



A Historical and Linguistic Overview of the Maltese Language

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Abstract

The Maltese language, a unique member of the Semitic language family, is shaped by strong influences from Malta's conquerors. What distinguishes the Maltese language from others is Malta's resilience; despite the various visitors to the island, the language has endured, absorbing influences from each of its visitors and inhabitants in turn. The aim of this paper is to explore the history of Malta and its language, delving into their origin, and how Malta's visitors, together with Romance languages of Europe, left an impact on the intertwined entity of Malta and its language. This paper analyzes historical sources that show Malta's rich history and events that have shaped it into the country it is today, tracing the development of Maltese over time. Moreover, it delves into the linguistic aspects of Maltese that include phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. A qualitative analysis is applied in the research. The Maltese language is analyzed in regard to Semitic and Romance languages, showing the uniqueness of Maltese and how it is unlike any other language in Europe. This allows the conclusion that Maltese should be studied in more detail, uncovering its roots and linguistic characteristics, as well as evidence of Malta's turbulent, yet interesting history.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malta, an island country in the Mediterranean, holds a unique position as it bridges Europe and the African coast. Despite its small size, Malta has hosted various visitors throughout its history, each contributing to the island's historical tapestry. One significant development resulting from this rich and fascinating history is the emergence of the Maltese language, a testament to a blend of influences. What sets the Maltese language apart is its Semitic origin, making it the sole Semitic language spoken in Europe. However, this Semitic foundation did not prevent other languages such as English and Romance languages from leaving their own mark on it, enriching Malta's linguistic landscape. This is what makes Maltese all the more interesting to explore.

This paper employs qualitative research method to analyze Malta's history, the evolution of its language, and the various influences on the language's linguistic aspects of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. These aspects incorporate diverse foreign influences, which are combined to form the linguistic identity of Maltese. Despite Malta's turbulent history and many conquerors, Maltese developed as a unique language in Europe, tracing its roots back to the Semitic language family.

2. Malta's turbulent history

Malta has a turbulent history, as seen from the many conquerors that have walked on the island. Early evidence of humans being in Malta dates to 5000 BC, belonging to the Neolithic culture whose people practiced farming and did not move around as nomads (Brincat, 2008). Setting

up their settlements, one of the first being at Tas-Silġ, the Phoenicians were the first to bring foreign influence to Malta, until the Maltese were conquered in 218 BC by the Romans. Romanization was crucial in the shaping of Malta's history: it brought new governance and infrastructure, and it affected the island's cultural and linguistic identity, during which Latin became a vital part of communication (Miller-Yianni, 2024). The early 5th century was characterized by the slow withdrawal of Roman forces; however, this does not mean that foreign influence in Malta came to a halt.

The Arab occupation characterized the period between the 4th and 11th centuries AD. This was a transformative era in the Eastern Mediterranean, beginning with the Byzantine Empire, which was based in Constantinople. Miller-Yianni (2024) described it as displaying a "robust bureaucratic structure" (p. 26). The emperor held absolute power, while the administrative hierarchy was well-organized and ensured effective governance. Unlike the Byzantines, however, the Arab rulers made a distinction between political and religious authority, emphasizing justice and the rule of law. Miller-Yianni (2024) pointed out that the spread of Islam during the Arab period brought with it a "distinct governance paradigm" (p. 26). The Byzantines and Arabs notably shaped the development of the Eastern Mediterranean, bringing with them political and administrative changes. Not only was social change evident, but it was also the scientific and academic advancements that this period witnessed. Arab scholars referred to Greek and Roman knowledge, enriching it by building upon it, thus contributing to the Islamic Golden Age. Moreover, the Arab culture left an impact on the region's architecture, evident in landmarks such as Mdina, Malta's fortified city (Miller-Yianni, 2024).

In 1090, Count Roger the Norman acquired control of Malta, igniting the start of the Norman presence on the island. The Norman rule was integrated in 1124 through the armed intervention of the Count's son, Roger II. During the twelfth century, Christian migrants from Sicily, Southern and Northern Italy, as well as other European parts established their presence in Malta. These people still lived alongside the Muslim population, as the Norman conquest left the Arabs undisturbed. However, as time passed, the literary Arabic that was used for administrative purposes was soon replaced by Latin, which remained the official language of the island administratively and judicially until the 18th century (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997).

A turning point in Malta's history was the year 1530. This year marked the arrival of the Hospitaller Knights of St. John, who had been ousted from Rhodes by the Ottomans. They took control of the island, marking the transition from Norman rule. The Great Siege of Malta took place in 1565, during which the Ottomans tried to take control of Malta, but failed, as the Knights were the key to Malta's defense. They went on to transform the island into a fortifications network, establishing Valletta in 1566, which is now the capital of Malta, as a new cosmopolitan city (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997; Miller-Yianni, 2024). The Knights left an enduring legacy on the architecture and cultural heritage of Malta. Nevertheless, this did not deter foreign visitors from continuing to come to Malta.

In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Malta, after which the Knights' rule abruptly came to an end overnight. The French established their own administration and government, dashing the hopes of the Maltese for the anticipated era of French liberal rule (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). The influence of the Catholic Church was undermined, and taxes and conscription were imposed, all to the dissatisfaction of the Maltese, ultimately leading them to rise to rebellion against the French. Two years after Napoleon's invasion, the Maltese asked for the protection of the British Crown, which eventually resulted in the surrender of the French forces. Consequently, Malta came under British rule. The Treaty of Amiens provided them with a legal framework for their presence until Malta achieved independence in 1964, leaving behind them an abundance of advancements in socioeconomic, cultural, and political aspects

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(Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997; Miller-Yianni, 2024). Malta also played an important role in World War II, during which it endured intense bombing. As an award for the islanders' resilience, their home was awarded the George Cross, which is featured on the Maltese flag. The eponymous cross was awarded by King George VI in 1942 (Miller-Yianni, 2024).

