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*Before Maltese: Languages in Malta from Prehistory
to the Byzantine age*

Diglossia through the Ages

Due to its position exactly at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta's contacts have not been limited to its immediate neighbours, Sicily and North Africa. Throughout its history it has been at the mercy of the naval powers that sailed the Sicilian channel and the Maltese language has been shaped by its inhabitants' contacts with the peoples who governed the islands or established colonies there. For thousands of years, when the inhabitants had to live off the islands' resources, the population was small, around 5,000, and this factor may have allowed language substitution a number of times. This may surprise us today, but before the Romantic Age people had a very pragmatic view of language: like any other tool it was prized mostly for its efficiency. The population multiplied in the past one thousand years, thanks to waves of settlers from abroad who forged strong contacts with the locals and introduced bilingual interaction in various domains. For this reason a history of the Maltese language must be seen in the wider linguistic history of the Maltese islands and offers linguists in both the historical and typological fields an intriguing case study of a "minor" language that survived alongside a series of "major" languages like Arabic, Latin, Sicilian, Italian and English. These enjoyed a lot of prestige in Malta but their use was restricted to the literate minority.

Before writing

The earliest evidence of human presence in Malta goes back to about 5000 BC and belongs to the Neolithic culture that practised farming and lived in fixed settlements. The first inhabitants were descendants of the migration movement that began in the East in 9500 BC and reached southern Italy and Sicily between 6000 and 5000 BC. Written evidence is obviously lacking and therefore linguistic information can only be indirect. Archaeological finds dating back to 5000-4300 BC revealed a community that had Sicilian origins and kept regular contacts with and was influenced by Sicilian developments (Ghar Dalam and Stentinello; Trump

2002: 46). In subsequent phases (4100-2500 BC) close commercial contacts with Sicilian sites (Żebbuġ and San Cono; Trump 2002: 249) must have kept the varieties of the same language mutually intelligible in spite of geographic isolation. The orientation of the famous megalithic temples towards the North and Northwest has been interpreted as an indication of the group's ethnic origins (Stoddart *et al.* 1993, p. 16). The Temple civilization (3600-2500 BC) represents an enigma for scholars who admire the extraordinary achievements in art and architecture, but are intrigued by the fact that the same people show no knowledge of writing or metals. In Egypt the first pyramids were built a thousand years after the construction of the Maltese temples, and the spiral decorations of Tarxien predate those on the stelae of Mycenae by 1500 years, but writing was used in Mesopotamia since 4000 BC and copper was already known in Europe around 3000 BC. For about 1500 years the Temple civilization did not undergo cultural changes, the population increased naturally, without migratory influxes, and this implies linguistic continuity.

It is practically impossible to identify the language spoken in prehistoric Malta, but material clues help to recognize at least the language family. The traditional theory of the origins and diaspora of the Indo-Europeans expounded by Marija Gimbutas (1997) and J.P. Mallory (1989) dates their penetration into Europe between 2000 and 1500 BC. In the light of this theory, between 5000 and 1500 BC the inhabitants of Malta would have spoken a non-Indo-European language called "Mediterranean". This family of languages is unknown because its speakers did not leave any written evidence, and its only vestiges are words that crept into the Indo-European languages of southern Europe. The pre-Indo-European peoples comprised the Iberians, Basques, Ligurians, Rhaetians, Etruscans, Piceni, Sicans and Caucasians. The Sicilian origins of the earliest inhabitants of Malta and their contacts with Sicily suggest that Sican was spoken in Malta.

Colin Renfrew (1987) asserts that the Indo-Europeans began moving out of Anatolia in the seventh millennium, spreading agriculture and animal-rearing as well as their language wherever they settled. According to this theory the first known inhabitants of Malta who came over from Sicily around 5000 BC spoke an Indo-European language. Since archaeology shows continuity in Malta between 5000 and 2500 BC, the inhabitants of Malta probably spoke an Indo-European language that came from Sicily for 2500 years. Over time, geographic isolation may have provoked a process of divergence but commercial contacts with the parent group may have maintained mutual intelligibility.

