

EXTRALINGUISTIC DETERMINANTS IN LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND SHIFT AMONG ARMENIANS IN BEIRUT

ARDA JEBEJIAN
ardaj@cyberia.net.lb

INTRODUCTION

The Western Armenian language¹ and linguistic attitudes have been undergoing a process of fundamental change during the last few decades. The overall linguistic and extralinguistic systems are changing, and the language is losing certain communal, national, and cultural distinctions. The evidence of language shift put forward in “Patterns of Language Use Among Armenians in Beirut in the Last 95 Years”² is the increasing reliance of Armenian speakers on other languages, the changing self-identification of the speakers, and the changing association of language with social and economic advancement. As noticed in the study just cited, limited use of Armenian, which is more conspicuous as the speakers’ age decreases, is closely linked to broad social, economic, technological, and political changes and determinants.

The main goal of the present study is to create a clearer view of the ideological and socio-economic bases of the change and make realistic projections about the linguistic future of the Armenian community. Individuals’ perspectives and statements about language, reasons for shift, and maintenance efforts were generated through two focus group interviews. Data gathered through the two focus groups also shed light on the issues pertaining to cultural, socio-economic, and political factors, clarified the participants’ interpretations of the reasons leading to shifts in linguistic and attitudinal behavior, and complemented the conclusions reached in the previous studies.³

This paper focuses on the discussions generated during the group interviews. The subsequent analysis is organized according to the prompting questions asked during the discussions.

THE STUDY

This study examines language maintenance and shift, and, hence, investigates individuals’ perspectives and statements about language, maintenance efforts, and reasons for shift, generated under group conditions. Focus group discussions seemed well-suited to these purposes. In particular, they enabled me to follow closely patterns of “recontextualization”⁴ and the transformation of concepts such as identity, culture, and language during group interactions. Moreover, during the discussion I was able to gain powerful insights into how meanings of important concepts such as diaspora, identity, and language are jointly shaped and negotiated or “coconstructed”⁵. These focus group interviews yielded valuable knowledge which would otherwise have been difficult to obtain.

Focus groups, however, have a number of shortcomings. These relate to the extent to which participants may experience peer pressure to remain silent about some views or to readily agree with more dominant views in the group.⁶

Nevertheless, the objectives of focus groups, of ideally 7 to 10 people, seem to provide the best tool to serve the objectives of this study.⁷

Three males and two females took part in the first focus group. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 48 years. Their education and training ranged from high school diploma to graduate degree. The following occupations were represented: high school teacher, housewife, university student, church administrator, and executive secretary. Two males and three females took part in the second focus group. Their ages ranged from 39 to 67 years. Their education ranged from high school to post-graduate training. The following occupations were represented: businessman, librarian, writer/editor, travel agent, and housewife. The group interviews were conducted in 2005 by the researcher. A detailed profile of the participants in the focus groups interviews is provided in Appendix A.

The prompting questions were the same for each group. However, there was considerable variation in the significance of the questions for each because each group had its own dynamic and intensity of discussion. In group one, participants tended to avoid open conflicts in the group and to work towards achieving group consensus. This meant that extreme positions were only rarely expressed, but the participants were able to express different viewpoints openly and comfortably. The number of contributions made by the participants was fairly balanced. It was obvious that the 20-year-old participant contributed whenever the topic of discussion, such as code-switching (CS) and the relevance of Armenian in daily activities, seemed relevant to her experiences. She seemed skeptical about positive changes, called on the other members to be realistic, and shared very little in the discussion on Armenia and significant stages in the history of the Armenians.

The condition of an Armenian school triggered a lengthy discussion. Also striking was the strong emphasis on the impact of technological innovations and globalization on ethnic identity and the future status of a linguistic minority in a diaspora context. Worth noting is the interest in Armenia and Armenia-diaspora relations, which were discussed at great length.

The participants in group two managed to express different points of view in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, as well. One notable feature of this group was its more critical attitude towards globalization during the discussion on 'future directions'. An Armenian school and its needs figured prominently in this group's discussions too.

On the whole there was great interest in linguistic issues. Prompted by the question on maintenance efforts, participants engaged in a critical discussion of the challenges facing the Armenian community and voiced nostalgia for the status the community held before the Lebanese civil war and the way the community conducted itself then. The frequent references to the Internet and Americanization were striking. Particularly detailed and discerning discussion in the group centered on the present socio-economic status, demography, and the prevalent consumerist mentality and behavior.

ANALYSIS

The following analysis focuses first on the perceptions of participants concerning individual and communal perspectives on linguistic, social, cultural, and political trends in Beirut. This discussion is followed by a section on identity issues and links with the homeland and another section on the necessary or possible steps that would help maintain the Armenian language in Beirut. The analysis emphasizes the specific content of the participants' utterances and examines their viewpoints and their assessment of the prevailing standpoints of other members of the Armenian community in Beirut. The extracts from the first focus group discussions are preceded by F and the second by S. The contribution, for example, of a 44-year-old male from the first group will be designated as FM44, and so on.

CHANGING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL PERSPECTIVES ABOUT LINGUISTIC AND EXTRALINGUISTIC ISSUES

An initial, spontaneous question was triggered by a conversation between two participants about the dilemma of one of the Armenian schools in finding a school principal. Hence, after a brief introduction, participants were asked about the reason why the school was unable to find a principal, a question relevant and closely related to the purpose of this study. As mentioned above, this query generated a vigorous discussion and elicited the participants' perceptions about the diminishing degree of interest and faith in the Armenian school, the current evident shift in the priorities of the community, the challenges faced by parents, and the latter's handling of the situation in a changing environment and increasing economic, cultural, and social pressures. The following extracts are from the first focus group discussions:

Moderator: I heard you discussing the difficulty you are facing in finding a principal. Can you tell us more?

FM39: We have not had a principal in our school for the last six months now, yet people are not worried. We are preparing our students for the official baccalaureate exams, but there is no one to be in charge and assume responsibilities. Unfortunately, the community has lost its priorities. The school comes last.

