It-tlieta li aħna
‘the three of us’
On grammatical and pragmatic aspects of group-formation in Maltese

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[Bidu 576]

It-tlieta li aħna konna qed niġu misjuqa
DET-three REL we be:PERF.1PL PROG 1:come:PL PP:drive:PL

għat-telgħa dejjem fl-istess kar<r>etta…
for:DET-ascent always in:DET-same cart

‘The three of us were being driven uphill always in the same cart.’
Food for thought

If taken in isolation this sentence is in no way remarkable. However, it is only one instance among a huge number of similar cases which attest a special aspect of group-formation. The text frequency of this and related phenomena is so high in Maltese that it strikes the eye of a native speaker of German, for instance, because German seems to be much more parsimonious when it comes to employing the translation equivalents of Maltese *it-tlieta li aħna* and its next of kin.

This impressionistic observation raises the question whether or not the assumed differences are of a systematic nature.
In my native language I

Maltese:  *it-tlieta li aħna*

German:  *die drei, die wir sind*

The German relative clause is formally possible but sounds odd as it makes sense only under very specific pragmatic conditions.
In my native language II

German: \( \text{wir (alle) drei(e)} \)

Maltese: \( a\mathring{n}na\ t-tlieta \)

The pragmatically acceptable German translation equivalent would be a construction which however resembles another Maltese option more closely in structural terms.

**Why has Maltese two options where German offers only one?**
Work to be done

The phenomenon I am interested in has never been treated exhaustively in linguistic studies dedicated to the structural properties of Maltese. Some facets thereof are mentioned in passing in a small number of publications (to be quoted in due course during this presentation!).

The scarcity of available information on the phenomenon does not mean that there are no interesting insights to be gained from an in-depth study of the phenomenon.
Combination

Pronominal reference

(aḥna, intom, huma)

+ 

Quantification

(tnejn, tlieta, kollha...)
Collection


Group-formation: The number of individuals forming a group ("collection") which is pronominally referred to is quantified exactly.

~ we three / the three of us
Back to the start

quantification

\[[it-tlieta \ [li \ aňna]_{RelC}}]_{NP} \text{ konna...}\]

pronominal reference
A construction type

Three major slots:

\[\text{DET-Numeral}_{[\text{Cardinal} > 1]} \quad li \quad \text{Copula}_{[\text{Plural}]} \quad \text{Collection}\]

---------slot 1------------- slot 2 ----slot 3------

Copula → ānna, intom, huma / [imperfective]
Copula → konna, kontu, kienu / [perfective]
Copula → nkunu, tkunu, ikunu / [future]
Trivial ways to form groups I

a) Bare numeral

[Bidu 750]  
*Tlaqna ħmistax-il priġunier lejn l-Alġieri; sakemm wasalna mietu erbgħa.* ‘We were fifteen prisoners who went to Algiers; until we arrived four had died.’

b) Definite numeral

[Bidu 54]  
*It-tlieta reġgħu ċċassaw lejh.* ‘The three stared at him again.’
Trvial ways to form groups II

c) Demonstrative

[Bidu 52] *Dawn it-tlieta ma kinux se jiġu jitrejqu hawn kieku fit-tverna jsiru laqgħat u ftehimiet li aħjar jinsatru mil-pulizija.* ‘*Those three* would not come eating here if in the tavern meetings took place and understandings were come to which should be better concealed from the police.’
Trivial ways to form groups III

Attributes

[Bidu 147] ...indaħal Tumas, li ntebah kif it-tnejn l-oħra ma fehmu xejn mid-djalett Malti... ‘Thomas intervened who noticed how the other two did not understanding anything of the Maltese dialect.’

[Bidu 52] It-tlieta li kienu miegħu dehrulu rġiel goffi... ‘The three who were with him appeared to him to be rude men.’
Trivial ways to form groups IV

Quantification

[Bidu 226] Min jaf xinhuma jaḥsбу ž-žewḏ qaddejja li ġibt mieg}$/i. ‘Who knows what the two servants I brought with me are thinking.’

