

Abstract

Maltese, a Semitic language, is the mother tongue of the vast majority of Maltese nationals and is used alongside a variety of English, known as Maltese-English. Although English in Malta is an inheritance of a colonial past, it is widely regarded to be of fundamental importance. Most regular users of English in Malta are normally of high socio-economic status, thereby creating a situation in which social difference can be manifest through language choice. While providing a description of the linguistic situation in Malta, I will focus on the structure of Maltese-English and place it within its sociolinguistic context. I will illustrate how this variety constitutes an example of 'difference' in a relatively small linguistic community and discuss the implications of this within Malta's bilingual/diglossic context.

1. Introduction

Malta is a small island in the Mediterranean, covering an area of around 316 square kilometers. It is heavily populated: data from the latest census, carried out in 2005, reveal that the total population is of 404,962, out of which 12,112 (3%) are foreigners residing on the island. 4,713 (39%) of these foreigners are British nationals¹. The islands' geographic position has been considered of great strategic importance throughout the course of history, and the various domains that ruled Malta until its independence inevitably left their mark on the languages spoken on the island as well as on their role as acrolects or basilects.

Maltese is the mother tongue of the vast majority of the population and is spoken all over the island. However, a number of Maltese citizens also claim that either English, or Maltese and English simultaneously, are their first language. Figures from the 2005 census indicate that 90% of Maltese nationals aged 10 years and over speak Maltese most regularly at home, 6% speak English, 1% speaks another language and the remaining 3% speak both Maltese and English.

Maltese, a Semitic language that "typologically falls well into the general characteristics of Maghrebi dialects" (Mifsud, 2008: 146), owes its origins to the period of time (870-1090 A.D.) when the Arabs who had already conquered Sicily moved South towards Malta and introduced their own vernacular which took over any pre-existing language (Brincat, 1995, 2003: 53-64 & 2011: 33-46). Varieties of Italian, especially those used in Sicily, started being used in Malta and gradually also started featuring within the language itself following the colonization of Malta by the Normans in 1090 A.D. and Malta's subsequent inclusion in the Kingdom of Sicily. These progressively acquired an increasingly more central role in the Maltese linguistic scene and were also used as a written medium alongside Latin which, in a similar manner to many Western European contexts, maintained its role as a language of high prestige². Eventually, Malta passed into the hands of the Knights of the Order of St. John and during their rule (1530-1798) documents were mainly published in Latin, although Italian (in its Tuscan variety) and Sicilian were also used. The situation changed drastically during the British colonial period (1800-1964) when English was introduced in Malta, in due course

replacing Italian as the country's official language³ after a lengthy struggle known as the 'language question'. As time passed, the status of Maltese improved and the language acquired a standardized written form, through a process initiated in 1921. It is significant to note that Maltese is written in Latin characters despite being a Semitic language: this is indeed symptomatic of the fact that Malta has always been a crossroads in the Mediterranean, between European countries in the North and Arab states in the South. Notwithstanding the fact that, even historically, Maltese was very widespread in Malta, its prestige until the first half of the twentieth century remained relatively poor, as it was generally used by the lower, uneducated classes and in higher circles it was largely overshadowed by Italian (mainly before the Second World War) and by English. Once the War was over, pressure to obtain Independence⁴ from the British Colonial Rule mounted slowly and use of Maltese spread among individuals of all social classes and of different educational backgrounds: the language is equated with the local identity, whereas English maintains its importance both for internal use, (as it is necessary especially to further one's studies), and to go beyond the country's shores, (as it provides the opportunity to communicate with foreigners of all nationalities). In recent years the status of Maltese has gained importance and the most significant indication of this is represented by its current role as an official language of the European Union, in the wake of Malta's accession in 2004.

