Indefinite pronouns in Maltese

Martin Haspelmath & Josephine Caruana

In this paper we study the formal and functional properties of Maltese indefinite pronouns in a typological perspective. Maltese has two main series of indefinite pronouns, which we call the xi-series and the ebd-a-series. From a formal point of view, it is remarkable that the ebd-a-series consists purely of special roots, i.e. none of its members is synchronically derived from a more basic word. When used in the negative function, the ebd-a-indefinites are in complementary distribution with the second part of the discontinuous negation, much like in standard French.

1. Introduction: indefinite pronouns and their uses

In this paper we describe and discuss indefinite pronouns in Maltese and put them in a typological perspective. By indefinite pronouns, we mean expressions like *somebody, something, anybody, anything, somewhere, anytime*, etc., i.e. we do not restrict our attention to "pro-nouns" in the narrow sense (grammatical words used as NPs), but we include pronominal adverbs with similar meanings.¹

Indefinite pronouns in human languages are generally organized in series, i.e. sets of expressions that share the same semantic-syntactic functions. Each series has members representing the major ontological categories such as `person`, `thing`, `place`, `time`, `manner`, `quantity`. English, for example, has two indefinite series: the *some*-series and the *any*-series, and Romanian has the *-va*-series and the *ori*-series, shown in (1a) and (1b) respectively.

(1) (a) English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) English</th>
<th>(b) Romanian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>some-series</td>
<td>any-series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some-one</td>
<td>any-one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some-thing</td>
<td>any-thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some-where</td>
<td>any-where</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some-time</td>
<td>any-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some-how</td>
<td>any-how</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some</td>
<td>any</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both English and Romanian, all the members of a series share not only the same semantic-syntactic functions, but also a formal element:
in English, the prefixes some- and any-, and in Romanian, the suffix -va and the prefix ori-. This formal element is called INDEFINITENESS MARKER.

The conditions of use for different series of indefinite pronouns are of various types: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. The distribution of the some-series and the any-series in English is basically determined by the general rules of negative polarity, that is to say, ultimately semantic-pragmatic factors (cf. Fauconnier 1975a, 1975b), the some-series being used in affirmative polarity contexts (cf. 2), and the any-series in negative polarity contexts (cf. 3).

(2) Affirmative polarity
    Someone stole her computer.

(3) Negative polarity
    a. (negative) She didn't notice anything.
    b. (conditional) If she had seen anybody, she would have run away.
    c. (interrogative) Can she get a new one anywhere in this town?

However, a syntactic condition restricts the any-series in negated clauses to postverbal positions, making (4) ungrammatical.

(4) *Anybody will not forget it.

Moreover in some cases the distinction between the some-series and the any-series is of a pragmatic nature. For example, in conditionals the speaker uses any if he hopes that the condition is not fulfilled, but some if he hopes that it is fulfilled (cf. R. Lakoff 1969: 611).

(5) a. (I warn you that) If you eat any candy, I'll whip you.
    b. (I promise you that) If you eat some/*any spinach, I'll give you ten dollars.

Languages differ greatly in the number and kinds of distinctions they make in indefinite pronouns. However, the nine functions in (6) turn out to be relevant in many languages.

(6) specific _specific__irrealis __negation  __conditional-comparative __free-choice
    known _unknown__non-specific
    question __indirect /negation  direct

2. The forms of Maltese indefinites

Maltese has two main series of indefinite pronouns: the xi-series, and the edba-series, shown in (7). The indefinites of the xi-series all include the indefiniteness marker xi, whereas the indefinites of the edba-series do not share a common element. Besides these two series, the numeral adjective wie ed’one can also be used as an indefinite pronoun.

(7) Maltese indefinite pronoun series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>xi-series</th>
<th>edba-series</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>person</td>
<td>xi fiadd</td>
<td>fiadd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thing</td>
<td>xi hâga</td>
<td>xejn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>place</td>
<td>xi mkiex</td>
<td>imkien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>xi darba</td>
<td>qatt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manner</td>
<td>b’xi mod (u manjiera)</td>
<td>bl’ edba mod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>determiner</td>
<td>xi</td>
<td>edba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The form of the Maltese indefinite pronouns bears almost no resemblance to the form of interrogative pronouns (min ‘who?’, xi ‘what?’, fejn ‘where?’, meta ‘when?’, kif ‘how?’, liena ‘which?’). This is in contrast to the majority of the world’s languages, where indefinite pronouns are derived from interrogative pronouns by means of indefiniteness markers (cf. Ullt 1978). Romanian is typical in this respect: the indefinites in the series in (1b) are based on the interrogative pronouns cine ‘who?’, ce ‘what?’, unde ‘where?’, cind ‘when?’, etc.
English has a mixed system. Some forms are built like the Persian forms (something, sometime, anyway), others are derived from interrogative pronouns (somewhere, somehow), and yet others have their own root (somebody, anybody). Maltese is remarkable in that it has one series, the ebd-a-series, in which all the five members are formed by special roots. This phenomenon seems to be quite rare in the world’s languages.

