

THE MALTESE BILINGUAL CLASSROOM: A MICROCOSM OF LOCAL SOCIETY

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Abstract – *This paper examines the relationship between language use in the Maltese bilingual classroom on the one hand, and in the societal context within which the classroom is embedded, on the other. The use of Maltese and English as media of instruction is a reflection of the functions of each language in society. At the same time, their functional distribution in the school context continues to shape the linguistic practices of Maltese students and adults. The employment of code-switching in the classroom is largely caused and shaped by factors like textbooks and technical terminology in English within a Maltese-speaking environment. It, in turn, continues to condition at least one type of bilingual behaviour in society: terminology switching. The other major distinction in the functional allocation of the two languages is the spoken-written contrast that often corresponds to the Maltese-English distribution respectively, both in the classroom and in most other domains. The analyses of bilingual classroom practices illustrate, in fact, how the discursive and literacy events taking place are a reflection of societal values and identities. Simultaneously, they continue to elaborate both the linguistic repertoire of Maltese bilinguals, and the relationships symbolized by each language, and by code switching itself.*

Introduction

Malta presents an interesting case of societal and educational bilingualism. The Maltese nation can be described, by and large, as a mono-ethnic and mono-cultural community that operates in two languages: Maltese and English. Maltese is the first language of about 98% of the population (Borg *et al.*, 1992) for whom it functions as the means of everyday communication. Maltese is designated as the national language in the Constitution of the Republic of Malta; it is the official language of Parliament, of the Law Courts and of the Church. English, on the other hand, is spoken as a home language by a minority, and simultaneously used for a variety of purposes by everyone: in public administration and industry, for written communication, by the mass media, and in education.

Historical background

Maltese is a mixed language of Semitic origin. It has been spoken by the people inhabiting the Maltese Islands for many centuries. Unfortunately, little is

known about language in Malta prior to Arab rule (870–1090 A.D.). It seems clear, however, that the Semitic foundations of Maltese are similar to North African Arabic, and were firmly established locally during Arab rule. The Arabic stratum forms the basis of the phonology, morphology, and to a lesser extent the syntax of Maltese, while the lexis of Semitic origin constitutes a nucleus of basic concepts related, for instance, to life in the home and realms of manual work.

Maltese has subsequently been shaped by a Romance superstratum. For many centuries following Arab rule, roughly until the 19th century, European cultural and linguistic influences became extensive (cf. Mifsud, 1995). A Romance superstratum, especially in the lexicon of Maltese, continues to hold its ground in many cultural domains. This is especially due to the influence of numerous Italian television stations accessed in Malta, geographical proximity to Sicily and Italy, and other cultural ties.

The English adstratum is a relatively recent phenomenon. During the latter half of the 20th century English became the main medium of international communication in Malta, of acculturation, and was promoted intensively in education. Under British rule (1800–1964) English became increasingly important and its use widespread among the Maltese population. Although it took English almost a century to be introduced in schools at a time when a significant sector of the Maltese professional elite were pro-Italian, once English found a secure place in the civil service and was promoted to official status alongside Maltese in the 1934 Constitution, then it steadily replaced Italian as the language of education. As time went by, English took over as the language of more and more domains, especially as a written medium. Nowadays, English is practically the exclusive linguistic source of new terminology connected with modern life, such as in the fields of science, technology and sport.

Maltese can be described as a 'Young Standard Language'. It has been codified with dictionaries, grammatical studies, and other volumes describing its history and development. A literature for both children and adults, as well as texts of literary criticism in Maltese, are available. It is a compulsory subject at school.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to point out that Maltese is not a heterogeneous reality, but consists of a number of geographically-defined varieties, with the main distinction being that between the Standard variety and the dialects. Standard Maltese is socially prestigious, and a superposed variety for all the population. Dialects, on the other hand, are many since every town and village practically boasts its own variety. These varieties are different from each other on most linguistic levels, and although the phonetic distinctions are the most obvious, differences have also been recorded on the lexical and grammatical levels (see for example, Camilleri and Vanhove, 1994; Aquilina and Isserlin, 1981).

In Gozo, for example, the dialects play an important role in the classroom. Buttigieg (1998) provides evidence about the kind of problems that dialect-speaking children face in school. Although all Gozitan dialects are linguistically related to Standard Maltese, when pupils are faced with a standard speaking teacher, and hence a different mode of communication from that experienced so far at home, they face a psycho-linguistic barrier. This results in a phase referred to as 'silencing' (Simon, 1990) during which, for a number of years at least, children choose to shut up rather than lose face by uttering anything in a dialect which is stigmatised by the standard speaking community represented in class by the teacher.

