

On the Semantics of the Preposition *në* – A General Overview of its Use and Realization within Prepositional Phrases in Contemporary Albanian

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Abstract Within the system of prepositions in Contemporary Albanian, the preposition *në* is classified in the group comprising the most representative Accusative prepositions expressing a variety of predominantly spatial relations. Our paper tackles the analysis of said preposition within prepositional phrases, its semantic meanings, scope, as well as its combinatory potential with other sentence constituents, from the aspect of morpho-syntax, semiology and cognitive linguistics. The analysis is directed towards identifying basic (primary) meanings which can be attributed to this preposition, in addition to the path of its secondary meanings.

Keywords Semantics. Albanian language. Preposition *në*. Prepositional phrases. Lexical meaning. Cognitive Linguistics.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 On the Semantics of Prepositions – A General Overview. – 3 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

The meaning of prepositions is one of the most complex issues in syntax, semantics, pragmatics and of grammar in general. Despite numerous interpretations and well-established linguistic concepts related to prepositions, this issue remains unresolved, giving the impression that there is always room for new interpretations of their meaning and functions.¹

According to O'Grady (1997, 166), languages can be distinguished based on the way they categorise words according to the type of meaning they encode. While many linguists highlight the importance of formal criteria – such as the compatibility of a word with specific inflectional patterns, or its distributional behaviour, i.e., its ability to co-occur with particular types of words – they often treat meaning as just one of several relevant factors in determining word categories (cf. O'Grady 1997). Nevertheless, meaning/semantics play a crucial role in both the classification of words and in specifying their syntactic and functional properties within the language system.

Klikovac (2006) states that when defining the prepositions, at least two major difficulties arise, both of which are indicative of the nature of language meaning in general. The first one pertains to the inability of encompassing all the meanings of a single preposition in one general definition “regardless of how much the definition is “stretched” to encompass as many uses as possible” [...], there are still many remaining ones – very different ones, while the second one indicates that “a preposition must be defined by itself” (Klikovac 2006, 7), i.e., any definition of a preposition essentially includes using the preposition itself in defining its own meaning. Although prepositions are defined in many languages, including Albanian, as dependent and unchangeable part of speech, as well as a closed word group, it is a fact that they are such linguistic units (lexemes) that acquire their meaning within a broader structure, phrase/syntagm/sentence, and that, on the one hand, they are not entirely devoid of lexical meaning, while on the other, they also have a certain frequency of use. In many languages, Albanian included, they represent the most frequent category within the group of invariable parts of speech (Samara 1999), while in modern linguistics they are described as relation words that always occur with the linguistic unit they combine

1 The work is based on the results of the research conducted within the monograph entitled *Semantics of Prepositions in the Modern Albanian Language*, published by the first author of the paper, Merima Krijezi, in 2023.

with and are referred to as adpositions² (Bortone 2010; Matovac 2013; Šekrst 2013). They are defined as polysemic, non-parsable or parsable language units “which have a function to establish semantic and grammatical relation between the language unit with which they form an adposition phrase, and the other language unit in the phrase” (Hagège 2010, 8 in Matovac 2014, 7). A preposition itself, without a noun, can very rarely be used as an independent word in the subject [e.g. *On* is a preposition] or as an object [Write *across* properly] (Пипер, Клајн 2014, 205), nor is it typically found following a linguistic unit it combines with (in Serbian, preposition *radi* ‘for the sake of’, sometimes *uprkos* ‘despite’, *sebe radi* ‘for one’s own sake’, *radi sebe* ‘for the own sake’, (Пипер, Клајн 2014, 205). Although an invariable part of speech, prepositions are not neutral in terms of grammatical categories such as number and form. Topalli (2011, 1111) emphasises that Albanian prepositions *ndër* ‘among’/‘between’, *midis* ‘between’ and *ndërmjet* ‘between’/‘among’ can be used only with a plural noun (e.g. *midis nesh* ‘between us’, but not *midis mua* ‘between me’), as well as that use of some prepositions is possible only with nouns in an indefinite form (*Dola në oborr* ‘I went out into the yard’, but in no case *Dola në oborrin* ‘I went out into the yard (of)’) (Topalli 2011, 1120). In the Albanian language, prepositions cannot appear before a verb in the indicative mood, but may constitute a part of impersonal verb forms, such as participles (*për* të punuar ‘to work’, *për* të kërkuar ‘to look for’/ geg. *me* punue ‘to work’, *me* kërkue ‘to look for’).

