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The Sociolinguistics of Migration. The Dynamics of dialect contact in Georgia

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The Sociolinguistics of Migration.
The Dynamics of dialect contact in Georgia¹
 მიგრაციების სოციოლინგვისტიკა.
 დიალექტური კონტაქტების დინამიკა საქართველოში¹

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Abstract. This study explores the sociolinguistic impact of internal migration in Georgia, focusing on the transformation, reconstruction and replication of dialectal networks. Drawing on extensive field data, it examines how migration disrupts original linguistic communities and fosters new dialectal constellations. The paper introduces the concepts of sociolinguistic network deconstruction and replication to illustrate how dialects resist or adapt to linguistic assimilation. It discusses dialect 'self-assertion' in response to contact, and how even minimal lexical or phonetic features are preserved for identity maintenance. By analysing language islands within and outside Georgia, the paper highlights the parallels between forced and voluntary migration. The empirical evidence confirms that naive linguistic awareness plays a crucial role in shaping dialect boundaries and resisting assimilation, and that migration not only reshapes language use, but also redefines social identities and cultural memory in both areas of origin and destination.

აბსტრაქტი. წინამდებარე კვლევა ეხება შიდა მიგრაციის სოციოლინგვისტურ გავლენას საქართველოში. ნაშრომში შესწავლილია დიალექტების კონტაქტის პროცესში დიალექტების დაშლის, აღდგენისა და რეპლიკაციის ფორმები. ფართომასშტაბიანი საველე მონაცემების საფუძველზე ნაჩვენებია, როგორ იშლება ტრადიციული დიალექტური ქსელები და როგორ იქმნება ახალი დიალექტური გარემო. წარმოდგენილია სოციოლინგვისტური ქსელების დეკონსტრუქციისა და რეპლიკაციის ცნებები და აღწერილია, როგორ ინარჩუნებენ დიალექტები თავიანთ თავისებურებებს ასიმილაციის პროცესის საპასუხოდ. ყურადღება გამახვილებულია დიალექტურ "თვითდამკვიდრებაზე" და ენობრივ ნიშნებზე, რომლებიც იდენტობის შენარჩუნებას ემსახურება. კვლევაში, ასევე, შედარებულია ენობრივი კუნძულები საქართველოში და მის ფარგლებს გარეთ. ორივე შემთხვევაში სავალდებულო და ნებაყოფლობითი მიგრაციის შედეგები ერთმანეთის პარალელურადაა განხილული. საბოლოოდ, ნაშრომში ნაჩვენებია, რომ ენობრივი ცნობიერება და ეგრეთ წოდებული "ნაივური ლინგვისტიკა" მნიშვნელოვან როლს თამაშობს დიალექტური საზღვრების შესწავლასა და კულტურული მეხსიერების ფორმირებაში.

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Keywords: sociolinguistic networks, internal migration, dialect contact, language islands, identity

საკვანძო სიტყვები: სოციოლინგვისტური ქსელები, შიდა მიგრაცია, დიალექტური კონტაქტი, ენობრივი კუნძულები, იდენტობა

1. Terms Used

In this paper, the term ‘sociolinguistic network’ refers to a linguistically manifested network of social relationships between different people who have agency. It includes identity-forming (e.g., customs, traditions) and cultural (e.g., architecture, holidays, cuisine, costume) components. In the context of the present study, the following mechanisms play an essential role: (1) ‘Deconstruction of sociolinguistic networks’, which concerns the starting point of migration, describes the disassembly or even the dissolution of the original constitutive parts of a network through resettlement. (2) ‘Reconstruction of sociolinguistic networks’, which refers to the destination of migration, describes the efforts of actors in the relocated community to reconstruct constitutive parts of the network from the place of origin. The focus here is on questions of language contact and the influence of the dialectal environment at the place of arrival. Given the empirical material on which the study is based, the use of the term ‘replication of sociolinguistic networks’ seems justified. What we are dealing with here is the phenomenon of simulated authenticity, in which presumed or assumed parts of the presumed original network are replicated at the destination of migration. In the process, parts of the original networks are adopted unchanged and parts are adapted (accommodation). All three mechanisms are derived from the specific circumstances of internal migration in Georgia and are supported by concrete examples in the paper.

2. The Sociolinguistic Portrait after Internal Migration

Internal migration not only reshapes demographic landscapes - it also leaves profound traces on language use, especially on regional dialects. In sociolinguistic terms, the movement of speakers from one region to another initiates a complex process of dialectal contact, adaptation and sometimes preservation. The following paper examines how such internal migration within Georgia affects the linguistic profile of dialects and how spatial shifts produce new forms of linguistic organisation. In order to understand these changes, it is important first to situate them within the broader history and methodology of Georgian dialectology, and to distinguish the different spatial models of dialect existence that result from internal versus external migration.

