

## The Fate of the Armenian Language in the United States

Bert Vaux

Professor of Linguistics

Harvard University

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“Now the question no longer is: how shall we learn English so that we may share in the social life of America and partake of her benefits; the great question is: how can we preserve the language of our ancestors here in a strange environment and pass on to our descendants the treasures it contains?” (T. Bothne, *Kort udsigt over det lutherske Kirkearbejde blandt normændene i Amerika*, 1898)

### 1. Introduction

Armenians in New England face the classic threat encountered by all minority groups in the United States and elsewhere, which is imminent assimilation to the dominant language and culture (in this case American) within three generations. We’ve all heard many examples like the following:

#### Classic scenario 1

In the classic scenario, two Armenians from Turkey escape the Genocide, come to New England, and marry. They have four daughters, to whom they speak only in Armenian. All four daughters grow up speaking and understanding Armenian perfectly, and also speak perfect English. In fact, the youngest daughter even responds to her mother in English. The four daughters all marry Armenians, and have eleven children between them. None of the eleven children learns to speak Armenian fluently, though they know the usual words such as *ինչպէս էս inchbes es*, *ճարպիկ jarbig*, *վարտիկ vardig*, *չիչիկ chishig*, *քաք kak*, *օտար odar*, *սոսո sus*, *սարսախ sarsax*, *աչքդ քոնայ ač<sup>h</sup>k<sup>h</sup>ət<sup>h</sup> k<sup>h</sup>orna*, and so on.

An Armenian friend relates the following parallel experience:

“My parents were born in Turkey, met and married in Boston where I grew up. Although they spoke to me in Armenian, I replied in English as none of my school or outside friends spoke Armenian. As a result, I understand house Armenian, but not newspaper Armenian, and my speaking ability is not very good. My children do not understand Armenian, and speak only a few words.”

#### Classic scenario 2

In the second scenario, things happen a bit more quickly. “My niece and her husband immigrated to the US from Egypt. Both of their children were born in America. The parents did everything in their power to transmit Armenian language and culture to their children but to no avail. In fact, they both resisted it fiercely. They are now 23 and 20. The daughter is married to an Anglo boy and quite happy to be devoid of all Armenian identity. The son seems more interested in his heritage; he speaks a bit more Armenian than his sister. I suspect they both could speak it better than they let on. It is interesting that the boy is more willing to admit his knowledge than the girl is. I can’t help but feel that their parents’ vigorous insistence during their younger ages and their

own involvement in Armenian activities, food at home, and the whole package, must have played a role in the children's resistance.”

The general picture that emerges is that the Armenian language is in immediate danger of disappearing in New England, and in the United States as a whole. Since the Armenian language is so essential to the survival and growth of Armenian culture, it is important to identify the factors that have been involved in the decline of the Armenian language in New England, as well as those that have played a part in keeping it from disappearing entirely. Our ultimate goal should be to determine what we can do to preserve Armenian in New England and in the Diaspora as a whole.

In this paper I present the results of a survey I conducted to determine how many American Armenians speak their ancestral language fluently. A secondary goal of the study was to probe the attitudes in the Armenian community toward maintaining Armenian or shifting to English, and to ascertain what role these attitudes play in determining the fate of the Armenian language in this country. With these data in hand, I then draw on the results of recent linguistic research on minority language maintenance and shift to evaluate the steps that are currently being taken to preserve the Armenian language, and to suggest some ways in which these steps might be modified or augmented to slow or even reverse the loss of the language.

## **2. The Problem**

In the course of my survey, I collected information about some 3400 American Armenians, by which I mean Armenians born and raised in the United States. Of these, just over 900, or 27%, were able to speak Armenian fluently. This number is quite a bit higher than what I expected based on the American Armenians I know, but it is still alarmingly low, and strongly suggests that the Armenian language will not survive for long in the United States, especially after the flood of immigrants from Armenia and the Diaspora slows down.

