

Fixing the Broken Plural in Maltese

Classifications of Maltese broken plural (BP) forms differ in the number of types, ranging from 11 (Schembri 2006) over 22 (Sutcliffe 1924) to 37 (Aquilina 1959), and in the criteria used for the classifications, i.e., on historical grounds (Borg 1978; Mifsud 1994) and on the basis of CV structures with same (Sutcliffe 1936; Aquilina 1959; Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander 1997) or different vowel melodies (Mifsud 1994; Schembri 2006) in the plural.

Unlike most classifications, which list forms according to the plural type only, the classification of Maltese BP types proposed in this study takes into account both singular and plural forms (for a similar categorization, cf. Schembri 2006: 106-119). Such an approach makes it possible to identify not only characteristics of particular types, but also a number of general constraints that apply across types. For instance, concerning consonant clusters the following generalizations can be observed:

- (i) onset clusters in the singular are (almost) never broken up in the plural, e.g., *blokka*_{SG} - *blokok*_{PL} 'block', *skarpan*_{SG} - *skrapan*_{PL} 'shoemaker' (the sole exceptions are four forms, e.g., *fqir*_{SG} - *foqra*_{PL} 'poor', *ktieb*_{SG} - *kotba*_{PL} 'book', which hark back to singular forms with no onset clusters, cf. Arabic *faqīr*, *kitāb*, as in the Maltese forms of the type *qasir*_{SG} - *qosra*_{PL} 'short', *nadif*_{SG} - *nodfa*_{PL} 'clean', etc.);
- (ii) adjacent consonants in the singular are (almost) always broken up in the plural, e.g., *pizza*_{SG} - *pizez*_{PL} 'pizza', *ballun*_{SG} - *blalen*_{PL} 'ball'; with geminates simplification is also possible: *bixkilla*_{SG} - *bxiel*_{PL} 'wicker basket'; there are only two exceptions: *flixxun*_{SG} - *fliexken*_{PL} 'bottle', *praspura*_{SG} - *praspar*_{PL} 'oddity', probably because the clusters *flx* (cf. **flxi*_{en}) and *prs* (cf. **prsapar*) are not permissible in Maltese.

This study also provides tendencies for vowel correspondences between singular and plural forms, both for individual types and in general. For instance, there is a strong tendency for the stressed vowel in the class exemplified by *birra*_{SG} - *birer*_{PL} 'beer' not to change from singular to plural (*koxxa*_{SG} - *koxox*_{PL} 'thigh', *farsa*_{SG} - *fares*_{PL} 'farce', *serra*_{SG} - *serer*_{PL} 'greenhouse'). Alternations in vowels can be generalized to regularities in vowel reduction; for instance, long *uu* in the singular (e.g., *gallun* 'gallon', *ċarruta* 'piece of cloth', *shun* 'hot') very frequently corresponds, across types, to a short *e* (sometimes *a*) in the plural (*glalen*, *ċraret*, *shan*).

In addition to the classification according to CV patterns, our novel approach also considers the moraic structure of the items where geminate consonants and consonant clusters contribute to the weight of forms (cf. Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander 1997: 321). By taking into account the correspondences of weight, we group together singular forms which differ in their singular CV patterns but are of the same plural type. For instance, even though *ballun* and *bixkilla* differ in their CV patterns (CVCCVVC vs. CVCCVCCV), they are nonetheless grouped together because they have the same plural type CCVVCVC and the same weight (three morae) in the singular.

References:

- Aquilina, J. (1959). *The Structure of Maltese*. Msida: Malta University Press.
Borg, A. (1978). *A Historical and Comparative Phonology and Morphology of Maltese*. Ph.D. dissertation, The Hebrew University.

- Borg, A., and Azzopardi-Alexander, M. (1997). *Maltese*. London: Routledge.
- Mifsud, M. (1994). Internal Pluralization in Maltese: Continuity and Innovation. In Caubet, D., and Vanhove, M. (Eds.), *Actes des Premières Journées de Dialectologie Arabe*. Paris: INALCO.
- Schembri, T. (2006). *The Broken Plural in Maltese - An Analysis of the Maltese Broken Plural*. University of Malta, Unpublished B.A. Thesis.
- Sutcliffe, E. F. (1924). *A Grammar of the Maltese Language*. Valletta: Progress Press.