Towards 2500 BC the Temple Culture collapsed rapidly, due to an epidemic, mass desertion, famine resulting from the excessive exploitation of the land, or a merciless invasion by a warring people. In each case the previously spoken language would have been lost and a new one acquired. A violent conquest seems

plausible because the new community left weapons and fortifications that show up its warlike character. Moreover, the total absence of the previous culture's characteristics seems to point to a massacre or some form of hiatus for a certain period of time. A drastic fall in population followed by immigration point to language shift in the Bronze Age, but no inscriptions or references in foreign literary sources survived from the initial phase (2350-1500 BC), and so we do not know how the new colonizers called themselves or how they were called by their neighbours. The only information comes from their handcrafts which are similar to objects found in Sicily (Capo Graziano). In the second phase, 1500-1000 BC, the population increased and the economy improved. Aegean-inspired artefacts imported into Malta in the Bronze Age include a few objects with engraved signs resembling characters of Linear A script such as the syllables *di*, *pu* and *du* (Bonanno 1999: 98-99). These are the oldest examples of writing discovered in the Maltese islands and could witness the use of Minoan or an Aegean language, at least as a high language. These clues are confirmed by literary sources which are considered "perhaps distant recollections of a closer relationship between the Maltese islands and the Mycaenean world than archaeology has revealed till now: a Mycaenean settlement or, more probably, a simple commercial outpost" (Bonanno 1999: 100-101). However, it is not known how widespread the use of proto-Greek was or for how long it was spoken. Trump safely concludes that "the Tarxien Cemetery folk came from the northeast" but affinities with Apulia and later with Calabria (ninth century Bahrija) complicate the picture (Trump 2002: 250, 275) if this means that Sicily was bypassed.

Determining the language which was spoken in Malta during the Bronze Age is therefore not simple. Contacts with distant peoples were not lacking, although these were usually mediated through Sicily. After the Sicans, who according to the traditional hypothesis were not Indo-Europeans, and the Elymians, who spoke an Indo-European language, the Sicels (Siculi), who were Indo-Europeans, came to Sicily around 1200 and pushed the Sicans to the west. Sicily was thus divided into two parts: the Sicans in the west, with the Elymians at Segesta, Eryx (Erice) and Entella, and the Sicels in the east. The latter colonized Sicily between 1200 and 1000 BC and therefore they could have inhabited Malta since they had important sites at Pantalica and Noto and, like the Maltese, used iron but not writing.

From the Phoenicians to the Byzantines

The picture in the Mediterranean changed rapidly towards 1000 BC when more robust ships made travel safer over long distances and allowed the Phoenicians and the Greeks to develop commercial activities. The first outposts became colonies when the Phoenicians of Tyre founded Carthage in 814 BC and the Greeks settled

at Naxos in Sicily in 750 BC. Malta appealed more to the Phoenicians as a stepping stone towards Carthage, but at first they only made short stops. Later they took the island in a peaceful manner and coexisted with the local population of the late Bronze Age. This is the first clear case of bilingualism in Malta.

Despite the evidence of writing, the linguistic situation in the Phoenician-Punic period is not clear. About sixty inscriptions in Phoenician and Punic have been described and dated between the seventh and the first centuries BC, the earliest one being a cippus commemorating an offering to Ba'al Hammon, but they only witness the high language. Peaceful coexistence between the Late Bronze Age people and the Phoenician colonizers probably led to their hybridization, which implies bilingualism for a stretch of time, depending on the strength of the two communities, their attitude to one another and the rate of the symbiotic process. The Indo-European language of the Bronze Age culture was practised in the lower domains (whence the absence of inscriptions), whereas Phoenician was learned by the native social groups who were in contact with the new, powerful settlers. Closer relations between members of the two communities in trade and employment or through intermarriage spread the more prestigious Phoenician and eventually the old language was abandoned. This is the usual pattern of language shift through diglossia but, since no writer hinted at the spoken language, the only clue is that the Phoenician domination was long enough to lead to Punic monolingualism.

