LOCALISM: A METHOD FOR DESCRIBING MEANING IN MALTESE

by ALBERT J. BORG

1. THE LOCALIST HYPOTHESIS

Psychologists are generally agreed that spatial organization is of central importance in human cognition (cf. Clark, H.H. 1973 and Sinclair de Zwart 1973). Assuming an intimate relationship between the development of intelligence in the human baby and the process whereby it acquires its mother language, the localist hypothesis claims that spatial expressions are more basic, grammatically and semantically, than various kinds of non-spatial expressions. Such spatial expressions are more basic linguistically in that they serve as models or structural templates, as it were, for other expressions (cf. Lyons 1977, §15.7 and Anderson 1977, §2.4).

The following sentence:

Ganni mexa mid-dar sa l-iskola
/1/ John – he walked – from the house – to the school
'John walked from home to school'

is one example of a spatial expression. It encodes a journey from one point to another in the dimension of space undertaken by a traveller, John. 'Mid-dar' is the expression referring to the point of departure, or the source of the traveller's movement, while 'sa l-iskola' is the expression referring to the point of arrival, or the goal of the traveller's movement. We can characterise the prepositions in each of these two expressions as respectively, 'minn' the source preposition, and 'sa' the goal preposition.

Observing now the sentence in /2/:

/2/ Karmnu nqatel minn Pawlu
Charles – he was killed – from Paul
'Charles was killed by Paul'

we notice the reappearance of the preposition 'minn' before the expression referring to the agent in the passive construction. There is nothing specifically spatial about an act of killing and

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yet we have to account for the presence of the source preposition 'minn'. The localist hypothesis claims that the non-spatial expression in /2/ is modelled on the spatial expression in /1/, in the sense that the notion of a journey (a concrete journey in /1/) is metaphorically transposed and utilised in an abstract interpretation of the act of killing in spatial terms: 'killing' emerges, as it were, from the agent, and hence the agent expression is preceded by the source preposition 'minn' (for the localistic notion of a journey, cf. Jessen 1974 and Lyons 1977, §15.7).

Let us examine some evidence for this claim. In sentence /3/:

/3/ Ganni baghat il-ktieb lil Pawlu
John — he sent — the book — to Paul
'John sent the book to Paul'

we have the encoding of another concrete journey in which an inanimate entity, the book, moves from a source location to a goal, Paul. Notice the presence of the preposition 'lil' before the goal expression, 'Pawlu'. Along with 'sa', we will also call 'lil' a goal preposition (for a characterisation of the semantic difference between the two prepositions cf. Borg 1979, ch. 2, §1.4). Now in sentence /4/:

/4/ Pawlu qatel lil Karmnu
Paul — he killed — to — Charles
'Paul killed Charles'

which is the active equivalent of the passive sentence in /2/, we have the appearance of the goal preposition 'lil' before the expression referring to the patient, Charles, in the act of killing. The occurrence of the preposition before the object of a transitive verb is related to a complex problem relating to a classification of nominal expressions (for a discussion of which cf. Borg 1979, ch. 2, and Borg 1980). Bypassing such problems however, we are still left with grounds for advancing the claim that just as in /2/ the agent is metaphorically interpreted in Maltese as the source of the action (or abstract journey) denoted by the verb, so in /4/ the patient is interpreted as the goal of the action (or journey) denoted by the verb.

Such a claim is also supported by traditional grammar, where a verb such as 'qatel' in /4/, is called a transitive verb: the term 'transitive' is explained as meaning that the action denoted by the verb passes from the subject to the object (cf. Lyons 1968, §8.2.2). The localist hypothesis itself, in fact, has somewhat distant ori-

gins, going back at least to the Byzantine scholar Maximus Planudes, who lived in the thirteenth century (cf. Robins 1974).

2. A LOCALIST INTERPRETATION OF ASPECT IN MALTESE

The rest of this paper is devoted to an exemplification of how the localistic notion of a journey can be used to characterise certain aspects of meaning in a selected area in the semantic structure of Maltese.

Most verbs in Maltese are said to have a Perfect and an Imperfect tense (cf. for instance, Sutcliffe 1936, p. 66). The verb in each of the sentences /1-4/ is in the Perfect. These verbs are listed again below in /5/, together with the corresponding Imperfect:

/5/ Perfect   Imperfect
   mexa   jimxi
   nqatel   jinqatel
   bagħat   jibgħat
   qatel   joqtol

In addition to the lexical meaning of each verb, say 'walking' as opposed to 'killing' or 'sending', there is an element of meaning common to the set *mexa-nqatel-bagħat-qatel* which is opposed to the element of meaning common to the set *jimxi-jinqatel-jibgħat-joqtol*. It is these common elements of meaning which we will attempt to characterise in localist terms.