Why is the language disappearing so quickly? One can identify a large number of contributing factors:

### *2.1. English-speaking environment*

First of all, many Armenian children are not immersed in an Armenian-speaking environment. This may be because one of the parents is non-Armenian, and the couple therefore speaks in English. This is of course especially common in America, where society does not frown on inter-ethnic or inter-religious marriages; by the same token the Armenian language is more likely to survive in Muslim countries like Iran and Lebanon, where intermarriage is relatively rare. Alternately, the parents may fear that their children won't learn English properly unless they're exposed to it at home, or they may feel more comfortable speaking English with each other, even if both of them are fluent in Armenian. This latter scenario is especially common with second-generation Armenians, who learned Armenian from their immigrant parents but typically met their spouse at school or work, where the language of communication was English. When a relationship between two people has been established in a particular language, it can be extremely difficult and awkward to consciously start using a different language when speaking with each other. It is also common for younger siblings to learn less Armenian, because their older brothers and sisters have already learned English from their friends and at school, and the younger sibling therefore is exposed to English both inside and outside the house.

## *2.2. Community*

A second important factor is the community. Armenians in tight-knit communities such as Watertown or Glendale are more likely than Armenians in say Montgomery, Alabama to be exposed to Armenian on a regular basis. More importantly, they are more likely to see Armenian as a useful language to know, as it can be used in grocery stores, churches, community meetings, and so on. As the bonds in the Armenian communities weaken, and hordes of Armenians move to the suburbs, the appeal of learning Armenian decreases proportionally.

A new relationship between language and ethnicity is then established, in which English becomes the language of living Armenianness—being used by churches, periodicals, societies, leaders and spokespeople—whereas the Armenian language is associated with foreign, old-fashioned, and/or scholarly notions of Armenianness. Children therefore have two important reasons to learn English rather than Armenian: they see English as their key to the worlds of both Anglo-America and Armenian America, and on the other hand they see Armenian as a relic that will mark them socially as out-of-date outsiders.

## *2.3. Church*

Changes in religious attitudes in America and in Armenia have also had profound effects on the Armenian language. The health of immigrant languages is closely tied to the health of the national church, if there is one. As the relative ease of American life has dulled the religious fervor of Armenians in America, and on the other side of the world 70 years of atheist Soviet rule have almost completely extinguished the light of Armenian Christianity, the Armenian church has come to play an increasingly small role in the day-to-day life of the average Armenian. The emotional investment in Armenianness that the old-timers had and, in part, passed on to their children and grandchildren, is no longer there for thoroughly secularized, modernized, and urbanized Armenians of today. As interest in being Armenian declines, so does interest in learning the language.

## *2.4. Attitude*

All of the above factors contribute to a general change in the attitude of young Armenian Americans that is not conducive and in fact even hostile to the learning of Armenian. As one Armenian at Tufts University observed,

“There are many Armenian-Americans at Tufts. They pride themselves in avoiding the Armenian club, and the Armenian program. They are often more intent on acting totally assimilated.”

## **3. Should the Armenian language be maintained in the U.S.?**

This hostile assimilatory attitude, driven in part by the factors discussed earlier, places the Armenian language in imminent danger of disappearing in America. At this point we must ask ourselves what can be done to prevent the disappearance of the language. Before answering this question, though, we must ask ourselves a more important question: should the Armenian language be maintained in the United States? Before embarking on a language revival program, we must be absolutely sure that doing so will help rather than harm the Armenian children who are targeted. We must also be careful not to force the language on an entirely unwilling population, bearing in mind that it is intellectuals, not regular people, who create problems of nationalism, ethnicity, and so on.

Members of the Armenian community in America take two opposing positions on the issue of maintaining Armenian in the United States:

1. On one side, populated primarily by Armenians who are older and/or speak the language well, we find the opinion that the link between language and ethnicity is vital—it is the essence of identity, authenticity, and uniqueness. In this line of thinking, the particular structural characteristics of Armenian are believed to cause, lead, force, constrain, and require its speakers to know, do, intuit, appreciate, and resonate the way they do. Armenian is viewed and experienced as a dynamo that generates sensitivities, skills, abilities, and understandings unique to its community of speakers.
2. The other side of the debate is occupied primarily by Americans and thoroughly Americanized Armenians. According to this view, languages are merely means of communication; any links with ethnicity are purely arbitrary. It is therefore possible to remain Armenian (if one wants to) without speaking the language.

The Armenians who participated in my survey overwhelmingly took the first of these two positions. However, one should bear in mind that my survey was conducted over various Armenian email networks, which by their very nature are expected to be frequented by Armenians who are actively interested in their heritage and probably in their language as well. Nonetheless, some respondents pointed out a number of arguments against the position that children in America should learn Armenian:

### *3.1. Disadvantages*

#### *3.1.1. Effects on English*

First of all, it is commonly believed that learning Armenian will adversely affect one's learning of English. The basic reasoning here is that if children are exposed to two languages, they will learn each one half as well. There is actually some scientific support for this position; in a 1992 study of 11-year-old Turkish children, Anneli Schaufeli found that children who were bilingual in Turkish and Dutch fared significantly worse on vocabulary tests than children of similar socio-economic background who spoke only Turkish. The bilingual children got an average of 44% of the test items correct, whereas the monolingual children on average were correct 75% of the time.

Another survey respondent noted that some Armenians fear that if their children spend all of their time studying Armenian, they will not have time to learn English. This of course is completely untrue; it is simply impossible for a child born and raised in the United States to not learn English, provided that he or she is allowed to go to school, watch television, and interact with other children. However, there is a kernel of truth in this fear; namely, children whose parents speak only Armenian will often begin school speaking no English. This experience can be utterly mortifying for a very young child; starting school and leaving one's parents is frightening enough without having to deal with a language barrier. It is crucial to note, though, that these children begin acquiring English immediately upon entering school, and are typically able to speak and understand perfectly within a few months, provided that they are young enough.

### *3.1.2. Fitting in*

The second concern that young Armenians have with learning the Armenian language is that it will prevent them from fitting in with their peers. Children want to be as “normal” as possible, and language plays a central role in establishing normalcy. Not only does a child have to speak the same language as his peers; he also must master the particular intonations, idioms, and quirks of pronunciation that distinguish the speech of his peer group from that of older kids, parents, and outsiders. Armenian children often start out in school with a disadvantage, even before we consider the language variable, because they look noticeably different from the other students—especially in non-Armenian areas such as the South or Midwest. When a child already feels singled out by his appearance, it is all the more embarrassing to be seen speaking another language, or having it spoken to him—it automatically establishes the child as “other”, rather than an integral part of his American social group.

An Armenian friend of mine notes that “while growing up in the Detroit church scene I was sneered at by my peers who were American-born but Armenian. It was seen as un-cool and sort of off-the-boat, peasant-like, to know Armenian by that age group. It was also uncool to pronounce Armenian words correctly.” This syndrome was apparently reinforced by the elders in the community: “everyone wanted to fit into that image of established, sophisticated professionals in the American world, and not let some immigrant Armenians tarnish the image of the Armenian community in the eyes of Americans”.

### *3.1.3. Practicality*

A third factor cited in favor of not learning Armenian is practicality: it is claimed that American-Armenians in the American mainstream have no practical need for Armenian. Armenian, the reasoning goes, is not useful as second language compared to Spanish or French, and it doesn’t help one in business or getting into college. Though it often seems otherwise, children are very sensitive to issues of practicality, and they pick up on the problem with Armenian at a very young age. The 8-year-old son of one of my Armenian friends, who has been trying to teach her child Armenian, recently asserted that there was no point in his knowing Armenian, since he never needed to use it.

### *3.1.4. Family*

The last general problem that arises when trying to teach one’s children Armenian involves communication. For a family to bond properly, its members need to be able to share complex ideas, humor, sarcasm, rage, hurt, and so on. If one of the parents isn’t sufficiently proficient in Armenian to express these ideas and emotions in a nuanced way, an invisible wall can grow up between the parent and the children, which can be hard to overcome. Parents of course will switch to English rather than let this happen.

## *3.2. Advantages*

Despite the drawbacks that we just catalogued, the overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey I conducted felt that it was an advantage to speak Armenian. Their reasons for this fell into five categories: the benefits of polylingualism, privacy, employment opportunities, access to Armenian culture, and preservation of Armenian culture and identity.

### 3.2.1. *Benefits of polylingualism*

The polylingual position is summed up in the well-known Armenian saying *քանի լեզու գիտես, այնքան մարդ ես kani lezu kides, aynkan mart es*, which means ‘how many languages you know is the number of men you’re worth’. There is actually some scientific truth behind this proverb: many neurolinguistic experiments suggest that even an attempt at bilingualism in early childhood has a felicitous impact on the brain, and may facilitate better general learning in children. As one survey respondent said, the perceptual and conceptual map of one language enriches that of the other. Being fluent in more than one language can also give one the confidence that comes with knowing more than the average person. And on a more fiscal note, knowing a second language can provide a bump in salary; teachers in the Los Angeles public school system for example receive a \$500 bonus if they know how to speak Armenian.

### 3.2.2. *Privacy*

Several survey participants mentioned that knowing Armenian can also give one the benefits that come with privacy: the relative obscurity of Armenians means that one can speak fairly freely in open places without concern for being overheard and understood. The need for privacy has always been very important in Armenian society, because of its traditional association with business and merchant trade. Popular legend has it that the Armenians of Agulis, who are called Zoks, developed their language Zokeren—which is entirely unintelligible to other Armenians—in order to be able to discuss business transactions with each other without the other party understanding. This sort of secrecy is actually very important to children, who are quite fond of inventing language games and secret languages of various sorts in order to hide their meaning from parents or other children. If we are to persuade our children to learn and use Armenian, we should point out this important advantage to them.

### 3.2.3. *Employment opportunities*

Knowing Armenian may also lead to job opportunities, such as tutoring recent immigrants in the Watertown school system, participating in Armenian political work such as Genocide recognition, working in Armenia, and so on. In fact, Diaspora Armenians who speak the language and work in Armenia are necessary for the mutual development, progress, and prosperity of the Armenian republic.

### 3.2.4. *Access to Armenian culture*

Perhaps most importantly, knowledge of Armenian gives one access to Armenian culture. Armenians who do not learn their ancestral tongue have little or no access to one of the cornerstones of Armenian culture, its literature, most of which has not been translated into Western languages. Many American Armenians have read Saroyan and Balakian, but these are no more than drops in the ocean of great Armenian writers: Raffi, Sundukian, Baronian, Zohrab, Eznik, and so on. Sayat-Nova, Naregatsi, Isahakian, Tekeyan, Charents, and Zahrad are even further removed from Armenians who have lost the language, due to the difficulties inherent in translating poetry from one language to another.

Armenian humor and folklore are equally hard to translate. The rhetorical and poetic effect of sayings like *դուրսը քահանայ, ներսը սատանայ tursə kahana, nersə sadana* or *շատ անուշ է, սակը փուշ է shad anush e, dagə push e* are lost in English. The English analog *every rose has its thorn* simply lacks the punch that the Armenian expression creates by rhyming the juxtaposed opposited *anush* and *push*. The rhyming pair *kahana/sadana* can be approximated by

the English words *priest* and *beast*, but *beast* lacks the religious connotations carried by *sadana*. In fact, the prosodic affinity between *kahana* and *sadana* sets up a cultural dichotomy in Armenian, where the notion of priesthood is closely associated with Satan, either as its opposite or as its shadow, depending on the context. This affinity is drawn upon in a plethora of Armenian proverbs, but is totally lacking in English culture and therefore is never truly translatable.

On the more practical side, without the Armenian language there is little or no common ground on which Armenians from different countries can interact. A Soviet Armenian who has grown up in Moscow and learned only Russian, for example, cannot interact with a Parisian Armenian who knows only French. Without this interaction, the Armenian people disintegrates into a random assortment of isolated diasporas. Knowing Armenian, on the other hand, brings people closer to their community and makes them feel more connected; if one is even peripherally involved in the Armenian community, speaking the language provides a credential proving membership and authenticity.

