

Language hierarchies in Georgia: an experimental approach

Jesse Driscoll^a, Christofer Berglund^b and Timothy Blauvelt^c

^aSchool of Global Policy and Strategy, University of California at San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA; ^bDepartment of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; ^cSoviet and Post Soviet Studies Department, Ilia State University/American Councils for International Education:ACTR/ACCELS, Tbilisi, Georgia

ABSTRACT

How do Georgian citizens of different nationalities evaluate people when they speak in different languages? This article presents the results of three sets of “matched-guise” experiments, a method long used by sociolinguists to evaluate attitudes to different language varieties and their speakers. The results are revealing of the language hierarchies that prevail in Tbilisi and in the southern border regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli (where Georgia’s Armenian and Azerbaijani populations are concentrated). Our results suggest that social rewards for linguistic assimilation from one national group to another are very low in both rural and urban parts of Georgia. These findings show that with linguistic assimilation unrewarded, contemporary language hierarchies leave room for Russian to be sustained as a bridge language between communities. The results also show that native speakers of English are afforded higher social status than native speakers of Russian in Tbilisi.

KEYWORDS

Georgia; language; linguistic assimilation; matched-guise; multiethnicity; minorities; Russian; English

Introduction

Ethno-linguistic fragmentation has long posed challenges for political centralization in Georgia. In the nineteenth century, the first generation of Georgian nationalists, led by Ilia Chavchavadze, hoped to transcend divisions by fostering a “linguistic nationalism’ of the European mold” (Nodia 2009, 89). After Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, and particularly after it gained recognition as its own Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), the tools of scientific socialism were brought to bear to achieve this aspiration (Suny 1994; Martin 2001). When Georgia achieved independent statehood, the Abkhaz and South Ossetians, aided by Russian forces and volunteers from the North Caucasus, opted out of the Georgian national project by seceding. But many non-Georgian ethnic minority groups continue to reside in Georgia. Though during the anarchy of the early 1990s the Armenians and Azerbaijanis residing in Georgia’s southern borderlands repurposed state resources to organize local militias to protect their co-ethnics, and might well have been capable of attracting foreign military assistance to aid them, these groups never organized to press an agenda of secession (George 2009). It has been more than 20 years since the tragic post-independence violence that branded Georgia in political scientists’ imagination as an exemplar case of ethnic war.¹ How are

non-Georgian minorities regarded in contemporary Georgia? And more generally: How do Georgian citizens in different parts of the country evaluate people when they speak in different languages?

To answer this question, this article analyses evidence from a set of psychological experiments that measure individuals' implicit associations based on speech. "Matched-guise experiments" are a well-known socio-linguistic research technique (Romaine 1995, 289), introduced to political science by Laitin in his study of "beached" Russian-speaking populations in Soviet successor states (1998). The matched-guise experiment discussed below enables researchers to elicit unconscious attitudes that people hold towards others based on speech, and functions as a powerful tool for mapping ethno-linguistic hierarchies.² We have utilized this approach in order to examine titular and non-titular attitudes in three linguistic frontier-zones: in Tbilisi, where Georgian and two international languages – Russian and English – are vying for prestige, and in Georgia's Armenian and Azerbaijani borderlands, where Georgian, Russian as the Soviet-era *lingua franca*, and the native language of the local populations are competing with each other for status. We organized a number of waves of matched-guise experiments, enrolling a total of 1581 research subjects, including large samples of both rural and urban citizens of Georgia from many ethnic groups. The data suggests that liberal cosmopolitan attitudes towards ethnicity in Georgia ought not be exaggerated, and that English has surpassed Russian as a high-status language in Georgia's capital.

The first section of this paper provides some background on ethnic minority relations in Georgia, introducing the research sites. The second section describes the experimental procedures. We report our results in the third section, and then draw conclusions in the final section.

Georgia's complex ethno-linguistic landscape

Georgia inherited a complex linguistic milieu at the time of its independence. Georgian is the most widely spoken out of the four languages in the Kartvelian group of South Caucasian languages (the others being Mingrelian, Laz and Svan). Though Russian served as the language of inter-ethnic communication and administration during tsarist rule, Georgian became an official language during the Democratic Republic of Georgia in 1918–1921. After the Soviet conquest, the Georgian SSR was one of the few union republics that successfully instituted usage of the titular language as the language of bureaucratic administration under the Soviet "indigenization" policy (Smith et al. 1998, 171).³ Georgian-language educational institutions, libraries, cultural and literary organizations were supported during the Soviet period. The Georgian leadership of the SSR made fluency in Georgian a criterion, and functional prerequisite, for cadre advancement within the republic (Cornell 2002, 144; Broers 2004; Amirejibi-Mullen 2011, 265). The Russian language was still necessary for educational and professional advancement at the all-Union level, as well as for cultural consumption (literature and movies). Locally it also functioned as the "bridge language" for inter-ethnic communication for ethnic minorities in Georgia. When an Abkhaz dentist needed to communicate with an Armenian party official, for example, they would most likely both speak Russian. While primary and secondary education in Georgia was available in official minority languages, such as Armenian and Azerbaijani, Russian was a mandatory subject of study in all non-Russian

schools beginning in 1938 (Slezkine 1994, 443). As a result, Georgia remained linguistically as well as ethnically diverse, despite the increasing demographic dominance of ethnic Georgians (foremost in Tbilisi, where the level of political-cultural control of the city's urban institutions was unusually high among SSR) over the 70 years of Soviet rule. According to the 1989 census (see Broers 2008, 277), Georgians made up 70.1% of the population. The next largest ethnic groups were the Armenians (8.1%), followed by self-identified Russians (6.3%), then Azerbaijanis (5.7%).

Georgia's ethnic makeup changed following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgian independence. As the Soviet Union began to unravel, ethnic Georgians and ethnic minorities in the SSR approached the project of post-independence nation-building with different kinds of apprehension. Georgian became the official state language, and those who could not speak it faced restricted life opportunities in several realms. Georgians overwhelmingly elected Zviad Gamsakhurdia as their first president, who infamously called for Georgian "ownership" of "their" republic, and is, fairly or unfairly, credited with fanning an environment of ethno-religious nationalism that threatened the interests of non-Georgian minorities (Nodia 2002; Hewitt 2013, Driscoll 2015, 62–70). Georgia's second president, Eduard Shevardnadze, pursued a "politics of omission", by paying lip service to "civic" policies, yet in fact doing little either to promote integration or minority rights (Broers 2008, 282). Though he did not adopt a law on national minorities, he did remove the Soviet-era nationality markers from Georgian passports (Reisner 2010). Russians and ethnic minorities have had to choose between assimilation and resettling in Russia or in their titular republics.⁴ Many Russians chose to exit: their percentage of Georgia's population declined from 6.3% in 1989 to 1.5% in 2002; Azerbaijanis and Armenians are Georgia's most numerous minorities today.

