

Migrations in the Maltese Islands: a linguistic melting pot

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Geography

The Maltese islands are located in the geographical centre of the Mediterranean Sea, 80 km away from Sicily, 320 km from Tunisia and Libya, a strategic position at the crossroad of the former Silk Road. The main island of Malta's surface is 246 km² (37x22), while Gozo is even smaller: 68 km² (22x11). It is surrounded by safe natural harbours, its maximum height is only 258 m, there are no rivers, and hardly any tree. Today, the whole population counts some 400,000 inhabitants.

History

From pre-history to the Muslim conquest

The pre-historical period (8000 – 3500 BC) survives with the megalithic temples (4100 – 2500 BC) that can still be seen on the two islands, but nothing is known about the people who built them. 1450 BC is generally considered as the beginning of Bronze Age groups' invasions, probably coming from Sicily. In 900 BC new settlers arrived, known as the Bahrija people. Phoenicians settlements are attested around 800 BC (the bilingual inscription Phoenician – Greek, which allowed Phoenician to be deciphered, was excavated in Malta). It is thus most likely that the Phoenician language was spoken on the islands until some unknown period, at least until the Greeks (VIIth - Vth BC) conquered them. Then comes the rule of Carthage (Vth BC - 218 BC), and then the Romans (218 BC - 870 AD). But historians doubt that the islands were ever thoroughly romanized (Blouet 1984:32), and consequently that the whole population of Malta spoke Latin. One often-quoted argument is the narration of St Paul shipwreck in Malta in 58/60 (Act of the Apostles, St Luke, XXVIII, I): the Maltese inhabitants are called "Barbarians", a term used for non-Latin speakers at that time. It is not sure whether they still spoke Phoenician, or Punic, or Greek, or whether, at least some of them, spoke Latin. It is believed that during the 5th century AD, Vandals raids took place, but their demographic and linguistic consequences are unknown.

The Muslim conquest

In 870, an Arabo-Berber squadron from Sicily conquers the Maltese islands. It is the beginning of the Muslim rule, which lasted until 1090. But two intriguing facts have for long puzzled both archaeologists and linguists: the lack of archaeological remains dating back from the Muslim period (all Arabic and Muslim remains are posterior), and the absence of toponyms and anthroponyms that go back to the period which preceded the introduction of the Arabic language (apart from the names of Malta and Gozo themselves). It is well known that military conquests and invasions that led to a language change do not lead to the total disappearance of the previous language(s). The origin of numerous French place names for instance can easily be traced back to Celtic. The oddity of the Maltese state of affairs might be explained by the historical account given by Ibn 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Himyarî, an Arab geographer of the 15th century. His work is based, as was the tradition, on previous reports by another geographer, contemporary of the end of the Muslim rule, al-Bakrî (1020-1094). Al-Bakrî's work is only known to us in fragments, which can be recognized in al-Himyarî's account. He explicitly reports that after 255 AH "the island of Malta remained an uninhabited ruin, but it was visited by ship builders, because the wood in it is of the strongest kind, by the fishermen, because of the abundance and tastiness of the fish around its shores, and by those who collect honey, because that is the most common thing there. After the year 440 AH (=

1049 AD) the Muslims peopled it and they built its city, and then it became a finer place than it was before.” (Brincat 1995:11). Knowing the Sicilian society of that time, it seems most likely that the new Muslim settlers came with their Christian slaves. It cannot be ruled out that some of the former Maltese inhabitants living in secluded places may have survived the possible deportations and massacres. The extent to which al-Himyari’s account is reliable is still debated, but if it got confirmed in other sources, this would mean that the Muslim actually ruled the islands for only 42 years (1048-1090). The possible depopulation of the Maltese islands would explain both the archaeological and linguistic enigmas. Still, what is sure is that the Arabic language was introduced during the Muslim rule, and that ever since, the Maltese kept on speaking a variety of Maghribi Arabic which developed into an independent language, the Maltese language, as it is spoken today.

