

SOME METAPHORS OF 'WATER' IN THE PHRASEOLOGY OF THREE BALKAN LANGUAGES FROM A COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE An ongoing research project¹

MONICA GENESIN¹, FLORA KOLECI²,
BILJANA MIRCEVSKA-BOSHEVA³, KATERINA VELJANOVSKA³,
ARISTOTLE SPIRO⁴

¹UNIVERSITY OF SALENTO, ²INSTITUT NATIONAL DES LANGUES ET CIVILISATIONS ORIENTALES,
³UNIVERSITY OF SS. CYRIL AND METHODIUS, SKOPJE, ⁴ATHENS, THE HAGUE, TIRANA

Abstract – This article analyses, within the framework of cognitive linguistics, the use of some WATER metaphors in the phraseology of three Balkan languages, Albanian, Macedonian and Modern Greek. Water, which occupies a significant place in human experience and perception, provides a versatile framework for metaphorical expression in various aspects of human life. In phraseology, these metaphors are likely to play a crucial role in conveying abstract concepts and cultural ideas rooted in the experience of water and its various manifestations in the three Balkan languages. This research project aims to shed light on the complex relationship between language, culture, and cognition, highlighting the role of water as a potent metaphorical resource in the Balkan linguistic repertoire. Our study is based on the variety of spoken and written language used by the average educated person, including newspapers, fiction and mass media. We have not considered the rich dialectal heritage of each of the three languages. We hope to extend the phraseological analysis of water to some of the dialects of these languages in the future.

Keywords: Balkan Languages; Cognitive Linguistics; Phraseology.

*Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge
your hand in it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a
solid wall; it will not stop you. But water always goes
where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand
against it.*
(M. Atwood "The Penelopiad", 2005, p. 32).

1. Exploring some uses of water metaphors in the phraseology of three Balkan languages

The study of the use of water metaphors in the phraseology of three Balkan languages, Albanian, Macedonian and Modern Greek, within the framework of cognitive linguistics offers a rich opportunity to explore how language reflects and shapes our cognitive understanding of the world, particularly through our interaction with the natural environment. Water occupies an important place in human experience and perception. Its qualities, such as flow, purity, depth, and turbulence, provide a versatile framework for

¹ The sections of the article are assigned as follows: to Monica Genesis 1., 2.2., 3.1, 4.; to Flora Koleci section 2.1.; to Biljana Mircevska-Bosheva and Katerina Veljanovska 3.2; to Aristotle Spiro 3.3.

metaphorical expression in different areas of human life. In phraseology, these metaphors are likely to play a crucial role in conveying abstract concepts and cultural ideas rooted in the three Balkan languages' experience of water and its various manifestations. The cognitive linguistic approach offers a valuable lens through which to analyse these metaphors, as it emphasises the role of conceptual metaphor in structuring thought and language.²

Underlying cognitive patterns and cultural conceptualisations that serve to express emotions, convey social norms, or encapsulate complex ideas in a concise and evocative way, can be identified by examining the use of water metaphors in phraseology. Moreover, comparing these metaphors across languages and cultures can provide insights into both universal cognitive processes and culturally specific interpretations of natural phenomena. Overall, this research project promises to provide insights into the complex relationship between language, culture, and cognition, highlighting the role of water as a potent metaphorical resource in the Balkan linguistic landscape³.

The analysed data came from online resources (corpora, dictionaries), such as the Albanian National Corpus (<http://albanian.web-corpora.net>), the dictionary of the Macedonian language (<http://zoze.mk>), Sketch Engine (www.sketchengine.com), the Greek Corpus (<http://web-corpora.net/GreekCorpus>), specific lexicographical repertoires, such as the phraseological dictionary of the Macedonian language (Димитровски, Ширилов 2003), the phraseological dictionary of the Albanian language (Thomaj 2006), the dictionaries of the Modern Greek (Μπαμπινιώτη 2019, Τριανταφυλλίδη 2013).

In addition, interviews were conducted with native speakers aged between 30 and 70 who had an excellent command of the language. In this research we have relied on the variety of spoken and written language used by the average educated person, newspapers, fiction and the mass media in general. We have not considered the linguistic use of the rich dialectal heritage of each of the three languages. We hope to continue the phraseological analysis of water in some of the dialects of these languages in the future.

