

# Functions of the dual suffix in Maltese

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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. *sagħtejn* '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. *għajnejha l-leminja* 'her left eye' in the sense of the singular form *għajna l-leminja*; and (c) the function of a plural allomorph, mainly in parts of the body which are in pair, e.g. *xofftejn* 'lips'. The variants of the dual suffix as a real dual are two: *-ejn* [-eyn] 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:

raġel	'a man'
tifel	'a boy'
dar	'a house'
omm	'a mother'

The same rule applies in the case of many adjectives. Thus there are examples such as:

sabih	'beautiful'
zghir	'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 =	xuxet	+ 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. bnedmin	'men'
mghallem	'a master',	pl. mghallmin	'masters'

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

saltna	'kingdom',	pl. saltniet	'kingdoms'
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kitba	'writing',	pl. kitbiet	'writings'
werqa	'leaf',	pl. werqiet	'leaves'
naha	'side',	pl. nahat, or nahiet	'sides'
ilma	'water',	pl. ilmijiet	'waters'

(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. naggara	'stone-dressers'

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

haddied	'blacksmith',	pl. haddidin
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(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'
gnien	'a garden',	pl. gonna	'gardens'
seger	'a falcon',	pl. isqra	'falcons'
difer	'a finger or toe nail',	pl. dwiefer	'fingers or toe nails'
qalb	'a heart',	pl. qlub	'hearts'
xitwa	'winter',	pl. xtiewi	'winters'

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

qiegh	'a bottom',	pl. qighan	'bottoms'
wied	'a valley',	pl. widien	'valleys'

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

ciklun	'cyclone',	pl. cikluni	'cyclones'
gurnal	'newspaper',	pl. gurnali	'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:

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

In the case of the last example, the plural *liwien* 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. henjin  
 biežel 'industrious', pl. bežlin  
 għaqli 'wise', pl. għaqlin

(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  
 għani 'rich', pl. għomja

(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 *uċuh* and the double plural *uċuhijiet* 'a children's game'. Also, the noun *mniewier* 'nose', plural of *minhār*, can take a double plural, *mniewrijiet*. J. Aquilina gives the forms *imħira* and *mniewrin*, but they do not occur in the idiolect of the present writer.

### 3.3. The quantitative "ħafna"

The quantitative *ħafna* 'much, many' can be used before countables (e.g. *ħafna għalliema* 'many teachers') and non-countables (*ħafna ilma* 'much water'), before the singular and the collectives (*ħafna nbid* 'much wine', *ħafna ġebel* 'many stones') and before the plural (*ħafna 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. *ħafna orfni* 'many orphans', *ħafna vergni* 'many virgins', *ħafna xhud* 'many witnesses'). One should note here that although *xhud* is morphologically a plural (with the hypothetical *xiehed* 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-ħmar '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:

wiċċ idejġh 'the palm of his hands'  
 ġwienah spallejġh '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', | du. saġhtejn    |
| jum    | 'a day',   | du. jumejn      |
| ġimgħa | 'a week',  | du. ġimgagħtejn |
| xaħar  | 'a month', | du. xaħrejn     |
| sena   | 'a year',  | du. sentejn     |
- (b) *Number*
- |       |                 |              |
|-------|-----------------|--------------|
| darba | 'once'          | du. darbtejn |
| mija  | 'one hundred',  | du. mitejn   |
| elf   | 'one thousand', | du. elfejn   |
- (c) *Old Maltese Weights*
- |        |                       |               |
|--------|-----------------------|---------------|
| uqija  | 'an ounce',           | du. uqitejn   |
| ratal  | 'a rotolo',           | du. ratlejn   |
| wizna  | 'four kilogrammes',   | du. wizintejn |
| qantar | 'eighty kilogrammes', | du. qantarejn |
- (d) *Old Maltese Measures*
- |       |                          |              |
|-------|--------------------------|--------------|
| tomna | 'tumulo',                | du. tomnejn  |
| modd  | 'sixteen tumoli',        | du. moddejn  |
| wejba | 'four tumoli',           | du. wejbejn  |
| hemel | 'stack, 8 or 10 sheafs', | du. hemlejn  |
| qasba | 'a cane',                | du. qasbtejn |
| qatta | 'a sheaf',               | du. qattejn  |
| sieġh | 'a Maltese bushel',      | du. sieġhajn |

pinta 'a pint', du. pintejn  
 kejlja 'a small measure for capers, etc.', du. kejlajn

(e) *Old Maltese Coins*

habba	'a grain',	du. habbtejn
rbieġhi	'twenty grains',	du. rbieġhajn

(f) *Basic Food*

hobża	'a loaf of bread',	du. hbiztejn
bajda	'an egg',	du. badtejn
ġbejna	'a cheeselet',	du. ġbintejn

(g) *Familiar Unsophisticated Objects*

demgħa	'a tear',	du. demagħtejn
bicċa	'a piece',	du. bicċtejn
hofra	'a hole',	du. hofortejn
fergħa	'a branch',	du. feragħtejn
werqa	'a leaf',	du. werqtejn
qoffa	'a wicker basket',	du. qofftejn

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 *zewġ* 'two' or *ġieħ* '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', *jumejn* for 'two days' and *mitejn* for 'two hundred', one is free to say *uqitejn* or *zewġ uqijiet* for 'two ounces', *tomnejn* or *zewġ tomniet* for 'two tumoli', and *ħbiztejn* or *zewġ ħbiziet* for 'two loaves of bread'. In the spoken language the word *ġieħ* quite often replaces the word *zewġ*, thus:

*ġieħ uqijiet, ġieħ tomniet, and ġieħ ħbiziet.*

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

L-artista ghamlet operazzjoni f'ghajnejha l-leminjja.