The early Christian period (1090- 1530)

In 1090, the Christian Normans take over Malta, which remains mainly Muslim, although the latter are not the rulers any longer. In 1175, the Bishop of Strasbourg, after Roger II in 1127 had ‘re-conquered’ Malta once more, still records that the islands are inhabited by Moslems (Blouet 1984:37) From now on, the demography of Malta is submitted to many ups and downs related to “migrations” understood in a broad sense (including new rulers, razzias, deportations of all sorts into and out of the islands), which led to extensive language contact with other forms of Arabic, with Romance languages (and, much later on, with English). The latter contacts changed the language without jeopardizing its genetic identity. These “migrations” can be summed up in a few historical facts, bearing in mind that it is also a period of intensive piracy:

- 1146: Fall of Tripoli, Muslim slaves are taken over to Malta.
- Frederick II (1194-1250) reorganizes the Sicilian kingdom. Western influences begin to permeate Malta more strongly.
- 1224: after a revolt, part of the population of the town of Celano (Abruzzi) is deported to Malta.
- 1240/1250: Muslims are expelled from Malta, but it is likely that a good (unknown) proportion of them converted to Catholicism.
- 1240 census: 771 Muslim families, 250 Christian, 33 Jewish, slaves and poor not recorded; estimate between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants.
- Early Middle Ages: progressive settlements of small numbers of Italians, quickly assimilated; migrations of merchants from Pisa, Genova, also from Catalonia; workers from Sicily and Italy.
- After the Sicilian Vespers (1282), Malta is more fully integrated in the economic and social world of Sicily and Aragon.
- Several European rulers: Suabians until 1266, Angevins, Aragonese until 1410, then Castilians.
- 13-15th c.: a ruling caste of prominent families from Sicily and Aragon settle in the islands.
- 14-15th century: Malta belongs to the kingdom of Sicily. Frequent Muslim razzias: in 1385 Moores raid Malta and Gozo several times.
- 1419: 8,500 to 10,000 inhabitants, mainly sailors, also peasants, masons, stonecutters.
- 1429: Moorish invasion. Loss of 3,000 inhabitants.
- 1528: 17,000 to 20,000 inhabitants.

During this period, Maltese is an oral language only, and apart from place and person names recorded in notarial deeds, there is little trace of the Maltese language of the Middle Ages. In

the only literary remain of that time, a twenty-verse *Cantilena*, there is only one word of Romance origin (Wettinger and Fsadni, 1968, Cohen and Vanhove, 1991). It is thus difficult to get a clear picture of the influence of Romance languages (see Wettinger 1968, 1971a & b, 1980, 1986) on the Maltese language, but it has to be reminded that Latin, and then Sicilian were used as written and administrative languages. Still, judging from the approximate spelling systems used at that time, it seems that the phonetic changes so characteristic of Maltese had hardly started, if not at all.

The Rule of the Order of St John of Jerusalem (1530-1798)

In 1530, the pope gives the Maltese islands to the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, which were recently defeated by the Ottomans in Rhodes. A new era starts for Malta, demographically, politically and linguistically. The Knights, in majority French, then Spanish, and Italian settle in the islands with their servants, soldiers, attendants, and also with Rhodians. During their almost three-century rule, the population grows, naturally and via migrations, by five: from 20,000 to 100,000. The building of Valletta triggers an influx of migrant workers, probably mainly from Sicily. In 1590, 29,000 inhabitants are registered. Between 1590 and 1617 the population growth rate is up to + 2% per year, which supposes intense migration movements. But piracy was still going on, rivalry between the Christians and the Turks was at its peak, and all this had also a strong impact on the demography of the Maltese islands, both ways. For instance in 1546, the famous pirate Dragut raids Gozo; three Maltese *casals* are raided in 1547; in 1551 the northern coast of Malta is devastated, and the entire Gozo population (5,000) is taken into slavery by the Turks. It will take several decades before Gozo is repopulated from the island of Malta. The Ottomans besiege the island in 1565, but today historians think that the 7 to 9,000 Maltese victims are probably overestimated.

