

# First Maltese to Maltese dictionary

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Michael Agius’s Dizzjunarju tal-Lsien Malti [sic] found at the University of Malta’s archives.

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There are different realities and circumstances in which the practice of lexicography – described as the art and craft of writing dictionaries – is carried out. Thus, for instance, the Oxford English Dictionary’s Current Staff list includes a team ranging from the chief editor to the marketing person, proof that dictionaries at the highest level are the result of collective effort.

Moreover, several universities worldwide train students to become lexicographers by offering diploma and degree programmes in the field.

Locally, however, we do not have that luxury. The University of Malta offers only one elective study-unit, delivered by Manwel Mifsud, namely Il-Lessikografija Maltija.

It is also a reality that historically, local dictionaries were painstakingly compiled by individual scholars such as Agius De Soldanis and Vassalli (whose works we finally learned to appreciate) back in the 18th century and Erin Serracino-Inglott and Joseph Aquilina closer to our times. The latter two lexicographers’ monumental works – the monolingual Il-Miklem Malti and the bilingual Maltese-English Dictionary /English-Maltese Dictionary respectively – are the Maltese language’s main reference points to this day.

A close look at Serracino-Inglott’s Kotba li Qdewni and Aquilina’s bibliography, reveals that they miss an important work – still an unpublished manuscript to this day – meaning its compiler has been nearly forgotten.

I am here referring to Michael (Mikiel) Agius (1896-1984) and his manuscript (Ms. 312) *Dizzjunarju tal-Lsien Malti* [sic], which I came across during my MA research. As is recorded in a short article, *Preżentazzjoni ta' Manuskritti* (In-Nazzjon Tagħna, December 13, 1978), this manuscript, along with two others, was presented to the University of Malta Library on January 12, 1978.

When I interviewed Michael Agius's descendants for my research, I found out he was already working on the *Dizzjunarju tal-Lsien Malti* [sic] even before his retirement in 1961, and finished typing it before 1970. However, even taking the University presentation date of January 12, 1978 as the dictionary's completion date, would still set Agius's as the first known completed Maltese to Maltese dictionary to be compiled, since by 1978 Serracino-Inglott had published only up to his fifth (J-L) volume of *Il-Miklem Malti*.

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Moreover, his manuscripts Ms. 310, *Ftit Sinonimi w Antonomi Maltin* [sic] – the first known Maltese language thesaurus – and Ms. 311, *Dictionary for Commercial Correspondence*, make Agius a local pioneer also in these other fields.

*Dizzjunarju tal-Lsien Malti* [sic] consists of 868 yellowish foolscap-sized pages bound in 4 volumes – A-GH, H-L, M-Q, and R-Ż – each covered in brown paper and fastened with a clip. The relevant entries are typewritten on the recto whereas the text on the verso – which has nothing to do with the dictionary – is crossed out.

In the preface, the author credits Ninu Cremona for inspiring him to set to work on the dictionary. Agius stresses the reasons for the need for a Maltese to Maltese dictionary. On the one hand, the decreasing proficiency level of the language and on the other hand the inundation of Maltese with foreign words (which, in the preface to his thesaurus, he calls *barbariżmi*) at the expense of its own. He, therefore, goes on to explain that he did his best to collect not only archaic but also contemporary words.

He reminds users that he had hardly any help, since no one had ventured into this unexplored territory before him.

Finally, Agius confesses his satisfaction at having paved the way for future compilers. He thanks them in advance for correcting any mistakes he might have made and for including words that might have slipped his mind. Among the headwords, one can find: *bezzun*, *boj*,

dnewwa, ferken, hanex, iff, ixxejkjat, jedd, keċċapp [sic], kus, liv [sic], luħ, maqfel, ossidju, vaċċin, vann, widna and żabar.

Although Agius may be depicted as a purist, these headwords show he was also conscious that borrowing words from other languages is part of the natural process of a language.

But what about the compiler as a person? What is there to know about him? Michael Agius, the only son of blacksmith Spiru and Elisa Agius, had a very colourful life. He was born in Qormi on December 16, 1896 and died on October 2, 1984. In 1917 he and Assweru Scicluna, both teachers at Cospicua's Elementary School, founded the first Cospicua Scout Group.

In 1919 Agius married Pawlina née Abdilla, and soon after moved to Rome where his wife taught English while he translated the Banca Commerciale di Roma's correspondence from Italian to English and vice versa. Agius's first son, Joe, was born in Italy while his other son, Carol, was born in Malta.

During his stay in Italy he also worked as a correspondent for The Daily Malta Chronicle and was the treasurer of the Maltese Association in Rome. He was a very proficient shorthand writer. In fact, in 1922 he also published Agius's Three Letter Commercial Code (4, Corso Umberto I, Rome). His skills in shorthand writing proved essential to write his report of the speech made by Malta's first Prime Minister, Joseph Howard, among others, during a dinner held at La Rinascente on September 24, 1923.

Certain phrases that Howard was reported to have said were then interpreted as irredentist and resulted in Howard's resignation. Conflicting reports about what was actually said on that fateful day can be found in The Daily Malta Chronicle and Il Popolo di Malta.

Agius returned to Malta for a 'complimentary luncheon in honour of Mr M. Agius at the Westminster Hotel, Wednesday, October 17, 1923' as a guest of Sir Gerald Strickland. Later on he worked as an accountant for the British Armed Forces in Malta and for the Air Ministry.

Agius was self-taught in Arabic and although he was not a proficient speaker, he was able to read and understand the language. He also played the clarinet with Pinto Philharmonic Society. He was a friend of Fr Dionysius Mintoff OFM, Fr Edward Fenech OSA, Ninu Cremona and also had contacts with Mgr Peter Paul Saydon.

Agius wrote three novels – Il-Kurċifiss tal-Imnara: Ġrajja Spanjola, Hasad li Żara' and Is-Surgent Pawlu Barbara, jew, Kif Taħdem il-Puluzija [sic]. Other works, including poems and

linguistic studies, were published in Il-Malti.

I am indebted to Michael Agius's descendants for sharing with me some of the above information.

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