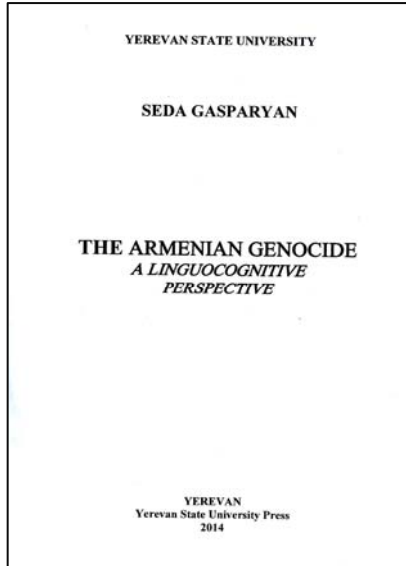

SEDA GASPARYAN. *The Armenian Genocide. A Linguocognitive Perspective*, Yerevan, Yerevan State University Press, 2014, 206 p.



The imminent occasion of the centenary anniversary of the Armenian Genocide (in 2015) provides a unique opportunity for further attention and debate on the issue. Historians, literary scholars, and researchers in variously related disciplines have undoubtedly already provided ample documentation from different sources, and they have discussed the events from different and even sharply diverging points of view.

What Dr. Seda Gasparian's recent book provides to the debate is a very interesting fresh perspective. In fact, this internationally renowned scholar of English literature and culture, of

linguistics and philology, adopts an approach which makes use of great academic expertise in these fields, and develops the argument along innovative lines. As the subtitle of the book explains, she approaches the issue through the use of linguocognitive tools, and her method aims at shedding new light on the historical moment, not so much through the discovery of new documents, but through the close analysis of abundant extant materials.

The main methodological and epistemological point of the book rests on the proposition that the reader should move beyond a mere "informative" reception of historical texts and documents, and should, on the contrary, strive to recapture the aims and strategies of the writers of such texts, particularly insofar as they are directed to different readers. The linguocognitive process illustrated and practiced in this book does exactly that. It combines careful attention to the sources (and here sources are rich and diverse), with parallel attention to the manipulative goals of texts, beyond their mere informative nature.

The recent study of history, and of the relationship between history and literature, i.e., the ongoing academic debate about "facta" and "ficta" demonstrates that the uses to which historical documents are put may, and

often do, transcend their immediate validity. However, not only the subsequent uses, but also the intrinsic textual articulation of historical documents do bear crucial traces of the historians' intentions and motives, and thus promote or hinder the readers' understanding of both events and interpretations. This means that historical "evidence" should not be taken as indisputable before a careful and sophisticated examination of the motives that are sometimes concealed in documents supposed to be, or presented as "transparent" in nature.

One of the helpful tools for such a critical examination is provided by the linguocognitive sciences. Gasparyan's book makes us better "readers of history" precisely by magisterially carrying out this form of critical reading. In this sense, the value of her book on the Armenian genocide reaches well beyond its immediate focus, i.e., the horrific mass deportations, destructions and massacres of 1915, while providing a more adequate understanding of these historical events. Her focus is based on the study of a solid and exemplary corpus of relevant texts that include: diplomatic reports, letters, eye witness accounts, official political statements released worldwide, all of which are - and this is the novelty of the book - studied through a linguocognitive perspective.

Besides numerous documents produced by European and American ambassadors, consuls, army generals, heads of state, and politicians, Gasparyan examines several books. Some of them receive special attention: Henry Morgenthau's *The Murder of a Nation* (pp.39-56), Guenter Lewy's *The Armenian Massacre in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* (pp.57-75), Ronald Suny's *Looking Toward Ararat* (pp.77-104); others are mentioned because of their international reputation: Yuri Barseghov's *The Armenian Genocide: Turkey's Responsibility and the Liability of the World*, Bernard Lewis's *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (3 vols.), Y. Auran's *The Banality of Denial. Israel and the Armenian Genocide*. All of these books are aptly discussed or mentioned because they exemplify the complexity of the issue, and the diverse attitudes and treatment to the Armenian genocide. Gasparyan's aim as a scholar of language is to tease out the implication of these texts, their persuasive aims, and thereby to unveil their ultimate goal and motives, their good or bad faith.

One of the merits of the book is that it does not hide, but rather openly faces, the highly controversial nature of the issue under discussion. We come across a spectrum of possibilities, ranging from the two opposite positions of the denial and of the recognition of genocide. We face the middle position of indifference and non commitment (either interested or

fearful), and the empathetic participation in the incommensurable suffering of the Armenian people (a suffering which, as Gasparyan's book unequivocally suggests, continues to be caused by biased propaganda). Her book is thought provoking, her aim is to use the textual method in order to expose all distortions of facts. As readers, we are invited, through a stringent linguocognitive analysis, to ponder the reasons and strategies of the historians' respective positions.

Denial is proposed by official Turkish authorities and their sympathizers who, when acknowledging the criminal nature of the events (but this is not always the case), tend to qualify the "vicious course of action" as orchestrated by individuals rather than by a predetermined national political design. The works of Guenter Lewy and Ronald Suny are emblematic in this respect, and they are discussed in detail, in order to demonstrate through linguocognitive analysis the biased nature of their thesis. In the opposite camp stand, among others, the works of Henry Morgenthau, Franz Werfel, René Pinon, Y. Auran, Bernard Lewis, and AkçamTaner's, (a Turkish historian, who, in response to G. Lewy, qualifies the Armenian "genocide" as a "shameful act"). An in-between position is represented by Israel, whose perception of the Armenian genocide, Gasparyan argues in relation to Shimon Peres's pronouncements, has been conditioned by both the willingness to please Turkey, since Turkey recognized the State of Israel upon its foundation, and by "an exclusivity syndrome" (implying that Jews are the only or primary victims of "genocide").

Gasparyan's exquisitely linguocognitive approach is demonstrated by her attention to linguistic use and terminology in diverse and specific situations. The study of significant pejorative epithets such as the use of "gavur" (infidel) enforcing discrimination, the consideration that language was declared by the Young Turks Party in the 1910 and 1911 Salonika Conference to be of primary importance for the establishment of Muslim rule, the subsequent change of toponyms referring to Armenia on the part of Ottoman authorities, Sultan Abdul Hamid II substitution of the very name "Armenia" with those of "Kurdistan" or "Anatolia" (thus obliterating the idea of an "Armenian" question), and above all the numerous implications and connotations of the term "genocide" as the equivalent of the Armenian "Yeghern", confirm Gasparyan's keen attention to linguistic issues and the fruitfulness of the linguocognitive method in the study of complex historical contexts.

A further significant contribution to the debate is the conclusion (reached through the expert application of this method to a wide number of texts),

that the forced mass migration and massacres of the Armenians under the Ottoman rule fully deserve the name of "genocide", and that no other term should be used with reference to these historical facts. Gasparian outlines the many implications of the term "genocide", starting from its United Nations 1948 acceptance and shows that the choice of a different lexical item with reference to the Armenian events of 1915 (and several items have been proposed instead of "genocide", such as the generic "crime" or "tragedy") risks to hide the nature of the brutal and complex acts perpetrated against an entire population and culture. A careless or biased lexical choice may also amount to taking the side of the perpetrators against the victims, instead of requiring widespread public condemnation of such acts. In Gasparian's linguocognitive perspective, the Armenian word "yeghern" is the equivalent of the English "genocide", and, since it sums up all of the following: "slaughter", "race murder", "racial extermination", "ethnic cleansing", "massacre", "victimization", "atrocities", "destruction of language and religion", it is fully applicable to the horrible crimes against humanity of 1915.

I wish to conclude by suggesting that Gasparian's book is extremely valuable in the contexts of recent academic debates on the so called "textuality of history" and on the tasks of historiography. In this sense, the debate on the Armenian genocide, as discussed through a linguocognitive perspective, is a unique case study in order to come to terms with general epistemic and ethical problems, including the honest, accurate and relentless pursuit of historical facts as something that cannot be dissolved into a panlinguistic perspective that reduces them to mere verbal play. Gasparian advocates, and significantly practices a laudable "textological analysis of diverse interpretations". Her pronouncements on the Armenian Yeghern as Armenian Genocide, are clearly passionate, but always remain very lucid. Her book is likely to become a milestone in Armenological Studies and beyond, in historical and philological scientific research.

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