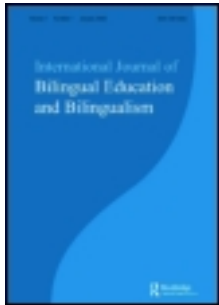


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### Languages and language varieties in Malta

Alexandra Vella <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Linguistics, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

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## Languages and language varieties in Malta

Alexandra Vella\*

*Institute of Linguistics, University of Malta, Msida, Malta*

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Maltese, the national language of Malta, is, without doubt, the dominant language of most Maltese in most domains of language use in Malta. It however shares official status with English, which is also in regular use. Most Maltese can, in fact, be said to be bilingual to differing degrees. This article begins by providing some background information and a brief outline of the geographical and historical origins of Maltese. This separate ‘entity’ – one which also has its own dialects – has developed by melding elements from different sources. The internal heterogeneity of Maltese can be seen to be a reflection of the complex external situation of language use on the Islands. Official bilingualism in fact gives rise to a rich linguistic context of use within which Maltese speakers, bilingual and/or bidialectal to different degrees, operate. The notion of a continuum of use is employed as a means of explaining the complex linguistic behaviour of bilingual Maltese speakers. The effects of regular use of English alongside Maltese on the English of speakers of Maltese are also discussed briefly.

**Keywords:** bidialectal; crosslinguistic influence; domain; status; continuum

### 1. Maltese and its dialects

#### 1.1. Facts and figures

Maltese is the national language and is spoken by the overwhelming majority of the 417,617 (National Statistics Office, Malta 2011) inhabitants of the Maltese Islands.<sup>1</sup> In answer to the National Census of 2005<sup>2</sup> question about the language most frequently used at home, Maltese is reported to be the language most frequently used at home by 90% of the population aged 10 years and over, English by 6% of the population (cf. also Sciriha and Vassallo 2001, 2006).

However, it is an established fact that Maltese, even in its own territory, does not hold sway alone, and probably never has. Malta’s position in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea has no doubt impacted on both the development of the language and on that of the rich and complex linguistic situation on the Islands. Thus, not only is it likely that the linguistic reality of the Maltese Islands has always been one involving plurilingualism, but also Maltese itself is an interesting example of the melding of elements from different sources – an Arabic base upon which are superimposed various borrowings from other languages, English as well as the Romance languages – into a separate entity (Brincat 2011; Mifsud 1995). The language not only has a ‘flourishing literary and cultural scene’ (Fabri 2011, 811), but it is also rich in dialectal diversity. According to Fabri (2011), although it may be

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\*Email: alexandra.vella@um.edu.mt

considered a less-studied language, it can nevertheless be argued to be a ‘robust language that is certainly not, in any way, to be classified as a threatened language’ (Fabri 2011, 811).

Whilst Maltese can, without doubt, be considered the dominant language of most Maltese, the Constitution of the Republic of Malta grants co-official status to English and ‘such other language as may be prescribed by Parliament’,<sup>3</sup> alongside the national language, Maltese (cf. also Section 2). The Maltese can, in fact, be said to be bilingual to differing degrees. Code-switching is a phenomenon, which, although it often gives rise to the usual complaints and suspicions of deterioration, also gives an added dimension to language use, not all of which can or should be seen as negative (cf. e.g. Camilleri 1995a; Camilleri Grima this issue). The effects of regular use of English alongside Maltese on the English of speakers of Maltese are also noteworthy. The notion of a continuum of use serves to successfully account for the complex linguistic behaviour of Maltese speakers, bilingual in Maltese and English and/or bidialectal in Standard Maltese and one of its dialects to different degrees (cf. Section 3).

It is these points which this article seeks to elucidate. A brief outline of the geographical and historical context within which Maltese has developed is given below. This provides the setting for a brief look at this separate ‘entity’, Maltese, and its dialects.

### ***1.2. Geographical and historical context***

The strategic location of the Maltese Islands (approximate area 316 km<sup>2</sup>) in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea can be construed to be a significant factor in the way Maltese has developed. Moreover, Malta’s position at what have often been referred to as the crossroads between East and West has impacted on the development of a rich and complex linguistic situation.

Until fairly recently, Malta’s history has been one involving a series of dominations: Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Angevins, Aragonese, Castilians and the Order of the Knights of St. John, all of whom set up base in Malta at some point. In Malta’s more recent history, the period of the greatest importance is that involving British rule which stretched from 1800, when the British ‘ousted’ the French who had taken Malta over for a brief 2-year period, to 1964 when Malta gained independence. Malta is a member of the Commonwealth and became a Republic in 1974, and the remnants of the British base closed down completely in 1979. Malta became a member of the European Union (EU) in 2004. With accession, Maltese became an official language of the EU on a par with 22 other official EU languages. It is the first official language of Arabic origin within the EU.

### ***1.3. What kind of language is Maltese?***

The Maltese language of today is an entity distinct from any other, but one which has developed by adapting, often in the presence of other languages, to the need for change. It is likely that the language we now know as ‘Maltese’ was introduced into Malta and Gozo by the Arabs sometime between 870 and 1090 AD (cf. e.g. Hull 1993), and that the Maltese language of today had its beginnings as a manifestation of Arabic known as Siculo-Arabic (cf. e.g. Brincat 2000, 2011; Cassola 1985). Mifsud

(1995, 23) says of what he refers to as the ‘most important contribution’ made by the Arabs under their rule, that the language ‘to this day betrays its origin as an Arabic dialect of the North African type, possibly with strong ties with the Arabic of Sicily’. It has been suggested by both Borg (1978)<sup>4</sup> and by Wettinger (1993) that Maltese fits in better with the Maghreb (North African) Arabic dialect group in so far as features of verbal morphology and other aspects of grammar are concerned, but with the Levantine (Eastern) dialects where phonological traits, as well as lexis, are concerned.

