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A Sea for Encounters

Essays Towards a Postcolonial Commonwealth

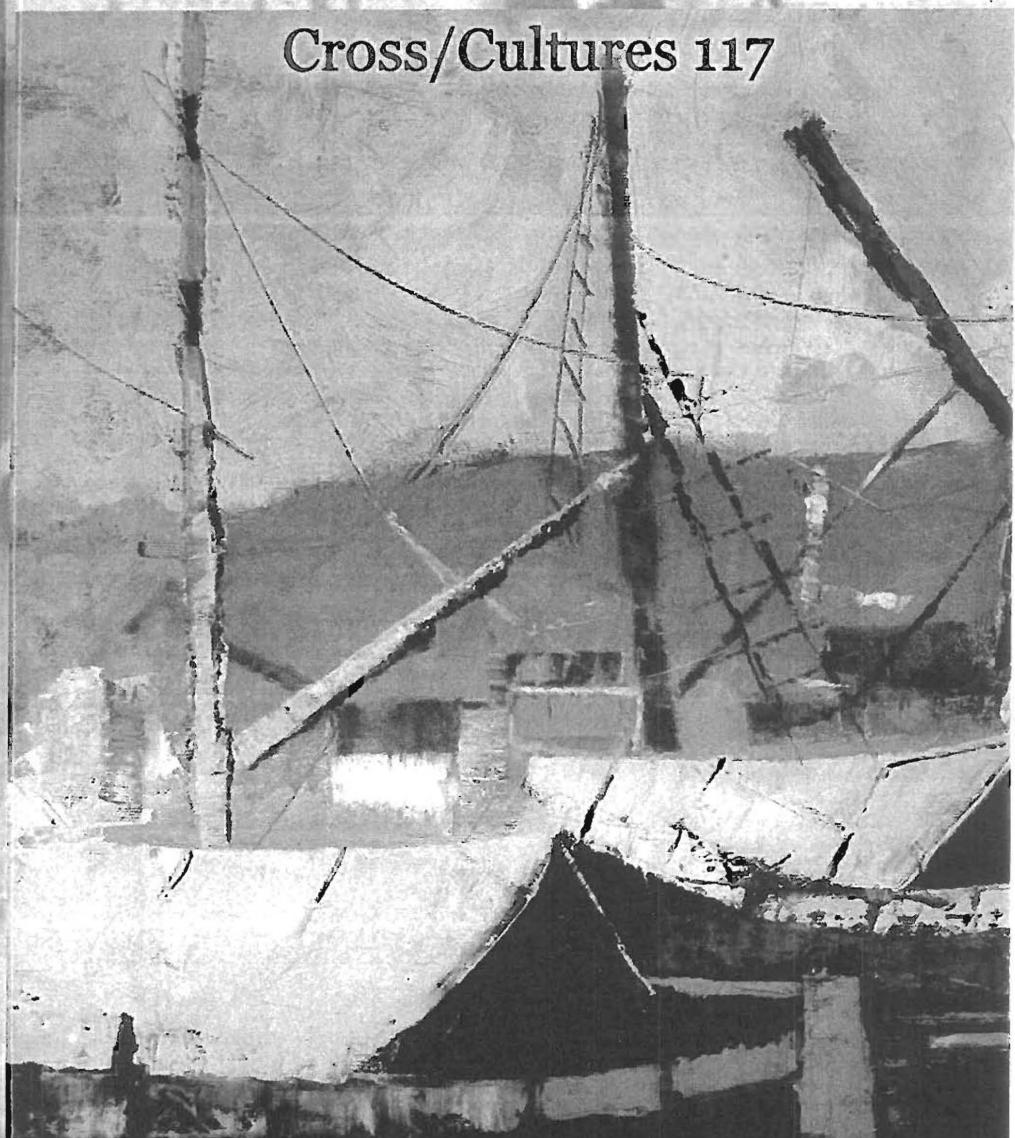
Edited by
Stella Borg Barthet



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Postcolonial Commonwealth

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The present volume contains general essays on: the relevance of 'Commonwealth' literature; the treatment of Dalits in literature and culture; the teaching of African literature in the UK; 'sharing places' and *Drum* magazine in South Africa; black British book covers as primers for cultural contact; Christianity, imperialism, and conversion; Orang Pendek and Papuans in colonial Indonesia; Carnival and drama in the anglophone Caribbean; issues of choice between the Maltese language and Its Others; and patterns of interaction between married couples in Malta. As well as these, there are essays providing close readings of works by the following authors:

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Stella Borg Barthet



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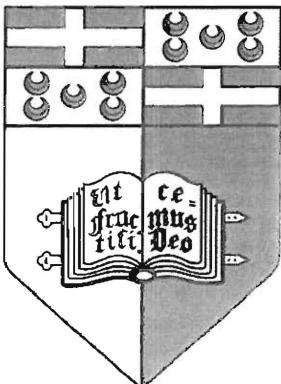
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For Victor

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Identity and Instruction

Issues of Choice Between the Maltese Language and Its Others

CLARE THAKE VASSALLO

IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZED LANGUAGE, minority languages are under threat of annihilation. Almost one-third of the global population is competent in English to varying degrees. Historically,¹ the movement of the language can be traced through the voyages of exploration to the Americas, Asia, and the Antipodes, followed by the nineteenth-century British colonial expansion in Africa and the South Pacific. This was followed by mass European emigration to the 'melting-pot' nations which hosted multilingual, multicultural and multiracial populations brought together by the use of the English language as official or semi-official language. The use of English in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada has further contributed to the global spread of English which is represented in every continent. The fact that the USA and Britain are, politically, two highly influential nations, and that the media and technology industries, as well as the entertainment industry, all function in English have effectively made English, in its many varieties, the most used medium of communication on a global level.

One of the implications of the power exerted by the English language is that it poses a threat to the survival of minority languages that live side by side with English. The fear of language-loss is a very real one; David Crystal estimates that "at least 50 per cent of the world's 6,000 or so living languages will die out within the next century."² Among the concrete moves to

¹ See David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997, 2003), for a full discussion of the historical, cultural, and economic aspects of the global spread of the English language.

² Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, 20. Crystal discusses this point in detail in *Language Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000): ch. 1.

counter this trend is the European Union's stance in using its members' national languages and in actively protecting minority languages spoken in the Union, recognizing them as the unique cultural artefacts and means of cultural expressions that they indeed are.

It is against this background that we are to consider the particular case of Malta's national language. A national language is clearly a depository of a particular nation's memory and experience of the world through time. It bears traces of the attitudes of its inhabitants, of its history, as well as of its particular climatic and social environment, which are reflected in its vocabulary, its expressions, and even its verb-structure. It is easy, therefore, to revere a nation's language as a prized possession, and to regard the use of the language as the epitome of what it means to belong to a particular culture. A frequently recurring notion in postcolonial writing is the desire,³ more often seen as a right, to be allowed to speak one's own native language. Yet this feeling is neither universal nor historically consistent. In fact, the specific historical case of language-choice and language-use in Malta in the nineteenth century, described in this essay, seems to fly in the face of this norm.

The question of language also has a considerable impact on the practical issue of formal education in a country. The selection of a language of instruction in schools, the fact that the language is to be accessible in written form, and the availability of text books for students in that language, are just a few considerations related to the practical aspects of schooling. In an interesting anomaly, the culturally and linguistically specific situation pertaining in Malta in the early-nineteenth century could not be dealt with according to the established norms of British colonial education policy, tried and tested in far larger colonies such as India.

A brief historical overview will highlight the essential language issues. Malta came under British rule in 1800 and had previously been under the dominion of the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, from early in the sixteenth century, bar two years, 1798 to 1800, when it fell under French rule.⁴ Under the domination of the Knights of St John, the education of the local people was hardly given any attention at all. The language used by the

³ See discussions in Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), Alistair Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), and *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995): esp. Part IX ("Language"), as a sample of works which deal with the issue of language and nation.

⁴ In all of its history, in one form or another, Malta was caught within the territorial domination of various powers that held sway over the Mediterranean – Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, and then the Knights of St John, the French, and finally the British. Malta became independent in 1964.

Knights to govern was Italian, and the language used by the Maltese was primarily Maltese as oral means of communication among themselves, while various dialects of Sicilian and Italian were also spoken. The languages used for writing were predominantly Italian and Latin.⁵ The population was, however, largely illiterate, with the exception of a small noble class of mainly Italian and Spanish origin, together with priests, monks, doctors, notaries, and some merchants. The local language was therefore a purely oral means of communication and no definitive writing system was created for it until the early part of the twentieth century. With the arrival of the British, a third language, English, was introduced. Both Italian and English were powerful European languages with their specific literary and cultural sense of identity firmly engrained. When, in the nineteenth century, the British began, rather slowly and reluctantly, to address the issue of local education, a series of linguistic obstacles and attitudes were found to be very difficult to overcome. The fundamental problem was that of establishing which language ought to be used as a medium of instruction in schools.

British colonial language policy had previously established the indigenous language as the normative language of instruction for early or primary education. Secondary education, and tertiary where this was available, were, on the other hand, usually taught through the medium of the English language. The courses offered to students tended to be pitched towards the needs of the occupier, thus producing a range of skilled English-speaking administrators but not a technically skilled workforce, which would likely have been better suited the economic needs of the particular country. Many of the debates about education and language policy in the British Empire were formalized with specific reference to India.⁶



Much has been written by non-native English speakers about the difficult decision whether to use, or not to use, the English language in their writing. The English language, once the language of the occupier but now a potent global language, is perceived as too useful a means of communication to be rejected on grounds of anticolonialist sentiment and attitudes. As has been observed time and again, the English language is one of the most useful and precious, although seriously double-edged, commodities that the historical

⁵ Descriptions of the Maltese language and its origins in Arabic, Sicilian, and Italian can be found in works by various authors, including the late-eighteenth-century work of Mikael Anton Vassalli, and contemporary linguists such as Joseph Aquilina and Joseph Brincat.

⁶ Alistair Pennycook provides a detailed discussion of British colonial language policy in India and Hong Kong in *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*.

fact of British colonial occupation has left in its wake. To some extent, the perceived danger in the use of English has to do with current global political activity which associates the use of the language with a form of neocolonialism, intentional or otherwise. Perhaps nowhere is the irony of language choice more apparent than in the case of writing about colonial and postcolonial issues in English. But to publish in a minority language is to risk marginalization and being ignored.

A language is not simply a channel useful for putting ideas and arguments across in transparent packaging. Language is what has been described a 'primary modelling system' by the cultural semiotician Jurij Lotman. Language in general, and each language in particular, determines the manner in which the world is organized and understood. We enter a language and to some degree we are shaped by it. Anyone who speaks more than one language can attest to this experience. The viewpoints embedded within language determine the manner in which relations between things, events, ideas, and races are perceived. The more aware speakers and readers are of these formations of attitudes embedded in language structures, the more sophisticated users of language they become. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, evokes, through a different though related context, the act of women reading as a habit which required a double perspective and the creation of a large dose of awareness in female readers, who inevitably learned to read texts composed by men for a specifically male readership. The textually implied reader⁷ interpolated by the male author is also male, shares similar views, similar racial features and so forth, while the actual reader may very well be female. Female readers are drawn into a form of reading act that is best compared with the act of simultaneous translation: reading first as a man and then as a woman. Arguably, a similar act of interpretation during the act of reading is carried out by non-native English language readers who read at a remove, neutralizing or amplifying the cultural constructs embedded in various textual points of view.

Formal education is clearly the practical entry to learning the strategies of reading and writing, as well as into a process of acculturation. It is crucial that education is not simply perceived as a neutral formation of persons but as a manner of moulding and shaping individuals; whether or not it is intended to be so. Following Michel Foucault's far-ranging work on the development of institutions in societies, including those which are seen to be for the common good, such as hospitals and schools, we cannot ignore the manner in which

⁷ The reference here is to Umberto Eco's terms when describing reading and writing strategies and reader cooperation in *The Role of the Reader* (1979; Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1984).

they also function as state-controlled apparatuses for the management of society. Perhaps, of all the institutions Foucault describes, none is more insidious than the school, since we are legally obliged to send children to school in order to learn fundamental skills, such as literacy and numeracy, which are deemed important by the state, involved as it is in normalizing its inhabitants and honing them to fit into other structures and institutions established within societies. As Foucault so ably showed, this is not something we need associate with the colonial enterprise, but, rather, with the organization of society in democratically run countries like France. How much more ruthless, then, has the organization of society been in places far from the scrutiny received at home, where indigenous inhabitants are likely to be seen as manageable commodities, there purely for the interests, mostly economic, of the occupier.

Besides shaping its subjects, formal education also provides the means by which we learn to be critical and through which we can have access to the past which provides the means of shaping the present and the future. The situation with regard to education as well as language in Malta before, during, and after British rule was not, and is not yet, either simple or straightforward. The issue of a language of instruction in Malta's schools, which brings together the two main debates touched on above concerning language and education, is one that runs counter to the established trend. This is because the issue of a first language was fought out between the use of Italian or English. Maltese was used mainly as a dialect by the educated classes, but it was *the* language of the majority of the inhabitants. This fact seems to have been overlooked, deliberately, by the Maltese occupying decision-making positions.

Philip G. Altbach writes that in matters of education policy colonial government often destroyed:

indigenous educational patterns [...] either by design or as the inadvertent result of policies which ignored local needs and traditions. Colonial powers seldom set up adequate educational facilities in their colonies and immediately limited educational opportunity and, in a sense, hindered modernization.⁸

This is not entirely the case in Malta, mainly because there was very little in terms of "indigenous education patterns" to disrupt, since there were only three state schools in the whole of the two islands, one in each of the major towns of Valletta and Senglea, and one on the island of Gozo. In addition, there were a small number of church-run schools, such as those run by the Dominican and Franciscan Orders, there were individual clerics who were

⁸ Philip G. Altbach, "Education and Neocolonialism" (1971), excerpt in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995): 453.

employed as tutors, and the one important Lyceum, originally established as a Jesuit College in 1692. In 1769, Grandmaster Pinto established the 'Pubblica Università di Studi Generali', although this university, originally known as the Collegium Melitense, was actually founded by the Jesuits in 1592. But there was not a single village school. This meant that although there was an educated class of Maltese doctors, lawyers, judges, notaries, and priests, the general population did not have access to a system of education or basic literacy in all but a few cases.

However, looking at the more general historical context, as David Marshall in *History of the Maltese Language in Local Education* does, we can see that even in England education was by no means a social force as yet, so it could hardly be expected that the new administration (just over thirty years) would open schools in Malta, when in England they were established partly as charitable institutions mainly as the result of private concerns or individuals.⁹

The British administration had already debated and established guidelines on language policy in education in the colonies, specifically in the case of India. As Alistair Pennycook reminds us, none of the positions taken "was as monolithic as it is sometimes made out to be."¹⁰ Nevertheless, the various Reports provide insight into the type of concerns and regulations that were being suggested with regard to language policy in education. The following is an example from the guidelines of the 1854 Despatch where the Provincial Committee of Bombay Report¹¹ argues that

bringing European knowledge within the reach of the masses is to give every pupil a thorough grounding in the vernacular, and to keep his attention upon it even up to the college course. In pursuance of this policy English is rigidly excluded from the primary school course.¹²

Also in 1882 in the Bombay Report,

In Bombay, on the other hand, the Department has systematically resisted every attempt to introduce the study of English until a boy [sic] has completed Standard IV and reached the point where secondary education com-

⁹ David Marshall, *History of the Maltese Language in Local Education* (Malta: Malta UP, 1971): 12.

