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Summary  
Language and Identity in the Case of Armenians in Romania

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This thesis aims to investigate the role of the Armenian language in the identity-construction strategies of local Armenian communities in Romania during the post-communist period. Given the historical, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity of the Armenian community in Romania—comprising various diasporic subtypes unified under a common ethno-political label—the research questions are formulated on two levels, accounting for these internal differences and the specific linguistic attachments. On the one hand, the analysis addresses the processes of language shift and the ways in which diverse social, political, and ideological factors influence this phenomenon. On the other hand, it explores the potential community functions of the language as an identity symbol in those subgroups that have already undergone a language shift. Nonetheless, this endeavor cannot be undertaken without a preliminary understanding of the specific linguistic conditions of each subgroup, which is why the central questions of the thesis are closely linked to the language shift process: What are the characteristics of this process among the Armenian communities in Romania? What factors influence its dynamics, and how is this reflected in the relationship between ethnic and linguistic identity categories?

The thesis is divided into eleven chapters:

The aim of the chapter on the **General Context of the Research (1.3)** is to systematize current research trends and key findings on the topic of language and identity in Armenian communities. Beginning at the level of the global Armenian diaspora, the chapter reviews the most relevant studies, paying particular attention to case studies with historical and cultural similarities, as well as those that maintain closer connections with Armenian communities in Romania.

The **theoretical concepts of the analysis (2)** are presented in a subsection structured into three parts: the first part proposes a typology of Armenians as a diasporic group; the second grounds concepts related to ethnic identity—such as identity dynamics, ethnic boundary maintenance, assimilation, and multiple ethnic affiliation; the third part surveys the concepts and factors that explain the dissociation between language and identity, alongside key research directions on language shift.

Chapter 3, entitled **Objectives, Phases, and Methodological Aspects of the Analysis**, returns to the theoretical underpinnings and, following a more nuanced restatement of the general objectives introduced earlier, presents the methodological features of the research: the methods

employed, the databases analyzed, as well as the procedures used for data collection and interpretation.

The analysis is based on the following sources:

- The general starting point and methodological framework was provided by the research conducted in 2008 by the Romanian Institute for Research in National Minorities in Cluj-Napoca. This project combined qualitative methods and surveys as well with the aim of inventorying minority institutions in Romania. The main objective was to map minority institutions represented in Parliament, applying an extended definition: any institution explicitly serving an ethnic purpose, led by members of an ethnic group, or operating in a minority language was considered a minority institution. The 2008 database included 21 Armenian NGOs, and local Armenian church parishes were likewise categorized as ethnic institutions. Data collection via questionnaires was supplemented by narrative-biographical interviews with community leaders. This database was updated in 2016, and for the present analysis, the activity of each organization was reassessed again in 2023 and 2024. As in 2008, questionnaires were complemented—where possible—by direct contact, email correspondence, and interviews with the leadership of each institution, selected based on their relevance to language-related activities.
- The Armenian Diaspora Survey database: a mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative) research project organized by the Armenian Institute in London. The 2019 wave compared four countries—Romania,
  - Argentina, Canada, and Lebanon—and included 244 respondents from Romania, forming a subsample of the Romanian Armenian community out of a total of 2,697 participants. The questionnaire addressed central themes such as identity, language use, political, religious, and civic engagement, and relations with the homeland. In the present analysis, the 244 Romanian cases were grouped by historical regions (Transylvania, Moldova, Bucharest and Dobruja), and ethnic and linguistic self-identification were examined within each regional case study.
- The researcher's own collection of qualitative and sociolinguistic data from the Armenian community in Constanța, conducted through questionnaires starting in November 2022 and continuing into early 2025. Following basic socio-demographic

questions, the survey includes six thematic modules: the relationship between mother tongue and ethnic identity, the characteristics of linguistic socialization and language proficiency, modes of language transmission, domains of Armenian language use, language attitudes, and cultural practices of ethnic identity. The results of the questionnaire survey were complemented with semi-structured interviews with community members involved in Armenian language education.

