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# Three Women, Three Generations: An In-Depth Case Study of Language Retention and Shift in One Family from the Maltese Australian Community in Melbourne

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*Abstract-* This paper analysis one family pertaining to the Maltese Australian community in Melbourne and investigates the retention of the Maltese language. The Maltese Australian community is a small community that is getting smaller since migration from Malta to Australia has largely stopped. Thus, the Maltese language is spoken mostly by the first generation of immigrants who left the island after the Second World War seeking a better future. The second generation, born in Australia, usually understands the language but lacks the opportunity or the will to speak the language except with members of the family. The third generation, raised in a multicultural country, normally has very little fluency in the Maltese language. The investigation is grounded in interview data gathered among a family of three generations of Maltese origin in Melbourne. The findings of this research show that the aging population of the Maltese community and the dominance of the English language do not favour the retention of the Maltese language in the future.

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*Keywords: language retention, language shift, language attitudes, family domain, english dominance, maltese australians.*

## I. Introduction

Malta is a small Mediterranean country with very limited resources and thus, throughout its history, many Maltese have ventured abroad to seek a better life. In the past some of the Maltese moved to Northern Africa, while Australia, the United States and Canada became the most popular destinations in the last century. Since the country achieved its independence from Great Britain in 1964, migration has largely stopped. This is because of better work opportunities resulting from greater investment which ensured that the Maltese could prosper in their country. On the other hand, Australia is a country that encouraged migration from all over the world. This has resulted in a developed and prosperous country with a high standard of living. While Australia initially encouraged migration from Great Britain and later from other European countries, nowadays it is hosting new people mostly from Asia. The first Maltese, Antonio Azzopardi, who migrated to Australia, arrived in the country in 1838 (Agius 2001). However, while there was a first wave of migration, mostly of males, in the early twentieth century, the huge departure of people from Malta started at the end of the Second World War and continued up to a few years after Malta's independence. Cohen (1997) refers to a labour diaspora when he describes migrants who leave their country for better work opportunities and the Maltese did just that. This was the result of the difficult economic circumstances on the island that encouraged many Maltese to leave, hoping for better financial security.

The Australian Census of 2021 shows that there are 198,989 people who are of a Maltese descent living in Australia, mostly in Victoria and New South Wales. 35,413 Maltese Australians were born in Malta, three fourths of which are over the age of 65. On the other hand, there are 404,113 Maltese who live on the Maltese Islands as stated in the Malta Census of Population and Housing 2021. The number of new migrants has steadily decreased in the past fifty years. Independence brought better economic opportunities in Malta and since Malta joined the European Union in 2004 the Maltese have additional prospects in Europe. Working and living in another European Union country is rather convenient, given the proximity to Malta.

Maltese is the national language of Malta, but the country has officially been bilingual since 1934. Maltese and English are the two languages of the republic of Malta. The Maltese language, a mixed language of Semitic origin (Cachia 1994, Saliba 2012), goes back more than one millennium to the Arab Period (870 – 1091) (Aquilina 1988). With the arrival of the Normans and other European powers the language began its enrichment process and various words of Sicilian, Latin and, later, Italian origin were merged in the language. This phenomenon happened especially during the reign of the Order of the Knights of St. John (1530-1798) when the language was influenced by the Romance languages that the Knights and the workers that they brought on the island spoke. After a short French interlude, Malta was colonized by Great Britain. Throughout the British domination (1800-1964), the Maltese language was influenced by the English (Aquilina 1988), and in the modern era the English language still has some bearing on the Maltese, mostly due to the dominance of the English language in the world and also due to the bilingual situation on the island. Maltese is written in Roman letters, and it is the only Semitic language in Europe. The official

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orthography of the Maltese language is rather recent, going back to 1934 (Akkademja tal-Malti 1998). Maltese became officially recognized as one of the European Union languages on the country's accession in 2004.

The Maltese community has been well integrated in Australia. Most of the community is proficient in English, yet the Maltese language is still used amongst the Maltese population, and this obviously fosters a deep ethnic kinship. According to the Australian 2021 Census, nearly 27,000 people speak Maltese at home.

