

# JOURNAL OF MALTESE STUDIES

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## LANGUAGE AND INDEPENDENCE

THE Department of Maltese and Oriental Languages, whose Head is the Editor of this JOURNAL, was set up in 1937. Before that year, there was hardly any teaching in the University which one could describe as primarily or even indirectly Maltese. No wonder that so many generations of 'mentally conditioned' graduates were not only ignorant of their linguistic heritage, but were often prejudiced against it. The long process of 'brain washing' emptied them of their Maltese personality. This is one reason why we, the citizens of the one-year old Republic of Malta, are finding it so difficult to identify our national identity in the commonwealth of independent nations. So many foreigners have been pushing us for so long in the direction of England and some in the direction of Italy that in 1975 we do not know where we stand and neither England nor Italy has ever taken the slightest interest in the discovery and identification of our national identity language and literature. It is not their cup of tea! But, thanks to them, it has certainly become our national mess.

Political independence should, but does not necessarily, engender the feeling of a stable national identity so long as those in charge of Malta's political and cultural destiny limit the concept of independence to that of political self-rule within, or outside the Commonwealth (the constitutional transition may be a matter of time, for that is where we seem to be moving). Unfortunately, we have failed to translate the concept of 'political independence' in terms of total, as against partial, or discriminatory, nationhood. Malta still suffers from colonial linguistic confusion – a prolonged hangover. The English Language, however useful for practical purposes, is still being used by many as the badge of an élite followed by those lower down who look up to them for leadership. Those lower down as a rule, are those higher up.

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We have not yet shaken off the chains and shackles of a deeply ingrained mental colonialism. For this reason, the concept of Maltese 'political independence' not only leaves much to be desired, it depresses our status as a self-respecting nation vis-a-vis the self-assertive Arab and European countries whose concept of independence has more substance in it. The remote and proximate cause of this anomaly is our inherited sense of inferiority complex engendered by Malta's prolonged foreign domination – the foreign rulers who, for so many years, ran the show for us and who would very obligingly run the show for us again if only we gave them the chance! We know from history that when America's exploited slaves were emancipated in 1863 many of them felt so helpless, so unable to use their newly-won freedom, that they asked their old masters to take them back – to continue running the show for them!

How can we Maltese, especially the younger people who are by nature generous and idealist, feel proud of their ancestral home when our temporary masters in the administration of public affairs still use the English language rather than the people's language simply because, let's face it! most of our civil servants who belong to the old school of thought (colonial products) were never taught the people's language and were brought up in what one might describe as a system exclusively English in the colonial sense of the word? This odious linguistic situation is inconceivable in Libya or Egypt or in any other language-conscious European country. Of course, the English language is important – who said it is not? It is a world language for international traffic. So what? Let us continue to learn, teach and, when necessary, write English, but when will the upper-class Maltese stop writing and speaking English amongst themselves also when there is no good reason for doing so? Malta's University itself, which should be the nation's torch-bearer, is not innocent of this national aberration.

The Department of Maltese in its almost 40 years of existence has, practically single-handed, tried to lay the foundation of a new national linguistic consciousness in what was once the fortress of a Fascist-Oriented pro-Italianism. It began to do so long before Malta ceased to be a British colony. We must now be on our guard against the swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, the campus of our University still resounds with the cacophony of a sort of *caflas English* (the gibberish of our elite especially lady students) made up of English words loosely strung

together, pronounced with a Maltese phonetic twist marred by a sort of affected pseudo-Oxford accent, and bastardised Maltese, all mixed up together like the vegetables of a Maltese *kawlata*? To put an end to this disgrace (at *Tal-Qroqq* it is just shocking!), we need the cooperation of those high up who can, by their personal authority and good example, give the right lead in the University, in private, and in public schools, and, above all, in government departments. The fact that in our attitude towards the people's language we are still different from other peoples is evidence enough that there is something wrong with us.

Unlike the Departments of English and Italian, which receive substantial financial and moral support from outside the country, the under-staffed Department of Maltese which, as far as output is concerned, bears favourable comparison with any other Department, has had to rely on very limited resources made up mainly of power of will determination and a sense of pride in our nation and this in spite of the fact that all pats on the back go to the foreigners.

Independent Malta is still a country kinder to foreigners who, no doubt, must continue to be treated kindly, than to its own people. The biblical saying 'No one is a prophet in his own country' still applies to us Maltese. We can only blame ourselves for this. There are times when the Maltese mentality can be both mercenary and servile as a result of many centuries of colonialism.

THE EDITOR