

Il-Malti Mghaġġel: Maltese in computer-mediated chat conversations

Taqsisra

Il-htieġa ta' komunikazzjoni immedjata u effikaċi meta jintuza ċ-chat fuq l-Internet hija spiss ferm akbar mill-attenzjoni għall-korrettezza grammatikali jew mill-użu ta' strutturi sintattici tal-Malti standard. Ta' sikwit tintuza varjetà lingwistika ta' kitba li tixbah lil Malti mitkellem, varjetà li f'dan ix-xogħol tissejjah *Malti Mghaġġel*. Wara li nagħtu spjegazzjoni tal-karatteristiċi ta' din il-varjetà tal-Malti, ibbażata fuq kunsiderazzjonijiet minn studji mix-xena internazzjonali, niddiskutu xi riżultati li haġġu permezz ta' riċerka li saret fost studenti tal-Fakultà tal-Edukazzjoni tal-Università ta' Malta. F'din il-parti tax-xogħol ninvestigaw kif jaħsbuha dawn l-għalliema tal-ġejjieni dwar il-mod kif il-Malti jiġi miktub fiċ-chat tal-kompjuter u jekk, fil-fehma tagħhom, din il-varjetà tintuza wkoll meta l-istudenti tal-iskola jagħmlu xogħolijiet ta' kitba formali bħal komponimenti.

1. Introduction

One of the language varieties which has undoubtedly taken on a major role in many domains is related to modern means of communication, amongst which chat conversations, blogs and e-mails. The use of this language variety has led to a number of noteworthy developments from a sociolinguistic point of view: whereas up to some years ago the distinction between spoken and written varieties often ran parallel to the distinction between informal and formal registers, over the last few years this has changed considerably, as many modern means of communication are characterised by a written code which normally is also highly informal. In fact, the use of these modern means of communication has led to the formation of a written variety which is highly iconic, syntactically concise and often very similar to colloquial speech.

Although Maltese is historically mainly associated to the spoken variety, as English has always had a significant role where reading and writing are concerned, its use as a written form is very widespread in all means of communication, including the more modern ones. This paper aims to identify some of the main characteristics of the language as it is used in chat conversations and to provide a description of *il-Malti Mghaġġel* (literally, 'hurried Maltese'). Most of the considerations that will be presented are based on orthographic variation, though some other linguistic will also be discussed. Some considerations, based on a

quantitative survey among future language teachers in Malta, will also be presented. We will therefore commence by presenting features of computer-mediated discourse (henceforward CMD) as described in international research. These will serve as a basis in order to describe the *Malti Mghagġel* variety, five utterances of which were put forward to the sample of future teachers in order to be evaluated in terms of acceptability within a classroom context.

2. Features of Computer Mediated Discourse

The study of CMD, as described by HERRING 2001:612, is a specialisation within the broader interdisciplinary study of computer-mediated communication, distinguished by its focus on language and language use in computer networked environments, and by its use of methods of discourse analysis. For example, language produced in internet chatting, in emails and in blogs are all considered to be types of CMD. Although language used for mobile-phone texting does not pertain directly to the varieties of CMD, it shares a number of linguistic features with it, as will be documented at a later stage of this paper.

By drawing on findings of previous studies, the main arguments that will be discussed are the speech-like or written-like properties of CMD and the idiosyncratic features this form of language exhibits. A persistent question regarding CMD has been whether its stylistic features resemble those of speech or those of writing (for example FERRARA et al. 1991; COLLOT & BELMORE 1996; CRYSTAL 2001; HERRING 2005, among others).¹ There is extensive literature that analyzes the relationship and the differences between spoken and written language and this suggests that the two modalities often differ in relatively predictable ways (for example HALLIDAY 1978; BIBER 1991, 2006, 2009). However, do these arguments pertain to the description of CMD and are they useful to analyse this variety?

Much of the early research dealing with the characteristics of speech and writing has dealt with the dichotomous relationship between the two modes. However, dichotomous models do not offer explanations to instances where writing has a number of qualities associated with speech, such as note-taking² or writing memos. TANNEN (1982:14) had already

¹ Similar arguments also pertain to the classification of SMS messages as either speech or writing. LING (2005:347-348) argues that most SMS messages are often informal, thus they are akin to speech. At the same time, SMS messaging is more similar to writing, in that it does not assume that the interlocutors are physically proximate.

² FERRARA ET AL. (1991:12-13) examined the syntactic and stylistic features of Interactive Written Discourse (IWD) in its initial phases of its creation. The authors conclude that the

suggested that an oral/literate continuum should be applied to the classification of different registers, rather than a dichotomous opposition, with academic writing and casual conversations representing the two extreme poles. This continuum model is pertinent when dealing with language produced by communication technologies, including CMD.

Most forms of CMD require the use of the written variety. However, this is used in a very informal, colloquial manner as some forms, especially synchronous ones such as Instant Messaging, are used mainly to maintain relationships (RAMIREZ & BRONECK 2009:291). Furthermore, although electronically mediated communication is a form of written variety, it is often considered as transient speech. When we receive emails and SMS messages we tend to discard them as soon as they are read. This trend towards informality is not solely limited to language that is technologically mediated, neither is it happening within a social vacuum, as “the technological facility coincides with social, cultural, economic and political changes, all of which together are producing and pushing that change” (KRESS 2003:38). In fact, BARON (2008:171) argues that contemporary writing is becoming increasingly informal due to the growing trend to communicate electronically in writing.

2.1 CMD and writing

Technological developments have made writing become an important medium for immediate communication. For instance, cell phones which have greatly expanded the range of the spoken word are often used for text messaging, rather than conversation. Teenagers, who up to some years ago would have spent hours chatting over the telephone, now use instant messaging to socialise with their peers (BARON 2008:45).

One of the most important findings of Internet research over the past years has been that CMD varies according to the technologies that are being used by interlocutors (HERRING 2005:111). CMD is produced by a vast range of media. The types of media can be differentiated on two parameters: the number of recipients (one-to-one or one-to-many) and the synchronicity of the communication (synchronous forms and asynchronous forms). The language that is produced will inadvertently be influenced by the medium in question. Hence, synchronous forms (for example, chatting) are different from asynchronous forms (for example, email) in their message complexity, in the length of utterances, formality and interactivity. Thus, stating that all forms of online writing are informal would not be doing justice to its diverse nature. There are

concept of *register* helps account for the syntactic reductions and omissions that characterise this text format. They also compare this with note-taking and conclude that there are comparisons in the strategies being adopted in both forms of writing.

several examples of online writing that is formal, for example the type of writing present in online academic journals and newspapers. HÅRD AF SEGERSTAD (2002) analysed how users adapt written language according to the medium that they use and concluded that the language produced via different media highlights the innate human characteristic of adaptation.

As already stated, most CMD is produced in the written form, even though there are many similarities between CMD and speech, primarily due to its informal nature. However, even in synchronous forms like chatting, there can be lack of simultaneous feedback due to lag and the “rhythm lacks the pace and predictability of that found in telephonic or face-to-face communication” (CRYSTAL 2001:31). Participants may refer to exchanges that have been contributed earlier, in a way that challenges the transient nature of speech. Users can still go back to some messages and reflect on and react to them. Still, in most cases of synchronous forms of CMD, writing lacks the editing and the grammatical coherence of the standard variety and it is also less complex syntactically.

