

Keep to the Local or Aim for the Global? Issues at the Borders of a Minority Language

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at the paradoxical situation faced by writers of minority languages in countries in which English is a strong second language. The choice of whether to write in Maltese for a very small readership, to write directly in English giving the language a local flavour, or to rely on translation is based on a range of considerations examined here. Language choice and issues of post-colonial identity played a strong role in the last decades of the 20th century, however these considerations seem to have been left behind as recent writing embraces a bilingual strategy that reflects actual language use and code-switching practices. This new style, in line with international trends, poses its own set of problems when it comes to translation into English. Perhaps collaborative re-writing rather than translation which creates a similar but not identical text is the only possible solution.

Keywords: minorities, translation, Maltese, global language

1. A minor literature in a minor language

A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language.

Deleuze and Guattari (1975: 16)

Maltese literature, or the literature of Malta, is a minority literature in a number of ways. The most obvious is that most of the literature that is written in Maltese can only be read by a total of under a million speakers worldwide. Yet, it is also, in its more contemporary expression, a literature wishing to be considered outside of the shores

of the small island and beyond the borders of a minority language¹. There are at least two possibilities open to writers. The means of translation to achieve the movement from minor to major, from local to global, or alternatively, that of avoiding the intermediary of translation altogether by not writing in Maltese but writing directly in English. This language shift is possible in a bilingual population such as the Maltese one, but at what cost? Each of these routes offers the possibility of being read by a broader public and of establishing a voice and an experience that is minor within a major literary tradition as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "a literature a minority makes in a major language" (1975: 16).

The national Maltese language is spoken by a local population of 400,000 people, and the second language is none other than the dominant English language, the current global *lingua franca*, and the language of the most recent colonial occupier of this small island at the Southern tip of Europe. A third language, Italian, has also played an important role in the linguistic and cultural landscape of the island. It was the language of culture and literature, of politics, of law and of education for many centuries until the Second World War when Italy attacked the island, which was then part of the British Empire.

The local architecture visually emphasises the varying influences that have merged into the cultural fabric of the island, and which are reflected in the evolving languages spoken and written there, its opulent Baroque churches and palaces sitting side by side with the limestone houses with their oriental-inspired balconies and Italian louvered shutters, next to stone rubble walls, Megalithic temples and a range of engineered military fortifications from different centuries. It is a country of connections, of insertions and the grafting of cultural effects that have created a natural hybridity. Cultures have merged

¹ This is a desire expressed by an increasing number of writers and publishers. European prize winning author Immanuel Mifsud, who won the EU Prize for Literature 2011 with his short story *In the Name of the Father (and the Son)* [*Fl-Isem tal-Missier (u tal-Iben)*], which was translated for the competition, expressed this clearly in an interview with *The Times of Malta* (11 May, 2012). He states: "Maltese literature urgently needs to be translated and exported [...]. When we become conscious that our market is wider, then our perspective and our writing will change" and, he believes, it will also become more interesting (Mifsud 2012).

and new forms of language emerged over a millennium of meetings at a melting point where the imperatives of communication, trade, exchange and tourism have overridden the principle of linguistic or cultural purity. The Semitic language brought over in 870 via Sicily has been transformed. It is now written in Latin script, contains a Romance superstrate and an English adstrate, and, importantly, it is a language which borrows and accommodates words and phrases with the greatest of ease.

However, it is only as recently as 1934 that Maltese and English became the official languages of Malta. Up until this date, Italian served in the role of national language in formal and written domains, and Maltese functioned as an oral form of communication, while English was the language of administration under British rule. Maltese was transformed from an oral means of communication, which was generally perceived as not capable of fine written argument or expression, to a national written language only just under 80 years ago. An alphabet still had to be established and the orthographic rules, as laid out by the Union of Maltese Writers (*Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti*) in 1924, were adopted and then revised in 1984, 1992, and 2008. The language is, therefore, paradoxically both very old in its oral form and in linguistic memory, and simultaneously very young and unsure of itself in the first few decades of its coming of age.

The Maltese language now embodies the local sensibility of the national, the cultural, and the political identity of the island. It has become the strongest signifier of national pride, and a political means to establish a truly Maltese identity that is no longer connected to Britain or Italy. However, the continuing use of English in the domains of instruction both at schools and universities, as well as its constitutional status as an official language, the fact that a minority of the population (about 5%) use English as their mother tongue, and the englobing presence of English through its dominant position in the domains of communication, internet, entertainment, music, and so on, has ensured that the second language has also remained visible and vital on the island – often provoking strong feelings and reactions from those who feel its presence threatens the Maltese language.