'The film star had an operation in her right eye (literally, in her two right eyes)'

Ghandu grizmejh juġġuh.

'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-żewġ rikkieba li kienu fil-karozza meta din inqalbet 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-żewġ rikkieba li kienu fil-karozza meta din inqalbet 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.

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

When the dual suffix is used as a plural allomorph it can have four variants: *-ejn*, *-ajn*, *-ej-*, *-aj-*. In this case, therefore, one notices the two variants of the real dual and the two variants of the empty morph.

As a matter of fact, the two variants *-ej-* and *-aj-* are the phonetic results of the full forms *-ejn* and *-ajn* after the functioning of an apocope because of a further suffix, namely the attached pronoun.

The variation between the vowel *-e-* and the vowel *-a-* existing in the set *-ejn*, *-ajn*, and *-ej-*, *-aj-* is also due to a phonetic element. If we decide to present the vowel */e/* as the phoneme embracing both allophones *e* and *a*, then we can give the following rules:

Rule 1

*/e/* = *a* / back consonant

Rule 2

*/e/* = *e* / elsewhere.

According to rule 1, the phoneme */e/* is realized as *a* in the environment of a back consonant, e.g. *saqajn* sa'ayn 'feet', *saqajh* sa?ayh 'his feet'. But then, according to rule 2, the phoneme */e/* is realized as *e* elsewhere, e.g. *riġlejn* rid3lejn 'legs', *riġlejh* rid3leyh 'his legs'. The phonetic rules function at all the levels of the dual suffix, that is in the case of a real dual, in the case of an empty morph and in the case of a plural allomorph.

When the above four variants of the dual suffix function as plural suffixes, they should be considered synchronically as four other allomorphs of the plural morpheme. These occur regularly with (a) some parts of the body which are in pair, and (b) with a very limited number of parts of the body which are not in pair.

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:

abt	'armpit',	du.	abtejn / abtejh
bezzul	'breast',	du.	bizlejn / bizlejha
driegh	'arm',	du.	dirghajn / dirghajh
genb	'side',	du.	genbejn / genbejh

gwna	'wing'; 'shoulder-blade',	du. gwinhajj / gwinhajj
hadd	'cheek',	du. haddej / haddej
hageb	'eyebrow',	du. hugbejn / hugbejn
ghajj	'eye',	du. ghajnejn / ghajnejj
gharqub	'heel',	du. gharqbejn / gharqbejj
id	'hand',	du. idejn / idejj
kitf	'shoulder',	du. kitfejn / kitfejj
koxxa	'thigh',	du. koxxejn / koxxejj
mimfes	'nostril',	du. mimfsejn / mimfsejj
minkbej	'elbow',	du. minkbejn / minkbejj
rigel	'leg',	du. riglejn / riglejj
rkobba	'knee',	du. rkubbejn / rkubbejj
sieq	'foot',	du. saqajn / saqajj
spalla	'shoulder',	du. spallejn / spallejj
tebqa	'eyelid',	du. tebqejn / tebqejj
widna	'ear',	du. widnejn / widnejj
wirk	'thigh',	du. wirkejn / wirkejj
xiber	'span',	du. xibrejn / xibrejj
xoffa	'lip',	du. xoffejn / xoffejj.

#### 4.3.2. *Parts of the body which are not in pair*

The dual suffix is now functioning so much as a plural allomorph that it is being used also with parts of the body which are in ten, namely with the fingers, finger nails and toes. In these cases, the dual meaning is completely out of the question.

difer	'finger nail; toe nail',	du. difrejn / difrejj
seba	'finger, toe',	du. subghajj / subghajj sebghajj/sebghajj.

#### 4.3.3. *Other generic words*

There are also some other words, of a rather generic type, which take the dual suffix as a plural allomorph, with the meaning of 'a few'. Here are some examples:

daqqa	'a hit',	du. daqqtejn 'a beating'
kamra	'a room',	du. kamartejn
kelma	'word',	du. kelimtejn 'a foreword of a book, a preface'
pass	'a stride',	du. passejn.

These three lists should be fairly exhaustive. They certainly contain all the words mentioned by the Maltese grammarians, besides a small number of new entries. The words *haġeb* 'eyebrow' and *kitf* 'shoulder' are already on the way out by the older generations and are completely disused by the younger generations. Practically, therefore, one can say

that the dual suffix functions as a plural allomorph in just about twenty-nine words.

With the exception of *gwna*, *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 hypothetical 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 nouns 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.

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