

Thinking in a different language: the Orientalist Senkovskii and ‘Orientalism’

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Abstract. This article deals with the research methods of an alumnus of the University of Wilno, the controversial Russian Orientalist Osip Ivanovich Senkovskii (1800–1859). His attitude towards the scholarly and literary production of his contemporaries—the Austrian Orientalist von Hammer-Purgstall, Russian historian Karamzin, and Russian poet Zhukovskii—is reflected in his letters to his teacher Joachim Lelewel. Senkovskii, at the time considered even a ‘literary clown’ in his popular writings, criticised the leading Western theories of Eastern culture. His views about the necessity to learn the East from inside as opposed to the theories of the European Orientalists found support only 150 years later in the works of the Palestinian scholar Edward W. Said (1935–2003).

Анна Андреевна. Скажите, так это вы были Брамбеус?
Хлестаков. Как же, я им всем поправляю статьи...
(н.в. гоголь, *Ревизор*)

A memoir of 1872 written by a certain ‘Ciprinus’¹ described a remarkable event that had taken place some 20 years earlier, in 1850. St Petersburg University traditionally hosted an annual professorial lecture before closing for summer holidays. That time a lecture entitled ‘About the name of Russians’ was announced. It was going to be delivered by University Professor Osip Ivanovich Senkovskii. In the middle of the 19th century, this name was known by everybody in Russia. Senkovskii was also a traveller and an extraordinary polymath, but above all a St Petersburg gossip and extremely successful publisher who ran the *Biblioteka dlya chteniya*² (The Reader’s Digest).³ It is no wonder, therefore, that public interest in his lecture was high. Among the many dignitaries (all solemnly dressed for the occasion) who graced the assembly with their immediate presence were the Imperial Minister of Education Count

¹ A pen name of the Pole Józef Przeclawski, who lived in St Petersburg in the mid 19th century.

² Literally: ‘A Library for Reading’.

³ The collected works of Senkovskii were posthumously published in 1858–1859; see Senkovskii 1858–1859. The basic reading list about Senkovskii and his works comprises the following major publications, accompanied by a detailed bibliography: Save’ev 1858; Kaverin 1966; Pedrotti 1965; Alieva 1977; Ambroziak 2007 (see there the appropriate bibliography).

Shirinskii-Shikhmatov, the archbishop, senators, and the provost and professors of the university. The main lecture hall of the university was full. Even the distant places were all taken by curious students.

Before the lecture commenced, a certain German rose in front of the first row. He introduced himself as Professor Senkovskii's assistant and announced that the professor



Osip Ivanovich Senkovskii.
Source: Krachkovskii 1958.

on that very day happened to be unwell. He further added that he trusted his assistant to read the lecture from the paper before the audience. Initially the reading received due attention. The topic and its argument sounded, however, somewhat strange if not suspicious. The latter was based upon the etymologies of place names, names of rivers, etc., which was pretty unusual. Everybody who knew Senkovskii in person or was familiar with his writings in the *Biblioteka dlya chteniya* was aware that their author was more than critical about the etymologies (Senkovskii 1859d)⁴ and very much doubted the results they could yield.

The exercises in etymology seemed eventually to be merely a *prelude* to what the author actually intended to say in his lecture.

It came out that the 'nation of the Slavs', with the 'Russian tribe' at its head, had to be universally considered the first and most important among the peoples of the world. The whole of Europe, it was further said, and also the largest part of Asia were inhabited by the Scythian people, whose major tribe constituted namely the Slavs. The author made a reference to 'ancient books' in which these Slavs appeared to be called 'Scythians the boasters', because 'from time immemorial they loved to extol both themselves and their deeds'. This was brought up in connection with the name 'Russian' and its provenance. The most authoritative manuscripts dealing with this subject, according to Senkovskii, were however 'locked in a tower' in the 'Moorish palace of Aljambra [Alhambra—N.S.]', where 'everybody who wished to verify this argument of his in person was invited to go immediately'.

Equally astonishing was the subsequent analysis of the word '*skald*', as applied to Scandinavian bards. The Orientalist professor brought this up in connection with the word '*skjold*', which according to him was related to the German '*Schild*' (shield).

