

CULTURAL CROSS-CURRENTS IN MALTESE IDIOMS*

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THE VICISSITUDES of history that made Malta part of the Aghlabid domains for more than 200 years, then for even longer centuries the battered but unconquered bastion of Christendom against Islam, have left it a strangely mixed inheritance. On the one hand, its language has obvious, close, and to-day widely acknowledged bonds of kinship with Arabic. On the other, not only is there among the common people a conscious antipathy to the Arabs which makes the very word *ġbarbi* a term of abuse, but almost every manifestation of Maltese cultural life other than the language places it clearly in the stream of European, more specifically Italian, civilisation.

This European affiliation is not merely a veneer taken on by the educated classes, nor is it entirely the result of that penetration of the Near East by the West which began in the 19th century and has coloured the life of the Arabs themselves.

It is of course most patent in the Maltese literary movement, in that its pioneers were men steeped in the Italian literary tradition, in several instances men with a reputation as writers in Italian before they turned to the native idiom. But Maltese folk-literature too, although not so homogeneous, betrays profound and long-standing European influences. The folk-tales, for example, are strongly reminiscent of the Arab *ḥaddutah*, with its characteristically luxuriant fantasy – although even in these there are curiously revealing twists, as when the role which in Arab tales is usually filled by a Persian *ḥakīm* or a Maghribī magician is, in its Maltese counterpart, assigned to a German Professor.¹ As for folk-songs, their metrical forms are Italian, and they are sung to Italian music usually played on the guitar.

Significant also is the testimony of Fāris ash-Shidyāq who lived and worked in Malta from 1834 to 1848 and reported at length on the customs, the superstitions, the social demeanour, the mannerisms, even the conventional gestures, of the Maltese. Biased and inaccurate as his observations often were, it is clear that he was reacting to a way of life that on the whole seemed foreign to him, and his final verdict on it was that 'the island of Malta pleases but few Europeans. The reason is that they find nothing novel when they come of it, nothing that cannot be found in their own country – for everything in it is but the refuse of what they possess

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¹See 'The Fisherman's Son' in *Maltese Anthology*, ed. A. Arberry, p. 26.

... Of the Arabs it would please no one. This is because the Maltese all hate the entire race of Arabs and Muslims.'²

It is the Maltese language, then, that is the abiding monument of the Arab connection with Malta. The morphology and syntax of Maltese remain remarkably close to, although not identical with, those of Arabic. As for the vocabulary, it appears that some 6,500 words or more of Semitic derivation are still in common use among the Maltese, and although these are not very many, they are clustered mostly in the primary stratum of the language and are 'enough to express the manifold ideas and contexts of ordinary human life, the world of primitive, elemental ideas, man's natural world of feeling and reacting.'³ The enquiry suggests itself: What cultural cross-currents may be detected not in isolated words, but in the idiomatic, set phrases of the Maltese? It is a first step in such an enquiry that is attempted here.

A first and tentative step it must be, for linguists have paid surprisingly little attention to the study of idioms. Indeed if the blessing of a well-established scholar is to be sought for this venture, it must be in Prof. McIntosh's appeal to linguists not to restrict themselves to the old respectable fields of philology with which linguistics tends to be equated, but to stick their necks out even at the risk of making fools of themselves.⁴

So far as Maltese idioms are concerned, the similarity between many of them and Italian ones was noted by Dr. Salvatore Castaldi who in 1883 published a booklet entitled *Maltesismi e Frasi Toscane* in which 456 Maltese set phrases or single words used idiomatically are paired with exact Tuscan equivalents. But of other influences, Dr. Castaldi took no note. More directly related to the present study is a suggestion made by Prof. Aquilina in an article entitled 'Fields of Maltese Linguistic Research'⁵ for a detailed study of such loan-translations and *calques*. By way of illustration, he listed twenty Sicilian and Italian idioms, then ten Arabic ones taken from Beaussier's dictionary, all of which made mention of the hand and all of which could be matched from Maltese usage; he thus gave *prima facie* evidence that the crop of loan-translations from Sicilian and Italian is more abundant than that from the Arabic of North

² Aḥmad Fāris Ash-Shidyāq, *al-Wāsiṭah fī Ma'rifat Aḥwāl Mālīṭab*, Istanbul, 1299 A.H., p. 17.

