

The Rise of Maltese in Malta: Social and Educational Perspectives

Lydia Sciriha

University of Malta

Abstract

This paper focuses on Maltese, the indigenous language of Malta - a miniscule island in the heart of the Mediterranean and a former colony of Britain until its Independence in 1964. Malta's two official languages are English and Maltese, the indigenous language that has been spoken by the Maltese for centuries, but which for a long time, had been looked down upon and dubbed 'the language of the kitchen' by the educated Maltese who mainly spoke Italian or English. This paper examines the results of a series of large-scale surveys conducted by the author over a period of nearly a decade. During that period, Maltese language use steadily soared to the extent that overwhelmingly, respondents in the 1999 survey considered Maltese as the most important language for a person living in Malta. Moreover, the most recent survey (2001) revealed that the native language of the Maltese people is Maltese (98.6%). Why has Maltese become so important for a small island state that has applied for EU membership and what are the implications for English and other languages in Malta?

Introduction

The main focus of this paper delves into the meteoric rise of Maltese, for centuries the indigenous language of the people of Malta. In the first part of the paper, a brief historical overview of Maltese will be given to enable the reader to understand how this language, once dubbed 'the language of the kitchen' has now become the national language of Malta, as well as the official language together

with English. Following this historical background, in the second part of the paper, data are given on Maltese language use from the language surveys that were conducted by the author over a period of eight years. The conclusion will seek to unearth the reasons for the unexpected importance accorded to Maltese in the different domains over the last few years and will discuss its implication in view of Malta's application to join the European Union.

I Historical Background

The Maltese islands cover an area of 317.2 square kilometres and are situated in the centre of the Mediterranean, 93 kilometres south of Sicily and 288 kilometres north of Africa. The population of Malta stands at about 380,000.

Malta's chequered history has included among its many colonisers, the Arabs (870-1090), the Normans (1090-1266); the Angevins (1266-1283); the Aragonese (1283-1410); the Castilians (1412-1530); the Order of St. John (1530-1798); the French (1798-1800) and the British (1800-1964). Malta obtained its Independence in 1964 and Maltese, the indigenous language of the islanders, together with English, became the two official languages of the country .

Malta is in fact, not merely a bridge between Europe and North Africa, but is also a strategic and cultural bastion between the Christian and the Muslim worlds (Boissevain, 1965).

Of particular note is the fact that political domination by the different colonisers in Malta does not coincide with the evolution of Maltese, because the origins of modern Maltese date back only to the Arab stay in Malta. Rulers, previous to the Arabs are, linguistically speaking unimportant with regard to the development of the Maltese language. It is also not surprising that the Arabs exerted so much linguistic influence on Malta since their linguistic domination (870-1224) outlasted their political one (870-1090). It was only in 1224 that all Arabs were expelled from Malta and by that time the Arabs had left an indelible mark on the Maltese islands. The invasion of Malta by the Normans, who came to Malta from Sicily left its mark on Maltese, especially with regard to Sicilian navigational and commercial terms. Moreover, the Sicilian influence was maintained not only during the Sicilian domination but also throughout the stay of the Knights of St. John who were mostly Italian. Interestingly so, even during British rule, Italian was still spoken in Malta by Maltese intellectuals and it is thus hardly surprising that the Maltese lexicon is replete with loan-words of Siculo-Italian origin (Aquilina, 1959;1961; Fenech, 1978). However, the influx of Italian loan-words into Maltese declined when Maltese replaced Italian as the official and instructional language in 1934.

Mikiel Anton Vassalli was the first Maltese scholar who openly declared the importance of the Maltese language as a crucial vehicle in the pursuit of the islanders' nationalism. In 1796 he recognised the fact that Malta was in need of a 'lingua nazionale' that could not be Italian, the language that was then spoken and

written only by educated Maltese, but the indigenous language Maltese, then spoken by the majority of the islanders. Vassalli regarded these native speakers of the island's indigenous language as 'veri nazionali' (true nationals) even though according to him, the Maltese language was a hybrid language comprising loan-words from other languages. Vassalli's avant-garde attitude towards Maltese many years later earned him the praise of Dun Karm, Malta's national poet who dedicated a poem "Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli", and subsequently dubbed Vassalli "Missier l-ilsien Malti" (the father of the Maltese language). Thus, Vassalli gave birth to a Maltese national conscience and many years later, Maltese acted as the surrogate for national identity and the fight for self-determination (Vassallo, 1977).

