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Worrying about language



Current thinking is shifting away from neat categories in favour of looking at language use on a spectrum.

Is the Maltese population losing its command of English? Are standards of English in Malta in decline? Is it true that there was a time when Malta's population had a faultless command of English?

Some emerging facts and figures might suggest a different, and altogether more positive, reality.

Still, many seem anxious that something is palpably wrong with our once apparently enviable command of English. Prevailing commentaries about English in Malta focus on deteriorating standards and in particular on the apparent inability of younger generations to match up to their elders in language skills. Prevailing commentaries about Maltese don't often fare much better, as it happens.

There may well be some truth in these concerns. But perhaps the truth of what we seem to be experiencing and reacting to lies closer to rapid change than rapid deterioration in the way we use our languages here in Malta.

Change is difficult to accept, but it's not always all bad. One change might be that Malta is now capitalising on its tradition of speaking several languages for sheer survival. With knights and other assorted colonisers around, the Maltese got used to peppering their language with bits of French, Italian and whatever else came in handy. Today, we're trying to fine-tune this natural survival skill by endorsing early bilingualism in schools.

These days, figures show that more children take exams in both English and Maltese than previously. According to figures reported in Brincat's *Maltese and Other Languages*, both Maltese and English saw a steep rise in ordinary or SEC level candidates from under 200 in the 1950s to over 5,000 in 2010.

It's easy to see that a larger number of people actively using two – or even more – languages might generate some change. This is because people use languages for different purposes. A young student training to become an engineer needs both Maltese and English in very different ways compared to, say, another student aiming for international business, or compared to another youngster going in to social work. All three students will need both languages, and possibly others too, but they'll need to use them differently, so probably their efforts to perform will reflect those needs.

The point is, though, that all three types of student will be doing some form of language study well into their late teens. Better still, increasing demands of professionalism and accountability mean that an engineer, a social worker and people in international trade might have to both write and speak at varying times in either English or Maltese, where they might not have needed to previously. So possibly, more people formally learn and use more languages in more diverse situations than ever before, in Malta, just as they do all over the world.

It's inevitable that such diversity is going to generate some changes. It's also inevitable that some people will naturally be better at expressing themselves in one language rather than another, or indeed, might better express themselves through other forms entirely. Have you ever watched a top footballer give an interview? Are they always as eloquent as your lawyer? Unlikely! Unlike your linguistically acrobatic lawyer, a footballer's skill lies, generally, elsewhere.

Malta is now capitalising on its tradition of speaking several languages.

If we accept that now is a time of great change in Malta, then we should be treading a little carefully. In our anxiety to do what's best where formal language learning is concerned, we're risking acting rashly, making proposals and counter proposals, accusing teachers of lousy teaching, accusing youngsters of being nonchalant, accusing everyone else of doing everything wrong, basically. But when we run around like headless chickens, how can we consider the key issues calmly, (almost) objectively, and take steps in the best interests of all sorts of people who use languages in all sorts of different ways?

One of the real concerns is that we might be unnaturally compartmentalising our use of languages, not to say fitting a square peg in a round hole. But we're lagging behind here. Current thinking is shifting away from neat categories in favour of looking at language use on a spectrum. A spectrum can have well-defined points, but its edges are fuzzy.

One English language lecturer I know described language use as a rainbow. Think of how a child draws a rainbow, with neat lines, clearly demarcated colours and so on. Now think of the last rainbow you saw in the sky. Using several languages is less like the child's drawing and more like the actual rainbow, both in daily life as well as in school. People could turn up at any point on that spectrum.

At one end of the spectrum their background might lead them to favour one language over another, but the other language is still there, in some form. On the other end of the spectrum, people will favour something different. And what of all those other people falling anywhere in between, and possibly drawing still more languages with them?

This is not just a case of how a society morphs and shapes itself, and with what degree of freedom, but also how schooling comes into the picture. To be educated in a language means you can read, write and generally communicate with varying degrees of efficiency.

But what precisely are our expectations here? Before you can measure something, it's only fair to determine what you're measuring and how you're measuring it. Measuring language, unfortunately, can become a little like trying to measure something like wine. We might know when wine is no longer wine but vinegar, and the experts might tell us one grape from another. But nobody can tell me which wine is "better", because "better" for me might include features that aren't important to the next person. Like price, or sweetness and dryness. It's the same with languages, to a certain extent.

And this is where teachers and schools (not ministers and government officials) could do with our support. The teachers in the schools don't need to be told how to teach. But they do need the space and time to get their heads around these rapidly changing realities in our society.

Teachers are required to deal both with the extreme ends of that spectrum, while nurturing the already-present language skills of those nearer the middle of the spectrum, often in the same class. Some teachers manage this better than others, as in everything, but no teacher can keep a clear head while the rest of society is intent on complaining and bemoaning a past golden age of eloquence, which might, or might not, have really existed.

Granted, all this fluidity might make us queasy, but then life, generally, can be a bit of a whirlwind sometimes. The key is to act carefully, within all of this, rather than to react in either one extreme or the other.

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