

# PERCEPTIONS OF MALTA IN ARABIC PROVERBS AND IDIOMS

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## **1.0. Introduction**

This paper delves into the realm of paremiology, the scientific study of proverbs, shedding light on both proverbs and idioms in different varieties of Arabic that specifically mention Malta, the Maltese people, or the Maltese language. This research aims to provide a list of such expressions and examine the perceptions that Arabic proverbs impart about Malta, its inhabitants and its language. The study consists of four main sections; the first one discusses the role of proverbs in the long-standing Arabic–Islamic tradition, and is followed by an overview of existing literature and research in the field. The third section provides a discussion on the collection of the proverbs taken into consideration in this research, assembling a list of these linguistic expressions and presenting them in transcription and their translated versions. Subsequently, a thematic analysis is presented in the final section, which features the central themes that are prevalent in the collected Arabic expressions about Malta. The paper concludes by summarising key findings and implications from this inquiry.

## 2.0. The Role of Proverbs and Idioms

Often rooted in folklore and tradition, proverbs serve as conduits for imparting age-old perceptions from one generation to the next. Proverbs are short, traditional sayings with a generally fixed structure that offer advice, wisdom, or a moral lesson. They often convey universal truths or cultural values. According to Wolfgang Mieder (1993, 5), a proverb is “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which has been handed down from generation to generation.” Far beyond their pithy nature, proverbs serve as repositories of information and may, at times, impart deeply rooted stereotypes with reference to other national, linguistic, or religious communities, wielding influence on how consumers of a particular language perceive other groups. While proverbs find usage in literate societies, their significance is amplified in non-literate societies, where the oral transmission of traditions prevails.

When embedded in discourse, proverbs fulfil several functions, such as advising, warning, satirising, educating, motivating, and summarising an argument. At times, proverbs are used as part of the argument. They may lend “support and force to the statement” if quoted at the right moment in a discussion (Freyha 1974, xvii). Moreover, a proverb “has the authority to settle a dispute or solve a vexing problem” or may be used to settle a dispute in “quarrels over verbal agreements or binding contracts” (Freyha 1974, xvii). Some proverbs include everyday observations on the weather and seasons, knowledge about customs,

manners, laws, traditions and superstitions, medical advice, prescriptions, and health regulations (Freyha 1974, xiv–xx).

This study takes into consideration a number of idioms in addition to proverbs. Structurally, idioms are expressions that often have a fixed structure as well, but their meanings can be opaque or nonsensical when interpreted literally. They may originate from historical or cultural contexts but are not always as universally recognised or employed as proverbs. Functionally, idioms are expressions whose meanings cannot be understood from the literal definitions of the individual words. They convey a figurative meaning that is unique to the specific phrase. Idioms tend to add colour or emphasis to language but typically lack the didactic content found in proverbs.

Arabic proverbs are a testament to the heritage of the Arabic language, showcasing centuries of wisdom and cultural idiosyncrasies. These sayings have been passed down through generations, forming a remarkably well-documented branch of Arabic prose literature (Leder 1998, 616). In Arabic poetry, the technique of intertextuality may be explicitly achieved by alluding to proverbs. Poets may evoke a well-known earlier proverb “to create an enigmatic line which can only be understood with reference to the original line” (Heinrichs 1998, 82).

The closest term to ‘proverb’ in Arabic is *mathal* (pl. *amthāl*), which expresses different meanings, including “likeness; metaphor, simile, parable; proverb, adage” (Wehr 1979). Proverbs may also indirectly impart knowledge by alluding to historically or socio-culturally known facts or persons, and their mean-

ing is considered wisdom (*ḥikma*). Proverbs appear in various literary genres, including classical Arabic poetry, *adab* works, folk literature, and the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hariri (d. 1122 CE). In the pre-modern period, knowledge of proverbs was integral to one's education; "to know and use a certain amount of proverbs was part of the ideal of the civilised and educated *adīb*" (Walther 1998, 622). Their value lies in their ability to capture truths and societal values in concise and memorable phrases.

