



## A TRAVEL NARRATIVE BY GUSTAV MEYER

**Irimi Dibra<sup>1</sup>**

Department of German Language,  
University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi",  
Albania

### **Abstract:**

The journey in literature symbolizes the pursuit of knowledge, personal development and confrontation with the unknown—a theme that remains relevant across all literary periods. This study examines travel writing as a genre that intertwines scientific reporting with personal experience, emphasizing the importance of reliability in modern scholarly journeys. In this context, the work of the linguist Gustav Meyer is analyzed, presenting him not only as a philologist but also as a travel writer with poetic sensitivity. The text represents a form of autobiographical travel narrative in which literary description is combined with ethnographic and linguistic field research in an Arbëreshë community in Italy. The study highlights Meyer's contribution to the analysis of sociolinguistic dynamics within the Albanian diaspora, the development of comparative linguistic methods, and the documentation of dialects and vocabulary. It also underscores the significance of such journeys for understanding the preservation of national identity across centuries.

**Keywords:** philologist, travel writing, ethnographic, vocabulary, Arbëreshë

### **1. Introduction**

The various travel narratives aim to convey topographical, ethnological, historical, economic and socio-political facts, as well as personal experiences and impressions. A key criterion for scientific travel is the reliability of the information. Accurate reporting began in the modern era, often in the form of diaries. New scientific knowledge was brought by geographical and ethnological research expeditions. In literary travel descriptions, however, facts are often embellished subjectively (Meyers Lexikonredaktion, 1995, p. 170). In literature, travel has long been one of the oldest and most enduring themes, spanning from antiquity to modern times. Travel literature encompasses all writings that focus on the experience of traveling, ranging from factual descriptions and practical guides to literary narratives and adventure novels. It appears as early as antiquity with Homer's *Odyssey*, evolves through the Middle Ages with pilgrimages and novels, and after the geographical discoveries of around 1500, it becomes closely linked to

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence: email [irini.pirani@unishk.edu.al](mailto:irini.pirani@unishk.edu.al)

the exploration of the world, utopian ideas, satire (as in Voltaire, 18th century), and adventure (Von Wilpert, 1969, pp. 631–633).

*“The journey to other places and the trial that arises from encountering the unknown — sometimes undertaken for the sake of the travel itself and its educational impact, sometimes in order to get to know oneself through facing the unknown — is a fundamental thematic principle in odysseys, in the adventurous journeys of heroes in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, in travel narratives, in satires on wanderlust and in fictional dream journeys”* (Daemmrich & Daemmrich, 1995, p. 140).

Travel literature mixes fact and fiction: the narratives are often based on real experiences of travelers, but they are artistically transformed to emphasize learning, change, and discovery.

Typical examples of this interplay between fact and literary elaboration are Chateaubriand's *Voyage en Amérique* (1793) and *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811). This form influenced the French literary tradition (Lamartine, Nerval, Stendhal), which stands alongside sentimental journeys (Sterne, Hermes) and the travel narratives of German authors such as Johann Gottfried Seume, Johann Georg Jacobi, Moritz August von Thuemmel, and Heinrich Heine.

In the travel writings of Chateaubriand and Goethe (*Italienische Reise* - 1816-17), a characteristic narrative style emerges, in which the traveler's observation turns into reflection: the author connects places, people, architecture, art and history, developing a "dialogue" with the surrounding world, thereby understanding better the relationships between things and acquiring new insights. This narrative style became typical of the literary tradition of travel writing - from travel narratives and critical comparisons between the individual's world and the foreign world, to satires and modern texts that seek profound interpretation. In this tradition, traveling characters appear in many forms (wanderers, adventurers, pilgrims, artists), yet all are driven by the same desire: to discover the secrets of the world. Among the authors of the 18th–20th century literature who contributed to this tradition are Friedrich Nicolai, Karl Philipp Moritz, Georg Forster, Carl von Voß, Stendhal, Laurence Sterne, Washington Irving, Theodor Fontane, Voltaire, Alexander Pushkin, James Joyce, Thomas Mann.

From antiquity to Romanticism, travel serves as a test of maturity, a means of confronting the unknown and a way of viewing the familiar world critically, as the stranger or traveler exposes the weaknesses of his own civilization. It fulfills informative, didactic, moral and social functions. In Romanticism, travel becomes an inner experience that connects an individual with nature, self-discovery, and reflections on human existence, thus giving the journey a subjective and poetic dimension.

In modern literature (19th–20th century), the motif expands and becomes more psychological and philosophical.

Essentially, travel in literature appears as a central aspect of human experience, connecting adventure, knowledge, social criticism and spiritual development (Daemmrich & Daemmrich, 1995, pp. 140–145).

Scientific and documentary travels gained significance with authors such as J. Georg Forster, Alexander von Humboldt, and Chamisso, who described the world, nature, and cultures (Von Wilpert, 1969, pp. 631–633).

## 2. Examples from the tradition of travel writing

*“The description of peoples, their nature, customs, religion, forms of government, and language, is so embedded in the travel writing produced in Europe after the sixteenth century that one assumes ethnography to be essential to the genre”* (Rubies, 2002, p.242).