Today, Georgians enjoy overwhelming demographic dominance in Georgia (Table 1). Georgia's Armenian population consists of two distinct groups. First, there is the urban Armenian population, residing primarily in Tbilisi, that has lived in the area since the Middle Ages. They are highly educated and usually fluent in Georgian, but maintain a distinct identity and are often relatively Russified compared to their ethnic Georgian counterparts (e.g. more likely to send their children to Russian-language secondary and post-secondary educational institutions). Second, there is the rural Armenian population, which lives in the Samtskhe-Javakheti district in southwestern Georgia. These Armenians were resettled in the nineteenth century against the backdrop of the Russo-Turkish wars. They tend to be employed in agriculture and less educated than their co-ethnics in Tbilisi. Samtskhe-Javakheti Armenians are seldom proficient in Georgian, and speak Armenian

Table 1. The ethnic demography of contemporary Georgia.

	Nationwide	Tbilisi	Samtskhe-Javakheti	Kvemo Kartli
Total	4371,535	1,081,679	207,598	497,530
Georgians (%)	3,661,173 (83.8)	910,712 (84.2)	89,995 (43.4)	222,450 (44.7)
Armenians (%)	248,929 (5.7)	82,586 (7.6)	113,347 (54.6)	31,777 (6.4)
Azerbaijanis (%)	284,761 (6.5)	10,942 (1.0)	59 (0.0)	224,606 (45.1)
Ossetians (%)	38,028 (0.9)	10,268 (0.9)	822 (0.4)	2184 (0.4)
Abkhaz (%)	3527 (0.1)	471 (0.1)	42 (0.0)	183 (0.0)
Russians (%)	67,671 (1.5)	32,580 (3.0)	2230 (1.1)	6464 (1.3)
Others (%)	67,446 (1.5)	34,120 (3.2)	1103 (0.5)	9866 (2.0)

Note: Does not include separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Source: Data compiled from Geostat (2002).

with a strong regional dialect (called the Karin dialect) that is also spoken in parts of northern Armenia. The Azerbaijani population is primarily rural and agricultural. While there is a very small community in old Tbilisi, Azerbaijanis tend to be demographically concentrated in Kvemo Kartli to the south of the capital, near the border with Azerbaijan. Like the rural Armenians of Samtskhe-Javakheti, they tend to have lower levels of education and are seldom capable of communicating fluently in Georgian. Ethnic Russians are usually well-educated urban dwellers that hold cosmopolitan worldviews.⁵

The relationship between Georgia's central government and ethnic minorities residing in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli has varied. In the Shevardnadze era, these groups were functionally self-governing in most relevant respects.⁶ The Rose Revolution brought a more liberal strand of nationalists to power – including many individuals educated in the West and sensitive to the political necessity of matching discourses of inclusion with actions.⁷ The Georgian authorities made rigorous efforts to integrate its national minorities by promoting a language-centred nationalism (Berglund [forthcoming](#)). Within the framework of a “National Concept and Action Plan for Tolerance and Civic Integration”, the authorities tried to incentivize minorities in the Armenian and Azerbaijani borderlands to learn Georgian, repaired roads, enforced language laws, and improved the teaching of the state language in public schools. At the same time, these authorities supported reforms to emphasize Georgian tolerance, strengthening anti-discrimination laws to promote tolerant attitudes to ethnic diversity. Educational reforms discouraged the use of the Russian language.⁸ And in the months leading up to and following the August War of 2008, state officials in Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency tried to dissociate Georgia from its Soviet and Russian past, stressing Georgia's proper heritage as a part of Europe (Kolstø and Rusetskii 2012; Blauvelt 2013). These policy shifts make it more important than ever to investigate the language hierarchies predominating in the capital and in Georgia's Armenian and Azeri border regions. Given this legacy and this situation, a question that suggests itself as central to the overcoming of the Soviet inheritance and the project of Georgian state-building in the image of Euro-Atlantic models is whether members of different language communities do in fact reward each other for efforts to communicate in a different language.

Matched-guise: reviving a classic experiment

The matched-guise experiment was designed in order to help researchers isolate the mechanism of language status in the minds of respondents (Lambert et al. 1960). Ethnic politics in the South Caucasus are contentious, and they are challenging to study for several reasons. Social desirability biases – both inherited frames from Soviet times, when ethnic quotas were enforced, and from the politically correct Western European attitudes that are pervasive in contemporary Tbilisi society – make it difficult to draw meaningful inferences from direct questions asked on a survey (e.g. “what do you think of [such and such people]?”). Additionally, the physiognomy of different ethnic groups does not track onto predictable markers in this part of the world: more than any of these groups would readily admit, the truth is that Iranians look a lot like Turks, who look a lot like Georgians, who look a lot like Armenians. In this socio-political environment, where groups cannot be easily sorted from each other “on sight”, the language one speaks, and whether one

speaks it with an accent, is probably the most relevant marker used to flag ethnicity for the purposes of distributional politics.

Since it first was administrated in Quebec, Canada, scholars have used the experiment to examine language attitudes in a wide variety of countries, including Spain (Catalonia) and in the post-Soviet space, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, and Kazakhstan (Woolard 1989; Laitin 1998; Bilaniuk 2004). The experimental set-up is straightforward. Speakers are recorded reading a text in multiple languages, dialects, or accents. The recorded voices are played for respondents, who are asked to rank the voice in terms of certain characteristics (e.g. honest, intelligent, hard-working, or attractive). Deception is employed. Respondents are led to believe that the voices they are evaluating belong to different individuals, but they are *actually* hearing the same individuals reading the same text in different languages, dialects or accents (in different “guises”, hence the “matched-guise” moniker). Subtle vocal cues to the same speaker are thus held constant. Respondents’ reactions to the same speaker can then be compared between different guises. This ingenious trick allows researchers to claim to have held constant subtle psychological cues that infuse different speakers’ voices, isolating the cognitive mechanism of language status. An optional downloadable [appendix](#) details the samples and specific experimental procedures used in Tbilisi, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli.

Results

How did our respondents rate the speakers as they read the same text in different guises? By mapping differences in this regard, we can infer what social costs are associated with the choice of using one language to communicate instead of another – and gauge the costs of attempting to assimilate linguistically into Georgian for minority groups.

