An Exploration of the Urban Linguistic Landscape of Batumi:
The Case of Luka Asatiani Street

Karina Vamling (Malmö)

The linguistic landscape is formed by the multitude of linguistic signs present in the public space. Researchers have adopted different approaches to the use of the concept "linguistic landscape".[1] A widely used definition of the notion of linguistic landscape proposed by Rodrigue Landry and Richard Bourhis is:[2]

> The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration.

The approach to the linguistic landscape in this study is wider than the definition above, as it includes all signs ranging from official and commercial signs to private notes, signs, and graffiti. Thus, it reflects both official and professional as well as private (written) language use and language choices in the public space of the community. Furthermore, Landry and Bourhis point at the important symbolic function of the linguistic landscape, involving a competition for visibility among languages: "The share of visibility allocated to rival languages on private and government signs can be seen as a product of competing forces exerted by dominant and subordinate language groups inhabiting a given territory".[3]

The Georgian language has a long history of competition with Russian in Georgia. The 19th century was characterised by Russification, but in the latter part of the century there was a strong movement under the writer Ilia Chavchavadze to spread and strengthen the Georgian language.[4] Extensive language reforms were carried out after the Russian revolution, during Georgia's brief period of independence, to develop the status of Georgian as a state language,[5] which were met with setbacks following the Bolshevik invasion in 1921.

After increasing Russification during the Soviet era, the struggle for the status and use of the Georgian language again became an important part of the independence movement in the last years of the Soviet era.[6] A noticeable feature in the early period was the change of street signs. The Soviet Georgian-Russian signs (cf. Fig. 1)[7] were gradually replaced by Georgian-English or Georgian monolingual signs (cf. Figures 2 and 3), reflecting the changes in the country's language policy. The consolidation of Georgian as a state language continued in the post-Soviet period, along with the promotion of English as the first foreign language, at the expense of Russian.[8]

---

[1] For a discussion of definitions, see Brito 2016; Gorter & Cenoz 2023; Grzech & Dohle 2018.
[2] Landry & Bourhis 1997: 25.
[3] Landry & Bourhis 1997: 29.
[4] Tabidze 1999.
[5] Manjgaladze & Chanishvili 2021.
[6] Vamling 1990.
[7] All images are by the author.
[8] Gabunia & Gochitashvili (2020).

Fig. 1: Bank office in Soviet Georgia, end of the 1980s. Signs with parallel texts in Georgian and Russian

Fig. 2: Early post-Soviet period: old Georgian-Russian street signs being replaced

Fig. 3: Current bilingual Georgian-English street sign

In the last post-Soviet decades, the use of Russian in Georgia decreased, with a considerable outmigration of Russians from Georgia. However, with the tourist boom in recent years and the high increase in the number of speakers of Russian in Georgia following February 2022,[9] it is to be expected that this development will have an impact on the language situation in Georgia,[10] both from a short-term and long-term perspective.

The present study sets out to explore patterns of multilinguality in a case study based on fieldwork and aims at detecting tendencies in the domains of language use in the public space. The aim is to find out which languages are used and which languages dominate on mono-, bi-, and trilingual signs. Are there any observable tendencies with respect to the choice of language(s) in certain discourses? Do signs used in official top-down communication show any particular characteristics? In which contexts do signs involving Russian occur, and are there any observable patterns?

