

Bilingualism in Malta. Some notes by Simone Scicluna.

I get all sorts of reactions when revealing my Maltese nationality to foreigners. Generally, I get blank or puzzled faces as they try to work out how to classify that linguistically. More often than not, the answer comes to their surprise and it's easy to see why. Malta, with a span of only 316km² and home to a mere 440,000 inhabitants, has its own autonomous language – and what's more, this language is co-official alongside the world's emerging lingua franca, English.

In order to better understand the bilingual situation of Malta, it's worth being aware of the origins of its national language, Maltese. With its distinctive combination of linguistic roots, Maltese is pretty much the result of the cultural blend earned by the country's long history of colonisations (including that of the British) and cultural influences. The Maltese language, which is only spoken in Malta, constitutes of largely Arabic, as well as Italian and English, and it classifies as a Semitic language. This makes it the only European language belonging to this language family, and the only one its kind written in the Latin alphabet.

As an individual born and raised within the shores of the Maltese islands, I could say that the bilingualism in my country is vividly integrated in everyday life. First of all, it's relatively impossible to be Maltese and be strictly monolingual. As a student, my daily scenario involved speaking mostly Maltese at home, listening to the radio in Maltese, reading books and watching movies in English, studying in mostly English at school, watching the TV news broadcast in Maltese, and speaking to my friends in both languages. Generally, it is assumed that while Maltese is more preferred in speaking, English is more preferred in reading and writing, especially in formal or academic contexts.

The scenario gets a little more interesting when the (inevitable) occurrence of code-switching comes into the picture. Bearing in mind that the Maltese vocabulary is supplemented by a host of English loan words (such as *torċ* (torch), *envelop* (envelope), and countless others), it can still be the case that Maltese speakers choose to use an English term even if there is a Maltese equivalent to it (for example, preferring to use the word *driver* to refer to a bus driver instead of its Maltese equivalent *xufier*). The reasons for this may include the lack of profound knowledge in the language (perhaps as a consequence of bilingualism), the case of 'laziness' in word accessibility, or simply the limitations of the Maltese lexicon relative to that of English.

Of course, even though the status of the Maltese language stands to be secure and unthreatened, there has been a growing concern about whether the mixture of languages will eventually become the mother-tongue of a large proportion of the population. Perhaps this could be explained by the fact that most Maltese speakers are compound bilinguals, meaning that they develop both languages as a single system, rather than as two separate ones. This may have also led to the emergence of *Maltese English*, which refers to the variety of the English spoken in Malta, said to be distinct from Standard English in its syntax, grammar, pronunciation, prosody, and phonology. With this said, there is an on-going debate on whether Maltese English should be considered a language variety or whether it is simply the product of lack of mastery.

The challenges in the life of a Maltese bilingual do not stop here. Linguistically speaking, there is the remaining concern that both languages seem to be changing as a consequence of each other, where English is seen as a potential danger to the purity of the Maltese language, and Maltese is seen as an influence on English to the extent of it possibly having become a variety in the context of Malta. Speaking from the interest of a community, bilingualism in Malta has for long been considered a “necessity”, and regardless of the inevitable bilingualism-related challenges both languages face, this status plays a crucial role in both the identity and the potential of the nation.