

NEGATION IN MALTESE

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of the key facts relating to the expression of negation in contemporary Standard Maltese. Issues considered include: anaphoric negation, constituent negation, sentential negation expressed both with the particle *mhux* and the bipartite construction *ma...-x*, factors governing omission of one or both elements of the bipartite construction, the interaction of negation with indefinite pronouns, and the analysis of *-x* in non-negative contexts.

Dan l-artiklu joffri deskrizzjoni tal-fatti ewlenin marbutin man-negazzjoni fil-Malti Standard kontemporanju. Fost it-temi trattati hemm in-negazzjoni anaforika, in-negazzjoni tal-kostitwenti, in-negazzjoni sentenzjali espressa kemm bil-particella *mhux* kif ukoll bil-binja bipartita *ma...-x*, il-fatturi li jirregolaw l-ommissjoni ta' komponent wiehed jew taż-żewġ komponenti li jiffurmaw il-binja bipartita, l-interazzjoni tan-negazzjoni mal-pronomi indefiniti, u l-analizi ta' *-x* f'kontesti mhux negattivi.

1. Introduction

In formal logic, negation is an operation which is applied to a proposition, and which has the effect of reversing the conditions under which that proposition is true. For example, consider the proposition expressed by the English sentence *I am taller than you*. The truth of this proposition depends on certain facts about the world at the time the sentence is uttered: most importantly, that the speaker's height is indeed greater than that of the addressee. If these conditions hold, then this sentence expresses a true proposition, while the negative version of this sentence – *I am not taller than you* – expresses a false proposition. Thus, whenever a proposition *p* is true, the negation of that proposition (symbolized as $\neg p$ in formal logic) is false, and vice versa.

As far as it is possible to tell, all human languages have some means of modifying utterances in ways similar to the negation operation of formal logic. The present article sets out some of the most important ways in which this semantic notion of negation manifests itself in Maltese.¹ We consider anaphoric negation (§2), sentential negation (§3), constituent negation (§4), negation and indefinite pronouns (§5), and non-negative uses of the suffix *-x* (§6).

2. Anaphoric negation

Some languages, including Maltese and English, have a specialized morpheme, distinct from the main sentence negator(s), to succinctly deny the truth of a salient proposition from the immediately preceding discourse. In Maltese and English these are *le* and *no*, respectively (the corresponding affirmative forms being *iva* and *yes*). Maltese *le* is cognate with Classical Arabic

1 The use of the term Maltese in this article should be understood as referring in all cases to contemporary Standard Maltese, unless otherwise indicated.

lā, but unlike the latter it only functions as an anaphoric negator in the language, as in (1). English *no* has an additional function as a negative determiner (as in *no books*) not shared by Maltese *le*, which expresses this meaning with a dedicated item *ebda*. The interaction of indefinite pronouns of this sort with negation in Maltese is addressed in §5.

(1) Korpus Malti v3.0 news148902

<i>Kif</i>	<i>tista'</i>	<i>tghid</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>xi hadd</i>	<i>hurwa</i>
how	MOD.IPFV.2SG	say.IPFV.2SG	COMP	someone	3SGM
<i>terrorist</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>iehor</i>	<i>le?</i>		
terrorist	CONJ	other	no		

'How can you say that someone is a terrorist and someone else is not?' (Lit.: *'...and someone else, no'*)

3. Sentential negation

Apart from anaphoric negation, what we might think of as the most basic type of negation in any language is sentential negation. This term refers to the means used to render a sentence negative in the sense outlined in §1. Many languages have several different morphemes or constructions to express sentential negation, depending on the precise context or function, and Maltese is no exception. The different ways in which sentential negation is expressed in Maltese are addressed in the following subsections. Negation that operates below the level of the sentence is dealt with in §4.

3.1 *Standard negation*

Standard negation is a term coined by Payne (1985). It refers to “the non-emphatic negation of a lexical main verb in a declarative main clause” (van der Auwera & Krasnoukhova 2020: 91). Standard negation in Maltese is expressed by a bipartite construction *ma...-x*, as in (2).

- (2) Korpus Malti v3.0 news139511

<i>...hafna</i>	<i>nies</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>jifhmu-x</i>	<i>x'-inkunu</i>
much	people	NEG	understand.IPFV.3PL-NEG	what-AUX.IPFV.1PL
<i>rridu</i>	<i>nghidu.</i>			
want.IPFV.1PL	say.IPFV.1PL			
'Many people don't understand what we are trying to say.'				

This bipartite construction is shared with a number of Arabic dialects, especially those of North Africa to which Maltese is most closely related (see Lucas 2018, Lucas & Alluhaybi 2022 for details). The second element of the construction, *-x*, like the indefinite pronoun *xejn* and the particle *xi* (discussed in §5), ultimately derives from the Arabic word *šayʔ* 'thing'. The common historical process whereby a more lexical item (such as *šayʔ*) comes to be recruited for a more grammatical function (often in a highly phonologically reduced form, as with *-x*) has been known since at least Meillet (1912) as grammaticalization. The particular type of grammaticalization evidenced by the development of Arabic *šayʔ* into the Maltese negative element *-x* has been known since Dahl (1979) as Jespersen's cycle, after the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, who, in a (1917) work, was one of the first authors to describe this cycle as it occurred in the history of English and French. For more details on Jespersen's cycle in the languages of Europe and the Mediterranean, see Willis et al. (2013a) and Breitbarth et al. (2020).

