

THE MALTESE LANGUAGE

In Search of a Method

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In the summer of 1925 I found myself in more or less the same circumstances as I am now. I had just finished my course of Biblical and Orientalistic Studies at the *Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française* of Jerusalem, received my appointment as Professor at the Dominican University *Angelicum* of Rome, and was having a short rest here in Malta. Some friends of mine, prominent members of the *Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti*, invited me to collaborate in the Review *Il-Malti*. Maltese is my mother-tongue, and in my studies upon the various Semitic Languages I had gathered quite a lot of useful notes upon the vocabulary, phonetics and orthography, grammar and syntax, as well as upon the relation of Maltese to the other classical Semitic Languages, especially Arabic and the modern Arabic dialects. I, therefore, gladly accepted the invitation to contribute some writings upon Maltese and made up my mind to give form to some of my notes. I did not intend to write one or two articles and finish; but I really meant to make a systematic study of the language, and help in my own way in promoting the scientific knowledge of Maltese. My first task was to find a method. Although not a few authors have already written upon Maltese, there is hardly any unity among them: we cannot yet quote an author who commands a real scientific knowledge of our native tongue; in one word we lack classics in Maltese. There is, and I am afraid there will still be for a long time, divergencies between the various writers even upon the most fundamental elements of the language. I, therefore, endeavoured to find a method for my own study, and the result was my first article *L-Ilsien Malti*, which was published in the second quarter of 1926 (See *Il-Malti*, II, 1926, pp. 39-46). I

intend now to write a series of articles upon Maltese in "Scientia", and for the reasons stated above I feel that I must first say a few words upon my method. I am not going to repeat what I have said in my paper *L-Ilsien Malti*, but I endeavour to resume the main points, and possibly make them more clear.

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In my view there are two very important principles in the study of a language, namely: the national history of the country where that language is in use, and comparative philology, because kindred languages, especially when they are better known, may throw a great light on problems pertaining to the other sister-languages. I am therefore inclined to explain briefly these two principles in order to prove their importance for the knowledge of Maltese.

National history.—It has often been asserted that language reveals the history of a nation. Indeed language bears marks of all the past influences which a nation has received from the various foreign peoples with whom it was in relation. Hence we can also say that national history points out the sources whence the national language may derive. One must therefore keep in mind the history of a nation, in order to discuss objectively, and not only theoretically, the origin of the vocabulary and other grammatical and syntactical forms used in a given language. If, for example, Malta never had any relation with Persia, and both in Maltese as well as in the Persian Language we find lists of similar words, although theoretically one may conclude that either Maltese derives from Persian or vice-versa; historically we must affirm that there is no relation between Maltese and Persian, and if similar words and forms are found in both languages, there must be a third language on which they both depend, which in fact is Arabic! This first philological principle, namely national history, will be found very useful to judge critically those books and articles which compare Maltese to other languages or dialects, spoken by people who never had any historical relation with Malta.

Comparative Philology.—The scientific knowledge of a language consists in a thorough understanding of a particular speech, that is to say of its orthography and phonology, morphology, grammar and syntax, and finally of its literature; all of which are based on the language of the people, because in this matter *usus populi* is the supreme law. The knowledge of a language must be based on the people's language and not vice-versa. This is why the language varies with the ages and is not fixed. It is born, it grows, becomes old, and even it may die. The national history will discover to the scholar whether a certain people has always had the language they use today or whether in the course of centuries they have changed their language. Thus, for example, in Egypt, where today the national tongue is Arabic, in olden days the national language was the Coptic language.

National History, therefore, gives to the philologist that guidance by which he can connect the language of that nation to those languages from which it derives. Indeed, languages have a genealogical table like men. We must therefore divide languages into families or groups of kindred origin and formation, and arrange the various languages of one and the same family or group according to their origin and priority.

The Maltese language as spoken today by the people of these Islands is definitely a Semitic language. It seems to us absolutely ridiculous to maintain that Maltese should be connected to Italian or Sicilian dialects. The Maltese vocabulary, phonetics and morphology, grammar and syntax, are definitely Semitic; and when a foreign word passes into Maltese, it takes, as far as it is possible, Semitic flexions and forms.

We do not think, as some writers thought, that the builders of our megalithic temples were Semites and spoke Semitic. The age of those monuments is older than any Semitic migration to the West and most especially to the Middle Sea. Those people were very probably Egeans or Mycenaeans and must have spoken an Aryan language. The Semitic tongue was introduced in Malta by the Phoenicians about the middle of the second

millenium B.C., who were succeeded by the Carthaginians. When Malta fell to the Romans in 216 B.C., Latin did not change the language spoken on the island, so much so that when S. Paul came to Malta, in the autumn of the year 60 A.D., the inhabitants did not speak either Greek or Latin (See Acts xxviii, 1). The Romans had no rivals in the Mediterranean Sea and paid little care to fortify Malta or to keep in it a numerous garrison and although their national language was Latin, they preferred Greek. They were followed in Malta by the Byzantines, whose language was also Greek. But this language does not seem to have been introduced into the Island, and the Byzantines were succeeded by the Saracens in 870, who spoke the language of the Qoran. This people dominated over Malta for about two centuries, and we may say that Malta retained relations with the Saracens, Barbarians, and other people of Arabic language until the fall of the Islamic domination on the Mediterranean. In the second millenium A.D. Malta has always been in strict relation with the European countries, especially with Spain, who dominated over Sicily and Southern Italy. Hence the Maltese language which was planted in Malta by the Phoenicians, increased by the Carthaginians, and strengthened by the Arabs is essentially Semitic, although today it bears signs of Latin influences which derive either from the Roman domination or from the relations which Malta has had continuously from the beginning of the second millenium A.D. until our own days with the European nations. A knowledge of these languages must therefore be of great help for a better understanding of the language, spoken today in the Maltese Islands.