8   Language myths and the discourse of nation-building in Georgia

Language issues have played a large part in the nationalist discourse and in the shaping of new and transformed national identities in the post-Soviet states: witness the requirement to learn Estonian built into the citizenship legislation of Estonia and the return to the Latin script in the Central Asian states.[1] Cases such as these could be subsumed under the heading of language planning, whether in the form of attempts to purge the language of foreign elements or of legislation on language use. No less significant is what has been described as the 'impromptu linguistics' of politicians and civil servants.[2] Although the tenets of this form of linguistics bear only a passing resemblance to those of contemporary linguistic scholarship, their consequences are vastly more significant than those of the beliefs held by linguistics professionals. Implicitly or explicitly, they underlie irredentism, ethnic conflict, mass migration and ethnic cleansing, and the redrawing of national and regional boundaries. A key element in such politicised linguistics and the discourse of nation-building in many of the post-Soviet states is myths about language. Since the publication of Anthony D. Smith's *The Ethnic Revival* (1981) and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), to name but two of the most distinguished contributions to the subject, the importance of myth, belief and self-image in the formation of group identity has been acknowledged to be a crucial factor in the emergence of many nationalisms.[3] In charting these beliefs, scholars have tended to focus on myths relating to ethnohistory and homeland; language myths have barely been touched upon. Why is this? Several factors are at work: the inaccessibility of source material;[4] the lack of the specialised linguistic knowledge required to interpret and evaluate language myths; the absence of a theoretical framework within which to situate the myths; and a pervasive tendency amongst social scientists to reduce language and language issues to questions of communication and language planning.[5] It is the purpose of this chapter to set out some basic concepts relating to language myths, to provide a taxonomy of the commonest myths and to investigate their historical antecedents and their use in the construction and redefinition of

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Georgian identity. We shall thereby shed light upon an important component of Georgian nationalism in particular,[6] and take a first step towards the integration of language myths in general into current scholarship on the discourse of nation-building.[7]

Language in Georgia

Any visitor to Georgia is immediately struck by the centrality of the Georgian language, both in everyday functions and in cultural contexts. Georgians are deeply proud of their language and literature. Until recently, every well-born Georgian girl was expected to have memorised great chunks of Shota Rustaveli's late twelfth-century epic, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, before marriage, and it forms part of the heritage of educated Georgians to this day in much the same way that Shakespeare and the King James version of the Bible were the common heritage of all educated English-speaking people until the present generation. The revered writers of the nineteenth century – Ilia Chavchavadze, Nikoloz Baratashvili, Vazha-Pshavela – are still widely quoted. And, as one Tbilisi resident remarked, 'We have many more poets in Georgia than we need: almost every "mountain person" is a poet.'

Oral communication plays a more ritualised role in the functioning of society than in contemporary English-speaking countries. Georgians – middle-aged professors as much as love-struck teenagers – expect to initiate and receive large numbers of social telephone calls, maintaining contact on a daily basis with a wide network of relatives, friends and acquaintances. Academic and business visitors from abroad find that they are expected to make an ever-increasing number of social visits, simply for the purpose of phatic communion – keeping the lines of communication open – to such an extent that the time-pressed Westerner despairs of ever getting down to work. His Georgian host, meanwhile, arrives at work the next day bleary-eyed and out of pocket, but with a sense of a social obligation duly fulfilled. Most conspicuously institutionalised is the traditional role of the *t'amada*, the toastmaster, whose job it is at formal dinners to pace the drinking and entertain the company with his eloquent words – and not in a single speech, but in a rich and variegated series of discourses. The holy places of Georgia, the visitor from afar, the parents who gave us birth, our revered teachers, the state of the nation and so on and so forth – each topic provides the occasion for a lengthy display of verbal virtuosity. No *t'amada* would ever dream of using notes.[8] Even the folk music is predominantly vocal: Georgians speak with pride about their rich repertoire of polyphonic song, but seldom mention traditional instruments such as the *salamuri*, the *duduki* and the *p'anduri*.

Equally, Georgian newspapers not infrequently carry articles with a bearing on language. In England, language is seldom deemed to be news-worthy. When it is, it is in one of two contexts: language choice, as in the debate over what variety of English Jamaican children should be taught at school; and grammar, as in the recent controversy over the use of 'they' as an impersonal pronoun. Both issues belong, broadly speaking, to the domain of language planning. But in Georgian newspapers, particularly between 1989 and 1993, one encountered articles on a huge range of lan-guage-related subjects, from the origin of the alphabet to the purchase of Georgian typewriters by the independent government of 1918. In part this is a consequence of differing journalistic traditions: recent academic books and monographs are far more likely to be reviewed or summarised in popularising newspaper articles than is the case in Britain.[9] Indeed, the *State Programme for the Georgian Language* (1989)[10] included amongst its numerous measures to promote the use of Georgian the publication of newspaper articles on the history of the Georgian language, its function in contemporary life and the defence of the purity of the written language. Theories about language and ethnohistory thus tend to receive wide public exposure in Georgia, arousing energetic, often acrimonious debate, and assuring their authors a degree of fame (or notoriety) rarely achieved by British scholars in comparable areas. On another level, odes to the Georgian language continue to form, if not an obligatory part of a poet's oeuvre, at any rate a not uncommon element in it.[11]

Georgia could thus be characterised as a highly language-conscious society. As regards the current language situation, the state of Georgia is very far from linguistically homogeneous: over a dozen languages are spoken on its territory. Georgian itself, the titular language and the first language of over half the population, is a member of the Kartvelian (South Caucasian) branch of the Ibero-Caucasian family, which, although it is geographically situated amidst languages belonging to the Indo-European (Armenian, Ossetic, Russian) and Turkic (Azeri, Turkish) families, is not related to either group. The more distant affiliations of the Ibero-Caucasian family remain unclear, although suggestions of remote kinship with Basque and Sumerian, now generally advanced on typological rather than genetic grounds, are still current. Establishing how many people are native speakers of Georgian is not as easy as it might appear, in that speakers of other Kartvelian languages may sometimes have recorded themselves as Georgian-speakers. Of the 3.78 million 'Georgians' recorded in the 1989 census (70 per cent of the population), it is estimated that 'about one million people' are speakers of the closely related Mingrelian language.[12] The next largest minority lan-guage is Armenian, spoken by approximately 437,000 people (8 per cent

of the population). Other languages, such as Azeri, Ossetic, Svan, Laz, Abkhaz, Bats, Russian and Ukrainian, are spoken by much smaller percentages of the population.

The first references to the language situation in this region underline its complexity: late in the first century BC Strabo remarked that three hundred languages could be heard in Dioscurias, on the Black Sea coast of Georgia, a comment echoed two generations later by Pliny the Elder.[13] The eleventh-century historian Leonti Mroveli, in *K'art'lis tskhovreba* (Life of Georgia), says that several languages were in use in K'art'li (central Georgia) in the reign of King P'arnavaz (third century BC), but that P'arnavaz 'extended Georgian, and no other language than Georgian was spoken in K'art'li'.[14] Later sources, notably the edition of *K'art'lis tskhovreba* by Vakhushti Bagrationi (1696–1757), provide more detailed accounts of the language situation. Vakhushti's description evokes a picture of a dialectically differentiated use of Georgian across a large part of the territory under Georgian sovereignty, but of a restricted degree of bilingualism in certain areas (notably Chaneti (Lazistan)), while in Mingrelia and Abkhazia only the elite are reported as knowing Georgian.[15]

Georgian writers attached, and continue to attach, great importance to the use of Georgian as the common language of scholarship, culture, religion, law and inter-ethnic communication, allegedly from the time of King P'arnavaz on.[16] But with the annexation of much of Georgia by the Russian Empire in 1801, Russian replaced Georgian as the official language of administration and of the Church. A policy of Russification was carried out through the nineteenth century at the expense of Georgian, and attempts were made to foster minority languages through the creation of alphabets for and the preparation of elementary textbooks in Mingrelian, Abkhaz and Svan.[17] The policy of fostering minority languages would have obviated any need for the use of Georgian by their speakers, leading to the replacement of Georgian by Russian as the vehicle of high culture, and the grooming of the newly created written forms of the minority languages to take over from Georgian as the vehicle of everyday literacy. Georgians, not surprisingly, regarded this policy as a deliberate attempt to weaken the status of Georgian, a prelude to the splitting of the country.[18] During the brief period of Georgian independence (1918–21) before incorporation into the Soviet Union, a policy of Georgianisation was introduced in an attempt to reverse the effects of a century of Russification: Georgian was specified as the sole official language of the republic, and Tbilisi State University was founded as a Georgian-medium institution of higher education (1918). Indeed, so

high a priority was attached to the reinstatement of the Georgian language that N. Chkheidze, the chairman of the National Council, wrote to the Georgian Technical Society on 31 May 1918, just five days after Georgia declared independence, to ask for assistance in organising the mass conversion of Russian typewriters to a Georgian font as quickly as possible.[19] Attempts after 1921 to reintroduce Russian were resisted by Georgian communists as well as by the intelligentsia, to the point where Sergo Orzhonikidze, first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, had to remind Georgians that Russian was not 'the language of oppression', but 'the language of the October Revolution'.

The policy of *korenizatsiia* promoted the development of a new type of nationalism with the effect of furthering the appointment of ethnic Georgians to important positions at the expense of the minorities. In the 1920s Georgian was introduced throughout the education system. Dissertations could be written and defended in either Georgian or Russian, rather than in Russian alone, and higher degrees were awarded for several decades without consulting authorities in Moscow. During the 1930s, under Beria (himself a Mingrelian from Abkhazia) and Stalin, there was a revival of Georgianisation, with native-language schools in Abkhazia (which acquired the status of an autonomous republic in 1931) and Ossetia (an autonomous region from 1922) forced to close, a script based on Georgian being introduced for Abkhaz and Ossetic in 1938, and minorities generally coming under pressure.[20]

A reaction took place after the death of Stalin, when the position of minority languages was strengthened at the expense of Georgian. Thus, in 1954 a Cyrillic alphabet was reintroduced for Abkhaz and Ossetic, and in the same year new teacher-training courses in 'Abkhaz language and literature and Russian language and literature' and in 'Russian language and literature and Ossetic language and literature' were created in the Sukhumi Pedagogical Institute and in the South Ossetian Pedagogical Institute respectively.[21] Similar courses in Russian and Armenian and Russian and Azeri were also introduced.[22] These measures simultaneously enhanced the status of selected minority languages and Russian, and downgraded Georgian in the autonomous regions and other areas with a significant minority population. Attempts to promote the teaching of Russian throughout the USSR during the 1970s created increasing resentment in Georgia (as elsewhere).[23] Ethnic conflict and complaints of linguistic discrimination recurred in the 1970s, when Eduard Shevardnadze was first secretary of the Communist Party in Georgia. When, early in 1978, the central government in Moscow attempted to compel the Transcaucasian republics to drop the clause guaranteeing the

position of the titular language as the state language from their respective constitutions, a huge demonstration in Tbilisi resulted in the withdrawal of the measure.[24]

Continued anxiety over the centre's intentions reinforced Georgian suspicion *vis-à-vis* both Russians and the minorities such that the *State Programme for the Georgian Language*, published in December 1988 and officially adopted in revised form in August 1989, contained a large number of measures designed specifically to enhance the position of Georgian, such as furthering the teaching of Georgian to non-native speakers resident in Georgia (I 6), introducing compulsory examinations in Georgian for students of art, theatre, music and technology (III 9), creating courses in Georgian stylistics and the history of Georgian literature for students in the non-Georgian sectors of the philological faculties (III 15) and the establishment of a Georgian Language Day (I 7).[25] It may be, however, that these provisions contributed to the increasing polarisation and mutual suspicion[26] which, exacerbated by the extreme nationalist policies of the government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, resulted in ethnic conflict in South Ossetia and, under Eduard Shevardnadze, in Abkhazia, and tension in the area of language policy.[27] Significantly, an unsigned editorial in the May 1997 issue of *Burji erovnebisa*, a popular monthly devoted to language, literature and religion, laments the fact that the programme was never implemented and calls for its revival and implementation.[28] In an interview in the same issue the director of the A. Chikobava Institute of Linguistics of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Gucha Kvaratskhelia, announces 'the project of the revitalisation of the Programme' as one of the goals of the standing State Commission on the Georgian Language (of which Shevardnadze is the chairman).[29]

Language relations in Georgia since 1801 have thus been far from straightforward. The respective attitudes of Georgians and ethnic minorities to each other's languages are often ambivalent or downright contradictory. The relationship obtaining between Georgian and Russian in the post-Soviet period appears to be changing swiftly. A major component in it is a fear that the Georgian language and, with it, the Georgian identity are still under threat from Russia. Andrei Sakharov's now ubiquitous model of Georgia as a 'little empire' captures another aspect: even as Russia once rode roughshod over Georgian aspirations and rights, so Georgians are now perceived as behaving similarly towards the minorities within their state. But Georgian fears and suspicions *vis-à-vis* the Russians are by far the most significant factor underlying their current attitudes, and their minority policy often represents a response to perceived Russian intentions as much as it reflects Georgian sentiments towards the minorities themselves. The tempestuous recent history of

language relations is one manifestation, and a highly visible and significant one, of Georgian nationalism engaged in a process of self-definition ostensibly *vis-à-vis*, and often at the expense of, minority nationalisms, but with ever anxious glances over the shoulder in the direction of Russia. It is against this backdrop that we should consider the myths about the Georgian language current amongst Georgian-speakers, to which we shall now turn.

Language myths

Language myths are widely held beliefs about the origins, history and qualities of a language, whether one's own or a foreign language. The use of the word 'myth' does not necessarily imply that these beliefs are false. In some instances, popular belief and current scholarly orthodoxy may coincide; in others, they may be at loggerheads. Often, the matters at issue have long ceased to interest orthodox linguists, being regarded as 'non-issues', questions not susceptible to scholarly investigation or just plain uninteresting. 'Myth' is the term used in current academic discourse to denote such beliefs.

As we shall see, many language myths are extraordinarily resilient, emerging in near-identical form in one *ethnie* after another, generation after generation. A number of those found today are attested already in the sixteenth century, in the discourse of the emerging nationalisms of early modern Europe. But there is at least one significant difference between their status amongst early modern intellectuals, and the standing of their contemporary manifestations in the post-Soviet states. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and to a large extent in the eighteenth, language myths constituted an element of linguistic orthodoxy. The most highly regarded scholars of their day contributed to their formation and elaboration. Certainly, scholars clashed over individual myths: even his fellow-countrymen regarded J. Goropius Becanus' claim that Dutch/Flemish was the *Ursprache*, the primeval language of mankind, with scepticism. But by and large such myths were accepted by the entire educated community, and all its members could legitimately contribute to their refinement, from country parsons to scions of the aristocracy. Early in the nineteenth century, however, this academic eclecticism vanished. The reform of the university system carried out in Prussia by the scholar-diplomat Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), imitated throughout Europe, created an acknowledged path of training in all academic disciplines, including linguistics, and this training became the indispensable badge of the Establishment scholar; those without it were henceforth stigmatised as amateurs, fringe writers, eccentrics.

Concurrently, the locus of research shifted to the universities, making it difficult for those without an institutional affiliation to achieve recognition for their ideas, not least because of the control over the recognised channels of dissemination – academic journals and monograph series – exercised by members of universities and research institutes.

Thus, the notion of professionalism took root in linguistics as in other disciplines, and the consequence was the creation of two distinct groups of people writing about language: the professionals, a self-defined and self-regulating group characterised by a common path of training (with local and temporal variations) and shared notions of scientific method; and the non-professionals, fringe linguists who might themselves be professionals in a related sphere – theology, literature, journalism – but whose lack of the common training and outlook results in non-recognition by the linguistics professionals. Thus, in historical terms we can observe a shift from the position in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when these myths were an element of linguistic orthodoxy, through the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries, when they underwent a process of refinement and testing, to a point in the middle third of the nineteenth century when they were rejected by orthodox linguists, and the previous situation was reversed: beliefs that were previously constitutive of linguistic orthodoxy now became a badge of heterodoxy.[30]

Today this dichotomy exists as much in the post-Soviet states as in the West.[31] Just as in Britain it is the educated layperson, and not the professional linguist, who worries about the decline in standards in English usage and takes pride in the extensive vocabulary of English, the largest, s/he firmly believes, of any language in the world, so too in Georgia it is artists, journalists and teachers who most energetically propound comparable myths and attitudes. Georgian professionals – university teachers of linguistics and researchers in the A. Chikobava Institute of Linguistics of the Georgian Academy of Sciences – would disavow most, if not all, of these beliefs, and indeed some of this writer's Georgian professional contacts were deeply embarrassed that a foreigner had encountered such 'unscientific' views. For our purposes, the scientificity of these myths is not at issue; they are incontestably a reality at one highly significant level, namely, in the mental universe of a number of educated, articulate and influential Georgians who are actively engaged in examining and reconstructing their national and ethnic identity, and in formulating policy in all spheres from education to ethnic relations. That alone justifies taking language myths seriously.

Language-extrinsic and language-intrinsic myths

Language myths may be divided into two broad groups: those that emphasise *language-extrinsic* features such as the origin and destiny of a language, and those that focus on *language-intrinsic* features such as purity, elegance and lexical resources. Many of the myths occur repeatedly in different language communities, often redeployed with the express intention of demonstrating that *my* language is every bit as good as *yours*; some, however, are language- or culture-specific. It does not necessarily follow that it is the language-specific myths which are the most resonant or effective; as we shall see, the very fact that a popular myth is perceived as having enhanced the status of a rival language in the past may make it all the more effective as a tool to enhance the status of one's own language. Thus, A. D. Smith's comment about cultural symbols in general – 'it is the *specific* doctrines and ideas that provide the symbolism and ceremonial that arouse the deepest popular emotions and aspirations'[32] – is true only in a restricted sphere, that of *visual* symbols, where by the nature of the thing linguistic symbols have to be chosen from amongst material realisations of language with clear ethnic associations: a monument to a celebrated writer, an ancient inscription or a medieval manuscript, the signature of a famous author, the title page of a work with powerful emotional resonances. At the conceptual level, the *recycled myth* may contribute as much as more specific myths (or indeed more) to the legitimation of a sense of linguistic identity which is under siege or as yet weakly established. Some may be deployed absolutely ('our language is better than any other'), others relationally ('our language is better than yours').

Language-extrinsic myths

Those beliefs which focus on the external history and context of a language – its origins and antiquity, its genetic affiliations, its destiny, its perfect match to its speakers or to Nature – constitute the repertoire of *language-extrinsic myths*. To a large extent, language-extrinsic myths are intertwined with ethnic myths – myths of origin, of descent, of homeland and so forth – and are founded upon the identification of the language and its speakers. This equation is as old as the Bible, an enduring theme in the history of both linguistic and ethnological thought.[33] Not only is the language = *ethnie* equation widespread, but many of the specific arguments used to bolster the status of one language also reappear across the frontier, pressed into the service of a rival language. At times it may suit the shapers of nation-building discourse better to transfer the language =

ethnie equation on to the diachronic plane, substituting language history for ethnohistory. (See further pp. 192–4 below.)

Language-extrinsic myths may intersect with religious traditions, notably in myths about the chosen language or about the language spoken by Adam in the Garden of Eden ('the Adamic language'). They may ultimately be calqued upon the doctrine of linguistics professionals, albeit with divergent content, as in the many metamorphoses of the myth of the parent language or *Ursprache*. Alternatively, they may be related only indirectly to religious or mainstream academic doctrine, reflecting instead an amalgam of aspirations and self-image: witness the myths of conformity to Nature, of conformity to national character and of foreign approbation.

1. Myth of primordiality
- Myth of the parent language: 'our language is the parent of all related languages'.
- Myth of the *Ursprache*: 'our language is the original language of mankind'.
- Myth of the Adamic language: 'our language is the language spoken in Paradise by Adam and Eve'.

The three variants of this myth, although in principle distinct, shade over into one another with such facility that they are best discussed as facets of one and the same myth.

In the Middle Ages, it was accepted universally throughout the West and in much of the East that Hebrew was the Adamic language and the parent of all existing languages. Only in the Renaissance, with the growth of interest and pride in the national vernaculars, did scholars begin to investigate alternative scenarios. Speakers of Romance languages tried to legitimate their vernaculars by tracing their pedigree back to one or another of the *tres linguae sacrae*, the 'three sacred languages', Latin, Greek and Hebrew. The Italians traced their language back through Greek and Etruscan to Hebrew; the French, anxious to avoid giving ground to their cultural and political rivals in Italy, looked not to Latin but to Greek (via the Gauls, who according to Caesar used the Greek alphabet). Speakers of German and Dutch, uncomfortably aware that any attempt on their part to do likewise would meet with derision, adopted an alternative strategy: they claimed that their language was independent of any other. Indeed, one patriotic citizen of Antwerp, Johannes Goropius Becanus, redeployed the arguments commonly used to demonstrate Hebrew's status as the *Ursprache* to show that his native Flemish had a better claim to that status.[34] Celtic, favoured by British antiquaries, was a later contender. Shortly after 1800, the integration of

Sanskrit, the ancient literary and liturgical language of India, into the mainstream of Western linguistic thinking resulted in a brief burst of claims that *it* was the parent language, if not of all the languages in the world, then at least of most of the languages of Europe. Soon Sanskrit was displaced, far less romantically, by constructs such as 'the lost Indo-European parent language', 'proto-Indo-European' and analogous formations, up to 'Nostratic' and 'proto-World'. Fringe attempts to demonstrate the identity of the parent language with some existing language, and to bring an ever wider circle of languages into a genetic relationship with it, proliferated through the later nineteenth century and into the twentieth.[35]

In early twentieth-century Georgia, the fixation of Western scholars with the Indo-European family of languages was a source of no little resentment. This attitude marginalised the non-Indo-European Georgian and its relatives and, to the considerable chagrin of Georgian linguists, exalted both Russian and the neighbouring Armenian to what they regarded as a totally unmerited position of superiority. It was partly in reaction to this that Georgia's most celebrated linguist, Nikolai Marr (1864/5–1934), formulated the Japhetic hypothesis. Marr's relationship to the academic community of his day was complex. Marr himself, the offspring of a Scottish father and a Georgian mother, was never regarded as properly Georgian by his fellow-countrymen: they thought he was 'an English prince'. Within his own country he fell out with much of the academic establishment, a break underlined by Ivane Javakhishvili's refusal to give him the coveted post at the newly founded Tbilisi State University. (Javakhishvili later reconsidered his decision, but it was too late: Marr remained embittered.) Nor were his relations with Western scholars entirely easy. On the other hand, he rose to positions of great eminence within the Soviet scholarly establishment, becoming vice president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (1930) and a member of the Order of Lenin (1933), and having the Institute of Language and Thought named after him (1933).

Marr postulated a Japhetic family of languages, of which Georgian and other Ibero-Caucasian languages were the initial 'core' members. It gradually expanded to take in all the languages of the Mediterranean, including Basque, Etruscan and Pelasgian, and a great many others besides. In a later form of the theory Georgian–Sumerian kinship was advanced, possibly via Sumerian as the link between the Basque, Caucasian and Mongolian languages. By 1928 Marr had succeeded in establishing to his own satisfaction a relationship not only between Indo-European and Semitic, but also with Turkic, Chinese, African, Oceanic, Australian and Amerindian languages via his Japhetic root-language, and in due course

he announced that Indo-European was simply a later, imperialistic, stage of Japhetic. Although Marr's ideas were denounced in 1950 by a number of prominent linguists, including the Georgian scholar Arnold Chikobava (the probable ghost-writer of Stalin's celebrated speech on linguistics), they lived on in the popular consciousness; indeed, whereas the Institute of Linguistics of the Georgian Academy of Sciences (named after Chikobava) espoused Chikobava's repudiation of Marr, Tbilisi State University supported his ideas, and the division is said to live on to this day.[36]

'Japhetic' swiftly became part of educated Georgian common knowledge. On the first page of *Sak'art'velos istoria* (History of Georgia),[37] S. R. Gorgadze outlined the place of Georgian amongst the world's languages as follows:

There was a time when human beings all spoke one language; but when they multiplied and moved away from one another, the language gradually became differentiated: many languages arose in the place of the single one. Scholars today divide these languages into a number of families. For us the following three families are of the greatest significance: Semitic, Japhetic and Indo-European or Aryan. Each family has its own branches and dialects . . . The Japhetic family has the following branches: Elamite, Primitive Local 'Armenian', Georgian, Chan-Mingrelian and Svan.

Semitic and Indo-European are allocated two lines each, whilst the Japhetic family occupies some twenty-one lines. Whereas Gorgadze's wording implies that there are other language families besides those named, his formulation passed into popular consciousness without the qualifying rider. Several educated Georgians have informed this author that there are three 'root-languages' in the world, which invariably turn out to be the three listed by Gorgadze. An indication of the extent to which this myth is an unexamined item of belief is that, asked where Chinese fits in this scheme, all these individuals immediately concluded that the 'fact' cannot, after all, have been meant to be all encompassing; instead of defending it, they abandon it.[38]

Marr's ideas, with their pronounced anti-Indo-European (and therefore both anti-Russian and, when expedient, anti-Armenian) colouring, provided a convenient linguistic and ethnolinguistic underpinning for the ethnic nationalism propounded by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, president of Georgia from October 1990, when he took power in Georgia's first democratic elections since the arrival of the Bolsheviks, to his overthrow in January 1992. Gamsakhurdia, an expert on American literature and on the medieval Georgian epic *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, took up Marr's ideas and popularised them in, amongst other writings, his address 'The Spiritual Mission of Georgia' (1990) and his article on

Ioane Zosime's *Praise and Glorification of the Georgian Language*.[39] Gamsakhurdia cites Marr and Wilhelm von Humboldt for the notion that the Sumerians, Pelasgians, Etruscans and others were all connected with the proto-Iberians,[40] and Marr for the statement that 'the proto-Georgian [*proto-k'art'uli*] or Japhetic root-language is a unique language-generating phenomenon, the common root of every language originating from it by a process of differentiation'.[41]

Whereas Marr had been anxious to enhance the status of the Japhetic languages generally (and the Ibero-Caucasian languages in particular), and not exclusively that of Georgian (which sank, in the course of his career, from being 'one of the best-preserved Japhetic languages and one with the least admixture'[42] to being a 'hybrid language'), his more extreme followers amongst Georgian nationalists have preferred to ignore that aspect of his work, equating Japhetic with proto-Georgian. Thus, one Tbilisi researcher, an English teacher by profession, is currently engaged upon a huge project aimed at demonstrating that all Indo-European languages are descended from Georgian and other Ibero-Caucasian languages, beginning with the most ancient toponyms in the British Isles as proof to support the thesis.[43]

Overall, it is plain that the *Ursprache* myth has proved to be remarkably successful in contemporary Georgia. The Japhetic hypothesis advanced by Marr and his immediate followers served throughout the Soviet era to enhance the self-esteem of the Georgians in the face of the overwhelming might of the Indo-Europeans, represented for Georgia by the Russians. Zviad Gamsakhurdia combined the Japhetic hypothesis with Zosime's messianic hints (see pp. 180–2 below) to create a myth of salvation for the language, and hence for the nation as well. Meanwhile, others continue to seek linguistic ways of gaining recognition in the world for Georgian and its speakers – by seeking the origins of Indo-European lexical stock in it, so reducing the conquerors' much vaunted parent-language to a mere Johnny-come-lately offshoot of the despised Japhetic languages, or by tracing back the oldest known writing systems – Phoenician (the acknowledged ancestor of all Graeco-Roman scripts, including Cyrillic), Egyptian and 'Sumerian' – to one or another of the Georgian scripts.[44]

The *Ursprache* myth has played a role in the nation-building activities of other nationalities, during and since the Soviet period. Another case from the Caucasus is reported from Ossetia by Suzanne Goldenberg.[45] The -*don* morpheme in *London* and *Croydon* is identified with the -*don* ending of many Ossetian place-names and adduced as evidence for an ancient Ossetian empire spreading across Europe to include Britain. Beyond the Caucasus, a striking example comes from the mid-century Lithuanian

diaspora. In a pamphlet reprinting a portion of the introduction to his *Comparative Philology and an Outline of Lithuanian Grammar*, volume II, Theodore S. Thurston[46] rewrites a celebrated paragraph known to all Indo-Europeanists, the account of the relationship of Sanskrit to Latin and Greek from Sir William Jones' *Third Anniversary Discourse* (1786), placing Lithuanian in the position Jones gave to Sanskrit:

> The Lithuanian language, whatever its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than either Sanskrit or Greek, more copious than Latin, and more exquisitely refined than any of these three. Yet, Lithuanian bears to all three of them a stronger affinity than could have been produced by nature, not only in the roots of verbs, but also in forms of grammatical structure and the morphological construction of words. So strong is this affinity that any philologist can see very clearly that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin must have sprung from a common source, Lithuanian.
>
> There is a similar reason for supposing that the Heruli, Rugians, Goths, Old Prussians, and Latvians, and their language, had the same origin, for they were ancient Lithuanian people.[47]

Lithuanian thus becomes the Indo-European *Ursprache*. Thurston goes on to claim: 'Renowned philologists have agree[d] that the Lithuanian language is not only the oldest language in the world today, but the language used by Aryans before the invention of evolution of Sanskrit.' Such argumentation is intended to create respect for the language, and with it the people, leading inexorably to a call for Lithuanian independence: 'the world today would be greatly enriched with an independent Lithuania and with its ancient and important language in the field of linguistic science'. The device of ignoring or overturning generally accepted scholarly views of language relationships for political ends is very much alive in the contemporary Baltic republics, where the long-established orthodox notion of a Balto-Slavonic subgroup of Indo-European languages, comprising the Baltic languages – Latvian, Lithuanian and Old Prussian – alongside Russian, Polish and the other Slavonic languages, has been rejected in favour of a Balto-Germanic subgroup. Far harder to substantiate on purely linguistic grounds, this theory owes its existence to the desire to create linguistic independence from Russian in order to provide a further justification, using the language = *ethnie* equation, for political independence.[48]

> *2. Myth of the chosen language: 'our language has been singled out above all others for a special destiny'.*

The archetypal 'chosen' or 'sacred' language is Hebrew, *leshon ha-qodesh*, in transparent parallelism with the proclaimed destiny of the Jewish people.[49] From Bishop Isidore of Seville (d. 636) on, medieval Christendom

expanded this notion of a 'chosen' or 'sacred' language to accommodate the liturgical languages of the Church, Greek and Latin alongside Hebrew. The resulting myth of the 'three sacred languages', *tres linguae sacrae*, created a linguistic dualism which mirrored the widespread medieval social practice of a ruling elite of one ethnic stock presiding over a populace of another. The European vernaculars were on an equal footing – all alike inferior, a curse brought upon mankind by the presumptuous building of the Tower of Babel. The *tres linguae sacrae* alone stood outside the ebb and flow of time, the perpetual flux to which all other languages had been condemned. Only the *tres linguae sacrae* were capable of being reduced to rule, of being described in grammars; only they could guarantee intelligibility across great tracts of time and space; only they were worthy of study.

In the Orthodox East a less pessimistic view was adopted. Išoʿdad of Merv (c. 850) tells us that God created linguistic diversity 'in order to instruct, develop and exercise the intelligence and lead to the growth of wisdom'.[50] In contrast to the Church of Rome, which imposed Latin upon its converts, the Greek Church adopted a policy of translation, creating an alphabet where none existed, and encouraging the translation of the Bible and exegetical writings into the local language. Thus, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic and Old Church Slavonic all became the vehicle of high culture long before this could be said of any Western vernacular (with the partial exception of Old Irish). It was in this climate of linguistic tolerance that the first text in defence of the Georgian language was written in the tenth century, *Praise and Glorification of the Georgian Language*, by the hymnographer Ioane Zosime. Enigmatic in the extreme to modern eyes, it begins:

> Buried is the Georgian language
> As a martyr until the day of the Messiah's second coming,
> So that God may look at every language
> Through this language.
> And so the language
> Is sleeping to this day.

Later we read:

> Every secret is buried in this language . . .
> And this language
> Beautified and blessed by the name of the Lord,
> Humble and afflicted,
> Awaits the day of the second coming of the Lord.[51]

Praise and Glorification is unique, not only in Georgia, but in Europe as a whole, at this early date. Not until the late fifteenth century did writing in praise and defence of the vernacular commence in the West. Leaving

aside the many questions which surround the origins and *raison d'être* of this text, however, we should note that it has become a potent symbol of Georgian linguistic nationalism in the twentieth century. Amongst the many scholars to have attempted to unravel its numerous obscurities is the former president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Gamsakhurdia's reading united the destinies of language and people, seeing both the Georgians and their language as humiliated and pushed into obscurity by the Indo-Europeans, but predicting their ultimate resurrection and elevation to the spiritual leadership of mankind.[52] This messianic interpretation was eagerly taken up by Gamsakhurdia's supporters – it is significant that the article was placed first in his collected works – and Zosime's text, a symbol of the transcendence of the Georgian language, became a leitmotiv of nationalist discourse. Thus, two articles published in nationalist newspapers on the occasion of Georgian Language Day, 14 April 1993, invoke the *Praise and Glorification* with specific reference to Gamsakhurdia, one concluding with a few sentences from his essay,[53] and the other juxtaposing the complete text with a photograph of Gamsakhurdia and a facsimile of a few lines from the autograph manuscript of his essay, with the title page of the first school textbook in the Georgian language, Iakob Gogebashvili's *Deda ena*.[54] The Georgian language, represented by *Deda ena*, is linked visually with the deposed leader and conceptually, via Zosime's *Praise and Glorification*, with the message of resurrection: the political overtones are transparent.

An interest in *Praise and Glorification of the Georgian Language* thus links both official academic culture and the fringe discourse of nationalism. The professionals, in this case philologists and medievalists, publish their theories in specialist journals, focusing on the work as a historical document to be interpreted with respect to its tenth-century context, whereas the fringe professionals and nationalists deploy it as a symbol to reinforce their existing concerns, exploiting its mythopoeic potential. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, as a scholar turned politician, was a member of both groups, but from 1990 on his role not only as the spokesman of Georgian nationalism but also as the political leader of Georgia increasingly dominated his scholarly persona. Despite numerous attempts to claim the text for nationalist ends, Georgian medievalists have continued to grapple with the very real interpretive difficulties posed by every line.

> 3. *Myth of conformity to Nature:* 'our language has a deep inner connection with extralinguistic reality, mirroring the world directly in its sounds, letters and vocabulary'.

Of all the language myths this one is the most diverse in its manifestations and the most pervasive. At some level we all sympathise with the English-

speaker who exclaimed: 'Isn't "cow" a wonderfully cowlike word!' As native speakers, we have instilled into us from earliest childhood the feeling that the words of our language are the only possible way to express our emotions and describe the outer world. As we grow in linguistic sophistication, we come to realise that speakers of other languages hold the same view of their languages; and we may well encounter the dogma formulated first by Aristotle but given its most celebrated articulation by Saussure: 'l'arbitraire du signe'. And yet the poet in us maintains a covert sympathy for the unorthodox view, the view which finds in Tennyson's 'murmuring of immemorial elms' a clear case of sound echoing sense.[55]

During the Middle Ages the search for extra-linguistic correlations to linguistic phenomena was underpinned by a serious theoretical motivation. Scholars trained in the Judaeo-Christian tradition deeply regretted the existence of linguistic diversity, believing as they did that it was a punishment visited upon Man for his arrogance in attempting to build the Tower of Babel. As a result, the harmony and mutual understanding which had prevailed while all human beings shared the Adamic language was lost. Nevertheless, the three sacred languages – Latin, Greek and Hebrew – were held to be in some way superior to the rest, and to be to some extent immune to the consequences of the 'fall' of language. Scholars embarked upon a lengthy quest to identify features of these languages which still retained some element of their original 'rightness', revealing an intrinsic connection with extra-linguistic reality. Thus, Latin was said to have five vowels because man has five senses, while the seven vowels of Greek correspond to the seven planets. Instances of such correlative thinking are frequent throughout the Middle Ages in both the Byzantine and the Roman cultural spheres, and likewise in Jewish writing.[56] With the Renaissance discovery of the vernaculars, the locus for extra-linguistic correlations was transferred from the *tres linguae sacrae* to the vernacular. Concurrently the rationale behind the search shifted too: no longer was it a matter of seeking redemption from the 'fall' of language by focusing on a small group of 'superior' languages and ignoring the rest; rather, successful demonstration of a close correlation between one's own language and extra-linguistic reality could be used not only to enhance the prestige of one's own language, but even to buttress its claim to be the Adamic language.

Conformity to nature was sought in all aspects of language, but four domains stand out: sounds, vocabulary, sentence structure and letter forms. Sounds and sentence structure, frequently invoked by early modern Western writers, have not been invoked in recent Georgian nationalist discourse to demonstrate the superior 'naturalness' of their language, and they will therefore not be discussed here.

Vocabulary

One lexical item advanced in support of the 'naturalness' of Georgian is the verb *dzgers*, meaning 'beat', allegedly used exclusively of the heart. Particular significance is claimed for this on account of the great attachment Georgians feel for the notion of the heart, *guli*; it follows that there should be a special word for the beating of the heart. This claim is problematical, however, in that *dzgers* can also be used of a throbbing finger or a twitching eyelid, and indeed the author who reports this claim distances herself from it by attributing it by name to another authority, Guram Petriashvili (formerly a member of Round Table, Gamsakhurdia's party[57]).

Letter forms

The possibility that the shapes of the letters might reflect something beyond themselves, whether material or spiritual, has been discussed since antiquity. Perhaps the clearest statement of 'graphemic Platonism' comes from an artist who has taken a deep, often polemically articulated interest in the sources of the Georgian alphabet, Zurab K´ap´ianidze. On his poster about the Old Georgian *asomt´avruli* script he declares: 'I consider an alphabet meaningless when it has no other significance, either numerical or astronomical, except the meaning of a letter-symbol.' Western scholars of the eighth and ninth centuries saw typological and allegorical significance in the letters – the Trinity in the three strokes of the letter A, the Old and New Testaments in the two bows of the letter B and so on. The natural philosophers of fourteenth-century Oxford tried to trace a correlation between the shapes of the letters and the type of motion carried out by the articulatory organs, foreshadowing numerous later attempts to demonstrate a correlation between the position of the organs of the vocal tract and the letter forms. J. P. Ericus (1686), in a veritable *tour de force*, traced the Greek vowel signs back to the planetary symbols and the consonants to drawings of various animals and objects.[58] In the post-Soviet context, Georgian offers fertile material to thinkers of a like turn of mind, in that it has an alphabet of considerable antiquity associated primarily[59] with the titular language. Let us take two examples. Alina Chaganava, the author of one of the articles commemorating Georgian Language Day 1993 mentioned above (p. 182) remarks that the name Jesus (*Ieso*) 'represented in Georgian letters takes the form of a cross: იესო.' (This observation is not common knowledge amongst Georgians: several of this writer's Georgian acquaintances have expressed surprise on having this pointed out to them.) Perhaps the most remarkable manifestation of 'graphemic Platonism' in Georgia, however, is K´ap´ianidze's research on the origins of the earliest Georgian alphabet, the *asomt´avruli* script. In a book bearing the (translated) title *The First*

Alphabet of the Human Race (1990) and an associated poster K´ap´ianidze set out to demonstrate that the forms of the *asomt´avruli* letters reflect cosmic astronomical phenomena. Thus, the first letter, *ani*, represents the waning moon, the most auspicious season for any undertaking. Placing a moon symbol at the start of the alphabet points to the fact that the lunar calendar is encoded in the alphabet, and that it should ultimately be possible to discover the cosmic-astronomical significance of every letter. Likewise, each letter possesses religious or mythological significance, again transparently exemplified in the first letter: the Sumerians, we are told, called their moon deity *An*.[60]

As might be expected, K´ap´ianidze's ideas have not been taken seriously by the Georgian academic establishment. The extent of the union between K´ap´ianidze's cosmic-astronomical interpretation of the alphabet and Georgian nationalism emerges from his attack on a bastion of the academic establishment in Georgia, T´amaz Gamqrelidze (Gamkrelidze). Gamqrelidze, whose credentials include the directorship of the Oriental Institute of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, membership of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and recognition by numerous learned societies abroad, including the British Academy and the Linguistic Society of America, accorded for his work in Indo-European linguistics, published a book on the origins of the Georgian alphabet in 1990.[61] His conclusion, that the Old Georgian script was founded upon Greek rather than directly upon earlier forms of the Semitic alphabet, surprised no one in the West, but aroused great ire in Georgia. K´ap´ianidze's vitriolic response,[62] full of personal abuse, accuses Gamqrelidze of playing into Russian hands, joining the ranks of those traitorous Georgian scholars who assist the Russians in suppressing Georgian history. Such an attack makes vividly clear the extent to which research into Georgian linguistic history is bound up with nationalism amongst fringe linguists.[63] Likewise, Ayvazian's claim that the Armenians invented the first alphabet, as reported in chapter 3 (p. 51 above), is intended to reinforce Armenian claims to primordiality.

> *4. Myth of conformity to national character: 'our language reflects the character of its speakers not only in the sentiments expressed through it, but in its very sounds, vocabulary and structure'.*

In the early modern period, circular arguments about the relationship of language to national character were rife, as exemplified in the celebrated characterisation of European languages by William Camden:[64] 'Our *English* tongue is (I will not say as sacred as the *Hebrew*, or as learned as the *Greeke*,) but as fluent as the *Latine*, as courteous as the *Spanish*, as courtlike as the French, and as amorous as the *Italian*.' Needless to say, here and in many other such characterisations the conventionally

acknowledged qualities of the literature (in the case of dead languages) – the Hebrew Bible, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, Ciceronian oratory and so forth – and the stereotype characteristics of the speakers of living languages are being projected on to the associated languages. Of course, every language boasts its own special term for a dispositional quality allegedly foreign to other speech-communities: German *Gemütlichkeit*, Portuguese *saudades* and English *fairness* are well-known examples. Chaganava provides a striking development of this in the Georgian context:[65]

The Georgian language has the character of the Georgian man. Both are tolerant by nature, and in this there is a divine element. 'He killed the man unintentionally', the Georgian says, and thereby tries to justify that weightiest of all sins – the killing of one man by another: 'It is a mistake', he says. In so saying he seeks the reason for the mistake elsewhere than in the individual.

To a Western reader, this seems a truly remarkable example of tolerance – an attempt to explain away a homicide; other examples offered by Georgian-speakers include *puri shemomech'ama*, 'I unintentionally ate up all the bread' and *bavshvi shemomelakha*, which can be paraphrased as 'I didn't mean to hit my child, but did so through a momentary loss of control.'[66] This passage stands out for its use of another item of belief prominent in Georgian nationalism, both Zviadist and post-Zviadist: the stress upon the traditional tolerance of the Georgians. Thus, in the words of a booklet produced by the Georgian government, 'under the influence of specific historical conditions and due to their nature the Georgians have developed a high degree of national and religious tolerance'.[67] This too could be classed as a perennial myth spontaneously generated amongst one people after another.

5. Myth of foreign approbation: 'our language possesses such unique qualities that foreigners come from far and wide to study it'.

That a language's potential or actual interest to foreign scholars should be advanced as a matter of national pride is itself indicative of the way in which the discourse of nation-building is so often reliant upon external vindication. External scholarly interest is a claim that has been possible only since the advent of the serious academic study of languages for languages' sake. As long as languages were studied purely as a means to an end – an entrée to a prestigious foreign culture, as in the case of Ancient Greek since the Renaissance, or because of their relevance to one's own culture and contemporary concerns, as in the case of Anglo-Saxon in the theological controversies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England – the preconditions for this belief were lacking.[68] Consequently, this myth is not attested in early modern Europe; effectively, it is found only in the twentieth century (although in principle one might expect to find it in the

latter part of the nineteenth as well). Thus, the Georgian diaspora scholar Kita Tschenkéli devotes five pages of the introduction to his Georgian grammar to a section headed 'Importance of the Study of Georgian' (Bedeutung des Studiums des Georgischen, pp. xxiii–xxvii), composed largely of extensive quotations from scholars from A. Dirr (1904) to V. Polák (1950) testifying to the philological interest of Georgian.[69] G. I. Tsibakhishvili's elementary grammar of Georgian (in Russian) is a more striking example; the work is prefaced with a series of quotations testifying to the qualities of the language drawn from four authorities, each with his credentials and nationality: N. Ia. Marr, academician; D. Allen, professor (England); R. Meckelein, professor (Germany); I. Marschev, professor (Switzerland). The introduction, by academician Sh. V. Dzidziguri, devotes several paragraphs to evidence of foreign interest, listing the countries in which Georgian culture and Georgian language were arousing interest, and naming foreign Kartvelologists.[70] Likewise, on a poster about the Georgian alphabet published c. 1990 the English scholar W. E. D. Allen is quoted in praise of the perfectly phonemic nature of the alphabet, uniquely amongst the writing systems of the world. Such testimonials are, needless to say, absent from grammars by Western writers.

Chaganava, in the article already cited,[71] makes the point explicitly, albeit in more general terms: 'See what riches, what a unique linguistic phenomenon we Georgians have at our disposal! Scholars from various countries have studied and are studying our exceedingly ancient language in order to obtain the valuable textual and grammatical data preserved in it.' Chaganava, writing in 1993, two years after Georgia gained internationally recognised independence, has little call to develop the possible political implications of linguistic uniqueness. Theodore S. Thurston, the Lithuanian diaspora writer already quoted, demonstrates the logical endpoint of such argumentation, a consequence documented time and again since the era of Fichte and Herder.[72] Passages testifying to the antiquity and intrinsic worth of Lithuanian are quoted from the writings of the British ethnologist Robert G. Latham (1812–88), the American educationalist Benjamin W. Dwight (1816–89), the French geographer Elisée Reclus (1830–1905), the English archaeologist and philologist Isaac Taylor (1829–1901) and the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), prefaced by the apparently anodyne formulation, 'The following fragmentary quotations from eminent linguistic scholars will show the value and importance of the Lithuanian language to the culture of the world.' At the end, the real motivation is revealed: 'The above quotations from the renowned linguistic scholars of the 19th century substantiates [sic] the fact that the world today would be greatly enriched with an independent Lithuania and with its ancient and important language in the field of linguistic science.'[73] These renowned long-departed scholars are

thus made to lend their authority to the cause of Lithuanian independence: because they have recognised the unique worth of the language, the argument goes, the world should recognise the uniqueness and independence of its speakers. Quite why Thurston should draw attention to the fact that his authorities all belong to the last century – a factor that would lessen his authority in the eyes of contemporary academics – is unclear: the 'oldest is best' mentality which often prevails amongst amateur scholars? The use of such outdated testimonials was no doubt forced upon Thurston by the fact that such sweeping value judgements would have been hard to find in more recent linguistic scholarship.

The last word on the consequences of the judgements of outsiders belongs to a small ethnic group in Dagestan. On learning from the anthropologist Robert Chenciner that so far as was known their language was related to no other, the people responded: 'Very well. In that case, we have two questions. First, does this mean that we are descended from monkeys? And secondly, should we declare independence?'[74]

Language-intrinsic myths

Claims centring on the perceived – or desired – characteristics of a language – its purity, its euphoniousness, the size of its vocabulary, its expressiveness and so forth – constitute the *language-intrinsic myths*. The basic repertoire of language-intrinsic myths remains strikingly constant from one nation to another, and indeed myths of this kind are if anything more readily transferable than language-extrinsic myths. Certain language-intrinsic myths are mutually exclusive, in competition, as it were; thus, a writer who boasts of the purity of his language will probably not also vaunt the copiousness of its vocabulary, nor will the myth of monosyllabicity be invoked in the same breath as that of elegance. The particular myths selected tend to mirror current cultural and linguistic rivalries.[75] Although such myths still bulk large in popular consciousness, they tend to be invoked less in the discourse of contemporary nation-building in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union than language-extrinsic myths, where the language = *ethnie* equation is more apparent, an issue we shall return to below. A second factor which may be contributing to their relegation to the sidelines is the ever wider awareness of the doctrine of linguistic relativity. Up to the end of the eighteenth century it was accepted that some languages (notably Greek and Latin) were intrinsically superior to others, and much energy was devoted to rescuing 'inferior' languages, either by demonstrating that they too possessed the prized features of the superior languages, or alternatively by redefining the shibboleths of superiority. With the advent of Romanticism, linguistic and cultural diversity were celebrated as manifestations of the diverse

Volksgeister, and gradually, in a process extending well into the twentieth century, scholars learnt to think of languages as different but equal. The equality of languages is one of the fundamental tenets of contemporary linguistics, such that people with even minimal exposure to the beliefs of linguistics professionals are likely to share it, and consequently to disavow language-intrinsic myths and any claims founded upon them to a far greater extent than is the case with language-extrinsic myths.

1. Myth of euphoniousness: 'our language is more harmonious than others'.

Like most of the language-intrinsic myths, the myth of euphoniousness plays only a minor part in the discourse of Georgian linguistic nationalism. Even Chaganava restricts her comments on 'harmony' to the forms of the letters.[76] Might this reflect some unwritten item of popular belief about the harshness of Georgian? With its abundant repertoire of ejectives, affricates and fricatives, and its frequent complex consonant clusters, Georgian presents an initially formidable aspect to speakers of many other languages, although the difficulties are more apparent than real. Kita Tschenkéli, the Georgian diaspora scholar already mentioned (p. 186 above), seeks euphoniousness not in the phonemic inventory but in the intonation pattern, quoting two earlier philologists, the Russian scholar A. Dirr and the German scholar Hugo Schuchardt: 'Georgian speech runs along like murmuring water' (Dirr) and 'the accentuation is like the sea after a storm' (Schuchardt).[77]

2. Myth of unique expressiveness and untranslatability: 'our language is capable of expressing all concepts, even the most technical, whereas other languages cannot adequately translate from ours'.

Perhaps the most drastic version of this claim is exemplified in Georg Philipp Harsdörffer's challenge (1644) to speakers of foreign languages to translate a series of German verses describing animal cries:

> Die Lerche tirieret ihr tiretilier,
> Es binken die Finken den Buhlen allhier,
> Die Frösche koachsen und wachsen in Lachen,
> Reckrecken und strecken sich lustig zu machen.[78]

Given that even Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky', not to mention the writings of James Joyce, has been translated effectively into a great range of other languages, the claim of untranslatability nowadays finds short shrift. Somewhat more persuasive is the subtler approach of Cooper (1685):

Those matters which are written wittily and succinctly in our language are to be translated into other languages with considerable difficulty, and it is scarcely pos-

sible to avoid weakening their style and vigour of wit, whereas matters written in other languages may be translated into our language much more easily, with the same elegance and the same degree of vigour of wit.[79]

A short passage from one of Marr's writings quoted by Chaganava runs as follows:

The Georgian language is able to transmit the concepts of abstract thought fully and without distortion. The entire output of both Asian and European culture can easily be translated into Georgian . . . Georgian readily appropriates the thought of neighbouring and foreign peoples and renders their expressions. Georgian is one of the world's most developed languages.

Although Marr does not say outright that other languages are unable to do this, the implication is clear, and is driven home in the final sentence. Marr provides one of the mottoes for Tsibakhashvili's grammar of Georgian:

Everything that can be expressed in any language on Earth is expressed in Georgian . . .
   Georgian embodies every thought highly artistically, without distortion or misrepresentation . . .
   Georgian is so rich that it is a language of world significance in its inner nature.[80]

The first and last sentences had already figured as the motto of Sh. V. Dzidziguri's little book about Georgian,[81] and no doubt in countless other works besides. Lurking unstated behind such claims is an assumption of superiority: 'Whereas the other perceives and expresses reality only partially, we can do so perfectly.' This almost instinctive feeling has lost a lot of ground amongst the educated as the notion of linguistic equality has become ever more widespread.

3. Myth of lexical copiousness: 'our language has a larger vocabulary than others'.

Renaissance scholars marvelled at the wealth of vocabulary they found in Latin and Greek, and compared it ruefully with what they regarded as the lamentably underdeveloped vocabularies of their own vernaculars. Heartened by Cicero's story of how Latin lacked philosophical terminology when he began to write, but (thanks to his attention) became as rich and expressive a medium for philosophical reflection as Greek, sixteenth-century scholars vied for the title of the 'Cicero' of their respective languages, creating new terms for technical and literary domains alike. It became a common complaint in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, for instance, that ordinary citizens could no longer understand literature in their own language on account of the ubiquitous latinate neologisms. The myth persists to this day, in that many an educated

English-speaker 'knows' that English has the largest vocabulary of any language in the world, even though s/he also knows that by no means all these words are available to all speakers.[82] Equally, the English and their neighbours have been aware ever since the sixteenth century that this rich vocabulary has been built up at the expense of lexical purity: English has borrowed extensively from the numerous languages its speakers have encountered in the course of their history. Stigmatised as a 'gallimaufrey', a 'mingle-mangle' and 'the scum of languages', English has patently not been able to lay claim to linguistic purity in the same way as some of its neighbours. Georgian writers, although they revel in the expressiveness and untranslatability of their language, do not single out lexical copiousness as a prized feature of their language. Is this on account of its incompatibility with the myth of purity, or because of a competing and dominant myth about the superior lexical copiousness of Russian? Declarations concerning the wealth of the Russian vocabulary are not far to seek.[83]

> *4. Myth of purity: 'our language has maintained its original vocabulary and grammar as handed down by our ancestors, pure and uncontaminated by outside influences'.*

The only language which in sixteenth-century eyes could claim true purity was Hebrew, the sole language to have escaped the consequences of the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel (or so it was argued). Even Latin, revered though it was as the language of scholarship, contained a number of transparent borrowings from Greek; and as for the vernaculars, most were acknowledged to be swarming with loanwords reflecting their tumultuous histories. English, for instance, was, in the words of the Swiss doctor and polymath Conrad Gesner, 'the most mixed and corrupt of all present-day languages; for initially the ancient British language [i.e. a Celtic dialect] was partly obliterated by the rule of the Saxons, partly corrupted; and then it borrowed large numbers of words from French'.[84] Apart from the antiquaries, scholars concerned with ancient texts who looked back nostalgically to an age when their languages were pure and 'unmixed', it was only German- and Dutch-speakers who made great play of the status of their language as 'a pure untouched virgin'.

Interestingly, in the light of the obvious ethnic overtones of all such argumentation, Georgian writers remain silent on this issue. A certain degree of purism, and a strong awareness of the status of loanwords versus calques was a conspicuous element in Soviet language planning.[85] Around 1990 there was a move to replace some Russian loanwords with coinages of Georgian stock, a common corollary of nationalist movements.[86] Significantly, the account of the activities of the Department for

the Cultivation of Georgian Speech (*k'art'uli metqvelebis kulturis ganqop'ileba*) of the A. Chikobava Institute of Linguistics of the Georgian Academy of Sciences published in 1991 in honour of the Institute's fiftieth anniversary does not so much as mention the Russian language, although 'purification' (*sits'minde*) of Georgian is alluded to. It may be that the reprinting in the same issue of an old article by V. T'op'uria on the extirpation of a Russian syntactic construction from Georgian is an oblique indication of the sympathies of the Institute.

Anecdotal confirmation of the strength of popular belief in a largely 'pure' Georgian vocabulary comes from a scholar involved in the compilation of the eight-volume *Ganmartebit'i lek'sikoni*: 'One could never indicate *all* the borrowings from foreign sources because people would get too angry.' Thus, the widely held popular etymology of Georgian *t'avaziani*, 'polite', from Georgian *t'avi*, 'self', serves to confirm the Georgian self-perception as an intrinsically courteous people, the notion of selfhood being built into the very word for 'polite'. Its actual derivation (from Arabic) would be 'unacceptable'. At an early editorial meeting attended by A. Chikobava, G. Tsereteli and other highly regarded philologists it was decided not to mention the presumed foreign origin of such long-naturalised words as *puri*, 'bread', and *lukma*, 'bit, piece, crumb', partly because their immediate provenance was unknown, and partly in order not to anger people unnecessarily.

Elsewhere in the post-Soviet states, notably in Ukraine, movements to purify the language of Russian elements have made considerable headway. At the Second International Conference of Ukrainianists in L'viv (1993) a purist attack on the allegedly Russian preposition *po* aroused angry interventions from the audience. In general, linguistic purism is a perennial concomitant of nationalism, and particularly of nationalisms with a pronounced ethnic component. Even in present-day Belarus, as elsewhere in the post-Soviet states, the issue of Russification is a subject of concern. In a little book by S. Stankevich, the history of the process in Belarusian is traced in detail, and Russicisms in morphology, syntax, idiom and vocabulary (including some involving the preposition *po/pa*) are catalogued. The state of the language today is contrasted with its historical status as the official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – thereby extending across a huge tract of eastern Europe – in the early modern period.[87]

Conclusion

Why are language myths so important in the discourse of Georgian nationalism? As we saw at the outset, oral components play a large part in Georgian culture, but this would seem to be a precondition for develop-

ing a language-oriented form of national consciousness, context rather than cause. The answer has much to do with divergent perceptions of language history and ethnohistory. As a good many Georgians will readily acknowledge in conversation, and occasionally in print, apart from a brief Golden Age in the twelfth century their ethnohistory does not provide a satisfactory self-image, whether one focuses on the past – subjugation by Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Persians, Russians – or on the present – civil and inter-ethnic conflict. Furthermore, the creation of rival ethnohistories by scholars seeking to strengthen Ossetian and Abkhaz claims to statehood[88] has had the effect of narrowing the scope of the term 'Georgian', a process hastened by the Zviadist slogan, 'Georgia for the Georgians'. From meaning 'all who live under Georgian sovereignty', approximately in the way that 'Russian' was used to mean 'Soviet citizen' in the West before the break-up of the USSR, the term *k´art´velebi*, 'Georgians', is increasingly being used in the restricted sense of 'ethnic Georgians'. The extreme nationalist claim to exclusive rights to a Georgian identity is now backfiring as the marginalised minorities create new identities for themselves and secessionist movements arise (with or without Russian assistance). If, as many Western observers predict, the Mingrelians travel the same path, that will be a worse blow to Georgian identity than any previously suffered. Only brief glimpses of a glorious past remain – a successful challenge to the might of the Roman Empire under Parsman II in the second century, the Golden Age under David the Builder and T´amar in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Attempts to boost morale by focusing on these episodes, frequent during the first few years of independence, now tend to meet at best with scepticism, at worst with derision.

It is in this climate that language history finds a role, functioning as a substitute for an unsatisfactory ethnohistory. The new and hotly contested picture of distinct ethnic identities stretching back millennia, united only fitfully and under compulsion, gives way to the cherished image of harmonious voluntary coexistence in the common heritage at once symbolised and created by the Georgian language. The most prized aspect of Georgian national character, according to the national self-image – tolerance – is transferred from ethnic relations, where it is patently at variance with recent history, to linguistic relations. In one sphere after another, language history permits the construction of a more favourable picture of the past than ethnohistory:

- Millennia of subjugation by foreign powers are replaced by a lengthy history of linguistic independence, beginning with the earliest written monuments at the very latest in the fifth century AD, a good two centuries earlier than the earliest texts in English (or for that matter in French or German), as

Georgians take pleasure in pointing out. Other readings take the history of written Georgian back to the third century BC, to the era of the mythical creation of the Georgian alphabet by King P'arnavaz; more extreme readings still would see in the Georgian alphabet the ancestor of the Egyptian or Phoenician scripts, or even of all alphabetic writing systems.

- Even if the Georgians themselves have been downtrodden and subjugated, they can comfort themselves with the thought that their language was once dominant throughout Europe, older than and therefore superior to the languages of the imperialistic Indo-Europeans, and will one day again be triumphant: a messianic, teleological view of ethnohistory replaces widespread feelings of despair. As the poet Vakhtang Gorganeli put it, 'Is not our Georgian language / A monument of our refusal to yield?'[89]

- The language is seen to reflect back the most highly prized character trait of the Georgians, tolerance. Extremists would argue that the very forms of the Georgian letters encapsulate cosmic-astronomical verities long since lost to other scripts. Both readings support the view that Georgian is in some sense more 'natural' than other languages.

- The picture of foreign interest in the language balances the feelings of abandonment and despair which arise out of their recent history. Many Georgians believe that at the Malta summit of 1991 the then US president, George Bush, conceded Georgia to Russia's sphere of influence, and in this way they rationalise what they regard as the otherwise inexplicable Western failure to intervene or even speak out in the face of clear evidence of Russian involvement in Abkhazia. Interest in their language on the part of foreign philologists serves to counteract this sense of abandonment, although it may also raise unrealistic expectations based upon an exaggerated view of the political influence of Western scholars.

Georgia is thus a case of an *ethnie* looking to its language for an alternative history and source of symbols at a time when ethnohistory fails to provide them or, rather, provides the 'wrong' story.

This account raises several issues, some specific to the Georgian case, others of a more general theoretical nature. For one thing, the materials on which this article is based are largely from nationalist sources from shortly before, during and after Zviad Gamsakhurdia's period in power. To what extent is linguistic nationalism a feature of nationalist discourse amongst followers of Shevardnadze? Have they managed to appropriate

it, or is it perceived as being too closely linked with the deposed president?[90] Secondly, although it would be easy to recast Georgian linguistic history with Georgian in the role of aggressor, this possibility has apparently not entered into the consciousness of those who have cultivated linguistic nationalism. One would predict that, if such a version of Georgian-language history entered circulation, linguistic nationalism would be downplayed. More broadly, one might predict that, where linguistic nationalism is prominent, there is a strong likelihood that language history and ethnohistory are tacitly perceived as being at variance, and that the myths provided by language history are considered to conform more closely to the image of the *ethnie* which the purveyors of nation-building discourse are seeking to reinforce.

Transcending all these possibilities is the greater issue of the nature of the nationalism which prevails in a given area. It could be argued that there is a correlation between the type of nationalism and the kind of language myth favoured. Broadly speaking, the Georgian examples considered here emphasise language-extrinsic myths; language-intrinsic ones, in contrast, play only a minor role. In recent Western history the reverse is true. To take one instance, the preferred language myths in the discourse of nation-building in Ireland in the latter part of the nineteenth century singled out language-intrinsic features such as euphony, expressiveness and logical structure. Language-extrinsic myths, frequent up until around 1800, had disappeared almost totally from view by the middle of the century.[91] Two factors are no doubt at work in this. One, and a very powerful one, is the spread of linguistic orthodoxy in the form of comparative philology, with its emphasis upon the Indo-European family of languages and the position of Irish Gaelic as one of the daughter languages of Indo-European. The widespread currency of this tenet of linguistic orthodoxy thus served to undermine those language-extrinsic myths which sought to affirm the historical uniqueness of Gaelic as the language of Adam and Eve.

Secondly, however, the relatively inclusive type of nationalism adopted in western Europe ruled out the language-extrinsic myths with their implicit language = *ethnie* equation. Ireland, of all countries, many of its patriots English-speakers who knew no Gaelic, could not afford an exclusive brand of linguistic nationalism. Only the language-intrinsic myths, which could be claimed indifferently by any of the speakers of the language in question, regardless of their ethnic origin, lent themselves to use in this context. In eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where an exclusive, largely ethnic form of nationalism tends to prevail, it is to be expected that language-extrinsic myths will be favoured in order, via the language = *ethnie* equation, to strengthen the self-image of the *ethnie*. As the type of nationalism changes, veering from relatively inclusive to rela-

tively exclusive, or vice versa, the type of language myth selected to rein-
force the sense of identity will change too.

INCLUSIVE NATIONALISM ↔ *LANGUAGE-INTRINSIC MYTHS*
              ↕   ↕
EXCLUSIVE NATIONALISM↔ *LANGUAGE-EXTRINSIC MYTHS*

Thus, in the middle of the twentieth century it suited the shapers of iden-
tity in both the Soviet Union and the British Commonwealth of Nations
to emphasise the intrinsic virtues of Russian and English respectively, the
common heritage and bond of a multitude of different *ethnies*. In present-
day Georgia, however, a disjunction manifestly exists between two forms
of discourse. On the one hand, government sources and the Tbilisi intelli-
gentsia continue to perpetuate the inclusive historical myth of the
Georgians as a tolerant people and of the traditional ethnic harmony of
the country as a whole; but at the same time the language-extrinsic myths
are being deployed to create an image of Georgian identity which is exclu-
sive rather than inclusive in nature. The attitudes implicit in the language-
extrinsic myths are thus at variance with the official statements about
tolerance, harmony and so forth. To say that such statements are untrue
would hardly be fair: many very sincere Georgians believe them utterly
and do their best to live by them. But precisely because the type of nation-
alism encoded in language myths is covert rather than overt, they are a
better indicator of the views which prevail amongst the shapers of the
national self-image and should be given more attention than they have
been hitherto by students of nationalism and the discourse of nation-
building.