Chapter 9

On the characterisation of Maltese English: An error-analysis perspective based on nominal structures in Maltese university student texts

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The characterisation of varieties of English is an ongoing process that has focused on speech communities around the world for whom English is the mother tongue or is one of two main languages competing for dominance in a bilingual setting, as is the case for Maltese English. This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on Maltese English as a variety in its own right (e.g. Vella 1995; Schembri 2005; Hilbert & Krug 2012; Krug & Rosen 2012). It reflects on the theoretical assumptions that underpin its characterisation as a dialect in a bilingual setting distinct from Standard English and therefore identifiable on grammatical and lexical as well as phonological levels (see Trudgill 2002, for example, for a characterisation of Standard English along these lines). It analyses nominal phrase structure data from university student texts produced by 30 undergraduate Commerce students at the University of Malta. The study focuses on affixation, compounding and prepositional usage and examines the contention that not all deviations from Standard English can be given the status of characteristics of Maltese English. Applying an error analysis approach to the analysis of the data, it distinguishes between developmental errors that are untraceable to Maltese as the background language, and transfer errors that have this origin by definition. It further contends that only those transfer errors that fossilize over time are capable of achieving the status of core characteristics of Maltese English. Following studies such as Hyltenstam (1988), the analysis works on the assumption that fossilized transfer errors are identifiable in the current data by virtue of the fact that they are still present in the output of participants who have achieved advanced learner status. From a varieties-of-language point of view, once fossilized transfer errors

have been identified, their status ceases to be considered as erroneous and is construable instead as characteristic of the variety (Selinker 1974). The study concludes that the overuse of the preposition *of* was the most likely error type to fossilize and gain status as a stable nominal feature of Maltese English. As a Maltese bilingual, I use my first-hand understanding of the Maltese English linguistic scenario to provide some insights into what is by linguistic standards still a young and developing linguistic variety.

1 Introduction

The characterisation of varieties of language centres around the identification and description of linguistic features that make specific varieties distinct from others of the same language. From a language description perspective, the central theoretical issue is the distinction between common core features and stylistically significant features (Crystal & Davy 1969), with the descriptive emphasis falling on the latter. Common core features occur across varieties and fulfil the fundamental cohesive function of basic building blocks of the language that allow it to operate as a unified system. In contrast, stylistically significant features are distinctive by virtue of their lack of common occurrence, as is the case with specialised terminology, or by virtue of some aspect of their use that makes them variationally distinct, such as the relatively high frequency of passive forms in academic writing (Swales 1990). A comprehensive description of a regional variety would therefore comprise a description of significant features at all linguistic levels that are regionally distinct in both the variety's spoken and written forms.

This ongoing process is in its initial stages in the case of Maltese English, a variety of English spoken on the Maltese islands where Maltese is the national language and English has official status (as stated in the Constitution of Malta, Articles 5(1) and 5(2)). This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research describing regional features of Maltese English in its written form (e.g. Schembri 2005; Hilbert & Krug 2012; Krug & Rosen 2012). It will employ an error-analysis approach in an initial attempt to identify and characterise regional nominal features of Maltese English in a corpus of academic commerce texts, with a focus on distinguishing these from other nominal features that are present in the variety but do not necessarily identify it as Maltese English. The study will start by exploring the theoretical assumptions that underpin the role error analysis can play in identifying regional characteristics. These will be followed by the methodological procedures undertaken to collect and analyse the noun phrase data in §3; §4 will then provide the error analysis and some conclusions as to possible candidates that characterise the variety are drawn in the last section.

2 Theoretical background

This section will outline the theoretical framework underlying the identification of features of Maltese English in this study. It will explain how an error-analysis approach and its characteristic distinction between developmental and transfer errors can be employed to advantage in the identification of regional features. The pivotal argument will be the role fossilization of transfer errors plays in the development of a set of features that become common across speakers of a variety to the extent that they configure as its identifying characteristics.

