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Being a Bilingual "National" Poet:
The Case of Dionysios Solomos/Dionisio Salamon

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Being a bilingual national poet:
The case of Dionysios Solomos

Count Dionysios Solomòs (1798-1857), a native of the Ionian island of Zakynthos, is the national poet of Modern Greece after the War of Independence (1821). Yet, this "national poet" was bilingual.

The aim of this paper is to highlight his case, which is probably unique in Modern Greek studies, if not in bilingual studies in general.

More specifically, I will examine three interrelated issues:

1) the hybrid nature of Solomos's language, as evidenced by his manu-scripts;

2) the fragmented state of his oeuvre, which had been almost entirely unpublished by the poet himself;

3) the challenge of compiling a "standard" edition of his works.

My ultimate goal is to suggest that Solomos's case, as a case study, could provide us a more acute insight at bilingualism and language acquisition in our multicultural and multilingual societies *through literature.*

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The pioneering work of

a) Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact* (1953, new ed. 2011)

b) Charles A. Ferguson, "Diglossia", (1959, 1964) and

c) George Steiner, *After Babel* (1975, revised ed. 1992)

provides the starting point for examining Solomos's bilingualism from

a) a pure linguistic / grammatical

b) a socio-linguistic, and

c) a psycho-linguistic point of view.

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1. Bilingualism and Diglossia

1a. Environment

Diglossia was a fact of life in the Ionian islands, Solomos's homeland, since they had been under Venetian rule for more than 4 centuries (1386-1797).

Adapting Ferguson's terminology,

- **Italian** was considered **the "high variety"**, while

- **Greek**, or more precisely the local dialect, full of Italianisms and Venetian elements, was **the "low variety"**.

Variations in the choice of language were determined by **class criteria** and **educational background**. Thus,

- The aristocratic and bourgeois circles used a language that tended towards Italian.

- The lower classes used a language that tended towards Demotic Greek.

It would be more appropriate to refer to **a "canvas" language**, on which elements of both languages were interwoven at a different rate depending on social class, occupation, and occasion.

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1. Bilingualism and Diglossia

1b. <u>Biography</u>

In the case of Solomos, this state of social diglossia coupled with

- his dual origin, being born to 61-year-old *Count* Nikolaos Solomos and his 16-year-old *housekeeper* Angeliki Nikli, but also

- with the fact that he studied in Italy in his early years, namely from the age of ten to the age of twenty (1818-1828).

1. Bilingualism and Diglossia

1c. <u>The Language Question</u>

In Solomos's times (first half of the 19th century) diglossia existed also in Greece proper, the only difference being that

- in the Greek state diglossia was **intralingual**: "katharevusa" (the purist formal language) vs the Demotic Greek, while

- in the Ionian islands (which were incorporated in the Greek state after the poet's death, in 1864) it was **interlingual**: Italian vs Greek.

These three factors (homeland, biography, the language question) constitute the historical and literary context in which the so-called "Solomos problem" emerges.

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Languages in contact: Distinction or Interference?

- The dominant line of interpretation of Solomos's bilingualism in Greek scholarship is that the poet made a ***distinction*** in the use of the two languages in different cases and contexts: he spoke or wrote to his friends in Italian, conceived his poems also in Italian, but ultimately wrote them in Greek *or* in Italian (in his last decade).

- Solomos's manuscripts, however, published in 1964, reveal not a distinction but an ***interference*** between the two languages,

- ✓ Italian being the "dominant language" of his culture (he studied in Italy for 10 consecutive years), and

- ✓ Greek being a "mother tongue", which was, however, acquired as *a second language* after his return from Italy.

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Surface and depth interference

The language interference in Solomos's manuscripts can be traced in a wide range of **code-switched and code-mixed productions**.

In order to identify the "grammar" of the poet's mixed or fused language, I have proposed two terms:

➢ "surface interference" = *evident* code-mixing and

➢ "depth interference" = *latent* code-mixing

in Solomos's expression (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics).

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Some examples

a) **Phonology / Morphology:** The poet wrote in Greek *following the simplified phonetic spelling of Italian*, often substituting Greek for Italian letters within the same word, e.g. *μεσυτις - μεσυτiς - μεσiτiς – με**σσ**ϊτις*, ομπρος – ομ**r**ος, *μα**ti**α – μα**ti**α*, **t**ε**ti**α, φ**ri**χτον, *τρομα**r**α*, **x**ερυς, etc. The word **Lambro (it.) / Λάμπρος (gr)** is written <u>in the drafts of the same poem</u> as follows: ***Λambro, Lambros, Lambρo, Lamπρος, Lambro***

b) **Syntax / Mixed clauses:** *il nanotto εμεγαλονε*; *στὸ μερος della Visione*; *τὸ χρομα del velo*; *E mi sentii τὰ σοϑικὰ*; *E mi trovai sta tria pigadia* (in the last case a Greek phrase, *στα τρία πηγάδια*, is written with Italian characters).

c) **Code-switched sentences:**

- ✓ From Italian to Greek: *E andai dietro allo specchio e vidi la donna del Zante που εκρεμοτουνα κ΄ εκiματiζε e sotto καϑισμενος το δiπλοποδι un nano che imitava perfettamente quel ridere*;

- ✓ From Greek to Italian: *προτα τη στοχαζετε την αδελφι κ΄ επιτα λει τη πονηριὰ του πουκάμισου, sei tu invidiosa, bugiarda, folle, τiχτικιασμενi σαπια* […] (the sentence continues in Italian);

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2. Fragmentation

2a. <u>The state of Solomos's autographs</u>

The poet's manuscripts contain

➢ various messy drafts of fragmented poems,

➢ constantly reviewed and eventually abandoned by the poet,

➢ without ever arriving at a final version that could be published.

In effect, Solomos had never published his works, except for just a few and not the most mature ones.

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2b. <u>Interpretation</u>

The fragmentation of the poet's work has given rise to **two main interpretative approaches**, a "positive" and a "negative" one.

❑ According to the **positivist approach**, fragmentation is a theoretical and practical imperative of the Romantic movement; consequently, is not a "problem" but a distinguishing feature of Solomos's romantic poetry.

❑ The proponents of the **dominant negativist approach**, on the other hand, blame the fragmentation of Solomos's oeuvre on his bilingualism and on diglossia in general, either in the Ionian islands or in Greece proper.

In a period in which Modern Greek language was not fixed and the debate about the language question was at its peak, "Solomos problem" became even more complicated and critical issue, given his poetic supremacy and the fact that he was considered the "national poet" of a new born nation-state that struggled to unify its language.

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3. The editing problem

Solomos's manuscripts, fragmented into multiple drafts written in a mixed language with no final version, pose a huge challenge to editors and scholars.

3a. The standard editions

❑ Iakovos Polylas, the first editor of Solomos (*Works Found,* 1859), published **a "refined" (hence, distorted) version of what he found**.

▪ He published a standardised edition of Solomos's drafts, favouring one "principal text" for each poem and placing the remaining versions in annexes.

▪ He also translated *tacitly* all Solomos's notes written in Italian, providing a purely Greek edition, devoid of any trace of Italian.

❑ Linos Politis's edition of Solomos's *Autograph Works* (1964) is undoubtedly the most important edition in Solomos studies, given the fact that is **the only edition which reveals the *real nature* of Solomos's bilingual and fragmented work**. But, of course, this edition is illegible.

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3b. Some solutions to the editing problem

After Polylas's *editio princeps* and Politis's edition of the *Autograph Works*, the following solutions to the editing problem have been proposed:

❑ **The "analytical" edition** reveals progressively the different stages of composition *without proceeding to the synthesis of a completed poem*, although it promotes the final stage of the composition as the "final form" of the poem (see the editing proposal of Tsantsanoglou 1982, and others).

❑ **The "synthetic" edition**, on the other hand, presents the poet's oeuvres as completed *by selecting and re-arranging the "best" verses* of the draft versions according to the editor's "language sense" and aesthetic criteria (Alexiou 1994, revised 2007)

❑ **No edition at all** (Peri 2016): this scholar argues that *any* edition of Solomos's oeuvre is impossible, because the poet's drafts are a spontaneous expression of his creative unconscious that defies (philo)logical ordering.

❑ **The "genetic" edition** seeks to reveal Solomos's creative process by presenting the various versions and revisions of a poem *not linearly but as a constellation*, in which *the central poetic idea spreads out into different Greco-Italian drafts that are equivalent* (Pavlou 2015; Mackridge 2015).

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Conclusions

The depth of Solomos's bilingualism goes beyond a merely linguistic approach to his idiom. It reaches all the way down, from the very conception of the poetic idea to the constitution of the poem (composition, diction, style). This is what makes Solomos's bilingualism such a complex, yet critical issue not only in Modern Greek Studies but in bilingual studies in general.

Solomos's case constitutes an ideal case study, especially in the context of the multilingual and multicultural societies of our time, for the following reasons:

Firstly, his language raises significant issues in various disciplines of applied linguistics and, most importantly, it raises issues of identity: who "am I", being a bilingual/multilingual.

Secondly, Solomos's manuscripts permit one to examine the creation process of an *organically* bilingual poet, which is of interest to both stylistics and editing (especially, genetic criticism).

Finally, Solomos's case study, I believe, could open a path to explore language acquisition and intercultural education through literature.

Thank you for your attention.