

Michael Spagnol

***Taf x'naf?* A closer look at stative verbs in Maltese**

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it classifies Maltese stative verbs into four distinct groups based on their morphological characteristics, especially their ability to form the perfect. Second, it demonstrates that, despite their formal differences, these verbs share particular morphological and syntactic traits. Notably, they have an actual present time reference in the imperfect, frequently rely on auxiliary verbs to express tense and modality, and are generally incongruent with progressive constructions, setting them apart from dynamic verbs.

Keywords: lexical aspect, stative verbs, morphosyntax, pseudo-verbs, Maltese

1 Introduction

This work¹ examines the classification and grammatical behaviour of stative verbs in Maltese. Unlike dynamic verbs that express actions or events, stative verbs denote unchanging conditions, qualities, or relationships. Four distinct categories of Maltese stative verbs are identified: (a) perfectless verbs, (b) pseudo-verbs, (c) semi-perfectless verbs, and (d) verbs with a perfect form. This typology reveals the morphological and syntactic diversity within the class of stative verbs in Maltese. Key characteristics of stative verbs include their dependence on auxiliary verbs like *kien* 'to be' to express tense and modality, and their incompatibility with the progressive aspect. The study sheds light on how Maltese encodes stativity through specific linguistic means, providing insights into the interplay between morphology and syntax.

The rest of the paper is organised into six sections. Section 2 provides an overview of aspectology, situating Maltese stative verbs within a broader framework. Section 3 focuses on verb classification, elaborating on the distinctions between

¹ This study revisits and builds upon findings previously discussed by the author (Spagnol 2007, 2009). An earlier version of this research, written in Maltese, was published as Spagnol (2023). The present version offers an expanded analysis of the original with the goal of engaging a wider scholarly community. All examples, unless otherwise attributed, have been formulated by the author.

Michael Spagnol, University of Malta, e-mail: michael.spagnol@um.edu.mt

states and events and the features that define each category. Section 4 explores the defining characteristics of stative predicates, highlighting their persistence, lack of change, and interpretation in the imperfect. Section 5 presents the main typology of stative verbs in Maltese, identifying four categories, while section 6 establishes morphosyntactic criteria for identifying stative verbs, notwithstanding their formal differences. Finally, Section 7 summarises the key findings of the study and proposes directions for future research.

2 Aspectology

Tense and aspect are two primary means of expressing temporality in language. While tense locates an event in time relative to another point (often the moment of speaking), aspect focuses on the event's internal temporal structure. Comrie's (1976: 3) often-cited definition of aspect as "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" highlights how aspect enables us to perceive a situation either as a complete whole (perfective) or as an ongoing process (imperfective). For instance, in Maltese, sentences (1a) and (2a) show a perfective view, while sentences (1b) and (2b) reflect a progressive, imperfective view.

- (1a) *Il-vann* ***għadda*** *mill-mina.*
 DEF-van pass.PFV.3SG.M from.DEF-tunnel
 'The van drove through the tunnel.'

- (1b) *Il-vann* ***għaddej*** *mill-mina.*
 DEF-van pass.PROG.3SG.M from.DEF-tunnel
 'The van is driving through the tunnel.'

- (2a) *It-tifel* ***niżel*** *it-taraġ.*
 DEF-boy descend.PFV.3SG.M DEF-stairs
 'The boy went down the stairs.'

- (2b) *It-tifel* ***nieżel*** *it-taraġ.*
 DEF-boy descend.PROG.3SG.M DEF-stairs
 'The boy is going down the stairs.'

Following Binnick (1991, 2012, 2020), this study distinguishes between three types of aspect: grammatical, lexical, and phasal. Grammatical aspect, also termed

viewpoint aspect (Smith 1991), is concerned with how the event's temporal structure is framed. It may be expressed through verbal inflectional morphology, as Italian imperfective *lui cucinava* 'he was cooking', and periphrastically, as Dutch progressive *hij is aan het koken* 'he is cooking'. Lexical aspect, sometimes called *situation aspect* (Smith 1991), *Aktionsart* or *Aristotelian aspect* (Binnick 1991), classifies verbs based on intrinsic features like dynamicity (stative, *to own* vs. dynamic, *to eat*), telicity (goal-oriented, *to die* vs. with no defined endpoint, *to laugh*), and durativity (durative, *to sleep* vs. punctual, *to blink*).² Lastly, phasal aspect focuses on the internal phases of an event, such as its initiation, progression, or completion, and is often expressed by Maltese verbs such as *beda* 'to start' (*beda jiekol* 'he started eating') or *kompl* 'to continue' (*kompl jaqra* 'he kept on reading').

Maltese has been characterized as an aspect-prominent language, with tense and modal associations stemming from its aspectual nature (Borg 1981: 141; Ingham 1983; Bhat 1999: 171–172, 178). The study of verbal aspect in Maltese has garnered significant attention, particularly following Borg's (1981) pioneering investigation of a set of motion verbs within the localist theoretical framework of the journey paradigm. This foundational work, along with subsequent studies such as Fabri (1995) and Ebert (2000), focus on grammatical aspect. Some of the verbs used to analytically express phasal aspect are examined by Vanhove (1987, 1993), under the broad terminological heading of 'verbal auxiliaries'. Phasal constructions are discussed by Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander (1997), Spagnol (2007), Stolz and Ammann (2007, 2008), who offer more detailed explorations of ingressives and continuatives, and Camilleri (2016), who investigates temporal and aspectual auxiliaries, including pseudo-verbs. Lexical aspect was first systematically addressed by Spagnol (2007, 2009), who demonstrated that the intrinsic temporal properties of verbs play a fundamental role in Maltese's verbal system.³

Building upon previous research on Maltese aspectology, the rest of this study concentrates on lexical aspect, with an emphasis on the morphosyntactic properties of stative verbs. It further examines the relationship between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect, tense, and modality.

