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NEOLOGISMS AND ARCHAISMS IN THE "REGOLE PER LA LINGUA MALTESE"

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The *Regole per la lingua maltese*, the earliest extant grammar and dictionary of the Maltese language, was recovered at the Biblioteca Vallicelliana in Rome, in 1987, (cf. Cassola 1988, Cassola 1992). Certain linguistic features prove that this manuscript has been written by a Frenchman. A Provençal Knight of the Order of St John, Chevallier Thezan, had compiled a dictionary of the Maltese language (Mifsud 1764: 324–325). This manuscript is now lost. Thezan must have compiled his dictionary between 1600, date given by Mifsud 1764 in his *Indice Cronologico degli Scrittori, delli quali si fa menzione nell'Appendice*, and 1647, date of publication of G.F. Abela's *Descrittione di Malta*.¹ The *Regole* is probably an augmented version of Thezan's original.

The *Regole per la lingua maltese* was last in possession of Girolamo Spinola. Spinola, a nobleman from Genoa, had been admitted into the Order of St John in 1702, at the age of sixteen years. He died of hydropsy in Rome, at the convent of the Preti Filippini, in 1721. His presence in the Roman convent was already documented in 1719. One can presume that during his stay in Malta Spinola could have contracted his illness and that he must have left the island for Rome some time between 1703–1719 (cf. Cassola 1990b). This means that the *Regole* can certainly be backdated to 1719, at least. However, the fact that it belonged to "Monsieur Le Chevallier De La Bastie Fogasses" before it came into Spinola's possession as well as the fact that the paper on which it is transcribed was possibly produced in the latter part of the 17th century (Cassola 1988: 54; 60–61) point towards the 17th century as the probable period of its compilation.

The main linguistic features of the "Regole"

The compiler of the *Regole* makes use of a mixed alphabet (Roman letters together with ten Arabic characters) to transcribe his entries. Out of a total amount of 7035 entries, 3925 are to be found in the Italian-Maltese section and 3110 in the Maltese-Italian section. Most of the words registered in the *Regole* are still in use in the Maltese and the Italian languages, and the odd French or Sicilian loan word

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1. In 1841, Thezan's manuscript must have been still available. Stefano Zerafa, who had been commissioned by the "Società Medica" to draw up an alphabet of the Maltese language, had access to it. In fact, his "alfabeto progettato fu composto da segni già usati da TEZAN, ABELA, AGIUS, WIZZINO e VASSALLI" (Società Medica 1845: XXXIII). The names are given in chronological order. Thus, Thezan's work must have preceded Abela's 1647 publication.

is not difficult to come by. There are also, however, entries that are totally obsolete and neologisms. These owe their origin to various sources and can be grouped into five main categories: (a) Italian neologisms of Sicilian origin; (b) Italian neologisms of Maltese origin; (c) Italian neologisms of French origin; (d) Maltese obsolete words of Italian origin and (e) Maltese obsolete words of Arabic origin. The French compiler of the *Regole* was not only able to record possible obsolete Italian and Maltese entries but must also have had such grounding in French, Italian, Arabic, Maltese and Sicilian as to be able to come up with the formation of "new" Italian and Maltese words.

(a) Italian neologisms of Sicilian origin

There are various words which are actually Italianized forms of Sicilian words. Since I have studied this category of words elsewhere (Cassola 1990a), I shall now just comment on those words that seem to have originated in the province of Syracuse. Of particular note are I 1056 *nacaré* < *nacari*, M 2658 *mucialia* < *mmucciagghia* and M 1536 *giorgolana* < *ggiurgiolenà*.² In the first case, one would more commonly encounter *annacari* in Sicilian, but the word is pronounced with an apocope of the first syllable at Noto, in the province of Syracuse (cf. TRA, s.v. *annacari*). *Mmucciagghia*, which stands for the game 'hide and seek', is recorded in the Syracuse area in place of *ammucciagghia* (cf. VS, s.v. *mmucciagghia*, *ammucciagghia*). The same applies to *ggiurgiolenà*, which is preferred to the word with assimilated *-gi*, which is more commonly used in the Syracusan area (cf. VS, s.v. *ggiuggiulena*).