At a certain point Greek inscriptions come into the picture. Proto-Greeks knew Malta, Greek material remains have occasionally turned up as direct imports, but the use of the Greek language in Malta as *acrolect* is now firmly placed from the fourth century BC onwards as a result of Hellenistic influence on the Carthaginians and later on it was consolidated by the increasing influence of Sicily during the Roman period (Bonanno 2005: 25). The earliest full Greek text discovered in Malta is on two identical marble candelabra with a parallel Punic text. These are the most noteworthy reminders of that age's cultural symbiosis, the sculpture's style being Hellenistic and the bilingual inscription witnessing the use of both Punic and Greek as high languages in the temple of Melqart and Ashtart (Herakles and Hera/Juno). The candelabra are dated to the third or second century BC and were excavated in 1694. One is exhibited at the archaeological museum in Valletta while the other is at the Louvre in Paris. It helped Jean-Jacques Barthélemy to decipher Phoenician script in 1758 (see Bonanno 2005: 150-153). Another very important Greek inscription is the Demetrios bronze tablet, an honorary consulate conferred by the Maltese authorities on a citizen of Syracuse in recognition of his services in the first century BC (Bonanno 2005: 154-5, 172).

The Romans conquered Malta in 218 BC and the islands became part of the

Sicilian province. Livy explained that the Carthaginians had 2000 soldiers stationed there, which implies a population of about 10,000 persons. However, the takeover was peaceful and allowed the practice of three cultures, Punic, Hellenic and Roman, in the first two centuries of Roman rule which suggests the overlapping use of Punic, Greek and Latin. The earliest full text in Latin is a marble inscription written under Augustus (27 BC – 14 AD) and commemorates the restoration of the temple of Proserpina (Bonanno 2005: 203). With one exception in Greek, all the epigraphy found in Malta and Gozo dating to the Imperial age is in Latin. Roman culture in Malta flourished mostly from the first to the third century AD, and although the abundant inscriptions only witness the high language, they show that Latin replaced Punic and Greek and remained Malta's *acrolect* for five centuries. The question of the spoken language is less clear. The Roman conquest everywhere fostered a very slow process of acculturation, and Latinization was even slower. Rather than being imposed, the use of Latin was conceded as a privilege to the peoples that desired and deserved to become part of the large Latin-speaking community. In Italy it took three centuries to be achieved and in Sicily the process was even more complicated because Greek was widely used and enjoyed high prestige. In the eastern half of the Empire, which was culturally Greek, Latin never established itself and, significantly, Sicily and Malta were right on the border of the two halves. Moreover, in western Sicily as in Malta, Punic was still spoken under Roman rule, and survived perhaps up to the first or second century AD (Varvaro 1981: 26-7).

It is not surprising that the author of the *Acts of the Apostles* calls the inhabitants of Malta “barbarians”, although they helped the shipwrecked survivors and treated them kindly. The definition was a linguistic, not a social one, and implies that in the year AD 60 the inhabitants of Malta did not speak correct Latin or Greek. This has been interpreted as proof that the Maltese spoke Punic, which seems plausible, but St. Luke did not say that they spoke Punic, and therefore *barbaroi* could denote a local (“corrupt”) Greek or Latin dialect. In any case, one cannot stretch the interpretation of the passage to the whole period up to the Arab conquest, which happened 800 years later. In the meantime Roman rule went on for 400 years (and was followed by 350 years of Byzantine domination). In those 400 years most of the peoples of Western Europe abandoned their tongues and became Latin speakers, and so did the coastal areas of North Africa. The adoption of Latin in Malta is likely, considering the length of time and the smallness of the population (5,000-10,000 inhabitants). The process would have started with bilingualism in social circles and areas where contacts with the Romans were intense, like the only town and the ports. Conditions in Malta were similar to Sicily's, where the Romans found a population that spoke Punic in the west and Greek in the east. As Punic receded with the decline of Carthage, in Sicily the shift to Latin or Greek was inevitable since Latin enjoyed the backing of administrative power while Greek

culture commanded respect in Rome itself. It is unlikely that things went differently in Malta. Bonanno finds proof of the use of Latin at the lower social levels in modest funerary inscriptions (2005: 269).

