

“QUITE A DILEMMA!”

Musical Performance and Debate Concerning the Usefulness of the Maltese Language in Australia

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Introduction

Academic considerations of identity in migrant and marginalised communities often highlight language as a key cultural nexus. Anne-Marie Fortier has argued that the loss of “mother-tongues” in emigrant cultures can “signal the loss of some originary self” (Fortier, 2000: 84). The archipelago of Malta has a long history of occupation and colonisation and up until 1934 Italian and English were both recognised as the official languages rather than Maltese. Malta’s history, then, reflects the systematic shaping of national identity via language. This shaping continued through government sponsored migration programs in the decades following World War II^[1] which sought to address Malta’s socio-economic disparities. Fifty years on, the impact of broadly based displacement is being negotiated in migrant communities and realised through cultural performances such as folk music known as *ghana* which requires the use of ‘pure’ and ‘archaic’ Maltese. However performance of *ghana* in Australian Maltese communities highlights the dwindling of the Maltese language in second and subsequent generations.

In July 2004 the Maltese Historical Association held an evening entitled a ‘History of the Maltese Language and its Role in Contemporary Australia’ with the aim of providing a space to discuss my initial research into the use of language in *ghana* performance (see Klein, 2003; Klein, 2005). Polarised opinions emerged, some that valourised the continuation of the Maltese language, and others that deemed the task “futile” (Maltese Historical Association, 2004: 13). Following this discussion, *The Maltese Herald*, an Australian publication, reported the talk and finished with the opinion that: “The solution to this problem falls back to the use of English. Quite a dilemma!”(ibid). Building from the experiences of the Maltese Community in Melbourne, Australia, this article seeks to analyse the “dilemma” that expatriate communities face at the loss of language as a distinct marker of culture and identity, with particular emphasis on the re-location of identity and class conflicts through language.^[2]

Ghana: Performing Maltese Community

Ghana, the cultural performance of Maltese folk music, is used in combination with other activities such as social, political or religious gatherings, sports, cookery, dance, music and theatre performance to encourage a physical connection to and an inclusive sense of Maltese community in Australia. *Ghana*, as a pervasive cultural form, is regularly performed in community centres, as part of cultural festivals, in designated clubs and in home environments. *Ghana* is a generic term for 'singing', referencing a range of genres, though it is primarily associated with *spirtu pront*, a masculine 'song duel' style of performance. All types of *ghana* feature sophisticated structures emphasising the interplay and placement of words. Sung in Maltese, a verse will usually consist of four lines with an A-B-C-B rhyme scheme (varying slightly between genres), with each line using a total of eight syllables (Fsadni, 1993: online).

Rainier Fsadni believes that themes of social origin played upon in *ghana* performance establish identities: "by focusing on difference and the 'essence' of Maltese" (ibid). The thematic link between 'Maltese' and language is particularly resonant in a migrant context because it is something tangible that can be genealogically traced back to the Malta of memory, remaining distinct from the dominant mainstream of their new homelands. Yet because identity can be established by language "in the sense of both 'tongue' and 'rhetoric'" (ibid), or rather by both the language as sound and grammar, and language as a common expression of encoded values, it is possible for a community to create through its use a changeable cultural space "'outside' or 'inside'" (ibid) other dominant cultures and social stratifications. Maltese Australian communities are concerned about the deterioration of traditional practices and this general concern can become focused on language as a signifier of tradition because its rate of decline within the second and third generations of Australian-born is measurable.

The 1991 Australian "Malta Born" census profile found that only 19% of second generation Maltese Australians spoke any Maltese at home. Comparatively, this figure is low for European migrants to Australia, the same census revealing that 48% of second generation Italian Australians and 74% of second generation Greek Australians spoke their ancestral language in the home. The decline in the usage of Maltese at home between 1996 and 2001 was 8.5%^[31], while the usage of Italian and Greek shrank by 5.9% and 2.2% respectively (CRC, The Community Relations Commission For a multicultural NSW: <http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/statistics/Sect1/Table1p04Aust.pdf>). Because Maltese is a Semitic language of Arabic origin, Clyne has compared results of its usage in the 1996 Australian census to Arabic (Lebanese), noting language shifts in the first generation correspond to 36.5% and 5.5% (2003: 25). These comparisons all reveal the Maltese Australian community as having a relatively poor rate of language retention. This realisation has caused the community to question the continued viability and place of Maltese culture in Australia, particularly to subsequent generations.

The impact of contemporary culture on Maltese Australian youth was significant enough for the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Victorian Ministry of Education to fund a report entitled *To Learn More Than I Have: The Educational aspirations and experiences of the Maltese in Melbourne* (Terry, Borland and Adams, 1993). Compiled by the Victorian University of Technology, the report aimed to uncover reasons for low school retention and participation rates of Maltese background Australian students in Victoria and also to determine some of the causes of the second and third generations' seeming loss of interest in the Maltese language and culture. The report concluded that these areas of concern were exacerbated by the education system itself, which generally took no action to address and rectify the problems. It specifically highlighted the "almost total absence" of Maltese language programs in Victoria; a lack of recognition that many Maltese Australian students acquire English as a second language; and an obviously inadequate relationship between schools and Maltese background parents (ibid: 66). The report's recommendations suggested that these problems could be alleviated by providing students with opportunities to "explore issues to do with ethnicity and culture in a way that moves beyond stereotypes", allowing for "a broader and more critical examination of the way in which Australian society has developed" (ibid).

Dynamic Tensions: English, Maltese and Italian

The use of *ghana* to promote the Maltese language is wrought with conflicts, though many originally stem from the use and position of the language within Maltese society. The subordination of Maltese to English and Italian has a long history, which problematises any attempt to define Maltese culture via language in a diasporic context. Under British rule in the 19th century, English was made the official language of Malta, replacing Italian. Italian had long been instituted as the language of government during Malta's rule by the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem (known as the Knights of St John) who governed Malta from 1530-1798. Dugan records that the British practice was merely to substitute English for Italian when they took control of Malta's administration, but the transition was difficult, and for a considerable time Maltese affairs "at the higher levels" were "conducted in a mixture of Italian and English" (Dugan, 1988: 43). It wasn't until 1934 that Maltese was also recognised as an official language of the islands. Joseph Brincat argues that Maltese writers and other supporters of the language had been waiting for the right time to raise Maltese to official status, which was afforded "at the height of preparations for World War II which pitted Britain against Italy" allowing Italian to be dropped from official status in 1936 (Brincat, 2005: online). The contention between languages informs Maltese Australian cultural performance like *ghana* as the following excerpt highlights:

Excerpt from a conversation with R. Farugia (RF); Re. Farugia (REF); G. Aylwin (GA) and E. Klein (EK). This is taken from a section of dialogue as they are translating a comic, fictional song known as a *fatt*:

REF: *He had a woman going into his shop, right. So this woman she was very like, you know, show off, whatever. She was licking the icecream and she speaks English. She was a show off, you know what I mean? She said, "don't speak to me in Maltese". She's not from Malta and she ask him for one of those long...*

RF: *Marrows.*

REF: *Marrows, you know and that.*

RF: *You know what the long marrows are called?*

REF: *Marrows, you know like what do we call them, the marrows. Not watermelons, the marrows, the long ones?*

EK: *I think I know.*

REF: *Marrows, you grow them in the... They're like ...*

RF: *They grow on a vine.*

REF: *They grow on a vine. You know what I mean? Europeans have them a lot you know.*

RF: *The key is with all this he's singing, you gotta know exactly the words*

REF: *The words...*

RF: *Because the words gonna finish up like you thinking he's saying dirty things...*

REF: *Oh it's very funny this one...*

RF: *Alright.*

REF: *Yeah...*

RF: *I mean ...*

REF: *But you've got to listen.*

RF: *He's talking [untranslatable comment in Maltese] for a long marrow.*

REF: *Ah what you do? Stopped it?*

RF: *[Untranslatable comment in Maltese] ... for a long marrow. You can imagine from now on with this long marrow, what she's gonna do with it, alright?*

REF: *[laughs] [pause]*

RF: *Listen to this...*

GA: *WOOH!*

(Aylwin, Farugia and Farugia, interview with author, 15/3/02).

This is a transcribed excerpt of an afternoon I spent with my great aunt and uncle R. and Re. Farugia, Maltese migrants to Australia. The story being translated is a comic derivative of *ghana tal-fatt*. *Ghana tal-fatt* is a tradition of sung ballads that illustrate Maltese historical narratives and important cultural values. In this *fatt* a female English-speaking foreigner has walked up to a masculine fruit and vegetable vendor and flirtatiously asks for a long marrow. The hyperbole of the *fatt* dually emphasises the seductive danger of foreigners (as foreign influence) and feminine sexuality (as temptation). As the story continues the woman successfully seduces the hard working (male) vendor, but turns out to be an escaped criminal from Sicily who wants to shoot the vendor if he doesn't consent to marry her. This danger is compounded and transformed when she asks the vendor not to speak Maltese, but English. The gender-roles played out in this *fatt* fall within standard comic stereotypes and are anticipated by *ghana* audiences. The obvious reference to English defines for the audience what constitutes a significant

threat to the continuation of traditional Maltese culture, and the cultures of diasporic Maltese communities around the world.

The "Codeswitching" Problem

Currently in Malta, English is taught from the beginning of formal education in varying degrees: from tuition either entirely in English (generally the private school sector), to having classes taught alternatively in English and Maltese, to classes primarily taught in Maltese with supplementary English as a Second Language lessons (now the practice in Maltese public schools) (Zammit, 1978). According to sources such as Xuereb, segments of Maltese society particularly within the higher economic social stratifications, attempt to teach their children English as their native language to denote this status (Xuereb, nd: online). This is achieved with varying degrees of success and the result is sometimes a pidgin tongue generally referred to as Maltese English or English Maltese, depending upon where the emphasis lies.

The contemporary signification of English as 'high' and Maltese as 'low' draws upon what Chetcuti describes as the historical descriptions of spoken Maltese as the language of the "idiot" and the "ruffian" and a "dialect of the kitchen" (Chetcuti cited in Terry, Borland and Adams, 1993: 27). Sciriha studied the way that English and Maltese are used in Malta and found results that suggested parallels to migrant community experiences of the Maltese language in both Canada and Australia (being the most numerically significant). The study found that:

In particular areas... where the density of the Maltese population is very high, Maltese language retention is surprisingly low in the second and subsequent generations... the shift towards English, the dominant language, starts precisely at home when parents, whose English proficiency is low, decide to interact in 'English' with their children so that their offspring would not experience a linguistic shock when they go to school. These two contexts (the Maltese and the Migrant context in either Canada or Australia) are however not identical. An important difference exists since in both Canada and Australia, English is reinforced at school by native English speakers and the negative effects of the Maltese children's home background, which generally provided them with a large dose of degraded input in English are neutralised. Instead, in Malta, exposure to English is limited and the quality is not even, with the result that the levels of code-switching increase. It is only too understandable in consequence, that Maltese children do not feel comfortable interacting in either Maltese or in English and thus resort to the easy habit of code-switching. (Sciriha with reference to Cauchi and Sciriha, 1997: 87-88)

To use, to not use, or to use only a little English in everyday speech is complex and carries with it different signifiers of power and status. Fsadni notes of this situation that English has "hierarchical connotations and Maltese egalitarian ones" and that often it is necessary, or appropriate to switch forms of usage to suit a situation (Fsadni, 1993). To

not do so is also a choice, and this will have social consequences pertaining to 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. This kind of language switching which has encoded "H(igh) and "L(ow)" status is referred to by Winford as diglossia (2003: 112). However Winford describes this situation as a "complementary distribution across different domains", the H language being used in the public sphere, and the L language being used in the private sphere. However the diglossic relationship between English and Maltese is awkward due to the transgression of English into the private sphere which Sciriha highlights. It is important to note that Sciriha's study is relying upon two relatively old definitions of codeswitching. She cites Di Pietro's 1977 definition "the use of more than one language by communicants in the exclusion of a speech act" and Grosjean's 1982 definition "alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation" (Sciriha, 1997: 71). These definitions are fairly generalised, and more recent considerations of codeswitching usually emphasise linguistic competency, rather than discomfort. Winford addresses this distinction saying:

there is a tendency to restrict the definition of codeswitching only to those kinds of language mixture practised by skilled bilinguals. Hence those kinds of mixing that characterize the interlanguage of learners acquiring a second language tend to be treated as a distinct phenomena. (2003: 124-125)

Definitions aside, Sciriha's study is relevant to considerations of this paper because it forms part of the Maltese Australian community's understanding of language usage in the Maltese archipelago. Entitled 'One Country, Two Languages?', it was published in an Australian volume entitled *Malta: A Siege and a Journey* (2003) alongside papers on Maltese history and migration to Australia from prominent community figures like Barry York. Additionally, Sciriha has become involved in the Maltese Australian community during her time as a visiting lecturer at the Victorian University of Technology.

