

SECRET LANGUAGES: PRELIMINARY NOTES ON FOUR
EXAMPLES FROM THE MALTESE ISLANDS

The phenomenon of 'secret languages' is a widespread one and is known to occur in many cultures and contexts. It involves the creation and use by a particular group of a verbal, or non-verbal (such as signs and gestures), systematic means of communication that is unintelligible to all except the members of that group. Usually the secret languages exploits aspects of the everyday tongue in use, and the code-mongering takes on different forms. Words are systematically altered beyond recognition (for uninitiated listeners, that is) through the addition, substitution, subtraction and transposition of sounds, letters, or groups of sounds. Letters may also be replaced by numbers, implying that the secret language thus formed would be inaccessible to illiterate people: significantly, such a secret language was described for Moroccan religious men, highly acquainted with the Qu'ran and therefore literate (Berjaoui 1994).

Secret languages in the Maltese islands have, to my knowledge, never received any systematic attention. The aim of this article is to briefly present and describe four examples—it is very possible that other secret languages have been 'borrowed' from English and grafted onto the local language: these require further investigation, however.

Braik and Brejku

*Braik*¹ features in nineteenth-century literature, and apparently is not in use any more. The best account available is to be found in *Description of Malta and Gozo* by George Percy Badger, an Englishman who spent several years in Malta up to 1841 and published three works dealing with education and the Maltese language as well as the aforementioned volume. Badger describes a "peculiar jargon ... not understood by the inhabitants of any of the other villages" (1838: 297) from Gharb, Gozo, a small farming community. Badger witnessed the use of *Braik* on two occasions after being informed of its existence. Once he managed, with great difficulty, to persuade two peasants to converse in the cryptic language in his presence. On another occasion he proposed several sentences in Maltese to a villager, which the latter duly encoded. We are lucky enough to be in possession of three of them (given here as in Badger):

(i) **Maltese:** Immurru yien u inti? (Are we going?)

Braik: Rumu nayi u linki?

1. In Maltese the word *Ebrajk* means 'Hebrew'. There is definitely no structural linguistic connection—the word *Braik* as a secret language is therefore of uncertain origin.

(ii) **Maltese:** Fein tokghod inti? (Where do you live?)

Braik: Neif ghodtok linki?

(iii) **Maltese:** Inti ghandek mara? (Do you have a wife?)

Braik: Rama dennek linki?

The three examples show a change in the order of syllables or consonants within the word, which retains its position. The item *u* preserves its form; necessarily so, given the particular nature of the encoding process. Discrepancies are possibly, yet not necessarily so, due to inaccuracies of notetaking by Badger or simply to a lack of fluency by the speaker. The substitution of *t* for *k* almost certainly derives from the former source of error, as in Maltese discourse *t* is often pronounced *k*, as in *klaqt* instead of *tlaqt*. Cryptic codes that adopt a similar strategy of codification have been described from Cuna. Significantly, local terminology has named them *arepecunmakke*, from the Spanish *al revés* (backwards) and Cuna *sunmakke* (to speak) (Crystal 1987: 59).

Perhaps more interesting is the location of the social context within which *Braik* was used and to this end sociolinguistic inferences can be drawn from Badger's account. First, if *Braik* was indeed confined to north-western Gozo—and there is no reason to think otherwise—it could have been a regional code rather than one confined solely to Gharb. According to Badger a certain 'Wenzu ta' Xmun' was renowned for his excellence in the use of the secret language. And Wenzu was a resident of San Lawrenz, not Gharb. These are two neighbouring villages and undoubtedly residents from both would work in adjacent fields, thus being afforded the opportunity of social interaction. There is also the possibility that *Braik* had survived in the whereabouts of Gharb and previously had a more widespread distribution. Indeed Gharb was, and to some extent still is, synonymous with archaic cultural patterns (Formosa unpublished). Still, the connection between Gharb and *Braik* seems to hold water for two reasons. First, a "widespread distribution" would bypass the very sociological nature of secret languages, typically associated with small bounded groups, of which the 'traditional' agricultural village is a prime example. Secondly, there is written evidence to support the association. Vassalli (1796: 17), for instance, writes "*Nell'Gharb dicesi che vi sia un dialetto a parte. Io mi ci portai a bella posta per indagarlo: ma non è da tenere in verun conto, per essere un gergo artificiale tra qualche privato*" (my emphasis). Vassalli's mention is additionally germane in that he is confirming a "jargon" and not a dialect.

One should point out another inference that can be drawn from Badger's account, namely that of secrecy. He specifically mentions that it was very difficult to get the villagers to converse in *Braik*: "The villagers appear very shy in using it before strangers ..." (1838: 297). What Badger terms 'shyness' is in fact reluctance due to the nature of the topic, that usually hinders the researcher from establishing contact with informants who tend to feel they are betraying their speech community

(Berjaoui 1993). Indeed Badger probably only succeeded because of his sporadic appearance in the village and his being a foreigner, both factors excluding him from any chances of violating the purpose of the code; Vassalli was Maltese and this appears to have entailed a different behaviour by the villagers. From the reluctance of the villages to divulge their secret, it is evident that *Braik* was not simply a pastime but rather a social marker and a convenient way of achieving unintelligibility when the need arose.

From limited fieldwork in Gharb by the present author it may be tentatively ascertained that *Braik* as described by Badger does no longer exist. Interestingly, however, the word *Brejku* is still in use among the wider population of Maltese speakers and is taken to mean an unintelligible utterance in the course of ordinary discourse, or alternatively the introduction of a notion of subterfuge in social transactions. Aquilina (1972: 80) quotes the proverb "Min jimxi bil-brejku ma jasal imkien" (He who uses *brejku* [subterfuge] won't get anywhere). Similarly, one ought to point out the frequent use of the frozen phrase "Int se tkellimni bil-brejku, jew?", (Are you going to speak to me in *brejku*?). Here, the notion is one of evasive meaning (Mifsud pers. commn.).

Another secret language is apparently still in use and referred to by some authors as *Brejku* (Attard 1991: 134). It involves two steps, namely the separation of components and the insertion of the consonant 'p' before each syllable. A singular example, quoted in Attard, is:

Maltese: Jiena sejjer Malta ghada (Tomorrow I am going to Malta).

Brejku: Pjie pna psej pjer pmal pta pgha pda.

The mechanism is similar to one described in Morocco (Berjaoui unpublished). Unfortunately no further information exists and it is impossible to dwell on the social context of this variant. It is, however, fairly sure that it was used in Gozo as illustrated above² and has been described to the present author by a middle-aged informant who in her childhood spent regular periods in Gozo.

Cat Language

The third and most complete account concerns 'Cat Language'³, described to the author by an informant in her twenties from Valletta, an urban setting that contrasts strongly with the one within which *Braik* was located. This being a largely bilingual community⁴, 'Cat Language' could and did embrace both the Maltese 'as well as the' English language. The five examples presented here were proposed by the author and translated by the informant with no hesitation whatsoever.

2. Attard himself hails from Gozo.

3. Apparently a purely incident name.

4. Again, the same context occurs in Morocco (Berjaoui unpublished).

- (i) **English:** Dog
Cat Language: Dotonog
- (ii) **English:** Circumstance
Cat Language: Citnircutunumstatanace
- (iii) **English:** I own a car.
Cat Language: Itini otonown atan catanar.
- (iv) **Maltese:** Jiena u int. (Me and you).
Cat Language: Jitinatana utunu itinint.
- (v) **Maltese:** Ghada sejjer il-Belt. (Tomorrow I am going to Valletta).
Cat Language: Ghatanadatana setenejetener itinil Betenelt.

The process involves the insertion of two syllables after each syllable of the word. The introduced syllables are made up of two letters: a *t* and an *n* each followed by the vowel of the preceding syllable in the original word. Interestingly, the item *a* is encoded; in this case the encoding process does allow this. Although the process looks complex enough, the informant was highly fluent and described this quality for the other speakers with whom she interacted.

'Cat Language' was the secret language of a group in Valletta (which existed until recently) that met regularly under the auspices of a Catholic parish to pray, share experiences and generally interact socially. The group consisted of about twenty youths aged 15 to 25. According to the informant 'Cat Language' was used very frequently, primarily for passing certain socially unacceptable comments. Code-switching between English or Maltese and 'Cat Language' was constantly resorted to. This process was found to be true for the Moroccan examples as well (Berjaoui per. comm.). It was also summoned as a pastime and gave the group members a sense of detachment from the rest of the world. Only after several sessions with the group would an initiate be taught the ploy, and revelation was prohibited, via consensus, to people who were *close to* but not *members of* the group. Describing the secret language to complete strangers was quite acceptable, after it was ascertained that the strangers had no potential to come into closer contacts with the group: note the interesting parallel with Badger's case. The informant was not aware of the origin of the secret language, but stated that it was thought to her by a friend after joining the group. In this case the cryptic language is important in symbolising a psychologically real as well as a sociologically official group. It has been shown that 'argots', 'jargon' and 'slang' often act to create a differentiation where no political or sociological one exists (Edwards 1976). One may mention, for instance, the jargon used within Maltese drug users' circles, or the nuances of discourse specific to shipyard workers (Falzon in prep.).

