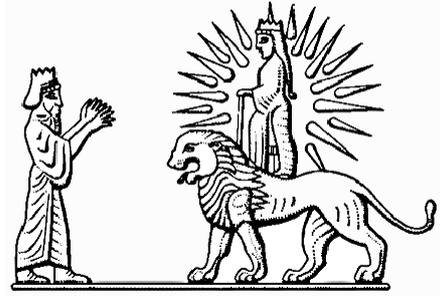


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“Assyrian (Aramaic). A Recent Model for its Maintenance and Revitalization”

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EDWARD Y. ODISHO Chicago

Assyrian (Aramaic): A Recent Model for its Maintenance and Revitalization*

1. Introductory Remarks

In previous research works pertaining to the survival and maintenance of the Assyrian language,¹ it was concluded that the Assyrian language has been undergoing serious erosion especially among its speakers in diaspora. Although the focus has thus far been on its speakers in the United States since they represent one of the largest population concentrations of the Assyrians, the erosion has been equally serious in the native homelands of the language in the Middle East including Iraq, Iran and Syria.² The erosion has been so acute that some investigators have listed Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic) among the endangered languages that face disappearance or are vulnerable to it.³ Several reasons have been adduced to account for this deterioration in the use and status of Assyrian.⁴ Foremost among those reasons were the collapse of the geographic and social barriers (boundaries) and the ensuing

massive immersion of the Assyrians in the languages of the majorities with which they coexisted. The immersion usually assumed two forms; either through large-scale migration into the majority language-dominant urban areas [especially, Arabic, Turkish and Farsi] or through even larger scale immigration to foreign countries in Europe, North America and Australia and the domination of, especially, the English language.

It was in light of the above evidence and observations that the author was led to conclude that “The survival of Aramaic [Assyrian] requires some sort of *geographical concentration* of population, *formal schooling* or massive tutoring in the native language and continuation of literary publications.”⁵ At the time, this conclusion necessitated the addition of the following footnote:

“For the last few years, the leadership of the Assyrian Democratic Movement which

* Assyrian, Syriac and Aramaic are used interchangeably since they all refer to the same language; each appellation is used in the context of this paper when it is most appropriate. This usage is to impress a sense of unity and oneness and to avoid a ridiculous dispute over appellations.

¹ Edward Y. Odisho, “Bilingualism and Multilingualism among Assyrians: a Case of Language Erosion and Demise,” in *Semitica: Serta Philologica Constantino Tsereteli Dicata*, ed R. Contini, F. Penacchietti and M. Tosco (Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 1993); “The Ethnic, Linguistic and Cultural Identity of Modern Assyrians,” paper presented at the Second Annual Meeting of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project (Melammu), Paris/

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France, 1999b, published in R.M. Whiting (ed.), *Mythology and Mythologies* (Melammu Symposia II), Helsinki 2001, pp. 137-148; “Assyrian Language Maintenance and Erosion in U.S.: a World War I Family Case Study,” in *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*,” Vol. 13:1, 1999a; “ADM’s Educational Policy: A Serious Project of Assyrian Language Maintenance,” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, Vol. 15:1, 2001.

² Odisho, “Bilingualism and Multilingualism...,” 1993; “The Ethnic, Linguistic...,” 1999b; “Assyrian Language Maintenance...,” 1999a.

³ Jonathan Owens, ..., forthcoming.

⁴ Odisho, 1993: 195-7.

⁵ Odisho, 1999a: 4-5.

is part of the governmental coalition in the self-rule region in the North of Iraq has adopted and initiated instruction in content areas at both elementary and secondary levels in the Assyrian language. This is a very important step with far-reaching consequences for a realistic maintenance of language as a communicative tool for generations to come.”⁶

The bulk of this paper will focus primarily on the efforts of language maintenance in Iraq; only occasionally, will other regions be brought into focus when their relevance is inevitable. This restriction on the domain of this research is attributed to two reasons. Firstly, the broadening of the domain to incorporate all language maintenance attempts in all the Assyrian-speaking regions will stretch the research beyond its specific objective. Secondly, this specific objective was triggered by the recent educational project of the *Assyrian Democratic Movement*⁷ [abbreviated hereafter as ADM]. Within the self-rule region in the North of Iraq, ADM has initiated an educational system in which Assyrian is either the primary language of instruction or is a language item required by all the Assyrian students. In the first case, all instruction is administered in Assyrian, while Kurdish and Arabic are taught as the regional languages with English as a foreign language to facilitate inter-community and cross-language communica-