Later on, the intense privateering by Muslims and Maltese (Order and Maltese bourgeoisie alike) pirates and corsairs in the Mediterranean which went on all along the 17th and 18th centuries, and resulted in the presence of numerous Muslim slaves on the island of Malta (Wettinger 1971b). In the early 18th century, it was estimated that some 10,000 slaves from Tunisia, and Algeria were held as prisoners in Malta.

From a political point of view, the Spanish power over Malta declines in the second half of the 17th century (from 1680) and the 18th century is characterized by a strong French influence through shipping trade.

Linguistically, the influence of the prestigious Romance languages, first Sicilian, then varieties of Italian, is obviously increasing, as well as the influence of the Mediterranean Lingua Franca through shipping trade. Favourable conditions that lead to intensive language mixing now prevail. Toscan Italian is the language of Justice, lawyers and solicitors, and of the administration. It is also used among the upper classes, and by Maltese intellectuals and writers between the 17th and the beginning of the 20th century, even though Maltese authors start translating into and writing in Maltese during the 19th century. Italian was also the language used in schools (for a minority of children) until the early 20th century. One can reasonably assume that the influence of Sicilian and Italian was lesser among the Gozitans and the illiterate peasants than among the city dwellers of the main island, Malta. Nevertheless, it is difficult to give an estimation of the proportion of bilingual speakers among the Maltese population at that time. But apart from bilingualism, the close bond with Sicily that remained all along the Knights rule through the coming of administrators, merchants, craftsmen, sailors and fishermen speaking Sicilian and Italian, the prestigious status of these languages, were bound to leave traces on the language and explain the importance of Romance elements of all kinds, phonetical, morphological, syntactical and lexical, on the Maltese language. The Maltese grammarian, Mikiel Anton Vassalli, in his Maltese-Latin-

Italian dictionary published in 1796, was complaining about the “snobbism” of some inhabitants of Valletta, the Capital city, whose language was packed full of Sicilian and Italian expressions they were “maltalizing”.

On the other hand, one should not underestimate the contact with Arab slaves as a possible “conservative” factor on the language of at least some Maltese speakers. The same Vassalli was also writing, concerning the dialects of Valletta and the neighbouring cities, that the influence of Arabic was quite obvious, because, he was assuming, of the presence of numerous Muslim prisoners.

French Rule (1798-1800)

The French rule only lasted two years. On June 10th, 1798, Napoleon troops took over Malta, expelled the Knights, and declared the abolition of slavery. They were soon expelled by the British with the help of the Maltese people. But this short rule opened the way to radical social, political and linguistic changes.

British Rule (1800-1964)

The British rule lasted slightly more than a century and a half. It was officialized at the treaty of Paris, on March 30th, 1814. During this period, the Maltese islands went on welcoming numerous Italian exiles, because of the political situation, particularly in 1850-60. The population grew rapidly: 140,000 inhabitants in 1871, 165,000 in 1891, 205,000 in 1906, 280,000 in 1939. But, because of economical and overpopulation problems, it is also the beginning of an important Maltese emigration towards Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, the Levant, Italy, USA, and Australia. Another important event on Maltese demography is World War II (from June 10th, 1940 until November 8th, 1943) during which Malta suffers from a blockade and heavy bombing by the Axis.

The influence of Italian is still very strong during British rule, but it goes along with the growing importance of both Maltese and English. During the second half of the 18th century, individual initiatives encourage the use of Maltese as a literary and written language. The first serious attempts towards description and standardization of the Maltese are due to two local scholars, de Soldanis (1770) then Vassalli (1798). They tried, without success, to impose a unified orthography and the teaching of Maltese at school. But they were to some extent supported by the British rulers as part of their fight against Italian influence, e.g., in 1825 the British created a chair of Maltese, which was offered to Vassalli.

