

# ARMENIAN-LEBANESE YOUTH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITIES

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## INTRODUCTION

The discursive practice of identities has developed into an issue of immense interest in sociolinguistic and applied linguistic research. A growing number of case studies have sought to study the way speakers represent themselves, position, and negotiate identities through language. As a sociolinguist, born of several migrations and raised in several cultures, I believe that the construction and negotiation of identities demand a close, detailed study.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which Armenian-Lebanese youths negotiate identities through the way they talk about their language choices and linguistic practices, and how these practices affect the way they view themselves in terms of their identities. The paper will first examine how participants position themselves and how others position them in terms of their identity and language within multiple worlds and discourse sites and how participants talk about identity through their linguistic practices.

The importance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach to exploring the intersection of identity and linguistic behavior among Armenian-Lebanese youth. Since the creation of the Armenian Diaspora in Lebanon after the 1915 genocide, no study has been undertaken to examine the impact of displacement, survival, and multilingualism in Lebanon on the status of its language and the way in which third and fourth generation Armenian-Lebanese youth lean on different aspects of their identities through their linguistic practices. Language is the vehicle through which speakers can challenge, negotiate, reproduce, and interpret what it means to be Lebanese, Armenian-Lebanese, or Armenian. Language practices reflect the multiple positions that speakers hold and hope to hold in terms of their identities both within and across multiple discourse sites.

An important facet of this study is its focus on ethnicity and the participants' construction of identities in their peer interactions within the Lebanese and Armenian-Lebanese worlds, and in their interactions within the Armenian world when they travel to Armenia. The participants' reports of their language practices as well as their actual language practices illustrate how these Armenian-Lebanese youth identify themselves through their linguistic knowledge and practices.

## LANGUAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

The exploration of ethnicities and identities has shifted beyond the notion that these concepts are fixed and constructed in isolation. Heller believes that ethnic identity is:

Not necessarily an important part of all aspects of everyday life: Rather, there will be certain activities in which ethnicity is more meaningful or central... Finally, ethnicity is related to the control of access to participation in the social networks and activities of each group; differences in the actual content of ways of life, of beliefs and values, and of ways of behaving are seen as a product of the social separation of groups rather than as its cause.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, ethnic identity is socially constructed and explains one's social relationships to the world. It is through a dialogical relationship that identities are produced and reproduced.

Some scholars treat language as one ingredient in a mixture of factors that make up identity.<sup>2</sup> Giles *et al.* state, "ingroup can serve as a symbol of ethnic identity and cultural solidarity. It is used for reminding the group about its cultural heritage, for transmitting group feelings, and for excluding members of the out-group from the internal transactions".<sup>3</sup> The Greeks, for instance, identified as non-Greek those whose speech sounded to them *barbarbar* and called them *barbarians*.<sup>4</sup> Alcott<sup>5</sup> and Tabouret-Keller agree that this link between language and identity is often so strong that a single feature of language use suffices to identify someone's membership in a given group. The following oft-cited example illustrates this latter point. On the battlefield after their victory over the people of Ephraim, the Gileads applied a language-identity test to sort out friend and foe: All of the soldiers were asked to pronounce the word *shibboleth*; those who pronounced the first consonant [ʃ] were friends, those who pronounced it [s] were enemies and therefore killed at once (Judges 12:6). Hence, a single phonemic feature may be sufficient to include or exclude somebody from a social group.

Karmsch<sup>6</sup> is fundamentally right when she asserts that identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people, and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic, it gives one a sense of personal location, a stable core to one's individuality. But it is also about social relationships, one's complex involvement with others. These facts were illustrated in a 1997 advertisement on BBC Radio One for a helpline for victims of racial discrimination:

It took the form of first two men, one English, and the other Scottish, arguing in a pub. The two traded insults based on the other's individual ethnic identity. A third man, with an East Indian accent, then intervened and the Englishman and Scotsman then claimed solidarity as 'real' British, turning on the member of the British East Indian minority group. A Frenchman then waded into the foray, which caused the Englishman, Scotsman and East Indian to claim solidarity as 'British' and to carry on a well-established tradition of hostility with France. An American stepped in, causing the Frenchman and the 'British' to merge into 'Europeans'. The sketch ended with the appearance of a Martian, which then united the rest as 'Earth humans'.<sup>7</sup>

That language interlocks with identity is surely a piece of knowledge that is as old as human speech itself. Language carries out this role in what Fishman sees as a "sensitive web of intimacy and mutuality."<sup>8</sup> In particular, language acts as the medium for connecting the past to the present and the future, thus bestowing on the past by virtue of its durability a legitimacy and authority which, in turn, "accrues to language itself through the power of close association and intellectual transmission"<sup>9</sup>. Suleiman believes that language also plays a part in other communication facilities, including learned habits, symbols, memories, patterns of social stratification, events in history, and personal association. Hence, my assessment is that identity is rather a network of identities, reflecting the many commitments, allegiances, loyalties, and hatreds everyone tries to handle in ever-varying compromise strategies. These, Tabouret-Keller concludes, show that language is used to imply group affiliation, to reveal permitted or forbidden boundaries, or to exclude or include.