3.2 Bipartite negation in other contexts

In addition to regular main verbs, the bipartite *ma...-x* construction is also typically used to negate the copula in most of its various forms, as well as so-called pseudo-verbs, modal and other auxiliary verbs, and verbs in subordinate clauses. We consider each of these in turn in the following.

3.2.1 Copular negation

As Stassen (1996) and Camilleri & Sadler (2019) among others describe, Maltese has a number of different constructions that function as equivalents of the English ‘to be’ copula verb. One of these, *qiegħed*, is (from an etymological point of view) a participle and is addressed in §3.3.2. Two of them, *kien* and *jinsab*, are verbs which, while exhibiting various irregularities, are negated just like any other verb, as illustrated in (3).

(3)

a. Korpus Malti v3.0 news11011

<i>F'-Mater Dei</i>	<i>gie</i>	<i>ċcertifikat</i>	<i>li</i>
in-PN	come.PFV.3SGM	certify.PTCP.PASS	COMP
<i>hajt-u</i>	ma	tinsab-x	<i>f-il-periklu.</i>
life-3SGM	NEG	COP.IPFV.3SGF-NEG	IN-DEF-danger

‘In Mater Dei hospital it has been confirmed that his life is not in danger.’

b. Korpus Malti v3.0 academic189

<i>Il-kronoloġiji</i>	<i>ta-l-paġni</i>	<i>mħassra</i>
DEF-chronology.PL	GEN-DEF-PAGE.PL	damage.PTCP.PASS.PL
<i>f'-dak</i>	<i>il-perjodu</i>	<i>ma kinu-x</i>
in-DEM	DEF-period	NEG COP.PST.3PL-NEG
		<i>disponibbli.</i>
		available

‘The chronologies of the pages damaged during that period were not available.’

More interesting from the point of view of negation are the other two copular constructions found in Maltese: one involving a third-person pronominal copula *hu(wa)/hi(ja)/huma*, and one with no copula. In the negative, these two constructions collapse into one, in which the copula takes the form of any of the personal pronouns circumfixed with *ma...-x*, as shown in (4) and Table 1.²

- 2 The first person singular negative pronominal copula also has the alternative forms *m'jiniex*, *ma jienx* and *m'jienx*. The second person singular has the alternative form *m'intx*. All persons and numbers additionally appear without suffixed -x in the contexts set out in §3.3.1.

(4)

- a. Korpus Malti v3.0 news72278

Ahna m'-ahnix hawn biex naghmlu l-gwerer...
 1PL NEG-1PL-NEG here PURP do.IPFV.1PL DEF-war.PL
 'We are not here to fight wars...'

- b. Korpus Malti v3.0 news190513

Dan m'huwix-x xogħol faċli, jiehu żmien...
 DEM NEG-3SGM-NEG work easy take.IPFV.3SGM time
 'This is no easy task, it takes time...'

Person	Singular	Plural
1 st	m'iniex	m'ahnix
2 nd	m'intix	m'intomx
3 rd masc.	mhuwix/mhux	mhumix
3 rd fem.	mhijix/mhix	

Table 1: Paradigm of the Maltese negative pronominal copula

A very common alternative to full person–number–gender agreement of the negative copula as seen in (4) is the use of *mhux* as a frozen form in negative copular sentences with subjects of any person/number/gender, as in (5).

(5)

- a. Korpus Malti v3.0 culture1149

Din mhux l-ewwel darba li Ira tkellmet kontra
 DEM.F NEG DEF-first time COMP PN speak.PFV.3SGF against
l-bullying...
 DEF-bullying
 'This is not the first time that Ira has spoken out against bullying...'

- b. Korpus Malti v3.0 parl12135

intom mhux biss union, imma assoċjazzjoni...
 2PL NEG only union but association
 'you are not just a union, but also an association...'

This frozen element *mhux* is in fact the basic negator for various constructions that in contemporary Maltese cannot be seen as copular, as discussed in §3.3.2 and §4. This form, as well as the fully

inflected forms shown in Table 1, are, however, also sometimes used for the negation of ordinary verbs, in contexts where bipartite *ma...-x* would be the typical negative construction. As shown by Al-Sayyed & Wilmsen (2017), use of *mhux* as a negator of ordinary verbs is associated with various pragmatic or metalinguistic functions, typically centred around the denial of a discourse-active presupposition (cf. Schwenter 2005; Hansen 2013 for discussion of similar phenomena in other languages), while Spagnol (2009) argues that use of *mhux* with imperfective verbs triggers a progressive interpretation of the verb. Both these properties are illustrated in (6), with (6b) demonstrating that they also hold true for the fully inflected forms of the negative copula used as a verbal negator.

(6)

- a. Korpus Malti v3.0 parl3502 (Al-Sayyed & Wilmsen 2017: 163)

<i>mhux</i>	<i>nistaqsi</i>	<i>iżda</i>	<i>nittallab</i>	<i>lil-l-ministeri</i>
NEG	ask.IPFV.1SG	but	beg.IPFV.1SG	OBJ-DEF-ministry.PL

konċernati...
concern.PTCP.PASS.PL
'I am not asking but begging from the ministries concerned...'

- b. Korpus Malti v3.0 news127417

<i>M-inie-x</i>	<i>nikteb</i>	<i>dan</i>	<i>l-artiklu</i>	<i>biex</i>
NEG-1SG-NEG	write.IPFV.1SG	DEM	DEF-article	PURP

nattakka *lil xi hadd, imma...*
attack.IPFV.1SG OBJ someone but
'I am not writing this article to attack someone, but...'