It is a generally accepted fact that the retention of the mother tongue in migrant communities is difficult when the migrants are living in a country whose main language is different from the migrants' language (Sciriha 1990). On paper, English is not the official language of Australia; however, the 'de facto' national language is English, an international language and the language of economic powers and prestige. Therefore, the community languages of the various ethnic groups and the language of the indigenous populations, especially those of the smaller communities, are in a continuous struggle with a language of massive supremacy. The pressure of the English language can be wide-ranging and often ominous.

## II. Language Maintenance and Shift

The necessary requirement for an investigation on language maintenance and shift 'is for two linguistically different groups' to interact (Sciriha 1990, p. 35). Language maintenance is the continuous use of a community language in one or several spheres of language practices. Language shift, on the other hand, happens when a language is, by time, substituted by another language in all fields of use (Pauwels 2016).

English has achieved a very high status as the international language. In her study among the Maltese-Canadian community, Sciriha (1990) found that most parents prefer that their children are proficient in English rather than Maltese, to the extent that some of them deem that knowledge of Maltese is useless, or harmful for English proficiency. Maltese as a community language in Australia was also studied by Borland (2005) who found that the children of Maltese migrants in the country usually do not keep speaking Maltese at home at a faster and earlier rate than appears to be the case among other ethnic communities. Moreover, in 2010, Sciriha directed an online questionnaire among 660 Maltese Australians and included questions concerning the language use within the family. The majority of respondents were of the second oldest age group, and the results show that while Maltese is the first language of most of the participants (61.2%) only 2.9% of the respondents interact in Maltese only with their children, clearly indicating a shift in language use.

A similar observation in Australia was noted by Azzopardi (2014) who maintains that the first-generation post Second World War Maltese migrants yearned for their children to be eloquent in English and thereby the Maltese language in Australia is now risking extinction. Pauwels (2016) affirms that when investigating language retention, one must set apart those migrants who grew up in the country of origin and those who grew up in the host country. In this case-study of three generations of Maltese migrants, the oldest lady was born and raised in Malta and then migrated to Australia when reaching adulthood, while her daughter and granddaughter were both born in Australia, distant and to a certain extent isolated from Malta.

## III. The Family as One of the Language Domains

The study of language retention and language shift necessitates an extremely complex kind of evidence grounded on consistent language use (Fishman 1964). Contexts of language use are usually referred to as 'domains' (Pauwels 2061, p. 21) and these include the family or home domain amongst others mentioned by Fishman (1991). Fishman (1964) refers to Schmidt-Rohr who identified nine domains of language use. Although the domains of language use are classified separately, in studies of language retention most domains do in fact merge. Clyne (1985) mentions interlocuters who need to talk about an issue related to one domain, such as the educational or occupational domain, within the context of another, such as home and family.

In recent years, some other researchers have increasingly insisted that sociolinguistic traditions need to be reconsidered in the age of globalization (Blommaert 2010). The term 'spaces' instead of 'domains' has been used by Hatoss (2013, p. 128) because of their 'dynamic characteristics' and refers to the family home 'as the most important space for intergenerational transmission of the immigrant language' (Hatoss 2013, p. 141).

## IV. Language in the Family

Studies on community languages in Australia have revealed that the family is very important for language retention. 'The family, as a primary group system in which relationships are usually close and enduring, is generally recognised as the most critical site of language and cultural maintenance' (Hughes 1994, p. 452). Pauwels (2016, p. 124) concludes that 'the family remains for most immigrants and their offspring the main domain for community language use.' This implies that language retention is high when the children are spoken to in their community language at home. This should lead to a bilingual situation where

the children are fluent in English, which they learn at school and through their exposure via means of communications, and the community language spoken at home.

The attitude of parents towards their community language is conducive to the successful way in which their language is transferred to their offspring. However, 'parents in Australia generally encounter an unsupportive – if not outright negative – environment' and this does not help the community languages which are in competition with English (Eisenchlas and Schalley 2019, p. 572). De Houwer (2007) elucidates on the fact that the young ones are most likely to grasp a community language if both parents speak that language, while if the dominant language is spoken at home by the parents the chances of language transmission seem to be lower. Thus, language choice models can be decided beforehand and changed to accommodate the families' linguistic needs. But it seems that parents are not conscious that they should devise a particular home language policy and stick to it (Ellis, Sims et al. 2018).

