

THE STUDY AND TEACHING OF MALTESE.*

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The earliest literary records of the Maltese Language do not go further back than the beginning of the sixteenth century. The first attempt to write Maltese was made in the drafting of Maltese sermons of which some handwritten specimens exist in the Royal Malta Library. The first Maltese Grammar was written and published at Rome in 1750 by Canon G. Fco. Agius Sultana (better known by his latinized surname De Soldanis), who was the first Librarian of the Malta Library. His works comprise another grammar, a dictionary which is still in script, and a collection of proverbs which have been published in the *Malta Letteraria*, vol. III, 1928, by Dr G. Curmi.

One of the earliest attempts to write Maltese verse, according to De Soldanis, was during the Grandmastership of Nicola Cottoner (1660-80) when Dr Gio. Francesco Bonamico, a naturalist, wrote, in honour of the Grandmaster, an ode on the Maypole Festival followed by a Latin and French version. The cause of Maltese not having been used as a written language earlier is due to (a) lack of popular education coupled with the absence of any democratic Government. In mediaeval times the people were unrepresented in the local Government until 1428 and, even then, representation was not truly popular; (b) the discouragement of publications of local interest until the freedom of the press in 1838; (c) the usage, prevalent since the Aragonese period up to 1813, of all forensic documents, laws, notarial deeds and correspondence being written exclusively in Latin or in Siculo-Italian, and afterwards in Italian and English.

Although, as we are assured by De Soldanis and by Mifsud in his *Biblioteca Maltese* (1764), there were several Maltese Grammars and Dictionaries, written by local and foreign savants who lived before the seventeenth century, yet up to the year 1838 there is no traceable record to show that any serious attempt was ever made to introduce the reading or writing of Maltese in schools.

In 1825 a school for teaching language was established in connection with the University by the good services of the Right Honourable Hookham Frere (Chairman of the University General Council) and the veteran Michel

* A paper read at an Academic Meeting of the *Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* in the Library of the Royal University of Malta on the 14th May 1949 on the occasion of its Silver Jubilee when Mr John Pudney, English writer, was invited to attend and read a paper on the 'Difficulties of the Writer in the Modern World'.

Antonio Vassalli, the author of a Maltese Grammar (in Latin), was appointed as Teacher. In 1827 Vassalli published a new Maltese Grammar written in Italian, containing the series of lectures that he had delivered in the University. His two grammars embody the fundamental principles of the soundest orthography which, with some variations in the alphabetical symbols, was afterwards followed by the best Maltese scholars. Since the publication of Vassalli's grammar (Italian edition), several Maltese grammars and reading books have been produced written in various systems with the object of introducing them in schools or for adoption in literary publications. All these systems, some of them appearing temporarily, died away after a very short life, — all of them being out of touch with the scholastic method then prevailing.

Francis Vella's Grammar in English was the second attempt after Vassalli's to introduce a system which was thought to be more compatible with popular educational usage. Some efforts were made at the same epoch to write Maltese with Arabic characters and, although the plan was favourably commented by the Rev. Schlienz in his 'Views on the improvements of the Maltese Language and its use for the purpose of education' (1838), the attempt proved very unpopular and was bound to fail among people with a European education.

The freedom of the Press in 1838 brought to life a number of newspapers including one under the editorship of George Percy Badger and James Richardson. Subsequently the number of vernacular papers steadily grew until, with the advent of a constitutional Government, they outnumbered those published in the cultural and official foreign language.

The several alphabets that, one after another, were tried since the earliest attempts to write Maltese, were a serious stumbling block in the way of progress.

In 1843 the *Accademia Filologica Maltese* proposed an alphabet which was sanctioned as the standard one for schools in 1850. But some scholars showed a preference for the adoption of an alphabet and a system which, grammatically, was more compatible with the semitic morphology of the Maltese language. In this particular, some prominent members of the *Società Medica* stood for a scientific transliteration by phonetic symbols. As an instance, Professor Stefano Zerafa's phonetic alphabet was sanctioned and adopted by the *Società Medica* and the *Società Economico-Agraria* in the period 1840-45. This and similar alphabets, as that of the *Xirka Xemiä* (1882), never achieved a very wide popularity, their appreciation being confined to the upholders of the respective systems.