Reminiscences of the Syracusan dialect are also to be found in the specific meanings of words such as I 1957 *lanzata* (< *allanzata*), which means 'scratch' (cf. VS, s.v. *allanzata*, *allanzarsi*), as well as in the typical Syracusan (and Tuscan) pronunciation *sc* for *ci*. This pronunciation is repeatedly encountered in the *Regole* (cf., e.g. 2332 *musciato* < past part. of *mmucciari*, *ammucciari*—VS, s.v.).

(b) Italian neologisms of Maltese origin

Not all the 7035 entries in the *Regole* are still current in the Maltese or Italian languages. Some Italian words are not recorded at all in the major Italian dictionary. Amongst them one finds two words which probably owe their origin, wholly or partly, to the Maltese language. These are: I 1119 *gebso* and M 1141 *mostascia*.

I 1119 gebso: From its immediate context one can infer that the word is a synonym of *diavolo* or *ostinato*. This would exclude its being derived from the Maltese word *gypsum* or its current Italian variant *gesso*. In fact, while the main feature

2. The numbers preceded by the letter I refer to entries in the Italian-Maltese section of the Dictionary, those preceded by the letter M refer to entries in the Maltese-Italian section.

this mineral is its softness and fragility, *ostinato* conveys the opposite meaning, i.e. 'hardness'. It is also quite improbable that *gebso* is derived etymologically from *gebuseo* (cf. GDLI, s.v.), with a metaphorical reference to the strong resistance put up by the pre-Israelitic tribe, which gave origin to this latter word, against the Hebrews.

In Maltese, the corresponding word for *gesso* is *gibs*. But even the Maltese *signifiant* indicates that soft and powdery substance known as *chalk*. So much so that the Maltese expression *ghandu rasu qisha tal-gibs* ['his head seems made of chalk'] conveys the idea of a "light headed person", one who is not worth his salt at all (cf. ESI, s.v. *gibs*)!

The Maltese word for 'hard' is *iebes*, fem. *iebsa*. The word, which derives from Arabic *يَابِس*, is reproduced by some dictionaries with an initial *j*. The result would thus be *jiebes*, *jiebsa* (cf. ESI, s.v. *iebes* and *jiebes*). The variant with initial *j*, though more precise from a philological point of view, is no longer current in Maltese.

As to the meaning of *iebes*, ESI records a couple of Maltese expressions which give the word a particular connotation: that of 'resistant', 'obstinate' and 'pig-headed'. The first expression is *zamm iebes* ['to resist']; the second is *ras iebsa* ['hard headed', 'stubborn'] and is used to indicate an obstinate and determined person. Incidentally, *ras ta' blis* ['devil head'] (cf. ESI, s.v. *blis*) is a synonym of *ras iebsa*. Here, therefore, *blis* and *iebsa* are syntactically and semantically equivalent.

A plausible hypothesis could be that *gebso* derives from the obsolete Maltese form *jiebes*, *jiebsa*, with the initial semi-vowel *j* which evolves into the palatal consonant *g*.

M 1141 *mostascia*: In the *Regole*, the corresponding Maltese word is *ġamiema*, which is probably related to *ghamniem*, fem. *ghamniema*, a word which is no longer in use. Etymologically, ESI derives it from Ar. *عَمَارٌ*, which means 'qui couvre, qui recouvre, qui enveloppe; assombri, sombre (jour), triste, affligé' (cf. ESI, s.v. *ghamniem*).

The *Regole* gives 'velo sottile di mostascia' as the Italian equivalent of *ġamiema*. *Mostascia* is not recorded at all in the Italian dictionaries. It is, however, a current Maltese word and has been recorded as *mustaxija* ['thin and transparent veil']. The word is registered by Agius de Soldanis as *moxtaxija* and with the meaning of 'tela di seta sottilissima e finissima; velo' (cf. ESI, s.v. *mustaxija*).

