A VERSATILE LANGUAGE IS ONE KEY TO SURVIVAL

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A response to the Keghart.com editorial, "Language Pollution Persists", published on 18 November, 2015

Nareg Seferian, Yerevan, 19 November 2015

Living languages are organic entities. They express meaning for the speaker and communicate that meaning to the interlocutor. As long as a language can fulfill that function, it is used.

Languages also tend to change over time. This is a mark of the vitality of a language. It so happened in modern times that many languages of Europe began to look to their native ways of communicating, rather than sticking, for example, to the ancient Latin, because Latin was no longer useful.

This is a natural phenomenon, and it is how we got, among many others, French and Spanish – although this "French" happened to be the dialect of Paris, where the royal court was located, and likewise the "Spanish" we know is specifically the dialect of Castile, the region around Madrid. "A language is a dialect with an army," a certain saying goes.

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Something similar occurred with the Armenian language as well, but without any armies. The Armenians of the Russian Empire, in particular led by Khachatour Abovian, did away with the church-dominated education that emphasised the Classical Armenian language. Eastern Armenian as a literary language thus got its start in the 1840s after Abovian's novel *Verk Hayastani* ("Wounds of Armenia") was published. Similarly, the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire – educated individuals in Constantinople and elsewhere – developed their own dialect into what we now call Western Armenian. Both versions of Armenian spread through active school systems over the course of the generations that followed.

Armenian does not have a standard governing body, at least not one that has sway over the entire language, whether in the Republic or in the Diaspora. Anyway, it is strange to think of a living, organic entity being dictated terms on how to develop. Languages do not work that way. When people who speak Armenian mix in words from Russian or Turkish, or French or Arabic, or English or Persian, this is a rather natural occurrence. No government official can tell them not to do so.

As such, the forced censorship of any language in order to "purify" it is highly problematic. What is a "pure" language, anyway? There really is no such thing. Armenian would certainly not qualify even if there were. Thousands of Armenian words in fact stem from old Persian vocabulary or ancient Semitic roots. It is a testament to the Armenian language's activity and the history and geography of the Armenian people that a language could have words in use for centuries that come from both the classical, stereotypical West (*baron*, for example, or *megheti*) and the classical, stereotypical East (*ishkhan, yerajishd*). Isn't it wonderful that the Armenian word for money arises from and shares similar words with other languages in the Mediterranean and the Middle East? A merchant does not distinguish between making some *tram* or some *drachme* or some *dirham*. Once again, this is linguistic wealth that showcases the versatility of the Armenian people and the Armenian language.

There is nothing impure going on here at all. It is the natural give-and-take of any living language – as opposed to a language set in stone that does not like change in grammar and vocabulary, doomed to fall out of use (Latin, Ancient Greek, Sanskrit… Classical Armenian).

The only reason that speakers of modern Armenian are able to point out to so-called impurities in the language is by identifying words from other languages they happen to know at the time. It just so happens in this historical moment that there is an awareness of Russian or Turkish among many speakers of Armenian. So when words from those languages are used in Armenian, a listener might be able to immediately identify them. But I can assure all Armenian speakers that they are using foreign words all the time, whether they identify those foreign words or not. And, indeed, it also happens that foreigners might use words from Armenian in their own languages, whether they realise it or not. Again, this is a completely natural phenomenon.

I find the use of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or other vocabulary in the works of Sayat Nova, Nahapet Kouchak, and a host of others to be absolutely charming, to be a mark of the Armenian people's openness towards other cultures, and, quite frankly, to the richness of the Armenian language. This has been a mechanism of survival of the Armenian identity throughout its history and its many geographies. I wouldn't want it any other way. A versatile language should be celebrated.

One could also say that Grigor Narekatsi's exceptional use of Classical Armenian – his creation of new words, his powerful poetic style – elevated the Armenian language in a way that might not have needed foreign words. But that is likewise a mark of versatility of the Armenian language. Both capacities of the Armenian language should be admired. Why limit what the language can do?

And for those who may still doubt the organic, ever-developing nature of the Armenian

language, I would suggest having a look at the first page of Khachatour Abovian's *Wounds of Armenia* – Click on Վերք Հայաստանի

How clear is this Eastern Armenian for the modern reader today? Eastern Armenian, it turns out, has itself developed over the past two centuries. As has Western Armenian. As they should.

And, by the way, how many words of Persian and Turkish origin can the reader point out in that text by Abovian? Not just one or two.

The Armenian language is indeed one element of the Armenian identity, a significant one. And, just like the Armenian identity, it is constantly changing. That's the way languages and identities survive.

Nareg Seferian's published writings are available at naregseferian.com.