



THREE FUNCTIONS OF THE DUAL SUFFIX IN MALTESE

by EDWARD FENECH

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,¹ 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.

¹H. Blanc, 'Dual and Pseudo-Dual in the Arabic Dialects', *Language*, Vol. 46, 1970, pp. 42-57.

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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.² Ibn Khaldun, for example, says that the Arabs were expelled definitely from Malta by the Emperor Frederick II in 1249.³ 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. Wettinger and M. Fsadni 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.⁴ 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* [ju:m] 'day' becomes *jumejn* [ju'mein] 'two days' and *wiżna* ['wiżna] 'eleven pounds four ounces' becomes *wiżintejn* [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 [ʃiber] becomes [ʃib'rein], but also shortens a preceding long vowel, so that [ju:m] 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

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

³M. Amari, Ed., *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, Torino, Roma, 1880, p. 190.

⁴G. Wettinger and M. Fsadni, *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena*, Malta, 1968, p. 33.

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, *xabar* [ʃa:r] 'a month' becomes *xabrejn* [ʃa:'rein] 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, *gimgha* ['dʒima] 'a week' becomes *gimagħtejn* [dʒi,ma:'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: [ʃa'rein] and [dʒima'tein]. Other similar examples are: *sagħtejn* [sa'tein] 'two hours' for [sa:'tein], *irbigħejn* [irbi'ein] or *irbigħajn* [irbi'ain] 'forty grains' for [ir,bi:'ein] or [ir,bi:'ain], *feragħtejn* [fera'tein] 'two branches' for [fe,ra:'tein], *demagħtejn* [dema'tein] 'two tears' for [de,ma:'tein].

As seen in the variant form *irbigħajn* [irbi'ain] given above, the dual suffix can be realised as [-ain]. 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, *wiżna* ['wiżna], already mentioned above, becomes *wiżintejn* [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 junction [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 *wiżna* we have just mentioned is a feminine noun, and its gender marker is the suffix [-a]. However, when we examine the dual form *wiżintejn*, 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 *ilmara* (mar+a) ta' Ġanni 'the wife of John', but one also says *mart* (mar+t) Ġanni '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 construct state where the feminine

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

Occasionally, the feminine marker [-a] together with the diphthong [ei] 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 tumulo; a Maltese measure' becomes *tomnejn* [tom'nein], and not **tomntejn* [tomn'tein], not even the more likely form, because of the application of the rule of segholization, **tomintejn* [tomin'tein]. 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* [wid'nein] and *widintejn* [widin'tein].

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

gimħa ['dʒima] 'a week' > *gimħatejn* [dʒima'tein] or [dʒi,ma'tein]
jum [ju:m] 'a day' > *jumejn* [ju'mein]
sena ['sena] 'a year' > *sentejn* [sen'tein]
sieħħa ['si:a] 'an hour' > *sagħtejn* [sa'tein] or [,sa'tein]
xabar [ʃa:r] 'a month' > *xabrejn* [ʃa'rein] or [,ʃa'rein]
elf [elf] 'one thousand' > *elfejn* [el'fein] or [,e:l'fein]
mija ['mi:ja] 'one hundred' > *mitejn* [mi'tein]

(b) MALTESE WEIGHTS, MEASURES AND COINS

uqija [u'ʔi:ja] 'one ounce' > *uqitejn* [u'ʔi'tein]
wiżna ['wiżna] 'four kilogrammes' > *wiżintejn* [wiżin'tein]
ħemel ['ħemel] 'stack; eight sheafs in Gozo, and ten (smaller) sheafs in Malta' > *ħemlejn* [ħem'lein]
qasba [ʔasba] 'one cane' > *qasbtejn* [ʔas'ptein]
qatta [ʔatta] 'one sheaf' > *qattejn* [ʔat'tein]
sieħħ [sieħ] 'a Maltese bushel' > *sieħħajn* [si'ain] or [,si'ain]
ħabba ['ħabba] 'a grain' > *ħabbtejn* [ħap'tein]
rbieħi [ir'bi:ei] or [ir'bi:ai] 'twenty grains' > *irbieħajn* [irbi'ein] or [irbi'ain] or [ir,bi:'ein] or [ir,bi:'ain]

(c) FOOD AND FAMILIAR SMALL OBJECTS

bajda ['baida] 'an egg' > *badtejn* [bat'tein]
ġbejna ['dʒbeina] 'a cheeselet' > *ġbintejn* [dʒbin'tein]
ħobħa ['ħobħa] 'a loaf' > *ħbiħtejn* [ħbiz'tein]
ferħħa ['fera] 'a branch' > *feragħtejn* [fera'tein]
werqa ['wer'ʔa] 'a leaf' > *werqtejn* [wer'tein]
bičča ['bitʃtʃa] 'a piece' > *biččtejn* [bitʃ'tein]
demħħa ['dema] 'a tear' > *demagħtejn* [dema'tein] or [de,ma'tein]
ħofra ['ħofra] 'a hole' > *ħofortejn* [ħofor'tein]

We can say by way of conclusion to the first section of our investigation that the real 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 **zewġt ijiem*, not even **ġiext ijiem*. In all other thematic categories mentioned above, the dual suffix is an optional element and can be replaced either by *zewġ* or by *ġiex*, meaning 'two' in both cases. The word *zewġ* occurs both in the written and in the spoken language, while the word *ġiex* is mainly restricted to the spoken language. Thus, for example, one can say *biččtejn*, *zewġ biččiet* or *ġiex biččiet*.

