

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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The purpose of this publication is to present a snapshot of the state of the art of research on the languages of the Maltese islands, which include standard Maltese, Maltese English and Maltese Sign Language.

Malta is a tiny but densely populated country, with over 422,000 inhabitants spread over only 316 square kilometers. It is a bilingual country, with Maltese and English as official languages. Maltese is a descendant of Arabic, but due to the history of the island, it has borrowed extensively from Sicilian, Italian and English. Furthermore, local dialects still coexist alongside the official standard variety. The status of English as a second language dates back to British colonial rule, and just as in other former British colonies, a characteristic Maltese variety of English has developed. To these languages must be added Maltese Sign Language (*Lingwa tas-Sinjali Maltija*; LSM), which is the language of the Maltese Deaf community. LSM was recently recognised as Malta's third official language by an Act of Parliament in 2016.

While a volume such as the present one can hardly do justice to all aspects of a diverse and complex linguistic situation, even in a small community like that of Malta, our aim in editing this book was to shed light on the main strands of research being undertaken in the Maltese linguistic context.



## **1 Overview of the volume**

Of the three languages (or, in the case of Maltese English, varieties) represented in this collection, Maltese is perhaps the best-studied, with a rich tradition of descriptive and theoretical work and, more recently, experimental and computational studies. Maltese is the focus of six of the contributions in this book.

Puech's paper on "Loss of emphatic and guttural consonants" traces the development of emphatic obstruents and gutturals that Maltese inherited from Arabic, but which underwent substantial change in the transition from Medieval to Contemporary Maltese. Puech's argument centres on evidence from documentary and other sources in the history of Maltese which, while written, nevertheless contain valuable insights and observations into ongoing changes in the Maltese sound system, enabling the contemporary linguist to map such changes over the long term.

By contrast, Galea and Ussishkin's paper on "Onset clusters, syllable structure and syllabification in Maltese" contributes to an already sizeable body of work on the description of Maltese phonotactic constraints and syllable structure, here couched within an Onset-Rhyme model and stressing the role of sonority in determining possible onset clusters in Maltese syllables, yielding an exhaustive and fine-grained description of possible clusters that will provide solid grounds for future work on Maltese syllabification strategies and phonotactics.

The contribution by Paggio, Galea and Vella, entitled "Prosodic and gestural marking of complement fronting in Maltese", is also concerned with phonological processes, but focusses on their interaction with gesture in spoken Maltese, a topic which has received comparatively little attention. The authors rely on a sample of annotated, spontaneous conversations in Maltese, identifying a subset of utterances that evince complement fronting, which is further broken down into subtypes (topicalisation, focus movement and left dislocation). These instances are further analysed according to gestural and prosodic characteristics, showing that fronted complements have a strong tendency to be accompanied by gestures and a falling pitch accent. At the same time, the phonological complexity and the tendency to co-occur with gestures is also dependent on the type of complement fronting in question. To date, this study is one of only a handful of studies on gesture and its interaction with other levels of linguistic analysis in Maltese.

Of the remaining three contributions on Maltese, two papers, one by Lucas and Spagnol and another by Gatt and Fabri, focus on morphology. Like the work of Paggio et al, both have a strong empirical orientation.

Lucas and Spagnol's paper "Conditions on /t/-insertion in Maltese numeral phrases: A reassessment" investigates the factors which determine the insertion of a /t/ in cardinal numerals preceding a plural noun. The main puzzle here is the apparent optionality of /t/-insertion. This motivates the question whether the distribution of /t/-insertion is due to phonological and/or morphological constraints. Lucas and Spagnol present an exhaustive analysis of data collected from a production experiment in which numeral phrases were elicited orally, using nouns with complex word-initial clusters consisting of two consonants. Their conclusion is that the primary influence on /t/-insertion is a morphological pattern, though this also interacts with phonological properties. According to these new findings, certain morphological patterns determining the arrangement of root consonants and vowels in plural nouns are strongly resistant to /t/-insertion. At the same time, the findings do not support a strict separation along the lines drawn in previous descriptive work, for example, between whole and broken plurals (the former do allow /t/-insertion, albeit less frequently). Finally, the authors also shed light on potential sociolinguistic variables, especially gender, that could influence the inter-speaker variation in /t/-insertion.

The paper "Borrowed affixes and morphological productivity: A case study of two Maltese nominalisations" by Gatt and Fabri deals with derivational processes in Maltese. In particular, it focusses on two non-Semitic derivational suffixes, *-Vr* and *-(z)zjoni*, and asks the question how productive they are. The paper gives an outline of morphological derivation in Maltese, and explains both Semitic and Romance derivational processes before describing the two nominalisations of interest. It then presents a careful and detailed corpus analysis based on data from the *Korpus Malti*, an online corpus of Maltese. Several different measures of productivity are estimated, with tests of the degree to which the two affixes can be considered indirectly borrowed, that is first borrowed from another language and then gradually becoming likely to form novel derivations in combination with native stems. The various statistical measures nicely converge towards a view of *-Vr* as the more productive of the two deverbal suffixes, and the more likely to be used with both Semitic and Romance stems, in spite of *-(z)zjoni* being the most frequently used.

