

Asking or not asking in Maltese, that is the question

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the form and function of questions in Maltese. An attempt to determine whether information-seeking questions differ from confirmation-seeking ones is made. Map Task questions coded for function as QUERY-YN and CHECK/ALIGN, as well as QUERY-WH questions, are examined. The paper aims to establish whether choice of tune in Maltese is determined by function, or whether function is subordinate to other factors such as information structure, the accentability or otherwise of specific structures etc. Accentability is found to have primacy of some sort over other factors, no categorical distinction in choice of tune being found to be associated with information-seeking type questions (QUERY-YN), as opposed to confirmation-seeking ones (CHECK/ALIGN).

Index Terms: Maltese intonation, asking questions, form and function in questions

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to provide an overview of the form and function of Map Task questions in Maltese, looking in particular at the form of questions coded for function following Carletta et. al.'s [1] scheme. The analysis provided here concentrates on questions coded as QUERY-YN, CHECK and ALIGN although questions coded as QUERY-WH are also briefly described.

The form of questions has been found, e.g. by [2] to have some sort of correlation to different functions, a distinction being made intonationally between information-seeking questions (QUERY-YN) and confirmation-seeking ones (CHECKS) (see [3] for distinction between these broad types). The aim of this paper is to attempt to establish whether a similar correlation exists between the form and function of questions in Maltese or whether other factors such as information structure, the accentability or otherwise of specific structures etc., are at play.

2. Framework and methodology

The data discussed in this paper assume an Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) framework for the analysis of the intonational phonology, see [4], of Maltese as exemplified e.g. in [5], [6] and [7]. The analysis assumes that intonation can be analysed in terms of sequences of **tones** (**T**s), **H**(igh) or **L**(ow), combined into **tunes**. Tones are associated to different texts by means of association rules, two main kinds of phonological event, stressed syllables and boundaries, serving as docking points. Ts associated to the former, notationally **T***, are also called **pitch accents**, following Bolinger [8], while the latter are also referred to as **boundary tones**, notationally **T%**. As in earlier work by this author [5], a distinction is made between boundary tones which associate with a P(honological)-phrase and those which associate with an I(ntonational)-phrase, notationally **T_p** and **T_i** respectively. Tones of the phrase accent type, as originally proposed by [9]

and revived by Grice et. al. [10], are also used in the analysis as suggested in Vella [6]. Phrase accent tones of this sort have been proposed to occur in Maltese in contexts of a [-focus] stretch of speech following an early [+ focus] stretch.

Map Task data from the *MalToBI* project, annotated in the context of the project *SPAN* [13], [14], has been used in this analysis. The *MalToBI* project was intended as the first step towards building an annotated corpus of spoken Maltese which could serve, amongst other things, as a much-needed structured resource for use in research [11]. Of the four types of data contained in the *MalToBI* corpus, data were analysed from 8 Map Tasks collected using a design similar to that used in other Map Tasks intended as a means of collecting quasi-spontaneous spoken data, see [12].

PRAAT version 5.1.20 [15] was used in both the annotation and analysis of data and in preparation of illustrative examples for this paper. The annotations so far contain the following tiers: SP1 and SP2 – annotations of the contributions of the speakers filling the roles of **G**(iver) and **F**(ollower) respectively, see [12], in the Map Task; a Br-P-O tier identifies Breaks, Pauses and Overlaps – change of speaker is also indicated; TI and FP tiers flag the Target Items and Filled Pauses in the data – the information on these tiers is intended as a means to increase searchability of the annotated data; lastly the annotations contain a MISC tier for miscellaneous information.

Only tiers of relevance to the discussion are included in the illustrative material included in this paper. The SP1/SP2 tier/s contain a word-by-word segmentation in standard orthography of each speaker's contribution. The information in these tiers has been enriched, for the purposes of this paper, in two ways: in the figures presented below, stressed syllables are indicated by means of capital letters; an asterisk is placed preceding the syllable clearly identifiable as the one carrying main stress within any particular stretch. Two tiers not yet available in the annotations carried out to date have also been included here, a Tone tier (the topmost tier in the figures) and a Function tier (second tier from the top). The Tone tier contains a tonal analysis: labelling is based on current knowledge of the facts about Maltese intonation. The Function tier contains function labels based on definitions given in [1].

3. Interrogative structures in Maltese

This section provides an overview of different types of interrogatives in Maltese, outlining, in so doing, some of the relevant structural facts. Wherever possible, examples are taken from Map Task data from Maltese which is the subject of ongoing analysis (see 2 above).

