

Heading towards definitions of silence: An analysis of synonymous nouns

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In this day and age, noise of various kinds has become an ever-growing concern. As our surroundings grow louder, humans are increasingly seeking silence. Having precise lexemes to describe silence, both in literary and non-literary texts, is desired and of the essence.

In this study, we propose an in-depth analysis of the so-called synonymous nouns: *silenzju* ('silence'), *skiet* ('silence'), *hemda* ('stillness'), and *kwiet* ('quiet'). The nouns *silenzju* (derived from Italian) and *skiet* (derived from Arabic) are more synonymous in nature because of their different etymology. But to which extent are the Semitic-derived nouns *skiet*, *hemda*, and *kwiet* synonymous?

The thesaurus *Id-Dizzjunarju Malti u teżawru ta' Malti mħaddem* (2016) shows that these four nouns are synonymous. Barring *skiet*, which is not listed as a synonym under the headword *hemda* (except as its inflected form *sikta*), *silenzju*, *skiet*, *hemda*, and *kwiet* are all given as synonyms of each other. Furthermore, an analysis of the collocational behaviour of these synonyms in the Maltese corpus, the Maltese Language Resource Server v.3, will shed further light on the near-synonymous character of these lexemes. In ascending order, *kwiet* occurs 3,924 times, *skiet* occurs 2,354 times, *silenzju* occurs 2,150 times, and *hemda* occurs 348 times.

Considering these prior observations, we ask: (1) Is there a difference in meaning between these synonyms? and (2) What specific contexts are these nouns related to? In *Speaking Silences* (1994), Vogel Ertin claims that, "Usage [of the terms related to silence], however, tends to obscure rather than solidify those differences over time. Therefore, it does not seem appropriate to insist on rigorous differentiating among such related terms, except insofar as some particular context suggests." Following this, a closer look at these synonyms in various texts might dictate the nuances of each lexeme and suggest a more precise meaning.

Keywords

silence, stillness, quiet, lexeme, semantics, collocations, corpus