The use of a language is critical for its retention and transmission. The outcomes of an investigation by Forrest (2018) among Australia's Indigenous communities suggests that parents' knowledge and use of their native languages is crucial to their transmission to the young generation. The study shows that most of the young ones who can speak an Indigenous language have a parent who also communicates in an Indigenous language, while only two percent of children whose parents do not use an Indigenous language speak one.

Pauwels (2005) contends that extended families are better than the immediate families in retaining the community language. She states that 'the main interlocutors for heritage language used by children in migrant families are grandparents and those belonging to that generation' (Pauwels 2016, p. 91). The significance of grandparents, especially those who do not speak English, as a decisive aspect of language maintenance, is mentioned earlier by Clyne (1985), who claims that this might also be the consequence of old people's tendency to go back to the mother tongue and thereby stop communicating in English.

Ryazantsev (2013) argues that while many Russian migrants in Australia transmitted knowledge of Russian to their children, they grow to be fluent in English as well due to their exposure to the language at school. Years later, the grandchildren choose to stick to the English language because it provides more chances of interaction with their generations and settings. In such a context, parents are not always ready to sustain proficiency of the Russian language for their children and thereby, by the third generation there is little knowledge of the community language.

Research conducted among Spanish-speaking mothers in Australia by Mejia (2016) demonstrates that for this cohort, language retention was a beneficial manner to keep Spanish culture alive and a way of sustaining harmony within the family. These mothers concurred with the idea that as a result of using their native language the children value their mother's Spanish origins even more. They felt that it would be disgraceful not to pass their way of life to their offspring and most mothers agreed that language maintenance was critical to the unity of the family in being the only manner for their children to bond with their relatives, especially grandparents, outside of Australia. This study backs the statement by Tannebaum (2005, p. 232) that 'immigrants often view their mother tongue as a symbol of their past, their family of origin, childhood landscapes, familial myths, and early memories'.

On the other hand, exogamy, or mixed marriages, may have a negative effect on community language retention. A survey conducted in 2017 found that a quarter of Australians are in an inter-ethnic relationship (Lass 2019). Intermarriage is a sign of integration as well as a gauge of the progress of multiculturalism in ethnically diverse countries (Khoo, 2011). In her study on Dutch language shift in mixed marriages, Pauwels (1985, pp. 53-54) concludes that 'exogamy affects the Dutch language use patterns of both the immigrant spouses and their Australian-born children in a negative way.' Cauchi (2014) shows that this is the case amongst the Maltese-Australian community. A survey conducted by Cauchi (2014) among the Maltese ethnic community in Australia indicates that 57% can understand Maltese at least moderately well; yet only 21% use it to communicate with their parents or friends. Furthermore, 69% declared that they never speak to their children in Maltese (Cauchi 2014). Third generation members of the community do not think that their community language is important because they feel fully-fledged Australians (Rubino 2002). On the other hand, Colic-Peisker (2010) illustrates that other ethnic groups give more importance to their community language; in fact, even though English is their first language, many ethnic Croats are bilingual and can speak Croat.

## V. Research Approach and Methodology

The investigation entitled 'The Survival of the Maltese language in Australia' was conducted in Melbourne and Sydney. Twenty-eight adult contributors agreed in writing to participate in this research and were interviewed over a span of three weeks. The investigation consisted of structured interviews, with 10 questions each, that were conducted face to face, mainly at their homes. The interviewees were voice-recorded. Some interviews were held at schools where the teaching and learning of Maltese takes place. The interviews took around one hour. None of the participants in the study were vulnerable persons and

therefore the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee (UREC) waived the requirement for a formal adjudication of the request to conduct the study. It was ascertained that all the guiding principles presented by the UREC were strictly pursued before the investigation on the ground and during the research itself.

The equal number of male and female participants was deemed important so that a proper representation of the ethnic community was considered. The researcher interviewed fourteen first generation Maltese-Australians, seven from the second generation and seven from the third generation. In addition, a representation of all three generations is present in the study. Thus, this paper gives an in-depth account of three ladies pertaining to the same family, the grandmother, the daughter, and the granddaughter. At the time of the interview, the grandmother was seventy-six years old. She was born in Malta and left the island, heavily pregnant, after marrying her Maltese husband, in 1965. The daughter was born soon after their arrival in Australia and she was fifty-four years old at the time of the interview. She married a man of Maltese descent, and they had a daughter, referred to here as the granddaughter who was a young adult of twenty-five. Like the rest of the participants, these three women were asked to answer in the language that they feel more confident speaking. The grandmother answered in Maltese, while the daughter and the granddaughter answered in English. This already gives an indication that language shift took place among the different generations. The purpose of the investigation was to evaluate the opinions and attitudes of the participants regarding the Maltese language, the maintenance of the language, and the importance or lack of it in Australia.

All the interviews were subsequently analysed through coding. The purpose of coding is to '*name* units of data' (Newby 2010, p. 462). An alternative to coding from data is to analyse the information gathered from the interviews deductively by expounding a predetermined code structure and then tallying the collected data into such structure. This research was based on Grounded Theory originated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and therefore the constant comparative technique was employed.

Besides interviews, the researcher did additional qualitative investigations in the form of observations amongst a cohort of Maltese Australians. Several families, Maltese associations and organizations, Maltese language schools, and a church that serves the Maltese community were observed. The researcher visited and observed the interactions between the members of the family in question. The researcher joined the grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter for dinner on two occasions and therefore the researcher acted the role of '*observer as participant*' (Kawulich 2005, p. 7) since the researcher actively took part during these dinners and the time that the family spent together, and the family members were aware that their language interaction was being observed.

## VI. Research Findings

While the first generation have all the skills and full knowledge of the Maltese language that they have brought with them to Australia, the second generation only understands Maltese, yet most of them rarely speaks the language. This is because, apart from the time spent with their immediate family, their interactions are mainly with other Australians and thus the preferred language is English. The third generation has very little knowledge of the language of their grandparents, notwithstanding the fact that many grandparents still use the Maltese language even when speaking to their grandchildren. However, the younger generations, in general, are not even bothered to learn Maltese since they feel they are Australian, and the Maltese language is alien to them. Amongst the second and third generations, there is quite a lot of curiosity about Malta, including the language, its history, and the culture. The younger generations look at Malta with a keen sense of curiosity. Malta sounds exotic. Malta is also a nice holiday destination that many aspire to visit. Yet, they are aware that most people in Malta speak English and therefore, even if they plan to visit the island, they rarely try to master the Maltese language.

While there is awareness about the presence of schools that teach Maltese, as well as online courses, there is little interest in putting an effort in the learning of the language, even if this is seen as something positive. The daughter explains that even though she understands Maltese 'I went for like six months, but I found it very hard. From week to week, it was too hard. I remember the *h* with the line, and the *c* with the dot, but that was ages ago. So, I can speak and understand Maltese, but it is very hard to write or read something'. The granddaughter is aware that there are lessons available and declares that 'I know there are lessons for adults. I think I should go'. Reluctance to learn Maltese is rife. She admits that 'learning another language is always good … I am intrigued but the language is difficult. It is nice to connect with my roots, but I've never decided to do it'.

Radio and television programs in Maltese are very important but are seen as intended for the first generation. In fact, while the grandmother always follows the news from Malta and other transmissions on SBS radio and television, as well as on a handful of community radios, the daughter only does so occasionally, and the granddaughter never does. The daughter suggests that these transmissions on television should be subtitled in English. She thinks that in this way many of her generation will find it easier to follow what is happening in Malta. The granddaughter

finds such broadcasts as boring and irrelevant to her life. The grandmother also buys DVDs from Malta showing Maltese situation comedies and dramas. The daughter and granddaughter would not even think of watching such 'dreary shows'. The grandmother declares that amongst her generation of Maltese born, now mostly elderly migrants, religious rituals, praying, and worshipping are in Maltese. On the contrary, the younger generations are less religious and if they had to pray, they would do so in English and not in Maltese. This is because they attended catechism lessons with other Catholics from various ethnicities and these lessons were always in English.

## VII. The Language Amongst Different Generations

The Maltese language is still spoken by the first generation. This generation, now consisting mainly of old people, speaks Maltese at home, with their Maltese neighbours and within the Maltese community. Notwithstanding living in Australia for more than half a century, some never attained full fluency in the English language and, therefore, they are more comfortable conversing in Maltese. It is quite important to point out, however, that this same generation has, in the past, preferred to use the English language at home with the children. Many felt that it was very important for their children to integrate in Australia, without being bullied or called names at school. The English language was seen as the ticket to success, so they deemed it important that their children had a sound grasp of the language. The grandmother recalls that she made it a point to speak English to her daughter, because she wanted her to get good grades at school. However, most of the time she spoke Maltese to her husband who was not very proficient in English and, thus, the daughter was always exposed to the community language. Therefore, she proudly reminisces that her household was bilingual, and she argues that bilingualism is beneficial. Also, the daughter's babysitter was Maltese and did not speak any English. Therefore, the daughter was exposed to the community language since birth. However, she concedes that once her daughter started schooling, she preferred to communicate in English even at home. The grandmother remarks that the Maltese language in Australia is more useful for her generation. Some of the Maltese migrants never became fully fluent in English and now, that they are getting older, and retired, they are reluctant to make the effort and speak English. Therefore, they have gone back to their mother tongue. In fact, she says that 'the Maltese elderly feel comfortable with the nuns (at the old people's home) who speak Maltese. For this reason, even radio broadcasts are essential for the elderly many of whom are lonely and isolated.

While the grandmother is very fluent in Maltese, occasionally she code-switches and uses various English utterances. The daughter code-switches more often. Code-switching 'is a powerful linguistic tool used to enhance communication' (Dykes 2018, p. 81). Thus, the grandmother, at times, cannot express herself in one language, and therefore 'may switch to the other to compensate for the deficiency and avoid stammering' (Abdul-Zahra 2010, p. 291).

The grandmother draws the researcher's attention to the fact that now that the children, making up the second generation, have grown up and moved out of home, most of her friends have reverted to speaking Maltese at home, even in the presence of their grownup children. There is no more fear that their children will not be integrated in the Australian society, because, most if not all, have truly forged successful careers. Therefore, the second generation, usually does not speak Maltese. However, they do understand the language, and can follow a conversation. Many refuse to speak Maltese, since they feel that they are not confident enough. Thereby, many second-generation members of the community are subtractive bilingual, meaning that they are receptive to the Maltese language, but not productive at all. Many absolutely refuse to talk in Maltese, because they believe that they are not sufficiently confident in expressing their thoughts. According to the daughter, the second generation does not speak Maltese because at a young age they had a lot of peer pressure. They attended school with boys and girls coming from various ethnic communities and they felt the pressure to speak only in English. She says that many 'understand everything but do not speak the language a lot. They speak Maltese if they really need to say something, but not fluently … only if they cannot help it'. This tallies with the findings of Sciriha (1990) who concludes that when the immigrants settle in a host country where another language is predominant, the migrants find it hard to keep their community language. This is also because Maltese migrants have tried hard to integrate, and language seemed to be their ticket to integration. It seems that now it is quite late for the second and third generations to appreciate the validity of the Maltese language.

In general, the third generation cannot understand and, consequently cannot, speak Maltese. They might know a few words and are able to repeat them, but no proper conversation can be carried out in Maltese. Effectively, they just have a smattering of the language, which for many is alien. Maltese is therefore considered as the language of the grandparents who moved to Australia way back. It is very evident that the language was not passed very strongly from one generation to another. The granddaughter declares that 'mum and dad are Maltese but did not speak a lot in Maltese to us kids. Nannu and nanna (grandparents)

would teach us the very basic words. I only understand little bits …' She also says that 'well, the older generation keeps it going but from my generation I do not know anyone who can speak Maltese fluently. So, the future is bleak, I suppose. The third generation are mostly like me.' This mirrors 'the overall pattern' of a shift from the community languages in Australia 'toward a monolingual national with minimal heritage language retention beyond the second or third generations' (Forrest et al. 2020, p. 1071). Most European community languages, except those originating in South-Eastern Europe, have endured linguistic shift (Forrest et al. 2020). Maltese is hence regarded as the language of the grandparents who moved to the country decades ago. It is rather evident that the community language was not passed on successfully from one generation to another.

Another reason why the Maltese language is not passed on from one to generation to another is because of mixed marriages. Many second-generation members and, even more so, third-generation ones, have married into other ethnic groups. The daughter's first husband and parent of her children was of Maltese origin. Her second husband however is not and therefore she cannot speak Maltese at home. With some friends of Maltese origins, she speaks Maltese, if they do know the language, and she recalls that when she had her own shop, she used to practice Maltese when Maltese people visited. The granddaughter married a third generation Italian, who, contrary to many of his age, is quite fluent in the Italian dialect of his family . This makes language retention more difficult, since in the presence of somebody who cannot understand Maltese, English always provides common ground.

The clubs and associations for the Maltese community were intended to help the Maltese diaspora integrate in Australia. However, these same clubs are instrumental in the maintenance of the Maltese language in Australia. This is because those attending such clubs tend to speak Maltese while being only surrounded by other people of Maltese origin. The grandmother visits several Maltese clubs and says that in the clubs she attends 'we speak Maltese, and we speak a lot about the old times in Malta'. She asserts that 'I go to various clubs. The people who gather there speak Maltese ... the people who came from Malta speak Maltese and not English. At the clubs, for example, you feel that you are in Malta.' Evidently, the old generation misses Malta and thus the island harbours nostalgia.

However, it is very evident that these clubs have not managed to attract the younger generations. The daughter explains that 'the clubs are mostly intended for a different age group and ... I work during the day'. On the other hand, she is happy that there is like 'a comeback' or Maltese revival with commercial entities offering products related to Malta. She says that 'maybe people are realising the importance of keeping one's roots' and possibly she thinks that this could lead to a revival of the language as well. The granddaughter says that 'I feel out of place there (in the clubs) because I do not speak Maltese and I grew up in a multicultural society; those clubs are more for the older generation'. In fact, the daughter laments that 'there is nothing for my age; I am fifty-four. The clubs are for the first generation only'. She admits that speaking Maltese is not very easy when you are surrounded by English all the time. 'I find the numbers a bit confusing. Sometimes I speak Maltese, but I am not sure of what I said. But I find it that the more I speak Maltese, the easier it is. As they say, practice makes perfect.'

## VIII. Conclusion

While this paper investigates one family, one can conclude that gradually, the Maltese diaspora in Australia is abandoning the Maltese language and choosing English as their main language of communication. Such a language shift happened within one generation in some families and within two generations in others. Now that the fourth generation derived from the mass migration, which happened between 1945 and 1969, is being raised, there is a strong feeling that eventually the Maltese language will perish from Australia. Cauchi (2002) asserts that migration affects not just the migrants who left their country of origin but also the consequent generations. This is because from a young age 'they find themselves constantly crossing the borders between two cultures' (Cauchi 2002, p. 253). The researcher can observe that while the grandmother is very fluent in Maltese and her language skills are similar to those of the residents of Malta, the daughter like many second-generation Maltese Australians is fluent in the Maltese language, at least orally. Nevertheless, both grandmother and daughter code-switch to better express themselves. However, this research shows that by the third-generation fluency in Maltese is minimal. Clearly, the language is in a crisis. Within the next twenty years, most of the post Second World War migrants will have passed away and that will probably mark the end of the Maltese language in Australia, since there is very little new blood in the community.

The general perception gathered from the investigation is that the Maltese language is no longer needed and relevant in Australia. The Maltese diaspora has integrated very well in Australia and most Maltese Australians are prospering. Their desire to integrate, coupled with the fact that most of these Maltese migrants left a country with a highly regarded British ethos and who were, therefore, used to an Anglo-Saxon environment, meant that many did not pass on their mother language to their offspring.

Maltese in Australia has the bleakest prognoses since it is battling a losing fight against the dominance

of English. The efforts to retain Maltese are decreasing, and the language is in grave danger. The death of a language will invariably give a hard blow to culture and to accumulated wisdom. One should not only emphasize the loss of linguistic diversity, but the fact that the disappearance of a language has broader implications. The economic, financial, and social onslaught against the use of Maltese in Australia, has made migrants realise that there is no viable reason why one should hold onto the language.

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