Since 2004, Malta has been a member of the European Union, marking a new historical turning point. Today, Malta is a country that boasts its rich history, strong economy, and diverse and unique cultural influences, evident in its vibrant arts encompassing both spoken and visual forms, such as the colorful and lively festas celebrated across Malta, traditional Maltese folk music, and the intricate craftsmanship of glass-making.

3. A unique language in Europe

The uniqueness of the Maltese language can be seen in its Semitic origin. The development of the Arabo-Maltese language, referred to as Siculo-Arabic, likely emerged from the trade and political relations between the Sicilians and the Maltese. This linguistic fusion began during the Arabo-Islamization period and went on through the Norman occupation, during which the Normans tolerated Arabic alongside Latin and Greek. This language blend produced a mosaic reflecting Siculo-European characteristics, shaping the islanders' cultural identity (Agius, 1981). For a historical overview of the development of the Maltese language, we can offer two theories: the first inhabitants came from Sicily and could have spoken a language known as Mediterranean up to the Bronze Age (Gimbutas, 1997; Mallory, 1989; as cited in Brincat, 2017), or an Indo-European language starting from 5500 BC (Renfrew, 1987, 1999, as cited in Brincat, 2017).

Settlements of the Phoenicians started around 800 BC, absorbing the Bronze Age autochtones. The Romans rose to their rule in 218 BC, followed by the Byzantines almost 700 years later in 535 AD. Phoenicians left their first writings on stone around 700 BC, but the use of Greek as a high language is evidenced by two candelabra made of marble that date back to the second century BC, bearing parallel inscriptions in Punic and Greek, and by a *tessera hospitalis* (a token of mutual hospitality) sent to Syracuse by the senate and the people of Malta that dates back to circa 40 BC (Brincat, 2017). Latin was in abundance during the first three centuries of Roman rule, and its first inscriptions were linked to the rule of Augustus. These inscriptions only revealed the formal language, but this could be evidence of bilingualism during these long periods of colonization. A plausible theory is that Malta was also immersed in Latin during that time. Greek, however, was the official language of the Byzantine Empire, but since the Maltese fell under their rule as well, Greek must have been spoken on the island (Brincat, 2017).

A shift occurred during the Arab rule, during which they introduced their own language. Brincat (2017) describes the conquering army as supposedly having spoken an imperfect form of Maghrebi Arabic, or Berber (p. 208). Al-Himyari (as cited in Brincat, 2017), an Arab historian and geographer, asserts that the Muslim army devastated the island, later abandoning it. Subsequently, in 1048, a new Arabic-speaking community was brought in, having the survivors become immersed in it and not leaving their mark on the new language. Consequently, it is impossible to define which language was spoken before Arabic due to the absence of a substratum. The origins of what is today Maltese are found in a variety of Maghrebi speech which is similar to the one developed in Sicily in 1000 AD, still spoken in the areas under Norman rule (Brincat, 2017).

Normans tolerated Arabic; however, the original Arabic dialect was immediately exposed to a gradual process of Latinization. The Muslims were expelled from Malta and Sicily in 1223 and 1246 by the Swabian Frederick II, and, as a result, the local dialect fell out of touch with

Classical Arabic, as well as with its spoken variations. Consequently, Maltese developed on its own, gradually being influenced by Sicilian and later by Italian (Brincat, 2017).

Brincat (2017) proceeds to depict the Knights' settling in Malta, during whose time the island's official languages were Latin and Sicilian, but they chose Italian as their local official language, despite the majority being Spanish or French. A deciding factor for the effect of Italian on the Maltese language was the establishment of Valletta from 1566 to 1580. Since this was a new town, surrounded by fortifications, its building required thousands of laborers, who came from Sicily, Italy, France, and Spain, many of whom married locally and settled permanently. Local laborers moved in from Malta's different parts as well, and their concentration in a small area produced a lingua franca of Maltese dialects. This was destined to become the base for the standard language (p. 209).

Napoleon was the one who set forward a linguistic policy in Malta; however, since the Maltese revolted against him after a few months, his attempts to initiate French fell through. Moreover, an attempt was made to introduce English as early as 1800, but it did not make progress with the locals, who resisted it, especially after the Colonial Office announced an Anglicization policy as early as 1813. The Maltese were loyal to Italian and Catholicism as the safe havens of their national identity. The Mediterranean was unfamiliar with English in those days, especially because the British troops stayed in isolated barracks and rarely interacted with the locals, even though they worked amongst them. Political pressure in the period before the War made knowledge of English essential for employment with the British armed forces, the police and the civil service. As a consequence, it rose by 22.6% of literates, and compulsory primary education in 1946 was well on its way towards the 100% mark (Brincat, 2017).

These historical events are reflected in the structure of the Maltese lexicon, which Brincat (2017) describes as consisting of four levels through which languages influenced each other. Since there is no layer that existed in the region before the arrival of a dominant language group, medieval Arabic actually makes up the first and principal layer, which comprises most of the basic vocabulary and the vast part of the morphological rules of Maltese. This is what makes Maltese distinct as a Semitic language. Sicilian crept into some areas of the vocabulary as well, which makes it part of the Maltese lexicon brought by colonizers. This vocabulary refers to the terminology regarding arts and crafts, including legal and medical learned words (*nutàr* – notary; *sptar* – hospital), parts of the body (*spalla* – shoulder; *stonku* – stomach), and some areas of the core vocabulary (*missier* – father; *arja* – air). However, Sicilian never replaced Maltese as a spoken language, and when the Knights of St. John introduced Italian, Sicilian lost its prestige. Italian was adopted by the educated locals as their language of culture and administration (pp. 210-211).

Standardization of Maltese was achieved in the scholars' writing of grammars and dictionaries in the meantime. In 1934, Maltese was raised to official status. Since this was the time of preparations for the Second World War which set Britain against Italy, Italian was dropped from official status two years later. It was revived after 1957 when Italian television was broadcast (Brincat, 2017).