5. The origins of the term could not be ascertained. Possibly 'Cabbage Language' had been passed on to Gozitan youths by a Canadian son of an emigree' on holiday in Marsalforn.

Cabbage Language

'Cabbage Language'⁵ is strikingly similar to 'Cat Language'. The social context was a group of about 30 individuals aged 12–16 years who until recently socialised at a games room run by the local chaplain in Marsalforn, Gozo. This small coastal village is a popular summer resort and the linguistic context one of several different dialects of Maltese from various areas of Gozo; English was often spoken in order to accommodate into the group a British girl. My informant was taught the ploy three weeks after joining the group, when she had established her trustworthy status. *Jistghu jafdawk*, to be trustworthy, involved a code of silence and secrecy *vis-a-vis* parents, younger siblings, and the chaplain himself. These categories, therefore, constituted the 'Other'. Typically, the initiate would be taught the key to the encoding process by a senior member of the group. Senior members may therefore be described as the entrepreneurs of the group's symbols.

Two examples encoded by informants will suffice to illustrate Cabbage Language:

- (i) **Maltese:** Ghada sejjer il-Belt
Cabbage: Ghalagadalaga selegejeleger iligil Belegelt.
- (ii) **English:** I own a car.
Cabbage: Iligi ologown alaga calagar.

The encoding process is similar to that used for Cat Language, the difference being that the introduced syllables are made up of the letters *l* and *g*, still followed by the vowel of the preceding syllable of the original word. Again, the item *a* is encoded.

The primary use of Cabbage was secrecy; in addition, understanding and speaking it meant that one's group membership had been sanctioned⁶. Rarely, if ever, was the code invoked as a pastime.

Comments

Crystal (1987: 58) cites three general reasons why one should want to use a secret language. The first is to locate oneself within a group. The notion may be expanded to introduced the factor of boundary: for any given group, the process of self-ascription includes the creation of a boundary that may have economic or political significance but is often merely a *symbolic* one—'communities' tend to be symbolically constructed (see for instance Cohen 1985). Groups select symbols, therefore, that effectively delineate their limits. In this sense, secret languages are social markers. Thus, in Morocco, the secret language of religious men tends to

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6. This particular group had other mechanisms at hand to signify membership. A specific nickname was given to every individual member, for instance.

occur in contexts where the speaker deems it is important to point out his identity or where he accommodates with a group of religious men that he happens to meet (Berjaoui 1993: 50). *Braik*, 'Cat Language' and 'Cabbage Language' thus served as the symbolic boundaries to the agricultural community of Gharb, the Valletta Catholic group and the Marsalforn circle.

The second reason, interrelated to the first, is secrecy. Only members of the group may understand an encoded message, to the effect that communication may take place freely in the presence of non-group members. The learning process becomes a *rite de passage*, an initiation into the group, and fluency a measure of one's legitimacy as a member—thus for 'Cat Language', the more fluent encoders are generally the individuals who have been members of the Catholic group for the longest period of time, or who attend sessions most frequently; for 'Cabbage Language', fluency depends on interaction within the bounded circle of speakers. In both cases the most fluent individuals constitute the core of the group.

The third reason why people should use a secret language is to provide a pastime, a humorous alternative to ordinary discourse. However, it ought to be pointed out that the element of secrecy always takes precedence. As Berjaoui (1993: 51) points out, it would be peculiar for a secret language not to be used for secret encoding purposes: if a given code is used for humorous (or other) purposes, it was certainly invented to serve as a secret medium and eventually lost its primary motive. 'Cat Language', according to my informant, is now adopting such a structural role.

These factors illustrate the nature of secret languages, not just as artefacts but as socially significant. Indeed, they shed light on one of the most important functions of language, namely to enable the construction of social groups.

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