

Brian D. JOSEPH/Ohio State University

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE ALBANIAN *STËR*- PREFIX

Newmark (1998: 785) characterizes Albanian *stër*-, which he refers to as a “formative prefix”, in two ways. First, he says that it “expresses semantic enlargement or excess”, for which the glosses “ultra-, super-, over-” are given; it is exemplified by *stër-gjatë* ‘too long/tall’ and *stër-bujar* ‘too generous’. Second, he notes that it occurs “with kinship terms”, for which the gloss ‘great-’ is given; examples of that use include *stër-gjysh* ‘great-grandfather’,¹ *stër-gjyshe* ‘great-grandmother’, *stër-nip* ‘great-grandson; great-nephew’, and *stër-mbes* ‘great-granddaughter’.

This prefix has a number of interesting properties. For instance, it can be iterated to indicate increased generational distance, e.g. *stër-stër-gjysh* ‘great-great-grandfather’.² Also, there is an intensifying use of *stër*- with verbs, as in *stër-holloj* ‘go into excessive detail’ (cf. *holloj* ‘make thin; clarify; explain in detail’) or *stër-nxeh* ‘overheat; make extremely hot’ (cf. *nxeh* ‘heat, make hot’). Further, it should be noted that while the form of prefix now is *stër*-, earlier, as reported, e.g., in Meyer 1891, it was *shtër*-, a fact taken up again below.

A further point of interest regarding *stër*- is that its range of uses more or less accords with a prefix *stră*- that occurs in Romanian. In particular, *stră*- occurs in the kinship use in forms such as *stră-bun(ic)* ‘ancestor; great-grandfather’ (cf. *bun* ‘grandfather’), where it can iterate, as in *stră-stră-bunic* ‘great-great-grandfather’. Moreover, this prefix can be used in an intensifying function with verbs, as in *a stră-luci* ‘to shine very brightly’. Furthermore, there are some instances in both languages where the use of the verbal prefix yields forms with little or no evidence of the ‘excessive’ meaning, e.g. Albanian *stër-formoj* ‘transform’ (cf. *formoj* ‘form, train’), Romanian *stră-bate*- ‘to go through’ (cf. *a bate* ‘to hit, beat’), *stră-muta* ‘change places’ (cf. *a muta* ‘change’).

Still, there are as well some differences, largely of degree, between the Albanian and the Romanian prefix. For one thing, there appears to be greater productivity in Albanian for the kin-term use than in Romanian; for instance, it is found with ‘grandfather’, ‘grandmother’, ‘nephew’, ‘granddaughter’ in Albanian but not in Romanian. On the other hand, the intensifying function shows differences, being found in Romanian with adjectives as well as verbs, as in *stră-vechi* ‘very old’. Additionally, there appear to be more verbs in Romanian than in Albanian in which the prefix does not have a clear intensifying value, *stërformoj* is the only one cited in Newmark 1998). Finally, the nonintensive use is found with nouns in Romanian, but not in Albanian, as shown by *stră-moš* ‘ancestor’, with the same meaning as *moş* ‘ancestor’.

¹ For one of my Albanian-speaking consultants, *stër-gjysh* meant ‘great-great-grandfather’.

² This meant ‘great-great-great-grandfather’ for the consultant mentioned in footnote 1.

This prefix is not treated in most of the standard etymological sources on Albanian, being absent from Çabej 2006, Demiraj 1997, and Huld 1984, for instance. Only Meyer 1891 mentions it, in the form *stër-*, as noted above, and he derives it from Latin *extra*.

The presence of such similar forms and functions for this prefix in both Albanian and Romanian raises a number of questions beyond just its etymology. Given the parallels, for instance, it may well be that Albanian *stër-* and Romanian *stră-* represent an early feature of Balkan Latin, but even so, where did the multi-functionality come from? Is it just a semantic extension of Latin *extra* within Balkan Latin, or is it the result of parallel developments within each of Albanian and Romanian? Or is there something else going on? In what follows, I address these issues, offering a different take on the etymology of *stër-*. Some of this material is found as well in Joseph 2010, but a review of the relevant material is useful here as there are additional points to make that clarify the uses and form of *stër-*.

According to Meyer, as noted above, *stër-* derives etymologically from Lat. *extra*, so that presumably, though he does not say so directly, the ‘excessive’ meaning is original and the kin-term usage is an extension of that usage. My suggestion here is that the possibility should be entertained of there being a different source for at least some functions of *stër-*. More specifically, my claim is that to understand the etymology of this prefix, a look into expressions of “multi-generational” kinship, a kind of “temporal displacement”, in Indo-European is needed.

Indo-European languages show considerable variety in the formation of such multi-generational expressions; a remarkable Latin passage from Plautus’s *Persa* (57) yields a host of relevant forms:³

- (1) *pater auos proauos abauos atauos tritauos*
 ‘fa’ ‘grfa’ ‘grt-grfa’ ‘grt-grt-grfa’ ‘grt-grt-grt-grfa’ ‘grt-grt-grt-grt-grfa’

These various Latin forms reveal three types that are instantiated elsewhere in Indo-European; these are listed in (2) with some examples and annotations as needed:

- (2) a. preposition + Noun type (*pro-auos*), e.g.:
- Grk. ἔκ-παππος ‘great-great-grandfather’
 - ἐπί-παππος ‘grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather’
 - Lat. *ab-avus* ‘great-great-grandfather’
 - *ad-nepos* ‘great-great-great-grandson’
 - Skt. *prati-napti-* ‘great-grandson’
 - *para-prati-napti-* ‘great-great-grandson’ (*para-* = ‘distant, remote’ (for time, used of both future and past))
- b. kin-on-kin type (*at-auos*, if, as Ernout-Meillet 1939: s.v., suggest, the first part is from *at-* ‘father’ (cf. Hittite *attas* ‘father’, Slavic *otъcb* ‘father’, Ancient Greek ἄττα ‘daddy’, etc.; note that de Vaan 2008: 59 treats it as the (a) type); e.g.:
- Skt. *pitṛ-pitṛ-* ‘father’s father’ (apparent recursion, but could just be a regular determinative (“tatpuruṣa”) compound; cf. *putra-putra-* for ‘grandson’ (literally “son of son”))

³ All of these from *proauos* on down also mean ‘remote ancestor, forefather’ (at unspecified generational removes).

- *pit̥r-p(a)it̥ā-maha-* (in plural) 'ancestors'⁴ (with apparent recursion, and with some degree of noncompositionality in that it might be expected to mean simply one generation further back from *pait̥ā-maha-* if it reflects the kin-on-kin type) or 'father's grandfather(ly ones)'; or could be a coordinative ("dvandva") compound in its basis ('father and grandfather' => 'ancestors', cf. the adjectival meaning given in Monier-Williams 1899: s.v., 'inherited from father and grandfather')
- Grk. *παππ-επίπαππος* 'grandfather's grandfather' (i.e. 'great-great-grandfather', thus not really different in meaning from *ἐπίπαππος*)
- c. numerical type (*tritauros*, admittedly with some Hellenic influence, since *tri-t-* is the Greek combining form (Latin is *ter-t-*)); e.g.:
 - Grk. *τρί-παππος* 'ancestor in the 6th generation'
 - Lat. *triauos* 'great-great-great-grandfather' (variant of *tritauros*)
 - there is some semantic noncompositionality, depending on how a unit is counted (the Greek example could be compositional, if "three-times-grandfather" = 6 generational removes (grandfather of grandfather of grandfather) but it could in principle be counting one generation further back from ego's grandfather as once, two generations back as twice, etc.) and note that *tri-* in Latin is not (generally) multiplicative (as it would have to be here to get the meaning right)

How are these types realized in Albanian, if at all? The preposition + noun type of (2a) seems not to be found, and the kin-on-kin type of (2b) may occur in the form *baba-gjysh*, if (as according to one informant -- see also footnote 1) it means 'great-grandfather' (cf. *baba* 'father', *gjysh* 'grandfather' (< *sū-s)), as opposed to (according to another informant, and also in Newmark 1998: s.v.) just a familiar way of referring to grandfather (normally *gjysh*), i.e. rather like 'gramps'.

The third type, the numerical type of (2c), however, is found rather robustly. Newmark 1998 gives the form *tregjysh* 'great-grandfather', for instance, and this occurs in Meyer 1891 as well, in the (equivalent) form *trëgÿš*. It is worth noting here that with *tre-* one does not get the right generation either multiplicatively or additively; such noncompositionality is evident in many of the forms examined here. There are also other numerical forms that work better arithmetically once one takes *tregjysh* as a point of departure, e.g.:

- (3) a. Newmark 1998: *katragjysh* 'great-great-grandfather' (Meyer 1891: *katrëgÿš* 'Ururgr.')
- b. Meyer 1891: *peseëgÿš* 'Urururgr.' (going beyond Greek and Latin but with more transparently compositional semantics).

Forms with *stër-*, however, seem not to fit into any attested Indo-European type.

The key to understanding the etymology of *stër-* lies in the numerical type of reference to generational distance. In particular, my etymological hypothesis for the generational function of *stër-* is that it derives from a Latin source connected to the form *tritavus* in the

⁴ The basis here is *pit̥ā-maha-* 'paternal grandfather', built on *maha-*, the combining form of *mahant-* 'great', and regular word for 'father', but in an unusual form as a "reverse" *tatpuruṣa* compound (Noun-Adj rather than the more usual Adj-Noun) and with case-form, here nominative, and not the stem, as first member.

Plautine passage in (1). In particular, in Paulus ex Festo (p315M), a variant of *tritavus*, namely *strittauus* (with *-itt-* for *-īt-*, presumably) occurs, given as follows: *Strittauum antiqui dicebant pro tritauo* ‘*strittauum* those-of-old used-to-say for *tritauum*’. It might be supposed, based on this attestation, that *strittauum* is an older form, since it is labelled as something said by “*antiqui*”; however, antiquarians like Paulus were not necessarily trustworthy when it comes to how they labeled the forms they cite, so we cannot be completely clear as to what “*antiqui*” means here. In fact, some scholars doubt the authenticity of *strittauum*: Ernout-Meillet (s.v.) suggest that it might simply reflect a miscopying of *tritavus* from the Plautine passage above, especially since *tritauuos* is immediately preceded by a word ending in *-s*, namely *atauos*.

Still, this variant form of the prefix, *stri-*, can be taken at face-value as a real form and if so, then it further offers a source for Albanian *stër-* (and presumably Romanian *stră-*) as a generational prefix in kin-terms like *stërgjysh*. Admittedly, the source of the *s-* is open to speculation, but it could be the result of a phonetic, rather than a graphic, resegmentation and subsequent accretion onto *tri-*. A resegmentation becomes all the more plausible if the sequence of kinship terms in (1) was a ditty of some sort, perhaps like “Soldier, sailor, tinker, tailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief” in English, or instead perhaps a counting verse, that is, something that children might have learned as an undifferentiated whole, and thus something highly susceptible to resegmentations and reanalyses.

Looking to Latin *stri-* (**ster-*) as the source of the Albanian *stër-* prefix gives the generational displacement sense rather directly (and note that the semantics of many of these displacement prefixes are not very precise as to which generation or how many generations so a general sense of “prioriness” would be extractable), and as noted in Joseph 2010, this etymology works for other reasons too.⁵ Nonetheless, a derivation from Latin *extra* does most of the same work that the *stri-* derivation does, and then some, in that it offers a possible way of linking the ‘excessive’ meaning and the ‘generational’ meaning (seeing the multi-generational reference as a kind of “excessive” reference in kinship). However, a significant fact here is that *extra-* does not seem to be attested in kin-terms in Latin, and neither does *stra-*, its outcome in Italian; this fact counts in favor of the derivation of at least the generational *stër-* from *stri-*, even if the ‘excessive’ sense of *stër-* might come from *extra/stra*.

There is though another dimension to the relation of the ‘over/excessive’ meaning to the multi-generational meaning that needs to be considered here. In particular, beside *epi-* in multi-generational terms in Ancient Greek (cf. *papp-epi-pappos*), Greek has forms with *epi-* in an ‘excessive’ meaning:

- (4) ἐπί-πονος ‘(very) painful’
 ἐπι-μαθής ‘very learned’
 ἐπί-τριτος ‘valued at an integer + 1/3’ (i.e., “having 1/3 beyond”)

Such forms mean that the linkage of the two meanings of *s(h)tër-* in Albanian could somehow be due to influence from Greek ἐπι- formations, influence either onto Albanian (and Romanian?) separately or onto *Balkan* Latin *extra*. Even if, as *stri-* suggests, the etymology of the generational sense is in the numerical type of Latin, the connection that Greek provides between the two functions (generational and excessive) could have

⁵ For instance, it would give the *sht-* form cited by Meyer directly, as *sht* is the regular outcome of Latin loanwords in Albanian with *st-* (and of PIE **st-* too), as seen in *gusht* ‘August’ from *augustus*.

secondarily affected items that had the same form but different etymologies, and which seem to be at least synchronically related.⁶

Nonetheless, one further fact would seem to tip the balance in favor of the derivation of *stër-* from Latin *stri-*. Just as Latin, it seems, had both a relevant form with initial *s-*, seen in *strittavus*, and without initial *s-*, seen in *tritavus*, so too in Albanian we find not only *stër-* in a generational displacement meaning and an excessiveness meaning but also *tër-*. That is, in Albanian, beside *stër-*, there is an apparent variant form without an *s-* that has a function similar to the ‘excessive’ meaning, namely *tër-* in *tër-hedh-* ‘throw all around’ and *tër-hapet* ‘spread broadly’,⁷ and there is also a use of *tër-* in an expression of displacement, in this case temporal distance, in *tër-vit* ‘year before last’.⁸ The *s-/Ø*-parallelism here (*stri-/tri-* ~ *stër-/tër-*) is striking,⁹ and provides a basis for thinking of a particular closeness between the two kinds of meaning, but it raises a problem as well. If it is assumed that *tër-* is from Latin *tri-* (or maybe even *ter* ‘thrice’), a numerical meaning would be expected for the forms utilizing this prefix and not the (mildly) excessive meaning seen in *tër-hedh-* nor the temporal displacement meaning in *tër-vit*. An ‘excessive’ meaning for *tër-* makes sense only if it arose secondarily via an association forged between it and *stër-* and a perceived connection between a generational usage (from a numerical type in IE, since *tri-* is clearly numerical in origin) and an ‘excessive’ function; such a connection gives a basis on which the closeness of the two meanings alluded to herein begins to make sense.

Given the meaning of excess that seems inescapable here, one might well ask whether *extra* and especially its later form *stra* in Italian were involved in some way in the development of the Albanian prefixes. It is certainly not out of the question that there was some semantic influence from these forms at either the Latin or the Italian stage, though Greek *ἐπι-* may provide a better source, admittedly. Still, at the very least, by way of tying up one loose end, influence of *extra/stra* can be invoked at the phonological level; to explain the present-day *st-* onset vs. the earlier *sht-* found in Meyer, later influence from Italian *stra-* is perhaps responsible.¹⁰ It is important to note, by way of understanding the relation (whether secondary or original) between the generational sense and the ‘excessive’ sense of *stër-*, that when the form was (re)Italianized to *stër-*, this process carried along both functions.

Thus, *stër-* in Albanian is likely to be the product of several different strands of influence over the ages: two different Latin sources for its two main functions, possible influence semantically from Greek, and Italian influence on the modern form. Despite these

⁶ Indeed, Newmark’s collapsing the two functions suggests a perceived synchronic connection; see below also on the change of *shtër-* to *stër-*.

⁷ *tër-* here is mildly ‘excessive’ in meaning, adding the sense of wide dispersal, i.e. over an area that exceeds a normal range.

⁸ This is besides the more usual term *parvjet* for ‘year before last’.

⁹ As noted in Joseph 2010, Meyer 1891 cites *skatraĝüš*, with an unexpected initial *s-*, as a variant of *katreĝüš*, and perhaps unrelatedly, though a connection cannot be ruled out, Greek has a variant *stripodo* alongside the more usual (and etymologically expected) *tripodo* ‘tripod’ with the ‘three/third’ prefix.

¹⁰ Hamp (p.c., 2007) has suggested that perhaps a simple distant dissimilation – a relatively recent one to judge from the form in Meyer 1891 -- from *shtërgjysh* with the recurring *sh*’s to *stër-gjysh* is responsible for the modern form.

different sources, there are ways in which the generational (and more generally temporal) displacement sense and the excessive sense have comingled. One must never forget the need for multiply nuanced layers of interpretation when dealing with any Albanian linguistic phenomenon, as so ably pursued over the years by the honorand, Rexhepi Ismajli.

References

- Ernout, A. & Antoine Meillet (1939). *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine: histoire des mots*, Paris: Klincksieck.
- Joseph, Brian D., (2010). *On Latin (s)tritavus*. In *Studies in Classical Languages in Honor of Philip Baldi*, ed. by B. Richard Page and Aaron D. Rubin, 43-46, Keiden: Brill.
- Meyer, Gustav (1891). *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der albanesischen Sprache*. Strassburg: Trubner.
- Monier-Williams, Sir Monier (1899). *A Sanskrit-English dictionary: etymologically and philologically arranged with special reference to cognate Indo-European languages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Newmark, Leonard (1998). *Albanian-English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.