If *mostascia* is to be considered an Italianized form of Malt. *mustaxija*, it is quite probable that it maintains the Maltese accent, which falls on the penultimate vowel *-i*.

(c) Italian neologisms of French origin

The influence of the French language in the *Regole* is quite strong and asserts itself in various manners. The most obvious of these is when the compiler resorts directly to the use of French words in his explanations. This happens either because

he is at a loss for additional synonyms of Italian words; as in the case of, e.g., I 20 *embrasement* ['conflagration'], I 2031 *fard* ['rouge', 'make up'] and I 3449 *levain* ['leaven', 'yeast'], or because he just cannot find any Italian *signifiant* to express the *signifié* he would like to convey, as in the case of, e.g., I 3048 *farce* ['stuffing'] for *infarcimento* and M 1002 *sommeillier* ['to doze'] for *sonnacchiare*.

Certain graphic features clearly denote a French influence. The most common amongst these are the diphthong *-oi-* for It. *-u* and the nexus *qu* for It. *ch*. Examples of the diphthong *-oi-* include I 2716 *poignata* ['handful'] which, though most likely derived from Sic. *pugnu*, is also influenced by Fr. *poignée*, and M 1997 *gratoigliato* ['tickled'], which is the Italianized form of the past part. of the Sicilian verb *grattigghiari* with prosthesis of *-oi-*, < Fr. *grattoir*. Examples of the nexus *-qu-* include I 60 *qualque* for It. *qualche* and M 416 *conquilla* for It. *conchiglia*. Moreover, the word *doncque* at M 2047 is clearly the result of the superimposition of Fr. *donc* on It. *dunque*. Other French graphic influences can be identified in words like I 2204 *meringeine* ['egg-plant'], which is possibly a corrupt form of the southern Italian word *melangina*, with prosthesis of the French ending *-eine*, and *redobliato* (1.71 of the *Taġlim aġl soldat*), where the Latin nexus *pl*, which usually becomes *pp* both in Italian and Maltese, is here rendered by *bl*, as in Fr. *redoubler*.

French phonetic features have also left their mark on some Italian words. Amongst these, one could single out M 2933 *giumelli*, which is a variant of It. *gemelli* that has probably been influenced by the pronunciation in Fr. *jumeau*, *-elle-*, *-eaux*, and *burra* at 1.45 of the *Taġlim*, where *-u* instead of *-o* (as in It. *borra*) is clearly the result of a phonetic rendering of the diphthong *-ou-* in Fr. *bourre*.

Another notable "French" feature in the *Regole* is the creation of various Italian neologisms of French derivation. The mechanism governing the transformation of French verbs into Italian ones is quite simple: the ending *-er* is substituted by *-ar*, thus forming "Italian" verbs like I 574 *brandolare* (< Fr. *brandeler* ['to shake']) and I 1681 *grimpare* (< Fr. *grimper* ['to climb']). As to the formation of new nouns, this materializes through the addition of the vowel *-o* to French nouns ending with a consonant (e.g. I 272 *aniso* < Fr. *anis* ['aniseed']) and the transformation of the final vowel into *-a* or *-o* in those French words ending in *-e* (e.g. I 153 *aguilla* < Fr. *aiguille* ['needle'] and I 550 *bletta herba* < Fr. *blette* ['strawberry-spinach']).³

As for the adjective *gialno* (M 900), this is another Sicilian import of French origin. The word is recorded in Sicily before 1322. Cf. VES, s.v. *giarnu*.

3. One must however keep in mind that some words of French origin have actually come down to us via Sicilian. Cf., e.g., *aniso*, which is an Italianized form of Sic. *anisu* (MOR, s.v. *anasu*, *anisu*), which "[...] pare allotropo attraverso il gallorom. [...]" (VES, s.v. *gira*¹) and *brandolare*, which could have been influenced by Sic. *bbrannuriari* ['to shine'] (VS, s.v. *bbrannuriari* and *bbrannuriari*).

