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Linguistic and Territorial Identities: National-Ethnic Selfconsciousness Through the Prism of Sign-Symbolic Interpretation

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Abstract

National-ethnic selfconsciousness is represented in a sign-symbolic interpretation of the linguistic and territorial identity of the Georgian people. A distinctive feature of the study is that such an interpretation introduces a certain degree of objectivity into the ethnographic research, and thereby provides an opportunity to consider the national-ethnic self-knowledge or identity of the Georgian people both on linguistic identification based on knowledge of the Georgian language and territorial affiliation. The purpose of this study is to combine different perspectives that relate to research issues connected with human language and territory and/or geographical environment. It has been hypothesized that both linguistic and territorial identities of the Georgian people are among the determining factors of national selfconsciousness in general. The multidimensional design of the study, the interpretation of the natural Georgian language codification in the concepts of semiotics and identity through the perception of territorial belonging through the prism of semiotic ethnography are based on the analysis of the description of the Georgian language, landscape and architecture.

Keywords: language, selfconsciousness, identity, topophilia, mkhedruli (one of the three Georgian scripts), Kartvelian texts, ethnosemiotics, sign, symbol.

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Языковая и территориальная идентичности: национально-этническое самосознание через призму знаково-символической интерпретации

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Аннотация

Национально-этническое самосознание представлено в знаково-символической интерпретации языковой и территориальной идентичности грузинского народа. Отличительной чертой исследования является то, что такая

интерпретация вносит определенную степень объективности в этнографическое исследование, и тем самым предоставляет возможность рассматривать национально-этническое самопознание или идентичность грузинского народа как на языковой идентификации, основанной на знании грузинского языка, так и территориальной принадлежности. Цель данного исследования состоит в том, чтобы объединить различные точки зрения, которые касаются вопросов, связанных с человеческим языком и территорией и/или географической средой. Выдвинута гипотеза, что как языковая, так и территориальная идентичности грузинского народа являются одними из определяющих факторов национального самосознания в целом. Многомерный дизайн исследования, интерпретация кодификации естественного грузинского языка в понятиях семиотики и идентичности через восприятие территориальной принадлежности и призму семиотической этнографии, основаны на анализе описания грузинского языка, ландшафта и архитектуры.

Ключевые слова: язык, самосознание, идентичность, топофилия, мхедрули, картвельские тексты, этно-семиотика, знак, символ.

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Introduction. The world in which we live is divided into many parts: from continents and parts of the world to regions, countries and republics, territories, cities and districts, etc. Every person knows the name of the country in which he lives, but did everyone think what exactly makes the country what it is? The person is inextricably linked to the place in which he lives, the environment in which he exists. Using natural resources, the person satisfies his basic needs and, thereby, changes the surrounding area, forms a completely new landscape of the surrounding territory. As a result of active human activity, a special indicator is formed: “a per-son is a habitat”.

The national language developed by the nation is also an indicator that reflects the national identity, heritage of community members and each individual.

The distinctive feature of the work is the application of symbolic interaction to the study of ethnos. A key term in semiology/semiotics is “sign”, consisting of at least a tangible effect on one of the recipient’s feelings, which means content. Semiology and semiotics were gradually differentiated by methodological content making the distinction between these two designations significant. If semiology considers language as a sign system of the field of linguistics, then in semiotics signs take different forms, form certain ideas and associations in the mind. For example, in cartographic semiotics, spatial visualization serves as a key mapper for transmitting representative information about the part of space being depicted creating an ordered representation of patterns that convey meaning. Based on a descriptive analysis of the Georgian language, spatial practice and visual discourse, the study showed the distinctive features of the Georgian people.

Materials and Methods. While ethnography traditionally focuses on factors associated with the behaviour of people, and the function of the sign-symbolic system is to convey ideas through messages, in the study, the application of the ethnosemantic method to the description of the Georgian language and territorial semiotic ethnography to spatial practice and visual discourse provided an opportunity to consider the distinctive characteristics that form the national ethnic identity of the Georgian people using examples of linguistic and territorial identity.

First introduced by Stoic philosophers, the term “sign”, recognized in European medieval literature as signans and signatum reappeared in the theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher, the logician, Charles Sanders Pierce as an object of the interdisciplinary field of the sign study and the sign system that stores and transmits information.

In F. de Saussure’s theory as meaning and significant: a sign is what “derives from the association of the meaning with the signified” [2, p. 67]. In C. S. Pearce’s theory, the scientist notes that as a “sign means” and “designate”, “nothing is a sign unless interpreted as a sign” [9, p. 689].

