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Young Children Living Bilingually in Malta

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Abstract:

Malta presents a unique and interesting sociolinguistic scenario of widespread bilingualism in Maltese and English. Over 95% of the population are ethnic Maltese, learn and use Maltese in their everyday life as a first language, in parallel co-existence with English. In fact, over 85% of Maltese people are also fluent in English. This chapter takes a look at the bilingualism of Maltese children aged four to seven, and describes the ways in which the children interact bilingually in the home, at kindergarden and in public play areas across the two Maltese islands. All the studies reported here were conducted independently of each other in the last few years and they have produced remarkably similar results. In each instance a balanced use of each language was observed, such that it can be safely concluded that young Maltese children are already functioning bilingually by age 4-5. This is very similar to the situation found in primary and secondary schools, and in Maltese society in general.

1. The sociolinguistics of bilingualism in Malta

Recently, while sunbathing on one of the popular Maltese beaches, I heard a brief conversation between a girl about six years of age, who was swimming in front of me, and her mother who was sunbathing next to me:

Girl: **Ma issa ejja ilghab mieghi.**

Look ma this is protecting me from the waves (*showing a piece of wood she was holding in front of her face*)

Mother: **Iva ejja hawnhekk.**

Girl: **Mum now come and play with me.**

Mother: **Yes, but come here.**

I immediately realised how typical this use of language was among Maltese children. In this example, the girl utters one full sentence in Maltese (shown in bold) asking her mother to play with her, followed by a full sentence in English giving information about what she was doing, and then her mother reacts by ordering her in Maltese to come close by. In this chapter I would like to show how Maltese children are growing up in a fully bilingual environment, where they are not only exposed to the Maltese and English languages in a non-diglossic context, but to which they are also contributing as active participants by interacting bilingually.

The Maltese scenario presents a unique situation where one ethnic group functions bilingually on a daily basis. According to the traditional concept of languages as depicted by J.A. Fishman (1967), it can be described as bilingualism without diglossia because the two languages are used in all social domains and treated on an equal footing. Indeed, the majority of citizens have command of both Maltese and English, in both written and spoken forms to various degrees, and therefore, as explained by A. Hudson (2002) and by D. Snow (2010, 2013), such a context would be considered as non-diglossic. According to J.A. Fishman (1967: 85) a speech community that functions bilingually without diglossia must be showing signs of “rapid social change, of great social unrest, of widespread abandonment of prior norms before the consolidation of new ones”. However, the Maltese context challenges this observation because Maltese society has been operating in this way for a good number of decades. While it is true that the Maltese language has been influenced by English on a number of linguistic levels such as the morphological and lexical ones, and that the variety of English used in Malta is described as Maltese English (J. Brincat 2011, A. Vella 2013) one cannot say that the Maltese language has been in any way ‘swallowed’ by this major international language, or that Maltese English is in any way unintelligible to the international community. In A. Camilleri Grima (2015) I explain this successful bilingual reality in terms of a healthy tension between valuing the Maltese language for identity and self-preservation, while adopting English for instrumental reasons in order to fit in with the rest of the world. There is no doubt that the fact that Maltese was recognised as an official European Union (EU) language in 2004 when Malta became a member state, strengthened the social and political standing of the Maltese language.

In this contribution I concentrate on young Maltese children and my aim is to describe and discuss how they function bilingually in Maltese and English in the home, at kindergarten and during play time in public gardens and play areas. I will start by presenting the local sociolinguistic context.

The Maltese Constitution recognises Maltese as the national language and both Maltese and English as official languages (Constitution of the Republic of Malta 1974, Section 5). Maltese law is written in both language versions, although the Maltese one is binding. In public administration, for example, the *Gazzetta tal-Gvern ta' Malta/Malta Government Gazette* is published on-line in two separate language versions, but it is printed and is available in pdf format on-line with the two languages appearing side by side on the same page, as shown in Figure 1.

