

# LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND LANGUAGE SHIFT OF THE MALTESE MIGRANTS IN CANADA

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is a widely accepted fact that mother tongue maintenance in immigrant families is not easy when the host country's official language is different from the immigrants' first language. There are a number of studies which have documented language maintenance and/or language loss of different ethnic communities such as the Norwegian-Americans (Haugen: 1956), the French Canadians (Lieberson: 1972), the German-Hungarians (Gal: 1979), the Pennsylvanian-Germans (Huffines: 1980), the Chinese-Canadians (Lin & Stanford: 1983), the Albanians living in Greece (Tsitsipis: 1983), the Indian community of Taos in New Mexico (Fasold: 1985), the Lebanese immigrants in Australia (Taft: 1989) and the Maltese-Australians (Cauchi: 1990). Similarly, this short study discusses the language use of three generations of the same family of Maltese-Canadians living in Toronto, Canada.

## 2. LOCATION OF THE GROUP

The community which was chosen for this study is located in one particular area in Toronto known as "The Junction Area" which has a relatively high percentage of Maltese-Canadians. Around this area the Maltese community built the church of St Paul the Apostle, which is run by the Franciscan Fathers from the Province of Malta. Close to the Maltese church there are a number of businesses run by Maltese such as a coffee shop, a bakery, a barber shop and a Maltese restaurant. Maltese clubs such as the Melita Soccer Club and the Malta Band Club and a recreational centre called the Malta Park, are located in the vicinity of the Maltese church.

## 3. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GROUP

According to the 1981 Canadian census only 15,440 were born in Malta or in Gozo. However, Bonavia (1988) says that a rough estimate of the people of Maltese origin would be around 100,000 with over 8000 of the Maltese concentrated around "The Junction Area".

The Maltese emigrated to Canada before the First World War and over 10,000 Maltese left Malta for North America and Australia from 1918 to 1920.

It is estimated that the number of Maltese in Canada following the Second World War was around 12,000 by the early 1950s. Although "the Maltese are one of the smallest groups of the ethnocultural groups in Canada, . . . they have retained most of their national characteristics, culture and customs adding their unique Maltese touch to the Canadian Kaleidoscopic pattern" (Bonavia, 1988:9).

## 4. LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

The basic condition for the study of maintenance and shift of a language is for two linguistically different groups, in our case, Maltese-Canadians and Anglo-Canadians to be in contact. It should be noted that in the study of language maintenance and shift there is "the relationship between change and stability in habitual language use, on the one hand and ongoing psychological, social or cultural processes on the other hand when populations differing in language are in contact with each other" (Fishman 1966: 424).

We shall look at the variables that have been measured in order to obtain a clear picture of language use. These are the Media variable which consists of information about the language that is read, and the Domain variable which includes information about the use of language in the family and with relatives. The combination of categories for measuring habitual language use has been patterned after Fishman's suggestions (Fishman 1966:426-434).

## 5. METHODOLOGY OF FIELDWORK<sup>1</sup>

To obtain the information for this study, sixty informants, i.e. twenty, three generation families participated in the survey. Informants were asked to fill in a questionnaire which was divided into two sections: the first section asked for information regarding the informant's family and cultural connections, while the second section, which was linguistic, asked the informant with whom he spoke Maltese.

### 5.1 Recruiting Informants

Informants were recruited through contacts made by the pastor of the Maltese church of St Paul the Apostle. I attended several functions of the Maltese community, and visited clubs such as The Malta Band Club and the Melita Soccer Club to obtain more Maltese-Canadian informants.

The average ages of first, second and third generation Maltese-Canadian informants were 67, 40 and 15 respectively.

## 6. RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

### 6.1 SECTION 1: Biographical

6.1.1 Informants Occupations The following information was obtained regarding informants' occupations.

TABLE 1. Occupation by Generation

	1st Generation*	2nd Generation	3rd Generation**
Occupation	Mechanic 5% Butcher 15% Driver 40% Factory Worker 10% Teacher 5% Electrician 5% Carpenter 10% Businessman 10%	Mechanic 10% Butcher 15% Driver 20% Factory Worker 10% Teacher 15% Electrician 20% Carpenter 10%	Foreman 5% Univ. student 30% Secretary 5%
Total	100%	100%	40%

\*All first generation informants were born in Malta or Gozo.

\*\*60% of informants in the third generation are under the age of 16 and thus do not work.

As is evident from Table 1, there is a tendency for second generation Maltese-Canadian to adopt their father's occupation. This trend seems to decline, especially in the third generation where 30% are university students. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that there is a trend for upward mobility. Maltese-Canadian parents seem to encourage their children to continue their studies up to tertiary level. By contrast, Frendo (1987) cites one of the La Trobe Sociology Papers in which a study was conducted on "The Career Aspirations of School Children in Victoria", the results of which showed that Maltese-Australian students do not aim high with regard to their future careers.