Brincat argues that while "switching between languages is condemned by everyone" with at least one third of the population practising it regularly, the situation isn't grave because "at present this danger seems remote because most speakers do not consider mixing as a permanent structure" (2005). Despite this, he argues "conditions are different" to previously imposed or borrowed words because today:

Everybody learns both English and Maltese, so that virtually all the English words (said to be a million) can be used when switching between languages. This shows how necessary it is to protect the Maltese language, not by old-fashioned censorship but by strengthening the standard variety. (ibid)

With Maltese being accepted as an official European Union language in 2005, it seems likely that this will happen.

Ghana Spirtu Pront: Maltese Fighting Back

Refereed papers from
The 1st international Small Island Cultures conference
Kagoshima University Centre for the Pacific Islands, February 7th-10th 2005
<http://www.sicri.org>

The most recognisable genre of *ghana* performance is the song duel, categorised by Marcia Herndon as the "wounding song" (Herndon, 1971). Called *ghana spirtu pront*, it is an intricate and highly politicised exchange of sung rhetoric (ibid: 21). This is because the purpose of competing, or performing in a song duel is to "best the other in argument" (Fsadni, 1993). Each sung argument is improvised on either a pre-determined topic, or a topic that is loosely decided by the *ghannejja* (singers) during the first stages of performance. In *ghana* performance, it is highly inappropriate to use an English word to make a rhyme scheme function correctly. The use of English is restricted to the most limited occasions, usually when a large impact is required, and often in *spirtu pront* it can be used to denote 'outsider' status onto an opponent (Fsadni, 1993). Fsadni believes that this precipice between English and Maltese that the *ghannejja* walk in each performance is a tangible example of the language tension experienced by "the majority of the Maltese in their everyday life" (Fsadni, 1993). One particularly resonant example of this anxiety is from a *spirtu pront* performance in 1996 on the topic of 'The Maltese Immigrants in Australia'. This performance was a commemoration marking the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the Rangatiki, the first ship carrying Maltese migrants to Australia after the Second World War.

Text

Translation

FS: U gejna minn gzira Maltija
Biex fl-Awstralja naghmlu success
U Kuzzu nahseb li qed tigdeb
Malta u Ghawdex ghadhom l-istess.
* Translator's parenthesis

And we came from the island of Malta
So in Australia we will make success
And Kuzzu I think you are fibbing (that)*
Malta and Gozo are still the same.

LD: Din il-kelma li ghidtli issa
Nitolbok tghidlu dan l-ghaliex
Imma l-lingwa li ghandhom huma
U s'issa ghadhom ma tilfuhix.
* Translator's parenthesis

This word that you said to me now
I pray that you tell him because
That the language they have (in Malta)*
Up to now they have not lost it.

FS: U hbieb tieghi din l-ahhar ghanja
Ser ninfirdu minn xulxin;
Mill-Awstralja ghall-gzira taghna,
Hbieb, kemm ahna mbeghdin!

And my friends this last song
We are about to become separated;
From Australia to our island,
Friends, how far we are apart.

(Zammit cited in Klein, 2005: 71; Except for Maltese text in verse 3, Zammit cited in Klein, 2003: 51)

This exchange between Leli Debrincat (LD) and Frank Saliba (FS) illustrates the threat to and loss of the Maltese language as felt by the Maltese Australian community in Debrincat's response to his opponent's use of the English word 'success'. Similarly,

Saliba reveals the tensions of displacement in an earlier remark: "We came from Malta to Australia/ And in our time we had unrest/ But you are mostly enjoying that/ When you sing you get applause" (Klein, 2005: 70). Saliba is commenting on the unrest that both performers have felt as migrants to Australia, but rebuking his opponents enjoyment of this feeling of unrest when he performs *ghana* (and gains approval from his peers and audience). This exchange ends on a call to "never forget" Malta (ibid: 71), the performers setting an example for the audience via their sophisticated use of the Maltese language. "From Australia to our island/ Friends, how far we are apart" (ibid) highlights the distances between the *ghannejja* as individuals and the distance of the Maltese Australian community from their homeland and possibly from Australian mainstream culture.

The precise and targeted switching or borrowing in *ghana spirtu pront* can be viewed as a deliberate reaction against the linguistic stress and divisions that English has caused throughout all levels of Maltese society. All forms of *ghana* (both in Malta and Australia) use only Maltese except in these instances of switching, thereby affirming its worth, which has historically been degraded. However this is not a simple affirmation of culture through language.

A Dilemma of Dialects?

During one performance of *ghana tal-fatt* I attended in 2002, I was included in a conversation where a table of first generation Maltese Australians were discussing the difficulties of coming to watch *ghana* performances. Despite all of them being native speakers of Maltese it had taken each of them several years of regular attendance at *ghana* performances before they could begin to discern the story. Two women admitted that they were often unable to understand portions of what was being said. At the time I didn't consider the significance of this, and brought the tapes of the performance back to Sydney. After several attempts at translation I had to conclude that for the moment it was, for me, an unachievable task. After the Farugias unsuccessfully attempted to translate the tapes, they remarked that they were unable to do so because it was a dialect of Maltese that was "very difficult to understand" and as such they couldn't "quite catch the words" (Aylwin, Farugia and Farugia, interview with author, 15/3/02). Aylwin, who also attempted to translate the tapes, said that it sounded like people from the countryside speaking and that it made no sense to her (ibid). I questioned Aylwin as to what part of Malta she was from, and she said that her family was from St Paul's Bay, as were several other people in attendance at the *fatt* performance night. This warranted greater exploration but what surfaced was even more perplexing.

The Maltese language has altered many times due to the island's long history of occupation by a variety of different regimes, each time with a different language being introduced into general usage. The most lasting influence has come from the Arabic language, which the 'wailing' quality of *ghana* melodies seems to invoke. These influences, along with local linguistic and cultural variation, have generated regional

dialects within Malta. What has emerged through urban centres is Standard Maltese, which Borg theorises was at one time "perceived as being a model by the rest of the inhabitants of the islands" and copied (Borg cited by Xuereb, online). In some areas where regional dialects exist, Standard Maltese is also used in certain situations, and depending on context, "one variety is superposed on the rest of the varieties" (Borg cited by Xuereb). Considering that people from all areas of Malta have migrated to Australia, it seems unlikely that a single regional dialect would dominate *ghana* performance. Fsadni comments that the language used in *ghana* "is not one that is used in ordinary social intercourse: it is high-flown, using elaborate metaphors and formalistic phrases, as well as (depending on the ghannej) occasionally out-rightly self-righteous" (Fsdni, 1993). "High-flown" and "elaborate metaphors" could make it difficult for someone new to *ghana* to understand what was being insinuated, but it is problematic that the Farugias were unable to translate the tapes. R. Farugia has been collecting audio and video recordings of *ghana* performance since the 1970s and, prior to his retirement and some health problems, would attend *ghana* performances in both Sydney and Malta. The use of "formalistic phrases" suggests that Standard Maltese could be used, but this again is problematic if referenced against claims that *ghana* originated as a "village" song form. Manuel Casha, a Maltese Australian *ghana* guitarist and scholar mentioned to me in June 2003 that only 'pure' Maltese could be used to sing *ghana*, which again would suggest the use of the dominant, and socially 'acceptable' Standard Maltese.

In 2002 I developed a theory to explain why the *ghana* from Melbourne could not be translated in Sydney. I hypothesised that a new variation of Maltese had emerged since the establishment of densely populated Maltese areas in Melbourne, created from several of the dialects blending together with Standard Maltese over the course of social interaction. On returning to Melbourne in 2003, I asked those at a *spirtu pront* session what their experiences were of the differences between Maltese spoken in Sydney and Maltese spoken in Melbourne. There was a general consensus that there were differences in the way Maltese was used in Melbourne and Sydney, based upon contact with relatives who had been living in Sydney. While these observations, in themselves, were far too subjective and anecdotal to draw conclusions from, they are supported by linguist Roderick Bovingdon's studies of the Maltese language in Australia - in his monograph *The Maltese language of Australia: Maltraljan* (2001), a co-paper of a similar title 'Maltraljan: The Maltese Language in Australia' with A. Dalli (2003) and a conference paper entitled 'From Langage to Ethnolect: Maltese to Maltraljan - a case study in Cross Continental Lexicography' (2004). Bovingdon coined the word 'Maltraljan' to describe the deviation and adaptation of Maltese language into an Australian ethnolect.

