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TO BE OR NOT TO BE A COPULA IN MALTESE

Abstract

A parte le frasi verbali, nel maltese occorrono anche frasi senza verbo. Nella comunicazione si esaminano tutti i vari tentativi di giustificare una sottoclasse di tali frasi, ma tutti risultano insoddisfacenti, per una ragione o per un'altra (sezione 1.1, 1.2). Nel presente studio si identificano tre espressioni che possono verificarsi tra il soggetto e il predicato in tali frasi nella loro forma meno marcata (2.0), e viene assegnata una funzione (semantica) a ciascuna.

Qiegheqd e jinsab ("sta" e "si trova") occorrono in predicazione di luogo (fisico) di soggetti che si riferiscono a oggetti fisici discreti (animati o non-animati), in contrasto con eventi, processi e stati (2.1.2. – 2.1.5.), mentre qiegheqd (piuttosto che jinsab) occorre anche in predicazioni che codificano un ruolo temporaneo al soggetto (4.0).

Un tipo di pronome personale subentra tra il soggetto e il predicato in predicazioni equative (3.0) e in quelle dove il predicato codifica una caratteristica essenziale analitica del soggetto (5.0) oppure una caratteristica essenziale sintetica ma necessaria del soggetto (7.2).

Jinsab occorre anche in predicazioni che esprimono gli stati contingenti del soggetto (7.1), mentre si conclude che esiste una ulteriore sottoclasse di predicazioni nella quale nessuna delle tre espressioni menzionate sembra accettabile, e si osserva che queste esprimono caratteristiche contingenti (in contrasto con stati contingenti) del soggetto (6.0).

Infine, si avanza l'ipotesi per spiegare l'opzionalità di un'espressione copulativa in tali frasi che altrimenti sarebbero senza verbo (8.0).

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1.0 To be or not to be a copula in maltese: that might very well be the question a linguist could ask himself in attempting to account for the following apparently verbless sentences (and others like them) in the language, containing only a subject and a predicate:

1. Ġanni tabib
   John doctor
   “John is a doctor”

2. L-istudent marid
   The-student sick
   “The student is sick”

3. Il-ġiżimina fjura
   The-jasmine flower
   “Jasmines are flowers”

4. Pietru l-eżaminatur
   Peter the-examiner
   “Peter is the examiner”
5. It-tifel id-dar  
   The-boy the-house  
   "The boy is at home"

1.1 Now when such sentences are put into the past, a verbal form does occur between the subject and the predicate expressions:

6. Ġanni kien tabib  
   "John was a doctor"

7. L-istudent kien marid  
   "The student was sick"

8. Pietru kien l-eżaminatur  
   "Peter was the examiner"

9. It-tifel kien id-dar  
   "The boy was at home"

The form kien is usually translated as "he was" (but cf. Borg 1981: ch. 5, where the verb in this particular form is characterised as expressing past location in a state). Similarly, these sentences can be put into the future in which case another form of 'kien', preceded by the invariable particle se, appears between the subject and the predicate:

10. Ġanni se jkun tabib  
    "John will be a doctor"

11. It-tifel se jkun id-dar  
    "The boy will be at home"

These facts of distribution lead R. Bonello in his unpublished work Toward a Theory of the Base Component of Maltese (1968) to assign a special status to the verb 'kien', calling it the linking verb, while all other verbs he calls non linking. The distributional facts he accounts for by saying that "in the Present Tense the linking verb is covert" and it is "overt" in the Past Tense or when preceeded by a verbal Particle".

In another unpublished work D. Zammit Mangion (1977) also regards 'kien' as the copula, though she realizes such an analysis is not without its problems.

1.2 A different position is taken by Edmund Sutcliffe in his grammar published in 1936. He states that (personal) pronouns are regularly used as a verbal copula (1936: p. 180). However, his examples include cases where an appropriate form of the personal pronoun is obligatorily present in the sentence, as well as others where it is optional, that is where it can be left out without affecting the status of full sentencehood of the expression:

12. Min hu Ġanni?  
    Who he John?  
    "Who is John?"

13. Liema hu t-tabib?  
    Which he the-doctor?  
    "Which one is the doctor?"
(12) and (13) are two interrogative sentences in which a form of the personal pronoun follows the interrogative pronoun so that the corresponding versions (14) and (15) are non-sentences, marked as such by a preceding asterisk:

14. *Min Ġanni?
15. *Liema t-tabib?

