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Language in Armenian American communities: Western Armenian and efforts for preservation

Abstract: This article examines the state of Western Armenian instruction in Armenian day schools within the United States to evaluate the state of language transmission and acquisition through the specific structure of private schools. In analyzing methodologies and modes of instruction, content development, resources, teacher training and student demographics, we aim to identify patterns that can pose a challenge to or serve as models for Armenian language instruction and, ultimately, the maintenance of Western Armenian, which UNESCO classified as an endangered language in 2010. To begin with, we offer an overview of the standardization of modern Western Armenian, first, in the late 1800s in Constantinople and subsequently, in the Middle East after World War II. Then, we examine Armenian immigration to the United States to understand the impact of language use as well as the establishment of educational and other institutions necessary for its prolonged existence. The move to establish Armenian day schools in the United States dates back to the 1960s. We trace the development of this movement and study the current state of language instruction, as well as current trends in student demographics, to ask how successful these institutions are in heritage language maintenance.

Keywords: Western Armenian, endangered languages, heritage language, pedagogy of ethnic language, diaspora language maintenance

1 Introduction

In 2010, Western Armenian joined UNESCO's atlas of endangered languages, ringing alarm through Armenian diaspora communities and initiating organized efforts to ensure the language's preservation, cultivation, and longevity. This article examines the state of Western Armenian language instruction in

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Armenian day schools within the United States to evaluate the state of language transmission and acquisition through the specific structure of private schools. In analyzing methodologies and modes of instruction, content development, resources, teacher training and student demographics, we aim to identify patterns that can pose a challenge to or serve as models for Armenian language instruction and ultimately, the maintenance of Western Armenian. To begin with, we offer an overview of the standardization of modern Western Armenian, first, in the late 1800s in Constantinople and subsequently, in the Middle East after World War II. Then, we examine Armenian immigration to the United States to understand the impact of language use as well as the establishment of educational and other institutions necessary for its prolonged existence. The move to establish Armenian day schools in the United States dates back to the 1960s. We trace the development of this movement and study the current state of language instruction, as well as current trends in student demographics, to ask how successful these institutions are in heritage language maintenance.

While Western Armenian was initially the predominant language of Armenian Americans, after the Iranian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union the number of speakers of Eastern Armenian increased significantly, especially in Southern California. Therefore, Armenian American communities provide a unique vantage point to examine the existential question of Western Armenian, because there in the state-less language shapes itself in direct interaction with its Eastern counterpart, which is governed by the Republic of Armenia.

With a research grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation, we conducted 31 interviews with professionals in Armenian schools in the United States. We developed (and translated into Armenian) questionnaires for principals, teachers, board members, curriculum developers, Western Armenian activists and language instructors at the college level. Our bilingual research assistant[1] interviewed 11 respondents in person, 15 by phone and five by email. About 37% of the respondents were principals and 23% teachers. Given that the vast majority of the Armenian schools are located in Southern California, our data reflect that reality. Furthermore, Chahinian adds her expertise on Western Armenian as the director of the Saroyan Project, which seeks to enhance Armenian language instruction at Chamlian School, and as a member of the Language Promotion Committee, which advocates for Armenian heritage language use across Southern California.

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2 Brief history of Western Armenian

Armenians, an ethnic group native to the Armenian highlands, were among the first to adopt Christianity as a state religion around 301 CE. Armenian, a distinct branch in the family of Indo-European languages became a literary language in the 5th century, due to the efforts of the monk Mesrop Mashtots', who is attributed with inventing the alphabet. While *grabar*, the classical Armenian, reigned as the literary language for many centuries, its spoken counterpart evolved quicker – *ashkharabar*, the "language of the people". The modernization of the Armenian language was a process that sought to draw the literary language closer to the spoken vernaculars. It was the product of a cultural and political enlightenment of the Armenian people and the rise of their national consciousness approximately from 1700 to 1850 (Oshagan 1997). Across Armenian communities, a new educated elite emerged in urban centers – Madras, Calcutta, Smyrna, Constantinople, Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Tiblisi—who invested in developing national structures that promoted the masses through establishing schools, training teachers and writers, opening printing presses and publishing grammar books, textbooks, periodicals and literature. By the 19th century, two linguistic forms had developed through parallel trajectories: Western Armenian constituted the various dialects used by Armenians living under Ottoman rule, and Eastern Armenian was the vernacular of Armenians living in the Caucasus under Tsarist rule, as well as those living within the Persian Empire.

In the Ottoman Empire, educators and writers debated the merits of developing the literary *ashkharabar* based on either the vernacular or classical Armenian; however, the language of the people was popularized by numerous publications including grammar books and works of poetry, prose and translations from other languages (Oshagan 1997). Authors adopted three principles to standardize Western Armenian: classical Armenian grammar was rejected; foreign words borrowed generally from Turkish were purged and Armenian equivalents invented; and regional dialects were avoided (Acharyan 1951). Yet these principles had an inherent paradox. Given the absence of a hegemonic spoken vernacular and the writers' resistance to incorporating the nuances of regional dialects, ultimately the dialect of Constantinople became the standard because the city was a major center of cultural production and home to the majority of Western Armenian intellectuals.