The Maltese xi-series, on the other hand, is of the mixed type: one member, xi ftża ‘something’, is based on the general noun ftża ‘thing’; two members, xi hadd ‘somebody’ and xi mkien ‘someplace’ are based on the corresponding member of the ebd-a-series (hadd ‘nobody’, mkien ‘nowhere’); and one member is based on an adverb (darba ‘once’, xi darba ‘sometime’).

3. Functions of the xi-series

Indefinite pronouns of the xi-series are used in the specific function in realis contexts, where English uses the some-series. E.g.

(9) Xi hadd qed jaadem fil-gnien.
INDEF ANYONE PROG HE:work:IPF in-the-garden
‘Somebody is working in the garden.’

(10) It-tiefel ra xi ftża wara s-sigra.
the-boy he:see:PRF INDEF thing behind s-sigra.
‘The boy saw something behind the tree.’

The xi-series is also used in irrealis contexts like imperative sentences and complements to ‘want’, when the reference is non-specific. (Some languages use a different indefinite series here, e.g. Russian, where the non-specific -nibud’-series contrasts with the specific -to-series, cf. Padučeva 1985).

4. Functions of the ebd-a-series

Indefinites of the ebd-a-series are used in negated sentences, like English indefinites of the any- or no-series. They are more like the any-series in that the verb has to be accompanied by a negative marker, e.g.

(11) Jekk ma tafs. staqsi lil xi hadd.
if NEG you:know:IPF NEG ask:IMPV ACC INDEF anyone
‘If you don’t know, ask somebody.’

(12) Trid tizzewwax li xi hadd b’xaghrtu iswed.
shewant:IPF she:marry:IPF ACC INDEF anyone with-his hair black
‘She wants to marry someone (non-specific) with black hair.’

(13) Xi darba is-sena d-dieilha mmur l-Afrxka.
INDEF time the-year the-entering Igo:IPF the-Africa
‘I’ll go to Africa sometime next year.’

Finally, the xi-series is also used in negative-polarity contexts like conditional clauses and interrogative sentences, where English generally uses its any-series.

(14) Jekk tara xi ftża, ghidli.
you:see:IPF INDEF thing tell:time:IPV
‘If you see anything, tell me.’

(15) Rajt xi ftża?
you:see:PRF INDEF thing
‘Did you see anything?’

However, the ebd-a-series is inherently negative in that it can be used in elliptical negative answers to parametric (i.e. “wh-“) questions. This test for the negative status of an indefinite series was developed in Bernini & Ramat (1992). E.g.

(16) a. It-tifla ma rat xejn.
the-girl NEG she:see:PRF anything
‘The girl didn’t see anything.’ (= “The girl saw nothing.”)

b. Ma se nitlaqha qatt.
NEG FUT I:leave:her:IPF ever
‘I will never leave her.’

c. Ma kelll ebd-a mistrieh.
NEG I:have:PRF any rest
‘I did not have any rest.’
The *ebda* series also contrasts with the English *any*-series in that it cooccurs only with the preverbal negation. Standard verbal negation in Maltese consists of two elements, as in the French *ne...pas*. In Maltese the particle *ma* precedes the verb and the suffix -x attaches to it.

Further evidence of the negative status of the *ebda*-series and its contrast to the *any*-series is that when a pronoun of the *ebda*-series is present in a negative clause, the preverbal negative particle is retained but the suffix -x is dropped, again as in French (compare (16a) above with French *La fille n’a rien vu*). ²

In contrast to the English *any*-series, but like the French *aucun*-series, a pronoun of the *ebda*-series may occupy a pre-verbal position, e.g.

(19) a. Hadd ma qalli xejn.
   anyone NEG he:tell:me:PRF anything
   ‘Nobody told me anything.’

b. Qatt ma jiġri xejn f’dan ir-rahal.
   ever NEG it:happen:IPF anything in-this the-village
   ‘Nothing ever happens in this village’.

And an *ebda*-indefinite may also occur in a subordinate clause when the pre-verbal negation is on a superordinate verb: ²

(20) a. Ma naxseb li gie hadd.
    NEG I:think:IPF that he:come:PRF anyone
    ‘I don’t think that anyone came.’

b. Ma ried li ġjun jaf hadd.
    NEG he:want:PRF that he:be:IPF he:know:IPF anyone
    ‘He did not want that any man should know it.’ (Mk 9.30)

The negation does not even have to be of the ordinary verbal kind. It may be the negative preposition *mingħajr* (or *bla*) ‘without’, e.g.

(21) It-tifla għamliża mingħajr ebdə ghajnuna.
    the-girl she:do:PRF without *ebda* without
    ‘The girl did it without any help.’

Or the negation may be implicit in a ‘before’ clause:

(22) Kien jaf x’ gara qabel ma hadd hebe:prf hekno:IMPF what it:happen:PRF before that anyone qallu.
    hekno:him:PRF
    ‘He knew what had happened before anyone told him.’

*Ebdə*-indefinites may also occur in the standard of comparison, or in the qualifying relative clause of a superlative expression:

(23) Dan huwa l-ibbah inkwatra li hadd qatt
    this it the-beautiful:comp picture that anyone ever
    he:paint:PRF
    ‘This is the most beautiful painting that anyone has ever painted.’

There is one member of the *ebda*-series that behaves somewhat differently, namely *qatt ‘ever’. This word can also be used in conditionals and questions, where otherwise indefinites of the *xi*-series are used.

(24) a. Jekk qatt tigi Londra, eja arani.
    if ever you:come:IPF London come:MPV see:MPV
    ‘If you ever come to London, come and see me.’

b. Qatt mort Londra?
    ever you:go:PRF London
    ‘Have you ever been to London?’

The corresponding sentences with other members of the *ebda*-series are ungrammatical, e.g. *hadd mar Londra? ‘Has anyone been to London?’

5. The indefinite pronoun *wied ‘one, someone’*

In addition to the two indefinite series discussed in the previous sections, there is one important indefinite expression that must be mentioned in this context, namely *wied* (m.)/ *waħda* (f.) ‘one’. This is originally a numeral adjective, but like ‘one’ expressions in many other
languages, it can also be used as an indefinite pronoun and as an
indefinite article, though in Maltese this is restricted to nouns denoting
human beings. This makes it very similar in meaning to *ix hadd*:

(25) Tkelimit ma *więked* il-hierah fuq il-karrozza tal-linija.
Italk:PRF with one the-yesterday on the-car of the-line
‘I talked to someone yesterday on the bus.’

But there is a subtle difference in meaning between *więked* and *ix hadd*. *Więked* refers to a specific person or one who is known to the
speaker (but whose identity is irrelevant or is not revealed for other
reasons), and *ix hadd* refers to an unknown person or to a non-specific
person. In realis contexts, the reference must be specific, so the relevant
contrast is ‘known to the speaker/unknown to the speaker’. This can be
nicely illustrated by the following two sentences from the New Testa-
ment:

(26) Qallu Ganni: “Mghallam, rajna *więked* johrog
hetell:him:PRF John master wesec:PRF one hetthrow:IPF
ix-xijen fismek.” (Mt 9.38)
the-devils in-your:name
‘John said to him: “Master, we saw someone casting out devils in thy
name.”’

(27) Qal Gesù: “Messni *ix* hadd,
hesay:PRF Jesus hetouch:me:PRF INDEF anyone
ghax hassejt qawwa hierga minni.” (Lk 8.46)
because I feel:PRF strength going.out from:me
‘Jesus said: “Somebody hath touched me: for I perceive that virtue is
gone out of me.”’

In (26), the speaker (John) was a witness of the reported event
and therefore knows the referent, while in (27), the speaker (Jesus) does not
know who touched him.

In irrealis contexts, *więked* is again preferably interpreted as
having a specific referent, while *ix hadd* expresses a non-specific refer-
ent, the contrast in meaning between (28) and (29) being indicated by
means of the context in brackets.