2 The development of the concepts of aspect and *Aktionsart*, along with the terminology related to them, has a complex and often perplexing history. For brief historical accounts, see Binnick (1991: 139–149), Kortmann (1991), and Młynarczyk (2004: Ch.2).

3 Further studies touching on various elements of Maltese's aspectual system include Aquilina (1965, 1973, 1979), Bhat (1999), Binnick (1991), Borg (1988), Comrie (1985, 1991), Cremona (1961, 1964, 1966), Cuvalay-Haak (1997), Grech (1977), Olsen (1997), Saydon (1935), Schinas (1977), Sutcliffe (1936), Thieroff (1995), and Zammit Mangion (1977).

3 Classifying verbs

The traditional characterization of verbs as words that denote actions or events is inadequate, not only because many nouns like *ġiri* ‘running’, *qabża* ‘a jump’, and *sparar* ‘shooting’ also convey events, but also because some verbs, as shown in sentences (3)–(6), do not denote actions but rather states.

- (3) *Il-basket jżen nofs kilo.*
 DEF-bag weigh.IPFV.3SG.M half kilo
 ‘The bag weighs half a kilo.’

- (4) *It-tifel jixbah lil zitu.*
 DEF-boy resemble.IPFV.3SG.M OBJ aunt.SG.M
 ‘The boy resembles his aunt.’

- (5) *It-tifla ma tiflaħx.*
 DEF-girl NEG feel.well.IPFV.3SG.F.NEG
 ‘The girl is unwell.’

- (6) *Fejn toqgħod?*
 Where live.IPFV.2SG
 ‘Where do you live?’

A fundamental distinction is made between states and events, or between stative predicates and events, which are further divided into different types. Events are divided into two types based on durativity. Durative events, like *studja* ‘he studied’ and *lagħab bil-ballun* ‘he played with the ball’, take time to occur, while punctual events happen instantaneously. According to Comrie (1976: 42), a punctual event is “a situation that does not last in time (is not conceived of as lasting in time), one that takes place momentarily”, such as *sab iċ-ċavetta* ‘he found the key’ and *wasal id-dar* ‘he arrived home’. In Maltese, the distinction between the two types of events becomes evident in expressions involving duration, like *għal siegħa shiħa* ‘for a whole hour’ and with the durative verb *dam* ‘to take time’, as these indicate prolonged action. This incompatibility with instantaneous predicates is seen in sentences (7)–(8).

- (7a) **Lagħab** *bil-ballun* *għal* *siegħa* *shiha*.
 play.PFV.3SG.M with-DEF-ball for hour whole.SG.F
 'He played with the ball for a whole hour.'
- (7b) *Dam* *kwarta* **jistudja**.
 take.time.PFV.3SG.M quarter study.IPFV.3SG.M
 'He spent a quarter of an hour studying.'
- (8a) ***Sab** *iċ-ċavetta* *għal* *siegħa* *shiha*.
 find.PFV.3SG.M DEF-key for hour whole.SG.F
 'He found the key for a whole hour.'
- (8b) ***Dam** *kwarta* **jasal** *id-dar*.
 take.time.PFV.3SG.M quarter arrive.IPFV.3SG.M DEF-home
 'He spent a quarter of an hour arriving home.'

Events are further classified based on their telicity, i.e., whether they reach a natural endpoint (telic), such as *il-vapur għereq* 'the ship sank' and *kiteb ittra* 'he wrote a letter', or can stop at any arbitrary point (atelic), for example *lagħab bil-ballun* 'he played with the ball' and *daħak* 'he laughed'. The implications of telicity vary in progressive constructions, as shown in sentences involving the progressive marker *qed*. While *It-tifel kien qed jilgħab bil-ballun* 'The boy was playing with the ball' implies he spent time playing, *It-tifel kien qed jikteb ittra* 'The boy was writing a letter' does not imply the letter was completed, because it is goal-oriented and culminates in a specific outcome.

The situation types mentioned above are summarised in Table 1. It is worth noting that verbs commonly shift from one category to another, and that such shifts in verb meanings often adhere to predictable patterns influenced by context (Vendler 1957; Pustejovsky 1995; de Swart 1998). For instance, while the verb *wiżen* 'to weigh' in sentence (3) above expresses a state, referring to the weight of the bag, in sentences like *Il-qabla tiżen lit-trabi* 'The midwife weighs the babies' or *Se niżen il-bagalja* 'I'm going to weigh the suitcase', the verb expresses an action.

Table 1: Types of situations.

Situation	Description	Examples	Gloss
stative predicate	state, rather than action or process	<i>jaf</i> <i>jixbah</i> <i>ma jiflahx</i>	to know to resemble to be unwell
durative event	action that takes time	<i>studja</i> <i>ppassiġġa</i> <i>nhasel</i>	to study to stroll to wash oneself
punctual event	action that occurs instantaneously	<i>sab iċ-ċavetta</i> <i>wasal id-dar</i> <i>sfronda</i>	to find the key to arrive home to collapse
telic event	action with an endpoint that must be reached	<i>kiteb ittra</i> <i>ghereq vapur</i> <i>miet</i>	to write a letter to sink (ship) to die
atelic event	action that may stop at any arbitrary point	<i>lagħab bil-ballun</i> <i>dahak</i> <i>tkellem</i>	to play with the ball to laugh to speak

Put differently, the three features, that is dynamicity (change of state), telicity (end, limit or boundary), and durativity (temporal extent), should theoretically define eight distinct possibilities. However, most studies identify between three and six classes of eventualities. Despite some criticism and attempts at reclassification, most discussions of actionality begin with Vendler’s (1957) four-way classification, as illustrated in these examples.

