

SEBASTIAN BEDNAROWICZ

(Kazimierz Wielki University, Bydgoszcz, Poland)

On Maltese Names for Some Ancient Agricultural Tools**Abstract**

Etymologies demonstrate complexity of semantic changes that the Maltese words underwent as well as reflect the local history and lifestyle of peasants dwelling in rural areas of Malta and Gozo. In such way the words may be considered as a reservoir of the collective memory of Maltese people. Strikingly, the Maltese language, though Semitic in its grammar, semantically seems to be attached more to the Romance word. It is manifested not only in the preponderance of Sicilian words in Maltese dictionaries, but also in the transposition of some semantic structures mirroring the internal development of Romance languages. In the article the following Maltese terms were discussed: *mghażqa*, *zappun*, *mingel*, *xatba*, *rixtellu*, *mingla*, *rancila*, *romblu tad-dris*, *midra*, *luh*, *mannara*, *lexxuna*.

Keywords: Maltese language, etymology, agricultural terms, Romance languages, Malta, Sicily

Maltese is a Semitic language closely related to North African Arabic. It is spoken by approximately four hundred thousand inhabitants of the islands Malta and Gozo (Ghawdex) as well as by members of the Maltese diaspora (Australia). The Arab history of Malta began in 870 when the Arabs conquered the archipelago and sold its Roman and Punic dwellers into slavery. The islands were later repopulated but by Arabic speaking inhabitants of Muslim Sicily. After in 1091 the Normans took power over Malta, Arabs were allowed to remain there. The Norman reign was rather tolerant and the Muslims constituted still the majority of Maltese population until 1224 when the Roman Emperor Frederick II expelled them from the island. The Arabic language, however, continued to survive among Christian inhabitants of Malta who avoided the displacement. Another event that influenced on the fate of Maltese archipelago was the arrival of the St. John Knights, who

settled down there after in 1530 the Turks forced them to abandon Rhode. The Knights retained the power over Malta until the invasion of French troops that conquered the island in 1798. Nevertheless, the French had to withdraw quickly and passed the rule over Malta to the British Empire. The British period in the history of Malta finished in 1964 after the archipelago got gained independence. Since 2004 the Republic of Malta is a member of European Union.

This complex history and a relatively short period of the Arab and Islamic domination caused that the Maltese language differs substantially from other Arabic varieties. Such peculiarities are observable first of all in the vocabulary. The analysis of the etymology of the 41,016 words in Aquilina's *Maltese-English Dictionary* showed that 32.41% are of Semitic origin, 52.46% are from Sicilian or Italian, and 6.12% are from English¹. Such strong Romance lexical influence on the Maltese resulted from the fact that the Italian culture and languages preponderated in Malta at least from the Norman period. The Romance cultural dominance started to weaken only when the British took power over the island. The Semitic features of the Maltese language are more perceptible in its grammar. For instance, Maltese preserved the purely Arabic verbal conjugation reflecting North African dialectal peculiarities. The North African Arabic influence on Maltese is manifested also in the reduction of the vowel in the unstressed open non-final syllable. This phonological feature concerns the vocabulary both of Semitic and Romance origin².

Referring to the internal differentiation of the Maltese language one can distinguish some regional linguistic variants. First of all, they may be divided into rural dialects and the urban standard language based on a variety used in the Great Harbor (Valetta, Birgu and surrounding cities). The regional differences of Maltese include mainly phonetic alternations concerning both vocalic and consonantal levels³.

The literary form of Maltese appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and eventually was recognized as an official language of the Republic of Malta (in 1964). It is worth mentioning that it is the only Semitic language that adopted the Latin script for orthographical purposes. First attempts to write in such manner date back to the fifteenth century⁴.

In the subsequent part of this article we will present the etymological examination of a handful of Maltese names concerning agricultural tools. The research will try to explain etymologies of the Maltese words, as well as it will include semantic and word-formative remarks. As our study focuses on the diachronic use of words, we have consulted mainly ancient dictionaries, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

¹ Joseph M. Brincat, *Maltese and Other Languages. A Linguistic History of Malta*, Sta. Venera 2011, p. 407.

² Cf. Fernande Krier, *Le maltais au contact de l'italien. Etude phonologique, grammaticale et sémantique*, Helmut Buske Verlag, Hamburg 1976, pp. 33–34; Janusz Danecki, *Współczesny język arabski i jego dialekty*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, Warszawa 2009, pp. 86 and 91.