In the same vein, Tannenbaum<sup>10</sup> maintains that language is a crucial aspect of the homeland and the old world, and the mother tongue is often viewed as a positive symbol of cultural pride, as a means of maintaining practical and emotional contact with the homeland and with oneself, and as a tool that strengthens family cohesion. He observes that language is the means of socialization into one's culture, the vehicle for transmitting the cultural heritage of the past, reshaping it, and passing it on to the next generations. As one Native American put it, "We must know the white man language to survive in this world. But we must know our language to survive forever".<sup>11</sup> However, established generations of diasporic populations across the globe generally, and the Armenian diasporic community in Beirut particularly, have been grappling with these questions as their children are born and raised in diasporic contexts: How will they

relate to the cultural heritage of their parents? Will they reject aspects of the home country culture? Will they embrace other aspects? What types of alliances will they seek to establish?

Crystal<sup>12</sup> maintains that to make sense of a community's identity, we need to look at its language, as language is the primary index, or symbol, or register of identity. Closely related to Crystal's perception of ethnic identity is Joshua Fishman's<sup>13</sup> use of the same term. Fishman uses ethnic identity to signify "belongingness", a term that was often alluded to in the data gathering process of this study. This is also a term that surfaces in any discussion on diaspora, a displaced community of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile<sup>14</sup>. However, what emerges is the ambivalent relationship or double loyalty that diasporans have to places and that subsequently affect identity formation, in Rushdie's words, "out-of-country, ... even out-of-language" experience<sup>15</sup>.

There is increasing evidence that knowledge and usage of the ethnic language have a positive effect on adolescents in immigrant families. Studies that directly address this question suggest that ethnic language and ethnic identity, two important variables in this research, are positively related. Imbens-Bailey<sup>16</sup>, for instance, used interviews with first and second generation Armenian-American children to explore the importance of being proficient in Armenian. Results showed that the bilingual children and adolescents expressed a closer affinity with the Armenian community than those who were monolingual in English. The author suggests that knowledge of the ancestral language may help maintain ethnic participation, which may in turn reinforce ethnic identity. Similarly, in a study on ethnic identity among 81 Armenian families, 47 Vietnamese families, and 88 Mexican families in the US, Phinney *et al.*<sup>17</sup> conclude that language, social interaction with same-ethnic peers, and the attitudes of parents regarding cultural maintenance form a cluster of variables that reinforce ethnic culture and ethnic identity.

Hall<sup>18</sup> argues that identity should be thought of as a production which is never complete. Hall suggests that identity is as much about "being" as it is about "becoming"; that is, identity is about both the past and the future at the same time. Ibrahim<sup>19</sup> explains the idea of "being" as an accumulative memory, an experience, and a conception upon which individuals interact with the world around them whereas "becoming" is the process of building this conception. Hall explains the relationship between "being" and "becoming" in the construction of identities thus:

Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will

secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past<sup>20</sup>.

The ways we represent or position ourselves with respect to others become important parts of our identities, in Hall's words "old/new ethnicities/identities". Within this framework, the participants experience the "old" through their "exiled past," that is, their Armenian heritage and the interplay of their family history and experiences of forced displacement as well as their own notions of Armenianness. Expressions of Armenianness become symbols of ethnicity. These are the social markers that identify one publicly as Armenian. The "new" has to do with the situations and experiences which Armenian-Lebanese youth confront with regards to their representation and positioning not only within the Lebanese world but also within the Armenian-Lebanese world and the Armenian world.

Across their multiple worlds, Armenian-Lebanese youth have to struggle with the stereotyped representations of Armenians within Lebanese society. "Speaking like an Armenian," that is, making gender mistakes in Arabic, has become the most potent negative stereotype of Armenians in Lebanon. Armenian grammar and syntax do not carry gender inflections, unlike Arabic, which exists in a diglossic situation, Colloquial Lebanese Arabic and Standard Arabic. Jokes and advertisements depicting "Armenian Arabic" are alive and well within our media. Such representations and positions perpetuate a certain stereotype within the dominant culture.

Armenian-Lebanese youth must also challenge the discourses of Armenian-Lebanese identity within the community itself and the possible positions that they can hold. At one end, being a "true" Armenian for some means not "being a Lebanese" or not "becoming *odar* (stranger)." These are terms used by Armenian-Lebanese to define the dominant, Arabic-speaking majority. These are terms passed down from the first generation Armenian settlers who used them in pejorative ways to refer to the Other. Thus, for some, to be "truly" Armenian-Lebanese one must not be too Lebanese. For some Armenian-Lebanese this is regarded as selling out and joining the Lebanese world.

At the other end, being Lebanese means moving beyond the stereotyped "Artine/Georgette", that is, the image of the accented Arabic-dialect speaking, *soujouk*-eater, *basterma*-smelling, loud, *Bourj-Hammoudtsi* Armenian-Lebanese. This is far from being a positive image for some Armenian-Lebanese. Furthermore, what it means to be native

Armenian and the images that young Armenian-Lebanese have of a modern Armenia, such as the sovietized, diaspora-dependent, weird-speaking Armenian, factor into this discourse of representation. For some, this image of Armenianness must be avoided.