2. WATER Metaphors in Language and Culture

2.1. The importance of WATER in Balkan traditional life and culture

Like numerous other traditional societies, water holds a pivotal position in Albania's intangible heritage. Various rituals are intertwined with water, such as the “ujë i pafolur” (‘mute water’), and female archetypes in oral traditions like the “Gërshetëza”, the “Floçka”, and the “Kulshedra/Kuçedra” (‘female dragon’), as well as the “Nuse e ujërave” (‘Bride of the waters’), all exhibit a profound connection to the element of water. Additionally, water assumes a significant role in numerous folk songs, exemplified by the renowned “A kanë ujë ato burime?” (‘Do those springs have water?’), where water is a metaphor for the feeling of love:

A kanë ujë ato burime?/ Ti moj buzëkarafilja ime/ Ti moj buzëkarafilja ime/ Nëm ujë me dorën tënde/ Ti moj vajza moj përmetar/ Tek burimi po të pres/ Prite lalën se po vjen/ Prite

² S. Kövecses (1990), and Kövecses (2000).

³ “Fjalori Frazologjik Ballkanik” (Thomai, Lloshi, Hristova, Qiriazati, Melonashi 1999) is a first contribution to the comparative analysis of Balkan phraseology, shedding light on the numerous parallelisms among Balkan languages.

lalën se po vjen/ Kom nji llaf e do ta them/ Paska dalë goca te pusi/ Syni i zi aman porsì rrushi/
Më jep pak ujë se plasa/ Se më dogji vapa/ Se më dogji vapa moj goce/ Më jep nji ujë se plasa.
'Do those springs have water?/ You, my carnation-lips/ You, my carnation/ Give me water
with your hand/ You, girl of Permet/ I wait for you at the fountain/ Wait for the lover to come/
Wait for the lover to come/ I have something to tell you and I'll tell you/ The girl at the well
has appeared/ Her black eye is like grapes/ Give me some water I'm dying/ Because the heat is
burning me/ Because the heat is burning me, my girl/ Give me some water.' (Popular Albanian
folk-song).

Water is a vital element, and its significance is reflected in numerous popular beliefs and customs, often linked to various cults. Throughout history, water has been seen as having healing or miraculous properties, starting from pagan beliefs and continuing through mythology and other enduring traditions. Interestingly, in isolated rural areas, these beliefs often blend and transform, taking on unique forms in different places. This phenomenon explains why similar myths, legends, and beliefs frequently emerge among neighboring peoples, such as those in the Balkans, influenced by their historical kinship relations.

One notable ritual involving water is "ujët e pafolë", or the ritual of the silent water, which researchers have found extends throughout the Mediterranean⁴. This ritual requires complete silence during its observance. Among the Arbëreshë of Italy and in some parts of Greece, the "ujët e pafolë" or "ujët e vjedhur" ('stolen water') ritual is primarily associated with Christmas Eve and Easter night. In Albania and across the Balkans, this rite is also linked to pagan festivals like "Dita e Verës" (Spring Day) on March 14. On specific days such as Christmas morning, New Year's Day, Holy Water Day (January 6), or St. George's Day, people would draw water early in the morning from springs or rivers without speaking a word. This water was believed to acquire special properties, and it was used to sprinkle homes, animals, fields, and more. A branch of walnut, laurel, or olive would be dipped into the jar containing "ujët e pafolë" and used to sprinkle everything in the house, stables, gardens, and fields.

Not only is water itself significant, but so are the places where it originates, such as springs, wells, streams, and lakes, which hold a special place in myths and popular beliefs. In folk mythology, the "kroi" ('source') is often seen as a meeting point between the human world and an invisible one inhabited by "Ora", "Zana", and other supernatural entities. Many folk legends describe supernatural, often malevolent beings living in lakes and swamps. In Albanian mythology, these beings are called "Kuçedra", depicted as many-headed creatures that one should avoid. Their feared existence led to sacrifices meant to appease them and avert disaster. Researchers suggest that these beliefs might stem from natural phenomena, such as lightning strikes in forested areas around lakes, which were dangerous to humans. Additionally, the reflection of the surrounding nature in the water, often seen upside down, contributed to their perception as gateways to unknown and frightening worlds.⁵

In contrast, springs and groves were considered almost sacred, and damaging them was a grave sin. Springs were often associated with supernatural events, and their water was deemed holy. For instance, a spring on Mount Vela in the Lezha Highlands (North Albania) is believed to have gushed forth miraculously when a girl fleeing Ottoman soldiers prayed for water. This spring is still regarded as holy today.

