



# Retaining the nuances of a minority language when writing in English

## A Creative-critical Approach to How the Nuances of the Maltese Language Can be Retained

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### ABSTRACT

Where a minority culture has retained its own language, the writer who wants or needs to write in another language faces the challenge of conveying the full meaning of the nuances belonging to that minority culture. Through examples from my own creative work, this study explores three main ways, by which the nuances of the Maltese language can be retained when writing short fiction in English, all involving code-switching. By code-switching what is meant is shifting from one language to another, depending on the social context. In this case, since the audience is not just a Maltese one, the intention is to create a realistic linguistic landscape that does not jeopardize a wider audience's understanding of the text. The argument points to the fact that although there are ways to retain the nuances of the Maltese language, there are many limitations in evincing specific facets of Maltese life in the English language, especially those relating to jokes, politics, or dialect and for this reason, the Maltese culture can never be fully represented in mainstream literature.

### KEYWORDS

Code-Switching, discourse, linguistic, landscape, minority, language, major, literature, English, Maltese.

## INTRODUCTION

In colonized countries it is often the case that there is a linguistic conflict between the languages of the colonizer and colonized. By default, the language in which the said colonized country's literature should be written also becomes a disputed issue and often the colonized advocate for literary work to be composed in their native tongue, rather than in a dominant language. In this paper, I will be focusing specifically on Maltese literature as a minority literature that remains widely unavailable to foreign audiences because of the exclusivity of its language. Through examples from my own work, I will showcase how the English language should be perceived as a neutral language, possessing the ability to publicize Maltese literature, rather than the language of power, designed to exercise the colonizer's superiority. I will also exhibit how the Maltese language can appear in small doses alongside English, how its nuances can be retained in some ways. However, I also argue that overall, its linguistic overtones can never be fully represented in mainstream literature, meaning fiction that is available to people from a wide range of "age groups and gender lines", mainly because the Maltese language is only spoken by around "440 thousand people in at least six territories" (Lindenstein 2018 & Worldmapper 2021).

Naturally, it is understandable why a colonized nation would want the literature of their country to be written in their own, native language. In the case of Maltese, although the language is not yet endangered, it is still at a high "risk of disappearing", because it is "used by a proportionally small number of people" (Bartolo 2018). However, there are other languages that are actually threatened with extinction. Welsh is one of them. It is interesting to note that in 20th century Wales, despite the fact that the English controlled "educational, religious and governing institutions", Welsh language culture and literature still persisted (Lloyd 1992). Also, despite that over the last 200 years there has been a decrease in Welsh speakers and a rise in Anglo-Welsh literature, many have not welcomed the latter at all (Lloyd 1992: 435-436). In fact R. S. Thomas, the most praised Welsh poet believes that "what is written in Welsh is Welsh literature of varying quality. What is written in English has to strain very hard indeed to merit the description of Welsh writing in English, which is nonsense anyway" (Ned, Barnie n.d., cited in Lloyd 1992). It also appears as though Anglo-Welsh literature has not been all too successful, both in Wales and abroad. Bobi Jones

has argued that Anglo-Welsh literature can never be considered as good as Welsh Literature in the Welsh language, and Harri Webb, an English language Welsh poet, in 1985, announced that he "would no longer contribute to the "load of rubbish" that constitutes Anglo-Welsh literature" (Lloyd 1992: 436). The reason that it has gained little recognition might be related to the fact that although it is written in English, it is written "out of a Welsh milieu", and is therefore "physically and culturally distant from the centres of English-language literacy activity in London and New York" (Lloyd 1992: 437). Apart from this, it has been unacknowledged by American and English literary critics and considered "peripheral" and "antithetical" to the mores of "Welsh-speaking Wales" (Lloyd 1992). This indicates that using the language of the colonizer to make Welsh literature accessible to a wider audience has not been particularly well received by the Welsh, and what this highlights is that some minority literatures have had a harder time at promoting their culture in the language of the other. Therefore, I knew that if I were to depict the Maltese minority community in the English language, instead of Maltese, I had to explain my rationale behind it.

