

Joseph Aquilina
(*Malta*)

THE PROBLEMS OF A BILINGUAL DICTIONARY

The compilation of a dictionary involves its author in the arduous task of a systematic collection and ordering of the words current in the spoken language. In the historically more comprehensive type of dictionary words which have fallen out of use and therefore, strictly speaking, no longer belong to the contemporary generation of the compiler nonetheless belong to the linguistic archives of the people.

There are different kinds of dictionaries. The simplest and least lexically comprehensive are dictionaries which give a word for word explanation and stop there. These are the practical quick reference dictionaries suitable for school children and adults who want to know the meaning of a word to meet a specific linguistic situation there and then. This is then the minimum practical sufficiency. But every civilized nation, that looks after its own language as it looks after its own museums, keeps a record thereof in its linguistic archive. What served a linguistic purpose in the past is past history; but the past is the people's heritage.

The native language of the writer of this article is a lexically mixed language, grammatically Semitic with its morphological scaffolding largely North African Arabic going back to 870—1090 when Malta was an Arab colony, inevitably an Arab-speaking country. From 1090 onwards (the year when the Normans conquered Malta) which marked practically the end, though not totally, of Arabic linguistic infiltration of the people's language, Maltese received considerable lexical accretions from Old Sicilian and Old Italian. The influx of loanwords continues to this very day. Political colonialism involved Malta for several centuries in one of the sinister side-effects of foreign rule, namely cultural and intellectual colonialism. Foreign rulers imposed their own language on the people and hardly ever encouraged the people to express their national identity through their own language. At one time, most Maltese intellectuals, scientists and creative authors preferred to write in Italian and, later, in English with a more widespread readership. This explains two things in the history of Maltese culture. It explains the comparatively late appearance of creative literature in the people's own tongue and the comparatively late publication of grammars and dictionaries which, however, chronologically preceded creative literature.

In spite of these disadvantages, the Maltese have compiled so far 13 dictionaries of their language, three of which Dessoulavy's (1938); Barbera's (1939) and E. Serracino Inglott's still in course of publication are also etymological (Dessoulavy's entirely so). The first difficulty that the compiler of the Maltese dictionary meets with and must overcome is that of devising a system which satisfies the hybrid, but none the less homogeneous, nature of the language still morphologically Arabic but lexically mixed from different sources. Since the primary source is based on an Arabic foundation vocabu-

271440

lary and the secondary sources, numerically larger and ideologically European and closer to modern times, the lexicographer must integrate hundreds of loanwords from Sicily, Italy and in modern times also from the English speaking world. The lexical two-stream structure is integrated within the framework of a Semitic language the words of which are systematically tied up with Root-Consonants as against the Stem-Index of Romance loanwords. European dictionaries are alphabetical. All that the compiler of a European bilingual or monolingual dictionary has to do is to list the words according to the letter of the alphabet regardless of different sources and, making sure that none fall out of place, give the correct explanation and illustrate contextual usages. In the dictionary of a Semitic language, such as Maltese, the order can be both alphabetical and by roots. It is alphabetical according to the general rule because the main words that provide the roots for their derivatives singly fall into an alphabetical classification. But every such main entry covers also the more or less numerous scatter thereof.

The advantage of this system is that single derived words can be seen to relate to a parent-word (main entry) independently of the first letter with which they begin. To give an example, the verb *tkabbar* to be increased/to become haughty alphabetically is included under letter T, but as a derived form it is also included under the main entry root word *kiber* to grow together with the following differently-vowelled derivatives.

kbir pl. *kbar* 'great; large'; *kobor* 'greatness; old age'; *kburi* 'proud; haughty'; *kburija* 'haughtiness'; *kbarat* 'upper class leaders'; *mkabbar* 'self-conceited'. Another example: *fidil* (< Sic. *fidili*/It. *fedele*) as a main entry is followed by offshoots *feddel* 'to domesticate animals' (Semitic verbal pattern) and *tifdil* both of which as single words occur in different alphabetical places. Under the main entry, they form a lexical unit. When separated alphabetically, they become individual entries cut off from the main entry. In my Maltese-English dictionary these are considered as cross references in their proper alphabetical order but are always referred back to the main entry from which they are derived.

