THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION, MYTHOLOGY AND POPULAR TRADITION ON THE GREEK AND ENGLISH CLICHÉ SIMILES

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1. Introduction

"Similes are figures of speech, involving a comparison between two unlike entities. In the simile, unlike the metaphor, the resemblance is explicitly indicated by the words 'like' or 'as'. The common heritage of similes in every day speech usually reflects simple comparisons based on the natural world of familiar domestic objects." (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1993)

At first, we should make a distinction between free similes and cliché similes. The free similes have been used in literature (i.e. poetry, drama, novels, folk songs, etc.) from antiquity up to the present time. Poets and writers, such as Homer, Aeschylus, Plutarch, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton (to mention only a few) realised the importance of similes as figures of speech and used them extensively in their works.

Cliché similes, on the other hand, are idiomatic units of language, which have fixed form. They are short in structure and usually have prosodic features, so that they are easily memorised and remembered by the members of a linguistic community. They appear mostly in everyday conversation, but also in written texts. They are transmitted from generation to generation and belong to folklore, because they form part of the linguistic tradition of a certain ethnic group.

Some of the reasons that make cliché similes important are the following:

a) They have great descriptive potential and can indicate relations between two distinctly different things most vividly, because they use "icons" or "images", taken from the nature that surrounds each ethnic group (plants, animals, natural phenomena), and also from its religion, mythology, popular tradition, and generally its culture.

b) They have either literal meaning or metaphorical, according to the context. Thus, their study may enlighten the procedure of metaphorical thinking, which is a very important process of the human brain.

c) They give liveliness and vividness to speech, either oral or written, because they are "verbal icons".

2. A contrastive analysis of the Greek and English cliché similes

Because of the importance of cliché similes, an extensive study was carried out recently (Bolla-Mavrides, 1996), dealing with the contrastive analysis of English and Greek cliché similes, that are introduced by an adjective or participle, such as, fresh as a daisy, drunk as a lord, κόκκινος οινός παντζάρι, ζωομένος σαν οσταρίδα, etc.

In the framework of this study, questionnaires were distributed to Greek and English native speakers, aiming at the collection of cliché similes in the respective languages. These subjects were students of secondary and tertiary education in large residential areas of Greece and England. They covered the age range of 14 to 24
years, and were about 600 in each ethnic group. They had the same linguistic background and there was no difference in the way they used and perceived their mother tongue. Also their sociocultural background was relatively uniform.

When the necessary data were collected, they were processed and 320 questionnaires in each language were found appropriate to be used for the final analysis.

3. Distribution of the vehicles of cliché similes of the Greek and English language

During our research a total of 48,540 Greek cliché similes and 32,245 English cliché similes were collected. For a more thorough study of these similes, we classified them into certain categories according to their "vehicles". These categories are the following, and they constitute a slight modification of the categories introduced by Norrick (1986):

1) Living beings.
2) Natural products and raw materials.
3) Artifacts and technical constructions.
4) Social life.
5) The supernatural (mythological, religious, and fictional figures), historical and political personalities.
6) Natural phenomena, geographical terms, etc.

The cliché similes found in our research were classified into 6 groups on the basis of the corresponding vehicle. The results thus found can be summarised as follows:

1) 48% of the vehicles of the Greek cliché similes and 40% of the vehicles of the English cliché similes correspond to living beings.
2) 8% of the vehicles of the Greek cliché similes and 9% of the vehicles of the English cliché similes correspond to natural products and raw materials.
3) 19% of the vehicles of the Greek cliché similes and 21% of the vehicles of the English cliché similes correspond to artifacts and technical constructions.
4) 7% of the vehicles of the Greek cliché similes and 9% of the vehicles of the English cliché similes correspond to social life.
5) 8% of the vehicles of the Greek cliché similes and 4% of the vehicles of the English cliché similes correspond to the supernatural and also to historical and political personalities.
6) 10% of the vehicles of the Greek cliché similes and 17% of the vehicles of the English cliché similes correspond to natural phenomena.

4. Study of the cliché similes of the Greek and English language with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural

In the present paper, an effort will be made to explain the above findings concerning the fifth category, i.e. the cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural, and also to historical and political personalities.

