

Turning night into day: Milieu and semantic change in Albanian

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Abstract. We bring to light here two case studies from Albanian that show interesting semantic change, and we argue that in order to understand the particular changes involved, the concept of “milieu” (Christiansen and Joseph 2016: 56-7) should be invoked.

Keywords. Albanian; context; milieu; semantic change

1. Introduction. The phenomenon of semantic change, whereby shifts occur in the meaning(s) associated with particular words, is well known, even if not understood to the same degree that, for instance, changes in other domains, such as regular phonetically driven sound change or cognitively driven analogical change, are. It has been argued that in order to motivate and make sense of semantic change, more than just the linguistic context — in the spirit of the pronouncement of Firth 1951, “You shall know a word by the company it keeps” — is needed. In particular, Christiansen & Joseph (2016:56-57) invoke the concept of ‘milieu’ as determinative in semantic change, which they define as “the social, cultural, and physical setting in which the linguistic context resides”. We present here two case studies from Albanian to illustrate the value of this further notion of ‘milieu’. We show that context is not enough, and that an appeal to the milieu of a development offers insight into and motivation for the changes in question that context alone cannot do. Milieu thus is shown to be a powerful determinative factor in semantic change.

2. Albanian *gjëmë* ~ *gjâmë* ‘lament’. In Modern Albanian *gjëmë* means ‘lament’. In the northern Albanian Geg dialect, the form is *gjâma* [jǎ:ma] and it is used specifically for the *gjâma e burrave* ‘lament of men’, a death rite performed by men for another man, a fallen hero. The death rite consisted of two stages. In the first stage, the men place their hands on their hips. One of the men begins twisting sometimes to the left and sometimes to the right, bending over and striking the ground with his feet. In unison then, all the men raise their hands putting one to their mouth and the other to their ear, calling out the name of the deceased in a loud and long voice.

In the second stage, they rush towards the deceased stopping before the body. When the leader begins, all the men continuously yell “hou hou hou!” They lift up their hands making fists and they chant *i mjeri unë për ty!* (literally: “Poor me for you!”). Then they begin beating their chest and again yell “hou hou hou!”¹

The first recorded instance of the *gjâma* was made by Marlin Barleti, a Catholic priest from Shkodër, in *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarvm principis* published in 1504. Here Barleti tells us of the *gjâma e burrave* that took place during the death of the Albanian hero Gjergj Kastrioti (Skanderbeg) in 1468. A fellow feudal lord known as Lekë Dukagjini, upon hearing of the death of Skanderbeg, went out and began beating his chest and pulling out his hair

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¹ See *Gjama e maleve* ‘The Lament of the Mountains’. YouTube, uploaded by Majlinda Bregasi, June 9, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEdfMUUqZCk> (12:00-14:00).

and beard, which from then on was referred to as *gjâma e burrave të Dukagjinit* ‘the lament of men from Dukagjin’.

In Malësia e Madhe, where the tradition survived until the 1960’s,² the locals believed that several days after the body was buried, the *gjâma e orëve* ‘The lament of the Ora’s’ would begin (Shkurtaj 2021: 372). The Ora’s were mythological goddesses that decide the fate of mankind (Elsie 2001: 88). The anthropologist Reiner Schulz in 1937 was fortunate enough in an expedition to see the *gjâma e burrave* at the funeral of Ujk Vuksani from Theth. Below are pictures taken at the funeral by Schulz.³



Figure 1. The funeral of Ujk Vuksani in Theth (Photos: Reimer Schulz, 1937)

The *gjâma e burrave* appears to date further back than medieval Albania. A recent discovery was made at the Kamenica fort in Kosovo of a stela representing a funeral procession. The stone has been dated from anywhere between 100-500 BC. During this period of history, the Paleo-Balkan ethnic group the Dardanians lived in the area. On the stela, the procession is led by a woman, who is followed by a man’s coffin and a group of mourners.



Figure 2. Stela of a funerary procession 500-100 BC (National Museum of Kosovo)⁴

² The practice of *gjâma e burrave* was outlawed during the Communist regime in Albania in the mid-to-late 20th century.

³ Robert Elsie: Early Photography in Albania. Last accessed March 7, 2024.

<http://www.albanianphotography.net/schulz/>

⁴ Albanian Institute New York. A Stela from Dardana Fortress. Last Accessed March 7, 2024.

