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Intergenerational Language Conflicts in Georgia: Tradition vs. Innovation

Abstract: This paper explores generational slang and language-based misunderstandings in Georgia, focusing on how linguistic change contributes to social and cultural conflicts between generations. In recent decades, Georgia has experienced rapid political, technological, and cultural transformations, which have significantly influenced everyday language use. Younger generations increasingly adopt slang influenced by English, Russian, and digital communication, particularly through social media, music, and global popular culture. In contrast, older generations tend to value traditional Georgian linguistic norms and often perceive new slang as a threat to cultural identity and language purity. These differing linguistic practices frequently lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and tensions in family, educational, and professional settings. Slang expressions used by young people may be viewed as disrespectful or unclear by older speakers, while younger generations may see traditional language attitudes as restrictive or outdated. The paper argues that these language conflicts are not merely about vocabulary, but reflect deeper generational differences in values, identity, and worldviews. By examining examples of generational slang and everyday communication in Georgia, this study highlights how language functions as both a bridge and a barrier between generations. Understanding these dynamics can contribute to more effective intergenerational dialogue and promote greater linguistic tolerance in a rapidly changing society.

Keywords: Intergenerational Communication; Sociolinguistic Change; Language Ideologies; Linguistic Tradition and Modernization; Cultural and Generational Dynamics.

Introduction

Multilingualism is traditionally defined as the use of two or more distinct languages within a society. However, contemporary sociolinguistics has broadened this concept to include variation within a single language, encompassing registers, sociolects, styles, and generational varieties. This paper argues that generational slang functions as a form of “micro-multilingualism,” producing communicative boundaries comparable to those observed in classical multilingual contexts. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory, language ideology studies, and digital

communication research, the paper conceptualizes intergenerational language conflict as a form of cross-generational multilingualism. Special attention is given to digital environments, where rapid linguistic innovation intensifies asymmetries between younger and older speakers. The study proposes that digital slang and semiotic systems create new forms of symbolic authority, positioning youth as native speakers of emergent communicative codes while older generations occupy the role of second-language learners. The paper concludes by suggesting that intergenerational dialogue should be understood not as a simple issue of misunderstanding, but as a dynamic site of power negotiation and linguistic transformation.

Multilingualism has long been associated with the coexistence of distinct national or ethnic languages within a single society. However, recent developments in sociolinguistics challenge the assumption that multilingualism necessarily involves separate, codified languages. Instead, scholars increasingly recognize that variation within a language may create communicative boundaries analogous to those found between languages (Blommaert, 2010).

This paper proposes that generational slang can be conceptualized as a form of multilingualism operating within one linguistic system. In particular, it argues that intergenerational language conflict mirrors classical multilingual tensions concerning prestige, authority, legitimacy, and access. Furthermore, the rise of digital communication has accelerated linguistic innovation, intensifying generational divides and producing asymmetrical forms of communicative competence.

Conceptualizing Multilingualism Beyond National Languages

Traditional definitions of multilingualism focus on the coexistence of distinct languages within a society. However, contemporary sociolinguistics emphasizes linguistic repertoires rather than bounded languages (Blommaert, 2010). Speakers draw on diverse semiotic resources, including dialects, registers, styles, and discourse conventions. Bakhtin (1981) introduced the concept of heteroglossia, arguing that language is inherently stratified and contains multiple voices and social meanings. From this perspective, variation is not peripheral but constitutive of language itself. Similarly, Gumperz (1982) demonstrated that shifts in linguistic style and code signal social boundaries and group membership. What appears to be a single language may function as multiple socially differentiated systems.

Intra-language variation refers to the differences that exist within a single language and reflects the diversity of its speakers and communication contexts. One important form of variation is regional dialects, which develop in different geographical areas and often differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Another type is sociolects, which are language varieties associated with specific social groups, influenced by factors such as education, occupation, age, or social status. Language also varies according to professional needs through professional registers, which include specialized terminology and expressions used in fields such as medicine, law, business, or technology. In addition, youth language represents a dynamic and creative form of communication commonly used by younger generations. It is characterized by the frequent use of slang, innovative expressions, and linguistic trends that help create group identity and distinguish younger speakers from older generations. Furthermore, the rise of technology has contributed to the development of digital communication styles, which are commonly used in online interactions, social media platforms, and instant messaging. These styles often involve abbreviations, emojis, acronyms, and informal language structures that facilitate quick and efficient communication. Together, regional dialects, sociolects, professional registers, youth language, and digital communication styles illustrate how language adapts to social, cultural, and technological influences while remaining a unified linguistic system.

Labov (1972) established that linguistic variation correlates systematically with social factors such as age, class, and identity. Age, in particular, plays a central role in linguistic innovation and change. From this theoretical foundation, generational varieties of language can be understood as structured systems with their own norms, meanings, and social functions. In this sense, multilingualism may exist not only between languages but within generational strata of a single linguistic community.

Generational Slang as a Form of Linguistic Boundary

Youth language functions as a marker of identity and group solidarity. Eckert (2000) demonstrates that adolescents use linguistic variation to construct social identities and differentiate themselves from adults. Slang is not random innovation; it is socially meaningful performance.

Generational slang plays an important role in shaping social identity and communication among younger speakers. It serves as a marker

of in-group belonging, helping individuals feel connected to their peers through shared expressions and vocabulary. At the same time, it reflects cultural alignment, as slang often emerges from popular culture, social media, music, and current trends. Generational slang also contributes to social positioning, allowing speakers to express their identity, values, and membership in specific communities. Furthermore, it can represent resistance to authority, as younger generations often create and use slang to distinguish themselves from older groups and established norms. In this way, slang operates similarly to minority or regional languages, reinforcing boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Language boundaries often produce symbolic exclusion. Bourdieu (1991) argues that language carries symbolic power, and certain varieties are legitimized while others are marginalized.

In intergenerational contexts, older speakers often interpret youth slang in a negative way, positioning it as incorrect compared to standard language norms. It may also be seen as trivial, with little perceived seriousness or value in formal communication. Additionally, youth slang is sometimes labeled as linguistically deficient, suggesting that it reflects a lack of proper vocabulary or grammatical knowledge, rather than a legitimate linguistic variety. In some cases, it is even viewed as morally problematic, as older generations may associate it with disrespect, rebellion, or declining cultural standards. These perceptions highlight the gap between generational language attitudes and the evolving nature of everyday speech.

Conversely, younger speakers may perceive standard or traditional forms as outdated or disconnected from contemporary realities. This dynamic mirrors classic multilingual conflicts in which one language holds prestige while another is stigmatized. Thus, intergenerational language conflict is not merely stylistic disagreement but a struggle over linguistic legitimacy.

Authority in language is socially constructed. Standard varieties often derive prestige from institutional support (education, media, governance). Youth slang, lacking institutional backing, may appear linguistically subordinate. However, within peer networks, youth varieties possess high symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). What is stigmatized in formal settings may be authoritative in informal contexts. Therefore, generational language conflict reflects competing systems of linguistic value rather than objective differences in correctness.

Language ideologies refer to beliefs about language structure and use that are socially embedded (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). These

ideologies shape perceptions of linguistic change and variation. Older generations often adopt ideologies of linguistic purity and stability, perceiving rapid innovation as decline. Younger speakers, by contrast, may view innovation as creativity and adaptation. Misunderstandings between generations frequently stem not from semantic ambiguity but from ideological differences regarding what language should be.

For example, younger speakers often embrace abbreviation and emoji-based communication as a fast and efficient way to express meaning in digital environments. In contrast, older speakers may interpret these same forms as careless, informal, or even disrespectful, especially in contexts where traditional written standards are expected. This difference highlights how attitudes toward language use can vary across generations and reflect broader changes in communication norms. Thus, intergenerational conflict emerges at the intersection of linguistic practice and ideological expectation.

The Digital Environment as Linguistic Accelerator

Digital communication platforms have dramatically accelerated language change. Androutsopoulos (2014) argues that online environments facilitate rapid circulation and transformation of linguistic forms. Memes, hashtags, emojis, abbreviations, and multimodal elements function as semiotic systems with internal rules and shared meanings. Unlike traditional slang, which diffused through local peer networks, digital slang spreads globally and evolves at high speed.

Herring (2013) emphasizes that computer-mediated communication is not merely written language but a hybrid form integrating text, visuals, and symbolic markers. Emojis and memes operate as culturally encoded signs requiring contextual knowledge. For digital natives, these signs function intuitively. For older generations, they may appear opaque or ambiguous. Thus, digital communication introduces not only new vocabulary but new grammars of interaction.

The concept of asymmetric multilingualism traditionally refers to situations in which one group has greater access to dominant linguistic resources. In digital contexts, this asymmetry may reverse. Youth often function as “native speakers” of digital communication (Prensky, 2001). Older generations, even if linguistically proficient in standard language, may lack fluency in digital semiotic systems. This creates a communicative asymmetry in which younger speakers often possess high digital linguistic capital, as they are more fluent in contemporary online styles, slang, and platform-specific norms. In contrast, older

speakers may find themselves in a position similar to second-language learners, as they must adapt to unfamiliar abbreviations, emojis, and rapidly evolving communication practices. This imbalance reflects differences in exposure and adaptability to digital environments. This shift reconfigures traditional power hierarchies, especially in informal communication domains.

