

Maltese-English Dictionary to be Digitized

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Adam Ussishkin said that when he and his collaborators set out to improve the Maltese-English dictionary, they wanted to create a digital resource "both to serve the Maltese people and to help linguists interested in studying Maltese." (Photo credit: Beatriz Verdugo / UANews)

(PhysOrg.com) -- University of Arizona linguist Adam Ussishkin has headed up an effort to update and digitize the Maltese-English dictionary of record. The new searchable database will enable scholars and speakers to more readily study the language.

The standard Maltese-English dictionary, originally drafted by 20th century [linguist](#) Joseph Aquilina over nearly 50 years, has served as the

language's primary linguistic source for decades.

Subsequently, much of the dictionary - published in volumes leading up to the 1980s - is outdated, which poses some challenges for speakers and researchers, said Adam Ussishkin, a University of Arizona linguistics professor.

This resulted in a major undertaking led by Ussishkin and Alina Twist, one of his graduate students: a seven-year project to digitize the Maltese-to-English dictionary, enabling researchers the flexibility to swiftly access and update the text.

"Maltese has developed numerous new [vocabulary](#) in recent years," said Ussishkin, who also co-directs the UA's [Psycholinguistics](#) and Computational Linguistics Lab.

"The average Maltese speaker isn't familiar with up to one-third of the dictionary entries," he added.

Ussishkin and Twist initiated the project in 2003 and have since created an editable formattable dictionary that will be completed by next month.

Also, Ussishkin is working with the dictionary's publisher, Midsea Books, to soon make the text available to the public.

The project, though on a smaller scale, is comparable to the Oxford English Dictionary available online.

The project is important for those studying and also speaking the language.

Pinned between Italy and the northern region of Africa, Malta has long been influenced by Italian, Arabic and also English dialects, resulting in

a hybrid native language and grammar system.

The Italian influence has had a much longer influence on the island of fewer than 500,000 inhabitants, yet English has emerged within the last few centuries on the island, a former British colony, Ussishkin said.

While Maltese, is not diminishing in useage, "unfortunately, the language is relatively underdocumented compared with other European languages," Ussishkin said.

Initially, he and Twist were using the dictionary for their own research but found difficulties because so many words in the dictionary were no longer in use while other popular words were not included.

Twist, who was completing a dissertation leading up to her 2006 graduation from the UA, is now an assistant research scientist at the University of Maryland's Center for Advanced Study of Language.

"It was at her urging that the two of us started working on this project together," Ussishkin said, noting that both their research efforts involved relying on primary sources to help understand patterns in the Maltese language.

As it turned out, one of Ussishkin's friends and colleagues - the president of the National Council of the Maltese Language - was closely connected to the Midsea Books publisher. The connection ultimately led to the publishing company contracting Ussishkin for his work on the dictionary.

In working with the publisher, the team created electronic scans of each page of the dictionary, which contains about 80,000 entries. The team then ran optical character recognition on the scans, converting the pages into an editable document.

Ussishkin has spent years visiting Malta to work on the [dictionary](#) while also conducting research for another project. Other UA graduate students in linguistics involved include Jeff Punske, Amy LaCross and Kevin Schluter.

While in Malta, he has been measuring the psycholinguistic behavior of hundreds of people to understand how native speakers understand grammatical Maltese patterns.

"The language is really unique in a number of ways," he said, adding that because the island has "always been settled," the language has long been influenced by other dialects.

Grammar patterns, for instance, can be tracked back to Arabic and Italian.

"A lot of the older Maltese words were being supplanted by recent words from English," he said. "We thought that maybe someone needed to make a version that was updated."

The new searchable database, which includes words, terms and etymological information, will enable scholars and speakers to more readily study the language.

"Other people will be able to do this research much more easily than we were able," Ussishkin said.

"Maybe other people will now see that what would have been obstacles to research in this area no longer exist," he said.

"The language is a strong part of the identity of the people of Malta, so we thought this was a useful endeavor," he added. "The end product will enable people with an interest in the language to have all of this

information at their fingertips."

Provided by University of Arizona

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