

A NEW DIALECT SURVEY  
OF PRESENT DAY SPOKEN MALTESE  
PRELIMINARY NOTICE

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THE following pages are intended to offer some preliminary information about a dialect survey which has been agreed on, as a joint project, between the Royal University of Malta (and in particular the Department of Maltese and Oriental Languages) and the Department of Semitic Languages and Literatures of Leeds University. The Department of Phonetics of Leeds University, by arrangement, also has made available to the project certain of its facilities, and made it possible in particular for Mr. Annan, a member of that Department, to take a leading part in the survey.\* In Malta, the project has enjoyed the benevolent interest of the Government, and in particular of the Department of Education, which arranged for the teaching duties of certain teachers to be carried out in such a way as to permit them to give the project valuable help; also of the broadcasting station which made available tape recorders and facilities. The British Council likewise lent valuable assistance (in particular a grant which enabled Mr. Annan to spend time in Malta training a number of voluntary helpers). Last, but not least, we have to thank not only the helpers to be mentioned below, who willingly participated in the enterprise, but also the people of Malta who goodhumouredly allowed us to interrupt their daily rounds of work with lengthy questionings and tape recordings.

While dialect surveys and dialect atlases are by now all known well where the main European language groups are concerned (cf. e.g., besides the English and Scottish dialect surveys mentioned below, the French, German and Italian surveys; and especially such more recent works as the *Atlas Linguistique et Ethnographique de l'Italie et de la Suisse Méridionale* by K. Jaberg and J. Jud respectively) no Semitic language has, as yet, been surveyed as a whole with the application of modern techniques; even regional surveys of the kind undertaken by J. Cantineau for the Hauran region\* are still comparatively rare. Evidently, however, the study of

\* We wish to express our thanks in this connection to Mr. MacCarthy, the Head of the Leeds Phonetics Department.

\* J. Cantineau.

modern Semitic languages by dialect surveys in a modern way is in itself very desirable, and here Maltese offers in several ways a peculiarly favourable field for research. Not only does it cover an extremely restricted territory (Malta being roughly 12 by 8 miles in extent, Gozo 8 by 5), but within this limited extent there are nevertheless a number of fairly well marked regional dialects and sub-dialects. Easy accessibility of practically every spot, and close settlement, allow the coverage of the linguistic territory as a whole by a very dense network of stations; high literacy, and in particular a widespread facility in speaking English, found among what is basically a friendly and helpful people, are a great help to the enquirer, since it will be grasped what he is after. Finally, the existence of the University (which possesses, through its students and graduates, close links with all parts of Malta and Gozo) offers to a dialect survey a *point d'appui* of a sort which is not yet available in every Semitic-speaking land. While research is thus granted optimal facilities in a number of respects, it is in itself very worth while: be it under the aspect of Maltese as a language which, long divided from its Semitic parent stem, has had to go its own way, preserving both archaic features inherited from the past, and new ones of its own creation; or with regard to the study of the linguistic interpretation of Semitic and Romance (especially Sicilian) elements. Nor are the results of a study of Maltese likely to be of purely local interest, in view of the central position of these islands which have been in contact with a variety of Semitic Languages and dialects in the course of history.

We now come to the detailed consideration of the aims and methods of the survey. Our plans are based on a double approach, i.e. phonological and lexical.

The phonological questionnaire is modelled to some extent on the Scottish dialect survey, but with necessary adaptations to this Semitic-speaking milieu. Answers are taped and supplementary notes kept. Free conversation by each informant is also included in each interview in order to add a wide linguistic background. The phonological questionnaire is determined on a synchronic base whereby the different systems of vowel units can be established and compared; this will facilitate a historical statement at a systemic level in addition to yielding an accurate report of the present situation. Included in the questionnaire are sections purporting to syllabification (e.g. *cagħaq* = one or two syllables/absence or presence of back velar fricative) and to the presence of contours which are purely Arabic, e.g. *h*, *G* etc. In Semitic languages it is often primarily the differences between vowels which represent dialect borders, but one must be careful not to limit a survey of this nature to the vocalic system, especially in Maltese, where the influence from non-Semitic is fairly great. Education

and radio/T.V. communication have, as can be expected, reduced the differences in dialect within the younger members of the community, sometimes to a minimum.