<p>BORD TAD-DIRETTURI TAL-KORPORAZZJONI GHAS-SERVIZZI TAL-ILMA</p> <p>NGHARRFU b' din illi bis-sahha tas-setghat moghtija lilu bl-artikoli 5 u 7 tal-Att dwar il-Korporazzjoni ghas-Servizzi tal-Ilma, il-Ministru għall-Energija u s-Sahha ghogbu jahtar mill-ġdid lill-Bord tad-Diretturi tal-Korporazzjoni ghas-Servizzi tal-Ilma kif jidher hawn taht b'seħh mis-27 ta' April, 2015 għal perjodu ta' sena.</p>	<p>WATER SERVICES CORPORATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS</p> <p>IT is notified that, in exercise of the powers conferred through articles 5 and 7 of the Water Services Corporation Act, the Minister for Energy and Health has re-appointed the Water Services Corporation Board of Directors with effect from the 27th April, 2015 for a period of one year.</p>
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Figure 1. Extract No 608 from the *Gazzetta tal-Gvern ta' Malta/Malta Government Gazette* (30 June 2015, page 11, 345)

The Maltese media is roughly equally divided into English and Maltese broadcasts on radio, television and in printed matter. Two of the four daily newspapers and five of the eleven weekly papers are in English. Out of the thirteen Maltese radio stations at least six broadcast in Maltese, a couple of others have programmes in both languages such as the University-based station *Campusfm*, and the rest broadcast only in English (A. Vella 2013). There are six local TV stations and on all of them most programmes are transmitted in Maltese, but films and documentaries, as well as adverts in English are shown. Films in Maltese in local cinemas have recently started to be shown, such as the successful film called ‘Simshar’ based on a real life tragedy at sea¹. Telenovelas in Maltese on local TV stations are very popular. English documentaries and other programmes in English on TV, and films in English at the cinema, are shown without dubbing. In 2015 a new radio and TV station were inaugurated in order to transmit live parliamentary sittings which are always carried out in Maltese.

In education, although the teaching of the majority of subjects relies on textbooks in English starting from the Early Years upwards, the use of Maltese is widespread especially as a spoken medium of communication among learners and between the teacher and the learners (A. Camilleri 1995). Bilingual classroom discourse in Malta has been well researched, and there is clear evidence that the learners’ linguistic repertoires, including the dialects of Maltese, Standard Maltese and English are, in many cases, admirably used to promote and sustain learning across subjects (A. Camilleri Grima 2013, M.T. Farrugia 2013, H. Gauci/ A. Camilleri Grima 2013). It will suffice to say that at school leaving age (age 16), the national matriculation examinations required for entry to further education include five subjects, namely Maltese History, Social Studies, Religion, European Studies, and Environmental Studies, in which candidates are allowed to answer questions in either Maltese or English. The language subjects are examined in the language under investigation and the rest are examined in English. To gain entry to a post-secondary institution and/or to the University of Malta, candidates must pass the examinations in Maltese, English, Mathematics and one Science subject. To enter teacher education courses at the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, passes in written and spoken proficiency tests in both Maltese and English are obligatory. The *de factobilingual* school policy has been in place for many decades and it will remain so in the foreseeable future given that both the Maltese government, as well as European policy, support bilingualism (Commission of the European Communities 2007, Council of Europe 2015).

National statistics, based on self-report data, give a clear picture of how the vast majority of the Maltese people are bilingual, with more than a third of them being trilingual (Table 1).

¹ http://www.imdb.com/media/rm2597570816/tt2521700?ref_=tt_ov_i#

Languages spoken	Well	Average	Total	% of Maltese citizens
Maltese	352,121	5,571	357,692	90%
English	248,570	61,709	310,279	78%
Italian	93,401	62,863	156,264	39%
French	11,698	18,886	30,584	8%
German	3,979	3,987	7,966	2%
Arabic	3,948	2,457	6,405	1.6%

Table 1. Languages spoken in Malta (Adapted from the Census of population and housing 2011, National Statistics Office 2014)

