Implications of Language in Georgia-Abkhaz conflict

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*Abstract:*

It is known that the ethnic tensions between Gerogians and Abkhazians have existed for generations, even before the conflict began. It is also known that our perception of others is heavily based upon culture and language. Language & word choice have the ability to transform the way people interact with each other, themselves and the world. In this brief we will be analyzing the language dynamics between these two groups and how language influences perceptions which lead both sides to be completely shut down to the other. Language used to describe each side has psychological consequences that have shaped the way each side perceives the other on a cognitive level. Certain phrases or word choice emphasize differences and allow sides to dehumanize their opponent. As a consequence of decades of tensions between Georgia and Abkhazia generational biases also subconsciously affect the dynamic and perception of the other side. After analyzing different types of data and the type of language used, it is safe to state that misuse of language has played an influential role in the Georgia-Abkhazia stalemate.

*Defining the Problem: Language Contributes to Stalemate of Conflict*

The problem at hand is the use of language solidifies the lack of progress made between Georgia & Abkhazia to end the conflict. Tensions between Georgia and Abkhazia began around the 1980’s. This is around the time that Abkhazia became vocal wanting independence. Dynamics between the two groups began to change, words and language used began to create an inhuman illusion of the opposing side. Language is the primary tool for expression and communication. Word choice plays a role in subconsciously creating biases (SHASHKEVICH 2019). Psychologists at Stanford have been conducting research that has shown how language is cognitively processed by individuals. Bias is highly correlated with the word choice of the speaker, “Girls are just as good at math as boys are” proved to perpetuate sexist biases of the speaker to the audience (SHASHKEVICH 2019).

“Language is the primary tool for communicating prejudice interpersonally and cross-generationally” (Maas 1996, p. 193). Zviad Gamsakhurdia won over 86% of Georgians by using nationalist rhetoric which caused the dehumanization and isolation of ethnic minorities. He was elected in 1991 and shortly after that “Georgians for Georgia” campaign began spreading more hostility and stereotypes throughout both regions. Enthic (Ethnic) cleansing became a recurring act that both sides participated in. Gamsakhurdia used words like they, them, those, it, pigs, etc. when discussing the ethnic minorities in Georgia. The use of language and word choice generalizations, stereotypes and narratives about each side are issues that continue to keep these two groups divided.

*Consequences of manipulation of Language*

Our brain has a natural ability to group similar items, colors, people, details, etc. together. These groupings are called schemas. Schemas allow our brain to make fast generalizations without requiring so much processing time. For example, if you see a dog your brain immediately goes to the furry animal schema and begins using other clues to figure out that you are looking at a dog. Most brain processes happen in less than a second and mostly occur subconsciously. The same effect happens when individuals create schemas of other individuals/groups. Words/Language is used to create these schemas and language has an innate connection to stereotype formation(Allport 1954). Research has shown that politicians will use ethnic differences to create more trust for catered audiences and to increase their following (Janns 1998). This manipulation of language has proven dangerous in regards to this conflict, especially during 1991-1993. The pro nationalist movement broadcasted the implicit biases that have been carried down for generations.

Generational biases and perception of each side have remained in these two societies. These implicit biases are subconsciously making decisions for the individual. Implicit biases are subconscious perceptions and generalization about a specific group that are passed down by generation(Joyti 2018). Developmental research has concluded that children mainly learn how to interact with the outside world by imitating adults. When children are taught stereotypes or generalizations about a certain race they receive all that new information and perceive it all as true. In the case of Georgia & Abkhazia, because their language, culture, beliefs are different it makes it even easier to dismiss the other side. Gamsakhurdia convinced more than half the Goergian population to believe that they were better than the Abkhaz. That it was their right to “take what's theirs” (Human Rights Watch 1995). The propaganda, murders, protests etc. were all consequences of the misuse of language to misrepresent two very different groups. Due to the importance of word choice, it is easy for one to create syntax to make them sound more trustworthy (Allport 1954). In 1992 when Georgia officials banned the use of minority languages it created more distrust between both sides. These two groups are very quick to make assumptions of the other.

*Current State: Stalemate*

In a testimonial found on Youtube, some Abkhazians speak out on how they still feel like outcasts in modern society. A taxi driver named Astamur Maan said, “When you have borders and they refuse to have a dialogue with you...this is the main reason why our relationship with our neighbors are ruined. Dialogue involves two so if you are not recognized as a participant it is a problem”(Maan 2021). Georgia continues to acknowledge its minorities, the use of language and words to create oppressing policies emphasizes Abkhazian distrust for the other side. Another Abkha`zian citizen stated, “A passenger said hello in Georgian and I responded in Russian the passenger responded "I said hi in human language not pig language" (RT 2018). Since language has influenced how each side views/ distrusts each other, language can be the only mechanism to break generational stereotypes and rebuild trust in order to progress towards peace.

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