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# Mother tongue and language use in Armenian and Russian schools in Georgia

Manana Kock Kobaidze

This paper deals with the different stages of language maintenance and language shift among some minority groups in connection with the language of education and character of settlement in Georgia. This paper is focused on the comparison of Armenian respondents educated via Russian and via Armenian, and also on Armenian respondents living in Tbilisi and in areas of compact Armenian settlement. The respondents' different understandings and self-evaluations of the notion 'mother tongue' are also touched upon.

## Introduction

Georgia is a multilingual country. The official language (state language) of Georgia has been Georgian since the 1930s. During the Soviet period Russian was a majority language relative to Georgian, while Georgian was a majority language relative to other languages in Georgia. On the other hand, from the demographic point of view, Georgian is a minority language relative to some other languages in some regions of Georgia. This complicated situation coupled with the Soviet educational policy to provide all minority groups with education in their mother tongue created a background for the diversity of languages of instruction at schools, as well as for the diversity of language choice in different domains of language use.

## The notion of minority in Georgia

The notion of minority in Georgia involves neither the time and circumstances of group immigration in Georgia. Nor does it involve the demographic, language or political situation of this group outside Georgia. Only one exception in this respect is that those groups whose motherland is outside the Soviet Union have not had schools in the language of their own nationality since the late 1930s.

The notion of nationality in Georgia (as in the whole Soviet Union) was equal to the notion of ethnic origin. Citizenship and nationality were two

different notions and both were indicated in the Soviet passport (Kobaidze 1999:157-58). Everybody who is born in Georgia, irrespective of ethnic identity and degree of knowledge or ignorance of Georgian, is a citizen of Georgia. Nowadays, the paragraph about nationality is abolished in Georgian passports and identity cards, and only citizenship is indicated. This change is still a much-debated problem in Georgia.

The law on protection of the rights of national (ethnic) minorities in Georgia defines a minority as “a group of citizens of Georgia, for whom the state language of Georgia is not their national language (the ethnic or native language), a group that possesses other sustainable ethnic characteristics whereby it differs from the majority of the country’s population, and constitutes a numerical minority striving to preserve and develop its native language, culture and traditions” (Zhorzholiani & Abashidze 1999:1.1).

## Material

A questionnaire study was conducted in Tbilisi and also in some regions of Georgia where representatives of minorities live compactly, in April and May 1999.

I preferred to make a detailed questionnaire. Respondents were asked about which language they use and in which language they are answered in communication with their parents, older relatives, younger relatives, with their spouses and children, with colleagues, with officials, in public and non-public situations, etc. The questionnaire consisted of questions about both language competence and language use (about 140 fields). Part of the questionnaire was made as tables, which made it possible to place all these fields in 6 pages.

Data have been collected among respondents studying at or graduated from Russian and Armenian schools.

## Languages of schooling in Georgia

The educational system in Georgia has been just a part of the Soviet educational system and the Soviet language policy. It would be unjust to deny great achievements of this policy for encouragement of the mother tongue, for spreading literacy and, in many cases, for the creation of literacy for many ethnic groups. At the same time it worked for segregation of the population within republics, and for integration of these segregated parts into one new identity – the Soviet nation. The unity of contradictory tendencies, segregation and integration as the principles of the Soviet educational system, is described and analysed both in Soviet and non-Soviet research literature (Lewis 1972:157-59).

**Table 1.** Number of pupils by the language of instruction in Georgia 1996/97 (except Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

From The main centre of information of the Ministry of Education of Georgia.

<i>Georgian</i>	591 880	83,4%
<i>Azeri</i>	42 513	5,99%
<i>Armenian</i>	27 950	3,9%
<i>Ossetian</i>	266	0,03%
<i>Russian</i>	46 894	6,6%

In Soviet times, the state encouraged the mother tongue (in the literal sense of this word) instead of the state (official) language (Kurdiani 1998:267).

Besides the goal mentioned above (to segregate the population by nationality within the republics), the Soviet language policy aimed to encourage all languages of the Soviet Union and: (a) spread literacy (and to create it when it did not exist, in some cases to change already existing scripts) in order to spread the new ideology to everyone by means of the educational system and media; (b) oppose the old (Tsarist) Russian policy of forced implementation of Russian as the state language, and reach the same goal by a different policy.

In some sense this policy resembles the French language policy after the 1870 revolution (all laws should be translated into five languages in order to make them understandable for everybody and, in opposition to the previous language policy: one monarchy – one language).

State schools had functioned in fourteen languages in Georgia at the beginning of the 1930s. Nowadays state schools function in six languages in Georgia.

In 1996-97, the total number of pupils in primary and secondary schools was 709,503 (data from two regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are not available). The number of pupils taught in these languages (except Abkhaz) is represented in Table 1.

Regardless of the language of instruction, all state schools in Georgia are (and were) supported by the Republic of Georgia. It is not only the language of instruction that distinguishes these schools from each other, but also the study of language, literature, history and geography of countries other than Georgia. A common feature of all these schools, besides the natural and mathematical sciences, was the teaching of the Russian language and literature, and also the history of Russia, that was studied under the name of history of the Soviet Union.

**Table 2.** Correlation between demographic situation and choice of language of instruction.

	Tbilisi	Akhalkikhe	Akhalkalaki
Georgian population	66.02	37.7	4.4
Pupils taught in Georgian	81.4	61.1	4.7
Armenian population	12.07	42.73	79.5
Pupils taught in Armenian	1.2	32.1	89.4
Russian population	10.1	12.03	10.5
Pupils taught in Russian	17.2	6.8	5.8

The percentage of population is counted according to the 1989 census. The percentage of pupils (relative to the total number of pupils) is taken after the data from 1996-97 (data from The main centre of information of the Ministry of Education of Georgia).

Armenian schools in Georgia get all textbooks from Armenia. All subjects are studied in Armenian from grade 1 to grade 10 or 11, except for the second language course (Russian), the third language course (one of the West European languages) and (if studied) the fourth language course (Georgian). The pupils are Armenians living in Georgia.

Russian schools in Georgia get all textbooks from Russia. All subjects are studied in Russian from grade 1 to grade 10 or 11 except for the second language course (one of the West European languages) and (if studied) the third language course (Georgian). Pupils are Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, Assyrians, Georgians etc. It should be noted here that Armenian, Russian, Azeri etc. in Georgia usually does not mean citizens of Armenia, Russia, etc., living in Georgia, but citizens of Georgia who are Armenian, Russian, etc. by origin (see *The notion of minority in Georgia* above).

Table 2 shows the percentage of the Georgian, Armenian and Russian population in Tbilisi, Akhalkikhe and Akhalkalaki, as well as the percentage of secondary school pupils taught in Georgian, Armenian and Russian in these areas. This table gives only an approximate picture of reality, but it can show the main tendency of correlation between the demographic situation of the group and the choice of language of instruction.

## Encouragement of the mother tongue: mixed marriages and choice of school

The diversity of languages of instruction gives the opportunity to choose a language of schooling for the children whose parents are representatives of different nationalities. This choice is an indicator of the language situation in the area. For example, the three languages Georgian, Armenian and Russian compete for the place of a majority language in Akhalkalaki where the

**Table 3.** Mixed marriages and mother tongue.

Place of residence	Akhalkalaki	Akhalkalaki	Akhalkalaki	Akhalcikhe
Father's mother tongue	Russian	Georgian	Armenian	Armenian
Mother's mother tongue	Armenian	Armenian	Georgian	Georgian
Respondent's nationality	Russian	Georgian	Armenian	Armenian
Respondent's mother tongue	Russian	Armenian	Armenian	Armenian
Language of schooling	Armenian	Armenian	Armenian	Georgian
Language used for obtaining of information	Armenian	Armenian	Armenian	Georgian
Language spoken to spouse and children	Armenian	Armenian	Armenian	Georgian

Armenian population is settled compactly due to the immigration of Armenian refugees from Turkey and Iran in the 1830s. Mixed marriages, e.g. Georgian-Armenian marriages may result in the choice of a Georgian, Armenian or Russian school for the children from such a family. Table 3 shows some different variants in this respect attested in my material.

Where there is a choice of language of schooling, the demographic factor can be decisive for this choice which in its turn may determine the character of language use, and also the language and identity orientation of an individual.

A Georgian father or even a Georgian mother in an area of compact non-Georgian settlement where Georgian schools exists does not inevitably determine the language orientation of the child. A Russian father may also fulfil the function of minority representative in an area where a Russian school exists but in such an area, a Russian mother usually plays the decisive part for the language choice of her children. A Russian mother in an area where there is no Russian school is not able to assimilate her children linguistically.

### Bilingualism and trilingualism among Armenian pupils in the Armenian and the Russian schools – ‘Literary’ and ‘oral’ mother tongue

Our material shows a clear picture of subtractive bilingualism among Armenian pupils in Russian schools and additive bilingualism among Armenian pupils in Armenian schools (in Landry & Allard's (1992:223-51) sense of these terms). It is significant that additive bilingualism involves knowledge of Armenian and Russian both in Tbilisi and Akhalkalaki. Trilingualism, involving Armenian, Russian and Georgian, is more observable in Tbilisi than in Akhalkalaki.

