THREE FUNCTIONS OF
THE DUAL SUFFIX IN MALTESE —
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INTRODUCTION

We know that for several centuries Maltese had no direct contacts with the Arab World. This was due mainly to commercial, cultural and political contacts with Europe, especially with Sicily, Italy and England. Partially through isolation, and partially through linguistic contacts with Romance and Indo-European languages, not to mention the general trend towards linguistic simplification, Maltese developed its own peculiarities at different levels of language. It is no wonder, therefore, that the old dual has more than one usage in modern Maltese.

The purpose of this survey is that of analyzing, classifying and describing the different usages of the dual morphological increment, taking into consideration both the written and the spoken forms. More precisely, this analysis attempts to show that the old dual actually has three distinct roles: (a) that of a real dual; (b) that of a plural allomorph; and (c) that of an empty morph. It seems that one can safely say that the dual suffix was used initially in Maltese, as in Classical and other Arabic dialects, as a morphological increment denoting the presence of two objects or things. It was only later that the same suffix was used as a plural allomorph. This semantic shift was perhaps mainly due to the loss of sharp distinctiveness between the old dual form and the plural which, on its side, seems to have been brought about, at least partially, through the constant metaphoric use of the dual form. The use of the old dual form as an empty morph is a recent phenomenon and is attested very well in the journalistic Maltese of the 1960's.

It occurs as well in spoken Maltese, but it is still considered as unacceptable in standard Maltese. The three usages of the dual suffix will be analysed and described individually below.

From the historical point of view, one can add that after the first half of the thirteenth century, the Maltese language developed independently of any Arabic dialect. Ibn Khaldun, for example, says that the Arabs were expelled definitively from Malta by the Emperor Frederick II in 1249. Up to that date, the Arabs were still in Malta, looking after its administration, and having political and commercial contacts with Sicily and North Africa. G. Wettenger and M. Fasadni think that by that date large numbers of Arabs had already become Christian and that other Arabs did so at the very last moment so as to be able to stay on in the island. Thus, one can say that Maltese developed in isolation from 1250 onwards.

I. The Function of a Real Dual

As a general rule, we can say that the real dual is formed in Maltese by means of the suffix [-ein] that is added to the singular form of countable nouns that indicate generally some form of limit, such as in time, weight and measure. Thus, for example, jum [jum] 'day' becomes jumejn [ju:mein] 'two days' and wizna ['wizna] 'eleven pounds four ounces' becomes wizintejn [wizin'tein] 'four kilogrammes'.

As one can see from the above examples, the suffixing of the dual increment involves some phonological modifications, due mainly to the phonological rules which govern the stress and the stress shift in Maltese. Thus, for example, the suffix [-ein] not only causes a stress shift so that [l'jib] becomes [ljib' rein], but also shortens a preceding long vowel, so that [jum] becomes [ju:mein], and turns into a vowel a preceding diphthong, so that gbejna ['dʒbeina] 'cheeselet' becomes gbintejn [dʒbin'tein]. In the first example given in this paragraph we note a stress shift which, however, was accompanied by the elimination of the vowel [e] in an unstressed position. The second example involved a stress shift and a vowel shortening whence [u:] became [u]. The third example carried with it not only a stress shift, but also the dropping

of the vowel [e] so that the diphthong [ei] became a simple vowel [i].

It is interesting to note that when the vowel length is an indication of the presence of gh or h, the shortening does not necessarily happen, becoming an optional element. The trend in spoken Maltese is that of preserving vowel length in such a case. Thus, xabbar ['ja:bar] 'a month' becomes xabrejn [ja:brein] in unguarded speech. Due to the stress shift and the realization of an adjacent gh, a short vowel can also become long in spoken Maltese in similar circumstances. Thus, for example, qimgha ['dʒima] 'a week' becomes qimaghajn [dʒima' tein]. Because of a prescriptive rule in our traditional grammars saying that no word may have more than one accent, there is a trend in standard Maltese to pronounce the above words in the dual form: ['ja:tein] and [dʒima' tein]. Other similar examples are: saghtejn [sa' tein] 'two hours' for [la:tein], irbighajn [ri:bi' tein] or irbighajn [ri:bi'ain] 'forty grains' for [ra:bi' tein] or [ra:bi' ain], feraghajn [fe:ra' tein] 'two branches' for [fe:ra' tein], demaghajn [de:ma' tein] 'two ears' for [de:ma' tein].

As seen in the variant form irbighajn [ri:bi'ain] given above, the dual suffix can be realised as [-ai:n]. This happens when the final radical is gh, h or q, which are all back consonants. This realization is more frequently used as a plural allomorph than as a real dual, but this is so only because the conditioning consonants are more frequent there than elsewhere.

Segholization is another phenomenon which can take place in the process of the suffixing of the dual increment. Thus, for example, wizna ['wizna], already mentioned above, becomes wizintejn [wizin'tein] instead of the form [* wizin'tein] constructed on the normal pattern. Here, of course, we note the insertion of the euphonic vowel [i] which was necessary to break up the phonological function [zn] as this is not permissible in Maltese, due to the fact that [n] is a nasal and a liquid consonant, and as such makes segholization obligatory.

The dual suffix can also bring about a change at the morphological level. Thus, the word wizna we have just mentioned is a feminine noun, and its gender marker is the suffix [-a]. However, when we examine the dual form wizintejn, we note that the feminine marker is now the suffix [-t]. The same allomorphic change is witnessed elsewhere in Maltese. Thus, for example, one can say il-mara (mar+a) ta' Ganni 'the wife of John', but one also says mar (mar+t) Ganni 'John's wife'. In the first instance we have a ta-'construction, and the feminine marker [-a] is obligatory, while in the second instance we have a construction state where the feminine

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2 See D. Cohen, 'Le vocabulaire de base sémitique et le classement des dialectes du Sud', in H. Études de Linguistique Sémitique et Arabe, The Hague, Mouton, 1970, pp. 7-30, where Maltese is also treated from the historical aspect.


marker [-t] or its variant [-et] is obligatory. We can illustrate the use of this last allomorph by the following short sentence: libset it-tiifla sabiha 'the girl's dress is nice', which can stand for the more popular structure: il-libsa tat-tiifla sabiha 'the dress of the girl is nice'.

Occasionally, the feminine marker [-a] together with the diphthong [el] of the dual suffix can form a sandhi. This generally happens when the final radical of the noun is the nasal [n]. Thus, for example, tomna ['tomna] 'a tumulto; a Maltese measure' becomes tomnejn [tom'nein], and not *tomntejn [tom'tein], not even the more likely form, because of the application of the rule of segholization, *tomintejn [tom'intejn]. It is interesting to note here for the sake of comparison that when the dual suffix is used as a plural allomorph with the word widna ['widna] 'an ear', both forms are acceptable, namely widnejn [w'id'nein] and widintejn [wid'intejn].

The dual suffix is actually used with a real dual meaning in the case of only a few semantic themes. The words involved are countables, and they indicate familiar objects to the speakers of the language. Such words are classified below under three main headings. For the sake of completeness, examples mentioned above are included in the following lists according to their individual classification.

(a) TIME AND NUMBERS


(b) MALTESE WEIGHTS, MEASURES AND COINS


(c) FOOD AND FAMILIAR SMALL OBJECTS


We can say by way of conclusion to the first section of our investigation that the dual is employed with less than thirty words in Maltese, but even within this limit there is quite a big variety in thematic themes. Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that, in the classification given above, the dual suffix is obligatory only in the case of the words denoting time and numbers. Thus, for example, 'two days' in Maltese is jumejn, and not *żewi gijem, not even *giext gijem. In all other thematic categories mentioned above, the dual suffix is an optional element and can be replaced either by żewi or by gie, meaning 'two' in both cases. The word żewi occurs both in the written and in the spoken language, while the word gie is mainly restricted to the spoken language. Thus, as example, one can say biċtejn, żewi biċeti or gie biċeti.

As there are three different ways for expressing the semantic idea of the dual, we can safely say that the dual suffix itself is already losing ground, as it is obligatory only in just a few words denoting time and numbers. This phenomenon agrees to the general trend in modern Maltese in that it is becoming more and more an isolating language.

II. THE FUNCTION OF THE DUAL SUFFIX AS A PLURAL ALLOMORPH

When dealing with the dual suffix used as a plural allomorph we note four variants: -ejn [-tein], -ajn [-tain], -aj [-eit] and -aj [-ait]. Practically, therefore, we have the same endings as in the case of the real dual. As a matter of fact, the last two variants are the phonetic results of the previous forms due to apocope. The main difference between the forms of the dual suffix used as a plural alomorph and the dual suffix used as a real dual lies in the fact that the dual suffix used as a plural allomorph admits a pronominal suffix, while the dual suffix used as a real dual does not admit any other suffix. Thus, one can say ghanejn [ai'nnejn] 'his eyes', but one cannot say *sentejn [sen'teijn] 'his two years' instead of issentejn tiegju [issen'teijn tiejnu].
When the dual suffix in any of the above variants is used in Maltese as a plural allomorph, it should be considered synchronically as another realization of the plural morpheme with countable nouns. The following suffixes are some of the other plural allomorphs: -in [-i:n], e.g. bnedmin [bned' mín] 'human beings', -at [-a:t], e.g. werqat [wer' a:t] 'leaves', -iet [-i:e:t], e.g. [wer' i:e:t] 'leaves', -i-l, e.g. landieri [lan'dierî] 'em-smiths', -an [-a:n], e.g. hitan [hi'tân] 'walls', -ien [-i'en], e.g. girien [dʒi' rîen] 'neighbours', -a [-a], e.g. haddiena [hd'diema] 'workmen', -ijiet [-i' a:j], e.g. imnhejbiet [imnheh' i:ejt] 'noses'.

The following examples illustrate the use of the four allomorph variants derived from the old dual suffix: -ej [-e:j], e.g. idejn [i'dejn] 'hands', -a:n [-a:n], e.g. saqajn [sa' qajn] 'feet', -ej [-e:j], e.g. widnejb [wîd' nehî] 'his ears', -a:j [-a:j], e.g. dirghajb [di'râj] 'his arms'.

As we have noted earlier in the first section, the forms -a:n and -a:j [-a:j], both with an initial [a], occur more frequently as a plural allomorph than as a real dual. This is because there are several words belonging to this classification which have b and q as the final radical besides the gh already encountered in the previous section. Thus, for example, ġewnah [dʒew' nah] 'wing; shoulder-blade' becomes ġwinhajn [dʒwin'hajn] and ġwinhajb [dʒwin'hajb].

The dual suffix in one variant or another is used as a plural allomorph in a single semantic category, made up of nouns denoting parts of the body which, with the exception of difer 'finger nail' and sebgha 'finger', are always in pairs. The four variant suffixes are to be considered as morphophonemic alternations. In the list that follows, we again repeat the few examples already mentioned so as to make the list as complete as possible. In the case of the truncated forms -ej, -a:j, we are always adding the same masculine singular suffix -b for the sake of simplicity.

(a) PARTS OF THE BODY WHICH ARE IN PAIRS
 abduction [ap' tbounding] > abtejn [ap' tbinding] or [ap' t' binding], abtejb [ap' t' binding] [ap' t' binding]
dirghajb [di'râj] 'arm' > dirghajn [di'râj], dirghajb [di'râj]
gi:nhajb [dʒ win'hajb] 'wing; shoulder-blade' > ġwinhajn [dʒwin'hajn], ġwinhajb [dʒwin'hajb]

(b) PARTS OF THE BODY WHICH ARE NOT IN PAIRS
difer ['difer'] 'finger nail' > diferjn [difer' n] or dufrejn [duf'ren], diferjb [difer' b] or dufrejb [duf'reb]
sebgha ['seba'] 'finger' > subghajn [sub' hajn], subghajb [sub'hajb]

These two lists should be fairly exhaustive. At least we certainly contain all the relevant words mentioned by the leading Maltese grammarians, besides a small number of new entries. Some of these words, like hageb 'eyebrow' and kift 'shoulder', are already on the way out, if not disused completely. Practically,
therefore, the number of such fully functioning words is just about twenty, especially in the spoken language.

All the words listed above, with the exception of ġewnaħ, koxx, spalla, xiber, diera and sebagha, take the form of the dual suffix with a plural meaning obligatorily in modern Maltese, even though old dictionaries, and others not so old, give other likely forms for the plural. The optional plural forms for the above examples are the following: ġwienah ['dɔwiwnaħ], koxox ['koɔɔs], spalal ['spalal], xbar ['xa\b], diewer ['dive\er] and swaba ['swaoba]. Contrary to the forms having a pseudo-dual suffix, these plurals do not admit any pronominal suffix. Thus, for example, one can say ġwienah, but one cannot say ġwienahu for il-ġwienah tiegħu [il'dɔwiwnaħ 'ri\ou] 'his blade-shoulders' or 'his wings'. The forms diewer 'finger nails' and swaba 'fingers' look very normal as they do not refer to parts of the body which are in pairs. As a matter of fact, the plural swaba may be used as an optional alternative to subghajn; but the plural diewer is a case on its own as it either refers to rather long human finger or toe nails, or else it refers to animals' claw or hoof. The word ġenb 'side' can also have the plural forms ġnieb ['dɔniip] and ġnub ['dɔnup] with reference to objects. Similarly għajn can have the plural form egħjan [e'ju\n] or [e'j讓人], in this case the meaning is different, as it refers to a fountain or spring of water.

III. The Function of the Dual Suffix as an Empty Morph

The variants of the dual suffix which function as an empty morph are two: -eʃ- and -aiʃ-. The two other variants can either function as a real dual, or as plural allomorphs, but never as empty morphs. In other words, the dual suffix can behave as an empty morph only when followed by the pronominal suffix in the first, second and third person masculine and feminine, singular number. It is in fact the pronominal suffix in the singular which serves as camouflage for the dual suffix. Thus, in modern Maltese, one normally says għamel operażzjoni għajnejb ix-xellugija 'he had an operation in his left (literally, his two left) eye', instead of the standard form għamel operażzjoni għajnu x-xellugija. It is in fact the context that makes the meaning clear. In the two versions of the same sentence given here by way of example, the words għajnejb and għajnu mean one and the same thing: 'his eye'. Consequently, the suffix -eʃ- does not contribute anything to the meaning of the first word. On the other hand, the pronominal -b [-h] and -u [-u] are well established allomorphs of the third person masculine singular.

As a general rule, the empty morph can function with any of the words denoting parts of the body which are in pairs already listed above, and as such there is no need to repeat them here. One can say, however, that this trend is not accepted in standard Maltese. It occurs mainly in the spoken language, in broadcasting and in the journals, especially those which are published daily. Thus, one can hear remarks such as these: weggaj 'saqaj il-lentijija 'he hurt his right foot'; lewa riqlejx x-xellugija 'he twisted his right leg'; kuhadd iqs b'sibrejħ 'everybody measures with his own span'. The relevant words would be replaced by siequ, riqlu and xibr in standard Maltese.

The dual suffix occasionally functions as an empty morph in the case of words which denote parts of the body which are not in pairs. Thus, for example, one frequently hears the observation ghandu gribnejb juqgħbu 'he has a sore throat'. Note here that even the verb is in the plural form juqgħbu instead of tuqgħa. Literally, the sentence should read, 'he has his two throats hurting him'. However strange this might appear in translation, the expression is so common in Maltese that it looks quite normal at first sight. The hypercorrect form in standard Maltese would be ghandu gertumju tuqgħu, which sounds somewhat farfetched for native speakers.

Conclusion

It seems that one can safely conclude that the dual suffix was used originally with a dual meaning not only with words indicating time, numbers, Maltese weights, measures and coins, food and other familiar small objects, but also with many other nouns denoting parts of the body which are in pairs. At a second stage, the dual form took the role of a plural allomorph, and was employed first with nouns denoting parts of the body which are in pairs, and later with parts of the body which are not in pairs, being either single or multiple. Finally, in contemporany Maltese, the dual suffix took the role of an empty morph in the non-standard levels of language.

The variants for the real dual are -eʃin [-eʃin], -aiʃin [-aiʃin], as the words involved cannot take a pronominal suffix; the variants for the dual suffix functioning as a plural are -eʃin [-eʃin], -aiʃin [-aiʃin], -eʃ- [-eʃi], -aiʃ- [-aiʃi], as the words involved can take a pronominal suffix; the variants for the dual suffix functioning as an empty morph are -eʃ- [-eʃi], -aiʃ- [-aiʃi], as the words in question should have a pronominal suffix.