

# Literary self-translation, exile and dialogism: the multilingual works of Vassilis Alexakis

ELEFThERIA TASSIOPOULOS

*York University, Toronto, Canada*

*Bilingual writers like Vassilis Alexakis are a challenge for translators since in their works they try to reconcile their divided linguistic identity. One of the strategies available to bilingual writers to help them explore their specific linguistic condition is self-translation. The theory of dialogism facilitates exploration of the many levels of dialogic connections inherent in bilingual writers' works, especially in self-translation.*

*Key words: bilingual, displacement, self-translation, dialogism*

## Introduction

Vassilis Alexakis is a literary figure whose works present challenges for translators due to their bilingual nature and the author's particular writing strategies. Alexakis was born and raised in Greece and moved to study to France, where he remained for political reasons. He began his career as a French writer in France and only later in his life did he return to his mother tongue, writing in both French and Greek. His autobiography, *Paris-Athènes*, tells the story of this conflict between two languages, two cultures, and the experience of exile. Examination of his work reveals that Alexakis was displaced not only physically but also spiritually and emotionally. His works often center on, or in some way include, his bilingual identity and the displacements he experienced throughout his life.

Here I focus on two of Alexakis's major literary works, representing two different types of writing: *Talgo* (fiction) and *Les Mots étrangers* (autofiction). Despite the difference in genres, the connections between the author's two languages and cultures appear in each work repeatedly, in his attempt to reconcile his divided linguistic identity.

Self-translation is one of the strategies available to bilingual writers to help them explore their specific linguistic condition: a bilingual or

fragmented identity. Alexakis translates his work from French to Greek and vice versa, a fact that creates constant displacement from one literary space to another. Self-translation also constitutes a problem for traditional literary boundaries, blurring the line between “original” and “translation”. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is helpful in demonstrating the many levels of dialogic connections inherent in bilingual writers' works, especially in self-translation. These connections can be analyzed from the perspective of the narration (the relationship between the represented author/narrator/hero), writing (the real author and the act of creation) and intercultural associations (each text anticipates two audiences simultaneously).

## **Dialogism as a theoretical framework**

### *Polyphony, dialogism and self-translation*

While Bakhtin does not specifically address self-translation, I have analyzed Alexakis's works and applied the theory of dialogism to self-translation as it is described by Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson in *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation*. For Hokenson and Munson, Bakhtin compares monological texts to polyphonic texts and examines the dialogism that is present in the latter. A monological text is one in which the author's word/voice is that of the omnipresent narrator who knows and determines everything that happens in the novel. The polyphonic novel is written in a style in which there is no omnipresent narrator telling the story; in other words, the main character's voice—or the voices of the different characters—is not completely submerged by the narrator. The novel is not necessarily written from one point of view and may not follow a linear form (Bakhtin 1970: 244-245). Dialogism exists in all literary works, but it is more apparent in polyphonic texts and self-translations, since the two versions of the same text are written to engage in a dialogue with the reader, and with other texts. Thus, as Walsh and Munson explain, the texts are engaged in a dialogue with their partner text, as well as “those of the literary fields of their reader's languages” (Hokenson and Munson 2007: 198). Each version of the text includes a different audience; therefore, there are cultural discrepancies between the two (ibid.).

Alexakis's works expose his audiences to a foreign culture, more specifically to French or Greek culture and the similarities and differences between the two. Versions of the same text in each language remain marked by difference and, as Scheiner explains, it is their dialogical relationship that reveals their difference as “clearly marked as situational and cultural. The self-translated text can never provide a perfect replica of the original for the two do not arise from the same context” (2000: 87). In each text, Alexakis

writes with a different reader in mind, resulting in the creation of dialogic links between different cultures, languages, spaces, countries, people and times.

### *Dialogism, the utterance and the novel*

The utterance is the element that engages in dialogism; it is a word or a fragment of a word whose most important characteristic is its intertextuality. According to Bakhtin, language exists because we use it, and each discourse made up of utterances enters into a dialogue with all other “discours antérieurs tenus sur le même objet, ainsi qu’avec les discours à venir, dont il pressent et prévient les réactions” (Todorov 1981: 8). This can also be thought of as a “collective utterance”, since an individual voice cannot be heard unless it is integrated in the complex choir with other voices present.