The Maltese literary canon boasts a rather unique phenomenon of having had its literature written in no less than six languages,

namely Arabic, Latin, Sicilian, Italian, English and Maltese (Cassola, 2000: 110). Its earliest text, the *Cantilena* written in circa 1450 by Pietro Caxaro, is possibly the first instance of literary Sicilian-Arabic influence. Six languages that form part of three very distinct linguistic families – the Semitic, the Romance and the Germanic –, languages that encompass different, even opposing, cultural values, world views and religions. It is only, properly speaking, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that we can begin to talk of a body of writing in the Maltese language. A number of writers and poets wrote and published in more than one language and, slowly over the years, came to use Maltese more frequently. These writers were directly influenced by major works in the Italian and British canons, which they could read in the original languages. The Classics and the Bible were also accessible in various translations. Multilingualism is not a recent phenomenon in Malta. Whereas the canon of local writing embodies the particular aesthetic and flavour of Maltese identity, its past, its particular issues, traditions and aspirations, the other canons or works to which Maltese readers have had access embody rather different tropes, cultures and themes. Furthermore, since all that is written and translated into English is accessible, the reading population is informed and up to date with current literary and critical trends, as well as with literary and popular best-sellers and the winning titles of major literary awards.

2. Post-colonial Maltese literature and language issues

The island's narrative from the 1920s to the end of the century is one of increasing independence, achieved in 1964, and the freeing itself of colonial status. The Maltese language came to signify national identity and nation status, and therefore desire for a literature in Maltese became an urgent priority, while simultaneously, in some circles, writing and even speaking in English came to be frowned upon as unpatriotic. At the start of the 21st century, in 2004, Malta joined the European Union and the Maltese language achieved another level of recognition as an official European language that, as it turns out, is the only Semitic language to hold that position.

The question of language in post-colonial Malta loomed large in the literature of the years preceding and immediately following

independence². The urge to prove that Maltese was a language capable of the expression of sophisticated thought and argument led to a number of key canonical European texts, such as Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Manzoni, Milton, the Bible, works of Greek philosophy, and others being translated into Maltese, despite the fact that those works in Italian and English remain accessible in their original languages, and others in English translations. Post-colonial language concerns are evident in the writers of the immediate pre- and post-independence years. The decision of which language to write in was a highly political one and was carefully considered. Not only were there political implications in the choice of Maltese or English, but it was a choice which also carried (and still does) commercial consequences when the potential number of readers is considered.

Despite the imperative to use Maltese, not all writers were prepared to isolate themselves within this tiny language. George Zammit, for instance, in 1973 published his collection of poems by the name of *Trifolium* thereby emphasising its three languages of composition. And Victor Fenech, who lived in England for some time and wrote most of his poetry in English, wrote in 1976 that he is:

not exactly a lover of the language [Maltese]. I accept it because it is there and it is our language and there is nothing I can do about it (I think I am realistic here), but the way I see it is that national pride and national identity apart, the Maltese language only keeps us locked out of the mainstream of international literature. (Fenech 1976: 6, in Cassola 2000: 158)

The dilemma of language choice and the eventual decision of many independence-era writers to do away with English and write in Maltese are acutely depicted within the fictional world of Thomas Pynchon's *V*, published in 1963. In chapter 11 we get to know the concerns of the character named Fausto Majjestrà, a Maltese poet and writer, through his diaries, which run from the late 1930s and on through the years of WWII. Pynchon traces the aspirations of a

² For the political/linguistic history of the so-called 'Language Question', see Geoffrey Hull, Dominic Fenech and Henry Frendo.

group of Anglo-Maltese poets who saw their work develop through the British literary tradition:

“God His own”: that brings a smile. Shakespeare. Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot ruined us all. On Ash Wednesday of ’42 for example, Dnubietna wrote a ‘satire’ on Eliot’s poem:

Because I do
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to survive
Injustice from the Palace, death from the air [...]

