

# **‘The Italian Job’: The impact of input from television on language learning**

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## **Abstract**

*One of the most interesting aspects regarding Maltese media throughout the recent years has been language acquisition, especially where exposure to Italian via television is concerned. Research carried out locally provides clear evidence that individuals who follow Italian television programmes regularly can both comprehend and speak Italian, even though they may not have learnt the language at school or through formal instruction. The effectiveness of television input in order to learn Italian is also corroborated by the fact that the recent developments in Maltese media, which have led to a considerable decrease in the amount of exposure to this language, have also been accompanied by an evident decline in the popularity and in the competence of this language.*

*Furthermore, language acquisition via television is not only a Maltese phenomenon: though learning Italian through television Malta is enhanced by cultural and typological issues, in foreign contexts linguistic input via television may enhance foreign language competence. This is the case of English in Holland, Belgium and in Scandinavian countries and of Italian itself in Albania and in some North African countries.*

## Introduction

One of the most interesting aspects regarding Maltese media throughout the recent years has been language acquisition, especially where exposure to Italian via television is concerned. The local situation is representative of an aspect of language learning which has been largely ignored in the field of Applied Linguistics. The rather sporadic references to language acquisition via television in this field are limited to considerations regarding how regular exposure to television programmes could, potentially, enable an individual to comprehend a foreign language. Linguistic input from television is mainly unidirectional and therefore direct verbal interaction only occurs on rare occasions, such as phone-ins. This automatically would imply that it is very hard for one to actually start speaking a foreign language after being exposed to it solely via this medium. However, this seems to be in stark contrast with the situation of Italian in Malta, where the acquisition of this language is strongly linked to the exposure to it via television.

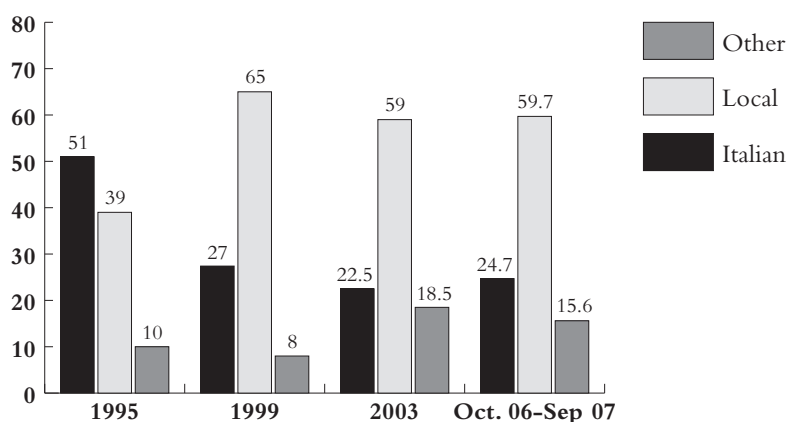
## Italian in Malta

During the last forty years or so, Italian has made a significant comeback on the Maltese linguistic scene following the decline the language experienced during the post-war years. The popularity of Italian television channels reached a peak in the Seventies and in the Eighties, when, apart from the national television station only Italian television channels were received locally. The programmes transmitted by the Italian stations (especially those of the state-run network RAI and the private network Mediaset) were indeed so popular at the time that Secondary School teachers used to notice that many students were quite fluent in the language even prior to the start of the guided learning process, which normally begins at 11 years of age.

Over the past fifteen years this situation has undergone rapid developments due to the introduction of cable and, subsequently, satellite and digital terrestrial television. These developments have greatly increased the amount of television channels received in Malta as well as rendering programmes and films in various languages more accessible. Renting out video-cassettes or DVDs and watching films in English has also become commonplace. Further technological progress in the field, including the widespread and ever-increasing use of Internet, also seems to be leading to a decline in exposure to television programmes especially among the

younger generations, although this consideration requires further investigation.

After the introduction of pluralism in broadcasting in Malta, a number of private and political party owned television channels started their transmissions, offering viewers a wide variety of programmes both in Maltese and in English. Consequently the viewership of programmes in these two languages has increased at the expense of Italian. In fact, data from the quarterly survey carried out by the Broadcasting Authority (Malta) reveal that whereas 51% of television viewers used to follow Italian channels regularly in 1995, this percentage has dropped to approximately 20–25% in the recent years:



**Figure 1:** Daily TV average audience share (source: Broadcasting Authority, Malta)

In the graph presented above, the tallies for 1999 and 2003 are based on calculations resulting from the quarterly Broadcasting Authority reports. On the other hand, the figures for 1995 are quoted from Brincat (1998) whereas those for 2006–2007 are included in the report published by the Broadcasting Authority (2007) for the entire twelve-month period.

To a lesser extent than television, Italian music, radio channels, books, magazines and newspapers have also played a significant role in rendering Italian widespread in Malta. The influence of these media, however, is normally limited to specific domains. For example, radio broadcasts of sporting events, especially the Italian football league, have proved to be popular among males. Females show more interest in Italian magazines and music, as reported in Caruana (2003).

## Language acquisition through television viewing

Learning a second or a foreign language (L2) directly through input received from television is a form of spontaneous acquisition which is often not accounted for and which so far has been investigated only very marginally. In the Mediterranean area, where Italian television is popular in a number of countries, it seems that scientific studies carried out to investigate language acquisition following exposure to television input have only been held in Malta, though over the recent years this issue seems to be attracting more attention (Rositi, 1995; Giordano, 1997; Ademi & Bulija, in preparation).

Since the very nature of L2 input received via television is mainly unidirectional and non-interactive, it lacks some of the main features that are conducive to language learning. These characteristics are different on interactive television (Fallahkhair, Masthoff & Pemberton 2004) and on television programmes designed specifically for language teaching. However, in most circumstances, when one watches a television programme he/she does not have the possibility to control the input in order to make it more readily comprehensible to the learner, as normally occurs in the L2 classroom. Another aspect which is normally conducive to L2 learning is negotiation, that is the possibility to ask an interlocutor to repeat or rephrase what he/she has said. Again this is absent in the case of the unidirectional input one receives from television. Furthermore, in most cases input is also not simplified, as far as both speech-rate and syntactic complexity are concerned. The absence of the possibility to interact in the L2 puts the learner in a position in which he/she has to deal with a language, which at least initially, may be largely incomprehensible to him/her and which he/she cannot control. The only means at his/her disposal would be to ask a person who is more competent in the language and who is exposed to the same input at the same time to explain what is being said. However, this interaction seldom occurs in the L2, but only in the individuals' mother tongue.

On the other hand, input from television is accompanied by the visual element and this may enable the learner to comprehend what is being said. This can indeed be an advantage if one follows television programmes in a language which shares some features with his/her mother tongue or with another language which he/she knows well. This is a consideration which can explain, at least in part, the relative ease with which Maltese children who watch Italian television programmes from an early age acquire the language. In fact, though Maltese may be considered to be genetically distant from Italian, since one language is Semitic and the other Romance, there are

many terms (especially nouns) in Maltese which are of Italian origin (Brincat, 2004 & in print) reports that in Aquilina's Maltese-English dictionary (1987, 1990), 52.38% of the lemmas included are of Italian origin, and the percentage rises to 62% in the *Concise* version of the same dictionary, published in 2006. This undoubtedly helps the learner to start comprehending the language and, added to the attractive visual element, provides the basis for language acquisition via television.

In most European contexts one is exposed exclusively to one's mother tongue through the media but there are also many contexts in which viewers are exposed to programmes in a L2. For example, in Belgium and in the Netherlands as well as in Scandinavia, films in English are not translated into the native language, thus providing a regular source of input in the L2. In many countries in the Mediterranean, including Malta, Italian television and radio channels are received and there is also access to newspapers, magazines and other written texts in Italian, besides all the material available through the Internet. Consequently, as illustrated by Simone (1997) and Giordano (1997), in countries such as Albania, Greece and Slovenia, in large areas of North Africa and also in Malta, Italian media, particularly television channels, are widely received and are highly popular among viewers.

A similar situation to the one present in Malta is evident in Italy itself, and is especially manifest when Albanian refugees reach the Italian shores. Despite the dire social and economic conditions which many of these refugees have to deal with, a number of them speak Italian correctly, even though their formal studies of the language may indeed be very limited. Even in this case, as Simone (1997, p.68) reports, their knowledge of the language is a result of their constant exposure to television programmes in Italian, which are very popular in Albania.

The variety of Italian transmitted via television, known as *italiano televisivo*, is described by Diadori (1994) and Nacci (2003). It presents characteristics that are similar to what is called *italiano dell'uso medio* (Sabatini, 1985), that is the spoken variety of everyday use. Besides this, it also presents some specific linguistic elements which are determined by the medium through which it is transmitted. Diadori (1994, p.12-17) draws on Nencioni (1983) to describe the language variety of television, which includes: 'actual speech' (*parlato-parlato*), the variety used by talk-show guests or by people interviewed in the streets; 'recited speech' (*parlato-recitato*), the variety used by actors who recite their part after having memorised a script; 'written speech' (*parlato-scritto*), used by broadcasters reading the news, or the form used in many advertisements and in documentaries.

In many programmes 'recited speech' is used, as among the most popular programmes transmitted on Italian television there are films, telefilms and soap operas. Undoubtedly, this variety favours language acquisition for the simple reason that the language used in these programmes is often accompanied by actions and by gestures which are directly related to what is being said. This does not necessarily occur in the case of the other two varieties, wherein language use tends to be more rapid and fragmented ('actual speech') and more technical and elaborate ('written speech'). Furthermore, many 'recited speech' television programmes are dubbed into Italian from English. Pavesi (2006) illustrates how dubbing is a technique which is very different from straightforward translating and how dubbed versions must fit in within the time allocated to the scene and should even match the actors' lip movements, although this is not always possible. Furthermore, dubbing neutralizes the forms of dialect and regional traits that are normally found in spoken Italian. It is therefore not surprising that, especially among the younger Maltese viewers, the programmes in Italian which are followed most regularly are those which include the language variety of 'recited speech' as, from a linguistic point of view, it is undoubtedly the variety which is most conducive to L2 comprehension.

### **Research carried out in Malta**

Research carried out in Malta, of which comprehensive summaries are included in Brincat (1992 & 1998) and in Caruana (2003 & 2006), shows that there is clear evidence that in Malta many individuals can both comprehend and speak Italian after having followed Italian television programmes for a number of years, even in the absence of formal instruction. Linguistic competence is also greatly enhanced when exposure occurs from a very young age, thereby confirming that age does play a significant role especially where implicit learning is concerned. In this respect, it must be said that the 'age effect' on implicit and explicit L2 learning has been debated extensively in the field of language acquisition (see, for example, DeKeyser, 2003).

A number of research projects held throughout the Eighties, under the supervision of Professor Joseph M. Brincat, provided evidence that individuals of various ages in Malta comprehended correctly a number of words and short phrases, which were taken from Italian television programmes which were popular among young children at the time. Subjects of studies carried out in 1991 included Primary School students, that is students who had not

yet started to learn Italian at school. Results were surprisingly positive, and revealed that these students possessed a high degree of competence in Italian, despite the absence of formal instruction in the language. My research corroborated these findings when in Caruana (1996), I compared the competence in Italian of secondary students studying Italian at school to the competence in the same language of students who were not, having opted to study French or German instead. Yet again, those students who were not studying Italian at school, but who had a high degree of exposure to the language via television from a young age (equivalent to more than one hour of daily viewing), comprehended a series of words and phrases extracted from television programmes.

Having reached these conclusions, in Caruana (2003) I took the research referred to above to another level as I examined whether students who do not study Italian at school, but who are regularly exposed to this language, also have the ability to speak the language. As part of this research a number of 14-year old Maltese students were asked to narrate an abridged version of Charlie Chaplin's mute masterpiece *Modern Times*. Results confirmed that those subjects who were used to listening to Italian via television from a young age were indeed capable of communicating actively in the language: they possessed adequate use of the basic verb tenses of Italian, they constructed sentences correctly and they did not necessarily resort to code-switching in their production. Again, this was also the case of students who were not necessarily studying Italian at school.

The effectiveness of television input in order to learn Italian is also corroborated by the fact that the recent developments in Maltese media, which have led to a considerable decrease in the amount of exposure to this language, have also been accompanied by an evident decline in the popularity of and in the competence in this language.

Marmarà (2004) carried out a dissertation in which he replicated the 1991 study with Primary School students, referred to above. Once again a series of words and phrases were taken from popular Italian children's programmes and asked to 6-11 year-old Maltese students. Results contrasted sharply with those registered a decade earlier and show a significant decrease of spontaneous acquisition of Italian among Maltese young children.

It is also significant to point out how the decrease in terms of popularity of Italian programmes in Malta has also been accompanied by a slow, yet steady, decline in the percentage of students who sit for the Secondary Education Certificate examination in the subject, as confirmed by the figures represented in the following table:

	Total registrations SEC	Registrations (Italian)	%
2003	7764	3027	38.98
2004	7861	2981	37.92
2005	8038	2925	36.38
2006	7983	2794	34.99
2007	7942	2660	33.49
2008- unofficial figures	7856	2576	32.79

**Table 1:** Italian at SEC level

Besides the drop in percentage points between 2003 and 2008 as shown above, one must also consider that in 1995 the percentage of students who registered for the SEC examination of Italian stood at 50% of the total. This could indicate that the language has indeed declined in popularity. Of course, the SEC examination is not necessarily representative of the national reality and undoubtedly there may be a number of individuals who are competent in the language who do not sit for this examination, possibly because they feel competent as far as the spoken variety is concerned but have difficulty in the written form. Also, one cannot ignore the fact that part of this decline is also due to the introduction of other subjects in local schools which sometimes students opt to study instead of foreign languages. However, it is also possible to interpret these figures by relating them to the decline in the viewership of Italian television programmes, as illustrated in Figure 1 presented in Section 2 of this paper. In fact, as the viewership of Italian television programmes lessens, so does the percentage of students who attempt to obtain a certification in the language at SEC level, though one may not necessarily be the sole consequence of the other.

From a didactic point of view, the teaching of Italian in Maltese schools has been heavily influenced by changes in the media, especially as far as television is concerned. Teachers of Italian face mixed ability groups, irrespective of the schools in which they teach. Again, the main variable in this case is television viewership. A typical Form 1 class, that is the class at which formal teaching of Italian normally initiates, is inevitably composed of students with different levels of linguistic competence. These classes include some



students who have already developed an adequate competence in the language, others who have limited competence in it and others who are absolute beginners. This contrasts with the situation of other foreign languages taught in Maltese schools where in an initial class all students would be beginners.

Modern-day pedagogical tools, including the Italian textbook (Balboni & Mezzadri, 2006) used in most local schools, encourage the use of a communicative approach. We have therefore moved away from the traditional grammatical approach which relied heavily on one's writing skills, thereby presenting the L2 in a manner which is distant from the variety to which one may be exposed to via television. However, there still are clear indications that students who are exposed regularly to the language via the media achieve considerably better results, often both in terms of the communicative abilities and in their academic achievement in the subject. This aspect, already highlighted in Grima (2007), deserves further consideration, and research is currently underway in order to shed further light on these recent developments.

## Conclusion

The Italian language returned to the Maltese linguistic scene through television very strongly up to some years ago, but it has shown signs of a decline recently. Besides language acquisition, as Di Liddo (2007) documents, a cultural and social image has been formed:

The point of view, which is certainly incomplete and politically conditioned by whoever produces the information, does not allow the Maltese, who are very interested in Italy, to possess the adequate notions to know the Italian reality in all its aspects and through different points of interpretation. Despite this, the popular critical level is certainly not inferior to what is found in Italy.

(Di Liddo, 2007, p.62, *my translation*)

The extremely rapid developments in the field of the media over the past years have changed the role of television. Where once it was the uncontested means of entertainment in many households, it now has to 'compete' with other computer-based attractions, most notably the use of Internet and of online chatting and blogging. On these modern means of communication the written form is very similar to the spoken variety, and this is in-

deed significantly different when compared to the language varieties used on television. Undoubtedly, in terms of language use, the new media, being multi-directional, offer the possibility to interact actively and in real-time. This contrasts with the characteristics of media such as television and radio which are mostly unidirectional. Yet, in Malta, at least among the younger generations, the use of these media has not contributed to maintain the popularity and widespread use that Italian had in the past, as most online interactions occur in English.

Over the recent decades Italian in Malta has therefore gone through a number of shifts and changes which, in a metaphoric sense, may be compared to the twists and turns of a film with a complex plot, like the 1969 classic 'The Italian Job'! It was once the undisputed language of television entertainment and in some cases, it still maintains this role, though not as undisputedly as in the recent past. However, it is certainly not the language of online chatting and of Internet surfing in Malta. This shows that developments and changes in mass media have a significant impact on the sociolinguistic context and on the domains and functions of different languages within a community.

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