

Lexical Variation in the Dialects of Malta and Gozo

Michael Spagnol & Ruben Farrugia

University of Malta

Regional lexical variation in Maltese has not been appropriately analyzed and compared across a wide range of concepts and localities. There was an attempt at eliciting data from many levels of linguistic analysis, including a collection of lexical differences, by Aquilina & Isserlin (1981), however, the study was left unfinished and barely covers enough data for Gozo alone.

Other studies dealing with lexical variation include a number of undergraduate theses that cover specific semantic fields, such as agricultural tools, construction and culinary terminology (see, among others, Chetcuti 2003, Borg 2011, Attard & Spagnol 2014). Such studies do find some regional patterns, but the data are not explicitly compared across a wide range of localities that cover most of the Maltese and Gozitan dialects. Also, whilst specific semantic fields confirm the existence of lexical variation in determined niches, they are limited in establishing the extent of lexical variants of more generic concepts widely used in everyday life and affirming regional linguistic variation.

This paper presents the results drawn from a lexical survey conducted among 640 speakers, aged 60 or over, from 16 localities in Malta and Gozo in an attempt to provide a general idea of Maltese geolinguistics by mapping them out. We introduce a general method for the comparison of geosynonyms to outline common patterns of regional lexical variation. In particular, this study focuses on the results of a quantitative analysis of lexical data derived from everyday concepts spread across a number of localities in order to give an overview of the degree of lexical variation present in different regions of the Maltese islands.

References

- Aquilina, Joseph & Benedikt Isserlin (1981) *Survey of Contemporary Dialectal Maltese. Volume 1: Gozo*. Leeds: Leeds University Press.
- Attard, Keith & Spagnol, Michael (2014) Differenzi lessikali bejn il-Malti u l-Għawdxì. Leñen il-Malti. *Leñen il-Malti*. L-Għaqda tal-Malti – Università.
- Borg, Albert (2011) Lectal Variation in Maltese. In Sandro Caruana, Ray Fabri & Thomas Stolz (eds.), *Variation and Change. The Dynamics of Maltese in space, time and society*. Akademie Verlag, 11-31.
- Chetcuti, Flavia (2003). Lexical Variation in the Semantic Field of Agricultural Tools. B.A. (Hons), University of Malta.