<https://www.albanianinstitute.org/program/a-stela-from-the-ancient-dardana-fortress/>.

Institute for the Study of the Ancient World. Iron Age. Performing Identity. Last Accessed March 7, 2024.

The stela mirrors, with great accuracy, the *gjâma e burrave*. The mourners appear to be raising their hands, beating their chests, and grabbing their heads, lamenting the deceased. The importance of this stela is that this specific lamentation tradition for the dead appears to date not just to medieval Albania with the death of Skanderbeg, but to classical antiquity.

Various etymologies have been proposed for *gjëmë* ‘lament’. Miklosich (*Rom. Elemente* 30) and Meyer (*Wb.* 139-40) treat it as based on a verb borrowed from Latin *gemere* ‘to cry, to shout’, while Orel (1998: 134) cites Latin *clāmāre* ‘to cry, shout’ as the source. Problematic for such accounts is the Albanian variant *glëmoj*, since the initial *gl-* is inconsistent with both the *gj-* of *gjëmë* and the *cl-* of Latin *clāmāre*. While Albanian *gj-* can be from *glj*, as in dialectal *gljuhë* ‘language; tongue’ (vs. Standard Albanian *gjuhë*), *glëmoj* has *gl-* not *glj-*, and for the Latin to be a suitable source, one would need to posit the occurrence of the prefix *en-*, to explain the voiced *g-* in *glëmoj*; there is, however, no direct evidence for the use of *en-* with this verb.⁵ Another verb in Albanian which has become homophonous in form is *gjëmojë* ‘to thunder’, a more likely borrowing from Latin *gemere*, from which, for Orel (*idem*) the noun *gjëmë* ‘thunder, shout, illness’ is taken as a deverbative formation. In Old Albanian (16th AD) the initial clusters *gl-* and *kl-* are preserved. But the oldest Geg Albanian author Gjon Buzuku, in his *Meshari* (1555), has *gjamnë e atyne* ‘their mourning’ (Topalli 2017: 597), where *gjamnë* [jamnə] is written with a voiced palatal stop <gj> [j], and not <gl> [gl]. The same is seen in the texts of the oldest Tosk author Luca Matranga in his *La Dottrina Christiana* (1592), *tue gjumuarë e tue klarë* ‘(while) mourning and weeping’ (Sciambra 1964: 47).

These facts tell us that the forms *glëmojë* and *gjëmojë* are clearly from two different etymological roots, for it is expected that the old authors would have preserved the initial cluster *gl-*. It is also not surprising to find a semantic shift of ‘lamenting’ > ‘thundering’, as the noun for ‘thunder’ is *bubullin*, a form found in Buzuku: *një bonbullim ën qiellit* ‘a thunder from heaven’, as if the heavens are lamenting or wailing. It is clear that the secondary form of the noun *gjëmë* ‘thunder’ is derived from ‘lament’; the form *glëmojë*, despite our misgivings above, may somehow reflect a loan from Latin *clāmāre* ‘to cry, shout’.

Given such an etymological tangle, we therefore posit a different, novel, etymology for *gjëmë* ‘lament’. In particular, we take it to be from the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) starting point **sh₂óm-ŋ* ‘song’. One reason for positing this etymology is that it follows regularity of sound change impeccably (**s > gj* [j] before a stressed vowel, **o > a*, **m > m*, **ŋ > a*).⁶ Geg *gjâmë* corresponding to *gjëmë* in the southern Albanian Tosk dialect reflects the inner-Albanian regular development of Proto Albanian nasalized **ã > Tosk ë*, Geg *â* (see Bonnet 1998: 117f). Second, as the evidence above of the stela suggests, the *gjâma e burrave* would seem to reflect an ancient Balkan lamentation song for the dead and fallen heroes. PIE **sh₂óm-ŋ* ‘song’ has reflexes in Sanskrit *sāman-* ‘metrical hymn, song of praise; (later) any song or tune’ (Monier-Williams

<https://ritualandmemory.com/theme/performing-identity>.

⁵ The Albanian pair of *ngarkoj* ‘to burden’ ~ *shkarkoj* ‘unload’, from presumed Latin forms **incar(r)icare* ~ **excar(r)icare*, is instructive here, as they show *g* from a prefix with a nasal on a root that synchronically for Albanian has a *k-*.