Following the 1915 genocide, deportations of Ottoman Armenians from the provinces, and the execution of the majority of the Armenian intelligentsia in Constantinople, the Western Armenian literary tradition was forced to reinvent

itself in cosmopolitan centers in Europe and the Middle East along the refugee trail. Paris was home for a small number of privileged Armenians who had arrived from Constantinople prior to World War I. These intellectuals[2] became the nucleus of the surviving authors and emerging voices of the "orphaned" generation in dispersion between the World Wars. The novels, short stories, journals, and newspapers published during this time were written in a Western Armenian derivative of each writer's regional background and schooling – mostly minimal in orphanages (Ch'ormisian 1975). When Beirut emerged in the 1950s as the center of the Western diaspora, scholars and writers focused on language to achieve a unified identity. Consequently, they submitted Western Armenian to a second wave of standardization using the pre-1915 Constantinople variant as a model.

Language standardization in the Middle East achieved a linguistically homogenous group out of a culturally diverse population. For instance, the Armenian refugees in Lebanon and Syria consisted of at least two linguistic groups. Natives of Cilicia (south coastal region of Turkey) used Turkish as their day-to-day language, whereas those who came from Armenian *vilayet*s[3] (north eastern Anatolia) were predominantly Armenian speaking (Migliorino 2008). The reshaping of a monolingual community was less of an aesthetic project than a carefully strategized political endeavor. As Razmik Panossian (2006: 299) argues, "The nationalist leaders of post-Genocide diaspora realized the importance of a key cultural marker around which modern Armenian identity could be cemented. Given their secular attitudes, religion and the Armenian church could not have been the means. Language was therefore used as the common denominator, as the unifying element – more specifically *western* Armenian, its literature and intellectual traditions".

Nationalist leaders saw the education of youth a priority in ensuring the reorientation of the masses toward a new collective diasporic identity (Schahgaldian 1979). Beginning in 1920s, Armenian churches and political parties propagated the development of an Armenian educational system in the Middle East that by the early 1950s accounted for 60 schools in Lebanon alone (Migliorino 2008). Hamazkayin cultural foundation's language academy was notable in this endeavor with regard to language maintenance and teacher training. An institutional affiliate of the ARF, Hamazkayin established Collège Arménian or Jemaran in Beirut in 1929 (Panian and Ishkhan 1954). With a faculty

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2 For example, Arshag Ch'obanian was a student who could not part with France; his celebrated periodical *Anahid* was issued from 1908 to 1949 (with some breaks) (Beledian 2001: 461).
3 The six Armenian *vilayet*s or provinces in the Ottoman Empire were Van, Erzurum, Harput, Bitlis, Diyarbakir and Sivas.

that included leading thinkers like Lewon Shant, Nikol Aghpalian, Mushegh Ishkhan and Simon Vratsian, Jemaran developed into a K–12 program with a boarding facility, and educated generations of Armenian youth from all over the Middle East (e.g. Gregorian 2003), even the United States (e.g. Mesrobian 2000). Known for its rigorous language program, the school's curriculum offered a specialized track in Armenian Studies, aimed at training Armenian language educators, that went on to sustain the Middle East's Armenian language institutions and cultural production.

Until the Civil War in 1975, Beirut produced for consumers of Western Armenian a rich culture ranging from literature, theater, film and song and music. Other vibrant Armenian communities in the Middle East have been thinning due to continued war and turmoil, most recently in Baghdad and Aleppo. While the emigrants settle in Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, their dispersion over huge distances does not allow them to replicate the Armenian day school movement in the Middle East in the 20th century. Furthermore, processes of integration often lead to linguistic assimilation. Recently, UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* designated Western Armenian as "definitely endangered", which falls in the middle of a six point scale ranging from "safe", "vulnerable", "definitely endangered", "severely endangered", "critically endangered", and "extinct". This categorization means that "children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue in the home".[4] Next, we address the Armenian American communities and their efforts to retain Western Armenian.

3 The Armenian American communities

Armenians immigrated in large numbers to the United States of America roughly in three waves. First the pioneers arrived at the turn of the 20th century, fleeing the economic and political instability in the Ottoman Empire; and specifically the Hamidian Massacres (1894–1896) and the 1915 genocide and deportations (Mirak 1983). After the restrictive immigration years from 1924 to 1965, the second wave comprised the children of the 1915 survivors who had sought shelter in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, but propelled to resettle in the US. Those who managed to leave Communist Romania and Bulgaria were welcome in the US during the Cold War. Due to the protracted civil war in Lebanon (1975–1990) and the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978–1979), many

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4 http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/atlas-of-languages-in-danger/

citizens of these countries emigrated, including a proportional number of Armenians (Bakalian 1993: 11). The third wave constitutes Armenians from the Soviet Union. The early cohorts arrived in the 1980s; after the independence of the Republic of Armenia in 1991, many fled the miserable economic conditions. By 2007, a national survey by the Census Bureau found that among foreign-born Armenians, the single largest category was from Armenia. Douglas and Bakalian (2009: 42–43) write that "the expansion of 'Hayastantsis' (Armenians from the Republic) has repercussions for inter-group relations, as well as institutions such as schools, churches, and social service agencies in the near future because a significant linguistic differences".