⁴ Altimari (2021).

⁵ Tirta (2004, p. 60-77).

2.2. Theoretical background

Our study builds on the seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson's "Metaphors We Live by" (1980). This approach is based on the belief that metaphor has a conceptual and an experiential basis. A metaphor is a mapping of concepts between the target and source domains, inviting the listener to conceptualize and understand the target concept in terms of the source concept. This process is influenced by shared experiences between speakers. For example, Lakoff and Johnson's famous metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR arises from the shared experience that argument resembles a battle in which opposing sides defend and attack each other.

Drawing on this theoretical framework, our paper explores a series of metaphors using the source domain of WATER. We aim to illustrate how WATER serves as a versatile source domain for understanding abstract concepts due to its ubiquitous presence and importance in everyday life. Based on the theoretical foundations of this research paradigm, the present paper focuses on a series of metaphors with the source domain WATER. We will show that WATER has been extended as a source domain for understanding abstract domains because water is an entity that is important and common in our everyday lives.

This research also benefited greatly from Nie and Chen's article "WATER Metaphors and Metonyms in Chinese: A Semantic Network", which introduces the concepts of super-domain and sub-domain in relation to the hierarchical organization of metaphors and metonyms within a semantic network. Super-domains represent broad conceptual categories that encompass different subdomains. The former serve as overarching themes or concepts that unify different metaphorical and metonymical expressions. For example, a super-domain discussed in the article is PURITY, which may include subdomains such as BEAUTY, HEART and FRIENDSHIP. Sub-domains, on the other hand, are more specific conceptual categories that fall under the umbrella of super-domains. According to Nie and Chen (2008), sub-domains represent different aspects or manifestations of the broader super-domain, including specific metaphorical or metonymical expressions related to WATER. The identification and analysis of super-domains and subdomains helps us to understand the organization and structure of metaphorical and metonymical mappings within a language or cultural context. These concepts provide insights into how abstract concepts are conceptualized and represented through language and cultural expressions. Nie and Chen highlight a distinction between the concept of a super-domain and the notion of a "metaphorical concept" as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson.

In Lakoff and Johnson's framework, the metaphorical concept ARGUMENT IS WAR includes different instances, such as defend and attack, which illustrate different aspects of the overarching idea. Indeed, the relationships between metaphors and metonyms within different subdomains are not just facets of a single concept: they represent separate domains that both share and instantiate the super-domain above them. This suggests a more complex and nuanced understanding of how conceptual metaphors and metonyms operate within semantic networks.

In Albanian, as well as in various Balkan and non-Balkan languages, there is a rich and varied phraseology centered on WATER. One often encounters extensive cross-linguistic parallels related to specific attributes of WATER, as exemplified by the idiom "Much water ran under the bridges" (e.g. Albanian "Kalon shumë ujë nën urë", Italian "N'è passato dell'acqua sotto i ponti", German "Da muss noch viel Wasser die Donau/den Rhein hinunterfließen"), signifying the potential for life circumstances to change over time. In the following sections, we will focus on the analysis of specific phraseological expressions

in Albanian, Macedonian and Modern Greek, with the aim of examining the phraseology of these three Balkan languages and understanding how the semantic network of WATER is constructed through the embodied experiences of individuals within their physical and cultural milieu.

3. WATER Metaphors in three Balkan Languages

3.1. WATER Metaphors in some Albanian phrasemes

The analysis of the selected corpus allows us to identify tokens in which “ujë” is used as a Source Domain to express a range of abstract and concrete meanings (Target Domains). Water’s attribute of fluidity serves as a natural motivation for some metaphorical expressions which, as disparate as they may seem at a first glance, can be considered as instances of extension of WATER to the super-domain MOVEMENT. The smoothness of flowing water has therefore been transferred to the specific sub-domain EASINESS as can be seen in the following examples⁶:

Token	Meaning
“M’u bë rruga ujë” ‘My road became water’	‘To go smoothly with something’
“E bëj ujë” ‘I make it water’	‘To learn something perfectly’
“I ecën kungulli mbi ujë” ‘His gourd goes over water’	‘To go smoothly with something’

Table 1
 EASINESS IS FLOWING WATER in Albanian.

These phraseological expressions stress the smoothness of moving water and invite us to see the ease and naturalness with which an activity is carried out in terms of flowing water. Hence what underlies seems to be the metaphor EASINESS IS FLOWING WATER.

Another salient feature of flowing water is its lack of boundaries or shape, so it is not possible to know exactly where it begins and where it ends. For this reason, it can express power, strength, and, on the other hand, vulnerability, when one loses control of oneself, leading to unexpected and unconscious results:

Token	Meaning
“Dola mbi ujë” ‘I went out over the water’	‘To overcome difficulties, to get by’

Table 2
 STRENGTH IS FLOWING WATER in Albanian.

⁶ Cipo, Çabej (2005, p. 589); Xhuvani (2020, p. 656); Thomaj (2006, p. 1136-1138); Thomaj (2010, p. 1041-1051).

The attribute of fluidity, lack of solidity and the destructive power of moving water serve as a motivation for the metaphorical phraseological tokens which express instability, vulnerability. These expressions are consistent with the metaphor INSTABILITY IS FLOWING WATER. In these cases the subdomain is INSTABILITY.

Token	Meaning
“Jam mbi ujë” 'I am above water'	'To be in an unstable, insecure situation'
“(Diçka) i ka rrënjët mbi ujë” '(Something) has its roots on water'	'To be in an unstable, unsteady position'

Table 3
INSTABILITY IS FLOWING WATER in Albanian.

As Ayako Omori⁷ points out, EMOTION IS NATURAL PHENOMENA is one of the major metaphorical source domains utilized for understanding emotion. This proposal owes much to the EMOTIONS ARE NATURAL FORCES metaphor proposed by Kövecses⁸. He specifies the source domain NATURAL FORCES by listing the subordinate concepts STORMS, WAVES, FLOODS, and FIRE, illustrating these with examples like “She was on fire with emotion”.

Omori has expanded Kövecses's source domain into NATURAL PHENOMENA so that it can cover the four elements comprehensively, i.e., AIR, EARTH, FIRE, and also WATER. All of them have been traditionally regarded as the fundamental constituents of the natural world.

With regard to the metaphorical extensions of WATER, the experiential basis of the WATER IS EMOTION mapping is clear: the movement of the body of water can be a natural source domain for describing certain types of human emotions and can therefore be transferred to the EMOTION sub-domain, as can be seen in the following Albanian examples, in which tokens can express a wide range of physical and mental emotions and reactions, i.e. fear, psychological and physical fatigue, weakness, and humiliation:

Token	Meaning
“(Diçka/Dikush) ma bëri gjakun ujë” '(Someone/something) made my blood water'	'To frighten, disquiet someone',
“M'u bë gjaku ujë” 'My blood became water'	'To be frightened, disquietened'
“M'u bë mendja ujë” 'My mind became water'	'To exhaust oneself, to wear out'
“M'u bënë sytë ujë” 'My eyes became water'	'To get tired eyes'
“U bëra për ujë të	'To feel

⁷ Omori (2008).

⁸ Kövecses (1990, p. 162-163), Kövecses (2000, p. 71-72).

ftohtë” ‘I became for fresh water’ “Më bëri për ujë të ftohtë” ‘(Someone) made me for fresh water’	reproached, humiliated’; ‘To be frightened’ ‘To reprimand, to teach a lesson to sb.’
“Ma bën barkun ujë” ‘(Someone/something) makes my belly water’	‘To sadden, to humiliate’
“Ma bëri zemrën ujë” ‘(Someone/something) made my heart water’	‘To humiliate, to frighten’
“Më bëri për ujë në zemër” ‘(Someone) made in my heart for water’	‘To scare, scold, severely criticise someone’
“Më bëri për ujë të ftohtë” ‘(Someone) made me for fresh water’	‘To reprimand’
“Më ra ujë i valë” ‘I dropped boiling water’	‘To resign, to loose physical and mental strength’

Table 4
EMOTION IS FLOWING WATER in Albanian.

3.2. WATER Metaphors in some Macedonian phrasemes

Water, one of the four sacred elements, has always been particularly revered by the Slavs. Water is often associated with the beginning of the world: “From the beginning there was neither heaven nor earth, but only darkness and water, and God with the Holy Spirit flew over the water”⁹. As well as being the source of life, it is also a sacred symbol of purification. According to some South Slavic beliefs, the whole system of rivers and streams represents living land, and widespread in Slavic mythology is the idea that through flowing water a person can communicate with the deceased, and that the expanse of water was thought to be the afterlife.

The symbolism of water is thus linked, on the one hand, to its natural properties - freshness, transparency, ability to cleanse, rapid movement - and, on the other, to mythological ideas of water as the *foreign* and the dangerous space. The negative symbolism of water is revealed by the fact that there were common Slavic beliefs about the presence of demons and other impure forces in it.¹⁰

Given this belief in water as a living element characterised by various movements (waves, flowing water, etc.), it is quite natural that expressions based on this characteristic of water appear in the language. They are primarily associated with the idea of the ease with which water flows, and this is a symbol associated with things that are easily done.

In the Macedonian language, the subdomain EASINESS can be seen in the examples, referring to the smoothness of moving water¹¹:

⁹ Толстой (1995, p. 386).

¹⁰ Толстой (1995, p. 386).

¹¹ S. Димитровски, Ширилов (2003).

Token	Meaning
“Лесно како вода” 'Easy as water'	'A task or experience that is enjoyable and easy'
“Знае како вода” '(He) knows something like water'	'To know something very well (ease and excellent knowledge of a certain school subject)'
“Како гола вода” 'Easy as naked water'	'A task or experience that is enjoyable and easy'

Table 5
EASINESS IS FLOWING WATER in Macedonian.

In the Macedonian language, water can be associated with an unpleasant feeling, it can be an element used to put someone in an unpleasant situation. This is expressed in phrases¹²:

Token	Meaning
“Полее со ладна/студена вода (некого) “ 'To pour cold water on someone'.	'To say something that makes someone uncomfortable, to put someone in an uncomfortable situation'
“Попари (како) со врела вода” 'To scald someone with hot water” ’	'To say something that makes someone feel extremely uncomfortable'.

Table 6
EMOTION IS FLOWING WATER in Macedonian.

The instability and danger of a certain difficult situation and its overcoming can be expressed in the following phraseme in Macedonian language¹³:

Token	Meaning
“Заплови во помирни води” 'To sail in calmer waters'	'To make or do something in a quiet way'.

Table 7
INSTABILITY IS FLOWING WATER in Macedonian.

¹² S. Димитровски, Ширилов (2003).

¹³ S. Димитровски, Ширилов (2003).

In this phraseme, stormy water is perceived as a danger, and entering or sailing in calm water is understood as overcoming a certain danger or difficulty.

3.3. WATER Metaphors in some Modern Greek phrasemes

The analysis of the selected corpus allows us to locate phrases containing either the ancient term ὕδωρ, or the modern term νερό. Both serve as source domains to convey a wide range of abstract and concrete meanings (target domains). Metaphors associated with water typically embody life and vitality, purity and purification, fluidity and adaptability, emotion and the subconscious, depth and mystery, transformation and change, healing and rejuvenation, connection and unity, endurance and patience. Water, essential to life, often symbolises vitality, growth and renewal. Just as water sustains living organisms, it can symbolise energy, resilience and the flow of existence. The transparent and cleansing nature of water makes it a metaphor for purity, clarity and renewal. It is often used in rituals and ceremonies for purification, suggesting spiritual or emotional cleansing. Water conforms to the shape of its container and flows around obstacles, symbolising adaptability, flexibility and the ability to overcome challenges with grace.

In view of the belief that water is a living element, characterised by different movements (waves, flowing water, etc.), it is natural that expressions based on this characteristic of water appear in different contexts and with different meanings. An interesting parallel with the two Balkan languages analysed in this article is represented by the following expressions, which can be associated with the idea of the ease with which water flows¹⁴:

Token	Meaning
“Ξέρω το μάθημά μου νερό / νεράκι” ‘I know my lesson water’	‘To have learned the lesson like a piece of cake’
“Το ξέρω νεράκι” ‘I know (like) flowing water’	‘I have learned the lesson very well’

Table 8
 EASYNES IS FLOWING WATER in Modern Greek.

As we have seen in the previous sections, water is closely associated with emotion, the subconscious and intuition. The calm surface of water can represent serenity, while turbulent water can symbolise inner turmoil or emotional upheaval. Water, being transformative and able to move between liquid, vapour and solid states, symbolises change, transformation and metamorphosis. Its persistence in wearing away even the hardest rocks over time suggests patience and perseverance in the face of obstacles - these metaphors vividly illustrate the richness and adaptability of water as a symbol in literature, art, mythology and everyday language¹⁵:

¹⁴ S. Μπαμπινιώτη (2019), Τριανταφυλλίδη (2013).

¹⁵ S. Μπαμπινιώτη (2019), Τριανταφυλλίδη (2013).

Token	Meaning
“Ἐφ’ ὕδωρ ἔλαχεν” '(He/She) run upon the water'	'To be unlucky to be forced to do a menial job' ¹⁶
“Μου κάνει νερά” '(He/She) makes me waters'	'To cause trouble to someone'
“Χάνω τα νερά μου” 'I lose my waters'	'To lose one's temper'

Table 9
EMOTION IS FLOWING WATER in Modern Greek.

4. Conclusion

In this article we have made a preliminary comparison of metaphorical expressions in Albanian, Macedonian and Modern Greek, focusing on instances where WATER is associated with the super-domain of MOVEMENT. The movement of flowing water serves as the underlying motivation for these metaphors, as follows: EASINESS IS FLOWING WATER (Tables 1, 5, 8), STRENGTH IS FLOWING WATER (Table 2), INSTABILITY IS FLOWING WATER (Tables 3, 7), and EMOTION IS FLOWING WATER (Tables 4, 6, 9). In particular, metaphorical patterns using WATER as a source domain are prevalent in the expression of human emotions, especially negative emotions, in the three Balkan languages. These negative emotions include loss of control, fear, physical and mental fatigue, and humiliation. This brief analysis, based on a limited set of phrases, illustrates the potential for uncovering new cross-linguistic parallels in the Balkan languages through the cognitive linguistic framework for the study of metaphor. We aim to extend this comparative analysis by examining a wider range of conceptual domains, using the online corpora now available for many Balkan languages.

Bionotes: Monica Genesin holds a PhD in Albanian Studies from the University of Calabria. In 1997-1998 she was a Humboldt Research Fellow at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. She is currently Associate Professor of “Albanian Language and Literature” at the Faculty of Humanities, Università del Salento. Her research interests focus on diachronic and synchronic Albanian linguistics, Balkan languages and cultures, translation practices from Albanian into Italian. She is also on the editorial board of several scientific journals.

Flora Koleci teaches Albanian at the “Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales”, Paris. She graduated in Albanian Language and Literature from the University of Tirana with a thesis in Linguistics. She obtained her PhD in Generative Linguistics from the University of Calabria. From 2020-2023 she was a researcher in Albanian at the University of Salento; from 2003-2007, and from 2010-2019 she was a researcher and lecturer in Syntax at the University of Tirana, and in between (2007-2010) she was a lecturer in Albanian at the University of Calabria.

Biljana Mircevska-Bosheva holds a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje. She is a Doctor of Philology, full-time Professor at the Department of Slavistics, Faculty of Philology “Blaze Koneski”, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Director of the Russian Centre in Skopje.

¹⁶ Supervising the flow of water in the hourglass of the court (which determined the time for the parties to speak) was a menial job that no one wanted to do. They were therefore chosen by lot.

Her main research interests are: Second Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistics, Intercultural Communication.

Katerina Veljanovska holds a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje. She is a Doctor of Philology, full-time professor at the Department of Macedonian Language, Faculty of Philology "Blaze Koneski", University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje. Her main research interests are: Macedonian Language, Lexicology and Phraseology, Contrastive Analysis of Slavic Languages.

Aristotle Spiro holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Athens. Formerly Professor of Albanian History at the University of Elbasan and of General Linguistics at the University of Tirana, he is now an independent researcher. He has also been a research fellow at the University of Athens. His research interests range from the History of Albanian Grammar and the contact between Greek and Albanian dialects, to the Theory of Translation.

Authors' addresses: monica.genesin@unisalento.it, flora.koleci@inalco.fr,
katerina.veljanovska@flf.ukim.edu.mk, biljana.mirchevska@flf.ukim.edu.mk, aristotlespiro@gmail.com.

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Online Resources

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