It was not until the nineteenth century that Maltese novelists who had previously produced works in Italian reconsidered the language in which they were writing and turned instead to Maltese, their vernacular, the people's tongue (Friggieri 1988). The main reason for this was that it was the only way novelists could hope to be understood by most of the Maltese population (Friggieri 1988). By then, the Maltese language had not been cultivated politically or scientifically for centuries. In fact, the alphabet wasn't standardized until 1924 (Arevalo 2014). However, through the historical novels of Anton Manwel Caruana and Ġuze Muscat Azzopardi, self-expression in Maltese was set in motion (Friggieri 1988). The success of the Maltese historical novel in the latter part of the nineteenth century preceded the social novel, which began to make its mark in the early twentieth century with novels like *Leli ta' Ħaż- Żgħir* and *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka*. The social novel presented itself as a scrutiny into the working-class condition which in previous literary works had been overshadowed by the urgency to express the importance of "national identity and constitutional emancipation", from the colonizer (Friggieri 1988: 302). Maltese came to be recognized as an important literary language in the island and the Academy of Maltese Writers, launched in 1920, strengthened its importance even further by

validating its purpose as the guardian of the Maltese language and its literature (Times of Malta 2020). The Academy took an active role in ensuring that the Maltese language was given its due respect, guiding broadcasters on correct Maltese usage, going to Brussels before Malta's 2003 EU referendum to discuss issues relating to translation with the European Commission and Parliament, and in 1989, publicly deploring the lack of importance that Maltese was being given at certain private schools (Casha, Camilleri 2000).

Following the struggle that went into establishing Maltese as an important literary language, it is understandable that contemporary Maltese writers feel strongly about writing in their vernacular and oppose the idea of Maltese literature being publicized in the English language, of asserting itself "through a presencing in the language of the other" (Callus 2009: 37). In 'Performativity, precarity and sexual politics', Butler uses Spivak's assertion that "under conditions of subalternity", the only real solution "to lay claim to rights" is through "assimilating to those juridical systems" which were structured on the eradication and misuse of Indigenous cultures (Butler 2009: x). Butler goes on to emphasise the importance of using the dominant language, not to confirm its power, but rather to oppose its savagery, "to find the language through which to lay claim to rights to which one is not yet entitled" (Butler 2009: x). Ultimately, what Butler, Callus and Spivak are pointing at is the importance of allowing the voiceless a right to speak, even if this means "negotiating the right to speak", through using the language of the colonizer (Butler 2009: x).

It is apt to note that the valorizing of the vernacular isn't motivated by simple patriotism. It is also influenced by the belief that some things are "beyond translation" and that translating them might actually undermine what is inherently Maltese (Callus 2009: 37). Spivak also claims that "unthinking translations" will always be somewhat flawed, because "they rest on flawed ground" (Spivak n.d., cited in Maini 2018). A minority language being translated into English, will always be robbed "of its phonetic and cultural substance" (Spivak n.d., cited in Maini 2018). In fact, this was perhaps the main struggle I faced in my creative practice; how could I convincingly write about the Maltese outcast's development in another language, in my case English, when according to a survey carried out by the National Council for the Maltese Language and the Department of Maltese at the University of Malta, 97% of Maltese citizens aged between 18 and 80 consider Maltese as their first

language? (Borg at al 2021).

Fowler conjectures that it is necessary for a novel to confer an assurance of the real on the imaginary (Fowler 2006). In fact, in most Maltese fiction, a person's social class and character, as well as the country's bilingual element, are brought out through authentic sounding dialogue, reflective of real life. Alex Vella Gera's novel, *Is-Sriep Regghu saru Valenuzi* is written in both Maltese and English and he does this to reflect the island's social divide. The narrator's family are mostly English speaking and this is reflected in the way they code-switch, moving swiftly from Maltese to English as in the example below:

"Jaħasra the boat dis-sena għadni lanqas hriġtha. I did some repairs over the winter u qisni I got tired of it" (Vella Gera 2012: 181). They send their children to private schools and vote for the Nationalist party, yet the other people in their street are Maltese speaking and send their children to government schools. The fact that the protagonist himself speaks Maltese, reveals the "cultural and political position" he has taken in defiance of his family (Vassallo 2016: 218). However, despite this, he cannot escape his very bilingual upbringing as his thoughts and language constantly move "to and from English", highlighting the ease he feels with both languages, as well as the anxiety he experiences at the thought of betraying his Maltese identity (Vassallo 2016: 218).

Vella Gera's experimentation with language fits Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien's definition of "weird English", which she claims is mostly concerned with "who the speaker is" and how the latter can commandeer the language in whichever way they want (Ch'ien 2004: 17). Not only does this variety of English depicted by Vella Gera undermine the traditional language and allow the Maltese language to share the prestige savoured by English, it also disobeys the rules of the English language (Torres 2007: 76). Lourdes Torres explores how this is done in most Latino texts, where although English is the main language, Spanish "lexical items and phrases are incorporated into the English language text" (Torres 2007). Junot Diaz is one such Latino author who mixes Spanish and English in his writing and believes in the coexistence and fluctuation between the two languages (Ch'ien 2004). Much like Vella Gera, he doesn't use italics or quotation marks when including Spanish elements in his work and for him this is a crucial political gesture, because he argues

that “Spanish is not a minority language, so why treat it like one?” (Ch’ien 2004).

However, the difference between Junot Diaz and Alex Vella Gera is that the former affords to promote Spanish in this way, since after all, Spanish is “a cultural language of the highest order”, “an international language”, with “an official and vehicular capacity in 21 countries worldwide”, while Maltese is only mainly spoken in one island (Moreno-Fernandez & Otero 2008: 68). Consequently, although a novel like Vella Gera’s *Is-Sriep Reġġhu saru Valenuzi*, communicates very well Malta’s position as a bilingual country with established diglossia and heavy dependence on code-switching, this not only means that it is limited to the reader who understands the humour, politics and nuances between both languages, but also that the readership is much narrower than Junot Diaz’s.

Apart from refusing to italicize Spanish elements, Junot Diaz is also against translating his work, as he claims that the notion of translation is designed by the “dominant culture” and is effectively “erasure”, resulting in “inauthenticity, distortion and contamination” (Ch’ien 2004: 208). This is the same problem that Vella Gera would have if he were to translate his work completely into English; the nuances identified by each language in different contexts are completely lost. An example of this is when the protagonist visits his family’s house, right after his mother’s funeral and his stream of consciousness switches from Maltese to English, a language he equates with his mother, heightening his sense of grief. This would not come across if the whole work were to be translated into English.

“Id-dar kienet bħal pjaneta oħra, diżabitata the rarefied air of grief and loss and sadness still palpable, especially in certain nooks and crannies” (Vella Gera 2012: 131).

The problems inherent in translation were particularly noticeable with the publication of Francis Ebejer’s *Requiem for a Malta Fascist* which was initially written in English and subsequently translated into Maltese. The translated title, *Requiem għal Siehbi Faxxista* managed to capture “the flavour of the story”, as it emphasised the importance of friendship within the novel and through the use of “siehbi”, implied both that although his friend was a fascist, he was not, and that despite this, they remained friends (Caruana 2008: 162). These implications weren’t present in the English title. Apart from this, “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: 162). For instance in Maltese, the term “gebuba” refers to a small space within the house, while “għarix”, is “a stand alone structure in the countryside” (Caruana 2008). While the Maltese version was able to make this distinction, the English version was not, and Ebejer was therefore forced to use the term “hut” in both cases (Caruana 2008). Much like in Gera’s case, if *Is-Sriep Reġġhu saru Valenuzi*, were to be translated completely into English, Ebejer’s original English version was unable to depict “the bilingual context which is Malta”, while the Maltese version did so with ease (Caruana 2008). A particular instance is when both the English soldier and Maltese constable tell Lorenz to move away. In the Maltese version, the soldier’s order to “Hop it!” is retained, while the constable exclaims “Aħrab ‘l hemm!”, giving a genuine linguistic account (Caruana 2008: 163). However, perhaps the translator truly managed to create an authentic Maltese ambience through bringing in dialect in the villagers’ dialogue which works to infer the social status of those who speak dialect and those who speak standard Maltese (Caruana 2008: 163). The translator, Briffa was also able “to exploit the phonological aspects of Maltese” and at times, the text reads as a ballad, helped on by the use of alliteration in lines like, “Taħriġ ta’ kastig u turment’ and ‘imkemma u mhaffra biż-żmien” (Briffa 2004: 141). In this way, the translation into Maltese “can be viewed as a reverse process, the local reality being brought back and reunited with its roots” and therefore a much more authentic and honest depiction than the first work (Caruana 2008:164). However, ultimately Briffa’s translation was aimed solely at a Maltese audience, while Ebejer’s initial work allowed for a much wider audience.