Indefinite (pseudo-partitive)

[Bidu 459] F’daqqa ġie fuq tlieta min-nies… ‘Suddenly he came upon three people.’
Trivial ways to form groups V

[Bidu 45] *Tnejn minn dawk bilqegħda waħidhom osservawh jagħmel hekk b‘għajnejn kalmi u skuri…* ‘Two of those sitting alone observed him doing so with calm and dark eyes.’

[Bidu 45] *Fil-ħin, qam wieħed mill-grupp ta‘ tlieta u resaq lejhom b‘inkin profond. ‘At that time one of the group of three stood up and approached them bowing deeply.’*
Further instances of collectives

[Bidu 323] *fit-tarf tal-filliera ta‘ erbgħa* ‘at the end of the queue of four’

[Bidu 381] *gemgħa ta’ xi nofs tużżana rgiel jew aktar* ‘a crowd of half a dozen men or more’

[Bidu 708] *ċorma rgiel żvelti fuq iż-żwiemel* ‘a troop of lively men on horseback’
The extent of it


„In a noun phrase, a free pronoun can be associated with a numeral.[...] Notice [...] the optional relative clause in which the free pronoun occurs in predicate position. The free pronoun in this construction can also be a direct or indirect object [...]. In theory there is no limit on the size of the numeral in the constructions exemplified [...]“
Relative clause

\[ \text{[DET-Numeral}_{\text{Cardinal}} \text{ li Copula}_{\text{Plural}}] \]

[Bidu 659]

*Lit-tnejn li huma fakkarthom kif hemm differenza kbira bejn il-Kataj u Spanja l-Ġdida.*

‘I reminded the two of them of the huge difference between China and New Spain.’
Apposition I

[Pronoun\{Plural\} | DET-Numeral\{Cardinal\}]

[Bidu 137]

*Huma t-tnejn baqgħu waħidhom madwar il-mejda ta’ l-ikel, li l-bqija tal-mistedin abbandunaw biex ħarġu hawn fil-bitħa.*

‘The two of them remained alone at the dinner-table which the rest of the invited left to come out here into the courtyard.’
Apposition II

[Preposition-PRO DET-Numeral[Cardinal]]

[Bidu 327]

…u ħadd ħliefhom it-tnejn ma kien jaf li qed isellmu lil xulxin għall-aħħar darba b‘għajnejhom.

‘And nobody but the two of them knew that they were greeting one another with their eyes for the last time.’
Apposition III

Verb-[PRO][Object] DET-Numeral-[Cardinal]

[Bidu 364]

*Ma jistax iżurhom it-tnejn bil-lejl…*

‘He cannot visit the two of them at night.’
Apposition IV

[Noun-PRO[Possessor] DET-Numeral[Cardinal]]

[Bidu 205]

Leħinhom it-tnejn f‘daqqa beda jidwi f‘nofs ġbinu minn ġewwa, mingħajr ma hu kien ġħadu qed jarahom.

‘The voices of them both began to echo from behind his forehead although he could not see them yet.’
Universal quantification I

[Pronoun[Plural] lkoll]
[Bidu 798]
Dik hi verità li nafu aњna lkoll…
‘This is a truth we all know.’

[Preposition-PRO[Plural] lkoll]
[Bidu 525]
Ftit dejquni l-botti ta‘ sљabi fiċ-ċorma, li b‘xejn ma setgħu jifhmu kif jien, minnhom ilkoll, idakkart daqstant mit-tagħlim tal-kjeriku li għalihom ma kien xejn ħlief ħela ta‘ ћin.
‘I was hardly annoyed by the sharp remarks of my comrades in the crew who could not understand that of them all it was me who was so influenced by the teaching of the cleric which for them was but a waste of time.’
Universal quantification II


[\textit{lkoll/kollha} \textit{kemm} Copula_{\text{Plural}}]

[Bidu 133]