- State: *It-tifla taf il-Frañċiż*
‘The girl knows French’
- Activity: *It-tifel daqq il-pjanu*
‘The boy played the piano’
- Accomplishment: *It-tifla qasmet it-triq*
‘The girl crossed the street’
- Achievement: *It-tifel rebah it-tellieqa*
‘The boy won the race’

Subsequent studies, such as Dowty (1979), have refined Vendler’s framework, categorising these classes using the features [±durative], [±telic], and [±dynamic], as in Table 2. States are unchanging situations that are durative but not goal-oriented. Activities are dynamic actions without a defined endpoint, while accomplishments involve processes with a clear endpoint, characterised as durative, dynamic, and

telic. Lastly, achievements are instantaneous events with a specific result, making them telic and dynamic but not durative.

Table 2: Classification of situations by features.

Class	Dynamic	Telic	Durative	Example
States	-	-	+	<i>taf</i> 'know'
Activities	+	-	+	<i>daqq il-pjanu</i> 'play the piano'
Accomplishments	+	+	+	<i>qasmet it-triq</i> 'cross the street'
Achievements	+	+	-	<i>rebaħ it-tellieqa</i> 'win the race'

4 States

This section focuses on the first type of situation: states, “that puzzling type in which the role of the verb melts into that of predicate, and actions fade into qualities and relations” (Vendler 1967: 152). The most common stative situations express possession, location, and mental states, encompassing verbs such as *għandu* ‘to have’, *jismu* ‘to be named’, *seta* ‘can’, *ried* ‘to want’, and *xtaq* ‘to wish’. Three key characteristics are central to defining states.

First, lack of change. States, as Lyons (1977: 483) puts it, exist rather than occur, as they remain the same over time without change. Comparing *jaf* ‘to know’ (stative) with *ġera/jiġri* ‘to run’ (dynamic), we see that all phases of the situation in (9) are linguistically identical, unlike the phases in (10). While knowing involves a constant mental state, so each moment is indistinguishable from the next, each moment in the running process involves different positions, movements, and energy levels, contributing to a constantly evolving sequence of actions.

- (9) *It-tifel jaf il-verità.*
 DEF-boy know.IPFV.3SG.F DEF-truth
 ‘The boy knows the truth.’

- (10) *It-tifel jġri ġirja kuljum.*
 DEF-boy run.IPFV.3SG.F run.SG.F every day
 ‘The boy runs every day.’

The second characteristic is persistence. States persist, unlike events, which tend to cease if not actively continued. The phasal verbs *baqa* ‘to remain’ and *kompl* ‘to continue’ highlight this distinction: the former tends to associate with states and sometimes with events, while the latter only fits with events, as sentences (11)–(12) show.

- (11a) *It-tifel baqa’ jixbah lil zitu.*
 DEF-boy keep.PFV.3SG.M resemble.IPFV.3.SG.M OBJ aunt.3.SG.M
 ‘The boy continues to resemble his aunt.’
- (11b) **?It-tifel kompl jixbah lil zitu.*
 DEF-boy continue.PFV.3SG.M resemble.IPFV.3.SG.M OBJ aunt.3.SG.M
 ‘The boy continues to resemble his aunt.’
- (12a) *It-tifel baqa’ joqghod Ghawdex.*
 DEF-boy keep.PFV.3SG.M live.IPFV.3.SG.M Gozo
 ‘The boy continues to live in Gozo.’
- (12b) **?It-tifel kompl joqghod Ghawdex.*
 DEF-boy continue.PFV.3SG.M live.IPFV.3.SG.M Gozo
 ‘The boy continues to live in Gozo.’

Third, the interpretation of verbs changes in the imperfect. Dynamic verbs in the imperfect have a habitual or frequentative reading (13a). Conversely, stative verbs in the imperfect have an actual present time reference, even without explicit temporal context. This is evidenced by their inability to license habitual adjuncts like *kull filghodu* ‘every morning’ (13b–c).

- (13a) *It-tifel idoqq il-pjanu kull filghodu.*
 DEF-boy play.IPFV.3SG.M DEF-piano every morning
 ‘The boy plays the piano every morning.’
- (13b) **It-tifel jismu Peter kull filghodu.*
 DEF-boy be.named.IPFV.3SG.M Peter every morning
 ‘The boy is called Peter every morning.’

- (13c) **It-tifel jaf il-verità kull filgħodu.*
 DEF-boy know.IPFV.3SG.M DEF-truth every morning
 'The boy knows the truth every morning.'

5 Typology of stative verbs in Maltese

In Maltese, stativity spans a spectrum, ranging from strongly stative verbs like *jaf* 'to know' to those with more dynamic characteristics, such as *xtaq* 'to wish'. In this section, I present a classification of Maltese stative verbs into four main types: (a) perfectless statives, which generally lack a perfect morphological form in standard Maltese; (b) pseudo-verbs, linguistic expressions exhibiting verb-like morphosyntactic properties; (c) semi-perfectless statives, having a perfect form that is usually not used in stative contexts; and (d) stative verbs with a standard perfect form. I will now provide a brief overview of each category and introduce diagnostic tests to differentiate them from dynamic verbs and establish their coherence as a natural class.