Although Maltese was spoken by the islanders, during Vassalli's time the indigenous language was regarded as a non-standard language which was perceived to be of an inferior status to the other languages, especially Italian that were spoken in Malta. Until the 1920s the Maltese alphabet was not yet standardised and only in 1934 did Maltese supplant Italian to become the language of the administration together with English.

Finally, in 1964, Malta became an Independent state and the Maltese constitution decreed English and Maltese to be the official languages, with Maltese also being the national language and the language of the courts. Moreover, Section 75 of the Constitution declares that "every law will be enacted in Maltese and English and in the eventuality of conflict between the Maltese and English texts, the Maltese text shall prevail".

II Malta Language Surveys 1993-2001

Prior to the first sociolinguistic survey, a few qualitative studies were conducted. However, owing to the qualitative nature of such studies, these were micro focussed and small-scale and the results were impressionistic. Thus, what in reality emerged from such studies was a distorted picture of the actual linguistic situation in Malta.

Methodology

To counteract such small-scale studies, over the last eight years a total of five large-scale language surveys were carried out in Malta using quantitative research methodology - a methodology that strives for breadth since it covers the entire population. The methodology used in the surveys was identical. Respondents were selected from among those who have the right to vote in local elections, including those non-Maltese residents with a resident permit. A two-stage probability sampling technique was used to interview respondents. Malta was grid-divided and respondents were randomly selected using the standard system of regular intervals after a random starting point. For each block, interviewers were assigned a given quota, based on the ideal sampling distribution in such a way that the quota for each block numerically represented the total quota. The quota for each block was

stratified by gender and by age group. It is important to note that this methodology adopted makes the surveys fully representative of Malta.

These surveys were conducted by Sciriha 1993, 1996, 1999, 2000 and Sciriha and Vassallo 2001 and each of them focussed on different aspects of language use namely: (i) language use in the home and school domains, (ii) language use among school children, (iii) the social and educational aspects of trilingualism in Malta and (iv) the introduction of English immersion programmes in Malta and (v) language use in different domains and the importance of foreign languages.

The salient findings obtained from each of these surveys will be given in order to show on a longitudinal scale the use of the Maltese language in different settings by representative samples of the Maltese population.

Sociolinguistic survey 1993 (I)

The first scientifically based language survey that was conducted in 1993, had a total of 501 respondents, who had all been individually interviewed by trained and experienced interviewers. The main objective of this survey was to discover which of the two official languages of Malta is used in the home domain with family members. Since gender, age and the socio-economic status of the respondent are important independent variables, respondents' answers to their reported language use were cross-tabulated with these independent variables.

The results of this survey as shown in Table 1 revealed that an overwhelming number of the Maltese respondents (90.4%) reported using *Maltese only* (M) when interacting with family members. Only 1% claimed using *English only* (E), while the rest of the respondents stated that they use more *Maltese than English* (Me: 5%) and 1.8% of the respondents said that they communicate more in *English than in Maltese* (Em). A very low percentage of respondents claimed using another language, other than Maltese and English when interacting with family members.

Table 1. Language Spoken at Home among Adults

	Total	Age				Gender		Socio-Economic Category					
		18-30	31-50	51-65	65+	Male	Female	A	B	C1	C2	D	E
N=	501	103	256	85	57	230	271	3	41	150	87	148	19
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
NA	0.6	-	0.8	-	1.8	-	1.1	-	-	0.7	-	0.7	-
English	1.0	1.0	1.2	1.2	-	1.3	0.7	3.2	4.4	1.3	-	-	-
Maltese	90.4	86.4	90.2	94.1	93.0	92.6	88.6	77.4	71.1	90.7	96.6	94.6	94.7
Em	1.8	4.9	1.2	1.2	-	1.3	2.2	-	3.2	6.7	2.0	1.1	5.3
Me	5.0	6.8	5.5	2.4	3.5	3.9	5.9	16.1	15.6	4.0	-	4.1	-
Other	1.2	1.0	1.2	1.2	1.8	0.9	1.5	-	2.2	1.3	2.3	0.7	-

