

EXTRACTED FROM

# *Ex Anatolia Lux*

Anatolian and Indo-European studies  
in honor of

**H. Craig Melchert**

on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday

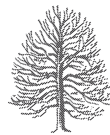
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## Revisiting the Origin of the Albanian 2pl. Verbal Ending *-ni*

Brian D. Joseph

Certain facts about the Albanian second person plural verbal ending *-ni* are clear: It occurs in nonpast contexts (present tense indicative, subjunctive and imperative moods) and it is found in both Tosk and Geg dialects.<sup>1</sup> Its origin, however, has long been a matter of some dispute. The reason for the lack of a consensus on the source of *-ni* is that it is ostensibly so different from its counterpart in numerous other Indo-European languages, where, for the most part, one finds a form that has an obvious connection to an ending with a nucleus of *\*-t-* (e.g. Greek *-te*, Sanskrit *-tha*, Latin *-tis*, Russian *-te*, and so on). The various views on the origin of *-ni* do not need to be rehearsed here, as Rasmussen (1985:48–52) gives a thorough and very useful summary. More to the point, though, Rasmussen notes weaknesses in all these views, and puts forward a very attractive alternative in which *-ni* derives from the free adverb *\*nū* in Proto-Indo-European, the word for ‘now’, originally providing some emphasis or immediacy to the verbal meaning but ultimately reanalyzed as a personal ending and univerted with the verb.

Rasmussen provides compelling evidence for his account, including an explanation for the failure of Tosk rhotacism, which generally affected intervocalic *\*-n-*, to apply to *-ni*, since the *-n-* of *\*nū*, when the form was adjoined to an apocopated 2pl. *\*-t* from *\*-te*, would not have been intervocalic and would thus have been protected from the effects of rhotacism. Moreover, this account allows for a natural explanation for the exclusion of *-ni* from past tenses, since the meaning of *\*nū* is clearly presential. As a result, it can be concluded that Rasmussen offers what certainly appears to be the most solid source available for this otherwise etymologically recalcitrant ending. My goal in this brief note is first, by way of further strengthening his account, to adduce an additional piece of supporting evidence, and then, by way of refinement, to offer some alternatives to two key elements in it.

First, to the evidence that Rasmussen presents can be added one important way in which *-ni* exhibits behavior unlike a verbal ending and instead more like a free adverbial word. In particular, though not standard usage and only “rarely encountered

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<sup>1</sup>It is my great pleasure to be able to offer this small piece to honor here a friend I have known since my own graduate school days, back in the 1970s at Harvard, someone who has taught me (and others) much over the years with his insightful and always interesting studies. For the particulars contained herein, I owe thanks to Eric Hamp, who first enlightened me about the origin of *-ni*, but especially to Jens Elmegård Rasmussen for providing me with a copy of what I recognize as an entirely authoritative discussion of the subject (Rasmussen 1985), as it clarified my thinking on the matter and gave me a basis for offering these remarks that build on his analysis.

in the [standard] spoken language, and still more rarely in the written language,” according to Newmark et al. (1982:324), -ni can attach to various interjections and greetings to indicate that they are “addressed to a plural ‘you’ or politely to a singular ‘you’.” Among the plural forms found are the greetings *mirëditani* ‘good day’, *mirëmëngjesni* ‘good morning’, and *tungjatjetani* ‘hello’, and the exhortative interjections *forçani* ‘heave-ho!’ (cf. *forca* ‘powers’), *o burrani* ‘onward!’ (cf. *burra* ‘men’, with the vocative particle *o*), and a few others. Newmark et al. (1982:324) refer to these latter as “imperative interjections” that show “a kind of imperative force,” so that the use of the imperatival plural ending -ni admittedly has a certain synchronic rationale. Still, it is also the case that attachment to a nonverbal element such as a noun (*forca*, *burra*) or a univerted greeting (as with *mirëdita* and the others) of uncertain synchronic categorial status (even if derived historically from noun phrases or even, as in the case of *tungjatjeta*, sentences<sup>2</sup>) is on the face of it an unusual property for a verbal ending to show. Such synchronically unusual behavior often indicates that an element originally was something quite different from what its synchronic status would suggest at face value. In this case, then, it is reasonable to consider this unusual feature of -ni to be a trace of behavior appropriate to an element other than a verbal ending; in that way, the *mirëditani* (etc.) evidence can be seen as a reflection of combining possibilities that would be expected for a free adverbial, that is an element that could combine with any sort of phrase and would not necessarily be restricted to occurring only after a verb.

While it is not clear how widespread this usage is in the outlying Albanian dialects, whatever its range, this synchronic anomaly about what -ni can attach to receives a natural explanation in terms of Rasmussen’s hypothesis that it derives from the free word \**nū*. In that way, the added evidence of *mirëditani* (etc.) provides further support for his account.