The Maltese language has been described by Mifsud (1995) as consisting of three ‘strata’, a Semitic base, upon which are superimposed borrowings from the Romance languages and from English. Mifsud (1995), like Brincat (2011), notes periods of greater influence from Sicilian Italian as compared to Tuscan Italian, with the year 1530 which heralded the arrival of the Knight Hospitallers of St. John in Malta, as the approximate cut-off point. Mifsud (1995) further points out that the earlier loans are more fully integrated than the later ones. On the basis of available evidence, Brincat’s (2011) interpretation of the linguistic stratigraphy of Maltese puts Sicilian into the position of superstratum to Maltese, with both Italian and English as adstrata. What is common to both interpretations is the fact of a principal stratum of Semitic origin. This is described by Mifsud (1995, 27) as ‘the basis of the phonology, morphology and to a lesser extent the syntax of Maltese, while the lexis of Semitic origin constitutes a nucleus of basic concepts, with more culturally sophisticated terms generally being of Romance or English origin’. Upon this stratum are superimposed, and/or added, strata involving other languages or language varieties. The typologically greater closeness generally of Maltese ‘to Semitic (represented here by Egyptian Arabic) than to Romance (represented here by Spanish)’ has been confirmed in a recent study by Comrie (2009, 3), the only feature tested in the study for which the closeness with Semitic does not seem to hold being word order. Brincat (2011) points out the unusual fact of the absence of a ‘perceivable substratum’ in the case of Maltese, further noting that ‘All in all, given the small size of the land and the fluctuations in population numbers, language shift is more likely than conservation’ (Brincat 2011, 32, cf. also Brincat 1994). And yet, in spite of this fact, Maltese has survived the test of time and this in a context of constant contact with at least one, and sometimes more, language(s).

A situation of bilingualism is nothing new to the Maltese as Brincat (2011) clearly shows. Although currently it is with English that Maltese shares official status, bilingualism is a long-standing characteristic of these Islands. Brincat maps out a situation which has existed ever since Arabic was introduced into Malta in around 870 AD, involving co-existence of at least two languages or language varieties. He (Brincat 2011, xxxix) presents a timeline showing which language partners were engaged in relationships of diglossia at different periods in Malta’s history, as reproduced here (Figure 1).

Although, as Mifsud (1995, 24) suggests, expulsion of the Muslim population from Malta in 1249/1250 ‘probably marks the end of any type of diglossia (Classical and dialectal Arabic) which may have prevailed up to then’, Brincat’s account is interesting for two reasons: (1) it clearly demonstrates that Maltese has been one of the players, even if only as a low, rather than as a high variety, almost from its beginnings; (2) it also suggests an increase in the status accorded to Maltese by its speakers, particularly since independence, but also in the period leading up to that event, and this in spite of the continuing presence in the linguistic scene of other languages, such as, most recently, English, and to a lesser extent, Italian.

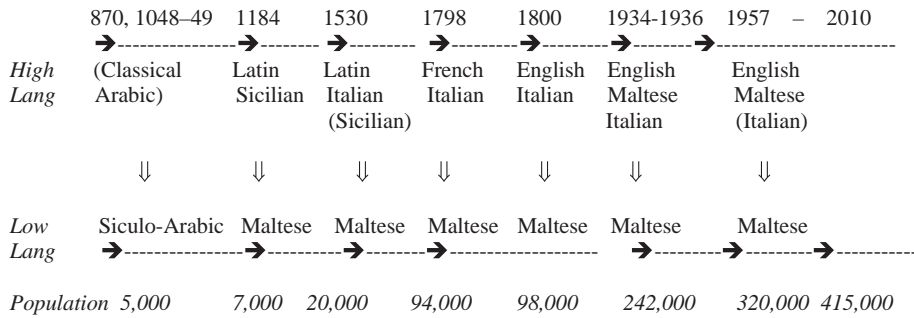


Figure 1. Diglossia in Malta in the last millennium. Reproduced with permission from Brincat (2011, xxxix).

This, therefore, is the context within which Maltese has survived, or should we perhaps say, thrived (cf. also Fabri 2011). As Brincat (2011, xxxviii) notes: ‘Therefore, the key factor was, and still is, survival through change’. And this is what Maltese has done, successfully so. The result is the heterogeneity which has frequently been remarked upon, in the structure of Maltese itself (cf. e.g. ‘Maltese as a mixed language’ Aquilina 1958, as well as other articles in Aquilina 1961; Mifsud 1995). Brincat (2011, xxxviii) is worth quoting at length at this point:

Every new conqueror brought a new language, which was usually endowed with the prestige of power and/or culture, and since the outsiders also brought with them technical, social and cultural innovations, new objects and concepts were usually accepted together with their original names. This is how society kept pace with new developments, and so the language kept pace with social developments. Society could not remain fossilized in old habits and, if the local language had not managed to keep pace with innovation in all fields and activities, it would have been abandoned and replaced by the new one.

The adaptability of Maltese in the face of foreign accretions, English as well as Romance, is well attested at all levels of structure, the most obvious of which is the lexical level (cf. e.g. Borg 1988a; Brincat 2000, 2011). One oft-cited example is that of the adoption into Maltese alongside a word of Arabic origin, *tejjeb*, of two near-synonyms, one from Romance, *immiljora*, the other from English, *impruvja*. All three words (roughly translatable as ‘he made better/improved’) have been retained in the lexicon of Maltese in spite of the near-synonymy.

Apart from the lexical level, which, as we have seen, has developed by borrowing extensively from the three main sources mentioned above, the Maltese language of today is also characterised by what Spagnol (2011, 12) calls the ‘double-sided morphology’ which ‘results from the constant interaction between Semitic and Romance structures’. On the one hand, it still has a productive root-and-pattern morphology similar to that of other Semitic languages; on the other it also uses elements of concatenative morphology more usual in many European languages (cf. Fabri 2011; Mifsud 1995; Spagnol 2011). What is particularly interesting about Maltese is that items of Romance origin can be subjected to patterning following the root-and-pattern morphology more typical of Arabic and vice versa (Mifsud 1995; Spagnol 2011). Camilleri and Borg (1992) note that both the kind of borrowing that takes place, and how it is brought about, often result in further transformation of the

original Semitic base. One example of this involves the ‘nativization’ of the English plural morpheme ‘s’, which, according to Camilleri and Borg (1992), is rapidly becoming ‘an integral part of Maltese pluralising morphology’.