2.1 Deviation from standard varieties: The role of developmental errors and transfer errors

Error analysis has provided a basic distinction in the identification and classification of errors, or output that varies from standard usage (Corder 1974). Although the distinction is normally applied in the analysis of learner output, it will be argued here that it can also be used to advantage in the identification of regional features as specified below. The distinction is based on the application of a systematic comparison of deviant structures in learner varieties to corresponding target-language structures in the standard variety, a principle first introduced by Lado (1957) as the contrastive analysis hypothesis. Systematic deviant structures are first defined as erroneous and characterised as developmental or transfer errors after comparative analysis (see, for example, Dulay & Burt 1974 for an application in the analysis of bilingual children's speech). Developmental errors are target-language generated (Richards 1974: 173) and are generally understood to be the result of simplification of target-language structures, for example, when target-language rules are overapplied (Jain 1974). Developmental errors are therefore intralingual in nature, and are in fact also evident in native-speaker output in children (Jain 1974).

In contrast, transfer errors are interlingual in nature and are seen to be present when intralingual explanations are ruled out and an examination of corresponding background language structures indicates that negative transfer of linguistic knowledge has taken place (Lado 1957; Wardaugh 1975). By virtue of their provenance therefore, transfer errors establish a contextual link with the speaker's background language that developmental errors do not, an important point to bear in mind for the purposes of this study.

As a first premise on the application of this distinction in variational contexts, it is important to foreground the fact that it is a distinction endemic to linguistic output in bilingual situations. Transfer only comes into play when a background

language provides pre-existing linguistic knowledge the speaker perceives as transferable to the target language. Furthermore, a speaker's perception of what is and is not transferable changes and becomes more accurate as knowledge of target-language structures improves (Taylor 1975). This to the extent that the majority of errors in advanced learner output are expected to be developmental (McLaughlin 1987). Data from Thewissen (2013) in fact shows a trend towards plateauing in various errors occurring across learners from three different language backgrounds from upper intermediate level[1] onwards. This is identified as one of the three main error developmental profiles in her data taken from the International Corpus of Learner English. The phenomenon that is of interest to this study, however, is the fact that in spite of a general trend to the contrary, some systematic transfer errors will remain in advanced learner output, providing traces of the background language that eventually establish themselves as stable features in the target language (Selinker 1974).

2.2 Regional varieties and fossilization

In the context of regional variation, the notion that some deviant linguistic phenomena are resistant to the kind of change that results in the achievement of target-language norms and consequent native-like competence has particular significance. It can in fact be argued that a widespread systematic failure by speakers of a specific speech community to adapt to target-language norms is crucial to the development of regional varieties. Selinker (1974) has described the tendency of certain deviant structures to remain in the output of speakers over time and stabilize themselves in the output of learners even in advanced learner competences as fossilization. He defines fossilized linguistic material as "linguistic items, rules, and subsystems which speakers of a particular NL will tend to keep in their IL relative to a particular TL, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the TL" (Selinker 1974: 36). There is currently some sense of dissatisfaction with lack of clarity relating in particular as to whether fossilisation is a product- or a process-oriented concept and whether it is global (relating to general linguistic competence) or local (relating to specific areas of language use; see Fidler 2006 for a review of relevant literature). However, this basic definition has prevailed and will be used in this study, which is a product-oriented analysis focusing on specific areas of language use and therefore has a clear orientation in terms of these two issues. To foreground issues more central to this study, the focus on contrast in the defi-

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[1]As defined by the Common European Framework of Reference

nition of Selinker (1974) makes it clear that fossilization has particular relevance in bilingual contexts. Furthermore, fossilized competences are competences that have reached a mature stage of development at which a depletion of errors has taken place to leave a reduced set of errors characterised by resistance to target-language norms. As pointed out in §2.1, an indication that a speaker has reached this level of competence is the presence of a high proportion of developmental errors in relation to transfer errors.

To put this into a variationist perspective, an important point that needs to be considered is the perception of Selinker (1974) that "not only can entire IL competences be fossilized in individual learners performing in their own interlingual situation, but also in whole groups of individuals, resulting in the emergence of a new dialect [...] where fossilized IL competences may be the normal situation" (p. 38). Selinker's argument indicates that fossilized competences include both developmental and transfer errors. However, it is the contention of this paper that only those fossilized errors in advanced learner competences that are capable of contextualising the linguistic output, that is fossilized *transfer* errors, are capable of gaining the status of core characteristics of a regional variety. Any co-existing fossilized developmental errors will serve to identify the variety as deviant from the standard variety, but will not have the ability to mark it as regional. Previous work in the characterisation of Maltese English has tended to ignore this distinction. It is therefore the purpose of this study to examine the linguistic output of Maltese university students in its capacity as advanced learner output, with a view to identifying initial possible candidates characterising Maltese English as a regional variant. Initial work in this direction was carried out in an earlier study (Schembri, under review) that focused on article usage, singular and plural forms and noncount nouns and identified overuse of the definite article as a likely nominal feature of Maltese English. The current study will consider affixation, compounding and prepositional errors to provide a more comprehensive picture of nominal characteristics of the variety. It will apply an error-analysis approach to identify both developmental and transfer errors in so doing and will also provide some insight into fossilized developmental errors that play a role in characterising the variety but have secondary status as non-context bound features.

3 Methodology

This section will outline the details of the methodological procedures undertaken for the purposes of data collection. Apart from the noun phrases that consti-

tuted the primary data, secondary data was collected through a questionnaire as a source of information about the subjects' language background. The Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy provided scripts from the May/June 1997 session and noun phrases were collected from them as specified below. All potential participants were sent a consent form and sampling was carried out on the pool of consenting candidates.

3.1 Participants

All participants had satisfied the University of Malta entry requirements and had a pass at Grade 5 or better in English in the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) (*General Entry Requirements* 2010). It should be noted that this allows for a fairly broad spectrum of linguistic competence levels. Participants were following one of the four degree courses run by the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy. These were the Bachelor of Commerce, the Bachelor of Commerce (Honours), the Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Accountancy and the Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Tourism. Examinations were held at the end of the first year, which is common to the first three courses, and subsequently during the third year and the fourth or fifth year depending on the length of the course. Three sets of examination scripts from three different student cohorts were therefore available at the point of data collection.

In order for sampling to take place, potential participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire with their demographic details and details relating to their language background. This information was used to filter out participants whose native language was not Maltese and whose language competence might have been influenced by atypical language exposure. Two hundred and thirty seven candidates from the May/June 1997 session answered the questionnaire, 30 of whom were considered atypical because they were foreign, had dual nationality, had a foreign parent or had lived in an English-speaking country for a significant period of time. A random sample of 10 candidates from each year group was chosen after this filtering had taken place and noun phrases were collected from the scripts produced by the 30 candidates chosen. The subjects were sixteen males and fourteen females who had been educated in Malta. They had received formal instruction in English between the ages of 5 and 16, at least. Twenty-seven of them were between eighteen and twenty-four years old when they sat for the examinations in question, and the remaining three were in their early thirties. As Hyltenstam (1988) has pointed out, adult learners have been considered the "natural population" (p. 69) for studies of fossilisation, on the basis that higher levels of mastery act as an automomatic filter for deviances that are not likely to be fossilizable (p.70).

3.2 Collection and analysis of noun phrase data

Two hundred and fifty noun phrases were collected manually from the scripts of each of the thirty subjects to make up a corpus of 7,500 noun phrases. The definition of a noun phrase used was that given by Quirk et al. (1985) and considers phrases functioning "as subject, object, and complement of clauses and as complement of prepositional phrases" (p. 245) to be nominal. Pronouns were not included.

Once the corpus was complete, each noun phrase was judged erroneous or error-free by the researcher and doubts as to errors in specialised terminology and border-line cases were double checked by a specialist in the field and a second rater respectively. The researcher satisfied the criteria of Etherton (1977: 72) regarding the qualities needed for satisfactory error judgement. Apart from being a linguist by profession and therefore in possession of "an understanding of how the English language works or genuine curiosity on this point", she had the required level of competence in the language,[2] was a native speaker of Maltese and had taught for a number of years at the level concerned.

Data was collected as evenly as possible from the first, middle and last parts of essay-type questions answered by the subjects. First-year students had answered 12 essay-type questions on average and third-year and honours students 25-26 questions. The ratio of erroneous to error-free structures was then computed for each subject. Noun phrases classified as erroneous were given target forms as close to the original structures as possible. Care was taken to disregard infelicities of style and concentrate on instances of incorrect usage. All structures were listed as output from a specific subject (i.e. candidate) and numbered for ease of identification. In the error analysis that follows, these details are given in a bracket at the end of each example. For example, Subject 2: 184 indicates the error in the example preceding it occurred in the 184th noun phrase collected from the output of the second candidate. Errors are given in enough context to identify them as such and italicised for ease of identification. Corresponding target forms are given immediately below. Erroneous structures were subsequently categorised on the basis of structure and error-type to facilitate the identification of any existing patterns and enable errors of a similar type to be discussed in tandem. In the discussion, an attempt was made to distinguish between devel-

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[2]Etherton (1977: 72)'s criteria specify a "high standard of English". The researcher's standard of English was considered high enough to warrant her inclusion as a member of the Academic English Team at the Institute of Linguistics of the University of Malta whose role was to ensure and maintain standards of English at the university. At the time the study was undertaken she had been fulfilling this role for five years.

opmental and transfer errors on the basis of comparative analysis carried out in line with the theoretical assumptions underlying the study.

4 Error analysis

This section will provide a systematic error analysis of affixation, compounding and prepositional errors in that order. It will characterise the errors in the data falling under these three categories as developmental or transfer errors and will subsequently consider their possible status as fossilized features and potential candidates as nominal characteristics of Maltese English. A general picture of erroneous versus error-free noun phrases broken down by student group is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Average of erroneous versus error-free noun phrases across year groups

Student group	Average of erroneous noun phrases	Average of error-free noun phrases
First-year students	45 (18%)	205 (82%)
Third-year students	35 (14%)	215 (86%)
Honours students	32 (13%)	218 (87%)
Total	112 (15%)	638 (85%)

The results in Table 1 indicate an overall 15% error rate average located in noun phrases in the data. These include the three types of error examined in this paper, as well as other error types such as faulty article usage, proform errors and the misuse of singular and plural forms. The subset of errors falling under the three categories examined in this paper are given as raw scores in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of propositional affixation and compounding errors

Error type	Frequency (n)
Prepositional errors	29
Affixation errors	21
Compounding errors	7

4.1 Affixation errors

The errors discussed in this section concern faulty nominal word-formation processes involving affixation located in the head of the NP. These are of two types: the first type involves word class changes that result in lack of correspondence between form and function. One example is "insurance *brokering*" (Subject 11: 34), where the verb form is being incorrectly used as a noun instead of *brokerage*. The second type involves affixation processes resulting in the formation of non-words, as in the use of the *un-* prefix in "*unadmissible* assets" (Subject 22: 227). The next two sections will consider the two different types of error in turn.

4.1.1 Lack of correspondence between form and function

Different factors were seen to come into play in errors of affixation that resulted in lack of correspondence between form and function. "The reduction of the target language to a simpler system" (Jain 1974: 191), or simplification, was a likely motivator in cases of non-suffixed forms that were in need of a suffix, as in the three errors in (1) and (2) below:

(1) Subject 3: 154, 155
*Physiological needs include the very basic ones for survival – **drink** and **eat** here come to mind.*
'Physiological needs include the very basic ones for survival – drinking and eating here come to mind.'

(2) Subject 2: 184
*or dies for force reasons, that is during arrest or to the **safeguard** of others or during state emergencies*
'or dies for force reasons, that is during arrest or the safeguarding of others or during state emergencies'

The base forms *drink*, *eat* and *safeguard* all require the suffix *-ing* to change their word class into the nouns appropriate for use in their current contexts. All three are base forms of verbs, and *drink* and *safeguard* can also function as nouns, albeit with different meanings to the ones intended here. Although *eat* cannot function as a noun, the tendency to use base forms as opposed to more complex affixed forms requiring a choice of suffix is present in all three.

The opposite is however the case in (3), where the suffix *-ing* has erroneously been added to the base form *search*, which is the noun needed in this context:

(3) Subject 9: 139
     *needs such as exploration and the **searching** for meaning and knowledge*
     'needs such as exploration and the search for meaning and knowledge'

The unnecessary addition of the suffix could be indicative of a more advanced type of error occurring at a stage in the learning process when affixation is being used rather than avoided, but is overapplied in some cases.

The data also provided a case of affixation involving an incorrect choice of suffix:

(4) Subject 11: 34
     *insurance **brokering***
     'insurance brokerage'

This error may be conditioned by the fact that *-ing* is much more productive than *-age* and might therefore be functioning as a default suffix until a more detailed understanding of affixation is in place. It should also be noted that, as opposed to *eat, drink, search* and to some extent also *safeguard, brokerage* has a more specialised usage and the subject who made the error may still have been developing some familiarity with the lexeme and its different forms in the process of acquiring new vocabulary in this field.

The above analysis suggests these types of problems are developmental in nature insofar as they deal with simplification of target-language structures or the use of intralingual processes that are valid in themselves but incorrectly applied.

4.1.2 Non-words

Affixation processes sometimes resulted in the formation of non-words. The following three examples show non-existent words resulting from an incorrect choice of the negative prefix:

(5) Subject 22: 226
     *loans that are **unadequately** secured*
     'loans that are inadequately secured'

(6) Subject 22: 227
     ***unadmissible** assets*
     'inadmissible assets'

(7) Subject 17, 146
     *the disorders created when rule of law is weak or **inexistent***
     'the disorders created when rule of law is weak or nonexistent'

The first two errors were made by the same subject and, as in the case of *-ing* earlier, it is possible that *un-* is being used as a kind of default negative suffix, particularly since it is more productive than *in-*. The use of *inexistent* in the third example is not likely to be such a case, however, since *in-* is not as productive as *un-*.

Other cases of non-words resulting from NP affixation were the following:

(8)   Subject 1: 191
      illegitimation
      'illegitimacy'

(9)   Subject 7: 180
      incapacitance
      'incapacitation'

(10) Subject 5: 200
      enbreechment
      'breech'

The first two examples, taken from the output of different subjects, show the suffix *-ation* being overapplied in (8) and replaced by *-ance* in (9). More evidence would be needed to deduce whether the use of a default suffix is in operation. It is possible that the Maltese cognate *illeġittimazzjoni*, where *-azzjoni* corresponds formally to *-ation*, influenced the choice in the first case. In the second case, the Maltese cognate *kapacità* is not suffixed; however, my intuition as a Maltese speaker would indicate that the final accented *à* is more in harmony with *-ance* than with *-ation*. These two examples indicate some possible traces of transfer in the use of affixation and suggest that not all word-formation processing errors are necessarily developmental in nature, particularly where cognates are concerned. The third example, on the other hand, cannot be attributed to transfer, and the unnecessary addition of a suffix to *breech* is probably a result of lack of familiarity with its double function, which would make the error intralingual and therefore developmental.

Although there is clearly different patterning at work, what is interesting in the above three examples is the fact that they are all specialised terms from Law, which is a subject area Commerce students are tested on, but not one they are particularly familiar with. On the basis that studies such as Nation (1993) show that specialised vocabulary increases in tandem with one's understanding of the subject matter, these errors can be taken as an indication that learners need some

time to familiarise themselves with the different forms of new lexemes and, particularly in the case of cognates, may fall back on their knowledge of the L1 to fill in any existing gaps.

4.2 Compounding errors

Other types of non-forms in the data concerned the use of non-existent phrases, most of which were unacceptable noun compounds. Compound nouns have been found to be problematic in Alamin & Ahmed (2012) who explained that students studying Science at Taif University in Saudi Arabia who had previously studied English as a foreign language for five to ten years failed to use compound nouns correctly in spite of having been taught their use in scientific English.

Since compounding is not possible in Maltese, direct transfer cannot be considered as possible motivation for errors of compounding. Contrastive analysis suggests it is more likely that the motivation is avoidance. As is evident from the following examples, the correct target form for most unacceptable noun compounds in the data is a postmodifying prepositional phrase:

(11) Subject 3: 192
      Ombudsman decisions
      'decisions taken by the ombudsman'

(12) Subject 13: 127
      *a new **management line of though*** [sic]
      'a new line of thought in management'

(13) Subject 21: 142
      the Dividend Article of the Treaties number 10
      'point Number 10 of the Dividend Article of the Treaties'

(14) Subject 4: 171
      *the **human personality** and his behaviour*
      'the personality and behaviour of human beings'

It is possible that the construction of erroneous compound nouns in the above cases is an attempt to avoid prepositional phrases, which involve the notoriously difficult area of prepositional usage (Jain 1974) and it is interesting to consider to what extent such strategies may be influenced by the background language.

In a contrastive study, Schachter (1974) considered avoidance in the light of the acquisition of English relative clauses by native speakers of Persian, Arabic,

Chinese, and Japanese. She found that the Persian and Arabic learners produced significantly more, albeit at times erroneous relative clauses in English than the Chinese and Japanese learners. One of the insights that came out of the study was the fact that avoidance possibly occurred as a result of the perception of language distance resulting from the postnominal position of relative clauses in English, as contrasted with their prenominal position in Chinese and Japanese.

In cases such as those in Schachter's (1974) study, knowledge of corresponding background language structures can be seen to influence target-language output, and some element of transfer therefore understood to be present, if indirectly. With respect to prepositional usage in English, however, avoidance can much more readily be interpreted as a result of the degree of arbitrariness in prepositional usage present in the target language itself (Jain 1974), and less so as a background language related issue. It is however interesting to note that in the current data, the prepositions in all the examples would have been correct had they been directly translated from Maltese, and that with the possible exception of 11, which has a relatively simple structure, it is not unlikely that avoidance was significantly conditioned by the level of complexity of the corresponding target-language structures.

With respect to whether or not any specific erroneous noun compounds are likely to fossilize as stable developmental features of the variety, it is difficult to come to any definitive conclusion. As in the case of the production of errors occurring as a result of valid affixation processes, it is doubtful whether the production of erroneous noun compounds is productive and widespread enough to be fossilizable, and a large-scale study would need to be conducted to determine whether this is the case.

4.3 Prepositional errors

Errors in prepositional usage were found in twenty-seven out of the thirty subjects. This is in line with what one would expect since prepositions are considered one of the areas of the surface structure of English that are "more facilitative of indeterminacy than others" (Jain 1974: 205) and are therefore highly problematic for learners, including those at an advanced stage of their language learning. A number of recent studies on adult learners with semitic background languages show correspondingly high frequencies of errors involving prepostions. Gholami & Zeinolabedini (2015), for example, found prepositions to be one of the four grammatical areas with the most frequent errors in a corpus of sixty Iranian medical research articles published in international English journals (p. 64). In this study, the published versions of the articles were compared to their

first drafts to identify which areas had required grammatical improvement in the process of publication. Although the data is largely comparable, it included instances such as the replacement of 'to' instead of a dash in phrases such as '8-10', which would not be considered error types in the current study. In another recent study on the written production of sixty Iranian adult students' performance in a mock IELTS test, prepositions accounted for 10.9% of grammatical errors (Nosrati & Nafisi 2015). Similarly, an earlier study involving 50 male and 50 female advanced Iranian EFL learners found misuse of prepositions accounted for 13.5% of syntactic errors in female writers and 15.5% of syntactic errors in males (Boroomand & Rostami Abusaeedi 2013); and Al-Harafsheh & Pandian (2012) listed adjectives with prepositions as the second most frequent type of adjectival error in a test on the use of adjectives administered on 150 twenty-two-year-old Jordanian students at Al-Albeyt University. Similar indications of the problematic nature of prepositions were present in an error analysis carried out on forty-nine third-year university students majoring in English in Northeast Normal University Changchun with Chinese as their first language. In this study, prepositional errors accounted for 11.6% of errors produced in a narrative essay.

In the current study, errors involving prepositional usage were in most cases located in phrases that involved an incorrect choice of preposition whose target form needed a simple substitution of preposition, or else more complex modification of the prepositional phrase or its substitution with some form of premodification. What shall be considered here is whether any specific prepositional error type is a likely candidate for fossilization and if that is the case, if it can be considered a possible characteristic of Maltese English on the basis that it is the result of negative transfer from Maltese.

The most common errors needing a simple substitution of preposition were cases of *for* being replaced incorrectly by *of*, as in the following:

(15)   Subject 9: 148
       *the need **of** beauty, order and symmetry*
       'the need for beauty, order and symmetry'

(16)   Subject 7: 166
       *the need **of** esteem*
       'the need for esteem'

(17)   Subject 6: 200
       *reason **of** arrest*
       'reason for arrest'

(18) Subject 27: 181
the best price **of** assets
'the best price for assets'

These errors can be considered transfer errors since the phrases are directly translated from Maltese, with the preposition *of* translating *ta'*. *Of* is also seen to incorrectly replace other prepositions, such as *to* and *about* respectively in the following:

(19) Subject 10: 198
*the right **of** life*
'the right to life'

(20) Subject 9: 180
*the film **of** Nature and Nurture*
'the film about Nature and Nurture'

In both examples, *ta'* again gives a valid version in Maltese, although *għal* is also possible in (19). Direct transfer where *of* translates *ta'* is again therefore likely.

As in (19), *ta'* is also seen to replace *to* in the following examples, however with a different target form that requires the base form of the verb to follow it:

(21) Subject 2: 225
*his need **of** feeling loved*
'the need to be loved'

(22) Subject 9: 146
*the need **of** being seen at his best*
'the need to be seen at his best'

(23) Subject 18: 56
*the failure **of** paying attention*
'the failure to pay attention'

In (23), direct transfer is likely since the Maltese translation would be *in-nuqqas ta' attenzjoni*. Example (21) could follow the same structure translated as *il-bżonn ta' l-imħabba*; however, *li* is also possible if a verb follows the preposition instead of a noun to produce *il-bżonn li tkun maħbub*. The latter structure would also be needed for a translation of (22) in *il-bżonn li jidher fl-aħjar tiegħu*. In the latter

two cases transfer through direct translation of the preposition can be ruled out since *li* does not translate *of.*

Examples (21), (22) and (23) introduce a set of examples where V*ing* follows *of* to produce NP + *of* + V*ing*. This structure is perfectly acceptable in English in certain cases but is used erroneously as indicated above and in the following examples:

(24)　Subject 16: 97
　　　*the prevention **of letting** hardware get damaged by humidity or mishandling*
　　　'the prevention of harware damage caused by humidity or mishandling'

(25)　Subject 16: 94
　　　*The prevention **of losing** information*
　　　'The prevention of information loss'

(26)　Subject 27: 226
　　　*the pursuit **of making** higher profits*
　　　'the pursuit of higher profits'

In these three cases, *of* needs to be followed by NP to produce the NP + *of* + NP structure that was used erroneously in (15–20) above. Maltese would tend to have an NP following *of* so that direct transfer would have favoured the correct choice of structure. However, it would also have favoured *damage of hardware* and *loss of information* respectively in the first two examples since compounding is not possible. It is difficult to determine whether the resulting double use of *of* may have created some perception of awkwardness the writers wanted to avoid, but this still rules out direct transfer. It is more likely that the NP + *of* + V*ing* structure is being overapplied until further familiarization limits its usage to acceptable environments.

The last set of errors concerned postmodifying prepositional phrases whose target structures required some form of premodification. Occasionally, as in (27), an adjective was needed instead:

(27)　Subject 1: 216
　　　*various roles **of managers***
　　　'various managerial roles'

It is likely that the Maltese equivalent would favour a stucture with *ta'* which would indicate direct transfer.

Postmodifying prepositional phrases more commonly needed to be replaced by an *'s* genitive:

(28) Subject 22: 169
*the consent **of** the partners*
'the partners' consent'

(29) Subject 24: 85
*an opinion **of** the auditor on the truth and fairness of the financial statements*
'the auditor's opinion on the the truth and fairness of the financial statements'

(30) Subject 27: 54
the advantages associated with the use by the company of debt capital
'the advantages associated with the company's use of debt capital'

It is possible to interpret the above errors as the result of negative transfer since in all three cases Maltese would have a postmodifying prepositional phrase with *ta'*. It is, however, also possible to use the same structure in English in other cases, and therefore the errors can also be interpreted as the overapplication of a TL rule. However, the *of* construction to indicate possession is less common in English, and it is usually the more common structure that is overapplied when more than one realisation is possible. A crosslinguistic motivation is therefore more likely.

Lastly, postmodifying prepositional phrases with *of* also replaced compound nouns, as can be seen in the following:

(31) Subject 7: 50
*a fixed rate **of** tax*
'a fixed tax rate'

(32) Subject 28: 50
*the confidence **of** investors*
'investor confidence'

(33) Subject 7: 84
*an accountant **for** the government*
'a government accountant'

(34) Subject 16: 136
*the Brandt Commission **of** the 1990*
'the 1990 Brandt Commission'

These errors are clearly crosslinguistic in nature, since in Maltese a postmodifying prepositional phrase would be used in such cases and its substitution with some form of premodification would not be possible. It is interesting to note that the subjects who had erroneous compound nouns in their production (see §4.2) did not make these kinds of errors. This suggests the two error types are indicative of different stages of development, with erroneous postmodification of the type shown in Examples (31–34) above preceding the production of erroneous compound nouns. The fact that different stages of development are characterised by the quality of the errors and not simply by error rates has recently been shown in a study on error rates and error types in three different IELTS bands by Müller (2015). Nezami & Najafi (2012) also found significant differences across low, mid and high proficiency groups on error types made in a TOEFL-based written English test taken by 103 Iranian students of English at two universities in Iran.

As is clear from the above, the majority of prepositional errors concern *of*, which shows a wider application of its use than its target-language usage would allow, and suggests a tendency for its application as a preferred option when in doubt. The above analysis indicates it is likely to replace *for* in NP + *of* + NP structures, but may also replace other prepositions such as *to* and *about*. As the analysis of previous errors related to the overuse of affixes suggests, it is not unusual for learners to overuse the most common realisation of a grammatical form, particularly if there is overlap in meaning and some degree of arbitrariness in their application, as is the case here. More importantly in relation to issues of characterisation of the variety, the data suggest that the preference for *of* is triggered by the usage of *ta'* in Maltese in such cases.

Other relatively frequent errors related to *of* are postmodifying prepositional phrases replacing *'s* genitives or compound nouns, which add to the frequency of problematic structures starting with NP + *of* likely to be the result of transfer and strengthen the possibility that a preference for such structures is a possible feature of Maltese English. Less clear cases of transfer with initial NP + *of* structures that contribute to this general picture are NP + *of* + V*ing* structures. The possibility of prepositional usage being affected by the L1 follows findings by Koosha & Jafarpour (2006) indicating that errors in the collocation of prepositions in a test administered on 200 Iranian university English majors were more than twice as likely to be interlingual in nature (68.4% as opposed to 31.6% intralingual errors).

5 Conclusion

This study applied an error-analysis approach to errors of affixation, compounding and prepositional usage in Maltese university students' commerce texts in an attempt to identify nominal characteristics of Maltese English. With respect to affixation, it concluded that with the exception of some evidence of transfer in cognates, affixation errors were mostly developmental in nature and unlikely candidates for fossilization. Transfer was even less evident in noun compounds, where avoidance of complex prepositional phrases was seen to be the most probable cause of error. Prepositional errors were mostly *of*-related, and were the errors that showed the clearest evidence of transfer. There was some indication that *of* might be functioning as a preferred preposition in cases of doubt as to the correct choice of preposition. It was concluded that the overuse of *of* was the most likely type of error to fossilize and gain status as a stable nominal feature of Maltese English.

More evidence is needed to determine whether any of the developmental error types found in the data are likely candidates for fossilization. One of the issues that needs to be addressed with respect to affixation and compounding and other errors of this type is to what extent fossilization is likely in such cases. The point is that it is not the affixation process in itself that is erroneous, but its overapplication in specific cases. What needs to be determined is therefore whether any specific usage of an incorrect form has fossilized, and this is difficult to do unless the noun happens to be commonly used. Unlike highly productive linguistic forms, such as the definite or indefinite article, fossilization of linguistic items that are not highly productive would need substantial amounts of data for enough instances of their usage to give clear indications as to whether fossilization is taking place. Furthermore, such usage would need to be found across subjects to determine whether fossilization is ideolectal or else more widespread and therefore possibly variational. A further question is whether actual lack of productiveness of linguistic items may deter fossilization in any case, particularly if repeated usage is found to be a determining factor.

This study has extended the examination of nominal features of Maltese English initially examined in Schembri (under review). Further evidence is however necessary to consolidate the findings from both these studies and to create a more comprehensive picture of regional features characterising the variety, particularly since the dataset is not extensive. It is also important at this point to consider more recent data to see whether current linguistic trends match those evident in the data collected in 1997 for this study. Although variational change

takes time to establish itself, the timespan at this point is probably large enough for any significant linguistic development to become evident.

On a more general note, the discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the identification of such features, in particular the role of fossilization and the distinction between the status of developmental and transfer features in such a context needs to be further developed. A clearer understanding is also needed of what determines which features in a given variety are likely to fossilize and which are more likely to develop to native speaker competence levels. A detailed examination of such issues will shed light on the development of regional varieties in bilingual contexts.

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