The end of Roman rule in Malta is not documented and presumably followed a lengthy period of decline. In 535 the Maltese islands came under the jurisdiction of the Byzantine Empire in 535, together with Sicily. Literary sources from the period are scarce, and the lack of architectural remains indicates economic and social decline and a decrease in population. Lately, excavations have confirmed the crisis of the third and fourth centuries but a large amount of Byzantine pottery has come to light, showing a revival in the sixth and seventh centuries. Numerous amphorae witness considerable mercantile activity. Bruno and Cutajar (2002) distinguish two phases, the high period (up to the seventh century) which shows expansion in the town, and the late period, in the eighth and ninth centuries. The latter was marked by the depopulation of the countryside following the Islamic conquest of North Africa, but still showed commercial contacts with Tunisia. From the linguistic point of view, the scarcity of epigraphic and literary sources is such that the adoption of Greek instead of Latin can only be based on conjecture. The length of the Byzantine period (350 years), the population crisis, the nearness of Syracuse and its political and social power (it was the capital from 535 and residence of the Emperor Constantine II from 663 to 668) certainly favoured the adoption of Greek. A total shift was possible because relations between Malta and Syracuse were strong in the Byzantine period.

Few studies throw light on the linguistic situation in Byzantine Malta. They mostly concern place-names and personal names but a technical clue could be the unvoicing of consonants in certain contexts. Maltese shares this feature with the Arabic of Cyprus and the Arabic spoken by the Greeks of Sicily, and therefore it may show that Greek was spoken in Malta before the Arab conquest (which is perfectly logical) or that it was the substratum of the Sicilian variety of Arabic that took root in Malta. Moreover, the vocalic structure of Sicilian on three levels (open, mid-close and close) has been attributed to the influence of Byzantine Greek (Fanciullo 1985), and this characteristic is deeply rooted in Maltese where it is applied to all words adopted from Italian and to English words of Latin origin.

The myth of the Punic origins of Maltese

For a number of centuries the problem of the origins of Maltese was hotly debated and the best-loved assumption was that Maltese descends from Phoenician. It was given great importance because etymology got entangled with the issues of race and nationalism. The identification of nationality and language is a very old

concept that achieved popularity in Europe thanks to the Bible, philosophers like Herder and the Romantic movement. In the nineteenth century these ideas played a very important part in the rise of certain nations, like Germany and Italy, and the consolidation of others that had been unified earlier. However, sometimes they degenerated into racism with the claims that one language was intrinsically better than the others, just as a race claimed to be superior to the others. The concepts of “people” and “language” were static, the origins of a nation were considered more important than its present condition, the past was idealized and the dangerous concept of purism crept into both the ethnic and linguistic domains. For this reason debates were highly emotional.

In Malta the issue was seen in a genetic and universalistic way, and the hint about the language of the inhabitants in St. Luke’s narration of St. Paul’s shipwreck was taken as proof that the Maltese spoke neither Latin nor Greek, and that therefore they must have spoken Punic. It was believed that if one spoke Punic one belonged to the Punic race, and these were the descendants of the Phoenicians. This was something that the Maltese could be proud of since it raised them above the status of their neighbours and gave them a prestigious identity. The hypothesis was first mentioned by Quintinus in 1536 (Vella 1980) and was repeated by many authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see Cassola 1991-92). Ironically, Punic script had not been deciphered yet (Barthélemy presented his *mémoire* in 1758), and so scholars had only a vague idea that Punic was a Semitic language, therefore similar to Arabic, but conveniently not identical because it belonged to a different race. Historical linguistics was in its infancy then, and linguistic relations were hazy. This is highlighted by what Hieronymus Megiser wrote about the Maltese and their tongue: “Although they are Christians, they make use of a language which is Saracen, Moorish or Carthaginian or ‘lingua punica’, which is a kind of Arabic and which has its origin in Hebrew” (1606, p. 8: English translation in Friggieri & Freller 1998: 134). This genetic muddle was proclaimed by one of the foremost linguists of the time. Although most foreign scholars simply considered the Maltese language “African” or defined it as “Arabic”, the Maltese upheld the Punic myth because it satisfied their national pride. It also conformed to the zeal of the Enlightenment and the Romantic age in the search for the deepest roots of national identity. This is evident in the subtitle of a grammar by De Soldanis (1750), *Della lingua punica presentemente usata da’ Maltesi ... ovvero Nuovi documenti li quali possono servire di lume all’antica lingua etrusca*, where the author not only insisted on the prestige of the Maltese people’s ancient Punic language, but increased it by relating it to Etruscan.

