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English or Maltese? Language use among university students on social media platforms

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ABSTRACT

Malta's Constitution declares both Maltese, the indigenous language, and English as the country's official languages. Maltese is also the national language and since 2002 it was accorded official status in the European Union. Maltese is therefore given more importance in Malta, a miniscule island with a population of slightly more than half a million people.

This study reports on the findings of a scientifically representative study among 500 University of Malta students on their language use when using social media platforms. It provides data on the actual languages used in messages sent by the students themselves. This paper examines the different contexts in which English and Maltese are used on the social media platforms. It compares how the participants spontaneously use either language in different social media forms of communication. The study concludes that rather than a process of displacement of Maltese, what is happening is differential usage through which Maltese is predominant in informal settings, while English is mainly used in more formal settings.

Keywords: Maltese, social media platform, official language, domain, frequency of use, language proficiency.

1. The context

The Maltese language is one of the lesser used languages of the world: it is spoken in Malta by its inhabitants and, much less so, by the Maltese diaspora. Traditionally, Maltese served as the identity carrier for the inhabitants of the Maltese archipelago during centuries of foreign rule. It

served as an important buffer against the influences of the foreigner who occupied the islands because of their geographically strategic significance. Maltese is a Semitic language, but over the centuries it has accumulated a significant amount of Romance and Anglo-Saxon accretions. Historically too, it was often derided by many who did not appreciate its intrinsic value, and by others who would have preferred that, politically, the island should not be on its own in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea known for its inter-tribal animosities, but rather belong to a larger nation, often on the pretext that such a small population was not sustainable. Maltese was often instrumentalised politically to promote the interests of the British colonisers to displace the dominant position of Italian. In this regard Malta has a well-documented 'language question' (Hull 1993).

Despite this, Maltese did survive. It began to acquire added prominence when it started to be written and disseminated through print. Maltese vacillated from being considered useful only for 'use in the kitchen', as it was frequently derided before the two world wars, to being recognised as one of the official languages of the European Union when Malta was accepted as a full member of the Union. Maltese pragmatists naturally recognised that Maltese could not be their only language if they wanted to be able to communicate, without losing their identity however, with the outside world. Because of this, Italian had developed in Malta, in parallel to its development in Italy, and was extensively used by the 'literati' and the Church. With the massive effect of the second world war when the Maltese fought a war which was not theirs, English started to be more widely accepted, and today constitutes Malta's other 'official' language, second to Maltese which is also Malta's 'national' language (Vassallo 1979).

With globalisation, the advent of universal education and the massive spread of the new media of communication and of mass tourism, the use of English in Malta rapidly increased as it did in other societies. This naturally resulted in the loss of space for Maltese, and both quantitative and qualitative linguistic research (e.g. Boffa 2010; Brincat 2005; Caruana 2006; Farrugia 2019; Sciriha 2016; Sciriha – Vassallo 2001, 2006; Vassallo – Sciriha 2020) on the recent experience of the language started to point to a resultant meltdown of the language. The reasons put forward in this research were based on both external and internal factors: on the one hand the external ones were related to the need for the Maltese to be active as citizens of the world; on the other hand, internal factors were based on the somewhat cavalier use of the language by the inhabitants of the island, especially in communication with children, and the constant use of code switching

entertained by speakers of all social groups. The question therefore arises as to whether English will eventually eclipse Maltese.

This paper addresses a number of issues. It first seeks to establish the self-perceived language proficiency among the Maltese on social media platforms. On the basis of the data collected, it then seeks to establish whether the media are instrumental in pushing Maltese into disuse, or whether their choice of language actually reflects a much wider preference for differential use of languages in specific contexts, as has been documented in other bilingual contexts. According to Fishman (1965) language choice is not random but there is a pattern in such a choice which is governed by what he calls 'domains'. These are institutional contexts in which one language is likely to occur more than the other. Some domains, such as the family domain, are less formal than others and there is differential preference. Other studies (Bishop – Hicks 2005; Costa – Santesteban 2004; Gonzalez-Vilabazo – López 2012) show that adult proficient bilinguals tend to allow themselves to use both languages interactively, with code-switching being the most common practice when communicating with their in-groups (Bhatt – Bolonyai 2011). These studies suggest that, whilst formal language is used whenever interlocutors are not familiar with each other, an element of 'laissez-faire' in language choice, or language 'combinations' is adopted in communicating with persons who are so intimately known to each other. The 2016 study by Jongbloed-Faber and others on the use of Frisian teenagers in social media suggests that Frisian use is expanding despite the fact that Frisian is mostly spoken and not written. The Jongbloed-Faber group explain that Frisian is the mother tongue of 54% of the 650,000 inhabitants of the province and is predominantly a spoken language. Actually, 64% of the Frisian population can speak it well, while only 12% indicate that they can write well. But their study shows that as many as 87% of this group use it to some extent as their medium of communication on social media. It is specifically this aspect of differential use of the two dominant languages in Malta that this study seeks to address.

To answer this set of questions, a quantitative study was undertaken among a representative sample of Maltese university students. It is commonly held that what goes on among this 'elite' group of citizens is likely to be the foretaste of things to come. The findings of the study will be used in this paper to document the relative use of English among this group, how they evaluate it, and what preferences they have in various social media domains.

2. Language use on social media platforms?

In everyday face-to-face conversations, bilingual speakers are always faced with an important choice. Which one of the languages in their linguistic repertoire do they select and for what reason? Very often they converge towards the needs of the addressee (Giles et al. 1977) and only rarely do they consciously decide not to accommodate the addressee's needs.

Studies on language use on social media platforms are by no means as prolific when compared to those which focus on bilinguals' language use in different domains (e.g. family, transactions, education, church). Only recently has the use of English on social media platforms been studied by researchers such as Kelly-Holmes (2019), while Jongbloed-Faber et al. (2016) and Jongbloed-Faber (2021) investigated the use of Frisian among teenagers in the province of Fryslân in the Netherlands.

The present study investigates the use of languages among students at the University of Malta in respect of three social media platforms: WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. Of these three platforms, respondents use Facebook and WhatsApp profusely, whilst Twitter is not so popular. In the case of bilinguals, one language tends to be preferred on the basis of whether the message is private or public. Successive surveys have been conducted in Malta over the last two decades (Sciriha 1998, 2001, 2018; Sciriha – Vassallo 2001, 2006) to examine the use of the official languages in different domains. To date, no study has been conducted on language use on social media, despite their proliferation and accessibility even to people who are geographically far away from each other.

3. Methodology

A scientifically representative survey was conducted among 500 University of Malta students following courses in fourteen Faculties just before the Covid-19 pandemic. In-person interviews with the selected students were held on campus by a team of interviewers. The instrument used to collect the data was a structured questionnaire in which, besides the demographic data, respondents were asked questions pertaining to their mother tongue, their parents' occupation and the faculty they belonged to. Other questions focused on (i) their self-rated proficiency levels in the spoken and written skills and (ii) the frequency of use of these skills. The main focus of the study was the students' language use in either English and/or Maltese on social

media platforms, more specifically their usage on different platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter.

Table 1 gives a sample profile by gender and faculty. More females (N = 295) were interviewed because the overall total percentage of female students at the university is higher than that of male students (N = 205).