Bakhtin argues that literary texts contain utterances and are utterances themselves. Not only do they depend on the author (who is writing the text), but also, as Holquist explains, “on the place they hold and the social and historical forces at work when the text is produced and when it is consumed” (1990: 68). The words contained in literary texts engage in a dialogic exchange that takes place simultaneously on several levels: firstly between language at “the level of prescribed meanings” (where “tree” means any tree) and secondly at the level of discourse (where “tree” means this tree here and now, with all the cultural associations that cling to trees in this time and in this place) (Holquist 1990: 69). Simultaneity also pertains to the multiple meanings a word has at different times throughout history for a specific language. In the case of the novel, simultaneity exists in “the dialogue between an author, his characters, and his audience, as well as in the dialogue of readers with the characters and their author” (ibid.).

### **Self-translation**

Self-translation occurs when an author writes a work in more than one language. In doing so, Scheiner writes, “the author engages in an individual process by performing the act of self-translation him/herself” (2000: 66). The bilingual writer moves “between different sign systems and audiences to create a text in two languages” (Hokenson and Munson 2007: i). Works of bilingual authors and self-translators are most often studied in only one of the two languages, which means that an important dimension of these works—explicit dialogism—is left unexplored.

Self-translations are difficult texts to classify because one must consider whether both texts are translations, whether one text is the original, or whether both are original literary works. Nicola Doone Danby’s research on

self-translation navigates these issues by considering self-translation, or auto-translation, a phenomenon that can be studied both in the literary and translation fields (Danby 2003: 10). Each version of the text is valid, and should be included in the reader's appreciation and interpretation of the work, since they are both produced by the original author (Danby 2003: 10-11).

### *The double-voiced word*

The double-voiced word is a conceptual tool that explains dialogism and self-translation. According to Bakhtin, it can be any individual word "if that word is perceived not as an impersonal word of language, but as the sign of another person's semantic position, as the representative of another person's utterance, i.e. if we hear in that word another person's voice" (1973: 152). The dialogical relationship that exists within an utterance or an individual word creates the double-voiced word in which two voices collide. In self-translation every word is double-voiced because each word speaks to two audiences simultaneously, as the author's voice is split into two, moving "from one context to another context" and from one cultural space to another cultural space (Danow 1991: 26).

## **Alexakis's Works and Dialogism**

### *Talgo - a novel/fiction*

The dialogism in Alexakis's works becomes apparent in *Talgo*, since it is the first novel he wrote in his mother tongue and translated it himself into French. It was completed in 1980 and circulated for the first time in 1982 (Alexakis 1997: 6). Since Alexakis began his career as a French writer, his first novels were written only in French and published in France. After many years away from Greece, he felt the need to "return" to the Greek language with *Talgo*.

Alexakis writes for the dual reader, and the polyphony that is inherently present as a result of the underlying Greek roots in his French texts (i.e. locations, names and cultural references) is what creates the dialogism in his works. Todorov's theory of dialogism and bilingualism describes "bilingualism [as] the clearest example" of what he calls "radical dialogism":

Note that in radical dialogism the two modes of discourse do not comprise a diglossic situation, in which each language is reserved for a distinct, specific, functional use; rather, they exist in constant simultaneity. Central to this comparison is the idea that there is always already present an intended listener, whom Todorov calls “*le destinataire imaginaire*”. (Scheiner 2000: 13)

Radical dialogism as applied to Alexakis’s bilingual text *Talgo* doubles the intended listener because every utterance is intended not only for the Greek listener/reader but also for the French listener/reader. Although two discourses are being used (Greek and French), they do not constitute a “diglossic situation” because each language is not reserved for a distinct, specific, function; instead, both languages and texts exist simultaneously, and are connected as partner texts, each one revealing the same story in layers to its audience/other, with both audiences, languages and cultures in mind.

This is demonstrated in Alexakis’s use of the character Karaguiozis in both the French and Greek versions of *Talgo*. Karaguiozis was a famous character and beloved icon in the theatre of shadows in Greece, first appearing in the nineteenth century (Coutsoukis 2008). He lived in poverty and was always hungry. He was thus forced to come up with new schemes in order to feed himself and his family. Alexakis borrows the character of Karaguiozis as a reference to the hunger the Greek people suffered during the military dictatorship and the Ottoman rule. Alexakis does not omit Karaguiozis in his French text, nor does he replace him with a French cultural equivalent.

Karaguiozis’s appearance in the French *Talgo*, as an utterance, carries a number of connotations that simultaneously tie the French text to its Greek counterpart and establish a dialogic connection between the Greek reader and the French reader. A number of examples appear in the following excerpts:

Πρέπει νά δείξεις πώς ήταν ή Ελλάδα, πόσο φτώχη, παρατήρησε ό Κώστας. Θυμάμαι έποχή πού ό έργατικός κόσμος έτρωγε στά έστιατόρια κρατώντας μέ τό άριστερό χέρι τό πιάτο, λές και φοβόταν μήν τό άρπάξουν! Τρώμε τώρα όσα δέν έφαγε μιά ζωή ό **Καραγκιόζης**.

*Κι ό Σπίθας, είπες έσύ, κι ό Σπίθας!*

Δέν τόν ήξερε ό Κώστας τόν Σπίθα, δέν τόν άφηναν οί γονείς του νά διαβάξει **Μικρό Ήρωα**.

Είναι ο φίλος του Μικρού Ήρωα, είπες, μοιάζει λιγάκι μέ τόν Καραγκιόζη, μόνο πού είναι χοντρός.\* (Alexakis 1980: 35)

Tu dois absolument rappeler la misère que la Grèce a connue jusqu'aux années cinquante, a observé Kostas. Je me souviens que les gens mangeaient dans les restaurants en tenant continuellement leur assiette de la main gauche, comme s'ils avaient peur de se la faire enlever! Nous sommes en train de manger maintenant tout ce que **Karagiozis**<sup>1</sup> n'a pu manger au cours de sa vie.

*Il y a beaucoup de personnages affamés dans notre littérature, as-tu dit. Je pense, par exemple, à l'Étincelle!*

Kostas ne connaissait pas l'Étincelle, ses parents ne lui permettaient pas de lire les aventures du **Jeune Héros**<sup>2</sup> quand il était enfant.

C'est l'ami intime du Jeune Héros, as-tu dit, il ressemble un peu à Karagiozis, sauf qu'il est gros. *Dès qu'il aperçoit un rôti, il oublie complètement sa mission. C'est une sorte d'Obélix.* (Alexakis 1997: 37-38; emphasis mine)<sup>3</sup>

Other cultural references in *Talgo* that establish dialogic connections between the French and Greek cultures and languages are the terms “**Jeune Héros/ Μικρό Ήρωα**” (in bold in the above example). The meaning of the name of this Greek children's novel remains the same in the translated French text. Alexakis has included a footnote that keeps the original cultural reference and provides clarification for the French reader.

---

<sup>1</sup> Personnage central du théâtre d'ombres grec. (This footnote is from the novel.)

<sup>2</sup> Roman populaire pour enfants publié sous forme de fascicules, retraçant les péripéties d'un jeune résistant et de ses amis sous l'Occupation allemande. (This footnote is from the novel.)

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that in Example 1 from *Talgo* the sentences in italics differ from the Greek version to the French version. The first sentence in italics in the Greek version corresponds to the first sentence in italics in the French version, the difference being that the literal translation of the Greek version reads: “And Spithas, you said, And Spithas!” while the French version reads: “You said there are a lot of hungry characters in our literature. I'm thinking for example of l'Étincelle.” The French version provides an explanation for the French reader while the Greek version does not. The explanation is implied in the Greek version. It is also important to note that Spithas/Σπιθας in Greek means *étincelle* (“spark”) in French. The second sentence found in italics in the French version does not exist in the Greek version. It would appear in the Greek version where the asterisk (\*) is placed. Alexakis once again added a sentence to the French version so that he could keep the Greek cultural reference in the French text by explaining it instead of substituting the reference completely with a French cultural equivalent.

*Les mots étrangers - autofiction*

*Les mots étrangers* was written by Alexakis in French in 2002, and later translated by the author into Greek. It is the first of his novels to be translated into English by Alyson Waters, who worked from the French version of the text. In this novel, Alexakis sought out a third language and a third cultural space in order to appease the conflicting relationship that has always existed for him between Greek and French (De Pizzol 2007: 295). Alexakis returns once again to his Greek past in the novel, and simultaneously in real life, as a means of retracing his roots because he fears they will disappear now that his parents have passed away. He seeks out this third language and space in the Central African Republic to create some distance between himself and the two European nations that he lives between, and he does this in order to understand better what they mean to him. At the age of 52 Alexakis decided to learn Sango, a language from the Central African Republic, in order to honor the memory of his father who had always been fascinated by Africa.

It is impossible to discuss *Les Mots étrangers* without considering the dialogic connections in Alexakis's writing. The novel is a work of autofiction, meaning it is both autobiography and fiction. The author/narrator is also the main character; a French author of Greek origin, who experienced a displacement from Athens to Paris during the military dictatorship that plagued Greece in the 1970s. He has recently lost his father and he is finding it difficult to grieve in Greek and in French, which leads him to study Sango. The narrator questions his decision and we come to understand that he longs to learn something new, to return to the feeling that he only had in his youth while learning Greek and French. He traces back connections from his ancestors to Africa and to the Central African Republic. He is drawn to Sango, and the reader accompanies him through the process of learning it.

The narrator constantly describes the connections between Greece, France and Africa, specifically the Central African Republic. Since Alexakis has written the novel in this way, he makes the dialogic connections for us: with every word in the French version we see the connection to the Greek language and culture, and vice versa. Also, since the narrator is learning Sango we start to see the connections with Africa in both the Greek and French versions. The examples of trialogic connections that the author/narrator/main character make for the reader are many and they start on the first page:

Le premier mot de sango que j'ai appris est baba, « papa ». Il est facile à retenir, bien sûr. « Mon père » se traduit par baba ti mbi. L'adjectif possessif « mon » n'existe apparemment pas dans cette langue, car baba ti mbi signifie littéralement « le papa de moi ». Kodoro veut dire « village », et aussi « pays ». Si j'avais à décliner mon identité, je dirais :

Kodoro ti mbi, c'est la Grèce.

Est-ce qu'il existe un mot en sango pour désigner la Grèce? Mais je n'ai pas envie de parler de moi (mbi, répétons-le). J'ai le sentiment d'avoir épuisé le sujet de mes allées et venues entre Athènes et Paris. (Alexakis 2003: 11)

Η πρώτη λέξη που έμαθα στα σάνγκο είναι μπαμπα, «ο μπαμπάς». Δεν δυσκολεύτηκα βέβαια να τη συγκρατήσω. «Ο πατέρας μου» μεταφράζεται μπαμπα τι μπι. Η κτητική αντωνυμία «μου» δεν συναντάται προφανώς σ' αυτή τη γλώσσα, γιατί μπι σημαίνει «εγώ». Μπαμπα τι μπι θα πει στην κυριολεξία «ο πατέρας του εαυτού μου». Κοντορο σημαίνει «χωριό», και επίσης «χώρα». Αν ήμουν υποχρεωμένος να δώσω τα στοιχεία της ταυτότητάς μου, θα έλεγα:

- Κοντορο τι μπι είναι η Ελλάδα.

Υπάρχει άραγε στα σάνγκο η λέξη Ελλάδα; Αλλά δεν έχω διάθεση να μιλήσω για μένα (μπι, το επαναλαμβάνω). Νομίζω ότι έχω εξαντλήσει το θέμα των ταξιδιών μου μεταξύ Αθήνας και Παρισιού. (Alexakis 2003: 7)

The first word of Sango I learned was baba, “papa”. It’s easy to remember, of course. “My father” is translated as baba ti mbi. The possessive adjective “my” apparently doesn’t exist in Sango, for baba ti mbi literally means “the father of me.” Kodoro means both “village” and “country.” If I had to say something about my identity, I would say, “Kodoro ti mbi is Greece.”

Is there a word in Sango for Greece? But I don’t want to talk about me (I repeat, mbi). I think I have exhausted the subject of my comings and goings between Athens and Paris. (Alexakis 2006: 1)

This trialogism between French, Greek and Sango is consistent throughout the novel because Alexakis writes in three languages, using three cultures as references to try to find new solutions to his bi-identity and the tension in this duality. He writes in the three different languages as an attempt to translate the untranslatable: the inner conflicts he is experiencing due to exile, uprootedness and the constant movement between the two languages, cultures and spaces. *Les Mots étrangers* reflects Alexakis’s inability to translate his bilingual condition and his difficulties in expressing himself and his grief over the loss of his father in either French or Greek. He seeks a third language and cultural space (in Africa) to escape to in order to gain distance from both European languages, and return to a pre-exile happiness of belonging.

There is always something that is lost in translation, and Alexakis’s way of addressing this loss is to find a third space, Sango, a visible “third” that

acts as a mediator between Alexakis's two already existing spaces and languages. Sango in the novel is :

une troisième langue, une langue reine, "qui vient médiatiser le rapport entre deux langues en contact", ce qui permettrait à "la langue maternelle traduisante" de "s'ouvrir pleinement à l'autre langue." L'espace autre qui apparaît à la rencontre de deux idiomes promet l'exploration des possibilités inouïes de sa propre langue. (Klimkiewicz 2001: 79)

## Conclusion

The complexities of Alexakis's texts are best understood when examined in a dialogic context, and offer excellent examples of dialogism and its application to the novel. His works give insights into the bilingual text and the uncertainties that arise during its analysis, such as how one defines the "original" text, or how one values its translated counterpart, while suggesting that both texts are equal when studied side by side, and the connections they establish between readers in the past or present, here or there, are infinite.

The self-translator's place is in the literature of each language in which they write, as well as in Translation Studies. However, is it important for a third space to open up between Literature and Translation Studies, where self-translated texts and the dialogic connections they establish can be studied as their own genre. Twentieth-century writers like Alexakis have developed the genre of self-translation by creating a style of writing that captures the experiences of displacement, migration and exile by using new writing strategies, and they deserve their own space for analysis.

## References

- Alexakis, Vassilis. 1980. *Talgo*. Athens: Exadas.  
 Alexakis, Vassilis. 1989. *Paris-Athènes*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.  
 Alexakis, Vassilis. 1993. *Parisi – Athena*. Athens: Exadas.  
 Alexakis, Vassilis. 1997. *Talgo*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard.  
 Alexakis, Vassilis. 2003. *Hoi xenes lexeis*. Athens: Exadas.  
 Alexakis, Vassilis. 2003. *Les mots étrangers*. Paris: Gallimard.  
 Alexakis, Vassilis. 2006. *Foreign Words*. Iowa City: Autumn Hill Books.  
 Bakhtin, Mikhaïl Mikhailovich. 1970. *La Poétique de Dostoïevski*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.  
 Bakhtin, Mikhaïl Mikhailovich. 1973. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by R. W. Rotsel. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis.

- Coutsoukis, Photius. 2008. *The magic of traditional Greek shadow theatre*. <http://www.photius.com/thus/karagiozis.html>. Visited April 2009.
- Danby, Nicola Doone. 2003. *The space between: Self-translators Nancy Huston and Samuel Beckett*. Masters thesis, York University.
- Danow, David K. 1991. *The Thought of Mikhail Bakhtin: From Word to Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- De Pizzol, Vanessa. 2007. "L'identité déchirée de Vassilis Alexakis : La langue maternelle et *Les Mots étrangers*". In *Écrivains multilingues et écritures métisses: l'hospitalité des langues*. Ed. Axel Gasquet and Modesta Suárez. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal. 293-304.
- Hokenson, Jan Walsh, and Marcella Munson. 2007. *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Holquist, Michael. 1990. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*. New York: Routledge.
- Klimkiewicz, Aurelia. 2001. *Bakhtine et l'herméneutique du XXe siècle: Interprétation, traduction, dialogue*. Université de Montréal: Département de linguistique et traduction.
- Scheiner, Corinne Laura. 2000. *Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Self-Translation: Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov as Doubled Novelists*. PhD dissertation. The University of Chicago, Department of Comparative Literature.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1981. *Mikhail Bakhtine: Le principe dialogique, suivi de: Écrits du cercle de Bakhtine*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

