



Armenians: An Exception in the World of Bilingualism

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ABSTRACT

Language serves as an appropriate medium of interaction for society and society is a matrix in which the language is emerged; therefore, they have very close relationships. The terms bilingualism, language shift, language choice can indicate that in certain conditions different varieties of language are used. The way society members choose varieties of a language or switch toward another code can determine the influence of social factors on language choice (Freidoni, Jahandideh 2010). It is a fact that only a minority of the third generation (grandchildren) of the people who migrate to a new society maintain bilingual; since it is a predominant pattern by the third generation to use only the spoken language of that particular community. However, it seems to be of a different case with the Armenians in Iran. Iran as a multilingual society is a suitable community in which the different varieties of language are used to serve different functions. Isfahan, one of the Iranian provinces, is a good representative of multilingualism in Iran; after Tehran, Isfahan has got the second rank regarding the density of Armenian population. After approximately 400 years of the arrival of their first generation to Iran, we can still see that Armenian people remain bilingual. According to our data analysis and the results obtained from questionnaires – distributed among 60 participants from three different generations – the major factor which keeps Armenians from moving away from their ethnicity, culture and language is their prejudice towards the factors above.

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Introduction

A language shift could be defined as the shift from the habitual use of one language to that of another (Weinreich, 1953: 68). The course and speed of the process of language shift in a bilingual community is greatly influenced by several factors (e.g. social, historical, demographic, linguistics, originality, ethnicity, etc.) For bilinguals it is the environment, the culture, and the interlocutors that cause bilinguals- esp. bicultural bilinguals- to change attitudes, feelings and behaviors, along with language. It has to be noted first of all, that there are two types of bilinguals: Mono-cultural bilinguals- who make up the majority of bilinguals in the world- and Bi-cultural bilinguals. This phenomenon does not pertain to the Mono-cultural bilinguals, although bi- or multilingual, they are in fact members of just one culture. But as for Bi-cultural bilinguals, what is seen as a change in personality is most probably simply a shift in attitudes and behaviors that correspond to a shift in situation or context, independent of language. That is, the bicultural bilinguals behave bi-culturally, they adapt to the context in which they are (Grosjean; 2011). By the third generation of the immigrants i.e., for the grandchildren of immigrants, bilingualism is maintained only by minorities of almost all groups (Alba; 2004). Bilingualism is common among second-generation children, i.e., those growing up in immigrant households: most speak an immigrant language at home, but almost all are proficient in the spoken language of the country. Therefore, in the third- and later- generations, the predominant pattern is mono-lingualism- the spoken language of the country- in such situations, children speak only the spoken language of the country at home, making it highly unlikely that they will be bilingual as adults (Alba; 2004). In general, in the community of immigrants in a new society, the members can choose their

mother tongue in daily interactions depending mainly on their and their partner(s) decision and habits fitting to each speech situation. It could be said that speakers' strategies in connection with the choice of their mother tongue can be divided into two types (denoted by A and B).

Type A: Immigrants with very strong sense of identity and ethnicity, who use their mother tongue in almost all speech situations.

Type B: These speakers never choose their mother tongue on their own. The choice depends on their partner's decision.

In the Armenian bilingual communities in Iran people are mostly of type A. Research results have shown that, in almost all bilingual communities we can see that the number of type A speakers is decreasing, and the progress of language shift is increasing in the communities. Yet, in Armenian communities all over Iran we can see the number of type A speakers is increasing. As it was mentioned, after almost four centuries passing from the arrival of the first generation of Armenians in Iran we can still see that they've remained bilingual.

[A] number of extra-linguistic factors have been examined and it has been found that age is the most significant factor associated with this change in language choice and language ability. (Lei Wei; 1994: 114-115). The children and grandchildren of the immigrants grow up and come to know themselves as natives of that particular society, so they start becoming mono-lingual(s), speaking only the spoken language of the society. However, Armenians' children and grandchildren, the younger and the more educated they come to know themselves as Armenians all the way.

Community

New Julfa – an area in Isfahan, Iran – is a place where Shah Abbas relocated tens of thousands of Armenians from

Nakhchevan in the early 17th century, which was created to be an Armenian quarter. The community became active in the cultural and economic development of Iran. As it was mentioned above, Armenians were separated (each group being sent to different regions of Iran); as a result, even though all Armenian migrants spoke the same language and were from the same region, with the same accent, they grew to speak Armenian with different accents.

Methods

Methods described in international publications (e.g. Fishman, 1965; Gal, 1979; Labov, 1988; Kontra, 1990; Eckert, 1997) have been adopted in this study. The primary aim of this investigation was to assess the language use of Armenians in Iran, the degree and nature of Armenian-Farsi language switching, and linguistic change and interference of Armenian in Farsi and vice versa. For the description of the sociolinguistic characteristics of the community in question, a single settlement was chosen, New Julfa- a neighborhood resided mostly by Armenians- situated in Isfahan. Studying these factors in a given community, helps estimating the likelihood of continuation, decline or revitalization of the language in any community.

The devices adopted in present study include participant observation, a sociolinguistic interview accompanied by a guided conversation, questionnaires on language use and language attitudes, a self-report test on language proficiency, and a word-test. The interview was administered orally, by one of the authors, herself an Armenian living in Iran, known to the interviewees. A number of 60 subjects were selected with considerations of age (18–39, 40–58, 59–69, 70–85), gender (half of the subjects were male in each group), and education level (4–7, 8–11, 12–14 grades completed).

In the present paper only the responses to some direct questions will be analyzed. The responses refer to the use of one or more languages in some situations: church (praying, and congregation fellows); home (mate, and children); public health (patients at doctor’s waiting room); market (market sellers); shopping (shop-sellers);work (workplace, and colleagues).

Table 1

Subjects’ Subgroups						
Age Groups	Levels Of Education (Grades Completed)					
	4-7		8-11		12-15	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
18-39 yrs old	10	10	10	10	10	10
40-58 yrs old	10	10	10	10	10	10

Results

Using the spoken language of a society outside the bilingual communities is a norm. Armenians do not follow this rule-while communicating with an Armenian partner- due to their very strong Armenian identity, ethnicity and originality. Factors influencing Armenian language choice are: the content and the function of the interaction. Some topics are better handled in mother-tongue, because bilinguals have learned to deal with these topics in one language only. In this group we find topics related to family, religion, as well as even topics related to work, technical or other science(s).

In general; in the immigrant communities of a society, the members can choose their mother tongue in daily interactions depending mainly on their and their partner(s) decision and habits. It could be said that speakers’ strategies in connection with the choice of their mother tongue can be divided into two types (denoted by A and B) based on the subjects’ descriptions.

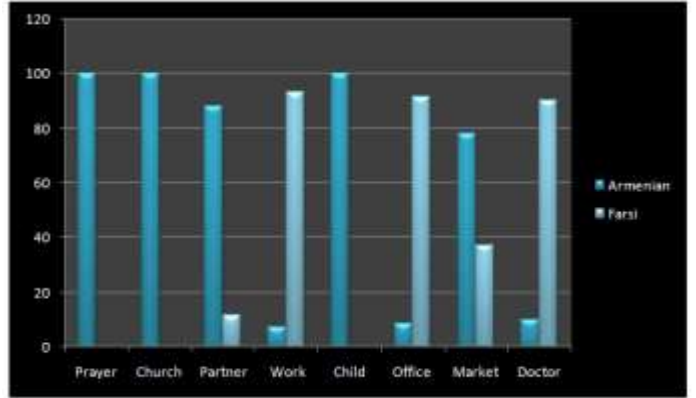
Type A:The choice of Armenian is the speaker’s decision. Because of their strong sense of identity,these type of people always use Armenian with Armenian people even in those situations where the Armenian partners choose Farsi.

Type B:The choice of Armenian depends on the partner’s decision. This kind of speakersaccommodate to their partner’s language choice. These speakers never choose Armenianon their own.

In this Armenian bilingual community people are mostly of type A. Research results have shown that, in almost all the bilingual communities we can see the number of type A speakers is decreasing, and the progress of language shift is increasing. Yet in Armenian communities all over Iran the case is quite the contrary.

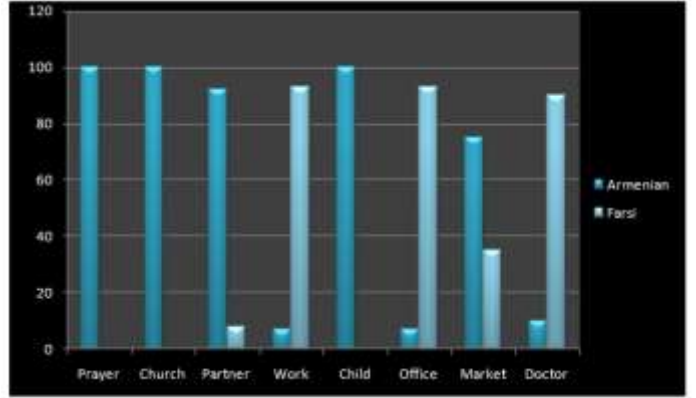
The choice of Armenian (n=60)

Figure 1



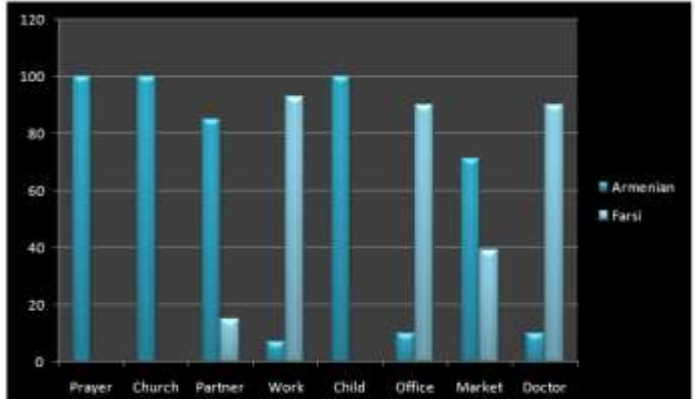
The choice of Armenian (18 -39 years old; n= 30)

Figure 2



The choice of Armenian (40 – 58 years old; n= 30)

Figure 3



Discussion and Conclusion

Bilingual speakers, just like monolinguals, choose among diverse varieties of a language. When speaking to other bilinguals, they have access to two languages. Bilingualism is common among second-generation children, i.e., those growing up in immigrant households most speak an immigrant language at home, but almost all are proficient in the spoken language of the country. Therefore, in the third- and later- generations, the predominant pattern is monolingualism -- the spoken language

of the country -- making it highly unlikely that they will be bilingual as adults (Alba; 2004). The children become almost overwhelmed by the strength of the new language and express a preference to use that language all the time. It is much easier for the child to speak the language of the country, to the point where it becomes the child's natural language and speaking the native language requires greater effort(Bychkov Green S., Bychkov I. 1987). However, the younger and the more educated the Armenians are the more they insist on maintaining bilingualism. And this is due to such factors as: social and political changes in the community and the Iranian society, as well as maintaining their ethnicity. Contact by speakers of other languages is seen as endangering not only the language, but also the identity of the speakers (Young; 2008). Fighting being estranged with their originality, Armenians are persistent in using their mother tongue in all possible contexts.

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