

BILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE PLANNING IN ARMENIA

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Language planning in Armenia is part of language policy and government policy in general. After the destruction of the USSR, the Armenian government became more independent to adopt a policy with regard to the languages spoken in Armenia. Armenian is a major language used in education, administration and public life. It is also the main means of communication for such minority groups as Kurds, Greeks, Yezidies and others who master Armenian along with their mother tongues. Language planning in Armenia is also directed at the further development of minority languages, for its main principles are based on the assumption that the mother tongue must be used as the initial medium for the child's general cognitive development, besides it is a necessary prerequisite for the healthy development of the child's personality and will hinder forced cultural as well as linguistic assimilation of minority groups.

This is the line adopted by the Armenian government and it proved effective during the long history of Armenian people. Thus, the only model that can be adopted in Armenia is to guarantee the preservation and development of all the languages spoken in the area – sharing the sociolinguistic functions between state language– Armenian.

It should be noted anyway, that the minority groups are not in the same position concerning language. Greeks, Kurds and others have to learn Armenian in order to attain a certain degree of bilingualism (very often they know Armenian better than their mother tongue) if they want to participate in mainstream society, whereas Russians are in a much more comfortable position: they often don't learn Armenian (though they might live in Armenia all their lives), as most Armenians know Russian due to the long contact with Russians and due to the fact that Russian has been the main language of communication in the USSR (and still is). So, Russian can be considered a minority language in Armenia only from a pragmatic point of view, the position of Russians isn't the same as of the other minority groups, and besides, they have majority not minority psychology.

Being the major language in Armenia, language planning is now directed towards the development and purification of Armenian. A proposal has been made to replace English,

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Russian, etc. loan-words by new Armenian coinages. At present the Terminological Committee in Armenia is working at this problem and has invented a number of new words to replace borrowings. Some of them have become publicly accepted but most loan-words appear to be very persistent: this especially concerns terms in computer language, political science, management, business and other spheres. Probably, this is due to the fact that the flow of loan-words is great, the literature found on this branches is generally non-Armenian, besides, the purist forms proposed are often not very happy ones.

Language planning undoubtedly plays an important part in the nation's life, and yet it is not always effective, as it is not easy to force to speak a certain way, especially in a relatively short period. Often the choice of the individuals exhibited in their speech conflicts the language planning adopted by Language Academies. On the other hand, such purist tendencies seem to be only natural: after the destruction of the Soviet Union Language Laws acquired defensive functions so as to protect the Armenian language. It should be noted in this respect, however, that the rights of the Russian-speaking population are not violated as they seem to be in other republics (e. g. in Baltic republics). First of all, the percentage of Russians is very small in Armenia as compared to other republics, secondly, Russian is still the first language for a large group of Armenians; they are more fluent in Russian, than in Armenian (the result of former language policy). In such families children also know Russian better than Armenian, especially in their preschool period.

The main language used in school and institutions of higher education now is Armenian. But it is not, of course, the only language taught at school. Russian as a second language is compulsory at school in the first grade. A third foreign language (mostly English) is compulsory in second or third grades. The knowledge Armenians have of Russian and their command of it is far better than that of any foreign language and that is only natural. The number of Russian programs on TV and radio, the variety of numerous newspapers and magazines published in Russian, etc. account for it. The Russian-Soviet mentality still prevails among the elderly people calling forth nostalgic moods and filling them with contempt towards everything modern (especially American).

An important stimulus in successful second language learning is the attitudinal orientation towards the second language. Second language learning is directed by individual's motivation for language learning. The target language may be mastered at different levels. Much depends on the aim of learners. Quite often learning a second (foreign) language is motivated by the need of a passive knowledge –the need of access to the literature of foreign

peoples. Of course, much depends also on the individual features of the learners: their intelligence, age, language aptitude.

The choice of a second language depends also on a number of other factors: historical, social, economic, cultural and others, perhaps this is the reason why in the course of history languages like Persian, Turkish, Russian were chosen as second and often even as first languages. So, in the Armenian community bilingualism is the norm, rather than the exception.

There was a marked difference between teaching Russian as a second language and teaching a foreign language in Armenia (perhaps in other republics of the Soviet Union as well). Teaching Russian was marked by the orientation towards the assimilation of the Russian culture; while the approach to the teaching of foreign languages was minimally cultural. Thus, the textbooks of English, as well as the Russian ones were full of texts like “Mr. Petrov is a worker. He works in a factory. He is a young Communist”, and so on, and so forth. Nowadays the old Soviet textbooks are being replaced by new ones, which try to fill this gap.

Increasingly significant in second language teaching is the problem of relation between the mother tongue and the foreign language. In the process of mastering a foreign language bilingual thinking serves as a link: the speaker’s conscious and unconscious wish to facilitate the communication (with the consideration of psychological, ethnic, cultural, etc. factors) makes changes in the relation of the languages on the grammatical, semantic, syntactic and logical levels.

Most often a foreign language is taught to subjects who come from bilingual families and already know Armenian and Russian, and those two languages influence to a certain degree, the acquisition of a third language. With the consideration of similarities and differences that exist between language pairs, the process of the language acquisition could be made more resourceful. Parallels made between languages help children to understand the language phenomena better, they widen their scope and teach to generalize “Learning a second language leads the child to the mastering of the highest forms of the native language. It makes the child realize that the native language is a particular case of the system, and so gives him an opportunity to generalize the phenomena of his own language and thus, to realize his speech operations and master them” (Vygotsky, 1956: 292).

The language policy in Armenia encourages the schoolchildren and students to also study a foreign language. In most schools English is taught as a foreign language, in some others French or German, and even Persian.

It must be noted, however, that unfortunately schools do not offer much opportunity for language learning (lack of textbooks, competent teachers, normal conditions, audio and video apparatus). After leaving school most young people are not able to speak either the second or the third language taught at school. In order to reach the stage of understanding and especially speaking and writing they have to develop language skills by taking private lessons, attending courses, etc. It is amazing, but a lot of teachers of English testify that applicants for institutions of higher education manage to learn a foreign language (more or less) in nine or ten months, covering the school program, which was to be learnt in the period of eight years, and successfully pass their entrance exams. So, much work must be done concerning educational programs. Perhaps the whole program of bilingual education should be changed.

Most Armenian parents are for bilingual (trilingual) education thinking that it is the best education they can give their children and generally do not tend to associate it with problems which seem to disturb parents in Europe: the detrimental effect bilingual education might have on individuals, the problem of cultural values, the negative impact it might have on personality or identity development. Most children get bilingual education from early childhood: actually they come from bilingual families where their parents (usually belonging to intelligentsia) are interested in the child's bilingual (trilingual) education: "Every new foreign language changes the focus of examining the world around us, directs our attention to new aspects of knowledge and acts as an additional, extralogical factor of realizing all that goes on around us" (Brutyán, 1968: 55).

One of the main factors influencing language maintenance is social status and economic status closely related to it. As schools do not offer much, those who want to learn a foreign language have to take private lessons, which not many can afford. And of course, last but not least is the prestige value of mastering internationally accepted languages like English, French, Spanish, German.

Thus, the two tendencies that can be observed in many countries seem to prevail in Armenia as well: the nation's natural instinct to preserve its identity, culture and language on the one hand, and the influence of modern science and technology (mostly American) reflected in the life and language of the country on the other

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