

From “Ska Problèm” to “Don Uorri”: Transidiomatic Practices in Albania

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Introduction

Albania constitutes a remarkable social laboratory for the study of a locality that experienced a particularly sudden encounter with global cultural flows. After World War II, this country suffered an abrupt and total interruption of contacts with the Western world—this, after centuries of continuous interactions with European countries and almost twenty years of Italian colonization (Vickers 1995; Morozzo 1997; Vickers and Pettifer 1997). For almost half a century (1945-1991), Enver Hoxha’s totalitarian regime cut off 3.5 million Albanians from contact with the outside world, turning Albania into a nightmarish experiment of autocratic self-reliance and cultural insularity. People were not allowed to travel (even movements from town to town had to be authorized in advance by the government), foreign broadcasts were jammed, and any attempt to reach the outside world was punished with long detention (Pipa 1990; Kasoraho 1997; Martelli 1998). Many Western books (both fiction and non-fiction) were banned, and the study of foreign languages, principally French and Russian, was tightly regulated, ensuring that only the state elite had access to them. Then, in 1991, with the fall of the totalitarian regime that had survived for five years after Hoxha’s death, the wall of isolation suddenly collapsed (Lubonja and Hodgson 1997).

At this time Albanians, some of whom had first glimpsed foreign television broadcasts in the 1980s by illegally rigging their TV sets, were flooded with the now completely uncensored programs offered by European channels, Italian commercial networks above all. After 1991, Albanians’ impressions of the “West” came from advertisements promoting commodities unavailable in the local economy, game shows that provided the possibility of wealth within easy reach, and newscasts more interested in entertainment than information (Vehbiu and Devole 1996). This skewed representation would later be modified by out-migrants’ narratives about their host countries and the influx of their remittances into the local economy, the increasing penetration of global media conglomerates, and local contacts with the international community (representatives of the European Union, United Nations’ organizations, international Nongovernmental Organizations, and businesses). These interactions with the Western world led Albanians to believe that their life after communism would reach Western standards in no time. This not only produced unrealistic expectations of the new democratic state (which had two catastrophic political crisis and full-scale anarchic revolts), but also prompted people to develop skills perceived

as valuable in a free market, including linguistic skills. Since the fall of the Hoxha regime, for Albanians, knowledge of foreign languages has become one of the few commodities with a reliable value in the job markets, and is the best opportunity for their social and geographical mobility.

This paper explores the multiple effects of foreign languages on the Albanian socio-cultural environment, and focuses on the different avenues available for people learning foreign languages. Newly acquired linguistic knowledge not only becomes a valuable commodity within the local/global linguistic marketplace but, more importantly, produces a creolized zone of transidiomatic practices that shapes how multilingual Albanians imagine the rich world, interact with its local representatives, and desire to belong to a “global community.” In turn, this social imagination, interactions with foreigners, and desired belonging inevitably lead to fantasies of out-migration.

Mobile People/Mobile Texts

Chez Xhemalis

To give you a sense of Albania’s contemporary communicative environment, I would like to start by describing an evening I spent in Tirana last year. In June 2000 I found myself in the middle of the Xhemali family reunion. The Xhemali children who had migrated to the United States were back home, and this was cause for celebration. The oldest daughter, Drita, left Tirana in the early 1990s, settling first in Germany, then in New York City. She now lives there in Astoria, a Queens neighborhood with a high concentration of Christian-Orthodox Greeks. Her Albanian husband, Gencit, chose this residence after converting to Orthodoxy in Greece. Drita speaks fluent Albanian, German, and English, and has modest proficiency in Italian. Gencit speaks fluent Albanian, Greek, English, and Italian.

Also reunited with the family in Tirana was Drita’s brother, Ildir, who lives two floors above Drita in the same apartment building with his wife, Helga. Helga is from Germany, the daughter of a German mother and a Turkish father. She lived for 6 months in Tirana some years ago, and now can speak Albanian, English, and German. Last summer she went on vacation to her father’s hometown in an area of Central Turkey which saw, over the centuries, the settlement of different waves of Albanian migrants. At that time she met Turks of Albanian origin who still spoke their forefathers’ language. Thanks to her stay in Tirana, she could communicate with them.

