

## PREFACE

This volume of the *Journal of Maltese Studies* aims at presenting the reader with a selection of studies focusing on selected issues in the morpho-syntax of Maltese, with contributions by linguists who are currently active in research.

The aims of this volume are threefold: a) to showcase current research on Maltese syntax, both for a general and for a specialised audience, b) to provide an update of current, state-of-the-art descriptions and analyses of a selected set of topics in syntax in order to stimulate further research within these areas, especially among young scholars of Maltese linguistics, and c) to provide a general introduction to the study of the specific areas chosen while placing the study within a larger picture, and setting the stage for further studies in other related areas.

Maltese has a long and intriguing history going back to its Arabic roots in the 11th century. Through the centuries up to the present, it has gone through phases of intense contact with non-Arabic languages, mainly Sicilian, Italian and English, that have sculpted its unique character and moulded it into a language that has achieved the status of national language and, together with English, official language of the Republic of Malta. Maltese is spoken by a large majority of the Maltese population on a daily basis and boasts a rich literature and a diverse media landscape.<sup>1</sup>

1 Information about the most recent National Statistics Office survey (2021)

Since at least the 17th century, many scholars and travellers have shown an interest in describing the grammar and vocabulary of Maltese, the earliest being the *Thesaurus Polyglottus*, a multilingual dictionary by the German linguist and historian Hieronymus Megiser published in 1603 which features 121 items from Maltese (Cowan 1964). In recent times, there has been a surge of interest by scholars and young researchers interested in exploring various features covering the core areas of language, i.e., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, as well as applied areas of language use, such as language acquisition, language teaching, language contact, and, most importantly in the modern age, the development of digital language resources and tools. Unfortunately, however, Maltese still lags behind in the availability of basic resources such as electronic lexicons, and spell and grammar checkers. This crucial lack of resources is certainly not due to a lack of interest or expertise but to a lack of consistent and targeted financial and human resources that are dedicated to long-term national projects specifically focused on developing such crucial tools.

Maltese has a Maghrebi Arabic stratum, a Romance superstratum (Sicilian, Italian) and an English adstratum. According to Brincat (2000, p. 24), “we cannot decide whether the substrate of Maltese should be Punic, Latin or Greek, for the simple reason that in the Maltese language there is no substrate” (our translation). As a result of intensive language contact, Arabic Maltese has undergone a process of relexification, first through contact with Sicilian, and later Florentine Italian, followed by English, which is currently the main source of borrowing.

The morphosyntax of Maltese retains a strong Arabic character, although this is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify, with lexical items borrowed from Sicilian, Italian, and English

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either being formally integrated into the Arabic root system to some extent or other, such as the 2nd form (binyan, declension) verb *pejjep* ‘to smoke’ from Italian *pipa* ‘pipe’, or retaining the stem and inflecting it through Arabic based affixes, such as *niskorja* ‘I score (a goal)’ and *tiskorja* ‘you score (a goal)’ from English ‘score (a goal)’ (see Mifsud 1995 for an in-depth study of loan verbs). Contact from two very different language families, Semitic and Indo-European, has thus resulted in an intriguing mixed morphological system displaying both root and stem bases through integration and innovation.

In its syntax, Maltese also displays typical Arabic features, mostly reminiscent of Maghrebi varieties, in particular Tunisian Arabic, in their expression, such as the construct state, e.g. *xagħar it-tifel* ‘the boy’s hair, lit. hair the boy’, and nominal sentences, e.g. *Ħija tabib* ‘My brother is a doctor, lit. My brother doctor’. However, it also shows innovations, such as the analytical passive, e.g. *Il-ktieb ġie ppubblikat* ‘The book was published’, as opposed to the synthetic passive, e.g. *Il-ktieb inkiteb minn awtur żagħżuġħ* ‘The book was written by a young author’ (see in particular Lukas & Čéplö 2020 for a discussion of contact-induced changes in Maltese, and Ebert 2000 for a discussion of TMA forms in Arabic and Maltese).

The six articles in the present volume set out to provide a description and analysis of a number of salient (morpho-) syntactic constructions and phenomena of Modern Maltese from a synchronic perspective. The first two articles are pitched at the clause level. Albert Borg’s contribution deals with nominal complement clauses and in various positions (subject, object, in apposition, as complement to adjective, preposition and adverb) in both declaratives and interrogatives as well as with various types of adverbial clauses (time, manner, conditional, etc.), exploring in detail the rich variety displayed and the differences and similarities between them. Maris Camilleri focuses on the relative clause, specifically restrictive, non-restrictive, and free

relative clauses, focusing on the strategies adopted (resumptive pronouns, gaps, etc.) and also highlighting interesting differences between Standard and Dialect. Together, these two contributions make up an in-depth study of the clause in Maltese.

These are followed by two contributions that focus on two specific syntagmatic relations, i.e. the relation between elements within the string that makes up a phrase or a clause. Ray Fabri goes into the details of grammatical agreement in Maltese within two main syntactic domains, namely, within the noun phrase (demonstrative - noun, attributive adjective - noun, etc.) and outside of the noun phrase (verb - subject, verb - object, predicative adjective - subject, etc.), also touching upon cases of long-distance pronoun - antecedent agreement. The contribution ends with a discussion of examples of notional agreement, which, at least on the surface, involves two elements that do not agree formally within a domain in which they would normally agree formally, thus forcing a specific reading based on the semantics of the elements involved, therefore, ‘semantic agreement’.

Slavomír Čěplö looks at constituent order, in terms of S(ubject), V(erb) and O(bject) within declarative sentences, critically reviewing previous analyses of Maltese. Based on an analysis of corpus data, he concludes that Maltese ‘looks... more like a strict SVO language like English’, with the only exception being SV in existential clauses. Given these two contributions, it would be interesting to explore in more detail the relation between agreement and constituent order, assuming, of course, that such a relation exists.

Finally, the remaining two contributions deal with very specific phenomena. Christopher Lucas describes in great detail various constructions involving negation in Maltese, both at the sentence/ clause (main and subordinate) level and at the subsentential (constituent) level. He explores the relation between negation and indefinite pronouns and ends by discussing the occurrence of the suffix *-x*, which is typically used to negate verbs, in non-negative contexts, for which he offers an interesting, plausible explanation.

Thomas Stolz, Nataliya Levkovtch, and Maike Vorholt investigate the occurrences of the three spatial propositions which express Place or Goal (in, at, inside, within), namely, *fì*, *gò* and *gèwwa* as well as ‘zero-marking’, when they take place names as complements, trying to work out on the basis of what criteria (e.g., familiarity or complexity of the place name) a particular preposition is chosen rather than another, or nothing. The article sets a solid basis for more analyses of the prepositional system of Maltese, and raises a number of questions hopefully to be taken up in future research by scholars interested in Maltese, in particular, and in syntax and syntactic theory in general.

Taken together, these articles cover important areas of the Maltese (morpho-)syntactic landscape. Clearly, there is still a great deal of research that needs to be done; however, we hope that this volume can serve as an incentive for more scholars to explore the grammar of Maltese, and come up with descriptions and theoretical explanations of the observed phenomena. The volume is intended as the first in a series of publications by the University of Malta, covering not only topics in Maltese syntax but also in the other areas of linguistic analysis, both core, i.e., phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, and lexicography, and applied areas, such as language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and historical linguistics.

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Ray Fabri & Michael Spagnol  
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