As we have already mentioned, the percentage of Greek cliché similes belonging to this category is equal to 8%, i.e. two times greater than the percentage for the English cliché similes of the same category (4%). It is, therefore, interesting to investigate whether this difference is due to specific sociocultural reasons.

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1 The term "vehicle" was introduced by Richards (1936) and refers to the part of the metaphor (or simile) that comes after the word 'as' or 'like'.
Out of the 4063 cliché similes of the Greek language with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural, and also to historical and political personalities (i.e. 8% or more precisely 8.37% of the total number of the Greek cliché similes collected), 929 (i.e. 1.91% of the total number of the Greek cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to historical and political personalities, and the remaining 3134 (i.e. 6.46% of the total number of the Greek cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to the supernatural.

Out of the 1315 English cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural, and also to historical and political personalities, (i.e. 4% or more precisely 4.08% of the total number of the English cliché similes collected), 180 (i.e. 0.56% of the total number of the English cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to historical and political personalities, and the remaining 1135 (i.e. 3.52% of the total number of the English cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to the supernatural.

In the following, we shall disregard the cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to historical or political personalities, and focus our attention on the ones with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural, which can be subdivided into three groups, namely the cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to:

a) religious figures or concepts (e.g. hot as hell, θόλος ο θαλάσσης),

b) mythological figures (e.g. πολυμήχανος σαιν τον Όδυσσεα, δυνατός σαιν τον Ηρακλή), and

c) figures that occur in popular tradition\(^2\) (e.g. wicked as a witch, βαρμένος σαιν καραγκιάζεις).

From the data given above, it can be seen that the percentage of the Greek cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural is equal to 6.46%, i.e. almost double (1.84 times greater) of the corresponding percentage of the English cliché similes (3.52%).

Furthermore, out of the 3134 cliché similes of the Greek language with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural:

1) 1427 (i.e. 2.94% of the total number of the Greek cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to religious figures and concepts,

2) 1512 (i.e. 3.12% of the total number of the Greek cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to mythological figures, and

3) only 195 (i.e. 0.40% of the total number of the Greek cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to figures that occur in popular tradition.

Also, out of the 1135 English cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural:

1) 585 (i.e. 1.81 % of the total number of the English cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to religious figures and concepts,

2) No cliché simile has a vehicle corresponding to mythological figures, and

3) 550 (i.e. 1.71 % of the total number of the English cliché similes collected) have vehicles corresponding to figures that occur in popular tradition.

From the above data it can be seen that the percentage of the Greek cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to religious figures or concepts is equal to

\(^2\) The term “fictional figures” was changed into “popular tradition”, because the analysis of our data showed that the vehicles belonging to this subgroup are figures that occur in popular tradition.
2.94%, i.e. 1.62 times greater than the corresponding percentage (1.81%) for the English cliché similes.

Also, the percentage of the Greek cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to mythological figures is equal to 3.12%, while the corresponding percentage for the English cliché similes is equal to zero.

Finally, the percentage of the English cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to figures that occur in popular tradition is 1.71%, i.e. 4.28 times greater than the corresponding percentage (0.40%) for the Greek cliché similes.

5. Discussion of the results

In the following section, an attempt will be made to give some explanations of the results given above. It is obvious that there may be also additional and/or alternative explanations for the same results.

5.1. Religious figures and concepts

In the previous section we have seen that the percentage of the Greek cliché similes corresponding to religious figures and concepts, collected during our research, is 1.62 times greater than the corresponding percentage for the English cliché similes. Our hypothesis is that this is mainly due to the very influential role that the Greek Orthodox Church has played in Greek society and the history of the nation during the last centuries.

In ancient Greece, religion was inter-related with mythology, since ancient Greeks believed in the twelve famous gods who lived on Mount Olympus. These gods were mythological figures that exercised a very strong influence on the lives of ancient Greeks and the literature of the time.

