GENERAL ARTICLE

'He Wasn't Able to Understand What I Was Saying': The Experiences of Returnees' Speaking Western Armenian in 'Eastern' Armenia

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Abstract

Since Armenia's independence in 1991, thousands of diasporans have made the decision to return and settle in the ancestral homeland. The returnees, who speak Western Armenian, one of the two standardised forms of modern Armenian, are switching to the use of Eastern Armenian, the official variant of the homeland. Using two determinants of language perception—standardisation and vitality—this paper analyses the reactions received by thirty returnees who emigrated from nine countries, when speaking Western Armenian to an Eastern Armenian-speaking society. The vitality of the language shows signs of increasing through an encouragement by locals aware of the language's historical significance, and an admiration of its 'beauty' and terminology. A heightened vitality has led returnees to feel confident about its use during social interactions and the possibility of the standard being incorporated into the nation's linguistic narrative. However, confusion and ridicule due to a differing pronunciation, vocabulary, terminology, and the inability to be understood by some in Armenian society, has led to discomfort by returnees who are shifting to the usage of Eastern Armenian. At present, the use of Western Armenian in the homeland remains within the confines of family, friends and returnee circles. Despite the changing status of Western Armenian through a notable welcoming of the language into the linguistic narrative of the country, some segments of Armenian society do not perceive Western Armenian as

an acceptable standard for broader use in Armenian society and national institutions. The homeland's inconsistent, and at times questionable, acceptance of the language perpetuates the status quo that Western Armenian remains an unacceptable standard within the homeland and for use only in the diaspora.

Keywords:

Armenia; Armenian; Homeland; Language Attitudes; Returnee; Western Armenian

Over the past century, Armenia has experienced numerous waves of return migration from descendants of those forced to flee the homeland during and following the Armenian Genocide (Herzig & Kurkchiyan 2004). These returnees arrived and settled in their ancestral homeland with varying degrees of success, often encountering challenges to their narrative of 'Armenianness.' The challenges were often in relation to the returnees' Armenian identity (Lehmann, 2012; Pattie 1999), ideology (Lehmann 2012), or their variant of spoken Armenian (Lehmann 2012). The latter received significant attention in academia following the large-scale return of Armenians from throughout the diaspora to Soviet Armenia during the mid- to late 1940s. Recent scholarly research, however, although thoroughly examining the varied experiences of return migration to Armenia, has overlooked this important aspect of the returnees' transition—language. Issues relating to the acceptance of the returnees' variant of the Armenian language, an explanation on the frustrations that returnees experience, and barriers on the returnees' path to integration have been overlooked, particularly following Armenia's independence in 1991.

Armenia, officially the Republic of Armenia (1991–) is the successor state to the Democratic Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) and the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (1921–1991). All three states upheld the official status of the Armenian language. However, the dominant variant of the Armenian language utilised in the Republic of Armenia is Eastern Armenian,[1] one of two standardised variants of the language. As the official variant, Eastern Armenian is used within the state apparatus and is consequentially reflected in social settings, where the use of other variants has been historically kept outside of national institutions. Reasons behind the hesitation to accept Western Armenian as part of the nation's official linguistic register have included: societal perceptions of Western Armenian as a dialect rather than a standardised branch of the modern Armenian language; the historical division of the Armenian nation in the nineteenth century when divided under the rule of competing empires (Marchesini 2017); and the 'shaping' of an Eastern Armenian linguistic narrative during the Soviet period (Dum-Tragut 2009).[2] The narrative shaped during the Soviet period left an enduring mark on the mindset of society in the homeland as to what is and what is not an essential component of 'Armenianness.'[3]

Since independence, thousands of Western Armenian-speakers have made the decision to return and settle in the ancestral homeland. These returnees are typically third-, fourth-

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1   The official language of Armenia according to the Armenian language law of 1993 is standard Armenian in its Modern Eastern Armenian variant.

2   Dum-Tragut (2009: 4–5) describes the changes to the re-shaping of Eastern Armenian as, the explicit description, definition and labeling of the specific linguistic functions of the language; the acquiring of new linguistic functions related to the political, administrational, juridical, scientific and economic domains; and the assigning of the status of official national language.

3   The term 'Armenianness' is intended to reflect one's quality or state of being Armenian.

or fifth-generation diasporans motivated by the desire to live amongst their ethnic kin. Scholarly research on return migration, in general, has investigated the motivations behind individuals wanting to return to a homeland, for reasons including having a place to call 'home' (Lehmann 2012; Winland 2007), participating in the development of the homeland (Darieva 2011; Fittante 2017), financial security (Cook-Martin & Viladrich 2009; Tsuda 2010), and nationalist desires (Winland 2007). These motivations act as key drivers for generations of diasporans seeking a return to their ancestral homeland, including Armenians from the USA (Fittante 2017) and other parts of the diaspora (Kasbarian 2015), Croatians from Australia (Skrbiš 2017) and Canada (Winland 2007), Greeks from the USA (Christou 2002), and Jewish peoples to Israel (Lev Ari & Mittelberg 2008). However, within the critical literature, there appears to be as many, if not more, negative experiences than positive, particularly in relation to the returnees' identity and language. The assumption that the returnees' arrival and subsequent integration will be successful, merely on the basis of a shared historical ethnic and cultural background, is far from the experiences they encounter.

In the Armenian context, several repatriation movements from throughout the diaspora to Soviet Armenia took place, the largest between 1946 and 1949. During this period, Soviet Armenia welcomed home thousands of diasporans as part of a pan-Armenian repatriation movement known as *nerkaght* ('in-gathering'). The *nerkaght* movement saw the arrival of 89,637 Armenians, the majority of whom were Western Armenian-speakers from Iraq, Lebanon, the USA, Syria, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Palestine, Egypt, France, Turkey, Cyprus, Great Britain and Jordan. These returnees were said to be 'yearning for a homeland, [and] an opportunity not to live in "exile" anymore' (Lehmann 2012: 182). However, upon arrival, the returnees were ridiculed and labelled 'illiterate' for not speaking 'proper' (Eastern) Armenian (Lehmann 2012: 198). Many returnees, particularly those of the older generation, were said to have been 'surprised and disappointed at feeling themselves "strangers in their own land"' (Pattie 1999: 117).

Drawing on a study of Western Armenian-speaking returnees, this article demonstrates that much like the experiences of returnees to Soviet Armenia during the 1940s, returnees to an Independent Armenia who speak Western Armenian are continuing to switch to the use of Eastern Armenian. While the returnees feel their language is valued by segments of society aware of its historical and cultural importance, the misunderstanding that ensues during communication due to a differing pronunciation and vocabulary diminishes the value of the language as a medium for communication in the country. Furthermore, this misunderstanding often leads to the rejection of the language for not reaching a standard of Armenian able to be utilised within the linguistic domain of the country.