⁶ PIE **s > Alb. gj*: PIE **sérpen-* ‘serpent’ (from the root **sérp-* ‘to crawl’) > Alb. *gjarpër* ‘snake’ (Geg *gjarpën*); note also *gjumë* ‘sleep’, cognate with Latin *somnum*, and *gjalpë* ‘butter’, cognate with English *salve*. PIE **ŋ* gives Alb. *a* regularly, as PIE **mŋto-* > Alb. *mat* ‘bank (de Vaan 2018).

2017/1899: 1205), and possibly Ancient Greek *ῥυμος*, which means ‘song, hymn’,⁷ but also, perhaps importantly, ‘elegy’. Hittite *išhamai* ‘sings’ shows the verbal root at the basis of these nouns. In the Dardanian stela, it is clear that the funerary procession is over the deceased who held high societal prestige, judging from the number of mourners represented. Likewise, in Geg Albania, the *gjâma e burrave* is a ‘lament of men’ that is given to those of high respect and prestige, such as the 15th century Albanian hero Skanderbeg.

Going from ‘song’ > ‘lament’ appears to be more than just simple semantic shift. The meanings are close enough so that one might assume a specialization, but the concept of “milieu” here helps identify the social and cultural setting in which such a linguistic change is motivated. In this case the cultural practice of a song of praise specifically in a funeral procession is the milieu in which the shift from ‘song’ to ‘lamentation song’ would be triggered.⁸

There is a further geographic aspect to the milieu that is noteworthy, in particular, the rugged mountainous terrain of Northern Albania. This geography contrasts with southern Albania where the mountains rise steeply from the plain and from the sea, making passage to the interior more difficult (Wilkes 1992: 16-7). The mountainous terrain is generally considered to be the reason why the population succeeded in retaining their native idiom and ethnic identity during the Roman empire (S. Demiraj 2006: 26). Historian Fine states that during the Slavic invasions of the 6th century in southeastern Europe, the minority groups were able to take refuge in the mountains to escape conquerors and retain their identities. Thus, indigenous tribes were able to retreat into the mountains at that time and maintain themselves as Albanians and Vlachs (Fine 1991: 2). We find a similar situation during the Ottoman rule of Albania (15th to early 20th century). The highlanders referred to as ‘Malsors’ under the Ottoman empire lived in virtual autonomy according to their tribal laws, with little Ottoman control (Gawrych 2006: 29).

The concepts of tribal law, respect, and honor were the most important aspects of social life in northern Albania. Edith Durham, in her travels through northern Albania, points out that for Malsors “tribal instinct is far stronger than Church law” (Elsie 2015: 86-7). Scaldaferrri (2021: 16) cites the summary of Zumthor’s formulation noting that “the (Albanian) epic tends toward the “heroic,”” and that ‘it finds its most fertile grounds in border regions where there exists a prolonged hostility between two races, two cultures’. In a region where peace is historically unusual, the practice of the *gjâma e burrave* honors those who have died as heroes. It is such a cultural milieu for the *gjâma e burrave* that sheds light on the shift from PIE **sh₂óm-n̥* ‘song’ > Albanian *gjâma*.

3. Albanian *natë* ‘night’ => *nate* ‘morning’. Albanian provides also a second case where looking to the milieu in an apparent semantic shift gives a more insightful account. In particular, alongside Albanian *natë* [natə] ‘night’, we find in the Geg dialect, primarily in northwestern subdialects, the form *nate* [nɔ:tɛ] in the meaning ‘morning’, thus an apparent semantic shift involving an innovative opposite meaning. These two Albanian forms *natë* ‘night’ and *nate* ‘morning’ are cognate with Greek *νύξ*, Sanskrit *nákta-*, and Latin *nox*, all meaning ‘night’, and Hittite *nekuz* (genitive) ‘of the evening’. In the northernmost region of Malësia e Madhe the form

⁷ There is considerable debate, and no real consensus, regarding a connection of *ῥυμος* with *sāman-*; see Beekes (2010: s.v.).