The tradition of travel writing constitutes an important source for ethnographic studies, offering a unique combination of narrative descriptions, factual documentation, and ethnographic analysis. It shows that travelers' accounts are not only literature, but also rich sources for academic and historical research.

Here are some examples from works of the travel writing<sup>ii</sup>, mainly from the 19th century:

- *Italienische Reise (Italian Journey)* is a travel narrative and diary by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, documenting his journey through Italy between 1786 and 1788:

*“October 1st*

*I went and looked at the city from various perspectives, and since it was Sunday, I noticed the uncleanliness of the streets. This made me reflect. There is indeed some kind of police regulation on this matter: people push their rubbish into the corners; I also see large ships moving about here and there, lying still in certain places and taking away the rubbish – for people from the surrounding islands who need manure; but there is neither consistency nor rigor in these arrangements, and the most inexcusable is the uncleanliness of the city, considering that it was designed entirely for cleanliness, just like any Dutch city”* (Goethe, 1870, p. 65).

- The British poet Lord Byron describes the roads and cities he visited during his journey to Albania in 1809, noting that the country was relatively unknown to Europeans at that time:

*“Circumstances, of little consequence to mention, led Mr. Hobhouse and myself into that country before we visited any other part of the Ottoman dominions; and with the exception of Major Leake, then officially resident at Joannina, no other Englishmen have ever advanced beyond the capital into the interior, as that gentleman very lately assured me. Ali Pacha was at that time (October, 1809) carrying on war against Ibrahim Pacha, whom he had driven to Berat, a strong fortress which he was then besieging : on our arrival at Joannina we were invited to Tepaleni, his Highness's birth-place, [...] On our route, we passed two cities, Argyrocastro and Libochabo, apparently little inferior to Yanina in size; and no pencil or pen can ever do justice to the scenery*

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<sup>ii</sup> In this study, the term *travel writing* is used in a broad sense to encompass all forms of travel narratives, without distinguishing between individual accounts and the wider literary tradition.

*in the vicinity of Zitza and Delvinachi, the frontier village of Epirus and Albania proper*" (Byron, 1812, pp. 124-125).

- *Travels in Northern Greece* by the British writer, topographer and diplomat William Martin Leake is a travel narrative of the author's travels in northern Greece and surrounding areas at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

*"Dec. 27. — At half-past seven this morning we continue to skirt the foot of the mountain in a northerly direction, advancing very slowly through rocky ground, or along the edge of the marshy plain, and leaving several small villages on the heights above us, until ten, when we arrive at the point of a low projecting ridge, where the river, wide, deep, and rapid, approaches so near to the heights as to leave only a passage for the road. On the point stands the village of Kuloritza, and on a similar projection, two miles further, the town of Arghyrokaastro"* (Leake, W. M., 1835, p.26).

- From the field of Albanology, special mention should be made of the linguist of German origin Johann Georg von Hahn (1811–1869). Hahn traveled throughout the Balkan regions, including Albania, and collected detailed data on the country and its people. In his book *"Albanesische Studien"* (1854) (*Albanian Studies*), this Albanologist provides a wide range of information in the fields of ethnography, linguistics and the history of the Albanian people. In the section of travel writings, Hahn provides an analytical description of the regions in Albania, creating a scientific travel narrative. Rather than following a diary-like chronological structure, he presents each location in a static, detailed manner, enriching his descriptions with historical context and reflective observations. Consequently, his text lacks a continuous chronology, and can be characterized as a scientific-descriptive travel narrative:

*"Shkodra. — The Shkodra Lake may be about 8 hours long and approximately 3 hours wide in its middle, narrowing by half or more toward both ends. It stretches from northwest-north to southeast-south, and is therefore represented on most maps. On the eastern side, it indents significantly roughly in the middle; this bay is called the Hotti Lake by the locals, but according to the description, it seems more like a swamp than a lake. [...] in the southeast, the view extends over the plain of Drin and various beautifully shaped mountain ranges, which rise one behind the other in the background; — in the foreground, the neighborhood of Tabaki stretches like a long street between the southern slopes of the bare hills and Kjiri, [...]"* (Hahn, 1854, pp. 94- 95).

- *Reise durch die Gebiete von Drin und Wardar* (*Journey through the regions of Drin and Vardar*) is another work by Johann Georg von Hahn. There are travel narratives in this work, in which Hahn explores the regions in the valleys of the Drin and Vardar rivers in the Balkans. This is a travel narrative in diary form, featuring a chronological account, personal observations and descriptions of places and events:

“IX. Skodra.

