

## Armenian Dialectology

NAASR Conference: Armenian Studies in the 21st Century

November 3-5, 1995

### 1. Introduction

I believe it is safe to say that the defining moment in modern Armenian history is the Genocide; Armenologists have therefore rightly focused on the Genocide in their work since 1915. This work has primarily involved three activities: investigating the contemporary political climate that led the Young Turks to develop and implement their program for the systematic elimination of the Armenians while Europe watched; collecting documentation to convince Turkey and the West that the Genocide actually occurred; and recording the experiences of Survivors during those fatal days.

The survivors of the Genocide did not just live for those few dark days, though. Before the Genocide, these ill-starred Armenians led rich lives in the hundreds of Armenian villages throughout Turkey that are now in ruins or inhabited by Kurds. According to the survivors I have spoken with, they led happy lives full of song, dance, humor, stories, and tradition. Here is an example of a typical song sung in those happier days by the Zoks, the Armenians of Agulis in southeastern Naxichevan [PLAY MOUSSIAN SONG].

(1) transcript of Zok song

Elders such as Ervand Melik-Moussian, the 96-year-old Zok who after seeing most of his family killed by the Turkish Army in 1919 lived to sing this song to myself and James Russell in New Jersey in 1995, are the last witnesses of true Armenian culture, as it was preserved in the villages of historical Armenia long after the intellectual centers of Istanbul, Erevan, and Tiflis had abandoned their ancient traditions in favor of Western industrial culture. When NAASR was founded in 1955, these survivors who were adults in 1915 were already advanced in age. Now, forty years later, the last few remaining survivors are in their nineties, and we lose more of them every day. It is therefore imperative that we devote our attentions to these elders immediately, and learn whatever we can of their lives, traditions, and culture before they are gone forever. For this reason I have devoted my energies since arriving in Boston six years ago to working with these survivors and their families. I have accomplished a fair amount in this time, but much much more remains to be done. Here in America we have the best combination of Armenian communities and technological resources to carry out this work, yet it is not done. I hope my words can encourage some of you to take up this calling.

Now, what exactly is involved in this traditional culture that we wish to preserve? At the heart of culture lies language. Humor, for example, relies heavily on language-specific wordplay: only Armenians can appreciate the affinity between a brother (*akbar*) and a garbageman (*akb-ar*). Only Armenians from the Van area can appreciate that the adjective *keř* 'crooked' can also be used to refer to Kurds, *sev* 'black' refers to a Yezidi, *mazvur* 'hairy' can also mean 'priest', *bakarj* 'unleavened bread' also means 'moon', *kōč* 'knuckle bone' also means 'old woman', *χuv* 'cottage' also means 'man', and so on.

(2)	metonymy	<i>keř</i> ‘crooked’	⇒	‘Kurd’
		<i>sev</i> ‘black’	⇒	‘Yezidi’
		<i>mazvur</i> ‘hairy’	⇒	‘priest’
replacement	<i>bakarj</i> ‘unleavened bread’	⇒	‘moon’	
	<i>kōč</i> ‘knuckle bone’	⇒	‘old woman’	
	<i>χuv</i> ‘cottage’	⇒	‘man’	

The heart of a culture is also reflected in its idiomatic expressions, which again are highly language-specific. The Armenians of Hamshen on the Black Sea, for example, who call their language Homshecma, have a saying *vur keč'i šebeču χeč'i*, literally ‘hit, goat, hit, so that it falls down’, used to goad someone into action (3).

(3)	<i>vur</i>	<i>keč'i</i>	<i>šebeču</i>	<i>χeč'i</i>
	hit.imperative	goat	hit.imperative	fall-3sg.subjunctive
	‘hit, goat, hit, [so that it] falls down’			

The efficacy of this idiom crucially depends on the linguistic tools available exclusively to the Homsheci: living in a Turkish-speaking milieu, he can play the Turkish verb *vurmak* ‘hit’ against its Homshecma equivalent *šebečnuš*--which, I should mention, does not seem to be used in standard Armenian, though it is found in the dialects of Van, Erevan, and Ghazax. Similarly, he can rhyme the Turkish word *keçi* ‘goat’ with the Homshecma verb *χečuš* ‘fall’, which again is rare in standard Armenian.