3. TENSE AND ASPECT

An opposition such as *mexa-jimxi* is traditionally referred to as one of tense. However as will be shown below, there is more to such an opposition than merely a distinction in tense, since the grammatical category of aspect is also involved. The distinction between tense and aspect is set out briefly below.

Tense is a grammatical category which establishes a relation between two points in time, one of which is usually the moment of speaking (cf. Lyons 1968, §7.5.1 and Comrie 1976, §0.1). In figure 1 below, the straight line represents the dimension of time. The point t_o represents the moment of speaking, the point t_x to the right of t_o represents a moment in the future and t_{-x} to the left of t_o, represents a moment in the past.

Fig. 1

t_{-x} t_o t_x

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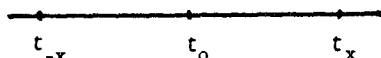
Now in uttering a sentence such as /6a/, a speaker refers to a situation happening at a point in time t_{-x}, which is in a past relation to the moment at which he is speaking,

/6a/ John came home yesterday
/6b/ John will come home tomorrow

namely t_o. In uttering /6b/ on the other hand, reference is made to a moment t_x which is in a future relation to t_o (for present purposes the element of modality implicit in statements about future events will be ignored here).

Examining now the sentences in /7/:

/7a/ John came home yesterday
/7b/ John used to come home rather late at night
/7c/ John was coming home yesterday, when his car broke down

it will be seen that a distinction between them cannot be made on the basis of tense, since all the verbs (in the main clause) refer to past time. This is not to say however that their meaning is alike: in /7a/ the situation of John's coming home is viewed as a past event; in /7b/ it is structured as a habit happening in the past, and in /7c/ the same situation is presented as a process in the past. The difference here is an aspectual one. Aspect does not relate the time of the situation to any other time-point; rather it is concerned with the temporal distribution or contour of a situation (cf. Hockett 1958, §27.9) or in Comrie's terms, with the internal temporal constituency of the one situation (cf. Comrie 1976, §0.1).
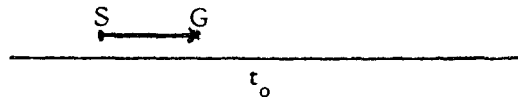
4. THE PERFECT AND THE IMPERFECT

Consider now sentence /1/ repeated below as /8/:

/8/ Ganni mexa mid-dar sa l-iskola

This sentence encodes one concrete journey of walking which is completed and over at the moment of speaking. In relation to the diagram in Fig. 1, this situation may be represented as in Fig. 2:

Fig. 2

The arrow from point S to the point G represents John's journey of walking from a source to a goal. The arrow itself is placed to the left of t_o because at the moment of speaking the journey is over: that is, it is located in past time.

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Taking now the corresponding Imperfect form of the verb as exemplified in /9/:

/9/ Ganni jimxi mid-dar sa l-iskola
    John – he walks – from the house – to the school
    'John walks from home to school'

we have here the encoding of a recurring piece of behaviour by John, involving an unbounded series of repetitions of completed journeys. This can be presented graphically as in Fig. 3:

Fig. 3
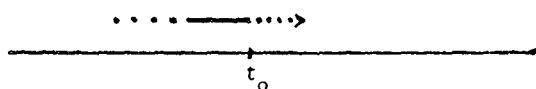
The extremities of the arrow in Fig. 3 are made up of broken lines. This is to show that the Imperfect form of the verb expresses no limit on the recurring piece of behaviour. In fact the Imperfect is used in Maltese to express generic (or timeless) statements such as the ones in /10/:

/10a/ Ix-xemx titla' fil-Lvant
    The sun – she rises – in the east
    'The sun rises in the east'

/10b/ Is-silġ jinhall bis-shana
    The snow – he melts – with the heat
    'Snow melts in the heat'

However, in addition to expressing the unbounded nature of the series of repetitions, the broken line to the right of t_o represents also the element of modality which is implicit in a statement relating to the future. The speaker asserts that the behaviour he observed in the past (John's walking) will continue also in the future. The unbroken portion of the arrow to the left of t_o is meant to represent that part of the series of repetitions which happened in the past and which is open, at least in principle, to direct or indirect observation by the speaker. It is this observation (in the past) in the experience of the speaker which becomes the basis for the assertion of an unrestricted habit(spilling over into the future).

Summarizing our results so far, we can say that the Perfect encodes a past event, which we characterise in localist terms, as a completed journey in the past; and the Imperfect encodes unrestricted habituality, characterised as an infinite series of repetitions of completed journeys. If we now take the meaning of the traditional labels, the use of the term 'Perfect' for a form of the

verb like *mexa* is understandable in the sense of the idea of 'wholeness' applied to the encoding of a completed journey. However if this sense for the 'Perfect' is granted, then the Imperfect can only mean that the journey encoded by a form of the verb like *jimxi* is not complete. Such a meaning for the Imperfect is explicitly advanced for instance by Vella (1970, p. 201; p. 281) and Borg (1978, p. 208). Note however that although Sutcliffe uses the traditional labels, he says simply of the Imperfect that it 'may denote future action or habitual action (Sutcliffe 1936, ch. 1, §2. 1. 1). For a detailed review of the terminology cf. Borg 1979, ch. 5, § 1. 2).

But the Imperfect *jimxi*, as we have seen, encodes an unbounded series of repetitions of completed journeys. In this case the only thing about this so-called Imperfect which could be construed as 'incomplete' would be the series itself, which is represented as unbounded, and hence in a certain sense, as ongoing.

5. THE PRESENT PARTICIPLE

Let us therefore turn our attention to yet another form of the verb, traditionally called the present or active participle, to establish whether it might not fit the designation 'Imperfect'. This present participial form is illustrated in / 11/:

/ 11/ Ganni miexi mid-dar sa l-iskola

John – he walking – from the house – to the school

'John is walking from home to school'

From hearing sentence / 11/ a native speaker infers that John has started his journey of walking, but has not yet completed it. This point may be illustrated by the sets of sentences in / 12/ and / 13/:

/ 12a/ Ganni mexa mid-dar sa l-i skola

/ 12b/ Ganni miexi mid-dar sa l-iskola

Ɔ / 13a/ Ganni telaq mid-dar   Ɔ

Ɔ / 13b/ Ganni wasal l-iskola   Ƀ

/ 12a/ implies both / 13a/ and / 13b/, but / 12b/ implies only / 13a/ (Note that I do not use the term 'imply' in its strict sense of 'logical implication' but rather in the sense of 'implicate', cf. Grice, 1975).

That is to say, although the journey encoded by sentence / 11/ with the form *miexi* has already started at the moment of speaking, it has not yet been completed: *miexi* encodes a journey in progress at the moment of speaking. The situation may be presented

graphi cally as in Fig. 4:

Fig. 4
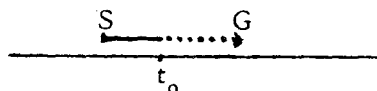
The unbroken portion of the arrow refers to that part of the journey which is already over when the speaker refers to it. The broken portion refers to that part of the journey which still has to be completed. Re-examining the traditional terminology, it will now be seen that the opposition Perfect:Imperfect (in the sense of incompleted action) should refer not to the pair of forms *mexa: jimxi*, but to the set, *mexa: miexi*. However the use of the terms Perfect: Imperfect for forms such as *mexa: jimxi* is well established in the literature. So I continue to make use of them as labels for the morphological distinction involved without however adopting the semantic overtones they carry.

6. THE *qed* CONSTRUCTION

Now it is only a relatively small number of verbs which exhibit the so-called present participial form (cf. Sutcliffe, 1936, p. 69). To express an action (or, in our terms, a journey) in progress, verbs lacking such a form make use of a construction involving the Imperfect preceded by the particle *qed*, as in /14/:

/14/ L-ajruplan qed jasal issa
   The aeroplane – he is arriving – now
   'The plane is just arriving'

This construction, referred to here as the *qed* construction, is also possible however, in the case of verbs which have a present participial form. This means that we have to account not only for a form like *miexi*, but also for that of the construction *qed jimxi*.

We already have a characterization of the meaning of the Imperfect, which figures in this construction (cf. section 4 above). Following traditional grammar I assume that the particle *qed* is an abbreviation of the form *qieghed*, the present participle of the verb of physical location *qaghad*. For a review of the arguments justifying such an assumption, cf. Borg 1979, ch. 5, §2.2.

Our next task is to arrive at a characterization of the meaning of *qed* (= *qieghed*). Sentence /15a/ below:

/15a/ Ganni qaghad id-dar mill-hamsa sat-tmienja
   John – he stayed – the house – from the five – to the

eight
　　　　　'John stayed at home from five to eight'

/ 15b/　Ganni qieghed id-dar
　　　　　John — he is located — the home
　　　　　'John is at home'

encodes the physical location of John in a specific place. But
John's location is encoded as taking place for a definite period in
the past. In effect, we have an abstract journey through time (of
physical location in a place) from one point in time to another.

In / 15b/ we have another abstract journey through time. Just as
in the case of *miexi* in / 11/, this journey is in progress at the
moment of speaking, but note that *qieghed* involves, just the same,
the encoding of one journey. The *qed* construction, therefore,
brings together the encoding of unrestricted habituality (the Imper-
fect *jimxi*) with progressivity (the present participle *qieghed*).

　　　Observe now the sets of sentences in / 16/ and / 17/:

/ 16a/　Ganni jimxi mid-dar sa l-iskola
/ 16b/　Ganni qed jimxi mid-dar sa l-iskola

⌀ / 17a/　Ganni mexa darba biss mid-dar sa l-iskola　　　⌀
⌀ / 17b/　Ganni mexa xi drabi mid-dar sa l-iskola　　　⊃
⊃ / 17c/　Ganni mexa hafna drabi mid-dar sa l-iskola　　⌀

Other things being equal, / 16a/ implies / 17c/ but not / 17a/ or
/ 17b/, and this is in keeping with our earlier characterization of
the Imperfect as encoding unrestricted habituality.

　　　Now / 16b/ can be taken to encode one journey in progress as in
the case of / 11/: or habituality. These two different interpreta-
tions are brought out in the sentences in / 18/ below, through the
use of different adverbial expressions:

/ 18a/　Ganni qed jimxi mid-dar sa l-iskola bhalissa
　　　　　'John is (in the process of) walking from home to school
　　　　　just now'

/ 18b/　Ganni qed jimxi mid-dar sa l-iskola dan l-ahhar
　　　　　'John is walking from home to school lately'

　　　Going back to / 16b/, it is in the interpretation of habituality
that this sentence is said to imply / 17b/ but not / 17a/ or / 17c/.
Notice also that / 17a/ is implied by neither / 16a/ nor / 16b/. The
difference in the relations of implication is with respect to sen-
tences / 17b/ and / 17c/. The Imperfect encoding unrestricted
habituality is compatible with the statement of an event happening

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many times as in /17c/ but not a few times or some times as in
/17b/. The *qed* construction is compatible only with the statement
of an event happening a few times, as in /17b/. On this basis, we
will characterize the *qed* construction in its habitual interpreta-
tion as encoding restricted habituality. Bringing together the
threads of our argument, we can now see how this interpretation
results from the presence of the present participle *qed* together
with the Imperfect. To do this I make use of the hypothesis which
analyses auxiliary verbs or particles as main verbs (cf. for in-
stance Huddleston 1974 and 1976, ch. 14). We can then say that
the encoding of unrestricted habituality (via the Imperfect) is em-
bedded in the encoding of a journey in progress (via *qed*), so that
the statement of unrestricted habituality is qualified, or restricted,
by the statement of one journey in progress. This situation may be
represented as in the figure in 5:
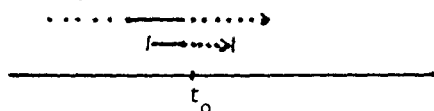
which really brings together the representation of the situation en-
coded by the Imperfect (Fig. 3) with that for the Present Participle
(Fig. 4).

Notice finally that it is not being claimed here that the *qed* con-
struction can be characterised uniquely as encoding restricted
habituality. Rather, in the case of those verbs which do not have
a present participle (such as *wasal*) the *qed* construction is am-
biguous between an interpretation of progressivity and of restric-
ted habituality. In the case of verbs which do have a present par-
ticiple (such as *mexa*) the *qed* construction is also ambiguous, but
the interpretation which comes to the fore, other things being
equal, is that of restricted habituality.

7. CONCLUDING SUMMARY

By making use of the localistic notion of a journey (section 1)
we arrive at a characterisation of the meaning of the morphological
opposition Perfect:Imperfect in terms of one completed journey at
the moment of speaking vs. an infinite series of repetitions of
completed journeys or unrestricted habituality (section 4). In ad-
dition, the form identified as the present participle is charac-
terised an encoding one journey in progress or progressivity (sec-
tion 5) and contrasted to the *qed* construction characterised as
primarily encoding a restricted series of repetitions of completed

journeys or restricted habituality (section 6). These aspectual distinctions (cf. section 3) correlate with certain tense and modal meanings which are ignored in the present study. In Borg 1979 (ch. 5, §7) however, a case is put forward for treating the aspectual opposition as the fundamental one, and tense and modal associations are interpreted as deriving from it.

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