*My fellow travelers had landed on August 19th [...] together with the three sailors assigned to accompany us [...]. The ship's lieutenant had immediately begun his observations in Shkodra, and the doctor had started taking a panoramic view from the Shkodra castle; however, they were very concerned about my long absence, as my journey from Durrës to Shkodra had exceeded the estimated time announced by letter by no less than four days – and thus they were all more pleased at my eventual arrival. On the following morning, preparations for our river journey began, [...]. The ship's lieutenant had already inspected the vessels on the lake and selected a kind of light, flat-bottomed fishing boat, about 12 feet long and wide enough for two people to sit comfortably side by side, [...].” (Hahn, 1867, p. 35)*

- Another travel narrative of Hahn's journeys in the Balkans during the 19th century is the work *“Reise von Belgrad nach Salonik”* (Journey from Belgrade to Thessaloniki). Here is a passage from his journey from Vienna to Niš:

*“We had set out from Belgrade, but had barely traveled half an hour when the first encounter proved an ominous sign for our journey. The Tatar courier, who was carrying the imperial mail from Constantinople to Belgrade, came riding toward our carriage at a sharp trot, wrapped in a wide white burnous and, by virtue of his privilege of not having to yield to anyone. He frightened the young animals so much that they all jumped to the left at once, and the pole owed its survival only to its great elasticity, while the carriage began to tip over” (Hahn, 1868, pp. 25-26).*

### 3. The travel writings of Gustav Meyer

Gustav Meyer (1850–1900) was a Prussian linguist and one of the founders of Albanology. He demonstrated, on a scientific basis, that Albanian belongs to the Indo-European languages. During his most productive creative period, Meyer published the work *Essays und Studien zur Sprachgeschichte und Volkskunde* (Essays and Studies on the History of Language and Folklore). The first volume was published in 1885, while the second was published in 1893. In this publication, the essays are divided into several thematic fields: language history, comparative studies of fairy tales, contributions to folk songs, and travel writings.

The travel narratives are found at the end of the second volume. They consist of descriptions from Meyer's journeys to Greece (Corfu, Athens, Zakynthos) and Italy (Brindisi, Lecce, Calimera, Taranto, Bologna) during the years 1888-1890: *“Das heutige Griechenland (1888)”, Griechische Reisemomente (1889), Zakynthos (1888), Apulische Reisetage (1890), Bei den Albanesen Italiens (1890), Das Jubiläum der Universität in Bologna (1888)* (Meyer, 1893, pp. 236-364).

Unlike academic reports, his travel-oriented writings clearly reveal another side of his personality: Meyer as a talented writer positioned between science and literature. These journeys date back several years after he had already begun exploring these places. His fluent style and poetic sensitivity become here especially evident. For example, he describes his departure from Corfu to Athens with a tone of melancholy:

*“The moon had risen behind the Albanian mountains, making the soul - already trembling with the anxious feeling of farewell - even softer and more sorrowful” (Meyer, 1893, p. fq.270).*

He also describes the landscapes of Greece and Italy in vivid and heartfelt language:

*“Across the waves, almost within reach of my hands, lay the bluish outline of Ithaca, with its two mountain peaks rising at a gentle slope. I would not have traded for anything the peculiar feeling that welled up in my chest as I stood on the coast of Samos and gazed across toward the island of Odysseus” (Meyer, 1893, p. 272).*

The lyrical tone is also evident in the way this cheerful man tells us about Cesaria in Lecce, the girl with “dark, almond-shaped eyes” who accompanies him to the church:

*“On her full, slightly tanned cheeks was a lovely, healthy blush; above them, two dark, almond-shaped eyes shone, bright and lively, taking in the world, and her soft, luscious lips conveyed an expression of fresh, natural sensuality, which complemented the otherwise childlike charm of her face perfectly” (Meyer, 1893, p. 332).*

Likewise, during his stay in Zakynthos, he refers to the girls and women as “flowers of the East” (Meyer, 1893, p. 301).

*“The talent for effortless, conversational charm and to write essays of this kind is rare among Germans—but G. Meyer possessed it like few others, and his essays belong to the best in German literature. He had a remarkable ability to portray foreign lands, landscapes, and people in vivid and engaging ways. He had the talent of a storyteller. [...] These essays reflect a refined and cultivated mind. Even when they seem to be merely the easy chatter of a cosmopolitan gentleman, there lies serious work that probes carefully into even the smallest details. [...] Some of these pieces may have been written for a particular occasion and intended for immediate reading. Yet most of them are as much a treasured part of our popular-scientific literature as Gustav Meyer’s scholarly works are considered among the most valuable contributions to Indo-European linguistics” (Thumb, 1901, pp. 151-152).*

In his travel narratives, the reader encounters a writer and scholar who possesses a true gift for observation and storytelling. He recounts his journeys step by step, examining language, customs and mentality along the way. He presents these descriptions with atmosphere, humor and sensitivity. Thanks to his narrative talent and sharp eye for detail, he captures small gestures of people, ways of speaking and spontaneous reactions, everyday customs, household objects, clothing, forms of hospitality, and even the collective psychology of the communities in Greece and Southern Italy. In his texts, Meyer succeeds in blending ethnography and linguistics with real images, places and people. These accounts resemble a diary, in which he expresses his experiences in real time, such as astonishment, disappointment, humor, the surprise of the people he meets, and his ironic reflections on various situations. Through these detailed journeys, he brings the reader very close to the scene. The narrative unfolds chronologically,

marked by concrete movements in space ('the gaze turns back', 'the horse makes its way up the hill'), creating the impression of a journey taking place before the reader's eyes. Time and space are dynamic; the reader follows the author step by step, as if taking part in a vivid journey:

*"Once again, near San Giorgio, the gaze turns back toward the gleaming twin seas, where the white houses of Taranto are mirrored in the water; [...] With difficulty, the horse makes its way up the steep hill on which the large village of Fravagnano lies very picturesquely, distinguished by its notable Baroque church and its impressive stone houses [...]"* (Meyer, 1893, pp. 347-348).

