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SOME SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-COGNITIVE NOTES ON THE GAGAUZ LANGUAGE IN ATU OF GAGAUZIA

GAGAUZ ÖZERK BÖLGESİNDE KONUŞULAN GAGAUZCA ÜZERİNE
SOSYAL-PSİKOLOJİK VE SOSYAL-BİLİŞSEL BAĞLAMDA BAZI NOTLAR

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the author's onsite observations in Gagauzia and placing them in socio-psychologically and socio-cognitively relevant grounds, this paper aims to discuss some aspects of the current state of the Gagauz language and underlines that the endangerment of the language is not simply a result of the past and ongoing political, educational, economic, etc. factors, but also of historically constructed cognitive and social-psychological formation of individuals. The observed dissonance between the positive national identity orientations or ethnic language attitudes of individuals and their actual linguistic practices imply that the situation should be handled also from different interdisciplinary perspectives, which would contribute to the understanding of why the vitality of languages gets threatened.

ÖZET

Yazarın Gagauzya'daki gözlemlerinden yola çıkan ve bu gözlemleri toplum-psikolojik ve toplum-bilişsel bir çerçevede ele alan bu yazıda, Gagauzca'nın tehlikede bir dil olması gerçeğinin, tarihsel süreçlerde baskın dilin ve kültürün sosyal, politik, ekonomik, eğitim, vb. uygulamaları ile bireylerde ve genelde Gagauz toplumunda yapılandığı bilişsel ve sosyal-psikolojik süreçlerle de ilgili olduğu öne sürülmektedir. Bireylerin ideolojik açıdan kendi ulusal kimliklerine ve dil tutumlarına ilişkin olumlu görüşleri ile iletişimde etnik dilin düşük oranda kullanımı arasında gözlenen uyumsuzluk ve benzeri diğer olgular disiplinlerarası farklı bakış açıları ile incelendiğinde bir dilin tehlikeye girmesi ardındaki farklı nedenlerin daha ayrıntılı biçimde ele alınabileceği ve bilimsel açıdan çeşitli çalışmaların yapılabileceği düşünülmektedir.

1. Introduction

Although the study of endangered languages also has implications for cognitive and psychological science, there has been little interest in carrying out extensive research from such perspectives on any of these languages. In fact, each language is a unique form of reality representation and displays how the human mind perceives, interprets and expresses reality in its own linguistic system. Diversity of languages shows not only diversity of semiotic systems, cultures, world views, etc., but also the enormous capabilities of the human mind. As each language is a different form of selecting, organizing, processing, and conveying information, when a language dies out or stands somewhere at the verge of extinction, what is lost is not only its formal linguistic or cultural properties, but also unique forms of mental model-building, perspectivization and construal operations, which are part of human cognitive heritage. As Malone (2008 in Turin 2012: 860) mentions in her special report prepared on the state of endangered languages for the National Science Foundation, 'the enormous variety of these languages represents a vast, largely unmapped terrain on which linguists, cognitive scientists and philosophers can chart the full capabilities—and limits—of the human mind'.

Cognitive psychologists and cognitive linguists who have paid attention to how information is processed, categorized and linked with other pieces of information to form cognitive 'schemas' in the brain have also investigated how culture and language influence social cognition and the 'social mind'. Cognitive linguists, linking the study of human cognition to the study of language, argue that language and cognition, which mutually influence each other, are embedded in the experiences and environments of speakers. Broadly speaking, one of the claims in cognitive linguistics is that 'human physical, cognitive, and social embodiment ground our conceptual and linguistic systems' (Rohrer 2007: 27). On the other hand, much before the development of cognitive linguistics, cultural-historical psychologist L. S. Vygotsky (1896-1934) and philosopher, literary scholar, and semiotician M. M. Bakhtin (1895-1975), two well-known Russian scholars who both lived in the Soviet Union, yet were not personally acquainted although they were contemporaries, believed that individual mental functioning has roots in social and communicative processes. (see, Wertsch, 1985a, 1985b, 1991; Fernyhough, 2008; Herman, 2007). The early origin of the idea actually dates back particularly to Émile Durkheim, who postulated the term 'conscience collective', which means that social facts act upon individuals in such a way that they shape the totality of beliefs, sentiments and practices. Briefly speaking, as language is embedded in the overall human cognitive capacities, one may question whether or not the power of the mainstream language and its cognitive and psychological influences on the ethnic population are factors in the endangerment of the native language.

On the other hand, a number of social psychological theories conceptualize individual's language socialization and use in terms of language ideologies, linguistic hegemony, social identity, impression management and self-identification (see, for example, Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner and Reynolds 2010). While thinking about the reasons for the endangerment of languages, such social psychological factors also need to be considered, because in a condition of linguistic (also educational, economic and political) hegemony of another culture, individuals tend to associate their present or future needs (like employment, income, school success, etc.), social identities and impression management strategies with the mainstream policies and perceive the legitimacy and stability of their status accordingly so as to be able to participate and survive in the dominant culture's system. In such cases, it would not be surprising to observe dissonance between their

emotional attitudes towards the ethnic language and their actual linguistic practices favouring the dominant language. This dissonance will eventually lead to problems in the intergenerational transmission of the ethnic language when the effects of the dominant culture's educational policies on the young population are taken into consideration.

Jumping to a larger scale, the issue of bilingualism has always been a scientific subject of investigation for linguists, psychologists, cognitive scientists and many others. Effects of a bilingual environment on the linguistic, cognitive and social psychological performances of the individuals are factors which may also lead to the low prestige or infrequent use of the ethnic language among speakers.

With these ideas in mind, this paper focuses on one of the endangered Turkic languages, the Gagauz language, and, drawing upon the author's observations and interviews in ATU of Gagauzia, discusses the issue in the contexts of some socio-psychological and socio-cognitive factors and bilingualism that are also thought to have effects on the current definitely endangered position of the Gagauz language. It goes without saying that the ideas presented in this paper also require the support of extensive scientific research to be carried out on the ethnic population and language. Actually, there is a great need for the linguists to go for a variety of detailed micro- and especially macro-linguistic analyses on endangered languages, because the number of such studies is unfortunately really scarce. It is believed that approaching endangered languages from multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives can help us better appreciate not only the distinctive cognitive features of each language but also the social psychological factors behind the phenomenon. This way, other reasons for and consequences of language endangerment can be further analyzed on the basis of various theoretical dimensions which have yet not been a subject of detailed investigation in terms of endangered Turkic languages. To sum up, the purpose of the article is to expand on the understanding of language endangerment through the example of the Gagauz language.

2. On the current state of the Gagauz language

The Gagauz language is categorized under the 'definitely endangered languages' group by UNESCO.¹ While UNESCO's nine language vitality criteria (see Appendix) developed for 'identification of needs and appropriate safeguarding measures' and taken as the basis for determining degrees of endangerment apply either totally or partially to many languages at risk, the also significant socio-psychological and socio-cognitive factors surrounding some of these languages are usually overlooked and the Gagauz language is no exception. A good number of studies and reports on the political and linguistic practices in Gagauzia is available (e.g., Demirdirek 1996, 2000; Menz 2003; Ciscel 2005; Järve 2008; Zanet 2010; Hatlas 2011; Prina 2012). According to Kristioglo;

'... In practice, besides the lack of resources, many problems of the education system are related to the poor status of the Gagauz language. The authorities of Soviet Moldova had introduced Cyrillic script for the Gagauz language in 1957. The Gagauz language was then unable to establish itself during the following years as the main language of the Gagauz and is still facing difficulties. In 1989, 87.5 % of the Gagauz claimed Gagauz as their native language, but a 1998 sociological survey established that only 37.8% of the adult population of Gagauzia knew the written form of the language, while 44.1% spoke Gagauz with their children at home. With regard to the language of education for their children, 80.6 % of the respondents preferred Russian, 4.6%

¹ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap>

Gagauz in combination with other languages, 2.6 % Gagauz only, 2.6% English, and 1.4% Moldovan.' (Kristioglo, 2000: 223-224 in Järve, 2008:327).

In a well-prepared project report (Sirkeli & Lisenco 2012), implementation of linguistic rights is explained in detail. As explained both in this report and similar other studies, most points of which are parallel to the author's onsite observations, it is the Russian language, not the Gagauz, that is widely used by the Gagauz people even in simple daily-based communicative practices. Although the legislative framework defines the Moldovan, Gagauz, and Russian languages as the official languages of Gagauzia, the fact is that there is no active revitalizing attempts to promote the actual use of the Gagauz language in official documents (for more details, see the related articles in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, the Law of the Republic of Moldova 'On languages functioning on the territory of the Moldovan SSR', the Law of 1994 and Provisions of Gagauzia, which are also mentioned at Sirkeli & Lisenco 2012: 7). To the exception of some villages where the elderly still prefers using the Gagauz language, almost in all areas of life, Russian is the working language. This is evident also in the overheard dialogues among the Gagauz individuals in many informal domains such as marketplace, church, streets, restaurants, homes, etc. When people of different age groups are interviewed in Gagauz, they respond and speak in Gagauz; however, their proficiency levels in the four language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, writing) is unknown. Unfortunately, there has been no scientific study identifying the proficiency levels of the Gagauz population in their ethnic language. This is definitely a worth-studying subject, because it was again surprising to see some comparatively better-speaking Gagauz individuals translating parts of interview conversations into Russian for the understanding of their ethnic mates. In Comrat or in neighbouring villages, it is possible to communicate with children or adults in the Gagauz language, but this is not at all a valid criterion indicating that they are fully competent in all four language skills. This is one of the neglected facts: linguistic vitality measures cannot be based on limited speaking skills only.

Besides the spoken medium, written forms such as those in sign posts, billboards, shop plates, the names of settlement areas or streets, official websites, etc. all display the use of Russian. Some limited use of the Moldovan and Gagauz languages can be seen on the signs at the entrance of state offices and schools. To the exception of the limited number of weekly hours of the ethnic language teaching, language of instruction at schools is again Russian. Similar examples of the Russian language dominancy can be multiplied as were directly observed by the uthor and are mentioned in related studies and reports as well.

3. How better one could risk... ?

Dominance of the Russian language in a variety of formal and informal domains in Gagauzia can, of course, be explained in relation to a variety of past and present social, political, educational, cultural, and economic factors. However, it seems that the endangered case of the Gagauz language is not only a direct but also an indirect consequence of all these processes. It would not be wrong to say that the indirect consequence is the historically-constructed cognitive formation of the Gagauz minds. In other words, it seems that the semiotic and symbolic nature of higher mental functions and consciousness of the people have been constructed mostly by means of the Russian language system rather than that of the Gagauz language, thus the Russian language has dominantly acted as a medium for the formation both of the cognitive schemas of individuals and the collective 'social mind'. The same situation can be observed in other post-Soviet communities.

'Social mind' here is a term of the Vygotskian theory (Vygotsky 1930-35/1978), which claims that higher mental functioning in the individual has social origins and the tools, signs and related practices are social and psychological activities. This can be traced, as Vygotsky suggested, through genetic and developmental analyses. Relating individual cognitive processes, including language use, to socially established forms of reality, Vygotsky and his followers (see, for example, Wertsch 1985a, 1985b, 1991; Searle 1995; Tomasello 1999) propose a socio-cultural approach to mind and underline the relationship between mental processes and their cultural, historical, and institutional settings. Thus, they demonstrate how the nature of semiotic mediation contributes to the study of human consciousness.

If 'building models is one of our automatic mental activities' (Lamb 1999: 103) and this is achieved through the interactive subsystems of a certain language, then it would be reasonable to ask which language is or has been the working language in such a process. According to Lamb (1998: 123-125), linguistic system is hierarchical with several layers of structure in highly complex network relations. This hierarchy starts with the perceptual interfaces with the world and follows with multiple levels of abstraction going up to the cognitive system where linguistic subsystems, conceptual subsystems and perceptual subsystems interact. In the broader sense, the perceptual subsystems in the brain are closely connected to the conceptual subsystems where the concepts or meanings of lexemes are stored. Lamb (1998: 125) explains that 'in the case of production, activation evidently proceeds roughly from perception and/or conceptual areas to the area which controls operation of the organs of speech-production; while in the receptive mode, activation proceeds from the auditory system through linguistic connections to conceptual and/or perceptual and/or motor areas'. As known, the more a connection both downwards or upwards is activated, the stronger the connection gets. If the perceptual and conceptual subsystem interactions on the comprehension level and the conceptual and linguistic subsystem interactions on the production level are / have been construed and the neurons have been activated mostly via the use of the dominant language, it is predicted that the language which has become the main connection-strengthening medium in this process proliferates all or most cognitive possibilities in the human mind. This is both a linguistically and culturally supported mental construction process as a result of which the minds are formed and comprehension and production processes are built and senses are attributed. The same fact applies also during the early language acquisition process in children. If intergenerational language transmission is considered as a problem, it is also because of the close environmental and educational processes which strengthen the mental activations not in favour of the ethnic but of the mainstream language and culture. Politically determined linguistic and educational policies do work on the cognitive level as well. The functioning of the brain is formed not only by intrinsic but also by extrinsic factors which forge the neuron connections that shape the patterns of reality perception and expression. When higher-level thinking practices are shaped through the education given in the dominant language, but not enough in the ethnic tongue, this might mean that sufficient mental exercise in that language is lacking as a result of which the related ability may be permanently degraded. Such a degradation concerning the mental and linguistic skills in the ethnic language can be considered as one of the important factors leading to the endangerment of the language, especially in children who would have problems in the understanding and production of more complex syntax, abstract and analytic reasoning, lexical selection, etc. Closing the gap between the mainstream and ethnic language policies definitely needs considering.

As became evident in field observations, despite the ideologically positive discourses of the ethnic population at the level of language attitudes which advocate the idea that the ethnic language should be protected, maintained and transmitted to new generations, the linguistic interactions observed even in informal domains and in simple daily interactions of speakers seem to be giving little or no chance to the future vitality of the Gagauz language. In other words, the reality connects the Russian language not only with prestige but also a socially shared form of internalization. On the other hand, there are also scholars who regard the link between ethnic language and ethnic identity to be too deterministic and essentialist (see, for example, Hall 1996; Eastman 1984; Edwards 1984). It is argued that within cultural hybridity even in the case of a strong identification with their ethnic identity, speakers may not transmit the language to their children and the loss of language does not necessarily mean the loss of ethnic identity as a heritage.

In a bi-/multilingual environment where both the Gagauz and Russian languages are available (Moldovan is not taken into consideration in this paper for it is not extensively used by the Gagauz people even though it is one of the three official languages of Moldova), it may be assumed that speakers' cognitive structure, social mind and linguistic identity have been formed not via their ethnic language but basically via Russian. Besides being the language of most daily communication, Russian is the medium of instruction at schools where the minds of children are formed. Though there is not an extensively prepared comparative research, it is thought the lexical and conceptual wealth of the Russian language in terms of modern scientific, technological, educational and economic domains is more productive. In other words, where there is a need to linguistically express a particular concept in any of these domains, the appropriate vocabulary seems to be available mostly in the Russian language. The command of the Gagauz language is correlated with the level of input both at home and at school. Furthermore, maintenance of this language in later years may be contingent on continued exposure to the language. The observations imply that optimal conditions in bringing up children favour the use of the Russian language including the critical period of life.

It may be argued that this is the result of historically applied policies. It has to be underlined, by the way, that such factors supposed to be contributing to its endangered position, thus to the low-frequency of its naturally occurring linguistic practice as well as to the mother tongue proficiency levels have not yet been thoroughly investigated. However, the field observations of the author and the interviews provide strong hypotheses in that all Gagauz individuals are not fully proficient in speaking, writing, listening and reading skills in their native tongue. If there is dissonance between the ethnic language ideological orientations and the actual linguistic practices or proficiency levels of the people, then how is this possible? Why don't the speakers prefer using mostly Gagauz among themselves in informal, daily conversations? Why, for example, a mother does not speak to her child only in Gagauz at least until the school age? Why isn't the vitality of the Gagauz language promoted by the speakers themselves with a conscious attitude considering this as part of the ethnic and linguistic identity? The present picture is that 'the development of the Gagauz language, culture and probably also identity have not developed as one should have expected during the first years of the autonomy' (Neukirch, 2002: 14). Should we take the Gagauz language as part of the Gagauz national identity or not? Why can't the situation be changed, at least on the level of interpersonal communication among the ethnic population? It is almost impossible to talk about extensive fieldwork investigations on such issues (It should be noted, however, that the number of extensive

scientific research supported by sociolinguistically significant fieldwork methodology for each of the nine vitality criteria for the Gagauz language is also scarce). The field observations, including overheard natural conversations, as well as the widespread use of the Russian language in order for the Gagauz individuals to better communicate among themselves seem to be supporting the hypothesis that the individuals' mental processes are more active in the Russian language than in the Gagauz. To put it simply, expressing thoughts in Russian is an automatic and easier action for the minds since it does not bring an extra system- changing burden to the mind. This brings forth the question whether or not Russian language acts as a 'mother tongue' for the minds of many Gagauz speakers. The case is similar to some of the ethnic languages in other post-Soviet regions. Although the linguistic vitality of these languages is no doubt under threat, both Gagauz and other ethnic languages trying to survive during the post-Soviet era have generally been treated in the context of general sociolinguistic concepts such as 'minority languages', 'endangered languages', 'disadvantaged languages', etc. within the reality of a bi-/multi-lingual and bi-/multi-cultural environment. However, how the historical processes has contributed to the formation of cognitive processes in favour of the Russian language has not fully been discussed. At this point, one feels like saying this: **How better one could risk the vitality of a language than constructing / reshaping the cognitive structures of its speakers in another language and culture?** This is a historically significant question. Once the members of an ethnic community turn into the individuals who unconsciously prefer using another language simply because its ways of perception, categorization and expression have been the easier and automatic processes for them, endangerment of the subordinate language will be an expected result. Taking into consideration the active use of the ethnic language in many formal and informal domains through serious language planning efforts and thus reversing or reshaping the cognitive processes in the minds of the speakers can be a way out (this definitely requires the implementation of a series of political, educational, social and linguistic decisions over a considerable time), which would also revitalize the inter-generational transmission of the language. Changing both the present policies and the already formed mental linguistic constructions of the speakers may not be that easy, however, it is not impossible. Putting all socio-political facts aside, it is known that, when given relevant foundations, the plasticity of the human brain succeeds in the mental and linguistic re-construction and re-adaptation of new skills.

In the case of bilingualism, which of the two languages serves in the position the internalized 'mother tongue', in other words, mostly through which of the languages cognitive processes are formed is a question worth considering in this context. At this point, the issue of bilingualism needs to be considered briefly.

4. Bilingualism and beyond

'Bilingualism' is usually defined as the individual's ability to use two different languages or the use of two languages in a community, but such definitions are too general to be able to provide explanation to the complexity of the concept. Needless to say, there are varying degrees of bilingualism. May it be individual or social bilingualism, the definition of the term is highly complex. 'True bilingualism', which is defined as native-like proficiency in both languages, is said to be a rare case (Cutler, Mehler, Norris, Segui: 1992). Therefore, it is considered that most bilinguals are more competent in one language, which is said to be their dominant language. This means significant consequences for language and cognitive skills of the speakers. Hamers and Blanc (2004: 6-23) discuss why the

available definitions of bilingualism are quite problematic and question the issue in relation to a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions. In a bilingual environment where 'both socialisation through language and socialisation to use language' (Ochs 1986) have taken place mostly through one language to the detriment of the other, the child will develop a comparative understanding of the two languages in terms of their status, functions, prestige, etc. both at the societal and individual levels. Meanwhile, if the child has developed his conceptual-linguistic abilities through one of the languages (in this case, Russian as the dominant language), this language then is internalized as a tool for his cognitive functioning, that is, for classifying, reorganising and analysing representations. (Hamers; Blanc 2004: 83-84). The effects of bilingualism on cognition are discussed with evidence also in a variety of sources (see, for example, Taylor and Mac Laury 1995; Köpke et al. 2007; Cook and Bassetti 2011). Such a situation in a bilingual environment appears as a common phenomenon and a reason for the attrition of the other language (in this case, the Gagauz language) due to its partial mastery by the young population. By the partial mastery, I mean those limited speaking and listening comprehension skills, not to mention the developed reading and writing skills in the ethnic language. Even if the ethnic identity is preserved and, in our case, the individual feels that he is part of the Gagauz community, the observed nature of intergroup linguistic behaviour, in other words, the frequent language use in favour of the Russian language can be the case. Then, the salience of the Gagauz language in defining ethnic identity may not be a static criterion. The ethnic language is still seen as 'my language' by the Gagauz individuals, even if most of them, particularly the young population, rarely use it (at least in the cities) and do not master it to the same extent as they master Russian. If this phenomenon is observed particularly among the second or third generation, this means they have a feeling of possessing the ethnic language mostly in a symbolic way as they have limited skills. As Mueller Gathercole and Thomas (2009: 1) state, 'growing evidence shows that in bilingual communities in which one language is very dominant, acquisition of the dominant language may be quite unproblematic across sub-groups, while acquisition of the minority language can be hampered under conditions of reduced input'. Research on bilinguals aimed to determine how two languages are organized in the brain and how the cognitive processes of the speakers function in favour of each of the two languages have been a subject of inquiry and various methods have been developed. The developed techniques can measure only some aspects of linguistic competence. Taking measures in each of the bilingual's two different language competences and comparing these equally established measurements are required (Hamers; Blanc 2004: 33-35). However, let alone such complex measurements, no tool or data is yet available to identify the language skills in the ethnic Gagauz language.

The Gagauz case requires a serious consideration in connection with the bilingual conditions the speakers are/have been in, because the present case indicates the existence of hybridised linguistic and cognitive constructions as well as linguistic identity fluctuations in individuals. No matter how ideologically positive attitudes towards the ethnic language may be observed, if the act of thinking, thus its linguistic manifestation has been formed by means of the cognitively dominant medium, the linguistic vitality of the ethnic language is most likely to get lower. In other words, the Gagauz language might unfortunately turn into only a symbolic heritage in the near future.

5. Conclusion:

Aiming to draw attention to the importance of social psychological and cognitive factors in the process of language endangerment, this article drew upon the example of the Gagauz language and making use of the field observations in ATU of Gagauzia, tried to underline the following points in particular:

In a socially bilingual environment, if one of the two languages and cultures has been historically, politically and economically more powerful, and if language planning strategies have foregrounded education in the dominant language, the possibility of maintenance of the other language by the next generations will most likely be under threat. Even if the ethnic speakers feel respect for their language and have ethnic (and even political) solidarity, historically constructed and internalised practices which have foregrounded the dominant culture and language might have caused the minds to be evolved in such a way that the linguistic production and comprehension processes as well as other cognitive skills are primarily activated in the dominant language. In this case, the less activated mental and linguistic processes in the ethnic language might lead to conceptual and linguistic weakening in the long run. Due to educational and other social practices, the rate of this weakening is likely to be higher in the younger generations. Because linguistic processes are part of cognitive processes, as mentioned before, the endangerment of the language in question gets a higher risk. At this point, no other policy can be more effective than reshaping the cognition of the speakers. One feels like saying once again this: **How better one could risk the vitality of a language than constructing / reshaping the cognitive structures of its speakers in another language and culture?** The Gagauz case seems to be presenting such a picture as in the similar cases concerning some other Turkic languages.

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Appendix

Language Vitality and Endangerment , @UNESCO.



Appendix

Yayıma Hazırlayan: Edanur Sağlam