1. Case study

For practical reasons, the research site for data collection has to be limited; a neighbourhood, a region, a shopping mall, a market, an airport, a street, etc. could be chosen. The present study is a case study of one street, which means that the research site is limited by the boundaries of the street. Such a limitation of investigating signs in one street is not unique; it has been done by, for instance, Yehudit Rosenbaum and colleagues.[11]

The research site has not been chosen randomly, but it goes without saying that it may not claim representativity of the linguistic landscape of the city as a whole. The street chosen starts in the most prestigious part of the city by the seaside boulevard, passes the 19th-century City Hall,

---

[9] Alibegashvili & Tetradze 2023.
[10] Tsaava 2023.
[11] Rosenbaum et al. 1977.

crosses several major streets, and ends in a predominantly residential area closer to the hills. Luka Asatiani Street, named after the city's first mayor, is one of the older streets in central Batumi. In Soviet times, this was Japaridze Street, and during the 19th century, it was named Sheremetiev Street.[12] It is located in the mid-central part of the city, with the oldest part of the city at the harbour to the north and the newest commercial and residential neighbourhoods to the south. Proximity to the Black Sea coast and the beach can be seen as a measure of how prestigious the location is, among other things, in terms of property prices.

2. Fieldwork and data collection

The character of Luka Asatiani Street differs markedly from one end to the other. For that reason, prior to the data collection, the street was divided into four sections (marked in colour on the map, Fig. 4), where it was expected to see different tendencies in the distribution of languages: (1) section from the seaside boulevard to the City Hall, which is the oldest and most prestigious part; (2) section from the City Hall to the central Chavchavadze Avenue; (3) section from Chavchavadze Avenue to Giorgi Brtskinvale (ბრწყინვალე) Street, featuring several new and expensive buildings; (4) section closer to the hills with mainly residential buildings.
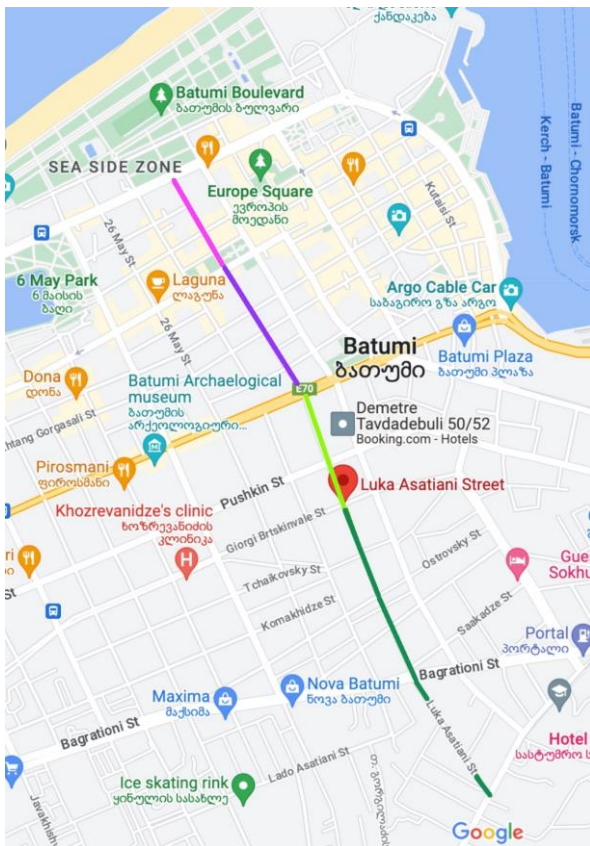

Fig. 4: Luka Asatiani Street, divided into four sections

Fig. 5: Photo shot and geotagging in Old Batumi

In this field study, conducted in the spring of 2023, I set out to compile a complete inventory of all signs along the entire Luka Asatiani Street, i.e., all signs ranging from official and commercial signs to private notes, signs, and graffiti. Different approaches are found in the

---

[12] Uzunadze et al. 2013.

linguistic landscape research literature to defining the unit of analysis, as discussed at length by Gorter and Cenoz.[13] The definition by Backhaus is widely used: "any piece of text with a spatially definable frame".[14] All signs were photographed and geotagged with an iPhone (cf. Fig. 5) for exact position, capturing over 400 textual units along the street.

