

OPINIONS AND LETTERS

Maltese risks digital extinction



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“Keeep fighting for the language... it's important.” This message, communicated to me by the Times of Malta's editor-in-chief, Herman Grech, echoes deeply with me. I've spent decades committed to this minority language as both a profession and a calling.

Maltese is my passion, my identity and my mission. Writing in English here underscores the challenge that, while Maltese is central to my identity, it's increasingly being sidelined in the digital and media context dominated by English.

Maltese isn't an insignificant or irrelevant language. It's spoken by over half a million people and is a unique linguistic gem, both historically and structurally. It's the only Semitic language written in the Latin script and the only Semitic language that's an official language of the European Union. Despite this, Maltese is already endangered in the digital world.

Though it's still spoken widely across Malta, the language is virtually absent from the tools and platforms that shape the lives of our younger generations. Phones, smart assistants, video games, learning apps and even the films and shows they watch, all speak English. If a language is unusable in these spaces, it becomes invisible. And invisibility, in today's tech-centric world, is a precursor to extinction. This is not just my concern; scientific research backs it up.

The Digital Language Diversity Project, which was funded by the European Commission, classified Maltese as “weak” in terms of digital presence. The study evaluated over 30 minority European languages and found that many, including Maltese, lacked the basic tools for survival in the digital realm such as spellcheckers, speech recognition and machine translation.

While major languages like English, Spanish and Chinese are well-supported by language



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technologies, minority languages are often left out. Furthermore, UNESCO's 2021 World Report of Languages: Towards a Global Assessment Framework for Linguistic Diversity emphasised that digital neglect is accelerating language decline globally. When a language is unavailable in search engines, online learning, or AI-driven platforms, young speakers begin to subconsciously associate it with the past and not the future.

Some might still brush off technology as a frivolous distraction. But let's be clear: tech tools aren't toys. They're crucial language environments. They shape how we think, speak and learn. If Maltese doesn't live inside the devices that children grow up with, it'll be viewed as outdated and a school subject rather than a living, breathing language.

That's why I've been personally involved in contributing educational content in Maltese through digital means, including an ongoing Erasmus+ project focusing on Augmented Reality. Although I have already researched the importance of Virtual Reality (VR) in Maltese language

learning, I currently lack the funding and technical expertise needed to develop full VR-based educational games designed to teach Maltese vocabulary and grammar in a playful, immersive way.

These tools allow children to experience the language as an exciting part of their digital world, rather than as a chore.

Other countries have led the way. Take Iceland, where the government funded the development of speech technologies to ensure Icelandic

wouldn't be pushed aside by English in smart devices. Or Wales, which created Welsh-language versions of Microsoft tools and virtual assistants to keep the language alive digitally. We need the same vision and urgency here.

Creating digital tools for Maltese isn't just a technical challenge. It's a national responsibility. It requires collaboration between educators, technologists, policymakers and the wider public. And, yes, it requires funding.

While some progress has been made, developing robust and widely accessible language resources like speech-to-text systems, grammar checkers and Maltese-language AI still require significant expertise, time and infrastructure. Projects like the Maltese Language Resource Server hosted by the University of Malta are already laying the groundwork. But much more is needed, especially tools that are accessible to everyone.

We also need to invest in VR games in Maltese and ensure that more films and streaming content are either produced in Maltese or, at least,

offered with Maltese subtitles. If Maltese is not present in the media and digital formats that young people use every day, it risks being seen as outdated or secondary.

Maltese is not dying but it is vulnerable. Whether we like it or not, the digital world is where the future of Maltese will be decided. We need to move beyond pride and nostalgia and toward concrete action.

That means ensuring Maltese is part of every app, every platform and every technological advancement we adopt.

So, yes, Herman, I'll keep fighting for the Maltese language because this is not just a linguistic issue. It's a question of cultural survival. It's about whether our children and their children will be able to use Maltese in their daily lives and not just remember it as something tucked away on a shelf, preserved like a relic of the past.

Maltese must live, breathe and evolve, especially in the digital spaces where the future is being shaped.

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