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**MOTHER TONGUE: LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM
AND THE CULT OF TRANSLATION IN
POSTCOMMUNIST ARMENIA**

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MOTHER TONGUE: LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM AND THE CULT OF TRANSLATION IN POSTCOMMUNIST ARMENIA

During a recent episode of a popular Russian TV program, the show's hosts asked several children to secretly choose a word and then use images and riddles to describe this word to a panel of adults. As in a game of charades, the adults were then asked to try and guess the word on the basis of the clues provided by the children's images and riddles. Tellingly, several children chose an image of a person speaking a foreign language as a clue to the word *nationality*. This episode illustrates the close relation between language and the origins of perceptions of national identity. Many such examples can be seen in everyday life. For instance, people tend to think consciously about language only when encountering a foreign language. Indeed, a person's mother tongue is not "heard" or distinguished unless compared with some alien language,¹ in the same way young children learn to distinguish their reflection in the mirror by comparing it to the reflection of others.

In Russian, the word "pagan" is *yazychnik*, from *yazyk*, 'language', or 'ethnos' in old Church Slavonic.² Thus the notion of pagan here derives from linguistic difference, from the perception of an alien quality distinguished by speech.³ Perhaps the Stalinist state security services of Armenia were thinking in the same archaic way when in the 1930s they incriminated Hrachia Acharian, a prominent Armenian linguist, for being a spy for numerous foreign countries on the basis of the many languages he knew.⁴ Intriguingly, in the Armenia of the mid-1990s, the "alienness" of those speaking foreign languages emerged as a similar problem for former President Levon Ter-Petrossian, a famous polyglot. The question of the national leader's linguistic status is of particular interest, as it reflects essential cultural characteristics of the leader as symbol, from his role as embodiment of the quintessence of society, to the distinction and separateness of his outstanding position.

Paradoxically, then, the mother tongue—the language through which forms of national identity are articulated—does not usually appear as a 'language' to its speakers. Rather, people who know only their native tongue just speak it. Indeed, the mother tongue becomes a symbol of national identity only for those who know other, foreign languages, that is, for the bilinguals, marginals, or nationalist intellectuals who explicitly

¹ Indeed, the best experts on a language are sometimes people for whom this language is either not their mother tongue, or who bear some "alienness" in their personality or background. For example, the best explanatory dictionary of the Russian language was compiled by Vladimir Dal, the famous Russian lexicographer and ethnographer, who was born to a German family. Dal's work was supplemented by Boduen de Courtene, another famous specialist in Russian of foreign origin.

² Fasmer (1973: 551).

³ On the other hand, once one's own language has been distinguished as a language from other languages, foreign languages often appear as pseudo-languages, as incomprehensible mumbling. For example, the Armenian word *barbaros*, 'barbarian', originated from words meaning 'mumbling'. The Russian word for "German," *nemets*, presents an even starker case, as *nemets* descends from *nemoi*, 'dumb' or 'mute'. See Acharian (1971: 420) and Fasmer (1971: 62).

⁴ Traditional national animosity played its role even in this absurd drama, as Acharian, though forced to plead guilty to this absurd accusation, was nevertheless said to have denied being a Turkish spy.

champion their native language as a *national* cause. Often, such individuals are specialists in linguistics, as was the case in Armenia during the flowering of national consciousness in the late 1980s, the time of Ter-Petrossian's political ascent.

In many cases, factors other than language form the principal referents of national identity. For example, the Armenian cultural identity of a small group of Circassian speakers in the northwest Caucasus seems to have originated and been preserved through the active practice of Christian religious traditions brought to the region in medieval times, evidently after a group of Armenian warriors married Circassian women.⁵ Thus, though this small group shares linguistic and other ethnic traits with other Circassians, religion here serves as the primary marker of group identity. However, after becoming a rich and firmly established regional community in the second half of the nineteenth century, these Circassian Armenians decided to “recover” the Armenian language by founding schools and inviting teachers from Armenia. In the end, this proved a short-lived recovery, as the community had turned to the Russian language by the beginning of the twentieth century.⁶

Similarly, the Yezidis of Armenia—an ethnic group of Kurdish origin with an archaic religion preserving many features of Zoroastrianism—strongly distinguish themselves from Muslim Kurds of the Transcaucasus. Both groups speak the same language, known as Kurmanji. Nevertheless, the Yezidis' cultural identity is based mainly on their religion. In an ironic twist, however, many contemporary Yezidis now count language as a distinguishing factor of their group identity by claiming to speak “Yezidi,” which, they argue, Muslim Kurds appropriated and misnamed Kurmanji.

Although nationalists often place too much emphasis on language as a factor responsible for national identity, language does at times play a considerable, though indirect, role in consolidating national identity. Take, for example, scholarly arguments over the reasons for the separation of the Armenian Church from orthodox Christianity. Few scholars would contest the centrality of this separation to the subsequent formation of Armenian national identity. Some scholars argue that this separation resulted from a linguistic misunderstanding.⁷ According to Boris Uspensky, the Armenian clergy, when translating the resolutions of the Chalcedon Council of 451 on the nature of Jesus Christ, misunderstood the Greek term “hypostasis” as “person,” which led these clergy to interpret the resolution as affirming the already anathematized Nestorian heresy.⁸ Let's for the sake of argument accept this interpretation of the reasons for the schism between ancient Armenian and Greco-Roman Christianity. Then a simple misinterpretation of a foreign-language document helps explain a historical event whose consequences have played a central role in Armenian history ever since. Here, we see the subtle yet important influence that language can have on the formation of group identity, in this case, religious identity, in accord with the Sepir-Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis asserts a general influence of language on thinking. By broadening the implications of the Sepir-Whorf hy-

⁵ Arakelian (1984: 43-58).

⁶ Arakelian (1984: 122-126).

⁷ Sarkissian (1965: 14).

⁸ Uspensky (1969: 163-164).

pothesis, we could say that language to a certain degree *must* influence national character and national identity, because it structures traditional perceptions and ways of thinking. Take, for example, the relation between “national character” and the sense of humor. Certainly, the ability to appreciate humor forms an integral part of national character, insofar as the intelligibility of many jokes consists in the linguistic transparency of a great deal of untranslatable puns and plays on language.

LANGUAGE AND THE ORIGINS OF NATIONS

In general, nationalists who claim a central role for language in the process of national identity-formation do not appeal to such deep levels of language-identity correlation. Instead, they often prefer speculations on their own nation’s “advanced” language and cultural achievement in order to gain “scientific” substantiation for their nationalist political constructions. For example, in their historical and political constructions Armenian nationalists often make broad appeal to the hypothesis of T. Gamkrelidze and V. Ivanov (1984), which locates the fatherland of the Indo-Europeans within the historical territory populated by ethnic Armenians. The late General Dudayev, the rebel leader of Chechnya, also like to cite modern linguistic research when claiming that the Chechens would one day dominate over the other Caucasian nations, as the Chechen language was the most ancient in the region.⁹ Evidently, the General in his own peculiar way adhered to some version of the linguistic theory of the closeness of the east-Caucasian languages (to which group the Chechen language belongs) and the Hurrian languages.¹⁰ Dudayev constructed his “linguistic” theory of eventual Chechen national dominance in the Caucasus on the eve of the bloody Chechen-Russian war. Dudayev’s “linguistic nationalism” underscores the complex relation between language and ethnic conflict. As Ranko Bugarski points out, the rise of competing nationalisms and outbreak of inter-ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia was preceded by their symbolic expressions in language (Bugarski 1997).

One thing is clear: linguistic theories are often broadly used to reconstruct national histories, especially in relation to “prehistoric” times (that is, times prior to the transition from oral to literate culture). Similarly, in ethnogenetic constructions, language often serves as the only evidence of a society’s ethnic roots. And since these roots are widely held to confer a nation some special right to occupy specific territories, language often stands out among the set of factors shaping national identity. Thus language figures directly or indirectly in a wide range of nationalist phenomena: from speculative myths on national origins, to historical claims on a perceived national territory, to the formation and legitimation of irredentist political ideologies. I would place particular emphasis here on the close relation between language and ethnogenetic speculation, which—given Europe’s intricate ethnic history—has long played a central role in European politics. In contrast, linguistically oriented ethnogenetic speculation plays a much less prominent role in the political life of the United States, with its relatively brief history and its long-held notion of being a cultural “melting pot.”

⁹ Mineev (1991: 8).

¹⁰ See Diakonov and Starostin (1988).

In light of all this, it is interesting to note that ethnogenetic investigations were not encouraged in the Soviet Union until the late 1930s. During the first decade of Soviet power, the internationalist school of M. Pokrovsky was the dominant perspective in Soviet historical science. This school denied the validity of even the term “Russian history,” out of respect for the numerous non-Russian ethnic groups who lived in Russia.¹¹ The linguistic theory of Nikolai Marr became another factor discouraging ethnogenetic research in the early Soviet period. Marr’s ideas dominated Soviet academics in these years. Marr’s theory turned the language pyramid upside down, inverting the “unnatural” image of many languages standing on one peak—that is, originating from a common source—to the “natural” position of one (future) language resting on a base of many diverse origins. In short, Marr’s fantastic theory denied the principle of the tree-like differentiation of languages over time (and hence of the importance of alien influences on particular languages), asserting instead the development of language through progressive “stages” embodied by social classes.¹²

Perhaps the most absurd consequence of Marr’s theory was the position developed in the early 1930s by the Soviet archaeologist V. I. Ravdonikas. A follower of both Pokrovsky’s school and Marr’s linguistic ideas, Ravdonikas formulated a novel account of the ethnic origin of German-speaking Goths who lived in southern Russia in early medieval times. Against his German opponents, Ravdonikas explained the German language of the Goths in terms of Marr’s stage-theory of language. His argument boiled down to the claim that different peoples living on different territories might create the same language independently, due to similar social-economical conditions.¹³

In 1936, Pokrovsky’s school was severely attacked as anti-historical. This signaled a new trend emphasizing concrete historical studies in the Soviet social sciences. Paradoxically, however, this sharp change in research agendas was, until 1950, framed as a continuation of Marr’s work. In that year, Marr’s school itself was also officially denounced. In any case, from the late 1930s to the present day, ethnogenetic speculation has represented the most popular framework for discussions on national history and identity on the territories of the former Soviet Union.

FOUR MODELS OF CONSOLIDATING NATIONAL IDENTITY

Having outlined the complex and subtle relation between mother tongues and the formation of national identities, we now turn to the problem of modeling the process of national identity formation itself. At least four paths to national-identity formation are possible. We can conceptualize these four paths in terms of the *selective*, the *historical*, the *prestigious*, and the *omnivorous* models of national-identity formation.¹⁴ These models can, in turn, be constructed in reference to the basic metaphor of the genealogical tree of ancestors and descendants, where the “roots” function as the discursive referent of communal

¹¹ Shnirelman (1993: 52-53).

¹² On the mythological aspects of Marr’s bizarre linguistic theories, see Alpatov (1991: 6-111).

¹³ Shnirelman (1993: 57-58).

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion, see Abrahamian (1998). This article treats the linguistic dimensions of these models in depth.

ancestry, and the “trunk” and “branches” represent the shared history of the reference-group and its subgroups. The top of the tree, of course, represents the community today. Finally, we note that these ubiquitous genealogical metaphors—metaphors common to diverse nationalist discourses around the globe—explicitly frame the history of the community or nation in terms of contrasts between “central” and “deviational” (side-branching) historical segments of the genealogical tree. As we shall see, nationalist projects thus implicitly define primary national tasks in terms of pruning the top of the contemporary tree by shaping the national community to conform to an idealized representation of the history of the main line—the trunk—of communal history.

The selective model corresponds, for example, to the Russian path to identity consolidation. This path cuts away the alien (e.g., Jewish) branches in the “upper,” contemporary part of the national genealogical tree, while accepting such alien branches in the “lower,” historical reaches of the communal past. Thus many of today’s Russian nationalists symbolically incorporate Pushkin and his African ancestry into the cultural heritage of “Mother Russia,” while at the same time targeting contemporary Russian Jews for “pruning” from the contemporary community. According to the logic of this model, Pushkin’s use of the Russian language functions as an ideal against which the national task of cultural “purification” can be realized. For instance, certain Russian nationalists today admonish specialists in Pushkin’s language and poetry who happen to be of Jewish ethnic origin to identify themselves as Russians and renounce their Jewishness.¹⁵

Our three remaining models of national-identity formation, the historical, the prestigious, and the omnivorous, describe the three main paths to national-identity formation in the contemporary Transcaucasus region. As a matter of fact, the historical model most elegantly represents the “Armenian path;” the prestigious, the “Georgian path;” and the omnivorous, the “Azerbaijani path.” At this point, a cautionary note as to the analytical use of these models needs to be made. These models are “ideal-types,” abstract representations of a central course in the developmental history of a particular instance of national identity. Thus, one could apply these same models, or a combination thereof, to any nation or ethnic minority undergoing a process of nation-state building. The selection of one model over another in relation to the history of Russian or Armenian national identity, for example, is thus a matter of abstracting from the rich diversity of “sub-paths” to national identity at work in these processes in order to capture descriptively what the analyst feels to be the predominant developmental tendency unfolding in a given empirical case.

For instance, a comparison of the Armenian and Russian paths to national-identity formation generate the distinction between the historical and selective models. When we turn our attention to the Armenian case, we immediately note the centrality of the representation of the “deep past,” the mythic time of communal origin, in the discourse of Armenian nationalism. A discursive preoccupation with the roots of the national genealogical tree, then, leads the analyst to generate what I call the historical model of national-identity formation. This path to national identity transforms traces of distinctions between

¹⁵ See, for instance, the open letter of the Russian writer Viktor Astafiev to a Russian Pushkinist of Jewish origin, Natan Eidelman.

aliens and the “imagined” ethnic community in the deep past into a story of how such aliens actually formed a root of the primary reference-community. Thus, aliens present at the ethnic “origin time” are symbolically transformed into ancestors. The aliens in the case of the Armenians are the Urartians, a Hurrian-speaking people who formed the state Urartu on the historical and present-day territory of Armenia in the period running roughly from 900 to 600 BC. Thus, one can say that the Armenian model of national-identity “fights” for the Armenian identity of the Urartians in order to stake a claim for the essential “Armenianness” of regions once dominated by the Urartians.