In this study, the same weight is given to big signs and small stickers, meaning that all signs are equal when discussing the languages used. Another question in the data collection is how to handle the issue of repetition. This applies, for instance, to signs with the name of the street and commercial stickers. These were counted only once. Furthermore, moving signs could also pose a problem, whether they should be included or not. Parked cars with text on them were included, as they are likely to have a connection to the neighbourhood.

3. Systematisation of data and categories of analysis

As I am interested in a broad range of textual signs, a comprehensive set of categories is needed in order to systematise the types and features of signs. A useful point of departure is the taxonomy proposed in the online *Lingscape* project. For the purposes of this field study, not all categories have been considered relevant. The categories used are listed below. I have made some modifications.

(1) An overarching division is seen in messages that are directed, on the one hand, *top-down*, i.e., from institutions and official administration to the public, and on the other hand, *bottom-up*, which are communicated by commercial and private actors.

(2) The *linguality* of the sign refers to the number of languages involved: mono-, bi- or trilingual. More languages could be involved, but that has not been the case here.

(3) The domain, or *discourse,* is an important parameter. Based on *Lingscape*, the following categories were used: Artistic, Commemorative, Commercial, Expressive, Informatory, Infrastructural, Political, Regulatory, Subcultural, Technical, and Other.

Under one of the discourses, *Commercial*, I found it useful to add subdomains such as Eating, Real estate, Hiring of apartments, Money/Banking, Clothes, Private services, Building technology services, Education and courses, Culture, Technology, Security, Transportation, Medicine and cosmetics.

(4) A further parameter refers to how the languages in a multilingual sign are distributed. Is the multilingual text given in one language with full information (*duplicated)* in the other, or with only fragments having been translated into the other language(s), *fragmentary*?

(5) The sign may appear in many different *forms*: graffiti, mural, neon signs, plaque, poster, stand, display panel, sticker, street signs, wall signs, signs on windows, handwritten notes, etc.

(6) In some cases, the signs occur in *layers* (new on top of old ones).

(7) Texts on the signs are represented in different *scripts,* such as Georgian, Cyrillic, and Latin.

An Excel database was set up to systematise the textual units according to the parameters outlined above, which allowed for a study of the relative frequency of the values of these parameters. Despite the rather limited number of signs or textual units (423), the results will in

---

[13] Gorter & Cenoz 2023.
[14] Backhaus 2007: 66.

most cases be presented in percentage. The first part of this study is thus quantitative, but some further qualitative observations are also included.

4. Results

4.1 Linguality

The linguality parameter is one of the most interesting ones, as it concerns the number of languages used (cf. Fig. 6). In general, only a few signs are trilingual – not more than 5%. Most signs are actually monolingual (53%), and a large proportion are bilingual signs.
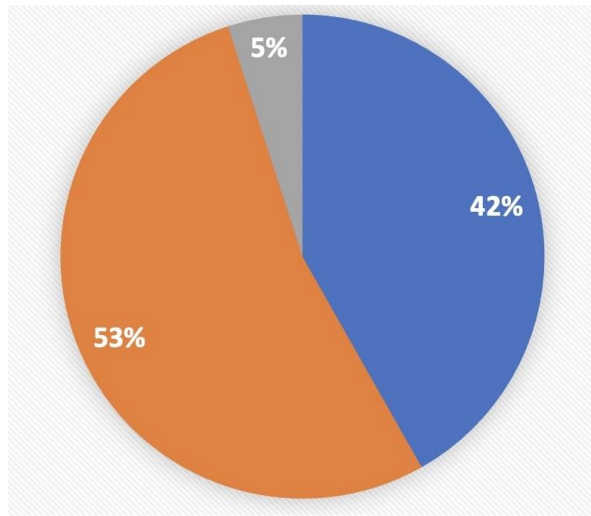

Fig. 6: Mono- (53%), bi- (42%) and trilingual signs (5%)

