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# On Morpho-Syntactic Levantisms in Maltese

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 The peripheral Arabic variety Maltese is usually classed amongst the North African dialects of Arabic. Yet, what Mifsud has called, “some curious similarities with the Eastern dialects” (2008: 46) are obvious in the language, such that Stumme (1904: 83) was moved reservedly to suggest that Maltese be classified as Levantine not North African, supposing that its obvious affinities with North African varieties of Arabic came about through its neighbouring proximity to North Africa. Zammit (2014) has established the close relation between Tunisian Arabic and Maltese (cf. also Čeplö *et al* 2016). Meanwhile, Borg (1994 & 1997) has examined some of its Levantine traits, casting most attention upon the phonology and to a lesser degree on the lexicon and morphology. He also remarks one singularly Levantine syntactic feature, direct object marking with /l-/ (Borg 1994: 57–59; 1997: 138–139).
- 2 That, however, is not the only syntactic feature that Maltese shares with Levantine varieties of Arabic. We have been examining the morpho-syntactic affinities between Maltese and Levantine Arabic varieties and have already reported on some (Al-Sayyed & Wilmsen 2017; Wilmsen 2016a & 2016b). Others we are presenting here for the first time. Altogether, the features we have been examining, either singly or in collaboration, are the following:
  - Polar interrogative *š* (Wilmsen 2016a)
  - Prohibitive *t ... š*; dehortative *muš/mhux* (Wilmsen 2016b; Al-Sayyed & Wilmsen 2017)
  - Double object marking with *l-/lil*
  - Pronominal circumstantial clauses

## 2. Data sources

- 3 Our data come largely from electronically searchable corpora, especially the Korpus Malti (mlrs.research.um.edu.mt), encompassing 250 million tokens. In addition to the extensive searchable texts that the Korpus Malti makes available, we have been scouring Maltese blogs and online news sources, mostly for corroborating evidence and the occasional particularly apt example of the phenomena under examination. The Arabic data come from Tunisian Arabic Corpus (<http://tunisiya.org/>), comprising 818,310 tokens, and the Egyptian Arabic material from arabiCorpus (arabicorpus.byu.edu) with 140,234 tokens. We also took advantage of our presence in the Levant to glean examples of usage from that milieu.

## 3. Polar interrogative š

- 4 A polar interrogative -š has been documented in some Arabic dialects (Oblert 1975: 45–46; Holes 2004: 192; Woidich 2006: 358; Gibson 2008; Wilmsen 2014: 53–55 & Chapter 5 and references). Wilmsen (2016a) examines the phenomenon in Maltese in greater depth. Here is an example from our data:

(1) Maltese: pseudo-verb

Ghandekx hila tinsieni ?

*ānd-ə k-š            ĩla            ti-nsi-ni*

PREP-you=Q            ability            2-forget-PRO.1S

‘Have [lit. ‘at’] you the ability to forget me?’ (cf. Sutcliffe 1936: 211: *għandekx il-ħila tmur?* ‘Do you have the temerity to go’)

(2) Maltese: Verb

ħriġtx flus ?

*irig-t-š            flus*

extract.PFV-2M=Q money

‘[Have] you taken out money [from your pocket]?’ (cf. Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander 1997: 4: *ħriġtux mill forn?*)

In Maltese, polar interrogative š follows the verb or pseudo-verb; in Levantine Arabic, it can as well, but it often, perhaps usually, comes at the end of the utterance (Holes 2004: 192).

(3a) Levantine Arabic

*šuft-u            ši    la    murād*

see.PFV-PRO.3MS Q    ACC    name

‘[Have] you seen Murad?’

(3b)

*šuft-ā*                      *la*    *faṭ ma*        *ši*  
 see.PFV-PRO.3FS    ACC    name            Q  
 ‘[Have] you seen Fatma?’

- 5 These examples also exhibit another trait that Maltese shares with Levantine varieties of Arabic: the double object marker /l-/. We shall return to this presently.

