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# Sociolinguistic aspects of the development of Georgian

Manana Tabidze

A language cannot be considered apart from the extra-linguistic and intra-linguistic factors that influence it. The influence of these factors on the language is always conditioned by the contact with another language; and the question of its social status is always related to another language.

When two languages exist in a state, one spoken by an autochthonic population and the other by a ‘guest’, priority is given to the language whose speakers have the most advantageous economic or political-economical position. In this case, bilingualism is a logical consequence. The humanistic essence of teaching the second language is quite obvious – guaranteeing competent and valuable participation in the political life of the country. There exists another, much more mercantile motive for a state to protect itself from the strange mentality of the linguistically isolated mass. Because of the language barrier, this may find itself in an oppressed condition, and the dissatisfaction may be the cause of an ethnic conflict in the future. Such conflicts can develop inside a country, but may also be inspired artificially, from the outside. Such periods can be observed in the history of the Georgian literary language.

The Georgian literary language developed during many centuries. The oldest epigraphic material dates back to the 5th century AD (an inscription from 492-493 on the Sioni church of Bolnisi, a Georgian orthodox church). The oldest known literary text in Georgian is *The Martyrdom of Santa Shushanik*, written in 475-83.

In the Georgian literary tradition, the creation of the Georgian alphabet is connected with the name of king Pharnavaz, who lived in the 4th–3rd centuries BC. In the Georgian chronicle *Kartlis Cxovreba* ‘The life of Kartli’ we read: “Pharnavaz was the king who extended the area of the Georgian language and created the Georgian writing”.

According to some historical documents there was a tradition of writing in Georgia even before Pharnavaz. The historian Teimuraz Bagrationi writes:

“There were no Georgians without writing; they wrote before the time of Pharnavaz, using the alphabet of their priests, and now our monks and priests are using it”.

The fact that an alphabetic writing was created and that it was brought into general use, shows the high level of national mentality. The language is the primary expression of the spiritual and material culture of a nation.

For a long time the attitude towards the Georgian literary language was generally the same – every representative of any part or region of Georgia perceived the Georgian literary language as a common cultural heritage and the subject of common care. The memorial religious story of the 10th century, *The life of Grigol Xancteli* by Giorgi Merchule tells about the time of the Arabian invasion in east Georgia (8th–9th centuries), and also gives some information on west Georgia, which had contacts with the Byzantine empire, and south Georgia, where a restoration after the Arabs took place. So, in a moment of political dismemberment, the state was united psychologically and the language was the first attribute of ethnic and psychological unity.

The Georgian literary language has had uniting and protective functions for many centuries and the protection of the norms of the literary language has been of great importance. However, Georgian has been in contact with various languages. For example, eastern Georgia was in contact with the Persians in the 5th–4th centuries and with the Arabs in the 7th–8th centuries. Western Georgia had contacts with the Byzantine empire in the 5th–12th centuries, and with Russia in the 19th–20th, etc.

The social function of the Georgian language has always been unification, and all the literary and philosophical schools propagated several normative principles in the field of terminology, translation, philosophical and religious literature. In times of political and military aggression, Georgia used its strongest weapons – the language and Christianity – against the enemy.

There is an extensive theological and philosophical literature in old Georgian. It is true that most of it represents translated material, but the translation of such difficult and varied texts demands a rich vocabulary and a complex grammatical system. At the same time, the extensive translation process activated the development of the Georgian literary language. The number of Georgian manuscripts at the Institute of Manuscripts in Tbilisi dating from the 9th–11th centuries amounts to 200.

The political and economic situation always affects the mentality of a nation. The Renaissance in Georgian culture took its beginning in the 11th–12th centuries and lasted up to the second part of the 13th century, the

time of the Mongolian invasion. The preparatory period of the Renaissance begins during the 10th century, when the process of unification of the Georgian kingdom takes place, after the complete liberation from foreign usurpation.

The liturgical writer Ioane-Zosime from the 10th century, who was a well-known figure in Palestine and Mount Sinai, is the author of a text of very great importance, *Praise and grandeur of the Georgian language*. This manuscript says that the Georgian language preserves the mysteries of God. In the 12th century there were two higher schools in Georgia, the Gelati Academy in western Georgia and the Iqalto Academy in the east. Notwithstanding the fact that the eastern and western parts of Georgia had linguistic differences, the literary language was normalised and had the same grammatical principles in both parts.

The second half of the 13th century is the time of the Mongolian invasion. It became fatal for the Georgian kingdom and the cultural life of the country suffered greatly. After the Mongolian period comes a time of restoration, but the national honour never returned to what it was during Renaissance time. For example, king Vakhtang VI of east Georgia, who was engaged in wars with Persia throughout his life, commented on the Persian language in his poetry: “The sweetness of the Persian language made me want to write poems”.

In the 1620s, Italian Catholic missionaries came to Georgia. They composed grammars of Georgian and wrote Italian-Georgian and Georgian-Italian dictionaries. Georgian children studied Greek, Latin and Georgian grammar in schools opened by them.

The dismemberment of the Georgian empire entertained the danger of dismembering the Georgian literary language. Sulxan-Saba Orbeliani, a well-known writer and political figure of his time, opposed this danger by compiling a Georgian dictionary (17th century).

Each country's concrete language situation is the result of specific historical processes and events. The similarities of the language situations of different countries are often superficial, in depth each of them is individual and of specific character. Political-administrative status of the unity, the degree of development of its social-economic and social-cultural infrastructure, demographic and social-structural peculiarities of the population, national-political principles, belonging to a certain cultural-historical area are considered as relevant factors of a definite national-territorial unity as a social-political system and situation.

Each territory and population has its own historical past, and without considering the social history of a language situation, one will not be able to understand its present and to plan its future. The development of the Georgian literary language under the conditions of linguistic variation, the systematic protection of its social status, and interlanguage protective mechanisms are the bases of a specific Georgian mentality.

Russia's interests towards Georgia began in the 17th century, when Peter I decided to transform Russia into a maritime power and his interests were directed to the Black Sea. From this point an indirect Russian interference begins in the spiritual and political life of Georgia involving the clergy, education and political contacts. For example, some time before the occupation of Georgia by Russia, the well-known Georgian Katholikos Anthon, who lived six years (1757-1763) in Russia and became an expert on Russian culture, introduced 'the theory of three styles' in Georgia. He taught this theory at his schools and they heavily influenced the development of the Georgian literary language. The destruction of the uniformity of the Georgian literary language and the changing of its natural development is connected with his name (Babunashvili & Uturgaidze 1991:11).

So, we can say that Russia began its interference and control of the fate of the Georgian language in this way, and by means of the language controlled the nation's mentality. In 1801, Russia abolished the Georgian empire, drove away the Georgian royal dynasty, and prohibited the divine service in Georgian.

The Russian 'three styles theory' for Georgian in reality means: (1) the 'high style', which is the language of divine service; (2) the 'middle style', the language of historical texts and (3) the simple 'low style', 'the language of plebeians'. These norms in principle rejected the sufficiency of one literary language and requested three styles of Georgian.

At that time, when Russia tried to disjoin and dominate the Caucasus, the Georgian society was divided into two parts, those who thought that a war with Russia was impossible and those who considered it necessary. The Russian policy aimed at disjoining the state, prohibiting the divine service in Georgian, prohibiting religious schools and making one group of Georgians into faithful servants. The same disjoinment took place in the Georgian language.

The representatives of Georgian romanticism (first part of the 19th century) witnessed many acts of repression towards the movement for national independence and the pursuit of patriots. It is interesting, that this generation

later became servants of Russia and this group propagated the ‘high’ and ‘middle’ styles and looked down on popular speech. They actively introduced borrowed vocabulary from Russian, untypical phonetic elements, and sometimes Russian affix elements. For example, they transformed Georgian names by introducing Russian suffixes (*Nino* > *Nina*, *Tamari* > *Tamara*, surnames: *Baratashvili* > *Baratov*, *Orbeliani* > *Orbelianov*, *Cicishvili* > *Cicianov*, etc.). The first Georgian newspaper, named *Leport* (1763-87), closely followed the Russian press.

The russification of the Georgian elite was defined by two fundamental factors: (1) fear (of Russian repression for nationality ideas) and (2) ambition (Russia gave the greatest privileges to its supporters).

Only two secondary schools were classified as Georgian (in Tbilisi and in Kutaisi) but only the Georgian language and literature and Georgian history were taught in Georgian, all other subjects in Russian. The Georgian scientific language and scientific terminology had developed since the oldest times and reached its highest level in the 11th–12th centuries (Eqvtime and Giorgi Mtacmindeli, Ephrem Mcire, Ioane Petrici). During the Russian period it was left without function.

From the 1840s realism begins to dominate in the literature. From this time a tendency to improve the Georgian language and liberate it from borrowing is noted. In comedies, the elitary classes are ridiculed, those who are separated from their people and their country are distinguished by their speech.

In Georgia of the 1860s the youth, who got their education in Russia and other foreign countries returned to Georgia. This group led the national liberation movement and viewed as a most serious problem the recovering of the traditional functions of the Georgian language: the unification of the nation and the defence of the national mentality (Kotinovi & Mepharishvili 1992:8).

The leader of this movement was Ilia Chavchavadze, who in 1861 wrote an article about one untalented translation from Russian into Georgian and by this undertaking discussed reforms and unification of the Georgian language, opposing the ‘three styles theory’.

The orientation of this ideology and of Ilia Chavchavadze may be characterised as follows:

(1) Abolition of the ‘three styles theory’ and restoration of the unity of the literary Georgian language for all social classes and all branches of science and culture.

(2) Limitation of the process of borrowing vocabulary from Russian, and removal of those letters from the Georgian alphabet that had no phonemic



value and were used in loans from Indo-European languages, specifically from Russian.

(3) Creation of ‘The society of spreading literacy among Georgians’, for the lower classes.

(4) Widening and spreading of the Georgian press.

(5) Preparations for a Georgian University, a collection and systematisation of the vocabulary of different branches of science (for example, in 1873 *The Latin-Georgian short dictionary of plants* was published and in 1884 *The Georgian-Russian-Latin short dictionary of plants, animals and metals*).

(6) Creation of agricultural and economical schools and special literature for them, and thereby widening the sphere of social influence for the Georgian language.

(7) Elaboration of the theory of translation according to the norms of modern Georgian literature; work in textologic committees, etc.

The discussion of the development of the literary language became very critical in character and continued for more than ten years.

From a social point of view, the grouping of the participants is interesting and falls into two categories: the ‘three styles theory’ was defended by those who served the Russian system and government and the position of unification of the literary Georgian language was defended by the ideologists of the national liberation movement.

So we can say that language became a means of expressing political faith. That debate ended with the victory of the national activists. The social-political analysis shows that during the whole 19th century the Georgian language fought for its distinction and social functions.

Already at the end of the 19th century there were some Georgian names among the activists, who tried to transform Russia by a ‘Bolshevik modification’: Stalin, Ordzhonikidze, Makharadze, etc. With their hands Russia murdered Ilia Chavchavadze. After that the national-liberation movement in Georgia in fact stood without a leader, but at that moment the national mentality was already awake and so was the policy of self-defence of the language.

After the October revolution in 1917, Georgia proclaimed independence which lasted until February 1922, when the second annexation of Georgia by Russia took place. The Georgian government aspired to protect the principal signs of an independent state, so it urgently adopted the most important documents corresponding to international cooperation and at the same time Georgian schools, high schools and the Georgian University opened. It is true

that only a few years is too short a period to consolidate a young independent country, but those years have great meaning: in spite of much repression in Georgia by Soviet Russia, it could not and did not dare to abolish what had been done within the field of education and language during the time of Georgian independence.

In a sociolinguistic characterisation of the Soviet period, the situation in the whole Caucasian area must be taken into consideration. Everyone has a right to education in his native language, but only the union republics were ready to develop education or science in the mother tongue, the other nations were not ready for this. For this need it suited Russia well to offer them the Russian alphabet and Russian publications. In addition to this, there was a massive migration of Russian speaking population into these areas and thereby a change of the demographic picture, establishing a new balance between the languages of the native population and the Russian language.

The same policy was used in relation to the languages of the republics: The Russian language was considered an obligatory language. It is true, that according to the constitution Georgian was the state language of the republic, but the social strength of Russian was by far greater than Georgian:

(1) Russian was taught in all forms in Georgian schools, from the first to the last year.

(2) All administrative systems were dependent on Moscow, and Russian was therefore used in administration and business.

(3) All scientific degrees (candidate or doctor) had to be translated and sent to Moscow for confirmation, because there was only one highest committee of attestation and it was in Moscow.

(4) The teaching of Georgian in Russian or other national schools in Georgia was mostly considered a formality. Special literature for higher education was mainly in Russian and all school-books were translated from Russian, because of the centralised educational system. For example, the schoolbook in history included only Russian history, and some facts from the Georgian past were included only in cultural reviews along with facts for other Soviet republics. Georgian history was included only in a list of extra-curricular, non obligatory subjects.

(5) The national minorities faced the difficulty of acquiring knowledge of several languages (the mother-tongue, Russian, Georgian and one European language). As the influence of Russian was more intense, they preferred to study Russian. It was more convenient for them, as it was not a problem to live in Georgia without knowledge of Georgian. There were Russian faculties



of every speciality and most of the students who graduated from the Russian sectors did not know Georgian and worked at their posts using Russian. Large-scale constructions of roads, railways or hydroelectric power stations were planned in the areas compactly inhabited by Georgians, and thus a compact Russian-speaking population was introduced. So the demographic picture was artificially changed – it is not by chance that the Russian state during the Post-Soviet period has found its strongest support among the compact Russian-language population in all territories of the Soviet Union.

(6) Some Georgian families sent their children to Russian schools in order to ensure their social position in the future.

(7) Mass media, it is true, were in Georgian, but all films (except Georgian films) were shown only in Russian.

(8) The church, which at one time defended the Georgian language and the Georgian mentality, was in Soviet time left without functions.

(9) The highest instance of defence of different aspects of human rights was situated in Moscow and worked in the Russian language.

(10) All more important official meetings were conducted in Russian.

Such active interference in Georgian daily life certainly had his consequences:

(1) The influence of the Russian language left traces in Georgian vocabulary, syntax and stylistics.

(2) Translation calques from Russian occur in press, radio and television speech.

(3) The basic language of technology and science was Russian and therefore the Georgian terminology in these areas was not activated.

(4) A part of the Georgian terminology lost its terminological functions and was replaced by borrowed terms.

(5) The language of business and administration, especially the terminology, was influenced by Russian.

(6) In everyday speech and slang, Russian vocabulary was abundant. The Georgian literary language faced a difficult situation. The limitation of the functions of the Georgian literary language created a layer among the Georgians who defended the advancement of the Russian language, and a layer of the non-Georgian population, who actually did not know Georgian, and subconsciously they showed a preference for the limitation of the state functions of the Georgian language (this gave them a social advantage over the people for whom Georgian was the primary language).

The Georgian public and Georgian language institutes made a great effort to defend and protect the social rights and norms of the Georgian language (*Razvitie terminologii* 1987:59), for example:

(1) In 1925 the Central committee of terminology was created at the Commissariat of People's Education.

(2) In 1936, the Department of scientific terminology was opened.

(3) The publication of the *Georgian dictionary* in 8 volumes (over 113,000 words), edited by Arnold Chikobava.

(4) In 1936 the first volume of the *Standards of modern Georgian* appeared.

(5) The publication of an orthographic dictionary for schools.

(6) In 1968 the publication of a comprehensive orthographic dictionary.

(7) From the 1970s the *Collected norms of the Georgian language* appeared.

(8) In 1982 there was a discussion on the onomastics of foreign names in Georgian.

(9) Studies of the language of the press, text books and other problems concerning foreign orthography.

The development of the Georgian language, its linguistic analysis, its relations to other Ibero-Caucasian languages, the norms of the Georgian literary language and terminology have been studied at the Chikobava Institute of linguistics and the departments of Tbilisi University.

Due to the extensive work on the Georgian language the Georgian public was well aware of the problems concerning the status of the language. This explains the protests from the Georgian public against the statement of the Soviet minister of education and the member of the Politbiuro D. Ligachov about the transfer of education at departments of the Georgian University and all higher education into Russian, and against the Soviet *ukaz* making the Russian language the only state language according to the constitution of 1978. The constitutional rights of the Georgian language were defended at mass meetings at a time when spontaneous mass meetings did not occur in the Soviet Union.

The Post-Soviet period has been characterised by a strengthening of the functions of the Georgian language. All Georgian citizens have been convinced of the weakening of the social role of Russian. Now the Georgian language is really the state language. After the decentralisation of the Post-Soviet system it has become the language of politics, administration and business.

The quota of Russian schools is decreasing. This is mainly because Georgian and non-Russian children choose to go to Georgian or national schools now. A study conducted among teachers, children and their parents in Russian schools showed that the majority plans to leave Georgia in the future and therefore have chosen this. The popularity of the English language is growing, especially among the non-Georgian population. Now school books are written and published in Georgia.

The aim of our report has been to give a short review of the social history of the development of Georgian and to show how sensitive the language is to political and social changes in the fate of the country, and also to stress that in the 19th–20th centuries the Georgian language has had a terrible fight in defending its traditional way of developing, as it stood under the Russian regime. Accordingly, Georgia could not infringe on the rights of other ethnic groups, as it has been accused of by Soviet and Post-Soviet ideologists, and, unfortunately, it could not give substantial help to other nations and languages either, because during this period the Georgian language had too limited sociopolitical possibilities.

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