Aquilina makes much the same point in his book *Teach Yourself Maltese* (1965), but is more explicit on the possibility that the pronoun in copular function may be optional. He suggests that it is present when emphasis is intended, but otherwise it is absent (1965: p. 40). We shall be looking at the question of emphasis later on (cf. section 8.0), but for the moment let us note that both Sutcliffe and Aquilina talk only in terms of an undifferentiated copular function, in connection with the personal pronoun. They do not raise the question whether all instances of a subject occurring with a predicate in verbless sentences should be further subclassified into different classes.

Schabert (1976: p. 59) and Krier (1976: p. 67) share much the same position. However in a work published a year earlier ("Analyse syntaxique de la phrase nominale en maltais", 1975) Krier does recognise two subclasses of predicate expressions, one of which I will later in this paper hold to occur in a locative predication.

2.0 If we take another look at the predications in (1) to (5), we will find that it is possible to introduce a further expression between the subject and the predicate without altering their (present) time reference. In fact it is possible to introduce at least three such expressions, but each predication will be more or less acceptable to native speakers according to which expression is introduced. In addition to an asterisk to mark unacceptable expressions, a preceding question mark is here used to signify dubious acceptability.

16. (?hu) Ġanni (?qieghed) tabib
   (?jinsab )
17. (*hu) L-istudent (*qieghed) marid
    (jinsab )
18. (*qieghda) fjura
    (*tinsab )
19. ( hu ) Pietru (?qieghed) l-eżaminatur
    (*jinsab )
20. (*hu) It-tifel (?qieghed) id-dar
    (jinsab )

These expressions will each be considered in due course, but for the moment note that there is the possibility native speakers will disagree with the acceptability judgements set out in sentences (16) – (20). This could be due to
at least two factors. They could be speakers native in different varieties of Maltese so that in their judgement of sentences realised in utterances which are taken to exemplify what could loosely be called Standard Maltese, they could be making use of a different grammatical system. Secondly, independently of the variety of Maltese they are native in, speakers will make acceptability judgements influenced by their own particular cultural context. So rather than putting forward descriptive rules which operate within clear cut boundaries, I will be identifying particular dimensions along which, hopefully, variation will occur to a certain extent in specifiable ways. Moreover, it has to be remembered that we are dealing with optional expressions, so that clear cut judgements cannot be readily expected.

This is also a convenient place to note that in this paper I will only be considering predications in their most unmarked form, that is, in the present tense and with third person subjects. I will not be considering predications in interrogative or negative form. Furthermore, I will also be omitting any consideration of variation in thematic and information structure. There is some evidence that word order (more properly, constituent order) seems to correlate with thematic structure (cf. Borg 1983), but for present purposes, I will only be examining predications with the relative order:

Subject expression followed by Predicate expression

From an examination of sentences (16) to (20), it will be seen that there are two clear instances in which a form of the personal pronoun is definitely excluded, namely (17), where the

17. (*hu )
L-istudent (*qieghed) marid
( jinsab )

predicate position is occupied by an adjective, and (20), where

20. (*hu )
It-tifel ( qieghed) id-dar
( jinsab )

the predicate is a place nominal, a noun preceded by the definite article. So much, therefore, for the unqualified general position expressed by Sutcliffe, Aquilina and others.

2.1.1 Taking for the moment sentence (20), it will be

20. (*hu )
It-tifel ( qieghed) id-dar
( jinsab )

"The boy is at home"

seen that this is a predication expressing the location of the boy at home. For predications such as this Krier (1975: p. 103) says that "... c'est une des caracteristiques du maltais de 'sous-entendre' le fonctionnel dans les syntagmes indiquant le lieu (ou le temps)" , and it is quite clear that by “fonctionnel” she means here a locative preposition. Castles (1975: p. 31) and Zammit Mangion
(1977: p. 185) also note some instances of locative predications in which there is no occurrence of a preposition.

However, there is more to the presence or absence of the locative preposition than Krier seems to imply. Locative predications in which the subject expression refers to an entity high in animacy (especially humans) can occur with a locative preposition or without it, as in:

21. It-tifel (qiegbed) id-dar
   “The boy is at home”

22. It-tifel (qiegbed) fid-dar
   The-boy in-the-house
   “The boy is in the house”

but this is hardly a question of semantic optionality. In (22) the boy is encoded as physically enclosed within the house, whereas in (21) he is encoded as being at home, even if at the moment he happens to be in the garden outside. Thus without contradiction, one might say:

23. It-tifel (qiegbed) id-dar ghax rajtu fil-gnien
   The-boy the house, because I-saw-him in-the-garden
   “The boy is at home, because I saw him in the garden”

But the utterance (24)

24. It-tifel (qiegbed) fid-dar, ghax rajtu fil-gnien
   The-boy in-the-house, because I-saw-him in-the-garden
   “The boy is in the house, because I saw him in the garden”

would express a contradiction: the boy is either physically located in the house or in the garden.

Let us take sentence (20) without any expression between its subject and predicate:

20a It-tifel id-dar
   The-boy the-house

and noting that in utterance it will be accompanied by an intonation pattern marking a full sentence. Because of this pattern, a native speaker will avoid interpreting utterance (20) as a mere listing of two nominal expressions, which would have been signalled by quite a different intonation pattern:

20b It-tifel, id-dar,...
   The-boy, the house,...

Neither would a native speaker interpret (20) equatively, as encoding the fact that the two nominal expressions have the same referent. Equative predications like (19)

19. Pietru l-eżaminatur
   “Peter is the examiner”

will be discussed in section 3.0. For the moment notice that although both (19) and (20) have a definite noun in their predicate, ‘l-eżaminatur’ in (19) refers to an entity, whereas in the context in which it occurs the predicate of (20) is
interpreted as referring to a place. And a place cannot be identified with an
entity, “The boy” which is the referent of the subject of (20). The juxtaposition
of the two expressions (with an appropriate intonation contour, and without a
locative preposition) is interpreted as expressing a locative relation.

Here are some more locative predications:

25. It-tabib l-isptar
   The-doctor the-hospital
   “The doctor is at hospital”

26. It-tifel l-iskola
   The-boy the-school
   “The boy is at school”

27. Iz-ziju l-ghalqa
   The-uncle the-field
   (My) Uncle is in (his) field”

28. ?Il-qassis il-ğnie
   The-priest the-garden

29. ?L-istudent il-hanut
   The-student the-shop

The predicate in (25) and (26) encodes a typical location with respect to the
subject. In my idiolect (30), too, offers no difficulty of interpretation, but only
because drawing on my knowledge of my (cultural) context, a field can be the
habitual haunt of a particular person. The exact relation between subject and
predicate, on the other hand, is difficult for me to establish: possibly I could
interpret (28) as:

“The priest is working the garden” or “The priest is in the garden”.

Even with the interposition of the locative expression ‘qieghed’, I would still
require the specification afforded by a particular locative preposition to
interpret these predications. But the judgement need not be shared by another
native speaker who might be familiar with the idea of a priest working a garden
in his free time, for instance. For convenience of exposition, extralinguistic
considerations of this nature will be loosely grouped under the umbrella term
‘contextual factors’. Probably some factor of this sort underlies the emergence
in the translation of (27) of the English possessive pronoun in the subject
expression and in the predicate.

Thus in the case of locative predications with animate subjects, we have two
distributional possibilities: a locative preposition may or may not occur before
the locative predicate according to the sense intended, or else it has to appear
obligatorily, and the distinction between the two cases is established through
contextual factors.

2.1.2 However, when we come to locative predications with an inanimate
subject such as:

30. *Is-sigaretti (qeghdin) il-kaxxa
   The-cigarettes the-box
31. *Iċ-ċavetta (qieghda) il-kexxun  
   The-key the-drawer

    even with an appropriate intonation contour, these expressions are interpret­
    able only as a mere listing of nominals, unless an appropriate locative
    preposition precedes the place nominal. The sharp distinction between an
    (animate) entity and a place seems to be blurred in the case of inanimate
    entities, and it is possible to interpret the nominals in predicate position in (30)
    and (31) as entity, rather than place referring expressions.

    However, contextual factors may lead to the overcoming of the tendency
    illustrated in (30) and (31) as in the case of predication (32)

32. Il-vapur (qieghed) il-port  
   The-ship the-harbour
   “The ship is in the harbour”

    in which the subject expression refers to an inanimate entity and the
    predication is interpreted as expressing a locative relation even though there is
    no locative preposition preceding the predicate.

