

BOOK REVIEW

J. AQUILINA, *Teach Yourself Maltese*. The English Universities Press Ltd., 1965. 240 pp. Price 10/6 net in U.K.

THE appearance of Professor Aquilina's Grammar comes just over a year after Malta's attainment of nationhood through Independence. Promoters of the Maltese Language have always stressed that the language of the people is the hall mark of their nationality. After long years of misunderstanding, Maltese has now been constitutionally confirmed as 'the national language of Malta' and as 'the language of the Courts' and its position entrenched with suitable safeguards in the 1964 Independence Constitution. In this sense the publishers' decision to issue a volume on Maltese in their *Teach Yourself Series* was a laudable one as by this means the whole English-speaking world can know the exact nature of the strongest means of self-expression which our people cherish as part of their spiritual heritage.

Neatly printed in Malta for the publishers by Progress Press Co. Ltd., of Valletta, this Grammar, which has been specially written for the series, conforms to the same general teaching principles of the language volumes published in it. The treatment of the subject is scholarly without, however, being high-brow. Naturally, the book can never pretend to dispense with a teacher completely or with the need of engaging in frequent conversation with the speakers of the language if one wants to acquire proficiency in Maltese. In writing the book the author found himself confronted with two difficulties: either to compress too much and turn out a book that would be more than anyone could ever hope to cope with and assimilate, or to be too diffuse, and that would have practically defeated the purpose of the Series. Aquilina's book lies safely in between these two extremes.

Historically, the work under review is in line with a long tradition of grammatical studies of the Maltese language by local and foreign scholars. This line goes back to the eighteenth century pioneering attempt of G.F. Agius De Soldanis (1750) and the more scholarly achievement of M.A. Vassalli (1791). In the nineteenth century, the study was kept up mainly by M.A. Vassalli (1827), F. Vella (1831, 1845) and F. Panzavecchia (1845). However, it was during the two decades preceding the last World War which culminated in the setting up of a Chair of Maltese in 1938 — held with such distinction by Professor Aquilina himself — that the study of the language has attracted the attention of scholars, following the lead given by the *Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* in standardising the Maltese Orthography with the publication of its *Tagħrif fuq il-Kitba Maltija* in

1924. To this category of works belong A. Cremona's *Tagħlim fuq il-Kitba Maltija*, Part I (1935, latest reprint 1962) and Part II (1938, eighth edition 1964), E.F. Sutcliffe's *A Grammar of the Maltese Language* (1936, reprinted 1950) and M. Butcher's *Elements of Maltese* (1938). For a critical appreciation of these and other grammars the reader is referred to P.P. Saydon's *Bibliographical Aids to the Study of Maltese* – offprint from *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (Chicago) Vol. XII (1953), Nos. 1 - 2. Since the War no new major grammatical work on Maltese has appeared. This period has rather been one of consolidation in this field and of steady progress in the related one of linguistics, where Prof. Aquilina's solid achievement has been recognised in international linguistic circles. Otherwise during this period the emphasis shifted to the publication of collected poetical works, new editions of earlier prose, the establishment of what might be called a Maltese dramatic tradition and an improved standard of journalism and broadcasting in Maltese. Viewed against this background, the present work assumes added importance.

In a special sense, this volume forms a logical corollary to the author's previous publications, i.e. *Structure of Maltese* (1959) and *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (1961). In both the existence of a strong Romance element superimposed over a Semitic base had been stressed, and cogent reasons, historical and other, had been adduced to account for this linguistic phenomenon. In the present work Aquilina tackles from the grammatical angle the problem posed by the fusion of these two different and completely alien elements. Cremona had very rightly adumbrated the significance of the resulting composite language. Other grammarians, however, had totally disregarded the Romance element as a grammatical factor calling for special attention. In this respect Aquilina's book breaks new ground. In the author's words: 'The present volume differs from Sutcliffe's *A Grammar of the Maltese Language* and May Butcher's *Elements of Maltese* in that it considers Maltese without any arbitrary exclusion of the Romance element of the language; this is, in fact, as absurd as writing a grammar of the English Language including only the lexical and morphological Anglo-Saxon element, leaving out all the linguistic Romance element'.

The injection of this Romance element into the Semitic trunk of the language has clearly affected its phonetics and morphology. A careful perusal of the volume reveals the extent of this influence in the rules governing the length of vowels at the end of loan-words from Italian (p. 28), in the rules governing spelling and places of stress (p. 32), the assimilation of the definite article *l-* with *s* followed by a consonant in loan-words (p. 36), the gender of loan-words (nouns and adjectives) ending in *u* in

open syllable or in *i* (p. 52), and the plural suffixes of words of foreign (non-Arabic) origin, to which a whole section in Lesson 8 is devoted (pp. 77-8). Lesson 28 (pp. 201-207), deals extensively with the Conjugation of Verbs of Foreign Origin, which Aquilina classifies into five categories.

Because of the highly complex, though logical, structure of Maltese, the author has made frequent use of word models, which he calls patterns and which 'once understood, enable the user of the grammar to form more words on the model himself'. The examples and vocabulary given under each rule take the place of the usual List of Words at the end of similar works. The exercises at the end of each Lesson, which often contain general information on Malta, and the key to such exercises in Part 4 (pp. 226-240) add to the practical usefulness of this work.

Another useful feature of the book is the list of Maltese sounds and letters (pp. 12-15) given in the form of a table and showing the pronunciation and phonetic notation of consonants. To help the beginner the author groups together immediately after the list all the orthographic rules concerning letters *b* and *għ*, usually the *pons asinorum* of Maltese spelling, followed by a supplementary description of consonants. Between them these three features should, in the author's words 'enable the user of the book to get as close an imitation of Maltese words as it is possible to do so without the guidance of a native speaker of the language'.

Both the standard Maltese spelling and the phonetic notation are given for the Maltese words contained in Part I: The Sounds and Letters. From Part II: Morphology, onwards, phonetic notation is given only where necessary. The present standard orthography of Maltese, first reduced to its present grammatical rules by A. Cremona in 1921 and published under the title *Tagħrif fuq il-Kitba Maltija* by the 'Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti' in 1924, has been officially recognised and used by the Government since 1934 and is now accepted by all reputable writers and used generally in the Press. For a historical account of old and previous attempts at uniform Maltese spelling one should refer to the chapter on 'Systems of Maltese Orthography' in the author's other work *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (1961).

In many ways the author draws upon the conclusions reached in his *Structure of Maltese*, especially in Parts I and II. By and large, the rules of grammar, though presented differently, follow in substance those enunciated by the Għaqda in its *Tagħrif* in 1924, and in Cremona's and Sutcliffe's works. Occasionally, however, Aquilina departs somewhat from the accepted rule. For instance, under *Some Idiomatic Phrasal Comparisons* he groups various examples under (a) colour, (b) palate, (c) measures

and (e) others without going so far as to assert, as Cremona does, that this is a comparison in the superlative degree. Living survivals of the diminutive form of nouns and adjectives are grouped under the two main accepted patterns in Lesson 6: (i) *KTajjaB*, more frequently *KTajjeB* (m) / *KTajBa* (f) and (ii) *KTejjaB* (m) / *KTejBa* (f), with a few other examples forming their diminutives by suffix -a. However, there is another surviving form of diminutive that should perhaps be included by grammarians. This form is generally limited to baby vocabulary and is characterised by stressed long vowel *u* infixed between the second and third radicals, often duplicated, of the word. Sometimes this results in a repetition of the third radical and the addition of the feminine suffix -a, e.g. *žaqquqa*, dim. of *žaqq*, 'belly', *qamuna*, dim. of *qam* 'horn', *geduda* dim. of *gidja* 'kid', *xituta*, dim. of *xita* 'rain' and *bedudu* dim. of *beddu* 'lovely'.

We read in the preface that 'Maltese is a very interesting language with an Arabic morphology and a very mixed vocabulary'. Aquilina refers the student of Comparative Arabic dialectology to two companion volumes in the *Teach Yourself Series*, i.e. A.S. Tritton's *Teach Yourself Arabic* (Classical Arabic) and T.F. Mitchell's *Teach Yourself Colloquial Arabic* (Egyptian).

Earlier in this review we mentioned that there were historical and other reasons at work to turn Maltese into a linguistic phenomenon. Aquilina thus summarises the nature of these factors: '... though the Maltese speak a morphologically Arabic language (North African branch), a continuous political connection with the Arabic world came to an end about eight hundred seventy five years ago, while linguistic influence continued till 1224 when the Arabs were expelled from Malta by Frederick II, the Suabian king of Sicily (1197-1250). One may assume that very probably a number of Arabs became Christians in order to acquire the right to remain in the island and keep their property. With the arrival of the Normans, the Maltese language began to absorb a large number of Romance loan-words expressing new ideas and requirements. This explains why spoken Maltese, like modern English, which is basically Anglo-Saxon where Maltese is largely Semitic, has so many loan-words. But so strong is the Semitic morphology of the language that these have been adapted to Maltese morphological word-patterns'.

Apart from its many other intrinsic merits, this cool and scientific detachment in his approach to the rules of Maltese Grammar makes Aquilina's work a 'must' for those who take an intelligent interest in things Maltese.

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