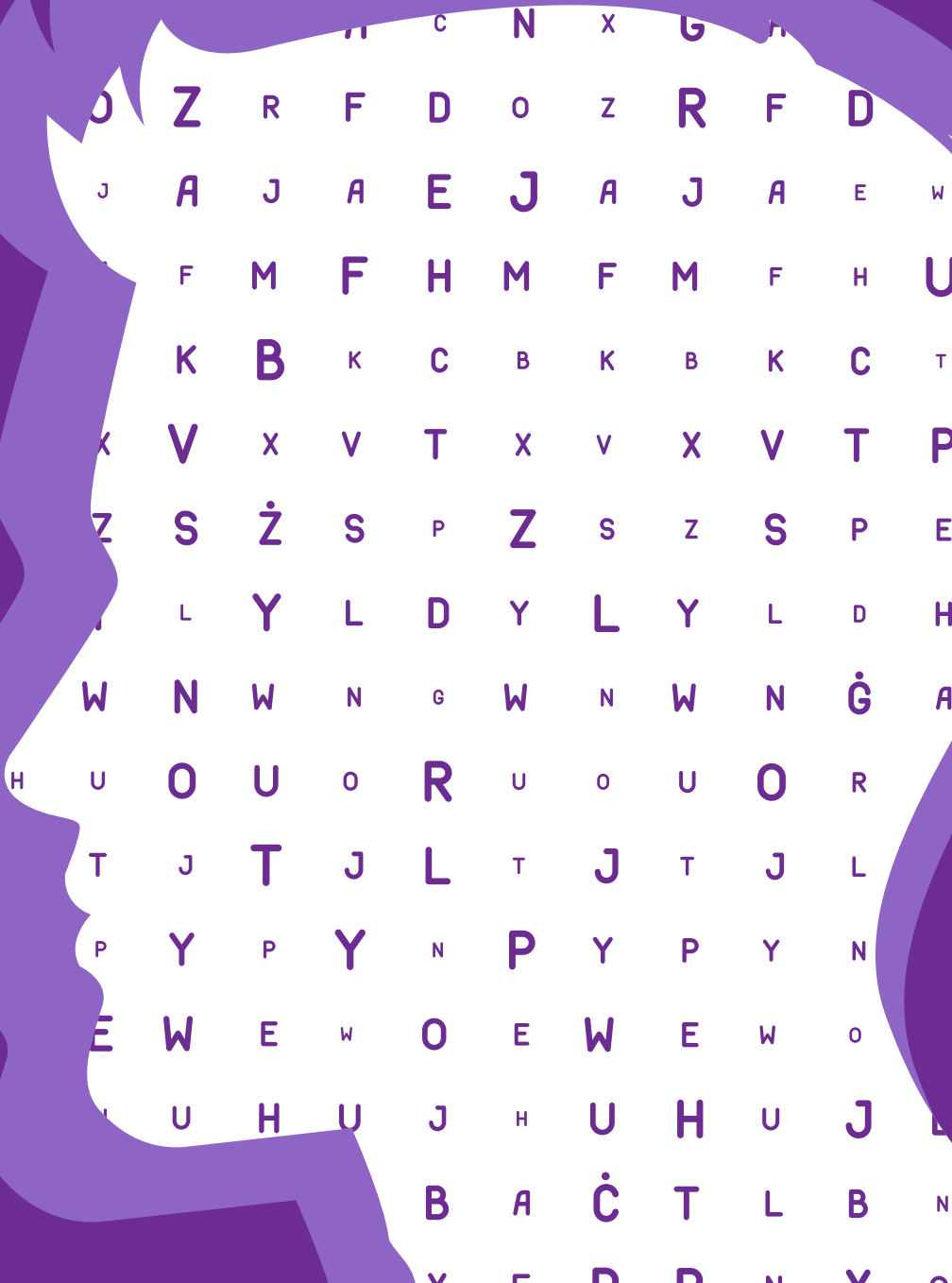


Who will be one of those please?



In an existence where change is constant, language is no exception. **Caroline Curmi** meets **Dr Sarah Grech** to discuss Malta's English language patterns and what data our language and word choices reveal about us.

A young woman once approached a greengrocer's counter to ask for some 'bully beef'. The poor shopkeeper was confuddled by her request and demanded she repeat herself. She eulogised a louder /bølij beif/ to no avail, but a breakthrough was finally made when she motioned to some tapered, rectangular tins stacked directly behind the shopkeeper. The latter, thinking this some bland prank, brusquely retorted with: 'Why didn't you say corned beef if that's what you wanted? *Donnok minn wara l-muntanji int!*' ((Literal translation: You must be from behind the mountains! Common interpretation: You sound like a disconnected, undomesticated simpleton!).

The woman, whose face by then was redder than the tin, hastily handed over some coins and ran out, vowing never to let her accent and choice of words betray her again. This scenario provides an interesting insight into the inner workings of Malta's local speech communities as well as indigenous dialects and the public understanding of them. A simple misunderstanding resulted in an abrasive display and an embarrassed reaction. Senior lecturer Dr Sarah Grech (Institute of Linguistics and Language Technology, University

of Malta) explains the dynamics at play behind this interaction: 'As we speak, we pick up cues about how our output is received, and we reshape or reinforce our subsequent language accordingly,' she says. This is done on both a conscious and subconscious level and reflects an 'interactive and circular process of production, feedback, and re-alignment,' she elaborates.