⁴ «Корнесловы, которые ищут сходных звуков по словарям, не изучив наперед большого числа языков западных и не проникнувшись их духом»

Because the word '*Schild*' itself in certain German dialects sounds almost like '*skilt*' or '*skit*' with the ellipsis of the consonant '*l*' he therefore allowed the possibility of seeing in this enigmatic '*skit*' a 'Scythian' (which in Russian sounds like '*skif*'). According to the speaker, this etymology had to be seen as proof that the Scandinavians were in fact Slavs and that their sagas were part of Slavonic folklore.

Everybody who had so far been patiently listening to this lecture slowly began to acquire the feeling that the lecture was impregnated with irony. And indeed, it soon became obvious that Senkovskii had bluntly fooled the audience. The pedantic German assistant went on and on, elaborating upon other facts, among those that ancient history in its entirety was nothing else but the 'history of the Slavonic tribe' and that the scribes who wrote chronicles were exclusively dealing with the events of Slavonic history. The obvious incongruences found there were explained by confusion and uncertainty in the correct pronunciation and recording of place names. This argument was followed by the discovery that all the military campaigns of King Cyrus of Persia⁵ in fact took place in Belorussia and that the main battle had been won by him near the Belorussian city of Orsha. The last statement received additional confirmation by a reference to Napoléon Bonaparte. In the Russian campaign of 1812, he specifically considered the city of Orsha to be exceptionally important strategically.

As soon as this was read aloud, nobody could help giggling. The first who burst out with Homeric laughter was the University Provost, Professor Ignatii Ivanovskii, who was followed by the audience. Everybody laughed so energetically that even the window panes began to jingle. The indignant minister of education rose and left the auditorium. He was followed by the archbishop and some other dignitaries. Meanwhile, the German assistant, conscientious about his task, continued reading the lecture aloud. His voice, however, was drowned out by the incessant laughter.

The lecture provoked a great deal of gossip in St Petersburg. Some said that the author should be severely disciplined for such a blow to the 'learned public'. Others doubted that: one could not say for sure whether the author himself did not believe that Cyrus bravely fought at the city of Orsha (Ciprinus 1872).

The controversial lecture read by the German assistant belonged to Józef Julian Sękowski (or in Russian Osip Ivanovich Senkovskii; Осип Иванович Сенковский), 1800–1858, a 'Russified Pole' and a 'blend of clown and scholar', as he was sometimes called by his enemies and adversaries (cit. after Pedrotti 1965, 3) but no doubt the most distinguished alumnus of the University of Wilno,⁶ who became widely known to his contemporaries under his popular pen name 'Baron Brambeus'.

⁵ Cyrus the Great, ca 600 BC / 576 BC–530 BC.

⁶ About Senkovskii's bitter relations with his *alma mater* after he left the university, see Pedrotti 1965, 20–3.

The early education of this future writer and publisher was received at home under the tutelage of his mother's maternal aunt's husband, the Wilno classicist Professor Gottfried Groddeck, who taught him Greek and Latin (Ambroziak 2007, 22, see in detail: Pedrotti 1965, 17–42). After graduation from the *collegium* in Minsk,⁷ Senkovskii joined the University of Wilno, where he was mostly influenced by Jan and Jędrzej (Andrew) Śniadecki (the former was a member of a Masonic lodge) (Pedrotti 1965, 70) and the historian Joachim Lelewel to name but a few. Jędrzej Śniadecki evoked in Senkovskii a zeal for exact sciences (Pedrotti 1965, 58) and, more importantly, taught him methods of scientific research. His natural sense of humour also had a not insignificant influence on his pupil. Śniadecki's ability to combine serious research with a brilliant joke subsequently revealed itself in Senkovskii's writings, which were rightly seen by many as a fortunate combination of profound science and scholarship and of being humorously and gracefully written. His later success as a popular writer was significantly influenced by his membership in the Brotherhood of Rascals (*Towarzystwo Szubrawców*), a community of young educated people, the organisation of which resembled that of a Masonic lodge. Senkovskii had already begun to polish his ironic literary style by writing for the brotherhood's magazine.