Much like Ebejer, when I started writing my collection of stories, the reader I had in mind wasn’t simply a Maltese one. My objective has always been to publicize my country’s concerns, to make our minority culture accessible to a wider audience and it was predominantly for this reason that I chose to write in English. However, through resorting to the dominant language, I found that I was unable to depict what speaking in Maltese means to specific characters, what it reveals about their social class and upbringing, and what different dialects say about the regions in Malta they have grown up in. I also lost the correlation between Maltese and English as, respectively, the colonized and the colonizer’s languages. I was at risk of what Clare Vassallo refers to as reducing “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” (Vassallo 2013: 51).

For this reason, I was initially hesitant to include too much dialogue in some of the stories, turning to stream of consciousness instead. In one of my earlier stories, “The Interdiction”, the protagonist doesn’t talk to her brother about memories of their mother. Instead the latter are captured in her thought process. A lot of significant actions happen when the characters are alone, removing the necessity for conversation with other characters to ensue. This was a problem because it resulted in not being able to fully communicate the characters’ relations to each other and even in flat characters at times, particularly the minor ones in the story whose stream of consciousness is never revealed to the audience. I felt frustrated at not being able to convey my characters’ linguistic reality and at having to find ways to avoid dialogue, which is crucial in inferring character.

Another strategy that I used to avoid reducing the dialogue to the “monolingual sameness”, described by Vassallo, was to include Maltese phrases and terms throughout the story (Vassallo 2013: 51). I will now go over some instances where I did this in my collection. In one of the stories entitled “Shadow Puppets”, the protagonist, Karl can’t speak English, so it wouldn’t have been linguistically realistic to have him converse in the dominant language. For that reason, in Karl’s narrative, the only piece of dialogue present is, “Oqghod għassa magħhom,” a phrase frequently used by Kristi whenever the foreigners her and Karl work with are “behind the till or picking up customers’ money from the table” because she “doesn’t trust them”. Through this information, even without knowing the words, a wider audience can infer its meaning and understand that the comment is disparaging and directed at the foreigners. Another instance where Maltese surfaces in dialogue is when Frans is talking to Ġorġ about his ex-wife and how he’d woken up “sweating and shaking in anger”, after dreaming of her with another man. Once again, although a wider audience won’t understand the meaning of “Noqtolha kont Ġorġ, inħanxrilha għonqa żgur”, through the fact that Frans draws “his right thumb across the base of his neck” and slams his ex-wife’s photo on the table, “his fist coming down on her face”, it can be inferred that the man’s sentiments regarding his wife are strong and the thought of her with another man triggers violence in him. In “Small Tight Spaces”, I also managed to insert a common Maltese expression, which can be inferred by a foreign audience, through the fact that

it’s explained in English, “Yes hi, I like everything. In Maltese we say minix qanzħa.”