Language hierarchies in Tbilisi

Early matched-guise experiments showed that speakers communicating in linguistic forms close to standard usage received the most favourable evaluations. Later experiments revealed a counter-trend: those speaking lower-status languages or dialects often rate the higher status guise more favourably on characteristics related to prestige (Respect), but rate their *own* speech guise more highly on affective or emotive characteristics (Friendship).⁹ We will present our initial results along the same two dimensions – Respect and Friendship – in [Tables 2–6](#).¹⁰ However, when analysing our data we found that a single underlying factor is driving all results across the 15 characteristics, varying only in intensity.¹¹ For this reason we will also use a number of alternative visualizations – plots and heat maps – to enable the readers to observe the linguistic prestige hierarchies in

Table 2. Evaluations of Russian and Georgian-speakers in Tbilisi.

Respondents	FRG–FRR	RRG–RRR	FGG–FGR	RGG–RGR
Georgian	–7.17***	–11.49***	9.41***	2.00*
Russian	–0.25	–6.30***	3.80***	4.81***

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Persistence of a colonial mentality: ranking by Georgian-speaking respondents.

	RRR	RGG	RRR-RGG	<i>t</i> -score
Tbilisi	0.398	0.619	−0.220	−4.00 ***

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.

contemporary Georgia. In his study of “beached” Russian-speakers, stranded in the newly independent states of Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, Laitin organized his matched-guise experiments to explore primordialism, mankurtism, bilingualism, and the persistence of a colonial mentality.¹² We recognize that these theoretical categories are probably not familiar to most readers, however, so while Tables 2–6 reproduce the format and order of Tables 8.3 and 8.6–8.9 in Laitin (1998, 235–241), we shall explain in depth what trends we believe are revealed in our data.

In Laitin’s tables “T” means “Titular”; however, since ours is a single-country study, we have simply replaced it with “G” for “Georgian”. To allow readers to quickly skim the results of cross-country comparisons, Laitin opted to subtract certain scores from others to examine the benefits and punishments associated with assimilation. Pooling data from across speakers has the disadvantage of obscuring the individual-level “voice controls” that are central to the experiment’s validity, but for space considerations, and to fully replicate Laitin (1998), we assume that unmodelled biases against individual speakers’ voices balance out statistically across a large sample of aggregate data.¹³ Table 2 shows that Georgians do not reward Russian-speakers for their efforts at linguistic assimilation. “FRG–FRR” is shorthand that indicates the “mean Friendship score for a Russian-speaking Georgian in the sample minus the mean Friendship score for a Russian-speaking-Russian in the sample”. “RRG–RRR” is shorthand that indicates the “mean Respect score for a Russian-speaking-Georgian in the sample minus the mean Respect score for a Russian-speaking-Russian in the sample”.

The first thing to note is that the scores, −7.17 and −11.49 for Georgian-speaking listeners, are strongly negative. The scores for Russian-speaking listeners on the friendship dimension, −0.25, is not statistically distinguishable from a null-effect – which suggests to us that, on average, the Russian-speaking audience saw themselves somehow in solidarity with a Russian-speaker attempting to speak Georgian. On the dimension of respect, the score is negative and statistically significant (−6.30). We believe that this signals that a Russian-speaker in Tbilisi tends to lose both respect and affection – especially by Georgians, but to some extent by everyone – by attempting to speak Georgian but doing so with an accent betraying the reality that Georgian is not their native language. Moving to the right, the FGG–FGR and RGG–RGR columns suggest that Georgians in Tbilisi cannot improve their social standing in Tbilisi by speaking Russian. This is not a

Table 4. Cost of mankurtism: ranking of Georgian-speaking respondents.

	FGG–FGR	RGG–RGR
Tbilisi	0.633***	0.120*

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Respondents' primordial sentiments.

Respondent Tbilisi	FGG > FGR	FRR > FRG	RGG > RGR	RRR > RRG
Georgians	Yes***	Yes***	Yes*	Yes***
Russians	Yes***	Yes	Yes***	Yes***

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.**Table 6.** Bilingualism.

Respondents Tbilisi	FRG	RRG
Georgian	0.025*	0.002
Russian	0.002	−0.007

Note: Our independent variable is scaled to a 13-point scale like Laitin's original. Our original scale goes from 4 to 24, where Laitin's goes from 4 to 16. In our scale, higher values are associated with being more bilingual, and lower values as less bilingual. The dependent variables are FRT and RRT, while the independent variable, bilingualism, is Georgian knowledge of Russian or the minority language, or Russian/minority knowledge of Georgian.

*Significant at $p < .05$.

surprising finding, but one that provides some confidence that the experimental methodology is producing coherent results.

Laitin defines a “colonial mentality” as a social tendency towards affording higher respect to speakers of the colonial language (in this case Russian) than the titular language of the republic-turned-nation-state (in this case Georgian). The relevant comparison is between mean levels of respect afforded native speakers of Russian speaking Russian and native speakers of Georgian speaking Georgian (RRR and RGG). Table 3 confirms that no “colonial mentality” persists with respect to Russian in the pooled Tbilisi sample. Young adults in Tbilisi in 2010 believed that Georgians speaking Georgian merited more respect than Russians speaking Russian. This bias extends to higher status jobs, as well (below). And while we believe that Laitin's discussion of “mankurtism” has little obvious social resonance in contemporary Georgia, the trends in Table 4 confirm that there is, on average, neither an increase in friendship nor respect for Georgian-speakers attempting to speak in Russian. The Georgian-language term *gadagvarebuli* (which translates literally to “denigrate” or “degraded”) is used by Georgians to refer to other ethnic Georgians that lack the capacity to communicate fluently in their “native” tongue (an example of “in-group punishment” behaviours, in Laitin's framework).

Table 5 is, in many ways, a summary of all of these findings. It confirms that primordialism remains *very* strong in the capital. There seems to be a general preference for “hearing people speak in their own language [rather] than hearing them speaking in a non-native way in a language foreign to them” (Laitin 1998, 240). This drives home the central finding from these data: there are virtually no social rewards to moving between language families – at least when the speaker retains a foreign accent characteristic of her ethnic group. Since accents are easily detected, we see this as evidence that the language hierarchy in Tbilisi is well-understood. Among Georgian respondents, the losses to Russian-speakers for speaking Georgian (“out-group punishment”) are *much* more severe than those discovered by Laitin in his countries in the mid-1990s. Russian-speakers face strong disincentives to assimilate linguistically in Georgia, unless they somehow completely shed their native accents.

Table 6 presents results that are more optimistic than those found by Laitin. Bilingual Georgians seem to have greater emotional solidarity with non-Georgians trying to assimilate. This may be an encouraging finding for liberals, and the authors of this study are inclined to seize on it as hopeful evidence that the better the Georgian respondents' self-reported knowledge of Russian, the more positively they relate to Russians on the friendship dimension when Russians speak in a Georgian guise. The effect is slight but statistically significant, and provides some grounds for liberal optimism that more educated and worldly Georgians are more accommodating to Russian-speakers attempting to Georgianize.