Historian Joachim Lelewel turned Senkovskii's attention to the East and Oriental cultures as a phenomenon of paramount importance. He nurtured and supported his pupil's desire to visit these countries. A fortunate constellation of Senkovskii's exceptionally gifted personality with his early years spent in the fruitful cultural atmosphere of what was then the city of Wilno, the vibrant cultural capital of the Tsardom of Poland (*Królestwo Kongresowe*), made a real Renaissance man out of him. The years antecedent to the university's official closure by the Russian government in 1832 were perhaps the most productive in its history. Due to the university's autonomy, it boasted a distinguished teaching corps. Among them were Professors of Medicine J. Frank and H. Bojanus, the aforementioned classicist Gottfried Ernest Groddeck and the brothers Jan and Jędrzej Śniadeckis, the historian Joachim Lelewel, and others (Ambroziak 2007, 23). The situation for a student to be engaged in Oriental studies was more than favourable. The influential university librarian, Kazimierz Kontrym (1776–1836), was planning to establish a department of Oriental studies at the university. The university obviously was in need of properly educated and trained teachers and Senkovskii seemed to be one of the most desirable candidates for this post. After he graduated in 1819 from the Imperial University of Wilno, he had already developed a natural love of the subject and was an accomplished linguist. Already experienced in Classical and European languages, he had a solid

⁷ The full name: *Rhetorum Collegium Minscensis*.

albeit academic knowledge of the Oriental languages, especially Persian and Arabic.⁸ In 1818 his first translation from Arabic into Polish appeared, the 'Fables of Luqman the Wise Man' (Lokman el-Hakim 1818).

Senkovskii's 2 years in the Orient⁹ had turned him (at the age of 22!) into an international authority in the field of Oriental studies. He accepted an appointment to the Chair of Arabic and Turkish at the Imperial University of St Petersburg, which however was only offered to him after some hesitation from the Russian authorities (Kaverin 1966, ch. 1, ft. 15). This immediately made the Imperial University of St Petersburg very conspicuous and highly esteemed among European universities of that time (Pedrotti 1965, 50).

The main feature that distinguished Russian Orientalist scholarship from that in the West was, along with profound academism, the deep and intimate knowledge of the life of the Eastern people. This tradition owes much to Senkovskii's personal acquaintances and experiences, all which he acquired during his travels in the early 1820s. An energetic and brilliant lecturer, he was 'the only professor among his colleagues who had lived in the Arab Middle East ... he made his teaching full of energy and temperament, sparkling with clever but sometimes fantastic ideas. The memoirs of his students from the 1820s and 1830s extolled his teaching' (Krachkovskii 1950, 106). It is very fortunate that he managed to ingeniously plant his profound knowledge in the Russian academic soil.

The exact process of Senkovskii becoming such an outstanding Orientalist scholar has not been sufficiently reflected in contemporary sources. However, even the modest information we have, mostly from his personal letters,¹⁰ allows us to see his attitude to the East as an object of academic and practical study. This attitude was ultimately instrumental in allowing him to take the exceptional, although often underestimated, position which he occupies in the history of Russian culture. His personal travel to the then Ottoman Empire, which at that time included the lands where the events of ancient history took place, was instrumental in changing his research method and, subsequently, views and perceptions. These changes later formed a great gap that firmly divided Senkovskii from many of his contemporary Russian colleagues, as well as other European intellectuals and Orientalists of the 19th century.

⁸ Pedrotti (1965, 27) gives a list of the languages Senkovskii mastered. Apart from Arabic, Persian and Turkish, he had a formidable command of Polish, Modern Greek, Italian, English, French, German, Lithuanian, Basque, Georgian, Mongolian, Manchurian and Chinese.

⁹ An account can be found in Reychman 1972, 124–8.

¹⁰ A modern researcher is fortunate to have access to Senkovskii's letters sent from the Near East to his friend and former teacher at the University of Wilno, historian J. Lelewel. They were published in 1913 by Aleksander Jablonowski (1913).

Quite naturally Senkovskii's initial views about the Eastern countries were based upon the books, chiefly by Western authors, that he had read about this subject before going to the East. A reference to the popular account of the travels of Count Volney¹¹ found in his letters is expected and justified (Jabłonowski 1913, 35). No wonder he paid a due attention to the remnants of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages that he happened to see, and his 'journey to the past' is reflected in his letters more than once. The adherence to the classical tradition to which, being influenced by G. Groddeck, Senkovskii remained faithful throughout his life (Pedrotti 1965, 24) becomes obvious, especially in his accounts about Turkey.