A closer look at the monolingual signs (cf. Fig. 7) reveals that two-thirds of the monolingual signs are in Georgian, followed by English (32%). There are very few monolingual texts in Russian (and marginally two signs in German).
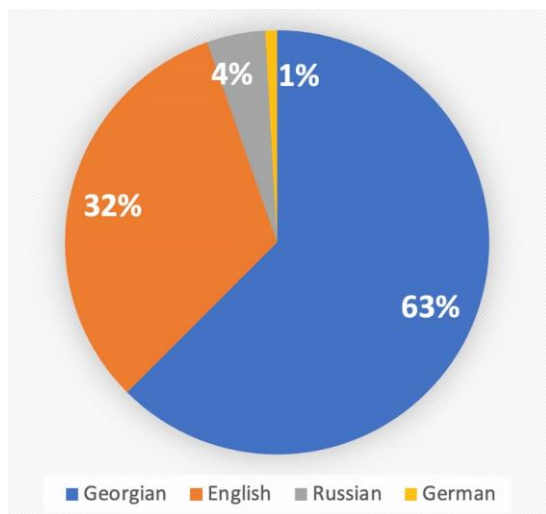

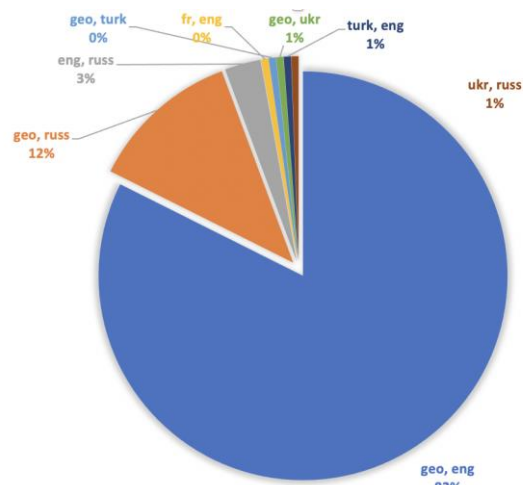**Fig. 7: Languages of monolingual signs**

Fig. 8: Languages represented on bilingual signs

Turning to the bilingual signs (cf. Fig. 8), Georgian and English make up the main proportion (63%). Bilingual signs involving Russian amount to 15% (with 12% Georgian-Russian and 3% English-Russian signs). Other minor language combinations are French-English, Georgian-Ukrainian, Turkish-English, and Ukrainian-Russian.

Finally, we turn to the trilingual signs, which amount to only 5% of the total. All trilingual signs are commercial ones, except for one (cf. Fig. 9). All trilingual signs are in Georgian, English, and Russian, except for one that is in English, Georgian, and Turkish.

Fig. 9: Example of a trilingual sign   **Fig. 10: Bilingual sign in Georgian and fragmentary translation into English**

4.2 Distribution of languages on multilingual signs

It is more often the case that the information given in one language is duplicated in the other language(s) than that only fragments are translated into the other language(s). The bilingual sign in Fig. 10 shows a fragmentary distribution of the two languages. The main language is Georgian, with only certain parts of the text having been translated into English (with several mistakes).

4.3 Forms of signs, layers of signs

The largest proportion of signs are wall signs, followed by stickers, signs on windows, and graffiti. Signs in layers, where new signs have been pasted on top of old ones, occur quite rarely.

4.4 Directionality of communication

When we look at signs that represent top-down communication, i.e., from institutions and official administration to the public, and, on the other hand, bottom-up communication, we see that the top-down signs account for only 10%. A number of these signs are monolingual in Georgian, such as memorial plaques (cf. Fig. 11), or bilingual in Georgian-English, such as road signs (cf. Fig. 3 above). A couple of interesting cases occur with Georgian and Russian, but appear to be old signs from the Soviet period with official institutions (cf. Fig. 12).

