

‘SPEAKING TURKISH LIKE AN EFFENDI’: ARMINIUS VAMBÉRY’S SELF-REFLECTIONS ON HIS LANGUAGE SKILLS IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY ISTANBUL

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Abstract: *This article shines a light on the nineteenth century Hungarian scholar, explorer, and polyglot Arminius Vambéry (c. 1832-1913) and his own reflections on his language skills during the several years he spent in Istanbul as a young man. It provides some brief information about the general importance of self-reflection, as well as a short biographical overview of Vambéry’s early life, contextualising his trip to the Ottoman Empire in the relevant historical setting. The source materials for Vambéry’s self-reflections are his two memoirs, published in English in 1883 and 1904 respectively, and which chronicle his adventures in great detail. Taking a case study approach, these texts are scrutinised with the aim of outlining how he viewed his own remarkable linguistic talents, as well as how he was able to utilise them to become well-known in Ottoman and diplomatic circles in mid-nineteenth century Istanbul, thereby paving the way for his future success.*

Keywords: *Arminius Vambéry, language learning and teaching, nineteenth century history, Ottoman Empire, polyglot, self-reflection*

„ДА ГОВОРИШ ТУРСКИ КАТО ЕФЕНДИ“: РАЗМИШЛЕНИЯ НА АРМИН ВАМБЕРИ ВЪРХУ НЕГОВИТЕ ЕЗИКОВИ УМЕНИЯ В ИСТАНБУЛ В СРЕДАТА НА XIX ВЕК

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Резюме: *Статията хвърля светлина върху Армин Вамбери, унгарски учен, изследовател и полиглот, живял през XIX век (1832-1913), и неговите размишления върху езиковите му умения по време на няколкото години, прекарани в Истанбул като млад. Представя се кратка информация за общото значение на самосъзерцанието, както и кратък биографски преглед на ранния живот на Вамбери, като се контекстуализира пътуването му до Османската империя в съответната историческа ситуация. Източниците за размишленията на Вамбери са два мемоара, публикувани на английски език съответно през 1883 и 1904, които отразяват хрониките за неговите приключения с най-големи подробности. Като се използва подходът за изследвания на отделни случаи тези текстове имат за цел да очертаят неговия забележителен езиков талант, както и да покажат как го използва той за да стане известен в отоманските и дипломатическите кръгове на Истанбул в средата на XIX век, като по този начин проправя пътя си за бъдещия си успех.*

Ключови думи: *Армин Вамбери, езиково обучение и преподаване, историята на XIX век, Османската империя, полиглот, размишление*

Introduction

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have witnessed the exponential growth of reflective practices (for example, see Schön, 2016 [1983]), starting in the workplace and then expanding into many other aspects of our professional and personal lives. With such practices being polyvalent and multifunctional in their applications, they can offer a “space where previously

marginalized groups are recognized as potential centers of a variety of intercrossings between different cultures and disciplines" (Linstead, Lehman 2023: 11). As such, reflection has become an integral part of modern-day education and training, as exemplified in the learning and teaching of languages (for example, see Gün 2011; Saylag 2012; Farrell 2022; Hammad Al-Rashidi, Aberash 2024, etc.) as well as the training of translators and interpreters (Pietrzak 2019), and students are often encouraged to self-reflect on their language learning abilities (see Han 2012; Crane, Sosulski 2020, etc.). Though considerable research has been conducted on the present-day environment, the present brief study shines a light on a historical approach through exploring the self-reflections of Arminius Vambéry, the nineteenth-century Hungarian polyglot and scholar. It offers a short case study-based approach focusing on a selected period in his early adult life: a period of several years he spent in Ottoman Istanbul during the late-1850s and early 1860s.