Figure 1 plots the factor scores by respondent language, scaled by “friendship” and “respect” across listeners in Tbilisi. Georgian-speakers (who can safely be assumed to be ethnically Georgian) are represented as squares and Russian-speakers (a more heterogeneous sample) are represented as x's, with larger data points indicating higher average job status.¹⁴ The singular (linear) dimension of the data suggests that the two factors are highly correlated, suggesting that the heat maps of job status capture the essence of Tbilisi's linguistic-social hierarchy: Native English-speakers at the top, then fluent Georgian-speakers, then fluent Russian-speakers, and non-native speakers of Georgian at the bottom.

Since Figure 1 makes the single linear dimension of the data clear, we hope that readers will appreciate the cleaner exposition of the findings in the heat map in Figure 2. Heat maps enable us to examine trends in different subsections of the data, scaled by colour. The variable displayed is the “job status” variable – the listeners' estimation of what kind of job the speaker of the recorded voice held. This variable is the most granular measure of the single factor that most determines one's location in Tbilisi's social hierarchy. The lowest values – those associated with the better professions – are lightest in colour, and as the prestige of the job declines, the colour fades towards black. Numbers around 8 are associated with what Georgians would consider “upper-middle class” jobs like economist or administrator. The higher scores around 12 are associated with what Georgians would consider “lower-middle class” jobs like accountant or secretary. Respondents selecting the Russian-language questionnaire are represented across the top row and respondents selecting the Georgian-language questionnaire are along the bottom row, but one can quickly eyeball that both groups agree substantially on who belongs at the top and bottom of the hierarchy.

It should be acknowledged that this visualization of the data goes beyond the original precepts of the experiment. Since it involves comparing completely different speakers (e.g. native English (EE), native Georgian (GG), and native Russian (RR)) according to the same scale with no experimental control, we cannot preclude that some special characteristic of the speakers' voices (such as the timbre of the pitch) rather than the accent is driving the results. This is a salient complaint, and results should be treated cautiously. Nonetheless, we will provide a speculative interpretation of the heat map, informed by extensive ethnographic observation.

Reading across the heat map from left to right, one can see that the highest-ranked job opportunities are afforded to English-speakers and Georgian-speakers in their native guise (EE and GG, respectively). Russian and Georgian respondents both ascribe higher job prestige to native speakers of English (EE) compared to any other outcome, including a Georgian-speaking Georgian, which provides suggestive evidence of emergent “colonial

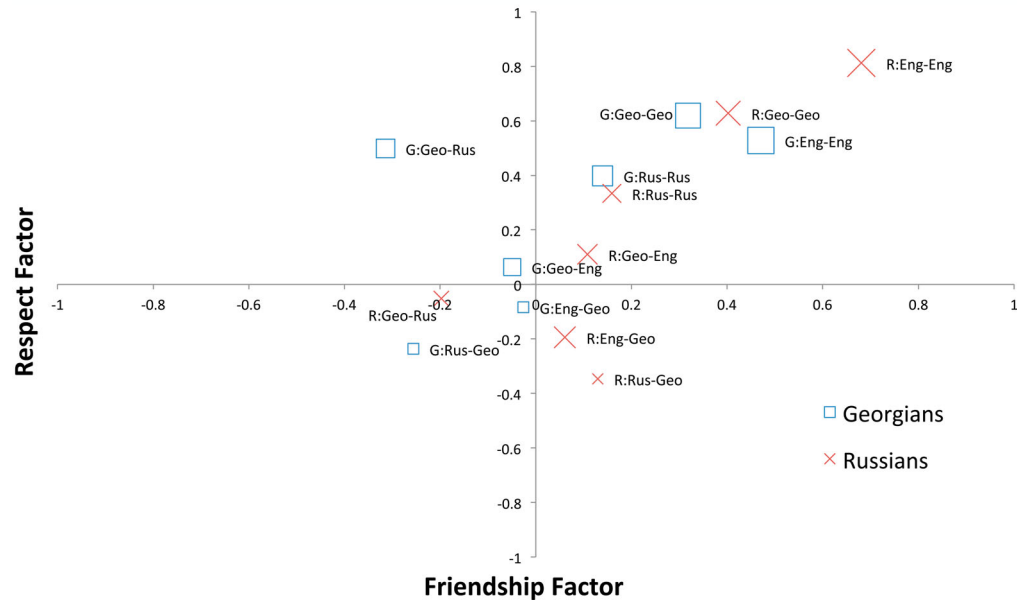


Figure 1. Factor scores by respondent language (Tbilisi).

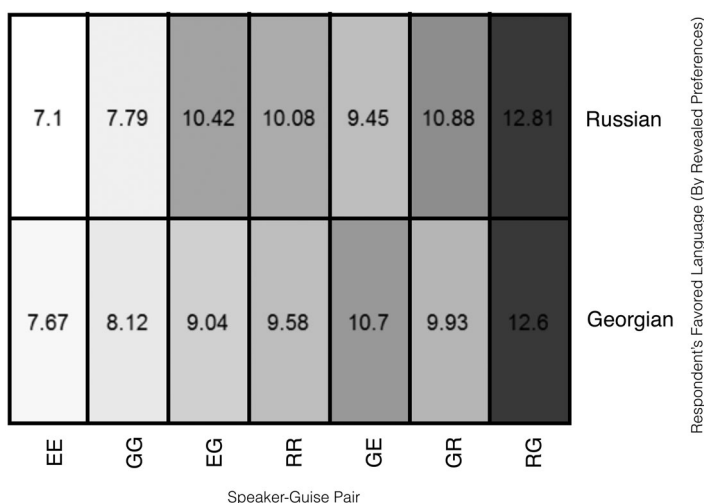


Figure 2. Heat map of job status (Tbilisi).

mentality” in Laitin’s phrasing (Laitin 1998, 238).¹⁵ Next highest, but a step down, is the Georgian-speaker in her Georgian guise (GG). For both Georgian and Russian respondents, affect and respect for the Georgian-speaker declines remarkably when she attempts to speak either English (GE) or Russian (GR) compared to speaking her native Georgian.¹⁶ Despite the enthusiasm in Georgia for foreigners who learn Georgian, both Georgian and Russian respondents report more solidarity and respect for the English-speaker when she speaks English than Georgian (EG). Our hunch is that Georgian and Russian-speakers perceive that Western foreigners have better job opportunities, period, and that speaking Georgian is an optional “step down” for an English-speaker. There is also a clear “middle-man” strata of respect for Russian-speakers speaking Russian (RR), reflecting the respect afforded Russian intellectual and social elites.¹⁷ One might note that non-Georgian respondents rank a Georgian-speaker speaking English (GE) higher than any option available for a Russian-speaker (RG or RR), suggesting an internalization of second-class status for Russian-speakers. At the right end of the status spectrum are Russian-speakers attempting to speak Georgian (RG). These speakers are not rewarded for their attempts at linguistic assimilation into Georgian.

