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LANGUAGE TEACHING IN A NATIONAL CONTEXT

If one could describe languages as an indigenous product of the countries where they are spoken, how could one describe them when these languages are transplanted from their native milieu to that of a foreign country? One could whimsically compare transplanted languages to exotic plants. The languages that are taught outside their native context, have to be fitted into a different context the nature of which is determined by the needs and exigencies of the country where these languages are taught as well as by the mechanism of the people's own language which generally gives rise to the problem of bilingualism.

The languages studied most intensely in Malta are English and Italian with unfortunately very little French. There is now also a drive for the teaching of Arabic as a compulsory subject in government secondary schools. English takes the lion's share not so much out of consideration for the splendour of the great literature that it has produced as for its practical utility and, most unfortunately, also for a sort of fictitious prestige that English enjoys in the society that is emerging very slowly from a long spell of British colonialism. One wonders how many who read for a degree in English, for instance, do so because they are sensitive to the values of English literature and not because they are self-consciously sensitive to its prestige status in an ex-colony and its economic market value as a world language.

There is a type of English that is widely used in non-academic social circles in Malta which is a kind of local Creole, that some upper class families still prefer to their native language, at cocktail and other social parties. It makes them feel different and superior. This mentality is bound to create friction between the genuine claims of Maltese as the people's language with prior rights in its own country, and English, which has for many years

now usurped or at least obscured the place of honour that belongs to the people's language by birth-right. We have ourselves drawn great moral strength from the heritage of English past and contemporary literature, and hold it in very high regard, but we are not sure that the claims of English language in Malta are not being somewhat inflated and supported for the wrong motives. We would like to have seen (that is what we have been advocating for many years) Maltese, as the people's language and English as a foreign but nonetheless an indispensable tool, create between them the right educational outlook for a country that is still looking for its long-blurred national identity. We would like to have seen the many teachers with degrees in a foreign language who are now language teachers in government or private schools acquainted with their native language and the route of its growth. As only Maltese has been a social product of the people of Malta for a number of centuries, no other foreign language can claim national parity with it even if it boasts a greater literature and history. How many Maltese teachers holding degrees in a foreign language can contribute to the formation of the right linguistic outlook? No teacher can fit well into the national context without a well-founded knowledge of his or her national heritage. Even when you have sung the highest praise of a foreign language, for instance, the greatness of Italian, English and French literatures, the status of a foreign language in a Maltese context remains basically different from that it holds in its native country. Languages are native plants (the people's own creation). Outside their native country they are exotic comparable to transplanted plants of which some survive and some perish in the process of transplantation. There is nothing wrong with exotic plants; they can be as fascinating as exotic plants are to the gardener, but a nation that really wants to be true to itself, holding up a clear mirror to its soul (its national identity) should insist on all teachers in government and private schools being well versed in the language and history of their country. How can they otherwise serve their country loyally and get their pupils interested in Malta, her language and her history?

This is where 'exotic plants' can hurt like stinging thorns. They do so when they spread like weeds and choke the native plants. They need not do so if there is proper guidance and direction from those who advise students. The teacher with a degree in a foreign language who sniffs at his or her native language, literature and history, is an unfortunate product of a misdirected or confused policy. We don't want such teachers in our government and private schools.

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