⁸ If Greek *ῥυμος* belongs here, the apparent shift in meaning from ‘song’ to ‘elegy’ may also be connected to the milieu of ancient Balkan funeral practices; we leave that for a future study.

found is *nate* ‘morning’ (Shkurtaj 2021: 635-36), whereas south of the area in the cities of Shkodër and Lezhë one can hear *nade* with a voiced intervocalic [d]. In the Northeastern Geg subdialect in some regions of Kosovo and Tropojë, the rare form used is *mnatje* ‘morning’ with a prefix *më-* (Topalli 2017: 1027). Where other regions also use *mëngjes* for ‘morning’, presumably from the influence of the standard language (based on Tosk), only Malësia e Madhe predominantly uses *nate* for ‘morning’.

In older Albanian, the form for morning is only found in the work of Geg authors who historically come from isolated regions. The Old Geg writer Pjetrë Budi (17th century) wrote the form *ndënatje* ‘in the morning’ and Gjon Nikollë Kazazi (18th century) wrote the form *në nate* ‘in the morning’ (Topalli 2017: 1027). Pjetrë Budi was from Guri Bardhe, a mountainous town in the Mat valley, and Kazazi was from Gjakovë, which borders the mountainous region of Tropojë where the form *mnatje* is found. The writer Frang Bardhi (17th century) from the northwestern Geg region in *Dictionarium Latino Epiroticum* (1635) also wrote the form <ndenatenete> ‘in the morning’.

Natë ‘night’ and *nate* ‘morning’ are certainly related, but the question is how to make sense of this relationship. The term *nate* ‘morning’ has survived in the mountainous northern areas. It is completely absent in Tosk and as noted, only a few Geg writers of the 17th and 18th century have used the form. We can make sense of this distribution and the unusual meaning of a form based on ‘night’ by reference to the Northwestern Geg milieu. In particular, the lifestyle of the Northwestern Glegs has been historically based on agriculture, especially the raising of livestock. Berishaj (2013: 97-107, vol. 2) cites the detailed classification of livestock from the region of Malësia e Madhe, where there are thirteen distinct types of goats, ten types of sheep, ten types of bulls, etc.⁹ The farmers in the region typically awaken in the early hours of the morning when it is otherwise dark. *Natë* ‘night’ is semantically associated with the dark hours of the night, whereas the early morning hours *nate* are also dark but transitioning to daylight.¹⁰

⁹ Just for goats there is: *kocere* ‘black goat’, *lacë* ‘spotted goat’, *mushkere* ‘dark colored goat’, *kuqe* ‘red colored goat’, *sjapole* ‘goat with big horns’, *shegla* ‘pomegranate colored goat’, *thile* ‘gray colored goat’, *balë* ‘goat with a spot on its forehead’, *gjeshtë* ‘goat with a white line that runs across its body and red shoulders’, *shytë* ‘goat without horns’, *viderr* ‘multi-colored goat’, *bardhë* ‘white goat’, *kracë* ‘goat that is not completely black’ (distinct from a *kocere*) (Berishaj 2013: 98, vol. 2).

¹⁰ A phrase recorded in Berishaj (2013: 47, vol. 2) has both the definite form *nata* ‘night’ and *natja* ‘morning’: *Kur te thonë: natja e mire, ik se të zuni nata*. ‘When you are told good morning, flee, for the night will catch you’.



Figure 3. A Geg man posing for the photographer beside his oxen drawn cartload
(Photo: Carleton Coon 1929)¹¹

The shift from ‘night’ => ‘morning’ may thus be an innovation in the milieu in which one rises in the morning hours when it is still night-like, i.e. dark. But at the same time, it may also reveal an archaism in view of the fact that the Hittite cognate, *nekuz* (genitive) means ‘of evening’; that is, the Hittite form suggests for the reconstructed noun **nok^wt-s* (nominative) / **nek^wt-s* (genitive) an original meaning ‘transition period between day and night’, and not simply ‘night’ (as in Standard Albanian and the rest of Indo-European). Nonetheless, we claim that the development of ‘night’ > ‘(the morning part of the) day’ reflects this traditional pastoral social milieu (though in light of the Hittite *nekuz*, treating *nate* ‘morning’ as an archaism cannot be ruled out).

4. Conclusion. The concept of milieu, therefore, has great utility in these case studies, offering a basis for seeing the factors that motivate a semantic shift, and thus allows the analyst to go beyond just a description of the shift. We anticipate that once recognized through case studies such as those given here as playing a role in semantic change, this notion will prove useful in other instances in which the semantic range associated with a given word undergoes a shift.

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¹¹Elsie, Robert. Early Photography in Albania. Last accessed March 7, 2024.
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