The historical development of the Maltese plural suffixes *-iet* and *-(i)jiet*

Having spent the last millennium in close contact with several Indo-European languages, Maltese, the modern descendant of Siculo-Arabic (Brincat 2011), possesses various pluralization strategies. In this paper I explore the historical development of two such strategies of Semitic-origin: the suffixes *-iet* and *-(i)jiet* (e.g. *papa* 'pope', pl. *pap*<u>*iet*</u>; *omm* 'mother', pl. *ommi*<u>*jiet*</u>). Specialists agree that both suffixes originated from the Arabic plural suffix *-āt* (Borg 1976; Mifsud 1995); however, no research has explained the development of *-(i)jiet*, nor connected its development to that of *-iet*. I argue that the development of *-(i)jiet* was driven by the influx of *i*-final words which resulted from contact with Italian: Maltese speakers affixed *-iet* to such words, triggering a glide-epenthesis that occurs elsewhere in Maltese (e.g. Mifsud 1996: 34) and in other varieties of Arabic (e.g. Erwin 1963; Cowell 1964; Owens 1984; Harrell 2004). With a large number of plurals now ending in *ijiet*, speakers reanalyzed this sequence as a unique plural suffix and began applying it to new non-*i*-final words as well. Since only Maltese experienced this influx of *i*-final words, it was only in Maltese that speakers reanalyzed this sequence as a separate suffix. Additionally, I argue against an explanation of the development of *-(i)jiet* that does not rely on epenthesis. With regard to the suffix *-iet*, I argue that two properties unique to it – the obligatory omission of stem-final vowels upon pluralization, and the near-universal tendency to pluralize only *a*-final words – emerged from a separate reanalysis of the pluralization of collective nouns that reflects a general weakening of the Semitic element in Maltese under Indo-European contact.

To test these hypotheses I first surveyed Aquilina's (1987-90) Maltese-English-Maltese dictionary for all words pluralized by *-iet* and *-(i)jiet* (1,449 and 2,387 words, respectively). Three patterns emerged: (1) *-iet* exclusively pluralizes words having an *a*-final (1,386 words, or 95.7%) or consonant-final (63 words, or 4.3%) singular, and never singulars ending in any other vowel; (2) among words which Aquilina identifies as having entered Maltese through English, and which I thus assume represent the most recent loanwords in Maltese (Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander 1997: xii-xiv; Brincat 2011), *-iet* only pluralizes those for which the singular ends in *a;* (3) *-(i)jiet* can pluralize words ending in any segment, but tends to pluralize *i*-final words (1,122 words, or 47%), the majority of which Aquilina identifies as having entered the language through Italian.

Extensive contact with Italian introduced a large number of *i*-final loanwords into Maltese. I hypothesize that speakers historically pluralized such words with *-iet*, bringing stem-final and suffix-initial vowels into contact and so triggering the epenthesis of *j*. Glide-epenthesis is attested elsewhere in Maltese between stem-final high vowels and various suffix-initial vowels (e.g. *mieli* 'wealthy' + *-a* 'FEM' → *mielija*, + *-in* 'PL' → *mieli*<u>*j*</u>*in*; *gru* 'crane' + *-a* 'SG' → *gru*<u>*w*</u>*a*, + *-iet* 'PL' → *gru*<u>*w*</u>*iet*) (Mifsud 1996:34), as well as in Maghrebi varieties of Arabic closely related to Maltese (e.g. Eastern Libyan Arabic (Owens 1984), Moroccan Arabic (Harrell 2004)) and in more disparate varieties (e.g. Iraqi Arabic (Erwin 1963), Syrian Arabic (Cowell 1964)). With many plurals suddenly ending in *ijiet*, Maltese speakers reanalyzed this sequence as a plural suffix and began applying it to new words: as *-ijiet* on consonant- and some vowel-final words (deleting the stem-final vowel in the latter case), and as *-jiet* elsewhere (preserving the vowel). Although they likewise separate stem-final vowels and the reflex of *-āt* with an epenthetic glide, other Arabic varieties did not experience a comparable influx of *i*-final words and so a similar reanalysis never occurred. Thus, although a general, non-Maltese-specific epenthesis process was responsible for the glide of *-(i)jiet*, I attribute the reanalysis of the resulting *ijiet* sequence as a unique suffix and its subsequent extension to new forms to the extensive contact with Italian which only Maltese experienced.

One may wonder whether the glide of -(*i*)*jiet* instead originated from the suffixation-triggered reemergence of a root-final glide, or whether such a process could have played any role in the development of the suffix. To answer this, I surveyed Aquilina (1987-90) for all roots having *j* or *w* as the final radical. When a stem having such a root and ending in a vowel instead of the glide takes a suffix, suffixation triggers both the restoration of the glide and the loss of the vowel, creating a consonant-glide cluster (e.g. *xidi* 'gadfly' + -*a* 'SG' → *xidja*, + -*iet* 'PL' → *xidjiet*; root: *x-d-j*). This is inconsistent with the behavior of -(*i*)*jiet*: otherwise, -*jiet* marks only vowel-final stems. Thus, I regard such plurals as bearing the -*iet* suffix and reject any connection between this process and the development of -(*i*)*jiet* as both unnecessary and implausible.

Some words, especially those of Semitic-origin, have collective (a type of syntactically-singular noun denoting an uncountable genus, species, or material), singular, and plural forms; the singular and plural derive from the collective via the affixation of -*a* and -*iet*, respectively (e.g. collective *lawż* 'almond' + -*a* 'SG' → *lawża*, + -*iet* 'PL' → *lawżiet*) (Mifsud 1996). Reflecting a general weakening of the Semitic features of Maltese under prolonged contact with Indo-European languages, Mifsud (1995, 1996) finds that Maltese speakers have tended to abandon grammatical features atypical of Indo-European languages (e.g. collectivity) and to treat collectives as plural nouns. I propose that Maltese speakers reanalyzed -*iet* here as marking the *a*-final singular (rather than the collective form), deleting the vowel in the process, and so associated -*iet* as a pluralizer of *a*-final singulars. Hence, -*iet* tends to mark new words having an *a*-final singular, and deletes the vowel even when it is not a suffix (e.g. *papiet* 'popes' < *papa*, *pap) in modern Maltese.

To summarize, I have argued that extensive contact with and borrowing from Italian ultimately drove the development of the Maltese plural suffix -(*i*)*jiet*. Additionally, I have argued that the suffix -*iet* acquired two unique properties due to a separate reanalysis that occurred as part of a general weakening of the Semitic features of the language under Indo-European influence.

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