3.1. Structural characteristics

3.1.1. Yes-no questions

As in many other languages, notably both its Arab “forebears” and its Romance “neighbours”, Italian in particular, yes-no questions in Maltese are generally formed without the use of

morpho-syntactic marking. Thus, e.g., *Forsi tindikali t-triq?* (JA_4_6) only functions as a “polite request” meaning something like ‘Maybe you can show me the way’ due to its intonation; a version of this sentence involving the expression of possibility as in something like ‘She might show me the way’ is also possible with a different intonation.

Moreover, given that Maltese is a pro-drop language, questions involving a verb and nothing else are extremely commonplace, thus: *Lesta?* ‘Are you ready?’ (AS_C1_20) is intonationally distinct from *Lesta*. ‘I am ready.’ (IV_C1_2), the former involving a rise in pitch, the latter a fall, or *Nibdew?* ‘Shall we start?’ (MC_C1_4) with a rise in pitch as compared to *Nibdew*. ‘(Yes) let’s start!’ (CB_C1_2).

The oft-noted relative freedom of constituent order which is possible in Maltese, see [16], [17], [5], also needs to be noted here. All constituent orders apart from *VSO are acceptable, pronominal cliticisation resulting in the acceptability even of the latter. Topicalisation effects are involved, with intonation playing an important role in the acceptability or otherwise of different constituent order versions of a sentence. Other conditions such as negation and the use of indefinite pronouns have also been noted, see e.g. [18], to trigger the assignment of [+focus] early in the sentence, this in turn resulting in use of phrase accent type phenomena, one of which is described in 3.2.1 below.

All sorts of structures can, as it were, be involved in a request for information, e.g. *’Il fuq?* ‘Upwards’ (AD_C1_134_135), *Hemm id-djar?* ‘Are there houses’ (IV_C1_96_97) in which *hemm* is a deictic item functioning as a pseudo-verb, etc. The load on intonation in signalling communicative function can therefore be expected to be extremely high in Maltese.

3.1.2. Interrogative word (*wh-*) and other questions

According to Sutcliffe [19], interrogative questions in Maltese, for convenience also referred to here as *wh*-qs, are usually introduced by an interrogative adverb or pronoun such as *kemm* ‘how much’, *xi* ‘what’, *min* ‘who’, *minn fejn* literally ‘from where’. Constituent order is relatively free also in this case, see also 3.1.1 above. Thus, *wh*-words in Maltese can occur in most positions in a sentence. While the canonical *wh*-q version of *It-tifel mar il-Belt*. ‘The boy went to Valletta.’ would be *Fejn mar it-tifel?*, (*wh*-word underlined), ‘Where has the boy gone?’, other word order possibilities also exist, e.g. *Mar fejn it-tifel?*: the unacceptability of **Fejn it-tifel mar?* parallels that of the unacceptable *VSO order mentioned earlier. Differences in the position of the *wh*-word and/or information structure bring about topicalisation and intonational effects, research on which is still needed.

Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander [20] note a number of other types of interrogative structure, amongst which, “leading questions” with either yes or no as the expected answer (p.4-5) and alternative questions involving use of the co-ordinating conjunction *jew* ‘or’ (p.6). Questions of the latter two types will not be considered further here.

3.2. Prosodic characteristics

3.2.1. Intonation in yes-no questions

Earlier work by this author has established the existence of two types of rising question tune in Maltese, a nuclear tune $L^* H_p$ which occurs in conditions of late focus, and a post-nuclear tune consisting of a phrase accent and boundary tone sequence $L+H H_i$ tune which occurs following an early focus $L^* H_p$. A schematisation of both tunes is provided in Fig. 1. (In the figure below, shading is an indication that a syllable is stressed whilst broken lines indicate the possibility of an unspecified number of syllables prior to the stressed syllable.)

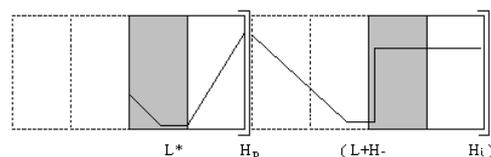


Figure 1: Schematisation of a rising early focus nuclear, followed by a post-nuclear tune, in Maltese

Seen in the light of the facts noted earlier in 3.1.1, the constraints on the occurrence of the post-nuclear phrase accent $L+H$ appear to be largely related to the occurrence of a [-focus] stretch following an early [+focus] stretch. It is one purpose of this paper to attempt to establish what the relative importance of the “backgrounding” role of these phrase accents is compared to other factors such as communicative function, accentability etc.

3.2.2. *Wh*-q(uestion) intonation

Vella [5], [21], as well as, e.g. Magro [22], describe a falling tune, different from that in declaratives, typical of *wh*-qs in Maltese. The latter differs from the former in two main ways: (1) the H tone in *wh*-qs is linked at the boundary of the *wh*-word normally located at the left edge of the phrase; and (2) the H tone tends to be scaled higher as compared to that in the declarative tune. Further research on this tune is still needed, both with respect to a more precise description of the realisation details of the tune, but also to matters such as the accentability or otherwise of *wh*-words themselves, see [4] and [7], and use of this tune with other structures such as vocatives and imperatives, see [5].

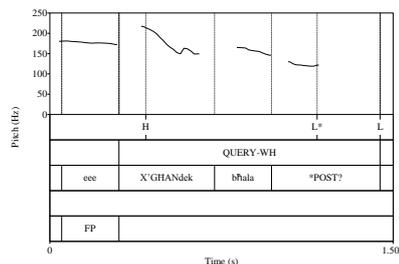


Figure 2

The F0 contour for the QUERY-WH ...*eee, x'ghandek bhala post?* ‘*eee, what do you have, in terms of location?*’ (SC_C1_97-100) is shown in Fig. 2 above. The presence of the Filled Pause (FP) just before the *wh*-word *X* ‘what’ in this case brings into relief the earliness of the target for the H tone. An early target for the H tone has also been noted to occur in *wh*-qs starting with a *wh*-word such as *ghaLIEX* ‘why’ which has lexical stress on its final syllable, see [24]. Even in such cases, the H tone occurs at the left edge of the *wh*-word rather than peaking on the stressed syllable.

The rest of this paper focuses on questions involving a rise in pitch rather than a fall, in particular on questions coded as QUERY-YN, CHECK/ALIGN rather than as QUERY-WH.

4. Information structure, focus and accentability vs. communicative function

Gussenhoven [23] explains both the notion of “focus” and the assignment of $[\pm\text{focus}]$ as resulting from speakers manipulation of semantic material with respect to differing discourse contexts. He suggests using the term “variable” to refer to that to which speakers obligatorily assign [+focus], and the term “background” to refer to that stretch of speech which has been assigned [-focus]. In essence, the analysis in [6] and [18] suggests that Gussenhoven-style “variable” information is assigned [+focus], “background” information,

[focus]: intonational choices are made accordingly, i.e. L* H_p in the former case, and L+H H_i in the latter, see also 3.2.1.

This in effect mirrors the distinction between different degrees of “accessibility” made by Chafe [25] and adopted in the analysis carried out in [2]. Given the tripartite distinction between “new”, “given” and “accessible” in the latter, one would expect Gussenhoven-type “variable” information to mainly involve “new” information, information-seeking questions coded as QUERY-YN (but also questions coded as QUERY-WH discussed earlier in this paper, see 3.2.2) being the most likely possibility in this case. Gussenhoven-type “background” information could be expected to correlate with “given” information; one would also be more likely to expect “accessible” information to correlate with “background” rather than with “variable” information. This latter possibility is relevant to our discussion of the Maltese Map Task data below. The presence of “background” information is more likely to lead to use of confirmation-seeking questions or questions coded as CHECK/ALIGN.

In the rest of this paper, an attempt is made to establish whether a distinction in form correlates with a distinction in terms of functions of the Carletta et. al. type in Maltese or whether other factors such as information structure, accentability etc. are more important in determining intonational form. To start with, a brief comment about single word questions such as *Lesta?* ‘Are you ready?’ and *Nidbew?* ‘Shall we start?’ mentioned in 3.1.1, many of which have an ALIGN function. These typically take a L* H_p pitch accent in the data analysed. It seems safe to suggest in fact that intonational form does not serve to distinguish ALIGN questions such as those just referred to from QUERY-YN ones such as the *’Il fuq?* example also referred to in 3.1.1 above.

Let us begin by looking at a question with a very clear QUERY-YN function, *u nibqa’ sejra Triq AmeRY?* ‘and continue on to *Triq AmeRY?*’ (CB_C1_105_110). The F0 contour for this example is shown in Fig. 3 below.

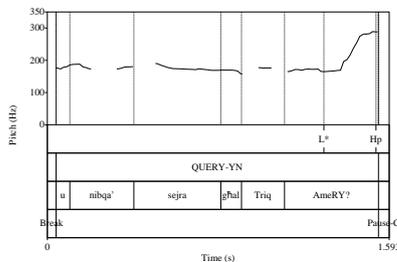


Figure 3

The question in this example involves a request for information on the direction that F should take rather than a request for information about the nature, shared or otherwise, of the locations referred to. Late focus on the final syllable of the target item *Triq AmeRY* and a L* H_p rise from the final stressed syllable of *AmeRY* is involved.

The F0 contour for the utterance *Indur, ma’ Triq l-Ewwel ta’ Mejju?* ‘Shall I turn, at *Triq l-Ewwel ta’ Mejju?*’ (CB_C1_170_176) is given in Fig. 4 below.

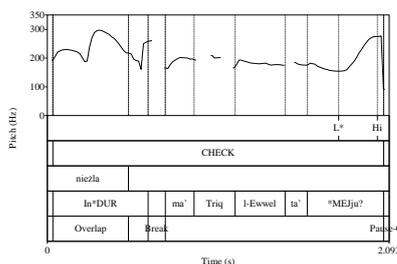


Figure 4

The above example is interesting because, although, at face value, it looks like the question could be functioning as a

QUERY-YN, the discourse context given below suggests otherwise. (Example sentences in the context boxes in the rest of this paper are given in bold. Target items are left unchanged in the translations provided.)

F> <i>Misrah il-Lejl ghandi.</i>	<i>Misrah il-Lejl</i> , I have.
F> <i>Triq l-Ewwel ta’ Mejju</i>	<i>Triq l-Ewwel ta’ Mejju</i> ,
F> <i>’ekk nibqa’ tielgha’ l’fuq</i>	if I continue going upwards
F> <i>ha niggi hdejha.</i>	I will get to it.
G> <i>Mela ehe, u dur maghha fuq.</i>	So, okay, and turn there upwards.
F> <i>U dur maghha fuq</i>	And I turn there upwards
G> <i>Maghha fuq.</i>	There upwards.
G> <i>lbqa’ niezla</i>	Continue walking downwards
G> <i>Indur ma’ Triq l-Ewwel ta’ Mejju?</i>	Do I turn at <i>Triq l-Ewwel ta’ Mejju?</i>

The target item *Triq l-Ewwel ta’ Mejju* was in fact already present in the discourse context by the time the question illustrated above was put, as was the possibility of ‘turning’. This question has in fact been analysed as having a CHECK rather than a QUERY-YN function. The F0 contour for this example is nevertheless similar to that for the example in Fig. 3. Both are characterised by late focus. In this example there is a L* H_p on *MEJju ‘May’.

Choice of tune differs however in the examples shown in Fig. 5, *U ghandek Triq l-Imnarja?* ‘And do you have *Triq l-Imnarja?*’ (AD_C1_347_350), and Fig. 6 *ghandek xi haga?* ‘do you have something?’ (MG_C1_395-398), see below.

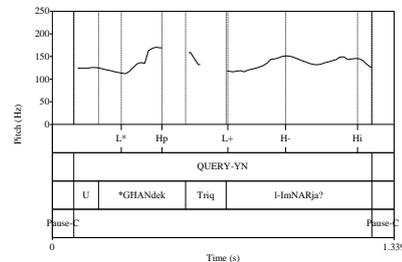


Figure 5

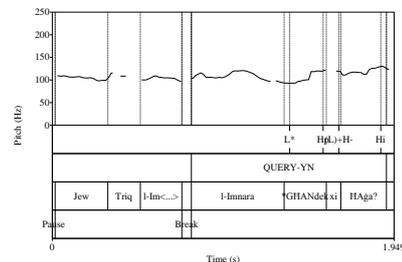


Figure 6

In both cases, [+focus] and an accompanying L* H_p rise from the stressed syllable is on *GHANdek ‘do you have’. Again in both cases, a dip to a L tone just before the stressed syllables of *l-ImNARja* and *xi HAgA* respectively follows; there is then a stepping up to a H tone continuing to the edge of the phrase in a kind of plateau. In the case of the example in Fig. 6, the lack of segmental material between the end of *GHANdek and the stressed syllable on *xi HAgA* is the reason for the absence of a clear L tone in the (L)+H H_i sequence.

In spite of similarities, these examples differ somewhat.

The context for the utterance in Fig. 5 is given below.

G> <i>Naqblu?</i>	Are we in agreement?
F> <i>Mhm.</i>	Yes
G> <i>U ghandek Triq l-Imnarja?</i>	And do you have <i>Triq l-Imnarja?</i>
F> <i>Mhm.</i>	Mhm. (Yes)
G> <i>Mela...</i>	So...

The above suggests an element of “givenness” associated with use of *Triq l-Imnarja* in that, given the nature of the task, participants who reach this point in the discourse know items of this sort to be potential target items. At the same time this target item is new information in the sense that it hasn’t itself been specifically mentioned earlier in the discourse. In other words, the information G is after is in some sense “accessible”: it is part of the “background”, even though, at some other level, it is a new piece of information or “variable”.

The context for the example in Fig. 6 is given below.

F> <i>Jien ghandi Dawran l-Ghannej.</i>	I have <i>Dawran l-Ghannej.</i>
G> <i>Rajtha x'imkien.</i>	I saw it somewhere.
G> <i>Qieghda l-boghod tieghi dik.</i>	It is far away, mine, that one.
G> <i>Emm.</i>	Emm. (Filled Pause)
G> <i>Jew.</i>	Or.
G> <i>Jew Triq l-Imnara, ghandek xi haġa?</i>	Or Triq l-Imnara do you have something?
F> <i>Triq l-Imnarja.</i>	<i>Triq l-Imnarja.</i>

The above suggests that *Triq l-Imnara* (a misread target item) is the new piece of information or “variable” added to the discourse at this point. The point of the question in this case is to see whether F “has” or “does not have” some location matching the one G has referred to. In this case it is the “having” or “not having” which is at issue and *ghandek* gets accented accordingly, the location being relegated into the “background” as given information.

What is interesting here is that these two utterances, both information-seeking in some way, differ with respect both to the information which is being sought and to the degree of “accessibility” of this information. The fact of “having” or “not having” does not seem to be the most important element in the former exchange, although it does in the latter, and yet, in both cases it is *GHANdek which gets accented.

An interesting parallel can be drawn to examples taken from Map Tasks involving Maltese speakers of English collected in the context of [5]. Maltese English (ME) is a variety characterised by transfer effects of all sorts from Maltese, see e.g. [5]. An example of a question taken from the beginning of one of the Map Tasks when the only shared information was the fact that both participants had a map with a number of locations on it is given in Fig. 7. This might serve to highlight the extremely marked intonation of questions of this sort in ME, a markedness which is noteworthy for the similarity in intonation to that in Maltese described above.

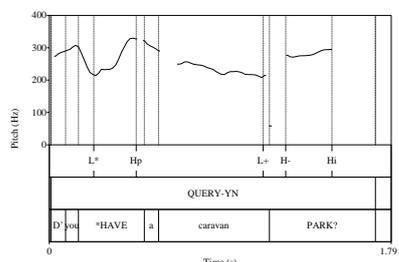


Figure 7

This example (and similar ones of which there are a large number in the corpus), is notable for the fact that main stress is on *HAVE rather than on the “variable” ‘Caravan Park’ (note also the stress shift in the target item, see also [5]). As in the case of the example in Fig. 5 in particular discussed earlier, “having” or “not having” a particular target item does not seem to be the issue in this case, and yet it is the verb which gets assigned the main stress and consequently the L* H_p pitch accent. A L+H H_i follows.

Structures in Maltese involving use of verbs such as *ghandek* (referred to in [17] as “pseudo-verbs” and as “pseudo-predicates in [26]) are interesting because such verbs appear to be, in some way, highly “accentable”. The same can be said for other verbs such as *thobb* and *trid* especially when such verbs are used in complex verb groups such as *thobb issiefer* ‘you/she like/s to go abroad/do /does you/she like to go abroad’ *tista’ tiġi tghinni* ‘you/she can come to help me/can you/she come to help me’ (verbs of this sort are referred to as “coverbs” in “complex verb groups” in [26]).

5. Conclusion

The discussion above has suggested that there is no real difference in intonational form between questions of a more information-seeking type (QUERY-YN) and those of a more confirmation-seeking nature (CHECK/ALIGN). Information structure and the assignment of focus are, on the other hand,

important in determining choice of tune and there is a specific pitch + phrase accent combination which results from the assignment of focus to some element early in the utterance. More importantly however in the context of this paper, is the finding that there appear to be certain elements which act as it were as magnets to accent, and that accentability of such elements, in some sense takes precedence over other factors. When this happens, information structure and focus assignment rules may end up being subservient to accentability. The matter of competing constraints as an issue worth investigating in an attempt at explaining accentuation patterns cross-linguistically has been raised in [4]. The research reported here suggests that such an investigation for Maltese would be worth pursuing.

6. References

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