FF39: The struggles faced by the Armenian school reflect the problems the community is going through. I believe that when Armenians started getting rich, they began separating themselves from the Armenian school and the Armenian community. They prefer to send their children to well-known Lebanese schools rather than to Armenian schools. There is more prestige in that.

FF20: I think they do it because they think their children will not need Armenian in the future. They will need Arabic, English, and French, and Armenian schools are unable to produce students who are well versed in these languages. Today, how many are majoring in Armenian literature? None. My friends, for instance, are all majoring either in computer science or business administration. We are studying practical things. In this day and time, we are

not worried about maintaining Armenian or being helpful to the Armenian community. It is survival of the fittest. We have to be well-equipped to be successful and make money.

As if in a complementary sequel to the above thought, the following discussion among participants in the second focus group identifies the reasons why they think Armenians are avoiding engaging in undergraduate or graduate work in Armenian language or history. In addition, they believe the lack of passion of unqualified teachers and the low importance given to Armenian subjects in schools are affecting the way Armenian and Armenian history are taught.

SM67: The problem is that our schools pay teachers of Armenian less than what they pay the other teachers.

SM39: Yes, unfortunately, that is true.

SF49: Moreover, those who are qualified to teach end up doing all kinds of jobs except teaching Armenian.

SM49: Because it is a matter of supply and demand. When there is more demand for good teachers of foreign languages, mathematics, and the sciences, it is logical that they will be paid more.

SF47: But, you see, the demand is even greater for good teachers of Armenian because there is little or even no interest among our young generation to become teachers of Armenian.

SM67: But who is going to pay them enough to survive? I have been in this profession for 40 years. In the 1960s and 70s, many went to Armenia to study Armenian literature and history. When they returned they were disappointed. Thus, they were obliged to choose professions outside the community. This led to the rise of unqualified teachers. Yet, because Armenian is not included in the official exams, schools are not careful enough in their selection of teachers of Armenian. They are not even supervised the way the physics, mathematics, or Arabic teachers are. And believe me it will only get worse...

SF47: I know from my daughter's teacher. She lacks passion. She does not make the lessons interesting for the students, especially Armenian history. Our books are outmoded, I know, but teachers have to be innovative in their approach so that students would get interested and not be bored hearing about things that happened thousands of years ago.

SF49: It is our duty to instill in children love of the Armenian language so that when they grow up they will want to teach it to others. SF47: If this is how schools are operating, then how can we blame parents who believe that Armenian has become redundant. They do not see it as an asset for their children's future and success. It will not put bread on the table. So they believe that if their children are not going to need Armenian, why then waste time learning it.

SM49: My wife and I decided to send our children to a well-known Lebanese school because we did not want to take risks. Armenian schools have a low academic and social level. I want to make sure that my children will receive the best education. Look around you. The big schools in Lebanon have

produced presidents and ministers. This made me think that if I send my children to a well-known school, there is a high probability that my children too will reach high places.

SF47: I have heard that before from parents who think that Armenian has become redundant. They do not see it as an asset for their children's future and success. They are convinced that Lebanese schools have better teachers and teach foreign languages more professionally. So they believe that if their children are not going to need Armenian, why then waste time learning it. So they prefer to send their children to foreign schools from the very beginning to master the foreign languages. In most cases, parents become proud of their children mixing their languages instead of seeing it as harming the Armenian language and weakening its importance.

SM67: There are other reasons, too, like the birth rate. When I started teaching in the 1960s, most families had either four or five children. Now we rarely have families that have three children. Most have two, and many more have only one child. For these reasons we have very few students in our kindergartens. The other issue is the Lebanese schools. Our concentration areas do not exist anymore. Bourj Hammoud, Dora, and the camps do not exist anymore. Armenians have dispersed in the suburbs, away from the Armenian schools. Therefore, parents do not want to send their children to schools that are far away. Some do, but others prefer to send them to schools that are close to their residence. Yet others are influenced by the propaganda that Lebanese schools offer better education. We lost a big number of educated people like engineers, doctors, architects, and professors to migration. They were all educated in Armenian schools and had reached important places in the community. At one time, when you asked parents what their children would be in the future, they would have said doctors and engineers. But what we failed to produce is lawyers and experts in the Arabic language. Our difficulties arise from the fact that for a long time we lived in ghettos and could not come out of them easily... .

SF47: Let us not forget that our schools are spending a lot of money to employ the best teachers, especially in the upper classes. But if you listen to parents who send their children to Lebanese schools, they say that there are certain things that are so different from ours. For example, they are interested in the psychology of the students. They take care of the psychological well-being of their students. But they also charge three or four times more than our schools.

SM49: From my brief experience with Armenians, I can tell you that those who lived in Bourj Hammoud sent their children to Armenian schools because they were poor. Those who were wealthy sent their children to Lebanese schools because they could afford it and they had different national and international experiences. They did not care if their children knew Armenian or not. These also ended up marrying Lebanese men and women... .

SF49: How many families subscribe to Armenian dailies? Very few. Children have to see Armenian books and newspapers being read at home so that they

too will get used to reading them, identify with them, and imbibe Armenianness.

Moderator: Why do you think this is not happening?

SF47: How many parents are interested in their children these days? Many of them say, "I have to live my life. I cannot spend my entire life looking after my children." They go out every night, and their children, without parental supervision, spend hours either chatting or surfing the Internet.

SM67: The other day an 11-year-old student became sick at school. He had high fever. We called home to his mother, but she refused to believe us, saying that her son was lying. We told her that he was really sick. At last she said that she had an aerobics class, and that she would pick him up after her class. This is the mentality that we are facing now.