Bovingdon traces Maltraljan back to a surprisingly early point, citing a Sydney-based magazine begun in 1929 by George Parnis as the first written documentation of Maltese-Australian terminology (2004: 10). The magazine, printed in English and Maltese for Maltese Australian migrants, contained lists of words and conversation sketches (ibid). Bovingdon considers this venture as noteworthy given that it was produced so soon after Maltese migrants began arriving in New South Wales in the early 1920s, stating: "the

first Maltraljan lexemes had already become sufficiently widespread and accepted into the local "Maltese-Australian" idiom in 1929 as to feature prominently in the print form" (ibid: 10-11).

After the Second World War, Maltese who came to Australia on assisted passage migration schemes arrived in a period when the Australian government had institutionalised a strategy of migrant assimilation. Barry York records that Maltese migrants were encouraged to define themselves as "British Subjects" on arrival, exacerbating tensions of language and identity already experienced in Malta (York cited in Dugan, 1988: 113-14). Approximately 50,000 Maltese migrated to Australia under assisted passage agreements between 1948 and 1971 (Bureau of Immigration & Population Research 1994: 4 - see Endnote 1). Clyne asserts that Maltese migrants from this period "maintained a low profile" until the 1970s when community representatives began establishing "a welfare umbrella organization" (Clyne, 2003: 14). He notes that Maltese Australian community activity began in the wake of Maltese independence in 1964 that saw the "development of Maltese, previously the L language of a diglossic relationship with English... into an H language (Clyne with reference to Fishman and Ferguson, ibid.).

The dramatic influx of native Maltese speakers conceivably introduced more modern forms of Maltese language to Australia, but given that significant migration from Malta to Australia ended in the early 1970s, the renewal of Maltese linguistic change in Australia has not been ongoing. Bovingdon has commented that in settling into an Australian ambience, the Maltese Language has "deviated considerably from the Standard Maltese spoken in the Maltese Islands" (Bovingdon, 2004: 11). He describes this phenomenon as a "norm", occurring "in all migrant communities where significant numbers of persons of the same ethnic origins have congregated" (ibid). Bovingdon outlines the current dynamic of Maltese as Maltraljan in Australia, arguing:

As Maltraljan is not a fully developed dialect or language in that a complete syntactic construction is not possible in its present stage of development, it is unable to sustain itself in isolation from Standard Maltese. While Maltraljan is used universally throughout Australia wherever large groups of Maltese have settled, each region has in turn developed segments of its own vocabulary and adopted other language subtleties and nuances in keeping with their own individual exigencies. For this reason it is always used in a code-switching manner, interspersed with Standard Maltese, or more accurately, with that form of Standard Maltese which the settlers imported with them upon their arrival to Australia. (Bovingdon, 2004: 11-12)

While Bovingdon's study is the first significant step to documenting the linguistic diversity of the Maltese Australian community, its focus only sheds light onto sections of the community which continue to interact in a Maltese language variant. Some native Maltese or Maltraljan speakers choose not to speak the language, and others who wish to, do not always have access to the structures to learn or practise these tongues. York

describes the obstacle to Maltese language in Australia as "the reality that Maltese is not a useful language to the Australian-born" in terms of economic and career prospects (York, 1997: 98). These factors, he argues, can surmount the individual relevance of the Maltese language in an Australian context (ibid). So the "dilemma for 'the future generation'" in York's eyes, rests on the segments of the Maltese Australian community "who want to keep alive some kind of Malteseness in Australia" (York: 1997, 95; 96).

Beyond

This paper arrives at the point of its origin: the "dilemma!" as seen by participants at the Maltese Historical Association's July, 2004 evening on the place of Maltese language in Australia. The society asked me to present an informal lecture for an hour, which would be followed with question time. I presented my observations, some of which are included in this paper, and afterwards question time turned into a lengthy community discussion. After several minutes, participants stopped addressing their questions to me and began addressing each other. While community members present that evening generally agreed that there were significant linguistic differences between the Maltese language as it is spoken in Australia and Malta, they did not think of these Australian differences as interrelated, like the unifying term "Maltraljan" suggests. Rather they seem to think of language in terms of their contact with Maltese spoken in Malta. Because of the significant changes between Maltese and Maltese Australian language usage, the community appears to be bitterly divided over the role that language as a bearer of culture continues to play, especially within the second and emerging third generation. Three speakers commented about return trips to Malta, saying that sections of their conversations were incomprehensible for Maltese locals. Some community members expressed a strong belief that the language was already lost, or so different in an Australian context that it is no longer a workable marker of Maltese identity. These speakers, in the face of Maltese language decline in Australia, considered that the community's efforts should focus on promoting other aspects of Maltese culture in Australia. Other community members are frustrated by the attitude, viewing Maltese language, whatever its Australian deviation, as a vital component of Maltese identity that should be fought for.