The Maltese still widely understand Italian, so it can be considered as a language that developed due to Italy and Malta's adjacent geographic regions. English was introduced in Malta in 1800. Its influence gradually strengthened, particularly after 1946 when primary education became compulsory, with both Maltese and English being the languages of instruction. The domination of English globally is to be credited for the main source of lexical innovation today, as well as official bilingualism (Brincat, 2017).

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Today, the official languages of Malta are Maltese and English, but it nevertheless remains important to consider the historical journey of Maltese and its noteworthy evolution. Even though English is now dominant in Malta, it is still vital to preserve Maltese as a language by strengthening it besides English. Maltese becoming an official language of the European Union where Malta resides was a surprise to the islanders themselves (Sciriha & Vassallo, as cited in Sciriha, 2024). Moreover, Maltese achieved official status in 1934 through the Letters Patent, while it was still a British Colony (Pace & Borg, as cited in Sciriha, 2024; Sciriha, 2024).

The Constitution of Malta (Konstituzzjoni ta' Malta, as cited in Sciriha, 2024), upon the independence of the island, underlines the importance of the language by giving Maltese an official and a national status (Sciriha, 2024). A census from 2007 revealed that Maltese is spoken at home by 90.2% of the population that is over ten years old, and 6% of the population was revealed to speak English. The rest would speak another language (NSO, as cited in Sciriha, 2024).

Another census from 2021 revealed that 97% of Maltese people said that Maltese was their first language; however, they also said that they use Maltese and English in different contexts. Spoken Maltese at home is most dominant when speaking with parents, while a slightly lower dominance is seen when speaking with partners or children. Listening to the radio or watching news in Maltese is slightly less dominant than speaking it, but it still above the 50% mark. However, what shows a decrease is written Maltese, as only a minority of the population write emails or informal texts in Maltese. A very low percentage (23%) asserted that they read a book written in Maltese (NSO, as cited in Sciriha, 2024).

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2012) recognizes the following aspects that need to be addressed regarding the language policy:

- entitlement issues – students' need for proficiency in Maltese, English, and another language to ensure socioeconomic and cultural integration;
- cultural issues – recognizing Maltese as a part of the national identity of the Maltese people;
- implementation issues – addressing the use of languages in various learning areas as well as which language should be used;
- professional issues – requirements for teachers to be proficient in both Maltese and English;
- economic issues – English proficiency is important to ensure a place in the economic environment of the world (NCF, as cited in Sciriha, 2024).

Despite both Maltese and English being spoken in schools, there is always a preference for one language over the other depending on the type of school. State schools seem to favor Maltese, inside and outside the classroom. Independent schools teach classes in English, except for Maltese, but both languages are used outside of class, as a mixture. Church schools favor Maltese, but to a lesser extent than State schools (Sciriha, as cited in Sciriha, 2024).

Studies showed that preschools (State and Church) generally use Maltese in activities, with some English words being used. This is a slight contrast from Independent schools, where English is the main language of communication, with some preschoolers speaking Maltese among themselves (Sciriha, 2024). The National Literacy Agency conducted a study that showed that educators are aware of the fact that they should include both languages at that age, as well as creating activities that would allow them to improve their bilingualism (Vella et al., as cited in Sciriha, 2024).

Primary education in Malta begins at the age of five, and since Malta is bilingual in terms of the official languages, both Maltese and English begin to be taught from the first grade. At the primary education level, students have one English language lesson and one Maltese language lesson daily. Both languages are official and both are used as languages of instruction (Sciriha, 2024).

In secondary education, the numbers of Maltese lessons varies according to the grade; nevertheless, the textbooks focus on Maltese grammar and orthography. Moreover, the curriculum includes literature in Maltese as well, allowing students to explore Maltese novelists, poets, and playwrights (Sciriha, 2024).

The vocational education in Malta, which is after the eleven years of mandatory schooling, begins to include codeswitching, but the textbooks are in English. Despite the English textbooks, Maltese is still the main language in such institutions, and communication between students and the teaching staff mainly takes place in Maltese (Sciriha, 2024).

Higher education requires Maltese proficiency for a student to enroll, but besides Maltese, English is also a language of instruction. Courses that offer Maltese literature and linguistics also exist, promoting Maltese culture and identity (Sciriha, 2024).

Sciriha (2024) notes that Maltese is also being studied outside of the island: the International Association of Maltese Linguistics was established on the 19th of October, 2007 at the University of Bremen as an attempt to promote Maltese and to encourage university centers outside of Malta to network between scholars and researchers from different backgrounds. A few years later, in 2012, the first center was established at the same university through a mutual contract between them and the University of Malta, as a way of expanding resources on Maltese language and linguistics.

Another important factor to consider is the growing number of people coming to Malta. The non-Maltese population is becoming significantly high, with around 43,000 people on the island with a migrant background in 2018 (Martin, as cited in Sciriha, 2024), and more arriving by 2021, converging to a number of 115,449 (Vella, as cited in Sciriha, 2024). Since these people do not have a Maltese background, they will try to use English or other languages to communicate, which leads to a decline when it comes to spoken Maltese. Even though Maltese is still offered in the adult education sector and in the attempts to facilitate children's integration into the education of system of Malta, linguistic expectations are changing on the island. Migrants now expect the Maltese to accommodate them by speaking English, and the Maltese do not expect other Maltese people to speak the language. Aside from the migrants' arrival to Malta, tourism also affects the linguistic background of Maltese, causing it to gradually decline (Vassallo & Sciriha, as cited in Sciriha, 2024). Unfortunately, since English is a dominant language globally, chances for Maltese are low, lacking the same influence as English. Even the migrants who do come to Malta, use the opportunity of speaking English even if they are not proficient in it; they would rather do so than learn or speak Maltese.

