

The Language Question and the Diaspora*

Karen Van Dyck

The national perspective on the language question

The issue of language has a privileged place in Greek intellectual discourse. In America the race question has been at the forefront of political discussions over the past century and a half; Italy has its Southern Question; in Greece it is the Language Question (*to glossiko zitima*), that has generated an analogous amount of pages and debate. Since the eighteenth century, well before independence, Greek intellectuals, school teachers, and priests have fought over which variety of the Greek language should be the official one: demotic, the language ‘of the people’, or *katharevousa*, a purist language that reintroduced elements of ancient Greek in order to ‘clean up’, or ‘purify’, spoken Greek, a language supposedly contaminated by centuries of Roman, Frankish, and Turkish rule. Which register of Greek a Greek spoke – and, even more importantly, wrote – was central to what it meant to be Greek. As scholars have amply shown, the language question and the particular problem of diglossia – in the Greek case the existence of two competing varieties of the language – have been enmeshed with the major developments and cultural struggles in modern Greek history from the nation’s inception to the present, as has been discussed by Peter Mackridge in chapter 13.¹

Here I propose to shift the focus from the national to a diasporic perspective on the Language Question. I begin by rehearsing the familiar story of language reform

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¹ The term diglossia refers to the simultaneous existence of two varieties of the same language. The term bilingualism applies to the simultaneous existence of two different languages. Although the Greek case is usually understood in terms of diglossia, Ferguson uses the term to refer to two complementary forms of a language, each with its own range of functions (Ferguson 1959). In Greek the purist and the demotic forms compete for the same social functions. Alexiou’s term *polyglossia* is probably the aptest term for the Greek case, since the language question is not just about two different varieties of Greek but many. It is possible to divide the purists into at least two camps: those that promoted a highly Atticized version and those who called for a compromise (Alexiou 2002, 36–9). In fact, no two authors wrote *katharevousa* alike, and until recently this polyphony of registers was also true of demotic. Standardization has come very late to Greek. On this issue see Georgakopoulou and Silk (eds) 2009.

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in the service of nation-building, but my primary concern will be to show that the same texts that illustrate this story also illustrate another. Many of the works written by the major figures in this debate reveal, on closer examination, that issues of nation are caught up with the question of what it means to be a Diaspora Greek. In fact, the fight for a single national language seems to be as much about diasporic multilingualism as it is about enforcing monolingualism. In my reading of texts by some of the foremost writers on the language question, Adamantios Korais, Dionysios Solomos, Psycharis (Jean Psichari), and Penelope Delta, in particular, I aim to show how much the nation's language question has been indebted to the transnational and diasporic dimension of modern Greek culture. To read the work of these writers solely through the lens of the nation involves forgetting the multilingual and diasporic journeys that make their texts possible.

Here, then, are some of the key moments in the oft-told story of the language question:² Adamantios Korais's prefaces to ancient Greek classics starting with his edition of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* published in Paris in 1804 in which he spells out the *mesi odos*, the middle road, and paves the way for the eventual triumph of *katharevousa* as the language of government in the 1911 Constitution; the Greek national poet Dionysios Solomos's 1824 'Dialogos' ('Dialogue') in which he rehearses his decision to learn and write his poetry in demotic Greek, though educated in Italy; Psycharis's 1888 manifesto of demoticism *To taxidi mou* (*My Journey*), which precipitated a turn away from *katharevousa*, and heralded the literary explosion in demotic of the early twentieth century; Roidis's *Ta eidola* (*The Idols*), an attack on *katharevousa* in *katharevousa*; Alexander Pallis's 1901 translation of the New Testament into demotic Greek which precipitated the so-called Gospel riots; Penelope Delta's historical novels such as *Ton kairo tou Voulgaroktonou* (*In the time of the Bulgar-slayer*) (1911), which taught Greek children that demotic could be a literary language; Manolis Triantafyllidis's classic introduction to the grammar of demotic Greek commissioned by Metaxas (Triantafyllidis 1941); the so-called 'trial of the accents' in 1941, in which the classical scholar J.Th. Kakridis was suspended from his post at the University of Athens for doing away with some accents and all breathing marks;³ the introduction of demotic at all levels of schooling by the then Prime Minister George Papandreou in 1964; the Colonels' refocusing attention on *katharevousa* by reducing demotic's presence in schools during the dictatorship from 1967 to 1974; the Education Act of 1976 that established demotic as the official language; and Greece's entry into the EEC in 1981 with demotic as one of the official European languages.

