

Italian loanwords in Maltese and the vocabulary of “Levant Italian”

Although the majority of the Italo-Romance borrowings of Maltese is undoubtedly of Sicilian origin (Vàrvaro 2004), there is a relevant number of loanwords in Maltese deriving from Literary Italian and Italian dialects other than Sicilian. Unlike Sicilianisms, most of which date from the Middle Ages, borrowings from Literary Italian and regional varieties other than Sicilian started circulating in Maltese during the Knights’ rule of the island. These words concern not only the highest levels of the language, that is to say bureaucracy, justice and science, in which case their penetration is due to the use of Italian as a written language in the schools and in the public chancelleries, but also some peculiar semantic areas, such as trade and seafaring, that are evidence for the spread of Italian as a not only written *lingua franca* among the merchants, sailors and slaves of several nationalities who crowded Valletta’s harbour (Brincat 2003: 203-11). In this respect Malta’s *Porto Grande* can be compared with the coeval harbours in the Middle East and on the North-African coast, where a variety of Italian generally referred to as “Levant Italian” served as an international language for trade, diplomacy and ordinary justice (Bruni 1999).

This paper aims to investigate the relation within Italian loanwords in Maltese and the most characteristic lexicon of “Levant Italian”. Taking as a basis the Tunisian texts dating from the 17th century studied by Joe Cremona (1996; 1998) and comparing their vocabulary with the entries of Aquilina’s *Maltese English Dictionary*, the many features in common will be pointed out, especially for what concerns technical terms of corsairs such as *priza* ‘prey’, *skapula* ‘to escape’ and *furban* ‘corsair’ corresponding with the words *presa* ‘booty’, *(e)scapolare* ‘to escape’ and *furbinu* ‘(adj.) of a corsair’ recorded in Tunisian documents and absent with these acceptations from Sicilian and coeval Literary Italian. Phonetic evidence will also be used in the case, for instance, of Maltese *putarga* ‘mullet’s eggs’, whose initial consonant reveals a non-Tuscan (*bottarga*) and non-Sicilian (*bbutaraca*) derivation, just like the form *potarga* occurring in Tunisian deeds. As a result, interesting similarities between the linguistic Italianisation of Early Modern Malta, Tunis and other Levantine harbours will be shown, thus contributing to delineate the history of Maltese under the Knights’ rule in a wider Mediterranean context.

BRINCAT 2003 = Giuseppe B., *Malta. Una storia linguistica*, Recco.

BRUNI 1999 = Francesco B., *Lingua d’oltremare: sulle tracce del ‘Levant Italian’ in età preunitaria*, «Lingua Nostra», 60: 65-79.

CREMONA 1996 = Joseph C., *L’italiano in Tunisi*, in *Italiano e dialetti nel tempo. Saggi di grammatica per Giulio C. Lepschy*, edd. P. BENINCÀ, G. CINQUE, T. DE MAURO, N. VINCENT, Roma: 149-73.

CREMONA 1998 = Joseph C., “*La Lingua d’Italia*” nell’Africa settentrionale: *usi cancellereschi francesi nel tardo Cinquecento e nel Seicento*, in *La “Lingua d’Italia”: usi pubblici e istituzionali*, Atti del XXIX congresso internazionale della SLI (Malta, 3-5 novembre 1995), edd. G. ALFIERI & A. CASSOLA, Roma: 340-56.

VÀRVARO 2004 = Alberto V., *Maltese e siciliano: varietà a contatto nel tempo* [1988], in ID., *Identità linguistiche e letterarie nell’Europa romanza*, Roma: 167-79.