
LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY DIVERSITY IN ALBANIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Rudina Alimerko

University “Ismail Qemali” Vlora, Department of Education Vlora, Albania, rudi_alimerko@yahoo.it

Abstract: In the digital age, Albanian children's literature is inevitably facing new challenges and opportunities, where the power of reflection on the preservation of cultural and linguistic heritage is becoming increasingly important and serious. Linguistic and literary diversity in children's literature is a rich and complex field that reflects the social, cultural, and educational changes that have occurred in Albania and the Albanian diaspora. The aim of this research is to present several literary perspectives to reflect on how linguistic and literary diversity helps children become aware not only of the richness of their language and culture but also promotes a strong sense of national identity and interculturalism. By delving into the features of the culture and language they study and through comparison with other cultures, children and young people become more aware of the values of their national culture.

The research methodology is based on the analysis of works by authors who have played a significant role in preserving and promoting linguistic, dialectal, cultural, and regional diversity, thus reflecting the richness and variety of Albanian traditions; and an evaluative method based on teachers' experiences in developing literary lessons. The information that students gain through literature and readings of various kinds makes them well-versed in the diversity of human society, the humane values this society has conveyed and continues to convey, as well as the opposite; using a comparative method to see the role reading plays as a bridge between the events read and the individual's linguistic experience, which facilitates the integration of different perspectives on the real world. We often see ourselves as a story, and storytelling is an innate and unique part of humanity; therefore, we must strive to use its power to think from a global perspective.

Albanian writers, through their stories, narratives, events, and characters, have contributed to the preservation and promotion of various Albanian cultures and traditions, offering a rich window for children to recognize and appreciate the diversity of their country.

Thus, we as educators and researchers have the privilege of reflecting on the power that books and stories have in educating, transforming, and raising awareness of literary heritage, cultural diversity, multilingualism, and multiculturalism, as they serve as invaluable gateways to the world of truth, enabling critical thinking about the ever-changing world.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, literary, cultural diversity, heritage, children's literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The proposed paper aims to present an academic study that reflects on the rapid development of technology, the ever-changing environment, tangible global challenges, and the inevitable digital information. It examines the linguistic and literary diversity in Albanian children's literature. The literature is characterized by a problem-solving perspective, which goes beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge, moving towards a more concrete, active, and interactive approach, fostering reasoning and critical thinking to deepen the understanding of global issues that threaten our universe. From this viewpoint, children's literature reflects a variety of identities and cultures within the Albanian community. Writers focus on descriptions of life in different regions of Albania, as well as the experiences of Albanian children in the diaspora, offering a vivid portrayal of local traditions, dialects, and ways of life. This cultural diversity influences children and young people to understand and appreciate the richness of their national heritage. As Donna Norton also emphasizes, *children's literature provides a path for students to learn about their cultural heritage and the cultures of others. It is essential that children learn these values, as "the development of positive attitudes towards our own culture and the cultures of others is necessary for social and personal development"* (Norton, 2010) cited according to (Crippen, 2012).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, adopted in 2000 by top European representatives, Article 22 states that the Union respects linguistic diversity. Article 21 prohibits any discrimination concerning languages. Respect for linguistic diversity is an important value of the Union, in the same way as respect for human dignity, openness to other cultures, tolerance, and the acceptance of others (Haloçi, 2019).

In this context, relying on theoretical literature and the method of analysis through the works of authors, they have played an important role in preserving and promoting linguistic, dialectal, cultural, and regional diversity, thus

reflecting the richness and variety of Albanian traditions. We have also focused on empirical studies and personal experience based on collaboration with students in research and scientific activities. From our perspective, this research is significant because it aims to raise students' awareness in their individual and professional formation, promoting through a good understanding of literary works, the universality of shared moral values, cultural diversity, and more. As mentioned in the position statement of the Children's Literature Assembly, *while children read various children's literature, these texts can support and affirm their own identity and that of others, informing the narratives children form about themselves and others. In other words, children come to see themselves and their experiences represented in the stories they read, and these stories can also offer insights into ways of living and knowing that differ from their own. This alone makes access to diverse literature an ethical and moral imperative, so that all students' lives and languages are represented, especially those historically underrepresented communities in schools* (Children's Literature Assembly Position Statement, February 12, 2019).

3. RESULTS

Albanian artistic literature for children is deeply rooted in the country's cultural and linguistic tradition. Linguistic and literary diversity in children's literature is an important aspect that reflects the cultural and identity richness of the Albanian people. In this context, we have approached it from the following literary perspective:

Linguistic Diversity: This refers to dialects and linguistic variants. Children's literature in Albania includes texts written in the two main dialects of Albanian, Tosk and Gheg, enriching children's linguistic experience and helping them recognize and appreciate the linguistic variations of their native language. Although the dominant standard language is Tosk, children's literature authors often use Gheg, especially in contexts related to the cultural heritage of northern Albania. Writer Ndre Mjeda gave special importance to the Albanian language, and in his poem *Gjuha shqipe* (The Albanian Language), inspired by the ideals of the time, he masterfully intertwined the history of a nation and the spiritual identity of its people, with the hero (Mjeda), the dedicated scholar of the Albanian language, and his optimistic spirit, bursting in a vow to be a worthy son of the homeland:

*"Above the song that the nightingale sings,
The Albanian language echoes in my ears,
Above the scent the hyacinth brings,
My heart it consoles without fears."*

(Mjeda, 1978)

The author compares our beloved language to the song of the nightingale and the scent and beauty of the hyacinth. Naturally, he elevates the Albanian language because its sound and undoubtedly its freshness surpass that of the nightingale and the hyacinth. The literary device of comparison that the author uses serves to create a stronger impact. This comparison resonates deeply with every Albanian's sentiment toward their mother tongue (instilling this feeling in children), because, given the circumstances of the time, the Albanian language the mother tongue, for which sacrifices were made and blood was shed by the national revivalists seems more beautiful, even the most beautiful, than any other language in the world.

Perhaps today's children do not fully grasp the importance of the language or the historical context. For them, these concepts may seem abstract, especially when compared to the rapid development of technology, social changes, and modern communication. Therefore, as educators, it is our duty to reflect on the sense of beauty, aesthetics, and the importance of fostering love for the language and the country.

One of Albania's most renowned writers, Mitrush Kuteli, wrote stories and tales that often incorporate elements from various Albanian dialects. He skillfully used both Gheg and Tosk dialects to reflect the linguistic richness of the Albanian people. In 1938, Kuteli published his first volume of stories, *Netë shqiptare* (Albanian Nights), in Bucharest. These prose works, written between 1925 and 1930, include many stories and literary sketches based on the author's childhood memories, revealing moments from his youth through poetic descriptions. Kuteli's storytelling brought the enchanting beauty of spoken Albanian into literature. The structure of *Netë shqiptare* revolves around a group of Albanian emigrants in a foreign land, each recounting a memorable event from their homeland. Together, these stories paint a vivid picture of Albania at the turn of the 20th century. Beyond his mastery of short stories and novellas, Kuteli introduced a new literary form to Albanian literature the "rrefënja" (folk tale). He developed this form over 40 years, making it a key expression of his literary individuality.

Kuteli also adapted some of the most beautiful epics from the *Cikli i Kreshnikëve* (Cycle of the Highland Warriors) and Arberesh songs about Skanderbeg into prose, published in the now classic collection *Tregime të moçme shqiptare* (Ancient Albanian Tales). In this work: *"he blended epic and lyric, humor and tragedy, narrative and description, wisdom and philosophical reflections on life and death, highlighting the unwavering bravery and resilience of the Albanian people"* (Kuteli, 2005).

This collection, cherished by both young and adult readers, has become a model for reworking Albanian epics and mythology, the oldest testament to Albanian national identity. It was selected by the Center for Diaspora Publications as supplementary reading for Albanian schools abroad, emphasizing both its didactic value and its ability to introduce the rich folkloric heritage to Albanians living outside the country. The collection is being translated into English, Italian, Greek, German, and French, aiming to connect the younger generation of the diaspora with one of Albania's most important authors (Diaspora Shqiptare, 2020). The selected stories are: *Rozafati* (The Legend of Rozafa), *E bija e Hënës dhe e Diellit* (The Daughter of the Moon and the Sun), *Besa e Kostandinit* (Constantine's Pledge), *Gjergj Elez Alia*, *Ymer Agë Ulqini*, *Muji dhe zanat* (Muji and the Fairies), *Omeri i Ri* (Young Omer), *Dasma e Hysen Kraposhnikut* (The Wedding of Hysen Kraposhniku), *Halili pas vdekjes* (Halili After Death), and *Skënderbeu dhe Ballabani* (Skanderbeg and Ballaban). Presenting these stories in two languages will enrich the vocabulary of students attending Albanian schools in the diaspora. For the translation, the Center for Diaspora Publications has selected experienced and renowned translators such as Andrea Grill, Évelyne Noygues, and Eugenio Scalabrino.

Kuteli's aim was modest: to introduce children to the beauty of folklore and inspire them to read the original folk stories, once they overcame the dialectal challenges of the language. In adapting and retelling this cultural treasure, Kuteli displayed a deep knowledge of this folk heritage, particularly in storytelling techniques, popular models, subjects, artistic details, motives, characters, and landscapes. His adaptations were tailored to fit the psychology of children and young readers.

Odhise Grillo is another author who has utilized traditional myths and legends in children's literature. He has written several books that recount the stories of legendary heroes and mythical figures from Albania, creating narratives that captivate children and give them a deeper understanding of Albanian history and culture. Notably, in 1987, he took one of the classic poems of Albanian literature, Naim Frashëri's *History of Skanderbeg*, and recreated it in artistic prose. The aim was to convey some of the values of our national literature to young readers and make them part of their spiritual heritage at a time when they are still in their formative years. It is understood that this is not a mechanical task, but a lively creative process that can only be undertaken by writers, and particularly experienced authors. Grillo was aware of its challenges: *recreating a work is much more difficult than creating one. This is because one must preserve the personality, work, and style of the original author, without losing one's own identity as a writer* (Bishqemi, A. 2004). Grillo strives to maintain the vitality and moral lessons of these stories, making them valuable for children's education.

Researcher Kastriot Gjika, at a scientific conference dedicated to the writer Naum Prifti, emphasized that the author has engaged in several genres of children's literature and praised him as an original voice and a master of Albanian prose. Dr. Gjika highlighted the works *Legends and Stories about Skanderbeg* and *Mountain Breeze, Field Breeze*, noting the masterful qualities of the narrative, particularly the first person storytelling and the broadening of themes related to the psychological development of children. He pointed out that novellas like *Cikoja and Beni* and other stories related to the National Liberation war express narrative mastery, where the artistic quality leaves a deeper impression than the subject matter itself. Regarding children's fairy tales, he referred to Naum Prifti as the initiator of cultivated fairy tales with educational and scientific elements, such as the volumes *A Month of Fairy Tales* and *The Water Drop*, which was adapted into an animated film, as well as *19 Stories about Skanderbeg* (Gjika, K. 2024).

3. DISCUSSIONS

As we can see from the works studied, as well as from our collective experience as educators and researchers, linguistic and literary diversity in children's literature is a reflection of the cultural and identity richness of the Albanian nation. We cannot claim to include all the authors who have contributed with their works to the promotion of linguistic diversity in this paper, as mentioned earlier, this is an ongoing effort that will be reflected in future works. However, in this paper, we aim to emphasize the great importance of promoting linguistic diversity in the education of future generations from a neurodidactic perspective, where new knowledge and concepts are built upon the foundation of the old ones to make them more sustainable and to encourage the application of social-emotional learning in various and simultaneously challenging activities in the classroom and the ever-changing global society. Specifically, from a critical and didactic perspective, we bring the experience of a teacher in her work promoting linguistic diversity in what she calls: The ease of learning the Albanian language by Greek minority students. Teaching these students makes one sensitive to the practical and theoretical issues they face and the difficulties they encounter. It is fundamental for every teacher that success in their work is truly successful and effective. Language is a system of signs that helps us communicate. It is the fundamental tool of communication in human society. In all countries, there is linguistic diversity to some degree, and there are also various ways to manage this diversity. Many interesting pedagogical approaches are applied in bilingual regions and multilingual school classrooms in different parts of Europe, including Albania, particularly in the municipalities of Dropull, Finiq, and Saranda.

The Indo-European language family is vast, and within it, among the many languages, lie the Albanian and Greek languages, as two distinct languages without other subdivisions. Greek and Albanian have coexisted for centuries, sharing both significant similarities and differences. What we aim to identify and analyze are the challenges faced by Greek-speaking students from the Greek minority in Albania when learning the Albanian language. We must take into account that children raised and educated in Greek-speaking families have specific linguistic and cultural foundations. They are most suited to their mother tongue, and learning a foreign language is not easy for them. For minority students to properly learn the Albanian language, they must become familiar with Albanian culture and traditions. They need to understand the historical and cultural context of this people.

Learning would be easier for students if they were introduced to customs, traditions, and historical events that have marked the evolution of the language over the centuries. However, beyond traditions, they must work with books that best meet their needs and their linguistic level. The current schoolbooks used in classrooms are designed and structured for teaching the Albanian language to Albanian children, for whom this language is their mother tongue, and whose linguistic intuition understands and accepts it without difficulty. We must not forget that the mother tongue is, in addition to knowledge, an emotional connection that each of us has with our ancestors, and Greek-speaking students do not have this connection with the Albanian language but with the Greek one, which is perfectly normal and understandable. This is a connection that should be accepted, respected, and taken into account when we decide to teach these students the Albanian language.

Some of the issues encountered include, for example, the extensive use of the Gheg and Tosk dialects. We notice a wide use of both literary and non-literary texts in the Gheg and Tosk dialects. The vocabulary accompanying the text is not sufficient for this group of students, and teachers supplement it with additional Albanian-Albanian and Albanian-Greek dictionaries. This cannot be offered by all teachers, as they must have knowledge of the Greek language. This is somewhat difficult to achieve.

The long-standing coexistence with the Greek minority has led to many borrowings from Greek and vice versa, making the learning of the Albanian language easier. However, over the years, younger generations are moving away from dialectalisms, and on both sides Greek-speaking and Albanian-speaking students learn the standard language. This distances them even further from their common points, making it more difficult to learn one language or the other. School textbooks should contain literary and non-literary texts written in the standard language, as the use of the Gheg and Tosk dialects complicates or makes it impossible for students to understand. This is an added difficulty for them and reduces their desire to learn. More contemporary texts should be selected, with a rich and clear language. The curriculum should include authors and works that are closer to everyday reality, with neologisms, a rich vocabulary, and academic language. Throughout the 9-year cycle, students should be accompanied by a supportive Albanian-Greek dictionary that includes all new and difficult words. What we must be careful about is always finding an Albanian word and avoiding replacing it in translation with foreign or outdated words, emphasizes Eruglina Haska, a teacher at the Bularat Unified Secondary School.

The role of teachers and specialists of different fields in the school is extremely important, because they can positively influence the language model, personality and openness to multilingualism. With their grateful attitude as well as with the selective integration of their students' languages (in this case the Albanian language) in the regular lesson, they can use linguistic diversity as a potential (Selimi, N. 2023).

The field of children's literature is valuable as it helps teachers, librarians, publishers, curriculum planners, and others decide on the materials to be used in the educational setting and to help young people develop a sense of culture and identity (Roehl, K. 2018). In today's globalized world, the importance of diversity in children's literature cannot be overstated. Books serve as mirrors and windows into the broad tapestry of human experiences. They offer children a chance to see themselves reflected and to explore the lives of others from different backgrounds.

Why Does Diversity Matter? Children's books that act as mirrors allow young readers to see themselves, their cultures, and their experiences represented. This validation can be incredibly powerful for a child's self-esteem and identity development. Introducing children to different characters and stories offers windows into the lives of people from various cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. This exposure increases their awareness and promotes values of empathy and understanding. A diverse range of books challenges stereotypes and often unconscious biases that can take root at an early age. By presenting characters from different backgrounds in positive and realistic roles, literature can transform perceptions and attitudes. The massive shift in the publishing industry toward more inclusive stories is not just news; it's a movement. Books that highlight diversity promote an inclusive mindset, teaching children that differences are not only tolerated but also celebrated (Ronaldino, S. 2023). Children's Literature can serve as a bridge to different cultures and traditions. It introduces young readers to customs, languages, and perspectives they may not encounter in their immediate surroundings. Exposure to diverse cultures through literature promotes cultural awareness and fosters an appreciation for the richness of our global community (Giglets News, 2023).

4. CONCLUSIONS

In children's literature, linguistic diversity plays a key role in preserving and enriching the Albanian language, including its dialects and linguistic variants. Children who learn their language and literature from an early age develop a stronger connection to their cultural and national roots. The inclusion of dialects such as Tosk and Gheg helps strengthen a shared sense of linguistic identity, making the language more vibrant and diverse. For Albanian children living in the diaspora, literature that incorporates linguistic and literary diversity serves as an important bridge to maintaining their connection to their homeland. Through literature in Albanian, they can keep their language and culture alive, despite being surrounded by other languages and cultures.

Children's literature is valuable in providing an opportunity to engage with literature, cultural knowledge, emotional intelligence, creativity, social development, personal growth, and the history of literature across generations. Exposing children to quality literature can contribute to shaping responsible, successful, and caring individuals (Crippen, 2012). Children's literature, as a subject at the university level, but also an integral part of the primary school curriculum, aims to acquaint students with outstanding foreign works and authors, to expand knowledge of global issues addressed by various authors. The information they receive through literature and readings of various natures made them well acquainted with the diversity of human society, of human values. *A large part of children's literature is represented by fairy tales, fables, stories and novels, which have the final goal of transmitting basic universal values and making children aware of many aspects of life* (Pulimeno, Manuela; Piscitelli, Prisco; Colazzo, Salvatore 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In an increasingly globalized world, where Albania and Albanian territories are facing various international influences, children who grow up reading literature that reflects linguistic and cultural diversity are better prepared to embrace this interconnectedness. Therefore, preserving linguistic and literary diversity faces contemporary challenges, particularly in the context of globalization and modern technology. One of the main challenges is the trend toward language standardization, which often comes at the expense of dialects and linguistic varieties. If literature and education focus solely on a standardized language, this may lead to the loss of the richness that comes from dialectal and linguistic diversity.

The younger generation is often influenced by international culture and content, gravitating more toward books, films, and games in other languages, which are more accessible and appealing. From our perspective, we think and suggest: the education and promotion of literature that includes dialects and different narrative forms, reflecting the power of books, stories, myths, legends, and folklore in transforming and raising awareness of literary heritage, cultural diversity, multilingualism, and multiculturalism. These serve as invaluable gateways to a world of truthfulness, encouraging critical thinking about a world that changes every day.

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