The evening at the Maltese Historical Association was fruitful because it provided a forum to discuss the Melbourne community's understanding of Maltese language decline in Australia. Similar to the Terry, Borland and Adams study, the community highlighted a lack of government recognition and funding as a hindrance to the building of accessible and sustainable Maltese language programs in Australia. Frances Bonnici, president of the Maltese Historical Association and a qualified Maltese language teacher, stated that the community's efforts to teach Maltese in Australia was being hampered by a shortage of trained Maltese teachers. The result of this situation in Bonnici's eyes was a quality of language tuition that was often below the standard that the community would hope for. Bonnici stressed the efforts of Melbourne community organisations to entice qualified language teachers to Australia from Malta but, without financial assistance, this was not

seen as a viable solution for the community. As a result, new international input into language tuition is only occasionally possible through assistance from visiting language teachers from Malta, who give classes to Australian children during their stay.

Another key issue affecting Maltese language education is the scarcity of government or institutionally directed studies on the Maltese community in Australia, most of which have focused on Melbourne. Some of these studies, such as Terry, Borland and Adams's 1993 report have been questioned because of limited geographical focus and problematic methodology. I mentioned the Terry, Borland and Adams report during my lecture to the Association and it was raised in the subsequent discussion. There was a feeling in the Melbourne community (notably, the location of the study) that the results were somewhat misleading because it only focused on four schools within Melbourne's western region. Terry, Borland and Adams discussed problems they encountered while developing their methodology, including the community response to the project design in the final publication (see *ibid*: 14-18) and it appears that the researchers made a sincere effort to conduct a fair and meaningful study. However its usefulness to the community itself (as opposed to other researchers) is difficult to ascertain because of the lingering doubt over its validity. This is problematic given that it is one of the few studies in existence that has delved into the perceptions of Maltese language and culture in second and third generation Maltese Australians.

It is difficult to reconcile the community's varied and impassioned responses to the Maltese language in Australia with the rate of its decline. Bovingdon's work to build a "mini-lexicon" (2004: 31) of Maltrajlan will hopefully help to maintain its use, but the likelihood of "expansion" (*ibid*: 13) that Bovingdon foresees in linguistic terms, is perhaps contentious in terms of the lived cultural experience. Research into these issues, of which this paper cannot be exempt, needs to take seriously its role within Maltese Australian community's understanding of and efforts towards cultural renewal and sustainability.

Endnotes

[1] In 1947, prior to the assisted passage agreement, there were 3238 Malta-born Australians (Bureau of Immigration & Population Research, 1994: 4). Between 1948 and 1971 the Malta-born population increased by approximately fifty thousand (*ibid*). As the number of Maltese born Australians has decreased between 1971 and 1996 (McDonald, 2000: 5), it can be surmised that this constitutes the most significant period of Maltese migration to Australia. This period coincides with Australian government policies of immigrant cultural assimilation. Maltese migration during this period was primarily economic-based, fuelled by a post-war population boom and a severe economic decline. As such the majority of Maltese who came to Australia were working class and migrated with the hope of providing a better life for their families. When encouraged by Australian government institutions Maltese migrants often used their status as 'British subjects' as a means of easing their transition into Australian society and encouraged migrants to speak only English at home.

[2] NB While this article involves linguistic considerations, it is not a linguistic study *per se* and should not be read in that light.

[3] 45,243 respondents spoke Maltese at home in 1996 compared to 41,392 persons in 2001 (CRC: <http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/statistics/Sect1/Table1p04Aust.pdf>). The 2001 census reports 136,754 persons of Maltese ancestry, including 46,998 people of Maltese-birth (CRC: <http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/statistics/Sect1/Table1p07Aust.pdf>; <http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/statistics/Sect1/Table1p01Aust.pdf>). The 1996 census reported the Malta-born population of Australia at 50,879. The number of Malta-born people and the rate of decline in the Maltese born population (7.6%) seem to correspond to the number of people speaking Maltese at home and the rate of language decline (8.5%) (ibid: <http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/statistics/Sect1/Table1p01Aust.pdf>; <http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/statistics/Sect1/Table1p04Aust.pdf>).

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