

PHONEMIC CHANGE AND THE GROWTH OF HOMOPHONES IN MALTESE¹

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A DETERMINATION of the causes of the linguistic changes that created homophones in the languages derived from Classical Arabic can provide valuable data for comparative Arabic dialect studies. Maltese is outstanding among the descendants of Arabic in that it has undergone more extensive phonetic modifications than any other dialect, and as a result has developed a great number of homophones where none existed in the parent language. Many of these modifications took place early in the development of Maltese as a language distinct from the Arabic that gave it birth; that is, in the period beginning with the Arabic conquest in 870 and extending to the time when the influences of Medieval Sicilian and Italian made themselves felt. Still other modifications have occurred more recently; in fact, they are still occurring, as what we can term standard Maltese (the 'educated' dialect of Valletta) draws further away from other current Maltese speech, with these latter representing older forms of the language.

The growth of homophones in Maltese² can be attributed to two general factors: 1) natural linguistic changes over time, some of which are shared to a lesser extent by other descendants of Classical Arabic; and

¹Thanks are due for the personal advice and assistance of Professor Joseph Aquilina, The Royal University of Malta.

²Written sources for homophones are given below. Sources consulted but not quoted are as follows for phonetic transcriptions of Maltese words: Hans Stumme, *Maltesische Studien*, Leipzig, 1904; Luigi Bonelli, 'Il Dialetto Maltese,' *Supplementi Periodici All'Archivio Glottologico Italiano*, IV, ~~1987~~ VI, 1899, VII, 1900, VIII, 1907. Dictionaries: R.S. Harrell, *A Dictionary of Moroccan Arabic: Arabic-English*, 1966, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University; J.G. Hava, *Al-Faraid Arabic-English Dictionary*, Beirut, Catholic Press, 1964; H. Sobelman and R.S. Harrell, *A Dictionary of Moroccan Arabic: English-Arabic*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University, 1963; K. Stowasser and Moukhtar Ani, *A Dictionary of Syrian Arabic: English-Arabic*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University, 1964, *Student English-Arabic Dictionary*, Beirut, Catholic Press, 1953; *Student Arabic-English Dictionary*, Beirut, Catholic Press, 1955; H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (edited by Milton J. Cowan), Wiesbaden, 1961; J. Wortabet and H. Porter, *Arabic-English and English-Arabic Dictionary*, New York, Ungar, 1954.

2) the continuous and increasingly powerful non-Semitic influences which began with the end of Arab domination of the islands in 1090. Both factors are still operating, of course, as the Maltese speaker shares with the rest of mankind the natural human tendency to seek the line of least resistance in language usage.

In terms of historical development, it is often difficult to determine the line of separation between natural change and outside influence. However, it would appear logical to credit to natural linguistic change those phonetic phenomena which are shared in varying degrees by other dialects of Classical Arabic, and to credit to external influences those phenomena which so sharply differentiate Maltese from its related languages. Even with such definite criteria, a lack of records of the early forms of Maltese prevents us from classifying all homophones as definitely caused by one or the other of these factors; consequently, no attempt will be made in this paper to do more than suggest the underlying causes for the development of homophones. Nor will there be more than brief mention of similarities and differences with other Arabic dialects. The primary purpose here is to give the phonemic changes that have occurred in Maltese since its establishment with the conquest of the islands by the Arabs in 870 A.D. and to show how these changes have resulted – and are still resulting – in the creation of homophones. The order of presentation is only roughly chronological; again a lack of early records prevents precise dating.

We can be definite, however, in stating that the first stage of homophonic development resulted from the fusion of a number of the Classical Arabic phonemes with one another. These homophones were universal; that is, they were shared by all speakers of the language, in contrast to more recent homophones which often are found only in a given dialect. It appears that originally eight Classical Arabic phonemes were completely lost, that two others were confused with one of the remaining distinctly Semitic phonemes, and that another, while not lost, disappeared completely from its original positions.³

These phonemic fusions – with resultant phonemic loss – can be summarized as follows:

(1) The Arabic voiced velar fricative *ghain* (ġ) and the voiced pharyngeal fricative 'ain (ʕ) fused to become Maltese /v/, pronounced roughly as original *ghain* and orthographically rendered in the current alphabet by *gh*. This phone is now silent in standard Maltese speech except insofar

³While four phonemes, /p/, /g/, /č/, and /v/ were ultimately added to the language, they had little effect on the creation of homophones during the period under discussion.

as it tends to lengthen and pharyngealize surrounding vowels. Examples of homophones resulting from this fusion are:

