

Maltese: a millennial history

GIUSEPPE BRINCAT: *Malta. Una Storia Linguistica*, Introduction by Francesco Bruni, Università degli Studi di Udine, Udine, 2003, xvi + 430 pp., ISBN 88-8012-274-6, €30.

PROFESSOR Joseph Brincat's excellent study of the millennial history of our native language will surely place it where it deserves for scholars in the Italian-speaking world. In 2000 Brincat had published his *Il-Malti. Elf sena ta' Storja* in the *Kullana Kulturali* series in which he had presented in an analytic coherent whole the fruit of his long-standing linguistic and philological studies in the Maltese language. His achievement is all the more remarkable since Brincat's official specialisation is Italian linguistics and medieval literature and he has published important books on Italian philology together with a history of linguistics in Italian, published in Bologna in 1986.

Malta. Una Storia Linguistica is an expanded version of the Maltese book, while the English edition that Brincat is working upon should provide a definite consecration among scholars in the universal English-speaking world. This, I am sure, will do much more good than the deluge of sanctimonious statements and empty declarations of love towards our national language made for personal or political reasons.

Malta. Una Storia Linguistica has the honour of being the first in a series of studies that cover the plurilingual Mediterranean and which is being published by the *Centro Internazionale sul Plurilinguismo* at the Università degli Studi di Udine.

Many might question whether there is any foreign interest in a language spoken (to be honest in many cases rather incompetently) by fewer than half a million people, but then the language is a case of a particular development and a miraculous survival against all odds.

Linguistic situation

One of the great merits of Brincat's book is that it is most readable and avoids the traditional jargon that very often tends to make scientific books almost impossible for pleasure, a point that Francesco Bruni rightly notes in his presentation.

Although naturally most importance is given to the Maltese language, Brincat's book is really an account of languages in the islands and how they interacted with one another to bring about the present linguistic situation.

It is impossible to determine which language the pre-Punic population of the islands used, but we are on firmer ground with the coming of the Phoenicians and then the Romans. In this case we have the first instance of a bilingual situation, as can be attested from inscriptions in stone and on coins and, of course, the testimony by Luke in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Still, it is most odd that there are no vestigial remains of any pre-Arabic language which is testimony enough of the break which, according to the Arab historian Al-Himyari, took place



between 870 and 1048-49.

Incidentally Brincat has the distinction of bringing this particular Arab author within the ken of Maltese scholars. In the latter date, the settlement of 400 soldiers and their families must have brought about a new linguistic situation where, if there were any pockets of survivors, these must have been absorbed by the newcomers, creating a situation not dissimilar from that which obtained in Sicily and parts of southern Spain.

The long periods of cultural, linguistic, and religious co-existence were clearly detected in the rich Arabic layer that is the basis of the language. A chapter discusses the first contacts of this Semitic language with the Romance dialects to the north.

Brincat believes in a Latin Christian community that established a footing soon after the Norman liberation rather than in any contacts with Basilian monks. Since Christian belief then did not impose the use of vulgar Latin, the people could still retain their Semitic language, in the presence of the Romance languages and the Sicilian dialect being spoken by the "newcomers". This would start that feeling of "separateness" of the locals from "the others" that explains the survival of the language in spite of overwhelming odds, and which, to a degree, is still present today.

Brincat rightly deals at some length with this evolving linguistic situation, since this was in effective the formative period of the Maltese language. The further arrival of immigrants from Celano in Abruzzo in 1224 as part of the ethnic management carried out by the Swabians and to replace Muslims expelled to Lucera. Abate's report of 1240, no matter how one looks at it, seems to indicate a growing Christian population and a decreasing Muslim one in the islands.

A language in evolution

Between the 13th and 15th century, the written language in Malta was either Latin or the chancery *koiné* of the Sicilian dialect, but this often, and with increasing frequency over the years, betrayed a local influence with many spoken words creeping into the



THE official launching of Professor Joseph Brincat's book at the University of Udine last March. Dr Fabio Pasquarelli of Elsag SpA (Genova), sponsors of the project on *Il Mediterraneo Plurilingue*, as part of the activities for Genoa as European Culture Capital 2004, Professor Furio Honsell, Rector of the University of Udine, Professor Vincenzo Orioles, director of the Centro Internazionale sul Plurilinguismo (Udine), which was entrusted with the scientific aspects of the project, and the author. The main speaker was Professor Francesco Bruni of the University of Venice, who dwelt on the significance and the methodology of the book.

written form. Still even the leading citizens apparently were more familiar with the spoken language since, at one stage in a meeting of the *universitas*, the councillors complained against a foreign priest "because he could not speak the language".

