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And the Lord shall utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea; and with his mighty wind shall he shake his hand over the river, and shall smite it in the seven streams, and make men go over dryshod. Isaiah 11:15

Symptoms of a Language Death: A Case Study

Topic: I discuss symptoms indicating the possibility of language death for Western Armenian and analyze the circumstances and reasons generating them, with a comparison and contrast with other endangered languages.

Statistics: There are around 6000 languages currently used around the world. The majority is endangered. According to the gravest predictions, 90% of currently spoken languages will be extinct or obsolescent in the next century. Only 200 are ‘safe’ in the visible future (Kraus, 1992).

Definitions: Languages are social creations which originate and demise in historical circumstances. Languages die when no living speakers remain. Language death occurs in two modes: 1. by extermination of the entire speech community and 2. gradually, when speakers abandon their L1 in favor of a socially dominant L2. The next generation shifts to this dominant language (as a rule the L1 of that country) still communicating with parents in the native tongue which becomes moribund, i.e., spoken only by adults. A third scenario of language death is the loss of native tongue in emigration, though the language itself is not endangered in its home country.

External symptoms indicating GLD for WA
1. There are no speech communities, except for private homes, where people would be able to function with WA (Western Armenian) only.
2. If WA still remains the primary language for its speakers; it is limited within formal-familial spheres. In formal and professional settings, speakers need other languages too.
3. The bilingualism of WA speakers backfires at WA with a constant transfer from other languages.
4. No higher or professional education is feasible in WA. The few high schools operate in the sphere and under the dominance of another language. Beyond High school WA, may be a subject of study, not medium of instruction.
5. No major media functions in WA. Most WA newspapers are bilingual.
6. Functional limitations of WA result in its few live variations.
7. WA functions in loosely tied Diaspora communities, each imposing its own prescriptivist rules, limiting the natural flow of WA, and inhibiting speakers’ creativity.

Internal Symptoms indicating GLD for WA
The internal symptoms concern only the language proficiency of current speakers and in no case the inherent quality or intrinsic worth of any language. The internal symptoms are more clearly observed in the speech of younger generations [YGS]. The following observations and examples are from my students’ oral and written speech.
1. Pragmatics: YGS is practically void of styles and registers.
2. Grammar: Confusion in preposition and postposition use with appropriate case forms (e.g., որոտ առաջարկ դարձին). Confusion with article use (Ղարաբաղ կոլեջ ամբողջ).
3. Phonetics: Disregard of sound changes in diphthongs (e.g., իր գումրու). Confusion with article use (Ղարաբաղ կոլեջ ամբողջ).
4. Overgeneralization of irregular nouns and verbs (e.g., տիկի—տիկ, մարիկ). Disregard of sound changes in diphthongs (e.g., իր գումրու).
5. Semantics: Words are monosemanticized and used like labels. Many words are stripped off connotative meanings and emotional load.
6. Transfer: English syntax takes over especially in written speech (իր գումրու դարձին). Confusion with article use (Ղարաբաղ կոլեջ ամբողջ).
7. Transfer: Common Eastern Armenian forms infiltrate into everyday speech, e.g., animate/inanimate differentiation in accusative-direct object in the Dative form.

Historical Reasons and Current Circumstances:
1. There is no piece of land to locate WA (except for a few dialects) and no statehood to defend it. 2. Genocide and 3. Diaspora in the midst of dominant languages. 4. ‘Iron’ barriers between Armenia and Diaspora for 70 years. 5. Limited opportunities for professional and social activity in WA.

Compare-Contrast: The situation of WA is compared with: 1. Other immigrant languages in the US, particularly, Los Angeles. 2. Other endangered languages Native American languages, Welsh, Gaelic, Basque, Irish, Retoroman, Kurdish.

Literature