THE VOWELS OF VERBS 
WITH THIRD WEAK RADICAL

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The first point that strikes the attention is that the first vowel in the
perfect of many of these verbs long ago definitely established itself as a. 
Thus beda, beka, bena, feda, fela, ġera, beba, bēla, bema, keru, lewa,
mesa, nesa, ġeuna, ġeda, ġela, reba. These words are all so written to-
day as they are to be found already in the dictionaries of Caruana and
Falzon. On the other hand, verbs whose third radical letter is ġhaajo, have
not attained the same stability. In the dictionaries just mentioned we find
the spellings bala' , baţa', ĝama', naţa', sama', ġaţa', ġaţa'. Now Dun
P P. Saydon lays it down as a rule that in all these words the first vowel
should be e. 'Fi fiq klim niżgha nghdu li metb l-šhhar konsonanti hi
ġb il-vokali tal-verb huma e-d', and then mentions the verbs cited, Il-
Malti (1939)98. At the same time he admits that usage varies at the pre-
sent day: 'lä niżgha ru li ġaha u niċaddtu l-vokali a u f'haʃna verbi
jinbiddu, u ġhalhekk min iżgħid ġema u min iżgħid sama'. Similarly Dun
Karm writes: 'żiena sib tix drabi min kiteb sama (to hear) u xi drabi
min kiteb ġema; xi drabi tela' u xi drabi ta'la; xi waqt ġema u xi waqt
ġema' u reja' u raja', u bosta oħrajn', Il-Malti (1938)67. These facts show
that the present is a period of transition in regard to these verbs whose
third radical is ġhaajo. Some writers still retain the original a of the first
syllable, others substitute for it the vowel e. These latter would seem to
be influenced by the vowel e that, as we have seen, has long been estab-
lished as the first vowel of many verbs with third weak radical. But can
a rule be laid down? Can it be said that the one way of speaking and
writing is correct and the other wrong? Those who use the vowel a, can
plead for their usage the form of the words previously current and the
fact that this form is supported by Semitic analogy. They cannot be said
to be in error. The worst that can be said of them is that they are conser-
ervative, if, indeed, it is bad at all to keep to the old ways. On the other
hand, neither can those who follow tradition accuse of blundering those
who write these words with e. And the reason is that language is not
something for which immutable laws can be laid down for all time.
Language is something living that cannot be restricted by the rules of a
book. Only time can show whether the change will become universally
adopted.
The original vowel of the first syllable of the perfect was $a$ both in verbs with ghajn as their third radical and in verbs with a weak letter in this position. The change to $e$ has been much slower in coming in the case of the ghajn verbs than with the others. What is the reason of this? I suggest that the reason is to be found in the influence of other persons of the perfect tense. Verbs with weak third radical have the forms, e.g., bdejt, bdejtu, bdejna; krejt, krew, krejtu, krejna; mejtu, mejna. On the other hand, the ghajn verbs have such forms as $tajt$, $tajtu$, $tajna$; $tajt$, $tajtu$, $tajna$. The first $e$ in te𫓲jet, reਜgha is due to assimilation to the second. This feminine form influenced the third person plural te众筹, re┞gha, where the first vowel also, as in the feminine singular, falls in a closed syllable.

The original $a$ of the first syllable has been preserved in a certain number of verbs with third weak radical, dagha, dara, bara, qara, ragha. In these cases the retaining influence is principally from the second radical. The first seems to have little effect. It is clear in the case of the first two words that the first consonant is not the influence at all. And with bara contrast beba, befa, bela, bemna. With qara contrast qeda, qela, and with ra┞gha rema. Hata in this type of verb is exceptional.

Dun Kamm lays down a rule, Il-Malti (1938) 67, on which he invites criticism. The rule is that if the imperative consists of two consonants between two vowels and the second vowel is $a$, then the first vowel of the perfect 3rd person masculine singular is also $a$. This rule clearly works out correctly in a number of cases, but it breaks down in the case of rada the imperative of which is rada, and in the case of mela the imperative of which is melma. The rule may none the less be a handy rule of thumb to which certain exceptions must be remembered, but it does not rest on any scientific principle. And besides it cannot be accepted by others, like Dun P.P. Saydon, assert that sema' and not sama' is correct, and so with other ghajn verbs. We have seen, however, that it is going beyond the facts to condemn sema' as incorrect, though usage may be winning for sama' also its right to recognition.

To sum up our results so far, it may be said that whereas the original first vowel of verbs with ghajn as first radical has been retained till modern times and is still only in danger of being superseded by $e$, verbs with third weak radical have long since substituted $e$ for $a$, except in the case of verbs which have a restraining influence in one of their radicals.

If we turn to the imperfect, we find that in words beginning with a consonant other than a guttural or $r$ the first vowel has been thinned to $i$. In this Maltese has followed the same path as Hebrew. Examples are jibbi, jibbi, jibbi, jibbi, jibbi, jibbi, jibbi, jibbi. With the gutturals the original $a$ has been retained. Examples are jabbi, jabbi, jabbi. The letter $r$ is distinctly eclectic in its tastes. Thus fari, jebbi, j grubha.

Lastly we come to the second vowel of the imperfect. This is sometimes $a$ and sometimes $i$. It would be convenient if some simple rule could be laid down by which it would be possible to tell which class of verbs would take which vowel. From a study of Maltese alone it is not possible to formulate any such rule. The reason is that Maltese has made great strides towards the goal of simplification, which I call a goal because a language is more perfect in proportion as it expresses thought with equal clarity and force but with less expenditure of sound and effort. But simplification of forms tends to hide origins and, therefore, it is by comparison with cognate languages that the earlier forms of words must often be sought.

It will be found that verbs with $a$ as second vowel of the imperfect belong to one of three classes. Some belong to the class that had hama, corresponding to Hebrew aleph, as third radical. Thus jibda from original bada'a, similarly jilma and jagra Jabra is from original bari'a. Others, with which jabra could also be classed, had $i$ as second vowel of the perfect. Thus jidra from original daria, jinsa from nasija, and jisua from sawaja. The third class, which is the least numerous, is characterised by having a guttural as second radical accompanied by $a$ in the perfect. Thus jirgha from original raghaja.

Verbs with $i$ as second vowel of the imperfect had originally in the perfect $a$ as second vowel and $j$ as third radical. Thus jibni from original bani'a, which became bana and finally bena. Similarly jibbi from baka', jinxa from magjuxa, and so on. There are of course apparent exceptions, but they are only apparent. Thus to beba, jabbi, corresponds in classical Arabic baba'a, whence it might be argued that the form of the imperfect to be expected is jabba. But actually in addition to the form with hamza there is also a form of the same word with $j$ as third radical. Hema, jahbi, may be similarly explained. And though I have not actually found it, there must be or have been a similar parallel form to explain bata, jabbi.