The use of CMD by teenagers has raised an alarm from both teachers and parents. For example THURLOW (2006) analysed a corpus of 101 print-media accounts (collected between 2001 and 2005) which discuss language use in technologies such as instant messaging and text messaging. He argues that although scholarly discourse has focussed on the positive opportunities that these technologies can offer, public discourse is not so optimistic. Language that is produced in texting and in chatting is described as “a written slang” (THURLOW 2006:682) which can get “out of hand” (THURLOW 2006:681). In a similar fashion, CRYSTAL (2008:151) provides examples of “doom-laden prophecies” which proclaim that the use of texting will lead to a breakdown of the English language, that texting habits will inevitably be transferred to their school-work and that this will erode children’s ability to spell and to use punctuation. Although, “there was never clear evidence supporting these assertions, (...) that did not stop them being made” (CRYSTAL 2008: 151).

These considerations are based on the presupposition that CMD will have an adverse effect on the quality of offline writing by students. Thus, this indicates that CMD is frequently judged and evaluated on the basis of criteria used for the written rather than the spoken variety. Often those responsible for language policy as well as the general public manifest the fear that features present in CMD texts will leak into other, more formal forms of writing. Many studies held to date in this respect also deal specifically with mobile phone texting, rather than with Internet chatting.

Considering that the two varieties do hold a number of similarities some findings are worth reporting³.

PLESTER, WOOD & BELL (2008) carried out a study among 65 eleven to twelve year-olds order to investigate the effects of mobile phone texting on literacy attainment. They conclude that there is no “no compelling evidence that texting damages standard English in preteens” PLESTER, WOOD & BELL (2008:143). In most cases texting is conditioned by the subjects’ phonological awareness and the use of abbreviated or non-standard spelling form is largely due to the fact that they are aware that such forms are appropriate within the context. The results obtained by DROUIN & DAVIES (2009) on a sample of eighty college students (mean age = 21.8) lead to two significant conclusions: firstly, as in PLESTER, WOOD & BELL’s (2008) study, they found that English literacy does not seem to be affected significantly by texting. They add, however that, “... text speak users cannot cut corners on the longer, more elaborate words but only on the shorter, common ones. As such, declines in standardized literacy performance would not be expected” (DROUIN & DAVIES 2009:64). Secondly, the authors report that despite the above considerations, more than half of their subjects report that using texting regularly makes it hard to remember Standard English. In a more recent study, PLESTER, WOOD & JOSHI (2009) elaborated on their previous study and their conclusions indicate that “facility with text literacy is positively associated with standard English literacy” (PLESTER, WOOD & JOSHI 2009:158).

In their study on the relationship between the use of textisms and the production of formal and informal writing, ROSEN et al. (2010) investigated whether the reported use of textisms in daily electronic communication is related to the quality of writing. It was noted that very few participants used textisms in their formal and informal examples of writing. The researchers argue that in view of these studies, additional work should be carried out to relate the daily use of textisms to a variety of actual classroom writing assignments to better assess the effect of these textisms on students’ writing. Moreover, as DROUIN & DAVIS (2009:62) also state, decline in spelling performance could take place across time and statistically significant differences may not be evident for

³ There seem to be affinities between language produced in chatting and language produced in texting, even though different media are involved in linguistic production. For example, CRYSTAL (2008:37-62) describes how texters also make use of strategies found in chatting, such as the use of abbreviations, misspellings and omission of apostrophes. However, there are also differences between the two varieties and thus conclusions pertaining to the effect of texting on literacy cannot be wholly applied to the possible effects of internet chatting on literacy.

a few years. This calls for further exploration within longitudinal contexts.

With specific reference to the relationship between chatting and literacy, TAGLIAMONTE & DENIS (2008:6) argue that chatting, rather than impoverishing language “may actually be a bellwether in the evolution of the English language in general.” However, further research on the effect of chatting on literacy is needed in order to prove the validity of this claim.

BARON (2008) views CMD very much as a product of today’s modern lifestyle and its effects on literacy cannot be studied in isolation:

“Is the Internet destroying language? If you look at the effects – direct or otherwise – on traditional language, the case is highly tenuous. True, electronically-mediated language and the likes of spell-check and Google make it easy to drift into sloppy writing habits. The culprit, however, is not technology. Depending upon how you view the situation, fault lies either in ourselves or in the more global “whatever” attitude regarding regularity in language.” (BARON 2008:180)

2.2 *CMD and oral communication*

Notwithstanding the fact that most CMD is produced in writing, CRYSTAL (2001:29) argues that the language produced in synchronous situations, “though expressed through the medium of writing, display(s) several of the core properties of speech”. Chatting is often listed as the prime force in radical linguistic innovations: “it is the synchronous interactions which cause most radical linguistic innovation ... affecting several basic conventions of traditional spoken and written communication” (CRYSTAL 2001:130). It is the nearest we are likely to get to seeing “a written dialogue in its spontaneous, unedited, naked state” (CRYSTAL 2001:176). Since language produced in synchronous media is time governed, and there is a demand for immediate response, it limits the amount of time spent reflecting on language. Unless a history is kept, the permanent characteristic of writing is also defied in chatting, as there is routine textual deletion and other synchronous media.

Since CMD lacks the physical proximity and paraverbal cues that mark spoken conversation, various strategies are employed to make up for these missing features, such as unconventional use of spelling and punctuation, as well as the use of capitals, spacing and special symbols for emphasis. Playing with punctuation and typography are not the only tools available for expressing emotion in Internet chatting and other forms of CMD. Users can also use emoticons which were explicitly

created with the goal of clarifying emotions in order to avoid misinterpretation. The main aim of the research on emoticons has been to explore the assumption that emoticons are a valuable tool to compensate for the lack of affective cues that characterise face-to-face communication. These arguments hinge on the assumptions that users in online communication are attempting to represent speech (Baron, 2009:116). In the same vein, WERRY (1996:58) argued that CMD used in Internet Relay Chat (henceforth IRC) is speech-like because “one can identify a common impulse: an almost manic tendency to produce auditory and visual effects in writing, a straining to make written words simulate speech.”

Language that is technologically mediated is syntactically fragmented due to time pressures, especially in synchronous situations. BARON (1984) had already predicted that users will use fewer subordinate clauses and a narrower range of vocabulary, and as a result, this would have a negative effect on the richness of language produced.

Synchronous systems like chatting also disrupt patterns of turn taking, due to overlapping and responses are often separated by irrelevant messages. However, the very chaotic nature of chat makes it a fertile ground for neography (ANIS, 2007) and playfulness. DANET et al. (1997) state that the four features of CMD that foster playfulness are ephemerality, speed, interactivity, and freedom from the restriction of rules. Moreover, its grammar is chiefly characterised by highly colloquial constructions and marked features including the omission of copulas and auxiliaries as well as non-standard agreement between subject and verb (CRYSTAL 2001; HÅRD AF SEGERSTAD 2002).

2.3 CMD as a language variety with features of both written and oral communication

In contrast with early CMD research that has focused on the limitations of the medium to accomplish traditional communicative ends, a more recent body of work, among which HERRING (2005) and BARON (2008), tends to focus on new forms of communication enabled by the Internet. HERRING (2001) had already emphasised the ability of human beings to adapt language to suit a range of linguistic purposes, as these strategies, “rather than reflecting impoverished or simplified communication, demonstrate the ability of users to adapt the computer medium to their expressive needs” (HERRING 2001:617). Based on the evidence found in studies dealing with CMD and mode, the conclusion is that this form of language shows us the ability of human beings to be flexible and adapt their rational behaviour according to the variables that condition communication.

As mentioned in the previous section, when discussing CMD, the medium used for its language production should be taken into consideration. Consequently, language that is produced in emails and blogs will be different from language that is produced in internet chatting (for example, HÅRD AF SEGERSTAD 2002, BARON & LING 2007; BARON 2008). In addition, language use will vary according to the context in which it is being used. Therefore, the use of linguistic strategies in CMD might not hold universal value. Research is being directed to replace listing of prototypical features that have been popular in mode-centred Internet linguistics, by a user and community-centred approach, which is promising for a more complex theorising of the social and contextual diversity of language use on the Internet (for example PAOLILLO 2001; AGIUS 2005; ANDROUTSOPOULOS 2006; SIEBENHAAR 2006; PALFREMAN & AL KHALI 2007; SU 2007; WARSCHAUER ET AL. 2007).

The most definite conclusion is therefore to view CMD as a series of different language varieties which include a mixture of features of both writing and speech: “Netspeak is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both” (CRYSTAL, 2001:47).

TAGLIAMONTE & DENIS (2008) conclude that “Instant Messaging language is characterised by a robust mix of features from both informal spoken registers and more formal written registers – in essence it is a hybrid register.” (TAGLIAMONTE & DENIS, 2008:5)

The main features associated with CMD are summarised below (DANET, 2010:148):

Feature	Example
Multiple punctuation	Type back soon!!!!!!
Eccentric, non-standard spelling	Warez (<i>wares</i>)
All capital letters	I'M REALLY ANGRY AT YOU!
Acronyms, abbreviations	TTYL (<i>talk to you later</i>);
Descriptions of actions	*grins* <grins>
Emoticons	:-) (<i>smile</i>)
Rebus writing	CUI8tr (<i>see you later</i>)
Asterisks for emphasis	I'm *really* angry at you!
Written-out laughter	Hahahaha

Table 1: Features of CMD (DANET, 2010:148)

These features demonstrate that CMD makes use of characteristics that belong both to speech and to writing. The reasons for such use of language vary from reasons related to ludic language, to those arising due to constraints placed on users, as well as reasons pertaining to the amount of effort that users would like to invest in the task at hand.

Having examined a number of studies which dealt with CMD and texting and having outlined the main features of the variety, we will now proceed to use some of the above reflections in order to produce a description of the most common features found in *il-Malti mghaġġel* on the basis of a corpus collected from University of Malta students.

3. The corpus

A number of the features outlined above as listed by DANET (2010:148) are regularly present in *il-Malti mghaġġel*. In order to study this variety classification a corpus was collected from 19-22 year-old students reading for a degree in Education at the University of Malta. Overall 20 episodes of IRC were collected through print-outs provided by the students themselves. These print-outs were all from the students' IRC history and therefore constitute examples of CMD in its authentic form as while the subjects were chatting they were not aware that their exchanges would be used for research purposes. In fact, once the subjects gave consent to participate in the study, they were asked to provide us with copies of the print-outs of past IRC exchanges. The researchers did not log actively into the subjects' chat conversations and did not participate in these exchanges. The corpus consisted of 650 units, a 'unit' being a word, a symbol or any form of abbreviation between two spaces. The following utterance is therefore composed of 14 units:

- (1) *isma hammur nikol xi haga ta ax ed immut bilguh imbad nidhol wara... XP⁴*
SM⁵, isma, ha mmur niekol xi haġa ta, ġhax qed immut bil-ġuħ.
Imbagħad nidhol wara.
'Listen, I'm going to eat something as I am dying of hunger. Then I'll log in later'

4. Features of *il-Malti Mghaġġel*

The first feature that is immediately evident when examining these CMD utterances is that characteristic Maltese graphemes⁶ are totally disregarded. The reason for this may also be that these graphemes are not

⁴ An emoticon used to indicate humour or laughter.

⁵ SM = Standard Maltese. In all the examples the SM spelling of the utterances from the IRC corpus will be provided. This will be useful in order to have an immediate reference point as to how CMD spelling deviates from SM spelling.

⁶ 'ç' (voiceless postalveolar affricate); 'ġ' (voiced postalveolar affricate); 'ħ' (voiceless pharyngeal fricative); 'ż' (voiced alveolar fricative); digraph 'gh' (muted in most contexts).

necessarily present on one's computer keyboard and, even if this were the case (the newer generation of computer keyboards do, in fact, include Maltese special characters) IRC programmes may not necessarily be configured for their inclusion.

Another aspect which features regularly in IRC is the graphical representation of phonetic material which is not normally represented in writing (including interjections, ideophones and other paraverbal features). Examples include:

- (2) *uijwaaaaaaaaaaaa*
SM, *u iva*
(literally, 'oh yes'), interjection normally used to express the fact that what occurred can be dismissed or taken lightly.
- (3) *uhhhhhhhhhhh*
interjection used to convey sense of great amazement, excitement etc.
- (4) *uffaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa*
SM, *uff/uffa*
interjection used to convey sense of annoyance, frustration etc.
- (5) *awwwwwwwwww mela nhar il hadd il knisja taf lil min rajttttttttt*
SM, *Aw, mela nhar il-Ħadd il knisja taf lil min rajt?*
'Hi, so last Sunday at church do you know who I saw?'
- (6) *ajmmaa ghidt hekk ghax hawn 2 neils ;p;p*
SM, *Ajma, ġhidt hekk ġhax hawn 2 Neils!*
'How silly, I said that because there are 2 Neils!'

The utterances represented in 2, 3 and 4 are extremely common in spoken Maltese and feature in IRC with a series of repeated characters in order to represent more accurately the level of expressiveness that one may wish to convey. The same can be said for the two discourse markers (*awwwwwwwwww* and *ajmmaa*) in 5 and 6 above. The repeated characters used in *ajmmaa* also mirrors a rising intonation in spoken Maltese which gives an ironical connotation to the whole utterance. This is then attenuated by the use of the emoticons (;p;p) which are used to express humour.

Another feature of *il-Malti Mġħaġġel* is that often words which standard orthography keeps apart are integrated as one unit, as shown in the examples below:

- (7) *mela xandek? / u galli xdizappunt*

- SM, *mela x'għandek? / u qalli x'diżappunt!*
'So, what's up?; (literally, 'So, what do you have?') / 'and he told me, how disappointing!'
- (8) *ax maweggajtx hafna / mandekx lessons?*
SM, *għax ma wegghajtx hafna / m'għandekx lessons?*
'because I did not hurt much' / 'Don't you have lessons?'
- (9) *mhemx xtamel*
SM, *m'hemmx x'taġħmel*
'there's nothing that can be done'
- (10) *fajjatalla swty*
SM/E⁷, *f'hajjet Alla, sweety*
'Thank God, sweety'
- (11) *hammur / senamel*
SM, *ħa mmur / se naġħmel*
'I'm going' / 'I will do'
- (12) *lewwel u lahhar / talostra*⁸
SM, *l-ewwel u l-aħħar / tal-ostra!*
'the first and the last' / 'Great!'

Occurrences 7, 8 and 9 above are examples of how the interrogative and exclamative *xi* and of how the negation particles *ma ...x* are integrated into following words in order to form one unit. The following occurrences are instances regarding frequently used idiomatic expressions (example 10), the integration of future or aspectual markers *ħa* and *se* with verbs (example 11) and that of the article *l-* (example 12) with nouns.

A characteristic of *il-Malti mgħaġġel* is the limited distinction between graphic and phonetic representation. Often features of SM writing which are of Arabic etymology are disregarded. In the following examples the underlined words are examples of how spelling on IRC mirrors the phonetic representation of the word, rather than SM spelling:

- (13) *u jien adtlu issa min amila x jamel?*
SM, *u jien għidtlu, issa min għamilha, x'jaġħmel?*
'and I told him, now who did it, what should he do?'

⁷ SM/E = Standard Maltese and Standard English.

⁸ a variant of a more vulgar, taboo expression, normally used in order to express agreement or to show approval.

- (14) *edtlek li se jibdel it time table uxx??*
 SM, *ghidtek li se jibdel it-time-table, ux?*
 ‘I had told you that he was going to change his time table, had I?’
- (15) *dik tejr ta*
 SM, *dik tghir, ta!*
 ‘she’s jealous, you know’
- (16) *ax dawk kont se nippruva nivvinta ricetta aliom*
 SM, *ghax dawk kont se nipprova nivvinta ricetta ghalihom*
 ‘because I was going to invent a recipe for them’
- (17) *nah don't think so. gejjin andkom sippost*
 SM/E, *No, I don't think so. Ġejjin għandkom suppost*
 ‘We’re supposed to be coming over to you’
- (18) *ili ma nithol andom*
 SM, *ili ma nidhol għandhom*
 ‘I haven’t been over to them for some time’

In the case of 13 and 14 above one notes the influence of the spoken variety of the form represented in *il-Malti mghagġel*. In Maltese both [ˈtɫo] and [ˈtɫɔ] are acceptable phonetic representations of <ghidtlu> (‘I told him’), though the choice of one variant rather than another may also be determined by diatopic features. The same can be said for example 15 wherein both [ˈtɛɪr] and [ˈtɛɪr] correspond to <tghir> (‘she is jealous’). One may note other examples of vocalic variation in 16 and 17, *nippruva* for SM <nipprova> (‘I try’) and *sippost* for SM <suppost> (‘supposedly’). In 18 the devoicing of the alveolar plosive, caused by regressive assimilation, is represented graphically. Therefore [ˈnɪθɔl] is represented as *nithol* rather than <nidhol> (‘I enter’).

More often than not punctuation marks are totally omitted. However, as occurs in IRC in other languages, one also finds an unconventional use of punctuation, often characterized by the repeated use of the same punctuation mark (as also included in the table of features by Danet (2010:148) mentioned earlier):

- (19) *min jin, leeeeeee!!!!!!!!!!*
 SM, *Min jien? Le!*
 ‘Who me? No!’

As one might expect, the use of abbreviated forms (both in Maltese and in English), as well as the use of acronyms and emoticons, which are standard features in IRC, feature copiously in *il-Malti mghagġel*:

- (20) *fix xitwa qas tara ruh*
SM, *fix-Xitwa lanqas tara ruħ*
'In Winter you wouldn't meet a single person'
- (21) *jn ma jinteressanix*
SM, *jien ma jinteressanix*
'To me it is of no interest'
- (22) *ghadni kemm bat msg lil kulhadd*
SM, *ghadni kemm bghatt messagg lil kulhadd*
'I just sent a message to everyone'
- (23) *aw hi ber ghadni ma rajtu ta duda*
SM, *Aw, hi Ber, ghadni ma rajtux ta, duda*
'Hi, Ber, I haven't seen him yet, you know *duda*'⁹
- (24) *brb ta malajr*
SM/E, *be right back, ta, malajr*
'I'll be back soon, you know'
- (25) *illallu¹⁰ llol*
SM/E *il-lallu* (laugh out loud)
- (26) *y?*
E¹¹, 'Why?'
- (27) *ooo ic :P*
E, 'Oh, I see!'
- (28) *mhh ok ;/*
E, 'Mhm, ok'

In occurrences 20 and 21 one finds abbreviated forms of <*lanqas*> (*qas*) 'not even' and of the first person singular personal pronoun <*jien*> (*jn*). Both are used frequently in *il-Malti mghaġġel*. Whereas the latter is a representation of a contracted form which is used colloquially, the second representation mirrors other forms which are often present in other languages wherein synthesis is achieved by omitting vowels¹².

⁹ SM, *duda* (literally, 'worm') is an appellative which is used in this context to convey a sense of affection.

¹⁰ *il-lallu* is a variant of a taboo expression, normally used in order to express great surprise.

¹¹ E = Standard English.

¹² Some corresponding examples are documented for other languages: in Italian 'dp' is used for 'dopo' 'cmq' for 'comunque' (CRYSTAL 2008: 215); in French 'bjr' is used for

Example 22 represents an example of how despite the fact that some features of SM are retained by the writer (note the standard spelling in a number of the words used in this utterance, as well as the use of the *gh* in *ghadni*), in the case of ‘*bat*’ and ‘*msg*’ contracted forms are used. The form ‘*bat*’ features frequently in *il-Malti mghaġġel* (both for the first, second and third masculine singular form of the perfect tense of the verb *bagħat* ‘send’), whereas *msg* is used commonly as an abbreviation of the word ‘message’. Example 23 starts with two greeting forms, *aw* and *hi*. Though the latter form is probably the typical Maltese greeting ‘*hi*’ a contracted form of *hija* ‘brother’, it could also be the English informal popular greeting form ‘hi’. Another typically colloquial feature present in utterance 23 is the use of the endearing locution ‘*duda*’ in order to close the sequence. In the same example the omission of the negative suffix ‘*x*’ in the unit ‘*ma rajtu*’ is probably due to a typing error. In occurrences 24–28, one notices how ‘international’ IRC abbreviations and emoticons (*brb*, *lol*, *y*, *ic*, *:P*, *:/*) also feature regularly in *il-Malti mghaġġel*.

The vocabulary used in Maltese IRC is often characterised by code-switching (see examples 10, 14 and 17 above). Discourse markers and appellatives also feature regularly (e.g. ‘*uxx*’ in example 14, a request for feedback from the interlocutor; ‘*ta*’ in examples 15, 23 and 24, used in order to convey a sense of reassurance; ‘*aw*’ in example 23 used as a form of greeting). In other instances one may note the use of terms which are not used in SM (see utterance 27 below, where *jiddiskoncentrak* is coined by the user in order to represent synthetically a more complex SM form ‘*qed itellfek il-koncentrazzjoni*’, ‘he’s making you lose your concentration’) and of colloquial terms of frequent use (including obscenities, see utterance 28 below):

- (27) *qed jinsinwa li tlift mohħok fdal guvni jew. li qed jiddiskoncentrak lol*
 SM, *qed jinsinwa li tlift mohħok f’dal guvni? Li qed *jiddiskoncentrak?* (laugh out loud)
 ‘Is he implying that you’ve lost your head for this guy? That he’s making you lose your concentration?’
- (28) *jin dal odu lanqas ilhaqta is sok haq al madoff*
 SM, *jen dalghodu lanqas ilħhaqtha is-SOK, ħaqq għall-madoff!*
 ‘This morning I did not even make it to the Systems of Knowledge (SOK) lesson, damn it!’

bonjour (CRYSTAL 2008: 207), ‘vs’ for ‘vous’, ‘ac’ for ‘avec’ (ANIS 2007: 102); in Swedish ‘cs’ is used for ‘ses’ (‘see you’) (HÅRD AF SEGERSTAD 2005:326).

The term *jiddiskoncentrak* is an analogical formation, mirroring terms of English or Italian origin (e.g. SM, *immissja* ‘miss’ > *jimmissjak* ‘he misses you’; SM, *salva* ‘save’, Italian, ‘salvare’ > *isalvak* ‘he saves you’). In example 28, besides the frequently used vulgar form *ħaqq għall-madoff*, one may also note how the SM article ‘*is-*’ is assimilated to the English acronym SOK, which refers to Systems of Knowledge, a subject taught in Maltese Sixth Form classes.

The features described above represent some of the main characteristics that one finds regularly in *il-Malti mghaġġel*. Similarly to observations reported in studies cited in section 2.1, one may ask whether these features are confined to this variety or whether, in some way or another, they also affect the way Maltese is written in other contexts. In this respect it is also necessary to keep in mind that Maltese, historically, was more a spoken than a written medium and that modern means of communication have played a significant role in rendering written Maltese more widespread. However, as seen above, orthographic and grammatical rules pertaining to SM are often disregarded when using IRC. Is this affecting the way we write in Maltese today and is this variety also being utilised in more formal contexts? In order to obtain some indications in this regard we asked some future teachers whether, according to them, features of *il-Malti mghaġġel* are encountered in Maltese students’ writing at school.

5. The study

5.1 Introduction

In the light of the above considerations, and on the basis of the fact that *il-Malti mghaġġel* features consistently in the repertoire of youths, we conducted a small-scale investigation on teachers’ perception of this variety. For this purpose 53 future language teachers, whose age ranged from 19-22 years old, were asked to participate in a study in which they were asked to evaluate whether five utterances of *il-Malti mghaġġel* would be acceptable were they to be used in a writing task in class. These subjects were chosen for the reason that they also use IRC regularly and were also the providers of the documentation on which we based the taxonomy of some features of *il-Malti mghaġġel* in Section 4. Furthermore, being future teachers, also implies that they will eventually be in a position in which they will be required to evaluate their students’ writing and therefore decide whether certain utterances which may present traces of *il-Malti mghaġġel* will be acceptable or not in the classroom context.

5.2 Subjects and settings

As stated above this study involved 53 future language teachers, whose age ranged between 19-22 years, all frequenting Faculty of Education courses at the University of Malta. The L1 of 48 of these subjects is Maltese, 3 of them stated to have both English and Maltese as their mother tongue, and only 2 subjects said that English was their L1. Among these subjects, 14 were specialising in teaching Maltese whereas the remaining 39 subjects were specialising in the teaching of other languages taught in Maltese schools, namely Italian, English and/or French. All these subjects had already had a teaching experience in local schools (from a minimum of six to a maximum of twelve weeks) during Teaching Practice sessions, a core component of Faculty of Education courses.

5.3 Objectives

The main objective of this small-scale study is to verify whether to-be language teachers in Malta consider utterances with features of *il-Malti mgħaġġel* as acceptable, partially acceptable or unacceptable if used in a Maltese writing task at school. Subjects were also required to give a brief explanation whenever they rated the utterances as partially acceptable or unacceptable.

5.4 The task

Subjects were asked to evaluate, using a 3-point scale (acceptable / partially acceptable / unacceptable) the following five utterances. All five of them were taken from IRC exchanges by university students, and subjects were asked to rate their degree of acceptability if they were used, as they are represented below, in a written essay in Maltese at school:

1. ISSA VERU MORNA L-BAHAR, MAN
2. Qeghdin sew!!!! kemm qisu l karnival tan nadur ha jitlef is sabih tieghu!
3. jiena mux hazin hi adni kif waslt id dar ara qeda relax nara t tv
4. ax qed namel frame bil-seashells
5. Hekk baqa jonqos, isiru dawn l-affarijiet fuq il-post tax-xoghol!

These utterances cannot be considered to be representative of all the characteristics of *il-Malti mgħaġġel*, however, as we explain below, they do include a number of features of the variety. One feature is present in all the utterances, namely the total disregard of Maltese special characters

(see footnote 6). Further information on the five utterances is provided below, together with their representation in standard Maltese writing:

Utterance 1¹³:

ISSA VERU MOR-NA L-BAHAR, MAN
 now really gone-PF.1.PL the-sea man
SM, Issa veru morna l-baħar, man!
 (lit. Now we have really gone to the sea, man)
 ‘Now, we’ve really gone to the dogs, man!’

This utterance, written entirely in capital letters (in IRC this is an indication of loud volume or of a highly emphatic utterance), is marked colloquially and ends with a discourse marker (‘man’) which is fairly common in informal Maltese speech¹⁴.

Utterance 2:

Qeghd-in sew!!!! kemm qis-u l karnival
 stay-COP.1.PL well how seem-3.SG.M the Carnival
ta-n nadur ha j-itlef is sabih tiegh-u!
 of-the Nadur FUT 3.PRS.SG.M-lose the beauty of-3.SG.M
SM, Qeghdin sew! Kemm qisu l-Karnival tan-Nadur ha jitlef is-sabih
tieghu!
 ‘What a state we’re in! It seems that the Carnival of Nadur is going to lose its beauty!’

This utterance is mainly characterised by the omission of the dash between article and noun (*l karnival; tan nadur; is sabih*). This is a feature which features in standard Maltese writing, as would also be the case of capital letters for proper nouns *Karnival* and *Nadur* (place-name). Omitting the dash would therefore be considered to be an error as far as standard writing is concerned.

Utterance 3:

jiena mux hazin hi ad-ni kif wasl-t
 I not bad hi¹⁵ just-1.SG how arrive-PF.1.SG

¹³ The following abbreviations are used in the interlinear glosses and in the translations: COP = copula; F= feminine; FUT = future; IMP = Imperative; M = masculine; PF = Perfect; PL = plural; PROG = progressive; PRS = Present; SG = singular; SM= Standard Maltese; SM/E = Standard Maltese and English.

¹⁴ E.g. ‘*Aw, man!*’ or ‘*Ċaw, man!*’ (Hi, man!; Goodbye, man!)

¹⁵ The Maltese appellative *hi* is retained in the interlinear gloss and in the English translation of this utterance. This term (originally an abbreviation of *hija* ‘brother’) is normally used to address friends or relatives and is considered to be highly informal.

id dar ara qed-a relax
 the home look-IMP.2.SG PROG-1.SG.F relax
n-ara t tv
 1.PRS.SG-watch the tv
 SM, *Jiena mhux hazin, hi. Għadni kif wasalt id-dar, ara qieghda relax, nara t-TV.*
 ‘I’m not feeling bad, *hi*. Look, I just got home, I am relaxing watching TV’

This utterance, characterised by the omission of the *gh* digraph, features the total omission of punctuation and the presence of discourse forms such as the appellative *hi* and the verb *ara* ‘look’ (in this context this form is semantically a discourse marker), which create a sense of familiarity and immediacy. The intrasentential code-switch ‘relax’ is another feature worth observing.

Utterance 4:

ax qed n-amel frame b-il-seashells
 because PROG 1.PRS.SG-make frame with-the-seashells
 SM/E, *Għax qed nagħmel frame bis-seashells*
 ‘Because I am making a frame with seashells’

This utterance features the alternate use of two codes, Maltese and English. Furthermore, there is the omission of the Maltese *gh* as well as the rather unusual lack of phonetic assimilation between article and noun (*bil-seashells*, rather than *bis-seashells*).

Utterance 5:

Hekk baqa j-onqos, i-sir-u dawn
 That leave-PF.3.SG.M PRS.3.SG.M-lack. PRS.3-lack-PL these
l-affarijiet fuq il-post ta-x-xogħol!
 the-things on the-place of-the-work
 SM, *Hekk baqa’ jonqos,[li] isiru dawn l-affarijiet fuq il-post tax-xogħol!*
 ‘That’s all we need, that these things happen at the work-place!’

Utterance 5 is undoubtedly the one in which there are more features of standard Maltese when compared to the other utterances illustrated above. One may note, however, that this utterance presents a colloquial syntactic structure, marked by the initial phrase (*Hekk baqa’ jonqos*) and the omission of the standard Maltese complementizer *li* ‘that’ between the two verb phrases. The apostrophe (in *baqa’*) and the special features of the Maltese alphabet are omitted (although the *gh* is used, albeit without the barred *h*).

6. Results

The subjects were first asked to indicate which language or languages they used in their CMD. Results are represented in figure 1:

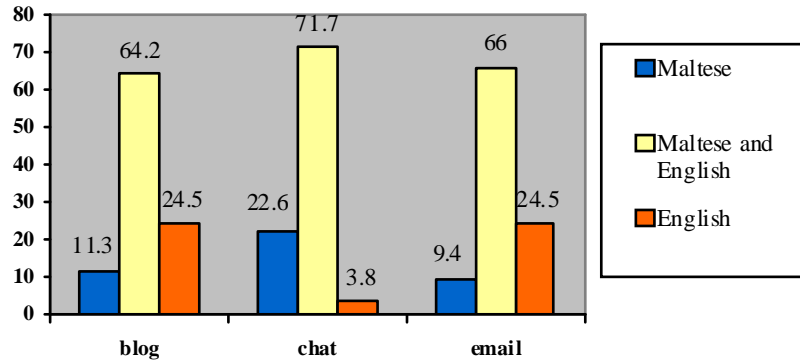


Figure 1: Languages used in CMD in Malta

Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the subjects involved are Maltese L1 speakers (48 subjects out of 53), a large number of them use both Maltese and English in CMD. Another interesting consideration arises from the fact that whereas English is used more frequently than Maltese when one writes in blogs or when one writes emails, the tendency is reversed in computer chat. This indicates that the chat variety is perceived to be more conducive to the use of one's L1, probably because of its high degree of informality, whereas English is considered to be more appropriate than Maltese in emails and in blogs since these two media are slightly less informal than chat.

The subjects of this study were required to evaluate the five utterances with features of *il-Malti mghaġġel* in order to rate their acceptability in a written task carried out at school. In Figure 2 we provide descriptive data regarding the response given for each utterance:

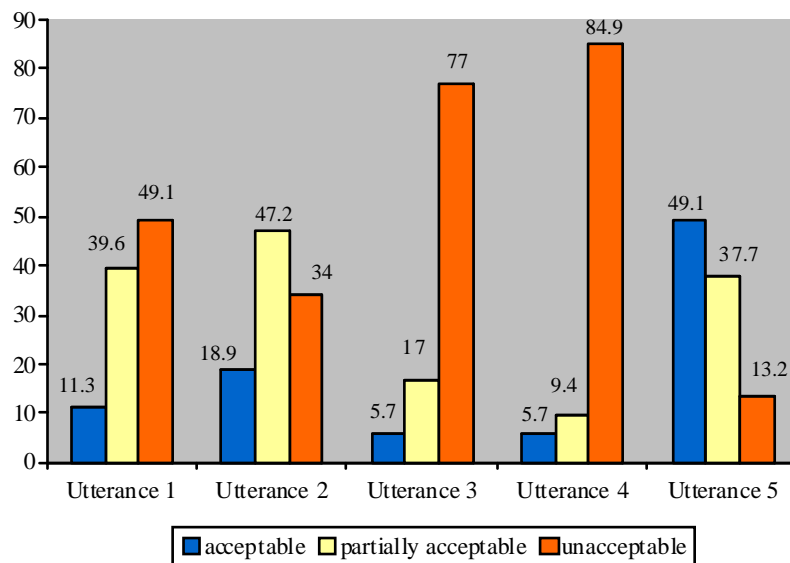


Figure 2: The evaluation of the 5 utterances

Results clearly indicate that the two utterances which are deemed to be as clearly unacceptable are utterance 3 and 4, namely the two utterances which include instances of intra-sentential code-switching between Maltese and English. As expected, Utterance 5, in which there are a number of features which are included in SM, was considered to be acceptable by almost half of the subjects and partially acceptable by 37.7% of them. Utterance 1 and 2 are rated as partially acceptable by a fair share of the subjects, although Utterance 1 is deemed to be less acceptable than Utterance 2.

This response was also cross-tabulated in order to verify whether differences were registered between subjects who are studying in order to become teachers of Maltese and subjects who are studying to become teachers of other languages. This variable was deemed worth investigating as normally teachers of the mother tongue are less likely to consider utterances that distance themselves from the standard form as acceptable. However, in the case of our investigation results proved to be not statistically significant for four utterances out of five. The only regards utterance 2, the response to which is illustrated in Figure 3:

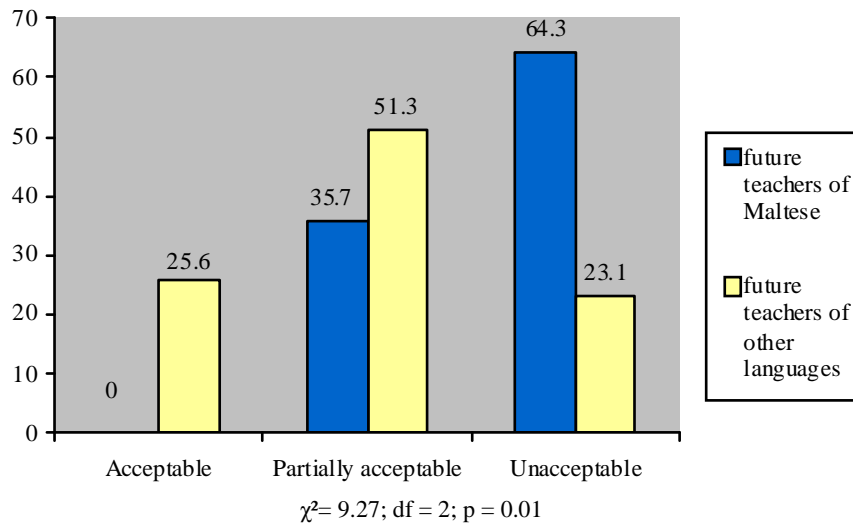


Figure 3: Evaluation of teachers of Maltese vs. teachers of other languages for utterance 2: *Qeghdin sew!!!! kemm qisu l karnival tan nadur ha jitlef is sabih tieghu!*

A significantly higher number of to-be teachers of Maltese deemed Utterance 2 to be partially acceptable or totally unacceptable when compared to to-be teachers of other languages.

Subjects were also asked whether they think that the way Maltese is written in IRC influences writing skills. A very large number of prospective teachers, namely 51 out of the 53 subjects, stated that this is indeed the case. When asked to give a brief explanation for their answer almost all these subjects stated that very often they have encountered cases, during their Teaching Practice sessions, of students who use informal varieties even within formal contexts. Two of these comments, reproduced below, are representative of the views of a number of subjects:

“...their writing skills are going to be affected adversely thereafter and they will end up reproducing unconsciously what they are seeing all the time”

“Thus they take the habit¹⁶ of writing with a lot of spelling mistakes causing them to write similarly when writing formally”

Other to-be teachers commented on the fact that in *il-Malti mghaġġel* there is total disregard for special features of Maltese characters, that the *għ* is frequently omitted, that words are spelt on the basis of their phonology, that syntax is highly fragmented and that punctuation is frequently conspicuous by its absence. Two of these comments are represented below:

“I think that the level of written Maltese is very low compared to when I was at school. Students are not even bothered to make dots on the ‘g’ and ‘c’ and leave the ‘h’ like ‘h’”

“The way they’re writing Maltese is atrocious. Not only do they spell it incorrectly but they also use English words and translate it phonetically to Maltese, ex: kjuwt! Even their English is being influenced as I’m sick of correcting ‘coz’ instead of ‘because’ and ‘dat’ instead of ‘that’!”

In some cases these future teachers did refer to the importance of making students aware of the differences between formal and informal writing and highlighted the importance of making students aware of the appropriateness of the variety used according to the context in which it is inserted:

¹⁶ A syntactic calque of the Maltese form ‘*jieħdu l-vizzju*’ lit. ‘they take the habit’.

“On the other hand, I find that when typing you automatically switch to self made grammar rules, while when writing for formal purposes, it is not that difficult to put such habits aside”

“However if one pays more attention to what he is writing or checking it before handing it in, will help a lot.”

Overall, most of these future teachers viewed CMD, and its effects on the Maltese language, as a challenge to face rather than a problem to solve. One to-be teacher of Maltese even commented that lessons should be dedicated specifically to illustrating the differences between this variety and SM in order to explain explicitly which variety is adequate within formal and informal contexts.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Without a shadow of doubt, *il-Malti mghaġġel* represents an extremely versatile and innovative variety which merits further investigation especially from a longitudinal point of view, as already suggested by DROUIN & DAVIS (2009) referring to other languages. In this sense we agree with TAGLIAMONTE & DENIS (2008:6) argument that chatting, rather than impoverishing language may be a “bellwether” in the evolution of a language. It is also a clear sign of a language’s vitality and significance at a communicative level.

The features of this variety outlined in this paper show that one of the aspects through which *il-Malti mghaġġel* distinguishes itself from SM is the fact that often words are spelt according to their phonetic representation, thereby ignoring characters of SM spelling which are the result of diachronic processes related to the etymology of the language. Furthermore, articles as well as future and negation markers, which are kept apart from nouns and verbs in SM, are often integrated with them forming one unit. Other features include emoticons, unconventional punctuation and the use of colloquially marked syntactic structures. As shown repeatedly in this paper, CMD in Maltese is heavily characterised by a form of neography, which in some respects may be compared to ANIS’s (2007) considerations regarding French. Colloquial forms are an integral part of *il-Malti mghaġġel* and, among other features, special Maltese orthographic characters are disregarded totally. Furthermore, whereas in English words that seem to be modified most frequently in texting are shorter, common terms (as stated by DROUIN & DAVIES 2009:64), this may not necessarily be the case for Maltese where standard orthography (even of frequently used terms) may require a metalinguistic knowledge of spelling patterns because of the language’s typically Arabic introflexive morphology.

It is therefore not necessarily far-fetched that, as expressed by the future teachers interviewed in this study, features of Maltese CMD are transferred to classroom tasks, where students are expected to adhere to SM in formal writing. In this respect one may also note certain similarities between ‘low’ Maltese written varieties (e.g. Maltese written by the elderly who received no formal instruction in the language or by individuals who did not complete higher levels of education) and *il-Malti mghaġġel*. Certainly, at this stage it is not possible to conclude that individuals who spell ‘deviantly’ or who use unconventional forms in IRC or while texting would actually be aware of the way such terms are represented in SM. Neither can one state that *il-Malti mghaġġel* may not be affecting SM spelling, as PLESTER, WOOD & BELL’s (2008) found when they concluded that English literacy does not seem to be affected significantly by texting.

As stated in Section 2.1, literature in the field quoted in this study does refer to the fact that there is a ‘worry’ that the way we write formally is suffering as a consequence of CMD and texting. This alarm is clearly reflected in the views of subjects who participated in this study, despite the fact that further investigation is required in order to provide empirical evidence which will indicate whether these concerns are justified.

As BARON 2008 and CRYSTAL 2001 state, the way we write when we chat or when we send text messages is a reflection of the society we live in and it is thereby a consequence of the fact that when we write for immediate communicative purposes there is rarely time to reflect on whether standardised forms are being used, whether grammatical conventions are being observed or indeed if we are deviating from what is considered to be ‘correct’ orthographically.

The future teachers involved in this study are quite aware of the challenges that CMD poses to language teachers. In some of their comments, they showed awareness of the fact that language varieties, including CMD, are to be considered as appropriate or inappropriate according to the circumstances and the context in which they are used. Furthermore, even in language teaching, the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching and of a Task-Based Approach to Second and Foreign language teaching has given more prominence to oral and aural communication in the classroom. Whereas previous methodology placed heavy emphasis on form and on accuracy, these approaches to the teaching of language place emphasis on the communicative purpose of language, leading to a redefinition of linguistic competence, which, in this day and age must also take into consideration language varieties used via modern technology.

