

Lexical Variation in the Dialects of Malta and Gozo

This paper is concerned with regional lexical variation in Maltese. Previous literature on the topic consists of a number of undergraduate theses that cover specific semantic fields, such as agricultural tools, construction and culinary terminology (see, among others, Chetcuti 2003, Borg 2011, Attard & Spagnol 2014). Such studies do find some regional patterns, but the data are not explicitly compared across a wide range of localities that cover most of the Maltese and Gozitan dialects. Also, whilst specific semantic fields confirm the existence of lexical variation in determined niches, they are limited in establishing the extent of lexical variants of more generic concepts widely used in everyday life and affirming regional linguistic variation.

In this paper I present the results drawn from a lexical survey conducted among 1,000 speakers, aged 60 or over, from 25 localities in Malta and Gozo in an attempt to provide a general idea of Maltese geolinguistics by mapping them out using Gabmap. I introduce a general method for the comparison of geosynonyms to outline common patterns of regional lexical variation. In particular, I focus on the results of a quantitative analysis of lexical data derived from everyday concepts spread across a number of localities in order to give an overview of the degree of lexical variation present in different regions of the Maltese Islands.

References

- Aquilina, Joseph & Benedikt Isserlin (1981) Survey of Contemporary Dialectal Maltese. Volume 1: Gozo. Leeds: Leeds University Press.
- Attard, Keith & Spagnol, Michael (2014) Differenzi lessikali bejn il-Malti u l-Għawdxì. Lehen il-Malti. L-Għaqda tal-Malti – Università.
- Borg, Albert (2011) Lectal Variation in Maltese. In Sandro Caruana, Ray Fabri & Thomas Stolz (eds.), Variation and Change. The Dynamics of Maltese in space, time and society. Akademie Verlag, 11-31.
- Chetcuti, Flavia (2003). Lexical Variation in the Semantic Field of Agricultural Tools. B.A. (Hons), University of Malta.