Table 1. Sample profile, by gender and faculty

Faculty	Male	Female	Total
Arts	20	41	61
Column %	9.8	13.9	12.2
Built Environment	12	8	20
Column %	5.9	2.7	4.0
Dental Surgery	2	6	8
Column %	1.0	2.0	1.6
Education	4	19	23
Column %	2.0	6.4	4.6
Engineering	17	5	22
Column %	8.3	1.7	4.4
FEMA (Management & Accountancy)	43	44	87
Column %	21.0	14.9	17.4
Health Sciences	18	53	71
Column %	8.8	18.0	14.2
Information Technology	13	3	16
Column %	6.3	1.0	3.2
Laws	15	26	41
Column %	7.3	8.8	8.2
Media & Knowledge Science	7	9	16
Column %	3.4	3.1	3.2
Medicine & Surgery	27	33	60
Column %	13.2	11.2	12.0
Science	12	10	22
Column %	5.9	3.4	4.4
Social Wellbeing	13	37	50
Column %	6.3	12.5	10.0
Theology	2	1	3
Column %	1.0	0.3	0.6
Total	**205**	**295**	**500**

The female presence is higher in the Faculties of Arts (N = 41 vs. 20 males), Education (N = 19 vs. 4 males), Wellbeing (N = 37 vs 13 males), Health Sciences (53 vs. 18 males), Medicine and Surgery (N = 33 vs. 27 males), and Dental and Science (N = 6 vs. 2 males). The number of female students is lower in other faculties, particularly so in Engineering (N = 5 vs. 17 males) and Information Technology (N = 3 vs. 13), to mention two. Random stratified sampling was used to ensure that the base reflected the total full-time student population at the University of Malta.

4. Mother tongue and language preference

To put the study in perspective, the participants were asked about what they considered their mother tongue. This was defined as 'the language learnt from parents/guardians as a child'. They were subsequently also asked what language they actually preferred to speak. Table 2 presents the findings about the students' reporting of what their mother tongue is, broken down by the socio-economic group of their household.

The figures in Table 2 clearly indicate that the majority of the students (73.0%) were brought up in families in which both parents spoke Maltese. Families in which both parents spoke only English add up to only 8.2% of the total sample. Some 16.4% of the sample originated from a Maltese and English bilingual household whilst the rest (2.4% in all) hailed from families with other language combinations. It is worthwhile noting that of the entire sample only 1% had a background which did not include any Maltese or English.

When the participants were in turn asked what language they prefer to speak, as many as 50.8% of all the respondents stated that they prefer to speak in Maltese, in contrast to 21% who claimed that they prefer to speak in English. Another 28.2% do not have any specific preference, thus indicating that they feel that they are balanced bilinguals. The full details are presented in Table 3.

With a *p-value* of 0.000, the relationship between preferred language and the respondents' household socio-economic category is significant. In this respect, it is obvious from the table that the lower the socio-economic category, the higher the preference for Maltese as the medium of 'spoken' communication: the number of those who consider Maltese as their mother language within the lowest socio-economic group, the DE group, amounts to 72.7%, in contrast to only 3.6% of the same group who consider English as their mother tongue. Interestingly, the percentages of

Table 2. Mother tongue, by household socio-economic group

	TOTAL	Household Socio-Economic Category			
		AB	C1	C2	DE
Maltese	365	118	130	63	54
Row %	100.0	32.3	35.6	17.3	14.8
Column %	73.0	58.7	78.3	80.8	98.2
English	41	25	12	4	0
Row %	100.0	61.0	29.3	9.8	0.0
Column %	8.2	12.4	7.2	5.1	0.0
Maltese & English	82	50	21	10	1
Row %	100.0	61.0	25.6	12.2	1.2
Column %	16.4	24.9	12.7	12.8	1.8
English & another language	3	2	0	1	0
Row %	100.0	66.7	0.0	33.3	0.0
Column %	0.6	1.0	0.0	1.3	0.0
Maltese & another language	4	2	2	0	0
Row %	100.0	50.0	50.0	0.0	0.0
Column %	0.8	1.0	1.2	0.0	0.0
Other languages, neither Maltese nor English	5	4	1	0	0
Row %	100.0	80.0	20.0	0.0	0.0
Column %	1.0	2.0	0.6	0.0	0.0
Total	**500**	**201**	**166**	**78**	**55**

Table 3. Preferred language for spoken communication, by household socio-economic group