The symbolic construction of ancient “Urartians” as Armenians in contemporary Armenian national discourse can itself be explained in relation to gaps in the linguistic theories and empirical evidence used by the linguists and historians who, as I argued above, have played such a prominent role in formulating this discourse in the last decade. Though the already mentioned hypothesis of the Near Eastern motherland of the Indo-Europeans “confirmed” the ancient roots of the Armenians in their territory, the Hurrian speaking Urartians and their high culture formed a gap in the continuity of Armenian “deep” history. Thus, by identifying Urartu with Armenia, Armenian nationalists could trace the Armenian genealogical tree back to the most ancient times without any breaks in continuity. Little wonder, then, that Souren Aivazian, a champion of the idea of the Urartians’ Armenian origin, “reads” Urartian cuneiforms as written in proto-Armenian (Aivazian 1986: 30-31).

The prestigious model, in turn, describes a path of consolidating national identity through the symbolic construction of prestigious forefathers. Here we note that in many cultures, *prestigious* designates that which is unique, distinctive and thus of continuing value and relevance. This feeling of national uniqueness is especially prominent among contemporary Georgian nationalists, though, of course, we also see this as a sub-tendency in the other ideal-typical models of national development. Armenian and Russian nationalists, for example, often claim that some historic Armenian or Russian was the originator of this or that cultural accomplishment or value now widely adopted by many cultures. Georgian national discourse, however, is marked by a “disinterested” or “confident” sense of national uniqueness. Here, national discourse tends to assume as “merely factual” the uniqueness and distinction of the accomplishments of “great” ancestors. Thus ancestral distinction eclipses ethnic origination as the most important historical reference in the construction of national identity.

The prestigious path projects this sense of the distinction and accomplishment of individual ancestors into the sphere of ethnogenesis writ large. Thus, nationalists of this type tend to search for a unique ancestral community from which individual founding-father figures are postulated in order to build their nationalist discourse. From a linguistic perspective, this means that the unique ancestor had to speak a unique language from which, in turn, the national mother tongue descended. Thus in contemporary Georgian national discourse, the list of postulated candidates for such founding-father figures (or at least ancient close relatives) include Sumerians, Urartians and even Basques. Remarkably, the so-called “Basquian hypothesis” of Georgian national origins is among the most popular in Georgia today, especially in non-academic circles. Generally speaking, builders

of prestigious types of national identity do not pursue explicit political aims, though the flexibility such constructions give to mythically inclined narrators of ethnogenetic processes allow this type of national discourse to be easily appropriated for political aims.

Finally, the omnivorous path to national identity is best understood as a variation on the prestigious model. A tendency to implicitly and explicitly appropriate elements from a wide variety of alien cultures distinguishes this path. Indeed, the active appropriation of cultural elements from contemporary “cultural others” plays an ongoing, central role in the construction of such omnivorous cultural identities. Thus the top of the tree—that is, the contemporary form of nationalist discourse—appears as a sort of makeshift “cultural polyglot” improvised for the purpose of rapidly mobilizing a populace behind a state-building project. This distinguishes the omnivorous path from the selective, historical and prestigious paths, where incorporation of “the other” explicitly occurs only in the lower—that is, historical—reaches of the ethno-genetic tree.

Contemporary Azerbaijani nationalism exemplifies the omnivorous path to national identity. Azerbaijani national discourse thus strives to consolidate Azerbaijani identity by explicitly and simultaneously incorporating elements of the Turkic, the Median, and the Caucasian-Albanian versions of Azerbaijani ethnogenesis and national history.¹⁶ From a linguistic point of view, the omnivorous path easily appropriates any foreign language present in various periods of national-territorial history. Thus, according to Azerbaijani ethno-history, the Albanian-speaking “proto-Azerbaijanis” who once lived on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan adopted the Turkic language from a small group of nomads in medieval times.¹⁷ On the other hand, those proto-Azerbaijanis who lived on the territory of present-day Nagorno-Karabagh are thought to have adopted the Armenian language. Armenian and Azerbaijani variations on this last theme actually served as a “linguistic rationale” for the bloody war in the region in the late 1980s and early 1990s, feeding both Azerbaijani nationalism and Armenian irredentism.

In contemporary Azerbaijani national discourse, the long fight of the proto-Azerbaijanis for “linguistic identity” is extended back into ancient history. Thus, according to an opinion popular in Azerbaijan, Armenians appropriated Caucasian Albanian history and identity by translating Albanian texts into Old Armenian and destroying the original manuscripts,¹⁸ or by destroying Albanian inscriptions on the medieval *khachkar* (cross-stone) monuments and thus claiming them to be Armenian¹⁹. The free-acquisition princi-

¹⁶ On the Albanian/Turkic/Median controversies in Azerbaijani interpretations

of Azerbaijani national history, see Dudwick (1990); Astourian (1994: 52-67); and Abrahamian (1997).

¹⁷ See Guliev (1979: 64); as well as Aliev (1988: 48). Most Armenian scholars, on the contrary, consider the Turkic language of present-day Azerbaijan to be the legacy of the mass nomadic invasions of the 13th- and 14th centuries, and Azerbaijanis to be in the main direct descendants of these Turkic-speaking nomads. See Galoyan and Khudaverdian (1988: 13).

¹⁸ See Buniatov (1965: 97) for such accusations, and Muradian (1990: 62-63) for criticism of this approach.

¹⁹ See Akhundov and Akhundov (1983: 13). Interestingly, when accusing the Armenians of destroying Albanian inscriptions and erroneously dating one of the stelae from Jugha at 1602, the Akhundovs, evidently, didn't notice the Armenian inscription indicating the date (in Armenian letters) and the name of the master woven into the ornaments of the monument. Old photographs show that the now damaged in-

ple of the omnivorous path thus proves a very flexible mechanism for adapting a diverse and ambiguous regional cultural legacy for contemporary nationalist tasks. Moreover, such omnivorous readings of a regional past can easily serve as a basis for making claims to additional territories in which “proto-nationals” are presumed to have once lived.

Such a “swelling through appropriation” of group identity is commonly encountered among nomadic peoples, or settled communities descended from nomadic peoples. In this way, the migration itinerary of the ancestors transmogrifies into both a map of the ancestors’ historical territories, and a guide-book to the collage-like construction of a contemporary national identity serviceable for nation-state building. Identities “swelled” by such omnivorous and flexible appropriation are characteristic of “continental” ethnic groups, groups that develop within the geographic context of continental-scale trade, migration and other forms of cultural exchange. We also see variations on the omnivorous pattern on large islands situated near or on maritime trade routes, as in England. Such cases generate intermittent periods of rapid swelling of ethnic identity through appropriation of alien elements, punctuated by periods of isolation and retrenchment that result in the crystallization of some “deep layer” of “base references” in the resultant group identity. Alien inputs thus remain only in the vertical direction of national memory, and not in the horizontal direction of contemporary identification with other cultures. The modern English language, for instance, formed in part as a consequence of alien invasions, each contributing fragments to English from one or another Indo-European language.

