

## The Antecedents and Development of Interrogative –š in Maltese

Some of the earliest grammars of Maltese, those of Vassalli and Vella, attest a polar interrogative suffix –š fully operational in the language in the 19th century, marking verbs: *chiltûx* ‘Have you eaten?’ *thobbnix* ‘Do you love me?’ and a full complement of copular interrogatives in all persons of the independent pronouns: *Jeniex* ‘am I?’ *Contx* ‘was I/were you?’ *Ncûnûx* ‘shall we be?’ *Hujex* ‘Is he?’ *Cheinitx* ‘was she?’ *Jcûnûx* ‘shall they be?’ The interrogative –š appears by the early twentieth century to have been in decline, at least as represented in Sutcliffe’s grammar, where it is limited to forming indirect questions. By the late twentieth century, it appears to have almost completely disappeared. Whereas Aquilina makes no mention of it in his teaching grammar, Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander do remark briefly on its continued function, affirming that the suffix –x on a verb forms a neutral yes-no question, also adducing an invariable copular interrogative built upon the independent 3rd person masculine pronoun *hux* ‘is it?’

Yet, the Korpus Malti reveals the continued operation of a copular pronominal interrogative –š in all three persons, forming indirect questions:

*jekk ahniex ha ngħallmu lit-tfal kollha jew lit-tfal tal-elit biss*

‘whether we will teach all children or children of the elite only’

*jekk intiex qieghed titkellem bis-serjetà jew inkella tipprova tidhak bin-nies*

‘whether you are talking seriously or are trying to fool people’

*jekk persuna hijiex jew kienetx persuna impjegata*

‘whether a person is or was employed’

This indicates two things:

1. A close link between Maltese and ancestral forms of Arabic:

- Andalusian Arabic: *anīš nadri* ‘Do I know?’ *huwāš miġaṭṭi riġlayya* ‘Does it cover my legs?’
- Tunisian Arabic: *yirġa‘ši* ‘Will he return?’ *šuftši lēlā* ‘have you seen Leila?’ *huwāši* ‘is he?’

2. A documented language change between the 19th and the 21st centuries.