

Chapter 11

Maltese Sign Language: Parallel interwoven journeys of the Deaf community and the researchers

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This article traces the rapid development of Maltese Sign Language (LSM) from a language that was reportedly restricted to informal day-to-day communication by the Deaf community, to one that is now widely used in both informal and formal settings, including in the context of academic subjects such as the sciences, and in the context of professional activities. The article gives an account of LSM from a historical perspective, paying particular attention to its roots within the Deaf community, culminating in its recent recognition as an official language of Malta.

1 Introduction

This article traces the rapid development of Maltese Sign Language (LSM) from a language that is reported to have been used only for informal day-to-day communication by the Deaf¹ community (Llewellyn-Jones 1986: 7) to one that is used in both informal and formal settings and for a variety of academic subjects such as science as well as in applications such as professional hairdressing and automotive civil engineering (Azzopardi-Alexander 2015: 55 ff). A noteworthy vocabulary explosion occurred rapidly to meet the demands of signers, particularly since access to secondary and post-secondary education was enabled through sign language interpreters since 2001.

¹The use of lowercase *deaf* will refer to any or all hearing-impaired persons whereas uppercase *Deaf* will be restricted to those who use sign language and consider themselves members of the Deaf community.



This development parallels the research interest in LSM originating in the 1980s (see Section 3) and culminating around ten years later with the setting up of the Maltese Sign Language Research Project at the University of Malta's Institute of Linguistics.² This led to the start of courses in Maltese Sign Language taught by young Deaf adults and the compilation of the Maltese Sign Language Dictionary (see Azzopardi-Alexander 2003 and Azzopardi-Alexander 2004), work that is now continuing on the online version. Nevertheless, LSM is a minority language in a tiny island and the Deaf community faces the enormous challenge of surviving within the already bilingual setting of Maltese and English (Azzopardi-Alexander 2015: 52).

2 Looking back

2.1 Undocumented beginnings

Very little is known about the hearing-impaired population in Malta (henceforth the deaf) beyond that recorded in its educational history. Looking around one can still see those, now elderly, deaf persons who did not benefit from the educational system and who still managed to survive. It is impossible to gauge their quality of life. No attempt has been made to ask for their stories probably because research has so far been limited to the more easy-to-access younger members of the Deaf community. The older Deaf who did not access education at all must have been limited in their communication to matters of every day life with those who have lived with them or who are in their close vicinity (e.g. local shopkeepers). The only source of information on this is hearsay – people who remember “il-mutu” or “il-muta” (the dumb man or woman) who stuck out in the locality. Their vocal communication amounted to unintelligible vocalisations to the outsider but was sufficient to get by with family and other acquaintances who understood and presumably used home-made signs. They were sheltered by strong family structures. A few are still identifiable in various towns and villages. They did not usually work beyond occasional odd jobs given by family members or friends and their social interactions were limited. It would be desirable to enable them to record their own perspectives before their world disappears. Similar stories are known elsewhere because hearing family members have told them (e.g. various migrants to the US reported by Torres 2009 and many others) or because others who were themselves Deaf could present the Deaf perspective more reliably (e.g. Corker 1996).

²<http://www.um.edu.mt/linguistics/research/maltesesignlang>

2.2 Seedlings of the Deaf community

Deaf children in Malta were given the opportunity to attend school for the first time in 1956 though some whose hearing loss was not too severe were sent to their local school prior to that, in spite of the school's inability to cater specifically for them in any way. They were expected to fit in. Nevertheless, unlike in other places such as the UK, the USA and mainland Europe, there were never any boarding schools for the Deaf in Malta – probably because the size of the island combined with the small number of deaf children does not warrant residential education. Hence the Deaf community did not flourish beyond what interaction could be fitted into the school day.

Although deaf and Deaf children were educated together in the one school, the educational system was intensively oral-aural, “with auditory training, lip-reading and speech lessons taking a good slice off the time-table.” (A. Galea 1991: 36) The time for the rest of the curriculum was significantly reduced. Signing was not presented as a means of full access at the school for the deaf since few teachers could use more than a few signs though they gradually moved towards a more total-communicative approach in the 1980s. This meant that access to the ordinary curriculum was very limited. “Besides the three Rs³ these children were trained in carpentry, printing, lace making, needlework and home economics, thus preparing them for a better future.” (A. Galea 1991: 38) English was not taught in the special unit apart from “a few common words and phrases” if they were going to the Trade School. This was not challenged by the educators although, as the Head of the Deaf Unit of the time admitted, “We have always found that by teaching only Maltese in our schools we are condemning our deaf children to be second class citizens in a country where Secondary Education, public examinations etc. have a predominant English background.” (A. Galea 1991: 39)

Parents started to consider mainstreaming⁴ their deaf children motivated by the knowledge that their children would not be missing much in the mainstream that they would have accomplished at the Deaf Unit where basic literacy and numeracy formed the bulk of the curriculum. “The method of aural-oral teaching ... at times has been enforced even with children who could not follow it, with the result that the latter could neither communicate orally or in an officially recognised sign language... and have had to resort to a primitive environmental sign language understood only amongst themselves.” (A. Borg 1991: 50-51)

³The three Rs are reading, writing, and arithmetic.

⁴Mainstreaming refers to education within regular schools. Mainstreaming deaf children in Malta preceded the Inclusive Education movement in the 1990s where all children with disability were welcomed into regular schools and usually granted the help of a Learning Support Assistant.

Thus, at the request of one or two of the parents, deaf children started to be mainstreamed in the 1970s over the next few years as a result of the parents' growing awareness that special education for deaf children was far from being academically at par with what they would be exposed to in the mainstream. Where intensive parental/family support could be given, some children did very well in the mainstream. We are told that a deaf child "absorbed and is absorbing a lot of our attention and time ... interpreting for her most of the time" (Bezzina 1991: 45). Others did not thrive within the mainstream school system (A. Galea 1991: 38). This is no surprise particularly because at the time mainstream primary school classes tended to be much larger, often 30% larger than the current average of 17.6 in State schools, 25.4 in Church schools and 20.2 in Independent schools (National Statistics Office 2016). Moreover, deaf children had to have extensive parental academic support at home to enable them to cope with the learning of their hearing peers.

2.3 Mainstreaming – dissolution of the deaf-deaf contact

Professionals such as psychologists, social workers and even priests were unable to communicate with deaf youngsters or adults and this was felt throughout. Teachers often took on the role of interpreters where ex-students turned to them for help of all kinds. Families – usually one particular hearing member of the family – often acted as interpreter but in some situations this did not happen. Even those who completed their secondary education successfully and continued into post-secondary level did not feel completely at ease in the hearing world. One of the most academically successful youngsters states publicly at the 1991 conference *Partnership between Deaf People and Professionals* that using signs with deaf people made communication quicker and easier but he would always speak to hearing people. Unfortunately he felt left out when his work-mates "do not always tell me what has happened, because deafness is a hidden handicap, so they forget to explain to me. This also happens to other people like my swimming coach and also my teachers." He also anticipated problems were he to have a hearing girlfriend because "hearing people do not know enough about the deaf."

I think I am different from hearing people. They can communicate quickly. I communicate slowly. Hearing people can communicate easily. Sometimes I communicate with difficulty.

Like myself, deaf people in Malta have difficulties at home, at work, and at other places. I am very lucky that I have little or no problems with my

family at home but I know that many deaf people have a lot of problems with their family (K. Borg 1991: 41).

He concludes with a “wish that in the future, deaf people in Malta would have more opportunities to improve the quality of their life” (K. Borg 1991: 43). Sign language made life much easier but with the size of the Deaf Maltese community, there are inevitable disadvantages if Deaf youngsters and adults are to work and socialise within the dominantly hearing community, greater disadvantages than those of larger populations with larger Deaf communities.

Mainstreaming separates the deaf from each other completely. Often, there is only one deaf child in a school. I have occasionally been present when a deaf child is introduced to other deaf persons and s/he is surprised and then exhilarated to realise that s/he is not alone, not the only deaf one any more.

The small group of girls and the small group of boys who were educated together in mainstream schools continued to form a miniature community. These two groups were separate from the Deaf Unit and were even freer to foster sign language. By that time, in the early 1990s, a qualified teacher of the deaf who was a fluent signer⁵ facilitated their access to some of the secondary school curriculum. The teacher challenged the children to develop signs they required for the subjects they followed in the mainstream and to discuss the different signs they came up with in order to agree on usable signs. The children’s friendship blossomed, particularly because they shared more than they could share with hearing peers with whom they often felt left out since communicating was an effort. Retelling jokes and stories to deaf peers can become frustrating for hearing youngsters, slowing down spontaneous conversation. Summaries of everyday conversations filters out jokes and other important titbits that are technically not really informative, even at home within the family. The fact that the children in these groups managed to continue into post-secondary education may point to the fact that this kind of semi-mainstreaming may reap benefits and should be considered as a way forward.

3 The emergence of Maltese Sign Language

It is commonly acknowledged that “Very little is known about the history of sign languages; most evidence is anecdotal. It is likely that in the past, as in the present, there has been some contact between signers from different countries ...” (Woll

⁵She had qualified as a teacher of the deaf in the UK in 1991 and her ability to use British Sign Language led her to progress quickly to becoming fluent in Maltese Sign Language.

1984: 81) It could be said that many of the deaf children at the hearing-impaired unit in Pietà formed the first Maltese community of Deaf people along with the two small groups of children taught together in the mainstream (see §2.2). Of course, they were very young and did not include Deaf adults so they did not have the advantages of exposure to adult sign language except in the case of one particular child whose parents were also Deaf. This reaped some benefits to the others as well who were exposed to the adult Deaf community more extensively in their late teens through the Deaf club. However, on the whole they were deprived of the continuity of sign language users which is important to all Deaf communities and they were left to their own devices in constructing signs. Later, teachers used signs from British Sign Language (BSL) and from Gestuno⁶ (Llewellyn-Jones 1986), though most of these were not retained in the long term.

