In *Grammatical Gender in Maltese*, George Farrugia discusses the grammatical gender system in Maltese primarily from a descriptive perspective, expanding on earlier work (see Farrugia 2015). The volume furthers research on systems of grammatical gender in romance languages (e.g. French, Spanish) by focusing on a language with unique historical influences from Italian and Arabic. The methodology utilised by Farrugia could be useful for researchers who work with languages, whether or not they aim to explore large corpora of naturally occurring data.

The book is divided into seven chapters that range from theoretical discussions of grammatical gender to quantitative analyses of data. Following the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses linguistic theories on the comprehension and use of grammatical gender, while Chapter 3 outlines the ways gender can be expressed grammatically. The next three chapters centre findings from the studies that Farrugia has conducted on Maltese. Specifically, Chapter 4 reviews how grammatical gender is described in Maltese dictionaries and grammars, highlighting the context for any reader with limited knowledge of the language. Chapter 5 presents the results from two questionnaires focused on the morphosyntactic elements that potentially influence speakers’ understandings of grammatical gender for inanimate nouns. Chapter 6 discusses the understandings and
conceptualisation of grammatical gender specifically in animate nouns, as found in two other questionnaires.

Farrugia is concerned with three main theories for the ways in which grammatical gender is comprehended and produced by speakers: Levelt’s (1993) model of comprehension, which is a workflow model of how the brain processes ideas into speech; Caramazza’s (1997) independent network model, which proposes that we access gender information after retrieval of either the sound or written form of words; and the maximalist hypothesis, which emphasises the role of contextual factors in the construction and construal of utterances. Farrugia situates each of these theories within a psycholinguistic perspective. The book primarily uses examples from Maltese, with some examples from other languages (e.g. Dutch, English, Italian) to demonstrate how the theories function outside the specific Maltese context. The examples clearly illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of each theory. The theories discussed are dense at points, as each model has its own complexities, but Farrugia maintains forward momentum and showcases their relevance for understanding the theoretical implications of grammatical gender.

The grammatical gender discussion is centred around a diachronic investigation into three dictionaries/grammars (Grammatika Ġdida tal-Malti 1994; Maltese – Descriptive Grammar 1997; Grammatika Maltija 2004). In particular, the discussion investigates how the grammatical genders of different words are categorised on the basis of their historic origin (in this case, Arabic, Italian and Sicilian, English and unknown/other). From this investigation, Maltese does not follow a singular system, but tends to copy either the grammatical gender category of borrowed words (a phenomenon also discussed by Stolz 2009) or the grammatical gender of the Maltese hypernym. The analysis identifies that there are almost three times the number of borrowed words from Italian and Sicilian origins than the next most common source, Arabic. In addition, there are roughly the same number of borrowed words from English origins as from unknown/diverse origins. There were also some differences in the ending patterns and grammatical gender assignment depending on the origin of the word. For instance, Maltese words ending in -i that are of Arabic origin tend to be grammatically masculine, whereas -i-ending words of Italian and Sicilian origin tend to be grammatically feminine. The implication of these results is that, unless Maltese is learned by rote, understanding a word’s etymology is important for understanding the word’s gender.

Farrugia designed two questionnaires to ascertain Maltese speakers’ understandings of the language’s grammar; these form the second part of the volume. Farrugia acknowledges that a corpus of spontaneous speech would be preferable, but uses questionnaires as a substitute since suitable
corpora were not available. There were 210 respondents: 110 Maltese students ranging from sixteen to eighteen years, 50 Gozitan students also aged sixteen to eighteen years and 50 adults over 35 years, origin unspecified. While the methodological decision to use questionnaires was clear, a rationale for why the Gozitan students were considered a separate group would have provided a solid background to understand the analysis.

One questionnaire focused on the grammatical gender of inanimate nouns in isolation. Respondents were first asked to identify the gender of nouns in a list. Generally, respondents’ identified gender matched that of the dictionaries’/grammars’ descriptions. From the findings, Farrugia asserts a strong association between word form and grammatical gender. Farrugia’s questionnaire also included questions regarding nouns within the context of written and spoken language: respondents were asked to identify the correct verb in noun phrases with conflicting genders and were also asked questions such as ‘whether they would use tazza nbid ahmar or tazza nbid ħamra (both meaning ‘a glass of red wine’) in response to someone who asked them what they would like to drink’ (158). Farrugia found that ‘when the noun phrase was the subject, in five out of seven cases, the verb agreed with the second noun rather than the head noun (the first)’ (155). Conflict was strongest when the second noun was grammatically feminine.

The second questionnaire explored how grammatical gender is conceptualised with human antecedents. Farrugia found that the ‘rules for gender assignment that apply to nouns referring to inanimate are less strong when applied to nouns referring to persons’ (175). For example, respondents interpreted the masculine noun individwu ‘individual’ as encompassing the feminine in half of the responses but in isolation tended toward interpreting it as masculine. Farrugia ascribes these results to the influence of social gender and concludes that when assigning gender to a noun, ‘the most important criterion is the extent to which informants associate the referent of the noun with its sex’ (233–234). Given the significance of social gender, Farrugia could have enriched his discussion by including insights from linguistic discrimination, feminist and non-binary activism and queer theory.

Farrugia’s book gives a detailed overview of how grammatical gender functions in Maltese and expands the literature on grammatical gender overall. The writing style is easy to follow and flows from one chapter to the next. This is a solid introduction to Maltese for researchers who may be unfamiliar with the language. While there could be improvements, such as by clarifying the significance of considering Gozitan and Maltese respondents separately and by incorporating discussions of gender and politics,
this text is essential for understanding the workings of grammatical gender in lesser studied languages.

References