All of us drunk, arguing politics: it was in a café in Kingsway – scusi, Strada Reale then. Before the Italians started bombing us. (Pynchon 1963: 308)³

In this brief passage taken from the fictional diary, Pynchon captures a wealth of detail and mood from the dominant poetic influence of the university-educated writers to the repeated change of street names. The language of street names changed according to the dominant political power as is seen in Pynchon’s example of Valletta’s main street which was called *Strada Reale* before the British renamed it *Kingsway*, and it was again changed in 1974 when Malta became a republic and it was again given the Maltese name *Triq Ir-Repubblika*⁴. Another detail is the inserted “scusi” in a conversation taking place in English which is typical of the code-

³ It is interesting to note that Eliot’s influence, as well as that of Ezra Pound and the Surrealists, proved to be significant for Maltese poetry up until the 1980s. The move from fixed metre to free verse proved liberating and came to be associated with a breaking away of the strong Italianate Romantic style of poetry that had dominated Maltese poetry for decades. One of the most prominent voices of the 1967 *Moviment Qawmien Letterarju* (The Literary Awakening) is the dramatist and poet Mario Azzopardi, described as “among the most outspoken activists of the time, committed to social and cultural change away from a rigid and asphyxiating tradition” (Falzon 1996: xi): he cites T.S. Eliot’s poetry as one of the most significant influences on the new post-independence poetry of the 1960s and 1970s.

⁴ The same observation is made by one of Francis Ebejer’s characters, Lorenz, in *Requiem for a Maltese Fascist* (1980: 41): “He lived with his mother... in Strada Forni, so named after the vast bake-houses of the Knights. (As also in the case of most other streets and important landmarks, this street was named in Italian at a time when that language held a privileged position. Later, it was re-christened Old Bakery Street, when English had superseded Italian as the Island’s second language after Maltese; later still, Triq l-Ifran when the vernacular at last came into its own and its prestige mounted steadily.)” (Ebejer’s parenthesis).

switching patterns which are still current. Pynchon captured the multilingual atmosphere that was, and still is, a feature of life in Malta.

Later on in Fausto's diary, after the bombings and after the descent into the rock shelters of Valletta, the balance between his Maltese and English parts began to shift. They had come "closer to the beleaguered city than they cared to admit, were more Maltese, i.e. than English" (p. 330). Yet, he observes in the next paragraph: "the English part of him was still there, keeping up the journal" (p. 330). By the end of the war, and the end of the journal, Fausto has moved into the Maltese language. He complains that there are no words for:

finer shades; nor words for intellectual states of mind. She cannot read my poetry, I cannot translate it for her (p. 309)

he says of his Maltese speaking girlfriend, Elena Xemxi. And Fausto goes on examining his in-between condition:

But we are torn, our grand 'Generation of '37.' To be merely Maltese: endure almost mindless, without sense of time? Or to think – continuously – in English, to be too aware of war, of time, of all the greys and shadows of love?

Perhaps British colonialism has produced a new sort of being, a dual man, aimed two ways at once: towards peace and simplicity on the one hand, towards an exhausted intellectual searching on the other. (p. 309)

What Pynchon, as an American observer, somehow managed to put his finger on are the strong feelings as well as the cultural behaviour associated with each of these two languages. The issue of Maltese or English is not simply one of language choice, but of a mode of being which one consciously chooses. Interestingly, this notion of a "dual man, aimed two ways at once" is echoed in the writing and critical works of the Maltese playwright and novelist Francis Ebejer (1925-1993) when he compares Maltese bilingual writers to the figure of Janus. Janus, the god of entrances and gates who, with two faces back to back, looks both ways at once – and yet, must choose one language in which to speak choosing but one direction in which to look at any one time⁵.

⁵ Ebejer (1989).

Ebejer, who was one of the best known and respected writers of the 1960s and 1970s, was almost alone in his decision to use both languages in his work. He was fluent in both and chose to write some of his work in English and some in Maltese. His choice of language was deliberate and provided him with the advantage of avoiding the pitfalls of translation, thereby giving him complete control over his own texts. Despite Ebejer's deliberate decision to write the novel *Requiem for a Maltese Fascist* in English, arguably to incorporate a distance in perspective and tone from the action, this work was translated into Maltese in 2004. A critical analysis of the translation of this novel⁶ reveals an interesting act of translation-as-appropriation. It is claimed that the translation into Maltese brought the text home and "re-christened" it so that it is reborn as a more "authentic" text than the original. The fact that the author, fluent in Maltese, intended the novel in English is completely disregarded. The heightened 'authenticity' of the translation is explained as:

due in part to the fact that the mock-reality being presented reflects Maltese reality which is inextricably bound to the Maltese language not to English. In many instances, the language of translation was able to reflect wholly and accurately the physical and socio-cultural environment which English was unable to do. (Caruana 2008: 16)

This is, surprisingly, a point made in 2008 and not in the heat of post-colonialism in the 1960s and 1970s. The 'reality' of the novel is defined as "mock-reality" implying that unless written in Maltese it cannot hope to grasp the local 'reality' effectively, and that the original language in which it was written is an aberration littered with errors, which the Maltese version has "corrected" (2008: 16)⁷. The text, it is suggested, has been saved by being re-written in Maltese, the subtext clearly indicating that authenticity is only possible in the national language.

