On Morpho-Syntactic Levantisms in Maltese

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1. Introduction

The peripheral Arabic variety Maltese is usually classed amongst the North African dialects of Arabic. Yet, what Mifsud has called, “some curious similarities with the Eastern dialects” (2008: 46) are obvious in the language, such that Stumme (1904: 83) was moved reservedly to suggest that Maltese be classified as Levantine not North African, supposing that its obvious affinities with North African varieties of Arabic came about through its neighbouring proximity to North Africa. Zammit (2014) has established the close relation between Tunisian Arabic and Maltese (cf. also Čeplô et al 2016). Meanwhile, Borg (1994 & 1997) has examined some of its Levantine traits, casting most attention upon the phonology and to a lesser degree on the lexicon and morphology. He also remarks one singularly Levantine syntactic feature, direct object marking with /l-/ (Borg 1994: 57–59; 1997: 138–139).

That, however, is not the only syntactic feature that Maltese shares with Levantine varieties of Arabic. We have been examining the morpho-syntactic affinities between Maltese and Levantine Arabic varieties and have already reported on some (Al-Sayyed & Wilmsen 2017; Wilmsen 2016a & 2016b). Others we are presenting here for the first time. Altogether, the features we have been examining, either singly or in collaboration, are the following:

- Polar interrogative š (Wilmsen 2016a)
- Prohibitive t .. š; dehortative mus/mhux (Wilmsen 2016b; Al-Sayyed & Wilmsen 2017)
- Double object marking with l-/lil
- Pronominal circumstantial clauses
2. Data sources

Our data come largely from electronically searchable corpora, especially the Korpus Malti (mlrs.research.um.edu.mt), encompassing 250 million tokens. In addition to the extensive searchable texts that the Korpus Malti makes available, we have been scouring Maltese blogs and online news sources, mostly for corroborating evidence and the occasional particularly apt example of the phenomena under examination. The Arabic data come from Tunisian Arabic Corpus (http://tunisiya.org/), comprising 818,310 tokens, and the Egyptian Arabic material from arabicorpus (arabicorpus.byu.edu) with 140,234 tokens. We also took advantage of our presence in the Levant to glean examples of usage from that milieu.

3. Polar interrogative š

A polar interrogative -š has been documented in some Arabic dialects (Obler 1975: 45–46; Holes 2004: 192; Woidich 2006: 358; Gibson 2008; Wilmsen 2014: 53–55 & Chapter 5 and references). Wilmsen (2016a) examines the phenomenon in Maltese in greater depth. Here is an example from our data:

(1) Maltese: pseudo-verb

\[
\text{Ghandekx hila tinsieni?} \\
\text{ānd-š k-š īla ti-nsi-ni} \\
\text{PREP-you=Q ability 2-forget-PRO.1S} \\
\text{‘Have [lit. ‘at’] you the ability to forget me?’ (cf. Sutcliffe 1936: 211: ghandeke} \\
\text{xi-hila tmur? ‘Do you have the temerity to go’)}
\]

(2) Maltese: Verb

\[
\text{hrigtx flus?} \\
\text{irig-t-š flus} \\
\text{extract.PFV-2M=Q money} \\
\text{‘[Have you taken out money [from your pocket]?’ (cf. Borg & Azzopardi-} \\
\text{Alexander 1997: 4: Hrįgtux mill forn?)}
\]

In Maltese, polar interrogative š follows the verb or pseudo-verb; in Levantine Arabic, it can as well, but it often, perhaps usually, comes at the end of the utterance (Holes 2004: 192).

(3a) Levantine Arabic

\[
\text{šuft-u ši la murād} \\
\text{see.PFV-PRO.3MS Q ACC name} \\
\text{‘[Have you seen Murad?]}
\]
These examples also exhibit another trait that Maltese shares with Levantine varieties of Arabic: the double object marker /l-/. We shall return to this presently.

