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MALTA: country report for MERIDIUM Project

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Summary

Since the island of Malta is situated right in the middle of the Mediterranean, encounters between individuals of different cultural backgrounds have been extremely frequent throughout its history. As in the case of neighbouring countries, the post-War history of the island has been characterised by massive emigration, often involving individuals in search of better living conditions. This trend has practically ceased over the past years and Malta has become a sought-after destination for many foreigners, including tourists, tertiary level students and professionals who visit the island for work-related purposes. Alongside this influx there has also been a considerable increase in the number of individuals, mostly from Africa, who enter the country illegally.

1. Linguistic aspect of the country

Malta, a small island in the Mediterranean, covering an area of around 316 square kilometers with a population of about 400,000 inhabitants (see Figure 1 below), has a rich and varied history which has inevitably influenced languages use on the island in the course of the years. Currently Maltese and English are actively used in both their spoken and written forms.

Figure 1 - The geographical position of the Maltese islands¹.



Maltese, a Semitic language, owes its origins to the period of time (870 – 1090 A.D.) when the Arabs took over Malta, possibly in a violent manner, and thereby introduced their own vernacular which eventually took over any pre-existing language (Brincat, 1995 & 2003). Successive colonizers, most notably the Normans (1091-1194), reintroduced contact with the Romance world and Italian, and Italian language varieties (most notably Sicilian), gradually acquired an increasingly more central role in the linguistic scenario in Malta. Some use of these varieties as a written medium alongside Latin has been reported (Cassola, 1998). However, the situation was to change drastically during the British colonial period (1800-1964) when English was introduced slowly but surely into Malta, eventually replacing Italian as the country's official language after a lengthy struggle involving what was known as the 'language question' (Hull, 1993). As time passed, the status of Maltese improved and following a period during which it was an exclusively spoken variety, the language acquired its written form. While in the 1930s it was still defined as "*il-lingwa tal-kcina*", 'the

¹The following map has been reproduced from: www.thecommonwealth.org.

language of the kitchen', it is now a fully-fledged language, used regularly by speakers from all social classes and educational backgrounds. Maltese is now one of the official languages of the European Union, this recognition coming in the wake of Malta's accession in 2004. Presently Maltese is considered to be the national language of Malta; Maltese and English are its co-official languages.

A closer look at the current sociolinguistic situation in Malta reveals that Maltese has widespread use as a spoken variety but that it is used to a lesser extent as a written medium, although this latter too is changing. In fact, Maltese can be said to be the language used to communicate orally in most circumstances. It is the language which is used almost exclusively on local television and radio stations. Very often, however, media presenters and producers are criticized, even by the general public, since the Maltese they use is not up to the standards that one might expect when transmitting a programme via the mass media. Maltese is also used regularly in most churches, in the law courts and in parliament. English, on the other hand, is generally used in writing. The most popular local daily newspaper is an English-medium one and most textbooks used in schools are also English-medium ones. Official governmental and legal documentation is normally written in both Maltese and English. A very recent development (July 2008) was the implementation of new rules proposed by the *Il-Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ilsien Malti* (National Council of Maltese Language). These changes regard some alterations in the way Maltese should be written and have also be the cause of some controversy.

1.1. Presence of linguistic historical and/or regional minorities

Due to the small size of the island it is problematic to describe the Maltese linguistic situation in terms of historical and/or regional minorities. In fact, Maltese is the mother tongue of the vast majority of the population and is spoken all over the island. However, a number of Maltese citizens also claim that either English, or Maltese and English simultaneously, are their first language. In this respect data included in studies vary considerably and are inevitably influenced by the social and educational background of the respondents taken into consideration. Recent studies by Sciriha and Vassallo (2001 & 2006), however, indicate that Maltese is the native language of around 98% of the population. These figures confirm those obtained by Borg, Mifsud and Sciriha in a 1992 study, as reported in Camilleri (1995:96), wherein, from a sample of 186 informants, 96% used mainly Maltese at home.