Interestingly, both groups alluded to the fact that neither they nor their community in Beirut were exempt from the current changes around them. For example, FM39 referred to the increasing economic concerns, growing uncertainties, and constant political instability in the Middle East that consume a lot of energy and that render the argument over Armenian irrelevant. Similarly, FM48, through a brief historical glance, provided his perspective of the factors that have affected the Armenian community:

Some of the newcomers did not even know Armenian. They spoke Turkish. But they were determined to teach Armenian to their children. Besides, they lived in insulated areas. The school was close to their house. The church was in the next street. Relatives lived close by. The cemetery was near. Their lives revolved around five streets. This went on till the 1970s. With the commencement of the civil war in 1975 things started to change. Immigration was at its climax. The leadership left. The so-called fence that used to protect the Armenians started to fall down. The Internet finished the process and tore down all kinds of fences. (FM48)

In agreement with FM48's explanation, FM44 argued, "Twenty years ago people used to get together more often, visit grandparents or relatives, and spend Christmas or Easter together. Now people hardly visit each other, and young people have little or no contact with their cousins. The Internet has replaced everything and everybody". This stance was explicitly endorsed by FM39 who mentioned the example of an Armenian family who spend most of their evenings with the father watching football matches on one television set, the mother watching a Mexican soap opera on another and the son playing games on the Internet. He concluded, "There is little or no communication among the three". In a similar vein, FM39 referred to the time when grandparents used to live with the family and play an important role in maintaining the ethnic language and history: "Grandmother used to tell stories about the massacres and the long deadly marches in the desert. She was a survivor and had stories to tell. She would cry while recounting the atrocities. She would pray and teach her grandchildren how to pray. Things have changed greatly now".

The participants showed great interest in the issue, and they expressed their view of the impact of the Internet and English on the role and usage of Armenian in everyday life. As we will see, the youngest participant believes that change is unpreventable and proposes to be realistic about it. Her perception of CS falls in the same category, whereas FF39 interprets it as the result of negligence and lax behavior.

FF20: The Internet and chatting are all in English. What is the use of Armenian? Why do I have to spend years learning something that will be redundant in the end? Besides, my generation is not that ignorant. We know enough Armenian to use at home. And it is not only us who mix our languages. Look at the Lebanese. Very few speak only Arabic. The rest either mix their languages or speak in French or English.

FF39: I do not blame you for thinking like that because it is our fault. We have failed in giving the young enough incentives to learn and appreciate Armenian. Visit an Armenian school and listen to the children talking. You will hear them speaking broken Armenian mixed with Arabic, English, and French. We used to be rebuked for mixing our languages and were told to speak 'clean' Armenian. My children, at least know that if they use a foreign word, they have to repeat it in Armenian.

FF20: How long do you think you can keep on doing that? How long can you control your children? We are living in an era where we are being influenced tremendously. Even the French have a problem with the spread of the use of English in France. Therefore, it would be a good idea if Armenians stopped seeing code-switching as wrong and unacceptable.

FM44: If we accept code-switching, Armenian will suffer irrevocably.

FM39: My students often complain that I am very demanding when it comes to speaking Armenian. This is a century where everything is quick. We cannot keep up because Armenian is a slow language, like our character. Our ancestors lived in a mountainous country. In chatting they are so quick that we cannot expect them to appreciate the long words we have in Armenian.

Moderator: What do you propose must be done?

FM39: Armenian has to show a little flexibility if it is to survive and make the new generation like it.

FF20: I do not think that will make any difference. We have grown used to mixing our language and depending on Arabic and English to finish our conversations. Besides, it takes a lot of effort and time to remember Armenian.

FM39: I understand what you are saying. The Internet and computer language is developing so quickly that the Armenian language cannot cope, especially with the new technological words, and linguists have a hard time making up words, which so often are so complicated and superficial that we prefer to use the original version, that is, the English words.

FM44: I think expert linguists in Armenia have to deal with this issue and make up Armenian words for *surfing*, *phishing*, *chatting*, and so on. But they

have their own problems. Their Armenian is so saturated with Russian words that they have enough on their plate.

Interestingly, the discussion in the second focus group took a similar turn, and the debate concentrated on the possibility and impossibility of controlling CS, something SF47 considers harms the Armenian language, weakens its importance, and encourages shift. In agreement, SM67 shared the following with the group:

SM67: I have friends who, every time their children code-switch, remind them to switch back to Armenian. The mother interrupts them constantly. Their daughter is so influenced by this that if her mother or a visitor uses a foreign word she reminds them to say it in Armenian.

SM49: Today if I tell my children that they have to speak only Armenian at home, I will be in trouble. Their French teacher will be upset.

SF47: Something must be done though to preserve our language from everything we have been talking about. As an Armenian, my language comes first. It will help my children feel Armenian. Leniency in this issue sends the wrong message to our children. It is as if we are telling them that it is all right if they do not know or remember words in their mother tongue. Plus, language mixing is a bad habit that distorts the meaning of a conversation.

These extracts underline the linguistic and ideological changes the Armenian community in Beirut has experienced and still is experiencing. These passages highlight a very important issue, but a disturbing one to some of the participants, and that is the community's shifting priorities and its impact on the status of Armenian schools, especially in producing culturally and linguistically well-equipped individuals, and the increasing attractiveness of Lebanese schools. These concerns echo comments from American-born Armenians who contend that under ideal conditions it is desirable to retain language use, but not if it is at the expense of their ability to make a comfortable living and achieve mobility in the dominant society. These people emphasize integration and accuse the "defenders of 'language at all costs' of operating in a vacuum, of being dream merchants who are oblivious of reality".⁸

These lengthy discussions in the focus groups shed light on the changes experienced by the community and the adjustments members of this community have opted to make to cope with social, economic, and technological transformations. From the participants' interpretations we understand that education in the mother language and the seriousness with which that education is passed on play a crucial role in the transmission of a minority language. However, we also gather from their discussion that Armenian subjects are not taught as passionately as they used to be, and that increasingly Lebanese schools are viewed as the vehicle for a successful educational and social future. Even though the majority of participants in both groups upheld the importance of multilingualism, some of them lamented the fact that their importance was being overstated and that not enough was being done to circumvent the repercussions, especially of the Internet, on family life, language maintenance, and CS.

IMPACT OF IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION WITH THE HOMELAND ON LANGUAGE SHIFT

To make sense of a community's identity, we need to look at its language, as language is the primary index, or symbol, or register of identity.⁹ Closely related to this perception of ethnic identity is Joshua Fishman's use of the same term. Fishman uses ethnic identity to signify "belongingness".¹⁰ This is also a term that surfaces in any discussion on diaspora, a displaced community of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile.¹¹ Diaspora, in today's world, refers to groups of displaced persons and communities moving across the globe. Many people find themselves exiles without really having moved very far; however, what emerges is the ambivalent relationship or double loyalty that diasporans have to places and that subsequently affect identity formation.

In this sense, the extracts below, which are taken from the discussions of the first focus group, present a very clear picture of the different phases the Armenian diaspora in Beirut seems to have experienced concerning its ethnic identity. It is remarkable the way the focus group participants have come to perceive their ethnic identity and their rationalization of their feelings towards the homeland, and the fact that the 20-year-old participant felt comfortable in her Lebanese identity and did not feel as concerned as the others concerning the issue of shifting loyalties. The extracts also manifest the reasons why this specific diasporic community feels alienated from the motherland and its inhabitants. The discussion the participants had in this group elucidates their dilemma concerning belongingness. In short, it can be condensed to the formula: 'I do not 100% identify with Lebanon, yet I do not seem to get along well with my emerging homeland either'.

FF20: I am speaking from experience. At the university we hardly speak Armenian. Some of us have graduated from Armenian schools, but the Armenian we speak is a mixture of Arabic, English, and French.

Moderator: What language do you speak at home?

FF20: Armenian, but after a very long day at the university, Armenian does not seem very important. I do not feel that I need to speak correct Armenian because I know I will not need Armenian when I graduate. I do not live in Armenia.

Moderator: What about your identity? What do you say you are?

FF20: I believe I am Lebanese.

FM39: I do not blame her. Many think like that. For years we said we were Armenian. Then, we began saying that we were Lebanese-Armenian, imitating the American-Armenians. That led us into thinking like the Lebanese and living like the Lebanese.

FM48: There is a growing trend among our people which says that we are Lebanese of Armenian descent...

FM39: What you said is true because we do not feel proud of being Armenian any more. 15 years ago we were very proud of our culture and heritage. We used to look down at the Lebanese and consider *them* as second-class citizens.

FM44: Now we are underestimating ourselves and our culture and praising the Lebanese culture. Is it because our number has dwindled? I do not think so. Something has changed in our psychology. We see ourselves as second-class citizens and try to look good in front of the Lebanese by saying that we are Lebanese like you but somewhere we had Armenian ancestors. These are people whose *parents* are Armenian...

FF39: My assessment is that the educated Armenians left Lebanon during the war and that harmed the community a lot. They were true leaders who made the community proud of them and their achievements. They held the community together. Their departure created a huge vacuum in leadership.

FM48: Our priorities have changed. We have become too submerged in Lebanese life, especially in politics.

FM39: Exactly, and that is taking a lot of our time. We could invest that time in thinking and planning how to maintain our identity and language. Our grandparents and parents had great pride, integrity, honor, and ethical values. Now those Armenians born here have acquired Mediterranean traits, discarding Armenianness and Armenian values.

FM48: When are we going to wake up? When will we realize that Lebanese politics is very complicated. We cannot get involved in their disputes. But unfortunately our leaders have gotten too involved... .

Moderator: What do you suggest they do?

FM48: During the Lebanese civil war, we were more Armenian. We were able to decide not to be dragged into the war and take sides, and we succeeded. We were threatened for not getting involved. Some of our best men were killed, but we endured. They can decide to do the same now.

FM39: One of our well-known poets has a famous saying, "Armenians are people of dark days. In times of trouble, they hold together. In times of prosperity, they become vulnerable". In my opinion, giving in to pressure from the majority was bound to happen. We have been here for more than ninety years.

FM44: You have a point there. You cannot keep a diaspora community intact for long. Diaspora communities are temporary. Assimilation is inevitable.

FM37 and FF39: Look at what happened to our community in Egypt.

FM44: Our community in Poland was also one of the strongest ones, but they assimilated. Those who went to Russia a hundred years ago, now have names ending in -ov.

Apart from exposing the complexity of the issue, the discussion above reveals the conviction of the 20-year-old university student of her Lebanese identity and the position of the other older participants. Their debate, triggered by the opinion put forward by the young participant, provides a historical analysis of the change in the perceptions and self-identification of the Armenians before and after the civil war in Lebanon. Their conversation depicts the initial identification and pride of the survivors in Armenian values, and it attributes the current decrease in affiliation to that legacy to changes in self-association, self-confidence, leadership, political stance, prosperity, pressure from the majority, and the time factor. Their

allusions to the fates of the communities in Poland, Egypt, and Russia signal the inevitability of the assimilation of the community in Beirut. The participants seemed to conclude that complete integration into Lebanese society is inexorable and that current efforts serve merely to postpone what is inevitable.

Language issues are part and parcel of diasporas worldwide.¹² Interestingly, social scientists assert that linguistic diasporas are usually conscious of their peripherality in the political, social, and economic life of their host country; hence, their efforts, as the case may be, to reach some degree of acculturation or feel more committed to the home country.¹³

The discussion in the extract below confirms the latter remark. Armenia and Armenia-diaspora relations are contentious issues both in the homeland and among the diaspora communities. As expressed below by the discussion among participants of the first focus group, the 'reunion' with Armenia was and has not been a smooth process.

Moderator: What role do you think Armenia can play?

FM39: After Armenia got its independence, we started to think about the rationale behind keeping our language in the diaspora and staying Armenian... .

FM48: The independence of Armenia should make us want to cling to our identity and language more forcefully, but you are right. There are a few whose love for the homeland was rekindled by the independence, but the majority felt let down.

FM39: Until the independence we were determined that we should remain Armenian and defend the Armenian Cause. However, after the independence of Armenia some of us seem to be tired of struggling to maintain our identity in the diaspora.

Moderator: Would you explain, please?

FM39: It is because we used to have a dream, the dream of Armenia. Armenia was a dream for us. The day the dream became a reality, and we got to know who the real Armenians are, we were greatly disappointed.

Moderator: Why were you disappointed?

FM39: They are totally different in customs, language, character, and mentality. We constantly have to build schools there, to renovate their homes, to take care of their daily expenses. This is not the Armenians we dreamed about... .

FM44: We think all Armenians are one, but Armenians in Armenia do not think like that. We believe emigration is bad for Armenia because Armenia is being emptied of its citizens and especially its brainpower, but they do not see it that way... .

Moderator: So, how would you like to see relations evolving between the homeland and Armenia?

FF39: Let me answer that question. The diaspora is prone to myriad influences that have led and will lead many such communities to total integration into the majority and complete assimilation. Armenia has to realize that a strong diaspora that affiliates itself with the homeland will contribute greatly to the

improvement of its economic, political, and educational sectors. Therefore, more efforts should be invested in coordinating relations between the two because both complement each other.

FM44: That is very good, but we need to be realistic. The American Empire has established threatening conditions that have to do with life or death. This Empire has declared war on all national histories, historical rights and memory, national economies, boundaries, authorities, and cultures, and it wants to impose its marketing regulations, and cultural and ethical values on all of humanity, regarding them as its enemies and punishing those who disobey. These conditions endanger the fate of minorities like us and especially the Armenian Cause.

Moderator: How?

FM44: The Armenian government has started giving in to this American politics and some of the political leaders in Armenia refuse to act against Turkey joining the European Union. Some of them have even been bold enough to announce that Armenia and the Armenian people have no land claims from Turkey and that they are ready to open the borders between the two countries and initiate joint business ventures.

FM48: Exactly. And these have greatly disappointed us in the diaspora. For years we struggled to stay Armenian and keep the Armenian Cause alive, and now our people in the homeland show readiness to overshadow our century-long struggle. These and other such stances are having catastrophic repercussions on the Armenians in the diaspora. We are totally disillusioned.

In the extract above the participants reveal the gap that seemed to surface in the aftermath of Armenia's independence and as a result of the increased contact between the diaspora and the homeland. The participants' perspectives shed light on the complicated nature of reestablishing relations with a homeland with which they hardly had any contact for more than seventy years. What is more taxing for some is that the differences in the social, economic and political agendas of both, the homeland and the diaspora, have left some Lebanese diasporans, even after so many years of contact with Armenia and Armenians, struggling with issues of belongingness and ambivalent feelings.

FUTURE ENDEAVORS AND HINDRANCES

Fishman stresses the important relation between the process of language shift and the need for culture change in schools, or change in the ethno-cultural patterns, and symbolic and value systems of the community. He calls for "indigenized schools", where the minority language and culture are valued as much as any majority language.¹⁴ The participants in both focus groups voiced similar opinions in their discussions above. Therefore, the recurrence of this theme in the extracts below simply indicates the value they accord schools. Interestingly, as illustrated below, the data emphasize the need for concrete agendas for language maintenance and at the same time pinpoint the communal, global, technological, and socio-economic challenges that would hinder maintenance efforts. Still, both groups suggested feasible steps whose successful implementation would guarantee ethnic,

cultural, and linguistic maintenance. The following extracts are from the discussions carried out in the first group.

Moderator: What do you suggest would redress the current situation?

FM44: Perhaps what needs to be done is to take the number of the community into consideration and then think about whether we need all the schools that we have now. However, many wonder whether parents would be willing to take their children to Armenian schools that are far from where they live, or would they simply take them to the Lebanese school that is around the corner. This is a real problem.

Moderator: Has anything been done lately to address these issues?

FM39: For the last couple of years, some of the Armenian Orthodox schools handled the situation by making kindergarten free.

FM44: But that created a sensitive situation.

Moderator: What do you mean?

FM44: The students who registered came from other Armenian schools. Therefore, some of the schools were upset by this measure.

FM48: We know the mission of the Armenian schools. It is to maintain the language by transmitting it to the new generation. To do that in this time and age we need professionalism. Sentimentalism is a thing of the past. We need attractive, new, colorful, and interesting books for the teaching of the language and history.

FF39: Exactly. Dissatisfied with the existing textbooks, some teachers use materials they have collected. But what disturbs me the most is that until now we do not have textbooks that teach the Genocide.

FM39: All these need planning and human resources. I believe that a committee made up of representatives of all the factions of the community should get together and discuss these issues and agree on future plans. Armenian must be preserved, so we need to take practical, efficient steps.

Moderator: How would you go about doing it?

FM44: What is happening is that everybody wants to work alone. Such problems cannot be solved alone. The political parties and different denominations need to come together and plan together. It is a matter of to be or not to be. When people see their leaders sitting together and planning the future together, they will be encouraged and become optimistic. What they see in front of them now is each struggling alone and criticizing each other's work. All the diaspora is facing the same problem... .

FM48: True, and that makes me even more worried about the future of the Armenian community in Beirut. Logic says that the number of schools will decrease. There are families that cannot even pay the discounted fees of the Armenian schools and consequently send their children to public schools. This is a new phenomenon that we need to investigate and put an end to.

Moderator: What do you suggest?

FM48: What we need to do is find new sponsors who would give generously so that these students would remain in our schools and learn Armenian.

Maybe we need to establish a special fund that would take care of scholastic expenses.

FF20: I understand what you are going through to preserve the language, but you need to be realistic. For me it is more important to feel Armenian.

FM44: I do not agree because, if we start saying that, we will stop being faithful not only to the language but also to our identity, heritage, and history.

FF39: One way that would help is to work towards making Armenian part of the official baccalaureate exams.

FM39: We lobbied for it some years ago. We wanted Armenian to be the fourth language in the official exams. The government asked us to present them with books for authorization, but nobody took it seriously and the whole issue was forgotten.

FF20: If that happens, I believe students may start to take Armenian into account and prepare their lessons more seriously.

FM39: It would also guarantee the maintenance of the language.

