SOME LINGUISTIC COMMENTS ON RELIGIOUS TERMS IN MALTESE[1]

By Louis P. Trimble

When the Arabs of North Africa conquered the islands of Malta and Gozo in 870 they found a community that had been continuously Christian since the coming of St. Paul in 60 A.D. When they were driven out two hundred years later by the Siculo-Norman invasion, the Arabs left only a single significant contribution to Maltese social structure – their language. They reduced, but they did not eliminate, Christianity.

What tongue Arabic replaced is a matter of speculation. Evidence from place names indicates an early Semitic structure, perhaps influenced by Punic, and containing Semiticized Latin words that came through contacts between Malta and the Greco-Roman culture of pre-Muslim North Africa.[2]

However, with the coming of the Normans from Sicily, the reverse of the pattern that developed under Arab domination took place: the language remained basically Semitic but the social structure altered rapidly. The Roman Catholic Church became the dominant form of religion, and it has so remained to the present. Ecclesiastical and secular authority was vested in speakers of Sicilian and Italian, thus creating a Romance superstructure on the Semitic linguistic base.

The effects of these and other less influential linguistic and cultural waves that have swept over Malta and Gozo can be seen from an examination of some of the linguistic elements in the religious language of the people. This paper attempts to show some of these elements by presenting a brief linguistic analysis of the three most commonly recited Catholic prayers: *Il-Missierna* or the *Pater Noster, Il-Kredu* or the *Apostles' Creed* and *Is-Sliema* or the *Hail Mary*. The paper also discusses some representational religious phrases and some common words used with their religious meanings. Of particular note are the shifting from the construct state to periphrasis in noun-noun possessive relationships; the free mixing of Romance and Semitic words in the same phrase; the development of lexically and morphologically Semitic but syntactically and conceptually Romance calques from Italian; and the increasing existence of doublets – one Semitic and the other Romance.

Beginning with the Christianization of Malta by St. Paul, we can posit

four layers of religious terms: (1) the pre-Arabic, in which we find Greek and Latin words as well as those Maltese shares with Syriac; (2) the Arabic, during which the basic language of the islands was established; (3) the post-Norman, in which we find the greatest influence of the Roman Catholic Church and thus the period of greatest borrowing from Sicilian and Italian; and (4) the modern, which, as Aquilina points out, still takes its religious terms from Italian, despite the strong influence of English on the secular language.[3]

The three prayers presented below illustrate the first three of these layers most clearly. A roughly literal translation has been provided for each of the prayers in an effort to show the Romance influence on the lexicon and the lesser influence on Maltese syntax, and also to show the manner in which both Romance and Semitic (primarily Arabic) words are adapted to Maltese phonetics and morphology.

Il-Missierna is the oldest of the prayers, being found in Matthew and Luke and having become part of the Christian liturgy in the first century.[4] We can assume then that it was known in Malta from early Christian times, with its basic Semitic form dating back to the period when Arabic became the tongue of the people, and with the present version containing accretions coming through Roman Catholicism.

IL-MISSIERNA[5]

Missierna, li inti fis-smewwiet, jitqaddes ismek, tiġi
Father-our, who thee [art] in the heavens, hallowed [be] thy name, come

is-saltna tiegħek, ikun li trid int, kif fis-sema hekkda fl-art.
the kingdom thy, be which will thee, as in the heaven thus in the earth.

Ħobżna ta' kull jum, agħtina llum. Aħfrilna dnubietna bħalma
Bread our of every day, give us the today. Forgive us our sins as we

naħfru lil min hu ħati għalina. La ddaħħalniex fit-
forgive him who he trespasses against us. Not lead us-not into the

tiġrib, iżda eħlisna minn kull deni. Hekk ikun [or Ammen].
temptation, but deliver us from every evil. Amen.

Aquilina[6] gives the following variations: *saltnatek* for *is-saltna tiegħek*; *kif naħfru (aħna)* for *bħalma naħfru*; and *għalina u la* for *għalina. La . . .*

In this prayer we find only one non-Semitic word, *Missier* 'father' (from

Sicilian *misseri* 'overseer',[7] with *imala*, always represented in Maltese by the accented diphthong *ie*. However, even this lone non-Semitic word is syntactically and morphologically Semitic, as the *imala* and the attached pronominal possessive particle *-na* indicate. Along with the preponderance of Semitic words we find an equally high percentage of Semitic syntactic and morphological forms. The lone non-Semitic syntactic construction is found in the periphrastic noun-noun possessive *Hobżna ta' kull jum* 'Our bread of every day'. That this phrase is non-Semitic is clearly indicated by the Classical Arabic and the modern Egyptian versions, both of which are in the construct state. These are respectively: *Khubzana kafa fana* and *khubzina kafa fana*.[8]

The periphrastic construction in the current Maltese version of the prayer may well be the result of the strong tendency of modern Maltese to substitute periphrasis for the construct state pattern. However, as we note below, the shift to periphrasis occurs slowly in Maltese religious phrases; in fact, evidence indicates that when traditional phrases are composed wholly of Semitic words, they tend to remain longer in the construct, although this too may be changing, as the growing number of doublet noun-noun possessives indicates.

Il-Kredu is the second oldest of the three prayers, having reached its present form by the end of the 4th Century.[9] Thus we can assume that the prayer reached Malta well before the Arab conquest and therefore was subjected to the same influences as *Il-Missierna*. However, analysis reveals more than three times the number of non-Semitic words in *Il-Kredu* than in *Il-Missierna* and also reveals evidence of the first three layers of religious terms: the pre-Arabic, the Arabic, and the post-Arabic periods.

IL-KREDU[10]

Jena nemmen f'Alla l-Missier, li jista' kollox, li ħalaq is-
I believe in God the Father, who can [do] everything, who created the

sema u l-art u f'Ġesù Kristu ibnu wieħed Sidna, li
heaven and the earth, and in Jesus Christ son only [of] our Lord, who

kien konċeput mill-Ispirtu s-Santu, twieled minn Marija Verġni, bata
was conceived from the Holy Spirit, born from Mary Virgin, suffered

taħt il-ħaqq ta' Ponzu Pilatu, kien mislub, miet, u
under the tribunal of Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and [they]

difnuh. Niżel fil-Limbu, u fit-tielet jum qam
buried him. He descended into the Limbo, and on the third day arose
minn bejn l-imwiet. Tala' fis-smewwiet, u qiegħed in-naħa
from among the dead. He rose into the heavens, and stands [at] the side
tal-lemin t'Alla l-Missier, li jista' kollox. Minn
of the right [hand] of God the Father, who can [do] everything. From
hemm għandu jiġi jagħmel ħaqq mill-ħajjin u mill-mejtin.
there he has come to make justice for the living and for the dead.
Nemmen fl-Ispirtu s-Santu, il-Knisja mqaddsa Kattolika xirket
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church holy Catholic, [the] communion
il-Qaddisin, il-maħfra tad-dnubiet, il-qawma ta' l-imwiet, il-ħajja
[of] Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, the life
ta' dejjem. Ammen.
of forever. Amen.

In this prayer we find eight terms which are etymologically non-Semitic: (1) *Ġesù Kristu,* (2) *Marija Verġni,* (3) *Ponzu Pilatu,* (4) *Kattolika,* (5) *Missier* (twice), (6) *l-Ispirtu s-Santu,* (7) *Limbu,* and (8) *konċeput.* The first three and the sixth and seventh are Christian terms which could well have come into the language during the pre-Arabic period although the phonetic modifications to their present forms could only have occurred during or after the time of Arab domination. The remaining three terms – *Kattolika, Missier,* and *konċeput* obviously must date after the coming of the Siculo-Normans and the establishment of Roman Catholicism.

As with *Il-Missierna, Il-Kredu* is lexically and syntactically basically Semitic, although only one of its six noun-noun possessives has remained in the construct state: *Xirket il-Qaddisin* 'Communion [of] Saints.' However, Psaila's modern English-Maltese Dictionary[11] gives as the current form the periphrastic *Ix-Xirka tal-Qaddisin,* thus indicating that the phrase as given in the prayer is the older, ritualistic form. Further evidence for its being archaic is shown by the retention of *t-marbuta,* an anachronism in modern Maltese and today found only in such survivals.

In contrast to this lone construct state noun-noun possessive, the prayer contains five periphrastic possessives: *il-ħaqq ta' Ponzu Pilatu* 'the tribunal of Pontius Pilate'; *in-naħa tal-lemin t'Alla* 'the side of the right

[hand] of God' (two possessives); *il-maħfra tad-dnubiet* 'the forgiveness of sins'; and *il-qawma tal-imwiet* 'the resurrection of the dead.' As each of these constructions is composed wholly of Semitic words (discounting proper names), we can posit original construct syntactic patterns with the shift to the modern periphrastic forms again due to the tendency away from the synthetic and toward the analytic, particularly in current spoken Maltese.