The nineteenth century represents an important period in the development of linguistics as a scientific discipline. During this time, scholars developed systematic methods for comparing and studying languages. In addition to using these methods, Meyer also engaged in travel writing and fieldwork documentation. This made him not only a theoretical linguist but also an ethnographer and a collector of cultural and linguistic data.

#### **4. The travel narrative "Bei den Albanesen Italiens (1890)" (Among the Arbëreshë people of Italy)**

In this study, one of Meyer's travel narratives is analyzed in detail, highlighting his ethnographic observations, with each passage explained in chronological order: *"Among the Arbëreshë people of Italy"* is a vivid historical, linguistic and ethnographic narrative of life in an Arbëreshë village in the late nineteenth-century in Italy.

The passage opens with a typical essayistic and travel-writing style, emphasizing that most people in the Western world are unaware of the existence of Albanians in Southern Italy:

*"It is probably not known to many people [...]"* (Meyer, 1893, p. 345).

Gustav Meyer provides a historical context for the Arbëreshë migration, outlining how the Arbëreshë communities were established in Southern Italy, following the large-scale Albanian migrations in the 15th century, especially after the death of Skanderbeg. These migrations were driven by the Ottoman expansion in the Balkans. Meyer describes the Arbëreshë people as *"close relatives of the wild mountain tribes"* of the Balkans, who found refuge in Southern Italy, settling in large groups during and after the wars against the Ottomans. Thus, *"wild mountain tribes"* refers to the Albanians of the Balkans, who are presented as *"exotic"* people in the Western imagination and often perceived as both violent and primitive (Meyer, 1893, p. 345).

He points out that, over the centuries, the Arbëreshë people established stable communities and loyally preserved the language and customs of their ancestors, even maintaining them with admirable purity. He also emphasizes their successful integration into Southern Italian society, where they were received with hospitality without undergoing immediate assimilation. Meyer underlines that the Arbëreshë people became *"good Italian citizens"*. Therefore, there was no reason to accelerate the disappearance of their mother tongue. Italy, he notes, did not impose pressure for rapid Italianization; instead, the linguistic shift was

allowed to develop gradually. As a result, the Arbëreshë language<sup>iii</sup> was preserved (Meyer, 1893, p. 345). Thus, despite centuries of coexistence with the Italian population, Albanian continued to function as the language of daily communication, particularly within family and community life. Through this passage, the author shifts the geographical and conceptual focus from the Balkans to Southern Italy. He contrasts the stereotypical image of the Balkan Albanians with the reality of the Arbëreshë communities. He points out that the close relatives of these supposedly “wild” Albanians live peacefully and fully integrated in Southern Italy, thereby challenging prevailing Western perceptions (Meyer, 1893, p. 345). The passage combines travel narrative, historical context, and cultural reflection.

In terms of geographical distribution within Italy, Meyer notes that the Arbëreshë people are spread across four villages in Sicily, numerous villages in Calabria, as well as in Basilicata and Capitanata, and in the village of San Marzano in the province of Lecce. He highlights that the family of the former Italian Prime Minister Francesco Crispi originates from one of the Sicilian Arbëreshë villages. This reference serves to demonstrate that the Arbëreshë people have provided important figures within the Italian state, thereby challenging the perception of the Arbëreshë people as a peripheral group. Meyer emphasizes that the preservation of their ethnic identity did not prevent their political and social integration (Meyer, 1893, p. 346).

Next, the author speaks from an autobiographical perspective, as in his Easter journey, while also emphasizing the research purpose of his journey. Autobiographical references represent a key characteristic of travel writing:

*“Since my Easter trip this year had first taken me to Terra d’Otranto, I didn’t want to miss the opportunity to at least make a brief visit to this Arbëreshë village”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 346).

This determination to direct observation is a typical element of the researcher-traveler’s approach. Here, the author gives exact details of his route: by carriage to Oria, then by train to Brindisi. These particulars contribute to the travel-writing aspect and make the narrative more vivid and realistic:

*“I chose to return by first taking a carriage to Oria, where I would then catch the train to Brindisi”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 346).

In a poetic tone, he portrays his encounter with the Arbëreshë world:

*“[...] and so, one morning at 7 o’clock I cheerfully rolled out of Taranto into the Apulian landscape”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 346).

The Apulian people are depicted in an idealized manner, characterized by a set of moral qualities: honesty, modesty, self-restraint, and politeness:

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<sup>iii</sup> *Arbëreshë language* refers to Arbëreshë varieties of Albanian spoken in Greece and Italy. In this text, it refers to the local speech variety of Albanian language in Italy.

*"I found all the people there, whether in town or country, to be exemplary in their decency, modesty, restraint, and kindness – overall, possessing all the virtues a visitor among strangers would appreciate and cherish" (Meyer, 1893, p. 346).*

He complains about only two people in this country. He chooses to remain silent about the first one. This silence has an ethical character, as in this way he avoids publicly discrediting that person:

*"During my two-week stay in Apulia, I met only two bad people; [...] What the first of them two did to offend the excellent character of the Apulian people shall not be revealed by me to posterity" (Meyer, 1893, p. 346).*

The second was the coachman, who is portrayed as unreliable and difficult to deal with. He had broken the agreement to provide two horses and had shown up with only one:

*"The second one, however, was unfortunately the coachman who took me to Oria. Although the day before I had firmly agreed with him – despite the difficulties posed by his dialect – on a carriage with two horses, when the appointed morning came there was only a single horse harnessed to it, and even that was a rather unimpressive nag" (Meyer, 1893, pp. 346-347).*

Since the coachman had broken the agreement, Meyer paid him less:

*"His trouble only began at the station in Oria, when I deducted five 'lire' from the fare we had agreed on; and his astonished face, along with the futile pleas he made, gave me every reason to hope that next time he would indeed show up with two horses."*

The author constantly comments and reveals his feelings, sometimes even with irony:

*"But I certainly didn't win the coachman's heart by selfishly asserting my right" (Meyer, 1893, pp. 346-347).*

The text offers a vivid narrative description because the author recounts personal experiences in the first person, through concrete events – such as arranging the carriage, discovering only one horse, and negotiating the payment – while situating them in time (*the morning, the day of travel*) and place (*Taranto, the road to Oria, the train station*). He also includes details, like the coachman's astonished expression, and subjective comments, noting, for example, that he did not *'win the coachman's heart'*. These details bring the scene to life, while the author's subjective perspective prevents the text from becoming a dry, factual account.

The text then describes the author's journey through the Apulian landscape, starting from Taranto, leaving the sea behind and traveling into the southern Italian plain. He pauses to admire the beauty of the clear, deep sky. The landscape is described as a *"terrestrial sea"* of orange groves, silvery olive trees, and white houses, creating a picturesque and poetic scene:

*“A wonderfully clear, deep-blue sky, [...], stretched over the rich, blessed plain we rode into. [...] From this point on, the sea vanished from sight, leaving nothing but the vast, uniform beauty of the Apulian countryside. Like no sea could rival it, it stretched endlessly - a radiant, vibrant garden as far as the eye can see, the dark green of the orange trees mellowed by the silvery gray of the olives, with white country houses appearing here and there [...]”* (Meyer, 1893, pp. 347-348).

In this passage, Meyer reveals himself as a prose writer with a strong poetic sensibility. The sky is described as *“a wonderfully clear, deep-blue sky”*, not just to inform, but to evoke a deeply emotional atmosphere. Likewise, by comparing the Apulian plain to the sea — *“Like no sea could rival it, it stretched endlessly”* — the text gives the landscape a feeling of sublime, endless space. This passage goes beyond its informative function and transforms into a poetic tableau of the southern Mediterranean. It is a typical example of a travel description turned into a lyrical landscape.

To conclude, the author recounts his visit to the Arbëreshë village of San Marzano, in Apulia:

*“About two hours after leaving Taranto, we stopped at the market square of San Marzano”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 348).

The market square (Marktplatz<sup>iv</sup>) becomes his first point of contact with the Arbëreshë community. Here, the tone is simple and realistic, closer to a documentary travel narrative. He carefully traces his entire itinerary, noting the places he passes through and the people he encounters, and includes concrete details such as having breakfast, entering the municipality (Municipio), and formally presenting a letter of recommendation in order to meet the Albanian-speaking inhabitants of San Marzano. All this underscores his role as a researcher, approaching the community with clear linguistic and ethnographic interests:

*“[...] I went to the municipality, [...] I found the mayor in the middle of his work. [...] With carefully chosen words, I handed him my letter of recommendation and assured him that the main reason for my long journey was to personally get to know the village of San Marzano and its Arbëreshë inhabitants”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 349).

Here, Meyer appears as a researcher who practices field research, basing his work on direct contact with the community. He goes beyond simple observation, interacting with the locals, as shown in the moment when he speaks to them in Albanian:

*“I spoke to one of the farmers in Arbëreshë language, using the language skills I had acquired back in Albania, and we were able to communicate without any difficulty”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 349).

It is striking and remains unclear how Meyer here refers to Albania as the place where he learned Albanian: *“using the language skills I had acquired back in Albania”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 349).<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>iv</sup> Marktplatz is the term used in the original text (German language).

<sup>v</sup> It is unclear whether Meyer, in addition to visiting the Arbëreshë communities, actually traveled to Albania itself.

Next, the text turns to its linguistic and ethnographic aspects. Meyer wanted to study this community, which, beyond partial Italianization, had still preserved important Arbëreshë ethnolinguistic elements. This researcher formally requested permission to collect local words and folk songs:

*"I then expressed my wish to collect a series of words, and perhaps also to have some folk songs dictated to me" (Meyer, 1893, p. 349).*

It's a remarkable moment: a foreign researcher speaking their language, and the local people reacting with surprise and interest:

*"Growing astonishment. [...] A circle of farmers gathered around the table, constantly swelling as more villagers arrived, after the rumor of the presence of such an unusual stranger had spread through the village at lightning speed." (Meyer, 1893, p. 349).*

So, the author notes that the news of his presence as an *"unusual stranger"* spreads at lightning speed. This shows both a kind of isolation of the community and their intense curiosity in this unusual situation. The passage recounts the moment of direct contact between the researcher and the Arbëreshë community. Meyer creates a vivid ethnographic scene in which the researcher shifts from being a curious outsider to becoming the center of the community's attention. His method of research relies on gathering vocabulary and folklore through oral accounts. In this way, Meyer is not simply a travel writer, but becomes an engaged ethnographer, who documents language and culture through direct involvement and genuine interaction with the community.

What follows is a classic scene of philological fieldwork. First, an educated pharmacist appeared, whom the locals considered the *"the local scholar"*. He wasn't of Arbëreshë origin himself; he just had a notebook where he had collected Arbëreshë words from books:

*"[...] pulled out a small notebook in which he had put together a list of Arbëreshë words, partly based on printed books" (Meyer, 1893, p. 350).*

But Meyer wasn't interested in his collected words, as they didn't reflect the community's authentic dialect, so he politely and diplomatically rejected him:

*"He insisted on dictating it to me, although I was only mildly interested, since much of it hadn't been collected from the local people and didn't accurately reflect the dialect of the Calabrian villages. I won his heart with a few polite phrases and managed to get him to put his notebook back in his pocket" (Meyer, 1893, p. 350).*

This is precisely what makes his methodology valuable: Meyer aimed to collect words directly from native speakers. He focused on the spoken language, not just what was written down. He understood that the dialect couldn't be learned from books—it had to be heard alive.

Meyer started by using a question-and-answer approach. The locals helped him collect some words, translating them from Italian into the Arbëreshë language:

*“Then the exam began. I said an Italian word, and the group replied with its Arbëreshë equivalent. Only three or four people really joined in, including a young boy with a very keen expression, who seemed to fully understand the seriousness of what we were doing. Every now and then a small argument popped up over which word to use or how to pronounce it correctly, and he usually settled it with a clear explanation. In this way, over the course of an hour, I went through several hundred words: names of body parts, tools, plants, animals and relatives — anything that came to my mind”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 350).

Within an intensive hour, Meyer says he collected *“several hundred words”*. The semantic fields are typical of ethnographic research: body parts, tools, plants, animals, and family relations. This shows the systematic approach of the researcher. Using this method, Meyer documents the Arbëreshë language by giving priority to oral sources rather than printed ones. By contrasting himself with the pharmacist, he highlights the value of empirical research over knowledge mediated by books, presenting himself as a modern philologist with a clear awareness of his methodology.

The text continues by describing the challenges of fieldwork in collecting folk songs:

*“I wasn’t as successful in my search for a folk song — a ‘sunett’, as they call it here”* (Meyer, 1893, pp. 350-351).

The scene is also marked by a strong sense of the community’s moral code. One of the people present recalled a song, but he

*“...hesitated to sing it to me, as it was considered somewhat improper”* Meyer, 1893, p. 351.

However, Meyer says:

*“I managed to overcome his moral reservations and wrote it down”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 351).

This demonstrates both persistence and persuasive skill, with his scientific interest outweighing social norms. In this song, Meyer immediately notices the Italian loanwords, showing how Italian has influenced the Arbëreshë language: *pítseke*, *mótsseke* are Italian loanwords (*pizzichi*, *mozzichi*) (see Figure 4).<sup>vi</sup> It was a love song, which Meyer describes as *“not particularly delicate”*. Here Meyer's Western perspective becomes evident, standing in contrast to the insular mindset of San Marzano. He also concludes that the song *“has no poetic value at all”* (Meyer, 1893, p. 351). Here Meyer's critical stance is evident. He does not automatically attribute value to every piece of folklore. Meyer remains rational in his philological approach.

He notes another song as well, evaluating it in the same way:

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<sup>vi</sup> The full text of the song is provided in Figure 4, at the end of this study.

*“This [...] little song is not worth much and is far inferior to the Italian and Greek folk songs of the Terra d’Otranto” (Meyer, 1893, p. 352).*

Meyer implies that the Arbëreshë poetic output is poorer compared to the other two traditions. Meyer acts as a cultural observer, applying a rational and measured perspective. At its core, the song represents a modest remnant of a fading tradition, which Meyer documents with scientific rigor, but without aesthetic excitement.

He noted that the Arbëreshë language was still spoken in the village, but the risk of its extinction was obvious, as it was gradually being replaced by Italian as a result of *“the school system, dealing with the authorities, and contact with the Italian-speaking residents of the surrounding villages”*. He observes that everyone in the village speaks both languages, yet Arbëreshë language is still preserved at home. Meyer points out that, compared to Apulia, the Calabrian villages are in a more favorable position to preserve their language. They are more numerous, and Arbëreshë language has consistently been cultivated there, even developing a tradition of literary expression (Meyer, 1893, p. 353).