The final paper on Maltese is Camilleri's contribution "On raising and copy raising in Maltese". Here, Camilleri seeks to give, first, a descriptive account and a typology of types of raising phenomena in Maltese; and second, a formalisation couched within the framework of Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG). Consistent with this lexicalist orientation, Camilleri first seeks to identify the properties of raising predicates and gives a precise characterisation of their lexical entries, be-

fore proposing a twofold account of raising, whereby some raising phenomena are accounted for in terms of structure-sharing, determined via constraints stipulated at the level of *f(unctional)*-structure, while others are better explained in terms of anaphoric binding. Camilleri's work, while an important contribution to LFG in its own right, is also strongly empirical in flavour, with conclusions based on naturally-occurring examples obtained from corpora, among other sources.

The study of Maltese English, especially with the purpose of establishing the defining characteristics of this variety of English, is a relatively new area of research. Three of the contributions included in this volume deal with Maltese English, which is explored from the different perspectives of rhythm, the syntax of nominal phrases and lexical choice.

The paper by Grech and Vella, "Rhythm in Maltese English", studies variability in vowel duration in six Maltese English speakers. An average durational variability measure is calculated for each speaker in terms of a normalised Pairwise Variability Index (nPVI), which is based on the differences in duration between all successive vowel pairs. The six speakers were rated in a previous study for the degree to which they could be identified as speakers of Maltese English. In the present paper, the authors find a negative correlation between the speakers' nPVI and their degree of identifiability as Maltese English speakers. In other words, the less variability in vowel duration they display, the more they are perceived as speaking Maltese English. This correlation indicates that rhythm, measured in terms of vowel duration, is a significant feature in listeners' perception of a specific Maltese variety of English.

The paper by Schembri "On the characterisation of Maltese English" applies error analysis to identify fossilised transfer errors that have acquired status as stable features of Maltese English. A theoretical distinction is made between developmental errors on the one hand, which are due to simplification of target language structures, and transfer errors on the other. The latter are caused by native language interference. When transfer errors still appear at advanced learner level, and occur systematically in a community of speakers in a bilingual context, they can be said to mark a regional variant of the language. The empirical data studied in the paper consist of a corpus of 7,500 noun phrases extracted from English examination scripts by Maltese university students. Schembri discusses errors in the use of prepositions, nominal affixation and compounding, and concludes that the feature most likely to become a stable marker of Maltese English is the overuse of the preposition *of*.

The third paper on Maltese English, "Language change in Maltese English: The influence of age and parental languages" by Krug and Sönning, deals with lexi-

cal choice in Maltese English between British and American variants. The paper presents data from a questionnaire in which 424 Maltese informants were asked about their preferences concerning lexical variants. The results are described, and specific words are discussed in detail. A mixed-effects model of the data is then run with age and the parents' native language as factors, and it is found that age has the strongest effect on the informants' preferences. Interestingly, the pattern created by age shows an increasingly stronger trend towards less British usage in the youngest generations. The authors take this as evidence of an ongoing change, probably due to globalisation. The model also shows that the mother's language has a stronger influence on informants' choices than the father's, probably due to the different roles of the two parents in Maltese families.

The last contribution to this volume, "Maltese Sign Language: Parallel interwoven journeys of the Deaf community and the researchers" by Marie Azzopardi-Alexander, discusses the way in which LSM has evolved in parallel with the development of LSM research. The author explains how sign languages emerge naturally when communities of profound deaf people are formed. The origins of LSM can probably be traced back to the 70's, when young Maltese signers started to develop the first signs distinct from British Sign Language, and which reflected specific traits of Maltese society. Initial iconic gestures used for every day purposes changed gradually into conventionalised signs, and the vocabulary of LSM grew rapidly to include the abstract signs necessary to cover the vocabulary of school subjects for which a sign interpreting service had become available. The author argues that LSM research has played a crucial role in empowering deaf signers and directly contributed to the LSM vocabulary growth by involving Deaf users in the Maltese Sign Language Research Project at the University of Malta Institute of Linguistics. The material made available through the project also stimulated important studies on several aspects of LSM, which are briefly summarised in the paper.

## 2 Summary

In summary, we believe the present volume has the potential to present a unique snapshot of a complex linguistic situation in a geographically restricted area. Given the nature and range of topics proposed, the volume will likely be of interest to researchers in both theoretical and comparative linguistics, as well as those working with experimental and corpus-based methodologies. Our hope is that the studies presented here will also serve to pave the way for further research on the languages of Malta, encouraging researchers to also take new di-

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reactions, including the exploration of variation and sociolinguistic factors which, while often raised as explanatory constructs in the papers presented here, remain under-researched.