The semiotic project was reduced to almost zero as it was developed within the limited framework of Saussure's definition without any contact with the epistemology of the humanities. Among two terms semiotics and semiology having been used interchangeably for quite a long time, the preference was given to "semiotics". It should be noted that despite this institutionalization, the term "semiology" is firmly rooted in the works of R. Barthes, A. Greimas, L. Yelmslev, Yu. Lotman, T. Sebeok, W. Eco and other scientists, but for the most part various practices of studying the sign as an elementary unit of the language code have been determined in the theories of communication of linguistics [1, p. 99].

From a linguistic perspective, natural languages are loci in which all other semiotic systems manifest themselves. The number of Caucasian languages distributed in the territory to the north and south of the Great Caucasian Range varies from 30 to 40 depending on various classifications. About 8 million people speak the Caucasian languages. Language communities range in size from a few hundred people to large national groups with millions of people [4].

Results. The environment is human-transformed nature, the space that directly surrounds a person and with which he interacts. Language, culture, history, literature, architecture integrated into the nature of Georgia have always attracted both new researchers, writers and poets and simply curious people. Whereas different environmental models assume different behaviours and aesthetic experiences, the perception of this environment limits or expands a person's behavioural and aesthetic choices depending on how the environment is configured, likened, or creatively reimagined. The purpose of the study was to consider the national and ethnic identity of the nation combining various points of view that relate to the study issues, using a semitological approach to language and semiotic to toponymia of the Georgian people. Semiotic and semitological theories made it possible, using the example of linguistic and territorial identity, to consider the distinctive features of the Georgian nation, which show national and ethnic identity. The study confirmed the hypothesis that the linguistic and territorial identities of the Georgian people are among the determining factors of national identity. The study can be interesting to philosophers, linguists, sociologists, all those who are interested in identity issues. It can be continued and become the basis for studying the problems and identities of other nations.

Discussion and Conclusions. The population of the relatively small country of Georgia is 3,983,329, which is 0.05 % of the total population of the globe. Almost half of the population lives in five major cities (Figure 1).

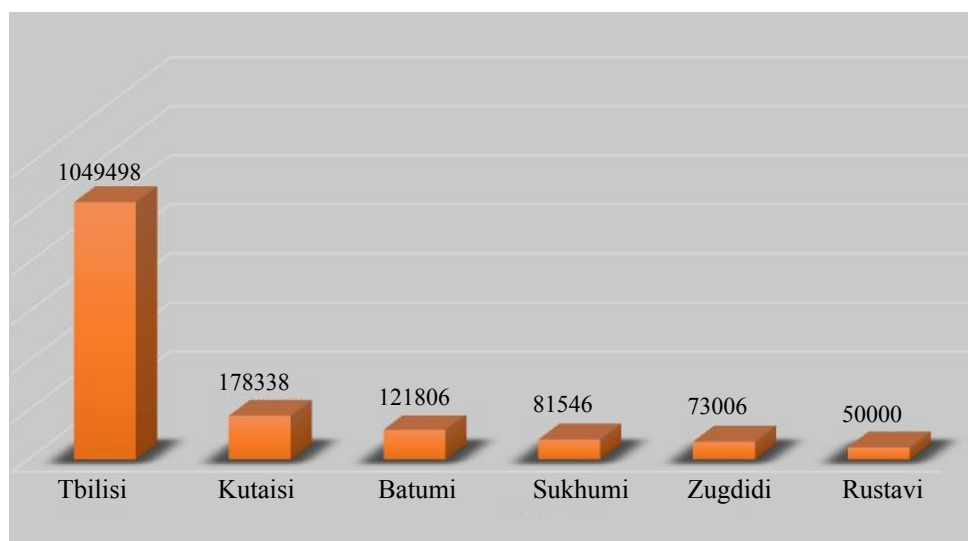


Fig. 1. The population living in five major cities of Georgia

Few people speak Georgian (ქართული ენა) except Georgians. Outside of Georgia, Georgian is spoken in the adjacent regions of Azerbaijan and in northeastern Turkey, also in the province of Efahan (Iran), where several villages are located in which the Georgian population lives [4]. A distinctive feature of the large number of languages of the North Caucasus is the long history and ancient literary tradition and original writing dating back to the 5th century AD. The exclusivity and uniqueness of the Georgian language is that it is included in 14 unique languages in the world that have their own alphabet. In its history, the Georgian form of writing, based on a standard set of signs, was three different writing systems: Nuskhuri, Asomtavruli and Mkhedruli. The alphabet (Mkhedruli), which has been used by Georgians from the 11th century until now, consists of 33 symbols-letters, which belongs to the category of Kartvelian languages. The spelling of the symbols-letters of the Georgian writing system “is based on a round italic, which was developed based on an angular book font. The Georgian writing system standardly includes a symbol for each of the distinctive sounds (phonemes) of the Georgian language” [4].

