

## Labile verbs in Maltese

In many languages change of state verbs (e.g. *break*, *melt*) and some activity verbs (e.g. *bounce*, *roll*) participate in the **causative-inchoative alternation**, one of the basic types of valency changing alternations, illustrated in (1) with an English example. Such verbs permit both transitive/causative and intransitive/inchoative construals, whereby the subject of the intransitive alternant bears the same semantic relation to the verb as the object of the transitive.

- 1 (a) The boy broke the glass. *Causative*  
(b) The glass broke. *Inchoative*

The paradigm in (1) has been the subject of much discussion in linguistic theory (Pinker 1989; Haspelmath 1993; Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995, 2005; Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 2004; Koontz-Garboden 2009; inter alia) because it raises a number of intriguing questions. In this study we address two of them.

The first question concerns the formal encoding of the alternation, and the role morphological marking plays in determining the directionality of derivation. In derivational approaches, the derived form is taken to be morphologically marked. There is no single direction of derivation from causative to inchoative, as in (2), or inchoative to causative, as in (3); both examples are from Maltese.

- 2 (a) *It=tifel saħħan l-ilma.* *Causative*  
DEF=boy warm.PFV.3.SG.M DEF=water  
(b) *L=ilma saħan.* *Inchoative*  
DEF=water warm.PFV.3.SG.M
- 3 (a) *Omm=i ħall-et iċ-ċikkulata.* *Causative*  
Mum=my melt-PFV.3.SG.F DEF=chocolate  
(b) *Iċ-ċikkulata nħall-et.* *Inchoative*  
DEF=chocolate melt-PFV.3.SG.F

Typological research on the ways languages mark the causative-inchoative contrast has shown that Maltese exhibits a preference for **anticausative** formations, i.e. cases like (3) above where the causative is basic and the inchoative is derived (Comrie 2006, Spagnol, Bamyacı & Schönhuber 2010; Spagnol forthcoming). This is particularly true for templatic verbs, formed by a combination of a tri- or quadri-consonantal root (e.g.  $\sqrt{\text{shn}}$ ,  $\sqrt{\text{ħll}}$ ) and a *binyan* (e.g.  $\text{C1vC2vC3}$  *saħan*,  $\text{nC1vC2C3}$  *nħall*). By contrast, concatenative verbs such as *ċċarġja* ‘recharge’, *ffriża* ‘freeze’, *sploda* ‘explode’, most of which are more recent loan verbs, tend to effect the causative-inchoative alternation **labially**, i.e. with verb pairs that use the same form as causative and inchoative, as in (4).

- 4 (a) *It=tifla ċċarġj-at il=batterija.* *Causative*  
DEF=girl recharge-PFV.3.SG.F DEF=battery  
(b) *Il=batterija ċċarġj-at.* *Inchoative*  
DEF=battery recharge-PFV.3.SG.F

The second question concerns the derivational relationship, if any, between the causative and inchoative member. The issue is whether we are actually dealing with a process of **causativization**/transitivization, where inchoatives are basic and causatives derived (cf. Lyons 1968; Lakoff 1970; Pinker 1989; Jackendoff 1990) or **anticausativization**/detransitivization, where the order of derivation is reversed (cf. Chierchia 1989; Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995).

In this study, we focus on labile verbs in Maltese, such as *ċċarġja* ‘recharge’ in (4). Unlike verb pairs exemplified by *saħħan/saħan* ‘warm (tr./intr.)’ in (2) and *ħall/nħall* ‘melt (tr./intr.)’ in (3), where the causative or inchoative is formally derived from the other, labile verbs lack overt morphological marking. Here we tackle the issue of whether labile verb pairs are basically transitive or intransitive on the basis of data obtained from (i) a corpus-based analysis of the occurrence of labile verbs in transitive and intransitive clausal patterns and (ii) a sentence creation task.

The data suggest that there is not one direction of derivation (causativization or anticausativization) in Maltese labile verbs. The direction of derivation is rather sensitive to the type of event named by the verbs in question, whether they are **internally caused**, as with *bloom* and *rust*, where the bringing about of the change of state event is conceptualized as an inherent property of the entity undergoing the change, or **externally caused**, as with *break* and *crumble* which are conceptualized as coming about due to a force external to the entity undergoing the change of state (cf. Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995; McKoon & Macfarland 2000; Wright 2001, 2002; Koontz-Garboden 2009).

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