(d) Maltese obsolete words of Italian origin.

The *Regole* records a number of Maltese entries which are not in use in current Maltese and which have not been registered in any another lexicon. These entries, which might have been in use in the 17th/18th centuries, can either be of Italian or Arabic origin. The following words seem to have been derived from Italian: M 186 *arbitelu* ['il bestiame d'una massaria'] < Sic. *arbitriu* (cf. VES, s.v.); M 1863 *lumenare* ['porto lampione'] < *luminario* (cf. GDLI, s.v.); M 2424 *passo sena* ['come hora l'anno'] < Tusc. *passo* (cf. GDLI, s.v.); M 2432 *plaġ* ['piace'] < Sic. *placiri* (cf. TRA, s.v.) and M 2437 *psivele* ['possibile'] < It. *possevole/possivole* (cf. GDLI, s.v. *possibile*).

On these Maltese obsolete words of Italian origin, cf. Cassola 1989.

(e) Maltese obsolete words of Arabic origin

In the *Regole*, the number of obsolete Maltese words which owe their origin to Arabic is higher than that of those derived from Italian. The following are just a sample of these obsolete words of Arabic origin. The Italian corresponding meaning, as recorded in the *Regole*, is given in square brackets.

M 22 *aġaġ* ['avorio dente d'elefante']: The word is probably derived from Ar. 'aġ ['ivory'].

M 185 *ara sus* ['così sia, con toto il core']: This might be related to Malt. *ras* ['head']. But a connection with Ar. *min ar-ra's* ['willingly'] is not to be excluded.

M 236 *aġuüeiniet* ['occhiette d'occhiale']: In current Maltese, *nuċċali* is the corresponding word for 'spectacles', 'glasses'. This word might be related to dialectal Ar. 'uyaynāt ['small eyes'] (< Ar. 'ayn).

M 349 *bernita* ['capello a l'antica']: This is probably related to Ar. *burnayta* ['hat'].

M 425 *burnia* ['ventosa d'vaso di vetro, d'porcellana']: The word may be related to Ar. *barniyya* ['an earthenware vase'], but it would have entered the Maltese language via Sicilian. In fact, *burnia* "'vaso cilindrico di terracotta invetriata per conservare viveri grassi o medicine' (1336), è relitto dell'ar. *burniyya* 'id.', che dalla Sicilia è passato in Calabria, Liguria e Piemonte, mentre la parallela voce cat. è giunta al sardo". Cf. VES, s.v. *burnia*.

M 427 *buza* ['sorta di macarone']: The word is registered as *busa* by Vassalli. It may be a metaphorical offshoot of the Egyptian-Arabic form *būša* ['cane'].

I shall now list a group of archaisms which are recorded in the *Regole*. The first are a series of adverbial pronouns made up of *xi* + preposition + *xi*:

- M 2752 *ishif* *ishif*, legato insieme, congiunto
 M 2753 *ishifuk* *ishifuk*, l'uno sopra l'altro
 M 2754 *ishifeda* *ishifeda*, l'un a canto de l'altro
 M 2755 *ishilil* *ishilil* ò *ishilil*, l'uno a l'altro
 M 2756 *ishima* *ishima*, l'un con l'altro
 M 2757 *ishuara* *ishuara*, l'uno dopo ò appresso de l'altro.

In current Maltese *xulxin* is the corresponding word for 'each other', 'one another' (AQU, s.v. *xulxin*). A dialectal variant given by Vassalli and De Soldanis is *xilxin* (ESI, s.v. *xulxin*). This adverbial pronoun is made up of *xi* + *lil* + *xi*, with prosthesis of *-n* at the end. Vassalli also records *ximexin* ['together'], which has now become obsolete. Literally, the two words would read 'one to one' ['each other'] and 'one with one' ['together'].