The famous Arab philologist al-Maydani (d. 1124 CE), who provided a voluminous compilation of proverbs, considered proverbs to be "the summit of rhetoric" and claimed that proverbs were popular due to their "concise formulation, their apt expression, their beautiful comparisons and their excellent allusions" (Walther 1998, 623). The study of proverbs provides a glimpse into the consciousness of various Arabic-speaking cultures, exposing "socio-religious, anthropological and cultural conceptions, some conditioned by special social and historical circumstances" (Walther 1998, 623).

While the origins of proverbs remain enigmatic due to the inherent challenge of attributing their authorship, Anis Freyha, who compiled a list of modern Lebanese proverbs, posits that, while it is impossible to trace the origins of the proverb, it is feasible to infer, in a broad manner, the contextual factors, events, and conditions that conceivably led to the emergence of a particular proverb. These factors include proverbs derived from day-to-day encounters or observations of the natural world, those rooted in allegorical tales and anecdotes, riddles and answers to riddles, expressions referring to classical literature, emulations of

existing proverbs, and expressions that seemingly originated around some historical incident (Frehya 1974, xii).

### 3.0. State of the Art

There are several collections of proverbs in Classical Arabic; the earliest documented is *Kitāb al-amthāl* by Abu ‘Ubayd (d. 838 CE). Later, the Arab philologist Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Maydani (d. 1124) prepared a well-known collection of proverbs known as *Majma‘ al-amthāl*, which was based on fifty previous collections (Walther 1998, 520). In Western scholarship, the German Arabist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Freytag undertook the production of an edition of al-Maydani’s compilation of proverbs, accompanied by a Latin translation, between 1838 and 1843 (Freytag 1838–1843). Collections of proverbs in regional varieties of Arabic became popular from the thirteenth century onwards. The Tunisian scholar Abu Yahya al-Zajjali (d. 1294) wrote *Amthāl al-‘awwām fī al-andalus* (see Zajjālī 1975).

While the researcher acknowledges the extensive scholarship on Arabic proverbs in Arabic and other languages, this review shall exclusively reference sources that are directly pertinent to this study. Crucial for analysing perceptions about Malta in Arabic proverbs is the work of the Lebanese author and scholar Anis Frehya (d. 1993), who compiled *A Dictionary of Modern Lebanese Proverbs* (Frehya 1974). This publication consists of a list of Lebanese proverbs, which are presented in Arabic script, transliteration, and English translation. In the preface of this compilation, Frehya states that he collected the proverbs in his native

village, Ras al-Matn, which is a predominantly Druze village in the district of Matn, to the east of Beirut.

Similarly, Ferdinand-Joseph Abela's (1981) *Proverbes populaires du Liban sud: Saïda et ses environs* consists of Arabic proverbs collected from southern Lebanon with French translation and comments.<sup>1</sup> There are also multiple collections of proverbs in Moroccan Arabic. One of the earliest collections was compiled by the Finnish sociologist Edward Alexander Westermarck (d. 1939) in his book *Wit and Wisdom in Morocco: A Study of Native Proverbs* (Westermarck 1930).

In spite of the wealth of documented collections of Arabic proverbs in Classical and dialectal Arabic, along with extensive Western scholarship in this area, there remains a notable gap in the realm of research about how specific countries, cultures, or people are portrayed in Arabic proverbs. This research aims to bridge this gap by delving into the interplay of linguistic and cultural dynamics to examine the representation of Malta and the Maltese within Arabic expressions.

#### 4.0. Collection of Proverbs

One of the main challenges in analysing the Arabic proverbs referencing Malta is contextualisation, because of the frequent lack

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand-Joseph Abela was born in Sidon in South Lebanon in 1887. After finishing his studies in Oriental studies and archaeology, he became the vice-consul of Spain and Britain in Sidon. While his surname may suggest that he was of Maltese origin, the researcher could not find any information about Abela's family background.

of details or explanations accompanying these linguistic expressions. To mitigate the potential misunderstandings related to specific proverbs, and given that the researcher is not intimately connected to the vast communities where these proverbs are commonly employed, the researcher reached out to several scholars in various disciplines related to particular communities and asked for their insights and explanations. Additionally, any anecdotes or incidents linked to a specific proverb are included in the discussion. Nevertheless, it is essential to clarify that this study does not aim to trace the origins of these proverbs. Since cultural traditions are primarily passed down orally from one generation to another, often with varying degrees of accuracy, it is impossible to attribute a particular proverb to a specific historical event.

