

The Maltese broken plural: Getting to the root of the issue

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Traditionally, the Maltese broken plural has been argued to be derived from its singular counterpart via a series of rules (Mayer et al. 2013, Schembri 2006, 2012, Borg & Azzopardi-Alexander 1997, etc.). This proposal argues instead that the broken plural is derived directly from the abstract root in the syntax. Using a Distributed Morphology framework (Halle & Marantz 1993), I argue that the [+plural] feature is realized in two distinct nodes of the tree: in the *n* node for the broken (non-concatenative) plurals and in the NUM node for the sound (concatenative) plurals. Additionally, I argue that due to the rich linguistic history of Maltese, two types of abstract roots exist in the Vocabulary List: ‘Root’ roots which spell out tri/quadriliteral roots, and ‘Stem’ roots which spell out stems:

- (1) a. Root: $\sqrt{\text{KTB}} \rightarrow \sqrt{\text{KTB}+n} \rightarrow \text{ktieb, kotba}$ (book/s)
b. Stem: $\sqrt{\text{ZIJU}} \rightarrow \sqrt{\text{ZIJU}+n} \rightarrow \text{ziju}$ (uncle)

I argue that, following the theory of phases and cyclic spell-out proposed in Chomsky (1998), category-defining heads (such as *n*) trigger a phase of spell-out. In (1b), the *n* node is grammatically empty (i.e. no [+plural] feature), so the output of the cyclic spell-out triggered by *n* is ‘*ziju*’. This stem merges with a [+plural] feature higher in the tree (NUM), which spells out a plural suffix *-ijiet*. In (1a), the *n* node is not grammatically empty; it contains a [+plural] feature. When spell-out is triggered by *n*, the abstract ‘Root’ root and the [+plural] feature are spelled out together. ‘Root’ roots are tagged to select certain prosodic allomorphs (which realize [+plural]), resulting in prosodic variation in the broken plural form.

This analysis is supported by the derivation of deverbal agentive nouns, which always take a sound plural suffix, and the derivation of the ‘broken’ diminutive, which cannot be pluralized morphologically.

References

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