



Our Second Language

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It would make life much easier if we all spoke in the same way. No foreign languages to learn, no translations, easy communication with anyone in the world. This is no new idea – before the War ‘Esperanto’ was devised and people started learning it. Simple, easy to master, and with no difficult grammar or idioms. The War put paid to its development. In Malta our first national language, Maltese, is regarded as defining our culture, our Maltese heritage, and should be preserved and cherished. However it is a Semitic language, understandable in Arabic countries but not in Europe to which we now look. It is written in European style and not in Arabic fashion, so in a kind of paradox we are unique and look both north and south.

In the ninth century Malta and Gozo were part of the Byzantine Empire, ruled from Constantinople (Istanbul) and with Latin and Greek as the *lingua franca*, over the local tongues – whatever that may have been here. The Aghlabid Arabs from Tunisia conducted a series of raids in the ninth century, looting the Islands and eventually in 870AD conquering. As far as we know they left Malta virtually un-inhabited and were occupied with struggles for the Caliphate at home. The Fatimids succeeded to the Caliphate and then Malta was resettled according to the Arab historians. This was in about 1050 AD and included a rebuilding of Mdina. Soon after, 1092 the Normans took us, but they left the local Arabs to carry on at first and so they laid the basis for the Maltese language. In about 1225 the Normans started to establish Christianity and Moslems became second class citizens (as previously the Christians), and eventually in 1502 the last Moslems who had not already left or converted were expelled. Malta and Gozo were part of Sicily and therefore the language of administration was Italian (or Latin) and Italian continued so until Mussolini times, when Italy became an enemy and British became the language of administration and Government.

Maltese did not die – it continued as the local spoken tongue and in the 18th century it began to be realized that Malta in a way different from Sicily and Italy. Mikael Anton Vassali was one of the first to put this forward, and in 1796 he published a Maltese–Italian and Latin Dictionary in Rome. With the British administration starting in 1800 the individuality of the Islands was given a further boost and as said before English became the language of government when the Axis powers started to move against Britain. Maltese had continued to develop and the present orthography was devised by Saydon. When Malta became



independent in 1964 Maltese became the first language but with English as the second official language. Maltese is promoted but English is necessary as it is the language of the digital age and makes communicating with other European nations and large areas of the Worlds such as the British Commonwealth and America.

English is an old and idiosyncratic language, beautiful in its range of expression, but full of difficulties for the student. Our feet smell, but our nose will run. Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana, you can take a horse to the water, but a pencil must be lead, the bandage was wound around the wound Why is it that a fat chance and a slim chance mean the same thing whereas a wise man and a wise guy are opposites. Why does a writer write, when a grocer does not grocer, or a hammer ham, or a finger fling? Grammar and syntax can also be difficult, and what do you do about the man who says ‘marriage’ is not a ‘word’ (it is a sentence.)

The list of paradoxes is unlimited, but in fact most people use only three to four thousand of the two hundred thousand or so words in the full dictionary. The same is true of Maltese, but the range is much smaller. Although I have not counted them, Shakespeare is said to have used forty thousand and Winston Churchill half that. People are very sloppy about their vocabulary and use fashionable buzz words which encompass a range of meanings – current examples are ‘incredible’ or ‘incredibly’ and ‘absolutely’ Prince Harry used both when announcing the birth of his new son Archie. We borrow freely from our cousins in the USA. Everything good is ‘cool’ (what about awesome and humungous) ‘have a nice day’, ‘See you later/soon’ ‘Take care’ and the awful ‘Missing you already’. Other words are often ill-treated like ‘very unique’, ‘very honest’, ‘centred around’ and I am sure you can think of many more. One suggestion you might like to take on board is that you select a different word every day and use it in your conversations four or five times that day. Your vocabulary soon extends and you find you can express yourself more clearly.

We are very lucky to have English as a second language – there are many other languages in the world and there are advantages in learning them, particularly if you have business in other countries. Mandarin (Chinese), French, German and Spanish are major languages and taught in schools, but (thank goodness!) in most parts of the world a little English will be understood – we are all members of the same human race (which is not a race at all!).