Two landmark-court decisions – *In re Halladjian et al.* (1909) and *United States v. Cartozian* (1924–1925) – allowed Armenians to become naturalized US citizens on the basis that they were white (Alexander 2005; Tehranian 2009). However, this privilege made them invisible in demographic registers. During the so-called ethnic revival movement in the 1970s,[5] white ethnics petitioned to be counted. Thus the 1980, 1990 and 2000 long form of the decennial census included questions on ancestry and language spoken at home (see Der-Matirosian 2008). Then the Census replaced the long form with the American Community Survey (ACS) that generates ethnicity from birthplace and self-identification.[6] The picture that the ACS shows of Armenians in the United States is painted in broad-brush strokes, but it is the most reliable measurement we have.

Table 1 indicates that Armenians from the Middle East were the single largest sub-ethnicity among foreign-born before 1980; however, after that date the majority of immigrants came from Armenia (and former Soviet Union, though they may have reported Republic Armenia in the survey). The Census numbers confirm the waves of immigration discussed above. This community is relatively new to the US; 43% are between the ages of 18 and 39, which is the peak age for changing countries, entering careers, and establishing families. In contrast, immigrants from the Middle East are aging – 46% are over age 60 and

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5 Scholars (e.g., Fishman et al. 1985: 489–525) demonstrated that white ethnics celebrated their roots through food, dance and music festivals, but not by maintaining their ancestral language. Likewise, Bakalian (1993: 312) found that "the Armenian-American community is not a speech community; if it is to survive it cannot afford to alienate those who do not speak Armenian."

6 We use the ACS to examine national trends in Armenian immigration and language patterns. As the ACS is a 1% sample of the United States population, it is difficult to extrapolate the numbers of small communities such as the Armenians. Therefore, we merged the 2009, 2010 and 2011 surveys to increase the level of confidence.

Table 1: Period of immigration to the United States by region or country of origin for foreign-born Armenian Americans, 2009–2011.

Region or country of origin	Pre-1980 (%)	Post-1980 (%)	All periods (%)
Republic of Armenia	16	45	38
Middle East	53	15	24
Iran	18	25	23
Other	14	15	15
Population (weighted)	51,393	164,267	215,660

Source: US Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2009–2011, 1% Public Use Microdata Samples.
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

only 1% is under age 18. As a result, the future of Western Armenian in the United States cannot count on new arrivals from the Middle East as in the past; more seriously, Eastern Armenian speakers from Armenia are increasing (table not shown).

Table 2: At-home language use and English proficiency of native-born and foreign-born Armenian Americans by region or country of origin, 2009–2011.

Characteristic	Native-born (%)	Foreign-born				All Armenians (%)
		Armenia (%)	Middle East (%)	Iran (%)	Other (%)	
Language spoken at home:						
Armenian	19	90	78	91	42	47
English	67	3	9	3	13	40
Other	4	7	13	5	45	8
Not applicable	10	1	0	0	0	5

Source: US Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2009–2011, 1% Public Use Microdata Samples.
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Table 2 shows that immigrant households have high levels of speaking Armenian at home (91% among immigrants from Iran, 90% from Armenia, and 78% from the Middle East). On the other hand, 67% of Armenians born in the United States speak English at home. Only 19% of US-born Armenians speak Armenian at home, and are most likely members of immigrant households or second generation. The decline of at home usage of the language contributes to

the daunting obstacles activists for the survival of Western Armenian in the United States have to overcome.

4 The Armenian school movement

At the beginning of the 20th century, assimilation was the guiding policy in the US and most new immigrants, including Armenians, were short on resources, thus, ethnic schools were not established. Nonetheless, mothers – many who had survived the deportations – taught the Armenian language to their children. Eventually, Armenian political parties[7] offered Saturday Armenian classes. When the second generation became adults in the 1930s and 1940s, there was a realization that "the obsession with Armenian language as a sort of prerequisite to feeling and being Armenian was threatening to alienate most of the generation that had grown up in the United States" (Mesrobian 2000: 164). Concurrently, Armenian American newspapers started to publish English-language sections and eventually issued separate papers (see also Alexander 2008).

When the second wave arrived from the Middle East, they clashed with the Americanized Armenians over language. They asked: "How can you be an Armenian if you do not speak Armenian? What kind of Armenian are you?" (Bakalian 1993: 251). The newcomers had attended Armenian schools in Lebanon, Syria, and other countries and wanted to educate their US-born children in that tradition. The first Armenian all-day school, Holy Martyrs' Ferrahian, was established in Encino, shortly thereafter Los Angeles and other states had Armenian schools. Consequently, specific historical contexts explain the changes between the second generation in the 1930s and those in the 1980s. Equally important is that the fact the second generation is "characterized with a duality of forces and interests, sometimes complementary but often conflicting. Members of the second generation straddle, willy-nilly, the ethnic world and the 'other' – the host society" (Bakalian 2007: 328).

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7 Armenian immigrants to the US brought with them three political parties, all of which emerged following social and political challenges in Ottoman Turkey and Russia during the last decades of the 19th century. The Social Democratic Hunchakian party is the oldest (1887), but has been the smallest because of its dogmatic Marxist tenets. Established in 1890, the Tashnag, Armenian Revolutionary Federation, espoused first a nationalist then socialist agenda and has been the most popular. The Ramgavar, Armenian Democratic Liberal Party, first formed in Egypt in 1908, advocated the interests of the bourgeoisie. All parties had athletic, cultural and other social branches.

Table 3: List of Armenian all-day schools in the United States: location, year established, enrollment in 2014, and highest grade level.

Name	Year established	Enrollment	Grade level
California-Southern			
AGBU Manoogian-Demirgian	1976	700	PreK–12
AGBU Vatche & Tamar Manookian	2006	165	9th–12
Armenian Sisters' Academy of Los Angeles	1985	300	PreK–8
Ari Guiragos Minassian	1986	73	PreK–6
C&E Merdinian Armenian Evangelical	1982	158	PreK–8
Holy Martyrs Ferrahian	1964	314	6th–12
Holy Martyrs Marie Cabayan	1964	200	K–5
Levon & Hasmik Tavlian	1991	70	PreK & K
Mesrobian Armenian	1965	189	PreK–12
Rose & Alex Pilibos	1969	500	K–12
Sahag-Mesrob Armenian Christian	1980	208	PreK–12
St. Gregory's Alfred & Marguerite Hovsepian	1984	151	PreK–8
St. Mary's Richard Tufenkian	1975	180	PreK & K
TCA Arshag Dickranian	1981	170	PreK–12
Vahan & Anoush Chamlian	1975	561	1st–8
California-Bay Area			
Charlie Keyan Armenian Community	1977	104	PreK–6
Krouzian Zekarian Vasbouragan	1980	97	PreK–8
Massachusetts			
St. Stephen's Armenian	1984	104	PreK–5
Michigan			
AGBU Alex & Marie Manoogian	1969	400	PreK–12
New Jersey			
Hovnanian	1976	118	PreK–8
New York			
Holy Martyrs Armenian	1967	80	PreK–6
Pennsylvania			
Armenian Sisters' Academy of Radnor	1967	120	PreK–8

Source: Updated by authors and research assistant based on Bakalian (1993: 270, Table 4.4).

Today, there are 24 Armenians schools in the US (see Table 3). Although all Armenian day schools in the US host a diverse student population with regard to family background and linguistic form and dialect, all of them offer Western Armenian as their standard track. There are three schools in Los Angeles (one kindergarten, one 1st through 8th grade, and one high school) that offer both Eastern and Western track to their students. Moreover, a K–5 charter school

called Ararat, in California's San Fernando Valley, teaches Eastern Armenian, along with Spanish, as a second language to all its students. In addition, two public schools in the Glendale Unified School District, Jefferson Elementary and R. D. White Elementary, host Foreign Language Academies of Glendale (FLAG) programs in Armenian. We compared Table 3 to Bakalian's data from the late 1980s (1993: 270, Table 4.4); two new schools were founded in Greater LA and four schools closed (Mekhitarian in CA, AGBU in Watertown, Armenian Sisters' Academy of Lexington and St. Illuminator in Queens/NY).

In addition to all-day Armenian schools in the United States, there are numerous part-time schools and institutions that support Western Armenian. Generally the churches and the Armenian political parties sponsor Saturday and/or Sunday classes aimed to teach children the Armenian language, history, and culture. There are auxiliary organizations such as summer camps, Boy and Girl Scout troupes, dance troupes, basketball, college internships at the AGBU in New York and the Armenian Assembly in Washington D.C, and Young Professional clubs that are likely to maintain Armenian networks, but do not necessarily reinforce the language, especially among the US-born.

While Armenian language and history have been offered sporadically in colleges and universities in United States since the turn of the 20th century, the establishment of the National Association of Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR) in 1955 generated momentum to endow chairs and programs (Mamigonian 2012–2013). While Harvard, Columbia and UCLA had the first chairs for Armenian Studies in the 1960s, the number of universities with endowed positions in a variety of topics and institutes has increased over time. In the last decade, UCLA has been the foremost institution to offer instruction in Armenian language, in both Eastern and Western tracks. Hosted by the department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, the program offers Ph.D. in Armenian language and literature.