⁶ The novel was translated by Charles Briffa in 2004 and the aims of his translation are discussed in a paper by Rose Marie Caruana (2008).

⁷ Such is the instance of the word 'hut' in English as used by Ebejer which, we are told, has two referents in Maltese, *gebuba* and *gharix*, and is therefore now "corrected" in the translated Maltese text (Caruana 2008: 16).

The discussion on the translation of *Requiem for a Maltese Fascist* into Maltese follows a route of interesting inversions in which the translation is made to take the place of the original. “When Briffa chose to *authenticate the text* in Maltese he chose to make the translated text stand on its own”, “thereby giving a *more authentic* account of the reality”. He therefore changed the title and “*re-christened* the novel”, and, “Consequently the Maltese text *accurately reflects* the context, the social reality which the English version was unable to portray” (p. 17, my italics). This sleight of hand continues and the final inversion occurs when the original is re-cast in terms of a ‘translation’, implying a second order work derived from a prior ‘authentic’ first text:

Francis Ebejer wrote the novel *Requiem for a Malta Fascist* in English. However, in a sense *this is already a translation* because he was endeavouring to transpose the Maltese situation and anima into an English context, in the sense of presenting and exporting the local reality to an English-speaking audience. In turn, the translation into Maltese can be viewed as a reverse process, the local reality being brought back and reunited with its roots. (p. 18, my italics)

The implied critical position in this discourse on the translation is a belief that authentic national identity is irrevocably tied in with national language, and that only work written in the national language can rightly claim to be Maltese and ‘authentic’, irrespective of the choices of the author. Ironically, although this discussion is about a translated text, it provides statements that weaken the argument for effective cultural and literary translation, and simultaneously, for the possibility of having Maltese writing made available and known to a larger potential readership through the means of translation.

There are numerous instances in which readers have direct access to a text in its original language and yet a decision to translate the work is nevertheless taken. It seems that there is more at stake than intelligibility, and that certain translations are undertaken from cultural and political imperatives instead. Such instances can frequently be detected in bilingual or multilingual communities. Dirk Delabastita and Rainier Grutman, for instance, describe the 1990s translation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* into Scottish in similar terms as the Ebejer translation. They note that:

Any concerns about the Scottish audience's understanding of Shakespeare is at best a pretext for the politically inspired project of lifting Scots above the status of 'dialect' or worse, a bastard offshoot of English, and making it into a 'real' literary language that accommodates Shakespeare's tragedy as effectively as English, indeed finally giving Shakespeare's Scottish heroes their true voices! (Delabastita and Grutman 2005: 13)

Diana Bryden, with reference to Canadian literature, echoes the Maltese post-independence and post-colonial situation outlined above. The desire for cultural and linguistic authenticity of a minority language comes at a price. She claims that:

insisting on self-definition and resisting appropriation, even tactically they prove self-defeating because they depend on a view of cultural authenticity that condemns them to a continued marginality and an eventual death. Whose interests are served by this retreat into preserving an untainted authenticity? (Bryden [1991] 1997: 141)

Indeed, authenticity, like the notion of 'purity' in languages, cultures and traditions is a dangerous and an ultimately self-defeating game since nothing is pure. The underlying presumption, perhaps not fully examined, is that to be authentic is to be 'true' to a single source or origin. However, culture and language are successful examples of influence, confluence, multiplicity, hybridity – which attest to the myriad sources through which everything is derived. Everything always has been Babelian, multiple, plural. The pre-Babelian singular stage is the myth that lingers tantalisingly through definitions of purity, authenticity and the ghost of the pre-Lacanian singular, unfragmented identity.

Language choice is a common feature of much post-colonial soul-searching, mixed with a desire for self-representation in one's own language – a powerful signifier, a statement of nothing less than existence on one's own terms, unmediated, untranslated, and in the Maltese case, isolated. Bill Ashcroft discusses language choice within a clear post-colonial context and makes a case for using the language of the ex-coloniser, in this case English, while still preserving the local within it:

Those writers who do write in English have used it as a cultural vehicle, a medium through which a world audience could be introduced to features of

culturally diverse post-colonial societies. [...] The language is a tool which has meaning according to the way in which it is used. This is, of course, a key to the importance of language as cultural capital. Proficiency in the language does not exclude the capacity to use it in a way that ‘localizes’ it. (Ashcroft 2001: 56-7)

Francis Ebejer, in his English language texts, often exercised this option. He made syntactical use of turns of phrase evocative of local use and flavour of the English language, thereby providing a taste of the local within the global language.