The essential characteristics of the speech community under investigation that need to be highlighted are that, (i) it consists of a single ethnic group; (ii) it has experienced bilingualism historically for many centuries. For instance, there was a degree of bilingualism concerning the Maltese vernacular and the Latin and Italian languages from the Middle Ages to the latter part of the nineteenth century (J. Brincat 2011); (iii) both Maltese and English have been present in the education system since education became compulsory for all at the beginning of the twentieth century under British rule; and (iv) to a lesser or greater degree the Maltese population has been functionally bilingual in Maltese and English for decades, with each language expanding its roles, e.g. English gaining important ground in the tourism industry which is the mainstay of the Maltese economy, and Maltese developing intensively in terms of lexical elaboration. Malta's entry to the EU offered the opportunity for EU legislation to be translated into Maltese, and this created a new translation and interpreting industry. Such new language services brought about "an expansion of the language's functional range, allowing it to serve, for example, as a medium of scientific and technical discourse" (G. Ferguson 2006: 24). Since the focus of this article is on children, in the following sections I will focus on three domains: the home, the kindergarten, and the public play area, in order to describe the bilingual life of young Maltese children. In order to do this, I will draw mainly on the research conducted by M. Sultana (2014), T. Scerri (2015) and D. Caruana Lia (forthcoming).

2. Bilingualism in the home

M. Sultana (2014) observed two boys (names changed to Aron and Brent) and two girls (names changed to Clara and Donna) aged 4–5 years in their homes. She visited the families for an average of four hours per week at different times during the day, over a period of nine months during 2013. All four children who were chosen randomly by convenience sampling (L. Cohen/ L. Manion/ K. Morrison 2000: 102), resided in a central conurbation, attended the local state kindergarten and hailed from working class families where none of the parents had attended school beyond the age of 16. At the start of the study it was ascertained that all the parents spoke Maltese as L1 but also had knowledge of English. In addition to her field notes and recordings the researcher asked the parents to keep a language diary on certain days of the week for fourteen weeks in which they recorded samples of speech during activities such as waking up the child, getting the child dressed, during meals, dropping off or collecting the child from school and other daily routines.

Tables 2 and 3, based on M. Sultana's (2014) work, present a succinct picture of the presence of Maltese and English in the home life of these children. Table 2 takes into account three types of activities carried out by the children, namely, watching television, using the internet, and reading books. The internet is largely used in English, although Clara was observed to use one Maltese site. Books, on the other hand, were widely available in both languages. As Table 2 shows, books in English are likely to be more plentiful in the home.

	T.V. programmes	Internet	Books
Aron	Only in English	Only in English	Equal number in Maltese & English
Brent	All in English except one in Maltese and one in Italian	Only in English	Two-thirds in English and one-third in Maltese
Clara	Mostly in English but watched two in Maltese and three in Italian	All in English but one site in Maltese	Two-thirds in English and one-third in Maltese
Donna	Only in English	Only in English	In English except for one book in Maltese

Table 2. Children's exposure to Maltese and English at home

In order to obtain a more holistic picture of bilingual life at home it is necessary to look at Table 3 which provides the percentages of spoken language in the homes of the four children. In the case of Aron, Brent and Clara, Maltese was much more profusely used than English by the children and their parents. In the case of Donna, there was a more balanced bilingual interaction.

	Aron		Brent		Clara		Donna	
	child	parents	child	parents	child	parents	child	parents
Maltese	87%	85%	81%	64%	76%	90%	47%	59%
English	13%	15%	19%	36%	24%	10%	53%	41%

Table 3. Percentages of Maltese and English words used by children and their parents

Aron is an only son whose father works at the airport interacting mainly in English at work while his mother works in a factory using almost only Maltese. The language of the home is largely Maltese, but English is used in polite formulas, as in 'good morning' and 'please'; and to refer to items such as 'socks', 'noodles' and 'toast'. Aron did utter sentences in English occasionally such as, 'Today I am going to school with dad' when addressing the researcher. The researcher spoke Maltese to the child but the child was aware that she was a 'teacher' and this could have triggered his use of English. Many other utterances addressed to the mother were in Maltese: 'tini oħra għax għandi l-guħ' (*give me another one because I'm hungry*); 'ma rridx brodu, ma rridx laħam' (*I don't want broth, I don't want meat*).

Brent has an older sister aged eleven. Their mother is a housewife and their father is a computer technician and is more likely to use English at work than the mother. Although Maltese is clearly the dominant language of home conversation, the mother

said she makes a conscious effort to address Brent in English, for instance, when dropping him off at school: ‘Bye’, ‘God Bless you’, ‘take care’, ‘be good’, ‘pay attention’. Brent’s parents reported that they had made a conscious decision to adopt Maltese as the language of the home, and to expose their children to English through books and by occasionally using English with them. Brent’s utterances in Maltese tend to be longer than those in English, as in:

Brent’s utterances in Maltese

Iva kollox kilt.

(Yes I’ve eaten everything)

Ma rridx laring illum.

(I don’t want any oranges today)

Ma rridx niekol is-soppa.

(I don’t want to eat any soup)

Illum ghall-iskola?

*(Are we going to school today?)***Brent’s utterances in English**

Bye bye

Good night

Show!

I love pasta

Clara has an older brother aged ten. The mother is a housewife and the father is a store-keeper and they use Maltese throughout the day. Nevertheless, they sporadically use English, for instance during meal times: ‘Do you want any more?’, or when dropping off Clara at school: ‘Bye, love you’. The mother admitted that she sometimes makes an effort to speak English to her daughter in order to provide Clara with an opportunity to feel more confident in an English speaking environment. The following are some examples of Clara’s utterances:

Clara’s utterances in Maltese

Ma kiltx kollox illum.

(I didn’t eat everything today)

Ma rridx aktar.

(I don’t want any more)

Kemmu hu tajjeb.

*(This tastes really nice)***Clara’s utterances in English**

Thank you.

Love you.

Good morning.

Donna has an older sister aged nine, and a younger brother aged two. The father works in a factory where Maltese is used and the mother is a housewife and uses Maltese predominantly in the household. However, during the observations it transpired that in the presence of the brother-toddler, English is used as a form of ‘motherese’, using words like ‘paint’, ‘pink’, ‘chocolate’, ‘nice’, ‘police’, ‘cereal’, ‘strawberry milk’; and other adapted words like ‘wakey, wakey’ for ‘to wake up’, ‘milky’ for milk and ‘facey’ for ‘face’. Given that the mother speaks in this way to the young brother, Donna imitates this and uses the same form of motherese. It is interesting that as A. Borg (2011) notes, the use of English as motherese is eventually replaced by the use of Maltese as the children grow older.

The final reflection I would like to make about language use in the Maltese family is that all the parents included in M. Sultana's (2014) project were surprisingly aware of how Maltese and English were being used at home. The following quotations from the interviews with these parents illustrate how the children's parents spoke about their language use in the home:

L-iktar li nitkellmu bil-Malti. Bil-Malti drajt u l-Malti l-lingwa tagħna. Meta jkun hemm kliem aktar faċli bl-Ingliż bħal 'bus', 'car' nuża l-Ingliż biex ikun jaf jitkellm mal-barranin u meta ma jkunx jaf xi kelma bl-Ingliż naqleb għall-Malti jew nuża terminu iehor. (Aron's mother)

We speak mainly in Maltese. I'm used to speaking Maltese and Maltese is our language. When I find easy words in English like 'bus', 'car' I use English so that Aron will know how to speak English to foreigners, and when he does not understand a word in English I switch to Maltese or use another term. (Aron's mother)

Donna qed titgħallem il-kuluri biż-żewġ lingwi imma l-aktar li nużaw l-Ingliż, pereżempju 'orange' mhux 'orangjo', 'pink' mhux 'roża'. Meta nara li Donna mhix qed tifhem meta nsaqsiha għal xi kulur li ngħidilha bl-Ingliż, nirrepeti bil-Malti. (Donna's mother)

Donna is learning the colours in both languages but we use English more frequently, for example 'orange' not 'orangjo', 'pink' not 'roza'. When I feel that Donna is finding it difficult to pick the right colour from a set of crayons if I ask her in English, I repeat the colour in Maltese. (Donna's mother)

During the interviews the parents were able to speak about their employment of bilingualism fluently and with ease. They all explained that Maltese was the first language of the home, and that they were aware of how English pervades their children's life; of how they sometimes shifted from one language to another and of how at times they made an effort not to; and that their overall belief was that while Maltese was a natural and obvious choice, it was necessary to expose their children to English as this was crucial in education and for life. This perspective that English is synonymous with education is also attested by A. Borg (2011).

3. Bilingualism in early childhood education

The first study in Malta that looked specifically at language in a kindergarten setting through observation was that of I. Banković (2012). This was a case study that studied language use in two kindergarten classrooms with children aged 4. According to I. Banković (2012: 72):

The findings showed that acquisition of English was a priority. Activities which had great potential for children's learning and development were organised. These include storytelling, drama and crafts.

Similarly, M. Sultana (2014) conducted six hours of observation in three kindergarten classrooms in a large state school located in the largest town of Malta. Table 4 gives an idea of how the teachers of the children mentioned in the previous section, Aron

(Teacher A), Brent and Clara who were in the same class (Teacher BC), and Donna (Teacher D), adopted language by activity.

Number of activities by language during researcher's observation period			
	English	Maltese	Both languages
Teacher A	1	5	8
Teacher B C	2	6	8
Teacher D	0	11	4

Table 4. Number of activities by language in three kindergarten classes

The information gleaned from Table 4 suggests that while Teacher A and Teacher BC conducted many activities in Maltese with a majority of activities utilizing both languages, Teacher D emphasised Maltese. Indeed, the teacher herself is a significant variable when it comes to language choice in Maltese classrooms (A. Camilleri 1995). As mentioned by I. Banković (2012), M. Sultana (2014) also refers to the use of songs, CDs, and games in English and, in fact, this naturally results in the use of English and Maltese within the same activity because the dialogue and interaction with the children in activities using English media tends to involve Maltese anyway. The following is an outline of a two-hour period of observation in Aron's kindergarten classroom:

- First:** Children watch video in English called 'Noah's Ark' twice. The volume of the video is very low and the children do not seem to be paying much attention. This lasts 35 min.
- Second:** Activity in English about letter sounds like 'cl' (cliff, clap), including a word search game. The children write down words, colour the words starting with the 'cl' sound. This session lasts 45 minutes. The teacher speaks mostly in English to the group and to individual pupils but towards the end of the activity switches to Maltese.
- Third:** Activity in Maltese, including reading and vocabulary work. At the start of the activity the teacher specifies that now they are shifting language to Maltese 'Mela tfal, issa ha naqilbu għall-Malti' (*so, children, now we are switching to Maltese*). This activity lasts for 30 minutes and ends with a prayer in Maltese.

It is typical of teachers to draw pupils' attention to the use of either Maltese or English at any point in the interaction. In the example from Teacher A's class above it was toward the end of the activity in English, and highlighting that the next activity was going to be in Maltese, that the teacher announces the switch from English to Maltese. However, in the following excerpt transcribed from a recording of an activity in Teacher BC class (M. Sultana 2014: 52), the teacher requests the use of English half-way through the interaction:

	Interaction	<i>Translation</i>
Teacher	What should we do before we cross the road?	
Brent	Inharsu 'l hemm u 'l hemm.	<i>We look there and there</i>
Teacher	Why?	
Brent	Biex jekk ikun hemm karozza nieqfu.	<i>So that if we see a car we stop.</i>
Teacher	Try to speak in English	
Brent	When we are crossing the road we look this way and that way.	
Teacher	Very good !	

Even from this brief interaction one can appreciate how Brent could understand and speak English, but using Maltese came more spontaneously to him as he answered in Maltese to the teacher's questions in English. The teacher, on her part, insisted on an answer in English and Brent was able to give it. This is quite typical of bilingual use in Maltese classrooms throughout the age groups (A. Camilleri Grima 2013, M.T. Farrugia 2013).

D. Caruana Lia (forthcoming) has observed, recorded and transcribed kindergarten lessons with children aged 4 in two different schools. The data on language use that emerges from her lesson transcriptions is very interesting, and concurs with previous findings. For example, in one of the story-telling activities, there is constant reference to explicit metalinguistic awareness activities, as in, 'X'ngħidulha bil-Malti?' (*what is this called in Maltese*), and 'X'number hu tnejn in English?' (*How do you say number 2 in English*). During a reading activity the book is in Maltese but rather than simply reading it out aloud the teacher discusses the pictures with the children. This means that they sometimes identify objects in the pictures using English, like 'tomatoes', 'pumpkin' and 'treat'; and sometimes in Maltese, like 'pala' (*spade*) and 'gallinar' (*hen coop*). Many a time, when the children give the word in English the teacher asks explicitly for the equivalent word in Maltese 'Black in English. Bil-Malti x'ngħidulu black?' (*What is black in Maltese?*); or simply repeats the word or phrase in Maltese. 'kanna tal-ilma in English jgħidulha water spout' (*in English is called water spout*). This happens at other moments during the day like in the morning when the teacher says 'good Morning in English u bongu bil-Malti hux veru?' and 'Ejja tlaqna, hurry up'. More significant is when during the teaching of the alphabet the teacher asks for a student's name that starts with the 'sound 'g' in English and another one with 'j' in English'. The letter 'g' in Maltese sounds like the first letter of George and the 'j' as the first letter of Yanika. So the teacher emphasizes how the names sound in English by referring to alphabet letters in Maltese.

During an activity which involves the practice of numbers, and includes a number song in English, all the numbers are uttered in English (D. Caruana Lia, forthcoming). The following is an excerpt from the conversation that follows the song:

		<i>Translation</i>
Teacher	Dak x'number hu? (<i>pointing to different numbers on the board</i>)	<i>What number is that?</i>
Girl	Five, seven, six.	
Teacher	Brava	<i>Good girl.</i>
Girl	Four	
Teacher	Ghoddhom.	<i>Count them.</i>
Girl	One, two, three, four.	
Teacher	Dan x'number hu? (<i>pointing to different numbers on the board</i>)	<i>What number is this?</i>
Girl	Five, four, three, six.	
Teacher	Very good! Tini six.	<i>Very good! Count to six.</i>
Girl	One, two, three, four, five, six.	
Teacher	Very good. Ċapċpulha. (<i>The children clap their hands</i>)	<i>Very good. Give her a hand.</i>

The use of Maltese and English when referring to numbers was researched by M. Cucciardi (1990). He found that Maltese people refer to numbers in English when telling age, class at school, bus numbers, bus fares, and lotto numbers. The same group of respondents used Maltese when giving the time and telling the number of family members. When referring to the cost of objects there was a tendency to use English when mentioning cents and Maltese when referring to pounds (Cucciardi's study was conducted prior to the introduction of the Euro). When giving the date or the date of birth, there often was a mixed language construction as in: 'it-tmienja ta' Jannar, nineteen seventy-four' (8 January 1974).

As a concluding remark on the use of Maltese and English at kindergarten level, it must be affirmed that teachers often draw the children's attention to whether they are speaking one or the other language, often ask for the equivalent word in the other language, and when giving instructions or explaining something they repeat in both languages: 'Close your eyes. Għalquhom sew. Kulhadd għajnejh magħluqin sew. So I want you to close your eyes. Close your eyes' (*Close your eyes properly. Everyone close their eyes tight*), and as in 'Twahħal, sticky, hux vera twahħal? (*It is sticky, isn't it sticky?*).

4. Bilingualism in public play areas

T. Scerri (2015) carried out extensive data collection in public play areas and gardens across the islands of Malta and Gozo. This researcher (T. Scerri 2015) spent about thirty hours observing a random sample of children and noting their linguistic interaction. Several of her findings are noteworthy of mention, such as the fact that in Malta's island of Gozo the parents or adult carers are much more likely to be involved in the child's play: 81% of conversations in Gozo involved an adult, while 45% of conversations in Malta involved an adult. However, both in Malta and Gozo, whenever an adult was involved it was largely to give instructions and directions to the children. Indeed, in only one conversation held between a mother and her son did the mother ask questions about colours instead of instructing him to do something using the imperative form. Another important finding is that while in Malta the languages used are Standard Maltese and English, all the conversations recorded in Gozo consist of dialectal Maltese and English.

(For detailed reviews of dialects in Malta and Gozo see M. Azzopardi-Alexander 2011, A. Borg 2011, A. Camilleri Grima 2009).

