

## Editorial - Special Issue

### Maltese - a mature standard language

**Antoinette Camilleri Grima**  
University of Malta

In 2004 the Maltese language was proud to have found its place among the officially designated European Union languages. No small feat for a language spoken by less than half a million people, on an island-state that is just over 300 sq. km., and that has been dominated by major empires like the British. Over the last hundred years it has developed to a stage termed 'mature standard language'. Language standardisation refers to the historical process by which a speech community develops a particular dialect for use as a medium of discourse in science, education, administration and literature. In the case of Maltese, the process of standardisation was initiated within the literary and legal fields, supported by crucial developments in linguistics whereby dictionaries and grammars were produced, and finally recognised as an official and national language in the 1964 Independence Constitution. When Malta joined the European Union in 2004, Maltese became an official language of the EU, and as such carries out all the related tasks of translation and interpretation involving all the subjects under the sun.

The first calls for nationalisation of Malta and of the Maltese language were made during colonisation, by scholars like Ġ.F. Agius de Soldanis (1712-1770) and M.A. Vassalli (1764-1829). Under British rule, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century various historical and social events led to Maltese finding a rightful place in the domains of law and administration. The so called 'Language Question' at the time debated whether English or Italian should take precedence in official discourse, and in the end the Maltese language was declared official language together with English in 1934. At that point important linguistic developments were made which substantially enhanced the standardisation process through language elaboration and cultivation.

---

**Corresponding author:** antoinette.camilleri-grima@um.edu.mt

These were, among others, the establishment of a standard orthography, the publication of grammar books and books of idioms, proverbs and usage, the translation of the Bible, the publication of dictionaries and an abundance of literary works. Language standardisation is a normative process, and this role is nowhere better displayed and enacted than in education. The use of Maltese as a subject and a medium of instruction gives it the prestige that any standard language enjoys.

In view of this, it is with great pleasure that I edited this Special Issue of the MRER on issues related to Maltese language teaching because this is one more sign of how this numerically small language has flourished in more ways than one. This is the first time that a journal issue is dedicated specifically to Maltese pedagogical perspectives. Maltese has had a role to play in education in Malta since its inception, because the first language of the majority of the learners in public state education has always been Maltese, and teachers have successfully connected the subject matter with the learner via their first language. Furthermore, Maltese has been taught as a subject to introduce literacy and as a vehicle for reading and writing for over a hundred years. While in Malta we retain numerous dialectal varieties, largely identifiable on the basis of geographical borders, the standard language is well-established and acts as a superposed variety for dialect speakers. Standard Maltese is the only variety of Maltese taught in schools and it is undoubtedly the model presented to the foreign learner of Maltese.

The articles presented in this Issue represent various ramifications of the Maltese language in education. Two articles, by Sammut and Micallef, look at two different aspects of the teaching of Maltese in Early Childhood Education, namely the introduction to literacy and the use of drama as a vehicle for language learning. The article by Ungaro specifies issues in the teaching of grammar at Secondary level to native speakers; another one by Camilleri Grima attempts a study of the acquisition of Maltese as a foreign language. Farrugia's article tackles another important question, that of using Maltese as a medium of instruction, in this case in the teaching of mathematics. Maltese has not been immune to recent developments in education, and in fact Gatt's article discusses the introduction of ICT in Maltese language classrooms.

While in the area of Maltese in education we are able to draw on international research generally, for instance, that of relevance to the teaching of speaking and listening skills and to the writing process, and to issues related to intercultural competence and differentiated learning, there is still a very wide scope for research that is specific to the Maltese language, and that is grounded in the local context. For this reason, the articles presented in this Special Issue break new ground.

Sammut describes the two-pronged process of introducing literacy to Maltese children. On the one hand, she needed to take into consideration international approaches to literacy, and on the other she had to carry out a seminal exercise of identifying the relevant Maltese vocabulary and of organising it in pedagogically meaningful ways. After intense preparation she actually implemented the programme and evaluated it in a Year One classroom. Her endeavours can now serve as a useful stepping stone for further research.

Micallef explains how drama can be used to enhance multiple intelligences, and how it can thus be combined with Maltese language teaching in the Early Years. Once again, through this article, one can appreciate how the international literature is relevant to the teaching of Maltese, but at the same time how Maltese educators and researchers need to carry out their own enquiries. Maltese research can, in turn, enhance the pool of international results.

Ungaro tackles the teaching of the noun as part of the Maltese grammar syllabus at secondary school level. The Maltese language is classified as a mixed language, originating from Arabic and maintaining basic Semitic structures, while having been exposed to Romance languages for almost a thousand years and to English in the last century and a half, and having thus accrued layers of vocabulary and grammar that emanate from European languages. This article explains how traditional Maltese grammar still taught in schools has not been updated after modern linguistic research has come to light, and provides one model of how the noun as a part of speech should be presented in the classroom.

Camilleri Grima attempts an initial description of how foreign learners of Maltese perform on tasks requiring analysed and unanalysed knowledge of four verb forms. The performance of the advanced learners of Maltese is compared to that of native speakers on the same tasks and some important findings seem to emerge. Notwithstanding the fact that these advanced learners clearly had analysed knowledge of the 'perfett' and 'imperfett', when it came to production tasks they used the 'imperfett' twice as much as the native speakers, who generally preferred the 'perfett'. Furthermore, the progressive and restricted habitual forms were not yet acquired at this advanced stage of learning Maltese. These findings should be helpful to the teacher of foreign learners of Maltese.

Farrugia tackles another important area of concern for the Maltese language in education, that is, its use as a medium of instruction, where specific registers are required and are not widely used outside the classroom. This article discusses the creation of a standard Maltese mathematics register, the development of relevant mathematical terminology, and related grammatical structures. Farrugia concludes that careful consideration must be given to the

development of a Maltese mathematics register. She believes that through reflection and discussion language issues in the area of Maltese as a medium of instruction can be resolved.

Teachers of Maltese have not been immune to the recent implementation of ICT in classrooms across the board. Gatt describes some of the teachers' concerns that arose in the process, and provides examples of resources that could help the implementation of ICT in Maltese language teaching.

Faculty of Education  
2015