Language hierarchies in the borderlands

Since we had a strong intuition that things would be different outside the urban metropole, and theoretical reasons to be interested in Georgia’s southern frontier-zones, we next replicated the experiment in high school classrooms outside of Tbilisi: in the southwestern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti along the Armenian and Turkish border (home to large population of ethnic Armenians) and in Kvemo Kartli, the region adjoining the Azerbaijani border (home to a large number of Azeris). Respondents in these borderlands listened to Georgian- and Armenian- or Azeri-speakers reading the text in Georgian, Russian, and Armenian or Azerbaijani. A simple comparison of Figures 3 and 4 – which, to re-emphasize, should be treated with a bit of caution since they compare not only different guises

but different speakers – reveal that language hierarchies are very different in these parts of the country from those in Tbilisi (Figure 2). Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti hold native speakers of Armenian to be of higher status than native speakers of Georgian, but Azeris in Kvemo Kartli self-subalternize, placing themselves lower in respect than native speakers of Georgian.

In both the Armenian and Azeri borderlands there were no rewards for minorities attempting to speak Georgian, and no reciprocal rewards for Georgians in these regions

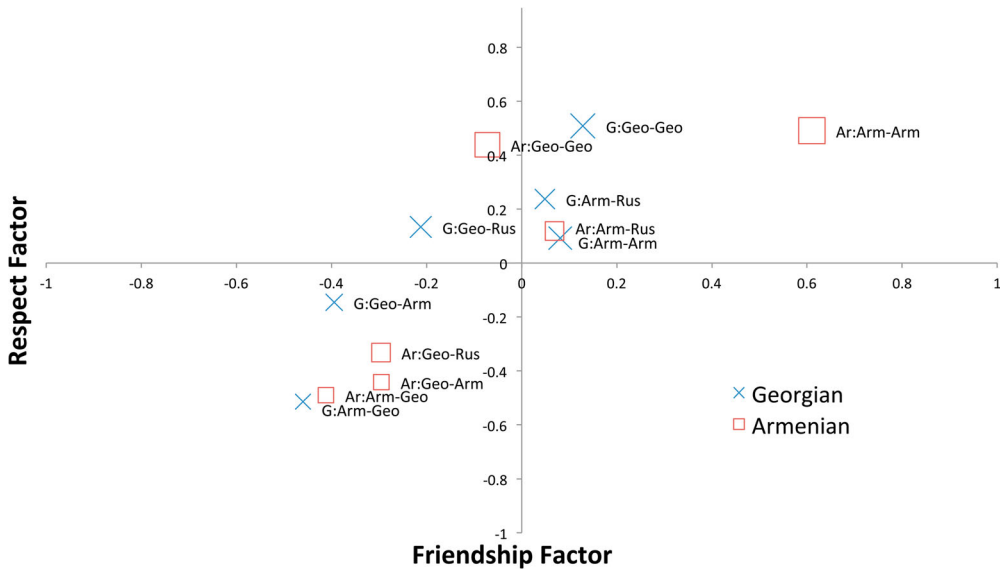


Figure 3. Factor scores by respondent language (Samtskhe-Javakheti).

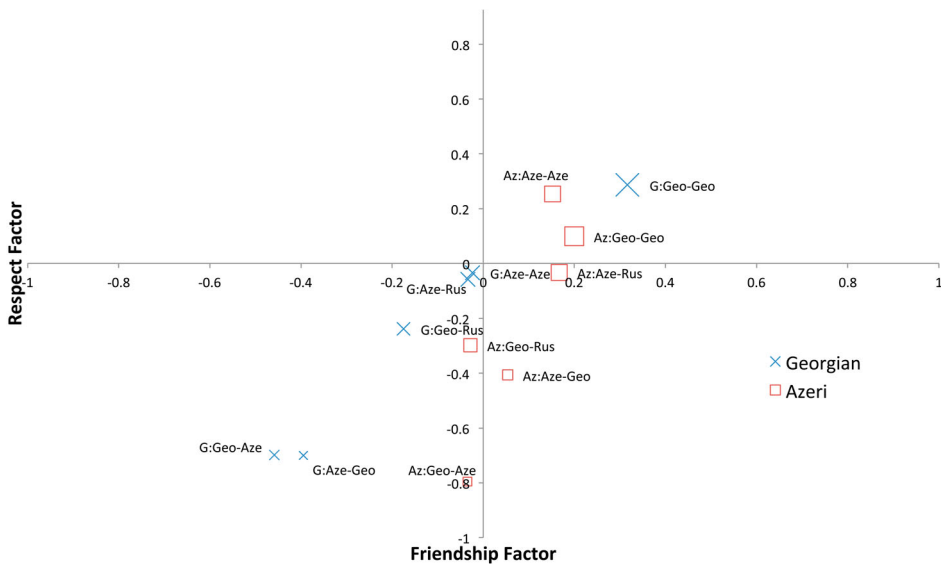


Figure 4. Factor scores by respondent language (Kvemo Kartli).

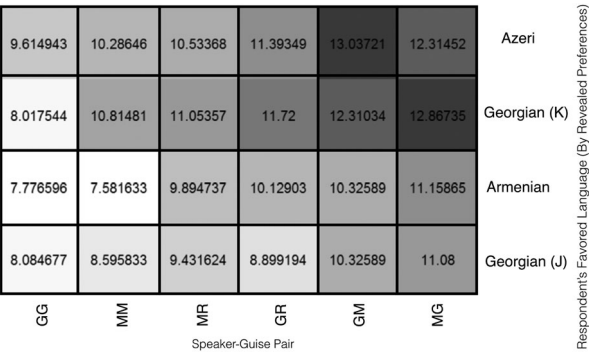


Figure 5. Heat map of job status (in minority regions).

trying to communicate in the local minority language. Since minorities – Azeris in Kvemo Kartli and Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti – rank members of their own group lower in terms of job status when speaking Georgian, we can conclude that minorities in these regions see few rewards for linguistic assimilation. This pattern is reflected in Figure 5, which is a heat map presenting the job status attributed to speakers of different languages, as evaluated by different ethnic groups in Kvemo Kartli and Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti (pooled across speakers, as above). Here the categories are Azeri, Georgians living in Kvemo Kartli (Georgian (K)), Armenian, and Georgians in Samtskhe-Javakheti (Georgian (J)). The categories across the bottom “G” (for Georgian), “M” (for the appropriate minority language, which varies by sub-region), and “R” for Russian (the common medium for non-Georgian communication). The main inference we draw from these patterns is that when communicating in Russian, both minorities and Georgians receive worse ratings than when speaking in their own languages – but more positive reactions than when attempting to switch to each others’ languages.