In 1364, Benedictine monks had even refused to found a convent on the island since, they said, they did not know the local language.

Brincat provides an excellent analysis of this evolving situation when a good number of lexical terms started making their way into the language and many of which still survive in our modern language. In many ways the very grammatical foundations were being laid.

Still, Pietro Caxaro's *Cantilena* of c. 1470 remains a bright flash in a dark age with Maltese being used for a literary purpose. Brincat concludes that the poem belongs to the Christian, Latin, and Romance cultural environment because it uses thematic, rhetorical, and formal elements of the European tradition. In trying to account for the Sicilian component in the language, Brincat proposes a number of problems and suggests solutions. For example, he analyses the demographic movements which must have been quite considerable at times.

The coming of the Order of St John in 1530 set in motion deep changes in all aspects of life in the island, not least the language. The knights' language of administration was Italian which made it possible for Maltese men of learning to make use of an "international" language with a full pedigree. Such scholars as Antonio Bosio, Gian Francesco Abela, Count Ciantar, Canon Agius de Soldanis are some of the examples in a tradition that would survive strongly well within the British period.

The fact that the Order was a multinational organisation, with its seven remaining effective languages, never made it possible for any one single language to obtain an indisputable pre-eminence. In such a situation, Maltese could continue to survive and even develop dialectal changes. In 1796 Mikiel Anton Vassalli identified four separate varieties.

In discussing the survival of the language under the Order, Brincat explains this as having been due to the fact that the various migrations were never overpowering and had time to be integrated and assimilated with the native stock. And since this new input consisted mostly of males, within the maternal home the old language would survive (shades of the even older distinction between *omm* and *missier*).

A very useful chapter discusses the study of Maltese during the period of the Order. One constant problem was the origin of the language. Quintinus calls it an African language, while Abela was the first local scholar to recognize its Arabic origins, using the indication of such learned visitors as Leoni and, especially, Kircher.

Maltese and English

The British presence brought about a new linguistic reality with the new colonial power at first not ready to shake the boat by insisting on introducing their language... at least not until political developments made them wary of the local predilection for Italian culture which could become a call for political separateness. Anyway, English eventually came to be the third language in play.

Through it all, Maltese remained a living reality, scooped at by the Italianate classes as "a kitchen language", but more wisely seen by the Anglophiles as a possible means to supplant the predominance of Italian. The Language Question was fated to become a complex problem and would only be definitely solved by the dropping of the first Fascist bombs on the island in June 1940.

At present the importance of Maltese never really comes up for questioning, although the linguistic situation is anything but simple. Lip-service is paid to the native language with proper rejoicings that followed its acceptance as an official EU language only to find us woefully unprepared to meet the expected demands. The proliferation of radio stations, in particular, made it possible for anybody simply with the nerve to speak from behind a microphone to take a national stage even without preparation.

The popularity of Italian TV from the mid-Fifties onwards brought about a renaissance for the language, which was partly offset by the introduction of cable TV and ready access to high-quality programming mainly in English.

The final chapter of Brincat's book discusses the linguistic experiences and the structure of Maltese in the twentieth century. The topics discussed include politics and language, the educational system, phonology and phonetics morphology and syntax, semantics, the development of the lexical stock, Maltese-English and anglicised Maltese, the system of writing words coming from English, the effect of this heavy contact with English, the varieties of Maltese, and Maltese spoken outside the island.

Joseph Brincat's *Malta. Una Storia Linguistica* is a remarkable book for the breadth and depth of its contents and for its superb analytical approach. I doubt how many books published locally this year will reach this level. Anybody with more than a superficial interest in the language and who can read Italian should get a copy and read it carefully through for an enriching experience. For all those who can not read Italian, they just have to wait for the English edition... they will be well rewarded!

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