A survey on language use in Malta was also carried out in November 2000 by the National Statistics Office (2002). This survey based on a sample of 800 subjects representative of the target population of Maltese (aged 16 years and over) confirms that Maltese is undoubtedly the language which is used most frequently as the spoken vernacular of the population. In this survey 86.2% of the subjects interviewed stated that they opt for Maltese during daily conversation. In this respect, it is necessary to point out that regular use of English in Malta, especially as a spoken medium, is often associated, whether rightly or wrongly, with families having a higher socio-economic background. English also gains ground over Maltese in certain contexts, including higher education or studies at tertiary level. Textbooks used in the vast majority of university courses are in English and therefore proficiency in both spoken and written English constitutes an advantage to those students who pursue their studies beyond secondary level.

Though Maltese society may be defined as bilingual, the linguistic situation on the island is more complex than this definition may suggest as Italian also has a significant role in Malta. In fact, Italian television channels, received in Malta via antennae or satellite, are quite popular amongst Maltese of all ages (Caruana, 2003 & 2006). The presence of the Italian media in Malta was especially influential up to the early nineties. In fact, up to 1993 there was only one local state-owned television channel alongside which a large number of Italian channels could be received via antennae. These included the Italian state run channels as well as a large number of private channels.

1.2. Characteristics of the internal diatopic variability

Due to the reasons outlined in the previous section, diatopic variability in Malta is limited, especially when one compares the island to larger countries. Diatopic variation is also related to the bilingual situation outlined above. Though there is no clear empirical evidence to support this, in certain areas in Malta (marked by means of red circles in Figure 2 below) one notices intuitively that English is more widespread than it is in others. This is possibly a result of factors of various sorts such as historical factors and socio-economic circumstances.

Figure 2 – Internal diatopic variability



Language use also reveals a person's underlying culture and background and in this sense Malta is no exception. At times Maltese nationals who speak English are perceived as *tal-pepè* 'snobs' or *qżież* 'show-offs'. On the other hand, in certain circumstances, these English speakers are also prejudiced towards those who find difficulty expressing themselves in English or are unable to do so, as they automatically consider them to be uneducated or pertaining to a low socioeconomic group. Still, even those who claim to use exclusively Maltese or English at all times are likely to use forms of codeswitching or codemixing, as, whatever the mother tongue, one is inevitably conditioned into using the languages one is regularly in

contact with. As Berruto (1998:16) claims, in a bilingual context codeswitching and codemixing are always present, whether to a greater or to a lesser extent, and Malta is no exception to this (see, for example, Camilleri, 1995; Sciriha, 2004; Sciriha & Vassallo, 2006; Caruana, 2002; Neame, 2006).

Further to the above, one may also point out that diatopic variation exists even where Maltese is concerned. The so-called *djaletti* normally vary to different extents from standard Maltese, with most variation occurring at the phonetic level, segmental (see Aquilina & Isserlin, 1981; Camilleri & Vanhove, 1994), as well as prosodic – work on the latter is only just starting to attract interest. Variation at other levels of structure has also been documented (see, for example, Borg, 1986; 1988). The areas in Malta where varieties of the language diverge from the standard are mainly rural areas or villages (some of which are found on the island of Gozo) although variation is not restricted to geographical variation.

1.3. Regulations and Linguistic policies

The Constitution of the Republic of Malta recognises Maltese as the national language. However, the said Constitution also states that both Maltese and English are official languages in Malta, and thereby, the two languages are used in parallel for official communication.

Malta became a member of the European Union in May 2004. Two years prior to this, Maltese was recognised as an official language of the European Union and the language is also used to translate official EU documentation and in order to interpret European Parliament plenary sessions, for Council of Europe meetings and for some European Commission meetings². In 2005, following the initiative of the Ministry of Education, the *Il-Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ilsien Malti* was created. This is now responsible for the development of the national language as well including initiatives relating to the development of Maltese literature. The Council's aim is to protect and promote the Maltese language, and thus to improve it by modernising its structures. Among the other authorities which have a direct influence on policy making one must also mention the *Akkademja tal-Malti*.