Busily serving food at the reunion was Emeralda, the only sister who still lives in Tirana. She works as a translator for an international organization and speaks English at work all day. After work she interacts with her friends in Albanian and

Italian. Every night she watches South American soap operas (dubbed into Italian), listens to Italian pop music, and surfs the English-saturated Internet.

Drita invited a girlfriend, Kristina, to the party. Kristina migrated to New York City around the same time as Drita and was also visiting relatives in Tirana. She currently lives in the Bronx with her husband Georges, a third generation American and a descendant of an Albanian-Italian family that migrated from Sicily to the United States at the turn of the century. At home Georges' family speaks Arberesh, the variety of Albanian language brought to southern Italy in the 15th century by Catholic refugees from Northern Albania who fled the Ottoman empire. In public Georges' family speaks English. They communicate with their daughter-in-law in a mixture of Arberesh, English, and southern regional Italian.

In the Xhemali family apartment, the Albanian language blended with English, Italian, and occasionally German. The TV was tuned to an Italian channel, while from another room you could hear the beat of Nuyorican hip-hop (some Puerto Rican New Yorkers had introduced Ildir to their music and he had promptly copied the tapes).

Communicative practices such as those of the Xhemali family are spreading like wild fire in contemporary Tirana—an area that only fifteen years ago had severely limited contact with the outside world. The Xhemalis, however, as an example of a multilingual group, are not a new phenomenon. After all, social groups in reciprocal contact have always learned and borrowed from each other's language(s), a tendency that accelerated as colonization and international trade gave rise to *lingua francas*, pidgins, and creoles. What is new and impressive is the extraordinary simultaneity and co-presence of these languages produced through a multiplicity of communicative channels, from face-to-face communication to mass media.

I propose the term *transidiomatic practice* to describe the communicative behavior of transnational groups that interact using different languages and communicative codes simultaneously present in a range of communicative channels. Transidiomatic practices are found in environments that are characterized by the co-presence of multilingual talk and electronic media, such as the Xhemalis' party, but also in such places as the offices of international organizations, airport lounges, the board meetings of international companies, and political rallies at anti-globalization protests. In these environments, an expanding translocal multilingualism interacts with the electronic technologies of contemporary communication.

Transidiomatic practices usually produce linguistic innovations grafted onto an English structure, but any number of other languages could be involved in these recombinations. Moreover, transidiomatic practices are no longer solely contained in areas of colonial and post-colonial contact. Rather, using multiple channels of electronic communication, they flow over the entire world, from contact zones,

borderlands, and diasporic nets of relationships to the most remote and self-contained areas of the globe. These communicative resources are most employed by people with the linguistic and cognitive skills to operate in multiple, co-present, and overlapping communicative frames. The “language” they use to communicate depends on the contextual nature of their multi-site interactions, but is necessarily mixed, translated, and creolized. In other words, it is transidiomatic.

Anyone present in transnational milieus, whose talk is mediated by deterritorialized technologies, and who interacts with both present and distant people, will find him or herself immersed in transidiomatic practices. Through these practices, diasporic and local groups alike recombine their identities by maintaining simultaneous presence in a multiplicity of sites and by participating in elective networks spread over transnational territories. These recombinant identities are based on multi-presence, multilingualism, and decentered political and social engagements.

In Albania, this transidiomatic proclivity is one of the by-products of the shift from Hoxha’s totalitarian regime to an almost stateless society shaped by transnational forces. After 50 years of dictatorship, political, social, and cultural supremacy is now in the hands of transnational governmental bodies (such as the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, International Organization for Migration, United Nations High Commission on Refugees, and the United Nations Development Program), multinational companies, international relief organizations and churches, and various multinational military forces. Albania is now dependent upon a globalized governmentality that scholars are starting to call “mobile sovereignty” (Sassen 1996; Cheah and Robbins 1998; Hardt and Negri 2000).