Of the 13 Maltese lexicographers, however, only one followed this word-root system, A. E. Caruana author of *Vocabolario della lingua Maltese* (Malta, 1903). All others have followed the European system of word-placing by alphabetical order of the initial letters. Under this system all derived forms are cut off from the main entry. They are, figuratively speaking, like so many branches cut off from the main trunk of the tree and scattered about all over the dictionary.

The following are the existing dictionaries of the Maltese language:

1. M. A. Vassalli: *Lexicon Melitense-Latino-Italum* (Romae 1796).
2. F. Vella: *Dizionario Portatile delle lingue Maltese, Italiana, Inglese* (Livorno 1843).
3. G. B. Falzon: (a) *Dizionario Maltese, Italiano, Inglese* (Malta 1845; 2nd ed. 1882); (b) *Dizionario Italiano, Inglese, Maltese* (Malta 1882).
4. Baron V. Azzopardi: *Piccolo Dizionario Maltese-Italiano-Inglese* (Malta 1856).
5. S. Mamo: *English-Maltese Dictionary* (Malta 1885).
6. V. Busuttill: (a) *Dizjunariu mill Inglis għall Malti* (Malta 1900; 2nd ed. 1932); (b) *Dizjunariu mill Malti għall Inglis* (Malta 1900).
7. A. E. Caruana: *Vocabolario della lingua Maltese* (Malta 1903).
8. E. Magro: *English and Maltese Dictionary* (Malta Government Printing Office 1906).

9. E. D. Busuttil: (a) *Kalepin (Damm il-Kliem) Malti-Ingliš* (Malta 1941—42; 2nd ed. 1950); (b) *Kalepin Ingliš-Malti* (Malta 1952).
10. Dun Karm: *English-Maltese Dictionary* (Malta Government Printing Office 1936—55).
11. Capt. Paul Bugeja: *Kif tikkellem bl-Ingliš Dizżjunarju Malti-Ingliš* (Malta 1955) — elementary; intended for Maltese migrants wishing to learn colloquial English.
Etymological Dictionaries:
12. C. L. Dessoulavy: *A Maltese-Arabic Word-List* (Lutzac 1938).
13. D. G. Barbera: *Dizionario Maltese-Arabo-Italiano* in 4 vols. (Beyrouth Imprimerie Catholique 1939—40).

To these must be added E. Serracino Inglott's *Il-Miklem Malti* the first Maltese-Maltese dictionary still in course of publication of which hitherto seven volumes have been published. There are also two manuscripts of unpublished dictionaries. These are the Maltese-Maltese dictionaries: one by Fr. J. Mejlaq S. J. who did not live long enough to finish it (he died in 1962); the other is by Agius De Soldanis (1712—1770) whose manuscript is preserved at the Malta National Library. This is the most important manuscript dictionary for the history of Maltese lexicography. The manuscript dictionary consists of the following parts entitled Vol. I *Dizionario Maltese, Italiano, Latino*; Vols. II and III *Italiano Latino Maltese*; Vol. IV *Latino, Italiano, Maltese*. Unfortunately, this dictionary was never published, maybe because it was considered too voluminous or expensive in its time but it served as a fruitful source to later lexicographers, the most outstanding of whom was M. A. Vassalli (1764—1829).

In my article on Maltese lexicography included in my book «Papers in Maltese Linguistics» (1970), published by the University of Malta, I wrote: «There is no doubt that, judging by the standards of the time, De Soldanis was a well-read man but, as the title of his work shows, he was concerned mainly with the hypothetical Punic origin of the Maltese. His dictionaries, though not as systematic as Vassalli's, contain very useful material not only for the lexical study of the language, but also for our folklore. De Soldanis was very prolix and rambling in his explanations. In the course of the rambling, he provided extra information of historic and folkloristic importance which would not, however, be acceptable in a modern dictionary».

