

Preface

George Poulimenos

While in Izmir for the November 2010 Levantine Symposium, I was surprised to hear several of the participants address me in Greek. Or, rather, that's what I thought at that time, for this was not the Athenian Greek I was used to, but the *Smyrneika* idiom of Greek, which I had considered extinct since the last of the Greek-speaking refugees from Smyrna had passed away and the language spoken by their descendants had gradually transformed into standard Greek.

The tongue I was hearing reminded me of my grandmother, born in Kato Panagia (now Çiftlik) near Çeşme, a seaside resort of Izmir. The words and syntax were the same, even the accent revealed the same musical tone as modern Italian, or the idiom of Chios Island. Back then, when I was still in high school, I had started jotting down the strange words uttered by my grandmother in a notebook, now unfortunately lost forever.

Those speaking *Smyrneika* to me that day were not Greeks in the narrow sense, but Levantines, that elusive, conglomerate ethnical entity of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Western European merchants, mostly from the Italian maritime republics, had been living and trading in the Levant since even before the capture of Constantinople by the Latins in 1204. The Capitulations (treaties signed between the Ottoman Porte and European powers from the 16th century onwards) continued the Byzantine practice of concessions to foreign merchants and enabled even more western Europeans to establish themselves and prosper in the port cities of the Ottoman Empire.

Franks, Latins, Catholics, Levantines: these were some of the names given to the western Europeans of the Levant. However, they were not exclusively of Catholic faith, a great deal of them were from Protestant lands, mainly England and the Netherlands.

Gradually, the Levantines adopted Greek as their first language. This was due to a number of reasons: they lived in cities such as Constantinople and Smyrna, where a sizable proportion of the population was Greek-speaking; there was a constant influx of Catholic Greeks from the islands; couples in mixed marriages had no other linguistic choice for themselves and their children; children's nannies were Greek, and so on.

The 19th and early 20th century was the golden age for the Levantines. In Smyrna alone they formed about 10% of the population, controlling a substantial part of the city's commerce and pioneering in the exploitation of her rich hinterland. The advent of nationalisms, however, would soon bring this era of plenty to an end.

Most Levantines left Smyrna after the Great Fire in that fateful September of 1922, but many of them managed to return after a while, to continue their lives in the beloved city of their birth. Thus it happened that the Greek language, or at least the *Smyrneika* idiom, did not entirely die out in what is now Izmir as a consequence of the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923. Polyglots from birth and multi-cultural by nature, the Levantines carried on using *Smyrneika* in everyday life, side by side with the other languages they knew: French, Italian, or in some cases English.

Smyrneika continued to evolve for some time after that, even in the absence of native Greeks, on occasion influenced by the speakers' mother tongue, though now being predominantly enriched with words from Turkish and French. Phrases like "Όταν *kondouizérnis vrádhi*, n' anávis ta *fára* tou *otomobiliou*" ("When you drive at night, you should turn on the headlights of the car". See words in italics in the Lexicon), containing terms of modern technology, demonstrate the influence of the latter, taught in French schools run by religious orders.

Alas, the passage of time is inexorable. Newer generations have no incentive to learn *Smyrneika*: Turkish, French and, increasingly, English, have assumed the role of a *Lingua Franca* among Smyrna's Levantines. This, and the slowly diminishing numbers of

Smyrna Levantines (now less than 0.1% of the Izmir population), inspired Mr. Peter Polycarp Galdies, MVO, a Smyrniot and late father of my co–author, to start taking notes of words, expressions and song lyrics in *Smyrneika*, along with their translations into English.

The re–discovery of those notes and subsequent conversations with older Levantines inspired my co–author George Galdies to expand on this work and thus try to preserve the *Smyrneika* he knew and loved. He was soon joined by Alex Baltazzi, who collaborated with him in this enterprise and also undertook to write “*Smyrneikes Kouvedes*”, a series of dialogues designed to illustrate the *Smyrneika* idiom and the unique atmosphere of old cosmopolitan Smyrna.

After the project was announced at the *Levantine Heritage* forum, I jumped at the opportunity to become the third member of the team, initially to help with editing the “*Smyrneika Lexicon*” and “*Kouvedes*” and also to contribute with my knowledge of common Greek. But soon roles became superimposed, each of us spending much of our free time and energy on each and every task and challenge that arose on the road to our common goal.

During the following months more than 5,000 e-mails carrying new words, thoughts and ideas flew between Izmir, Athens and London. Sometimes our opinions differed significantly, but we always managed to reach a satisfactory scholarly agreement.

The result is the “*Smyrneika Lexicon*”, containing approximately 2,000 entries, and the “*Smyrneikes Kouvedes*”. Our principal source was the memory of my fellow co–authors and friends, augmented by the reading of a few literary works written in the *Smyrneika* idiom. Words from these books were only included, however, if Alex and George remembered them, and on condition that they supplied the meanings themselves. On the whole, it can be said that our work covers a wider scope in terms of the number of words and explanations given than any other we know of.

At this point we would like to thank our families, friends and contributors for their help and encouragement. Without the patience demonstrated by our families during our quest, this work would never have been possible.

Athens, May 2012

Introduction

Alex Baltazzi

At first, the idea of making a Lexicon of Smyrneika, the Greek idiom of Izmir, seemed to me in a way to be nothing more than 'resusciter les morts' as the French would say, resurrecting the dead. However it is also true that the well known languages of today are very much indebted to old languages such as ancient Greek and Latin.