Recounting these landmarks reveals how the language question in Greece is often framed with regard to national security and irredentism.⁴ The territory of the

² Some of the overviews of the language question that have been useful to me are Alexiou 2002, 32–42; Beaton 1999, 296–365; Bien 1972; Browning 1983; Horrocks 1997, 291–365; Liakos 2007 [2001]; Mackridge 1990; and Thomson 1960.

³ For a full account of this trial see Kakridis 1998.

⁴ For a comparative perspective on the relation of the language question and nation, see Anderson 1991 and 1998; Gellner 1983.

Greek state (recognized in 1832) was only a small portion of what Greece is today and an even smaller part of what Greeks imagined had been theirs before the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Proponents on both sides of the language controversy believed that a unified language would help to bring about a unified nation and make possible a greater Greece, a Greece more in keeping with the glory of ancient days. Up until the Asia Minor Disaster in 1922 and the subsequent compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, the two sides were united in their pursuit of the dream to reclaim Constantinople. They referred to the city as *I Poli* (The City), as though there was no other. To different ends, they used similar imagery in their polemics for and against *katharevousa*. Their linguistic register of choice was always ‘the mother tongue’. The question, though, was *what* language was the mother tongue?

This nationalist perspective on the Language Question is clearly expressed by the writers I have chosen to discuss. Adamantios Korais (1748–1833), often remembered as the father of *katharevousa*, makes the connection between language and nation obvious in the prologue to his edition of Heliodorus when he writes,

Just as it is true concerning each individual person that ‘a man’s character is known by his speech’, so in the same way, the character of an entire nation is known by its language (Korais 1984, 52, translated and cited in Bien 1972, 23).

His point is that a language must be respectable, proper, ‘cleaned up’, not the vulgar tongue, if a nation is to be respected. In contrast, Korais’s opponent, the poet and proponent of demotic Greek, Dionysios Solomos (1798–1857), has the poet in his famous ‘*Dialogos*’, already mentioned, counter the purist: ‘the teacher of words is the people’ (Solomos 1994, 535). He calls attention to his and an unnamed Korais’s different conceptions of who should be in charge, the Moderns or the Ancients, but clearly voices the same belief that language and nation are indivisible.

Psycharis (1854–1929), Odessa-born, Paris-based, the son-in-law of Ernest Renan, a novelist, linguist, and professor, was best known as the father of demoticism. He opened and closed his famous 1888 manifesto *My Journey* with the oft-quoted phrase equating language and *patrida*: ‘Whoever reads me will understand with what purpose I wrote *My Journey*. Language and *patrida* are one and the same’ (Psycharis 2000, 37). Here we could use various translations for *patrida*: nation, country, homeland, motherland, fatherland; but in all these cases it is clear that Psycharis, perhaps even more explicitly than Korais or Solomos, connects language to politics. He repeatedly refers to his demoticist position as the ‘Idea’, a direct reference to the *Megali Idea* (Great Idea), and the hope that some day Greece would recover Constantinople, Asia Minor, and what is today northern Greece.

Penelope Delta (1874–1941) also emphasizes that the national project depends on writing about the Greek people in the language of the Greek people.⁵ In her

⁵ While I am stressing their ideological similarities it is important to note that though Delta shared Psycharis’s moment historically, as a Greek from Alexandria she was better trained in *katharevousa*

children's novels, diaries, reviews, and letters to Psycharis and other demoticists she constantly emphasizes that demotic is a language of literature and invention. In one letter she refers to how her own daughters when writing to their aunts have difficulty in thinking of anything to say when they are writing in *katharevousa*, but when they write in demotic they write freely (Delta 1997, 366 n.1). For her, too, Greece's territory and borders are also a part of the equation. In another letter she chastises Dimitri Petrococchino, another Diaspora demoticist, for his polemic on the Greek language in which he refers to three brothers from the island of Chios who had made their fortune in America. Her criticism is that to maintain Greek as the language of the people we need to focus our attention on Greeks in Greece.

I would prefer them illiterate shepherds, but *Greeks*, instead of naval officers and millionaire *Americans* [...]. I have much more respect for [these men's] brothers who stayed in Chios, lived, married, and died, leaving children in Chios or Greece, the unknown dust of world history, but Greek dust, the specks that make up, along with other specks, the Greece of today (Delta 1997, 369).