3.2.2 Negation of pseudo-verbs

On the other hand, there is a class of predicates in Maltese which are etymologically non-verbal, but which exhibit various verb-like properties, including in a number of cases being typically negated with the bipartite *ma...-x* construction, as illustrated in (7). This class of predicates, which includes items such as existential *hemm*, possessive *għand-*, and *għad-* 'still', are usually given the collective label of pseudo-verbs, and the fact that they are negated in the same

way as verbs is treated by Comrie (1982) as a key piece of evidence in favour of analysing these items as (irregular) verbs.³ See Peterson (2009) for a detailed discussion of Maltese pseudo-verbs.

(7)

a. Korpus Malti v3.0 academic8

<i>Aħna</i>	<i>m'-għand-nie-x</i>	<i>involvement</i>	<i>dirett</i>	<i>f-il-linja</i>
1PL	NEG-POSS-1PL-NEG	involvement	direct	in-DEF-line

ta-l-produzzjoni.

GEN-DEF-production

'We do not have direct involvement in the production line.'

b. Korpus Malti v3.0 academic10

<i>M'-hemm-x</i>	<i>dubju</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>s-suq</i>	<i>globali</i>	<i>se</i>
NEG-EXS-NEG	doubt	COMP	DEF-market	global	FUT

jkompli

continue.IPFV.3SGM

jeżisti...

exist.IPFV.3SGM

'There is no doubt that the global market will continue to exist...'

3.2.3 Negation of auxiliary verbs

A salient feature of Maltese syntax is the prevalence of extended chains of finite verbs, as in (8) (cf. Stolz 2009; Fabri & Borg 2017).

(8) BCv3: 1993 Immanuel Mifsud - Il-Ktieb tas-Sibt Filgħaxija (Čéplö 2018: 145)

<i>Issa</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>jkoll-i</i>	<i>nerġa'</i>	<i>nibda</i>	<i>nistenna</i>
NOW	FUT	MOD-1SG	return.IPFV.1SG	begin.IPFV.1SG	wait.IPFV.1SG

'Now I will have to once more start waiting.'

Negation interacts with such verbal chains in interesting and complex ways, a thorough examination of which remains a desideratum for future research. Here let us simply make a few key observations that arise from the fact that, in theory, any of the verbs in such a chain should be able to host negation.

3 Note that clearly non-verbal predicates (such as nominal, adjectival or prepositional phrases) in copular clauses cannot be negated this way in Maltese, as illustrated in (i):

(i) **Il-pop_music* *m'-interessanti-x.*

DEF-pop_music NEG-interesting-NEG

Intended meaning: 'Pop music is not interesting.'

[Adapted from Korpus Malti v3.0 parl18: *l-pop music mhux interessanti*]

First, note that more than one verb in such a chain can host negation, as pointed out by Stolz (2009: 153), in which case we have logical double negation, with two negatives cancelling each other out to form an affirmative, as illustrated in (9).

- (9) Korpus Malti v3.0 news126780 (cf. Stolz 2009: 153)

Ma	<i>nistghu-x</i>	ma	<i>naħsbu-x</i>	<i>kif...</i>
NEG	can.IPFV.1PL-NEG	NEG	think.IPFV.1PL-NEG	how

‘We cannot not consider how...’

The example in (9) involves a sequence of two negated verbs. This does not seem to represent the upper limit from a syntactic point of view. But the one example in the 250-million-word Korpus Malti v3.0 of three successive negated verbs in a single clause, shown in (10), appears to be a case of what has come to be known as misnegation or overnegation:⁴ a frequent phenomenon distinct from that of negative concord (discussed in §5), whereby speakers become confused as to the number of negations required to convey their meaning, such that the literal meaning of an utterance is the opposite of what is intended (and usually understood without hesitation by the addressee).

- (10) Korpus Malti v3.0 news60485

<i>Izda</i>	ma	<i>nista-x</i>	ma	<i>nerġa-x</i>
but	NEG	MOD.IPFV.1SG-NEG	NEG	return.IPFV.1SG-NEG
ma	<i>nirringrazzja-x [...]</i>	<i>lil-l-president...</i>		
NEG	thank.IPFV.1SG-NEG	OBJ-DEF-president		

Literal meaning: ‘But I cannot fail to again not thank the president...’
 Intended meaning: ‘But I can’t not thank the president once more...’

However, the norm is just one negated verb per chain, with the choice of which verb is negated determined, as in (9), by which predicate the speaker wishes to deny holds. This is easiest to see when one of the verbs has a modal value (i.e. meanings such as ‘can’, ‘must’, ‘ought’, etc.), as in (11), where

4 These terms appear to have been invented by contributors to the linguistics blog *Language Log*. See <https://linguagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?cat=273> (accessed 24/5/2023) for examples.

the relative scope of the modal, the predicate, and the negation is clear.