The second aspect of the survey is lexical, and in approach and indeed where possible with regard to the actual questions set it is modelled closely on the English dialect survey. Naturally, the position of Malta in a Mediterranean region has affected certain questions, those concerned with farming in particular. There are, for the present, five sets of questions in all, dealing with Cooking, Eating and Drinking, Kitchen Utensils, Clothing and The Human Body. Answers to these are taken down on tapes, supplemented by simplified phonetic representation of additional duplicate replies.

Another set of questions concerns Maltese craftsmen and their vocabularies, particularly those of old-fashioned crafts or methods which are now rapidly disappearing. Here free questions and answers (taken down on tapes) are intended to elicit the special vocabulary used for both the names of utensils and materials, and for the particular actions applied in the various processes. In order to avoid doubts as to what is intended by a particular word or phrase, the University photographer of Malta University has systematically taken photographs of the workshops, tools, materials and actions in question, and a cine-film may supplement this in future. This section of our study should thus prove of benefit to future students of folklore and economic and industrial history, as well as linguists.

The procedure adopted for the whole work is as follows. The University of Malta and Leeds University supply the core of the staffing of the enterprise, Professor Aquilina being directly concerned with arrangements in Malta and the provision of teams and facilities, as well as the allotment of tasks. He is furthermore specially interested in Maltese lexicography. Mr. Annan of Leeds University Phonetics Department is in charge of the training of helpers in phonetics and dialectical methods. Dr. Isserlin is particularly concerned with the comparative and regional distributional aspect of the survey. It is hoped to bring in a folklore specialist during future stages of the work.

Under this triple directorate there are teams of local trained helpers, mainly postgraduate students of Malta University and teachers. These work in pairs, one being assigned phonological and one lexical questions taken down on different tape recorders and into different question books.

It is intended that all villages and towns in Malta and Gozo are to be visited. For the general lexical and phonetic questionnaires, at least two informants are to be found in each locality; where a locality has more than one sub-dialect, at least one for each sub-dialect. In addition to

villages, a sufficiency of permanently settled hamlets or farms in the open country is to be included to permit a closer study of dialect boundaries or the gradual transition of one variety of speech into another.

Craftsmen's vocabularies are to be investigated as follows: where only one or two craftsmen of a particular trade survive, these will be asked to act as informants. Where possible, one representative of each trade is to be selected in each locality; there should in any case be at least one in Malta and Gozo each.

The collection of linguistic data in the field, it is thought, will probably take two to three years. Thereafter, it is hoped to publish first the facts as found, lexical material being published by Professor Aquilina, phonological data by Mr. Annan and distribution by Dr. Isserlin. It is hoped to bring out a number of supplementary papers which will study the data thus presented in a wide frame, both the linguistic affinities of Maltese with other (especially Semitic and in particular Arabic) idioms being taken into consideration, and also the geographical and historical factors in Malta itself which may be relevant, as well as what is known about the history of Maltese. To promote these aims, both linguistic field work in countries near Malta, and also research into certain aspects of Maltese history, etc., may be required, and it is hoped that these can be arranged. Since the survey is still in its early stages it is premature to say much about results achieved to date, but it may be in order to give certain preliminary impressions.

On the phonetic side in particular, we found that the influence of radio and school as levellers of speech have been fairly drastic. While in fact the older generation still keeps dialect distinctions fairly clear, the young now at, or only fresh from, school no longer follow the local models to the same extent: thus we hardly heard any younger person still using the ghain in Gozo (village of Ġharb), though they are still well aware of their elders using it.

On the lexical side the impression was confirmed that towns are more Italianized than villages, and the more urban or profitable and socially desirable trades, as well as the more recent ones, more than occupations connected with agriculture or very primitive crafts. Semitic features, and especially broken plurals, applied to Italian words, are very much alive, but more in the country than in the town.

On the distributional side it is best to wait till fuller documentation may allow both the presentation of a coherent account, and an attempt to understand the picture arrived at. However the mapping in detail of the numerous dialect graduations and divisions across the two islands would seem to offer a *prima facie* likelihood of suggestions as to the processes

which led to this state of things presenting themselves. It will then be a further task to seek whether historical or geographical entities can be found which might be linked with the dialect groupings mapped. We must also, under this aspect, keep in mind the geographical and historical links between Malta and its nearer or more remote neighbours, and it will be our task to try to discover whether influences which can be linked with certain of these can be traced over part, or perhaps the whole, of the Maltese linguistic territory.