While travelling in Turkey, he described the environs of the ancient cities with reference to the appropriate chapters from the *Graeciae Descriptio* (The Description of Greece) by Pausanias, a Greek author who lived 1600 years before him (Hitzig, Blümner 1984, 2.22.2–3). The place names in his letter are understandably given in their Greek forms rather than contemporary Turkish. 'Izmir' for example is called '*Smyrna*' and the resort 'Kız Kalesi' is called '*Nymphaeon*': 'I have visited Nymphaeon, situated within a journey of 6 hours from Smyrna, where one still can see the ruins of the citadel built on the hill and a dilapidated castle known from Byzantine times'. A short remark about the European Christian inhabitants of Izmir, the 'Franks', that follows this account made his antiquarian attitude even more visible. It was namely he, a European Orientalist, who looked for traces of the Byzantine past, not the locals, not even his fellow Christians: 'This exquisite place [*Nymphaeon*—*N.S.*], in spring attracts the Franks from Ismir. They come riding donkeys, but with the purpose not to admire the ruins [*sic!*—*N.S.*] but to relish the cherries that grow there'.¹² Another passage from this letter is even more explicit: 'I stayed for 8 days in Dardanellae in order to visit Sestos,¹³ Abydos¹⁴ and especially Troy. I have been through it holding my Homer [*sic!*—*N.S.*] in hand in the company of a map drawn by Mr Lechevalier (Kaufer, Lechevalier 1803) and a Jew, a resident of Dardanellae who seemed to be exceptionally good showing the antiquities, because he has been doing this for 20 odd years'.¹⁵ The Jew was obviously providing his services to the Europeans visiting the 'Homeric site' and had well learned their tastes, requirements and expectations. The correct perception of Homeric epics as it further comes from this letter cannot be understood completely without paying a visit to the historical site itself.

¹¹ Constantin François de Chassebœuf, Comte de Volney (1757–1820). Volney's account of his travels in the Near East was widely read in 19th century Europe. They enjoyed translations into other languages and numerous editions. Cf. Jabłonowski 1913, 36.

¹² Letter from the 29 May 1820 (cf. Alieva, Demidchik 1987, 40).

¹³ Modern Gallipoli peninsula.

¹⁴ Modern Canakkale.

¹⁵ Letter from 29 May 1820 (see Alieva, Demidchik 1987, 40); Jabłonowski 1913, 32.

The antiquarian approach to the events of contemporary Greek history, however, occasionally became sarcastic. Contrary to the British eccentric Lord Byron, who went to fight for Greek freedom and even died in 1824 in the city of Mesologhi, Senkovskii was not enthusiastic about the Greek revolt and disliked the insurgent Greeks.¹⁶ He left an ironic description of how the Greek allied fleets fought one another for the booty of 200 *zembils* (baskets) of coffee. He referred in a Homeric way to those who confiscated coffee by calling them the 'new Agamemnonns' (Jabłonowski 1913, 58). Equally he compared the seizure of the coffee beans to Briseis, or Hippodamea, the queen from Asia Minor at the time of the Trojan War: as we read in the First Book of the *Iliad*, Briseis became the centre of the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon.

The events of classical antiquity described by its authors could obviously not be readily verified by a later traveller. Senkovskii however assessed the accounts of Eastern culture as described by Western scholars with great scrutiny. This scrutiny surely was a result of the resolution that he made before leaving for the East, namely 'to live himself into' Eastern culture. This task, described by him as 'one of the most painful and diverse periods' of his life, was anything but easy. The young man (Senkovskii was only 19 years of age) was avidly acquiring knowledge. His modest means dictated him 'not to forget anything once acquired by his memory'; he copied manuscript books and learned by heart what he was not able to copy. He stayed in the Maronite monastery of Ayn Tur and his incessant studies combined by astonishing success made him widely known among the indigenous population. The locals, who otherwise were 'sceptical about Europeans', arrived there to talk to the young Pole and even to examine his knowledge of Arabic language and literature (Kaverin 1966, ch. 1). Senkovskii's fame spread even more when his poems composed in Arabic became known (Jabłonowski 1913, 39). He reciprocated in kindness by instructing in Latin the pupils of his master, the 'most learned monk Aryda', sometime Viennese professor who retired home to Mount Lebanon. 'Since I am here' wrote Senkovskii, 'four of his pupils, or to be more precise three, are excelling in Latin.... These people are very gifted in everything, indeed' (Alieva, Demidchik 1987, 49).

This kind of intensive learning allowed Senkovskii not only to become an expert in the Arabic, Persian and Turkish languages but also to be able to view the Eastern people and their culture from inside. His 'Syrian memoirs' (Smilyanskaya 1991) of a later period are full of remarkable and sharp observations. 'Analysis as such is not

¹⁶ Senkovskii probably shared similar disgust towards the Polish revolutionaries. Quoting from Louis Pedrotti (1965, 11) one can see that Senkovskii's 'attitude expressed in his personal statements about his Polish heritage was somewhat anomalous. He seemed genuinely proud of his background but at the same time critical about the efforts of self-determination on the part of Polish patriots'.

known to the Orientals' wrote he for example, stressing that 'Eastern Thought' is based on scholastic maxims. The sayings of the 'great Aristotle' are therefore more persuasive for the 'Orientals' than all the logical syllogisms all together. Similarly they value a new poetic metaphor as much as a new thought.

In order to reach these conclusions, which might sound even nowadays like a revelation to some scholars of the Islamic East, a European, according to Senkovskii, had to 'get rid of his superstitions'. It was not enough for a researcher even 'so-to-say to take off himself the obsolete garment of a European. He also had to surmount innumerable impediments, which originate in different sites, ideas and languages. The expressions he used to describe things in Europe are very wrong to be applied to various aspects of life in the East. Our words, therefore, are not sufficient to describe many things and a researcher must learn how to think in a different language' (Senkovskii 1859a, 72).¹⁷ Equally one also had to be very cautious in applying European terms to Eastern phenomena and 'not call Asian things by European names. It is a recipe for disaster to view everything in the wrong way and acquire a cross-dressed mistake instead of reality' (Senkovskii 1859b). The European scholarship of the East, according to him, kept on 'repeating obsolete tales'. In order to make a step forward, 'one should not take an exception for a rule and a rule for an exception'. In such cases, a wrong assumption based on a real case will bear a 'misleading similarity to reality' (Senkovskii 1859a, 74). One has to add that in this attitude of his Senkovskii was very close to one of his great contemporaries, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), the privy councillor of the duchy of Saxe-Weimar.¹⁸

Senkovskii, 'Frank-Yusuf' as he was known among the locals, while studying on Mount Lebanon, opposed the then popular European 'tales of the East' to a proper knowledge of the East (Jabłonowski 1913, 36). This opposition mostly transpired in his sharp criticism of one of the most distinguished Orientalists of his time, Austrian Baron Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856). The pure scientific method of research based upon experiment and comparison, so well learned at the University of Wilno from Professor Jędrzej Śniadecki (Pedrotti 1965, 58) and widely promoted at St Petersburg (*ibid.*, 50), led Senkovskii to the conclusion that the doyen of the Austrian Orientalists often simply invented and ascribed to the Eastern people what

¹⁷ Senkovskii himself seems to have learned the Eastern cultures adequately. In 1828–9 he published two volumes of a military phrasebook entitled *A Pocket-Book for Russian Soldiers in the Turkish Campaign* (Карманная книга для русских воинов в турецких походах) and *The Rules of Colloquial Turkish* (Основные правила турецкого разговорного языка). The book was highly praised and Senkovskii himself was awarded with a diamond ring by the Emperor. Time proved the use of the phrasebook: it was reprinted at the time of the Crimean War in 1854.