Nonetheless, despite the inferences that can be made, these phrases would still be unintelligible to a foreign audience. The importance of unintelligibility in the postcolonial has been drawn out by Salman Rushdie, whose writing not only expresses different languages, but also “moves in many worlds at hyperspeed, confronting the unintelligibility of existence with multiple narratives” (Rushdie 1996 cited in Ch’ien 2004: 258). In fact, the reader Rushdie has in mind is the urban Indian. He claims that “it is typical of Bombay and maybe of India that there is a sense of play in the way people use language. Most people in India are multilingual... it’s quite characteristic that a sentence will begin in one language, go through a second language and end in a third” (Rushdie 1996 cited in Ch’ien 2004: 260). His characters use a “personalized pidgin” which defies interpretation by those who do not speak it. This pidgin is reflective of reality, of the fact that all families have their own private language and “linguistic oddities” (Ch’ien 2004). Besides this, Rushdie doesn’t believe in using the English language in the same manner as the British (Ch’ien 2004). He believes in reworking it to suit his culture’s needs. For Rushdie, to conquer and manipulate the English language means completing “the process of making ourselves free” (Ch’ien 2004: 264). In *Trainspotting*, Irvine Welsh also doesn’t write in standard English. Instead, he chooses the Scottish dialect. He does this to reflect the coarse lives of characters who refuse to be indoctrinated into the colonizer’s values and who remain “unbrainwashed by the dominant culture” (Ch’ien 2004: 13).

As someone writing about contemporary Malta, I also wanted my work to reflect the reality of Malta’s sociolinguistic and postcolonial nature. However, I was all too aware that my position is unlike Rushdie’s or Welsh’s. Rushdie is writing about a contemporary urban India whose official language is the fourth most spoken language in the world. Welsh’s writing is comprehensible by English speakers who may not instantly understand the dialect, but can do so by a little effort, especially by reading it aloud (Ch’ien 2004). I, however, am attempting to advocate the language of a small island with just about 440 thousand people (Worldmapper 2021). Despite this, I still felt obliged to include Maltese elements in dialogue and I found three main circumstances where I was able to do this without risking being misunderstood by a wider audience.

The first circumstance arose when I had Maltese-speaking protagonists in the presence of characters who didn't speak Maltese themselves. These Maltese speakers were therefore forced to communicate in the majority language with the non-Maltese speakers. However, because my Maltese-speaking characters' knowledge of English is minimal, Maltese elements appear in their discourse nonetheless. In "Shadow Puppets", I included Maltese words such as "ara", "mela" or "hux vera" in Frans' speeches with the Canadian girls at his farmhouse. These are constantly used in Maltese discourse, and yet require no particular explanation or definition. Through showcasing his limited knowledge of the English language in phrases such as "What you want?" or "He drinks from five this afternoon", I hoped to create what Vassallo refers to as a "particular local flavour". (Vassallo 2013: 51) Moreover, it is a flavor that is indicative of the kind of education Frans has received, as well as the social class he belongs to. In another story, "Rows of Lavender", the only Maltese character, a guard at the detention centre, also uses Maltese elements in his speech when communicating with foreigners, reflecting a weak command of English, such as in, "Filkas, you better go to room".

I want to turn now to the second circumstance where I found it easy to include 'a local flavour' in dialogue without mentioning anything significant in the minority language. This circumstance occurred when I was writing about characters who speak the variety of Maltese English which Vella defines as "the English acquired by children of Maltese parentage in a family Type D" (Vella 2013: 12). Type D families belong to the fourth family type identified by Vella whose first acquired language is English, and they then learn Maltese through formal education. This means that overall, their preferred spoken language is English. The characters in my story 'Pet' speak this variety of English, and so, are predominantly English-speaking. They also conform to the traits usually associated with these kinds of speakers in Malta, who according to a research carried out by Bagley are often white-collar workers, non-State educated and very well-off (Bagley 2001 cited in Vella 2013: 16). A linguistic structure that particularly denotes this sub-variety includes the idiosyncratic use of "stay reading" in a sentence like "I don't have the patience to stay reading a magazine" (Vella 2013: 15). In the story "Pet", Petrina uses it in a conversation with her mother, in which she tells her that, "I'm alone this afternoon ta, I'll stay reading, watching some TV, then dinner in the evening." Another characteristic of this Mixed Maltese English,

pointed out by Vella is the use of 'but' at the end of sentences, in an example like, "I don't know what I want but." (Vella 2013: 15). Petrina also employs this attribute in her speech, "Where is he? Where's Papa but?"

Moreover, "Pet", also highlights how in Malta, second language teaching occurs in the language being taught. In other words, teachers "are encouraged to use Italian to teach the Italian language or French to teach French" (Caruana 2016: 275). However, since Maltese is so necessary for informal communication, according to Caruana, exchanges in Maltese are very common, and in fact Pet's students complain when she refuses to translate in Maltese (Caruana 2016). Thus et al consider Maltese English as "part of the local linguistic repertoire", hence, for this reason, speaking it is indicative of Malta's bilingual nature and by default part of "Malta's heritage" (Vella 2013: 16). It also perpetuates the notion that this could be Malta's "own variety of English", which proposes the liberty to contemplate this "New English" as "a natural resource", or part of our national identity, and not a foreign language (Vella 2013: 16).

The third occasion where employing the Maltese language came naturally occurred when I was writing about characters who had emigrated to a country where the "other" language was the vernacular. Characters in a story such as "Beach Houses" have become accustomed to speaking mainly in English after having lived in the UK for years. Nonetheless, they still use Maltese words and phrases in their dialogue, reflective of a "semi-conscious interlingua", "a shifting stage between the use of two languages" (Brincat 2006: 155). The main characteristic of this shift is that the speakers are acutely aware of the fact that Maltese and English are separate and that the people they are conversing with are familiar with both languages. From the context of the phone call at the end of "Beach Houses" and through the sentences, "Ara marelli. It's been a long time Mar. Int bqajt Morecambe kont?", the audience understands that the person talking hasn't spoken to the caller in a long time and that he's probably asking whether she's still living in Morecambe. The use of both Maltese and English establishes that the caller understands both, and that she is at ease with code-switching between them.

However, in present day Malta, standard Maltese remains the first language of the majority of the population (Caruana 2016). Children in state schools continue to be taught in Maltese, even if the textbooks are written in English. In addition, Maltese

is used in familiar domains such as work places, and with family members and friends. Attitudes towards Maltese are “integrative, related to the desire to identify, with one’s culture or language group” (Caruana 2016: 276). Therefore, a pertinent question that might arise is how can I justify using the English language to communicate my characters’ dialogues and thoughts, when in real life, none of these characters would think in English at all?

The answer to this question lies in the perhaps somewhat harsh reality that the most productive way for a “subaltern literature”, a minority one, to make its presence felt is through occurring in the language of “the other” (Callus 2011). Deleuze and Guattari define minor literature as “not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language” (Deleuze, Guattari 1975: 16). By this definition, because Maltese literature so seldom registers in any major languages, it does not qualify as even a minor literature, but is rather “on the periphery of the periphery” (Callus 2011). It therefore isn’t surprising that many criticized Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of minor literature, accusing it of basing itself solely on Europe and of being unable to extend itself to global literature. According to their definition of minor literature, even Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s English novels are considered “minor literature”. Such a definition does little to help us when we try to understand his many novels for children, and his plays which are written in Gikuyu and Kiswahili (Jussawalla 1991: 145). Under which category would these fall? D’haen laments the fact that Dutch, although a European language spoken by 22 to 23 million speakers, is still threatened by the uncertainty of “whether there is any hope of its authors or works to be included in any of the newer world anthologies, even if only in the category of “resonances” or “perspectives” (D’haen 2014). The same can be said for Malta and Maltese works.

Damrosch and Moberg’s version of “ultraminor literature” seems to be the most suitable interpretation of Maltese writing, since it considers the size of the linguistic community, as well as its access to publication and literacy rates (Damrosch, Moberg 2017: 134). In fact, all small island literature is considered as “ultraminor literature”, because island communities have limited resources, a small market and “a high degree of dependency on external forces” (Damrosch, Moberg 2017: 135). Damrosch and Moberg also claim that this kind of literature can be the product of a “small language community”, “based in a specific territory” and for this reason

can be used to enhance the community’s territorial unity (Damrosch, Moberg 2017: 135). The size of ultraminor literatures is crucial, as the purpose of ultraminor literatures centres around delineating their aesthetic and cultural ramifications.

This is all well and good, however a question that remains unanswered is this: how can the Maltese language literature make its mark internationally? According to Callus, it is inevitable for postcolonial writers to turn to other languages, more dominant ones, otherwise the literature of the minor country will remain inaccessible to a wider audience (Callus 2009: 36). A writer must therefore be aware of the absurdity of any commitment to “monolingualism”, established in a “cult of authenticity, including linguistic authenticity” (Callus 2009: 37). Ultimately, anything original is already influenced by the foreign, rendering the question of authenticity irrelevant.

Here it is useful to mention Derrida’s assertion that “all culture is originally colonial” (Derrida 1998: 68). If we are to agree with the latter, we have to submit to the reality that there will always be inequalities among languages and that what is native and primal is always already plagued by what is foreign (Derrida 1998: 68). Moreover, there can never really be such a thing as something that is considered “integrally Maltese”, especially since our island’s history is “a prolonged experience of hybridity” (Callus 2009: 38). English can therefore come to be regarded as a product beyond possession, beyond ownership or appropriation, as a “nonlocalizable and noncountable” language which “is less the sign of imposition by political force or cunning, than it is the promise of the singular” (Chow 2008: 225). Derrida configures language as a neutral territory in which the notion of foreignness is separate from that of belonging or nationality and in which any claims of “my language” are obsolete. This configuration validates using the language of the other, particularly because it is up to the latter to “summon the heterological opening that permits it to address itself to the other” (Derrida 1998: 129). Just as Derrida claims that he “only has one language which isn’t his”, and yet it is the language he must write and speak in, Maltese writers seeking to make an impact internationally must also revert to the “other”, the language which isn’t theirs (Derrida 1998: 13-14).

Derrida’s declaration that language is to be regarded as a neutral territory, separate from belonging or nationality helps me feel licensed to write English language dialogues for characters who would have spoken completely in Maltese. Indeed, I must

write such dialogues if I am “to bring Maltese literature’s potential to the other’s notice with greater immediacy” and to “impinge upon literature more broadly” (Callus 2011). In fact, the instances of Maltese terms, although present in many of the stories, do not jeopardize the reader’s understanding of the plot or characterization and in many cases are accompanied largely by English phrases or explanations.

However, being unable to write in Maltese also means that the dialogue in my work wouldn’t reflect many facets of Maltese life, such as the fact that the Maltese mostly prefer to discuss jokes, secrets, intimate things and politics in Maltese, while English is preferred to discuss scientific and technological matters and literature (Caruana 2006: 278-279). This is mainly because most of my stories are about relationships, between family members and friends who in reality, when talking about something very personal would never talk about it in English and therefore, having them discuss it in the language of the “other” sounds very inauthentic to a Maltese audience. An example of this is in “Light Green colours” when Rodney tells Eman that he has recently met Eman’s ex-wife and gives him information about his son who he has not seen in years. Through having two Maltese maintenance workers conversing completely in English, I am unable to depict their dialects if they have any, or certain idiosyncrasies in their speech, or even swear words since if I were to throw in a few of these, and have the rest of their dialogue in English, it would make them sound as though they were speakers of Maltese English, whose first acquired language was English, and who then learnt Maltese through formal education. However, this is not the case with these characters since they were brought up speaking Maltese and learnt English at school when they were older.

Apart from this, I can’t subtly communicate the reality that opinions surrounding English in Malta are mainly “instrumental, linked with the motivation to learn the language for useful and utilitarian purposes”, if the characters mostly speak in English for the sake of being understood by a wider audience (Chow 2008: 225). Even illustrating how proud certain Maltese people are about their language becomes very hard when you’re writing in the majority language. For example, through mostly having to write in English, I would struggle with depicting how some Maltese speakers, when spoken to in English, would still use Maltese. I would also find it hard to delineate that the reason for this is that

they “do not perceive the use of English positively, as they feel that Maltese is very much part of their identity whereas English is not”, as discovered in Sciriha’s 2004 research on the “sociolinguistics of mobile telephony” (Sciriha 2004: 276). Ultimately, many of the language issues surrounding the Maltese and English languages in Malta are hard to depict when I must mostly write in English and cannot code-switch to Maltese during significant parts of conversations as I risk being misunderstood.