For many years Malta suffered from what one may describe as a chronic Language Complex reaching a political climax during the British domination which, politically, but not linguistically, came to an end in 1964 (the year of Malta's Independence). There was a reason for that. Malta is geographically situated very close to Sicily and Italy and for many years formed part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies with a line of Sicilians of Italian Bishops up to 1800. Inevitably, Italian became the official and cultural language of the country, of the Episcopal Curia and the upper class Maltese boosted by Italian Political Refugees belonging to the Italian Risorgimento who settled in Malta. These for their own ends heartily opposed any movement not only that in favour of English, the language of the foreign rulers, but also of any movement in favour of the language of the people. Their aim was, of course, the cultural and political Italianization of the island which in time reached its climax during the Fascist regime in Italy when Mussolini claimed Malta as *terra irredenta*. That claim aroused reactionary feelings in favour of the Maltese language which, officially, replaced Italian and led to the establishment of the first Chair of Maltese in our University held by this writer from 1937 to 1975. Before that, the people were tried in their law courts in Italian which the masses neither spoke nor understood.

The Maltese language received its main impetus from the Labour movement, especially when it was led by Dr. Paul Boffa, and from the Constitutional Party whose leader, Lord Strickland, opposed the Italian language supporting the people's language mainly to facilitate the diffusion of British culture and British political influence in Malta which eventually replaced Italian hegemony. This language complex affected some of our Maltese lexicographers some of whom to assert the Semitic nature of the language either excluded all words of Romance origin completely or reduced their number. The compiler of the unpublished 4-volume dictionary, De Soldanis, whom I have already mentioned took a liberal view of the language. He was by no means exclusive. He included Sicilian and Italian loanwords very frequently. His successor M. A. Vassalli included some loanwords but excluded quite a large number current in his time and still current even in our time.

The paragon of what is known as *Malti Safi* (Pure Maltese, that is without Romance loanwords) was A. E. Caruana in whose *Vocabolario della lingua Maltese* a few Romance loanwords occur because the compiler mistook them for words of Phoenician origin. Incidentally, the Phoenician theory, now debunked, was another language complex which for many years bedevilled Maltese philology and lexicography. Very few of the early grammarians and lexicographers escaped the malady and its crippling effects on the scientific study of the Maltese language. Caruana's *Vocabolario*, which is an example of a linguistic hard-liner, leaves out hundreds of words of Romance origin in current usage. This makes the Maltese look like inarticulate people. For this reason, it deserves to be described more as a vocabulary of Semitic root-words than a dictionary of the Maltese language. Here are some examples from letter A included by Falzon but omitted by A. E. Caruana: *abatija* abbey (< It. *abazia*); *abbord* aboard (< It. *a bordo*); *abbozz* sketch (< It. *abbozzo*); *acċess* acces (< It. *accesso*); *aiċċola* white tunny-fish (< It. *acciola*); *addoċċ* at random (< Sic. *ad occhju*); *adura* to worship (< Sic. *adurari*); *aġġettiv* adjective (< It. *aggettivo*); *agretta* wood sorrel (< It. *agretta*); *ajkla* eagle (< It. *aquila*); *altar/artal* altar (< It. *altare*); *ankra* anchor (< It. *ancora*); *antik* ancient (< It. *antico*); *aptit* appetite (< It. *appetito*); *arblu* mast of a ship (< It. *albero*); *argentier* a silver smith (< It. *argentiere*); *arlogġ* clock; watch (< It. *orologio*); *astronomija* astronomy (< It. *astronomia*); *awtur* author (< It. *autore*); *avukat* advocate, pleader (< It. *avvocato*); *azzar* steel (< Sic *azzaru* It. *acciaio*). These are some of the more current words. There are, of course, others left out. It is in the manner he recorded the Semitic entries by roots that his dictionary stands out as more scientifically planned than the other dictionaries. But, even so, A.E. Caruana's *Vocabolario* has many shortcomings.

The compiler of a monolingual dictionary enjoys an advantage over the compiler of the bilingual dictionary in the explanation of words rooted in the soil of the country that are alien to another language. In this case, the compiler of a bilingual dictionary attempts explanations by periphrasis through words which often fail to reach some of the semantic frontiers of the word. In this case, the lexicographer can solve the problem by complementary illustrations that are justifiable pictorial aids to the fuller understanding of words. Such are in Maltese, and I should say also in other languages, words indicating primitive local crafts and their popular technical vocabulary; names of the different parts of tools etc. This is a difficulty I met with when I had to describe in English the single parts of a windmill (*miħna*) of which only two survive: one in Malta and another in Gozo as objects of curiosity, or the single parts of the primitive wooden plough (*moħriet*) or the loom (*newl*). However carefully worded periphrasis can be, it is the picture that helps the eye to see and grasp the exact meaning.