³ Cf. Joseph Aquilina, *Maltese Linguistic Surveys*, University of Malta, Malta 1976, pp. 40–50.

⁴ Brincat, *Maltese and Other Languages*, pp. 169–180.

Nevertheless, we have also consulted the great dictionary of Joseph Aquilina⁵, which still remains one of the most useful lexicographic sources and presents many interesting etymological proposals for Maltese words.

1) Hoe, mattock

A hoe (mattock) was one of the most primitive tools of farmers used before the plough was invented. In the Maltese language this implement has two names originated both in Semitic and Romance stems. The former is represented by Maltese *mghażqa*⁶ [māz'a], a word that has a structural and semantic counterpart in Arabic (*mi'zaqa*)⁷ and was formed according to the Arabic pattern of *nomina instrumenti* (*mi-CC-a-C-a*), though reshaped slightly because of the phonetic development of the Maltese language. The root *ʕzq 'to dig, to hoe' is attested also in Hebrew and Aramaic⁸ and seems to be characteristic for the West Semitic⁹.

Another Maltese word for "hoe" is *zappun*¹⁰, being an evident loanword from the Sicilian *zappuni* (cf. It. *zappone*) 'a kind of long and narrow mattock used to cultivate rocky soil'¹¹. This term, in turn, is derived from the common Italian *zappa* "a hoe used to work on non-rocky fields", which was provided with the augmentative suffix *-uni* (It. *-one*)¹². The etymology of *zappa* has not been explained satisfactory yet. It is assumed that it is rooted in the late Latin *sappa* 'hoe'¹³, the origin of which, however, remains uncertain. Pratti claims that the word was borrowed from Illyric *tsap* "male goat" because of the similarity between the bearded goat's head and the shape of this implement¹⁴. More convincing than such folk etymology is the explanation proposed by Pianigiani,

⁵ Joseph Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, Midsea Publications, Valletta 1987 (vol. 1 A–L) – 1990 (vol. 2 M–Z and addenda).

⁶ Michelantonio Vassalli, *Vocabolario Maltese recato nelle lingue latina e italiana*, Roma 1796, p. 452; Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 851.

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Freytag, *Lexicon arabico-latinum*, v. 3, Halle 1835, p. 151; Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. 5, Libr. du Liban, Beirut 1968, p. 2036.

⁸ Witold Tyloch, *The Evidence of the Proto-lexicon for the Cultural Background of the Semitic People*, in: *Hamito-Semitic*, Mouton, The Hague–Paris 1975, p. 58.

⁹ The cultural function of the term *mghażqa* in the Maltese appears in a proverb: *Ta bli-mghażqa fuq saqajh* ('He hit his leg with the hoe') which means that 'someone did something against himself'. Michelantonio Vassalli, *Motti, aforismi e proverbi maltesi*, Malta 1828, p. 86.

¹⁰ Vassalli defined it as *mghażqa kbira*, "a big hoe", Vassalli, *Vocabolario*, p. 682; Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 1634.

¹¹ Vincenzo Mortillaro, *Nuovo dizionario siciliano-italiano*, Palermo 1853; cf. Francesco d'Alberti di Villanuova, *Dizionario universale critico-enciclopedico della lingua italiana*, v. 6, Milano 1835, p. 931.

¹² Di Villanuova, *Dizionario universale*, v. 6, p. 931; Maria Grossmann and Franz Rainer, *La formazione delle parole in italiano*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 2004, pp. 287–289.

¹³ Wilhelm Meyer-Lübke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, C. Winter, Heidelberg 1911, p. 572; Mihai Vinereanu, *Dicționar etimologic al limbii române pe baza cercetărilor de indo-europenistică*, Alcor Edimpex, București 2008, p. 726.

¹⁴ Angelico Pratti, *Vocabolario etimologico italiano*, Garzanti, Torino 1951, p. 1060.

who deduces the origin of the Romance *sappa/zappa* from the Greek *σκαπάνη* ‘small hoe’¹⁵. If so, the word would contain the PIE root *(s)kēp-, (s)kōp- ‘to dig’ (cf. Polish *kop-ać*)¹⁶. Still, the Illyrian influence or mediation should not be excluded since the Albanian dialects know alternations of the type *sk=ts*, e.g. *sqap/tsap* ‘male goat’¹⁷.

2) Harrow

The harrow is an agricultural implement used to crush lumps of earth that were formed as a result of the ploughing. Before the sowers widespread, the fields were harrowed also after the sieving to bury seeds with the soil. The tool consists usually of a grate provided with iron teeth attached on its one side.

In the Classical Arabic language¹⁸ the harrow was called *mikamma* (from *kmm ‘to cover up’)¹⁹ or *mimlaqa* (from *mlq ‘to even’)²⁰. The meanings of these terms, as we can see from the verbal roots, are related to the function and use of this agricultural tool. None of these stems, however, appear in the Maltese name for the harrow, which is *xatba*²¹.

The history of the word *xatba* [šatba] in the Maltese language dates back at least to the beginning of the sixteenth century. The term was mentioned in 1502 in the acts of the notary Julio Cumbo, who wrote: “Item una chana di chanare terra alias xatba”²². Hence, the word *xatba* is one of very few of Maltese terms that were recorded before the literary language emerged in the eighteenth century²³.

Etymologically, *xatba* seems to be related to the Arabic word *šaṭba* ‘a green palm leaf’, which probably was derived from the stem *šṭb ‘to cut, to scarify’²⁴ because palm leaves look as they were incised on their edges. Another explanation, why the root *šṭb was used to denote a palm leaf is that it might serve as a tool to scarify skin, for instance for the ritual purposes. Similarly, as the harrow leaves furrows on the earth, which resemble scarification, it is possibly that the word *šaṭba* changed its meaning and started to be employed as the name for this agricultural implement.

¹⁵ Ottorino Pianigiani, *Vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana*, Società editrice Dante Alighieri di Albrighi, Roma-Milano 1907, p. 1550.

¹⁶ Vinereanu, *Dicționar etimologic*, p. 727, cf. Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2010, pp. 1342–1343.

¹⁷ Vladimir Orel, *Albanian Etymological Dictionary*, Brill, Leiden–Boston–Köln 1998, p. 47; cf. Vinereanu *Dicționar etimologic*, p. 727.

¹⁸ The modern Arabic neologisms, as irrelevant for our research, were excluded from the analysis.

¹⁹ Georg Wilhelm Freytag, *Lexicon arabico-latinum*, v. 4, Halle 1837, p. 57.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 207.

²¹ Vassalli, *Vocabolario*, p. 623; Francesco Vella, *Dizionario portatile delle lingue maltese, italiana, inglese*, Livorno 1843, p. 156; Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 1550.

²² “Then a plane to level the earth, i.e. *xatba*”, Godfrey Wettinger, *Kliem Malti Qadim*, University of Malta, Malta 2006, p. 118.

²³ *Xatba* appears also in the proverb *Fost l’ahwa min jigib il-palju w min jiqarqar ix-xatba* (‘It happens that one brother carries the prize and another drags the harrow’), Vassalli, *Motti*, p. 32.

²⁴ Georg Wilhelm Freytag, *Lexicon arabico-latinum*, v. 2, Halle 1833, p. 421.

A useful hint to connect the palm leaf with the harrow may be offered by the Andalusian Arabic noun *šaṭaba* ‘broom made of the palm leaves’²⁵. One may assume that this tool could be used as well to level ground, so it served as a rake. The modern Maltese word for ‘rake’ is *moxt tal-ħadid*²⁶, though, in the past, as testified by Vassalli (1796) and Vella (1843), a rake was called simply *xatba*. As the harrow is used for the activity which resembles raking, the term *xatba* extended its meaning by that agricultural implement²⁷.

Another Maltese tool corresponding to the harrow was *rixtellu*. It consisted of a wooden grate with ten iron teeth on one side of it. The implement was used by farmers to clear the field of weeds²⁸. The word *rixtellu* is of Romance background, though its phonetic development [rištellu] may be considered problematic, because it should be related to the late Latin *rastellum* ‘rake’ (hence It. *rastello*, Sp. *rastillo*, Cat. *rastell*, Fr. *râteau*²⁹). According to Brincat the cluster *-št-* in the place of *-st-* seems to be a Sicilian influence, and the term should be borrowed in the early period of Romance impact on the Maltese language³⁰.

3) Sickle

The Maltese word for ‘sickle’ is *mingel*³¹ [mingel]. This term has isomorphic counterparts in the majority of Semitic languages (Ar. *miṅgal*; Syr. *maggālā*; Hbr. *maggel*; Akk. *niggallu*). However, even though the word-formation of *mingel* resembles similar structure of Arabic tools names (*mi-CC-a-C* e.g. *mibrad* ‘file’), it is difficult to identify its semantic root. Aro³² and Tyloch³³ maintained that this root, although unattested in other Semitic terms, is *ngl. Such view is shared by Diakonoff³⁴ and Militarev³⁵, as well as Orel and Stolbova who derive *miṅgal* from the hypothetical Proto Afro-Asiatic *nVgil ‘to cut’³⁶. Yet, this etymon presents both structural and semantic problems. Firstly,

²⁵ Federico Corriente, *A Dictionary of Andalusian Arabic*, Brill, Leiden–New York–Köln 1997, p. 282.

²⁶ Pawlu Bugeja, *Kelemet il-Malti. Malti-Ingiliz. English-Maltese*, Gżira 2013, p. 431.

²⁷ Cf. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol.2, p. 1550.

²⁸ Aquilina, *Maltese- English Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 1227; cf. Martin Morana, *Ara x’Int Tgħid. Glossarju Enċiklopediku ta’ Termini Storiċi, Toponimi, Qwiel u Idjomi, Tradizzionijiet Maltin, Kurżitajiet ohra*, il-Qrendi 2012, p. 198.

²⁹ Meyer-Lübke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p. 532.

³⁰ Brincat, *Maltese and Other Languages*, p. 121.

³¹ Vassalli, *Vocabolario*, p. 494; Vella, *Dizionario portatile*, p. 89.

³² Jusi Aro, *Gemeinsemitische Ackerbauerterminologie*, “Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft”, 113/3 (1964), p. 476.

³³ Tyloch, *The Evidence of the Proto-lexicon*, p. 58.

³⁴ Igor Diakonoff, *The Earliest Semitic Society. Linguistic Data*, “Journal of Semitic Studies”, XLIII/2 (1998), pp. 213–214.

³⁵ Alexander Militarev, *The Prehistory of a Dispersal: the Proto-Afrasian (Afroasiatic) Farming Lexicon*, in: *Time Depth in Historical Linguistics*, The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge 2000, p. 147.

³⁶ Vladimir Orel and Olga Stolbova, *Hamito-Semitic Etymological Dictionary. Materials for a Reconstruction*, Brill, Leiden–New York–Köln 1995, pp. 402–403 and 408.

in the oldest attestation of this word on the Semitic ground, namely in the Akkadian *niggallu* or *ningallu*³⁷, occurs the unusual word-formation of *nomina instrumenti*. We would rather expect *mangalu, which remains in accordance with the East Semitic consonantal patterns³⁸. Moreover, the particle *nin-* appears very often in Sumerian compound words where it means simply ‘thing’, what may suggest a non-Semitic origin of the supposed *nin-gallu*³⁹. Still, both these obstacles to provide an Afro-Asiatic provenience for the stem *ngl seem to have been convincingly removed by Blažek⁴⁰.

By contrast, according to Klein, the Hebrew *maggel* should be associated with the Semitic root *g-l-l (‘to roll’)⁴¹. Indeed, the stem *gol ‘to be round’⁴² may be semantically related to the bowed shape of the sickle. Moreover, this stem probably occurs in Akkadian *gamlu* ‘bent stick’⁴³ and Ugaritic *gml* ‘first quarter of the moon’⁴⁴. The metathesis *mg > gm* in the hypothetical Semitic word formation *m-gl seems to be the only plausible explanation⁴⁵ because it is dubious, if the root *mgl related to ‘sickle’ existed in Semitic at all. Admittedly, somewhat similar verbal stem (*mǧl) may be encountered in the South Semitic Jibbali. It means ‘to pick grass or fruit’⁴⁶, so an activity which is often performed with a sickle, but one should rather connect this verb with *migir* ‘kind of grass’ attested in Harari and borrowed from Cushitic⁴⁷. Worth mentioning here that the

³⁷ Jeremy Black, Andrew George, Nicholas Postgate, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2000, p. 252.

³⁸ Richard Caplice, *Introduction to Akkadian*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Roma 2002, p. 89.

³⁹ The term *mayul* ‘a kind of sickle’, that occurs in Old Georgian and according to Klimov should be related to the Kartvelian verb stem *γwel- ‘to curve’, might offer here a helpful hint (provided that it is not a loanword from the Semitic as suggested Blažek). Georgij Klimov, *Etymological Dictionary of the Kartvelian Languages*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin–New York 1998, p. 227; Vaclav Blažek, *The Diffusion of Agricultural Terms from Mesopotamia*, “Arhiv Orientalni”, 60 (1992), p. 17.

⁴⁰ Blažek, *The Diffusion of Agricultural Terms*, pp. 17–19.

⁴¹ Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew language for Readers of English*, Carta Jerusalem, Jerusalem 1987, p. 315. A term similar to Hebrew *maggel* may be encountered in Berber languages, e.g. *a-mger* means ‘sickle’ in Kabyle. The stem *mgr denoting ‘sickle’ or ‘harvest’ appears with phonetic alternations in the majority of Berber varieties, cf. Gábor Takács, *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian. Volume Three m-*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2008, pp. 514–515. It may be an old loanword from Punic given the allophonic l/r in Berber languages, cf. Edward Lipiński, *Semitic Languages. Outline of a Comparative Grammar*, Peeters, Leuven 1997, p. 135; Maarten Kossmann and Hary Stroomer, *Berber Phonology*, in: *Phonologies of Asia and Africa*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, Indiana 1997, p. 470. On the other hand, Militarev traces the origin of Modern Berber *mgr to Afro Asiatic *gur/gar/g^war ‘to harvest’, Militarev, *The Prehistory of a Dispersal* p. 144.

⁴² Orel and Stolbova, *Hamito-Semitic Etymological Dictionary*, p. 214.

⁴³ Black and al., *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2015, p. 297.

⁴⁵ Issam Halayqa, *A Comparative Lexicon of Ugaritic and Canaanite*, Ugarit Verlag, Münster 2008, p. 211. Cf. Takács, *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*, p. 170.

⁴⁶ Thomas M. Johnstone, *Jibbali Lexicon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1981, p. 169.

⁴⁷ Cf. Wolf Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Harari*, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1963, p. 104.

pattern *m-gl-t, related to the stem *g-l ('to cut'), appears also in Ethio-Semitic, Cushitic and Chadic languages⁴⁸.

Summing up, although so far it failed to offer any univocal and plausible etymology for the Semitic name of 'sickle', its Proto Afro-Asiatic origin, however, seems to be certain.

4) *Mingla*

The sickles were used traditionally to mow cereal crops. Still, there was another sickle-shaped tool, which served to cut lucerne or sulla for animal fodder. It differed from the sickle in the straighter blade as well as in the lack of the handle. In the Maltese language this implement was called *mingla* [mingla]⁴⁹. Undoubtedly, the lexeme derives from the aforementioned term *mingel* that was provided with the feminine suffix *-a*. It resulted with the disappearance of the short vowel in the open unstressed syllable, a phenomenon that is regular for the Maltese vocalism.

The pattern *mi-CC-a-C-a* is common for the formation of the Arabic *nomina instrumenti*, albeit the words built according to it are usually synonymous doublets for *mi-CC-a-C* (e.g. *miṣāf* and *miṣāfa* 'towel' or *miṣʿad* and *miṣʿada* 'lift')⁵⁰. Nonetheless, in the case of *mingla* the Romance influence on the word-formation should be also taken into consideration. The pair of masculine *mingel* and feminine *mingla* might be patterned after Italian *roncolo* 'pruning knife' and *roncola* 'billhook'. Both of these lexemes are derived from the late Latin verb *runcare* "to weed, to grub"⁵¹.

The same Romance stem appears also in another Maltese name for *mingla*, namely *rančila*⁵² [rančila]. It is a loanword cognate with the Italian *ronciglio* and, ultimately, the late Latin **runcilium* 'hook'⁵³, what brings to mind the medieval weed hook (Lat. *sarculum* or *runco*) being in the fact a kind of the sickle set on the long wooden handle.

Still, in the case of the Maltese *rančila* the Gallo-Italian *ranza* ('scythe')⁵⁴ seems to be more relevant for our etymological considerations, especially, because of the Lombardian settlement in Sicily, which dates back to the Norman reign⁵⁵. Remnants of Gallo-Italian dialects survived there until present time, and one of them might be a donor of the

⁴⁸ Takács, *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*, pp. 829–830.

⁴⁹ Guzi Gatt, *Qiegħda fil-Pont ta' Lsieni*, Santa Venera, pp. 18–19; Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, p. 832.

⁵⁰ Iwona Król, *Słownictwo rzeczowników arabskich i polskich w ujęciu kontrastowym*, Kraków 2013, p. 107.

⁵¹ Meyer-Lübke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p. 559; Alois Walde, *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, C. Winter, Heidelberg 1910, p. 664. The verb is derived from PIE *h3ru-n-k- 'to dig out', cf. Michele de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages*, Brill, Leiden 2008, p. 530.

⁵² Morana, *Ara x'Int Tghid.*, p. 154; Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, p. 832. Aquilina gives also another local name of this tool used in Dingli: *ringla*.

⁵³ Pianigiani, *Vocabolario etimologico*, p. 1167, cf. Meyer-Lübke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p.559 and Pratti, *Vocabolario etimologico italiano*, p. 842.

⁵⁴ Francesco Angiolini, *Vocabolario milanese-italiano coi segni per la pronuncia*, Milano 1897, p. 653. Manufali Hoepfli, *Dizionario milanese-italiano col repertorio italiano-milanese*, Milano 1896, p. 590.

⁵⁵ Giacomo de Gregorio, *Sulla varia origine dei dialetti gallo-italici di Sicilia con osservazioni sui pedemontani e gli emiliani*, Palermo 1897, pp. 6–15.

term *rančila* for the Maltese language. The development of the word seems to proceed as follows: the old Italian feminine suffix of *nomina instrumenti* *-ile*⁵⁶ was added to the Gallo-Italian stem *rants-* what resulted in the shift *ts>č* and the formation of the word **rančile*, changed then into **rančil*, since in the Lombardian dialects the final unstressed *-e* disappears regularly⁵⁷. Probably, such form was borrowed into Maltese and provided eventually with the Maltese feminine suffix *-a*.

5) Threshing roller

Crops, after being reaped with a sickle, needed to be threshed. For that purpose the Maltese people used a machine, dragged by donkeys or horses, that was called *romblu tad-dris*⁵⁸. It consisted of a wooden roller with several sharp teeth or blades which cut the straw and shook the grain out from the ears. This threshing implement, in its various forms, has been known in the Mediterranean area since the ancient times. The Romans named it *plostellum punicum* described by Varro in *De re rustica* (52, 1–2)⁵⁹:

On the threshing-floor the largest and best ears should be placed apart, to furnish the best seed, and the grain should be threshed on the floor. This is done in some districts by means of a yoke of steers and a sledge. The latter is constructed either of a board made rough with stones or iron, which separates the grain from the ear when it is dragged by a yoke of steers with the driver or a heavy weight on it; or of a toothed axle running on low wheels, called a Punic cart, the driver sitting on it and driving the steers which drag it – a contrivance in use in Hither Spain and other places.

The Maltese *romblu tad-dris* is a compound term based on the periphrastic genitive construction. The first item (*romblu*)⁶⁰ has, beyond doubt, non-Semitic etymology. The most plausible explanation of its origin would associate it with the Sicilian word *rummulu* ‘roller’⁶¹ that is derived from the Greek *ρόμβος* ‘rotating thing’. The Greek stem *romb-* has been provided here with the Latin formant of *nomina instrumenti* *-bul-*. Yet, the hypothetical **rhomb-bul-um* might also be patterned after the Latin name for another similar threshing implement called *tribulum* (from the verb *terō* ‘to rub, to thresh’⁶²).

⁵⁶ Grossmann and Rainer, *La formazione delle parole in italiano*, p. 233.

⁵⁷ Gerhard Rohlfs, *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana e dei suoi dialetti. Fonetica*, Einaudi, Torino 1966, p. 180.

⁵⁸ Gatt, *Qiegda fil-Ponta*, pp. 23–24.

⁵⁹ William D. Hooper and Harrison W. Ash (trans.), *Cato and Varro. De re rustica*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1934, p. 287.

⁶⁰ Vassalli, *Vocabolario*, p. 581; Vella, *Dizionario portatile*, p. 112, Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, pp. 1232–1233.

⁶¹ Aquilina, *Maltese Linguistic Surveys*, p. 105.

⁶² De Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin*, p. 616.

The conservative phonetic form of the Maltese *romblu* is not problematic, since the consonant cluster *-mb-* survived in some north-eastern Sicilian dialects due the fact, that the Greek language remained spoken in that area even in the Middle Ages⁶³. Similarly, the continuation of the Latin /ō/ as /o/ in the place of /u/ (expected for the Sicilian varieties), has parallels in some dialects of the aforementioned region (e.g. Montealbano⁶⁴). Given these data, we may assume that the Maltese *romblu* was borrowed from one of the dialects of north-eastern Sicily.

The second part of the compound word (*dris*) has a well-established Semitic etymology. The Arabic root *drs ‘to tread, to thresh’ perhaps was borrowed from the Aramaic *drš, though it has been already attested in Akkadian *darāsu/darāšu* ‘to trample’. The Maltese noun *dris* has a lexical counterpart in the Arabic *darīs* ‘rubbing, threshing’⁶⁵.

6) Winnowing fork

The process of winnowing consists in separating the grains from the chaff as well as shocking the rest of seeds out from the ears. It differs, however, from sieving through the fact, that the wind plays the main role in this work. If the weather conditions are favorable and the strong enough wind is blowing, the farmers throw the threshed corn, which contains still chaffs as well as straw and ears cut to shreds, into the air using for that purpose a special winnowing fork. The grains, as being heavier, fall in the one place on the threshing floor, and the straw, chaff and shreds are carried by the wind to another.

In the Maltese language, the winnowing fork was called *midra*⁶⁶. This term is formed in accordance with the Arabic pattern of *nomina instrumenti*. The stem *dry is well attested in Semitic languages, bearing unanimously meaning of winnowing or scattering (cf. Akk. *zaru*, Ugr. *dry*, Ar. *ḏarā*, Syr. *dārā*, Hbr. *zera*, Gz. *zarawa*)⁶⁷, however, only in the western Semitic languages this root is used to build names for the winnowing fork (Syr. *maḏāryā*, Hbr. *mizre*, Ar. *miḏrā/miḏrāt*)⁶⁸. It is also worth mentioning that the Maltese *midra*, even in the eighteenth century started to denote ‘hay fork’⁶⁹ and it is already the only meaning of this term known to Vella (1843)⁷⁰.

⁶³ Cf. Rohlfs, *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana*, pp. 356–361.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 97. The similar phenomenon is also observable in some Calabrian dialects and depends on the word stress. In Sicily the stress is irrelevant for the shift *ō > u*. cf. Arrigo Castellani, *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana. Volume 1. Introduzione*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2000, pp. 265–266.

⁶⁵ Freytag, *Lexicon arabico-latinum*, v. 2, p. 22.

⁶⁶ Vassalli, *Vocabolario*, p. 487; Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 824.

⁶⁷ Tyloch, *The Evidence of the Proto-lexicon*, p. 57. The Afro-Asiatic stem of these terms remains still vague. Most likely it would be *ḏar-/*ḏur- ‘to throw’, cf. Orel and Stolbova, *Hamito-Semitic Etymological Dictionary*, p. 551.

⁶⁸ In Akkadian the winnowing tool is called *rapšu* and in Gee’z *maš’ē*.

⁶⁹ Vassalli, *Vocabolario*, p. 487.

⁷⁰ Vella, *Dizionario portatile*, p. 88.

7) Shovel

In the final stage of winnowing the farmer cannot anymore use the fork to pick up the grains, which are now mixed with the chaffs only. Another tool is needed to continue the process of separating corn from the less valuable elements. This implement is usually a wooden shovel, which in Malta was called *luħ* [lūħ] or *luħa* [lūħa]⁷¹.

The Maltese term is undoubtedly of the Semitic origin and has its formal counterpart in the Arabic *lawħ* ‘board’ (cf. Syr. *lūħ*, Hbr. *luah*, Ugr. *lh*, Akk. *lē’u*). The semantic shift *board* > *shovel* may be explained through the development of the meaning of the Romance term *pala*, being another word used by the Maltese people for ‘shovel’⁷². In the late Latin *pala* had an established meaning related to the implement which served to pick up loose materials like sand, grain etc. Nevertheless, in the Romance languages the diminutive of *pala* (Fr. *palette*, It. *paletta*) started to signify secondarily a flat piece of wood, that is the item which Arabs called *lawħ*. It resulted that in the Maltese language the borrowed diminutive related to the shovel (*paletta*)⁷³ might mean simultaneously a small board. Probably, this extension of meaning at first was transferred into the Semitic synonym of *paletta* (*lwejjah*) and then also the Maltese *luħ* started to equate semantically with the word *pala*.

8) Axe

The most common Maltese word for “axe” is *mannara*. The term derives from Sicilian *mannara* ‘axe, hatchet’⁷⁴ (cf. It. *mannaia*) and its etymology comes back to the Latin adjective *manuaria* “easy handled, handy” (from *manus* ‘hand’)⁷⁵.

It is noteworthy, that in the Maltese language the term *fies* (and its feminine form *fiesa*), which is an etymological continuant of the common Arabic *faš* ‘axe, hatchet’, changed its primitive meaning and is related to “pickaxe”, what may reflect the additional use of axes on the rocky Malta in the ancient times⁷⁶.

Another Maltese term employed to name ‘axe’ is *lexxuna* [leššūna]⁷⁷. Its origin is derived from the Sicilian *asciuni* ‘an iron implement similar to the axe’⁷⁸, which presents an augmentative form of *ascia* ‘axe’. The latter word, though attested both in Latin (*ascia*) and in Greek (ἀξίμη), seems to have non-IE etymology⁷⁹. Klein suggests that it could be

⁷¹ Vassalli, *Vocabolario*, p. 443; Vella, *Dizionario portatile*, p. 79; Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 761.

⁷² Vella, *Dizionario portatile*, p. 100.

⁷³ V. Busuttill, *Dizjunariju mill Malti għal Inglis*, N.C. Cortis & Sons, Valletta Sliema 1900, p. 290.

⁷⁴ Mortillaro, *Nuovo dizionario siciliano-italiano*, p. 512.

⁷⁵ Pratti, *Vocabolario etimologico italiano*, p. 620; Pianigiani, *Vocabolario etimologico*, p. 807. The Maltese language knows also a Romance diminutive of this word *mannarett* “small hatchet”.

⁷⁶ Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 336.

⁷⁷ Morana, *Ara x’Int Tghid*, p. 136; Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 743.

⁷⁸ Mortillaro, *Nuovo dizionario siciliano-italiano*, p. 88.

⁷⁹ De Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin*, p. 57.

a loanword from one of the Semitic languages (cf. Syr. and Hbr. *ḥaṣṣīn*, Akk. *ḥaṣṣinnu* ‘axe’)⁸⁰. On the other hand, Beekes maintains that the Greek *ἀζίνη* is of Anatolian origin⁸¹.

The word *lexxuna* was borrowed together with the Sicilian definite article *l-*, which was treated as a part of the stem⁸². Such practice appears in another Maltese term, even those rooted in Arabic (cf. *l-ilma* from Ar. *al-māʾ* ‘water’).

Concluding remarks

On the basis of the above presentation of Maltese agricultural vocabulary, it is possible to make some conclusions concerning the semantic development of the Maltese language. Etymologies of terms under analysis demonstrate complexity of semantic changes that the Maltese words underwent as well as reflect the local history and lifestyle of peasants dwelling in rural areas of Malta and Gozo. In such way those words, as many others, may be considered as a reservoir of the collective memory of Maltese people.

Strikingly, the Maltese language, though Semitic in its grammar, semantically seems to be attached more to the Romance word. It is manifested not only in the preponderance of Sicilian words in Maltese dictionaries, but also in the transposition of some semantic structures mirroring the internal development of Romance languages.

Eventually, it is necessary to emphasize that after the technical revolution and mechanization that took place in Maltese agriculture in the twentieth century the farming terminology entered the field of the linguistic obsolescence. Names of agricultural implements are being forgotten now or have already vanished. Worth mentioning here, that Maltese young generations have already problem to understand farming terms, as it was revealed in the examiners’ report for Maltese secondary schools (2010). And forgetting this part of Maltese linguistic heritage would be a lamentable loss.

Abbreviations

Akk.	Akkadian
Ar.	Arabic
Cat.	Catalan
Fr.	French
Gz.	Ge’ez
Hbr.	Hebrew
It.	Italian
Sp.	Spanish
Syr.	Syriac
Ugr.	Ugaritic

⁸⁰ Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary*, p. 229. Black 110.

⁸¹ Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, p. 111.

⁸² Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 743.

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