Some brief remarks on Arminius Vambéry

Famous in his time as a philologist, translator, and traveller, the noted scholar and polyglot Arminius Vambéry (c. 1832-1913) was born to humble Jewish parents in rural Hungary. He was lame from birth, and his father died when Vambéry was still a child (for more information on his early years and schooling, see Mandler 2016: 3-10; MTAK 2013a). Largely self-taught as a linguist, after completing grammar school Vambéry found work as a private tutor for various families in Hungary and Slavonia (now Croatia), before eventually travelling via Galați to Istanbul in the late 1850s, where he spent the years between 1857 and 1863 (see Mandler 2016: 17; MTAK 2013a) rising through society and gaining a reputation as a teacher and scholar of languages. After a brief return to Austria-Hungary, he subsequently embarked on the intrepid travels in Central Asia which would make his name. In disguise as a dervish, and with scholarly aims to seek the atavistic origin of the Hungarians, he made his way through various khanates, gathering all kinds of information, meeting interesting people, and making detailed observations about a region then little-travelled by Europeans at a time of great geopolitical significance (see Mandler 2016: 2). On his return, Vambéry was honoured by monarchs and learned societies in several different countries; he was awarded a professorship of Oriental languages at the University of Pest; and also wrote prolifically (for a full bibliography, see MTAK 2013b). In addition to numerous scholarly works and travelogues, Vambéry also authored two English-language autobiographies which documented his exploits and were both bestsellers in their time (see Mandler 2016: 48 and 94, for more information) – these will be utilised as the relevant sources for this brief contribution: *Life and Adventures of Arminius Vambéry, Written by Himself* (first published in 1883; this article uses the 1884 edition) and the two-volume *The Story of My Struggles: The Memoirs of Arminius Vambéry* (1904).

Unsurprisingly, given his reputation as an Orientalist, author, linguist, and explorer, Vambéry has been the subject of much study in different languages, and English-language scholarship includes a comprehensive biography by Mandler (2016), as well as journal articles (for example, see Mandler 2007; Hamilton 2011; Landau 2014; Sárközy 2015 & 2020; Gholi, Mosaabad 2024 etc.) as well as informative blogposts by institutions such as the British Library (Wollner 2016) and a bilingual exhibition about his life and accomplishments held in Budapest (see Kelecsényi, Kovács 2019). In addition, the centenary of his death also saw the creation of an extensive English-

language website developed by the library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences under the leadership of Ágnes Kelecsényi (see MTAK 2013c), which in addition to articles about his life and work also contains a series of relevant photographs of artefacts, documents, and places important to Vambéry. In providing some brief perspectives on the Hungarian polyglot's reflections on his own linguistic skills, this article adds to the literature through following a case study-based approach (see Priya, 2021). It utilises Vambéry's two autobiographies (Vambéry 1884 & 1904) as core texts, focusing on the examination of the online open-access versions of these books to see how Vambéry portrayed his own knowledge and usage of Turkish and other languages during his period of residence in Istanbul as a young man. Through analysis of his own self-reflections on this period in his life, it is intended to provide a cursory understanding of how Vambéry's linguistic prowess assisted him in integrating into the imperial capital's elite, managing to gain entry not only to Istanbul's sizable expatriate diplomatic community but also to the upper echelons of contemporary Ottoman society including the imperial court.

Vambéry's self-reflections on his language skills

From the opening pages of the first of his autobiographies, Vambéry details that even as an adolescent he was already well-advanced in his linguistic quest, writing that:

“Besides my native language, Hungarian, I had acquired German early in life. At about nearly the same time I had mastered Slavonian, and as my studies at school had rendered me familiar with Latin and Greek, I found myself, not quite sixteen years old, conversant with so many principal languages that acquiring the idioms kindred to them had become a comparatively easy task for me” (Vambéry 1884: 6).

With advanced proficiency of modern foreign languages from the Germanic and Slavic language families, as well as a good grounding in classical languages (see Mandler 2016: 9-10), Vambéry recalled that a teenage desire to explore Asia – given that he viewed himself “by birth and education half an Asiatic” (Vambéry 1884: 8), led him to embark on the self-study of Turkish, a language which would eventually prove crucial in his life (Mandler 2016: 10-11). With the aid of dictionaries, literary works, and other resources, his autodidactic approach to various languages fuelled his initial motivation to travel and explore the lands lying outside his native Hungary.

Vambéry's teenage years and early adulthood coincided with an important period in Hungarian history. Though the fervour surrounding the 1848 revolutions had convulsed much of continental Europe, the unsuccessful uprising and conflict against Habsburg rule over Hungary had left a strong impact on that part of the world, with the revolutionaries eventually escaping abroad, including to the Ottoman lands (Ágoston 2008: 16; Mandler 2016: 15). Though the Habsburgs eventually prevailed, Hungarian linguistic and cultural identity remained a potent force, and tensions between and within the Austrian and Hungarian portions of the Habsburg Empire remained latent even after the Compromise (*Ausgleich*) of 1867 and the formation of the Dual Monarchy (Witt 2009).

For Vambéry, having completed his grammar school studies and after a disastrous stint as a private tutor to wealthy rural families, he was finally able to realise his ambition and travel to Istanbul, the famous capital of the sprawling multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman Empire, in 1857 (Mandler 2016: 14; MTAK 2013d). At the time

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of Vambéry’s travels, the Ottoman lands were gradually opening up, via a series of reforms (*tanzimat*) aimed at modernising its antiquated approach and lagging economy (Akgün 1991). The Ottoman Empire was also characterised by the presence of various ethnicities, and particular importance was accorded to knowledge of languages. In many regards, skilled translators and interpreters (known as dragomans) were valued for their assistance with bureaucratic and other activities related to the Sublime Porte (for example, see Rothman 2021; Delibaş 2023, etc.). Indeed, in certain areas some dragomans even held privileged positions of power, as was the case of Ottoman-ruled Cyprus (for example, see Dinç, Çelik 2012; Moutsis 2020: 378-379). As such, being an ambitious young man with a flair for languages, Vambéry was soon able to find his feet in the multilingual surroundings of mid-nineteenth century Istanbul:

“I traversed in all directions both the European and the Turkish quarters of the town, and always liked to enter into conversation with the Turks lounging in the coffee-houses; [...] [they] were impressed by my knowledge of Turkish and Persian, and regarded me as a kind of prodigy who, having arrived in Stambul only a day or two ago, already spoke Turkish like an Effendi” (Vambéry 1904: 118).

As a virtual unknown in this bustling city, Vambéry initially found accommodation in very modest circumstances, but he was keenly aware of the importance of familiarising himself with his new surroundings. He embarked upon expanding his social network, meeting new people and in the process, dazzling them with his linguistic capabilities:

“Day by day the circle of my acquaintances was increasing, and all of them were particularly struck with the varied knowledge I exhibited in the matter of languages, and my being able to speak fluently and read easily the language of the country, without having lived in Turkey, was to them a subject of special wonder” (Vambéry 1884: 19).

Indeed, this fact is reiterated in his second autobiography (written twenty years after the first), when the author reflects of “the fame [he] enjoyed among the Turks of a thorough knowledge of their language” (Vambéry 1904: 135). Thus, it is eminently clear that the young Hungarian is very much conscious of his own abilities, and of the reaction of others who are simply amazed by his skills as a polyglot. Indeed, it is interesting that even in the present era, people who speak multiple languages – sometimes even dozens of them – still retain a degree of fascination for the wider public, as Erard (2012) outlines in his study of hyperpolyglots. This is all the more so given that the internet and other technological advances have really opened up the possibility for digital communication and multilingualism in the twenty-first century (Kelly-Holmes 2019), especially with regard to opportunities for contact and authentic materials. For Vambéry, the nineteenth-century equivalent of this panoply of possibilities can be found in the streets of Istanbul:

“The mixed nationalities that I came into contact with on the banks of the Bosphorus, were exactly what I needed to complete my theoretical knowledge of their languages, and ear and memory stood each other in good stead. I soon acquired the correct accent and construction; and imitating the different languages as closely as I could in tone and sound, many took me for a native,

and the jokes and jests caused by this muddle of languages gave me many a delicious moment” (Vambéry 1904: 119).

In reflecting on his own skills, Vambéry notes the importance of having a solid grammatical foundation, which once in the relevant milieu (i.e., the everyday multilingualism of the Ottoman capital) is activated through the application of strong aural skills and bolstered by a good ability to remember new vocabulary and structures. It is also interesting to observe the importance he places both on grammatical accuracy as well as on “correct” (i.e., presumably native-like) pronunciation. With regard to the latter, the acquisition of quasi-native skills in the pronunciation of additional languages is something which has only recently been focused on in the academic literature, as attested to in the pioneering recent volume by Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos (2022; see also Hoyte-West 2023).