Some examples of what some have called the ‘Englishization of Maltese’ have also been noted at the syntactic level (cf. e.g. Brincat Massa 1986; Camilleri and Borg 1992). An example of change to the original Semitic resulting from contact with English involves a possible decrease in the use of topicalised structures, especially in the written form, in contemporary Maltese. Fabri (2011, 794) points out that ‘Maltese is a topic-oriented language’, whilst work in this area (cf. e.g. Fabri and Borg 2002; Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997) points in the direction of a feature which enjoys a certain amount of robustness in the language. However, Borg (personal communication) notes that, particularly in translation from source texts in English, non-topicalised versions of the English original rather than their more ‘Maltese-sounding’ topicalised versions are used with enough frequency that one could speculate eventual change to the original Semitic base.

According to Crystal (2008, 142), ‘Any language with a reasonably large number of speakers will develop dialects, especially if there are geographical barriers separating groups of people from each other, or if there are divisions of social class’. Maltese is on a par with many other languages having much larger numbers of speakers, over a larger territory, in having an extremely rich dialectal situation. This is discussed in the following section.

#### ***1.4. The emergence of a Standard Maltese and dialects of Maltese***

The existence of dialects of Maltese was noted relatively early (cf. e.g. Agius de Soldanis 1750; Vassalli 1796). This suggests awareness of the emergence of some form of Standard. According to Brincat (2011, 337):

The standardization of spoken Maltese began with the arrival of the Knights of St. John, who created the right conditions for it when they developed the area around the Grand Harbour, first in the Cottonera, and then in the new city of Valletta and its suburb Floriana. This social and economic process continued under the British because the imperial authorities exploited Malta’s strategic position which was ideal for the Royal Navy. . . . As had happened under the Knights, the peasants who moved from the countryside abandoned their peculiar regional sounds and, in an effort to integrate themselves better in their new surroundings, they adopted city speech.

Demographic factors, in particular migration towards the cities for reasons to do with work, contact with the high variety (Italian or English), and access to education, particularly at a time when “the rise and development of Maltese literature provided a fixed model for the whole island” (Brincat 2011, 339), furthered the process of the emergence of a Standard. One must however remember the complexity of the linguistic scenario at the time (cf. Section 1.3), a scenario characterised by the co-existence of Maltese (often as the low variety) with at least one other language or language variety (as the high variety). According to Mifsud (personal communication) evidence for the levelling of dialects suggested by Brincat is weak. Mifsud speculates instead that, what may have happened is that some sort of ‘superposed’ variety of Maltese may have developed and that this variety may have taken on the function of a high variety, with speakers still retaining their ‘home’ variety of Maltese in the function of low variety. Exactly what this ‘superposed’

variety was, who spoke it and what its relationship with other varieties was are issues which still await research.

In spite of the many still unanswered questions regarding the emergence of the standard variety of Maltese, the early work by De Soldanis and Vassalli is still useful. Agius de Soldanis (1750) note differences between the language used in the villages as compared to that used in the city, as well as between dialects of the East as compared to those of the West, whilst Vassalli (1796) goes further, identifying five dialect regions, these being: the cities, Gozo, the upper villages, the lower villages and the central villages. This work laid the foundation for later dialectal work by introducing the idea of dialects of Maltese, raising the importance of dialect study and providing a preliminary framework for work on the dialects of Malta and Gozo. Indeed, later mention of dialects of Maltese seems to reiterate the same positions taken by these two authors, many early studies concentrating on differences between the dialects of towns as compared to villages.

A number of early dialect studies exist (cf. e.g. Stumme 1904a, 1904b), but the first relatively large-scale Survey of the dialects of the Maltese islands was carried out in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Aquilina and Isserlin 1981). The study considered variation at three levels of structure: the phonetic/phonological, the morphological and the lexical. Moreover, we are told that samples from 41 villages in Malta and Gozo were collected. This is an impressive spread by any standard.

More recent work on Maltese dialectology has tended to focus on one specific dialect or dialect group or on analysis at one level of structure. Studies on the phonetics and phonology of different dialects include Camilleri and Vanhove's (1994) analysis of the dialect of the village of Mġarr (Malta), Incorvaja's (2007) work on the phonetic and phonological characteristics of *Xlukkajr*, the dialect of speakers from Marsaxlokk, and Said (2007) and Farrugia (2010) who characterise the vowel systems of *Naduri* and *Sannati* – the dialects of two villages in Gozo – respectively; aspects of the lexis of the dialect in the former case, and sociolinguistic variation in the latter, are also examined. Aspects of lexical variation are also examined in a number of other student dissertations, for example Busuttil (1989), who looks at the names given to different types of butterflies amongst children from different areas of Malta, Rapa (1995), who looks at the lexical field related to traditional sweetmeats, and Curmi and Debono (1997) and Chetcuti (2003) who examine sociolinguistic variation in the use of terminology associated with agricultural tools. Some work on dialectal differences at the level of morphology has also been carried out (cf. e.g. Agius 1992), whilst differences between dialects at the level of syntax have also been noted, for example by Borg (1988a, 1988b). Other work on Maltese dialects includes Schabert (1976), Borg (1977) and Puech (1979, 1994). (For a recent overview of work on the dialects of Malta and Gozo, cf. Borg 2011.)

A number of studies having a sociolinguistic orientation have also been carried out, notably in Borg (1980), Sciriha (1986) and Camilleri (1987, 1995b). A study by Chetcuti (2005) looks at the 'standard' as compared to 'dialectal' vowels of speakers from Mġarr (Malta), thus suggesting an additional 'bidialectal' possibility for some speakers, and therefore an added complexity when one comes to consider language use (cf. Section 3). Recent work by Camilleri Grima (2009a) also shows that attitudes towards the use of dialects in domains such as education, which may in some parts of Malta have been sources of levelling, at least for some speakers, and in certain parts of Malta and especially in Gozo, education may not always have the effect of relegating dialect use to the status of low variety. Speakers may differentiate between

domains in which it is appropriate or otherwise to use the dialect, without necessarily resulting, however, in loss of the dialect.

That the dialects are still in use is not in doubt, although the sociolinguistics governing their use may be different from what it was in the 1960s. Moreover, the above discussion also suggests that bidialectalism in Maltese and one of its dialects, alongside bilingualism in Maltese and English, may be a reality for a number of Maltese speakers, and this not solely until entry into education, but beyond it.

## **2. The linguistic scene in present-day Malta**

### **2.1. Official bilingualism**

As mentioned earlier, whilst Maltese is the national language of Malta, it shares co-official status with English.

