

Crossing boundaries: the role of language and space in (re)shaping identity of ethnic Georgian teenagers in Moscow




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Introduction

- Moscow – culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse city – increased migration flows predominantly from the former Soviet republics.
 - A large number of the newcomers faced the problem of adaptation and access to good quality education for their children.
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- Schools with an ethno-cultural component have been established for some ethnic minorities residing in Moscow on a long-term or permanent basis.

Moscow school with Georgian ethno-cultural component – historical background

Military conflict in Georgia end of 1980s/beginning of 1990s marked by massive outflow of Georgians/Abkhazians

1988: First kindergarten

1993: Secondary school

1994: Small church on the territory of the school

2006: Around 800 students

2006: Deportations of Georgian (illegal) immigrants

2008: Mass exodus due to military conflict in South Ossetia

2016: The school was structurally merged with another Moscow school and moved to a new building while retaining its autonomy. Today there are around 300 students

Framework

Language ideologies:

A shared body of common-sense notions – seen as expressions of a collective order – about the nature of language, the nature and purpose of communication and appropriate communicative behaviour (Woolard, 1992: 235).

Language ideologies allow us to examine the meta-level of socio-culturally motivated beliefs, ideas, political and cultural perceptions around language within a certain context and look at the social and political significance of linguistic practices (Woolard, 1998; Kroskrity, 2004).

Aims of the study

How students’ identity is (re)shaped:

- Spatial boundaries
- Linguistic boundaries
- Cultural boundaries



Methodology

Quantitative

- 74 questionnaires filled out by students of 6th-11th grades

Qualitative

Interviews (semi-structured) 5.02 hours in total

4 Individual interviews

- 2 interviews with the Headmaster
- 1 interview with a teacher of history
- 1 interview with a teacher of the Russian language and literature

4 Group Interviews:

- 1 group interview: 7th grade students (2 boys and 3 girls)
- 1 group interview: 8th grade students (2 boys and 2 girls)
- 1 group interview: 11th grade students (1 boy and 6 girls)
- 1 group interview with two teachers of Georgian background

Classroom observations: linguistic practices during lessons



References

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Results and Discussion

Speakers express how they want to be seen, what social group they want to be affiliated with in their interlocutor’s mind, and thereby, how they position themselves in relation to other social groups (Le Page and Taburet-Keller, 1985).

These positions are often stated, affirmed and negotiated in interaction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005).



Georgian chapel in Sivtsev Vrazhek, Moscow



Annual Georgian festival “Tbelisoba” in Moscow

Spatial Boundaries

Group interview with 11th grade students

S6: *I would like to stay here (in Moscow) but I often miss Georgia because we’ve got everything so to say, we don’t have this development, but you see we’ve got **mountains**, we’ve got **sea**, I don’t know, we’ve got **such a beautiful country** (i.e. Georgia), but here (i.e. in Moscow), there are more opportunities than there (i.e. in Georgia), I’d like to stay here, I was born here, I got used to living here, I’ve got my friends here, **but Georgia is closer to me**.*

- Despite the fact that S6 reports on the wider spectrum of opportunities one can find in Moscow, she demonstrates a high degree of emotional attachment to Georgia, stressing the fact that she misses it, the geographical beauties, unambiguously defining her belonging ‘**we’ve got...**’ and concluding that Georgia is eventually closer to her as a country.
- Her wish to stay in Russia does not hinder her association with Georgia nor her positive attitude to it.

Linguistic Boundaries

| In-classroom language use | % |
|------------------------------|------|
| Only/mostly Georgian | 0 |
| Equally Georgian and Russian | 29.9 |
| Only/mostly Russian | 70.1 |

| Outside the classroom language use | % |
|------------------------------------|------|
| Only/mostly Georgian | 6.8 |
| Equally Georgian and Russian | 56.8 |
| Only/mostly Russian | 36.4 |

Linguistic features of the Georgian-Russian bilinguals’ speech

Phonetics

Due to great differences in the phonetic systems of Russian and Georgian nearly all of our participants, including those born in Moscow, possess Georgian accent features while speaking Russian. These include 1) consonant sounds that are absent in Russian such as uvular [χ], ejectives, aspirates; 2) wrong palatalization; 3) less reduced vowels. Students realize that they have the Georgian accent and make an attempt to make it less noticeable or eliminate it. They usually hold negative attitude to the heavy accent in Russian of others (their Russian-speaking friends and relatives in Georgia, for example). Georgian teenagers realize that there is an accent boundary between them and Russian students but at the same time they ‘draw’ boundaries between themselves and their peers in Georgia whose proficiency in the Russian language is low.

Grammar

The most common grammar mistakes that can frequently be met in the speech of bilingual Georgian students are the following: 1) gender (gender distinction in Russian vs. absence of it in Georgian); 2) case formation (fusional in Russian vs. agglutinative in Georgian); 3) case and gender agreement in noun and verb phrases; 4) word formation.

Lexicon

There is a large number of cultural borrowings from Georgian into Russian (mostly related to popular dishes of the Georgian cuisine), which Russians also use. However Georgian students, often say these words with Georgian pronunciation while speaking Russian.

Discourse

Our data shows a phenomenon of “spatial shift”: when Georgian students tell stories about Georgia and related things, their accent strengthens. Sometimes the difference can be found even in the same sentence. Students transfer themselves to this or that part of the boundary and this transference in mind affects their speech.

Cultural Boundaries

Interview with a teacher of history

E.: *Taking into account that I teach world history, and the history of Russia, most probably to familiarize people of other countries with the rich history of Russia so that they can understand and draw similarities, it is essential, because we’ve had lots of common problems, solved them together, but also had conflicts (...) and it is precisely in this direction, it’s important to show the non-Russian children those sides for the future, for the present, to know, to take into account (...) and it is precisely in our school, where not only Georgians but also Azerbaijani, Armenian and other nationalities, we familiarize them with the history of Russia so that they know what country they live in, so that they understand the culture, history, language of this country, then...I don’t like this word ‘Tolerance’ which means ‘to tolerate’, we need to respect each other. That’s why I try to teach them to respect traditions and history of other nations and other countries. (...) As you can see (pointing to 2 flags) there’s a **Georgian flag, a Russian flag**, I somehow want them to be at the **same level**.*

| Nationality | % |
|-------------------|------|
| Georgian | 97.3 |
| Russian-Georgian | 1.7 |
| Armenian-Georgian | 1.7 |

| Who do you feel you are? | % |
|--------------------------|------|
| Georgian | 54 |
| Muscovite-Georgian | 37.8 |
| Russian-Georgian | 6.7 |
| Armenian-Georgian | 1.3 |

Concluding remarks

The data shows blurring of spatial, linguistic and cultural boundaries when it comes to students’ identity construction. The school’s institutionalized support plays an important role in (re)shaping students’ identity in light of the localized language ideologies highlighting the Georgian linguistic/cultural/national element in the context of the Russian school curriculum. The measures adopted by the school’s policy could be argued to be aimed at students’ fostering bilingual/bicultural identity that will allow them to bridge the two cultures:

- Careful avoidance of Georgian linguistic/phonetic markers in the students’ Russian language use, following the dominant language ideologies, does not seem to threaten their identity as Georgians.
- Students negotiate their bilingual & bicultural identities in light of transnational lifestyles in/outside the classroom walls.
- The multilingual urban space of Moscow makes the cultural and linguistic boundaries permeable.