The main interpretations of the Georgian language in Kartvelian texts explain the use of words to represent objects through social practices in order to distinguish different types of things and associate names with things of the same type. For example, the “general Kartvelian dictionary” includes the terms of kinship, names of animals, birds, trees, plants and body parts, as well as various human actions, qualities, conditions, etc. Words that use the numbers from 1 to 10 and the word “hundred” are also original common Kartvelian terms. For research, “pragmatics explains semantics by the general norms regulating the use of names, fixes references, and thus explains how names can represent objects and express thoughts” [3, pp. 57–78]. The correspondences between sounds and meanings in the words and verbal elements of the Georgian language provide the basis for considering Kartvelian languages, which have a close connection and derive from a common ancestral language (proto-language).

The sound system of Kartvelian languages is relatively homogeneous, the difference is represented in the vowel system, which contains five main vowel letters phonemes *a, e, i, o, u*, whereas in the Svan dialects two or more vowels are added and there are several additional vowels: front (or palatalized) vowels *ä, ö, ü* and a high central vowel *ə* (as in English “sofa”) [5, pp. 14–20]. The consonant system of the Kartvelian language has voiced, voiceless and vocal varieties as well as stops, which are expressed both by a complete and short-term stop of respiratory flow at some place in the speech tract and affricates which are sounds that begin with a stop, but which are released with local friction, for example, the sound [tʃ] in “church” [19].

“...Language is an “intermediate world” between thought and reality, individual con-sciousness, tongue and, accordingly, culture, the world in which an unstructured stream of impressions and unrelated messages has taken on a conceptual form”. The culture of Georgia, as one of the 4 countries of the North Caucasus, is not only the spatio-temporal boundaries of a separate ethnic group existence ...” [10, pp. 46–48], it is also evidence of the genetic similarity of peoples, as evidenced by the language, which is replete with ancient borrowings from Iranian, Greek, Arabic, Turkish and other languages, although it can distinguish both the basic vocabulary and grammatical elements of native Caucasian origin [13, pp. 45–52].

The linguistic commonality of the language meaning is based on general linguistic principles with a fixed cultural code of the Georgian nation; it represents the basis for decoding messages contained in words. The development of a representative function of the language is carried out, among other things, through the study of the environment in which human life activity occurs [11, pp. 88–94].

As a form of communication, the use of images precedes written speech by several thousand years. Forms instantly form certain ideas and associations in the mind. Associations of colour, for the most part, are based on emergence in nature, whereas associations behind the forms are more abstract, and it is possible that they have been formed since the beginning of human civilization [12, p. 98].

People had provided geographical information with the help of images for millennia. Maps that visually depict territories, as well as images, exist either on paper or in the minds of people (in the form of the so-called mental maps)

[7, pp. 759–770]. “... One of the earliest surviving images, including both an indication of scale and orientation, is the plan of the city of Nippur created around 1330 BC”. [8, pp. 67–74].

Consideration of development policy and actions aimed at (re) asserting landscape and other features of territorial identity forms a conceptual and methodological basis for the study of topophilia. “Topophilia is a study of the perception of the environment, relations and values”, Yi-Fu Tuan defines neologism, which includes all «human affective connections with the material environment» [18, pp. 99–100].

The main idea of semiotics is to extract meaning from something. So, for example, “car-tosemiotics”, also called “cartographic semiotics”, is a semiotic study of a cartographic model (maps, relief models, etc.). These models are combined by the fact that they represent the Earth’s space (or, in a broader sense, other celestial bodies) with the help of model space. H. Schlichtmann in “Map Semiotics Review” (2009) noted that semiotic studies were mainly devoted to maps in the traditional sense, as defined in the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cartography. “According to the scientist cartosemiotics as a separate research field originated in the 60s of the last century and has now reached an acceptable level of maturity” [16, pp. 15–21].

It should be noted that the signs take different forms, but the meaning embedded in them is mandatory. The transfer of a meaning can be through pictures, photos, 3D images, models, maps, or anything else. It can be argued that cartosemiotics and/or semiotics of maps, has interdisciplinary connections with both cartography and cognitive science. Located between semiotics of mental images representation and semiotics of codes, cartosemiotics belongs to the general field of applied semiotics: since maps usually contain written language and are signs encoded according to certain mapping conventions, they also need to be decoded. This combination of graphic and verbal elements makes them complex semiotic systems. Maps can represent space much better than words that must be pronounced in a linear sequence because they are two-dimensional carriers. At the same time, maps use a complex symbol system to determine the location or describe geographical locations. Cartographic images are usually equipped with a legend that facilitates the interpretation of signs [7, pp. 759–770].

The geometric shape of the triangle on the map can represent both mountains and caves, depending on its orientation. The triangle, the top of which faces up, represents the mountain. The top which faces down is a cave. The physical properties of a triangle can be related to ideas of force or balance, depending on its orientation (much as in its relation to mountains and caves). If we look at the map of Georgia, we will see a significant number of triangles with different orientations. The impressive Caucasus Mountains are the hallmark of Georgia. The height of their peaks reaches 5 kilometers. For example, the height of Kazbek (Georgian მყინვარწვერი) is 5033.8 meters. The snow-white top of the triangular pyramid of the regular geometric shape of Tetnuldi (Georgian თეთნულდი), which height is 4869 meters, is one of the hallmarks of Svanetii [14].

There are four deep caves in Georgia: “Verevkina”, “Krubera”, “Sarma”, “Snezhnaya-Mezhonogo-Illyuziya System”, as well as many others such as the New Athos Cave, Tekenteri Cave, “Prometheus Cave” Nature Monument, Natural City, that is Uplistsikhe Cave, etc. [6].

Just as many triangle associations arise because the triangle has three sides, the square is largely determined by its four sides. The four sides of the square connect it with directions (north, east, south and west), seasons (winter, spring, summer, autumn), nature forces (land, water, air and fire), etc. On the map, a square represents the shape of a building, foundation, base, or even a house. Tbilisi residential buildings, also indicated by this symbol, reveal their peculiarity of residential buildings of the whole state with their characteristic features of use in the construction of homogeneous building material (wood and brick). An interesting “Tbilisi” model of “an open dwelling” was developed due to the thoughtful connection

of courtyards and balconies with the street. Here, the balcony has undergone an interesting development in the process of adapting to the pan-European facades. The same goes for the courtyards that penetrated the Art Nouveau style buildings, contributing to the creation of its unforgettable “Tbilisi” designs. “In addition, the organic relationship of the city, “intertwined” along the mountainous slope and rocky plateau with the environment, the dynamics of the outlines of streets, dwellings, views, ensembles of buildings is formed by planning and spatial-conceptual integrity. The diverse urban architecture generated by the local highly artistic identity of the city, its cosmopolitan nature and historical destiny, destruction and renewal, forms a peculiar complex of values, turning the capital into a specific city...” [17].

The fact that semiotics symbol of maps represents a visual demonstration of the constructed language of individual geographical features makes it possible to group the symbols manifested in maps (called the map language or type of sign systems) into “three main classes: sign production, sign reception (a process understood as extraction), obtaining information from signs (cartographers speak about the use of maps)” [16, pp. 15–21]. The symbol of the cartographic image of the river is a wavy line. Wavy lines on the map of Georgia, the rivers of Georgia like mountains and architecture are as a kind of the state’s hallmark. The river system of Georgia is 25 thousand large and small rivers with a total length of about 55 thousand kilometers, which belong to the basins of the Black and Caspian Seas. The Kura River (Mtkvari in Georgian) is one of the most important rivers of Georgia. Translated from Georgian, Mtkvari means «good water,» and from Megrel it means “the river that eats the mountains”. The Kura River rises high in the mountains breaking through numerous canyons and gorges, that’s why its water is muddy. Cities such as Tbilisi, Borjomi, Mtskheta and Gori are located on its banks. The Aragvi River flows along the picturesque Georgian Military Road to the east and joins the Kura forming its largest tributary. On the river there is the Zhinval reservoir, built in 1986, the Ananuri Castle and the Assumption Church of the 17th century. At the confluence of the Aragvi and Kura rivers there is an ancient capital of Georgia, Mtskheta, and the Zedazeni Monastery dating back to the 6th century, where the events described in the famous poem by M. Yu. Lermontov “Mtsyri” took place. Famous Russian writers such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Yesenin, Griboyedov, Mandelstam, Akhmadulina and many others fascinated by its beauty repeatedly praised Georgia in their works [15]. Specific features of the river system of Georgia contribute to the development of such activities, or rather extreme sports, as rafting and kayaking.

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