

## **LANGUAGES ACROSS FRONTIERS. THE ACQUISITION OF ITALIAN IN MALTA BY VIEWERS OF ITALIAN T.V. PROGRAMMES**

**Joseph Brincat**

*University of Malta*

**Abstract:** Good quality reception of Italian T.V. stations since 1957 brought the whole population of Malta in daily contact with the Italian language, and everybody seemed to enjoy these programmes although competence in the language varied greatly. The writer devised a project to test the comprehension of the different age-groups, from primary schoolchildren to senior citizens, taking into account factors like self-assessment, the lack of or the duration of formal instruction in the Italian language, average daily exposure to Italian T.V., the quality of reception in the area of residence, social class and the influence of the large number of Italian words that are currently used in the Maltese language. The results provide insight into sociolinguistic aspects as well as into language acquisition on the passive level and on a national, as opposed to an individual, scale.

**Keywords:** Informal language acquisition. Linguistic influence of Television.

### **1. AIMS OF THIS STUDY**

In this paper I am presenting the results of a series of theses and dissertations written by students of the Department of Italian in the Faculties of Arts and Education of the University of Malta which I have supervised between 1990 and 1996 on the comprehension of Italian T.V. programmes in Malta. We focused on various age-groups to cover representative sections of the population: 600 children (Camilleri and Caruana, 1991; Quattromani and Seychell, 1991), 100 young women aged 13-26 (Sciberras, 1994), 100 adult women aged 26-60 (Abdilla, 1993), 180 men aged 13-60 (Mintoff, 1994) and 90 senior citizens (Psaila, 1992), for a total of 1070 subjects. The last thesis was produced by Caruana (1996) who traced 369 of the original 600 children, who were now in the secondary school, to check the effects of formal learning. Such a large-scale project was justified by two motives. First of all because the Maltese audience of Italian T.V. programmes is very high, and it seemed worthwhile to investigate the viewers' degrees of comprehension; secondly because studies on passive linguistic competence are rather rare, especially on a national scale.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The present status of Italian in Malta is that of a foreign language, but due to a number of significant variables it cannot be compared to, say, French or German. Italian became the acrolect in Malta with the arrival of the Knights of St. John in 1530, when it replaced Latin and Sicilian which had been introduced by the Normans. It remained the official language and the preferred medium of literary expression for most of the British period and was only replaced by English and Maltese in 1934 (Brincat, 1992, 1998). After the historical and cultural aspects, geographical proximity continues to be a determinant factor since it favours strong commercial, touristic and ethnic ties, while excellent television reception brings about a kind of "partial immersion" on the cultural and linguistic levels.

## 3. ITALIAN TELEVISION IN MALTA

World War II had brought about a reaction against Italy and consequently the language lost much of its popularity in the 1950s, however when Italian television was introduced in 1957 and could be watched in Malta too, the trend was reversed and the language became useful and desirable again. The result is that nowadays the whole population is constantly exposed to Italian. This is proved by the official Broadcasting Authority television audience survey for 1997 which shows that Italian TV channels are the most popular at 47%, with local stations at 43% and satellite channels at 8%.

Table 1 Annual Television Audience Survey

Channels	1995	1996	1997	Language
Italian: Fininvest	34%	31%	32%	Italian
RAI	13%	17%	10%	
Other Italian	4%	2%	5%	
Total %	51%	50%	47%	
Local: TVM	32%	30%	23%	English and Maltese
Super 1	6%	11%	19%	
Other Local	1%	1%	1%	
Satellite	10%	8%	8%	English
Total %	49%	50%	53%	

## 4. TELEVISION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Although the influence of the above-mentioned historical, cultural, commercial and ethnic ties should not be underestimated, the appeal of television must be considered as the main factor which determines the choice of Italian as a subject learned at school. Whereas in 1960 only 441 candidates sat for it at Ordinary level (age 16), in 1997 the figure reached 3258, which is over 65% of school-leavers. Considering that, unlike English and Maltese, Italian is not compulsory the numbers are quite significant, as is the fact that in 1993, which was the boom year for soap operas on Italian channels, over 400 housewives joined the Adult

Education Programme compared to about 100 the previous year, and the reason they gave for their option was precisely that they wanted to understand their favourite programmes better.

## 5. HOURS OF VIEWING AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

Actual exposure to Italian through television is quite strong because in all the social categories investigated the average viewing time was about two hours, and very few subjects stated that they never watch Italian television at all. Another surprising result was that most subjects declared that they preferred watching programmes in Italian rather than in English or Maltese. This was highest among the younger viewers, reaching 74% of the primary school children and 76% of women aged 13-26. Figures decrease slightly for the older groups. The most surprising fact is that a considerable number of viewers stated that they preferred watching American films, teleserials (like *Beverly Hills* and *Happy Days*) and soap operas (like *Dynasty* and *Beautiful*) in Italian than in the original language even when both versions were on the air on different channels, although English is taught from the nursery school onwards and the cinemas only show films in English.

