

Understanding wor(1)ds

Sitting at her desk in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta, in an office lined with hundreds of books, there is nothing to attest to how much Professor Lydia Sciriha's work actually engages with society around her.

But many of the conclusions of her work are testimony to her deep and practical engagement with society. "Men and women need to be aware that they have different conversational styles... The advent of mobile phones has made it much harder for parents to keep tabs on their kids... It is not surprising that so many marriages are on the rocks since there seems to be little communication between the two partners..."

By delving into the linguistic worlds constructed by men and women – and the cultural practices they reveal – Professor Sciriha's work seeks to increase our understanding of what it means to be a Maltese person, to be aware of the linguistic and cultural practices by which we are surrounded and which we use to engage in significant relationships with others.

"One of my recent publications *Keeping in Touch: the sociolinguistics of mobile telephony in Malta* is set in an international framework but it provides a laboratory-like case study of the influence of mobile telephony in a small island state, simultaneously a macrocosm and a microcosm. This study documents the results of a scientifically representative survey on the use of both fixed and mobile telephony in Malta and how mobile telephony has changed our lives completely," explains Professor Sciriha.

"McLuhan considers the telephone as 'the irresistible intruder'," she says, smiling, after we are interrupted by a phone call, timed *a propos*, as if to illustrate her point. "Many callers do not realize that for participants in face-to-face interactions such as meetings, it is indeed very frustrating and irritating to be interrupted when the phone rings and the caller takes precedence over the other persons present. This situation is now being circumvented when callers send a short text message (SMS) since this is less intrusive and allows the called a longer timeframe in which to answer. SMS messages are also more private than a phone call."

In this monograph, Professor Sciriha discussed several topics,



Many might shrug off academic work as not engaging with their everyday worries and anxieties but sociolinguistic work provides deep insights on how awareness of linguistic practices can help us engage in more meaningful relationships. Professor Lydia Sciriha from the University of Malta talks to Sandra Aquilina

such as whether Maltese callers identify themselves and if they don't, what are their reasons for not doing so. Are there significant differences in the way we answer a call on a fixed line as opposed to that on the mobile? Is it acceptable for the called who has identified the caller to answer 'Aw, xi trid?' [What do you want?] or 'Ghidli?' [Tell me?].

"Though it does sound rather inelegant and unrefined to answer in such a manner, most people are not at all offended – probably because in Malta, unlike some other countries, mobile phone calls are charged per second and not per minute – so every syllable we utter costs money!" she says.

This monograph also discusses the extent of awareness among the Maltese of standard sociolinguistic conventions such as who should terminate a telephone conversation and whether there are differences in the usage patterns of a fixed line as compared to a mobile. It also focuses on the erstwhile debate as to whether females really do talk more than males.

"The truth is that on the mobile it is the males who talk more - but then females will talk much longer on a fixed line," she reveals.

One of the chapters in this work deals exclusively with teenagers and their use of the mobile phone.

"Some parents seem to be labouring under the illusion that by buying their children a mobile phone, they have them on an invisible leash. When phoning their teenagers, one of the first questions parents usually ask is 'where are you?' and though they usually do get an answer, their children are not always truthful,"

says Professor Sciriha.

"After all, it is easier to be economical with the truth when speaking on the phone than in face-to-face encounters. When you want to lie to someone, phone them. Don't do it in person because your facial gestures reveal much more than you would like them to!"

Moreover, she adds, it is quite common for teenagers to switch off their mobile phone so that their parents will not contact them and interrogate them on what they are doing.

"The commonest reason teenagers give when their parents quiz them as to why they were not in a position to respond is that they had a flat battery. Roos calls this the 'dead battery syndrome'.

I think parents nowadays have quite a hard time controlling their children. Before the advent of mobile telephony parents generally knew their children's friends because they would phone home on the fixed line and the parents would act as the gatekeepers by answering the phone, and occasionally listening in. Nowadays, teenagers either phone on the mobile or use the less costly and even more private short text messages. Undoubtedly, it is now more difficult for parents to know with whom their children hang around, what they're really doing and how they're organising their day," she says.

Currently, Professor Sciriha is working on family communication. "In this project I zoom in on couples interacting with one another and analyse some sociolinguistic aspects of their conversations. Is it true that men tend to interrupt more than women when interacting in a group? How long is each turn? Do women give more backchannel cues, like nodding, than their male counterparts? Do Maltese couples use the high involvement style when communicating with one another?"

