A Cryptolanguage of Georgian Jewish Merchants

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Introduction

The merchant language of the Georgian Jews deserves scholarly attention for several reasons. The political and social developments of the last fifty years have caused the extinction of this very interesting form of communication, as most Georgian Jews have emigrated to Israel. In a natural interaction, the type of language described in this article can be found very rarely, if at all. Records of this communication have been preserved in various contexts and received different levels of scholarly attention. Our interest concerns the linguistic aspects as well as the classification.

In the following paper we argue that the specific merchant language of Georgian Jews belongs to the pragmatic phenomenon of "very indirect language." The use of mostly Hebrew lexemes in Georgian conversation leads to an unfounded assumption that the speakers are equally competent in Hebrew and Georgian. It is reported that a high level of linguistic competence in Hebrew does not guarantee understanding of the Jewish merchant language. In the Georgian context, the decisive factors are membership in the professional interest group of merchants and residential membership in the Jewish community. These factors seem to be equivalent, because Jewish members of other professional groups (and those from outside the particular urban residential area) have difficulties in following the language that are similar to those of the Georgian majority. We describe the pragmatic structure of interactions conducted with the help of the merchant language and take into account the purpose of the language's use or the intention of the speakers. Relevant linguistic examples are analysed and their sociocultural contexts explained.

Languages and Language Variaties along the Silk Road

The traditional historical routes of massive migrations of peoples form linguistic spaces containing the largest language families and language areas in the world. Every kind of human activity along the migration routes was inevitably accompanied by language. What counted here were both the cross-linguistic contacts that were essential for survival and the culture-specific codification of life. The Silk Road is undoubtedly one of the most linguistically complex and multilayered of these geographical constructs. This construct, preserved over the centuries, is home to the most extensive Indo-European language family as well as the location of several regions with remarkably high linguistic diversity, such as the Caucasus. A new perspective on the emergence of the first lingua franca for the purpose of optimizing trade in the Silk Road countries sheds further light on the function and structure of such languages as Tocharian or Khotanese. The functioning of what was once the most important, though later extinct, contact

language in the Silk Road world—Sogdian—cannot be explained in purely linguistic terms but is causally linked to political and social cataclysms along this historical trade route. Chinese can be viewed in a similar way, as a language that became "big" with the Silk Road and continues to shape China's current social and political perspectives on the basis of the Silk Road experience of this language. The Silk Road, as a linguistic area, can also be considered as a space of linguistic prestige. Economically, politically, and militarily influential societies and individuals served to spread one language or language variety and at the same time restrict others. In this context, it is not only politically or militarily active individuals who are to be emphasized but also the various professional groups that significantly helped the Silk Road to become economically important. Such professional groups shaped their own activities not only through distinct rules of conduct and trade but also and above all through distinct languages. Along the Silk Road, particular varieties of language developed, which fulfilled their function in relation to particular social practices within particular, socially determined groups. The peaceful use of resources, the maintenance of acceptable commercial activity according to current norms and rules, and both transparent communication about and concealment of profession-specific interests and intentions: all this and much more was grounded in the use of language.

The written evidence from the lands of the Silk Road and the linguistic diversity of this evidence give us an idea of the linguistic diversity of social practices throughout this cultural area. The traditions and customs established within the context of these social practices may still be reflected today in the form of different linguistic varieties. Specific merchant "languages" can be counted among such forms.

The Caucasus region has traditionally been one of the Silk Road catchment areas, and Georgia, with its multiethnic and multilingual culture, has been influenced by the political and cultural processes of the Silk Road. Historical sources document Georgia's social orientation towards the countries geographically located directly on the traditional trade route, such as Iran and Byzantium. Special attention was also paid to the customs and practices of trade established along the Silk Road. Based on the fact that Jewish communities have always been a historical and integral part of Georgian culture, it can be assumed that specific traditions in these communities can be considered in different historical and global contexts. The secret merchant language of Georgian Jews, which was still relatively clearly documented until the twentieth century, reflects the perspectives indicated: specific tradition and global context. We describe this coded communication among merchants as part of the modes of communication on the Silk Road and consider the cryptolanguage of Georgian Jews as an example of the broader phenomenon.