Deaf communities emerge naturally when profoundly deaf people meet on a regular basis. This has been known to happen in schools for the deaf across continents (Reilly & Reilly 2005). In spite of the lack of adult to child sign language exposure, and in spite of the mainly oral educational setting, Maltese Deaf youngsters are captured signing by Peter Llewellyn-Jones during visits to the Deaf Unit. One of the teachers of the deaf who taught the children at the Pietà Deaf Unit at the time observes five years later: “It is fascinating ... to see how resourceful the hearing impaired can be, even in the most difficult situations. Also fascinating is their ability to find or, better still, invent signs adapted from their local environment” (A. Borg 1991: 50). Alex Borg also observes how the deaf turn to “natural gestures in a kind of basic sign language” at the Deaf Unit.

The Deaf youngsters had started to develop signs distinct from those of BSL and Gestuno imported by teachers of the deaf since the vocabulary was published in 1975. Some of the signs developed as all the deaf children started to come together at the Deaf Club and reflected more of the Maltese reality and culture as time went by. The sign for DAR (HOUSE) reflects the flat roofs although most Maltese children would still draw the typical sloping roofed house; the sign for RĠEL (MAN) reflects the cap worn by mainly elderly Maltese men. The term Maltese Sign Language was used first by Llewellyn-Jones (1986: 7) and subsequently by researchers in their discussions with members of the Deaf community in the mid-1990s and in the first publication of the Maltese Sign Language Project, the first volume of the Dictionary (Azzopardi-Alexander 2003) as well as

⁶Gestuno was the name given to the first publication of internationally-agreed on sign vocabulary useful at international meetings. However, this soon developed into International Sign to enable more Deaf people to understand each other in international settings (e.g. The World Federation of the Deaf congresses).

in subsequent publications (Azzopardi-Alexander 2009; Azzopardi-Axiaq 2005). The acronym for Maltese Sign Language was established internationally as LSM in accordance with the Maltese name *Lingwa tas-Sinjali Maltija*.

4 The emergence of the Deaf community

A number of people and events led to the Deaf moving beyond the ‘control’ of the hearing teachers and parents who led the Association. Nevertheless some hearing individuals recognised the need for the deaf to be masters of their own destiny, to move away from what can be considered kind-hearted but nevertheless paternalistic attitudes of the hearing. This was important for them to develop their own identity and belong as first-class citizens to a decidedly Deaf community which was Deaf-led.

A. Borg (1991) mentions the setting up of a Maltese Sign Language Project. However, attempts to follow up the reference pointed to the Bristol University Deaf Studies-led research project, which involved collecting data of Maltese Sign Language along with data of other European and Middle Eastern sign languages and was not a Malta-initiated project – at least the author could not trace any references to it. It seems to point, instead, to the intention of the Special Education Department to look into the use of sign language in deaf education with the help of the UK agencies mentioned in the Llewellyn-Jones (1986) report. Nothing appears to have come out of the project in terms of deaf education, sign language interpreting or even other professionals specialised with the deaf which were listed in the ‘General Comments and Suggestions’ section of the report.

Bezzina (1991) reports that he established and coordinated a self-help group of parents of deaf children who met regularly and organised educational and social events for their children that included the whole family, enabling them and eventually deaf adults to meet on a regular basis (Bezzina 1991: 45). Moreover, Bezzina was very concerned about the lack of use of Maltese Sign Language in education and wanted to expose deaf children and their families to sign language since many deaf children “are leaving school unable to speak, read, write or communicate manually except with close relatives and/or friends” (Bezzina 1991: 46). Out of context this reflects that in the past most decisions concerning the Deaf were made in hearing-led settings. However, more recent events indicate the Deaf are now in a position to determine what happens to their community. In fact many Deaf activists were involved in discussions during the phase where the Maltese Sign Language Law was being discussed (see §10.1).

Bezzina was the mind (and spirit) behind the opening of the Deaf Club in 1981 at Lascaris Wharf in Valletta. This enabled the Deaf to come together with the expected results that Maltese Sign Language was used much more extensively, it was passed on to the younger deaf who became primary users and hence they contributed to its development by extending its vocabulary to meet their needs, and Deaf adults started marrying and continuing to visit the Deaf Club with their mainly hearing children. Bezzina expressed two important thoughts publicly:

... we have to give the deaf adults more space. We have to believe in their capabilities. The Maltese deaf adults should gradually lead their own community ... Maybe this conference will be the start of a Deaf Pride movement based on the Maltese Deaf Culture with the Maltese Sign Language as the Unifying force between the members of this community (Bezzina 1991: 48-49).

5 Deaf culture and identity

One important milestone was reached when classes of Maltese Sign Language started to be taught at the University of Malta Institute of Linguistics and were later offered also as evening classes by the Education Department and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) where they are still a popular addition to the evening course programmes offered by the two institutions.

