

Labile Verbs in Maltese

As a result of intense language contact between typologically diverse languages (viz. Arabic, Sicilian, Italian, English), Maltese has developed two verb formation strategies: root-and-pattern association and concatenation. In terms of stem structure, derivational potential and inflectional morphology, Maltese verbs fall into two classes:

- **templatic**, e.g., *kiteb* 'write', formed by combining a consonantal root ($\sqrt{\text{ktb}}$) with a binyan ($C_1VC_2VC_3$);
- **concatenative**, e.g., *ttajpja* 'type', formed by attaching a verbal suffix (-ja) to a syllabic root ($\sqrt{\text{tajp}}$), which generally undergoes initial gemination.

Templatic verbs, which are mostly of Semitic origin, constitute a closed list. Concatenative verbs are predominantly derived from Romance and English, and make up an open, highly productive class (cf. Mifsud 1995; Hoberman & Aronoff 2003; Hoberman 2007; Spagnol 2011).

Consonantal roots are usually inserted in more than one verbalizing morpheme (binyan), creating different verbs. Consider, for instance, $\sqrt{\text{ksh}}$ in the examples below:

binyan 1	$C_1VC_2VC_3$	<i>kesaħ</i> 'cool, v.i'
binyan 2	$C_1VC_2C_2VC_3$	<i>kessaħ</i> 'cool, v.t'
binyan 5	$tC_1VC_2C_2VC_3$	<i>tkessaħ</i> 'be cooled'

By contrast, syllabic roots typically combine with one verbalizing suffix only. For instance, $\sqrt{\text{intens}}$ selects the morpheme *-ifika* (*intensifika* 'intensify') and $\sqrt{\text{organ}}$ selects *-izza* (*organizza* 'organize'), and it never happens that $\sqrt{\text{intens}}$ selects *-izza* (**intensizza*), or vice versa. Argument alternations are therefore marked by morphologically related verbs on the one hand, and are not encoded in derivational morphology, on the other. Concatenative verbs express argument alternations either periphrastically (e.g., *aċċerta* 'assure' – *aċċerta ruħu* 'assure oneself') or by a labile verb (e.g., *skura* 'make dark' and

'become dark').

Focusing on the causative-inchoative alternation, one of the main valency alternations in the language, I show that there is considerable variation in the marking of the alternation in Maltese, which goes hand in hand with the distinction between the two verb formation strategies. Templatic verbs typically mark the alternation by means of two different morphologically related verbs, with the inchoative verb (1b) being often morphologically more complex than the causative one (1a).

(1a) *It=tifla* *fetħ-et* *it=tieqa.*
DEF=girl open-PFV.3SG.F DEF=window
'The girl opened the window.'

(1b) *It=tieqa* *nfetħ-et.*
DEF=window open-PFV.3SG.F
'The window opened.'

Concatenative verbs, however, do not express the alternation overtly. Labile verbs are used to mark both the causative and the inchoative alternant, as in (2).

(2a) *Hiġa* ***ċċarġja*** *l=mobile.*
brother.1SG charge.PFV.3SG.M DEF=mobile
'My brother charged the mobile.'

(2b) *Il=mobile* ***ċċarġja.***
DEF=mobile charge.PFV.3SG.M
'The mobile charged.'

A sentence creation task and a corpus study on a set of around 40 labile verbs in Maltese (cf. Gatt & Spagnol; Spagnol 2011) reveal that, even though they fail to show any morphological mark that would distinguish the causative or inchoative alternant as

formally more marked than the other, labile verbs nonetheless evince a bias in transitivity. In other words, labile verbs do not constitute a homogeneous class: some of them are more likely to occur in transitive frames, while others tend to pattern with intransitive constructions.

References

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