**6.1.2 Married Working Women's Occupations** A particular feature was noted regarding the occupations of married women in the first and second generation. It has been the trend in Malta for married women to be full-time housewives, although studies by Meo (1988) and Sciriha (1986) have shown that the percentage of married women who worked outside their home is on the increase. In fact, the following table shows that there is a sharp difference between the percentage of married working females in the first and second generation. Only 5% of the first generation married women go out to work or used to work, whereas 45% of the second generation of married women go out to work.

TABLE 2. Married Working Women by Occupation

	1st Generation	2nd Generation	3rd Generation
Housewife	95%	55%	N/A
Working woman	5%	45%	N/A

Table 3 is a breakdown of table 2, with the different occupations held by married women. What is rather interesting about the different occupations of women is that only one informant who is a pharmacist assistant is a first generation Maltese-Canadian. All the others are second generation. Also, one notes that though the trend is for more married women to go out to work, out of the 45% of these married working women, 30% are not Maltese but are married to Maltese males.

TABLE 3 Occupations of Married Working Women by Origin

MALTESE	CANADIAN
Pharm. assistant (5%)	Secretary (10%)
Teacher assistant (10%)	Teacher (15%)
	Bank clerk (5%)
Total 15%	30%

In the first generation all the informants are married to a Maltese, but in the second generation only 40% of informants are married to a Maltese. Table 4 illustrates the percentages of spouses who are married to Non-Maltese. There are higher percentages of Maltese men marrying Canadian females than Maltese females marrying Canadian men.

TABLE 4 Non-Maltese Spouses by Generation

	1st Generation	2nd Generation	3rd Generation
Canadian Males	0%	25%	N/A
Canadian Females	0%	35%	N/A
Total	0%	60%	

RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

6.2 SECTION II: Linguistic

**6.2.1 Language Maintenance and Language Shift of Maltese:** Now we shall examine the responses involving the domain variable, that is the actual use of the language with members of the immediate family.

The following tables illustrate that the use of either Maltese alone, or both Maltese and English or only English, depends on several factors, namely who speaks what language and to whom. In fact, it is evident that the maintenance of Maltese varies with the informant's generation and also, to some extent, with the person spoken to. Thus Maltese is spoken by a very high percentage of first generation Maltese-Canadian informants and not by their children and grandchildren who fall under the second or third generation category respectively.

Tables 5 and 6 illustrate the language use by the informants when speaking to immediate family members such as their spouse, father/mother, son/daughter and brother/sister.

TABLE 5 Language Spoken to

	BROTHER AND SISTER			FATHER AND MOTHER		
	M	ME	E	M	ME	E
1st Generation	80%	0%	20%	95%	5%	0%
2nd Generation	40%	5%	55%	50%	10%	40%
3rd Generation	5%	15%	80%	10%	20%	70%

M, ME and E stand for Maltese, Maltese and English and English respectively.

TABLE 6 Language Spoken to

	SON AND DAUGHTER			SPOUSE		
	M	ME	E	M	ME	E
1st Generation	65%	5%	30%	90%	5%	5%
2nd Generation	15%	20%	65%	45%	5%	50%
3rd Generation	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Tables 5 and 6 show that the percentage of informants who speak Maltese decreases according to (i) which generation they belong to and (ii) their relationship with each other. Thus, the highest percentage of informants who speak Maltese to other family members such as their spouses, sons and/or daughters, fathers or mothers are first generation Maltese-Canadians. It is not surprising for this to be so when one considers that all first generation Maltese-Canadians were born in Malta and for 95% of whom Maltese is their first language. Moreover, the average age when they came to Canada is that of 24 years. Table 7 shows this clearly.

TABLE 7 First Language Spoken by Generation

	M	ME	E
1st Generation	95%	5%	0%
2nd Generation	55%	0%	45%
3rd Generation	10%	0%	90%

One notes that even though second generation informants were all born in Canada, more than half of them had Maltese as their first language. In the third generation of informants, there is a significant decrease in the percentage of informants who acquired Maltese as their first language. Only 10% of these informants have Maltese as their mother language.

Tables 5 and 6 also illustrate that even for first generation of Maltese-Canadians, Maltese is spoken to some family members more than with others. Thus, with parents, all three generations show the highest percentage of Maltese spoken. The lowest percentage registered is when second generation Maltese-Canadians speak with their sons and/or daughters. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that more second generation Maltese-Canadians speak to their spouses in Maltese than to their children. This is hardly surprising for two reasons: (i) as is evident from table 4, 60% of the Maltese-Canadian second generation informants are married to Anglo-Canadian spouses and (ii) only 55% of second generation Maltese-Canadians learnt Maltese as their first language.

6.2.2. *Language Maintenance: Reading Maltese* Informants were also asked questions about language maintenance regarding reading newspapers or books in Maltese. The following table summarizes the responses which informants gave as regards the Media variable.