In popular opinion myth is often stronger than science because it appeals to the imagination and to sentiment, whereas the detachment and complexity of scientific arguments puzzle the man in the street. However, the links between Maltese and

Arabic had already been perceived by the Maltese historian Gian Francesco Abela as early as 1647 and Wilhelm Gesenius produced scientific and detailed proof that should have settled the issue in 1810 (Kontzi 1994-95: 26-30). And yet Michel Anton Vassalli only recognized them in 1827 and after that a number of Maltese scholars continued to spread folk etymologies. The issue was later exploited for political ends when the British government launched the process of Anglicization and strove to suppress the Maltese defence of Italian culture. In the eighteenth century, the time was not yet ripe for Maltese to carry out the role of *acrolect*, because it was still considered a dialect. Therefore far-sighted scholars embarked on its standardization and produced a steady stream of literary works, but some of them felt the need to stress the prestige that came from its noble lineage: the mythical relationship with Punic and Phoenician was deemed indispensable.

Unfortunately, one still hears amateurs repeat that Maltese derives from Punic, and this misconception occasionally turns up in guide-books for tourists, but scholars who seriously examined the question, like Prosper Grech (1961) and Alexander Borg (1976, 1996), proved that there are no traces of Punic in the Maltese language. The fact that terms of Latin or Greek origin are too few, despite the likelihood of successive language shifts, brings us to the most intriguing aspect of Maltese, namely that it does not have a perceivable substratum belonging to one of the languages spoken in the islands before the Arab conquest.

The real origins of Maltese

The beginning of the Arab domination of Malta and Gozo has traditionally been dated to the year 870. The situation was conceived as that of an autochthonous people dominated by a foreign minority, more or less on the lines of the islanders' experience under the Knights of St. John, the French and the British. Very few people realized how small the population was then. Literary sources were few, short and sometimes contradictory and no critical philological exercise was attempted to determine the more reliable ones. Scholars depended heavily on Michele Amari, who had described the situation prevailing in Muslim Sicily, which included Malta, in his monumental work published in 1857. Little progress had been made after that.

In 1990 a passage was discovered written in the fourteenth century by al-Himyari, an Arab historian who had access to documents that were contemporary with the events recorded (Brincat 1995). In the longest and most detailed account of the two main events in the Arab period in Malta, al-Himyari describes a violent attack in 870 which left the island in ruins and, after a period of relative neglect, a fresh settlement in 1048-49. He also says that the city was rebuilt and improved.

From the linguistic viewpoint these facts are very significant. The year 870 certainly marks the end or drastic reduction of the Byzantine community, which may have been Greek-speaking, and the introduction of Arabic as an acrolect with the use of Berber as the more likely spoken dialect of the invaders. The period of neglect may have witnessed two small communities, the survivors and the conquerors' garrison, speaking two different languages and slowly intermingling in 150 years. In 1048-9 the sudden influx of a 5000-strong community, composed of Muslims (400 combatants with families) and their more numerous slaves, absorbed the descendants of the Byzantine community who must have been too few for their language to leave its mark on the new one. As to the immigrants, had the slaves not been Arabic-speaking their mother-tongue would have given the Arabic of Malta a very strong local flavour. Comparative studies, however, reveal marked similarities with the Maghreb variety which had evolved in Sicily under Arab rule and which was still spoken under the Normans (Agius 1996). In this light Maltese appears as the only survivor of a linguistic situation which prevailed in most of Sicily and large parts of Spain, and this gives it considerable historical value.

