

IN THE MOULD OF A NEW ENVIRONMENT: THE MALTESE LANGUAGE IN AUSTRALIA

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As far as is presently known, people of Maltese origin in Australia first set foot here as voluntary settlers, as early as 1838; indeed at the very infancy of this country's Europeanisation. The first documented Maltese individual to settle in Australia was an Anthony (Toni) Azzopardi, in the city of Melbourne which, at the time was known as and formed part of the Port Phillip District. It is also conclusively known that there were even earlier settlers¹ of Maltese origin amongst the convicts, as well as stowaways and seamen who jumped ship, when they reached the safety of an Australian port. It was not until formal agreements between the two Governments of Malta and Australia that any numerically significant quantities of Maltese began migrating here in a steady pattern. The earliest of these, who arrived in an organised group of eight men, came here in 1882, thus forming the core of the very first formal group of Maltese pioneers² who played a significant part, alongside their Australian counterparts, in settling the land. This group was also instrumental in opening up the way for the many hordes of Maltese who followed in the ensuing decades³.

Today it is claimed that Australia harbours some 400,000 persons of Maltese origin. About half this number, a very arbitrary figure, were born in Australia, the greater majority of whom understand and speak the Maltese language. A smaller percentage of those born in Australia or who came here at a very tender age, can also write the language. This figure is slowly on the increase after the introduction of Maltese classes in a number of Australian States^{3a}.

The major Australian regions in which the greater number of Maltese are clustered today are Melbourne, Sydney, Port Kembla/Wollongong District, Mackay, Innisfail, Brisbane, Adelaide, Moe/Morwell Region and Perth. As a consequence these regions are the areas where the greater part of the Maltese linguistic development has occurred. Other areas, where there are numerically smaller concentrations of Maltese are Queanbeyan/Canberra Area, Gosford/Wyong District, Bundaberg, Proserpine, Cairns, Townsville, Fremantle and Broken Hill. These regions of the second grouping have played a less significant role in the development of the Ozmaltese idiom⁴.

The term Ozmaltese is used to denote the peculiar Maltese language, both spoken and to a lesser extent written, as it has developed and as it is applied by the Maltese of Australia, with its own characteristics distinguishing it from Standard Maltese. This phenomenon appears to have developed very markedly in the first group of regions I have identified herein while in the second group the linguistic contribution appears to be more of a transient and less prolific nature.

The main sociological factors impinging on the two groups contributing to this change are, in the main:

1st Group
numerically large (thousands)
close clusterings
regular contact
more settled

2nd Group
tens to hundreds only
scattered settlements
infrequent meetings
transient populations

frequent organised functions	no functions or rarely
common meeting places	no common venue
ethnic radio	no radio access
language classes	no such facilities
access to Maltese commodities (books, records, souvenirs, etc.)	no access or difficulty to obtain
community settlements	isolation
organised committees	no community structures

In the first grouping, where the Maltese Language is in more frequent usage and where the most significant changes have occurred (and are still occurring), the distinctions from the spoken lingua franca of Malta are vast and peculiar only to them; a phenomenon which has been observed by many linguists as occurring within all the ethnic groups of Australia which have a long settlemental history.

Some of the more significant alterations and accretions characterising Ozmaltese as a language spoken by a distinct group and as developed by that group in isolation from the parent tongue, include the following:

- (i) intonation—where it becomes difficult to distinguish between an exclamation, a statement, a question or whatever, from the simple tone of voice, which is characterised by the transference of the monotonal idiomatic expression from Australian into Maltese. —e.g. "I am on duty today" can be a straightforward statement of fact, or a question or an emphatic 'I'. This is imitated into Ozmaltese and the meaning is only understood from the rest of the text and the context in which it is used.
- (ii) accentuation—the omission or addition of a syllable contrary to Sd.M. usage. —e.g. "X'inhom" instead of "X'inhuma" and 'djarjet' for 'djar'.
- (iii) newly coined words—taking Australian words and melitensing them by adapting them to the rules of Maltese philology. —e.g. 'ikkikkja' for 'ixxuttja' and 'fajbruwwa' for 'a sheet of fibro'.
- (iv) newly coined idioms (calques)—transliterating an Australian saying instead of translating or adopting a native equivalent. —e.g. "Waqghet mill-wara ta' trakk" (It fell off the back of a truck), euphemism for stealing.
- (v) new meanings for Sd.M. words—niddmanda (I demand). In common Maltese parlance this would render 'to ask a question', with the rule of elision having taken over by dropping the medial 'o' thus altering the word structure and the meaning.
- (vi) the obliteration of words from the Sd.M. vocabulary—e.g. —'ferrovija' and 'karozza tal-linja' for 'train' and 'bus' are rarely, if ever, heard. Instead the local idiom in common usage is 'trejn' and 'bass'.
- (vii) replacing Sd.M. words with newly coined ones—e.g. 'klabb' as used in Ozmaltese has a vastly different meaning from that used in Sd.M.

- (viii) new ways of asking questions –
e.g. (tonal) “Dawk marru, jew?” — — — ?⁵
“Dawk marru, jew?” — — — ?
- (ix) syntax – e.g. – “Meta intom sejrin ejja ghidli.” instead of “Ejja ghidli meta tkunu sejrin.”
- (x) completely new vocabulary having no meaning in Sd.M. – e.g. – ‘nibblaggja’ i.e. to get something for nothing; to bludge.
- (xi) locally formed words having different meanings in different parts of Australia –
e.g. – ‘friema’ which in Mackay and other North Queensland towns means ‘cane farmers’ and adopted by the Maltese of Sydney with the meaning of ‘market gardeners’ and ‘poultry, cattle and sheep farmers’.
- (xii) new non-traditional Maltese sounds taking the place of Sd.M. sounds – e.g. – replacing the ‘t’ sound at the end of some Maltese words with the glottal stop as in ‘inq’ instead of ‘int’, also ‘inqi’ for ‘inti’.
- (xiii) the introduction of sounds not present in Sd.M. – e.g. – “Qax mhux sejrin?” for “Ghax mhux sejrin?” The silent ‘gh’ at the beginning of Maltese words appears difficult to acknowledge. (Note: The Italians in Australia have a similar tendency to add vowels onto words ending with consonants e.g. ‘brick’ in Australoitalian becomes ‘bricca’.)
- (xiv) the deletion or dropping of certain consonantal sounds –
e.g. – ‘il-attus’ for ‘il-qattus’.
- (xv) the drift away from the Italian sphere of influence – Modern Maltese has borrowed freely from Italian owing to historical and geographical proximity, but in Australia the tendency is to ignore Italian as a source language and to rely on the native semitic root structure. e.g. ‘rifed’ for ‘appogga’.
- (xvi) the drift away from the British-English sphere of influence – Maltese has been influenced strongly by 200 years of British colonialism. With the geographic distance from Britain, the Maltese in Australia tend to drift away from the traditional English Language reliance in favour of the local Australian content. (This claim would appear to infer that the Maltese spoken in England would be far more English influenced than its Australian counterpart. Other factors would need to be examined and evaluated also in assessing this difference, one important one being the relative closeness of Malta to Britain with the resultant easier access to the mother country compared to the isolation of the Australian continent.) e.g. – ‘futbol’ in Malta means ‘soccer’ but in Australia it refers directly to the game of rugby, so the local Ozmaltese equivalent becomes ‘soker’.
- (xvii) a tendency to revive archaic Maltese words towards a purer Maltese in a conscious desire towards self identity –
e.g. – ‘hâra’ for ‘distrett’ and ‘mislef’ for ‘bank’.

- (xix) a general inclination to melitense all Australian words in an ordinary conversation which fit easily in the Maltese mould –
e.g. – “Jekk sa toqghod tisspikja waqt li qed niddrajvja se nistoppja.”
(If you insist on speaking while I am driving I am going to stop the car.)
- (xx) interspersing of Australian in the middle of a Maltese sentence –
e.g. – “Il-priest qalli nghid ir-rosary.”
- (xxi) the rapid loss of the native idiom, so rich in meaning, as found in proverbs and common sayings.
- (xxii) multiple plural formations –
e.g. – ‘djars’, ‘djarsijiet’, ‘djarijiet’ and ‘dars’.
- (xxiii) plurals which determine the singular –
e.g. – ‘friema’ gives the singular form, by reverse philological reasoning, of ‘farma’⁶.

Owing to the vastness of the Australian continent, with the resultant widely scattered groupings and the resources needed to cover all aspects of this linguistic research, I have had to limit this study to its present confines; itself a mammoth task of seemingly endless scope. It requires a keen ear to tune in to some of the more subtle nuances and to actually distinguish some of these observations, as most of them manifest themselves as the normal mode of speech emanating naturally and unconsciously from their perpetrators. And indeed this phenomenon is a continuing process which is so strong and so ingrained into the fibre of the everyday Ozmaltese speech, that despite conscious and artificial efforts by some Maltese newspaper editors and radio broadcasters to rigidly stick to Sd.M. and thereby resist the natural tendencies of the locals, it is rapidly edging its way into an accepted written and spoken sub-language.

Characteristically, the written Ozmaltese appears to be developing along very similar lines to its spoken version and has expanded, out of sheer necessity, into most aspects of today’s modern living, having permeated through almost every facet of our daily human interactional functionings.

The earliest records of written Maltese in Australia were, as was to be expected from a fervently Catholic people, those of a religious nature⁷. There were no traces of Ozmaltese in these records and this stands to reason, as they mainly consisted of traditional prayers, sermons and the like. For while the ordinary citizen in the workforce had to contend with and, often rapidly adapt to his new environment, having to keep pace with new developments, the man of the Church was ever so more secure and far less threatened by innovations in his traditional protective cocoon. This no doubt, was a major factor in influencing the marked lack of change in the linguistic habits of the local Maltese clerics.

As the number of Maltese migrants coming to Australia increased, as life became more and more complex, as demands and needs varied, as necessity dictated, as cultural attitudes changed and values altered, the Maltese priest found himself becoming increasingly isolated from his traditional role. He suddenly found that he was no longer in demand as an interpreter, as a translator, as a social worker and the numerous other responsibilities he was accustomed to assuming. The migrant

began to look to the various government agencies who provided services in his language. Banks and other commercial houses sought translations for the services they offered. Many of these translations often necessitated innovations by skilled translators who continually came across new concepts which had no equivalent in their native tongue; be it Maltese or otherwise.

In addition to the challenge from the commercial world, the translator's job was compounded when he found himself up against the technical language of the scientific, technological, legal and medical worlds. He had to contend with industrial jargon and countless new concepts in transmitting a message across to the populace in the simplest and most lucid form possible. Sheer necessity and obvious economic advantage were the overriding factors stimulating this upsurge towards the use of ethnic languages by the non-academic world. The businessman who wanted to increase his selling market, the mechanic who sought to expand his business, the club which aimed at larger crowds, the professional person who wished to increase his clientele, the publisher who desired a wider readership and a better advertising response; all these and many others were the driving forces behind the widespread use of foreign languages in Australia. They were mainly concerned with putting across a message which would be understood in the widest possible cross-section of the public in the quickest, simplest and most effective form to which the foreign public could adapt and identify.

The local Maltese language newspapers of past and present have played a prominent and influential role in keeping alive and spreading the written word and to a lesser extent in helping to evolve an acceptable written form of our own peculiar mode of utterance. Although they have, over the years proven to be somewhat conservative in making themselves more linguistically amenable to their readers by their resistance to change, over recent months they have shown some tendency to open up, owing to continuous prodding from myself and others, yet they still have a long way to go before a satisfactory level of linguistic emancipation has been achieved and thereby hopefully, establishing themselves as the brave leaders of a reality which is with us to stay.

On both the conscious and the unconscious levels, the phenomenon of Ozmaltese is one of the most interesting developments to observe, as it passes through the different phases in its evolutionary process. The conscious linguistic developmental output is that part of the written language which found its way into the various publications (leaflets, advertising material, official translations, etc.) and which appears to be slowly gaining a foothold with our newspapers out of the signal pressure of demand and supply or perish. The unconscious part, which has as its breeding ground the lesser educated populace with their very basic linguistic grasps, is no less meritorious and if anything, more in keeping with the natural and uninhibited self expression. Indeed, as a direct result of this formal language ignorance, several new idioms, newly coined words, whole new phrases, different modes of spelling and unusual grammatical formations have found their way into the local written Ozmaltese and have become accepted by us, despite their disregard of traditional syntactical, lexical, morphological, etymological and even historical ties our Mediterranean language has been aligned with for the last few thousand years.⁹

1 Bovingdon Rigu, 1883: *Ghaliex ma naqbilx*, "The Maltese Herald", 20.9.88.

2 De Cesare F.S., No.1 Mr F.S. De Cesare to the Chief Secretary, Brisbane, 18.9.1882, Colonial Office Reports.

3 Op. cit., according to De Cesare, in 1882 there were already small groupings of Maltese scattered around various parts of Australia who came here as free settlers and who had been in the country for several years.

4 The Northern Territory and Tasmania are the only two States which do not harbour large numbers of Maltese. Formerly there were large gangs of Maltese workers in both these areas; these have since dispersed to other States.

5 The linear configuration represents the tonal levels with each individual line standing for one syllable.

6 A more detailed analysis is presently being compiled by the author. This will include an extensive and in-depth synopsis and an evaluation of Ozmaltese together with an exhaustive glossary.

7 The earliest written tendencies towards the Ozmaltese are to be found in the publications "Maltese and English and Maltese Educational Publications", The Cumberland Argus, Parramatta, New South Wales, 1929, edited by Charles G. Parnis.

8 Bovingdon Rigu, *Dokument Malti Storiku*, "The Maltese Herald", 26.4.88. This document contains no traces of Ozmaltese. Its significance is of historical importance, being the first known official address in writing, in the Maltese Language, presented to a high dignitary of the Catholic Hierarchy.

9 Perhaps the most interesting dual aspects of these linguistic studies in Australia will, in future emanate from (i) how much and in what way will Ozmaltese be incorporated into the regular Australian idiom, and (ii) how extensive will Ozmaltese influence be on Standard Maltese in the light of current observations which already point to a certain amount of assimilation into the mainstream of Maltese.

3a The first ever classes for the teaching of Maltese held in Australia were organised by myself early in 1968 at the local Catholic School in the Sydney suburb of Smithfield. Unfortunately these folded up after some six months owing to great difficulties in co-ordinating times, age gaps of the mixed attendance and individual educational levels. In 1978, ten years later, Joseph Abela forged ahead with a second attempt at Maltese classes. These flourished from the lowest levels to finally end up at tertiary level for the first time in the history of the Maltese Language overseas.