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## Recognisably Arabian: A Levantine/South-Arabian Morphosyntactic Bundle in Maltese

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**RECOGNISABLY ARABIAN:  
A LEVANTINE/SOUTH-ARABIAN  
MORPHOSYNTACTIC BUNDLE IN  
MALTESE**

*David Wilmsen*

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Martin Zammit speaks cautiously but convincingly of shared Levantine features in Maltese (2006; 2009; 2009–2010), less cautiously of South Arabian elements (2009), and quite confidently of the relationship between Andalusí Arabic and Maltese (2009–2010; 2020). His caution notwithstanding, drawing a connection between Levantine Arabic, South Arabian, southern peninsular Arabic, and Andalusí varieties and Maltese is a bold stance, motivated by compelling evidence emerging from Professor Zammit’s careful comparisons between Maltese and other varieties of Arabic. Taken together, these attest, as he says, “to the remarkable diachronic depth of the Maltese language” (Zammit 2009–2010, 29)

Much of Professor Zammit’s work involves skilful lexical comparisons in the mode of the classic comparative method for establishing relationships between members of a language family. Bearing in mind that words can be borrowed from adjacent languages, the Arabic and South Arabian borrowings—if that is

what they are—in Maltese indicate proximity to or descent from source languages that are at a far remove from Maltese in place and time.

So, too, with morphosyntactic traits. An examination of a bundle of those vindicates Professor Zammit's conception of the development of the features of Maltese from South Arabian sources by way of the Levant. These are grammatical constructions formed with an enclitic *-š* or *-šī* alone. One of these is the unusual prohibitive so formed, which appears occasionally in Egyptian Arabic dialects, characteristically and frequently in some varieties of Levantine Arabic, and obligatorily in Maltese. It also appears a few times in one of the earliest documentations of an Arabic dialect, that of Oman (Reinhardt 1894, 178, 183). Another is the posing of polar questions—to which the answer is either 'yes' or 'no'—with a phrase- or sentence-final *-š/šī*. This, too, is shared by Maltese (Wilmsen 2016a) and Levantine Arabic (Holes 2004, 192), and it is attested also in Egyptian Arabic of the nineteenth century (Wilmsen and Al-Sayyed 2019, 11) and in the early documentation of Omani Arabic (Reinhardt 1894, 16, 220–21, 283). Yet a third is what has been called a partitive, distributive, or quantifier *šī* (Reinhardt 1984, 29, 69, 291, 416). It happens that an analogue of *šī* also performs these functions in the so-called 'Modern' South Arabian languages (Wilmsen 2022a; Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2022–2023, 105–9).

It is thus possible to trace the movement of the feature bundle from southern Arabia to the Levant and points westward, notably Muslim Iberia and Malta. It happens that Andalusī Arabic texts also show a few instances of polar interrogative *-š/šī*. The

implication is that Maltese does, indeed, exhibit remarkable diachronic depth.

## 1.0. Enclitic -š in Maltese and Arabic

### 1.1. Negations with -š in Maltese and Arabic

The usual negation of the indicative in Maltese follows the pattern that is widespread across North Africa, Egypt, and some Levantine Arabic varieties, with a pre-posed negator *mā* (or *ma*) and an enclitic -š:

#### (1a) Maltese<sup>1</sup>

*ma smajtx l-istoria kollha*

Neg. heard.1sg. the-story all

‘I [did] not hear the whole story’ (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997, 88)

#### (1b) Egyptian Arabic

*ma simi<sup>c</sup>-š hāḍa l-kalām*

NEG heard.3MSG-NEG DEM DET-talk

‘He [did] not hear this talk’ (own data)

These Arabic varieties form the prohibitive with *mā* or *lā*, with some of them usually affixing an enclitic -š:

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<sup>1</sup> The interlinear glosses and transcriptions of the authors of the Maltese examples are retained, with some modifications for the purposes of clarity. The glosses of the Arabic examples will conform to the Leipzig Glossing Rules. A list of the abbreviations follows the chapter.

(2a) Moroccan Arabic

*ma ti-mši-š*

NEG 2-go-NEG

(2b) Moroccan Arabic

*lā ti-mši-š*

PRH 2-go-PRH

(2c) Moroccan Arabic

*lā t-rōḥ*

PRH 2-go

‘[Do] not go’ (Wilmsen 2016b, 136)

A few Arabic dialects optionally form their prohibitives with an enclitic *-š* alone. Egyptian Arabic dialects may exercise this option, but it is especially common in southern Levantine Arabic varieties, that is, southern Syrian, Jordanian, and Palestinian dialects. Maltese obligatorily forms its prohibitive in the same way (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997, 27; Wilmsen 2016b, 136–38):

(3a) Jordanian Arabic

*ti-nsā-š*

2-forget-NEG

(3b) Maltese

*ti-nsie-x*

you-forget-NEG

‘[Do] not forget’ (Wilmsen 2016b, 137–38)

Reinhardt attests this quality in his 1894 study of a dialect of Omani Arabic, one of the earliest thorough documentations of an Arabic dialect, in which the prohibitive is an enclitic *-šī* alone:<sup>2</sup>

(4) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

*tī-xrug-šī*

2-exit-PRH

‘[Do] not go out’ (Reinhardt 1894, 178)

Notable, however, is the fact that, in the Omani Arabic of the nineteenth century, the negator enclitic *-šī* is used to negate all parts of speech, not only verbs and not only in the prohibitive (Reinhardt 1894, 137). A few examples should suffice to illustrate this (for others, see Morano 2022, 247–48; Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2023, 95–96).

(5a) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

Negating a participle

*ḡadbān-šī*      ‘*alī-k*

angry.PTCP.MSG-NEG    PREP-PRO.MSG

‘[He is] not angry with you’ (Reinhardt 1894, 96)

(5b) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

Negating a preposition

‘*alī-k-šī*      *xōf*

PREP-PRO.MSG-NEG    fear

‘Fear not’ [lit. ‘on you not fear’] (Reinhardt 1894, 96)

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<sup>2</sup> Forming the prohibitive with *lā*, as do some varieties of Arabic, including other Gulf Arabic dialects, is an alternative (Reinhardt 1894, 152)

## (5c) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

Negating a demonstrative

*kitāb-ek hinā-ši*

book-PRO.MSG here-NEG

‘Your book [is] not here’ (Reinhardt 1894, 102)

Also worth noting is that negation with enclitic *-ši* has almost completely disappeared from the Omani Arabic of the twenty-first century. Sentential negation is now carried out with *mā*, which was always an option (Reinhardt 1894, 137). Morano (2022, 250), who revisits the same dialects that Reinhardt documented, proposes “that the clitic /-ši/ was probably the original negative construct used in the region, before being almost entirely replaced by *mā* under the influence of non-š-dialects as the ones spoken in the Arabian Peninsula.” Compare, for example, (5b) and (5c) from the nineteenth century with (6a) and (6b) from the twenty-first:

## (6a) Omani Arabic (twenty-first century)

Negating a demonstrative

*hiya mā hinā*

PRO.FSG NEG here

‘She [is] not here’ (Morano 2022, 244)

## (6b) Omani Arabic (twenty-first century)

Negating a preposition

*mā ‘ind-i flūs*

NEG PREP-1SG money

‘I [do] not have cash’ [lit. ‘not at me money’] (Morano 2022, 246)

For their part, prohibitives are now formed with *lā* in the manner of other Gulf Arabic varieties:

(7) Omani Arabic (twenty-first century)

*lā t-rūḥ-i*

PRH 2-go-FSG

‘[Do] not go’ (Morano 2022, 246)

Negation with enclitic *-ši* alone appears only in relicts. Morano (2022, 250–51) notes its occurrence in a folk song, which may be expected to preserve older speech styles, and in negative existentials (Morano 2022, 252). She also mentions Reinhardt’s documenting the negation of personal pronouns in copular utterances, which apparently do not appear in her data.

(8) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

Negating a personal pronoun

*hūwā-ši sekrān*

PRO.3MSG-NEG drunk.PTCP

‘[He is] not drunk’ (Reinhardt 1894, 282; Morano 2022, 247)

Its absence in Morano’s data notwithstanding, this type of pronominal negation remains attested amongst Arabic speakers from the interior of Oman west of Muscat, the same dialect area that Reinhardt documented.

(9) Omani Arabic (Dakhiliyya Governorate)

*hūwā-š ‘umāni*

PRO.3MSG-NEG Omani

‘He [is] not Omani’ (Wilmsen 2022b, 166; Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2022–2023, 115 n. 2)

Reinhardt (1894, 21–22) provides an almost complete list of negated personal pronouns. These are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Reinhardt’s (1894, 21–22) negation of personal pronouns

<i>enā-ši</i>	<i>nicht ich</i>	not I
<i>ntā-ši</i>	<i>nicht du</i>	not you (M)
<i>ntī-šši</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>nicht du</i>	not you (F)
<i>huwā-ši</i>	<i>nicht er</i>	not he
<i>hiyā-ši</i>	<i>nicht sie</i>	not she
<i>henā-ši</i>	<i>nicht wir</i>	not us
<i>ntū-šši</i>	<i>nicht ir</i>	not you (PL)

Remarkably, the same construction occurs in Andalusi Arabic in a fifteenth-century collection of folk proverbs:

(10) Andalusi Arabic

*’ism-u*            *‘alay-ya*

name-PRO.3MSG    PREP-PRO.1SG

*wa hūwā-š*      *yi-ḡaṭṭi riḡlay-ya*

CONJ    PRO.3MSG-NEG    3-cover    legs-PRO.1SG

‘His name [is] on me but it [does] not cover my legs’<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Reinhardt notes that *Bei den auf ursprünglich lange Vocale ausgehenden Formen wird das š verdoppelt* ‘In forms based on originally long vowels, the š is doubled’.

<sup>4</sup> The meaning of this maxim becomes clear when it is compared to its modern Moroccan counterpart, in which it is the ears that are uncovered, not the legs. It is couched as spoken by a servant whose master is rich and would be expected to earn a decent salary but who laments, ‘It does not even cover my ears’ (Wilmsen 2014, 70).

Another instance of pronominal negation in Andalusī Arabic appears around a half century earlier in a *kharja*, a genre of colloquial poetry, usually involving lovers' complaints, which gives voice to this lament and warning:

## (11) Andalusī Arabic

*qāl li-y man rā-k*

said.3MSG PREP-PRO.1SG PRO saw.3MSG- PRO.2SG

*wa lis min asrā-k*

CONJ NEG PREP captives-PRO.2SG

*mira iyyāk yā nāẓir iyyāk 'anī-š na-dri*

look.3MSG beware VOC viewer beware PRO.1SG-NEG 1SG-know

'He said to me, "Who has seen you and is not among your captives? Look, [but] beware, O you who look, beware. I know not"'

It is possible to interpret these negators as rhetorical polar interrogatives of the type that are common in spoken Arabic, in which a question is used to negate a presupposition, as in the common Levantine Arabic expression (see discussion in Wilmsen 2014, 75–81):

## (12) Levantine Arabic

*šū b-ya-ʿrif-ni*

Q DUR-3-inform-PRO.1SG

'What do I know?' [lit. 'What informs me?'] = 'I don't know'

As such, the negations in (10) and especially (11) can be understood as rhetorical questions 'Do I know? [what might happen to you if you look?]'.

Remarkably, personal pronouns with enclitic *-š* also function as polar interrogatives in Maltese.

## 1.2. Polar Interrogative *-x* in Maltese

Polar interrogative pronominals in Maltese have been documented from some of the early grammars of the language, Vassalli's *Grammatica della Lingua Maltese* (1827, 142), Vella's *Maltese Grammar for the Use of the English* (1831, 249–51), and Sutcliffe's *A Grammar of the Maltese Language* (1936, 211). Indeed, according to these sources and to later descriptions of the language, an enclitic *-š* may also be attached to other parts of speech to form a polar interrogative. Vella (1834, 249) actually misstates the matter in his grammar for the English: “In our interrogative phrases, we affix *x* [*š*] to the end of the verb.” It is *polar* interrogatives that are so formed, and the *-x* is affixed to other parts of speech as well, notably pronouns. Following his initial statement, Vella does give an example of a perfective verb phrase, ‘Have you eaten?’, which he writes as *Chiltux?* Immediately following that, he gives what he calls ‘Conjugation of an interrogative verb’, giving the pronominal paradigm in Table 2.

Table 2: Vella's (1834, 249) pronominal polar interrogative paradigm

<i>Jieniex?</i>	Am I?	<i>Ah'niex?</i>	Are we?
<i>Intix?</i>	Art thou?	<i>Intomx?</i>	Are you?
<i>Hujex?</i>	Is he?	<i>Humiex?</i>	Are they?
<i>Hijiex</i>	Is she?		

Vella gives but one example of a sentence with a pronominal polar interrogative:

(13) Maltese

*Intomx tah'seb fuku*

'Do you think of it?' (Vella 1831, 251)

He does, however, provide a complete paradigm for the verb 'to be' in the past tense and the future.<sup>5</sup> He also gives examples of a few other verbs (Vella 1834, 250–51), noting further that negating any of these constructions involves *ma*:

(14a) Maltese

Affirmative

*Th'obbnix?*

'Do you love me?' (Vella 1831, 251)

(14b) Negated

*Ma th'obbnix int?*

'Do you not love me?' (Vella 1831, 252)

Notice that even with the negator, the question remains a polar interrogative. By the time Sutcliffe was writing about Maltese, a full century after Vassalli and Vella, polar interrogative -š had become optional, as is evidenced by his explanation that "an interrogation is *frequently* indicated by the addition of the particle -x" (Sutcliffe 1936, 211, emphasis added). Some sixty years after Sutcliffe, in their grammar of Maltese, Borg and Azzopardi (1997, 3–4) document a further delimiting of usage, such that neutral yes–no questions, as they call them, "are characterized by a rising

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<sup>5</sup> Vassalli (1827, 1420) gives the paradigm, too, using a script of his own invention to indicate the sound [š], but his examples of usage are all verbs, including *geuš?* 'sono eglino venuti?', *mortuš?* 'siete andati?', *kyltš?* 'hai mangiato?'.

intonation contour,” but that it is possible to add what they call “the negative suffix *-x* to the verb,” giving the example *Frìgtux min l-forn* ‘Did you take it out of the oven?’. According to them, it also functions as a tag, and as an obligatory element of indirect questions in the invariable third-person pronoun *hux* meaning ‘is it?’.

The reality is more complex. An examination of a Maltese corpus (Wilmsen 2016a) shows that any of the personal pronouns may be used in indirect questions and that they may continue to pose direct polar questions as well:

(15a) Maltese

Pronominal interrogative in indirect question

*Ma n-af-x intom-x aware minn-u*

not 1SG-know-NEG you(PL)-Q aware PREP-it

‘I don’t know if you are aware of it’ (Wilmsen 2016a, 182)

(15b) Maltese

Pronominal interrogative in direct question with tag

*Inti-x ta-ra hux*

you.SG-Q 2-see Q

‘You do see, don’t you?’ (Wilmsen 2016a, 185)

Here, the tag *hux* retains the quality of a negator, meaning something like ‘is it not?’ and, indeed, other such pronominal constructions must be interpreted as negators:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See the detailed discussion of negator and interrogative *-x* in Wilmsen (2014, 90–101) and Wilmsen (2016a).

*Bħala poplu nistgħu naffordjaw li nħaddnu l-abort, id-divorzju, il-konsumiżmu u l-egoiżmu? Humiex dawn il-perċimeż għad-diżażtri spiritwali li jeżiżtu f' pajjiżna?*

As a people, can we afford to embrace abortion, divorce, consumerism, and selfishness? *Are these not precursors to the spiritual disasters in our country?*

(16) Maltese

*Humie-x? dawn il-perċimeż għa-d-diżażtri spiritwali*

they.are-NEG these the-precursors PREP-the-disasters spiritual

‘[Are] these not precursors to the spiritual disasters?’

(Wilmsen 2016a, 185)

Many Arabic dialects also exhibit a polar interrogative *šī*, and some Moroccan Arabic dialects use *wāš*, surely an analogue of the Maltese *hux/huix* (Procházka and Dallaji 2020, 234). It is evidently an archaic feature dating back at least to Andalusī Arabic and probably earlier.

### 1.3. Polar Interrogative *šī* in Arabic

Reinhardt (1894, 16, 32) specifically identifies what he calls *fragenden šy* ‘question [marker] *šī*’ and *die Frage verstärkende šī* ‘the question reinforcer *šī*’ in the Omani Arabic of the late nineteenth century, a function that it retains to the present day in the dialects that Reinhardt describes.

(17a) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

*šrub-ti t̄āse qahwe waħdā-šī llē*

drunk-2SG cup coffee one-PQ ADV

‘[Did] you drink one cup of coffee only?’ (Reinhardt 1894, 136)

(17b) Omani Arabic (twenty-first century)

*waǧaʿ šay fi idē-š*

pain PQ PREP hands-PRO.FSG

‘[Is there] pain in your (f)<sup>7</sup> hands?’ (Holes 2016, 27)

The same polar interrogative is so common in Levantine dialects of Arabic as to be a hallmark feature.

(18a) Levantine Arabic

*hāsis bi waǧaʿ šī*

feel.PCPT PREP pain PQ

‘[Are you] feeling pain?’ (own data)

(18b) Levantine Arabic

*ʿāmil-ik šī ǧarba šī*

do.PCPT-PRO.2FSG QUANT blow PQ

‘[Has he] struck you any blow?’ (own data)

The first *šī* in (18b) is what has variously been called a partitive (Wilmsen 2014, 51–53), a distributive (Holes 2016, 113), a quantifier (Vanhove 2009), or all three (Wilmsen 2017), corresponding to the English ‘some, any’, ‘certain’, ‘about/approximately’, and even the indefinite determiner ‘a’. That, too, is a feature of the bundle in Maltese.

#### 1.4. Quantifier *šī* in Maltese and Arabic

In an exploration of the same phenomenon in Maltese, Vanhove (2009) undertakes an in-depth analysis of its various functions, providing numerous examples (see also Wilmsen 2017, 292–97).

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<sup>7</sup> The *-š* in *idē-š* is a palatisation of the second-person possessive feminine pronoun *-ik* ‘yours.’

(19a) Maltese

*Irrid xi bellus fin*

I want some velvet delicate

‘I want some delicate velvet’ (Vanhove 2009, 22)

(19b) Maltese

*Meta kien jara xi għasfura*

when he was he sees some bird

‘Whenever he saw a bird’ (Vanhove 2009, 22)

In example (19b), she glosses *xi* as ‘some’, but she translates it as the indefinite article ‘a’ with no inconsistency, as indefinite pronouns and indefinite determiners overlap in meaning. As she observes, “the quantifier *xi* refers to part of a subset of a class and does not pick out the individuals of which it is made up” (Vanhove 2009, 25). This is almost identical to the way Holes (2016, 132) defines what he calls distributives, of which Arabic *šī* is one, as “as denoting ‘particular ones from a large group’, each defined by some characteristic.” This is essentially the same definition as that for partitives (Wilmsen 2014, 51–52).

Hence, Vanhove (2009, 25): “Like in Moroccan Arabic, depending on the context or the extra-linguistic situation, *xi* may highlight more a value of quantitative determination, meaning ‘some, a certain number’.”

(20) Maltese

*xi nies kienu jużawhom*

some people they were they use them

‘Some people would use them’ (Vanhove 2009, 25)

Notably, *xi* can indicate an approximation of numerical values:

## (21) Maltese

*kien hemm xi mitejn ruh jisimgħu*

was there some hundred.DU soul they listen

‘There were about two hundred people listening’ (Vanhove 2009, 27)

Notice that, in all these examples, the range of meanings is somewhat interchangeable: ‘a certain amount of velvet’, ‘he saw some bird’, ‘certain people use them’, and ‘some two hundred people’.

Vanhove provides a convenient summary of the range of values of quantifier *xi* in Maltese, modified here as Table 3.

Table 3: Vanhove’s (2009, 32) values of quantifier *xi*

semantic value	syntax
possible element of a class: ‘some’	<i>xi</i> + sg. noun
indefinite article	<i>xi</i> + sg. noun
subset of a class: ‘certain’	<i>xi</i> + pl. noun
quantitative approximation: ‘about’	<i>xi</i> + numerals
indefiniteness of noun: ‘some’	<i>xi</i> + numerals

These are the same values quantifier *šī* expresses in the various Arabic dialects in which it occurs. Among these is Levantine Arabic, in which, as with polar interrogative *šī*, quantifier *šī* is a hallmark feature, and, as in Maltese, can be interpreted as expressing a range of values, as a quantitative, an indefinite determiner, a distributive or partitive, and an approximator.

## (22a) Levantine Arabic

*b-t-axd-i šī dawā li-l-ğudda?*

DUR-2-take-FSG QUANT medicine PREP-DET-gland

‘[Do] you take a/any/some medicine for the thyroid?’ (own data)

## (22b) Levantine Arabic

*y-kūn fī šī xabar ‘an-hum yi-farriḥ*

3-be EXIST QUANT news PREP-PRO.3PL 3-gladden

*’alb ahālī-hum*

heart families-PRO.3PL

‘There may be any/some news about them to gladden the hearts of their families’ (own data)

## (22c) Levantine Arabic

*naṭar-t šī xamas da’āyi’ wa mā ḥadā ajā*

waited-1SG QUANT five minutes CONJ NEG one came

‘I waited about/some five minutes, and no one came’ (own data)

The same usage is documented in Omani Arabic from the nineteenth century to the present.

## (23a) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

*fī-l-bistān šay sēbö’ šegrāt tāmrat*

PREP-DET-garden QUANT seven trees fruiting

‘In the garden [there are] some seven fruiting trees’ (Reinhardt 1894, 69)

## (23b) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

*e-lqa šay xlāf mekān*

1SG-find QUANT afterwards place

‘I’ll find some place later’ (Reinhardt 1894, 291)

## (23c) Omani Arabic (twenty-first century)

*lo kān ‘and-i šē flūs*

if was-3MSG to-me some money

‘If I had some money’ (Davey 2016, 207)

In Omani Arabic too, quantitative *šay* is amenable to alternative readings: ‘In the garden there are *about* seven trees’, ‘I’ll find a place later’, ‘If I had *any* money’.

These similarities in function and semantic values are unlikely to have arisen independently in the widely disbursed Arabic sister varieties where they appear. They point in the direction of a common origin in the southern Arabian Peninsula, reaching their dispersal points at various times in the prehistory and sparsely documented history of the migrations of Arabic speakers throughout the Arabian Peninsula, including the Fertile Crescent, and the Mediterranean Basin. It is likely that the bundle of features shared amongst Maltese, Levantine Arabic, and southern peninsular Arabic, represented by Omani Arabic but not restricted to the geographical boundaries of the modern Sultanate of Oman, predates the Islamic era. It happens that the so-called ‘Modern’ South Arabian languages, the ancestor or ancestors of which are undoubtedly older than the so-called Old South Arabian languages, exhibit the same bundle of features as their Arabic and Arabic-derived sisters.

## 2.0. A South Arabian Analogue

The extant South Arabian languages, the so-called ‘Modern’ South Arabian languages, possess an analogue of Arabic *šī* (Simone-Senelle 1997, 419) realised with a lateral fricative [ʃ], which is traditionally represented as [š] in writings about Semitic languages.

The current homeland of the Modern South Arabian languages is delimited to an area of southern Oman and the southeastern Yemen, as well as the island of Socotra off the southern coast of the Yemen, but their traditional territories likely encompassed a large part of southeastern Arabia before the Islamic era. The largest and best studied of the Modern South Arabian languages is Mehri, with an estimated current population of some one hundred thousand speakers.

### 2.1. Quantifier *šī* in Mehri

One of the most frequent uses of the grammatical particle *šī* in Mehri is as a quantifier (Wilmsen 2022a, 633–37 and 661–62)

(24a) Mehri

*šī-hām šī ša‘ār wli šī šī-hām kṣāb*

PREP-PRO.3MPL QUANT hay CONJ QUANT PREP- PRO.3MPL straw

‘They have some hay or they have some straw’ (Sima 2009, 292)

(24b) Mehri

*t-axxarij šī šāhlit thām arba‘*

2MSL-extract QUANT three charcoal four

‘You take out three [or] four [pieces of] charcoal’ (Sima 2009, 312)

### 2.2. Polar Interrogative *šī* in Mehri

Less common is the use of *šī* as a polar interrogative (Watson 2012, 241; Wilmsen 2022a, 639–40, 662), but when it does occur, it mirrors Arabic usage.

(25) Mehri

*šū-k mḥanēt šī*

PREP-2MSG problem Q

‘You have a problem?’ (Watson 2012, 241)

## 2.2. Negations with *šī* in Mehri

The Modern South Arabian languages negate with a reflex of the common Semitic negator *lā* (Sjörs 2018), but they are unusual amongst their Semitic sisters in that standard (that is to say verbal) negation is usually performed by a post-positioned *lā̄*.<sup>8</sup> Negations are often associated with an adjunct *šī*, when they take the configuration V + *šī* + *lā̄*, V + *šī* + N + *lā̄*, or N + *šī* + *lā̄*.

(26a) Mehri

*y-ḥasrām hēh lā̄*

3-guard PRO.3MSG NEG

‘They don’t guard it’ (Sima 2009, 298)

(26b) Mehri

*nā-wokfān šī lā̄*

1PL-stop ADJ NEG

‘We [do] not stop’ (Sima 2009, 516)

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<sup>8</sup> Watson (2012, 310–37) gives a detailed explanation of negation in Mehri, noting that the negated element is often, although not always, preceded by an anticipatory negator *al-* or *l-*, which pertains to the discussion below.

(26c) Mehri

*n-ḥōmal śī kṣāb lā*

1PL-carry ADJ straw NEG

‘We [do] not carry straw’ (Sima 2009, 446)

### 3.0. Discussion: On Cycles and Contacts

Analysing the similarities in negation between Mehri and Arabic varieties, including Maltese, requires interpretation. Recall that those spoken Arabic varieties that use the common Semitic *lā* generally restrict it to prohibitives, undertaking standard negation with *mā*, which is itself unusual in Semitic languages (Sjörs 2018, 242–49, 395–96), and some of them, including Maltese, affix *š(i)* to the end of the verb.

#### 3.1. A Jespersen Cycle in Arabic?

The prevailing opinion in Arabic dialectology is that negation with post-positioned *-šī* or reflexes thereof constitutes a stage of a cycle that is operable in standard negation, dubbed the Jespersen cycle after the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, who proposed that, over the life of a language, as verbal negations become associated with adjuncts, such as *pas* ‘step’ in French (the characteristic example), those adjuncts may eventually overtake the entire process of negation (Lucas 2007, 398–400). Although the assumption has long been that negation in the Arabic dialects resembles that in French, the Arabic phenomena were not specifically identified as a Jespersen cycle until Lucas (2007) named them as such.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Watson (2012, 310–11) embraces the notion as applying to *al + v + (šī) + lā* negations where they occur in Mehri.

It is unnecessary here to outline the dynamics of the cycle as it is assumed to operate in Arabic in depth, because its contours have by now become thoroughly familiar in the discourse of Arabic dialectology, as recently summarised by Diem (2014, 100–2), who expresses some reservations about it. In brief, it is said in Arabic to follow an arc from negation with *mā* alone, through negation augmented with the adjunct *š(i)*, to negation with *š(i)* alone, as follows:

Stage I: *mā* + v > Stage II: *mā* + v + *š(i)* > Stage III: v + *š(i)*

Amongst themselves, Arabic varieties do exhibit all these forms of standard negation, some exhibiting all of them together. Palestinian Arabic is held to be the characteristic example of this latter type (Lucas 2010), but the reality is that it occurs throughout Levantine varieties of Arabic in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine (see discussion and references in Khairallah 2014, 25–37). The following are all from a northern Lebanese dialect of Arabic, the mountain village dialect of Zeitoun, about an hour's drive north of Beirut:

(27a) Northern Lebanese Arabic (Zeitoun)

*mā šil-nā-hon*

NEG lift/carry/take1PL-PRO.3PL

(27b) Northern Lebanese Arabic (Zeitoun)

*mā šil-nā-hon-š*

NEG lift/carry/take1PL-PRO.3PL-NEG

'We [did] not take them' (Khairallah 2014, 42)

It is notable that the prohibitive in the spoken Arabic of Zeitoun may be formed by an enclitic *-š* in the same configuration as the

Maltese prohibitive, but it may also be formed without the second-person marker *t*.

(28a) Northern Lebanese Arabic (Zeitoun)

*tī-ns-ī-š*      *amīšt-ik*

2-forget-FSG-PRH shirt-PRO.2FSG

‘Don’t forget your shirt’ (Khairallah 2014, 46)

(28b) Northern Lebanese Arabic (Zeitoun)

*xāf-ī-š*      ‘a *Maureen*

scared-FSG-PRH PREP personal name

‘Don’t worry about Maureen’ (Khairallah 2014, 46)

Verbs in both the imperfective and the perfective may also be negated with an enclitic *-šī* alone (Khairallah 2014, 29–30, 46–47).

In the context of a Jespersen cycle, the variability in this dialect would be interpreted as exhibiting a transitional stage between negation with a preposed element alone and negation with a postposed element alone. Indeed, it is taken as *prima facie* evidence of the working of the cycle in Arabic. In that regard, Reinhardt’s presentation of negation in the Omani Arabic of the late nineteenth century presents something of a conundrum. He documents only two types of negation: either with *mā* or *lā* alone or with enclitic *-šī* alone (Reinhardt 1894, 137):<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lucas (2007, 403) misreads Reinhardt as representing Omani Arabic as negating with the discontinuous *mā + v + š(i)*: “A stage II construction is (generally speaking) the unmarked structure for expressing sentential negation in Arabic varieties spoken... in parts of Oman and on Zanzibar.”

*Das Zeitwort wird verneint 1. durch mā oder lā. Das erstere steht vor dem Perfect [sic] und Imperfect, des letztere nur vor dem Imperfect; 2. durch angehängtes šī.*

The verb is negated 1. by *mā* or *lā*. The former comes before the perfect and imperfect, the latter only before the imperfect; 2. by added *šī*.

For example:

(29a) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

*mā tü-fhem h-al-keḷām*

NEG 2-understand DEM-DET-talk

‘You [do] not understand this talk’ (Reinhardt 1894, 145)

(29b) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

*hādā il-xaṭṭ yu-n-qri-šī*

NEG DET-handwriting DEM-DET-talk

‘This handwriting [is] not read’ [= ‘cannot be read’] (Reinhardt 1894, 231)

Had negation with enclitic *-šī* alone been the end state of a Jespersen cycle in Omani Arabic, remnants of an intermediary stage II, exhibiting the bipartite construction *mā + v + š(i)*, would be expected. But there are none. So, too, might it be expected that all but a few remnants of negation with a preposed *mā* would have vanished. Instead, it is negation with enclitic *-šī* that has largely vanished, leaving a few relicts behind, and negation with *mā* that predominates. This change has apparently come about through contact with an inter-regional Arabian Gulf idiom to which the dialects of Oman are gradually succumbing (Holes

2012, 245; Morano 2022, 250), a process that would be external to and disruptive of the operation of a Jespersen cycle.<sup>11</sup>

Be that as it may, Reinhardt's documentation of negation effectuated solely with enclitic *-šī* in a variety or varieties of Omani Arabic of the nineteenth century, with no trace of a presumed intermediary stage of a Jespersen cycle, might be interpreted as indicating that the cycle had proceeded to a stage III in so remote a past that relicts of an intermediate stage had long since disappeared from the dialect(s). This explanation would leave the stages of a Jespersen cycle in other Arabic dialects as requiring further explication.

The hypothesis that stages II and III of a Jespersen cycle arose in or around the Mediterranean multiple times independently and relatively late and spread to Oman by means of trade (Lucas 2007, 415) is uncongenial. It is highly unlikely that a feature that is so similar across the Arabic dialects in which it appears arose independently over and over again. Owens (2006, 156) maintains that in historical linguistics of Arabic, "unless the high degree of similarity is due to chance independent development, it has to be assumed that the similar contemporary populations must have at one time shared a common ancestor." As for the feature spreading to Oman by way of coastal entrepôts (Lucas 2007, 215–16), Reinhardt describes dialect(s) from the interior, which in his day would have been remote from the coast and

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<sup>11</sup> Diem (2014, 102) suggests that a completion of the cycle might involve a return to negation with *mā* alone. Compare Watson and Rowlett (2012, 207), who propose that Mehri is "showing signs of moving to a stage I."

singularly isolated, although they are nowadays reachable from Muscat by paved roads within about an hour and a half (Holes 2012, 241).

### 3.2. Contact Phenomena—Which Way?

Recent work with Mehri (Wilmsen 2022a; Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2022–2023) suggests that negation with enclitic *šī* may well have come into the Arabic dialects of southern Arabia through contact with ancestors to the Modern South Arabian languages. It happens that Lucas (2020, 653–60) partly agrees with this, regarding the stages of a Jespersen cycle arising where they did in Arabic as a contact phenomenon. He identifies five contact languages, the speakers of which are and indeed have been in contact with Arabic: Berber varieties, with a bipartite structure *ul... kra*; Coptic, whose negators are *en... an*; Domari, with negators *n... e'*; Kumsari with a sole post-positioned *...na*; and, tellingly, Modern South Arabian, which may sometimes negate with *al ...la?* There are complicating circumstances, which Lucas acknowledges, with the languages in question mutually reinforcing their respective negation patterns.

Regardless, assuming five separate contacts as motivating a Jespersen cycle in Arabic is problematic. If contact really were the motivator for the development of bipartite negation in Arabic, the dialects utilising bipartite negation or negation with an enclitic *-š(i)* will not have arrived at those stages—or more correctly *states*—by undergoing cyclic change but by coming into contact with languages that exhibit those states. What is more, it is unlikely that all varieties in which bipartite negation or enclitic

negation occurs will have converged upon the same enclitic  $-š(i)$ , when none of the negative enclitic negators of the contact languages resembles it. It also assumes that the contact in southern Arabia must have taken place after the beginning of the Islamic era.

In this regard, Lucas (2020, 655) envisions a mechanism by which speakers of Modern South Arabian languages will have imposed a bipartite construction on Arabic, their second language, by reanalysing a presumably borrowed Arabic  $šī/šay$  as a negator. Aside from the fact that  $šī$  is not a negator in Modern South Arabian languages, there is new evidence for Arabic speakers living close to or amongst speakers of languages ancestral to the Modern South Arabian languages in the centuries before the Islamic era (Wilmsen 2022a, 646–48). This provides a deeper diachrony for contact-induced change to appear and a simpler mechanism for a borrowing to occur.

Arabic speakers who were in the habit of negating with  $mā$  alone, when hearing negation in Modern South Arabian languages with  $v + šī + lā̄$  and  $v + šī + N + lā̄$ , could easily have misinterpreted  $šī$  as the verbal negator, with  $lā̄$ , derived from a common Semitic negator that they both share, as a pro-sentential negator placed at the end of the utterance for emphasis. Hearing things thus, they could have adopted  $šī$ , which they would have realised as  $šī$ , as an alternative negation pattern to their native  $mā$ .<sup>12</sup> This would explain the presence of the enclitic  $-šī$  negator

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<sup>12</sup> An indication that  $šī$  is a borrowing into Arabic is that Modern South Arabian Languages possess  $[š]$  as well as  $[š̄]$ , whereas Arabic has  $[š]$  only (Wilmsen 2022a, 645).

with verbs in the Omani Arabic of the nineteenth century: it was a feature incorporated into Omani Arabic, and, indeed, other Arabic varieties of the southern Arabian Peninsula, where similar features are attested (Wilmsen 2022a, 652), by exposure to languages ancestral to the Modern South Arabian languages.

This in turn can explain the otherwise extraordinarily odd negation patterns in nineteenth-century Omani Arabic, which, according to Reinhardt's attestations, can negate anything with an enclitic *šī* (see also Morano 2022, 247–48). This type of negation is so vanishingly rare in other varieties of Arabic as to be nonexistent. In Modern South Arabian languages, on the other hand, for whatever reason, the negator may often be paired with an adjunct *šī* to form *šī lā̄*, which appears at the end of the sentence, adjacent to any part of speech. Watson (2012, 310) observes, "the main *l*-based negative particle generally follows the whole proposition even where the negated term is the initial element." In such constructions, it is difficult to assess the intended meaning of *šī*, but *šī lā̄* constructions are, nevertheless, common in Mehri.

(30a) Mehri

*lākan lyōmāh y-nāf'am māt šī lā̄*

but DEM 3-benefit PREP ADJ NEG

'But these are of no use' (Sima 2009, 58)

(30b) Mehri

*y-ḥōkam ḥābū šī lā̄*

3-judge people ADJ NEG

'People [did] not judge' (Sima 2009, 250)

### 3.3. Original Modern South Arabian *šī*

Quite possibly the original function of Modern South Arabian *šī* was as an existential particle, bearing a meaning analogous to English ‘there is/was’ (Wilmsen 2022a, 648–56). In Mehri, *N + šī lā* and *šī + N + lā* constructions are often existential negations.

(31a) Mehri

*xadmāt šī lā*  
work      EXIST NEG

(31b) Mehri

*šī xadmāt lā*  
EXIST work      NEG

‘There was no work’ (Sima 2009, 422)

Less often, *šī* appears in affirmative existential predications.

(32) Mehri

*šī xarrayt būmäh*  
EXIST hole      DEM

‘There [is a] hole here’ (Sima 2009, 156)

Omani Arabic and other dialects of the southern Arabian Peninsula have an exact analogue, realised variably as *šay*, *šē*, or *šī* (Davey 2016, 171, 180, 223; Holes 2016, 24–26). Reinhardt attested it in the Omani Arabic of his day, and it was attested in all dialects of the southern and eastern Arabian Peninsula soon afterwards (see discussion and references in Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2022–2023).

## (33a) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

*mā šay yi-ṭlaʿ ʿan-i minn-he ʾlle rabb-i*

NEG EXIST 3-elevate PREP-PRO.1SG PREP-PRO.3MSG PREP lord-PRO.1SG

‘There [is] not [anyone to] lift from me from it except my Lord’ (Reinhardt 1894, 297)

## (33b) Omani Arabic (nineteenth century)

*šay baʿdo tāife saġīra*

EXIST ADV tribe small

‘There [is] still [a] small tribe’ (Reinhardt 1894, 423)

It is worth noting that Reinhardt attests *mā šī* less often than the odd construction *šīšī*, comprising both an existential particle *šī* and a negator *šī*. This is the negative existential that Morano (2022, 252) reports as surviving in modern interior dialects of Oman.

## (34) Omani Arabic (twenty-first century)

*šī šī šay hnā*

EXIST NEG CONJ DET

‘There [is] nothing here’ (Morano 2022, 252)

The more common negative existential throughout the Omani Arabic of the twenty-first century is *mā šī*, which Reinhardt (1894, 30) also attests.

## (35) Omani Arabic (twenty-first century)

*šay šāy wallā mā šī*

EXIST tea CONJ NEG EXIST

‘[Is] there tea or [is] there not?’ (Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2022–2023, 100)

It is also worth noting that the perception is that *mā šay/šē/šī* is less common than *mā fī*, but recent work shows the opposite. Affirmative existential predications are more common with *fī*, but their negations are more common with *mā šī* (Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2022–2023, 100–2).

The reasons for this are of little relevance to the matter at hand (see the discussion in Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2022–2023, 102–3). More relevant is that an existential particle *šay/šē/šī* is highly unusual in Arabic, almost entirely restricted to the varieties of the southern peninsula, in the dialects of the Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. This is perhaps the best indicator that it and the bundle of features associated with it are original to the Modern South Arabian languages, or, more precisely, to their ancestor or ancestors, and that it and they were adopted by Arabic speakers resident in the same areas of the southern Arabian Peninsula in which the ancestors to the Modern South Arabian speaking peoples lived.

Relevant, too, is that a polar interrogative and partitive or quantifier *šay/šē/šī* can derive from the existential, by way of a tag question ‘is it?’, and a subjunctive ‘be it’ (Wilmsen and Al-Taei 2022–2023, 97, 109).

#### 4.0. Closing the Cycle: Maltese Connections

Of course, existential *šī* is not part of this particular South Arabian/Lebanese bundle in Maltese, which possesses another unusual existential particle: *hemm*, meaning both ‘there’ and ‘there is/are’ (Vanhove 2009, 19–20). This is itself a feature of apparent southern peninsular origin, deriving from an archaic Arabic distal

demonstrative *tamma* ‘there’, reflexes of which are found only in writing and in spoken southern peninsular dialects of Arabic (Behnstedt 2016, 164–65). It may have come to Maltese either by way of Tunisian Arabic, which has *tamma* or *famma*, or Andalusī Arabic, which had the two as well (Institute of Islamic Studies of the University of Zaragoza 2013, 22, 106). Aside from Maltese, they are the only other Arabic varieties to use it existentially.

This, too, is a testament to the diachronic depth of Maltese, or, to put it more precisely, to the diachronic depth of features of Maltese. The earliest evidence of the use of an Arabic existential particle is, in fact, *tamma*, in Qur’ān 2:115: ‘Wherever you turn, *there* is the face of Allah’ فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَشَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ. In the other three instances of *ثمَّ* in the Qur’ān, it is unambiguously a deictic adverbial, and, indeed, it may be so interpreted here too. It is, nevertheless, unambiguously an existential form in Tunisian and Andalusī Arabic, and it may have reached Malta’s shores from either of those sources or both.

With regard to possible Andalusī sources of features of Maltese, Professor Zammit (2009–2010, 57) makes a trenchant point and sounds a cautionary note regarding the possibility of multiple sources for the Arabic matrix of Maltese:

Andalusī Arabic and Maltese had access to common and rather archaic sources of Arabic. However, they were not necessarily exposed to the same diffusion patterns, nor did they inevitably follow the same evolutionary paths. Nevertheless, in view of the role played by the Aragonese in Malta’s medieval past, and given that Andalusī Morisco elements interacted with the Maltese islands, and some even settled in these islands, one cannot exclude the eventuality

that a number of Andalusī Arabic elements must have reached Malta directly through these channels.

The bundle of features in Maltese that have evidently derived from the South Arabian *šī* may have been reinforced by input from al-Andalus or Tunisia. Tunisian Arabic does exhibit a distributive and polar interrogative *šī* (Wilmsen 2014, 111–115; 2017, 292), but they seem to be developing along their own evolutionary paths, as Professor Zammit names them. For example, the use of *šī* as a polar interrogative in Tunisian Arabic appears to be on the wane as compared to its usage from fifty years ago (Procházka and Dallaji 2020, 239). Regardless, the features of *šī* likely did come to Maltese from Tunis, and likely from Andalusī Arabic, too. Nevertheless, they are also likely to have come from the input of Levantine Arabic dialects, where reflexes of *šī* remain vital.

The Levantine Arabic dialects themselves were surely influenced by influxes of Arabic speakers from the southern peninsula. It is known that there were population pulses from the southern peninsula into the Fertile Crescent in the centuries before Islam. The same sorts of population influxes will have informed the Arabic matrix of Maltese. The Aghlabids, who entered Sicily and likely Malta from Tunisia in the ninth century, were originally from Najd, the north central plateau of the Arabian Peninsula. The Fatimids replaced the Aghlabids in North Africa and Sicily, which they ruled briefly, before appointing the Kalbids as governors of Sicily (Jiwa 2024). The Kalbids, who established an independent emirate there, and who controlled the islands for the longest period, came from Syria and in pre-Islamic times were

members of a tribal confederacy of southern peninsular origin. They were also involved in the conquest of al-Andalus.

Little is known about the Arabic of Sicily, but it should be clear from this brief review of the successive Arab dynasties to rule in Sicily that the Arabic spoken there would itself have received multiple inputs, as Manwel Mifsud (2008, 146) says of Maltese, “from different Arab stations and at different points in the island’s history.” So, too, of Maltese, which, it is generally accepted, descended from the varieties of Arabic spoken on Sicily.

The early formation of the Arabic regional dialects, too, involved contact with, and the absorption of multiple influences from, numerous varieties of Arabic. In such a situation, it is meaningless to speak of a cyclic development of bipartite or solely post-positioned negation within the language. There are too many competing influences militating against a linear progression of stages. It would have been, and likely was, a natural process for Arabic speakers in the Levant, who were accustomed to form negations with *mā* or *lā*, when encountering emigrant speakers of southern Arabian dialects negating with *mā* alone or *šī* alone, to adopt those negations and to begin applying their own *mā* to the enclitic *šī* negations that they were hearing, retaining the negation with enclitic *šī* as an alternate form.

That is as good an explanation as any for the high variability in negation forms throughout Levantine varieties of Arabic. It also goes a long way towards explaining the South Arabian and Levantine elements in Maltese.

The bundle of features derived from existential *šay/šē/šī* is found variously in varieties of Arabic outside the southern Arabian Peninsula, but only the Levantine dialects and Maltese exhibit all of them consistently. Egyptian Arabic can form an enclitic *šī* prohibitive, but apparently not as consistently as do Levantine dialects; it has a disjunctive *išī*, but one that is not otherwise used as a quantitative or partitive; and it had a polar interrogative *šī* attested in the nineteenth century (Wilmsen and Al-Sayyed 2019, 11). North African dialects of Arabic do variously retain a polar interrogative and a partitive *šī*, but no enclitic *šī* prohibitive.

## 5.0. Conclusions

Regardless of their origin, the consistency in form and function of the bundle of features of reflexes of *šī* in Levantine varieties of Arabic and of reflexes of *xi* in Maltese, along with their attestation in an Arabic variety of the southern Arabian Peninsula of the nineteenth century and their survival in the entire dialect area of the southern peninsula, do, indeed, attest to the diachronic depth of Maltese. To put it more correctly, they attest to the diachronic depth of the individual features or bundles of features of Maltese. Maltese itself cannot extend any further back in time than the ninth century, but its many Arabic elements are older. The Arabic elements of Maltese are unlikely to have a linear descent from any single Arabic variety. Professor Zammit's work with the many Arabic lexical forms of diverse origins had already suggested this.

## Abbreviations

ADJ	adjunct	NEG	negator
CONJ	conjunction	PL	plural
DEM	demonstrative	PRH	prohibitive
DET	determiner	PRO	pronoun
DU	dual	PTCP	participle
DUR	durative aspect particle	PQ	polar interrogative
EXIST	existential particle	Q	interrogative
FSG	feminine singular	QUANT	quantifier
IMP	imperative	SG	singular
MPL	masculine plural	1	1st person
MSG	masculine singular	2	2nd person
		3	3rd person

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