When a detested person sneezes, a Homsheci can say *sadga!*, literally ‘die like an animal!’. This usage may strike a chord with those of you who grew up in Armenian-speaking households. The same basic meaning can be expressed in English by saying ‘die like an animal!’, but this concept clearly does not have the status in the lexicon of English that it has in Armenian, and the appeal of the expression is lost. Wordplay of these types is clearly highly dependent on the language and culture in which it is formulated.

Another of the important manifestations of culture, poetry, relies on linguistic devices such as alliteration, rhyme, and meter, which do not transfer happily to other languages. Let us return to Hamshen, where minstrels traditionally compete in composing songs in the town square. One such song that my informant Temel Yilmaz remembered began as follows:

(4)	<i>monin ive ellovum</i>	I’ll go up the oak tree
	<i>moni mole va tovum</i>	I drop the oak leaves down
	<i>če kyavin aχčganoun</i>	Your village’s girls
	<i>govu bes țarmanovum</i>	I’ll feed like cows

One of the poetic devices employed in this verse is rhyme of the final sequence *-ouN*, which for a number of reasons is only possible in Homshecma in this particular case. Homshecma has assimilated many features of Turkish phonology, including a rule that optionally allows deletion of intervocalic /v/. This rule allows *ellovum*, *tovum*, and *țarmanovum*, each of which has an underlying /v/, to rhyme with *aχčganoun*, which does not. Homshecma forms the future tense by adding the participial suffix *-ov* to the verb

root; this allows the verbs ‘I’ll go up’ and ‘I’ll feed’ to rhyme with the present subjunctive *fobum*, in which the *-ov* sequence is actually part of the root. This would not be possible in standard Armenian, which would use *bidi ellem* (in SWA) or *kelnem* (in SEA). The same is true with the Homshecma dative plural suffix *-noun*, which is well-suited to rhyme with the first person verbal forms employed here, whereas the corresponding SWA and SEA forms *-nerun* and *-nerin* respectively would not work at all.

It should be clear from these examples that Armenian culture would not and could not be what it is without the Armenian language. But what exactly is the Armenian language? We all know that there is no single entity that can be called the Armenian language: we minimally have to deal with SWA, SEA, Classical Armenian, and Middle Armenian. Armenian encompasses more than just these literary languages, however. In addition to a number of distinct languages, such as Zok (which I mentioned earlier), *Kyevac’aneren* (the language of Zeytun), *Kesbanok’* (the language of Kesab), and perhaps strangest of all, the language of the Armenian gypsies, there are well over 120 remarkably different dialects of Armenian. Like the local cultures they represent, each of these dialects has its own unique archaisms and innovations. You can get an idea of how different these dialects can be from one another from the versions of Tumanian’s story “The Liar” that I’ve collected in (5).

[Can anyone identify any of these dialects?]

(5) *Sutasanə* ‘The Liar’, by Hovhannes Tumanian

**Version 1:** *χαρόβε*

*gonna gu čgonna gu mek’ kəral me gonna gu. as kərales uune milläfin anons gena: ‘vov u oyle bir çapaana yes asim çapəlu ča im kərallouz gese garnu.’ ku ka hoyiv me gasa, ‘kərale sav elli, im babas hast meg pır me uner, an pıre isti ergencenelov havayin astavniye çarne gur.’ ‘elli gaa,’ kərale jevab gu da. ‘im babs a mek’ pıpo me uner meg jare pıane tene gur meg al jare aakagan kole gur.’ χαρόβε kəloxe kiyelov heruna gu. terzi me ku ka gasa, ‘af aa, kəral, tēz me ka ama ušac’a. eek’ šat’ čax eyev šimšəknerē gajgedec’in havan baderečav gargauš kənaaj ε.’ ‘ha, bedk’ ε avajues,’ kərale gasa, ‘ama soy gargede čarčaj es. asakvan a kič me čax eyev.’ terzin a tūs kella. aχkad mart me mečnuz mednu gu tēvin dage kova me. kərale harčena gu, ‘tun inč kuzes fa?’ ‘inji meg kova me altun dalik’ unes; donuš egaj im.’ šaširmiš gena kərale, ‘meg kova me? çapēs gu, yes kēzi altun dalik’ čunim.’ ‘madem ki çapı gum na, kəralləvət gese du.’ ‘ča ča, šidag çarbe gus,’ kərale astaje farčena gu. ‘astajes šidag a fa a na, du kova me altune.’ čaresiz kərale kova me altune gu da.*

**Version 2:** *sot ásovə*

*inúm a činúm min takavór a inúm. es takavórə ü’ ün yerkrúm tarácum a: ‘hu min sot ası, ver yes ásim sot a, im təkavorutyán ke’sə ürán kətám.’ min čóban kyam a ásum, ‘takavérə áprac kená. im här min kópal a ünec’ al ver este’ vic’ me’ knum er yerkinči astvə’ rner çárnım.’ ‘kəpətáhi,’ takavérə asum a. ‘im papn el min čúbuç óner min cérə pıranın er tinúm en min cern er me’ knum a arevíc’ vářum.’ sot ásovə kəlóçə kórelav tūs ü kyinum. min dérjak a kyam ásum, ‘nervutyún təkáver, yes ε’ kúic’ pıti kyä’ i ušac’a. yerke’ šat for yekáv. kəcıkəraknérə tərakəcín ye’ rkinkə čəvve’ l er kyec’al eı kərkəte’ lu.’ ‘ha, lav əs əral,’ asum a təkáverə, ‘bayč lav čəs kərkátal. es əřávut el mi çərə’ gy anjre’ v ye’ ka.’ es el a tūs kyinúm. min kýásib šináci a ni mətnúm, kótə kúřnə tákin. ‘tu hinč əs ózum ay*

*mart?*’ *təkáver harcnuím a.* ‘*inj min kot və’ski əs patk. ye’ kal əm taním.*’ ‘*mi kot vəski?*’  
*zərmánum a təkáverə,* ‘*sot əs asúm. yes kəz və’ski čəm patk.*’ ‘*devér sot əm asúm,*  
*təkavorutyánəf kəsə inj to.*’ ‘*če če, düz əs asúm,*’ *χóskə póχum a təkáverə.* ‘*devér düz*  
*um asum, mi kot vəskis tur.*’

**Version 3:** *sot χusuəbə* [Qaladuran (Kesab)]

*gicir i čí gicir i təkávür mə. üt təkávürə gəsi er ihalen:* ‘*uv ər mic seöd mə χüsä, is esim*  
*seöd i, təkévürüftünes gəsə gudum er.*’ *gu kú huvev mə gəsi, ‘təkévürə sav ginö. im düədə*  
*guniər huést verüć mə, zän gidnän gə mingier tərvir zerginkən zarastəv ginnirə gə*  
*χeringer.’ ‘garnu ənnu,’ gəsi təkévürü, ‘im duədə guniər qəlun mə miəg jarkə birunə gə*  
*təniər miäl jarkə gərgencəniər eriven gə varier zə.’ sot χusuəbə gə harvəno kəloχə*  
*kəriluən. gu kú tərzey mə, gəsi, ‘nerobutyun təkévür, is evilä uχtuəv bidä ukərem himičü*  
*iriek’ šuat enjəriv igik. gəjgədilien gardilien ergenkə badəřicüəv gečüəj erəm zə*  
*gergedilə.’ ‘šuat əbüür iruəj is,’ gəsi təkévürə, ‘əmmə əbüür čí gergeduəj ere zə. əs*  
*səbəχtän keyč mə enjəriv igik.’ tərzeyn ili turicü gənni. niksi gə mənňä əχkuat kekečey*  
*mə gulueyə fiven duəkə. ‘teon čey hə uzis ay mort?’ gə harcəni təkévürə. ‘ənji miəg*  
*guluək isgä buordk is. iguəj im zə denilə.’ ‘guluəm isgä?’ gə šašməšənnə təkévürə,*  
*‘seöd hə χuseys. is ki isgä buordk čim.’ ‘än ki seöd hə χuseym, təkévurufunəf giəse deo.’*  
*‘čí čí, uəurf hə χuseys,’ χueskə hə pəχi təkévürə. ‘fi uəurf i im esuəjə, deo inji guluəmə*  
*isgä.’ umóda gədariluən təkévürə gu dueyer guluəmə isgä.*

I’d now like to summarize quickly for you the work that has been and is currently being done on the dialects of Armenian.

