

Editorial:

The Demise of Gozitan Dialects

There is no doubt that after skin colour, dialect is the most immediate marker of social identity. Being able to speak fluently in the dominant dialect has been a mark of belonging to the ruling class, an elitist characteristic sought by all within the community. Whether it is Oxford English or Maltese Slemis makes no difference to the kudos associated with ability to speak the accepted dialect.

Those born in outlying areas, distant from this linguistic epicentre, often find themselves disadvantaged. In spite of the relative insignificance of linguistic differences between dialects, and in spite of the fact that the choice of the dominant dialect happens to be a pure co-incidence implying no intrinsic superiority, there is nonetheless a very real psychological disadvantage in being seen as belonging to the village class and ousted from the class of the '*puliti*'.

Such was the situation relating to Gozitan dialects for several generations. Time was when villagers in Gozo could be instantly recognised as belonging to a specific village as soon as they opened their mouth. A distance of a couple of kilometres was sufficient to establish distinct and distinguishable dialectal characteristics. It was also a fact that many made considerable efforts to conceal this characteristic as soon as they crossed *il-Fliegi* and arrived in Malta.

This in itself implied an inferiority complex, an acceptance of the fact that a different dialect implies a societal inferiority. It is curious to note that this feeling was more noticeable in those hoping to be included within the higher strata of society than in those who had no such perspectives: Students, businessmen, politicians, professional people all felt the need to conform and use standard Maltese dialect when in Malta, only to revert back to their village dialect as soon as they came back to Gozo.

How things have changed over the past generation! With increasing mobility, the isolation of one village from another has all but disappeared and with it the tendency to develop a unique dialect. It is no longer possible to identify anyone's locality from their speech, a characteristic retained only by the oldest parishioners who are fast disappearing. Moreover the intermixing now possible between people of all age groups, and their exposure to the levelling influence of radio and television, has now ensured that difference in dialects have all but disappeared.

Is this loss to be mourned and regretted as one of those casualties associated with modern development? There is no doubt that loss of dialects represents an impoverishment of language. Language learned from radio and television with its efforts to translate foreign news into the vernacular, often results in a contraction of vocabulary and loss of concepts. With the necessary introduction of a plethora of foreign words, particularly in the field of technology, there seems to be a marked loss of innate vocabulary which is found to be redundant and unnecessary. But it is the variety of dialect which seems to bear the burden of this intrusion of foreignness within our community.

It is therefore of considerable significance to note events like the *Djaletti Festival*, organised by NGO *VersAgħtini Il-Kelma Maltija* which was held in September at Munxar, where speakers from various villages spoke or sang using their unique dialect. It is hoped that such events do not merely highlight a historical passing of a dying language, a sort of archaeological digging of dead verbiage, but a stimulus to give status to dialects so that they may be maintained indefinitely.