

Expert in the spotlight in Oktober/November 2013 Lydia Sciriha

The expert in the Spotlight feature gives you the chance to interact one-on-one with our Ask the expert-section. The feature also provides interesting and insightful comments regarding the subjects mentioned above, in-depth content and exclusive Q and A's.

Featured Expert / Area of focus:

Dr. Lydia Sciriha is Professor of Sociolinguistics in the Department of English at the University of Malta (Linken naar <http://www.um.edu.mt/>). Her research interests are: Bilingualism, Sociolinguistics, Discourse Analysis and Language Surveys. She is the author of the Regional Dossier: [**Maltese, the Maltese language in education in Malta**](#), which will be published in October 2013 by Mercator Research Centre.

Professor Sciriha has won a number of awards including the Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship, the British Council scholarship, the Marquis Scicluna Senior Fellowship and the Commonwealth Academic Fellowship. She has taught in Australia, Cyprus, Germany and Luxembourg.

Professor Lydia Sciriha is the author or co-author of eleven books and has edited two volumes of Humanitas Journal of the Faculty of Arts and number of articles in linguistics in scientific journals. More biographical information at <https://www.um.edu.mt/profile/lydiasciriha>

Face to face with Lydia Sciriha

What is your background in the field of regional and minority languages/education/multilingualism?

My main area of research is sociolinguistics and in most of my studies my particular focus is the bilingual situation in Malta, an officially bilingual country in Maltese, the indigenous language and English. It is important to highlight the fact that Maltese is not a minority language, since it has been the official language of Malta since 1934 and the overwhelming majority of the Maltese are native speakers of this language.

My interest in the study of the Maltese language intensified in 1987 when I became the Director of the Language Laboratory Complex at the University of Malta which was then used predominantly by foreign students who availed themselves of the self-taught courses in English. I would also receive many requests from foreign students wishing to learn Maltese but who were hampered from doing so because there was little material available to learn Maltese as a foreign language, though many textbooks on Maltese are available. However these are aimed at native speakers of the language and not at foreigners who desire to add Maltese to their linguistic repertoire. In order to redress the lacunae I wrote two language courses (Beginning Maltese 1996, 1998, 2004, 2009 and Continuing Maltese, 2010). Nevertheless, my main area of research is to discover language use by means of extensive representative surveys of language use in Malta, through which, among others, the rise of Maltese has been traced over a period of 20 years (Sciriha and Vassallo 2001, Sciriha, 2002, Sciriha and Vassallo 2006).

What do you think is the major challenge in your field of work?

As most of my research is survey-based, it is now becoming increasingly more difficult for interviewers to conduct face-to-face interviews following strictly representative selection methods since residents now tend to be at home only for short periods of time. This is not only true of youngsters, who increasingly live at addresses where they are not registered officially, but also for adults because of new patterns of work commitments and leisure activities. This has become quite a challenge especially since it is important to get a snapshot of the ever-changing linguistic profile of Malta especially in view of the paucity of data that is available. Unfortunately only one question on language proficiency was asked in the 2011 national Census. Even so, this data is limited since one respondent within the family often replies for all the family members, something which is not ideal for socio-linguistic work in which the respondent him/herself is required to provide the data. Moreover, with the steady influx of

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immigrants from African countries, issues regarding the ethno-linguistic mix of the population of Malta need to be addressed. In view of such changes, the linguistic picture of Malta is bound to change in the next few years.

What is one of the hottest new projects / items you are working on?

I am at present researching the linguistic landscape of Malta and in particular, how the two official languages appear in the public sphere in both government and non-government domains in the residential and commercial localities. This aim of this project is to discover the visibility or otherwise of Maltese on signs in public view, especially in the light of the efforts made by successive governments to promote and safeguard the Maltese Language, as clearly stated in the Maltese Language Act of 2005 which emphasises the salience of Maltese in education and in society at large. This research seeks to discover whether, at the official level, these government efforts to make Maltese more visible on street names, place names and other public signs are bearing fruit. Is Maltese more visible in some localities more than in others and why is this so? These are the questions which the project on linguistic landscape aims to answer.

Are there any important references such as articles, links, etc. you would like to mention?

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- Sciriha Lydia and Mario Vassallo (2012) *Profiling English Language Use in Malta – a sociolinguistic study*. Unpublished monograph.
- Sciriha Lydia (2010) *Continuing Maltese. A Lower Intermediate to Intermediate Level Course* [Book and 2 CDs]. Malta: Book Distributors Limited.
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