

## Syriac Language Maintenance among the Assyrians of Iraq

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### Abstract

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This study aimed to explore the factors that support the maintenance of the Syriac language among the Assyrians who constitute a large ethnic community in Iraq. The researchers used informal interviews and a sociolinguistic questionnaire following Bickerton's method (1971) who suggested that using the method of readily obtainable group of people would enable the researchers to gain fruitful results and would overcome some problems. A random sample that consisted of 150 participants was selected. Results indicated that the Assyrians have been relatively successful in maintaining their ethnic language despite the long-term contact with many languages such as Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish and Persian. The factors that helped maintain the Syriac language include using it at home with family members and relatives, the church, the tight social relations, the media, the positive attitudes they exert towards it and internal marriages.

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**Keywords:** Syriac, factors, language maintenance, Assyrians, Iraq

### 1. Introduction

One of the central concerns of sociolinguists has been the situation of minority languages which for various reasons are in danger of disappearing either globally or locally. Ethnic languages are important components to many ethnic minority groups because they are symbols that identify a person with certain ethnic features. Spolsky (1998) referred to the role of language in establishing social identity and maintained that "most ethnic groups believe that their language is the best medium for preserving and expressing their traditions" (p.57).

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Many studies were conducted to investigate the languages of indigenous minority groups in many places around the world. Researchers investigated ethnic language loyalty and described the usage and attitude of ethnic minorities towards languages such as Quechua language in Peru, (Von Gleich & Wolck, 2004), and Arabic language in Palestine (Dweik, 1986 and Kittaneh, 2009) and the Assyrian language in the diaspora (Odisho, 1999 and McClure, 2001).

There is evidence from a number of sociolinguistic studies performed all over the world that when languages are in contact, the powerful language dominates and the other language may be replaced or the two languages are used side by side in a diglossic relationship (Fishman, 1989).

### 1.1. Who are the Assyrians of Iraq?

The Assyrians are the descendants of the ancient Aramean-speaking population of northern Mesopotamia, which adopted Christianity in the first century A.D. and pioneered this religion in the area. Currently Assyrian communities exist almost in every Near Eastern country including Iran, in major cities of Iraq (Mosul, Duhok, and Baghdad), Syria, Turkey, and Armenia. Furthermore, the name Assyrians according to Nissan (2002) embodies the collective ethnicity of Aramean-speaking Christians and includes the primary religious groups under one Assyrian nation which existed long time before Christianity.

According to Stafford (2006) the Assyrians are " Semitic people who had migrated from southern Mesopotamia after the fall of Ur...and their power was felt all over the Middle East and Near East...but the heart of their country was the Tigris plain between Nineveh and Assur" (p. 15).

Assyria which is a kingdom in northern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) began around 1350 BC. At its height (730-650 BC), the Assyrian empire controlled the Middle East from the Gulf to Egypt, but it collapsed in 612 BC.

According to AINA, (2004) (Assyrian International News Agency) the Assyrians constitute the third largest ethnic group in Iraq estimating between 1.5-2 million people. Stafford (2006) has traced the historical development of Assyrians through centuries of suffering from suppression and discrimination by the dominant majorities in their homeland.

He has pointed out that they tried for decades to call for their recognition; to possess a separate state that belongs to their nation and to retain their rights.

The Assyrians have experienced a series of conquests and invasions and were subjected to what Parpola (2004) reported " endless persecutions and massacres, first at the hands of the Romans, then at the hands of the Sassaian Persians, and most recently at the hands of Arabs, Kurds and Turks" (p. 21). He has pointed out that these suppressions helped dwindle the number of Assyrians from an estimated 20 million or more in the ancient time to less than two millions today.

According to Yildiz (1999) and Parpola (2004), without these persecutions the Assyrians would not have preserved their ethnic identity. Conquest after conquest, their stock has remained unchanged, and those conquerors have assimilated themselves into the Assyrians. The Assyrian religion and the church have been the safe-keepers of their traditions, culture and language. Liturgical-cultural heritage confirmed this characteristic. Besides, Parpola (2004) has stated that "oppressed and persecuted ethnic minorities may develop stronger identities than undisturbed" (p. 7).

After the termination of British mandate and establishing the newly Iraq State in 1933, the Assyrians have felt disappointed by the British mandate because they have broken their promise to give them an independent autonomous Assyrian state within the Iraqi state, similar to the Kurdish autonomy. The World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples (2008) has stated that after Iraqi independence in 1933, a series of massacres have been committed by the Iraqi army, which caused mass-migrations from Mosul to America and to Baghdad. Ethnic and religious violence and regional and political tensions also have triggered them to leave Iraq.

It is also reported that 300,000 Assyrian followers of the Chaldean Catholic sect have settled in Baghdad. Until the 1950s, Chaldean Catholics have mostly settled in Mosul. In 1932, 70 percent of Assyrian Christians of all denominations have lived there, but by 1957, only 47 percent have remained.

This study attempts to answer the following question:

- What are the factors that support using and maintaining the Syriac language among the Assyrians of Iraq?

## 2. Review of Literature

This study aims to investigate the factors that support language maintenance among the Assyrians of Baghdad. Fishman (1989) discussed three resolutions which constitute the outcome of languages in contact. He stated that when the immigrant language, the "intrusive" language, comes into contact with the host language" the indigenous" language faces three possibilities. The first one is when the indigenous language interacts with the intrusive language then the intrusive language is lost. The second resolution happens when an indigenous language interacts with an intrusive language; here the indigenous is lost. The third and the final resolution is that when an indigenous language comes into contact with intrusive language; here both languages are preserved or maintained. The last resolution is the theoretical foundation of the current study where the indigenous language (i.e. Syriac) is used side by side with the intrusive languages mainly the current dominant language (i.e. Arabic) through its long history

Fishman (1966) drew an outline for an approach dealing with the immigrants in the United States. He showed how the immigrants maintained their linguistic and cultural heritage and pointed out that language maintenance and language shift as a field of inquiry " is concerned with the relationship between change and stability in habitual language use, on the one hand, and ongoing psychological, social or cultural processes on the other, when populations differing in language are in contact with each other" (p.424).

Weinreich (1974) asserted that when studying language maintenance and shift, it is necessary to detect external pressures which result in the choice of language, determine how well a minority language is learned at the community and define the influence of the majority group on the minority language preservation. He also referred to the term language loyalty (in terms of maintenance) and language shift. He defined language loyalty as a "principle in the name of which people will rally themselves and their fellow speakers consciously and explicitly to resist changes in...their language" (p.99). He added that some ethnic groups kept using their mother tongue because "it becomes a symbol of group integrity, based on the extensive emotional involvement of the speakers with the language during the period of its acquisition in childhood" (p. 100).

Furthermore, he defined language shift as “the change away from the habitual use of one language to that of another” (p.106) and suggested that the shift in language use is an evidence of the dominance of one language over another. He referred to the dominance here in contact situations as it is measured according to several criteria which have been proposed by him such as: usefulness of communication, emotional involvement, function in social advance, and literary-cultural value.

Clyne (1982) highlighted the role of grandparents in mother tongue maintenance. He expressed the opinion that in this respect the extended family structure may be more conducive to language ecology than the nuclear family. The home domain and particularly relations with older relatives who do not speak well - if at all- the national language is one of the situations that elicit the use of the community language, especially within the extended family, as in the case when grandparents look after their preschool grandchildren.

Ferguson and Fishman (1986) stated that the indigenous groups sometimes maintain their languages and do not rapidly change into the dominant or conquering language:

Subordinate groups, who are indigenous at the time of contact, either through colonization as in the case of American Indians through annexation as in the case of the Chicanos in the U.S. South-West, are unlikely to change rapidly (p. 494).

Fishman (1991) described the role of various institutions in language maintenance within an ethnolinguistic community, such as language schools, libraries, print and broadcast media, religious congregations, social clubs and ethnic restaurants and shops. He elaborated on the role of the family or home domain in maintaining or losing their ethnic language. For the language to be maintained, it needs to be passed on to, and acquired by, each successive generation. Because language is tied not only to communication with family but to cultural identity as well, it is often parents who decide to teach their mother tongue to their children.

Vakhtin (1998) examined Siberian indigenous languages which were in close contact with each other for centuries under the title *Endangered Languages in Northeast Siberia: Siberian Yupik and other languages of Chukotka*.

He presented two-fold perspectives on the indigenous languages of Chukotka: an insider perspective which is the researcher's point of view and an outsider perspective that is made by several interviews with the members of indigenous community to document the condition of the languages of the indigenous groups. In his study he found that most of the indigenous groups have lost their native languages especially among the young generation and shifted to the Russian language, the dominant and official language because as he said they "demonstrated strong Russian influence, deep traces of language contact in their lexicons, grammars and even phonology" (p. 167) that they were going into the process of language loss. He stated that in spite of the language abandonment among the indigenous groups, they believed that their native languages are the symbol of their ethnic identity and had a positive attitude towards their mother tongue.

In Schrauf's (1999) study of the mother tongue maintenance in North America, settlement patterns and religious practice were identified as one of the most important indicators of language retention. He stated that the key factors of participating in language maintenance constitute of seven main variables such as pattern of settlement, religion, schools, festivals, homeland, marriage, and labor. Of all the related variables, he argues that religious practice is a considerable factor in minority language maintenance well into the third generation. Adding that Religious ritual can motivate deep emotional associations, Inculcated from early childhood through the medium of early development of the psyche and it may function to preserve the mother tongue in the long term.

Odicho (1999) investigated language maintenance and erosion in an immigrant Assyrian family in its fourth generation in the U.S. The researcher provided a historical sketch of the family to make an elaboration about the linguistic and cultural developments across four generations. He observed that the erosion was in the second and third generation. Most of the speakers of the second generation became bilingual, while with the third generation English became so dominant in almost all aspects of life where English functionally replaced the ethnic language and became the first language. The total loss of the ethnic language was in the fourth generation and what remained was only for a symbolic and occasional usage.

Dweik (2000) investigated linguistic and cultural maintenance among Chechens of Jordan and found that the third and fourth generations have maintained their ethnic language.

The researcher used a questionnaire as an instrument in his study, selected a sample of 100 respondents to answer the questionnaire that measure their linguistic and cultural maintenance. The results showed that the Chechens of Jordan maintained their language in spite of the passage of many years and that "the third and the fourth generations of Jordanian Chechens were proud of their national origin and their Jordanian national identity" (p. 47).

Friðriksson (2008) investigated language stability versus change in the conservative language communities and he took the Icelandic language as one of them to examine whether or not the language can still be characterized as stable under the ongoing changes in modern Icelandic. In his study, he presented a historical background of the Iceland and how the community could preserve their language even after several political developments and despite the diseases that caused lots of death and immigration to other areas. He made a number of interviews as a means of collecting data to identify the conditions which support this stability with a total of 108 informants chosen on the basis of a set of social criteria. All informants were interviewed to obtain information on their social background, the structure of their social networks, and on their attitudes towards and awareness of the supposed changes.

Kittaneh (2009) investigated the language situation among the Arab Palestinians of 1948. She reported that Arabic and Turkish were the official languages during the Ottoman Empire and thereafter came into contact with other languages like English and recently with Hebrew.

The researcher used a sociolinguistic questionnaire distributed among a selected sample of 70 Palestinian Arabs of 1948 to examine their use of language and attitudes towards, Arabic and Hebrew. She found that the indigenous language (Arabic) was used side by side with the intrusive language (Hebrew).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Population**

The targeted population of this study consisted of all Assyrians who live in Baghdad.

A sample of 150 participants was selected on the basis of convenience and availability. The sample included a wide range of several important demographic variables i.e. different age, gender, occupations, and marital status besides linguistic and community background. It consists of (53) males and (82) females of whom (64) were single, (44) married, (11) engaged, (2) divorced and (14) widows.

### 3.2. Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study were informal interviews and a questionnaire. The researchers used in-group assistance method following Bickerton's method (1971) who suggested that using the method of readily obtainable group of people would enable the researchers to gain fruitful results and would overcome some problems. For instance, some of the respondents would not give personal information or any other thing to the strangers. Thus those assistants of in-group, he claimed, are part of the speech community and considered an important component for the sample of the study.

The researchers selected a number of persons and key personalities of the community for a focus group interview which could provide the required information about the community (Butler and DePhelps, 1994). The interviews were conducted informally using open-ended questions and were coded and transcribed. The researchers asked about the estimate number of the Assyrians in Baghdad, their residential distributions, their ethnic schools and Churches locations, their economic, social and linguistic status and their social activities. Other wide range of detailed questions was raised within the conversation contexts which in turn helped the researchers to compile extra data on the community.

The researchers made use of the questionnaires used by Fishman (1966), Dweik (2000), Al-Khatib (2001), Kittaneh (2009), Al-Nahar (2009) and Nofal (2011). They adapted and modified them to suit the community under investigation. The questionnaire was validated and tested before it was administered to a sample of 135 Assyrian respondents from Baghdad.

## 4. Results of the Study

Results reported in Table (1) highlight the factors that support the use of Syriac.



These factors are arranged in a descending order placing the highest percentages at the top of the chart.

Results show that while 99% of the respondents believe that "Syriac is a highly prized culture", 98% of them agree that "family and home play a role in preserving Syriac". On the other hand, 95% stated that establishing new TV channels for Assyrians help preserve the use of Syriac.

Ninety-four per cent believe that the pride in the Assyrian identity has a role in preserving the ethnic language (Syriac). Yet, 92% emphasize the role of churches as well as the tight relations among the Assyrians in preserving the ethnic language.

**Table 1: Factors that Support the Use of Syriac**

<b>Factors that support the use of Syriac</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>UN</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>NR</b>	<b>Total 100%</b>
Syriac is a vehicle of a highly prized culture.	71	28	-	1	-	-	100
My family and the home play an important role in preserving my ethnic language.	76	22	2	-	-	-	100
Establishing new TV channels for Assyrians that develop and support Syriac language help preserve Syriac.	63	32	4	1	-	-	100
The pride in my Assyrian identity has a role in using and maintaining Syriac.	66	28	4	-	-	2	100
Churches play a major role in preserving Syriac language	55	37	8	-	-	-	100
The tight relations among the Assyrians help preserve Syriac.	57	35	8	-	-	-	100
Syriac unites me with the Assyrian world.	64	26	6	-	-	4	100
Syriac is a symbol of my childhood	64	25	-	3	-	8	100
The Assyrian political parties have a role in preserving Syriac.	64	25	4	2	-	5	100
Syriac is the backbone of my religion (Christianity).	59	23	17	-	-	1	100
Internal marriages among the Assyrians help keep Syriac alive.	44	37	19	-	-	-	100
The democratic language choice in Iraq helps the Assyrian minority to maintain their language.	46	34	14	-	2	4	100
Syriac unites me with the Christian world.	54	26	15	-	3	2	100
The Assyrian history of suffering makes me adhere to the Syriac language.	60	15	9	8	-	8	100
The spirit of compassion between the Muslim Arabs and the Christian Assyrians in Baghdad has a positive role in preserving Syriac.	34	40	15	7	1	6	100
Social and religious Assyrian leaders in my community play an important role in maintaining Syriac.	44	27	18	3	-	8	100
Syriac is used in my work.	40	12	24	13	-	11	100

\*Keys: SA= Strongly Agree, A= Agree, UN= Undecided, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree, NR= No Response

Moreover, 90% believe that Syriac unites them with the Assyrians in the world and 89% agree that preserving Syriac is a result of being their language of childhood as well as the existence of Assyrian political parties. When asked about the relation between language and religion, 82% emphasize that Syriac is the backbone of their religion (Christianity). Likewise, 81% consider internal marriage to be of a great importance to language preservation.

The majority, 80%, indicate that the democratic language choice in Iraq helps the Assyrian minority to maintain their language. Again, the same percentage consider Syriac a symbol of unity with the Christian world.

Results also show that 75% agree that the Assyrian history of suffering makes them adhere to Syriac. Besides, 74% believe that the spirit of compassion between the Muslim Arabs and the Christian Assyrians in Baghdad helps them to preserve Syriac. When asked about the social and religious Assyrian leaders in their community and the role they play in preserving the Syriac language, 71% indicate that they had a vital role in preserving the ethnic language. However, results show that almost half of the respondents, 52%, agree that they use Syriac in their work.

## **5. Discussion**

The factors that stand behind the use of Syriac language can be summarized as follows:

The family and the home play a major role in using and preserving Syriac among the Assyrians in Baghdad. This result supports Fishman (1991), who highlights the role of the family or home domain in maintaining or losing the ethnic language and he adds that it is often parents who decide to teach their mother tongue to their children. This finding also supports Clyne & Kipp (1999) and is similar to the findings of Dweik (2000) and Al-Nahar (2009).

The Assyrian Church also helps them to use Syriac. This is evident in the attitudes of the majority of the Assyrian respondents who believe that Syriac is significant to their religion (Christianity) and then it must be perpetuated at worship places and churches. This is consistent with Schrauf (1999) who argues that religious practice is a considerable factor in minority language maintenance.

He states that "religious ritual can motivate deep emotional associations, inculcated from early childhood through the medium of early development of the psyche and it may function to preserve the mother tongue in the long term" (p.187).

Additionally, the tight relations among the Assyrians help them to use and preserve Syriac. The Assyrian respondents' views towards their ethnic language supports this. They believe that the homogeneity in the Assyrian community which results in perpetuating the tightly-knit shape of their community, has definitely affected the preservation of their identity, culture, religion and language.

The psychological factors have helped them to use and maintain the Syriac language among the Assyrians in Baghdad. Their positive attitudes towards the ethnic Syriac make them stick to it. It is a vehicle of a highly prized culture, the backbone of their religion (Christianity), the thread that unites them with the Christian world. It is the symbol of their identity. This result is in line with Weinreich (1974) who states that some ethnic groups keep using their mother tongue because "it becomes a symbol of group integrity, based on the extensive emotional involvement of the speakers with the language during the period of its acquisition in childhood" (p. 100). The findings support Vakhtin (1998) and Friðriksson (2008) who conclude that the positive attitudes of the informants towards the mother tongue have a key role in its stability.

The audio visual media i.e. TV channels and radio stations that broadcast in the Syriac language help to use and preserve Syriac among the Assyrians in Baghdad. This is supported by the vast majority of the Assyrian respondents' who indicate using it when they listen to radio programs or watching TV programs. This matches Fishman (1991) who highlighted the role of print and broadcasting media in preserving the ethnic language.

The Assyrian "internal marriages" along with the political parties and the religious Assyrian leaders have also a crucial role in using and preserving the Assyrian identity and the Syriac language.

Regarding the Assyrians' views about the Iraqi educational policy, they confirm that it has not supported their ethnic language, Syriac, throughout many years.

Perhaps, due to the times of political conflicts which have taken place in the country for years, the Assyrians see that none of the former governments has given them the full right to teach and practice their ethnic language freely in their land. They find themselves a minority people who do not enjoy a national entity in their own land among other ethnic groups. This finding supports Petrosian (2006) who reported that "despite the preferential policy...., never did the government of Iraq recognize Assyrians as anything other than a religious minority...this was the first...attempt to deny the national existence of the Assyrians in modern Iraqi history" (pp. 126-127).

In addition, the majority of the Assyrians believe that the segregation between the Christian Assyrians and the Muslim Arabs in their residential areas does not help preserve their ethnic language, Syriac. In other words, if they lived in mixed areas with other ethnic groups (i.e. Arabs), this would not affect the preservation of their ethnic language. This can be attributed to the fact that the Assyrians believe that they are a closely-knit community and they have strong ties that link them and that they will not allow any factor to wipe off their language. Furthermore, they think that their religion has helped them to preserve and practice their ethnic language despite living in mixed residential areas with Arabs or others.

## 6. Conclusion

An analysis of the overall results of the study indicates that the Assyrians have been relatively successful in maintaining their ethnic language despite the long-term contact with many languages such as Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish and Persian. They have kept alive their authentic language, religious and cultural traditions and a sense of national belonging.

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