A Cryptolanguage of Goldsmiths: Karaite Jewish Evidence

Maritime trade deserves special attention in the global context of the Silk Road. Multilingual interaction on a ship establishes its own forms of language contact and promotes the development of grammatical forms that are often only accessible to the members of a ship's crew. The most prominent example is probably Captain John Smith's A Sea Grammar (London, 1627). "Such speech acts would have provided an ideal situation for the mixing, leveling and simplification processes of new dialect formation […] and also would have provided opportunities for new recruits to listen to, practice, and acquire features of Ship English" (Delgado 2019: 115). Similar to maritime communities, different professional groups also establish their own communication codes that they use in their professional practices. The linguistic classification of such linguistic varieties is not always easy. Terms such as "argot," "technical jargon," "slang," "vernacular dialect," and "idiomatic variant" are often used to describe the many aspects of this kind of communication.

Various sources document a special argot of the Khan al-Khalili market in Cairo, which has been transformed from a coded communication channel used by a specific ethnoreligious group of goldsmiths into a general communication tool for the goldsmith profession (Khan 1995, Hugi 2013). This is the cryptolanguage of the Egyptian Karaite community, who were mainly goldsmiths. "The goldsmiths […] used a special vocabulary of arabicized words and phrases mainly of Hebrew origin that was unfamiliar to their Muslim clients" (Khan 1995, 74). The morphology and syntax of Egyptian vernacular Arabic was retained.

Khan 1995, 75

(1) *ḥami'ša*   < (Hebr) *ḥami'ša* 'five'
    'five'   *ʿa 'neṭra wi-ḥami'š a* 'fifteen *qurūs* '
(2) *mišṭ*   < (Egypt) vernacular *mišṭ* 'comb'
    'twenty *qurūš* '   *hēt mišṭ* 'give me twenty *qurūš* '
(3) *rabaṣ*   < (Hebr) *raḇaṣ* 'to crouch, to brood (hen)'
    'he has come, has entered (the shop)'   *id-'dafši 'rabaṣ* 'the man has come'

Hugi 2013

(4) *yaffet (yāfit)*   < (Hebr) 'good' / 'nice'
(5) *zahub*   one Egyptian lira   (Hebr.) *zahav* 'gold'
(6) *halakh / ahalakh ~ halah*   'get rid of a customer'   (Hebr.) *halah* 'go'
(7) *shal*   possessive   (Hebr.) *shali* 'with me'
(8) *echad, shnayin, shishin, shefin,*   < (Hebr) one, two, sixty, seventy

This article reports a similar linguistic phenomenon documented in the context of Judeo-Georgian. Similar to the Karaite example, the Georgian context involves a specific professional group and a specific interaction, sales talk. It is not unusual that the representatives of a professional group, who engage in intensive exchange with each other for professional purposes, optimize their communication in order to make it more effective. This effectiveness does not always mean the shortening of speech and reduction of effort in speaking.

Effectiveness can also mean making communication unrecognizable. The determining factor in this context is not a concrete language per se but the purpose of a communication and the linguistic ways in which this purpose can be fulfilled according to the intention of the speaker. Therefore, if we observe lexical elements of Hebrew in this communication, the question still remains, how Hebrew is it really? Or is it simply an allusion to Hebrew in order to fulfil the speaker's pragmatic intentions in a Georgian-language communication? (see Aslanov 2014).

Georgian Jews: Key Data

The first Georgian-Hebrew contacts are already documented in the fourth and third centuries BC. During the first exile from Palestine to Georgia in the fourth century BC, Hebrew was the dominant language of the Jewish settlements in Georgia (Mtskheta, Urbnisi), whereas during the second great exile in the first century AD, Aramaic was the predominant language of communication among the settlers. According to the Georgian chronicle Kartlis Cxovreba, six languages were spoken in ancient Georgia: Georgian, Greek, Armenian, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Khazar. The first population census in 1800 counted 3,300 Jews living in Georgia. In 1832, 4,000 were recorded, and in 1867, 7,800. As of 1989, 14,800 Jews were counted. According to the 1897 survey, 6,407 Jews had Georgian as their first language, and the number of Jews who declared Georgian as their mother tongue grew to 33,673 in 1959. In 1993, there were about 14,500 Jews living in Georgia, about half of whom emigrated to Israel in the following years (Lortkipaniʒe 1994: 3–4, Meṭreveli 2002: 26–31). According to some sources, about 20,000 Jews were living in Georgia in the nineteenth century, mainly Ashkenazim.