tion. In the latter case, the instruction is administered in Kurdish, while Assyrian is a language requirement restricted to the Assyrian students. In other words, ADM has been afforded a unique opportunity to create and implement a curriculum of instruction which promotes the use of the Assyrian language as the primary medium of instruction in all content areas or is, at least, taught as a subject. This unique situation of granting the Assyrians the opportunity to practice their human rights in conducting the education of their children in the native language is, hopefully, the result of the growing democratic awareness among the Kurdish majority in their treatment of the other native and/or ethnic nationalities coexisting with them. This paper will have three areas of emphasis: *firstly*, the structural nature of ADM’s educational project; *secondly*, its effectiveness in native language maintenance and revitalization compared to other past attempts; and *thirdly*, its long-term future significance for the maintenance and revitalization of Assyrian as a language of culture and civilization that had a brilliant past. However, since the assessment of ADM’s educational project will be strictly in objective sociolinguistic terms some clarification of the terminology involved is inevitable.

2. Language Erosion and Maintenance: Clarification of Terminology

The terms *language erosion* and *language maintenance* are used in a general sense; the former indicates the deteriora-

tion in the conditions of a language as a medium of communication, while the latter indicates the healthy continuation

⁶ Odisho, 1999a: 4, ft.6.

⁷ It is, perhaps, the most organized and popular political movement in the modern history of the Assyri-

ans. In spite of its relatively recent formation in 1979 it has become highly favorable by the masses of the Assyrian population.

of its use as a medium of communication. In order to further specify the basic terms, one needs more supplementary terms and attributes to achieve that. For instance, to better denote *erosion* one needs to understand the concept of *language loss* or *shift* and *language disappearance* or *death*. "Language shift is used in literature to refer to a downward language movement. That is, there is lessening of the number of speakers of a language, a decreasing saturation of language speakers in the population, a loss in language proficiency, or decreasing use of that language in different domains. The last stages of language shift are called language death."⁸ In other words, a language begins first to suffer from erosion the cumulative effect of which is language shift or loss. Realistically, a language as a system does not disappear or die. However, when its natives cease to use it then the language is said to be functionally dead even if it is occasionally resuscitated through its orthography [its writing system]. As for *language maintenance*, Baker describes it as the process that "usually refers to relative language stability in the number and distribution of its speakers, its proficient usage in children and adults, and to the retention and use of the language in specific domains (e.g. home, school, religion)."⁹

Linguistically speaking, there are at least two distinct patterns of language erosion and loss that are applicable to all languages. The first pattern applies when two languages come into contact with each other, but maintain their domains,

borders and functions leading to a long-lasting situation of bilingualism among the speakers of both languages. According to this pattern, it takes a long time, perhaps centuries, for one of the languages to erode and succumb to the other. The second pattern applies when two languages come into contact, but one of them [usually the minority language] is suddenly immersed in the other one [usually the majority language] thus speedily losing its domain, borders and functions. In this pattern, bilingualism may emerge, but it is predominantly a one-sided bilingualism confined to the minority. The successive dominance of languages in Mesopotamia [Sumerian, Akkadian, Aramaic, Arabic] and the survival of the Assyrian language until this very day, despite its severe erosion through the dominance of Arabic, are typically representative of the first pattern. The second pattern is commonly attested, such as in the United States, where the ethnic languages suffer from shift and loss within three generations of their exposure to English and the mainstream society.¹⁰ The latter pattern is highly applicable to the case of the Assyrian ethnic communities in the United States, in particular, and those in Europe and Australia, in general.¹¹ However, in both patterns when the ethnic groups or minorities sense the imminent danger of erosion and the subsequent threat to the maintenance of their languages, they attempt to counter the erosion and halt the shift and reverse it if possible. The reversal may involve processes of different degrees of intensity and scale such as *revival* and

⁸ Colin Baker, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters 1997), 43.

⁹ Baker, 1997, 43.

¹⁰ R. Garcia and C.F. Diaz, "The Status and Use of

Spanish and English among Hispanic Youth in Dade County (Miami) Florida: a Sociolinguistic Study." *Language and Education*. Vol. 6:1, 13-32, 1992.

¹¹ Odisho, 1993 and 2000.

revitalization. According to Paulston, Chen and Connerty, language revival is reserved for the giving of new life to a dead language [such as the revival of Hebrew], while language revitalization is the imparting of new vigor to an existing language, often by increasing the do-

mains where the language is used.¹² This distinction by Paulston, *et alii* between *revival* and *revitalization* is very practical for this study since the project being described and evaluated here is a typical example of language revitalization.