In this research, the constant shifting and affirming of identities is expressed through linguistic practices. Language is an important factor in the construction of identities. It is through interaction that speakers produce, reproduce, and exchange linguistic and cultural notions<sup>21</sup>. Norton Peirce believes that "it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to--or is denied access to--powerful social networks that give learners the opportunities to speak"<sup>22</sup>. Language can be seen, therefore, as important in the construction of group boundaries. Also, language use mirrors the shared experiences and background knowledge that underlie group membership and ethnic identity. Building on the notion of boundaries, Heller argues that code switching is:

a form of language practice in which individuals draw on their linguistic resources to accomplish conversational purposes; those resources have value in terms of the various existing marketplaces. In other terms, those resources constitute the basis of strategies, like code switching, for playing the game of social life<sup>23</sup>.

Code switching, the alternation of one or more language codes within an interaction, is seen as a "mirror of the Self": "the Self is ever shifting and ever changing and always on the move, so is code switching ... To say the least, code switching is an expression of the complex ways of one's own desire: where one wants to be, where one wants to ally him/herself and where and how the Self wants to be positioned and looked at by the Other"<sup>24</sup>. This implies that a speaker at any given time can lean on and construct his/her identities through the interplay of linguistic codes thus positioning him/herself in a particular way.

The linguistic repertoire of Armenian-Lebanese youth consists mainly of French, Arabic, Armenian, and English. One of the findings of a study I conducted among Armenians in Lebanon was that code switching betrays a lack of knowledge of Armenian<sup>25</sup>. Code switching was viewed as an escape mechanism used by Armenian bilinguals to make themselves clear or to express themselves better. As they did not know the Armenian equivalent of a word or could not remember it, Armenian bilinguals chose to continue their conversations in Arabic, English, and/or French or

borrow a word or insert a sentence here and there to complete their discourse.

There seems, however, to be a consensus among researchers<sup>26</sup> that code switching does not mean incompetence in any of the languages concerned. It results from complex bilingual skills and emerges in various places among multilinguals of similar circumstances, such as a multilingual context, group awareness, and permeability of cultural and linguistic norms. These participants navigate their way through the discourses of Armenian-Lebanese, reconstructing their identities and negotiating them on their own terms.

## THE DISCOURSE OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION

The negotiation of identities begins through the process of identification. The question that faces these participants often is: "How do you define yourself: as Lebanese, Armenian-Lebanese, or Armenian? That is, how do you position yourself within these multiple worlds?"

The interviewees' responses echo the range of experiences of living across multiple worlds. These self-identifications also mirror the discourses of identity present not only within the dominant Arab-Lebanese society but also within the Armenian-Lebanese minority community. The following examples from 18- to 23-year-old Armenian-Lebanese youth indicate the range of positions that interviewees hold. These positions include the representation of the "Other." Hall explains:

Another critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other. Only when there is the Other can you know who you are ...there is no identity that is without the dialogic relationship to the Other. The Other is not outside, but also inside the Self, the identity. So identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself<sup>27</sup>.

The interviewees' responses point to the multiple nature of their identities and for some raises problematic questions. Both Houry and Seta discuss their identities as being part of the Lebanese context. Being "Armenian-Lebanese" for them is conceptualized within the multilingual context of Beirut. Houry, for example, points to her two ethnic identities:

I usually see myself as Lebanese. First I'm Lebanese, and then I'm Armenian. It depends on the situation, too. Sometimes with my family I feel I'm more Armenian, but when I'm out in

Beirut with my friends and I speak Arabic with them, I feel more Lebanese. I have a Lebanese passport.

Houry sees birthplace as an important marker for her identification as Armenian-Lebanese. She is first of all Lebanese, which in turn allows her Armenian identity to unfold. She makes a connection between the discourse sites, her identities, language choices (e.g., Arabic with her friends) when out in Beirut. During the interview, Houry explained the way her identities have made her into who she is:

I feel a part of both of these worlds. These different cultures have shaped me to be the person that I am today.

Seta represents herself as Armenian-Lebanese, for she sees this identity as adopting the Armenian culture but at the same time echoing the reality of living within a multicultural and multilingual Lebanese world. She says:

I've been influenced by my Armenian culture, but I'm also very influenced by the Lebanese culture.

Seta sees herself as Armenian and Lebanese, which she feels expresses more accurately where she positions herself. We can see this notion of a multicultural Beirut where multiple influences shape the process of positioning and the formation of new identities.

Unlike Houry and Seta, Hagop focuses on the tensions within his worlds. His definition of being Armenian-Lebanese represents the balance that he and many young Armenian-Lebanese look for:

I am an Armenian in a foreign land. I dread losing my heritage, for often I find myself describing myself as Lebanese to a Lebanese audience. However, it is clear for me that I am a Lebanese citizen and am often influenced by the Lebanese culture around me. But I am not an Arab, as I have an Armenian background. I must say that it is difficult to be a fourth generation Armenian-Lebanese. I try my hardest not to lose my balance.

