

# DEFYING THE MONOLINGUAL MINDSET - MALTESE AS A LANGUAGE OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING

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In Malta, Maltese and English have shared the status of co-official languages for many years. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of English global dominance, the Maltese language is facing multifaceted challenges. These complexities are exacerbated by the relatively small number of speakers of Maltese and by the island's recent migration patterns and demographic shifts. Despite the undeniable instrumental value of English, Maltese remains a pillar of national identity. Spoken by the vast majority of the population it is deeply ingrained in the nation's essence, and signifies belonging in ways no other language could capture. This paper underscores the urgency of addressing a number of key issues to preserve Maltese, particularly in familiar, social, and informal settings. It advocates for the strengthening of Malta's bilingual tradition, in which Maltese represents a vital cultural heritage, the legacy of which is to be protected amid the challenges posed by English. By recognizing the intrinsic value of Maltese within the nation's fabric, efforts can be directed toward its preservation, fostering a future where the Maltese identity thrives despite the pressures of global linguistic shifts.

## **1. Introduction**

The Maltese language has over one thousand years of history and today holds a strong position in relation to prestige and status, safeguarded by the Constitution of Malta (Article 5)<sup>1</sup> which recognises Maltese as the national language while giving English co-official status. Other legislation and policy documents regulating language skills and language use, such as the

1 Constitution of Malta (1964). <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5550.html>.

Language Act<sup>2</sup>, further strengthen the position of Maltese, combined with the fact of it being, since Malta's accession in 2004, an official language of the European Union. As amply discussed in the linguistic and philological studies conducted by Brincat (2000; 2004; 2011 & 2021) on the millennial history of Maltese, the language has developed over the years as a result of contact with other languages, namely Arabic, Sicilian, Italian and English. With a speaker population counting just a few hundred thousand, many consider the Maltese language as a case of particular evolvment, a miraculous survival against all odds.

Maltese is today a central part of the people's identity as a nation. It is the language that prevails in domains such as politics, law courts, the church and the media (radio and television) (Camilleri Grima, 2021). In a survey conducted by the National Council for the Maltese language and the University of Malta in collaboration with the National Statistics Office entitled *The State of the Maltese Language* (2021)<sup>3</sup>, 97% of Maltese citizens aged between 18 and 80 consider Maltese as their first and preferred language. The result is consistent with trends that were found in other surveys and studies carried out in the last few years (cf. survey conducted by *MaltaToday*, 2018)<sup>4</sup> and with the most recent national survey *The State of the Maltese Nation* (Marmarà & Bondi, 2022) which indicates that 81.6% of the Maltese population considers Maltese as their primary language, in contrast to 1.6% for English. 16% consider both languages simultaneously as their primary languages. While living in a bilingual country means also being frequently exposed to English, Maltese people clearly consider the Maltese language important and useful showing a strong predominant role of Maltese over English particularly in the spoken modality. This somewhat means that in spite of a linguistic situation which is anything but simple, the relevance and importance of Maltese does not really come up for questioning since amongst the Maltese people the most widely-spoken language is undoubtedly Maltese, while the use of English is still mostly linked to the passive skills, reading and listening (Brincat 2021, p. 422).

- 2 Chapter 470, Maltese Language Act, ACT V of 2004, National Legislation Malta <https://www.eui.eu/Projects/InternationalArtHeritageLaw/Documents/NationalLegislation/Malta/Chapt470.pdf>
- 3 <https://kunsillmalti.gov.mt/hidma/stharrignazzjonali/>
- 4 [https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/data\\_and\\_surveys/86807/maltatoday\\_survey\\_bilingual\\_malta\\_maltese\\_spoken\\_language\\_of\\_choice](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/data_and_surveys/86807/maltatoday_survey_bilingual_malta_maltese_spoken_language_of_choice)

## 2. Local migration trends

A look at the Maltese history reveals how considerable demographic movements set in motion deep changes across all aspects of life on the island, notably its language. Considering this historical context, the demographic movements occurring in Malta over the past decade are poised to have a substantial impact as well. Some recent census data on population and housing published by the National Statistics Office (NSO, 2023) provides a detailed insight into Malta's growing foreign population. There are now over 115,000 non-Maltese nationals in Malta, translating into 22% of the total population. This figure stood at a little over 20,000 people in 2011 (under 5%). It is worth noting that 72% of non-Maltese nationals are between the ages of 20 and 50 while only 39% of Maltese nationals are within this age group. Amongst the strongest pull factors contributing to such local migration trends are recent economic developments and low unemployment rates. While for years the largest population of non-Maltese was made up of EU nationals, in recent years Malta has seen an increase in the number of non-EU nationals. According to the latest NSO Census (2023), the highest number of non-natives living in Malta are British. These are closely followed by Italians who until recently represented the largest population of foreigners in the Maltese workforce, attracted to the island mainly due to geographical proximity, and the desire to live and work in an anglophone context (Caruana, 2022). Amongst other common nationalities are Indians<sup>5</sup>, Filipinos, Serbians, Australians, Libyans, Russians and Bulgarians (NSO, 2023). The presence of this needed workforce was and still is key in increasing the productive capacity of the Maltese economy, in a country with an aging population and negative population growth, with a shortage of workers in the medical and technology sectors, and the construction, care and hospitality industries, among others.