Second, Rasmussen assumes that the imperative was the pivotal form in the developments that led to a verbal ending -ni from an adverb \**nū*. I agree with this point of departure for -ni, but see the relevant steps in a somewhat different light. In particular, rather than starting, as Rasmussen does, following Mann (1977:41), with \**nū* adjoining to an inflected second person plural form in \*-te, I would like to suggest that an original opposition of a bare imperative singular (e.g. \**bhere* # ‘carry!’) with an imperative singular modified emphatically by \**nū* (e.g. \**bhere* # # *nū* ‘carry (right) now!!’)<sup>3</sup> was reinterpreted in terms of the other key opposition that a singular imperative enters into, namely that of number, singular versus plural. This reinterpretation would presuppose the absence, for whatever reason, of an overtly marked plural form. The free element \**nū* as the differentiating element in the set of opposing forms would have come to signal plurality, once the interpretation of the opposition shifted from an original nonemphatic/emphatic to singular/plural. Note further that

<sup>2</sup>This is from the weak oblique pronominal *të* ‘(for) you’, plus the nonactive voice marker *u* and an optative (3sg.) of the verb *ngjat*- ‘lengthen’, together with the noun *jeta* ‘the-life’ as subject, so that it is etymologically “May the life be lengthened for you.”

<sup>3</sup>Note, as a typological parallel to the sort of reinforcement or emphasis that Rasmussen posits as being behind the use of the temporal adverb \**nū* with imperatives in the first place, the use of the spatial adverb *here* in English in (some) imperatives, such as *See here!*

rhotacism would not have been applicable to the *-n-* of *\*nū* in such a construction since it was word-initial, and word-initial *\*n* was never affected by rhotacism (even if initial *\*n* would sometimes be phrasally intervocalic if occurring after a vowel-final word in connected speech). Rasmussen (1985:53) recognizes this but ultimately rejects it since rhotacism is found only in Tosk whereas *-ni* is affixal in all of Albanian; he is perhaps overcautious here, since the necessary univerbation is banal enough to have occurred independently in Tosk and Geg.

This slightly modified account finds some support in the facts concerning infixation of weak pronoun forms in plural imperatives with *-ni*, facts that Rasmussen was aware of but interpreted in such a way as to be irrelevant to his account. My contention is that, to the contrary, the infixation phenomenon is relevant and in fact can be viewed as supportive of Rasmussen's general approach to the origin of *-ni*.

The facts in question are that weak object pronouns are typically bound to the verb and positioned relative to the verb, occurring before most verbal forms, such as the present tense or subjunctive forms, e.g. (*unë*) *e hap* '(I) it open', i.e. 'I open it' or (*ju*) *e hapni* '(you all) (do) open it' or *të na shikojë* 'that he see us'; but when the verb is an imperative, the pronoun may occur after the verb, as in the singular form (*ti*) *hap-e* '(you,) open it!'<sup>4</sup> But in the plural imperative, with the ending *-ni*, the weak pronoun does not occur at the end, after *-ni*, but rather occurs between the verbal stem and the ending, e.g. *hap-e-ni* 'you (all) open it!'

Rasmussen (1985:52) recognizes that this infixation pattern would have begun with singular imperative forms such as *hap-e*, and sees these as "generat[ing] new plurals of the type *hap-e-ni*," on the pattern of the "2sg and 2pl . . . *hap* : *hap-ni* [with] *-ni* simply added to the sg. form." This newly generated imperative with an infixed pronoun would have thus replaced or filled in for what must have been a missing (or completely opaque) overtly marked plural, the same sort of absence as is needed in the reanalysis posited above whereby a once-emphatic *\*nū* came to serve as a plural-marking *\*nū*.

Rasmussen is inclined not to consider this infixation pattern to be particularly old, since the oldest testimony for Albanian, the 1555 Missal of Gjon Buzuku, shows the pronoun positioned after *-ni* in plural imperatives, and the infixation seems to be generally lacking from "the Albanian of the colonies in Greece or Italy." If the infixation is not old, then the support for the "missing-old-plural-imperative" needed in the above reanalysis disappears, as it becomes instead a Balkan Albanian innovation and not a pan-Albanian one. However, Rasmussen himself notes the "precious Arberesh [Southern Italy Albanian] example of infixation of an object pronoun . . . reported by De Rada (1870:30)" and he admits that this "may indicate that infixation is not young after all." In fact, as seemingly straightforward as the creation of the infixation pattern might be, via the pattern noted above,<sup>5</sup> it is surely just as straightforward, if not more so, to assume a regularization of pronoun placement to positioning after a

<sup>4</sup>I use hyphens here to show morphemic divisions, even though they are not part of the regular Albanian orthography.

<sup>5</sup>It is worth noting that this same sort of infixation of weak pronouns occurs in some Thessalian dialects of Modern Greek, as discussed in Tzártanos 1909, Thavóris 1977, and Joseph 1989; whether Albanian influence in some form played a role is not entirely clear, but the parallel is striking.

fully inflected form, as in Buzuku. Thus, I contend that De Rada's Arbëresh example should be given the weight that Rasmussen hesitatingly suggests it might, and that the dialect of Buzuku should be taken as innovative in regard to pronoun placement in plural imperatives. Viewed this way, the reanalysis of, e.g., *\*bhere* # # *nū* from emphatic to plural, in the light of an absent overtly plural form, becomes more plausible, as the infixation pattern also depends on the absence of an overt plural imperative.

There may be more to learn still about *-ni*, but it seems that the evidence pointing in the direction that Rasmussen posited is more than enough to allow it to be taken as received wisdom on the matter.

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