

# A Study of the Identity Construction of Standard Albanian from Certain Western Perspectives

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**Abstract.** In the context of nation-state construction and ideological change, language is the main material for identity construction. From the perspective of the differences between the Albanian dialects of Gheg and Tosk, this paper explores how the dialectal differences have changed from a language phenomenon to a social identity issue. From the perspective of structural linguistics and sociolinguistics, this paper discusses in detail the similarities and differences between the two dialects in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, as well as the process of selecting the standard language, and analyzes the deep reasons behind the language standardization. On this basis, it explains the behavior of the marginal Gheg dialect while Albania molded the Tosk dialect as a symbol of “progress” and “unity” in the socialist period from the perspective of language ideology theory and symbolic power. In addition, in the experience of different regions in Albania, it explains how language becomes the center of social division and its role in the real situation. Finally, it is concluded that behind the implementation of Albanian standard language is a dynamic identity problem, and language is the resource to create group identity.

**Keywords:** Albanian, Gheg dialect, Tosk dialect, Identity.

## 1. Introduction

Language plays an important role in the construction of modern nation-state. Usually, it is a neutral communication tool, but it is also the link between rights and the basis of collective identity. In Albania, people in the North mostly use the Gheg dialect, while people in the South mainly use the Tosk dialect. There are many differences between the two Albanian dialects, so the implementation of standard language is necessary and important for Albania.

Messing pointed out in his research on the Albanian language that the choice of language policy is closely related to the ideological demands of a specific period [1]. Riverin-Coutlée et al. conducted an empirical study of 125 Albanian listeners and for the first time systematically revealed the intrinsic connection between language attitudes and dialectal changes, providing important data support for understanding the language dynamics within Albania [2]. Lloshi explored the controversies and challenges faced by the Albanian standard language in the post-communist era from a more macro perspective [3]. Paçarizi summarized the characteristics of Gheg and Tosk dialects [4], and Munishi explained why and how to form and implement the language policy from the perspective of ideology [5]. These studies have already helped people to have a relatively complete understanding of the current situation of the Albanian standard language, but so far, there is still a lack of a comprehensive framework that takes into account language structure analysis, ideological deconstruction, and local practice research simultaneously.

This paper uses the compound analysis path, combining Bourdieu symbolic violence theory, Irvine and Gal language ideology theory, and Le Page and Tabouret-Keller identity behavior theory, to explore the implementation logic of Albanian standard language as comprehensively as possible, and how language users carry out identity practice in this environment [6, 7, 8]. The research aims include: what are the differences between Gheg and Tosk in structural linguistics; What are the dominant factors in the process of standard language selection; How the underlying logic behind the official language is designed; How different languages are flexibly used in different regions of Albania. It is

hoped that the study can fill the corresponding academic gap and provide a case study of language identity for today's multilingual society.

## **2. Linguistic structure and the choice of standard language**

The structural differences between the two major Albanian dialects, that is, the most basic structural linguistic differences between the two major dialects of Gheg and Tosk, are the origin and basis of all subsequent complex issues such as identity. Of course, structural linguistic differences themselves have no ability to trigger such a complex problem as identity. Only when they are integrated with such phenomena as the establishment of a nation-state and ideology, will they gradually evolve and intensify into an identity problem.

### **2.1. The difference of language structure between Gheg and Tosk**

There are many obvious differences in structural linguistics between Gheg dialect and Tosk dialect in Albanian language. These differences are significant and easy to identify, and they are distributed in the three levels of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, shaping the unique language style of the two dialects.

At the phonetic system level, the most obvious difference between the two dialects is whether the nasal vowels are retained or not. Nasal vowel is an important historical phonetic feature of Albanian language, which has been preserved in the northern Gheg dialect; The Tosk dialect in the South desalinates this feature and replaces it with oral vowels, which are widely used today. This difference makes the two have a different sense of hearing. For example, the word “moon” has a nasal vowel in Gheg dialect, which is similar to “hânë”, in which “â” is a nasal vowel; The Tosk dialect uses “hënë”, which uses the oral vowel “ë”, and has no nasal characteristics.

In addition, “rhoticism” is another historical reason for the difference of the two dialects. This phenomenon occurred around the 7th century A.D., and it changed the nasal “n” in the word position in Tosk dialect into the trill “r”. However, Gheg dialect did not adopt this sound change and still retained the old “n” sound. Therefore, this phenomenon is also another obvious regional feature of the two dialects, which has become a stable phonetic symbol between the two dialects for hundreds of years and easy to distinguish. Taking the word “gold” as an example, the Albanian language is written with “ar”, and the word ends with “r” in Tosk dialect; The Gheg dialect pronounces “r” as “n”, which is more similar to “an”.

From the perspective of grammatical structure, there are differences in the use of infinitives and subjunctives in the two dialects. Gheg dialect retains the original infinitive form of verbs, and the corresponding syntactic structure is more flexible; However, Tosk dialect weakens the use frequency of infinitives, and develops another set of subjunctive use system and promotes it, so as to use subjunctive instead of many uses of the original infinitive. This lexical difference not only makes the two dialects have great differences in structure, but also has a impact on the language habits and expression styles of the two dialects’ users. For example, when expressing the sentence “I want to work”, Gheg dialect uses “Dua me punue”, where “me punue” is an infinitive structure, which is composed of the auxiliary word “me” and the verb infinitive; Tosk dialect uses subjunctive structure to undertake the corresponding grammatical function of the original infinitive, so the same expression in Tosk dialect is “Dua të punoj”, in which “të punoj” is a subjunctive structure.

At the same time, the two dialects have many small differences in the plural form of nouns, the change of personal pronouns and the expression of tenses. For example, when it means “finger”, the singular form is “gisht”. In Gheg dialect, the plural form of the word is “gishta”, and the suffix “a” is used to form the plural; In Tosk dialect, the plural form of the word is “gishtërinj”, and the suffix “ërinj” is used to form the plural. These differences make Gheg and Tosk form their own grammatical system.

Because the thesaurus of the two dialects is shared, the users of the two dialects will not have too much difficulty in understanding when communicating. However, due to the different geographical

location, the countries bordering the north and south regions of Albania are naturally different, so the degree of language and cultural exchange between regions is also different. With the deepening of exchanges, the north and south have gradually accumulated a certain number of unique words or ambiguous usages of shared words in their exchanges with the surrounding areas. For example, when expressing “neighbor”, Gheg dialect will use “komshi”, which is derived from Turkish and mediated by Slavic language, while Tosk dialect will use “fqinj”, which is derived from Latin. These lexical differences also become one of the regional differences between Gheg dialect and Tosk dialect.

Although there are many differences between the two dialects, the research of linguist Rrahman Paçarizi has proved that these differences have not become a gap that hinders the mutual understanding between users of Gheg dialect and Tosk dialect [4]. On the contrary, the degree of mutual understanding between the two dialects is high. This linguistic fact proves that all subsequent identity processes, even the process of ideologization, are not caused by the differences in structural linguistics between Gheg dialect and Tosk dialect, because these differences in structural linguistics are not irreconcilable and incomprehensible. Therefore, there are other reasons for these consequences.

## **2.2. Game theory in standard language selection**

The standardization of Albanian language is a chronicle of language choice. The process of language standardization is not simply a technical language planning. On the contrary, it is full of compromise and game, which more profoundly reflects the shaping and adjustment of Albanian cultural identity in different historical stages.

The unification of language aims to serve the emerging national identity, so all nation states will face the dilemma of how to solve the problem of language unification in the early stage of construction, and Albania is no exception. In 1920, at the national education conference held in Lushnjë, Albanian delegates reached a wise and balanced plan: the Albanian standard language will be based on the dialect of the central city of Elbasan. Although the Elbasan dialect is a sub dialect of the Gheg dialect in the language pedigree, its geographical location is just located in the transition area between the north and the south of Albania, so although the Elbasan dialect belongs to the Gheg branch, it also has many characteristics of the southern Tosk dialect, which is an ideal compromise. The selection of Elbasan dialect as the Albanian standard language at that time was an effort made by the early nation builders to seek national unity and bridge regional contradictions, aiming to create an inclusive common language standard that could be accepted by the Albanians from both north and south. The attempt of standard language in this period more reflects the integration requirements needed in the early stage of nationalism construction.

However, after the end of the Second World War, the standard language of Albania changed again. With the establishment of the communist regime, in 1972, under the strong impetus of the ruling party and its core leaders, the Albanian regime held a decisive orthographic conference in Tirana. The congress officially overturned the Lushnjë resolution adopted in 1920 and changed the standard language base of Albania from Elbasan dialect to Tosk dialect. The purpose of the resolution is clear: the emerging political parties institutionalize their mother tongue dialect as the country's only standard language, and implement it nationwide. This change is the practical proof that language ideology directly intervenes and dominates the practice of language planning as pointed out in Shkumbin Munishi [5]. With the transformation of standard language, new standard language textbooks based on Tosk dialect, such as Spoken Albanian, were rapidly compiled and published, and widely explained and circulated among the masses [13]. Furthermore, the new standard language has become the only legal norm in the education system, official documents, news media and even all communication fields, thus completing the Tosk dialectalization process of the standard language comprehensively and efficiently in practice.

Gordon M. Messing mentioned that the core of Albanian language standardization policy, that is, Albanian language policy, is by no means a purely linguistic or pedagogical issue [1]. The choice and implementation of standard language were closely related to the social structure and ideology at that

time. Therefore, the transformation of Albanian standard language from Elbasan dialect to Tosk dialect is not a simple process of language standard adjustment, but a profound political action. This has also laid a solid foundation for the complex language relations within Albanian society and its closely related identity problems in the following decades.

### **3. The theoretical framework of language ideology and identity construction**

The transformation of the differences between the north and south Albanian dialects from a linguistic fact to a social problem is not a spontaneous transformation, but the result of the joint action of specific facts and ideology. By using the theoretical tools of sociolinguistics to analyze the transformation process, we can understand how language has become a tool of value bearing, distribution and social segmentation.

#### **3.1. The construction mechanism of language ideology**

The theory of language ideology is a sociolinguistic theory proposed by Irvine and Gal, which provides a comprehensive and precise analytical tool for the analysis of Albanian dialects[7]. They define language ideology as a belief system shared by social members about language forms and social relations. This belief system is not a passive reflection of language reality, but actively shaping people's evaluation and cognition of language. After in-depth study, Irvine and Gal further identified three semantic processes, which are the support for the specific operation of language ideology. They are iconization, fractal recursivity and erasure.

In the context of the Albanian socialist period, in order to legalize and effectively implement the standard language based on Tosk dialect, the state led discourse system launched a large-scale ideological promotion. Similarly, this process can be parsed with the above three semantic processes.

Through the process of "iconization", some features of Tosk dialect are endowed with specific positive social values, such as the loss of nasal vowels, the occurrence of "r" sound and other phenomena, which are promoted as symbols of "simplicity", "clarity" and "modernity", so it is naturally directly related to the grand positive images of "revolution", "progress" and "national unity". On the other hand, because Gheg dialect retains the ancient features such as nasal vowels and verb infinitives, it is iconized as "conservative", "obscure" and "complex", and then linked with negative labels such as "conservative", "feudal", "backward" and even "split and unified localism". As a result, the differences between the two dialects have been gradually transformed and gradually separated from their original structural linguistics category.

Then, through the process of "fractal recursivity", the ideological opposition between the north and the south is constantly copied and projected to a more microscopic social level. For example, in the southern region where Tosk dialect is mostly used, more "pure" and "marginal" Tosk dialect variants will be distinguished; In the area where Gheg dialect is used in the south, it will be divided into different value levels similar to those in the north due to the similarity between different variants and Tosk dialect. This kind of core opposition is constantly copied and recursive, making ideology permeate every corner of society, and constantly strengthening the persuasiveness and naturalization effect of ideology, making this ideology deeply rooted in the hearts of the people.

The specific role of the process of "erasure" is that any language reality that does not conform to the dominant ideology will be intentionally or unintentionally diluted, ignored or even denied. According to the Albanian language policy, the rich historical documents, the role of the Gheg dialect in the national renaissance literature and its deep social and cultural foundation in the northern region will be marginalized or selectively forgotten in the Albanian official national narrative. The result is that in public discourse, Tosk dialect is described as the only natural legal language basis for the construction of modern Albanian nation, while the historical contribution and cultural value of Gheg dialect are effectively "erased" from the collective consensus. In July 2025, Fadil Hysaj, the director and professor, clearly pointed out in an interview with the media "KOHA.net" that the language standard established by the 1972 orthography conference did not represent the entire Albanian region,

but was dominated by the southern dialect, excluding the Gheg dialect users of 70% of the population [9]. Hysaj even called this decision "the most serious language extinction" and believed that the "spiritual DNA" of Albanians had suffered serious damage. Although this expression has a strong emotional color, it also proves the factual role of the process of "erasure".

### **3.2. Language policy and symbolic violence theory**

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power and symbolic violence provides another theoretical support for understanding the effect of ideological operation in Albanian society [6]. He proposed that symbolic violence is a non physical form of forced control that takes effect on the premise of the acquiescence of the dominated. This form strategically presents certain cultural tastes, norms and social hierarchies naturally or even naturally, so that the dominated people unconsciously acquiesce to these cultural tastes and social hierarchies.

The Albanian language policy during the socialist period is a typical case of the operation of this theory. Through a series of measures such as controlling the national education system, strictly reviewing and publishing books, and implementing the unified management of mass media, the state has shaped Tosk standard language into the only "correct", "elegant" and "useful" language in modern society. What follows is that the Gheg dialect is comprehensively restricted. For example, in schools, students who use the Gheg dialect will be asked to correct or even ridiculed; In social public places and workplace working environment, the use of Gheg dialect expression or the inclusion of Gheg dialect accent will have a high probability of being regarded as lack of education or low level of education by others; Similarly, in the field of culture, books and radio programs that use Gheg dialect are also strictly restricted. In July 2025, Fadil Hysaj, the director and professor, clearly mentioned in an interview with the media "KOHA.net" that since 1950, the Albanian authorities have ended the previous tradition of publishing two primary school literacy textbooks, Gheg dialect and Tosk dialect, and only implemented Tosk dialect textbooks [9]. This means that all school-age children in the northern Gheg dialect area are forced to accept a standard language different from their family language for learning. In the actual teaching scene, students who use Gheg dialect often receive systematic correction and criticism.

Therefore, the long-term discrimination and devaluation have led many native speakers of Gheg dialect, especially the younger generation, to unconsciously internalize and accept this concept of language hierarchy. They began to feel ashamed of their native dialect, automatically linked Gheg dialect with negative labels such as "vulgar" and "uneducated", and voluntarily gave up using Gheg dialect in formal occasions. This concept even affects the language inheritance of Gheg dialect within the family. This kind of self-examination and self devaluation makes power no longer rely on external norms to enforce the maintenance, but through the symbolic image of language, it realizes a more efficient, profound and lower cost social structure identification, and achieves a more efficient social control. This is also consistent with the research of Munishi, that is, the Albanian language policy at that time was not just a neutral and professional language planning, but a well-designed decision [5].

### **3.3. Language practice and identity construction initiative**

However, the operation of power has never been a one-way task, and the domination of power will always encounter resistance, either overt or covert. The identity behavior theory of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller provides an indispensable perspective for the initiative of language users under the operation of power [8]. The theory emphasizes that language users are not passive recipients of social structure and language norms; Language users will intentionally use different language choices to actively project their self-image, and draw close to or distinguish from specific social groups. Dialect is also a form of language, so this theory can also be used to analyze Albania's internal dialect selection.

In Albania, especially in the post-communist period, there have been a series of complex and strategic identity behaviors. Although the Albanian government has strongly promoted the standard language based on Tosk dialect through the state machine, and has successfully shaped the language

appearance of the public to a considerable extent, many Gheg dialect users, especially the new generation of youth and intellectuals, have consciously re used and disseminated the vocabulary, pronunciation and expression forms of Gheg dialect in daily communication, literary and artistic creation, social activities and even some local media. This is not a simple reflection of nostalgia or local complex, but a highly proactive and purposeful practice. Benefiting from this practice, they are not only fighting against the official language ideology and the language policy with symbolic violence, but also actively expressing and building an identity different from the “official Albanian” based on the Albanian standard language, i.e. Tosk dialect: an identity based on Gheg dialect and rooted in northern history and cultural traditions. This linguistic return and reappraisal is essentially an act of advocating cultural autonomy, historical continuity and identity pride. This also proves that language users are not indifferent passives. They have the ability to resist creatively under external pressure and use language resources to redefine their own identity. Thus, the problem of identity under Albanian language ideology initially appeared.

#### **4. Language and identity practice in Albania**

In Albania, the entanglement between language and identity shows a unique and complex situation. This is not only the origin of the differences between the northern and southern dialects, but also the place where the language policy plays a direct role. In recent years, a series of empirical studies based on Albania have provided valuable data support for understanding the dynamic relationship between language attitude, dialect change and identity.

##### **4.1. An empirical study of language attitude and dialect change**

The study of language attitude is an important window to understand the interaction between language and society. The research of Riverin-Coutlée, Kopia and Gubian comprehensively investigated the Albanian audience’s attitude towards the two main dialects of Gheg and Tosk [2]. In this study, 125 Albanian listeners were selected as samples, and their perception of four speech features was measured by visual analog scale, covering three dimensions: dialect recognition, status and sense of solidarity.

The results show that the changing Gheg dialect feature variants are given a lower status evaluation by the audience, while the stable feature variants are given a relatively higher status evaluation. This finding shows that there is a close relationship between language attitude and dialect change. Changing characteristics are often accompanied by a decline in prestige, while stable characteristics can maintain their social status. However, the study also emphasizes that understanding language change needs to consider both external and internal factors, such as the evolution of phonetic structure and other complex situations. All the tested speech stimuli received positive evaluation in the sense of solidarity dimension, and the audience generally rated them as “friendly” rather than “unfriendly”. This finding may reflect the particularity of Albanian social culture – even in the context of significant differences in dialects, users of different dialects still maintain strong social cohesion and mutual identity. The research of Riverin-Coutlée et al. provides an important empirical basis for understanding the language dynamics in Albania, and also opens up a new path for the follow-up study of the relationship between language attitude and identity [2].

##### **4.2. Language criticism and identity expression in folk discourse**

Outside the official language policy, there is always a critical voice on the standard language policy in Albania’s public discourse space. These criticisms are not only the expression of language attitude, but also the practice of identity.

In July 2025, Fadil Hysaj, the director and professor, made a remarkable point in an interview with “KOHA.net”[9]. He clearly pointed out that the language standard established by the orthography conference in 1972 did not represent the entire Albanian language region, but was dominated by the southern dialect, excluding the Gheg dialect users of 70% of the population. He further stressed that

“the language used by 70% of the population has been ignored. The north is not only the north of Albania, but also Kosovo and Macedonia.” Hysaj’s criticism pointed to the specific embodiment of the “erasure” mechanism in the process of language standardization. The rich historical documents of Gheg dialect, its role in national renaissance literature and its deep social and cultural foundation in the northern region have been marginalized or selectively forgotten in the official narrative. This “erasure” is not only reflected in the system level, but also in the construction process of collective consensus, which makes the historical contribution and cultural value of Gheg dialect gradually fade in public discourse.

Xhavit Beqiri theoretically analyzed the tension between standard language and natural language, that is, under any ideology and regime, the perception, meaning and value of words have its special way [10]. Each era has its own “discourse”, such as language form or thinking. The first task of the new government is to “overthrow” the existing discourse order and its functions, so as to introduce “new discourse” in line with its own interests. He believes that the current Albanian standard language is a “new discourse”, because it is arbitrary as any standard language, overturning the previous discourse. Standard language is always opposite to natural language. As an external and arbitrary intervention in the natural process of language, it covers the existing diversity of language. Although there is a tendency to define it as “the only real language”, it is only one of many language variants.

### **4.3. Language disputes in the post-communist period**

After the political change in 1991, the Albanian language issue once again became the focus of public discussion. Xhevat Lloshi combed the disputes and challenges faced by the standard Albanian language in the post-communist period [3]. In 1972, the standard Albanian language was officially adopted in public exchanges and schools, but after the political change from 1991 to 1992, the language problem was reopened and the standard language itself was questioned.

Lloshi believes that the root of the current debate can be traced back to the division of Albanian dialects, a variety of written variants formed in history, and the standardization achieved during the communist period [3]. He described how the standard Albanian language was established and its recent evolution. For the future, he raised a fundamental question: will there be one Albanian national identity or two Albanian national identities? His own answer is that Albanians already have a good standard language. Although there are many problems, a lot of work is still needed to enrich and improve it, but Albanians do not need to create a new standard or undergo a "language resection". This view represents the academic position of safeguarding the standard language, but it also reflects that the language issue is still the core issue of identity controversy in the post-communist period.

Shehu is also concerned about this issue [11]. He said that Albania already has a standard language, and the responsibility of the national dictionary is to present this unified Albanian literary language. This statement itself is a reaffirmation of the legitimacy of the standard language, and also reflects the position of the academic community in the language dispute. In addition, the dialectological atlas of Albanian provides foundational data for understanding regional linguistic variation, while the historical analysis of standard language development and the critical perspective on socialist language politics further contextualize the ongoing debates [15, 12, 14].

## **5. Conclusion**

After a comprehensive and detailed investigation of the above-mentioned specific differences between the north and south Albanian dialects and a series of social problems caused by them, this study clearly reveals and demonstrates a core proposition. In the complex social and cultural field, language problems have never been purely internal issues in linguistics. It is not only the medium of historical memory and cultural identity, but also the cornerstone of collective and individual identity construction, negotiation and expression.

The case of Albania shows that when a specific dialect is selected and promoted to the status of national standard language, it will break away from the category of neutral communication tools and

become an important social mechanism that carries specific ideological value, distributes cultural capital and even affects individual social mobility. The comprehensive implementation of Tosk standard language in Albanian socialist period is not only a technical language standardization movement, but also a profound process of social and cultural integration. Through the systematic promotion of the education system and the media network, this language policy has been continuously precipitated and institutionalized at the grass-roots level, and finally accepted and internalized by the public, which has become an important link to shape the common cultural identity of the society.

The control and operation of the upper power will always cause people to resist and negotiate in different forms. The study observed that language users are not passive recipients of the indifference of power structure and ideology, whether it is the signs of cultural revival of the Gheg dialect in Albania in the post-communist era or the critical voice that persists in folk discourse. On the contrary, they respond, negotiate, adapt and even challenge the established order through active and situational identity behavior and skillfully use all available resources, so as to continuously participate in the construction, reconstruction and defense of their individual and group identity. The attitude of language users is not only a passive response, but also a force to actively participate in the evolution of language.

The most appropriate understanding of the differences between the north and south Albanian dialects is to interpret it as a continuously open and dynamically evolving identity arena. The tension and vitality contained in it are not only derived from the historical differences in structural linguistics itself, but also from the continuous, sometimes open and sometimes hidden struggles around the fundamental issues of “who is the real Albanian”, “how to define the cultural core of the Albanian nation” and “how to allocate the power resources of the state”. The question of “one or two Albanian national identities” raised by Lloshi is the core embodiment of this struggle. Among them, language is not only the focus of the struggle, but also the core weapon of the struggle.

The in-depth study of this topic can be further promoted in the following directions: under the background of globalization and digitalization, tracking how new social media and communication technologies affect the vitality, evolution and inheritance of dialects, and how they provide a new platform and form for the expression of identity; Continue to observe how the language policy implemented in Albania will reconcile the internal dialect contradictions in practice, and how to build a comprehensive identity that is both inclusive of multiculturalism and strong enough on this basis. These future explorations will continue to prove that the complex relationship among language, power and identity has always been the key to people’s understanding of society.

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