Grech's reflections are reinforced by author and psychology professor Lakshmi Bandlamudi (City University of New York), who in her reference to Mikhail Bakhtin (referred to as the 20th century 'patron saint of Dialogism'), offers a breakdown of the multi-faceted verbal communication model: 'Individuals are forever engaged in language games – co-constructing, asserting, refuting, dismissing, and twisting meanings. These transactions are never straight and steady, but full of zigzags and coils...'

Indeed, there are many elements at play in verbal interactions: linguistic, psychological, anthropological, and sociological. But it is the physiological aspect that provides the first clear path. 'Our voice pitch gives away quite a bit in relation to whether we're old or young, male or female, and even – with a bit of study – our



MaltE showcases certain British and American language traits but also exhibits an Italian influence. Up until 1934, Italian was also one of Malta's official languages.

ethnicity,' Grech explains. This is particularly relevant to Malta when one considers its multilingual status and its position as an economic migrant hub. The amalgamation of Maltese and English — Malta's two official languages — is the subject of concern in many an online forum. Somewhat understandably, members fear the demise of the indigenous Maltese language, and stereotypes have only grown in potency.

LANGUAGE REVEALS ALL

On a local level (and as something of a national pastime), language use nods towards one's education, social status, and town of origin. For example, it is not an uncommon bias that Maltese-dominant locals with a recognisable accent are largely deemed rural folk (*minn tar-raħal*), while English-dominant citizens from central areas such as Sliema are infamously considered snobs (*tal-pepe*). Interestingly, citizens living in the island's North side rely more on the English language yet are not met with the same misconceptions.

To a degree, the mechanism behind these stereotypes is backed up by research: '[it] suggests that a listener reacts and makes judgments about a person which can tentatively be said to correlate — or at least covary — with the kinds of phonetic details that I'm studying,' says Grech. However, she is also quick to diffuse some popular misconceptions on the matter: 'We can't really say that more/less English/Maltese is confined to different geographical pockets in Malta/Gozo, because, a bit like a city, people move around a lot,' she explains.

For example, Grech continues, a Maltese-dominant person from Qrendi ordering a meal in a St Paul's Bay restaurant might: 'need to make an order in (Maltese) English to [a] Serbian waiter, who in turn, will use English, but will also have picked up some Maltese English patterns, usually of intonation or melody of speech to be more easily understood here.' From a migrant's perspective, both Maltese and English morph into a Lingua Franca,

but on a national level, such an exchange creates an interesting dynamic that allows native listeners to pick up a vast deal of information in the speech signal, which the other speaker may not be in full control or conscious knowledge of.

A THIRD LANGUAGE?

Grech and researcher Prof. Alexandra Vella from the Institute of Linguistics are co-investigating these prompts and cues. Their research focuses on MaltE, a post-colonial form of Maltese English spoken by most bilingual locals, to identify aspects of the Maltese English accent. While not a widely accepted research topic, its use by over half a million people spread locally and in Maltese speech communities abroad demands it. 'It is definitely worth studying further for many reasons. If not for its own right, then for the sake of learning a little more about ourselves and our identity as a small island nation with three official languages, one of them being the one



A language is in a constant state of flux; a process that is indicative of the sociological changes within the community that makes use of it.

in question,' explains Grech, adding that this area deserves highly focused research which it is presently lacking.

Brushing 'good' or 'bad' English language use aside and focusing on phonetic features — or the physical properties of a language's sound — Grech's research does not only examine basic social scenarios but also delves into interactions with chatbots like Siri, Alexa, and Cortana, amongst others, to determine whether this variety of English emerging locally can be easily understood.

While collecting data may prove difficult due to the noticeable shift in language use between formal and informal settings, Grech draws on the works of William Labov, Sali Tagliamonte, Penny Eckert, and Miriam Meyerhoff to highlight a language's constant state of flux: a process that is indicative of the sociological changes within the community that makes use of it. Grech explains that awareness is key to collecting accurate data. 'It's

important...to know that if I make a person read aloud, they are going to have one accent (which they probably learnt in school) because their speech might be more careful, but if I record someone chatting with a friend, they'll probably have a different accent,' she says.

LANGUAGE USE IS EVER-CHANGING

Grech says that fluctuations in language use are a common occurrence until a person reaches 25 years of age and small modifications continue to occur throughout one's life. Such changes are generally indicative of one's willingness to adapt to the other's speech pattern, and a practical example is brought up: 'In my case, if I'm speaking to an older, well-educated person in a semi-formal environment, I will probably drop my r's in words like 'heart' or 'car', but if I'm speaking to a younger person, also in an informal setting, I might have more of a pronounced 'r' in the same words,' Grech says.

Similar modifications may be observed when one yearns for acceptance — or even, in some instances, rejection — from a particular community. To receivers endowed with high critical awareness and sensitivity, such communication is generally more conspicuous, however, shy or insecure English speakers need not be made too self-conscious by this statement as these traits require serious training. Nevertheless, a mischievous and semi-serious question arises: how does GDPR protect unwitting speakers from casual and leisurely analysis by linguists while out for a coffee or cheeky G&T? Well folks, that's a conversation for another time. **T**

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