

The teaching and learning of Italian in Malta: toward a new dimension

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In talking about the presence of Italian in Malta one needs to look at the linguistic influence of a succession of many foreign rulers. After the Arabic domination (870-1092) that marked the semitic base of the Maltese language, the Normans who took over Malta in 1091 introduced Latin as the administrative language. From around 1400 onwards the official language used between the local Maltese government and the Central government in Sicily was not only Latin but also the Sicilian dialect (Wettinger 1993).

The taking over of the Maltese Islands by the Knights of the Order of St. John and their long domain (1530-1798) marks a fundamental stage in Maltese linguistic history. The Tuscan dialect adopted by the Knights as their official language became the language of culture on the Islands. From the second half of the XVI century, official documents were written in Italian. This, however, did not hamper Maltese writers from making use of other Italian dialects, especially Sicilian and Neapolitan (Eynaud 1979).

The brief period of French rule (1798-1800) does not entail important changes from a linguistic point of view. However, the primacy of the Italian language is put in jeopardy during the English domain (1800-1964). After the relative calmness of the first years, the English rulers started to make reservations against the use of the Italian language, perceived with suspicion following the Unification of Italy. These events brought about the much discussed issue of The Language Question that characterised the socio-political history of Malta up to the Second World War.

The year 1934 was decisive: the Constitution of Malta was modified so that the Maltese language became an official language alongside Italian and English. At a successive stage the Italian language was ousted from the University and the law courts. The definite degrading of Italian from official language came about in the month of May 1936. The subsequent entrance of Italy in the war of 1940 closes definitely the Language Question.

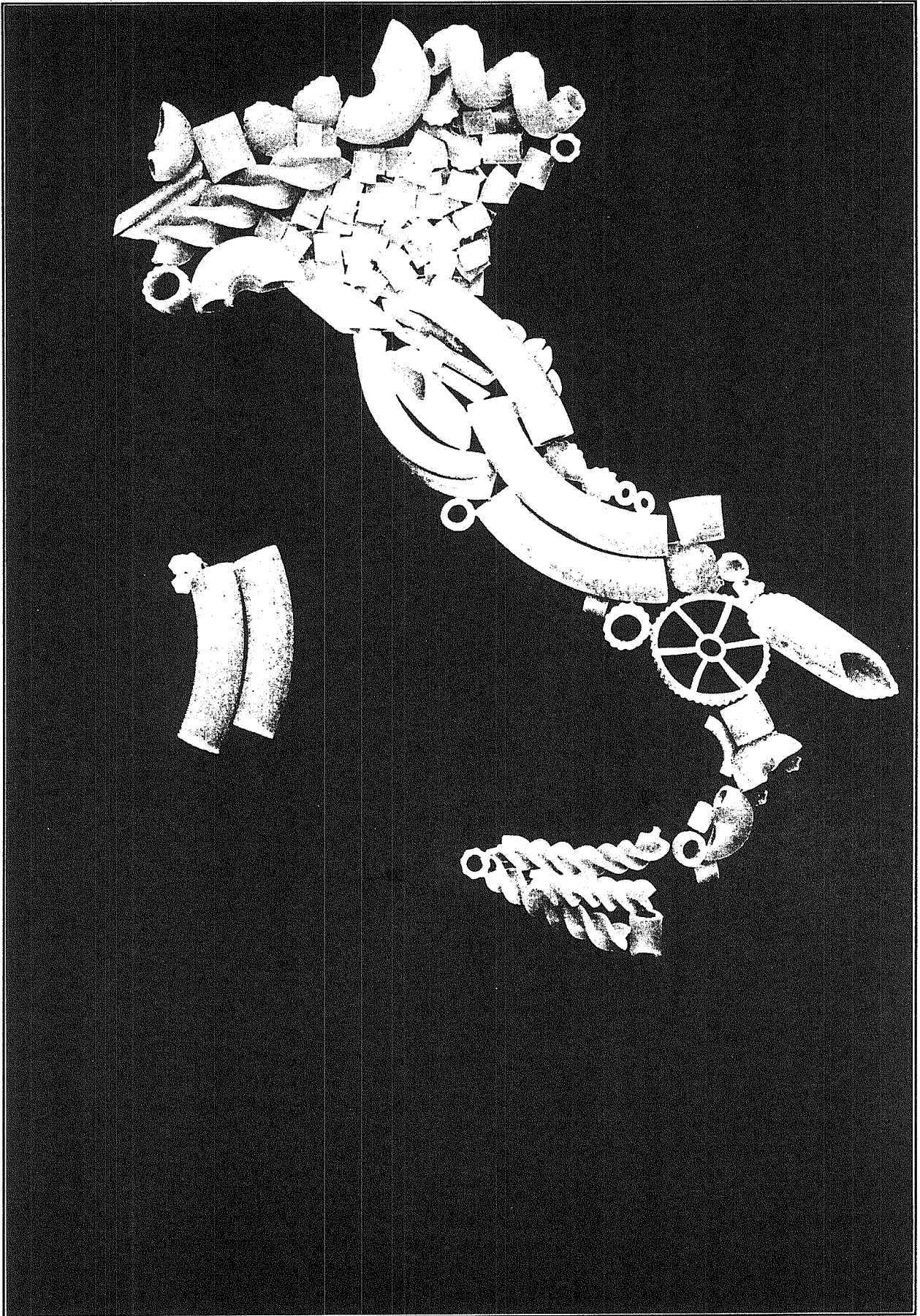
The 1964 Maltese Constitution elevates the status of the Maltese language, promoting it to National Language, with English as the other Official language. Paradoxically the Italian language again gains position, at least, as to the number of Italian speakers in Malta. Today, all political controversies of the first half of this century are forgotten, and Italy has become the greatest partner of the island, not only in the political and economic fields but also in the cultural spheres.

The diffusion of television programmes by RAI and other private Italian networks has rendered the Maltese viewers almost completely dependent on Italian television, at least until the recent arrival of cable television. As a consequence, the young generation not only absorb and reproduce Italian modes of saying, but look up to Italy as a way of life to admire and imitate.

The Maltese Society

The position of the Italian language in Malta and in Maltese schools is therefore very strong. In 1963, 10,000 primary school students chose to study Italian probably because they felt its need. It was important, if not vital, for them to understand and follow TV programmes, such as cartoons, news, sport, the Olympics, the World Cup, quizzes etc. Between 1957 and 1962, when the first local channel was set up, the Maltese could only watch the programmes of RAI TV. In the mid-seventies, the private Italian television networks increased the exposure to Italian language and culture of the Maltese of all ages and of every social background. This continuous exposure to Italian language and culture had to leave its effects.

In fact, television has been crucial in putting the teaching of Italian on a very strong platform. As Caruana (1996) clearly shows, at the start of secondary education, a significant number of Maltese students already have a basic comprehension of the Italian language very largely due to their exposure to Italian via television.



A survey carried out by Bartolo (1994) shows that 68% of a sample of 180 primary school pupils follow Italian TV programmes, 28% follow English programmes and 4% follow Maltese TV. From the same sample it results that more than 40% spend at least an hour in front of the TV set daily.

Another survey by Pace (1986) shows that out of 400 children aged 10 to 17, only 16% follow Italian TV for less than an hour daily. Only 5% declared they do not understand Italian.

Over 2000 students sit for the Italian school leaving matriculation examination with a 65% pass rate. Over 300 sit for the advanced level every year with a 70% pass rate.

As Caruana (1996) rightly concludes, it would be mistaken to classify Italian as a foreign language in Malta. It ought to be considered as a third language to which many students are exposed before undergoing the process of its formal teaching and learning. The presence of the Italian media clearly puts the Italian language in an advantageous position in comparison with languages such as French, German and Spanish, also taught in local schools:

Many Maltese students develop refined aural comprehension skills at a very young age even before initiating the process of the formal learning of Italian

(Caruana 1996:149)

Cultural Awareness

Byram (1993) states that while cultural awareness can be described rather than defined, "the promotion of the understanding of, and respect for, other cultures is one of the most important aims of modern language studies".

Considering the widespread exposure that Maltese students have to Italian television, and hence to the Italian language and culture, and given the increasing importance of cultural awareness in language learning, in what follows I report the conclusions drawn by two student-teachers, Camilleri and Gixti, at the end of a project on the subject. The two B.Ed. (Hons.) students carried out two projects within the framework of the Council of Europe Workshops 13A and 13B, aimed at enhancing learner autonomy in language learning. The work was based on cultural awareness.

Camilleri (1996) conducted the study in two different schools: a secondary girls' state school, and a co-ed private secondary school. She outlines her purposes as follows:

1. Equipping students with the necessary skills of autonomous learning, so as to enable students to improve their competence in Italian independently of the classroom setting.

2. The development of conscious awareness of the cultural aspects implicit in language, and of the structure, function and grammatical rules that make up the same language.

The lessons were based on short video recordings, obviously recorded from Italian television stations. The video was therefore the major teaching aid used during the lesson, and the videoclips selected for the lessons included advertisements, news reports and film selections. All were original Italian productions.

A typical lesson plan included the following steps:

1. Watching the videoclip.
2. A brief discussion of the recording where the teacher encouraged students to point out and talk about aspects of cultural interest.
3. Watching the video for the second time in order to give students the opportunity to observe accurately the aspects discussed.
4. Small group discussions whereby students were encouraged to elaborate further on the cultural aspects observed, and to communicate their findings to the other groups.
5. Distribution of handouts with exercises that require a general comprehension of the recording and the understanding of the cultural aspects included.
6. Working out the exercises and explanation of homework. Homework consisted in another exercise which required the students to deepen their knowledge about the topics discussed during the lesson. In order to be completed the homework usually required the students to watch specific programmes on television, or to use other sources of information to extend their awareness about culture and to develop their language skills.
7. Listening to the spoken language of the videoclip, while following a written transcription of the speech recorded. This exercise was intended to help the students become aware of pronunciation and spelling.

The students were also asked to keep a diary in which they recorded those cultural aspects observed on television during their free time at home. The purpose of the diary was to instil in the students the idea that learning is an active ongoing process which can take place without the teacher's presence and assistance.

Autonomous learning requires an active role in the learning process. It often involves more effort and presupposes motivation on the students' part. It therefore turns out to be a rather demanding and difficult process of learning for them. In fact, the first problem encountered was precisely that of how students could be motivated to work harder on their own so as to improve their competence. Undoubtedly the use of video is an excellent aid in language teaching as it provides the students with the opportunity of observing language being used in a natural setting.

Initially, the aim of the lesson was more focused upon cultural awareness rather than on language. But in actual fact, as the lessons progressed, the two aspects proved to be quite difficult to separate. In the second part of the experiment carried out in a co-ed private school, therefore, specific exercises of language were included to help students reflect on its function, structure and meaning. Text analysis of the language used in the video clip facilitated comprehension and rendered the lesson more interesting and motivating. It also led to more learner participation. The use of video also provided excellent support for students with special needs who benefited greatly from the fact that language was accompanied by constant visual input. Furthermore, the auditory input provided the students with the opportunity of listening to native spoken language. One particular exercise aimed at the development of written language skills required the students to listen to speech while following a written transcription. This exercise was extremely useful in enhancing native-like pronunciation and correct spelling as it entailed reflection on the students' part as they compared the written and spoken modes.

Grixti (1996) carried out a similar study at a boys' Junior Lyceum in the southern part of Malta. The project was launched through an introductory lesson on the concept of "culture". The aim was to equip the students with the basic notions which they would need in order to participate in this project. A discussion took place on those cultural elements that Maltese people share with the Italians, and others that distinguish the two nations.

A questionnaire was distributed to the students to gather some initial information as to their exposure

to television and their attitude to the Italian language in general. The salient results are summarised below.

1. The students in all classes are exposed on average to 22.6 hours of television on Italian channels per week. Seventy-four per cent of students claim to understand absolutely all that is being said during such programmes.
2. The majority of students in the sample said that TV boosted their language acquisition and a substantial number stated that they learnt more Italian from television than during their lessons at school.
3. The students in form 3 are attracted to the language by intrinsic factors whilst those in form 4 mentioned extrinsic motivations such as obtaining an additional school leaving qualification.
4. Although students watch a lot of TV, their favourite programmes are predominantly American, dubbed in Italian. This creates a problem because the culture thereby projected is not Italian, and the students are not aware of this fact.

During one Italian lesson per week, the students watched a video clip, about three minutes long, and with the teacher's help and with the use of pre-prepared handouts, they tried to identify the cultural elements presented in the clip. Grixti (1996) notes that this part of the project was very successful. The use of the videorecorder and of programme clips with which the students are very familiar, turned the lessons into a very motivating learning experience. The students enjoyed it and participated actively. The teacher himself enjoyed preparing and delivering the lessons more than usual.

Furthermore, on the basis of this project Grixti (1996) concludes that:

1. Television is a powerful educational tool which all students possess at home and to which most students have high exposure. It would be gravely wasteful not to utilise it as a learning experience.
2. Very often teachers seem to underestimate students' abilities. The performance of some students who participated in this project was outstandingly high.
3. This approach to language seemed to motivate students greatly. In a post-modern world, education has to go beyond the limited world of the classroom. Didactic approaches which ignore this fall miserably short on stimulus.

4. With the teacher's help, and with the use of handouts, even the slower learners managed to participate successfully. This project was a significant step forward in the direction of learner autonomy.

I sincerely hope that this project will stimulate established teachers of Italian to work together with the Italian methodology section of the University and to be in line with modern European trends in foreign language teaching.

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