(11)

a. Korpus Malti parl547

<i>kuntrattur</i> [...] <i>jista'</i>		<i>ma</i>	<i>jkun-x</i>
contractor	MOD.IPFV.3SGM	NEG	be.IPFV.3SGM-NEG
<i>kopert</i>	<i>b'</i>	" <i>ċittadin Malti</i> ",	<i>imma...</i>
COVER.PTCP.PASS	PREP	citizen	Maltese
			but

'It is possible for a contractor **not** to be covered by [the designation] "Maltese citizen", but...'

b. Korpus Malti v3.0 european9802

<i>Riskju</i>	<i>gdid</i> [...]	<i>jirrekjedi</i>		<i>prodott</i>	<i>ta-l-assigurazzjoni</i>
risk	new	require.IPFV.3SGM		product	GEN-DEF-insurance
<i>kompletament</i>	<i>gdid</i> ,	<i>u</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>jista-x</i>	
completely	new	CONJ	NEG	MOD.IPFV.3SGM-NEG	
<i>jkun</i>	<i>kopert</i>		<i>b'-żidiet</i>	<i>jew</i>	
be.IPFV.3SGM	COVER.PTCP.PASS		PREP-addition.PL	or	
<i>modifikazzjonijiet</i>	<i>f'-prodott</i>		<i>ta-l-assigurazzjoni</i>	<i>eżistenti</i> .	
modification.PL	PREP-product		GEN-DEF-insurance	existing	

'A new risk requires a completely new insurance product, and it is not possible for the risk to be covered by additions or modifications to the existing insurance product.'

In cases of verb chains involving the aspectual auxiliary *kien*, which has no conceptual content, it is not usually possible for negation to have scope over the main verb only (and not also *kien*). To see why, consider *it was the case that he didn't laugh* versus *it wasn't the case that he laughed*. Just as there is no difference in the literal meaning of these sentences, in the same way no obvious difference in meaning could be achieved by moving the expression of negation from the auxiliary to the main verb in an example such as (12). In such cases it is the auxiliary that carries negation by default, a fact probably best explained by what Horn (2001: 292) calls the Negative First Principle, following Jespersen's (1933: 297) observation of the tendency "to put the negative word or element as early as possible, so as to leave no doubt in the mind of the hearer as to the purport of what is said."

- (12) Korpus Malti v3.0 parl111

<i>Intom</i>	ma	kontu-x	<i>titkellmu</i>	<i>magh-hom...</i>
2PL	NEG	AUX.PST.2PL-NEG	speak.IPFV.2PL	with-3PL

‘You didn’t use to talk to them...’

Essentially the only exception to this generalization concerns the verb *felaħ* ‘to manage to, to be able to afford to; to thrive, be in good health’. In its ‘manage’ meaning it is unexceptional, as illustrated in (13).

- (13) Korpus Malti v3.0 news151867

<i>...ghax</i>	ma	kien-x	<i>jiflaħ</i>
because	NEG	AUX.PST.3SGM-NEG	manage.IPFV.3SGM

jirrispondi *ghal-l-mistoqsijiet.*
 respond.IPFV.3SGM PREP-DEF-question.PL
 ‘...because he didn’t have the strength to reply to the questions.’

In its ‘thrive’ meaning, however, this verb is used predominantly in the negative,⁵ where it takes on the meaning not of merely not thriving but of being actively unwell. Here we see that, even in combination with *kien*, a distinction of scope becomes relevant, as it was for modal *jista*’ above: a speaker may feel it necessary to make clear that she is not referring merely to a lack of vigorous good health, but in fact to the active presence of poor health. This explains why combinations of this verb in this meaning with *kien* typically show negation on *felaħ*, as in (14) (contrast with (12) and (13)).

- (14) Korpus Malti v3.0 news132671

<i>...kell-hom</i>	<i>jinżlu</i>	<i>minghajr</i>	<i>il-goalkeeper</i>
MOD.PST-3PL	descend.IPFV.3PL	without	DEF-goalkeeper

regolari *tagħ-hom,* *Nicky Gouder,* *li* *kien* **ma**
 regular GEN-3PL PN COMP AUX.PST.3SGM NEG
jiflaħ-x.
 thrive.IPFV.3SGM-NEG
 ‘...they had to turn out without their regular goalkeeper, Nicky Gouder, who was unwell.’

- 5 Other verbs used predominantly in the negative include *ħamel* ‘to bear, tolerate’, and, in the negative imperative (see § 3.3.1), *iwworja* ‘to worry’.

3.2.4 *Negation in subordinate clauses*

Unlike in certain languages such as Latin or Greek, there are no particles or constructions in Maltese that are specialized for the negation of predicates in subordinate clauses. Such predicates are negated in exactly the same way as their main-clause counterparts described in the rest of this article. There are also no obvious respects in which the syntax of negation in subordinate clauses in Maltese differs in interesting ways from other better described languages. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning here an interesting phenomenon in this domain that Maltese shares with many (perhaps all) languages, namely what is called “neg-raising” (see Horn 1989: §5.2 for a detailed pragmatic account of this phenomenon). Neg-raising is the phenomenon whereby, with a restricted class of experiential predicates such as ‘think’, ‘believe’, and ‘want’, negation appears in a higher clause than where it is interpreted.

To illustrate the phenomenon, consider first the ordinary case with non-neg-raising predicates. Here we see that, just as with verb chains in a single clause, in a main-clause–subordinate-clause sequence, the locus of the negative particle(s) is determined by the semantic scope of negation relative to the main-clause and subordinate-clause predicates. This is shown in (15), taken from Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander (1997: 93), where we see that when there is an order not to move, negation attaches to ‘move’, whereas when it is denied that there was an order to move, negation attaches to ‘order’.

(15)

- a. *Ordna-l-u* **ma** *jiċċaqlaq-x.*
 order.PFV.3SG-DAT-3SG NEG move.IPFV.3SG-NEG
 ‘He ordered him not to move.’
- b. *M’-ordna-l-u-x* *jiċċaqlaq* *minn* *post-u.*
 NEG-order.PFV.3SG-DAT-3SG-NEG move.IPFV.3SG from place-3SGM
 ‘He did not order him to move from his place.’