Positioning for Hagop is quite problematic. He says he leans more towards the Armenian side but at the same time struggles with the impact that his Lebanese side may have on his identity. He talks about "being an Armenian in a foreign land," "losing" his heritage, not being "an Arab," culminating in the fear of losing his balance. In his initial response about being Armenian-Lebanese, Hagop maintains that he cannot claim to be

Armenian, that is, native Armenian, because he was not born in Armenia. What unfolds through this interview is how his positioning shifts within the Armenian and the Lebanese worlds.

Similarly, Dikran is very clear in the way he describes being Armenian-Lebanese:

I am proud to be Armenian, and many times I find myself obliged to defend Armenians because my Lebanese friends constantly accuse us of not speaking Arabic correctly. That is why my parents sent me to a Lebanese school, to enhance my Arabic language. And now I am too busy to learn Armenian; however, I consider myself Armenian before Lebanese.

Unlike Houry, who said that being Armenian-Lebanese is as much about being Armenian as it is about being Lebanese, Dikran positions himself as Armenian. He fights the stereotyped image of the "Artine" which is present within the Lebanese world.

Talar, however, finds being Armenian-Lebanese quite complicated in terms of her feelings of being on the periphery of the Armenian-Lebanese community. She explains that that is partly because she has a different educational background:

I see myself as different from other Armenian-Lebanese. I didn't go to the same high schools as they did, they all went to Armenian high schools. I went to a Lebanese school. That was an issue when the Armenian national holidays came up. Even when I went to university, "I am Armenian," I thought. I was Armenian, but then I hadn't been educated in an Armenian school. I didn't really fit in.

On the other hand, Talar moves closer to the center when she emphasizes her Armenian origins and characterizes her Lebanese position as a holder of its citizenship only. Despite her rudimentary knowledge of the language and culture, Talar expressed a strong desire to maintain the Armenian language and culture in Lebanon, as they define who she is and make her different from the Other. She claims:

I admit that I don't have Armenian friends and speak English with my siblings. But I believe that we have a unique history and language which make us different from the majority of the Lebanese. Therefore, it is important that we see ourselves as Armenian-Lebanese because that will allow us to maintain the heritage, maintain our media, maintain our newspapers.

Talar's appreciation of her multiple identities through the maintenance of the Armenian culture and language has prompted her to visit Armenia several times in order to connect with her roots.

Similarly, Maral finds positioning within the Armenian-Lebanese world quite problematic. In talking about where she positions herself as an Armenian-Lebanese, she distinguishes between the Armenian-Lebanese that she recognizes herself to be and the "real Armenian" that she knows exists. She talks about this, giving an example from her Armenian club experiences:

I feel Lebanese, but at the same time I am proud of my ancient culture and language. That is what counts, the Armenianness, but not for my peers at the club. I was so severely and constantly criticized for my weak language that I gave it all up and stopped going to the club altogether.

The above example highlights Maral's dilemma in self positioning and being positioned by the Other. She fights the image of the Armenian which is present within the Armenian-Lebanese community. This image, which shows her as indifferent to the mother language, is certainly used by her Armenian peers to position her as a particular type of Armenian within the Armenian reality.

Similarly, Shant talks about his multiple identities:

Among Lebanese friends, I just speak Arabic. So I think people are surprised often. Sometimes some people are surprised that I'm Armenian, of Armenian background. Sometimes, I don't think I've ever strongly associated with that Armenian background. It's, I guess, part of me. I never like being associated with one particular group.

His words manifest the different parts of his identities at different times. Language also plays a central role in the way he positions himself in terms of his Armenian-Lebanese identity. The multiple positions that Shant talks about are manifested in his discussion about Armenian-Lebanese. He states:

I'm Lebanese first, alright, which to me, Armenian-Lebanese, means you speak Armenian and Arabic. If I were to say Armenian, I would show fanaticism. I'd say, I'm Lebanese to show my gratitude to the people of Lebanon who gave us a home and a nationality. But I never deny my Armenian background.

Ara's words also reflect the distinctions between the multiple positions within the Armenian-Lebanese community. Even though Ara positions himself as Armenian, he makes a clear distinction between being Armenian in Lebanon (i.e., Armenian-Lebanese) and being a native from Armenia. He explains:

I usually say I'm Lebanese. I'm not "Armenian, Armenian," but my background is. I was born here, but I'd explain, saying that my grandparents are from Western Armenia that is occupied by Turkey.

Ara is sometimes living on the periphery and sometimes shifting towards the center of his multiple worlds. He explains:

I dislike our history. I think it is too bloody and full of defeats. At the same time, I feel embarrassed when I go visiting my grandparents and cannot communicate in proper Armenian with them. I feel like I'm missing the culture and everything. I mean I'm Armenian. Armenian is my identity. But, I'm living in Lebanon now, and all because of the Genocide, and I have to adapt myself to the Lebanese culture.

The participants' multiple identities and multiple positions shift and evolve within different discourse sites. Their ability to move within and across worlds is dependent on the valued capitals at play within their worlds and their decision to lean on different aspects of their identities in order to facilitate a shift in positioning. Their reflections illustrate the way they perceive the multiple representations and positions in terms of their being Armenian-Lebanese.

With these positional identities in mind, the following section will examine the participants' views on how language is a tool to negotiating different aspects of their identities within their multiple worlds and discourse sites.