It is a known fact that the language of old Smyrna is a Greek idiom, one of many different regional variations of the language. The idiom of Istanbul, though it has many similarities to that of Izmir is considered a separate idiom, as is that of Chios.

Throughout the ages these idioms have appeared in multicultural environments populated by people from different cultures and religions. The languages of the foreign traders who came to trade and even to settle in various Mediterranean ports brought new words to our dictionaries and idioms. This can be seen, for example, in the large number of Italian maritime words (mainly of Venetian and Genovese origin) in the Turkish language.

The people who emigrated to the Mediterranean area, Ottomans, Arabs, Greeks, Italians, French and Spanish, did not completely lose their own languages but preserved them as much as they could while also adding local words.

In times where communication and education were less accessible than now, the languages which would otherwise have been lost have in fact been preserved through these various idioms. As such, in our work on the Lexicon we came across many old Greek words in Smyrneika that are no longer used in standard Greek.

Besides the Greek, which is the origin of the majority of words in Smyrneika, the idiom also received influences from mainly Turkish, Italian and French, and a great number of the 2,000 words in our Lexicon are of Turkish origin.

As well as the influence of Italian on maritime vocabulary, the numerous and active Levantines of Italian origin in Smyrna brought many words from their language into the everyday language of Smyrneika.

As far as we can see, besides the French-speaking foreigners living in Izmir, French culture and education held an important place in Smyrna, particularly amongst the Levantines, and thus many French words found their way into Smyrneika.

It is well known that, for many Greek Smyrniots and especially for Levantines, Greek was not a language learned at school but a vehicular language of everyday life learned mainly aurally. Therefore it happened that many words were pronounced in various ways and meanings changed depending on the context and the individual concerned. Therefore, in our Lexicon there are many examples of words that have more than one spelling.

Forced to stay in Athens for about ten years due to the Second World War, the Greek spoken by my mother was different to that of other Smyrniot Levantines and was closer to that of Athenians. She would use, for example, the "tis" ("tis to ípa") of Athens in place of the "tzi" ("tzi to ípa") of Izmir. Having myself entered into business relations with Greeks, although I was unable to write Greek using the Greek alphabet and preferred to use Frangochiotika mode (Greek in Latin characters), my Greek became quite close to standard modern Greek. My Greek friends would tell me "You do not speak Greek like a Smyrniot, like someone from Izmir." Someone who speaks the idiom of a language can quickly learn the original language if they stay for a time in a place where it is spoken. In the Kouvedes (Conversations) section, I tried to give examples from Smyrneika on topics that focus on the daily life of old Smyrna. A different location was chosen for the different days of the week and the subtleties of the language of the speaker were used to try to give an impression of old Smyrna as well as of the individuals living there.

Izmir, May 2012

On Smyrneika

George Galdies

Smyrneika (or Smyrriotika) was the everyday language of old Smyrna, a Greek idiom with some similarities to the dialect of Chios. Through the ages, Smyrniots referred to their language as Romeika: the Greek language of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium), from which Smyrneika has derived. The idiom's grammar and syntax are that of common Greek with some small differences; in contrast, many words are the result of a fusion between different language sources.

As time went by words from other languages, mainly French, Italian and Turkish, were given a Greek ending, or turned into a hitherto non-existent Greek noun, verb or adjective. Furthermore, some words, although now extinct in Greece, have been traced as having their roots in Greek antiquity and are assumed to have survived on the Anatolian shores of the Aegean Sea.

Smyrneika was commonly spoken in the non-Muslim quarters of Smyrna and its environs as a vehicular language between the various nationalities and ethnicities that formed Smyrna's cosmopolitan population. It was the mother tongue of Hellenes and Ottoman Greeks and even for most Levantines, but even Turks, Armenians and Jews had at least an elementary knowledge of the language, especially those involved in any kind of commercial activity. The language was still spoken by Smyrna Levantines well into the 1960s, when many of them emigrated to all corners of the world, taking with them some rudiments of the language.

The Smyrna idiom survived for a time in Greece itself since it was spoken by the refugees who had left Smyrna after its partial destruction in 1922, only to disappear after younger generations were taught a purified version of common Greek in state schools. Meanwhile, several Hellenic writers have used Smyrneika in their poems, novels and reminiscences, among them Sokratis Prokopiou and Kosmas Politis. The idiom has been prevalent in the verses of Rebetiko songs too.

Sadly, Smyrneika is facing an impending demise. As our contribution towards preserving its memory, we have undertaken to compile this lexicon of words and expressions that make up the language. Since this is a glossary of genuine Smyrneika words, we have tried to avoid including words that could be found in any Greek to English dictionary, and in this sense it purports to be an original work, to a large extent void of common Greek. Nevertheless, we did enter some key words from Greek, Turkish and western European languages that played a major role in the social and economic life of Smyrna of that time.

Smyrneika was usually written in the Greek script. However, among Levantines a different writing prevailed: "Frangochiotika". This is a phonetic writing of Greek using the Latin script, which had originated in Chios when the island was under Genoese rule, and at a time when it was flourishing as a major Aegean trade centre prior to the fulcrum eventually shifting to Smyrna. We have decided to use this writing for the Lexicon and the dialogues that follow, so as to reach as large an audience as possible.

We are grateful to all contributors for their comments and suggestions. It has taken us nearly a year of exhaustive research to compile this lexicon, yet we still cannot claim that this work is fully complete, as more words and expressions are bound to surface, perhaps giving us material for future editions...

The following work was researched, compiled and written jointly by Alex Baltazzi, George Galdies and George Poulimenos. It is protected by the authors' copyright.

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