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## **Vapshe Ara: Attitudes of English Philology Students in Georgia Towards the Russian Language**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the beliefs and attitudes of English Philology students in Georgia towards the Russian language, focusing on Russia's linguistic prestige and history within Georgia, and the current state of Russian-Georgian relations.

The study employs a qualitative research approach through interviews and contrastive analysis to investigate linguistic prestige, models for language context, relevant educational and language policy, and student perspectives. This exploration is rooted in sociolinguistics, though draws from linguistic anthropology, and political science, taking an interdisciplinary approach to the subject. The study seeks to answer various research questions, including the role of Russian in contemporary and historical Georgia, the factors that influence the students' perceptions of the Russian language, and how historical context shapes linguistic attitudes.

The findings suggest that the status of Russian in Georgia reflects the country's historical, cultural, and political context, where the promotion of both Georgian national identity and language, as well as the English language, has led to the marginalization of Russian in most domains. Additionally, the research underscores the significant role of the legacy of the Soviet occupation in shaping the views of English Philology students toward the Russian language. Overall, this article sheds light on the complex relationship between language, politics, and identity in contemporary Georgia.

**Keywords:** Georgia, Language policy, Language prestige

## **1. Introduction**

This research paper focuses on the attitudes of English Philology students in Georgia toward the Russian language. Georgia has a long history of being governed by different empires, resulting in influences from foreign languages such as Farsi, Turkish, and Russian. Currently, English is the most prevalently used foreign language in Georgia. This has resulted in a generational divide between the younger generation, who better understand English, and their elders, who often exhibit superior competence in Russian. Today, Russian is still spoken by a notable minority of the population in Georgia, particularly in urban areas. However, its status as a language of prestige has declined, and it is often viewed as a language associated with the Soviet past and Russian political dominance.

The paper explores the reasons behind this shift, including the rise of Georgian national identity, the politicization of language issues, changing governmental goals, and the emergence of English as a global language. It also considers the role of Russian in contemporary Georgia, its historical significance, and its relevance in the current state of Russian-Georgian relations, especially within the context of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The research will use qualitative interviews and contrastive analysis to examine linguistic prestige, models for language context, relevant educational and language policy, and student perspectives. Ultimately, the paper seeks to assess the current state and future of English and Russian language use in Georgia, considering political preferences, linguistic prestige, models of language contact, and Russian-Georgian slang.

## **2. Methodology**

This article is a mixed contrastive analysis, building on previous theoretical and experimental work on Georgian education policy and language prestige, open-source quantitative data from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers' (CRRC) Caucasus Barometer on language competence and educational attainment in Georgia, as well as first-hand qualitative interviews conducted with English Philology students at TSU. These interviews were conducted as group-based discussions with first-year English Philology students in English language classrooms. This population of young educated Georgians is the most suitable to investigate the effects of language policy in the educational system they were raised in. Further, as students of English Philology, this study population is uniquely positioned in their metalinguistic cognizance of language prestige and

linguistics codes.

Approximately 11 classes with an average of 10 students from various regions of Georgia were asked about why they chose to study English philology, the other languages they speak and are engaged in studying at university, their self-reported Russian competence, and their opinions about the Russian language and its role in their lives as philology students. Further, their peer interactions in class were observed for a 3-week period. In particular, attention was paid to their use of Russian loanwords in Georgian, their use of the Russian language, and metalinguistic statements made between students about their perceptions of the aforementioned languages.

More informal discussions about language, politics, and identity during my time as a Fulbright English Language assistant grant recipient in Tbilisi were also referenced. The aforementioned interviews with students, when taken alongside additional first-hand informal conversations, lead to a sample of about 150 Georgian youth, ranging from the ages of 17-23, that shared their experiences and perspectives with me. Tbilisi is the cultural and political center of Georgia. Though language practices and perceptions in the capital city of Tbilisi do not necessarily reflect those found in the smaller towns in Georgia, it remains an effective setting for a study of how secondary language policy and practice function.

All the first-hand interview participants, in both the classroom and informal settings, were provided with a verbal acknowledgement that the discussion was purely for research purposes, not mandatory, and that all information would be anonymized and analyzed as aggregated data.

Lastly, qualitative data was analyzed from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) Caucasus Barometer time-series data from the years 2008 and 2019. The Caucasus Barometer is a Georgia-wide annual household survey about social economic issues and political attitudes conducted by the CRRC. This survey utilized multi-stage cluster sampling with preliminary stratification. The sample size of the Caucasus Barometer is an average of 1,957 annual respondents between the years 2008 and 2019. The respondent population is made up of adults (18 years and over) from across Georgia, excluding populations living in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This survey data is publicly accessible online through CRRC-Georgia's Online Data Analysis tool (ODA), created to support access to empirical data about the South Caucasus. Though data from Caucasus Barometer surveys after 2019 is not yet publicly available, the ODA still provides an invaluable historical overview of Georgian public

sentiment and linguistic attitudes within a recent 11-year period.

### **3. Discussion**

#### *3.1. Language Prestige*

Language prestige and attitudes are crucial aspects of language acquisition, language policy, and language maintenance. Language prestige is an important phenomenon in sociolinguistics, referring to the social and cultural value that is placed on a particular language or dialect within a given speech community. Language prestige can vary across different contexts and communities, and it can have substantial implications for language use and attitudes. In multilingual societies, language prestige can be a complex issue, as different languages or dialects may have distinct levels of prestige depending on factors such as historical context, political power, and cultural associations.

Linguistic prestige can be overt or covert, with the former being recognized and acknowledged by the wider society, and the latter being valued by a specific group or community, but not recognized by the larger speech community.

Overt linguistic prestige is often associated with social status, education, and power. It is typically associated with standard or prestigious varieties of a language. For example, in the United States, standard American English is often viewed as the most prestigious variety of English, and it is the variety that is most commonly taught in schools and used in formal settings. Those who speak the standard or prestigious variety of a language are often seen as more educated, intelligent, and competent than those who speak non-standard or stigmatized varieties (Eckert, 2008). As a result, people who speak non-standard varieties may face discrimination in education, employment, and social settings (Eckert, 2008).

Covert linguistic prestige is typically associated with non-standard or stigmatized varieties of a language. For example, in many African American communities in the United States, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is viewed as a valuable and meaningful way of communicating, despite its stigmatized status in mainstream society (Labov, 1972). Covert prestige is often associated with social identity and solidarity. Speakers of non-standard varieties, such as AAVE, may view their way of speaking as a salient aspect of their identity and may use it as a means of signaling their membership in a particular group (Labov, 1972).. In this way, non-standard varieties can serve as markers of social identity and may be valued by speakers,

even if they are not valued by the wider society.

This is particularly evident in the case of Russian in Georgia; the prestige of Russian has been a complex and contested issue, shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors (Fishman, 1977). Georgia is a country with a diverse linguistic landscape, where multiple languages, including Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Russian, are spoken. The Georgian language is the official language of the country, and it plays a central role in the construction of national identity and culture.

The status of Russian in Georgia has been unstable in the post-Soviet era, as the language has both positive and negative connotations in different social domains (Sherouse, 2014). The status of Russian has been in decline since the collapse of the Soviet Union, during which Russian was the lingua franca, as Georgia has sought to promote the use of the Georgian language and to distance itself from Russian influence. The increased promotion of English as a foreign language in the last 10 years has exacerbated this decline. This ideology of replacement, in which English is seen as a higher-status language than Russian, endures, although, in use, Russian and English occupy very different functions, niches, and sets of ascribed values (Kleshik, 2010).

### *3.2. Russian in Georgia*

Linguist Susan Gal has argued that the evaluation of linguistic codes is a response to the political-economic order. In particular, she has claimed that code-switching, the process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting, is reflective of resistance to the dominant political and social order (Gal, 1987). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the ways in which political relations between states inform the uses and evaluations of linguistic codes.

Russian has been an influential language in Georgia since the 19th century when the Russian Empire annexed the country (Sherouse, 2014). The incorporation of the Kartli-Kakheti Georgian kingdom (ქართლ-კახეთის სამეფო, kartli-kaxeti samepo) into the Russian Empire was decreed in 1801. Later, in 1921, the Red Army invaded the then independent Democratic Republic of Georgia and a Soviet government was installed. During the Soviet era, although Russian was not as actively used at the household level as in other Soviet republics, it often dominated the state agencies, scientific institutions, and the Georgian intelligentsia (Cornell,

2009). As such, Russian became the dominant language of politics, education, and culture (Cornell, 2009). The term ‘Russification’ can be applied here, defined, within this context, as the forcible imposition of the Russian language and culture at the expense of the native language (Rannut, 2012). ‘Russification’ (обрусевание, obrusevanie) can also be extended beyond a linguistic ideology, to the process whereby non-Russians are transformed objectively and psychologically into Russians (Rannut, 2012). During the Soviet Union, language was a means of domination and hegemony; a subtle combination of coercion, pressure, and consensus. (Rannut, 2012). Through the standardization of the literary language and literacy campaigns, the government sought to build a new Soviet speech community with Russian at its core (Sherouse, 2014).

However, after Georgia gained independence in 1991, the status of Russian began to decline, as the country sought to promote the use of the Georgian language and to reduce its dependence on Russian resources and markets (Cornell, 2009). This decline was accompanied by a rise in anti-Russian sentiment, fueled by political tensions and territorial disputes between Georgia and Russia (Maisuradze, 2022). Russian was increasingly associated with the image of an aggressive and authoritarian state that threatened the sovereignty and integrity of Georgia (Artoni, 2020). Moreover, the rise of nationalism in Georgia and the desire to distance itself from the Soviet legacy contributed to the marginalization of Russian and the elevation of Georgian as the emblematic language of national identity and cultural heritage (Kleshik, 2010). In the political sphere, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War marked a turning point in the relations between Georgia and Russia and intensified the anti-Russian sentiment in Georgia (Darchiashvili, 2018). In the economic sphere, the transition to a market-oriented economy led to the rise of Georgian-language business and media, which further promoted the use of Georgian and reduced the demand for Russian (Robinson, 2010). In the cultural sphere, the promotion of Georgian national identity and culture led to a decline in the use of Russian in literature, music, and other artistic domains.

In an article about nation-building in Georgian and the role of language, Graham Smith et al. discuss how the use of the Russian language was conceptualized during the early Soviet period. They characterize Georgian society as "highly language conscious" and share the following example to illustrate the realization of this consciousness on language policy:

“So high a priority was attached to the reinstatement of the Georgian language during the brief period of independence (1918-1921) from the Soviet Union that N. Chkheidze, the chairman of the National Council, wrote to the Georgian Technical Society on 31 May, 1918, just five days after Georgia declared independence, to ask for assistance in organizing the mass conversion of Russian typewriters to a Georgian font as quickly as possible. Attempts after 1921 to reintroduce Russian were resisted by Georgian communists as well as by the intelligentsia, to the point where Sergo Orzhonikidze, first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, had to remind Georgians that Russian was not 'the language of oppression', but the 'language of the October Revolution.’” (Smith et al. 1998:171)

The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine has had a significant impact on the use of the Russian language in Tbilisi, Georgia. As a result of the conflict, anti-Russian sentiment has risen in Georgia, particularly among the younger generation. This is due, in part, to the increasing identification of Russian with the conflict and the associated negative perceptions of Russian influence. A recent survey found that 87% of Georgians view the war in Ukraine as “their own war with Russia” (Maisuradze, 2022). Less than 14 years since the Russian invasion of Georgia, Georgians are uneasy about the dramatic influx of Russians— an estimated 222,274 people entered Georgia from Russia in September 2022 alone, according to the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs. Statistics aside, this new Russian-speaking presence is increasingly palpable. According to one Russian asylum seeker in Georgia, “You go to buy something for dinner, you walk into the supermarket or into a shop and you hear Russian words and see Russian faces. In cafes, everywhere. It's a new reality for Georgians, too” (Maisuradze, 2022).

The use of Russian in Tbilisi has been a source of controversy, with some viewing it as a symbol of Russian influence and oppression, while others see it as a natural part of Tbilisi's cultural heritage (Maisuradze, 2022). On the one hand, Russian is seen as a reminder of Georgia's past struggles under Russian rule and the ongoing tensions between the two countries. On the other hand, it is viewed by some as a means of communication and cultural exchange, particularly with Russia and other countries in the region.

However, despite the strong policy of ‘derussification' and the investment in the promotion of the English language, Russian still plays a relevant role within Georgian society, even among

the younger generations; the status of Russian still has some prestige among certain social groups and domains (Kukhianidze, 2019). Russian is still widely spoken in certain regions of Georgia, especially in the capital city of Tbilisi, where the Russian-speaking minority constitutes a significant part of the population (Kukhianidze, 2019). Moreover, as a result of increased economic and cultural ties with Russia, Russian is still a significant language of media, literature, and science in several domains, and some Georgians still view Russian as a language of culture and refinement (Cornell, 2009). In some cases, knowledge of Russian can also provide access to better job opportunities, especially in fields such as diplomacy, business, and academia (Maisuradze, 2022). Georgia's ambition to become a major tourist center is another pragmatic intensive for many to not forget the Russian language (Maisuradze, 2022). Significant revenue enters Georgia from Russian-speaking former-Soviet states. In this regard, the Russian language has a practical use. Russian language skills are a mandatory requirement for those who seek jobs in hospitality and tourism (Maisuradze, 2022).

Though in an increasingly limited capacity, Russian is still used as a tool for communication between a minority of the Georgian population and their neighbors (Artoni, 2020). In education, for example, it can be studied as an optional second foreign language up to the 5th class (Pavlenko, 2011). There are still Russian schools in Georgia, where students are not only ethnic Russians but also Assyrians, Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, as well as Georgians, whose parents decided to educate their children in Russian for a variety of reasons (Pavlenko, 2011). Further, some Georgian-speakers utilize Russian as a means of inter-ethnic discourse with their regional neighbors; Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Ukrainians, and Kazakhs. Russian (Artoni, 2020). Therefore, if the Russian language is forgotten, there likely will be ramifications for economic, political, and social communication in the region (Maisuradze, 2022).

### *3.3. Prestige in Georgia*

In Georgia, the Georgian language enjoys overt linguistic prestige and is the language of instruction in schools and official government documents. The Georgian language has been historically privileged over other languages spoken within the country, such as Russian. Many scholars have identified the Georgian language as a central component of definitions of Georgianness (ქართველობა, 'kartveloba') throughout history, in both top-down policies as well as informal, non-institutional preconceptions (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011). This framework



approaches language through the lens of identity, as a medium through which members of a speech community simultaneously experience collective belonging and personal self-definition. Knowing Georgian has long been a dominant sign of being Georgian, in addition to ethnic, territorial, or religious claims to Georgianness (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011). Russian, however, was the language of the former Soviet Union. During the Soviet era, the Russian language was taught in schools and used in official documents, making it the dominant language of politics and education. While Russian lost its official status in Georgia after independence, it has not disappeared from the public domain, especially in urban areas and by the ethnic Russian minority (Gabunia, 2019). Despite the loss of official status, Russian continues to hold a degree of overt linguistic prestige in Georgia due to its historical association with education, literature, and science (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011).

In addition to the overt prestige of the Georgian language, Russian still holds a degree of covert linguistic prestige among certain groups in Georgia. For example, some Georgians, especially members of older generations (старая гвардия, ‘staraja gvardija’) view the ability to speak Russian as an index of cultural knowledge and sophistication (Pavlenko, 2011). Additionally, many ethnic Russians living in Georgia continue to use Russian as a means of expressing their cultural identity (Cornell, 2009). However, the use of Russian in Georgia can also be associated with a lack of integration and assimilation into Georgian society (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011). As a result, the use of Russian in public settings can be met with suspicion or hostility from some Georgians who view it as a sign of disloyalty or a lack of commitment to the national identity (Cornell, 2009).

This is especially true within the context of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and an overwhelmingly pro-Ukrainian Georgian vox populi (Maisuradze, 2022). Indeed, the popular social campaign slogan “I am Georgian and my country is occupied by Russia,” is often heard at mass protests and seen in tags all over Tbilisi walls. This contemporary context is of specific interest, as the impact of this wartime migration on the prestige of Russian in Georgia is materializing in real-time and holds consequential implications for the geo-political future of Georgian foreign relations.

#### *3.4. Russian Georgian Language Contact*

To further conceptualize Russian-Georgian language contact, one might look to Susan

Philips' 'ecosystems' model of ideological diversity (Philips, 2004). Through the plant and ecosystem metaphor, Philips moves beyond the limitations of the water metaphor, or 'flow' model of contact, propagated by Appadurai in 1990.

"[...] just as plants enter into ecological relationships with other plants as they colonize new environments, so, too, do ideas enter into particular configurations as they colonize discourse" (Philips, 2004:233)

"[i]deologies are like plant species, entering into and inhabiting different discourse environments" (Philips, 2004:247)

Through the source domain of ecosystems, Philips emphasizes issues of compatibility. Extralinguistic factors such as history, geography, politics, religion, and culture determine whether new ideological presences can develop, and the contexts in which they flounder or flourish (Philips, 2004). This model conceptualizes the target domain of languages as living and malleable entities, not solidified objects that clash with one another, as previous models had. This variable ecosystem-based metaphor, divergent from the Newtonian colliding-balls model of language contact prevailing in language contact literature in linguistics and linguistic anthropology, more fully encapsulates the historical remnants of languages in contact by understanding them as vertically-arranged ecosystems; language practices cannot be extracted from their environments.

### *3.5. Language and Education Policy in Georgia*

Georgia is a multilingual country with a diverse linguistic ecosystem. Georgian is the principal language of the Kartvelian language family, and it is spoken by 90% of the population of 3.7 million (Radjabzade, 2021). As enshrined in Article 4 of the Constitution of Georgia, Georgian is the official language of the country, and the co-official language in Abkhazia, along with Abkhazian. The Georgian government has established several language policies aimed at promoting the use and preservation of the Georgian language. The Law on the State Language of Georgia, which was adopted in 1997, established Georgian as the official language of the country and mandated its use in all official government documents and proceedings (Van der Wusten, 2018). The law also established the Georgian Language Commission, which is responsible for promoting the use of the Georgian language and for developing policies aimed at protecting and preserving the language (Radjabzade, 2021). In addition to the Law on the State Language, there

are several other laws and policies aimed at promoting the use of the Georgian language. For example, the Law on Education, which was adopted in 2005, mandates that the Georgian language be the primary language of instruction in all schools in the country (Van der Wusten, 2018). The law also establishes the Georgian language as a mandatory subject in all schools, and it requires that all students achieve a certain level of proficiency in the language to graduate.

In addition to promoting the Georgian language and English language teaching, the Georgian government has also implemented policies aimed at preserving multilingualism within the population by supporting other foreign languages such as German and Russian (Nodia, 2009). Russian language programs are especially prominent, as it remains the second most widely spoken language in Georgia (Amirejibi-Mullen, 2011). In recent years, in regions where Russian is still widely spoken, instruction in Russian is paired with promotion of the study of Georgian language and culture (Amirejibi-Mullen, 2011).

In a deliberate and recent shift away from a former Soviet identity, English is being emphasized as the default second language of 21st-century Georgia (Robinson, 2010). English is now compulsory in all schools from Grade 1 to Grade 12, and the national curriculum for the English language makes reference to listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Maisuradze, 2022). The aim of the national curriculum, overseen by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, is for school graduates to achieve at least a B1 level in English (Radjabzade, 2021). According to former Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, Dmitry Shashkin, an ethnic Russian:

“We’re a free and independent country and our people are free and independent. It's their choice of which language to learn. English opens many doors. Georgia doesn't have oil, Georgia doesn't have natural gas. The resource we have is our people, the intellectual potential of our country.” (Robinson, 2010).

The language policies and educational policies in Georgia have important implications for education in the country. The promotion of the Georgian language in schools is seen as essential for maintaining the country's national identity and for promoting social cohesion.

### 3.6. *Student Choices and Perspectives*

The English Philology Department at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU) is one of the most prestigious departments in Georgia. The department's primary goal was to

provide training for English language teachers in Georgia. Over the years, the department has evolved to become a center for research and education in the fields of English language and literature.

Students in the department are required to take a wide range of courses in English language, linguistics, and literature, as well as courses in subjects such as philosophy, history, and social sciences. Students are also given the ability to study additional foreign languages, such as German, Turkish, Portuguese, French, and more. English is overwhelmingly the most widely studied foreign language at TSU. Students seeking entry to university take a compulsory language exam. Although this language component may be in English, Russian, French, or German, 80% of school graduates choose English (Radjabzade, 2021). Students of the many Georgian-medium programs at TSU also have the opportunity to take foreign language courses, and although a number of languages are available, over 90% select English (Radjabzade, 2021).

Studying a foreign language is a common choice among linguistics students, who are often passionate about language learning and desire to explore new cultures. The decision to study a particular language can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including personal interests, career goals, and perceptions of language prestige (Fishman, 1977).

First, personal interest is a key factor that influences the language choices of linguistics students. Many students choose to study a particular language because they are fascinated by the culture, history, or literature associated with that language. For example, a student interested in Japanese anime and manga might choose to study Japanese, while a student interested in European history and art might choose to study French or Italian. This interest-driven motivation is an important factor in language learning success, as it provides students with the intrinsic motivation they need to sustain their efforts and overcome the challenges of learning a new language.

Second, career goals are another important factor in language choice. Many linguistics students choose to study a language because they believe it will enhance their employability or open up new career opportunities. For example, a student interested in international business might choose to study Mandarin Chinese, as China is a major player in the global economy. This career-oriented motivation is also important in language learning success, as it provides students with a clear goal and a practical reason for learning the language.

Third, perceptions of language prestige also play a role in language choice. Students may choose to study a language perceived as prestigious or avoid a language that is stigmatized or associated with low social status. For example, English is perceived as a prestigious language due to its global dominance, while regional languages may be deemed informal or not worthy of academic study.

Students entering university now were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Robinson, 2010). The internet, Western pop culture, the rise of English as a global language, and the aftermath of the deterioration in political relations with Russia since the 2003 Rose Revolution and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War are now more salient ecological influences, predisposing students to prefer English over Russian (Darchiashvili, 2018). According to an 8th grader at a Tbilisi public school, “We need Russian only at school. As for English, we watch movies and read books. And also, on the Internet, everything is available in English.” (Maisuradze, 2022). However, these language attitudes and preferences are not always straightforward.

The views of English philology students towards the Russian language reflect the complex interplay of linguistic, social, and political factors that shape language attitudes. Throughout several qualitative interviews, TSU English philology students exhibit a keen intrinsic motivation to study English, though English is just equally considered to be a practical choice in their career and personal goals. Over the course of several discussions, different students shared with me their passion for Thai due to their love of Thai dramas, their love of Japanese due to their passion for anime, their fascination with Mandarin Chinese due to its incredible history and rigor, and more. It seems their intrinsic motivation is more strongly activated by these additional foreign languages. Perceptions of language prestige are also clear in the classroom. Students will often categorize English as “beautiful” and speaking the language as “fun” and “pleasant.” Russian, in contrast, is categorized as “horrible” and an object of “hate.” While a handful of students expressed positive attitudes toward Russian, citing its literary and cultural heritage, most expressed negative attitudes. Students were quick to point out the connection between the Russian language and Russian political domination and cultural imperialism., expressing their opposition to the politics of the Russian Federation and disdain for the amplified presence of the

Russian language on the streets of Tbilisi. Therefore, the attitudes of the students seem to mirror those of the population. This is particularly of note because these students will soon graduate from a prestigious university and seek jobs in the public and private sectors, in spheres ranging from politics to tourism; the motivations, values, and perspectives of the sample group of this analysis will likely meaningfully impact the future of Georgia.

### *3.7. Quantitative Analysis*

Time-series datasets from the Caucasus Barometer provide key insight into the Georgian populations' language competence and linguistic perceptions. In 2019, 87% of respondents in Georgia self-reported some level of knowledge of the Russian language, and only 13% reported no basic knowledge (Caucasus Barometer, KNOWRUS). From 2008-2019, the average percentage of self-reported knowledge of Russian in Georgia was 89%, indicating relative stability in competence amongst respondents, despite fluctuating political circumstances and dominant cultural influences. Russian was, therefore, still seen as a meaningful part of the respondents' linguistic background. Between 2008 and 2019, self-reported knowledge of at least "some level of knowledge" of English increased from 28% to 41% (Caucasus Barometer, KNOWENG). Responses for "no basic knowledge" decreased by 13%, as well. This improvement in self-reported English competency is slight but steady, indicating a positive future projection. This result may seem like a relatively minor increase relative to the economic, cultural, and political shifts and transformations that Georgia has undergone in this 11-year period. However, other statistics illustrate a different story. In 2012, when asked which foreign language should be mandatory in schools, votes for English were at an all-time low, while Russian was at an all-time high (52% and 32% respectively) (Caucasus Barometer, FLMANDSC). After 2012, the trends permeated, with English rising to an all-time high and Russian falling to an all-time low (77% and 13%, respectively, in 2019). Therefore, not only has English been consistently ranked as the most popular choice for mandatory foreign language classes in schools since 2008, but competence in English has also been steeply increasing, while Russian has faced an inverse effect.

If one transposes this data with shifts in Georgian language and educational policy, it is possible to suggest causation between major political transformations and language attitudes, as 2012 saw the inauguration of a new government. The evidence from this study reinforces the

initial hypothesis and qualitative observations that the motivation that drives Georgian students in learning English and Russian as foreign languages is predominantly extrinsic: increasing their job opportunities, getting high marks, and better education in English-speaking universities in Georgia or other countries.

### *3.8. Youth and Russian-Georgian slang*

The theoretical framework of ‘register’ can be invoked to discuss the subsets of the lexicon that are known to speakers by the terms slang, argot, barbarism, and jargon. In sociolinguistics, this dominant mode for analyzing these linguistics elements is defined by the degree of formality and choice of vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax, according to the communicative purpose, social context, and social status of the user. This non-standard language is often assessed negatively, and criticized for being vulgar, unprofessional, or unintelligent. However, slang also serves important functions such as creating social bonds and signaling group identity. Slang can be used to convey humor, irony, or subversion, and it can be a way for speakers to assert their individuality or resistance to mainstream culture. This lexicon plays an important role in the way language is used and the way people perceive a language and its users.

One of the only discussions of the categorical uses of Russian-Georgian slang and barbarisms in Georgia comes from the sociologist Lika Tsuladze (2011). Her basic argument is that Russian Georgian slang is used to insult or mock someone for "provincialism", whereas English-Georgian slang is used to make the speaker appear "cool" or “intellectual” (Tsuladze, 2011). Tsuladze's argument is posited on politics and social status as the underlying, motivating factor, where Russian code is viewed as directly and monolithically indexing Russia, while English code as indexing the United States— which are then viewed by Tsuladze as representing the enemy and the protector, respectively (Tsuladze, 2011). Further, Russian-originated terms such as *vapshe* (ვაფშე, from вообще), *kharasho* (ხარაშო, from хорошо), and *k'aroche* (კაროჩე, from короче) are used very commonly in Georgian. Tsuladze indicates that these loan words are neutral and do not usually signal strong political alignments. For example, Marina Beridze, host of the television show ‘Geost’ari 2011,’ Georgia's version of American Idol, responded to an inquiry "rogor khart?" 'how are you?' with "nichivo, nela, nela" 'nothing, slowly, slowly'. The use of *nichio* (ნიჩიო) (from Russian ничего, nechego) does not signal a political alignment but has come to be a way to express a relaxed, joking, or slightly ironic tone

(Tsuladze, 2011).

During my observations of English Philology students, these Russian-Georgian slang words were common in peer-to-peer interactions. Interestingly, although most students self-reported negative perceptions of the Russian language and Russian-language speakers, and indicated their own Russian competence as relatively limited, most expressed receptive capacity and were positively engaged when Russian was used in class. These uses were either as a reference to a cultural item such as a Soviet cartoon or film, or as a translation of English idiom or barbarism. A possible explanation of this contradiction is that these limited code-switched uses of the Russian language were more saliently indexes for a past childhood experience or an object of nostalgia, rather than a signal of political alignment, especially within the physical context of a space of Georgian-majority interlocutors. As such, slang can serve important functions such as facilitating communication within particular groups, signaling group identity, and creating social bonds. It is important to recognize the role of slang in language attitudes and the ways in which context influences a speaker's choice of lexicon.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The status of Russian in Georgia is a complex and evolving issue that reflects the historical, cultural, and political context of the country. Language prestige is an essential aspect of language attitudes and language policies in multilingual societies, shaping the social value of different languages and their use in different domains.

The results of this study have strong limitations, such as the informal nature of the first-person qualitative data-collection mechanism, the limited number of interview participants, and the fact that the interviews were conducted only in Tbilisi, the most urban and globalized area of Georgia, without considering other regions and rural areas, and only among university students who were specializing in English philology. Further research could be conducted amongst English philology students in regional universities in Georgia, as well as with a wider range of ages, to receive a more nuanced view of linguistic perception and the ever-shifting role of the Russian language in Georgia.

In closing, the decline of Russian in Georgia reflects the desire to assert Georgian national identity and distance the country from the Soviet legacy and Russian influence. Though the Russian language retains some prestige in certain social groups and domains, reflecting the



enduring influence of Russian occupation and the pragmatic benefits of knowing Russian, its status is on the decline. Intensified by the 2022 Russian occupation of Ukraine and the resulting migration of Russian-speakers into Georgia, Russian has been once-again underscored as indexing the Russian Federation and political occupation. This linguistic occupation of a former colonial space may be less violent than artillery but is nevertheless saliently unwelcome by the majority of the Georgian-speaking population. The dynamics between Russian and Georgian are continually subject to economic and war-time shifts, highlighting the ongoing importance of rigorous data collection and appropriate accounting. Understanding language prestige in the context of Georgia is crucial to the development of language and educational policies that promote security and national identity, but also multilingualism, linguistic diversity, and intercultural communication. As of now, the future is undetermined, and important lessons prevail from the past.

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**Appendix A.**

*Figure 1. Caucasus Barometer Georgia: Which Foreign Language Should be Mandatory in Schools? (%)*

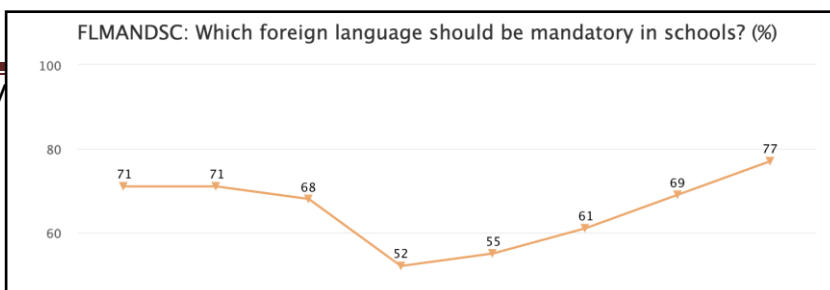
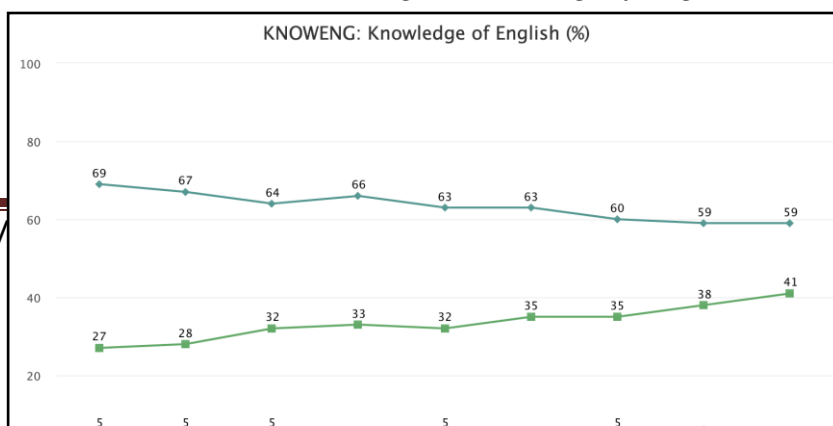


Figure 2. Caucasus Barometer Georgia: Knowledge of Russian (%)



Figure 3. Caucasus Barometer Georgia: Knowledge of English (%)





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