2.1.3 It is opportune at this stage to take a closer look at the locative
    expression ‘qieghed’ which may optionally occur in a locative predication. This
    expression is derivationally associated with the verb ‘qaghad’ encoding physical
    location. It displays a morphological inflection similar to that of adjectives
    (singular masculine qiegfried, singular feminine qieghida, (common) plural
    qegfhdin). Syntactically it can occupy, like adjectives, predicate position cf.

33. Ġanni marid  
    John sick (masculine)
    “John is sick”

34. Ġanni qieghed  
    John located
    “John is without a job”

    but unlike adjectives it may occur before a locative predicate as we have just
    been seeing, and in verbal sentences, within the verb phrase:

35. L-istudent qieghed jistudja hafna  
    The-student he studies a-lot

    For an account of this occurrence of ‘qieghed’ in verbal sentences cf. Borg
    1981: ch. 5, sections 2.2 and 3.1. Traditionally ‘qieghed’ is called a present or
    active participle, but I have characterised it as a reflexive causative adjectival­
    ization, involving the notion of (reflexive) agency and thereby requiring the
    presence of the feature of animacy in its subject (Borg 1981, p. 134). There are
    other such particles which can occur as the only verbal element in a complete
    sentence:

36. It-tifel miexi lejn id-dar  
    The-boy walking (masculine) towards the-house
    “The boy is walking home”
37. It-tabib tielaq issa  
   The-doctor leaving (masculine) now  
   "The doctor is leaving now"

but unlike the occurrences of ‘qieghed’ in locative predications, the presence of
‘miexi’ and ‘tielaq’ in (36) and (37) is not optional.

Semantically, ‘qieghed’ encodes location (in space) in present time, but there
is the further aspectual component of present time duration within limits
roughly co-terminous with the moment of utterance (cf. Borg 1981, ch. 4
section 5.0, for a discussion of the semantic structure associated with
‘qieghed’).

Now the encoding of location in space is not restricted to present time
reference only. An entity may be encoded as located in space in past time.

38. It-tifel kien (qieghed) id-dar  
   The-boy he-was the-house  
   “The boy was at home”

39. It-tifel qaghad id-dar  
   he-stayed  
   “The boy stayed at home”

40. Ic-cavetta kienet (qeghda) fil-kexxun  
   The-key she-was in-the-drawer  
   “The key was in the drawer”

41. *Iċ-ċavetta qaghdet fil-kexxun  
   she-stayed

(38) to (41) express a locative relation in past time. However, in the case of
an animate subject we have two possible expressions. (38) is a plain statement
of location of the boy at home in past time, from the point of view of an
observer (the speaker). In (39) however, the boy as an agent is reflexively
responsible for his (past) location at home. With inanimate subjects however,
we have only one possibility: its locational relation can only be observed by a
third party, as in (40); it cannot be willed by the subject itself. This leaves us
with a problem of a semantic nature: the voluntary component requiring the
feature of “animacy” in the subject expression is found not only in the sense of
the verb ‘qaghad’ but it should also be present in the sense of the participle
‘qieghed’. Yet ‘qieghed’ occurs with both animate and inanimate subjects,
unlike ‘qaghad’.

Possibly, the optional use of the locative participle with animate subjects was
at some stage syntactically extended to express also the location in present time
of inanimate subjects. The requirement of the feature “animacy” in the subject
would have given way to a syntactic overgeneralization, made easier by the
optional status of ‘qieghed’ for expressing the present location of animate
subjects. In fact, while for past location the opposition ‘kien (qieghed)’ vs
‘qaghad’ correlates with “mere location” vs “willed location” as in predications
(38) and (39), in the two locative expressions (42) and (43)
42. It-tifel id-dar
   The-boy the-house
   "The boy is at home"

43. It-tifel qieghed id-dar
   "The boy is at home"

The absence or presence of ‘qieghed’ does not correlate with “mere location” vs “willed location” even though the subject is animate in both cases. Both (42) and (43) encode the mere location in the present of the boy at home, and that is why we have been speaking of the optional presence of ‘qieghed’ in locative predications. For encoding of willed present location of an animate subject one would have to use a different construction as in (44)

44. It-tifel qed/qieghed joqghod id-dar
   The-boy he-stays the-house
   "The boy is staying at home"

for an account of which cf. Borg 1981, ch. 4, section 5.0

2.1.4 In predication (20)

20. (*hu)
   It-tifel (qieghed) id-dar
   (jinsab)

the locative expression ‘qieghed’ alternates optionally with another locative expression ‘jinsab’. In traditional terms this would be called the Imperfect form of a seventh form verb morphologically related to the first form verb ‘sab’ “he found”. In the framework developed in Borg 1981, ‘jinsab’ would be characterized as a passive causative verb; furthermore the meaning of the Imperfect is characterised as encoding unrestricted habituality with respect to the moment of utterance, so that there are no limits set for the “present duration” of an entity “being found (somewhere)”, unlike the constrained “present duration” of the location encoded by ‘qieghed’ (cf. the previous section, 2.1.3).

Thus the Imperfect form of the verb is used for a generic statement such as (45)

45. Ix-xemx titla’ fil-Lvant
    The-sun she-rises in-the-East
    “The sun rises in the East”

or for a timeless statement as in (46)

46. Tnejn u tnejn jaghmlu erba’
    Two and two they-make four

However, as far as the encoding of physical location is concerned, I cannot detect in my idiolect, a significant variation in the syntactic distribution of these two expressions, except that possibly there is a tendency for inanimate subjects to prefer ‘qieghed’ rather than ‘jinsab’.
2.1.5 Before concluding our consideration of locative predications, a further distinction has to be mentioned. As I pointed out in Borg (1981: ch. 2) the alternation in the syntactic distribution of the preposition ‘lil’ “to” preceding what could be called a direct object in Maltese (but cf. Borg and Comrie 1984) is explicable in terms of a classification of nominal expressions into a hierarchy involving a continuum from what are called first order nominals to second order nominals (cf. Lyons 1977, ch. 11). This distinction is also relevant to an analysis of the encoding of location in Maltese. Let us assume that the external world contains a number of individual persons, animals and other more or less discrete physical objects which are publicly observable, whose perceptual properties are relatively constant under normal conditions and which are located, at any point in time, in what is, psychologically at least, a three dimensional space. Such entities are called first order entities and the nominal expressions which correspond to them are called first order nominals. Events, processes and states of affairs, on the other hand, which are located in time, are called second order entities and the corresponding nominals, second order nominals.

All the locative predications we have examined so far have had a first order nominal for a subject, whether animate or inanimate, and correspondingly the locative expressions ‘qieglied’ and ‘jinsab’ alternated optionally with zero in all of them. To predicate the location of second order nominals in past time, however, we find the obligatory presence of the expression ‘gara’ “he happened” as in the following sentence:

47. L-ispluzjoni grat fil-hamsa
    The-explosion she-happened in-the-five
    “The explosion occurred at five”

or that of ‘sar’ “he became” as in:

48. Il-glieda saret dal-ghodu
    The-fight she-happened this-the-morning
    “The fight took place this morning”

In this paper, I will make use of the syntactic optionality of ‘qieglied’/‘jinsab’ in locative predications, as opposed to the obligatory presence of ‘gara’/‘sar’ in sentences (47) and (48) in order to assign to the former, but not to the latter, the special syntactic status of copular (as opposed to fully verbal) function. This assignment also conveniently brings to an end, for present purposes, our consideration of predications of (physical) location.

3.0 Let us at this point turn to predication (19)

19. Pietru ( hu )
    (?qieglied) l-eżaminatur
    (*jinsab )

which we can conveniently label “equative”. If an expression occurs between the subject and the predicate, the most acceptable would be an appropriate form of the personal pronoun: singular masculine ‘hu’/‘huwa’, singular
feminine ‘hi’/‘hija’, (common) plural ‘huma’ (the variants in the singular being probably phonologically conditioned).

The (new) information which is encoded by an equative predication such as (19) is the identity of the subject and the predicate expressions such that they have the same referent. Both the proper name ‘Pietru’ in (19) and the definite noun in the predicate ‘l-ezaminatur’ are singular terms. We have already met the syntactic structure

\[ \text{definite article + noun} \]

in locative predicates, but whereas here we had an expression identifying a place, in an equative predicate we have an expression identifying an entity. In such predications, the juxtaposition, with an appropriate intonation contour, of two entity referring expressions, signals and identity relation between the two and this relation is optionally further encoded by an appropriate form of the personal pronoun (but cf. predications (51), (52) in section 5.0).

4.0 Formally, we could say that the difference between an equative and a locative predication corresponds to the exclusion of the expression ‘qieghed’ and ‘jinsab’ in equatives, and the exclusion of the personal pronoun in locatives. Except that the exclusion of the expression ‘qieghed’ is not so clear in the case of equative predications. This distribution can be explained as follows. A predication such as (19) is interpreted equatively if it occurs without any copular expression between subject and predicate, or if it occurs with a personal pronoun.

4.1 But when the form ‘qieghed’ occurs in such a predication (with an entity, instead of a place-referring predicate) it is understood that the identity relation being predicated is a temporary one. In this context the locative ‘qieghed’ encodes not the physical location with limited present time duration of the subject entity in a place, but its abstract temporary (limited present time duration) location in the role identified by the predicate.

In an equative predication with a proper noun as subject and with the personal pronoun as copula it is possible to commute the relative order of subject and predicate, and the predication of identity is unaffected:

19. Pietru (hu) l-ezaminatur
   "Peter is the examiner"

49. L-ezaminatur (hu) Pietru
   "The examiner is Peter"

But it is not possible to commute the subject and predicate of such a predication when the copular expression is ‘qieghed’

19. Pietru qieghed l-ezaminatur
   "Peter is temporarily the examiner"

50. *L-ezaminatur qieghed Pietru

The only case (to my knowledge) where a predication like (50) would be possible would be in a very specific context, say in a discussion regarding the
assignment of roles for actors in a film or stage production, in which case one could understand that a certain person (identified by a proper name or a definite nominal) is playing the role of 'Peter'.

4.2 Notice also that in role predications, unless the context (such as the one just mentioned) made it absolutely clear that the predicate is to be understood as identifying a role rather than an entity, we have the obligatory presence of the locative expression ‘qieghed’ – this accounts for the dubious acceptability judgement associated with ‘qieghed’ in predication (19), in which this specification context is not given.

Notice furthermore that the locative expression ‘jinsab’ is rejected in an equative predication, and ‘qieghed’ is preferred to it in a role predication. This unequal distribution of the two locative expressions in role predications may be explained in terms of the respective characterisation of their meaning: the temporary nature of abstract location in a role is more compatible with the limited present time duration encoded by ‘qieghed’ than with the limitless present time duration encoded by ‘jinsab’.

In addition to the locative copulas ‘qieghed’ and ‘jinsab’ we can therefore include in our growing list, an appropriate form of the personal pronoun as the equative or identity copula. Furthermore, we can now distinguish two functions for the locative copula ‘qieghed’ the encoding of physical location and that of abstract location in a role.

5.0 We come now to the predication in (18) in which we find a clear acceptance of a form of the personal pronoun and an equally clear rejection of the locative expressions ‘qieghed’ and ‘jinsab’.

18. Il-giżimina (hi)
   (*qieghda) fjura
   (*tinsab)

Notice that this distribution is exactly the opposite of what we find in a locative predication such as (20)

20. It-tifel (*hu)
   (qieghed) id-dar
   (jinsab)

On the other hand there is only one other predication in our list, in which a form of the personal pronoun, is freely insertable, namely the equative predication (19) we considered in section 3.0:

19. Pietru (hu)
   (?qieghed) l-eżaminatur
   (*jinsab)

Examining the sense relation which holds between the subject and the predicate in predication (18), it will be seen that we have here a hyponymous relation, that is the sense of the subject expression is included in that of the predicate. Now we have seen that the personal pronoun encodes an identity relation in equative predications, and its occurrence in a predication expressing
an inclusive relation would seem to require some explanation. After all, we have seen the locative preposition ‘fi’ which encodes inclusion, appearing in certain locative predicates.

Of course, it is always possible that through syntactic over-generalization, the function of an expression could come to bear little relation to its meaning—the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign is not restricted to word level only. Before having recourse to such a solution, however, let us look at the predication in (16)

16. Ganni ( ?hu )
   ( ?qieghed ) tabib
   ( ?jinsab )

which resembles (18) in that both predicates contain an undefined common noun, but which manifests a different distribution with respect to the copular expression which may potentially be interposed between its subject and its predicate.

Predication (16) is remarkable in fact, in that it seems to accept with difficulty any of the three copular expressions we have considered. Taking our cue from the different distributional patterns manifested in (16) and (18), we could say that there is in fact a semantic difference between the two: the predicate ‘tabib’ is predicated synthetically and contingently of the subject ‘Ganni’ in (16), whereas the predicate ‘fjura’ is predicated analytically of the subject ‘il-ġiżimina’ in (18): I can see the truth of the proposition expressed in (18) going only by my native knowledge of the language.

It seems that the occurrence of the personal pronoun in a predication like (18) encodes an identity relation between the subject expression and the predicate expression which identifies the subject’s essence or essential characteristic:

“The jasmine is (=) flowerness”

In this case the predicate ‘fjura’ would be construed as a characterising universal. Consequently, we will have to distinguish the equative function of the personal pronoun in copular position from its essentially defining function in predications like (18). On the other hand, it is possible to arrive at a somewhat different conclusion by maintaining one undifferentiated equative function for the copular personal pronoun encoding the identity relation and attributing the differences to the types of terms involved in such a relation. I will not pursue the matter further here, except to mention predications like the following in addition to (18) and (19):

18. Il-ġiżimina fjura
   “Jasmines are flowers”

19. Pietru l-eżaminatur
   “Peter is the examiner”

51. Id-disprament ( hu )
    (*qieghed) dwejjaq
    (*jinsab )
The-despair sorrow
"To despair is sorrowful"

52. Malta (*hi)
   (*qieghda) gżira
   (*tinsab)

"Malta is an island"

6.0 The dubious status of the personal pronoun in predication (16) on the other hand,

16. Ġanni (*hu)
    (?qieghed) tabib
    (?jinsab)

could be explained in terms of the incompatibility of the copular expression encoding an essential relation between subject and predicate with a predication expressing a contingent relation between subject and predicate as in (16).

The locative expressions in (16) could just be construed as encoding a role relation between subject and predicate, and here too I note a preference for 'qieghed' against 'jinsab' in my idiolect. The role relation does not come out clearly as in the case of (19) with 'qieghed' occurring with a definite noun predicate.

Overall, it would seem preferable to consider predications like (16) as with difficulty accepting any copular expression. We could characterise such predications as encoding a contingent characteristic, as opposed to a predication like (18) encoding analytic or essential definition.

7.0 Finally, we come to predication (17)

17. L-istudent (*hu)
    (?qieghed) marid
    (?jinsab)

"The student is sick"

which is the only one in which the expression 'jinsab' alone is judged acceptable.

7.1 It would be easy to explain this distribution by saying that the locative expression 'jinsab' encodes the abstract location of the subject-entity in a particular state identified by the predicate. Location in a state, even though of a contingent nature as in (17), has a timeless quality about it which is much closer to the meaning of 'jinsab', namely "location with limitless present duration" than to that of 'qieghed', namely "location with limited present duration". This would account for the preference of 'jinsab' against that of 'qieghed'. We could therefore, provisionally distinguish within the locative function of 'jinsab', that of encoding physical location as in predication (20), from that of encoding abstract location in a (contingent) state as in (17).

7.2 However, there are other predications with adjective predicates in which we do not find the same distributional pattern for the copular expression as that exhibited in predication (17).
53. L-istudent (hu) (*qieghed) bravu/injorant (*jinsab)
   The-student clever/ignorant
   *The student is clever/ignorant"

54. Il-qattiel (hu) (*qieghed) kattiv (*jinsab)
   The-murderer cruel
   "The murderer is cruel"

55. L-arblu (hu) (*qieghed) qasir (*jinsab)
   The-pole short
   "The pole is short"

The distributional pattern in (53) to (55) parallels exactly the pattern in the essential/analytic predication (18): only the personal pronoun is acceptable. Predication (54) in particular, seems close to (18) in that arguably the predicate "kattiv' is predicated analytically of the subject. However, I do not want to pursue this matter further, since in any case the predicates in (53) and (55) are predicated synthetically of their subjects respectively.

In predication (55), as far as the individual identified in the subject expression is concerned, it is not a necessary quality or state of the pole that it should be short, but as far as this individual pole is concerned, its state of shortness is permanent: it is necessary a posteriori. The presence of the personal pronoun here means that the predicate 'qasir' is being construed as a characterizing universal expression, encoding a contingent but synthetically necessary characteristic with which the subject is identified via the personal pronoun. In the case of predication (53) we do not have to hold that the predicates 'bravu'/injorant' encode irreversible states, but they can still be interpreted as characterizing universals, that is to say, "being clever" or "being ignorant" are construed as a posteriori synthetically necessary characteristics of the subject entity. This at any rate is the way they seem to be interpreted in the language, going by the synthetic distribution of the copular expression.

7.3 So far we have seen adjective predicates occurring with the copular expression 'jinsab' as in (17)

17. L-istudent (*hu) marid (*qieghed) marid (jinsab)

and with a form of the personal pronoun as in (53), (54) and (55) here exemplified by (55)

55. L-arblu (hu) (*qieghed) qasir (*jinsab)
Now the adjective predicate in (56)

56. It-tifel (hu)
    (qieglied) kwiet
    (jinsab)

can occur with all three copular expressions. Drawing upon our conclusions in section 7.1 and 7.2 we can say that the predication with the adjective predicate 'kwiet', "quiet" can be interpreted as encoding a contingent state when the copular expression is 'jinsab': the boy happens to be in a quiet state but it could very well have been otherwise. When it occurs with the personal pronoun it is interpreted as encoding a synthetic a posteriori characteristic of the subject: the boy has a quiet disposition as opposed to say, a mischievous one. When it occurs with 'qieglied' the predication is understood as implying that the boy is playing at being quiet, that is, 'qieglied' encodes the abstract location of limited present duration of the boy in a state of quiet.

This varying syntactic pattern is found also in the case of predications with an adjective predicate but with an inanimate subject, except that in such a case the occurrence of 'qieglied' is excluded:

57. Il-bieb (hu)
    (*qieglied) maqful
    (jinsab)

The door locked (masculine)
"The door is locked"

The exclusion of 'qieglied' here seems to contradict the notion of syntactic over-generalization and the consequent expression of the requirement of animacy in the subject of 'qieglied', to which recourse was made in section 2.1.3. However, the exclusion of 'qieglied' in this context may be due to an interpretation whereby the playing of roles would be restricted to animate subjects.

8.0 These remarks bring our consideration of different types of predication to an end. However, reference was made in section 1.2 to a point mentioned by Aquilina (1965) and taken up by D. Zammit Mangion (1977: p. 57–58). The occurrence of the personal pronoun in copular position is tied up with an emphatic function. Since Aquilina does not elaborate further, the point may be tackled by considering, for example, an imaginary argument between two speakers A and B in which disagreement and emphasis occur:

A. 58. Il-ġizimina haxixa
    "Jasmines are vegetables"

B. 59. Le, il-ġizimina fjura
    "No, jasmines are flowers"

A. 60. Mhux veru, il-ġizimina haxixa
    Not true
    "That's not true, jasmines are vegetables"
61. Qed nghidlek, il-ġizimina fjura
I-tell-you
"I insist, jasmines are flowers"

The essential predication in (61) occurs in an emphatic context. The truth of the predication is being asserted by speaker B in the face of flat contradiction by speaker A. Even in this emphatic context, however, marked not only by the preceding expression ‘qed nghidlek’ but also by such supra segmental factors as a change in the level of loudness, the personal pronoun can still occur optionally. We meet with this optionality in emphatic contexts even in the case of equative and locative predications. Clearly, simple correlation with emphasis cannot be the solution to this problem.

Now our considerations have led us to uncover not only one but at least three expressions which can assume copular function. To a certain extent these expressions occur in complementary distribution: the personal pronoun is excluded in locative predications and in predications of contingent states; ‘qieghed’ and ‘jinsab’ are excluded in analytically essential predications; any copular expression seems unacceptable in contingent predications with nominal predicates, and the expression ‘qieghed’ can be considered to occur obligatorily in role predications. Notwithstanding this intricate distributional pattern, however, most predications can also occur without a copular expression, at least in their most unmarked form (present tense, third person singular). Yet we have seen that there is considerable differentiation in predicative function.

I tentatively propose that when a speaker wants to spell out as clearly as he can the predicative function he has in mind to make sure his meaning is understood in an otherwise potentially ambiguous utterance, one of the mechanisms he can have recourse to is precisely the interpretation of the particular (optional) copular expression he needs to make his meaning more explicit. It may be that an emphatic context is one in which this need would be particularly felt, but it is certainly not the only one, and even then, a speaker may choose to omit copular expression.

Clearly further work in this area is needed to throw more light on this mysterious ability of copulas in Maltese to be or not to be, or at least, to appear or not to appear.

References