Base = All respondents

Sociolinguistic survey 1996 (II)

Since the 1993 survey revealed the importance of the family for the transmission of the Maltese language, the 1996 survey zoomed in not only on language use at home, but also to a greater extent on language use at school by 930 Maltese children. In view of the fact that the respondents were children who were not listed in the electoral register, their parents were first contacted using the methodology used in the other surveys and subsequently, these parents gave their permission for their children to take part in the survey. The respondents were between 5-9 years old, and interviewers, all University students, conducted face-to-face interviews in the children's homes. Since parents in Malta tend to be somewhat overprotective of their children, interviewers asked parents not to be present during the interview. In this way, during the interview parents would not prompt what they considered to be 'desired answers' and the child would feel free to answer questions without worrying that his parents are monitoring him.

The results of this survey as shown in Table 2 confirmed the findings of the previous survey, since once again, an overwhelming majority of these children claimed to speak Maltese with family members. It is however, apposite to highlight the fact that the percentages of language use with parents are lower than in the first survey because the sample's focus was young children of a particular age group and such a sample is not representative of the entire population of Malta.

Table 2. Language Spoken at Home

	Maltese	English	ME	No Answer
<i>Respondent to:</i>	%	%	%	%
Father	61.7	22.6	14.4	1.3
Mother	57.2	24.1	18.0	0.8
Sibling	53.9	23.2	8.6	14.3

Base: All Respondents

Table 3 reveals the striking fact that our respondents interacted in a second language, namely in English predominantly at school, especially if respondents, attend church-run or independent schools. Thus, language use is not only person-oriented and domain-oriented, but interestingly so, the type of school that the child attends seems to condition the child's language of interaction while at school and with friends.

Table 3. Language Spoken at School

	Maltese	English	EM	No Answer
N=				
Respondent to:	%	%	%	%
Teacher	36.2	32.3	30.8	0.8
Friend	57.6	26.9	14.6	0.9

Base=All respondents

Sociolinguistic survey 1999 (III)

The 1999 survey focused on the different languages a sample of 500 respondents claimed to be proficient in. In view of the differences in the types of schools (state, church-run and independent) and in the spectrum of languages taught at school, the survey sought to discover, among other things, the languages Maltese children are being taught in addition to the two official languages and to unearth respondents' perceptions regarding the importance or otherwise of the most commonly taught languages in Malta. The results of this survey as shown in Table 4 illustrate that while the vast majority of children are taught a third language, only 10% of children attending state schools are taught a fourth language, while 82% of church-run school children and 83% of children attending independent schools are taught four languages.

Table 4. Total Number of Languages learnt at school

	TOTAL	STATE	CHURCH	INDEPENDENT
N=	500	295	165	40
	%	%	%	%
No Answer	2	3	0	2
Three	58	87	18	15
Four	40	10	82	83

Base= All respondents

Furthermore, the majority of the respondents held positive attitudes towards learning at least three languages and in the course of the interview they were also asked questions to gauge how they perceive particular languages that are taught in Maltese schools. First they were asked to rank seven languages in order of importance as Maltese 'citizens living in Malta'. They were subsequently asked to rank the same languages as 'citizens of the world'.

The results given in Tables 5 and 6 reveal two interesting classifications. Table 5 shows that respondents ranked Maltese as the number one language in importance for a Maltese living in Malta.

Table 5. Ranking of Different Languages for Maltese Living in Malta

	Arabic	English	French	German	Italian	Maltese	Spanish		Final Ranking
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%		
1st	-	22	-	1	-	77	-		Maltese 1
2nd	1	75	1	1	4	18	-		English 2
3rd	2	2	14	2	79	1	-		Italian 3
4th	5	1	57	18	12	1	6		French 4
5th	10	-	20	48	4	1	17		German 5
6th	14	-	7	23	1	1	54		Spanish 6
7th	68	-	1	7	-	1	23		Arabic 7

Base= All respondents

On the other hand in Table 6, Maltese is giving the last rating (number seven) when respondents were asked to place it among the other six (Sciriha, 2001a)

