

# **'Glocalised' youth culture as linguistic performance: media globalisation and the construction of hybrid identities**

by Joe Grixti

## **Abstract**

This article explores how young people's cultural identities are being increasingly redefined in complex linguistic and performative relation to trans-cultural media experiences. Drawing on interviews with young people living in Malta, it examines children's use of and attitudes to language in a post-colonial bilingual context in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the global-local interface informing the construction of contemporary youth identities provide a striking example of 'glocal' hybridity, irrespective of whether they choose to claim Maltese or English or combination of the two as the primary marker of their cultural identity.

## **Summary**

1. Globalisation, youth culture, and identity
2. Cultural identity in a post-colonial bilingual context
3. Language as Marker of global or local identity
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## **1. Globalisation, youth culture, and identity**

Media globalization is usefully understood as a process emerging from a combination of dramatic developments in technology, world-wide processes of deregulation in broadcasting, and the growth of massive multi-national media conglomerates which command interests that span a range of key media sectors and operate across the major world markets. These developments have given the leading world communications companies 'an unrivalled capacity to shape the symbolic environment which we all inhabit' (Murdoch, 1996: 92). Indeed, for many popular as well as academic commentators, this process amounts to a new form of cultural imperialism, 'reconceptualised as the media imperialism model in which the motivation for dissemination is economic rather than political' (Crane, 2002: 17). Many perceive these developments as amounting to a form of specifically American cultural imperialism – as reflected in claims about the 'McDonaldisation' or 'Disneyfication' of the world (see Ritzer, 2004 and Barber, 1996). But it is important to remember that 'global mass culture' is an abstraction, not a homogeneous or unidirectional force, and the 'global mass media' are actually made up of complex and varied networks of conglomerates and forces which are not exclusively American in origin or orientation. As Appadurai (1996:31) points out, 'the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes'.

The imaginary landscapes constructed by transnational media systems have been argued by some to act as culture-levellers, blurring traditional social relations (Meyrowitz, 1985) and 'corrod[ing] both the old local identities and traditional notions of national identity by blending them into one communication system' (Meyrowitz & Maguire, 1993: 48). These patterns of influence are frequently perceived as applying especially to the young, on the grounds that there now appear to be some very pronounced similarities between young people from different parts of the world, especially in their modes of speech, styles of dress, and in the types of films, TV programmes, video games and music which they find most appealing and claim as their own. The homogenizing influence of youth-oriented media is thus frequently identified as a key feature of life in the global village – not least by those who own or run these media. According to MTV's chairman and chief executive officer, for instance, 'kids are not the same all over the world, but they resemble each other closely, more than any other generation in history' (cited in Rollin, 1999: 277). Critics often complain that these patterns of consumption are breeding 'a borderless youth culture' (Sine, 2000) or 'an army of teen clones marching – in "uniform" as the marketers say – into the global mall' (Klein, 2000: 129).

These concerns about young people's alleged loss of cultural diversity and indigenous uniqueness partly derive from recognition of the large-scale, intense and aggressive targeting of youth markets in increasingly globalised commercial cultures. Today's youth are the first generation to be enculturated into global media from the beginning of their lives, and their media experiences are far more extensive and intensive than any other generation in history (Best & Kellner, 2003). Indeed, the concept and image of 'youth' as we understand it today is itself very much a product of the commercial media. It is young people's distinctive patterns of media use and practices of commodity consumption that have come to set 'youth' apart as a distinct cross-cultural group (Osgerby, 2004).

But though it is true that young people everywhere increasingly appear to share similar tastes in styles of dress and entertainment, there are still significant regional, ethnic, and cultural differences in the ways they use and appropriate the media technologies and global images at their disposal. For one thing, though it is heavily influenced by the commercial orientations currently dominating the global media, youth-oriented media entertainment is also strongly driven by the interests and input of young people themselves. Young people play important roles not just in determining which particular media products, images and values they choose to endorse, but also in the production of such media images and values. Local versions of programmes aimed at and presented by young people (as in MTV-style compilations) may indeed often look and sound very similar to their overseas counterparts, but they are usually also very distinctly local. And it is often the local flavour which makes many of these imitations more popular than their imported counterparts (van der Rijt et al, 2000).

