
A QUESTION OF THE ALPHABET

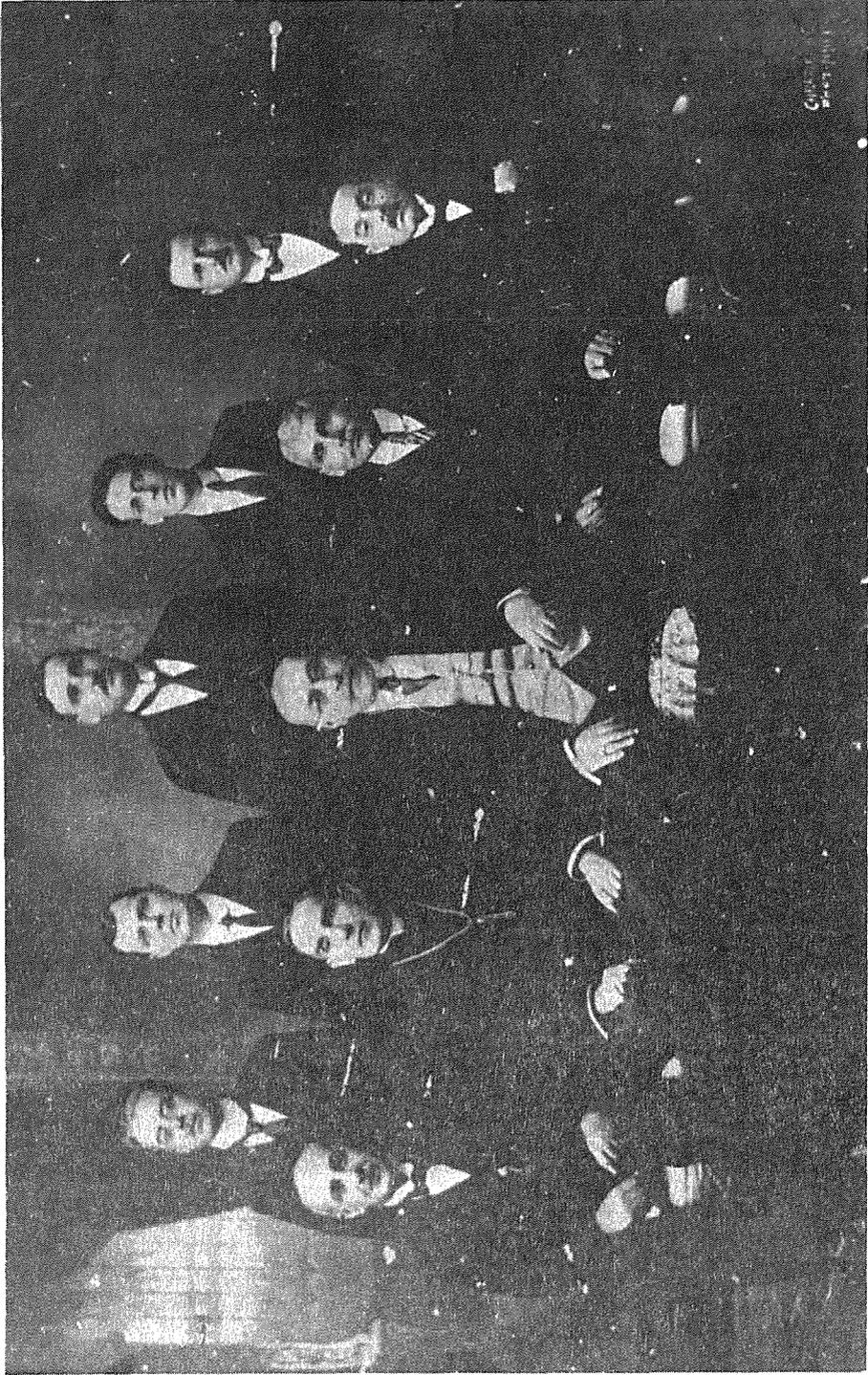
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Sir Thomas Maitland seriously challenged the old predominance of Italian when he gave official recognition to English. He initiated the Language Question¹ which escalated primarily into a rival battle for ascendancy between the adherents of the two languages. The Language Question evolved into a hot controversial issue characterized by strong political agitation and prejudice.² Many people became involved; in the heat of the moment those interested often lost their sense of balance and the issue complicated itself needlessly.