- A qualitative content analysis of dominant language ideologies related to the Armenian language: focused on explicit content from the 2019 Armenian Language Day as featured in the news section of the Romanian-language online news portal [araratonline.com](http://araratonline.com), a nationally accessible platform edited by the Armenian community in Romania. The corpus consists of 22 articles written by prominent community leaders. This level of analysis thus addresses the ideological discourse of power within the community.

The remaining sections of this thesis are divided into two major sections: the first outlines the external factors underpinning the linguistic processes of Armenians in Romania across four thematic axes; the second provides an overview of language use patterns among Armenians in Romania, analyzed through three regional case studies representing historically and linguistically distinct profiles.

**Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Armenian Population in Romania (Chapter 4).** The general socio-demographic profile of Armenians in Romania was constructed with two objectives in mind: to define the Armenian population as the study's target group and to describe, based on census data and population movement statistics, those demographic characteristics that may be decisive in shaping ethnic affiliations and linguistic processes.

To delineate the Armenian population under investigation, the analysis primarily relied on ethnic and linguistic data from post-1989 censuses, supplemented with information on religious affiliation and findings from other qualitative studies. According to census results, Armenians constitute one of the most spatially dispersed minority groups in Romania. At the most recent census, only one-third of individuals who self-identified as Armenian declared Armenian as their mother tongue and the majority of these speakers belonged to the over-65 age group, which is at an advanced stage of language shift.

This situation can be discussed in the context of factors such as intermarriage and the challenges of ethnic and linguistic socialization of children born in mixed marriages: only about one-third of such children are registered as Armenian in official records. From the perspective of language shift, then, the demographic profile of Armenians in Romania reveals clear vulnerabilities. The already advanced process of language shift, low population size, aging age structure, and spatial dispersion all negatively impact language maintenance.

**Legal Framework for the Reproduction of Small Minority Languages in Romania (Chapter 5).** This chapter analyzes the legal framework for the reproduction of small minority languages in Romania following the change in regime, which represents a significant component of the formal institutions that serve as a space for the reproduction of identity and language. By examining the juridical framework for the Armenian language as a minority language, I discuss the legislative implications of the post-1989 revolution for linguistic communities with a small number of members and a low territorial concentration.

The analysis highlights the development of both the legal and the broader institutional framework, including the system of parliamentary representation and state support for officially recognized minorities. It then systematizes the legal measures concerning national minorities. One key conclusion is that the post-1989 legislation concerning the protection of minorities and their languages has been characterized by the simultaneous influence of both homogenous nation-state and pluralistic ideologies.

While the primacy of the state language is always presumed in all cases of linguistic rights, a clear change in direction can be identified, unlike the assimilatory tendencies of the previous political regime. This shift is primarily influenced by EU language policy, which indicates a stabilization of linguistic rights for minorities in Romania. However, in the case of an ethnic group such as the Armenians, who have never reached the threshold for a higher level of linguistic rights in any municipality, there is little to identify beyond the continuity of political representation and the right to mother-tongue education.

**Languages and Institutions (Chapter 6).** This chapter aims to outline the institutional network that determines language use and reproduction, considering both the presence of Armenian diaspora policy and institutions deemed important for language maintenance within Armenian communities in Romania. The subsequent analytical step involved sketching the

institutional framework that can serve as a space for language use and reproduction. However, based on language use patterns and the linguistic-cultural offerings of ethnic institutions, Armenian is not considered a public language, even in communities with a speaker base, as programs are designed as a cultural service for the majority. The only domain where Armenian can be consistently used is within language education programs, which have operated uninterruptedly under the legal framework since the 1990s.

**Language Ideologies (Chapter 7).** The primary reason for inventorying the linguistic ideologies of the languages used by the studied community—Romanian, Armenian, and Hungarian—was that ideologies represent the conceptual reflections of power relations between linguistic groups within the social space. Thus, this subsection of the analysis sought to capture the ideological reflections of the relationship between several minority languages with asymmetric status and the state language. The majority society's perceptions of the Romanian language are ideologically rooted in linguistic nationalism, whose most significant manifestation is the treatment of the state language as the norm and the special status it deserves. The various elements of this ideological package clearly lead to a loss of functional space and prestige for minority languages. In contrast, the most important feature of the linguistic ideologies of the Hungarian minority is an explicit opposition to the linguistic ideologies of the majority society and a prominent ethno-identitarian linguistic stance. Ideologies related to the Armenian language were outlined based on our own prior analysis, grounded in qualitative content analysis. These can be grouped into four closely related types of linguistic ideologies that capture different aspects of the language's role in ethnic identity. The well-identified ethno-identitarian linguistic ideology considers the Armenian language as the basis of Armenian ethnic identity, while ideologies of axiologism and linguistic primordialism, mixed with sacralism, emphasize the privileged role and distinctive character of the language.