Jewish settlements have been an organic part of villages and larger urban centres in Georgia over the centuries. Descriptions of such settlements that can be traced back to scholarly sources date from the nineteenth century and underline Jewish dominance of the inhabitants' merchant activities. Markets in these districts operated on the basis of the supply of goods through cross-regional networks and logistics organized and maintained by Georgian Jews. A Jewish-oriented social class of city traders developed, making necessary adaptations to global and local political developments.

According to Papisimedov (1945: 3), "Georgian Jews had their own commercial language, which enabled encrypted conversation for the buyer." The author observes that this language was originally restricted only to trade interactions, but with time it became a part of everyday conversation and thus spread to the language of non-Jewish Georgians. Lomtadze et al. (2019: 2) describe two dominant perspectives on the cultural status of Georgian Jews. The first, the Georgian Jewish perspective, regards Georgian Jews as part of the Jewish diaspora in Georgia with a centuries-old tradition. The second, the so-called assimilative perspective, sees Georgian Jews as part of the Georgian nation with a common culture and history. The authors point out that "Georgian Jewish speech tended to be distinct from that of their non-Jewish neighbours.

The differences from standard Georgian can be seen in prosody/intonation, grammar, and lexicon" (2019: 2).
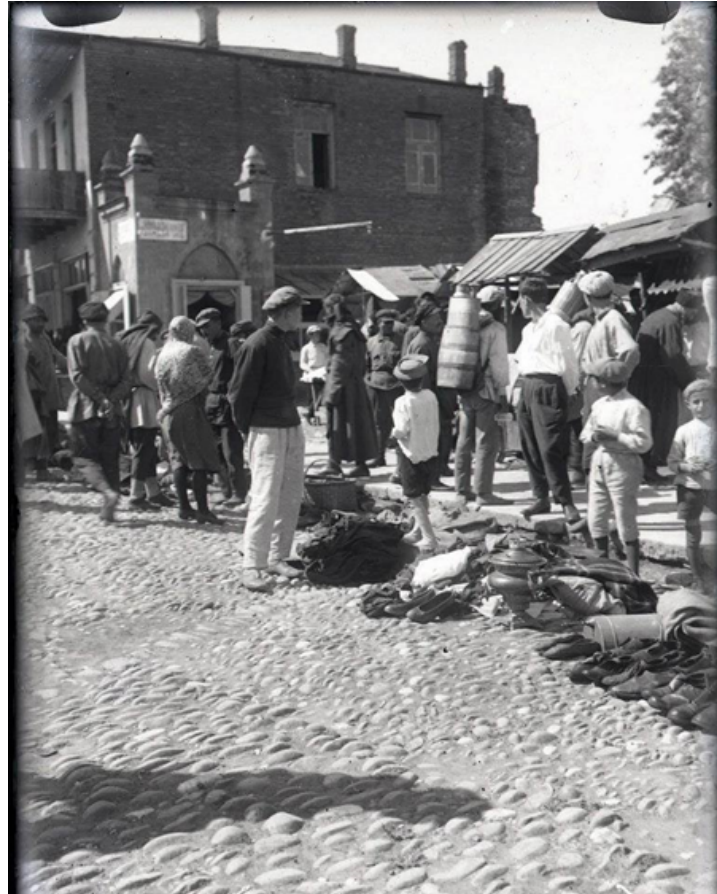
Picture 1: Marketplace in the Jewish district of Kutaisi, 1929[1]

What this means linguistically is discussed in Moskovich and Ben-Oren (1982: 20): "According to the established view, a separate Judeo-Georgian language does not exist. The Georgian Jews themselves claim that they speak the Georgian language common to them and to the Georgian gentiles. There are no studies of the spoken language of Georgian Jews, except for fragmentary remarks on the existence of a secret Jewish argot, the main function of which is to conceal secrets in trade from customers. This argot of peddlers and merchants includes many Hebrew words and expressions, which make it unintelligible to uninitiated Georgian listeners."

Our aim in this paper is to more deeply examine the linguistic pragmatic aspect of this particular form of communication. We give a brief overview of the empirical basis of the whole discussion and then try to justify a classification based on the social practice of this specific language. We take the linguistic examples from generally accessible scholarly papers and

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[1] The archive photo from the collection of Mamuka Ashvetia.

nonscholarly essays. Our special focus on the language's pragmatic aspects is justified by the assumption that this particular form of communication has resulted from its practical use in a trade context. A possible connection of this form of merchant communication to the Silk Road countries needs to be verified through further targeted research.

Linguistic Data

Contextless Lexical Evidence

Linguistically, the word forms consist of two parts: the lexical part is of Hebrew origin, and the grammatical elements are derived from Georgian. Not all segmentations and related interpretations are possible. Often the etymologies are based on word sound and are therefore not very reliable. The examples in the following table come from Papisimedov (1945) and are cited in various studies.

		SEGMENTATION	EXAMPLE/MEANING
(9)	გატარიფება /gaṭaripeba/ [2]	/ga-ṭarip-eb-a/	/gaṭaripebuli čurčeli/
	'according to the Jewish food laws', 'permitted'		'kosher tableware'
(10)	დადიანი /dadiani/ → [dōd]		'maid of honor'
(11)	შოშპინი /šošpini/		'best man'
(12)	დალეხთა /dalexta/ V → [halax]	/da-lex(t)-a/	'go' = 'passed away'
	(Hebr) *halax* 'to go', irregular verb, *h-* disappears in some forms: past *halax*, future *yelex*, imperative *lex*, infinitive *laléxet* *da-m-a-**lex**-e-t* (imp.) 'take me' (Lomtadze et al. 2019, 8)		
(13)	დაქაშვრა /dakašvra/ →[kāšēr]	/da-kašvr-a/	'sacred', 'usable'
(14)	მაზალი /mazali/		'destiny'
(15)	ხახამი /xaxami/ →[xāxām]		'clever', 'wise'
(16)	გაუსუხარა /gausuxara/	/ga-u-sux-ar-a/	'(he)(has) sold it (for him) or sold it (to him)'
(17)	ქსივა /ksiva/		'message', 'letter'
(18)	დათირა /datira/		'has seen', 'saw'

Single lexical units were incorporated into language use outside Jewish districts in specific forms of street slang. As a rule, the lexemes belong to communication within criminally influenced circles. They are also used outside criminal circles in everyday conversation to create a more relaxed atmosphere. There is no perception of the foreign-language origin of the lexemes. The listed lexemes very often serve as means for the speaker's self-identification as belonging to a social group. The words are excluded from the standard Georgian language and make no appearance in the printed language. The exception is stage plays, in which listed words are used to characterize specific individuals.

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[2] The grammatical form of the examples is not standardized and represents the forms of use.

SEGMENTATION   EXAMPLE/MEANING

(19) განაბი /ganabi/   /ganab-i/   'pickpocket', 'crook'

(20) დააგაბანა /daagabana/   da-a-gaban-a: ganav 'steal', also *ganav* 'thief' (comp. German 'Ganove'), with prob. metathesis (Hebr) *b/v > b* = conditioned allophones

(21) გოიმი /goimi/   /goim-i/   'hillbilly'

(22) მაყუთი /maquti/   /maqut-i/   'money'

(23) ნაშა /naša/   /naša/   'chick', 'bitch'

(24) ტობე /tobe/   /ṭobe/   'good', 'profitable'

(25) ხავერა /xavera/   /xaver-a/

(26) თომარი /tomari/   /tomar-i/   *amar* 'to speak, to talk', irregular verb, past *amar*, future *yomar*, imp. *emor* (not used), *tomar* = formal 2ms future (can be used in modal forms/colloquialisms: *eyx tomar* 'how do you say')

(27) დავალაილავეთ /davlailavdet/   /da-v-lailav-de-t/   *layla* = 'night', also in *layla tov* 'good night'

According to Papisimedov, these originally "secret expressions" dominate Georgian urban jargon in large urban centres and serve as linguistic identity markers. The origin of this communication, however, is coded merchant communication in Jewish-dominated marketplaces (1945: 28).