Although the Spanish reconquista and the Norman invasion of Sicily were achieved by military action, there was a long period of religious, cultural and linguistic co-existence, and this is reflected in the substantial Arabic substrate that survives in the dialects of both Spain and Sicily. In Malta and Pantelleria, each cut off from the larger island by about 90 km, this coexistence lasted longer. In Pantelleria the Arabic dialect survived till the seventeenth or eighteenth century, when the Sicilian dialect of Trapani took over (Tropea 1988), but it was marked by a very strong Arabic substrate (Brincat 1977). In Malta Arabic remained the principal stratum although it steadily absorbed Sicilian elements.

The point of departure of the immigrant community is unknown but internal linguistic evidence points in two complementary directions. The first one links up with the old cities of Tunisia, especially Kairouan. Martine Vanhove (1998) explains that the first wave in the Arabicization of the Maghreb was limited to the cities and the larger fortified towns. The second wave, which followed the advance of the Banū Hilāl and other tribes from Egypt in the eleventh century, was slow and took more than a hundred years to spread to the Maghreb. Consequently it did not reach Sicily and Malta, which had already been conquered by the Normans by then. Pre-Hilalian Arabic was a mosaic of dialects which had coalesced into a kind of koine, but had maintained differentiation due to the heterogeneity of the process that peopled Ifriqiyya. The French scholar analyzed a number of phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical features of Maltese and, following a comparative exercise, concluded that 25 features out of 37 place Maltese among the urban dialects of the pre-Hilalian Maghreb, whereas out of the other 12 features only 3 are common to the Bedouin dialects. She then found that 16 out of those 25

features are innovations, and so she underlines the importance of Maltese for a better knowledge of the Maghreb dialects' evolution because some of the innovations were introduced after the linguistic Arabicization of Malta.

Fully aware of the difficulties posed by such a historical comparative exercise, Vanhove recommends caution but she suggests that Maltese should be placed among the "peripheral" Arabic dialects, like those of Spain and Sicily, because the conquest of Sicily set off from the cities of Tunisia, Tripolitania and Algeria. Another significant factor is that after the Norman conquest, and especially after Frederick II's expulsion of the Muslims, Malta only had conflictual relations with the external Arab-Islamic world (Saracen raids, the Ottoman Siege of 1565), while contacts within the island were limited to the Muslim slaves at the time of the Knights, with the result that Arabic enjoyed very low esteem. Isolation allowed the Maltese variety to develop independently, free of the influence of spoken or written varieties of Arabic. Comrie (1991) too dwells on certain features of Maltese and concludes that the language can be considered as a depository of archaisms that were lost in Arabic dialects (p. 238) and that therefore it can shed light on their development (p. 243).

Romanization

After the Norman conquest Romanization kept increasing in Malta and complemented the fundamental elements of the local variety of Arabic. Unlike full re-Christianization, which was achieved rapidly, linguistic Romanization was slow because the authorities did not implement a linguistic policy. The Sicilian viceroys in the Angevin, Aragonese and Castillian periods (1266-1530), and later the Knights were only interested in the high language which was available to a small fraction of the population. The earliest documents received and written in Malta were in Latin (the first known dates back to 1198 and was accompanied by an Arabic version) but various Romance dialects were spoken due to the presence of Genoese counts (1191-1123), exiles from Abruzzi (1224), French and Catalan soldiers (in 1268 and 1283 respectively). For geographical, administrative and practical reasons the largest and most consistent presence was Sicilian and this left a very strong mark on the language. Maltese soldiers and sailors employed by the rulers rubbed shoulders with the immigrants, initiating the symbiotic process of Arabic and Sicilian. Frederick II's expulsion of Muslims in 1224 caused a significant shift in population but, as in Sicily, many preferred conversion to banishment. In 1241 Muslims still made up a third of the islands' population but the year 1249 saw the end of the Muslim religion in Malta. Catholic orders established monasteries between 1371 and 1452 and churches mushroomed from 10 to 430 between 1350 and 1575. While Latin was the formal language in liturgy,

the local tongue was used for interaction with the faithful. This practice, and the exceedingly poor school system, ensured the survival of Maltese because the majority remained monolingual since primary education was only made compulsory in 1946 (for a linguistic history of Malta see Brincat 2004).

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