One might expect that attitudes toward linguistic accommodation are different in more mixed communities, where there are ample opportunities for inter-ethnic contact, than in more compact homogenous settlements. Since our experiments in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli were conducted in heterogeneous districts (Akhalsikhe and Gardabani, respectively) as well as in homogenous districts (Akhalkalaki and Marneuli, respectively), our data could confirm different social attitudes towards assimilation. Briefly: self-reported language suggests that population balance affects what languages are considered prestigious. In both Samtskhe-Javakheti and in Kvemo Kartli the groups that make up the smaller part of the population seem to accommodate most to the dominant language. The Armenians and Azeris who live in relatively heterogeneous areas tend to have a better command of Georgian.¹⁸

Conclusion

This article has analysed data from three sets of matched-guise experiments conducted on large samples of young adults in three ethno-linguistic frontier-zones: in Tbilisi and in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, where Georgia’s Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities are concentrated. In Tbilisi, we found signs of what Laitin (1998) dubbed a “colonial

mentality” – a prevalent belief that the highest-prestige language, whose fluent speakers have the best life opportunities, is a language other than the national mother tongue. This mentality exists vis-à-vis the language of the European Union and international business (English), rather than towards the former imperial tongue (Russian). The social implications of this result are still unclear, but these trends could not possibly have been anticipated when Laitin collected baseline data on this question in the mid-1990s. The experiment also revealed that Russian-speakers in the capital are discouraged from switching to the state language (Georgian) both by Georgians and by their fellow Russian-speakers. The experiments in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli further demonstrated that Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians all stigmatized minorities for speaking Georgian. Georgians are not rewarded for attempts to speak in the minorities’ languages, either. Both minorities and Georgians are given higher professions ratings when speaking in Russian than when speaking “into” each other’s languages.

Taken together, these results indicate that rewards for linguistic assimilation are quite bleak in all three research localities. Unless a speaker can completely shed a foreign accent and “pass” as a native speaker of Georgian – a daunting task that some people cannot accomplish even after a lifetime of effort – individuals are looked down upon for attempting to linguistically assimilate. Since the findings are drawn from a sample of young adults, we should not expect Georgia’s ethno-linguistic fractionalization to subside in the near future. Our results suggest that for non-Georgians residing within Georgia, a common strategy for straddling this divide is to continue using Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication, rather than attempting to assimilate by “speaking into” Georgian or the other minority languages. Though English could play this bridging role in principle, recall that neither high levels of respect nor prestige accrue to Georgian-speakers attempting to speak English in our Tbilisi data. As such, strong incentives exist for minorities to continue teaching their children Russian as a second language for communication between non-Georgian ethnic minorities. This casts doubt on the efficacy of the Georgian government’s attempts to rid itself of its reliance on the Soviet-era *lingua franca*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. For exemplars of the kind of scholarship we have in mind, see Kaufman (2001), Cornell (2002) and Toft (2005).
2. Psychologists have argued that people’s implicit attitudes are more interesting than their explicit statements of their attitudes, which are mediated by “social desirability bias” (e.g. psychological pressure to say the politically correct thing in the context of a survey). The matched-guise experiment is part of an empirical lineage of research in human psychology that attempts to catalogue respondents’ implicit associations. For useful summary introductions to the justifications for, and research findings from implicit association tests, see Fazio and Olson (2003), Norton, Vandello, and Darley (2004), and Kahneman (2011) generally.
3. This is our effort to capture the spirit of the Russian word *делопроизводство*. For the importance of language in Georgian nationalism, see Jones (2005). See also Darden and Grzymała-Busse (2006).

4. Jones (2006, 266) observes that Georgians' ethnic passions have waned overall since the Gamsakhurdia era, and Broers (2008) describes diverse attitudes of Georgians towards ethnic minorities residing within Georgia's territorial borders.
5. For survey and longitudinal school enrolment data in support of these claims, see Blauvelt (2013).
6. Regional governors Levan Mamaladze and Giga Baramidze were given a great deal of autonomous freedom of action, which extended to what languages were taught to children in primary school, what languages were put on signs, and who was permitted to serve in the local administration and police force. In exchange, according to popular understandings, 100% (or more) of both regions' votes went to the Citizens' Union of Georgia, the ruling party and institutional base of the Shevardnadze presidency.
7. See George (2008) and Wheatley (2009) for critical analyses of the gap between rhetoric and reality in the Saakashvili liberal reforms.
8. Changes to the Law on Broadcasting in 2009 ended the practice of dubbing foreign films into Russian. Many Russian schools were closed. For pupils attending schools using other languages of instruction, Russian became an elective foreign language, while English became mandatory from grade 1.
9. See Carranza and Ryan (1975), Woolard (1989), and Bilaniuk (1998, 2005). These findings echo Lupia and McCubbins (1998), who argue that a speaker's overall persuasion is determined by whether a listener considers the speaker to be both knowledgeable and trustworthy.
10. In our implementation of the experiment in 2010, we decided to replicate the approach of David Laitin (1998) as closely as possible, and have opted to present findings in a way that can be directly comparable, as well. We only recorded female voices, and they were reading the same text on Euclidian geometry that Laitin had used. We also employed the same questionnaire design, asking about the same 15 traits with the same Russian translations (alongside an open question on the likely profession of the speaker). See Laitin (1977, 158) for a useful discussion of why it would be difficult to be confident that the same concept is understood in the same way in translation with political or normative language.
11. A scree-plot validating this claim can be made available upon request.
12. We anticipate that all of these terms will be intuitively familiar to readers except for the notion of *mankurtism*. In certain parts of the former Soviet Union, cultural elites became concerned that modernizing in the Soviet mode – becoming a “successful” SSR in a power hierarchy where fluent knowledge of Russian was rewarded and real power was centred in Moscow – was having practical effects of incentivizing future generations to abandon their “native” linguistic and cultural traditions. The Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov captured this anxiety about lost identity in his novel *The Day Lasts More Than 100 Years* (originally published in series form in 1980), when he described the “mankurts” – captured soldiers who had had a camel skin bound tightly to the top of their head. As the skin dried, it shrank and cut into the brains of the captured soldiers, which caused them to forget their names, their families and their identity, eventually turning into a kind of zombie. Downey (2015), who conducted extensive fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan (including her own modified matched-guise experiments) reports that *mankurtism* is a popular political smear used against Russian-speaking, Russian-media consuming and Russian-oriented cultural elites whose physiognomy appears Kyrgyz but who have “forgotten their roots.” There is no easily analogous sociological phenomenon in Georgian society, as our data will show.
13. All of the same basic trends we report in this paper can be extracted from the smaller samples of within-speaker variation.
14. To produce the Friendship and Respect values, we follow the steps laid out in Laitin's description. We use a varimax rotation of the factor analysis for the 13 qualities on which respondents evaluate each voice. The loading on these overlap, but given the heavier loading of educated and cultured on one factor, and amusing and spiritual on another, we define the former as respect and the latter as friendship. We then use regression scoring for each respondent to assign them a friendship and respect value for each voice.

15. According to self-reported scores, the English knowledge among the respondents in Tbilisi is quite high: When asked in a survey at the end of the study, 67% of respondents self-reported good or excellent understanding of English, and only 3.2% claim no knowledge of the language.
16. Our suspicion is that that Georgians who have learned Russian are assumed to *also* know English, making Russian fluency a costly additional educational signal – a “peacock’s tail” of sorts, rather than a necessary and natural component of job advancement outside of Georgia. Georgians rate other Georgians speaking English (GE) higher on respect and lower on friendship. While learning English is prestigious, it doesn’t make people like you (and is often perceived socially as “showing off”).
17. It is also a nod to the “separate but equal” status afforded the permanent community of non-assimilation-seeking Armenians who have resided in Tbilisi since the Middle Ages. As an additional experimental test of primordial solidarities, for a randomly selected half of the Tbilisi sample we preceded each voice with a clearly Georgian or Russian name tag (like Nino, Gvantsa and Tekla for Georgians; Svetlana, Lyuba and Tatyana for Russians) to see if that would make any difference compared to just relying on accent as the signal. It had little effect on Georgians, but had some effect on Armenian speakers of Russian. Though the sample was small, Armenians seem to have had more sympathy for the Russian voices without the names. This is presumably because for the control group, for which no name was added, respondents identified the voice as Armenian.
18. In the homogenously minority-populated districts of Akhalkalaki (90% Armenian) and Marneuli (83% Azeri), the Georgian respondents report a higher proficiency in Armenian and Azeri, respectively (especially in the conversational skills of understanding and speaking), than the Georgian respondents from the more heterogeneous districts of Akhaltsikhe and Gardabani.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the HALBI and HNG working groups at UCSD, audiences at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, as well as the journal editors and referees for valuable feedback that contributed to the paper in its current form. Nic Wondra, Eka Rostomashvili, Maya Giorgadze, Maya Bashirova and Arpine Porsughyan and the Caucasus Research Resource Centres for assistance with the implementation of the experiment. Daniel Maliniak assisted with data visualizations. The usual caveat applies.

References

- Aitmatov, Chingiz. 1988. *The Day Lasts More Than 100 Years*. Trans. J. F. French. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Amirejibi-Mullen, Rusudan. 2011. “Language Policy and National Identity in Georgia.” PhD diss., Queen Mary University of London.
- Berglund, Christofer. *Forthcoming*. “Forward to David the Builder!?: Georgia’s (Re)turn to Language-Centered Nationalism”.
- Bilaniuk, Laada. 1998. “The Politics of Language and Identity in Ukraine.” PhD diss., University of Michigan.
- Bilaniuk, Laada. 2004. “A Typology of Surzhyk: Mixed Ukrainian-Russian Language.” *International Journal of Bilingualism* 8 (4): 409–425.
- Bilaniuk, Laada. 2005. *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Blauvelt, Timothy. 2013. “Endurance of the Soviet Imperial Tongue: The Russian Language in Contemporary Georgia.” *Central Asian Survey* 32 (2): 189–209.
- Broers, Laurence. 2004. “Containing the Nation, Building the State: Coping with Nationalism, Minorities and Conflict in Post-Soviet Georgia.” PhD diss., University of London.

- Broers, Laurence. 2008. "Filling the Void: Ethnic Politics and Nationalities Policy in Post-Conflict Georgia." *Nationalities Papers* 36 (2): 275–304.
- Carranza, Michael and Ellen B. Ryan. 1975. "Evaluative Reactions of Bilingual Anglo and Mexican American Adolescents Towards Speakers of English and Spanish." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 6: 83–104.
- Cornell, Svante E. 2002. *Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia*. Uppsala: Department of Peace and Conflict Research Report #61.
- Darden, Keith, and Anna Maria Grzymała-Busse. 2006. "The Great Divide: Literacy, Nationalism, and the Communist Collapse." *World Politics* 59 (1): 83–115.
- Downey, Kara. 2015. "Building the Nation, Binding the State: Insecurity, National Identity and Patriotism in Kyrgyzstan." Ph.D. diss., Stanford University.
- Driscoll, Jesse. 2015. *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fazio, R. H., and Olson, M. A. 2003. "Implicit Measures in Social Cognition Research: Their Meaning and Use." *Annual Review of Psychology* 54 (1): 297–327.
- George, Julie. 2008. "Minority Political Inclusion in Mikheil Saakashvili's Georgia." *Europe-Asia Studies* 60 (7): 1151–1175.
- George, Julie. 2009. *The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Geostat. 2002. "Ethnic Groups by Major Administrative – Territorial Units". National Statistics Office of Georgia. http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/census/2002/03%20Ethnic%20Composition.pdf.
- Hewitt, George. 2013. *Discordant Neighbours: A Reassessment of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian Conflicts*. Leiden: Brill.
- Jones, Stephen. 2005. *Socialism in Georgian Colours: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883–1917*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Jones, Stephen. 2006. "Georgia: Nationalism from Under the Rubble." In *After Independence: Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcolonial and Postcommunist States*, edited by Lowell Barrington, 248–276. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Kahneman, D. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Kaufman, Stuart 2001. *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kolstø, Pål, and Aleksander Rusetskii. 2012. "Power Differentials and Identity Formation: Images of Self and Other on the Russian-Georgian Boundary." *National Identities* 14 (2): 139–155.
- Laitin, David D. 1977. *Politics, Language, and Thought: The Somali Experience*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Laitin, David D. 1998. *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lambert, Wallace E., Richard C. Hodgson, Robert C. Gardner, and Samuel Fillenbaum. 1960. "Evaluational Reactions to Spoken Languages." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 60 (1): 44–51.
- Lupia, Arthur and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1998. *The Democratic Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, Terry 2001. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Nodia, Ghia. 2002. "Putting The State Back Together in Post-Soviet Georgia." In *Beyond State Crisis?: Post-Colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Mark Beissinger and M. Crawford Young, 413–443. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Nodia, Ghia. 2009. "Components of the Georgian National Idea: an Outline." *Identity Studies* 1: 84–101.
- Norton, M. I., J. A. Vandello, and J. M. Darley. 2004. "Casuistry and Social Category Bias." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87 (6): 817–831.

- Reisner, Oliver. 2010. "Between State and Nation Building: The Debate about Ethnicity in Georgian Citizens' ID Cards." In *Exploring the Caucasus in the 21st Century*, edited by Françoise Companjen, László Marác, and Lia Versteegh, 157–180. Amsterdam: Pallas Publications.
- Romaine, Suzanne. 1995. *Bilingualism. Volume 13 of Language in Society*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Slezkine, Yuri. 1994. "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism." *Slavic Review* 53 (2): 414–452.
- Smith, Graham, Law Vivien, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr, and Edward Allworth. 1998. *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Suny, Ronald Grigor. 1994. *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Toft, Monica Duffy. 2005. *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests and the Indivisibility of Territory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wheatley, Jonathan. 2009. "Managing Ethnic Diversity in Georgia: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back." *Central Asian Survey* 28 (2): 119–134.
- Woolard, Katryn A. 1989. *Double Talk: Bilingualism and the Politics of Ethnicity in Catalonia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Appendix. Additional details on samples and enumeration

Tbilisi

The experiment in the capital was implemented during May and June 2010. We gathered 655 respondents from 12 randomly selected schools around the city (in the both central and outer districts), which harbored both Georgian-language and Russian-language sectors, as well as from three universities. Following Laitin (1998), we categorized respondents into "Russian-speakers" (i.e. *russko-yazychnye*, as opposed to ethnic Russians, or *russkie*) and "titulars" (here, Georgian-speakers) based on the language of the questionnaires that they selected. Within the Tbilisi sample, there were 548 Georgian-speakers (83.7%) and 107 Russian-speakers (16.3%). The latter tended to be either self-identified ethnic Russians or Armenians, but could also be other non-Georgians using Russian as a bridging language. The Russian-speakers are a heterogeneous group.

The 655 respondents listened to recordings produced by four separate speakers, each reading the text in several languages, or guises. Speaker 1, Irma, is a native Georgian-speaker and Tbilisi-ite in her early 40s, and speaks without accent in Georgian and with a perceivable Georgian accent in Russian. Speaker 2, Becky, is in her mid-20s and grew up in a mixed Russian-Georgian household in Tbilisi. In the recording her Georgian speech has a slight but perceptible (especially to native Georgian-speakers) Russian tinge, and her Russian is unaccented. Speaker 3, Irina, is a native Russian-speaker (and ethnic Russian-Ukrainian) from Kazakhstan in her mid-40s who married a Georgian and moved to Tbilisi in her early 20s, and who speaks Russian without accent and with a perceivable Russian accent in Georgian. Thus we have one "Georgian" (Irma) and two varieties of "Russians", the slightly perceptible (Becky) and the fully perceptible (Irina). Irma also read the text in English with a distinct Georgian accent. And last but not least, respondents listened to Speaker 4, Camrin, a native English-speaker from the US in her early thirties who likewise speaks fluent Georgian, although with a noticeably foreign accent.

Samtskhe-Javakheti

The experiment was conducted in Samtskhe-Javakheti in March 2010, in Armenian-, Georgian- and Russian-language schools in the cities of Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe, as well as in Akhaltsikhe State University, the region's only accredited higher education institution. We gathered a sample of 328 respondents, of which 186 (56.7%) identified themselves as Georgians and 142 (43.3%) as Armenians. 56.1% studied in Georgian schools, 27.7% in Armenian schools, and 16.2% in Russian schools. 226 (68.9%) of the respondents were from Akhaltsikhe and 102 (31.1%) of the respondents were from Akhalkalaki. Akhaltsikhe is the administrative centre of the region, and is a mixed city with 61% Georgians and 37% Armenians, whereas 90% of Akhalkalaki's population is Armenian (according to the 2002 census).

Our 328 respondents listened to two "Georgians" and two Armenians. Recruiting speakers with the proper language repertoires (Georgian, Russian and Armenian) and accents proved difficult. Georgian-speaker 1, Lela, is a Georgian from Tbilisi in her mid-50s and a professor of Armenian studies at a Georgian university, and speaks both Armenian and Russian with a clear Georgian accent. Georgian-speaker 2, Viktoria, is actually an ethnic Armenian from Tbilisi in her early-30s and a native Georgian-speaker. An actress at the Armenian Theater in Tbilisi, she read the text in Georgian without accent and in Armenian and Russian with a Georgian accent. Armenian speaker 1, Narine, is an NGO activist from Javakheti in her early-30s, and learned Georgian at university in Tbilisi. She is a native speaker of Armenian, which she speaks with the Karin dialect (of Western Armenian origin), and she speaks Russian and Georgian with a strong Armenian accent. Armenian speaker 2, Satenik, is an Armenian from Yerevan in her mid-twenties who is studying in graduate school in Tbilisi. She speaks Armenian with the Yerevan dialect (of Eastern Armenian origin) and speaks Georgian and Russian with an Armenian accent.

Kvemo Kartli

The experiment was administered in Kvemo Kartli in April 2010, in Azeri- and Georgian-language schools in the Gardabani and Marneuli districts, as well as in two predominantly Azeri unaccredited higher educational institutions located there. We collected 598 respondents, of which 122 (or 20.4%) identified themselves as Georgians and 460 (76.9%) as Azeris. 136 (22.7%) reported that they currently study in Georgian, 124 (20.7%) in Russian and 338 (56.5%) in Azeri. Thus, in this sample, Azeris comprise 14.7% of the pupils in Georgian schools and 83.9% of the Russian schools, while 95.1% of Georgians study in Georgian schools and only 4.1% of them study in Russian schools. The Gardabani district, just like Akhaltsikhe in Samtskhe-Javakheti, has a more mixed population (53.2% Georgian and 43.7% Azeri), whereas Marneuli is predominantly Azeri (83.1% Azeri, 7.9% Georgian).

The 598 respondents listened to two Georgians and two Azeris. Georgian-speaker 1, Eteri, is a Georgian in her late-twenties who works as a Georgian-language teacher in an Azeri school in a village outside of Gardabani. She is a native Georgian-speaker and speaks Azeri with a noticeable Georgian accent. Georgian-speaker 2, Salome, is a Georgian in her late-twenties from Tbilisi who works in an international NGO and who graduated

from a Turkish run high school. She is a native Georgian-speaker, and read the Azeri text with a pronounced Georgian accent. Azeri speaker 1, Gulben, is a native Azeri speaker and a student from Marneuli in her early-twenties who studies in Georgian at a university in Tbilisi. She graduated from a Russian language high school in Marneuli. Azeri speaker 2, Nulifar, is likewise a native Azeri speaker and a student from Marneuli in her early-twenties who studies in Georgian in university in Tbilisi. She graduated from an Azeri-language high school in Marneuli.