The low social, economic and educational level of the Maltese in the past often reflected official indifference and inactivity. One of the principal shortcomings in local education was the inability to establish a language for teaching purposes. The teaching of Maltese was not seriously considered; it was regarded by many as waste of time. However, the case for Maltese was advocated by a few supporters.

The lack of an accepted Maltese alphabet and a standard orthography created serious difficulties and hindered progress. So when in 1920 *l-Ghaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* was founded it took this matter in hand and gave it prime importance. On November 14 of that same year it appointed a Commission to study and devise the Maltese alphabet. This was one of the very first activities of the *Ghaqda*. The Commission's proposed draft of the alphabet was discussed at a general meeting held on 18 November 1921. It was approved and four days later the Secretary of the *Ghaqda*, F.S. Caruana, enclosed a specimen of the alphabet

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1. Pace P., *The Language Question, 1920-34, A critical edition of the relevant documents*, Vols. 1-4, M.A. thesis, 1975.
 2. On 12 September 1925: Giuseppe Pisani and forty-three other residents from Mellieħa complained by letter to the M.P.I. about the low standard of education attained by children in government elementary schools and also requested the introduction of Maltese reading in all elementary school classes *per una mezz'ora ad ogni secondo giorno*. Dr. A.V. Laferla, the Director of Elementary Schools, investigated and advised the Minister not to take further notice of the petition as these statements were unfounded. But on 11 October 1926 a similar letter was sent to the M.P.I. by Maria Attard and nine other Mellieħa residents. The Minister again rebutted the allegations made by parents in connection with the standard of proficiency of pupils in the Maltese language. The Minister said that children attending the government schools could read Maltese and were able to correspond with their people abroad. Replying to parents he said, "thirteen girls attending Standard Two take Maltese prayer books with them to church which they read with facility."
 - (a) Teaching of Maltese Language in Elementary Schools, File P.355/26, Giuseppe and others to M.P.I., 12.9.26.
 - (b) *ibid.*, Secretary M.P.I. to Giuseppe Pisani, 2 October 1926.
 - (c) *ibid.*, Secretary M.P.I. to Mrs. Maria Attard, 5 November 1926.This little incident, singled out from a long series of its kind, is reminiscent of past local political wranglings.



The Committee and the Commission of "L-Ghaqda tal-Kitteba tal-Malti" (1922). Standing from l. to r. Guzè Micallef, Rog. Cachia, A.M. Borg, F.S. Caruana and Guzè Micallef Goggi P.P. Sitting from l. to r. Guzè Darmanin Demajo P.L., Mons. Prof. K. Psaila, Kav. Guzè Muscat-Azzopardi B.M., P.E.P., P.L., Ganni Vassallo and Ninu Cremona.

to the Head of the Ministry, Joseph Howard³ and, requesting the co-operation of Government, he proposed that this alphabet be adopted in all Maltese publications. Caruana wrote, "The Commission's aims in devising a phonetic alphabet as advocated by the best scholars in oriental studies are simply to place the actual scripture of our vernacular on a fixed standard of its sounds which, so far, have been vaguely represented by capricious transcriptions borrowed from foreign orthoepy which is practically embarrassing and scientifically incorrect. It was expected that, if this alphabet was favourably accepted by those people who were anxious to promote the literary progress of the vernacular, the Society would make it its duty to publish the full report on the orthographical rules. These rules had already been set and compiled for the purpose of establishing a uniformity in Maltese writing among all writers and editors."

This letter was passed on to the Minister for Public Instruction, but no action was taken. In fact, in his letter of 5 December 1929,⁴ F.S. Caruana was still insisting with Government on the use of the *Għaqda's* alphabet in all official documents of a permanent nature. The problem was not settled before 1 January 1934 and ironically it had to be a Crown Government to give the Maltese alphabet and orthography official recognition. F.S. Caruana's correspondence of 5 December 1929 was referred to Ninu Cremona, who at that time was the editor of Government Maltese publications. Besides, Cremona was one of the members of the Commission devising the alphabet, a founder and a stalwart of the *Għaqda*. In spite of this, the secretary's letter did not meet Cremona's favour and approval, the theories he advocated and the advice which he gave to the Minister for Public Instruction, might have demoralized, frustrated and even alienated F.S. Caruana and the handful of Maltese enthusiasts of the time. But Ninu Cremona was beyond their suspicion, they might have not been unaware of the details of the long minute which he wrote to the Minister on 4 February 1930.⁵ I must state from the very start that I do not intend in anyway to put Cremona in a bad light nor to portray him as a turncoat who speaks one thing before his colleagues at the *Għaqda* and writes another in his capacity as a public official when confronting his Minister. It is true that the Minute is of a controversial nature and that he is at variance with his friends on the imposition of the official alphabet, but one should decide if all this was a matter of whether one should go at a certain pace or go faster.

Cremona said that since its institution on 14 November 1920, the *Għaqda's* aim was to fix a uniform orthography amongst writers in Maltese, and a Commission was set up for that purpose, but he believed that such an aim had not been achieved and the publication of *Tagħrif* had abortive results among writers, printers and editors in general. Cremona assisted by G. Vassallo was entrusted

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3. File C 26/21, F.S. Caruana, Secretary *Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti*, to the Head of Ministry, Forwarding a specimen of the Alphabet by the Union of Writers and requesting the co-operation of the Government for its adoption by the Maltese press, 22.12.21.
 4. File C 489/29, F.S. Caruana to M.P.I., requests the use of the Maltese alphabet as introduced by the Academy of the Maltese Language in all official documents of a permanent nature, 5.12.29.
 5. *ibid.*, A. Cremona, minute of 4.2.30.

with the compilation of the *Tagħrif*. He ascribed the failure of the *Għaqda's* scheme "to its hard and fast attempts to adopt a phonic alphabet." While admitting that it was the most correct one, he said that it "is generally considered as an unfamiliar innovation and, as facts have shown, is doomed to fail; notwithstanding, in the case of the *Għaqda*, the symbols chosen were the most current ones, except for two or three of them which differ from their usual character and value, i.e. the g (for the *fixed* sound of hard g), the k (for the *câf*, ca, che, chi, co, cu), and the q (for the guttural *kâf*)."

Ninu Cremona went on to say that since the publication of the *Għaqda's* organ *Il-Malti*, the claims of the society for the popular adoption of its alphabet had practically ceased. The alphabet was then only used by the subscribers of the organ and in some purely literary or philological matter published by its members; the *Għaqda* itself, in a linguistic sense, was regarded as a scientific society rather than a popular literary society.

"As to the plea raised in the enclosed correspondence, that the adoption by Government of the *Għaqda's* alphabet in all official documents of a permanent nature should determine the progress of the Maltese Language and in the meantime serve as a help both to the Government and to the students of Maltese, I am afraid that the *Għaqda's* committee has failed to forecast the adverse effects of such adoption and to realize to what a limited extent the Government, though in theory should approve of the *Għaqda's* principles, may commit itself in adopting the *Għaqda's* alphabet." Cremona was of the opinion that any attempt to induce the government to try the experiment of adopting this system, which since Vassalli's time (1790) had failed several times, would be simply exposing the government to a risk of losing what so far it had gained through its prudent policy and efforts towards the standardization of the Maltese orthography on the best practical lines, which for the time being, could be adopted. He went on to show how the orthography in any language was mainly formed by chance or by the fancies of early writers. History showed that its gradual standardization was never attained other than by a radical scholastic scheme. He was convinced that the activities of Academies, even if supported by governments, to introduce straightaway a standard alphabet had always proved unsuccessful and had done more harm than good to the language itself.

"The current Maltese alphabetical transliteration which has been used by the best writers in the different epochs, and which should rightly be considered as a standard one, is the outcome of a radical scholastic system in the early Primary Government School. Since 1840 children were first taught the Italian language through the medium of written Maltese and for that purpose, Maltese was transliterated on the alphabet of the *Società Filologica*. This transliteration has prevailed for the last 90 years and there is no likelihood of its being modified, at any rate for the time being, by the change of the three letters (and not two) suggested by the *Għaqda* in order to conform to the principle of an accurate phonic alphabet. It may perhaps be amended in progress of time by a radical scholastic system; but I repeat, any other effort will prove unsuccessful and harmful. Besides the unsuccessful efforts of Vassalli (1790-1827); Zerafa (1827); Bellanti (1829) and Panzavecchia (1845) it is worth mentioning as striking instances the following phonic alphabets which although adopted or strongly backed up by the Government had also failed: (a) The Arabo-Maltese alphabet (1838); (b) Panzavecchia's alphabet (*Grammatica Maltese* 1845); (c) Alphabet of the *Società Medica* (1841); (d) Alphabet of the *Xirca Xemja* (1882).

"Contrary to what has happened in other languages, Maltese orthography is not

morphologically the result of chance or fancièrs, except in some conventional symbols of transliteration. Maltese being a semitic language, when written, is transcribed by the generality of the best writers in accordance with the fixed rules of grammar and the value of the letter independently of the proper formation of the letters.

“So far the *Ghaqda*'s contention, regarding the convenience of the use of its alphabet by the government on the grounds of scientific importance and simplicity, does not practically hold good; and although there might have been many adherents of the system, I being foremost in the ranks in a scientific sense, who have contributed to the Maltese literature in the *Ghaqda*'s transcript, several of the scholars had to revert to the use of the current alphabet when writing for popular purposes. To prove this assertion, I may quote the following authors and scholars who advocated the use of the phonetic alphabet during different epochs and had reverted to the current one, viz. (a) Francis Vella (1831); (b) Luigi Rosato (1839); (c) The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (1845); (d) Sir George Percy Badger (1841); (e) Gio-Batta Falzon (1861); (f) Annibale Preca (1900); (g) Napoleone Tagliaferro (1901); (h) E. Magro (1906); (i) Salvo Mamo (1901) and quite recently the President of the *Ghaqda* itself, the late Chev. G. Muscat Azzopardi who published the Gospels with a common alphabet whilst the *Ghaqda* was in its full swing. The editors of newspapers such as the *Habib* and the *Lehen is-Sewwa* who formed part of the *Ghaqda*'s Commission also refrained from using the *Ghaqda*'s alphabet.

“As the Committee of the *Ghaqda* admits, the alphabet used by government in its official documents is the nearest to that of the *Ghaqda*'s, the difference being only in the three letters mentioned in para. 2 of this minute. To use the three letters of the *Ghaqda* instead of the current ones would be forcing the government to bring about a revolution in the standard transcript into such a confusion as to spoil the good plans of the government to uplift and spread the Maltese language. The present government has adopted the best and the most practical Maltese transliteration which is in conformity with the orthography used by the old government in its official documents and school books for the last 40 years, the previous one (that of the late *Xirca Xemija*) has been abolished from schools as being unpracticable. On the recommendation of a Committee of Maltese writers which was formed in 1893, the present orthography used by the government was introduced. This orthography consisted of the alphabet of the *Società Filologica* (with the exception of the consonant *u* which was subsequently substituted by the *w*) and embodies the grammatical principles at first propounded by Vassalli, by the *Xirca Xemija* and lately by G. Vassallo in the *Muġtieh* and by the *Ghaqda* itself in the *Taghrif*.

“The difference in symbols as Panzavecchia himself asserts in his *Grammatica della Lingua Maltese* (1845) does not practically imply improper orthography; and letters of one single sound, even if expressed by digraphs, are in practice considered as varying conventional characters. They are not therefore expected to stand a scientific test.

“The question of transliteration which is to be used in the translation of laws into Maltese has already and duly been discussed by the Commission entrusted with these translations on 12 September 1929 and the Commission has decided to adopt the orthography now used by the government.

“I wish to state that as one of the members of the Committee of the *Ghaqda*, I was invited to discuss this matter in a meeting which was to be held on 17 November 1929 and which for want of a quorum was put off to 24 November 1929. I refrained from attending this meeting as I thought perhaps my position as editor of the Government Maltese publications might interfere with the free opinions of the members. I, as well as Mr. G. Vassallo, expressed in writing that we did not approve in principle the action of the Committee of the *Ghaqda* in this matter.

“I would suggest that the Secretary of the *Ghaqda* be informed that the government does not consider it advisable for the present to modify the alphabet used in government publications.”

So far I have only tried to be factual, and historical facts have been made known even though perhaps through a presentation of disjointed remnants of

official correspondence. The facts now need to be interpreted in their correct setting, taking into account the socio-political ambience of Cremona's life and times. It might be argued that Cremona agreed in principle with his colleagues but he was on the side of proceeding cautiously and prudently as not to create too much opposition. One thing is certain, Cremona remained faithful to the ideal to the end.

While the problem of Maltese orthography and terminology remained unsolved, the government in the meantime issued directions concerning their use. The Minister for Public Instruction, Dr. Enrico Mizzi, complained with the Head of the Ministry that the Maltese used in Government notices and other official publications was not uniform. Furthermore he requested him to direct the officer in charge of such translations to follow government instructions. "Such directions do not only conform with the decision arrived at by the Cabinet, but are also based on the principles enunciated by the great majority of both Houses of Parliament in the resolution approved on October 31 and November 9 last; in view of which the Maltese used in such publications should also be as commonly spoken."⁶ Specimens of writings in the Maltese orthography⁷ as desired by the M.P.I. were also sent to Ninu Cremona for his perusal. He was instructed to follow at once the directives of the Head of Ministry. Cremona gave his views about these instructions. "I am inclined to presume that the lack of orthographical uniformity in the Maltese versions referred to me by the Hon. Minister for Public Instruction is evidently due to the two different systems of spelling which had to be unavoidably adopted since 23 June 1932, when orders were given to the Superintendent of the Printing Office to effect some changes in the standard Maltese orthography used in the Government Gazette."⁸ He was of opinion that the specimens of the new Maltese orthography desired by the Minister did not provide sufficient technical guidance to follow a uniform and consistent orthography, and he thus requested to be furnished with "such specific rules as might enable me to follow as precisely as possible the orthography prescribed by the Hon. Minister for Public Instruction."⁹ Dr. E. Mizzi remarked that the specimens of Maltese orthography submitted might not provide sufficient technical guidance to follow a uniform and consistent orthography to the uninitiated, but, as these were intended for professionals in the matter, it was not deemed necessary to enter into any details. He said that in this matter it was a question of carrying out decisions already taken by government.¹⁰ However, he

6. File 614/32, M.P.I., Instructions anent Maltese Orthography and Terminology, 7.12.32.

7. Specimens enclosed: List of Buildings, sites and remains existing in Malta and Gozo, which have a geological, archeological, antiquarian or artistic importance, Malta Government Printing Office, 1932; Referendum, the Lyceum, 4 November 1932; Malta Government Gazette, 5 October 1932.

8. *ibid.*, A. Cremona to Superintendent of the Government Printing Office, 20 December 1932.

9. *ibid.*

10. *ibid.*, M.P.I. to S.P.O., 27 December 1932. In 1932, Dr. E. Mizzi had also ordered the suppression of the letter *j* in such words as *pulizija*. Refer J. Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics*, (Malta 1961) "Systems of Maltese Orthography", p. 76. The statement which Cremona submitted to the Head of the Ministry on the 28 July 1932 in defence of the use of the letter *j* is reproduced.

formulated and issued these instructions which he considered quite sufficient for the future guidance of the officer in charge of Maltese Publications.