For Maltese to prevail, migrants can start by learning Maltese as a way of integrating into the society thereof (Borg; Vassallo & Sciriha; as cited in Sciriha, 2024). Żammit (2024) researches whether VR (virtual reality) would be a viable solution for learning languages such as Maltese, as VR encourages communication, a vital skill for foreign students integrating into Maltese society. VR could also remove physical barriers, which could deem helpful to Maltese communities living outside of Malta, who would also want to improve their Maltese. Educators interviewed by Żammit claimed that VR could combine entertainment and educational elements, as an attempt to design interactive language learning activities that could facilitate in memorizing new words and participating in various activities. Ultimately, educators and

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linguists should work on preserving Maltese before it becomes completely overshadowed by English and other external influences on the island. Action is urgently needed to preserve Maltese remains a vibrant and essential cornerstone of Malta's cultural and linguistic identity.

4. Linguistic aspects of Maltese

Linguistically, the Maltese language can be compared to Semitic languages such as Arabic, but it can also be compared to Italian or English. A person who speaks Arabic can with no trouble understand the following utterance: “*Wasal il-waqt li nħallu warajna l-illużjoni tal-progress bhala xi torta kbira li dejjem tiżdied.*” This is pronounced as “*Wasal il-waqt li n-hall-u waray-na l-illużjóni ta-l-progress b-hala ši torta kbira li deyyem ti-zdēd.*” In English, this utterance translates to: “The time has arrived that we leave behind us the illusion of progress as a large cake that always increases.” An Arabic speaker can immediately notice that this utterance is Arabic in regard to its structure and vocabulary, but that there are three nouns (*illużjoni*, *progress*, *torta*) that originated in European languages (Wilmsen, 2021, p. 249), and translate to *illusion*, *progress*, and *cake*. Wilmsen (2021) also identifies Maltese as being one of the “peripheral” dialects of Arabic, which are language varieties descending from Arabic yet becoming an independent language, due to their isolation from the mainland (p. 244).

We can offer another aspect in which it is seen that Maltese is derived from Arabic: its numbers. Any speaker of Arabic, even a beginner, can immediately recognize these numbers from one to ten without the need of a translation: *wieħed*, *tnejn*, *tlieta*, *erbgha*, *ħamsa*, *sitta*, *sebgħa*, *tmienja*, *disgħa*, *għaxra*. Zero in Maltese is *żero*, which is borrowed from Italian *zero* coming from Latin, which is again borrowed from the Arabic word *sifr*. Even the days of the week are Arabic in origin: *it-Tnejn*, *it-Tlieta*, *l-Erbgħa*, *il-Ħamis*, *il-Ġimgħa*, *is-Sibt*, *il-Ħadd*. Breaking down linguistic aspects, we will compare Maltese phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics in regard to Arabic, English, as well as to Romance languages.

The Appendix provides the Maltese alphabet as a guide for reading the sentences that will be discussed and analyzed in this section of the paper.

4.1. Phonology

Despite the Maltese language becoming isolated from Arabic at some point during its evolution, there are curiosities surrounding its phonology. For instance, what is interesting is that Maltese adopted the two groups of consonants that already exist in Arabic: the sun or solar letters, and the moon or lunar letters (Arabic: *huruf šamsiyyah* and *huruf qamariyyah*; Maltese: *konsonanti xemxin* and *konsonanti qamrin*). The sun and moon letters with their IPA are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Sun and moon letters in Maltese and their IPA

Sun letters	ċ	d	l	n	r	s	t	x	ż	z				
IPA	/tʃ/	/d/	/l/	/n/	/r/	/s/	/t/	/ʃ/	/z/	/ts/, /ds/				
Moon letters	b	f	ġ	g	għ	h	ħ	j	k	m	p	q	v	w
IPA	/b/	/f/	/dʒ/	/g/	silent	/h/ (silent)	/ħ/	/j/	/k/	/m/	/p/	/q/	/v/	/w/

As it is the case with Arabic, Maltese uses the same definite article (*l-*). The distinction between sun and moon letters affects pronunciation when making a word definite by adding *l-*. When a word begins with a sun letter, the *l* sound of the article is not pronounced, but rather it assimilates with or doubles the initial consonant sound. For instance, words like *ix-xemx* (the sun), *id-dar* (the house) or *it-tifel* (the child) illustrate this assimilation. When a word begins with a moon letter, the *l* remains unchanged, and both the *l* and the following letter are pronounced. For instance, *qamar* becomes *il-qamar* (the moon), *raġel* becomes *il-raġel* (the man), and *fjura* becomes *il-fjura* (the flower).

Even though the sun and moon letters are only characteristic to Arabic and Maltese, the phonology of the latter is not Arabic in character. According to Avram (as cited in Wilmsen, 2021), “the domain in which Maltese differs most significantly from other modern dialects of Arabic is phonology” (p. 251). For instance, the emphatic consonants of Arabic (*s*, *z*, *t*, and *ḍ*) do not exist in standard Maltese. Table 2 includes some examples.

Table 2

Examples of words in Maltese containing consonants derived from the emphatic consonants in Arabic

Maltese	Arabic	Translation
<i>isfar</i>	<i>aṣfar</i>	yellow
<i>tajjeb</i>	<i>ṭayyeb</i>	good
<i>dawl</i>	<i>ḍawḥ</i>	light
<i>dell</i>	<i>ẓill</i>	shadow

When it comes to the consonant *q*, which is also found in Maltese, it is generally not pronounced the same in Classical Arabic as the sound *qaf*, but rather as a glottal stop (ʔ). According to Lucas & Čéplö (2020), innovations in Maltese phonology are assumed to have been borrowed from Italo-Romance and English lexical items without adapting to the original native inventory subsequently (p. 269). For instance, the word *pulizija* is borrowed from Italian *polizia* while the phoneme [p] was still undergoing adaptation to the phonological system of Maltese (Lucas & Čéplö, 2020). Except for [p], other additions to the Maltese alphabet include [v], [z], [č], and [g] (Lucas & Čéplö, 2020).

The authors (2020) also mention the phoneme /dz/ being an innovated addition, and that there are no minimal pairs that represent a phonetic distinction between /dz/ and /ts/. Both of these are represented as [z] orthographically (p. 269). Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander (as cited in Lucas & Čéplö, 2020) assert that /dz/ occurs in environments that do not require a voiced obstruent, such as the word *gazzetta*, meaning newspaper (p. 269). Another note is in regard to /z/ which can be found in words that are borrowed from English, such as *televixin* (television) (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, as cited in Lucas & Čéplö, 2020).

As it can be seen from this analysis, even though Maltese would seem to be similar to Arabic in its phonology due to instances such as the sun and moon letters, it does at some point start developing on its own, dropping concepts such as emphatic consonants and adopting new letters.

4.2. Morphology

Morphology, being the part of linguistics that deals with words and their formation, is probably the most obvious indicator that Maltese has foreign influence (Hoberman, 2007). Hoberman's

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analysis (2007) shows that all verbs are inflected for the gender, number, and person of the subject with affixes of Arabic origin (p. 259). For example, the verb *to write* in Maltese is *kiteb*, derived from the Arabic *kataba*. Table 3 shows the similarities in the inflections upon conjugating the verb in the present tense.

Table 3

Conjugations of the verbs kiteb and kataba

Maltese				Arabic			
	Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural
1st person	<i>nikteb</i>	1 st person	<i>niktbu</i>	1 st person	<i>ʔaktubu</i>	1 st person	<i>naktubu</i>
2nd person	<i>tikteb</i>	2 nd person	<i>tiktbu</i>	2 nd person (m)	<i>taktubu</i>	2 nd person (m)	<i>taktubuuna</i>
3rd person (m)	<i>jikteb</i>	3 rd person	<i>jiktbu</i>	2 nd person (f)	<i>taktubina</i>	2 nd person (f)	<i>taktubna</i>
3rd person (f)	<i>tikteb</i>			3 rd person (m)	<i>yaktubu</i>	3 rd person (m)	<i>yaktubuuna</i>
				3 rd person (f)	<i>taktubu</i>	3 rd person (f)	<i>yaktubna</i>

One can immediately notice that one of the differences is that Arabic has a masculine and feminine gender for the second person, whereas Maltese has only one gender for it. Both languages have both genders for the third person.

Lucas & Čéplo (2020) describe Maltese as having acquired plural morphemes from Sicilian and English. It has, nevertheless, also acquired “broken plurals”, which also play a role of the plurals of words borrowed from Italo-Romance languages or from English, although the latter’s case is a rarer one (p. 275). The authors (2020) identify six plural suffixes of Maltese: *-in*, *-a*, *-iet*, *-ijiet*, *-i*, and *-s*. Table 4 lists some examples of sound plurals in Maltese (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997).

Table 4

Examples of sound plurals in Maltese

Singular	Plural
<i>bahri</i> (sailor)	<i>bahrin</i>
<i>werqa</i> (leaf)	<i>werqat</i> or <i>werqiet</i>

żmien (time)	<i>żminijiet</i>
barbier (barber)	<i>barbiera</i>
karta (paper)	<i>karti</i>
garaxx (garage)	<i>garaxxijiet</i>
ġar (neighbor)	<i>ġirien</i>
ċekk (cheque)	<i>ċekkijiet</i> or <i>ċekks</i>
rikkieb (rider)	<i>rikkieba</i>
haddied (blacksmith)	<i>haddieda</i> or <i>haddedin</i>

Another aspect of plurals borrowed from Arabic is the dual plural: adding *-ejn* (or *-ajn*) to the end of the noun yields us with “two of something”. The suffix *-ajn* is used when the final consonants of the singular form are /ʔ/, /h/, or an underlying back consonant that is represented by *għ* or *ʿ* (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). An example is “*elf – elfejn*” (“*one thousand – two thousand*”) (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997, p.175).

In Maltese, we also have the occurrence of broken plurals. Broken plurals are not rare in Maltese, and it can be difficult to predict whether a plural of a noun will be sound or broken (Hoberman, 2007). Table 5 includes some examples of broken plurals in Maltese (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997; Hoberman, 2007).

Table 5

Examples of broken plurals in Maltese

Singular	Plural
<i>qatra</i> (a drop)	<i>qtar</i>
<i>forn</i> (oven)	<i>fran</i>
<i>vers</i> (verse)	<i>vrus</i>
<i>fenek</i> (rabbit)	<i>fniek</i>
<i>kittla</i> (kettle)	<i>ktieli</i>
<i>sena</i> (year)	<i>snin</i>
<i>borsa</i> (purse)	<i>boros</i>
<i>villa</i> (villa)	<i>vilel</i>
<i>katina</i> (chain)	<i>ktajjen</i>
<i>xemx</i> (sun)	<i>xmux</i>
<i>xahar</i> (month)	<i>xhur</i>
<i>qarib</i> (relative)	<i>qraba</i>
<i>Qormi</i> (name of a village in Malta)	<i>Qriema</i> (people from <i>Qormi</i>)
<i>rahal</i> (village)	<i>rħula</i>
<i>triq</i> (street)	<i>toroq</i>
<i>qmis</i> (shirt)	<i>qomos</i>
<i>fwieha</i> (fragrance)	<i>fwejjah</i>
<i>mitraħ</i> (mattress)	<i>mtieraħ</i>
<i>mhadđa</i> (pillow)	<i>mħaded</i>
<i>ħaġa</i> (thing)	<i>ħwejjeg</i>
<i>pjazza</i> (square)	<i>pjazzez</i>
<i>envelops</i> (envelope)	<i>envelopsijiet</i>
<i>skola</i> (school)	<i>skejjel</i>
<i>xmara</i> (river)	<i>xmajjar</i>
<i>flett</i> (flat)	<i>fletts</i> or <i>flettsijiet</i>

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We can see here that also Romance loanwords (*forn, kittla, borsa, katina, pjazza, skola, xmara*) as well as words from English (*flett, envelops*) are subject to irregular plurality (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997; Hoberman, 2007).

Table 6 shows comparative adjectives formed from words of Arabic and Romance origin, as well as from English adjectives that are part of non-standard Maltese spoken by emigrants in Australia (Hoberman, 2007).

Table 6

Examples of comparatives in Maltese

Base adjective	Comparative
<i>qawwi (strong)</i>	<i>aqwa</i>
<i>tajjeb (good)</i>	<i>itjeb</i>
<i>nadif (clean)</i>	<i>indaf</i>
<i>ħelu (sweet)</i>	<i>oħla</i>
<i>bravu (clever)</i>	<i>ibrav</i>
<i>ċkejken (small)</i>	<i>iċken</i>
<i>dear</i>	<i>idjer</i>
<i>polite</i>	<i>iplet</i>
<i>smart</i>	<i>ismart</i>
<i>quiet</i>	<i>ikwet</i>

As we can see from these examples, Maltese has a great amount of foreign influence in its morphology, most notably in its inflections.

4.3. Syntax

Maltese has a SVO (subject-verb-object) word order in sentences: *It-tifel imur l-iskola*. Upon translating this, we can see that the word order is preserved in English: The child goes to school. When negating Maltese sentences, one adds the particle *ma* before the verb and the suffix *-x* after the verb: *It-tifel ma jmurx l-iskola*. Yes-no question forms are the same as the sentences themselves, except that there is an intonation contour which Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander (1997) explained as “beginning on a low pitch on the first stressed syllable and ending on a high pitch on the last stressed syllable” (p. 3). Another variant of yes-no questions which is more frequent is adding the particle *huwa* before the statement itself: *Huwa it-tifel imur l-iskola?* The particle *huwa* is a third-person masculine singular independent pronoun. This translates to *Is the child going to school?* *Huwa* is also derived from the same word in Arabic.

Positive questions that expect an affirmative answer add the tag *hu* at the beginning of the question: *Hu it-tifel imur l-iskola?* *Hu* is an alternative form of *huwa*. Such negative questions add *hu – hux* at the end of the sentence, or they can add the form *hux hekk*, which means “isn’t that so?” (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). The former tags are optional, and if we want the question to receive a higher degree of expectancy, we can add *hux* (not *hu*) at the beginning of the question (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). Let us now look at these two variants: *It-tifel ma jmurx għall-iskola, hu/hux?* and *Hu it-tifel ma jmurx għall-iskola?* Putting *hu* at the beginning of the sentence results in a greater degree of expectancy, with it being pronounced on a low pitch, before it rises in a bouncing movement to a high pitch on the last stressed syllable (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). Questions that expect a negative answer can be said in a more extensive pitch, or can add the subordinator *li*: *Trid tgħid li t-tifel sejjer l-iskola?* which translates to *Do you mean to say that the child is going to school?* This subordinator is

also derived from the Arabic *alladī*, meaning *who*, *which*, or *that*, which in common Arabic takes the form *illi*.

Other sentences that we can look at are those in which we can analyze which constituents can be questioned. In Maltese, we can question any constituent, as long as we use the appropriate question-word (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). A few examples are discussed below.

1. We can question the subject using the question-word *min*: *Oħti ordnat il-ktieb* (My sister ordered the book). Questioning who ordered the book is achieved using the question-word *min*: *Min ordnat il-ktieb?*
2. We can also question the inanimate subject of a sentence using the question-word *xi*: *Il-borra nizlet fuq il-fjuri. X'waqa' fuq il-fjuri?* (The snow fell on the flowers. What fell on the flowers?).
3. Questioning the object, we use the question-word *'il min*: *Il-missier ġabar lil ibnu mill-iskola*. (The father picked up his son from school). *'Il min mar jigbor il-missier mill-iskola?* Note that *lil min* can be used as well, as *'il min* is the contracted form of the former.
4. As was the case with the inanimate subject, questioning the inanimate object uses the word *xi*: *Hija xtara l-affarijiet tal-merċa. Xi xtara ħija?* (My brother bought the groceries. What did my brother buy?)
5. We can also question the indirect object of a sentence. For instance, *Hija baġhat karta lill-imġhallem tiegħu*. (My brother sent his boss a paper.). Using *lil min*, we can form this question: *Lil min baġhatha l-karta ħija?* (To whom did my brother send the paper?)
6. The verb phrase can be questioned as well in Maltese: *L-avukati ġew l-uffiċċju* (The lawyers came to the office). To question what the lawyers did, we ask *X'għamlu l-avukati?*
7. Questioning time adverbials is also possible: *Hija marret l-ajruport fis-sieġha* (She went to the airport at one o'clock). If we want to know at what time the subject went to the airport, we can achieve that using *fi x' ħin*: *Fi x'ħin marret l-ajruport?* Here we used what is known as the detailed time question-word. Using a regular time question-word is also common and it uses the word *meta*.
8. Questioning place adverbials is also possible in Maltese. In *L-aħwa marru fir-restorant* (The siblings went to the restaurant), we can question the place where they went using *fejn*: *Fejn marru l-aħwa?*
9. Another prevalent question-form in Maltese is the one for manner, *kif*: *Huwa telaq mil-laqgħa bl-ġhaġġla. Kif telaq mil-laqgħa?* (He left the meeting in a hurry. How did he leave the meeting?)
10. Maltese also includes the instrumental question-word *b'xiex*: *Huwa kiteb l-ittra b'pinna. B'xiex kitibha l-ittra?* (He wrote the letter with a pen. With what did he write the letter?). *B'xiex* is a combination of *bi* and *xiex*. The form *b'* is used when it comes before a consonant cluster. Note that instead of *b'xiex* we can also use *biex*.

What is interesting to notice is that all the aforementioned question-words are derived from Arabic:

1. *Min* is derived from the Arabic *man* (or *min* in dialectal Arabic), meaning *who*.
2. *Xi* is derived from the Arabic *ʔayyu šayʔ* meaning *what thing*. In Maltese, this is used as a pronoun in the interrogative context meaning *what*.
3. *Lil min* is consisted of two parts: *lil* from Arabic *li*, meaning *to*, and *min*, which means *who*.
4. *X'* is a contraction of *xi*, which is in turn a contraction of *xiex*.

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5. *Fi x'ħin* is a combination of *fī*, *x'* and *ħin*. *Fi* is derived from Arabic *fī* meaning *in*, and *ħin* is derived from Arabic *ħin*, meaning *time*. Therefore, *fi x'ħin* means *at what time*.
6. *Meta* is derived from Arabic *mata*, meaning *when*.
7. *Fejn* is derived from Arabic *fī ʔayna*, meaning *where*.
8. *Kif* is derived from Arabic *kayfa* meaning *how*.
9. *B'xiex* is a combination of *bi* and *xiex*, both derived from Arabic, where *bi* means *by* and *xiex* means *what thing*. The form *b'* is used when it comes before a consonant cluster. Note that instead of *b'xiex* we can also use *biex*. In Maltese, this means *with what*.

In Maltese, we can also question more than one thing in a sentence. Using the examples put forward by Borg & Alexander-Azzopardi (1997), the question “*Min jagħmel xiex?*” meaning “*Who does what?*” results with the subject and object being questioned. Another example is when we question the subject, object, and indirect object: “*Min jagħmel xiex ‘il mien?*” meaning “*Who does what to whom?*” (p. 19). These examples show us that using question-words in Maltese can lead us to many combinations of question forms.

To introduce adverbial clauses of comparison, Maltese uses the adverbial expressions *izjed milli* (*more than*) or *inqas milli* (*less than*). *Milli* is a contracted form of *minn li*, meaning *from what/that*. This form is derived from Arabic, where *min* means *from* and *li* means *who, which, or that*, as we saw earlier. We can give an example using both forms to see how they function in a sentence: *Zujuk siefer iktar milli/inqas milli sifirt int*. There is another way to express comparison and that is using *izjed* in one clause, and *inqas* in the other (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997): *Iktar ma raqdet, inqas kienet għajjena* (The more she slept, the less tired she was). Note that instead of *izjed* we can use the synonym *iktar*.

We can also express equative clauses using the expression *daqs kemm*, which means *as much as* (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). *Daqs* is most likely to have derived from the Arabic *qays*, which is derived from the verb *qāsa*, which means *to measure*. *Kemm* is also derived from the Arabic determiner *kamm*, meaning *how much*. Example: *Huwa kiteb daqs kemm ktibt int* (He wrote as much as you did).

Another concept where Maltese is similar to Arabic is in the expression of present-time reference, where no copula is necessary (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997). For example, the sentence *Hiya mumareċa* (Arabic for *She is a nurse*), translates to Maltese as *Hija infermiera*. If the predicate nominal refers to a place, then the present participle *qiegħed* is used: *Ommi qiegħda d-dar* (My mother is at home). Note that we used the form *qiegħda* because of the noun in the feminine gender. The Maltese *qiegħed* is derived from the Arabic *qāʔid*, which means *sitting*, but is used in the context of indicating progressive verb tenses. This form is common in dialectal Arabic as well. If we want to express time reference other than the present, we can use *kien*, which is the imperfect form of the verb *to be*, and this is derived from the Arabic *kāna*. In this context, *kien* means *he was*, because Maltese has gender inflections as Arabic does. In the case of the feminine gender, the form would be *kienet*.

We will now look at quantifiers in Maltese. Quantifying expressions that come before a plural indefinite noun or a collective noun are *fii* (*a little/few*), *bosta* (*several*), *ħafna* (*a lot*), and *wisq* (*too many*). All of these are derived from Arabic: *fatit* (*crumbs*; in the sense of small pieces); *basta* (*size*); *ħafna* (*a handful*); and *wasq* (*load*), respectively. We can look at this sentence with a plural indefinite noun using the aforementioned quantifiers: *Aħna xtrajna fii/bosta/ħafna/wisq kotba* (We bought a few/several/a lot of/too many books). When these expressions come before definite plural nouns, we need to add *minn* (*from*): *ħafna mill-ġenituri ġew il-laqqgħa* (Many of the parents came to the meeting).

Distributive quantifiers, *kull* (positive connotation; *each* from Arabic *kull*: each, every) and *ebda* (negative connotation; *none* from Arabic *ʔabadan*: never), precede a singular, undefined noun: *Kull pjanta għandha zokk* (Every plant has a stem). The non-distributive quantifier *xi* (*some* from Arabic *šajʔ*: thing) precedes a singular or plural undefined noun, while the universal *kollha* (*all* from Arabic *kulluhu/a*: all) follows a plural, defined noun: *In-nies kollha fl-udjenja kienu impressjonati bl-ispettaklu* (All the people in the audience were impressed by the performance). The universal quantifier takes the form *kollu* (*kollha* in case of a feminine noun or a plural) following a collective noun: *L-annimali kollha sabu kenn fl-ghorfa* (All the animals found shelter in the barnyard).

We can assert here that the syntax of the Maltese language is predominantly influenced by Arabic linguistic structures and grammatical categories.

4.4.Semantics

So far, we have seen the foreign influences on Maltese phonology, morphology, and syntax. We will now give example sentences in English and translate them to Maltese in which we will see the various origins of Maltese words and their respective meanings.

1. They want to hitchhike to reach the airport.
This sentence translates to *Huma għamlu l-awtostop biex imorru l-ajruport* in Maltese. What is interesting to note is the meaning of the verb *to hitchhike* in Maltese: *għamel l-awtostop*. The part *għamel* is derived from the Arabic *ʕamila*, meaning *to do* or *to make*, so combining this verb with the noun *awtostop* derived from a pseudo-anglicism, creates a new word in Maltese.
2. You gave the wrong home address to the courier.
In Maltese, this sentence translates to *Inti tajt l-indirizz tad-dar ħażin lill-kurrier*. The compound noun we are looking at here is *home address*: *indirizz tad-dar* in Maltese. *Indirizz* means *address*, and this is borrowed from the Italian *indirizzo*, and combining it with the Arabic *dar* meaning *house* or *home* creates the compound noun *home address*.
3. She took a photograph next to the telephone booth.
Hija ħadet ritratt maġenb il-kabina tat-telefon is the Maltese translation of the above sentence. We are now looking at the compound noun *telephone booth*, meaning *kabina tat-telefon* in Maltese. *Kabina* is derived from the English *cabin*, and *telefon* is derived from English *telephone* as well, which in turn was borrowed from French *telephone*, stemming from Ancient Greek.
4. They thought the hot water was actually cold.
This sentence translates to *Huma ħasbu li l-ilma šhun kien kiesaħ*. We will now look at the noun phrase *hot water* which translates to *ilma šhun* in Maltese. This phrase is comprised of two words derived from Arabic: *ilma* from the Arabic *maʔ* meaning *water*, and *šhun* from the Arabic *sukhn*, meaning *hot*.
5. They needed insect repellent for the trip.
The translation of this sentence is *Huma kellhom bżonn il-krema kontra l-insetti għal waqt il-vjaġġ*. and what is worthy of noticing is the compound noun *krema kontra l-insetti*, which has all three parts deriving from Italian, which are in turn derived from French *crème*, Latin *contra* and Latin *insectus*.
6. Show me the nearest hotel.
To express this sentence in Maltese, we would say *Urini l-iktar lukanda fil-viċin*. What is interesting to notice is the phrase *l-iktar viċin*, which is comprised of two words of different origins: *iktar* meaning *more*, which we mentioned in the previous section, and *viċin* which is derived from Italian *vicino*, in turn derived from Latin *vicinus*, meaning *near*. These two words are joined together to form a superlative adjective phrase.

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7. The children want orange juice.

It-tfal iridu s-sugu tal-laring is the translation of the above sentence in Maltese. Let us notice the noun *sugu tal-laring*, comprised of the nouns *sugu* and *laring*. The preposition *tal* (or *ta'* in general, depending on what comes after the preposition itself) comes from the Arabic word *mataf* meaning *possession*, and in this context its meaning in Maltese is *of* or used as a third-person singular pronoun possessive ending. *Sugu* probably stems from Italian, as the Italian *sugo* is used to refer to tomato juice. The word *meraq tal-laring* can also be used, where *meraq* stems from the Arabic *maraq*, meaning *broth*.

8. The hotel is 100 euros per night per person.

This sentence translates to *Il-lukanda qieghda €100 kull lejl ghal persuna*. Let us notice the phrase *per person*, which in Maltese is *ghal persuna*. *Ghal* is derived from Arabic *ġala*, meaning *on, for*, and *persuna*, derived from Latin, meaning *person*.

9. Hand me the sunglasses, please.

The noun *nuċċali tax-xemx* that appears in the sentence *Newwili n-nuċċali tax-xemx, jekk jogħġbok*, is again comprised of two words of different origins: *nuċċali* and *xemx*. *Nuċċali* is borrowed from Sicilian *ucchiali*, and *xemx*, as we saw earlier, is derived from the Arabic *šams*.

10. They were able to buy some carbon paper to make an identical drawing.

Huma rnexxielhom jixtru karta saħħara biex jagħmlu tpingija identika is the translation of the sentence above, and the word in question again has parts of two origins: *karta* from Latin *charta*, and *saħħara* from Arabic *sahhara*, meaning *witch* or *sorceress*, which probably alludes to the “magic” of using carbon paper, as it gives an identical copy of the etchings of a drawing done on it.

These sentences can serve as an example of how Maltese has integrated many different languages into its lexicon, and how the different variations of these words comprise what is now Maltese vocabulary. This linguistic diversity not only enriches Maltese semantics but it also provides a fascinating glimpse into the historical and cultural influences that have shaped the language.

5. CONCLUSION

Using semantics as our final destination in the overview of the Maltese language, we can conclude that the Maltese language warrants more detailed study to uncover its roots and distinctive linguistic characteristics. This exploration also reveals evidence of Malta’s turbulent yet fascinating history, through which the unique Semitic language of Maltese has developed. This paper can serve as a key to unlocking the secrets the Maltese language possesses and as an introductory guide for anyone seeking to learn Maltese and explore its origins.

Further research can be conducted on various other aspects of Maltese linguistics that were not covered in this paper, from vowels in phonology and formations of nouns, verbs, and adjectives in morphology, to different sentence structures in syntax and their meanings in semantics. It is up to us to preserve this language before it becomes completely absorbed by English, which, alongside Maltese, is the official language of Malta.

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Appendix

Table 7

The Maltese alphabet with its IPA

Letter	IPA
A a	/a/
B b	/b/
Ċ ċ	/tʃ/
D d	/d/
E e	/e/
F f	/f/
Ġ ġ	/dʒ/
G g	/g/
H h	/h/ (silent)

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H h	/h/
I i	/i/
J j	/y/
K k	/k/
L l	/l/
M m	/m/
N n	/n/
O o	/o/
GH gh	silent
P p	/p/
Q q	/q/
R r	/r/
S s	/s/
T t	/t/
U u	/u/
V v	/v/
W w	/w/
X x	/ʃ/
Ż ż	/z/
Z z	/ts/, /ds/