

### *The language question*

The language question was an ideological, cultural, political and even a religious confrontation whose various repercussions are still felt, though muted, even today. As we have seen, Maltese is a branch of Arabic, however corrupted, spoken in the Maghrib and introduced in the islands after the 870 A.D. conquest. However, starting from the middle of the last century, a highly-personal and heated debate has raged about the Semitic nature of the language, fuelled by the reluctance of highly-influential classes to accept it as such. Certain members of the Maltese intelligentsia were nourished on an Italianate culture and fired by the nineteenth-century zeal for union with Italy, they regarded their homeland as part of “*Italia Irridenta*”, the last outpost of Italy. They tended to idealize Malta as a hundred percent Italian, European and Christian island, wedded since Apostolic times to a religion and culture which abhorred any non-European and non-Christian elements. Opponents of an “Italianate Malta”, on the other hand, posited a Punic origin for the Maltese language: dazzled by memories of a Phoenician inheritance which could prove an alternative and prestigious answer to the Italophiles, they held Maltese “to be nothing less than a survival (however evolved or corrupted) of ancient Punic.”<sup>1</sup> Writers like Quintinus,<sup>2</sup> Annibale Preca, Sigismondo Savona, A.E. Caruana, Louis Mizzi and Lord Strickland abetted professionally by Henricus Maius, Joachim Bellermand and by such recent commentators as Sir Harry Luke, Harrison Smith and Adrianus Koster held this view.<sup>3</sup>

Oliver Friggieri stresses the intimate, political, cultural and religious bonds between Italy and Malta by stressing that Malta and particularly Sicily shared the same civilization for two millenia.<sup>4</sup> During the Middle Ages, Italian took the place of Latin as the language of business and culture. The

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<sup>1</sup> G. HULL, *ibid.*, 298.

<sup>2</sup> H.C.R. VELLA, *The Earliest Description of Malta*, *ibid.*, 17-19.

<sup>3</sup> G. HULL, *ibid.* 298.

<sup>4</sup> O. FRIGGIERI, *Il-Kultura Taljana f'Dun Karm*, Malta 1976, 1.

hegemony of Italian increased during the rule of the Order and infiltrated all aspects of Maltese life. The first printing press and the first book published in Malta were in Italian. G.F. Abela, the first Maltese historian, wrote his *opus magnus* in Italian. The first Maltese newspaper was written in Italian and French. Even the British, from 1814 onwards used Italian as a means of communicating with the Maltese.<sup>5</sup> Later on, they used Maltese as the medium with which to supplant Italian: Maltese was a “Trojan horse” which would facilitate the introduction of English.

Mikiel Anton Vassalli<sup>6</sup> was the first person of any importance connected with the teaching of the Maltese language. He saw, ahead of his time, the importance of the vernacular in the birth and development of a national identity because “it is the main tool of society and the only vehicle for understanding each other.”<sup>7</sup> He saw that “where the national language is not esteemed, and not even written, that nation which speaks it can never reach the heights of success and greatness.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, the first royal commission on education in Malta (1836) concluded that the time for the use of Maltese lay in the future.<sup>9</sup> Lewis and Austin, the Commissioners, acknowledged that “Italian may be deemed the literary and even the written language of the island.”<sup>10</sup> In 1879 Patrick Keenan, however, saw the importance of Maltese as a tool for teaching in the Primary Schools. He recommended English as the school language and suggested that the system of teaching two languages should be removed. English was to be the language taught in the higher classes and in the University should become a secondary language. He recognised Maltese as a “natural means of bringing about a general use of English.”<sup>11</sup> Keenan’s report set the cat among the pigeons. The Italophiles led by Sir Adrian Dingli argued against the use of Maltese saying that the islanders should learn a language “which

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 1-5.

<sup>6</sup> [1764-1829].

<sup>7</sup> M.A. VASSALLI, *Kryb yl klym Malti*, Roma 1796, xxi; see also: A.F. RIGAUD (trans), *M. A. Vassalli 1754-1829: Maltese Patriot and Grammarian*, in *The Sunday Times of Malta* (Malta, 4/6/39) 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, xxi.

<sup>9</sup> D. MARSHALL, *History of the Maltese Language in Local Education*, Malta 1971, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 29.

would enable us to participate in the progress of civilisation in Europe”.<sup>12</sup> Defenders of Maltese like Dr. Pisani and Dr. S. Manchè argued for its promotion.<sup>13</sup> Sigismondo Savona, appointed Director of Education in 1880 made the Keenan report the charter of his reforms. Dr. Fortunato Mizzi, a champion of Italianity, now began his career in Maltese politics, attacking Keenan and Savona with promoting English at the expense of Italian. He and his supporters proclaimed that the Maltese were Italian by race and language and so would oppose any moves that were thought disadvantageous to Italian.<sup>14</sup>

These years also witnessed the rise of Gerald Strickland, an Anglo-Maltese nobleman who was destined to have an extraordinarily powerful role in Maltese politics up to the Second World War. Strickland was true to his origins; he wanted English to replace Italian as Malta’s language. A thorough imperialist, he wanted a British Malta, a Malta of anglicised Maltese who conversed and even thought in English.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary with these personalities who were so rapt with the language question, is Manuel Dimech<sup>16</sup> apotheosized by some and demonized by others. Alternately a convicted murderer and a figure of Enlightenment, his teaching can be described as a flickering candlelight in an ocean of darkness. He was one of the first Maltese to urge his compatriots to stand up for their rights and champion the use of Maltese. He fell foul of the ecclesiastical and civil authorities and after being much-maligned in his lifetime died in exile in Egypt in 1921.<sup>17</sup> Another person intimately connected with the language question is Enrico Mizzi, firebrand son of Fortunato who had died in 1905. Enrico was notably more anti-British than his father, “His dream... was to see Malta eventually united to Italy”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>14</sup> G. HULL, *ibid*, 26-32; Herbert Ganado, a Nationalist born and bred, commenting much later, put the Italianate view in a nutshell saying that “Keenan’s wish... was to destroy Italian, to have English alone taught, to turn upside down our cultural system, and to force us to throw out of the window the cultural traditions of entire centuries. Keenan wanted a revolution and not a natural evolution, in our country’s educational system.” (H. GANADO, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel*, I, Malta 1974, 101.)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 102-103; see also: M. STRICKLAND, (ed.), *Malta and the Phoenicians*, Malta 1969; G. HULL, *ibid*, 38-44.

<sup>16</sup> [1870-1921], a controversial figure.

<sup>17</sup> H. FRENDO, *Birth Pangs of a Nation*, Malta 1972; see also: G. AZZOPARDI, *X’garrab Manwel Dimech*, Malta 1975.

<sup>18</sup> G. HULL, *ibid*, 49.

During the Great War (1914-1919), the language question had a *siesta* but at the war's end it flared up again. After the Sette Giugno riots a new constitution was granted to Malta in 1921 which proclaimed that English and Italian were both official languages. In 1927, Strickland's Constitutionalist Party, in compact with the Labour Party, came to power and a general offensive against the Italian language was launched with Augustus Bartolo as Minister of Education at the helm.<sup>19</sup> The Nationalists, "Italianate" to the core, were alienated as was the Catholic Church who helped the former to defeat Strickland, branded as anti-clerical and a freemason, in the election of 1932. The Nationalists, in turn, began to demolish all that Strickland had done in office. With the overt help of Fascist Italy they soon clashed with the Colonial government who in turn suspended the Constitution on the 2nd November 1933.<sup>20</sup> In 1934 English became the sole medium of administration and of public records, documents and government notices; English and Maltese became the only languages in the civil service, with Maltese the general language of the law courts. At the University, teaching in Italian was to cease in the Faculty of Science.<sup>21</sup>

Discord between the Anglophiles and the Italophiles increased and intensified as war clouds appeared on the horizon. The political, cultural and social atmosphere in the late thirties was poisoned by xenophobia, paranoia, witch-hunts, etc., as the drift towards war continued.<sup>22</sup> Several Maltese became Italian citizens, notably Prof. Carlo Mallia<sup>23</sup> who exiled himself and was appointed "Senator for Malta by Mussolini's government."<sup>24</sup> The solution to the language question can be seen, with hindsight, to have been solved by the dropping of the first Fascist bombs on Malta on June 11th 1940.<sup>25</sup> Against this background, the Stricklandian establishment launched a witch-hunt against the "Pro-Italian" elements and several notable persons such as Dr. Enrico Mizzi, Sir Arturo Mercieca and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 78-80.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>23</sup> [d.b.1929], founder and President of the Maltese Esperanto Society, former Nationalist Minister for Justice.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 84.

Dr. Herbert Ganado were arrested and in 1942 exiled to Uganda.<sup>26</sup> In May 1942 Carmelo Borg Pisani, a pre-war defector to Italy, was executed after being captured on his clandestine return to Malta.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>27</sup> L. MIZZI, *Ghall-Holma ta' Hajtu*, Malta 1980.