¹⁸ 'Wer das Dichten will verstehen, Muß ins Land der Dichter gehen: Wer den Dichter will verstehen, Muß in Dichters Lande gehen' (Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan*)

in fact did not exist in reality. In one of his early letters to Lelewel, Senkovskii left an ironic remark on von Hammer-Purgstall's book *Discovery of the Mystery of Baphomet* (Hammer-Purgstall 1818). The book, written in Latin, was aimed at discrediting Templarist Masonry and probably Freemasonry as well. Taking into account Senkovskii's membership in the 'Brotherhood of the Rascals', one cannot exclude his sympathetic feelings towards Freemasonry. His criticism of von Hammer-Purgstall's book, however, was purely academic. It is also based on his own observations, which show that the text of the Austrian scholar was 'full of unrealistic suggestions'. The arcane signs ascribed by von Hammer-Purgstall to the Templarists were in fact found in the East on 'kitchen utensils' (Jabłonowski 1913, 33). A couple of years later, Senkovskii again criticised von Hammer-Purgstall's work entitled the *Origin of Russians* (Hammer-Purgstall 1827) and published in St Petersburg in 1827. This time his criticism was dressed in the form of a naive letter written by a 'Turkish philosopher', Tyutyunju-oglu-Moustafa-aga,¹⁹ to Faddei Bulgarin (Tadeusz Krzysztof Bulharyn, rus. Фаддей Венедиктович Булгарин), the editor of the magazine *The Northern Archive* and himself a 'condotier de la plume'. The letter itself, written by the 'son of a tobacco seller', was 'translated from the Russian' and supplied with a commentary by a seller of dried apricots at the *Gostiny Dvor* (a huge department store on Nevski Prospekt in St Petersburg) and *littérateur*, Koutlouk-Fouladi.²⁰ The full title ran as follows: 'Letter from Tyutyunju-oglu-Moustafa-aga, a real Turkish philosopher, sent to Mr Faddei Bulgarin, the editor of the *Northern Bee*, translated from the Russian and published with a learned commentary by Koutlouk-Fouladi, sometime ambassador of the court of Bukhara to Khiva [which is the old name for Germany], nowadays a seller of a dried apricots from Samarkand, and *littérateur*' (Senkovskii 1828). The 'Letter' became widely known also in the West and was obviously frequently read due to its exceptional literary style. Everything sounded insulting to the European ear: a learned work by the leading Austrian Orientalist was reviewed by a 'seller of dried apricots', who proclaimed himself a 'colleague' and 'a *littérateur*'.²¹ The bitter oxymoron and insult was exacerbated by the age of Tyutyunju-oglu-Moustafa-aga. At that time Senkovskii was only 27 years old, 16 years younger than the established authority from Vienna. The criticism shows that his opponent was simply ignorant in Oriental languages and therefore could not correctly read the sources he based his arguments upon. The style itself was simply

¹⁹ A pen name of Senkovskii.

²⁰ Another pen name of Senkovskii.

²¹ Cf. the typical 'Oriental' address to the editor: 'Très-respectable, très-noble, très-grave, très-savant sultan, Rédacteur Effendi! Que le Dieu vous accorde toutes sortes de biens, et qu'il vous pardonne vos pêchés, ainsi que vos fautes de langue, d'orthographe et d'impression! Lettre de Tuntjuoglou-Moustafa-aga' (Senkovskii 1828, 1).

killingly naive. ‘The most-honoured, most-learned, most-profound and most-prolific Mr Hammer, the crème of the Viennese Ulems and the decoration of the belletrists of the Nemcy²² wants to convince everybody that our Prophet has mentioned the Russians in the Koran and that he has found the proof for that in the writings of our Oriental authors’ (Senkovskii 1828, 12). Von Hammer-Purgstall coined a non-existent authority, somebody called ‘Ikhtiar Ibn Djérir’, which as it was made clear by Tyutyunju-oglu-Moustafa-aga was in fact the wrongly understood Arabic word *ikhtiyar*, i.e. opinion. In the proper name ‘Zarina’, the Austrian Orientalist again wrongly saw ‘Tsarine’. Of course, this conclusion was also met with another sarcastic remark: ‘Mr Hammer has made the conclusion that this must be the Tsarine. ... however, he has forgotten to add that these Messrs would have had to converse in French at that time’.²³ Finally he shows that ‘the learned Orientalist of Vienna’ had a very superficial knowledge of the Arabic language and always confused various letters like م and س, final د and ل, and so on.²⁴ Senkovskii’s opinion, let us add here, about the ability of most Europeans (and especially the French) to master Oriental languages was not very high and could never rank with that of the Poles. ‘Neither the Germans nor French nor Italians can be good linguists’ he wrote to his teacher and friend Lelewel. ‘As proof you can have for example Mr de Sacy,²⁵ whose fame is more than his knowledge of Oriental languages.... He invented there [in his Arabic grammar—*N.S.*] grammatical rules that were never heard of! The educated Arabs burst out laughing at them’ (Jabłonowski 1913, 48).