The local and the global have thus become deeply intertwined, paradoxically reinforcing as they symbiotically transform each other (see Gixti, 2006). In this sense, contemporary youth are often also perceived as having unprecedented opportunities to create their own (multiple) identities, where identity is understood as 'a "production", which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (Hall, 1997: 51). In this 'glocalised' context, life experiences are no longer exclusively defined and confined by once-powerful solidarities such as class, occupation, church, locality, gender and family. Rather, daily life has increasingly become reconstituted in terms of 'the dialectical interplay of the local and the global', and individuals are increasingly forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options (Giddens, 1991: 5). These options and choices play a central role in the construction of youth identities, since identity (in Judith Butler's terms) is 'performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results' (Butler, 1990: 25).

The options available to young people in different socio-cultural contexts as they negotiate lifestyle choices are also importantly inflected by language, so that 'the dialectical interplay of the local and the global' is often embodied in choices between varieties and variations of language use and linguistic performance. In this relation, the experience of Maltese youth offers a revealing illustration of the links between 'glocal' behaviour and youth identity, not least because Maltese youths' experiences of and engagements with the local-global interface are deeply intertwined with the linguistic choices which they make as they define and perform their cultural identities in Malta's historically loaded bilingual context.

## 2. Cultural identity in a post-colonial context

Though the Maltese language 'has long been held to be the crux of Maltese identity and is often held to be the main differentiating mark of ethnic identity' (Cassar, 2001: 257), it has also had to survive centuries of colonial domination during which it was 'constrained to the "low" domains of the home and village life' (Borland, 2005: 113). As a spoken language, Maltese has a very long and complex history, but writing in Maltese only started to become relatively widespread in the nineteenth century, and it was only standardized and codified in the 1920s. It did not have any official status till 1934 (when it replaced Italian as the language of the courts), and was only officially identified as the country's national language after independence from Britain in 1964. Malta's Constitution now lists Maltese and English as the country's two official languages, and the government's policy is to make Malta truly bilingual – so that, for instance, all laws have to be framed in the two languages, though the Maltese text will prevail over the English in the case of conflict (*Constitution*, p.7). Maltese is now widely used in most sectors of public life, including parliament, the church, radio and television, as well as in general conversation. The overwhelming majority of the population

speak Maltese as their first language – over 96% according to some estimates (Borg et al, 1992; Sciriha and Vassallo, 2001), though exact quantification is problematic because of the variety of ways in which individual speakers will often interlace Maltese with English, and because the use of either language is usually context-driven.

But though the Maltese language is now officially and firmly established as an essential marker of Maltese national identity, there is also widespread competition from English because of its importance as a language of wider communication. English language newspapers, books and magazines are sold everywhere, English-language films dominate local cinemas, and local theatre productions in English are at least as frequent as those in Maltese. Most of the inhabitants are bilingual, but to varying degrees of competence, and many do not feel equally confident in both languages. Because of historical and geographic links with Italy, as well as access to Italian television transmissions since the late 1950s, Italian is also widely understood and (to varying degrees) spoken by large sections of the population.

English was introduced in Malta during the British colonial period (1800 - 1964), but it did not start to achieve the important position which it enjoys today until the second quarter of the twentieth century. An 1879 British commission of enquiry into the position of the English language in Malta, for example, reported that though English was in growing demand because of commercial conditions, its teaching was 'given little or no attention' in primary schools, and 'its use was forbidden in 13 of 14 classes of the Lyceum (the only secondary school) and 17 of 18 classes in the university' (Camilleri, 1996: 86). One cause of this resistance to the introduction of English was the firmly established status of Italian as the language of the educated and professional classes. Throughout the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, Italian remained the only formal language, while Maltese continued to be spoken by the local population. It was only after the Second World War (when the prestige of Italian was eroded because it came to be seen as the language of the enemy) that English really began to play a major role in public institutional life and Maltese culture, coming to be seen by all echelons of Maltese society as the language of education and as a status symbol (Aquilina, 1978: 45). The emergence of English as a focal force in global communications and media technology during the late twentieth century, coupled with the massive growth of the tourist industry as a main source of Malta's national income after independence in 1964, have further consolidated the position of English in Malta as the useful international language. But the standing of Maltese as national language has also been strengthened – as evidenced by its acceptance as an official language of the European Union in 2004 (see Badia, 2004: 5). According to Brincat (2005), 'the vitality of the local language and political insistence on national identity have helped Maltese to encroach on areas where fifty years ago English dominated (even ATMs and Google offer an option).'

