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**Revistë për studime filologjike**

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## THE LIMITS OF CONTEXT IN SEMANTIC SHIFT: A CASE STUDY FROM ALBANIAN

KDU 811.18'37

In his 1951 paper “Modes of Meaning,” J. R. Firth first expressed the now-famous sentiment, “You shall know a word by the company it keeps”.<sup>1</sup> He meant, of course, that lexemes acquire meaning by their linguistic context and by the collocations in which they occur. While Firth’s concern was with synchronic semantics, Hock and Joseph (1996/ 2009) extend Firth’s conceptualization to diachronic semantics, stating that “Natural language permits a great amount of flexibility in meaning... depending on the context” (208). Moreover, an expression “may have a variety of different interpretations,” and this, along with the distinction between “CORE meaning” and “transferred or EXTENDED meanings” forms the basis for their model of semantic change. Firth’s synchronic model and Hock and Joseph’s diachronic model are complementary, both positing that “context” (however defined) is the basis for all semantics and semantic change.

“Context” is admittedly a broad term. As conventionally used, “context” is an umbrella under which falls a variety of processes of semantic change, including processes such as metaphor, metonymy, avoidance of homonymy, avoidance of synonymy, and semantic differentiation, as well as more socially motivated processes such as amelioration, pejoration, and taboo-induced deformation. In addition to these processes, “context” can also include the external socio-cultural circumstances in which words are used.

A dramatic example of the role of such external factors in semantic

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was reprinted as Firth 1957a, though our source for this particular citation is Firth (1957b: 11).

change is the well-known example (see Fortson 2003, for instance) of Present Day English *bead* ‘a small perforated ball or other body ... threaded upon a string’, which comes from Old English *bēd*, ‘a prayer, supplication (normally to God)’.<sup>2</sup> Ullman (1962: 194) states the traditional view that OE *bēd* ‘prayer’ became PDE *bead* ‘bead’ by a reanalysis within a cultural setting in which the ‘prayer’ was associated with the beads on a rosary or prayer necklace which were held or rubbed while praying. This is a semantic shift that only makes sense within the external environment of a specific religiously centered society. A similar but less dramatic shift of a word originally based in religious discourse is the PDE word *boon*, which has undergone a distinct semantic shift from the OE ‘prayer to God that entails a request for a favor’ to a more secular sense of ‘the request of the favor itself’; it is this secular meaning that has prevailed in PDE, in the social environment of greater division between the discourses of church and non-church.<sup>3</sup> These shifts in meaning require reference to the external.

Thus on conceptual grounds, we are interrogating what ‘context’ means in regard to semantic change. While we do not contest the role of context, we argue that previous formulations of ‘context’ do not distinguish between language-internal context and the role of the external environment in semantic change. This failure has allowed the notion of “context” to expand so greatly as to render the term unexplanatory. We therefore introduce the terminological – and conceptual – division between the language-internal and the language-external factors with regard to context. We propose that only the immediate linguistic surrounding (i.e., Firthian ‘company’) of the utterance or written text be considered context. This use of the term *context* should be differentiated from *milieu*, which we define as ‘the social, cultural, and physical setting in

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<sup>2</sup> *DOE*, s.v. *bēd*; *OED*, s.v. *bead*, n.

<sup>3</sup> PDE *boon* actually derives from the Old Norse form *bón*, which was most likely borrowed into the Northern OE dialects from eighth- and ninth-century Old Norse speakers who settled the Danelaw. The *bón* form or its reflexes do not appear in records until Middle English. ON *bón* is a cognate of OE *bēn*, which does appear in Old English texts written in the predominant West Saxon dialect, with the same meaning of ‘prayer to God that entails a request for favor’ (*OED*, s.v. *boon* n.1; *DOE*, s.v. *bēn*). This form, however, disappears from the written records by the Middle English period.

which the linguistic context resides'. This notion is roughly akin to what Firth (1957b: 7ff.) called "context of situation", which he defines as the discourse situation (verbal and non-verbal communication in which the speakers are immediately implicated) in which the utterance takes place. We take the discourse situation to be part of milieu rather than context, but our use of the term *milieu* goes beyond this, taking in whatever aspect of the physical and sociopolitical world is at play in the semantic shift; it is at once broader but at the same time more explicit.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the determining factor in the changes seen in *bead* and *boon* should, in our conceptualization, be considered milieu and not context.

With these theoretical considerations as prelude, we turn now to a case study involving Albanian where we believe that a sensitivity to both context and milieu allows for a different, and in our view better, etymology than has previously been proposed for a high-frequency verb in the language. The verb in question is *bie*, the primary meaning of which is generally agreed to be 'fall', though, as seen below, it has a wider range of meanings as well.

Based on all available sources on Albanian etymology (Meyer 1891, Çabej 1976, Demiraj 1998, Huld 1984, Orel 1998), the consensus view is that *bie* 'fall', with a suppletive past *rashë*, is cognate with Latin *feriō* 'strike' and various Germanic forms, e.g. Old Norse *berja* (and ultimately English *bore*, i.e., with a drill). These forms are derived from a Proto-Indo-European root \*bherH- 'mit scharfem Werkzeug bearbeiten (Rix 2001: 80); pierce, strike' (cf. Pokorny 1959: 133-135). Not all sources recognize the root-final laryngeal, but the root in any case is held to be distinct from \*bher- 'carry' (Rix 2001: 76-77; Pokorny 1959: 128-132), which has an Albanian outcome in the homophonous verb *bie* 'bring', with a different suppletive past tense, *prura*. And, working in the opposite direction, most sources on Latin etymology (Ernout-Meillet 1959, Walde-Hoffmann 1954, DeVaan 2008) give \*bher(H)- for Latin *feriō* and connect it with Albanian *bie* 'fall'.

We take no position on *feriō*, per se, and the various forms it is related

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<sup>4</sup> Firth (1957b: 7-9) talks about "context of situation" in terms of entities "attested in experience" and so has himself an admittedly broad view, referring to "the economic, religious and other social structures of the societies of which the participants are members". We extend this view here in our use of *milieu*.

to, but as far as *bie* is concerned, we have a different suggestion. In particular, it would seem that one reason that the root \**bher-* ‘carry’, which is better-instantiated across the Indo-European family than \**bherH-*, has generally not been considered as the starting point for *bie* ‘fall’ is the semantic side of the possible connection. That is, on the face of it, it might seem more difficult to move from a basic meaning of ‘bear, carry’ to ‘fall’, than from ‘strike’ to ‘fall’; indeed, one can think of ‘fall’ being used with subjects like ‘hammer’ or the like, where the meaning of the collocation clearly involves the subject falling as it strikes something, in the typical case. But with a piercing, to take the other meaning associated with ‘strike’ root \**bherH-* (cf., English *bore*), the connection seems more tenuous, in the absence of a clear context in which the meaning shift can be motivated.

For that reason, we look elsewhere for the source of the ‘fall’ sense of *bie*, to a verb from which a motivating context can be given. It must be noted first that *bie* has a wider range of meanings beyond ‘fall’, including ‘fall down; drop; diminish, weaken, lessen; move in, stay overnight; strike; hit; descend with force on; play (an instrument); happen’ (Newmark 1998: 76), and figures in a large number of phrases and idiomatic expressions, as well.

It is not possible here to treat all of the meanings (though see below for some speculation as to how such polysemy could have arisen) so we focus on the meaning which is, to judge from most lexicographic sources, primary, namely ‘fall’. In particular, our suggestion is that the ‘fall’ meaning derives from \**bher-* ‘carry, bear’, and we can account for the shift in meaning by reference to both context, i.e. the linguistic surroundings, and milieu, the external setting, thus using the theory of semantic change developed above.

The combination of the linguistic context we identify and the attendant external milieu is crucial, because it provides a situation in which the meaning of ‘carry’ naturally gives way to the meaning ‘fall’. It is not enough, we argue, to simply think in terms of an abstract chain of reasoning, e.g. that things that one *carries* can be *dropped* (or can *drop*) and thus *fall*. Rather, one needs to look for a more motivated set of circumstances that provides a far more natural path for the shift.

The key is the collocation of the verb *bie* with the subject *shi* ‘rain’ in the meaning ‘rain falls’, i.e. ‘it is raining’; so also with (*dë*)*borë* ‘snow’ as the

subject (*bie (dë)borë* ‘snow falls; it is snowing’). This collocation provides a basis for a shift from ‘carry’ to ‘fall’, because rain is something that is carried, specifically by clouds, and which, by virtue of having been carried, falls. The milieu here of the natural world tells us that clouds carry rain and that all rain can do is fall (go down, not up!). This milieu, reflected in the linguistic context and moving from clouds carrying rain to rain falling, gives us the ingredients for the semantic shift of ‘carry’ to ‘fall’. We can presume here a syntactic shift of X (i.e. **a cloud**) **carries rain** to **rain carries (in a cloud)**, which is essentially a shift in diathesis<sup>5</sup> like that seen in English *The dry air carried the batted ball well* allowing for *The batted ball carried well in the dry air*. Such a diathetic shift would presumably have been possible in Albanian with this verb (at one time, even if perhaps not at present), inasmuch as Albanian has always had a productive middle voice verbal category. From such a shifted form, with *shi* ‘rain’ as subject, the shift in meaning of ‘carry’ to ‘fall’ is natural, as that is what rain does; it falls. It is important to note here that while rain might be said to “strike” the earth, especially in a very heavy or violent storm, that is not really a possible characterization of what snow does. What rain and snow have in common as natural phenomena is that they fall from the skies; moreover, once one brings clouds into the picture, as the source of rainfall and snowfall, the root ‘carry’ becomes circumstantially essential and provides a basis for the particular linguistic form in question. Thus we take here a more all-encompassing perspective, taking all the relevant parts into consideration and figuring the subjects and the verb into the picture. In this way we are looking beyond the linguistic (collocational) context, though drawing on it, and looking to the milieu in which the collocation occurs. This viewpoint offers a solid basis for understanding the relationship between ‘carry’ and ‘fall’.

Of course, subjects other than *shi* and *(dë)borë* are possible with *bie*, inasmuch as other entities can fall. It must therefore be further assumed that the meaning ‘fall’ is generalized to subjects other than rain and snow. But such a step is usually needed whenever one starts with a very specific context/milieu as the basis for a semantic shift. A *bead*, for instance, is not just an object on a rosary but has been generalized to any such smallish, roundish

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<sup>5</sup> We take diathesis to be the reflection of the orientation of the participants in an action to the verbal expression of that action.

object on a string, and is not even necessarily round, nor always placed on a string.

As to the question of the wider range of meanings for *bie*, our hypothesis is that the ‘fall’ meaning is contributed by \*bher- ‘carry’ (*bie* with past tense *prura*), but that others of the meanings listed above, especially ‘strike; hit; descend with force on; play (an instrument)’, may well derive from the \*bherH- root and thus be proper (original) to *bie* (past tense *rashë*). That is, the ultimate grouping of meanings for *bie* (*rashë*) involves a blend of the two \*bher- roots. That such blending is possible can be seen on the formal side in the fact noted and commented on by Huld (1984: 43), namely, that in Falconara Arbëresh, the verb *bie* meaning ‘bring’ has as its the past tense and past participle the forms from the verb *bie* ‘fall’, thus *bie*, *ras* (perhaps better as *raš*), *rat* for ‘bring’. As Huld (1984: 43) puts it, “the principal parts in Falconara result from confusion with the homophonous *bie* ‘fall, strike’.” The Falconara forms show that blending is possible on the formal side, and so, we propose, it is possible on the semantic side as well.<sup>6</sup>

In this example we see a number of factors that influence the semantic shift of PIE \*bher- ‘carry’ to Albanian *bie* ‘fall’. They range from the purely linguistic collocational fact of *bie* being used with *shi* and *dëborë*, that is, a fact about *context* in the sense developed above, to the natural setting of what clouds, rain, and snow do, that is, a fact about the external *milieu*. The separation of context and milieu here allows us to focus on aspects of the external setting that were previously occluded by the use of *context* as a blanket category. We thus take *bie* (*shi*) as an exemplar of the utility of separating context from milieu in understanding semantic change; this approach allows us to focus more explicitly on processes of semantic change that develop in milieu as opposed to those that emerge in context proper.

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<sup>6</sup> Christiansen 2015 discusses the case of Old English *fāh* ‘criminal, hostile; multicolored, decorated’ in this way, i.e. as a semantic blending of two roots.

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 NGA SHQIPJA**

### **Rezume**

Pikënijsa e këtij studimi është konstatimi i J. R. Firth për kuptimin e fjalës sipas rrithimit të saj, për të vazhduar më tej me shtrirjen që i bëjnë kësa çështjeje autorëçt Hock dhe Joseph në konceptimet e semantikës diakronike: “Gjuhët natyrore lejojnë një shkallë të madhe fleksibiliteti në kuptim... varësisht nga konteksti”, duke bërë dallimin midis “kuptimit bërrhamë” dhe “kuptimeve të bartur ose të shtrire”, si bazë e ndryshimit semantik. Kjo do të thotë se në të dy aspektet, sinkronik e diakronik, ‘konteksti’ është baza e çdo semantike dhe ndryshimi semantik. Konteksti është term me gjëresi të madhe, ku hyjnë proceset e ndryshimeve kuptimore, përfshirë metaforën, metonyminë, evitimin e homonimisë, të sinonimisë dhe të diferencimit semantik, të ameliorimit apo të përkëqësimit, të tabusë, etj. Aty mund të përfshihen dhe rrethanat e jashtme socio-kulturore në të cilat përdoren fjalët.

Ata ngulin këmbë te dallimi midis kontekstit të brendshëm gjuhësor dhe rolit të rrithimit të jashhtëm sa i përket këmbimit semantik. Për këtë nisen nga shembuj konkretë brenda anglishtes. Prandaj e shohim të nevojshme të sjellin ndarjen terminologjike e konceptuale midis faktorëve brenda-gjuhësorë dhew faktorëve jashtë-gjuhësorë liddhur me kontekstin. Pra si kontekst propozojnë të kuptohet vetëm rrithimi i pandërmjetshëm gjuhësori thënisë, për ta dalluar nga mjedisë (milieu), të përkufizuar si mjedis shoqëror, kulturor e fizik, në të cilin vendoset konteksti gjuhësor.

Mbi baza konsideratash të këtilla ata i janë kthyer rasti të shqipes ku mendojnë se ndjeshmëria për konteksttin dhe mjedisin bën të mundur një etimologji tjetër, më të mirë se të mëparshmet për një folje me denduri të madhe, për foljen bie, me më shumë kuptime.

Autorët raportojnë për interpretimin etimologjik që foljen bie (*rashë*) e shpjegon si kognatë me latinishte *feriō* ‘strike’ dhe format gjermanikes si norishtja e vjetër *berja* (angl. *bore*), nga rrënja proto-indo-europeiane \**bherH-*. Kjo rrënje shihet e ndryshme nga \**bher-* ‘carry’ shq. *bie* ‘bring’, me formën supletive *prura*. Pas diskutimeve lidhur me kuptimet e ndryshme dhe kolokimet e foljes shqipe bie/ *rashë*, bie/ *prura*, si psh. bie shi/ borë, ata, pra duke marrë parasysh dhe kontekstin, gjënjë një bazë solide për të kuptuar më mirë raportin midis kuptimeve ‘carry’ dhe ‘fall’.

Pas vështrimit të kuptimeve të ndryshme të bie, autorët sjellin hipotezën se kuptimi ‘fall’ lidhet me \**bher-* ‘carry’ (*bie/ prura*), ndërsa kuptimet e tjera, sidomos ‘strike; hit; descend with force on; play (an instrument)’, mund të rrjedhin nga rrënja \**bherH-* dhe kjo të jetë origjinalja për *bie* (*rashë*).

Kështu shihen ndikimi i faktorëve të ndryshëm semantikë që lidhen me ndryshimin nga ProtoIE \**bher-* ‘carry’ te shqipja *bie* ‘fall’. Pra kemi faktin thjesht kolokacional gjuhësor të përdorimit të *bie* me *shi* dhe *dëborë*, pra fokt që ka të bëjë me kontekstin, në një anë dhe nga ana tjetër vendosjen e natyrshme të aspekteve që lidhen me re, *shi* e *borë*, si mjedis i jashtëm.

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# **STUDIME**

**22**

**2015**

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*Redaktor teknik:*

ASHAK

*Realizimi kompjuterik:*

ASHAK

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