



Sejjatli b'laqmi

(Call me by my nickname)

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your best friend? Is it the way they wear their socks up to their knees? Is it their long curly hair that seems to have a character of its own? **Abigail Galea** speaks to linguist **Prof. Charles Briffa** about the use of nicknames in Malta's communities.

Experiences feed into our language choices. 'Your choice of words can tell a whole story about you,' says Prof.

Charles Briffa, a linguist, researcher, and author who studies language beyond its communicative role.

Briffa looks at words and phrases as a way to understand those who speak them. 'I see language as a reflection of people's minds—their way of thinking, their values and priorities in life, the opinions they have, and their interpretation of the world,' he says.

In one of his most recent publications, *Il-Laqmijiet Karkariżi fil-Kultura Maltija*, Briffa explores the nature of nicknames (*laqmijiet* in Maltese) in our communities. Commissioned by the Birkirkara Local Council, it is a collection of all the nicknames he could find for the locality.

Discussing the early use of nicknames, Briffa says they were customary for those going into battle. Warriors would choose a name for themselves and with it, a narrative of what they brought to the battlefield. 'Our names have our identities wrapped up in them. By only making their nickname known in battle, they believed the enemy would have less power over them.'

Briffa talks about primitive man's belief that the name was a vital portion of the self—a distinct part of man's personality. People also believed that they could be harmed by the malicious handling of their name. And so they often hid their real names to protect themselves from evil-disposed persons who might injure their owners. The nickname was used to make this possible. Everyone could use it freely and divulge it to anyone since it held no

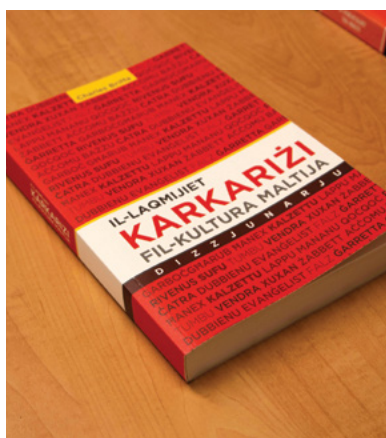
id-Didunna



tal-Minfuha



Prof. Charles Briffa
Photo by James Moffett



Il-Laqmijet Karkarizi fil-Kultura Maltja
Photo by James Moffett

'real' part of the person it belonged to and so would not endanger their safety.

Over time, nicknames evolved into something more social. A nickname was given to you by others in your community, usually based on a trait you possessed, your job, or an experience you had been through. It became a means of describing you as a distinct individual.

For Briffa's book, an electoral register from the early 1930s proved to be a critical source of information. He also posted about his research on a Facebook group called *Muza Karkariza*, asking people to give him nicknames they knew about, as well as the explanations or stories behind them. The response was astounding.

Suggestions and stories from the community came pouring in. Often Briffa needed to go through them carefully and conduct his own research. People did not always differentiate fact from hearsay. Other times, they just did not realise certain words were linked. Take the nickname 'Paxaxa'. No one seemed to realise that it was an alternative form of *pačaxa* (a Maltese vulgarity meaning 'incompetent' or 'silly').

On other occasions, Briffa encountered nicknames with numerous origins. Briffa noted everything he found: 'I felt I had no authority to choose which was right and which was wrong.' For example, 'Tal-Minfuha' can refer to physical appearance, since *minfuha* means 'blown up' in Maltese, but could also refer to personality, since *minfuha* can mean that someone is arrogant.

After collecting all these stories, Briffa also looked into the etymology of the words. 'Some of the names I found had unknown roots. I couldn't find anything about them in Maltese dictionaries. In those cases, I would go back to Sicilian and Arabic dictionaries to find possible meanings.' Some nicknames remained elusive. Briffa says he still can't find the roots of the nickname 'id-Didunna'. But in successful attempts, Briffa would 're-discover' lost words—an occurrence that gives him joy and motivation.

This 'linguistic archaeology' is important, Briffa tells us. It links us to an older Maltese culture, reconstructing what language and society sounded like in the past. 'Ideally every locality would support such publications since they preserve cultural and linguistic wealth. More so, they preserve Maltese identity.' 