

# **British English, Maltese English or American English? Attitudes, Perceptions and Lexical Choices among Malta's Bilingual Population**

**Lydia Sciriha & Mario Vassallo**

University of Malta

## **Abstract**

Though it is generally assumed that British English and Maltese English are spoken in Malta, a former British colony, American English seems to be gaining popularity on account of its presence on TV and on social media platforms. This paper reports on a survey among 500 Maltese, aged 18 years and over. The findings of this study reveal that attitudes towards British English are more positive than those in respect of Maltese English and American English, even though there is a wide recognition among the respondents that the Maltese English variety is profusely used in the Maltese media, and also by teachers of the English language. These attitudes are also reflected in the participants' choice of sixteen pairs of lexical variants (British English and American English). The British English variants are mostly used, even though this study detects a shift towards American English use for some words. After nearly six decades of independence from the British, the Maltese still consider the standard variety of their last coloniser as a desideratum.

**Keywords:** Maltese English, British English, American English, attitudes, perceptions, lexical variants

## **1. Introduction**

This paper first gives a brief historical overview of the linguistic situation in Malta since the British colonisation of Malta. It then presents some of the findings of a large-scale scientifically-representative language survey. This study is divided into two: the first part of the study focuses on the attitudes and perceptions of the Maltese with regard to three varieties of English – Maltese English, British English and American English and their perceptions on their usage – while the second part centres on whether the participants' attitudes and perceptions are reflected in the participants' choice of the twenty pairs of

lexical variants. What are the views of the Maltese about their own variety of English in relation to British English after nearly six decades of independence?

## **1.2 The Beginnings of English in Malta**

Malta is a small island strategically positioned at the centre of the Mediterranean. Over the centuries, it was conquered by numerous colonisers namely, the Arabs (870-1090), the Normans (1090-1266), the Angevins (1266-1283), the Castilians (1412-1530), the Order of St John (1530-1798), the French (1798-1800) and finally the British (1800-1964). Malta became an Independent state within the Commonwealth in 1964, a Republic in 1974 and a member of the European Union in 2004.

The British colonisation of Malta for slightly more than 160 years is an important one in many ways but particularly so, linguistically speaking. In fact, when the British came to Malta in 1800, the island's linguistic situation was unique: educated persons both spoke and wrote Italian, whereas the overwhelming majority of the Maltese population, who was then illiterate, spoke Maltese, a Semitic language that unlike Italian, had no official status. Colonial powers usually impose their own language on the colonised and the British in Malta were no different. However, during the first decades of British rule the language situation did not undergo seismic changes. Italian was still spoken and written by Maltese intellectuals who belonged to the middle and upper classes, while the majority of the Maltese spoke the indigenous language. Though some Maltese realised the benefits of knowing English and learnt the language, but there were others who still used Italian as it was still considered the language of education, of the church and of the law courts (Hull, 1993).

Understandably so, the dominance of Italian in these three formal contexts did not please the British colonisers and the first signs that English would be given more importance occurred in the late 1870's when the report of the civil establishment in Malta by Sir Julyan Penrose recommended that the government should conduct its business in English. Shortly afterwards, Patrick Keenan wrote a report in which he proposed that both English and Maltese should occupy a more important position in the syllabi of the island's schools. Such proposals were disputed by the pro-Italian group and many discordant debates were held in the Council of Government (Vassallo, 1975; Hull 1993).

This notwithstanding, reform did occur because it was unacceptable for the British rulers to allow Italy's political influence in Malta, despite the fact that the majority of the Maltese did

not speak nor write the language. In 1899 it was permissible to use English in the law courts in certain circumstances, but it was not until 1934 that Maltese was made the principal language in the law courts. The 1921 Constitution had declared Italian and English as Malta's two official languages and in 1934 Maltese was added to the list. In 1936 only English and Maltese were the official languages.

Though the official status of these two languages was retained when Malta obtained its Independence from Britain in 1964, Maltese also became the national language. Its position was further strengthened in 2002, when Maltese was accorded official status in the European Union, much to the utter surprise of the Maltese who never thought that such the language of such a small country could be given such a status outside Malta (Sciriha and Vassallo, 2006).

## **1.2 The Maltese English variety**

In 1976 Geoffrey Broughton presented a research paper entitled *The Degree of Proficiency to be aimed at in English in Maltese Schools* at a conference held in Malta, during which he stated that the variety of English spoken by the Maltese is not Standard British English but Maltese English. According to him, Maltese English is marked by particular features related to stress, intonation, pronunciation and syntactic features. Joseph Brincat (2000), one of the academics who was present during Broughton's communication, notes that the latter's statement was not enthusiastically received by the Maltese conference attendees.