Mobile sovereignty is linked to the emergence of two new layers in the international division of cultural labor: a class made up of cosmopolitan elites (multinational corporate executives, UN bureaucrats, the staff of international NGOs, international media producers), and a class made up of the local workers catering to these elites (secretaries, computer technicians, interpreters, local politicians, and so on). Among the many skills that local workers possess, knowledge of foreign languages is the most desirable, and is imported and acquired through electronic media, the arrival of international organizations, and return migrants. This transidiomatic knowledge constitutes the best, and sometimes the only, resource currently available to Albanians, especially youth, for social and geographical mobility.

To understand how foreign languages (especially English and Italian) flow into Albania, and how they are influencing the desires and prospects of locals, it is crucial to investigate the local impact of what Appadurai (1996) identifies as the two foundational diacritics of “modernity-at-large”: mobile people (Western missionaries and businessmen, the staff of international organizations, and return migrants) and mobile electronic technologies (from television to Internet mailing lists).

In the next section, I focus on two of the various sociolinguistic forces that have had an impact on people like Emeraldal Xhemali, the sister who "stayed behind": international organizations and television networks. International agencies and foreign television outfits warrant this attention not only because of their predominance in the communicative environment of contemporary Tirana, but also because their presence in Albania is mediated precisely by people like Emeraldal. Interpreters and translators are on the transidiomatic frontline of the sociocultural encounter dictated by contemporary capitalism. They are gatekeepers between global forces and the local environment.

Globalizing Agents

International organizations

Since 1994, but especially during the Kosovo war, international organizations have had an important impact on the Albanian economy. The density of international organizations in the country reached its apex in 1999, with more than 150 fully staffed agencies present in Tirana. An intricate network of UN agencies, relief organizations, military forces, international NGOs, and church groups created the conditions for a steady supply of work for people able to interact and communicate with these organizations' multinational personnel. Taxi-drivers, hotel operators, security personnel, secretaries, and interpreters became some of the highest paid workers in Albania, receiving daily wages that exceeded the monthly salaries of many senior public employees.

Secretaries and interpreters became the most crucial workers to the smooth functioning of the local chapter of an international organization. They not only handled all their employer's requests for translation, but became a sort of cultural mediator, arranging a soft landing for international staff sent to Albania without any preparation for how to handle the local situation. Italian relief organizations, in particular, demanded improvisational skills from both Italian and local staff.

Most secretaries and interpreters were college-educated women in their twenties. With the arrival of foreign aid, young people, no longer interested in the stagnant state sectors, and unable or unwilling to migrate, sought financial and personal fulfillment working for the international community. As a side effect, gender, age, and class acquired new values in a job market stimulated by the foreign aid economy. Highly paid positions as bilingual secretaries or production assistants were opened almost exclusively to young women (young men were, for the most part, hired in less prestigious positions, such as security guards or drivers). Youth (and to some extent, feminine beauty) is still today a determinant factor in obtaining a lucrative job. A new ideology, easily visible in popular culture, promotes youthful

fashion and such beauty products as anti-aging cremes, which are ironically used by women in their twenties—the only ones who can afford them.

The agencies that favored hiring young Albanian women tended to be those that offered humanitarian services. A minority of agencies, especially those concerned with public policy (from finance to law and order), hired men as interpreters and women as receptionists. Local hiring patterns took on a familiar gendered divide: interpreters involved in interacting with people as service providers (from health care to food distributions) tended to be women, while interpreters involved in translating during bureaucratic encounters (from asylum-seeking interviews to meetings with local politicians) tended to be men.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was one of the agencies that favored hiring male interpreters. With staff from all over the world (Spain, Uganda, Japan) the organization relied on interpreters to determine the legitimacy of asylum claims filed by supposed Kosovar refugees. These interpreters, Kosovar refugees themselves, played a pivotal, though often unrecognized, role in managing the interaction between asylum applicants and the international community represented by the UNHCR. In the year 2000, this role evolved from simply translating refugees' stories and mediating between refugees and humanitarian organizations, to identifying bogus claims for refugee status filed by Albanian citizens. Last winter, a growing number of Albanians, locked out of rich countries by immigration restrictions, increasingly sought asylum as the only legal means of migrating. Thus, the UNHCR Registration Office in Tirana devoted considerable energy to detecting Albanians posing as Kosovar refugees. Every interview conducted by the office's staff and interpreters included careful screening of the identity of the asylum seekers—a process that depended heavily on the interpreters' fluency in multiple Albanian dialects as well as in English.