As far as schooling is concerned, Maltese and English are both obligatory subjects from the start of Primary schooling. The National Minimum Curriculum³ (Ministry of Education, 1999), the official document which governs educational policies in Malta, states that at Primary Level (from 5 to 11 years of age) some subjects are to be taught in English as the vehicular language (English, Maths, Science etc.) whereas others (Maltese, Religion, Social Studies etc.) are to be taught in Maltese. At Secondary level, students start learning one or two other languages, and may generally choose between Arabic, French, German, Italian and Spanish.

The above considerations indicate that the linguistic situation in Malta is a reflection of the historical and political permutations of the past. As stated previously, Maltese is used predominately as an oral medium while at a written/reading level English has

² We thank Prof. Joseph Eynaud (Head of the Department of Translation & Interpreting Studies, University of Malta) for this information.

³ Also available at: http://curriculum.gov.mt/docs/nmc_english.pdf. Access date, 31st March 2009.

widespread use. Maltese has limited use as a vehicular language as far as higher education is concerned and a sound knowledge of English is important in order to gain access to tertiary education.

Migratory profile

2.1. Inbound and outbound migration trends

Malta has always been a meeting point at a crossroads in the centre of the Mediterranean: the presence of foreigners is widely accepted. Furthermore, many Maltese citizens have direct experience of the social implications and difficulties faced by emigrants: this is mainly due to the fact that the post-War years in Malta were characterised by massive emigration, mainly emigration for economic reasons. Many Maltese citizens emigrated to Australia: other destinations included the US, Canada and Great Britain. The trend described here has practically ceased in recent years (in fact today there are also a number of returned migrants) and, with further economic development, the Maltese have become accustomed to having a number of individuals from overseas among them, often individuals visiting the island for leisure or work purposes. Recently, however, the renowned ‘Maltese hospitality’ has been facing a severe test indeed: this is mainly due, as will be reported extensively below, to the influx of illegal immigrants reaching the Maltese shores on a regular basis.

The current situation in Malta as far as foreign presence is concerned is extremely complex indeed, both from a social and from a linguistic perspective. The arrival of immigrants from North Africa to Southern Mediterranean countries is a well-known phenomenon and these migratory movements have affected Malta significantly given the geographical position of the Islands (see Figure 2). Immigration has led to considerable logistical problems and the island’s migrant centres, run by the Maltese security forces, currently house over 1,000 people. The local Jesuit Refugee Service’s (JRS) website (www.jrsmalta.org) recently reported that “Over the past couple of years, JRS Malta has been called to adapt to a rapidly changing scenario as numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Malta rose sharply and then dropped again. There were 1,686 arrivals in 2002 compared to 24 in 2000, as successive boatloads of undocumented migrants were intercepted in Maltese waters or landed on our shores from March 2002 onwards. For several months, an average of around 1000 people was held in immigration detention”. Recent figures show that there has been a steady increase in the number of immigrants who reached the Maltese shores by boat in recent years, with boats landing on the Maltese shores, not only in summer, as was the case in the past, but also during the winter months.

Considering Malta’s size, it is important to point out that even a seemingly contained arrival of immigrants can have a significant impact on the island. In fact the Maltese Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Tonio Borg is quoted as having said that “...the landing of 235 immigrants in Malta is equivalent to the arrival of 23,500 people in Sicily”⁴. Furthermore the local immigration office is also pressed by requests to obtain the necessary permits in order for foreigners to stay for long periods of time in Malta or to obtain Maltese citizenship.

⁴ Quote from: <http://www.maltamedia.net/wt/2005/09/influx-continues.shtml>, accessed 15th November 2008.

Frendo (2006) offers some extremely interesting insights into the background of these asylum seekers. Whilst reiterating the fact that this social situation is indeed arousing great concern in the general public in Malta, the author reveals that these asylum seekers comprise a heterogeneous group in terms of nationality, many of them possessing only a basic, if any, form of education. Many of them hail from war-stricken zones and are granted temporary refugee humanitarian status since they cannot be sent back to their homeland.