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* [-ein], *-ajn* [-ain], *-ej* [-ei] and *-aj* [-ai]. 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 allomorph 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 *għajnejb* [ai'neih] 'his eyes', but one cannot say **sentejħ* [sen'teih] 'his two years' instead of *is-sentejn tiegħu* [issen'tein'ti:ou].

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'mi:n] 'human beings', *-at* [-a:t], e.g. *werqat* [wer'ʔa:t] 'leaves', *-iet* [-iet], e.g. [wer'ʔiet] 'leaves', *-i* [-i], e.g. *landieri* [lan'dieri] 'tin-smiths', *-an* [-a:n], e.g. *ħitan* [ħi'ta:n] 'walls', *-ien* [-ien] e.g. *ġirien* [dʒi'rien] 'neighbours', *-a* [-a] e.g. *ħaddiema* [ħad'diema] 'workmen', *-ijiet* [-i:'jiet], e.g. *imneħrijiet* [imneħ,ri:'jiet] 'noses'.⁵

The following examples illustrate the use of the four allomorphic variants derived from the old dual suffix: *-ejn* [-ein], e.g. *idejn* [i'dein] 'hands', *-ajn* [-ain], e.g. *saqajn* [sa'ʔain] 'feet', *-ej-* [-ei-], e.g. *widnejħ* [wid'neiħ] 'his ears', *-aj-* [-ai-], e.g. *dirġħajħ* [di'raiħ] 'his arms'.

As we have noted earlier in the first section, the forms *-ajn* [-ain] and *-aj-* [-ai-], 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 *ħ* and *q* as the final radical besides the *ġħ* already encountered in the previous section. Thus, for example, *ġewnaħ* [dʒewnaħ] 'wing; shoulder-blade' becomes *ġwinħajn* [dʒwin'ħain] and *ġwinħajħ* [dʒwin'ħaiħ].

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 *sebgħa* '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-*, *-aj-*, we are always adding the same masculine singular suffix *-b* for the sake of simplicity.

(a) PARTS OF THE BODY WHICH ARE IN PAIRS

abt [ap] 'armpit' > *abtejn* [ap'tein] or [,a:p'tein], *abtejħ* [ap'teiħ] [,a:p'teiħ]
driegħ [drieh] 'arm' > *dirġħajn* [di'rain], *dirġħajħ* [di'raiħ]
ġenb [dʒemp] 'side' > *ġenbejn* [dʒem'bein], *ġenbejħ* [dʒem'beiħ]
ġewnaħ [dʒewnaħ] 'wing; shoulder-blade' > *ġwinħajn* [dʒwin'ħain],
ġwinħajħ [dʒwin'ħaiħ]

⁵For a longer treatment on the same subject, see J. Aquilina, *The Structure of Maltese*, The Royal University of Malta, Malta, 1959, pp. 224-251.

ħadd [ħat] 'cheek' > *ħaddejn* [ħad'dein], *ħaddejħ* [ħad'deiħ]
ħaġeb [ħadʒep] 'eyebrow' > *ħuġbejn* [ħudʒ'bein], *ħuġbejħ* [ħudʒ'beiħ]
ħarta [ħarta] 'cheek' > *ħartejn* [ħar'tein], *ħartejħ* [ħar'teiħ]
għajn [ain] 'eye' > [ai'nein] or [,a:i'nein], *għajnejħ* [ai'neiħ] or
[,a:i'neiħ]
għarqub [ar'ʔu:p] or [a:,r'ʔu:p] 'heel' > *għarqbejn* [ar'ʔbein] or
[,a:r'ʔbein], *għarqbejħ* [ar'ʔbeiħ] or [,a:r'ʔbeiħ]
id [i:t] 'hand' > *idejn* [i'dein], *idejħ* [i'deiħ]
kift [kift] 'shoulder' > *kiftejn* [kif'tein], *kiftejħ* [kif'teiħ]
koxxa [koʃʃa] 'thigh' > *koxxtejn* [koʃ'tein], *koxxtejħ* [koʃ'teiħ]
minfes [minfes] 'nostril' > *imnifsejn* [imnif'sein], *imnifsejħ*
[imnif'seiħ]
minkeb [minkep] 'elbow' > *minkbejn* [mink'bein], *minkbejħ*
[mink'beiħ]
riġel [ridʒel] 'leg' > *riġlejn* [ridʒ'lein], *riġlejħ* [ridʒ'leiħ]
rkobba [ir'koppa] 'knee' > *irkubbejn* [irkup'tein], *irkubbejħ*
[irkup'teiħ]
sieq [sieʔ] 'foot' > *saqajn* [sa'ʔain], *saqajħ* [sa'ʔaiħ]
spalla [spalla] 'shoulder' > *spallejn* [spal'lein], *spallejħ* [spal'leiħ]
tebqa [rebʔa] 'eyelid' > *tebqejn* [teb'ʔein], *tebqejħ* [teb'ʔeiħ]
widna [widna] 'ear' > *widnejn* [wid'nein] or *widintejn* [widin'tein],
widnejħ [wid'neiħ] or *widintejħ* [widin'teiħ]
wirk [wirk] 'thigh' > *wirkejn* [wir'kein], *wirkejħ* [wir'keiħ]
xiber [ʃiber] 'span' > *xibrejn* [ʃib'rein], *xibrejħ* [ʃib'reiħ]
xoffa [ʃoffa] 'lip' > *xofftejn* [ʃof'tein], *xofftejħ* [ʃof'teiħ]

(b) PARTS OF THE BODY WHICH ARE NOT IN PAIRS

difer [difer] 'finger nail' > *difrejn* [dif'rein] or *dufrejn* [duf'rein],
difrejħ [dif'reiħ] or *dufrejħ* [duf'reiħ]
sebgħa [seba] 'finger' > *subgħajn* [su'bain], *subgħajħ* [su'baiħ]

These two lists should be fairly exhaustive. At least they certainly contain all the relevant words mentioned by the leading Maltese grammarians,⁶ besides a small number of new entries. Some of these words, like *ħaġeb* 'eyebrow' and *kift* 'shoulder', are already on the way out, if not disused completely. Practically,

⁶See, for example, J. Aquilina, *Teach Yourself Maltese*, London, 1965, pp. 69-73; A. Cremona, *Tagħlim Fuq il-Kiġba Maltija*, 9th Ed., Vol. II, Malta, 1968, pp. 181-4; E. F. Sutcliffe, *A Grammar of the Maltese Language*, 3rd Ed., Malta, 1960, pp. 34-6. The tripartite distinction of real dual, plural allomorph and empty morph does not figure in any Maltese grammar. H. Blanc, *op. cit.*, made a bipartite distinction including only real dual and pseudo-dual (or plural).

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*, *koxxa*, *spalla*, *xiber*, *difer* and *sebgħa*, 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: *ġwienaħ* ['dʒwienəħ], *koxox* ['koʃoʃ], *spalel* ['spalel], *xbar* [ʃba:r], *dwiefer* ['dwiefer] and *swaba'* ['swa:ba]. Contrary to the forms having a pseudo-dual suffix, these plurals do not admit any pronominal suffix. Thus, for example, one can say *ġwinħajb*, but one cannot say **ġwienaħu* for *il-ġwienaħ tiegħu* [il'dʒwienəħ 'ti:ou] 'his blade-shoulders' or 'his wings'. The forms *dwiefer* '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 *subgħajn*; but the plural *dwiefer* 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* [dʒniep] and *ġnub* [dʒnu:p] with reference to objects. Similarly *għajn* can have the plural form *egħjun* [e'ju:n] or [e:'ju:n], but 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: *-ej-* and *-aj-*. 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 operazzjoni f'għajnejb ix-xellugija* 'he had an operation in his left (literally, his two left) eye', instead of the standard form *għamel operazzjoni f'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 *-ej-* does not contribute anything to the meaning of the first word. On the other hand, the pronominal *-b* [-ħ] 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: *wegġa' saqajb il-leminiġa* 'he hurt his right foot'; *lewa riġlejb ix-xellugija* 'he twisted his right leg'; *kulħadd iqis b'xibrejeb* 'everybody measures with his own span'. The relevant words would be replaced by *siequ*, *riġlu* and *xibru* 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 *għandu griżmejb juġġħub* 'he has a sore throat'. Note here that even the verb is in the plural form *juġġħu* instead of *tuġġa'*. 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 *għandu gerżumtu tuġġħu*, 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 contemporary 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 *-ejn* [-ein], *-ajn* [-ain], as the words involved cannot take a pronominal suffix; the variants for the dual suffix functioning as a plural are *-ejn* [-ein], *-ajn* [-ain], *-ej-* [-ei-], *-aj-* [-ai-], as the words involved can take a pronominal suffix; the variants for the dual suffix functioning as an empty morph are *-ej-* [-ei-], *-aj-* [-ai-], as the words in question should have a pronominal suffix.