“Anyhow, the Officer entrusted with Maltese translations is requested to adopt the following specific changes in the Maltese orthography so far adopted by him:

- (1) The letter *U* is to substitute the letter *W* everywhere
- (2) To do away with all dots so far adopted on the letters *Z*, *J*, *C*, and *G* and in the case of the latter two letters to substitute such dots:
 - (a) by an *i* in the case of words where the letters *c* and *g* are usually followed by a vowel, such as *ciar*, *giostra*, *giurdien*, etc.
 - (b) by an apostrophe in cases where such letters are followed by a consonant, such as *c'cheichen*, *g'bart*, *ig'mla* etc. wherever the said letters *c* and *g* have a soft sound.
- (3) The apostrophe is to substitute the hyphen in the case of all articles, prepositions or articulated prepositions preceding words beginning with a vowel, such as *l'arma*, *f'oqbra*, *fl'ackbar* not *l-arma*, *f-oqbra*, *fl-akbar*, etc.
- (4) The letter *Q* is to take its normal place as universally based in order not to have the incomprehensible *kwiet*, but the regular and natural *quiet*; and the letter *K* is no longer to substitute the hard *C* (*hecc* not *hekk*) but to take the place so far usurped by the *Q* (*kasba* not *qasba*). The letter *Q* should invariably be followed by a *U*.
- (5) The double consonant *sc* is to substitute the letter *x* in every Maltese word deriving from Italian, such as *coscia* (not *coxxa*), *scialata* (not *xalata*).
- (6) Maltese-Italian words should invariably be written as nearest as compatibly possible to the Italian way, so as not to have *azzjoni* instead of *azjoni* nor *fjuri* instead of *fiuri*, etc.”

In formulating the instructions the M.P.I. was motivated by these principles.

“The recognized type of our orthography, which is also common and familiar to the people in general, is that adopted in the Italian language and the more Maltese is written differently from Italian the less will it suit our spoken idiom. I do not mean by this to deny the existence of certain differences of sound in the pronunciation of our vernacular, but the so-much-talked-of danger of amphibology is nugatory if attention is paid to the meaning of the phrases. Besides, all languages abound with amphibologisms and peculiarities in pronunciation and nobody has ever thought of them as defects that need correction for common use. Excessive, not to say ridiculous, philological severity is considered pedantry and is not insisted upon in those very languages which are reputed as most perfect.”¹²

A decision about the teaching of Maltese in Elementary Schools had already been taken at a Cabinet meeting held on 1 September 1932. It was decided that Maltese should be taught as is commonly spoken and that it should be written as pronounced.¹³ The M.P.I., Dr. E. Mizzi, had also discussed the matter with Dr. A. Laferla, the Director of Elementary Schools. He told him, “In view of the fact that our dialect contains a very large number of Italian words or of Italian origin, I am anxious that the teaching of the vernacular should be such as to enable the students later on to learn with greater facility the Italian language, the more so that in accordance with Clause 1 of the Letters Patent issued on 2 May 1932 — the English and Italian languages shall be recognized as equal languages of

11. These instructions appeared in a departmental circular to all teachers on 13 January 1933 under the signature of A. Laferla, Director of Elementary Schools, para 4 translated into English.

12. File 614/32, M.P.I. to S.P.O., 27 December 1932.

13. File 130/32, M.P.I. to D.E.S., 1.9.32.

cutlure in Malta at the University and in the Secondary Schools.”¹⁴ In 1923, Act No. IX the so-called *Pari Passu* Law, regularized the simultaneous teaching and the use of the English and Italian languages in public institutions in these islands. In the original draft of that Act the government’s proposal that the teaching of Italian was to commence in the first elementary class was approved by the Legislative Assembly, but this provision was modified by the Senate against the will of the government in such a way that the teaching of Italian had to start in Standard III instead of Standard I. It was therefore argued that the *Pari Passu* Law did not represent the will of the people.

Leading Maltese personalities appearing before the Royal Commission of 1931 headed by Lord Askwith gave their views and opinions about the language issue. The Minutes of Evidence¹⁵ make very interesting reading. The Language Question was finally settled by the Imperial Letters Patent in 1934.

14. *ibid.*

15. Malta Royal Commission, 1931, Minutes of Evidence, Malta, 1931.