## THE LEBANESE AND ARMENIAN-LEBANESE WORLDS AND PEER INTERACTIONS

In both the Armenian-Lebanese and Lebanese worlds, English, French, and Arabic dominate the public discourse sites of the interviewees' lives. Within these public spaces, the participants negotiate their identities and position themselves through their linguistic choices.

The interviewees' linguistic practices within the peer group and family discourse sites reflect the way in which they negotiate their identities within their Armenian-Lebanese world and act as an expression of

inclusion and exclusion<sup>28</sup>. Dikran performs identity through code switching into English, French, and Arabic with his friends and family. He explains:

When we were younger we used to speak only Armenian. Now, we speak more English, French, and Arabic. I have very few Armenian friends, but when we get together we switch between our languages because we were all educated in Lebanese schools and find it easier to conduct our conversations in English, French, Armenian, and Arabic.

Dikran sees the maintenance and use of his Armenian language as an integral part of his identity:

I feel proud knowing my language. However, I wish I could learn how to express myself better, especially with the people who know Armenian.

The notion of exclusion/inclusion is there in the interactions experienced between Talar and her close friends. Myers-Scotton<sup>29</sup> in her explanation of code switching, using primarily an East African data base, reports that in many multilingual societies switching to a language not understood by everybody, normally to an ethnic language, is a common means of exclusion, often conscious. Often, Myers-Scotton suggests, it is done to keep back information and to express negative remarks about the excluded. Talar portrays her code switching as follows:

When I am with a friend who speaks Armenian and we are joined by somebody who does not speak it, we sometimes speak Armenian, especially if we want to say something about that person or something else that we do not wish him or her to understand. I find that very convenient. But I also switch a lot to English and French when talking with my siblings or with my mother. I feel comfortable when I do that because those languages are part of me. I started learning them at a very young age.

Seta, too, performs identity through code switching. However, unlike Talar, Seta considers code switching to Armenian in front of her non-Armenian friends as rude. She also believes that since she code switches a lot, she cannot rely on her Armenian to express her thoughts or finish her sentences without code switching to English, French, or Arabic.

Ara expressed similar concerns and believed that code switching has alienated him from the older generation of his extended family that predominantly speaks Armenian. Furthermore, he talks about code

switching into English, French, and Arabic as somehow betraying his family roots:

I have had no proper schooling in Armenian. I am pretty sure that really affected my proficiency in Armenian. Often, I use only Arabic with my siblings. And whenever I am around my grandparents, I feel uncomfortable because I code switch all the time.

Maral uses code switching as a way of expressing herself meaningfully. Unlike Ara, Maral describes code switching as reconstructing her Armenianness and locating herself within her Armenian-Lebanese world. This can be seen in the following example:

I code switch a lot. It is part of me, and I feel it is normal to do so. So, I do not feel bad or anything at all about it. On the contrary, that is me. I can never hear myself as using only Armenian. Besides, I am not sure whether it is ever possible for me to engage in a monolingual conversation.

Maral refers to the way she and her friends use code switching as part of their daily peer group interactions. Her reflection on code switching highlights her own desire to be located within the Armenian-Lebanese identity. She draws on French, Arabic, and English to negotiate her identities within her Armenian-Lebanese peer group network:

Sometimes, instead of using certain terms in Armenian, my friends and I use English, French, or Arabic phrases. We think it is normal for us to do that because everybody around us does it. It has become a habit, especially when we use certain technical words such as *computer*, *cellulaire*, *browsing*, *internet*, and so on.

Seta's understanding of code switching, on the other hand, like Ara's, underlines the symbolic importance it has for her with respect to her identity performance:

To me switching betrays my weakness in the Armenian language. I feel guilty when I code switch and try hard not to. My mother rebukes me for mixing my languages, but now she has given up on me. However, I still make an extra effort when I am with her to speak in Armenian to show that I care about her and our Armenian heritage. But, I also have to be realistic about it. The other languages are part of my linguistic repertoire, education, and identity.

These examples emphasize the way the participants position themselves and negotiate their identities through language. Their words explain their wish to regain and develop not only their Armenianness but also bring to light their multiple ethnic identities. Quite probably, in the context of our discussion, language is the main factor influencing cultural attitudes within diaspora groups, host countries, and home countries. Suleiman observes that the shared memories of the diaspora are based on religion, customs, and language. However, with the hold of religion waning amongst certain sections of the population, the main tie between home country and Diaspora appears to be culture, with an emphasis on language, as evidence of authenticity<sup>30</sup>. What emerges is what Gloria Anzaldua<sup>31</sup> calls 'the new *mestiza*' who copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, juggling cultures, and operating in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing abandoned. Rosaldo<sup>32</sup> reinforces this when he talks of a twenty-first century marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries that are saturated with inequality, power, and domination.

#### THE TRIP TO THE MOTHERLAND: ARMENIA AND THE ARMENIAN IDENTITY

Suleiman argues that language issues in diasporas will most probably endure partly because of the fact that only in rare cases do individuals belonging to the majority learn the languages of minorities living among them. Linguistic diasporas, he asserts, are generally well aware of their peripherality in the political, social, and economic life of their host country; hence, their efforts, as the case may be, to reach some degree of acculturation or feel more committed to the home country.

The discussion in the extracts below confirms Suleiman's latter remark. Armenia and Armenia-diaspora relations are contentious issues both in the homeland and among the diaspora communities. The independence of Armenia caught the diaspora off guard. Some rushed to support the new Republic with all their financial resources. Others complained that such efforts were draining the diaspora's funds. Diaspora grants in millions of dollars were allocated to the renovation of schools, hospitals, houses, and energy supplies. The 1988 earthquake, independence, the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karapagh, and the subsequent poverty, power cuts in sub-zero conditions, destruction, and countless orphaned children and maimed parents, brought the diaspora into close contact with the homeland, which implied putting an end to decades of severed links between the two. However, as expressed below by the participants, the 'reunion' was and has not been a smooth process.

The generated discussion mirrors the disillusionment the interviewees experienced and prompts questions such as: to what extent does the "old country" function as a framework and regulate transplanted identities within the diaspora? Should the old country be revered as a given absolute, or is it all right to invent the old country itself in response to people's contemporary locations? Whose interpretation of the homeland is correct: the older generation's, that of the younger, the insider's, or the diasporan's? The participants' standpoints bring to light the complexity of such queries and hence the complicated nature of reestablishing relations with a homeland they have hardly had any contacts with for more than seventy years. What is more challenging is that the differences in the agendas of both, the homeland and the diaspora, has left some Lebanese diasporans, even after eighteen years of traffic between Armenia and the diaspora, struggling with issues of belongingness and fostering ambivalent feelings.

Interestingly enough, in the attempt to investigate their perceptions of identity, the variations in opinions concerning ethnic identity fade away, and a consensus prevails among the interviewees concerning Armenia. What unfolds through these interviews is how the homeland is viewed by a diaspora community that is geographically not that far from it. Despite this there seem to be, in the eyes of the interviewees, tremendous gaps between them and the people living in Armenia, and between Lebanon and Armenia.

In this section, I will concentrate on Seta, Maral, Talar, and Hagop, who have traveled to Armenia. The discussion will revolve around the role language plays in the participants' perception of themselves in the homeland.

The negotiation of identities shifts into the native Armenian world, where the participants should position themselves through their language practices. For these participants, the trip to Armenia becomes a metaphor for identity. The journey is not only a way of reconnecting to their past but also is part of the process of becoming Armenian-Lebanese. Talar illustrates:

I felt some anxiety about being in Armenia and what that would mean for me. I wondered how I would feel and whether I could blend in. At the same time, I felt comforted at the fact that I was in my homeland. However, I wondered how *they* would see me and how I would see myself in terms of my language and identity. I could not pretend that I was totally at ease. Yet, part of me wanted to feel at home.

In the Armenian world, Talar had to deal with the way that native Armenians positioned her in terms of identity. For some, becoming Armenian-Lebanese is defined by linguistic and cultural links that are maintained especially through the trip back to Armenia. Talar, who has become an annual visitor, believes that being/becoming Armenian-Lebanese is strongly linked to her trips to the motherland. She explains:

My friends want to hear me talk about my experiences in the homeland, but they do not want to visit it themselves. Most of the time, I do not blame them because when I go to Armenia I am a foreigner. Moreover, I am treated as a foreigner. When I think about it, I understand it perfectly. We practically speak two different languages and come from different cultures. I simply cannot understand their language, and that really created a problem when I first went there. Now, it is a little bit better, but still we think differently about certain issues.

For Hagop, it is important to keep the links to Armenia, both through regular visits and the language. According to Hagop, the homeland will guarantee the just resolution of the Armenian Cause. Hence, it is important to keep the language and even move to live in the motherland. Hagop acknowledges the difficulties the different dialects and socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions will impose on his acculturation. However, he is confident that being a legitimate speaker of Armenian is important in order to negotiate across a number of sociolinguistic sites. He explains:

I view my presence in Lebanon as a temporary one because I know I belong in Armenia. I was forced to live in Lebanon. My proper homeland is Armenia. Armenia will eventually seek recognition for our cause and retrieve our confiscated lands. As an Armenian and speaker of the language, I believe it is my duty to eventually emigrate to Armenia. I have been there. I know it is not easy to live there. They speak a different language, think differently, and act differently, but I will try and adapt because I believe my proper place is in Armenia.

Hagop recognizes the value of the language and the motherland as part of his Armenian identity. It is the constructive role Armenia can play that he sees as encouraging and worth leaving Lebanon for. What this belief affords him is a position within the Armenian world. It is his dedication to the Armenian Cause and knowledge of the language and what they represent within the Armenian world in terms of identity that Hagop

strives to achieve. Immersing himself within the language and culture brings him closer to being an Armenian rather than just an Armenian-Lebanese. He states:

The second time I wasn't treated too much as a foreigner. I did not have a strong Armenian identity. Now, it is strengthening because I am getting used to the spoken eastern language. I am getting outside being just of Lebanese heritage. I wanted to be regarded more as an Armenian, linked with the Armenian heritage not just a diasporan heritage. I do not want to be seen as a native Armenian. I was not born there. I would like to reach a point where I have strong ties or stronger identity, Armenian identity, than before. But I also don't mind having my Lebanese identity. I think for me that is important. I regard it as being important for me to have both. I also believe my experiences as a diaspora Armenian will benefit Armenians in Armenia.