The following is an example of present-day Maltese, extracted from the website (www.illum.com.mt) of the edition of the newspaper *Illum*⁵ published on the 7th March 2010:

Fil-preżenza tal-Pulizija r-raġel intalab ukoll jiġbor l-iskart kollu li tefa' mal-art. Ix-xufier qed jissogra li jekk jinstab hati jispiċċa bit-trakk konfiskat kif inhu stabbilit fil-massimu tal-Liġi. L-aggravju seħħ biswit il-bring-in sites fl-inhawi Tas-Sellum qrib l-Għadira. Tliet ġimħat ilu din il-gazzetta ppubblikat ritratti li turi l-ħmieġ mormi madwar sett ta' kontenituri oħra fil-qalba taż-żona turistika fil-lokal.

"In the presence of the Police the man was asked to gather all the rubbish he had thrown on the ground. The driver is risking, if he's found guilty, having his truck confiscated as established by the maximum penalty of Law. The incumbrance occurred in the vicinity of the bring-in sites in the area of Tas-Sellum close to Għadira. Three weeks ago this newspaper published photos showing litter strewn around a set of rubbish containers in the heart of a touristic zone in the locality"

In the above extract one may note how invariables in Maltese are normally of Arabic etymology, for example the prepositions (+ definite article) *fil-*, *mal-*, *tal-* and the relative pronoun/complementiser *li*. Another quite typically Semitic phenomenon regards the assimilation of the definite article *l-* with consonant-initial words possessing the feature [+coronal]⁶, for example *r-raġel*, *ix-xufier*, *taż-żona*. On the other hand, especially in the case of nouns, one may note the numerous influences of other languages on Maltese: *preżenza*; *pulizija*; *skart* (from Italian 'scarto'); *xufier* (originally from French 'chaffeur' though one cannot exclude the possibility of an indirect influence of English, where it is also attested, which led to this term being introduced in Maltese); *jispiċċa* (from Sicilian 'spicciari', which literally means 'to hurry up, to hasten'); *aggravju* (a legal term from Italian); *gazzetta*; *ritratti* etc. Finally, always within the nouns' category one may note the most recent adstrate which has been added to the Maltese language, namely English, which is evidenced through the integrated loanword *trakk* (which also forms a plural using a Semitic suffix: *trakkijiet*

‘trucks’) and the non-integrated form *bring-in sites*. This shows how English today features in Malta not only as a variety in its own right as I will explain further below, but that it is also present in Maltese through integrated and non-integrated borrowings, a phenomenon which, of course, is very common in a number of other languages today.

2. The sociolinguistic situation

A closer look at the current sociolinguistic situation in Malta reveals that Maltese is still used extensively as a spoken variety and that it is used to a somewhat lesser extent as a written medium, although this situation is subject to dynamic change. Maltese is used to communicate orally in most circumstances, especially at informal levels. It is used almost exclusively on local television and radio stations. It is also found very frequently in modern means of communication which require a written variety, such as Internet Relay Chat (Brincat & Caruana, 2011) and mobile phone texting. Maltese is also used in Parliament, in the Law Courts, by the Church and in virtually all work-places. Official governmental and legal documentation is written in both Maltese and English. English, on the other hand, is used frequently in writing. The most popular local daily newspaper (The Times of Malta) is in English and so are most textbooks used in schools. As a consequence, English gains ground over Maltese in certain contexts, including higher education. Though both English and Maltese are the official languages of the University of Malta, the language of assessment (bar some exceptions) is English, as textbooks used in most courses are not available in Maltese. The increasing number of foreign students attending courses at the University of Malta also necessitates that many lectures are delivered entirely in English. Therefore, proficiency in both spoken and written English constitutes an advantage to those Maltese students who pursue their studies beyond secondary level and, as a direct consequence of this, regular use of English in Malta, especially as a spoken medium, is often associated with families having a higher socio-economic background or individuals who have carried on studying up to tertiary level. Though the Maltese society is normally defined as bilingual, the linguistic situation on the island is more complex than this definition may suggest as the situation is characterized by frequent interplay between bilingualism and diglossia – especially scholastic diglossia, as illustrated above.