The structure of these two adverbial pronouns is: pronoun (*xi*) + preposition (*lil/ma*) + pronoun (*xi*) + final *-n*. This combination has been maintained in current Maltese only to express the meaning 'each other' (*xulxin*). *Xulxin*, with the meaning 'one to one', would now read *wiehed lill-iehor* ['one to the other'], while *ximexin* ['one with one'] would read *wiehed ma' l-iehor* ['one with the other']. This means that the final *-n* has dropped, the initial pronoun *xi* has been substituted by the indefinite pronoun *wiehed* ['one'], while the final pronoun *xi* has been substituted by another pronoun, *iehor* ['other'].

The *Regole* not only confirms that *ximexin* was still in use in the 17/18th century but also that the structure *xi* + preposition + *xi* (without final *-n*) was certainly productive at that time, and that expressions like *wiehed fl-iehor* ['one in the other'], *wiehed fuq l-iehor* ['one on the other'], *wiehed hdejn l-iehor* ['one next to the other'], *wiehed lill-iehor* ['one to the other'], *wiehed ma' l-iehor* ['one with the other'] and *wiehed wara l-iehor* ['one after the other'] must have come into use at a later stage.

Another category of archaisms in the *Regole* can be identified in a series of words which denote different types of human or animal excrement. While M 1732 *redus* ['merda'] and M 2466 *redus* ['sterco di pecore, capre et conigli'] are still in use today, words like M 2463 *rau a rau* ['sterco di bove'], which is probably connected to current *rawta/rawt* ['cattle dung'] (AQU, s.v. *rawt*), M 2836 *taqrisa* ['sterco di bove impastato con paglia per brugiare'], which is recorded with this meaning in both ESI and AQU,⁴ and M 1110 *frak* ['sterco degli animali'], which is

4. The word is related to *taqris/tiqris*, which Falzon recorded in his *Dizionario Maltese-Italiano* with the meaning of 'dried cow dung generally plastered on a wall to be used a fuel' (AQU, s.v. *taqris*). It was also recorded by Agius de Soldanis, with the meaning 'sterco delle vacche e tori involto col frangere della paglia, che, poi, così formato, attaccato al muro ed ivi disseccato dal sole, serve per cuocere le legna e carbone' (ESI, s.v. *taqris*).

recorded at all with this meaning in either Serracino Inglott or Aquilina,⁵ have become obsolete. The particular meaning of these last two words, as recorded in the *Regole*, is today probably limited to agricultural and rural areas.

M 12 *qoħħ, qoħħ, qoħħ, putanegiare*

In the Italian-Maltese section, at I 2825, one finds *Putaneggiare, paillarder, qoħħ, qoħħ, qoħħ o qoħħ, qoħħ, qoħħ*. In current Maltese, the noun *Għaxaq* pertains to the field of onomastics (a family surname) and toponomastics (a village name) (AQU, s.v. *Għaxaq*).⁶ The adjective *ghaxaq* was recorded by Agius de Soldanis, then by Vassalli, with the meaning of 'dilettante, che dà piacere, giulivo'. Serracino Inglott states that this meaning of the word is now obsolete, and gives as current meaning 'happy', 'delighted'. In a wider sense, the word conveys the meaning 'someone happy, who is attracted by something; a lover; a fiancé' (ESI, s.v. *ghaxaq*).

In current Maltese, *ghaxxaq* is a verb of the II form, derived from *ghaxaq*. The verb means 'to delight, to make one feel very happy or very pleased', but has also the ironic meaning of 'to put one's foot in it; to go too far; to make matters worse' (AQU and ESI, s.v. *ghaxxaq*).

The *Regole* provides us with a specific meaning, which does not seem to have been recorded before, and which is synonymous of *qoħob* ['to commit fornication'; to prostitute oneself'] (AQU, s.v. *qoħob*). Probably, this meaning is a metaphorical extension of the adj. *ghaxaq* ['che dà piacere' - Vassalli], since it is common knowledge that a prostitute should be a source of pleasure.