Central to our inquiry are the following research questions: What are the Arabic proverbs that mention Malta or the Maltese, and how are Malta and its people portrayed in Arabic proverbs and sayings? In order to systematically analyse the portrayal of Malta, its inhabitants, and its language within Arabic proverbs, the following approach was adopted. Firstly, proverbs were gathered from various sources, including books on famous sayings and proverbs, popular songs, and other elements of popular culture. Subsequently, these proverbs were documented both in transcription and in transliteration to ensure clarity and accessibility for readers. The next step entailed categorising these proverbs thematically based on their overarching impressions about Malta, its inhabitants, and its language. Finally, each proverb's usage was elucidated, accompanied by any relevant comments or anecdotes that were associated with it.

The proverbs considered in this study are gathered in the following list, with the country to which each proverb is attributed indicated in parentheses. It is important to note that the country mentioned in the brackets corresponds to the attribution provided in the collection of proverbs, and this does not imply that variations of the same proverb do not exist in other communities, particularly in neighbouring ones. In the translation of the proverbs, the researcher attempted to preserve the original as faithfully as possible. Additionally, while these expressions serve as key focal points, this compilation is not exhaustive, and the possibility of encountering additional expressions within the broader context of the topic exists. However, the chosen proverbs constitute this research study's primary body of text.

#### 4.1. Transcription

1. *riġlayh* (var. *əḡrayh*) *b-təlħa' mālħa* (or 'Obroṣ) (Lebanon)
2. *yħalli* 'awwāk *yaşil l-mālħa* (Syria)
3. *ə'daħ* 'alayh *hawn b-yūla' bi-mālħa* (Lebanon)
4. *mālħa yōk* (Lebanon)
5. *baddu yuqim d-din fi mālħa* (Palestine)
6. *bi-l-aḡān fi mālħa* (Egypt)
  - a) *lā aḡān fi mālħa*
  - b) *ḡāy yu'aḡḡin fi mālħa*
  - c) *miḡla l-mu'aḡḡin fi mālħa*
  - d) *aḡḡan ba'da ħirāb mālħa*
7. *l-mālħi wū l-fār lā tswurrīhum bāb ḡ-dār* (Morocco)
8. *hāni bach nəḡbəd men mālħa* (Tunisia)
9. *mālħa l-ħnina ħubza w-sardina* (Tunisia)

## **4.2. English Translation**

1. [He is so agile that] his feet would reach Malta (or Cyprus).
2. He will let your shouting reach Malta.
3. Light the (lighter) here, and it will catch fire in Malta!
4. There is no Malta.
5. He wants to uphold religion in Malta.
6. Calling to prayer in Malta.
  - a) There is no call to prayer in Malta.
  - b) He's coming to call for prayer in Malta.
  - c) Like the muezzin in Malta.
  - d) He called for prayer after the destruction of Malta.
7. Don't show the house-door to the Maltese and the mouse.
8. I am going to get [my words] from Malta.
9. Malta is kind, bread and sardines.

## **5.0. Themes**

The proverbs listed above include a range of themes that shed light on perceptions and cultural perspectives related to Malta and the Maltese. The main themes that are discussed henceforth include Malta as a relatively distant or unreachable and potentially unfamiliar location, Malta as a non-existent place, Malta as non-Islamic, the Maltese people as untrustworthy, and the Maltese language as enigmatic or incomprehensible.

### 5.1. Theme 1: Malta as a Distant/Unreachable and Potentially Unfamiliar Location

One of the recurring themes present within Arabic lore is the portrayal of Malta as a geographically remote destination, which reflects a geographical understanding and carries deeper cultural and symbolic meanings. Introducing this theme about Malta, the Palestinian-born scholar Nawaf al-Tamimi (2018) writes in a blog post that:

تحضر مالطا في ذاكرة الطفولة مرادفة لبعُد المسافة. كان الطفل منا يتهدّد قرينه بالقول: "أضربك أجيبك في مالطا"، أو يصف الطفل المسافة البعيدة أو المكان البعيد، فيقول "مشينا حتى وصلنا إلى مالطا"، أو قوله "بعيد مثل هنا ومالطا". لا ندري من أي جاءت هذه الكناية، علماً أن هذه الجزيرة المتوسطية أقرب إلى الشرق والمغرب العربيين من الصين أو اليابان أو أستراليا، أو كأن خيال الطفل منا لم يكن يقدر على التحليق أبعد من مالطا.