¹⁰ Alistair Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*, 75.

¹¹ Alistair Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*. In ch. 3, "Anglicism, Orientalism and Colonial Language Policy," Pennycook provides a broad collection of passages from various Reports on British Language Policy decisions applied to the Indian situation.

¹² 1882 Report (1883): 124–25, cited in Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*, 74.

mences. Even then an English class is not attached to a purely primary school unless those who require it are prepared to pay for the extra cost.¹³

These and many other comments and suggestions about the use of English in the education system attest to the fact that, in the main, the usual position taken was that English would be taught at secondary- rather than primary-school level. The reasons are partly economic, as suggested by the last reference, in that many children who did not continue their schooling beyond primary level would not need to use English in their work, which would be mainly manual or semi-skilled labour. Those proceeding to secondary-level education, on the other hand, were far more likely to find jobs within the colonial administration and, therefore, the investment in teaching them English would yield returns.

In Malta, this situation was entirely reversed, this being due to a number of interesting and highly complex cultural and political strategies to do with the interplay of three, and to some extent even four, languages.

The strange issue is that education in the vernacular was precisely what the educated class of Maltese, as well as the Curia, opposed. The reasons, which are various, include the fact that Italian was the predominant language used by the literate educated class in Malta, as was the case in many Mediterranean islands. It was also the language of the Church and of the law-courts, and the members of the legal profession on the island tended to be pro-Italian in terms of language and culture. The Maltese elite spoke a cultured form of Tuscan Italian and considered themselves to be Italian and belonging to a European culture. Italy is a country with a rich and varied cultural and literary history, to which the Maltese unquestionably felt they belonged. The Maltese language, on the other hand, being an Arabic dialect, did not appeal as a cultural model. The educated and cultured attitude towards the Maltese language suggested that it was a waste of time to study it and that it would simply die a natural death if left alone, as was the case with other dialects in the Mediterranean region.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it was used by Maltese speakers of Italian among themselves as a spoken dialect, and was described in functional terms as the 'language of the kitchen'. A further highly significant complication was the fact that Maltese had no written form. There had as yet been no agreement about an alphabet, despite the attempts of a number of philologists, primary

¹³ 1882 Report (1883): 124, cited in Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*, 74.

¹⁴ Ironically, when Italian was removed as an official language and English instituted instead on the eve of the Second World War, the legal profession took Maltese as the language of the law-courts and the legal profession, in another politico-linguistic manoeuvre to restrict British interference.

among them being the Maltese Professor of Oriental languages, Mikiel Anton Vassalli, who has ever since been regarded with reverence as the father of the Maltese language.

A development occurred with the establishment of the British ruling class. The Maltese who began to associate with them learned to speak English despite the fact that they were made bitter fun of by the Italian speakers, who criticized their accents and idiom, as well as the reasons for which they adopted the language.

Debate about language-use has characterized Maltese political and cultural life for many years, and is still a heated topic of discussion. This is reflected in what must be one of the most significant issues in the modern history of Malta, which is in fact referred to as the 'Language Question'. Geoffrey Hull, in his highly influential work of the same name, sub-titled *A Case Study in Cultural Imperialism*, provides a detailed historical analysis of the political issues so fiercely connected to and reflected in language debates. Over the years, the pro-English language position gained both in influence and number and came to be pitted against the pro-Italian position. A clash was inevitable. The 'Language Question' reached a climax in the 1930s in the approaching shadow of the Second World War. In the introduction to Hull's work, published in 1993, Giulio Soravia of the University of Bologna remarks that Hull, unlike other historians, does not "underestimate the phenomenon of language, which [others] see merely as a rather inconvenient synchronism of limited relevance."¹⁵ Soravia claims that in Hull's study two diverse and often irreconcilable disciplines successfully merge: "the fact is that Malta can be understood only through her linguistic identity, which is the result of her history, and the best litmus for the testing of her various moods and tendencies."¹⁶

The 'Language Question' can be described as a reflection not simply of which power dominated Malta, but, rather, of which country, Italy or Britain, Malta wanted to be closely connected to. The choice implied two desires: either to be annexed to Italy, or to be integrated with Britain.

Chance often plays a strange hand in the evolution of issues, both in the private and in the national sphere. There was much unrest back in the 1830s and matters came to a head in the proposal of a new Code of Laws. At this point, the Secretary of State, Lord Glenelg, advised the King to appoint a formal enquiry. It was in this manner that a Royal Commission was appointed with John Austin and George Cornwall Lewis as Commissioners. A major

¹⁵ Giulio Soravia, "Introduction" to Geoffrey Hull, *The Malta Language Question: A Case Study in Cultural Imperialism* (Malta: Said International, 1993): xiv.

¹⁶ Soravia, "Introduction" to Hull, *The Malta Language Question*, xiv.

area of their report was to address legal issues; in addition, education was also an aspect which they were required to investigate. John and his wife, Sarah Austin, arrived at the Grand Harbour of Valletta late in 1836 "on board the magnificent frigate *Vernon*," from which, in a letter written by Mrs Austin, they thought that "no description, and I think no painting, can do justice to the wonderful aspect."¹⁷ The Austins were so relieved to be sent on a mission away from Boulogne, where they had been unhappy, that they took on their new role with enthusiasm., Austin's wife Sarah was a particularly enlightened and educated woman with a keen social sense. She was a friend of John Stuart Mill's and corresponded with Gladstone, and her principles were generally liberal.

She and her husband were in Malta for a period of just under two years. In this brief time, her husband's report met with many obstacles and objections; he also fell ill, and some of the legal objectives of the Commission's report remained unachieved. Their appointment was eventually terminated without any warning. John Austin met with stiff opposition from his fellow British countrymen and he was ultimately disappointed with the outcome of their brief. Sarah Austin's self-appointed task of improving the education system, on the other hand, was an unquestionable success.

There was such a huge divide among the Maltese population. Austin, on the one hand, uses adjectives in her letters such as "the poor Maltese," or comments that "but no one who has not been here can understand how entirely it is like having to manage for a lot of children" (109); on the other hand, she was also familiar with the educated class involved in decision-making and international political matters. The above two brief examples from her correspondence¹⁸ reveal, in Edward Said's terms, a textual attitude towards the people of the island that can be described as consciously benevolent. This has been reflected in the positive vein in which she, in turn, has been written about by Maltese writers over the years. In narratological terms, Austin is textually cast in the role of beneficial donor, a role that corresponds to her actual historical role, for which there is further evidence in her letters, such that she was referred to, affectionately, as "La Signora Commissionaria" (Sarah Austin to Mr N. Senior, Valletta, 25 January 1837; 111). On realizing the sad state of public education in Malta, she took on the task, which was part of her husband's and Mr Cornwall Lewis's brief, of improv-

¹⁷ In Janet Ross, *Three Generations of Englishwomen and Correspondence of Mrs John Taylor, Mrs Sarah Austin and Lady Duff Gordon* (London: John Murray, 1888): 101–102. All further page references to letters of Sarah Austin in Ross's compilation are in the main text.

¹⁸ There are, of course, many more such uses of adjectives and descriptions.

ing it as best she could. Her letter of 25 April 1838 to Mr Victor Cousin states:

public instruction [...] did not exist at Malta. There was one school for boys and one for girls in the town of Valletta. In obedience to the recommendations of the Commissioners, twelve more are to be established in the villages, six for each sex. (Translation, Letter to Mr. Victor Cousin, Valletta, 25 April 1838; 121)

And in a letter to Mr N. Senior written from Valletta very soon after her arrival in January 1837:

The moral and intellectual destitution of the people is dreadful. No schools in the Cazals, no *tolerable* education for the middling classes; an university whose first professor receives 25 (pounds) a year; and to which no attention is paid by the Government; no press, no place for discussion. (25 January 1837; 107)

Austin continued to write to her mentor, Victor Cousin, about the state of public education in Malta all the while she was here and also continued to brief him on developments after her departure from the island. By the time they left in late 1838, she had achieved a great deal. She wrote from her residence in Mayfair, London on 31 December 1838 as follows:

As to my little island, there it was not a question of writing but of acting. And I acted. I will not tell you how I worked, but the fact is that there are now ten village schools where there was not one. I believe things would have remained as they were, had I not searched for and found the masters and opened the schools in person. (126)

And

I gained the complete confidence of the Maltese as soon as they found out that I did not aim at converting them. They generally distrust Protestants, and I must confess they are not far wrong. (126)

Apart from the significant act of actually setting up schools, the most interesting aspect of her observation of the problem of education has to do with the choice of a language of instruction. In an earlier letter dated 25 April 1838, while still resident in Malta, Austin described to Cousin the language situation facing Maltese children:

Then my dear Councillor of State, imagine the condition of a people forced to learn four languages – (1) Maltese, a kind of bastard Arabic, which has never been reduced to any system or written down, so they conceived the

brilliant idea of teaching children to read in a foreign language (Italian), *and the consequence is a whole generation who read fluently without understanding a word.* (2) Italian, the written language used in the courts, the pulpit, the theatre, etc. (3) English, the language of the governing class, I need not tell you how necessary a language of this is to all who are not absolutely independent of us. (4) Arabic. The islands swarms with inhabitants and emigration is perpetual. The opposite coast of Africa, and the Levant offer the easiest and most profitable outlet, for though the poor Maltese are far behind in us in civilization, yet they are in advance of Africa and Asia. (121; my emphasis)

Along the same lines:

(To mend the matter, I keep school every day for the monitors of the Normal School. I am a dreadful beggar, and so hardened that I don't mind asking you for a copy of an easy, simple little historical work.) These boys, and very clever boys too, have been taught to read fluently Italian and English, understanding *nothing* of either. (Sarah Austin, letter to Mr. Murray, 6 January 1838; 113; emphasis in the original)

The implication in comments of this sort is that, ultimately, Austin saw the practice of teaching children in a language that was essentially foreign to them as useless. Austin, in line with the ideas of John Hookham Frere, then also resident in Malta, and Mikiel Anton Vassalli, believed that children should be taught in their own mother tongue.

The fact that such a position was open to debate and resistance by the local population is what makes the Maltese situation so unusual. It is hard to overstate the fact that Maltese educated into an Italian frame of reference could only perceive Arabic and all things Arab through the same textual attitude of other Europeans. Who, in his right mind, they asked, would *choose* to be associated with the Arab world, a world associated with laziness, lasciviousness, sloth, backward attitudes – all the qualities, in a nutshell, that Edward Said describes in *Orientalism?* After all, they were speakers of a ‘civilized’ European language with which they had very close cultural and geographical ties, as well as generations of blood relations. Furthermore, the Maltese language, then considered a dialect, was linguistically related to Italian but ‘corrupted’ by Arabic. Italian was perceived as a pure language worth using for educational purposes, whereas Maltese seemed only to be an inferior and contaminated form of the language. Time or money invested in the teaching of Maltese was not only a waste of precious resources, but also a cultural association to be decidedly opposed.