Furthermore, dialect-speaking pupils face a number of additional problems when it comes to learning to write. Written Maltese is very closely related to the standard variety, and is phonetically-based on it such that almost every vowel and consonant corresponds to a phoneme. Thus, non-standard speakers need to first learn to speak the standard variety prior to learning how to spell the written language. Buttigieg (1998) puts forward a number of practical pedagogical proposals that she tried out herself with a third year primary class in Gozo. These consist of tasks that help pupils become aware of the value of possessing more than one language variety, thus leading them to feel confident in using their own dialect as appropriate, while developing a positive attitude towards the acquisition of Standard Maltese.

The relation between dialectal and Standard Maltese can be described as one of *diglossia*, where two language varieties exist side by side in a community, and where one has a higher status than the other (cf. Ferguson, 1959). On the other hand, Standard Maltese and English co-exist in a context of bilingualism without diglossia, where two languages compete for use in the same domains (cf. Fishman, 1967). The Maltese bilingual context is a rather complex one given that there is only one speech community that uses a number of dialects, a standard variety of the national language, and English in very similar, and sometimes the same spheres of activity (For a more detailed account see Camilleri, 1995).

The functional distribution of Maltese and English in local society

Maltese and English come together within the Maltese speech community at two levels: (a) the level of the bilingual individual who learns and uses both languages from childhood, and (b) at the societal level where, although there are domains in which one language dominates, there are many others in which both languages are used interchangeably.

The only two domains that could probably claim exclusivity for the Maltese language in both spoken and written forms are: Parliament, where proceedings are

only recorded in Maltese; and the Law Courts, where the Maltese version of the Law is binding. This does not mean, however, that an individual's speech in these domains may not be coloured by some code-switching into English, even if not as frequently as in the other domains. In addition, it is interesting that Italian terminological influences abound in these two contexts.

Two important official domains are the Catholic Church and the Public Service. The Catholic Church declared Maltese its official language following Vatican Council II (1964) when the vernaculars replaced Latin as the language of the Church. Since then, Standard Maltese (henceforth Maltese) has been used for spoken purposes, for communication with the people, and for spreading the teachings of the Church through many publications. Yet again, within this domain, there are a few contexts where prayers and religion classes are held in English. The argument put forward is that the participants are English-speaking, as is the case in some localities or in some families in Malta. Written Church documents for international communication are in English.

Similarly, in the Public Service, spoken interaction takes place largely in Maltese, with some code-switching into English depending on the topic and the interlocutor. Written documents are either in Maltese, in English, or bilingual.

The media is one of the greater influential domains on language. There are seven Maltese television stations, all of which broadcast programmes in both languages. Normally, films and documentaries are transmitted in English, while the main news bulletins, discussion programmes, day-time entertainment, and children's programmes are broadcast in Maltese. Radio stations are numerous, and amount to about fifteen which are Maltese-speaking, and three with an English-speaking policy. In contrast to this, there is, more or less, a balance in the publication of both daily and Sunday newspapers in both languages. It is not rare to find bilingual journals and magazines. To mention two in the education domain, *Education 2000*, the journal of the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, and *The Teacher*, the journal of the Malta Union of Teachers, are bilingual.

Bilingual education in Malta

Classroom language practices are to be understood in the light of the specific societal background in which they are embedded. Teachers and learners continually interact in the classroom. Societies are made up of interacting individuals; people and language are continually changing through such interactions. Interaction implies human beings acting in relation to each other, taking each other into account, acting, perceiving, interpreting and acting again.

Any instance of bilingual use needs to be understood in terms of the use of language in that particular lesson, and as embedded in a series of concentric circles of increasingly larger (more 'macro') contexts. If we move from the micro-context of specific instances of language use (for example, a specific instance of code-switching in a particular lesson) outward, these rings will include other interactions during the lesson taken as a whole, and their dependence on participants' classroom characteristics, the school, the society and its linguistic repertoire.

The following examples of bilingual usage in the classroom reflect the major patterns observed within this micro-context embedded, as it is, within the larger societal context.

The choice of medium of instruction

There is an opportunity to use either Maltese or English as media of instruction across the schooling system. There has, as yet, been no legal obligation for schools or teachers to use any particular language for any subject. What normally dictates the choice of medium is the availability of textbooks, and the language of the national examinations. Mid-yearly and annual school examinations are held nationally for state schools starting from the fifth year of primary school. All subjects are examined through written papers in English, except for Maltese, Religion, Social Studies and Maltese History. At a later stage, when sitting for School Leaving, Intermediate and Advanced Matriculation Examinations, students are allowed to respond to questions in the Religion, Social Studies, Maltese History, and Systems of Knowledge papers in either language. In the latter paper examinees are to answer at least one question in the other language.

The extensive use of English in examinations has been in place since the introduction of examinations at these levels, which, until the 1980's were British based. The continued use of English is justified due to the availability of textbooks and other pedagogical materials in English. Furthermore, it allows students the possibility of further studies in that subject that are carried out in English both locally and abroad. The use of English for examination purposes does not seem to be contested as it is understood by the Maltese population as a necessary window to the field of world knowledge.

In fact, the use of a second or foreign language for non-language subject instruction is a method that is recently being emulated in a number of schools across Europe (cf. Marsh *et al.*, 1998). In most cases it is English that is chosen as the new medium of instruction since this language has become widely acknowledged, in practice, as a world language.

The use of Maltese for a few subjects, on the other hand, helps to give the language additional status and value in the education domain, and ensures that students acquire a desirable level of competence in it as a language of study and knowledge.

As has been explained earlier, Maltese and English share roles in many societal domains. The allotment of different languages to different subjects in the written mode reflects a societal reality where the two languages are used within any one domain; are valued almost equally, and thus render the situation close to one of bilingualism without diglossia.

The spoken-written distinction and terminology switching

The most conspicuous division of labour between the two languages is the spoken/written distinction. English is largely a written language, Maltese the major spoken means of interaction. Education in Malta is heavily associated with subject-teaching that relies almost exclusively on the written text established by the syllabus. In the classroom, there is continual interaction between the written text in English as the basic point of reference, and the oral discussion in Maltese through which participants reiterate and reinterpret the written text. By using Maltese, participants reason out problems for themselves and find their ways to the solutions required.

The discussion of a written text in English through Maltese motivates code-switching. The international literature reports several kinds of code-switching that result from this interaction between the written word in one language, and the spoken discourse in another (e.g. Taha, 1989; Lin, 1990; Ndayipfukamiye, 1991; Merritt *et al.*, 1992).

The use of technical terms in English amidst what can be otherwise considered as Maltese discourse, amounts to two-thirds of all code-switching taking place in the classroom (cf. Camilleri 1995). Considering that almost all textbooks used throughout the school day are in English, and that the majority of learners come to class with Maltese as their first language, then it becomes clear why the participants resort to English terms all the time, and why the teacher very often needs to translate terms from English to Maltese.

The translation of technical terms, in fact, has been investigated in detail in Camilleri (1996, 1998, 1999). Not every code-switch related to technical terminology is carried out in the same way. For instance, translation switching could be explicit or non-explicit. The explicit translation of terms means that a literal equivalent in Maltese is given, and this may or may not involve a metalinguistic marker such as *'igifiri* ('this means'). On the other hand, non-explicit translation of terms or phrases involves the use of other linguistic devices,

such as: an amplification in Maltese on the meaning of the term in English, without an exact translation; the elicitation of a response from the learners following the introduction of a term in English by calling out on them in Maltese to indicate that a response explaining the term is expected from them; a relatively lengthy explanation in Maltese is given by the teacher, again without giving a precise equivalent for the term.

The following examples should serve as illustrations of terminology switching, very frequent both in the classroom and outside it. The first two examples show how the speaker translates an English phrase or term into Maltese. In the classroom extract there is no metalinguistic marker, while in the example from a television documentary there is a metalinguistic marker *bil-Malti* ('in Maltese').

In the classroom	Outside the classroom
<p>In the following extract from a social studies lesson (students aged 11) where a poem in English is discussed in Maltese, the teacher translates a phrase into Maltese. At this stage he does not explain that the phrase refers to the name of a flower.</p> <p>T: Jack in the pulpit is preaching today, għax qisu qiegħed jippriedka fil-pulptu.</p> <p><i>(T: Jack in the pulpit is preaching today, because he looks like he is preaching in the pulpit.)</i></p>	<p>During a television programme in Maltese on nature and ecology, the presenter translates the term from English to Maltese (23.11.99):</p> <p>P: Il-legumes bil-Malti legumi.</p> <p><i>(P: Legumes, in Maltese are called legumi).</i></p>

Another type of translation switching involves the elaboration in Maltese of new information given in English. When new information is introduced through an English term or phrase, it is sometimes discussed further in Maltese in a way that the speaker explains what he meant by what he said in English without giving a translation equivalent. One important reason for this is the lack of an exact equivalent in Maltese, especially since technical terms are introduced in English at the same time as the concept they represent. Occasionally, however, as one Biology teacher explained, even if there are Maltese equivalents, they do not carry the academic connotations necessary for their use in a classroom setting, and therefore are sometimes avoided.