One can also communicate with the large number of people who know Armenian but not English; this can help reduce the culture gap with one's elders, and relieve the problems stemming from children not understanding the cultural tendencies of their families. Finally—and this is a point that again we should stress to our children—speaking Armenian spares a person the humiliation that he is sure to suffer at the hands of Armenians who will ridicule and reprimand him for not knowing the language.

### *3.2.5. Survival of Armenian culture and ethnicity*

The last general advantage of learning to speak Armenian is that it can play a role in preserving Armenian culture and ethnicity. The survival of Armenian culture and identity is closely linked to the survival of the Armenian language. The language plays a central role in delineating Armenian national identity, as distinct from the identities of the nations among which Armenians are now required to live. There is a tendency among American-Armenians who speak only English, for example, to consider themselves Americans rather than Armenians, and to reject their Armenian heritage entirely. If the language is not passed on from generation to generation, total assimilation is sure to follow. Without the language, the culture and the nation eventually die.

## **4. The Solution(?)**

If we accept the arguments just given in favor of learning Armenian, we must then come up with some way of addressing the arguments against it that we enumerated earlier, which seem to be responsible at least in part for the fact that American-born Armenians generally do not learn the language. The problem is that the same patterns of language shift show up again and again, be it with Armenians in America, Turks in Holland, Swedes in Finland, Koreans in Japan, or Ubykhs in Turkey. This suggests that the attitudes and conditions driving language shift are universal, and therefore will be extremely difficult to change. Nevertheless we must attempt to identify these attitudes if we are to begin to remedy them.

The leading expert on language maintenance, Joshua Fishman of Yeshiva University, believes that language shift is driven by socio-economic factors. In his view, knowledge of language is linguistic capital, traded on the linguistic market. The vast majority if any speech community comes to speak (read, write) in the way it does—monolingually or bilingually—because of its long and intricate involvement in reward systems requiring such speech. The rewards in question are social rewards (enforcing and recognizing membership in the family,

community, or society); fiscal rewards (jobs, promotions, raises, bonuses); political rewards (election, appointment, public acclaim); religious rewards; and so on. By which rewards do the Armenian community and American society motivate its minority members to stay bilingual or shift to the majority language?

Clearly Anglo-American society provides all sorts of incentives for Armenian children to learn English, and even to avoid learning Armenian. Changing American society is too large a task, though, so we should concentrate on what can be done within the Armenian community.

#### *4.1. Sources of Maintenance*

There are three logical sources of influence in the Armenian community: the family, the school, and the church.

##### *4.1.1. The Family*

The family is the key to the survival of Armenian in the United States. The first hurdle is obviously convincing the parents to speak exclusively in Armenian with their children. This crucially must start at an early age, when children are able to learn several languages with no effort and no schooling. Each year that we postpone exposing our children to Armenian makes it significantly harder for them to learn the language, and no amount of schooling will be able to fix this.

We have already seen that when parents speak only Armenian, their children are sure to be proficient in Armenian by the time they begin schooling. This is when the real challenge begins, as the children's socialization leads them down the slippery slope to English monolingualism. From this point on it is essential to provide the children with constant exposure to the language and encouragement to speak it; if the children are not required to speak Armenian at home, they almost surely will not, and they will then soon forget any Armenian they knew before they went off to school.

Even if the parents only speak Armenian at home, though, it can be difficult to prevent the children from speaking English at home once they begin school. The challenge therefore is to create an environment conducive to speaking Armenian. A study of Turks in Holland by Huls and van de Mond showed that children speak Turkish more with their parents than with their siblings, and when playing Turkish games, having arguments, or dealing with crises. Conversely, they used Dutch more when speaking with each other or watching TV. Assuming that the dynamics are the same for Armenian families in the United States, this suggests that parents should minimize their children's TV time, play (Armenian) games with them, and be around them as much as possible, thereby minimizing the amount of time in which they can speak English to each other.

##### *4.1.2. The School*

Following these steps can go a long way toward maintaining bilingualism in one's children. Unfortunately this is not always enough in the United States; we therefore must rely to some degree on the schools. Many Armenians believe that the only way to teach children Armenian "properly" is in school, but this is utterly false. Fishman observes that nowhere in the world have major programs of language maintenance succeeded if their major bet was on the school rather than on other, more primary social processes. Thus, Hebrew, Greek, Armenian, Ukrainian, and Chinese schools generally fail to maintain their languages, whereas the Pennsylvania Germans

and Hasidic Jews succeed, because the latter communities regulate the domain and degree of interaction with Anglo-America.

Sadly, the education that Armenian schools provide commonly fosters the indigenization of participatory ethnicity, i.e. the stabilization of particularly American ways of being ethnic, much more than they foster language maintenance. Attending an Armenian school may well be an almost obligatory second-generation ethnic experience in the United States, whereas learning to speak, read, and write the mother tongue with facility at such schools is clearly the exception rather than the rule. The problem is that most Armenian schools moderate and modulate ethnic uniqueness at the same time that they channel Americanness via the Armenian community's own institutions.

However, when set up properly the schools can be extremely helpful in augmenting the Armenian used in the home. The Manoogian school in Southfield, MI is claimed to be quite successful at this, having produced 50 fluent speakers out of 100 American-born graduates between 1978 and 1991. The Pilibos, Dickranian, and Merdinian schools in Hollywood and Glendale are said to have similar success. In order for the school to have any effect on children's language abilities, they crucially must provide a speaking immersion experience, rather than teaching Armenian grammar one hour a day or week, which seems to be the preferred option in many Armenian churches and schools.

What we really need is at least one Armenian magnet school, which provides more incentive for Armenians to send their children there than just the fact that Armenian is taught. The school must provide an immersion experience—i.e. the students must be required to speak in and listen to Armenian for a significant percentage of each day—and the facilities, location, faculty, and reputation must be competitive with the best conventional public and private schools in the area. To facilitate the recruitment of good teachers, fellowships should be created for promising college graduates who are proficient in Armenian hone their teaching skills at the best graduate schools.

With a system like this in place, the Armenian school will have its role to play in the overall scheme for maintaining the Armenian language. But it will do so by serving a vibrant and purposeful community—a community which uses Armenian in the home and possesses a modicum of economic, political, and religious power of its own—rather than by being called upon to do the impossible—save the community from itself.

#### *4.1.3. The Church*

The last source for language maintenance is the Armenian church. Unfortunately, if the church seeks to serve individuals in the community who have no mastery of Armenian, it must become bilingual to some degree. Thus it has happened that even church programs originally established for language maintenance purposes ultimately contribute to the broadening of children's experiences and to the extension of their interactions with the world of English and its speakers, behaviors, values, skills, understandings, beliefs, and attitudes.

But this is not necessarily the beginning of the end. Bilingual schools and bilingual churches, if carefully related to compartmentalized home and community arrangements of the sort outlined earlier, can be fully consistent with language maintenance, as they are in the Amish and Hasidic cases. However, such arrangements require constant vigilance, because their underlying dynamics lead their constituencies ever so easily and ever so naturally to the world of English. Thus, even the first networks beyond the immediate home and community pose potential problems for the maintenance of Armenian in the U.S. Unless controlled by home and

community authorities so that sociolinguistic compartmentalization is reinforced rather than counteracted, these institutions can seriously weaken rather than foster language maintenance because of their own links to primary institutions in the English language.

To conclude, the Armenian language is severely endangered in New England and in the United States as a whole. If we are to prevent it from disappearing, we must fundamentally realign our attitudes about the language itself, and how it is learned and maintained. Of central importance is the fact that Armenian can only be learned properly in the home; schooling can reinforce parental input, but not replace it. Armenian-speaking parents must make a commitment to speaking Armenian to their children at all times, even after they have learned the language; if they let their children start speaking English, the battle is lost.

As Vahan Tekeyan has written, the Armenian language is like an orchard, and its words are the fruits; let us eat these fruits while we can and plant their seeds, so that new trees can grow to protect the orchard when the violent winds of the English language gust all around, felling every orchard in sight.