

Oral Histories and the Dialectal Research in Albania

Daniela-Carmen Stoica dstoica76@gmail.com

Anyla Saraçi animaxhe@yahoo.com

"Fan S. Noli" University of Korçë, Albania

The present article aims at discussing the advantages but also limitations of oral histories (both in the form of video recordings and in the form of interviews), as the sociolinguists' main tools for linguistic and dialectal research, as well as for the historians to document various historical moments in Albania. The article draws mainly on the empirical experience of the two authors, who have performed their research activity mainly in Korce area, situated in South-Eastern Albania, an area of complex linguistic contacts (Albanian-Slavic Macedonian-Greek), where the Tosk dialect of the Albanian language and its various speeches also come in contact with the Aromanian dialect, particularly with its Farsherot speech (Nevaci 2011). During their field research, often accompanied by their students, the two experienced researchers managed to record an important number of oral histories (approximately 5 hours each) in various speeches of the Tosk and Aromanian dialects, speeches which are in danger of becoming extinct because of the latest linguistic homogenization of the Albanian dialects into the standard variant (Shkurtaj 1999), on the one hand and due to the cultural and linguistic assimilation of the Aromanians living in Albania, on the other hand (Capidan 1943). More than that, the oral histories collected represent two important data bases not only for linguistic and dialectal research in this particular geographic area of Albania, but they may become valuable data for historians and social scientists since they focus on particular events from the history of Albania, such as the creation of the Albanian modern state, the Second World War and the liberation from the Germans, the instauration of the Communist regime in Albania and its consequences, the transition from the traditional nomad lifestyle to the sedentary one within the borders of the Albanian state of the Aromanians during the Communist regime etc. By focusing on the speakers' unique life experiences, these oral histories become an opportunity for all these recorded people who have been "hidden from history" to have their voices heard.

Last but not least, oral histories are looked upon as narratives, which according to many authors (Schiffrin, 1996; De Fina, 2003, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2007) represent an important locus for the articulation of identities because they give the tellers the opportunity to present themselves as actors in social worlds, while at the same time negotiating their present self with other interactants. The case of the Aromanians is a particular one because, even though they are among the oldest ethnic groups in the Balkans, speaking a Romance idiom, they have never managed to form a state. In addition, their traditional nomad lifestyle contributed to a large extent to their spread in the Balkans. Our method of research combines the sociolinguistic interview with the ethnographic qualitative research, focusing mainly on *indexicality* (especially linguistic - e.g. sounds, accents, words, expressions that may be associated with aspects of the larger context when they evoke specific traits, ideas, activities and properties that may be seen as typical of certain social identities), *local occasioning* (i.e. identity seen as a communicative process taking place within concrete social contexts and practices, paying attention to details of local talk in order to understand how identities are brought about and negotiated), *positioning* and *dialogism* as relational processes (i.e. identity seen as a socially grounded process that involves a continuous confrontation of the self with others- Wilson, 1990; De Fina, 1995; Van Dijk, 2010).

Our study will show that certain phonetical traits and styles of speaking in the case of the Albanians living in Devoll area and Aromanians from Korce become symbolically associated with complex systems of meaning such as ideologies, social representations about group membership, social roles and attributes, presuppositions about all aspects of social reality, individual and collective stances, practices and organization structures. From the collected material, it appears that in the case of the Aromanians living in Korce area, the frequency of pronouncing the apical *r* with several vibrations is more frequent with men, who, according to Capidan (1943: 78-79), have lost their uvular *r*, due to their social mobility, to their bilingualism or even trilingualism. Uvular *r* appears only in the speech of the Aromanian women, especially from rural areas, a sound which changes the usual sound of the nearby vowels, a situation which we are going to exemplify. On the other hand, in the case of the Devoll speech of the Tosk dialect, the oral histories belonging to speakers around 80 years old have highlighted phonetical traits, such as the use of the consonant groups [kl], [gl], as in *klishë* (>kishë 'church'), *glu* (>gju 'knee'), present in the old Albanian¹ and today in the Arberesh speeches of Italy. Thus, these speakers are considered to be the only ones left still preserving the Devoll speech, while the oral histories of the other age groups present more phonetical characteristics of the standard variant.

¹ the Albanian language before its separation into the two main dialects, Geg and Tosk, around the 15th century.

At the lexical level, our analysis has dealt mainly with the borrowings and code-switching phenomena, using several linguistic criteria (i.e. frequency, adaptation and attestation in dictionaries), so that we may conclude on the degree of influence of the Tosk dialect over the Aromanian one, on the one hand, and of the standard Albanian on the Devoll speech, on the other hand. In addition, we have taken into account the gender, age, education level of the Albanian and Aromanian informants in order to see whether there are variations in this respect. In the case of Aromanian, the inserted language is Albanian (i.e. the Tosk dialect spoken in South-Eastern Albania) and the analysis is limited to the dialect spoken by the Aromanians from Korce area, who live together with the Albanian majority. They are predominantly bilingual, using Aromanian mostly at home, in the family environment and within the community, and Albanian, both in the community and official communication. Younger generations tend to abandon their mother tongue and use Albanian in verbal interactions both within the family and the Aromanian community, motivated by the strong influence of the Albanian language on the Aromanian children and youths during the schooling process.

The number of the informants was 60 (30 Albanians and 30 Aromanians), males and females in a balanced number, of various ages and having various education levels. The age groups we identified are the following: 60 to 80, retired, most of them used to work on farms especially during the communist regime, playing various professional roles within the agricultural cooperatives of production. Before the instauration of this regime in Albania, the Aromanian informants belonging to this age group used to have a largely nomadic lifestyle, characterized by transhumance (i.e. in summertime they used to live high up in the mountains, where they were leading their flocks of sheep, and winter they used to lead them near the sea, where they would build shelters for them), many of them being without formal education or having only the basic level. The other groups identified were adults aged 30 to 50, professionally active, having graduated high school or university, working in the public or private sector, and children aged 7 to 15, all attending public schools where standard Albanian, quite similar to the Tosk dialect, is the main language of instruction.

An important part of each research has been the transcription of the interviews, partly recorded by video camera and partly by Dictaphones. For the Tosk dialect, the system of transcription used was IPA, following the tradition of the Albanian dialectological school which started in the 1950's, also present in *The Dialectological Atlas of the Albanian Language* (Volume I, II 2007, 2008), whereas for the Aromanian dialect, the system was the one used by the Romanian school of linguistics and dialectology, particularly by the *Romanian Linguistic Atlas* taken over, with a few additions, from the collaborators to the *New Romanian Linguistic Atlas by Regions* and to the *Romanian Phonogramic Archive*. In the latter case, many symbols are accompanied by diacritical signs in order to reflect specific characteristics of certain vowels (degree of openness, centrality, intensity, length etc.) and consonants (palatalization, nasality etc.), which unfortunately could not be transferred into ELAN, the linguistic annotator, which the researcher attempted to use in order to further analyze the linguistic corpora collected, especially quantitatively. The transcription of diphthongs, whose presence was massive and specific for both speeches, remained a challenge in both cases.

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