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Maltese: blending Semitic, Romance and Germanic lexemes

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Abstract: Malta's position at the centre of the Mediterranean attracted various conquerors and settlers, but in its present form Maltese has its origins in the Arabic dialect introduced by the Muslim conquest around the year 1000. Lexical Latinisation started early under Norman rule and kept increasing steadily up to the twentieth century thanks to contact with Chancery and spoken Sicilian up to the sixteenth century, and then with Italian which was introduced by the Knights of Malta. This article traces the historical developments and their influence on the Maltese language, providing statistics concerning the composition of the lexicon and the various methods by which it can be analysed. A look at the present situation explains how Maltese and English bilingualism in the schools and in society is affecting the spoken variety which is often marked by code-switching.

Keywords: Maltese, Italian, English, language contact, lexical stratigraphy

1 Malta's many languages

Situated right at the centre of the Mediterranean (90 km south of Sicily), the islands of Malta and Gozo (316 sq km, with 415,000 inhabitants) are not only exposed to the four winds and the main sea currents; they have always been at the mercy of the powers that sailed the waves. The first inhabitants, who erected the oldest free-standing stone buildings in the world (unique temples from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age), came from Sicily and may have spoken a Mediterranean language up to the Bronze Age (cf. Gimbutas 1997 and Mallory 1989), or an Indo-European language as early as 5,500 BC (Renfrew 1987, 1999). The Phoenicians settled there around 800 BC and absorbed the previous Bronze Age autochtones, the Romans took over in 218 BC, and were followed by the Byzantines in 535 AD. The first writings on stone were left by the Phoenicians around 700 BC, but the use of Greek

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as a high language is witnessed by two marble candelabra dated to the third or second century BC with parallel inscriptions in Punic and Greek,¹ and by a *tessera hospitalis* sent to Syracuse by the senate and people of Malta datable to circa 40 BC. The first Latin inscriptions belong to the age of Augustus (27 BC – 14 AD) and became abundant in the first three centuries of the Empire. Obviously inscriptions only reveal the formal, written, language, not the way the people spoke, but it is clear that during those long periods of colonization the small population, numbering between 5,000 and 10,000, practised cultural overlap and bilingualism, and probably underwent language shift with every new conquest. Suffice it to say that in Malta Roman rule lasted for about six centuries, during which time spoken Latin spread as far as Iberia, Gaul, Dacia and the Northwest African coasts, and it is therefore quite plausible that it was also adopted by Malta's tiny population. The same can be said of Greek under Byzantine rule, which lasted for about 350 years.

The turning point came in 870 when the Arabs made a violent raid on the islands. Arabic was certainly introduced then, although the conquering army would have spoken Berber, or an imperfect form of Arabic acquired in the Maghreb. However, the Arab historian and geographer al-Himyari says that the Muslim army devastated and abandoned the islands. In 1048 the Arabs brought in a new Arabic-speaking community that absorbed the few survivors of the previous one (Brincat 2011: 33–63) and the latter did not leave their mark on the new language. As a result the absence of a substratum makes it impossible to define the language spoken before Arabic. Therefore the origins of present-day Maltese lie in a variety of Maghrebi speech akin to, or derived from, the one that had developed in Sicily around the year 1000 and was still spoken in its western areas under the Normans. Affinity with Andalusian is probable but still under study.

When the Normans conquered the islands in 1090, the original Arabic dialect was immediately exposed to Latinisation, but this was a slow process, unlike Christianisation which was complete by 1250. When the Swabian Frederick II expelled the Muslims from Malta, as from Sicily, in 1223 and 1246 the local dialect lost contact with Classical Arabic as well as with its spoken varieties. Consequently Maltese developed on its own, slowly but steadily absorbing new words from Sicilian and later from Italian according to the needs of the developing community. The first documented presence of Romance speakers goes back to 1191–1223 when Malta was a Genoese fief (the troubadour Peire Vidal composed poems there in 1204–1205), and increased in 1224 when Tommaso da Celano and his followers were exiled from the Abruzzi. Under Angevin and Aragonese rule a castellan and French or Spanish soldiers with families were stationed at the *Castello a mare* that guarded the en-

¹ These candelabra were discovered at the temple of Tas-Silġ in Malta and helped abbé Barthélemy to decipher the Phoenician and Punic alphabet in 1758. One of them was later donated by the French Grand Master De Rohan to Louis XVI of France, and is now exhibited at the Louvre. The other one is at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta.

trance to the main harbour. The population kept growing, mainly through immigration from the north, especially under the Order of Saint John which obtained the islands as a fief from Charles V in 1530. The Knights Hospitallers repulsed the Ottoman siege of 1565 and brought prosperity to the island, raising it to the social levels of a contemporary European town, and the number of inhabitants increased dramatically from 17,000 to 96,000 between 1530 and 1797, when the Knights were ousted by Napoleon.

Before the coming of the Knights, Malta's high languages were Latin and Sicilian but the Knights chose Italian as their local official language although the majority were French or Spanish. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century the Maltese only wrote in Latin or Italian, some of them obtaining fame in Italy through their publications on a considerable variety of topics. In the largely agricultural society of that age very few persons received an education, certainly less than 10% of the population, but Italian terms were passed on from the educated few to the illiterate many through oral communication. A decisive factor for the influence of Italian on the Maltese language was the building of Valletta from 1566 to 1580. This was a completely new town on a previously uninhabited promontory straddling two harbours, and it was surrounded by very high fortifications. Its development required thousands of labourers, who came from Sicily, Italy, France and Spain, many of whom married local girls and settled permanently. Local workmen moved in from the different parts of Malta too, and their concentration in a small area comprising about two square kilometres produced a koiné where speakers of dialectal Maltese shed their peculiarities and absorbed a large number of terms from their foreign co-workers.

In 1796 a purist called this speech the most corrupt variety of Maltese but it was destined to become the basis for the standard language because by 1740 the residents of the harbour area (Valletta, Floriana and the three cities on the other side of the Grand Harbour) comprised no less than 41% of the total population of Malta and Gozo (Brincat 2011: 210–233). The demographic importance of immigration is witnessed by the composition of the pool of Maltese surnames: an analysis carried out in 2008 showed 137 locally-formed surnames shared by 130,660 persons, 1,947 Italian surnames borne by 183,889, and 3849 British surnames borne by 20,483 persons. One must explain that the large number of immigrants did not overwhelm the language because the individuals came in steadily but in small groups and were easily absorbed by the local inhabitants, among whom they were a minority in the family or workplace, and therefore had to adapt to their new environment by acquiring the local language. Another factor that accounts for the survival of Maltese, apart from the fact that the Knights did not enforce a linguistic policy (the Grand Masters rotated and never identified the Order with their particular nation of origin, although the majority were French or Spanish), was the very poor educational system which kept the great majority illiterate and therefore monolingual.

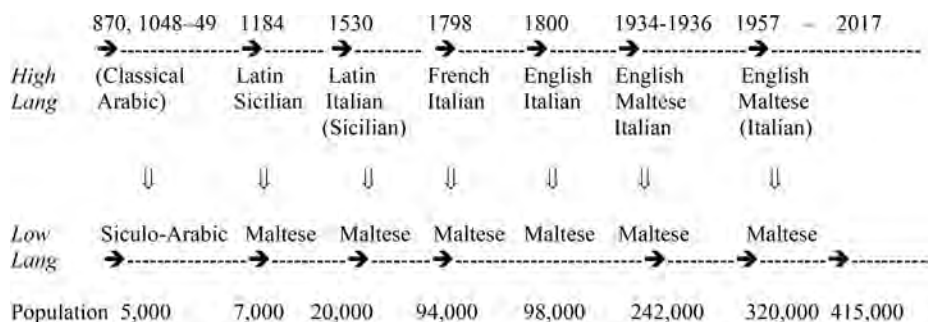


Fig. 1: Diglossia in Malta in the last millennium.

It was Napoleon who first announced a linguistic policy in Malta, but his attempts to introduce French failed when the Maltese revolted after a few months and the French were forced to surrender to Nelson's blockade after barely two years. Although English was introduced in Malta as early as 1800, it did not make much headway among the local population. The Colonial Office declared a policy of Anglicisation as early as 1813, but the Maltese resisted it, and stuck to Italian and the Catholic faith as the shields of their national identity. English was practically unknown in the Mediterranean in those days; moreover, the British troops (about 4,000) were housed in isolated barracks and rarely mixed with the locals, although hundreds of these were employed as craftsmen, gardeners, cooks and maids. Even the civilian British residents (another 4,000) generally kept aloof from the local middle class. The fact that the British mainly professed the Protestant religion did not encourage intermarriages, except for the Irish. In 1842 all the literates (11%) learned Italian, but only 4.5% could read, write and speak English, and not before 1911 did English overtake Italian, reaching 13.1% against 11.5%. Political pressure in the pre-War period made the knowledge of English indispensable for employment with the British armed forces, the police and the civil service. As a result, by 1931 it rose to 22.6%, whereas Italian remained at 13%. Compulsory primary schooling in 1946 set it on its way towards the 100% mark.

2 A composite lexicon

The effect of these historical events is reflected in the structure of the lexicon, which is made up of four stratigraphic levels. We have already noted the absence of a substratum, and as a consequence the first and principal stratum is medieval spoken Arabic, which still consists of the most basic vocabulary and the larger part of morphological rules, making it recognizable as a Semitic language. The superstratum is Sicilian, which penetrated into some areas of the core vocabulary (e.g. *missier* 'father', *arja* 'air', *temp* 'weather', and certain parts of the body: *spalla*,

Tab. 1: The stratigraphy of the Maltese language.

Strata	Period	Languages	Lexemes
adstratum 2	1800–	English	2,511 = 06.12 %
adstratum 1	1530–	Italian	21,481 = 52.46 %
superstratum	(1091)–1184–1530 (c. 1900)	Sicilian	
principal stratum	(870?)–1048–1241	(Siculo) Arabic Maghreb variety	13,293 = 32.41 %
substratum	535–870	Byzantine	nil
	218 BC–c. 400 AD	Latin	nil
	c. 650–c. 50 BC	Punic	nil

stonku, *pulmùn*, *koxxa*, ‘shoulder, stomach, lung, thigh’) and comprised most of the terminology concerning the arts and crafts, like carpentry, fishing and the building industry, as well as some administrative, legal, medical and learned words (*sinjùr*, *nutàr*, *sptar*, *skola* ‘mister/rich man, notary, hospital, school’).² However, despite contact stretching over four centuries at both the upper and lower social levels, Sicilian did not replace Maltese as a spoken language, limiting its influence to phonology (the five-vowel system and the doubling of consonants in certain contexts) and enriching its vocabulary (Brincat 2011: 145–182). When Italian was introduced by the Knights of St. John in 1530 Sicilian lost its prestige and usefulness in Malta, and thus became a superstratum and Italian was adopted by the educated locals as their language of culture, administration, law and science.

In the meantime, Maltese writers built up a decent literary tradition in the vernacular, scholars wrote grammars and compiled dictionaries and in this way standardization was achieved, so that when the time was ripe Maltese could be raised to official status. This happened in 1934, at the height of preparations for World War II which pitted Britain against Italy, and Italian was dropped from official status in 1936.

Contact with Italian waned since the 1930s, but was revived when Italian television was received from 1957 onwards. Although after the year 2000 Italian began losing its former popularity, it is still widely understood in Malta (see 2.2), and therefore it can be considered as an adstratum. The second adstratum is obviously English, which was introduced in 1800 and made very slow progress up to World

² Maltese is written in the Latin alphabet: the vowels are as in Italian, *ie* is long as in German, *w* and *k* as in English, *x* as in Old Spanish [ʃ], *j* as in Latin [y], *ç* and *ġ* are palatal, *z* is voiced, *q* is a glottal stop [ʔ], *h* is mute, crossed *h* is aspirate, *gh* is mute but aspirate in certain contexts. Stress is not marked, except for words like *pjetà*, *kafé* and *virtù*, but here accents are placed on internal vowels to show the correct pronunciation, without distinguishing between close and open articulation and between length.

War II, but its influence became very strong when primary schooling became compulsory in 1946 with both Maltese and English as languages of instruction. The domination of English on a global scale, together with official bilingualism, has made it the main source of lexical innovation nowadays.

2.1 Lexical studies

The first document that includes Maltese words was the report drawn up by Giliberto Abate for Frederick II about tax revenues in 1240: it shows a mixed population made up of 1047 Christian, 836 Muslim and 33 Jewish families, which allows a reckoning of 14,000 inhabitants. The words are: *madia*, *marammata*, and *sorte/xurte*, the first two being of Arabic origin, meaning ‘ferry’ and ‘building works in stone’, and the third one Romance, ‘luck or fate’. There are also two Sicilian words that are still used in Maltese today: *jardena* ‘a small garden or orchard’, and *butiro* ‘butter’, today written *ġardina* and *butìr*. Single words, mainly place-names, geonyms and household objects, occur in notarial deeds written in Latin, Chancery Sicilian or Italian from 1373 throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth century (Wettinger 2006). An entry in the minutes of the local government dated 1473 attests the adaptation of Italian words to Semitic Maltese grammar: *isfeduene*, today written *jisfidawna*, shows the Italian verb *sfidare* with a paradigmatic prefix (*ji-*) and suffix (*-aw*), indicating the present tense, third person plural (‘they defy’), with the enclitic pronoun (*-na*, ‘us’), and a phrase in another document dated 1556 quotes a formula (*nichalli he franca o franc*, ‘I set her/him free’) that was considered valid at law when giving freedom to a slave. Literary texts tend to avoid Sicilian and Italian terms: a poem composed around 1470 by Petrus Caxaro contains only one Sicilian word, *vintura*, quoting a Sicilian proverb in loan translation, and another poem by Giovan Francesco Buonamico in praise of Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner, datable to 1672–1675, mentions the month of May, *Mejju*, and the adverb *tant li* ‘so long as’ (Italian *tanto che*). However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Romance words increased considerably in literary sermons, plays and practical writings like prayers (the *Pater Noster*), the catechism (Wzzino 1752), and military instructions (how to fire a musket, c. 1645) written in Maltese (Cassola 1992, 187r–190r).

It is worthy of note that references to Maltese insist on its unique character when written by Maltese authors (*in lingua maltensi* 1436, *in lingua melitea* 1540, *in melivetana et vernacula lingua* 1560) whereas foreigners defined it “Lingua africana” 1541, “lingua arabica” 1541, “il parlar saracino” 1558. These were usually travellers and based their definition on impressions, and the question of the origins of Maltese was further complicated in 1536 by Jean Quintin who identified it with Punic, giving rise to a debate which raged till the 1950s. The first linguist who described Maltese was Hieronymus Megiser, who visited the island in 1588 and defined it as Saracenic, Moorish and Carthaginian, “a kind of Arabic which has its origin in Hebrew” (Megiser 1606, 8). A more realistic description was given by the

Maltese historian Gian Francesco Abela in his *Della Descrittione di Malta* (1647, 257–259). Abela refuted the theory of Punic origins, traced his language to the Muslim conquest and was aware that the same variety had been spoken in nearby Sicily and was still spoken in Pantelleria in his times. Serious attention to the Maltese grammar was given by German scholars such as Johannes Enricus Maius, who embraced the Punic theory in the *Specimen Linguae Punicae* (1725) and was echoed by Bellermann in 1809, and the more prestigious Wilhelm Gesenius who proved its Arabic origins in 1810 (Kontzi 1994).

In the seventeenth century Maltese lexical studies were in their infancy but grew steadily over time. Megiser deserves credit for including nine Maltese words in his *Thesaurus Polyglottus* (1603) and later he published a list of 121 words in a monograph devoted to Maltese, *Propugnaculum Europae*, printed in 1606, 1610 and 1612. In 1664 an English traveller, Philip Skippon, recorded 381 words. Although Abela (1647) did not attempt a dictionary, he showed a deep interest in onomastics because he devoted 140 pages to describe place-names and geonyms, explained 121 surnames and quoted 16 Sicilian words of Arabic origin. Unfortunately three early glossaries have been lost, one was anonymous, one compiled by a knight called Thezan, and one by a knight called Francesco Bardon. In 1992 Arnold Cassola discovered a manuscript in Rome which seems to be a copy of Thezan's dictionary. It lists 3,925 Italian words and 3,110 Maltese words, giving their relative equivalents (Cassola 1992). In the eighteenth-century dictionaries by Maltese authors the number of words increased substantially. Gian Francesco Agius De Soldanis, the first director of the Knights' Public Library, wrote a very ambitious work in four volumes between 1755 and 1759 but it remained unpublished till very recently (De Soldanis 2016). The Maltese-Italian-Latin section has 12,000 entries and was superseded by Michel Antonio Vassalli's *Lexicon* which was published in Rome in 1796 listing 18,000 Maltese headwords described in Italian (Vassalli 1796). The nineteenth century saw the compilation of dictionaries for practical purposes, for schoolchildren or for the British community, like the *Dizionario portatile delle lingue maltese, italiana e inglese* (1843) which twinned the *Maltese Grammar for the use of the English* (1831), both by Francesco Vella.

In the nineteenth century the British government's early attempts to introduce English as the official language and language of the courts and instruction were strongly opposed, but after unification was achieved in Italy, Britain began to suspect that the locals' attachment to Italian culture would foster their desire to join the nearby nation. A long-fought cultural battle between imperialists and nationalists ensued that saw Italian being demoted between the 1880s and the 1930s, and progressively reduced in and removed from the primary school curricula, street names, first names, and public notices, until it lost its official status in 1936.

In the nineteenth century the promotion of Maltese unfortunately embraced the puristic trend which purported to reconstruct the Maltese language, and this affected not only the writing of poetry and novels, where words of Semitic origin were consistently preferred over those of Romance origin, but also the compilation

of dictionaries. A case in point was Antonio Emanuele Caruana's *Vocabolario della lingua maltese* (1903) which excluded all Romance words (including such basic ones as *skola*, *liġi*, and *vapùr* – 'school, law, ship') and brought the vocabulary down to 9,947 lexemes, despite the creation of pseudo-archaic words like *màqdes* and *màsġar* ('holy place' and 'place with trees') which were actually hypernyms fit for poetry but less useful in everyday speech where one would need to distinguish between the various types of holy places (*knisja*, *katidràl*, *kon-katidràl*, *bażielka*, *parroċċa*, *kappella*, *oratorju*, *niċċa* – 'church, cathedral, co-cathedral, basilica, parish, chapel, oratory, a wall shrine') or between a forest (*foresta*), a wood (*bosk*), an orchard (*ort*), and a small high-walled garden (*ġardina*). In the twentieth century the puristic trend was abandoned by lexicographers who included all the words of Sicilian and Italian origin that were in common use. Some of them added a few English ones as well. Dun Karm Psaila, the poet who gave high prestige to Maltese literature, was quite puristic in his verse, but much less so in informal prose and especially in his *English-Maltese Dictionary* (1936–1955, 3 vols.), although he was reluctant to admit technical and scientific terms which he replaced by periphrases. Of a much higher stature are the *Miklem Malti* of Erin Serracino Inglott (9 vols., 1975–1989), which is of little use to foreigners as its definitions are given in Maltese, and the *Maltese-English Dictionary* by Joseph Aquilina (1987–1990), which registers 41,016 entries, and was followed by an *English–Maltese Dictionary* in four volumes 1999–2000. A concise edition based on both works was produced in 2006.

2.2 The present composition of the lexicon

The twentieth century witnessed three social developments that had considerable linguistic consequences: aspirations to political autonomy, compulsory education, and the mass media. These three powerful agents brought rapid changes to social life in Malta and forged the present linguistic situation, where Maltese and English are not only compulsory subjects, but also languages of instruction in the primary and secondary schools. Italian is only studied in the secondary and post-secondary schools but remains the firm favourite among the foreign languages, while Italian television is still very popular, accounting for 20 to 25 percent of daily prime-time viewership. Italian is also buoyed by trade, Italy being the top country for commercial imports and outgoing tourism. The result of all this is witnessed by the data collected during the last national census. In 2005 almost all the inhabitants of Malta declared that they speak Maltese (97.9%), while 87.9% and 56.7% claimed knowledge of English and Italian, respectively. The island's history is also evident in the composition of the Maltese lexicon (Tab. 2). An analysis of the etymology of the 41,016 lexemes in Aquilina's *Maltese-English Dictionary* shows that 32.41% are of Arabic origin, 52.46% are from Sicilian and Italian, and 6.12% are from English. Local and mixed formations, amounting to 1,491 words (1.73%), of which no less than 1,248 (5.51%) are retained in the *Concise*, show healthy creativity in forging

Tab. 2: The etymology of the Maltese vocabulary in Aquilina's *Maltese-English Dictionary* and its Concise version.

J. Aquilina, <i>Maltese-English Dictionary</i> , 1987–1990		<i>Concise</i> , 2006		
Total number of words:	41,016	100.00 %	22,649	100.00 %
Semitic: Arabic	13,293	32.41	5,080	22.42
Romance: Sicilian	1,746	4.26	977	4.31
Italian	19,735	48.12	12,980	57.30
Other Italian dialects	38			
Latin	191		37	
French	215		94	
English	2,511	6.12	1,914	8.45
Various origins	269		46	
Unknown origin	1,527	3.72	273	1.21
Local formations	1,491	1.73	1,248	5.51
(mixed formations S/R, R/S)	(1,425)			
(obsolete)	(657)			
(names: toponyms, personal, nations)	(853)			
Total Semitic words	13,293	32.41	5,080	22.43
Total non-Semitic (Sic., It., Lat., Fr., Eng., various)	24,705	60.23	16,048	70.86
Local and Mixed formations	1,491	1.73	1,248	5.51
Unknown origin	1,527	3.72	273	1.21
	41,016	100.00 %	22,649	100.00 %

Semitic and Romance elements (S/R and R/S; cf. Brincat / Mifsud 2016). Figures based on the *Concise* edition (2006), which eliminates obsolete, rare and literary terms, reveals a substantial shift towards Romance: out of a total lexicon of 22,649 words, the Semitic element is down to 5,080 (22.43 per cent), the non-Semitic element is up to 16,048 (70.86 per cent, with Romance and English words making up 61.6 and 8.45 per cent respectively). Although nowadays we know that all languages are mixed to varying degrees, this is quite a remarkable formula. However, the words derived from Arabic are more frequent because they denote the basic ideas and include the function words. Grammar is mainly Arabic, although drastically simplified, but syntax, possibly through the influence of schooling, is more akin to Italian and English.

The figures summarily described above show that in Malta the original Arabic dialect moved progressively closer to the Romance languages, especially in the lexicon, but word counts based on etymology give different results according to the criteria adopted in research. It is obviously not easy to define the core vocabulary, but one can start with the list of one hundred words that denote fundamental notions as drawn up by Morris Swadesh (1972). For the purposes of this comparative exercise the Italian version has been preferred (Crystal / Bertinetto 1993: 331). A slight change was necessary because the relative pronouns *che* and *chi*, as well as the compound interrogative pronoun *che cosa* and the compound relative-demonstrative *ciò che* are listed together in Bertinetto's version, whereas in Table 3 they are listed separately.

Tab. 3: Bertinetto's Italian translation of Swadesh's list with the Maltese equivalents.

io	<i>jien</i>	seme	<i>zerriegħa</i>	ventre	<i>żaqq</i>	stella	<i>stilla/kewkba</i>
tu	<i>int</i>	foglia	<i>werqa</i>	collo	<i>għonq</i>	acqua	<i>ilma</i>
noi	<i>aħna</i>	radice	<i>għerq</i>	mammelle	<i>żejziet</i>	pioggia	<i>xita</i>
questo	<i>dan</i>	corteccia	<i>qoxra</i>	cuore	<i>qalb</i>	pietra	<i>ġebła</i>
quello	<i>dak</i>	pelle	<i>ġilda</i>	fegato	<i>fwied</i>	sabbia	<i>rāmel</i>
che (rel)	<i>li</i>	carne	<i>lāħam</i>	bere	<i>ixrob</i>	terra	<i>art</i>
chi	<i>min</i>	sangue	<i>demm</i>	mangiare	<i>tiekol</i>	nuvola	<i>shaba</i>
che cosa	<i>xi, xiex</i>	osso	<i>għadma</i>	mordere	<i>tigdem</i>	fumo	<i>duħħān</i>
ciò che	<i>dak li</i>	grasso	<i>xāħam/grass</i>	vedere	<i>tara</i>	fuoco	<i>nar</i>
no	<i>le</i>	uovo	<i>bajda</i>	ascoltare	<i>tisma'</i>	cenere	<i>irmied</i>
tutto	<i>kóllox</i>	cornio	<i>qarn</i>	conoscere	<i>taf</i>	bruciare	<i>tāħraq</i>
parecchi	<i>ħafna</i>	coda	<i>denb</i>	dormire	<i>tórqod</i>	sentiero	<i>moghđija</i>
uno	<i>wieħed</i>	piuma	<i>rixa</i>	morire	<i>tmut</i>	monte	<i>muntanja</i>
due	<i>tnejn</i>	capelli	<i>xáġħar</i>	uccidere	<i>tóqtol</i>	rosso	<i>āħmar</i>
grande	<i>kbir</i>	testa	<i>ras</i>	nuotare	<i>tġħum</i>	verde	<i>āħdar</i>
lungo	<i>twil</i>	orecchio	<i>widna</i>	volare	<i>ittr</i>	giallo	<i>isfar</i>
piccolo	<i>żgħir</i>	occhio	<i>għajn</i>	camminare	<i>timxi</i>	bianco	<i>ābjad</i>
donna	<i>māra</i>	naso	<i>imnieħer</i>	venire	<i>tigi</i>	nero	<i>iswed</i>
uomo	<i>raġel</i>	bocca	<i>ħalq</i>	giacere	<i>timtēdd</i>	notte	<i>lejl</i>
persona	<i>persuna</i>	dente	<i>sinna</i>	sedere	<i>bilqiegħda</i>	caldo	<i>shana</i>
pesce	<i>ħuta</i>	lingua	<i>ilsien</i>	in piedi	<i>bilwieġfa</i>	freddo	<i>bard</i>
uccello	<i>għasfūr</i>	unghia	<i>difer</i>	dare	<i>tagħti</i>	pieno	<i>mimli</i>
cane	<i>kelb</i>	piede	<i>sieq</i>	dire	<i>tgħid</i>	nuovo	<i>ġdid</i>
pidocchio	<i>qāmila</i>	ginocchio	<i>irkoppa</i>	sole	<i>xemx</i>	buono	<i>tājjeb</i>
albero	<i>siġra</i>	mano	<i>id</i>	luna	<i>qāmar</i>	rotondo	<i>tond</i>
secco	<i>niexef/xott</i>	nome	<i>isem</i>				

Tab. 4: Advanced or specialized vocabulary in Maltese derived from Italian.