The choice of English, rather than Italian, was not an automatic one. Until the transfer of Malta to British sovereignty in 1800, the language issue pitted Italian, the language of culture, government and the Church, against Maltese, ‘the language of the kitchen’, as it was commonly referred to. By the early part of the nineteenth century, due to the vision of Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1774–1829), Maltese had however started to be seen as a possible vehicle for education as well as an important medium for cultural and political emancipation. English entered the fray as a third variable during the period of British rule. The so-called ‘Maltese Language Question’ raged on intermittently throughout – and possibly beyond – this period (cf. Hull 1993). It revolved around what Frendo (1975, 24) refers to as the rather ‘curious’ fact of ‘the British desire to promote the study of Maltese in the schools, mostly as a vehicle to teach English and therefore slowly eliminate Italian’. The debate was finally resolved, with English taking precedence over Italian, and this fact is now entrenched in the constitution.

The necessity for bilingualism is recognised, even if not always actively accepted, graciously or otherwise, by all. Thake Vassallo (2009, 361–2) comments on the fact that ‘Maltese has taken centre stage and is intimately connected with what it means to be Maltese’, but adds ‘Since the Maltese language is such an incredibly small language shared by only 400,000 people, it would be unwise to let a relative advantage fade into a lost opportunity’, this advantage clearly being that of being bilingual. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the Council of Europe’s policy on promoting plurilingualism.<sup>5</sup>

### **2.2. Domains of use**

Problems notwithstanding, Malta continues to be officially bilingual. Language use amongst the speakers of this highly adaptable nation can be demonstrated to result in a rich linguistic scene. Something of the complexity of the situation should become clear from a brief sketch of the linguistic environment as represented by the domains of administration, the media and the home given below. Other papers in this volume provide detailed examinations of language use in the domain of education in Malta and Gozo.



### 2.2.1. Administration

In the domain of administration, though Maltese is clearly given precedence by the Constitution in some domains, for example within the Law Courts and during Parliamentary proceedings, a ruling by parliament is all that is needed to allow for the use of English in the Law Courts or to decide what language/s be used during parliamentary proceedings or for keeping records. Moreover, individuals have the right both to use either of the two official languages (Maltese or English) in addressing an administrative body, and to receive a reply in the same language as that used in their original address to that administrative body.

Maltese predominates as the spoken medium in this (as in most other) domain(s) (cf. also Brincat 2011). Moreover, in spite of efforts on the part of government to encourage more extensive use of written Maltese for administrative purposes, English remains more widely used than Maltese in written communication in this domain. Brincat (2011) however also notes an interesting innovation which he calls ‘Anglicized Maltese’ which he suggests is mainly used in administration. He defines this tentatively as a variety which ‘(1) uses English words that are not recorded in Aquilina’s dictionary and (2) that these words are more numerous and occur more frequently than in normal Maltese speech’ (cf. Brincat 2011, 429). According to Brincat, this variety seems to be ‘the result of the recent practice of providing bilingual information on practices which were previously dealt with only in English’ and is typical of information leaflets of different sorts, which he adds, may often be written in English first, only later being translated to Maltese.

### 2.2.2. The media<sup>6</sup>

Choice of language in the domain of the media is determined mainly by whether the medium in question is primarily a written rather than a spoken one, English being the language of choice in the former case, Maltese in the latter.

The print media is dominated by English although the number of newspapers published locally reflects the bilingual situation in that 2 of the 4 dailies, and 5 of the 11 weekly papers, are in English. Whilst newspaper readership generally is not particularly high, readership of the sister papers *The Times of Malta* and *The Sunday Times* is consistently higher than that of other papers, Maltese as well as English, although *The Malta Independent* and its counterpart *The Malta Independent on Sunday* have made some inroads into readership. The most widely read newspapers in Maltese are *L-Orizzont* and *It-Torċa*, both published by the largest trade union in Malta, the General Workers Union. The two main political parties in Malta, *Partit Laburista (Kullhadd)* and *Partit Nazzjonalista (Il-Mument and in-Nazzjon)*, and the Church (*Lehen is-Sewwa*) are responsible for most of the remaining papers in Maltese. Although many households subscribe to one of the dailies and/or weeklies in Maltese, these publications are known to be high in editorialising and many may turn to the newspapers in English partly in an attempt at obtaining a less partisan coverage of news. A large number of magazines on all sorts of subjects are published locally. These however share the market with popular magazines, most of them in English, imported mainly from Britain. A small number of titles are also imported from the continent, mainly from Italy. English editions of some German publications such as the fashion magazine *Burda Moden* are also popular.

In the words of Adrian Grima (2008), one of Malta's new generation of literary authors, 'Despite the obvious limitations of readership and the added problem that only 45% of the Maltese choose to read at least one book a year for leisure, Malta has a small but healthy and thriving book-publishing industry'. An increasing number of books are being written in Maltese, and a considerable number of foreign classics are being translated into Maltese (cf. e.g. translations of Homer's *Odyssey*, Xuereb 1989; Dante's *La Divina Commedia*, Palma 1991; and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, published as *Iċ-Ċkejken Prinċep*, Aquilina 2000). However, reading material in Maltese remains comparatively limited. This is especially true of reference material. A definite bias exists for works in Maltese to consist mainly of works of fiction (prose and poetry mainly, and to a lesser extent drama) with works of a scholarly nature by Maltese writers frequently being written in English. A few attempts have been made at promoting the publication of bilingual versions of texts written by Maltese authors, both reference texts such as Baldacchino, Lanfranco, and Schembri's *Appuntamenti man-Natura* (1990a), also published as *Discovering Nature in the Maltese Islands* (1990b), and children's books such as Borg Cuschieri's *Fuq Siġra Mwarra/On a Lonely Tree* (2000). Textbooks in Maltese are generally those dealing with the actual teaching/learning of Maltese; textbooks in Maltese in other subject areas are few and far between.

One other sub-domain in which English seems to have precedence over Maltese in the more general domain of the media is the Internet, a domain which predominately involves the written rather than the spoken mode. Although the web presence of Maltese is steadily increasing (Rosner and Joachimsem 2011), English is still a strong competitor to Maltese in this sub-domain. A number of the newspapers in Maltese have Internet versions (although this is also the case for the newspapers in English), and many official websites are often either fully or partly bilingual.