5.1 Type A | Perfectless verbs

- (14) *It-tifla taf il-verità.*
 DEF-girl know.IPFV.3SG.F DEF-truth
 'The girl knows the truth.'
- (15) *It-tifel jixbah lil zitu.*
 DEF-boy resemble.IPFV.3SG.M OBJ aunt.SG.M
 'The boy resembles his aunt.'
- (16) *X'nambihom ir-ritratti?*
 what-need.IPFV.1SG.3PL DEF-photos
 'What do I need those photos for?'
- (17) *Huma jahtu għal li gara.*
 They blame.IPFV.3PL for what happen.3SG.M
 'They are to blame for what happened.'
- (18) *It-tifel jismu Peter.*
 DEF-boy be.named.IPFV.3SG.M Peter
 'The boy's name is Peter.'

- (19) *Is-soppa* ***tfuħ*** *ħafna*.
 DEF-soup smell.good.IPFV.3SG.F much
 ‘The soup smells delicious.’
- (20) *Id-dettalji* ***jinsabu*** *fis-sit*.
 DEF-details be.located-IPFV.3PL in.DEF-website
 ‘The details are on the website.’

Drawing on nearly ten years of conversations with various native speakers, I have observed that the verbs in (14)–(20) lack a perfect form for a significant number of speakers. Instead, a periphrastic construction involving the verb *kien* ‘to be’ is employed to express the perfect, e.g., *kien jafha* ‘he knew her’, *kont nixbhu* ‘I resembled him’. Occasionally, especially in literary or dialectal Maltese, one encounters perfect forms, such as the verse *qatt m’afuni niesi* ‘my people never knew me’ in the poem *Demgħat tas-Silġ* by Mario Azzopardi, or the sentence *Dan il-ktieb ikompli jagħti raġun lil min lil Ġanninu dejjem afu u għarf u bħala l-poeta tal-Assunta* ‘This book continues to support those who always knew and recognized Ġanninu as the poet of the Assunta’, taken from a website of the Cathedral of Gozo. According to Aquilina (1987: 24), *jambi* is a verb used exclusively in the imperfect. However, in 2006, I heard a woman from Żejtun, who was then in her forties, recount an older woman from the same locality saying, *X’ambieħ dak il-mutur?* ‘What did he need that motorbike for?’. These are, however, marginal examples that are not at all easy to encounter.

There are some non-stative verbs that either do not occur in the perfect or do so very rarely. Examples include *ihuf* ‘to prowl’, *isus* ‘to persist’, *ilum* ‘to blame’, *inin* ‘to pine away’, *jishar* ‘to work overtime’, and *jixher* ‘to cry loudly’. Some speakers, particularly those exposed to dialectal variety, might occasionally use some of these verbs in the perfect, e.g., *Ommu sieset warajh* ‘His mother followed closely behind him’ and *Hi ddawret għax saħret fuq ix-xogħol* ‘She was late because she worked overtime’. In most cases, however, the absence of a perfect form for such verbs is not due to semantics but to morphophonological constraints. Many verbs whose citation form (sometimes hypothetical) ends in a syllable composed of a long vowel and a consonant lack a perfect form or exhibit an irregular one. For example, verbs like *biegħ* ‘to sell’, *għam* ‘to swim’, and *striegħ* ‘to rest’ often take the suffixes of weak verbs (*bigh-ejt*, *ghom-ejt*, *strih-ajt*) rather than those of strong verbs (*begħ-t*, *ghom-t*, *strah-t*). Additionally, verbs like *magħad* ‘to chew’ and *nagħas* ‘to doze off’ are often conjugated by many speakers as *omghodt* and *onghost*, derived from the imperfect stem, instead of the expected forms *mghadt* and *ngħast*. It is worth noting, however, that this restriction does not apply universally to all verbs ending in such syllables. Verbs like *tar* ‘to fly’, *sar* ‘to become’,

lagħab ‘to play’, and *deher* ‘to appear’ follow regular patterns in the formation of their perfect forms.

5.2 Type B | Pseudo-verbs

- (21) **Għandha** *xagħharha twil.*
 have.3SG.F hair.3SG.F long
 ‘She has long hair.’
- (22) *Il-ktieb fih ħafna stampi.*
 DEF-book in.3SG.M many pictures
 ‘The book has many pictures in it.’
- (23) **Bini** *l-ġuħ.*
 with.1SG DEF-hunger
 ‘I am hungry.’
- (24) **Għadni** *d-dar.*
 still.1SG DEF-home
 ‘I am still at home.’
- (25) **Kemm ilek hawn?**
 how.much last.2SG here
 ‘How long have you been here?’
- (26) *It-tifla qisha riezda.*
 DEF-girl as.if.3SG.F sleepy.3SG.F
 ‘The girl seems sleepy.’
- (27) *It-tifel donnu ma jiflaħx.*
 DEF-boy seem.3SG.M NEG endure.3SG.M.NEG
 ‘The boy seems unwell.’
- (28) *Hu-k għoddu waqa’.*
 brother2SG almost.3SG.M fall.PERF.3SG.M
 ‘Your brother nearly fell.’

- (29) **Ħaqqu** *aħjar minn hekk.*
 deserve.3SG.M better than this
 ‘He deserves better than this.’
- (30) **Mohħni** *fihom lejl u nhar.*
 mind.1SG in.3PL night and day
 ‘They’re always on my mind.’
- (31) *Dejjem* **ħsiebni** *hemm.*
 always thought.1SG there
 ‘I’m always focused.’
- (32) *Imtlejt* **kollni** *trab.*
 fill.PRF.1SG all.1SG dust
 ‘I got completely covered in dust.’
- (33) *Wara l-ikel* *kont* **nofsni** *rieqed.*
 after DEF-food be.PST.1SG half.1SG asleep.SG.M
 ‘After eating, I was half asleep.’

Verbal expressions like those in (21)–(33) are referred to as *pseudo-verbs*, that is prepositions (*għand-* ‘at’, *fī-* ‘in’, *bi-* ‘with’, *għad-* ‘still’, *il-* ‘ago’), synchronic or historical imperatives (*qis-* ‘measure’, *donn-* ‘consider’, *għodd-* ‘count’), nouns (*ħaqq-* ‘justice’, *mohħ-* ‘mind’, *ħsieb-* ‘thought’), and quantifiers (*koll-* ‘all’, *nofs-* ‘half’) that, in certain respects, behave like verbs. Pseudo-verbs share three key characteristics with verbs. Firstly, they agree with the subject in number, person, and gender. Unlike regular verbs, which achieve agreement through affixes, pseudo-verbs rely on bound pronouns, e.g., *It-tifel ħaqq-u rigal* ‘The boy deserves a gift’, *It-tifla ħaqq-ħa rigal* ‘The girl deserves a gift’, and *It-tfal ħaqq-hom rigal* ‘The children deserve a gift.’

Secondly, some of them take negation using the circumfix *ma . . . -x* like regular verbs, e.g., *M’għandux tfal* ‘He doesn’t have children’, *Il-bramel ma fihomx ilma* ‘There’s no water in the buckets’, *Ma ħaqqnix iżjed minn hekk* ‘I don’t deserve more than this’, and *M’ilux wisq hawn* ‘He hasn’t been here long.’ Others take the final *-x* (e.g., *Qisekx mudell* ‘Thinking you’re a model now?’) or *mhux* (e.g., *Illum mhux mohħu hawn* ‘Today his mind isn’t here’).

Thirdly, pseudo-verbs take the first-person singular bound pronoun *-ni*, which is specifically used with verbs (e.g., *fittix-ni* ‘he looked for me’, *ried-ni* ‘he wanted me’) but not with nouns (e.g., *wiċċ-i* ‘my face’, *omm-i* ‘my mother’) or prepositions (e.g., *fuq-i* ‘on me’, *taħt-i* ‘under me’). This is why a distinction is made between

prepositional *fi* and *bi* (e.g., *Saq għal go fi-ja* ‘He drove into me’, *Qed jidhak bi-ja* ‘He is laughing at me’) and the pseudo-verbs (e.g., *Fi-ni tifel* ‘I’m well-built’, *Bi-ni l-ghatx* ‘I’m thirsty’). Some speakers also distinguish between nominal *moħħ* and *ħsieb* (e.g., *Telagħli musmar fuq moħħ-i* ‘I have a pimple on my forehead’, *Qrali ħsieb-i* ‘He read my thoughts’) and their use as pseudo-verbs (e.g., *Moħħ-ni fit-televixin* ‘My mind is on the television’, *Dejjem ħsieb-ni biex noħroġ* ‘I’m always thinking about going out’).

Pseudo-verbs, therefore, express stative situations related to possession (*għand-*, *bi-*), inclusion (*fi-*, *koll-*), appearance (*donn-*, *qis-*), and mental states (*moħħ-*, *ħsieb-*), and they have an actual present time reference. Their perfect is constructed analytically using the verb *kien* ‘to be’, e.g., *Il-bott kien fih iz-zokkor* ‘The jar had sugar in it’, *Dak il-ħin kienet għadha d-dar* ‘At that moment, she was still at home.’

5.3 Type C | Semi-perfectless verbs

- (34) *Attent għax it-taġen jahraq.*
careful.SG.M because DEF-pan burn.IPFV.3SG.M
‘Be careful because the pan is hot.’
- (35) *Kuġinti toqgħod Birkirkara.*
cousin.1SG live.IPFV.3SG.F Birkirkara
‘My cousin lives in Birkirkara.’
- (36) *Il-basket jiżen nofs kilo.*
DEF-bag weigh.IPFV.3SG.M half kilo
‘The bag weighs half a kilo.’
- (37) *Mhux sejjer skola għax ma jiflaħx.*
NEG going school because NEG endure.IPFV.3SG.M-NEG
‘He’s not going to school because he’s unwell.’
- (38) *Il-madum jizloq ħafna.*
DEF-tiles slip.IPFV.3SG.M much
‘The tiles are very slippery.’
- (39) *Il-ġirien tiegħek jiġu minni.*
DEF-neighbors your come.IPFV.3PL from.1SG
‘Your neighbors are related to me.’

- (40) *Tilbes kuluri jgħajtu.*
wear.IPFV.3.SG.F color.PL shout.IPFV.3PL
'She wears bright colors.'
- (41) *Il-kutra xxewwek.*
DEF-blanket itch.IPFV.3SG.F
'The blanket is itchy.'
- (42) *It-triq tagħmel ma' Marsaxlokk.*
DEF-road make.IPFV.3SG.F with Marsaxlokk
'The road falls within the remit of Marsaxlokk.'
- (43) *Ħuk jifhem fil-politika.*
brother-2SG understand.IPFV.3SG.M in.DEF-politics
'Your brother is knowledgeable about politics.'
- (44) *Għandek ilsienek iniggeż.*
have.2SG tongue.2SG sting.IPFV.3SG.M
'You have a sharp tongue.'
- (45) *Sab xogħol jgħodd għalih.*
find.PFV.3SG.M job suit.IPFV.3SG.M for-3SG.M
He found a job that suits him.
- (46) *L-imqass jaqta' ħafna.*
DEF-scissors cut.IPFV.3SG.M much
'The scissors are very sharp.'