	TOTAL	Household Socio-Economic Category			
		AB	C1	C2	DE
Maltese	254	65	90	59	40
Row %	100.0	25.6	35.4	23.2	15.7
Column %	50.8	32.3	54.2	75.6	72.7
English	105	71	25	7	2
Row %	100.0	67.6	23.8	6.7	1.9
Column %	21.0	35.3	15.1	9.0	3.6
Either Maltese or English: No Difference	141	65	51	12	13
Row %	100.0	46.1	36.2	8.5	9.2
Column %	28.2	32.3	30.7	15.4	23.6
Total	**500**	**201**	**166**	**78**	**55**

the highest socio-economic group, the AB respondents who prefer to speak in English (at 35.3%), is not very different from those representing speakers who prefer to use Maltese (at 32.3%) as the medium for their spoken communication.

5. Language proficiency in and frequency of use of English and Maltese

Respondents were also asked to self-evaluate their spoken and written proficiency levels in both official languages. Though this exercise is fraught with difficulties since persons usually tend to inflate their proficiency levels in languages, yet it gives researchers an idea of the respondents' proficiency levels in the two languages. Moreover, this exercise provided students with the opportunity to reflect on their competencies in the two official languages. As evident in Table 4, a high 77.8% of the university students reported speaking Maltese 'very well', while 13.2% speak Maltese 'well'. Only 2.4% declared that they spoke Maltese 'with some difficulty'. As regards their writing skills in the national language, their levels of proficiency are lower than their speaking ones. Still, slightly more than the majority of the students (58.8%) said they write Maltese at the highest level of proficiency ('very well') and 24.4% evaluated their written Maltese at a lower level (well: 24.4%). Interestingly, in respect of English, their writing skills at the highest level surpass those in Maltese (English 'very well': 69.4% vs. Maltese: 58.8%). Moreover, while only 2.2% of the students said that they write 'with difficulty' in English, this figure was higher for Maltese (5.0%).

Table 4. Proficiency in spoken and written Maltese and English

Proficiency Levels	MALTESE		ENGLISH	
	Speaking	Writing	Speaking	Writing
	%	%	%	%
Very well	77.8	58.8	69.0	69.4
Well	13.2	24.4	23.6	21.8
Reasonably well	5.6	10.8	6.0	5.8
With difficulty	2.4	5.0	0.4	2.2
None	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.8
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

In order to reveal what these values actually mean, a 100-Point Proficiency Index was constructed, and is presented in Table 5. The Index was constructed through a weighting system that differentiates the values obtained through the Likert Scale summarised in Table 4. The Index shows that in a range of −100 to +100, respondents estimate their proficiency in speaking Maltese to exceed their proficiency in speaking English, at 91.10 and 89.80 points respectively. Both values are very high. What is quite interesting is that the two Indices are so close to each other, which clearly suggests that altogether Maltese tertiary students consider themselves to be balanced bilinguals in the spoken domain.

The Index figures are slightly lower in respect of writing, and, not surprisingly, the Index for writing in English is higher than the Index for writing in Maltese, at 89.20 and 83.75 points respectively. The reason for this is that although Maltese is phonetically written, the existence of the two typically Semitic unsounded consonants (*ħ* and *għ*) present significant orthographic difficulties.

Table 5. 100-Point Language Proficiency Index

	PROFICIENCY INDEX
Maltese Speaking	91.10
Maltese Writing	83.75
English Speaking	89.80
English Writing	89.20

In addition to their evaluation of proficiency, respondents were also asked about the extent of their use of English and Maltese. The data in Table 6 show that spoken Maltese is more frequent than spoken English ('All the time': Spoken Maltese 78% vs. Spoken English: 62%) among the respondents. However, the frequency of writing in English is much higher than it is in Maltese. English clearly outstrips Maltese in so far as frequency of writing is concerned. In fact, 73.2% of the respondents claimed to write in English 'all the time' when compared to 51% of those who use Maltese in writing. Moreover, 7.6% said that they 'never' write in Maltese. Only 0.2% of the respondents claimed never to write in English.

Once more the findings summarised in Table 6 were computed into another 100-Point Index, and they are presented in Table 7. On this Index, the values for Maltese and English speaking are respectively 91.60 and 86.95 points. Writing in English, however, exceeds writing in Maltese by 14.80 points, which is very significant. This shows that in written communication English is extensively preferred to Maltese. In view of the fact that Social Media practically rely on the written form of language use, this already points to important considerations in answer to the questions

set for this paper. The data suggest that, rather than driving language shift, social media preference conforms to a wider pattern of language use. The data suggest that Maltese is preferred for private, domestic and local use while English is preferred for public and international use. Social media has an immediacy of interaction more typical of speech than of writing and in this context. As such, Maltese is preferred when social media is more 'speech-like', while English is preferred when social media is more 'writing-like'. This points to an interesting functional differentiation process of the two languages in social media preferences.

Table 6. Frequency of use in spoken and written Maltese and English

	MALTESE		ENGLISH	
Frequency	Speaking	Writing	Speaking	Writing
	%	%	%	%
All the time	78.0	51.0	62.0	73.2
Often	13.6	15.0	26.6	19.2
Now & then	6.2	23.8	9.4	6.4
Never	1.2	7.6	1.2	0.2
NA	1.0	2.6	0.8	1.0
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Table 7. 100-Point Language Usage Index

	USAGE INDEX
Maltese Speaking	91.60
Maltese Writing	76.05
English Speaking	86.95
English Writing	90.85

6. Language use on social media platforms

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the use of the two official languages on social media platforms and whether when using these platforms, respondents employ more English than Maltese. It sought to discover which one of the two languages is more prevalent on three popular platforms: WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. For this reason, separate questions were asked to collect hard data on whether there is a difference in the use of languages depending on the social media platforms used.

6.1 Group and private WhatsApp messages

WhatsApp allows the user to send both group messages and private messages. This distinction is important in view of the fact that a private message is sent to one addressee who, typically, is well known to the sender of the message, whereas a group message is sent to several addressees who might not all know Maltese but would be able to understand messages in English. As such, the data presented in Table 8 reveal the extent to which this is important. Whereas 41.4% of the respondents reported sending private messages in Maltese 'all the time', a lower percentage is registered in respect of English (30.4%). In contrast, with regard to Group messages, the total percentage of 67.6% regarding the use of English in two frequency levels of 'all the time' (32.2%) and 'often' (35.4%) is identical to that of Maltese language use in these two frequencies of use. This is so even though the use of Maltese is higher when it is used 'all the time' (39.8%) and lower when it is used 'often' (27.8%). In contrast, 18.6% of the respondents claimed that they 'never' send group messages in Maltese, while only 12.2% do so in English.

Table 8. Maltese and English use on group and private WhatsApp messages

Frequency	MALTESE		ENGLISH	
	Group WhatsApp	Private WhatsApp	Group WhatsApp	Private WhatsApp
	%	%	%	%
All the time	39.8	41.4	32.2	30.4
Often	27.8	25.8	35.4	33.4
Now & then	13.8	14.6	20.2	22.0
Never	18.6	18.2	12.2	14.2
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

What these figures suggest, therefore, is that when the frequencies for 'all the time' and 'often' are taken together, Maltese occupies slightly more space on Whatsapp in respect of private messaging but occupies an equal space with English in respect of group messaging.

6.2 Facebook

One of the most popular social media platforms is Facebook. In fact, out of 500 respondents only 3 said that they do not have their own Facebook

page. A high 87% said that they check their Facebook accounts 'all the time' (26.0%) or 'as often as I can' (61%).

Like WhatsApp, Facebook includes private messages and status updates which are public. In view of this distinction, respondents in the survey were asked to cite the language they use when updating their Facebook status and also when sending private messages on this platform. The findings are presented in Table 9.

English is the language that is used 'all the time' for status updates by 30.6% when compared to a mere 6.4% who use Maltese. Conversely, while 19.2% of the participants 'never' use English for status updates, a much higher percentage (45.4%) said that they 'never' use Maltese.

The situation regarding language use changes in private messages. A high 50.4% of the participants claimed to use Maltese 'all the time', when compared to a lower 36.0% who claimed to use English with the same high frequency. On the other side of the frequency spectrum, there is really not much difference between those who claimed 'never' to use either Maltese (5.8%) or English (4.0%) in private messages.

As such, Maltese is preferred in inter-personal communication on the Facebook platform, but English is the preferred medium for the propagation of one's status as reflected in the language used for regular updates.

Table 9. Maltese and English use on status updates and private Facebook messages

Frequency	MALTESE		ENGLISH	
	Facebook Status update	Facebook Private Messages	Facebook Status update	Facebook Private Messages
	%	%	%	%
All the time	6.4	50.4	30.6	36.0
Often	18.8	30.0	27.4	37.4
Now & then	29.4	13.8	22.8	22.6
Never	45.4	5.8	19.2	4.0
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

6.3 Twitter

Twitter is not as popular among the university students. In fact, a very high 73.4% of them do not even have a Twitter account. Nevertheless, those who have such an account either use it rather sparingly or never use it.

Twitter allows two different types of tweets: regular ones and tweets with @. Regular tweets are messages posted on Twitter that could contain text, photos, a GIF, and/or video. This kind of tweet appears on the sender's profile page and Home timeline. It also appears in the Home timeline of anyone who is following the sender. In contrast, tweets with @ show in the recipient's Notifications tabs, which are accessible only to them. Additionally, mentions will appear in the recipient's Home timeline view (not on their profile) if they are following the sender. This group of tweets is seen by anyone on Twitter who is following the sender in their Home timeline. This makes tweets with @ somewhat more private.

Table 10 gives a breakdown of the findings of respondents who send either regular tweets or tweets starting with @. The results show that in respect of regular tweets which are sent 'all the time', English is used significantly more (30.6%) than Maltese (1.6%). Moreover, while 52.7% of the participants claimed that they never send a regular tweet in English, the percentage is much higher for those who 'never' send regular tweets in Maltese (83.5%).

In respect of sending tweets which start with @ with great frequency ('all the time'), again English is the preferred language: 22.6% send such tweets in English when compared to a mere 0.5% in Maltese. The percentages of English language use for 'never' sending such tweets are much lower (54.3%) when compared to Maltese (80.1%).

Table 10. Maltese and English use when using regular tweets and tweets beginning with @

Frequency	MALTESE		ENGLISH	
	Regular Tweet	Tweet starting with @	Regular Tweet	Tweet starting with @
	%	%	%	%
All the time	1.6	0.5	30.6	22.6
Often	3.2	2.2	4.3	10.8
Now & then	11.7	17.2	12.4	12.4
Never	83.5	80.1	52.7	54.3
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

In respect of the use of Twitter, the pattern does not appear to follow that used in respect of Facebook: English is the language most often used for both

kinds of tweets, whether they are the regular ones which are more public, or the more private ones that start with @. On this particular platform, English is more dominant than Maltese among the participants in this study.

7. Language ranking

The foregoing set of data is a vivid expression of the language ranking Maltese university students use in their daily lives. This is done unconsciously and unobtrusively but is very real in its consequences. To test the consistency between conscious and unconscious language ranking processes, participants in this study were specifically asked to rank seven languages according to two different factors, namely in respect of their being 'citizens of Malta', and subsequently in 'their being citizens of the world'. The findings are respectively presented in Tables 11 and 12.

Table 11. Ranking of seven languages in terms of perceived importance as Maltese nationals living in Malta among UOM students

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Maltese	72.4	25.0	0.2	0.4	1.0	0.4	0.6
English	32.8	65.4	1.2	0.4	–	–	0.2
Italian	0.8	4.4	79.4	10.0	3.8	1.4	0.2
French	0.0	1.2	10.0	42.2	30.2	12.2	4.2
German	0.0	0.4	3.6	11.2	26.6	33.8	24.4
Spanish	0.8	0.2	2.2	13.2	23.0	35.2	25.4
Arabic	0.0	1.0	3.8	20.4	14.4	15.2	45.2

Table 12. Ranking of seven languages in terms of perceived importance as citizens of the global society among UOM students

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
English	96.2	3.2	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
French	1.6	41.0	30.8	15.2	7.0	3.4	1.0
Italian	0.0	19.0	23.4	23.6	19.0	14.0	1.0
German	0.6	7.4	19.6	28.6	28.4	13.4	2.0
Arabic	0.8	7.6	9.0	11.2	12.6	37.6	21.2
Spanish	0.8	16.0	17.4	20.6	29.2	12.4	3.6
Maltese	1.0	3.8	2.4	2.4	3.8	16.4	70.2

Table 11 and Table 12 are interesting in the way they differ from each other: in respect of being a citizen of Malta, Maltese is ranked first (72.4%,) whilst English was ranked first by 32.8% of participants. At the same time, English was ranked second by 65.4% whilst Maltese was ranked second by 25%. The space allowed for other languages at these two highest levels is minimal. This contrasts very sharply with the rankings obtained when the same set of languages were ranked according to 'being a citizen of the world'. Here English dominates, with as many as 96.2% of the participants ranking it first, in sharp contrast with only 1% of those who ranked Maltese as the most important language. In fact, as many as 70.2% ranked it as the least important language. Even though Maltese is one of the official EU languages, its relevance on the international plane is considered minimal.

8. Conclusion

This study sought to map the relevance of Maltese and English in social media communication, and to identify patterns which could point to shifts in the importance of the two languages. What clearly emerges from the data collected is that both Maltese and English remain important for the Maltese, but with very different functions. Even though the Maltese are officially bilingual, different domains prompt users to use different languages. For inter-personal communication among friends, where intimacy is important, the Maltese language tends to be more commonly used. But when communication is intended to reach a wider audience, English prevails. The diversity in function is very clear, and what the consciously documented language rankings state, was clearly echoed in the use of the social media platforms. This is not necessarily true of every person involved in this study, but the pattern is clear. Maltese has its importance, which is duly acknowledged both consciously and unconsciously, but this language is relegated to practical insignificance when a medium is required to project oneself to a wider audience, or to communicate internationally.

What does the future hold? It is difficult to forecast what will happen. In a world in which atomisation is becoming increasingly more widespread (Habermas 1989), the individual's personality tends to be lost in a plethora of different identities depending on the multiplicity of transient roles which modernity has brought about. As a result, the search for a context in which the individuality of a person is recognised and celebrated, becomes very

important, and the private sphere tends to become more appreciated and tenderly safeguarded (Luckmann 1967). And for this purpose, languages that reflect this privacy, and protect the individual from the intrusions of omni-present outside influences, might become more relevant and much more sought after and appreciated than at present.

The phenomenon of giving more value to privacy, as reflected in social domains like the family and in religious practices, might also affect choices about which language one uses to express intimacy and self-expression. This study clearly points in this direction: Maltese is extremely important for many Maltese university students, but despite the difficulties they encounter in writing it considering its seemingly 'problematic' orthographic rules, it is still manifestly used more than English, albeit English is equally known and easier to write, as their preferred medium for communications with their peers on all the three social media platforms studied.

Maltese university students use the same differential mechanism that is used by the Friesland teenagers in the Jongbloed-Faber (2016) group study, even though not precisely in the same way. Many Friesland teenagers simply fall back on Frisian, which they speak but generally do not write, on their social media. Maltese university students also differentiate between languages. Both Maltese and English are written and spoken and Maltese students are competent in both. But they unconsciously tend to use Maltese, traditionally the carrier of national identity, when they are interacting with their in-group, when interactions are more 'speech-like', and they do not have to bother much about correct orthography. In contrast, they use English to signify social distance when, even on the same social media, they are using a 'written-like' mode of communication.

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