

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

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight the case of the national poet of Modern Greece, Dionysios Solomos, whose Italian-Greek expression constitutes a case of bilingualism, which is probably unique in Modern Greek studies, if not in bilingual studies in general. Count Dionysios Solomos (1798-1857), a native of the Ionian island of Zakynthos, grew up in the environment in which diglossia was a fact of life, since the Ionian islands had been under Venetian rule for more than four centuries (1386-1797). In the case of Solomos, this state of diglossia coupled with the fact that he studied in Italy for ten years, from the age of ten to the age of twenty (1818-1828). In fact, Solomos’s manuscripts reveal unambiguously the interference between the two languages, Italian being the “dominant language” of his culture and Greek being a “mother tongue”, which was, however, acquired as a second language. This interference can be traced in a wide range of code-switched and code-mixed productions, a sample of which will be presented in the paper. Evidently, 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. Solomos’s case constitutes an ideal case study, especially in the context of the multilingual and multicultural societies of our time. Firstly, his language raises significant issues in various disciplines of applied linguistics (i.e. sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and neurolinguistics), but also, 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). In conclusion, Solomos’s case study, I believe, could open a path to explore language acquisition and intercultural education through literature.

Keywords: *Bilingualism; Diglossia; Languages in contact; code-switching; code-mixing; Dionysios Solomos;*

Count Dionysios Solomos (1798-1857), a native of the Ionian island of Zakynthos, is the first major writer of New Hellenism after the War of Independence (1821). His *Hymn to Liberty* (1823) has been the anthem of the Modern Greek State since 1865. And yet, this “national poet” was bilingual. The aim of this paper is to summarise the grid of issues that constitute the so-called “Solomos problem”, highlighting a case of bilingualism which is probably unique not only in Modern Greek studies but also 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 manuscripts, 2) the fragmented state of his oeuvre, and 3) the challenge of compiling a “standard” edition of his complete works. The pioneering work of Weinreich, Ferguson, and Steiner provides the starting point for examining these issues in the framework of bilingual studies from a socio-linguistic [1], a psycho-linguistic [2], and a pure linguistic (grammatical) point of view [3].

1. Bilingualism and Diglossia

Solomos grew up in an environment in which diglossia was a fact of life, since the Ionian islands had been under Venetian rule for more than four centuries (1386-1797). 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, while the lower classes used a language that tended towards Demotic Greek. In fact, the written evidence of this period –mainly notary documents and correspondence– suggest that the distinction between Italian and Greek was by no means clear. It would be more appropriate to refer to a “canvas” language, a linguistic foundation on which elements of both languages were interwoven at a different rate depending on social class, occupation, and occasion. In the case of Solomos, this state of

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 from the age of ten to the age of twenty (1818-1828). He signed as Dionisio Salamon (or Solomòs), thought, spoke, and wrote in Italian. The only published poetic collection of his, composed in his early years, was written in Italian [4]. So were the comments, notes to self, and contemplations on his major works that can be found in his manuscripts (interestingly, none of them concerns his bilingualism).

The dominant line of interpretation of Solomos's bilingualism in Greek scholarship since Polyas, the first editor of Solomos's oeuvre [5], is that the poet made a distinction in the use of the two languages in different cases and contexts. According to this interpretation, 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 [6], reveal not a distinction but an *interference* between the two languages, Italian being the "dominant language" of his culture and Greek being a "mother tongue", which was, however, acquired as a second language after his return from Italy. In fact, the poet wrote in Greek following the simplified phonetic spelling of Italian, often substituting Greek for Italian letters within the same word. The language interference 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" and "depth interference", for the fundamental distinction between *evident* and *latent* code-mixing in Solomos's expression (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics) [7]. Here follow a few indicative examples of the "surface interference" between Greek and Italian in the poet's manuscripts:

- a) Phonology – Morphology: The name Lambro (it.) / Λάμπρος (gr.) in the drafts of *the same poem* is written as follows: *Lambro, Lambros, Λάμπρο, Λάμπρος, Lambro* (*Autographs*, p. 36, v. 10; p. 34, v. 12; p. 41, v. 11; p. 53, v. 12-18: the last three forms occurred *in the same passage*). Other examples: *μεσουτις, μεσουτις, μεσιτις, μεσσίτις, ομπρος - ομορος, ματια - ματια, tetia, φριχτον, τρομαρα, κερυς*, and so on.
- b) Clauses: *il nanotto εμεγαλονε* (p. 260, col. B, v. 14-15); *mi ricordai του θεοκαταρατου* (p. 259, col. B, v. 20); *prendendo il pitale για κουτρουπουχι* (p. 285, col. B, v. 18); *στο μερος della Visione* (p. 290, v. 9-10); *το χρομα del velo* (p. 290, v. 17); *il laccio του Ζωναριου* (p. 297, col. B, v. 4-5); *E mi sentii tà σοθικά* (p. 280, v. 16-17); *E mi trovai sta tria pigadia* (p. 297, col. B, v.13): in the last case a Greek phrase (*στα τρία πηγάδια*) is written with Italian characters.
- c) Sentences: *E andai dietro allo specchio e vidi la donna del Zante που εκρεμοτουνα κ' εκιματιζε e sotto καθισμενος το διπλοποδι un nano che imitava perfettamente quel ridere* (p. 294, col. B, v. 16-20);
- d) *προτα τη στοχαζετε την αδελφι κ' επιτα λει τη πονηρια του πουκάμισου sei tu invidiosa, bugiarda, folle, τυχτικιασμενι σαπια [...]* (p. 294, col. B, v. 2-12: the sentence continues in Italian);
- e) *Sul principio della Visione introdurre il fantasma del Diavolo che si fa grande come gigante fino που εδωσε τα κερατα στα σιγγεφα e stendendo una mano all' Oriente, e l'altra all'Occidente avec une grimace εδο κατου κατου ιπε fino che dura sta macchinetta, θελι εχο κ' εγδ ο καιμενος να παριγοριθδ μαμουλιζοντας* (p. 261, col. B, v. 17-28). This example is trilingual.

