

Intercultural encounters in Malta: a descriptive account

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Abstract

Since the island of Malta is situated right in the middle of the Mediterranean, encounters between individuals of different cultural background have been extremely frequent throughout its history. Like neighbouring countries, the post-War history of the island was characterised by massive emigration, often involving individuals in search of better living conditions. This trend has practically ceased over the past years and Malta has become a sought destination for many adults-in-mobility, including tourists, tertiary level students and professionals who visit the island for work-related purposes. Alongside this influx there has also been a considerable increase in the amount of individuals, mostly from Africa, who enter the country illegally. Materials from the SPICES Guidelines present an opportunity for adults-in-mobility and adults-in-contact-with-mobility in Malta to learn about intercultural communication and, as a consequence, to raise awareness and to be in a better position to face the challenging demands of intercultural exchanges.

1. Introduction - Sociolinguistic context

Malta, a small island in the Mediterranean, covering an area of around 316 square kilometers with a population of about 400,000 inhabitants, has a rich and varied history which has inevitably influenced the languages used on the island throughout the course of the years. Currently Maltese and English are actively used both in their spoken and written forms.



Figure 1. The geographical position of the Maltese islands⁽¹⁾.

⁽¹⁾ The following map has been reproduced from: www.thecommonwealth.org.

Maltese, a Semitic language, owes its origins to the period of time (870 A.D. - 1090) when the Arabs took over Malta, possibly in a violent manner, and thereby introduced their own vernacular which eventually took over any pre-existing language (Brincat, 1995 & 2003). Successive colonizers, most notably the Normans (1091-1194), reintroduced contacts with the Romance world and Italian, and Italian language varieties (most notably Sicilian), gradually gained a major role in Malta and were also used as a written medium alongside Latin (Cassola, 1998). However, the situation was to change drastically during the British colonial period (1800-1964) when English was introduced slowly but surely in Malta and eventually replaced Italian as the country's official language after a lengthy struggle known as the 'language question' (Hull, 1993). As time passed, the status of Maltese improved and from an exclusively spoken variety, the language acquired its written form. While in the 1930s it was still defined as "*il-lingwa tal-kcina*", 'the language of the kitchen', it is now a fully-fledged language, which is used regularly by speakers pertaining to all social classes and has recently been recognized as one of the official languages of the European Union, following Malta's accession in 2004. Presently Maltese is considered to be the national language of Malta whereas both Maltese and English are official languages.

A closer look at the current sociolinguistic situation in Malta reveals that Maltese is very widespread as a spoken variety but that it is used to a lesser extent as a written medium. In fact, Maltese can be said to be the language used to communicate orally in most circumstances. It is the language which is used almost exclusively on local television and radio stations and it is used regularly in most churches, in the law courts and in parliament. English, on the other hand, is generally used in writing. The most popular local daily newspaper is in English and so are most textbooks used in schools. Official governmental and legal documentation is normally written both in English and in Maltese.

Maltese is the mother tongue of the vast majority of the population, but a number of Maltese citizens also claim that either English, or Maltese and English simultaneously, are their first language. In this respect data included in studies vary quite considerably and are inevitably influenced by the nature and social background of the respondents taken into consideration. Recent studies by Sciriha and Vassallo (2001 & 2006), however, indicate that Maltese is their native language of around 98% of the population. These figures confirm those obtained by Borg, Mifsud and Sciriha in a 1992 study, as reported in Camilleri (1995:96), wherein, from a sample of 186 informants, 96% used mainly Maltese at home.

A survey on language use in Malta was also carried out in November 2000 by the National Statistics Office (2002). This survey based on a sample of 800 subjects representative of the target population of Maltese citizens (aged 16 years and over) confirms that Maltese is undoubtedly the language which is used most frequently as the spoken vernacular of the population. In this survey 86.2% of the subjects interviewed stated that they opt for Maltese during daily conversation.

In this respect, it is necessary to point out that regular use of English in Malta, especially as a spoken medium, is often associated to families pertaining to a higher socio-economic class. English also gains ground over Maltese in certain contexts, including studies at higher or at tertiary level. Textbooks used in the vast majority of university courses are in English and therefore the knowledge of both spoken and written English constitutes an advantage to those students who pursue studies at this level.