The will of some Maltese to gain full social recognition for their native tongue, in line with the Romantic ideals and of the French revolution, was both comforted and weakened, later on, by the Italian irredentism. Nationalism and anti-colonialism was leading part of the Maltese population to advocate for the teaching of Maltese, alongside with English, while others were giving greater place to their feeling of belonging to the Italian cultural and political sphere, as against the Anglo-Saxon one. For the latter the affection for non-written Maltese, and thus of low status, was considered ridiculous. The conflict between the two parties lasted more than a century, and was hot in all parts of the Maltese society, illiterates included. The catholic church was fearing protestant proselytism, but more importantly, the Maltese upper classes, jurists, merchants, Italian-speaking elites, were defending their own economic and intellectual dominant position. The introduction of Maltese and English would have meant giving a larger access to their professions and privileges.

On the other hand, although they were supporting Italian irredentism, the British could not but react to the dangers of the nationalistic model it was representing for their own colonial power. This is the reason why they tried several times to introduce Maltese and English in schools and at the court of justice. Later on, the rise of fascism in Italy, and Mussolini's claim over Malta, led the British, after several attempts, to abolish Italian as an official language,

promoting instead both English and Maltese, the latter becoming compulsory in schools in 1934, to the great satisfaction of the supporters of the Maltese language. An official Latin alphabet, still in use today, was adopted, the one which had been prepared ten years earlier by the Union of Maltese Writers.

Independence

On September 21st, 1964, Malta is declared an independent Republic, but remains a member of the Commonwealth, and on May, 1st, 2004, Malta joins the E.U. After a very passionate internal debate, during which the partisans of English were about to win, Maltese is now one of the 23 languages of the E.U.

Today the vast majority of the Maltese people is bilingual Maltese-English, and both languages are still the official languages of the Republic, Maltese being the sole “national” language by constitution. Italian, although declining, is also still widely spoken, or at least understood on the islands, and keeps being an important source of borrowings. Somewhat paradoxically, the knowledge of English, and its influence on the Maltese language, are now stronger than they were during British rule, when British citizens were residing permanently in greater number on the islands. A significant proportion of the national income comes from English training for foreigners...

The Maltese language

To sum up what has been described above directly in connection with the Maltese history and population movements, below is a reminder of the main linguistic and socio-linguistic characteristics of Maltese, with a few necessary additions:

- No linguistic trace (not even in toponymy or onomastics) of the language(s) spoken before the Muslim period.
- *Genetic affiliation*: North African Arabic variety (Semitic), related to the first wave of Arabicisation of the Mediterranean coasts.
- *Sociolinguistics*:
 - Until 19th century: exclusively oral; Sicilian, later Italian, written and “official” languages; bilingualism in upper classes, more limited in lower classes
 - 1933: English and Maltese official languages
 - 1934: Maltese orthography adopted and taught in schools
 - 20th century: widespread trilingualism Maltese, English, Italian.
 - 1964: Maltese National language + official language along with English
 - Schools: bilingual education in Maltese and English
 - 2004: Official language of the E.U.
 - Post-independence: increasing code-switching between Maltese and English.

Phonology

The phonology of the Maltese language is characterized by a progressive loss and merges of Arabic sounds, mainly back and “emphatic” consonants, the acquisition of Romance sounds, which were almost stabilized at the beginning of 20th century. Changes, not yet stabilized, are still occurring under the influence of Italian and English, although migrations from these countries are now insignificant. Below is a chart of today’s Maltese phonemes, showing in red the borrowed phonemes:

Consonants				Short vowels		Long vowels	
<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>k</i>	ʔ				
<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>g</i>		<i>i</i>	<i>(u)</i> ¹	<i>i:</i>	<i>u:</i>
	<i>ts</i>	<i>tʃ</i>		<i>e</i>	<i>o</i>		<i>iə</i>
	<i>dz</i>	<i>dʒ</i>		<i>a</i>		<i>e:</i>	<i>o:</i>
<i>f</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>ʃ</i>	<i>ħ</i>			<i>a:</i>	
<i>v</i>	<i>z</i>						
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>						
	<i>r</i>						
	<i>l</i>						
<i>w</i>		<i>j</i>					

Lexicon

The lexicon contains massive borrowings from Sicilian, Italian, and more recently from English. Their proportion is approximately 57% of the total lexicon (Brincat 2004), but lots of them are technical words not in daily use.

There are numerous doublets and partial synonyms with words of Arabic origin (*tqil* ‘heavy, difficult, hard’ (< Ar.) *diffiċli* ‘difficult, hard’ (< It.)),

Semantic shifts of Italian loans occur under the influence of English (*figura* ‘figure’ < It. ‘image, human shape’)

The old layer of borrowings present a syllabic restructuring to adapt to Arabic patterns (/katti:v/ ‘cruel’ < It. *cattivo*, /seftu:r/ ‘servant’ < Sic. *servituri*). In recent borrowings, there is hardly any syllabic change.

Morphology

The Maltese morphology is strikingly a mixture of Arabic and Romance features.

In the old layer of borrowings, there were adaptations to the Arabic derivational system (*fallaz* ‘falsify’, *ifallaz* ‘be falsified’ < Sic. *falsu*; *kaċċa* ‘hunt’, *tkaċċa* ‘be hunted’ < It. *cacciare*; *mbaċċaċ* ‘rounded’ < *baċċaċ* ‘turn round’ < *boċċa* ‘ball’ < Sic. *bboccia*, It. *boccia*; *ifrem* ‘firmer’ < *ferm* ‘firm’ < it. *fermo*)

In the new layer of borrowings, there is, in the verbal system, a generalisation of a Sicilian pattern (Mifsud 1995), conjugated with an Arabic inflection (*ippubblika* ‘publish’ < It. *pubblicare*; *iċċekkja* ‘check’ < Eng. ‘to check’). The verbal derivation system inherited from Arabic is now frozen.

On the other hand, the Arabic nominal morphology may apply to borrowings. In particular, the Arabic broken plural patterns are quite productive: *furketta* ‘fork’, pl. *frieket* (< It.), *skrun* ‘screw, propeller’, pl. *skrejjen* (< Eng.), as well as Arabic plural suffixes: f.pl. *-iet* / *-ijiet*: *Ar. *bajda* ‘egg’, pl. *bajdiet*; *It. *frotta* ‘fruit’, pl. *frottiet*, and in masc. nouns with vocalic ending: *patri* ‘monk’, pl. *patrijiet*.

Maltese has also acquired numerous suffixes from Romance languages, which sometime also apply to the inherited Arabic lexicon: *-at*, *-it* and *-ut* (passive participial) *indannat* ‘doomed’ (< It.), *spellut* ‘spelled’ (< Eng.), *emmnut* ‘believed’ (< Ar.); *-ar* (verbal nouns) *imbuttar* ‘pushing’ (< it.), *iffilmjar* ‘shooting of a film’ (< Eng.), *stennar* ‘waiting’ (< Ar.); *-ment* (adverbials and nouns) *ċertament* ‘certainly’, *zgumbrament* ‘moving’; *-nett* (intensive) *il-bidunett* ‘the very beginning’ (< Ar.), etc.

Syntax

The syntax is basically Arabic, but calques are not infrequent. One may mention just a few:

- Word order change: abstract adjectives tend to precede the noun (*il-maħbub isqof tagħna* ‘our beloved bishop’, lit. the beloved bishop of ours), while the order is strictly the reverse in Arabic.
- Loss of article with attributive adjectives (impossible in Arabic): *it-tifel il-kbir* (or *it-tifel kbir*) *qed jilgħab il-futbol* ‘the big boy is playing football’.
- Periphrastic passive, calque of colloquial Italian: *gie ppumpjat* ‘it was pumped up’ (lit. ‘it came pumped’).
- But, the grammaticalization of numerous auxiliary verbs (45, hardly any calques or borrowings, over 200 verbal periphrasis) is an inner answer to the pressure of language contact (Vanhove 1993 and 2001).

¹ *u* inherited from Arabic regularly changed to *o* in stressed syllables in Maltese. The unstable (*u*) of contemporary standard Maltese occurs only in some borrowings from Italian.

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