Language use also reveals a person’s underlying culture and background and this is also highly relevant in Malta, despite the fact that the population constitutes one ethnic group. At times Maltese nationals who speak in English are called *tal-pepè* ‘snobs’ or *qżież* ‘show-offs’. On the other hand, in certain circumstances, these speakers of Maltese-English may also be prejudiced towards those who find difficulty in expressing themselves in English or are unable to do so, as they somewhat automatically consider them to be uneducated or pertaining to a low socioeconomic group. Within the Maltese linguistic context one also encounters frequent intersentential and intrasentential forms of code-switching, as, whichever the mother tongue, one is inevitably conditioned into using the languages one is regularly in contact with. After all, whether to a greater or to a lesser extent, in any bilingual context code-switching is generally present, and Malta is no exception to this (Sciriha, 2001).

3. Features of Maltese English

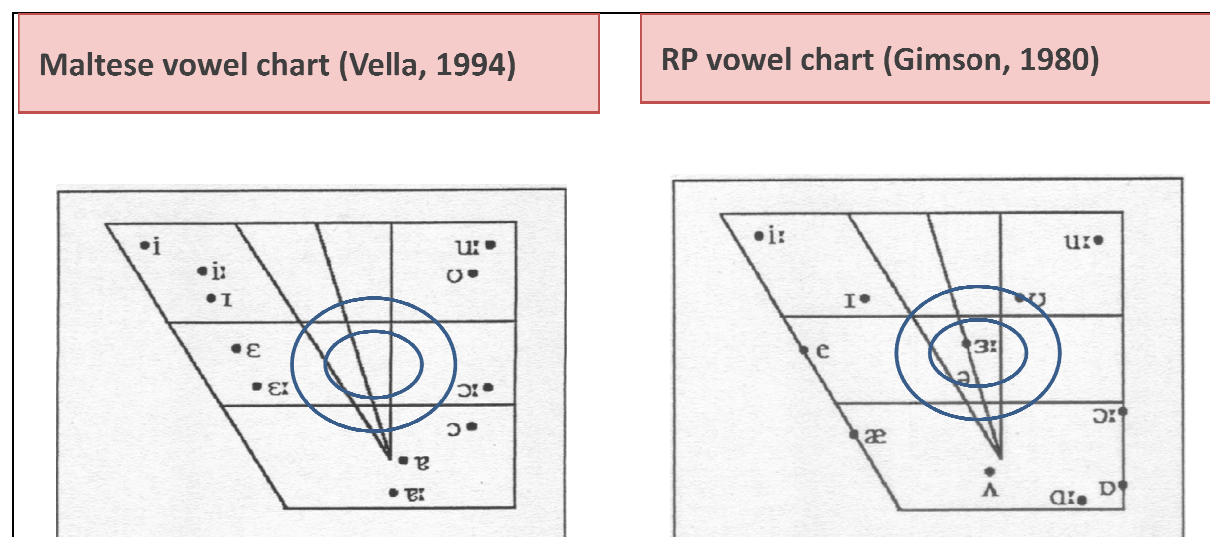
The variety of English that is spoken in Malta is normally referred to as ‘Maltese English’, a nomenclature introduced by Broughton (1976). Brincat (2011: 426) reports that this definition “was not very well received because in those days the target was standard English (...) and the label was considered a negative judgement on the quality of the English taught

