Functions of the dual suffix in Maltese

Edward Fenech

The dual suffix in spoken, journalistic and literary Maltese can have: (a) the function of a real dual, after countable nouns that are semantically related to time, number, weights, measures, coins, food and familiar objects, e.g. saggiejn 'two hours'; (b) the function of an empty morph, after nouns denoting parts of the body not necessarily in pair but always followed by a pronominal suffix, e.g. ghajnejha t-leminia 'her left eye' in the sense of the singular form ghajnejha t-leminia; and (c) the function of a plural allomorph, mainly in parts of the body which are in pair, e.g. xoffiejn 'lips'. The variants of the dual suffix as a real dual are two: -ejn [-ey] and -ajn [-ay]; the variants of the dual suffix as an empty morph are two: -ej [-ey], -aj [-ay] both followed by a pronominal suffix; and the variants of the dual suffix as a plural allomorph are four: -ejn and -ajn when in the construct state and in isolation without a following pronominal suffix, and -ej and -aj when followed by a pronominal suffix.

1. Introduction

The contemporary Maltese grammar functioning at the levels of the spoken and the written mediums distinguishes between the singular, the dual and the plural. Generally speaking, the singular is left unmarked as to number, but the dual and the plural are as a rule marked with morphological increments.

As the present dual suffix in Maltese has linguistic connections with both the singular and the plural, something will be said briefly about them by way of introduction. Then, later on, the functions of the dual itself will be analyzed and discussed.

2. The singular marker and non-marker

As a rule, the singular has no number marker. Here are some examples of nouns which are left unmarked for number:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>English Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ragel</td>
<td>'a man'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tifel</td>
<td>'a boy'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dar</td>
<td>'a house'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>omm</td>
<td>'a mother'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The same rule applies in the case of many adjectives. Thus there are examples such as:

- sabih ‘beautiful’
- zgbir ‘small’
- qasir ‘short’
- twil ‘long’

Then there are masculine nouns which can be turned to the feminine gender by means of the suffix -a. Thus:

- tifel ‘a boy’ + -a = tifla ‘a girl’
- sultan ‘a king’ + -a = sultana ‘a queen’

In this case, the suffix -a should be considered as a double marker, that is a marker both for the feminine and for the singular. The function of this portmanteau is still made more clear in the case of the nomina unitatis, such as:

- sigar ‘trees’ (collective) + -a = sigra ‘a tree’
- baqar ‘cows’ (collective) + -a = baqra ‘a cow’
- hagar ‘stones’ (collective) + -a = hagra ‘a stone’
- qasab ‘reeds’ (collective) + -a = qasba ‘a reed’

The feminine/singular marker -a is replaced with one of the allomorphs -t or -et when the noun involved is the first noun in the syntactic construction of the construct state:

- mara ‘a woman’ + -t = mart + Ganni ‘John’s wife’
- lejla ‘eve’ + -et = lejlet + il-Milied ‘Christmas eve’
- xuxa ‘long hair’ + -et = xutet + Sansun ‘literally, Samson’s long hair, i.e. marigold fig’.

3. The plural marker in Maltese nouns

The Plural in Maltese nouns can be classified into eight classes:

(a) the sound masculine plural, with the suffix -in, such as:

- bniedem ‘a man’, pl. bniedmin ‘men’
- mghallem ‘a master’, pl. mghallmin ‘masters’

(b) the sound feminine plural, with the suffixes -at, -iet, -ijiet, such as:

- saltma ‘kingdom’, pl. saltmiet ‘kingdoms’

(c) the plural with the suffix -a derived from the feminine singular, such as:

- haddied ‘blacksmith’, pl. haddieda ‘blacksmiths’
- hajjat ‘tailor’, pl. hajjata ‘tailors’
- naggar ‘stone-dresser’, pl. nagghara ‘stone-dressers’

This class of nouns generally can also take the sound masculine plural:

- haddied ‘blacksmith’, pl. haddidin

(d) the broken plural, involving internal changes, such as:

- ktieb ‘a book’, pl. kotba ‘books’
- sinna ‘a tooth’, pl. snien ‘teeth’
- fart ‘ox’, pl. frat ‘oxen’
- musmar ‘a nail’, pl. msiemer ‘nails’
- gniem ‘a garden’, pl. ganna ‘gardens’
- seqer ‘a falcon’, pl. isqra ‘falcons’
- differ ‘a finger or toe nail’, pl. dwiefer ‘fingers or toe nails’
- qalb ‘a heart’, pl. qlab ‘hearts’
- xitwa ‘winter’, pl. xtiwi ‘winters’

(e) the broken plural, with the suffixes -an, -ien, such as:

- qieg ‘a bottom’, pl. qieghan ‘bottoms’
- wied ‘a valley’, pl. wiedan ‘valleys’

(f) the Romance plural, with the suffix -i, such as:

- ciklun ‘cyclone’, pl. cikluni ‘cyclones’
- gurnal ‘newspaper’, pl. gurnal ‘newspapers’

(g) the English plural, with the suffix -s, such as:

- futbol ‘football’, pl. futbols ‘footballs’
- kompjuter ‘computer’, pl. kompjuters ‘computers’

(h) the plural form involving a different radical from that of the singular, such as:
Edward Fenech

mara 'a woman'; pl. nisa 'women'
lewn 'colour'; pl. kuluri 'colours'

In the case of the last example, the plural liewen is also possible, especially in Malta. The plural kuluri is very common as a popular response in Gozo.

3.1. The plural marker in Maltese adjectives and participles

The Maltese plural in the case of adjectives and participles has a more limited classification. This includes the following classes mentioned above in § 3:

(a) the sound masculine plural, with the suffix -in, such as:

hieni 'happy', pl. hienin
biezel 'industrious', pl. bezlin
ghaqlali 'wise', pl. ghaqlini

(c) the plural with the suffix -a derived from the feminine singular, such as:

rieqed 'asleep', pl. rieqda
mejjet 'dead', pl. mejta

(d) the broken plural, involving internal changes, such as:

sabih 'beautiful', pl. sbieh
ikrah 'ugly', pl. koroh
kbir 'big', pl. kbar
ghani 'rich', pl. ghonja

(f) the Romance plural, with the suffix -i, such as:

antik 'ancient', pl. antiki
krudil 'cruel', pl. krudili
baxx 'low', pl. baxxi
ekonomiku 'economic', pl. ekonomici

This list shows the following plural classes mentioned in § 2.2 above with reference to nouns which do not occur in the case of adjectives and participles:

(b) the sound feminine plural, with the suffixes -at, -iet, -ijiet;
(e) the broken plural, with the suffixes -an, -ien;
(g) the English plural, with the suffix -s; and

(h) the plural form involving a different radical from that of the singular.

3.2. The double plural in nouns

Occasionally, a plural noun can take a second plural. Thus the word wicc 'face' takes the plural ucuh and the double plural ucuhijiet 'a children's game'. Also, the noun mniexer 'nose', plural of minhtar, can take a double plural, mniexrijiet. J. Aquilina gives the forms imhra and mnihrin, but they do not occur in the idiolect of the present writer.

3.3. The quantitative 'hafna'

The quantitative hafna 'much, many' can be used before countables (e.g. hafna għalliema 'many teachers') and non-countables (hafna ilma 'much water'), before the singular and the collectives (hafna nbid 'much wine', hafna gebel 'many stones') and before the plural (hafna Indjani 'many Indians'). Sometimes it is used before nouns which do not have a plural marker or intensifier when the plural meaning is required (e.g. hafna orfni 'many orphans', hafna vergni 'many virgins', hafna xhud 'many witnesses'. One should note here that although xhud is morphologically a plural (with the hypothetical xied as its singular), it is always considered as a noun in the singular by the general Maltese speaker, but like vergni 'virgin' it can take the plural zero morpheme.

4. Three functions of the dual suffix

In modern spoken and written Maltese, the dual is marked by one of the variant suffixes -ejn, -ajn. When the noun to which they are affixed is placed at the head of a construct state, these suffixes retain their final -n, such as:

idejn Ganni "John's hands"
widnejn il-hmar "the donkey's ears"

One should note, however, that when these suffixes are followed by one of the pronominal suffixes, they lose the final -n. In this case, they are reduced to -ej- or -aj-, such as in the following examples:

idejh 'his hands'
widnejh 'his ears'
This is also true when the word to which they are affixed happens to be in the final position of the construct state, for example:

wice idejiji 'the palm of his hands'
gwienah spallejji 'his shoulder blades'

In Modern Maltese, the dual suffix has three functions: (a) that of a real dual; (b) that of an empty morph leaving the nouns semantically in the singular; and (c) that of a plural allomorph. For the sake of clarity, each of these functions will be dealt with individually.

4.1. The function of a real dual

The real dual occurs after countable nouns that are semantically related to time, number, old Maltese weights, old Maltese measures, old Maltese coins, basic food, and some familiar objects closely related to the unsophisticated man. It follows, therefore, that the real dual is limited to a small class of words indicating preciseness. The words involved in such a process are given below under the corresponding heading.

(a) Time
siegħa 'an hour',
jum 'a day',
gimgha 'a week',
xahar 'a month',
sejna 'a year',

du. sagħtejn
du. jumjejn
du. gimgħejn
du. xarhejn
du. santejn

(b) Number
darba 'once',
mija 'one hundred',
elf 'one thousand',

du. darbtejn
du. mitejn
du. elftejn

(c) Old Maltese Weights
ugija 'an ounce',
ratał 'a rotilo',
wiżna 'four kilogrammes',
qantar 'eighty kilogrammes',

du. uqijtejn
du. ratlejn
du. wiżntejn
du. qantarejn

(d) Old Maltese Measures
tomna 'tumulo',
omd 'sixteen tumoli',
wejba 'four tumoli',
hemel 'stack, 8 or 10 sheafs',
qasba 'a cane',
qatta 'a sheaf',
siegħ 'a Maltese bushel',

du. tomnejn
du. moddejn
du. wejbejn
du. hemlejn
du. qasbejn
du. qattejn
du. sighajn

(pinta 'a pint',
kejla 'a small measure for capers, etc.',

du. pintejn
du. kejlejn

(e) Old Maltese Coins
ħabba 'a grain',
rbiegha 'twenty grains',

(f) Basic Food
ħobża 'a loaf of bread',
bajda 'an egg',
gbejna 'a cheeselet',

(g) Familiar Unsophisticated Objects
demgħa 'a tear',
bicċa 'a piece',
hoħra 'a hole',
fergha 'a branch',
werqja 'a leaf',
gofa 'a wicker basket',

This list of nouns which take the real dual is limited to just above thirty examples, but even within this limit there is quite a big variety of themes including time, number, weights, measures, coins, basic food, and familiar unsophisticated objects.

There is a modern trend in Maltese which prefers the paraphrastic usage of placing the word żewġ 'two' or giex 'two' before the noun in the plural to the synthetic usage of the dual suffix as an increment to the singular form.

For this purpose all the above words were analysed to find out which of them take the dual form as an obligatory element, and which of them can take it as an option. Out of the seven thematic categories, the dual was found to be obligatory only in the case of the words denoting time and number. Thus, while one is obliged to say sagħtejn for 'two hours', jumjejn for 'two days' and mitejn for 'two hundred', one is free to say uqijtejn or żewġ uqijiet for 'two ounces', tomnejn or żewġ tomnejet for 'two tumoli', and ħbżejn or żewġ ħobżiet for 'two loaves of bread'. In the spoken language the word giex quite often replaces the word żewġ, thus:

Giex uqijiet, giex tomnejet, and giex ħobżiet.

As the dual form is obligatory only in the case of eight words denoting time and number, we can safely say that the real dual is on the way out.

This phenomenon agrees with the general trend in modern Maltese in that it is becoming more and more an isolating language.
4.2. The function of the dual suffix as an empty morph

It is clear in the above examples (§ 1.31) that the variants of the real dual were two: -ejn and -ajn. As a matter of fact, the real dual cannot take any pronoun suffix after it. When we come to the function of the dual suffix as an empty morph the situation is different.

When the dual suffix occurs as an empty morph, only two variants are permissible. These are: -ej and -aj. In other words, the dual suffix can behave as an empty morph only when followed by a pronominal suffix. Thus, in modern Maltese at the spoken level, at the journalistic level and occasionally at the literary level one finds sentences such as:

Qala' daqa' fuq widnejh ix-xellugija.
'He was hit on his left ear (literally, on his two left ears)'

L-artista ghamlet operazzjoni f'għajnejha l-leminija.
The film star had an operation in her right eye (literally, in her two right eyes)

Ghandu griznejh jughuh.
'He has a sore throat (literally, two sore throats)'

The plural pronominal suffix can also occur after the dual suffix functioning as an empty morph. Thus one can have a sentence like this:

Iż-żewg rikkieba li kienu fil-karozza meta din inqalbiet kisru idejhom.
'The two passengers who were in the car when this overturned ended up with a broken hand (literally, with their two hands broken)'

In this last example, when two hands are actually meant, the word it-tnejn 'both' is normally added for the sake of clarity:

Iż-żewg rikkieba li kienu fil-karozza meta din inqalbiet kisru idejhom it-tnejn
'The two passengers who were in the car when this overturned ended up with both hands broken'.

The fact that the dual suffix is functioning regularly as an empty morph shows that the old Maltese dual is losing ground in modern Maltese. As a matter of fact, native speakers of Maltese do not associate the suffixes -ej, and -aj, with the dual in such constructions. Although they are conscious of their existence, they consider them as non-markers with reference to number. Consequently, they look at the noun to which they are affixed as being in the singular.

4.3. The function of the dual suffix as a plural allomorph

As a general rule, one can add that the empty morph can function with any one of the words denoting parts of the body which are in pairs.

4.3.1. Parts of the body which are in pair

Most of the parts of the body which are in pair take the dual suffix with a plural meaning. The same nouns can also take the pronominal suffix after the shorter form of the dual suffix.

The nouns to be considered under this heading are given below for easy reference:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abt</td>
<td>'armpit', du. abtejn / abtejhn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bezzul</td>
<td>'breast', du. bizlejn / bizlejha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>driegh</td>
<td>'arm', du. dirghajn / dirghajh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genb</td>
<td>'side', du. genbejn / genbejhn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that the dual suffix functions as a plural allomorph in just about twenty-nine words.

With the exception of gewna, koxxa, spalla, xiber and seba' which all have a real plural, the above nouns, denoting parts of the body, take the dual suffix with a plural meaning in modern Maltese, even though some dictionaries and grammars give other hypotetic and likely forms of the plural.

5. Conclusions

It seems fairly safe to conclude that the dual suffix was used originally to carry the dual meaning, and so not only with words indicating time, numbers, old Maltese weights, old Maltese measures, old Maltese coins, basic food, and other familiar unsophisticated objects, but also with many other words referring to parts of the body which are in pairs. At a second stage, the dual suffix took the role of a plural allomorph with nouns denoting parts of the body which are in pair, and later with other parts of the body which are not in pair. Finally, in contemporary Maltese, the dual suffix took the negative function of an empty morph. This surely shows a new trend of the inflecting element of Maltese morphology related to the old dual suffix.

Address of the Author:

Department of Arabic, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, Tal-Qroqq, Msida, Malta.

References

AQUILINA, J. (1959), The Structure of Maltese, Malta, The Royal University of Malta.