

Critics' Forum

Literature

Western Armenian in Peril: UNESCO's Recognition and the Question of Contemporary Literature in the Exilic Language

By Talar Chahinian

In February of this year, Western Armenian joined UNESCO's online Atlas of World Languages in Danger¹, earning the "definitely" status within the list's degrees of endangerment. Out of the five-tier spectrum that ranges from "vulnerable" to "extinct," "definitely endangered" refers to a language that children no longer learn as their mother tongue at home. The degrees of endangerment, which measure the diminishing vitality of vulnerable languages, are established fundamentally on the basis of a language's intergenerational transmission, among other factors such as absolute number of speakers or proportion of usage within the total population. A language is considered extinct when, after a period of non-transmission, it has no more speakers.

Although the Atlas' framework relies primarily on the oral usage of a language, I would like to raise the question of what its definition of extinction means for Western Armenian's written forms of expression. Administrative use of the language has been reduced to the symbolic, as more and more diasporan institutions and organizations turn their operations bilingual. Journalistic use of the language is also shrinking, due to the decreasing number of diasporan communities that have a sustaining readership (as attested by last year's disestablishment of the 84-year old Parisian newspaper *Haratch*.) In its religious use, the Western Armenian vernacular seems to be regarded by the younger generation along the same lines as the classical Armenian used for liturgy-- as a language that contains traditional, but not educational or practical, benefits. So what has become of Western Armenian as a vehicle for literature?

It is difficult to assess the current state of Western Armenian literature, as no scholarly study exists that offers a comprehensive overview of this linguistic forms' contemporary production. Furthermore, since much of diaspora's literary works are privately funded and printed or published sporadically in various newspapers and journals, instead of through publishing houses, obtaining comprehensive lists of publication and circulation proves difficult or impossible. Armenian textbooks or anthologies of modern Armenian stop with the generation of writers born during the first half of the twentieth century. Contemporary writers of Western Armenian do exist, however. Today, authors living in the United States, Canada, Argentina, Istanbul, Syria, and Lebanon produce works in Western Armenian. Of these contemporary voices, that of the Lebanese-born Parisian writer, Krikor Beledian, stands out. His oeuvre seems to defy the linguists' label of "definitely endangered," considering the sheer volume of his prose works in Western Armenian. It is also alone in cultivating nation-less diaspora's underdeveloped genre, the

¹ The UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger is based on the Atlas' 2009 print edition and documents extinct or endangered languages since 1950. The Interactive Atlas may be accessed at the following URL: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00206>

novel, traditionally linked to the rise of the modern ‘nation’ in post-colonial theoretical discourse.

As a writer, professor and critic of literature, Krikor Beledian has produced six novels in the last two decades, alongside multiple volumes of critical essays. His essays cover a wide variety of topics, whether analyzing the works of the early twentieth-century poet Daniel Varujan (*Gragē shrchanagē D. Varuzhani shurch*, 1988) and the tenth-century poet-theologian Narekatsi (*Ergkhosutiwn naregats ‘ii hed* [Dialogue with Narekatsi], 2008 and others) or surveying French-Armenian literature, in *Cinquante ans de littérature arménienne en France* [Fifty Years of Armenian Literature in France], 2001.

Although his ample theoretical and critical publications play a significant role in the cultivation and retention of Western Armenian, Beledian himself dismisses them, presenting himself as a writer, and a writer alone. His fiction demonstrates a style that is somewhere between the *nouveau roman* and the post-modern novel. His novels often shun punctuation rules, sequential plot lines, and reliable narrators. But though his novels’ forms are overwhelmingly inspired by French post-structuralist thought, their linguistic acrobatics and content are strikingly representative of the post-1915 Armenian diaspora, marked like it by a sense of chronological interruption and geographic dispersion. So, to extend my earlier question about the endangered status of Western Armenian in light of Beledian’s influential position within it, what does it mean to represent a diasporic cultural experience in an infinitely exilic linguistic form? What would such a narrative hope to accomplish? And how will it treat time and space? Beledian’s novels suggest that the answer lies in Western Armenian’s performative capability. In his works, rather than holding up a mirror to life, as a more realist approach would mandate, Beledian holds a mirror up to Western Armenian linguistic form itself.

