

Lengthening (at boundaries?) as a discourse strategy in Maltese: phonetic and phonological characteristics

Lengthening and pausing in speech seem to be inextricably linked. This is evidenced by the well-studied phenomenon often referred to as pre-boundary lengthening (PBL) (e.g. Vaissère 1983, Hayes 1997). Analysis of new spontaneous (but, significantly non-Map Task) data from Maltese has brought to light a feature which appears to occur relatively frequently. This involves lengthening which might not otherwise occur at a “natural” prosodic (or other type of) boundary and/or whose role is not simply one involving either simple demarcation of intonation phrases or straightforward hesitation. The kind of lengthening we examine, therefore, is a distinct phenomenon which plays a role in planning and in managing turn-taking similar to that noted to be involved in the use of both filled pauses (FPs) and, to a lesser extent also of unfilled pauses (UPs) in different languages (e.g. Cutler & Pearson 1986, Clark & Fox Tree 2002, Grosz & Hirschberg 1992, Swerts 1998), Maltese included (Vella et al., 2011 and forthcoming).

This study provides evidence for the existence of this specific form of lengthening, i.e. one involving an intuitively longer than long duration, in Maltese. It further examines the characteristics associated with this phenomenon in an attempt at understanding its role within discourse.

The data we report on reveal that this type of lengthening:

- is possible at a wide range of locations, not always ones at which one would expect a boundary to be placed;
- normally affects the final, rather than the stressed syllable, suggesting that this type of lengthening is an edge phenomenon of some sort;
- can but needn't be followed, and is not usually preceded, by pause – this is different for FPs but similar for UPs;
- enables the speaker to pause without relinquishing the floor – by contrast, standard PBL necessarily precedes a phrase boundary of some sort, and in dialogue is linked to the possibility of a change of speaker;
- involves a mid-level F0 similar to that also observed to be the case for FPs.

References

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