Another difficulty for the compiler of a bilingual dictionary is the translation of idioms and colloquial phraseology which represent different attitudes and situations

that may be common to languages belonging to the same family, say French, Italian and Spanish, but are not common to languages belonging to different families as in the case of Arabic and Italian or English and Maltese. In the case of Maltese, we have (i) phraseology that is easy to translate and (ii) phrases rather too difficult to explain in another language generally because of the untranslatable nuances. Here are examples of group (i) from Maltese entry *ra* 'to see/he saw', It. *vedere* and English *to see*. M. *ma kontx tara ruħi*/It. non si vedeva anima viva/Eng. there wasn't a living soul to be seen; M. *it-tabib rah*/It. il medico l'ha visto/Eng. the doctor has seen him; M. *ara li tikkumentah*/It. vedete di accontentarlo/Eng. see about satisfying him; M. *jiem nurih* (minatory)! /It. gliela, farò vedere!/Eng. I'll show him!; M. *ma narax is-siegħa li nerga naraha*/It. non vedo l'ora di rivederla/Eng. I'm looking forward to seeing her again; M. *m'iniex nara bil-ġuħ*/It. non vedo più della fame/Eng. I am dying of hunger; M. *ma jarax lil hinn minn imnieħru*/It. non vede più in là del naso/Eng. he can't see further than the end of his nose; M. *ma nistax narah* (also + *b'għajnejja*)/It. non posso vederlo/Eng. I can't stand the sight of him. These examples illustrate a common basic phraseology which is closer between Maltese and Italian than it is between Maltese and English though, in this case, the basic phraseology is common to the three languages. Group (ii) includes as large a number of Maltese phrases that are not common either to English or Italian of which I reproduce a few examples, which can only be understood by those who know the language, with a literal translation: *ta' arani u la tmissnix*, literally a man to be seen but not touched, for an aloof character; *narah u ma narahx* literally, I see him and I don't see him, having two meanings (a) his health is declining; he hasn't got long to live; (b) the business went bust; *kemm ahna sbieħ min jaf jarana* literally, we are a bunch of good-looking fellows if you can look at us, an ironical expression for 'we are in a mess'. The easier phraseology is that which is common to Romance Maltese (Old Sicilian or Italian). Phraseology that is difficult to translate adequately is that which is peculiar to the language and alien to other languages.

Every language develops peculiar idioms of its own that are not common to other languages which, likewise, develop peculiar idioms that are not common to other languages. Only artificial languages are idiomless. Where the idioms are common they should be translated by the corresponding idioms, but when the idioms are not common to the two languages they should be translated by idioms meaning the same thing but not literally corresponding, though this often means sacrificing some of the ethnic nuances. Examples: *jorgod daps bumarin* literally, he sleeps like a seal/Eng. he sleeps like a log; *tgajjimx ħama* literally, don't stir mud/let sleeping dogs lie.

Another problem that a lexicographer has to face is what to do with so called vulgar words. Vulgarity is both relative and contextual. One has to be careful which words to use when speaking to others, especially in polite society. For this is a situation involving vulgar words in a social context. There are degrees of linguistic formality (conventional/literary style) and informality (familiar/colloquial style). There are also words in public use to which society objects. In a dictionary any word is a social product (a people is judged by its language; the vulgar vocabulary is an integral part thereof). Outside a context, any word is quite impersonal, a mere unrelated lexeme entitled to a place in a dictionary like any other word. The lexicographer is expected to qualify such words as formal or informal/vulgar, certainly not on moral grounds for no word is by itself immoral but by way of instruction to the user of the word in question.

I consider no less entitled to a place in a dictionary words generally regarded as slang because these too, like the rest of the language, are a linguistic social product, a lexical instrument of informal self-expression, very often more colourful and effective

than the formal conventional language. Slang is part of the current language of daily conversation, even if within a more restricted group and therefore eminently suitable for a free dialogue in a play true to life. Generally, we don't talk as we write. The two media do not function similarly. The language of literary books is not always the spoken language of the people. People don't talk like books; and vice-versa.

Mr. E. Serracino Inglott in his monolingual Maltese dictionary (*Il-Miklem Malti*) has included Maltese toponymy. I have followed suit because in the case of Maltese (it might be the case of any other language from a similar angle) some ancient place-names preserve relics of obsolete words that may once have formed part of the living language and therefore are historically important as direct evidences of the origins of the language or an earlier linguistic stratum as well as of its losses through the centuries.

The inclusion of toponymic entries is not an essential nor usual feature of a conventional dictionary. Toponymic words can form the subject-matter of specialised dictionaries (and there are many such dictionaries on the market). I have decided to include as many ancient toponymic and onomastic entries of linguistic importance because both Mr. E. Serracino Inglott and myself have planned a comprehensive word-book. The chances of Maltese specialised dictionaries are very slim. I don't apologise for the unusual inclusion of this feature, but I defend it on the ground of its linguistic importance to the historical appreciation of our language. This is an effort to preserve the linguistic evidence of ancient place-names some of which are being replaced by more recent ones.

My dictionary will be provided with etymological information in square brackets at the end of every main entry. Etymology is the fascinating aspect of a historical dictionary. One must avoid the pitfalls of fanciful derivations based on a superficial phonetic similarity, sheer coincidences, as in the case of Maltese *art* and Eng. *earth* (common meaning but different origin). These phonetically similar, sometimes homophonous, words can lead the unwary etymologist into temptation.

Of special interest to the scholars of Romance languages are some ancient Maltese words, long embedded in the language, which, etymologically, are traced back to Old Sicilian and Italian now extinct words. There is also the serious challenge of words which are of a distinctly Italian word-pattern, but are otherwise etymologically untraceable in modern or Old Sicilian or Italian. A few examples from letters A and B are: *amorin* budgerigar; *anċisa* rebate for a steel window; *ansahun* (a nautical word) bowsprit; *battusa* row-lock; *bekkum* kind of sea-shell; *birwin* plover; *blanzun* a bud; *brajdlj* a kind of mollusc and many more practicable under all the different letters of the alphabet.

Also the Semitic element of the dictionary provides a fruitful field of comparative etymological research covering words which are (a) Common Semitic, some of them like the word *zifen* to dance, classical Arabic replaced by different colloquial words in the Arabic dialects, (b) words which establish an etymological link with the dialects of the Maghreb, and (c) a considerable number of words which are structurally Arabic, but otherwise untraceable to any other Arabic dialect either because they died out in the other dialects or are local formations. There are also interesting hybrids made up of an Arabic word + Italian suffix. Examples: *xemxata* a sunstroke (= *xemx* 'sun'); *diksata* a severe setback (= *diksa* relapse in a disease; + *ta*).

The compilation of a dictionary must be such as to provide handy tools for self-expression at all levels of feeling and speech. Where such verbal sufficiency is lacking there is bound to be insufficiency of self-expression. A good, up-to-date dictionary must include words that express also new ideas and inventions generated by contem-

porary scientific progress. Hence the inevitable influx of neologisms which are, in fact, new words only because they have been introduced into the language recently but which otherwise, once incorporated into the language, undergo the process of ageing and, eventually, of obsolescence in the course of time, a constant linguistic phenomenon which did not escape the attention of the Roman poet Horace who wrote *Verborum vetus interit aetas|Et juvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque*.