At the end of his expedition in this place, Meyer visits the local priest, who recounts the legendary story of Skanderbeg and of the Arbëreshë people who settled in Italy. In the course of the narrative, the priest refers to Skanderbeg as a mere band leader, which provokes the indignation of a young doctor, who passionately rises to defend the national hero. Meyer steps in to defuse the tension and allows the priest to complete his account (Meyer, 1893, pp. 353-354). This passage reflects the admiration and deep respect for Skanderbeg within the Albanian community, even beyond the borders of Albania. The young doctor’s reaction also brings to light the tension between religious tradition and modern nationalist feeling. The episode unfolds with a vivid atmosphere, blending legendary motifs with social dynamics.

The author concludes his visit to the village. He gets into his carriage and heads towards the ancient city of Oria (Meyer, 1893, p. 354).

## **5. The linguistic material collected in San Marzano**

Meyer published the linguistic material he gathered in San Marzano in the "Journal of Romance Philology", in the year 1891 ("Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie", 1891). He notes that, having visited San Marzano in person, he was able to supplement the material that earlier researchers had published:

*“Last Easter, I traveled from Taranto to San Marzano—the only place in Terra d’Otranto where Arbëreshë language is still spoken—and was thus able to check and supplement the material previously reported by Bonaparte and the late J. Hanusz, who died young. During a stay of several hours, with the mayor’s assistance, I collected from the locals a number of words, a few paradigms, and two songs, and I now take this opportunity to present the complete material here” (Meyer, 1891, p. 547).*

Below are some selected excerpts from the vocabulary, in which Meyer occasionally adds comparisons with earlier works by Prince Louis Lucien Bonaparte and Jan Hanusz:

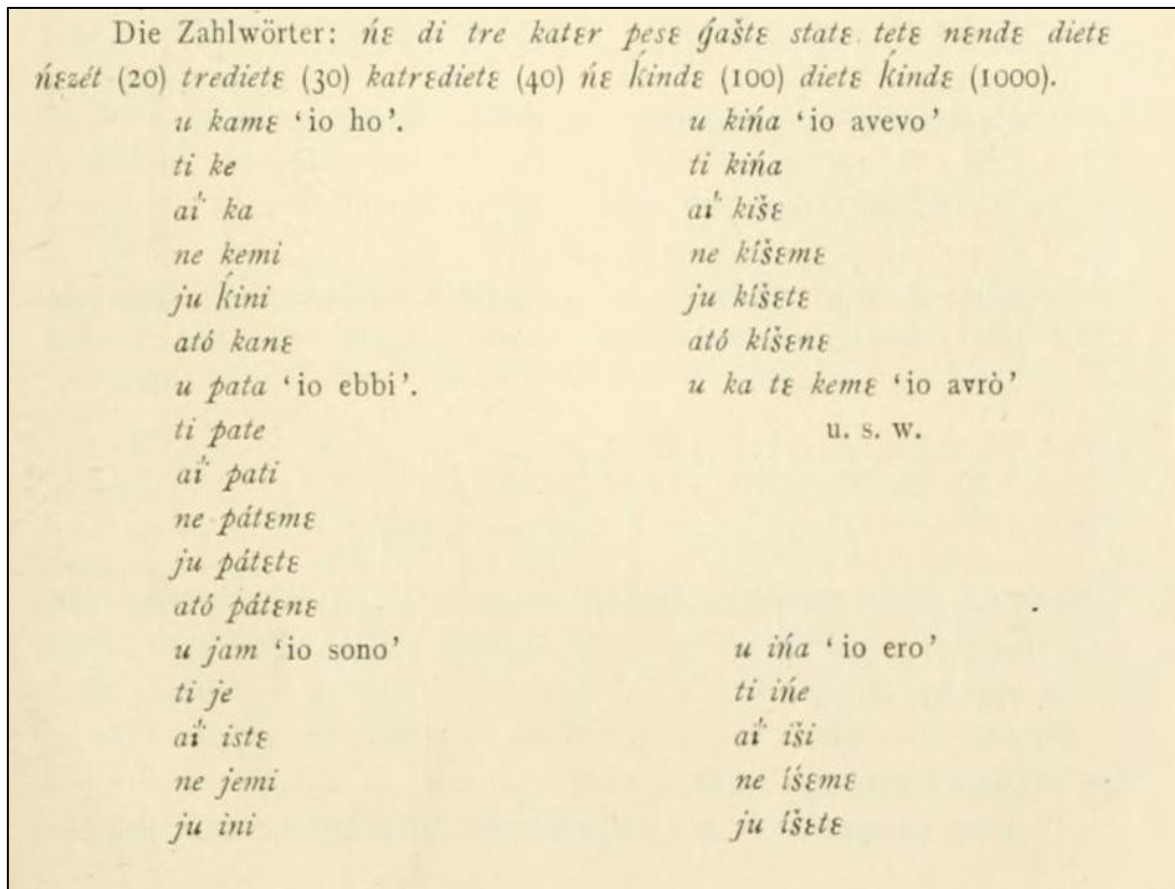
*buzε* 'bocca'.  
*dašɛ* 'montone'.  
*dɛlja* 'la pecora'.  
*derku* 'il majale'.  
*derpra* 'la volpe'.  
*dieli* 'il sole'.  
*dora* 'la mano'.  
*dru-tɛ* 'legna'.  
*ʒoŋa* 'l'unghia'.  
*era* 'il vento'.  
*erbi* 'l'orzo'. Toskisch ist *el'bi*.  
*t'ɛmblɛtɛ* 'i fichi'. Eig. „das Süfse'. Bon. hat *ɛn̄blɛ* 'sweet', wo er, wie überhaupt vor Labialen, gutturales *n* schreibt. Ich habe überall *m* gehört.  
*frima* 'l'aria'.  
*funda* 'il naso'. Toskisch ist *hundɛ*.  
*giu* 'il petto'.  
*glisti* 'il dito'. Plural *glistra*.  
*gluga* 'la lingua'. Bon. hat *gluke*, Hanusz *gljug*.  
*glúmestɛ* 'latte'.

Figure 1: Words translated from Albanian (Arbëreshë variety) into Italian (Meyer, 1891, p.547).

*ʒeli* 'il gallo'.  
*grurɛ* 'grano'.  
*hɛnnɛ* 'luna'. Bon. *ʒɛnnɛ*. Hanusz *hɛn*.  
*idrɛ* 'amaro'. Tosk. *íderɛ*.  
*kali* 'il cavallo'.  
*kalokɛ* 'grande bastone'. Et. Wtb. 192.  
*kašɛ-tɛ* 'gli animali'. Sing. *kaša*. Tosk. *kafšɛ*.  
*kau* 'il bue'.  
*kɛmba* 'il piede'.  
*kɛmiša* 'la camicia'.  
*klitšɛka* 'il membro virile'.  
*kliša* 'la chiesa'.  
*kosul'a* 'il berretto'.  
*krage-tɛ* 'i bracci'.  
*krie* 'testa'.  
*kunázɛ* 'anello'. Tosk. *unazɛ*.

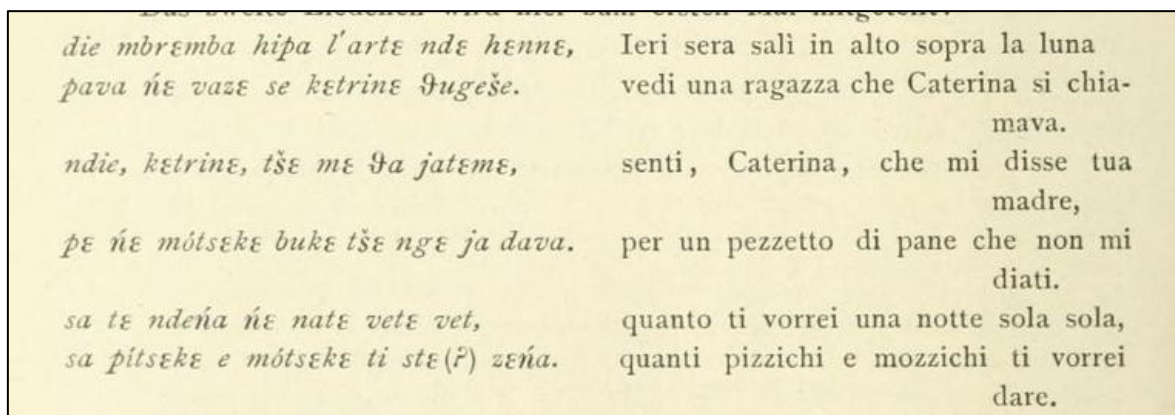
Figure 2: Words translated from Albanian (Arbëreshë variety) into Italian (Meyer, 1891, p.548).

This material also includes some numerals and verb conjugations:



**Figure 3:** Numerals and verb conjugations in Albanian language (Arbëreshë variety) (Meyer, 1891, p.549)

There are also love songs in this material, which Meyer records and describes in his travel account:



**Figure 4:** An Arbëreshë love song and its translation in Italian (Meyer, 1891, p.550).

## 6. Conclusions

This text is an example of an autobiographical travel narrative, blending personal experiences with scientific interest. Meyer emerges here not only as a philologist and travel writer but also as a prose author with a fine poetic sensibility. His style is calm, fluid, and expressive.

This study is especially significant because it shows a linguist of Gustav Meyer's caliber conducting firsthand ethnographic and linguistic research among the Arbëreshë communities in Italy. He aims to explore the sociolinguistic dynamics of these Albanian diaspora communities. This is a contribution to the development of comparative linguistic methods, enabling further studies of dialects, vocabulary, and language variation through fieldwork. This text also highlights how the Albanian diaspora in Italy has preserved its national identity over the centuries.

The combination of travel writing and scientific methods developed a unique approach to the study of language, allowing not only for structural analysis, but also for an understanding of the cultural and historical context. His ethnographic documentation created a rich heritage that serves as a valuable resource for linguistic and cultural studies of the Balkans and Indo-European languages.

Travel narratives were not simply personal accounts of travelers, but valuable scientific sources for the study of languages, customs, and the ethnic composition of different populations. These journeys show how travel writing can effectively combine the scientific methods of linguistics with ethnographic and folkloric documentation.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### **About the Author(s)**

Irimi Dibra is a Lecturer at the Department of German Language in the University of Shkodra in Albania. She is especially interested in linguistics, literature, and the cultures of German-speaking countries. She is currently pursuing a PhD.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5536-7605>

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