Azerbaijani nationalism, in contrast, is a case of “identity-swelling” on the continental pattern. Here, we see the importance of historic Transcaucasia as a continental crossroads, the site of the old “Silk Road” between Europe and Asia and of repeated nomadic conquests. Thus the three main controversies in the theory of Azerbaijani ethnogenesis all turn on various formulas for incorporating Caucasian Albanian, Median and Turkic cultural legacies. These three legacies, in turn, represent different language families—the Caucasian, the Indo-European, and the Altayan, respectively. Thus, contemporary Azerbaijani nationalism illustrates very well the “omnivorous” nature of this path to national identity.

PURISM AND LANGUAGE POLICY

Together with the ethnogenetic speculations discussed above, the particular paths along which national identities crystallize, shape, and constrain the language policy of states, or at the very least, affect the formulation of national language policies. Moreover, such policies can help us to understand both a society’s past, as in the Yugoslav case, as well as to forecast possible future political trends. But most importantly for purposes of this discussion, national language policies tell us a lot about the ethnic structure and ethnic problems of the societies in which they are formulated. For example, both the language policy of the former Georgian Soviet republic, and that of the newly independent Republic of

scription at the foot of the monument was also written in Armenian (Arakelian and Sahakian, 1986: 46; Aivazian, 1984: Pl.62-63). Thus, though the Caucasian Albanians are practically unknown in the West, we see that their history plays a central role in arguments between contemporary Armenian and Azerbaijani nationalists.

Georgia, reflect very well all the political problems Georgia has had and continues to face in regard to its ethnic minorities. For instance, the Constitution of the Georgian SSR of 1978 declared Georgian as the republic's state language, while the constitution of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic within Georgia declared Abkhazian as the autonomous republic's state language. Although the adoption of these documents had different backgrounds,²⁰ these symmetrical features of the two constitutions foreshadowed the secession of Georgia from the USSR, and then of Abkhazia from Georgia.

In comparison with Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Georgians were always more radical in questions concerning national language and nationalism in general. Indeed, mass protests in Georgia against Soviet proposals to impose Russian as the only state language in the republic prompted the adoption of the aforementioned articles in the 1978 Georgian constitution on state-languages. These demonstrations forced the Soviet authorities in Moscow to give Georgian the status of a state language. In Armenia, only a few intellectuals raised objections to a similar proposal to declare Russian as the republic's state language. However, the authorities, frightened by the mass actions in Georgia, decided to declare Armenian and Azerbaijani state languages at the republican level, without waiting for similar manifestations in either republic. Thus, thanks to the activities of Georgian nationalists, the Soviet authorities agreed to designate Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian as the official state languages of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, in marked contrast to other Soviet republics.

However, language policy does not always correspond to the ethnic structure of a society. For example, similar struggles against the use of Russian as the *lingua franca* of official discourse in Estonia and Armenia in the early 1990s were based on quite different ethnic situations. In Estonia, the adoption of an anti-Russian language policy was obviously directed against ethnic Russians living in the republic, who constituted the bulk of the Russian-speaking population. On the other hand, the adoption of policies meant to discourage the official use of Russian in the almost monoethnic Armenian Republic were in fact directed against Russian-speaking Armenians, particularly refugees from Azerbaijan who attended Russian schools before being expelled in late 1980s and thus could only speak an Armenian dialect, at best. Thus the same language policy may favor the consolidation of a nation in one case (leaving aside the troubling moral aspects of Estonia's anti-Russian policy here), while artificially dividing an already consolidated nation in another case.²¹

On the other hand, the formal similarity between the official language policies adopted recently in Estonia and Armenia show that a difference in dialect and even in accent may favor the creation of subethnic divisions, which in turn may develop into social contradictions between a dominant majority and a new, underprivileged minority. Thus in Armenia, the Russian spoken by the Armenians from Baku has an accent specific to the Azerbaijanis, and this accent functions in everyday life to distinguish and often marginalize

²⁰ See Jones (1995: 546-547, notes 6 and 14).

²¹ For the very high rate of national consolidation evidenced in the mass rallies in Armenia in the late 1980s, see Abramian (1990), and Abrahamian (1993).

these “outsiders.” Ironically, the destructive effects of Armenia’s recent anti-Russian language policy were an unintended by-product of a mostly symbolic policy, as Armenia had already gained her independence from Russia.²²

Thus in Estonia, the adoption of an anti-Russian language policy was designed as an explicit step toward expelling “the foreigners” (the Russians) who had “occupied” the country, while in Armenia the adoption of practically the same policy embodied the growing influence of purist trends in Armenian nationalist discourse in the 1990s. Indeed, the Armenia policy aimed at transforming the newly consolidated language of national identity into a concrete program to invigorate national culture, rather than at targeting an “enemy” or “alien” group. In the almost monoethnic Armenian Republic, the new language policy reflected the nationalist discourse of self-purification, of expelling the foreigner in one’s self by expelling foreign—Russian—words from Armenian daily life.²³ Thus, during one of the early nationalist rallies of 1988, a well-known Armenian linguist called on the people to begin freeing themselves from Russian by taking the first step of changing the script of their signatures and name plates on their apartment doors from Russian to Armenian. Many of the linguistically oriented nationalist intellectuals active in this early phase of “nationalism-building” subsequently set the “purist” tone of the anti-Russian language policies adopted by the postcommunist Armenian government.

Purism, in a broad sense of the word, thus plays a considerable role in maintaining contemporary Armenian national identity, since Armenian culture and language are layered with “foreign” imports of various ages and origins, a fact which reflects the geographical situation and historical background of Armenia. Indeed, for many years Armenian was thought to be a branch of the same linguistic subgroup of the Indo-European languages as Farsi, due to the wide number of Persian cognates in the Armenian language. This position was widely held until 1875, when H. Hübsmann proved Armenian to be a separate Indo-European language.

We can thus distinguish three motivating forces driving the adoption of anti-Russian language policies in Armenia and Estonia: 1) as a means of waging a political struggle against Russians and/or Russian-speakers; 2) as an instrument of secessionism; and 3) as a reflection of a drive for “cultural purification.” In both cases, we can also de-

²² Fortunately for the refugees from Azerbaijan, the extremist project of decreeing an immediate and complete switch of the language of instruction in Russian-oriented schools to Armenian failed in Parliament, and a more moderate and less painful project of stage by stage transition, beginning with the lower grades, was accepted. However, this gradual transition policy has not always been strictly observed in educational practice.

²³ A significant percentage of the relatively small ethnic-Russian community in Armenia emigrated in the early 1990s. Estimating very roughly, no less than one third of the 51,500 ethnic Russians registered as living in Armenia in the 1989 Census emigrated in this period. However, most analysts attribute this emigration to the very difficult economic conditions in Armenia in these years, rather than to the consequences of Armenia’s post-Soviet language policies, though these policies did cause additional difficulties for the ethnic Russian community and may thus have augmented the pace of immigration somewhat. In the same years, an estimated 600,000 to 1 million Armenians (of the 3 million registered in the 1989 Census) left the country. However, while since 1996 a significant number of these Armenian émigrés have returned, the Russians seem to have left Armenia permanently.

tect a certain post factum policy of revenge or reaction against the Soviet state's long-term policies of trying to assimilate non-Russian societies into the Soviet order through the local promotion of the Russian language in the former national republics. This phenomenon can be described as "political aphasia," since in some cases non-Russian former citizens of the USSR not only refused to speak Russian, but had real psychological difficulties in trying to learn and speak this language. For instance, I would describe the following incident in terms of "temporary political aphasia." In July 1988, Soviet troops reacted cruelly and brutally against peaceful demonstrations in the Yerevan airport, in the process shooting to death a student. My bilingual informant couldn't speak Russian for a couple of days immediately following these events.²⁴

Indeed, the Soviet state's policy of trying to accelerate assimilation through language policy was actually one of the factors which stimulated the collapse of the USSR, in contrast with the more common analysis that the permitting of local languages helped bring about the dissolution by facilitating the rise of native elites. In this respect, the Soviet empire inherited the language policy of its predecessor, the Russian empire. For example, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian government initiated a very repressive language policy of closing schools using national languages as part of its drive to forcibly spread the Russian language throughout the empire. In Armenia, this triggered a burst of nationalist reaction; in particular, Armenian nationalists answered with a series of terrorist acts. As a matter of fact, this Russifying language policy partly stimulated the formation of nationalist parties in Armenia.

One must acknowledge, of course, that during the first decades following the Bolshevik Revolution, the language policy of the Soviet state differed considerably from the policy of the Russian empire. This early policy was conciliatory toward the languages and traditions of the many nations and national minorities that comprised the Soviet Union, and certainly encouraged the development of many national languages by helping to create alphabets for those which never had them, and so forth. Thus in the mid-1920s, about 30 new written languages were created. By 1934, textbooks had been published in 104 languages. But from 1936 on, an assimilatory language policy typical of totalitarian states became more and more prominent in Soviet national policy. In the 1980s, the drive to implement an assimilationist policy based on Russian entered into a new phase. Between the late 1930s and the 1980s, this assimilationist policy complemented the drive to "confirm" the final victory of Soviet ideology through the claim that a new ethnographic entity, "the Soviet people," had come into being in the USSR. To corroborate this theory, Soviet anthropologists and sociologists rushed to "prove" empirically the existence of a new people sharing a common Soviet identity and socialist culture and speaking a common language, namely Russian.²⁵

²⁴ Cf. Boris Pasternak's difficulties in writing in German, a language he knew very well, after the victory of fascism in Germany in 1933 (Pasternak 1990: 139).

²⁵ See, for instance, Bromley and Chistov (1987: 12), citing Gorbachev; or Bruk's listing of this entity in an ethnodemographic directory (1986: 141).

However, the burst of nationalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s across the USSR showed that the formation of such an entity was in fact a fiction. One could argue that the forced cultural equalization aimed at by later Soviet policies resulted in a forced increase of entropy that brought the Soviet empire's living organism to its "thermodynamic death."²⁶ The forced unification of language, obviously, played a significant role in this process.

In Armenia, where the genocide of 1915 forms a key theme or "root paradigm,"²⁷ the Russifying language policy of the late-Soviet period was interpreted as "language genocide."²⁸ However, we should note that the purist fight against Russification in Soviet Armenia developed alongside a contrary tendency, namely the growing social identification of attendance at Russian schools with enhanced social prestige. However, the seemingly contradictory spread of both of these trends in Armenian society reflects the linguistic dilemmas of subordinate groups well aware of both their bilingualism and status as an ethnic minority. Those who spoke only Armenian, on the other hand, faced no identity problems related to language, as they spoke only the mother tongue. Again, I would reiterate that the mother tongue is not perceived by its speakers as a language as such unless it is compared to some other language. Thus the fight for a national language in Armenia has been closely related to the problem of bilingualism and the psychological conflict engendered in bilingual Armenian intellectuals identifying simultaneously with the "national idea" of Armenia, on the one hand, and with the prestige and status associated with profession training in Russian in the Soviet period, on the other.

BILINGUALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The close relation between bilingualism and nationalism is quite natural, since a long period of co-existence between two spoken languages in a given society may well eventuate in the gradual death of the language with a lower status.²⁹ Due to the creeping effects of the post-1935 shift in Soviet policies in favor of gradual Russification, and the concomitant association of Russian with honor and status in the Soviet hierarchy, the national languages of the non-Russian Soviet republics became identified in official life and in employment opportunities with a lower social status. The sweeping social consequences of these shifts explain the intense preoccupation with the problem of bilingualism in the Baltic republics, especially in Estonia, where the fight against Soviet—i.e., Russian—language—domination was more acute than in other former Soviet republics. Against this backdrop, the attempt of some Estonian nationalists to try and develop a "scientific" demonstration that bilingualism is harmful to human societies becomes more intelligible.

Attempts to assess the effect of bilingualism on the intellectual qualities of the bilingual child have been the subject of much discussion, research, argument and speculation

²⁶ On the collapse of the USSR as a result of increasing systemic entropy, see Abrahamian (1990: 67-68).

²⁷ See Dudwick (1989: 64), who uses Victor Turner's concept of "root paradigm" to characterize the key elements of contemporary Armenian national consciousness.

²⁸ The banners of the 1988 nationalist rallies in Armenia clearly express this theme (Abrahamian and Marutyan, n.d., ch.2).

²⁹ Cf. Rannut (1988: 288).

since the beginning of the 20th century.³⁰ I here review a few claims that bilingualism has a negative effect on the child's development, as such claims have at times been used by nationalist intellectuals to rationalize their programs of linguistic-cultural "purification" (as in Estonia), and have even been used to generate explanations of ethnic conflict (as we shall see momentarily).

Examples of arguments that bilingualism has a negative effect on the child often entail claims that the second language negatively impacts the bilingual child's own world perception.³¹ Similar notions can be traced back as far as the work of Rabindranath Tagore in the late 19th century, who considered textbooks in foreign languages incapable of serving as a medium for understanding the richness of Indian culture.³² Tagore's ideas thus attempted to account for the very real differences between the world described in these textbooks and the familiar world of native culture.³³ A contemporary philosopher adds that while the main opposition in Western cultures and languages is that between life and death, in the Indian culture, the principal metaphorical-conceptual opposition is between free and non-free conditions. Crucially, Indian intellectual and religious thought tends to identify both life and death as non-free conditions.³⁴ Thus the two languages of a bilingual Indian may generate a fundamental internal contradiction on a very basic conceptual-linguistic level. This illustrates the language-thought relation discussed earlier in connection with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, only here generalized to describe global differences between Indian and Western philosophical systems and modes of life.

Thus we see a close association between claims that bilingualism is harmful, and the dilemmas faced by "nativist" intellectuals in a colonized society. Generally speaking, however, the cultural consequences of bilingualism are much broader than the linguistic ones. No wonder that Sergei Arutiunov dedicates a special chapter to the structural parallelism between biculturalism and bilingualism in his penetrating book on culture, language and identity.³⁵ Since distinct languages, as we know, closely correlate with distinct representations of "national character," bilingual people may find themselves enmeshed in cultural tensions between distinct and even conflicting national identities. In this way, one may say "external" ethnic conflicts may effect a perpetual "inner" ethnic conflict at the level of the psychological identity of the bilingual person.

More common, however, are arguments to the effect that bilingual people may develop inferiority complexes due to an indefinite ethnic identification, mapping "inner" tensions over identity onto the "outer" world.³⁶ At times, for instance, bilingual people fail to develop real fluency in either of their languages. According to Gasan Guseinov, such people end up being labeled as "semi-lingual" rather than bilingual. Such "semi-lingual persons," Guseinov suggests, may thus develop an aggressive disposition. This aggressive

³⁰ Steinberg (1988: 300-302).

³¹ See, for example, Okonkwo (1985: 118-126), and Graburn and Iutzi-Mitchell (1992).

³² Tagore (1961).

³³ Cf. Okonkwo (1985: 122).

³⁴ Piatigorsky (1965: 43).

³⁵ Arutiunov (1989: 114-127).

³⁶ See Christophersen (1973), and Okonkwo (1985: 124).

disposition, Guseinov claims, is the product of a continuous inability of expressing oneself by means of words.³⁷ When many such semi-lingual people (who are nearly always marked by an inescapable affectation) are assembled together, any conflict, even the most inconspicuous one, which in principle can be settled by dialog gives rise instead to rude violence. Thus, semi-lingualism is not only the linguistic, but also the ethno-social, disease of the 20th-century crowd.³⁸

In this manner, Guseinov tries to explain the psychological motivations of the anti-Armenian pogroms in the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait in February 1988, tracing the violence of the participants back to their “semi-lingualism.”³⁹

Certainly, such theories describe real dilemmas and frustrations at play in the formation of ethnic identity and the development of ethnic and national enmities. Most cognitive psychologists and social scientists, however, strongly disagree that bilingualism in itself is somehow responsible for such problems. No matter how grave the negative consequences of bilingualism may appear, the positive role of bilingualism in the development of national cultures can hardly be denied. The enrichment and developmental stimulus that follows from cultural interaction is the flip side of the condition of marginality, as the bilingual’s linguistic capacities renders him or her potentially open to outside influences. Indeed, without bilinguals, a society would be condemned to a condition of near-total isolation in relation to the outside world, for the bilingual’s marginal position serves as a point of entry for alien cultural elements into the ethnic or national community. Monolingualism and purism, on the contrary, can easily lead a nation—especially a small nation—into a period of cultural stagnation.

ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGES: THE FIGHT FOR “ALPHABET IDENTITY”

If language fixes national identity, written language plays an especially prominent role in attempts to symbolize, specify, construct, codify, and institutionalize this identity. Writing provides nationalists with doorways into the genealogical past, and “proofs” for asserting the antiquity of the nation and national identity. Moreover, the script of a language represents crucial empirical evidence for scholarly arguments, and may well provide clues to the reasons a given case of nationalism developed along either a selective, historical, prestigious, or omnivorous path. For instance, the fact that both Armenians and Georgians have had a specific and identifiable script directly traceable to at least the beginning of the 5th century favored the subsequent development of Armenian and Georgian identity along, respectively, historical and prestigious lines. After all, continuity of script traceable into the “deep” cultural past provides ready fodder for claims about mythic origins times and the relative prestige and distinction of a regional culture. Georgian nationalists have been particularly adept at using the antiquity of the Georgian script as a sign of a prestigious Georgian inventor of their alphabet. These nationalistic constructions aim to elide Mesrop

³⁷ Guseinov (1988: 36-41).

³⁸ Guseinov (1988: 37).

³⁹ Guseinov (1988: 37).

Mashtots—the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, whom Armenian tradition also credits with inventing the Georgian and Caucasian Albanian alphabets—from Georgian national history.⁴⁰ After all, the notion that an Armenian invented the Georgian script ipso facto reduces the national prestige of this script.

In any case, the revival of national language currently underway in both Armenia and Georgia has occasioned great interest in the ancient graphical design of these mother tongues. The situation is very different in cases where national languages had no written tradition before the October Revolution, as illustrated by Gasan Guseinov's account of an interesting situation he observed in a Moscow market in the summer of 1988. Guseinov noticed that many fruit stalls run by Central Asians had been labeled with Arabic inscriptions, which neither visitors nor the vast majority of vendors could read. Guseinov interprets these labels as a symbolic manifestation of ethnic and national values, or even more broadly, of the “higher” values of the Orient in comparison with Russian language and culture. He subsequently describes this phenomenon as an orientation to “phantom values,” drawing an analogy to the oft-heard claims of amputees to “feel” their amputated extremity.⁴¹

However, given the nature of symbolic forms and the feeling of national identity, such artifices might in the end generate a real, not a phantom, extremity (identity). In this case, we should note that Arabic is not so much a national language, as a language of the Koran and of Islamic fundamentalism. Hence the symbolic abnegation of the Russian script may here facilitate the spread of Islamic identity and related forms of political fundamentalism, rather than the formation of national identities coterminous with the nation-state building projects of the former Soviet Central Asian republics. Of course, I am not prognosticating the political evolution of the originally Muslim former Soviet republics, but simply trying to show the multiple, complex and extensive political and cultural power that the codification of written language often entails.

This short-lived “graphical burst of identity” in a Moscow market-place⁴² reflects both a deep cultural background, and the peculiarities of Soviet national policy during the first years of the Soviet regime. During the early Soviet period, the new regime devised alphabets based on Latin letters for those officially designated nations and national minorities lacking a written language. Here, the Bolsheviks underscored in practice their ideological commitment to the subsequent independent development of national languages,

⁴⁰ The story of Mashtots as the inventor of all three of these alphabets originates from the hagiography of Mashtots written by his disciple Koryun, though Georgian scholars consider this story to be a later addition of the copyists. For the Georgian version of the origin of the Georgian script, see Gamkrelidze (1989: 303). Also, cf. S. Muraviev's attempt to prove Mashtots' authorship by revealing a common constructing principle in the three Transcaucasian alphabets (Muraviev 1985).

⁴¹ Guseinov (1988: 38-39).

⁴² Guseinov describes this incident in his article of 1988. By the mid-1990s, these same vendors preferred to conceal their nationality, in part because of the adoption of openly racist policies by the Moscow authorities against non-Russians from the former Caucasian and Central Asian Soviet republics. For instance, in the summer of 1996 the local police beat without provocation some Azerbaijani vendors at the same market-place.

free from the dominating influence of the Russian language. But by 1936, the Central Committee of the Communist Party had reversed itself and criticized the Latinization of these new alphabets. By the end of the 1930s, when Russian domination became the official trend not only in language but in every almost sphere of internal policy, all alphabets, except Armenian and Georgian, were officially reconstructed on the basis of Cyrillic scripts. Thus the vendors at the Moscow market place were in fact trying to purge these Russian-oriented alphabets by returning to the Arabic of the Koran in search of some authentic national identity.

Moldova presents an especially interesting case of the sometimes intricate relation between the fight for national identity and the character of the “official” script of the mother tongue. Indeed, the attempt to fashion a distinct Moldovan identity could be called a case of “alphabet nationalism,” since Moldovan nationalists both in 1917 and in the late 1980s made the principal of adopting a Latin alphabet against the Cyrillic script of the Russians a primary element of their various nationalist programs.⁴³ Here, the Latin alphabet obviously affirmed the relation of Moldovan to Romanian, which passed from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet in the 1860s. Beyond its obvious anti-Russian overtones, the gravitation of the Moldovans to the Latin alphabet also manifests the strong feeling of closeness to Latinized Europe among Moldovan nationalists. For instance, a slogan observed on a placard at a 1989 nationalist rally in Kishinev read “Legalize our Latin Identity.”⁴⁴ Of particular interest here is the fact that Cyrillic is the alphabet of Old Church Slavonic, which since the tenth century has served as the internal language of the Orthodox church, the traditional religion of both Romanians and Moldovans. Thus the recent Moldovan fight for a Latin “alphabet identity” in fact directly contradicts the region’s traditional religious identity. For this reason, the Moldovan clergy initially opposed the movement calling for the adoption of a Latin alphabet.⁴⁵ In Moldova, then, we see a directly opposite trend to that in the former Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, where the search for a viable identity had generated a push for adopting Arabic, the alphabet of the region’s traditional religious identity.