Self-assessment on comprehension was consistently high in all the categories. The great majority declared that they understand everything or almost, and very few admitted that they understand nothing. Obviously, if viewers did not understand a fair amount of what they heard they would not watch programmes in Italian, but still these figures seemed over-optimistic and called for verification.

Table 2 Viewers' self-assessment

Viewers who understand	Everything	Almost ev.	A little	Nothing
Children aged 9-10	24%	29%	43%	3%
Women aged 13-25	55%	38%	7%	0%
Women aged 26-60	23%	37%	40%	0%
Men aged 13-60	34%	46%	19%	1%
Senior citizens 61+	13%	39%	42%	4%

## 6. THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Since my aim was to provide solid information to confirm or disprove a widespread impression, I adopted a pragmatic approach which was free of pre-set theoretical positions but took into account as many significant variables as possible. The questionnaires asked such information about the subjects as age, level of education, occupation, hours of viewing per day and their preferences of language, channels, type of programmes, actual programmes, etc. I did not impose a standard test, but tailor-made tests were devised for each category, based on the kind of language registers that they were exposed to. This ensured a high degree of motivation as the children's tests were based on a cartoon, *Happy Days* and *Supercar*, the young women's on *Beverly Hills*, *Bayside School* and a teenage talk-show (*Non è la Rai*), the adult women's on a soap opera (*Maria*), a quiz show (*La Ruota della Fortuna*) and the news, the men's on the news, football round-up and *Beverly Hills*, and the senior citizens' on a soap opera (*Manuela*), a quiz show (*Telemike*) and the late news broadcast.

Recordings were made of the top three favourite programmes of each category, and each researcher transcribed the scripts, in full or in part, then drew up word frequency lists. A number of cards were produced for every category containing ten words each, carefully composed of nouns, verbs, adjectives and grammatical words. Each card included words which are commonly used in the Maltese language to test the effects of typological affinity. In order to obtain significant results every card was presented to ten different subjects. The viewers' grasp of grammatical usage was obtained by presenting them with another set of cards each containing 5 phrases or short sentences taken from the said programmes. The competence of the members of every category is shown by the number of correct answers provided.

The average percentages were rather high and therefore confirmed both the general impression and the viewers' self-assessment. The highest percentages of words and phrases understood correctly were given by young women (aged 13-26), 83 and 89 respectively. The men gave an almost equal amount of correct answers to both words and phrases, 77% and 75%, while adult women and senior citizens performed better in the words' test (69% and 82% respectively) than in the phrases' test (46% and 43%).

Table 3 Overall Results in Comprehension

<i>Correct answers to tests of</i>		Words on 10			Phrases on 5		
		0-3	4-6	7-10	0-1	2-3	4-5
Children aged 6-7	%	55	23	22	60	21	19
(Total 600) 10-11	%	22	24	54	27	20	53

  

<i>Percentage of correct answers:</i>		Words	Phrases
Women aged 13-25	(100)	83%	89%
Women aged 26-60	(100)	69%	46%
Men aged 13-60	(180)	77%	75%
Senior citizens 61+	(90)	82%	43%
Average viewers 13+	(470)	78%	63%

## 7. RESULTS AND FORMAL LEARNING

In the case of young children formal learning was ruled out simply because Italian is only taught in the secondary schools. The large number of subjects was necessary to guarantee the validity of the effects of natural acquisition. Whatever these children know has been acquired only by watching Italian television programmes, practically since birth. Here it is very interesting to note how passive competence increases with age because in the span of four years the figures for the highest and the lowest achievements are inverted: 55% of 6-7 year-olds only answered 0-3 words correctly while only 22% of 10-11 year-olds performed as badly. On the contrary the percentage of those giving from 7 to 10 correct answers out of 10 rose from 22 for the 6-7 year-olds to 54 for those aged 10-11. The same trend was observed in the phrases' test. It is also important to observe that scores in the phrases' test were not inferior to those for the words' test, for this shows that the acquisition of morphological and syntactic rules did not create any problems to young viewers. This contrasts sharply with the



case of illiterate senior citizens whose acquisition of Italian was very poor (40% of words and 0% of phrases), and showed that 30 years' exposure to Italian television had no effect on them. Even the comprehension of women aged 51-60 was low (54% words and 22% phrases) and this must be attributed to their lack of formal instruction in the language. This age group has the least competence in Italian because secondary education became compulsory only in 1970. Even in the men's category the 41-60 group was the only one which included persons with a primary education (17 out of 60), whereas subjects over 60 with a primary level of education performed well because in pre-war days Italian was taught in the primary schools.