Evidently, 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, metrics, etc.), and it raises not only issues regarding the aesthetic/stylistic aspect of creativity, but also issues of identity: who "am I" being a bilingual/multilingual. This is what makes Solomos's bilingualism such a complex, yet critical issue [8].

2. Fragmentation

Solomos's oeuvre has been preserved in manuscripts that contain various messy drafts of fragmented poems, which the poet constantly reviewed and eventually abandoned without ever arriving at a final version that could be published. In effect, Solomos demonstrated a characteristic and bewildering negligence in publishing his works, except for just a few and not the most mature ones. This has given rise to different interpretations among Solomos scholars, all of which boil down to two main interpretative approaches, a "positivist" and a "negativist" one. According to the positivist approach, fragmentation – a theoretical and practical imperative of the Romantic movement – is not a "problem",

but a distinguishing feature of Solomos's romantic poetry [9]. On the other hand, the proponents of the dominant negativist approach blame the fragmentation of Solomos's oeuvre on his bilingualism and on diglossia in general [10]. It should be noted that in the historical-literary context of Solomos's time (first half of the 19th century) diglossia existed also in Greece proper. The difference with the Ionian islands (which were incorporated in the Greek state as late as 1864, after the poet's death) was that in Greece diglossia was intralingual ("katharevusa", i.e. the purist formal language vs the Demotic Greek), while in the Ionian islands it was interlingual (Italian vs Greek). This makes Solomos's "language problem" even more complicated in a period in which Modern Greek language was not fixed and the debate about the language question was at its peak.

3. The editor's impasse

Solomos's manuscripts, fragmented into multiple drafts written in a mixed language with no final version, pose a huge challenge to editors and scholars. After Polyklas's editio princeps (1859) and Politis's edition of the *Autograph Works* (1964), the following solutions to the editing problem have been proposed: a. "analytical" edition; b. "synthetic" edition; c. no edition at all beyond the autographs themselves; d. "genetic" edition, which has been gaining ground lately in the framework of genetic criticism.

Although Iakovos Polyklas was the first to see the state of Solomos's manuscripts in which Italian and Greek intermingle often beyond separation, he inevitably published a "refined" (hence, distorted) version of what he found. He dealt with the different drafts, favouring one "principal text" for each poem and placing the remaining versions in annexes, he translated *tacitly* all Solomos's notes written in Italian, and he ultimately published a purely Greek edition, devoid of any trace of Italian. One could accuse Polyklas of mere "fabrication", but could also argue that this editing approach was quite understandable for an Heptanesian, for whom bilingualism was a fact of life, but who nevertheless sought to comply with the language policy of the Modern Greek nation-state in order to promote the bilingual Solomos as the "national poet" of Greece.

Linus Politis's edition of Solomos's *Autograph Works* in 1964 is undoubtedly the most important edition in Solomos studies, given the fact that it is the only edition which reveals the *real nature* of Solomos's bilingual and fragmented work. The basic difference between the "analytical" and the "synthetic" edition, which are based on the *Autograph Works*, is that the analytical edition reveals Solomos's progress through 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 [11]. The synthetic edition, on the other hand, presents the poet's works as completed *by selecting and re-arranging the "best" versions* of the draft verses according to the editor's "language sense" and aesthetic criteria [12]. Peri, however, 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 [13]. Finally, 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 [14].

In conclusion, Solomos's case constitutes an ideal case study for bilingual studies, especially in the context of the multilingual and multicultural societies of our time. Firstly, because his language raises significant issues in various disciplines of applied linguistics (sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and so forth), such as: how two or more languages co-exist in the human brain and co-operate at the creative level; who "am I", being a bilingual/multilingual; what Solomos's language theory and practice tell us about the status of diglossia and bilingualism of his time. More specifically, Solomos's bilingualism permits one to examine: a) the grammatical uniformity of standard languages and of "standard editions" as a means of regularising the plurilingualism of individuals and of ethnic communities in the context of the language policy of the modern nation-states of the 19th century onwards; b) the language variation (high/low variety) and strategies of bilingual performance (code-switching, code-mixing) in formal and informal contexts: home/school, oral/written, private/public, etc.; c) the negative and positive impact of bilingualism on creativity and the formation of an author's style.

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). In this

perspective, the most interesting issue, in my opinion, is that the bilingual and “fragmented” Solomos became the *par excellence* national poet of Modern Greece, achieving a quality of poetic expression that is considered unrivalled so far in Modern Greek literature. My hypothesis is that, *being bilingual*, Solomos faced the problem of expression in a way that a monolingual poet can hardly grasp simply because his native language is too familiar to him. This hypothesis ultimately allows one to evaluate in a different light Solomos’s unpublished fragmentary oeuvre, not (only) as an evidence of a noble, yet failed effort, but (mainly) as a precious legacy of a devotee of the “perfect expression”. This assumption could contribute to understanding better the works of other bilingual poets in Greece and beyond, and most importantly, could open a path to explore language acquisition and intercultural education *through literature*.

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In the Greek entries, the original title is given in parenthesis.

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