

JMS 10 (1975) (4-10)

CAXARO'S CANTILENA: A CHECKPOINT FOR
CHANGE IN MALTESE

by WILLIAM COWAN

HISTORICAL linguistics is largely a speculative business. Both of its two main concerns – establishing the structure of an earlier stage of a language, and tracing the changes that have taken place between this earlier stage and some later stage – depend in part upon an imaginative reconstruction of elements and processes which cannot be directly observed but only hypothesized. For example, in phonological reconstruction, we can observe only the reflexes of a given phoneme or phonological complex in descendant languages; we speculate about what it must have been in the parent language. The debate about the phonemic and phonetic quality of the Indo-European laryngeals discussed by Wyatt 1964 is an example of various types and kinds of speculation about structures which can only be inferred. In tracing linguistic change, we also can observe only the previous stage – itself a speculation if a reconstruction, a partial speculation if derived from texts – and the later stage, and must speculate about the number, kind, extent, and chronological order of the changes that must have intervened between the two stages. Lachmann's law in Latin concerning the lengthening of a vowel preceding a voiced stop in certain morphological categories is a case of this nature: evidence which would establish that the change occurred before the stop was devoiced is lacking, and several different speculative solutions are possible and have been set forth, one of the most recent being Watkins 1970.

It is, therefore, a distinct advantage when we have available to us some sort of documentation that allows us to check whether our speculations are correct or not, to correct our statements in the light of this documentation if the statements are wrong; to rejoice in the acuity and the soundness of our methods if our statements are right; or to resolve an ambiguity if we cannot decide which of two possible speculations to choose. In much of the Indo-European domain, a large amount of documentation is available, and has been used as checks on the methods of historical linguistics. Within Romance, for example, there is available not only the documenta-

tion that is Latin, useful for testing the validity of a reconstructed Proto-Romance, but also in each language area a vast amount of texts from the earlier post-Classical periods through the middle ages to modern times, texts that allow scholars to find out whether the changes postulated did indeed take place, and in the order that their theoretical presuppositions indicate they should have.

In Arabic, we are less fortunate than those working in most Indo-European areas. It is true that we have the documentation of Classical Arabic, corresponding roughly to Latin for Romance, but there is lacking that documentation between that stage and modern times that is available in Europe. In effect, for most dialects, we have only two reference points for the history of Arabic: Classical Arabic of ca. 600 A.D., and, at the earliest, colloquial Arabic of the 19th century, with few or no intervening stages. The reason is, of course, that for non-linguistic factors of social, cultural and political import, the documentation in the Arabic-speaking areas of the world has always been written in Classical Arabic, not in the descendant colloquial dialects, and almost always in the Arabic writing system, one that is an excellent instrument for Classical Arabic, but a poor one for noting dialectal variants, or for inadvertently revealing a colloquial bias underlying a Classical text. Nuances of vocalic variation are not easily noted in a script that normally does not indicate short vowels, and has highly traditional methods of writing long vowels.

Maltese is an exception to this state of affairs. It is a dialect in which the speakers did not adhere to a Classical norm in their writing, and did not use either the Arabic script, or another Semitic script like Hebrew, for their writing. The problem with the Maltese writings is their scarcity: there are very few texts, especially from the earlier time of the formation of the Maltese dialect in the middle ages. Even when we consider texts written by non-native speakers of Maltese, the amount is still very small. It is a distinct advantage, therefore, to discover any Maltese text of an earlier period which might be of documentary value in the establishment of changes in Maltese. Such is the text of Peter Caxaro's *Cantilena*, discovered by Wettinger and Fsadni in 1966 and published by them with commentary in Wettinger and Fsadni 1968. This turns out not only to be an early text, but is the earliest text so far discovered of Maltese. It must have been composed before the year 1485, the year of Caxaro's death, and could have been composed as much as

40 years earlier. It is therefore potentially valuable as an indicator of what had and what had not changed by Caxaro's time in the process of Arabic becoming Maltese.

I would like to focus attention upon two changes in particular as examples of the value of documented intermediary stages for the establishment of the extent, shape and chronology of changes that in the lack of such documentation would remain in the realm of speculation. The changes are those dealing with the long vowel /a:/, and the short pretonic /a/ in an open syllable.

The traditional *imala*, or fronting and raising of long /a:/ in Arabic, is expressed in Maltese by the development of /a:/ to /ie/ in plain, that is, non-emphatic or non-back environment: Classical /ka:n/ 'he was', Maltese /kfen/. In emphatic, i.e. either preceding or following an emphatic consonant, or back, i.e. following but not preceding /x, q, h, ʒ, or y/, environments it remains /a:/ in Maltese as it does in most other dialects that exhibit this feature: Classical /ʔinša:b/ 'was found', Maltese /ʔinsá:p/. In addition, when the /a:/ was unstressed at the end of the word, or followed only by Classical /ʔ/ or /h/, it remained /a/ in Maltese; i.e. it was shortened, but not raised or fronted. It is identical with the /a/ that represents the short vowel /a/ in this position, as in /séna/ 'year', Classical /sana/. Examples are Classical /mata:/ 'when', Maltese /méta/; Classical /ʔalla:h/, Maltese /ʔállá/; Classical /sawda:ʔ/ 'black (fem. sg.)', Maltese /séwda/. There is no *imala* of the /a:/ in these positions. It seems a reasonable assumption, given the uniformity of the reflexes in this position, that the final /h/ and the final /ʔ/ were elided, making all three types of word end in /a:/. Since final /a:/ does not exhibit the results of *imala* as does non-final /a:/, we must seek for a historical explanation for the split of /a:/ into these two reflexes /ie/ and /a/. There are at least two explanations that come to mind: (1) final /a:/ did undergo *imala* just as did non-final /a:/, then lost it, undergoing subsequent changes which eliminated all traces of a previous fronting and raising; or (2) final /a:/ did not undergo *imala* at all, possibly by virtue of becoming shortened in final position, as did final /i:/ and /u:/, and hence being no longer susceptible to the fronting and raising process, a process which did not affect the original final short /a/. The evidence of Classical Arabic and modern Maltese does not give us grounds for a choice as to one or another explanation: both are equally probable. When we turn to the

material from Caxaro, however, the speculation that /a:/ underwent *imala* in all positions, then was shortened in final position and fell together there with /a/ is corroborated: in Caxaro, both final and non-final /a:/ are rendered by *e*, presumably a mid-front unrounded vowel (i.e. one that has been raised and fronted from a low central position), in plain environments: Classical /ʔira:ni:/ 'my neighbors', Caxaro *gireni*, Maltese /ʔirieni/; Classical /zama:n/ 'time', Caxaro *zimen*, Maltese /zmien/; Classical /si:sa:n/ 'foundations', Caxaro *sisen*, Maltese /sisien/; Classical /maka:n/ 'place', Caxaro *miken*, Maltese /mkfen/ 'nowhere'. For contrast, the /a:/ in emphatic non-final position is seen in Classical /ʔalʔara:ʔi:/ 'the lands', Caxaro *liradi*, a form which does not occur in modern Maltese. For the final /a:/ in a plain environment we have the following: Classical /ya:/ 'oh', Caxaro *ye*, Maltese /ya/; Classical /la:/ 'no', Caxaro *le*, Maltese /le/; Classical /-ha:/ 'her', Caxaro *-he*, Maltese /-a/; Classical /mawla:/ 'lord', Caxaro *mule*, Maltese /mú:la/, a form which occurs only in place names; Classical /ʔamma:/ 'but', Caxaro *me*, Maltese /ʔimma/; Classical /humma:/ 'there', Caxaro *hemme*, Maltese /ʔemma/; Classical /sawda:ʔ/ 'black (fem. sg.)', Caxaro *seude*, Maltese /séwda/. Classical /ma:/ 'not' does not occur final in the poem, but does occur as a prefix *me-* in *mensab* 'was not found', and is probably joined to the following word for purely orthographic reasons. In modern Maltese it is /ma/. It is noted that with the exception of /le/ 'no', all these words end in /-a/ in modern Maltese. Again for contrast, final /a:/ in an emphatic environment is *a* in Caxaro: Classical /bayda:ʔ/ 'white (fem. sg.)', Caxaro *bayda*, Maltese /báyda/. The changes that seem to have occurred are:

1. a → e in all positions; i.e. /ʔi:ra:ni:/ → *gireni*, and /mawla:/ → *mule*
2. e → a in final position; i.e. *mule* → /mú:la/
3. e → ie in all positions where it still occurred: i.e. *gireni* → /ʔirieni/

If we examine documentary material that comes after Caxaro, we find that by the time of Megiser in 1588, roughly 100 years later, (quoted in Cowan 1964) the plain non-final *e* had become diphthongized to /ie/: Megiser writes *-bliet* 'country', for Classical /bila:d/, *mnieber* 'nose' for Classical /mana:xir/, *siech* for Classical /sa:q/, *cbtieb* 'three' for Classical /ʔala:ʔa/, and *sfnema*

'eight' for Classical /θama:niya/. In final position, the evidence is scantier: for Classical /ʔalla:h/ 'God', Megiser writes *alla*, with an expected emphatic final /a/. For Classical /sama:ʔ/ 'heaven' he writes *semme*, with the final *e* that was the reflex in Caxaro's time. For Classical /dunya:/ 'world' he writes *digna*, with the modern reflex *a*. For Classical /ʔalma:ʔ/ 'water' he writes *elma*, also with the modern reflex. It is possible that Megiser recorded Maltese when the change from final *e* to final /a/ was in progress, so to speak, and had affected the words for 'world' and 'water', but had not affected the word for 'heaven'. By the time of Bonamico's *Sonnetto* in 1672, again roughly 100 years after Megiser (quoted in Wettinger and Fsadni 1968), the only reflex for final Classical /a:/ or /a:ʔ/ is *a*. Bonamico writes *sceta* 'rain' for Classical /ʃita:ʔ/, *sema* 'heaven' for Classical /sama:ʔ/, *hena* 'happiness' for Classical /hana:ʔ/, and *-na* 'us' for Classical /-na:/. Whatever the status of the reflexes of final Classical long /a:/ in Megiser's time, by Bonamico's time the change to /a/ was complete.

A second problem of sound change can be partially resolved by examining the data from Caxaro. In Maltese, a Classical short unstressed /i/ or /u/ in an open initial syllable was elided in all environments: Classical /ħima:r/ 'donkey', Maltese /hma:r/, Classical /ʃufu:t/ 'lines', Maltese /sfu:t/. The Classical short /a/ in this position, however, was elided only in plain environments: Classical /zama:n/, Maltese /zmien/, but Classical /naθi:f/ 'clean', Maltese /nadí:f/. From the evidence of Classical Arabic and Maltese only, there are two possible explanations for the path of change followed by this /a/ in plain position: either (1) it was elided directly, as were /i/ and /u/, or (2) it was raised to /i/ (or possibly /u/, but this is less likely than /i/ since there was already the precedent for fronting and raising of low central vowels in the *imala* that affected the /a:/), then elided. That is, did the change consist of one change for /a/, in which all short vowels in the requisite environments were elided, or did it consist of two changes for /a/ in which it was raised, then elided. Examination of Caxaro's material shows that the second formulation is correct: items which had /a/ in Classical in the proper environments show up with *i* in Caxaro: Classical /zama:n/ 'time', Caxaro *zimen*; Classical /maka:n/ 'place', Caxaro *miken*. In non-plain environments the /a/ is found as such: Classical /haki:m/ 'governor', Caxaro *chakim*. An apparent exception is Caxaro's *timajt* 'I hoped',

Classical /ʔittama9t/, Maltese /ʔittamayt/, where the /a/ following the /t/ should have been preserved, being in an emphatic environment. However, the same word is also spelled *tumajt* in Caxaro, a possible indication of a vowel which was neither /i/ nor /u/ nor /a/, but one for which he had no ready symbol, i.e. an emphatic /a/. This presupposes that the feature of consonantal emphasis was still present in the Maltese of Caxaro's time. There are other examples of *i* in Caxaro coming from Classical /a/ in the positions we are considering, but they are more problematical, being from longer words of less certain reading. If *xideu* 'recital' could be traced to a formation like /ʃadaw/ or */ʃada:w/, from Classical /ʃadw/ 'singing', the *i* in the first syllable would be an example of this change. Similarly, if *rimittine* 'has thrown me' could be traced to a formation like */rama:ni/, Classical /ramatni:/ 'she threw me', this *i* in the first syllable of Caxaro's form would be another example. Also if *mirammiti* 'my house' is from an earlier type /maramma/ 'wall', then its first *i* is a further example. What Caxaro's material cannot resolve is whether the /i/ resulting from /a/ was elided at the same time as or later than the original /i/ and /u/. That is, a possible sequence of events in that /i/ and /u/ were elided while /a/ was still /a/; then, when /a/ was raised to /i/, it too was elided. Another possible sequence of events is that /a/ was raised to /i/, then both original /i/, and /i/ resulting from /a/ were elided at the same time, with /u/ being elided before, with, or after the two /i/'s. Unfortunately there are few clear examples of Classical /i/ or /u/ in this position for comparison and the evidence they present is problematical. If the initial *be-* of *betragin* 'with steps' goes back to Classical /bi:/, this could be an indication of the retention of the original /i/. And if Caxaro's *tred* 'you want' goes back to a Classical /turi:d/, this could be an indication of the elision of the /u/. Neither of these two examples are cogent enough to allow me to make a firm decision on this sequence of events. When we compare this material with that of Megiser, we see that all the vowels in question had been elided: Megiser writes *guir* (emended to *gbir*) 'big' for Classical /kabi:r/, *schechen* 'little' for Classical */ʃukayken/, *mmieher* 'nose' for Classical /mana:xir/, *embit* 'wine' with epenthetic initial *e-* for Classical /nabi:ð/, *flus* 'money' for Classical /fulu:s/, *chtieb* 'book' for Classical /kita:b/, and the aforementioned numbers for 'three' and 'eight'. One exception is *fuchir*, Classical /faqi:r/

'poor', a form that cannot be explained.

In effect, this examination of the material provided by Canaro's *Cantilena* has shown us what had changed by what time in the development from Arabic to Maltese in respect to /aʔ/, changes which the mere consideration of the beginning and end points of the changes in question would have not been able to fix with similar precision. And it gives us a partial, but not a complete picture of the changes concerning /a/. Perhaps the discovery of further checkpoints will provide the necessary data to complete that picture. Such are the uses of checkpoints for change.

REFERENCES

- COWAN, WILLIAM. 1964. 'An early Maltese word-list'. *Journal of Maltese Studies*, 2.217-25.
- WATKINS, CALVERT. 1970. 'A further remark on Lachmann's law'. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 74.55-65.
- WETTINGER, G. and FSADNI, M. 1968. *Peter Canaro's Cantilena*. Malta: Lux Press.
- WYATT, WILLIAM. 1964. 'Structural linguistics and the laryngeal theory'. *Language*, 40.138-52.

MALTESE MORPHOPHONEMICS¹

by ALEXANDER BORG

0.0 *Phonological preliminaries*

0.01 *Phonemic chart of Maltese consonants*²

	BILABIAL	LABIODENTAL	DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	ALVEOPALATAL	PALATAL	VELAR	PHARYNGEAL	GLOTTAL
STOPS	p b		t d				k g		q
FRICATIVES		f v		s z	ʃ ʒ		h		
AFFRICATES				ʧ ʤ	ʨ ʥ				
NASALS	m			n					
LATERAL				l					
TRILL				r					
SEMIVOWELS	w					y			

¹Maltese is a Semitic language spoken by the 320,000 inhabitants of the Maltese archipelago comprising Malta, Gozo, Comino and Cominotto, and lying approximately 60 miles south of Sicily and 180 miles east of the Tunisian coast. This portion of a description of Maltese, which forms part of a larger work *The Phonology and Morphology of Maltese*, now in progress, is based on the native speech of the author who was born in the town of Sliema, Malta, and lived there for fifteen years.

²With the exception of /ʔ/, all the symbols have been taken from Pike's *Phonemics* (Ann Arbor, 1947). /ʔ/ is here used for the sake of convenience instead of the more usual digraph dz.