Obscured Borders of Migrants’ ‘Locality’: Language and Identity Shift of Armenian Refugees from Azerbaijan: Case Study of Getashen village

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Nagorno-Karabakh ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out parallel to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1988 with the official cease-fire signed in 1994. The conflict followed up by emigration waves from both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Getashen was an Armenian village in the north of Nagorno-Karabakh. It was one of the few territories forcefully ceded to the Azeris in 1991, whereas the Armenian population was deported.

The current research studies the identity and language belonging changes among the Armenian refugees from Getashen settled down in compact groups in Armenia. The data collected in summer 2014 and 2015 in Armenia counts over 30 hours of recordings with over 150,000 tokens.

Getashen Armenians speak an Armenian dialect belonging to the Karabakh dialect group. Only partial mutual intelligibility exists between Getashen dialect and Standard Eastern Armenian (the official language of Armenia).

The data is analyzed in the framework of dialect/standard convergence and divergence as compared to Getashen/Armenian ‘generalizing’ and ‘particularizing’ narrative frames. In terms of contrast marking language and identity belonging of the Armenian society is viewed at three stages: (1) pre-modern or traditional society in which contrast marking is absent for one’s local community; (2) modern society corresponding to ‘nation-state’ with no contrast marking for national language which becomes the standard language for the ‘imagined community’; and (3) post-modern society in which contrast marking can be exploited to accentuate one’s uniqueness. The three stages correspond roughly to pre-Soviet, Soviet and late post-Soviet periods.

From language group belonging perspective ‘real’ (Karabakh group dialect according to the linguistic classification) and ‘imagined’ (closer to standard Armenian or even to Old Armenian according to the informants’ narratives) pictures are opposed on the background of Armenian dialectal continuum as well as of other foreign contact languages (Russian, Azeri).

Social group belonging is focused on post-immigration status variety such as refugee status (administrative vs. public); ‘refugee stereotype deviation’ (as opposed to Baku refugees) with Armenian speaking vs. Russian-speaking, rural population vs. urban population. The discourse of Getashen refugees abounds with topics like resistance (vs. evasion), heroism as well as traumatic memory of ‘wasted victims’ in the context of a ‘particular loss’ on the background of the ‘general victory’. New regional and national belonging is further highlighted.

The research follows up by the analysis on language and social belongings switching process. The reasons of code-switching or social belonging switching are numerous: direct speech, prestige factor, discourse type etc. The research studies them in terms of markedness, e.g. the dialect is marked while speaking to standard language speakers and unmarked as to (any other) dialect speakers, the markedness changes with switching of the reference frames of social boundaries between inclusive and exclusive.

The current interdisciplinary research could contribute to better understanding of the functioning of a ‘mono-ethnic’ society with poly-language/culture background in the framework of the adaptation of immigrant groups ethnically similar and linguistically different.