According to Petropoulos (1960), mythology is a source of inspiration common to Homeric epics and modern Greek similes. However, the similes used by Homer that were relevant to mythology referred mostly to deities, and more specifically to female deities, for example Artemis, Lito, the Nymphs, etc. In Greek folksongs, a very rich source of inspiration for similes is the Christian religion. The holy figures that are represented in the vehicles of the similes have replaced the ancient deities that appeared in Homer. It is worth mentioning that, the female ancient deities of the Homeric epics, are now replaced mainly by female saints, and to a smaller degree by angels and male saints. This is probably due to the special importance attached to the female figures in ancient Greek cult and Christian religion. The observation mentioned above by Petropoulos, shows the close relationship between the ancient Greek and modern Greek tradition.

As stated previously, 1427 Greek cliché similes with vehicles referring to religious figures and concepts are included in the corpus of our research. This fact also emphasises the close relationship between the ancient Greek and modern Greek tradition.

Another important fact is that in modern times the Greek society is very homogeneous concerning religion. Almost all Greeks belong to the Greek Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church has played a very important role during the various phases of Greek history, and especially during the four centuries of Turkish occupation. The Patriarch was the spiritual leader of the Greeks, and the so called kryfo sholio, a kind of secret school hosted in the churches and run by the priests, was the only educational possibility for the Greeks during this period. In this way the Orthodox Church nourished the national consciousness of the Greek people, and prepared the liberation of the nation from the Turkish yolk.
Another important factor concerning the attitude of Greek people towards their faith is that they are very emotional about it. They believe strongly in the grace of Virgin Mary and in numerous saints, and use their names in everyday speech, especially when they are confronted with difficulties. They also believe in the supernatural power of the religious figures and consequently in miracles. It is, therefore, not surprising that religious figures and concepts have influenced very strongly the Greek language, and are represented so frequently in the vehicles of the cliché similes.

As far as the English language is concerned, religion has not influenced to the same extent the vehicles of cliché similes. One of the probable causes for this could be that Puritanism prevailed for a long period of time in English history. The use of the name of God in everyday discussions was considered to be a blasphemy during this time. People were obliged to follow very strictly the ten commandments and generally the Bible in their everyday life. Therefore, any figures or concepts referring to God or religion in general, could not pass easily into oral communication and subsequently to cliché similes.

It should be mentioned that the first printed translation of the Bible in England was made by William Caxton in 1529, during the reign of Henry VIII. Then, by Kings order a translation was placed in every church, so that it could be read by everyone. From that day on, the Bible was the best-seller of all books in England. In many homes it was the only book until modern times, and the beautiful English of those early translations had a powerful influence on other types of literature.

English religion had been under catholic influence for many centuries. It followed the religious leadership of the Pope in Rome, who united the Church in an extended part of Europe. This was natural because Rome had brought Christianity to England. But in the 16th century, Henry the VIII excommunicated the Church from Rome. The Church of England became a national body, under the control of Parliament and the King. In the years that followed, the so-called Anglican Church, retained its protestant character.

Nowadays the percentage of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom who belong to the Anglican Church is fairly high. There are, however, numerous social groups belonging to other churches, such as the Catholic Church, etc. It seems that the majority of English people have religious feelings, especially the older generation, but these are rather reserved and restrained in their manifestations. Generally, they have a rather spiritual attitude towards religion. Furthermore, English people do not believe in as many saints as Greeks do. Also, the figure of Virgin Mary does not have the predominance it has in the Greek Orthodox Church. Finally, the Church in England has played a different role in the history of the nation, compared to that of the Orthodox Church in Greece. Perhaps, this was due to the historical circumstances, which were quite different in England and Greece.

These are some of the reasons why the religious figures and concepts are more represented in the vehicles of the Greek cliché similes, and less represented in the English ones.

5.2. Mythological figures

In the previous section we have seen that the percentage of the Greek cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to mythological figures is equal to 3.12% of the
total number of the Greek cliche similes collected during our research, while there were no English cliche similes with vehicles corresponding to mythological figures.

According to Scott (1965) “a myth is a traditional story or legend offering an explanation of religious or supernatural phenomena, such as the gods, heroes, the many forces of nature”.

It is universally accepted that Greek mythology is very rich. Ancient Greeks tried to explain the phenomena that occurred in the surrounding world. Thus, they created numerous myths, which later became famous all over the world, to such an extent as to influence the literature of many nations. Because of the continuity of the Greek language throughout the centuries, this very rich mythology passed through oral tradition, from antiquity to the present time. Although the rate of illiteracy in Greece was fairly high up to the 20th century, the mythological stories were transmitted from generation to generation by oral communication, and influenced the culture of the Greek people in such a way that the heroes of mythology were used in cliche similes in everyday speech.

In Greek cliche similes, mythological figures such as the strong Hercules, the quick-footed Hermes, the brave Achilles, the cunning Ulysses, the rich Krissos, the faithful Penelope, and the beautiful Aphrodite, appear again and again. This shows that Greek people have a deep knowledge of Greek mythology, which is evident even in their daily life. We are not sure whether they know the full context of the numerous myths of Greek mythology, but it is certain that the most striking figures, such as the ones mentioned above, form part of their educational background.

The situation seems to be different for English people. Greek mythology, as we have already mentioned, has influenced world literature to a great extent and certainly it has influenced English literature. Major writers such as Milton, Shakespeare, James Joyce, and many others, were fascinated by the remoteness, mystery and heroism of myth, and used it as an inexhaustible source that provided material for their art.

However, the knowledge of Greek mythology remained a possession of the educated people, and did not reach the wider population, whose level of literacy was rather low until the early modern period, especially in the rural areas. Consequently, Greek mythology did not pass into the oral tradition of the English people and more specifically into their cliche similes.

5.3. Figures that occur in popular tradition

In the previous section we have seen that the percentage of the English cliche similes collected in our research, with vehicles corresponding to figures that occur in popular tradition is 4.28 times greater than the corresponding percentage for the Greek cliche similes.

The English people have a long tradition of legends some of them occurring in chivalric romances and epics, such as, the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, and also a tradition of ballads, folk-tales, children's stories and songs, fairy tales, etc.

In the following, we will try to define all the literary genres mentioned above. According to Scott (1965), “a legend originally was an account of a saints life which was read aloud as a duty... Later, the legend was extended to include stories of other kinds, generally of a marvellous character. Then, the legend became a traditional popular tale with a basis of fact, but including imaginative material”.

At this point the name of King Arthur should be mentioned, and the legendary round table, where his knights used to sit. Also, the names of Robin
Hood and William Tell, which are well-known to those who enjoyed reading the old legends of heroism.

Concerning the folk-tale, Scott (1965) defines it as “a popular story handed down by oral tradition or written form from much earlier dates. This term covers a wide range of material from myths to fairy tales”.

Still according to Scott (1965), “fairy tales are stories of mythical beings, such as fairies, gnomes, pixies, elves or goblins. Such tales are found in the folklore of many countries and were handed down by word of mouth. In 1697, Charles Perrault in France compiled one of the first printed collections, which contains ‘The Sleeping Beauty’, ‘Red Riding Hood’, ‘Puss in Boots’ and ‘Cinderella’. The brothers Grimm began to publish their famous collection of German fairy tales in 1812. Hans Christian Andersen first issued his fairy tales in 1835”.

According to Abrams (1993), “a chivalric romance (or medieval romance) is a narrative form... Its standard plot is that of a quest undertaken by a single knight in order to gain a lady’s favour. Frequently its central interest is courtly love, together with tournaments fought, and dragons and monsters slain, for the damsels sake; it stresses the chivalric ideas of courage, loyalty, honor, and mercifulness to an opponent, and exquisite and elaborate manners; and it delights in wonders and marvels”.

Concerning epics, the following definition is given by Cook (1952): “Epics are long narrative poems which passed by word of mouth from generation to generation and were the creation of many unknown singers, who changed and added lines as they retold the story. Such poems recounting the deeds of natural heroes we call folk epics, because they grew out of the folk or people, and only in later times were set down in writing and given a fixed form”.

Abrams (1993) makes a distinction between the supernatural events occurring in the epic and in romance. He says that, “supernatural events in the epic have their causes in the will and actions of the gods; Romance shifts the supernatural to this world, and makes much of the mysterious effect of magic, spells, and enchantments”.

Finally, a ballad, as Scott (1965) defines it, is “a narrative poem which was anonymous, of folk origin, sung to their own accompaniment by the minstrels. Ballads passed by word of mouth, were direct and simple, with romantic, historical, or supernatural setting”.

All the above mentioned literary genres have some common characteristics, for example: a) They form part of the oral tradition and were transmitted from generation to generation mostly by word of mouth, b) They include in their plot some real facts, which are extended to the sphere of supernatural, and c) They form part of the popular tradition or the folklore of a certain nation (in our case of the English nation). For these reasons, we will include all these literary genres under the term “popular tradition”.

The popular tradition in England, which included the stories of the lives and heroic deeds of brave kings, knights, and princes became a very rich source for cliché similes that were transmitted orally from generation to generation. Figures such as giants, witches and fairies are abundant in the English cliché similes collected in our research. Characters from children’s songs and nursery rhymes, such as Simple Simon and Plain Jane appear in our corpus. Also the mad Hatter and the March hare, which are famous characters in “Alice in Wonderland” by Lewis Carroll, are
found in our similes. Last but not least, the famous puppet Punch appears in the English cliché similes.

As we have mentioned before, the percentage of the English cliché similes collected in our research which have vehicles belonging to popular tradition is 4.28 times greater than the corresponding percentage for the Greek cliché similes. In order to explain this difference, one should take into account the fact that during the period from the 15th to the 18th century, Greece was under Turkish occupation. This fact created serious limitations in the development of the cultural life of the Greek people. On the other hand, Greek people had already inherited the rich mythology of their ancestors, and they subconsciously felt the obligation and the need to cling to it, preserve it, and pass it on to the coming generations, because it strengthened their national identity.

At the same time, they were subject to the influence of the Greek popular tradition, which had to do with giants, fairies, and dragons. We should also mention the significance of the Greek demotic or folk songs, the so-called “dimotika tragoudia”, which narrated stories of love, courage, and heroic deeds of the Greek people during the years of Turkish occupation. These stories passed into the oral tradition of the Greeks. Later on, in the late 19th and 20th century the influence of foreign fairy tales started to become visible, and stories like “Cinderella” and “The Sleeping Beauty” were narrated to small children.

In the Greek cliché similes, figures such as giants, fairies, witches and dragons appear frequently; also a character named “Fataoulos” of a well-known story by Penelope Delta, entitled “A tale without a name”. Another figure that we should mention is “Karagiozis”, who is a poor fellow but very funny, because of the tricks he uses to make his living. This figure appears as a puppet in the shadow theatre, which is very popular in Greece, especially in the summer time.

All this popular tradition has certainly influenced the Greek cliché similes, but not to the extent that the English popular tradition has influenced the English cliché similes.

6. Conclusions

In the previous sections we have explained in detail the research which was carried out concerning the Greek and English cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural. It was found that:

a) The percentage of the Greek cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to religious figures or concepts is 1.62 times greater than the corresponding percentage for the English cliché similes.

b) The percentage of the Greek cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to mythological figures is equal to 3.12% of the total number of the Greek cliché similes collected during our research, while the corresponding percentage for the English cliché similes is equal to zero.

c) The percentage of the English cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to figures that occur in popular tradition is 4.28 times greater than the corresponding percentage for the Greek cliché similes.

In the present paper an attempt was made to explain the above differences. The explanations given by no means exclude any other possible explanations.

At first the important role of the Greek Orthodox Church was stressed and its contribution to the survival of national consciousness, throughout the difficult years
of Turkish occupation. Also, the Greeks emotional attitude towards the Virgin Mary and the other saints was mentioned.

Concerning the English attitude towards religion, this was said to be more spiritual and less emotional. Also the role of the Church of England was described as quite different from that of the Greek Orthodox Church. The combination of these facts could explain the difference mentioned above.

Concerning the subject of Greek mythology, its impact was very powerful not only on Greek literature, but also on world literature. Its richness in characters and concepts has influenced the Greek language quite extensively, and mainly through oral tradition, the Greek cliché similes. However, Greek mythology has not influenced the English oral tradition to such a degree, as to be represented in the English cliché similes, for reasons already mentioned.

On the other hand, the English people are distinguished by their long tradition of legends, ballads, folk tales, fairy tales, childrens stories etc., which are evident in their cliché similes. The Greek popular tradition has certainly influenced the Greek cliché similes, but to a minor degree.

These facts could be considered as an explanation of the differences mentioned above, concerning the frequency of the Greek and English cliché similes with vehicles corresponding to the supernatural.

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