**2. The Past**

*2.1. Proto-Dialectology*

In a sense, the first Armenian dialectologist was the fifth century theologian Eznik, who observed that in his time there were two dialects of Armenian, one in the north and one in the south. Speaking of the Classical Armenian form *ays*, he says:

- (6) *yoržam mek’ asemk’ tē sik’ šnčē, storneayk’ asen` ays šnčē*  
 ‘when we (i.e. Armenians of Koghb and northern Armenia) say *sik’ šnčē* for ‘a wind is blowing’, the southern Armenians say *ays šnčē*’.

The form *ays* was in fact used in the north, but in the meaning ‘evil spirit’ or ‘demon’; the southern Armenians preferred *dev* for this function.

Armenian dialects are next mentioned by the early Armenian grammarians; the sixth century translation of Dionysus Thrax refers to the dialect of Gordayk’, for example, and the eighth century commentary of Step’anos of Siwnik’ mentions eight dialects: Korçayk’, Tayk’, Xut’ayk’, Fourth Armenia, Sperk’, Siwnik’, Arcax, and Central Armenia (Ararat).

*2.2. The Beginnings of Armenian Dialectology: 18th Century*

The first analysis of significant amounts of dialect material was Rivola’s *Dictionarium Armeno-Latinum*, published in Paris in 1624, which contained numerous lexical items from

New Julfa and other dialects. Rivola did not distinguish between the dialects he employed, however.

Schröder's immensely useful *Thesaurus Linguae Armeniacae*, published in Amsterdam in 1711, provides extensive samples of Agulis, New Julfa, and other Armenian dialects. Both of these important works are available on microfilm for those of you who are interested.

### 2.3. *The Heyday of Armenian dialectology: 19th Century*

The nineteenth century saw an explosion of interest in the dialects of Armenian. Shahan Ĵarbed (Cirbied), a Tokat Armenian who was professor of Armenian in Paris, devoted an entire section of his 1823 *Grammaire de la Langue Arménienne* to the nonliterary dialects of Armenian, some 30 in number. In 1850, Shirmazanian published his *Patmutiwnk' i Lezu Erewanc'oc'* 'Stories in the Language of the Erevancis', which discussed general features of the Erevan dialect. In 1852, Haxverdian's *Sayat-Nova* appeared in Moscow; the first portion of this landmark publication was devoted to the grammar of Haxverdian and Sayat-Nova's native dialect of Tiflis. Aydānian's important *K'nnakan Kerakanutiwn ašxarhabar kam ardi hayeren lezui* 'Critical Grammar of the Modern Armenian Language' appeared in Vienna in 1866. Aydānian postulated the existence of Armenian dialects already in the fifth century, citing a mention by Koriwn in the fifth century of Armenian dialects in Siwnik' and in the land of the Medes (Agulis). He divided the modern dialects into four groups: Eastern Turkey, Western Turkey, Europe, and Russia/Persia/India. Petermann's study of the Agulis dialect appeared in Berlin in the same year.

Spurred on in part by the nationalism and romanticism sweeping through Europe, Armenian dialectology reached its zenith in the second half of the nineteenth century. Just as the brothers Grimm scoured the 19th century German countryside in search of pure and ancient Germanic folklore, Armenians such as Garegin Srvanctean returned to their village roots in search of a lost epic past that could rival those being produced in neighboring countries. Srvanctean's discovery of the Sasun epic is one of the many fruits of this halcyon period of intellectual curiosity. Numerous works on the language and ethnography of Armenian villages followed in quick succession, documented in books such as Allahverdian's *Ulnia kam Zeytun* (1884), Sedrakean's *K'nar Mšec'woč' ew Vaneč'woč'* (1874), Sherents' *Vana Saz* (1885, 1899), Haykuni's *Eminean Azgagrakan Žobovacu* (1900-13), and Lalayean's *Vaspurakan* (1912, 1914), and in journals such as *Murč*, *Biwrakn*, and *Azgagrakan Handes*.

The first true Armenian dialectologist was Patkanov, whose *Izsledovanie o Dialektax' Armjanskago Jazyka* 'Treatise on the Dialects of the Armenian Language' appeared in Saint Petersburg in 1869. His monumental work provided phonological, morphological sketches of the dialects of Astraxan, Erevan, Tiflis, Agulis, Karabagh, Xoy, New Julfa, Mush, Poland, and New Naxichevan. Soon thereafter, a veritable flood of dialect grammars began to pour out of Europe and Armenia: notable examples include Petermann's 1867 grammar of Tiflis dialect, Sargseanc's 1883 grammar of Agulis dialect, Hanusz's 1886 dictionary of Polish Armenian, Tomson's grammars of the Axalcxa and Tiflis dialects (1887, 1890), and Mserianc's various works dealing with the Mush dialect (1897).

The pinnacle of this period was of course the work of Hrachea Adjarian, who studied with the French Indo-Europeanist Antoine Meillet in the early 1890's, and was probably responsible for Meillet's intense interest in Armenian. Adjarian was the first scholar to bring contemporary European linguistic tools to bear on the manifold intricacies of the Armenian dialects. He was also insanely productive, and not only churned out dozens of groundbreaking books on Armenian dialects and the Armenian language in general, but also singlehandedly founded the modern schools of Armenian linguistics and dialectology that still survive in Armenia today.

#### *2.4. The Fall of Armenian Dialects and Dialectology: 20thC*

The twentieth century began with Armenian dialectology still at its peak. Meillet's students Adjarian, Davit Bek, Maxudianz, and Benveniste produced an abundance of excellent dialectological studies. The school that Adjarian began in Armenia would ultimately produce such productive dialectologists as Jahukyan, Gharibyan, Grigoryan, the two Muradyans, and Adjarian's niece, Amalya Xachaturyan.

Despite the massive interest in Armenian dialectology and folklore, however, at the turn of the century there were far more Armenian villages, dialects, songs, stories, and so on than could be collected by the army of amateur and professional Armenologists. Unfortunately, this changed forever in 1915, when most of these villages were eradicated.

Dialectological work has continued since 1915, with notable products such as Malxasianc's *Hayeren Bac'adrakan Ba'aran* (1944), the dialect grammars and dialect survey produced by the Institute of Dialectology in Erevan, Dumezil's studies of Hamshen and Musaler dialects, Pisowicz' grammar of the Pharpi dialect, and the memorial volumes produced by the various compatriotic organizations. Sadly, though, the popular interest in the language and culture of village Armenia has largely faded away.

### **3. The Present**

At the present time, very little is being done on Armenian dialectology. The Institute of Dialectology is still technically active, and engaged in the collection of materials for its monumental dialect atlas. In practice, however, these plans appear to have been put on hold indefinitely, as Armenia has more pressing matters to attend to.

One of our best living linguists and dialectologists working on Armenian is Andrzej Pisowicz, who I mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, the materialistic malaise that is currently afflicting American universities has also struck Poland, and as a result professor Pisowicz is currently working at the Polish embassy in Teheran.

The bright light of contemporary Armenian dialectology is the University of Leiden in Holland, which currently features two excellent dialectologists, Jos Weitenberg and Uwe Bläsing. Professor Weitenberg is primarily concerned with reconstructing the chronology of linguistic developments between proto and modern Armenian, using evidence from manuscript 'errors' and from dialects. Professor Bläsing is a Turkologist by trade, but his wife is a Hemshin Turk, and he has consequently done a great deal of immensely useful work on the Armenian lexical material that survives in the Turkish dialect of Hemshin.

Since Holland does not have a very significant Armenian population, these professors have not devoted much energy to field work with Armenian informants. This is

where I come into the picture. With the possible exception of California, Boston is the ideal location for working with the last speakers of Armenian dialects. It may not have the same variety of dialects that one could find in Armenia or Lebanon, but it has enough to make a large dent in the dialectological work that remains to be done, and it has the technical facilities that are lacking in those countries. In my six years here I have thus far worked with speakers of fifteen distinct dialects of Armenian. My work on these dialects has been directed toward four main goals:

- 1) To save as many Armenian dialects as possible. Unfortunately, it may not be possible to save any variety of Armenian other than Standard Eastern, as I will discuss in a minute.
- 2) To record as much dialect material as possible on audio and video tape; the information gathered in this way will be of more use to future researchers than simple transcriptions, which never capture all of the nuances of actual speech.
- 3) To revitalize the field of Armenian dialectology by demonstrating to Armenologists and to scholars in my own field, theoretical linguistics, that the Armenian dialects are a rich and important source of untapped information.
- 4) To make the wealth of Armenian dialect materials available to the interested public, via circulation of my tapes, translation of rare dialectological works and publication of new dialect materials.

#### **4. The Future**

Now, what are the future prospects for Armenian dialectology? At the moment the future looks bleak, because all of the nonstandard dialects are dying. Many dialects, such as Akn and Nicomedi,<sup>a</sup> appear to be already dead; many more are alive but have only a handful of speakers remaining, such as Marash and Van. A fair number of dialects still have communities wherein everyone speaks the dialect, but in some of these, such as Zeytun and Agulis, the communities do not have a permanent location and will probably disappear in the near future. Those which do have permanent locations, such as Hamshen, Kesab, Anjar, Diarbekir, and the various dialects in Armenia proper, stand a much better chance of surviving but are already beset by the pressures of the official languages of the countries in which they are spoken.

The key to understanding the future of these dialects is to look not at the number of people that speak them, but rather at whether or not the children are learning them. Thus, for example, the number of Zeytun speakers is fairly large, but of my Zeytunci friends I know *none* whose children speak the dialect. By this measure, in fact, even Standard Western Armenian is in trouble; the Armenians in the audience can readily see this by considering the number of American Armenians they know under the age of 21 who are fluent speakers of Armenian.

Now, some of you may ask: Is it worth saving these endangered dialects of Armenian? The answer is emphatically **yes**. I have already argued that language is an essential part of culture; without the Hamshen language, for example, we cannot fully appreciate the culture of the Hamshen Armenians. It is also important to know something about these dialects in order to appreciate Armenian literature. Literary Armenian was not created *ex nihilo*, nor does it exist in a vacuum; it draws its strength from the dialectal sources from which it was derived. Consider for example the influence on the standard language of such writers as Sundukyan, who wrote in Tiflis dialect, Raffi (Salmast

dialect), Patkanean (Nor Naxichevan), or Shirvanzade (Shamaxi). Finally, by preserving these varieties of Armenian, we also preserve the oral literature, songs, games, and traditions that are the backbone of Armenian culture.

So, what can we do to save the endangered dialects of Armenian? I can think of two obvious possibilities. First, we can kill two birds with one stone. Children need child care, and in our industrialized American society, more and more of our elders are ignored and abandoned. Why not establish child care centers where the elders, who are the repository of our culture's language and traditions, care for the children, who can acquire languages effortlessly?

Secondly, we must provide incentive for Armenians and odars to study Armenian. At present, students do not perceive Armenology to be a viable course of study, because there are so few jobs available. By the same token, no university is going to create such jobs when there are no students! The Turkish government has seen the way to break this vicious circle, namely by forcing universities to create professorships. The only way that universities will offer Armenian courses is if they are provided with funding for positions by the Armenian community. The only way that students will ever take these courses in significant numbers is if they feel that they have a good chance of getting a job; we therefore must create a certain critical mass of positions.

Supporting Armenian studies can have other benefits as well. Consider, for example, the fact that Armenian has never been studied by theoretical linguists, though neighboring languages such as Turkish and Arabic, which are no more interesting than Armenian, have played central roles in linguistic theory over the past few decades. For example, the standard textbook on phonological theory devotes 7 pages to Turkish and almost 100 pages to Arabic, but does not even mention Armenian. Why is this? The perceived unviability of Armenian studies that I mentioned earlier is largely responsible. Without a critical mass of students entering the field of Armenology, Armenian will continue to be ignored in the fields to which it can and should contribute. Once that critical mass is reached, however, the field can mushroom again like it did in the time of Meillet, and it is only a matter of time before the next Adjarian, who had previously been considering Law School, decides instead to major in Armenology.