THE PETITION AND MIXED READERSHIP RESPONSE

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Karen Mkrtchyan, Editorial, Yerevan, 30 May 2020

Concerned in the future of the Armenian language, a group recently launched a petition regarding the alarmingly excessive use of foreign words and phrases. Its message was addressed primarily to the Armenian authorities. It recommended the use of alien imports be minimized and even be removed from official communications. Keghart.org distributed the petition so as to involve people from various countries and walks of life for a wide representation.

Use of foreign words and phrases has crossed all acceptable boundaries. There does not seem to be any government office or a public servant who does not "contribute" to the violation of our language. From banks to the public notary offices, from the local self-governing bodies to members of parliament, from ministers to even the prime minister all resort to the blatant use of foreign terminology. The media, which has the largest audience, is the biggest "contributor" to the trend. What is even more outrageous is that these foreign terms are being "Armenianised" and made to seem harmless.

The petition got mixed responses. Congratulations, notes of gratitude and agreements came pouring in from various subscribers. Many in the diaspora and in Armenia shared the concerns and endorsed the petition. Most did not oppose the petition in toto or its spirit and some had reservations about particular points.

A reader, acknowledging that the initiative is encouraging, objected to the use of "garbage" in the following sentence, *"Armenian speakers" and "Armenian writers" have turned our mother tongue into garbage bin, making it incomprehensible."* Her concern was that it might be a case of "washing one's dirty linen in public" since the petition was translated into several foreign languages and would be read by non-Armenians as well. We believe the intentions of the initiators of the petition will not be misunderstood, nonetheless the feedback is taken in good spirit. Sometimes such 'hard-hitting' terminology is what's required.

To illustrate reference is made to Alexander Topchyan's thought-provoking piece "ԻՆՉԵՐԵ՞Ն ԵՆՔ… ԼՍՈՒՄ". He describes an incident that took place in Canada in 1960. A French-speaking priest, livid that American-English had infested the French language and turned into what René Étiemble described as "Frenglish," called for drastic measures. "The axe should be invoked," he had opined, indicating that people should fear for their lives at the thought of violating their mother tongue. He suggested the following measures:

1. Establish total control over radio and television. Prohibit speaking in the 'street language' using death threats to ensure it is followed.
2. Police should destroy all English or vulgar outdoor signs overnight.
3. Give the right, following a two-year window, to kill on the spot all officials, ministers, teachers, and priests who speak English.

This, according to the priest, would have ensured the salvation of the French language. As Topchyan remarked: "the knife must have reached the bone" for a servant of God to demand such cruel measures for the protection of his mother tongue.

Another Keghart subscriber states, *"I've a couple of English-Armenian-English dictionaries from Armenia. They are pretty good, but even in them when looking up English words to find the Armenian translation, English words are included as being Armenian."* Who would have thought that the day would come when Armenian words would be replaced with English ones in the dictionaries published in Armenia?

A similar incident was narrated by another Keghart subscriber. He said he was surprised to see people in Armenia are so adapted to foreign terminology that they genuinely believe them to be Armenian. *"I was discussing our languages with two of my friends from Armenia and we came to my much-hated word "congret" (as pronounced in Eastern Armenian)-- "concrete" in English. They said 'congret' (i.e. "concrete") was an Armenian word! I vehemently argued that it was not."*

To some the call for strict measures was unacceptable.

One reader saw a problem with the following call addressed to the authorities. "Reject and ignore in state offices all communications in Latin or Cyrillic (Russian) alphabet sent on-line by citizens of Armenia." Another reader responded to this call by "*This will stifle often people who cannot communicate otherwise," C*iting examples whereby many people had not received a response to their letters addressed to concerned organizations, a reader said this would further encourage the "culture" of ignoring citizens' letters.

While it is true that many people find it easier to type using Latin or Cyrillic keyboard, the petition concerns itself with what is right, rather than what is more comfortable. When it comes to the preservation of one's mother tongue, comfort is not a priority. If they do not know Armenian well enough, they should write their letters and applications in another language but certainly not in Armenian using other fonts. Nevertheless, the reader had constructive suggestions for the preservation of the language.

Dr. Harutyun Marutyan, director of Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, points that in almost all non-ghettoized diasporan communities, the third- and fourth-generation tend to be less fluent in their mother tongue. Marutyan suggests innovative measures to be implemented, such as competitions, awards, grants of full or partial scholarships in prestigious educational institutions, fully- or partially-funded trips to Armenia, including Western Armenia for those who display proficiency in the Armenian language. Language aptitude tests along the lines of TOEFL can also be organized. These, of course, are measures that can be implemented in the diaspora as well as in Armenia.

Some 5,000 emails were sent containing the link to the petition. As of May 29, 2,882 individuals had opened the message. 532 endorsements were obtained, including the 26 signatures of the initiators.

These endorsements represent only 18.45% of the people who viewed their emails and 10.64% of the total sent. The lowest readership was among Armenian parliamentarians and high-ranking bureaucrats from the offices of the President and the Prime Minister. However, one parliamentarian requested that further detail be provided to the house. Considering the seriousness of the situation and the hard work that went into it, the yield is low. Perhaps other avenues should be explored to make sure the message reaches as many people as possible and, more importantly, the authorities in Armenia.

The issue raised in the petition is a serious one and needs the immediate attention of the concerned authorities. It is not surprising, then, that a subscriber starts his email sent to Keghart with the following worrying information, "Four or five years ago while in Armenia, I viewed a TV show in which a linguist indicated that if the current rate of replacing Armenian words with English words continues, in 100 years 90% of the Armenian vocabulary will be English

If this does not come as a wake-up call for us, perhaps nothing will.

There are no comments yet.