



Ústav obecné lingvistiky

Orkida Backus Borshi: *Formal Expression of Definiteness in Albanian: A Description Based on Comparison with English*. Ph.D. Thesis, Charles University in Prague, 2015.

OPPONENT'S REVIEW

CONTENTS

The thesis under review is a study of the grammatical category of definiteness in Albanian in comparison with English. It consists of two major parts of almost equal length: The slightly longer 'theoretical' chapter (pp. 14–78) surveys philosophical and general linguistic, including typological, literature on definiteness (pp. 14–33) and summarises language specific descriptions of the grammatical category of definiteness in both Albanian (pp. 34–60) and English (pp. 61–78). The 'empirical' chapter ("Research project – data sources, collection and analysis", pp. 79–141) consists especially of what the author terms 'system-oriented' (pp. 85–124) and 'text-oriented' (pp. 125–141) investigation of definiteness in Albanian, in comparison with English. The brief final chapter (pp. 142–146) concludes. The thesis closes with an appendix (p. 159–182) presenting two English texts and their Albanian translations, both annotated for definite marking.

SIGNIFICANCE AND OVERALL QUALITY

Though I am not in a position to verify this independently, the author's overview of the publications on definiteness in Albanian strongly suggests that the category is in need of a more detailed analysis. The thesis under review, especially its empirical part, is certainly a welcome and significant contribution to the topic.

The author used a variety of methods to acquire her Albanian data, including parallel corpora, reverse translation elicitation from English, and native speaker expertise. (Incidentally, the role of introspection, which was obviously involved in constructing Albanian translations of numerous English examples, is not sufficiently reflected in the thesis, in my opinion.)

The thesis is written in good English, as far as I can judge, and the amount of typos is tolerable. The structure of the thesis is clear and logical, though the presentation of data is confusing at places (e.g. there is an example on p. 93, which is meant to illustrate definite marking determined by 'postmodification' by a prepositional phrase but the comment focuses on a completely different aspect of the example). What I miss terribly is glossing, i.e. interlinear translation of the Albanian examples: how is a reader who is not competent in Albanian supposed to know what the morphosyntactic structure of the example is? Also, in some parts of the thesis (esp. on pp. 107–111) there are several unnecessarily long textual examples whose length does not seem to contribute to what they are meant to illustrate.

The thesis contains numerous novel descriptive insights and generalisations (e.g. on definite marking in Albanian personal names) and the overall quality of the linguistic analysis is high. Instead of discussing in detail the few analysis-related objections I have, in the remainder of this review I will focus on two issues which I consider especially problematic:



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PROBLEM 1: PERILS OF THE CONTRASTIVE METHODOLOGY

The aim of the thesis, as stated in its main title, is to provide a description of the grammatical category of definiteness in Albanian. The general methodology, and the author is completely open about it, reflecting it in the subtitle, is to arrive at a description of Albanian definiteness on the basis of comparison with English definiteness. While contrastive studies of this sort are certainly legitimate (and necessary for the production of language teaching materials; e.g. Gast 2012), the adoption of such an approach in a thesis that claims *descriptive* goals raises a number of questions.

Before proceeding to formulate two of these, let me briefly summarise the author's methodology in three steps and a somewhat abstract wording:

1. Look at the description of a category in a 'reference' language. This is Section 1.4 of the thesis ("Reference grammar accounts of the expression of definiteness in English").
2. Use the, functional or formal, distinctions the description makes in describing the category in the 'reference' language (e.g. marking of definiteness in indirect anaphora, in multiword proper names, in hydronyms etc.) as a checklist and look for the corresponding constructions in the 'object' language. This is Section 2.2 of the thesis ("System-oriented investigation: uses of definite forms in Albanian").
3. Identify the 'matches' and 'mismatches' between the two languages with regard to formal marking of the category in question. These are formulated in Sections 2.2 and 2.3. (For a somewhat more elaborated review of this step see below.)

The first question relates to the identity of the 'reference' language: Why is it precisely English that has been selected for contrastive comparison? The author answers this question in a satisfactory manner, by referring to the fact that the English category of definiteness has been well described. As she puts it in the motto of her thesis, an Albanian proverb: *i vogli mëson nga i madhi* "the little one learns from the big one" (p. 5), where the adjectives "little" and "big" appear to stand for the detail of description of the category in Albanian and English, respectively.

The second question is, in my view, more fundamental: Can we describe a certain (i.e. the 'object') language adequately, if we describe it by means of contrastive comparison to another (i.e. the 'reference') language? The research in linguistic typology has shown convincingly that there are no universal or cross-linguistic categories; instead, there are only language-particular ('descriptive') categories, which might be – and should be only if one wants to engage in typology or contrastive linguistics – compared cross-linguistically by means of the so-called 'comparative concepts' (esp. Haspelmath 2010). (In other words: what we decide to term 'definiteness' in one language – and it is clear that the author is aware of this – is almost never identical to what we decide to term 'definiteness' in another language, though these language-particular categories may show a greater or lesser degree of formal and/or functional similarity.) Any particular language can only be described adequately in terms of its own descriptive categories, i.e. "in its own terms", though, of course, the grammaticographer may let herself inform and inspire by typological literature and/or by descriptive analyses of other languages in her search for the functional or formal distinctions in the 'object' language. The author's contrastive approach is, in effect, a formalisation of such an inspiration and the individual items on the English checklist in fact represent specific comparative concepts.