Indeed, this passage echoes Fishman's assertion above, as obviously the participants focused on the importance of schools in transmitting the language, history, sense of belongingness, and heritage. The proposals they offered, such as better textbooks, cooperation among the different organizations and denominations, and the creation of a special fund, sounded like practical strategies towards the effective realization of language maintenance. At the same time, though, as if in an effort to be realistic, a few of the participants underlined the seriousness of the situation and expressed fears that not much was being done, due to lack of concerted communal efforts. FM44, for instance, voiced his concern thus, "Unfortunately, I am convinced that Armenian is losing its foothold". FF20 observed that in schools "Arabic is a priority, especially when it is time to get ready for the official exams. Armenian is a tough subject that takes a lot of our time. During the final month of school, our parents pleaded with the principal to cancel Armenian classes so that we would have more time to concentrate on Arabic". While FM39 remarked, "*We* talk about the closure of a school with sadness, but others do not. Instead, they gossip about it and blame people without knowing the truth about the circumstances that led the school to such a fate".

Apart from identifying some feasible steps oriented towards the maintenance of the Armenian language, the discussion in the second group tended to locate global challenges and trends that the participants thought were tremendously influential, totally oblivious of minorities, and unmindful of other cultures and their heritage.

SF49: As long as we are outside our homeland and live in the diaspora, we have to put a greater effort into maintaining our Armenian identity. Parents should make Armenian relevant.

SM67: As Armenians we have a heritage. We have a mission as a people. We have a duty to be faithful to our fathers' and our people's history. We are still a people with a cause. We have lands that we need to reclaim. This cannot be done by losing our Armenian identity or language.

Moderator: What do you suggest must be done?

SM67: Stay Armenian. I am not saying it is easy, and I believe in time we will give in and assimilate. But it is our duty to at least fight indifference, fight assimilation. Our schools and churches were built when our people were still hungry. Now we are well-to-do, each household has two or three cars, and we complain that it is very hard to teach our children Armenian. It depends on our stance. Maintaining Armenian is our duty... .

SF47: We have always struggled. Why stop now?

SM67: With globalization, it seems all cultures are destined to be downtrodden. If you watch the local television channels, there is nothing there that would make you feel Lebanese or proud of being Lebanese. If you watch the *BBC* or read *Time*, all you hear or read about is: are we going to be a one-language world? In other words, they are trying to inculcate in us the mentality of “why should we bother about minority languages?” Read the last few issues of *Time* or *Newsweek*. Most of the articles and even cover stories are about dieting, tourism, technology, Hollywood, or business. It did not use to be like this. So they are telling us to eat healthily, travel, spend money, and not worry about anything else.

SM49: Pure consumerism! This is the trend. You are right, but we have to find a balance. This is what we are unable to do.

This passage demonstrates the variety of different positions that were put forward. There is, once again, reference to the prevalent global trends. Obviously, some of the participants believe that globalization is having negative effects not only on the Armenian community and its endeavors in maintaining its culture, history, and language. It is also affecting Lebanese society and other societies worldwide. In such circumstances and with the growing indifference of the members of the community and their socio-economic aspirations, the participants in this discussion group seemed to conclude that maintenance programs would be difficult to implement and that maintenance efforts would be unfruitful.

Interestingly enough, though, this group pinpointed the importance of the part the Church can have in maintenance efforts. Historically the Church played an important role in teaching and safeguarding the language. It is true that the remarks of some of the participants in the second focus group were critical of the gap between the Church and the new generation. However, others' reference to the part the Church can have in the communal efforts of transmitting the importance and relevance of the language, history, and culture is remarkable. SM49 remarked, “When the priest gives a sermon we do not understand him, so why keep on going to church if I do not learn anything or feel that the priest is relating to my needs”. Nevertheless, SF39 offered practical ways in which the Church could reestablish relations with the community and rekindle the community's respect and love towards the language: “I believe the church can do a lot. For instance, instead of having a three-hour-long Sunday service, why not make it for only half that time. Instead of having everything in classical Armenian, why not introduce modern Armenian. These can be the starting points to attract us back to the church. They can also develop new, non-traditional, and interesting activities that would attract

the young. These are actions that might draw us nearer to our heritage, keep us focused on our culture, and gather us around activities where we can hear and speak our language more often”.

CONCLUSION

In this study the main objectives have been to identify dimensions of language use, speech behavior, and communicative functions of Armenian among the Armenian community in Beirut. The research focused on the effects of the history of Armenian speakers and, their past and present socio-economic position as well as ethno-cultural character in a changing environment, cultural and religious features, political and constitutional structures, relevant outcomes like dominance and subordination of the language and power relationships, and the impact of education, technology, and media in language maintenance and shift.

In order to explain the process of linguistic changes, however, it is important to understand the factors that have led adults to regard the new language, in this case, languages, as more important than their ancestral language. In the Language Maintenance and Language Shift (LMLS) literature, researchers assert people learn dominant languages because they are pressured to do so through dominant-group members who are numerically, socially, and politically more powerful and prestigious, demographic heterogeneity, stigmatization, and/or because people find the dominant language attractive, as it facilitates outward movement from the indigenous community and opens up new opportunities which members of the community wish to grasp.¹⁵

These elements of pressure and socioeconomic ambitions are present in the Armenians' inclusion of Arabic, English, and French in their repertoire. To concentrate on these views as such, however, would overshadow the real motives of the members of this community. The reasons for the desire to learn these languages are not so much pragmatic or socioeconomic as they are ideological. It is true that the present-day Armenian community in Beirut is quite different from what it was at the beginning of the twentieth century, and that there have been far-reaching changes in livelihood, marriage patterns, and employment opportunities. The collected data show that the fading away of the bitter memories of the early years of settlement after the Genocide and the realization that Lebanon could become a 'permanent' "home", eventually led to changes in beliefs and loyalties.

For instance, feelings of attachment to the ancestral language, pride in cultural legacy, and the imperative of passing on a sense of loyalty to one's homeland as ways to keep the Armenian Cause alive have been obscured by the perception of the Genocide by some fourth generation Armenians as a pretext to stay in the past, a symbol of perpetual victimization, and fanaticism. This line of thought is accentuated by their parents' growing indifference towards Armenianness, aspirations for integration and engrossment into Lebanese society and politics, and increasing emphasis on teaching their children Arabic, English, and French first. Their keenness for the metamorphosis to happen has been coupled with the desire to speak Arabic fluently, move out of the "ghetto", and augment their chances of socializing with the majority by sending their children to Lebanese schools and taking up residence away from Armenian-populated areas.

These “modifications”, as discussed in the focus groups, are having unfavorable effects on the linguistic and ethnic heritage of Armenians in Beirut. This echoes researchers’ belief that retention of an original language is seen as detrimental as it interferes with internal desires of social mobility, power, and material advancement.

Even though some of the interviewees had apparently been concerned about the issues raised in this study and were open to discuss them to reverse the present social, linguistic, and cultural trends prevalent in the Armenian community, a few participants asked that some of their views concerning the homeland, the local lay and religious leadership in the community, and the current commitments of the young generation not be included in the final writing of this paper. Part of their concern had to do with the fact that the paper was going to be read by *odars* (outsiders), and part of it had to do with preserving traditions by keeping such matters private and not open for public scrutiny. Most of what was asked to be kept private, however, was in the form of specific examples that backed up their general stance. Hence, the exclusion of such data has not affected the nature of the perspectives they expressed. Interestingly, their stance seems to be familiar to scholars. Such community members perceive similar inquiries “to be a denial of their ethnicity,” and that “their language is under special protection”.¹⁶

An overall conclusion that can be drawn is that the idea that knowledge of a language opens a channel to power has generated an overwhelming dynamic. The process of shift in the community and the transformations in people’s understanding of themselves and their world are having decisive consequences for how Armenians in Beirut think about and use their languages. There is a need to continue study of the nature and complexity of such a dynamic in the future because, like many communities around the world, the Armenian community in Beirut is changing rapidly.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are a number of important issues that could not be analyzed here, but would be worthwhile topics for future research, as further research into the Armenian situation could contribute to the wider field of LMLS. For instance, in their assessment of the current linguistic situation of the Armenian community in Beirut, most of the interviewees seemed to agree that the Armenian language was degenerating. Thus it may be productive to extend the current research and examine a range of constructs, both at the level of language acquisition and at the level of individual speech behavior. Such a study would analyze the chances of the future transmission of the language and broaden and deepen our understanding of LMLS among Armenians. A closely connected issue would be exploring the phenomenon of CS and its relation to linguistic loss. For instance, it is interesting to note that Armenian is rarely used when CS, but Arabic, English, and French words and phrases are freely incorporated into Armenian, where they are made to conform to the rules of word-formation and pronunciation of the language switched to.

Another interesting dimension worth examining is the issue of Armenian students in public and non-Armenian Lebanese schools. In an effort to provide a

picture of the current situation, I contacted the municipality of Beirut and the Ministry of Education to get a list of the public schools in Beirut so as to facilitate my task of locating Armenian students in these institutions. My inquiry was viewed with suspicion. After being sent from one clerk to the other to no avail, I gave up my endeavor not to be sidetracked from the main objectives of this study. However, perceiving the sensitivity of the issue but also its importance, I believe it is worth pursuing the matter at a later stage and for another study. I was also refused interviews with the principals of two private Lebanese schools that are known to have a large number of Armenians among their student body. A clearer picture would definitely assist research in this area, which will also need to examine language acquisition patterns of the young members of the community attending Lebanese schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper presented evidence that the participants in the focus groups perceive that the state of the Armenian language is deteriorating and that its speakers have undergone a considerable change in matters once held almost sacred by their parents and grandparents. The discussions provided an account of the Armenian community's understanding of past and present viewpoints on its mother language, its reading of its experiences, its analysis of personal, communal, and global factors that contribute or have contributed to the shrinkage of the domains in which Armenian is used, and its viewpoints on the implications these may have on language maintenance possibilities.

Understanding the place of languages in multilingual societies has acquired new and urgent relevance in the face of globalization and the ethno-nationalism which appears to have arisen as a counter-balance to it.¹⁷ It is important that people become aware of the sequence of events, particularly the effects of certain attitudes on their descendants "who will not be in any position to choose".¹⁸

The recommendations/suggestions provided by the interviewees may be a plausible working strategy, especially when agreed on and adopted by the different factions of the community, who would have to divide the work among themselves. This means that members of the community need to develop a sense of responsibility for language transmission. Some of these recommendations/suggestions were: improving the academic standards of the Armenian schools; producing new, interesting textbooks for the teaching of Armenian language and history; reintroducing the teaching of geography, science, and mathematics in Armenian especially at the elementary level; holding seminars that would target the equipping of Armenian teachers; providing more financial aid to needy Armenian students; rekindling parents' interest in Armenian issues; teaching the last one hundred years of Armenian history instead of the last three thousand years; producing cultural events that would instill pride in the young; making Armenian culture known to the Lebanese public; organizing special language and history courses for those who attend Lebanese schools; encouraging parents to speak Armenian with their children; eradicating rivalry between the political parties; organizing trips to Armenia; and discouraging exogamy. A significant conclusion that can be drawn from these models is that for successful

language maintenance it is prerequisite for the whole or at least a large number of the community to be involved. A similar scenario would hopefully reinforce the ideological patterns that support maintenance, as “a language is the emblem of its speakers”.¹⁹ That is, the words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas, or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share. From this membership they draw personal strength and pride, as well as a sense of social importance and historical continuity.

The data gathered for this study show that even though some put the greatest responsibility on the growing indifference of parents, the existing chasm between the Church and the community, and the lack of proper language and history textbooks, there was some uncertainty over who is actually responsible for preserving the language. However, there was a general agreement among the interviewees that schools should perform the necessary miracle by, for example, replacing pride in the number of schools by pride in the academic quality of schools, thus making them attractive institutions and tools for language transmission. This is what Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer have called the “bureaucratic fix”.²⁰ Fishman warns, however, that it is easy “to prescribe ‘fixes’ that cannot be undertaken”.²¹

While these recommendations seem worthwhile, I agree with Crystal who asserts that researchers must create opportunities for the people “to improve morale so that they come to think of their language with feelings of confidence, self-esteem, and pride. Only in this way will the community develop an ability from within to deal with the pressure of ongoing change”.²²

APPENDIX A

Detailed profiles of the participants in the group interviews

Focus Group One

Sex	Age	Education	Profession	Attended Armenian school	Knowledge of Armenian	Other languages
F	20	Second year university	University student	Yes	Weak	Arabic, English,
F	39	High school	Housewife	Yes	Very good	Arabic, English, French
M	39	Graduate degree	Teacher	Yes	Very good	Arabic, English, French, Turkish
M	44	Undergraduate degree	Church administrator	Yes	Very good	Arabic, English, Turkish
M	48	Graduate degree	Executive secretary	Yes	Very good	Arabic, English, Turkish

Focus Group Two

Sex	Age	Education	Profession	Attended Armenian school	Knowledge of Armenian	Other languages
F	39	Undergrad.	Housewife	No	Fair	Arabic, English, French
F	47	High school	Travel agent	No	Good	Arabic, English, Turkish
M	49	Undergrad.	Businessman	No	Fair	Arabic, English, French
F	49	Undergrad.	Librarian	Yes	Very good	Arabic, English, Turkish
M	67	Post grad.	Writer/Teacher	Yes	Very good	English, Turkish

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Armenians use two different but standardized vernacular dialects: western Armenian, spoken in the diaspora, and eastern Armenian, used in Armenia, Russia, Iran and elsewhere where immigrants from Armenia thrive. As a diasporic language, Western Armenian is a minority language and is not the official language of any state. Differences include phonological, grammatical (including conjugation and declension), and idiomatic variances.
- ² Arda Jebejian, "Patterns of Language Use Among Armenians in Beirut in the Last 95 Years", *Haigazian Armenological Review*, Vol. 31, pp. 453-469.
- ³ Arda Jebejian, "Armenian-Lebanese Youth and the Construction of Ethnic Identities", *Haigazian Armenological Review*, Vol. 29, 2009, pp. 249-270; Jebejian, "Patterns".
- ⁴ R. Wodak, *The Discursive Construction Of National Identity*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press: 1999, p. 107.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Y. Darlington and S. Scott, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Stories from the Field*, Buckingham, Open University Press: 2002.
- ⁷ Darlington and Scott.
- ⁸ A. Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being Armenian to Feeling Armenian*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers: 1994, p. 253.
- ⁹ D. Crystal, *Language Death*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP: 2000.
- ¹⁰ J. Fishman, (Ed.) *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved? Reversing Language Shift, Revisited: a 21st Century Perspective*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 2001, p. 329.
- ¹¹ J. E. Braziel and A. Mannur, *Theorizing Diaspora*, Oxford, Blackwell. Braziel and Mannur: 2003.
- ¹² Y. Suleiman (ed.), "Language and Society in the Middle East and North Africa: Studies" in *Variation and Identity*, Surrey, Curzon: 1999.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ J. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters: 1991, p. 62.

- ¹⁵ J. Swann, A. Deumert, T. Lillis and R. Mesthrie, *A Dictionary of Sociolinguistics*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press: 2004.
- ¹⁶ Crystal, p. 108.
- ¹⁷ W. Pfaff, *The Wrath of Nations: Civilisation and the Furies of Nationalism*, New York, Simon and Schuster: 1993.
- ¹⁸ Crystal, p. 106.
- ¹⁹ R.M.W. Dixon, *The Rise and Fall of Languages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1997, p. 135.
- ²⁰ N. M. Dauenhauer, and R. Dauenhauer, "Technical, Emotional, and Ideological Issues in Reversing Language Shift: Examples from Southeast Alaska", in L. A. Grenoble, & L. J. Whaley (eds.), *Endangered Languages: Current Issues and Future Perspectives*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP: 1998, pp 57-98.
- ²¹ Fishman, p. 13.
- ²² Crystal, p. 111.

**ԱՐՏԱԼԵԶՈՒԱԿԱՆ ԱԶԴԱԿՆԵՐ ՊԷՅՐՈՒԹԻ ՀԱՅ ԳԱՂՈՒԹԻ
ԼԵԶՈՒԱՊԱՀՊԱՆՄԱՆ ԵՒ ԼԵԶՈՒԱՓՈՆՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՄԷՋ
(Ամփոփում)**

ԱՐՏԱ ՃԵՊԷՃԵԱՆ
ardaj@cyberia.net.lb

Յօդուածը կը սերտէ 20-67 տարեկան լիբանանահայերու տեսակէտերը հայերէնի պահպանման եւ փոփոխութեան մասին: Հետազօտութիւնը կը մատնանշէ գաղափարախօսական, ընկերային, մշակութային, կրթական, տնտեսական, լրատեստողական, մամուլի եւ ճարտարարուեստական գործօններ, որոնք կ'ազդեն պէյրութաբնակ հայութեան հայերէնի պահպանման եւ փոփոխութեան վրայ:

Հեղինակը հիմնուելով սերտողութեան մասնակցող անհատներու փորձառութիւններուն վրայ, կը ներկայացնէ համայնքին անցեալի, ներկայի եւ ապագայի լեզուապահպանման եւ լեզուափոխութեան առնչութեամբ կատարուած դրական եւ ժխտական ըմբռումներ:

Սերտողութիւնը նաեւ կը քննարկէ անձնական, համայնքային, տեղական եւ համաշխարհային այն ազդակները, որոնք իրենց անդրադարձը կ'ունենան պէյրութահայութեան մայրենի լեզուի պահպանման եւ փոփոխութեան վրայ:

Հուսկ, սերտողութիւնը կը հետեցնէ թէ գաղութին դիմագրուած գաղափարախօսական, ընկերային, մշակութային, կրթական եւ տնտեսական փոփոխութիւնները, լիբանանեան քաղաքական կեանքով շեշտակի զբաղուածութիւնը, հայ ընտանիքին անտարբերութիւնը հայ դպրոցին, մամուլին, կրօնքի եւ մշակոյթի հանդէպ, ժխտական անդրադարձ կ'ունենան պէյրութահայութեան մայրենի լեզուի պահպանման եւ հետզհետէ անոր փոփոխութեան վրայ: