
Dwayne Ellul

MALTESE LEXICOGRAPHY

A Historical Context and the Current State

Abstract This study has two main objectives: firstly, to provide a concise overview of the evolution of Maltese lexicography, and secondly, to shed light on the latest advancements in the field within the local context. Following select criteria for dictionary reviews presented in Svensén's (2009, pp. 482–483) checklist, this paper reviews the most significant dictionaries in the Maltese lexicographic tradition, starting from Thezan's dictionary, compiled in the early 17th century, and continuing with the most important ones from each subsequent century.

Keywords Maltese lexicography; trilingual lexicography; bilingual lexicography; monolingual lexicography; dictionary criticism; online dictionaries; root-and-pattern morphology; concatenative morphology

1. Introduction

Maltese is an ancient language that has a rich history spanning over a millennium. In a simplified manner, the stratigraphy of the language can be presented in terms of three different strata: the Semitic (Arabic) stratum, the Romance superstratum and the English adstratum (Mifsud, 1995, pp. 26–27). Maltese became recognised as an official language of Malta, alongside English, in 1934. Then, in 1964, when Malta gained independence and ceased to be a British colony, Maltese was also recognised as the national language. The Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti [Association of Writers of Maltese] standardised the alphabet and spelling in 1921 and 1924, respectively and were legally accepted by the State in 1934. However, Malta has a long-standing lexicographic tradition dating back hundreds of years.¹ In spite of this, Maltese rarely features in literature on lexicography. Given that it is a language that exhibits various linguistic systems in contact, it would be useful to provide an overview of its most important lexicographic resources.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2.1 focuses on bilingual and trilingual dictionaries in which, as a result of the Maltese historical and cultural context, English does not feature as one of the languages. On the other hand, section 2.2 deals with dictionaries in which English does feature whereas section 2.3 deals with monolingual dictionaries. Section 3 provides insights about recent local advancements in the field, specifically two ongoing initiatives: Camilleri's *Gabra*, an open online lexical database for Maltese, and *Gabra Terminologika*: an online terminology resource currently being developed at the University of Malta.

¹ For a comprehensive list of Maltese dictionaries see <https://kunsillmalti.gov.mt/rizorsi/listabiblijografika/>

2. The Maltese Lexicographic Tradition

The first 9 Maltese words in a dictionary can be found in *Thesaurus Polyglottus* which Hieronymus Megiser published in Frankfurt in 1603 after visiting Malta in 1588 (Cassola, 1986, p. 21). One can observe the proliferation of Maltese words in 17th and 18th centuries vocabulary lists (Brincat, 2011, pp. 243–248). This study will not address such lists, as it will concentrate on the most significant dictionaries in the Maltese lexicographic tradition.

Following the norm of the early stages of lexicography in most languages, Maltese bilingual and multilingual dictionaries are far more common than monolingual ones. This is a result of cultural and historical factors. During the period between 1530 and 1798, when Malta was ruled by the Order of St John, the languages that featured in dictionaries alongside Maltese, were Latin and Italian: the Order's official languages. While Italian continued to be used in some dictionaries during the 19th century,² it was progressively replaced by English. The earliest monolingual dictionary and the two most comprehensive Maltese dictionaries—one bilingual and one monolingual—appear in the 20th century.

2.1 Bilingual and Trilingual Dictionaries Before English

The oldest dictionary in our possession is the *Regole per La Lingua Maltese* [*Rules for the Maltese Language*], a manuscript discovered by Cassola at the Biblioteca Vallicelliana in Rome. Cassola (1992, p. xxxiii) claims that the manuscript in question is a copy which Monsieur le Chevallier De La Bastie Fogasses based on a dictionary authored by the French Knight Thezan during the early 17th century. The Vallicelliana manuscript (hereinafter *Regole*), cannot be dated past 1719 (p. xxx).

Regole starts with a short seventeen-page grammar (Cassola, 1992, pp. 3r–11r) written in Italian. Next, there is the bidirectional bilingual Italian-Maltese (pp. 14r–112r) and Maltese-Italian (pp. 115r–185v) dictionary. With a few exceptions, the macrostructure of the first part is organised alphabetically using the Latin alphabet, whereas in the second part a combination of Latin and Arabic characters is used. As noted by Cassola (1992, p. xi), until approximately 1844 it was customary for a small number of individuals who wrote in Maltese to include Arabic graphemes for phonemes that were not represented in the Latin alphabet.

The Italian-Maltese section comprises 3,925 Italian lemma signs paired with their Maltese equivalents, with a further 5 (p. xlvi) lemmas to be included, bringing the total to 3,930. The Maltese-Italian section consists of 3,110 lemma signs, with an additional 4 lemmas (xlvi) that need to be included, bringing the total to 3,114.

² A significant dictionary is the *Vocabolario della Lingua Maltese* [*Vocabulary of the Maltese Language*], published by A.E. Caruana in 1903. This dictionary was the first to organise lemmata according to their root into nests, following the Arabic way of listing. It was also the first to provide etymological information, even though according to Saydon (24), its reliability is questionable. One significant critique of this dictionary is that Caruana excluded numerous contemporary non-Semitic words in Maltese in order to maintain the macrostructure's functionality. For critical comments about this dictionary see Saydon (pp. 23–24), Privitera (pp. 28–29), and Agius (pp. 174–175).

Alferi (in Brincat, 2011, p. 250) states that the Italian-Maltese section does not rely on established Italian dictionaries of that era, and its synonyms seem to have been directly derived from practical usage. Furthermore, it seems that the lemma signs for both sections were taken directly from usage. This demonstrates that the primary objective of the dictionary was practical: to aid the Knights in effectively communicating with the monolingual Maltese population. Indeed, the manuscript concludes with a section titled “Ta ϵ lim a ϵ l Soldat” [Teaching a Soldier] which is a series of drill commands for training with weapons in Italian translated into Maltese.

A significant dictionary in the Maltese lexicographic tradition is the *Ġamma tal Kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel Fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin* [A collection of Carthaginian words spoken by the Maltese and the Gozitans], which was being compiled by Canon Gianfrancesku Agius Sultana Ghauci, also known as De Soldanis, before 1750 and completed around 1767. De Soldanis had intended to publish the dictionary (Agius De Soldanis, 1750, p. 19), but he passed away in 1770. As a result, the dictionary remained in manuscript form until 2016, when the first volume was finally published by Carabott. Prior to the discovery of the *Regole*, this dictionary was considered the oldest known compilation of Maltese vocabulary and formed the fundamental basis for numerous future dictionaries. *Ġamma* is a trilingual tridirectional dictionary that is divided into four volumes. Volume 1: Maltese-Italian-Latin; volumes 2 and 3: Italian-Latin-Maltese; and volume 4: Latin-Italian-Maltese. I limit myself to comment on Volume 1 which was published in 2016.

The manuscript dictionary consists of 1,036 folios. The text commences with a brief preface entitled “Lel Karrai” [To the reader], in which the compiler shares his motivation for compiling the dictionary. This is followed by a list of abbreviations. The dictionary begins with a collection of about 12,000 Maltese words (Brincat, 2011, p. 251), organised into 21 alphabetic stretches.

De Soldanis’s lexicographic method, as indicated by the title, has been descriptive from the outset. The lemmata he compiled were not selected according to etymological criteria, such as their origin from Carthaginian, but rather because they were current in the period. In “Lel Karrai,” the author states: “... believe me, reader, one can find foreign words, never the amount people anticipated, and when I recognised them, I uncovered them.”³ De Soldanis made the deliberate decision to use the Latin alphabet and exclude Arabic letters. This option was aimed to assist the potential users, as the few educated Maltese at that time were more accustomed to the Latin script than the Arabic one.

A notable deficiency in *Ġamma* is the lemmatisation of verbs in the first singular person of the imperfect, following the pattern found in dictionaries of Romance languages, rather than the third singular person of the perfect, which is the canonical form in many Arabic dictionaries due to the root-and-pattern morphology. Aquilina (1987, p. xxv) criticises the semantic treatment in *Ġamma* for being “generally prolix”. For example, one of the longest entries is “Gherk General” [Fungus Rock⁴], consisting of

³ My translation.

⁴ The name of a very small islet close to Dwejra in San Lawrenz, Gozo (Malta).

959 words. This copiousness is due to the fact that the lexicographer includes a wealth of encyclopaedic information which covers various topics such as food, traditional clothing, family habits, festivities, legends, proverbs, and many more.

The year 1796 holds great importance in the Maltese lexicographic tradition as it is the year in which *Ktýb yl Klým Mâlti 'Mfysser byl-Latġn u byl-Talġan* [*The Book of Maltese words explained in Latin and in Italian*, commonly referred to as *Lexicon*] was published in Rome. This dictionary was authored by Mikiel Anton Vassalli (Michaelis Antonii Vassalli), known as the father of the Maltese language, and it was the first printed dictionary of the Maltese language. Vassalli, an enlightened patriot and reformer, recognised that Maltese was mostly spoken by the illiterate masses, however he was the very first to call it “la lingua nazionale” [the national language]. He was not only the first to lay the foundations of the scientific study of Maltese but also devised a plan to develop and utilise it as a means of education and progress. The dictionary was therefore the third important publication for the implementation of this plan after an alphabet (1790) and a grammar (1791).

Vassalli’s *Lexicon* is an alphabetical dictionary including around 18,000 lemmata (Vassalli, 1796, p. xxxviii). The book consists of 387 pages, with the central list comprising 341 pages, and two additional sections, namely the errata and omissa. Despite being mentioned in the title page and in the actual text, the etymological and comparative appendices, along with the two indices (one in Latin and the other in Italian), were not published and are now lost (Bonavia, 2006). Vassalli commences the 44 pages front matter by introducing his dictionary to Maltese citizens with the address titled “Alla Nazione Maltese” [To the Maltese Nation]. Next, he proceeds to the “Discorso Preliminare” [Preliminary Discourse], which is organised into nine sections. Section 8 (“Of the present Maltese dictionary”) is particularly pertinent since it covers Vassalli’s considerations and lexicographic principles, some of which are still relevant in the present day and hence, demonstrate to what extent this early work was based on scientific foundations.

In this section Vassalli (1796, p. xxxvii) states that the words for the dictionary were collected by using the index card system, a method previously employed by the renowned English lexicographer Samuel Johnson prior to 1755. Vassalli acknowledges the challenge of finding equivalents and states that when he couldn’t find them, he provided paraphrases instead. Vassalli informs readers that he gathered information on various topics by consulting Maltese and Italian informants regarding words that were commonly used (p. xxxvii). Additionally, the author mentions that for the words he collected but didn’t understand their meaning, he marked them with the abbreviation “d. s.” (i.e., “desire for meaning”). The *Lexicon* distinguishes between the primary or original meaning of a lemma and other meanings, both current and obsolete, which are indicated by Latin numbers. At the very end of the dictionary article, users are advised to consult the etymological appendix. The reason Vassalli gives for this decision is to avoid confusing those who are unfamiliar with Semitic languages.