Verbs in this category, exemplified by sentences (34)–(46) have a perfect form which is, however, not used when the verb is employed in a stative sense. For instance, *ħaraq* 'to burn', *wiżen* 'to weigh', and *għadd* 'to count' as transitive verbs are used in both the perfect (47a), (48a), (49a) and the imperfect (47b), (48b), (49b). However, as intransitive verbs (34), (36), (45), they acquire a stative meaning and, therefore, the perfect form is not used. Instead of the perfect form – e.g., **It-taġen ħaraq* 'The pan burned,' **Il-basket wiżen nofs kilo* 'The bag weighed half a kilo,' or **Ix-xogħol għadd għalih* 'The job suited him'—the construction with *kien* (to be) is used, that is, *It-taġen kien jahraq* 'The pan was hot,' *Il-basket kien jiżen nofs kilo* 'The bag weighed half a kilo,' and *Ix-xogħol kien jgħodd għalih* 'The job suited him.'

- (47a) *Dis-sena ħarqu ħafna murtali.*
 this-year burn.PFV.3PL many fireworks
 'This year, they set off many fireworks.'
- (47b) *Kull sena jaħarqu ħafna murtali.*
 every year burn.IPFV.3PL many fireworks
 'Every year, they set off many fireworks.'
- (48a) *Qabel ma siefer wiżen il-basket.*
 before REL travel.PFV.3SG weigh.PFV.3SG.F DEF-bag
 'Before traveling, he weighed the bag.'
- (48b) *Qabel ma jsiefer jiżen il-basket.*
 before REL travel.IPFV.3SG weigh.IPFV.3SG.F DEF-bag
 'Before traveling, he weighs the bag.'
- (49a) *Il-flus għoddejthom darbtejn.*
 DEF-money count.PFV.1SG.3PL twice
 'I counted the money twice.'
- (49b) *Il-flus ngħoddhom darbtejn.*
 DEF-money count.IPFV.1SG.3PL twice
 'I count the money twice.'

These verbs need to be distinguished from dynamic verbs that refer to general states or universal truths in the imperfect, such as *Ix-xemx titla' mil-Lvant*. 'The sun rises in the East.' and *Is-silġ jinħall fis-šana*. 'Ice melts in the heat.', or typical characteristics of natural entities like *Is-serduq jidden*. 'The rooster crows.' and artificial ones like *L-arloġġ itektek*. 'The clock ticks.' These are not stative verbs, for one thing, because in the imperfect they have a habitual or frequentative reading, as shown by their compatibility with adverbial expressions of habit, e.g., *Is-serduq jidden kull filgħodu*. 'The rooster crows every morning.' and *Ix-xemx titla' kuljum mil-Lvant*. 'The sun rises every day in the East.'

5.4 Type D | Verbs with perfect forms

- (50a) *In-nanna tħobbu ħafna lin-nannu.*
 DEF-grandma love.IPFV.3SG.F.3SG.M much to.DEF-grandpa
 'Grandma loves Grandpa very much.'

- (50b) *In-nanna ħabbitu ħafna lin-nannu.*
 DEF-grandma love.PRF.3SG.F.3SG.M much to.DEF-grandpa
 ‘Grandma loved Grandpa very much.’
- (51a) *Is-sala tesagħna kollha.*
 DEF-hall hold.IPFV.3SG.F.1PL all
 ‘The hall has enough space for all of us.’
- (51b) *Is-sala wesgħetna kollha.*
 DEF-hall hold.PRF.3SG.F.1PL all
 ‘The hall accommodated all of us.’
- (52a) *Il-ħwienet jistgħu jiftħu.*
 DEF-shops can.IPFV.3PL open.IPFV.3PL
 ‘The shops can open.’
- (52b) *Il-ħwienet setgħu jiftħu.*
 DEF-shops can.PFV.3PL open.IPFV.3PL
 ‘The shops could open.’
- (53a) *Ma jaħmilx id-diżonestà.*
 NEG tolerate.IPFV.3SG.M.NEG DEF-dishonesty
 ‘He does not tolerate dishonesty.’
- (53b) *Ma ħamilx id-diżonestà.*
 NEG tolerate.PFV.3SG.M.NEG DEF-dishonesty
 ‘He did not tolerate dishonesty.’
- (54a) *It-tifel irid ġelat.*
 DEF-boy want.IPFV.3SG.M ice.cream
 ‘The boy wants ice cream.’
- (54b) *It-tifel ried ġelat.*
 DEF-boy want.IPFV.3SG.M ice.cream
 ‘The boy wanted ice cream.’
- (55a) *Sieħbek jixtieq isiefer magħna.*
 friend.2SG want.IPFV.3SG.M travel.IPFV.3SG.M with.us
 ‘Your friend wants to travel with us.’

- (55b) *Sieħbek xtaq isiefer magħna.*
 friend.2SG want.PFV.3SG.M travel.IPFV.3SG.M with.us
 'Your friend wanted to travel with us.'

