

How is Italian spoken in Malta? First evidence of /r/ as an (ethno)phonetic cue

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This study is the first phase of a broader investigation into phonetic variation in Italian spoken by Maltese nationals, both Maltese and English dominant. It addresses a gap in interlanguage phonology literature by examining the Maltese multilingual context. Malta has a long history of bilingualism [3], with Italian once being a prestigious language widely spread through television ([2]). The phenomena under investigation were selected for their typicality in this interlanguage from a contrastive phonology perspective ([5]), based on both developmental acquisition paths and perceptual salience observed in preliminary auditory and acoustic analysis.

Initial analyses focused on the acoustic realizations of the Italian rhotic /r/, both as a single consonant (in word-initial position, intervocalic contexts, and tautosyllabic/heterosyllabic clusters) and as a geminate in intervocalic contexts only. From our acoustic-perceptual evaluations Maltese speakers tend to produce a variant approximant-like /r/ in preconsonantal contexts. In phonological description of Maltese, /r/ is reported to be “realized as voiced, labialized (in some speakers) slightly retroflex apico post-alveolar (or retracted alveolar) approximant [ɹ] or tap [ɾ]”[1].

The study involved twelve Maltese-English bilingual adults, categorized as Mainly Maltese Speakers (MMS) or Mainly English Speakers (MES) based on language dominance (see [3]). All participants, proficient in Italian, completed an ethno-sociolinguistic questionnaire, followed by tasks eliciting both controlled and semi-spontaneous speech: Oral word identification through images (ORW), Picture-based story narration (NPS), Semi-structured dialogue with the interviewer (SSD).

The oral productions were analyzed using Praat software, with target sounds classified based on acoustic parameters of articulatory constriction and release [4]. All variants deviating from the standard Italian reference (realized as a trill) were analyzed. Phonetic variants were quantified as percentages of the total target productions and examined in relation to external variables such as age, gender, and elicitation style, with statistical validation applied.

Our preliminary results show noteworthy evidence of variation in the productions of /r/ in L2 Italian by Maltese speakers that may be summarized as follows:

in general, rhotic variants can be grouped into 5 categories (depending on the phonetic contexts and L1 dominance – English or Maltese); trill realizations are primarily attested in post-consonantal contexts (CrV) and intervocalic geminate context (VrrV); approximant realizations - absent from the phonological inventory of Italian - are documented in post-vocalic contexts (Vr#, VrC); tap realizations occur mainly in intervocalic singleton context (VrV); fricative realizations are primarily attested in post-consonantal contexts (CrV); non-prototypical realizations due to target undershooting phenomena (such as reductions of taps or trills, bi-phasic variants, hybrid variants)

The cross-task comparison (PS vs. PN) reveals a significant effect of degree of accuracy required by the task in the rhotic production: in picture naming /r/ are realized with native-like variants to a greater extent (= correlation with variable social stratum + style, see ‘marker’ in the Labovian paradigm).

Correlation with external variables show a significance with gender: female respondents produce rhotic variants which are closer to the acoustic and phonetic correlates of L1 Italian.

Data from a small control group by English-dominant Maltese speakers reveal a greater amount of realizations affected by phonetic interference from English, rather than Maltese /r/.

Our data are also characterised by a degree of variability between individual respondents. In the future other segmental and sub-segmental phenomena will be investigated to describe this interlanguage variety and evaluate its accentedness, taking into account the role of the L1 (by expanding our sample of English-dominant bilinguals) and the linguistic repertoire of informants (such as input variety/ies of Italian).

References

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