Data used in this article derives from a larger research project exploring the homecoming experience of Western Armenian-speaking returnees to the homeland. The returnees interviewed as part of the project originated from countries with traditionally Western Armenian-speaking communities,[4] taken to include countries outside the former Soviet Union and Iran.[5] The 'returnees' are so-called due to their return being to what they perceive as the remaining portion of the Armenian homeland—the Republic of Armenia. The use of quotation marks, although absent throughout this paper, is also a reflection that their ancestors

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4   Acknowledging the growth in Eastern Armenian speakers across the globe following events such as the Revolution in Iran (1978–1979) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991).

5   The variant of Armenian spoken in the former Soviet Union and Iran is Eastern Armenian.

never originated from the territory of the present-day Republic of Armenia.[6] Rather, their ancestors originated from what is historically termed Western Armenia or 'Turkish Armenia' (Suny 2005) prior to the Armenian Genocide, and which was located east of the second and third Armenian Republics (see Figure 1). The next section of the paper provides a background of the modern Armenian language, a historical overview of the Armenian language within the territory of Armenia and the presence of Western Armenian in the Republic of Armenia (1991–).
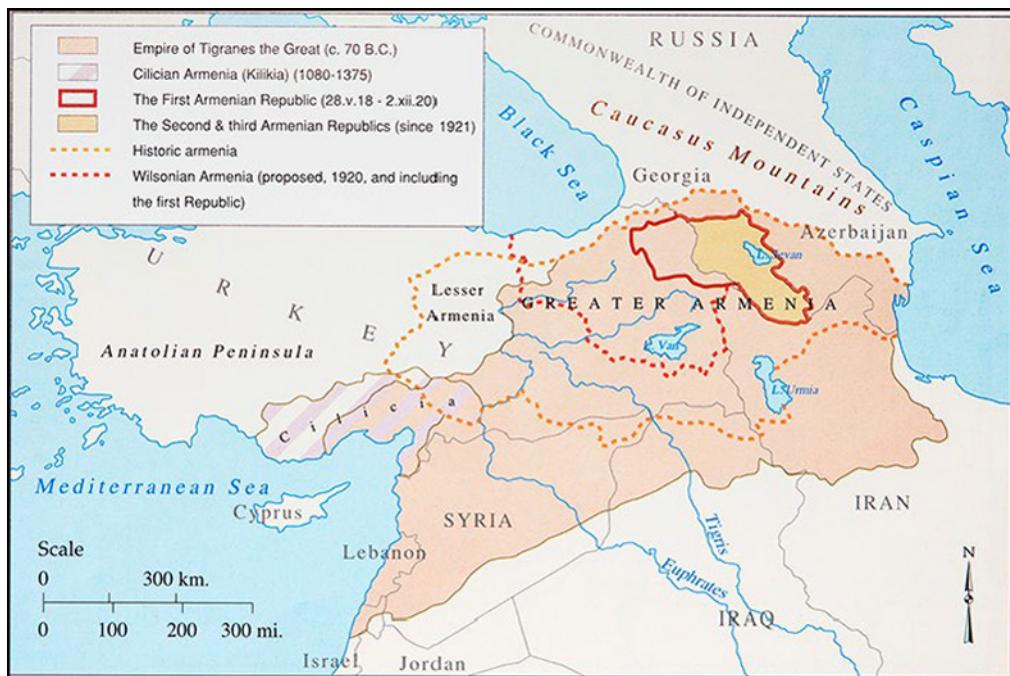
Figure 1   The territory from which the ancestors of Western Armenian-speakers originated—labelled 'Wilsonian Armenia' and Historic Armenia/Cilician Armenia (Hewsen 2001).

Background

THE MODERN ARMENIAN LANGUAGE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The standardisation of the Modern Armenian language can be chronologically placed from the 18th century onwards, following Classical Armenian (5th–12th century) and Middle Armenian (12th–early 18th century) (Clyne 1992: 326). The two branches of the modern Armenian language, Eastern and Western, present a story of competing empires and the linguistic division of their respective Armenian communities. The origins of modern Armenian stem from two dialectical branches of Armenian (Clyne 1992: 326), each representing the vernacular that was codified and spread throughout Armenian communities within their respective empires (Dum-Tragut 2009: 3). Western Armenian, based on the

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6   The use of quotation marks is an idea borrowed from Anastasia Christou, who labels second-generation Greek American 'returnees,' as they believe to be returning to their ancestral homeland, despite their place of origin being outside of Greece.

dialect of Constantinople, spread throughout the communities of the Ottoman Empire. Eastern Armenian, centred on the dialect spoken on the Ararat plain,[7] was to be used by the Armenians of the Russian and Persian Empires. The spread of literature in one of the two standardised forms of modern Armenian, and the general lack of interaction between these communities or their respective literatures, further divided the Armenian people. The diatopic nature of modern Armenian was also exacerbated with the division of the two groups: a post-Genocide diaspora, and a Sovietised homeland. Throughout most of the 20th century, the homeland-diaspora relationship would be described as an Eastern and Western Armenian relationship. Western Armenian would be used by the Armenian communities of the Middle East, Europe, and other parts of the diaspora (with the exception of Iran[8]); Eastern Armenian would be the language of Soviet Armenia and the Armenian communities of the Soviet Union (Clyne 1992: 325).

LINGUISTIC HISTORY OF THE THREE ARMENIAN REPUBLICS (1918–)

The declaration of the first Armenian Republic was made on 28 May 1918 following the collapse of the Russian Empire. The fledgling state declared Armenian its official language. Historical and geopolitical factors of the time meant that the Eastern variant of Armenian would be used in the state apparatus and amongst the population. However, the first Republic was short-lived. In 1920, Armenia became a socialist state and was later incorporated into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. During the first decade of Soviet rule, the Armenian language, or more specifically Eastern Armenian, was transformed into the language of the courts, government institutions and schools (Suny 2005). Following a period of nativisation,[9] the country underwent a period of Russification. It was during this period, known as *nerkaght* (in-gathering), that Soviet Armenia welcomed thousands of repatriates, mostly Western Armenian-speaking diasporans, who would introduce challenges to the nation and its accepted Eastern Armenian standard. Newcomers encountered a hostile environment in which their variant of Armenian was discredited and branded the antithesis of the modern Armenian language (Lehmann 2012). Authorities would continue to emphasise the teaching, learning and adoption of Eastern Armenian and Russian for newcomers, seeking not to have the Armenian language tarnished by the 'dialect of Constantinople' (Lehmann 2012). This large influx of Western Armenian-speakers had a minimal impact on the linguistic landscape of Armenia, due to large numbers falling victim to Stalinist purges and their offspring adopting Eastern Armenian (Clyne 1992: 342). Eastern Armenian and Russian would continue as the official languages of Soviet Armenia until its independence in 1991.