Some stative verbs do occur in the perfect (50)–(55), placing them at the opposite end of the stativity spectrum, closer to dynamic verbs. As with the verbs discussed in the previous section, the meaning of a verb can affect its use in the perfect tense. For instance, *ħabb* 'to love', when used to express a liking for a type of food (e.g., *Inħobbu l-ghaġin* 'I like pasta'), is less commonly found in the perfect (?*ħabbejtu l-ghaġin* 'I liked pasta'). Instead, the construction with *kien*, such as *Kont inħobbu l-ghaġin* 'I used to like pasta', is more natural. Similarly, the verb *wesa* 'to hold, have capacity' without an attached pronoun is generally not used in the perfect. Compare sentences (51a–b) with the following examples:

- (56a) *Is-sala tesa' elf ruħ.*
 DEF-hall hold.IPFV.3SG.F thousand soul
 'The hall can accommodate a thousand people.'
- (56b) **?Is-sala wesgħet elf ruħ.*
 DEF-hall hold.PRF.3SG.F thousand soul
 'The hall accommodated a thousand people.'
- (56c) *Is-sala kienet tesa' elf ruħ.*
 DEF-hall be.PRF.3SG.F hold.PRF.3SG.F thousand soul
 'The hall used to accommodate a thousand people.'

6 Criteria for stative verb identification

In summary, stative verbs in Maltese can be grouped into four main categories, as shown in Table 3. Although morphologically different, the verbs in these categories behave syntactically in similar ways, particularly in relation to tense, modality, and certain adverbial expressions on one hand, and grammatical aspect on the other. Below, I outline two criteria: the first presents a stative syntactic construction, while the second identifies a context in which stative verbs typically do not occur – namely, the progressive construction formed with *qed* (shortened form of *qiegħed*, active participle of *qagħad* 'to stay') and a verb in the imperfect.

Table 3: Types of stative verbs in Maltese.

Class	Description	Examples	Translation
perfectless verbs	verbs which, in most varieties of Maltese, do not have a perfect form	<i>jaf</i> <i>ifuħ</i> <i>jismu</i>	'know' 'smell good' 'be named'
pseudo-verbs	elements that share some morphosyntactic characteristics with verbs	<i>fiħ</i> <i>ħaqqu</i> <i>ghadu</i>	'contain' 'deserve' 'be still'
semi-perfectless verbs	verbs that have a perfect form but do not use it when the meaning is stative	dynamic <i>żelaq</i> 'to slip' is used in both the perfect: a) <i>It-tifel żelaq fil-bitha</i> and the imperfect: b) <i>It-tifel jizloq spiss fil-bitha</i> while stative <i>żelaq</i> 'to be slippery' is used only in the imperfect c) <i>Il-madam jizloq</i> or d) <i>Il-madam kien jizloq</i> but not e) * <i>Il-madam żelaq</i>	a) 'The boy slipped in the yard' b) 'The boy often slips in the yard' c) 'The tiles are slippery' d) 'The tiles were slippery' e) 'The tiles slipped'
verbs with perfect forms	unlike other statives, these verbs have a perfect form	<i>ħabb</i> <i>seta'</i> <i>xtaq</i>	'love' 'can' 'wish'

6.1 Criterion 1: The use of the verb *kien*

At the heart of the first criterion, which distinguishes stative from dynamic verbs in Maltese, lies the verb *kien* 'to be', and occasionally *ġie* 'to come' or *sar* 'to become', in the imperfect, within three syntactic contexts exemplified here using the dynamic verb *wasal* 'to arrive' and two stative verbs: *jaf* 'to know' from the first category (perfectless verbs), and a verb from another category (pseudo-verbs, semi-perfectless verbs, verbs with perfect forms). Stative verbs require this marker when placed in three constructions:

- (i) The future tense construction formed with future marker *se*, *ser*, *ħa*, or *ghad* and a verb in the imperfect

- (57) *Naħseb **se** **jasal** tard.* dynamic
'I think he'll arrive late.'
- (58a) **Kif **se** **naf** x'hin jibda l-film?*
'How will I know what time the movie starts?'
- (58b) *Kif **se** **nkun naf** x'hin jibda l-film?* stative
'How will I know what time the movie starts?'
- (59a) **Jekk jarak bil-ġelat, **se** **jrid** wiehed.*
'If he sees you with the ice cream, he'll want one.'
- (59b) *Jekk jarak bil-ġelat, **se** **jkun irid** wiehed.* stative
'If he sees you with the ice cream, he'll want one.'
- (ii) Deontic modal constructions with the pseudo-verb *għandu* 'should' or 'must'
- (60) ***Għandu** **jasal** fil-ħin.* dynamic
'He should arrive on time.'
- (61a) *?*La jahdem hawn, **għandu jaf** x'hin jibda l-film*
'Since he works here, he should know what time the movie starts.'
- (61b) *La jahdem hawn, **għandu jkun jaf** x'hin jibda l-film.* stative
'Since he works here, he should know what time the movie starts.'
- (62a) *?*Il-madum **m'għandux jizloq.***
'The tiles should not be slippery.'
- (62b) *Il-madum **m'għandux ikun jizloq.*** stative
'The tiles should not be slippery.'
- (iii) Constructions with an adverbial expression of purpose, such as *(sa)biex* 'in order to'
- (63) ***Biex** **jasal** fil-ħin, irid iqum kmieni.* dynamic
'To arrive on time, he has to wake up early.'
- (64a) *?***Biex taf** x'hin jibda, aħjar issaqsi.*
'To know what time it starts, you'd better ask.'
- (64b) ***Biex tkun taf** x'hin jibda, aħjar issaqsi.* stative
'To know what time it starts, you'd better ask.'

- (65a) *?*Biex tista'* tidhol, trid turini l-invīt.
'To be able to enter, you need to show me the invitation.'
- (65b) *Biex tkun tista'* tidhol, trid turini l-invīt. stative
'To be able to enter, you need to show me the invitation.'