The second level of the thesis's analysis is represented by regional case studies, which reflect three characteristic subtypes of Armenian communities in Romania: the Moldavian communities with the oldest presence in Romania, the native Hungarian-speaking Armenians from Transylvania, and the Western Armenian-speaking community in Constanța.

**Armenians in Moldova (Chapter 8).** Regarding linguistic and identity processes in Moldova, until the late 19th century, Moldavian Armenians formed a closed, stable group with



their own religious and educational institutions. Its boundaries began to disintegrate after the Little Union of 1859, when full equality of rights was achieved. The education law, which discriminated against Armenian students, led to the gradual closure of institutions that had functioned effectively until then. Parallel to the abolition of education in Armenian, the Romanian Armenian Apostolic Archbishopric in Romania, independent from Constantinople, was officially established, primarily due to the large number of Armenian refugees. The fact that this initiative, as a symbol of ethnic segregation, also caused resistance among traditional communities, suggests that the primary aspiration of Armenian communities in Moldova was to achieve the fullest possible social integration and mobility within Romanian society in Moldova. The gradual disappearance of Armenian-language educational institutions indicates that the process of community language shift may have accelerated in the early 20th century. The period after the Second World War and socialism meant the disappearance of the last Armenian elementary schools, thus the formal framework for language transmission was finally abolished. For almost four decades, the church remained the sole ethnic institution that kept the community united.

Based on census data and the results of a secondary analysis of the Moldavian sub-sample of the Armenian diaspora survey, it can be stated that Moldavian Armenians are a difficult population to quantify, with multiple ethnic affiliation being their most important characteristic. They constitute an ethnic group characterized by a predominance of Romanian national attachment, which, with the exception of a few native speakers, has a very small proportion of members fluent in Armenian. The majority either do not speak Armenian or have no deeper knowledge of the language beyond a few words and phrases. This demographic profile explains why Armenian language education initiatives after 1989 were not long-lasting, especially since the language is not a central element of Moldavian Armenians' identity. Rather, it functions as an identity category defined by family, church, and local community ties, and manifests through specific symbolic cultural practices associated with Armenians. At the same time, one of the most important of these symbolic practices associated with a living ethnic identity, participation in Armenian religious events, is inextricably linked to the classical Armenian language used by the Armenian Church worldwide. Thus, the ritual use of the Armenian language functions as a performative element through which Armenian identity can be experienced and represented in the social space. However, the global Armenian diaspora not only activates communities through

church practices but has also become a target group for the Armenian diaspora's nation-building strategy, which has gained momentum in recent decades and has somewhat transformed the identity strategies of the communities. Through twinning, they have become actively involved politically with the motherland, and the communities' memory practices have shifted towards the memory of the genocide as a common denominator of the Armenian diaspora.

**Armenians in Transylvania: From a Language Community to a Community Remembering the Language (Chapter 9).** Transylvanian Armenian communities, formed by refugee members of Moldavian communities in the 17th century, integrated very rapidly into the contemporary Hungarian society of Transylvania. This integration was primarily driven by religious union with the Catholic Church and specific economic privileges that brought stability and development. However, their numbers steadily declined from the 19th century onwards due to emigration and assimilation into the majority nation. From the mid-19th century, we can speak of a community-wide shift to the Hungarian language, most clearly indicated by the disappearance of Armenian educational institutions. The emergence of a specific Armenian-Hungarian identity can be dated to the period after the 1848 Revolution, which, on the one hand, meant the loss of previous economic privileges, but at the same time opened a new dimension of national identification. Subsequently, they primarily defined themselves as a Hungarian minority within the identity politics of the new Romanian nation-state.

The post-regime change period was also a time of ethnic reorganization for Transylvanian Armenians, with a variety of institutional possibilities that shifted with the transformation of the content of Armenian identity. One of the most important indicators of ethnic identification, ethnic self-classification in censuses, shows a pattern similar to that in the Moldova region; that is, the dominant national affiliation, in this case Hungarian, prevails over the Armenian, thus forming an almost invisible group. In this regard, the Armenian presence is somewhat stronger in Gherla, due to socio-historical reasons such as a significantly larger population, a higher status within the settlement, and the successful integration of genocide refugees into community life. This Hungarian-dominated identity pattern can be described in terms of hyphenated identities, specifically positional and symbolic ethnicity, which denote how Armenian identity is experienced and represented to the majority society through cultural practices elevated to the status of ethnic symbols. The components of this specific identity variation, namely the Hungarian, Armenian, and

Romanian elements, are present with different intensities depending on the degree of Hungarian language presence in their social context.

Two broad institutional categories form the framework for the expression and reproduction of ethnic identity: those with an ecclesiastical past and those with a civil society past. Parishes belonging to the Ordinariate for Armenian Catholics represent, on the one hand, a fundamental pillar of Transylvanian Armenian identity through the preservation of the Armenian liturgy. On the other hand, they constitute the only framework where the Armenian language still has an active liturgical function. The ongoing liturgical reform, which aims to strengthen the sacred functions of the language and generates a certain degree of resistance within the communities, does not stem from a locally expressed need but is correlated with broader processes occurring in the global Armenian diaspora. Civil institutional life, conducted in parallel with church activity, is supported in Gherla by the local branch of the national representation organization, which primarily carries out cultural activities. These activities involve not only young people of Armenian origin from the area but also young Romanians. Although traditional attempts at teaching the Armenian language have been unsuccessful, the initiative to relaunch language learning remains an active objective, thanks to frequent contacts with standard Armenian-speaking groups coming to Romania for work.

After the fall of the communist regime, the community in Gheorgheni remained within the ecclesiastical institutional sphere but integrated into transnational diaspora networks through Armenian communities in Budapest, which still consider this area as a "homeland." At the same time, alongside a local identity predominantly defined by religion and descent, a new direction has emerged attempting to redefine their identity within the global context of the Armenian diaspora. An important indicator of this trend is the pronounced orientation towards national and international relations. A significant step in this direction is active participation in Armenia's policies towards its "historical diasporas," a process observable through both the diversification of external relations and the transformation of collective memory practices. A crucial particularity of this transformation is the symbolic increase in the presence of the Armenian language. Although the language no longer holds real communicative functions, it remains a central component, in various ways, in the identity reproduction repertoire of the three types of institutions: the national representation organization, the Armenian church, and civil organizations. Nevertheless, a unified definition of Armenian identity among institutional actors cannot be discussed, a fact explainable

by the historical divergences that determined the extent and pace at which communities underwent linguistic and identity Hungarianization. These differences also reflect new identity strategies adopted by the analyzed communities for group renewal. The institutions involved promote different types of Armenians: the church primarily supports a liturgical and descent-based identity, while the Union of Armenians of Romania (UAR) and civil organizations of Hungarian-speaking Armenians promote a broader vision focused on global Armenian culture. The relationships between these organizations, which in fact target the same continuously declining group, are also marked by tensions rooted in the asymmetric relationship between the dominant and minority languages.

**Language Shift in the Armenian Community of Constanța: A "Restricted Circulation" Language (Chapter 10).** The final case study presented in the analysis pertains to the Armenian community in Constanța, which speaks the Western Armenian dialect. The process of language shift is approached through four major themes, based on original qualitative and quantitative research. Regarding the relationship between ethnic and linguistic identity categories, unlike the previously presented regions, ethnic identification among the Armenian community in Constanța can be said to be high. However, when respondents can also express secondary ethnic attachments, a multiple identity emerges, with Armenian dominance—an Armenian-Romanian variation. The frequency of exclusively Armenian identities and multiple identities, respectively, has an inversely proportional relationship with the respondents' age: the proportion of those who define themselves exclusively as Armenian is significantly higher among the third and fourth generations, reflecting an intensification of ethnic consciousness.

Concerning the circumstances of language acquisition, although the overall sample average indicates Romanian as the mother tongue, there are notable intergenerational differences: the older generation, with few exceptions, first learned Armenian, but this proportion decreases considerably in younger generations. Intergenerational transmission, essential for linguistic vitality, shows a clear break, and linguistic socialization spaces have changed, thus shifting language learning from the family sphere to specialized institutions. The community's linguistic competencies are influenced by both access to or lack of Armenian language education and the ethnic and linguistic structure of families. Children from mixed families show a considerably lower level of Armenian language knowledge than those from ethnically endogamous families.

Regarding public spaces for Armenian language use, the most important are the church and the local community. However, significant differences appear across age groups: for the older generation, the most important spaces for language use are the community (broadly, including internationally) and the religious context; for the middle generation, language use is predominantly passive (media and internet consumption), while for the community's youth, family and educational programs organized by the local community constitute the main contexts for language use.

Regarding the relationship between the Western Armenian dialect and Standard Armenian from Armenia, the older generation demonstrates a much more confident attitude towards using the standard variant, due to access to Armenian language media content and more intense relations with the motherland. The analysis of linguistic attitudes was carried out using two methods: evaluation in relation to dominant linguistic ideologies and identification of patterns of attitudinal differentiation. In general, language-related attitudes—concerning the affective dimension, linguistic functions, and future projection—range from neutral to clearly positive, reflecting the most frequent types of linguistic ideologies formulated at the community level. Thus, three distinct types of attitudes emerged: an idealizing orientation, with a strong attachment to the language; a pragmatic, community-centered orientation; and a value-based cultural orientation.

Finally, the analysis addressed the relationship between linguistic and ethnic identity categories in the context of the most representative daily practices of Armenian identity. Based on the frequency of mentioning these cultural practices, three profiles of Armenian identity expression emerged: a political and high-culture orientation, a traditional-communitarian one, and a religious-historical one. Only in the latter case was language identified as an instrument of identity expression, suggesting the language's retreat into the religious sphere. The analyzed community is, therefore, at an advanced stage of the language shift process, with an intergenerational transmission rate that halves from one generation to the next. Even though the church and community events are the only public spaces for Armenian language use, these occasions do not offer predictable, regular, and clear language use, as events often take place in Romanian – an aspect determined by both the heterogeneous linguistic competencies of members and the superior status of the official language. Thus, at the local community level, Armenian remains a language with restricted functionality. This situation is partly compensated by the community's integration

into the international diaspora network and intensified relations with Armenia, achieved through organized trips and, for young people, through participation in identity and linguistic consolidation programs offered by Armenian diaspora policies. In this latter case, these programs even become one of the most important spaces for language use.

**Conclusions (Chapter 11).** This concluding chapter synthesizes the most important results of the partial analyses. The most relevant conclusion of the research – although, given the internal historical and cultural heterogeneity of the analyzed group, it is almost impossible to formulate universally valid statements – concerns the specific dynamics of Armenian identity as a diaspora: as a multiple ethnic affiliation and, at the same time, as a national minority identity. Within these identity categories, the Armenian language appears as an identity element with varying intensities and diverse linguistic functions. Approaches highlighting the continuous transformation, complexity, and variability of Armenian identity as a diasporic form are essential for understanding the specific identity and linguistic processes of Armenians in Romania. These communities, regardless of historical region, dominant identity categories, or defining linguistic attachments, must be understood as social entities at the intersection of the national context – often characterized by multiple minority affiliations – and a global diasporic network. Although the language shift process has inevitably occurred in almost all regions – due to the small number of speakers, social integration, legal equality, and social mobility – the Armenian language, supported by the increasingly active policies of the motherland, becomes an integral part of collective cultural memory. Thus, it acquires the role of a constantly reinterpreted symbol of ethnic identity and can function as a common cultural bridge between the different subgroups of the community.

**Keywords:** language shift, ethnodemography, identity politics, linguistic ideologies and attitudes.

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