³ G. Aquilina, 'Maltese as a Mixed Language', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (January 1958), p. 63.

⁴ A. McIntosh, 'The Problem of Language and Literature', lecture delivered to the Ninth Annual Conference of Non-Professorial University Teachers of English, Wadham College, Oxford, April 4th, 1959.

⁵ *Lingua*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (November 1957), pp. 30-45.

There is an objection to this approach, or rather a difficulty that must be recognised and contended with in any such study. It is that whereas in Italian as in many other European languages idioms have been systematically collected, whereas in fact most desk dictionaries record the idioms most commonly in use, Arabic – especially its colloquial dialects – is not nearly so well served. The best collection, that of Aḥmad Taymūr Pasha,⁶ numbers only 336, and the fact that the same idioms seldom recur in the various dictionaries of spoken Arabic – those of Beaussier, of Spiro, of Barthèlèmy – suggests how haphazard and incomplete the record must be. A crumb of comfort, however, is that Beaussier's dictionary – which with its North African associations is presumably the most relevant to Maltese – is the most idiom-conscious.

The bias resulting from this under-representation of Arabic idioms could be reduced though not eliminated if the procedure suggested by Professor Aquilina was reversed, and one started with a fairly extensive number of Maltese idioms collected with no such intended comparison in mind, and then sought comparable ones in Italian and in Arabic. For the purpose of the present study, all the idioms containing figures of speech related to parts of the body were extracted from K. Fenech's *Idjomi Maltin* (Malta, 1955) and were supplemented from current Maltese dictionaries. This particular group of idioms was selected because it is comparatively easy to trace through the dictionaries, yet may be expected to reveal firm and stable associations of ideas. The number thus brought together was approximately 450. The search for comparable material in Italian and in Arabic was intensified for a smaller number within the group, namely the idioms which involved the head, face and facial features, by tracing through the dictionaries all the subsidiary words occurring in the idioms; but the additional effort yielded no appreciably different results. In a few instances, I found it necessary to draw on my own acquaintance with Egyptian colloquial Arabic, and to put down as current idioms that could not be found in printed sources.

A further question arises as to whether the Maltese idioms thus collected are not in some measure peculiar to an intelligentsia steeped in Italian or English culture, especially as Fenech illustrates the use of nearly half the idioms in his book by quotations from literary works which may in some instances be the very channel through which these idioms were introduced into the language. But there is in Maltese none of the deep cleavage between the language of literature and the language of everyday speech that we find in Arabic. In fact Maltese writers show a lively inter-

⁶ *al-Kināyāt al-'Āmmiyyah*, Cairo, n.d.

est in the common concerns and the manners of their compatriots, and they appear faithfully to reflect the speaking habits of the people. Besides the population of Malta is too small and too compact to allow of very extensive variations in usage. Some variations there are nevertheless, as has been pointed out in a study of 'The Lexical Material in Maltese Folklore',⁷ and a comparison with idioms extracted solely from folklore – perhaps also of idioms in use among the many Maltese who live or have lived in Arab countries – would be interesting, but for such comparisons there is not, here and now, sufficient material.

It will be recognised, therefore, that such material as we have may be expected to do less than justice to Arab influences, and that any comparison based solely on numbers is subject to obvious reservations.

A fairly representative sample of this material follows. It consists of the idioms relating to the mouth, for which three Maltese words are used: the uncomplimentary *geddum*, literally 'snout', *fomm* which is applied mostly to the orifice of the mouth, and *ħalq* to its cavity. The idioms are arranged according to the idea they express. In each instance, the Maltese idiom is followed by a literal English translation and, where the meaning is not immediately clear, by an explanation. Comparable Italian idioms are given on an indented line below, and Arabic ones on another further indented. For Arabic idioms, a source is indicated wherever possible.⁸

MALTESE IDIOMS REFERRING TO THE MOUTH

A. EATING, BITING, SWALLOWING

1. *mimli ħalq*, 'mouthful'

boccata

melw boqquh, etc.

2. *geddumu dejjem fix-xgħir*, 'his snout is always in the barley' (he lives in plenty)

cf. mangiare col capo nel sacco

3. *biskuttini f'ħalq il-ħmir*, 'sugar-cakes in the mouth of donkeys' (pearls

⁷ By J. Aquilina and J. Cassar Pullicino, *Journal of the Faculty of Arts of the Royal University of Malta*, I, 1 (1957), pp. 1-36.

⁸ For these, the following symbols are used throughout:

A: Ahmad Amīn, *Qāmūs al-'ādāt wa 't-taqālīd wa 't-ta'ābīr al-miṣriyyab*, Cairo, 1953.

B: M. Beaussier, *Dictionnaire Pratique Arabe-Français*, Alger, 1887.

Bar: A. Barthèlèmy, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français*, Paris, 1935-1954.

S: S. Spiro, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, Cairo, 1923.

T: Ahmed Taymūr, *al-Kināyāt al-'Ammiyyab*, Cairo, n.d.

before swine)

4. **tnehhi l-hobz minn halqek**, 'divert the bread from your mouth' (deny oneself)

cavarsi (or: levarsi) il pane di bocca

qadd ma hu kheyver leqmet lefi temmoh mā hī iluh (Bar),
'he is so generous that the bite that is in his mouth is
not for him'.

5. **f'halq il-lupu**, 'in the wolf's mouth (in danger)'

in bocca al lupo

B. SPEECH

6. **ta' fommu sieket**, 'quiet-mouthed'

7. **bil-fomm**, 'with the mouth' (by word of mouth)

a bocca

bel-hanak (S)

8. **smajtu minn fommu stess**, 'I heard it from his own mouth'

udire una cosa di bocca (or: per bocca d'uno)

men fommuh (B)

9. **dak li f'qalbek f'fommok**, 'what is in your heart is in your mouth'

avere sulle labbra (or: sulla lingua) quel che si ha nel cuore

10. **minn fommok 'l Alla**, 'from your mouth to God' (may your prayer be heard)

11. **minn fommi 'l barra**, 'from my mouth to the outside' (I did not mean what I said)

cf. dire ciò che viene alla bocca, aprir bocca e lasciare andare

cf. falatet mennī, 'it escaped me'

12. **fommu taz-zokkor**, 'his mouth is of sugar' (he speaks well)

cf. tenere a bocca dolce (to flatter)

*boqquh beynaqqat shahd (A), 'his mouth drips honey'
(speaks well)*

13. **haġa qiegħda f'halqu**, 'something staying in his mouth' (on the tip of his tongue)

14. **hadlu l-keġma minn halqu**, 'he took the word out of his mouth'

me l'avete levato di bocca

khadhāluh min boqquh

15. **mela (or: sadd) halqu bi-ilma**, 'he filled his mouth with water' (kept quiet)

acqua in bocca (mum's the word)

16. **thit il-halq**, 'sew the mouth' (silence someone)
cucire la bocca

C. LAUGHTER

17. **ċarrat halqu**, 'he tore his mouth' (laughed loud and long, esp. forcedly)

D. ILL-TEMPER

18. **ghamel** (or: **dendel**) **il-geddum**, 'make the snout' (long face)

fare il muso, fare grugno

tawwel būzoh, lawā būzoh (S); *mbawwez* (B)

19. **geddum ta' xiber**, 'snout of a span' (in length)

baqa' b' xiber geddum, 'remained with a span's length of snout'

muso lungo un palmo

būzoh shebr (e) *l-quddām*

20. **geddum se nieklu l-lejla**, 'it's snout we'll be eating to-night' (said when a member of the company is seen to be in a bad mood)

E. ASTONISHMENT

21. **baqa' halqu miftuh**, 'he remained open-mouthed'

rimanere (or: *restare*) *a bocca aperta*

F. WITHIN REACH

22. **taht geddumu, taht halqu**, 'under his mouth' (under his nose)

cf. sotto il naso, sotto gli occhi

cf. quddām būzoh, quddām 'enēh

G. COMPARISON

23. **halq il-vopa**, 'mouth of a boops' (said of a large mouth)

It will be readily observed that most of the words used in these as in the other Maltese idioms are of Arabic derivation. Of fifty-eight words for parts of the body which occur in all these idioms, only three are of Italian origin. They are *koxxa* 'thigh', *mustaċċi* 'moustaches', and *spalla* with its dual *spallejn* 'shoulder' – none of them denoting a main part of member, although it is surprising to find the functional *katif* displaced by the Italian *spalla* especially as a derived form of it occurs in *libsa mkittfa*, 'a tight-fitting dress'. There is also one idiom – *la kap u la kuda* 'without head or tail' – in which the words for 'head' and 'tail' which elsewhere are always *ras* and *denb* are given an Italian form.

As idioms, however, they betray a different balance of influences. The

figures for what they are worth are: Out of 257 idioms involving the head or parts of it, sixty-seven can, on the strength of their exact wording or of the figure of speech they express, be matched with idioms both in Arabic and Italian, seventy-five have equivalents in Italian only, and fifteen in Arabic only.

This leaves 100 for which no recognizable matches have been found. Most of these may be presumed to be of native origin; indeed some of them are demonstrably so because of their local or historical associations. Thus of a shameless person, 'stone-faced' in the sense that he has none of the mobility of expression that may be taken to denote a sensitive nature, the Maltese say: *Għandu wiċċ l-għatba tal-Kistlanija* i.e. 'he has the face of the door-step of the Castellania', this being a public building (at one time a Court) in Valletta. And of a morose person, a kill-joy, one says *Wiċċ Laskri*; the reference is to Jean Paul Lascaris, Grand Master of the ruling Order from 1636 to 1657, and it illustrates how long-lived these idioms can be. Similarly, the Maltese version of 'heads or tails', *wiċċ jew Regina* (literally: face or queen) — a variant of which has 'queen' in the plural, i.e. *irġejjen* — is explained by Fenech as relevant to the English penny, the 'face' being that of the monarch on the obverse, and the 'queen' being the figure of Britannia on the reverse. Also presumably native is an idiom in which a word of Italian origin is used to rhyme with one of Arab origin; it is *Mutu mutu u grunu f'butu* (silent, silent, but with his horns in his pocket), used in much the same sense as 'Still waters run deep'.

Prominent among these unidentified idioms are simple metaphors associated with the sea. A large mouth is said to be *ħalq il-vopa* — the mouth of a boops, which is a kind of fish. To a drunk with blood-shot eyes, the Maltese apply the cry with which the fishmonger advertises the freshness of his wares: *Għajnu ħamra t-tonn* 'its eye is red, the tunny'. Of a forgetful person, they say *Mohħu żurzieqa* 'his brain is a slip-way', and of one with a retentive memory *għajnejh sponża* 'his eyes are a sponge'. And of a person of small intelligence, whereas an Italian will emphasize the smallness by speaking of 'the brain of an ant' *cervello di formica*, and an Arab of that of a bird *aḥlām al-'aṣāfīr*, a Maltese will say: *mohħu daqs imħara* 'his brain is the size of a limpet'.