While the overwhelming majority of Maltese children acquire Maltese as their first language, there is also a small but influential number of people who prefer to use English as a first language with their children. Up to relatively recently, these latter groups were mostly concentrated in areas where many British people lived during the colonial era 'and probably served as models for local families aspiring to upward social mobility' (Camilleri, 1995: 89). Members of this group often use both Maltese and English interchangeably at home, but there are many for whom Maltese is only acquired through formal teaching at school and through contact with speakers of Maltese outside the home. This is in marked contrast to the majority, for whom it is English that is only acquired at school, and increasingly also through exposure to English-language media and contact with tourists. These different patterns of language acquisition and use, and the different language environments in which Maltese children grow (with either Maltese or English or a hybrid mixture of the two serving as primary language) have a significant impact on the ways in which young Maltese people understand and define their national and cultural identities.

### 3. Language as marker of global or local identity

The following discussion is based on fieldwork which I conducted in Malta in 1998-1999 and 2002-2003 as part of two qualitative research projects commissioned by the national Broadcasting Authority (Gixti, 2000 and 2004). The projects examined the significance of the media in the formation and enculturation of young Maltese consumers, and included a series of focus-group interviews with a total of 500 children and young adults aged between 5 and 25. The interviewees came from different socio-economic and regional backgrounds,

and the discussions were conducted in a variety of locations, including university, a range of schools, private homes, and different work places. The interviews were held either in Maltese or in English, depending on which language the participants were most comfortable with. In some cases, because of the mixed nature of the group, a mixture of both languages was used.

In the course of my research, I was frequently struck by young Maltese people's tendency to associate being young, forward-looking, modern, technologically advanced and enlightened with being in tune with what comes from overseas – or more specifically, with what comes from Western Europe, Britain and the United States, particularly through the media. Being 'old fashioned' and backward tended to be linked with an inability to move beyond the more obviously indigenous and traditional (especially as embodied in local party politics and religion). For those coming from the more upwardly mobile professional classes, the speaking of English often became an assertion of alignment with this wider global context. When asked about their television viewing preferences, for instance, interviewees from higher socio-economic backgrounds often insisted that they make a point of not watching local TV programmes, or that they only do so to laugh at their limitations and poor quality.

The fact that many of these teenagers spoke exclusively in English, and in some cases even proudly drew attention to the fact that they do not speak or understand Maltese, suggested that the attitude is primarily perceived as an assertion of superior social status. Speaking in English, one teenager told me that he intensely disliked Maltese soap operas 'because for me, in English a soap opera is OK, but Maltese is a rough language and I don't like it, on soap operas. I don't think it's right, *ul'* [*'u'* at the end of a sentence is the Maltese equivalent of 'eh' or 'you know']. These attitudes are probably reinforced by the fact that, even though local soap operas are widely perceived as (at times 'embarrassingly') less professional and polished than their overseas counterparts, they are immensely popular with young people coming from lower educational and socio-economic backgrounds – primarily because they are in Maltese, are easily understood, and usually deal with local issues.

Malta's size and its geographical insularity have at various points in its history been seen as limiting and constricting. In some cases, faster and easier access to images and ideas from overseas have further accentuated young people's dissatisfaction with local limitations and nurtured a stronger longing for the foreign. But new technologies have also made it possible for many young people to also think of themselves as belonging to a larger global community, perceiving Malta's insularity as less constricting – or else as no longer being of relevance. The Internet plays a key role in this, in that it allows young people to actively participate in global youth communities without leaving home. In this context, the advantages of easy communication on a global scale have made the embracing of English doubly attractive.

The implications of these developments to young people's understanding of their national and cultural identities were well captured for me when one young man told me that he considered himself 'more European than Maltese' because his family always spoke English and because he has been 'influenced too much by foreign culture, foreign attitudes, foreign ways of life.' Another young man described himself as 'Maltese by nationality, but not Maltese by culture' because he speaks English whenever possible and does not indulge in 'traditional customs like going to village band clubs or dancing the traditional folk dance'. These young men appear to be locating their own cultural identity on what they perceive as the enlightened end of a continuum between two essentialised positions. On the one extreme stands the indigenous past, associated in their minds with irrelevant local traditions and the Maltese language; on the other stands the future, accessed through English and vaguely epitomised as 'Western society', home of new technology and forward looking ideas. This is a 'society' which these young people have come to know primarily through the media of film, television, books, magazines and the Internet.

There is a curious process of self identification and identity formation reflected in these attitudes. Drawing on Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991), Hannerz (1996: 21) has noted how shared commonality within a nation is usually paralleled by a strong sense of cultural and linguistic discontinuity with respect to outsider-nations. All identity construction, as Kennedy and Danks (2001: 3) put it, 'requires the summoning of difference, the relativization of the self as against the "other" imagined as separate, outside – and perhaps also as marginal, inferior and dangerous.' These patterns certainly apply to the majority of young Maltese people who communicate primarily (and in some cases exclusively) in

Maltese, and for whom the Maltese language is a key marker of their national identity. For this group, the use of Maltese is 'perhaps the ultimate marker of inclusion and exclusion' (Mitchell, 2002: 64) and an assertion of local and group cohesion. Interestingly, in some cases these essentialised distinctions between the local and the foreign have also become entangled with perceptions and performances of gender identity. Describing his research in a comprehensive boys' school in Malta, Portelli (2006: 426) argues that 'underlying many boys' preferences for the national language rather than English, and their deriding their peers who speak English, is their investment in a version of masculinity which is aligned with an outward display of national pride.'

But in the case of the smaller but significant number of young people for whom English is the first language, or who insist on identifying themselves as primarily English-speaking, what seems to be happening is that it is the traditional and indigenous which have been designated as the 'other'. The choice of English as the main or only language of communication has become their means of distancing themselves from local limitations and insularity, and of embracing a more 'global' identity by aligning themselves with (and appropriating some of the attributes of) the 'outsider/foreigner'.

It bears stressing that these young people's perceptions of the local and the foreign as essentialised and distinct entities are in reality quite different from the realities of their lived experiences. Malta's cultural history, the Maltese language and the Maltese media landscape have all been shaped by complex interminglings of local and foreign influences. In this context, young Maltese people's concern about being identified as predominantly 'European' rather than 'Maltese' (or vice-versa) amount to performative expressions of post-colonial hybridity.

#### 4. Glocality and diasporic hybridity

The English habitually spoken by those young people who want to align themselves with the non-indigenous is distinctive and unique to Malta, representing a striking example of how foreign influences are both incorporated and transformed in specific communities. English here has become indigenized, put to local use, and given a local accent, with many local variations and idiosyncrasies. This phenomenon is not unique to Malta, of course, in that the English spoken in Malta is one of the many local (or 'nativised') varieties of English which 'take place characteristically in ex-colonial territories where forms of the ex-colonial language have evolved and developed in their own right independently of their metropolitan sources' (Norrish, 1997: 1).

In this complex bi-lingual context, both Maltese and the English spoken in Malta have undergone significant changes. English loan-words in Maltese have become very widespread, language switching and mixing is very common, and there has also been a growing tendency for the use of hybrid forms of Maltese and English. English in Malta is often spoken with an intonation and accent which have evolved through contact and regular interaction with the patterns of spoken Maltese. It will tend to include transliterations of Maltese words and idiomatic expressions which only make sense if one knows the Maltese original – as in 'I'm going to cut now' in a telephone conversation, meaning 'I'm going to hang up' (Brincat, 2005). Maltese words or expressions often punctuate sentences in English, and vice versa. For example, in the course of a conversation in English: 'I don't think it's right, *u!*' (cited above) or 'I love shopping, *jigifieri* [I mean]'; and, in the course of one in Maltese: '*mhu*x worth it *li tizzewweg*' [it's not worth getting married], or 'Round drinks *gieli jqumli* fourteen pounds' ['a round of drinks often costs me fourteen pounds'], or '*ghandna is-satellite, jigifieri, ghandna xi* five hundred channels' [we have satellite, I mean, we have some five hundred channels] (Gixti, 2004: 55, 28-29; 2000: 7).

Whether they choose to claim Maltese or English or a combination of the two as the primary marker of their cultural identity, young Maltese people's performative and linguistic constructions of their own identities are in this sense always and inevitably hybridised. Because these identities, like the language(s) in which they are constructed and performed, draw on different cultural traditions at the same time, they have also become expressions of 'those complicated cross-overs and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalised world' (1992: 310). If 'diaspora' is understood metaphorically (Spencer and Wollman, 2002: 165), then it is diasporic identities which these young people are embracing

– identities which (to borrow Brah's definition) are 'networks of transactional identifications encompassing "imagined" and "encountered" communities' (1996: 196).

As we have seen, for Maltese youth, the imagined communities of 'the global' and 'the local' are often associated with essentialised perceptions of language – where English becomes the conduit to a technologically advanced and forward-looking world, while Maltese remains the language of tradition and the indigenous past. But these perceptions are in reality very different from young people's experiences of 'the global' and 'the local' as actually encountered and performed through the entwined varieties of Maltese and English spoken in Malta. In this sense, young Maltese people's attitudes to language are useful reminders of the fact that the imagined and encountered communities of 'the global' and 'the local' are also performative productions in their own right (see Hörschelmann & Schäfer, 2005: 224). They too are 'always in process' in that they are to varying degrees created or denied in social and linguistic performances of cultural identity.

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