A corpus based analysis of differential object indexing in Maltese

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Clitic doubling is a syntactic phenomenon where the bound pronominal form of an object, henceforth called index (Haspelmath 2013), can be present on the verb alongside the object expressed as an overt noun phrase. Clitic doubling falls into the range of phenomena referred to as differential argument marking (DAM) which can be defined as any situation where an argument of a predicate with the same semantic argument role is coded differently (Seržant and Witzlack-Makarevich 2018), with no restriction to adpositional or case marking (Iemmolo 2011).

In Maltese, clitic doubling - or, in the terminology of DAM, "differential object indexing" - is associated with factors such as word order (Fabri 1993) and information structure (Fabri and Borg 2002, Čéplö 2014), but it is never fully predictable. Our hypothesis is therefore that we are dealing with probabilistic rules, induced by an interplay of different variables including - but not limited to - animacy, givenness and identifiability. A possible response to such a probability distribution is to test each possible variable as the single predictor in a descriptive model to examine the impact of each individual factor. This was done, for example, for DAM in Nepali (Schikowski 2013), where over a dozen factors were identified as being significantly relevant for differential case marking of objects, such as PoS, humanness, specificity or discourse frequency, to mention but a few.

Adding an additional level of annotation to the Maltese Universal Dependencies Treebank (MUDT; Čéplö 2018, current version http://hdl.handle.net/11234/1-2895) based on the factors considered relevant for DAM in the literature (on Maltese as well as in general), we use conditional inference (Tagliamonte and Baayen 2012, Levshina 2015) to test the extent to which each possible predictor variable is associated with object indexing in Maltese and thus to determine the relevant argument properties and quantify their individual impact.

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