What does stand-up comedy in Malta tell us about gender ideologies in language use?
By Becky Vella Muskat

The research work disclosed in this publication is partially funded by the Master it! Scholarship Scheme (Malta). This Scholarship is part-financed by the European Union – European Social Fund (ESF) under Operational Programme II – Cohesion Policy 2007-2013, “Empowering People for More Jobs and a Better Quality Of Life”

Following the completion of my undergraduate degree in Linguistics at the University of Malta I decided to further my studies with a Master’s in English Language in the UK. While there, I wrote a number of papers covering several topics from the civil unions debate in Maltese newspapers to an analysis of gender stereotypes as perpetuated through sex education books for children. I will however be focusing this article on one research paper I wrote through which I gained a great insight into the linguistic reality of the Maltese islands and which exposes an, as yet, unexplored area of research that needs addressing. The research paper to which I refer was partially funded by the aforementioned Master it! Scholarship Scheme (Malta).

I became interested in the link between gender and language choice in Malta after I read the PhD thesis of Lisa Bonnici (2010), a Maltese-American studying at the University of Colorado. For her study, Bonnici used ethnographic methods to observe various aspects of what is commonly known as Maltese English (MalE). In order to do so, she recorded speakers from the Sliema/St. Julian’s area for whom English is a first language. Amongst her many findings, Bonnici found that, within this group of speakers, Maltese tended to be associated with masculinity while English was not. Subsequently, I became curious as to whether or not this held true for the Maltese-speaking section of society and what other ideologies are associated with language choice in Malta.

In the two weeks I had to write the paper it was not possible to collect actual recorded samples of natural language and it was therefore necessary to find some other way to go about this. I decided to look at comedy, as this is a genre that is commonly known to parody and exaggerate parts of reality. Furthermore, I wanted not only to look at Maltese-speaking comedy, but also to compare it to English-speaking comedy in Malta. Thus, my first challenge was to obtain samples of comedy, which were publicly available. For Maltese comedy I used snippets of ‘Bla Kondixin’ (see: Borg, 2011a, Borg, 2011b, wirdiena, 2011a, widdiena 2011b, Zarb, 2013) available on Youtube, while for the English comedy, which was more sparse, I used acts from the Hard Rock comedy nights run by the Wembley Store Boys (see: Bezzina, 2013 and Warrington 2013) and one sketch from the MADC show ‘Fourplay’ (see: finditmalta, 2008a, finditmalta, 2008b, finditmalta, 2008c, finditmalta, 2008d)

Although language use might index various identities, such as age, education, and class, this research project was concerned primarily with gender and other ideologies closely associated with it. It is impossible here to thoroughly discuss the entirety of the analysis and findings, so I will be brief and methodical.

The English-speaking comedy reflected Bonnici’s earlier findings that within the community of English speakers, Maltese is associated more with masculinity. This came to light through sketches such as one in which stand-up comedian Daniel Warrington jokes about his sister’s broken Maltese while switching to Maltese himself. It is evident through this example that his expectations were such that his sister would only have a weak command of Maltese,
while his is strong enough to correct hers as well as switch to Maltese while performing in front of an audience.

The Maltese data showed a similar a pattern. However, rather than a distinction between Maltese and English, there appeared to be a distinction between Standard Maltese (SM) and Dialect Maltese (DM). This data showed that within the Maltese-speaking section of society, DM is associated with masculinity. Thus for example, in one sketch, a male actor playing a female character uses SM throughout, apart from one dialectal word at the end, when the character displays strong elements of masculinity.

This projection of the masculine/ feminine dichotomy associated with language choice onto the two sections of Maltese society is a process known as fractal recursivity. It is better described as “the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level” (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 38). Through this one can see that in the data analysed the association of masculinity with ‘non-standard’ Maltese within the English-speaking section of society is recycled within the Maltese-speaking section of society by association with ‘non-standard’ DM.

Gender was not the only identity found to be associated with language choice in Malta. Ideologies pertaining to class, education, and political affiliation were also observed within this data sample. It was not possible in the original research paper, nor is it possible in this article, to expand on each of these identities. However, the research did bring to light various ideologies surrounding language choice in Malta, which have previously been mentioned only in passing by various Maltese academics. This study thus serves as stepping stone for further research and investigation into the actual practices and ideological behaviour of Maltese speakers.


finditmalta. (2008d, November 6). Defsa 4... the revenge! Retrieved February 25, 2014, from YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ABh5KIUE