THE STATUS OF WESTERN ARMENIAN IN THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA (1991–)

Article 20 of the Armenian Constitution declares the official language of the Republic to be the Armenian language. However, past actions, or rather inactions, have put into question the State's willingness to accept both variants of Armenian for official use. The status of Western Armenian within the Republic of Armenia remains ambiguous, even under the protection of

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7   The majority of the Ararat plain is located within the present-day territory of the Republic of Armenia.

8   The Armenians of Iran speak Eastern Armenian. This is due to the estimated 500,000 Armenians forcibly resettled in Persia (Iran) in the early 17th century having originated from parts of (then) Persian-Armenia and whose population spoke an eastern dialect of Armenian.

9   The policy of 'nativisation,' known as *Korenizatsiya* (Russian: *коренизация*), was an early policy of the Soviet Union, which promoted, amongst other things, the languages of national minorities.

Article 15(2) of the Constitution, which guarantees that 'the Armenian language and cultural heritage shall be under the care and protection of the state.' Numerous language conferences, teaching programs, university initiatives, and countless promises by politicians have resulted in little change to the mostly passive position of the homeland towards Western Armenian. Language conferences have suggested the opening of Western Armenian language schools ('Conference Calls for Western Armenian' 2010), a reaffirmation of the Government's position that Armenia must help preserve the existence of Western Armenian ('Conference on Issues of Convergence' 2015), and the creation of online tools and yet more conferences (Western Armenian language in Armenia 2016). A recent statement by a member of Armenia's Parliament suggests the inclusion of Western Armenian in schools throughout the country (Armenian MP 2019). Conferences and initiatives aimed at strengthening the presence of the Western Armenian language have thus far only concentrated on implementing changes to increase the presence of the language in Armenia and fall short of initiatives aimed at introducing and familiarising society with the language.[10] Thus, the attitudes of society towards the language remain overlooked.

Theoretical approaches to language attitudes

To understand the motivations behind certain shifts in people's speech styles during social encounters, researchers have made use of communication accommodation theory. Developed by Howard Giles (1979), the theory seeks to explain and predict why, when, and how people adjust their communicative behaviour during social interaction, and what social consequences result from those adjustments (Dragojevic, Gasiorek & Giles 2015). One example of communication accommodation was demonstrated in a study by S'hiri (2002) when analysing the language spoken by Tunisian Arabs working with speakers of 'Sharqi Arabic' (Middle Eastern Arabic) in London. The study found that Tunisian Arabs did not solely switch to *Fusha* (Modern Standard Arabic), but used elements of Tunisian Arabic, *Fusha* and some English words, revealing a pride felt by the Tunisian Arabs in being able to code-switch. Communication Accommodation theory is able to demonstrate modification of the speakers' speech during interactions. However, the theory does little to provide a holistic insight into the attitudes and reactions of the listeners that may result in language shift among speakers.

In order to understand the reasons behind the language shift process suggested by Communication Accommodation theorists, it is first important to take into account the language attitudes of a society. The concepts 'language attitudes' and 'language ideologies' are used interchangeably within scholarly research, both typically invoking speakers' feelings and beliefs about language structure or language use (Kroskrity 2016). Differences between the concepts apply to the usage of qualitative and quantitative methodologies; however this appears to be a tendency of researchers as opposed to a set process (Kroskrity 2016), as numerous studies utilise both methods interchangeably (Fazakas 2014). Studies have made evident the significance of attitudes to the study of language, describing their role in the restoration, preservation, decay or death of a language (Baker 1992). For this reason, this essay analyses the opinions, beliefs and thoughts of individuals about languages, which are transformed into language ideology once accepted by the community (Fazakas 2014).

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10   I do, however, acknowledge the efforts aimed at introducing Western Armenian at select schools and universities in Armenia.

Research on language attitudes has primarily focused on the attitudes towards standard and nonstandard language varieties (Dragojevic 2017). Karatsareas' (2018) study comparing the attitudes towards Standard Modern Greek and Cypriot Greek for Greek Cypriots residing in the United Kingdom, found the use of Cypriot Greek to be discouraged in informal settings such as the home, given the perception of Standard Modern Greek as prestigious, proper, and 'correct.' Similarly, Xu (2016) suggests that differences in societal attitudes in China have strengthened the understanding of Mandarin as a national language in comparison to other languages, which are perceived as 'dialects.' These studies demonstrate the importance societal attitudes have on the classification of a language despite official classification as standards or dialects. The factors that influence society's attitude of a language's classification include the vitality of the language.

The vitality of a language is reflected by the forces that lead to a shift in language use and in its symbolic value (Ryan, Giles & Sebastian 1982). Thus, the more a language is used as a means of communication in various social circles (inside and outside of the home) the higher its vitality. Pavlenko (2013) provides a unique account of a language's vitality, when describing the 'relatively smooth and rapid' transition of Armenia's public service from Russian to Armenian following independence in 1991. The smooth transition was due to the high level of standardisation of the Armenian language, societal loyalty to the language and the homogenous demographic of the population, all of which increase the vitality of Armenian in the country.

The standardisation of a language is said to be a characteristic of the social treatment of the variety, not the property of the language itself (Ryan, Giles & Sebastian, 1982:3) as was demonstrated in Karatsareas's study of Cypriot Greek and Modern Standard Greek in which negative perceptions of Cypriot Greek contributed to its non-standard status (2018). Similarly, in Gu's study of Putonghua in Hong Kong (2011), it was found that despite its status as a national standard in Mainland China and Hong Kong's official policy of trilingualism, the language was regarded as having a low status by participants in the study. In the case of Western Armenian, while it is officially classified as a standard of the Modern Armenian language, its de-territorialised nature as a diasporan language justifies the need to re-evaluate its status as a standard language in Armenia. The significance behind understanding the language's classification in Armenia is explained by Inoue (1991), who argues that society's treatment of a language and attitude towards it are part of the standardisation process (Inoue 1991). Thus, the attitudes of society in Armenia towards Western Armenian may determine the language's status as a standard language within the homeland, given that its acceptance as a standard involves its acceptance by the speech community.

For both attributes (standardisation and vitality), it is important to distinguish between the actual characteristics of a language variety and the variety's characteristics as perceived by members of the relevant speech community. The perceptions of these attributes are more important for attitudes than their actual existence (Giles & Johnson 1981; Street & Hopper 1982). For this purpose, a quadrant graph is used to illustrate the vitality and standardisation of a language based on societal attitudes (see Figure 2). The graph is an illustrative version of research carried out as part of Ryan, Giles and Sebastian's book, *Attitudes Towards Language Variation* (1982), and displays the researchers' findings on various languages during the 1980s.

Though dated, the graph is relevant to this study as it provides an illustrative and useful insight into language attitudes by positioning languages on a vitality and standard scale. It is worth noting that Ryan, Giles & Sebastian (1982) use the official classification of languages as 'standard' or 'nonstandard.' The 'standard' classification on the graph adapted for this essay

reflects society's perceptions of the language as a 'standard' or 'nonstandard' variant in the Republic of Armenia. The intention of the graph, much like its original purpose, aims to be illustrative rather than definitive, with reactions being thematically grouped and positioned on the graph. The findings of this paper reveal the attitudes in Armenian society toward a 'standard' variant of Armenian, not considered official in the Republic of Armenia. Given the relative absence of literature addressing the status of Western Armenian in Armenia, the findings will be of significant interest to researchers in the fields of migration, diaspora, and language studies, notably for those interested in pluricentric languages.
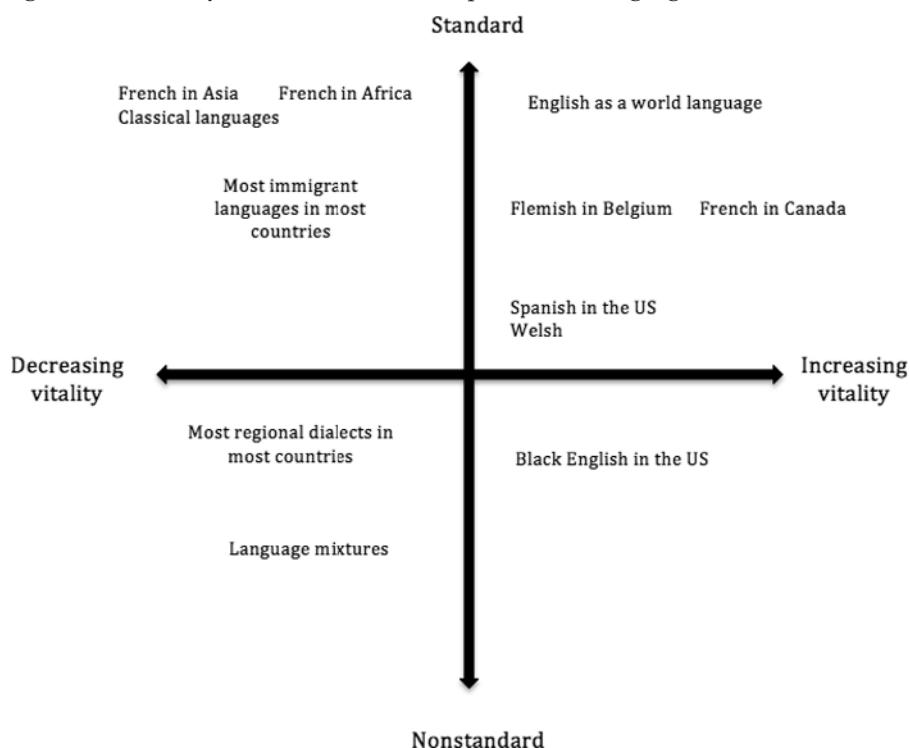
Figure 2   Standardisation and Vitality Quadrant.

Methodology

Participants: This article is based on research conducted in Yerevan, Armenia, over two months in 2016, during which thirty participants were chosen to take part in the study. These eligible participants met the following criteria: Participants were required to have been of adult age (18 and over) at the time of their return to Armenia; their return to Armenia was to have taken place following the nation's independence in 1991, meaning they were born and raised in the diaspora;[11] their Armenian education must have been completed in Western Armenian; and, they must have settled in Armenia on a permanent basis.

Participants were chosen through the assistance of the Repat Armenia Foundation, a non-governmental organisation. The foundation sent an email of introduction to a large group of returnees in their database, requesting interested participants contact the researcher directly.

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11   As specified, the diaspora for the purpose of this research is intended to represent communities who reside outside the territory of what was previously the Soviet Union, and specifically those who speak the western branch of the modern Armenian language.

The first thirty eligible participants were selected to take part in the study. The following is a brief description of the sample group, including country of origin, family composition, sex and duration of time in Armenia:
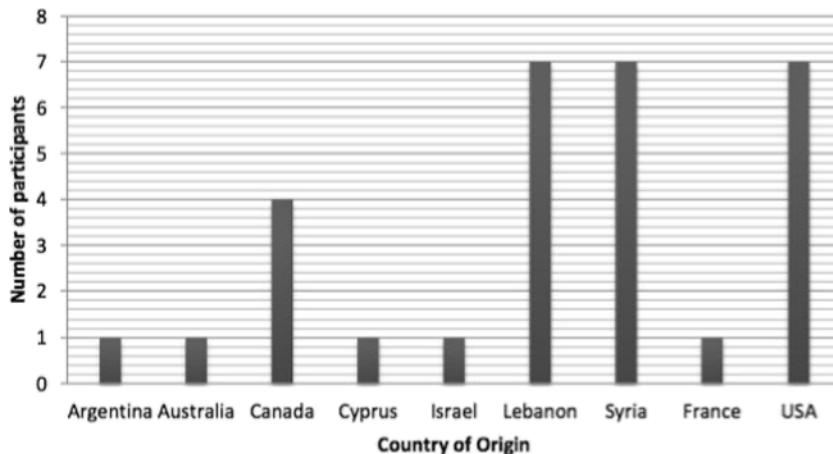

Figure 3   Country of Origin.

Country of Origin: Participants had migrated to Armenia from nine countries, which included Argentina, Australia, Canada, Cyprus, France, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and the USA. These countries represent the participants' countries of birth, or the country in which they spent most of their time before settling in Armenia (see Figure 3).

Family Composition: Of the 30 participants, 20 arrived in Armenia alone, five arrived with partners (spouse, fiancé(e), girlfriend or boyfriend), four arrived with family members (parents, siblings or children), and one arrived with a friend.

Sex: Out of the 30 participants, 12 identified as female and 18 identified as male.

Period of residence: The duration of time each participant had been in Armenia at the time they were interviewed, varied from six months to over 14 years. The average time was five years.

Fluency in Western Armenian: All 30 participants were raised speaking Western Armenian, with all but one participant having received their education at an Armenian community school in the diaspora. The 29 participants were educated at a mainstream (full-time) community school. However, attending an Armenian community school does not imply fluency in Armenian. In general, participants originating from the Middle East had a stronger command of the Armenian language given the emphasis placed on language education in their respective countries. Participants from Western countries had a somewhat weaker command of the language, although still able to hold conversations, provide responses, tell jokes and stories.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

In terms of positionality, I am very close to the research undertaken. The hybrid nature of my identity, as an Australian born to Armenian parents enabled me to build a level of trust and comfort with the individuals I interviewed. The participants' willingness to meet and provide honest and meaningful responses to the questions asked was surely influenced by their ability to identify with me as 'one of them.' The professional relationship that developed between the participants and myself was based on an understanding of a shared hybrid identity. This commonality was evident, as most participants used possessive pronouns such as 'us' or 'our,'

subconsciously including myself in their descriptions of both the diaspora and Western Armenians. However, this commonality was not without its challenges. As a researcher who shares a common identity, I remained mindful of any bias when asking questions, as well as when analysing the responses. The interview questions were scrutinised by university professors in Australia and a copy of the questions provided to the participants before commencing the interview.

DATA COLLECTION

The data for this research was collected through a qualitative method of in-depth interviews. These interviews were intended to collect the thoughts and experiences of each participant through statements, short responses and detailed stories. Anastasia Christou, who specialises in the counter-diasporic return movements from the Greek diaspora, explains that 'qualitative methods are much better suited than quantitative methods for addressing and further exploring meanings, processes and experiences in individuals' lives that are not easily quantifiable' (2006, p. 833). The interview questions were prepared in Armenian and English, with participants able to choose their preferred version. In general, participants originating from the Middle East (in addition to the participant from Argentina) chose to respond in Armenian. Participants from Australia, Canada and the United States of America chose to have the interview conducted in English. Most participants who chose to speak in English had a tendency to switch to Armenian when discussing certain topics or recalling interactions with locals in Armenia.

Discussion: The Western Armenian language

The Republic of Armenia welcomes thousands of Western Armenian-speaking diasporans to the homeland, including tourists, volunteers, long-term/permanent residents, and citizens. Their presence continues to revive the issue of language conflict between the two branches of modern Armenian that has been unaddressed for over a century. Returnee experiences reveal that the country's contemporary linguistic discourse is unfamiliar with Western Armenian and a population mostly unaccustomed to the presence of the language in its national and social institutions. However, not all in Armenia are unfamiliar with the language, as I discuss.

SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF SOCIETY: HIGH VITALITY

Returnees to Armenia describe the attitudes and impressions of locals when addressed in Western Armenian as one of encouragement and support. The displays of encouragement and support were said to be most common amongst people aware of the historic and cultural importance of the language to the Armenian people and nation, and those fascinated by what they perceived to be a 'beautiful' and 'pure' language.

Quite often, returnees deemed the homeland to be patriotic and well educated, and many had a good understanding of Armenian history and culture. Returnees were often delighted when meeting people who possessed such an awareness of Armenian issues, particularly those who appreciated the historical and cultural importance of the Western Armenian language to the greater Armenian nation. Lorig, a returnee from Lebanon, decided to pursue her post-secondary education in Armenia, aware of the fact that she may need to learn Eastern Armenian in order to be successful in Armenia's tertiary education system. This was, however, not an issue for Lorig who had been educated at one of Beirut's more prominent Armenian

language schools. Lorig's fluency in Eastern Armenian meant she was able to easily transition her speech from Western Armenian to Eastern Armenian. This shift in language use was not disconcerting for Lorig, until one day at university when presenting in Eastern Armenian:

> I was giving a presentation at university and speaking in Eastern Armenian. The teacher stopped me and asked, "aren't you Western Armenian? Why are you speaking Eastern Armenian? You have to preserve your language! Let others learn something about Western Armenian language and culture." It was at this stage I realised just how right she was. I will always remain true to my Western Armenian roots. (Lorig, Lebanon)

This display of encouragement was a defining moment in Lorig's homecoming journey to the ancestral homeland. It is not considered an uncommon reaction, yet the absolute insistence displayed by the teacher towards Lorig's use of Western Armenian made an impact on Lorig's decision to continue to use Western Armenian when interacting with locals. The teacher's insistence for Lorig to speak Western Armenian demonstrates her understanding of Western Armenian as a standard of equal status to Eastern Armenian and one that is to be accepted for use in Armenia. The teacher's willingness to hear Lorig present in Western Armenian, demonstrated not only her willingness but, indirectly, that of the whole class. It was evident that the teacher as well as others Lorig would meet during her first year or two in Armenia were aware of the Western Armenian language and its precarious position in the world's languages,[12] as perceptions of the language had changed within society, encouraging the use of the language during social interactions.

The comments, aimed at encouraging the use of Western Armenian within public institutions and social interactions, made clear the increasing vitality of Western Armenian within the Republic of Armenia. The heightening vitality of Western Armenian is in sharp contrast to the demonisation speakers of Western Armenian experienced during the Soviet period at a time when Soviet policy labelled it the antithesis of modern Armenian (Lehmann 2012). Since independence, the importance of Western Armenian has become increasingly apparent with statements made by government officials demonstrating a shifting position. Statements by Armenia's previous Minister of Diaspora, Hranush Hakobyan, referring to Western Armenian as a 'cultural treasure' of the Armenian nation (*Arewmtahayereny* 2015) and a recent proposal by an Armenian member of Parliament (from the ruling party) calling for Western Armenian to be taught at schools throughout Armenia (Armenian MO 2019). Support from different segments of society towards the use of Western Armenian are signs of a changing mindset by society in the homeland towards the inclusion of Western Armenian in the nation's linguistic discourse, if not its narrative.

In addition to reactions of support and encouragement, returnees explain how common it was to hear locals describe the Western Armenian language as a 'beautiful,' 'pure,' and 'musical' language. Three returnees explain:

> When my local friends hear my Western Armenian *accent*, they say it is a pretty language. A few people thought it was *Krapar* (classical Armenian) when I was speaking Western Armenian. [Roupen, Canada]

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12   In February 2010, Western Armenian was added to UNESCO's online 'Atlas of World Languages in Danger' (UNESCO 2010).

> They react positively by saying how beautiful Western Armenian is and that they like the sound of it. They describe it as a soft dialect,[13] one friend said to me, "don't switch to Eastern Armenian because you speak Western Armenian very well." [Krikor, USA].

> They accept it with great joy and encourage us to continue to speak Western Armenian, telling us that it sounds beautiful and very musical. They think that Eastern Armenian sounds quite rough compared to Western Armenian. [Ani, Syria]

Descriptive words such as 'beautiful,' 'pretty' and 'musical' are perceived very positively by the returnees, who at times are shocked at how interesting locals find the language they were raised speaking. These words are reflective of three realities. First, they demonstrate society's willingness to accept the variant of Armenian spoken by the returnees, manifested by the language's absence within institutions of the homeland for close to a century. Second, the disjunction in syntax, lexicosemantics and dialectical influence that differentiate Eastern and Western Armenian (Cowe 1992) make the variant distinct to the 'Ararat' dialect of Eastern Armenian spoken in much of Armenia. Lastly, the appeal of the Western Armenian language is due to its speakers' reluctance to use contemporary or foreign loan words commonly used in Armenia.

The terminology of Western Armenian, although influenced by loan words from Turkish, Arabic and French, remained unaffected by the Russification policies of the Soviet era. This meant that society in the homeland was able to make use of various foreign loan words during conversations, in place of the Armenian equivalent. The returnees are mostly aware of the fact that society knows the Armenian equivalent of the foreign loan words they use, but tend to use them as the words have become a part of everyday life in Armenia. Some examples of foreign loan words used in Armenia are listed in Table 1.

Table 1   Examples of foreign loan words

Word	Western Armenian	Eastern Armenian	Common Usage in Armenia
Information	*deghego'wt'iwn*	*teghekowt'yown1*	*informacia*
Corruption	*gashar'agero'wt'iwn*	*kashar'akerowt'yown*	*kor'owpcian*: the word *kashar'akerowt'yown* made up of the word *kashar'q* (bribe) denotes one form of corruption—bribery
Refrigerator	*sar'naran*	*sar'naran*	*khaladzer'nik*

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13   The usage of words such as 'dialect,' 'language,' 'vernacular' or 'accent' by returnees was common. Returnees were unfamiliar with the scientific definition of the terms or the correct classification of Western Armenian and therefore used the terms unintentionally.

When using the Armenian word in place of the foreign equivalent,[14] one returnee was encouraged by a local to keep using the 'correct' terminology. The reason for the returnees' use of Armenian terminology is two-fold. Returnees need to be understood when interacting with society in Armenia, therefore the use of Arabic, Turkish, French, or English equivalents that are used in the diaspora may be unfamiliar to society in Armenia. The other reason is due to homeland society's unfamiliarity with colloquial words used in Western Armenian. Arsen, a young Syrian-Armenian returnee, explains that it's not that I want to sound 'like a 20th century poet, but I need to use words that people around me will understand.' One example is the word Automobile (See Table 2).

Table 2   Inqnasharzh (Automobile)

Western Armenian	English translation	Composition	Eastern Armenian equivalent	Composition
Inqnasharzh	Automobile	*Inq* (self) + *sharzh* (moving)	*Avtomeqena* or *meqena*	*Avto* (auto) + *meqena* (machine)

The commonly used word for 'car' in Western Armenian is not *inqnasharzh*[15] but the colloquial word *oto* (oɾən). Therefore, rather than risking confusing the local, the returnees choose to use the formal word *inqnasharzh*. Interestingly, the returnees reluctance to use the informal word for automobile and instead make use of its formal equivalent in Western Armenian, increases the prestige of the language within society in Armenia, leading to both a heightened vitality as a language accepted for use by society in Armenia, but also reaffirms the status of the language as a 'standard' given its distinct use of terminology.

CONFUSION AND MISUNDERSTANDING: MEDIUM-LOW VITALITY

The misunderstandings that arise during interactions between local Eastern Armenian-speakers and the Western Armenian-speaking returnees are mostly due to differences in pronunciation and terminology. These differences can at times result in positive reactions, as noted previously, in the use of distinct terminology, but on other occasions they can lead to confusion. The experiences of misunderstanding and subsequent confusion are a reality that most returnees are accustomed to, seemingly aware of the experiences of Western Armenian-speakers who repatriated to Soviet Armenia during the period of *nerkaght* (1946–1949).

The differences in pronunciation of certain letters of the Armenian alphabet (*Aypenaran*) differ for Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian speakers. For example, the second letter of the alphabet, Բ, is pronounced 'b' in eastern and 'pʰ' in western, the third letter Գ is pronounced 'g' in eastern and 'kʰ' in western, and the fourth letter Դ is pronounced 'd' in eastern and 'tʰ' in western. There is also the absence of differentiation in the Western Armenian pronunciation of the letters Ջ (tʃʰ), Ճ (tʃʰ) and Ց (tsʰ), Ձ (ts). These letters are pronounced

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14. Differences in spelling are due to some letters having different phonetic sounds between Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian.

15   The words used are the Russian equivalent: *информация* (informacia), *коррупция* (korˈowpcia), and холодильник (kholodilˈnik) respectively

16   Words are transliterated from Armenian script to Latin letters using the appropriate Armenian phonetic keyboard (Eastern Armenian or Western Armenian keyboard). See http://am.translit.cc/.

distinctly in Eastern Armenian as Ձ (tʃʰ), Ձ (dʒ) and Ց (tsʰ) and Ձ (dz), respectively. This often creates confusion and unease for Eastern Armenian-speakers accustomed to hearing the distinct differences in pronunciation, with Western Armenian-speakers often having trouble hearing the sounds. Raphael, a young returnee from Canada, experienced one such encounter when ordering a glass of water at a bar.

> I asked the waiter for some water, but the waiter kept asking me what I wanted. He wasn't able to understand what I was saying when I was asking for water in Armenian. I still don't understand the difference between the western Armenian pronunciation *ch'o'wr* and the Eastern Armenian *jowr*. [Raphael, Canada]

Raphael's interaction with the waiter makes apparent the ongoing difficulty some in the homeland have with understanding the pronunciation of some Western Armenian words (See Table 3 for some further examples). The confusion that takes place during these interactions causes discomfort for the returnee who is likely to switch to pronouncing words in Eastern Armenian to prevent further confusion.

Table 3   Words with Differing Pronunciation

Western Armenian pronunciation	English equivalent	Eastern Armenian Pronunciation
Ch'o'wr	Water	*Jowr*
Ko'h'n	Colour	*Goyn*
Tzo'wg	Fish	*Dz'owk*

Misunderstandings also arise from differences in the vocabulary of Eastern and Western Armenian. Tina, a returnee from Israel, explains:

> In the beginning I used to get upset when they wouldn't understand the words I was using, however, after living here for a long time I began to understand that those words really have a different meaning for them in Eastern Armenian. One time I went to the shops to purchase a *kednaxntzo'r* [see Table 4], but this is the name of a completely different vegetable for them. [Tina, Israel]

The returnees' usage of Western Armenian words that have a different meaning in Eastern Armenian is a shift returnees willingly make. Returnees, in general, feel that using Eastern Armenian words when interacting with locals is more appropriate. For returnees, this is a matter of different meanings, not a differing pronunciation or use of a foreign loan word; this was simply about fitting into society.

Accommodation theorists explain this behaviour as the changes that people make to attune their communication to their partner. In this case, returnees were found to accommodate the meaning of words used in Eastern Armenian. Some examples of differences in meaning and vocabulary are listed in Table 4.

Returnees who continue to use Western Armenian words that differ in meaning will encounter situations in which their sentence is understood but misinterpreted. Roupen, a returnee from Canada, insisted on using the Western Armenian word for 'community,' only to be looked at strangely for referring to where he is from as a 'colony.' This was a word less commonly used nowadays, but previously used to refer to a group of people coming from the

Table 4   Words with Differing Meanings

Western Armenian word	Meaning of the Western Armenian word	Meaning of the Western Armenian word in Eastern Armenian
kednaxntzo'r	Potato	Gooseberry
shinel (verb)	To make	To build
goxel (verb)	To press	'Plunge' Also a colloquial word for sexual intercourse.
tzah'r	The edge	The end
kagho'wt'	Community	Colony

same country and residing in a particular section of a foreign country. The usage of these words is met with confusion, shock and a sense of unease. The shock is even more apparent should the returnee use the Western Armenian verb 'to press,' leading to an awkward reaction by the local as well as disapproving stares by others in the vicinity (see Table 4 for the meaning of the word). Such reactions cause the returnees to think twice about word selection, choosing instead to accommodate the usage of the Eastern Armenian equivalent. The misunderstanding that comes with a differing pronunciation, vocabulary and meaning is a learning curve that both returnees and locals in the homeland experience. For returnees, however, it is the unwillingness of most in the homeland to attempt to understand Western Armenian pronunciation, vocabulary and meaning that affirms their position that the Western Armenian language remains an 'irrelevant' language for most in the homeland. Raphael explains the attitudes of some locals when hearing words in Western Armenian:

> There are locals who are interested in Western Armenian, whilst on the other hand, there are locals who don't understand it. In my opinion, it's a matter of choice, it is your choice to understand it or not. If I can understand Eastern Armenian, or at least make an effort to understand it, then the person in front of me can make the same effort I think. However, some prefer not to make that effort. At my workplace, for instance, if I speak in Western Armenian to my co-workers the response will be like 'ha? What?,' which means that they are not making the effort to understand. [Raphael, Canada]

The unfamiliarity with Western Armenian pronunciation and vocabulary reduces the vitality of the language in Armenia as the language is used less frequently during interactions, given the misunderstanding that takes place. This in turn prevents the language from securing a status as a standard language in the territory of Armenia, leaving the language unanchored in the homeland.

REJECTION: LOW VITALITY

Less common than reactions of encouragement or misunderstanding, were instances when returnees were met with laughter, ridicule and amusement when speaking Western Armenian. These reactions were considered offensive and difficult for returnees to forget. However, what was more enduring than the offence caused by the comments, was the shift in language choice returnees experienced. This shift in language choice was due to the returnees' reluctance to speak Western Armenian, not wanting to meet unfavourable reactions.

More than two-thirds of returnees interviewed raised at least one instance of embarrassment or ridicule when speaking Western Armenian. Two returnees, Krikor and Zarmig, described the reactions of work colleagues:

> They will make fun of the Western Armenian sounds, telling me that I am not pronouncing the letters Ց (ts^h) and Ձ (ts) properly. I always try and explain to people that the same phonetics don't exist in Western Armenian, but they can't understand it. They would just laugh. [Krikor, USA]

> It's not necessarily in a bad way, but locals tease the way Western Armenian is spoken. But the teasing has a lot to do with the class of people; many say how beautiful it is, whilst others call us 'aghparner,' it just depends on the person. [Zarmig, Lebanon]

Although offended by the signs of ridicule, most returnees were generally dismissive of 'harmful' comments made by locals, preferring not to address the incident. The dismissal of such harmful behaviour can viewed as the returnees' way of blending into society by gradually transitioning to Eastern Armenian. This shift in language further contributes to the lessening vitality of Western Armenian in the homeland, as users of the language are reluctant to use it at the workplace, amongst friends and in other settings. Returnees' stories of ridicule and laughter were generally followed by a reassurance that the laughter was not 'loud' but instead a 'soft giggle.' These justifications are interpreted as the locals' way of not offending or insulting the returnee but rather a way to express how humorous they found the difference in pronunciation. However, the reassurance can also be interpreted as the returnees' technique of shielding potentially harmful behaviour, justifying the 'infrequent' negative behaviour as an issue of education and unfamiliarity.

Although Western Armenian is the language of instruction for thousands in the diaspora and within the majority of language schools outside Armenia, it is perceived as a language of irrelevance to many in the homeland who are unwilling to accept its differences. This rejection is most apparent by those in the homeland using the word *aghpar* when referring to the returnee. *Aghpar*, is a corruption by Eastern Armenian-speakers of the Western Armenian pronunciation for the word 'brother' (*yeghpayr*). The word was used as a denigrating term signifying both the claim and the negation of national unity—as the use of the word 'brother' represents an acceptance of the returnee, while its incorrect usage signifies society's rejection. The term is frequently referred to in research on Soviet-era Western Armenian return (See Lehmann 2012). The majority of the returnees had at one time or another since their arrival in Armenia been referred to as *aghpar* or their language as *aghparagan* (language of the *aghpar*). Present-day returnees attribute the use of this term to lower-class members of society in the homeland unable to accept their arrival or their differing identities. The use of this term was most common amongst older generations who may have heard the word being used during the Soviet period at a time when differences in language and identity between homeland and the diaspora were more apparent. However, it is worth noting that the term is also used by some in the homeland to refer to diasporans or Western Armenians, without the intention of causing offence. One example is cited in Pattie's (1999) research, in which *aghparagan geragoor* (food of the *aghpar*) signals something delicious. The historical definition of the term as harmful is the meaning returnees tend to associate with the word.

The reactions of locals towards the use of Western Armenian demonstrate the perceptions of segments of society towards the language as a low status language. These segments of society are unwilling to accept the classification of Western Armenian as a standard language within the Republic of Armenia. The scaling-down of the language's vitality in Armenia and the disregard

of its status as a standardised language, discourages returnees from utilising their language in public and instead compels them to switch to Eastern Armenian. Language switching is a conscious decision made by most returnees who had adjusted easily to Eastern Armenian, given both branches of modern Armenian are, for the most part, mutually intelligible. The decision to switch from Western to Eastern Armenian was common for returnees who wished not to have their language ridiculed, and for longer-term returnees who had resided in Armenia for greater than ten years. Returnees who had arrived in Armenia during the earlier years of repatriation (1991 to mid-2000s) experienced greater animosity as Western Armenian-speakers, given the smaller number of returnees living in or visiting Armenia at the time. They were met with comments such as 'what language is she speaking?' or 'where is he from?'

In general, returnees feel the Western Armenian language has a limited future in Armenia. The language is increasingly used among friends, family members and other diasporans:

> I use Western Armenian in the right situation, after all I've come to Armenia and I'm not here to create difference or annoy people; if I'm at the shops or a place like that, I will speak the way the people who work there speak, so there's no confusion or misunderstanding. [Arsen, Syria]

> Taking into consideration whichever country you migrate to you learn their language, here the official language is Eastern Armenian so we have to learn that. The important thing is it's Armenian, regardless of whether it's western or eastern. [Vahé, Cyprus]

> I still use Western Armenian when speaking to other diasporans I meet, however I talk like a local with the locals. I sometimes teach them Western Armenian words such as *aghvor* (nice), which they don't use, but generally they are the ones teaching me words, as I need their language more than they need mine. [Lorig, Lebanon]

The returnees' decision to speak Eastern Armenian when interacting with locals in the homeland, demonstrates their acceptance of the standard of Armenian used in Armenia, and their reluctance to create confusion and difficulty during interactions. The switch to Eastern Armenian appears to be a process of negotiating identities with the intention of adapting to life in the homeland, avoiding discomfort, yet maintaining the use of Western Armenian amongst other Western Armenian-speakers. The comments (above) by Arsen, Vahé and Lorig most importantly demonstrate the returnee accommodating the language of the majority, as the benefit of using Eastern Armenian is intended to assist their social integration. This position, arguably, weakens the continued presence of the Western Armenian identity in Armenia, both in terms of its vitality as a language used in various social settings and as a language to which Eastern Armenian-speakers are exposed.

ILLUSTRATIVE SUMMARY OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS WESTERN ARMENIAN

The two-dimensional graph (see Figure 4) is intended to be an illustrative, rather than definitive, summary of the various attributes of the Western Armenian language as perceived by society in the homeland with which returnees have interacted. Various themes were derived from the experiences of the returnee when speaking Western Armenian, including the 'beauty of the language,' its 'historical significance,' the usage of 'correct' terminology, ' a differing pronunciation,' a 'differing vocabulary,' 'differing phonetics,' and a reference to Western Armenian-speakers as '*aghpars*.' Each theme is positioned on the graph based on its effect on the vitality of the language in Armenia and its weight on influencing the perception of the language as a standard in the homeland.
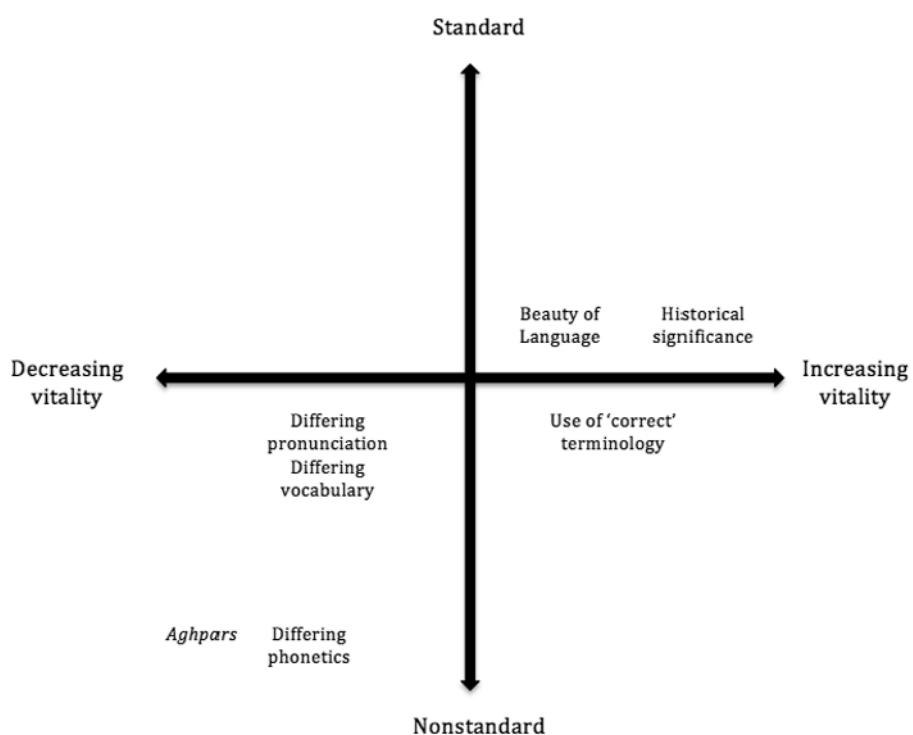
Figure 4   Standardisation and Vitality Quadrangle Graph for Western Armenian.

Western Armenian continues to be perceived by many in the homeland as a language of the diaspora. The language is accepted by some for its historical significance and beauty, though is rejected by others due to its differing phonetics, pronunciation and vocabulary. Reactions of encouragement and support experienced by returnees are signs of a significant change in discourse on Western Armenian from the Soviet-era. This encouragement leads to the growing vitality of the language within Armenia as returnees feel comfortable using the language during interactions. Nevertheless, the misunderstanding and less than frequent mockery, severely reduces the vitality of the language, as returnees feel their language is irrelevant in Armenia and are compelled to switch to Eastern Armenian, as a step towards integration.

Conclusion

The return of thousands of Western Armenian-speaking diasporans to the Republic of Armenia has resulted in what was once a centuries-old diatopic relationship within competing empires, into an issue of language use and acceptance. The Western Armenian-speaking returnees, much like returnees to Soviet Armenia, are shifting to the use of Eastern Armenian. The returnees' language shift to Eastern Armenian is due to societal attitudes towards the Western Armenian language. Segments of society in the homeland are found to provide encouragement towards the use of Western Armenian; attributing the use of the language to its historical significance, perceptions of the language as a 'beautiful' and 'correct' language, and an admiration for the distinct terminology used by Western Armenian-speakers. These signs of encouragement demonstrate a shift in society's mindset when compared to research on the treatment of Western Armenian-speakers during the Soviet period. Reactions of encouragement by homeland society towards the use of the language during social interactions,

increases the vitality of the language and the possibility that the language being included as a standard to be used in the nation.

The vitality of the language is however hampered by experiences of misunderstanding, confusion and ridicule, as a result of a differing pronunciation, vocabulary and terminology, unable to be understood by some in society. These reactions lead to discomfort by returnees who are reluctant to encounter confusion, misunderstanding and ridicule when speaking Western Armenian. This in turn led to the returnees switching to the use of Eastern Armenian pronunciation, vocabulary, and terminology in order to 'fit-in' and simplify daily interactions. Instances of misunderstanding and ridicule counter growing signs of Western Armenian's vitality in the homeland, which in turn leads to returnees' hesitating to use the language during social interactions. The lowering vitality of the Western Armenian language diminishes the possibility of the language becoming an 'acceptable' standard of use in the Republic of Armenia. Societal perceptions of the language that lead to the lowering of its vitality and limiting its chances of being 'accepted' as a standard in the homeland, result in a shift in the returnees' language from Western to Eastern Armenian. The growing shift towards the use of Eastern Armenian by returnees means the Western Armenian language will remain a language for use within the confines of personal circles, including friends, family and visiting diasporans who speak the language.

The status of Western Armenian in the Republic of Armenia remains unclear. There appear to be evident shifts in societal attitudes towards the language and its inclusion in the nation's linguistic narrative, notably in comparison to the treatment of the language during the Soviet period. However, frequent reactions of misunderstanding and ridicule, coupled with the growing trend of language shift by returnees to Eastern Armenian, makes the acceptance of the language as an official variant in the homeland, difficult. Further research on the topic is necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of societal perceptions of Western Armenian through the inclusion of segments of homeland society (that is, government, professional, academic, civil society, and so on). Future research would also benefit from a larger sample of the population, resulting in a more definitive understanding of the vitality of Western Armenian and its acceptability as a variant to be used within Armenia's institutions and among society.

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