**Table 4 Age, Level of Education and Comprehension in Adults**

<b>Women</b>						
Age	13-26	26-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	Average
<i>Results</i>						
Words	82.6%	80.4%	71.2%	72.4%	53.6%	72.04%
Phrases	89.0%	67.2%	44.8%	48.0%	22.4%	54.28%
<i>Level of Educ</i>						
Primary	-	-	2	14	23	39=20%
Second.	50	20	21	8	2	101=51%
Post sec.	31	4	2	3	0	40=20%
Univ.	13	1	0	0	0	14= 7%
Average						
Yrs	3.5	4.1	3.2	2.1	0.2	2.62 yrs
<i>Italian</i>						
Did not study Ital.	11	3	3	13	23	53=26.5%
Hrs TV daily	2	2.6	1.9	2.5	2.3	2.26 hrs
<b>Men</b>						
Age	13-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	Average
<i>Results</i>						
Words	77.3	76.3	75	73	80.6	76.6%
Phrases	76.6	76	76.6	73.3	68.6	74.6%
<i>Level of Educ</i>						
Primary	-	-	-	7	10	17=9.4%
Second.	38	16	18	13	14	99=55%
Post sec.	17	3	7	5	4	36=20%
Univ.	5	11	5	5	2	28=15.5%
Did not study Ital.	22	4	6	14	14	60=33.3%
Hrs. TV daily	1.8	1.6	1.8	1.6	1.9	1.74 hrs

<b>Senior Citizens</b>			<i>Words</i>	<i>Phrases</i>
<i>Level of Education</i>				
Primary	46 = 51.1%	}	72.4%	25.2%
Secondary	36 = 40.0%			
Post-secondary	2 = 2.2%		97.7%	76.4%
University	1 = 1.1%			
Illiterate	5 = 5.6%		40.0%	0.0%
(Did not study Ital.	33 = 36.6%)			
<i>Average Results</i>	(90 persons)		82%	43%

## 8. THE EFFECTS OF LINGUISTIC AFFINITY

The lexicon of Maltese is made up of 38% words of Semitic origin, 5.55% English and about 42% Italian words (Brincat, 1996). Such a high component deserved to be considered and the lexical test cards included Italian words used in Maltese to check their influence on the comprehension of Italian. Evidently the Italo-Maltese words were more readily comprehensible in all the categories. Figures were lowest for the primary school children who understood 63% of the Italo-Maltese words in the list as against 49.5% of the exclusively Italian terms, however one must remember that children under 11 do not possess their own language fully, and this can be compared to the performance of the senior citizens who understood correctly 96.2% of the Italian words used in Maltese as against 74.6% of those which are not.

Table 5 The Influence of Affinity between Maltese and Italian

Correct answers to	Italian words used in M.	not used in Maltese
<b>Children</b>		
<i>Supercar</i> (6-7, 10-11yrs)	46.26%	28.53%
<i>D'Artagnan</i> (6-7 yrs)	56.15%	47.50%
<i>Happy Days</i> (10-11 yrs)	86.92%	72.55%
<b>Men</b>	88.02%	71.24%
<b>Young Women</b>	88.72%	81.33%
<b>Adult Women</b>	89.63%	62.05%
<b>Senior Citizens</b>	96.20%	74.59%

Moreover in the comprehension of single words it was discovered that frequency of use (as listed in Sciarone, 1977) was also very important. For example primary schoolchildren (who had never learned Italian formally), apart from Italian words used in Maltese, found it easier to understand words with a high frequency in Italian. In fact correct answers to words used in Maltese and included in Sciarone's top 3000 were 48%, those used in Maltese but are not listed in Sciarone were 40%, those not used in Maltese but are listed in Sciarone were 33%, and those neither used in Maltese nor included in Sciarone were only 13%. The following table gives a more detailed breakdown of the correct results (%) obtained for each category (there were 10 answers for each of the 150 words). Sciarone's word frequency list was used, although it is based on the written language, because the more appropriate list for the spoken language was not yet published. The latter (De Mauro *et al.*, 1993) was used by Caruana (1996).

Table 6 Children's Comprehension and Word Frequency in Italian

<i>Correct answers to lexical tests (total 150 words)</i>						
Rank in Sciarone	1-500	501-1000	1001-1500	1501-2000	2001-3000	Not in Sciarone
Words Used in Maltese	59.73%	50.21%	39.09%	36.45%	45%	39.93%
N° of Ws	15	19	11	11	3	14
Not used in Maltese	35.37%	27.2%	29.33%	26.2	32%	13.06%
N° of Ws	41	10	3	5	1	17

## 9. THE EFFECTS OF FORMAL STUDY ON SCHOOLCHILDREN

Caruana (1996) administered the same tests to 369 out of the 600 children who had been tested in 1990 to check their progress in the secondary school. Most of these were in their 2<sup>nd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year learning Italian but 59 had opted for another language. Caruana discovered that in 1994-95 the overall performance was considerably better: high scores in the words' test (7-10 on 10) were up to 88.5% in Form 5 (age 15-16) and 63% in Form 2 (age 12-13), and in the phrases' test they rose to 69.5% in Form 5 and 55.5% in Form 2 (compare the respective percentages for 1991-2: 54.5, 22, 53, 19). The native language factor continued to be very influential because more Italo-Maltese words than exclusively Italian words were understood by over 80% of the subjects interviewed: 45 against 28 out of 150 words. However Caruana shows that subjects who did not study Italian performed just as well as those who did and that, while exposure to Italian T.V. was equal, academic ability was the decisive factor together with the difference in age which correlated with the cumulative effects of consistent exposure.

Table 7 Progress from the Primary to the Secondary School

<i>The Words' Tests:</i>		<i>Correct answers on 10</i>			Subjects
		Low (0-3)	Middle (4-6)	High (7-10)	
1991-2	age 6-7	54.5 %	23.5%	22%	297
1994-5	age 12-13	13.0 %	24.0 %	63 %	194
1991-2	age 10-11	21.5%	24.0%	54.5%	296
1994-5	age 15-16	2.0%	9.5%	88.5%	175

  

<i>The Phrases/Sentences Tests:</i>		<i>Correct answers on 5</i>			Subjects
		Low (0-1)	Mid. (2-3)	High (4-5)	
1991-2	age 6-7	59.5%	21.5%	19.0%	297
1994-5	age 12-13	25.0%	19.5%	55.5%	296
1991-2	age 10-11	27.5%	19.5%	53%	296
1994-5	age 15-16	11.0%	19.5%	69.5%	175

## REFERENCES

- Abdilla, D. (1993). *La comprensione dell'italiano televisivo a Malta: il pubblico femminile*. Unpublished B.A. Hons. dissertation, University of Malta.
- Brincat, G. (1992). *La lingua italiana a Malta: storia, scuola e società*. Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Malta.
- Brincat, G. (1992a). L'apprendimento spontaneo dell'italiano per televisione: l'esperienza dei bambini dai sei ai dieci anni a Malta. In: *Linee di tendenza dell'italiano contemporaneo* (Atti del XXV Congresso SLI), (B. Moretti, D. Petrini, S. Bianconi (Eds.)), pp. 501-519. Bulzoni, Roma.
- Brincat, G. (1993). L'italiano della televisione: lingua facile e lingua difficile. In: *Interferenze di sistemi linguistici e culturali nell'italiano*, (Atti X congresso AIPI) (J. Eynaud (Ed.)), pp. 271-284. AIPI, Malta.
- Brincat, G. (1998). L'italiano della corona britannica. In: *La "Lingua d'Italia": usi pubblici e istituzionali*, (Atti del XXIX Congresso SLI) (G. Alfieri, A. Cassola (Eds.)), Bulzoni, Roma.
- Brincat, J. M. (1996). Maltese Words. An Etymological Analysis of the Maltese Lexicon. In: *Romania Arabica. Festschrift für Reinholdt Kontzi* (J. Lüdtke, (Ed.)), pp. 111-116. Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen.
- Broadcasting Authority (1995, 1996, 1997). *TV and Radio Audience in Malta*. MUS, Malta.
- Camilleri, A. and Caruana, S. (1991) *La competenza degli alunni maltesi in italiano*. Unpublished B. Ed. Hons. dissertation, University of Malta.
- Caruana, S. (1996) *The Language of the Italian media and its contribution towards the spontaneous acquisition and formal learning of Italian in Malta*. Unpublished M.Ed. thesis, University of Malta.
- De Mauro T., F. Mancini, M. Vedovelli, M. Voghera (1993). *Lessico di frequenza dell'italiano parlato*. Etaslibri, Milano.
- Micallef, J. (1987) *I programmi televisivi italiani come sussidio nell'insegnamento dell'italiano*. Unpublished B. Ed. Hons. dissertation, University of Malta.
- Mintoff, R. (1994) *La comprensione dell'italiano televisivo a Malta: il pubblico maschile*. Unpublished B. A. Hons. dissertation, University of Malta.
- Psaila, G. (1992) *La conoscenza effettiva dell'italiano a Malta: la terza età*. Unpublished B. Ed. Hons. dissertation, University of Malta.
- Quattromani, R. and Seychell, M. (1991) *La competenza degli alunni maltesi in italiano*. Unpublished B. Ed. Hons. dissertation, University of Malta.
- Sciarone, A.G. (1977) *Vocabolario fondamentale della Lingua italiana*. Minerva Italica, Bergamo.
- Sciberras, A. (1994) *La conoscenza dell'italiano a Malta: il settore femminile fra i 13 e i 16 anni*. Unpublished B. A. Hons. dissertation, University of Malta.