Navigating the space of language: authorized language and symbolic power in Gozo

by Jessica Hopper

A B S T R A C T

In examining the concepts of authoritative language and symbolic power we often look to one legitimate language placed at the top of a hierarchy that serves to marginalize all others, and in so doing, marginalizes its speakers. We look at subversive moments of resistance to challenge this structure, but more often than not, it would seem, this hierarchical structure of language is the one that prevails. It is important, therefore, to examine language spaces that serve as a counterpoint or a place where the hierarchy isn't so black and white. The situational context of the dual language system of Malta provides just such juxtaposition, within which to study authoritative language, symbolic power, and strategies of condescension, as it is a place where the normal rules of language hierarchy do not apply. My research and field experience in Malta indicates that while English may be given primacy on a global level, the local reality gives legitimacy to Maltese. While strategies of condescension in the use of English abound, there are still ways to negotiate moments of power and meet in the middle.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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Introduction

As the world becomes smaller, with the advancement of information technologies bringing people into easier contact and globalization creating a blanket of unity covering the world, conversations regarding shared experiences turn to conversations regarding the sharing of language itself. It is a discussion that kicks up the dust of disagreement within the borders of countries looking for definitional rules and laws regarding language that will stretch to national conceptions of education, immigration and labor as in the case of the United States, as well as to conceptions of language-based political power plays in Canada and what it means to strategically leave Canadian natives out of the discussion. The conversation about languages crosses borders and invades the hallowed halls of academia, where scholars (Chapman 2003) admit publications are not given due consideration despite similar topics and themes of research because of the barrier of language causing a mutual ignorance.

And yet, this barrier is expected to be stripped when we look outside of academia to the tourist industry and find travelers negotiating a middle ground of language. The dust of disagreement is therefore, admittedly thick.

I would like to examine these areas of disagreement by looking at Malta as a place that both signifies and rejects the typical notions of authoritative language. Specifically, I will draw on my ethnographic research in Gozo from July 28th 2008 through August 17th 2008. I will first give a historical perspective of Malta in terms of the adoption of its two official languages. Second, I will look at the role the dual language system plays in the social structure of Gozo today, discussing the concepts of symbolic capital and the strategy of condescension while also providing examples of moments of negotiations of power. Finally, I will look at the role that tourism plays in the life of language in Gozo and examine the dusty middle ground that has been created.

Historical Perspective of Malta and the Maltese Language

The Maltese archipelago consists of the inhabited islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino, and is located approximately 180 miles north of Africa and 60 miles south of Sicily. Malta is considered to have been closely connected to North Africa until the third century B.C. when it was occupied by Rome. The Romano-Maltese period lasted until the end of the second century A.D., during which time the Roman Empire held Malta as a military outpost while the Maltese looked for ways to bring about their own independence. Malta was given practical autonomy in A.D. 177 and granted the status of a municipium, which lasted until the break-up of the Empire in A.D. 395 when the islands were taken over by the Eastern Empire and during which time there may have been invasions from Barbarians. By the time of the Arab capture of the island in 875, the island was occupied by Byzantines. The Arabs were then replaced by the Byzantines two hundred years later. With the death of the last Norman King, Malta shared the same fate as Sicily, passing to the Swabians in 1194, the Angevins in 1266 and the Aragonese in 1283. Malta was eventually turned over to the Knights of St. John by Emperor Charles V in 1530.

The role of the Knights in Malta is essential to its identity creation, especially in terms of the languages that have passed through the island. Because the Knights Hospitalliers were international in scope, there were eight divisions or "langues" according to the languages of the origins of the Knights – Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon, England, Germany and Castile. The English langue or division was squelched in 1540, but prior to that many of the Knights who had been in England had already fled to Malta. While the English langue division was officially suppressed, the fiction of one was kept until about 1782 under a foundation of a Bavarian langue which was thus added to the English category to become "Anglo-Bavarian." The dominant speech element at the time was French, however and the three French langues of Provence, Auvergne and France were given prominence both politically and culturally. Additionally, French and a version of Italian were used for official documentation and correspondence. Alienating Maltese from official policy making and planning was an effective way to subvert the language ideology of the Maltese and the cultural constructs that come from language (Morgan 2001: 74).

