Maltese at the Crossroads of Technological Developments

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Maltese is the native language of approximately 400,000 Maltese living in Malta and Gozo. It is also spoken in some communities abroad, mainly in Australia, Canada, the USA and the UK. Maltese traces its Arabic origins back to the 11th century. At different phases of its history, it borrowed profusely both from Romance (Sicilian, Tuscan, and Modern Italian, in particular), as well as from English, especially in recent times. Modern Maltese displays a great deal of mixture: the influence of the non-Semitic element is most obvious in the lexis, while the most salient basic grammatical structures are Arabic. Indeed, the combination of a root-based (and pattern) and a stem-based morpho-lexis is one of the factors that make Maltese a particularly intriguing language to describe, analyse and model.

The current linguistic situation in Malta is a complex one, in particular because both Maltese and English, the two official languages of the Maltese Islands, are used to different degrees of proficiency by the majority of the population and interact in different ways. As a national language, the status of Maltese has been positively affected by two significant recent developments, namely, its recognition as an official European Union language in 2004, and the establishment in 2005 of the *National Council for the Maltese Language* as the official body responsible for language policy and planning.

In recent years, Malta has also seen very rapid developments in the use of the Internet and mobile telephony. Many broadcasting and print media, as well as government and other local institutions now have their own websites, many of them also in Maltese. Some radio stations also stream their programmes live, while a number of media organisations exist only on the Web. However, one important area in which Malta still lags behind is the development of computational tools and resources, such as corpora, lexicons, and spell-checkers. Indeed, if Maltese is to develop further, and even to survive, and modernise itself, it is essential that significant investment be made both in basic language research in general and in the development of computational and technological resources and tools for Maltese, in particular.