Recently, changes were made to the Maltese Sign Language courses in order to make deaf culture part of the course design rather than in answer to incidental questions asked by interested hearing adults. This reflects the greater confidence of the Deaf tutors in presenting themselves as members of a minority group identifiable by their language but fitting into the hearing world.

The 'voice' of the Deaf can be seen in their language pride and their conscious ownership reflected in the active and conscious formation of new signs whenever the need arises. They are aware that they cannot work independently of each other because consensus is required for signs to thrive. It is hoped that more research will focus on the process of sign formation from the initial makeshift iconic sign to the more subtle signs (Azzopardi-Alexander 2009), from the first use instigated by an immediate need to the time when it becomes accepted by the larger group of signers.

6 Deaf education

Although over the years deaf children have been supported, they still share the dilemma of American (and probably many other) deaf children receiving a little service from a lot of professionals and still “falling through the cracks.” (Oliva & Lytle 2014: 198). Oliva & Lytle (2014) recommend, on the basis of the research done particularly in the VL2 Labs⁷ by Petitto and her team, “ongoing support from an individual who has been schooled in all the issues they face” to enable their Individual Educational Plan⁸ to be fulfilled (Oliva & Lytle 2014: 198), in particular the development of bimodal bilingual skills. The advantages of being bimodal bilingual can be attested both in the cognitive as well as in linguistic, educational and socio-emotional domains, particularly in identity formation. Previous concerns about the learning of sign language having a negative impact on the deaf child, especially educationally and specifically on learning spoken language, can now be shelved as archaic. Indeed, early learning of sign language provides the Deaf child with support in learning the spoken and written language:

Does the knowledge of a natural sign language facilitate Deaf children’s learning to read and write? The data collected in this study seem to lead to a positive answer to this question, by showing a strong relationship between LSF (French Sign Language) and written French skills developed by bilingual Deaf children (Niederberger 2008: 45).

Although a great deal of work still needs to be done in this area, Niederberger asserts the strong positive relationship between early exposure to a sign language, particularly to abundant narrative exposure and literacy in the language spoken around the Deaf child. Moreover, the research points to the use of metalinguistic skills in sign language that positively impacts the child’s development of the written language.

Pace (2007: 43) considers the lack of a language policy for deaf children as an ‘area of concern’ which “continues to hamper a clear understanding of the linguistic, socio-emotional and cultural needs of deaf children” and which reflects on “the contribution of deaf adults in the education of deaf children...(and) the development of suitable assessment protocols for LSM, Maltese and Maltese English....”. The role of Deaf adults in supporting sign language within the home

⁷The Brain and Language Lab for Neuroimaging developed by Laura-Ann Petitto in 2012.

⁸Every deaf child has an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) in Malta. However, there is lack of monitoring how and by whom the plan is to be realised beyond what is said at the IEP biannual meetings.

was a recommendation made in 1998 along with several others by the Kummissjoni Ministerjali dwar l-Edukazzjoni tal-Persuni Neqsin mis-Smigh (Ministerial Commission on the Education of the Hearing-Impaired). This would enable Maltese Sign Language to develop with continuity. So far, the Deaf themselves have no way of working for this continuity and research cannot contribute to more than establishing what the different varieties consist of and how they differ from each other.

7 Maltese Sign Language – From basic to refined

It must be assumed that Maltese deaf individuals probably made use of signs at home that were iconic or which extended from local non-deaf signs used by others in the community. If deaf persons did not actually meet anywhere except by coincidence, then one can assume that they used signs we now call 'home signs' that shared the usual features of any basic sign language used for day to day activities with family and close friends: iconicity, the mirroring to different degrees of the physical or other identifiable features of referents. More abstract concepts were most likely expressed through association with more iconic signs with which the abstract concepts are associated. Thus, for example, the signs for days of the week were expressed through the signs for the major activity of the day such as the sign for doing the laundry. Thus, as soon as Maltese deaf children started to meet on a more regular basis at school they communicated using these signs, each adjusting to signs of other members of the group where these seemed to them to be 'better' signs i.e. ones that were faster to produce, or which shared more elements of the group's different signs for the same object or concept.

Since Maltese deaf adults did not usually get married (A. Galea 1991) until around the late 1970s, probably because they did not usually meet except by coincidence, there did not seem to be any generation-to-generation transfer of signs. It is the first community of signers who attended the school for the deaf who must have formed the first Maltese Sign Language, however basic. From then on, it is likely that every other group who came together at the school would have learnt and possibly contributed to the then relatively slow development of the language since their lives were still very restricted in educational terms. The first recording of signs was carried out for the comparative study of signs across around 20 sign languages in Europe and the Middle East led by the Bristol University European Centre for Sign Language Research. A. Borg (1991) refers to the local part of the study as "a feasibility study on Maltese signs currently

used at that time” (A. Borg 1991: 52)⁹ As mainstreaming replaced the deaf unit, youngsters were again separated off in their district schools. However, once the Deaf Club was opened they had recourse to the other Deaf members and hence to sign language. Nevertheless, because their education went well beyond that of the older deaf, their need for signs beyond the every-day signs enabled sign language to flourish. The result was also a discontinuity such that the older Deaf currently use different signs from those of the younger Deaf. Contacts with Deaf communities overseas, facilitated by the social media, and sometimes leading to lasting relationships involving commitment, is now visible through signs borrowed from such contacts. Some of the adult Deaf are able to point to different members to indicate “heavy borrowers”. Whether the borrowed signs replace the local ones in the long term needs to be seen. Many Deaf youngsters resist using the borrowed signs possibly because of their language pride.

The more recent rapid increase in sign vocabulary (see Section 3) is a response to the very rapid changes in the lives of the Deaf. The most noteworthy vocabulary explosion occurred rapidly to meet the demands of signers who had a sign language interpreter at school¹⁰ and followed classes in science and in various other subjects. Signs had to be created to cover the vocabulary for the subjects for which sign language interpreting service was made available, starting with Mathematics, Home Economics and proceeding to Physics, Biology and much more. Since these signs are still being inputted for the forthcoming online Maltese Sign Language dictionary we are still unable to specify the size of the vocabulary. The creation of new signs led to their discussion with peers and a growing consciousness of what they were involved in when they needed to create new signs. They discussed how they signed different concepts and whether they liked or disliked what they had come up with. They analysed what aspects they liked and what they did not like and this growing consciousness and refined meta-linguistic skills constitute a much-used resource though some would insist on keeping the more iconic signs.

Deaf signers have been interpreting daily news bulletins on TV since 2012, and the school curriculum has been made more accessible to Deaf children first at secondary school especially since the first sign language interpreter was appointed by the Deaf Association in 2001. Access across educational levels, including University, through sign language interpreting is currently provided on request, sub-

⁹However, no information about this is available in the public domain and information from the Education Department is currently unavailable.

¹⁰Sign Language interpreters have, to date, only had informal training with substantial input by the Deaf community prior to their acceptance as competent for the task. Formal training is currently being planned.

ject to availability. Adolescents and young adults have started to follow part-time evening courses after full-time work. Growing confidence in their abilities once they are ensured of access is changing the Deaf lifestyle even though they still lag behind their hearing peers academically.

8 The contribution of the research community

This development of Maltese Sign Language parallels the research interest in LSM originating around 1994 and leading to the setting up of the Maltese Sign Language Research Project at the University of Malta Institute of Linguistics. The project to some extent triggered the Deaf community's heightened pride and interest in their sign language.

The first main aim of the project was the compilation of the Maltese Sign Language Dictionary which resulted in two published volumes (Azzopardi-Alexander 2003 and Azzopardi-Alexander 2004), and two completed but unpublished volumes. It was not financially viable to publish the hard copies and, since then, work progressed in view of having an online version. Work on this met with some difficulties which slowed down progress, but it is currently hoped that the online dictionary will be available in a relatively short time. It is also hoped that arrangements can be made to enable its regular update. The work on the dictionary brought together small groups of Deaf youngsters and adults for periods of time discussing among themselves the signs they used. They were all volunteers. The hearing researchers soon recognised the fact that signing changed in their presence and so the initial data collection was not used. Furthermore, there was no other study – linguistic or otherwise – on which to base the data collection apart from what was reported by Llewellyn-Jones (1986).

Very soon it was possible to engage two Deaf researchers to work on a part-time basis as sponsorship of the project by their employers.¹¹ This enabled the signing for the data collection to be more natural since no hearing researchers were involved. A fresh start was made by asking the Deaf participants to take full charge of the data collection. One of the participants was in a position to present signs used by the older generation and this enriched the project unexpectedly. Occasional meetings took place to point out gaps and ask questions about usage but it was considered unnecessary to interfere beyond this.

The Deaf did not adjust their signing but simply worked together. They often disagreed of course, a healthy step towards more representative data. This meant

¹¹The Bank of Valletta and the Works Department sponsored the project by allowing one of their employees to join the research team for the equivalent of a 1 day a week basis for several years.

that they were becoming more sophisticated meta-linguistically. They were intrigued by the fact that their language was of interest to University academics. This helped them sign more openly in most settings and they became conscious of many things they had not previously thought about in terms of themselves as communicators using sign language.

Entries in the Maltese Sign Language dictionaries (Azzopardi-Alexander 2003 and Azzopardi-Alexander 2004) include a description of the signs in Maltese and English, frames from video clips showing from one to three components of each sign as well as the signwritten form of the sign following the Valerie Sutton SignWriting system (Sutton 1995). Figure 1 shows a page from the first volume of the dictionary, *Animals*, which is the only volume that includes illustrations. Figure 2 shows a page from the second volume of the dictionary, *Places*. The image on the top right of each entry is the signwritten form. This is being updated for the online dictionary on the basis of M. Galea (2014).

The first volume, *Animals*, has just over 100 entries. The second volume, *Places*, has over 360 entries. The online dictionary that should be launched in March 2018 will contain all volumes including those that have not been published each of which contains around 350 entries. There are around 3,000 entries in total so far.

The online dictionary will have the advantage of video recordings for the full sign and hence provide a better teaching and learning resource than static video clips. Eventually signs will need to be placed in proper contexts as illustrations of the various entries. More financial input is required to enable the maintenance and the development of the dictionary. The Deaf community can be engaged directly to ensure that this is activated.

9 Academic research on Maltese Sign Language

Work on the dictionary entries generated a great deal of linguistic information most of which still needs to be investigated in depth. However, one can see the strands within the language tapestry within which Maltese Sign Language flourishes. It is possible to trace some interesting contact phenomena (see Azzopardi-Alexander 2015, especially pp. 57 ff) in studying the dictionary entries.

In the short history of the study of Maltese Sign Language there are only a few pieces of work that derive from academic study. However, some of the works completed so far on LSM are significant and should constitute a bridge to more extensive studies.

| | |
|---|--|
| bebbuxu snail | |
|  |  |
| bebbuxu | snail |
| <p>Dan is-sinjali isir biż-żewġ idejn li jiehdu forma differenti. Id waħda tiehu l-forma ta' V. L-id l-oħra tiehu l-forma ta' 5 mgħawwēg u titqiegħed fuq l-id l-oħra bħall-qoxra tal-bebbuxu. Is-swaba ta' l-id forma ta' V jorġu minn bejn is-swaba miftuħa ta' l-id l-oħra u jiċċaqilqu 'l fuq u 'l isfel mill-ghaksa tas-swaba bħall-antenna tal-bebbuxu. L-idejn jimxu flimkien bil-mod bħall-bebbuxu.</p> <p>Id-daqs tal-bebbuxu jiġi indikat b'id waħda forma ta' O żgħira għal bebbuxu żgħir u b'id waħda forma ta' Ċ biex tindika bebbuxu kbir.</p> <p>Għall-plural, l-id forma ta' V mgħawġa tintuża bhala classifier u titqiegħed f'punti differenti fiż-żona tas-sinjali qisu qed jitqiegħdu hafna bebbux hemm. Inkella jista' jintuża s-sinjali għal HAFNA wara s-sinjali għal BEBBUXU. Il-classifier tal-plural għali jnibidel għall-forma ta' X (e.ż. hafna bebbux f'toqba).</p> <p>Meta n-nom BEBBUXU jkun is-sugġett ta' verb ta' moviment l-idejn jimxu skond l-azzjoni tal-verb, jew l-id forma ta' V mgħawġa tintuża bhala classifier u timxi skond l-azzjoni tal-verb.</p> | <p>This sign is made with the hands in a different shape. One hand forms a V shape. The other hand forms a curved 5. This hand is placed over the other like the shell of a snail with the two fingers of the other hand coming through the open 5 shape and moving up and down at the knuckle joints like the feelers of a snail. The two hands move forward slowly together like the snail.</p> <p>A small snail is shown by one hand forming a small O whereas one hand in C shape is used to indicate a large snail.</p> <p>For the plural, the hand in a curved V shape is used as a classifier and is placed at various points in the signing space as though many snails are being placed there. The sign for MANY, following the sign for snail, can also be used instead. The classifier for the plural can change to an X shape (e.g. many snails inside a hole).</p> <p>When the noun SNAIL is the subject of a verb of movement the hands move according to the action indicated by the verb. Alternatively, the curved V shaped hand is used as a classifier and moves according to the action indicated by the verb.</p> |

Figure 1: Extracts from the Maltese Sign Language Dictionary Volume 1 (Azzopardi-Alexander 2003) for the entry BEBBUXU / SNAIL