5 Western Armenian instruction in day schools within the United States

Private Armenian day schools provide the space where Western Armenian is taught to a new generation of speakers and where it can potentially become institutionalized or standardized. In the past four decades, Southern California allowed Western Armenian speakers and Eastern Armenian speakers to interact and develop a new hybrid colloquial Armenian speech. However, cultural institutions have not been able to cultivate the evolving linguistic forms into a

literary language (Jinbashian 1996). Consequently, the result is more detrimental to Western Armenian for two reasons. As discussed above, Western speakers are dwindling in the US by lower immigration rates from the Middle East, by aging and death of the Western speaking cohorts and by the assimilation of the second and third generations. Second, Eastern Armenian has validity as the official language of a nation-state, but more importantly, the Republic has the power to maintain the language adaptive and vital through its institutionalized infrastructure. In contrast, Western Armenian is a state-less, exilic language facing the threat of assimilation not only from other languages, but also from its Eastern counterpart.[8] For example, all Armenian language programs in the public school systems of the greater Los Angeles area offer instruction in Eastern Armenian only. While this is a decision mandated by the state's bureaucratic procedures, it also caters to the majority of the Armenian community in Los Angeles, which is increasingly comprised of Eastern Armenian speaking immigrants or children of immigrants from Armenia or Iran. Therefore, Western Armenian, which once enjoyed the title of being the "diaspora's language" is becoming marginalized as diaspora's minority language and consigned entirely to the mercy of traditional diasporan institutions.

5.1 Challenges amidst a rapidly changing student demographic

One of the overarching phenomena affecting Armenian day schools today is the rapid shift in student demographics, which challenges the existing Armenian language curriculum and mode of instruction. As the byproduct of an immigration influx from the Middle East, Armenian day schools initially modeled their Armenian language curricular system based on the methodology used in Middle Eastern schools, which regarded Armenian as the students' dominant language. Whereas this model may have been appropriate for the children of first generation immigrant families, it does not cater to the needs of the current student body, whose overwhelming majority is comprised of third generation immigrants, who use English as their dominant language. For example, a long-time principal of a K–12 school noted that 51% of his current students' parents are graduates of his school and characterized the alumni as a strong emerging parent group. Another issue impacting Armenian schools is the influx of

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8 Orthography adds another layer of complication in the separation of the two linguistic forms. Following a 1921 policy to obliterate illiteracy, the Soviet Armenian orthography was reformed in 1922. Whereas the Armenian Republic continues to use the reformed orthography, Western Armenian in the diaspora maintains classical orthography (Bardakjian 2000: 202).

Syrian refugees. These children are Western Armenian speakers who have attended Armenian schools, but their English is weak or non-existent. Many of the day school's Board of Regents have adopted a policy of accepting the children of newly arrived Syrian-Armenian families with a nominal tuition fee. These students make up a small percentage of the student body (e.g., 0.04% in a 6–12 school LA); nevertheless, they complicate its character.

The overwhelming majority of the school administrators and teachers we interviewed claimed that 80–90% of their students' home language is English. A school in Southern California where the majority of parents come from Soviet or Post-Soviet Armenia serves as the exception to this experience, claiming that the home language of the majority of their students is Armenian. Yet, regardless of familiar background and at-home practices, all of the educators in our survey unequivocally claim that English is the preferred language of communication that students use during recess periods. Teachers and school administrators seem to have resigned themselves to the lack of language vitality within their schools and do not recognize it as an arena where they can intervene and bring about change. These schools have neither policies about language spoken outside of the classroom nor modes of cultivating Armenian language as "language of play". When asked about recess language use, a principal of a K–8 school justified why it is important not to force a particular language of preference onto students, and shared an alternate strategy. She said:

> My strategy is that depending on who the teacher is, every adult at my school has one designated language. We never say, *Hayeren khosetsek* [Speak in Armenian!]. Language has to be part of the context. But let's say they're playing in English and they see me and need to ask me a question, there's no question in their minds that they need to address me in Armenian. Same goes for the French teacher, for example. Inside or outside of the classroom, when they see her, they know they need to address her in French.

In other words, the Armenian language is relegated to the classroom in Armenian schools across the United States. Many teachers expressed that students perceive the Armenian language as "lacking dynamism" and as having no real-world relevance. The majority of Armenian day schools offer two class periods of Armenian instruction per day, including corollary subjects like Armenian history and religion, which amounts to an average of eight to ten hours of instruction in the Armenian language per week.[9] A few schools offer

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9 In most cases, Kindergarten programs conduct over 50% of their instruction and activities in Armenian. Starting with the first grade, Armenian becomes separated from the rest of the curriculum and is used only in Armenian language, Armenian history, and religion (when applicable) classes.

only one class period of Armenian per day, totaling five hours per week. When we asked our respondents about the time allocation for Armenian class, some principals remarked that the background and training of their faculty often allows for some flexibility in expanding Armenian language instruction to other subjects like music, dance, and art. For instance, one principal noted:

> We are lucky to have one of our Armenian language teachers teach also art to grades 1st through 8th. She uses both languages during art classes. Similarly, our computer teacher in middle school is Armenian, and she uses both languages in class instructions (more English when it comes to technical words). It would be ideal if we could also use Armenian during Physical Education; however, our teacher is not Armenian.

Other administrators expressed a similar sentiment about tapping into faculty background to offer more expansive Armenian language instruction. Yet this bilingual flexibility was never extended to core subjects such as science and math, and was discussed only with regard to extracurricular creative arts classes.

The immersion model has gained popularity as the most effective means of teaching a second language and has been adopted by university programs and public school systems. Even the California Glendale Unified School District, the Foreign Language Academies of Glendale (FLAG) offers dual immersion programs in Armenian at two Glendale elementary schools. By following a 50/50 dual immersion model, these programs aim at developing bilingualism and biliteracy in two languages. In other words, during the first half of the academic year, close to 70% of all instruction takes place in Armenian, whereas during the second half of the year, 70% of all instruction is in English. By the end of the academic year, students receive equal instruction in both languages on a variety of subjects. These programs are developed in Eastern Armenian and use the federal, reformed orthography. By contrast, in private Armenian schools across the United States, Armenian is taught as a second language through a curriculum that is developed based on first or dominant language standards. This discrepancy is the biggest challenge in the classroom for Armenian language teachers. All of the teachers that we interviewed identified the students' inability to carry a basic conversation in Armenian as the main challenge that they face in the classroom. A middle school teacher explained, "Our students' thought process is in English. This is because English has increasingly become our students' home language. As a result, they lack the very basic vocabulary necessary to hold a conversation. They generally have a very difficult time expressing themselves in Armenian". There are students whose language capabilities are an exception to the above generalization and in all such cases, teachers link a student's advanced language performance to their home

language, claiming that they come from a family who speaks Armenian at home. Subsequently, the second most mentioned challenge that teachers say they face in the classroom was accommodating to different levels of language skills. Schools with smaller student population often regroup their students for Armenian class, according to level of competence. For instance, one K–8 school divides their 6th through 8th graders into three levels of Armenian rather than offering one Armenian class per grade.

5.2 Language standards and course content

Language standards enable a curriculum to advance progressively across grade levels and provide quantifiable objectives with which language acquisition can be measured. When we asked principals and teachers if their school's Armenian language program follows a set of language standards appropriate for each grade level, their answers were ambiguous and inconclusive. A group of teachers belonging to a cluster of affiliated schools explained that their Board of Regents had developed Armenian language standards for 1–8 grade levels[10] a little over ten years ago. Yet all of them alleged to have modified the standards to better fit their student needs or abandoned them altogether. The respondents in this group maintained that the existing standards were too advanced for their students because they were a direct translation of English Language Arts standards used in their state's public schools. Therefore, the teachers affirmed that they develop derivative Armenian standards, use the grammar workbook as a guideline, or teach based on what they assessed as the students' language needs. In one school that claimed to follow the student-need approach, the staff explained that instead of language standards they have identified areas of instruction that address language needs appropriate to the age group and use these divisions to guide their curriculum. For example, during the 1st grade, they focus on building vocabulary and constructing sentences. For the 2nd grade, they focus on reading and reading comprehension. In the 3rd grade, they work on developing advanced reading skills and pronunciation, and so on. In general, many of the teachers interviewed noted that, ultimately, Armenian language instruction «կը մնայ ուսուցիչին հայեցողութեան» [is left up to the teacher's discretion]. Similarly, a teacher from another affiliate school cluster remarked on the inefficacy of pre-existing Armenian language standards, by saying, «Ոչ, չափորոշիչներ չենք օգտագործեր։ Շրջան մը աշխատեցանք այս ուղղութեամբ, եւ պատրաստեցինք, բայց

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10 None of the high schools in our survey claimed to have language standards. Textbooks or books guide the curriculum.

 դմբախտաբար չյաջողեցանք զանոնք գործադրել։ Ամէն մէկ ուսուցիչ իր հայեցողութեան, իր փորձառութեան կը վստահի եւ այդպէս կ՚աշխատի։» [No, we don't use standards. At one time, we worked toward this end, and we prepared them, but unfortunately we were not able to implement them. Each teacher works guided by his or her own discretion and experience]. The implementation of language standards, wherever they are available, presents a new set of difficulties. Some teachers state that their weekly plans take language standards into consideration, but most teachers stated that their daily lesson plans are not guided by language objectives informed by standards. Because language standards are developed independently and with the main aim of catering to the students' needs, they often do not match the content of the textbooks or grammar workbooks used in the classrooms. In other words, Armenian language standards in private Armenian day schools are obsolete and the teacher, rather than a standardized curriculum, is the driving force of instruction.

The teachers rely heavily on language textbooks and grammar books to organize their classroom time. In the absence of language standards, the content of stories in the textbooks are used as the basis of daily "lessons". In Armenian schools across the United States, the most commonly used textbook series for elementary and middle school is *Mer Lezun* [Our Language], prepared by Western Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America with a sponsorship from the Lincy Foundation. The elementary school series, published in 2002, contains textbooks, grammar workbooks, and teachers' manuals. Most teachers seem content with the series, but some complain that many of the stories in the textbook lack narrative depth and fail to be relevant to the everyday life of their students. As a result, many teachers say that they use a given story's thematic parameters and assign additional vocabulary words that are applicable to the student's lives. The middle school textbooks of the same series, published between 2001 and 2004, are co-edited by Harutiwn Kurkjian's and Maro Kalaydjian-Kurkjian and are often referred to as "the Kurkjian books" by middle-school teachers. The overwhelming majority of teachers using this textbook complain that the content is too dense for their students' level of language competence. They state, "it's too difficult", «լեզուն մատչելի չէ» [the linguistic register is not accessible], «էջերը գունաւոր կամ գրաւիչ չեն» [the pages are not colorful or attractive], and "the quality is also poor ... the pages come apart very easily". Regardless of the textbooks used, teachers across grade levels admit to supplementing the required readings. One middle school teacher explained, "They have to buy the book and pay 50 dollars for it. So I feel bad and don't want them to put it aside completely. So I select the sections that I can salvage, and otherwise offer supplement material".

Indeed, Armenian language teachers allocate a lot of time, both during their set prep periods and at home, in finding supplemental material for their courses.

In order to compete with contemporary modes of instruction used in other subjects, many try to deliver the supplemental material via new technologies. Since the set Armenian language curriculum, which does not extend beyond textbooks and grammar workbooks, does not include online resources, the incorporation of new media is left entirely up to teachers and the availability of classroom resources. In commenting about technology in the Armenian classroom, a principal of a K–12 school said, "Our Armenian teachers have the same resource allocations as teachers of other subjects, but of course the lack of available content limits things for them". Similar commentary reverberated through many teacher interviews. Most Armenian classrooms are equipped with projections systems or "smartboards". Therefore, teachers assert to use quite a lot of technology in the Armenian classroom (twice a week to everyday), but note that putting new material together takes up a lot of their time. Whereas upper grade levels can more easily benefit from Armenian language websites, such as news sites, or You Tube videos, teachers of lower grade levels find it difficult to locate appropriate material. They often mentioned that they translated activities and handouts from English sites. A couple of them mentioned using "Arevig", a computer-based course initiated by the Armenian Communities Department of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

5.3 Armenian language teachers

As Armenian teachers are compelled to find supplementary material for the curriculum, they have to take work home, which is unfair; moreover, they feel overworked and undervalued. In addition, due to the absence of new waves of younger Armenian language teachers, many continue to work at the same institution for decades. Without an Armenian language teacher training program in the United States, the overwhelming majority of Armenian day schools rely on migration flows that bring teachers trained in the Middle East. We found one exception to this pattern; a school in California far from an Armenian community hires teachers born in the US. The principal admitted that most of these teachers have no experience of teaching, but she believed that "they gain experience on the ground". Otherwise, almost all Western Armenian language teachers in the US are from Lebanon or Syria. Their demand is so high that many Armenian language teachers are hired independent of being educators in the field of language or literature. For instance, a middle school teacher explained how her training is in Business Administration and upon migrating to the greater Southern California area had wanted to be a teacher of science and math. But because there were no openings in that field, the principal of a school had asked

her whether she felt comfortable teaching Armenian language. Subsequently, she had been hired as an Armenian language teacher, a job that she has occupied for almost two decades.

5.4 Crisis of language vitality and efforts of intervention

The fundamental issue at the core of Armenian language instruction in private day schools is the discrepancy between a rapidly evolving student body and a curriculum that has not been able to keep up. All of the educators that we interviewed agree that Armenian can no longer be taught as a first language, yet it cannot be entirely placed in the category of a foreign language either. Regardless of the students' home language, all of them come to school with some connection to the Armenian language and culture. Therefore, Armenian language acquisition does not entirely happen in the classroom, as is the case with foreign language acquisition. Because Armenian language acquisition to varying degrees has its roots in the home, students of Armenian day schools may qualify as heritage language learners (Heritage Language Research Priority Conference Report 2000). Furthermore, two other qualities of heritage language may be applicable to Armenian school students: (a) that a heritage language is one that is acquired first, but is left incomplete due to a switch to another dominant language (Polinsky 2008), and (b) that a heritage language has family relevance and/or personal connection for the speaker (Fishman 2001).

More broadly speaking, language educators and activists consider the general demotion of the language, both inside and outside of day schools, as a core issue that threatens language vitality in Armenian American communities. They claim that young speakers face difficulty in expressing themselves in Armenian for their everyday needs. While some attribute this to the speakers' lack of basic vocabulary, others argue that the Armenian language itself, particularly Western Armenian, has not been able to evolve to meet the communicative needs of the contemporary speaker. Hagop Gulludjian, a Western Armenian language professor at UCLA and a language activist, takes a different approach to describing this phenomenon and refers to it as language compartmentalization. He argues that as a result of the lack of contemporary resources for literacy in new domains and media (for example, comic books, general education, tablet apps, science-fiction, etc.) and Armenian day school's approach to teaching Armenian as a "specialized subject" rather than through immersion, Armenian language is seen as not only "of the past, but for the past" (Gulludjian 2014). In other words, second and third generation speakers in the United States do not regard Armenian as a living language. Accordingly, they categorize subjects into

compartments that they allocate either to Armenian or to their dominant language, English. For instance, whereas speakers can discuss past figures such as saints and heroes in Armenian, they discuss spirituality, theology or philosophy in English. Or whereas they may express petrified statements, or dogma in Armenian, they perform abstract or critical thought in English, and so on. Gulludjian suggests that the goal of Armenian language instruction in diaspora communities should be to promote bilingualism without compartmentalization.

An experimental project, the Saroyan Project at Chamlian Armenian School, attempts to do just that. It adopts the heritage language model in its approach to language instruction. In doing so, it attempts to integrate culture and community in language instruction and places emphasis on developing students' oral language skills. Initially, the Saroyan Project developed 1st grade standards according to the five domains of language learning (content, structures, culture, settings, and communication), and second, the training of 1st to 3rd grade Armenian language teachers in objective-based lesson-planning and student-centered modes of teaching. Having just completed its first year of implementation, the Saroyan Project still awaits its evaluation process to access its success rate.

Other strategies are also underway. In 2013, the Western Prelacy launched a "Language Promotion" committee, comprised of college professors and educators. One of its members told us that the aim of the committee is to mobilize leaders of community organizations to prioritize Armenian language use within their institutional structures in hopes of generating a community-wide language promotion movement. Another venture that attempts to intervene in Armenian language's demotion is the Armenian Task Force of the Board of Regents of Prelacy schools. Established in 2013, it seeks to revitalize Armenian language instruction of Prelacy schools located in California. A member of the task force explained how part of the challenge is to shift the mode of education from having *preservation* as its goal to aiming for *cultivation*: "A language is not a cultural artifact that can be preserved. It is a living, breathing, and dynamic element of everyday life that needs to be cultivated by providing more domains of use".

The language promotion initiatives mentioned above are geared toward existing institutional structures within the Greater Los Angeles Armenian American community. In addition, because the communities that they cater to are not linguistically homogenous, their efforts do not single out Western Armenian, but rather consider Armenian language as one unit, consisting of both western and eastern counterparts. Ultimately, against the backdrop of the monolingual, English-dominant culture of the United States, the cultivation and safeguarding of Armenian as an immigrant heritage language should be the goal in the culturally and linguistically diverse Armenian American communities. Yet part of the challenge in reversing Western Armenian's threatened vitality needs

to be ensuring that language promotion efforts maintain the integrity of each linguistic form and realize that the stakes are greater for the exilic Western Armenian form. Standing on the threshold of language extinction, Western Armenian is in dire need of intervention. It is up to the current generation of educators and speakers to prepare a critical mass of *producers* and *consumers* of the language to secure its vitality in the coming decades.

6 Summary and conclusions

Given that Western Armenian is an endangered language, our goal in this article was to analyze the effectiveness of Armenian schools in the United States to safeguard its longevity. We first examined Armenian immigration to America. Next we used the American Community Survey (a product of the United States Census Bureau) to understand the percentages of Armenian immigrants from the Middle East, Iran and the Republic of Armenia, date of arrival, and language spoken at home. In the 1960s, the Armenian school movement in the US was initiated by immigrants from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, as well as Romania and Bulgaria. Since they were Armenian speakers and had attended Armenian schools, they wanted their children to attend school to keep the language alive. Bakalian's survey of Armenian Americans in the late 1980s found that speaking Armenian was a crucial feature of Armenianness; the common refrain was if one claims to be Armenian then he/she should speak Armenian. Two decades later, the language debate is nonexistent. With fewer immigrants arriving from the Middle East, Armenian language usage at home is at a decline, highlighting the inadequacies of methodologies used in the Armenian classroom in meeting student needs. Moreover, the mission of Armenian schools and the instructional aim of their Armenian language curriculum have moved from the transmission of the Armenian language to abstract terms such as the "Armenian spirit" or culture. Much like many other private schools, Armenian day schools strive for academic excellence above all.

The Western Armenian educators we interviewed established that the Armenian language curriculum in private day schools across the United States does not meet the language needs of their student body, whose overwhelming majority considers English as their first, and dominant tongue. The existing curriculum, both in its standards and its content (textbooks, grammar books, etc.) addresses language instruction based on first language criteria, while structurally, it is sustained by second language model of teaching not through immersion, but through "specialized classes". In addition, as Middle Eastern Armenian communities decline in numbers and resources, the lack of US-based

training programs for Armenian language teachers is equally troubling for the long-term vitality of Western Armenian.

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