

But, but, but

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

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Maltese boasts the three adversative connectors *imma*, *izda*, 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 *izda* 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.

connector	tokens	share	texts	per million
<i>imma</i>	401,788	59.3%	49,650	1,611.94
<i>izda</i>	225,837	33.4%	82,775	906.04
<i>però</i>	49,494	7.3%	9,844	198.57
total	677,119	100%		

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

The lion's share of the tokens goes to *imma* with *izda* 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 *izda* 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

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