A somewhat more elaborate example of the same is *Il-qarnita daret għal subgħajha* 'the octopus turned on its own fingers' for 'to rely on oneself, to fall back on one's own resources'.

The Italian influence throughout is as massive and as obvious as in the sample given above. Many indeed are the Maltese and Italian idioms which have not only distinctive images and associations in common, but

in which the Maltese closely follows the wording of the Italian, e.g. 'to have one foot in the grave' *għandu siequ waħda fil-ħofra*, avere un piede entro la fossa, 'to touch the sky with one's finger' for to attain something highly desirable, *tmiss is-sema b'subgħajk*, toccare il cielo col dito, or 'one hand washes the other and both of them wash the face' i.e. to be of mutual assistance, *id taħsel l-oħra u t-tnejn jaħslu l-wiċċ*: una mano lava l'altra, e le due lavano il viso. Many also are those in which the turn of the phrase is so peculiar that it cannot be ascribed to a coincidence of thought – e.g. *Jiekol minn fuq ras xi ħadd*, 'to eat off the top of someone's head', which like the Italian 'mangiare la torta in capo ad uno' means: 'to be taller than, to stand head and shoulders above somebody'. An idiom may even be an allusion to an Italian proverb that has passed into Maltese, e.g. 'to wash the donkey's head' *jaħsel ras il-ħmar* is not immediately intelligible unless it is associated with the saying *chi lava il capo all'asino perde il ranno e il sapone*, 'he who washes the donkey's head wastes both suds and soap'.

One group of such idioms which should be isolated is that which springs from the common faith of the Maltese and the Italians. Some of these are taken out of the Bible, e.g. to wash one's hands of an affair is *jaħsel idej*, and of a hand all too ready to use violence one says *donna id Malku*, 'as if it were Malchus's hand', for the Malchus who is mentioned in John 18, 10 as having had his ear cut off by Peter is also held to be the man who struck Jesus for answering the high priest disrespectfully (John 18: 22). Other idioms reflect tenets and practices of the Catholic church, e.g. someone anxiously awaiting something is said to be 'like a soul in Purgatory' *bħal ruħ tal-Purgatorju*, and to make a fresh start is 'to turn the cross over on its face' *radd is-salib għal wiċċu*.

Not surprisingly, there is not a single distinctively Qur'anic echo in Maltese usage, although 'to make someone pass through the eye of a needle' *għaddieb minn għajn il-labra*, which is used in Maltese for 'to dupe someone by a trick that would be obvious to most', recalls a phrase which occurs in the Qur'an (7: 38) as well as in the N.T. It has already been observed by T. Sabbagh⁹ however, that Qur'anic imagery relating to parts of the body is colourless and unexciting, consisting mostly of obvious metonymies.

Evidence of distinctive Arab influence is quite rare. Indeed the long-standing enmity of the Maltese to the Muslims is reflected in the expression *wiċċ ta' Fatma* for an ugly face – a somewhat cruder and unkindlier cut than Shakespeare's 'gipsy brow'. Similarly, if we allow ourselves to stray from the particular group of idioms under examination, we find that

⁹ *La Métaphore dans le Coran*, Paris, 1943, pp. 137-8.

X'it-Torok trid?, 'What the Turks do you want?' is a close parallel of 'What the devil do you want?' The compliment is of course returned, for the Arabic equivalent of 'to waste one's breath' is *yeddān fe Mālṭab*, 'to sound the (Muslim) call to prayer in Malta'.

It is also noticeable that some associations that are strong in Arabic usage – such as that of the beard with honour and self-respect – are absent from Maltese, for though the Maltese do say of a person or even a thing worthy of esteem that he or it is *bil-mustacċi* 'with whiskers', this is precisely the Italian, *coi mustacchi* or *co' baffi* with all its overtones.

The associations that are traceable to Arabic usage call for closer examination.