Being unable to showcase the language issues surrounding the Maltese and English languages through dialogue, I resorted to other approaches to create a realistic Maltese ambience nonetheless. For instance, to convey how strongly some Maltese feel about their Maltese heritage and how easily angered they become at the thought of it being threatened, there are many instances of characters being suspicious or exhibiting animosity towards that which is foreign or colonial. In “Shadow Puppets”, Kristi doesn’t trust the Romanians who work with them, Alina and Marius, and instructs Karl to not let them out of his sight when they’re “behind the till”. Her sense of pride in her country is heightened in her assertion that European cities “are nothing special” and that “nowhere’s better than here”, meaning Gozo. Karl’s brother Ġorġ also exhibits hostility towards colonialism and refers to the British as “pigs” because they have ruined the island Filfla by using it “as a target in the navy”. In “Barbie Girl”, Ramona feels “intimidated” by English people, she comments on “always feeling a sense of unease before talking to them, that she was going to be misunderstood, that her accent would be pointed out, that they would ask where she was from, and not know where that was”. In fact, she initially considers becoming friends with Graham only so that he could “introduce her to other British friends, ones she could come to trust and feel comfortable with.” Moreover, in yet another story, “Beach Houses”, when Mariam discovers that her husband has cheated on her with an English woman, she is quick to point out that “In England it happened a lot and the women there were like that. They flirted and got what they wanted some way or the other. It wasn’t his fault really.”

To indicate that the Maltese language is sometimes associated with people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, in “Pet”, I included English-speaking characters who are prejudiced towards those unable to express themselves in English. Pet’s boyfriend dislikes his father’s wife and calls her “vulgar” and “uneducated”, on account of the fact that “her father was a mechanic at a local garage” and that she



received a “state school education”.

However, despite many attempts at depicting the linguistic nuances of Maltese, and evincing the local’s anticolonial sentiments, the reality is that Malta’s sociolinguistics can never be fully represented if a wider audience is to be targeted. Ultimately, Chièn’s definition of “weird English” (as English that is “demoralized, out of resistance to it” and fused with an original language, “depriving English of its dominance and allowing other languages to enjoy the same status”) only applies to languages that are still widely spoken, such as Russian, Hindi and Spanish (Chièn 2004). Maltese can only appear in small doses alongside English, as I have illustrated in examples of my own work, particularly if the audience is to be international. If a lot of the writing is in Maltese, a large part of a foreign audience will completely fail to derive understanding of context. Therefore, for this reason, in a sense, Maltese lives do remain “linguistically disfranchised” and excluded from “mainstream discourse”, simply by virtue of the fact that Maltese has a relatively small group of speakers (Ch’ien 2004).

## CONCLUSION

Maltese language literature will always remain important, particularly to those of us who have grown up in a minor culture, speaking a minority language. However, one of the many pitfalls of Maltese language literature centres around its inaccessibility to a wider audience. It can never truly form part of mainstream literature unless it

is translated or written in a more widely spoken language such as English. Through experimenting with dialogue, I came to ascertain that Maltese can occasionally occur alongside English in small doses and that this can enhance a character’s linguistic reality. Essentially there are three main cases where this comes about most naturally. The first is when characters are in the presence of foreigners and forced to communicate in English but occasionally include Maltese elements, depicting how limited their knowledge of English is. The second is when the characters come from what Vella identifies as Type D families, whose vernacular is English but who sometimes use Maltese elements in speech. The third and last instance arises when writing about characters who have emigrated to a country where the “other” language is the vernacular, forcing them to communicate in English. Despite this, the reality is that the dominant language in Malta is Maltese and there are many different facets of Maltese life, such as jokes, politics and idioms that can never truly be elucidated in the English language. For this reason, certain nuances can never be shared with a wider audience and therefore, the Maltese culture can never be fully represented in mainstream literature. However, the English language can and should still be used as a tool in giving the voiceless a right to speak. In this case, it should be regarded in the same way it is by Derrida, as a neutral territory, in which the notion of foreignness is separate from that of belonging or nationality and in which any claims of “my language” are obsolete.

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