In his conclusion, Frendo (2006:47), insists on the fact that the European Union should play a more significant part in helping countries such as Malta to tackle the situation: “It is pathetic to continue talking about solidarity in the absence of burden-sharing, while at the same time it is wishful thinking to assume that self-inflicted problems in refugee-producing countries, which may be potentially wealthy, will go away without greater effort by all concerned, including the European Union. Whether we like it or not, unless this problem is addressed effectively and realistically, humanely but pragmatically, there is every likelihood that it will lead to a potentially decisive political spill over at the national level, possibly with implications for social cohesion. It is arguably the most difficult and delicate problem now facing Malta”.

2.2. Geographic distribution and concentration

Since Malta is a small country the issue of geographical distribution and concentration is a rather relative one. The detention centres where illegal immigrants are held (for up to a maximum of eighteen months) are situated in, relatively speaking, sparsely inhabited areas. Once immigrants obtain asylum / refugee status they move to a more central area, namely the Marsa Open Centre.

Due to the limited economic means of most immigrants, those who choose to settle legally in Malta normally occupy housing units in areas which are normally considered to be relatively cheap on the property market. A specific area in which a number of foreigners who reside in Malta purchase property are the coastal towns of Bugibba and St.Paul’s Bay where many relatively small flats may be hired out or purchased.

2.3. Socio-demographic characteristics and nationality

Figures from the 2005 census (www.census2005.gov.mt) reveal that the total population of Malta stands at 404,962, out of which 12,112 (3%) are foreigners residing on the Islands. This figure is much higher than the one registered ten years earlier, when the total number of foreigners residing in Malta stood at 7,231. The 2005 census indicates that 4,713 (39%) of these foreigners are British. These figures, however, do not necessarily shed light on the other phenomenon referred to above, namely the phenomenon of illegal immigration.

Martin Scicluna, the government’s advisor on illegal immigration, in a recent article published on the 29th March 2009 in the local newspaper ‘The Times’, provides the following information: “Although there have been almost 12,500 arrivals in Malta since March 2002, over 7,000 have been repatriated or have otherwise left Malta. Of those that remain today, about 2,235 are in detention awaiting the processing of their case, or their repatriation. A total of 2,137 are in open accommodation centres and

about a further 1,000 are living in the community. Very few, if any of them want to stay in Malta”.

The above information clearly shows how transient the phenomenon of illegal immigration is and how difficult it therefore is to get a clear, stable picture of the socio-geographic characteristics and nationality of these immigrants. However, it may safely be said that most immigrants in Malta originate from the Sub-Saharan African regions, mainly from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. Linguistically and culturally they form a highly heterogeneous group.

Finally, another recent phenomenon which often goes unnoticed, even in the local media, is the arrival of young adults from Eastern European countries who are employed (legally or illegally) or exploited in various sectors of the local community – these range from workers in the building and manufacturing industries, to cleaners or waiters in restaurants and hotels, to dancers or entertainers working in local establishments and also in prostitution.

2.4. Inclusive and exclusive social factors

As already stated earlier, dealing with the phenomenon of illegal immigration in Malta is not easy. If one just leafs through local daily newspapers one will immediately notice how topical this issue is. As is often the case in matters of a controversial nature, illegal immigration in Malta is also characterised by a fair share of prejudice, fear and xenophobia, all of which undoubtedly lead to discrimination and further emargination (if not total exclusion) of, in this case, immigrants. On the other hand, however, there are a number of institutions which are actively engaged in the educational, social and cultural inclusion of immigrants as will be outlined below.

Though Malta has a long-standing history of contact with foreigners, it is a fact that one of the major problems in this regard is the language barrier which needs to be overcome. Generally, communication with short and long-term visitors has not been a problem as such visitors speak either English or Italian (or other Romance languages, such as French or Spanish). However, the arrival of many adults in Malta who are unfamiliar with any European language does lead to communication problems. Members of the local police force, members of the army, officials and workers in the detention centres where immigrants are housed, doctors and nurses who may be called for assistance, all have to deal with this complex situation arising out of the absence of a “shared” language between themselves and the immigrants. Such professionals may lack both the know-how and the resources in order to overcome the problems in communication.