After becoming more settled in his new environment, the young Vambéry then decides to use his unique skills in order to earn a living. In a similar vein to modern-day language teachers advertising their skills on online portals, he does this by placing an advertisement offering language lessons in bookshops in the Pera neighbourhood (now known as Beyoğlu, on the western side of the Bosphorus). Though in retelling of the story he attempts to downplay this episode by drawing attention to ostensible cultural differences, it is clear that Vambéry was aware not only of his own capabilities, but also of the possibilities for advancement, economic or otherwise, which his skills could bring:

“In the East bombastic speeches and high-flown announcements are not at all a rarity; nevertheless, the advertisement which I had fixed up in all the booksellers' shops in Pera, and in which I offered myself as teacher of a whole string of Western and Eastern languages, attracted much attention. Bizarre, absurd, and fantastic as my advertisement was, it did not fail in its object, for before long I was summoned by a Turk in Scutari, and a Mr. von Hübsch, General-Consul of Denmark” (Vambéry 1904: 122).

Indeed, it is through giving these lessons in various languages that Vambéry gains entry to different areas of society, initially by giving lessons in Danish (a language which, as Mandler (2016: 10) details, Vambéry had learned in Hungary) to the consul, then expanding his teaching repertoire to offer classes in French (then the primary language of intercourse among foreigners) as well as in Ottoman languages. Through his students, Vambéry therefore became more and more accepted not only among European diplomatic and embassy circles, but also was able to count members of the imperial household among his students, thereby gaining entry to imperial Ottoman society. As such, he was even given a Turkish name of ‘Reshid Effendi’. Thus, his unusual linguistic skills, combined with an evident gift for making acquaintances and for getting ahead in Istanbul society, ensured that Vambéry was able to transcend his provincial social and religious background which would doubtlessly have hampered him in mid-19th century Europe. Indeed, he alludes to these factors in the following excerpt:

“[...] what struck me especially was the total absence of aristocratic pride and class distinction in social life. Vizier, marshal, minister, or son-in-law of the Sultan, all gave me an equally hearty reception, nobody asked after my antecedents, nobody inquired as to my circumstances, and I, who at home in the mother country had been an obscure Jewish teacher, living in absolute

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retirement, became now in the very short time of two years the confidential friend of the most distinguished and wealthiest dignitaries" (Vambéry 1904: 135).

Some concluding observations

The above overview has demonstrated that, according to the information in his two memoirs, language skills were vitally important to Arminius Vambéry during his stay in Istanbul as a young man. Indeed, his autobiographies clearly state that his linguistic gifts allowed him to access the upper echelons of Ottoman society, both imperial and diplomatic, and therefore open doors unavailable to him in his native land. By successfully being accepted by and gaining entry to both the domestic and the European elites in Istanbul, Vambéry acquired invaluable insights which would be key to his later social and academic activities, as he began to pursue simultaneous careers in journalism, scholarly research, and as an expert linguist and teacher of languages. As he himself observes in more detail:

"The free access I had to all circles of Turkish society, where even native Armenians and Greeks comported themselves with a certain amount of restraint, gave me a deeper insight into the political and social condition of Turkey in the fifties than perhaps any other European. And this was the more interesting as it revealed the first stage of the transformation from Eastern to Western civilisation" (Vambéry 1904: 136).

As such, in highlighting the fortuitous nature of his presence as a seminal epoch in Ottoman history (i.e., at a time when the Empire was opening up to external political and cultural influences), Vambéry was therefore well-positioned in terms of his linguistic and social contacts, and the friendships and networks he made were to form the groundwork for his future travels and eminent career. In his two autobiographies, it is noteworthy to observe how the Hungarian reflects on and views his own polyglot abilities, illustrating that he was very much aware of his exceptional skills and capabilities. Thus, from a modern perspective, it can certainly be advanced that he was very much 'reflective' in his personal assessment of how his linguistic talents were invaluable in assisting him as he progressed through life.

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