and spoken in Malta”. Once this variety started to be examined in more detail, it was clear that, despite retaining many features of Received Pronunciation (henceforth RP), it distances itself from it, especially phonetically and prosodically. On the basis of Schneider’s (2007) dynamic model of the evolution of New Englishes, Thusat et al. (2009: 25) claim that Malta is currently “centred in phase three, nativization, but important examples show Malta is moving into phase four: endonormative stabilization”. Schneider’s (2007) model takes into account four different linguistic levels, placing varieties of post-colonial English in a political, historical and social context. If, on the basis of these levels, Malta were to be collocated in the nativisation phase moving toward endonormative stabilisation, as stated above, one may claim that Maltese-English (henceforth ME) is part of the local linguistic repertoire, that there are a number of competent English L2 speakers and that it is going through ‘restructuring’. Thusat et al. (2009: 31) also hint at difficulties related to identifying “one clearly distinct ‘variety’ of Maltese English”. In this context ME refers clearly and exclusively to English as it is used in Malta, and therefore I exclude episodes of code-switching between Maltese and English or other varieties such as Anglicized Maltese⁷ (Brincat, 2011: 428-432). In order to address the above-mentioned issues in the final stages of this contribution it is necessary to describe some features of ME⁸.

3.1 Segmentals

In Figure 1 below I present a comparison of the vowel charts in Maltese and in RP, as formulated by Vella (1994: 68). One immediately notices how in Standard Maltese a number of vowels of RP are not attested, and how especially the absence of central vowels in Maltese (as shown by the circles drawn in the two vowel charts below) often lead to a rather distinct pronunciation of English when spoken by Maltese nationals.

Figure 1: Vowel chart – Maltese & RP



In order to exemplify this I will take account of the / ə / of RP, which is absent in standard Maltese, as this is normally replaced by other phonemes in Maltese-English (ME), as may be seen in the following examples, reproduced from Calleja, (1987: 87):

	ME	RP	
• husband	[həzbɪnt]	[həzbənd]	replaced by /ɪ/
• photography	[fəʊtəgrɪfi]	[fəʊtəgrəfi]	replaced by /i/
• innocence	[ɪnəsens]	[ɪnəsəns]	replaced by /ə/
• insufficient	[ɪnsəfɪjnt]	[ɪnsəfɪjnt]	replaced by /ə/

As far as consonants are concerned, there are a number of significant differences between RP and ME. Once again these can be largely attributed to transfer from Standard Maltese. Some examples include:

(1) Dental fricatives > alveolar plosives:

/θ / - /ð / - /t / - /d/

	ME	RP
• birthday	[bɜːderɪ]	[bɜːθdeɪ]
• thanks	[tɜːŋks] – [tæŋks]	[θæŋks]
• these	[diːz]	[ðiːz]

(2) Palato-alveolar fricatives (voiced > voiceless):

/ʒ / - /ʃ /

	ME	RP
• garage	[gəˈrɑːʃ]	[gəˈrɑːʒ]

(3) final devoicing (a feature present in Standard Maltese):

	ME	RP
• husband	[həzbɪnt]	[həzbənd]
• explosive	[ɛksplɒsɪf]	[ɪksplɒsɪv]

The above are just a very few select examples which may be useful to obtain an indication of some differences between RP and ME and which also contribute to understand how ME is indeed a variety of Standard English. These examples, however, cannot be treated in isolation, or separately from the sociolinguistic context in which they occur because the use of English in Malta is also strongly related to social class: therefore, for example, within formal contexts there is also the possibility that ME speakers will try to approximate their pronunciation of words to RP. Furthermore, one must also consider that among the Maltese population there is also a percentage of individuals whose first language is ME. In these cases, it is likely that oral production will be more RP-like.

3.2 Morphology and syntax

Morphologically ME registers some noteworthy deviances from RP, among which the overuse of the periphrastic possessive (example 1 below), the extension of the –ing suffix to stative verbs (2), the use of resumptive pronouns⁹ (3) and differences in the use of the definite article when compared to Standard English (example 4):

- (1) I think all of your friends of Gozo had the best day of their lives.
- (2) I am liking this ice-cream.
- (3) These students they are really uncontrollable.
- (4) Educators need to convince the children that plurilingualism is possible¹⁰.

