

Mother Tongue and the Origins of Nationalism

(A Comparative Analysis of
the Armenian and European
Primary Sources)*



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In its systematic analysis and conceptualization of the multifaceted phenomenon of nationalism, Western social science has made many insightful, theoretical generalizations. However, this analysis, particularly of the origins of nationalism, has been based almost entirely on the European social-historical experience from the 16th to the 20th centuries. This focus has somewhat skewed the results and led to insufficiently inclusive conclusions.

The majority of Western scholars of nationalism are of the opinion, for example, that the first nations appeared in Europe during the 16-19th centuries.¹ In this regard, Walker Connor, a “leading student of the origins and dynamics of ethnonationalism,” drawing upon the scholarship of Sir Ernest Barker, another well-known figure in the field, makes the sweeping claim that “the self-consciousness of nations is a product of the nineteenth century,”² which may be true of Europe, but not sufficiently inclusive of the experiences of non-European peoples with longer histories of national self-consciousness. Another expression of this school of thought is Liah Greenfeld’s insightful study (*Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Harvard University Press, 1992), which also over-extrapolates the European experience, stating:

The original modern idea of the nation emerged in sixteenth-century England, which was the first nation in the world...³

These views can be interpreted to be a reflection of the fact that the populations of European countries did indeed undergo a transformation of national consciousness in the 16-19th centuries. Thus, according to Western studies, “the vast majority of people living within France were not conscious of being French until long after the French Revolution [of 1789].”⁴ Likewise, “in mid-nineteenth century Italy... only 3% of Italians could speak the common language; most spoke highly distinct regional dialects, and most identified themselves as Sicilians, Romans, and the like. By the end of World War

* This is an abridged version of the study with the same title that was originally published by the author in Armenian as *Mayreni lezun yev azgaynakanutian skzbnavorume. haykakan yev yevropakan skzbnaghbyurneri hamematakan knnutiun (Yerevan, Matenadaran: Artagers, 2001, the updated 2nd ed. was published in 2004).*

I, however, most Italian immigrants to North America identified themselves as Italians. The Italian nation had grown or developed within less than seventy-five years."⁵

Against this background, the Armenian experience is striking. Ancient, medieval, and early modern primary sources evidence a strong Armenian identity and nationalism well before the earliest manifestations of European nationalism cited by these scholars of European history. Even taking into account the acknowledged unique features of Armenian national identity, Armenian national consciousness exhibits many of the key characteristics of early modern and modern European nationalisms.

The intimate relationship between language and national consciousness has been established by various schools of historians, ethnologists, sociologists and social psychologists. In particular, it has been noted that a nation's explicit pride in its national language coincides with the origin of nationhood itself. Mother tongues became the object of national pride for European nationalists only in the 16-19th centuries. This national pride was expressed in each case in like manner: the nation judged its language as far superior to all other languages. Armenian attitudes toward the Armenian language have not been thoroughly researched as a separate topic of history. Nevertheless, by all accounts, the Armenian language was perhaps chronologically the earliest and most crucial determinant in the formation of Armenian identity and ethnic consciousness. A distinct and coherent language community was a necessary prerequisite for the early branching of Armenian from the other Indo-European speakers. The use of Armenian as mother tongue determined who is Armenian.

This study sets forth comparative historical evidence about the time and circumstances when a national language becomes an object of national affection and pride. It analyzes the Armenian sources of the 5-18th centuries and compares them with the English, French and Russian sources of the 15-18th centuries.

The Armenian Case

The Golden Age of Armenian Culture (5th century AD)

Moses Khorenatzi, the Father of Armenian history who lived in the 5th century AD, was among the first to equate the territory of Armenia with the Armenian-speaking territory: "And on the eastern side [of Armenia], along the perimeter of Armenian language..."⁶

According to Khorenatzi, King Aram (who personifies either King Arame of 9th century BC or Aramani-Erimena of the 7th century BC) ordered the population of the newly incorporated westernmost region (later to be known as First Armenia) "to study the Armenian vocabulary and tongue."⁷ This can be taken as evidence that early on the Armenian state realized the strategic importance of "linguistic policies" and their implementation.

The 5th century Armenian author, Pavstos Buzand, defines Armenia as "the entire world of the Armenian language" and "the Torgomian country-world of the Armenian language"⁸ (Torgom is the legendary ancestor of the Armenians). However, an adequate understanding of these definitions demands a more precise explication of the content of these terms: "the entire 'world' where the Armenian language was predominant" and

“the Torgomian country-world where the Armenian language was predominant.”