#### 4. Prohibitive *t ... š*

- 6 Another well-documented phenomenon is the prohibitive formed with a post-positive *-š* alone. This is, in fact, a defining feature of southern Levantine dialects of Arabic:

(5) Levantine Arabic

*ti-nsā-š*                      *iš-šant a*  
 2S-forget-PROH    DET-bag  
 ‘[Do] not forget the [your] bag’

- 7 It is also the usual manner of forming the prohibitive in Maltese (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997: 27):

(6) Maltese

Tinsiex li Ġesù wkoll ibati mil loneliness bħalek u bħali  
*ti-nsi-š*                      *li*    *ġ esu*            *wkol*            *ī-bati*  
 2S-forget.PROH-NEG    REL    name            also            3MS-suffers  
*mi-l-loneliness*            *b-āl-ek*            *ū*                *b-āl-i*  
 PREP-DET-loneliness    PREP-self-PRO.2    CONJ            PREP-self-PRO.1S  
 ‘[Do] not forget that Jesus also suffers from loneliness, as you [do]’

#### 5. Dehortative *mūš*

- 8 Negating verbs with a reflex of *miš/muš* has been commented upon (Brustad 2000: 302–303; Doss 2008) with the assumption that it represents a language change in progress unique to Egyptian Arabic. It rather is a regular pragmatic feature, imparting shades of meaning to the negated predication (Håland 2011). Among these is the dehortative (Wilmsen 2016b). Not restricted to Egyptian Arabic, Levantine Arabic exhibits it, too:

(7) Levantine Arabic

*ba-‘ zim-kon*                      *‘ alā ’ ahwe*            *muš*    *ti-šrab-u*                      *šāy*  
 1-invite.IPFV-PRO.2PL    PREP    coffee            NEG    2-drink.IPFV-PRO.PL            tea  
 ‘I’m inviting you for coffee; [mind] you not drink tea’

- 9 Negating verbs with *mūš* is used with the same dehortative effect in Maltese. We have examined this in detail (Al-Sayyed and Wilmsen 2017). A difference between the dehortative and a prohibitive is that dehortatives are not restricted to the 2nd person, to which a prohibitive necessarily must be:

(8) Maltese

mhux jghid li jiena ivvintajt xi haġa  
*mūš yi-id li yena ivvint-ajt ši āga*  
 NEG 3MS-say.IPFV REL PRO.1S invent.PFV-1S some thing  
 ‘He [should] not say that I invented something’

## 6. Double object marking with /-//il/

- 10 Researchers have remarked this phenomenon in Levantine Arabic (Koutsoudas 1967; Levin 1987), and it is the sole syntactic affinity between Levantine Arabic and Maltese that Borg (1994: 57–59; 1997: 138–139) addresses. In Levantine Arabic, marking a direct object with /l-/ is optional, but common. When it occurs, the nominal direct object is usually preceded by an “anticipatory object pronoun” (Levin 1987: 33; Abu-Haidar 199: 116).

(9) Levantine Arabic

*kīf ti-żawwiz-ā la-l-binit*  
 Q 2-marry.IPFV-PRO.3FS ACC-DET-girl  
 ‘How can you marry the girl?’

- 11 What is more, double object marking itself is optional, with no difference in meaning between a phrase with or without an anticipatory pronoun (Koutsoudas 1967: 33):

(10)

*badd-ak ti-żawwiz hal-binit*  
 wish-PRO.2M 2-marry.IPFV DET-girl  
 ‘You want to marry the girl?’

This kind of variability is not usually seen in Maltese, which requires /lil/, a grammaticalization of the preposition /li-/ ‘to’ and the definite article /il-/, with animate direct objects. Generally, this appears without the anticipatory object pronoun of Levantine Arabic (11a), but an anticipatory pronoun does sometimes appear, usually in literary registers (11b):

(11) Maltese

a.

Nistaqsu lil San Pietru  
*ni-staqs-u*            *lil*    *San Pietru*  
 1-ask.IPFV-3PL    ACC   name  
 ‘We ask St Peter’

b.

habbejtha lil din l- art hanina  
*abb-eyt-a*                      *lil*    *din*    *l-art*            *ānina*  
 love.PFV-1S-PRO.3FS        ACC   DEM   DET-land        beloved  
 ‘I loved this beloved land’

Notice that the object in (11b) is inanimate. Such objects are usually not marked with /lil/ in Maltese, but they can be marked with /la-/ in Levantine Arabic:

(12) Levantine Arabic

a.

*b-ħ* *ibb-ā*                                      *la-hal-musī*’ *a*  
 HAB-love.IPFV-PRO.3FS                    ACC-DET-music  
 ‘I love this music!’

b.

*kīf*            *mi-n-ħ* *ibb-u*                                      *la-libnān*  
 EXCLAM        HAB-1PL-love.IPFV-PRO.3MS    ACC-place.name  
 ‘How we love Lebanon!’

In (11b) and (12b), the inanimate objects *din l-art* ‘this land’ and *libnān* might be seen as embodying personality, but in (12a) it is not.

## 7. Pronominal circumstantial clauses

- 12 As we were investigating double object marking in Maltese, we chanced upon this phrase: *Hi u tisma’ lil Rasha taḡḡtiha r-raḡunijiet taḡḡha ḡḡaliex bdiēt tilbes il-velu* ‘As she was listening to Rasha giving her the reasons she began to wear the veil’, in which the order of the pronoun and the verb in the circumstantial clause is the reverse of their usual order in most varieties of Arabic.

(13) Maltese

*ī*            *u*            *tī-sma*                                      *lil*    *Rasha*  
 PRO.3S        CONJ        3FS-listen.IPFV                                      ACC   name  
 ‘While she was listening to Rasha’

- 13 This also occurs in the same order in Levantine Arabic. According to Cowell (2005 [1964]: 532), it sometimes happens in Syrian Arabic. To the contrary, in our observations, it is common in Syrian Arabic, and it is the usual sequence in Lebanese Arabic:

(14) Levantine Arabic

*hēk min hinne wu z ġār*

ADV PREP PRO.PL CON small.PL

‘[It has been] thus from when they [were] small’

- 14 In the usual Arabic order, these would be expected to be as follows:

(15) a.

*wa hī ti-sma‘*

CONJ PRO 2f-listen.IPFV

‘As she was listening’

b.

*min wu hinne z ġār*

PREP CONJ PRO small

‘From when they were young’

- 15 Along with double object marking, the reversal of elements in pronominal circumstantial clauses looks to be another “striking parallel ... in the realm of syntax” (Borg 1997: 138).

## 8. Are these Levantine traits alone?

- 16 Many of these parallels had already been observed in Arabic varieties other than the Levantine.

### 8.1. Polar interrogative š

- 17 Ṭantāwi (1846) documents the use of a post-positive -š in polar interrogatives in Egyptian Arabic before the middle of the 19th century:

(17) Egyptian Arabic (19th century)

a.

*g‘ān-ši*

hungry.PCP-Q

‘Est-ce qu’il a faim?’ (Tantawi 1846: 86)

b.

*qām-š*

stand.PFV-Q

‘Est-ce qu’il est levé?’ (*ibid.*)

c.

ħ add-š                      gā  
 '[some]one-Q                come.PFV  
 'Est-ce que quelqu'un est venu ?' (*ibid.*)

- 18 Somewhat later, Šabbāg (1886) explains the principle in Egyptian Arabic: "They [Egyptians] add the *šin* at the end of the perfective and imperfective verb and the active and passive participle in interrogation. They say, *ḏrbt-š* meaning 'Have you struck?' (*hal ḏarabta?*) ... and in the present, *'aḏrab-š* meaning 'Do I strike?' (Sabbāg 1886: 14), also providing this example:

(18) Egyptian Arabic (19th century)

ʿ *inda-k-š*                *ħ ugga*                *fī*                *ḏālik*  
 PREP-PRO.3M-Q    excuse                PREP DEM  
 'Have you and excuse for that?' (Sabbāg 1886: 16)

- 19 By the 20th century, polar interrogative *-š* in Egyptian *'ind* expresses a negative hedge, with an approximate meaning of 'you wouldn't happen to have?' (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 449; Woidich 2006: 358–359).
- 20 Nevertheless, it retains its interrogative quality in Tunisian Arabic. Gibson (2008) gives an example in which it simply means 'have you?' (*cf.* example [1]), echoing Šabbāg's explanation: "interrogation can be expressed by the suffix *-ši*, sometimes shortened to *-š*" (Gibson 2008: 570). The following example is from our data:

(19) Tunisian Arabic

*ni-mšī-š*                      *nu-xruž*                *ni-lqā-h*                *fī*                *wažh-ī*  
 1S-go.IPFV-Q                1S-exit.IPFV    1S-find.IPFV-him    PREP                face-PRO.1S  
 'Am I to go out and find him in my face [everywhere]?'

## 8.2. Verbal negation with *muš/mhux*

- 21 Brustad (2000: 302–303) and Doss (2008) have remarked verbal negation with *miš/muš* in Egyptian Arabic, without, however, exploring its pragmatics in detail. Håland (2011) examines three pragmatic functions in negating verbs with *miš/muš*. A common reason for it is when, "one negated and one positive fact stand in contrast to each other" (Håland 2011: 30). We have found almost exact doublet of this between Egyptian Arabic and Maltese:

(20) a. Egyptian Arabic

*bi-ya-aħ ud*                      *fulūs*                *miš*    *bi-y-gīb*                *fulūs*  
 HAB-3M-take.IPFV                money                NEG    HAB-3M-get.IPFV    money  
 'He takes money; not gets money'

b. Maltese



jagħti l- flus u mhux jiehu  
 ya-ati l-flus u mūš y-eū  
 3M-give.IPFV DET-money CONJ NEG 3M-take.IPFV  
 ‘He gives money; not takes [it]’

- 22 Other functions are rhetorical negation and metalinguistic negation. In rhetorical negation, the negator *miš* poses a question of the type ‘is not X?’ and in metalinguistic negation registers an objection to the content or the form of an utterance, not to the proposition itself. We have found examples of all of these in Arabic varieties throughout the eastern Mediterranean (Al-Sayyed & Wilmsen 2017: 248–252).

### 8.3. Dehortative *mūš*

- 23 Another type of negation with *miš/muš* that has received scant attention is with dehortatives (cf. Wilmsen 2016b). In his examination of negation in Irbid, northern Jordan, Alqassas (2012: 22, 121, 127–134) seems puzzled by the phenomenon. Doss (2008) gives an example of it in Egyptian Arabic without recognizing it as such:

(21) Egyptian Arabic

*miš t-akl-i n-nahar-da wa a-gi bukra*  
 neg 2-EAT-F DET-day-DEM CONJ 1S-come.IPFV tomorrow  
*a-lā'i l-'akl zayy ma huwwa*  
 1s-find.IPFV DET-food CONJ REL PRO

‘[Mind] you not eat today and then I come tomorrow to find the food as is [uneaten]’ (Doss 2008: 87)

- 24 We see analogous dehortatives in Tunisian Arabic:

(22) Tunisian Arabic

*mūš yi-qūl -ū illi θamma hāža ism-hā istimrāriyya*  
 NEG 3-say.SBJV-PL CONJ EXIST thing name-PRO.3FS continuation  
 ‘[Let] them not say that there is something called continuity’

### 8.4. Double object marking with *l-//il*

- 25 Borg supposes that this is a feature of Arabic varieties that had been in close contact with Aramaic. Indeed, it is found in all Arabic dialects of the Fertile Crescent. In Iraqi Arabic, as in Syro-Lebanese, it can mark animate and inanimate objects:

(23) Iraqi Arabic

*āni šāyf-a l-il-mathaf*  
 PRO.1S see.PCP-PRO.3MS ACC-DET-museum

‘I’ve seen it the museum’ (Erwin 1963: 334; see also, & Jastrow 1979: 49; Levin 1987; Abu-Haidar 1991: 116)



and al-Andalus” (2007: 25). This is consistent with Mifsud’s observation: “It is likely that successive waves of impact reached the Maltese shores from different Arab stations and at different points in the island’s history” (Mifsud 2008: 146).

- 30 This, however, does not preclude the possibility that what are now emblematic features of North African varieties of Arabic and of Levantine dialects alike had their origins in the Levant or inland from it. Writing about similarities between Moroccan Arabic and Aramaic, Retsö makes this observation:

It is hereby suggested that these characteristics are a testimony of their originally belonging to a continuous linguistic continuum. It would have encompassed an area from central Syria to north-western Arabia (= the Syrian desert). The origins of the Maghribi dialects of Arabic are to be looked for in that area. We happen to know that the first wave of conquerors to North Africa were dominated by the so-called Qudā‘a tribes, whose original habitat was Syria. (Retsö 2000: 116).

- 31 These scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Speakers of Arabic dialects were present in the Fertile Crescent before the first Arabic speaking Muslims arrived in the 7th century. They would have been in close contact with Aramaic, and many were probably bilingual in both. Speakers of those dialects of Arabic were involved in the push westward during the expansion of Arab/Islamic civilization in the 7th and 8th centuries. Once that expansion had reached its full extent, Arabic speakers moved more-or-less freely throughout the Mediterranean. With that, we may suppose that both Mifsud and Retsö have described separate dimensions to the presence of a variety of Arabic on Malta one at and the other after the arrival of Arabic speakers on Malta some time between 870 and 1090 (Brincat 1995, 2008). Speakers of what we now call North African dialects must surely have come to Malta by way of Tunisia, but they will also have come by way of Al-Andalus, where Levantine traits must have been in place since the first entry of Arabic speakers onto the Peninsula in 711, and surely after the entry of the Syrian Umayyad prince Abdel Rahman arrived in 756. Indeed, the features that Arabic dialects of the Fertile Crescent and the Syrian Steppes acquired through contact with Aramaic should be considered an adstratal not a “substratal feature[s] carried over from Aramaic” as Borg (1994: 58). With that, the Levantine features found in Maltese are not curious at all.

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#### Corpora:

- arabiCorpus (<http://arabicorpus.byu.edu>)
- Korpus Malti (<http://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt>)
- Tunisian Arabic Corpus (<http://tunisiya.org>)

## APPENDIXES

### Abbreviations

- ACC accusative
- ADV adverbial
- CONJ conjunction
- DET determiner
- EXCLAM exclamative
- EXIST existential
- F feminine

FUT future  
 HAB habitual  
 IPFV imperfective  
 M masculine  
 NEG negative  
 PCP participle  
 PFV perfective  
 PL plural  
 PREP preposition  
 PRO pronoun  
 PROH prohibitive  
 Q interrogative  
 REL relative  
 S singular  
 SBJV subjunctive  
 1 1st person  
 2 2nd person  
 3 3rd person

## ABSTRACTS

Maltese is usually classified as a North African Arabic variety. Yet some researchers have remarked “some curious similarities with the Eastern dialects”. Investigations of these tend to concentrate upon the phonology and lexicon, with slight attention paid to morphology and syntax. We report on a long-term project in documenting some of those, including polar interrogation with a reflex of /š/; the prohibitive/dehortative system, also exhibiting reflexes of /š/; double object marking with reflexes of /l-/; and pronominal circumstantial clauses. None of these is exclusive to Maltese and the Levant alone. Polar interrogation with /š/ is found in the Levantine, and North African, and Andalusí Arabic. The Maltese prohibitive is largely southern Levantine in form, but its dehortative is common to eastern Mediterranean dialects of Arabic. Double object marking with reflexes of /l-/ appears in Andalusí, Levantine, and Mesopotamian varieties. The Maltese pronominal circumstantial clause is similar to Syro-Lebanese Arabic, the Be‘ēri Arabic of Upper Egypt, and some dialects of the United Arab Emirates.

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**Keywords:** Arabic dialects, circumstantial clauses, dehortative, double object marking, polar interrogatives, Maltese, prohibitive

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