

Innovation in Education:

Challenges in Teaching Western Armenian in the 21st Century

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INALCO, 65 rue des Grands Moulins, 75013 Paris

Auditorium

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Armenian Communities Department) and Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO)

MONDAY 21

OPENING CEREMONY

The conference was opened first by Manuelle Franck, President of INALCO, and secondly by Martin Essayan, Trustee of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. President Franck began by underlining her great pride in the holding of this conference at INALCO, and her hope that INALCO would be enriched in its teaching and in its approach to lesser-taught languages by the exchanges that would take place at the conference. Of the 100 languages taught at INALCO, Western Armenian is not the only one that does not benefit from an official status. INALCO teaches other minority and endangered languages, and is actively interested in promoting their vitality. President Franck said that while UNESCO may consider Western Armenian an endangered language, that is not the role it has at INALCO, where it has sustained appeal for students, and where its enrollment exceeds even that of Eastern Armenian. (French)

Martin Essayan began by congratulating the organizers on the significant fact that Armenian educators had come to the conference from at least four continents. He proposed that while they all may be struggling in their efforts to maintain the vitality of Western Armenian, the preservation and advancement of which are at the center of the Foundation's five-year plan, the conference would contribute directly to formulating and fueling those efforts. Mr. Essayan acknowledged Mr. Razmik Panossian and Mrs. Ani Garmiryan for their work in building connections to and between the many different communities of the diaspora prior to the conference. He cited the universal recognition of language as an important part of cultural heritage and survival, and the focus on innovation and technology as key to the success of the future efforts of the Foundation. (English)

INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE DEBATE

Ani Garmiryan delivered the opening address, which focused on moving from frustrations to solutions in language education, from preservation of the language to creation and production in the language. She invited educators to reevaluate their teaching models, many of which are "tragically obsolete", and embrace alternatives present among Armenian thinkers and educators for centuries yet still relevant today. Rather than pre-packaging the linguistic and cultural content that is passed on to students - a practice that has diluted the role of language - Mrs. Garmiryan advocated a student-centered approach in which Western Armenian is the medium of discovery that is relevant to and appropriate for children as they develop. She urged teachers to look at the world from a child's perspective and underlined the importance of learning and inquiring alongside students, being led by their curiosity.

In calling on educators to “re-imagine and re-invent” their instructional approach, Mrs. Garmiryman cited two related challenges that they must face. The first is to “distance ourselves” from the past and let go of the idea of preserving the language in a static state. The second is to “desacralize” the language - remove it from its pedestal - so that it is more accessible, and allow it to evolve. Mrs. Garmiryman asserted that in order to ensure the survival of the language, Western Armenian must become once again a language in which children discover and discuss the world around them. And for this to occur, it is necessary to “create” a natural environment in which language is acquired and teachers facilitate that acquisition." She cited the unique role that multi-age programs can play in fostering this approach, and stressed that the creation of children’s literature in Western Armenian is central to breathing new life into the language.

Mrs. Garmiryman affirmed that the Armenian diaspora is in a unique position - in part due to the Internet, social media, and other technology - to restore Western Armenian to its rightful place as a living language of communication and creativity. (English and Armenian)

PANEL 1: LINGUISTIC VITALITY OF LANGUAGE IN FOCUS: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Hagop Gulludjian spoke about his research into the vitality of the Western Armenian language in the Los Angeles area, and how it relates to UNESCO’s criteria of endangerment. The main aspect of decline that he discussed involved the interplay between High and Low varieties of a language, and their use across domains. The High variety of a language is its standardized form, while the Low variety is its contemporary way of being spoken. Domains are areas of life where language is used, and one classic theory of language shift and revitalization holds that a minority language needs to be used in all areas of life in order to avoid being relegated to the home or private domain.

The speaker outlined two challenges for Western Armenian. The first is to teach and use the High variety of the language for prestigious and creative purposes without putting so much pressure on speakers to use Armenian “correctly” that they begin to avoid doing so for fear of making mistakes. He pointed to the use of English or other languages for written correspondence between people who would otherwise speak Armenian together across the diaspora. This phenomenon demonstrates that while the language is being taught “correctly”, the emphasis on correctness has reduced the confidence of its users.