In the years immediately preceding WWII⁸, and in the years following independence in 1964, questions of language choice were indeed powerful political triggers which, in some domains, continue to stir emotion up to the present day.

3. The EU and Maltese literature

“We need an army of literary translators,” Mr Mifsud, the acclaimed author who has been the leading voice of the Maltese Generation X, said.

The Times of Malta, 2012

However, new voices in the literature of Malta, voices born of the freedom of movement and of unrestricted influences as a consequence of EU membership, have pushed many post-colonial concerns into insignificance. As the English language has itself been transformed from the ‘language of imperialism’ to the language of global culture and to that of an EU working language used by non-British speakers, it has become increasingly dislocated from its place of origin. It is argued that this ‘new’ English is leading towards a blanket homogeneity⁹ and a new form of monoculture as,

⁸ The issue of language, specifically the move from Italian to Maltese and English as official languages, was a major political issue in Malta during the 1930s (see footnote 3).

⁹ This can be seen specifically as a problem of translation. As literature is less linked to context since writers do not necessarily write in a single ‘native’ language, the cultural context becomes something of a mystery for a translator to unravel. See Burton Pike’s (2013) and Edward Nawotka’s response (2013) for a discussion of this issue from the translator’s point of view.

in Burton Pike's words, "a creeping homogenization is developing in prose fiction, a kind of generic international content and style that transcends national borders" (Pike 2013). The use of English 'beyond national borders' has come to mean that English has become the means for writers to achieve greater visibility without falling into the shadows of imperial hegemony, political correctness and over-zealous patriotism, while carrying the simultaneous risk of "homogenization".

Imperial hegemony has itself been replaced by other types of hegemonic imperatives of a cultural nature. Issues of periphery *versus* centre, of minor *versus* major cultures and literatures, have replaced the "old imperial centre *versus* dominated subject" dichotomy. The English language is no longer the hegemonic imperative, it has been deterritorialised and is now shared among many, it reflects many realities, and has become the vehicular language of Europe and the world. Deleuze and Guattari (1975: 19) ask, "[h]ow many people live today in a language that is not their own?" to which we can reply that there is an increased use of more languages especially in EU centres such as Brussels and Luxembourg, and that moving between languages that are not strictly the speakers' own has become more common. In practical terms, the shift between languages creates the ability to say things in specific ways, which cannot be said in quite the same way in other languages. Deleuze and Guattari argue that:

What can be said in one tongue cannot be said in another, and the body of what can be said and what cannot be said necessarily varies from tongue to tongue and according to their relations with each other. (1975: 24)

Individual languages determine not only what can or cannot be said, and how it is said, but also, as Pynchon indicated, different languages also create different behaviour. Deleuze and Guattari speak of Kafka's space between the languages of Yiddish and of Prague German, described as the re-territorialisation of the mouth through language. Similarly between Maltese and English, each language provides a different territory, a different angle, a different range of what is or is not possible to speak of, to think and to feel.

However, this new order of multicultural multilingualism, forged as it is on the empire writing back in English, has created a space for

writing “in a language that is not their own”. Through literary prizes such as the multi-ethnic Booker Prize, which has established value for the text in English written by non-English writers, the Nobel Prize for literature, the Strega Prize in Italy, prizes for translation such as the Mondello Prize in Palermo¹⁰, and through many others, the post-colonial subject, previously known as the peripheral author, has inscribed a place within the new cultural values accorded to multi-perspectives of culture and language.

Despite the increasing possibilities of writing directly in English, Maltese writers seem to resist this option, which leaves in an almost impossible situation. Literature in Maltese is read only by a few, unless it is translated. Yet, when written in languages other than Maltese, people question whether it is ‘Maltese writing’ at all, having abandoned the most specific indicator of ‘Maltese-ness’, the language itself. Writing in Maltese, as in all minor languages, is caught in this double bind¹¹. The only way it can be read beyond the shores of the island is in translation, thereby leaving behind what is believed to be truly individual and singular, and blending instead into a mass of English language writing.

There are fears of loss of identity and culture in the face of bilingualism and multiculturalism. Joseph Brincat, for instance, suggests that, “[t]he dangers of bilingualism on a national scale lurk in the breakdown of tradition because the phenomenon is spreading to all fields, both technological and domestic” (Brincat 2011: 439). The fear is that other languages might dilute the indigenous language and its cultural traditions. Ironically, the island itself, its language and its people are all evidence of the success of the mixing of ethnicities and traditions rather than of the post-colonial and post-independence dream of retrieving the purity and ‘authenticity’ of language, its people or literature. Evidence of this is the slowly

¹⁰ See Parks (2007, chapter 8: “Translating Individualism: Literature and Globalization”), for a discussion of the effects of literary prizes in translation on the globalisation of literature.

¹¹ Initiatives such as ‘Literature Without Frontiers’, and its recent publication *Transcript 38* dedicated to contemporary Maltese writing, aim at making minor literatures available through funded EU translation programmes. *Transcript 38*, Europe’s Online Review of International Writing, A Literature Without Frontiers Publication, 2011, <http://www.transcript-review.org/en/issue/transcript-38-malta/> editorial, last accessed February 20, 2013.

increasing body of poetry, prose and critical writing which is published in English in Malta quite unselfconsciously and possibly as a testament to the shift in status of the English language¹².

4. The multilingual text: contemporary Maltese literature

Linguistic diversity is usually at considerable risk of disappearing or having its subversive potential downplayed in translation.

Grutman (in Delabastita and Grutman 2005: 28)

Anglicised Maltese is therefore a variety that several people use at work (but not in literature or journalism, at least until now) [...]

It is a relatively new variety of Maltese that is the result of the recent practice of providing bilingual information on practices which were previously dealt with only in English.

Brincat (2011: 429)

Recent writing in Maltese seems to be exploring an alternative route into the language dilemma, that of using more than one language in a text. A multilingual, more precisely bilingual style that switches between Maltese and English, accurately reflects the code-switching which is increasingly apparent in ordinary conversation. Indeed, this third route which works consciously and deliberately with the two languages comes across as a mature and sophisticated solution. It depicts the tone of a country that, *de facto*, constantly lives and moves between two languages.

The mixing of English and Maltese, or “Anglicised Maltese” is a variety, a form of diglossia which is typical of spoken rather than written language (Brincat 2011: 429). It is quite normal to shift between languages in speech but less so in writing, unless in very informal texts such as personal e-mail and text messages.

¹² Maria Grech Ganado has published volumes of poetry in English and in Maltese, and is the winner of a number of international poetry prizes. Petra Bianchi’s novel, *Family Photos* (2008), is written in English.

It is therefore not surprising that this bilingual element has been introduced into contemporary Maltese prose precisely in passages of dialogue between characters. It is also relevant to note, within this context, that the novel is a relatively *rara avis* in the Maltese canon. The preferred genres for some generations have been poetry and drama, and the short story has been preferred in prose.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the diglossic element in literature is coming about through a shift in genre preference. While many new writers begin with the short story, there is an increasing tendency to move to the full-length novel. In these novels and short stories, the carrier language, that is the narrative voice and narrative context, is usually Maltese, while the bilingual ‘spoken’ English phrases are embedded within dialogue. Such examples can be found in the novels of Alex Vella Gera, Guze Stagno and Lou Drogenik¹³, as well as in the short stories of Immanuel Mifsud, Pierre J. Mejlak¹⁴ and Clare Azzopardi¹⁵, to name a handful of some interesting new voices to emerge in recent Maltese prose.

This deliberate insertion of English words and phrases in an otherwise Maltese text is a stylistic feature that has become more and more frequent over the last ten to fifteen years. The novel is a form that is notoriously slippery to define but we can do worse than look to one expert, Malcolm Bradbury, and his insightful comment when he writes that “[t]he fascination of the novel is that, because of its representational dimension, it raises the problem of the nature of fiction at a point very near to familiar *unfictionalised* versions of reality” (Bradbury 1995: 162). One of the essential elements of a novel (also present in the short story) is that the dialogue is convincing and plausible. Maltese novels that successfully capture the speech habit of switching between languages in dialogue are likely to archive that aim. As Delabastita and Grutman (2005: 15) remind us, “the real multilingualism” of a country lies “beneath the surface of official, often state-induced, monolingualism”. This fact alone can account for the introduction of a bilingual device that is fast becoming a regular feature despite the fact that it tends not to be well received

¹³ See *No Adjective Describe Story* (2010). Personal website.

¹⁴ See *Qed Nistenniek Nieżla Max-Xita* (2009) and *Dak li l-Lejl Ihallik Tghid* (2011).

¹⁵ *Birds of Passage* (2005).

by the more conservative local readership. The incorporation of bilingual dialogue has taken the Maltese writer beyond the post-colonial agony of language choice. The exigencies of the form have determined the use of language, or languages.

The multilingual novel, which a few years ago was considered “an unconventional domain of study” (Delabastita and Grutman 2005: p. 1) is fast becoming something of a trend. Delabastita and Grutman describe the situation concerning the sub-genre in this way:

Bilingual writers and multilingual texts were still very much frowned upon, being freak-like exceptions to the unwritten rule of monolingualism in the literary realm, notwithstanding the (by now well-documented) fact that every century and every genre has seen its share of language related experiments. (p. 1)

As they rightly point out, bilingual and multilingual authors are not an absolute novelty. Dante wrote in Latin as well as in the vernacular; English writers and poets up to the 15th and 16th centuries were multilingual when English did not have the status and the diffusion that it has today; Milton wrote poetry in English, Italian and Latin; Tolstoj wrote the first chapter of *War and Peace* in French, which best reflected the language used by the Russian aristocracy among themselves; T.S. Eliot played with languages inserting German, Latin and Italian and echoing rhythms and associations off them; the Yiddish phrases inserted in the twentieth-century American-Jewish novels provide a distinct local flavour, as such insertions do in a surprising number of novels which appear, on first encounter, to be monolingual.

Another interesting effect of the multi- or bilingual novel is that it disrupts the veneer of fluency in style and meaning, it forces the reader to become aware of the contrasting and contested meanings as captured and communicated in the different languages. Whereas it forces the bilingual reader to make use of knowledge embedded in both languages, it awakens the monolingual reader to the fact the world, including the fictional world, will not always be translated and made apparent for them. The text makes it clear that there are meanings that cannot be prised open without the reader's active inferential effort through contextual clues. All reading requires this type of engagement from the reader, but a fluent style reduces the

effort involved, whereas a multilingual text accentuates the active role of the reader in the act of making sense of a text¹⁶. Lawrence Venuti (2008: 1ff) describes this feature of style in translation as “the regime of fluency” which creates an “illusion of transparency” of meaning. The insistence of fluency or “domestication” in translation is a well-established norm in English language publishing and the foreignising practice, which Venuti labels ‘ethnodeviant’, highlights the cultural and linguistic differences which make the reader work harder and which, it can be argued, is a more honest approach since it does not seek to cover the different under a surface of fluent sameness. The multilingual novel works within the same parameters of expectation and cooperation of the reader by refusing to reduce the dialogue, and perhaps also the narration, to a fluent monolingual sameness which would no longer reflect the linguistic reality of the characters depicted in the novels.

This bilingual trend, nevertheless, presents a paradoxical and ironic situation for the Maltese novel. On the one hand, this style, especially as developed as it is in Alex Vella Gera’s novel *Is-Sriep Regghu saru Velenuzi*¹⁷, places the peripheral Maltese novel within a current European stylistic trend, yet it does not make it any more accessible to greater numbers of readers unless they can read Maltese. The juxtaposition of the two languages creates a particular local flavour, the effects of which depend on the use of English within a predominantly Maltese context. In addition, the social and political attitudes associated with each language make the issue of language as much a formal aspect of style as part of the themes, the content and the unspoken attitudes formed within the social fabric of the island over the years. Much can be suggested, yet little is spoken in a sentence such as the following:

“Nice one xbin! Bully int!” (2012: 71)

and

¹⁶ Umberto Eco in *The Role of the Reader* (1979) describes the different active strategies that a reader engages in during the act of reading. The multilingual text is an example of a more closed text and one which requires a reader’s more active cooperation.

¹⁷ A literal translation of the title reads as, ‘Snakes have become poisonous again’.

