

## Languages in Contact: Is the Gender Assignment System in Maltese Undergoing Change?

The nominal gender system serves two basic functions: (a) the classification of nouns as belonging to a particular category; (b) the triggering of grammatical agreement that is apparent in those words of different grammatical categories associated with the controlling noun. This paper focuses on (a). Being an offshoot of Arabic, Maltese inherited a system comprising two gender categories, masculine and feminine. This means that every noun, whether animate or inanimate, native or borrowed, has to be assigned a gender on the basis of some criterion, even if the language of origin of a loan word does not itself have the grammatical category of gender. In Maltese, nouns that refer to people or animals take gender according to the referent's sex. In contrast, the most important criterion for gender assignment to inanimate nouns is not semantic but formal namely, their declension. Numerous nouns of Romance origin were introduced in Maltese through contact first with Sicilian and subsequently with Italian, two languages that also have a masculine/feminine-based gender system. Some of these nouns introduced new noun endings, but most of them fit in with the established system. However, the more recent contact, with English has complicated matters. English is a language whose gender system is conceptual. Inanimate nouns are not marked for gender. Although, at a glance, nouns borrowed from English appear to have adopted the model previously established by nouns of Arabic, Sicilian and Italian origin, closer inspection of a corpus of almost 23,000 nouns reveals novel tendencies that are being introduced by English nouns that deviate from the established gender assignment patterns in Maltese.