The correctness of such a reading is supported by yet another passage from the *History of Armenia* by Pavstos Buzand, relating the national mourning which struck Armenia after the death of the revered 4th century Armenian Catholicos Nerses the Great:

Within the confines of Armenian country, from one end to the other, all nobles and common people, without exception, all nobles and common people of Torgomian country, and the Armenian language at large, were lamenting him.⁸

As clearly seen in this passage, Pavstos equated Armenians with those who spoke the Armenian language (it is noteworthy that there is no distinction on the basis of social classes). Further, he defined Armenia as an Armenian-speaking country, and again, like Movses Khorenatzi, determined the boundaries of Armenia by the territory dominated by the Armenian language. Pavstos Buzand deliberately used the Armenian language to connote an animate object, thus creating a semantical equation among the notions of country, people and language: Armenia=the Armenians=the Armenian language. In fact, in this context Pavstos used “the Armenian language” as a synonym for “the Armenian nation”⁹.

Centuries later the same equation can be found in a European analogue. At the beginning of the 19th century the German author Ernest Moritz Arndt gave a strikingly similar definition to Germany - *Das ist des Deutschen Vaterland*, literally - “this is the country [under the domination] of German language.”¹⁰

Among these fifth-century attempts to fix the place of the Armenian language in the sociopolitical development of Armenian society, perhaps the most articulate was that of Yeghishe, the author of the *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*. In his theological work, entitled “An Interpretation of the Book of Genesis,” Yeghishe describes the linguistic dispersion after the destruction of the Tower of Babel in which he includes the following comparison of the Armenian language to nine other languages:

Hence, a gracefulness came forth from the split of one large language: The Greek is soft, the Latin is vigorous, the Hunnish is threatening, the Assyrian is sychophantic, the Persian is eloquent, the Alani (i. e., the old Ossetic) is ornate, the Gothic is mocking, the Egyptian sounds as if spoken from the dark and hidden place, the Hindi is chirping, [and] the Armenian is sweet and capable of embracing all these languages in itself.

And as one color is brightened by another, one face by another, one age by another and one art by another, in the same way one language is made more beautiful by another.¹²

This passage shows, on the one hand, Yeghishe’s undisguised pride for his mother tongue, which he considers to be the best, and, on the other hand, a healthy respect for other languages or “linguistic cultures,” though Yeghishe’s almost bantering characterization of them serves further to emphasize his sense of the supremacy of the Armenian language. This calm and friendly posture toward alien cultures illustrates the

confidence of 5th-century Armenians that their civilization and culture were sufficiently powerful to withstand the alien influences or absorb their useful elements. Such an outward-looking nationalism could be perhaps termed as an "internationalist" nationalism.

13-18th centuries.

It is noteworthy that this passage from Yeghishe became a staple of Armenian literature, was frequently cited and developed by influential Armenian authors, such as Vardan Areveltzi (ca. 1200-1271) in 1267, Mkhitar Ayrivanetzi (?-1305) in 1289, Hovhannes Yerzkatzi (ca.1250-1326) in 1291, Grigor Tatevatzi (1346-1409) in 1397 and Michael Chamchian (1738-1823) in 1784¹⁵.

Furthermore, in his *Interpretation of Grammar* written at the request of the Cilician Armenian King Hetum I in 1244-1246, Vardan Areveltzi added his own comparative observations of Greek, Latin, and Armenian, finding Armenian to surpass the others:

But you, oh [Armenian] nation, examine and study the languages: Thus, the Greeks, the Franks (i.e. Europeans writing in Latin — A. A.) and the Hellens, who are the Macedonians (sic), must take great pains to say what they want and hear the distinctions of whether the words are masculine, feminine, neuter or dual.

But our Armenian nation, thanks to the richness and abundance of our language, was not constrained to this [usage of gender], while the Greeks and other nations were compelled [to such usage] because of the shortcomings of their languages and scripts, and by this way they filled in those insufficiencies¹⁶.

Vardan Areveltzi has three other comparative observations that also convey this pro-Armenian attitude. A widely copied and distributed book, his *Grammar*, originally contracted to be taught in the King's court as well as in schools, could not but have had an effect on the Armenians' patriotic-nationalistic worldview.

Grigor Tatevatzi (1346-1409), the great apologist of the Armenian Church and its doctrine, in his famous "Book of Questions and Answers" (completed in 1397) also repeats Yeghishe's linguistic observation, with slight modifications:

The Greek is soft, the Latin is vigorous, the Hunnish is threatening, the Hindu is chirping, the Persian is eloquent, the Armenian is sweet; and an Armenian is able to learn all languages completely and correctly, but others learn the Armenian in a faulty and distorted version, because their languages are imperfect¹⁷.

Other medieval and early modern Armenian authors expressed their own pride in Armenian language. Perhaps the most illustrative is the case of Michael Chamchian (1738-1823), the Catholic Armenian monk and historian, whose *History of Armenia* (published in 1784 in Venice) includes an extensive chapter with the revealing title — "About the Armenian Language, Which Is the First One," where it is argued that Armenian was and continued to be the language of God and Adam, because it was not subject to the confusion of languages during the destruction of Tower of Babel¹⁸.

The English Case.

According to recent research, the English began to express their affection and pride in their language in the 16th century. The majority of English intellectuals regarded English to be the finest language in the world. The best illustration is provided by Richard Carew, who in 1595-1596 wrote the *Epistle on the Excellency of the English Tongue*. Here is one excerpt from it:

The Italian is pleasante but without synewes, as to stilleye fleeting water; the French delicate but ouer nice, as a woman scarce daring to open her lipps for feare of marring her countenaunce; the Spanish maiesticall, but fulesome, running too much on the O, and terrible like the deuill in a playe; the Dutch manlike, but withall very hoarse, as one ready at every worde to picke a quarell. Now wee in borrowing from them geue the strength of Consonantes to the Italian, the full sounde of wordes to the French, the varietye of terminacions to the Spanish, and the mollifieinge of more vowells to the Dutch; and soe (like bees) gather the honey of their good properties and leave the dreggs to themselves. ...howe canne the languadge which consisteth of all these sounde other then most full of sweetnes?¹⁷

The French Case.

Scholarship has also found a similar attitude toward the French language during 13-14th centuries; however, in this case, the pride was not for the language of all France, but for the language of Paris alone. In the 11th century France, the vernacular literature was written in Anglo-Norman, while in the 13th and 14th centuries, depending from which region was the author - Picardese, Champagnese, Burgundese. Each of these languages had its own dialects. Nevertheless, starting from the 12th century, French became the language of European elites and according to one source dating to 1148, anyone who did not know French was considered a barbarian¹⁸. The French of Paris was referred to in 13th century as "the most beautiful language in the world" (la plus delitable a ouir et a entendre). Here is one example:

The sweet French tongue is the most beautiful, gracious and noble language in the world, the best accepted and loved. For God made it so sweet and lovable for his glory and praise, that it can be compared to the language spoken by the angels in heaven.¹⁹

The Russian Case.

The teachers of the Russian language, especially in the former Soviet Union, have frequently cited as a didactic material the statement of Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-1765), Russian writer, scientist and innovator, often called the founder of Russian science, who wrote:

...the Russian language is the greatest among all languages in Europe, not only because of the wideness of territory under its domination, but also because of its own abundance and sufficiency... Charles V, the Roman Emperor, was wont to say that one ought to speak Spanish to one's God, French to one's friends, German to one's

*enemies, Italian to the feminine sex. But, had he been well-versed in the Russian tongue, he would certainly have added that it is appropriate for converse with all of these. For he would have found in it the magnificence of Spanish, the vivacity of French, the firmness of German, the delicacy of Italian, and, moreover, the richness and powerful concise imagery of the Greek and Latin.*²⁰

This passage was written by Lomonosov in 1755. Paradoxically, the Russian language was only standardized phonetically, grammatically and stylistically in the first decades of the 19th century, thanks, in particular, to the writings by Alexander Pushkin. This coalescence of a standardized language was made possible by the efforts of the nationalistic intellectuals like Lomonosov as well as Russian state itself during the preceding century.

It is interesting to note that Hans Rogger and Liah Greenfeld, two British authors familiar with both Lomonosov's and Richard Carew's observations about Russian and English languages remarked upon their similarity, stating that Lomonosov was unaware of Carew's observations on the English language, written two centuries earlier. In a similar vein, it is fair to conclude that neither Carew, nor Lomonosov could have been familiar with similar thoughts expressed by the Armenian authors in the 5th, 13th, 14th and 18th centuries.

Furthermore, the saying by Charles V was quoted in a popular Armenian manual published as early as 1699:

Carlo Quinto, who ruled as Emperor since 1519, used to say to his vassals: "I would have wished that a knowledgeable person speaks French to his friends, German to his horse, Italian to his wife, Spanish to the God, English to the birds."

Conclusions.

Why and how did it happen that Yeghishe, Carew and Lomonosov independently created resembling maxims about their mother tongues, notwithstanding the great differences in time, space, and perhaps more importantly, their respective political-cultural environments?

One explanation is that these three authors were influenced by the similar historical-social circumstances and expressed this influence in strikingly similar terms and logic. Yeghishe, Carew and Lomonosov were prompted to speak on the excellence of their own languages, first and foremost, as part of the transformation of their national consciousness and the historical imperatives of their times, rather than by the inherent linguistic merits of mother tongues. In the Armenian case, Yeghishe was prompted to write by re-assertion of Armenian national consciousness, after the adoption of Christianity, creation of the national alphabet and the patriotic war against Persia of 450-451. In each case the same formula of comparison with other similar objects, that is, other languages, is the means to expression this national pride. This is precisely what was done by Yeghishe in 450-460s, Vardan Areveltzi, Mkhitar Ayrivanetzi, Hovhannes Yerzkatzi in the 13th century and Grigor Tatevatzi in 1397 in Armenia, by Richard Carew in 1595-1596 in England, and by Mikhail Lomonosov in 1755 in Russia.

As might be expected, these attitudes and this formula were not limited to language.

Yeghishe, for example, makes the following observation in the domain of geography:
*With the two rivers [i.e. Euphrates and Tigris] and the [Noah's] Ark, we stand higher than all other [nation]s!*¹²

It is not coincidental that Carew wrote his "Epistle on the Excellency of English Tongue" during the most glorious years of reign of Queen Elisabeth the First (1588-1603), just in a few years after England had destroyed Spain's Invincible Armada in 1588 and established its rule over seas. Likewise, Mikhail Lomonosov's glorification of the Russian language coincided with the unprecedented rise of Russia's political might in the second half of the 18th century.

In this regard, however, the Armenian case differs: Yeghishe and the other aforementioned Armenian writers cited above wrote when the Armenian state's mightiest period was a memory from the past, but the Armenians, as a nation, refused to reconcile themselves to the loss of full-fledged independence and continued to seek ways for the reestablishment of Armenian rule over all of historic Armenia. During exceptionally unfavorable historical periods, the Armenian intellectual elite turned its efforts to work in the cultural field, as well as on the refinement of ideological underpinnings for the preservation and reinforcement of national identity.

The analytical and patriotic arguments about the Armenian language, which are found in primary sources from the 5th century AD onwards, support the conclusion that the Armenians had a definite national consciousness as well as a well-developed national-political ideology as early as the 5th century.

In conclusion, the mother tongue becomes an object of national pride and affection, when an ethnic group with a high level of cultural development attains the stable characteristics of a nation. After this, the nation's intellectual elite, supported and sponsored by the political elite, with the aim of further refining and institutionalizing national consciousness, embarks on an in-depth analysis of the elements of national identity (including national language), elaborating, inter alia, a theoretical framework for the further development of that national consciousness.

Notes and References:

1. There are, however, some exceptions to this belief, notably the following studies by Adrian Hastings. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; Michael Lind, *In Defense of Liberal Nationalism*. // *Foreign Affairs*. May/June 1994, pp. 87-99.
2. See Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 4, paperback page; cf. Ernest Barker. *National Character and the Factors in Its Formation*. London, 1927, p. 173.
3. Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism. Five Roads to Modernity*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 14, cf. p. 6.

At the same time, Greenfeld, in her words, "parenthetically" accepts that

- “individual proto-nations - namely societies held together by solidarities remarkably similar to national, although not called “nations” - were known in the ancient world, notably among the Jews and the Greeks,” p. 495, endnote 9.
4. Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, op. cit., p. 95.
 5. Holsti K. J. *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*. New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1995, p. 58.
 6. Movses Khorenatzi, *Patmutiun Hayotz [History of Armenia]*. Yerevan: Academy of Sciences Printing House, 1991. Book 3, Chapter 8.
 7. *Ibid.*, p.46.
 8. Pavstos Buzand(atzi), *Patmutiun Hayotz [History of Armenia]*. Venice, 1933, Book 4, Chapter 12, p. 115.
 9. *Ibid.*, Book 3, Chapter 13, p. 43.
 10. For an in-depth analysis. see Armen Aivazian, “Hin Hayastane vorpes ‘azgayin petutiun’,” [Ancient Armenia as a ‘Nation State’]. // *Official Monthly of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin*. Etchmiadzin, No. 5 (May) 2005, pp. 123-138.
 11. Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism. Five Roads to Modernity*, pp. 368, 549 (n. 179); quoted from *Deutsche Vaterlandslieder*. Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 193[?], Insel-Bucherei 154, p. 28.
 12. Levon Khachikian, Yeghishei “Araratsotz meknutiune” [An Interpretation of the Book of Genesis]. Yerevan. “Zvartnotz”, 1992, p. 249; cf. Levon Khachikian, *Ashkhatutiunner [Works]*. Yerevan: “Gandzasar”, 1995, p. 15.
This passage, for the first time, was identically translated into English in 2001, see in A. Ayvazyan, *Mayreni lezun yev azgaynakanutiun skzbnavorume*, op.cit., p. 52. A later translation, apparently unaware of the first one, appeared in 2004 in *Commentary on Genesis by Eghishe*. Scholarly work by Levon Khachikyan. Introduction and editing by Hakob Kyoseyan. Translated by Michael Papazian Yerevan, Magaghat, 2004, p. 111: “From the eloquence in one great and delicate language there came Greek, impetuous, Latin, threatening, Hunnish, suppliant, Assyrian, haughty, Persian, well-adorned, Alan, ridiculous, Gothic, flat and obscure, Egyptian, chirpy, Indian, sweet, and Armenian, which can contain all these within itself.” As is absolutely evident from the comparison with the original Armenian text, this later translation confuses the sequence of evaluations given by Eghishe to all the ten languages, mistakenly attributing the word “delicate” or “soft” [in Armenian – **papuk**] to the “great” original language rather than to the Greek. The correct sequence is represented in the earlier translation, offered above. The mistake is additionally evident from the comparison with five later citations of Yeghishe’s same passage by the medieval Armenian authors, all of which accurately attribute the word “**papuk**” to the Greek. A. Ayvazyan, *Mayreni lezun yev azgaynakanutiun skzbnavorume*, op.cit., pp. 27-28, 30-31.
 13. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-33.
 14. Vardan Areveltzi, *Meknutiun kerakani [An Interpretation of Grammar]*. With an introduction and commentary by L. G. Khacherian. Yerevan, Academy of Sciences Printing House, 1972, p. 93.

15. Grigor Tatevatzi, *Girk hartz mantz*. Constantinople, 1729, p. 297.
16. M. Chamchiantz, *Patmutiun Hayotz* [History of Armenia]. Venice, 1784, pp. 153-154, 164.
17. Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism. Five Roads to Modernity*, pp. 69-70, 78.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
19. *Ibid.*.
20. М. В. Ломоносов, *Избранные произведения*. Том 2. История, филология, поэзия. Москва, Наука, 1986, с. 195; cf. Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism. Five Roads to Modernity*, p. 244-245.
21. Ghukas Vanandetzi, *Gandz chapo, kshro, tvotz yev dramitz bolor ashkharhi* [A manual of the measures, weights, numbers and coins of the whole world]. Amsterdam, 1699, pp. 50-51.
22. Levon Khachikian, *Yeghishei, Araratsotz meknutiune*, p. 245.

Մայրենի լեզուն և ազգայնականության սկզբնավորումը (հայկական և եվրոպական սկզբնաղբյուրների համեմատական քննություն)

Հողվածում համեմատական քննությամբ ներկայացվում են հայկական, անգլիական, ֆրանսիական ու ռուսական աղբյուրների տվյալները՝ պարզելով այն հանգամանքներն ու ժամանակը, թե երբ ու սոցիալ-պատմական ինչպիսի պայմաններում է մայրենի լեզուն դառնում համազգային սիրո և հպարտության առարկա: Հեղինակը եզրակացնում է, որ դա տեղի է ունենում այն ժամանակաշրջանում, երբ մշակութային զարգացածության որոշակիորեն բարձր աստիճանի հասած էթնիկ խումբը ձեռք է բերում ազգի կայուն հատկանիշներ: Այնուհետև, քաղաքական ընտրանու աջակցությամբ և հովանավորությամբ մտավորական ընտրանին կատարում է ազգային ինքնագիտակցության հետագա հղկումն ու կանոնակարգումը, որն էլ նպատակաուղղվում է մանրագնին վերլուծելու ազգային ինքնության տարրերը (այդ թվում՝ ազգային լեզուն) և տալու դրանց անհրաժեշտությունն ու օգտակարությունը հիմնավորող տեսաբանական-գաղափարախոսական բացատրություններ:

Հողվածագիրը մասնավորապես ցույց է տալիս, որ արդեն 5-րդ դարում հայ մտավոր ընտրանին լրջորեն զնահատել է հայոց լեզվի մշակութային և քաղաքական-ռազմավարական նշանակությունը: Ելնելով Փավստոս Բուզանդի, Մովսես Խորենացու և Եղիշեի կատարած դատողություններից՝ հեղինակը փաստում է հայերի ազգային ինքնագիտակցության հստակությունը (որը, սակայն, նրանցից շատ ավելի վաղ ժամանակներում էր ձեռք բերվել), ինչպես նաև հայ քաղաքական մտքի գաղափարայնացման բարձր մակարդակը: