Dialectology in Practice: Notes from Fieldwork in Gozo[1]

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The present paper summarizes the fieldwork experience of Maria Lipnicka and Maciej Klimiuk in Gozo, Malta, by reflecting on issues of field research methodology, technology and innovation in order to initiate a discussion on these factors in Semitic dialectology. Most of the paper is dedicated to fieldwork methodology understood as soft skills and includes outlines that the authors applied themselves and found effective. The authors discuss some technological intricacies and describe their 'off-field' research for innovative frameworks, both analytical and theoretical, that would fit the fieldwork data and vice versa.

1 Introduction

In contrast to other subfields of linguistics and philology, dialectology derives its language data almost entirely from fieldwork. Arguably both methodology and technology used during the field research have an immense impact on the quality of the collected material and in consequence on the theoretical conclusion drawn from it. By methodology, or soft skills, we mean the theoretical linguistic knowledge and skills acquired beforehand (which will not be discussed in this paper), the ways a dialectologist interacts with the local community, social arrangements and agreements with the speakers and so on. By technology, or 'hardware', we mean the technical equipment, both used for recording in the field and afterwards during the data analysis.

The current paper is based on our own field research in Gozo, the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago, that has been an object of dialectological interest for over two centuries (Vassalli 1796; Stumme 1904a,

1904b; Borg 1977, 1978; Schabert 1976; Aquilina and Isserlin 1981; Agiùs 1992; Puech 1994) and can therefore serve as a well documented example for the interdependence of fieldwork software, hardware and the linguistic conclusions implied by these.[2] The current research in Gozo began in 2013 as a solo project by Maria Lipnicka aiming the systematic description of pausal forms in Gozitan dialects (Lipnicka 2017a). In 2015, Maciej Klimiuk joined the project. The authors continued to conduct fieldwork together as a team during two following expeditions in 2016. This collaboration has inspired us to propose the project *GozoDia: Community-Oriented Dialectological Studies on Language Dynamics of the Island of Gozo*. Our main goal is to generate a linguistic atlas of the island, based on the analysis of the data collected during the ongoing fieldwork.

Although *GozoDia* is still in progress, it is opportune to initiate a discussion on applicable fieldwork methodologies in Semitic dialectology. Data collection is a crucial part of the scientific process in our discipline, but it has been only marginally addressed in literature until now.

2 Fieldwork methodology

2.1 Fieldwork preparation

The preparation for our fieldwork started long before the actual trip and included first and foremost critical readings of literature on the current state of research. Despite it can sometimes affect the fieldwork in an unfavourable manner, as some of the older concepts might be outdated or misleading, it is crucial to be accustomed to the existing literature in order to be able to place the fieldwork within scientific discourse. Even if the dialect in question has not been described yet, a preliminary investigation of the available literature on geographically close dialect groups can minimize surprises in the field and help one to navigate during recording sessions.

In 2016, we exceeded the reading itself and undertook a two-week trip to Tunisia, the geographically closest Arabic-speaking country to Malta, in order to check claims repeatedly stressed in literature, that Tunisian coastal dialects and Maltese language were closely related. After spending a few days in the capital Tunis, we visited Sfax, Chebba and Mahdia, gathering information and recording local dialect speakers. Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to travel to the Kerkennah Islands, which—similar to Gozo—are geographically isolated and could display a language dynamic similar to that of the Maltese islands. This hypothetical similarity needs to be properly investigated (cf. Herin and Zammit 2017).

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2   For a discussion of previous research on Maltese dialects see Fenech (1981) and Vanhove (1999).

In 2019, the fieldwork preparation included the creation of a questionnaire specifically designed for Gozitan dialects (Klimiuk 2019). It is based on our earlier fieldwork data gathered in years 2013–2016, but also includes data from previous research surveys on Gozo. For example, we took all 115 lexemes listed by Joseph Aquilina and B.S.J. Isserlin (1981) into consideration, as the re-checking of these helps us to understand the methodology applied by researchers in the past.

The preparation of our fieldwork includes also very pragmatic issues, like: arranging the travel routes and accommodation, checking of the local weather conditions, as well as of the schedule of local and religious festivities, reviewing the latest political and economic news from the region, as all this information can have an enormous impact on the course the fieldwork may take.

2.2 Language and dialects

As with most dialects, Gozitan varieties are entangled in the context of an official language, in our case Standard Maltese. During our fieldwork preparation for the research in Gozo, at first we were tempted to draw conclusions from the existing literature on the Maltese standard language, but this approach turned out to be problematic.

As Maltese has been standardized by means of it rendering in the Latin alphabet (Aquilina 1997), the orthography of the written language has led not only to pre-assumed transcription mistakes on our part but also had a rather unflattering impact on the interaction with Gozitan dialect speakers. In the first phase of the research, in the years 2013–2015, the interview arrangements became the first methodological challenge. Interviews, during which we would use any Maltese phrasing or pronunciation, would drive Gozitan speakers to switch spontaneously to Standard Maltese, hypercorrect themselves or mix dialectal and standardized language forms in a given utterance.

Previous research surveys were conducted either by Maltese speakers (e.g. Michael Vassalli, Joseph Aquilina) or mediated by Maltese speaking helpers (e.g. Hans Stumme, Gilbert Puech), which explains certain phonological inconsistencies their research outcome which follows. The question, which arises so far, is if the usage of non-local varieties of the same language group in interviews is methodologically rather ambiguous.

2.3 Informant care

An important issue during dialectological fieldwork, that involves soft skills, is to select appropriate dialect speakers. Not only is it crucial that the speakers are truly native to their local dialect, but first and foremost willing to be recorded. It is a challenging task to convince a private person to be recorded and interrogated, but it is both ethically and practically indispen-

sable. For example, we were invited to record a 92-year-old family member of an informant at the elderly section of the hospital in Rabat (Victoria), Gozo. Although both the family member and the hospital crew consented the recording, we had to abort the session, as we were not sure if the speaker was actually capable of consenting of his own volition.

Even when a dialect speaker is willing to be recorded, some other 'soft' factors can impede a successful recording session. On one hand, the quality of the recording depends on some personal traits of the speaker, like being extrovert and talkative beyond the recording session itself. On the other hand, the attitude of the speaker, and therefore the quality of the gathered material, can also be compromised by the recording setting. From our experience, the informants need to feel comfortable enough during the interview in order to improvise stories and answer grammatical questions.

It can also make a difference, if a person is recorded alone or in a group, at home or in public. Especially the presence of persons entangled in local power structures, as for example teachers, priests or other institutional representatives, can have a significant impact on a dialectological interview, as social status includes language as its symbol. We did not attempt cooperation with local schools which are associated with Standard Maltese. The mediation of other local institutions like local councils, churches, band clubs can be helpful, but also can put unnecessary pressure on the speakers and obstruct an interview. For example, during our search for informants, we were kindly invited for a recording session by a local parish in the sacristy of a church. The speakers were nudged to tell stories by the priest and showed a tendency to speak sparsely and reluctantly. Despite having given formal consent, the speakers seemed uncomfortable in that particular setting and we aborted that recording session as well.

2.4 Relationship management

Another major soft skill, especially crucial when conducting long-term field research, as in our case, is relationship management. As fieldwork is not an isolated laboratory experiment, and the speaker community is a functioning human environment on its own, keeping good relations with the informants before, during and after the recording sessions is a matter both of ethical and practical necessity.

The researcher is by the nature of her/his enquiry highly enmeshed in the local dynamics, so genuine interaction with informants, that include personal conversations, showing interest in the state of current local affairs and business, even societal rumours, is often necessary in order to facilitate smooth cooperation.

On the other hand, keeping appropriate boundaries is also part of relationship care between a field researcher and representatives of the local community. Relations of physically intimate or marital nature, can impose

new difficulties on the research and even jeopardize its validity. In some cases it is difficult to define clear boundaries in such a sensitive and mysterious part of human interaction as sexual intimacy, but as dialectological research is clearly initiated by the researcher and an institution supporting her/him, it is part of her responsibility to be aware of the possible loss of neutrality and credibility, that can go with it.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress the specific vulnerability of female researchers in the field. Anything starting from receiving unwanted personal attention, dubious propositions to any form of sexual harassment, does not come in question for a researcher. Cultural landscapes and the male-female etiquette may regionally differ, but the sense of imminent personal danger, if experienced, needs to be addressed and possibly even communicated to authorities in charge as soon as possible.

2.5 Contribution to the community

During our research in Gozo inevitably we received requests regarding payments or monetary reward for the participation in the recording sessions. We took such requests seriously, as we highly appreciate the time and effort our informants put into the recording sessions. Nevertheless, financial compensation in case of non-commercial research that serves an ideal purpose of preservation of local cultural heritage is problematic and we decided to decline requests to pay for recordings due to ethical and practical reasons. First, it would not be fair towards all other informants, that consent to participate in the research out of sentimental reasons and who voiced their appreciation for our research as a measure which serves the community. Secondly, speakers interested in monetary reward might feel pressure to perform while interrogated and forge answers, similarly to informants that were pressured by persons in authority to take part in recording sessions.

Returning something back to the community is still a valid concern to be reflected on while conducting dialectological fieldwork, as the researcher and her/his discipline profits (idealistically, if not commercially) from the initiated cooperation. Reciprocation of the help received in the field can take many other forms other than financial aid. For example, after Lipnicka reacted her research goals, she stayed on the island for a year, sharing her skills and knowledge during weekly held circle singing workshops offered in a local cultural centre and facilitated several artistic events. Every researcher has his own way to show appreciation to the community, that welcomed her/him, but sharing the research outcome with the local libraries and archives is the first and most obvious possibility. All of the gathered material, as well as papers published in future, will be handed over to the local authorities as part of community-oriented approach of our project.

3 Recording technology

3.1 Recording during fieldwork

Regardless of the importance of the aforementioned soft skills and methods, the major core of dialectological fieldwork is still the technical equipment and its proper usage. During our research in Gozo, we used the ZOOM H6 portable digital recorder that records sound in a high-resolution format allowing precise analysis of the recorded data in programs such as Praat[3] or ELAN[4] afterwards. Since the recorded files became big and bulky, additional hardware for storage of these turned out to be essential.

Before the recording sessions begin, we found it necessary to record a short test file to make sure the device is intact and adjust the settings, if needed. It is also advisable to detect and eliminate noise sources in the recording space, such as TV's, radios and mobile phones, ventilator fans, open windows and doors. Seemingly minor background noise can decrease the quality of a recording or even render it useless for detailed analysis.

The researcher herself/himself also needs to be aware of the effect of her/his own voice and expression on the recording. Especially during free speech recordings, when the speaker is telling a story of her/his choice and is prompting for a gesture of reassurance, silent nodding is the only advisable option, as even short phrases or spontaneous moanings of confirmation can overlap with the voice of the speaker and change the recorded material irreversibly.

3.2 Storage of recordings

After the recording has been made, secure storage and solid description of the recorded files become the next hurdle during and in the aftermath of the field research. Online server or cloud storage is a good solution for research teams, as sharing and downloading of files can be performed even if being geographically at a distance.

We also find publishing of fieldwork recordings, as in the case of the SemArch. Semitisches Tonarchiv[5] project, to be highly beneficial for the scientific discourse, as it allows other scientists to check and discuss transcription systems having the original recording at hand. In the case of the previous research surveys to Gozo, we were not fortunate enough to have such an opportunity, as the recordings either were damaged as a result of poor storage or were inaccessible to us, which hinders a discussion of methodology and innovation from a diachronic perspective.

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3   Praat: Doing Phonetics by Computer. www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat.
4   ELAN. https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan.
5   SemArch. Semitisches Tonarchiv. http://semarch.ub.uni-heidelberg.de.

4 Innovation in methodology

4.1 Innovation and fieldwork

The interest in pausal forms is a relatively new phenomenon in Semitic studies (e.g. Arnold 2010; Borg 1977; Klimiuk 2012, 2016; Lipnicka 2017a, 2017b; Zuniga 2015), which impelled us to experiment and innovate the existing query methods, since the traditional methodology cannot grasp the paradigmatic character of the case.

First and foremost, pausal forms intersect the realms of phonology and syntax, which impose difficulties on the interview methods, since each word in such a dialect has at least two versions—a context and a pausal form. For example, a questionnaire that consists basically of a word list would check a morpheme type in pausal, final position omitting the context forms of a word. In the worst case scenario, the researcher would randomly note either the context or the pausal form as the basic form of the lexeme in question, despite the significant difference between the two, as the following examples from the dialect of Għarb show:[6]

gaddéwm#	*gaddúm*	'chin',
zbeyp#	*zbíb*	'raisins',
ɹósoy#	*ɹósi*	'my head',
ˀlséney#	*ˀlséni*	'my tongue'.

If our questionnaire would contain only a word list, we would just investigate the first column above and falsely assume, that a vowel shift *u > ew* takes place in the last syllable of *gaddewm* or *i > ey* in the last syllable of *zbíb*, and that the 1SG pronominal suffix in that dialect has the form *-oy* (*ɹósi*) or *-ey* (*ˀlséni*), not *-i*. That type of assumption occurs in some of the earlier works on Gozitan dialects (e.g. Aquilina and Isserlin 1981; Agiùs 1992).

In our fieldwork questionnaire for Gozo (Klimiuk 2019), we had to include phrasing alternatives, so that the same morpheme could be recorded in diverse positions in a given utterance. For example, each verb paradigm needs to be investigated both in context and pause. Thus the following commentary appears in our questionnaire:

> [...] in order to get the verb form in context, use exemplary sentences: I wrote a letter, I am writing to my mum; I killed a rabbit, I am killing a chicken; I closed a door, I am closing a window; I opened the bottle, I am opening a shop; I drank coffee, I am drinking milk; I understood the question, I am understanding your words, etc. (Klimiuk 2019: 34)

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6   All cited examples are taken from the recorded material gathered during our own fieldwork.

As the foregoing quotation shows, checking of the contextual form becomes an integral part of the dialectological investigation and extends it significantly. So certain improvisation skills are required from the researcher in order to avoid monotony. This approach turned out to be the most beneficial to the workflow of the sessions, as it kept both the recording and recorded parties agile.

4.2 Innovation, data analysis and theoretical framework

Within a well-established analytical framework each further fieldwork provides novelty in the form of data from a new field, region or source that has not been yet explored, along with some reforms and adjustments of the methods. But when the innovation concerns the methodological framework itself, traditional tools and methods may well falter. We found ourselves in such an impasse while analyzing our research data from Gozo.

Perhaps the biggest discrepancy in describing a dialect with pausal forms is still the proper definition of the cause of the phenomenon—the pause itself. Usually, a phonological rule is constructed by the correlation of at least two definite, meaningful sounds or sound environments which impact each other. In the case of pausal forms, we are dealing with the absence of sound as one of the correlates involved in a phonological change, which lead us once again to a theoretical deadlock.

When the traditional methodology and theory in one discipline fail to apply, a more interdisciplinary investigation may deliver some surprising answers. In our case, engaging with the theoretical framework of prosodic phonology, a relatively new subfield of linguistics, helped us to realize the difference between segmental and suprasegmental levels of speech analyses. On a suprasegmental level, pause carries constructive, linguistic information, as is understood as a major factor in creating the perception of words, phrases and utterances.

Since our current research on Gozo is still in progress, the methodological, analytical and theoretical frameworks are still under construction. Our current comparison of the contextual and pausal forms of morphemes showed, to our surprise, that even the contextual forms differ significantly from one another according to their position in accentual phrases, which urges us to engage in further fieldwork and theoretical expansion.

5 Conclusion

Dialectological fieldwork in Semitic studies is a challenging undertaking. It requires the researcher not only to be properly trained in their own discipline but also to develop specific soft skills, a sense of technological affinity and the readiness to confront unexpected findings, that might overthrow the

theoretical frames within which the research has started. This paper is dedicated to young researchers decamping into their first fieldwork often without a plan or outline how to conduct it, as the existing literature just gives some marginal hints. Fieldwork-based research can be an exciting dialectological project, especially if the probable difficulties are anticipated beforehand.

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