In his 2003 novel *Anunē lezuis dag* [The Name on the Tip of my Tongue], for instance, Beledian addresses what it means for a post-traumatic culture in dispersion to produce the novel, by addressing the problem of representing the 1915 genocide through a web of narrative threads. In addition to navigating an array of circular and fragmented narrative layers, the novel oscillates between multiple points of view and between the dominant Western Armenian literary form and passages in Classical and Eastern Armenian, the Mush dialect, and colloquial Turkish-Armenian. Through its scenes that constantly switch time and locale – from lecture halls in France of the 1960s, to the Armenian neighborhoods of Beirut in the 1950s, to the Mush region of historic Armenia in 1915 – the novel presents a critique of history, meta-narratives, and mimetic representation, both generally and with particular regard to the Armenian Catastrophe.

Ultimately, the novel performs the failure of Language in the attempt at mimetic representation of a catastrophe, for it understands catastrophe as an event that defies meaning and one that, therefore, cannot be represented through a linguistic system of signs aimed at creating and perpetuating it. Though it highlights the impossibility of representing the 1915 Catastrophe as an event, the novel succeeds, however, in representing the *experience* of the Catastrophe by placing the loss of ‘national’ language (Western Armenian) on display. In essence, the novel claims that what is catastrophic

about 1915 is precisely the fact that it cannot be represented through Language (in general) while being equated to loss of national language (in particular).

Here, loss refers to the de-territorialization of a cultural and linguistic system, which will henceforth carry within it the diaspora's interrupted, discontinuous time. Beledian's novel serves as a celebratory funeral of sorts for Western Armenian – as though, in it, Western Armenian cries out, “look what I could have been, had I lived.” Amidst the dizzying multiplicity of the novel's narrative threads and voices, amidst the continuous flow of never-ending sentences, therefore, a sense of rhythm emerges that frees the language from time and space but, by doing so, also recognizes its susceptibility to the vagaries of time, history and narrative. That Beledian writes this experience of loss through the vehicle of the exilic language and within a literary form – the novel – that is meant to represent the birth of the nation state simply underscores the magnitude of his achievement as a writer.

Yet, and perhaps more optimistically, the rhythmic and performative development of the narrative presents a new notion of timeless duration, befitting the exilic nature of Western Armenian and, as such, representing the contours of a diasporic culture. Perhaps it claims, “This is the only kind of narrative possible and available to a culture in exile.” Seen under this light, Beledian's novel contributes to the current field of transnational studies by making a case for literary production in a language that is not bound by a hierarchical relationship with a nation-state, a development already underway in the more popular fields of study under this rubric, including Francophone, Lusophone, and Sinophone literatures.

We can deduce two similar conclusions from UNESCO's recognition of Western Armenian's endangerment. From the perspective of the pragmatic members of Armenian diasporic communities, the linguistic form is very likely headed toward extinction. The metaphor of a celebratory funeral suggests accurately that it is only a matter of time until the lack of intergenerational transmission will push the language toward its categorization as “severely endangered,” then to “critically endangered,” and eventually toward extinction. From the perspective of more idealist members, the interactive Atlas also includes the possibility of “Revitalization,” represented by the letter R beneath the vitality chart that lists the degrees of endangerment, and a reversal of course back “up” the degrees of endangerment toward a renewed vitality. In the case of Western Armenian, moreover, upward mobility would suggest a language's capacity for sustenance in the absence of the institutional mechanisms of a nation-state.

Western Armenian has, in fact, been revitalized before. The Atlas lists Western Armenian's corresponding geographic locations as Turkey and the Middle East. Turkey for obvious reasons: the language's original speakers are from Anatolia and its literature was developed mainly in Constantinople. But the Middle East is there because it represents the place where the various dialects of Western Armenian came to be standardized and taught to the mostly Turkish-speaking refugee population of 1915

survivors, through the efforts of nationalist organizations and parties.² For those belonging to this latter camp, UNESCO offers a list of online resources that provide grants for revitalization projects:

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00143>

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² See the section entitled "Creating a Diasporan National Identity" in Razmik Panossian's *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), where he discusses how the Istanbul variant of Western Armenian became the hegemonic language of the post-genocide diaspora.