However, the contrastive approach has its perils with regard to descriptive goals and the thesis is not completely immune to them:



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First, what if the ‘reference’ language makes a distinction, i.e. uses different constructions, where the ‘object’ language does not? Well, then such a distinction is simply irrelevant in the description of the ‘object’ language! If one’s goal is to describe definiteness in Albanian, it makes no sense, for example, to conclude the section on definiteness in toponyms (pp. 115–121), by enumerating semantic types where the two languages agree in definiteness (viz. names of oceans, seas, straits, channels, canals, rivers, lakes, deserts, mountain chains, groups of islands, falls, and mountain passes) and those where they do not (viz. names of continents, countries, cities, bays, peninsulas, and mountain peaks). The only relevant descriptive generalisation is that Albanian toponyms are always definite.

Second, what if the ‘reference’ language makes no distinction where the ‘object’ language does? Well, then the contrastive approach cannot bring any insight into the description of the ‘object’ language. For example, the few exceptions among Albanian proper names that do not show definite marking include names of “foreign origin” (presumably: of *perceived* foreign origin, since a great number of the regular, i.e. definite, Albanian proper names are loanwords as well) and the author does present an interesting hypothesis on the relevance of the origin of proper names for their definiteness marking (p. 124). Nevertheless, precisely this is the type of language-particular distinction where one would welcome a much more detailed analysis of the Albanian data. I am tempted to say that the contrastive focus of the thesis diverts attention from language-particular distinctions in Albanian.

Finally, and most importantly, what if the functional extent of the language-particular categories which we decide to name by an identical label (i.e. ‘definiteness’) is different in the two languages (and we know it *is*, almost by definition of what a language-particular category means)? More specifically, what if the category in the ‘object’ language is much wider than the category in the ‘reference’ language (and, indeed, this is what the author concludes for Albanian definiteness vis-à-vis English definiteness)? Well, then, again, the contrastive approach cannot bring any insight into the description of the, so to speak, ‘extra’ functions of the ‘object’ language. One of the sections of the thesis is devoted to ‘text-oriented investigation’ of definiteness in the two languages, which in practice amounts to a quantitative analysis of English-to-Albanian and Albanian-to-English correspondences in parallel texts in terms of definiteness marking. The author finds out that almost half of the instances of definite nouns in the Albanian texts do not have a definite translation in the English texts! However, and this is, in my view, a major fault of the thesis, the reader does not learn *anything* about the functions of these ‘extra’ uses of definite marking in Albanian: there is simply no descriptive analysis of these Albanian data apart from the statement of the contrastive quantitative asymmetry.

What the thesis presents, in effect, is – apart from a few exceptions such as the hypothesis on the relevance of perceived origin (see above) – *not* a description of the grammatical category of definiteness in Albanian but a description of the Albanian translation equivalents of the grammatical category of definiteness in English.

PROBLEM 2: LITTLE ATTENTION TO GRAMMATICALISATION

The major conclusion of the thesis is that marking of definiteness in Albanian is significantly more common than marking of definiteness in English. This is true both in terms of paradigmatic (‘system’) distribution of definite marking (e.g. definite marking of proper nouns is almost general in Albanian, while only a small subset of proper nouns require or allow definite marking in English) and in terms of its syntagmatic, i.e. textual, frequency. The author concludes that “in Albanian the definite noun is something of a default and [that] the noun assumes indefinite form basically and mainly in syntactically defined positions” (p. 145).



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It is to be regretted in the context of this conclusion that the thesis pays so little attention to grammaticalisation of definiteness marking: a single paragraph has been devoted to an extremely brief summary of a single (though representative) study on the topic (De Mulder & Carlier 2012); the whole discussion basically amounts to saying that “the definite article in most languages can be traced to a weakened demonstrative” (p. 34).

Nevertheless, definite articles (or better: definite markers) may be grammaticalised to differing degrees in different languages, an observation made explicit as early as in Greenberg (1978) and discussed in a number of subsequent typological studies, including De Mulder & Carlier (2012). As the author rightly observes, definite marking in Albanian is, unlike definite marking in English, synthetic and cumulated with marking of case and number. (Unlike the author, though, I would not hesitate to consider the Albanian marking of definiteness to be inflectional.) The high degree of formal grammaticalisation of the Albanian definite markers, as evidenced, *inter alia*, by their high degree of bondedness, clearly correlates with the high degree of their functional grammaticalisation, especially a relatively high degree of desemantisation. Though put in different terms, desemantisation is basically also what the author hints at when she formulates her conclusion on Albanian definite marking as “something of a default”.

While I certainly support the author’s call for testing her hypotheses on *more data* (p. 146), I am confident that bringing in *more theory* can only be profitable for the analysis of Albanian definiteness.

CONCLUSION

Despite the two objections I have raised, I feel comfortable to state that Orkida Backus Borshi’s Ph.D. dissertation meets the standard requirements for this type of thesis and **recommend** it for defence. I propose to grade it as **very good**, provided the Ph.D. candidate will address the my two objections in a convincing manner.

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