TABLE 8 Reading Maltese Books/Newspapers by Generation

	Yes	No
1st Generation	85%	15%
2nd Generation	20%	80%
3rd Generation	10%	90%

The percentage of second generation informants who read Maltese books and newspapers is very low. Since only 20% of second generation Maltese-Canadians read Maltese one would have expected to have no informants reading Maltese in the third generation. In fact, most of the second generation informants do not read Maltese newspapers and/or books because, according to what they said, they were not taught Maltese at school. However, 50% of these informants speak to their parents in Maltese. One notes from table 5 that though only 10% of third generation informants speak to their parents in Maltese, these informants can also read Maltese. The reason for this is that they attended Maltese classes in the Heritage Programme. Such a programme was introduced in Toronto in 1977 and there are now four classes with a total of about 130 students.

Although 10% of the third generation of informants speak and read Maltese, this is a rather low percentage when considering that some second generation parents encouraged their children to speak Maltese and even spoke Maltese to them as their first language (see tables 7 and 9). However, problems arise when children go to school. The language of instruction is English and children choose the path of least resistance by discontinuing to speak Maltese, although some of them retain an incipient knowledge of the language.

TABLE 9 Informants who encourage their children to speak Maltese

	Yes	No
1st Generation	40%	60%
2nd Generation	20%	80%
3rd Generation	N/A	N/A

## 7. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It is evident that even within a group which lives in an area that is relatively densely populated with Maltese immigrants such as the Junction area, the intergenerational retention of Maltese is very low. In fact, it is much lower than I had anticipated it to be.

Appel and Muysken (1987) considered several factors that influence language maintenance and language shift. They cite factors which Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) deem important in the maintenance of a language, such as Status, and Demographic and Institutional support. These factors constitute ethnographic vitality. "The vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and ethnic collective entity in intergroup situations. From this it is argued that ethnolinguistic minorities that have little or no group vitality would eventually cease to exist as distinctive groups. Conversely, the more vitality a linguistic group has, the more likely it will survive the thrive as a collective entity in an intergroup context" (Giles et al 1977: 308). Thus "with respect to the minority language, this implies that more high vitality will lead to maintenance and low vitality will result to shift towards the majority language" (Appel and Muysken 1987: 33).

The above-mentioned factors of status and demographic and institutional support are also important in maintaining Maltese as a minority language in Canada. When considering status, one notes that as is evident from Table 1, most Maltese-Canadians have a rather low social status. Consequently, it is not surprising that there is a shift to English, since Maltese immigrants attribute sociohistorical status to the English language. Malta was dominated by the British for nearly two centuries, and for a person to succeed in his career it was imperative for him to know well the language of the dominant group. Moreover, English has now a very high status as the international language. So, most Maltese-Canadian immigrants would like their children to know English very well rather than Maltese. Some of the informants also said that they considered it useless for their children to know Maltese and also expressed the fear that there might be negative transfer of Maltese on English.

Another factor worth considering is demography. In the present study, informants interviewed were residents of the Junction Area and the results showed a high intergenerational shift to English. The shift to English would have probably been dramatic had there been a lower number of Maltese-Canadians in the area. Clyne (1982) discovered that with the Maltese community in Australia, numerical strength correlates with maintenance of Maltese. The lowest rates of shift to English were in two states, namely Victoria and New South Wales, two relatively densely populated areas with Maltese-Australians.

A possible reason why intergenerational retention of Maltese is so low, may be attributed, to some extent, to inter-ethnic marriages. Table 4 shows that 60% of second generation Maltese-Canadians married Anglo-Canadians. Clyne (1982) has shown that the more prestigious language of one of the spouses, such as English, is adopted as the first language for the children and the language of communication.

The results of the present study show that third generation Maltese-Canadians (10%) who speak Maltese also read Maltese books and newspapers. The fact that these informants can also read Maltese is somewhat encouraging and reflects the influence of what call Institutional factors such as government, church and Maltese organizations. It is important to note that the Canadian government, with its policy of Multilingualism and Multiculturalism, encourages linguistic minorities to teach their languages by financially assisting Language Heritage programmes. In fact, in 1977, the Maltese Heritage programme was introduced. Maltese language classes are held every Saturday morning at the James Culnam School and there are about 130 students attending the programme. When one notes the number of Maltese living in Toronto, the percentage of registered students for Maltese is very low indeed. There seems to be an analogous situation with Maltese-Australians. Frendo (1989) mentions that courses in Maltese studies which were being held at the Phillip Institute of Technology in Melbourne have been discontinued, because only a few students were attending such courses.

The study shows that the position of the Maltese language among the Junction Area Maltese-Canadians is far from rosy. Though the Maltese Heritage programmes, the support of Maltese by the local parish and the limited television and radio air time available help in maintaining the Maltese language, yet tables 5 and 6 and 7 bear out the stark fact that the language is only alive in a limited sense. When first and second generation Maltese-Canadians die, very few will have the inclination to speak and even read the language. The results of the present study show that Maltese language death in the community studied seems to be inevitable within twenty or thirty years.

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