T. Scerri's (2015) analysis is largely qualitative, but she also produced word counts in order to quantify the use of Maltese and English. Out of a total of 5,024 words, 2,713 (54%) are in Maltese and 2,311 (46%) are in English. This is rather similar to a word count based on a set of lesson transcriptions noted in another study (A. Camilleri 1995), which included 48% Maltese words and 52% English ones. T. Scerri (2015) gives a breakdown of her word count by locality in Malta and Gozo. It transpires that in Gozo 63% of words are uttered in Maltese as opposed to 37% in English. In Malta, there are four localities (Naxxar, President's Garden in Attard, Sliema, Ta' Qali) with a significantly higher percentage of English words as opposed to three localities (Birzebbuga, Rabat, Qormi) where Maltese predominates.

T. Scerri (2015) found that it is not unusual for children to play together for some time without actually talking to each other. Furthermore, she noticed that when children talk during play their utterances tend to be very brief. In order to delve deeper into this issue I conducted an MLU (mean length of utterance) analysis of the play area transcripts in order to check whether there were obvious differences in the length of the children's utterances when they spoke in Maltese and in English. I found that the MLU of utterances in Maltese is 2.8, in English it is 3.6, and in utterances containing elements from both languages it is 4.4. This could be rather surprising at first, but upon further linguistic examination it comes to light that a semantic meaning in Maltese which is expressed in single word items, in English it requires two words or more. Consider the following examples, which are expressions with equivalent meaning, found in the data:

Maltese	English
inzel	climb down
ejja	let's go
attent	watch out
lesta	I'm free

Furthermore, it is important to note that mixed language utterances amount to only 14% of the total number of utterances in T. Scerri's (2015) data, since 51% of utterances were in Maltese and 35% were in English. In the mixed utterances, 8% contain only one word in the other language, and among these Maltese tags in English utterances predominate, as in: 'It's rolling ok, *hux?*' (*isn't it?*). When whole phrases in each language are used in one utterance, as in: '*Pa nista*' I get down?' (*Dad, can I get down?*), such utterances would have a larger MLU. And more significantly, inter-sentential switching is much more frequent. Consider the following example from T. Scerri's (2015) transcript in which Boy A opens the conversation by asking a question in Maltese to which Boy B replies in English. When Girl A joins the conversation she first used English and then immediately switched to Maltese. Girl B joins the interaction by first speaking in Maltese and then switching to English. Indeed, such intersentential switching is much more typical than mixed sentences.

	<i>Actual conversation</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Boy A	(after a short period of silent play) X'ghamiltu l-iskola?	<i>What did you do at school?</i>
Boy B	Insects, ants, birds, parrots	
Boy A	Le, jien minn hawn (referring to the direction of play)	<i>No, I'm going this way.</i>
Girl A	Are you going? Jien minn hawn.	<i>I'm going this way.</i>
Girl B	Ara x'ghamel! There's a big dinosaur.	<i>See what he did !</i>
Boy A	I've had enough.	
Girl A	Ejja nerġghu nitilghu.	<i>Come let's go up again!</i>

5. Conclusion

Young children in Malta are exposed to two languages and probably other ones as well, through the media, in books, and their environment. At school, especially, there is a constant reference and awareness raising to which language is being used, such that if something is expressed in English the teacher would request the children to find the equivalent in Maltese and vice-versa. In fact, this is a fundamental characteristic of bilingualism in Malta, i.e. there is a constant and obvious individual and social consciousness of whether communication is being carried out in English or Maltese.

In A. Camilleri Grima (2001) I examined the relationship between language use in the Maltese bilingual classroom on the one hand, and in the societal context within which the classroom is embedded, on the other. I concluded that the classroom is a microcosm of Maltese society because the discursive and literacy events taking place inside it are a reflection of societal values and identities. In turn, they shape and elaborate the linguistic repertoire of Maltese bilinguals. The data presented in this chapter corroborates the previous findings because, for example, the reading of books and the use of internet sites by children is much more extensively done in English than in Maltese, while spoken discourse by parents, kindergarten teachers and young children is largely conducted in Maltese. The overall picture that emerges is one of balanced bilingualism across social domains.

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