(28) Trid *tżeweweg* lil *więked* b’xaghru iswed.
shewant:IPF she:marry:IPF ACC one with-his hair black
‘She wants to marry someone with black hair [that’s a salient feature of
her future husband].’

(29) Trid *tżeweweg* lil *ix* hadd b’xaghru iswed.
shewant:IPF she:marry:IPF ACC INDEF anyone with-his hair black
‘She wants to marry someone with black hair [that’s a condition any
potential suitor must fulfill].’

6. Expressing the meaning of free choice

In many languages, indefinite pronouns of the type that we are
treating in this paper may also express free choice, e.g. the English an-
series:

(30) Anyone can solve this problem.

In Maltese, neither of the two indefinite series nor the word *więked*
can be used in this way. One way of expressing the free choice meaning
is the Italian loanword *kwalunkwe* ‘any’ (from Italian *qualunque*). 8 The
following example is from Borg 1995.

(31) *Kwalunkwe* tifel jista’ jghidlek din.
any boy he:can:IPF hetell:you:IPF this
‘Any boy can tell you this.’

Free choice can also be expressed by the universal pronoun *kull*
‘every; any’ and the compound *kullhadd* ‘everyone; anyone’ (as is the
case in German with *jeder* ‘every; any’), and by the verb *ried* ‘want’ in
combination with the interrogative pronouns *min* ‘who’, *fejn* ‘where’,
*meta* ‘when’, and *liema* ‘which’, this last also combing with nouns (cf.
(33)). The distribution of these forms seems to be determined largely by
syntactic factors, *kull* occurring in preverbal position and interrogative
pronoun plus *ried* occurring mainly in postverbal position. *Kwalunkwe*
is freer in its syntactic distribution, however many Maltese speakers
claim they do not use it very often and still regard it as “not quite
Maltese”.

(32) *Kull* gattus ghandu denb.
every cat he:have tail
‘Any cat has a tail.’

(33) *Kullhadd* jista’ jsolvija din il-problema.
everyone he:can:IPF hesolve:IPF this the-problem
‘Anyone can solve this problem.’
Even in Classical Arabic, the nouns on which Maltese indefinites are based were often used as indefinite pronouns and some of them occurred most commonly in negative and non-assertive contexts, especially ʔakad, ʔabadan, and qaʕtu. For Egyptian Arabic, Ahmed 1981 reports that ʔadda 'someone, anyone' is especially used in interrogative and subordinate clauses, while waʕhid is used in positive main clauses:

(37) ᵐadda min kun ʔaʕa n-nuur?
al:IMPV who:want:IPF
'Has any of you switched off the light?'

(38) Waʕhid biʕisʔal ʕaalek.
one PROG:he:ask:IPF on:you
'Someone is asking for you.'

Similarly, in Gulf Arabic ʔahad, ʔay and mukaan are used "in questions and sentences in which the verb is negative" (Holes 1990:241):

(a) ʔahad ʔawjaad taff?
anyone found down
'Is there anyone downstairs?'

(b) Ma sif ʔahad daa'il.
NEG I:see:IPF anyone inside
'I didn't see anyone inside.'

(40) a. Fiik ʔay?
there is thing
'Is there anything the matter?'

b. Ma fiik ʔay yimnaʕik min id-duxul.
NEG there is thing it:prevent:IPF from the-entering
'There isn't anything preventing you from entering.'

(41) Ma riht mukaan fi ʔ-z-ʕeef il-maad.
NEG I:go:IPF anywhere in the-summer the-past
'I didn't go anywhere last summer.'

The complementarity between the negative suffix -s and the negative indefinite pronoun is also found in some modern Arabic dialects. For example, in Eastern Libyan Arabic verbs are generally negated by means of the particle-suffix combination ma ...-s, as in Maltese (Owens 1984:157).

(42) Ma ʕif-naa-k-ʕ.
NEG see:IPF:we-you-NEG
'We didn't see you.'
But with a number of indefinite expressions, the final –s is optional (Owens 1984: 161-62).

(43) a. Mift
   NEG lsee:PRF
   ‘I didn’t see anyone.’
   Nadd.

b. Yamra ma
   ever NEG
   hear:drink:PRF
   ‘He never drank it.’

The main systematic differences between Maltese and the modern spoken Arabic dialects seem to be (i) that the indefinites of the ebdar-series are restricted to negative sentences and cannot be used in non-negative non-assertive sentences (i.e. interrogatives and conditionals), and (ii) that a new series characterized by the indefiniteness marker xi has been developed.12

8. Summary

Maltese has two main series of indefinite pronouns, the xi-series and the ebdar-series, and the numeral wiehied/wahda ‘one’ is also often used as an indefinite (‘someone’). The xi-series is used in specific, irreals-specific and negative-polarity functions, while the ebdar-series is used in the direct-negation and indirect-negation functions as well as in the standard of comparatives. The indefinite wiehied/wahda is restricted to a special type of realis function (‘known to the speaker’), and there are two special free-choice expressions, ried ‘want’ and kwalunkue ‘any’. This yields the picture in (44), where the functions of the four types of indefinites are all adjacent, in accordance with the universal hypothesis of Haspelmath (1993, to 1997).

This distribution of indefinite types over the implicational map is not unusual. There are, however, two respects in which Maltese is rather peculiar: (i) Maltese has one indefinite series which consists entirely of special roots, and (ii) negative indefinites are in complementary distribution with the second part of a discontinuous double negation. These features are not common cross-linguistically, but they are shared by other, non-Semitic circum-Mediterranean languages, notably French. It is tempting to suggest that there is an areal relationship here (as discussed in Bernini & Ramat 1992 on the areal distribution of negation in Europe).

Abbreviations

| ACC  | accusative             |
| COMP | comparative degree    |
| FUT  | future                |
| IMPV | imperative            |
| INDEF| indefiniteness marker |
| IPIF | Imperfect             |
| NEG  | negation              |
| PRF  | perfect               |
| PROG | progressive marker    |

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Notes

1. The term indefinite pronoun is also often used to refer to generic pronouns like French on, German man, to scalar quantifiers like much, little, and to universal pronouns like every, all. None of these is considered in this paper.
2. The term function is intended to be neutral between ‘meaning’, ‘use’, ‘contextually conditioned variant’, etc. What is important here are the necessary distinctions, not their exact nature.
3. The only exception is xi, which is both an interrogative pronoun (‘what?’) and an indefinite determiner (‘some’). See note 9.
4. Diachronically, body is of course identical to the noun body, but it is doubtful whether this is a synchronic fact.
5. Another case with four special roots is the French aucun-series: personne ‘nobody’, rien ‘nothing’, jamais ‘never’, aucun ‘no’. Maltese also resembles French in the syntax of these forms, cf. section 4 below.
Fenech 1978:78 notes that this rule is not always observed in the spoken and journalistic language, where postverbal negation may cooccur with *ebda*-indefinites, e.g.:  
(i) Ma jiqrax bl-ebda mod.  
NEG convenient:IPF.NEG in-any way

'It is not convenient in any way.'

However, the version with downstream negation is better:
(i) Nahebb li ma gie hadd.

I think:IPF that NEG become:PRF anyone

'I think that nobody came.'

Superordinate negation is not possible with all verbs, e.g. (ii) is ungrammatical, only (iii) is possible:
(ii) *Ma qal li gie hadd.

NEG he-say:PRF that become:PRF anyone

'He didn't say that anyone came.'

(iii) Ma qalix li gie xi hadd.

NEG he-say:PRF NEG that become:PRF INDEF anyone

'He didn't say that someone came.'

It seems that superordinate negation is possible only in the case of negative raising, but a full answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper.

When kwalunkwe is postposed, it means 'ordinary':
(i) Aqbad borma kwalunkwe u saflhaha sew.

take:IMPV pan ordinary and heat:IMPV well

'Take an ordinary pan and heat it well.' (from Borg 1995)

The Maltese interrogative pronoun *xi* 'what?' also derives from *say* 'thing' (cf. Italian *cosa* 'what?' < 'thing'). Whereas in most languages indefinites are similar to interrogatives because they are derived from them, it is the other way round in the case of Maltese *xi*.

Hadd is also the word for Sunday in Maltese and the words for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday are identical to the numbers two, three and four, which indicates that in this context the word *hadd* has survived as the covert numeral one.

Note again the parallel to French, where some indefinite pronouns of the *aucun-series* go back to general nouns, especially personne 'nobody' (from 'person'), rien 'nothing' (from 'thing', Latin *rem*).

However, not all Arabic dialects are as similar to Maltese as Egyptian Arabic, Gulf Arabic, and Eastern Libyan Arabic. Baghdad Arabic (as described by Ali 1970), for example, seems to have quite a different system.

References