For Hagop recovering an Armenian identity means moving beyond an imposed identity, and this is strongly linked to his political beliefs. He sees affirmation of his Armenian identity through the acquisition of eastern Armenian. Performing his identity linguistically and ideologically allows Hagop to negotiate his Armenianness and position himself in terms of a wider national Armenian identity. Hagop aspires to be perceived as Armenian, which is made possible in part through his gradual acquisition of the eastern dialect.

He cannot claim to be a native Armenian, but he desires to claim that identity through his linguistic abilities and political aspirations. His accounts illustrate the complexities involved in negotiating identities. As mentioned earlier, a gap surfaced in the aftermath of the independence of Armenia as a result of the increased contact between the diaspora and the homeland. Hagop thinks that the politics of identity and the value that Armenians ascribe to the recognition of the Genocide will help him reclaim his rightful place in the Armenian world.

Like Hagop, Maral, who is the only member of her family that went to Armenia for a visit, reflected that Armenia highlights her need to foster and develop the historical and cultural links which are made possible through her knowledge of Armenian. Maral sees this as a crucial way of bridging the gap. Language and historical affiliation play an integral role in what Maral calls re-becoming Armenian. She said:

I am a great advocate of maintaining our mother tongue to maintain defending our Cause. And Armenia encapsulates

that. I think my visit was about bridging the gap and developing my language when I went to Armenia. My goal in building the linguistic and historical bridges was to build the bonding bridge as well. However, my every hope to be more Armenian was shattered. I went to Armenia hoping my identity at least in part would become clear to me. The dialect was totally unintelligible to me. I felt like a stranger. I thought I would feel better in time, but with every step I wondered why I had gone to Armenia. Though I am very proud to be Armenian in Lebanon, it felt different there. I thought that going to Armenia was going to be the best thing I do but I came back really frustrated. I could not get along with them. I went with great hopes but realized that I did not belong!

Unlike Hagop, Maral found that it was extremely difficult for her to "imagine living in Armenia" even for a short time. In the Armenian world, Maral believes that the Armenian milieu is essential to her own process of identification as Armenian. However, it turns out to be a disillusionment and a confirmation of the many aspects of her identity.

Seta's visit to Armenia gave her a sense of belonging and also a feeling of reconnecting with a past through both identity and language. Unlike Talar, Seta does not re-position herself within this world as native Armenian. On the contrary, it makes her think about her language performance and her multiple identities. She explains:

I visited Armenia twice. I was so comfortable. As we drove into the city, I knew that I was going to like it. It felt like home. It did not matter that I spoke a different dialect. They, of course, understood me more than I understood them. I never stopped feeling Lebanese or more Armenian. I actually enjoyed the fact that I spoke Armenian and that I was in Armenia.

Through the trip to the homeland the participants experience many forms of positioning within the Armenian world. For Hagop, the experience is a symbolic journey of re-discovering his roots, of re-becoming Armenian. Language also plays an integral role in his journey, as he sees the need to understand eastern Armenian and immerse himself in the language and culture that will bring him closer to being more Armenian. The trip to Armenia is a powerful experience for Seta, Talar, Hagop, and Maral, and it is an important site where positions and identities

are negotiated and challenged. It is through these negotiations that the process of becoming Armenian-Lebanese takes place.

## CONCLUSION

The way participants talked about their identity points to its multiple nature, and for some raises problematic questions regarding identity and home. Several pointed to the interplay of their two ethnic identities, that is, being Armenian and Lebanese. Bromley<sup>33</sup> defines the latter situation as the third time-space and Hall and Du Gay<sup>34</sup> 'the third scenario'. This notion of hybridity and heterogeneity rejects the notion of ethnic identity formation as a simple assimilation to the host society or as retaining the original ethnic traits<sup>35</sup>. Instead, a space is charted in the interstices between the histories that constitute it and the rootedness of these histories in the politics of location. These researchers observe that the hyphenated time-space is a process not of becoming a something but one that remains active and intransitive, one that "does not limit itself to a duality between two cultural heritages. It leads, on the one hand, to an active search of 'our mother's garden'...the consciousness of root values...and on the other, to a heightened awareness of the other 'minority' sensitivities".<sup>36</sup>

What we see is how, in specific situations and moments, people strategically foreground different dimensions of their individual and collective memories to construct who they are and what they are aspiring to. The above responses represent the lived experiences of people whose lives have unfolded in myriad communities and hence are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity – linguistic, ethnic, and national. Thus, it is apparent that these diasporic subjects have experienced double and even plural identifications that are constitutive of hybrid forms of identity that are affiliated with constructions of nation or homeland<sup>37</sup>. The following words by Aurora Livens Morales echo some of the interviewees' feelings:

I am not African. Africa is in me, but I cannot return.

I am not taína. Taíno is in me, but there is no way back.

I am not European. Europe lives in me, but I have no home there.

I am new. History made me. My first language was spanglish.