Georgian pupils studying at Russian schools also show a tendency towards subtractive bilingualism, especially if the mother tongue of one of the parents (usually mother's) is not Georgian.

The level of knowledge of the Georgian language among these groups of respondents is different. Most Armenian respondents in Tbilisi whose language of schooling is (or was) Armenian, can read and write in Georgian (usually, middling or faintly (self-evaluation)) but they speak Georgian worse than they can read and write in Georgian, or they do not speak Georgian at all.

Armenians from Russian schools, regardless of whether they regard Armenian or Russian as the mother tongue, often speak Armenian well but usually cannot read and write in Armenian. They speak Georgian badly but they can read and write in Georgian. The same applies to Greeks. Those Greeks who use Azeri as their home language cannot read and write in Azeri, although they can read and write in Georgian.

This fact indicates that knowledge of Georgian is obtained in the classroom, resulting in secondary bilingualism, while knowledge of Armenian and Russian (or Azeri and Russian) among the pupils in the Russian schools is determined by contextual demands (contextual and secondary bilingualism: Edwards 1994:60). Personal contacts also play a certain role for the knowledge of Georgian among Armenians in Tbilisi.

The lower degree of trilingualism in Akhalkalaki than in Tbilisi is caused by several reasons:

1. *The history of the group.* Armenians who live in Akhalkalaki immigrated to Georgia in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century when Georgia was a part of the Russian Empire. Armenians in Tbilisi are traditionally a relatively integrated part of the population.

2. *Demographic factors.* About 80% of the population in Akhalkalaki consists of Armenians, while Armenians are only 12% of the population in Tbilisi.

3. *Geographic factors.* The population in Akhalkalaki has strong contacts with the adjacent Armenian population both inside and outside Georgia, while contacts with the Georgian population is stronger in Tbilisi.

4. *Institutional support.* Education, media, etc. in Armenian function both in Tbilisi and in Akhalkalaki, but the opportunity to use Armenian in all domains is characteristic for Akhalkalaki.

5. *Lack of the teachers* of Georgian in Akhalkalaki might be considered among these reasons, at the same time this lack reflects the lack of demand for Georgian in the area.



## Desired mother tongue

The questionnaire study reveals that the mother tongue is often understood as an indivisible sign of the ethnic identity. Some Armenian, Ukrainian, Greek and Kurd respondents consider the language of their nationality as their mother tongue though neither they nor their parents can speak or have ever spoken it. I call it a desired mother tongue.

All the following stages may coincide for the majority group pupils:

**Table 4.** Majority group pupils educated via Language 1.

Ethnic identity	Mother tongue	The first learned and still understood language	Language of thought	The most often used language
A	A	A	A	A

The last two parameters are the result of conditional generalisation of the responses to the different detailed questions. The questionnaire did not contain a direct question about language of thought or about the most often used language.

For the minority group pupils educated via their mother tongue, their language of thought and mother tongue coincide with one another. The most often used language in Tbilisi is the mother tongue together with one of the majority languages Russian or Georgian.

The picture may look differently for minority group pupils if they are educated via L2:

**Table 5.** Minority group pupils educated via Language 2.

Ethnic identity	Mother tongue	The first learned and still understood language	Language of thought	The most often used language
A	A	A	B	B

The next step in this range is the case when, for example, someone who is Ukrainian by nationality never has spoken Ukrainian but considers it to be his/her mother tongue:

**Table 6.** A never spoken language as mother tongue (desired mother tongue).

Ethnic identity	Mother tongue	The first learned and still understood language	Language of thought	The most often used language
A	A	B	B	B

Among my respondents there is a woman who regards Ukrainian as her mother tongue, has been brought up in Kazakhstan, speaks Russian, lives in



Georgia and speaks Georgian with her family. Thus Table 7 contains three languages:

**Table 7.** One Ukrainian respondent.

Ethnic identity	Mother tongue	The first learned and still understood language	Language of thought	The most often used language
A (Ukrainian)	A (Ukrainian)	B (Russian)	B (Russian)	C (Georgian)

Some Turkish (Azeri) speaking Greek respondents from the Russian School also claim that their mother tongue is Greek, though neither they nor their parents have ever spoken Greek:

**Table 8.** Mother tongue never spoken either by respondent or parents.

Ethnic identity	Mother tongue	The first learned and still understood language	Language of thought	The most often used language
A (Greek)	A (Greek)	B (Azeri)	C (Russian)	C /B Russian/Azeri

Similar cases have been attested among the Kurdish respondents as well.

It is significant that compactly settled Armenians show the characteristic features of a majority: the Armenian language occupies all stages (Table 4). Armenian is used in interaction with officials as well as for official documents. The same applies to Russians studying at the Russian schools in Tbilisi. They speak Russian even to their Georgian father at home (but Georgian is a dominant language for children from the mixed Georgian-Russian families living in the area where a Russian school does not exist).

In areas where a minority group lives compactly, cases of reversed assimilation may also occur: the minority group which is regional majority assimilates representatives of the majority (Kobaidze 1999:156).

#### *‘Concealed desired mother tongue’*

In some cases questions concerning other problems (not directly about the mother tongue) reveal a ‘concealed’ desired mother tongue.

“Because it is my mother tongue” is the motivation even for some Armenian respondents who are willing to let their children study at an Armenian school, but at the same time they recognise Russian as their mother tongue (when they reply to the direct question about the mother tongue).

#### *Mother tongue as a sign of origin and nationality*

One could consider the self-evaluation of mother tongue mentioned above (desired mother tongue and concealed desired mother tongue) as an error, but

first of all it confirms how ambiguous census data can be. At the same time it is more likely to be a parameter that sociolinguists should reckon with. It can determine disposition towards future, direction of language shift if any new opportunity arises. The desired mother tongue may be considered as a bridge to the original identity and mother tongue. If language shift usually starts from the right (Table 5) with the change of the most often used language, frequent use of the language, in its turn, may be either inevitable or elective. If the conditions permitting the choice exist or appear then the coexistence of these antecedents (desired mother tongue and opportunity of a choice), may result in a language shift and even in migration. Nowadays Turkish (Azeri) speaking Greeks study Greek and not Azeri and move to Greece and not to Turkey from Georgia, though complete language shift may occur only after some generations and they still undergo some problems in Greece because they belong to the Turkish speaking group.

It is true that not only those Turkish-speaking Greeks moved to Greece who regarded Greek as a mother tongue. But self-evaluation of a mother tongue shows that the understanding of national (ethnic) identity is often indivisibly connected with the language of this nation (ethnicity) and this may involve political allegiance as well.

*Language of schooling and self-evaluation of mother tongue: desired or actual?*

The mother tongue for all respondents studying at Armenian schools is Armenian.

About one third (36%) of the Armenian respondents studying at Russian schools consider Armenian to be their mother tongue, although they show rather different degrees of communicative competence in the mother tongue. They use it to a minimal extent, usually at home, in interaction with their Armenian-speaking parents (Russian with the Russian speaking parent) and older relatives, but they speak Russian to brothers or sisters, and to people of the same age. Functional bilingualism or diglossia is also obvious. Russian is the preferred language in conversation about other subjects than everyday life and personal matters (unlike the Armenian pupils studying at the Armenian schools whether they live in Tbilisi or in Akhalkalaki). Most Armenian pupils at Russian schools cannot read and write the language of their own nationality, and some cannot speak it. The same applies to Greeks, Kurds and Assyrians, although the tendency to language revival and strengthening is obvious in all these groups.

Georgians in Tbilisi, whose mother tongue is Russian, can speak, read and write in Georgian, although exceptions are also found.

*The different stages of maintenance of mother tongue*

Thus the understanding of mother tongue may involve:

- The first learned and most often used language; e.g. Georgian for Georgians at Georgian schools, Armenian for Armenians at Armenian schools in Akhalkalaki, Russian for Russians at Russian schools in Tbilisi.
- The first learned language, used only at home, involving literacy; e.g., Georgian for some Georgians at Russian schools in Tbilisi.
- The first learned used only at home, also with older relatives, but excluding literacy in this language, i.e. oral mother tongue; e.g., Armenian for part of the Armenians at Russian schools in Tbilisi (partially in Akhalkalaki too).
- Desired mother tongue, not spoken and not understood; among Armenian respondents from the Russian schools, Turkish-speaking Greeks, linguistically Russified Ukrainians, Kurds, etc.
- Concealed desired mother tongue; among Armenian respondents who recognise Russian as their mother tongue but regard Armenian as the mother tongue in responses to other questions.
- Mother tongue that differs from the language of own nationality and coincides with the language of schooling, sometimes with the mother tongue of one of the parents; e.g. Russian for part of the Georgian, Armenian, Kurd, Greek, etc., pupils in Russian schools.

## Language of schooling and the disposition towards the future

### *Armenian schools in Tbilisi and Akhalkalaki*

Almost all respondents from the Armenian schools in Tbilisi, Akhalkalaki and Akhalkikhe want their children to study at Armenian schools. The motivation is represented in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Motivation for choice of Armenian school for own children

In Tbilisi	It is my mother tongue
In Akhalkikhe and Akhalkalaki (compact Armenian population)	It is my mother tongue It makes it easier to continue to study It makes it easier to make a career

*Russian schools*

Responses of Armenian respondents from the Russian schools differ between Tbilisi and Akhalkikhe-Akhalkalaki: Armenian respondents from the Russian schools in Tbilisi prefer Russian schools for their children while Armenian respondents from the Russian schools in Akhalkalaki and Akhalkikhe are willing to teach their children at the Armenian school.

*Russian schools in Tbilisi.* Almost all respondents from the Russian schools, despite their ethnical identity and mother tongue, want their children to study at the Russian schools. The motivations are: 'It makes it easier to continue to study' and 'It makes it easier to get a career'.

Our material showed only two exceptions: two female respondents, adult Georgians graduated from the Russian school, who wish their children to study at Georgian schools (motivation: 'It is easier to continue to study'; 'Change of situation in Georgia'), but their children have already graduated from the Russian school and their home language is Russian as well.

*Russian schools in Akhalkalaki and Akhalkikhe.* Almost all Armenian respondents who study at Russian schools in Akhalkalaki and Akhalkikhe (including those who regard Russian as their mother tongue) would like their children to study at an Armenian school. The motivation is: 'It is the mother tongue'; 'It makes it easier to find a job, to continue to study and to get a career'.

*Compromise – planned bilingualism.* Some respondents (among them Armenians, Greeks, Georgians) studying at Russian schools in Tbilisi and are linguistically russified want their children to go to the Georgian kindergarten and the Russian school.

*Shade of a new majority language.* Two Armenian respondents would like to send their children to an English kindergarten and English school. The motivation: 'It makes it easier to find a job'; 'It makes it easier to get a career'.

*Rural-urban or ethnically homogeneous and ethnically heterogeneous settlements*

The data from Tbilisi (Armenians are 12% of the population) and from Akhalkalaki where Armenians make up 79.5% of the population (data from 1989 census), shows that the hypothesis about the difference between the rural and urban population in terms of degree of bilingualism might be more exact

if it would underline the difference between the ethnically homogeneous and ethnically heterogeneous population rather than between the rural and urban population. Data from some villages in the Borjomi district with an ethnically mixed population and high degree of bilingualism also confirms this consideration.

### *Mother tongue and the features determining nationality*

All respondents, who recognise the language of their own nationality as the mother tongue, even those who have never spoken this language (thus it is just 'desired mother tongue'), consider language to be the most important feature determining nationality.

All respondents who recognise Russian as the mother tongue (Armenians, Greeks, Georgians) consider religion, common origin and traditions to be the most important feature determining nationality. In such responses language occupies the second, in some replies the third place after the importance among other features determining nationality.

All these parameters are summarised in Table 10.

## Conclusions

The language of schooling together with the character of settlement (homogeneous/heterogeneous more than rural/urban) and share of minority (in case of heterogeneous settlement) of the total population in the area (in the context of the Post-Soviet ethnical-Russian bilingualism) are decisive factors for maintenance of the mother tongue in different degrees and, to some extent, for ignorance of an official language (Georgian). The language of the media and even the language of a parent belonging to a demographic minority can fulfil only a secondary function in this respect.

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**Table 10.**

Respondents	Mother tongue (self-evaluation)	The most often used language	School desired for own children	The most important feature determining the nationality in respondent's opinion
Armenians in Armenian schools in Akhalkalaki	Armenian	Armenian	Armenian	Language
Armenians in Armenian schools in Tbilisi	Armenian	Armenian/ Russian/Georgian	Armenian	Language
Armenians in Russian schools in Tbilisi	Russian	Russian / Armenian / Georgian	Russian	Religion, common origin
	Armenian	Russian / Armenian / Georgian	Russian	Language
Armenians in Russian schools in Akhalkalaki	Armenian	Russian / Armenian	Armenian	
	Russian	Russian / Armenian	Armenian	
Georgians in Russian schools	Russian	Russian/Georgian	Georgian kindergarten, Rus. school	Common origin, religion
	Georgian	Georgian/Russian	Georgian	Language
Greeks in Russian schools	Russian	Russian	Russian	Religion, common origin
	Greek	Russian /Azeri	Russian	Religion, common origin
Russians in Russian schools	Russian	Russian	Russian	Language

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