Is-Sliema, although a short prayer, gives us in the limited space of its three sentences three examples of a characteristic phenomenon of Maltese: the mixing of Semitic and Romance words in the same phrase, with both morphologically Maltesized. Since the prayer did not come into popular usage in its present form until the 11th Century, we can assume that it reached Malta through the Roman Catholic priesthood. That this occurred well after the coming of the Siculo-Normans in 1090 is indicated by the fact that the oldest prescription relating to the prayer was not made until the end of the 12th Century. This prescription required the clergy to include *Is-Sliema* among the prayers to be recited by the faithful.[12]

IS-SLIEMA[13]

Is-sliem għalik, Marija, bil-grazzja mimlija, is-Sinjur miegħek,
The hail for thee, Mary, with the grace filled, the Lord [is] with thee,

imbierka inti fost in-nisa, u mbierek il-frott tal-ġuf tiegħek
blessed [be] thee among the women and blessed the fruit of womb thy

Ġesù. Qaddisa Marija, Omm Alla, itlob għalina midinbin, issa u
Jesus. Holy Mary, mother [of] God, pray for us sinners, now and in

f'siegħet mewtna. Hekk ikun (Ammen).
hour [of] our death. Amen.

Aquilina[14] gives the following variants: *Alla* for *is-Sinjur* and *issa u fis-siegħa tal-mewt tagħna* for *issa u f'siegħet mewtna.*

Including names, *Is-Sliema* contains five words of non-Semitic origin: *Marija, grazzja* (from Italian *grazia*), *Sinjur* (from Italian *signore*), *frott* (from Sicilian *fruttu*), and *Ġesù*. The three previously mentioned examples of mixed phrasing are: *bil-grazzja mimlija* 'filled with grace'; *is-Sinjur miegħek* 'the Lord [is] with thee'; and *mbierek il-frott tal-ġuf tiegħek* 'the fruit of thy womb.'

This last phrase is also the lone example in the prayer of a periphrastic noun-noun possessive. In contrast, we have two construct state possessives: *Omm Alla* 'Mother [of] God' and *u f'sieghet mewtna* 'and in the hour [of] our death.' *Omm Alla* is clearly a traditional set phrase and most probably was established during the earliest translation of the prayer into Maltese Arabic and thus was 'frozen' into its syntactic pattern because of its ritualistic nature. *U f'sieghet mewtna* however cannot be so classified, although it too contains only Semitic words. As noted above, it has developed a more modern variant, *U fis-siegha tal-mewt taghna.*

A brief perusal of Maltese literature containing religious themes or references to religion has produced some 130 additional noun-noun possessives, only 17 of which are in the construct state. An examination of these phrases, along with those culled from the three prayers, allows us to posit the following: (1) In general, set phrases which are composed wholly of etymologically Semitic forms have usually remained in the construct state, while mixed phrases and those not of a ritual or liturgical character have almost always been replaced by periphrastic constructions. (2) There is a stage where doublet phrases exist, with the periphrastic form always later in development. (3) A number of the periphrastic constructions are calques, usually from the Italian. (4) When Maltese mixes Semitic and Romance words, it invariably Semiticizes the latter and Maltesizes both.

A representative cross section of the above-mentioned phrases illustrates several interesting linguistic developments in Maltese. Of 17 construct state phrases found, only three do not appear to have periphrastic doublets. These three are *Omni Alla; jum il-haqq*[15] 'day [of] judgement'; and *id l-imghallem*[16] 'hand [of] the Master.' It appears logical to assume that these will ultimately develop periphrastic forms even as *Ras il-Knisja*[17] 'Head [of] the Church' has the form *r-ras tal-Knisja*[18] and the ritualistic *Id Alla* 'Hand [of] God' has *L-id t'Alla.*[19]

An example of the older form of the phrase remaining in the construct while an offshoot (rather than a doublet) is periphrastic is found in *Ghid il-Hamsin* 'Whitsuntide' and *it-tnejn tal-Ghid il-Hamsin*[20] 'Whitmonday.' A 'halfway' form in the development from the construct state to periphrasis is seen in *is-sabar is-Salib*[21] 'the indulgence of the Cross' with the first noun definitized in violation of the Maltese rule that the first noun in construct state relationships never takes the definite article.

