

# THE WORD *TA'* IN THE MALTESE LANGUAGE

By A. CREMONA

IT HAS BEEN sometimes contended that the Maltese particle *ta'* the usage of which corresponds to that of English preposition *of* and Italian *di* is nothing else but the development of the so called *Ta marbuta* in Arabic which is sometimes pronounced as a final *t* (ت) in the noun in genitival relation to the one following it. Ex.: *Hazinat es-sultan*, (The treasury of the Sultan). This contention is lexically and syntactically erroneous.

It must be premised that in linguistic researches it is not enough to rely on the evidence of literary or classical terminology in order to ascertain the source of a word in a spoken language compared with that of other kindred tongues. The derivation of words of a spoken language such as Maltese, being an offshoot of another Semitic language, has to be sought through a comparative lexical study of other spoken dialects which are akin to Maltese against a background of the spoken vocabulary, morphological and syntactic peculiarities, ethnological and historical relations. It is only on such data that linguistic sources can be ascertained.

In some Arabic dialects as those spoken in Egypt, Algiers and Morocco, the genitive, besides being expressed by a construct form. Ex.: *Hikmat Suleyman*, 'The wisdom of Suleyman'; *kitab abi*, 'My brother's book', is also expressed, as in Maltese, by the word *mta'* (متاع) which is the Maltese shortened *ta'*. Ex.: *Ed-dukkian mta' et-tager* 'The merchant's shop'. (Cfr. Vaccari, P.A. *L'Arabo Scritto e l'Arabo Parlato della Libia*. p. 86. Griffini, E. *L'Arabo Parlato della Libia*. (1913) p. 81. Ex.: (*Go-gagga*) *tal-ewiet*, (Ar: متاع الا مواد) in *Maltesische Studien*. p. 33. Text XII. (Misch-dialect) by Hans Stumme (Leipzig, 1904). In Egypt and Morocco, besides using *mita'* for expressing the genitive, *bita'* is also used. Ex.: *El-beyt bita' shiriki*, 'My partner's house'. (Cfr. Green, A.O. *A Practical Arabic Grammar*. p. 64. para. 96).

In order to express the genitive, in Maltese, the *ta'* is more usually used particularly where the construct form, with, or without, the *Ta' marbuta*, cannot be used. Examples of this are: *Ċensu ta' Matthew*, (Matthew's son Vincent); *Hajt tas-sejgieh*, (Rubble wall), the word *tas-sejgieh*, denoting the form of the material with an adjectival meaning. Obviously, the Maltese *ta'* in such cases of sentence-construction could have never been derived from the Arabic *Ta marbuta* which is only used in the *status constructus*.

It is further to be noted that the *Ta marbuta* never occurs with nouns ending in a consonant but with ( ُ ). When, therefore, the noun preceding a substantive in the genitive is masculine and ends in a consonant, the particle *ta'* between the two nouns can never be identified as a relic of the *Ta marbuta*.

The organic structure of the Maltese *ta'* (with final  $\varepsilon$ ) is quite different from that of the *Ta Marbuta* consisting of a mere *t*, which is a development of the feminine, ending *ab* in genitival annexation. The Maltese *ta'* can also be easily compared with its counterpart in some Arabic dialects in such compound possessive forms as *mta'-i* (my-mine), *mta'-ak* (thy, thine-thine, your), *mta'-ab* (his); *mta'-ba* (her) (Griffini, op. cit. p. 81), corresponding to identical Maltese formations: *Tiegħi* (the Arabic vowel *a* changing into the *imala ie*), *tiegħek*, *tiegħu*, *tagħha*. Such other examples of *mta'* in an isolated form to express the possessive case as *et-triq mta' l-aziziya* (the way of Aziziya – to Aziziya); *El'-adam mta'at-ab*, (his bones), which correspond to the Maltese possessive phrases: *it-triq ta' l-Għazizija* and *il-għadam tiegħu* respectively, undoubtedly show a common etymological structure in both the Arabic *mta'* and the Maltese *ta'* which cannot be traced in the *Ta marbuta*. The Maltese expression *minn tiegħu* for *tiegħu*, etc., in such phrases as *il-kelma minn tiegħu*, (his word), can also be identified with the Arabic *mta'a* occurring in the above mentioned example: *el'-adam mta'at-ab*, the *m* as a prefix in *mta'* being the shortened original expression of *minn*.

An identical use of *meta'* or *mta'* is also to be met with in the North African coastlands in such phrases as: *El kitab mta'i*, (my book); *el maherma mta'ak*, (your handkerchief). (Cfr. *Grammaire Arabe Vulgaire* par A.P. Caussin de Parceval, 1843).

It may be argued that independently of other dialectal developments in the use of the Maltese *ta'* as a possible derivation of the Arabic *Ta marbuta*, the use of such Maltese *ta'* may have been largely influenced by the Italian genitive construction of the particle *di* (of), but it is to be borne in mind that the peculiar way of expressing the genitive by means of the particle *ta'* is not exclusively a Maltese peculiarity, but is also, as has been shown, actually used in the spoken dialects of other Semitic languages, which evidently have suffered no influence in its use from other foreign Romance sources. The word *mata'* in literary Arabic has the meaning of *property*, *belonging to*, *owning*, which in some Arabic dialects has become a genitive exponent.