Bonnici (2010: 87-88) also lists some examples regarding the use of ‘stay’ as an aspectual marker indicating a habitual action (example 5), ‘go’ as a quotative verb (6) and ‘like’ in various discourse functions (7 and 8):

- (5) To go abroad, we don’t want to stay changing currency and losing money off the currency.
- (6) I’m not going to go, “Let’s see who’s online, let me go speak.”
- (7) I read that in like, two day or three days, you know.
- (8) It was a big car with like a trailer and motorbikes on it.

The use of interrogatives in ME, as reported by Attard (2010), is frequently formulated through a marked intonational pattern. This occurs when ‘do’ is omitted (examples 9 and 10) and when declarative questions, involving no syntactic inversion, are used (11 and 12):

- (9) You want a coffee?
- (10) He found it?
- (11) He is going there?
- (12) She would like a DVD?

Many instances, including some of the above, are the result of the transfer of syntactic structures from Maltese. The following are some explicit examples of such transfer, quoted from Mazzon (1992), Hull (1993) and Brincat (2003), in which I italicise the corresponding Maltese forms which lead to a literal translation in ME:

- (13) The magazine *comes out* with the newspaper [SE¹¹: the magazine is issued/published with the newspaper]
(Maltese: Ir-rivista *toħrog* mal-gažżetta)
- (14) The book is *at me* [SE: I have got the book]
(Maltese: Il-ktieb *għandi*)
- (15) I *made* a photocopy [SE: I photocopied it]
(Maltese: *Għamilt* kopja)
- (16) I’ll *pay you* a drink [SE: I’ll offer you a drink]
(Maltese: *Inħallaslek* drink)
- (17) I *stayed playing* all day [SE: I played all day]
(Maltese: *Bqajt nilgħab* il-ġurnata kollha)
- (18) *Don’t jump* the queue! [SE: Keep your place in the queue!]
(Maltese: *Taqbiżx* il-kju)

The above utterances are often accompanied by paraverbal cues (especially intonation and stress patterns) which are characteristic of ME and are different in similar utterances in RP/SE. I must stress once again that one must consider the use of such morphological, syntactic, lexical and prosodical features of ME in the light of the sociolinguistic context in which they may be uttered. There are undoubtedly a number of ME speakers who will sense a high degree of markedness in a number of the examples presented above and who would also monitor their own speech in order to avoid them, especially within certain social circles. Other Maltese nationals, on the other hand will use them frequently whenever they speak in ME and will possibly not realise that other forms would be used in Standard English.

Discussion and conclusion

As highlighted in this contribution, the use of English in Malta is undoubtedly a differentiating social factor which in some cases may also create division within society as it is often associated with individuals pertaining to higher socio-economic sector. Having said this, it must also be remarked that over the recent years, through more widespread education and thanks to initiatives which allow a larger sector of society to gain access to tertiary education, the social divisions which in the past were clearly determined also a result of language use are becoming somewhat more blurred. Though the issue merits further investigation, the globalisation that English has experienced recently has also affected the perception of the language in Malta which is now seen less as a product of a colonial past (this is also undoubtedly also due to the fact that Malta's Independence was achieved almost 50 years ago) and more as a 'window to the world'.

Speakers who use ME more regularly, especially those who use it at home from childhood, will possess a variety which generally approximates RP. On the other hand Maltese L1 speakers from lower socio-economic groups will often speak ME with a heavily marked 'Maltese pronunciation' which inevitably distances it from RP. Also, as Brincat (2009) and Peska (2009) among others have shown, attitudes towards English are less positive among school students who are academically less successful, mainly because English is not only perceived as the language of the 'other' but also because the difficulty experienced in order to learn this language causes obstacles to one's education, often precluding one from accessing tertiary institutions. This inevitably creates 'differences' within Maltese society which are also partly the result of one's competence in English.