Fig. 11: Monolingual memorial plaque

Fig. 12: Old Georgian-Russian signs

4.5 Domains and language choices

A large proportion of the signs are commercial (over 60%). Not surprisingly, the majority of the commercial signs are in the domain of eating and food (cf. Fig. 13). The second largest group of commercial services is in the domain of medicine and cosmetics (cf. Fig. 14), followed by the two domains of banking and financial services (cf. Fig. 15), and building technology services (cf. Fig. 16). It has not been possible to identify domains where the use of Russian is more common than in others; it occurs on signs in a broad spectrum of commercial services.

Fig. 13: Domain of food and eating

Fig. 14: Domain of medicine and cosmetics

Fig. 15: Domain of banking and financial services

Fig. 16: Domain of building technology services

4.6 Russian language on signs: spatial distribution

Russian is clearly a much smaller language compared to English. Only 14% of the signs involve Russian in some constellations. Here, it is interesting to see that signs where Russian occurs are found in sections 1–3 of the street and almost not at all in the fourth section. This is clearly seen when we look at a map where these geotagged photos have been plotted onto a street map.
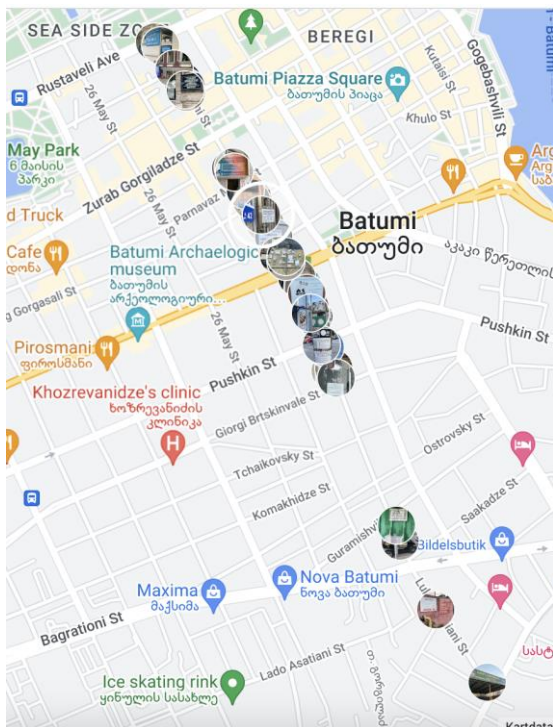

Fig. 17: Geotagged photos with plotted signs involving Russian text along Luka Asatiani Street
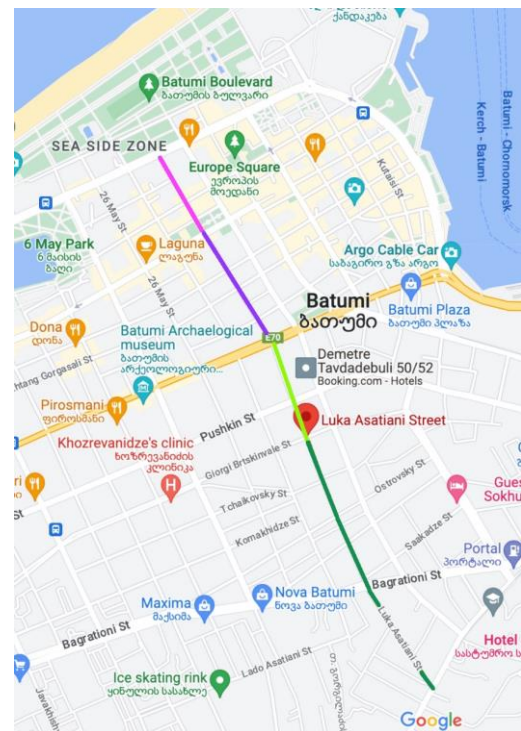

Fig. 18: Luka Asatiani Street with division into four sections

The map showing the four sections of the street is repeated here for reference (Fig. 18). In the fourth section (farther from the seaside; dark green on the map), only four signs occur involving Russian text, and two of them are on parked cars.

4.7 Language and scripts

Finally, I would like to discuss some instances where Russian occurs in nonstandard, Latinised forms. The first case is a café with the name *Slivki* (cf. Fig. 19), which means 'cream' in Russian. The form is incomprehensible to a person who does not know Russian, and it does not give any associations about the type of establishment. The name *Slivki* is flanked on each side by the two forms *Coffee* and ყავა 'coffee' (in Georgian script), informing bypassers that this is a café. The Latinised Russian name *Slivki* clearly signals that the café has some sort of Russian connection, but in a more discrete way than if it had been written in Cyrillic script.

Fig. 19: Café *Slivki*

Fig. 20: Russian text on glass window

Fig. 21: Beauty salon *Soul Dusha*

Another case of Latinised forms is the beauty studio called *Soul Dusha – ta samaya beauty Studiya* (cf. Fig. 21), showing an even more complex example of alternations between languages and scripts. The Latinised Russian form *Dusha* is preceded by its translation, *Soul*, which is also part of the name. The size of the English word *Soul* is much bigger than *Dusha*, indicating that this is the main part of the name. The text continues with the Latinised Russian phrase *ta samaya* 'the very', followed by English *beauty* and Latinised Russian *Studia* (alternating with Studiya), 'studio'. The information about opening hours is given in Georgian

(in Georgian script) and below in Russian (in Cyrillic), indicating that the studio is addressing Georgian and Russian-speaking customers. On both sides of the entrance, big windows reaching down to the street level, the text in Russian reads *Это не дверь* 'This is not a door' and, on the other side, *А это тоже не дверь* 'And this is not a door either' (cf. Fig. 20).

In the Georgian-English bilingual signs below, English appears to be the main language: the name of the kindergarten *Minion kids* is written in Georgian script, მინიონ ქიდს (cf. Fig. 22). Another example is the shop დეილი (*Daily*). In the same way, the Georgian form of the name კლინიკა ჰელსი / *Clinic Health* (cf. Fig. 23) is given in the Georgian script as the main form, based on the English word 'health' with the Georgian nominative case ending *-i* added.

Fig. 22: Kindergarten მინიონ ქიდს Minion kids

Fig. 23: კლინიკა ჰელსი Clinic Health

5. Concluding remarks

On the basis of this case study, several observations may be made regarding language use in the public space:

- The Georgian language dominates in monolingual textual units, followed by a substantial use of English.
- Bilingual texts are to a large extent written in Georgian and English, thus adhering to the official language policy prescribing the use of English in parallel to Georgian.
- Almost all trilingual signs are commercial and are written in the languages Georgian, English, and Russian.
- Signs involving Russian are rarely monolingual and are restricted to bottom-up messages, mostly of commercial character.
- The use of Russian is overall rather limited, and along Luka Asatiani Street, it appears to be concentrated in certain neighbourhoods.

As mentioned earlier, this case study has its limitations in that it reflects the language situation along only one street, which is a line of research that has been pursued in other comparable investigations. Further studies could be conducted of the linguistic landscape along other streets in the city in order to receive more comparable data. For instance, preliminary observations of streets in Old Batumi show that such languages as Turkish and Arabic are more frequent there than on Luka Asatiani Street. Many signs follow the official language policy for bilingual signs, but many also fall outside these rules and are composed on the basis of individual

communicative initiatives, for instance, using nonstandard scripts. In order to understand the language choices in such cases, it would be important to investigate the attitudes and strategies behind how these signs are shaped. Another issue to take into consideration is the temporal aspect. The linguistic landscape of a street could shift quite swiftly. If research is conducted on the same site at certain intervals, this would give the possibility of following how the dynamic linguistic landscape is changing and developing over time.

References

Alibegashvili & Tetradze (2023): Giorgi A. and Maka T., "Street Georgian – as a Reflection of functioning of the State language in Georgia", *Abstracts for the symposium Language in Conflict and War – Ukraine, Caucasus, Russia,* Nov 6–7, Malmö: Malmö University. Abstract: https://rucarr.mau.se/conferences/language-in-conflict-and-war-rucarr-symposium/november-7/.

Backhaus (2007): Peter B., *Linguistic Landscapes: A Comparative Study of Urban Multilingualism in Tokyo.* Clevedon-Buffalo-Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

Brito (2016): Ashleigh B., *Multilingualism and Mobility: A Linguistic Landscape Analysis of Three Neighbourhoods in Malmö, Sweden* (MA Thesis). Lund: Lund University. https://www.lu.se/lup/publication/8879681.

Gabunia & Gochitashvili (2020): Kakha Ga. and Ketevan Go., "Language policy in relation to the Russian language in Georgia before and after dissolution of the Soviet Union", in Arto Mustajoki, Ekaterina Protassova and Maria Yelenevskaya (eds.), *The Soft Power of the Russian Language: Pluricentricity, Politics and Policies*, London: Routledge, 37–45.

Gorter & Cenoz (2023): Durk G. and Jasone C., *A Panorama of Linguistic Landscape Studies*. Bristol / Jackson: Multilingual Matters. https://zenodo.org/record/8214590.

Grzech & Dohle (2018): Karolina Grzech and Ebany Dohle, "Language Landscape: An innovative tool for documenting linguistic landscapes", *Lingue e Linguaggi* 25, 65–80. http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/linguelinguaggi/article/view/18943/16200.

Landry & Bourhis (1997): Rodrigue L. and Richard Y. B., "Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study", *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 16/1, 23–49. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247744019.

Lingscape. Taxonomies for projects. https://lingscape.uni.lu/taxonomies/.

Manjgaladze & Chanishvili (2021): მარიამ მანჯგალაძე, ხათუნა ჯანიშვილი, საქართველოს დამოუკიდებლობის აქტის პუბლიცისტური გააზრება და ენობრივი პოლიტიკის საკითხები (1918 –1921 წლების პერიოდულ გამოცემები „საქართველო" და „ერთობა"). თბილისი: კავკასიის უნივერსიტეტი. https://ebook.cu.edu.ge/turnjs4/publicationOfIndependenceActOfGeorgiaAndLanguagePolicy.pdf.

Rosenbaum et al. (1977): Yehudit R., Elizabeth Nadel, Robert L. Cooper and Joshua A. Fishman, "English on Keren Kayemet Street", in Joshua A. Fishman, Robert L. Cooper and Andrew W. Conrad (eds.), *The Spread of English: The Sociology of English as an Additional Language*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 179–196.

Tabidze (1999): Manana T., "Sociolinguistic aspects of the development of Georgian", *Working Papers, Lund University, Dept. of Linguistics* 47, 201–210. https://journals.lub.lu.se/LWPL/article/ view/2332/1907.

Tsaava (2023): Maradia Ts., "One year after emigration: Russians in Georgia", *JAM News*, 29.03.23. https://jam-news.net/russians-in-georgia/.

Uzunadze et al. (2013): რევაზ უზუნაძე, რამაზ სურმანიძე, ნუგზარ ზოსიძე, ბათუმი (ისტორია და თანამედროვეობა). თბილისი: ივერიონი.

Vamling (1990): Karina V., "Språken som maktfaktor i Kaukasien [= Languages and power in the Caucasus]", in Birger Bergh & Ulf Teleman (eds.), *Språkets makt*, Lund: Lund University Press, 157–168. https://www.academia.edu/999805.

ურბანული ლანდშაფტის ლინგვისტური კვლევისათვის ბათუმში: ლუკა ასათიანის ქუჩის მაგალითი

კარინა ვამლინგი

ენობრივ სურათს საჯარო სივრცეში წარმოდგენილი სხვადასხვა სახის ნიშნების ერთობლიობა ქმნის, იგულისხმება როგორც ოფიციალური და კომერციული, ისე ცალკეული ენობრივი ნიშნები და წარწერები. ამრიგად, ენობრივი სურათი აერთიანებს როგორც ოფიციალურსა და პროფესიულ ენებს, ასევე ენის გამოყენების კერძო შემთხვევებსა და სოციუმის ენობრივ არჩევანს.

ქართულ ენას რუსულ ენასთან ჯიდილის ხანგრძლივი ისტორია აქვს საზოგადოების სხვადასხვა სფეროში. პოსტსაბჭოთა პერიოდის ბოლო ათწლეულში საქართველოში რუსული ენის გამოყენება შემცირდა. თუმცა, ბოლო წლებში ტურისტების განსაკუთრებით დიდი რაოდენობა და ამასთანავე, 2022 წლის თებერვლის შემდეგ რუსულ ენაზე მოლაპარაკეთა რიცხვის მკვეთრი ზრდა გვავარაუდებინებს, რომ ზემოთ ჩამოთვლილი ფაქტორები მნიშვნელოვან გავლენას მოახდენს ქვეყანაში არსებულ ენობრივ სურათზე. წარმოდგენილი კვლევა მიზნად ისახავს ქვეყანაში არსებული მრავალენოვნების შესწავლას და საჯარო სივრცეში ენის გამოყენების სხვადასხვა სფეროში არსებული ტენდენციების გამოვლენას.

ამ მიზნისთვის შევირჩა ბათუმში მდებარე ლუკა ასათიანის ქუჩა, რომელიც ქალაქის პირველი მერის სახელს ატარებს. ეს არის ბათუმის ერთ-ერთი უძველესი ქუჩა, რომლის სიგრძე 2.2 კილომეტრია, იწყება ქალაქის ყველაზე პრესტიჟული ნაწილიდან, ზღვისპირა ბულვარიდან, მოიცავს მე-19 საუკუნის მერიის შენობას, აერთიანებს რამდენიმე მთავარ ქუჩას და მთავრდება საცხოვრებელ უბანში, ფერდობებთან ახლოს.

საველე კვლევის ფარგლებში, რომელიც 2023 წლის გაზაფხულზე განხორციელდა, ფოტოგრაფიულად ადიწერა ლუკა ასათიანის ქუჩაზე განთავსებული ყველა აბრა, რომელთა რაოდენობა 400-ზე მეტ ტექსტურ ერთეულს შეადგენს. ციფრული ფოტოების და ტექსტური ერთეულების მონაცემთა ბაზა შეიქმნა Excel-ში, რამაც შესაძლებელი გახადა ისეთი კატეგორიებისა და მათი კომბინაციების ფარდობითი სიხშირის კვლევა, როგორებიცაა: ენობრივი სურათი (ერთენოვანი, ორენოვანი, სამენოვანი), ენების არჩევანი (ქართული, ინგლისური, რუსული, თურქული ან სხვა ენები), დაწერილობა (ქართული, ლათინური, კირილიცას გრაფიკული გამოყენება), ენის გამოყენების სფეროები, ასო-ნიშნების მოხაზულობა და სხვა კატეგორიები, რომლებიც განხილულია ნაშრომში.

კვლევის შედეგად მიღებული ზოგადი სურათი ახვენებს, რომ ქართული ენა დომინირებს ერთენოვან ტექსტებში, მას მოჰყვება ინგლისური ენის გამოყენების შემთხვევები. ერთენოვან ტექსტებში რუსული ენა შედარებით იშვიათად გვხდება. ორენოვანი ტექსტები დიდწილად ქართულ და ინგლისურ ენებზე იწერება; შესაბამისად, დაცულია ოფიციალური ენობრივი პოლიტიკა, რომელიც მოითხოვს ინგლისური ენის გამოყენებას ქართული ენის პარალელურად.

81