

Language and Village Dialects

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Language, being man's primary tool of self-expression through sounds that are recognizable as vehicles of ideas, is made possible by the sounds that are produced by the human vocal organs. To the person that doesn't understand the language, every foreign language is no more than a jumble of sounds. One's inherited language, being made ideologically recognizable by a conventional relation of sound to meaning, constitutes the major evidence of national identity. Maltese in this sense provides evidence of the linguistic identity of Malta, but does it also provide evidence of the national identity of Gozo? Yes, it does.

Maltese is the national language of both Malta and Gozo. Does this mean that there is one standard Maltese for both Malta and Gozo? Indeed, the inhabitants of the villages spread throughout the two islands in their speech betray phonetic, intonational and linguistic peculiarities that are common to one or more villages only. The answer to the question therefore is that, apart from the general definition of language as the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in an agreed way, we have to consider also another definition of a linguistic nature in a narrower sense. This is the definition of dialects as "a form of speech peculiar to a particular region; a subordinate variety of a language with non-standard vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar."

In the Preface to *An Introduction to a Survey of Scottish Dialects*, Angus McIntosh states:

"In the past half-century, the close study of living dialects has been actively pursued in a number of countries and the investigation of their interrelationships is a subject which has come to occupy a respected place among other branches of linguistic science. There is, however, a considerable dif-

ference between recognising the importance of a subject and being in a position to launch a large-scale investigation connected with it" (McIntosh 1961:vii).

This conclusion is applicable to the study of dialects in the Maltese Islands, since a survey which was started a few decades ago, was only partially completed, leaving a void in this important area of research.

A SURVEY OF DIALECTS IN GOZO

The aim of the survey was to cover dialects in Malta and Gozo. Only the results of the survey for Gozo are contained in a report entitled "A survey of Contemporary Dialectal Maltese" which presents the results of the field-work undertaken between 1964 and 1971 in Gozo, on behalf of the University of Malta and the University of Leeds, under the direction of J. Aquilina and B.S.J. Isserlin.

Isserlin had this to say about Maltese and Gozitan dialects:

"The Maltese Islands are situated in the centre of the Mediterranean, and their language reflects their situation, with an amalgam of influences from all directions of the compass. A basic stock of Arabic (mainly North African) derivation is fused with additions from European languages, especially English. The language thus developed occurs moreover in two essential guises: the standard Maltese spoken by the educated - the literary language - is juxtaposed with non-literary dialectal Maltese at home, essentially in the villages (though also found in the towns). This latter form of speech, representing old traditions, is again subdivided: Gozitans speech differs from the spoken Maltese of the main island (it seems indeed to go back to somewhat different traditions) and within each of the two main islands there are distinct local and regional dialectal variants which may sometimes cover hardly more territory than that of a single village. Such a situation has long attracted the interest of scholars who are here faced not only with a situation of considerable linguistic interest, both where the present situation and the past linguistic history are concerned, but also

favoured by the accessibility of the linguistic territory and its subregions and the presence of an educated and friendly population who are interested in their language and its story, and willing to answer queries about it.

“Maltese has, in the past, largely been studied by individual scholars who could naturally not cover the whole of the ground with equal detailed attention; however, in 1963, Prof. J. Aquilina and the undersigned thought that the knowledge of contemporary spoken Maltese dialects could be considerably advanced through the systematic study of the whole linguistic territory, village by village, by linguistic teams eliciting everywhere answers to the same three master questionnaires - phonetic, structural and lexical - as well as collecting samples of free conversation: answers could be preserved on tape recordings, and where necessary lexical items be given visual coverage (mainly by photographs, sometimes by sketches). The results would be a systematic and minute coverage equalled in few linguistic territories in the Arabic spoken world for which Maltese is specially relevant in particular. Field-work by the teams (usually for a few weeks annually) began in 1964 and continued into the 1970s; though recently there has been some additional field research undertaken by Dr Agius of Leeds University in Gozo. Where possible informants were chosen from among older people, little affected by modern speech. The collection of data has been practically completely achieved in Gozo, but the record of the main island, Malta, still shows some gaps which need filling. The Gozitan survey has produced very interesting results: it has, for example, proved possible to map the penetration of standard Maltese into territories with local traditions. This is evident in particular in the field of phonology, the results of investigations in which have been published with the addition of maps. Morphology shows less diversity, but lexis included items of unusual interest, such as the vocabulary taken from the last windmill still working in Gozo at the time when we worked there. It is, of course, a fact that with the spread of modern technology traditional crafts are left