Arabic *'abbara* 'to verify money' and *qabbara* 'to be dust, ash colored, to be angry' developed in Maltese first to /vabbar/ and then to current /a:bbat/, orthographically *għabbar*, with the Maltese meanings of, respectively, 'to compare weights' and 'to powder.'⁴ Similarly, Barbera⁵ gives Arabic *ba'ada* 'to remove oneself' and *ba'ada* 'to make hateful' as sources for Maltese /bie:ed/ (spelled *biegħed*) with not only fusion of *'ain* and *ghain* but of /d/ and /d/ and then final devoicing of /d/, and with *imala* represented orthographically by *ie* as always in Maltese. Many such examples of homophones caused by, especially, fusion of initial *'ain* and *ghain* exist; Aquilina alone lists over 20 in his *Papers*.⁶

(2) The Arabic emphatics fused with their non-emphatic counterparts. Thus /s/ > /s/, /d/ > /d/, /t/ > /t/, and /z/ > /ð/ and ultimately /d/. Examples of homophones created by some of these fusions are: Arabic *šaffara* 'to make pale, jaundiced' and *saffara* 'to travel by sea, sail' are found early in Maltese as *saffar* 'to whistle' and 'to make yellow' and currently with *imala* as /sie:fer/ (spelled *siefer*) 'to leave the island, to depart, to sail.' For /d/ becoming /d/ Barbera⁷ records vulgar Arabic *dik* (for *dhak*) 'that' and Arabic *diq* 'anxiety, unease' both giving Maltese *dik* with the same meanings. However, Psaila⁸ does not record *dik* as a form meaning 'unease' or 'anxiety' in modern Maltese. It is thus quite possible that in current 'standard' Maltese these homophones no longer exist. For /z/ becoming /ð/ and then /d/ Barbera⁹ gives Arabic *dalal* 'beautiful head of hair' and *zala'il* 'delicate, soft' as roots for Maltese *dliel* 'hair' (with *imala*) and *dliel*, plural of *dliil* 'soft, tender' (with loss of *hamza*).¹⁰

(3) The Arabic interdental fricatives merged in Maltese with their equivalent dental plosives: thus, /θ/ > /t/ and /ð/ > /d/. However, the only common homophones resulting from this fusion seem to be the Maltese

⁴ Joseph Aquilina, 'Some Historical Phonetic Changes of Maltese,' *Papers in Maltese Linguistics*, The Royal University of Malta, 1961, pp.115-165; see especially pages 156 and 157.

⁵ D. Giuseppe Barbera, *Dizionario Maltese-Arabo-Italiano*, Beyrouth, 1939, 4 volumes; see especially page 221.

⁶ Aquilina, *Papers*, pp. 156-7; also see E.D. Busuttil, *Kalepin (Dizzjunarju) Malti-Ingliż*, Aquilina and Co., Malta, 1949, especially words beginning with *gh*.

⁷ Barbera, p. 316.

⁸ Mons. C. Psaila, *Dizzjunarju Ingliż u Malti*, Malta, 1947.

⁹ Barbera, pp. 321-322.

¹⁰ Busuttil records *dliil* with the meaning of 'soft, tender' but does not record *dliel* 'hair'; Psaila, on the other hand, records *dliel* 'hair' but not *dliil* 'soft, tender.'

din with three sets of meanings: 'this', 'religion', and 'nature',¹¹ with the first meaning stemming from Arabic *dhi/ði:/* and the second and third from Arabic *din*.

(4) The voiceless uvular plosive *qof* shifted its phonetic value to that of the voiceless glottal plosive *hamza* (as it has in some dialects of Egyptian Arabic); however, on Gozo and in a few areas in Malta *qof* became a slightly uvularized form of the velar explosive *kaf* although whether pronounced either as *kaf* or *hamza* this phone is orthographically represented in current Maltese by *q*. Both Barbera¹² and Dessoulavy¹³ record Maltese /ta'/ (spelled *taq*) with the meaning 'to be diligent' coming from Arabic *ṭāqa* and with the meaning 'to nourish, to taste' from Arabic *dbaqa*. In addition to showing the shift of *qof* to *hamza* these homophones show fusion of Arabic /t/ and /ð/ to Maltese /t/. It should be noted, however, that neither Psaila nor Busuttill record *taq* with these meanings: Busuttill has no entry in this form while Psaila gives for 'to taste' *daq/da'/*, thus indicating that Arabic /ð/ did not always devoice to /t/ but, in this case at least, merely shifted from fricative to plosive.

(5) The Arabic voiceless velar *kba/x/* was replaced in Maltese by the voiceless pharyngeal fricative /ħa/ or was pronounced so weakly that for all practical purposes it had the phonetic value of /ha/ (spelled *ħa*), this weak articulation being most prominent on the island of Gozo. An example of possible homophones resulting from this fusion can be seen in Maltese /ħabbel/ (spelled *ħabbel*) with the meanings 'to intrigue, to involve, to confuse' and 'to impregnate.' Dessoulavy¹⁴ gives *ħabbel* 'to embroil' as coming from Arabic *khabbala*, while for 'to become pregnant' he gives¹⁵ *ħobol* from Arabic *ħubila*. Barbera,¹⁶ on the other hand, records only *khabbala* with the meanings 'to involve, intrigue, etc.' Busuttill records *ħabbel* as having both sets of meanings; Psaila, however, gives *ħabbel* for 'to confuse, to involve' but *ħobbol* for 'to impregnate.' Finally Aquilina¹⁷ indicates a form *ħabbel* with both meanings, and with each stemming from Arabic forms with initial *ħa-/ha-/*.¹⁸

(6) The Arabic voiceless glottal fricative *ha* weakened and ultimately

¹¹ Busuttill, p. 42.

¹² Barbera, p. 10.

¹³ C.L. Dessoulavy, *A Maltese-Arabic Word-List*, London (Luzac and Co.), 1938, p. 119.

¹⁴ Dessoulavy, p. 33.

¹⁵ Dessoulavy, p. 46.

¹⁶ Barbera, p. 479.

¹⁷ Aquilina: personal communication with the author, Balzan, Malta, August, 1970.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

fused with *ħa* (spelled in Maltese *ħa*). Except in some Gozitan dialects where /h/ is retained in pronunciation, *ħa* is silent in initial or medial position; however it cannot be said to be phonetically zero as it causes lengthening and pharyngealization of surrounding vowels. In final position *ħa* retains the phonetic value /ħa/ (*ħa*). Homophones created by the loss of phonetic value for initial or medial *ħa* are treated below.

(7) The Arabic voiceless glottal plosive *hamza* disappeared in Maltese, its phonetic function being taken over by the voiceless uvular plosive *qof*; however, *qof* did not replace *hamza* in respect to position in a word. As a result, the Arabic phone *hamza* dropped out of Maltese, while the phone *qof* took on the phonetic value of *ħamza* (spelled *q*) but retained the position of *qof*. Thus Arabic /qara:r/ became Maltese /'ra:r/ (spelled *qrar*). This loss of *hamza* reduced many Arabic trilateral roots to biradicals in Maltese. This reduction can be seen in the loss of the initial radical: Arabic /'ibn/ 'son' became in Maltese *ibn* (also *iben*) and Arabic /'arḏ/ 'earth, land' became Maltese *art*, both with a vowel as the initial sound, and thus violating the Arabic 'rule' that no word can start with a vowel. Examples of loss of *hamza* in medial position are as follows: Arabic /ra's/ 'head' became Maltese *ras* /ra:s/ and Arabic *bi'r* 'well' became Maltese *bir* /bi:r/; both of these examples also show the phenomenon of vowel lengthening, consistent with loss of Arabic *hamza* in medial position.

Some of these developments have, of course, taken place in other dialects of Arabic: for example, the fusion of Egyptian and Syrian interdentalals to their dental counterparts. Other phenomena sporadic in various Arabic dialects are consistent in Maltese: thus Maltese devoices all final voiced plosives, fricatives and affricates (except when followed in continuous speech by a word beginning with a voiced consonant); also, with minor exceptions regressive assimilation is consistent in Maltese.¹⁹ Similar assimilation is also found in Syrian Arabic, but only with /d/, /ḏ/, /z/, /z/, and /ž/, and even in these cases devoicing is not obligatory.²⁰ However, when these phenomena are obligatory – as in Maltese – additional fertile soil is provided for the growth of homophones: for example, *ħass* /ħass/ 'he felt' and *ħazz* /ħass/ 'he scribbled'.²¹

¹⁹ Joseph Aquilina, *The Structure of Maltese*, The Royal University of Malta, 1959, p. 8.

²⁰ Mark W. Cowell, *A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic*, Washington, D.C. (Georgetown University Press), 1964, p. 26.

²¹ Joseph Aquilina, *Teach Yourself Maltese*, London (The English Universities Press, Ltd.) 1965, p. 22; Aquilina, *ibid.*, also notes regressive assimilation occurring in the negative forms of these examples: /ma ħaħħ/ spelled *ma ħassx* 'he did not feel' and *ma ħazzx* 'he did not scribble'.

The most productive area for the development of homophones in Maltese is found in the loss in most dialects of initial and medial Arabic *ghain* and *ha*.²² Historically these phones show a definite pattern of change from their early Maltese pronunciations as /v/ (*għ*) and a weakened form of /h/ (*ħa*) respectively. Since the loss of both phonemes as consonants is found most prominently in urban speech, we can assume that the Medieval Sicilian and, later, the Italian officials, who were located in the urban areas, found difficulty in reproducing a sound so far removed from their linguistic experience as /v/ and thus caused its ultimate disappearance. Similarly, these non-native speakers would bring their own natural linguistic tendencies to Maltese words with the result that the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ was also lost. As Italian took on greater and greater status, to the point where it became the language of the educated classes and the official language of the courts and the church, these and other non-Semitic influences became more and more desirable to imitate and so spread on down from the 'top layers' of Maltese society.²³

This is not to suggest that these two phonemes disappeared from urban speech suddenly and without leaving any trace of their passing. On the contrary, even today in Valletta many words which could have developed into pairs of homophones did not do so because of the residual effects of the two phonemes. Their development, briefly, was from consonant to lengthening and pharyngealizing the surrounding vowel or vowels. Vowel pharyngealization had disappeared from Valletta – that is, standard – Maltese speech; but lengthening remains; and as vowel quantity is phonemic in Maltese, words which would otherwise have become homophones remain phonetically distinguished from one another: for example /dara/ (spelled *dara*) 'he got used to' and /da:ra/ (spelled *darba*) 'her house,' with lengthening of /a/ to /a:/ caused by the following *ba*.²⁴ In contrast *dabar* 'back' and *dar* 'house' are both phonetically /da:r/, with lengthening by *ba* in this case creating homophones.²⁵ A further example of homophones being created by the loss of Arabic *ha* and *ghain* in Maltese and by their function of lengthening surrounding vowels is found in the 'triple' set of homophones *żabar* 'blossoms,' *żgħar* plural of 'small,'

²²In final position *h* always takes on the phonetic value of *ħ* /ħ/; *gh* also becomes *ħ* but only in certain cases. Thus /kru:ħ/ spelled *krub* 'ugliness'; and /fo:ħ/ spelled *fo:ħ* 'the sea ebbed away' but /ta/ originally spelled *tagħ* but now *ta*.

²³Italian remained one of the official languages of Malta until 1934, when Maltese, along with English, replaced it.

²⁴Aquilina, *Teach Yourself Maltese*, p. 32.

²⁵Aquilina, personal communication, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1967.

and *zar* 'he visited,' all of which are phonetically /za:r/.²⁶

While the mere counting of homophones can be of statistical interest²⁷ to Maltese linguistics, more valuable insights into the language can be achieved by attempting classifications which will provide data useful in such areas as historical phonetics, and in lexical, semantic, and syntactic studies. For example, in addition to the classification suggested earlier – that of determining whether homophones are the result of natural change or of non-Semitic influences – a classification might be made in respect to the contexts surrounding the homophones. That is, (1) those homophones which are differentiated semantically by their syntactic functions and thus cause no confusion, as in the case of the noun *żabar*, the adjective *żgħar*, and the verb *zar* given above; and (2) those homophones which have the same syntactic function and thus may or may not cause confusion. In this case semantic differentiation depends on whether the homophones can 'patter' in the same context so that they 'feel' equally acceptable to a native speaker. If not, then they become differentiated by the listener's negative reaction to the 'logic of the language' and, so lose their homonymity. For example, among the examples quoted by Aquilina from Vassali's *Grammatica Della Lingua Maltese*²⁸ are the following pairs of homophones: (1) Maltese /vewa/ (spelled *għewa*) 'to howl' from Arabic /'awa/ and 'to instigate' from Arabic /qawa/. Although both Maltese words are verbs, it is difficult to conceive a 'logical' sentence in which one could substitute for the other so completely that the native speaker would find a confusion of meaning. (2) In contrast, both members of a verbal pair such as Maltese /alla/ 'to raise *walls* etc.' from Arabic /'alla:/ and 'to raise prices' from Arabic /qalla/, or of a nominal pair such as /na:r/ 'day' (spelled *nhar*) and 'fire' (spelled *nar*) could fit into the same sentence context and 'feel comfortable' in the mind of a native user of the language. In such cases a larger context than the immediate group containing the homonymic form is required for semantic differentiation.

In conclusion, studies of the growth of homophones in Maltese and inquiry into the causes of this growth can provide data useful in the study of Arabic dialectology. Such a study extended to loan words from non-Semitic sources could also provide information for scholars in other linguistic fields, particularly those in Romance.

²⁶ Aquilina, *Teach Yourself Maltese*, p. 16.

²⁷ In this vein, the author culled some 39 sets of homophones (with up to five terms to a set) beginning with *għa-* alone from Busuttil in a few moments; also Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics*, lists over 20 similar examples on pages 156 and 157.

²⁸ Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics*, p. 156; see also Dessoulavy, p. 75.