The Church could not but be in agreement on this sensitive issue, since the Roman Catholic Church leaned most naturally towards the language of Rome,

and certainly not towards the language of the Muslim. The Maltese people were devout Catholics and their allegiance to the Church was also evident through the use of the Italian language. English, on the other hand, could only be perceived as a foreign language in every sense. There is no cultural, geographic, religious or linguistic proximity between Maltese and English as there is between Maltese and Italian. However, the final blow to the Italian language locally was delivered through the effects of international politics. Britain began to view Italy as an enemy in the run-up to World War II. Maltese was suggested by the British as the language that ought to take the place of Italian, which is how it was finally made the 'Official Language of the Islands' on 1 January 1934. Although the English language had its uses within a colonial context, it is only through political expediency that it became the second official language of Malta, a position that ought logically to have been held by the Italian language. Ironically, the adoption of the English language has turned out to be one of Malta's assets today, while Italian remains a minority language upon the world's linguistic stage.

Of course, when Italian planes, on the morning of 11 June 1940, dropped their first bombs on Valletta, the pro-British faction must have felt vindicated, while the pro-Italian faction would have felt so inexplicably betrayed that it is indeed hard to imagine how they justified the continuous three years of Italian and German aerial bombardments on Malta to themselves, both in private and in public.



In line with his wife's observations, John Austin, together with George Cornwall Lewis, eventually made the following recommendation in their Report:

From this general use of the Italian language in Malta, from its use as the language of trade throughout the Mediterranean, and from the near neighbourhood of Malta to Italy and Sicily, it follows that the Italian language is far more useful to a Maltese than any other language excepting his native tongue. We recommend, therefore, that so soon as a child attending a Government school shall have learned to read Maltese, he shall learn to read and to write the Italian through the medium of the former. We recommend further, that so soon as he can read and write the Italian, he shall learn to read and to speak the English, if the time allotted to his schooling will allow him to do so. (Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Affairs of the Island of Malta. 1838. Part II, p.42.)¹⁹

¹⁹ Geoffrey Hull, *The Malta Language Question*, 15.

Strictly speaking, this recommendation was not followed. Although Maltese slowly gained more recognition within the classroom, it was plagued by the lack of an accepted alphabet. This matter was only settled in 1934 together with the establishment of Maltese as an official language.

In having had to choose a language, English or Italian, and to establish Maltese as the recognized native tongue, something has been lost. Perhaps no language ought to have been given up. Italian is the regional and natural language that reflects both Malta's geographical position and its position in history. The progressive loss of Italian has created a linguistic discontinuity with Malta's particular cultural memory.

Today, the Maltese language has taken centre stage and is intimately connected with what it means to be Maltese. The education system, however, still relies on English to a large extent, together with Maltese. It continues to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, primary-school children in State schools still learn some subjects in English rather than in their mother tongue, while being brought up on the notion that it is somehow unpatriotic to speak English within a local context. Clearly, if teaching in two languages is carried out by competent speakers of either or both languages, then a bilingual population ought to be in the making, yet this does not seem to have come about. Modern educational policy on a global scale is concerned with introducing English as a basic skill to primary-school students.²⁰ The policy of using two languages at primary level has been current since the 1950s in Malta. However, this has not produced the desired bilingual population.²¹ Negative attitudes towards the English language carried down from colonial days, together with classroom methodology and text books which do not reflect the fact that a second rather than a first language is being taught, and the fact that many teachers have only an imperfect grasp of the language being taught, are all significant factors which have contributed to the unfortunate reality of the Maltese population's decreasing knowledge of English precisely at the time when it is fast becoming the world's most important means of communication.²² Since the Maltese language is such an incredibly small language shared

²⁰ David Graddol, in "Global English," BBC/Open University online (23 August 2005).

²¹ In another essay, the author discusses the attitudes towards the diminishing use, and possible eventual loss, of the English language in Malta in further detail: "Throwing out the Baby with the Bathwater: The Ostracisation of English in Malta," in the CD-ROM mixed-media publication *Oralcy and Literacy*, ed. Marianne Boerch & Stephen Knight (Bologna: University of Bologna, 2006).

²² Public exam results, SEC and MATSEC, reveal progressively lower numbers of students achieving a pass grade at Ordinary, Intermediate, and Advanced levels each year (source: University of Malta, MATSEC Office).

by only 400,000 people, it would be unwise to let a relative advantage fade into a lost opportunity.

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