Though the Maltese society may be defined as bilingual, the linguistic situation on the island is more complex than this definition may suggest as Italian also has a significant role in Malta. In fact, Italian television channels, received in Malta via antenna or via satellite, are quite popular amongst Maltese of all ages (Caruana, 2003 & 2006). The presence of the Italian media in Malta was especially influential up to the early Nineties. In fact, up to 1993 there was only one local state-owned television channel alongside which a large number of Italian channels could be received via antenna. These included the Italian state run channels as well as a large number of private channels.

2. The Maltese educational system

As far as schooling is concerned, Maltese and English are both obligatory subjects from the start of Primary schooling. At Secondary level, students start learning one or two other languages, and may generally choose between Arabic, French, German, Italian and Spanish.

Maltese and English are therefore studied by all students at both Primary and Secondary level. As far as the other languages are concerned, Italian is the most popular in State schools (frequented by most Maltese students) and is studied by about 70% of students followed by French and German.

The above considerations indicate that the linguistic situation in Malta is a reflection of the historical and political permutations of the past. As stated previously, Maltese is used predominately as an oral medium while at a written/reading level English is used quite often. The use of Maltese is therefore limited as far as higher education is concerned and a sound knowledge of English is important in order to gain access to tertiary education.

A number of studies on the bilingual situation in Malta are mainly concerned with investigating issues related to code-switching and code-mixing. These include research by Ellul (1978) and by Camilleri (1995) who provide a detailed account of code-switching between Maltese and English in local Secondary schools. In these studies teacher-student interactions that took place in a number of lessons were analysed and discussed. Results indicate that in Maltese schools, though most textbooks are in English, lessons are often carried out in Maltese. This is mainly the case in State and in Church schools, as English is used more frequently in Independent schools, which are normally frequented by students coming from a high socio-economic background.

Within Maltese State schools, Maltese is generally perceived as necessary for most informal communication, whereas English is generally the language of instruction mainly used in order to refer to content-related terms. In this respect, it is also necessary to observe that in Malta second language teaching occurs in the language being taught, as teachers are encouraged to use Italian to teach the Italian language, French to teach the French language and so on. However, even in these cases it is far from unlikely for exchanges to occur in Maltese or in English throughout these lessons.

3. Adults-in-mobility and adults-in-contact-with-mobility in Malta

Since, as explained above, Malta has always been a meeting point at a crossroads in the centre of the Mediterranean the presence of foreigners is widely accepted. Furthermore, many Maltese citizens have direct experience of the social implications and difficulties faced by emigrants: this is mainly due to the fact that the post-War years in Malta were heavily characterised by massive emigration, mainly for economic reasons. Many Maltese citizens emigrated to Australia, and other destinations included the US, Canada and Great Britain. This trend has practically ceased in recent years (in fact today there are also a number of returned migrants) and, with further economic development, the Maltese have become accustomed to having a number of individuals from overseas among them, who normally visit the island for leisure or work purposes. Recently, however, the renowned 'Maltese hospitality' has been facing a severe test indeed: this is mainly due, as will be reported extensively below, to the influx of illegal immigrants who reach the Maltese shores.

The current situation in Malta as far as adults-in-mobility (AMs) and adults-in-contact-with-mobility (ACMs) are concerned is extremely complex indeed, both from a social and from a linguistic perspective. For the sake of clarity and concision, I will classify the presence of AMs in Malta in three broad sectors which will be subsequently discussed separately:

- a. AMs who stay in Malta on a long-term basis and thereby integrate fully with the local community.
- b. AMS who come to Malta on a short-term basis, mainly for leisure, study or work purposes.
- c. The recent influx of AMs who come to Malta as refugees or asylum seekers.

a. AMs who stay in Malta on a long-term basis and thereby integrate fully with the local community.

