dimension of fashion lexis, this piece of research confirmed that the global success of the iconic stiletto heels turned stiletto from a specialized term employed by professionals and fashionistas into an internationalism currently known and used also by non-connoisseurs, not only in American English, perhaps its birthplace, but in other languages as well, thus allowing this false Italianism to propagate and cross both linguistic and cultural boundaries.

---

75. Furiassi, “False Italianisms in English Dictionaries and Corpora,” 57.
77. Giuseppe Sergio, “Italianismi di moda nelle lingue del mondo,” in L’italiano e la creatività: marchi e costumi, moda e design, eds. Paolo D’Achille and Giuseppe Patota (Firenze: Accademia della Crusca/goWare, 2016), 62. En. It. stiletto ‘stabbing weapon similar to a dagger’ became stiletto heel in English ‘spike heel; a shoe with such a heel’ (1999), thus spreading with this meaning all over the world and, as a reborrowing, even to Italy, where it is considered an Anglicism: in some recent issues of «Vogue Italia» it indeed appears in italics and takes the English -s in its plural form (stilettos, not stiletti).
Due to the overt and covert prestige conferred on the donor language at issue, namely Italian, by speakers of other recipient languages, French and English being a case in point, the false Italianism stiletto is perceived as an attractive manifestation of language contact. Bearing witness to the fact that the creative potential of language users is virtually endless, all the more so in the world of fashion, the reinterpretation of a genuine Italian lexical item into a false Italianism is the result of a spontaneous but conscious act performed by designers and stylists who managed to forge foreign lexical material to their liking. Unquestionably, alongside etymologically justified reasons, the taste for the exotic, the charm of the foreign and the glamorous quirk of playing with language are the core motivations for the coinage of new terms in fashion, stiletto being a prototypical case.

The uniquely appealing flair of its lexicon is certainly ascribable to the very nature of fashion itself, to its ever-changing trends at vertigo-like speed and to the consistent fluidity of the globalization and glocalization processes it has recently undergone. However, it is also made possible by its permeability to social and linguistic phenomena that fosters constant manipulation of words such as stiletto, which, at one point, managed to become recognizable on the world scene. The present findings are hoped to demonstrate the intrinsically hybrid nature of the vocabulary of world fashion, governed by the dynamics which lie underneath unpredictable encounters in a cosmopolitan milieu.

**Bibliography**


Chronicling a Global Fetish


https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/10041


https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/10041


https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/10041