The macrostructure is strict-alphabetical and although it was Vassalli first to recognise the root-and-pattern structure of the Semitic part of Maltese morphology, lemmata

were not grouped according to their roots. Instead, the derivatives are arranged according to their alphabetical order (p. xlv). The page is divided into two columns, with each column being assigned a number and displaying the initial two or three letters of the lemma signs it contains. These fulfil the identical purpose as the guide words to which we are nowadays used to in printed dictionaries. The Latin alphabet letters are listed on the left side of each column, starting at A and progressing in accordance with the lemmata in the column. These were meant to serve as a reference to the etymological appendix. Despite all this attention to the user's needs, Vassalli was often criticised because the alphabet he devised, although more precise than his predecessor's, contained "queer signs" (Saydon, 1953, p. 21) that were "unpardonably awkward" (Aquilina, 1994, p. 68). In addition, the alphabetical order does not correspond to that of the contemporary Maltese alphabet (Cachia, 2016, p. xxiv).

Vassalli's microstructure contains data types such as inflections (e.g., verb conjugation in the third person masculine in the imperfect) and Latin and Italian equivalents. Roman numerals were employed to separate senses. Entries are rather brief, typically ranging from 3 to 10 lines (Brincat, 2011, p. 257). In addition, Vassalli employs some symbols such as the equals sign (=) to indicate synonyms, and the cross symbol (✝) to represent "dictio Barbara" (p. xlv), i.e., non-Semitic words.⁵

Vassalli's *Lexicon* captured the interest of the few scholars who wrote about aspects of Maltese lexicography. Saydon (1953, p. 20), Cassar Pullicino (2001, pp. 68–69), and other researchers note that despite having consulted *Damma* (p. xviii), Vassalli excluded a significant number of Romance words that had been previously registered by De Soldanis. At the same instant, Vassalli collects most Maltese words of Semitic provenance. This exposes Vassalli's prescriptive stance against "barbarous expressions."⁶ Saydon (1953, p. 21), notes "omissions of meanings and idioms," while Aquilina (1994, p. 68) also observes "insufficiency of phraseology, idioms and prepositional verbs which expand the area of meanings."

Critics have also identified additional shortcomings. Vella (2015, p. 278) and Saydon (p. 21) contend that Vassalli deliberately selected a specific dialectal variety from among five regional dialects, and was subsequently described in the dictionary. This was the variety of the central area of *Hal Qormi* and *Haż-Żebbuġ*, as it sounded closest to Chaldean⁷ (Vella, 2015, pp. 284–289). Saydon (1953, p. 21), and Cachia (2016, p. xxv) find some shortcomings in the equivalents although Cachia believes that they are generally precise. According to Saydon (1953, p. 21), and Cachia (2016, p. xxv), Vassalli included several archaic words or even words of Semitic origin that were never used in Maltese. The most comprehensive analysis of this aspect can be found in Vella (2015, pp. 309–315). Vella convincingly argues that Vassalli has attempted to revive documented old Maltese words, such as "rajjes" [captain or commander] and

⁵ Inconsistencies in this respect are noted by Vella (2015, pp. 314–315).

⁶ Expressions imported in Maltese from Neo-Latin languages, mainly Italian. His position played a significant role in establishing the myth of the "Malti safi" [pure Maltese] which still finds some support even today.

⁷ Another term for Old Aramaic which is related to Phoenician: the language which Vassalli believed Maltese originated from. Phoenician is an extinct Canaanite Semitic language originally spoken in the region surrounding the cities of Tyre and Sidon (nowadays part of Lebanon).

“talamid” [student] (p. 309). Vella also notes that Vassalli has: created words derived from Semitic languages or roots that have no evidence in the available documents, such as “tynkit” [punctuation] (p. 311); introduced new calques, such as “Ktȳb yl Klȳm” [Wordbook] (p. 311); and even proposed inflections, like “vjerrejn” (dual) and “vjerrijȳt” (plural) for “vjerr” [journey] (singular) (p. 311).

Brincat (2011, p. 257) considers Vassalli’s *Lexicon* to be “significantly superior to its predecessors” while Saydon (1953, p. 20), commends its exceptional attributes of completeness, accuracy, and reliability, and asserts that until 1953 it remained the primary dictionary for Maltese, even with the publication of more recent dictionaries.

2.2 Bilingual and Trilingual Dictionaries Featuring English

In 1800, Malta became a British colony. This led to the introduction of English in Maltese dictionaries. In the 19th century, there were several dictionaries published by lexicographers who were followers of Vassalli, thus influenced by his works. Among these lexicographers there are Francesco Vella (1843); Giovanni Battista Falzon (1845; 1882) and Vincenzo Azzopardi (1847; 1849; 1853; 1856) (see Aquilina, 1987, pp. xxv-xxvi). All of them compiled trilingual dictionaries which, having been somewhat influenced by Vassalli’s *Lexicon*, critics have not given them much attention. Due to limitations in length, I will refrain from providing further commentary on these dictionaries and focus on the bilingual dictionaries. Nevertheless, I believe they merit further study.

In 1885, Salvatore Mamo published the first bilingual English-Maltese Dictionary. Mamo utilises the alphabet that was established by the Xirka Xemija [Semitic Association] in 1882, which is very similar to the alphabet that eventually gained official recognition (Privitera, 1964, p. 27). The *English-Maltese Dictionary* has a one-page introduction, a list of ten abbreviations, and a 260-page alphabetical central list, followed by two pages of errata corrige. Aquilina (1987, p. xxv) asserts that the dictionary gives “practically word for word explanations. It is more a vocabulary than a dictionary.” In order to maintain the dictionary’s “smallest possible dimensions, consistent with its completeness as a dictionary,” Mamo tells users in the preface that only the basic lemma is provided whereas derivations were excluded because he regarded them as “quite useless” for users who are already familiar with the basic lemma.

Yet, he did find room for both obsolete lemmata – many of which are indicated with (o) – and loanwords that are typographically marked in italics and provided as a last option in the entry, even though in the preface to a later (lost) dictionary, Mamo acknowledges that there is “unquestionable preference in colloquial intercourse to the pure Maltese words” (Ellul, 2023, p. 101). Although Saydon (1953, p. 23), criticises Mamo for his omission of idioms and other expressions as well as his failure to distinguish between equivalents, among other shortcomings, he ultimately concludes that “On the whole the book is fairly complete and reliable.”

In 1900, two dictionaries authored by Vincenzo Busuttill were published. These dictionaries can be regarded as a bidirectional bilingual Maltese-English and English-

Maltese dictionary. They are titled *Diziunariu mill Malti għall Inglis* [Dictionary from Maltese to English] (2 ed. 1932) u *Diziunariu mill Inglis għall Malti* [Dictionary from English to Maltese]. In both dictionaries, Busuttil used the Maltese alphabet of the Accademia Filologica. The English-Maltese dictionary consists of a one-page preface, followed by a central list of 1,389 pages. This list comprises roughly 90,000 English lemmata, arranged in alphabetical order. The back matter includes a list of 4 pages featuring initialisms and abbreviations along with their English and Maltese meanings (e.g., C.T. – Certified Teacher, Surmastru li għandu ċ-ċertifikat jew il-warrant; N.P. – Notary Public, nutar) as well as a page entitled “Lil min Jakra” [To the Reader] calling on readers to inform the compiler of any shortcomings they might find in his work.

Busuttil’s Maltese-English dictionary contains a page entitled “Lil min Jakra” [To the Reader] followed by a central list of 723 pages, which includes around 30,000 Maltese words distributed in alphabetical order. Not taking into account the cross-references would lead to a significant decrease in the number of lemmata. The back matter consists of 34 pages listing initialisms and abbreviations along with their definitions in Maltese and English, followed by 10 pages listing personal names with their corresponding meanings.

Agius (1990, p. 174) describes Busuttil’s dictionaries as “The first more comprehensive bilingual dictionaries [...] these contain a considerable number of scientific terms of Romance origin.” According to Privitera (1964, p. 27) and Saydon (1953, p. 23) Busuttil’s Maltese-English dictionary’s greatest merit is its comprehensive nature, as it includes both Semitic and Romance words without any etymological bias. Nevertheless, Aquilina (1987, p. xxv) observes “a deplorable reluctance to use loanwords for Maltese words of scientific or technical meaning borrowed from Italian or English.” Busuttil attempts to expedite the user’s searches by providing different realisations of the same lemma in different grammatical forms. As regards verbs, for example, he gives the imperative (e.g., “aġħmel” [do]), the canonical form in the third person masculine singular (e.g., “għamel” [to do/he did]) and the second person singular (e.g., “tagħmel” [you do]). With regards to nouns, he provides the singular (e.g., “ċens” [emphyteusis]; “żiemel” [horse]) and the broken plural forms accompanied by a cross-reference to the lemma in the singular (e.g., “ċnus” [emphyteuses]; “żwiemel” [horses]). Busuttil does not provide grammatical description of the lemmata, but he deserves credit for gathering several Maltese words and, particularly, expressions that have greatly assisted subsequent compilers. These are beneficial not just for users seeking a deeper comprehension of them in English or for those who want to utilise them in Maltese, but most crucially, they uncover changes in meaning that depend on the manner in which the lemma is used in expressions.

Monseigneur Carmelo Psaila’s⁸ *Dizzjunarju Ingliz u Malti* [English and Maltese Dictionary] was published in fascicles between 1936 and 1955. It has a 5-page introduction that exposes the compiler’s slightly prescriptive stance. This is followed by a comprehensive central list of 1,473 pages.

⁸ Malta’s national poet.

Psaila's dictionary has captured the interest of numerous critics, who have predominantly expressed positive feedback. For instance, Aquilina (1987, p. xxv-xxvi) argues that this dictionary is "an improvement on that of Busuttil," making it "the most comprehensive bilingual dictionary" of his time. Psaila's dictionary is widely acknowledged by critics to have been based on *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary of Current English* (1934). Psaila is mostly denounced by critics because according to them he resorted to paraphrasing instead of finding equivalent forms, as well as for excluding numerous Maltese words of non-Semitic origin from the dictionary.

In an upcoming study, Ellul discovered significant *Oxford* influences, specifically on the central list, the semantic treatment of entries, and even the layout of this dictionary. Regarding equivalence, Ellul discovered instances where Psaila unnecessarily employed paraphrasing, despite the fact that, contrary to common portrayal, the dictionary frequently offers cognitive or translational equivalents (e.g., meteoric-meteoriku, television-televiżjoni, visa-viża) that greatly aid users in their productive purposes. Ellul notes that a number of technical terms are missing in Psaila's dictionary. Furthermore, it seems that in certain instances, Psaila deliberately chose to omit these terms. However, it is incorrect to claim that Psaila was hesitant to incorporate specific terminology just because it is not Semitic. It is evident that the lexicographer made an attempt to enhance the Maltese vocabulary in order to keep it abreast with the progress made by mankind in the first half of the 20th century. Ellul regards Psaila's dictionary as a very important source for the introduction of new vocabulary that was subsequently collected in later dictionaries, notably *Il-Miklem Malti* by Erin Serracino-Inglott and the *Maltese-English Dictionary* by Joseph Aquilina. Ellul discovered that 8.8% of the lemmata in Aquilina's dictionary were extracted from Psaila's.

In 1987, Joseph Aquilina started publishing the most prestigious bilingual dictionary in the Maltese lexicographic tradition. Aquilina's is a bidirectional bilingual comprehensive dictionary that consists of six volumes: a two-volume *Maltese-English Dictionary* (1987–1990) and a four-volume *English-Maltese Dictionary* (published posthumously in 1999–2000). This review will focus on the ***Maltese-English Dictionary***.

Besides the central list of 41,016 lemmata (Brincat, 2011, p. 407), the dictionary's megastructure is comprised of both front matter and back matter featuring both integrated and non-integrated outer texts.

The dictionary's macrostructure presents an interesting compromise devised by the lexicographer in order to deal with two different – frequently interwoven – morphologies: root-and-pattern and stem. The extensive use of cross-references provides a strict-alphabetical entry as the start of the search route in a dictionary consulting procedure. This in turn leads the user to nests containing either strict-alphabetical ordering subject to textual condensations (in case of concatenative morphology) or morphologically ordered lemmata (in case of root-and-pattern morphology) with their relative treatment.

The dictionary's microstructure varies according to the lemma's part of speech and its derivative morphology, among other variables. However, some general features are consistently present throughout the whole dictionary. Users are directed into the dictionary article through a lemma sign which is typographically marked in bold capital letters. In case of stem-based lemmata, the stem is demarked by a vertical line. Occasionally, very limited pronunciation aid is given with the use of accents marking stress mainly to highlight the difference between homographs such as “*kaħħal*” [to plaster] and “*kaħħâl*” [plasterer]. Lemmata are accompanied by orthographic variants.⁹ Both lemmata and its variants are typically followed by an abbreviation “of the first or one of the earliest” Aquilina (1987, p. xiv) sources in which they were recorded, generally previous dictionaries or word-lists. The comment on form section comprises of roots, grammatical description and inflections such as dual and plural suffixes in case of nouns and, with regards to verbs, the passive participle and the vowels needed to form the imperfect.

The right-core subsection is marked with sense numbers and other typographical indicators such as italics and brackets. The basic equivalent in English is given first followed by a bracket containing usage examples and their translation. Whenever needed, this is preceded by stylistic or usage data indicating, for example, technical or figurative usage. The equivalent is then followed – without any structural indicators – by collocates, idioms, proverbs etc as well as their renditions in English. No distributional data is given as such, except for the record of the region where the word was attested, and this is placed in square brackets right after the sense number. After the treatment of all derivatives and compounds populating the nest, etymological data is found within square brackets at the very end of the microstructure.

2.3 Monolingual Dictionaries

The only published¹⁰ comprehensive monolingual dictionary of Maltese is Erin Serracino-Inglott's *Il-Miklem Malti* [*The Maltese Wordbook*] which was published between 1975 and 1989. In 2003, Mario Serracino-Inglott – the lexicographer's son – released the tenth volume of the dictionary which is made up of an Addendum and a Root Index. The Dictionary collects over 34,000 lemmata in 3,354 pages (including the Addendum).

The megastructure of *Il-Miklem Malti* comprises of front matter (mainly in the first volume), the strict alphabetically ordered central list and the Addendum (the 10th and last volume). Among the front matter items, the user can find the “Tagħrif u Tifsir” [Information and explanation] giving information about what to expect in the dictionary and usage guidelines.

⁹ Besides real orthographic variants, there is a considerable number of “variants” that are actually incorrect versions of the lemma sign, which were mainly recorded in previous dictionaries when the Maltese alphabet and orthography were not standardised.

¹⁰ The first significant endeavour to compile a comprehensive monolingual dictionary for Maltese was undertaken by Mikiel (Michael) Agius, who submitted his manuscript to the University of Malta's Library in 1978. Agius also compiled the manuscript of the first Maltese thesaurus. For detailed reviews of Agius's dictionary and thesaurus, read Ellul 2018a, 2018b, and 2022.

The most important part of *Il-Miklem Malti*'s back matter is a comprehensive root index. This index gathers all lemmata derived from the same root, which are scattered across the dictionary due to its rigorous alphabetical arrangement; hence giving also the lemma's page numbers. For instance, for the root K-T-B the compiler gives "kitba" [writing] p. 116; "kiteb" [to write/he wrote] p. 116 ... "mikteb" [office; desk] p. 142 and "nkiteb" [was written] p. 309. This is particularly beneficial for those who have an interest in studying the Semitic component in the Maltese language and its development.

As pointed out by Agius (1990, p. 179) this dictionary is a historical one in the sense that the compiler documents the source that registered the lemma before him – if it was not collected by himself in the first place – and gives the etymology of every lemma, whenever possible. However, in doing this, Serracino-Inglott opted to start the dictionary article with an abbreviation of the source, hence relegating the lemma signs (typographically marked in bold capital letters) as only second in line. The comment on form section comprises of grammatical description and inflections such as dual and plural suffixes in case of nouns and, with regards to verbs, the third person singular of the imperfect.

The right-core subsection starts off with the etymology given between brackets and typographically marked in bold. It is usually concise; however, examples of extensive etymological treatment are also abundant and these may make it very difficult for the users who are not interested in etymology to locate other data they need from the dictionary article.

The semantic comment starts, when applicable, with usage labels indicating figurative or technical usage such as *t.rel* (religious term). The bracketed sense numbers follow suit, introducing the senses (first the original sense, then current senses: basic, secondary and figurative) definitions, synonyms, phrases, idioms and proverbs marked in bold, and italicised examples mark the end of the microstructure.

Il-Miklem Malti has been criticised with regards to a number of issues, but mainly for the spelling of some words (e.g., Aquilina, 1977; Z. M., 1975); for including words of Italian origin which are at best uncommon or maybe hardly ever used at all; for excluding some English words which are common in Maltese such as *aircraft carrier*, *bullet*, *bumper*, *best man* etc; and for omitting the current English plural suffixes in favour of prescribing Maltese sound plural suffixes such as in *bejbijiet* (babies) and *bajsikilijiet* (bicycles) instead of *bejbis* and *bajsikils* respectively.

Albeit having these defects, the importance of *Il-Miklem Malti* in our lexicographic tradition can never be underestimated, since to date it is the only comprehensive monolingual dictionary based on scientific principles. As Agius (1990, p. 179) puts it:

"This dictionary has unquestionably important contributions to make to comparative Arabic dialectology. But it also has contributions to make to comparative Romance dialectology. The monolingual character of the lexicon should not prevent the non-Maltese researcher from consulting it. Indeed, its scientific approach should assist linguists to explore further their own particular fields of enquiry."

3. Recent Developments

Several lexicographic works published in the past 24 years owe much to Joseph Aquilina's and Erin Serracino-Inglott's comprehensive dictionaries. Amongst these, there are various editions of the monolingual *Id-Dizzjunarju Malti u Teżawru ta' Malti Mħaddem* [*The Maltese Dictionary and thesaurus of current Maltese*] by Mario Serracino-Inglott (2000; 2003; 2011; 2016); the *Concise Maltese-English/English-Maltese Dictionary* by Joseph Aquilina (2006); *The English-Maltese Dictionary for the 21st Century* by Charles Briffa (2015); *It-Teżawru* [*The Thesaurus*] by Albert W. Agius (2000; 2010) and *Kelma għal Kelma: Teżawru Tematiku Malti* [*Word for Word: Maltese Thematic Thesaurus*] both in print and online by Dwayne Ellul (2020). Additionally, there have been initial attempts to create online dictionaries. Two notable examples were the *Malta Online Dictionary* by Carlo Saliba and *il-miklem.com* by John Spiteri Gingell. Given the word count constraint, this section focuses on two initiatives associated with the University of Malta: John J. Camilleri's *Ġabra* [*Collection*] accessed from the Institute of Linguistics' website, and *Ġabra Terminologika* [*Collection of Terms*] by the Department of Maltese at the University of Malta.

3.1 Ġabra

Ġabra [*Collection*] is a free open lexicon for Maltese described by Camilleri (2016, p. 376) as “an online database of lexical resources with full inflection forms” which have been automatically generated using the Grammatical Framework developed by Ranta (2011). *Ġabra* is based on the idea of integrating together various existing lexical resources into a single database.¹¹ These resources include: a list of 4,142 root-and-pattern verbs; a corpus of 654 broken plurals for nouns and adjectives; a list of over 2,500 verbal nouns; two smaller separate lexicons; and a basic morphological generator for Maltese from Apertium.

Although *Ġabra* is not a complete dictionary for Maltese, it includes 20,382 entries and 4,514,683 inflectional word forms. Several of these are linked by root, include English equivalents and are marked for various morphological and syntactic features, such as verbal patterns and transitivity. According to the lexicon's web page:

“The level of detail [within the entries] varies, and there are words, forms, and senses which are missing. Many of the word forms in the database are automatically generated, and may contain errors.”

Camilleri (2013, p. 377) stresses the need for *Ġabra* to be a full-form lexicon by arguing that traditional dictionaries – which only provide the lemma and affixes that “cannot be blindly appended to the headword” – do not offer sufficient information to the users and that they would require some further knowledge of the language in order to construct the inflection.

¹¹ Some database snapshots can be downloaded from <https://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt/resources/gabra-api/p/download>

As stated by Camilleri (2013, p. 379), the *Ġabra* lexical resources have varying structures. To ensure adaptability to future resources, the database needs to be “flexible enough to support heterogeneous data as it is found.” Subsequently, he proceeds to outline the top-level structure for lexemes, word forms and roots. Camilleri (p. 380) informs us that the database engine he chose for implementing *Ġabra* is MongoDB.

Ġabra can be accessed on <https://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt/resources/gabra/>. Results can be obtained by utilising three distinct search methods: the default mode, advanced search, and root search. A single search yields outcomes from the complete database, encompassing all lemmas, inflected word forms, and English glosses. When the user clicks on the lemma in the results page, they are redirected to another page that has a significantly larger amount of data: a phonetic transcription of the lemma in IPA, a description of the part of speech, a list of senses or equivalents, the root, morphological and syntactic features, a list of related items, and an acknowledgement of the source. Additionally, a list of possible inflections in the perfect, imperfect, and imperative is provided, along with the option to include the suffixes for the direct and indirect objects. The polarity can be changed to enable access to both positive and negative inflectional forms.

Ġabra includes a system that allows users to report any errors or omissions they may encounter.

3.2 *Ġabra Terminoloġika*

Over the past years, the Department of Maltese at the University of Malta has conducted dissertations to compile terminology from many registers, including both traditional activities (such as carpentry, hunting and trapping, and fishing with feather bait) and non-traditional activities (such as hairdressing, clothing, and pasta). During this period, there was a growing demand for the development of the Maltese language in all its domains. This was particularly important for numerous EU translators who frequently had to translate legal texts and instructions containing technical terms from different sectors or trades (Portelli 2017).

The *Ġabra Terminoloġika* [*Collection of Terms*] project commenced in 2018 with the objective of merging the glossaries from dissertations (40 at the time of writing) into a unified database accessible to both researchers and the general public. This language planning approach to terminology is in line with the initial five of eight stages identified by Cabré (1999: 49) that should be followed in language modernisation.

The database is presently populated with around 4,000 published entries covering 14 specialised fields such as “bini” [construction]; “ekonomija” [economics]; “ilbies” [clothing]; “mastrudaxxa” [carpentry]; and “żwiemel” [horses]. Another 1,766 entries are also queued for editing before publication.

The *Ġabra Terminoloġika* database is a WordPress database that utilises the MySQL database management system. The entries may include many data types, which

are indicated by red data identifying indicators. These data types include lemma, lemma variations, English equivalent, grammatical description, inflections (such as feminine, dual, plural, collective), definition in Maltese, source, and field (register). Furthermore, the incorporation of images, movies, and audio is also possible. Every entry is assigned to one or more specialised fields.

In order to enhance user experience, the database can be filtered according to the initial letter or the specialised field. Users can utilise the search feature to find matches across all entries and their respective fields.

Ġabra Terminoloġika can be accessed on <https://multi.mt/termini/glossarji/>. Users have three options for searching: they can utilise the search box located in the upper right corner, go through the *oqsma* [fields], or browse according to the initial letter of the lemma by selecting the blue icons. There are also two outer features: *Riżorsi Terminoloġiċi* [terminological resources] and *Dwarna* [about us]. The terminological resources page is a collection of references mostly focused on print, audio, or audiovisual resources related to the flora and fauna found in *art u sema* [land and sky] and *baħar* [sea].

A search for a term (e.g., “fagu” [beech wood]) will display the following data: the lemma “fagu”; a communicative English equivalent¹² “beech wood”; grammatical description “nom maskili” [noun, masculine]; definition in Maltese (translated as: “hard and heavy pinkish timber with a reddish grain”); specialised field [“qasam”] and source [“ħajr”]. Furthermore, *Ġabra Terminoloġika* can be searched for the terms of a whole field, e.g., carpentry. The lemmata pertaining to the field are presented in alphabetical order, allowing the user to select the desired entry for viewing.

4. Conclusion

This study looked at the most important dictionaries in the Maltese lexicographic tradition, tracing their evolution over centuries. From an analysis of various aspects of the most important dictionaries, it appears that the Maltese historical and cultural environment was not only fundamental in the weaving of the Maltese language but also in the development of its dictionaries. During the Knights’ period, the dominant Latinate culture in Malta required the inclusion of Italian or Latin language in dictionaries, alongside Maltese. However, once Malta came under the British rule, these languages were gradually replaced by English.

An important observation is that, prior to the standardisation of the alphabet, lexicographers often created their own alphabets in order to effectively represent the sounds of the Maltese language or to improve previous alphabets in order to make it easier for users. An inclination towards favouring the description and use of the Semitic component of the Maltese language, while neglecting the more

¹² This is not always possible due to anisomorphism between Maltese and English, particularly in more traditional activities, as pointed out by Gómez González-Jover (228) amongst others. However other data in the microstructure may help “in the different decision-making processes of comprehension and production of texts.”

contemporary vocabulary derived from Romance or English origins, is also noted in certain dictionaries. The preferred macrostructure is often strict-alphabetical order. However, lexicographers such as Aquilina have developed an interesting compromise that involves nesting and cross-referencing.

Although the Maltese lexicographic tradition is still going strong, with dictionaries being compiled every now and then and with ongoing online projects such as *Ġabra* and *Ġabra Terminoloġika*, a comprehensive online Maltese dictionary still needs to be compiled.

References

Dictionaries mentioned

Agius De Soldanis, G. P. F. (2016). *Ġamma tal-Kliem Kartaginis Mscerred fel Fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin*. (R. Carabott, Ed.) Il-Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ilsien Malti, il-Librerija Nazzjonali, id-Dipartiment tal-Malti, l-Akkademja tal-Malti, Heritage Malta, it-trust tad-Dipartiment tal-Innovazzjoni fir-Ricerka u l-Iżvilupp tal-Università ta' Malta, BPC International u l-Ministeru ta' Ghawdex. Florence. (Original work finished c. 1767)

Aquilina, J. (1987–1990). *Maltese-English Dictionary*. Midsea Books.

Busuttil, V. (1900). *Dizjunariu mill Malti għall Inglis*. Malta.

Busuttil, V. (1900). *Dizjunariu mill Inglis għall Malti*. Malta.

Camilleri, J. J. (2013). *A Computational Grammar and Lexicon for Maltese*. [M. Sc Thesis, Chalmers University of Technology].

Cassola, A. (1992). *The Biblioteca Vallicelliana "Regole per la Lingua Maltese"*. Said International.

Dipartiment tal-Malti, l-Università ta' Malta. *Ġabra Terminoloġika*. <https://malti.mt/termini/glossarji/>

Mamo, S. (1885). *English-Maltese Dictionary*. Aquilina e Co. Retrieved July 20, 2024, https://books.google.com.mt/books?id=DcwNAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Psaila, C. (1936–1955). *Dizzjunarju Ingliz u Malti*. DOI.

Serracino-Ingloft, E. (1975–2003). *Il-Miklem Malti*. Midsea Books.

Vassalli, M. A. (1796). *Ktôb yl Klým Mâlti 'Mfysser byl-Latîn u byt-Taljân*. Rome. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from https://books.google.com.mt/books?id=uQpaAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Other literature

Agius, D. A. (1990). Al-Miklem Malti: A contribution to Arabic lexical dialectology. *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, 17 (2), 171–180. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from <http://jstore.org/stable/194709>

- Agius De Soldanis, G. P. F. (2007). *Della Lingua Punica Presentamente usata da Maltesi & C.* (J. Zammit Ciantar, Ed.) Facsimile Edition Malta. (Original work published in 1750)
- Aquilina, J. (1977). L-Ortografija Llum: I: Fehmiet dwar l-Ortografija tal-Malti. *Il-Malti*, 53 (2–4) 3–16. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/62027/1/Il-Malti%201977%2053%282-4%29.PDF>
- Aquilina, J. (1994). Maltese Lexicography. In J. Aquilina (Ed.), *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (pp. 63–74). Malta UP.
- Bonavia, C. (2006, October 29). How Vassalli Lost His Library. *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 61. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from <https://timesofmalta.com/article/when-vassallis-library-was-torn-apart.37211>
- Brincat, J. M. (2011). *Maltese and Other Languages: A Linguistic History of Malta*. Midsea Books.
- Cabré, M. T. (1999). *Terminology: Theory, Methods and Applications*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Cachia, L. (Ed.). (2016). *Lexicon jew Dizzjunarju Malti-Latin-Taljan*. (An edition of Vassalli's *Lexicon* published in 1796)
- Camilleri, J. J. (2016). Digitizing the Grammar and Vocabulary of Maltese. In G. Puech, & B. Saade (Eds.), *Shifts and Patterns in Maltese* (pp. 359–385). De Gruyter, Inc.
- Cassar Pullicino, Ġ. (2001). *Il-Kitba bil-Malti sal-1870*. PIN Publications.
- Cassola, A. (1986, October 19). The first printed list of Maltese words. *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 21.
- Ellul, D. (2018). *Il-Kompilazzjoni ta' Teżawru Tematiku Malti dwar in-Natura tal-Bniedem u r-Relazzjonijiet Soċjali Tiegħu*. [Unpublished Master's thesis]. University of Malta.
- Ellul, D. (2018). Harsa Ħafifa lejn l-Ewwel Dizzjunarju Malti-Malti u Teżawru miġbura minn Michael Agius. *Leĥen il-Malti*, 37, 104–120.
- Ellul, D. (2022). Is-Sisien tad-“Dizzjunarju tal-Lsien Malti” ta' Michael Agius u Aspetti mill-Makrostruttura u l-Mikrostruttura Tiegħu. *Leĥen il-Malti*, 41, 166–185.
- Ellul, D. (2023). Sittax-il folja mid-Dizzjunarju Manuskritt Mitluf ta' Salvatore Mamo: storja tad-Dizzjunarju Manuskritt u Tqabbil mad-Dizzjunarju l-Ieħor ta' Mamo Stampat fl-1885. *Leĥen il-Malti*, 42, 83–103.
- Gómez González-Jover, A. (2006). Meaning and Anisomorphism in Modern Lexicography. In M. L'Homme (Ed.), *Processing of Terms in Specialized Dictionaries: New Models and Techniques* (pp. 215–234). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Mifsud, M. (1995). *Loan Verbs in Maltese: A Descriptive and Comparative Study*. E.J. Brill.
- Portelli, S. (2007). Terminology, Bilingualism and Language Planning (or lack thereof): The

Case of Maltese. In P. Faini (Ed.), *Terminological Approaches in the European Context* (pp. 98–106). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Privitera, V. (1964). *Id-Dizzjunarji Maltin*. [Unpublished Bachelor's dissertation] University of Malta.

Ranta, A. (2011). *Grammatical Framework: Programming with Multilingual Grammars*. CSLI Publications.

Saydon, P. P. (1953). Bibliographical Aids to the Study of Maltese. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 12 (1), 20–30. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/542741>

Svensén, B. (2009). *A Handbook of Lexicography: The Theory and Practice of Dictionary-Making*. Cambridge University Press.

Vella, O. (2015). *Il-Kodifikazzjoni tal-Ilsien Malti fis-Seklu 18 fl-Isfond Kulturali*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Malta]. OAR@UM

Z. M. (1975) "Il-Miklem Malti" ta' Erin Serracino-Inglott – L-Ewwel Volum – Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1975 St. Paul's Press Ltd. *Il-Malti*, 51(4), 119–120. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/61592/1/Il-Malti%201975%2051%284%29.PDF>

Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of my manuscript and their insightful comments and suggestions.

Contact information

Dwayne Ellul

University of Malta

dwayne.ellul@um.edu.mt