Problems arise in marriages because some couples have different communication styles, she notes. "Breakdown in communication is a serious matter. I have been told that at times, the only way couples communicate is by means of terse telephone conversations, which are often mere directives and of course this is especially perturbing when the couple lives in the same house. 'Conversations are hard work' according to Deborah Schiffrin, since they are fraught with misunderstandings. As E.M. Forster so aptly puts it in *A Passage to India* 'a pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood and a whole conversation went awry'."

So it is important for both males and females not only to know that they have different conversational styles, but also in what way these styles differ and eventually how to improve communication skills, she says. "The way I speak to another woman is not the same way that a man speaks to another man," says Professor Sciriha with slow emphasis.

And research shows us that couples all too often fail to understand each other when it matters most, she adds.

She refers to Deborah Tannen, an eminent professor at Georgetown University, one of the foremost discourse analysts who has written extensively on how conversational styles make or break relationships.

"Her interest in discourse analysis was heightened by the fact that her first marriage failed because she could not communicate with her husband – their styles were markedly different," explains Professor Sciriha.

To illustrate different conversational styles, she gives an oft-cited example of a couple travelling by car. At one point during the



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journey the wife asks her husband 'Would you like a coffee?' to which he curtly answers with a definitive 'No'.

"The wife was quite hurt that her husband did not bother to ask her whether she wanted a coffee even though he did not want one himself," she relates. "After a few minutes, the husband realized that all was not well and asked his wife what was bothering her. Her reason astounded him. Since men are mostly direct in their speech, indirectness does not get women very far when speaking to the opposite sex. She could have simply said 'John, I would like a coffee, do you mind if we stop?' Men very often do not understand subtle indirect messages and women are generally indirect because they have been socialized to be so."

However, not all differences in conversational styles are a result of socialization, she points out.

"Some differences are physiological. Allan and Barbara Pease reinforce this notion by reviewing actual brain scans obtained by Dr Tonmoy Sharma, head of psychopharmacology at the Institute of Psychiatry in London in 1999, which reveal that in males there are relatively few hotspots for language when compared to females."

This effectively means that women process much more information and are able to express their emotions verbally more than their male counterparts. Furthermore, these

hemispheres are connected by means of a bundle of nerves known as the *corpus callosum* which, in females, is thicker and the connection between the hemispheres is 30 per cent faster than in males.

"Simply put, I usually tell my students that in females the corpus callosum is like a highway, while it is a narrow village alley for males," says Professor Sciriha.

In view of such differences, it is not surprising that women often complain that men are not able to multitask, she says.

"For example, most men can only perform one thing at a time, while women have the ability to juggle several tasks simultaneously. It is an everyday occurrence for women to answer the phone, cook, watch TV and do other tasks simultaneously, while men usually only do one thing at a time. It is also a well-known fact that men do not like to be spoken to during breakfast when they are reading the newspaper. It is difficult for them to talk and read simultaneously but such is not the case for women."

Such differences are also grounds for arguments between couples since women just cannot comprehend why men can only do one thing at a time. As such, research is showing us that men and women have two different conversational styles, she says.

"This does not mean that one style is better than the other and it is unrealistic to expect the two sexes to change their conversational styles to accommodate each other. But research does suggest that it is important for men and women to recognise that inbuilt gender differences extend even to such important areas like inter-personal communication."

Professor Sciriha has been researching communication and gender differences in conversation for a number of years.

"Unfortunately, it takes a long time to write up my findings because time is limited and I am a firm believer that teaching and these supervision at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, should take precedence over my own research. Students' academic progress is definitely more important than my research. After all, I have always felt it to be a privilege and an honour to be entrusted to teach so many thousands of students. But as you very well know, privileges and responsibilities go in tandem and I consider it my duty to ensure that their degree is a valued asset which enables them to translate all their dreams and aspirations into reality and to be worthy ambassadors of the Department of English and of the University of Malta," she says.

"For a multitude of reasons, not every academic at our University enjoys the same support for research. But one might perhaps find ways whereby the best, and the more enthusiastic of students, are rewarded financially if they dedicate some time to assist in our research. This system is very common in universities in Europe. I often ask myself: why not in Malta too?" ■