In addition to its prepositional function and meaning, *në* in Albanian can also function as a conjunction – at the beginning of dependent conditional sentences (*në ardhsha vonë, mos më prit* ‘If I am late, don’t wait for me’), in conjunction phrases (*në qoftë se* ‘if’/‘in case’, *në rast se* ‘in case’/‘if’ etc.), and in sentences that have an indirect question form (*nuk e di në vjen apo jo* ‘I don’t know whether (s)he’s coming or not’). Based on the research conducted by Spahiu (2010), who analysed the corpus of modern Albanian language on a sample consisting of literal and non-literal texts, or more precisely, on a sample of more than 35 million words (with the support of IT experts and the Albanian Academy of Sciences), one hundred most frequent words in Albanian language were identified. The preposition *në* ranked third on the list, while every identified word was marked by the ordinal number it appears under on the list, and with a multi-digit number that indicated its frequency. The preposition *në*, as the

2 “An unanalysable or analysable grammatical word constituting an adpositional phrase with a term that it puts in relationship, like case affixes, with another linguistic unit, by marking the grammatical and semantic links between them” (Hagège 2010 in Matovac 2013, 6).

third most frequent word in the corpus, had 1,199,646 occurrences (Spahiu 2010, 3) and was identified as the most frequently used preposition in the Albanian language (Çeliku 2019, 94). According to the British National Corpus (BNC; Burnard 2000), the most frequent words in the English language include prepositions “of, to, in and for” (cf. Baldwin, Kordoni, Villavicencio 2009), where preposition ‘in’, as one of the equivalents of the preposition *në*, occupies an important position and is ranked among top ten.

1.1 Aim and Scope

Our analysis is focused on the semantics of the preposition *në* in the Albanian language, and is motivated by the following reasons:

- a. it is the most typical and most frequent preposition governing the accusative case, with a broad range of spatial and temporal meanings – 24 in total (according to FGJSSH 2006);
- b. within its semantic range, *në* also expresses ablative-like meanings, indicating that an entity may be located either *inside* or *outside* – *on* another entity (*in* / *at* / *on*);
- c. it denotes time and location in structures, indicates spatial relations, and marks the aspect of dynamics (movement) – a point towards which an entity moves, and final point of destination.

The objective of our research is to:

- a. present the semantic range of the preposition *në*, including a description of its meaning structure and use;
- b. determine the semantic network of the preposition *në*;
- c. determine the types of structures in which it is realised; which parts of speech it most commonly co-occurs with, and which verbs affect its rection and semantics.

2 On the Semantics of Prepositions – A General Overview

In linguistics, prepositions are described as highly polysemic words. According to Lakoff (1987, 13), this polysemy stems from the fact that there are systematic relations between different cognitive models and elements of the same model. Croft and Cruse (2004, 111) argue that “polysemic units originate from the same lexical source, as a result of the extension process, such as of metaphor and metonymy”, and that their polysemic property primarily depends on whether there is a perceived semantic relationship between two interpretations of a word or not, i.e., whether one interpretation is a convincing semantic extension of the other. Polysemy should, according to these authors,

enable variations in comprehending a single word across its different uses and realisations, as well as in singling out a specific meaning from a group of realistically plausible ones and simultaneously all possible meanings of the word within a structure. An additional observation of these authors is that a limited sense of a word is not a property of a lexical unit as such, but that it is rather constructed at the moment of actual use.

The appropriate understanding and acquisition of the meanings and semantic nuances of a preposition are not the same for all prepositions. While discussing prepositions in English, Lindstromberg (2010) emphasised that prepositions unrelated to space or time were observed as the least challenging ones, along with some prepositions of verbal origin. We would argue that this is also the case in the Albanian language, while noting that this group could also be extended so as to include prepositional phrases as well. Being complex prepositions, prepositional phrases generally do not denote time and place in Albanian. One of their key features is that their final constituent defines the reaction of the following sentence constituent (Samara 1999; Agalliu et al. 2005), such as *me anë të* 'through'/'by means', *për shkak të* 'due to', *me ndihmën e* 'with the help of', *falë ndihmës* 'thanks to the help', etc. This is clearly visible in the following instances: *me anë të studimit* (*të* + Ngen *studimit*) 'through the study'/'by means of studying', *për shkak të moskuptimit* (*të* + Ngen *moskuptimit*) 'due to misunderstanding', *me ndihmën e pajisjeve ortopedike* (*e* + Ngen *pajisjeve ortopedike*) 'with the help of orthopedic devices' and in the latter, *falë ndihmës së prindërve* (*së* + Ndat *prindërve*).

