

**SELF-TRANSLATION OR REWRITING A TEXT.
VASSILIS ALEXAKIS' NOVEL
I MITRIKI GLOSSA (LA LANGUE MATERNELLE)**

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ABSTRACT

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO ANALYSE THE (SELF-)TRANSLATION OF THE NOVEL I MITRIKI GLOSSA INTO FRENCH (LA LANGUE MATERNELLE), WRITTEN AND TRANSLATED BY VASSILIS ALEXAKIS, A FRENCH WRITER OF GREEK ORIGIN. ALEXAKIS WROTE HIS NOVEL IN GREEK, THEN HE TRANSLATED HIMSELF INTO FRENCH. ALTHOUGH WE CAN CONSIDER THE ORIGINAL AND THE TRANSLATION ONE AND THE SAME NOVEL, THE COMPARISON LED TO THE IDENTIFICATION OF SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO VARIANTS. THE AUTHOR/TRANSLATOR REWROTE SOME PARTS OF THE BOOK IN ORDER TO MAKE THEM MORE COMPREHENSIBLE TO THE FRENCH READER. MORE PRECISELY, ALEXAKIS TRANSLATED SOME GREEK WORDS AND PHRASES AND ADDED EXPLANATIONS TO DIFFERENT TERMS (E.G. KATHAREVOUSA) IN THE TEXT. HE AVOIDED USING FOOTNOTES AND, AS HE WAS BOTH THE TRANSLATOR AND THE AUTHOR OF THE TEXT, HE COULD MAKE THE BEST CHOICES IN TRANSLATING THE NOVEL. THE CONCLUSION OF THIS STUDY SHOWS THAT, WHEN POSSIBLE, SELF-TRANSLATION COULD BE THE BEST WAY TO RENDER THE MESSAGE, FEELINGS, ATTITUDES AND CULTURAL ELEMENTS OF A PARTICULAR LITERARY WORK.

KEY WORDS: VASSILIS ALEXAKIS, GREEK, FRENCH, SELF-TRANSLATION, CULTURE

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary translation is a very complex process that implies not only the mastering of two languages (source-language and target-language), but also the knowledge of an intricate web of cultural references, stylistic choices, textual functions and receptor's expectancies. This paper looks at the literary translation and the cultural elements, in terms of equivalence and communicative purpose. We will analyse the novel *I mitriki glossa* (or *La langue maternelle*), written by Vassilis Alexakis, a French writer of Greek origin, and we shall refer to the Greek source-text and its translations into French and Romanian, highlighting the relation between self-translation and the equivalence of cultural elements. Some parts of the novel were rewritten by the author/translator in order to provide a more comprehensible text. Last but not least, we will also refer to the Romanian translation of the novel (*Limba maternă*). The differences identified in the

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French text can also be found in the Romanian one as the translation was made from French. Interestingly, although the Greek text should be considered the original one, the publishing house decided to make the translation from French instead of Greek.

2. ALEXAKIS - LA LANGUE MATERNELLE OR I MITRIKI GLOSSA?

In this section 2, we would like to present some facts about Vassilis Alexakis, his career and works to understand better his personality. A writer's life and professional career influence his works and literary choices (major themes, genres etc.). Moreover, we want to demonstrate that the Greek text is the first one, namely the original.

Vassilis Alexakis is a contemporary French writer born in 1943, in Athens. At the age of 17, he left Greece to study journalism in Lille, but three years later he returned to Greece, as the scholarship finished and had to do his military service. After the coup d'état which led to the military regime, characterized by censorship, Alexakis decided to return to France. In 1968 he settled in France and ever since, for the past decades, he has been living there.