By contrast to the above two sub-domains, extensive use of Maltese is made on local radio and television, media which are largely dependent on the spoken rather than the written mode.

A relatively large number of radio stations, 13 at present, transmit locally. Three of these are public broadcaster stations, whilst each of the two main political parties in Malta, the *Partit Laburista* and the *Partit Nazzjonalista*, own a station; another station is owned by the Catholic Church. The *Partit Laburista*'s station, *Super One*, is the radio station with the largest following. These stations produce a reasonably large number of talk programmes, in Maltese, many of them also encouraging interactivity with their listeners through the use of phone-ins and interviews. A station with a niche-audience is the University-based *Campus FM* which focuses on cultural affairs generally, and university affairs more specifically. With the exception of two productions in English, Maltese is the language used in the in-house productions of this station, English also being used on occasion by Maltese interviewers interviewing foreign guest speakers.<sup>7</sup> Two commercial stations which have achieved some popularity, particularly with the younger generations, are *Bay Radio* and *Radio Calypso*. A relatively large number of the shows transmitted by the latter are music-oriented, so that even when they are presented in Maltese, air time consists almost entirely of current music from Britain and the USA (with lyrics in English), and to a lesser extent, European music, particularly Italian music which is very popular. Moreover, many presenters working for these stations are foreigners

residing in Malta who are native speakers of varieties of English other than the local one, thus giving listeners' exposure to a variety of Englishes.

Three main phases can be identified in so far as television in Malta goes. There was an early phase during which the British company Rediffusion was responsible for both radio and television services transmitting from Malta. This period was characterised by a considerable amount of use of English alongside Maltese. Radio and television services were nationalised in 1975. Maltese was given more prominence in local programming during this period. During these two phases, the Maltese had started receiving signals from Sicily which made it possible for them to tune into Italian television stations. Caruana (2003) reports a positive effect on both spontaneous acquisition and formal learning of Italian towards the end of this second phase. A third phase followed the amendment of the Broadcasting Act in 1993 which resulted in an increase in the number of television stations transmitting locally. Commercial ventures in the field of television in Malta have not been successful and in fact television continues to be dominated by the public service station *Television Malta (TVM)* and by two stations, one each owned by each of the two main political parties in Malta, *One TV (Partit Laburista)* and *Net TV (Partit Nazzjonalista)*.

Viewership patterns in recent years have changed substantially, partly because the loss of the monopoly forced the new local television stations to put more effort into producing high-quality programmes, and partly also as a result of another innovation, the introduction of cable and satellite (cf. Brincat and Caruana 2011). The latter resulted in Italian stations, not to mention Maltese ones, competing with stations transmitting programmes in English. While competition from stations transmitting in Italian, and more recently in English, continues to be strong, the Maltese language holds its own in programming for the locally transmitting television stations, although a large amount of outsourcing to private companies takes place. Local television continues to transmit films and documentaries in English, be it British or American English, over and above their own home-grown material. Such programmes are broadcast in the original, without subtitles. In view of the local linguistic context, both dubbing and subtitling are considered unnecessary (but cf. Caruana 2009 which reports on a student project involving dubbing and subtitling of the French film, *Les Choristes*). Films shown in local cinemas are predominantly in English, the range available being in general similar to that of films available for general release in Britain: dubbing and/or subtitling are considered unnecessary also in this case. Ventures into film production in Maltese are still few and far between although such ventures, when they succeed, have a good following. Some of the local stations, television as well as radio, retransmit selected excerpts from other sources such as CNN and BBC.

As mentioned above, besides the presence of English via local television, there is also the very significant presence of Italian: it is relatively easy to tune into a whole variety of television channels operating from Sicily, as well as to the main stations operating from mainland Italy. The competition to TVM from such TV stations is extensive and results in what is a very wide viewership of Italian television (Brincat 2011; Caruana 2006).

To conclude therefore, whilst Maltese is present in the linguistic environment in Malta through the media, this is more so in the case of those media which are more dependent on the use of spoken language. Exposure to English, and to a lesser extent to Italian, is however considerable. Exposure to English is greater through the print

media whilst that to Italian occurs mainly via television. Radio, and to a lesser extent television, additionally provides some degree of exposure to speakers of different varieties of both English and Italian.

The pervasive presence of English, particularly in its written form, alongside Maltese, in the domains of use discussed above, and possibly more crucially, its importance in the educational domain (cf. e.g. Camilleri Grima this issue), has repercussions on language use in the domain of the home. The necessity of English, not only for international communication, but particularly for education, strongly influences parents' decisions as to how best to prepare their child to face 'life with two languages' (Grosjean 1982). This issue is explored briefly in Section 2.2.3.

### *2.2.3. The home*

The above outline will have made it clear that the choice of language of the home is not straightforward. The question of which language to use in the home is an immensely loaded one for many families, with the result that a trend has emerged, noted, for example by Borg (1988a), for some well-intentioned parents to bring up their children with English as a first language. Thus, although Maltese is the first language of the majority of the Maltese in present day Malta, there is a small percentage of the offspring of Maltese parents whose first language is English (cf. e.g. Hull 1993). In such cases, the parents will often speak to each other in Maltese but to the children in English. This means that even those Maltese having English as their first language will have had exposure to Maltese quite early on. It is important to stress that, regardless of what the dominant home language is, it is practically impossible for a child to grow up in a strictly monolingual environment. For example, I have observed an incident in a particular Maltese-dominant household, of a mother at play with her child using the English nursery rhyme 'Humpty Dumpty'. In other words even in predominantly Maltese-based family environments, English cannot be considered completely 'alien', even in the pre-school years when the influence of education and the media is at its lowest.

As portrayed above the situation might appear to be one involving a straightforward dichotomy between Maltese or English as a first language, with influence in the former case from English, in the latter from Maltese. The situation is however not so straightforward.

Camilleri (1995a, 84) distinguishes between four family types ranging from families where children acquire the Dialect first, followed by Standard Maltese and English (Family Type A), to those in which Standard Maltese is acquired first followed by English (Family Type B), families where Standard Maltese and English are acquired at the same time (Family Type C) and lastly families in which English is acquired first followed by Standard Maltese (Family Type D). Camilleri clearly believes that for those of Maltese parentage, a Family Type C situation, in other words one in which 'both Maltese and English are acquired as a first language and are used interchangeably', is a more likely possibility than a Family Type D one in which English is the language acquired first, Maltese being acquired 'later through formal teaching at school and through socialization with speakers of Maltese' (Camilleri 1995a, 84). Underpinning Camilleri's distinction between Family Types C and D is the assumption that in the case of Family Type C, there is no strict separation between the two languages which are acquired together 'as a first language'. It is unclear whether this type of bilingualism can be said to qualify

as an example of ‘simultaneous bilingualism’ as characterised, for example, by De Houwer (1996).

