

A view of the linguistic situation in Malta

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Abstract

The object of this article is to provide an introduction to the Maltese language, giving a brief overview of its history and the conditions under which it is developing at the present time. The uniqueness and interest of Maltese in the European context is obvious: it is Europe's only Semitic language, and at the same time an authentic example of a mixed language owing to deep Sicilian and Italian influence. It has never enjoyed a dominant position in its own territory despite the fact that it is spoken by virtually all the inhabitants of the Maltese islands. Subordinated first to Italian, and then to English, it is today the only European language existing under colonial conditions analogous to those pertaining in a large part of the so-called Third World. The language has co-official status in Malta and is an official language of the European Union, but its future is not, however, assured, since it has to compete with English in many domains, the real language of power and prestige in Malta, and cannot rely on the language loyalty of its speakers.

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1. Malta: background information

The Maltese archipelago is situated right in the middle of the Mediterranean and, situated as it is at some 90 kilometres of the southern coast of Sicily, and 300 from Eastern Tunisia, it constitutes one of the European *entrepôts* for Africa. Note however that lying between Malta and the North African coast there is Pantelleria, and the Pelagic isles, both of which belong to Italy (Region of Sicily).

The five islands that make up the Maltese archipelago, with a surface area of 316 km², are Malta (in Maltese, *Malta*), Gozo (*Gawdex*), Comino (*Kemmuna*), Cominotto (*Kemmunett*) and Filforta (*Filfla*), of these, only the first three are inhabited (and Comino, in any case, has very few inhabitants). The climate of this comparatively flat and riverless country is warm, and the vegetation tends to maquis or scrub.

Given that other sectors of production are weak, especially the primary sector (owing to the physical conditions), Malta's economy is devoted largely (around 70%) to services, especially tourism. The latter is the source of at least a quarter of Malta's Gross Domestic Product. Malta exports mainly to the rest of the European Union, and it is from the Union that most of her imports come.

Malta currently has some 400,000 inhabitants. The population density of the country is very great, exceeding 1,000 per km², and this has brought about considerable emigration to English-speaking first world countries, above all Australia. A large part of Malta's population is concentrated in a few towns on the east coast of the island of Malta, or close to it, where the capital Valletta (Il-Belt) is located.

The great majority of the country's population is ethnically Maltese (96%) - although there are also some British and Italian residents - and Roman Catholic in religion (98%). Church-going is very strong in Malta, and the Church has considerable clout (the constitution lays down that Catholicism is the religion of Malta). Note that in Malta neither divorce nor abortion are legal.

Malta gained her independence in 1964, the year in which the present constitution came into force. In 1974, Malta ceased to be a monarchy (with Queen Elizabeth II of England as the head of state) and became a republic with the official name, in Maltese and English, of *Repubblika ta' Malta/Republic of Malta*. The political party system is simple: the only parties with representation in Parliament are the Nationalist Party (in power since 2003) and the Labour Party of Malta. Malta is a non-aligned or neutral state, is a member of the United Nations, a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, of the Council of Europe and, as of 2004, a member state of the European Union.

2. Summarised history of Malta

Towards the end of the prehistoric era, a culture developed on Malta which left behind it some impressive ruins. Later the Maltese entered into the Phoenician world, and then, as in other parts of the Mediterranean the islands were ruled in turn (and to quantitatively and qualitatively very different degrees) by the Carthaginians¹, Romans, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Byzantines and Arabs. The Arabs also overran Sicily and conquered Malta in the second half of ninth century, though they did not colonise it until the mid-eleventh century, with population most likely from Sicily who brought Islam and the local Magrebi Arab dialect. At the end of the eleventh century, however, Normans occupied both Sicily and Malta, which brought about Malta's reintegration into European Christendom, even though the Islamic population was not expelled from Malta until the early thirteenth century.