In Albanian, as in many other Indo-European languages, simple prepositions are polysemic, i.e., they have more than one meaning; complex ones most commonly have dual meanings, while prepositional phrases tend to have a single meaning. The lowest degree of lexical meaning clarity is expressed by simple prepositions, such as *në*, *me* 'with', *për* 'for', *nga* 'from', etc., whereas derived prepositions, such as *buzë* 'in front of', *mes* 'between', *afër* 'near', *kundër* 'against', 'together with prepositional phrases, have the highest degree of lexical meaning clarity, whereat their semantic meaning clearly matches their formation productive base" (Çeliku 2019, 16). Topalli (2011, 1114) states that both regular prepositions, as well as those formed later through the internal development of the Albanian language, are associated with two cases: the accusative and the ablative. Tracing the diachronic development of the Albanian language through written documents and preserved historical materials, we can say that the accusative is one of the primary cases used with prepositions from the early stages, as well as that it aligns semantically and syntactically with a large number of prepositions, primarily *në*, *më* 'with', *për* 'for' and *nëpër* 'through', but also with several others

that are specific to this case. Texts from the sixteenth century indicate that all prepositions in the Albanian language were used with only one case, the so-called *kallëzore parafjalore* 'prepositional accusative', while in its pre-written phase, Albanian had a single case for the formation of prepositional syntagms (Topalli 2011, 1115). The entire group of prepositions used with this case in modern Albanian corresponds to the accusative both semantically and syntactically (Topalli 2011; Demiraj 1989), with the preposition *në* occupying the primary position in this group. The only preposition that represents an exception to this rule is the preposition *n* (Buzuku's *en* = *n*), which corresponds semantically and syntactically to the ablative (Topalli 2011, 1117), although several examples of its use with the accusative are found in Buzuku's texts. The emergence of the preposition had significant consequences for the case system, where "in time, the preposition acquired a leading role in prepositional structures, while the case inflection of a noun became almost a redundant means, i.e., it turned into an additional means serving the preposition" (Demiraj 1989, 628). In a broader sense, prepositions took over the function previously performed by case inflections.

2.1 On the Semantics of the Preposition *në* in Albanian

When it comes to the meaning of a preposition, it has to be observed from a broader perspective, which includes all of its possible meanings as defined in grammar books and examples in the target language, meanings conditioned by social-cultural contexts, etymology, newly developed meanings etc., as well as its occurrence in different structures (syntagms, phrases, clauses) as language patterns. One of the properties of all natural languages is that they combine two or more words into units that are grammatically and semantically correct and comprehensible to all speakers of a given language. The number of such groups of words or structures is large in all languages, and according to Lindstromberg (2010, 5) "Some combinations of words have their own particular meaning to such an extent that if any of the words is replaced – even by a near synonym – that meaning disappears and/or the new combination seems odd". For instance, in English, the prepositions 'at' and 'in' can be synonyms used to denote where an entity is located. We can say: 'at school', 'at the faculty', but not 'at classroom'; we must always say 'in the classroom'.

In Albanian, we can say: *jam në shtëpi* 'I am at home', but not *jam mbi shtëpi* 'I'm above the house/on the house' (the second example would mean that we are above the house/on the house), although these are prepositions with synonymous meaning.

Grammar books and dictionaries of the Albanian language (a full list is provided at the end of the paper) list the following meanings of the preposition *në* (when used with a noun in the accusative case):

1. a place where someone or something is located, where an action is carried out;
2. destination of an entity's movement, as well as a place where an entity is placed or closed in;
3. final destination of a movement;
4. an entity (object, living creature, abstract item) which we come across, or we encounter during a movement, when we search for something and the like;
5. an object through which something runs, or by means of which some action is carried out;
6. time (when an action is carried out, or within which an action is carried out);
7. state (condition of a location where an entity is positioned, circumstances in which an action is carried out);
8. manner;
9. shapeshift (change of form), or the state of an entity;
10. business, activity, group, organisation, or similar, where someone works or participates in operation;
11. base, foundation, or site of mental or spiritual activity, or various forms of such activities;
12. goal, intention, reason or benefit for which something is done;
13. a whole, composed of parts (countable), which can be divided into parts based on different criteria;
14. a thing or phenomenon which serves to more closely define entities, characteristics, properties, abilities thereof, and the like;
15. relationship, bond with something or another entity;
16. entity under supervision, custody, monitoring, care, and the like;
17. event in which an entity participates;
18. colour or shade of an entity;
19. garment or object in which an entity is wrapped or dressed;
20. a member of a group;
21. with an accusative noun, it denotes a constituent of a word group, expression, phrase with verbal meaning;
22. in syntagms with prepositional meanings;
23. in phrases with a prepositional function: *në kundërshtim me* 'contrary to', *në bashkëpunim me* 'in collaboration with', *në krahasim me* 'in comparison to', *në emër të* 'on behalf of', *deri në* 'until', *në bazë të* 'on the basis of', etc.;
24. point of an action closure, (in conjunction with the preposition *nga* 'from'), extension or continual movement in space and time, or repetition of an action or state.

All listed meanings can be divided into two groups – a) with spatial and b) with non-spatial uses of the preposition *në*.

a. Spatial uses of the preposition *në*:

1. A place where someone or something is located, or where an action is carried out:

Jemi në pastičeri 'We are at the pastry shop';

- 1.a A place within an entity, observed as an enclosed space:

Në shtëpi / shkollë / kinema... 'In the house / at school / in the cinema...'

Në shpirt / errësirë / borxhe 'In the soul / in the darkness / in debts'

- 1.b A place on the surface and/or upper side of an entity:

Në tryezë 'On the table' *Në shesh / rrugë / majë* 'On the square / in the street

[on the road] / on the top' *Në letër* 'On paper'



Illustration 1

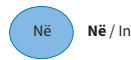


Illustration 2

2. Destination of an entity's movement:

Shkoj në treg 'I am going to the market'

3. Final point of movement:

U ngjitën në çati 'They climbed onto the roof'

Më në fund erdhën në fshat 'Finally, they arrived at the village'

b. Non-spatial uses:

1. Time (when an action is carried out or within which it is carried out):

Në pranverë 'In spring'; *Në fëmijëri* 'In childhood'

2. The entity being acted upon:

Foli në cellular 'He spoke on the cellphone' *Shkoj perin në gjilpërë* 'I thread (the thread in) the needle'

3. State (where an entity is positioned, circumstances in which an action is carried out):

Është në humor të mire 'He is in good mood'; *Në ankth* 'In agony'

4. Manner:

Rri në këmbë 'Standing tall' (literally 'being on legs'); *Bie në gjunjë* 'Fall on knees'

5. Goal, intention, reason or benefit:
Në luftë kundër korrupsionit 'In combat against corruption'; *Në dobi të komunitetit local* 'In favour of the local community'
6. A whole composed of (countable) parts, which can be divided based on different criteria:
Drama në katër akte 'A drama in four acts'
7. Providing further information about an entity:
Punim në gur 'Relief in stone'; *Kampion në kërcim së larti* 'Champion in high jumping'
8. Relationship, bond (with an entity):
Në lidhje me përdorimin e dokumentacionit tatimor 'In relation to the use of tax documents'; *Në konflikt me ligjin* 'In conflict with law'; *Ata janë në lidhje* 'They are in a relationship'
9. Providing additional information about an action:
Isha në një festë 'I was at a party'; *Mora pjesë në një garë* 'I took part in a competition'
10. Affiliation within a group / group member:
Në më të varfërit 'Among the poorest ones'; *Në të prekurit nga tërmeti* 'Among those hit by the earthquake'; *Në të mbijetuarit* 'Among the survivors'

Synonymy includes both vertical and horizontal branching of meanings of prepositions. The authors of *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985) state that it is very difficult to classify the areas of meanings of prepositions, and that in some cases, it is better to think about the scope or spectrum of meanings, first as one separate category, and then also as a category divided into separate, yet mutually concordant segments. In the case of a large number of prepositions, we can talk about synonymous semantic branching in two planes – a vertical one, which pertains to all possible meanings that are synonymous to the meaning of another/other preposition(s), and a horizontal one, which pertains to semantic concordance with a high degree of equivalence (we can never talk about absolute or one hundred percent synonymy) and its usage value.

The horizontal plane should demonstrate which prepositions have a high degree of semantic equivalence and usage value, and in a large number of cases can be used in a sentence to replace the other ones, carrying the same semantic content and not altering the meaning of the sentence, as well as which preposition is the first choice as a possible synonym for one preposition.

In the case of the preposition *në*, the synonymy with preposition *mbi* was analysed, referring to only one aspect of their meaning – locative meaning. There are two planes in focus:

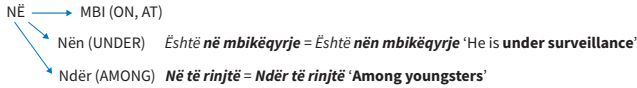


Illustration 3 A schematic overview of the synonymous meaning and its vertical branching on the example of prepositions *në* and *mbi*

The prepositions *në* and *mbi* are synonymous, and their synonymy is reflected in expressing a place where an entity is located, an action is carried out, and the like:

E vuri librin në tryezë = *E vuri librin mbi tryezë* 'He put the book **on the table**'

Ai u ngrit dhe vuri kapelën në kokë = *Ai u ngrit dhe vuri kapelën mbi kokë* 'He stood up and put the hat **on**'

Analysing the meanings listed in FGJSSH (2006) for the marker – preposition *në*, we noticed that this preposition can have a synonymous meaning with two more prepositions:

- a. with the preposition *nën* when denoting an entity under our surveillance, control:

Është në mbikëqyrje = *Është nën mbikëqyrje* 'He is **under surveillance**'

E ka në kujdestari = *E ka nën kujdestari* 'They are **under his/her custody**'

- b. and with the preposition *ndër* when denoting affiliation within a group:

Në të rinjtë = *Ndër të rinjtë* 'Among youngsters'

Në të sëmurët = *Ndër të sëmurët* 'Among patients'

Preposition *mbi*, in addition to the synonymous meaning with the above mentioned preposition *në*, can also have a synonymous meaning with the prepositions *përmbi*, *sipër* and *për*:

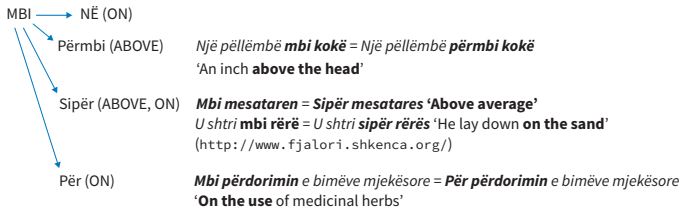


Illustration 4

1. *përmbi* to denote a place, or the position of an entity above another entity:
Një pëllëmbë mbi kokë = *Një pëllëmbë përmbi kokë* 'An inch **above the head**'
Urë mbi lumë = *Urë përmbi lumë* 'A bridge **on the river**'
2. The preposition *sipër* denotes states or quantities greater than usual, or the one taken as a basis, starting point:
Mbi mesataren = *Sipër mesatares* 'Above average'
- 2.a to denote a place, or the position of an entity above another entity:
Mbi tokë = *Sipër tokës* 'Above the ground'
- 2.b places where an entity moves around and an action is carried out:
Rrinin mbi krevate = *Rrinin sipër krevateve* 'They were sitting **on the beds**'
3. the preposition *për* (in scientific, publishing and journalistic style, in titles of books or articles):
Mbi përdorimin e bimëve mjekësore = *Për përdorimin e bimëve mjekësore* 'On the use of medicinal herbs'
Mbi gramatikën e persishtes = *Për gramatikën e persishtes* 'On the grammar of the Persian language'

Note that use of the preposition *për* in such structures is more accurate and is the recommended orthographical norm.

NË —————> MBI> SIPËR

U shtri në / MBI / SIPËR rërë / rërës 'He lay down **on the sand**'

Illustration 5 Schematic overview of horizontal branching of synonymous meanings of the prepositions *në* and *mbi*

The analysis of the synonymous semantic branching of the preposition *në* indicated that vertical branching connects a greater number of prepositions with synonymous meanings (the prepositions *nën* and *ndër*) compared to horizontal branching, which implies synonymy with only one preposition (the preposition *mbi*). Preposition *mbi* has a high degree of synonymic equivalence with the preposition *në*, including only one aspect of their meaning – locativeness. Synonymous prepositions along a vertical branching line have a more limited degree of equivalence of synonymy with the proposition *në*.