The second challenge is to revitalize the use of Armenian across more domains of the lives of its speakers. In his research, Mr. Gulludjian found that the use of Armenian is often limited to discussions of the past or of topics directly related to heritage, while discussions of present and future realities take place in the majority language. This does not bode well for the future of the language, and it is imperative that speakers, many of whom are capable of expressing their ideas on any topic in Western Armenian, be convinced to do so.

Anke al-Bataineh presented some practical conclusions from her research on Armenian schools in the Middle East and France and proposed a school-wide shift in how language transmission is structured.

Despite their significant differences, the schools in question demonstrated nearly identical pedagogical policies and methodologies and similar approaches were identified that could benefit all of them. Namely, teaching based on Communicative Competence, focusing on the positive experience, and engaging in spontaneous, natural dialogue, would redefine the role of language in learning. Writing and the correct application of linguistic rules would continue to be taught and valued, but their importance would be subordinate to the imperative for the language to be spoken and used authentically in as many contexts as possible.

Schools taking this approach would be supporting the vitality of the language by explicitly transmitting a range of language skills and attitudes that would make it possible and likely that graduates would speak Western Armenian at home with their children. At the same time, they would be opting out of obsolete, teacher-centered education models and bypassing many of the challenges of technology, student interest and diverse demographics that are forcing the educational scene to change internationally.

Shushan Karapetian discussed her research with heritage speakers of the Armenian diaspora in the LA area. This diaspora community is exceptionally diverse and both standards of the Armenian language have relatively high vitality there. However, as generations progressively adapt to life in the United States, vernacular use of the language decreases and the symbolic value of the language in terms of identity tends to increase.

While identity is constantly being negotiated within the community, an overarching trend is that for younger generations the actual use of the language becomes less important than its historical role as part of heritage. While different members of these generations may have different narratives about the value of the language and different views of their own competence, they are very similar in their gradually more flexible definitions of Armenian identity, which often focus more on political activism and common “values” than on the ability to communicate in Armenian or even on national origin. This produces both a certain cognitive dissonance for young people, as well as a complicated question of how language teachers can approach and differentiate different heritage speakers. One essential answer is that educators must recognize competences acquired in the family, even if they are only receptive, and value the diversity of language traditions that may be inherited.

During the question session, it was noted that none of the studies presented by this panel were performed on representative samples of Armenian populations, and that *intra-community* divisions were not the focus of these studies. However, each researcher commented that they found more commonalities than differences between segments of the Armenian diaspora population, and that differences between denominations, countries of previous residence and political affiliations were more rhetorical than practical for the issues at hand. (English)

PANEL 2: ARMENIAN EDUCATION PUT TO THE TEST OF CRITICAL THINKING

Hagop Yacoubian presented his research on critical thinking that was conducted in Lebanon with teachers and principals. He interrogated the idea of “Armenian values” - a set of facts and knowledge about language, religion and history, and the ability to think critically about them - and measured the degree of reflective awareness that school personnel had about this concept and their view of their role in transmitting these values. His findings were that very few of the research participants had a deep understanding of critical thinking, and among those who did, not all saw themselves as implicated in its teaching. Others had a more superficial understanding of the concept or did not feel it was their responsibility to foster it in students.

During classroom observations, Dr. Yacoubian found that many teachers did not implement techniques for teaching a variety of critical thinking skills, and of those that did, this application was incomplete. When students were “unconvinced” of the importance of the values the teachers were trying to instill, the teachers generally resorted to indoctrination and put less value on critical thinking than on the content they wanted to transmit.

