

Apostrophe Differences among Albanian Learners of English: Addressing Challenges in Possessives and Contractions

GENTIANA BIDOLLARI

PhD Candidate

Faculty of Foreign Languages

Department of English Language

gentiana.bidollari@unitir.edu.al

Abstract

This article investigates the differences in apostrophe usage between English and Albanian, emphasizing the grammatical roles each plays. The focus is on the common misinterpretations bilingual speakers, particularly students, have regarding the correct use of apostrophes in both languages. While the apostrophe is fundamental in English for contractions, possession, and marking omissions, it is less common and frequently misunderstood by learners of Albanian. The key reasons for these challenges stem from the linguistic discrepancies between the two languages and the lack of clear pedagogical guidance in educational contexts regarding these norms.

A survey conducted with sixty bilingual students aimed to assess their understanding of apostrophe usage, and a literature review was performed to contextualize the problem. Results indicate that Albanian students studying English often overgeneralize English apostrophe rules, leading to frequent errors. The study's findings illuminate broader linguistic challenges in managing two languages and highlight the need for clearer instructional guidelines on apostrophe usage for bilingual learners. These findings have implications for educators, linguists, and translators working with Albanian and English speakers, as they underscore the importance of understanding both grammatical differences and cultural contexts in effective language acquisition.

Keywords: apostrophe usage, punctuation, linguistics, education, language acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

Although small in appearance, the apostrophe plays a crucial role in written communication, particularly in languages where its grammatical functions are complex and varied. In English, the apostrophe is vital for marking omissions, forming contractions, and indicating possession. Its usage is embedded in the conventions that ensure clarity and accuracy in writing. Conversely, the apostrophe is less prevalent in Albanian, where it appears primarily in poetic, archaic forms or informal expressions, reflecting a linguistic tradition quite distinct from that of English. A comparative analysis of these two linguistic systems reveals notable differences in the use of this single punctuation mark.

English, due to its Latin and French influences, has developed highly standardized punctuation rules over centuries, with the apostrophe being closely linked to specific syntactic roles. Despite the seemingly straightforward rules, native English speakers often encounter difficulties with correct apostrophe usage. In contrast,

Albanian, a member of the Indo-European language family with historical ties to the Balkan region, assigns a more limited and culturally specific role to the apostrophe, mainly for poetic or archaic elision. In modern Albanian, it is not used to denote possession but is occasionally employed to show negative contraction.

Key texts, such as David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (2003), offer detailed analyses of the apostrophe's role in contemporary English, particularly in maintaining syntactic clarity. Similarly, Huddleston and Pullum (2002) provide a technical explanation of the apostrophe's role in forming possessives and contractions. Lesley Byron (2018) highlights the significance of apostrophe usage in academic and professional writing, emphasizing its role in maintaining precision.

In contrast, works such as Hysi's *Gramatika e gjuhës shqipe* (1997) and Shkurtaj's *Gramatika e gjuhës standarde shqipe* (2016) highlight that in Albanian, the apostrophe has a much smaller role, used primarily in older or literary texts to indicate elision, as seen in phrases like *N'atë natë të errët* (In that dark night). Possession is indicated through case endings in Albanian, such as *Libri i Gjonit* (John's book), contrasting with English reliance on the apostrophe.

Despite extensive research on English punctuation, few studies explore how Albanian speakers navigate English apostrophe rules, particularly in bilingual contexts. This research seeks to fill that gap by examining how Albanian learners of English understand and apply apostrophe conventions, focusing on linguistic transfer and the cultural significance of punctuation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Punctuation, particularly the apostrophe, is central to understanding the mechanics of written English. David Crystal (2003) underscores its importance in maintaining syntactic clarity, especially in marking possession and contractions. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) provide a detailed examination of its technical functions, stressing its importance in formal writing. Despite widespread familiarity with the apostrophe, errors in its usage are common, as noted by Trask (1997), making its proper teaching essential for non-native speakers.

