

Critics' Forum

Literature

Of Pedagogy and Cultural Production: Armenian Language Instruction in the Diaspora

By Talar Chahinian

Every fall, the Board of Regents of Prelacy Armenian Schools organizes a professional development day for teachers working in California's private Armenian schools, whether they be affiliated with the Prelacy or not. This year, I had the opportunity to participate in this one-day seminar by leading one of the workshops designed to address questions of methodology and curriculum for the schools' Armenian language and literature departments. Although I was working particularly with middle school teachers, later conversation with other workshop leaders revealed that the concerns and strategies that my group discussed were shared by Armenian teachers of all levels, spanning the first through the twelfth grades. What seemed to resonate throughout the workshops was an urgent need to fundamentally change the way Armenian language is currently taught in Armenian schools – in other words, rather than teaching it as the students' first language or "mother tongue," teaching it as a second language.

The teaching of the Armenian language in diasporan communities of Western countries has always embodied notions of challenge and difficulty. The establishment of Armenian schools in the greater Los Angeles area immediately following the initial flow of migration of Armenians from the Middle East in the 1960s launched a brief period of revival and promise for the future of the Armenian language in the West. What has seemed to follow in the last couple of decades is a gradual decline that is both silently acknowledged by the entire community and yet neglected as a concern of high priority when it comes to measurable action.

This may be an appropriate moment to raise the question about the value of Armenian language in relation to other markers of identity for Armenians living outside of Armenia. What is the significance of ensuring the preservation and cultivation of the Armenian language in the diaspora? My humble answer is as follows: Everything. If we are to regard language as a system of signs by which we construct meaning and come to understand and express our sense of self, then the Armenian language is both a tool for forging a collective group identity, psychology, and way of life and their representation in, and as, culture. Language is at the core of cultural production in diasporan communities.

When we conceive of the peril of extinction gnawing at the Armenian language in diasporan communities, we don't have to go far to seek its cause: the great dispersion of Armenians following the 1915 genocide has forced the Armenian language into exile and possible extinction, and the language at stake is the Western Armenian linguistic form, for the Eastern form has a territorial home in the Armenian Republic.

Interestingly, the concern over the modern Armenian language's longevity and the debate around its development predates the 1915 Catastrophe. In 1911, the prominent poet and intellectual, Taniel Varujan, published an article entitled "The Question of Armenian Language" in the weekly newspaper *Azadamard*, of Constantinople. Written in response to questions raised by the newspaper and its readers, the article outlines the development of Armenian language's Western and Eastern forms during the period of modernization, addresses concerns about the respective infiltration of French and Russian languages, criticizes Western Armenian's (then termed "Turkish Armenian") detachment from the stylistic and dialectical essence of provincial Armenian, and celebrates each linguistic form's diversity in an exposition against the call for assimilating the two forms for the sake of a unified standard Armenian.

In making his case against the forced fusion of Western and Eastern Armenian, Varujan writes, "Let us for a moment disregard the three main obstacles to such an assimilation, i.e. the people, the literary past, and the deep differences that exist between the two languages, and let us throw the Eastern and Western forms into one melting pot. What is to come forth? An amorphous conglomerate, a linguistic medley, an alchemical compound, from which we are sure not to receive gold."

The "amorphous conglomerate" that Varujan imagines resulting from the fusion of Western and Eastern forms is precisely what haunts many of the Armenian language classrooms, according to the teachers present at the workshop. As an Armenian community comprised of "second diasporas," the greater Los Angeles area has hosted immigrants from "first diasporas" like Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, as well as immigrants from the ex-Soviet, now the Republic of, Armenia. As a result, Los Angeles has become an experimental space for the intermingling of both Western and Eastern forms of the language, further complicated by the dialectical variants of each form.

Due to such exposure, the younger generation ends up producing an unprecedented hybrid form of the language, one that defies any sense of pattern, order, or recognition of existing standards. Consequently, it becomes difficult for teachers to introduce and demand the practice of one form over the other. Since the majority of Armenian schools in California teach only Western Armenian, the need to expand their curriculums to include instructions in Eastern Armenian seems of utmost importance.

Yet allowing students to practice the Armenian language in accordance with their personal and cultural linguistic background solves only part of the greater problem. Beyond the difficulties caused by formal differences, the teachers present at the development workshops were worried that the Armenian language would lose the battle against English, and more broadly, the dominance of the monolingual culture of our environment. The teachers expressed particular concern about the visible inequality between the Armenian and English curriculums, commenting on textbooks, resources, as well as student perspectives.

In this regard, they spoke extensively about how the students view the study of the Armenian language as mandatory and pointless – in other words, stripped of any utility.

In their eyes, the language not used in play (meaning at recess) is allocated to the classroom, which renders it archaic, hopelessly detached from everyday usage. As they maneuver among the digital world of computers, the Internet, and video games, as they interact with popular representations of American culture on television, in films, and in music, they perceive Armenian more and more as sealed in a glass box, stuck somewhere in the late nineteenth century.

The end result is a perception that the Armenian language – and, by implication, Armenian culture – lacks dynamism, which although theoretically false, nonetheless bears considerable truth-value in their everyday reality. The teachers at the workshop felt almost unanimously that the only solution to the dilemma of teaching the Armenian language lies in intervening into this false perception. Achieving such a change in the perception requires changing in a fundamental way the approach to Armenian language instruction; it requires a shift, in other words, from the first-language to the second-language model. The teachers discussed various short- and long-term strategies, borrowing from second-language techniques used by many public institutions. Whereas the short-term suggestions – focusing primarily on classroom exercises highlighting conversational language – seemed feasible according to school budget restraints and the limited time allotted for Armenian language and literature instruction, the long-term ones – dealing more broadly with methodology – would require a shift in the community’s priorities.

Along the lines of this second, more long-term strategy, the plan would have to include the training of new teachers, the retraining of current ones, the establishment of “language labs” in each school, and the publication of new textbooks accompanied by digital media. In making these suggestions, the teachers knew that although all of these suggestions would be welcomed as innovative ideas by higher administrative bodies, they would also be met with hesitancy and eventual neglect due to budgetary concerns.

The entrenchment of the community in its own cultural legacies presents an ever greater potential obstacle than the retraining of teachers. Funding for private institutions of education usually comes from the community – the culture – that supports the institution’s endeavors. Therefore, shifting the perspective of students vis-à-vis the Armenian language requires shifting the perspectives and priorities of the larger community, and culture, that they inhabit. In a 1996 article entitled “Surreal Armenian: Language in the Process of Community-Building” published in the Armenian Studies journal *Bazmavep*, Ishkhan Jinbashian reviews the status of the Armenian language in Los Angeles, claiming that “it is astonishing to find that Armenians, in possession of an immense cultural treasury, have for decades now, utterly neglected the Armenian language in the Diaspora, their most salient tool of expression.”

Over a decade later, we are now compelled to express the same astonishment. In his analysis, Jinbashian attributes the community’s neglect to the nationalist ideology of what he calls “delayed paradise,” or the notion of an eventual return to Anatolian Armenia, which has created a dictum of preserving, rather than cultivating, language and culture.

In this regard, things have in fact changed. Though remnants of the same ideology are still engrained and practiced in the instruction of Armenian language, the developing Armenian Republic has found a permanent residence in the Armenian cultural imaginary, testing the potency of the myth of return to Western Armenia, and substituting it with the modern state of Armenia.

Against the backdrop of the Armenian Republic, with the Eastern Armenian as its official language – in effect, its official form of linguistic and cultural expression – what continues to be threatened, perhaps now more than ever, is the Western form. Any hopes of its salvation, or perhaps more realistically, the prolongation of its survival falls within diaspora's domain. But where is this linguistic form to live and be cultivated, if not in literature? And if so, who is to write and read this literature, if not the generation of the students the teachers at the workshop were talking about? In order to ensure that future generations have the appropriate means for cultural expression, *Armenian* cultural expression, we will need to change dramatically the institutional practices that opt for “band-aid” solutions when it comes to Armenian language and culture by shifting the priorities of the communities that dictate them.

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