However, with neg-raising predicates such as *ħaseb* ‘think’ or *emmen* ‘believe’, negation is typically marked on the higher (neg-raising) predicate and nevertheless interpreted in the lower clause. Thus, in (16), also taken from Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander (1997: 93), the speaker is not denying that there is something she has a belief about; she is stating her belief, or worry, that she cannot afford the sum in question.

- (16) *Ma nahsib-x li niflah inħallas*
 NEG think.IPFV.1SG-NEG COMP afford.IPFV.1SG spend.IPFV.1SG
daqshekk f-ix-xahar.
 such in-DEF-month
 ‘I don’t think I can afford to pay so much every month.’

3.3 Single negation

3.3.1 Omission of either *ma* or *-x*

There are a number of contexts in which one or even both of the two elements of the bipartite construction are omitted. The second element, *-x*, is omitted: i) when an element closely related to the negated predicate is an indefinite pronoun or adverb, as in (17) (see §5 for further details); and ii) in coordinated negative sentences involving the focus particle *lanqas*, as in (18), where we also observe a unique aspect of this construction, namely the use of *la* in place of *ma* as the negator of the first element.⁶

6 There is also a distinct use of *lanqas* as a negative scalar focus particle ‘not even’, where it behaves similarly to indefinite pronouns in that it generally triggers omission of *-x*, as in (i). See Čěplö & Lucas (2020) for more details.

(i) Korpus Malti v3.0 literature21

<i>U</i>	<i>lanqas</i>	<i>jiena</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>stajt</i>	<i>norqod.</i>
CONJ	FOC	1SG	NEG	can.PFV.1SG	sleep.IPFV.1SG

‘And not even I could sleep.’

- (17) Korpus Malti v3.0 academic12

<i>Il-hajja</i>	<i>f'-dawn</i>	<i>l-istituti</i>	<i>qatt</i>	<i>ma</i>
DEF-life	in-DEM.PL	DEF-institution.PL	never	NEG
kienet	<i>waħda</i>	<i>ta'</i>	<i>lussu.</i>	
COP.PST.3SGF	one.F	POSS	luxury	

'The life in those institutions was never one of luxury.'

- (18) Korpus Malti v3.0 academic12

La	<i>kienu</i>	<i>kapaċi</i>	<i>jaqraw</i>	<i>u</i>	lanqas
NEG	COP.PST.3PL	capable.PL	read.IPFV.3PL	CONJ	FOC

jiktbu...
write.IPFV.3PL
'They were able neither to read nor to write...'

The first element of the bipartite construction, *ma*, is omitted with negative imperatives, as in (19).⁷

- (19) Korpus Malti v3.0 religion458

<i>Tarmi-x</i>	<i>barra,</i>	<i>thammig-x,</i>	<i>ibża'</i>
throw.IPFV.2SG-NEG	outside	dirty.IPFV.2SG-NEG	fear.IMP.2SG

ghall-ambjent...
on.DEF-environment
'Don't litter, don't make a mess, look after the environment...'

When we combine negative imperatives with indefinite pronouns, both the first and the second elements of the *ma...-x* construction are omitted, as in (20).

- (20) Notice observed in Valletta

<i>Tarmi</i>	<i>xejn</i>	<i>hawn.</i>
throw.IPFV.2SG	nothing	here

'Don't throw anything here.'

- 7 Historically speaking it is probably not correct to say that it is *ma* that is omitted from negative imperative sentences, since in older Maltese texts we find *la* as the preverbal negator in these, as illustrated in (i):

- (i) Traditional Maltese song

<i>Ninni</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>tibki-x</i>	<i>iżjed.</i>
sleep.IMP.2SG	NEG	cry.IPFV.2SG-NEG	more

'Go to sleep, don't cry any more.'

3.3.2 Single negation with *mhux*

We saw in §3.2 that the basic rule is that the bipartite *ma...-x* construction is reserved for verbs. If we wish to make this rule exceptionless, then we need to analyse the negative pronominal copula (§3.2.1) and a number of pseudo-verbs (§3.2.2) as irregular kinds of verbs, and, as we have seen, there are researchers who have made such arguments. Another kind of predicate with verbal qualities, which is, however, not negated with *ma...-x* but with *mhux*, is the participle, as illustrated in (21) for active and passive participles respectively.

(21)

- a. Korpus Malti v3.0 news109720
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| <i>L-argument</i> | <i>tagħ-hom</i> | <i>mhux</i> | <i>niežel</i> | <i>tajjeb</i> |
| DEF-argument | GEN-3PL | NEG | descend.PTCP.ACT | well |
| <i>din</i> | <i>id-darba.</i> | | | |
| DEM.F | DEF-time | | | |
- ‘Their argument is not really sound on this occasion.’
- b. Korpus Malti v3.0 parl453
- | | | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------------|
| <i>...għand-ek</i> | <i>issib</i> | <i>kriterju</i> | <i>iehor</i> | <i>li</i> | <i>mhux</i> |
| MOD-2SG | find.IPFV.2SG | criterion | other | COMP | NEG |
| <i>marbut</i> | <i>ma-l-eżami</i> | <i>ta-l-meżzi.</i> | | | |
| link.PTCP.PASS | PREP-DEF-test | GEN-DEF-wealth.PL | | | |
- ‘...you need to find another criterion that is not connected to means testing.’

Participles are, by definition, nominal or adjectival elements derived from verbs. As such, we could analyse the participle-containing clauses in (21) simply as (non-verbal) copular clauses, and explain the use of *mhux* rather than *ma...-x* here in this way (cf. §3.2.1). However, it seems that at an early stage in the (pre-) history of Maltese (as in apparently all Arabic varieties) *mhux* (or its equivalents in Arabic varieties) was felt to be an appropriate negator for participles specifically, no matter how verb-like their function. This would then explain why verb phrases containing aspectual particles such as future-marking *se* and progressive-

marking *qed*, which derive historically from the participial forms **sāyir* ‘going’ and **qāʿid* ‘sitting’ (> Maltese *qieġhed*), are negated with *mhux*, rather than with *ma...-x* as one might otherwise have expected:⁸

(22)

a. Korpus Malti v3.0 academic12

<i>...imma</i>	<i>żgur</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>l-Maltin</i>	<i>mhux</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>jsibu</i>
but	sure	COMP	DEF-Maltese.PL	NEG	FUT	find.IPFV.3PL
<i>post</i>	<i>aħjar</i>	<i>minn</i>	<i>Melbourne.</i>			
place	better	PREP	PN			

‘...but it is certain that the Maltese will not find a better place than Melbourne.’

b. Korpus Malti v3.0 culture2700

<i>Jekk</i>	<i>il-karozza</i>	<i>tinduna</i>	<i>li</i>	<i>s-sewwieq</i>	<i>mhux</i>
COMP	DEF-car	notice.IPFV.3SGF	COMP	DEF-driver	NEG
<i>qed</i>	<i>ihares...</i>				
PROG	look.IPFV.3SGM				

‘If the car notices [through sensors and cameras] that the driver is not paying attention...’

Similarly, the full form *qieġhed*, from which *qed* derives, retains the participial type of negation with *mhux* in its present-day function as a copula, as illustrated in (23).

(23) Korpus Malti v3.0 opinion1717

<i>Imma</i>	<i>bħalissa</i>	<i>mhux</i>	<i>qieġhed</i>	<i>l-isptar.</i>
but	currently	NEG	COP	DEF-hospital

‘But he is not in hospital at the moment.’

8 Note, however, that in a number of Maltese dialects *qed* (or even the full form *qieġhed*) is treated as a pseudo-verb (cf. § 3.2.2) and negated with *ma...-x* instead of *mhux*:

(i) Dialect of Mgarr (Vanhove 1993: 131)

<i>ma-?et-š</i>	<i>naħdim</i>	[≈ <i>Ma qedx naħdem.</i>]
NEG-PROG-NEG	work.IPFV.1SG	

‘I am not working.’

4 Constituent negation

Klima (1964) introduced a distinction between sentential negation and constituent negation. Constituent negation is sub-sentential: it is when negation has scope over some word or phrase that is only a part of a sentence or clause. This therefore includes negative prefixes, such as the *in-* prefix in Maltese words of Italian origin, as in *in-ċertezza* ‘un-certainty’ or *in-direttament* ‘in-directly’. But it also includes phrases made negative. This is illustrated in (24), where we see that the same negator *mhux* that is used for negating non-verbal predicates, participles, and prefixes derived from participles is also used for constituent negation.

(24) Korpus Malti v3.0 news85703

... <i>ghand-i</i>	<i>idea</i>	<i>mhux</i>	<i>ħażin</i>	<i>ta'</i>	<i>dawn</i>	<i>l-affarijiet...</i>
POSS-1SG	idea	NEG	bad	GEN	DEM.PL	DEF-matter.PL

‘...I have a reasonable understanding of these matters...’

Strictly speaking, constituent negation, as defined by Klima (1964), should be distinguished from sentential negation with narrow focus on a particular constituent (cf. Willis et al. 2013b: 5–6). However, the actual constructions used to express constituent negation and sentential negation with narrow focus are very frequently identical in the world’s languages, and Maltese is no exception, using *mhux* also for the latter, as illustrated in (25).

(25) Korpus Malti v3.0 literature82

<i>Kienu</i>	<i>qis-hom</i>	<i>ghaddew</i>	<i>xahrejn</i>	<i>mhux</i>	<i>jumejn.</i>
AUX.PST.3PL	like-3PL	PASS.PFV.3PL	month.DU	NEG	day.DU

‘It was as if two months had past, not two days.’

In (24) there is a single, affirmative proposition expressed (that the speaker has a certain kind of idea). In (25) we have, in effect, two conjoined propositions, the first affirmative, the second negative, with the material in the second that is identical to the first unexpressed: it was as if two months had past, (and it

was) not (as if) two days (had passed). From this point of view, the negation in (25) should be seen as sentential negation with ellipsis, not constituent negation, but the close resemblance to actual constituent negation, as in (24), means that the widespread labeling of examples similar to (25) as constituent negation is probably harmless.

5. Negation and indefinite pronouns

The area of grammar discussed in this section is covered in detail by Haspelmath & Caruana (1996), Lucas (2014), and Camilleri & Sadler (2017). Here I just present a brief overview of this rather complex domain. The topic at issue is the interaction of negation with indefinite pronouns; that is, how Maltese expresses meanings such as ‘I didn’t see anything’ or ‘No one said anything to anyone’. Like many European languages (including non-standard but not standard varieties of Germanic languages like English), Maltese exhibits a form of what is called, following Labov (1972), negative concord. This is the phenomenon whereby indefinite pronouns in the scope of negation must themselves also be negative (in a sense to be made more precise in a moment). Hence in (26) the presence of the negator *mhux* requires the element translated with English *anything* to be *xejn* and not *xi ħaġa*, which in other contexts would also be translated with English *anything*.

(26) Korpus Malti v3.0 news11479

... l-Partit	Nazzjonalista	<i>mhux</i>	<i>qed</i>	<i>jeskludi</i>	<i>xejn</i>
DEF-party	nationalist	NEG	PROG	exclude.IPFV.3SGM	nothing
‘...the Nationalist Party is not excluding anything.’					

In the theoretical literature, items such as *xejn* are either referred to as n-words (following Laka 1990), or, more frequently in recent years, as negative concord items (NCIs). The crucial property of such items is that in contexts such as (26) they appear not to

be negative, since there is no logical double negation with the predicate negator of the kind seen in (27) (= (9) above), whereas in other contexts, such as (28) (= (20) above) and (29), it seems clear that it is *xejn* that is generating the negative interpretation of the clause in which it appears (cf. Giannakidou 2006). Evidence that native speakers of Maltese also consider *xejn* to be inherently negative can be seen from the denominal verb *xejjen* ‘to nullify, make nothing’. NCIs thus represent a significant challenge for most compositional theories of natural-language syntax and semantics (see Lucas 2014 for discussion).

- (27) Korpus Malti v3.0 news126780 (cf. Stolz 2009: 153)

<i>Ma</i>	<i>nistghu-x</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>nahsbu-x</i>	<i>kif...</i>
NEG	can.IPFV.1PL	NEG	think.IPFV.1PL-NEG	how

‘We cannot not consider how...’

- (28) Notice observed in Valletta

<i>Tarmi</i>	<i>xejn</i>	<i>hawn.</i>
throw.IPFV.2SG-NEG	nothing	here

‘Don’t throw anything here.’

- (29) Korpus Malti v3.0 literature20

<i>Tifel</i>	<i>ta’</i>	<i>ħames</i>	<i>snin</i>	<i>x’-jista’</i>
child	GEN	five	year.PL	what-can.IPFV.3SGM

jifhem? *Xejn.*
understand.IPFV.3SGM nothing
‘What can a five-year-old child understand? Nothing.’

As noted above, an indefinite pronoun in the scope of negation that would be translated with English *anything* must be rendered by Maltese *xejn*. This does not mean, however, that *xi ħaġa*, which would typically be translated as *anything* in the question in (30), cannot also appear as the object of a negated verb. But when it does, it is interpreted outside the scope of negation, with a specific indefinite interpretation usually best translated with English *something*, as in (31).

negative meaning, as illustrated in (32), in which we see that *xejn* can also function as a determiner ‘any; many’.

- (32) Korpus Malti v3.0 news83159
- | | | |
|------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <i>...xtrajt</i> | <i>xejn</i> | <i>hwejjeg?</i> |
| buy.PFV.2SG | nothing | clothes |
- ‘... did you buy many clothes?’

Finally, recall from §3.3.1 that NCIs generally require the *-x* of the bipartite *ma...-x* negative construction to be absent, as illustrated in (33) (= (17)).

- (33) Korpus Malti v3.0 academic12
- | | | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| <i>Il-hajja</i> | <i>f’-dawn</i> | <i>l-istituti</i> | <i>qatt</i> | <i>ma</i> |
| DEF-life | in-DEM.PL | DEF-institution.PL | never | NEG |
- | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------|------------|---------------|
| <i>kienet</i> | <i>wahda</i> | <i>ta’</i> | <i>lussu.</i> |
| COP.PST.3SGF | one.F | POSS | luxury |
- ‘The life in those institutions was never one of luxury.’

There are two further details worth noting here. First, the general applicability of this rule of *x*-dropping means that it is surprising that we find *mhux* co-occurring with *xejn* in (26) above. Indeed, it seems that many speakers consider such structures to be ungrammatical (cf. Camilleri & Sadler 2017: 151); but they are robustly attested, albeit as a minority option relative to similar structures with *mh* (i.e. the expected form with *x*-dropping).⁹ There appears to be no similar possibility of *-x* appearing in structures like that in (33), in which a verb (rather than the pronominal copula) is negated with *ma* (not *mhux*) and co-occurs with an NCI. The discrepancy is presumably explained by the fact that, for at least some speakers, *mhux* is felt to be monomorphemic, so that it is either not possible or not necessary to drop the final consonant when it co-occurs with an NCI.

9 A search of Korpus Malti v3.0 with the query “*mhux* (_PROG|_FUT) _VERB *xejn*” returns 100 matches, whereas “(m’hu|mh) (_PROG|_FUT) _VERB *xejn*” returns 3,199 matches.

The second point is that it is not yet fully clear how closely associated a negative verb and an NCI need to be for the latter to trigger *x*-dropping (cf. Čéplö & Lucas 2020). We can say, informally, that it appears that the two need to be in the same sentence, but this then requires a precise definition of the concept sentence, which will not be attempted here. Note, however, that the NCI and the verb need not be in the same immediate clause: an NCI in a subordinate clause regularly triggers *x*-dropping in a higher clause, as illustrated in (34).

(34) Korpus Malti v3.0 news145572

... <i>m'ghand-ek</i>	<i>aptit</i>	<i>tagħmel</i>	<i>xejn...</i>
NEG-POSS-2SG	appetite	do.IPFV.2SG	nothing
'You don't feel like doing anything.'			