In the meantime a sort of semi-phonetic alphabet without diacritics was devised by Canon Fortunato Panzavecchia, Director of Primary Schools,

and adopted in his Grammar and also in his Bible Histories used in schools during the period 1845-50. The *Accademia Filologica's* system of orthography prevailed in the Primary Schools up to 1883 when Maltese Reading Books in the *Xirka Xemja's* system were introduced in the four classes (1882). It must be admitted that the *Accademia's* system, which had its organ *Il-Malti* containing instructive articles in Maltese and Italian, had up to the end of the nineteenth century been the model text of Maltese spelling most generally adopted by writers of whom a typical exponent was Gio. Antonio Vassallo, Professor of Italian Literature in the University, a lyrical Maltese poet of note, but a bad grammarian.

In view of the huge output of Maltese publications, much of it ungrammatically written, some of the better known writers, in 1894, formed a committee for the control of the Maltese spelling. The outcome of the labours of this committee was Vassallo's *Il-Muġġieħ tal-Chitba Maltija* (1901), being a new key for Maltese spelling. Its alphabet varies slightly from the *Accademia's* but the system of word-building was based on a sounder grammatical basis. The school text-books used under the written system from 1899 to 1912 and the Government publications from that period up to 1934 were written in accordance with this system as the then recognized standard one. Maltese having been used in schools only as a medium for *viva-voce* instruction, Maltese text-books were taboo for a period of about twenty years.

As there was no uniformity in spelling up to the early period of the twentieth century among writers when Maltese literature was steadily increasing, a Society of Maltese Writers (*Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti*) was set up in 1921. Its *Tagħrif fuq il-Kitba Maltija*, drawn up by a Commission of specialists and published in 1924, embodies the principles of its phonetic alphabet by using letters most familiar to Maltese readers and a system of spelling based on the soundest rules of Maltese phonetics and morphology. The system was first adopted in *Il-Malti*, the official organ of the society.

Following the amendments in the Malta Constitution Letters Patent (1921) regarding the teaching of language in schools, Maltese was re-established in schools in 1932, whilst notices of general popular interest appeared in the Government Gazette since 1927 with a Maltese version also.

Further amendments in the Malta Letters Patent in 1934 afforded a most lucky opportunity for the *Għaqda's* system of Maltese spelling to be introduced by the Government in schools, in the Courts and officially in the Government Departments.

Since 1934 Maltese has risen to new life and had its status re-established

on a firmer basis from an administrative and educational point of view by its introduction into legal and notarial acts, in school text-books and in the University where, at the same time, a Chair of Maltese Literature and Comparative Philology was established, — an epoch-making era has opened for Maltese as a National Language. The shadow of an old threatening political phantom, which once tended to destroy the *Għaqda's* activities and Maltese as a literary official language, seems to have been definitely cleared away by a new policy which originated in the Labour political movements after the first great war, — a new policy which had revolutionized the economical, bureaucratic and educational status of the Maltese people, whereby their native Tongue was radically affected.

Since that historical change in the history of the Maltese language, the *Għaqda's* system has strengthened its vitality and ensured its life.

So far the *Għaqda's* system, which has now been thriving for over a quarter of a century, has been lucky enough to have outlived all other systems numbering about thirty-two. Barely one year before the introduction of Maltese as a scholastic language, I had concluded my series of articles on the literary evolution of Maltese in the *Journal of the Malta Literary Society* by stating that 'if Maltese were really to be kept within such a limited area (that is, within the enclosure of a literary society or in a narrow sphere of literary publications) I am afraid that we shall be still very far from the real end, that there is still the danger of Maltese meeting disastrously with the same conditions which, during the last century, made it the most unsettled language in the world'.

The end has now been attained and the Government policy now prevailing is aiding in its consolidation.

Responsible Government, however, will agree that the healthy condition of a standardized official system mainly depends on the maintenance of its fundamental principle and that the *Għaqda's* activities in this respect should not be hampered by outside prejudices which rather than improving may destroy the system.

This is in the interest of the welfare of Maltese as a vital characteristic of the political freedom of the Islanders.