Contextual Evidence

There are rare notes of complete sentence constructions that illustrate the techniques used for secure communication by Georgian Jewish merchants. Let us consider the following example:

(28)

შენს **მამონს** მე მივ**ხრ**იდი და, რასაც მოვუ**გად**ოლებ, სავა**ხე**ზო იქოს.
šens **mamon**s me miv**x**ridi da rasac movu**gadol**eb, sava**xe**zo iqos.

The bold parts of the words have no meaning in Georgian. If these parts are deleted, what remains is a construction that does not allow meaningful interpretation.

(28)a.

შენს -[1]-ს მე მივ-[2]-იდი და, რასაც მოუ-[3]-ებ, სა-[4]-ო იყოს
šens -[1]-s me miv-[2]-idi da rasac mou-[3]-eb, sa-[4]-o iq̇os

šens	*-[1]-s*	*me*	*miv-[2]-idi*	*da*	*rasac*
Poss2Sg Dat	Hebr-Dat	PersPron1SgNom	VPv1Sg-Hebr-Fut	Conj	RelPron

movu-[3]-eb,	*sa-[4]-o*	*iq̇os*
PrV1SgVers-Hebr-Fut	circumfix	existing; being; living V Pass Opt S:3Sg

For the four gaps, it is possible to identify the Hebrew roots in the original sentence.

(28)b.

[1] *mamon-s* (Hebr) מָמוֹן (mamón, 'money') ~ 'the good'
[2] *mivxridi* (Hebr) moxer) מוֹכֵר1Sg. Masc, Pres) 'sell'
[3] *movugadoleb* (Hebr) 'growing up', basic meaning of the root *g-d-l*
[4] *savaxezo* (Hebr) xetzi חֵצִי 'half'

After the insertion of the Hebrew roots, the sentence becomes meaningful.

*šens **mamon**s me miv**x**ridi da rasac movu**gadol**eb, sava**x**ezo iq̇os*

I will sell your goods to him, and the profit I make will be split between us (fifty-fifty).
It is a fact that this sentence remains completely obscure to a Georgian native speaker. Even less understandable for a native Georgian speaker is sentence (29). (The lexemes marked in bold are of Hebrew origin.)

(29)

დღეს ტობათ ვისოხარე მაგრა, საფერი არ მიეშამდა და ქელებმა შოხადი წამართვა.
*dges **tob**at vi**sox**are magram **seper**i ar m**ieš**amda da **keleb**ma **šoxad**i çamartva.*

dges	*tob**at*		*vi**sox**are*	*magram*	*seper**i*	*ar*
			v-i-sox-a-re		*seper-i*	
today	profitable		trading	but	book	Neg
(Geo)	(Hebr) tov 'good', tova 'favour'		prob. (Hebr)	(Geo)	(Hebr) séfer	(Geo)

*m**ieš**amda*		*da*	*keleb**ma*
*m-(i)**eš**-am-d-a*		and	policeman
yeš 'there is', yeš li x 'it gives me x', 'I have x'		(Geo)	(Hebr) kélev 'dog'

*šoxad**i*	*çamartva*
bribery	take away
(Hebr) šóxad	(Geo)

I **traded profitably** today but had no **permission** (book), and (therefore) the **dogs** (policemen) took the **money** (bribe) from me.

On social media today, one can find sporadic examples of Judeo-Georgian. For example, Rabbi Moshe Mickelaqshvili was recently quoted on Facebook:
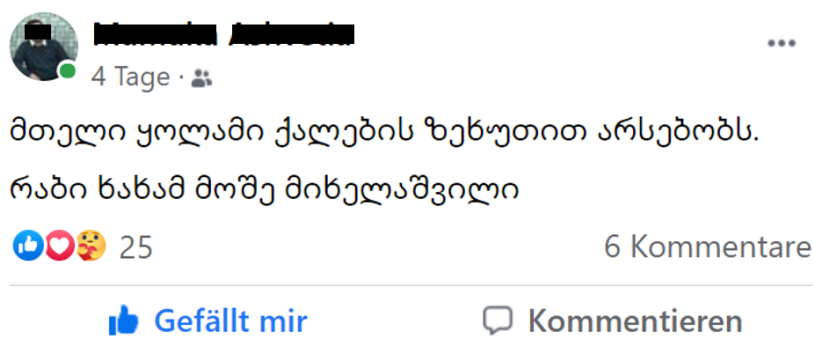
Picture 2: The Facebook post of a Georgian user