<i>sapituttu</i>	<i>folja</i>	<i>testiera</i>	<i>kordjali</i>	<i>solari</i>	<i>bjankerija</i>
<i>unu</i>	<i>radikali</i>	<i>orekkjetta</i>	<i>fegatini</i>	<i>lunari</i>	<i>nottúr</i>
<i>duwi</i>	<i>skorċa</i>	<i>addóċċ</i>	<i>manġapassiġġa</i>	<i>akkwadótt</i>	<i>kaldarrún</i>
<i>grandjúz</i>	<i>pellikola</i>	<i>nažali</i>	<i>mordaċi</i>	<i>pjetraġibsa</i>	<i>terrapien</i>
<i>longa</i>	<i>karnivál</i>	<i>bokka</i>	<i>veduta</i>	<i>terrakotta</i>	<i>novizz</i>
<i>belladonna</i>	<i>sangisuga</i>	<i>dentatura</i>	<i>konoxxenza</i>	<i>nugrufún</i>	<i>bonarju</i>
<i>salvawómu</i>	<i>ossarju</i>	<i>lingwa</i>	<i>dormitorju</i>	<i>gigġifogu</i>	<i>sikkatura</i>
<i>pixxispád</i>	<i>(l)uviera</i>	<i>pied</i>	<i>mortwarja</i>	<i>inċineratúr</i>	<i>nominát</i>
<i>uċċelliera</i>	<i>kuda</i>	<i>manuskritt</i>	<i>volantín</i>	<i>monti</i>	
<i>mazkán</i>	<i>pjuma</i>	<i>ventriera</i>	<i>seduta</i>	<i>pitirróss</i>	
<i>arblu</i>	<i>kapillari</i>	<i>kullana</i>	<i>voldieri</i>	<i>verdún</i>	

The most evident fact is that almost all the words in the Maltese list are of Arabic origin, a fact which places Maltese firmly among the Semitic languages. Only seven words are of Sicilian or Italian origin: *persuna*, *qarn*, *muntanja*, *tond* ('person, horn, mountain, round'), which have no Semitic equivalents in Maltese and are therefore irreplaceable, and *grass*, *stilla*, and *xott* (< It. *asciutto*) which form doublets with *xáħam*, *kewkba*, and *niexef* ('fat, star, dry') but are not exactly synonyms, since they express different shades of meaning or connotations and are therefore used in different contexts. One may add here that the English list has only one word that is current in Maltese, the noun *drink*, which is a neologism and has a restricted semantic area when compared to English where it covers the areas of *xarba* as well (Crystal 1997: 333). Just as in English there are words like *bird*, *birdcage*, and *aviary* which entered the language in different epochs and have different etymologies despite belonging to the same semantic field, in Maltese it is possible to draw up another list that shows how the basic lexemes in the Italian list have been blocked by Semitic fundamental words, but still entered the language in derived or compound forms that convey advanced or specialized notions, bringing the examples up to 63 out of 100. Excluding the ten grammatical or function words, the list in Table 4 shows that no less than two thirds of these words have Romance etyma.

Another interesting yardstick is the Threshold Level. Manwel Mifsud and Albert Borg (1997) produced the Maltese version of the Council of Europe's model for the minimum competence in linguistic communication and applied the criteria set down by Van Ek and Trim (1991). In Appendix C they list the 1,585 words that express fundamental ideas, and an etymological breakdown of these words reveals that the non-Semitic element at this level reaches 52.81 per cent, because the Semitic words are 748, the Romance words are 641 and the English words are 196 (see percentages in Table 5). It is worthwhile to compare these data with those compiled by Edward Fenech (1978), who based his research on three samples of 1,000 words each taken from free conversations held by Professor Aquilina with three informants recorded in 1969 in the framework of dialectal research conducted in rural

Tab. 5: Etymology and modes of discourse (Written and Spoken Maltese) in percentages.

Origin	Literary	Journalistic ³		Spokenrural	Threshold Level	Comrie-Spagnol
	1946–1971	1929	1973	1969	1997	2016
Semitic	93.9	77.7	72.9	86.2	47.19	56.0
Romance	5.7	20.4	22.3	9.1	40.45	30.3
English	.3	1.8	4.7	4.6	12.36	4.8

areas (Fenech 1978: 140, n. 16; the methods and conditions of the survey are described in Aquilina 1976: 45–47). As a result the data in the Threshold Level not only reflect the changes undergone by the language in 30 years, but also reflect usage in an urban and standard situation, which is completely different to the rural and dialectal situation that marked Aquilina’s recordings. The data about the four modes of discourse are summed up in Table 5 for easy and clear comparison.

A different approach is taken by Bernard Comrie and Michael Spagnol (2016) who are currently conducting a research product on the etymological composition of the Maltese lexicon within the project “Loanwords in the World’s Languages”.⁴ This project operates with a fixed list of about 1,500 lexical meanings, belonging to various semantic fields and reflecting various parts of speech. While many of the words in the list belong to unequivocal core/basic vocabulary that reflect universals of the human situation, the need to consider words highly susceptible to borrowing for comparison has necessarily meant the inclusion of words outside such core/basic vocabulary. Due to the overlap of many Sicilian and Italian words, these have been included under the term Romance, and account for a third of the 1,500 words in the list, with 56 % being of Arabic origin and 4.8 % derived from English.