For this reason, although Schnieder's (2007) dynamic model of post-colonial English is mainly based on social rather than individual bilingualism, Thusat et al.'s (2009) observation, referred to earlier, regarding ME as currently being in the nativisation phase possibly moving towards the endonormative one, may hold for a number of Maltese individuals whose competence of English is adequate and who might speak regularly in ME. However, in other situations, this may not be the case, especially for those who do not possess a good knowledge of English, who only use ME sporadically and who might harbour negative attitudes towards English even from a very young age. I therefore agree with Tusat's et. al's (2009:31) conclusion that the applicability of Schnieder's (2007) dynamic model may indeed not fit so comfortably when referring to Malta, also because of the heterogenous use of ME within the Maltese society and because of the different ways this variety is perceived.

The same authors also point out three main factors which may be affecting English in Malta: though two of them are undoubtedly correct (namely geographical differences related to the use of English in Malta and the tourism industry, which attracts foreigners to Malta in order to learn English), the other is disputable to say the least: reference is made to the Italian language and "to the increasing adoption of Italian words and phrases by Maltese youths" (Thusat et al. 2009: 31). The truth is that Italian gained popularity in Malta till the early Nineties when exposure to the language was widespread via television programmes. Italian is certainly an adstrate of the Maltese language and many words in Maltese are of Italian origin (as shown in the extract presented in the introduction): however the popularity of this language is on the decline in Malta since now television programmes in English and other languages are available via satellite, as documented in Caruana (2009). Italian in Malta is therefore not affecting issues related to the development of ME or the inclusion of English borrowings in the Maltese language.

The presence of English in Malta is obviously a direct consequence of the island's colonial past. It must be, however, contrarily to what often occurs as a result of colonialism, considered to be a heritage to protect rather than an imposition to do away with. There still is the need, however, to develop more awareness of the fact that the English language is indeed an important inheritance in Malta and enables access to a wealth of knowledge and opportunities. Safeguarding, developing and promoting the use of Maltese – the language of local identity – is a process which can be complementary, and not in conflict with, the maintenance and the improvement of the standards of English. At the same time, while English is an essential part of Malta's bilingual identity and a means in order to improve the country's social and economic status, it can undoubtedly also lead to social differences as it is still mostly accessible to those who attain high standards of education or who speak English regularly at home as a result of their socio-economic background. The educational system plays a capital role when it comes to promoting English in Malta by emphasizing that gaining competence in this language is indeed desirable and that Maltese-English cannot be always viewed in the light of and compared to Standard English: it is a local variety which shares a number of features with other World Englishes and also, despite having some specific features, with other post-colonial settings.

¹ www.census2005.gov.mt, access date 7th June 2011. Over the course of the past six years these figures might have changed quite significantly, even because of the recent migratory movements towards Malta from North Africa.

² See Cassola (1998) for further details.

³ Italian was Malta's official language till 1936, when, following a series of decisions which were the result of the political strife of those times, (see Hull (1993) on the 'language question' in Malta), it was demoted and substituted by English and Maltese.

⁴ Malta was granted its Independence in 1964, became a Republic in 1974 and totally ceased hosting British military and naval bases in 1979.

⁵ *Illum* means 'today' in Maltese.

⁶ See Azzopardi-Alexander & Borg (1997: 136) for further details.

⁷ This is essentially a variety of Maltese in which numerous words in English are used, including words which may be integrated into Maltese phonological and morphological patterns but are not attested in dictionaries.

⁸ Bonnici (2009: 411-412) provides a comprehensive list of phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical features of Maltese-English. These are compiled through a number of sources. Mazzon (1993: 196-197) and Brincat (2011: 426-428) also provide a number of examples.

⁹ This morphological structure is used frequently in Maltese, especially in the spoken variety.

¹⁰ Example (1) is from a comment to an article on a Maltese website. Examples (2) and (3) were heard recently in conversations in Malta. Example (3) was overheard at university, whereas example (2) was heard during a conversation between two Maltese English-speaking children. Example (4) is taken from the written work of a student attending a tertiary institution in Malta.

¹¹ SE=Standard English

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