(30) მთელი ყოლამი ქალების ზეხუთით არსებობს
mteli ġolami kalebis zexutit arsebobs

mteli	ġolam-i	kal-eb-is	zexut-it	arsebobs
Geo	*Hebr* /'olám / עוֹלָם	Geo	*Hebr* /sexut/ זכות	Geo
whole	universe-*Nom*	women-*Gen*	dignity-*Inst*	existsPres.3Sg

The whole universe exists due to women's grace.

Example (30) shows the deliberate use of Hebrew lexemes in Georgian-language expression to establish a particular communicative genre: ancient Judaic wisdom.

C o n c l u s i o n

On the basis of the data described, some conclusions can be drawn about the linguistic classification of cryptolanguage conversations between Georgian Jewish merchants. Such a conversation can take place in the presence of a native Georgian speaker without the chance of him interpreting any of it meaningfully. This fact gives rise to the idea that this is a kind of "indirect speech act," although this term may apply only in a very limited way, if at all. A comparable situation would be a conversation between two medical professionals in strictly technical language in the presence of a lay person who can only partially understand the content of the conversation. It has also been observed that the switch from the cryptolanguage to Georgian everyday language happens seamlessly. The observation by Khan (1995) that traders regularly use cryptolanguage for professional reasons is also true in the context of Georgian Jews. A linguistically relevant question is whether this is a special form of code switching or code mixing. For the standard cases of code switching and code mixing, two languages are necessary, which the speaker can use in parallel and consciously or unconsciously. It is well known that the Georgian Jews who lived in Georgia were not fluent in Hebrew. Fragments of

language memory were repeatedly reactivated in the synagogues during the religious service, but we cannot speak of an equivalent knowledge of Hebrew. For this reason, the classification of this cryptolanguage as a special form of code switching or code mixing is unfounded.

Probably the most useful perspective for the linguistic specification of the described phenomenon is the pragmatic level. The central question is the pragmatic function of the merchant cryptolanguage variant and its sociocultural conditions.

The assumption of linguistic indirectness would seem to make sense. It requires in this particular context that there are three conversation participants. Two of these three consciously switch to a coded language variant so that the relevant content of the conversation remains completely incomprehensible or inaccessible to the third participant. In linguistic pragmatics, similar conversation (coding of the content) is described in the contexts of hostage-taking and communication between hostages and their families. If the hostage-takers allow such contact, the hostages will try to provide not only evidence of life but also relevant information that could lead to their liberation. However, this hidden information must not be accessible to the hostage-takers, although they can read the original text. The term "very indirect speech act" corresponds to such a high degree of linguistic indirectness.

Of course, a sales conversation is not that dramatic, but it represents a natural conflict of interest that can be resolved in favour of those who can establish an exclusive communication channel. The general pragmatic framework can be described along two contradictory axes: the "benefactive axis" and the "malefactive axis." The conversation participants with knowledge of the code are positioned on the benefactive axis, whereas lack of knowledge puts the third participant at a disadvantage in the context of the action.

When this framework is applied to the cryptolanguage conversation of Georgian Jewish merchants, two perspectives emerge: (1) ethno-sociological and (2) dialectological. What actually takes place seems to have less to do directly with Hebrew but is played out within Georgian: the individual lexemes (Hebraisms) borrowed from Hebrew in the process of linguistic contact constitute an ethno-socio-(dia)lectal variant of Georgian that is used in specific pragmatic situations (market, sales talk). The use of this ethno-sociolect is characteristic of an ethnic and religious minority, the Georgian Jews, which justifies the ethno-sociological perspective.

Thus, two scientifically relevant approaches to the phenomenon of the cryptolanguage of Georgian Jewish merchants come into play: (1) which (ethnic, social, religious, etc.) group uses the variety? (2) in which specific social interactions is the variety used? These relevant perspectives seem to be covered by the composite term "ethno-sociolect."

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