Additional examples of construct state phrases giving way through doublets to periphrasis are the following: *Ghid l-imwiet*[22] 'All Soul's Day (literally, 'Festival [of] the dead, the departed' being replaced by *il-festa*

tal-Erwieħ[23] 'the feast of the souls'; *Jedd Alla*[24] 'the right (power, will) [of] God' being replaced by *il-Jedd t'Alla;*[25] and *bin Alla,* found in an 18th Century version of *The Advent Hymn*[26] as *iben t'Alla,* thus indicating that the shift of the construct state noun-noun possessives to the periphrastic is not wholly a modern phenomenon. For *Għid iż-żebbuġ*[27] 'Palm Sunday' (literally 'Festival [of] the Olives'), a phrase exemplifying the practice of the early Church fathers of substituting Christian Holy Days for already established observances, no doublet has yet been found; however, this phrase has a synonym, *Hadd il-Palm*[28] 'Sunday [of] the Palms.' Since it mixes Romance and Semitic words, this phrase should become *l-Hadd tal-Palm* if the pattern of linguistic development suggested in this paper is followed.

The majority of phrases that mix Semitic and Romance words are already in the periphrastic, as the following examples indicate: *il-purċissjoni tal-Ġimgħa l-Kbira*[29] 'the procession of Good Friday'; *il-Passjoni ta' Sidna Ġesù Kristu*[30] 'the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ'; and *Id-Diżinn t' Alla*[31] 'the design of God.'

Phrases interesting especially in the sociolinguistic sense are those composed of all Semitic words but which are direct translations from the Italian and thus syntactically Romance. Among these calques are: *L-Id t' Alla,* Italian *la mano d'Iddio; il-għajnuna t'Alla,*[32] Italian *l'aiuto d'Iddio* 'the help of God'; and *il-maħfra t'Alla,*[33] Italian *il perdono d'Iddio* 'the forgiveness of God.'

In religious poetry, notably that of Dun Karm, we find the choice of construct or periphrastic phrasing governed by prosodic considerations, and we find also the tendency toward the incorporation of as many Semitic words, excluding names, as the poet can manage. As a result of these two sometimes conflicting criteria, we often find a phrase composed wholly of Semitic words in the periphrastic form, although it may be basically ritualistic or liturgical in nature. Thus we get in Dun Karm the previously mentioned *L-id t'Alla* for *Id Alla.* We also get *l-bniedem t'Alla*[34] 'the man of God' for *bniedem Alla,* though in contrast we find *bin Marija*[35] 'son of Mary.' The use of *Iben t'Alla* in the 18th Century version of The Advent Hymn is a further example of modification made to satisfy the needs of poetry.

Although phrases most clearly show the linguistic phenomena discussed above, these phenomena are also exemplified by single words used with religious meanings. These fall into three groups: words which are etymologically Semitic and which may well pre-date the Arab conquest; doublets; and borrowings, primarily from the Italian, which clearly show

the patterns of phonetic and morphological Maltesization.

Examples of religious terms which may have entered the language at an early stage are: *bierek* 'bless' (see Syriac *berek*),[36] a very old term perhaps fitting into the earliest period of translation as the ritualistic phrases incorporating it indicate – *Alla jbierek!* 'Bless us!', *Alla jbierkek* 'God bless you,' and especially *Imbierek Alla!* 'Blessed [be] God![37] (Note that this word is cognate to Arabic *baraka* with the same meaning); and *nisrani* 'Christian,' with the Arabic equivalent *nasrani (nasara)* 'to help, aid, protect,' with the Verb 2 form meaning 'to Christianize, convert someone to Christianity.'[38]

Examples of single word doublets are: *patri* 'monk' and *raheb,* from Arabic *rahib* 'Christian monk'; *Salvatur* 'Saviour' and *Feddej* (literally Redeemer) from Arabic *fidya* 'redemption from certain religious duties'; and *kabozza* 'cowl' and *barnuż* from Arabic *burnus* 'chausable worn by Coptic priests.'

Final examples are those borrowings from Italian and/or Sicilian which show clearly the process of Maltesization: *abbati,* Italian *abate* 'abbot'; *anġlu,* Italian *angelo* 'angel'; *kalċi,* Italian *calice* 'chalice'; and *djaknu,* Italian *diacono* 'deacon.'[39]

In summary, religious terminology seems to be the last refuge for the construct state in Maltese, and today even the set phrases which contain only words derived from Semitic appear to be threatened by the pattern so strongly established in colloquial spoken Maltese – the shift to periphrasis. Also, whether a word is a heritage from the pre-Arabic or the Arabic layers of the language, or whether it has been borrowed from present day Arabic or Romance or English, Maltese treats all alike – phonetically and morphologically Maltesizing them. And finally, although such borrowings contain many calques (primarily literal translations from the Italian), syntactically Maltese continues to remain a Semitic tongue.