Contested relations between ancient scripts and oral mother tongues may also play a significant role in the formation of ethnic identities and nationalist agendas. The case of the modern Assyrians in Armenia, a national minority of about six thousand according to the 1989 census, presents an interesting example. In recent years, the script of ancient Assyrian has been appropriated as a functional alphabet for modern spoken Assyrian. Assyrian in both its ancient and modern forms is an Aramean dialect. Numerous Christian theological works were written in this language, which was known as Syriac between the 3rd and 7th centuries, the period of the flowering of Syriac literature. In the 1980s, the revival of the script of the Christian period began to be cited by modern Assyrians as further proof of their ancient Assyrian origin, as if they had regained the cuneiforms of the dead spoken language of ancient Assyrian. Intriguingly, the majority of experts in ancient Assyrian language and culture come from the younger generation of modern ethnic Assy-

⁴³ For an informative discussion of the fight for Moldovan national identity, see Livezeanu 1990.

⁴⁴ Livezeanu (1990: 180).

⁴⁵ Livezeanu (1990: 157, 163).

rians. These younger intellectuals, in turn, developed a movement to teach their elders, the bearers of the oral language, their “true” ancient identity.⁴⁶ Thus we see that the knowledge of a “dead” language in no way hinders modern Assyrians from consolidating a group identity; on the contrary, such knowledge only helps to confirm their ancient roots.⁴⁷ As we shall soon see, however, scholarly knowledge of the ancient script of a mother tongue may become a liability for politically active intellectuals in a time of nationalist upsurge.

Indeed, the expertise of Armenia’s first postcommunist president, Levon Ter-Petrossian, in dead languages was successfully turned into a political liability by his political opponents in the mid-1990s. Ter-Petrossian was a philologist by profession, with a deep knowledge of, among other ancient languages, Old Syriac. The opposition seized on Ter-Petrossian’s bookish and aloof scholarly persona and his lifelong interest in dead languages as a means of ridicule. This ridicule indeed resonated with the populace, as a popular joke of the early 1990s illustrates. This joke explained Armenia’s very difficult economical conditions at this time in terms of the president’s eagerness to add Armenian to the dead languages he already knew. Several years later, during the presidential election campaign of 1996, placards were often hoisted at opposition demonstrations imploring the people not to permit the president to turn Armenian into a dead language. Similarly, the president himself was often castigated as a political corpse, due to his knowledge of dead languages.

Such anecdotes shed light on the hidden mechanisms at work in the developmental history of identity construction. As a matter of fact, the history of many cases of national identity construction, including those discussed here, is to a significant degree a genealogy of ethnic anecdotes. We can easily overlook the centrality of jokes and parodies about “the other” and about “the fatherland” in the construction of such identities, in part because nationalists as a rule are very solemn persons who usually lack a sense of humor.

Anecdotes about President Ter-Petrossian’s proclivity for speaking dead languages bring us to the role of mythic origins in constructing national identities, and especially to the symbolic problem of the “First Man” of a particular nation and his language. Here we encounter a quintessential question that recurs in constructing the mythic framework of

⁴⁶ Indeed, Syriac was never taught in Armenia, but instead was introduced into the circle of the modern Assyrian intelligentsia through text-books published abroad. The question of the modern Assyrians’ identity is of special interest, though I don’t have space here for a more extended treatment of this subject.

⁴⁷ In the end, the historical legacy of the ancient Assyrian past turned out to be somewhat ambivalent for the contemporary Assyrians of Armenia. In the mid-1990s, a pro-government women’s organization, “Shamiram,” adopted the name of the legendary Assyrian queen Semiramis. According to legend, Semiramis fell into passionate but unrequited love with the Armenian king Ara the Beautiful, then killed him in rage and conquered Armenia. This well-known legend was appropriated by the opposition as a symbolic reference in its criticisms of the political activities of “Shamiram,” thus fostering a negative popular attitude towards the ancient Assyrian queen and, in some cases, her purported living descendants.

national identity and ideology: was this “First Man” one of “us,” or some primal figure ruling over space and time?⁴⁸

THE CULT OF TRANSLATION AND WRITING

The invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mashtots in 405 triggered a flowering of translations of foreign texts in ancient Armenia. Thus the fifth century became known as the Golden Age of translation. As a consequence, a number of ancient texts that have been lost in their original languages or versions survived only in Armenian translations (for example, works by Zeno, Aristid, Theon of Alexandria, various neoplatonic commentaries on Aristotle’s works, and so forth). This “translation boom” left a deep and lasting trace in Armenian culture in general and in the Armenian language in particular. For instance, Armenians still celebrate the canonical religious festival of the Saint Translators today. On the linguistic level, many calques⁴⁹ from the Greek were introduced at this time, and these calques continue to function in contemporary Armenian. Indeed, some modern authors and translators even prefer such calques to more ordinary and “less prestigious” words.⁵⁰ The calque principle, which is actually a legacy of the Golden Age of translation, is one of the most popular tools used by modern purists in their drive to create a true and pure Armenian. The purist principle thus transmogrifies into a sort of hypertranslation or “translation mania,” that is, a tendency to interpret or to find a meaning or a proper word in the mother tongue for everything in the world.⁵¹

⁴⁸ In shamanistic cultures, the shaman often plays the role of the First Man; speaks a specific, divine language incomprehensible to ordinary people; and journeys to the land of the dead. Priests, likewise, often symbolically embody the First Man, who in turn is commonly represented in the composite form of the king-priest. Like shamans, priests in many cultures also speak an archaic language incomprehensible to the majority of believers. Too much distance between shaman and kin, priest and laity, president and people, however, may generate a popular reaction against such ritualized separations, as in the Reformation-era fight for a comprehensible language of the Liturgy, or in the opposition’s derision of the dead languages of the philologist president Ter-Petrossian. Many variants on the relation of language and the First Man are possible. For instance, the attribution of a foreign or incomprehensible language to the First Man may relate this figure to the alien as progenitor of national dynasties, for example in Armenian and Russian traditions.

⁴⁹ A calque is a semantic borrowing in which a native word takes on a special or extended meaning developed as an analogy to a word having the same basic meaning in a foreign language.

⁵⁰ For example, modern Armenian translators of “Rigveda” chose the word *himn* of Greek origin, or the word *nerbol*, a calque from the Greek (Acharian 1977: 445), for the Sanskrit word for “hymn,” even though there is a more ancient and common word *erg* in Armenian. Ironically, *erg* is much closer etymologically to the Sanskrit original (Acharian 1973: 42), and is even reflected in the name of the “Rigveda” itself.