In childhood memory, Malta was synonymous with distance. Children among us used to taunt their peers by saying, "I will hit you (so hard), you will end up in Malta," or when describing a far-off place or a distant location, they would say, "We walked until we reached Malta," or use the phrase, "as far away as here and Malta." We do not know the origin of this metaphor, even though this Mediterranean island is closer to the Arab Eastern and Western regions than China, Japan, or Australia. It is as if our childhood imagination could not soar farther than Malta.

The concept of distance also appears in other proverbs in the Levant. A Lebanese proverb reads رجليه (اجريه) بتلحق المالطة (قبرص) *riḡlayh* (var. *əḡrayh*) *b-talḥa' mālta* (or *'Obroṣ*), which translates to '[He is so agile that] his feet could carry him as far as

Malta (or Cyprus)' (Abela 1981, 50). The mere mention of 'Malta' or its variant 'Cyprus' suggests that the inhabitants of Lebanon are knowledgeable about these two islands. Moreover, this expression implies shared geographical similarities between Malta and Cyprus. The most apparent similar features include the fact that they are both islands, separated from the mainland by sea and varying in distance from the Levant.

Historically, both Cyprus and Malta were pivotal to the maritime trade routes that connected the eastern and western Mediterranean during the ancient and pre-modern eras. They were sought-after territories due to their strategic positions, serving as trading hubs and centres of cultural exchange. This interconnectedness led to the presence of various cultures, including the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, and Crusaders, influencing the islands' historical past. Especially in an era predating modern air travel, embarking on a journey across the Mediterranean by sea was arduous and dangerous. The Mediterranean Sea was often perceived as a barrier, creating a sense of distance and separation between these islands and the mainland. The idea of walking to these islands highlights the arduousness of the journey and the extraordinary, if not impossible, abilities of the person in question. The proverb, therefore, demonstrates the imaginative lengths to which individuals would go to emphasise the exceptional qualities of someone's attributes.

The perception of Malta as a distant location also features in a satirical Syrian comedy series known as *ḍay'a dāyi'a*. This concept is notably highlighted in the twenty-sixth episode of the

series' second season (Sama Art International 2015). In this particular episode, one of the main characters, known as assistant Muhsan, becomes aware of a corruption case involving Joudah, another main character in the series. Upon arresting Joudah, assistant Muhsan addresses him by saying *والله ليخلي عواك يصل لمالطا* *w-allāhi li-yḥalli ‘awwāk yaṣil l-mālta*, which translates to 'By God, he will let your shouting reach Malta' (Darawshe 2023), implying that assistant Muhsan is so fed up or unbothered by the other person's angry or aggressive behaviour that he is willing to go to extreme lengths. The term *'awwā*, which is generally accompanied by the preposition *'alā*, means 'to bark' in Syrian Arabic (Stowasser and Ani 2004, 18), and is translated as 'to shout' in this context. It is worth mentioning that, in previous cases in this series, assistant Muhsan uses Cyprus to symbolise a remote place. However, in this particular case, the usage of Malta is intended to convey an even greater sense of distance, underscoring the gravity of the situation.

On a similar note, the Lebanese proverb *اقدح عليه هون بيولع* *ḏ'daḥ 'alayh hawn b-yūla' bi-mālta*, which translates to 'light the (lighter) here, and it will catch fire in Malta!' also depicts Malta as a distant geographical location. It is metaphorically used to describe something that will ignite or spread very quickly. Abela provides additional comments with this proverb, comparing the dry man with dry tinder; the man is so dry that he catches fire in Malta from a distance (Abela 1981, 280).

## 5.2. Theme 2: Malta as a Non-existent Place

Malta as a non-existent place is another perception about Malta which may be related to a historical incident involving Malta and the Arab world. The proverb مالطه يوك *mālṭa yōk*, meaning ‘Malta does not exist’, is an expression that features in different collections of Lebanese proverbs. The Turkish term *yōk* (‘does not exist’) encapsulates the concept of outright denial of an existing reality. According to one account, this proverb is related to a tale involving the Grand Admiral of the Turkish fleet during the sixteenth century. The admiral was tasked with visiting Malta, but after weeks of navigation, he returned empty-handed to his sultan, claiming that he had been unable to find the island (Abela 1981, 250). This narrative humorously stresses the notion of disbelief in the face of undeniable facts. In another anecdote, a Turkish captain assigned to recapture Malta similarly reported back to Constantinople that there was no such place as Malta after extensively sailing across the Mediterranean to no avail (Freyha 1974, 616). In another version of the anecdote, *mālṭa yōk* is believed to relate to the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman, who failed multiple times to conquer Malta, leading to his decree to erase any mention of the island’s military resistance and institution of a death penalty for those who referred to it. Therefore, the statement *mālṭa yōk* was embedded in Turkish and neighbouring cultures as signifying a deliberate rejection of reality, a denial so intense that it becomes farcical.

### 5.3. Theme 3: Malta as a Symbol of Religious Devotion

Several variants of Arabic proverbs depict Malta as a bastion of Christian devotion. The term 'Malta' features in one of the 5000 Arabic proverbs collected from Palestine by Sa'īd 'Abbud and translated by Martin Thilo. The proverb reads *بَدُّهُ يَقيِمُ الدِّينَ فِي مالطه* *baddu yuqīm d-dīn fī māḷṭa*, which translates to 'he wants to establish religion in Malta' (Thilo 1937, 59), implying that someone wants to accomplish something that is practically impossible. Malta was deemed a bastion of Catholicism; hence it was absolutely impossible to establish Islam on the island. The proverb carries a contextual meaning that revolves around an individual's actions and reactions in a specific situation, often linked to non-conformity or going against the prevailing norms. While it is challenging to trace this proverb's origins, an anecdote that accompanies this proverb links it to a particular historical incident.

According to Sa'īd 'Abbud, the underlying story behind this proverb centres around a non-Roman Catholic man's presence in Malta during a religious procession involving a body, presumably a funeral procession. It is narrated that everyone around the procession, when it approached them, would kneel or prostrate themselves as a sign of respect or devotion. However, this particular man chose to remain standing, not participating in the customary gesture of reverence. Others who were part of the crowd noticed his refusal to kneel and attempted to influence him to conform by physically pushing and urging him to kneel (Thilo 1937, 59). This proverb is used with reference to an individual who, in the midst of a prevailing practice or social convention,

resists conformity and persists in their beliefs or actions, even in the face of intense pressure from others to conform. It is a metaphorical way of referring to someone who goes against the grain or stands firm in their convictions despite the majority's expectations. Therefore, a plausible meaning would be that someone wants to accomplish something that is actually undoable.

This proverb perceives Malta as a place where religious customs and practices hold importance within the cultural and societal context. The story underlying the proverb, involving a non-Roman Catholic man's refusal to kneel during a religious procession, highlights the reverence for and devotion to religious traditions that people in Malta show; it also portrays a cultural milieu where religious observance is not just a personal choice but a communal and expected behaviour. The non-conformist behaviour of the man who chooses to stand upright instead of kneeling is an example of deviating from this norm. This highlights a perceived cultural expectation for individuals to adhere to religious customs, with the story emphasising the community's firm response to non-conformity.

Other proverbs also refer to Malta as a devout Christian country, such as the proverb لا أذان في مالطا *lā āḍān fī māḷṭā*, which translates to 'there is no call to prayer in Malta'. Other similar proverbs include جاي يؤذن في مالطا *ġāy yu'addīn fī māḷṭa* (see Al-bāb al-awwal), which means 'he's coming to call for prayer in Malta' and the proverbial comparison مثل المؤذن في مالطا *miṭṭla l-mu'addīn fī māḷṭa*, which translates to 'like the muezzin in Malta'. The Lebanese-born author Saqr Abu Fakhr provides a counterpart to this comparison, that is, *miṭṭla baṭrīark fī makka*, which translates to

‘like a patriarch in Mecca’ (Fakhr 2016). Which Muslim believer would listen to the muezzin’s call to prayer on a Catholic island isolated by the Mediterranean Sea? Likewise, which Catholic believer would listen to the Patriarch in Mecca, Islam’s holiest city? These expressions, therefore, are used when one needs to express the impossibility of accomplishing a task (al-Tamīmī 2018). One needs to stress the point that the potentially skewed and unreliable version of events is here being interpreted through Levantine eyes.

Other proverbial variants include *أذن بعد خراب مالطا āḏḏan ba‘da ḥirāb mālṭa*, translated as ‘he called for prayer after the destruction of Malta’, or its variant *آء بعد خراب مالطا ġā’ ba‘da ḥirāb mālṭa*, translated as ‘he came after the destruction of Malta’. The expression *ḥirbit mālṭa* ‘the destruction of Malta’ is also the name of a popular Egyptian song by the pop singer known by the stage name Sandy (2010), who laments that her lover ‘came after the destruction of Malta’ (*ġāy ba‘d mā ḥirbit mālṭa*). The proverb conveys a situation where there is an attempt at reform but no hope of success or when efforts to reform come too late.

In popular folklore, the ‘destruction of Malta’ is often attributed to the French occupation of Malta between 1798 and 1800. The French army, under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, brought about the island’s destruction (‘Alwān 2018). Even though the French occupation of the Maltese islands barely lasted two years, the islands were left in complete ruins. The French occupation is believed to have looted, plundered, and destroyed the islands to such an extent that the inhabitants were forced to

flee for their lives to the island of Sicily. Malta's residents returned to their city following its liberation by the English army, led by Commander Sir Alexander Ball, in 1800. However, by that time, the city had already been reduced to ruins. According to the blog writer Amal al-Attum (2020), this gave rise to the famous and enduring phrase, 'after the destruction of Malta'.

#### 5.4. Theme 4: The Maltese as Importunate

On a different note, there are proverbs that express perceptions about the Maltese people. A Moroccan proverb reads لمالطي والفار لـمآلتي ولفار لآ تـسـورـرهم باب الدار *l-mālṭī wū l-fār lā tswurrīhum bāb ḍ-ḍār*, which translates to 'don't show the house-door to the Maltese and the mouse'. Westermarck (1930, 134) explains this proverb by arguing that this formulaic expression refers to people, in this case the Maltese, who are perceived as both importunate and addicted to pilfering. The proverb serves as a cautionary expression about being mindful of who one trusts and allows into one's personal space or affairs, suggesting that if one welcomes them into one's home, they may take advantage of one's hospitality, potentially causing trouble.

This proverb emulates the structure of existing proverbs that follow the same formula and meaning but replace the word 'Maltese' (*l-mālṭī*) with other variants. For example, Westermarck notes another variant of this proverb, which is *l-filāli wū l-fār lā tswurrīhum bāb ḍ-ḍār*. The term *filāli* refers to someone from Tafilalt, a region in southeastern Morocco. Another Moroccan variant is *bnādam wū l-fār lā tswurrīhum bāb ḍ-ḍār*, in which the variant *bnādam* means 'human' (see Amthāl

ša‘abiyya maġribiyja). The formulaic structure of this proverb also appears in Maltese; Joseph Aquilina (1972, 488) claims that the people on the sister island of Gozo say the following about their fellow Maltese:

*Il-Malti u l-far iddahhlux id-dar* (or *turihx bieb id-dar*), ‘Let not a Maltese or a rat enter your house’. Var. (i) *Il-Malti u l-far iddahhlux id-dar għax jaħxilek il-mara u t-tfal*, ‘Do not let a Maltese or a rat enter your house for he will dishonour your wife and your children’. Var. (ii) *Il-Malti u xriku aħxih u niku*, ‘Never spare a Maltese or his companion’. In Gozo there is an old strain of anti-Maltese prejudice. One hears there: *Malti tajjeb aħarqu, aħseb u ara ħażin*, ‘Burn a Maltese even if he is good, let alone if he is bad’. Of course, the Maltese adapt a changed form of the proverb to the Gozitans.

It is interesting to note that Aquilina also provides other variants of this proverb, such as *l-‘arbī wa-l-fār lā twerrilhum bāb d-dār*; in this case, ‘the Arab’ refers to the Arab from the countryside (Aquilina 1972, 488). These different variants depict the versatility of these proverbs, whose formulaic structure can be adapted by speakers in a particular community to reflect their xenophobic perceptions.