Figures from the 2005 census (www.census2005.gov.mt) reveal that the total population of Malta stands at 404,962, out of which 12,112 (3%) are foreigners residing on the island. This figure was much higher than the one registered ten years before, when the total number of foreigners residing in Malta stood at 7,231. The 2005 census indicates that 4,713 (39%) of these foreigners are British.

The non-English speaking AMs who form part of this category are normally highly motivated to learn the context languages spoken in Malta and normally have both the educational and social background which are necessary to gain access to language courses. A limited number of these foreign residents also attempt to learn Maltese so as to integrate better with locals. In some cases Maltese is learnt spontaneously through regular contacts with speakers. This is especially the case of individuals involved in mixed marriages between Maltese and foreigners. Furthermore, Arabs who settle in Malta normally find it quite easy to communicate in Maltese.

b. AMs who come to Malta on a short-term basis, mainly for leisure, study or work purposes.

Besides the tourist industry, which plays a highly significant role in Malta's economy, a number of people work and reside in Malta for short spans of time. This is due to the fact that many Maltese private companies have regular contacts with their

foreign counterparts and in some cases also act as representatives for European companies for commerce and trade in North Africa.

The University of Malta has also benefited from the advantages offered by a number of international projects and exchanges and currently over 1,000 foreign students carry out either part or their entire tertiary studies in Malta. Most of these students are attracted by the fact that lectures are held in English and are based on English texts, as stated earlier.

In cases involving foreigners on work-related sojourns and tertiary-level students, there is virtually a very limited inclination to learn Maltese, as using English fulfills the communicative needs of these short-term visitors.

c. The recent influx of AMs who come to Malta as refugees or asylum seekers.

The arrival of immigrants from North Africa in Southern Mediterranean countries is a well-known phenomenon and these migratory movements have affected Malta significantly. Immigration has led to some considerable logistical problems and the island's migrant centres, run by the Maltese security forces, currently house over 1,000 people. On the local Jesuit Refugee Service's (JRS) website (www.jrsmalta.org) it was recently reported that "Over the past couple of years, JRS Malta has been called to adapt to a rapidly changing scenario as numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Malta rose sharply and then dropped again. There were 1,686 arrivals in 2002 compared to 24 in 2000, as successive boatloads of undocumented migrants were intercepted in Maltese waters or landed on our shores from March 2002 onwards. For several months, an average of around 1000 people was held in immigration detention". Recent figures show that there has been a steady increase in the number of immigrants who reached the Maltese shores by boat in the recent years, with the figure surpassing the 2,000 mark in 2008.

Considering Malta's size, it is important to point out that even a seemingly contained arrival of immigrants can have a significant impact on the island. In fact the Maltese Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Tonio Borg is quoted as having said that "...the landing of 235 immigrants in Malta is equivalent to the arrival of 23,500 people in Sicily"⁽²⁾. Furthermore the local immigration office is also pressed by requests to obtain the necessary permits in order for foreigners to stay for long periods of time in Malta or to obtain Maltese citizenship.

Frendo (2006) offers some extremely interesting insight regarding the background of these asylum seekers. Whilst reiterating the fact that this social situation is indeed raising great concern from the general public in Malta, the author reveals that most of these asylum seekers are of extremely heterogeneous nationalities and in most cases possess only a basic, if any, form of education. Many of them hail from war-stricken zones and are granted temporary refugee humanitarian status since they cannot be sent back to their homeland.

In the conclusion of his article, Frendo (2006:47), insists on the fact that the European Union should play a significant part in helping countries such as Malta to tackle the situation: "It is pathetic to continue talking about solidarity in the absence of burden-sharing, while at the same time it is wishful thinking to assume that self-inflicted

⁽²⁾ Quote from: <http://www.maltamedia.net/wt/2005/09/influx-continues.shtml>, accessed 15th November 2008.

problems in refugee-producing countries, which may be potentially wealthy, will go away without greater effort by all concerned, including the European Union. Whether we like it or not, unless this problem is addressed effectively and realistically, humanely but pragmatically, there is every likelihood that it will lead to a potentially decisive political spill over at the national level, possibly with implications for social cohesion. It is arguably the most difficult and delicate problem now facing Malta” .