| <p>Amerika (L-) America</p> | <p>Amerika ta' fuq (L-) North America</p> |
|---|---|
|  <p>Amerika (L-) (ta' fuq)</p> |  <p>America (north)</p> |
| <p>Dan is-sinjali isir biż-żewġ idejn forma ta' 5 miftuħ u bil-pala thares 'il gewwa. Is-swaba' ta' id jidhru bejn is-swaba' ta' id l-oħra u jimxu f'ċirku orizzontali 'l barra minn ġenb għanofs u għall-ġenb l-iehor. Għalkemm dan huwa s-sinjali għal L-AMERIKA TA' FUQ, ġieli jtkompla bis-sinjali għal FUQ biex issir enfazi fuq il-kuntrast ma' l-Amerika ta' Isfel. Dan isir b'id waħda li tiegħu l-forma ta' 1 bil-pala ta' id thares 'il barra u bil-werrej thares 'il fuq, is-sinjali użat mill-generazzjoni ta' qabel isir biż-żewġ idejn forma ta' 5 miftuħ u bil-pala thares 'il gewwa. Is-swaba' jmissu imbagħad jibiegħdu u jimxu f'ċirku orizzontali 'l barra sakemm jergħu jilqagħu.</p> | <p>This sign is made with two hands in the shape of open 5 with palms facing inwards. The fingers of both hands fit into each other and the hands rotate in a horizontal circle from side to centre and to the other side without letting go. Although this is the sign for NORTH AMERICA, it is often followed by the sign for UP to emphasize the contrast with South America. This is made with one hand in the shape of 1 with the palm facing outwards and with the index finger pointing upwards. The sign is made differently by the older generation. The two hands take the shape of open 5 with palms facing inwards. The fingers touch and then move away in a circle in a horizontal direction and then meet again.</p> |
|  <p>Amerika t'Isfel (L-)</p> |  <p>South America</p> |
| <p>Dan is-sinjali isir biż-żewġ idejn forma ta' 5 miftuħ u bis-swaba' strati. Id waħda titqiegħed bil-pala thares 'il gewwa fuq il-livell tas-sider. L-id l-oħra titqiegħed bil-pala thares 'il barra u bis-saba' l-kbir jistrieħ fuq is-saba' l-kbir ta' id l-oħra. Ġieli jintużaw is-sinjali għal L-AMERIKA u għal ISFEL wara xulxin f'lok dan is-sinjali differenti għal kollox.</p> | <p>This sign is made with two hands in the shape of open 5 with stretched-out fingers. One hand is placed at chest level with the palm facing inwards. The other hand is placed with palm facing outwards and with the thumb leaning on the thumb of the other hand. Sometimes the sign for AMERICA is immediately followed by the sign for DOWN instead of using this totally different sign.</p> |

Figure 2: Extract from the Maltese Sign Language Dictionary Volume 2 (Azzopardi-Alexander 2004) for the entries AMERICA and SOUTH AMERICA

Early interest resulted in two undergraduate theses. These include a study of the communicative competence of a young Deaf boy who used very little speech and who signed to his family. The thesis includes a compilation of signs used by the child (D'Amato 1988). At the time there was no contact between the child and other Deaf persons, old or young. So it would be interesting to compare the lexicon compiled with that of current LSM. Another study seven years later focussed on two Deaf adults who used extensive signing in their communication. They were educated at the Deaf Unit (Porter 1995). Another 6 years later we find a study of the sign language used by two children one of whom had used sign language all his life with his signing Deaf parents (Azzopardi 2001) whereas another study focussed on the narrative skills of Maltese youngsters (Fenech 2002).

The first Master's thesis is a comparative study of the communication skills of 3 deaf children, a cochlear-implanted child with post-lingual hearing loss, one Deaf child who used both speech and sign as she had been exposed to sign soon after diagnosis and was brought up by a signing speaking family and a Deaf child who signed but spoke very little (Azzopardi-Axiaoq 2005).

A huge milestone was reached with the Master's thesis that focussed on LSM classifier constructions (M. Galea 2006), as well as with the study of how the Maltese Deaf construct signs at different levels of abstraction in different lexical fields (Mifsud 2010). These works could be considered as initiating sign linguistics research on LSM. M. Galea (2006) is a detailed study of the way classifiers are constructed in the LSM and how they behave. Galea analyses the internal structure of LSM classifier handshapes as well as their orientation and movement. She considers the 3-way notional classification of classifier handshapes in the literature – that of Whole Entity, Size and Shape Specifier and Handle Handshapes classifiers and discusses its limitations. Different movements of classifiers are discussed in detail as is the function of holds (stationary classifier handshape) in combination with the other elements such as the articulating (moving) hand in creating prepositional meaning, maintaining reference and differing contact resulting in different lexical meaning. Galea also discusses how movement can be meaningful within the signed construction but can also form part of the lexical meaning of the sign itself. She concludes that the distinction between these constructions is signalled by non-manuals such as eye-gaze rather than by hand movement and hence that the verbal versus nominal distinction in LSM involves these non-manuals. She thus opens up a whole new area of research that calls for immediate attention. In the course of the study, she questions whether sign linguists, internationally, were unduly concerned about establishing parallels with

spoken language research and thus moved their attention away from important considerations stemming exclusively from the manual modality.

Mifsud (2010) showed how LSM enables its users to distinguish between different levels of abstraction through structural means. She found the use of simultaneous morpheme compositions, reduced morphemes resulting from extensive assimilation of handshape, location, orientation and movement to form a unitary whole as well as compounding with reduced movements. She identifies the different features involved in the compression of superordinate signs as including loss of movement within constituent parts, loss of morphemes, faster transitions of handshapes, handshape differences and durational compression (Mifsud 2010: 150). These structural characteristics resemble the sign formations reported in other sign languages such as ASL (Klima & Bellugi 1979: 225 ff).