Georgian dialectology has a 100-year history. It developed in the context of linguistic research and repeated the research pattern of traditional linguistics: describing the linguistic structure of a dialect at all accessible grammatical levels and comparing it with the structures of the standard language. The description of differences and similarities relative to the standard language served to outline an overall dialect continuum. The sociolinguistic aspects played a supporting role in explaining dialect change and dialect contact, as well as the mutual influence of dialect varieties and phenomena such as archaisation, standardisation and analogy.

Migration can be identified as one of the sociological factors that significantly influence the linguistic profile of a dialect. The spatial relationships shifted by migration play a crucial role. In the ideal ‘language world’ without migration, dialectal space can be visualised according to the principle of ‘water circles’: an undulating alternation of strong and weak linguistic features that define a dialectal continuum within a language. Migration appears to be a key sociological factor that corrects this ideal image of realistic language continua. With regard to the dialectal continuum of Georgian, three main models can be established:

- (1) The dialect exists within the historically evolved geographical boundaries.
- (2) The dialect is geographically outside the Georgian area and linguistically isolated in the vicinity of one or more unrelated contact languages (e.g. Fereydani Georgian, Ingilo Georgian, Turkey Georgian).
- (3) The dialect does not exist within the historically evolved geographical boundaries due to internal migration.

The first spatial model can be used to roughly describe all Georgian dialects within Georgia; with the exception of three dialects outside Georgia, all dialects have a connection to the historical area. Particularly in the highland dialects of Khevsurian and Tushish, where resettlement was almost complete, the individual families that remained in the mountains were able to mark the area linguistically and served as points of reference for returnees until recently. Within the framework of the second model, so-called Georgian language islands outside the

Georgian territory can be described: Fereydani Georgian in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ingilo Georgian in Azerbaijan, and the three varieties spoken in Turkey: Taoian, Shavshian and Klarjian (marginally also the varieties of Georgian Mujahir). The third model of spatial relationships between the Georgian dialects refers to some small language islands within the country that have arisen through internal migration. The number of such language islands grew at the end of the 20th Century due to environmental disasters and wars of occupation with the Russian Federation. The geographical distribution of such 'islands' shows the particular concentration in Kakheti and Samtskhe-Javakheti as destinations for internal migration. The internal migrants come from regions with little free arable land and other resources, such as the Imeretian Highlands, Khevsureti, Pshavi, Ratcha, Ajara, Mtiuleti, Gudamakhari, Lechkhumi, Svaneti. The consideration of the language areas created by internal migration as language islands enables the application of research concepts from classical language island research in this specific context.

3. Language Islands

The notion of 'language islands' occupies a unique position at the intersection of sociolinguistics, dialectology and migration studies. Traditionally understood as geographically or politically isolated linguistic communities, language islands offer valuable insights into how linguistic identity is preserved in adverse or assimilative environments. While most studies focus on islands created by international migration, this section examines whether internally migrated dialect communities in Georgia can also be described as language islands. It does so by first outlining the core characteristics of such linguistic formations and then applying these to internal Georgian contexts to assess similarities and differences.

A language island can generally be described as a language area that is geographically distant or politically isolated from its core area, which is why the term 'language island' is not a purely linguistic concept. It encompasses all aspects of the existence of an isolated community of speakers. Research into language islands therefore takes place at the interface of several disciplines and research programmes. According to Mattheier (1994), the essence of a language island lies in the closed community that is mobilised against assimilation. The constant 'vigilance' to preserve identity describes the sociological perspective of language island research and gives it its own position in dialectology. Can the language areas created by internal migration be described as language islands? The two forms of linguistic isolation have some significant overlaps.

The similarity between language islands outside and inside the mainland lies in the fact that the language areas created by internal migration are subject to the same linguistic laws as the classical language islands: they try to maintain the strong emotional ties with the place of origin of migration, to construct a special collective memory and to create a linguistic ecology at the destination as a replica of the place of origin. The main motivation is the same in both cases: Mobilisation against assimilation. The existence of language islands is often described as delayed or failed assimilation (Mattheier 1994), which makes the dissolution of a minority into the surrounding majority a matter of time. The Georgian language islands outside Georgia (Fereydani Georgian, Ingilo Georgian and Turkey Georgian) prove the opposite: they represent a successful isolation or the establishment of an exclusive group identity. They have successfully 'delayed' the abandonment of their own identity in the form of linguistic and cultural heritage for a good four hundred years, and have not been absorbed into the surrounding society as a whole over time. The Georgian language islands represent an uninterrupted effort to establish cognitive (mental awareness), emotional (feeling), sensual (values), and participatory (equal opportunities) ties with the mainland. This results in a weakening of assimilation with the surrounding cultural group(s).

The difference between the language islands outside and inside Georgia is that the 'internally migrated dialects' continue to have contact with the standard language despite their isolation. This possibility does not exist in the language islands outside the national territory, which represent a fundamental change in the language.

It can be assumed that one factor in the ethnolinguistic vitality of the language island is the type of migration: forced migration creates a more rigid framework for preserving the identity of the place of origin of the migration than voluntary migration. In some areas, 80 years since migration is sufficient for almost complete assimilation (migration from Samtskhe-Javakheti to Imereti), while in other areas not even 100 years is sufficient to abandon the dialect of the place of origin (Imeretians in Lagodekhi within the Kakheti region).

The population at the destination of the migration perceives the internal migrants on the basis of linguistic characteristics and adopts these 'foreign' characteristics when interacting with the new neighbours. A woman who was forcibly resettled from Samtskhe-Javakhetia to Guria returned to the place of origin of the migration after almost 40 years and introduced elements of the Gurian dialect into her language. Their former compatriots gave them a nickname - *reize*, a dialectal form of the Standard Georgian word *ratom*, 'why'. The story goes that the nickname was used so widely and intensively that when the person died, no one knew her real name and it was simply invented.

However strong the influence of the surrounding dialect, the link with the original core area remains strong. According to Jorbenadze (1989), Imeretian in the Kharagauli district would be expected to be linguistically closer to the Kartli dialect than the core area of Imeretian in the distant Terjola district. The Kharagauli district borders directly on the Kartli region, while there is no direct geographical transition to the core area in Terjola. Geographical proximity or distance cannot be directly translated into linguistic proximity or distance.

In summary, the Georgian experience shows that language islands — whether formed by internal or external migration — share common features of linguistic preservation, emotional attachment to place, and group identity formation. What distinguishes internal language islands is their sustained contact with the national standard language, which creates hybrid dynamics of both integration and differentiation. The resilience of dialectal features depends on the type of migration and the sociocultural setting at the destination. Even after decades or centuries, such communities often maintain distinct linguistic traits that act as symbolic markers of identity, reinforcing the idea that language islands are as much social constructs as they are linguistic phenomena.

4. The Sociolinguistics of Migration

Migration is never a neutral process; it reshapes not only population structures but also languages, identities and cultural practices. In the Georgian context, migration has been a persistent historical phenomenon, driven by war, empire and state policy, often beyond voluntary choice. This chapter seeks to trace the deep interrelationship between demographic shifts and sociolinguistic consequences. In contrast to classical migration theories that emphasise economic motivation, this study shifts the focus to internal migration and its socio-cultural and geopolitical roots - particularly as they have affected language use and identity in Georgia over the centuries.

Migration is seen as an accompanying process in the dissonant interaction between demography and the economy. The demographic deficits of rich countries are compensated by immigration from poorer countries (Coleman 2004; 2006). Classical migration theories (Lee 1966; Harris & Todaro 1970), as well as more recent ones (Parnreiter 2005), emphasise economic background as the main cause of migration. The reference to migration theories is limited in this study as it deals with internal migration within a country on the one hand, and geopolitical and socio-cultural aspects take precedence over economic aspects.

Georgia has experienced massive demographic change over the last four hundred years or so. Historical processes that fall under the term ‘migration’ can be categorised into various forms, from the migration of prisoners of war to state-ordered ‘demographic annexation’. The wars of conquest waged by the Persian Shah Abbas I in the first two decades of the 17th Century and the constant invasions from the Ottoman Empire turned large parts of the Georgian kingdom into deserted areas. Shah Abbas continued his war policy in the form of demographic restructuring of Georgia. He resettled some 80,000 families, mainly from Kakheti (eastern Georgia) (Davrizhetsi 1969), in various places in Iran, and colonised the land thus freed with North Caucasian tribes of Muslim faith, hoping to achieve greater loyalty to the Persian Empire. With no less vehemence, the Ottoman Empire attempted to create waves of forced migration in Georgia in order to secure a more favourable demographic position in the struggle against the Persian Empire. The Ottoman response to the demographic restructuring of Shah Abbas (Pourtskhvanidze, Beridze, Bakuradze 2023) was the direct occupation of historical provinces and the forced Islamisation of the indigenous population in Adjara, Samtskhe-Javakhia. Their influence extended to the easternmost border of Georgia, Saingilo. This was the home of several generations of crypto-orthodox Christians. The strengthening of the Russian Empire from the 18th Century onwards and its increasing influence in the Caucasus, combined with the simultaneous weakening of the two former competing empires, created the conditions for a completely new and novel migration policy, the long-term consequences of which have had a decisive influence on the demographic, socio-linguistic and socio-cultural landscape of Georgia today.

The state’s planned and violent ‘demographic annexation’ of Georgia was a mixture of military force, imperialist education policies and repressive economic systems. Recent archival material shows how deliberate and motivated the ethnic foreign designations in Russian-language state documents were in order to create a new demographic identity through foreign assignments. The subsequent correction of earlier historical documents with the aim of giving historical weight to the ethnonyms initiated by the Russian state apparatus is also plausible. The successors to this policy of the Russian Empire were the rulers of the USSR. The long-term migrations were declared economically motivated by the Soviet rulers, while the real reasons for the depopulation of the Georgian mountains were clearly political. The last thirty years of the Third Independent Republic (1991-present) brought further waves of migration within Georgia; see Figure 1.

Internal migration between 1991 and 2015 was caused by the two ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia (1991-1994, 2008) and part of Inner Kartli (Tskhinvali region) (1993, 2008), which were fuelled and controlled by Russia. These conflicts resulted in almost half a million direct and indirect internally displaced persons (IDP) in a country with a total population of around four million.

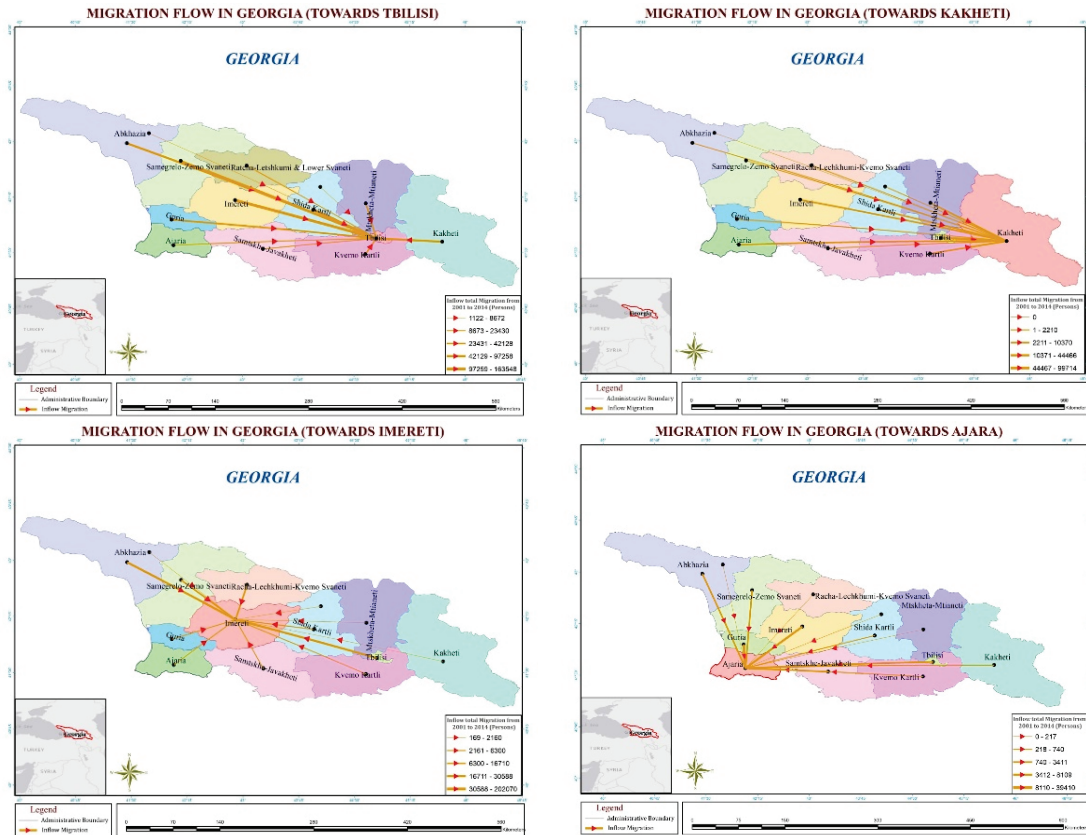


Figure 1. Directions of internal migration 2001-2014

This study focuses on the sociolinguistic outcomes of these waves of migration within Georgia under the Russian Empire, in the first democratic republic (1918-1921), during Soviet rule (1921-1991), and in the subsequent period of independence 1991-2015).

In summary, the historical trajectory of migration in Georgia reflects a series of forced movements and political restructurings that have had a significant impact on the sociolinguistic fabric of the country. Whether under Persian, Ottoman, Russian, Soviet or post-Soviet influence, each wave of migration has left its mark on the linguistic landscape - altering dialect distribution, fostering new linguistic islands and reshaping speaker identities. Internal migration, especially in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has resulted not only in physical displacements but also in lasting cultural and linguistic shifts. These developments underscore the need to consider migration as a central force in the evolution of Georgia's dialectal and sociolinguistic realities.

5. Data Basis

The main source of data for this study is the Migration Database (Beridze et al. 2017), which was created as part of the long-term research project ‘Linguistic Portrait of Georgia’ (2009-2015) (<http://www.corpora.co>). The database is based on empirical field research using a complex questionnaire administered in key regions of internal migration in Georgia. The data is mapped and can be used interactively. The other source of data is the archives of the Georgian Ministry of the Interior. These are mainly documents on the activities of the government in the First Republic (1918-1921), but also newspapers from the 19th Century. Most of these documents were used for the first time in this study from the perspective of internal migration. The data published by the Georgian National Statistical Office should not be neglected. Here the waves of migration are recorded geographically and statistically under various social categories.

6. Sociolinguistic networks in internal migration

Sociolinguistic networks serve as a conceptual bridge between language and the spatio-temporal structures of society. In the context of internal migration, these networks are crucial for understanding how linguistic behaviour is embedded in historically developed and ecologically shaped social relations. This chapter explores how such networks are formed, maintained or disrupted when communities are relocated, especially in a country like Georgia, where geographical diversity and traditional subsistence structures have strongly shaped dialectal variation. It builds on the notion that language not only reflects but also stabilises social relations across time and space.

The formation of social networks can be considered through two heuristic dimensions: temporal and spatial. The interaction between the two dimensions opens up the possibility of narrowing the concept of ‘social network’ thematically and empirically. The attribute ‘social’ in the network concept encompasses spatially determined and temporally established realities. The temporal dimension refers to the significant persistence of spatial processes, so that sustainable and rule-governed structures are formed. The term ‘sociolinguistic network’ therefore refers to the historically developed and spatially determined social contexts with corresponding linguistic representations. There are different interpretations of the dialectal landscape of the Georgian language. From a geographical point of view, Georgian dialects are divided into two main groups: (a) West Georgian and (b) East Georgian dialect groups. However, the dialects that exist outside Georgia are described within these two groups. In the East Georgian dialect group, the Georgian highland dialects form a subgroup, as do the autochthonous (Ingiloyan in Azerbaijan) and allochthonous (Fereydani Georgian in Iran) dialect islands. The number of dialects is mainly influenced by the historical and ethnographical parts of Georgia (for instance, the Imeretian dialect is prevalent in Imereti, located in western Georgia, while the Kakhetian dialect is spoken in Kakheti, situated in the eastern part of the country). The dialectal landscape of Georgian has always been interwoven with the ethnological landscape of the country (see Figure 2). The ethnocultural boundaries, which have always been blurred in Georgia, form the basis for the demarcation of Georgian dialects. Thus, the ethnological and linguistic maps of Georgian look almost identical by tradition.

What can be considered ‘spatial’ or ‘ecological’ in the case of the Georgian language area? The region, 80% of which consists of mountainous highlands, has historically had well-developed transport routes with seasonal accessibility in most parts of the area. The development and consolidation of a millennia-old subsistence economy can be described as a result of the above conditions. Apart from the Black Sea coast and some places in the lowlands, the Georgian-speaking region (as well as the North Caucasus in general) has no market tradition. Historically, it has lacked an important platform for exchange and linguistic contact with the outside world. Another result of the specific economic forms adapted to the ecology are the social hierarchies, which essentially correspond to the enculturation of the mountain landscape. The fact that the mountain ecology has limited vital resources is a natural prerequisite for the establishment of social conventions that serve or ensure the peaceful use of rare resources. Traditional social ties focus on maintaining and respecting boundaries that must not be crossed for reasons of social peace. The resulting social networks serve to resolve potential conflicts quickly and permanently, including through the use of language. One example of this is the “hunter’s language” that functions across languages in the Caucasus and ensures the peaceful shared use of mobile resources (game).



Figure 2. A general map of Georgian dialects

The linguistic strategies that are practiced and regulated form the framework for the social networks that are the end result. The social characteristics of the community in a given ecologically and economically coherent area are reflected in the specific linguistic structures and determine the peripheral ethnic variants of a general culture.

In a nutshell, the concept of sociolinguistic networks allows us to interpret language use as part of broader ecological, social, and historical processes. The Georgian case shows how dialects are closely aligned with ethno-cultural zones, maintained by traditional social hierarchies and ecological constraints. Internal migration disrupts but also reconfigures these networks as speakers negotiate their linguistic identity in new spatial contexts. Far from being passive reflections of change, linguistic strategies actively mediate social integration and boundary maintenance, confirming that language functions as both a product and a regulator of social organisation.

7. The concept of dialectal ‘self-assertion’

Dialectal self-assertion refers to the active linguistic strategy by which speakers consciously or unconsciously maintain distinctive features of their dialect in the face of contact with other varieties. It contrasts with accommodation, which reduces differences. In the Georgian context, self-assertion often emerges as a response to internal migration, where speakers come into close contact with linguistically different communities. Instead of assimilating, they may emphasise certain phonological, lexical or syntactic elements in order to preserve their linguistic identity. This chapter explores a variety of such strategies, based on the concept of “self-confinement” as described by Jorbenadze (1989), and illustrates them with real-life examples and folk linguistic perceptions.

Linguistic accommodation refers to the process of reducing the contrastive features of two contact varieties. The counter-process of accommodation is described in Georgian dialectology as ‘self-confinement’ (Jorbenadze 1989: 37) and refers to the state of language contact in which the process of accommodation has reached a kind of saturation. According to Jorbenadze, ‘mutual influence (including accommodation) is not the only force at work in dialect contact. If it were, the dialects in contact would merge over time into one dialect. However, reality shows that dialects coexist in the long term and have retained their linguistic characteristics. This observation justifies the assumption of an imminent and obvious process of self-limitation of dialects’ (ibid).

In order to understand the process of ‘self-assertion’, it is important to link it to the speakers’ perception of the dialect and to so-called naïve linguistics. It is precisely on this basis that ‘demarcation decisions’ are made: Which elements to block and which not to block, or which elements of one’s own variety to insist on in order to avoid assimilation, are all decided on the basis of naïve judgements.

An example of such naïve linguistic observation is described by Jorbenadze (1989: 38): “If you go from Poni to Marelis, there are the same idioms. But from Marelis the first insignificant differences will appear, until Zestaponi. Our idiom is not so much Imeretic, nor Kartlich... we don’t say *açi* ‘future’ or ‘-qe’, nor ‘*ķe*’, instead we say ‘*ki*’, say *çevida*, *movida*.”

The process of dialectal ‘self-restraint’ keeps adaptation at a level that avoids the complete dissolution of differences, and the features that are considered prototypical are given a special role in differentiation. As an example of this, the case of the Samtskhe-Javakh dialect will be analyzed, which has historically been the geographical focus of internal migration in Georgia. Under the administration of the Ottoman Empire, Samtskhe-Javakheti was a destination for the migration of many ethnic or religious minorities and experienced a significant increase in migration in the 20th Century. In addition to the indigenous population, there are migrants from Imereti, Ajara, Ratcha and Mtiuleti (Beridze 2005).

What is the relationship between Samtskhian-Javakhian and Standard Georgian? As the dialect is relatively well documented, it is possible to reconstruct the stages of development over the last 80 years. Harmonisation with Standard Georgian is now well advanced. Borrowings from Turkish have either been merged or replaced by Standard Georgian.

Due to the morphonematic transformation, the thematic signs *-av*, *-am* and *-eb* is realised as *-an* and *-en* in Samtskhian-Javakhian as in *xat-an-s* instead of the standard word *xat-av-s* ‘he/she/it grinds (something)’ or *aķet-eb-da* > *aķet-en-da* ‘he/she/it did (something)’. Despite this expectation, this feature is rarely encountered and is more common in older speakers.

When switching from the dialect to the standard language, Samtskhian-Javakhian retains the features associated with intonation: *deda* > *deda-i* ‘mother’; *akvs* > *ākvs* ‘he/she/it did (something)’; *zma* > *zmā* ‘brother’. The preservation of the phonetic elements that realise the dialect-specific intonation has an identity-forming function and is therefore at the center of the use of the dialect in various contexts.

Observation in a metropolitan context serves as evidence for this assumption. If an original dialect speaker lives in a large city and uses the standard language in his everyday life, he exercises linguistic empathy towards the dialect speaker by realising precisely this dialect-specific intonation through certain phonetic transpositions. Dialectal accommodation in the context of internal migration is not a straightforward process, but involves the

parallel use of codes. In the household, migrants retain the original dialect code. Outwardly, they appear using the accommodated code. The accommodated code does not match either the standard language or the surrounding dialect at the destination of migration, but it is crucial that it differs from their own (home) code.

In the dialect contacts between Imeretian and Samtskhian, the overlap of the codes is particularly striking. In Samtskhian, the nominative marker /-i/ appears for a few types of nouns (proper names only) in all positions of the noun in the sentence. In Imeretic, on the other hand, the same marker marks all types of nouns (both proper names and appellatives) only in certain positions in the sentence (in the postverbal position). In the course of adaptation, Imeretian generalised the Samtskhe-Javakhian feature and introduced the nominative mark /-i/ in general, regardless of the nominative position in the sentence.

The standard marker in the Meskhian dialect (target environment of Imeretian after migration):

(1)a			(1)b	
<i>peṭre-i</i>	<i>movida</i>	but never	* <i>dana-i</i>	<i>damartḡa</i>
Peter	came		knife	he/she has stabbed me

The standard marker in the Imeretian dialect (migrated dialect):

(2)a			(2)b	
<i>peṭre</i>	<i>movida</i>	but	<i>movida</i>	<i>peṭre-i</i>
Peter	came		came	Peter
<i>dana</i>	<i>damartḡa</i>	but	<i>damartḡa</i>	<i>dana-i</i>
knives	he/she struck me		he/she struck me	knives

After contact with Meskhian, a new standard designation was created in Imeretian:

(3)a			(3)b	
<i>peṭre-i</i>	<i>movida</i>	and	<i>movida</i>	<i>peṭre-i</i>
Peter	came		came	Peter
<i>dana-i</i>	<i>damartḡa</i>	and	<i>damartḡa</i>	<i>dana-i</i>
knives	he/she has stabbed me		he/she has stabbed me	knives

An untouched lexical isogloss between the migrant codes in Samtskhian-Javakhian is the lexeme ‘child’:

At the migration destination	The origin of migration	
Samtskhian-Javakhian	Imeretian	Mtiulian
<i>bavšvi</i>	<i>bovši</i>	<i>balḡi</i>

Such grammatical and lexical contrasts even function as pseudo-ethnonyms - informal labels that function like ethnic or regional group names - or as ethnophaulisms when used in a derogatory or mocking context (cf. Roback 1944; Mullen & Rice 2003). For example, the vocative *balḡo* ‘child’ served as a collective name for migrants from Mtiuleti, while the substituted pronoun *kvten* became a nickname - sometimes derogatory - for an entire village community: The representatives of a village in Samtskhe-Javakheti (for whatever reason) used the substituted form of the plural personal pronoun *tkven* > *kvten*, so that practically all the inhabitants of the village were called by the nickname *kvtena*.

The perceptual-dialectological perspective plays an important role in the internal differentiation of dialectal codes. The differentiation is based on individual lexemes that refer to everyday objects and are therefore generally accessible in terms of content. A village in Samtskhe-Javakheti distinguishes its own subdialectal variety from the other on the basis of metathesis, which is exist ‘there’ and not ‘with us’: -čx- > -xč- as in *čindaxčiri* vs. *čindačxiri* contraction from *čindis čxiri* ‘knitting needles’. The migration history of this village comprises several stages. The place of origin of the migration is in present-day Turkey. Two villages - Khiza and Bavra - moved to Jawacheti, while a generation later they moved on to Aspindza (on the outskirts of Javacheti). The idioms used

by the villagers are now fully assimilated into the Samtskhe-Javakheti dialect; however, their origin can still be identified based on a distinct linguistic feature.

It can be observed that simple linguistic features remain stable over time, resisting the process of assimilation. Naive folklinguistic observations are expressed in the form of poems and passed on orally. The mountain people of Khevsur were almost completely resettled in the Georgian lowlands, in Kakheti, in several waves of migration. A poem by an internal migrant from Khevsureti reads:

*me ḳi čamave ḳaxeta, ḳldet magiera xenia...
xolme' da 'metki' siṭṭvani satkmelad saḳvirelnia.*

'I descended to Kakheti, where fields replaced the rocks,
Looking at the words 'xolme' and 'metki', it closes itself in astonishment' (Shanidze 1931: 678; Arabuli 1998: 17).

For a Khevsurian, the words of the dialectal variety at the destination in Kakheti are as surprising and unusual as the fields are compared to the rocks of his homeland.

This poem is symptomatic for a number of reasons. The speaker, who has emigrated from the Georgian mountains to the lowlands, is surprised by the dialectal characteristics of the speakers at the destination of the migration and emphasises two particles in particular: *xolme* 'now and then' or 'every now and then' and *metki*, literally 'I say', as a univerbation of the citation particle. From the naive linguistic point of view of the migrant from the mountains, these two elements represent the dialectal code most clearly. From a purely grammatical point of view, both cases (*xolme*, *metki*) are relatively peripheral linguistic phenomena. Against this background, there are clear grammatical differences between Khevsurian (mountain dialect - place of origin of migration) and Kakhetian (lowland dialect - place of destination of migration) with regard to the paradigms of important grammatical categories such as tense, aspect and mode. However, such differences are not recognised in dialect contact or are weakened and abandoned after a certain time. The speakers' decision as to what should function as a linguistic difference between two dialect codes in dialect contact is not of a (naive) linguistic but of a socio-linguistic nature.

The lexeme (a compound) *čindačxiri* means 'weaving sticks'. A simple substitution within this word *činda*[cx]*iri činda*[xc]*iri* is sufficient for speakers to completely differentiate its dialect from the contact dialect. Weaving is a relevant socio-economic aspect and lexicons related to this craft are highly frequent compared to other fields. In line with this relevance, the simplest lexical differences represent important aspects of identity.

Observations made during fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2015 as part of the Linguistic Portrait of Georgia project show how deeply rooted and 'untouchable' such folk perceptions of assimilation are. This contrasts with objectively measurable changes, such as the standardisation of entire nominal case paradigms, which have been widely adopted. From a purely linguistic point of view, such decisions are neither predictable nor explainable. The explanation lies outside of grammar: the sociologically determined linguistic decisions of dialect speakers along the contact line serve to identify demarcation elements in order to initiate a counter-process of assimilation. The sum of such markers composes the 'I/we' of a dialect speaker and thus creates the idea of 'not-I/we'.

The naive linguistic analysis and categorisation based on it is, as already mentioned, widespread and persistent. It is particularly evident in relation to the widely separated dialect areas. The eastern dialects of Georgian are characterised by the consistent use of the complement vowel -a (*sad* 'where?' > *sad-a*) and the preverbs *ma-* and *ša-* instead of *mo-* and *šo-* (*mo-iṭane* 'bring it here' > *ma-iṭane* and *še-iṭane* 'bring it in' > *ša-iṭane*). The characteristic feature of Western dialects is the complementary vowel -e (*šen* 'you' > *šen-e*) and the preverbs *me-*; *ču-*; *šo-* instead of *mo-*; *ča-*; *še-* (*mo-iṭana* 'he/she brought it' > *me-iṭana*; *ča-iḡo* 'he/she took it' > *ču-uḡo*; *še-uṭana* 'he/she brought it (in/to)' > *šo-uṭana*).

These characteristics are the basis for recognising and classifying the respective representatives of the dialect areas. They are also used to imitate or simulate one variety or another. In most cases, the imitations and simulations are exaggerated, creating forms that do not actually exist. They can be called pseudo-dialectisms or pseudo-urbanisms. The same phenomena occur when a dialect speaker tries to distance himself from his own variety and adopts the characteristics of the country of destination. The end result is a mixed code that is neither completely different from the original code nor completely overlapping with the target code.

Interestingly, such socio-linguistic markers (lexemes, particles, intonation) become part of anecdotes, imitations, nicknames and other folklore. The social interaction surrounding these communicative genres reinforces the status of the markers and ensures their continued existence.

Another example of a naïve analysis is that in Fereydani Georgian the word *saḳvebi* 'food' is derived from the Masdar form *ḳveba* with the help of the circumfix *sa-ḳveb-i*. The Fereydani Georgians reanalysed the *-eb-*

found in the word stem as a plural sign and derived the singular *saḳve* ‘food’ from the presumed plural form *saḳv-eb-i* ‘food’, which is not a Georgian lexeme.

The most difficult thing for migrants is to adopt spatial names at the destination of migration. This is particularly the case when the migration is compact and the environment of the person encountered is not given, so that the toponyms are learnt on a micro or macro level in the exchange. A language assistant (70) from Giorgitsminda (who migrated from Kaspi) was only 11 years old when his village was resettled. Even at that age, he was able to meticulously list the names of places in his home village with his eyes closed. This makes it all the more astonishing that there is so much confusion about place names at the destination of the migration. Since the original population was no longer there, the information about the place names has not been preserved. When asked how to communicate when a pet is lost, the language assistant replied that they define the house of a particular person or the country road as a fixed spatial point.

The Turkish population of Giorgitsminda was forcibly removed by the Soviet secret service and military. In one night, they were packed into a railway carriage and transported to Kazakhstan. Parallel to the resettlement, the village was repopulated by internal migrants. They arrived in a ghost village with empty houses. There was no one to tell the newcomers the place names or other peculiarities of the village. The logbook of the local collective records that despite these events, agricultural work was not interrupted. This shows the power and the whole machinery of the Soviet state with which these demographic reorganisations were carried out.

These diverse examples - from phonetic distinctiveness and lexical pseudo-ethnonyms to perceptual contrasts and playful metathesis - illustrate the phenomenon of dialectal self-assertion in action. Rather than simply fading under the pressure of contact, dialects demonstrate a form of resilience by preserving salient identity markers and reinterpreting them in new social contexts. This self-assertion is not always systematic or consciously strategic; it often manifests itself through folkloric perceptions, poetic reflections, humorous nicknames or shifts in register. Crucially, these forms of differentiation serve a sociolinguistic function: to mark the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and to maintain a linguistic sense of belonging. Dialect self-assertion thus plays a central role in resisting total assimilation and enables dialect speakers to maintain continuity of cultural and linguistic identity across generations and geographies.

8. Conclusion

Observing the relationship between migration and identity highlights the central role of strong socio-linguistic networks. These networks capture the specific linguistic and cultural features that define group identity. If such networks are successfully maintained after migration, they allow speakers to continue to practice a recognisable version of their original local identity. The first effects of internal migration are typically felt in the place of origin, where dialect diversity tends to decline. This is particularly true of Georgian mountain dialects, many of which have lost their traditional geographical domains as a result of resettlement. The disappearance of dialects is often accompanied by the loss of associated customs, such as burial practices and communal speech rituals. The decline in the everyday use of these dialects reveals the vulnerability of linguistic identities in the face of social change.

At the place of arrival, however, some dialect features take on new significance. Lexical items, particles and intonations that once went unnoticed in the place of origin now stand out in the new environment, where they contrast with the surrounding dialects. These linguistic markers may take on a new symbolic function - not just as remnants of the language, but as instruments of identity preservation and resistance to assimilation. This dynamic is also evident in non-linguistic practices such as funeral traditions or village festivals. Even when rituals from the place of origin are adapted or hybridised at the destination, they often retain key elements - just as dialect speakers selectively retain phonetic or lexical features that mark their difference.

In sum, internal migration reshapes, but does not erase, both linguistic behaviour and social identity. Language becomes a site of negotiation between memory and adaptation. Speakers, consciously or unconsciously, engage in a process of deconstructing, reconstructing and replicating their socio-linguistic network. Through these networks, linguistic elements serve as tools for expressing belonging and difference — and in doing so, they anchor cultural continuity across displacement. Even in the absence of a fully intact dialect, the persistence of speech features in new contexts demonstrates how language remains central to the maintenance of local identity in migratory processes.

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