Some immigrants who come to Malta, both legally or illegally, seek to learn basic English or Maltese in order to enable them to communicate successfully. Needless to say, most of these immigrants do not have the opportunity to attend classes and therefore strive to learn the basic words and phrases of either language in order to manage to get their message across. Maltese adults in contact with these immigrants also face considerable communicative problems. In some cases an immigrant with a degree of knowledge of English or some other European language, is asked to act as an interpreter for all the others. Of course this remedy is not sufficient to solve problems for a number of reasons. For example, one’s interpreting skills may obviously not be sufficient to bridge the gap between the interlocutors and the complexity of various dialects or languages of African speakers may prove impossible to obtain a clear picture of what one may wish to convey.

Finally, another recent phenomenon which is often unaccounted for even in the local media, is the arrival of young adults from Eastern European countries who are employed (legally or illegally) or exploited in various sectors of the local community – from workers in the building and manufacturing industry, to cleaners or waiters in restaurants and hotels, to dancers or entertainers in local establishments and prostitution.

4. Basic language competencies and adult education courses in Malta

Adult education courses in Malta have increased considerably in Malta over the past few years. Nowadays a number of courses are organised by various institutions in order to introduce literacy and numeracy both to locals and to foreigners living in Malta. For this purpose the Maltese Ministry of Education has established the Department for Further Studies and Adult Education (<http://www.education.gov.mt/ministry/services/adults.htm>) which offers its services in order to put into practice the government’s policy of lifelong education for all.

The issue of literacy and numeracy in Malta is addressed in the “Report on the National Consultation Process on Lifelong Learning” submitted to the Directorate-General for Education and Culture European Commission: “People in Malta are increasingly becoming aware that the process of learning is a lifelong and lifewide one, that learning makes them better persons, and that such a process entails continually gaining and upgrading one’s skills. It is moreover recognised that the Government needs to guarantee open access to learning as well as enhanced support provisions for adults such as guidance and counselling to mitigate the complex decisions involved in seeking, holding and changing jobs. Such provisions, including second chance opportunities for school dropouts, should be especially directed towards those with little training and few qualifications. Proficiency in the areas outlined in the Memorandum

dum on Lifelong Learning assumes that a person is already literate. Feedback obtained by stakeholders regarding this key message highlights the need to include literacy, numeracy and communications as fundamental basic skills" ⁽³⁾.

In view of the above, a number of courses for adults are organized in Malta, and the Lifelong Learning Centre is frequented by over 400 students. This does not include students who attend evening classes. In most cases these courses are directed to Maltese citizens who wish to further their studies but courses are also organised for people who need to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills in order to be in a better position for employment. A number of evening classes also include courses specifically on English and Maltese to foreigners (www.eveningclasses.gov.mt). Most of the foreigners who attend these courses are normally in Malta for a long period of time or aim to settle in Malta. The aim of the Education Division is also to decentralize these courses and in fact a number of them are organized in various localities as parish churches and local councils are also involved in the set-up.

These courses are also going through an intensive period of development and currently new materials in order to acquire basic English and Maltese literacy skills are being produced. Such courses could indeed benefit from the SPICES guidelines (Klein et al., 2007) which could be developed and applied according to the learners attending the different courses. Another initiative regards the creation of an online platform which could enable learners to express their difficulties on an online forum (coordinated by the tutors in charge). By doing so, they develop both their literacy and their Information Technology (IT) skills. This initiative could also be enhanced if the forthcoming eSPICES Project were to be integrated into its actions and proceedings.

Besides the courses organised by the local Education Division other courses are run by non-governmental organisations and in some other private institutes. Most notably, amongst these are the courses run by the Foundation for Educational Services (FES). Again, however, these are normally literacy courses which are attended mainly by Maltese nationals, although some foreigners also do attend these courses.