6. Non-negative -x

A final observation concerns instances of suffixed *-x* that are sometimes referred to as negative (e.g. Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander 1997: 4), but which are not best analysed as such, either synchronically or diachronically. Recall from §3.1 that the negative suffix *-x*, as well as the indefinite items *xejn* and *xi* (and interrogative *x'*, among other items), are originally derived from the Arabic noun *šayʔ* 'thing'. The process by which this noun came to grammaticalize as a negator is analysed by Lucas & Lash (2010), Lucas (2013; 2018), and Diem (2014), among others. What is relevant to the present discussion is that Arabic *šayʔ* has evolved into numerous different grammatical items in Maltese and the Arabic dialects (cf. Souag 2018). A greater or lesser quantity of the original phonetic material is preserved in the different evolutions (*xejn*, *xi*, *-x/x'*),¹⁰ but there is no necessary link between negation and reduction to /f/. Rather we should envisage one

10 For a discussion of the etymologically unexpected final /n/ in *xejn* and a number of other Maltese items, see Lucas & Spagnol (2022).

major grammaticalization pathway as having been *šay? ‘thing’ > *ši (*xi*) ‘at all’. This adverbial element *ši would have been, like the English translation equivalent *at all*, a so-called negative polarity item – that is, restricted in its occurrence to nonveridical contexts such as interrogative, conditional, and negative clauses. In many (but not all) Arabic varieties, including the immediate ancestor of Maltese, this *ši (or a reduced form /ʃ/) was reanalysed in negative clauses as (part of) the expression of negation itself, coming in Maltese to suffice as the sole expression of negation in negative imperative sentences, as discussed in §3.3.1. But the non-negative uses in other nonveridical contexts persisted, sometimes also being reduced just to /ʃ/. The instances of -x illustrated in (35) below are thus reflexes of this adverbial *ši ‘at all’ element; they are not synchronically negative (these are not negative clauses), and they do not represent diachronic extensions to non-negative contexts of the negator -x. Note that an idiosyncrasy of this Maltese reflex of *ši is that its contexts of use have contracted almost exclusively to indirect questions optionally introduced by *jekk* ‘whether’. In such clauses non-negative -x has become obligatory, and where these clauses contain *qatt* ‘ever’, as in (35b), -x is obligatorily suffixed to *qatt*. Otherwise, it is a suffix on the verb, as in (35a). Non-negative -x may, however, also occur in direct questions, and rarely also in conditional clauses, as illustrated in (36) (cf. Wilmsen 2016; Lucas 2018).

(35)

a. Korpus Malti v3.0 news471

<i>Hafna</i>	<i>qed</i>	<i>jistaqsu</i>	<i>jekk</i>	<i>wasal-x</i>	<i>iż-żmien</i>
much	PROG	ask.IPFV.3PL	COMP	arrive.PFV.3SGM-ŠI	DEF-time
<i>li</i>	<i>ż-żona</i>	<i>Schengen</i>	<i>tigħi</i>		<i>mwaqqfa</i>
COMP	DEF-zone	PN	come.IPFV.3SGF		stop.PTCP.PASS.F
<i>temporanjament.</i>					
temporarily					
‘Many are asking whether the time has come for the Schengen zone to be temporarily halted.’					

- b. Korpus Malti v3.0 literature24

staqsie-ni jekk qatt-x nohlom li
 ask.PFV.3SGM-1SG COMP ever-ŠI dream.IPFV.1SG COMP
niżżewwēg.
marry.IPFV.1SG
 ‘He asked me whether I ever dream of getting married.’

(36)

- a. Korpus Malti v3.0 literature73

Intom-x taraw dak il-bieb f-ix-xellug ta-n-niċċa?
 2PL-ŠI see.IPFV.2PL DEM DEF-door PREP-DEF-left GEN-DEF-niche
 ‘Do you see that door on the left of the niche?’

- b. Korpus Malti v3.0 news80227

Jekk qatt-x ridna nkunu nafu
 COMP ever-ŠI want.PFV.1PL AUX.IPFV.1PL know.IPFV.1PL
nghixu-x f’-pajjiż ta-d-dahq jew ta-l-biki...
 live.IPFV.1PL-ŠI in-country GEN-DEF-laughter or GEN-DEF-crying
 ‘If we ever wanted to know whether we live in a land of laughter or of tears...’

7. Conclusion

As this article has shown, the major features of the morphosyntax of negation in contemporary Standard Maltese are now relatively well understood. We have seen how negation is expressed anaphorically, at the level of clauses and sub-clausal constituents, and in its interaction with indefinite pronouns. Much work remains to be done, however, before we have a full picture of some of the finer details, including the precise interaction of negation with auxiliaries in verbal chains, and with the different kinds of indefinite pronouns. Another area of particular interest to investigate in future is the extent of dialectal and sociolinguistic variation in the expression of the different kinds of negation in Maltese.

Abbreviations

*	reconstructed form	IPFV	imperfective
1, 2, 3	first, second, third person	M	masculine
ACT	active	MOD	modal
AUX	auxiliary	NEG	negative
COMP	complementizer	OBJ	object (marker)
CONJ	conjunction	PASS	passive
COP	copula	PFV	perfective
DAT	dative	PL	plural
DEF	definite article	PN	proper name
DEM	demonstrative	POSS	possessive
DU	dual	PREP	preposition
EXS	existential	PROG	progressive
F	feminine	PST	past
FOC	focus	PTCP	participle
FUT	future	PURP	purposive
GEN	genitive	SG	singular
IMP	imperative		

Electronic resources

Korpus Malti v3.0: <https://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt/>

BCv3 (bulbulistan corpus malti v3): www.bulbul.sk/bonito2 (login: guest, password: Ghilm3)

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