The ignorance of the Austrian scholar was concealed from his readers by simple tricks. By quoting from the mysterious ‘Abuna Boutros’, obviously a Christian monk, the ‘son of a tobacco-seller’ Tyutyunju-oglu-Moustafa-aga (Senkovskii) reveals them as follows: ‘among your authors in the land of ‘Frankistan’ [i.e. Europe, the land of ‘Franks’—*N.S.*], there are two excellent means to push to people’s attention faulty translations from the Oriental languages: 1) not to supply the bad translation with the

²² The fictitious Tutundjuoglou uses the Arabic word *nimsa* (Rus. немца) for the Austrians.

²³ ‘M. de Hammer eu conclut que c’est la Czarine. Vive l’esprit de rapprochement! Mais il à oublié de dire que ces messieurs devaient parler français à cette époque, car en Russe ce terme est inconnu, et le mot Czar don’t il est dérivé, vient par corruption de César’ (Senkovskii 1828, 49).

²⁴ ‘N’ayant qu’une connaissance très superficielle de la langue arabe, le savant orientaliste de Vienne eu connaît encore moins la paléographie et prend souvent une lettre par une autre. C’est ainsi qu’il confond constamment le م “m” arabe avec le س “s” le د “d” avec le ل “l” et le ر “r”, le ز “z” avec le و “w” et le ذ “d”; et il prend l’ancienne manière d’écrire la lettre ل pour deux lettres le “m” et le “l”, le ط “th” pour le ك “k”, le ب “b” par le ن “n” et vice versa. Ajouter à cela le déplacement des points distinctifs des lettres, qui sont en arabe beaucoup plus fréquents que les points sur les “i” en français, et vous comprendrez facilement jusqu’à quel point on peut multiplier les fautes et défigurer les mots d’une langue qu’on ne connaît pas à fond’ (Senkovskii 1828, 50–1).

²⁵ Antoine Isaac, Baron Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) a distinguished French linguist and Orientalist.

original text and 2) to provide a poetic translation. In the first instance, the difficulty of confronting the translation always leads to the fact that the reader who otherwise does not have any means to verify the translation must rely upon your authority and trust your word, and in the second instance you always can come away with the most unforgivable lack of punctiliousness by referring to the tyrannical laws of the rhymes and the metre' (Senkovskii 1828, 16). This light and funny style hid Senkovskii's more bitter attitude to the writings of the prolific Austrian Orientalist, which he expressed in no ambiguous words in his private letters to Lelewel:

Here in St Petersburg, Hammer publishes the extracts from the Oriental authors accompanied by a translation at the expense of [count] Roumiantseff 'Sur les origines Russes'. You would laugh yourself dead! This is another volume of his wise book on the Templar knights. Such stupidity the world has never seen. With this book Hammer has completely ruined his reputation as an Orientalist, because he clearly proves that he is not only ignorant in Oriental history and geography, but what is more importantly he does not know either Arabic or Persian (which is his hobby-horse) or Turkish. Even a beginner would not have allowed such mistakes. I would not have believed that this is Hammer's own work if I didn't have at hand his original text, *horrenda, horrenda, horrenda!* He never gives original texts along with his translations from the Oriental languages and therefore he enjoys a reputation as an Orientalist. (Jabłonowski 1913, 128)

The light style was obviously extremely insulting. Professor von Hammer-Purgstall had to respond to the letter of the 'son of a tobacco-seller'. In his most indignant letter to the editor of the *Nouveau journal asiatique*, he complained about the 'attack' of Mr Senkovskii, who seems to 'know everything without consulting dictionaries'.²⁶

This last remark by von Hammer-Purgstall was, however, correct: 'Senkovskii knew indeed almost everything'. Being exceptionally well read and profoundly learned in various subjects, including music and medicine, Senkovskii, according to a later biographer, 'knew so many languages that it looked as if he knew nothing' (Kaverin 1966, ch. 2).

Oriental studies were not the only field where Senkovskii applied his research method based upon his belief that in order to understand a phenomenon one has to start 'thinking in a different language'. This attitude sharpened his criticism towards the so-called 'Karamsinists', the supporters and the inner circle of the prominent Russian writer and historian, the author of the *History of the Russian State* (Rus. История Государства Российского), Nikolaj Ivanovich Karamzin (1766–1826).

