



Research Article

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Linguistic Stratification and Toponymic Persistence in the Kolonjë–Leskovik Region of Southeastern Albania

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Abstract

This study investigates the toponymy of the Kolonjë–Leskovik region in southeastern Albania through an integrated linguistic and historical framework. Rather than treating place names as isolated etymological labels or simple reflections of historical succession, the analysis treats toponymy as a structured linguistic system shaped by historical input and stabilized through internal language mechanisms. The research examines three interrelated dimensions: the stratification of toponyms by linguistic origin (autochthonous Albanian, Slavic, Greek, Ottoman, and Aromanian), the relationship between semantic meaning and historical experience in the organization of space, and the linguistic mechanisms that enable place names to persist over time.

Using a qualitative, diachronic approach grounded in historical linguistics and Balkan onomastics, a corpus of macro- and micro-toponyms is analyzed through lexical classification, semantic interpretation, and formal linguistic examination. The findings indicate that toponymic persistence in the region depends less on etymological origin and more on the degree of morphological, syntactic, and phonological integration into Albanian, with semantic relevance further contributing to stability. The results highlight toponymy as a form of linguistic memory regulated by language structure, with implications for historical linguistics, onomastics, and cultural heritage research.

Keywords: Toponymy; Albanian linguistics; Historical linguistics; Linguistic stratification; Balkan onomastics.

1. Introduction

names occupy a distinctive position within language. Unlike most lexical items, which are subject to frequent replacement and semantic drift, toponyms tend to display a high degree of persistence over time. This relative stability has long made them a valuable source for historical linguistics, particularly in regions where written documentation

is limited or discontinuous (Hough, 2016; Kadmon, 2000). At the same time, toponyms are not immune to linguistic change. They are transmitted through everyday speech and are therefore shaped by the grammatical, phonological, and semantic systems of the languages that sustain them.

In historically layered regions, toponymy reflects the cumulative outcome of settlement patterns, language contact, religious organization, administrative governance, and economic practice. Balkan scholarship has repeatedly shown that place names preserve traces of successive linguistic strata, including pre-Slavic, Slavic, Greek, and Ottoman elements (Duridanov, 1996; Hamp, 2002; Joseph, 2013). The interaction between linguistic continuity and contact observed in the Kolonjë–Leskovik region reflects broader patterns of contact-induced adaptation documented in Balkan linguistic studies (Joseph, 2013). However, more recent work emphasizes that identifying etymological origin alone is insufficient. Toponyms must also be examined as linguistic forms that undergo adaptation, restructuring, and reinterpretation within dominant language systems (Cacciafoco, 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant for Albanian speaking territories, where strong linguistic continuity coexists with prolonged contact. Studies in Albanian historical linguistics and onomastics have shown that Albanian frequently functions as a structuring language, absorbing foreign lexical material while maintaining its own morphological and syntactic patterns (Çabej, 1975; Demiraj, 2010). As a result, non-autochthonous toponyms often survive not as foreign elements, but as forms fully integrated into Albanian linguistic usage. The Kolonjë–Leskovik region in southeastern Albania offers a suitable context for examining these processes. The region has experienced long-term autochthonous settlement alongside Slavic contact, Byzantine and postbyzantine ecclesiastical influence, Ottoman administration, and Aromanian pastoral mobility. Despite this historical complexity, its toponymy exhibits a notable degree of internal coherence. This raises questions not only about the origins of place names, but also about the mechanisms through which they are stabilized and maintained. This study approaches the toponymy of Kolonjë–Leskovik as a structured linguistic system in which historical input is mediated through language structure. Rather than treating place names as static residues of past stages, the analysis examines how they function as active lexical units shaped by grammatical integration and semantic relevance. The study is guided by three research questions, each corresponding directly to the analytical structure of the paper:

- RQ.1- What lexical layers can be identified in the toponymy of the Kolonjë–Leskovik region?*
- RQ.2- How do semantic meaning and symbolism reflect historical experience in regional toponymy?*
- RQ.3- Which linguistic mechanisms contribute to the formation and long-term stabilization of toponyms?*

By addressing these questions in an integrated manner, the study aims to move beyond descriptive inventories toward an explanatory account of how regional toponymic systems operate over time. The Kolonjë–Leskovik case thus contributes to broader discussions in historical linguistics, Balkan onomastics, and cultural heritage studies by illustrating how linguistic structure regulates historical diversity.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Toponymy as a Historical-Linguistic Source

In historical linguistics, toponymy occupies a methodological position distinct from that of other lexical domains. Unlike common nouns, which are continuously renewed through everyday communicative needs, place names are characterized by a high degree of diachronic stability. Once established, toponyms tend to persist even when their original semantic motivation becomes partially or fully opaque (Ainiala et al., 2012). This persistence allows place names to function as valuable sources for reconstructing earlier linguistic stages that may be otherwise undocumented. Within Balkan studies, toponymy has long been recognized as a crucial source for tracing pre-Slavic and pre-Roman linguistic strata. Scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that hydronyms, oronyms, and settlement names often preserve archaic lexical material that predates later population movements and language shifts (Duridanov, 1976; Hamp, 2002). In this context, toponyms have frequently been described metaphorically as “linguistic fossils,” embedded in the landscape and resistant to rapid replacement. However, while this metaphor highlights the conservative nature of place names, it risks oversimplification if interpreted as implying immobility. As several studies have emphasized, toponyms are not static relics but dynamic linguistic units that undergo phonetic adaptation, morphological restructuring, and semantic reinterpretation over time. Their value as historical evidence lies precisely in this tension between continuity and change. Toponyms preserve traces of earlier linguistic stages, yet they do so through forms that have been reshaped by subsequent linguistic systems.

From this perspective, toponymy functions not as a passive archive, but as a mediated historical record, shaped by the internal logic of the language that maintains it. This methodological insight is particularly relevant for regions such as southeastern Albania, where long-term linguistic continuity intersects with sustained historical contact.

2.2 Linguistic Stratification and Language Contact

The concept of linguistic stratification is central to the analysis of regional toponymy. Stratification refers to the coexistence of lexical layers originating from different historical periods and linguistic systems within a single toponymic landscape. Importantly, stratification does not imply symmetry among layers. In most cases, one linguistic layer functions as structurally dominant, while others occupy secondary or functionally restricted positions. In Balkan onomastics, stratification has been widely documented in regions characterized by complex settlement histories and prolonged contact. Yet more recent approaches emphasize that identifying layers is only the first analytical step. Equally important is understanding how these layers interact and which linguistic system regulates their integration. In Albanian-speaking territories, numerous studies have shown that the autochthonous Albanian layer provides the grammatical, phonological, and morphological framework into which foreign toponymic material is incorporated. Slavic, Greek, Ottoman Turkish, and Aromanian toponyms do not form parallel or autonomous systems. Instead, they are adapted to Albanian phonotactics, reshaped

through Albanian morphological patterns, and embedded in Albanian syntactic constructions. This asymmetrical integration is a key indicator of linguistic continuity. Rather than reflecting linguistic fragmentation, stratified toponymy in Albanian regions often reveals the regulatory capacity of Albanian as a dominant system. Language contact, in this sense, does not necessarily lead to replacement or hybridization, but to controlled incorporation. Such a perspective aligns with broader contact-linguistic models that emphasize dominance, normalization, and structural filtering over simple borrowing (Polinsky & Scontras, 2020).

2.3 Semantics, Symbolism, and Spatial Memory

Beyond their formal structure and historical origin, toponyms encode semantic and symbolic meanings that reflect how communities conceptualize space. Mountains, rivers, passes, and settlements are not named arbitrarily; they are categorized and evaluated through culturally meaningful criteria. Descriptive toponyms often reflect environmental perception, while religious and commemorative names encode symbolic and historical associations. Several scholars have emphasized that toponymy functions as a semiotic system, linking language, landscape, and collective memory (Young & Light, 2017; Vuolteenaho, 2009; Rose-Redwood et al., 2022). Religious toponyms sacralize space, transforming geographic locations into sites of ritual and moral significance. Narrative and commemorative names preserve collective interpretations of past events, even when the original historical context becomes blurred. In this sense, toponymy operates as a form of spatial memory, maintaining continuity not only of linguistic forms but also of cultural perception. The persistence of such names reflects patterns of repeated use and shared interpretation rather than mere historical inertia. Place names endure not because they are imposed, but because they remain meaningful within the lived experience of the community.

This semantic dimension is particularly important for understanding why certain toponyms survive across centuries while others disappear. Meaning grounded in everyday interaction with the landscape or in enduring symbolic frameworks proves more resilient than meaning tied exclusively to administrative or institutional contexts. Consequently, toponymy offers insight not only into linguistic history, but also into the cultural logic through which space is continuously reinterpreted.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and theoretically grounded research design, situated within the established traditions of historical linguistics, Albanian studies, and Balkan onomastics. The primary aim is not to measure naming practices quantitatively, but to understand how a regional toponymic system is structured, how it has developed over time, and how it continues to encode historical and cultural experience. The epistemological position of the research is diachronic and interpretive. Toponyms are approached as historically layered linguistic signs whose present-day forms are

the result of long-term interaction between language structure and socio-historical processes. Rather than treating place names as isolated lexical items, the study situates them within broader patterns of settlement, contact, and cultural continuity. A purely descriptive inventory of names is therefore deliberately avoided. Instead, the analysis seeks to establish explanatory connections between linguistic form, semantic motivation, and historical context. This approach allows the study to move beyond classification toward an interpretation of why certain names persist, how they are reshaped, and what they reveal about the linguistic dynamics of the region.

3.2 Corpus Delimitation and Selection Criteria

The corpus examined in this study consists of both macro- and micro-toponyms from the Kolonjë–Leskovik region. The selection reflects the internal diversity of the toponymic landscape and includes different functional categories of place names, such as:

- Settlement names (e.g., *Ersekë, Leskovik*), which represent the most stable and institutionally recognized layer;
- Orographic names (e.g., *Gramozi, Çuka e Peçit*), closely tied to landscape perception and orientation;
- Hydronyms (e.g., *Kroi i Bardhë*), which often preserve archaic lexical material;
- Culturally motivated micro-toponyms (e.g., *Guri i Nuses*), transmitted primarily through oral tradition and local usage.

Toponyms were selected based on three main criteria: historical attestation, current or remembered local usage, and semantic relevance for understanding regional naming practices. Whenever possible, priority was given to forms documented in historical sources or preserved in oral tradition. Particular attention was paid to retaining dialectal and non-standard variants. Such forms often preserve phonetic, morphological, or semantic features that are obscured in standardized versions and are therefore especially valuable for diachronic analysis. Rather than treating variation as noise, the study considers it a source of linguistic insight.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analytical process follows three interrelated stages, each corresponding to a specific research question and building progressively from identification to interpretation. The first stage consists of a lexical–etymological analysis, aimed at identifying the linguistic origin of each toponym and assigning it to a stratified layer (autochthonous Albanian, Slavic, Greek, Ottoman Turkish, or Aromanian). This stage focuses on phonological structure, morphological markers, and core lexical elements, drawing on comparative evidence from Albanian and neighboring languages. The goal is not merely to label origins, but to establish the historical conditions under which different elements entered the system. The second stage involves a semantic and symbolic analysis, examining how toponyms encode cultural meaning and historical experience. This includes the interpretation of descriptive names linked to the natural environment, religious

toponyms associated with sacred space, and narrative or commemorative names reflecting collective memory. At this stage, meaning is considered independently of origin, allowing the analysis to capture how names function within the lived experience of the community. The third stage consists of a structural linguistic analysis, focusing on the formal mechanisms through which toponyms are shaped and stabilized. Processes such as suffixation, compounding, genitival constructions, and phonetic adaptation are examined as evidence of the active role of Albanian in regulating the toponymic system. This stage highlights how linguistic structure mediates between historical input and long-term continuity. Taken together, these procedures allow the study to move systematically from classification to interpretation, and from description to explanation. By integrating etymology, semantics, and linguistic structure within a single framework, the methodology supports a holistic understanding of regional toponymy as a dynamic and regulated linguistic system.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Layers of Toponyms in the Kolonjë–Leskovik Region

4.1.1 The Autochthonous Albanian Layer as the Structural and Semantic Core of the Toponymic System

A coherent interpretation of the toponymy of the Kolonjë–Leskovik region can be approached by first examining the autochthonous Albanian layer, which provides the primary structural and semantic framework of the system. This layer is not defined solely by its frequency, but by its role in establishing the phonological, morphological, and semantic conventions through which spatial entities are named and interpreted. Other toponymic layers are encountered within this framework and exhibit varying degrees of adaptation to it. The Albanian layer is particularly visible in toponyms associated with basic spatial categories, including settlements, relief features, water sources, and orientation points. Settlement names such as *Ersekë* and *Leskovik* display a notable degree of diachronic continuity in both form and usage. Their morphological structure aligns with productive Albanian derivational patterns, and their sustained use across different historical periods suggests a stable position within the regional toponymic repertoire. In a similar way, descriptive formations such as *Qafa e Qarrit*, *Çuka e Peçit*, and *Kroi i Bardhë* illustrate how Albanian lexical resources are employed to encode salient features of the landscape through semantically transparent constructions that remain interpretable to contemporary speakers. The internal organization of this layer becomes clearer when Albanian toponyms are examined in relation to their functional and semantic domains. Grouping them according to these criteria allows for a more systematic assessment of how different categories of spatial reference are linguistically structured within the region, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Functional and Semantic Classification of Autochthonous Albanian Toponyms in the Kolonjë–Leskovik Region

Toponym Type	Representative Ex- amples	Dominant Sema- ntic Domain	Functional Role
Settlement names	<i>Ersekë, Leskovik</i>	Habitation, local- ization	Systemic anchoring
Orographic names (macro)	<i>Gramozi, Çuka e Peçit</i>	Relief, elevation	Spatial orientation
Orographic names (micro)	<i>Qafa e Qarrit, Qafa e Gurit</i>	Passes, crossings	Territorial navigation
Hydronyms (springs)	<i>Kroi i Bardhë, Burimi i Ftohtë</i>	Water quality, availability	Environmental refer- ence
Hydronyms (streams)	<i>Përroi i Thatë, Përroi i Gurit</i>	Flow, seasonal behavior	Ecological awareness
Phytotoponyms	<i>Thanë, Livadhi i Thatë</i>	Vegetation, land use	Environmental cat- egorization
Lithotoponyms	<i>Guri i Nuses, Gurë i Kuq</i>	Rock formations, symbolism	Cultural memory
Pastoral micro-top- onyms	<i>Stani i Vjetër, Kodra e Stanit</i>	Seasonal habita- tion	Economic practice
Descriptive spatial toponyms	<i>Fusha e Madhe, Lugina e Ngushtë</i>	Shape, dimension	Visual orientation

The distribution presented in Table 1 shows that the Albanian layer extends across all major categories of place naming in the Kolonjë–Leskovik region. Rather than being limited to a single functional domain, it operates as a unifying system through which settlements, relief features, water sources, vegetation, and micro-spatial references are linguistically organized. Although each category fulfills a distinct communicative role, they are structured through shared formal principles and semantically transparent patterns. Morphologically, Albanian toponyms display stable and productive formation mechanisms. Derivational elements such as the suffixes *-ë* and *-ik*, observable in settlement names like *Ersekë* and *Leskovik*, function as localization markers and facilitate integration into the Albanian lexical system. These mechanisms are also evident in descriptive and microtoponymic formations, indicating continuity in naming practices rather than mere preservation of inherited forms. Phonological consistency further supports the cohesion of the Albanian layer. Regular stress placement and stable vowel structures enhance recognizability and transmission. This internal stability becomes clearer when contrasted with non-autochthonous toponyms, which commonly undergo phonetic adjustment to conform to Albanian phonotactic norms. Such patterns suggest that Albanian has historically functioned as the primary regulating language of the regional toponymic system. Semantically, Albanian toponyms reflect close engagement with

both the natural environment and cultural interpretation of space. Hydronyms such as *Kroi i Bardhë* encode practical knowledge related to water quality and accessibility, while orographic names like *Çuka e Peçit* reflect features relevant to seasonal movement and land use. At the same time, micro-toponyms such as *Guri i Nuses* demonstrate how narrative and symbolic meaning are embedded in spatial naming, contributing to long-term continuity. From a historical perspective, the persistence of the Albanian layer is evident in its ability to endure successive periods of political and administrative change. New naming practices introduced in different historical contexts did not replace core Albanian toponyms but coexisted with them. Foreign lexical material entering the system was reshaped to align with Albanian structural norms, reinforcing overall coherence rather than fragmentation. Taken together, the evidence indicates that the autochthonous Albanian layer constitutes the structural and semantic core of the toponymic system in the Kolonjë–Leskovik region. Its central role is expressed through its capacity to organize diverse naming categories and integrate non-autochthonous elements within a unified linguistic framework, providing insight into both the historical depth and internal coherence of the regional toponymy.

4.1.2 Non-Autochthonous Layers

Whereas the autochthonous Albanian layer constitutes the internal structure of the toponymic system, the non-autochthonous layers reflect external historical agents that entered the linguistic landscape under specific sociopolitical conditions. These layers are best understood not as alternative naming systems, but as functionally motivated historical strata, each associated with a distinct mode of interaction with space. The decisive analytical question in this section is not *what these toponyms mean*, but why and under what historical circumstances they entered the system at all. Their distribution, scope, and degree of integration are therefore interpreted primarily in relation to historical function rather than semantic content. A systematic overview of these strata is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Non-Autochthonous Toponymic Layers in the Kolonjë–Leskovik Region

Layer	Historical Agent	Mode of Spatial Interaction	Representative Toponyms
Slavic	Early medieval rural populations	Settlement and environmental naming	<i>Borovë, Radat, Radomirë, Gërmenj</i>
Greek	Orthodox ecclesiastical institutions	Sacralization of space	<i>Shën Koll(ë), Shën Mëri, Shën Pjetër, Kisha e Shën Mëhillit</i>
Ottoman Turkish	State administration and local authority	Institutional and infrastructural marking	<i>Han i Çarshisë, Ura e Beut, Çezma e Pashës, Kulla e Beut</i>
Aromanian	Transhumant pastoral communities	Seasonal land use and micro-toponymy	<i>Livadhi i Vllahut, Stani i Vllahut</i>

The Slavic layer represents the earliest non-autochthonous stratum in the toponymy

of the Kolonjë–Leskovik region and is associated primarily with early medieval rural settlement and patterns of land use. Slavic-derived toponyms are predominantly environmental in orientation, referring to vegetation, terrain, and localized landscape features (*Borovë, Gërmenj*). Their most salient characteristic is their deep structural integration into Albanian. Phonologically and morphologically, these names conform fully to Albanian norms, indicating not a superficial or transient influence, but prolonged coexistence and early stabilization. The absence of institutional or administrative Slavic naming suggests that this layer reflects everyday interaction with the landscape rather than organized territorial control. The Greek layer entered the regional toponymic system through ecclesiastical and liturgical channels, rather than through sustained demographic presence. Greek-derived toponyms are concentrated almost exclusively in sacred contexts, marking churches, chapels, and ritual landmarks (*Shën Koll(ë), Shën Mëri*). Their function is symbolic rather than spatial in the everyday sense, serving to sacralize specific locations within the Orthodox religious landscape. Although their lexical origin is Greek, their grammatical structure reveals clear adaptation to Albanian syntax, particularly through genitive constructions. The persistence of this layer reflects the continuity of Orthodox institutional authority and religious practice, even as the surrounding linguistic environment remained Albanian. The Ottoman layer is functionally distinct from both the Slavic and Greek strata. Ottoman Turkish toponyms correspond primarily to administrative governance, infrastructure, and economic organization, rather than to settlement or environmental perception. Names such as *Han i Çarshisë* and *Ura e Beut* designate sites of circulation, authority, and fiscal control, linking to the spatial logic of the Ottoman administrative system. Their distribution is uneven and their survival limited, mirroring the decline of the institutions that generated them. Once their administrative function ceased, many of these names lost their relevance, underscoring the dependence of this layer on historically bounded forms of authority rather than on local communal use. The Aromanian (Vlach) layer reflects a markedly different mode of toponymic entry, rooted in pastoral mobility and seasonal land use rather than permanent settlement or institutional control. Historically, Aromanian-speaking communities in southeastern Albania were transhumant pastoralists, moving seasonally between lowland and highland pastures. This socio-economic organization is directly reflected in the toponymic record. Aromanian-derived names occur primarily in micro-toponymy and refer to grazing areas, temporary shelters, and pastoral landmarks (*Stani i Vllahut, Fusha e Vllahut*). These names were transmitted orally within localized communities and remained closely tied to specific patterns of movement and land use. Their limited spatial diffusion and relative vulnerability are consistent with the non-territorial and seasonal nature of Aromanian presence in the region.

4.2 Semantic Organization and Symbolic Encoding of Space

Having outlined the historical conditions through which non-autochthonous layers entered the toponymic system, the analysis now shifts to the semantic and symbolic functioning of place names, considered independently of their lexical origin. At this stage, the focus moves away from historical layering and toward the types of meaning encoded

by toponyms and their role in shaping spatial understanding. Semantic motivation, particularly environmental and functional meaning, has been shown to play a significant role in the durability of place names across different linguistic contexts (Blair, D., & Tent, J., 2021). From this perspective, the toponymy of the Kolonjë–Leskovik region operates as a system that organizes space through recurring semantic categories. Place names do more than identify locations; they classify them according to environmental features, cultural associations, and patterns of use, contributing to a shared framework of spatial orientation. The principal semantic categories identified in the corpus are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Semantic Functions of Toponyms in the Kolonjë–Leskovik Region

Semantic Function	Cognitive Role	Representative Toponyms
Environmental	Practical orientation and survival	<i>Kroi i Bardhë, Çuka e Peçit, Qafa e Qarrit</i>
Sacred	Moral and spiritual anchoring	<i>Shën Koll(ë), Qafa e Shën Pjetrit</i>
Narrative	Collective memory and story-telling	<i>Guri i Nuses, Ara e Mallkuar</i>
Institutional memory	Residual historical awareness	<i>Ura e Beut, Han i Çarshisë</i>

Environmental semantics constitute the most stable category. Toponyms such as *Kroi i Bardhë* or *Çuka e Peçit* encode evaluative knowledge about water quality, climate, and terrain. Their meaning remains transparent because it is reinforced by everyday interaction with the environment. Such names function as practical linguistic tools for orientation and decision-making. Sacred semantics operate differently. Names like *Shën Kollë* or *Qafa e Shën Pjetrit* assign religious significance to space, transforming geographical points into moral reference markers. Their persistence does not depend on environmental utility but on ritual repetition and symbolic authority. Sacred toponyms thus structure space vertically, linking the physical landscape to spiritual belief.

Narrative toponyms encode collective memory through legend, myth, or moral evaluation. *Guri i Nuses* exemplifies how place names can function as narrative anchors even when the original story becomes fragmented or partially forgotten. In such cases, the name itself preserves the narrative function, maintaining cultural continuity through linguistic form. Finally, institutional-memory toponyms preserve traces of historical authority and organization. Names like *Ura e Beut* survive not because they describe current function, but because they mark historically significant locations. Over time, their meaning shifts from practical reference to historical index. The interaction of these semantic categories demonstrates that toponymy in the Kolonjë–Leskovik region is not merely referential but interpretive. Place names encode what communities have found meaningful enough to name and remember. Through this process, space itself becomes a linguistic archive structured by significance rather than chronology.

4.3 Linguistic Mechanisms of Toponym Formation and Stabilization

The toponymic system of the Kolonjë–Leskovik region displays a high degree of formal convergence despite lexical diversity. Place names originating from different historical layers are shaped through a shared set of linguistic mechanisms, which allows them to function cohesively within the Albanian language. These mechanisms operate across layers and contribute directly to the durability of the regional toponymic system.

4.3.1 Morphological Reanalysis and Nominal Integration

One of the most consistent mechanisms supporting toponymic stability in the Kolonjë–Leskovik region is morphological reanalysis. Through this process, place names regardless of their lexical origin, are treated as Albanian nouns and integrated into the nominal system. This integration is visible in the regular marking of definiteness and case, which allows toponyms to function in discourse in the same way as common nouns. Locality and settlement names such as *Barmash*, *Kamnik*, and *Radat* illustrate this process clearly. These toponyms allow full case inflection (*në Kamnik, nga Radati, banorët e Barmashit*), indicating that speakers perceive them as grammatically transparent units rather than as opaque or exceptional forms. The ability to decline and modify these names supports their repeated use in everyday language and contributes to their long-term persistence. What is significant here is that morphological integration applies equally to inherited and non-autochthonous names. Stability, therefore, does not depend on origin but on whether a toponym can be reanalyzed as part of the Albanian nominal system. Names that achieve this integration remain active; those that do not are more vulnerable to restructuring or replacement.

4.3.2 Compounding and Descriptive Structuring of Space

Compounding represents a second major mechanism through which space is linguistically organized. In the Kolonjë–Leskovik region, many toponyms are formed as compound structures that combine nouns and adjectives or nouns linked through relational markers. These formations allow speakers to encode descriptive information directly into the name. Toponyms such as *Qafa e Gurit*, *Qafa e Qarrit*, and *Fusha e Vllahut* exemplify this pattern. Their internal structure follows ordinary Albanian word-formation rules, making the meaning of the place immediately accessible. A pass is identified through a salient physical feature (*gur, thanë*), while an open area is associated with a specific social or economic use (*Vllahut*). In pastoral micro-toponymy linked to Aromanian-speaking communities, compounding plays a particularly important role. It allows lexical material associated with transhumant practices to be embedded within Albanian structural frames, ensuring that such names remain interpretable and usable beyond the original community. In this way, compounding functions not only as a descriptive device but also as a mechanism of linguistic accommodation.

4.3.3 Syntactic Integration and Relational Encoding

Syntactic integration strengthens the durability of toponyms by allowing them to function fully within Albanian sentence structure. In the Kolonjë–Leskovik region, many place

names are organized as Albanian noun phrases, most commonly through genitival constructions that encode spatial, functional, or associative relations. Toponyms such as *Kodra e Kishës*, *Ura e Beut*, and *Ara e Madhe* illustrate this pattern clearly. In these forms, the relational marker (*e / i*) establishes a syntactic dependency that mirrors ordinary Albanian noun phrase structure. As a result, the toponym behaves grammatically like any other nominal unit and can be freely declined and embedded in discourse (*te Kodra e Kishës*, *pranë Urës së Beut*, *poshtë Arës së Madhe*). This syntactic flexibility is reinforced by derivational word-formation, particularly through adjectival agreement and nominal expansion. Forms such as *Çuka e Peçit*, *Përroi i Thatë*, or *Fusha e Madhe* rely on productive Albanian adjectival morphology (*-ë, -e*) to encode physical characteristics. The transparency of these constructions ensures that relational meaning remains accessible and that the toponym can be easily reproduced and adapted in speech. Toponyms that integrate into such syntactic frames are less likely to undergo reduction or reinterpretation, as their internal structure remains aligned with productive grammatical patterns. In contrast, names that resist syntactic embedding tend to lose transparency over time, making them more vulnerable to restructuring. Syntactic integration therefore plays a direct role in maintaining continuity within the toponymic system.

4.3.4 Phonological Adaptation and Normalization

Phonological adaptation constitutes an additional mechanism supporting the stabilization of toponyms, particularly those of non-Albanian origin. Lexical bases entering the system are reshaped to conform to Albanian phonotactic constraints, including vowel regularization, consonant sequencing, and stress placement. In the Kolonjë–Leskovik region, toponyms such as *Rehovë* and *Radanj* illustrate this process. The addition of the Albanian nominal suffix *-ë* in *Rehovë*, *Borovë* facilitates integration into the Albanian declensional system, while also aligning the word with preferred syllable structure. Similarly, *Radanj* conforms to Albanian stress patterns and plural, like nominal morphology, allowing it to function naturally in speech (*nga Radanji*, *në Radanj*). Phonological normalization often works in parallel with derivational morphology. Suffixes such as *-ë, -at, -ik*, and *-isht* are frequently employed to adapt lexical material to Albanian phonology while simultaneously marking category and locality. This dual function explains why phonological adaptation is rarely an isolated process; it is closely tied to word-formation mechanisms that enhance grammatical compatibility. Through such adaptations, toponyms become easier to articulate, recognize, and transmit orally. Importantly, this process does not erase historical origin but allows foreign, derived names to circulate efficiently within Albanian speech. Phonological conformity thus complements morphological and syntactic integration, contributing to the overall coherence and durability of the regional toponymic system.

4.3.5 Interaction of Mechanisms and Systemic Stability

Crucially, the mechanisms described above do not operate in isolation. Morphological reanalysis enables syntactic participation, compounding contributes semantic transparency, and phonological normalization supports both processes by ensuring articulatory and

perceptual ease. Toponyms that conform across multiple dimensions are more likely to function as stable lexical units. Across non-autochthonous layers, integration operates at the level of form and function rather than lexical origin. Pastoral, ecclesiastical, administrative, and environmental terms are structurally recoded within Albanian, resulting in a system where historical diversity does not produce parallel naming frameworks. Instead, diverse layers coexist within a unified grammatical structure. The principal mechanisms discussed in this section are summarized in Table 4, which presents representative examples of morphological reanalysis, compounding, syntactic integration, and phonological adaptation observed in the Kolonjë–Leskovik region.

Table 4. Linguistic Mechanisms of Toponym Formation and Stabilization in the Kolonjë–Leskovik Region

Mechanism	Representative Toponyms	Formal Realization	Structural / Functional Effect
Morphological reanalysis	<i>Barmash, Kamnik, Radat</i>	Reassignment to Albanian nominal categories; regular case inflection (<i>në Kamnik, nga Radati</i>)	Full integration into Albanian morphology; treatment as ordinary nouns
Compounding	<i>Qafa e Gurit, Fusha e Vllahut, Çuka e Peçit</i>	Noun + noun / noun + adjective constructions following Albanian word-formation rules	Semantic transparency; immediate interpretability of spatial features
Genitival syntax	<i>Kodra e Kishës, Ura e Beut, Ara e Madhe</i>	Albanian genitive markers (<i>i / e</i>) encoding relational dependency	Syntactic flexibility; embedding in discourse and relational encoding
Derivational morphology	<i>Borovë, Leskovik, Kamnik, Vitisht</i>	Productive suffixes (<i>-ë, -ik, -it</i>) marking locality and nominal stability	Grammatical normalization; alignment with Albanian lexical patterns
Phonological adaptation	<i>Rehovë, Radanj</i>	Stress realignment; vowel regularization; consonant cluster simplification	Phonotactic conformity; enhanced oral transmission

All in all, the evidence indicates that toponymic persistence in the Kolonjë–Leskovik region is supported by regular linguistic processes embedded within Albanian. Historical origin and semantic motivation remain relevant, but they operate within constraints imposed by linguistic structure. Toponymy thus emerges as an active domain of grammatical organization through which historical complexity is regulated and stabilized over time.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the Kolonjë–Leskovik toponymic system suggests that explaining place names solely through their historical origin is insufficient. While etymology remains important, it does not fully account for why certain names remain in active use while others gradually disappear. This points to the need for approaches that consider not only where names come from, but how they function within a living linguistic system. One implication concerns the way linguistic dominance operates in historically multilingual regions. The presence of Slavic, Greek, Ottoman, and Aromanian elements does not lead to fragmented naming systems. Instead, these elements coexist within a shared grammatical framework. This indicates that dominance is expressed less through replacement and more through regulation, as incoming material is reshaped to fit the structural patterns of the dominant language. The findings also suggest that toponymy does not preserve history in a neutral or comprehensive way. Some names associated with strong historical institutions decline once their practical relevance fades, while others linked to everyday activities continue to circulate. This highlights the role of ordinary language use in shaping what is remembered spatially. Place names endure not simply because they are historically meaningful, but because they remain usable and interpretable in daily communication. From a broader perspective, the Kolonjë–Leskovik case encourages comparison with other regions that share similar historical layers but display different outcomes. The variation observed across regions may depend less on the presence of particular historical influences and more on how effectively those influences are absorbed into local linguistic practice. This shifts attention toward integration processes rather than inventories of layers. These relationships are summarized schematically in Figure 1, which presents toponymic formation as a process linking historical input, linguistic shaping, and long-term outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the toponymy of the Kolonjë–Leskovik region through an integrated linguistic and historical lens. By bringing together stratified lexical analysis, semantic interpretation, and formal linguistic examination, the analysis has shown that regional toponymy cannot be understood as a simple catalogue of etymologies, nor as a passive reflection of historical succession. Rather, place names emerge as elements of a regulated linguistic system—one that is historically motivated, yet shaped and stabilized through internal mechanisms of language.

Within this system, the autochthonous Albanian layer occupies a central role. Its importance lies not only in numerical presence, but in its function as a structural framework through which other layers are interpreted and absorbed. Slavic, Greek, Ottoman, and Aromanian elements enter the toponymic landscape under distinct historical conditions, but their long-term survival depends on their ability to conform to Albanian morphological, syntactic, and phonological norms. Linguistic continuity in the region thus appears less as a matter of symbolic inheritance and more as an outcome of sustained structural

governance. The analysis also highlights the importance of semantic stabilization in shaping toponymic persistence. Names grounded in everyday interaction with the landscape, in shared symbolic references, or in local narrative traditions tend to display greater resilience than those tied primarily to administrative or institutional functions. This pattern suggests that toponymy preserves not history in its entirety, but selected aspects of historical experience that remain meaningful in daily linguistic practice. In this way, place names function as a form of linguistic memory shaped by use rather than by historical prominence alone. Finally, the formal mechanisms examined: suffixation, compounding, syntactic integration, and phonetic adaptation, emerge as enabling conditions for toponymic survival. These mechanisms do not operate independently of historical or semantic factors, but they allow place names to remain usable as active lexical units. Where such compatibility is achieved, toponyms tend to persist; where it is weakened, erosion or reinterpretation becomes more likely. Toponymic endurance, therefore, results from the convergence of historical motivation, semantic relevance, and formal linguistic integration. Taken together, the findings contribute to a view of toponymy as a dynamic interface between history and language. The Kolonjë–Leskovik case illustrates how linguistic systems can accommodate historical complexity while maintaining internal coherence, offering a perspective that may inform the study of toponymy in other historically layered regions.

7. Future Research Directions and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have implications that extend beyond academic analysis and are relevant to several groups involved in the management, documentation, and transmission of cultural and linguistic heritage.

For researchers in linguistics, onomastics, and Balkan studies, the analytical model developed here offers a transferable approach for examining historically layered toponymic systems. Applying the same framework to other regions can support comparative work that moves beyond inventories of name origins and focuses instead on mechanisms of integration and stability. This perspective may also contribute to interdisciplinary collaboration with historians, geographers, and anthropologists working on spatial memory and regional identity.

For cultural heritage institutions and policy makers, including national heritage agencies and local cultural offices, the findings suggest a need to differentiate between place names that function as living linguistic heritage and those that survive primarily in archival records. Toponyms that remain structurally integrated and actively used in everyday language represent a form of intangible cultural heritage that merits documentation and protection through community-based initiatives (UNESCO, 2003). Names that have lost functional relevance may require preservation through mapping, archival recording, or scholarly documentation rather than revival in active use. For local authorities and municipal planners, an awareness of toponymic integration has practical relevance for naming policies, signage, and administrative standardization. Recognizing the linguistic mechanisms that support stability can help avoid the introduction of names

that are structurally incompatible with local usage, thereby reducing confusion and supporting continuity in place naming practices. In educational contexts, particularly in regional history and language education, the approach outlined in this study offers a way to connect linguistic structure with historical experience. Teaching place names as grammatically structured expressions of local history can strengthen awareness of regional continuity and foster engagement with the linguistic landscape among younger generations. Finally, for local communities, especially in regions characterized by historical multilingualism, the findings underscore the role of everyday language use in preserving place names. Toponymic continuity is not maintained solely through official recognition but through repeated use within speech and practice. Community, based documentation projects and oral history initiatives, can therefore play a crucial role in sustaining this aspect of linguistic heritage.

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