

DIALECTAL AND BALKAN INTERFERENCE IN THE PRESERVATION AND LOSS OF THE NEUTER GENDER IN ALBANIAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This study examines the historical evolution of the neuter gender in Albanian through a comparative analysis of two important sources: Karl Reinhold's *Pelasgian Nights* and Thimi Mitko's *Albanian–Greek, Greek–Albanian Dictionary*. The aim of the research is to identify the degree of preservation and the processes of disintegration of the neuter gender within the Albanian grammatical system. The analysis focuses on three groups of nouns: non-derived neuter nouns, neuter nouns derived from adjectives, and neuter nouns derived from verbs.

The results show that Reinhold's material reflects a conservative stage of the gender system, where the neuter category appears widely preserved, especially in verbal nouns. In contrast, the lexicographic material of Thimi Mitko demonstrates a more advanced stage of disintegration, characterised by fluctuations and the gradual integration of neuter nouns into masculine and feminine categories.

The comparison between the two sources highlights different trajectories in the historical development of the Albanian gender system and demonstrates the influence of dialectal factors and Balkan language contact in the gradual reduction of the neuter gender.

Keywords: *neuter gender, historical lexicography, Karl Reinhold, Thimi Mitko, historical morphology of Albanian, Arvanite dialects.*

1. Introduction

Neuter gender is perhaps the most controversial grammatical category of Albanian historical morphology. While the masculine and feminine genders have survived as productive grammatical categories with structurally stable declension paradigms, the neuter gender has experienced centuries of gradual reduction and dissolution. Researchers emphasize that the paradigm of neuter gender nouns appears to be deficient, because its paradigmatic differences with other genders appear only in the nominative and accusative cases, and even in these cases only in the accusative form, while in other cases, nouns of this gender have been integrated over time into the masculine gender, which has favored their complete disintegration and only the definite article *-te* has been a preserving factor of this gender¹⁹⁸. In Standard Albanian, neuter exists only in a small and largely closed class of nouns, mostly denominal nouns derived from adjectives or verbal stems.

¹⁹⁸ Kolec Topalli, *Gramatikë historike e gjuhës shqipe*. Qendra e Studimeve Albanologjike, Instituti i Gjuhësisë dhe i Letërsisë. Tiranë: Botimet Albanologjike, 2011, f. 217.

Language historians have observed for centuries that the neuter nominal declension paradigm was structurally weak. To quote Albanian historical grammarians themselves, “the neuter paradigm is distinct from the two others only in the nominative and accusative, while in the remaining cases it collapses with the masculine paradigm”. Consequently, this paradigm gradually fell into disuse over the centuries.

Nonetheless, neuter did not disappear in uniform stages throughout all Albanian dialects and historic periods. Language varieties spoken by Albanian communities in relative isolation have developed conservative grammatical traits, while those that experienced intensive language contact lost more grammatical distinctions. In this paper, we examine the development of neuter gender, comparing data from two sources: one that represents a continuum spoken by Albanian communities in Greece – *Pelasgian Nights* written by Karl Reinhold – and data from a bilingual Albanian–Greek dictionary compiled by Thimi Mitko during the Albanian National Renaissance. We aim to establish whether the above two language varieties have managed to preserve neuter gender to varying degrees and what mechanisms favoured neuter reduction in Albanian.

2. Methodology

The method consists of morphological and word-formation analysis of neuter nouns from the two texts.

Lexical material is divided into three main groups:

1. un-derived neuter nouns: inherited vocabulary which historically belonged to the neuter gender;

2. neuter nouns derived from adjectives. The majority of neuter nouns of this group are derived by substantivisation of adjectives.

3. neuter nouns derived from verbs. These are primarily participial or deverbal nouns.

All instances were listed and examined to determine:

- their frequency in each source;
- their morphology;
- whether they have a stable gender assignment or if there is variation;
- whether there are competing forms of masculine or feminine gender.

Keeping in mind similarities between languages of the Balkan area, conclusions also take into consideration the importance of language contact, in particular Greek, in the formation of the Albanian gender system.

3. The neuter gender in Karl Reinhold’s *Pelasgian Nights*

3.1. Linguistic context of the work

Karl Reinhold’s collection represents an important linguistic source for the study of the Arvanite dialects spoken in Greece. The material was recorded between 1850 and 1860 and reflects spoken language, which often preserves conservative linguistic features.

Because the lexicon was collected directly from oral discourse, the material displays certain phonetic and transcriptional inconsistencies. Nevertheless, the corpus offers valuable evidence regarding the grammatical structure of the dialects in which it was recorded.

To examine the features of the neuter gender in this work¹⁹⁹, we have used and compared both the original edition of the work and the edition transcribed and explained by Adrian Klosi in 2005²⁰⁰. The publication concerns the dialects of the Arvanites of Greece and includes linguistic and folklore material. Words and phraseologies were recorded quite early and only

¹⁹⁹Karl Heinrich Theodor Reinhold, *Noctes Pelasgicae vel symbolae ad cognoscendas dialectos graeciae pelasgicas* by Karl Reinhold -Athens: Typis Sophoclis Garbola, 1855.

²⁰⁰Adrian Klosi, *Netët Pellazgjike të Kral Reinholdit: tekste të vjetra të Greqisë*, mbledhur nga Karl Reinhold 1850-1860. Tiranë: Botime K&B, 2005.

published after 150 years. As a result, phonetic and transcription inaccuracies are understandable, partly due to the complex system of graphemes.

This is also pointed out by Dhori Q. Qirjazi, who writes that despite the meticulous and persistent work of Ardian Klos and the care taken to transcribe Karl Reinhold's manuscripts, inaccuracies and misreadings are noted that can lead to unsupported interpretations in some cases²⁰¹.

The folklore and linguistic material of Karl Reinhold's work is collected from spoken language, which is important for our work, because it is related to conservative elements in the lexicon, but, on the other hand, this creates space for, in many cases, the same word to appear in different phonetic or grammatical variants depending on the context in which it was collected and how it was heard and then transcribed. However, Karl Reinhold's lexicon appears to be quite related to neuter nouns. The linguistic material collected by Karl Reinhold represents a clearly conservative stage of Albanian, preserved in the Arvanite dialects of Greece. From the classification we have made of the lexical material, a considerable number of non-derived neuter nouns can be noted.

A total of approximately 110 neuter nouns were identified in Reinhold's material, indicating a relatively strong preservation of the category.

3.2. Non-derived neuter nouns

This group includes 28 nouns, mainly names of objects or body parts. Most of these forms also occur in ancient Albanian writers, which is an indication of a high morphological stability. While there are nouns that are attested which do not inflect as neuter in any other old author, shifts towards the other genders continue only infrequently and inconsistently.

3.3. Neuter nouns derived from adjectives

11 cases were identified in this category, which is much rarer. The common nouns confirm an early decade of naming model in which the two adjectives are poor forms of the respective nouns. Again, competition with feminine nouns is only seen in very few instances, indicating the traditional character of this dialect.

3.4. Neuter nouns derived from verbs

Verb-derived nouns (Dominant category) This category constitutes the main pillar of Reinhold's neuter preservation, accounting for about 65% of all recorded forms.

Key features include:

The widespread use of participial neuters or participial adjective neuters.

The preservation of old archaic prefixes such as n-, r-, and m- (e.g., *r'barturitë*), elements that attest to the continuity of old word-formation patterns.

Table 1: Typology and distribution of neuter nouns in Karl Reinhold

<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency (Approx.)</i>	<i>Main features</i>	<i>Representative Examples</i>
Non-derived neuter nouns	28 cases (25%)	<i>High durability, mainly nouns of objects or body parts.</i>	<i>ballëtë, barktë, krietë, ujët, klumështitë, dhjamtë, drithëtë ...</i>

²⁰¹ Dhori Q. Qirjazi, "Netët pellazgjike të Karl Reinholdit: tekste të vjetra shqipe të Greqisë: 1850-1860 mbledhur nga Karl Reinhold"; transkriptuar e shpjeguar nga Ardian Klosi, në: *ALBANOHELLENIKA*, Revistë e studimeve filologjike / A journal of philological studies: Athinë, Tiranë, 2008, Years (IV-X), Number 3, f. 185-188.

Neuter nouns derived from adjectives	11 cases (10%)	<i>Preservation of the old model; little competition with the feminine</i>	<i>të butët, të ftohëtitë, të gjallëtë</i>
Neuter nouns derived from verbs	~71 cases (65%)	<i>Dominant category; presence of prefixes n-, r-, m-</i>	<i>t'ecuritë, të dhëmburitë, të r'barturitë</i>

4. The neuter gender in Thimi Mitko's Dictionary

4.1 Lexicographic and historical context

Thimi Mitko's bilingual dictionary is considered a major contribution to Albanian lexicography of the National Renaissance. Jorgo Bullo said the National Renaissance thinking would have been 'a dream resting in the closet,' "if it has not become a problem of deed and during the 19th century has not become a spirit and the direction of an era". Thimi Mitko was the leading figure of the deed and he "raises from the oblivion, throws the century-old dust of the forgotten thing, lowers it to its beginnings, to the richness of the folk traditions, language and spiritual heritage of a nation"²⁰². His followers that follow the life and work of Thimi Mitko say Mitko worked on the field of the language, in order to get more clarification to this language's treasure. Among other things, he stated his opinion on a general Albanian literary language that will unify words from all parts, the dialectal wealth from all over, even from the Italian Arbresh²⁰³. Given the importance and size of this figure in the period of the National Renaissance, our paper includes one of Thimi Mitko's representative works in the lexicographic field, such as "Albanian-Greek, Greek-Albanian Dictionary & Other Lexicographic Aids", a publication of the Academy of Sciences of Albania, prepared for publication by Dhori Q. Qirjazi²⁰⁴.

The subject matter of this work is relevant in that within the lexicographical fund there is a portion of the folklore material and language both written and spoken in the various Albanian dialect areas. To these advantages the Dictionary adds a couple of particularities of the language. Perhaps one of the most distinctive and widely cited examples in the Dictionary is the neuter gender, but we have also included certain oddities which call for special note.

The wonder here is that dictionary is bilingual, Albanian-Greek and Greek-Albanian; therefore we have examined the word in Albanian in the two different cases where we also have underlined that there is gender neutral, make a comparison in the definitions or the forms in the different cases and make also notice that neuter gender persists stably. However, as the author of the work writes, in the Greek-Albanian part, it is very often by paraphrasing of the words that we get an explanation, and this makes us get acquainted with the wealth of the Albanian vocabulary. We can identify there the attempt of Thimi Mitko to form an Albanian common language; the fact is, he realised it almost in time by deciding to gather in his dictionary every form existing in oral and written culture.²⁰⁵

In Mitko, the process of neuter dissolution is palpable through two phenomena: complete integration into other genders and morphological uncertainty (fluctuation). Many nouns that were neuter in older authors appear here as masculine (e.g. milk, meat, blood).

²⁰²Jorgo Bullo, "Vepra e Thimit Mitkos për rindërtimin e identitetit kombëtar" në: *Konferencë Shkencore Ndërkombëtare kushtuar jetës dhe veprës së Thimi Mitkos në 195-vjetorin e lindjes*. Korçë: Universiteti "Fan S. Noli" Korçë, Fakulteti i Edukimit dhe Filologjisë, Bashkia e Korçës, 2015, f. 9-14.

²⁰³Qemal Haxhihasani, *Thimi Mitko, Vepra*. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, Instituti i Kulturës Popullore, 1981, f. 51.

²⁰⁴Thimi Mitko, *Fjalëtore Shqip-Gërqisht, Gërqisht-Shqip & Ndhimesa të tjera leksikografike*, (Përgatitur për botim dhe studim hyrës nga Dhori Q. Qirjazi). Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2012.

²⁰⁵Dhori Q. Qirjazi, "Studim hyrës-Rrugëtimi dhe vlera e veprës leksikografike të Th. Mitkos" në: *Thimi Mitko, Fjalëtore Shqip-Gërqisht, Gërqisht-Shqip & Ndhimesa të tjera leksikografike*, (Përgatitur për botim dhe studim hyrës nga Dhori Q. Qirjazi). Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2012, f. 7-27.

4.2. Non-derived neuter nouns: Lexical integration

Mitko's dictionary cuts this category down a lot. You mostly find nouns for objects or body parts here, and their gender isn't stable—they flip back and forth. Some still show up as neuter forms, while others have shifted all the way to masculine. This back-and-forth is basically the first sign that this category is starting to fall apart in the main vocabulary.

4.3. Adjectival neuters: Morphological competition

Even though there are quite a few neuter nouns that come from adjectives, they just don't carry much grammatical weight anymore. The author often offers alternatives instead—sometimes switching the root word to either masculine or feminine, or using abstract nouns made with suffixes. All this swapping shows a clear shift: the neuter's meaning and function are slowly getting replaced by the more consistent masculine and feminine forms.

There are plenty of neuter nouns that come from adjectives, but their role in the language isn't as strong as it used to be. The author often swaps out the neuter for other forms—sometimes changing the gender to masculine or feminine, other times using suffixes to create abstract nouns. This keeps happening and suggests that the neuter is losing ground. More and more, its meaning gets replaced by the sturdier masculine or feminine forms.

4.4. Verbal neuters: Structural duality

Among word-formation patterns, nouns derived from verbs are the most varied. In grammar, these nouns often appear alongside masculine and feminine forms that are created with suffixes. This widespread pairing of genders signals the late stages of neuter fading away, pointing to a shift toward a simpler two-gender system.

Table 2: Morphological competition and the transition of nouns from neuter gender to Thimi Mitko

<i>Noun category</i>	<i>Neutral (Conservative) Form</i>	<i>Competitive Form (M/F/Suffix)</i>	<i>Nature of change / Fluctuation</i>
<i>Non-derived neuter nouns</i>	ujët, mishtë, gjakët	uji, mishí, gjaku (M)	Full integration into the masculine gender.
<i>Adjectival neuters</i>	të ftohtëtë	i ftohti (M) / të ftohtë (shumës)	Transition to the masculine noun or plural paradigm.
<i>Adjectival neuters</i>	të dëréjtëtë	dëréjtëría (F)	Abstract noun substitution through suffixation -í/-ía.
<i>Verbal neuters</i>	të ngrënëtë	e ngrëna (F)	Transition to the feminine gender (often with a change of article).
<i>Verbal neuters</i>	të thënëtë	thënía (F)	Transition to action noun with suffix <i>-je</i> or <i>-im</i> .

5. Comparative analysis

The comparison between the two sources highlights a clear difference in the stability of the neuter category.

Table 3: Distribution of neuter nouns in the two sources

<i>Category</i>	<i>Reinhold</i>	<i>Mitko</i>
<i>Non-derived nouns</i>	28	very limited
<i>Derived from adjectives</i>	11	numerous but unstable
<i>Derived from verbs</i>	dominant group	frequent but competing

Total neuter forms

| ~110

significantly reduced

Table 4: Degree of stability of the neuter gender

Source	Stability of neuter	Linguistic stage
Reinhold	High	conservative dialect stage
Mitko	Low	advanced disintegration

Table 5: Main mechanisms of neuter loss

Mechanism	Example type
Masculinisation	<i>lesh-i, mish-i</i>
Feminine abstraction	<i>mirësia, dobësia</i>
Lexical replacement	<i>të qeshurit</i> → <i>gazëtia</i>
Morphological competition	neuter vs. suffixed nouns

The data clearly demonstrate that the neuter gender did not disappear uniformly. Instead, it followed different trajectories depending on dialectal conditions and sociolinguistic context.

Figure 1. Comparative distribution of neuter types in Reinhold and Mitko

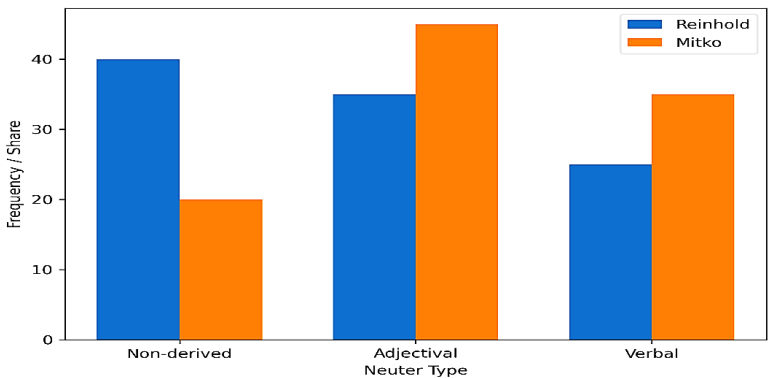
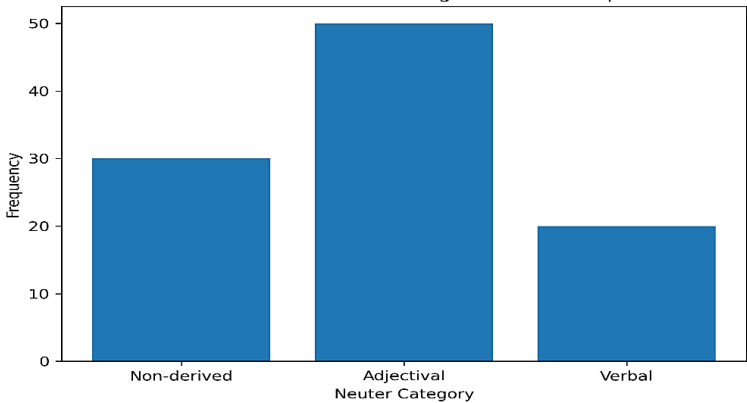


Figure 2. Distribution of neuter categories in the analysed corpus.



6. Discussion

The comparison of Reinhold's and Mitko's corpora shows that the neuter gender in Albanian evolved in an uneven way due to competing language influences. Three key factors stand out:

Dialectal Isolation and Conservatism: The Arvanite dialects noted by Reinhold show a high level of grammatical "fossilization." Their separation from the main linguistic centers in Albania helped preserve old structures, such as the active verbal neuter and ancient prefixes. These features had already begun to fade in other dialects.

Balkan Convergence and Simplification: The simplification of the gender system in Mitko's work fits with wider trends in the Balkan Sprachbund. Contact with Greek and Turkish likely sped up the reduction of morphological complexity, pushing Albanian toward a simpler two-gender system (masculine/feminine).

Lexical Competition and Functional Weakening: The emergence of new ways to create words, like forming abstract feminine nouns with suffixes, led to a functional "rivalry" with the neuter. This competition slowly pushed the neuter gender aside, limiting it to specific word areas before its eventual decline.

7. Conclusions

This study shows that the decline of the neuter gender in Albanian followed different paths based on dialect and environmental factors. Our findings lead to these conclusions:

Stability vs. Transition: Karl Reinhold's Pelasgian Nights shows a stable phase, where the neuter remains strong, especially among verbal nouns that make up over 75% of the recorded forms. In contrast, Thimi Mitko's dictionary captures a time of active decline, where systematic gender shifts and the use of paired forms (M/F) indicate a move toward a simpler system.

The role of context: The conservative nature of the Arvanite oral lexicon highlights the importance of dialect data in reconstructive linguistics. Meanwhile, Mitko's material reflects an open linguistic environment where Balkan influences contributed to the loss of the neuter. *Non-linear evolution:* The evidence suggests that the loss of the neuter was not a straight or synchronized event across all Albanian dialects. Instead, it was a multi-speed process affected by isolation, contact, and internal morphological pressure.

In summary, the differences between these two sources provide important evidence for the morphosyntactic history of Albanian. They support the idea that the Balkan linguistic area played a key role in gender reduction, while dialectal pockets served as essential sources for ancient Indo-European features.

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