Furthermore, when participants were surveyed for suggestions on improving the cultivation of critical thinking skills among the students of Armenian schools, no suggestions were to be had. This is a powerful indicator that critical thinking is not an inherent component of heritage

transmission in the Armenian schools of Lebanon. Mr. Yacoubian noted that since Lebanon functions as a main center of the global Armenian diaspora, and since a great many of the Armenian teachers in schools outside of Lebanon grew up and were trained there, this trend is likely to apply to most Armenian schools in the diaspora. (English and Armenian)

PANEL 3: THE TEACHING OF WESTERN ARMENIAN AROUND THE WORLD: TWO STUDIES

Jasmine Dum-Tragut presented the results of her study of the Armenian school in the Old City of Jerusalem, which differs from many diaspora schools in that most of its Armenian teachers come from Armenia. In this school, English is the medium of instruction and Western Armenian is just one component of the curriculum, as are Arabic and Hebrew. Arabic is the language most often used by Armenians in the multi-lingual environment of the Old City, while the absence of regular contact with Jewish Israelis renders Hebrew a marginal language for students.

Ms. Dum-Tragut's survey identified concerns about the varying degrees of language competencies among Armenian students due to their multi-lingual upbringing and to an increase in mixed marriages with Christian Arabs. Together, these two factors present the greatest challenge to language transmission within the family.

The speaker also found that the multilingual environment was foreign to the Armenian teachers, both in their practice and in their own language competencies, which can result in linguistic barriers and misunderstandings between students and teachers. The challenge for teachers is to immerse themselves in the socio-cultural scenario of Jerusalem's languages and to encourage and enable students to use their various linguistic competencies. (English)

Pinar Karakilçik discussed the current situation of the teaching of Western Armenian in Turkish universities, where in some cases Eastern Armenian is adopted as a standard, rather than the historically and culturally more appropriate choice of Western Armenian. She noted that students sometimes find themselves subject to the whims and political dynamics of universities and government policies, and that many teachers are dissatisfied with their working conditions.

Beyond those findings, the speaker discussed the complex difficulties she encountered in attempting to gather information by way of documents and interviews about Armenian courses in these universities. In some cases, she was directly refused access to speak with personnel or to visit classes; in other cases, her attempts to contact departments were repeatedly ignored. Nevertheless, certain indications of increasing tolerance have been seen, and it appears that universities are open and proactive about their teaching of Armenian, particularly as it relates to the Western Armenian-speaking diaspora. (Turkish)

ROUND TABLE 1: THE TEACHING OF WESTERN ARMENIAN AROUND THE COMPARATIVE EXPERIENCES

This session included Sosi Hadjian, Zari Tankaranian, Nora Baroudjian, Arshaluys Sapritchian, Shaghig Hudaverdian. Each participant described some experiences that were particular to their institution and to their national context, but several common themes emerged. The first and most obvious, perhaps, is that all of these educators are working in multilingual contexts, without having school policies or language pedagogy that are adapted to such contexts. There are also factors that discourage teachers in their work, whether it be isolation in the West or pessimism about vitality in the Middle East, and these affect both the performance of current teachers and the ability to attract new talent. And while for the most part, Armenian is neither encouraged nor discouraged by the government, there can be socially- or politically-imposed limits on its

teaching.

In several contexts outside of the Middle East, both the Western and Eastern variants of Armenian are relevant to the work of schools and universities, and this requires educators and experts to at the same time value both variants and to articulate the specific role of Western Armenian and how they envision its future. Conversely, the linguistic integration of Eastern Armenian speakers in the (mainly Western Armenian) schools of the Diaspora can be a concern for contemporary diaspora pedagogy.

Other common challenges were the integration of technology into teaching and meeting the demands of technology use among young people, adapting methods to current learning needs and effective practices, and the complicated nature of the relationship between the diaspora and Armenia.