The period of the Knights in Malta also introduced a large number of Turkish slaves into the region, further mixing the elements of the culture and the language use. The order held rule over the island until the break-up of Europe by Napoleon, but the French military surrendered their own occupation to the British in 1800 only two years later. The British crown officially took over Malta in 1814. Malta remained a British colony until 1964 when it declared its independence and set up its own constitution, entering the community of nations as an independent state for the very first time.

Although the Maltese language itself can be traced back to the Arab rule prior to the invasion of the Normans, it was never given an opportunity to develop in written form due to the continued occupation of the island by other groups who were more eager to advance their own languages and interests. Additionally, "the use of the Maltese language was often discouraged with varying degrees of enthusiasm and success, ostensibly in the hope that supplanting it would strengthen ties with the country which held possession of Malta at that particular point in time, a concept which has continuously surfaced in the islands and is also present to a certain extent in the present day." Because "other" languages were given preference as the "norm" in Malta, the use of Maltese turned into a choice of the counter language and became what Morgan would call a conscious attempt at subversion (2001: 84).

Because of the imposition of other languages as well as the second-rate status of Maltese, it wasn't a written language until the 19th Century when academics purposely set out to take it down into a written form. It is the only Semitic language written using the Roman alphabet. Further, it wasn't recognized as an official language until 1936. This lack of

written language, along with a preference of Latin by the church and a push toward English by the British had a lasting effect on the Maltese in their own language use, which is evident in the Maltese Constitution of 1964 which lists both English and Maltese as the official languages of Malta. Looking deeper at the constitution, however, we find that only Maltese is listed as the "National" language, and it is given preference in the matter of court proceedings. Given that Malta struggled with outside occupation since roughly 3 B.C., it takes no stretch of the imagination to see why only one National language would be chosen when the people were given their first opportunity to choose one. However, declaring both Maltese and English as the official languages of the country allows English to continue to hold authority in Malta, despite the fact that most people in Gozo use Maltese when choosing their speech genre in everyday use.

What does it mean to continue to legitimate and privilege English in Malta? For the answer, I look to Bourdieu. "Utterances are not only signs to be understood and deciphered" on their own. Language rarely operates purely for the sake of communication (Bourdieu 1991:66). We don't judge the words or utterances we hear. We judge the people who utter them. Taking this one step further, "the authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it" (Morris 1994:78). The creation of legitimate, official languages, means that all others are marginalized. The existence of language hierarchies and an imposition of legitimacy upon them means that those who possess a competency or mastery (both linguistic and performative) over the legitimate language, also receive legitimacy for themselves, as they are seen as accredited, effective, and worthy of belief (Bourdieu 1991:69).

Globally, the authorization of English as a legitimate, authority language strategically places Malta in the center of the conversation regarding the power of English. Although brought to Malta by the British, in terms of the world use of English it can't be separated from associations with the United States and the power the modern superpower wields. Additionally, within the United States, the continued push towards an English-Only environment by some politicians and activists has carved out English as a "white public space" (Hill 2001). This has come to mean that what is "white" is "right" and normal in terms of discourse (Hopper 2007). The continued link to English in Malta, then, means that those who find comfort in the "normal" and the "right" can find comfort in Malta. It also means that the power and authority that has been imbued in English through the far-reaching power of the United States as well as from the residue of the presence of the British Empire is present in Malta.

The local reality of the situation in Gozo, however, is that Maltese is chosen for conversation in everyday work and home life when conversing with other Gozitans. Although the use and claim of English as an official language carries with it global prestige, it is not afforded that prestige among the locals in their daily life. I turn then, to a discussion about the incorporation of the dual language system into the social structure of Gozo.

The Social Structure of Gozo

"Not only is the family the basic unit of Maltese society, it is also the basic unit of the Catholic Church" which plays an important role in Maltese social life (Boissevain 1969: 14). Jeremy Boissevain's fieldwork in Malta from the early 1960's serves to set the stage for the roots of the social structure of Gozo today. That structure is framed largely by Christianity, which was brought to Malta in A.D. 60 by St. Paul. With the exception of the 200 year period of Arab rule, Malta has remained devoutly Christian, [Catholic] (Boissevain 1969: 5). The structure of the family in Malta is therefore guided and determined by the structure laid out by the Church. The man is the head of the household, providing food and shelter for his family, all of whom serve in subservient roles to him (Boissevain 1969: 15). The woman's role in the family is to produce children who will be further indoctrinated into the way of the Church, and the Church therefore stresses that a woman's place is in the home and that she shouldn't go out and work (Boissevain 1969: 15). If we look at the civil code of marriage in Malta, the duties of the man are to act as the head of house, protect, receive and maintain his wife. The wife, meanwhile, has the responsibility to obey, live with, and follow her husband as well as to contribute to his maintenance if he is incapacitated (Boissevain 1969: 15).

Extending the concept of the differential roles that men and women have in their families, there also exists a very marked social difference among the sexes outside of the home due to both religious and legal bases that flow out from the Church's doctrines on the roles of husband and wife (Boissevain 1969: 41). While there are expectations for the sexes within the home, the line is not very rigid and the authority of the man is more of a formality than anything, as within the home the woman holds sway over the entire domain. Outside of the home, however, the social world of men and women is a lot less flexible and is considered to be strictly the area of men (Boissevain 1969: 41). If the traditional place of women is in the home, the place of men is either in the fields or in the market place.

Much of the physical segregation of the sexes that Boissevain took note of in the early 1960's is no longer present in the same way. Men and women no longer sit separately at church, but rather as a family unit. The schools are not segregated by sex, and even within the church itself, girls are allowed to help with traditional male roles such as that of the acolyte. However, there is still a geographical separation of the sexes within the village similar to what Boissevain witnessed. I will quote him at length:

The area of the village around the parish church and the small square and the streets leading into it are the territory of the men when they are in the village. Here are located the clubs and wine shops which are their particular preserves. Moreover, men of various ages often congregate in small groups on the sidewalk outside these clubs or on the street between them. The center of the village, the pjazza, is, thus, a male area. In fact, women and girls….don't linger there. Their area is located away from the center, on their doorsteps or in their houses and in the numerous little grocery and notion shops, run, for the most part, by women; (1969: 42)

This account is still true today. The men dominate the pjazza of adjacent to the Ave Maria church in Rabat, the largest city in Gozo. There are several cafés in that pjazza, and with the exception of female tourists, the locals gathered around the tables are exclusively male. Local women can be seen walking through the pjazza on the way to church, some of the shops in the area, the library or the state office building next door to one of the cafés but they do not sit with the men in the café. The men, meanwhile, sit in the café's for hours at a time, deep in discussion with each other in Maltese, occasionally taking note of the passers-by. In this "place of men" even the shop workers are male. At three of the four café's in the Pjazza males work behind the counter. This differs from the other squares in Rabat that are more frequented by tourists. In those more tourist spaces the waitresses and waiters are primarily female, or mixed genders if it is a family owned business. Even the public restrooms in the Pjazza reflect the dominant presence of males. While I was there, I absent-mindedly walked into the restroom next to the café. I assumed it was the women's bathroom just because it had three times as many toilets within it, but quickly realized that it was the men's bathroom and beat a hasty retreat. The Pjazza is, quite simply, male territory.

With the solidification of Maltese as first a subversive language throughout the periods of occupation and then as the official National language, it makes sense that it is the language used most frequently among locals when talking to each other. The shops in Rabat may have signage in both Maltese and English but when looking at places that are non-tourist in nature, the Church for example, we see a strict adherence to Maltese. The times of the masses and weekly bulletins are printed in Maltese as well as handouts for Festas. With the exception of the Seminary in Rabat that provides a weekly mass in English, all of the churches in Rabat give masses in Maltese.

I would like to look then at the concept of symbolic capital and how it fits into the social structure of Malta. As previously stated, those who possess the linguistic and performative competency of the authoritative language are given legitimacy and prestige. This means that we don't judge the words that are being spoken, but rather the person who is speaking (Bourdieu 1991: 159). Other non-linguistic properties, like the tone of voice, social qualities like titles, clothing choices and spatial representation all add a layer of complexity and formality to the authority that is created (Bourdieu 1991: 70). Through this authority, power – in the form of social capital – is created and accumulated. This results in the ability by the speaker to manipulate the listener or audience.

The virtuoso is considered to be someone who commands a mastery of performance. Typically reserved to describe musicians and artists, speakers and presenters also share this limelight. A virtuosic performer creates a space where the listener allows themselves to be caught up in the performance. The participatory nature of the audience through murmurs of recognition, clapping, cheering, whistling, etc. feeds into the overall enhancement of the experience if the speaker exhibits a mastery or charisma and the audience or listener values it as such (Bauman 1977: 43). Bauman used the term flow to describe the interaction between the performer and the audience, noting that the speaker must have both prestige in competence and control over the flow. Because virtuosic performances are linked to the creation of social structure, he states that virtuosos walk the line between being admired for their talents and feared for their potential to effect change (Bauman 1977: 45).

We return then, to the idea that the authoritative language demands that we acknowledge it as such. Bakhtin stated that our "ideological becoming" is wrapped up in our assimilation of authoritative language. The performance of discourse can and does shape both our internal world view and our behavior (Morris 1994: 78). This pushes us to the strategy of condescension that results from the power plays made through the linguistic command of the authoritative

language. The strategy of condescension, Bourdieu states, "consists in deriving profit from the objective relation of power between the languages that confront one another in practice in the very act of symbolically negating that relation, namely, the hierarchy of languages and of those who speak them" (Bourdieu 1991: 68). The profit that Bourdieu speaks of doesn't have to be large or monetary, but rather can simply be the further accumulation of symbolic capital. To explore this further, I would like to look at moments when the strategy of condescension was employed in Gozo, as well as a few moments when attempts were made at negotiations for power.

During a preliminary fieldwork exercise, a fellow researcher and I walked the streets of Rabat and rang on the doorbells of the homes there in an effort to begin to break down our own language barriers and fears and introduce ourselves to some Gozitans. While recognizing that the "home" is the place of the female, it was the time of day for siesta and there was therefore a large likelihood that the males of the household would be home as well. Of the ten plus doors we knocked on, all but two were answered by a female within the house. In one instance where a male answered the door, the male in question was an expatriate from Britain and was happy to assist other English speakers. In the second instance of a male answering the door, we asked if he spoke English. Although he replied, "a little" and gave a weak attempt at listening to our query, he quickly changed his mind, informing us that he didn't speak English and deferring to the woman of the house. He employed a strategy of condescension to legitimate his own authority by remaining silent and not allowing us access to him even though both my colleague and I were under the impression that he understood us quite perfectly. This condescension also further solidifies his role within the home, relegating the woman to deal with the less than desirable English speakers.

In a square just off of Triq ir-Repubblika near the Citadel, an elderly gentleman named Edward keeps a small storefront that has been in his family for generations. He opens it each day at approximately 11 a.m. to sell his family wine, primarily to locals and whatever handful of tourists might wander in for the hour and a half that he stays open. While in Gozo, a group of us took to spending time at Edward's shop each day having a glass of wine with him and learning about Gozo through his stories. Edward is a former English teacher and so his own command over English was quite exceptional. He particularly seemed to enjoy the conversations where he was able to give us Maltese lessons, slowly explaining to us the roots and meanings of words as well as patiently allowing us to stumble over our attempts at pronunciation. In one conversation he explained how he aged his wine, and when he asked, "You understand?" we all took it to be a question of us understanding the difficulties of the wine process rather than his mastery of the language. Through our communications with him, Edward built up symbolic capital with us, as we recognized his own command of our authoritative language as well as the fact that he condescended to use it for us.