\textit{Ilkoll kemm a\textit{\textomicr}na nafu kif ta\textit{\textomicr}sibha}…

‘We all know how you think about it.’
A quote – part I

“The interpretation involving recourse to the notion of ‘exhaustiveness’ is further reinforced by the possibility exemplified in [It-tfal kollha kemm huma ġew] where we have the additional expression kemm huma. On its own with the intonation for a question kemm huma? Would mean ‘How much do they cost’. The meaning of kemm obviously has to do with ‘extent’ and huma is the 3rd person plural independent pronoun ‘they’. It is significant that while the quantifier kollha is singular feminine, the independent pronoun huma agrees with the plural nominal it-tfal. The expression kemm huma reinforces the exhaustive interpretation of kollha by spelling out the precise extent of the class of individuals referred to by the subject nominal: ‘all the children as many as they are’ would be some sort of English equivalent here, or ‘every single one of them’.” [to be continued]
A quote – part II

“This analysis however is not without problems. I bypass for the moment the possibility that besides its occurrence as a singular feminine expression with plural nouns […], this quantifier can also agree in number (and in the singular, in gender) with its antecedent noun […]. It is possible to have a version […] in which no break is perceptible between the nominal and the quantifier. And there are syntactic contexts where such a break would be clearly ungrammatical, as in [it-tfal kollha li ġew kienu ġhajjenin ‘All the children who came were tired.’] There is no way in which a break could occur between the nominal it-tfal and the quantifier kollha in this sentence, where it-tfal is also the subject of the relative clause li ġew. This evidence would suggest that kollha […] in the rendering involving no suprasegmental break is interpreted as an adjective rather than as a special category of quantifier. This formal difference seems to correlate with a semantic one. The occurrence of kollha as an adjective (without a suprasegmental break) is interpreted as universally quantifying the noun. […] The occurrence of kollha as grammatical subject of the sentence (with a break following the nominal […]), is definitely interpreted in a distributive way.”
That’s bad for me

- literary sources
- no clues as to the suprasegmental level
- orthography is no reliable indicator of prosodic properties
- focus on those constructions which do not involve kollha
Source text

Alfred Sant. 2001. 

*La bidu, la tmiem (1599).*

San Ġwann: P.E.G.

880 pp. = 20,680 sentences = 422,400 words

[Historical fiction in prose; narrative text, dialogues including bits and pieces of dialectal and non-native Maltese; occasionally style is deliberately anachronistic to lend a Baroque flavour to the story; this does not seem to have an effect on the phenomenon under scrutiny]
# Statistics: Construction types

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## Statistics: Numerals

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<tr>
<td>3rd singular feminine</td>
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<tr>
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<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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Singular

[Bidu 107]

*Kieku mhux għax naf li int *kollok kemm int* ta‘ rieda tajba u ħabib tiegħi, kont nissuspetta li bagħtuk hawn biex tbeżżagħni…*

‘Would I not know that you are completely benevolent and a friend of mine, I had suspected that they sent you here to scare me.’
Why?

• The high token frequency of constructions involving the numeral *tnejn* ‘two’ is partly explained by the absence of a lexical dual in Maltese.

• Lexical duals are expressions like English *both* or German *beide* which display the properties of a numeral (= [two]), exhaustiveness (= [all]) and definiteness (= [+definite]).

• They may combine with pronouns.
Two in one

German: \( \textit{wir} \) \( \textit{beide} \)

Maltese: \( [\text{a}h\text{n}\text{a}] \) \( t-\text{tnejn} \) \( \text{exhaustiveness} \)

German: \( \textit{wir} \) \( \textit{zwei} \)
Previous work of ours

Relative clauses


Predication for attribution

[it-tlieta
  \hline
  head
][li a bombings]

predicate

attribute
Syntactic functions:
Subject – relative clause

[Bidu 46-47]

Jeżistu drawwiet fini ħafna li jirregolaw kif I-erbgħa li ħuma kellhom ġibu ruħħom ma‘ xulxin.

‘There exist very subtle customs which regulate how the four of them have to behave among each other.’
Syntactic functions:
Subject - apposition

[Bidu 73]

…il-kavalier ftakar f‘uħud mill-praspar li huma t-tnejn kien ġħamlu flimkien ma‘ xi tlieta oħra minn sħabhom…

‘The knight remembered some of the oddities which the two of them had committed together with three others of their comrades.’
Syntactic functions:
Subject – universal quantification

[Bidu 81]


‘Together with the three policemen whom Bernal hired for the occasion to carry the coffin, **they all** went to the cemetry of the quarter which was nearby.’
Syntactic functions: Object I – relative clause

[Bidu 190]

Minflok tkellmu fuq x‘kien qed iqanqalhom it-tnejn li kienu, edhew fil-qari…

‘In lieu of talking about what was troubling the two of them, they were busy reading.’
Syntactic functions:
Object I - apposition

[Bidu 751]
…rawna l-ħdax li konna mqagħbra u mċerċra ħafna aktar mill-ilsiera…
‘They saw the fifteen of us as more harrassed and shabbier dressed than the slaves.’
Syntactic functions:
Object I – universal quantification

[Bidu 81]
...kien ħallas id-drittijiet tad-difna kollha kemm huma u anki aktar, b‘rispett lejn il-mejjet.
‘He had payed the entire costs of the burial and even more out of respect for the dead.’
Syntactic functions: Object II – relative clause

[Bidu 238]

Lit-tnejn li kienu, l-omm u l-bint, kien fliehom tajjeb u t-tnejn għoġbuh.

‘He inspected the two of them, mother and daughter, closely and he liked both.’
Syntactic functions:
Object II - apposition

[Bidu 662]

Għodwa waħda, daħlu zbirri fis-sala u ħadu ħlina t-tlieta magħhom f‘sala oħra tal-ħabs...

‘One morning, policemen came into the hall and took the three of us with them to another hall of the prison.’
Syntactic functions:
PP complement – relative clause

[Bidu 358]
*Barak baqa‘ jniżżel id-daqqiet fuq it-tlieta li huma…*
‘Barak kept hitting the three of them.’
Syntactic functions:
PP complement - apposition

[Bidu 533]

*Barra minna t-tlieta, kull ma laqqat biex jieħu miegħu lejn il-Mexxiko kienu tnax-il brigant…*

‘Apart from the three of us, what he assembled to take with him to Mexico were twelve outlaws.’
Syntactic function:
Genitival attribute – relative clause

[Bidu 274]

…il-ħarsa tat-tnejn li kienu ċċassat fuq il-bini…

‘The look of both of them was fixed on the building.’
Syntactic functions:
Genitival attribute - apposition

[Bidu 451]
Wara, don Bernal ḥassu li sar tassew ḥabib tagḥhom it-tnejn…
‘Afterwards do Bernal felt that he had really become a friend of the two of them.’
Possession

[Bidu 101]

_Bdejt nibża‘ li xogħolkom kollha kemm intom_, _int u min hu bħalek, ħajjitkom, fehmietkom… m‘ghanhom l-ebda tifsira tassew, l-ebda importanza reali_.

‘I have begun to fear that the work of all of you, yours and that of those who are like you, your live, your opinions have no real meaning, no real importance.’
Exhaustiveness I

[Bidu 588]
Čitlalkoatl għarrafni li l-qassis il-kbir tal-belt kien qed jistqarr li l-aħjar ma tkunx dik li joqtlu t-tnejn li konna, imma lil wieħed biss u lill-ieħor, iżommuh ħaj, jagħm-luh Mixtek bħalhom.

‘Chitlalcoatl explained to me that the High Priest of the city confessed that the best solution was not to kill both of us, but to kill only one and keep the other one alive to make him a Mixtec like them.’
Exhaustiveness II

[Bidu 763]


‘Artan seemd to push me forward in the talk that I would have with de Saavedra and na-Levi, and at the same time, the suspicion grew in me that all I was doing with them was to see how I could make use of both of them to reach my goals.’
### Definite numerals - statistics

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<td>it-tlieta</td>
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<tr>
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</table>

| | [66] | [33] | [16] | [115] |
What’s the difference?

Definite numeral: [anaphor + quantity]

[Bidu 136]

_It-tlieta nfaqgħu jidħku._

‘The three burst out laughing.’

Relative clause: [anaphor + quantity + totality]

[Bidu 889]

_It-tlieta li huma daħku._

‘The three of them laughed.’
A continuum

quantification

exhaustiveness

it-tlieta  huma t-tlieta  it-tlieta li huma  kollha kemm huma
Famous last words

- preliminary results
- work in progress
- corpus needs to be enlarged
- diversification of genres/registers
- focus on pragmatic aspects
- comparison with other languages
- cooperation is welcome