

Wide angle**A healthy Maltese affair**

Lino Spiteri

A young female cashier in a supermarket, face turned away from the customer she was serving as she talked to a colleague, called out a number in Maltese to her. The latter called back, in Maltese too, "Are you practising?" The first salesgirl replied, still in the local language: "I hardly know them" (meaning the numbers). Both comely lasses could not be mistaken for anything else but Maltese, in their attitude to their mother tongue, which is just about the only thing that differentiates us from the rest of the world.

The language does so in a positive manner. We are blessed with our widespread grasp of the English language, as a valuable means of global communication, and with having our own, fully developed language. Increasingly, a substantial part of the citizenry is spurning both of these two gifts.

Maltese is a healthy, living language. Its robust health is best seen among those who speak no other language, and writers who can wield it well. Among the latter, few do so more tellingly than Frans Sammut, the writer and educator. Those who have no literary prowess but whose oral expression in their mother tongue stands out, include peasants, port workers and other folk who find not a few noses turned up at their still relatively uncomplicated way of life, and manner of describing it.

Ours is a living language because it borrows foreign words, where necessary, and by and by assimilates them. There are clear rules regarding how this should be done, starting with that relating to the phonetic aspect of the language. At times, that gives rise to confusion and useless controversy. We have borrowed words that were not needed because their Maltese equivalent had existed for centuries, and remains adequate.

We borrow words to replace Maltese equivalents, which have fallen out of use, or been shoved away through misuse. Loan words from the Italian have been adapted phonetically, and nowadays no one bats an eyelid at the way they are written. Least of all among them words which were borrowed to replace Maltese words with exactly the same meaning, but which were considered to reflect a 'low' position in society.

Within the circle of healthy Maltese alive to the need to import loanwords where applicable, the phonetic rule is raising some difficulty. It tends to result in ugly words, when applied to English words that are in common usage. Worse, in a society that is bilingual, even if imperfectly so, there are new hurdles for children with learning difficulties.

There are other difficulties within that circle. These mostly arise out of their being two different ways of writing some Maltese words. The National Council for the Maltese Language will be tackling such variants in several focused sessions later this month. Adopting a uniform approach after suitable open discussion will be a significant contribution towards strengthening the Maltese language.

It will not, however, silence those who are openly spurning Maltese, much less the many more who seem bent on slaughtering both Maltese and English. The former group is characterised by parents who object to their children having to pass the ordinary level (to retain the old usage) examination in Maltese in order to be eligible for consideration for undergraduate studies at our University.

Foreign students are accepted without being required to study Maltese, let alone pass an exam in it; why not our children too? So runs one line of thought. To each his right to an opinion. In older days, parents of students who found it hard to pass the O-level exam in English Language used to argue that a pass in English Literature ought to be accepted as being implicitly equivalent.

Some modify the absolute call to abolish the Maltese pass requirement. They restrict their opposition to the study of Maltese literature in the O-level syllabus. I hope that it is not because, as writer, I pen my short stories in Maltese that I feel strongly against this rejection of part of our identity. Those who argue in this manner would prefer not to introduce their offspring early on to the fact that Malta too has its authors, and if not to be viewed with unbridled pride, that is not such a bad thing to have, is it now?

The argument against the O-level Maltese language University entry requirement is based most vociferously on the assertion that Maltese is useless outside Malta. It is certainly not a means of international communication. Which language is, other than English? French, Spanish and Portuguese boast millions of users beyond their countries' shores. Arabic is spoken, with variations, in Arab countries only. Which other

languages can make claims similar to those of English, French, Portuguese and Spanish? Not even Italian. Nor, for that matter, Chinese.

By no means should anyone deny the right of others to apply their energy to fighting examinations at O-level in Maltese. Might one suggest, though, that it would be more relevant to press for a critical review of the method of instruction in the language, particularly once more standardisation takes place? And of more careful consideration of the extent to which Maltese should be put to use as the language of instruction and use where it manifestly makes more sense to import, and use foreign terms in distinguishing italics.

Drawing an old parallel, I continue to find it surprising that our MEPs still insist on brandishing Maltese in the European Parliament, where the primary object is to communicate, and that can be done more effectively in one of the major languages than through a translation from Maltese.

Back to the local context: if parents themselves grunt and groan because their children have to study Maltese, and do so from their early years, it is no small wonder that kids grow up disliking their native language. If the focus is on better content and style of instruction, there might be fewer salesgirls claiming they get confused when trying to tell the numbers in Maltese.