behind, and their vocabulary is lost with them.” (*Personal communication from Isserlin to Aquilina, 16 January 1995*).

The report on the Gozo dialectal survey, printed by the Leeds University Printing Service in 1981, contains, besides the prolegomena, informative chapters on (i) The Study of Maltese Dialects in the Past by E. Fenech; (ii) The Comparative Linguistic Background of Maltese by B.S.J. Isserlin; (iii) Phonetic Analysis of Gozitan Dialectal Maltese by P.J. Roach (this section presents a phonetic analysis of recordings of speakers from different villages in Gozo); and (iv) the Phonology of Gozitan Dialectal Maltese by J. Aquilina, E. Fenech and B.S.J. Isserlin. This publication, the first of its kind, preserves a historical record for the study of Gozitan dialects.

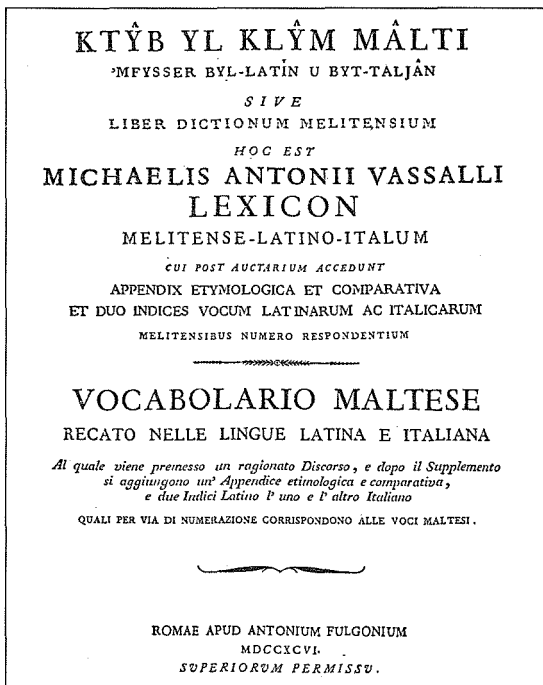
DIALECTAL PECULIARITIES

M.A. Vassalli (1764-1829) was the first Maltese scholar to take interest in Maltese dialectology and, incidentally, as far as is known, also the first man to think of Malta as a nation and of the Maltese Language as *Lingua Nazionale* - two designations which took a long time to come into their own in our time, and even now sometimes seem to be still gasping for breath.

Vassalli divided Maltese into five dialects.

“In cinque dialetti suole distinguersi dal volgo la lingua nostra, nei quali scherzando sogliamo contraffare gl’ uni agl’ altri. Eglino sono detti in maltese = *Lsÿn tal blÿd*, *lsÿn ta Ghawdex*, *lsÿn tar-rhajjël t’ysfel*, *lsÿn tar-rhajjël ta fûq*, u *lsÿn tar-rhajjël tan-nofs* = *Dialetto delle città*, *dialetto del Gozo*, *dialetto de’ paesi bassi*, *dialetto de’ paesi alti*, e *dialetto de’ paesi di mezzo*. Ogni dialetto poi à i suoi dialettini particolari d’un dato luogo, dai quali ciascuno fra noi si riconosce di qual parte sia, perchè sono molto sensibili. E’ principalmente si distinguono dalla variazione della pronuncia, che consiste ne’ suoni, o consonanti, o vocali, o in entrambi.

“Per dialetto della città, che io chiamo *di porto*, perchè parlasi



The title page of
M. A. Vassalli's
*Lexicon Melitense-
Latino-Italum.*

ne' paesi che sono sul porto principale, s'intende il linguaggio della nuova Capitale e suo Borgo, della città detta l' Isola per essere penisola dentro il porto, di Burmula, di Borgo – Santangelo, e de' castelli d' intorno. Nel dialetto di questi luoghi, che si possono considerare come una gran città, si distinguono de' dialettini a parte: poichè gl' Isolani nella loro loquela differiscono alquanto dai Burmulani, e questi dai Borgheggiani, come tutti dai Vallettani. Tra gl' annoverati dialetti di Malta questo è il più corrotto, non solo per la frequenza de' forestieri, la quale molto influisce nelle lingue, ma per un certo fanatismo che alcuni ànno di maltezzare voci estere e di barbarizzare l'idioma nativo con espressioni siciliane, italiane, francesi e simili." (Vassalli 1796: xvi).

Tracing the origin and causes of dialectal peculiarities needs more field-work than has been done so far, at least till such time as one may resume

and continue our dialectal survey which had to stop halfway. For instance, it would be very interesting to trace the similarity in the pronunciation of uvular /q/ in parts of Gozo (Xewkija and Triq ta' l-Ghajn) and the Cottonera area in Malta and, not less interesting, the dialectal intonation varieties in connected speech.

An article of great importance with regard to the dialects of Gozo is Roach's "Phonetic Analysis of Gozitan Dialectal Maltese". Without minimising the importance of the other articles, it could be stated that Roach's article, more than the others, makes a scientific analysis of Gozitan dialects. In the section which presents a phonetic analysis of recordings of speakers from different villages in Gozo, Roach writes:

"The recorded material consists of 115 words contained in the Phonological Questionnaire elicited one by one from the informants by a Maltese speaker. The questionnaire was designed to provide information on certain specific areas of Maltese phonology as well as to gather general phonetic information. Some of the words are rather archaic or obscure, occasionally to the extent that they were not in the informant's vocabulary at all.

"The recordings were made on a portable tape recorder, usually in the informant's home, and in most cases were necessarily made in conditions which were acoustically far from ideal.

"Because of the difficulty of obtaining informants, there is in general only one speaker from each village on Gozo, though the recorded material also contains various incomplete attempts at the questionnaire by several speakers. As a result, there is no possibility of accurately assessing the influence of such factors as age, sex, social class, occupation or education" (Aquilina and Isserlin 1981: 64).

Roach's remark that "some of the words are rather archaic or obscure, occasionally to the extent that they were not in the informant's vocabulary at all" needs explanation. These archaic words are current mainly in villages; they are spoken by the older generation and in several cases now are being replaced by Romance loan-words or are entirely forgotten

Here we are giving the whole text quoted by Preca. As elsewhere, we are making use of the I.P.A. symbols.²⁷

<u>Countryside/Gozo Dialect</u>	<u>Standard Maltese</u>	<u>Translation</u>
[kent'hierð mid'do:r	[kont'hierðsa mid'da:r	I was going out of
u rait il'a:ðjel	u rait il'o:ðjol	the house when I saw
'ta:kem 'jiekəl	'ta:kəm 'jiekəl	your calf eating the
it'tiben tal'ʔəmb	it'tiben tal'ʔəmb	straw. How it
kem i'hebbu	kem i'hobbu	likes it!
dʒiet dib'biəna	dʒiet dub'biəna	A fly came and
fuʔ'ʔiftu	fuʔ'ʔoftu	sat on its lip.
u'ramae j'harrek	u'rama j'harrek	It started moving
'ro:su	'ra:su	its head and ring-
u j'doʔ il 'dʒildʒəl	u j'doʔ il'dʒoldʒəl	ing its bell.
il ʔid'diem 'minnu	il ʔud'diem 'minnu	Beyond it
kien em il'hmo:r	kien em il'hma:r	there was your
'ta:kem	'ta:kəm	donkey
u l baʔ'ro:t 'ta:nə	u l baʔ'riet 'ta:nə	and our cows.
ʔ bat i'ne:ðdem	ʔ bat i'no:ðdom	I began counting
u dah'haltəm	u dah'haltəm	them and I led
'dʒəuwa	'dʒəuwa	in
do:k il'hi:n	da:k il'hi:n	At that instant
kien em	kien em	there was
'ʔata a'so:far	'ʔata a'sa:far	a flight of birds
u'to:ru	u'ta:ru	which flew away
'ussa do:n 'killu	'issa da:n 'kellu	Now, all this
ma kien 'minnu 'fein	ma kien 'minnu'fein	was not true at all.
kent'rieʔə	kənt 'rieʔə	I was asleep
fuʔ is'sidd ə	fuʔis'sodda	on the bed

A page from Aquilina and Isserlin's study on Gozitan dialects *A Survey of Contemporary Dialectal Maltese*, which was published by Leeds University Press in 1981.

by the younger people. As for the remark that "they are not in the informant's vocabulary at all", one must note that archaic words which survive in one village may have disappeared in another village in the process of obsolescence.

This aspect of Gozitan dialects and intonation provides a fruitful field for further lexical research that will throw light on the history of Gozitan dialects.

NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There is a need for deeper study of dialects in Gozo, not only taking every dialect independently but also comparatively within the islands where they are spoken and also with the dialects of mainland Malta. Through this comparative study, to which must be added for comparative purposes Sicilian dialects and North African Arabic, we can eventually reconstruct the complex picture of the origin of Gozitan and Mal-

tese dialects within a wider historic context. But to achieve this purpose more research work has to be carried out in the two islands.

The whole research commitment, now too long interrupted, when and if it is eventually resumed, will take some time to complete not only in Gozo but also in Malta, the two islands being dialectally complementary.

In the words of Isserlin, a number of constraints could be encountered in this regard:

“Future work on Gozitan Maltese, and indeed of Maltese dialects in general, holds out promise but it is also at present faced with difficulties. It should, for instance, be possible to some extent to investigate whether the comparative isolation of the speech of some villages as against the presence of outside influences in others can be linked with population movements or their absence in the past - the documented arrival of newcomers settling down in some localities, and intermarriage with people from other places, as against the comparative absence of such features elsewhere. Parish and other records should offer insight here. Again, better knowledge of archaic features in dialectal Maltese might be relevant for a better understanding of the relation of Maltese to both its Arabic and Romance parent stocks. On the debit side, there is the present shortage of manpower in the University of Malta in particular. It has not so far proved feasible for a staff with many teaching commitments to bring out another fascicle, dealing with Gozitan morphology, to follow the one on phonology which appeared in 1981. It is most desirable to have the publication of materials readily available now, and the gathering of additional data where required addressed as a priority at University and indeed inter-University level. A small permanent organisation at the University of Malta and elsewhere, Leeds in particular, backed up by research funds and a staff is urgently required to assure the necessary progress of this branch of research which is assuredly of very wide interest and appeal. (*Personal communication from Isserlin to Aquilina dated 16 January 1995*).

CONCLUSION

Some people still mistakenly consider dialectal peculiarities as forms of debased Maltese. Even educated village boys and girls continue to speak their native dialects in the villages but drop them and replace them with the Valletta dialect when they converse with city people - they say "jitektellmu bil-pulit".

There is still a lot to be done, and it is important that it is done with urgency before further losses are registered by our dialectal varieties in the various Maltese and Gozitan towns and villages due to the growing intrusion of "standard" Maltese brought about by demographic interaction and mass communications in such a small area of land.

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