

Writing words. Spelling strategies of Maltese pupils during their acquisition of the Maltese orthography.

On July 25, 2008, the *Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ilsien Malti* (National Council for the Maltese Language) published its latest reform of the Maltese orthography. Its aim was to reduce the number of variants, thus reducing insecurity among writers. In the information booklet *Deċiżjonijiet 1*, the reformers pointed out that an orthography is based on (potentially conflicting) principles, which “together in a hierarchy create stability”.¹

One linguistic theory whose central notion is the interaction of hierarchically ordered principles is Optimality Theory (OT): a number of output forms (candidates) are evaluated against a set of restrictions (constraints). All constraints can be violated by the candidates and are strictly ordered in a hierarchy such that a violation of lower-ranked constraints counts less than a violation against higher-ranked constraints. The optimal candidate among the output forms is the one with the fewest violations. A central claim of OT is that all grammars differ from each other only in the order of the constraints within the hierarchy.

OT is therefore a useful instrument for representing orthographical systems, as has been shown for German, e.g., by Wiese (2004) and Jacobs (2005). As with grammars of different languages, different orthographical systems can be modelled within the OT framework as different orders of the same constraints.

This paper aims to go a step further by testing the hypothesis that orthographical “mistakes” made by pupils during the acquisition of writing are not arbitrary but rather that a specific form produced is the result of a choice among variants, each of which is justified by a different ranking of constraints. If so, learners’ writing strategies should be able to be modelled within the OT framework as a different order of constraints in the hierarchy, e.g., ranking phonetic spelling higher than morphological constancy (*<uada> for <u għada> due to pronunciation, i.e., [ʔʊ.'v:.dɐ]). Moreover, different stages of learners’ writing acquisition could be modelled as different orderings of the constraints which will become more similar to that of the official orthography as the learning progress continues.

The first part of my talk will attempt to model within OT the logographic component of Maltese orthography, i.e., the representation of words by the use of spaces, hyphenation, apostrophes, morphologically constant spelling, etc.

The second part will deal with data collected during dictation tests at a school (year 3, year 6 and form 5), at university (2nd year students), and among members of a proof-reading course.

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¹ “Wiehed irrid jiftakar li l-ortografija tal-Malti kif inhija llum, u kif kienet sa minn twelidha, tirrappreżenta kompromess bejn prinċipji differenti, li kull wiehed minnhom għandu s-siwi u l-piż tiegħu u li jaħdmu flimkien f’gerarkija stabbilita.” (*Kunsill 2008: 2*).

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