

SMYRNEIKA – LONDON SPEECH, 8.2.2013

Why should anyone attempt to compile a lexicon of a dead Greek dialect, such as Smyrneika? I am sure that many of you would like this question answered.

Yet, is Smyrneika really a dead language?

The answer to that is NO, or at least not yet. Although the dialect is no longer spoken in Greece by the descendants of Smyrniot refugees, turning up only in some forgotten books and old songs, this is not the case for Smyrna itself, the modern Izmir.

I discovered this fact myself two years ago, when I was in Izmir in order to participate in the 1st Levantine Symposium. As long as I stayed in Izmir, many Levantines who addressed me spoke to me in Greek, or rather the Smyrneika idiom of Greek. I was very much surprised: How could it be that Smyrneika, the language, survived in Smyrna, when all her Greek inhabitants had been driven out some 90 years ago?

A partial answer would be that the Smyrneika speakers were not Greeks in the strict sense, but so-called Levantines. But even then, why would these Levantines continue to use a Greek idiom today, long after the departure of the Greeks?

Before 1922, Smyrna was a cosmopolitan port, where many ethnicities, religions and cultures co-existed and interacted: Greeks, Turks, Jews, Armenians and Levantines, people of Western European origin permanently residing in the Near East for centuries. The Levantines had come from various European countries, but mainly from France, Italy, the Netherlands and Britain, and they had been established in the Levant since the 16th century.

By taking advantage of the privileges ensuing from the capitulations, the trade agreements between the Ottoman Empire and individual European states, they settled in the Levant, where they lived and gave birth to their children, worked and prospered. With time the Levantine Europeans adapted to local conditions, adopting many behavioural patterns and customs of the indigenous people of the area. In contrast, they continued clinging to their ancestral faith, the cohesive factor that kept them together.

One of the adaptations of Levantines was in language: They became increasingly multi-lingual, and, in addition to the tongue of their country of origin, they could speak fluently in Greek, the language of the most important community of Smyrna, as well as in French, Italian and so on.

Greek especially grew to be a quasi – mother tongue among Levantines. The reasons for this were, among others, that their children's nannies were Greek; also mixed marriages, where the common language for the family members could be none other than Greek; and additionally the continued influx of Catholics from the Greek islands of the Aegean, who were absorbed and integrated into the Levantine

community. Another important reason was that the prevalent language in commerce was Greek. Thus, nobody could operate as a merchant in this city, where commerce was omnipresent, unless one had a good grasp of the language.

Levantine spoke Greek perfectly, but as they did not attend Greek schools, they wrote using the Latin script. Greek written in Latin script, so-called «Frangochiotika», is a predecessor of «Greeklis», often used today by Greek speakers in the internet.

Many Levantines remained in Smyrna even after 1922, and thus Smyrneika continued to be used in the city for many decades to follow. Today of course Smyrneika has almost disappeared, used exclusively by elderly Levantines, in Izmir as well as in Europe and the U.S., where most of the Levantines have emigrated.

So, to answer at last the question as to «why did we write this Lexicon»: The lexicon's publication certainly won't resurrect Smyrneika, nor will it suspend their course to extinction, yet it will be a permanent record for the idiom, which will survive even after its demise. Also, we had a lot of fun doing it.

The relationship of Smyrneika with the various non-Greek people of Smyrna operated both ways: Just as many foreigners adopted and used the dialect in their daily life, so did Smyrneika also adopt many words and expressions from the languages of the various ethnicities of Smyrna. It is reported, for example, that Smyrneika was the Greek idiom with the most lexical loans from the French. Yet it was not only French, but also Turkish, Italian, and even «Ladino», the ancient Spanish spoken by the Jews of Smyrna, that contributed to the Smyrneika vocabulary. At the same time, Smyrneika Greek similarly influenced the vocabulary of the other languages spoken in Smyrna, especially that of Turkish.

The many Smyrneika words for «the news» will give you an idea of the interplay between languages:

«néa», same as in modern Greek; «habéria» and «havadísi», from Turkish; «nouvelles» from French; and «mandáta» from Italian.

And now I would like to give you an account of how the Lexicon evolved from an initial idea to the printed book we have here.

Modern technology played a big role in this, especially the internet and electronic messages, not very surprising, if you consider that the three authors live in different cities, even in different countries.

Even my first contact with an embryonic version of the material, an initial word collection assembled by George Galdies, now a London resident but born in Izmir, and Alex Baltazzi, who lives in Izmir even now, was by electronic means, within the context of the informal Levantine discussion forum. The two had created the initial nucleus of the lexicon, while Alex had additionally written the first draft of a series of

dialogues in Smyrneika, in order to illustrate the use of the idiom in everyday life. Alex and George then publicised their work to the members of the Levantine forum, hoping that something bigger could come out of it.

I was drawn to the project at first by the dialogues, the «Kouvedes», which are published at the end of the book. I and my wife were much amused reading them one autumn night, while I also tried to mimic some aspects of Smyrniot pronunciation, known to me from days past. Still the need for some editing that would enhance the text considerably was immediately apparent. So, the very next day I proposed to Alex to undertake this myself.

Alex accepted at once, and thus I spent some days in analysing the dialogues in depth. First I transliterated the text into Greek script, and then I corrected any mistakes I found and homogenised it. After discussing the result with Alex and creating a final version, I transcribed it back to «Frangochiotika», while at the same time coming up against and solving the problem of Frangochiotika spelling, that is the uniform rendition of all Greek phonemes in the Latin script.

During this time, George didn't stop to prod me with his e-mails to give a look also to the main lexicon, which at that time included perhaps one quarter of the words it would have in its final version.

This initial word nucleus originated in some notes George's father had kept, himself born and having lived in old Smyrna. This list was then augmented with new words, which George and Alex had drawn from their own memories of the language.

Of course, the common fate of word lists such like that one is to remain in obscurity, locked up in a back drawer, until they are eventually forgotten and lost. This was for example the case for a similar small word list I had assembled myself, collecting strange words and expressions used by my grandmother, herself a refugee from Asia Minor. Fortunately, the list by Alex and George did not share the same end: By persistently reminding me, George ultimately succeeded in getting me to engage myself in the editing of this first draft of the Lexicon, too.

Initially the Smyrneika words, likewise written in Frangochiotika, included just an English translation, and, in some cases, a tentative etymology. This etymology was what persuaded me to contribute to the project, since the origin of words is a subject that has always interested me. So I started adding etymologies to the words, and Greek meanings too, when these were significantly different from Smyrneika.

While searching for word origins I started looking for aid in the internet, where I found a lot of dictionaries in various languages, from Turkish to old Venetian, that proved very helpful subsequently.

We decided to continue using the Latin script for Smyrneika and Greek, for practical reasons as well as to be able to address as large an audience as possible, including

the Levantines, who, although they can speak Greek, in most cases aren't able to read or write it.

In the meantime, communications via e-mail between the three of us were becoming very frequent. Whatever I was preparing, was sent for suggestions and approval to the other two co-authors. Simultaneously, Alex and George carried on delving into their memories and continuously remembering more words. Most of them ended up enriching the lexicon, frequently accompanied by expression examples explaining their use.

At this phase of the project, we also contacted some other Levantine speakers of the idiom, and they too contributed words and expressions they remembered and had escaped us. Another word source we started using were books, both old and new, written in whole or in part in the Smyrneika dialect. Many of them even included glossaries at the end, and we utilized them too.

Yet, to avoid direct copying and in order to create something original, we employed the following tactic: I would collect lists of interesting words from the books and I would send them to my co-authors, omitting the meanings given in the books. If George or Alex knew the words, they would provide their own meanings, and we then would include the words in the lexicon. So, the words originating from books are our own too, except that my co-authors had to extract them from deeper recesses in their memory.

While collecting and incorporating words into the lexicon, there was a constant flow of e-mails between us. It's no exaggeration that often more than 10 e-mails were sent and received by each of us daily. I was so used to this flow of e-mails, that I felt a kind of deprivation on days when I didn't receive post from my collaborators. Until the book was published, we had exchanged more than 5.000 e-mails.

When we had collected a critical mass of words, we started to think about ways for publishing the lexicon in a book. Yet, a first inquiry among publishers in Greece didn't yield any results, mainly because of the current economic crisis, which has affected the publishing sector just as the whole of Greek economy. Then we had the idea to address the Izmir Chamber of Commerce, which had hosted the Levantine Symposium two years ago, and was also active in publishing books about Smyrna. We were lucky in that, as the person responsible for the Chamber's publications had just been appointed at a managerial position in the Turkish History Foundation, «Tarih Vakfi», and he proposed that we should publish our book through the Foundation, while the Chamber of Commerce could finance the effort.

A precondition was to add also the Turkish meanings for the Smyrneika words, which we did, thereby making the lexicon tri-lingual. After that we submitted the book to the publishers. After an editing phase, the text was formatted in book form and a selection of photos was added.

A month later, we got the printed book in our hands.

It may seem strange that a basically Greek lexicon, that is a lexicon of a Greek dialect, would arouse enough interest among Turks, so that a Turkish publisher would attempt to publish it. But there is an explanation for this, too.

During the last few years, there is a nostalgia in Turkey for the era of the Ottoman Empire. Naturally, unpleasant events are often bypassed, and what remains is an often imaginary, idealised picture of the multi-ethnic empire, which takes hold of the public interest.

A characteristic example is Istanbul, where the residents already established there since the «good, old days» often look back with sympathy at that not-so-long bygone time, when the city still retained substantial Greek, Armenian, Jewish and Levantine minorities, especially when they compare the past with the current situation, when Istanbul has been flooded by immigrants from the interior of Anatolia.

This same mood prevails in Izmir too. There, the events of 1922 are being put aside and the interest is shifting to the cosmopolitan city of Smyrna before its destruction by fire and the subsequent expulsion of the greater part of its population. The glorious past of the city as a great Mediterranean port is remembered, and efforts are being made to elevate modern Izmir to the heights of the past. Thus, in books, films and theatre plays the emphasis is now more on the multicultural characteristics of Smyrna which played a great role in the city's commerce, and there are frequent references to the various ethnicities that comprised Smyrna's intricate mosaic.

These are then the reasons that the book was published in Turkey and was warmly received by the public and the press. In newspaper articles that appeared after its publication, the common elements of the Smyrneika idiom and Turkish were pointed out, highlighting the common cultural background of the various ethnic communities of Smyrna.

This multiculturalism of Smyrna is of course apparent in the city's language, Smyrneika, but it's also recorded in various sources dating from the time of Smyrna's heyday. These include written sources, such as newspapers and books, but also old maps, commercial guides of the time, photos and postcards.

All this constitutes a large and practically uncharted volume of materials, suitable as a source for new projects that could bring to light the character of the lost city.

I have now arrived at the end of my speech. I want to thank you all for attending, and I hope you found it interesting.