OF “MODERN” ARMENIAN

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Vahe Apelian, 10 December 2015

Recently a young repatriated mother from Aleppo noted in Facebook that her Grade II son's homework included composing sentences one of which had to include “excursia” (էքսգուրսիա), that is to say excursion. I understood the word because I know English. I doubt that I would have understood the word in my formative years. We have a beautiful Armenian complex word for it made up of Armenian root words. In all likelihood the teacher knew that word but it is doubtful that her choice of word was her own. The curriculum was surely approved and presented to the public schools by the ministry of education and hence proliferation of such words.

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One of the gurus for productive communication in the work place, Stephen R. Covey, says, first understand to be understood. Those of us in the Diaspora who are concerned in the course of the Armenian language in Armenia need to understand the motives for such draconian measures by the ministry of education. Surely, this course is the product of a prevailing mentality that eludes us.

What are the motives?

1. It could be that the prevailing mentality is that the Armenian language is regarded as evolving to keep pace with scientific and social progress. Let us remember that there is a tendency in Armenia to refer to the Armenian in use in Armenia as Modern Armenian (Arti Hayeren). For Diasporans the terminology may sound strange and akin to addressing English as Modern English in relation to the English spoken not long ago.

2. It could be that Eastern Armenians regard Western Armenian a backward language. It is commonplace in Armenia to refer to Western Armenia as Turkahayastan (Turkish Armenia) and Diaspora Armenians as Turkahayer (Turkish-Armenians). Two years ago, the master of ceremony at the Armenian Fund gathering, addressed a Diasporan as Turkahay. We have Turkish-Armenians (Turkahayer) as we have Lebanese-Armenians (Lepanahayer), but he meant to address Western Armenians. Annoyed by his repeated use of the adjective, I sent an email asking the officials of the Armenia Fund to use Spurkahye instead.

3. It may also be that the rampant use of such words may be a backlash to a Diaspora that is critical

of their spelling, thus signaling that not only they will not change the Apeghian spelling but that they are taking a step further to usher the language into "modernization" with the inclusion of such words, hence the Modern Armenian (Arti Hayeren).

This interference in the natural evolution of the language is most likely the unintended outcome of the Apeghian spelling. He set the precedent for interfering in the natural evolution of the language. I believe had Prof. Manoug Apeghian been alive he would have been aghast at the proliferation of such words.

I know Prof. Apeghian through his association with Eastern Armenian spelling and thus my mental picture of him envisions a committed communist. Recently I came across a photograph where he was seated at a table with a venerable Mekhitarist fathers along with the quintessential Armenian nationalist Karegin Njdeh. The photo was taken in the mid-'30s. It would not surprise me if charismatic Njdeh had just returned from his tour of the United States where he had been instrumental in founding the Armenian Youth Federation (A.Y.F.) as a nationalist organization. To this day the AYF calls its branches not chapters but as *Oukht* (Ուխտ) or solemn vow. The photograph was revealing: Two prominent Armenians, who were at the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum and who have left enduring legacies, were partaking at the same table. Surely Prof. Apeghian was cognizant of the immense historic task thrust upon him.

I referrred to the photograph because I have come to conclude that it is time the Diaspora waved the white flag and conceded by not only accepting the Eastern Armenian spelling but also embracing it. I say this even though it would have been more desirable for all Armenians to have read Bedros Tourian or the literary works of the other Western Armenian writers who brought the Armenian literature to its pinnacle in the Mesrobian spelling that has evolved through the centuries.

Should we concede to the Apeghian spelling we may find common ground with educators in Armenia and come to an understanding so as to cleans our language off foreign words. If we remain adamant on “waging” war, we may lose on both fronts to the detriment of our language.