SOME LINGUISTIC COMMENTS
ON RELIGIOUS TERMS IN MALTESE

By Louis P. Trimble

When the Arabs of North Africa conquered the islands of Malta and Gozo in 870 they founded 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.

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-Missiema 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.*

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-Missiena_ is the oldest of the prayers, being found in Matthew and Luke and having become part of the Christian liturgy in the first century.* 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-MISSIENA***

Missiema, li inti fis-smewwiet, jiqaddes ismek, tigi
Father-our, who thee [art] in the heavens, hallowed [be] thy name, come
is-saltna tieghex, 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.
Hobzna ta' kull jum, aqhtina llum. Ahfrilna dnubiema bhalma
Bread out of every day, give us the today. Forgive us our sins as we
nahrut lil min hu hati ghalina. La ddahhalniek fit-
forgive him who he trespasses against us. Not lead us-not into the
tigrib, izda ehisna minn kull deni. Hekk ikun [or Ammen].
temptation, but deliver us from every evil. Amen.

Aquilina* gives the following variations: _saltnatek_ for _is-saltna tieghex_; _kif nahrut (a glam)_ for _bhalma nahrut_; and _ghalina u la for ghalina. La_ ...

In this prayer we find only one non-Semitic word, _Missier_ 'father' (from
Sicilian *misseri* 'overseer', 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 *Hobizna 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: *Khubzama kafa jana* and *khubzina kafa jana*.6

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-Kread* is the second oldest of the three prayers, having reached its present form by the end of the 4th Century.6 Thus we can assume that the prayer reached Malta well before the Arab conquest and therefore was subjected to the same influences as *Il-Missiera*. However, analysis reveals more than three times the number of non-Semitic words in *Il-Kread* than in *Il-Missiera* and also reveals evidence of the first three layers of religious terms: the pre-Arabic, the Arabic, and the post-Arabic periods.

### IL-KREDU

I believe in God the Father, who can [do] everything, who created the heaven and the earth, and in Jesus Christ son only of our Lord, who was conceived from the Holy Spirit, born from Mary Virgin, suffered under the tribunal of Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and [they]
In this prayer we find eight terms which are etymologically non-Semitic: (1) Ġesù Kristu, (2) Marija Verġnij, (3) Ponzu Pilatu, (4) Kattolika, (5) Missier (twice), (6) I-l-Spiritu s-Santu, (7) Limbu, and (8) končeput. 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 končeput 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 Dictionary11 gives as the current form the periphrastic Ix-Xirka t-l-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-baqq ta' Ponzu Pilatu 'the tribunal of Pontius Pilate'; in-naha t-l-lemi n t'Alla 'the side of the right'...
[hand] of God' (two possessives); *il-mahlra tad-dubbiet* 'the forgiveness of sins'; and *il-gauma 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 paraphrastic 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.\(^{13}\)

**IS-SLIEMA**\(^{13}\)


Aquilina\(^{14}\) gives the following variants: *Alla* for *is-Sinjur* and *issa u fis-siegħa tal-meut 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 Ġesu. The three previously mentioned examples of mixed phrasing are: *bil-grazzja mimlija* 'filled with grace'; *is-Sinjur mieghex* 'the Lord [is] with thee'; and *mbierek il-frott tal-guf tieghek* '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 a f' sieghet meutna '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 meutna 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-meut 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 doublings. These three are Omm Alla; jum il-haq" "day [of] judgement"; and id l-inghallem "hand [of] the Master." It appears logical to assume that these will ultimately develop periphrastic forms even as Ras il-Knisja 'Head [of] the Church' has the form 觓-ras tal-Knisja and the ritualistic id Alla 'Hand [of] God' has L-id t'Alla.

