

The Subject of the Mother Tongue and The Meaning of Syriac Language

Language is one of the most important elements that define and characterise the identity of a society. It is through language that people express themselves, communicate and pass on their cultural heritage to future generations. By creating a sense of belonging, language strengthens the bond between communities and brings people together through shared values and goals.

Language reflects a society's history, values, beliefs and way of life. It also shapes a community's worldview and way of thinking. Each language has its own logic, vocabulary and forms of expression that show how the society that speaks that language perceives the world. If a language is lost, the knowledge, traditions and cultural richness that it brings with it are also lost. Therefore, preserving the language is crucial for a society to maintain its identity and cultural continuity.

The native language is not merely a tool for communication

The interplay between mother tongue and collective memory plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of cultural and historical heritage. The mother tongue is not only a means of communication, but also a treasure that preserves and transmits the memory of a society, including its past, experiences, traditions and values. While collective memory encompasses the shared memories, identity and cultural ties of a society, the mother tongue is the fundamental tool for expressing and keeping this memory alive.

All languages convey the secrets of humanity. However, a language that does not draw from its own source or culture is doomed to disappear. No society can sustain its existence with a way of thinking that is not rooted in its own culture. If a society develops a universal mindset based on its own culture but based on mutual interaction, social peace and harmony will find meaning. This mindset should evolve as a form of interaction that serves social justice, peace, fairness, mutual change and existence rather than establishing

dominance or assimilating others. **Everything in the universe is fair and beneficial as long as it serves the understanding and enhancement of the meaning of life.**

The most influential force in the transformation of societies

On the other hand, language is sometimes perceived and interpreted and judged according to socio-political awareness and understanding. Such perceptions and interpretations are proportional to how language is approached and understood, rather than to the values that language conveys. However, individuals or groups who have a high level of cultural awareness and a genuine understanding of the evolutionary process of languages do not fall into contradictions in understanding and interpreting language. Instead, they endeavour to understand and grasp the fundamental and ultimate purpose of language by drawing from and paying attention to the spiritual nourishment of evolution. For historically, language has been one of the most effective forces in reshaping individuals and societies, and it has played a significant role in shaping cultural continuity.

Every language in the history of mankind has its own history. However, the history of Syriac is unique and encompasses three different areas: **the historical past of Syriac, its historical upheavals and its own reality.** Undoubtedly, a more objective account of Syriac, which has contributed different meanings to the history of thought, depends on a more comprehensive exploration and study of these three different areas.

It was widely used across the Middle East

It is historically known that Syriac, as a continuation of Eastern Aramaic, took its vocabulary from Akkadian-Assyrian. The alphabets of many other languages developed on the basis of this early and archaic alphabet system. The relationship between Syriac and other Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic is therefore based on this common linguistic heritage. From a philological point of view, Akkadian forms an important basis for Syriac. This

language serves as a pioneering point of reference for relations with Semitic language groups and closely related languages such as Syriac, Hebrew and Arabic.

Although Syriac is known as the sister language of Hebrew and Arabic, it is certain that it has strongly influenced these languages. Syriac, which was once widely spoken throughout the Middle East, was also one of the eighteen different alphabets and writing systems used throughout Turkic history.

It holds a distinguished place within the Christian world

As it was the language spoken by Christ, Syriac holds an important place in the Christian world. Syriac has three similar writing styles, known as Estrangelo, Eastern (Madenḥāyā) and Western (Ma'arbāyā). Those who can read one style of writing can easily read the others. Just as there are dialectal differences in every language, Syriac also has such variations; it is divided into Eastern and Western dialects. Among people, the East Syriac dialect is commonly known as Chaldean or Assyrian, while the West Syriac dialect is simply referred to as Syriac. If one disregards the "a" and "o" sounds at the end of words in the Eastern and Western dialects, it is obvious that there is no significant difference between these two dialects.

The Syriac language also has spoken dialects that are separate from its written and literary forms. Although these dialects vary somewhat depending on regional and local characteristics, they can essentially be divided into two main dialects. The spoken language of Eastern Syriacs is called Assyrian or Surit, while the spoken language of Western Syriacs is called Turoyo or Surayt. Most of the Assyrians/Syriacs/Chaldeans living in the diaspora generally use one of these two dialects in everyday conversations.

It carries the mystical secrets of Mesopotamia

Syriac, which occupies a unique place in the history of civilisation, carries within it the mystical secrets and melancholy of Bethnahrin (Mesopotamia). For Syriac communities around the world, it is more than just a mother tongue; it is a matter of identity. Syriac is the carrier and heritage of the organic culture that originated in ancient Bethnahrin (Mesopotamia). Although it has lost its importance, it still embodies a contemporary voice that spans centuries. It originated in the East and was the official language of the Assyrian Empire. It is one of the oldest languages in the world.¹

Syriac developed with the rise of the Antiochian Church² in Christian history and has a long history related to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It is the language of the schools of Antioch, Nisibis, Urfa, Jundishapur and Kinnesrin, which have shaped the history of thought, philosophy, medicine, astrology and many other disciplines. Despite other social, theological and cultural factors, the conceptual depth of Syriac has contributed to the development of ritual language in the churches. With its powerful creative concepts, it has the

¹ During the reign of King Sennacherib of the Assyrian Empire (705-681 BCE), the Syriac/Aramaic language became the most widespread and influential language across the vast territories of the empire. During this period, King Sennacherib used this language as the official language in correspondence with world leaders outside the empire's borders. Sennacherib's advisor, the wise Ahikar, authored a book titled *The Wisdom of Ahikar* in the Syriac alphabet. Fortunately, a copy of this book, dated to the 5th century BCE, has survived to the present day. *The Wisdom of Ahikar* is considered one of the oldest surviving works in world literature.

² The Syriac Orthodox Church, Syriac Catholic Church, and Maronite Church use the Western dialect of Syriac in daily prayers and liturgical services, alongside their local languages. In contrast, the East Syriac Apostolic Church, Chaldean Church, and Ancient East Church use the Eastern dialect of Syriac. The Melkite Church (Greek Orthodox and Catholic), however, completely severed its organic connection with Syriac after the 7th century and turned to Arabic.

privilege of being a language that has developed and spread the teachings of Christ.

Syriac navigates an infinite ocean

Furthermore, the Syriac language has contributed significantly to the development of Christianity through its important contributions to Eastern and Western thought. It played a pioneering role in the development of thought, philosophy and spiritual awareness and in the spread of Greek civilisation in the Arab world, North Africa and Europe. The Syriac language, known for its pioneering character in the socio-cultural and artistic life of the region, served as a crucial bridge in intercultural interactions during its active historical periods. It has contributed to the development of civilisation, philosophy and rational thought, creating a path of thought that has reached the Arab world and Europe. Its role and influence in the transmission of ancient knowledge to the Islamic world is considerable. It is particularly known for her significant contributions to Arabic and Islamic philosophy. With its rich heritage in various fields of literature and spiritual awareness, it has contributed to the development of social thought. As scholarly studies uncover these facts today, the historical importance of Syriac is increasingly recognised and appreciated.

This language, which carries the past into the future, has a vocabulary that is inherently rich in unique and profound meanings. The origins of Syriac naming and conceptualisation can be traced back to the fertile wellsprings of ancient Mesopotamian culture. The tantalising range of meanings and interpretations of Syriac reveal its existence in all its glory from every perspective. When Syriac is the language used in research and study, an enjoyable marathon of endeavour begins. While navigating through the deep sea of words and concepts, one also sets sail towards an endless ocean.

It is like a treasure buried in the earth

Indeed, as with any language, delving into the 'meaning' and 'interpretation' of concepts in Syriac can be challenging. Despite the commendable efforts of

linguists over the past few centuries, I believe that the deep secrets hidden within this ancient language have not yet been fully uncovered. It's akin to a buried treasure. When brought to light, it will dazzle us with the vibrant and diverse 'system of meanings and productive spirit' from the ancient wisdom of Mesopotamia.

Syriac has been a crossroads for many cultures throughout history and has played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. It continues to be a central element in maintaining the identity of Syriac communities and passing it on to future generations.

Syriac is both a mother tongue and a source language.

There is a distinction between the concepts of '**mother tongue**' and '**source language**', which can sometimes lead to confusion.

The term '**source language**' (or '**parent language**') uses '**source**' in the sense of fundamental, original, or primary, rather than referring to 'mother' in the familial sense. This definition is crucial for indicating the historical significance of a language. A **source language** is one that contains other languages within it; it has its own dialects and variations, and serves as the origin from which related languages or dialects have evolved.

The term 'mother tongue' refers to the language that is learnt without a conscious learning process and is typically spoken at home, on the street and in the social environment. This term is closely linked to the concept of language learnt from the mother and emphasises the link between language and certain ethnic and cultural contexts.

According to linguists, the number of source languages from which other languages have emerged is very small. For example, Romance languages such as French and Italian are offshoots of Latin. Therefore, Latin is considered a source language. **Similarly, Syriac is both a mother tongue**

and a source language within the universal cultural context. For the Assyrian/Syriac/ Chaldean population, it is their direct mother tongue.

One who does not know their native language is akin to an orphan

A mother tongue is fundamental to a person's identity; not knowing one's mother tongue is like being an orphan. In this sense, it is inconceivable that anyone could be deprived of their mother tongue. No one should be deprived of the cultivation of their mother tongue; everyone should be able to speak, learn and develop their mother tongue freely. The mother tongue is as sacred as human dignity and the right to life.

Knowing or learning another language is like wearing a new dress - you can always change your clothes. However, it is different with the mother tongue. It is as inseparable as your own skin and cannot be replaced by another. Nevertheless, being multilingual or knowing other languages is a personal enrichment.

The mother tongue is a living source that nourishes the soul like mother's milk. Confucius (551-479 BC) expressed this with the words: **"To destroy a society, you do not need weapons; it is enough to make it forget its language."**

The death of a language signifies the loss of a heritage

The Syriac writer Malfono Naum Faik (1868-1930) emphasised the importance of the mother tongue with the words: **"A person who does not know his mother tongue does not know why it exists."**

Therefore, the death of a language means the disappearance of the people who speak it and the heritage that was created with that language. Language is not only a means of communication between people, but also a tool to pass on knowledge and wisdom to the future and to strengthen the link between the past and the future. The vitality of a mother tongue is therefore directly related

to cultural awareness. As the Syriac Maronite writer Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) said: "**Sincerity makes all our actions honourable and beautiful.**"

Efforts must be devoted to securing the future of the Syriac language

The survival and vitality of an ancient language like Syriac cannot depend solely on the efforts of its lovers and speakers. Social awareness, the will and responsibility of civil society organisations and the support of sensitive individuals, local authorities and relevant universities play a crucial role in this process. The continued existence of Syriac requires this kind of dedication and commitment.

Syriac is like an antique that adorns the chain of civilisation. It serves as a primary or source language in the universal culture and has a deep meaning as a mother tongue for the Assyrian/Syriac/Chaldean people. Sincere awareness and consistent efforts are needed to protect and develop it. Under today's conditions, this awareness and effort are needed more than ever.

Just as a jeweller understands the value of an antique, only those who deeply understand and appreciate the richness of a language can truly grasp its value. The Assyrian/Syriac/Chaldean authorities need to work harder and show greater commitment to safeguarding the future of the Syriac language, which is under threat. At the very least, they should reflect and ponder on this issue, because contemplation will start the process of understanding, development and learning.

Let it not be forgotten that the Syriac language is a vein that pulsates at the heart of history. To cultivate it is to breathe new life into a history that is on the verge of being forgotten.

Yusuf Beğtaş