Since then, Maltese linguists have also defined what constitutes Maltese English. According to Borg (1986: 96) 'Maltese English, however cannot be considered as a homogenous and discrete variety: rather it is realised by a continuum of speech styles characterised at one end by a minimum of interference from Maltese and at the other end by an ever-increasing influence from the mother tongue on all linguistic levels.' Along the continuum of speech styles, Borg includes Mixed Maltese English, a variety whose base language is English, but which also includes Maltese lexical items. Camilleri (1992: 18) further elaborates on the distinction made by Borg (1986) regarding Maltese English and Mixed Maltese English by noting that 'Maltese English could be defined *as the English spoken in Malta by bilingual speakers of Maltese and English*. Maltese English is influenced by Maltese on most linguistic levels, namely phonology, grammar, semantics and discourse, but not on the lexical level i.e. there are no Maltese lexical items within a stretch of Maltese English speech.' Furthermore, Vella (1995) concurs with Borg's (1986) concept regarding a continuum of varieties of Maltese English and Mixed Maltese English and postulates that on one end of the continuum

one finds the influence of Maltese on the pronunciation of English, while on the end, English is influenced by Maltese at the syntactic level. Furthermore, when discussing Maltese English, Brincat (2000: 206) draws an important distinction between common mistakes made by the Maltese owing to their dearth of proficiency in English on the one hand, and acceptable deviations from Standard English by proficient users of English on the other hand. In his view, Maltese English ‘hukaratterizzatminndevjanzi li humakkunsidratiacçettabbli’Malta’ (my translation: ‘is characterised by deviations that are considered acceptable in Malta’).

This paper first focuses on the attitudes and perceptions that the Maltese have in respect of three varieties of English, namely, British English, Maltese English and American English and whether these attitudes are also reflected in the choice of pairs of lexical variants. It seems to place the existing situation in the context of socio-political analysis.

### **3. Attitudes, perceptions and lexical choices**

The concept of attitude has been a core concept in sociolinguistics since, for example, Labov’s (2009) seminal work on the social stratification of speech communities and how language change is influenced by the prestige and stigma afforded by speech communities to specific linguistic features. Attitudes are acquired through various processes, for example through observational and instrumental learning, whether these bring rewards or detriments. Attitudes towards a language variety are linked to opinions about a host of other factors such as likelihood and frequency of contact with the language, historical connections and relationships between peoples, and relationship of language study of other valued social outcomes such as formal schooling. When two languages coexist within the same community, speakers of these languages can have different attitudes to each of these languages.

There are two approaches to the study of language attitudes and perceptions: (i) the socio-psychological approach to language perceptions and attitudes obtains information regarding views and reactions towards language varieties in an indirect method; (ii) the second approach is a sociolinguistic one which obtains data in a direct manner, namely through the use of a questionnaire as the instrument used for the research. In this study the sociolinguistic approach has been adopted by the present researchers.

#### **4. Methodology: Quantitative research**

This paper is based on the findings of a survey conducted among a representative sample of the Maltese population. Face-to-face interviewing was used for the purposes of this survey with a sample population aged 18 years and over. A total of 500 participants who had been randomly selected through a two-stage random sampling procedure from a selection of localities in Malta were interviewed by a team of Maltese bilingual interviewers, all of whom had a linguistics background. All Malta and its sister island Gozo were divided into five hundred contiguous blocks each containing the same number of persons. From these, twenty blocks were selected using a random seed as a starting point. In turn, from each of these blocks so selected, twenty-five persons were chosen to be personally interviewed, again selected at random using a random seed. The latest issue of the Local Councils' electoral registers was used for this purpose. All interviews were conducted at the homes of the participants in the chosen twenty localities. It should be noted that though the questionnaire was designed for fieldwork in Malta, the assumptions in this questionnaire are identical to those found in Labov (2009), who demonstrated that linguistic variation in a speech community is not incidental.

##### **4.1 The Questionnaire**

Besides the section intended to collect the demographic details of the participants, the questionnaire used for this study was divided into two parts. In the first part of this instrument, the participants were asked questions pertaining to their attitudes and perceptions of use in respect of three varieties of languages; the second part of the questionnaire comprised four sections on different linguistic aspects (pronunciation, vocabulary, morphology and syntax respectively) of English. The findings on attitudes and perceptions of three varieties of English in Section 5.2, whilst the view on the lexical variants (British English or American English) will be the focus of Section 5.3 of this paper. These variants were specifically chosen because they had already been researched by Krug and Sönning (2018).