The shop next to Edward's belongs to Joe and, when open, was his family's butcher shop. Joe and Edward are boyhood friends and went to school together. It isn't clear what Joe does for a living now. Although he lives elsewhere, his family still owns the storefront and Joe uses it as a base of operations of sorts when he's in Rabat. As such, Joe would usually stop in for a glass of wine or to say hello on all of the occasions when we were in Edward's shop. While Edward had a mastery of the English language, Joe had none. Joe, it would seem, was also very keen to try to communicate with us despite the language barrier. Edward would speak to us in English and Joe would talk in his ear in Maltese. Edward would sometimes translate what we were saying to Joe but he would never translate Joe's words to English for us. In this way, Edward controlled the conversation – not only what was said, but what languages were being used and which players were able to participate. On one afternoon, Joe had a particular story he wished to tell and Edward was not obliging, so we watched as Joe got off of his chair and acted out the story of a friend who had been shot to death in a bird-shooting incident. While Joe had no mastery over the English language, the bravado he expressed with the tone of his voice, his gestures and movements, negotiated power for him in the space of language. We all understood the story he told, and this form of communication broke down the translation barrier so that, upon my next meeting with Joe, we both tried to speak to each other despite neither of us knowing the other's language.

The next day, I happened to run into Joe on my way to Edward's shop. He was several doors down from Edward's shop enjoying a beer with a younger Maltese man. I came up short when I saw him and greeted him with a hello. He responded with a large smile and a hello. I tried to ask him why he wasn't at Edward's through gesturing, pointing, using Edward's name, and pretending to drink a pint. He gestured in reply something that gave me the impression that he might come later. I tried to ask him how his tooth was doing, as he had previously had a bad trip to the dentist, but he couldn't make it out.

At this point, he used his own symbolic capital to force the younger man to pay attention to our conversation and translate for him. The young man obliged and spoke to me in English as if it took great effort to stoop below Maltese. He then informed me that Joe had asked him to take our picture. Here again, Joe negotiated a moment of power, this time using his own linguistic command of Maltese to get what he wanted from the younger man. Not only did this show me that he held a power over the younger Maltese man, but it also showed the younger Maltese man that Joe could claim acquaintance with me as an English speaker in that global sense of power described earlier.

These three stories illustrate examples of the strategy of condescension and the power plays that can be made through the use of language at a very basic level. Though small examples in their own right, we can see that these strategies can be quite impacting when magnified by the whole of society as well as administration and governments when used in public policies and policy making. This doesn't even speak to places in which a virtuosic command of language is necessary in Gozo such as within the courts, on television, in front of a crowd at a political rally, or officiating mass in front of thousands at a festa.

Tourism and Language in Gozo

The population of Malta and Gozo at the end of 2007 was 410,290, with the populace of Gozo itself at roughly 31,000. Malta and Gozo bring in over 1,100,000 tourists a year , with Gozo attracting the same visitors as Malta as well as Maltese themselves looking for weekend getaways throughout the year. Though the island is formidably hot in the summer, it is the height of tourist season in Gozo and many shops, restaurants, café's, taxi's, tour buses, and SCUBA instructors make their money for the entire year during the tourist season. As previously stated, the signage in Gozo is primarily in both Maltese and English, but where all things tourist are concerned, the middle ground seems to be English. Whether its restaurant menus or bus schedules, English is the preferred language of the tourist in Gozo. While waiting for a bus from Xlendi to Rabat there could be a gathering of Americans, Germans, Italians, Swedes, Belgians and local Gozitans all waiting for the bus and all speaking to each other in their own tongue. If any passenger needs to question one of the others about the schedule, the chosen language is English. Because of the proximity to Italy and due in part to familial connections, occasionally shop-owners could be heard conversing with Italian tourists in Italian. Primarily, however, tourists can navigate Gozo fine if they know English. This returns us to that concept of "white" equals "right" and the dominance of English on a global scale. Whilst in other non-English speaking countries, one is encouraged to ask whether the person you're speaking with knows English – in their own native language. In Gozo, however, because it is one of the official languages this courtesy is never extended despite the fact that locals choose Maltese over English to speak to each other.

When asked, "Titkillem Bl'inglese?" most Gozitans will reply with "A little" before continuing on to demonstrate an exceptional grasp of English. This too fits our power play strategy, as they use the keying device Bauman would call "the disclaimer of performance" (1977: 15). By setting the performative frame and linguistic bar low, we are keyed not to expect much from the speaker. As such, their utterances will surely succeed because they've cautioned us against any real competence. Bauman states that "a disclaimer of performance serves both as a moral gesture, to counterbalance the power of performance to focus heightened attention on the performer, and a key to performance itself" (1977: 22). In the case of the Maltese, stating that one only know a little English sets them as comparative masters of Maltese, and deigns them with the strategy of condescension to employ what little English they've bothered to learn. This "little" will often turn out to be a complete mastery of English as well and as such, the Gozitans are able to accumulate symbolic capital with tourists for their mastery of both.

Occasionally one may find themselves in the dusty middle ground between English as legitimate and Maltese as legitimate in their own right. While in Gozo I was attempting to obtain an interview one of the local funeral directors. Although I knew it would be best to meet him through a connection to someone else, I threw caution to the wind and gave him a call. His signage, after all, was in both Maltese and English. After confirming, in English, that Mario was the owner of the shop, I gave a brief explanation of the questions I wanted to ask him. Before I could finish he told me he didn't speak English and hung up the phone. Days later I was able to meet Mario through a local priest at the Seminary who confirmed for me that Mario did, in fact, speak English. Upon our introduction, Fr. George told Mario in English, "Mario! I have brought a beautiful girl to meet you!" After which he leaned into Mario and explained what I wanted in Maltese. After shaking his hand and being left alone with him by Fr. George, I confirmed with Mario that he didn't mind me asking him some questions.

Through the course of our interviews over the next several meetings it became clear to me that, unlike the man at the door who claimed he didn't know English and delegated me to his wife, Mario's denial of English was a true disclaimer of performance. His English, though better than he probably realized, was something he was just not comfortable using if he didn't have to. In hindsight, I could see why my request to speak with him on the phone wouldn't have gotten me anywhere. In conversations in person we were both able to navigate the English language purposively, choosing the words and contexts that we both could tell worked best to describe what we were discussing based on our own puzzled looks and body language. As our meetings continued, I found Mario eager to speak with me, and he had even taken to making notes of things he'd forgotten to tell me upon our last meeting. Despite the fact that we were navigating and negotiating in English, I did my best to use Maltese phrases, and choose English words that would have meaning for Mario rather than just for me. In this way, we tried to meet in the middle of the legitimate language that was available to both of us, despite his lack of mastery and my lack of knowledge of Maltese.

For my final meeting with Mario I brought out my camera to ask him some questions about some pictures I had taken and he assumed I was going to ask him if I could take his picture. Before I could ask, he said, "Sure, sure. Go ahead." This left me to reframe what I was going to ask him, as I certainly didn't want to offend him, but still needed information about the other photos. At the end of our meeting that day, I informed him of my plans to return to Gozo in the fall of 2009 and asked if he'd be willing to work with me again. Mario replied that it would be fine as long as I didn't mind his bad English. I resolved to learn some Maltese in the interim and when I told him as much he appeared genuinely pleased.

Conclusion

The middle ground of language that Mario and I met in may not be a space that people find very often, but it provided me with a great vantage point to examine the unique dual language situation in Gozo. Language, certainly, isn't the only building block of power or authority in Gozo but it does play a large role in reinforcing the structures already in place, as well as provide new ground for others to stand on. As future generations of Maltese grow up in the dual language system, and the role of the church and family in the home continue to evolve, we may see changes in the primacy given to Maltese Given, however, that the Maltese language has thrived in Gozo despite attempts at its subversion and despite its lack of written record until the 19th century, I would argue that the authority and legitimacy afforded to it, and therefore to the people who use it, will only continue.

The research and fieldwork I've done in Gozo is, by no means, exhaustive on this (or any other) topic. After three short weeks of observation and interviews it was clear that there was much to be said about language and social structure in that space, and that anything I might put forward would only be the tip of the proverbial iceberg. It is, however, the start to something important in considerations of the role that language plays in areas where language exclusivity is not the rule or the norm. With the globalization of technologies and communication systems putting people within reach in ways that were previously unavailable, continued changes in the importance of language hierarchies will be made. Middle grounds will need to be found in order to continue the advancement of all types of relationships, whether those are social, economic, political, or academic. This needs to be done, not as a supplanting of a hierarchically elevated language like English at the expense of local forms but rather with due consideration and respect for the local language structures that are already in place, recognizing that language isn't the only thing at stake.

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