The Maltese language, very much like English but unlike Arabic and other conservative languages, accepts a foreign word in its original form subjecting it to its phonetics and word-pattern consisting mainly in a modification of the vocalic sequences. The Maltese hardly ever try to create new words from the resources of the language except some language-conscious authors. For instance, Arabic, to give an example, coined the word *tayya:ra* for aeroplane from the verb *tar* to fly. The Maltese verb for 'to fly' is also *tar*, but the Maltese word for aeroplane is *ajruplan* (< It. aeroplano). A sporadic example of a recent neologism created from this verb is the word *mitjar* for aerodrome. But this has remained a written word. The people who are, after all, the true language-makers call it *ajrudrom* (< It. aerodromo / Eng. aerodrome). Examples of recent Maltese loanwords are *astronawta* astronaut (< It. astronauta); *televiżjoni|televizin* television (< It. televisione/Eng. television); *maxingann* machine gun / *immaxingannja* [to] machine gun (< Eng. machine gun); *kowt* pl. *kowtiniet* coat/s (< Eng. coat/s); *iddribble* (to) dribble: football (< Eng. [to] dribble); *skorja* to score (< Eng. [to] score); *gowl* goal (< Eng. goal) and hundreds of others.

To the expanding category of loanwords belong also intellectual words that pertain to science, philosophy and the arts. The absence of such words in a people's dictionary is evidence of intellectual limitation. How can a nation achieve linguistic sufficiency and maturity with a defective vocabulary? This vocabulary is, of course, typically international and easily recognizable as such by a common basic linguistic currency except in the cases of loanwords through a literal or periphrastic translation from the native linguistic resources.

Malta, though a small island with a population of about 300,000 people, (more Maltese live overseas) is geographically and culturally part of the Western world open everyday to European cultural and linguistic influences, now more than ever thanks to Italian TV (RAI). The constant flow of ideas is rapidly affecting the quality and level of thinking of the population. The new pressures of different trends of self-expression automatically generate new words that make such self-expression possible. Hence the need for a modern, up-to-date dictionary which will satisfy the linguistic urges of the time but which will have eventually to be revised from time to time in order to include more words to satisfy new linguistic needs. The lexicographer knows that his dictionary cannot be final, that it would be followed in time by more dictionaries: but he also knows that he is, at least, helping to preserve time-conditioned speech-forms current in his generation and that, in doing so, is also helping to keep up-to-date for the future the linguistic archives of the people.

[The following are the letters of the Maltese alphabet compared with English or Italian sound: *a* = a in It. arte; *b* = b in Eng. bee; *ċ* = ch in Eng. church; *d* = d in Eng. deed; *e* = e in It. erba; *f* = f in Eng. food; *ġ* = j in Eng. jar; *g* = Eng. g in gun; *h* = silent h; *ħ* = Eng. h in horse but stronger; *i* = Eng. i in bin; *j* = y in Eng. yes; *k* = k in Eng. kind; *l* = It. l in ladro; Fr. lourd; *m* = Eng. m in mime; *n* = Eng. n in nun; *għ* = practically silent like gh in Eng. night, it merely lengthens the preceding and/or following vowel; *o* = It. o in ora; *p* = p in It. popolo; *q* = glottal stop; *r* = r in It. roba; *s* = s in Eng. sob; *t* = t in It. tetro; *u* = Eng. oo in fool; *v* = v in Eng. vain; *w* = w in Eng. white; *x* = Eng. sh in ship; *ż* = Eng. z in buzz; *z* = Eng. ts in bits.]

Sažetak

PROBLEMI DVOJEZIČNOG RJEČNIKA

Sastavljanje rječnika obuhvaća (1) sustavno prikupljanje pojedinačnih riječi; (2) pojedinačne riječi u rečeničnim ili u idiomatskim kolokacijama. U dvojezičnom rječniku najveća je poteškoća u pronalaženju odgovarajućih idioma u dvama jezicima i u objašnjavanju predmeta koji su posve lokalni proizvodi. Takvi će se idiomi prevoditi odgovarajućim idiomima kada oni postoje u oba jezika, a perifrantom kada nema odgovarajućih idioma. Prevođenje idioma lagano je u jezicima koji pripadaju istoj jezičnoj porodici, jer je tim jezicima općenito mnogo idioma zajedničko. Ono može biti teško u jezicima koji pripadaju dvjema različitim porodicama. Upravo je to poteškoća s kojom se suočava sastavljač rječnika malteškog jezika, kojemu su sastavni dijelovi semitski (arapski) i romanski (sicilijanski i talijanski) — dva izdanka dviju različitih jezičnih porodica.