

A Gozitan Dialect for Standard Maltese in the Eighteenth Century

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Agius de Soldanis (1712-1770) is one of the main literary figures of the eighteenth century. He was interested in all things Maltese, and published works on archaeology, natural history, religion, and language.

Neither the grammar (1750) – the first ever published – nor his manuscript dictionary in four volumes – are valued for their philological contribution. Their strong value lies in documentation: in these works, besides a large corpus of eighteenth century Maltese, the cultural historian finds a lot of interesting ethnographic material.

Throughout the years, Agius de Soldanis's choices to codify Maltese were viewed negatively. His contemporaries had something to say about his codification and, forty years later, Vassalli was extremely critical about his works. In fact, Agius de Soldanis's codification betrays phonological, morphological, lexical and phraseological elements closely associated with what apparently is his native Gozitan dialect, *ir-Rabti*.

In this paper I will argue that even though Agius de Soldanis lived in Malta for quite some years, he found himself unable to distinguish between city and village dialects, as can be inferred from his Dialogues. In this earliest kind of prose, the pronunciation realised by the city people from the higher class exhibited what up to now was closely associated with the pronunciation of the village people. This could only have happened because of Agius de Soldanis's long years living in Gozo, surrounded by country people, alien to life in the harbour area. He lamented more than once with foreign correspondents about the cultural isolation he felt in Gozo.