Word-final /n/ in Maltese

This paper examines the origin of final /n/ in *xejn* 'nothing' (Arabic *šayʔ* 'thing') through wider consideration of non-etymological and optional final /n/ in Maltese, as in *sufan* 'sofa' (Italian *sofà*) and *għajnej(n)* 'eyes', evaluating Aquilina's (1987: *s.v. xejn*) claim that /n/ in *xejn* is a retention of the indefinite *-Vn* suffix found in classical Arabic, but no spoken Arabic varieties (except as a clearly distinct "adnominal linker"; cf. Ferrando 2018).

Aquilina's claim, if correct, would be of huge importance for Arabic dialectology and historical linguistics. However, our investigation of the full set of items with non-etymological or optional /n/ suggests that Aquilina's derivation is likely incorrect. We find that /n/ is typically inserted with items with a final open stressed syllable. We suggest that this is a consequence of the near-absence in Semitic Maltese of lexical items with this phonological profile. A handful of items of this kind do exist, but are mostly function words (e.g. *le* 'no', *ġo* 'inside'), or otherwise high-token-frequency content items (e.g. *ħu* 'brother', *ġie* 'come'). Though high in token frequency, the type frequency of such items is tiny relative to the whole lexicon, such that loaned content items with this profile are likely to be judged poor phonological exemplars of Maltese words (cf. Bybee 2001). We suggest, therefore, that /n/-epenthesis in loans such as *sufan* and *skrun* is a repair strategy which serves to bring these items more closely into line with the inherited lexicon.

But why is /n/-insertion the chosen strategy? This must have its origins in the pre-existing alternation between word-final /n/ and zero in items with the dual suffix *-ej(n)*. This is initially grammatically conditioned, but becomes optional (as in *għajnej'*), opening the way for analogical insertion of non-etymolgical /n/ in *xejn*, as well as *ħdejn* 'near'.