But, but, but

On the coexistence of the adversative connectors imma, iżda, and però in contemporary Maltese

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Maltese boasts the three adversative connectors imma, iżda, and però which are registered as synonyms by Agius (2010: 383). Accordingly, the English translations for each of the three connectors provided by Aquilina (1987: 569, 595; 1990: 1050) comprise but and nevertheless. However, Serracino-Inglott (1981: 56) assumes that però is used to express a particularly strong contrast. Aquilina (1987: 569, 595; 1990: 1050) who classifies all three of the connectors as conjunctions derives imma from Arabic ‘ammā ‘but’ and però from Italian però ‘but, however’ whereas iżda is depicted as a univerbation of truncated issa ‘now’ and the proximal demonstrative da(n) ‘this’. Thus, the ternary set of adversative connectors consists of an inherited Semitic element, a local but purely Semitic innovation, and a function word borrowed from Italian. The question arises whether we are facing the competition of three functionally equivalent connectors or a division of labour whose internal organisation still needs to be investigated thoroughly.

Since both the reference grammar (Borg/Azzopardi-Alexander 1997: 79-80) and Mauri’s (2008) (areal-)typological study only mention Maltese imma, there still are many empirical gaps to be filled before we can claim that the research question has been answered satisfactorily. My talk is intended to serve as starting signal for a dedicated research project focusing on the system of Maltese connectors – be they adversative or other.

At least in terms of frequency, the three items under inspection behave differently. A preliminary search of the Korpus Malti 3.0 (as of 9 March, 2023) yielded the results displayed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>connector</th>
<th>tokens</th>
<th>share</th>
<th>texts</th>
<th>per million</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>imma</td>
<td>401,788</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
<td>49,650</td>
<td>1,611.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iżda</td>
<td>225,837</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
<td>82,775</td>
<td>906.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>però</td>
<td>49,494</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>9,844</td>
<td>198.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>677,119</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Frequencies of adversative connectors in the Korpus Malti 3.0

The lion’s share of the tokens goes to imma with iżda as runner-up still claiming a third of all instances of adversatives. In contrast, però is clearly only a minor option. Interestingly, the second best iżda is attested in considerably more texts than imma. This seemingly paradoxical distribution alone calls for being scrutinized more closely. In my talk, I address this issue by way of trying to determine the (semantic, pragmatic, or structural) factors which regulate the differential use of the three connectors.

References


