

Combinatorial restrictions on vowel sequences in CVCVC words in Maltese

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it examines the combinatorial restrictions on vowel sequences in CVCVC words in Standard Maltese, focussing on the short vowels. Previous work in this area has looked mainly at vowel sequences in CVCVC verbs (Saydon, 1928, 1958; Sutcliffe, 1936; Aquilina, 1959; Cremona, 1961; Hoberman, 2007; Spagnol, 2011), and a few works list vowel sequences in CVCVC nouns, in particular plural nouns (Aquilina, 1959; Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997; Schembri, 2006, 2012). Standard Maltese has five short vowels (e, ε, i, o, u), which yield 25 possible CVCVC permutations. An analysis of an extensive corpus of words with this CVCVC structure has shown that only six sequences are attested in both verbs and nouns/adjectives, namely e-e (*daħal*, ‘to enter’, *baħar*, ‘sea’), ε-e (*fetaħ*, ‘to open’, *weraq*, ‘leaves’), e-ε (*ħasel* ‘to wash’, *ramel*, ‘sand’), ε-ε (*ħeles* ‘to free’, *fenek*, ‘rabbit’), i-ε (*żifen* ‘to dance’, *tifel*, ‘boy’), o-o (*xorob*, ‘to drink’, *bolol*, ‘stamps’), while for nouns, i-e and u-ε are also attested (cf. *siġar* ‘trees’, *suwed* ‘black.PL’), even if rarely. In this study, we explore factors such as vowel quality (close-open, front-back, unrounded-rounded), type of adjacent consonants, and, for nouns, number (singular, plural, collective) to determine whether they play a role in the resulting combinatorial restrictions.

Second, given that Maltese dialects vary substantially in the phonetics and phonology of their vowels (Incorvaja, 2007; Said, 2007; Farrugia, 2010; Azzopardi-Alexander, 2011), this project aims to investigate which combinatorial restrictions on vowel sequences in CvCvC words can be observed in the dialects of Malta and Gozo, and compare them to those in Standard Maltese. We report on the methodology designed specifically for a pilot study in this area.

References

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