

In 1867, Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (d. 1887) published an account (called *al-Wāsiṭah*) of his sojourn in Malta. It ends with a chapter (pp. 56-66) on Maltese. *Al-Wāsiṭah* has been republished several times, partially translated into English (Cachia 1962-63), and translated *in toto* into Maltese (Cassar 1985). Yet linguists seem not to have noticed it. Even Brincat's monumental history (2001) does not mention it. But the text is worth revisiting for at least two reasons.

First, it provides insights, mostly corroborative, regarding the history of Maltese. For example, al-Shidyāq notes that people in the country distinguish between *ʿayn* and *ghayn* but pronounce both as *ʿayn* when working in Valletta, whose dialect they perceive as more prestigious. Profoundly learned in the Arabic philological tradition, al-Shidyāq, though he writes carelessly in other parts of the book, turns out to be an astute observer of the linguistic situation in Malta.

Second, the chapter documents an encounter of some importance for the history of Arabic. Al-Shidyāq was one of the founders of modern standard Arabic. Maltese, with its endlessly debatable relationship to Arabic, posed a problem for him. At several points, he denounces the language as corrupt and deficient. At other points, however, he suggests that these are contingent attributes: if the Maltese would only write their language, it would become a *Kultursprache*, and then—presumably—worthy of respect. He also notes that many features—from the alternation of *ḥā* and *hāʾ* to the local meaning of words like *sodda*—exist in certain varieties of Arabic as well. By the end of the chapter, he is praising Maltese as an example of the resilience of Arabic. Through careful study of al-Shidyāq's text, this paper will address the relationship between his notions of Maltese and his theorization of Arabic as a modern national language.