4. Prohibitive t ... š

Another well-documented phenomenon is the prohibitive formed with a post-positive –š alone. This is, in fact, a defining feature of southern Levantine dialects of Arabic:

(5) Levantine Arabic

\[ \text{ti-nš-š} \quad \text{iš-shant} \quad \text{a} \]

2S-forget-PROH DET-bag

‘[Do] not forget the [your] bag’

It is also the usual manner of forming the prohibitive in Maltese (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997: 27):

(6) Maltese

\[ \text{Tinsiex li Ġesu wkoll įbati mil loneliness bhalek u bhali} \]

\[ \text{ti-nši-š} \quad \text{li} \quad ġ ėsu \quad \text{wkol} \quad ī-bāti} \]

2S-forget-PROH-NEG REL name also 3MS-suffers

\[ \text{mi-l-loneliness} \quad \text{b-āl-ek} \quad ū \quad b-āl-i} \]

PREP-DET-loneliness PREP-self-PROH.2 CONJ PREP-self-PROH.1S

‘[Do] not forget that Jesus also suffers from loneliness, as you [do]’

5. Dehortative mūš

Negating verbs with a reflex of miš/muš has been commented upon (Brustad 2000: 302–303; Doss 2008) with the assumption that it represents a language change in progress unique to Egyptian Arabic. It rather is a regular pragmatic feature, imparting shades of meaning to the negated predication (Håland 2011). Among these is the dehortative (Wilmsen 2016b). Not restricted to Egyptian Arabic, Levantine Arabic exhibits it, too:

(7) Levantine Arabic

\[ \text{ba'-} \text{zim-kon} \quad \text{alā} \quad \text{ahwe} \quad \text{muš} \quad \text{ti-šrab-u} \quad \text{šāy} \]

1-invite.IPV-PRO.2PL PREP coffee NEG 2-drink.IPV-PRO.PL tea

‘I’m inviting you for coffee; [mind] you not drink tea’
Negating verbs with múš is used with the same dehortative effect in Maltese. We have examined this in detail (Al-Sayyed and Wilmsen 2017). A difference between the dehortative and a prohibitive is that dehortatives are not restricted to the 2nd person, to which a prohibitive necessarily must be:

(8) Maltese

\[
\begin{array}{llllll}
\text{mhuż } & \text{jiq} & \text{lid } & \text{ji} & \text{enà } & \text{ivv} \\
\text{NEG} & \text{3MS-say.IP} & \text{REL} & \text{PRO.1S} & \text{invent.PFV-1S} & \text{some thing}
\end{array}
\]

‘He [should] not say that I invented something’

6. Double object marking with \textit{l-/lil}

Researchers have remarked this phenomenon in Levantine Arabic (Koutsoudas 1967; Levin 1987), and it is the sole syntactic affinity between Levantine Arabic and Maltese that Borg (1994: 57–59; 1997: 138–139) addresses. In Levantine Arabic, marking a direct object with /l-/ is optional, but common. When it occurs, the nominal direct object is usually preceded by an “anticipatory object pronoun” (Levin 1987: 33; Abu-Haidar 199: 116).

(9) Levantine Arabic

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
\text{kif } & \text{ti-żawwiż-à } & \text{la-l-binit} \\
\text{Q} & \text{2-marry.IP-PRO.3FS} & \text{ACC-DET-girl}
\end{array}
\]

‘How can you marry the girl?’

What is more, double object marking itself is optional, with no difference in meaning between a phrase with or without an anticipatory pronoun (Koutsoudas 1967: 33):

(10)

\[
\begin{array}{lll}
badd-ak & \text{ti-żawwiż} & \text{hal-binit} \\
\text{wish-PRO.2M} & \text{2-marry.IP} & \text{DET-girl}
\end{array}
\]

‘You want to marry the girl?’

This kind of variability is not usually seen in Maltese, which requires /lil/, a grammaticalization of the preposition /li-/ ‘to’ and the definite article /il-/ with animate direct objects. Generally, this appears without the anticipatory object pronoun of Levantine Arabic (11a), but an anticipatory pronoun does sometimes appear, usually in literary registers (11b):

(11) Maltese a.
b. Notice that the object in (11b) is inanimate. Such objects are usually not marked with /lil/ in Maltese, but they can be marked with /la-/ in Levantine Arabic:

(12) Levantine Arabic

a. b-ḥ  ibb-ā la-hal-musī`a
HAB-love.IPVF-PRO.3FS ACC-DET-music
‘I love this music!’

b. kāf  mi-n-ḥ  ibb-u la-libnān
EXCLAM HAB-IPL-love.IPVF-PRO.3MS ACC-place.name
‘How we love Lebanon!’

