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Vowel Length in Maltese Dialects of Gozo

ABSTRACT The first part of this article is focused on previous works on the subject, which discuss the vowel system of standard Maltese (SM). The review will show the multiplicity of approaches and lack of unanimity among researchers in describing the vowel inventory of a language assumed to have been standardised. The second part discusses publications that deal with vowel systems in Maltese dialects and focuses on the vowel system of Gozitan dialects, based on the author's fieldwork.

KEYWORDS field research, Gozitan dialects, Gozo, Malta, Maltese dialectology, vowel, vowel length

1 Introduction

Maltese is not only described by Semitic language scholars, including Arabic dialectologists, but also—and this should be emphasised—general linguists, which makes it quite well represented in general linguistic publications. This is probably due to the fact that Maltese is standardised (although still not entirely), has a wealth of literature and is written in an alphabet based on Roman script. As in works on general linguistics, examples from Standard Arabic are most often used, rather than from its dialects. The same applies to standard Maltese (SM). Such an approach completely blurs the linguistic reality of the Maltese Republic. General linguists show us a situation that has little to do with the linguistic reality of Maltese. There are many reasons for this. One of them is that Arabic dialectologists have not carried out any major fieldwork since Stumme's studies at the beginning of the 20th century, even to at least confirm his over 100-year-old findings. Obviously, some research has been carried out, but it is quite limited. Another factor is that Maltese studies to date have almost completely omitted dialectological research and even if there have been any trials, they are usually based on the methodology used to study Indo-European languages

(especially English dialectology) and focus on lexicography. However, dialectology is not lexicography. While all Maltese words may be found in the language's dictionaries (e.g. Agius 2010; Aquilina 1987; 1990; Barbera 1939–1940; Ellul 2020; Moser 2005; Serracino-Inglott 1975–2003; 2016 etc.), users of the language themselves often do not know them. Thousands of people on the island of Gozo do not know words like *ħaġeb* ('eyebrow'), even though it appears in probably every Maltese lexicon.¹

The current language situation in Malta and Gozo—the two main islands of the Maltese archipelago—is somewhat more complicated than can be inferred from most publications. While the standard language is the subject of general linguistics and Arabic dialectology, inhabitants of Malta and Gozo use mainly dialects in everyday communication. It is therefore surprising that it is not Maltese dialects that are of interest to Arabic dialectologists but only SM. This may be due to the fact that Maltese written texts are easy to understand for people with knowledge of Arabic because the Maltese alphabet reflects the origin of the language, not its today's pronunciation.

The main focus of this paper is the vowel length in Gozitan dialects, taking into account the findings to date on Maltese vowel system(s) and its dialects. First discussed is a selection of earlier publications where the issue of vowel systems in the standard language is addressed.² I use the term 'standard' here to distinguish between Maltese, which functions primarily in written form, and the dialects used on a daily basis. A comparison of previous descriptions of Maltese vowel system(s) should show the diversity of approaches and lack of consensus among researchers in describing the vowel inventory of the language, which is assumed to be standardised. The few existing publications that deal with vowel systems in Maltese dialects are then described. The paper concludes with a polemic about the vowel system and the vowel length in Gozitan dialects. All considerations and analyses are based on field research which has been carried out on the island of Gozo since 2015 (Klimiuk and Lipnicka 2019), including research currently undertaken as part of the project 'GozoDia: Gemeinschaftsorientierte dialektologische Studien zur Sprachdynamik der Insel Gozo (Malta)' ['GozoDia: Community-oriented dialectological studies on the linguistic dynamics of the island of Gozo (Malta)'] (2018–2021).

1 During field research carried out since 2015, we have met no one who knows this word, as well as many others that seem to belong to the basic Maltese vocabulary. Some of the words that appeared in the questionnaires used by Aquilina and Isserlin (1981) were also not known to Gozitans. There are many questions here relating to Aquilina and Isserlin's research. So did the Gozitan informants repeat the words of the interviewees?

2 In the examples from quoted publications, I keep the original transcription.

2 SM vowel system(s): Different approaches

Linguists working on Maltese agree that SM includes short and long vowels. For example, Borg³ (1997: 264–265) indicates that there are five short vowels in SM: *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, *u*, and gives examples of minimal pairs. Unfortunately, three out of ten possible pairs (*i*:*e*, *i*:*a*, *i*:*o*, *i*:*u*, *e*:*a*, *e*:*o*, *e*:*u*, *a*:*o*, *a*:*u*, *o*:*u*) are examples of differentiation between only syllables and not whole words:

i : *a* *wisa* ‘breadth’ : *wasal* ‘he arrived,’
i : *u* *siwi* ‘value’ : *suwed* ‘black (pl.),’
a : *u* *dawwar* ‘he turned’ : *duwwa* ‘medicine.’ (Borg 1997: 264–265)

On the basis of the minimal pairs found, Borg raises an important issue in his article about the phonemic status of a short vowel *u*. He writes the following:

[...] vocalic contrasts involving /u/ are systemically weak in SM. Though /u/ is formally part of the M[altese] short vowel system—note its fairly widespread occurrence in unstressed syllables [...]. The low functional yield of the *u* : *o* contrast in SM misled Cohen (1970 [1970a]: 140) into assigning the vowel [u] purely allophonic status in the SM sound system. However, there can be little doubt that the occurrence of stressed [u] in several well-integrated Italian terms of a learned nature and in certain recent loans from English justifies the assigning of full functional status to short stressed /u/ [...]. (Borg 1997: 265)

As far as long vowels are concerned, Borg lists six of them: *i*ː, *r*ː, *e*ː, *a*ː, *o*ː, *u*ː (Borg 1997: 268), and emphasises that Maltese has maintained the opposition between long and short vowels in open stressed syllables (Borg 1997: 266).⁴ He also gives three minimal pairs to confirm the vowel length in SM:

i : *i*ː *nizel* ‘he descended’ : *ni:zel* ‘descending (m.),’
a : *a*ː *ġara* ‘it happened’ : *ġa:ra* ‘her neighbour,’
o : *o*ː *omma* ‘her mother’ : *o:mma* ‘sadness.’ (Borg 1997: 266)

Following Borg’s concept of the occurrence of a long vowel *r*ː which is the result of the monophthongisation of a diphthong *ie* (ʰ*e*), i.e. an *imāla* in Maltese, the word *nizel* should be transcribed as *nr:zel*.⁵ A pair of words *nizel* : *nr:zel*, would no longer be a minimal pair

3 Using only the surname ‘Borg,’ I quote Alexander Borg’s publications. In the case of Albert Borg, however, I systematically refer to ‘Alb. Borg’ in order not to confound my readers.

4 The same vowel system was presented by Borg (1978: 56–73) in his dissertation, in which he wrote long vowels as *iy* (in Borg [1997] as *i*ː), *ii* (in Borg [1997] as *r*ː), *ee*, *aa*, *oo*, *uu*.

5 See Borg (1976) on the *imāla* in Maltese.

if we assume, like Borg, that there is a phoneme *ɪ* and phoneme *iː*. Another solution would be to replace the vowel *i* in the system of short vowels with the vowel *ɪ*.

However, slightly earlier Aquilina (1959: 18), in his grammar *The Structure of Maltese*, distinguishes five short (unpharyngealised) vowels *a, e, i, o, u* and five long (unpharyngealised) vowels *aː, eː, iː, oː, uː*. He also listed the so-called pharyngealised vowels. Among the long vowels, therefore, no distinction is made between *iː* and *ɪː* as in Borg (1978; 1997).

Aquilina, who continued to focus in his grammar on the description of quantity criteria and vowel positions, did not call the examples he provided explicitly minimal pairs, confirming the presence of the vowel length. However, they can readily be found among the words he referred to, e.g.

- a : aː* *ħali* ‘waste’ : *ħaːli* ‘prodigal (m.),’
 ħalya ‘a waste’ : *ħaːlya* ‘prodigal (f.),’ (Aquilina 1959: 20)
 dara ‘he got used to’ : *daːra* ‘her house,’
 jara ‘it happened’ : *jaːra* ‘neighbour,’
 ħara ‘he evacuated his bowels’ : *ħaːra* ‘a district,’ (Aquilina 1959: 21)
- e : eː* *fena* ‘to accuse’ : *feːna* ‘scene,’
 mela ‘to fill’ : *Meːla* ‘short for Kar‘meːla, a Christian name,’
 (Aquilina 1959: 26)
- i : iː* *mili* ‘filling’ : *miːli* ‘miles,’
 fini ‘languishing’ : *fiːni* ‘aim,’ ‘there is in me,’ ‘astute.’ (Aquilina 1959: 31)

In their ‘question-answer’ grammar of Maltese, Alb. Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander state that there are five short and six long vowels, although they also omit one of them in their figures—*uː* (Alb. Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997: 303). They present the Maltese monophthongs by showing orthographic and phonetic realisation, as shown in Table 1:

TABLE 1. SM vowels based on Alb. Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander (1997: 299).

	Orthographic	<i>a</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>ie</i>
short	Phonetic	<i>e</i>	<i>ɛ</i>	<i>ɪ</i>	<i>ɔ</i>	<i>ʊ</i>	
long		<i>eː</i>	<i>ɛː</i>	<i>ɪː</i>	<i>ɔː</i>	<i>uː</i>	<i>ɪː</i>

It is not entirely clear why the authors write about phonetic realisation when they mean phonemes, which in any case have allophones. It should be made clear here that the allophones are a phonetic realisation of a phoneme, a basic unit of the phonological structure. Alb. Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander (1997: 303–304) even list various allophones in SM, but they do not give any minimal pair. The vowel inventory they have presented is equivalent to that described by Borg (1978; 1997).

In the context of these considerations, it is also worth quoting Ambros’s findings from his textbook on SM. He distinguishes five short vowels (*a, e, i, o, u*), noting

that there is no opposition between *u* and *o* in words derived from Arabic (Ambros 1998: 23–24). However, he goes on to point out that among six long vowels, four come from Arabic *ā*, *ī*, *ū*, *ie* (< **ā*) and two, *ē*, *ō*, are imported ('mitimportiert') from Italian or appear as a result of loss ('Schwund') of Arabic consonants: *ʕ*, *ġ* and *h* (Ambros 1998: 39). To confirm his deliberations, he gives some examples of minimal pairs:

- ie* : *i* *liebsa* 'gekleidet (f.)' : *libsa* 'Kleid,'
 nieżla 'herabsteigend (f.)' : *nizla* 'Abstieg,'
 ġierja 'laufend (f.)' : *ġirja* 'Lauf,'
ā : *a* *ħâra* 'Straße, Wohngegend' : *ħara* '(Vulg.) Exkrement.' (Ambros 1998: 39)

Ambros is also the only one to give two pairs of words in which, in addition to the vowel length, there is primarily the opposition of stress:

- (*a* : *ā*) *faħħar* 'rühmen' : *faħħâr* 'Prahler; Schmeichler,'
 ħammâr 'rotfärben' : *ħammâr* 'Rotfärber.' (Ambros 1998: 39)

These two examples of pairs are significant for further consideration of the vowel length in Gozitan dialects. It is probably easy to identify further pairs with a pattern like CaCCaC : CaCCâC, where in the first word a vowel will be stressed in the first closed syllable and in the second word in the last closed syllable. As these two examples from Ambros (1998: 39) illustrate, much more attention should be paid to stress or intonation. Perhaps these suprasegmental features may play a much greater role than the vowel length in some Maltese/Gozitan dialects.

It seems, therefore, that in SM it is quite difficult to find such pairs of words with different meanings in which there would be a clear opposition between short and long vowels. At this point, I reject any opposition only between syllables and not whole words that would confirm the presence of a particular distinctive feature, which is the vowel length in this case. If this strategy were adopted in Maltese (dialects), we would probably be dealing with an extremely extensive vowel system, in which certain allophones would have to be considered as phonemes.

3 Maltese and Gozitan dialects and their vowel systems: Even more different approaches?

In this section three publications (Schabert 1976; Camilleri and Vanhove 1994; Puech 1994) are discussed, in which authors describe vowel inventories in some Maltese dialects. Unfortunately, there are simply no other publications that would provide reliable, strictly dialectological information on Maltese dialects.

In his description of Maltese phonology and morphology, Schabert uses language data obtained from two variants—the dialect of San Ġiljan and the dialect of Marsaxlokk (Schabert 1976: 9–11). As he explains, his choice is based on the supposition that ‘[...] sie etwa die beiden äusseren Enden der Bandbreite bilden, auf der sich die Mundarten Maltas bewegen’ (Schabert 1976: 9). It is not entirely clear what the author means when he writes that Maltese dialects ‘move’ (‘sich bewegen’) between ‘two outer ends of the range’ (‘die beiden äusseren Enden der Bandbreite’). Schabert’s research assumptions sound exceptionally momentous and may imply that his grammatical description includes dialects stretching between San Ġiljan in the Central Region of Malta and Marsaxlokk in the South Eastern Region.

However, Schabert wrote primarily a comparative study in which he used language data from two different dialects, which should also be classified in two other dialect groups—San Ġiljan is an urban dialect belonging to Maltese port dialects, while Marsaxlokk is a rural dialect and shares a number of features common to Gozitan dialects, which are also rural. Schabert (1976: 10) among the characteristics of the Marsaxlokk dialect distinguishes an *išmām* (also known as *tafxīm*) $\bar{a} > \bar{o} > \bar{u}$), a ‘strong’ diphthongisation and a ‘stronger’ pharyngealisation than in San Ġiljan. His grammar therefore presents data from two different dialects, but most importantly for our considerations, Schabert describes their vowel systems. San Ġiljan has four short vowels, three pharyngealised vowels and four (+ two?) long vowels, as shown in Table 2:

TABLE 2. San Ġiljan vowel system based on Schabert (1976: 16).

short		<i>a</i>	<i>æ</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>o</i>		
	pharyngealised	<i>ɑ</i>	<i>æ̠</i>		<i>ɔ</i>		
long		<i>ā</i>	(<i>ǣ</i>)	<i>ī</i>	(<i>ō</i>)	<i>ū</i>	<i>î</i>

The long vowels $\bar{æ}$ and \bar{o} appear only in borrowings and may be pronounced as long or shortened to æ and ɔ , and in addition, the vowel $\bar{æ}$ is sometimes replaced by \hat{i} (Schabert 1976: 17). The author also quotes an anecdote concerning the long vowel \bar{o} , when the teacher of his informant’s daughter corrected the pronunciation of his speaker, who did not pronounce this vowel as long:

Meine Informanten hatten zum größten Teil ein ziemlich konservatives Phonemsystem, das z. B. kein / \bar{o} / enthält. So wurde mir von einem Informanten erzählt, die Lehrerin seiner kleinen Tochter sei eine /*soru*/ ‘Klosterschwester’, was seine Frau dazu veranlasste, ihn zu verbessern: /*sōru*/ müsse er sagen. Außerdem sagten sie beispielsweise regelmäßig /*bil-mod*/ ‘langsam’ statt SM /*bil-mōd*/. (Schabert 1976: 10)

One of the users of the dialect of San Ġiljan had a different type of vowel system, as shown in Table 3:

TABLE 3. Distinct San Ġiljan vowel system based on Schabert (1976: 17).

short		<i>a</i>	<i>æ</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>o</i>		
	pharyngealised	<i>ā</i>	<i>ǣ</i>		<i>ō</i>		
long		<i>ā</i>		<i>ī</i>		<i>ū</i>	<i>î</i>

Vowels *ā*, *ǣ* and *ō* replace three pharyngealised vowels *a*, *æ*, *ɔ*, respectively, while the vowel *ā* is also maintained among the long unpharyngealised vowels. Schabert argues his decision not to classify *ā* (< *a*), *ǣ* and *ō* among long ones as follows:

Diese /*ǣ*/, /*ō*/ und /*ā*/ < /*a*/ verhalten sich aber insofern nicht wie die übrigen langen Vokale (bzw. nicht wie /*ā*/ < **ā*), als sie der Kürzung bei Akzentverlust nicht unterliegen, so dass es auch bei diesen Sprechern gerechtfertigt erscheint, sie nicht der Klasse der Langvokale /*ī*, *ū*, *î*, *ō*, *ǣ*, *ā*/ zuzurechnen. (Schabert 1976: 17)

Unfortunately, Schabert does not give any minimal pair in his description to confirm the opposition between long and short vowels in the urban dialect of San Ġiljan.

As far as the Marsaxlokk dialect is concerned, its vowel system is characterised by four short vowels, three pharyngealised and two (+ one?) long vowels, as shown in Table 4:

TABLE 4. Marsaxlokk vowel system based on Schabert (1976: 17).

short		<i>a</i>	<i>æ</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>o</i>		
	pharyngealised	<i>ɑ</i>	<i>ǽ</i>		<i>ɔ</i>		
long			(<i>ǣ</i>)		<i>ō</i>		<i>î</i>

It seems that any Arabic dialectologist who does not even have the knowledge of Maltese rural dialects is immediately conspicuous by the absence of the long vowel *ā*, which indicates the presence of the *išmām* in these varieties. Since the long vowel **ā* in the dialect of Marsaxlokk has been replaced by the vowel *ō*, in order to prove the occurrence of long vowel phonemes, it is necessary to find minimal pairs for the pair *o* : *ō*. However, the author does not give any examples of minimal pairs. My search for such pairs in his grammar and registered text has come to nothing. As for the long vowels *ī* and *ū*, they do not appear in the system, as Schabert (1976: 17) writes, due to diphthongisation. Apparently, the author did not recognise pausal forms in this case

(Borg 1977; Klimiuk 2017; Lipnicka 2017a; 2017b; 2022), as illustrated by the examples quoted by him and a sample registered text (Schabert 1976: 226–233). It is curious and remarkable that not once during his fieldwork had he encountered contextual forms where no diphthongs would appear, as is the case with Gozitan dialects.⁶ Perhaps his questionnaire was not prepared to register contextual forms either, or he did not collect the relevant recordings.⁷ His description of the Marsaxlokk vowel system indicates that the length is only phonetic.

Another important piece of information on the vowel system of Maltese dialects is an article by Camilleri and Vanhove (1994) on the dialect of Mġarr on the island of Malta. The authors distinguish in this dialect, as shown Table 5, four short vowels and as many long vowels:

TABLE 5. Mġarr vowel system based on Camilleri and Vanhove (1994: 95).

short		<i>a</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>o</i>		
long				<i>ī</i>	<i>ō</i>	<i>ū</i>	<i>ig</i>

As in the case of the Marsaxlokk dialect, the lack of a long vowel *ā* is noteworthy due to the presence of an *išmām* in this dialect too which, just like the dialect of Marsaxlokk, is rural. However, Camilleri and Vanhove note that the long vowel *ā* appears in the recordings they have collected in three words. That is what they write about it:

We saw that /ō/ in Mġarri corresponds to /ɔ̄/ or /ā/ in standard Maltese, and that whenever an [ā] is found it is due to the presence of the virtual phoneme /^o/ ⁸ and has to be interpreted as a phonological short vowel. There are three exceptions to this rule in the corpus.

Two are borrowings from Italian: [brávu] ‘very clever,’ [kanadá] ‘Canada.’

The third one comes from an Arabic word with a short /a/ (also short in standard Maltese): [mára] ‘woman.’ (Camilleri and Vanhove 1994: 99)

It seems that it is difficult to draw any far-reaching conclusions without the context of speech, the place in the phrase of these words, the type of sentences or the emphasis with which they were pronounced. The pronunciation of the word *mára* ‘woman’

6 See for example a text from Sannat (Gozo) in this volume by Klimiuk and Farrugia (2022).

7 Klimiuk and Lipnicka (2019) draw attention to questionnaires in which data must be collected both in pausa and in context.

8 Camilleri and Vanhove (1994) use the term ‘virtual phoneme’ under the influence of Cohen’s works, who used it to describe the phonology of the dialect of Tunis (Cohen 1970b: 166), and then also in his studies of Maltese phonology (Cohen 1970a: 131, 139). In his earlier work, he did not describe it as virtual (Cohen 1967: 166). Vanhove (1993) then uses this term also in her work.

with a long vowel may just indicate that once again the length is only a phonetic feature and not a phonological one.

The authors also point out that the difference in the smaller number of long vowels in the dialect of Mġarr compared to SM ‘may account for a lesser influence of Siculo-Italian on Imġarri than on standard Maltese’ (Camilleri and Vanhove 1994: 95). I think it is not so much the ‘influence of Siculo-Italian’ but rather of the people who influenced the development, formation and creation of the standard language, the dialects on which SM was based, their knowledge of Italian, their degree of education etc.

The article by Camilleri and Vanhove is, above all, crucial to the consideration here because of the ‘minimal pairs’ found by researchers to confirm the presence of length opposition in the dialect of Mġarr. The authors contrast four pairs of vowels (and a diphthong *ie*):

$\bar{o} : o$	/dómna/ ‘medal’ : /tómna/ ‘land measure,’
$\bar{u} : o$	/fū/ ‘on’ : /fóra/ ‘poor,’ /ġūh/ ‘hunger’ : /hóġor/ ‘lap,’
$\bar{i} : i$	/bídu/ ‘with his hand’ : /bídu/ ‘beginning,’
$\bar{ie} : i$	/mi \bar{e} t/ ‘he died’ : /mitt/ ([mit]) ‘hundred.’ (Camilleri and Vanhove 1994: 96)

In order to prove the presence of vowel length in the dialect of Mġarr, it would be necessary to find minimal pairs for two oppositions $i : \bar{i}$ and $o : \bar{o}$. Unfortunately, all the pairs found by Camilleri and Vanhove are not up to the expected standard as far as the opposition between the two words is concerned. The pair *dómna* ‘medal’ : *tómna* ‘land measure’ is also the opposition between the voiced consonant *d* and the unvoiced consonant *t*. In fact, this pair may be used as confirmation of the presence of two consonant phonemes *d* and *t*. The juxtaposition *fū* ‘on’ : *fóra* ‘poor’ could be considered appropriate if the minimal pair is a syllable pair. However, it would be good if both words had the same number of syllables, in this case two. Another example of two words *ġūh* ‘hunger’ : *hóġor* ‘lap’ is completely wrong and no argument is made for using it as any minimal pair. The opposition *bídu* ‘with his hand’ : *bídu* ‘beginning’ seems to be accurate at first glance, but *bídu* ‘with his hand’ is a combination of words: the preposition *b-* ‘with,’ the noun *íd* ‘hand,’ and the pronominal suffix *-u* ‘his.’ There is also another question of whether the vowel *i* in the word *bídu* ‘beginning’ is by any chance not the vowel *ɪ* (also written here as $\bar{\partial}$), as in Gozitan dialects. The last pair are the opposition of rising diphthong $\bar{y}e$ (which starts with a semivowel \bar{y} and ends with a vowel *e*) and a vowel *i* (*ɪ?*, $\bar{\partial}?$).

The minimal pairs mentioned by Camilleri and Vanhove may be barely the same proof that length is not a distinctive feature when it comes to vowel phonemes in the dialect of Mġarr. Also, three words with a long vowel \bar{a} (*brávu* ‘very clever,’ *kanadá* ‘Canada’ and *mára* ‘woman’) may prove that length is not a relevant feature in this case.

Puech (1994: 18–23) in the introduction to his book with Maltese ethnographic texts briefly discusses four types of vowel inventories of Maltese dialects. In the case of rural dialects—both Maltese and Gozitan—he distinguishes long diphthongised and undiphthongised vowels. As in the case of the dialect of Marsaxlokk, this is a phenomenon of diphthongisation in pausa.

As far as the vowel system of Gozitan dialects is concerned, Puech identifies four short vowels and five long vowels, two of which are diphthongised, as shown in Table 6:

TABLE 6. Gozitan vowel system based on Puech (1994: 18–20).

short		<i>a</i> / [ɒ]	<i>ɛ</i>	<i>ɪ</i>		<i>σ</i>
long	diphthongised			<i>i:</i>		<i>u:</i>
	undiphthongised	<i>ɑ:</i>	<i>ɛ:</i> / [æ:]	<i>ɔ:</i> / [ɒ:]		<i>σ:</i>

Another vowel system discussed concerns the so-called quadrilateral ('quadrilatère') of Żurrieq, Safi, Kirkop, Mqabba and Qrendi, located in the Southern Region of Malta (see Table 7). Puech stresses that the system of short vowels is the same as in Gozitan dialects, there are also two diphthongised vowels, but the realisation of a vowel *i:* as a diphthong *oi* fades away. In addition, it is possible to list probably four (or three excluding *σ:*) long undiphthongised vowels and their allophones. The word 'probably' here stems from the fact that it is sometimes extremely difficult to say what Puech means because his analysis is at times ambiguous. The author simply does not make it clear which long vowels are phonemes:

TABLE 7. Żurrieq vowel system based on Puech (1994: 20–21).

short		<i>a</i> / [ɒ]	<i>ɛ</i>	<i>ɪ</i>		<i>σ</i>
long	diphthongised			<i>i:</i>		<i>u:</i>
	undiphthongised	<i>ɑ:</i>	<i>ɛ:</i> / [æ:]		<i>ɔ:</i> / [ɒ:]	<i>σ:</i>

The third vowel system applies to Malta's other rural dialects. Puech writes about four short vowels, two long diphthongised vowels and three undiphthongised ones, as shown in Table 8:

TABLE 8. Maltese rural vowel system based on Puech (1994: 21).

short		<i>a</i>	<i>æ</i>	<i>ɪ</i> / [ɛ]		<i>σ</i> / [ɔ]
long	diphthongised			<i>i:</i>		<i>u:</i>
	undiphthongised	<i>ɑ:</i>	<i>ɛ:</i>		<i>ɔ:</i>	

The last vowel system proposed by Puech (Table 9) concerns urban dialects and SM, with five short vowels, specifying that vowel *ʊ* has acquired a marginal phonemic status, and five long vowels:

TABLE 9. Maltese urban and SM vowel system based on Puech (1994: 21–22).

short		<i>a</i>	<i>ɛ</i>	<i>ɪ</i>	<i>ɔ</i>	(<i>ʊ</i>)
long	diphthongised					
	undiphthongised	<i>a:</i>	<i>ɛ:</i>	<i>i:</i>	<i>ɔ:</i>	<i>u:</i>

In the same way as Schabert, Puech in his collection of ethnographic texts does not give any minimal pairs to confirm the opposition between short and long vowels. Another problem that may arise from his analysis is that the long vowels are not always sufficiently and clearly described, making it sometimes difficult to determine which long vowels, according to Puech, may be phonemes.

All the authors mentioned here agree, however, that there are four short vowels in Gozitan and Maltese rural dialects. As far as long vowels are concerned, the discrepancies are already significant, mainly due to the adopted description model, including the way in which the vowel **ā* > SM *ie* is described, which can be implemented as a long vowel *ī* or a rising diphthong *ʲe*. This raises a number of problems of interpretation.

4 Gozitan vowel system and vowel length

Puech (1994: 18–20), who in the vowel system for Gozitan dialects (see Table 6) distinguishes four short vowels (*a*, *ɛ*, *ɪ*, *ʊ*) and five long ones (four undiphthongised *a:*, *ɛ:*, *ɔ:* / *ɔ:*, and two diphthongised *i:*, *u:*), does not give any minimal pairs to confirm his findings. Puech's texts show that his approach to describing the Gozitan vowel system was strictly phonetic and not phonological. This is quite surprising because when studying spoken Semitic languages/dialects, phonology should be the starting point. A slightly different approach was proposed by Schabert in his research into the dialect of Marsaxlokk, and by Camilleri and Vanhove in their description of the dialect of Mġarr.

None of the authors of studies on Maltese dialects has so far attempted to question the existence of vowel length in Gozitan dialects or, as previous analyses have also shown, probably all rural dialects in which the *išmām* phenomenon occurs. The reason for this approach could be seen in the influence of standard language on research into Maltese dialects. Studies to date take for granted the occurrence of opposition between long and short vowels. The presence of vowel length leads, as Lucas and

Čéplö (2020: 273) write, to the fact that ‘Maltese has a much richer vowel phoneme inventory than typical Maghrebi Arabic dialects, with, among the monophthongs [...], as well as seven distinct diphthongs.’ It is true that SM has more diphthongs than any Maghrebi Arabic dialects, but as research in Gozo also shows, the number of diphthongs may be lower.

Probably, the Maltese alphabet itself also has a great influence on the study of dialects. The way vowels are written may imply, for example, reading a short vowel *i* only as a phoneme *i* and not, for example, as *ə* or *ɪ*, which may also apply to the example of *bīdu* ‘beginning’ (Camilleri and Vanhove 1994: 96) already quoted. Another factor in this approach may be the methodology chosen by researchers, based, for example, on Roman or Germanic languages.

Field research carried out in the last few years in Gozo shows (Klimiuk and Lipnicka 2019) that it is not possible to find any minimal pair that would prove the opposition between long and short vowels in all sixteen Gozitan dialects studied.⁹ Attempts to find such pairs each time have failed. This is due to three basic characteristics of Gozitan dialects: the way of realisation of an *imāla*, an *išmām* and pausal forms.

The *imāla* in these dialects is still realised as a rising diphthong *ʏe* (*ʏə* etc.) or as a vowel *e*. In none of the dialects examined was the *imāla* pronounced as a long vowel *ī* [i:], as in SM. So it is impossible to find such minimal pairs as: *liebsa* (*libsa*) ‘dressed (f.)’ : *libsa* (*libsa*) ‘dress,’ *niežla* (*nīzla*) ‘descending (f.)’ : *nizla* (*nizla*) ‘way down.’ In Kerċem, for example, the pairs of these two words would be as follows:

ʏepsa ‘dressed (f.)’ – *ləpsa* ‘dress,’
nʏezla ‘descending (f.)’ – *nəzla* ‘way down.’

Another phenomenon—the *išmām* reduces the occurrence of the long vowel *ā*, which is demonstrated by the two earlier studies of dialects of Marsaxlokk and Mġarr discussed here (see Table 4 and Table 5). The long vowel *ā* does not appear in these dialects. Assuming that examples of opposition between *a* and *ā* would be found, it would then be worth checking whether the same syllable is stressed in both words, as was the case with Ambros’s examples (1998: 39). The stress can therefore be a distinctive feature.

Another key phenomenon for the vowel inventory of Gozitan dialects are pausal forms, which are characterised by the diphthongisation of vowels *u* and *i* in the last closed or open syllable (Lipnicka 2022). Their diachronic consonant environment—emphatic or non-emphatic, or a language of borrowings, in this case Italian—must be taken into account. Depending on whether a word is in a context or in pausa, it is

9 These are the following dialects: Għarb, Għasri, Żebbuġ, San Lawrenz, Santa Luċija, Kerċem, Victoria, Fontana, Victoria WSF (Wara San Fraŋġisk), Munxar, Xewkija, Sannat, Xaġhra, Għajnsielem, Nadur, and Qala.

realised in a different way. Nor is it the case that vowels *u* and *i* in the context, i.e. already as monophthongs, will be realised as long vowels. They can be articulated as short as other vowels. In this case, it is not only the word stress that plays an important role but above all the stress of the whole phrase or word clusters. Measurements of vowel lengths carried out so far have shown that even in the case of word stress, it is quite difficult to speak of any regularity. It is therefore worthwhile to look primarily at the entire phrase and clusters and their articulation, not just at a single word.

Based on field research, it should be considered that vowel length in Gozitan dialect is phonetic, not phonological. There are therefore no such minimal pairs that confirm the opposition between long and short vowels.

The vowel system of Gozitan dialects has fewer phonemes than the standard language inventory. There are six vowels: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* and *ə*. Between these vowels, it is easy to find minimal pairs. As far as raising diphthong *ye* is concerned, if it is articulated as a diphthong, it is part of the diphthong inventory and not of the vowel system.

5 Conclusion

The analysis presented above shows that vowel length in Gozitan dialects is phonetic, not phonological. Moreover, studies of other rural dialects in Malta so far also indicate this, although their authors have always differentiated between short and long vowels. This was probably due to the influence of standard language on the way research is conducted. Arabic dialectology is also familiar with cases where researchers have reached for the literary language more than needed. Standard language should not be the main reference for dialectological studies.

Unfortunately, research into Gozitan dialects is a neglected part of Maltese linguistics, despite attempts such as the Aquilina and Isserlin study (1981). In fact, our knowledge of e.g. Maltese urban dialects is infinitesimal and limited. The statement that SM is based on the urban dialects of the port area is repeated like a mantra, but there is no specific, extensive study of these dialects except for the comparative grammar of Schabert (1976) and his data from the dialect of San Ġiljan. It seems that now is the last chance to carry out any such larger-scale research on the island of Malta as well. This will not only enrich the knowledge of Semitic dialectology but, above all, contribute to research into the history of the Maltese language and preservation of the cultural heritage showing the diversity of the Maltese and Gozitan dialects.

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