##### **4.2 Research Questions**

1. What are the attitudes of the Maltese towards varieties of English in Malta?
2. Which are the preferences of the Maltese in respect of British English and American English pairs of lexical variants?

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Sample Profile

The 500 Maltese who took part in this survey comprised 244 males and 256 females. This sample reflects the demographic profile of the total population of the Maltese islands. Respondents were grouped into four age cohorts: the youngest age group (18-24), which is also the smallest one in the sample, comprised 96 participants who made up 19.2% of the total sample; the second and third age groups (25-39) and (40-54) included the largest numbers of participants each at 135 (27.0%), while 134 (26.8%) participants belonged to the 55+ age cohort. As can be seen from the breakdown of the findings in Table 1, the occupational groups used in this study are as follows: professional (80: 16.0%), clerical (127: 25.4%), self-employed (38:7.6%); self-employed (38: 7.6%); manual (138: 27.6%), homemaker (112: 22.4%) and unemployed (5: 1.0%).

The reason why occupational groups and socio-economic variables were used in this study is two-fold. First, a proper mapping of socio-economic groups validated for the Maltese islands is not yet in place, and the categories which are commonly used do not contain an in-built factor for 'notion of social class' as would be necessary for them to be able to capture social class boundaries in Malta. This issue is avoided if very specific occupational groups, such as those adopted in this study are used. Second, it is important that the current findings are comparable to those obtained in previous surveys (Sciriha and Vassallo 2001, 2006). In these studies, occupational groups were used, and they are therefore being retained here.

Table 1: Sample Profile by Occupation

	N=	%
Professional/Managerial	80	16.0
Clerical	127	25.4
Self-Employed	38	7.6
Manual	138	27.6
Homemaker	112	22.4
Unemployed	5	1.0
Total	500	100

Another important factor in the analysis of language use is the level of formal education. As shown in Table 2, just slightly less than the majority (214: 42.8%) of the persons taking part in this study have a secondary level of education, 71 (14.2%) have post-secondary education,

66 (13.2%) technical and 90 (18.0%) have attended university. Only 11.8% (59) of the sample attended primary education.

Table 2: Sample Profile by Education

	N=	%
Primary	59	11.8
Secondary	214	42.8
Post-secondary	71	14.2
Technical	66	13.2
University	90	18.0
Total	500	100.0

## 5.2 Research Question 1: Attitudes and perceptions towards varieties of English in Malta

Though Bonnici (2009: 403) contends that ‘Synchronically, many influences on MalTE exist, yet influences from other varieties of English besides British English are both widely available in Europe’ nevertheless, she still considers British English as ‘still strong in Malta given its prominence as a written medium in school.’ In light of Bonnici’s (2009) statement, this survey sought to discover the attitudes towards Maltese English, British English and American English. For this reason, the participants were asked for their opinion on the following six statements: (i) I prefer watching British films to American films; (ii) I prefer watching English advertisements with an English rather than an American accent; (iii) I prefer to watch the news on the BBC than on the CNN; (iv) I prefer to hear English advertisements in Maltese English; (v) Maltese newscasters speak Maltese English not British or American English; (vi) Teachers of English speak Maltese English not British or American English

A 3-point Likert scale (Table 3) was used to assess the respondents’ views on a set of issues. In order to facilitate interpretation, a 100-point Index was computed in which replies were weighted in such a way that the possible Index range could record an overall rejection/acceptance level between -100 to +100. The negative values represent levels of rejection, whilst the positive values represent level of acceptance. A standard interpretation of the Index of a value less than +30 is to be merely marginal acceptance of a statement.

Table 3: 100-point Index on Attitudes and Perceptions of Use

	<b>Statements</b>	<b>Total</b>
1	I prefer to watch BBC to CNN	48.2
2	I prefer to watch films in British English than American English	44.3
3	I prefer to watch advertisements in British English not American English	53.3
4	I prefer to hear English advertisements in Maltese English and not British or American English	-9.5
5	Maltese newscasters speak Maltese English not British or American English	70.3
6	Teachers of English speak Maltese English not British or American English	50.9

As can be seen from Table 3, British English is preferred among the respondents, but there is a clear understanding that the Maltese English variety is predominantly in use by newscasters and teachers of English in Malta. Preference for the British English variety is clear from the score of statement one (+48.2 points), statement two (+44.3 points), and statement three (+53.3 points). This is confirmed even more in statement four, in which the respondents register a negative value (-9.5 points) to indicate their lack of preference for Maltese English in advertisements. On the other hand, the respondents perceive that the reality in both the media and in the teaching of English is very different from what they prefer: the Index shows that respondents' views on the newscasters' use of Maltese English is a high +70.3 points, whilst the use of the same variety in the imparting of English instruction registered +50.9 points. Clearly what the Maltese prefer is very different from what they perceive to be happening in two very significant domains, namely the media and education.

