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LINGUISTIC FEATURES AND ECOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ONE OF GEORGIA'S BORDER REGIONS

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Abstract. *This study explores the linguistic features and ecological linguistic dynamics of Georgia's border regions, with a particular focus on the interaction between Georgian and other languages in ethnically diverse communities. Language plays a key role in national identity, and its preservation is influenced by various historical, social, and political factors, especially in the context of globalization and language contact. The study highlights how bilingualism and multilingualism in border regions can both enrich and challenge the Georgian language. Special attention is given to the Azerbaijani-speaking populations, their social integration, and the role of language policies in fostering bilingual education and promoting the state language, Georgian. The research also incorporates an ecological linguistic approach to examine language functioning within its social, cultural, and historical context. Findings suggest that to ensure the sustainable development of the Georgian language, comprehensive strategies must address socio-economic factors, educational barriers, and the cultural-linguistic influences of neighboring countries. Key challenges include the dominance of Azerbaijani in daily communication, limited access to Georgian-language media, and the need for targeted language policies that support the integration of national minorities. This paper proposes solutions for improving language education and strengthening the presence of Georgian in public and private spheres to foster greater linguistic integration in Georgia's border regions.*

Key words: *Language Policy, Bilingualism, Ecological Linguistics, Border Regions, Ethnic Minorities*

Language is not only a means of communication but also a crucial component of national identity. Its preservation and development depend on historical, social, political, and cultural factors. In the context of modern globalization, due to various interlanguage contacts, the penetration of foreign lexical units into the recipient language is inevitable. However, this process is especially sensitive for regions where people of different ethnicities coexist.

This phenomenon may significantly influence the structural and functional aspects of the language. On one hand, lexical insertions enrich the language's resources, but on the other hand, they may pose a threat to the uniqueness of the local language and its traditional forms. The educational system, media, and state policies play a decisive role in the preservation of a language. The involvement of younger generations is particularly crucial, as they represent the main driving force behind



language development and change.

Therefore, to protect and ensure the sustainable development of the language, it is necessary to implement targeted linguistic policies that will make the local language competitive in the modern era of communication and technology. The concept of language policy is directly related to language planning and, consequently, the concept of the state language. The state language is the language defined by the country's constitution, used in all legislative, executive, and judicial functions within the state. Language planning proceeds in two directions:

a) The state plans the development course of the state language, addresses the relationship between the state language and other languages spoken within the country's territory, and determines the areas of language functioning.

b) As external factors impact the linguistic situation within the country, language planning shifts in response to these influences.

According to the Constitution of Georgia, the state language is Georgian, while in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, both Georgian and Abkhazian are state languages. Despite this, there are still numerous settlements across the country where the ethnic non-Georgian population does not have sufficient proficiency in the state language. This problem is particularly acute in border regions and ethnically diverse settlements where local populations may have no access to Georgian-language education, media, or daily communication. This hinders their social integration, economic development, and full participation in political processes. Educational programs, intensive language courses, and the promotion of bilingual education initiated by both the state and non-governmental sectors are crucial to overcoming this issue. Moreover, the implementation of multicultural approaches is necessary to support the preservation of ethnic groups' cultural identity while broadening knowledge of the Georgian language in the national space.

The linguistic landscape of border regions presents a special subject for study, as language contacts are intense, and multilingualism is a frequent phenomenon. Ecological linguistic analysis involves studying the environment in which a language functions and is used, considering social-linguistic, cultural, and historical factors.



It is important to clarify the concept of "national minority," as best described by Georgian scholars: the term "linguistic minority" refers to linguistic varieties used by certain groups (as either first or second languages). These groups perceive themselves as distinct from others due to their territory, religion, way of life, or any other characteristic and regulate their differences within the larger society. It should be emphasized that linguistic minority status is quantitative, not qualitative; it should also be noted that the status of linguistic minorities does not always correspond to numerical criteria. Such varieties may be widely used or actively spoken in certain geographic areas or communities. Status relates to rights that these groups do not have, such as the use of their language in court, the production of legal or administrative documents, the use of their language in education (both at the primary school and university level), its functionality in national media, road signs, etc. (Kakha Gabunia, Lali Ezukhbaia, Chabuki Kiriya, p. 40)

According to the 2014 census, ethnic minorities represent 13.2% of Georgia's population. The largest group is Azerbaijanis (6.3%). Most Azerbaijanis live compactly in the Kvemo Kartli region, where they make up 41.75% of the population. Knowledge of the history and challenges of the Azerbaijani ethnic group living in Georgia is limited in academic and political circles, as well as in the wider public, due to factors such as language barriers and political, social, and cultural isolation.

In the present situation, the use of the Georgian language in Georgia's border regions often depends not only on state policy but also on the local population's socio-economic conditions, access to education, and the cultural-linguistic influence of neighboring countries. These factors shape the development of language policies and their practical application.

Ecological linguistic analysis aims to study the living environment of language in these regions, including:

1. Linguistic Diversity and its Impact on Georgian – How the Georgian language maintains its status and the threats it faces when interacting with other languages. This issue is important both from a dialectological perspective and in the context of language policy since bilingual communities often experience language



transformation and the adaptation of linguistic elements to other cultural contexts.

2. Bilingual Environment and Code-Switching – How different languages blend and how this affects everyday communication. Code-switching and language interference are often natural aspects of bilingual environments, influencing both the structure of speech and the formation of social identities.

3. The Functional Status of Georgian as the State Language – Its role in the public space, education, and media. The language policies regarding official documentation, the education system, and the media determine the position of Georgian in border regions. Additionally, analyzing government programs and initiatives aimed at strengthening the knowledge of the Georgian language in regions where Georgian is not the first language is necessary.

4. Language Transmission Dynamics between Generations – Whether young people retain Georgian when growing up in a multilingual environment. The education system and family communication play a significant role in this process, while bilingual or multilingual environments often alter language preferences among the younger generation.

5. Cultural-Linguistic Influence of Neighboring Countries – The population of border regions often has close ties with the cultures and languages of neighboring countries, which may be reflected in the Georgian language in various forms. This can include lexical influences, changes in linguistic norms, or new communication models emerging within the local community.

This type of ecological linguistic analysis not only describes current linguistic processes but also allows for the improvement of language policies, helping to strengthen the sustainability and functionality of the Georgian language in border regions.

In Georgia's regions where ethnic Azerbaijanis live as small, dispersed groups, the functioning of the Georgian language, especially as a spoken language, is particularly problematic. This is due to both socio-linguistic and educational and cultural factors that collectively determine the linguistic environment and communication models.



Main Challenges:

1. **Socio-Linguistic Factors** – The compact settlement of Azerbaijani-speaking populations fosters the dominance of the Azerbaijani language. As a result, Georgian faces competition, particularly in communities where there is little incentive for active use of the Georgian language. Additionally, in dispersed communities, Georgian is often used only in formal settings (e.g., in public institutions), while Azerbaijani remains the primary communication medium in daily life. This process diminishes the function of Georgian as the first language and transforms it into a second language.

2. **Interethnic Marriages and Multilingual Environment** – Marriages within the Azerbaijani-speaking population often occur between individuals from Azerbaijani families. This can lead to a reduction in the use of Georgian in households, directly affecting the linguistic capabilities of the younger generation. Furthermore, the presence of other language groups (such as Russian-speaking or Turkish-speaking communities) contributes to a multilingual communication model in which Georgian is not dominant.

3. **Educational and Administrative Language Barriers** – Communication in official institutions and some schools often takes place in Azerbaijani, which hinders the effective learning of Georgian. In schools where instruction is in Georgian, Azerbaijani-speaking students may face challenges integrating into the educational process, reducing their motivation to communicate in Georgian. Furthermore, low proficiency in Georgian often limits employment opportunities in the public sector, reinforcing the process of linguistic isolation.

Additional Aspects: 4. **Media and Cultural Space** – In regions where the Azerbaijani population is small, Georgian-language media is less accessible, or its consumption is low. Instead, the population often relies on Azerbaijani, Russian, or Turkish-language television channels and social media communication in those languages. This factor further reduces daily exposure to the Georgian language. 5. **State Language Policy and Linguistic Integration Programs** – The Georgian government implements various initiatives aimed at promoting the teaching of the Georgian language to national minorities. However, the success of these programs



largely depends on community involvement, teacher qualifications, and socio-economic conditions.

Thus, the functioning of the Georgian language in regions where ethnic Azerbaijanis live as small groups is influenced by multiple factors. To enhance linguistic integration, a comprehensive approach is needed that includes improving the quality of education, expanding language learning programs for the state language, promoting cultural dialogue, and strengthening the role of Georgian in administrative sectors. Only in this way can Georgian become not only formally but also practically a fully-fledged medium of communication in these regions.

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