5. Maltese adults-in-contact-with-mobility

Though Malta has a long-standing history of contact with foreigners, it is a fact that the recent influx of immigrants has given rise to a series of situations which the Maltese population has to come to terms with. One of the major problems in this regard is the language barrier which needs to be overcome. Generally, communication with short and long-term visitors has not been a problem as such visitors speak either in English or in Italian (or other Romance languages, such as French or Spanish). However, the arrival of many adults in Malta who are unfamiliar with any European language leads to many communication problems as at times they not only are unable to understand what they may be told, but they may be incapable of reading and following signs or indications. Therefore, members of the local police force, members of the army, officials and workers in the detention centres where immigrants are housed,

⁽³⁾ Quote from: http://www.education.gov.mt/edu/edu_division/report_III_05.htm, accessed 15th November 2008.

doctors and nurses who may be called for assistance, all have to deal with this complex situation and they normally lack both the know-how and the materials in order to come to terms with it.

It is also important to point out that contacts with foreigners in Malta is also becoming commonplace in local schools. The presence of foreign children in local classrooms is on the increase and though the SPICES Project does not deal directly with issues related to children, it is also a fact that their parents may face linguistic difficulties when they need to come in contact with teachers and with other schooling authorities.

Other areas of interest is the local Correctional Centre, where presently there are a large number of foreign inmates, as well as the governmental offices and the police Immigration Office which have regular contact with AMs during bureaucratic procedures.

As stated previously, most courses involving basic literacy skills are catered for by courses run by the Department of Adult Studies and Further Education, who also organise courses for the local Employment and training Corporation (www.etc.gov.mt). Other stakeholders in the area include other non-governmental organisations which also run adult education literacy programmes. Among these one may include the Foundation for Educational Services (www.fes.org.mt), the Fondazzjoni Guzè Ellul Mercer where basic literacy courses in Maltese are organised, the Maltese Paulo Freire Institute, the Malta College of Arts Science & Technology (www.mcast.edu.mt) and the aforementioned Jesuit Refugee Service. Overall, the Maltese situation provides extremely fertile ground for the materials that have been produced through the SPICES project. Furthermore, the very fact that a number of courses are indeed already functional makes them even more suitable for the SPICES methodology: in fact the very idea of SPICES, as explained by Klein (cf. the introduction to this volume) is not to create prescriptive materials but to lead to a type of formation which would enable trainers to improve existing courses and to create new materials, just like when one adds spices to his food.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion the SPICES Guidelines (Klein et al., 2007) could be directed to the following areas, among others, in Malta:

- a. The Department for Further Studies and Adult Education of the local Ministry of Education. The materials produced could be used to improve the existing courses and to create other courses in specific sectors where contact with adults-in-mobility is frequent.
- b. Materials could be developed in order to be used in specific bureaucratic-institutional settings namely:
 - i. the Health sector, for doctors and nurses who work at the local hospital and in policlinics and who occasionally have to communicate with foreigners;
 - ii. the local Police Immigration Office. These materials or similar ones could also be useful for members of the Armed forces who come directly in contact with illegal immigrants and also by workers in the Correctional Centre;

- iii. local school authorities in order to facilitate interaction with parents of foreign students;
- iv. the Jesuit Refugee Service;
- v. the Marsa Open Centre where individuals with refugee status and people with humanitarian protection are accommodated once they are released from the detention centre;
- vi. other interested parties and non-governmental organisations.

As stated earlier in this paper, there are a number of courses on literacy for foreigners organised in Malta. However, one of the major problems regards the fact that adults-in-mobility who may benefit from such courses do not have the means and the necessary know-how to gain access to them. The SPICES Project could play a highly important role in Malta if the materials produced could be accessed by adults-in-contact-with-mobility who work in these areas and if they could then be accessible to the so-called SPICES 'indirect targets', namely the adults-in-mobility with whom they come in contact regularly. The Guidelines (Klein et al., 2007) which have been produced could help to resolve communication problems and to understand intercultural issues better. As such educational and awareness-raising initiatives are organised (e.g. the SPICES 4 course organised in Malta between September 21st-28th 2008), it would undoubtedly be of great help to Malta if the European Union, first at foremost at a political level, takes forward-looking decisions in order to support the island in the difficult task of assisting individuals who require humanitarian aid.

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