The following two examples, one from a home-economics lesson, and the other from a Minister's speech, illustrate how an English term, once introduced, is further described and explained in Maltese. In both cases there is no one term in Maltese that could have been used as a translation equivalent.

In the classroom	Outside the classroom
<p>During a home-economics lesson (students aged 15), the teacher explains a term in English by giving more information rather than simply translating the term.</p> <p>T: Fast colour means fejn il-biċċa drapp tkun tal-kulur u mbagħad wara li naħsluha ma tibqax bħal qabel, tiċċara jew titlef il-kulur.</p> <p><i>(T: Fast colour means where a piece of coloured cloth that is washed becomes different, loses its colour.)</i></p>	<p>During his budget speech, the Minister of Finance (22.11.99), is not simply content to use technical terms in English as read out from his text, but resorts to an explanation:</p> <p>M: Hemm bżonn li tidħol il-mentalità ta' cost-consciousness fost kulhadd. Ma nistgħux nibqghu nippermettu l-ħala. Kulhadd irid iwieġeb għall-infiq li jsir.</p> <p><i>(M: There's a need for a mentality of cost-consciousness among everybody. We cannot permit waste. Everyone has to become responsible for the expenses carried out.)</i></p>

Another interesting case of terminology switching occurs when the speaker quotes or refers to the written text in English during an exchange in Maltese. This is related to what was termed 'situational switching' by Gumperz (1982)—only in this case, rather than a change in situation, there is a change in focus of medium, from the spoken to the written. It is different from translation switching in that it does not involve an explanation or elaboration in Maltese on the information given in English. In these cases, bilingual speakers simply make use of noun phrases in English within a context of Maltese discourse, without obvious signs that they are distinguishing between the two languages, unlike what happened in the examples explained above. It is interesting to note that this occurs most of the time with noun phrases in English, or more rarely with adjectives, but not with verbs. In the case of English verbs, these are usually inflected using a Maltese (Semitic) structure as in *niddrajklinjaw* ('we dry clean'), *tispelli* ('she spells'), and *tibbukkja* ('she books'). This phenomenon needs further analysis, but an overview of Maltese-English crosslinguistic influence is given in Camilleri (1995). The two examples below illustrate how bilingual speakers make use of English phrases and terms within Maltese discourse as they refer to the written text in English.

In the classroom	Outside the classroom
<p>During a mathematics lesson (pupils aged 11), the teacher switches to English when pointing to a drawing on the blackboard that represents the written text.</p> <p>T: Meta nġhidu the circumference of the circle x'inkunu qeġġdin niġġmu?</p> <p><i>(T: When we refer to the circumference of the circle, what do we understand?)</i></p>	<p>During a beauty programme in Maltese on television (20.11.99), a beautician refers to a number of beauty products, and switches to English as she shows each one.</p> <p>B: Ħa nitkellmu fuq il-powder. Din tista' tkun loose jew semi-loose.</p> <p><i>(B: We are going to talk about the powder. This could be loose, or semi-loose.)</i></p>

Conclusion

From a linguistic point of view, specialists do not express any worries in relation to the survival of Maltese as a language. First of all, it has to be appreciated that Maltese is a heterogeneous reality, and the first language of the vast majority of the population. It is valued by them as an important aspect of their identity. Its contact with, and the influence it receives from English, is understood in the light of the various influences Maltese has gone through throughout its history and explained/accepted as a natural evolution and sign of its vitality. Similarly, in education, there can be no doubt about its relevance, it being the native language of the majority of the learners who, as has been discussed, need to make sense of the written text in English through oral discussion in Maltese.

At the same time English is seriously valued. It is a world language, the language of education and international communication also very important locally due to the tourist industry, and undeniably has extended its use to local contexts.

Code switching is one way of managing a bilingual reality, in fact, of embodying and expressing such reality in the most spontaneous and resourceful of manners. In the classroom, undoubtedly, it becomes a pedagogically efficient way of communicating, of solving the difficulty of making sense of a 'foreign', new and academic text in English, by liberally and uninhibitedly discussing it in one's native language.

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