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MEN

A MALE-FEMALE SPEECH-HABIT DIFFERENCE  
IN MALTESE INDIVIDUALS: A PRELIMINARY  
COMMENT

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IN his article 'A Social Psychology of Bilingualism',<sup>1</sup> W. Lambert mentions one study designed to throw light on a number of questions, one of them being, 'Will judges react similarly to male and female speakers who change their pronunciation style or the language they speak?' The study showed that English Canadian males saw the French Canadian lady speakers in a more favourable light than their English Canadian counterparts. But English Canadian females too rated French Canadian lady speakers more favourably than in their English Canadian guise. Lambert offers a possible explanation:

'It may be that the increased attractiveness of the French Canadian woman in the eyes of the English Canadian male is partly a result of her inaccessibility. Perhaps also the English Canadian women are cognizant of the English Canadian men's latent preference for French Canadian women and accordingly are themselves prompted to upgrade the French Canadian woman as a model of what a woman should be.'<sup>2</sup>

Malta was a British colony until 1964. Before that date English was the official language and the medium of education for most subjects in both government and private schools. Maltese was used in a restricted number of domains. Since Independence, both Mal-

<sup>1</sup> Language, Psychology and Culture: Essays by W.E. LAMBERT (California, Stanford University Press, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 217-218.

tese and English are official languages, but the number of the domains in which Maltese is used has not increased to any remarkable extent. In the course of discussion with a class of undergraduate students<sup>3</sup> it was observed that girls use English much more frequently than boys. This impression was examined further, and the following distinctions emerged. In terms of linguistic codes the students concerned fell into two groups: one group was fluent in one variety of Maltese (loosely termed 'standard' for present purposes) and English, and another fluent in three codes: Dialectal and Standard Maltese and English. All the students were in their early twenties. 'Greater frequency of use' usually meant that English was used needlessly, that is, in situations where in terms of actual communication, Maltese would have done just as well. The males from both groups maintained the original impression about greater frequency of use of English by females, while one male from the Dialect-Standard-English group also held that females from his group use Standard Maltese much more frequently than their male counterparts. The females accepted the impression advanced by the males and one girl from the Dialect-Standard-English group admitted that 'normally, dialect was hardly the thing to use'.

It is possible however, that the distinction by code possession is not fine enough. It will probably have to be supplemented by the socio-economic variable. When provenance studies become available it will be possible to ascertain the extent to which the female University population for instance, derives from one particular area (the higher class status group); and in the case of the male population the extent to which this is more evenly derived from the whole country. A heavier concentration of females from the status group could well give rise to the impression that girls use English much more frequently than boys. In addition, English seems to be used much more widely in girls' schools than in boys' schools (even in government schools). It would be interesting to examine whether there is a correlation here with a greater conservative ten-

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dency in females.

At this stage, however, some interesting questions can still be raised. How to account for the possible greater frequency of use of English by females? Secondly, in a situation where, especially for individuals from the Standard Maltese-English group, use of English over Maltese is often regarded as a socially desirable attainment, why do the males allow the females to outdo them?

Perhaps an answer to the first of these questions may be sought along the same lines as Lambert's explanation quoted above. In the particular age group under consideration a lot of competition goes on among the females for the males because of the female statistical majority in the population. Besides, the females are aware that other foreign females are present to their males, especially English-speaking tourists, and quite a number of Maltese males do marry foreigners. In addition, possession of English as a viable linguistic code is always socially prestigious. It may be that females in this group use English as part of their adornment, that is, to increase their attractiveness to males of their own group.

The second question raises difficulties. On the one hand, for the male too English is socially prestigious. And if the male-female difference here is simply one of frequency (and not of ability) this would imply that the male is restraining himself voluntarily. In addition the males from the Standard Maltese-English group react to female superiority in this respect by attributing to the feature a certain 'artificiality' (the females would be using English needlessly, that is in situations, mostly among themselves, where Maltese could have served just as well). The reaction from males of the Dialect-Standard-English group is even more marked, bordering on resentment and an accusation of snobbishness. Possibly the males are kept from neutralising the difference because the needless use of English would be too strongly associated in their consciousness with a feminine way of behaviour, so that the only outlet to their feelings would be via a negative reaction of the type just mentioned.

Finally, it would be interesting to establish whether there are any factors which influence the choice of language code in communication between males and females in this group.

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