[1]Thanks are due for advice and criticism from Dr. Joseph Aquilina, Professor of Maltese and Oriental Languages, the Royal University of Malta

[2]Joseph Aquilina, 'Some Historical Phonetic Changes of Maltese,' *Papers in Maltese Linguistics,* The Royal University of Malta, 1961, p. 119

[3]Joseph Aquilina, 'Maltese as a Mixed Language,' *Papers in Maltese Linguistics,* The Royal University of Malta, 1961, p. 46

[4]'Our Father, The' *New Catholic Encyclopedia,* Vol. 10, New York 1966, pp. 829-831

[5] E.F. Sutcliffe, *A Grammar of the Maltese Language,* Oxford, 1936, p. 215, with modifications made by Aquilina

[6] Aquilina, 'Some Historical Phonetic Changes of Maltese,' *op. cit.,* pp. 117-118

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] 'Apostles' Creed,' *Catholic Dictionary of Theology,* London, 1961, pp. 128-130

[10] Sutcliffe, *op. cit.,* p. 215

[11] C. Psaila, *Dizzjunarju Ingliż u Malti,* Malta, 1947

[12] 'Hail Mary', *New Catholic Encyclopedia,* Vol. 6, New York, 1966, p. 898

[13] Sutcliffe, *op. cit.,* p. 215

[14] Joseph Aquilina, personal communication, August, 1970

[15] Psaila, *op. cit.,* p. 104

[16] Dun Karm, 'Il-"Jien" u L-Ilhinn Minnu,' in A.J. Arberry (editor and translator), *Dun Karm, Poet of Malta,* Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 156

[17] Dun P.P. Saydon, 'L-Ittri Lill-Efesin, Filippin, Kolossin u Filemon,' *L-Ittri Ta' S. Pawl,* Malta, The Empire Press, 1957, p. 2

[18] *Ibid.,* p. 3; it is interesting to note that the construct state phrase is capitalized while the periphrastic construction is not.

[19] Dun Karm, *Il-Musbieħ Tal-Mużew, Op. cit.,* p. 130

[20] E.D. Busuttil, *Kalepin Malti-Ingliż,* Malta, 1949 for both phrases

[21] Kitba Tal-Malti Fl-Imgħoddi,' *Il-Malti,* December, 1968, p. 99

[22] Busuttil, *op. cit.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Dun Karm, 'Ateiżmu,' op. cit. p. 102, verse 3

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 102, verse 2

[26] Sutcliffe, *op. cit.,* p. 217

[27] Busuttil, *op. cit.*

[28] Alfred Massa, 'Rebħu t-Tnejn,' *Il-Malti,* September, 1969, p. 69

[29] 'Reċensjonijiet,' *Il-Malti,* June, 1969, p. 64

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Dun Karm, *op. cit.,* p. 170

[32] V.M. Pelligrini, 'Santu Wistin Studjat Bħala Kittieb,' *Il-Malti,* June, 1969, p. 46

[33] Dun Karm, 'L-Oqbra,' *op. cit.,* p. 177

[34] Dun Karm, 'Missjunarju,' *op. cit.,* p. 47

[35] Dun Karm, 'Milied u Missjoni,' op. cit., p. 78

[36] For Syriac religious terms see T.H. Robinson, *Syriac Grammar,* Oxford, 1939; and see Aquilina, *op. cit.,* p. 46, where he lists examples of Christian words shared with Syriac.

[37] Psaila, *op. cit.,* for these three phrases

[38] Meanings of Arabic words and Maltese-Arabic etymologies are taken from the following works: Hans Zehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic,* Wiesbaden, 1961; C.L. Dessoulavy, *A Maltese-Arabic Word List,* London, 1938; and D.G. Barbera, *Dizionario Maltese-Arabo-Italiano,* 4 volumes, Beyrouth, 1939. Other dictionaries consulted are Wortabet and Porter, *Arabic-English and English-Arabic Dictionary,* New York, 1954; and the Syrian and Moroccan Dictionaries of the Georgetown Arabic Series, Edited by Richard S. Harrell.

[39] For these etymologies, see Barbera, *op. cit.*