3. Language Reversal and Revitalization

Baker rightly points out that Fishman has made a major contribution to the theory of language reversal.¹³ Fishman (1991) provides a list of priorities to halt language decline and attempt to reverse language shift.¹⁴ This list Fishman called *Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale* (GIDS) for threatened languages. The scale is divided into 8 stages, the higher the number on the scale the more threatened a language is.¹⁵ In order to assess where on the scale one can place the current condition of the Assyrian language, one needs to reveal the characteristics of each stage. The following outline of the characteristics of each stage is based on Baker, 1997.

Stage 8. Is the worst condition a language can be in. **Only a few of the older generations are able to speak the language**, but because they are socially isolated and geographically scattered active interaction is rarely possible.

Stage 7. Language is used on a daily communication basis, but usually by older generation. There is **a discontinuity in language production by the younger generation**; there is no choice but to communicate in the majority language. The aim here is to strive to help the

younger generation to learn the language and use it.

Stage 6. This is the most pivotal and crucial stage for language survival. **The language is passed to the next generation. There is native language communication across the three generations: grandparents, parents and children.** If the language is **used within the family**, it is highly likely to be used in the street, neighborhood and other religious and cultural events **in the community**. This stage essentially concerns the **informal use of a language in the home and community and predominantly through oral skills**.

Stage 5. It occurs when the minority language in the home, school and community goes **beyond oracy to literacy**. First, literacy in the minority language is seen to be important because it facilitates alternative means of communication, especially across distance and time. Second, the image and status of minority language is elevated when it is present in print; besides, speakers may not always be at the mercy of the majority language media. Third, literacy ensures a much wider variety of functions for a minority language. When formal education and schooling is in the majority language, then **literacy in the minority language**

¹² C. Paulston, C. Chen and M. Connerty, "Language Regeneration: A Conceptual Overview of Language Revival, Revitalization and Reversal." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. Vol. 14:4, 275-286, 1993.

¹³ Baker, 1997, 63.

¹⁴ J. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*. Clevedon: Multilingual Affairs, 1991[cited in Baker, 1997].

¹⁵ Baker, 1997, 68.

instruction may be achieved through local community effort through complete parochial schools, weekend and/or evening classes.

Stages 8 through 5 are the minimum and basic requirements for halting the language shift and then its reversal. In those stages, language reversal is primarily in its oral form and if literacy is involved then it is usually through informal schooling and education.

Stage 4. At this stage **formal and large-scale minority language medium education is sought.** It may be through private schools, but **usually state-sponsored schools are the target.** Maximum benefit is attained if minority language education is compulsory.

Stage 3. When the **minority language is established in the local community and is used in administering some economic activities independent of the majority language.**

Stage 2. During this stage the **minority language is used in some governmental institutions e.g., health, postal, courts, police services. Attempt is also made to secure certain hours on the national**

radio and television.

Stage 1. Some use of minority language available in **higher education, central government and national media.**

Generally speaking, Fishman's scale seems to be quite pertinent to the overall characterization and assessment of the conditions of the Assyrian language erosion and maintenance; however, in order for this scale to be more effectively applicable, Fishman's assertion that the stages are not meant to be strictly *sequential* and *dependent* on each other in the order in which they appear, should be seriously considered. Besides, "Fishman's eight stages must be seen as overlapping and interacting. In language revival, it is not the case of going one-step or stage at a time. The myriad of factors in language reversal link together in complex patterns"¹⁶ In light of the above two clarifications on the application of the scale, it is expected that the scale will not only be pertinent to the conditions of the Assyrian language, but also effective in the description and assessment of those conditions.

4. Past and Present Survival Conditions of Assyrian Language

As early as the 8th century B.C., the Aramaic [Assyrian] language and its alphabetic writing competed with the Akkadian/Assyrian language and its syllabic writing throughout Beth Nahrain, in general, and in Assyria, in particular. Once Aramaic prevailed, it reigned unchallenged as the native language or the common language of all the peoples of the Middle East until the Arab invasion in the 7th century A.D.¹⁷ With the Arab

conquests and their domination of Mesopotamia, Aramaic began a steady decline as a literary language, though still persisting as a spoken language.¹⁸ The Mongol invasion of Beth Nahrain dealt another severe blow to Aramaic, and those who spoke it suffered successive persecutions that forced them to take refuge in the mountains of today's Kurdistan and the plains of Urmi and Mosul.¹⁹ For at least six centuries following the Mongol inva-

¹⁶ Baker, 1997, 73.

¹⁷ Roux, 1964.

¹⁸ Atiya, 1968.

¹⁹ Arthur Maclean, 1895.

sion, speakers of Aramaic remained in a state of rigid geographic isolation and intellectual hibernation. Their language lost its prestigious status with increased acceleration, illiteracy pervaded among its speakers and their regional and tribal vernaculars prevailed. Their geographic isolation from the rest of the outside world was not ended until the arrival of the European missionaries around early 19th century. Regardless of the religious ambitions of the missionaries, if it had not been for their services in the revitalization of literacy among the Assyrians, the Assyrian language would have been in serious danger of disappearance since then. However, for a better portrayal of the survival situation of the Assyrian language since the advent of the missionaries until the present day, it would be convenient to look at this long period of time, which is almost equivalent to two centuries, in terms of three phases each one of which represents a serious attempt or model at the revitalization of the Assyrian language. These three models represent the periods of 1800-1918, 1918-1991 and 1991-Present, respectively. The survival condition of the Assyrian language in the countries of diaspora, mainly European and North American, is considered the fourth model. Details of 1800-1918 and 1918-1991 models have been documented in an earlier publication (Odisho, 2001); thus, the focus here will be predominantly on the 1991-Present model.

4.1. 1991-Present: the ADM Project

In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991 and Saddam's assault on the self-rule region, no one would ever predict that most of the refugees would return to their villages. Even more un-

predictable was the fact that ADM would take a brilliant leadership role in resettling most of the Assyrian-speakers in their villages and initiating an unprecedented endeavor for a comprehensive native-language educational system. These courageous steps did not only retain the hinterland of the Assyrian language and culture, but also laid out a blueprint for further serious and systematic linguistic and cultural revitalization. As pointed out earlier on, there are three areas of emphasis in this paper: *firstly*, the structural nature of ADM's educational project; *secondly*, its effectiveness in native language maintenance compared to other attempts and means; and *thirdly*, its long-term future significance for the maintenance of Assyrian as an ancient language of culture and civilization.

4.1.1. Structural Nature of ADM Project and its Scale

Initially, the project began with the implementation of instruction in Assyrian at the elementary level, which required the preparation of buildings, teachers and textbooks. Because the emphasis of this study is on the humanitarian, linguistic and cultural aspects, the material aspects, though very important in the successful implementation of any educational project, will not be dealt with here. As for the professionally qualified teachers, there was a general shortage, but the deficiency was specifically felt in the linguistic and professional preparedness of teachers in handling comprehensive instruction in the Assyrian language covering a wide array of content areas: mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. The deficiency was attributed, in general, to the high percentage of illiteracy in the native lan-

guage among the speakers of Assyrian as well as the rapidly decreasing fluency in their oral skills due to the pervasive dominance of Arabic. Faced with this serious language deficiency, ADM's leadership initiated intensive language proficiency courses for the teachers.²⁰ As for the textbooks, especially in content areas, they were almost non-existent. Thus, there was a serious urgency for creating them primarily by translating appropriate textbooks existing in Arabic for other parts of Iraq. Where and when appropriate, such textbooks have been properly edited and modified to be in line with the Assyrian cultural, national and patriotic goals.²¹ So with barely convenient school buildings, with continuing teacher preparation and in-service training, and with modest quality textbooks the project of Assyrianizing the educational curriculum was practically implemented in 1993.²² Since then, there has been improvement in school buildings, in the language preparedness of the teachers and in textbooks quality and content. By the academic year 1997-1998, 47 textbooks were printed in Assyrian covering all subjects included in the curriculum.²³

One of the most important facts to be known about ADM's project is that there are two categories of schools in which the Assyrian language is involved. The first category involves schools in which the Assyrian language is only taught as a language throughout the elementary school with a range of 4-6 hours per week. Altogether, in Erbil and Duhok there are 12 such elementary schools with a total of 1915 students. There are also six high schools with a total of 484

students. The second category involves schools in which the whole curriculum is administered in Assyrian. There are 15 such elementary schools with a total of 1560 students and one high school with a total of 319 students. There is also an Annex school, Ashurban, in Diyana with only seven students. Based on the available data,²⁴ there are 11 elementary schools. [1st through 6th grades] in the province of Erbil, 7 of them in Ainkawa, 2 in Shaqlawa and 1 in each Diyana and Koysinjaq. Altogether, they accommodate 1560 students with almost equal ratio of females to males. In the province of Duhok, there are 16 elementary schools, 4 in the center of Duhok and the rest in its other principalities. Altogether, they accommodate 1843 students with almost equal numbers of males and females. Thus, the overall number of the students covered by the Assyrian language instruction in both categories is presently 4285. For a systematic view of facts and figures about the schools incorporated in the project see table 1 below.

There are several principal points that are embedded in the above statistics whose relevant significance to the overall maintenance and revitalization of the Assyrian language will be dealt with in the context of the extended discussion that will soon follow. One such very interesting and principal point to notice is the high percentage of females, which is almost equal to males. A second point is the areas with the largest concentrations of students, which happen to be in Ainkawa of Erbil and in the center of Duhok. The relevance of such concentrations will arise when language mixing

²⁰ These courses continue due to the increasing demand for qualified Assyrian language teachers. For details, see *Syriac Education in the North of Iraq: Facts and Figures*. San Diego: Friends of the Syriac Education, 2000.

²¹ *Syriac Education in the North of Iraq*, p. 24.

²² *Ibid*, p. 20.

²³ *Syriac Education in the North of Iraq*, p. 25.

²⁴ <http://www.zowaa.org/Sub_Pgs/Education.htm>; also, *Syriac Education in the North of Iraq*, pp. 22-3.

and leveling of the different dialects of Assyrian is dealt with. These schools are all run by the *Directorate General of Syriac Teaching*, which is a body in the hierarchy of the Ministry of Education in

the self-rule region.²⁵ The Directorate is responsible for the overall administration, curriculum design, teacher training, and textbooks preparation for the Assyrian language instruction.

	Category # 1 Language Teaching				Category # 2 Content Teaching			
	Elementary School	Student	High School	Student	Elementary School	Student	High School	Student
Erbil	9	1483	6	484	2	149	1	7
Duhok	3	432	0	0	13	1411	1	319
Total	12	1915	6	484	15	1560	2	326

Table 1. Number of students, categories of schools and provinces involved in the ADM Assyrian language project.

Students admitted to the first grade of the elementary schools in 1991-1992 finished their 6th grade²⁶ in 1997 and were ready to proceed to the intermediate school [7th through 9th grades], which had not been established yet. ADM worked hard to avoid the disruption in the chain of educational progress. There was reluctance on the part of the central government of the self-rule region to approve the concept of an intermediate school, let alone sponsoring it financially. The reluctance was partially based on legal grounds in the sense that the law restricted the instruction in Assyrian to the elementary school level only. The legal grounds were further reinforced, allegedly, on the basis of the deficiency in the educational cadre required at this level of instruction. However, after further deliberations, a compromise was reached and in December 1998 the Ministry of Education granted the permission to es-

tablish a private intermediate school under the Ministry's supervision, but without its financial commitment. Thus, ADM had to find the ways and means of financing the administration of the intermediate school named *Nisibin*²⁷ Intermediate School.²⁸ Due to the extreme importance of this level school, the *Assyrian Aid Society* [AAS], an all-Assyrian public organization based in the United States, had to assume the full responsibility of running the school financially and administratively. For the academic year 1998/9, the school had 319 (7th & 8th grades only) students 102 of them were housed in dormitories. This is a huge financial and administrative burden to shoulder by a young organization, which depends primarily on individual donations from Assyrians throughout the world. However, the full sponsorship of this intermediate level school and other on-coming higher levels of Assyrian lan-

²⁵ Previously, it was only a Directorate. Recently, it was upgraded officially by the Ministry of Education to the level of a Directorate General.

²⁶ The pre-college educational system in Iraq in the self-rule region consists of 6 grades in the *Elementary School*, followed by 3 grades in the *Intermediate School* and 3 grades in the *High School*.

²⁷ A famous city of early Assyrian Christianity located near the Syrian-Turkish borders best known

best known as a center of scholarship.

²⁸ A smaller Annex Intermediate School, *Ashurban*, serves the Assyrian students in the region of Diyana. Also, just recently, a third Intermediate School, *Orhai*, opened its doors in November 2000 to educate students in the region of Sarsank and its vicinities. For further details, see *Bahra*, No. 143, November 2000; also, *Syriac Education in the North of Iraq*, p. 54.

guage instruction by the government of the self-rule is a political decision that is contingent on the future enhancement of the democratic self-rule and its policy towards ethnic nationalities in the region. The context of such political decisions will be revisited in due time when future assessment of this project becomes pertinent.

4.1.2. Effectiveness of the Project in Language Maintenance and Revitalization

In order to assess the effectiveness of the project, one has to consider the following criteria [to be abbreviated as C]:

1. Is the native language taught as a subject [as a language] only or both as a subject and as a medium for instruction in content areas [for all subjects]?
2. Is the native language the only [or dominant] language of instruction or is the instruction bilingual together with the *majority* language?
3. How many hours per week is the native language used in instruction [both subject and content]? Less than 5 hours per week implies very limited language instruction usually a weekend class or afternoon class, while more than 20 hours per week immediately implies subject and content instruction over several days of the week.
4. At what level of proficiency is the native language instruction conducted? If most of the instruction is confined to the basic skills of oracy and literacy, such as the learning of the alphabet letters/diacritical marks, the pronunciation of sounds and the initial familiarity with the decoding skills [listening and reading] and encoding skills [speaking and writing], then the instruction is at a low level of proficiency.
5. Is the language of instruction the same language used at home?
6. Is the language of instruction the only [or dominant] language used in the na-

tive community?

7. Does the native language have strong representation in most mass media or at least a reasonable representation in some of them?
8. Is the native language used in higher education instruction?

Of the above criteria, the ADM project undoubtedly secures the first 6 criteria and is already on its way to secure C7. In fact, C7 is only strongly applicable to ADM project compared to previous models of language maintenance because the community has its own mass media outlets, which are functional on daily basis and for prolonged hours. C8 is not applicable to any model including ADM because in no phase of native language instruction the Assyrians have had the opportunity to develop their own higher education, let alone implement it in the native language. A more holistic assessment of the effectiveness of ADM's model should *realistically be in terms of the cumulative hours it affords for the actual use of the native tongue in authentic communication both spoken and written*. The major characteristics of ADM project listed in the next section definitely secure the maximum hours for the active intergenerational oral and written circulation of the native language.

4.1.3. Long-Term Effectiveness of ADM's Project for Assyrian Language Maintenance and Revitalization

Hypothetically, it is quite plausible to predict the future effectiveness of ADM's project for the Assyrian language maintenance and revitalization because there is sufficient educational and linguistic evidence on the basis of which the prediction is to be made. However, realisti-

cally, such a prediction is very difficult to make since the whole future of the self-rule government is bound to the future politics and geo-politics of the region. If the self-rule is not protected or even further developed, and if the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein is not replaced with a democratic rule in Iraq under which the national, political, cultural and linguistic rights of the non-Arab ethnic nationalities are guaranteed and protected, the whole future of democracy, not just the Assyrian language maintenance, in the region will be doomed. Besides, ADM's project has still to be treated as experimental since it is only a mere one-decade old. Nevertheless, there should be no objection to proceed forward to formulate a prediction that is premised on the available educational and linguistic evidence.

ADM's model for language maintenance distinguishes itself from other models in the following features:

- a) ADM's model is unique in that it is the first time the instruction in the native language is administered through a *central* organ called the *Directorate General of Syriac Education*, which is a body of the Ministry of Education of the self-rule government. The Directorate is in charge of designing and implementing the instructional curriculum.²⁹
- b) Instruction in the native language is a major pillar of the national political and linguistic agenda of ADM and one of its primary strategic goals.
- c) The curriculum is uniformly implemented by native speakers of the language in all the Assyrian-speaking areas

within the region.

- d) Language instruction is authentically contextualized in the triangular environment of school, home and community, which is the best habitat for the maintenance of a language. To further highlight the significance of this feature, one has to assume that school only is not capable of realistic language maintenance without the continuous support of the community and home. It is the latter two that actually preserve the oral circulation of a given language. In other words, a realistic maintenance and revitalization of a language requires the active and complementary collaboration of three sources of language generation: *community*, *home* and *school* with each source activating the language and recycling it into the other source. The best symbolic representation is the recycling logo where each arrow of the three curved arrows leads generatively into the next source thus completing the generative cycle. Figure 1 below is a schematic representation of the generative cycle for language revitalization and maintenance.
- e) Language usage represents a complete array of communicative and educational functions in all fields of life and knowledge at all formal and informal modes, especially the modes of what have recently been identified as *Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills* [BICS] vs. *Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency* [CALP].³⁰ The two modes are simply identified as *conversational* language and *academic* language, respectively.
- f) Females represent almost 50% of the total learners, which is a ratio that has never been reached in the known history of modern Assyrians. This very high representation in ADM's model has significant bearing on the maintenance of the native language because it will lead to a

²⁹ Recently, the government of the self-rule region has been seriously engaged in planning for a campaign for the eradication of illiteracy. See *Bahra* [ADM's central newspaper], No. 137, July 2000. At this stage, it is not known if the campaign will be conducted in the native languages of the ethnic nationalities involved. If the latter condition is implemented, it will, undoubtedly, imply further belief in

human rights and democracy by the central government as well as a huge step in the direction of promoting and consolidating the ethnic languages including the Assyrian language.

³⁰ For details see Jim Cummins. *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1984.

high percentage of native-language literate mothers a condition which is the most conducive for children's acquisition of

the oral and literacy skills of the mother tongue.

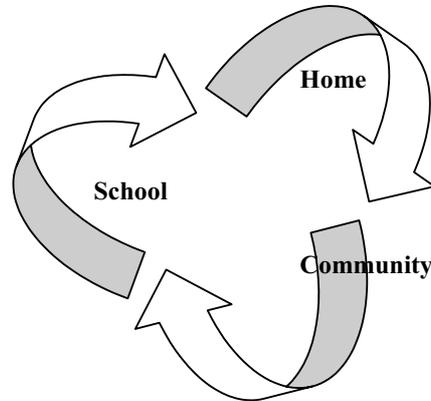


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the three sources of language generative cycle required for the maintenance and revitalization of a language.

g) Native language promotion is intimately associated with the promotion of the native cultural heritage. *The Directorate General of Syriac Education* has a twin body under the name of the *Directorate of Assyrian Culture*.

h) Native language instruction is strongly propagated and reinforced through the mass media that ADM administers in the form of newspapers, magazines, radio/television broadcasting and most recently electronic media.

i) ADM's project is a tremendous effort in the direction of dialect leveling which linguistically implies the reduction of the differences among those dialects through

enhancing their commonality and coherence. This process of dialect leveling will eventually promote a standard *koine* variety of the Assyrian language. The ADM project affords the second serious attempt at bringing all the tribal and regional dialects into contact with each other to contribute to a more standardized *koine* among the different speakers of Assyrian language including the so-called Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syrians.³¹ This trend of language leveling and standardization is the best linguistic and cultural service the speakers of a language can afford themselves as a people to consolidate their nationalistic identity.

5. Concluding Remarks

The focus of this study has been on the modern history of the Assyrians and the conditions of the survival, maintenance

and revitalization of their language as an important dimension of the preservation of their ethnic, historical and national

³¹ Based on this writer's observations of the variety of language used by television/radio stations run by ADM, language and dialect leveling have already progressed tremendously. Interestingly, the process of leveling is dominated by three trends. First, all the dialects are being enriched and embellished by lexical and grammatical borrowings from the standard Assyrian language. Second, all the dialects are

affording the *Koine* with the most linguistically appropriate lexical items and grammatical patterns. Third, loanwords from other local languages are being distinctly reduced. It is, indeed, so refreshing to listen to the newscasters from Ainkawa, for instance, using a standardized variety of Assyrian and at the same time maintaining some distinctive features of their own dialect.

identity. Although the Assyrians have been overwhelmed by other peoples and civilizations and have been a minority for long centuries, they have still been able to maintain their native language and identity. They managed to do so for three major reasons. Firstly, their literary, liturgical and linguistic heritage was too prodigious and impressive to lose its impact instantaneously. Secondly, their geographic isolation mainly in the mountainous regions of Turkey, though very harsh, served as physical borders that, in turn, created a buffer zone to protect them against linguistic and cultural absorption by other surrounding majority languages and cultures. Thirdly, their religious identity as a Christian island in the midst of an Islamic sea formed the social boundary and kept the whole community close to each other. Thus, this social isolation reinforced the geographic isolation and both helped the Assyrians to maintain their language and culture as much intact as possible and as long as possible. For all the above reasons, they were, in fact, like the 'Basques'³² of Europe. By early 19th century and with the arrival of the Christian missionaries, their language was at its worst condition. Literacy skills were almost non-existent among the ordinary populace and their daily speech was fragmented into hundreds of regional and tribal dialects with no trace, whatsoever, of a standard medium of communication. As was mentioned earlier on, the missionaries succeeded in creating a Standard Written Language which did not only serve as the literacy tool, but also as the foundation for the future emergence

of a common *koine* of oral communication that cut across all the tribal and regional dialects and helped to drastically standardize the oral language. This was the most significant milestone in the modern history of the Assyrians that was achieved during the period of 1800-1918; it salvaged the language from an early and imminent danger of extinction and helped to maintain it until this very day. During the second phase, there were two major linguistic achievements: firstly, the actual emergence of a common *koine* of oral communication; secondly, the firm establishment of SWL through the publication of literature and language materials and the extensive semi-formal and informal native language education activities that reached their peak during 1950s and 1960s, plateaued off in 1970s and seriously decelerated in 1980s. The political and socio-economic tragedies and turmoil resulting from the civil war between the Iraqi government and the Kurds, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the eruption of the Iraq-Iran War followed by the Gulf War created the worst conditions for the maintenance of the Assyrian language. Almost half of the population of the Assyrian-speakers were displaced most of whom sought refuge in other countries while others returned to their villages in the north under very difficult economic conditions. It is in these tragic circumstances, the leadership role of ADM was put to test. Their experience in political and nationalistic struggle and the mobilization of people since 1979 paid off. ADM played a brilliant leadership role in resettling most of the remaining Assyrian-speakers in their

³² Is a small national minority that inhabits the western Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France. The Basques are one of the few ethnic and nationalistic groups in Europe whose language is not Indo-

European. Regardless of their minority status, they have managed to maintain their language, culture and identity for long centuries mainly due to geographic and social isolation.

villages and initiating an unprecedented endeavor for a comprehensive native-language educational system after the Gulf War.

The first decade in the life of ADM's native language education project has already been assessed throughout this study in comparison with other previous endeavors. ADM's project surpasses all the previous attempts in effectiveness of language maintenance and revitalization. Its significance is not just based on its achievements, but also on the strategic incorporation of native language education in the overall political and national agenda which treats language as the most central pillar of unity and solidarity across all Assyrian language dialects, religious denominations and regional and political inclinations and biases. ADM's political and nationalistic horizons are not defined to embrace only the natives who have been traditionally subsumed under the appellation 'Assyrians'; rather, its new horizons are meant to be inclusive of all the *Assyrians* regardless of their religious, dialectal, historical and regional differences. *This* strategic politico-nationalistic trend is unprecedented in the modern history of the Assyrians. This trend does not seem to have emerged out of political convenience, but rather out of philosophical conviction which is detected in ADM's political literature, the composition of its political leadership and rank-and-file, and its daily political, economic and educational operations.

As the focus of this study is on the native language education and language maintenance, the significance of ADM's educational project presently lies in the fact that raising a new generation of young literates in Assyrian will prolong the life of the language up to three future generations because by the time this new

generation departs, its impact will be felt on at least the next two generations. However, as for a future long-term assessment of ADM's project, it is clouded with unpredictability. There are two major factors that dictate the unpredictability. *Firstly*, the volatility of the overall political scenario in the region, of which ADM is a part, makes the success of the education project contingent on the future political developments. If the region remains autonomous, as it has been for the last decade, the Assyrian language project will most likely continue to survive and improve. If the autonomy collapses, primarily due to external interference by Saddam Hussein's regime then everything is vulnerable to disruption and discontinuation. *Secondly*, the future nature of the working relationships between the Kurds as the majority in the region and the Assyrians as a minority is equally essential in this regard. At least for the last fifty years, the relationship between the Kurds and Assyrians has been very cordial and the coalition has been fairly effective. Since 1961 when the late Mustafa Barzani led his revolt against the Iraqi central government, the Assyrians, in general, have been supportive of the Kurds for their human rights and autonomous rule. In fact, many Assyrians have fought side-by-side with the Pesh Merga and several have fallen as martyrs on the battlefield in defense of the Kurdish cause. Certainly, throughout their long history as neighbors, their relationship had undergone periods of tension and, at times, even instances of bloody skirmishes. However, that was in the past and the two neighbors should earnestly embark on assessing their present and future. Now is the time when both sides should begin to plan for the development of a prospective working and survival rela-

tionship that is long-term in duration and strategic in nature. Such a long-term and strategic alliance is quite conceivable in light of the history, political ambitions and sufferings of both peoples. Historically, both peoples are the descendents of two of the most ancient native peoples of the region. Politically, the two peoples have been denied their political rights for autonomy and even independence for long centuries and most recently after World War I as evidenced by the terms of the treaties of Sevres (1920) and Lausanne (1923). In terms of suffering, both have been maltreated by ultra-nationalistic majorities in the countries in which they have been residing – Turkey, Iran and Iraq. All those common characteristics and long coexistence in the region have allowed them to share a folkloric culture that is quite similar. The folkloric commonality is best evidenced through the costumes they wear, foods they serve, lyrics they sing and rhythms they dance.

In planning this long-term and strategic alliance and solidarity between the Kurds

and Assyrians, both sides should be realistic and honest with each other. It is certainly true that the Kurds have a much larger population and, therefore, they constitute a majority. However, being a majority does not disqualify it from being democratic and humanitarian to the other ethnic nationalities [Assyrians, Arabs, Turkmanis, Armenians, among others] that coexist within its geographic and political jurisdiction. The Kurds should remember the lesson they learned from their recent past when they were treated as minorities and treated very undemocratically. Along this philosophical and political line of thinking, it is extremely encouraging to read that the national leader of the Kurds, Mr. Masoud Barzani, calls upon the non-Kurdish ethnic groups to identify themselves as ethnic nationalities rather than ethnic minorities.³³ From the democratic perspective and in terms of human rights such words by Barzani must be very soothing to the souls of the other nationalities co-existing with their Kurdish brothers.

³³ *Bahra*, No. 141, July 2000.