UNHCR interpreters were the most transidiomatic of speakers among Kosovar refugees. They were fluent in the Gheg dialect spoken in Kosovo and able to detect its differences from the Gheg spoken across the mountains in Northern Albania. They were also conversant in Albania's national, "standard" language, and effective in an English-language environment. All were male and most came from an urban, college-educated milieu. They were recognized as "community elders" by both refugees and the UNHCR, even if still in their twenties. In most cases, interpreters' assessments of asylum applicants were heavily influenced by such communicative factors as applicants' accents, looks, or politeness. The interpreters often seem more interested in detecting the "wrong" accent (a North Albanian accent when speaking Gheg) than in discovering solid evidence of applicants' claims. From the moment the asylum-seekers approached them to set up interviews, the interpreters turned into linguistic detectives—they tuned their ears to accents, checked clothes and communicative behavior, and observed women's gazes and postures. In a context where almost half of the applications were suspected to be fraudulent, interpreters

acted more as gatekeepers than as facilitators between asylum-seekers and the UNHCR. They turned their metalinguistic awareness about local communicative practices into a techno-political device for determining who was a "real" Kosovar and who was not, thus directly influencing applicants' access to aid and protection.

By 2001, when the UNHCR closed its Registration Office in Tirana, most of these interpreters had migrated or intended to do so. Ironically, international aid, after first creating a highly paid but temporary local labor force, created a new demand for out-migration by young local intelligentsia, whose employers were leaving the area.

Television

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on television as a mobile text that shapes the Albanian social imagination of the "West" and everyday local practices. Television, by operating in the interface between global forces and local processes, offers new rules and resources for the construction of social identity and cultural belonging. When the rapid, mediated flow of images, scenarios, or emotions merges with the unfulfilled needs and expectations of Albanian audiences, the result is a recombinant production of their subjectivity.

Television, the most visible and widespread of the many agents of globalization, allows Albanians to experiment with imaginary identity makeovers. It allows them to play along with Italian game shows and dream that they could win a fortune if only they could cross the Adriatic, to watch documentaries on health care in England and imagine taking their babies to the hospital for free check-ups, to listen to Alpine weather reports and feel the rush of skiing down black diamond slopes. This social imagination seeps into everyday practices (such as borrowing English words to use in conversation with their friends, window shopping in front of stores selling Italian shoes, hanging out in Tirana's only Irish pub) and finds its most intense expression in the widely-shared desire to migrate (D'Andra and Marta 1993; Resta 1996; Limes 1997).

In Albania today the most striking feature of the local mediascape is the number of TV stations crowding the country's airwaves: more than 34 for a population of 3 million people, a ratio not economically viable even in the best of markets. This does not include either satellite channels—since according to a USIS-Irex report for 1999, around 40 percent of Tirana households have satellite dishes—or the local reception of Italian and Greek networks broadcasting mainly from the South.

Most of these TV stations cannot afford to produce local programs, so they resort to pirating shows that are broadcast via satellite by global/regional networks (such as CNN, BBC, MTV, ITN, Eurosport, or RAI International, the satellite division of Italian public television). Until very recently, they did so without even bothering to

translate the shows. Albanians' desire to follow these programs resulted in an increase in foreign language acquisition.

After the passage in fall 1998 of a new law requiring local stations to broadcast at least 70 percent of their programs in Albanian, some of the stations began to subtitle foreign programs. The law, as of 2001, has not yet been enforced, however, having vanished for the time being in the halls of the Ministry of Telecommunications. The stations have hired a disproportionate number of translators, in some cases amounting to one-third of the entire staff. These translators, almost all women, monitor satellite broadcasts and select the relevant material to copy, edit, and translate.

For news and sportscasts, this selection and translation must usually be accomplished in the short interval between the morning broadcasts from abroad, between 9 and 11 am, and the local lunchtime news hour, usually around 2 pm. Here we find a preponderance of young women in charge of not only production, but also news casting. In the case of one of the most popular TV stations, TV Klan, each morning the young (and pretty) anchorwoman Mirela Albi monitors the most important foreign news networks, selects the news worthy of local distribution, copies entire segments on tape, translates the reporting, and records her voice over the edited images. Later on, she anchors the news hour and provides a connecting chat between the pre-recorded segments, which account for 60 to 70 percent of the total air time. Ms. Albi has achieved local cult status and, according to most Albanian men in Tirana, is one of the few Albanian women who has become a popular object of desire. Ms. Albi speaks proficient Italian, English, and Greek.

Other foreign programs subject to transidiomatic intervention for local rebroadcast are soap operas (or *telenovelas*). The most interesting local channel that rebroadcasts soap operas is Tele Norba Shiqpetare (TNSH), the local affiliate of an Italian company, properly Tele Norba (TN), which has an extensive network in south-east Italy. TN has been active in Albania since 1996, initially relaying its signal over the Albanian territory by using the relay antennae of the Albanian national network, RTSH, which had the advantage of being under Army surveillance 24 hours a day. This is a very valuable service in a country where people routinely steal such metal products as phone wires or manhole covers. In 1999, TN installed a local production team in Tirana, in charge of producing a 30 minute news program and translating the soap operas.

TNSH's soap operas were originally produced in Argentina, then imported into Italy by Mediaset, which is owned by media mogul and current Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi. This company dubbed the soap operas into Italian and broadcast them nationally in 1994, eventually reselling them to TN for local broadcasting in southeast Italy, and they were thus also viewed in Albania. In 1999, under the threat of Albania's new media law, TN started subtitling the dubbed *telenovelas* in Albanian.

In order to do so, they hired a team of 12 young women, all recent college graduates or senior students. These translators work in two shifts of five hours each, for a monthly wage of \$150-200. The actual rate is based on speed, ability, and seniority.

The translators view the shows in VHS format, create subtitles on a computer, and send the subtitled files by e-mail to Italy, where they are edited, synchronized with the images, and broadcast via the relay stations. The *telenovelas* are broadcast twice daily (between 8 am and 12 pm and again between 3 and 7 pm), thus comprising 90 percent of local programming by the station. The other 10 percent is the TNSQ newscast, produced in the almost same manner as Albi’s TV Klan show, with the only difference being that the content for short stories, which are simply read by the anchor, comes from monitoring news agencies on the Internet. In January 2000, TV Klan started competing with TNSQ by broadcasting the same *telenovelas*, this time translated directly from the original Spanish by a translator familiar with this language. After four months TV Klan had to discontinue the broadcasts for lack of audience, since people preferred to hear Italian while reading the Albanian subtitles.

The simultaneous arrival of international organizations and foreign television produced work and leisure environments where Albanians’ first transidiomatic practices blossomed. Initially, the linguistic elements of these practices consisted of transidiomatic floaters: words or expressions, either borrowed from a global language or produced locally by mixing local and foreign codes, able to bring into the vernacular the cosmopolitan patina of global communication. Italian greetings (“ciao”) or vernacular expressions (“vaffanculo”—fuck off, “che voglia!”—how I want it, “stai zitto”—shut up!) were the most commonly used, but English expressions or their literal translations (such as “have a nice time” with “një kohë të mirë,” an expression that matches the English one word for word and which did not exist previously) were also quite popular.

The use of transidiomatic floaters seemed to respond to the local desire to render everyday interactions more cosmopolitan. This practice was adapted mostly by young people and individuals in networks closely associated with the “expatriate” community (the staff of international agencies and NGOs, language teachers, military personnel, and the accidental tourist, businessman, or anthropologist).

Don Uorri as a Transidiomatic Floater

I became aware of the traditional Albanian saying “Ska problèm” (“No problem”) in 1996 through some migrants I met in Italy. It was often evoked in conversation as a way to assure each other about the positive development of some worrisome affair. In 1998, during my first stay in Albania, I was surrounded by the expression used by drivers who lost the way, restaurateurs dealing with my pleas during a black out, or informants responding to my requests for help. I came to the conclusion that “ska problèm” had spread to interactions between Albanians and

foreigners and played a major role in the cross-cultural repertoire of Albanian stranger-handlers. However, by the end of 1999 it had almost disappeared, replaced by one of the first transidiomatic floaters regularly used in everyday interaction: “Don uorri” (the Albanian pronunciation of the English “Don’t worry”).

It is worth noting that Albanians could have opted to hybridize “ska problèm” by simply pronouncing it with the English stress on the first syllable “ska pròblem.” This anglicized pronunciation might still have evoked the semantic connotation of the English language, while maintaining the local vernacular. The switch to a full English form (“don uorri”) reflected, in my view, a desire to display full control of a foreign language and to index the speaker’s superior social position, at a time when, as I have already pointed out, knowledge of foreign languages was perceived as a valuable tool for social mobility.

The floater “don uorri” sometimes was immediately followed up by another one: “Be heppi,” a clear testimony to the penetrating power of American pop music and the pervasive influence of Bobby McFerrin’s vocalizations (his song and video were released in 1988, but reached Albania only in the mid 1990s). When I first heard this popular refrain, I ascribed this linguistic shift to the global penetration of American pop culture and filed it away. However, the situation may be somewhat more complex.

In 1994, Tele Norba produced a comedy show called “Radio Durazzo,” which built a large audience in Southern Italy by poking fun at Albanian immigrants and Italians’ interactions with them (Durazzo, or Durrës, is Albania’s main port). Regardless of this, or maybe because of this, it also quickly became popular in Albania. This show was more recently replaced by a parody of the *telenovelas* genre. This parody, called “Melensa,” which entertained Radio Durazzo’s audiences in Italy and Albania, included among its characters an Anglican priest named “Don Uorri.” His partner was a Catholic priest specializing in romantic confessions, and thus aptly named, again using Italian pronunciation of English idiomatic expressions, “Don Brek Maiart.” In Tirana, some people recalled these shows in commenting on the popularity of Tele Norba and its local affiliate, TNSH. According to a recent estimate (ISB 2001), TNSH has the highest audience share in the late afternoon time slot (4:30 to 7:30 pm), when it broadcasts *telenovelas*.

Moreover, in 2000 an Italian website (altavista.it) advertised itself with a testimonial from a fictional character, also called “Don Uorri,” who had the typical features of a Mafia Don. This advertising campaign ran in most national newspapers, including *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, which publishes a sister edition in Albania (*Gazeta Shqiptarë*).

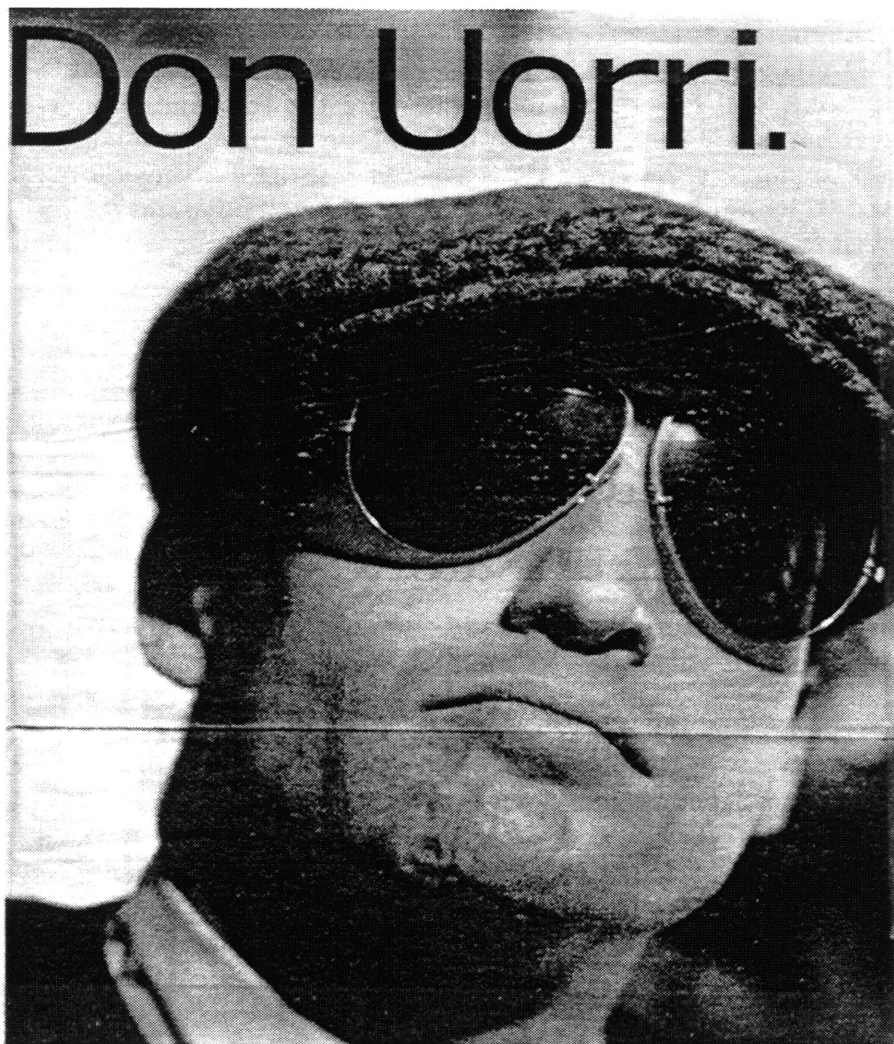


Figure 1: Don Uorri

Since the Italian media holds a strong influence over Albanian popular culture, the use of “don uorri” by Albanians was most likely precipitated, in part, by exposure to these Italian Don Uorris. This is in itself a transidiomatic process, where the Southern Italian local title of respect “don” was creolized by the English “don’t worry” to produce fictional characters with ambiguous qualities. When Albanians speak this transidiomatic floater, especially while interacting with Italians (including this researcher), they mark not only their knowledge of foreign languages but also awareness of Italian TV shows and advertising. In so doing, they display their

familiarity with and desire to belong to a cosmopolitan milieu immersed in global cultural flows (such as tongue-in-cheek stereotypes about Italians as *mafiosi*).

While more research will be needed to substantiate the full significance of “don uorri” in Albania (I happened to run into the Italian Don Uorris in the last days of fieldwork in Tirana), I suggest that the Albanians who use this transidiomatic floater had been exposed to its multiple sources—the song, the comedy, and the ad—and applied this new twist to their habitual way of reassuring stressed-out Westerners.

Conclusion

We are now witnessing in Albania daily interaction between Albanian and foreign languages, especially Italian and English. The collapse of the communist regime, its autarchic agenda, and its key institutions, combined with the opening of the country, has produced an awareness of the marginal role of the Albanian language both in local interactions with foreigners and on the global stage. A growing number of Albanians, especially urban youth, are learning foreign languages despite the almost complete absence of foreign language education. As I have explored in this paper, foreign media and the staff of international aid agencies have become the new language pushers for thousands of young people and their families.

Linguistic knowledge has not only become a valuable commodity in the local/global job market, but more importantly is viewed as a signifier of belonging to a world culture. As such, it produces a social imagination of and desire for the “rich” world that inevitably leads to fantasies and projects of out-migration. Albanians engaged in transidiomatic practices use their newly acquired multilingualism not only to access wealth but also to display the end of their isolation, their desire to be incorporated into the contemporary world, and their ability to imagine a better life.

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