

A game changer for our national language

TALKING POINT



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Seven months ago, the government announced the setting up of the 'Centre of the Maltese Language' and the appointment of its first chief executive. I'm not particularly interested in the story behind the choice of a CEO with no qualification in Maltese but I know that it sends the wrong message to our students and graduates who are eager to work in language planning.

So I look forward to the correction of the notice that created a centre that should be no more than 'the office' of the Maltese Language Council, run by the council and employing Maltese language experts for the benefit of our national language.

Legal Notice 201 (2023) undermines the law that established the National Council for the Maltese Language (2005). What was meant to be the executive arm of the council that carries out the policy designed by the experts and representatives was rewritten as a separate entity. Effectively a kind of second language council.

This is what we publicly objected to seven months ago. In our statement, co-authored by the university's Department of Maltese, our student organisation and all organisations involved in the study and development of the Maltese language, we said we did not disagree with the setting up of the centre but with this version of the centre.

What the Maltese Language Act (2005) says is that "In the execution of its functions and duties the council shall", among many other things, "establish a National Centre of the Maltese Language which, besides serving as the office of the council (my emphasis), shall offer the necessary printed and audiovisual resources to members of Maltese Language associations, institutions and other interested persons."

In the original Maltese version of the law, the centre is "is-sede tal-Kunsill". Therefore, it is the council, the overseeing body that, as you would expect, sets up the centre.

Legal Notice 201 changes the plot. It describes the centre as, "the administrative, organisational and operational organ of the National Council of the Maltese Language" and decrees that "the executive head shall be appointed by the minister. The minister may issue a public call (my emphasis) before appointing



The university has invested its knowledge, research and resources in the study of the Maltese language and literature.
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a person as executive head. The minister shall ensure that the selected person has professional qualifications, skills and competences through which he (sic.) can fulfil his role".

The minister set the tone of this new plot by appointing the first CEO. No public call. No clear and transparent process. No requirement that someone who is going to work on our national language should have studied the language and language policy.

While the autonomous council is legally bound to guarantee a filter of quality, the minister is not. "Il-Ministru jista' johroġ sejha pubblika (my emphasis) qabel jahtar persuna bhala Kap Eżekuttiv" but he's not obliged to.

So, what was meant to be an 'office' for the council, its executive arm, became a separate body. Seven months later, we know that we had good reason to object to this twist in the plot.



There is no mention in the Maltese Language Act of a centre with a 'CEO'

In essence, the 15-member Maltese Language Council is an autonomous entity made up of (unpaid) language experts and representatives of different bodies, including the University of Malta, the government, independent voluntary organisations, schools, publishers, journalists and the media. On the other hand, the centre is wholly controlled by the minister. Not a particularly original storyline.

There is no mention in the Maltese Language Act of a centre with a 'CEO'. The officer in charge of the day-to-day running of the council is the 'executive director', who is appointed by the council itself. The current director, whose doctoral project focuses on language planning, is the only employee the council has ever had since its inception. Not many national institutions have had to make do with one employee for almost 20 years.

We don't need a second national language 'centre' that does not have the expertise, experience and the network that the National Language Council has acquired over the past 20 years, not least as an active member of the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL).

We need the council to be finally given an office, the material and digital resources it requires and, most importantly, a team of full-time Maltese language experts to get on with the work that needs to be done.

A centre that is an integral part of the Maltese Language Council, set up

according to the spirit and the letter of the Maltese Language Act of 2005, could be a game changer for the future of our national language.

Over the past 60 years, when the first BA dissertations in Maltese were submitted to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Malta, our university has invested its knowledge, research and resources in the study of the Maltese language and literature.

Our graduates work in the public service; the private sector; the heritage and cultural sector; marketing; the media; and the EU institutions. They teach at all levels and to all kinds of students in schools, colleges and at universities but they also teach hundreds of foreign workers, from carers to health professionals. Many of them work in Malta but some have chosen to work abroad.

We know that there are many among our BA, MA and PhD graduates and our 12 current doctoral students who are perfectly capable of working in national language policy, both because of their academic preparation and the experience they have acquired in many different areas.

They would be the ideal candidates to work for the Maltese Language Council. The council needs their language expertise, transferable skills and passion to do what needs to be done.

There is no time to waste.

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