As has happened in the past throughout the history of the Maltese language, one would presume the settlement of newcomers and their children will bring about a new linguistic situation in Malta in the coming years, the effects of which are still not being researched or accounted for.

5 Recent unpublished statistical data indicates that in May 2023, the highest number of gainfully occupied migrants in Malta were Indians (12,453) followed by Italians (11,418). This data was presented by *Jobsplus* during the *Merhba Bik? Malta: Experiences of contemporary migration* conference, held at the University of Malta Valletta Campus on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2023.

A multicultural context leads to experiencing new enriching, significant exchanges brought about by 'forced' cultural and linguistic co-existence. Malta is not new to this mixture of cultures and languages and has a long history of multilingualism. In discussing the survival of the language under the Order of the Knights, for example, Brincat (2021) explains the running of this multinational organisation, with its seven effective languages, which never made it possible for any one single language to obtain an indisputable predominance. In such a context, Maltese continued to survive and even develop. But alas, progress in education and technology means that we are now living in an interconnected globalised world, with English acting as a *lingua franca*, a common language adopted by speakers of different native languages.

### **3. English as a global and local language**

English has gained a dominant position of power as a result of globalisation in recent years. Its unprecedented spread and far-reaching effects on global and local politics, economics, media and education have made the economic value of English undeniable. Indeed, throughout the years Malta has built a successful industry of English language schools and thrived on the fact that the island is bilingual, having both Maltese and English as official languages.

Spoken by a quarter of the world's population, English is becoming increasingly detached from any particular nation (Salomone, 2022). Today, fluency, or even just proficiency, in English becomes a fundamental tool for job and economic mobility and provides access to global markets, audiences, and conversations. As a result, together with its economic growth and employment opportunities, the fact that Malta is bilingual has become a major pull factor attracting many to relocate and settle with their families. Anyone with basic proficiency in English can access most of the essential services offered in Malta such as health and education. Indeed, the fact that education can be accessed in English is an added privilege for many parents whose children enter the Maltese educational system. Even those who intend to stay in Malta for a definite period of time acknowledge the benefit and economic value of having their children learn English as a means to access education, an asset for their future in a rapidly globalised world

dominated by technology, where people, information and economies are increasingly in contact. In addition, the use of English in higher education institutions means an opening to a number of opportunities locally but also beyond Malta, should they decide to relocate to a different country after a few years.

#### **4. Defining the deficit**

Language serves as a fundamental component of one's identity, shaping cultural affiliations and personal connections. It embodies heritage, traditions and societal values. People identify with their language, finding a sense of belonging and shared understanding within their linguistic community. Research by sociolinguists like Fishman (1991) emphasizes that language is not just a tool for communication: it reflects social contexts, and affects how people are perceived by others. Language, therefore, stands as a profound symbol of identity, fostering a sense of pride and belonging within a larger community.

The Maltese language is an integral part of its people's identity, ingrained in their culture and spoken by the absolute majority of the Maltese population. This is why those seeking to truly integrate and build meaningful relationships with locals, soon realise that English is not enough. Proficiency in Maltese, the country's prevailing language in domains such as the family, politics, law, religion and the media, improves the livelihoods of those living in Malta, enables them to be aware of their rights and encourages participation in civil society. It also increases their activity and competitiveness in the labour market, giving them the opportunity to work in the public sector and to pursue their studies at tertiary level. Furthermore, learning the language spoken in the new country, if successfully achieved, enables people "to become aware of differences in cultures, as well as to construct their own hybrid culture that enables them to negotiate both cultural systems" (García 2009, p. 101). The process of language acquisition is transformative because it demands adaptability, resilience, and a willingness to step outside one's comfort zone, qualities that become integral parts of one's identity (Dörnyei, 2014).

A shared language creates a common identity and understanding, fostering cooperation in local initiatives, openness to new experiences and

personal growth. Furthermore, clear communication and strong language skills empower individuals, providing them with a voice. This is precisely why the opportunity to acquire a proficient command of the national language should be extended to all residents of Malta, regardless of their origin.

### **5. The *I Belong* programme**

In 2017, as part of its Integration=Belonging: Migrant Integration Strategy & Action Plan (Vision 2020), Malta introduced its first ever integration programme for migrants who were already living and working in Malta. The programme, called *I Belong*, includes a cultural and a Maltese language component, and is part-requirement for non-EU nationals who wish to apply for long-term residence status<sup>6</sup>. The duration of the Maltese component is of approximately 70 hrs of language classes, 20 hours of which being delivered during Stage 1 of the course and the remaining 50 hours delivered during Stage 2. So far, 774 non-EU nationals living in Malta have successfully graduated from the Stage 2 Maltese language integration course<sup>7</sup>.

In a recent study with a number of adult migrants following the Maltese language Stage 2 integration programme (Gauci & Vella, 2022), participants declared that their overall experience of the programme was positive. Many of them expressed how their initial interest in the Maltese language, driven by the necessity to apply for long-term residence in Malta, evolved into a genuine motivation to understand better the Maltese language and way of life as the course progressed. Learners participating in the study agree unanimously on the positive effects brought about from speaking and understanding the Maltese language. Proficiency in Maltese allows them to perform better on the job because it helps them to understand their patients or to communicate more efficiently with clients. It also makes them feel more confident and generally more aware of what is happening around them, while allowing them to be involved in conversations and interactions with locals. Moreover, Maltese people are visibly more open

6 Constitution of Malta (1964), Legal notice 278 of 2006, as amended by Legal Notices 370 of 2010, 197 of 2014 and 366 of 2015 of subsidiary legislation 217.05

7 As per 28th September 2023. Data provided by the Human Rights Directorate via private correspondence.

and friendlier to them and appear appreciative of their efforts to speak the language. While lamenting the brevity of the Maltese course, participants explained how as the course progressed they increased their interactions with people in the larger community. Speaking about the people he meets in a shop or on the street, one of the participants said: “When we speak Maltese with them, they become friendlier with us because they see that we are trying” (Gauci & Vella 2022, p. 189).

Participants also speak about the challenge of learning Maltese in bilingual Malta and report varied levels of interaction within the Maltese community. This in turn shows how their exposure to and need to learn the Maltese language vary and are influenced by one’s locality of residence, type of employment, and reliance on the English language. The narratives of the adult migrants learning the Maltese language revealed an awareness of their developing “partial competences”. Although their productive and receptive skills or accuracy and fluency were, in many cases, considerably out of balance, learners spoke about how they were making use of all their linguistic abilities to enable effective communication. In this sense, the study shows how the *I Belong* course helps participants learn Maltese while supporting them in the complex but enriching endeavour of becoming plurilingual, with plurilingualism being “rooted in a dynamic and strategic process of noticing, meaning-making, purposeful use of (linguistic) resources, reflection, and openness to linguistic and cultural diversity” (Piccardo 2018, p. 220).

## **6. School education policies and Maltese as a foreign language**

Within the local bilingual education system, Maltese has always held an important place as a medium of instruction and serves as a scaffold to learn English and other subjects (Camilleri Grima, 2018). Research shows that the Maltese-speaking part of the student population would not benefit from an exclusive use of English in the classroom (Farrugia, 2009; Ventura, 2016; Zerafa, 2016). Therefore, it is important for Maltese-speaking children to have access to education through Maltese, alongside English, with continued use of codeswitching as a medium of instruction (Camilleri Grima, 2018). But in an educational system that is already bilingual, balancing the demands and needs of two linguistic

communities becomes even more challenging with the arrival of new communities speaking a variety of different languages (Camilleri Grima, 2013). In such contexts and unless adequately trained, teachers struggle to deal with multilingualism and to teach children whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds are different from their own (Caruana et al., 2019). What makes bilingual education complex is that one has to think not only of pedagogy, approaches, and methodology, but also of how to allocate, arrange and use the two or more languages of instruction. Because schools are most often under the influence of the state, issues of the different degrees of power of different languages are most important to consider in any bilingual education system (García 2009, p. 290).

In Malta, students need to develop literacy skills in both Maltese and English to be able to master the curriculum effectively (Ministry for Education, 2021). To this end, all students are to be given the opportunity to develop their competences in Maltese and English, while recognising the presence of multilingual literacies of children and their parents. A number of local policy documents outline strategies for parents, educators, senior management teams and teacher educators to ensure that all children are provided with opportunities to develop bilingualism in Maltese and English, such as the Language Policy for the Early Years (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016) and for the Junior Years (Vella et al., 2022), drawn up following the recommendations outlined in the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012). In the latter document, Maltese is regarded as the main mother tongue, whilst English as the second language of most pupils but one which also “provides access to a near-universal knowledge and culture”. Expectations for each language are, however, identical:

Communication in languages is the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form. This linguistic fluency and competence is expected in both the mother tongue (L1) and the second language (L2), which in the Maltese context generally refer to Maltese and English respectively (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012, p. 34).

The existing National Curriculum Framework lacks specific guidance on code-switching or language allocation. In contrast, the more recent policy documents formerly mentioned appear to recognize the complexity of the issue, granting educators greater flexibility in decisions

regarding the allocation, arrangement, and use of languages in bilingual classrooms. While schools are to be empowered to take decisions according to their particular context, educators need more professional development training on how to adopt strategies that favour the use of English and Maltese in specific subjects, or at specific times. These are important decisions which must be based on the individual needs of the child but with the ultimate aim of helping students develop balanced Maltese-English bilingualism.

A National policy for the teaching of Maltese as a foreign language (MFL/MLB – *Malti bhala lingwa barranija*) was launched in 2019, giving the possibility to all non-Maltese students within the education system to learn this subject at some level (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019). The measure, revolutionary in a way considering that up to a few years ago Maltese was a language learnt and studied almost exclusively by locals, was introduced as one that would help strengthen the Maltese language and address a gap within the system. The decision to introduce Maltese as a foreign language as a subject at MATSEC (Malta Qualification Framework, Level 3) for students in compulsory education in Malta was initially controversial and highly debated by a number of academics<sup>8</sup> whose concerns were heavily linked to eligibility criteria and logistics. Having balanced bilingualism as its ultimate goal, the policy advocates for Maltese to be given prominence in signage, websites, brochures, concerts, meetings and celebrations; for educators who are able to communicate with students and parents in both Maltese and English; and for communication between administration, educators and home also to be in both official languages. No student, in any school in Malta and Gozo who follows the National Curriculum, and for any reason whatsoever, should be exempted from Maltese lessons and assessment of their knowledge of the language (Ministry for Education and Employment 2019, pp. 7-8). While the policy should be binding on all schools following the National Curriculum Framework and their students, unfortunately “it is quite possible for practitioners to ignore official policies or simply abide by those parts of them which are merely applicable to their situations or interests” (Caruana & Santipolo 2021, p. 136). In fact, at times local school administrators and practitioners seem oblivious of language policies and while focusing on their day-to-day

8 *Academics are very sceptical of Ministry's Maltese as a Foreign Language plans*, Times of Malta, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2018 <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/academics-are-very-sceptical-of-ministrys-maltese.680254>

duties choose to rely solely on the use of English as determined by their immediate needs.

One of the advantages of this policy lies in its alignment with the principles of bilingualism *and* plurilingualism. Nonetheless, the actual linguistic diversity present in our schools remains somewhat concealed, and students seldom have opportunities to showcase or utilize the languages they bring with them to school. Notwithstanding Council of Europe recommendations (Council of Europe 2001; 2020), the model currently adopted in Malta seems to reflect the one still in use in many other European countries, whereby only the language/languages of instruction are really being sustained (Scaglione & Caruana, 2016). This is barely conducive to an effective “integration” of the linguistic diversity brought about by the many languages effectively present in the classroom. At the local level, this situation may arise from a deficiency in teacher training to effectively tailor their instructional methods to meet the requirements of migrant students (Caruana et al., 2019). Alternatively, it may stem from a need for greater teacher autonomy in determining classroom language approaches and practices (Camenzuli et al., 2023).

## **7. The challenges of globalisation for the Maltese language**

As previously discussed, recent studies show that Maltese is the preferred language among Maltese nationals. However, the global ascendancy of English as a dominant language is having a significant impact on languages worldwide. This phenomenon poses a particular challenge in the Maltese context, where English holds the status of an official language. The challenge is exacerbated by the fact that the Maltese-speaking population comprises only half a million people. In domains like information technology, higher education, research, and the service sector, the utilization of the Maltese language faces growing challenges stemming from technological advancements, international collaboration, and the rising presence of international personnel, especially within the local retail, healthcare, caregiving, and hospitality industries. This leads us to a sociolinguistic situation which is very different from what it was only a few years ago, when English in Malta was simply a tool of communication at an international level but much less so at a national level, at least as a spoken language.

Three are the issues that require immediate attention if we want to preserve the present position of Maltese, especially in the family, social and informal situations, where it has survived for over a thousand years:

### **7.1 Keeping up with technological innovations**

In order for Maltese speakers to consider their language useful and efficient, the development of language technology and terminology is a priority. For any language to thrive in today's technological world, the availability of linguistic resources such as dictionaries, databases, corpora, and linguistic applications (e.g. speech synthesis, speech recognition and machine translation) are vital. In addition, supporting the creation and use of Maltese-language terminology in all fields of research, life and society, encourages cooperation between professionals, translators and linguists, so that the terminology is updated in a collaborative manner and circulated promptly.

The development of technologies in Maltese strengthens the vitality and competitiveness of Maltese in a fast-developing, increasingly-digital, English-dominated world and ensures that it keeps up the pace of scientific and technological progress. The younger generation is increasingly dependent on technology and unfortunately our children access it almost exclusively via the English medium. While acknowledging the incessant work being conducted by entities such as *il-Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ilsien Malti*<sup>9</sup>, the University of Malta's Department of Maltese, the Faculty of Education and the Institute of Linguistics in this regard, supporting the development of innovative and attractive language resources and language-learning applications, while ensuring the availability of the most widespread software applications in Maltese, remains an urgent priority.

### **7.2 Prestige and positive attitudes towards Maltese**

In order to strengthen the status and prestige of Maltese, it is necessary to constantly monitor the relevant legislation which regulates language issues, to popularise and encourage the use and learning of, as well as research into, the Maltese language, and to give importance to Maltese as a vehicle of identity. The role of Maltese families to ensure its intergenerational transmission is crucial in this respect, considering an increased interest in the use of English by the younger generation of parents (Brincat 2021, p. 425)

9 <https://kunsillmalti.gov.mt/>

and within the language ideologies adopted by Maltese families (Formosa & Little, 2022). In a study which investigates Maltese learners' attitudes and ideologies towards the use of Maltese and English in Malta, Vella (2019) shows how the language spoken at home, particularly to the mother, and at school highly influenced children's language attitudes and ideologies. According to Vella (2019), language attitudes are also heavily shaped by age and school sector in Malta. In her study, Maltese is predominantly used by the older participants, while English is more prevalent amongst the younger groups who demonstrate more positive attitudes towards English. This may possibly be the result of the aforementioned strong presence of English as a vehicle for learning and entertainment amongst an increasingly technology dependant generation.

### ***7.3 Quality provision of Maltese language learning opportunities for non-Maltese native speakers***

Proficiency in Maltese contributes to the participation and social activity of those who seek long term residence in Malta, promotes their integration, and strengthens their competitiveness in society and in the labour market. Promoting equal opportunities in language learning reduces inequalities by ensuring that everyone has the language skills they need to succeed. However, it is important not just to make such opportunities available, but also to create a need, to make it attractive to learn the language. The *I Belong* course is a step in the right direction, but it is solely a requirement for non-EU nationals who wish to apply for long term residence in Malta, leaving EU nationals (Italians, for example, constitute a large percentage of the Maltese workforce) with no incentive to learn the language. Binding private and public employers to a language policy would be a good start. Many of them would be ready to support their employees' schedule in a manner that accommodates further learning, especially if this comes in the form of government incentives for those who offer language courses, and encourage or facilitate their employees' acquisition of Maltese particularly when expected to render a service to locals. The efforts of non-Maltese nationals who study the Maltese language should be recognised and acknowledged through work-related incentives, and better opportunities in education and the labour market for those who speak the language. After all, the Maltese language forms an integral part of the Maltese identity, and a person with a strong identity believes in his/her ability to influence the

development of the country, placing a higher value on their own living, wellbeing and natural environment through an inclusive system based on shared values.

## 8. Conclusion

While the instrumental value of being proficient in English is undisputable, Malta has a long-standing successful history of bilingualism which needs to be strengthened and sustained. There is a strong societal desire to maintain balanced Maltese-English bilingualism, as well as an understanding that this is both an ideological as well as a linguistic matter (Council of Europe 2015, p. 35). The functioning, vitality and status of Maltese in all spheres of society is further ensured through legislation and monitoring that the Maltese linguistic landscape (both visual and auditory) is bilingual - Maltese and English. In addition, material support must be provided to Maltese-language culture, including literature, theatre, film, singing, folklore, journalism and translations into and from Maltese. Maltese is a central part of the people's identity as a nation, our one and only national language. In order to ensure its functioning as the primary language in all areas of life for many years to come, we must preserve and strengthen its status and prestige by means of concrete policies and legislation that secure the opportunity for everyone to learn and use Maltese in Malta while valuing proficiency in English and other languages.

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