I was born at the crossroads and I am whole.<sup>38</sup>

What is interesting and important here is that personal testimony speaks precisely to how hyphenated subjects constantly build, reinvent, or even collage identities from multiple sources, often joining them with deep ambivalence. Knowing something about the uniqueness of particular

fourth generation Armenians' experiences certainly enhances generalizations about the group experience, but it also reveals humility about the adequacy of these generalizations and a realization that few actual individual lives fully conform to the master narrative.

Dikran sees the maintenance and use of his Armenian language as an integral part of his identity. Talar reveals her multiple identities within the peer group and the Armenian-Lebanese worlds through code switching. Ara claims an Armenian-Lebanese identity; however, he feels code switching disrupts his familial interactions. Houry maintains that her multilingualism marks her identities as both a Lebanese and an Armenian. Furthermore, both identities enhance her shifting identities through her shift in language. Hagop recognizes his multiple identities and seeks a balance between both through his language practices and language choices. These positions form the core of other Armenian-Lebanese in relation to the Arab majority. The power of representations stereotyping young Armenian-Lebanese and the participants' experiences of discrimination shift the way these participants see themselves and the positions that they struggle to hold within this world. They reiterate the need to downplay their ethnicity in order to challenge these stereotypes and position themselves as legitimate citizens.

Becoming Armenian-Lebanese within the Armenian world is performed in a number of different ways. Talar banks on her Armenian language and identity in order to negotiate her position in Armenia. Hagop ascribes to Armenia the obligation of resolving an unresolved issue, i.e., the Armenian Cause. For him, this encapsulates his identity within the native Armenian world. Maral, on the other hand, feels that her trip to Armenia allowed her to move in and out of a number of discourse sites and fully immerse herself in the many aspects of her identity.

The study reveals the complex and fluid ways in which the participants negotiate what it means to be Armenian-Lebanese within multiple worlds and discourse sites. The way identities are formed through their extralinguistic and linguistic practices confirms the diverse and multiple positions that these young Armenian-Lebanese have. Being Armenian-Lebanese takes on a number of meanings and positions within each of their worlds. Their voices echo the attitude of a generation that performs a balancing act across their worlds both in terms of their language practices and their ethnic identities.

## ENDNOTES

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## **ԼԻՐԱՆԱՆԱՀԱՅ ԵՐԻՏԱՍԱՐԴՈՒԹԻՒՆԸ ԵՒ ԻԹՆԻԲ ԻՆՔՆՈՒԹԵԱՆ ԿԵՐՏՈՒՄԸ** (Ամփոփում)

**ԱՐՏԱ ՃԷՊԷՃԵԱՆ**

Լեզուն մեծ հոմբ է էթնիք խմբաւորումներու ինքնութեան ընկալումը սերտելու: Ինքնութիւնը, որ բազմազան եւ փոփոխական է, կ'արտացոլայ եւ կը կազմուի լեզունին միջոցաւ:

Յօդուածը կը սերտէ 18-23 տարեկան լիբանանահայ երիտասարդներու ինքնութեան ընկալումը՝ ի մասնաւորի անոնց լեզուական եւ մշակութային վարքին ընդմէջէն, որ իր ազդեցութիւնը կ'ունենայ անոնց ինքնութեան բնութագրումին վրայ:

Ինքնութիւն պատկանելիութիւն կը նշանակէ. ան նաեւ առնչուած է ընկերային յարաբերութիւններու: Միւս կողմէ, լեզուի միջոցով է որ մարդ կը յարաբերի, կը սորվի ու կ'արտայայտուի: Ուստի, ինքնութիւնը ինքին ինքնութիւններու ցանց մըն է, որ կ'արտացոլէ այն բազմաթիւ առնչութիւնները, յիշողութիւնները, նուիրուածութիւնները եւ չքմեղանքները, որոնց մէջէն անհատը կը փորձէ թիափարել՝ վերապրելու եւ ապրելու մանաւանդ հայրենիքէն դուրս տարրեր միջոցներ որդեգրելով:

Սփիւռքեան բազմալեզու հաւաքականութիւններ գոյատեւումի կրկնակի մարտահրաւէրներ կը դիմադրաւեն: Լիբանանահայ երիտասարդներ հայերէն, արաբերէն, անգլերէն եւ ֆրանսերէն բառեր, դարձուածքներ կը գործածեն խօսակցութեան ընթացքին՝ պատկանելիութեան եւ բազմազան ինքնութիւններու խրթին վիճակ մը յառաջացնելով:

Յօդուածը կ'ընդգծէ լիբանանահայ երիտասարդներու տեսակէտերը, անոնց լեզուական, լիբանանեան, ազգային եւ սփիւռքեան փորձառութիւնները եւ պատկանելիութիւնները, եւ այդ բոլորին օգտագործումը՝ ինքնութիւն հիւսելու գործընթացին համար: Հայ, լիբանանցի եւ լիբանանահայ ըլլալ նոր նշանակութիւն կը ստանայ: Յստակ է, որ այս սերունդին կատարածը՝ իրենց տարրեր աշխարհներուն մէջ, իրենց տարրեր լեզուներով եւ պատկանելիութիւններով հաւասարակշռութիւն մը գտնելու փորձ է: