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Maltese is, among other things, arguably the only modern Arabic variety influenced not by Classical Arabic but rather by European languages. In this book, Joseph M. Brincat gives us a detailed and insightful account of the comings and goings of all the languages which have graced Malta’s shores. This is, however, clearly the story of one of them: Maltese, an Arabic dialect coming by way of Sicily, which was then strongly affected by the other languages present. The subject of this book is the language situation of Malta, an ‘external’ history of Maltese, sociolinguistic as much as historical.

The book asks the following question: ‘Where did Maltese come from, and how did it get to be the way it is?’ In the introduction, various possible approaches are presented, and B argues for a stratal approach, according to which the modern Maltese (lexicon) derives from: prehistoric substrata (nil), principal strata (Arabic, 32.41%), superstratum plus adstratum one (Sicilian + Italian, 53.46%), and adstratum two (English, 6.12%). In parallel, he argues for a diglossic approach, with a succession of acrolects alongside the ever-present Maltese (or in the earliest period, alongside Siculo-Arabic).

Before Maltese, several languages were surely spoken in Malta—Punic, Greek, Latin—and B tells us what we know (and what people speculate) about them (Ch. 1). These languages, however, had no significant impact on the main story, leaving few, if any, traces in Maltese itself. The story really begins (Ch. 2) with how an Arabic variety, and which Arabic variety, got established on Malta. Regardless of which variety came with the first Arab invasion of 870, for later Maltese B makes it clear that it is Siculo-Arabic, brought by immigrants (refugees) from Sicily in the eleventh century, that gave rise to Maltese.

Central to the story (Chs. 3–6) are the Romance adstrata, which donated the bulk of the modern Maltese vocabulary. Although a number of languages appear here (from the Vulgar Latin-speaking indigenous population invaded by the Arabs to Italian under the Order of St. John), again the main player is Sicilian, dominant from the eleventh century. Ch. 7 discusses the origins of Maltese ‘linguistics’ under the Order and how these studies developed up to the time of British rule.

The period from British rule to present (Chs. 8–10) is a story of transition (from Maltese-Italian to Maltese-English bilingualism), standardization, and stratification. An interesting thesis presented here is that Maltese was saved because it was seen as just a ‘dialect’; the British were too busy suppressing Italian to pay attention to Maltese. Finally (Ch. 10), B gives an engrossing ‘sociolinguistic snapshot’ of ‘bilingualism, code switching, and varieties’ in present-day Malta.

A superb treatment of the subject, this book is a must for Maltese specialists and also of great interest to those interested in the sociolinguistic history of ‘small’ languages, particularly Semitic
languages (especially North African Arabic varieties). Due to the prominent role the languages of Sicily played in this story of Maltese, anyone interested in a ‘linguistic history of Sicily’ would also surely want to read this book.