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Gustav Meyer and the Albanology of the nineteenth century

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Gustav Meyer (1850–1900), one of the founding figures of Albanian studies, whose work played a decisive role in establishing the scientific study of Albanian historical linguistics. During the nineteenth century, Albanology was still an emerging field, characterized by limited empirical data, fragmented descriptions of the Albanian language, and ongoing debates regarding its linguistic classification. In this scholarly context, Albanian was often studied indirectly and lacked a systematic grammatical framework.

Meyer's research marked a decisive turning point by introducing rigorous comparative methods and firmly situating Albanian within the Indo-European language family. Through meticulous analyses of phonetics and morphology, he laid the foundations for the scientific study of Albanian. His work established methodological standards that combined systematic phonetic description with detailed morphological analysis, thereby advancing both the precision and the scope of Albanian linguistics.

This paper examines Meyer's *Grammar of the Albanian Language* (1888), with particular emphasis on its morphological structure and the systematic integration of phonetics. Selected examples from his work illustrate Meyer's structured approach and highlight the enduring significance of his contributions to nineteenth-century Albanology. By situating Albanian within a comparative Indo-European framework, Meyer not only advanced the study of the language itself but also contributed to the broader development of historical linguistics in Europe.

Keywords: Albanian studies, grammar, nineteenth century, dialect, comparative approach.

1. Introduction

Gustav Meyer was a distinguished linguist and scholar of ancient and modern Greek, Turkish, Albanian, and the broader Indo-European language family. He also had scholarly interests in Balkan literature, folklore, and fairy tales, and is widely recognized as one of the most important Albanologists of his era. Meyer was born in 1850 in Upper Silesia, then part of Prussia (now in Poland), and pursued studies in clas-

sical philology, German, modern Greek, and Sanskrit. He is often considered a German-Austrian scholar, given that he was born in Prussia, completed part of his studies there, and contributed as a professor at the University of Graz (Klosi, 2004). His manuscript legacy is preserved at the University Library of Graz. Meyer's correspondence reveals a courageous and determined character; he was described as a proud, even eccentric, Prussian with remarkable enthusiasm for his work, and a brilliant and versatile linguist (Lochner, 1976). Since 1875, Meyer traveled extensively throughout the Balkans to conduct field research. In 1876, he was appointed professor of Sanskrit and comparative linguistics at the University of Prague (Elsie, 2010), and in 1877, he joined the University of Graz as a lecturer in the same fields. Unfortunately, in 1897, at the age of 47, Meyer was forced to resign from his professorship and suspend his scholarly activities due to a serious brain illness (Pohl, 1994). He died in a hospital near Graz in 1900 (Elsie, 2010). Meyer's significance for Indo-European linguistics is largely tied to his research on Albanian, which he recognized as an independent Indo-European language (Pohl, 1994). He made substantial contributions to Albanology through six volumes of *Albanian Studies* (1883–1897) and his *Abbreviated Albanian Grammar: With Reading Pieces and Glossary* (1888). Meyer is perhaps best remembered for his *Etymological Dictionary of the Albanian Language* (1891), the first dictionary of its kind for Albanian. In this work, he analyzed the origins of over 5,000 Albanian words, identifying only 400 as of direct Indo-European origin, while the remainder were loanwords of various origins. Although he emphasized Latin influence and suggested that Albanian was a semi-Romance language—a hypothesis now generally rejected—his contributions to Albanian linguistic studies and etymology remain of great scholarly value (Elsie, 2010).

2. Meyer's acquaintance with the Albanian language

Gustav Meyer's initial engagement with the Albanian language was both personal and scholarly. In his 1891 autobiography, Meyer reflects on the beginnings of his work:

“Right after finishing the Greek grammar, I returned to my earlier, rather tentative interest in Albanian. This was first prompted by a visit to the Albanian communities during a trip to Sicily in the autumn of 1880. I soon realized that almost everything still had to be done here, and that this language of the Indo-European linguistics had yet to be conquered. Apart from Miklosich's identification of a number of Slavic and Latin-Romance loanwords, nothing had been done to achieve a scientific understanding of the language, to the extent that it was not even clear whether it was Indo-European at all. In the following years, I made efforts through a number of journeys in Turkey, Greece and Italy to become acquainted with several speech varieties of this language, to collect grammatical and lexical material, and to verify what was already known. Through my investigations I demonstrated that the language is Indo-European, I sought to determine its more precise position among the other languages of this family, discussed many aspects of its phonetics, inflection and word formation, and endeavored to clearly distinguish the foreign elements from the native ones in the lexicon. A preliminary

conclusion of these studies is represented by the brief grammar—intended as a forerunner of a more extensive work—and the etymological dictionary. The latter received the Volney Prize in the present year. Alongside these studies, predominantly inspired by my engagement with the folk literature of the Albanians, I also pursued research in comparative literary history of fairy tales and folk songs, from which I occasionally presented some material to the public. Most of this work later appeared in collected form in my essays and studies” (Meyer, 1901, pp. 14–15). Meyer’s early work demonstrates a combination of field research, comparative methodology, and a systematic approach to both phonetics and morphology. His journeys through Turkey, Greece, and Italy allowed him to document multiple dialects and collect lexical and grammatical material, which laid the groundwork for his *Abbreviated Albanian Grammar* (1888) and *Etymological Dictionary of the Albanian Language* (1891). In addition to his scholarly contributions, Meyer was attentive to the sociopolitical context of the Albanian-speaking communities under Ottoman rule. He published articles in Austrian and German press outlets highlighting the difficult conditions faced by Albanians and even addressed a letter to the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs advocating for linguistic freedoms (Lochner, 1976). This engagement underscores Meyer’s broader commitment to both the linguistic and cultural preservation of the Albanian people.

3. The work “*Abbreviated Albanian grammar: with reading pieces and glossary*”

The focus of this study is Gustav Meyer’s work *Abbreviated Albanian Grammar: With Reading Pieces and Glossary* (1888), which represents a landmark in the systematic study of Albanian. Meyer himself explained the motivation for writing the book, highlighting his dissatisfaction with earlier descriptions of the language:

“This small book was initially prompted by the dissatisfaction I felt with the previous inadequate presentation of the Albanian language. It seemed appropriate to me to provide those who wished to acquire knowledge of this language with a more reliable and useful tool” (Meyer, 1888, p. 1).

Meyer structured the work in three main parts. The first part presents a concise grammar, offering a systematic overview of the morphological and syntactic features of Albanian. The second part contains reading passages that illustrate the main dialectal forms of the language, including fairy tales and excerpts from the Gospel. The third and final part provides a vocabulary appendix corresponding to the reading texts, allowing learners to contextualize and apply their understanding of the language.

Through this organization, Meyer not only documented the linguistic features of Albanian in a rigorous manner but also created a practical tool for scholars and students, bridging the gap between descriptive linguistics and applied language study. The work thus reflects both Meyer’s analytical approach and his commitment to fostering broader knowledge of Albanian.

3.1 Meyer’s grammar

The first part of Meyer’s *Abbreviated Albanian Grammar* (1888) focuses on phonetics and morphology. The morphological analysis covers major word categories, includ-

ing nouns, pronouns, adjectives, numerals, prepositions, conjunctions, and notably the verb system, which Meyer highlights as one of the most complex among Indo-European languages. The grammar is closely intertwined with historical phonetics, as Meyer describes the sounds of Albanian and occasionally incorporates etymological comparisons. He notes that these comparisons are limited in number but serve to “help bring the unfamiliar closer” (Meyer, 1888, p. 12). Meyer examines the development of grammatical forms in Albanian, comparing them systematically with other Indo-European languages such as Latin, Ancient Greek, and Sanskrit. This comparative approach allows readers to understand both the historical evolution and the structural uniqueness of Albanian within the Indo-European family. Selected examples of these analyses illustrate the depth and rigor of Meyer’s methodology, which combines descriptive grammar with historical and comparative insights.

First example

Meyer illustrates the aorist of the Albanian verb *viñ* while simultaneously tracing its Latin origin and providing the corresponding conjugational forms:

“*viñ*, *vij* is a loanword from the Latin *venio*: *viñ*, *vij* has -i- instead of -ie- before the double consonant (*venjo*); 2nd and 3rd person singular *vien* = *venis*, *venit*; plural *vime*, *vini*, *viñene* = *veniunt*. The aorist changes the root to: *erða*” (Meyer, 1888, p. 45). This example demonstrates Meyer’s comparative methodology, highlighting the historical development of Albanian verbal forms and showing how loanwords from Latin were adapted to the phonetic and morphological patterns of Albanian. It also exemplifies his integration of historical phonetics, morphology, and etymology in a single analysis.

Second example

Meyer also examines phonetic developments in Albanian, such as the behavior of nasal consonants, and relates these changes to Latin origins. For example, he notes:

“The nasal consonants

-n- in Gheg and -r- in Tosk: In nouns, -n occurring in final position and after a long stressed vowel has been lost: *mulī’n* (from Latin *molīn[um]*) → *mulī* ‘mill’; *fiðn-* from Latin *c(o)tōn(eum)* → *ftua* ‘quince’” (Meyer, 1888, p. 52).

This demonstrates Meyer’s attention to historical phonetics, as well as his use of comparative etymology to trace Albanian sound changes from Latin loanwords.

Although morphology occupies the largest portion of the grammar, Meyer also addresses syntactic features. He provides examples of the short forms of personal pronouns, explaining their placement in sentences and their interaction with other parts of speech:

“For the dative and accusative cases in the singular and plural of all three persons, there are unstressed forms, which are placed before the verb, even when a direct or indirect object follows the verb and is expressed by a noun or a pronoun, for example:

mε θa mua

te θa tūj

e řahu até” (Meyer, 1888, p. 58).

Through these analyses, Meyer integrates phonetic, morphological, and syntactic observations, illustrating both the structural complexity of Albanian and the systematic approach of his comparative methodology. His work emphasizes the interplay between historical forms, dialectal variation, and sentence-level grammatical patterns.

3.2 Dialectal basis

Meyer's *Abbreviated Albanian Grammar* (1888) includes examples from both major Albanian dialects, with a primary focus on northern Tosk, spoken from Elbasan to southern Frashër. While examples of Gheg are present, they are less frequent, and only a few examples are drawn from the Arbëresh varieties spoken in Italy and Greece. This attention to dialectal variation allows readers to understand the historical development and phonetic diversity of the Albanian language. In the grammar section, Meyer presents different dialectal forms to illustrate phonetic and morphological regularities. The comparative presentation of Gheg and Tosk forms highlights systematic differences in vowel and consonant pronunciation, helping to clarify patterns of sound change and morphological variation (Meyer, 1888). Through these examples, Meyer provides a comprehensive view of the Albanian language across its dialects, demonstrating both the unity and variation within the linguistic system and emphasizing the importance of dialectal study in historical and comparative linguistics.

The section in the book where the example is mentioned	Gheg	Tosk
Nasal consonants: In Tosk, the intervocalic <i>-n-</i> changes to <i>-r-</i>	émëna	émëra
Noun gender: <i>-n-</i> is retained before vowel endings; in Tosk, it changes to <i>-r-</i> .	pëni	përi
Noun declension: Turkish words	valija Alija	valiu Aliu
Personal pronouns	mue, mū até, atūne	mua até, atūre
Indefinite pronouns	taqe	i tere
Verb conjugation	ʒue jena kena ʒona	ʒua jemi kemi ʒomi
Past participle	ken, ngran, ʒan dašt	kene, ngrene , ʒene dășure
Non-finite verb forms	tue	duke/tuke
Prepositions	në ner më	ndë nder mbe

Examples from the **Arbëresh varieties of Albanian spoken in Greece and Italy** (Meyer, 1888):

The section in the book where the example is mentioned	Tosk	Arbëresh variety of Italy and Greece
Numerals	ġašteđiete	trezét
	teteđiete	katrezét

Subdialects

The author is not limited to the dialects of Albanian. He also gives forms from various local speech varieties:

First example

In addition to Tosk, Meyer (1888) examines the pronunciation of the vowel sequence /ie/ across different Gheg varieties. He observes that in some southern Gheg dialects—spoken in regions such as Elbasan, Kavajë, Durrës, Tiranë, and Krupjë—/ie/ is reduced to /i/, whereas in other Gheg varieties it retains the pronunciation /ie/. In contrast, the Tosk dialect consistently pronounces this sequence as /ié/. For example:

- *mbiét, mbíet, mbīl* — “to sow”
- *kiét, kíet, kíl* — “sky”

These examples illustrate Meyer’s attention to both phonetic variation and systematic patterns across dialects, highlighting the nuanced differences in pronunciation between Gheg and Tosk Albanian (Meyer, 1888).

Second example

In this example, in addition to Gheg and Tosk, there are also the speech varieties of Kavajë and Durrës, as well as that of Shkodër (Meyer, 1888):

The section in the book where the example is mentioned	Dialect	Speech variety
Numerals	ńi (Gheg)	ńine (Kavajë and Durrës)
	ńa (feminine gender, Gheg)	
	đüzét (Tosk)	katređiete (Shkodër)

Third example

The inflection of the verb “jam” (“to be”) varies across different speech varieties. In addition to Tosk, the author also provides an example from Përmet (Meyer, 1888):

The section in the book where the example is mentioned	Dialect	Speech variety
Past tense of the verb “jam” (to be)	<i>iš, ište</i> (Tosk)	<i>ištej</i> (Përmet)

Fourth example

These examples are taken from the glossary at the end of the book, where the author selects several words from the speech variety of Shkodër and translates them into Tosk (Meyer, 1888):

Speech variety of Shkodër	Tosk
dal'un	<i>Past participle of dal'</i>
ðam	ðom
massí	<i>(without translation into Tosk)</i>
nei	ndeña
šnoš	šendóš
üzmetšár	<i>(without translation into Tosk)</i>

Fifth example (Meyer, 1888)

The section in the book where the example is mentioned	Dialect	Speech variety
Noun declension Words with unstressed ending -o	Marko – Márkoja vito - vítoja	Márkua (Gjirokastër) vítua (Gjirokastër)
Personal pronouns	une tũ	una (Elbasan) tũne (another speech variety of Tosk)

In the second part of his *Abbreviated Albanian Grammar* (1888), Meyer presents texts in the main Albanian speech varieties. This section includes three fairy tales and wedding songs from Korçë, collected through Meyer's contacts with the folklorist Thimi Mitko. Additionally, passages from the Gospel are provided in both Tosk and Gheg dialects, as well as in the Arbëresh varieties spoken in Italy and Greece.

The book concludes with a glossary, which contains only words appearing in the texts. Meyer occasionally provides etymological explanations when the origin of a word seemed certain, stating:

"Where the etymology seemed certain to me, I have included it, both for inherited and for loanwords. I believed that I shouldn't mention here any words that would have required a more extensive explanation" (Meyer, 1888, p. 101).

For example:

- *buke* fem. — "Brot" (from Latin *bucca*, "mouth")
- *derǵem* — "bin krank"

This approach demonstrates Meyer's combined interest in linguistics and folklore,

as well as his careful methodological attention to etymology and dialectal variation. The texts and glossary not only provide practical material for learning Albanian but also document linguistic features across the primary dialects, reflecting historical and regional diversity.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of Gustav Meyer's *Abbreviated Albanian Grammar* (1888) demonstrates his systematic and comparative approach to the study of the Albanian language. By focusing primarily on morphological categories and integrating historical phonetics, Meyer provides a detailed account of the development of grammatical forms, often supported by etymological comparisons with other Indo-European languages. Although his syntactic observations occupy a more limited space, they nonetheless reflect an awareness of structural relationships within sentences. The inclusion of dialectal material, particularly northern Tosk, enhances the historical perspective of the grammar and provides a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic variation. Through this work, Meyer offered scholars a concise yet scientifically rigorous grammar, laying the foundations for the academic study of Albanian grammar and influencing its subsequent development. His dedication and methodical approach remain a benchmark in the field of Albanology.

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