

Lesson 202: Expressing "whose" in Italian | il, la, i, le cui (o il complemento di specificazione)

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Cui, as we have seen in *some of the previous lessons*, is a relative pronoun in Italian and is often combined with simple prepositions and can mean that, which, whom depending upon the context.

In Italian, the **definite article + cui** is used to form the *genitive*, or, in English, the relative pronoun, *whose*. In Italian, this is called **il complemento di specificazione** or *possessive phrase*.

Let's look at some sentences in English where whose is used as a relative pronoun:

*Your brother, **whose car** never starts, wants to buy a new one next week.*

*John, **whose daughter** studies at La Sapienza in Rome, also teaches there.*

*I don't want to go visit John, **whose parents** hate me!*

Now let's translate the first example into Italian:

Tuo fratello, **la cui macchina** non parte mai, vuole comprarne una la prossima settimana.

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Notice immediately how the definite article agrees with the noun that follows it and not with the antecedent (tuo fratello). *Whose* can also be formed with **del quale, della quale, dei quali, delle quali** since one of preposition's (di) roles is possession (**la matita di Marco** = *Marco's pencil*). Note that unlike the other combinations of **il quale, del quale** and its variants **follow the noun that they depend upon**. Unlike *il cui/la cui/i cui/le cui*, **il quale** agrees in gender and number with the antecedent (as we learned in [Lesson 201](#)) :

Giovanni, **la cui figlia** studia alla "Sapienza" a Roma, insegna lì.

Giovanni, la figlia **del quale** studia alla Sapienza a Roma, insegna lì.

Non voglio andare a trovare Marianna, **i cui genitori** mi odiano!

Non voglio andare a trovare **Marianna**, i genitori **della quale** mi odiano!

Using this construction might seem confusing, and you might be asking yourself why we don't just use the possessive adjectives. This construction can become staid and repetitive, and Italian, especially when written, is better expressed without needless repetition.

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In order to understand **il cui**, it's often best to look at combining two phrases. Let's look at these two sentences on their own:

Rome has great public transport.

Its traffic problems are among the worst in Europe.

In the two sentences above, the common element between them is the city, *Rome*. In the second sentence, *Rome* is expressed with the possessive adjective, *its*. While *Rome* isn't stated, we know from the context that we are talking about *Rome*. *Whose* is a relative pronoun that is used to combine phrases when the common element between two phrases is expressed via possession.

If we combine the two sentences about *Rome*, we come up with:

Rome, whose traffic problems are among the worst in Europe, also has great public transport.

and translated into Italian:

Roma, **i cui problemi di traffico** sono tra i più peggiori in Europa, possiede anche buoni mezzi pubblici.

Roma, i problemi di traffico **della quale** sono tra i più peggiori in Europa, possiede anche buoni mezzi pubblici.

In interrogatives, *whose* is expressed with **di chi**:

Di chi è la macchina?

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Whose car is it?

As we stated before, the preposition, **di**, is used to express possession (**la macchina di Giovanni** = *John's car*).

Di chi can also be used as a relative pronoun when there's no antecedent present:

Non so **di chi** sia quel portafoglio.
I don't know whose wallet it is.

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