Connecting /t/ in Maltese numerals: synchrony and diachrony

We discuss the /t/ morpheme that in certain circumstances intervenes between the numerals 2–10 and a following plural noun in Maltese, as in *ħamest iskejjel* 'five schools'. This unobtrusive prefix (treated orthographically as a suffix on the numeral) is worthy of closer investigation for at least three reasons: i) until now there has been no scholarly consensus on the basic facts of its distribution (e.g. Cremona 1938; Borg 1974; Fabri 1994), and we will show that no existing description is fully correct; ii) it has clear cognates in a number of Arabic dialects but a much freer distribution than in any of these, raising the question of how this extension occurred; and iii) the very existence of this morpheme, having survived since before the Arab occupation of Malta, is remarkable in itself, in view of its lack of any discernible function, showing that "junk" (à la Lass 1990) need not always be lost or exapted to new functions over time.

We report on a native-speaker production experiment designed to establish the distributional facts. This reveals a complex interaction between onset type (V- / CV- / CC-), number of syllables, and morphological class (broken vs. sound plural) in those plurals which favour connecting /t/, as well as considerable inter- and intra-speaker variation. The key innovation relative to the system reconstructable for early spoken Arabic, in which /t/ is restricted to certain V-initial broken plurals, is that CC-initial plural patterns (deriving from both original CVC-initial and VCC-initial patterns) become the major favouring context. On this basis we argue that the collapse of original CVCVVC and VCCVVC plural patterns into a single CCVVC pattern was the crucial factor triggering this extension (e.g. *kilāb > klieb* 'dogs', *aħbāb > ħbieb* 'friends').