### 5.5. Theme 5: The Maltese Language as Incomprehensible or Vulgar

Another perception about Malta is that its language is incomprehensible or even vulgar, even though research shows that asymmetric mutual intelligibility exists, especially between Tunisian and Libyan speakers and Maltese. It is estimated that speakers of Tunisian and Libyan Arabic can understand about 40% of the

Maltese language (Čéplö et al. 2016, 584). The Tunisian journalist Lubna al-Harbawi, who contributes to the Alarab blog, opens her article on Malta (al-Harbawi 2021) by introducing a local Tunisian proverb هاني باش نجيد من مالطا *hāni bach nāǧbād men mālṭa* which translates to ‘I am going to get [my words] from Malta’. Al-Harbawi explains that this expression is often used in moments of anger, signalling that the speaker is about to switch to a kind of speech where some words may not be understood or that could contain inappropriate or out-of-context language. According to al-Harbawi, this phenomenon might be attributed to several vulgar Tunisian words that have entered common parlance in the Maltese language.

### 5.6. Theme 6: Malta as a Poor Country

A famous Tunisian proverb reads مالطا الحنينة خبز وسردينة *mālṭa l-ḥnīna ḥubz w-sardīna*, which roughly translates to ‘Malta is kind, bread and sardines’. This Tunisian phrase is employed in times of adversity, specifically recalling the period when Maltese individuals faced severe hardships, prompting them to migrate to Tunisia (and other North African countries such as Algeria) in significant numbers (see al-Harbawi 2021). It is interesting to note that this proverb is also found in Maltese. According to Aquilina, the proverb *Malta ḥanina, ḥobza u sardina* ‘our beloved Malta, a loaf and a sardine’ and its variant *Malta ommna l-ḥanina* ‘Malta is our beloved mother’ depict Malta as “the well-loved country of a people destined to wrest their living from a resourceless soil” (Aquilina 1972, 488).

## 6.0. Conclusion

This study set out to determine the perceptions about Malta and the Maltese conveyed through Arabic proverbs. First, this paper provided a list of the proverbs with potential variants accompanied by their English translation. Subsequently, six perceptions about Malta, its people and language were identified, namely:

1. Malta as a distant/unreachable and unfamiliar location: The notion of Malta as a far-off and potentially unfamiliar place is consistently portrayed in the Arabic proverbs of Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.
2. Malta as a non-existent place: The Lebanese proverb *mālta yōk*, which translates to ‘Malta does not exist’, reflects the denial of Malta’s existence as part of a historical incident involving Malta and the Arab world. This proverb humorously illustrates the concept of disbelief in the face of undeniable facts and highlights the endurance of such tales in shaping societal perspectives.
3. Malta as a symbol of religious devotion: Some Arabic proverbs in Egypt and Palestine depict Malta as a bastion of Christian devotion, emphasising the importance of religious customs and practices within the Maltese cultural context. These proverbs also convey the expectation of conformity to religious norms, even in the face of non-conformity.
4. The Maltese as importunate: The Moroccan proverb *l-mālī wū l-fār lā tswurrīhum bāb d-ḍār* characterises the Maltese people as importunate and prone to pilfering. It

serves as a cautionary expression about being cautious of whom one trusts and invites into one's personal space.

5. The Maltese language as incomprehensible or vulgar: Perceptions of the Maltese language as incomprehensible or containing vulgar elements are reflected in the Tunisian expression *hānī bach nəǧbəd men mālta*. This proverb suggests that the Maltese language may be challenging for speakers of Arabic dialects to understand fully.
6. Malta as a poor country: The Tunisian proverb *mālta l-ħnīna ħubz w-sardīna* highlights the historical adversity faced by the Maltese people, who migrated to Tunisia in significant numbers during challenging times. It portrays Malta as a symbol of resilience in the face of hardship.

In examining these themes, this paper focussed on the intricate web of perceptions and cultural conceptions surrounding Malta, its language, and its people within the Arabic-speaking environment. Furthermore, this study underscored the need for further research in this field, as there are undoubtedly more proverbs that can help us understand how particular groups are perceived in the oral folklore of specific communities. Scholarship about linguistic and cultural expressions can help us better understand the intricate interplay between language, culture, and perception. Future studies may focus on the portrayal of Malta in other non-Arabic languages, the portrayal of other cultures and peoples in Arabic proverbs, and the portrayal of foreign cultures in Maltese proverbs.

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