There might also be greater recognition that, as regards the English language, many of us are sending it to the dogs faster than a greyhound is enticed to run. The basic observation that so many Maltese shuffle between Maltese and English in the same breath, managing to mangle both of them simultaneously, is a stand-alone affair. You can find examples all over the place.

The culprits include parents who think it is smart, or feel obliged, to speak in English to their children, and do that by mingling the languages or speaking English badly. Nor can some teachers raise clean hands in that regard as well. There is another category of manglers who would be offended by the merest suggestion that their command of English is anything less than perfect. Yet, distinguishing intonation aside, there is so much incorrect use of English being spoken by those who insist they know better that a touch of humility and introspection could go a long way to touching up self-arrogated class.

The ability to write and speak good English has served the Maltese people well in the past. The ability is a necessity for the future. The necessity does not require any badmouthing and relegation of the Maltese language in order to be met. Through proper curricula, instruction structure and delivery by enough adequately trained teachers, a thorough command of both Maltese and English is not at all beyond the grasp of our young by the time they reach the secondary level of education.

That could open the way more effectively for good preparation in a third language (there used to be a fourth as well in bygone days, but that was not an ideal arrangement), one chosen by reference not only to the European Union, but also to the Arab world and, by and by, China. That is what globalisation is all about, in addition to a strong command of the English language.

There is much to look into critically and change, when it comes to the learning, teaching and practising of Maltese, English and a third language. Stancing and polemicising will only take up precious time, which can be more usefully applied on reconstructing language from a problem into a project.

While polemics are threatening to run riot with the Maltese language, its literature is passing through a very strong phase. There is the traditional apparent anti-magnetism of older and newer writers. What the older writers used to feel in the Sixties now tends to be apparent towards them among the younger species of the same breed.

Such is the cycle of life. There isn't really a chasm between them; certainly not one as deep as is sometimes made out. They all live in the area common to both that is creativity. Among the older writers creativity remained strong, and bold as well. In younger veins, the blood courses more fiercely, and so does the mode of expression. With the usual bit of a lag, some of the younger writers are attacking verbal taboos, using a language that at times seems coarse.

The newer wave of writers sees the approach as essential. Older ones consider it unnecessary. While my mind, I hope, has not narrowed as much as arthritis has narrowed some of my bones, I tend towards the belief that the most explicit of stories can be told without being insensitively explicit.

I found confirmation recently catching up with a novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, his first in ten years. It belongs more to the novella, or long-short story genre, but he called it a novel, and who would contradict the grand old Latin American winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, Marquez writes about an ancient columnist who, out of free choice, has never known love in his life, and never had sex that he did not buy. About to turn 90, he gives himself a

present: he asks an old Madame to get him a young virgin. She procures him a girl who is so tired out looking after her younger siblings and working in a job sewing buttons that all she does in his bed is sleep. He never sees her awake, falls in hesitant, painful love with her and, now into his 91st year, is lost about what to do. The Madame tells him, in the only explicit sentence in the novella.

The book, so slim one reads it in half an afternoon, received worldwide acclaim. Marquez did not use the four-letter word more than twice. It can be done. The younger wave of writers wants to do it differently, whether to catch up with the avant-garde, to shock with ancient thrusts, or to be different, is immaterial. What matters is the creativity. And it is alive and well, and calling out for attention in their short stories and novels.

Creativity is bursting with life in poetry, too. A collection issued by Louis Briffa - Bil-Valroppa - offers irrefutable proof. It puts together in 430 pages most of the outpouring of the poet over the past 20 years, from the time he was 15.

Briffa structures his poems into seven sections introduced with studies by our leading literary critics and/or exponents of the poetry genre. He meticulously shapes his rhythms to fit his moods and themes, ranging from eroticism, politics and the heritage and the environment, to love and other personal experiences.

The collection, another fine PEG Ltd publication, was long in the making. Two years ago, Briffa's wife, Fanina, persuaded him to prepare and launch it. The poet did so, providing proof positive that the Maltese language is beautiful, expressive and strong, deployed by a master.

A poet and a master of form and language - that would be no more than an understated description of Louis Briffa, who as the title to his collection chose Bil-Varloppa (With a [carpenter's] Plane) to record for always that he crafted his broad spectrum of inspirations with the diligence akin to that of a master woodworker.

Should those who do not want their children to study literature in their formative years get their way, I would still urge them to nudge the offspring towards Bil-Valdroppa, and do themselves the favour of tagging along.

A great work of art like that of the poet Louis Briffa should not be missed by anyone. Not even by utilitarian cynics.

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