Bibliography

- AGIUS, ALEXIA (2005): *What goes on inside chatrooms: a language analysis*. Unpublished B.Ed (Hons) dissertation, University of Malta.
- ANDROUTSOPOULOS, JANNIS (2006): Introduction: Sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication, in: *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 10 (4), 419-438.
- ANIS, JACQUES (2007): Neography: Unconventional Spelling in French SMS Text Messages, in: Danet, B. & Herring, S.C. (eds.). *The Multilingual Internet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 87-115.
- BARON, NAOMI S. (1984): Computer-mediated communication as a force in language change, in: *Language*, 18 (2), 118-141.
- BARON, NAOMI S. (2004): See you Online: Gender Issues in College Student Use of Instant Messaging, in: *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 23, 397-423
- BARON, NAOMI S. (2008): *Always On. Language in an Online and Mobile World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BARON, NAOMI S. (2009): The Myth of Impoverished Signal: Dispelling the Spoken Language Fallacy for Emoticons in Online Communication, in: VINCENT, J. & FORTUNATI, L. (eds.), *Electronic Emotion: The Mediation of Emotion via Information and Communication Technologies*. London: Peter Lang, 107-136.
- BARON, NAOMI S. & LING, RICH (2007): Text Messaging and IM: Linguistic Comparison of American College, in: *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 26, 291- 298.
- BIBER, DOUGLAS (1991): *Variation across speech and writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BIBER, DOUGLAS (2006): *University language: A corpus-based study of spoken and written registers*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- BIBER, DOUGLAS (2009): Are there Linguistic Consequences of Literacy? Comparing the Potentials of Language Use in Speech and Writing, in: OLSON, D.R. & TORRANCE N. (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 75-91.
- COLLOT, MILENA & BELMORE, NANCY (1996): Electronic Language: A New Variety of English, in: HERRING, S.C. (ed.), *Computer-Mediated Communication. Linguistic, Social and Cross-cultural perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 14-28
- CRYSTAL, DAVID (2001): *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DANET, BRENDA, RUEDENBERG-WRIGHT, LUCIA & ROSENBAUM-TAMARI, YEHUDIT. (1997): "Hmmm...where's that smoke coming from?". Writing, Play and Performance on Internet Relay Chat, in: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 2,(4), Retrieved from , <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol2/issue4/danet.html>. Accessed 19/04/2010.
- DANET, BRENDA. (2010): Computer-mediated English, in: Maybin, J. & Swann, J. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to English Language Studies*.. London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 146-156.
- DROUIN, MICHELLE & DAVIES, CLAIRE. (2009): "R U txtng? Is the use of text speak hurting your literacy?" , in: *Journal of Literacy Research* 41, 46-67.
- FERRARA, KATHLEEN, BRUNNER, HANS, & WHITTEMORE, GREG (1991): Interactive Written Discourse as an Emergent Register, in: *Written Communication* 8, 8-34.
- HALLIDAY, MICHAEL. A.K. (1978): *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. Baltimore: University Park Press.
- HERRING, SUSAN C. (2001): Computer Mediated Discourse, in: SCHIFFRIN, D. TANNEN, D. & HEIDI E. HAMILTON, H.E. (eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell Publications 612-634.
- HERRING, SUSAN C. (2005): Computer-Mediated Communication on the Internet, in: *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 36 (1), 109-168.

- HÅRD AF SEGERSTAD, YLVA (2002): *Use and Adaptation of Written Language to the conditions of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Ph.D dissertation, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
- HÅRD AF SEGERSTAD, YLVA (2005): Language Use in Swedish Mobile Text Messaging, in: LING, R. & PEDERSEN P. E. (eds.), *Mobile Communications Re-negotiation of the Social Sphere*. London: Springer-Verlag, 313-333.
- KRESS, GUNTHER (2003): *Literacy in the New Media Age*. New York: Columbia University. Press.
- LING, RICH. (2005): The Sociolinguistics of SMS: An Analysis of SMS Use by a Random Sample of Norwegians, in: LING, R. & PEDERSEN P. E. (eds.) *Mobile Communications Re-negotiation of the Social Sphere*. London: Springer-Verlag, 335- 49.
- PALFREYMAN, DAVID. & AL KHALIL, MUHAMED (2007): "A Funky Language for Teenz toUse": Representing Gulf Arabic in Instant Messaging, in: DANET, B. & HERRING, S.C. (eds.), *The Multilingual Internet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 43-63.
- PAOLILLO, JOHN.C. (2001): Language variation on Internet Relay Chat: A social network approach, in: *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5 (2), 180-213.
- PLESTER, BEVERLY, WOOD, CLARE, & BELL, VICTORIA (2008): Txt msg n school literacy: Does texting and knowledge of text abbreviations adversely affect children's literacy attainment?, in: *Literacy* 42, 137-144.
- PLESTER, BEVERLY, WOOD, CLARE & JOSHI, PUJA (2009): Exploring the relationship between children's knowledge of text message abbreviations and school literacy outcomes, in: *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 27 (1), 145-161.
- RAMIREZ, ARTEMIO & BRONECK, KATHY (2009): 'Im me': Instant messaging as relational maintenance and everyday communication, in: *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 26, (2-3), 291-314.
- ROSEN, LARRY D., CHANG, JENNIFER, ERWIN, LYNNE, CARRIER, L. MARK & CHEEVER, NANCY A. (2010): The Relationship Between "Textisms" and Formal and Informal Writing Among Young Adults, in: *Communication Research* 37 (3), 420-440.
- SIEBENHAAR, BEAT (2006): Code choice and code-switching in Swiss-German Internet Relay Chat Rooms, in: *Journal of Sociolinguistics* , 10 (4), 481-506.
- SU, HIS-YAO (2007): The Multilingual and Multiorthographic Taiwan-Based Internet: Creative Uses of Writing Systems on College-Affiliated BBSs, in: DANET, B. & HERRING, S.C. (eds), *The Multilingual Internet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 64-86.
- TAGLIAMONTE, SALI A. & DENIS, DEREK (2008): Linguistic Ruin? LOL! Instant Messaging and Teen Language, in: *American Speech*, 83 (1), 3-34.
- TANNEN, DEBORAH (1982): (Ed) *Spoken and written language: exploring orality and literacy*. Norwood, N.J: Ablex Publishers.
- THURLOW, CRISPIN (2002). Generation Txt? The Sociolinguistics of Young People's Text-Messaging, in: *Discourse Analysis Online*, 1.1. Retrieved from <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/daol/articles/v1/n1/a3/thurlow2002003-01.html>. Accessed 19/04/2010.
- WARSCHAUER MARK, EL SAID GHADA R. & ZOHRY AYMAN (2007): Language choice online: globalization and identity in Egypt, in: DANET, B. & HERRING, S.C. (eds.), *The Multilingual Internet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 303-318..
- WERRY, CHRISTOPHER (1996): Linguistic and Interactional Features of Internet Relay Chat, in: HERRING, S.C. (ed.), *Computer-Mediated communication: Linguistic, social and cross-cultural perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 47-63.

SANDRO CARUANA
Department of Arts & Languages
in Education
Faculty of Education
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080
Malta
sandro.caruana@um.edu.mt

LARA BRINCAT
Department of Arts & Languages
in Education
Faculty of Education
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080
Malta
brinlara@hotmail.com