While technology has helped to update many traditional methods, like textbooks, it has not yet been used to its full potential for online learning and activities. This is a concern for native speakers and learners alike, since both groups are demanding more flexible and interactive learning opportunities. While Armenia serves important symbolic functions and may have access to more resources for publication and course creation than the diaspora, there is not necessarily a bigger audience for new technologies in language learning in Armenia than there is in the diaspora, and so it was agreed that innovation can not depend on the Republic's pace. (Armenian)

PUBLIC CONFERENCE AT THE CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION IN FRANCE

Anaïd Donabédian presented some findings from a report made last year to the Delegation Nationale de la Langue Française et des Langues de France (DGLFLF) on current uses and demographics of users of Western Armenian in France. The report was commissioned on the basis that Western Armenian is recognized by the French Government as a Langue de France, i.e., a heritage language for some French citizens, while not an official language in any other country. (This status was created in lieu of official protection for minority and regional languages, although that protection may soon replace it.)

The study was carried out as both fieldwork and online, and used both quantitative and qualitative methods, although the sample is not representative due to the lack of accurate data about the Armenian population in France. Since the study was distributed by and participated in by community organizations, churches, schools and Armenian-language press, it is understood that the participants were likely to be those most passionate about the vitality of Western Armenian. Indeed, results showed strong support for the maintenance of the language, widespread interest in obtaining at least some education in Armenian, and a high regard for the language in terms of identity.

However, results in terms of practical competence in the language were very different. Both self-assessments and observations in the schools demonstrated that although the language is highly valued and many people claim high competence in its use, the third generation of Armenians in France has an almost entirely receptive knowledge of Armenian that is usually confined to certain ritual domains. And although students may understand the language when spoken by teachers, they have limited practical applications for it.

The study showed that revitalization is seen as desirable and important by the community; however, its implementation is complicated and not yet widely realized. This means that the vitality of Western Armenian as a living language practiced by younger generations is in genuine danger in France, although the will is there to support initiatives to change this. (French)

A roundtable discussion between Hagop Gulludjian, Silva Kuyumcuyan, Hagop A. Yacoubian and Ani Garmiryan, centered on what form efforts for educational reform should take. The difficulty of engineering bottom-up vs top-down efforts, which might be easier to organize, was the first topic of discussion. Participants agreed that while many concerns for language use and competence are shared across Western Armenian-speaking communities, the most effective solutions are likely to differ across contexts, making it critical that local actors be the ones leading efforts for change. They acknowledged that grassroots efforts may seem harder to trust and may vary in their approaches and outcomes, but they seem to be an important means for charting a new path to educational and institutional reform.

On a pedagogical level, it was agreed that applying Western Armenian to the “wider world” was vital. Not only should school programs apply the language to areas and subjects unrelated to Armenian cultural heritage; the principles of high-quality education, such as creativity, innovation and critical thinking, that are applied to those other areas should be applied to the teaching of the language as well.

The importance of understanding what parents expect from the school - in terms of language acquisition and/or governance - and meeting or exceeding those expectations in order to maximize parent confidence was underscored. Also noted was the need for enrollment to be a point of awareness for schools, so that institutional capacity can reflect demand as appropriately as possible.

When institutions implement changes in order to meet the interests of the surrounding Armenian community, one important aspect is the professionalism of the teachers and school staff. The roundtable concurred that since innovative teaching requires a broad and deep understanding of child development, community dynamics, learning technologies and evolving models of language transmission, it is not enough for schools to rely on native speakers or passionate activists to be the teachers of Armenian language, history and culture, but rather they must be pro-actively trained in student-centered methods and in the priorities that are relevant for a minority, diaspora language. (Armenian)

TUESDAY 22 SEPTEMBER

KEYNOTE LECTURE: GIL SCHMERLER

Mr. Schmerler shared some lessons from his long and broad experience in building collaborative cultures in schools. He cautioned that a school culture is a complex thing to change and many factors come into play - emotional as well as practical.

While he allowed that change can be effected without the full support of staff members, Mr. Schmerler underlined the importance of working with teams of people who are interested and passionate, rather than any one person working alone. He did emphasize, however, the significant role that principals can play in creating collaborative environments in that they are in a position to design the school’s daily and evaluative structures to encourage professional development and cooperation, and to allocate the time needed for focusing on evolving themes for improvement.

In discussing the pivotal role that professional development can play in Armenian schools’ efforts to reform their instructional approaches, Mr. Schmerler stressed that it should be a means of increasing confidence and exchange rather than any form of burden or intimidation for school personnel.

The speaker further emphasized the importance of any change being made over a sufficient

period of time that it can be integrated into the culture of the school and accepted by staff at all levels. (English)

ROUND TABLE 2: RETHINKING THE ARMENIAN SCHOOL: INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND ACTIVE LEARNING PEDAGOGY

This session included Arusiak Koç, Silva Kuyumcuyan, Séta Bibérian, and Hagop A. Yacoubian and focused on the efforts and challenges involved in encouraging schools to include more active learning.

Some techniques for making learning more student-centered were choice-based activities, small-group time and learning through movement in theatre or dance. It was agreed that students should have as much voice in activities and the running of the program as is possible, and that adjusting both teaching and programming to their interests and abilities is ideal.

This student-centered approach is related to creating spaces where Armenian is a natural language choice for all interactions, without its being imposed upon students who may lack confidence in it. The creation of these spaces, however, presents a challenge for schools that offer national educational programs, as the time and formats required for such programs can deprive Armenian programs of the time and resources they need in order to become more flexible and interactive.

Adding to this dilemma are parents' dual expectations of excellence and high achievement both in the official national curriculum, which excludes Armenian, and in Armenian itself. And while testing and grading - traditional measures of achievement - sometimes provide for validation of the importance of learning Armenian, they do not necessarily support the kind of student-centered learning that would be most effective for language transmission.

Ultimately, it was agreed, teacher training and professional development are key to shifting approaches, but this means identifying young people who are willing to become teachers of Armenian, and providing institutions that not only look but think differently than they traditionally have. (Armenian and French)

ROUND TABLE 3: PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS, TEXTBOOKS, AND BEYOND

This round table included Hasmik Khalapyan, Jirair Tcholakian, Sonia Kiledjian, Maral Ebeoglu Satar, and Sossé Manakian. Each participant shared examples of ways that Armenian learners or speakers were interacting with technology. In traditional classrooms, this includes teaching lessons and creating projects on smart boards, accessing online resources and digitized textbook components, and encouraging students to do research.

Literacy is a particularly relevant area for digital technologies, although print media are being used in creative ways as well. Educational magazines have been created and students in some schools are being asked to collaborate on original texts that become illustrated books. The participants noted that engaging students in the writing and correcting of texts allows them to feel more ownership of their knowledge of the language and sets a precedent for creative activity in Armenian.

Many classrooms are opening up to games and artistic exploration, especially at the primary level. One important element of interactive play for language transmission, it was pointed out, is the reduction of psychological distance from the use of the language. Learning through the language not only helps teachers to maximize resources by drawing on the digital, it also allows learners to feel emotionally connected with Western Armenian. (Armenian)

ROUND TABLE 4: PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES: SHARED EXPERIENCES

This round table included Anahid Sarkissian, Korioun Khatchadourian, Sevana Tchakerian, Méliné Gazarian, Arpi Panossian Muttart. The session turned out to be unusual for several reasons. It began with an entirely participative experience of active learning, was rounded out by graduates of an immersive Armenian program in France sharing their experiences, and included an adult learner of Armenian - founder of an immersive learning program in France - who presented in Armenian. The discussion even prompted the participation of audience members who were themselves products of immersive programs.

Storytelling, music composition and performance, dance, play and projects were the main means through which all of the speakers recommended that Armenian be learned. Participants emphasized that these immersive media can be applied to both Eastern and Western Armenian, without the need to instill any preference, prejudice or emotional weight in either standard. Serious approaches were discouraged and the importance of levity and positive emotional experiences was stressed.

Participants echoed the sentiments of prior speakers that the opportunity to apply what is learned is vital, and that engaging learners in active situations through the medium of Armenian is the ideal way to produce comfortable and spontaneous speech, and to increase learners' confidence in their language abilities. (Armenian and French)

ROUND TABLE 5: TEACHING ADULTS: CURRENT PRACTICES

This round table included Sevan Deirmendjian, Mélanie Kélédjian, Haroutioun Kurkjian, Krikor Moskofian. Participants shared the successes and challenges that they had experienced in educating adult learners of Western Armenian. One challenge that applied to all programs and formats is finding opportunities for the learners to practice what they learn, since many are not in regular contact with native speakers.

Another common challenge is the assessment and tailoring of courses to very diverse levels of language competence, as learners may or may not have been exposed to some variant of Armenian at some time during their lives. And reaching a balance between identifying needs and valuing abilities can be a sensitive process.

Finally, institutional structures and limitations present a significant challenge to offering courses to adults. Accessibility and affordability can be problems for geographically-scattered adults with busy lives and financial responsibilities, while institutions need to see that courses bring in sufficient enrollment and revenue. (Armenian and English)

4 HOUR WORKSHOP: TEACHING AND LEARNING A LANGUAGE THROUGH ART AND CULTURE

Complementary practical workshop sessions were organized in cooperation with Descobrir: Programa Gulbenkian Educação para Cultura e Ciência. Two Portuguese artists, Sofia Cabrita and Maria Gil, were invited to challenge participants to move away from their comfort zone and experience learning and teaching through artistic methods. The workshop was available only by pre-registration and was limited to a small number of participants.

During the two sessions, participants performed a number of relaxing and creative exercises carefully designed by the artists to allow them to become aware of their body-language,

understand the space around them, and develop their senses.(Storytelling influenced by the sense of taste, smell and texture gave participants the chance to experience Portuguese olive oil and cod-fish!). In addition to encouraging individual work, by targeting people’s impulses and creative thinking, the workshop also fostered group-work, by nurturing a trusting environment that enabled people to collaborate under challenging circumstances and arrive at collective decisions. Some of the end results were a unique museum called “տաբճուր-փակցուր-բազար ” and three best-seller books!

Participants brought a positive attitude to every exercise as they experienced learning in a practical yet creative manner. They took with them questions about how they could make their classrooms more engaging, as well as some concrete strategies they wanted to try.

(This workshop is based on the Descubrir initiative 10X10 which aims at involving teachers, artists and students in work designed to enhance the secondary curriculum content, stimulating an interactive exchange of perspectives, knowledge and creativity on the part of each participant. In particular, the project was designed to act as a stimulus for teachers, who are subject to a difficult and tiring routine, by contributing towards a renewal of their repertoire of teaching tools and communication strategies in the classroom).

CLOSING ROUND TABLE: PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES, SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES, AND NEXT STEPS

The final round table included Rima Bahous, Colette Grinevald, Christine Hélot, Gil Schmerler and Razmik Panossian, and was moderated by Anaïd Donabédian and Ani Garmiryan. Many of the comments were celebratory of what had been presented and discussed at the conference. The participants were very diverse, not only in their origins and places of work, but also in their knowledge of the language and community in question, and in the paths they took to working in the field.

Rima Bahous suggested that standards be developed for the successful teaching of Western Armenian, and that these be implemented across programs and contexts. Christine Hélot recommended that more research be done on the outcomes obtained by the student-centered methods that had been discussed, and that pedagogy be developed to be explicitly multilingual and to capitalize on the strengths of multilingual learners.

Colette Grinevald discussed the specificity of the diaspora setting for a minority language, but also recommended that Western Armenian experts learn from experiences of language obsolescence in other settings and form strategies either to prevent this outcome or to preserve identity markers in place of the language.

Gil Schmerler suggested that more investment be made in digital technologies that would boost interactive learning opportunities in the diaspora, and that an emphasis be put on vernacular language rather than focusing too narrowly on grammatical correctness and standardized forms of language. This was seconded by Ani Garmiryan, who discouraged a focus on correctness or written language when this jeopardized the emotional experience of the child.

In closing, Razmik Panossian recognized that individual communities may have different needs in order to optimize their language maintenance efforts, but that all actors are needed to take ownership and build momentum for the overall effort. He acknowledged that not one individual or institution is going to save Western Armenian, but he assured all those present that “collectively, we are.” (English, French and Armenian)