Table 6. Ranking of Different Languages in the World

	Arabic	English	French	German	Italian	Maltese	Spanish		Final Ranking
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%		
1st	1	97	1	-	1	-	-		English 1
2nd	2	3	49	11	27	2	6		French 2
3rd	4	-	31	28	27	1	9		German 3
4th	5	-	11	38	25	1	20		Italian 4
5th	14	-	4	17	13	4	48		Spanish 5
6th	50	-	3	5	7	19	16		Arabic 6
7th	24	-	1	1	-	73	1		Maltese 7

Base= All respondents

Sociolinguistic survey 2000 (IV)

In view of the high percentages that the aforementioned large-scale surveys revealed as regards Maltese language use in different school domains with the concomitant decline in English language use even in the school domain, another survey was conducted in June 2000 to investigate whether respondents think that immersion programmes should be introduced.

Although both Maltese and English are taught at school from the first grade, unfortunately, MATSEC results show that an alarming percentage of students do not manage to obtain the school-leaving certificate in English, a mandatory certificate for one to proceed with tertiary education as well as for employment purposes.

With this in mind, the survey conducted in the year 2000 aimed to discover whether the 500 respondents of different age groups and socio-economic categories who participated in this survey consider immersion programmes in English to be necessary in Malta to help remedy the English language problem. The National Minimum Curriculum states in unequivocal terms that it “considers bilingualism as the basis of the educational system. This document regards bilingualism as entailing the effective, precise and confident use of the country’s two official languages. This goal must be reached by the students by the end of their entire schooling experience” (Ministry of Education 1999: 37; Giordmaina, 1999).

The National Minimum Curriculum sets its goals but our respondents are all too aware that these goals are, in all probability, not achievable unless immersion programmes in English are introduced. In fact, as Table 7 reveals, a total of 76% of respondents declared that immersion programmes should be implemented.

Table 7. Whether respondent would enrol child in an immersion programme

		YES	NO
		%	%
Socio-economic category	<i>AB</i>	72.2	27.8
	<i>C1</i>	75.8	24.2
	<i>C2</i>	79.9	20.1
	<i>DE</i>	74.5	25.5
Total		76.0	24.0
Education	<i>Primary</i>	83.1	16.9
	<i>Secondary</i>	75.3	24.5
	<i>Technical</i>	76.0	24.0
	<i>Tertiary</i>	71.2	28.8
	Total		76.0

Base= All respondents

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that as is evident in Table 8 the overwhelming majority of the respondents (70%) are interested in having their children attend immersion programmes in English (Sciriha, 2001b)

Table 8. Type of Immersion programme chosen by respondent for child

	Frequency	%
Early total immersion in English	170	34.0
Early total immersion in Maltese	10	2.0
Early partial immersion in English	140	28.0
Early partial immersion in Maltese	15	3.0
Delayed immersion in English	36	7.2
Late immersion in Maltese	2	0.4
Late immersion in English	7	1.4
Total	380	76.0
System	120	24.0
Total	500	100.0

Base=All respondents

Sociolinguistic Survey 2001 (V)

Five hundred respondents took part in the Lingua survey which replicated the Eurobarometer survey that had previously been conducted in all the EU countries in December 2000. The sample of the respondents comprised 244 (48.8%) males and 256 (51.2%) females and this reflects the demography of the Maltese islands.

Native Languages

As can be seen from Figure 1, a staggering 98.6% of the respondents claimed Maltese as their native language. Very few respondents (1.2%) claimed to have acquired both English and Maltese simultaneously as native languages; for another 1.2% of respondents English is their only native language, and the percentage is even lower as regards the acquisition of other languages. In fact, only 0.2% of the respondents claimed Italian as their native language.

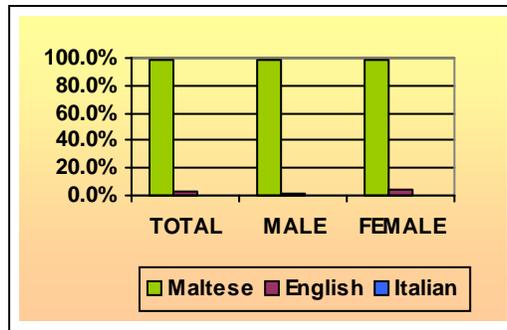


Figure 1: Native Language

Of particular note is the fact that more females (3.9%) claimed English as their native language than males (0.8%) and these respondents' socio-economic categories ranged from non-manual workers (3.6%), manual workers (2.7%) to housewives (1.8%).

The highest percentage of native speakers of English are between 25-39 years (4.3%) and those who are still studying (3.8%) or who completed their studies less than 15 years ago (4.6%).

III Social and Educational Aspects

Language as a Marker of Identity

As has been shown in the five surveys conducted, the overwhelming majority of respondents transmit Maltese to their offspring and openly declare that Maltese is an important language since they rank it number one from a list of seven languages that are taught at school. Nevertheless, respondents are quite aware that even though Maltese has steadily become a very important language in Malta, it is still completely dwarfed by other languages and because of this the Maltese need to know English, the second official language of Malta, well together with at least another foreign language.

What is particularly striking about Table 5 is that up to a few of decades ago, Maltese would probably have ranked at the bottom and not at the top of the list. This is so because during those times, Maltese was only spoken by the illiterates, while educated Maltese preferred to interact in Italian. Since then political and cultural developments have given Maltese added value, and, especially after Independence in 1964, Maltese has come to be perceived as an essential component of national identity. This is clearly especially attested to in the flourishing literature in Maltese, in the diffusion of the language through both printed and live media, and the pervasive use of it by all strata in society as their standard medium for communication, even if at times used jointly with considerable code-switching with English which Pavlova (1987) called 'a hotchpotch'. As such, the ranking of

Maltese documented by this study shows how the status of this indigenous language has rocketed from rock bottom position during the time when it was dubbed 'the language of the kitchen' to the top place it now holds. Participants in this study clearly perceive Maltese to be the most important language for a Maltese living in Malta today.

These surveys clearly show that, following Independence and the gaining of full self-determination, there has been a recrudescence of all things Maltese, including a re-appraisal of the role of the indigenous language. The result of this is particularly unique: Malta can boast of being an island nation-state that has a unique language, spoken by practically everybody as a 'native language', and understood as such.

Importance of English as Language of Wider Communication

These surveys reveal that the percentages of Maltese language use by respondents are extremely high. But what is indeed unfortunate is the fact that the Maltese have not retained a good balance in both the official languages: the rise of Maltese has led to a concomitant decline of English language use.

Furthermore, the data in Table 6 point to a reversal in importance for Maltese vis-à-vis the other six languages. Maltese respondents are aware of the fact that though Maltese, their mother tongue is important in a microcosmic society as Malta, yet when Maltese is in competition with other languages on a global level, they realise that Maltese does not have the same market value and power as English, a global language has.

The fourth survey that was conducted in 2000 also revealed that the respondents in this survey are perturbed with the precarious situation regarding English in Malta. In fact, they were enthusiastic about the proposal that immersion programmes could be run in Maltese schools. Of the 76% of respondents who were interested in such programmes, the overwhelming majority (70%) wished that such immersion programmes would be in English.

Although the fifth survey revealed that the Maltese have varying proficiency levels in languages, their self-rated proficiency level in English is not that high. As a former colony of Britain, the Maltese have been advantaged in having had English as the administrative language and later on following Independence as an official language. Though Italy, one of our neighbours, has never been exposed to English, it is now realising the importance of this world language and has embarked on intensive English language programmes in all schools to redress its linguistic inadequacies. Although on paper the Maltese National Minimum Curriculum states that both English and Maltese are equally important, the results evidence a see-saw linguistic pattern as regards Malta's two official languages. The rise of Maltese has come about at the expense of English. That this is happening in an officially bilingual country, as the Maltese one is noteworthy. The fact that *de jure* English is one of the official languages in Malta has placed Malta's application to join the EU

in a more advantageous position than other applicant countries whose official languages are not English. Although the official languages of the EU include all the official languages of the member states, it is becoming increasingly difficult to be cost effective when working within such a system. On paper the EU respects all the languages of its member states, but *de facto* English is increasingly becoming the 'only' working language and not the other languages. In view of Malta's application to become a EU member state, the complacent attitude towards English by the educational authorities is perturbing. One hopes that the importance of English is recognised and in turn revitalised, however, not at the expense of Maltese, our national language. A balance needs to be struck between these two languages.

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