The complexity of the etymological composition of the Maltese lexicon is shown by the wide-ranging variety of the percentages across time (1929–2016) and in the various modes of discourse: literary, journalistic, spoken rural, threshold level and the Loanwords in the World Languages list. It is confirmed by the breakdown of the words according to grammatical categories, as shown in Table 6:

³ Edward Fenech (1978) analyzed the literary register on the basis of an anthology of poems written before 1946 and two novels published in 1971 and 1972. He compiled his figures for journalistic Maltese on 15,000 words that appeared frequently in the August 1973 issues of three daily newspapers, which he then compared to dailies printed over 40 years before. The trend was a slight increase in Romance words and a considerable one in English words.

⁴ Led by Anthony Grant, Kim Schulte, and Uri Tadmor (See https://lingweb.eva.mpg.de/loanwords/index.php/Main_Page; last consulted on 20 November 2015); this is itself a successor to the project “Loanword Typology”, which gave rise to the publications Haspelmath & Tadmor (2009a, 2009b). Comrie and Spagnol point out that the 1,500 word list is based ultimately on Buck (1949), via the Intercontinental Dictionary Series (Borin et al. 2014).

Tab. 6: The etymological composition of the Maltese lexicon: Parts of speech.

	Comrie-Spagnol (2016)				Brincat (2011): Total Romance words 19,786 Total headwords in Aquilina (1987–1990) 41,016			
	Arabic	Romance	English	Other	Arabic: not counted	Romance words	% of Romance	% of total
Function word	84.7	6.2	0.0	9.1		8+5 ⁵	0.07	0.03
Verb	75.3	14.1	1.3	9.2		2,290	11.6	5.8
Adjective	65.2	28.5	0.3	6.0		3,898	19.7	9.5
Noun	44.7	39.6	7.2	8.6		13,420	67.8	32.7

Comrie and Spagnol's breakdown of Semitic (S), Romance (R) and English (E) words by 24 semantic fields is even more intriguing, showing extremes such as 84.2 S, 13.2 R, 0.0 E for Quantity and 3.0 S, 65.3 R and 22.8 E for Modern World. Words of Arabic origin exceed 50% in the fields of Quantity, Function words, Sense perception, The body, Basic actions and technology, Emotions and values, Motion, Food and drink, Spatial relations, Speech and language, The physical world, Possession, Time, Cognition, and Agriculture and vegetation. The percentages are closer in the fields of Social and political relations (both 48%), Animals, The house, and Kinship, whereas Romance prevails in Religion and belief, Clothing and grooming, Law, and Warfare and hunting (65% against 28.8 S and 2.5 E).

These ratios show how the language has grown in the past nine hundred years to keep pace with the social and cultural development of the community. Although the basic Arabic lexical core satisfies the communicative needs of a rural society and of most personal and domestic situations, the vocabulary acquired over the centuries kept, and keeps, growing together with the new skills. Therefore Sicilian words abound in traditional crafts like woodwork, fishing and building, while Italian words are mostly used in education, culture, religion, administration and law. On top of this, the terminology of new areas and activities that were introduced in the British period – ship-building, aviation, accountancy and taxation – or which have been drastically renewed, like medicine, the sciences and technology, especially those involving electrical and electronic appliances and practices – is replete with English words.

The blending of terms belonging to the four strata is amply illustrated by the structure of the very intimate semantic field of kinship, where one can speak of a Semitic inner circle and a Romance outer circle: *raġel* ('man, husband'), *mara*

5 Out of 50 common function words only 8 are Romance: (*bil-*)*fors*, *mank*, *mentri*, *mqar*, *peress* (*li*), *però*, *sikwit*, *tant*, and five variants of the latter, *frattànt*, *intànt*, *sadanittant*, *sadattànt*, *safrattànt*. They correspond to Italian or Sicilian: *forza*, *manco*, *mentre*, *magari*, *per essere*, *però*, (*di*) *seguito*, *tanto*, and *fra tanto*, *in tanto*, (*fino a*) *tanto*.

(‘woman, wife’), *iben* (‘son’), *bint* (‘daughter’), *tifel* (‘boy, son’), *tifla* (‘girl, daughter’), *tarbija* (‘baby’), *żewġ* (‘male spouse’, used only with the enclitic possessive *żewġi*, *żewġek*, *żewġha*, ‘my, your, her husband’), and *ħaten* (‘in-law’) are Semitic, whereas *nannu*, *nanna*, *ziju*, *zija*, *kuġin*, *kuġina*, *neputi*, *neputija* (‘grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt, cousin m. and f., nephew / grandson, niece / granddaughter’) are Romance. Particularly interesting is the terminology for the parents: *omm* (‘mother’) is Semitic and *missier* (‘father’) is Romance (from Sicilian), but *mamà* and *papà* are widely used, and so are *mummy* and *daddy*, especially as forms of address, where they can be abbreviated as *pa* and *ma*, although they sometimes take the article *il-pa* and *il-ma*. In babytalk *daddy* is simplified as *dadà*, perhaps by analogy with *mamà*.

2.3 Maltese and English: bilingualism, code-switching and the standard language

Anyone familiar with Malta will find it odd that only about 2,500 English words wriggled into the Maltese dictionary, considering that British rule lasted 180 years and that English became compulsory sixty years ago. Actually many English words are used in everyday conversation but this, in itself, does not make them Maltese words. Although it is very difficult to draw a neat line, bilingualism on a national scale makes the Maltese speaker aware that he/she is using an English word, even though it is embedded into Maltese grammatical patterns. This criterion helps to distinguish between words like *kitla*, *trakk*, *vann*, *fann*, *ċans*, *strajk*, *kejk*, etc, which are modified in spelling and sometimes in pronunciation (they transcribe ‘kettle, truck, van, fan, chance, strike, cake’), and words which are still felt as English, and are usually avoided in writing or else are written as spelt in English.

The Government’s policy is to make Malta truly bilingual, and schools teach some subjects in English and some in Maltese, while administration (the Civil Service, the Police, and para-statal utilities) use bilingual forms. And yet not everyone feels equally confident in both languages. At the University of Malta most subjects are taught in English, and in some environments like banks, accountancy offices, medical services and IT firms, English is preferred but non-specialists prefer Maltese. The vitality of the local language and political insistence on national identity (particularly forceful in the run-up to membership of the EU) have helped Maltese to encroach on areas where fifty years ago English dominated (even ATMs and Google offer an option). Moreover, Malta’s accession to the EU in 2004, and the recognition of Maltese as one of the EU’s official languages, necessitated a sudden surge in building up specialized terminologies. Of course, all this came at a price. Language switching and mixing are rife. At school one hears sentences like: “*id-diameter, le, mhux ir-radius*” (‘the diameter, no, not the radius’) in a Maths lesson; or “*l-istruttura tal-leaf*” ; (‘the structure of the leaf’) in a Biology lesson; at home: “*Ġibli n-napkin minn fuq id-dishwasher*” ; (‘get me the napkin which is on the dishwasher’); “*Tih il-*

bottle *lill-baby*”; (‘give the bottle to the baby’) and in the office: “*Il-maġġoranza tat-taxpayers ma jkollomx bżonn jimlew ir-return ta’ l-income tax*” (‘the majority of the taxpayers do not need to fill in the income tax return’). These few examples show that English is poaching core areas such as the school, the office and even the home (the bathroom, the kitchen and most appliances), because young mothers are increasingly speaking English to their toddlers, which means that infants are learning English basic words before they learn their Maltese equivalents.

Code-switching is condemned by everyone but at least one third of the population practices it regularly. Will it ruin the language? Will Maltese be abandoned? At present this danger seems remote because most speakers do not consider mixing a permanent structure. It is a compromise one resorts to in informal speech between persons who know both languages, when one does not bother to search for the right word but utters the one which comes to mind first, whether Maltese or English. In fact nobody switches when speaking to Maltese monolinguals or to English people or foreigners. Problems are more likely to arise with structures than with single words. Many Maltese persons do not realize that certain expressions are not used in English, and they may candidly use them when addressing English people or foreigners who will be puzzled to hear “I’m going to cut, now” in a telephone conversation, meaning ‘I’m going to hang up’, or “Did you cut the tickets for the film?”, meaning ‘did you buy the tickets?’. Other frequent expressions are “I’m going to buy”, for ‘I’m going shopping’ or “I’ll pay you a drink” meaning ‘I’ll buy you a drink’ (Brincat 2011: 419–432).

Another area which is going through rapid innovation is the high register, where the influence of English is now stronger than that of Italian. Most of these English words happen to be of Latin or French origin, therefore when they are adopted into Maltese they are given Italianate or Sicilianate forms. This gives new meanings to Italian words or creates words which do not exist at all in Italian. Some examples show how easy it is to turn *prosecutor*, *evaluation*, *industrial action* and *chemical armaments* into *prosektur*, *evalwazzjoni*, *azzjoni industrjali* and *armamenti kemikali*. Most Maltese people take it for granted that these are Italian words but the Italians say *pubblico ministero*, *valutazione*, *vertenza sindacale* and *armi chimiche*. Some English words undergo more complex modifications: the verb *to assess* is conjugated by adding Arabic prefixes and suffixes (present tense indicative 1st, 2nd, 3rd persons singular and plural: *nassessja*, *tassessja*, *jassessja*, *tassessja*, *nassessjaw*, *tassessjaw*, *jassessjaw*) while the derived noun takes the Italian suffix *-are* to produce *assessjār*. Past participles take the Italian suffix *-ato* or *-uto*, dropping the final vowel, and thus English *affected*, *involved* and *alleged* become *affettwàt*, *involut* and *allegàt*, keeping the English meanings, as does *attentàt* by which Maltese journalists translate *attempt*, whereas the Italian word *attentato* denotes a criminal act. False friends abound, like *deputàt* for ‘deputy’ which becomes an adjective, alongside the traditional meaning of the noun *deputàt*, ‘member of parliament’, which is still in use, provoking a semantic clash in the political field where *deputàt mexxej* means ‘deputy leader’, and *Kamra tad-Deputati* is the ‘House of Commons’.

Contrary to instances of recognizable code-switching, these examples are just the tip of a growing iceberg that easily shifts from hurriedly-written radio and television news broadcasts to newspapers, and on to the standard language (Brincat 2012). Is this dangerous? It is too early to say, but one should keep in mind that although the Maltese language absorbed thousands of words from Sicilian and Italian and yet it survived, this happened over a period of 700 years, passing orally from the educated minority (about 11%) to the illiterate majority. Conditions are different nowadays because everybody learns both English and Maltese, and exposure to English is very strong not only at the cinema, but also on television, on the radio and especially on the internet, with the result that virtually all English words (650,000 in the OED) can be used in code-switching. The speed of this development shows the need to protect the Maltese language, not by old-fashioned censorship but by strengthening the standard variety.

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