Some immigrants who come to Malta, both legally or illegally, seek to learn basic English or Maltese in order to enable them to communicate successfully. Needless to say, most of these immigrants do not have the opportunity to attend classes and instead strive to learn the basic words and phrases of either language in order to manage to get their message across. Maltese adults in contact with these immigrants also face considerable communicative problems. In some cases an immigrant with a degree of knowledge of English or some other European language, is asked to act as an interpreter for all the others. Of course this remedy is not sufficient to solve problems for a number of reasons. For example, one’s interpreting skills may not be

sufficient to bridge the gap between the interlocutors and the complexity of the various dialects or languages of African speakers and it may prove impossible for messages to be conveyed as one may wish them to be.

It is also important to point out that contact with foreigners in Malta is also becoming commonplace in local schools. The presence of foreign children in local classrooms is on the increase. The parents of such children may face linguistic difficulties when they come in contact with teachers and with the educational authorities.

Another area of interest in the context of this project is the local Correctional Centre. This presently houses a large number of foreign inmates. Various governmental offices and the police Immigration Office also have regular contact with foreigners in the course of the bureaucratic procedures they conduct vis-a-vis non-Maltese members of the public.

As stated previously, most courses involving basic literacy skills are run by the Department of Adult Studies and Further Education which also organises courses for the local Employment and Training Corporation (www.etc.gov.mt). Other stakeholders in the area include various non-governmental organisations which also run adult education literacy programmes. Among these, one may include the Foundation for Educational Services (www.fes.org.mt), the Fondazzjoni Guzè Ellul Mercer which organises basic literacy courses in Maltese, the Maltese Paulo Freire Institute, the Malta College of Arts Science & Technology (www.mcast.edu.mt) and the aforementioned Jesuit Refugee Service.

Legislations and measures on migration

3.1. National legislation

Immigration in Malta is regulated by Chapter 217 of the Laws of Malta, the Immigration Act, a soft copy of which is available at: http://docs.justice.gov.mt/lom/legislation/english/leg/vol_5/chapt217.pdf. The immigration act also regulates the granting of temporary and permanent residence permits as well as permits for foreigners to work in Malta.

Since Malta is now a full member of the European Union, EU nationals do not require a visa or a passport to enter Malta. Foreign spouses of Maltese citizens, as well as their dependents, are also exempt from a number of permits which would periodically have to be obtained by other immigrants.

As far as applying for refugee status in Malta is concerned, the following information is quoted from a document published by the Jesuit Refugee Service, which is freely available at http://www.jrsmalta.org/Guide_Book_EN.pdf:

“All applications for refugee status must be made to the Office of the Refugee Commissioner, which is the institution set up by law to receive and decide applications. (...) The task of the Refugee Commissioner and his Office is to examine each application for refugee status and make recommendations to the Minister for Justice and Home Affairs about whether a particular application should be accepted or rejected. The Minister usually accepts their recommendations. (...) Maltese refugee

law also provides another form of protection to immigrants who cannot return home safely. This form of protection is called Humanitarian Protection. Humanitarian Protection is special leave to remain in Malta until the person concerned can return safely to his country of origin or otherwise resettle safely in a third country.”

3.2. Regional legislation

This is not applicable in Malta, as all legislation is centralised and covers the whole geographical territory.

3.3 Measures for linguistic integration

Adult education courses in Malta have increased considerably in Malta over the past few years. At present a number of courses are organised by various institutions with the aim of introducing literacy and numeracy both to locals and to foreigners living in Malta. For this purpose the Maltese Ministry of Education has established the Department for Further Studies and Adult Education (<http://www.education.gov.mt/ministry/services/adults.htm>) which offers its services in order to put into practice the government’s policy of lifelong education for all.

The issue of literacy and numeracy in Malta is addressed in the “Report on the National Consultation Process on Lifelong Learning” submitted to the Directorate-General for Education and Culture European Commission: “People in Malta are increasingly becoming aware that the process of learning is a lifelong and lifewide one, that learning makes them better persons, and that such a process entails continually gaining and upgrading one’s skills. It is moreover recognised that the Government needs to guarantee open access to learning as well as enhanced support provisions for adults such as guidance and counselling to mitigate the complex decisions involved in seeking, holding and changing jobs. Such provisions, including second chance opportunities for school dropouts, should be especially directed towards those with little training and few qualifications. Proficiency in the areas outlined in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning assumes that a person is already literate. Feedback obtained by stakeholders regarding this key message highlights the need to include literacy, numeracy and communication as fundamental basic skills”⁵.

In view of the above, a number of courses for adults are organized in Malta, and the Lifelong Learning Centre is frequented by over 400 students. This does not include students who attend evening classes. In most cases these courses are aimed at Maltese citizens who wish to further their studies but courses are also organised for people who need to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills in order to be in a better position to gain employment. A number of evening classes also include courses specifically in English and Maltese for foreigners (www.eveningclasses.gov.mt). Most of the foreigners who attend these courses are normally in Malta for a long period of time or aim to settle in Malta. The aim of the Education Division is also to decentralize these courses and in fact a number of them are organized in various localities: parish churches and local councils are also involved in the set-up.

⁵ Quote from: http://www.education.gov.mt/edu/edu_division/report_III_05.htm, accessed 15th November 2008

These courses are currently undergoing extensive development and new materials for use in courses aimed at helping adults to acquire basic English and Maltese literacy skills are being developed and produced. Developing sets of materials and skill-based activities for specific groups of learners could indeed benefit from the SPICES (Social Promotion of Intercultural Communication, Expertise and Skills)⁶ guidelines (Klein et al. 2007). Since SPICES involves the participation of staff members from the Departments of Arts & Languages at the University of Malta, some materials created therein specifically suit the Maltese setting.

Another initiative regards the creation of an online platform which could enable learners to express their difficulties through an online forum (coordinated by the tutors in charge). Participation in such fora may facilitate development of both literacy and Information Technology (IT) skills. This initiative could also be enhanced if the forthcoming eSPICES project (in which materials from the above-mentioned SPICES project will be transferred to an e-learning platform) were to be integrated into its actions and proceedings.

Besides the courses organised by the local Education Division, other courses are run by non-governmental organisations and in some other private institutes. Most notably, amongst these are the courses run by the Foundation for Educational Services (FES). Again, however, these are normally literacy courses which are attended mainly by Maltese nationals, although some foreigners also attend the courses.

4. Selection criteria of the areas to be sampled for the survey

The Maltese Educational system is characterised by different types of schools, which may or may not be, frequented by students who live in the same area in which the school is situated:

- a. the State Schools sector - Primary State schools are co-educational. There is a Primary State school in each Maltese locality and attending such schools is free of charge.
- b. the Church Schools sector - Church schools may be either single-sex school or co-educational. Most Church Schools have a very strong ethos and a long-standing history. In the past they used to be the schools of the elite but recent developments have rendered them much more mixed in terms of both socio-economic and demographic intake. They are also free of charge.
- c. the Independent Schools sector - these schools are co-educational and one has to pay in order to attend them. Although the social background of students who attend these schools may vary, a number of students from the high socio-economic strata frequent these schools. These are also generally considered to be the schools in which English, rather than Maltese, is used more frequently as a teaching vehicular language.

In view of the above, it may be necessary, during the MERIDIUM Project, to target classes from schools of each of the three sectors described above. This, of course, will also depend on the sample-size and on the variables to be included in the study.

⁶ European Project SPICES – 224945-CP-1-2005-1-IT-GRUNDTVIG-G11, www.trainingspices.net.

Furthermore, schools which are known to have a highly multicultural population will be targeted. Consequently, as a first step, schools will be contacted in order to verify whether statistics are available on the percentage of students from either non-Maltese and/or mixed family backgrounds. Personal contacts, as well as publically available information on the demographic characteristics of schools from the different sectors, will therefore provide the basis for the initial identification of areas to be sampled.

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