

**The Armenian Language and Armenian Studies:
An Interview With Linguistics Professor Bert Vaux (Part 1)**

Interview by Jason Sohigian

Bert Vaux is an Associate Professor of Linguistics in the Department of Linguistics at Harvard University. Beginning in the Fall, Professor Vaux will begin teaching at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. He is the Editor of Oxford Surveys in Generative Phonology and the Editor of the Annual of Armenian Linguistics journal. He has published The Phonology of Armenian (Oxford University Press, 1998) and Introduction to Linguistic Field Methods (Lincom Europa, 1999), along with articles such as "Syllabification in Armenian, Universal Grammar, and the Lexicon," "Feature Spreading and the Representation of Place of Articulation," and "The Laryngeal Specifications of Fricatives" in Linguistic Inquiry and "Notes on the Armenian Dialect of Ayntab" in the Annual of Armenian Linguistics.

In addition to his work on the Armenian language, Vaux has mapped America's dialects and has been featured in articles by the Harvard Gazette, Boston Globe, Associated Press, and elsewhere such as "Standing on line at the bubbler with a hoagie in my hand," "It's still a mahk of distinction: The accent sets Bostonians apart," and "The great pop vs. soda controversy." The Harvard Crimson also reported in February 2003 that his dialects class was the second largest at the college. This interview was conducted on Tuesday, June 17, 2003. A mutual colleague, Hagop Hachikian of Watertown, MA, also participated in the interview.

Jason Sohigian: We met briefly once a couple of years ago at an event organized by the Harvard University Armenian students club, but I am grateful to have this opportunity for an interview/conversation before you leave for Wisconsin. I noticed on your web site that you were in Sports Illustrated?

Bert Vaux: Yes, I played basketball in college. It was a story from a conference, and they chose one player from each team. It was to show that our conference was a combination of athletics and intellectual activity. They tried to pick someone that did well in athletics, and was doing something interesting in school.

JS: And you are also in a music group?

BV: It will be hard to play with them now, because they are all in Washington. But actually, the singer in that band is now the legal counsel for the House Committee on East Asian Affairs. Until the previous election, he was with the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, which drafted the Genocide Resolution. He worked on writing it, and I let him know where to look to find the relevant primary documents. He also sent me a copy of Clinton's letter, threatening the House Speaker to take it off the

agenda. It's pretty damning. It says overtly that we have economic and military interests in Turkey. Normally they don't say that so overtly.

JS: I understand this is not your first visit to the Hairenik. You met with the previous editor, Vahakn Karakashian, to work on some of your research?

BV: Yes, we worked on the Vakif subdialect of Musaler many years ago, maybe 10 years ago. I haven't seen him since then.

JS: He is now the editor of Horizon in Montreal.

BV: There are a lot of Musalartsis there, right? My best informant ever is from one of the villages there. He is a shoemaker and he lives in Watertown. I use a dialect collection manual from Yerevan that is custom made for working with dialect informants, and no one has ever known every word in that book except for him. But he has the profession closest to what they have in mind, because they ask things about farm implements and things around the traditional house.

JS: How did you get involved with Armenian linguistics?

BV: I started at the University of Chicago, where they have a partially-funded chair in Armenian Studies, so they have a rotating person. My freshman year it was Abraham Terian from Jerusalem, and he now runs the St. Nersess Seminary. He's one of the few that still writes in Western Armenian—there aren't many academics like that at this point. It was just the two of us, and I loved taking classes with him. I had done it because it belongs to the Indo-European family, which was the language family I was working on at the time, but I found that I enjoyed it on its own merits. It was so different than all the other languages in the family.

Then I heard about the program from the University of Michigan that goes to Armenia, and I did that. That's where I met Robert Krikorian. Then I went again the next year, in 1990. It was after the earthquake and right before the fall of the Soviet Union, so all of the protests were going on. It was an exciting time. I realized it was something I would like to do for a long time, so I applied to Harvard to work with Robert Thomson, and I enjoyed that.

He was very efficient, and again it was just me in 1990. With him, you had to do all the preparation and all the translation yourself. He would only correct you if you got something wrong. So that was really good for getting better at Classical Armenian. Then I did the program in Venice, and I enjoyed that a lot. People in the group were actually speaking Armenian, while the Michigan group were American-Armenians, so they didn't.

When Thomson left, I started working more on dialects and things I could do on my own that no one else did. By then I had built up enough of an Armenian network that I could

meet people, mainly through Hagop Hachikian, though we started a bit later, and Harry Parsegian. They knew a lot of people, so once I met them, the rest was very easy.

Since that time I have been trying to document all of the dialects that are preserved around here, which is a large percentage of the ones that are still alive. But we're not so good on the Persian Armenian dialects here, compared to California. When I go there for the UCLA conferences, I visit the older Persian Armenian speakers in the community with Anahid Aramouni Keshishian.

JS: So you started off in the Armenian Studies Program at Harvard?

BV: I was in linguistics, but I came here to do Armenian. Then I got a job teaching in the Linguistics Department here in 1994.

JS: Is it a large Linguistics Department at Harvard?

BV: No. It's been on the decline since the 1950s. It's probably going to be eliminated within the next 2-3 years. They tried once 10 years ago, but certain things happened. We had one professor in our department who had incredible political clout because he's been here since 1950. But he just left, so the next time they try the department will not survive.

JS: It looks like a lot of your linguistics work is fun, from regional dialects in the US to studying the Boston accent. It is interesting for a general audience.

BV: It's all the same for me—the English dialects, the Armenian ones. It's all about the interesting aspects that every human has. One of the things that appealed to me, when I first went into academia and didn't know its dark side, was the egalitarian aspect of it. At my college, everyone went by their first name. There was no Doctor or Professor.

And in linguistics, they preach something I believe in, which is that all humans are equal and all languages are equal. And when you study them, you see that they all have equally complex structures. Once I discovered that all people were equally interesting, then I could work with anyone I wanted.

I especially enjoy working with elderly people, who are the best with older forms of dialects. They have something that I think is very valuable, that the younger people don't have anymore, and I find it intellectually interesting to hear these dialects that I have read about in 19th century books but you can't hear on the street. And they get a lot of enjoyment out of it because they are typically alone, feeling abandoned.

And humans are taught that speaking a non-standard dialect is a sign of lesser intellect, which isn't true. It comes out of bias against the working class, the rural, the poor, and the uneducated. But having education is largely a byproduct of one's social class. When we are five, we don't say we are going to have a better education. It's something your family arranges for you, and that's a product of who they are and how much money they have available.

I also discovered as I went into academia that there is a dark side, which is very hierarchical. People are extremely sensitive to who's senior to who, and who's smarter than who. This shows up in the Armenian Studies world too, like everywhere else. People are very concerned with showing that their research is respectable, and that typically means that they'll write in a way that is opaque, that is not enjoyable to read, and that does not make immediate sense to the average reader.

One thing I like about the linguistics work is that I can present things that are interesting to everyone and intellectually valid, without the need for the pretentious trappings to protect yourself from accusations of being a simpleton. It's very gratifying to be at the UCLA conferences, and to be able to talk about the dialects of Kayseri and have everyone in the audience nodding in recognition and pleasure at hearing something they can follow.

JS: I noticed that when you presented your work in Nagorno Karabagh, you showed photographs of the people and described your personal experiences with them that the audience can relate to. You make it more of a human thing, while my impression of linguistics has been that it is a very technical science, very theoretical, like studying mathematics or logic.

BV: You are right about linguistics today—Chomskyan linguistics dominates the field. That's what my training is in, and I do that sort of work, which is important too. One of the things that can be done to promote Armenian Studies is show that the Armenian materials are relevant to what regular academics do, like theory. So I do that also, but I think there needs to be more than that, which is some of the other work I was telling you about.

Noam Chomsky is actually very interested in individuals, but when people ask him about the connection between his linguistics thinking and his political thinking, he has said many times that there isn't any. But as I see it, they are intimately connected. He's a sort of Marxist, anarchist, populist type, and his work in linguistics is based on this idea that the object of study should be the individual, and all individuals are equal, which fits in directly with his political thinking, and the same analytical techniques can be used for both. So, conceptually what I do in the dialect realm and with the Karabagh work is directly connected to the Chomskyan work—valuing the individual over the group, and so on. But you are right that in practice, people like Chomsky don't deal with actual individuals—it's all just notation.

But it's so striking when you go to Karabagh—the social situation, the conditions that people live in there in the villages. It makes you want to talk about it, and I feel like it is something that would be of great interest to the audience, so why abstract away from that?

JS: So when you are working with people in the community, how do you approach them? When you hear someone speaking Armenian, do you listen to what dialect they are speaking, and if it is of interest you approach them and ask for an interview?

BV: I like to listen. Around here I will just listen to what people are saying. But if you have a specific need, like if I read that there is something interesting in the Marash dialect and I need someone that speaks it, then I'll just ask around. But then it's tricky, because most people speak more than one variety of their own language, and then Armenians typically speak other languages too.

And it's very difficult to get them to speak their non-standard dialect when they know that it is being studied by a professor. They tend, willingly or unwillingly, to go into something more literary. It's true for speakers of any language, not just Armenian. So I try to do a combination of having one or more other dialect speakers with them, so they can speak with each other. It is also good to have someone funny or interesting around to distract them or give something back to them in terms of the flow of the conversation.

In Karabagh, I worked with an anthropologist who is from Karabagh and is female. We would go to areas that we suspected had interesting dialects, and we would walk from house to house and say hello, which you can do there as you probably know. We would get a sense of whether they used a hardcore dialect or not. If they did, then we would see if we could come in and talk some more, which we always could. My partner would ask them her anthropological questions, which was good because it was non-linguistic, and she would ask them in Karabagh dialect. That invariably got them to respond in their dialect.

At the same time, the professors from the dialect institute in Yerevan were going around the same villages, and they said they couldn't find any dialect speakers. I saw them in action with one man whom we had worked with, who spoke a certain village dialect. They asked him, "how do you say this?" He said the dialect word for it, and they said "no, it should be this," and they would cite a form of that word from several hundred years before. He would be taken aback, and then he would answer the next question with a standard Armenian form, and after that it was all standard. So they got standard Eastern Armenian from everyone.

JS: What exactly are you looking for when you go in and talk with these people? What are you doing with the research?

BV: I am doing many different things. I want to record as much as I can of people talking freely, connective speech. Right now for the dialects, all we have are descriptions from the 19th century, which maybe have a few texts, but they are never analyzed so you don't know what they are saying and you don't know what they sound like. I want to have the primary materials available, so people in the future can hear what they sound like. I also have particular things that I am looking into, that are of theoretical interest to linguists, but they are sort of obscure.

I want to prepare grammars of each of these dialects, the way [Hrachea] Adjarian did for a lot of them from the 1890s through the 1950s. He covered about 15 of them, but there are hundreds of them. They could be grouped together into 30-50 books, but each one would have to be very large to cover all of the sub-varieties. I want to do that, in English, and analyze the texts.

But in Armenian Studies, all of the methodologies come out of the 1890s, which was when the last great Armenian scholars were studying in Europe and then came to Armenia, like Adjarian. And then they were killed or put in prison, and there was no new training. In the 1890s, the standard methodology was a historical one, where you would take a word and look at where it came from. You would just do that for all of the words you could come up with that were of historical interest. That was all they did—but now there are different things.

Because of the Chomskyan revolution, we want to know how the system of the language works inside the head of an individual. So that leads you to ask different questions, and I try to collect information of that sort too.

JS: Is it being recorded, or is it just being done on paper?

BV: I had been doing audio recording, but I have decided that it needs to be video recording because there is a lot of information that isn't captured on audio tape. Not just things like what the lips are doing and so on, but what the ambient environment is. Watching an old woman in her little house in a village in Karabagh speaking in the dialect is much more effective than just hearing her voice. So from now on that is what I am going to be doing.

JS: You have already published one textbook on Armenian linguistics?

BV: I published a book with Oxford on Armenian phonology, which is the system of sounds. I tried to highlight the most interesting phenomena from all of the different dialects, and put them together into a format that linguists could relate to, so they could then use Armenian data.

Unfortunately, I had to make it sort of technical, which I regret. But I am working on an equivalent of that, which is just for Western Armenian, and looks at all the phenomena of pronunciation in the main varieties of Western Armenian, and does it in a way that most people will be able to understand.

JS: What has been the response to the book?

BV: Because I had to make it technical, it hasn't gotten much of a response from the Armenian community, and that's my own fault—though there were extenuating political circumstances. It has done well in the linguistic community, and it has been reviewed in a lot of the major journals.

JS: How does the linguistics community view the Armenian language? For such a small group of people—less than 10 million in the world—is it considered almost a lost language, like Assyrian?

BV: They don't know anything about it in the linguistic world, except for my book. As I mention in the book, it is a problem of the languages of the Middle East, each of which is of equal linguistic interest. There are thousands of articles and books written on Turkish linguistics and phonology, and it is the same for Arabic and Hebrew. But nothing on Armenian, even though if you look at the structures of their grammars they all have an equal number of interesting phenomena.

Being a linguist, I like having more than one language around, but being a realist, I say you have to write in English if you want your work to be acknowledged. I'm all for writing a parallel version in Armenian or Russian, but you can't complain about people ignoring your work if you write it in Armenian.

JS: Have any Armenian linguists responded to your work, from places like the Brusov Language Institute in Yerevan? Does anyone at the American University of Armenia use your book, since it is published in English?

BV: My book is expensive, so I don't know if it is affordable to anyone in Armenia. I try to bring copies when I go, but I don't think many people have it there. And American University doesn't have any linguists, or anyone who is even remotely close to what I do.

JS: So they are doing their own kind of linguistics work in Armenia?

BV: They are in the dialect institute. The manual I mentioned has about 750 questions in it, and they have collected all of those for 500 villages. And they just released a dialect dictionary, which has a lot more dialect words than any previous dictionary. But in the familiar Soviet academic fashion, they don't cite where they get the words from or what dialect they are from, so it is not actually useful as an academic tool. But they can't do much now because they have no money.

JS: Do you focus more on Western Armenian?

BV: I do all varieties. People like to say there are two literary varieties of modern Armenian, but there are three. Persian Armenian is very different than Eastern Armenian, and you can tell right away if someone is a Persian Armenian. Their grammar is very different, the vocabulary is very different, the pronunciation is different. So I am also working on a book on Persian Armenian. This will be the first treatment of it—I don't know why no one has ever written about it.

JS: Do you also work on a journal?

BV: I run the *Annual of Armenian Linguistics*. It has been around for 22 years. Traditionally it was historical linguistics, the kind that Adjarian did, but I am trying to get

the younger linguists who work on Armenian and do modern linguistics to contribute. But it is going to take long time to fully integrate it into the linguistic world of today.

JS: When you worked in Karabagh and Armenia, did you see any problems with people not understanding each other because of their different dialects, and any discrimination that results from a kind of hierarchical way of looking at others? Also, in a similar way, can you comment on the conflicts that arise here between people that speak Western Armenian, and the new immigrants that speak Eastern Armenian?

BV: The main problem is between people that use what I call real Armenian and those who use artificial Armenian—where they have tried to force the grammar of Arabic or French onto it, or they have tried to excise all of the Turkish, Persian, and Arabic words, or at least the ones they know are Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. It ends up sounding like a made up language, and those are never as good as ones that humans come up with naturally and unconsciously.

For a linguist, it is much more interesting to work with a real dialect that has been evolving naturally in its village or city for thousands of years. The literary varieties are interesting because they are a combination of different dialects, but we are wary of them because they are artificial.

JS: Can you explain more of what you consider to be “real Armenian”?

BV: It is any variety that people haven’t tinkered with. It could be the Van dialect, or the Gyumri dialect.

JS: So for a linguist, the more dialects the better? It makes it more interesting?

BV: Definitely, because each one is different. In the Armenian world, each one is very different from each other, more so than in the English world. In the English world, a lot of the grammatical differences have disappeared over the last 100 years and we are left mainly with pronunciation and vocabulary differences. But in the Armenian world, the village dialects have major differences from each other, hence their inability to understand each other.

JS: I think many Armenians, especially in the ARF, are trying to find ways to help Armenians think of themselves spread across the world as part of the same nation. One thing that brings us together is the ability to speak the same language and communicate with each other, without one thinking the other is wrong or different. This would help them interact on an equal level in places like the Armenia-Diaspora Conference, where people are coming from all over the world, and they don’t understand each other or they don’t like the way the other is speaking because of these differences. In France, for example, the government tries to regulate the language...

BV: That’s definitely a bad model. The French are terrible for linguistic purposes. Your goal is a good one of emphasizing the unity of the people, while recognizing the diversity

within the community. It is not going to work if you try to force everyone to be the same—that's been seen many times. It's more useful to bear in mind examples like Sayat Nova, Khatchatur Abovian, and others who wrote in dialects, and whose work everyone respects and enjoys. These show that you can write well in any variety of your language, and it is more the skill of the author than what village they come from.

Whenever you try to provide one standard for people, it always ends up being completely unnatural if you don't pick any existing form, or it ends up being one particular form which favors that city or town over all the others.

When they pick Yerevan for Eastern, they are not really picking Yerevan, because people on the street in Yerevan don't speak standard Eastern Armenian. I'm sure you have noticed that—they speak a Yerevan dialect, which is very different. So either you favor the people of Yerevan, which is not fair, or you end up with something unnatural.

I think it is better to convey to the community that they are not inherently better or worse than another village or city just by virtue of being from that place. So, people from Istanbul are not inherently superior to people from Van.

There would be a problem if they couldn't understand each other, but from my experience that wouldn't be the case unless you did something like go into a village where an old woman could only speak in her Karabagh dialect. But everyone in Karabagh now can speak Eastern Armenian.

Hagop Hachikian: And Russian.

BV: Right, and in the Western Armenian world, some can speak in a way you can't understand if they want, but they can also speak in a way that can be understood. But you can probably still tell they are from Aleppo or Istanbul, or wherever, but that just becomes a problem of bias, when you say something like "they are talking stupidly because they are from Istanbul." That's a problem of bias, not a problem of the language itself, and biases should be broken down rather than caving in to them.

JS: Do you find that languages are changing because of politics? Like in Azerbaijan, for example, they have changed the alphabet several times. In Armenia, the Soviets made changes in the orthography. What do you say about those kinds of changes, which have been imposed from above?

BV: They are almost never successful. Language changes on its own, and you can't control it.

HH: There was spelling reform in Armenia, and in Azerbaijan. In Turkey, they did achieve changes in the vocabulary, where they eliminated Arabic and Persian words, changed the non-Turkish place-names, and adopted the so-called Istanbul dialect as the proper spoken dialect in Turkey. It was enforced more aggressively.

BV: Yes, you can make some changes, but that was not a good thing. That was a very draconian “Ataturkean” measure. The fact that this absolutist, nationalist state wanted to do that sort of thing should tell us that we don’t want to do that.

Nationalism to save yourselves and encourage people to survive is different from this kind of pan-Turkist nationalism. I don’t think anyone wants to go that far. The philosophy behind it is very nefarious: “everyone must be the same” and “they must change to be like me because I’m the one making rules.”

It has built into it the idea that some people are better than others, which is just one step removed from the idea that “since I am better than them, they must change to be like me or be eliminated.” Armenians, of all people, should know to stay away from that kind of thinking.

JS: Can you comment more on the gap between Eastern and Western Armenian? Do you think the changes made by the Soviets were logical or made sense linguistically, or was it something political to demonstrate control over the Armenians or to create a new division between people there and in the Diaspora? Do you think it will eventually be undone, or will one dialect shift to the other over time?

BV: Ultimately the differences will be resolved on their own, and you can’t control them very much. Even in the Turkish case, where they did their best to completely control what was going on, things still happened that were out of their control.

With the East-West issue and the Soviet control of the language, the spelling reform brings up a lot of issues that are analogous to the debate with English. If you reform the spelling, you stop discriminating against poorer people with less education. Our spelling system is so opaque that you have to have a lot of schooling to master it, so it discriminates against the poor, in effect. Similarly, in the Armenian world, the classical orthography was relatively opaque, although not as bad as English.

Since the idea of the Soviet Union was that everyone should be equally educated, they wanted to make the spelling transparent. That’s a noble goal, but then you eliminate the historical component of the language. If you keep the old orthography, you make it easier to know what the language used to look like and read old writings in the language.

But for the East-West issue, there is an asymmetry where all the Eastern Armenians know Western Armenian, at least passively, because of all the diasporans that went to Armenia, whereas the Western Armenians tend not to know Eastern.

Although that may change soon—we don’t yet know what the equilibrium reached in the post-Soviet period in the Diaspora will be from all of these Persian Armenians and Armenians from Armenia being in the US. The linguistic situation in California is very strange now—there are massive groups of Persian Armenians, Western Armenians, and Eastern Armenians, and it is not clear who will win out, if anyone.

It's hard to say what the ultimate effect will be, but I definitely would not want to try to enforce legislation saying you all have to speak Eastern or Western Armenian. Just let the kids work it out—I would prefer a naturalistic solution. The top priority should be that you keep the language.

But Eastern Armenian has a leg up because it has a country. Western Armenian doesn't, which makes me very worried about the future of Western Armenian in all its varieties. This is a topic of great concern—it looks like it is going to die out.

JS: Last June, we ran an opinion piece on the orthography change and the “unified spelling problem” by Haroutiun Khachatryan, where he outlined the issue in an even-handed way, but concluded that the language of the Republic of Armenia is Eastern Armenian, so the Armenian government and the people in the country can't be expected to change to the dialect of the Diaspora.

BV: The whole idea of nationalism didn't catch on until the late 19th century. Before then you could have people like Sayat Nova, and even Mesrob Mashtots, who would just write in their own dialect, and people didn't say “Why are you writing your songs in the Tiflis dialect—you should be writing in Van dialect.”

JS: There are a number of new immigrants who are speaking Eastern Armenian, but the Armenian schools here are teaching Western Armenian. Where do you see the future of the Armenian language in the US? Do you think both dialects will be lost eventually?

BV: It doesn't have to be lost, but it is extremely difficult to create a situation of stable diglossia, where a minority community is able to maintain its language in addition to the majority language. But there are many cases in the world where that does happen. A good example is in Karabagh, where it was under Russian control for a long time, and yet everyone there still speaks their village dialect. In the Russian republics, they all speak Russian from the 80 years under Soviet control, but everyone still learned the local languages.

JS: What is the typical life span in the US for languages other than English?

BV: This is a very-well-studied issue. What you find is, no matter how much the local community tries to stop the attrition process by having things like Saturday schools, the people who first immigrate try to speak the ambient language—in this case English—to their kids because they think it's the more educated language and they want their kids to fit in, and they think their kids will be confused if they hear a different language at home.

Those kids will either not learn their parents' language or, if they do hear that language from their parents, the first kid will learn it but the second and on will not. The first kid will learn the parents' language and English, and the younger kids will use the oldest kid as an intermediary between themselves and their parents—so they will speak English to the oldest kid, who will then translate for the parents.

Even with the kids who do learn the language from their parents or grandparents, at age five or six, when they are sent off to school, within one day typically they come home and refuse to speak that language anymore because they see that no one else has it and it is embarrassing for them. That's it for that language.

Then the generation after that, their kids, often want to reclaim their heritage. But again because of misconceptions about how languages are learned they either try to do it in college or after that, and that's too late and they can only learn a bit of it at best.

The only way to really learn a language is to hear it spoken when you are young. Teaching doesn't work, and anything after a certain age doesn't work. So the typical trajectory is that the language is lost within two generations. But there are always exceptional individuals who learn the language outside of these parameters, such as Lara Setrakian, the president of the Harvard Armenian Club.

JS: But Armenian is still being learned in homes and in schools across the US. Is there anything you can recommend for the future of the language here?

BV: I have an article on that, which you can read on my Web site, about what the Armenian community can do [see "The fate of the Armenian language in the United States" at <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~vaux/fate.pdf>]. I advocate teaming kids with grandparents, which is a strategy being used in California with the Native American languages.

But the key is for parents and grandparents to get over the misconception that if they speak Armenian to the kids, the kids will get confused and not learn English well. It's just not true, and Armenians of all people should know that, because they have always been multilingual.

If you say, Armenians in Istanbul know Turkish and Armenian, but they have an Armenian accent in Turkish, it doesn't result from their hearing two languages and not learning one well. It results from the fact that other people speak it that way around them. Kids just learn what they hear being used around them. To take an English example, kids around here don't speak with a Boston accent because they are stupid or lazy. They speak that way because they are in Boston and that's what they hear.

JS: How do you sort out the Turkish words mixed in Western Armenian and the Russian words mixed in Eastern Armenian? Does that confuse you as a linguist if you aren't fluent in those languages as well?

BV: It is confusing for a person who knows only standard Armenian speaking with a villager, because the villager won't know the neoclassical words that the literary person is using, and the literary person won't necessarily know all of the Turkish words the villager is using.

People need to bear in mind that you don't use Turkish words because you are ignorant or too lazy to think of the Armenian word. Typically it is because that is what people would normally use for that word around you, and you are just doing what everyone else does, unconsciously (and there's nothing wrong with that)—or it has a different linguistic significance than the Armenian word.

In English, if you say “je ne sais quoi” instead of “I don't know what,” they mean the same thing literally, but in terms of the pragmatics or the implications of using one phrase over the other, they are very different. One is very pretentious and academic, or you might be using it in an ironic way as a joke.

I discussed examples of this in a lecture on the use of Turkish in modern Armenian. There are times where the Turkish allows you to make a wordplay that you couldn't in Armenian, or vice versa. You may want to rhyme two words, but the rhyme won't work with the Armenian but it will with the Turkish, or vice versa.

The writer Yervant Odian referred to one Armenian official in the Ottoman Parliament as “the ox-cart of Turkish authority,” and he used the Turkish phrase for a specific reason. It wasn't because he couldn't think of the Armenian expression. He implies that this official was more connected to the Turkish lines of authority than the Armenian community. In Turkish, the word for ox also stirs up the connotation of being an idiot, but in Armenian it wouldn't necessarily be activated.

People need to bear in mind that when you use foreign words, it's not as simple as their being ignorant or lazy. There are reasons for everything we do, whether or not we are aware of them. People shouldn't be condemned for using Russian or Turkish or English.

JS: Can you describe some of your research on the Muslim Armenians, the Hemshin?

BV: Hagop introduced me to Temel, the main person who speaks it here. In the northeast corner of Turkey, there is a large group of Armenians who converted to Islam. In the eastern half of that area, a lot of them still speak a local dialect of Armenian. Adjarian actually worked with the non-Muslim ones at the turn of the century. Those mainly ended up in Abkhazia, which is just north of that region.

The Hemshinli are interesting for many reasons. They have been cut off for a long time. By virtue of converting to Islam, their ties to Armenia were severed. This meant no more Armenian educational system, no Armenian alphabet. Their conversion preceded the nationalist movement, so they never experienced the nefarious influence of nationalism and literacy, so their local speech patterns were not tinkered with by schoolteachers.

For someone interested in how things used to be, they are invaluable. And then there is the confrontation between the Islamic culture and their traditional Armenian culture. We worked a lot with Temel and his wife about eight years ago, and we now have a small research group of people who are interested in these people. We are having a conference about them in Holland in the fall.

Part of the plan is to organize a research expedition. I want to have a linguist, an anthropologist, a sociologist, a photographer, an art historian, and a geographer go around to the villages and do what we can the way people did in the 19th century. I want to do recording in every village, because every one we know about is a bit different from each of the other villages.

Hagop hears rumors about some of the more westerly ones still speaking Armenian, so I want to check that out. But again, you need to bring the right people. There is a professor in Holland who is German, but his wife is one of the western Hemshinli, so she has a lot of Armenian in her Turkish but doesn't speak Armenian.

JS: I know you ask this question, "What makes them Armenian?" There was a forced conversion to Islam, but this comes down to the core of questions around national identity.

Hagop Hachikian: Even the Turkish nationalists among them acknowledge that they were previously Christian. They say that before the coming of Islam, Christianity was the proper religion, so it was acceptable to be Christian until the coming of Islam when they would have to convert. They say that because they lived with Armenians before, they acquired Armenian Christianity as well as some words but the language they speak is pure Turkish now and they have no Armenian blood.

And there are different levels of denial. Some people deny more, some people acknowledge Armenian connections—they don't have a single story.

BV: When I spoke about them at the University of Michigan, the Turkish professor, who is German, approached me and he was very angry. I had presented linguistic evidence that they are Armenian—it is very clear to anyone that is objective, but I wanted to give evidence anyway. He was very offended, and he said, "These are just Turks who said they are Armenian so they would be treated better by the government." Of course, this makes no sense at all, and this was from someone who was German, not Turkish. They started the conversion in the 16th-17th century and went on as late as 1915.

JS: How do Armenian audiences react?

BV: I think normally they are titillated to hear that such a group exists. Some people get angry or outraged, but that's true no matter what topic you discuss. My take on it is, They are whatever they are, it is just interesting to study how their culture and language work now, and if you are interested in history to look at what you can reconstruct from the current situation about how they used to be. I am not really interested in forcing them to call themselves one thing or the other. Identity is an extremely complicated thing, and you can't just decide one way or the other based on a whim.

JS: And Hovann Simonian is working on a book on this topic?

BV: Yes, he is a student at USC working on a book on the Hemshinli, and Hagop has written a nice chapter for it, which is in part about the place-name reform in Turkey.

HH: There is a directive from Enver Pasha that goes back to 1916, which says “it is the proper time to speedily change those names which are in foreign languages—Armenian, Bulgarian, and Greek—and change them to Muslim names.” He does not say Turkish. He is trying to hold on to the Muslim groups as kindred people, as a single force against Christians and infidels, whom they had just declared a jihad against.

BV: This shows the power of language. The most powerful thing is the most simple, which is the change from “Anatolia” to “Turkey.” Now people outside of Turkey think that’s the land of the Turks because of the name. You’d think people could see beyond the name, but that’s not how it works.

Beyond that, they changed 30,000 place-names from 1916 to the mid-1960s. Now they all look Turkish or Muslim, which means that no outsider will ever even think—unless someone tells them—that this is anything other than a Turkish place. For my students who don’t know anything about the Armenians, they often take what they see on a map today or what they read in the paper as being how things are.

So something like a name change is extremely effective, although my friends tell me that people in Turkey still remember the old names. So right now we are in a pivotal time, where everything has been wiped out but people still have memory of how it used to be. But once you make the switch to the next stage, that’s it.

JS: Are the Hemshin going to be impacted by the pipeline that is going to be built in northeastern Turkey? I know Hovann is a coauthor of a great book on this topic, with Prof. R. Hrair Dekmejian. Will the purchase of the property along the route disrupt these people?

HH: They live on a mountain range near the Black Sea, and the route will pass south of that.

BV: This brings up something I will mention briefly. I spoke at NAASR about ways in which you can convey important Armenian issues to students. With the pipeline—which illustrates nefarious things about our government, the Turkish government, and the oil companies—they actually have that as a main plot point in one of the James Bond movies, where you can see the pipeline going up over Armenia. That’s something that non-Armenian students can relate to. You can show them the map, or show them the part where they depict the Azeris as being Christian. They depict an Orthodox priest in a cave church in Azerbaijan, which makes it seem like they are Christian. I personally don’t care if people are Christian or Muslim, but that has a subliminal effect on people watching.

JS: What about the Harvard Caspian Studies Program? We have written about the funding of the program from the US-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce and the oil industry, about academic integrity and corporate funding, and where research sponsorship

comes from. Even former Harvard President Derek Bok has written a book this year, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, in which he addresses these issues at Harvard and other institutions. This relates to the Caspian Studies Program, when they are called by the US government to testify on issues such as Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act.

BV: It is a terrible and scary thing that we have this institution that is just a cover for oil interests and the Azeri government. But it's not the only one like that at Harvard. Pretty much all of the Kennedy School-type operations are like that. They are just vehicles for politicians to do lobbying—they are not academic.

But what can you do about it? It would be hard to shut down the Caspian Studies Program. However, since Harvard presents itself as a pure academic institution, it is possible to get a leg in to the program. If we had people who were reasonable and played their cards properly, they could easily be put on the board and then start moving the agenda in a more reasonable direction.

Caspian Studies is a fine topic, if it is done in the right way and isn't just the Azeri President's son talking [Ilham Aliyev]. They asked Jirayr Libaridian to be on the board and he tried it for a while and stopped. The Armenian Chair should be on it, and probably one or two other people from within Harvard that have something to do with Armenian issues.

Once you have that in place, they can't be a puppet anymore for the Azeri government and the oil companies. There is nothing they could do to stop the Armenians from being involved in it. But because of mismanagement and flawed personalities at Harvard, Armenians have no representation on it.

JS: If those sorts of people, people like Libaridian who are described as "reasonable" or "moderate," were in that position, do you really think they will change much of what the program is doing? They invite Armenian speakers such as Ronald Suny, who only repeats their views and interpretations of the region.

BV: You have to get them [i.e. individuals who can represent the interests of the community well] on the governing board of the program, which determines what events will be held and who comes to speak. If they are only involved at the conferences, the effect will not be as great. They have to be involved in the decision-making.

JS: That is a weakness of the Armenian community, because we have not cultivated that level of person to serve in positions such as that. There are very few that could actually get into a program like that and speak in their terms on their level.

BV: I don't think that is a problem of the Armenian community. It is a problem of the individuals in Armenology in this country. There are plenty of Armenologists in Europe who would be perfect for it. They are very politically savvy and active, but that just isn't the case here, especially at Harvard.

JS: What is your impression of the Armenian Chair at Harvard, and is there anything you think the community can do to make the Armenian Chair at Harvard better?

BV: It's a tough challenge to improve things there because of the immunity that a chairholder has. But the first step is to make the community aware of what is being done and not being done by the chair. The next step is to take a stand and stop "kowtowing." Many people just don't know what is going on there, and the people that do know have not taken a stand.

Until recently that included me, for the same reasons as everyone else. It's difficult to stand up to a bully—there are political consequences. Whenever you say "the emperor has no clothes," there are people that will think you are crazy. In the case of the Soviet Union, everyone knew it wasn't working, but no one was willing to stand up and say it because they were afraid they would be scapegoated, killed, ridiculed, or lose their job. The next step is to stand up and say there is something wrong here, and we need to do something about it.

After that, then it becomes harder because you can't just replace someone. You can put pressure on them to shape up, and say, "Here is what we want out of the chair."

JS: Do you mean through the university? Does NAASR have anything to do with the chair anymore, or do they just play a supporting role?

BV: They play a facilitating role politically, in the sense that they still defer to the chair, but they don't have any power over the chair at this point.

JS: I think the community looks at Harvard as something that is untouchable, and the chair as something they want to protect. There is not much self-criticism in the Armenian world, so not many want to go public with something and hurt an Armenian position.

BV: It's reasonable to not want to hurt your own people or your own group. But that's one of the reasons that action needs to be taken, because the chair is actually hurting the community at this point. When you call the Armenians neo-Nazis, that isn't helping the community and it's not leaving it alone—it's hurting it. You are providing fodder for people that want to attack the Armenians.

JS: Professor [James] Russell is an expert on ancient Armenian and Persian history, but the period he often talks about is 1930s-1950s, mostly Armenian-American community life. Why do you think he gets into these current affairs?

BV: He's like most academics, and many non-academics, who think they are an expert on many things outside the area of their training. His training is actually in Iranian Studies.

JS: Does he have many students? Do you have to have a certain number of students to keep a chair?

BV: No. He typically has one new student each year. The Near Eastern Department is actually very reasonable. In theory a department could say we are only admitting the best 10 students, regardless of whether they want to do Arabic, Hebrew, Armenian, or whatever. Then they would probably mostly end up as students that do Hebrew. Instead, they give every professor the chance to have a student each year or every two years. They are making the commitment to let every professor have students.

What it means is that every year or two years there is a new Armenian grad student, but they have all dropped out or switched since James came in 1993. But they'll keep coming because of the Harvard name. There will always be people who want to do Armenian Studies at Harvard, regardless of who is in the position. To their credit, they don't know. Who would ever suspect these things that have been going on? But then they find out, and then they leave.

JS: How does the application process work? Does the department recruit the students for him, and drag them in?

BV: No. The students apply blindly to Harvard. Then the department says, for example, this year it is the Akkadian professor's turn to get someone, or the Iranian or the Armenian. Then James can pick one of the three applicants that he likes the most in that year.

JS: The student doesn't choose what to study?

HH: The student does apply, but there's no guarantee that he or she is going to be chosen for that year.

BV: In our department [linguistics], it works the other way. The chairman has total control over who gets in, and they just pick who they want for themselves each year, regardless of whether the other professors should be getting people. So NELC [Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations] is actually very kindly and wisely run, in my opinion. The opportunity to get one Armenian student a year is squandered, but the students have no choice in it.

JS: So one person has graduated from the program in the past 10 years?

BV: Yes, Sergio LaPorta finished two years ago. He is in Jerusalem now. He did his thesis on Grigor Tatevatsi, who was a 14th century theologian in Tatev.

JS: I read the text of Russell's recent public lecture series at NAASR, which is posted on their Web site. It is very cryptic and probably difficult to understand for a general audience. I imagine many in the audience show up, and if they can't really follow what he is talking about they just assume he is brilliant. It seems that no one wants to be critical of him, because of his position.

BV: They also give him the benefit of the doubt—I think humans are designed to be this way. They assume that other humans are acting rationally.

At the Kars conference at UCLA about a year ago, he was talking about the main Armenian church there and the carvings around it. Some of the Soviet-trained scholars there were very angry at what he said, which was partly justified and partly not. He had made up what he was saying about the significance of the images on the church, and they didn't like the fact that he couldn't substantiate what he was saying. But they were also annoyed that he was talking about Christian imagery of a sort they didn't agree with. One of them got up and said it was just "men," and not Gregory the Illuminator or whoever James was saying it was. So each side was not entirely justified in this case, but then James launched into an incredible tirade against them in front of everyone, and then another one in private in the hallway.

It was the usual arguments for him, that the Soviet Armenian scholars are all Nazis or were poorly trained.

JS: So what can the community do with Harvard or with the Armenian Chair?

BV: I am sure there are Armenians who can meet with the President of Harvard to let him know what's been going on with the chair and what they think are reasonable goals or activities for a chair—things that have nothing to do with academic freedom.

What you need to watch out for is the defense that academics need to be free to do their own research and you can't censor them—but this isn't about that. This is about basic goals like producing students, doing things for the community, allowing people to take your classes, and so on.

JS: So you have seen him in other academic settings where he reveals a bad temperament? I have read his criticism of the ARF in many places, but his attacks are not only directed toward us?

BV: It is just what happens to be a convenient attack against you. When someone attacks him, he will pick on whatever variable is available for that group. If it is the ARF or an equivalent Armenian organization, he could call them neo-Nazi, or reactionary, or nationalist. But if it is a group that doesn't have that attribute, then it will be anti-Semitic or homophobic. But he can't call me a rabid Armenian nationalist.

JS: I think this really comes down to sponsorship. NAASR gives Russell a forum to give lectures, where he might not have many classes at Harvard, and it also gives him exposure in the community. And the person that has run NAASR for so many years—Manoog Young—his background/interest is in that period of history, in Avedis Derounian/John Roy Carlson and the anti-communist reaction from the Armenian community. He has Derounian's papers at NAASR, and that is the period Russell is taking an interest in. Russell has told me that his parents were somehow affiliated with

the Communist Party in the US, so this subject is very personal for him, and he has that connection with Manoog because of those loyalties.

BV: In my opinion, this stuff about communism is not relevant today. It has no place.

JS: You are right. This is not relevant in the Armenian community today. People within the community don't have these kinds of loyalties and conflicts anymore, especially since the fall of the Soviet Union. People like Russell are trying to keep these fights going, but I don't think he has much of an audience for it. It is bothering people, but I don't think people are really responding to it the way he would like. I am not sure why he is getting into these political debates, and why he is "throwing stones." Do you think the chair is supposed to get involved in the community and make friends in the community? Is that how a chair advances itself?

BV: It would help. If the community endows the chair, I as the chairholder would feel an obligation to serve the community. But you shouldn't have to say things that are not true. In the case of the Genocide, if you look at it in an academic way it's clear that it happened, and as a scholar it is your obligation to make that known, whether it is your area or not.

The Armenian Chair at Harvard is what everyone looks to from around the world for things involving Armenians and Armenia. That makes it the most important position for representing Armenian interests—meaning, what actually happened. So it's important for the chair to consider the consequence of their actions and to think about what they should be doing and where they should be going with the program.

It's also important for the community to keep a close eye on what is happening. And I do think that building the program should be a goal of the department or the chair. And if you want to build it, you need to maintain good relations with the university, your department, and the community. Those are the people who can help you build the program. But I would never advocate selling out or lying about things.

JS: Why are you leaving Harvard?

BV: The short answer is that I didn't get tenure, and I have a full-professor offer at Wisconsin. The longer answer is that our department is the last holdout of the American equivalent of the school that Adjarian came out of. In America it died out in the 1950s, when Chomsky came on the scene.

But because of the way the Harvard tenure process works, you can maintain older traditions in the face of changes in direction in academia, because you don't have to defend hirings and non-hirings. You can do whatever you want and get away with it. At other schools, where the tenure process is explicit, the hirings directly reflect the currents in the academic world within a 10-20 year level of fineness, where at Harvard it is more like 100-150 years.

This field of 19th century linguistics died out by 1955 in the US, but we had someone come to our department in 1950 in this area, and he's still here. He's the guy who's just leaving, and he's built up a set of his students around him who protected our department from the currents of change in our field. That's the person who kept me from even getting reviewed for tenure, which is illegal according to the Handbook For Tenure Review at Harvard.

For your tenure review, it has to happen in a specific year. During that year, you hand in all of your publications and your teaching records (handouts, ratings). The department faculty looks them over and makes a decision of whether or not to put you forward for review.

In my case, they made their decision without telling me and without having my materials for review and without knowing the details of my record. I went to the administration and told them that they made the decision without looking at my record. I filed a protest in the middle of December, and I still haven't heard anything. I just have to leave, and there is no recourse against Harvard.

JS: So you got an offer elsewhere, in another linguistics department? Are you happy to be starting there, or do you have any regrets?

BV: I like Wisconsin—their linguistics faculty is actually better than at Harvard. But I am upset for reasons parallel to the Armenian case, which is that we have more potential here than anywhere. With no effort at all, Harvard could easily be in the top five in our field, and they could be number one in Armenian if they wanted.

JS: Are you glad to just be getting out of here, and to be able to start somewhere else, where you can be more productive?

BV: I'm glad about two things. First, running the department here was taking its toll on me, with 16-18 hour days taking care of several hundred students. The other thing is that having my plans and proposals shot down or negated by my chairman and by James constantly over the last nine years was extremely frustrating.

When I would try to do something in linguistics—like create a mind, brain, and behavior track, which was an interdepartmental program we have—I wanted our department to participate. When I tried to do something Armenian, James would undo it or counteract it. So those are two things I will be glad to be rid of.

Having really good students, and the network of dialect speakers and Armenian friends will be missed.

JS: What kinds of programs are you going to do next?

BV: I don't know yet. I know there is a Tomarza community that I want to meet, but it's hard to predict how people will react.

JS: You will definitely meet Armenians. I am sure Zohrab Kaligian from the ANC of Wisconsin will introduce you to the various parts of the community and he also works jointly with the universities on programs. I know you have already studied the Midwest, with your work on the “pop versus soda” controversy.

BV: I will continue that work. But here they have students from all over the world; at Wisconsin they will probably be more local. But for a professor it is important to adjust to the way things work at that school so you can best serve the students, so I’ll wait and see what they need and what they are interested in.

Armenian Studies is an incredibly diverse and wide-ranging area—it could be anthropology, history, linguistics. So a chair has to be equipped to handle and educate students in any of those areas. But the way it works out, they are all forced into one particular area, which almost none of them are interested in. I happen to think it is an interesting area, but I would never force everyone to go into it.

JS: Do you think there is enough interest in Armenian Studies to sustain growth?

BV: Yes, if there are the right people. It has been growing in areas where there are good chairholders.

JS: Why aren’t there more PhD’s in Armenian Studies?

BV: The pool that comes in is small, but the pool that comes out is much, much smaller. At Harvard we get one per year, but none come out.

JS: And where are they going to go? There is a lot of competition for a limited number of positions.

BV: You need to train to be able to get a job not in an Armenian Chair, like I have. Everyone should have that training anyway, even if there wasn’t a job crunch. You need to be marketable to the academic community at large. Once you get a critical mass of people placed, you can start changing attitudes in the field to the point where a department would be more willing to hire someone that works in Armenian.

JS: Where would the academic community draw in Armenian Studies? How can it become more integrated?

BV: It has to be done by individuals. Armenian Studies fits into a lot of different areas, but you need to have a good individual that can persuade a department that they want to hire that person. Christina Maranci is a prime example. She got two job offers of a non-Armenian sort in one year because she presents her work in a respectable way. It can be done. People think Armenian Studies is inferior, but it isn’t. It is just that because of various political or historical reasons, the people doing it now are not very marketable to the academic community.

JS: Suny talks about this, criticizing much of the work that has been done in Armenian Studies as nationalist propaganda, that the work needs to have a wider appeal with ideas and themes that everyone is using.

BV: I have problems with a lot of his work, but he did get a job that is non-Armenian, as a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, which is an important position in the academic world. It also gives him license to be consulted as an expert in non-Armenian circles, for example on the Soviet Union or the Caucasus.

JS: Prof. Vaux, I would like to thank you for your comments.

BV: Thank you.