

Discourse particles in contemporary spoken Maltese

The purpose of our paper is to provide the first examination of discourse particles in contemporary spoken Maltese (e.g. *mela* 'like, so, of course', *ifhem* 'you know', *heq* 'well', *ċoe* 'that is, like', *owkej* 'okay', *isma'* 'listen', *speċi* 'like, kind of', *ux iwa* 'yeah', *em* 'um', *lajk* 'like', *well* 'well', *taf kif* 'you know?'). A discourse particle, also known as a pragmatic marker, is an element in speech used to indicate pragmatic functions, such as emphasis, attitude, to signal attentiveness and hesitation, and to smoothen and structure discourse (Schiffrin 1988, Fischer 2006).

While Maltese grammar has long been an area of interest for linguists (see Borg, Caruana, and Vella 2013, Saade and Tosco 2017 for recent examples) and there are two grammatical descriptions of Maltese (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997, Ambros 1998), our study will fill a gap in the research by producing a preliminary qualitative analysis focusing on an area that has not been explored in detail previously. We will classify the particles according to their discourse, their syntactic role and placement, their formal properties, and their historical origins (Siculo-Arabic, Sicilian and other varieties of Romance, English). For example, from Siculo-Arabic we have *ifhem* 'you know' and *isma'* 'listen'; from Romance we have *ċoe* 'that is, like' and *speċi* 'like, kind of'; and from English we have *lajk* 'like', *well* 'well', and *owkej* 'okay'. The data comes from native Maltese speaking consultants and is analysed following the principles of linguistic typology.

Our findings will fit into the existing research on discourse particles in cross-linguistic perspective (see e.g. Bayer and Struckmeier 2016, Fischer 2006), and will particularly complement research into discourse particles in other Semitic languages (see Alazzawie 2015 and Marmorstein 2016 for discourse particles in Arabic; see Maschler Dori-Hacohen 2012 and Gonen, Einat, Zohar Livnat, and Noam Amir 2015 for discourse particles in Hebrew). Maltese offers an unusual case study of discourse in a multilingual Semitic context due to its long history of language contact with Romance and English (cf. Vella 2013).

The following examples illustrate these points. In (1), *speċi* 'like' is used to smoothen and hesitate. In (2), *isma'* 'listen' is used to change topic, draw attention to the new topic, and smoothen the delivery of bad news. In (3), *ifhem* 'well' is used to convey a lukewarm attitude and imply that some contrasting information is to follow. In (4), *taf kif* is used to seek acknowledgement from the interlocutor. In (5), *okay* or *mela* serves to introduce a new sequence in the discourse.

(1)

*Taħseb li, **speċi**, terġgħu flimkien?*

Do you think that you'll, **like**, get back together?

(2)

***Isma'**, ma naħsibx li jirnexxieli niġi.*

Listen, I don't know if I'll be able to make it.

(3)

***Ifhem**, ma kienx daqshekk tajjeb.*

Well, it wasn't that good.

(4)

Kont, speċi, vera sorpriż meta smajt. Taf kif?

It was like, you know, really surprising to hear that, **you know?**

(5)

Okay/Mela, ejja nergħu nibdew mil-bidu.

Okay, let's start over again.

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