Preoccupations have been expressed in a number of studies over the emergence and spread of a variety consisting precisely of the ‘mixture’ of Standard Maltese and English acquired in the Family Type C situation (cf. e.g. Borg 1980; Ellul 1978; Sciriha 1997). It emerges from such studies that there is an increasing concern amongst linguists – a concern which appears to be shared by non-linguists, judging by the ‘Letters to the editor’ sections of local newspapers, and, more recently in blogs – that this ‘mixed’ variety may become the mother tongue of an increasing section of the population.

An early study in this field, Ellul (1978), documents instances involving the ‘mixing’ of elements from both Maltese and English in both parents’ and children’s usage. She refers to this ‘mixing’ generically as ‘code-switching’, a practice followed by others working in this field such as Sciriha (1997). In his later study, Borg (1980) coins the term *Mixed Maltese English* and distinguishes this from Maltese English (cf. see Section 3.2). Borg asserts that what really happens when Maltese individuals claim to be speaking ‘English’ amongst themselves is that they use Mixed Maltese English. Thus, Mixed Maltese English seems to be what results in a Family Type C where the variety acquired consists of a ‘mixture’ of Standard Maltese and English, while Maltese English is the English acquired by children of Maltese parentage in a Family Type D. It appears that while Maltese and English are both present in most family environments, English is often present in the form of the mixed variety Mixed Maltese English (Family Type C), rather than as a discrete entity (Family Type D). In view of the importance of the early years in every child’s life in laying down the foundations for its continuing development, linguistic as well as otherwise, there is no doubt that language behaviour is affected by the presence of this mixed variety in the home environment.

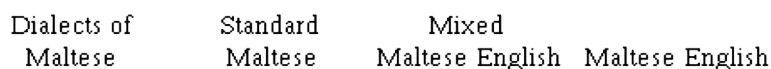
It is possible to put influences such as those from the external environment outlined in Section 2 into perspective by describing language behaviour in Malta in terms of a continuum of language use (cf. e.g. Borg 1988a). While the use of such a continuum reflects the ease with which speakers can move from speaking one language or language variety to another, it also provides the context for a brief discussion of the phenomenon of Maltese English provided at the end of Section 3.

### 3. Languages and language varieties in use in Malta

#### 3.1. Continuum of language use

It is not uncommon in the case of interaction between people aware of each other as having access to two codes, for rule-based, even if apparently indiscriminate, switching between the one code and the other to occur (cf. e.g. Myers-Scotton 1993; Nishimura 1986; Sankoff and Poplack 1981). The Maltese situation is no exception in this regard. In fact, while the Maltese are generally acknowledged to be bilingual to varying degrees (cf. e.g. Camilleri 1995a; Fabri 2011; Vella 1995), various reports are also available of code-switching between Maltese and English in their speech (cf. e.g. Borg 1980, 1988a; Darmanin 1989; Ellul 1978). The term *Maltese English* was first used by Broughton (1976) to refer to the English which could be considered a reasonable target to aim for in the teaching of English in Maltese schools. As mentioned in Section 2.2.3, however, this term was found by researchers

in the field to be inadequate for describing language use in the complex linguistic reality of Malta, an inadequacy which led to Borg (1980) introducing the term *Mixed Maltese English*. Borg (1988a) further proposes the notion of a continuum of language use involving dialects of Maltese at one end followed by Standard Maltese, Mixed Maltese English and Maltese English. The continuum can be represented schematically as follows:



### Continuum of language use

The continuum is characterised by a decrease in the influence of non-adjacent points on each other, as compared to adjacent points and as such provides a useful representation of decreasing influence from Maltese on Maltese English as compared to Mixed Maltese English. It also serves to illustrate the possibility available to speakers who have access to both Standard Maltese and a dialect of Maltese of shifting between points towards the left hand side of the continuum. Although patterns of usage in this direction do not seem to have attracted much research attention to date, Chetcuti (2005) manipulated the dimension of formality in an attempt at getting participants in her study to shift between their dialect variety and their standard one. The extent to which participants in the study in fact performed the required shift could not be quantified, although evidence for it happening was found.

The remainder of this section focuses on the shifting which can take place along the right-hand side of the continuum. A short excerpt from a conversation at a family gathering in a household, in which all of the adults concerned could be considered bilingual, will serve to illustrate the kind of language behaviour involved:

- |     |    |  |
|-----|----|--|
| 1   | L: | He died?   |
| 2   | V: | Miet      žgħir    miskin.<br><i>he-died    young    poor-man</i> <sup>8</sup>                                 |
| 3   | A: | Not long ago.    Last year he died.  |
| 4   | V: | In his forties.  |
| 5i  | G: | In his forties?!   |
| 5ii |    | Mela dik                    ‘in her forties’!<br>as-if that-one (is)   |
| 6   | M: | Hux forties.<br><i>not</i>   |
| 7   | A: | U    le    pa,    x’    eżagerazzjoni!<br>And no dad what (an)-exaggeration                                    |
| 8   | G: | Iddahħaqni int.<br>you-make-me-laugh    you  |
| 9   | M: | X’ forties forties!<br>What  |
| 10  | G: | Mela . . . mela    t-    tifla      tiegħu    kienet!<br>as-if . . . as-if    the daughter    his      she-was |
| 11  | A: | She’s older?   |
| 12  | M: | Fifties, fifties!  |
| 13  | A: | She’s over fifty?  |
| 14  | G: | Of course she’s over fifty.  |
| 15  | A: | Well in her . . . well in her fifties, she’s nearly sixty, I’m sure.   |

Of the 15 turns involved in the above extract, 2, 7, 8 and 10 are in Maltese; 1, 3, 4, 5i and 11 through 15 involve the use of English; the remainder consist of Maltese and English combined to different extents and in a number of different ways. The presence or absence of Maltese lexical items in a stretch of speech otherwise involving English is frequently used as a criterion for distinguishing Mixed Maltese English from Maltese English. For example, according to Camilleri (1995a, 88) there is a clear 'cut-off point between the two varieties' which occurs at the point where no Maltese lexical items are present in a particular stretch of speech. Such a claim makes it possible to classify the structures in Turns 5ii, 6 and 9 above, structures which all involve a 'mixture' of Standard Maltese and English, as Mixed Maltese English; those structures identified earlier as involving solely English can be classed as Maltese English.

Distinguishing Mixed Maltese English from Maltese English solely in terms of the presence or absence of Maltese lexical items, while useful in its way, muddies the waters somewhat however. For example, the absence of Maltese lexical items in structures such as *Last year he died.* (turn 3) and *She's over fifty?* (turn 13) results in the two structures being classed together as instances of Maltese English when in fact the influence from Maltese in these cases is different. More specifically, both these examples are interesting from the point of view of their intonation. However, while the preposing of *last year* to *he died* in the former of the two structures is clearly reminiscent of Maltese constituent structure, there does not appear to be any influence from Maltese syntax in the latter case. In other words, while the similarity between the intonation of the former of the two structures and a possible Maltese equivalent *Is-sena li ghaddiet miet.* 'It was last year that he died.' can be seen to correlate with a corresponding influence at the level of syntax, the influence of Maltese in the latter case is mainly one of pronunciation, in particular its intonation (cf. also Vella forthcoming).

Differences in the influence of Maltese in examples such as those discussed earlier can readily be accounted for by situating the examples in the region along the continuum between Mixed Maltese English and Maltese English without getting involved in the minutiae of differentiating between Maltese English which is more or less heavily influenced by Maltese at the various levels of structure. However, a brief discussion of whether the kind of differences noted above can be seen to warrant the acknowledgement of Maltese English as a variety in its own right is worth carrying out, partly because this may have implications for educational policy.

### 3.2. *Maltese English: a variety in its own right?*

Research on the English of speakers of Maltese English seems to agree that this variety has characteristics which can be identified with a reasonable amount of explicitness (Azzopardi 1981; Mazzon 1992). In fact, recent research has begun to identify characteristics in the English of Maltese speakers at all levels of structure which seem to be 'stable'. Some features are mentioned with greater frequency than others in the available literature (cf. Appendix in Bonnici 2009 for a list of characteristics of this variety which have been reported).

Thus, at the level of pronunciation, probably the level which most serves as a shibboleth for this variety, a number of segmental phonetic and phonological characteristics of Maltese English are often noted. These include neutralisation of the  $\theta/\delta$  contrast to  $t/d$ , the lack of reduction to  $\text{ə}$  as well as presence of vowels in

unstressed syllables having a syllabic consonant in other varieties, full release of final plosives, devoicing of word-final voiced obstruents, pronunciation of  $\eta$  as  $\eta g$  and some speakers' substitution of  $\text{æ}$  as  $\text{e}$  (cf. e.g. Debrincat 1999; Galea Cavallazzi 1998; Galea 1999). Bonnici (2010) carries out a systematic study of the presence or absence of 'r' in Maltese English and finds evidence for a correlation with perception of identity of 'r'-lessness in older speakers and 'r'-fullness in younger ones.

A limited amount of research on prosodic aspects of this variety has also been carried out. Calleja (1987), for example, identifies aspects of lexical stress in which Maltese English differs from other varieties, specifically from the variety of English often referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP), and demonstrates an effect on the rhythm of Maltese, of the lack of vowel reduction in this variety. Vella (1995) examines stress in compounds and phrases in Maltese English, showing that stress in Maltese English tri or quadrisyllabic compounds having a second element which is disyllabic such as *fire engine* and *wedding present* tends to shift to the penultimate syllable of the compound. Galea Cavallazzi (2004) notes that deaccenting, a feature commonly found in many other varieties of English, occurs only minimally in this variety. Bugeja (2005) and Vella (1995 and forthcoming) examine some of the intonational characteristics of this variety, in particular intonation in questions, with Vella (forthcoming) noting the tendency, in questions having an early focus, for a post-nuclear stepped up rise to occur.

Thusat et al. (2009) also note a number of characteristics of this variety at the levels of lexis and syntax. Thus, for example, they mention the idiosyncratic use of *scope* to mean 'aim' as in 'the *scope* of the task', as well as the commonly used 'she *makes part of*' for 'she *forms part of*', as well as overuse of structures involving periphrastic possession such as 'a boy of *my class*'. Misuse (or 'different' use) of prepositions in this variety is also often noted in the literature (Mazzon 1992; Thusat et al. 2009). Furthermore Bonnici (2010) notes frequent use of structures such as 'I don't have the patience to *stay reading* a magazine'. An in-depth study of the use of quotatives is reported in Bonnici (forthcoming), whilst Krug, Hilbert, and Fabri (forthcoming) use corpus- and questionnaire-based data to examine a number of morphosyntactic features, amongst which the use of sentence-final *but* and of constructions with *WANT*, which occur frequently in the English of speakers of Maltese.

A limited amount of research has also concentrated on examining characteristics of the English of speakers of Maltese at other levels of structure. Thus for example, Fenech Magrin (2003) examines transferability of polysemous expressions in the English of speakers of Maltese whilst Dandria (2002) and Attard (2005) look at lexical access of items with different degrees of prototypicality, and at colour naming, respectively. Dimech (2005) carries out a preliminary analysis of the use of metaphor in the English of speakers of Maltese, whilst Scerri (2005) examines the passive and active knowledge of slang amongst Maltese speakers of English as compared to speakers of other varieties of English.

Whether, and to what extent, the presence of characteristics, such as those mentioned above justify considering Maltese English as a variety in its own right or not, is closely linked with perceptions and attitudes, particularly on the part of the speakers themselves. Research by Bagley (2001) on attitudes towards Maltese and English in Malta, for example, suggests a negative reaction, on the part of listeners, to a specific sub-variety of English often known as 'tal-pepé'. This sub-variety is often associated with speakers from a particular area (Sliema) and socio-economic and educational background (generally a white collar and non-State school educated



one). In order to bypass the problem of variation with the variety, Bonnici (2010) concentrates her efforts on examining language use amongst speakers of a particular subgroup, English dominant and L1 English–Maltese bilinguals – probably the kind of speakers which generated the reaction reported by Bagley mentioned earlier.