In (11b) and (12b), the inanimate objects din l-art ‘this land’ and libnān might be seen as embodying personality, but in (12a) it is not.

7. Pronominal circumstantial clauses

As we were investigating double object marking in Maltese, we chanced upon this phrase:

Hi u tisma’ lil Rasha tagriha r-rajūnijiet tagriha gntaliex bdiet tilbes il-velu ‘As she was listening to Rasha giving her the reasons she began to wear the veil’, in which the order of the pronoun and the verb in the circumstantial clause is the reverse of their usual order in most varieties of Arabic.

(13) Maltese

i  u  ti-sama  lil  Rasha
PRO.3S  CONJ  3FS-listen.IPVF  ACC  name
‘While she was listening to Rasha’
This also occurs in the same order in Levantine Arabic. According to Cowell (2005 [1964]: 532), it sometimes happens in Syrian Arabic. To the contrary, in our observations, it is common in Syrian Arabic, and it is the usual sequence in Lebanese Arabic:

(14) Levantine Arabic

\[ \text{hēk } \text{mīn } \text{hinne } \text{wu } \text{zā } \text{gār} \]
\[ \text{ADV } \text{PREP } \text{PRO.PL } \text{CON } \text{small.PL} \]
\[ \text{‘[It has been] thus from when they [were] small’} \]

In the usual Arabic order, these would be expected to be as follows:  

(15) a.

\[ \text{wa } \text{hi } \text{ti-sma’} \]
\[ \text{CONJ } \text{PRO } \text{2f-listen.IPVF} \]
\[ \text{‘As she was listening’} \]

b.

\[ \text{mīn } \text{wu } \text{hinne } \text{zā } \text{gār} \]
\[ \text{PREP } \text{CONJ } \text{PRO } \text{small} \]
\[ \text{‘From when they were young’} \]

Along with double object marking, the reversal of elements in pronominal circumstantial clauses looks to be another “striking parallel ... in the realm of syntax” (Borg 1997: 138).

8. Are these Levantine traits alone?

Many of these parallels had already been observed in Arabic varieties other than the Levantine.

8.1. Polar interrogative š

Ṭantāwi (1846) documents the use of a post-positive -š in polar interrogatives in Egyptian Arabic before the middle of the 19th century:

(17) Egyptian Arabic (19th century)

a.

\[ \text{gān-ši} \]
\[ \text{hungry.PCP-Q} \]
\[ \text{‘Est-ce qu’il a faim ?’ (Tantawi 1846: 86)} \]

b.

\[ \text{qām-š} \]
\[ \text{stand.PFV-Q} \]
\[ \text{‘Est-ce qu’il est levé ?’ (ibid.)} \]

c.
Somewhat later, Šabbāġ (1886) explains the principle in Egyptian Arabic: “They [Egyptians] add the šīn at the end of the perfective and imperfective verb and the active and passive participle in interrogation. They say, ḍrbt-š meaning ‘Have you struck?’ (hal ḏarabta?) ... and in the present, ṭadrab-š meaning ‘Do I strike?’ (Šabbāġ 1886: 14), also providing this example:

(18) Egyptian Arabic (19th century)

’inda-k-š ḥ uggā ɣī ḏālik
PREP-PRO.3M-Q excuse PREP DEM
‘Have you and excuse for that?’ (Šabbāġ 1886: 16)

By the 20th century, polar interrogative -š in Egyptian ‘ind expresses a negative hedge, with an approximate meaning of ‘you wouldn’t happen to have?’ (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 449; Woidich 2006: 358–359).

Nevertheless, it retains its interrogative quality in Tunisian Arabic. Gibson (2008) gives an example in which it simply means ‘have you?’ (cf. example [1]), echoing Šabbāġ’s explanation: “interrogation can be expressed by the suffix -si, sometimes shortened to -š” (Gibson 2008: 570). The following example is from our data:

(19) Tunisian Arabic

ni-mš-š nu-xruż ni-lqā-h ɣī wažh-i
1S-go.1PFV-Q 1S-exit.1PFV 1S-find.1PFV-him PREP face-PRO.1S
‘Am I to go out and find him in my face [everywhere]?’

8.2. Verbal negation with muš/mhux

Brustad (2000: 302–303) and Doss (2008) have remarked verbal negation with miš/muš in Egyptian Arabic, without, however, exploring its pragmatics in detail. Håland (2011) examines three pragmatic functions in negating verbs with miš/muš. A common reason for it is when, “one negated and one positive fact stand in contrast to each other” (Håland 2011: 30). We have found almost exact doublet of this between Egyptian Arabic and Maltese:

(20) a. Egyptian Arabic

bi-ya-ah ud fulūs miš bi-y-gīh fulūs
HAB-3M-take.1PFV money NEG HAB-3M-get.1PFV money
‘He takes money; not gets money’

b. Maltese
Other functions are rhetorical negation and metalinguistic negation. In rhetorical negation, the negator mīš poses a question of the type ‘is not X?’ and in metalinguistic negation registers an objection to the content or the form of an utterance, not to the proposition itself. We have found examples of all of these in Arabic varieties throughout the eastern Mediterranean (Al-Sayyed & Wilmsen 2017: 248–252).

### 8.3. Dehortative mūš

Another type of negation with mīš/muš that has received scant attention is with dehortatives (cf. Wilmsen 2016b). In his examination of negation in Irbid, northern Jordan, Alqassas (2012: 22, 121, 127–134) seems puzzled by the phenomenon. Doss (2008) gives an example of it in Egyptian Arabic without recognizing it as such:

(21) Egyptian Arabic

```
miš  t-akl-i  n-nahar-da  wa  a-gi  bukra
neg  2-EAT-F  DET-day-DEM  CONJ  IS-come.IPfv  tomorrow
a-lā'i  l-akl  zayy  ma  huwwa
1s-find.IPfv  DET-food  CONJ  REL  PRO
```

‘[Mind] you not eat today and then I come tomorrow to find the food as is [uneaten]’ (Doss 2008: 87)

We see analogous dehortatives in Tunisian Arabic:

(22) Tunisian Arabic

```
mūš  yi-qūl-ū  ildi  3amma  hāža  ism-ha  istimrāriyya
NEG  3-say.SBJV-PL  CONJ  EXIST  thing  name-3FS  continuation
```

‘[Let] them not say that there is something called continuity’

### 8.4. Double object marking with l-/llī

Borg supposes that this is a feature of Arabic varieties that had been in close contact with Aramaic. Indeed, it is found in all Arabic dialects of the Fertile Crescent. In Iraqi Arabic, as in Syro-Lebanese, it can mark animate and inanimate objects:

(23) Iraqi Arabic

```
ānī  ṣāyf-a  l-il-mathaf
PRO.1S  see.PCP-PRO.3MS  ACC-DET-museum
```

‘I’ve seen it the museum’ (Erwin 1963: 334; see also, & Jastrow 1979: 49; Levin 1987; Abu-Haidar 1991: 116)
We had thought that we had found a uniquely Levantine and even uniquely Lebanese trait in the uncharacteristic word order of pronominal circumstantial clauses. But Woidich has documented it in a dialect of Upper Egypt:

(24) Egyptian Arabic (B’ēri – Upper Egypt)

a. ṣyf-t-u hūwwa w ’ a-yī-hrīṭ
see.IPfv-1S-PRO.3MS PRO.3MS CONJ PROG-3S-plow.IPfv
‘I saw him while he was plowing’

b. tā-kīl min-ha n-naas hiyya w ḥ aḏ ra
2-eat.IPfv PREP-PRO.3FS DET-people PRO.3FS CONJ green
‘People eat it while it is green’ (Woidich 2005: 308; see also Woidich 1980: 235)

What is more, we have found it in use in some dialects of the United Arab Emirates.

(25) Emirati Arabic

a. Fujairah

yī-ĝib sana hū wa fi-l-blād
3S-be.absent.IPfv year PRO.3MS CONJ PREP-DET-locality.
‘[Would] he stay away for a year while he is [still] in town?’

b. Fujairah

ana w rāyīk il-mahkama b-a-xď-a min-k
PRO.1S CONJ go.PCP.MS DET-court FUT-1S-take.IPfv-PRO.3FS PREP-
PRO.2S
‘When I’m going to the court, I’ll get it from you’

What appears to be a polar interrogative with pronouns that is characteristic of Maltese usage (Wilmsen 2016a) is documented in Andalusi Arabic from 13th and 14th centuries, for example anā’š nadri ‘Do I know?’ This has usually been read as a negation (cf. Corriente 2013: 126–127), and that is what its pragmatics accomplish, but it remains an interrogative analogous to the Levantine expression šū bi-yā’rīfni and the Egyptian anā’ ‘ ārīf, both meaning ‘what do I know?’ but the pragmatic effect is of firm denial, that is, a negation (Wilmsen 2014: 69–70). So, too, is double object marking an Andalusi Arabic feature (Corriente 2013: 107–108).

We may, thus, tentatively conclude that speakers of Andalusi Arabic dialects with precursors in the Levant may have entered Malta from Al-Andalus, perhaps by way of Sicily, as part of what Agius calls “a period of continuous immigration from North Africa.
and al-Andalus” (2007: 25). This is consistent with Mifsud’s observation: “It is likely that successive waves of impact reached the Maltese shores from different Arab stations and at different points in the island’s history” (Mifsud 2008: 146).

This, however, does not preclude the possibility that what are now emblematic features of North African varieties of Arabic and of Levantine dialects alike had their origins in the Levant or inland from it. Writing about similarities between Moroccan Arabic and Aramaic, Retsö makes this observation:

> It is hereby suggested that these characteristics are a testimony of their originally belonging to a continuous linguistic continuum. It would have encompassed an area from central Syria to north-western Arabia (= the Syrian desert). The origins of the Maghribi dialects of Arabic are to be looked for in that area. We happen to know that the first wave of conquerors to North Africa were dominated by the so-called Qudā’a tribes, whose original habitat was Syria. (Retsö 2000: 116).

These scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Speakers of Arabic dialects were present in the Fertile Crescent before the first Arabic speaking Muslims arrived in the 7th century. They would have been in close contact with Aramaic, and many were probably bilingual in both. Speakers of those dialects of Arabic were involved in the push westward during the expansion of Arab/Islamic civilization in the 7th and 8th centuries. Once that expansion had reached its full extent, Arabic speakers moved more-or-less freely throughout the Mediterranean. With that, we may suppose that both Mifsud and Retsö have described separate dimensions to the presence of a variety of Arabic on Malta one at and the other after the arrival of Arabic speakers on Malta some time between 870 and 1090 (Brincat 1995, 2008). Speakers of what we now call North African dialects must surely have come to Malta by way of Tunisia, but they will also have come by way of Al-Andalus, where Levantine traits must have been in place since the first entry of Arabic speakers onto the Peninsula in 711, and surely after the entry of the Syrian Umayyad prince Abdel Rahman arrived in 756. Indeed, the features that Arabic dialects of the Fertile Crescent and the Syrian Steppes acquired through contact with Aramaic should be considered an adstratal not a “substratal feature[s] carried over from Aramaic” as Borg (1994: 58). With that, the Levantine features found in Maltese are not curious at all.

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Corpora:
arabiCorpus (http://arabicorpus.byu.edu)
Korpus Malti (http://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt)
Tunisian Arabic Corpus (http://tunisiya.org )

APPENDIXES

Abbreviations

ACC accusative
ADV adverbial
CONJ conjunction
DET determiner
EXCLAM exclamative
EXIST existential
f feminine
Maltese is usually classified as a North African Arabic variety. Yet some researchers have remarked “some curious similarities with the Eastern dialects”. Investigations of these tend to concentrate upon the phonology and lexicon, with slight attention paid to morphology and syntax. We report on a long-term project in documenting some of those, including polar interrogation with a reflex of /š/; the prohibitive/dehortative system, also exhibiting reflexes of /š/; double object marking with reflexes of /l-/; and pronominal circumstantial clauses. None of these is exclusive to Maltese and the Levant alone. Polar interrogation with /š/ is found in the Levantine, and North African, and Andalusi Arabic. The Maltese prohibitive is largely southern Levantine in form, but its dehortative is common to eastern Mediterranean dialects of Arabic. Double object marking with reflexes of /l-/ appears in Andalusi, Levantine, and Mesopotamian varieties. The Maltese pronominal circumstantial clause is similar to Syro-Lebanese Arabic, the Be’ēri Arabic of Upper Egypt, and some dialects of the United Arabic Emirates.

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