

Multilingual issues in Malta

Country report for MINERVA Plus in 2005

Malta is located in the Mediterranean Sea, just south of Sicily; the Maltese archipelago basically consists of three islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino. Their total population in 2003 was 399,867. The largest island of the group is Malta, from which the archipelago takes its name. In 2003, it had a population of just over 388,867. Valletta, the capital, is the cultural, administrative and commercial centre of the archipelago. Malta is well served with harbours, chief of which is the Valletta Grand Harbour. Malta's international airport is situated five kilometres from the capital. The distance between Malta and the nearest point in Sicily is 93 km. The distance from the nearest point on the North African mainland (Tunisia) is 288 km. Gibraltar is 1,826 km to the west and Alexandria is 1,510 km to the east.

Circa 99% of the population are Maltese, and the remaining 1% consists of foreigners working in Malta and a few foreign residents who retired here. Besides the main islands, there are another two uninhabited ones, Kemmunit and Filfla.

With an area of 315.590 square kilometres, Malta has a population density of 1,257 persons per square kilometre, which is the highest in Europe. Because of its size and density, Emigration was necessary, especially during the 1950's and 1960's. There are a good number of Maltese communities abroad, the major ones are found in Canada and Australia. There are other important Maltese communities in UK and USA. Earlier migrations can also be traced in Algeria and Tunisia amongst others.

On 21st September 1964, Malta became a sovereign and independent nation within the Commonwealth. Ten years later, Parliament enacted important changes to the constitution and on the 13th December 1974, Malta was declared a Republic within the Commonwealth.

The official languages of Malta are Maltese and English, Maltese being our native language, which also can be referred as the majority language. Other popular languages practised in Malta besides English are Italian, French and German, with Italian being by far the most popular amongst the three. In fact, in the early 1900's, Italian was by far the more favoured, especially by the cultured classes and Maltese aristocracy; more than the English language and even the native Maltese tongue.

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Fundamentally, Maltese is a Semitic tongue, the same as Arabic, Aramaic (the language spoken by Jesus), Hebrew, Phoenician, Carthaginian and Ethiopian. However, unlike other Semitic languages, Maltese is written in the Latin alphabet, but with the addition of special characters to accommodate certain Semitic sounds. Nowadays, however, there is much in the Maltese language today that is not Semitic, due to the immeasurable Romantic influence from our succession of (Southern) European rulers through the ages.

The *MALTESE LANGUAGE ACT V* of 2004, CHAPTER 470 of the Laws of Malta established the National Council for the Maltese Language in order to promote the National Language of Malta and to provide the necessary means to achieve this aim.

Malta as a member of the subgroup of the MINERVA Work Package 3 called Multilingual issues and thesauri carried out a survey on multilingual websites and thesauri in 2005. The survey analysed websites linked in one way or another to Culture. The groups were subdivided into two categories: Governmental and NGO's.

Multilingualism and thesauri in Maltese websites is still an issue. The survey analysed 13 websites in all. Maltese does not feature anywhere on Maltese Cultural website except for the Ministry's Website where a number of Minister's speeches are carried out in Maltese. All websites are based in English being the language understood by a very high percentage of the Maltese population. 12 out of 13 are still monolingual, available only in English, with the remaining one being multi-lingual, but not including Maltese, which is targeted mainly for tourists rather than the Maltese population.

Multilingualism is still an issue on Maltese cultural sites. All of our websites except one are still monolingual websites.

The good practice would be the Malta Tourism Authority's Website (www.visitmalta.com) because its website has 9 language interfaces (English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Russian, Dutch, Chinese and Japanese). Heritage Malta is projecting to have its websites based on best practices in a few months time with its cultural content being professional. So

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far, the website is monolingual but is moving towards multilingual content at least in another 4 languages including Maltese.

The Cultural websites, which were surveyed, are the following (in alphabetical Order):

1. [Din l-Art Helwa](#)
2. [Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna](#)
3. [Heritage Malta](#)
4. [Malta Centre for Restoration](#)
5. [Malta Council for Culture and the Arts](#)
6. [Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce](#)
7. [Malta Tourism Authority](#)
8. [Manoel Theatre](#)
9. [Mediterranean Conference Centre](#)
10. [Ministry of Tourism and Culture](#)
11. [National Orchestra](#)
12. [St. James Cavalier](#)
13. [Superintendence of Cultural Heritage](#)