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The importance of preserving the Maltese Language and Culture among the Maltese Diaspora

When I offered to present this paper about the beauty and importance of the Maltese language in education, I started to write it in English. After a while, I was thinking that it is absurd to write about our language in a foreign language. Therefore, I decided to express myself in our language... Is that right? Who can blame me!

It would not have been appropriate to talk about this subject if, up to this day and age, one still encounters people with the wrong attitude towards the speaking and teaching of Maltese. I never spoke about this topic because I feel that it is not proper to remember those shameful days for us Maltese to witness in Malta a struggle between us regarding the rights of the Maltese Language.

Ashamed to speak our language

I am not alluding to the disagreement between us regarding the details in orthography, but I am referring to the shameful state that up to the last century Maltese was only spoken by peasants and in the kitchen and ignored completely in courts and schools. The Maltese language, pure or impure, was not officially recognized.

To those who do not understand the right and the need of the Maltese language and to those who still believe that Maltese should be ignored let us tell them to look at the history of the Maltese people. Who is to blame for such ignorance and lack of
language education among the Maltese people? Who is to blame for keeping the language out of the culture and educating our people?

Those who maintain that this ignorance and lack of appreciation by our people is due to the revival and introduction of Maltese language I call them fools, unwise and unpatriotic.

You do not need to be of great intelligence to understand why our people in previous centuries were deprived of developing their spoken language. The history of the Maltese language is solidly linked with the history of Malta. Our islands were always dominated by other nations. Those foreign rulers, for obvious reasons and to their advantage, never encouraged and permitted the Maltese to develop their language. They knew that the maintenance of the language of a nation results in germinating pride and unity among the citizens and instill in the hearts of the people strong patriotic sentiments.

The previous Maltese generations used to accept the fact that they should speak and write according to the whims of the foreigners. Our language was never accepted as the official language of Malta neither by the Government nor by the church. The past should serve as a lesson for the present and the future and I do not think it is appropriate to point the finger at individuals or groups or blame one another.

Are we proud of our language?

Our language, which is spoken only in Malta and by the Maltese who live abroad, is one of the ancient Mediterranean languages, because it contains various elements that are not all the same and unique. We find words borrowed from Sicilian and Italian languages.

As we shall see later on other words and phrases were inherited from Arabic and more recently, especially in the last 200 years, from English, which had a great influence on the Mediterranean languages.

We can say that because of the strategic position of the island of Malta in the middle of the Mediterranean, a position which is an envy of many other larger countries, the Maltese language was developed as it is today influenced by the European languages. However, the countries of North Africa aided to give our language a different and complete outlook.
It is true to say that the Maltese language, like many other languages, has survived because of the tenacity of the inhabitants in spite of being neglected by those who were more educated and had power to do so. History of the Maltese civilization embellished and enriched the Maltese language as we speak it today.

**Bilingualism**

Every human being is capable to learn the maternal language in a natural way. When children start attending school they are exposed and taught not only grammatical Maltese but also other languages. In our situation, English is the dominant language taught in school. Learning and speaking two languages simultaneously is called bilingualism.

It is to our advantage that most of our people in Malta can speak English or else we would have been isolated and cut off from the rest of the world. English is considered as a universal language. In fact, English is our official language together with Maltese. English is our second language and using it, we are able to communicate with the rest of the world.

It is our right and obligation to insist to preserve our language, which we inherited from our forebearers. This language preservation is not an easy task but it is not impossible. I sincerely salute those thousands of Maltese who in these last decades worked hard and fought to keep the Maltese language alive and widely spoken so that it will not end up in the archives of the national library.

I have strong conviction that the Maltese language will never cease to exist in Malta especially. Fortunately, we are witnessing the language widely used in the modern media like newspapers, internet, radio and television. Multitude of magazines, books and other publications in Maltese have been printed in these last 50 years. Maltese is widely taught in schools and even at university level.

**Maintenance of the language by Maltese living abroad**

However, today I would like to speak about preserving and sharing the Maltese language in Malta and abroad. This subject is close to my heart. I have been teaching Maltese in South Australia for over thirty years and I was the co-founder and the president of the Federation of Maltese Language Schools of Australia (FMLS).
The responsibility of the maintenance of the Maltese language rests mainly on the parents and the many Maltese associations operating overseas. Parents must insist that their children and grandchildren be taught how to speak the language especially at home. The Maltese associations should try to establish and support the language schools where our beautiful language is taught to future generations.

**Maltese language schools in many parts of the world**

During my presidency, we witnessed very active Maltese language schools in the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia. We used to organise an annual national conference for teachers and coordinators of these schools to discuss the administration of schools and the teaching techniques. We also held professional development for teachers of Maltese.

Although the community language schools are subsidised by the Australian Government, we did request other assistance from the Maltese government. I even wrote an online year 12 course on the internet, which was approved and accredited by the Board of Studies of South Australia. Several students from diverse States and Territories have undertaken this course and were given a certificate of achievement by the Education Department of South Australia. Unfortunately, this year I had to withdraw the course because it was running at a loss.

The Maltese ministry of education several times donated books and other teaching material to our schools, through the initiative of the respective Malta High Commission in many parts of the world. However, I am afraid to say, there was always lack of more relevant assistance so that these schools could be more efficient and educationally solid and viable.

We found that it is not easy to convince parents and Maltese associations operating abroad the importance of the Maltese language to strengthen the culture and the identity of Malta. They argue that the Maltese language is not a viable proposition for their children and they are better off to learn another language, which will be more financial beneficial for future employment. According to them Greek, Italian Japanese Chinese or other Asiatic languages are such languages.

**We asked for help**

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One of the problems that faced the administrators of the Maltese schools was, and still is, to find qualified teachers in Maltese within the communities and to dedicate their time and expertise either free of charge or for a very few dollars. The Ministry of Education was requested on several occasions to include the few Maltese language schools operating abroad under its jurisdiction and to give them assistance to boost their morale and prestige. The ministry was also asked to help the teachers to improve their method of teaching by providing professional development so that they can provide a very high quality of teaching.

We were always short of modern technological equipment such as computers, laptops, tablets, video recorders, electronic whiteboards etc which are the best and effective tools in the hands of every teacher to increase greater interest in the language.

We also requested that either here in Malta or in other parts of the world where Maltese citizens reside, experts in Maltese language be engaged to write courses and teaching textbooks to be used by students who want to learn Maltese as their second language. It is important to mention, at this stage, that the Australian Government is deleting Maltese from the list of languages that are taught in school unless there are 15 or more students from all over Australia who sit for Maltese examination at year 12 level in the next couple of years.

We requested also many a times to implement study and extensive research about the schools of Maltese communities living abroad. Unfortunately, this proposition was never eventuated and in the last few years, in Australia only, the Maltese language schools of Adelaide, Perth and Canberra closed their doors forever. Some time ago, a Maltese/Australian solicitor, Dr Chetcuti, wrote in *The Maltese Herald*, a Sydney based Maltese newspaper, which recently stopped its publication, "Unfortunately, it is about time that we bury the Maltese language in Australia".

I must admit that I do not agree with the above statement and as an optimist, I believe that there is still hope to solve the problems mentioned above and be proud of our language and culture wherever we live. We insisted that a new Maltese Cultural Institute be established and one of its primary aims is to promote and extend the Maltese language and culture in those countries where Maltese communities exist around the globe.
Let us act to today

These are not new ideas and they are not just mine either. These problems were mentioned and discussed at every meeting held in Australia and in Malta. I, personally, as one of the key speakers, mentioned these issues in the last two conventions held here in Malta.

Friends, let us make this Convention of 2015 a historical event and let us start today, not tomorrow, to answer to the needs and requests of the many Maltese living abroad and their schools so that we witness, in our lifetime, a revival of our unique language and to pass it on to future generations.

The days of promises are thing of the past. Today is the right time to start building a new structure not to lose forever the few institutions which are so dear to the Maltese communities living abroad.

I think it will be unwise to include on the agenda of Convention 2020 the same pleas that we are making today and mentioned in all the other previous conventions.

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