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Visible women in language: the case of Georgian

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Introduction

The societal opposition of male and female originates from the emergence of the human race. The rich data illustrating these relations may be found both in historic sources, and in fiction, religious literature, ethnographic materials, etc. Language, too, seems to have made a certain contribution to manifesting this opposition. Referring to Jespersen 1922, Thorne & Henley 1975:5 noted that "interest in the different relations of the sexes to their language dates back at least to 1664, the year of the publication of a report which cites different women's and men's forms in the speech of the Carib people". If we assume their approach, we can find much earlier instances of interest towards such phenomena, even beginning from the Bible, but the scholarly writings of linguists on this problem date back to the beginning of this century. Here we should refer to the works by two Nordic scholars: G. Cederschiöld's *Kvinnospråk* written in 1899 but published a little bit later (Cederschiöld 1900), and O. Jespersen's chapter in his *Language: Its nature, development and origin* (1922). But the boom of considerations upon gender-related aspects of language originates from some texts published in mid 1970s, R. Lakoff's *Language and woman's place* (1975) among them. In this work, the author gives one of the first comprehensive accounts of what is called *women's language*, this implying both how women speak, and what is said about them. When dealing with this second aspect it has often been claimed that language bears the male worldview in itself, being discriminatory of women, because males traditionally were leaders in various spheres of human activities; they wrote grammars, compiled dictionaries, etc. It has been claimed that "women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them" (Lakoff 1975:4). Furthermore, it has been stated that women are not visible through language, and if they

are, then it is in a rather unfavourable way. If authors drew examples from underdeveloped societies and their languages at the beginning of this century, in the later half they directed their attention towards the English language, and subsequently, to some of the Indo-European languages of the western societies, such as Nordic (see e.g. Holmberg & Nordenstam 1995).

But English was a starting point: "... in the culture of English speakers, men are more highly regarded than women. The male is associated with the universal, the general, the subsuming; the female is more often excluded or is the special case. Words associated with males more often have positive connotations; they convey notions of power, prestige, and leadership. In contrast, female words are more often negative, conveying weakness, inferiority, immaturity, a sense of the trivial. Terms applied to women are narrower in reference than those applied to men" (Thorne & Henley 1975:15). Two reasons may be found why English became the battlefield for this sexist linguistic argument: (a) the early American feminist movement, and (b) the system of grammatical and lexical means of expressing gender in present-day English. This resulted in reformative suggestions and activities regarding language, its semantic structure and its use. Some of the outcomes of these activities seem very unnatural and strange, e.g. *herstory* (coined from *history*). Such linguistic novelties have sometimes been considered to be the avoidance of male dominance, sex-exclusiveness for women, their non-visibility, and negative semantic space in language. Some militant feminists have even condemned the language: "English does more than hinder and hurt women: it proscribes the boundaries of the lives we might imagine and will ourselves to live" (Penelope 1990:XIV). Whether true or not, there have been attempts to universalize these provisions; that is it has been taken for granted that language is discriminatory towards females by its character. The situation in English is probably a linguistic representation of appropriate ethno-cultural significances of gender-related phenomena.

Some Georgian compounds with *deda* 'mother'

Judging from what is said above, a student of language and gender should not be satisfied with a survey of a narrow circle of tongues and 'male-made' evidence drawn from them. The view that language is anti-feminine and provides a negative semantic space for women should not be considered universal. For example, Georgian is a language which demonstrates facts

far from androcentrism, and the visibility of women is rather favourable for them.

It should primarily be mentioned that Georgian has no grammatical gender, and there is no basis for having arguments concerning the use of the third person pronoun (*is* and *igi* are generic) (cf. Aronson 1990:245).

In order to discuss the favourable visibility of women and the positive semantic space for them in Georgian, I will analyze the meaning of the word for mother, *deda*, and compounds with this word.

According to the *Explanatory dictionary of the Georgian language*, the denotational meaning of the word *deda* is 'a woman to her child(ren), a female parent' (Chikobava 1953:1113). Then the *Dictionary* gives some connotations dealing with femininity, and in 6. there is the following: 'a source of smth, giving life – a fundament, an originator, a starting point'. As for 7., it is 'main, principal' (Chikobava 1953:1114). The last two connotations have a rather considerable use in compounding.

Now I am going to survey some of the compounds including *deda*, beginning with an example which would seem rather familiar for English-speaking (and not only) readers:

(1) deda-ena-Ø[1]
mother-tongue-NOM
mother tongue

Cf. English *mother tongue*, Swedish *modersmål*, German *Muttersprache*, Chinese *mǔyǔ*, etc.