M 15 *aġbara, aġbariet, misura del mele*

In the Italian-Maltese section, at I 2245, one finds *misura del mele, aġbara, aġbariet*. Agius de Soldanis records this noun, which means 'a measure of about 10 *kejliet*', and specifies "poco usata". A.E. Caruana seems to be the only other lexicographer to record the word later on apart from, obviously, Aquilina and Serracino Inglott (ESI, s.v. *ghabara*).

The explanation contained in the *Regole*, whilst maintaining the association with weights and measures, gives rise to a hitherto unrecorded specific meaning: *a bara* is a particular type of liquid measure, utilized to calculate specific amounts of honey. The *Regole* explanation also sheds some light on the production of honey in Malta around three centuries ago: the fact that specific measuring instruments were used to quantify the product proves that the honey industry must have still been a

⁵ The current meaning of *frak* is 'Crumbs, smithereens' (AQU, s.v. *frak*).

⁶ Actually, a cursory look at the 1987 telephone directory reveals that the family surname only survives in the forms *Asciak, Asciaq, Axiak* and *Axiaq*.

flourishing one at that time.

M 422 *bullar, agro e dolce, nè agro nè dolce*

In the Italian-Maltese section, I 151, one finds *agro è docle, ne agro n'e dolce, bullar a, in*. In current Maltese, the word means 'pomegranate' (AQU, s.v. *bullara*). The meaning given in the *Regole* could possibly be an obsolete metaphorical usage, which refers to the bitter sweet taste left by pomegranate berries when these have not completely been sifted of their skin.

M 1683 *Kos, quasi*

I 2849 *Quasi, kos*

In current Maltese, *kos* is defined as "An emphatic expr. gen. occurring at the beginning of a sentence and less frequently at its end, meaning roughly 'by the way / when you come to think of it'," (AQU, s.v. *kos*). Though the word has been registered by various lexicographers, such as Agius de Soldanis, Vassalli, Barbera Caruana and Busuttill, the etymology of the word is unknown.

Barbera derives it from Sicilian *accussi* ['thus'; 'so'], Caruana from Hebrew which he translates as 'invertire', Serracino Ingloft (s.v. *kos*) suggests Italian *cosa* ['non specified thing'], while Aquilina indicates Italian *cosa* ['thing'] as a possible source.

Quasi, the meaning given in the *Regole*, could constitute a plausible etymology for *kos*. In fact, the Italian expression *quasi quasi* "esprim[e] indecisione o oscillazione di giudizio, talvolta soltanto apparente."⁷

The meaning 'when you come to think of it', given by Aquilina, corresponds to the Italian expression *quasi quasi*. Since Italian *quasi* has evolved into *kwazi* in current Maltese, *kos* would be a contracted variant which has lost its adverbial function and is limited only to its exclamatory one.

Going by the few examples examined above, the *Regole per la lingua maltese* is a precious source not only for words which are no longer current in Maltese but also for words whose etymology is still obscure to linguists.

7. Cf. GDLI, s.v. *quasi*.

Source Abbreviations

- AQU – J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, Vols. I–II, Malta, Mid-sea Books Ltd., 1987–1990.
- ESI – E. Serracino Inglott, *Il-Miklem Malti*, Vols. I–IX, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1975–1989.
- GDLI – S. Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, Vols. I–XV, Torino, UTET, 1961–1990.
- MOR – V. Mortillaro, *Nuovo Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano*, Bologna, Forni Editori, 1970, Ristampa anastatica dell'edizione di Palermo, 1876.
- TRA – A. Traina, *Nuovo Vocabolario Siciliano-Italiano*, Palermo, Giuseppe Pedone Lauriel Editore, 1868.
- VES – A. Varvaro, *Vocabolario Etimologico Siciliano*, Vol. I, Palermo, Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, 1986.
- VS – G. Piccitto, *Vocabolario Siciliano*, a cura di Giovanni Tropea, Vols. I–II, Catania-Palermo, Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, 1977–1985.

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