

From Russian to Maltese: Lessons in Linguistics with Yana Psaila

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As one of Malta's most versatile translators, Yana Psaila is constantly breaking linguistic barriers. Through her translations of Maltese and Russian literary texts, Yana has managed to bring language accessibility to new heights and caters to a diverse niche of speakers with a passion for Maltese language, history, and culture.

If you walk across the cobbled streets of Valletta or down the Sliema promenade, you will hear the melodies of various languages milling through the sea-swept air. As a nation with a sizable expat community, numerous multilingual people call Malta home, and hearing a cacophony of languages has become part and parcel of everyday life. Still, the Maltese language itself remains a vital part of the social fabric and can serve as a tool for foreigners to assimilate and integrate into Maltese society. Balancing the linguistic rhythm of any language can be a challenge, but for linguist and translator Yana Psaila, finding this middle ground is part of her daily routine. Through her work translating Maltese and Russian literature, Yana brings language to new audiences and makes it more accessible for people to learn in their native tongue. As a pioneer in translation from Slavic languages to Maltese, Yana's work has fostered Malta's ties to Slavic nations and, in doing so, propelled our language to new heights.

WHO IS YANA PSAILA?

Yana Psaila is a published poet, literary translator, and linguist with a passion for connecting people through language. She was born in Siberia and graduated from Tomsk State University as a linguist, lecturing in 'Foreign Languages and Cultures Teaching Theory and Methodology' before moving to Malta in 2004 and falling in love with the Maltese

language. For Yana, learning Maltese was instrumental in helping her assimilate into Maltese society, and from day one, she began immersing herself in the language. She initially used English to build her understanding of Maltese and worked through standard English-to-Maltese language books until she felt confident enough to experiment with literary translation. Yana then began studying Maltese literature, poetry, drama, and linguistics, and through her own initiative, passed her O-levels and A-levels in Maltese as a Native language. From there, she started translating Maltese novels into Russian and launched her career as a proponent of the Maltese language.

YANA'S WORK AND MISSION

Over the last 10 years, Yana has published numerous linguistic texts that are the first of their kind. She has translated over 200 literary works from Maltese to Russian and from Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Polish into Maltese. From translating the poetry of Vysotsky, Puskin, and Dun Karm Psaila to translating the beloved novel *Il-Hajja Sigrieta tan-Nanna Ġenoveffa* (The Secret Life of Nanna Genoveffa) by Trevor Zahra into Russian, Yana's portfolio also includes a Maltese-Russian anthology of 43 modern novels by 35 Maltese writers and her own collection of Maltese poetry, entitled *L-Imħabba Tal-Istilla Polari* (Love of the Polar Star). ◀

She composed the first Maltese-to-Russian and Russian-to-Maltese phrasebooks, which allow speakers to learn the language through their native tongue. 'I realised there weren't any phrasebooks like this,' Yana recounts, 'and Russian-speaking visitors and residents in Malta, by means of language, can better understand the culture of the country, which is important to becoming part of society.' Yana's phrasebooks include grammar rules, common vocabulary, and sentence structure, providing a succinct overview of both Russian and Maltese. Since nearly 200 million people around the world speak Russian and the language itself shares its roots with other Slavic tongues, Yana's phrasebooks provide easier access to the Maltese language for a vast range of people.

Yana is also an academic researcher, and her peer review articles, published in scientific journals indexed in Web of Science, Scopus, and other databases, are regularly cited in theses. Her publications provide academic commentary on the history of Maltese literature and the cultural elements hidden within a text. Through her connections with linguistic and literary realms across Europe, Yana participates in international projects as a representative of the Maltese language; a poetry collection of Dun Karm Psaila translated into Russian will soon be published in Estonia. This project was launched by the National Book Council of Malta. Yana is not only one of the nation's most notable female translators, she is also part of the Association of Maltese Poets, *Akkademja tal-Malti*, and the *L-Għaqda tal-Malti - Università*. Yana claims that the purpose of her work is to bring people to share cultural history through the melody of language. 'I want to connect different people, cultures, and nations through language,' Yana says. 'By translating the literature from different Slavic languages, I can represent those countries' literature here in Malta and vice versa, so there is visibility. I want to contribute more and make language more accessible.'

THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATION AND ITS CHALLENGES

Literary translation is intricate and fraught with challenges; even a seasoned translator like Yana faces her own unique limitations when it comes to translating. 'Each language has cultural markers that are particular to each country,' she explains. These markers, influenced by historical, cultural, and social context, set languages apart. For Yana, Maltese names and phenomena associated with Maltese religious feasts are particularly challenging because of the cultural and religious differences between Malta and Slavic countries. Another complication is the literary devices that are prevalent in each culture's storytelling. For example, Slavic poetry utilises rhyme to great effect; however, maintaining that melodic integrity is not always easy when translating between languages.

When in doubt, Yana falls back on linguistic theory to guide her work and considers the emotional response her translation



Yana Psaila
Photo by Ray Attard

will have on the reader. However, sometimes an exchange has to be made to retain the integrity of the poem. 'I prioritise meaning and understanding over rhyme or device.' While Yana fights to the very end to maintain the rhythm and rhyme of a poem and utilises every linguistic method in her toolbox, sometimes the rhyme is sacrificed to ensure that the original poem's meaning is securely portrayed. When it comes to metaphorical devices, Yana relates that oftentimes a precise equivalent to the expressions or idioms can be found. 'There may be differing imagery between the expressions,' Yana explains, 'but the meaning behind them portrays the same idea.'

Yana strives to hold her translations accountable and always seeks feedback on her work to check how her translations are impacting the reader. However, locating another linguist with a similar proficiency level in Maltese and Slavic languages is challenging. So Yana discovered a unique way to test the integrity of her work. With the help of postgraduate students at the University of Malta's Department of Translation, Terminology, and Interpreting Studies, Yana conducted research to evaluate the impact of Russian-to-Maltese translated poems on audiences, giving her vital feedback on the influence of her work. 'There are no specialists who know Maltese and Russian on an equal level,' Yana says, 'so there is no one who can evaluate the impact of my own linguistic work. This experiment helped me confirm how my translations are impacting the reader.'

HOW YANA'S WORK IMPACTS MALTA

Through her advocacy for the Maltese language, Yana has connected Malta to a number of Slavic countries and acts as a representative of both Slavic and Maltese languages. But most importantly, Yana's work supports the appreciation of language and culture, and helps people integrate into their communities. Through her work and constant dedication to sharing languages, Yana fulfils her mission of connecting people through language and promoting the languages and literature that move her. However, Yana always strives to contribute more. She hopes to complete studies leading to a Ph.D. thesis and bring more awareness to Maltese and Slavic literature and language, foster continual connections between people, cultures, and nations, and use language as a way to share our stories. 