(2) deda-azr-i
mother-opinion-NOM
main idea; subject matter

(3) deda-ars-i
mother-essence-NOM
main essence

(4) deda-boʒ-i
mother-column-NOM
main column

In this entry, the *Explanatory dictionary of the Georgian language* presents the following meanings: 1. the main column of the old Georgian house, standing in the center, the whole ceiling resting on it; [...] 2.

[1]These compounds are not hyphenized in the Georgian spelling but here they have been transliterated so for the sake of explicitness while glossing them.

fundament, main basis, touchstone. || an axis, a factor ..." (Chikobava 1953:1116).

(5) deda-bude-Ø
mother-nest-NOM
source; starting point

(6) deda-burʒ-i
mother-milestone-NOM
main milestone

(7) deda-mic'a-Ø
mother- earth-NOM
the Earth

(8) deda-kalak-i
mother-city-NOM
capital

(9) deda-ʒarɣv-i
mother-nerve-NOM
essential part

The illustrations of the overt principle (*deda* 'mother' = 'main, principal, essential, original') are not limited to those presented above. In the given compounds, *deda* is an adjectival component attributed to the most important notions in the life of the nation.

As is already mentioned above, this pattern is not alien to speakers of other languages, as there are *mother tongue*, *motherland*; but in English there is also *fatherland*, while in Georgian there is only:

(10) deda-samšoblo-Ø
mother-homeland-NOM
motherland

Once, one of the local poets in Georgia coined a new compound **mama-kalak-i* 'father-city-NOM' (cf. (8)), to refer to Kutaisi, the second largest city of the country; but it sounded awkward and ridiculous, and not positively characteristic of the author of the coinage. This means that the semantic component 'original' (reconstructable in the original meaning of the word *deda*)[2] is still alive and stable.

[2]cf.: (11) deda-n-i
mother-PL-NOM
an original

The fact that *deda,* with its meaning, is itself a 'generator' of positive semantic space can be highlighted by another compound (12). In this example, *deda* is no longer a determinandum, rather it is a determinatum (it is attributed by another word):

(12) gutn-is deda
plough-GEN mother
ploughman

This word exists irrespective of the fact that ploughmanship is generally a male occupation; cf. the discussions on the use of compounds with *-man* in English.

Deda as an interjection

Generally, interjections are defined as semantically empty words (sometimes even their wordness is questioned), but there are interjections and/or expletives which have been derived from notional words. The Georgian *deda* is one of such instances. In the above-mentioned Georgian *Dictionary,* this use of *deda* is explained as 'an exclamation expressing surprise' (Chikobava 1953:1114). It should be noted that it is not the only instance of its use. *Deda!* is the exclamation uttered by a Georgian-speaking person instinctively when s/he suddenly appears in a jam; it is used in the same place as the exclamation *ɣmerto!* (god-VOC 'God!'). They may even be interchangeable:

(13) a. ɣmerto, es ra damemarta?!
God, what has happened to me?!

b. deda, es ra damemarta?!
Mother, what has happened to me?!

But both should be translated into English as in (13a). So, on facing a problem, a Georgian-speaking individual can use either God and Mother (Demetradze 1997:100). This is even uncomparable with English where semantic derogation of women has gone so far that "even *mother* was used as a term for 'a bawd' and *sister* as a term for 'a disguised whore' in the seventeenth century" (Schulz 1975:66).

Some conclusions

Deborah Tannen dedicated her well-known *You just don't understand* to her parents and wrote: "TO MY FATHER AND MOTHER" (Tannen

1991:7). A Georgian author, either male or female, either feminist author or not, would have written *čems ded-mamas* 'to my mother and father':

(14) ded-mama[3]
mother-father
mother and father

And, generally, the order of components in the *dvandva* compounds denoting human species (of both sexes) is mostly sex-preferential (in favour of a female species). This is one more fact highlighting the non-exclusive and non-discriminatory character of Georgian language use. The presented data have shown that the semantic space is far more preferential for women than for men. One may argue that *deda* is generic in (1)–(12). Discussing the problems connected with the use of the generic *he* in English it is stated: "feminists are right in suggesting that generic *he* can be psychologically nongeneric" (Khosroshahi 1989:516). Consequently, the generic *deda* in Georgian might be psychologically nongeneric, but the said use has not been questioned.

The principal conclusion drawn from the analysis of the above-given data is that linguists should investigate more languages in light of the problem 'language and gender' in order to figure out the more complex character of this relation, rather than attaching certain universal labels to language, its semantic structure, and use.

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[3]In this case the hyphen is present in the original Georgian spelling, having the function of the conjunction *da* 'and'.

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