“Issa let’s go back...” (p. 47)

and

Lehen il-mama`, “Come for supper!” (p. 48)

Stylistically interesting and subversive in its manipulation and laying bare of deeply held and strongly felt attitudes concerning the use of the languages in Malta, this writing also requires translation if it is not to be trapped in the same narrow readership. However, bilingual and multilingual writing are notoriously difficult to translate. The above sentence can be translated into Italian by keeping the English insertions largely in place. But what happens when this is to be translated into English, when English is the signifier of so much unspoken reference in the source text as well as the language of the target text? Grutman points out that “[l]inguistic diversity is usually at considerable risk of disappearing or having its subversive potential downplayed in translation” (in Delabastita and Grutman 2005: 28) and, in addition, it will probably require some extra cues for the reader to pick up on the contextually culturally implied references. As Delabastita and Grutman put it, it is not the “quantity” of the other language involved but the “qualitative role” it plays in the overall structure, its significance to the plot and whether it is a controlling metaphor (p. 17). If the mix of languages is to disappear in translation, then one of the most interesting of formal effects will have to be sacrificed to intelligibility, but the implications in some novels and stories run deeper and are intrinsic or qualitatively central to the plot and the overarching meaning of the novel:

When language itself is one of the *topos* addressed in a given novel, translation accompanying heterolinguistic utterances may focus less on referential meaning, and highlight more subdued cultural connotations. (p. 18)

Alex Vella Gera’s *Is-Sriep Regghu saru Velenuzi*, although partially set in Brussels, focuses on the social and overtly political issues associated with each language and brings them back home. Language choice is indeed one of the central themes. The marriage

of the central characters, one Maltese-speaking by choice, and the other English-speaking by culture and habit, flounders on the social implications of each and comes to the fore with the decision about which language to use with their child:

“What do I do so wrong? Just because I want my son to learn Maltese, his *language?*” (p. 396, original italics)

The social and political context of each language in Malta is contextually clear to a Maltese reader, but is a difficult challenge for the translator preparing the text for a different readership.

On a lighter, sometimes comic note the goings on in multilingual Europe as experienced in key cities such as Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, are featured in a number of recent novels written in different European languages in which translators and interpreters play a key role. A range of language-driven situations and humorous complications based on the inevitable *confusio linguarum* where 23 different languages are being used is ripe with possibilities. Ġużè Stagno’s recent novel, *What Happens in Brussels Stays in Brussels* (2013), is typical of this sub-genre. It is a novel written in Maltese with an English title, narrated in Maltese with inserted bilingual dialogue. Such exchanges as the following, which take place at a party in Brussels between Maltese and Dutch friends, occur frequently:

“Look who’s here!” qalilhom dan x’hin rahom: b’lehen gholi minhabba l-istorbju.

“The kids are not here though?” staqsietu Larissa wara li bisitu, wiċċha taparsi mqarras.

“No,” wegibha hu bid-daħqa. “No kids tonight! Unfortunately. Or fortunately, I’d say!”

“Ooooh,” reggħet is-segretarja ta’ Charlo: issa tteptep għajnejha u ddendel ix-xoffa t’isfel b’tali mod li gieghel lil Alexia – Gustav raha minn taħt il-għajn – taqleb għajnejha.

“What are you drinking?” staqsiehom ir-ragel ta’ Joanne hu u jirringa l-kappell ippizzjat li kien liebes.

“A glass of wine,” qaltlu Alexia.

“I’ll have a vodka and orange,” qaltlu Larissa.

“And for you, sir?” staqsa r-ragel ta’ Joanne lil Gustav.

“Do you have some Martini?” qallu Gustav, jitbissimlu.

“Of course we do,” wieġbu l-Olandiż, dejjem daħqan. “No Martini... no party!” (Stagno 2013: 252-3)

But, despite the local Maltese novel and novelist achieving this conflux with European writing in issues of style and content, the issue of the accessibility of the language continues to be a barrier just as it is with the monolingual Maltese novel.

In its original bilingual form a reader comfortable in both languages can fully appreciate the issues, the humour, the irony and the social themes as they are developed through the play on languages, as well as through the variable syntactic structures used by Maltese people when speaking English. Much of the humour depends on the context of Maltese people in Brussels, their behaviour, their prejudices and idiosyncrasies that can only be fully grasped by readers familiar with these cultural clashes. Translation can take the new reader some way towards this context but, probably, not all the way. The Maltese novel goes international in trend and style, but remains local in the pragmatic context of its reception.

Deleuze and Guattari warn, “[w]hat can be said in one tongue cannot be said in another,” and that what is said also “varies from tongue to tongue and according to their relations with each other” (1975: 24). It is precisely in the relations with each other that the translator must grapple, and possibly find solutions that go beyond translation and might successfully move into the realm of co-operative translation with the author. By way of a solution, a broader notion of translation and adaptation might successfully be applied. Author and translator might provide a second version of a work that can address a wider readership and take the local text into a broader global context.

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