²⁶ 'Monseur, Ayant eu l'insigne honneur d'avoir été nommé par la Société asiatique le premier de ses associés étrangères je croirais manquer aux devoirs que cet honneur m'importe si je ne me défendrais pas contre l'indigne attaque de M Senkovski, lequel oubliant toutes les convenances et les égards dus au jugement de la Société, la compromet, dans son associé, par le ton et l'objet de sa critique...' (Hammer-Purgstall 1828, 10 [a print-off]).

Senkovskii supported the review of his book written by Joachim Lelewel, which appeared in Russian, being translated and published again by Faddei Bulgarin (Mocha 1972), the editor of the letter by Tyutyunju-oglu-Moustafa-aga. In his letter to the reviewer, Senkovskii described the disappointments his review caused among Karamzin's supporters, adding colourful details such as 'the well known poet Zhukovskii²⁷ has even cried' (Jabłonowski 1913, 75). Lelewel's criticism, however, was justifiable, because both Karamzin and his circle, in Senkovskii's view, were merely 'superficial fiction writers' who did not possess a solid scholarly basis. Nobody among them could be rightly called a 'scholar' because 'very few of them read Latin and even those who do, do it not much'. Karamzin himself, continued Senkovskii, referring to his intimate circle, did not have a knowledge of Latin either and equally did not have the slightest intention of learning the two most important languages for his studies: Polish and Swedish (*ibid.*).²⁸

Later in 1849 Senkovskii applied his approach of 'thinking in a different language' even to classical studies, which was not the fact earlier in the 1820s, indirectly criticising V. Zhukovskii's Russian translation of Homer's *Odyssey* published in 1848 and 1849. As soon as he saw in the *Odyssey* a collection of Greek folklore, he suggested that the Greek folkloric language had to be translated into other languages only as its cultural counterpart, namely the folkloric language as well. 'The folklore or the low style is in fact the real language, the phonetic reflection of popular thought, the eternal language', wrote Senkovskii (Senkovskii 1859c). He insisted that the nymph Calypso²⁹ should be called the 'Girl Coverer' (Rus. Покрывалиха), Zeus³⁰ the 'Living God' or the 'Celestial Father' (Rus. Живбог или Батька небес), the Cyclops³¹ Polyphemos the 'round-eyed man' (Rus. Круглоглазник), and so on. Quite typically for Senkovskii of the late period, however, this review also ended with a fantastic argument that all the events described in the *Odyssey* actually refer to those of 'Slavonic or Russian history'.

The necessary prerequisite for a historian, the ability to 'think in a different language' obviously did not find many followers during Senkovskii's lifetime. The lack of this ability inevitably generated, in his own words, 'tales of the Orient', which had in fact very little in common with the actual history of the East and Eastern people. Over a hundred years later what Senkovskii was fighting in the mid 19th century was

²⁷ Vasilii Andreevich Zhukovskii (1783–1852), a distinguished Russian poet.

²⁸ 'Nie umie i nie chce umieć dwóch dla swej rzeczy najpotrzebniejszych języków, polskiego i szwedzkiego'.

²⁹ From Greek καλύπτω 'to cover'.

³⁰ According to Senkovskii, from Greek ζάω 'to live'.

³¹ From the Greek κύκλος 'circle' and ὄμμα 'eye'.

termed ‘Orientalism’ by one of the leading Palestinian scholars, Edward W. Said (1935–2003), namely a set of false assumptions, which, however, define Western attitudes towards the East (Said 1978). These assumptions were mostly drawn not from real facts but from ‘archetypes’ built upon insufficient knowledge of the Eastern languages and multiplied by the cultural traditions of the West (Bartold 1925). Due to some natural functions of the human brain (Ivanov 1978), they constructed a dichotomy, a contraposition of the ‘East’ and ‘West’, where the former was antithetical to the latter. The alumnus of the University of Wilno, the Russian Orientalist, and journalist Osip Ivanovich Senkovskii was the first, almost 200 years ago, to warn about the dangerous consequences of such an antithesis (cf. Spanos 2009, 101).

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