In Albanian, apostrophes hold a marginal role, as detailed by Hysi (1997) and Shkurtaj (2016). They are primarily used for stylistic purposes, particularly in older or poetic texts, to indicate elision, as in *N'atë natë të errët* (In that dark night). Possession is indicated through case endings in Albanian, such as *Libri i Gjonit* (John's book), contrasting with the English reliance on the apostrophe for possessive structures.

While previous studies have explored cross-linguistic challenges with punctuation, there remains a gap in understanding how Albanian speakers approach English apostrophe conventions. This research aims to address this gap by examining the specific difficulties faced by bilingual learners of English, with a focus on both linguistic and cultural influences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to explore how Albanian learners of English understand and apply apostrophe usage. The methodology aims to uncover both the cognitive and cultural factors that influence their comprehension of English punctuation rules.

Participants and Sampling

The study surveyed 60 Albanian students currently studying English as a foreign language at the university level. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to include individuals from various regions of Albania and with varying levels of English proficiency, ranging from first-year students to advanced learners. This approach aimed to provide a broad dataset for assessing apostrophe comprehension across different stages of language acquisition.

Data Collection Instruments

Two primary instruments were employed for data collection. First, a questionnaire assessed participants' knowledge and application of apostrophe rules in both isolated sentences and short writing tasks. Key areas of focus included apostrophe use for possession, contractions, and omissions. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences with English punctuation and how it compares to punctuation in Albanian.

Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with a focus on identifying patterns in apostrophe usage errors. The analysis examined whether certain types of errors were more common in specific contexts, such as possessive constructions versus contractions. Additionally, cross-tabulations were used to investigate how proficiency levels correlated with error frequency. Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and thematically coded, with special attention to recurring themes related to cross-linguistic influence and cultural perceptions of punctuation.

RESULTS

The study's findings shed light on the challenges Albanian learners face when navigating English apostrophe usage. Only 40% of participants correctly identified apostrophe use in contractions, highlighting significant difficulty in this area. In contrast, 65% of participants correctly applied apostrophes in possessive forms, suggesting a better understanding of possessive structures. This discrepancy points to the alignment between possessive forms in English and Albanian's syntactic structures, while contractions—which lack a direct equivalent in Albanian—present more substantial obstacles.

The study also revealed that 25% of participants had encountered non-standard apostrophe usage in informal contexts, such as on social media, contributing to their confusion. This finding underscores the influence of informal learning environments on students' understanding of grammatical rules. Additionally, 30% of participants reported feeling uncertain about their apostrophe use, even when they had correctly identified the rules. This highlights the emotional barriers involved in language learning and suggests that psychological factors, such as confidence, play a crucial role in learners' ability to apply grammatical rules.

The results provide new insights into how bilingual learners of English, particularly from linguistic backgrounds like Albanian, struggle with punctuation systems that differ fundamentally from their own. These findings contrast with research on learners from languages with more punctuation similarities to English,

where smoother transitions in punctuation acquisition have been observed (Trask, 1997).

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the specific challenges Albanian learners of English face with apostrophe usage, particularly in contractions and possessives. The 65% of participants who correctly identified apostrophes in possessive forms demonstrate that this area of grammar is more easily understood, likely because Albanian has comparable syntactic means of showing possession. However, the 40% who struggled with contractions indicates a significant gap in understanding, as these forms do not have an equivalent in Albanian grammar.

Furthermore, the emotional factors revealed in the study—such as the 30% of participants who reported feeling insecure despite understanding the rules—illustrate that language acquisition involves both cognitive and emotional dimensions. Addressing these emotional barriers in the classroom may be key to improving overall grammatical proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses a critical gap in bilingual education by examining the challenges Albanian learners face with English apostrophe usage. The findings suggest a need for targeted teaching methods that focus on both grammatical misunderstandings and emotional barriers to learning. Enhancing learners' confidence through constructive feedback and explicit instruction on contractions and possessive forms could significantly improve their proficiency. Future research should expand the scope of this study to include diverse bilingual contexts and explore the long-term effectiveness of specialized teaching strategies.

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