The point is that, in order to even begin to come anywhere close to the idea of accepting Maltese English as a variety in its own right, definition is necessary. Most of the research to date has fed off attempts at identifying enough ‘linguistic’ characteristics of the variety for it to be then possible to say this is the variety we are dealing with, and these are its distinguishing characteristics. Work by Mori (forthcoming) suggests that Maltese English should be thought of as a ‘continuum of continua’, an idea which fits in very well with the notion of a continuum of use discussed in Section 3.1. However, whilst the idea of a ‘continuum of continua’ would appear to be a good starting point because it eliminates the problem faced by researchers in this field, of deciding exactly what to ‘count’ as a good exemplar of this variety, discussion on this issue in Grech (forthcoming) is worth reporting on at this stage.

Grech frames the discussion of whether or not Maltese English can be considered a variety in its own in the context of other work in the burgeoning field of ‘New Englishes’. Both Grech (forthcoming) and Thusat et al. (2009) agree that whilst Maltese English does not fit neatly into any of the ‘circles’ – Inner/Outer/Expanding – of Kachru’s (1976) model, Schneider’s (2003) Dynamic Model does more justice to a discussion of this variety. Both Kachru and Schneider identify struggles with language and identity as part of the process involved in an inherited language taking on a local identity. Schneider establishes at the outset the specific sociolinguistic context common across post-colonial varieties. He identifies the postcolonial speech community as one made up of the indigenous population (in the case of Malta, the Maltese), the settler population (since 1800, the British) and possibly other adstrate groups of third language speakers too (in the case of Malta, possibly Italian).

Schneider’s model is put to the test for Maltese English by Thusat et al. who provide evidence to suggest that Maltese English can be said to fall into the third stage of Schneider’s five-stage model, the stage of ‘nativization’ at which ‘the construction of identity is ongoing’, which according to Thusat et al. (2009, 28) is the case in Malta. Whilst further research in this area is still necessary, Grech’s (forthcoming) conclusion is worth quoting:

Firstly, English (variety unspecified) is spoken widely enough across domains to constitute an important element in the linguistic makeup of Maltese society.

Secondly, although the jury may still be out on exactly what variety of English we *should* be speaking here, there is growing evidence to suggest that Malta already has a well-established variety of English – Maltese English – which presents the trademark signs of a dialect in the making. Reported attitudes towards people using Maltese English in Malta suggest that this is not an alien or even an uncomfortable thought necessarily. On the contrary, the idea that Malta has its own variety of English might even offer the freedom to consider this New English as part of our national identity, rather than as a ‘foreign’ language necessary only in some restricted domains.

Discussion of the issue of whether or not Maltese English can be considered a variety in its own right is bound to be a hot one because such a discussion feeds off speakers’ perception of the variety which many of them speak. The importance of this issue in the

context of this article, and more so in that of the present volume, is that Maltese speakers' 'acceptance' of a variety of English which is their own, that is as a result of entry into Schneider's (2003) Endonormative Stabilization, Stage 4 (at which 'the existence of a new language form is recognized, and this form has lost its former stigma', 50), and Differentiation, Stage 5 (which is the 'stage of dialect birth', 54), is, in this author's view, more likely to allow for successful bilingualism of English alongside Maltese than is resistance to the 'language of the foreigner', in this case English.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To conclude therefore, this article has demonstrated the rich and complex linguistic context within which Maltese bidialectal and/or bilingual speakers operate. The idea of a continuum of use along which speakers shift as a function of different variables is a useful way to explain the linguistic behaviour of many Maltese. Monolingualism is virtually impossible in Malta as not only are speakers usually bilingual to some degree, even if only passively so in some cases, many speakers also have access to a dialect over and above Standard Maltese.

Clearly, with a situation as complex as this, there will always be room for pedagogical concern, especially regarding issues related to 'correctness' in the use of the two main languages, Maltese and English. However, speakers seem to have a high awareness of which language or language variety it is appropriate to use in different domains and, as other papers in this volume show, with different functions. The possible emergence of a variety of English, described in Section 3.2, which the Maltese can claim to be 'their own' may be viewed as a promising development in that having one's own variety may do away with the fear of the 'alien' language taking over. It seems important, as Thake Vassallo (2009) suggests, that the advantages of bilingualism be viewed to be part of Malta's 'heritage'. Given the long tradition of bilingualism on the Islands, the way to go would seem to be one which will consist in all concerned making every effort possible to enhance this 'natural resource'.

#### **Notes**

1. Maltese is also spoken by first, as well as, to a lesser extent, second and third-generation emigrants living in large expatriate communities such as those in Australia and New Zealand, Canada, the UK and the USA. It is also the home language, even if not always the dominant one, of smaller but linguistically interesting communities which have taken up residence, usually for professional reasons, in or around the two cities, Brussels and Luxembourg, in which the European Union institutions hold their seat (cf. Bonnici 2011 for interesting preliminary work on language use amongst children growing up in Luxembourg). Figures for the number of expatriates who use Maltese actively and/or have passive knowledge of it are not available, but cf. [http://www.malteseabroad.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=47&Itemid=58](http://www.malteseabroad.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=47&Itemid=58) (accessed December 12, 2011) (Borg and Borg-Manché 2010).
2. Available at: [http://www.nso.gov.mt/docs/Census2005\\_Vol1.pdf](http://www.nso.gov.mt/docs/Census2005_Vol1.pdf) (accessed January 19, 2012).
3. Constitution of Malta, <http://www.constitution.org/cons/malta/chapt0.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2011).
4. References to work by Alexander Borg are made using his first name as well as his surname; those to work by Albert Borg are made using only his surname.
5. The Council of Europe's policy on plurilingualism is available at: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/division\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/division_EN.asp) (accessed April 30, 2012).

6. Some of the details in this section are based on information provided in the European Journalism Centre's website entry on Malta at [http://www.ejc.net/media\\_landscape/article/malta/](http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/malta/) (accessed December 12, 2011).
7. A total of 31 hours per week of *Campus FM* transmission time consist of in-house productions (Celaine Buhagiar, Programmes Coordinator, personal communication).
8. Where provided, glosses are presented in italics.

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