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 Gbid il-Hamsin 'WhitSunday' and it-tnejn tal-Ghid il-Hamsin 'Whitmonday.' A 'halfway' form in the development from the construct state to periphrasis is seen in is-sabar is-Salib '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 doublings to periphrasis are the following: Gbid l-imwied 'All Soul's Day (literally, 'Festival [of] the dead, the departed' being replaced by il-festa
"tel-Eruieb"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 Hymn²⁶ as *ibn t'Alla, thus indicating that the shift of the construct state noun-noun possessives to the periphrastic is not wholly a modern phenomenon. For *Ghid 'iz-zebug²⁷ '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 doubt has yet been found; however, this phrase has a synonym, *Hadd il-Palm²⁸ 'Sunday [of the Palms]'. Since it mixes Romance and Semitic words, this phrase should become *il-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-purēissjoni tal-Ĝimgha l-Kbsra²⁹ 'the procession of Good Friday'; *il-Passjoni ta' Sidna Ėesu Cristu³⁰ 'the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ'; and *Id-Dišnn t'Alla³¹ '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'İddio; *il-ghajnuna t'Alla,³² Italian l'auto d'İddio 'the help of God'; and *il-mahbra t'Alla,³³ Italian il perdono d'İddio '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-bniiem Alla³⁴ 'the man of God' for *bniiem Alla, though in contrast we find *bin Marija³⁵ 'son of Mary.' The use of *ibn 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: *bijerek* 'bless' (see Syriac *berêk*), a very old term perhaps fitting into the earliest period of translation as the ritualistic phrases incorporating it indicate — *Alla jbijerek*! 'Bless us!', *Alla jbijerek* 'God bless you,' and especially *Imbijerek Alla*! 'Blessed [be] God!' (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.'

Examples of single word doublets are: *patri* 'monk' and *rabib*, from Arabic *rabib* 'Christian monk'; *Salvatur* 'Saviour' and *Feddej* (literally Redeemer) from Arabic *fidsa* 'redemption from certain religious duties'; and *kabozza* 'cowl' and *barnuz* 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'; *anglu*, Italian *angelo* 'angel'; *kalki*, Italian *calice* 'chalice'; and *djaknu*, Italian *diacono* 'deacon.'

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 periphery. 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.

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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
Aquilina, 'Some Historical Phonetic Changes of Maltese,' op. cit., pp. 117-118
Ibid.
Ibid.

Suclifte, op. cit., p. 215

C. Psaila, Dizzjunaru Ingliż u Malti, Malta, 1947

Suclifte, op. cit., p. 215

Joseph Aquilina, personal communication, August, 1970
Psaila, op. cit., p. 104

Dun Karm, 'Il-"Jien" u Lihinn Minnu,' in A.J. Arberry (editor and translator), Dun Karm, Poet of Malta, Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 156
Dun P. P. Saydon, 'L-Itrri Lilli-Efesin, Filippin, Kolossin u Filemon,' L-Itrri Ta' S. Paul, Malta, The Empire Press, 1957, p. 2
Ibid., p. 3; it is interesting to note that the construct state phrase is capitalized while the periphrastic construction is not.

E. O. Busuttil, Kalepina Malti-Ingliz, Malta, 1949 for both phrases
Busuttil, op. cit.
Ibid.

Dun Karm, 'Ateżm,' op. cit., p. 102, verse 3
Ibid., p. 102, verse 2
Suclifte, op. cit., p. 217
Busuttil, op. cit.

Alfred Massa, 'Rebbu t-Taejn,' Il-Malti, September, 1969, p. 69
'Recensionijiet,' Il-Malti, June, 1969, p. 64
Ibid.

Dun Karm, op. cit., p. 170
V. M. Pelligrini, 'Saatu Wistar Studjar Bhaal Kittieb,' Il-Malti, June, 1969, p. 46
Dun Karm, 'L-Oqbra,' op. cit., p. 177
Dun Karm, 'Missjunarja,' op. cit., p. 47
Dun Karm, 'Milied u Missjioni,' op. cit., p. 78
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.
Psaila, op. cit., for these three phrases

For these etymologies, see Barbera, op. cit.