Alexakis is a complex cultural personality, a journalist, a cartoonist, a writer and a translator, as well². In spite of his activity that covers many cultural areas, his novels and short stories are the most notable achievements. He has received many prizes for his books (among others, Médicis, Grand Prix de l' Académie Française). His works are inspired from both the Greek and French societies and written either in French or in Greek. Almost all the time Alexakis is the translator of his own works, from French into Greek or vice versa. Generally, his novels could be considered autobiographical as they seem to describe personal experiences and opinions, events inspired by the author's life, places etc. His works are sometimes ironical or lyrical, especially when Alexakis recalls past memories from Greece. His characters live either in France or in Greece, in two worlds and realities and they try to find their national and linguistic identity. This could be Alexakis story too if we look at his life and career.

This is the case of the novel that we are analysing here, *I mitriki glossa* or *La langue maternelle*. The central character is Pavlos, a Greek cartoonist who has been living and working in Paris for the last two decades. He returns to Athens for no particular reason and does not book a return airplane ticket to Paris. In Athens he discovers a new city and decides to find out what is the secret of the letter E (epsilon) written above the entrance to Apollo's temple in Delphi. Pavlos travels along western Greece and talks to different people trying to find out as many details as he can in order to solve the mystery. The novel seems to be self-referential, inspired by the writer's experience. Pavlos seems to be an alter ego of Alexakis who tries to find his own identity. In spite of this resemblance with Alexakis himself and the reality, the author claims that the book is not autobiographical. However, he does not say that the book was inspired by and reflects real events.

These personal events are narrated in the first person, by the main character, in a lyrical fashion interwoven with monologues and descriptions. In fact, Pavlos returns to Greece in order to understand his own history and past from the point of his reality, to search for his personal and cultural identity and to comprehend both Greek and French cultures. Alexakis manages to interweave different features and generalize them, dichotomies as individual vs. general, person, autobiography vs. society, national (Greek) vs. European.

The novel was written in Greek, as Alexakis says in an interview³, then the author himself translated it into French immediately. The Greek original and the French translation were

² *** Δεξικό της νεοελληνικής λογοτεχνίας (Athens: Patakis, 2007), s.v. Alexakis, Vassilis.

³ Η μητρική γλώσσα είναι γραμμένη στα ελληνικά και δεν μπορούσε παρά να είναι γραμμένη στα ελληνικά, γιατί πρωταγωνιστής σ' αυτό το βιβλίο είναι ένα γράμμα του Αλφαβήτου (Η μητρική γλώσσα [Mother tongue] was written

published almost at the same time, in 1995⁴. Therefore, it is quite difficult to say which the first text was. In spite of this, we would say that we are dealing with a ‘consecutive self-translation’⁵, namely a self-translation made only after the completion or even publication of the original.

In Romania, the novel under discussion was published in 2009, by Trei Publishing House, but the translation into Romanian was made after the French text, as the latter was better known and easier to translate. Therefore, we expect to find some differences between the Greek original and the Romanian text, concerning the stylistic choices and the equivalence of some phrases.

3.1. (SELF-)TRANSLATION: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Generally, texts can be divided into literary and non-literary, according to their features and functions. Literary texts, including fictional prose, poetry, theatre, “fulfil an affective/aesthetic rather than transactional or informational function”⁶, which influences the process of translation. Literary translators aim to (re)write texts into another language, making different linguistic and stylistic choices and applying a set of transformation techniques and strategies. Moreover, the act of translation has to take into consideration two essential elements - equivalence between texts and communicative purpose.

As mentioned, we shall refer to the process of (literary) translation from the angle of cultural elements. That is why, considered from this point of view, the question of adaptation and equivalence is crucial. One first question worth posing is: How far should translators adapt or update? Another question, related to the result of translation, could be: After translating a text, is the result a new text or the same with the previous, original one? How do texts and translations relate? In the following sections of our paper we try to give an answer to these questions from the angle of self-translation, adaptation and communicative purpose.

3.2. SELF-TRANSLATION, ADAPTATION AND COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSE

Self-translation can refer “both to the act of translating one’s own writings into another language and the result of such an undertaking”⁷. Although a writer masters two (or more) languages, he/she chooses to create in one of them. However at some point of their career, writers decide to translate their own writings, becoming self-translators. Under these circumstances, self-translation could be the best way to render the linguistic content, the meaning, the feelings and the attitudes of a literary work, because the author knows best what the message he/she wants to transmit is and he/she will try to translate it as faithfully as he/she can. In Menakhem Perry’s words, “Since the writer himself is the translator, he can allow himself bold shifts from the source text which, had it been done by another translator, probably would not have passed as an adequate translation”⁸. The reason for this acceptance is explained by Brian Fitch, who suggests that “the writer-translator is no doubt felt to have been in a better position to recapture the intentions of the

in Greek, because the protagonist of this book is a letter of the Alphabet), <http://www.hyper.gr/makthes/960117/60117d01.html>.

⁴ V. Alexakis, *Η μητρική γλώσσα - μθιστόρημα* (Athens: Exantas Publishing House, 1995) and *La langue maternelle - roman* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

⁵ M. Baker, G. Saldanha, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 259.

⁶ Baker, Saldanha, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 152.

⁷ Baker, Saldanha, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 257.

⁸ Menakhem Perry, ‘Thematic and Structural Shifts in Autotranslations by Bilingual Hebrew–Yiddish Writers: The Case of Mendele Mokher Sforim’, *Poetics Today* 2(4), (1981)181.

author of the original than any ordinary translator”⁹. In our case, Vassilis Alexakis, a bilingual writer, who masters two languages - Greek, his mother tongue, and French - is a self-translator, for whom this practice is a systematic one.

Furthermore, translators (as well as self-translators) should be considered cultural mediators. They do not translate only words and phrases (i.e. language), but they also have to “translate” culture. The reader should understand the text both from a linguistic and cultural point of view. Some elements (objects, attitudes, customs) that do not have an equivalent in reader’s culture must be explained (in footnotes, for instance). So translation (or adaptation) has to take into consideration the communicative purpose and the target reader: his/her expectancies, cultural horizon. In our view, for the reasons presented above (cf. Perry, Fitch), a self-translator, who masters the language and the cultural background of the target public, is the best translator of his own writings. Particularly, in section 5, we shall refer to the novel *La langue maternelle*, an example of self-translation, and to the choices made by Alexakis.

4. ALEXAKIS AS A SELF-TRANSLATOR: *LA LANGUE MATERNELLE*

After analysing and comparing the Greek and French texts, we identified some fragments where the novel was slightly changed in French. In the following, we will present and discuss these fragments, from the angle of self-translation and receptor’s expectancies, trying to provide some explanations for the self-translator’s choices.

First of all, when translating his novel into French, Alexakis added some words and phrases in order to explain the meaning of particular Greek words. There are many examples throughout the book, but we shall refer only to some of them. For instance, the main character of the novel decides to write in a notebook all the Greek words that begin with an epsilon. In Greek we can find the verb *ελίσσομαι* (‘twist, be flexible’), while in French the author-translator adds an explanatory translation of this word: *ελίσσομαι, se faufiler*. The author provides explanations for many other Greek words and phrases, which would have been superfluous in the Greek original (e.g. *έκτακτος* ‘extraordinary’, *εντός* ‘within, inside’, *εντελώς* ‘completely’, *αίνιγμα* ‘enigma’, *έρις* ‘discord’, *ευρίσκω* ‘find’ and the well-known sayings *το γνώθι σαυτόν* ‘know thyself’, *το μηδέν άγαν* ‘nothing in excess’).

In our view, Alexakis’ choice can be explained as follows. As Greek was the original language of the novel, these words were intrinsic and inherent to the linguistic substance and ideational structure of the text. Language (form, expression) and message were interrelated and rendering this connection and the communicational purpose was almost impossible. The Greek words had to remain in the translated French text, because they were relevant to the plot and philosophy of the novel. On the other hand, for the French reader the explanations and translation of these words were absolutely necessary. There was only one solution: to give all these explanations in footnotes, but this would have interrupted or even impeded the act of reading.

As expected, all these additions made by Alexakis in the French text will be present in the Romanian translation, as well (e.g. *ελίσσομαι, a se fofila*). So the changes in the French variant of the novel are reflected within the Romanian translation. The target public and the communicational purpose of the (translated) text was rather the same as in the case of French.

In some other parts of the book, we can identify another type of changes or differences between the Greek and French variants, also reflected in the Romanian text. More precisely, there

⁹ Brian Fitch, *Beckett and Babel. An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 125

are extended explanations and even rewriting of the text. These changes are apparent in examples of the following type:

Gr. *Μας υποχρέωνε να γράφουμε στην καθαρέουσα, αυτό το περίεργο ιδίωμα που ξεσηκώνει στ' αρχαία πρότυπα*¹⁰.

Fr. *On nous contraignait à écrire dans une courieuse langue artificielle, intermédiaire entre le grec modern et le grec ancien, appelée pure, catharévoussa.*

Rom. *Eram constrânși să scriem într-o limbă artificială ciudată, între greaca modernă și greaca veche, numită pură, catharevousa.*

As we can see, the author considers appropriate to add an adjective (*artificielle*) that does not exist in the Greek original and to explain the term *katharevousa* for the reader that might not know it. We can say that we deal with an explanatory commentary which enables the comprehension of the linguistic elements linked to cultural background of the Greek reader.

In this point of our paper we can take into account another opinion related to self-translations and the act of rewriting a text. Some scholars say that self-translations offer the bilingual writers the opportunity to revise their text and improve them¹¹. Considered from this point of view, the adjective *artificielle* could be the result of such revision of the novel.

Another interesting example refers to Hermes. Taking about the Greek letter E (epsilon), Pavlos makes some connections between it and the Greek god. In the fragments bellow, we can see that, in French, Alexakis added more information and commented upon the spelling of the Greek noun *Ἑρμῆς*. Again, these details and remarks would have been redundant to the native Greek reader, but very useful to the French one. The explanations provided by the self-translator, enrich the French text and ease the understanding of the message. Furthermore, the target public of the translation is a French speaking one and, therefore, the comments refer to the French spelling of the word under discussion. Interestingly, but as expected, these changes are reflected in the Romanian translation, too.

Gr. *Το έπιλον θα μπορούσε να είναι αφιερωμένο σ' αυτόν*¹².

Fr. *On peut imaginer que l'E lui était dédié: **son nom commence en effet par cette lettre en grec** (Ἑρμῆς), **le h ajouté en français n'étant qu'une reminiscence de l'esprit rude.***

Rom. *Ți-ai putea închipui că E-ul îi era dedicat lui [Hermes], **căci numele lui începe cu această literă în limba greacă „Ἑρμῆς!”, h-ul adăugat în franceză fiind doar o reminiscență a spiritului care indica vocala aspirată***¹³.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this final part, we want to answer the questions asked in section 3 and to draw some conclusions of the study in the light of its title.

How far should translators adapt? When rendering messages and texts that refer to different cultures, the degree of adaptation can be very high, because the translator must find the best equivalence between elements that do not exist in target-language. If this is not possible, he has to

¹⁰ “We were forced to write in *katharevousa*, this bizzare language that follows ancient patterns.” (our translation).

¹¹ M. Baker, G. Saldanha, *op.cit.*, 259.

¹² “Epsilon could have been dedicated to him” (our translation).

¹³ The fragment in bold is highlighted by us.

explain all the differences in footnotes. Alexakis, the author (creator) and the translator of the text, enriched the original with explanations, comments and translations, in order to make the text easier to read. His (self-)translation can be considered a partial rewriting of the novel. The identification of the translator with the author allowed him to change some parts and add explanations, which would have not been possible in the case of an ordinary translation.

The second question was: After translating a text, is the result a new text or the same with the previous, original one? How do texts and translations relate? In our case, the translation could be a French variant of the Greek original, due to the shifts from the source-text that had to be done by Alexakis. We cannot claim that we deal with a different text, although *La langue maternelle* does not reflect faithfully the novel *I mitriki glossa*. Moreover, the French text does not give the impression of artificiality and does not impede the act of reading the novel (for pleasure). The Greek words and the explanations do not interrupt the act of reading.

Finally, after analysing this novel from the angle of (self-)translation and rendering the cultural elements, we have to say that self-translation could be seen as a type of developed type of translation. The identity of the author (creator) - translator enables the process of translation and the result could express better the author's feelings, message and perspective. Nevertheless, the mastering of both languages and the knowledge of the cultural background are sine qua non conditions of an adequate translation. Alexakis was born in Greece and left his country in his 30s, so his mother tongue is Greek. On the other hand, he lives in France and speaks (writes etc.) French as a second language, at a native speaker level. He is permanently connected to the French way of life, culture and language. All these things made Alexakis' competent choices in his (self-)translation very adequate and enabled him to create a new variant of the text. Furthermore, besides a (literary) translator, Alexakis is a writer, creates literature, and this is another advantage of his translation.

Generally, the saying *traduttore, traditore* expresses quintessentially the act of translation and its lack of faithfulness, but in Alexakis' case, we can say that *traduttore* is not a *traditore*.

On the other hand, the relation established between the Greek novel and its French and Romanian translations could be presented synthetically as it follows:

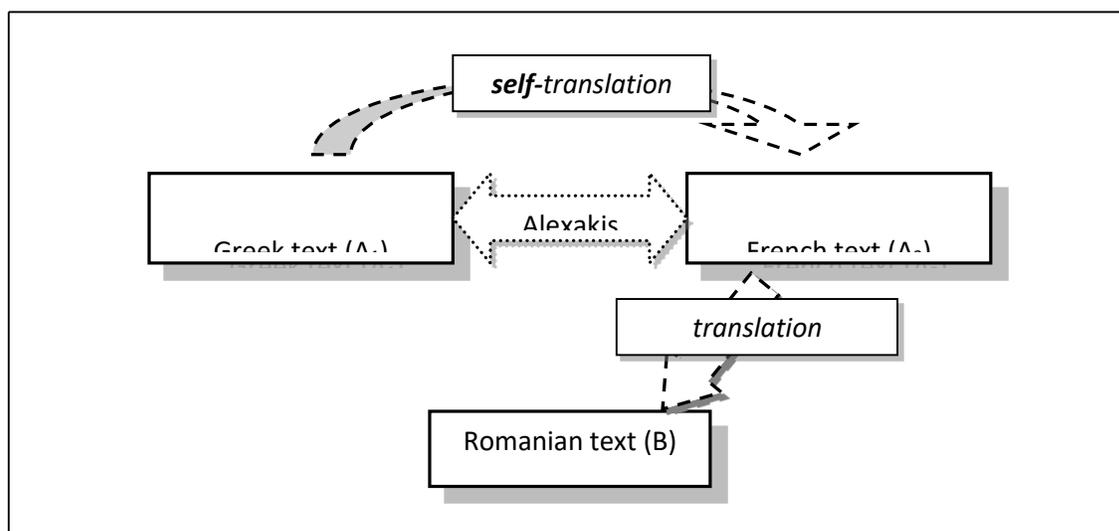


Fig. 1. The relation between the three variants of the text

As the Romanian translation followed the French text, it is obvious that the all differences, explanations and additions made by Alexakis in French were translated into Romanian. As we have already said in the Introduction of this study, the main reason of choosing to translate the novel from French is that the novel was better known in its French variant and more famous in France. On the other hand, the characteristics and the expectancies of the Romanian public are similar to the French one. They have a similar cultural background, different from the cultural background of the Greek readers. Otherwise, if we take all these into account, the Romanian translator had to insert footnotes to make the text more accessible to the reader.

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