

From Italian to Neapolitan: Learn by Decoding

A transformation manual for Italian speakers acquiring Neapolitan — rules auto-generated from IE-CoR gold cognate data; pedagogy authored

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Provenance & scope. The rule tables (§2–§3) are sound correspondences harvested automatically by aligning Italian↔Neapolitan cognate pairs in the IE-CoR database (expert cognacy), ranked by frequency; they are phonemic (IPA-ish), not spelling rules, and are a data-driven first draft. The pronunciation, bridge-sentence and instructor sections are authored and illustrative — validate all of it against a full corpus and a native speaker before course use. Counts are small (a Swadesh-sized list), so treat low-count rules as tendencies.

1. The good news: your crib

Of 170 basic concepts, 142 (84%) are cognate — the Neapolitan word is a regular transformation of the Italian word you already know. Only 28 (16%) are genuinely different words to memorise. Your learning target is therefore mostly a rule system, not a vocabulary.

Sounds that usually stay the same (transfer for free): /t/, /p/, /v/, /f/, /t:/, /k:/, /l:/, /ŋ/, /ʃ:/.

2. The rules to learn — consonants (the recognition skeleton)

Consonants carry most of a word's identity; these are the highest-leverage rules.

rule	count	reliability	examples
/r/ → ∅	18	64%	tira:re→təra (pull); kanta:re→kanta (sing)
/d/ → /r/ (variable)	6	30%	radi:tʃe→rarəkə (root); ko:da→korə (tail)
/s/ → /ʃ/	5	62%	bɔsko→vwɔʃkə (forest); moska→moʃkə (fly_N)
/m/ → /m:/	5	83%	no:me→nɔm:ə (name); fju:me→ʃum:ə (river)
/j/ → ∅	5	83%	fju:me→ʃum:ə (river); unɟja→ɔŋ:ə (nail)
/r/ → ∅ (variable)	4	40%	mori:re→muri (die); kʷat:ro→kʷat:ə (four)
/n/ → /n:/ (variable)	4	40%	tondo→tun:ə (round); naskondere→an:əʃkon:ə (hide)
/g/ → ∅	3	60%	lega:re→lia (tie); unɟja→ɔŋ:ə (nail)
/w/ → ∅	3	100%	sangwe→sangə (blood); nwota:re→nata (swim)
/t/ → /k/	3	60%	vomita:re→vum:əka (vomit); kortet:ʃa→ʃkortsə (bark)
/p/ → /k/	3	100%	pjɔd:ʒa→kjɔvərə (rain); pjandʒere→kjaŋ:ərə (cry)
/b/ → /v/ (variable)	3	43%	bok:a→vok:ə (mouth); bɔsko→vwɔʃkə (forest)

3. The rules to learn — vowels (the main body of shifts)

Vowels shift more than consonants; this is where most of the transformation lives.

rule	count	reliability	examples
/o/ → /ə/	55	76%	stret:o→strit:ə (narrow); vitʃi:no→vijinə (near)
/e/ → /ə/	49	57%	karne→karnə (meat); no:me→nɔm:ə (name)
/a/ → /ə/	24	92%	pantʃa→pantʃə (belly); lu:na→lunə (moon)
/a:/ → /a/	22	76%	na:zo→nasə (nose); tira:re→təra (pull)
/i/ → /ə/	7	70%	tira:re→təra (pull); pik:olo→pət:ʃəil:ə (small)
/ɔ/ → /o/	6	67%	kɔl:o→k*ol:ə (neck); ɔs:o→wos:ə (bone)
/u:/ → /u/	6	75%	lu:na→lunə (moon); u:no→unə (one)
/i:/ → /i/ (variable)	5	38%	vitʃi:no→vijinə (near); di:re→rifərə (say)
/ɛ/ → /e/	4	67%	vɛk:jo→vjek:jə (old); uttʃɛl:o→aufjel:ə (bird)
/ɔ:/ → /o/	4	67%	nwɔ:vo→nwovə (new); wɔ:vo→wovə (egg)
/e:/ → /e/ (variable)	4	40%	ne:ve→nevə (snow); be:re→vevərə (drink)
/dʒ/ → ∅	4	57%	dʒoka:re→juka (play); pjandʒere→kjan:ərə (cry)
/u/ → /o/	3	60%	kutʃi:re→kosərə (sew); unɡja→ɔn:ə (nail)
/tʃ/ → ∅ (variable)	3	30%	brutʃa:re→ab:ruʃa (burn); doltʃe→roʃə (sweet)
/o:/ → /o/	3	75%	so:le→solə (sun); ko:da→korə (tail)

4. Genuinely new words (no rule bridges them) — and your hidden access points

These 28 concepts are not cognate, so no rule turns the Italian word into the Neapolitan one. But your language often still keeps a cognate of the Neapolitan word — as a cultism, technical term, archaism or regional word, sometimes with a shifted meaning. That word is an access point: a hook already in your head. Where the meaning differs we flag the false friend, so the hook helps you remember the Neapolitan word without misusing it. (E.g. Spanish has no everyday cognate of Portuguese vermelho ‘red’ — but it has bermellón ‘vermilion (pigment)’; the colour is not the same, the word is.)

meaning	Italian (everyday)	Neapolitan	access via Italian	note — meaning may differ
back	skjɛ:na	rinə	reni	IT reni ‘loins, lower back’ = cognate of NAP rine (Latin renes).
bad	katti:vo	malamentə	malamente, malo	IT malamente ‘badly’, literary malo ‘bad’ = cognate of NAP malamente.
big	grande	rwos:ə	grosso	IT grosso ‘big, thick’ = cognate of NAP (g)ruosso.
breathe	respira:re	ʃata	fiato	IT fiato ‘breath’ = cognate of NAP sciato / sciata (Latin flatus, fl→sci).
claw	artiʎ:o	ɔn:ə	unghia	IT unghia ‘nail, claw’ = cognate of NAP ognia (Latin ungula).
feather	pju:ma	pen:ə	penna	IT penna also means ‘feather’ of a bird, beside ‘pen’ = NAP penna.

meaning	Italian (everyday)	Neapolitan	access via Italian	note — meaning may differ
fight	kombat:ere	lutta	lotta	IT lotta, lottare 'struggle, fight' = cognate of NAP lotta.
hard	du:ro	twostə	tosto	IT tosto 'tough' (faccia tosta) = cognate of NAP tuosto 'hard'.
head	tɛsta	kapə	capo	IT capo 'head, chief' = cognate of NAP capa (Latin caput).
hit	kol:pi:re	kɔʎ:əɾə	cogliere	IT cogliere nel segno 'to hit the mark' = cognate of NAP cogliere 'to hit'.
hot	kaldo	kavəɾə	calore, cálido	IT calore 'heat', poetic cálido = cognate of NAP càvero (Latin calidus).
leg	gamba	kɔʎ:ə	coscia	IT coscia 'thigh' = cognate of NAP coscia, here used for the leg.
live	vi:vere	kampa	campare	IT campare 'to get by, scrape a living' = cognate of NAP campà 'to live'.
push	spindzere	vutta	buttare	IT buttare 'to throw' = cognate of NAP vuttà 'to push/throw' (b→v).
rotten	martʃo	ɱfrafɛtatə	fradicio	IT fradicio 'soaked, rotten' = cognate of NAP nfracetato.
sand	sab:ja	renə	rena, arena	IT literary rena / arena 'sand' = cognate of NAP rena (Latin arena).
sharp	af:ila:to	am:ulatə	mola, molare	IT mola 'grindstone', molare 'to whet' = root of NAP ammolato 'sharpened'.
stand	sta:re+im+pjɛ:di	sta+al:ertə	all'erta, erto	IT stare all'erta 'be on the alert', erto 'steep, upright' = NAP allerta.
stick	basto:ne	mat:sə	mazza	IT mazza 'club, mallet, bat' = cognate of NAP mazza 'stick'.
stone	sas:o	prɛtə	pietra	IT pietra 'stone' = cognate of NAP preta (Latin petra).
swell	gomfja:re	ab:uffa	abbuffarsi	IT abbuffarsi 'to stuff oneself' = cognate of NAP abbuffà 'to swell'.
take	prɛndere	piʎʎa	pigliare	IT pigliare 'to grab, take' (colloquial) = cognate of NAP piglià.
thick	grɔs:o	rup:jə	—	
throw	tira:re	vutta	buttare	IT buttare 'to throw' = cognate of NAP vuttà.
tree	albero	kjantə	pianta	IT pianta 'plant, tree' = cognate of NAP chianta (Latin planta, pl→chi).
turn	dʒira:re	avuta	voltare	IT voltare 'to turn' = cognate of NAP votà / avutà.
wet	banɲa:to	ɱfusə	infuso	IT infuso 'infused, steeped' = cognate of NAP nfuso 'wet' (Latin infusus).
woman	dɔn:a	fem:ənə	femmina	IT femmina 'female' = cognate of NAP femmena 'woman'.

5. Pronunciation, rhythm & parallel listening

Reference accent — the one closest to you. Cultured urban Neapolitan (Naples), moderate register — not heavy street slang.

Rhythm & sounds to train:

- The signature: unstressed and final vowels reduce to a schwa [ə] (pane → 'o ppane [ə]). An Italian ear must learn to let word-endings fade — the consonant skeleton stays Italian.
- Metaphony: the stressed vowel is raised/diphthongised by an original final -i/-u (nero/nera → niro/nera; buono → buono/bbona).
- Syntactic doubling (raddoppiamento) geminates initial consonants after certain words ('o ppane). Stress placement is Italian-like, so the melody is familiar.

Parallel listening. For each bridge below (next section), hear the target sentence, then its bridge echo in your own language, back to back. You train not only the sound rules but the mode — the rhythm and melody the target speaks in.

6. Bridge sentences — feel the mode

A bridge is your own language bent toward the target: real words of your language, sometimes less usual ones, chosen so the sentence lines up almost word-for-word with the target. It is not the most natural phrasing — that is given too — but it lets you cross into the target's form and mode in the smallest step. Read the target, then the bridge, then the natural line.

- Neapolitan (target): 'O guaglione magna 'o ppane.
- Italian (bridge — bent to align): Il guaglione magna il pane.
- Italian (natural): Il ragazzo mangia il pane.
- The boy eats the bread — bridge uses IT-regional guaglione and colloquial magna to align.

- Neapolitan (target): 'A femmena tène 'e sorde.
- Italian (bridge — bent to align): La femmina tiene i soldi.
- Italian (natural): La donna ha i soldi.
- The woman has the money — femmina, tiene, soldi all exist in Italian and line up.

7. How to study (decoding drill)

1. Trust the crib: read Neapolitan and let the Italian cognate surface.
2. Learn the consonant rules first — they let you recognise.
3. Drill the vowel rules by conversion: take Italian words and produce the Neapolitan form, then check.
4. Do parallel listening on the bridge sentences in the reference accent — internalise the mode, not just the segments.
5. Memorise the short new-word list.
6. Watch for false friends (form matches, meaning does not) — they are the rules' failures.

8. Pedagogical distance (this pair)

Cognate coverage 84%; 20 regular correspondence rules carry the bulk of the crossing; 28 new words. A close, cheap key — the method is at its strong end here.

9. For the instructor

Sequence. Teach recognition before production: the consonant rules (the skeleton) first, so learners decode what they hear and read; then drill the vowel rules by conversion. Use the bridge sentences. For each sentence show three lines — the target, the bridge (the student's language bent to align), and the natural phrasing — so students internalise the transformation of form and mode, not just the meaning. Fix one reference accent (the one closest to the student, in the Pronunciation section) and do parallel listening in it from day one: the mode — rhythm, vowel quality, nasality — is half the crossing. Teach false friends explicitly as the rules' failures. Keep sessions short and productive: a few rules + one bridge sentence + a conversion drill each.

This pair specifically. Foreground the final-schwa mode from the first minute; students who only learn the segment rules but not the fading endings will read Neapolitan but not hear it.

Rules generated by *build_manual.py* from IE-CoR; pronunciation, bridges and instructor notes authored. Refine against a full corpus, add the orthographic layer, a false-friend list and a native-speaker pass before use as a real course.