With the expulsion of the Moslems Malta became cut-off once and for all from the Arab world. The Norman conquest of Malta meant that the islands remained link politically with the Kingdom of Sicily for the whole of the latter Middle Ages (from 1282 the Maltese were ruled over by the Catalan-Aragonese kings or by their relatives the Sicilian monarchy). The political situation changed completely in 1530, the year in which Emperor Charles, acting in defiance of the will of the Maltese people, ceded the islands to the Order of the Knights Hospitalers -who thus became known as the Knights of Malta - after the order had been driven out of the Greek island of Rhodes by Turks, a few years earlier. After centuries of close political union, Malta cut her ties with Sicily and came into being as a separate community. Despite that, in the realms of culture, Malta continued to be situated within the orbit of Italian influence.

The rule of the Knights Hospitalers came to an end with the arrival of modern times and, after two years of French rule, Malta became part of the British Empire in 1800, for whom it was a strategic base of considerable importance. From that moment, the twin process of simultaneous Anglicisation and de-Italianisation of Maltese society began to take its gradual course. This process culminated with the end of the Second World War, and was complicated by yet another that began to be noted from the closing decades of the nineteenth century onward, consisting of renewed appreciation and promotion of distinctive local culture, above all the Maltese language.

In 1921, the British government gave Malta its autonomy (devolution); this was suspended just before the outbreak of the Second World War, during which the islands were heavily bombed, and then resumed soon after the War in 1947. Finally, ongoing tension with the British was solved by the declaring of complete independence. The final cutting of political ties with Great Britain came when the British abandoned their naval base in 1979

3. The Maltese language

Maltese (*malti*), the language of the islands, is the only language of the Afro-Asiatic language family (traditionally named Hamito-Semitic) spoken indigenously in Europe. There are various branches to this family which extends principally along the north of Africa and into South West Asia. These branches are: the Semitic languages, the most important in terms of geographical extension and number of speakers; Berber; Cushitic; Chadic, and Egyptian (now extinct). It is calculated that at the present time, there are more than 200 million speakers of Afro-Asiatic languages. Maltese is a member of the Western group of the Semitic

¹ The fact that the Carthaginians spoke a language which, like Maltese, was Semitic -- Phoenician -- has led to Malta inheriting the Punic myth, still current, that makes it possible to explain the origins of the Maltese language without having recourse to Arabic, as incompatible as the latter is felt to be with the Europeanism and Christianity that typifies Malta.

branch, the latter originating in the Arabian peninsula where Common Semitic is spoken. The main Semitic languages are Arabic; Hebrew; Amharic; Aramaic; Akkadian (the language of the Assyrians and Babylonians), and Phoenician. The last two are of course dead. The common feature of Afro-Asiatic languages is that nouns and verbs related to a basic idea are formed by inserting different vowels into roots consisting only of consonants which express this meaning or idea, or by affixing prefixes or suffixes.

In Malta, the number of speakers of Maltese is close to 400,000 (virtually all the inhabitants of the islands have Maltese as their first language). In addition, there are the thousands of Maltese emigrants who still speak the language in various places around the world (above all Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada)². It is not known for sure how many of the descendents of these emigrants have an active knowledge of the language.

Maltese was originally a variety of Arabic, alongside the other Arabic dialects, and in fact retains many features reminiscent of the contemporary Arabic varieties, above all those spoken in the Magreb (North Africa, from Morocco to Libya), features which are not found in classical Arabic. After living for centuries cut off from the Moslem world, Maltese speakers do not understand spoken Arabic, and indeed Maltese exhibits phonetic features which set it apart from the Arabic dialects we have been mentioning. If we compare these languages on the grammatical level we see that at times Maltese is more conservative and at times more innovative, and suddenly because of the Romance influence.

This influence, however, can be seen above all in lexis, where we see a veritable avalanche of terms of Romance origin (French, Occitan, and especially Italian, more specifically Sicilian and Tuscan, many of which have conserved in Maltese the original Italian form and pronunciation)³. The lexis of culture and science is in large part of Italian or English origin.

Malta's secular inclusion in the Western European world was aided by the fact that Maltese is always written in the Latin alphabet⁴ and not in Arabic script, and by the transformation of Maltese into a mixed language. The latter, caused in the main by massive Romance relexification, is comparable to the changes undergone by medieval English when it was invaded by Norman French words. These developments led to Maltese, already far removed from Arabic, being perceived by its speakers in the end as an entirely autonomous and irreducible language in its own right.

4. Summarised history of the Maltese⁵

The Maltese language, at first just another local variety of Arabic, seemed destined to die out, in the same way as other dialects of Arabic in Europe, either by language shift or as a result of the expulsion of the speakers. This is what happened in other territories that were settled by a Moslem population such as the Iberian peninsula, Crete or Sicily itself where the local Italian dialect replaced Arabic in the latter Middle Ages; interestingly, an Arabic dialect did survive on the island of Pantelleria down to modern times and an Arabic dialect is still today spoken, if precariously, by a few speakers on the island of Cyprus.

Possibly the Maltese language World might gone the same way if Malta had continued to be politically subordinate to Italy. At the very least, Maltese would today probably be a minority language of the Italian state comparable to Sardinian or Friulian, in the more or less accelerated process of language shift. In point of fact, there were signs that this process had already begun: on the one hand, certain social classes made extensive use of Italian (formerly Sicilian), which was the language of culture and an official language until World

² In Australia there are some 85,000 speakers of Maltese, who have magazines and radio programmes in their language.

³ On the question of borrowings from Catalan in Maltese, and in general of relations between Catalan-speaking countries and Malta, see in the bibliography the reference to the article which the author published in *Quaderns* magazine.

⁴ It is the only Afro-Asiatic language which uses it.

⁵ On the slow progress of Maltese in becoming an independent language, see the definition given for Maltese in two of the most important Catalan dictionaries: the *Diccionari de la llengua catalana* published by the Institut d'Estudis Catalans says "Arabic dialect, written in Western script, spoken in Malta and the neighbouring islands", while the *Diccionari de la llengua catalana* published by the Enciclopèdia Catalana gives "dialect of Magreb Arabic, written in Western script, which is spoken in Malta".

War II; secondly, Maltese, at least in certain fields, was saturated with Italian terms⁶ and as is well-known, a language swamped in this way is often in the process of disappearing⁷. Political circumstances, however, took a hand in the matter, so that this mixed dialect crystallised to become the only Semitic language still spoken indigenously in Europe.

Malta's becoming a part of the British Empire marked the beginning of the decline of Italian, at first very slowly, but later gathering speed, and the beginning of the gradual penetration of English in the islands – at first timidly, and then on a large scale. This linguistic change, part of a far-reaching culture shift, met with considerable resistance, in the reluctance to abandon the use of Italian. Italian, after all, was seen by many as the national language of Malta and the most genuine vehicle of Maltese culture (Maltese itself was considered to be a dialect used almost exclusively in speech rather than writing). And the British, along with Maltese Anglophiles, were not able completely to overcome this resistance until the pre-war events in Europe – that is, the enmity between the United Kingdom and Fascist Italy, which latter intended to annexe Malta. Italian ceased to be an official language in 1936.

The question of what status the Maltese language should have, further complicated the Maltese language conflict. From the 16th century onwards, and more particularly in the 17th century and 18th century, there was growing scholarly interest in the native language of the Maltese people, but it was not until the second half of the 18th century that Maltese began to be written more or less continuously⁸. Then in the second half of the 19th century there was a revival of interest in the language, seeking the dignifying of the language of the country, the improvement of its legal standing and the increase in its formal use. At the beginning of the 20th century the present-day standard orthography and grammar began to be developed (the introduction of the modern spelling system dates from 1924, although there have been some subsequent modifications) and, after its achievement of official status in 1934 and even more so after independence (in 1964) the ambits in which the language is used (government, school, workplace, literature, cultural habits, etc.) have been continually expanding, although always in uneasy competition with English, the latter co-official, and playing a considerable role in the life of the country.

5. The legal standing of Maltese and the current language policy in Malta

According to the Maltese Constitution⁹, the national language of Malta is Maltese, and the latter together with English are the official languages of the country. Local government can use either of these two languages. In the same way, anyone can address local government in Maltese or in English and receive an answer in the same language. The constitution also says, nonetheless, that the language of the courts is Maltese (except for exceptions to this that might be established by parliament) and that the house of representatives can decide which language or languages it uses. Lastly, the Constitution lays down that the Maltese text of a law will prevail over the English one in the case of conflict between the two (all laws have to be framed in the two languages except where Parliament decides otherwise).

⁶ One only needs to leaf through a Maltese newspaper to note the quantity of terms of Italian origin that the language contains. Interestingly, the impression is similar to that one gets leafing through an English newspaper and noting the words of Romance origin.

⁷ C. Junyent 1995: 59.

⁸ Nonetheless there are a number of extant texts from earlier times in Maltese. In legal documents dating from the end of the 14th century in Latin or Sicilian we already find Maltese place names and nicknames, and there is even some use of Maltese in local government documents dating from the 16th century. In terms of literature the earliest extant text is a poem of 20 verses dating from the second half of the 15th century, entitled the *Cantilena* by Petro de Caxaro. (However, the copy we have of this poem dates from the first half of the 16th century); somewhat later, in 1673, the *Laudes Cottoneriae* written by the Maltese Bonamico, were published in Lyons. The latter contain a sonnet in Maltese composed in honour of the Majorcan master Nicolau Cotoner.

Turning to present-day publications in Maltese, we should note four authors in particular: two from before independence, Giuseppe Muscat Azzopardi, the father of modern literature in Maltese, and Dun Karm Psaila, the national poet of Malta, and two who post-date independence: Francis Ebejer and Oliver Friggieri.

⁹ The text can be consulted at <<http://confinder.richmond.edu>> (section 5 [National Language] and section 74 [Legal Languages]).

With Malta's entry into the European Union, Maltese is now one of the official languages of the Union. This means that all laws and official documents of the Union have to be translated into Maltese; that Maltese citizens can address the institutions of the Union in Maltese and, if they do so, any reply they receive should be in the same language, and lastly that the Maltese representatives the institutions of the Union may use Maltese.

The acceptance of Maltese as an official language of the European Union has been interpreted by an expert in administrative law as an instance of the non-application of the criterion, never made explicit, that denies official European status to languages which are co-official throughout the whole of their national territory with another language which is already official in the Union, being the official language of another member state¹⁰. In virtue of this criterion, Irish is not an official language of the European Union, despite being official throughout the Republic of Ireland, but sharing that status with English; and Luxembourgish is similarly placed, being official throughout Luxembourg, but together with French and German. We do not think that Maltese is an exception to this so-called criterion - rather, we feel that precisely the case of Irish and Luxembourgish are the exceptions to the more general principle that official languages of the Union are those which are official throughout the state in question (a condition which Maltese meets, as do all the other official languages). The exception of Irish and Luxembourgish arises, in the first case, out of the advanced state of language shift to English, and in the second, out of the fact that Luxembourgish, despite its vitality, is not a normalised language in Luxembourg. Maltese, unlike Irish, is the first language of practically all the inhabitants of Malta and, in comparison with Luxembourgish, is much more normalised.

Turning now to the current language policy in Malta, in November 2003 a motion (draft version of a law) was published relating to the Maltese language, and this motion was debated in the Maltese parliament in spring 2004. The motion states that the Maltese language is a fundamental element in the national identity of the Maltese people which the State has to protect from "deterioration and perdition". The primary aim of the motion is the creation of a National Council of the Maltese Language (Kunsill Nazzjonali ta' l-Ilsien Malti), to promote the national language by means of the adoption of a language policy which will promote its use in education, the media, the courts and the political, administrative, economic, social and cultural life of the country. The Council will also have the responsibility of bringing up-to-date the spelling of the language, if necessary, and of establishing the writing of borrowings. It should be added, incidentally, that there is already a Maltese Language Board, an organisation which answers to the Ministry of Education and encourages the study and development of Maltese. There is also the Maltese Academy (Akkademja tal-Malti), which for the last eighty years has been concerned with matters of orthography and grammar.

6. Patterns of language use in Maltese society

According to a study carried out in 2001¹¹, Maltese is the first language of 98.6% of the population and English that of 1.2%. Of these speakers however, there are some who claim both languages to be their first language (1.2% of the population)- Despite this, as many as 14% state they use English in the family and 29%, at work. In the case of Maltese, these figures are, respectively, 90% and 70% (there are, then, those who use both languages in the family). Other figures recently published by the National Statistics Office of Malta indicate that 86.23% "prefer" to speak in Maltese, 11.76% in English, and 1.84% in Italian. The very small number of people who have English as their first language who are in any case mostly British ex-patriots resident in Malta, is hardly the reason for the erosion of the position of Maltese in two vital areas, the workplace and above all family life, indicative as it is of the greater prestige of English compared to Maltese in Maltese society.

Also interesting are the figures (which we have rounded up or down) taken from the 1995 census: in that year Malta had 372.000 habitants. Of these, some 246,000 (76% of the adult population) said they knew English, while 118,000 (36% of the adult population) knew Italian. There were many people, obviously, who know both languages. Thus, despite former British domination, the co-official status of English at the present time and the considerable weight carried by that language in the Maltese society of today, there were still in 1995 more than 70,000 people, mostly rural, who did not know English. In any case, not all those who

¹⁰ A. Milian i Massana 2004.

¹¹) L. Sciriha; M. Vassallo. *Malta. A Linguistic Landscape*. Malta: 2001. Quoted in G. Brincat 2003.

stated they knew English were fluent to the same degree. With respect to knowledge of languages other than Maltese, we have information from 1931 -when Italian as well as English was an official language of the islands (while Maltese was not) . According to this report, of the approximately 225,000 inhabitants of Malta there were around 55,000 who knew English, and around 32,000 who knew Italian. Comparing these data from 1931 with those from 1995 it can be deduced, on the one hand, that the gap between English and Italian has widened and, on the other, that the number of monolinguals in Maltese has decreased, and done so quite markedly in relative terms.

The use of the Maltese language in Parliament, government and the legal world is quite considerable, just as it is in administration both national and municipal. The work of the political parties, too, is carried on mainly in Maltese. It is also important to note that the Catholic church, whose influence is very great in this country, mainly conducts its activities in Maltese.

Primary school education has been compulsory in Malta since 1946, and secondary education until sixteen became compulsory in 1971. The position of Maltese in education is weaker than in other areas. Both Maltese and English are used as the medium for teaching at primary level and secondary level, and both languages are also compulsory school subjects. A balance between Maltese and English is maintained much more successfully in the state schools than in the private ones, since some of the latter prefer to use mainly English. English is also the language of choice in most departments of the University of Malta, a circumstance which limits the full development of the Maltese language¹².

There are other languages in use in Maltese education: to the third language traditionally taught in the country, Italian, there has been added French, German, Russian and Spanish, studied at secondary level. This is a result of increased economic relations with the outside world and the increasing importance of the holiday industry. The teaching of Arabic deserves a special mention, since from 1975 to 1987, during one of the periods when there was a Labour government, this subject was compulsory at secondary level.

Turning now to the mass media, there is the same number of newspapers in Maltese as in English (two dailies and three Sunday papers). In terms of radio, we find the Maltese language predominating here, although there are also programmes in English, and the Italian radio stations are also picked up in Malta. Maltese television puts out programmes in both Maltese and English, and additionally a large number of English or North American channels (in English) and Italian channels (in Italian) are available. The Italian channels enjoy considerable popularity.

On the level of culture and cultural habits, Maltese people fall into two categories, those who make more use of Maltese, and those who make more use of English. In the 2001 study mentioned above, 43.2% of the sample stated they read in English, and 48% stated they watched television and cinema in English. The figures for Maltese were higher (48% and 59.2% respectively). Naturally there would be some overlap here, with some of the respondents at least able or likely to use both languages for the same activity. The figures published by the National Statistics Office of Malta, on the other hand, are somewhat different. According to their sample, the "preferred language" for reading is English for 61.13% (books) and 70.89% (magazines) while the corresponding figures regarding Maltese are respectively 35.75% and 22.65%. The reverse situation is reported for television, 25.41% reporting that they watch TV in English and 44.96% in Maltese; in the case of radio, 14.69% listened to broadcasts in English and 82.41% in Maltese. A not insignificant number of people opted for Italian, especially for television (29.63%, higher than English). Some 3.12% read books in Italian and 6.46% read magazines in that language; lastly, 2.91% tune into radio programmes in Italian.

7. The state of the Maltese Language

There are a series of symptoms suggesting that the vitality of Maltese is under threat. We have already seen that English is competing with Maltese in many ambits of Maltese life, an outcome of the low esteem or prestige enjoyed by Maltese among the inhabitants of the islands. The language is seen as local in its scope and much less suited for certain functions

¹² An indication of the profound influence of English in Malta education, at least in certain disciplines, is the widespread and deep-seated custom in the country of counting in English, even in a conversation otherwise in Maltese.

than English (the increasing importance of the holiday industry only confirms this view). English is a language of great prestige and utility which, furthermore, they may start to learn at home (it is the second language of the middle and upper classes) leading to considerable switching with different proportions of the two languages -as often happened previously with Italian and Maltese among the well-off. This mixing is often satirised, for example in popular television programmes, for its obvious overtones of ostentation, all the more ridiculous in those lacking sufficient knowledge to indulge in it but does so all the same, in an attempt to promote themselves socially. This is considered typically female behaviour in Malta: for example, there are mothers who learn English with their children to ensure their academic success. And there are some well-to-do families in certain neighbourhoods who have even ceased to use Maltese. By the same token, English is the language that the well-educated prefer to read and write in; it is the language that strangers tend to be addressed in, where it is not clear they want to talk in Maltese, and the language in which children are christened in the majority of cases.

It is clear that in a situation like this we obviously find a high degree of interference from English in Maltese; so for example Maltese words of Romance origin are often replaced by English words (*nurse*, for instance, tends to replace *infermiera*), or Maltese words change or extend their meaning as a result of the influx of English (for instance *librerija* (book shop) is replacing *bibljoteka* (library) under the influence of the English word *library*). On the phonological level, it has been observed that the English pronunciation of the /r/ phoneme is penetrating Maltese at the present time. In general, the segment of society which most show interference from English are upper class young women in certain areas around the capital.

Despite of the little language domain, Maltese exhibits considerable dialectal variation. There are two main groups of dialects: the prestigious varieties of the educated classes of Valletta and adjoining neighbourhoods, and those of the agricultural villages and the industrial areas around the ports. The first is more Italianised, and is expanding; it retains fewer phonological features and vocabulary from Arabic. The second group, on the other hand, is receding and is less likely to contain switching into English. Compulsory education, modern mass media and the ever increasing mobility of the population favours the extension of the standard form of Maltese (*malti pulit*) at the expense of the other dialects.

8. Conclusion

Malta's linguistic situation differs from that of other countries in Europe, in that the position of the Maltese language is not comparable to that of dominant languages such as Swedish, Polish, or indeed any of the other official languages of the states of Europe. Nor is its position comparable to a language like Friesian, Romansch, or any of the other minorised languages of Europe.

Given that Malta was for long integrated into the political and cultural orbit of Italy, Maltese played a similar role, with respect to Italian (the traditional language of administration and higher culture) as that of Napolitano, Lombardo, Friulian or Sardinian. The fact that the first two continue to be regarded as dialects of Italian and the other two as independent languages makes little or no difference to their social position).

British rule, established in the islands from the beginning of the 19th century onwards, has to a large extent brought about the removal of Italian from Maltese daily life. The vacuum left by Italian has largely been filled by English, rather than Maltese. The latter, despite its widespread and well-established oral use, was not seen as the new language and vehicle of the country's culture since it had never occupied that role and since the presence of English loomed large.

Malta's autonomy during the early decades of the 20th century and her independence from Britain in 1964 led to an advance in the use and acceptance of the Maltese language, both in terms of its legal status and in the domains and areas in which it was used. Nonetheless, the linguistic situation of the country continues to be colonial, that is, we continue to find a state of affairs more typical of Asiatic or African states that were formerly colonies of a European country or of the United States, countries such as India, or the Philippines, with their indigenous languages playing a subordinate role to that of the former metropolitan language.

As a consequence of all this, bilingualism has continued to increase among the Maltese population throughout the 20th century, and a process of language shift toward English has begun in certain (comparatively few) social circles, and the grammatical structure and lexis of the national language is being affected by the superstrate language, even though the majority of the population may not speak the latter (English) fluently.

This is not to say that Maltese does not have a future, and is destined to disappear, it simply means that its survival is not assured if there is not a profound change in attitudes among the population of Malta, and the overcoming of these attitudes will be necessary before genuine normalisation of the language of the country is achieved.

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