It is worth noting that there is considerable variation among Maltese speakers in this regard, a conclusion drawn from nearly a decade of discussions with numerous native speakers, especially undergraduate students. For instance, while some speakers accept the verb *jixbah* 'to resemble' in the future tense, as in *La jikber għad jixbah lil missieru* 'When he grows up, he'll resemble his father', others do not, unless the verb is accompanied by *kien*, *gie*, or *sar*, as in *Bil-parrokka se tiġi tixbah lil ommha* 'With the wig on, she'll end up resembling her mother'. Similarly, the verb *seta* 'can' may be used in the future tense by some speakers (e.g., *Tfal ta' 12-il sena jew inqas se jistgħu wkoll joħorġu mingħajr maskra* 'Children aged 12 years or younger will also be allowed to go out without a mask', from the Korpus Malti, version 4.2, or in constructions with an adverbial expression of purpose, e.g., *Kisbu liċenzja mill-Istitut Marittimu sabiex jistgħu jużaw opri tal-baħar* 'They obtained a license from the Maritime Institute so that they could use maritime equipment'; also from the corpus).

6.2 Criterion 2: The progressive

The second criterion is the progressive aspect. Typically, stative verbs do not occur in the *qed* construction. This applies to perfectless verbs (**It-tifla qed taf il-Franċiż* 'the girl is knowing French'), pseudo-verbs (**It-tank qed fih l-ilma* 'the tank is containing the water'), semi-perfectless verbs (**Kuġinuk qed jiġi minni* 'Your cousin is being related to me'), and stative verbs with a perfect form (**It-tifel qed irid il-ġelat* 'The boy is wanting ice cream').

However, in particular contexts, some stative verbs are occasionally used in the progressive, not only in Maltese. As Filip (2012: 729) puts it, "The use of state verbs in the progressive is often associated with special interpretations, but they all seem to involve some contingent or temporary manifestation of the disposition expressed by the base state verb". Some studies, like Dowty (1979) and Carlson (1977), suggest categorising states into two types: *interval states* or *stage-level predicates*, which represent temporary properties and can therefore appear in progressive constructions, such as 'The socks are lying under the bed' (Filip 2012: 729), and *momentary states* or *individual-level predicates*, which tend to remain constant throughout the majority, if not the entirety, of an individual's lifespan (Chierchia 1995: 196–198). These latter states are typically incompatible with progressive constructions, as

illustrated by the oddness of such a sentence as ‘*?Julie is having blue eyes’ (Filip 2012: 730), since eye colour is generally a permanent feature.

Therefore, when dynamism or change is implied, stative verbs take on certain characteristics of dynamic verbs, allowing them to fit within the progressive construction. Consider, for instance, (66a) compared to (66b). The latter, being about a child, implies a sense of dynamism, reflecting the way children’s features often change as they grow. The progressive is also used with stative verbs when telicity is implied, turning the states into temporary ones. Compare, for instance, (67a) with (67b). The progressive in the latter sentence implies a temporary situation, such as, *Kuġinti qed toqgħod man-nannu sa ma tbajjad id-dar* ‘My cousin is staying with grandpa until she paints her house’ or *sa ma ssib akkomodazzjoni oħra* ‘until she finds other accommodation.’

(66a) *It-tifel jixbah lil zitu.*

‘The boy resembles his aunt.’

(66b) *It-tifel lil zijuh qed jixbah.*

‘The boy is resembling his uncle.’

(67a) *Kuġinti toqgħod Birkirkara.*

‘My cousin lives in Birkirkara.’

(67b) *Kuġinti qed toqgħod man-nannu.*

‘My cousin is staying with Grandpa.’

7 Conclusion

In this paper, which presents an investigation of stative verbs in Maltese, I sought to achieve two main goals. First, by classifying these verbs into four distinct categories – perfectless verbs (*jaf* ‘to know’, *jixbah* ‘to resemble’), pseudo-verbs (*fi* ‘to contain’, *haqqu* ‘to deserve’), semi-perfectless verbs (*jaħraq* ‘to be hot’, *jaqta* ‘to be sharp’), and verbs with a perfect form (*xtaq* ‘to wish’, *ħabb* ‘to love’) – I show the diverse ways in which Maltese encodes stativity. Second, the study demonstrates that despite their formal differences, these verbs share certain morphosyntactic traits, namely they often rely on auxiliary verbs to express tense and modality and are generally incompatible with progressive constructions. A key finding is the pivotal role of auxiliary verbs like *kien* ‘to be’ in expressing tense and modality in stative verbs. These features highlight their fundamental distinction from dynamic verbs and the specific mechanisms Maltese uses to express stativity.

The paper further demonstrates that stative verbs generally resist contexts requiring dynamism, such as the progressive aspect or specific modal and purpose constructions, reinforcing their association with persistence and lack of change. The analysis also highlights the interplay between lexical and grammatical aspect, particularly in how stative verbs can adopt dynamic interpretations in specific contexts, such as temporary or contingent states.

In sum, this study provides an analysis of aspectology and verb classification in Maltese, shedding light on the characteristics of stative verbs. It also opens avenues for further research, including cross-linguistic comparisons and studies into the diachronic development of stativity in Maltese. Future research is necessary to (a) conduct a corpus-based analysis of stative verbs to provide a more data-driven understanding of their distribution, and (b) extend the scope of the study to include dynamic verbs with an examination of their morphosyntactic behaviour. Such work would facilitate a comparison between stative and dynamic verbs, offering deeper insights into their interaction and role within the Maltese verbal system.

Abbreviations

DEF	definite
F	feminine
IPFV	imperfect(ive)
M	masculine
OBJ	object marker
NEG	negation
PFV	perfect(ive)
PROG	progressive
PL	plural
SG	singular

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