### **5.3 Research Question 2: Lexical choice preferences: British English or American English?**

A quantitative study on pairs of lexical variants in British and American English was conducted by Krug and Sönning (2018) among 430 participants in Malta. Though most of the pairs of lexical items chosen in the present study are the same as those of Krug and Sönning (2018), the number of lexical pairs in the present study was smaller. In fact, sixteen items were tested with the 500 participants. Moreover, in line with Scotto di Carlo (2013), the variants were also grouped into five domains: clothing, food, house, transport and stationery. The lexical items in these groups did not all contain the same number. In fact, the 'transport' domain including six lexical items, the 'house' and 'clothing' domains were represented by three lexical items, while the 'food' and 'stationery' domains included just two items each. The findings are presented in Table 4.



Of the sixteen pairs of lexical items, the table shows that the British English variants obtain the highest scores in all five categories. In fact, the three highest scores were obtained for the British English variants 'tap' (96.6%: house category), 'nappy' (95%: clothing category) and 'rubber' (93.6%: stationery category). Conversely, the highest American English scores were registered in respect of three categories: food ('aubergine': 31%), stationery ('pen': 26.8%) and transport ('airplane': 19.4%). Of the six lexical items in the 'transport' domain, which also happens to be the one with the highest number of lexical items, three of them registered relatively high scores with regard to the use of the American English variant: 'airplane' (19.4%), 'trunk' (16.6%) and 'overpass' (15.4%). Interestingly so, a good number of the respondents (26.8%) also declared using 'ballpoint pen' and not the British English variant 'biro' (73.2%).

Table 4: Lexical choice preferences: British English or American English?

<b>British English</b>			<b>American English</b>		
Item	N=	%	Item	N=	%
<b>CLOTHING</b>					
Nappy	475	95.0	Diaper	25	5.0
Zip	434	86.8	Zipper	66	13.2
Trousers	426	85.2	Pants	74	14.8
<b>FOOD</b>					
Aubergine	345	69.0	Eggplant	155	31.0
Biscuit	403	80.6	Cookie	97	19.4
<b>HOUSE</b>					
Tap	483	96.6	Faucet	17	3.4
Rubbish	445	89.0	Trash	55	11.0
Dustbin	461	92.2	Trashcan	39	7.8
<b>TRANSPORT</b>					
Pushchair	456	91.2	Stroller	44	8.8
Pavement	453	90.6	Sidewalk	47	9.4
Boot	417	83.4	Trunk	83	16.6
Lift	464	92.8	Elevator	36	7.2
Aeroplane	403	80.6	Airplane	97	19.4
Flyover	423	84.6	Overpass	77	15.4
<b>STATIONERY</b>					
Rubber	468	93.6	Eraser	32	6.4
Biro	366	73.2	Ballpoint Pen	134	26.8

## 6. Conclusion

What starkly transpires from this study is that the attitudes of the Maltese towards users of Maltese English are not at all positive. Even after more than four decades since Broughton's (1976) statement that the population of Malta speaks Maltese English, attitudes towards this

variety have not really changed. This is clearly borne out by the findings in Table 3 in respect of Statement 4 – *I prefer to hear English advertisements in Maltese English and not in British or American English* – which received the lowest score (-9.5 points) and thus the lowest level of agreement of the six statements. Nevertheless, even so, respondents are all too aware that it is variety that is used by the Maltese newscasters (70.3 points) and Maltese teachers of English (50.9 points). This essentially means that even though the Maltese prefer British English, they are still exposed to the Maltese English variety on the media and at school. Moreover, when given a choice between the British and American English varieties, the Maltese participants prefer British English as clearly shown in statement one which reveals that the respondents prefer watching the BBC to the CNN (48.2%) and statement three whereby respondents prefer to watch advertisements on TV in British English (53.3 points) not American English.

When taking into consideration the pairs of lexical variants, the preference for the British English variant is overwhelming. Of the sixteen lexical pairs the highest percentages in American English do not exceed 31% ('eggplant'), while the lowest score of 3.4% is recorded for 'faucet'. From the findings one also notes that two domains tower over the other five: the 'food' and 'transport' domains where three of the items in the latter domain register relatively high scores in the American English variants, namely, 'airplane' (19.4%), 'trunk' (16.6%) and 'overpass' (15.4%). This trend is also evident in the food domain with both of the lexical items, namely 'eggplant' (31%) and 'cookie' (19.4%) registering quite high percentages.

What emerges from the data is the fact that all sixteen pairs of lexical variants were used by at least some respondents and that there is a shift towards American English particularly in two domains. The fact that the respondents access the internet to retrieve cooking recipes might be the reason why they show a slightly higher preference of the American English variants in the food category than in the other categories.

The foregoing data on their ability to recognize different variants, on their preferences and their lexical choices are not interesting only for their own sake: they are valuable as a commentary on Maltese society from a socio-linguistic perspective. They point to an uncanny revelation of the effect of colonialism on the minds of a small island community despite the fact that those colonial days ended almost six decades ago.

The all too obvious preference of most Maltese is for British English and not for their home-grown variety. British English is likely considered to be a desideratum as it represents 'the

best of British culture. It is an attitude borne out of long years of colonialism despite the fact that immediate and specific contact with this variety among the population at large must have been very sparse: British English would certainly not have been widely spoken by the thousands of sailors and soldiers that visited Malta during Britain's decades of colonial rule in Malta. The Maltese English variety, the data shows, is considered a lesser-valued variety when compared to standard British English, which most Maltese would only have come into contact with either very sporadically, or through the BBC's radio, and more recently, TV transmissions. In a very interesting way, the rejection of one's own variety in favour of somebody else's variety clearly reveals an attitude of awe towards the outsider, not uncommon among indigenous communities colonized by an outside power. The fact there is a wide recognition that the local variety is profusely used in the Maltese media, and no less by teachers of the English language, does not lessen this negative attitude towards Maltese English.

What is also very interesting is the fact that once unconsciously adopted, attitudes and usages are very difficult to change. The Maltese have been exposed to non-British lexical variants of English through the sprawling non-British TV channels, received via satellite and cable TV since the mid-1980s, the US-based film industry and, since the advent of the Internet, through the profusion of audio material in an extensive range of English language varieties. And yet, the foregoing data shows that the preference of words in the British variety is extensive. The basis of the Maltese English variety is the British one, and appears to be firmly rooted, as is evident from the high percentages of British English use of the sixteen pairs of lexical variants. However, the use of lexical equivalents in American English in the media, and increasingly on video through channels like YouTube is having a nascent effect among the Maltese.

What does the future have in store? Will current attitudes change? Of course, it is not easy to predict whether these trends will change in the next few decades. Nevertheless, given the perceived high value attributed to British English among the population, preferences made at the theoretical level will likely not change much. In parallel, it is very likely too, that the *use* of the Maltese English variety will get more deeply entrenched in even more social domains, despite the recognition among most Maltese that it is of lesser value. The high esteem that the Maltese have towards the British English variety could well be the reason why the American English variants have only a limited penetration.

## References

- Borg, A. (1986). The maintenance of Maltese as a language: What Chances? *Council of Europe: European Workshop on Multicultural Studies in Higher Education*, 89-106. Strasbourg, Valletta.
- Bonnici, L. (2009). Maltese English: History of use, structural variation and sociolinguistic status. In B. Comrie, R. Fabri, E. Hume, M. Mifsud, T. Stolz and M. Vanhove (eds.), *Introducing Maltese Linguistics: Selected Papers from the 1st International Conference on Maltese Linguistics*, 393-414. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Brincat, J. (2000). *Il-Malti Elf Sena Ta' Storja*. Pjetà: PIN.
- Broughton, G. (1976) The degree of proficiency to be aimed at in English in Maltese schools. *Communication given at the Conference on Bilingualism and Education with special reference to Malta*. University of Malta.
- Camilleri, A. (1992). The sociolinguistics status of English in Malta. *Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics* 3, 4-24,
- Hull, G. (1993). *The Malta Language Question: A Case History in Cultural Imperialism*. Valletta: Said International.
- Krug, M., & Sönning, L. (2018). Language change in Maltese English: The influence of age and parental languages. In P. Piaggio & A. Gatt (eds.), *The languages of Malta*, 247-270. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Labov, W. (2009). *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sciriha, L., & Vassallo, M. (2001). *Malta – a linguistic landscape*. Malta: Socrates.
- Sciriha, L., & Vassallo, M. (2006). *Living Languages in Malta*. Malta: Print It.
- Scotto di Carlo, G. (2013). Lexical Differences between American and British English: a Survey Study. *Language Design* 15, 61-75.
- Vella, A. (1995). *Prosodic Structure and Intonation in Maltese and its Influence on Maltese English*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh.