

Intonation in Maltese and Maltese English - the form and function of early H peaks

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Maltese English (henceforth MaltE) is the variety of English spoken in Malta. It has been described as a “continuum of continua” due to variability, not only across speakers, but also across different speaking contexts. It does not fit easily into the Kachruvian 3 circles model ([1]; [2]). According to Schneider’s Dynamic Model ([3]; [4]; [5]), which has been applied to MaltE by [6], the variety is transitioning from phase 3, nativisation, to phase 4, endonormative stabilization. Entry into this phase comes with increasing recognition, in this case of MaltE, as a variety in its own right. The co-existence of MaltE and Maltese in the everyday usage of Maltese bilinguals results in an interesting contact situation in which the two languages influence each other mutually at all levels of linguistic structure ([7], [8]). Here we focus on intonation, and in particular on a salient feature of both languages: the prevalence of F0 peaks at the beginning of words and phrases. Following the analysis of this peak as a H tone, we refer to these as early H peaks.

Early H peaks were first analysed in Maltese as an initial phrasal edge tone, drawing on examples of *wh*-questions with *wh*-words in initial position ([9]). By placing *wh*-words in different positions in the phrase, [10], following on from Vella ([11, [12]), provided experimental evidence for an analysis of these H peaks as H tones associated with the *wh*-words themselves, rather than the phrase. Evidence from tonal alignment indicates that the H tone is not associated with the lexical stress of these *wh*-words, as is the case in the same words when used in indirect questions, but rather with their left edge. Thus, although Maltese has regular pitch accents associated with lexical stress, the language also has word initial tones. What is still unclear is the contribution of these tones to the marking of prominence in the language, i.e., whether a word initial tone (often high in the speaker’s range) has a similar prominence-cueing function to a pitch accent on that word. Importantly, word initial tones are not confined to *wh*-questions; they have also been attested in imperatives, exclamatives and vocatives ([9], [10]).

In this paper, we investigate early H peaks in both languages, Maltese and MaltE, drawing on a corpus of television interviews in which, unlike in elicited speech, the speakers are engaged in real communication. This corpus allows us to shed light not only on the formal properties of early H peaks (occurrence at the word edge indicating edge association) but also on the question as to whether they are prominence cueing, insofar as it is possible to assess information structural content from the discourse context.

First results from the interviews indicate that these peaks are highly frequent in *wh*-questions in both languages. For examples of *wh*-questions in Maltese and MaltE, see Figures 1 and 2 respectively. Importantly, there is no contrastive focus on the *wh*-word in either case, and the question in Figure 2 cannot be interpreted as an echo question, although its superficial form might resemble such a question in other varieties of English.

Crucially, in neither language are early H peaks restricted to *wh*-questions. In fact, they are found in a wide range of sentence modalities/speech act types and contexts, occurring on pronouns, adverbials and conjunctions, and rarely coinciding with a constituent that appears to be newsworthy in the given context. Moreover, in words with more than one syllable or with non-initial stress, the peak occurs on the initial syllable (e.g. in the phrase “unless we have that” the peak is on the first syllable of “unless”).

We conclude that these peaks have a similar form and function in both Maltese and MaltE. They are distinct from pitch accents in their placement and in terms of their participation in cueing prominence, and thus information structural content.

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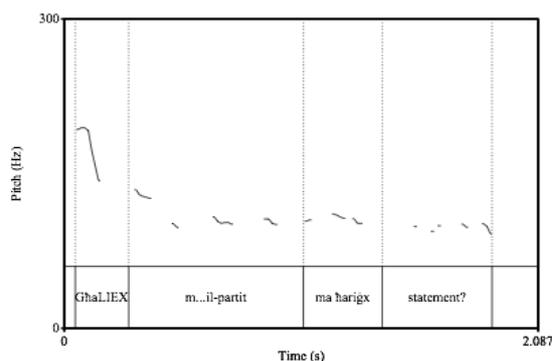


Figure 1:

Għaliex m...il-partit ma ħariġx statement?
 Why m DEF-party NEG put.out-NEG statement
 ‘Why did the party not issue a statement?’
 There is an H peak on the initial syllable although lexical stress is final on the wh-word *għaliEX*

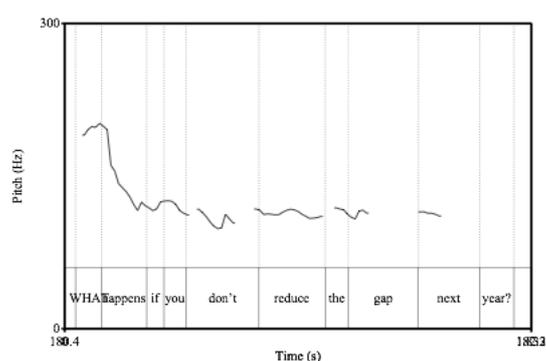


Figure 2:

What happens if you don't reduce the gap next year?
 There is an H peak on the wh-word *what*. This is an unmarked question in MaltE, with no contrastive focus on the wh-word.