Different linguistic aspects are tackled by M. Galea (2014) within the context of adapting the Valerie Sutton SignWriting System as a standardised way of writing Maltese Sign Language. In this work Galea investigates the way pronominals work in LSM in great detail. She then looks into how agreement verbs are used in relation to these pronominals. The study presents a very interesting linguistic analysis and is the start, it is hoped, of further in-depth linguistic research into this relatively new sign language. Naturally, there is a very long way to go. Some of that mileage will hopefully be covered by Deaf researchers themselves in the not too distant future. M. Galea (2014) in fact involves the Deaf perspective to reach the decisions expounded in the work.

10 Maltese Sign Language officially recognised in Malta

10.1 Recognition

When this article was started, the Maltese Parliament was expected to put the Maltese Sign Language Bill through its third reading in November 2015. The Bill was put through Parliament on March 16th 2016 and became an Act¹² signed by the President of Malta, Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, on March 24th 2016. The Sign Language Law ACT No. XVII of 2016 (ATT Nru XVII tal-2016) provides for the setting up a Sign Language Council similar to that set up within the Danish Sign Language Law.¹³ The Deaf community currently has 3 representatives on the newly appointed Sign Language Council. The law could make a great change to their lives and, particularly, to the future of the Deaf through fuller access all

¹²<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=26704&l=1>

¹³<http://dsn.dk/tegnsprog/about-the-danish-sign-language-council>

round. Since LSM has become an official language, resources should be created to benefit the Deaf community, particularly within education. In a few years, it is hoped that Deaf children will access all of the primary and secondary school curriculum as well as higher education through sign language interpreters. The interpreting service goes hand in hand with the recognition of LSM in Malta both because the interpreting service is being requested more extensively by the Deaf community and because more full-time interpreters will be employed particularly once sign language interpreter training is offered.

A great deal of work needs to be done in order to build the resources necessary for all this. Official recognition is just the gate being opened. The community is tiny and human resources in the field are limited. It is hoped that the motivation and hard work of the Council members will enable the Deaf to achieve better and lead fuller lives.

The law will only be as strong as the Council, empowered by the human resources who constitute it and by the financial resources it will have to enable them to recommend the appropriate measures and monitor their delivery.

10.2 Great expectations

The current number of full-time sign language interpreters, five, means that in practice the present number of interpreters can cope with only a very limited part of Deaf children's school day. The expected growth of the service goes hand in hand with the recognition of LSM in Malta. Once the importance of the early exposure to sign language is recognised and the number of sign language interpreters increases to give full educational access to each Deaf child, the achievements of Deaf children will improve and there will be a good number who would be able to access higher education. This will parallel the development in other countries. So far no profoundly prelingual deaf or Deaf Maltese youngster has followed a degree course at university. It is partly because very often profoundly deaf children do not achieve the same academic results as their hearing peers and partly because, even when they do, they have not, so far, been able to access the lectures delivered in spoken language and available to them by very limited auditory means alone and corresponding lip-reading which equates to visual guesswork.

Naturally, it also depends on how demanding parents are. Parents have always been a major force to contend with. It is hoped they will continue to be. Unfortunately, there is limited understanding resulting from lack of readily available information.

Little is known about bimodal bilingual education for the Deaf locally. Bimodal bilingual education is known to facilitate Deaf children's development of "positive self-esteem and a strong sense of identity" and to show "evidence of improved pupil attainment" (Swanwick & Gregory 2007: 19). In both the mainstream and schools for the Deaf settings "good practice exists where deaf adults have a specific responsibility as role models and also potentially as mentors for the deaf pupils as they develop their identities, esteem and confidence. The papers presented at the Multimodal Multilingual Outcomes workshop in Stockholm¹⁴ in June 2016 pointed to the advantages of sign bilingualism for all children with hearing loss, even those with cochlear implants.

A review of local deaf education must take place with the involvement of all stakeholders, including those who are intent on excluding sign language from their deaf children's lives. Evidence-based information must be available to help parents and young people make the right choices for the right reasons.

11 Conclusion

This attempt to work out the history of Maltese Sign Language and of the community that uses it is still not as complete as one would like. What is needed is to engage the older Deaf to narrate their own perspective of what happened. They report that they have only recently started to use LSM with pride instead of restricting it to settings with Deaf participants with no hearing onlookers. There are still some who would say that they are stared at but this does not stop them using it because they recognise it as a worthy means of communication and of interest to academics. They act as participants for data that forms the basis of academic research. Gradually they will themselves be the researchers. M. Galea (2014) has shown that they are able to contribute to metalinguistic thought and discussion and so there is an urgent need to enable some of them to work on academic research. As the Maltese Deaf continue to use and develop their language and contribute to academic research through their collaboration with hearing researchers, their meta-linguistic skills are likely to become more sophisticated than those of language users in only the spoken modality. This is an inevitable result as the research becomes meaningful to them and so they could be given opportunities to become protagonists in academic research.

¹⁴<http://www.ling.su.se/om-oss/evenemang/workshops-och-konferenser/multimodal-multilingual-outcomes-in-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-children-1.285132>

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