Imagining the nation and a language capable of imbuing the nation with a dignity worthy of Greece's ancient past are the explicit goals of intellectuals, regardless of their widely differing positions on whether this should be *katharevousa* or demotic. At the level of content and rhetoric Korais, Solomos, Psycharis, and Delta all insist that the language question is a national question.

The diasporic perspective on the language question

But such attention to the patriotic fervour and nationalist ambitions of the architects of the language question overlooks the fact that many of these intellectuals were not themselves natives of the Greek state. While critical discussions have centred on how the language question is about the making of a nation, it can also be viewed as an important resource for thinking about the ongoing role of the Greek Diaspora in inventing Greece inside and outside of Greece.⁶ It is worth observing that almost everyone mentioned thus far is not from Greece per se, not an 'autochthon', as the

than Psycharis, who grew up in Constantinople and France. She had little problem with the presence of certain *katharevousa* phrases in her books since, as she repeatedly points out, this mix is the state of the language she lives in, and she is obliged to speak as she lives her life.

⁶ Interestingly, the players themselves noted the significance of the Diaspora for the Language Question, though it was usually cited as the reason why someone should stay out of the debate altogether. As Beaton points out, it was 'the prescriptive interference of the expatriate who rides roughshod over centuries of written usage' that Chatzidakis had objected to in Psycharis, and Kodrikas in Korais (Beaton 1999, 314). Clearly Psycharis is responding to such criticisms when he writes the section of his *Grammar* entitled 'Europe and Greece' that begins: 'I often hear that it is my bad luck that I live in Paris and therefore do not know Greece. Maybe. [...] But who can accuse me, in the language question at least, of not having tried to make our Greece worthy of Europe' (Psycharis 1929, 74). Although there is no extended discussion on the Greek Diaspora and the language question, various recent essays prepare the ground for such inquiry (Gourgouris 2005; Jusdanis 2000; Lambropoulos 1997). For comparative discussions of the Diaspora that address issues of language and cosmopolitanism, see Cheah et al. 1998; Edwards 2003.

Greek term has it, but a ‘heterochthon’.⁷ These were not Greeks living in Nafplion or Athens, the capitals of the fledgling state, but Greeks born, bred, or at least working and living outside of Greece in Calcutta, Liverpool, Hull, or Paris. Greek for these Greeks was a second language or one of many possible languages (French, German, Italian, English, Turkish, Vlach, Albanian). These men and women who fought for monolingualism, whether in the name of *katharevousa* or demotic, were in fact all irremediable polyglots. Their concern for what kind of Greek a Greek should write reveals a great deal about what kind of nation Greece should be, but also about their own diasporic insecurities over their own hybrid Greek.

A more careful look even at the canonical texts by Korais, Solomos, Psycharis, and Delta that I referred to above reveals that dwelling on the relation of the Greek language to the nation is only half the story. Their texts are not only in *katharevousa* or demotic, but diglossic, written in or about different forms of Greek, and multilingual, written in or about different languages.⁸ Repeatedly the question is not simply whether *katharevousa* or demotic should win out as the new nation’s language, but whether different forms of Greek can coexist, and what should be the relation between Greek and other modern languages. In the same prologue to the edition of Heliodorus in which Korais relates national character to language, we find an interesting clue to his own multilingualism:

But this character cannot manifest itself as it truly is except when a person writes in his natural language – that is, in the language which he suckled with his mother’s milk and which he speaks every day, or at least more regularly than other, acquired languages (Korais 1984, 43–4, translated and cited in Bien 1972, 44).

The final tacked-on phrase, ‘at least more regularly than other, acquired languages’ is a dead give-away. How much more regularly does Korais really speak Greek? Born in Smyrna, a merchant in Amsterdam, and educated in Montpellier, it is understandable that he might want to impress upon us the centrality of his mother tongue. If we look at the language Korais writes in, we can see that it is the furthest thing from what a child might suckle with a mother’s milk. His archaized morphology ‘corrects’ spoken Greek. Although he explicitly criticizes the miscegenation of the Greek language and warns of its contamination from Ancient Greek and other languages,⁹ his own language is full of foreign imports. Certainly his imagined language of the nation owes more to his Philhellenic circle of classically educated friends outside of Greece than it does to any Greek mother’s milk. In a revealing moment in his *Vios [Life]*, which to a large degree is an autobiography of his linguistic training, he writes about how the lack of educational facilities in his home town caused by the presence of the Turks increased ‘the desire to deny [his] fatherland (*patrida*) which [he] now saw as a stepmother rather than a mother’

⁷ For these terms see chapters 8 and 9 above by Yanna Delivoria and Socrates Petmezias.

⁸ For an excellent discussion of Solomos’s bilingualism, see Mackridge 1994.

⁹ See in particular Korais 1984, 39–48: ‘You are in danger of filling up our common dialect with the idioms of other nations’ (39), ‘those who aspire to ancient Greek, those whom forgive me if I call mongrel-Hellenizers, or if you prefer, mongrel-barbarians [...]’ (47).

(Korais 1984, xii). Greek it seems was not so much his mother tongue, but, in a phrase resonant with diasporic displacement, his stepmother tongue.

Again in Solomos's '*Dialogos*', which deals with how the Greek language might better serve the new nation, we find as much about diasporic multilingualism as we do about which kind of Greek is to be spoken. Solomos's story is perhaps the paradigmatic tale of how the language question is a problem of cross-cultural translation. On the eve of the Greek War of Independence, the poet returns to his native Zakynthos from his Italian education in Cremona and Pavia. Upon hearing a folk song sung by an old man in the street, he swears to relearn his mother tongue and become Greece's first poet to write in demotic. The problem is, he does not know enough Greek. The film director Theo Angelopoulos fictionalizes this predicament in his 1998 film *Forever and a Day*, by having Solomos pay an island girl to teach him new words. The important role of multilingualism, apparent in Solomos's biography, is also clear in the set of rhetorical ploys he displays in the '*Dialogos*'. Like Korais, he does not seem to be able to talk about whether he prefers demotic or *katharevousa* without referring to a host of different forms of Greek as well as other languages. The poet in the '*Dialogos*' first tries to convince his interlocutor of the nobility of the people's language by quoting Socrates in the original ancient Greek, making the usual point that Greek is a language well over two thousand years old; while his next, more innovative move involves returning to the Italian he was trained in, which is also the language of his only collection of poetry to appear during his lifetime (Solomos 1822; cf. Mackridge 1994, 61). He argues for the propriety of demotic languages by listing various 'vulgar' words, or words he thinks the purist will find vulgar, in Italian. His trump card is that all these words are found together in a famous passage from Dante's literary masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno* xxxiii, 1–3):

The Purist. – Can you give me some example which will show me how words which appear to us vulgar may become ennobled?

The Poet. – Certainly, but they never change form. But tell me first, do words like *sollevò, peccator, capo, pasto, forbendo, capelli* appear noble to you?

The Purist. – The last three seem to me very vulgar indeed (Solomos 1994, 544).

In order to promote the use of the common tongue, Solomos first has the Poet connect it to ancient Greek and then has him quote Italian. Promoting a single national language involves resorting to other languages. The multilingualism of the Greeks outside the Greek state proves to be integral to the monolingual project of standardizing a national language.¹⁰

¹⁰ Korais's and Solomos's mixed linguistic allegiances also seem to contribute to their suspicion of completion, authoritativeness, and definitiveness. A fuller understanding of their multilingualism would involve an exploration of the fragmentary nature of their work. Both authors exhibit a pronounced anxiety over the impossibility of ever finishing anything. A list of Korais's titles of the texts where he makes his most important formulations about the Greek language question reveal the speculative, disorderly, provisional nature of his writing: *Mémoire sur l'état actuel de la civilisation dans la Grèce* (Memorandum),

The diasporic promiscuity of the language question is particularly clear in the cases of Psycharis and Delta. For Psycharis, as for Korais, French was his primary language. We know his parents spoke French to each other; certainly all his communication with his father was in French (Angelou 2000, 29). In the second edition of *My Journey*, Psycharis adds to the Homeric epigraph about defending one's country another from Dante: *Io cominciai, come persona franca* ('I have begun, as a frank individual'.) His numerous references to φράγκικα ('Frankish', i.e. Western European) suggest he is punning on the two senses of this idiomatic term, being frank or honest, and being a Western European and a speaker of French. Like Solomos, he can only make his argument about demotic by resorting to all sorts of other languages, most crucially Italian, French, and German. In another passage he illustrates visually how indebted *katharevousa* is to French and German syntax. He begins with a complete parody of this linguistic contamination when he interweaves the Greek phrase ελάμβανε τον κόπον ('he took the trouble') with the French translation, *il prenait la peine*, alternating the letters of each.¹¹ Clearly, the call to defend one's *patria* is not only about the internal peregrinations of an Odysseus, but, more to the point, of a diasporic Greek who begins his life being called Vanya in Odessa, lives most of his years as a Frenchman in Paris, and ends up writing poems in Italian (Angelou 2000, 11).

Penelope Delta, though more adamant about the necessity of living in Greece, also lived her life between different countries and languages. Born in Alexandria, Egypt, she stayed there until she was thirty, when she moved to Frankfurt. In her forties she relocated with her husband and three daughters to Athens. Her correspondence is a mine of information about the language usage of cosmopolitan Greeks of these times. Of her hundred correspondents in Calcutta, Liverpool, and other places, only a very small portion were 'autochthon' Greeks.¹² Her letters after she moved back to Athens tell us much about the struggle of a diaspora Greek to adapt to life in Greece. In them she urges Psycharis and others to come to live in Athens and write in Greek if they really want to help the demoticist cause. Nevertheless her texts, like Psycharis's, are peppered with other languages.¹³

Stochasmoi aftoschedioi (Improvised Thoughts), *Atakta* (Disorderly Papers, or Miscellany). Solomos's notebooks are full of sketches in Italian that he then laboriously translated into Greek and, more often than not, left in fragments. His most intriguing and most paradigmatically fragmentary work *I gynaike tis Zakynthos* (*The Woman of Zakynthos*) performs the impossibility of a national language through the stammering of a Zakynthian woman. Only through huge editorial efforts did these piles of fragments become the editions we know today.

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of multilingualism and the mixing of alphabets and languages in Psycharis, see Van Dyck 2005.

¹² The correspondence included in this volume (Delta 1997), as the editor unapologetically informs us, is only Delta's Greek correspondence. Except for one letter from Psycharis in French (which prompts a tirade from Delta about how she hates it when he writes to her in French), her own and others' letters written in English and French have been left out of this edition.

¹³ For an evocative description of the multilingual world that shaped Penelope Delta, see Patricia Storace's *Dinner with Persephone*. According to Storace, even courtship in Delta's day was a multilingual affair:

Although she may castigate Petrocchino in the passage already quoted for writing about Chiots who had made their fortunes in America and then wrote about their experiences in English, she ironically ends her review of his book: 'No, I do not like [your book about] the three American-Chiots, and don't get angry with me over this; on this topic you will find I am *chauvine*' (Delta 1997, 270). Even the nearest and dearest topic of nationalism and patriotism requires other languages in order to be fully expressed. The very word that communicates her fervent commitment to the nation is borrowed from French.

Conclusion

This review of some of the major figures involved in the Language Question shows that it is not only about Greeks trying to promote a single form of their language, but that it is also fuelled by the passions and perspectives of Diaspora Greeks who project the multilingual world of their lives in the Diaspora onto the cultural terrain of their homeland. In elaborating a monolingual solution, these intellectuals work from a multilingual template. Their texts suggest that diglossia hinges on a spectrum of registers rather than a clear opposition between two distinct varieties. Demotic and *katharevousa* are intertwined, just as Greek shares loan words and even at times its syntax with French, German, Italian, and other languages. The 'naturalness' of any one form of Greek is repeatedly undermined by an appeal to synchronic differences among languages. The Greek language, with its warring linguistic forms, is a problem for these reformers from the Diaspora, but it is also an expression of the way they have learned to live. Diglossia, to some degree, can thus be viewed as a by-product of a community of intellectuals from outside Greece, who themselves are always negotiating and reflecting upon the differences and similarities among languages. It serves as a matrix for working through the multilingualism of their diasporic existence. When seen from the perspective of the nation, diglossia can look like a lamentable division. But when viewed from the perspective of the Diaspora it is also a creative way of mapping out Greece's position in a transnational world.

Reading twice through key texts in the story of the language question allows me to showcase these different perspectives. It also helps me illustrate the particular task of literary criticism: to read texts not only for *what* they say, but *how* they say it. Even when the explicit message seems quite rigid and nationalistic, the diasporic multilingualism of these texts suggests a sensitivity and an openness to change.

Negotiating the intricate social fissures of being Greek, the young couples courted each other in foreign languages, particularly English and French, and the fragments of such courtships recorded in diaries of the period like Penelope's give the impression that in this world of repressed sexuality, moving from language to language was itself an erotic experience, full of momentary revelations, glimpses of sudden unpredictable nakedness, charged secret vocabularies (Storace 1996, 335).

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