2.1.1 Types of Structures Within which the Preposition *Në*
is Realised (which Verbs Affect Its Rection
and Semantics)

Applying a contrasting methodology to the basic and primary meaning, as well as the secondary, derived and metaphorical meanings of prepositions, we analysed the relations they express in Albanian language structures. In this analysis, we used and referenced all available and relevant monolingual and bilingual dictionaries of modern Albanian in both electronic and hard copies, as well as internet sources as auxiliary or secondary references. More than 30,000 pages were analysed, covering literal and non-literal content, parts of discourses, spoken language, and the like. The analysis demonstrated that nouns are the part of speech the prepositions are most commonly used with in a structure, but they can also be found with pronouns, adjectives and other noun words (like denominal adjectives) or adverbs.

The verbs found before the prepositional structure, which affect its rection and semantics, are state verbs: *jam* 'to be', *qjendem* 'to be located', *ndodhem* 'to be located', *rri* 'to sit/to socialise/to stand', *qëndrojmë* 'to stand', *shikoj* 'to look', *shtrihem* 'to spread', *banoj* 'to live' etc.; activity verbs, verbs of movement and the like: *nisem* 'to set off/to leave/to go', *shkoj* 'to go', *eci* 'to go/to walk', *iki* 'to leave/to escape', *arrij* 'to arrive', *vij* 'to come', *dal* 'to go out', *kthehem* 'to return', *zbres* 'to descend', *hyj* 'to enter', *vrapoj* 'to run', *marr* 'to take/to gain', *lë* 'to leave', *jetoj* 'to live', *shëtit* 'to walk', *flas* 'to talk/to speak/to tell', etc.

3 Conclusion

The conducted analysis referring to the meaning of this preposition in a structure demonstrated that the primary meaning of the preposition *në* is spatial. With a noun in the accusative case, it has the meaning "which is close to the basic accusative meaning, which is border directiveness, reaching a goal or realizing some kind of activity related to a certain place (in a broader sense)" (Silić, Pranjković 2005, 113). It indicates a place where someone is located, a place where an action is carried out (locative meaning), and the place towards which an entity moves (adlative meaning), marking two positions:

1. a point within an entity observed as an enclosed space, and b) a point on the surface and/or upper side of an entity;
2. a point towards an entity moves, and b) final destination of the movement.

There are ten non-spatial semantic meanings, which refer to the following: time, the entity being acted upon, state (in which an entity

is, or circumstances in which an action is carried out), manner, goal, intention, reason or benefit; a whole composed of (countable) parts which can be divided based on different criteria; further information about the entity; relation/bond with an entity; further information about an action; and affiliation within a group (group membership).

The analysis of the synonymous semantic branching of the preposition *në* indicated that, compared to horizontal branching, which implies synonymy with only one preposition (the preposition *mbi*), vertical branching connects a greater number of prepositions with synonymous meanings. It also indicated that synonymous prepositions along a vertical branching line have a more limited degree of equivalence in terms of synonymy with the proposition *në*, and that the preposition *mbi* has a high degree of synonymy equivalence with the preposition *në*, including only one aspect of their meaning – locativeness.

The analysis also demonstrated that nouns are the part of speech the prepositions are most commonly used with in a structure, but that they can also be found with pronouns, adjectives and other noun words (such as denominal adjectives), or adverbs. Verbs that can affect its rection and semantics (found before the prepositional structure) include state verbs such as *jam* ‘to be’, *gjendem* ‘to be located’, *ndodhem* ‘to be located’, *rri* ‘to sit/to socialise/to stand’, *qëndroj* ‘to stand’ etc.; activity verbs, verbs of movement, and the like, such as *nisem* ‘to set off/to leave/to go’, *shkoj* ‘to go’, *eci* ‘to go/to walk’, *iki* ‘to leave/to escape’, *arrij* ‘to arrive’, *vij* ‘to come’, *dal* ‘to go out’, *kthehem* ‘to return’ etc.

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