

The text below, written by Ani Garmiryan, was presented as the opening statement of the conference “Innovation in Education: Challenges in Teaching Western Armenian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” the Armenian Communities Department organised in Paris, in partnership with INALCO, on 21-22 September 2015. The paper addresses the core problem Western Armenian faces: transmitting the language from one generation to the next, as a living “everyday” language. It is inspired both by the realities of our diasporan existence – including the challenges Armenian faces as a second language – and by innovative pedagogical approaches used in other successful language acquisition initiatives. It is a call for Armenian institutions and education professionals in the diaspora to take charge of the difficult condition the language finds itself in, instead of relying on some external authority to ameliorate the situation. Ani Garmiryan’s text solidifies the philosophical foundation of our work on educational reform, and of our approach to the teaching/learning of Western Armenian. Western Armenian will succeed only if it is nurtured and advanced in a decentralised manner, where local needs are met by solutions inspired by local realities. Our focus therefore is on transmitting the language, ensuring that it is a real, used (and why not “abused”), “breathing” language and not a set of ossified rules, driven by concerns of “purity,” “unity” or grammatical perfection. In short, we want Western Armenian to be the daily language of many young Armenians in the diaspora, through which they can live and create (along with other languages they master), and not a language to be treated as a relic, however beautiful, to deal with the past. After all, languages survive and develop when new generations speak, read, write and produce in it – and Western Armenian, be it in the diaspora or in Armenia, is no different.

Razmik Panossian, Director

## **TABULA RASA:**

### **RETHINKING THE FUNDAMENTALS**

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We are gathered with the aim of imagining a new educational model *for* the Western Armenian language and *in* the Western Armenian language. We are situated in this space called the Diaspora, which for a century now has been lamented by many as just too unfavorable for the propagation and the preservation of a language that has no soil, no state, and no borders of its own. This lament has plunged us into what we think is an existential crisis. In other words, we are in a state of paralysis because we imagine that the Armenian Diaspora is collectively facing an existential crisis. And so much of that crisis comes from our experiences and perceptions of the education system.

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Our children attend Armenian all-day and Saturday schools, and yet we don't see any benefit from this attendance — a benefit in terms of speaking Armenian, in terms of being culturally creative, in terms of constituting an active readership. What is clear is that the educational models that have been practiced have become tragically obsolete. The reason is that we imported to the Western Diaspora the very same models that were used in the decades following 1915 in the Middle East. Those models are bankrupt today. This situation calls for the creation, elaboration, and implementation of a new and empowering educational model.

That is of course why we are gathered in Paris this week, and I want to use this presentation to begin our collective reflection on the nature of the turning point we have reached and to start a conversation on what it means to call for a new educational model.

What it means is that we, educators and teachers of the Armenian language, must revisit all of our assumptions, and we must initiate a thorough re-evaluation of our educational practices. The pedagogic enterprise is too often seen as a straightforward task of handing over some prepackaged knowledge to students, as though they were empty vessels waiting to be passively filled with information by enlightened instructors. I believe that this premise is particularly misguided when it comes to teaching languages in a diasporic situation. This is why we need to be teachers who want to redefine the fundamental commitments of the profession to which we are dedicated. We have to know how to clear away the past (in French the expression would be "faire table rase du passé") when its traditions are inefficient, based on prejudices, and not adapted to the needs, potentials and capabilities of children.

As early as in 1912, more than a century ago, Father Komitas was voicing quite a similar call during a lecture he delivered in front of the teachers of the Esayan School in Istanbul. I quote him first in Armenian:

Մենք մանուկներու հոգեկան պահանջներուն յարմարցուած դասագիրքեր չունինք, մեր դասագիրքերը լեցուն են փիլիսոփայական, բայց ոչ նիշդ մանկական նիւթերով: [...] Անոնց որ տակաւին կեանքի հասկացողութիւնը չունին, դուք տուած էք կեանքի փիլիսոփայութեան դասեր: Ասիկա՝ իր մտաւոր ստամոքսը չի կրնար մարսել. ծուռ, ծո՛ւռ դաստիարակութիւն է: Իսկական վարժապետներ չկան: Եթէ մանուկը չի հասկնար ձեր դասաւանդութիւնը, յանցանքը ձերն է, որովհետեւ չէք կրցած հասկնալ անոր հոգին. պէտք է վար

իջնել մինչեւ անոր հոգեկան աստիճանը [...]:<sup>1</sup>

We don't have textbooks adapted to the needs of the children. Our textbooks are full of moral lessons, and not of age appropriate topics. [...] To those children who don't yet have sufficient life experiences, you teach morality. Their intellect won't digest it. This is misguided, misguided teaching. If the child doesn't understand what you are teaching, it is your fault, you have been unable to understand their soul. You have to level yourself with the child [...]

In this warning we hear a pedagogical principle. The same principle inspired me to found the bilingual workshop *Mgnig* in Paris, and it guided me during my years as the principal of the Hovnanian School in New Jersey. It is important to look at the world from the children's perspective, as though from their own eyes; to respect them and their perceptions of the world; to learn from them and listen to them. Of course, these principles are valid for learners of all ages. But while young adults can defend themselves when things are done inappropriately, children cannot. They are more vulnerable. Moreover, their unbiased readiness to acquire a new language is an ideal guide for adults, if only they are open to see it. That is why looking at the process from the children's perspective is the best attitude for language teachers to adopt. It is the child's desire that should guide us. Hence the immense responsibility of the teachers to avoid any teaching *ex cathedra*.

Before elaborating on this idea in more detail, I want to take a little historical detour to note that in prior centuries the Armenian language was in a situation that was in some ways not unlike the one it is in today. In the 18th century, at a time in which the notion of public education had yet to emerge and the Armenian population in provinces and cities was largely illiterate, the Abbot Mekhitar taught the vernacular language, *ashkharabar* — the future Western Armenian — to students who had traveled to Venice and who often only spoke Turkish. It was for such students that he composed the very first Grammar of Western Armenian, in 1727. It was only a century later that the spoken language, *ashkharabar*, became the language of instruction in schools and consequently also the language of communication and culture for the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Even then, it was only after 1920 that the Armenians of the Middle East became a community that mainly spoke Armenian. That was far from being the case for the majority of survivors in the

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<sup>1</sup> Father Komitas's lecture is easily accessible in its original language for example in the Literary Supplement of the newspaper *Haratch*, issue 204, 7 May 1995. The title is “Պարն ու մանուկը” [Dancing and the Child]. It was published for the first time in 1928, in Theodik's *Ամէնուն տարեցոյցը* [Yearbook for all], p. 478-484, then in the collection *Զօրութեան եւ ուսումնասիրութիւններ* [Articles and Essays], Yerevan, 1941, p. 63-67.

deserts of Mesopotamia.

Then what is the difference between the linguistic situation then and the linguistic situation now, between that of the Middle East and that of contemporary Western countries?

My view is that there is an important difference in these situations, and it is as follows: in the situations I described the Armenian language was a tool with which children discovered the world that surrounded them. In other words, it was not just a window into the Armenian world, narrowly defined. It was one of the windows — even if not an exclusive one — with which they experienced, talked about, discussed their surroundings and their activities. What the practice of teaching Armenian has lost is the commitment to making it a language of discovery, a language with which to discover other things than the language itself.

This is what I believe needs to be reinvented.

On this point, the difference between educational practices in the Middle East (today those of Istanbul and Beirut in particular) and educational practices in Armenian communities in Europe and North America are minimal. In all these communities it is this same opening that needs to be re-imagined and re-invented.

We need to re-imagine and re-invent an approach to teaching the Armenian language in which children are empowered to open themselves to the world — the one and only world that we share, not just the part of the world that has to do with being Armenian — in two different languages. What this calls for is cultivating two languages for one single world.<sup>2</sup> The case is the same in situations where more than two languages are involved.

Little in the educational and pedagogical work of prior generations of Armenian educators has prepared us to confront this specific moment we are in: neither Abovian's work in the nineteenth century, nor Zabel Assadour's textbooks at the turn of the 20th century, not even Levon Shant's detailed pedagogical writings in the thirties, when he was the principal of the Djémaran in Beirut, nor finally Haroutiun Hintlian's modernist approach with the New School, *Nor Tbrots*, that he established in Istanbul. This is the challenge that we have to address, for the first time, in the Diaspora. This is why we have to begin by reevaluating everything we have done up to now regarding education.

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<sup>2</sup> I refer the reader to my essay entitled “Երկու լեզու, մեկ աշխարհ” [Two languages, one single world], published in the same issue of the Literary Supplement of the journal *Haratch*, 7 mai 1995.

This calls for some explanation. The prior experiences I am describing have been weighing heavily on our shoulders, and it is important that we find ways to overcome them. Paradoxically, it is necessary to go way back to Abbot Mekhitar's epoch in order to find a situation where a genuine exchange was achieved between Armenian and the Western languages, in the case of the Mekhitarists, Italian, Latin, and later French.

It was an understandable defense mechanism for the first generation in the Armenian communities of the Middle East to curl up on themselves, helping to constitute Armenian-speaking bastions. But that dynamic also had problematic effects when it came to the status of the Armenian language. These bastions did not necessarily become part of a wider world, and therefore did not engage in practices of exchange with and enrichment of others.

There was no student-centered pedagogy, no age-appropriate literature for children and teen-agers — an absolutely crucial point that I will repeat later — there was no production and transmission of an abstract vocabulary, there was no transmission of concepts, and no tools for critical thinking with which to measure up to the world in its entirety.

This situation constituted a constrained policy — perhaps we can go so far as to call it an ideology — of language transmission for generations of principals and language teachers. This policy or ideology even bore a name. It was called հայապահպանում, "preservation of Armenity." If there is one thing we must sweep away today, it is this ideology of conservation. It needs to be replaced by creation and production.

Let me remind you of something Haroutiun Kurkjian wrote half a century ago already:

... Ստեղծել հայութեան նոր որակ. որակ՝ որ միայն աւանդութեան ու նոր պայմաններու կրկնակ տիրապետումէն կը ծնի: Ստեղծել, եւ ո՛չ թէ պահպանել. ստեղծումը արդէն կը պահպանէ. իսկ պահպանումը... բա՛ն մըն ալ չի պահպաներ պահպանումը. ո՛չ իսկ ինքզինք:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Haroutiun Kurkjian, *Փորձ տարա-գրութեան մասին, Essai sur l'exil*, Collection Diaspora arménienne (bilingual edition), Paris, 1978, p. 129. These lines come from an essay called “Երկրորդ

... To create a new quality of Armenity, a quality which will only take birth from the double mastery of tradition and of our new predicament to create, and not to preserve. Creation is preservation anyway. As to preservation... preservation does not preserve anything, not even itself.

This is from an essay published in 1968. Later in the same essay, Haroutiun Kurkjian wrote the following about the boys and girls in the Diaspora who have lost the ability to master their own destiny:

... Խուճապահար, ինքնանպատակ պահպանումի գաղափարաբանութեան մը ծնունդներն էին այս աղջիկները, այս տղաքը: Իրենց ծնունդէն տարիներ, տարիշներ առաջ, վնոռած էր արդէն, աներեւակայելի, անըմբռնելի ճակատագրապաշտութեամբ մը, որ անոնք “պիտի ըլլան օտար, մտածումով եւ գործով”:<sup>4</sup>

These girls and these boys were the products of a panic-fuelled and self-centered ideology of preservation. Years before they were even born, it had been decided, under the influence of an incredible, incomprehensible fate, that they would assimilate, "with their thoughts and with their works."

Half a century has passed since Kurkjian wrote these lines, and little has changed. In many places the idea that is followed is that we must transmit to our children a traditional package — part-history, part-religion and culture, part-language. This is an "Armenity survival kit," which will allow students to be good Armenians with only the barest minimum. This is a survival kit that is imposed on students, here again placed in the role of passive recipients. What is crucial here is that the role of language is gradually diluted, while its role as a vector of creativity is completely deleted.

My own experience was not better than the one of these girls and boys described by Kurkjian in 1968. I grew up in Istanbul, I attended an Armenian school. I remember the boredom, the sadness and the fear, the yelling and the slapping, the scary hallways. So much violence in the name of education. How could I learn anything when my classmates were punished for minor misbehaviors, when those who were in need of special education were treated at best with indifference, at worst with outright hostility and ridicule, when our capacity to discover the world was suppressed from the start? And all this took place in Armenian.

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հաւասարում բազմաթիւ անյայտներով” [Second equation with several unknowns], first published in the literary journal *Ahegan*, Beirut, Fall 1968.

<sup>4</sup> *Essai sur l'exil*, p. 131.

Here then is the first challenge. It is the necessity of distancing ourselves from this past which knew only how to antagonize the children because it was committed to a model of education based on preserving a language and transmitting it to students *as is*, as though language were something that must not change, as though we should *guard* it from evolving.

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The second challenge is very much related to the first: it concerns the fact that language has become a sacralized object in the Diaspora. The reason I say this is that this sacralization represents the deadened facet of our relationship with language. It puts language on a pedestal and transforms it into something unattainable. In the end this mentality hopes to prove that we have access to no viable synthesis between tradition and modernity, that we will never become the owners and the creators of our own language, here and now, in the Diaspora, that the language will never belong to those who are supposed to communicate *in* this language and *with* this language. In order to counter this sacralization, we need to test the ground by walking on it: we need to practice a *successful* bilingual education and desacralize the language by making it breathe.

Let me set out some of the principles that should guide such an education. On a theoretical level, the main principle lies in the necessity of creating conditions conducive to the acquisition of Armenian as a second language by setting up a natural environment for it, ideally not just within the confined space of a school. Can a language in the Diaspora have a natural environment? The challenge is to artificially create such a *natural* environment, to design it *in vitro*. While this sounds like a paradox, it is not, for the following essential reason: to be *ours*, a language can only be *acquired*. We cannot teach a language (Armenian in our case), we can only facilitate its acquisition. We can set up a context, we can make things possible. We can only be facilitators, I would say *non-teachers* (չուսուցիչներ). It is difficult to admit that this is how things work, that in order to become facilitators we need to give up on our power — to stop sacralizing the language, wielding it as an instrument of power — and reconsider our role. One more time, to be non-teachers (բլլալ չուսուցիչներ), we must melt into a group that we do not control, we must share mutual experiences with the learners. This is why facilitating language acquisition is an instruction in democracy; and children are the citizens of this democracy. Let us empower them lest they feel subjected to their teachers, antagonized by the learning process, and ultimately alienated from Armenian.

We can translate these principles into practical rules. The first rule is respect. It is the obligation to respect the children and teen-agers, to see the world through their

gaze and accept that we have to learn from them, and not necessarily the other way around. The goal cannot be to train them to show off at end-of-the-year pageants, nor can it be to teach them rules just for the pleasure of correcting their mistakes and show our superiority as the owners of the language. What we need to do instead is to devise pedagogic strategies for the children to become the heirs of a language that lives in the present time. We therefore need to make sure that they will discover their world from within that language.

All of this is to propose some agenda for us. Our task is to reflect together on how to bring about such a new state of affairs. We need to design an educational project that is centered on the child but that also demands the active involvement of a rich teaching staff. This demands new principles and concrete programs and initiatives, ones that are up to date with the pedagogic knowledge of our times and are in harmony with other activities that children are already performing with their surrounding languages.

I want to briefly lay out here two particular areas that are worthy of attention and conversation. The first avenue is the need to remedy the troubling lack of children's literature in Western Armenian. I consider this to be a real symptom of the twin problems of preservation and sacralization I have discussed. This lack of children's literature is *the* most telling sign that something is flawed in our approach. The second avenue is the rich potential of multi-age programs built around activities that integrate children of different ages so as to create a sense of community among the young people and train the adults in their role as mediators and facilitators.

Of course none of this will be done overnight — neither the creation of new programs nor their implementation. If there is one thing that I myself learnt in all these years, it's that change requires time. It's a long process. But we have reached a turning point. This is why our encounter here around these topics is so important.

I began my talk by noting that we are all the time reminded, as though we didn't already know it, that the existence of Western Armenian as a living language is threatened. And yet ours is also a moment pregnant with possibilities. For one, the Diaspora has never been as interconnected as it is today, if only because of the Internet, social media, and other state of the art technological innovations. Western Armenian can become once again the language of communication and culture that it should have never ceased to be in and across the Diaspora. Because Western Armenian more than ever is a diasporic language, it is our duty to become aware of what these changes imply and what possibilities they open up.

We should bring teachers and school principals from different communities in



contact with one another, instead of continuing to live in mostly isolated fashion. By utilizing the global connections within the Diaspora and learning from each other, we will be better positioned to broaden educational and political horizons, create collaborative school cultures, inspire literature for children of all ages and all types of readers, restart translating into Western Armenian, and prepare a new generation of teachers, principals, and school boards for tomorrow. We must imagine employment prospects for our youth in all areas of Western Armenian. We must create teaching positions for "facilitators/non-teachers." In one sentence, Armenian language acquisition must enter into the 21st century. Then perhaps our experiences will be an object of interest for the specialists of language acquisition and a model for educational innovation.

Ani Garmiryan