⁵¹ Sometimes this results in paradoxical or absurd situations, when Armenian is claimed to be “more articulate” than the original language! Thus there is an Armenian word *agevaz* (from *agn* ‘tail’ and *vazel* ‘to run’, i.e., ‘one who runs on its tail’) for “kangaroo,” a universal word of Australian Aboriginal origin with unclear etymological roots. However, plausible etymological speculations on the origin of “kangaroo” have nothing to do with the purported “explanation” that the Armenian *agevaz* presents.

The English word *interpretation* elegantly captures the dynamic interplay of the “foreign” and the “native” we see in reconstructing the impact of translations and foreign borrowings on a mother tongue. Indeed, this interplay often takes the form of improvised juxtapositions of the unknown and alien to something familiar evoked by the word interpretation. In this light, the Armenian trend to hypertranslation corresponds to a clear tendency in the etymology of Armenian words toward maximal description. For example, while the English word *rose* for color has one root, the similar Armenian word *vardaguyn* needs two roots: *vard* ‘rose’ and *guyñ* ‘color’. It is difficult to say whether this peculiarity of Armenian is a result of the Armenian national character or, on the contrary, simply reflects the influence of the semantic structure of the language on the national character. In any case, the clear tendency of Armenian intellectuals to over-interpret languages and word-origins correlates with certain aspects of Armenian culture.⁵²

The invention of the Armenian alphabet not only occasioned a metaphorical cult of translation, but also a real cult of writing and books in Armenia.⁵³ We thus see one of the primary reasons why the Matenadaran, the famous repository of ancient manuscripts in Yerevan, became a kind of temple for Armenians.⁵⁴ Many manuscripts and books considered holy by their former owners are kept in the Matenadaran. In villages, such books are traditionally personified by a saint bearing the popular name of the book (for example, “The Red Gospel”). Up to the present day, some of the former owners of these holy books make pilgrimages to the Matenadaran to perform rituals of worship to their former patrons, presenting the books with flowers.⁵⁵ After the destructive earthquake of 1988, a colleague who participated in rescue operations informed me that rescue workers gave almost the same care to books as to the people they extracted from under the ruins. I myself witnessed a similar case in this same period, when I met a father who had risked his life by entering his tumble-down building simply to rescue his daughter’s textbooks.

The traditional Armenian respect and even reverence for the book was a principal reason for the very negative attitude of the populace toward the school reforms designed in the mid-1990s by Ashot Bleyan, the former Minister of Education. Bleyan tried to introduce the novelty of a combined textbook and exercise book, which was widely disliked. As an informant told me, “Books are for reading, not for writing in.” The attempt to introduce a common Western, and particularly American, pedagogical device thus generated broad dissatisfaction precisely because it reflected American teaching methods and the much more casual, even disrespectful, American attitude toward books and literary culture in general, an attitude deeply at odds with Armenian tradition. Of course, I’m reflecting my cultural roots here, but Armenians find it shocking to see how American students casually deface their textbooks, and even their library books, with multicolored markers.⁵⁶

⁵² Observe, for example, the rich, illustrative character of Armenian curses.

⁵³ See Petrossian (n.d.).

⁵⁴ See Abrahamian (n.d.).

⁵⁵ Greppin (1988).

⁵⁶ In the Soviet tradition, Lenin stands out as a notable figure famous for his disrespectful attitude towards library books. Indeed, Lenin used to write down marginal remarks even in the books he was reading in the library of the British Museum.

Another poorly received novelty of the former Armenian Education Minister was the introduction of the method of teaching the mother tongue in the first classes of primary schools by using play and designs prior to learning the alphabet. Nationalists in particular reacted with particular hostility to this reform, which they saw as an attempt to delay and hinder the child's learning of the national alphabet. Indeed, Bleyan's educational innovations, when combined with the attempt of the Ter-Petrossian government to reform the general teaching of national history, were broadly interpreted as a conspiracy on the Minister's part against Armenian identity. Many parents went so far as to bribe teachers to teach their children the mother tongue "illegally" by using the traditional method of introducing the alphabet from the first day of education.⁵⁷

All of this helps explain the conditions within which contemporary Armenian national identity has formed, and thus some of the peculiarities of contemporary Armenian nationalist discourse. Perhaps the cult of the written word will remain a centerpiece of Armenian nationalist programs and identity-formation until computers—with their enormous capacity to fix and at the same time lose words—bring the "information revolution" to Armenian soil.

LANGUAGE, FESTIVALS AND THE ENACTMENT OF IDENTITY

According to the Biblical story, the division of the original language of humankind—or, as linguists would say, the sprouting of the first twigs of the linguistic tree—occurred when God stopped the building of the tower of Babel by suddenly transforming the language of its builders into many mutually incomprehensible languages. There are moments in the life of a multilingual society, however, which appear as the exact reverse of this story, moments when the original language of communal unity seems to be regained. These moments are precisely the moments of cultural festivals. In the bilingual Yerevan of 1988, such a reunion took place during the mass nationalist rallies, which in many aspects resembled archaic festivals.⁵⁸ During these "festivals," the opposed poles of Armenian/Russian bilingualism suddenly seemed reconciled, together with the other semantic and symbolic oppositions that during "normal" times give cultural life in Yerevan its distinctive qualities.

The momentary unification of these linguistic and symbolic oppositions reached its zenith on the first day of the February rallies, when a Russian-speaking leader made a speech which captivated the crowd. Given the larger national and political context of these events, one might guess that the people gathered in the square would express dismay at a Russian-language speech given in the middle of a rally for Armenian solidarity. But the content of the speaker's message disarmed any discontent. "A Central Committee sec-

⁵⁷ This situation was aggravated at times by school teachers themselves, especially by those reluctant or unable to learn new methods of language teaching. Conservative and older mothers also played a considerable role in creating the hostile attitude to the reforms, since mothers, as a rule, help their children prepare homework, at least during the first years of primary school. Many young mothers, on the contrary, assured me that the new methods were very helpful and progressive, and they didn't see any harm to their children's national identity in them.

⁵⁸ See Abrahamian (1990 and 1993).

retary addressed you a moment ago,” the Russian-speaking leader said, “and he spoke Armenian. And what did he say to you?” The speaker went on to contrast the empty words of his predecessor and his own genuine solidarity with the Armenian people’s longing for cultural autonomy. Indeed, he said many things which pleased the crowd, though in Russian. From that moment until the end of Yerevan’s remarkable season of political festival in November 1988, the opposition between the two languages in fact vanished. This opposition crept back into everyday life and national discourse once the season of political festival had run its course, and the outbreak of an intense controversy over the role of Armenian and Russian-language schools in the education of Armenian children re-ignited the antagonism of many Armenians toward the speaking of Russian. This conflict, as we have already seen, culminated in the programmatic victory of Armenian language and identity in educational policy. Nevertheless, though fleeting, 1988’s “season of political festival” embodied precisely the specific and deeply felt communal unity pined after by nationalist intellectuals of all stripes, a sense of living communal unity notably absent in the subsequent “post-festival” period of independent Armenia’s state- and nation-building projects.

Thus we come full circle, standing face-to-face with the deep ambiguities entailed in the search for an elusive unity at play in all drives to fashion a national identity. Indeed, looking back through the mist of the centuries, the unity seemingly shared by the mythical builders of the tower of Babel, despite their loss of a mother tongue, appears to us now as closer to God than that of our own national communities today.

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