An intriguing idiom is: *Mela jien ta' Buleben?*, literally: 'What! Am I of Buleben?' or rather, more freely translated: 'Do you take me for a Buleben?' i.e. 'for a rich man?' Now the word *leben* is not in use among the Maltese, for in accordance with colloquial practice in virtually all Arab countries except Egypt, they say *ḥalib* for 'milk'. The idiom itself appears to be used without awareness of its literal meaning. Fenech badly asserts in explanation that there was once a very rich family called Buleben, but this is much too facile a surmise, and one for which there does not appear to be any supporting evidence. A literal rendering on the basis of the Arabic suggests that the idea behind it is 'Do you take me for someone that can be milked?' The variant *Mela ḥsibtni li għandi ta' Buleben?* 'Do you think that I possess that of a Buleben? further makes it possible to interpret *Buleben* as 'owner of [flocks that produce] milk', i. e. 'a rich man'. This would be entirely satisfying were it not that the term *abu laban* is in use in Egypt, where it is taken to be quite offensive, although I was never able to ascertain its meaning even from people who used it. Possibly *leben* here is a euphemism for 'seminal fluid', as it is in the Italian *latte di pesce*. At all events, the obscurity argues for a lengthy history, for it is unlikely – though not inconceivable – that the idiom gained currency while its meaning was indefinite.¹⁰

There are of course clearer and more striking examples of parallelism with Arabic, although it is not contended that these necessarily date back very far. For example, *kiellu wiċċu* 'he ate his face' for to berate someone is exactly matched by *kal wiṣṣhub* (T), and the curious *ḥoll xagħrek u gib iż-żejt* 'undo your hair and bring the oil' which means 'Do what you intend to do and take the consequences' recalls in part the Arabic *mesbi* (or: *dāyer*) '*alā ḥall sha'rub* (A) 'he went about with his hair undone' for

¹⁰ Cf. the use of 'to kick up a shindy' by Americans and others who have never known the old Scottish game of shinty, but who interpret the word – colourfully, though spuriously – as 'shin-dig', i.e. 'rowdy dance'.

'he did as he pleased'.

As may be expected, it is in connection with the eye – an organ particularly precious to the Arab – that we find the largest number of Arab contributions to Maltese usage. *Mela għajnu b'xi haġa* 'he filled his eye with a certain thing', i.e. was greatly impressed by it – is closely matched by *ma yimlās b'el-ʿēn* (S) 'he does not inspire respect'. *Mar għal għajnu* 'he went (i.e. stepped?) on his eye', used in the sense of 'it went badly with him', is common in Arabic in the form of an imprecation: *kballīb yer-rūh ʿalā ʿēnub*.¹¹ *Ma f'għajnu xejn minnu* 'there is nothing of him in his eye', i.e. he disapproves of him; recalls the Arabic *fe ʿēnub* (B) for 'in his good graces'. *Ksir il-għajn* 'the breaking of the eye', i.e. an annoyance, is fairly close to *kasar ʿēnub* (S) 'he humbled him'. Finally *xortib m'għajnu* 'his luck is with his eye', i.e. is favourable, is matched by *sbeyy ʿalā ʿēnub* (Bar) for 'something to his taste, according to his wishes'.

One also finds interesting associations between congeniality and the blood. In Italian, a person who takes a dislike to another is said 'not to have his blood with him' *non avere il suo sangue con alcuno*. In Arabic, however, it is the intrinsic quality of likeability or its opposite that is expressed in terms of 'light' or 'heavy' blood – *damm(e) kbaḥif* and *damm(e) tqīl*, and there are many elaborations on these, such as *dammub zey rišb en-naʿām* 'his blood is like ostrich feathers', *dammub yṭarrasb* 'his blood makes one vomit', *dammub zeyy es-semm* 'his blood is like poison', or *dammub yā bāy* 'his blood – oh my father!'. Maltese idioms reflect both usages. Expressing dislike are: the somewhat puzzling *ħadu fuq demm id-dars* 'he took him on the blood of the molar' and *m'għandux demm ma' xi ħadd* 'he has no blood with a certain person'. Reminiscent of the Arabic *ibniedem demmu jsawtek* 'a man whose blood scourges you'.

It may well be that here the two sources have enough in common to bolster each other, as presumably they do in the considerable number of idioms that are common to all three languages.

Some of these common idioms are almost inevitable metonymies – such as the usage of 'tongue' for 'speech', of 'brain' for 'intelligence', and so on – for which no indebtedness need be recorded; the others are the result of a widespread interpenetration of ideas.

In some instances, however, it is possible to link the Maltese idioms belonging to this group more closely with one source rather than the other on the strength of some artifice or peculiarity of wording.

Thus the Maltese form of 'without head or tail' *la kap u la kuda* has

¹¹ Cf. *ʿēnub bhāfrub* as explained by Barthélème: 'Que son œil soit à son sabot! (afin qu'il marche dessus et perde la vue.)'

counterparts in Arabic as well as in Italian: *la ras we la deneb* (B) and *lā rās we lāsās* (B); but the choice of two alliterative and comparatively uncommon words of Italian origin leaves little doubt as to its paternity.

Conversely, a Maltese idiom which makes prominent use of two rhyming words of Arabic origin might have been presumed to be of Arab inspiration, the more so as the rhyme is not a common adornment of these idioms; but so far little direct evidence has been found to support this presumption. The most striking examples are two sayings in which *lahma* 'flesh' and *ghadma* 'bone' are used antithetically to signify what is desirable and what is undesirable, in much the same way as are the rose and the thorn in English: *min jiekol il-lahma jiekol il-ghadma* 'he who eats the meat must eat the bone', and *daqqa tmissna l-ghadma u oħra l-lahma* 'sometimes we get the bone, sometimes the meat'; yet so far it is only in Italian that the same antithesis has been found: *volere la carne senza l'osso* 'to want the meat without the bone'. Similarly, there is nothing to show that *zamm ilsien u bejn snien* 'he put his tongue between his teeth, i.e. 'he held his tongue' is not a native elaboration of *frenare la lingua* or *mordersi la lingua*. Yet another idiom, *geddumu dejjem fix-xghir*, which has been mentioned earlier, is related to a proverb: *geddumu fix-xghir, nesa meta kien fqir* 'his snout being in barley, he has forgotten when he was poor'; here again the rhyme suggests an Arabic original, the more so as it is perfect in an Arabic pronunciation of the rhyming words *sha'ir* and *faqir*, but not in modern Maltese where the 'ayn forms a diphthong with the 'i' – yet no such original has been found. In fact, the rhyme has been a surprisingly poor criterion of an Arab connection.

Finally, there is one instance in which identical phrases convey different meanings to Italians and to Arabs. 'To make someone's face red' to an Italian means to make him ashamed. In North Africa, according to Beaussier, it means exactly the opposite, and to shame a person is to make his face yellow *šaffar lub wajbub*. Here again, as everything else has led us to expect, the Maltese follow Italian usage. Behind the North African idioms, which seem to run counter to physiological fact, may lie the association – stronger perhaps among a generally sallow people – of a florid complexion with well-being. If so, it may not be irrelevant to add that the Maltese describe a bright, attractive complexion as *wieċ itajjar in-nar* 'a face that sends out fire', even as the North African says of someone of high reputation that 'his face is hot' *wajbub ħāmī* (B); so when a Maltese says of a girl *ma' wieċba tixghel sulfarina* 'from her face you can light a match', he is being complimentary, and not comparing her skin to the side of a match-box.

From all this, there may be none but the most obvious and superficial

conclusions to be drawn. But perhaps enough has been said to show that idioms – and not Maltese idioms alone – providing as they do collocations and recurring contexts for words, reflect the thinking habits of a people in ways it would not be unprofitable to explore.