Code-switching traditionally refers to shifting between languages. However, in intergenerational contexts, speakers may engage in “age-switching” – adapting linguistic forms depending on interlocutor age. Younger speakers frequently modify their language when speaking to parents, teachers, or authority figures. This suggests that generational varieties function similarly to distinct codes requiring contextual adjustment. The ability to navigate between generational registers becomes a form of communicative competence. Blommaert (2010) argues that linguistic resources are unevenly distributed and contextually valued. In intergenerational interaction, the speaker who controls the legitimate code often controls the interactional frame. However, in digital spaces dominated by youth culture, this authority may shift.

Intergenerational Dialogue as Cross-Generational Multilingualism

If generational slang is conceptualized as a micro-language, then intergenerational dialogue resembles cross-linguistic communication. Miscommunication may arise due to semantic unfamiliarity, when speakers do not understand certain words or expressions used by another group. It can also result from differing pragmatic norms, where the same message is interpreted differently depending on social context or expectations. Divergent ideologies further contribute to misunderstanding, as speakers may attach different values or beliefs to language use. In addition, unequal access to semiotic codes can create barriers, since not all individuals share the same familiarity with symbols, slang, or digital communication practices.

Recognizing these interactions as forms of multilingual negotiation reframes the problem. Instead of viewing youth language as deficient or adult language as rigid, intergenerational communication becomes a site of translation and adaptation.

This perspective promotes linguistic tolerance by encouraging acceptance of diverse language forms. It also fosters awareness of ideo-

logical bias in how people judge different varieties of speech. In addition, it supports recognition of dynamic language change, highlighting that language naturally evolves over time.

Implications for Sociolinguistic Theory

Conceptualizing generational slang as a form of multilingualism expands traditional linguistic frameworks in several important ways. First, it challenges the notion of bounded languages by showing that linguistic variation often exists within a single language system rather than between clearly separated languages. Second, it foregrounds age as a central sociolinguistic variable, emphasizing how generational differences shape communication practices and linguistic competence. Third, it integrates digital semiotics into multilingualism research by including emojis, abbreviations, and platform-specific conventions as meaningful semiotic resources. Finally, it reconceptualizes language conflict not simply as competition between languages, but as age-based power negotiation, where different generations struggle over legitimacy, authority, and interpretive control in communication. Moreover, it highlights the importance of examining language authority beyond institutional contexts. Youth-driven digital innovation demonstrates that linguistic legitimacy is fluid and context-dependent.

Empirical section

The study draws on responses from four participants aged 27 to 51, representing diverse academic and professional backgrounds. Among them are a software testing automation specialist (QA engineer) with international experience, a student studying abroad, a PhD candidate in political science focused on governance, security, and communication, and a university lecturer (associate professor). Their profiles combine technical expertise, advanced academic training, and entrepreneurial experience. These participants offer perspectives from different professional settings.

All respondents identify Georgian as their primary and native language, which plays a central role in their everyday communication. It is mainly used in family and social contexts as the main means of interaction with close friends and relatives. For some participants, the language also has a clear professional and academic function, being used for writing scientific texts and analytical work. A multilingual context is also observed, where Georgian coexists with other languages, such

as English, in professional environments. In addition, for certain respondents, the language carries a strong identity function, serving as an important marker of national and cultural belonging.

Respondents generally perceive the current state of the Georgian language as stable and significant, although influenced by external factors. Some participants emphasize its uniqueness, aesthetic value, and central role in national identity, while also acknowledging the controlled introduction of neologisms. It is noted that globalization, digital communication, and the media environment affect linguistic norms, leading both to enrichment and potential challenges. At the same time, institutional support and regulation are highlighted as important factors that help maintain the language's status and cultural importance.

All respondents report clear generational differences in Georgian language use. Younger speakers show greater linguistic flexibility, often using slang, neologisms, and borrowings, especially from English, influenced by globalization and digital communication. Older speakers adhere more strictly to grammatical norms and formal registers. Respondents nevertheless regard the core structure of Georgian as stable.

Tradition plays a crucial role in preserving the Georgian language. It ensures intergenerational transmission through family environments and oral communication. Historical experiences of linguistic restriction further strengthened its importance as a form of cultural resilience. Tradition also supports the preservation of grammar, vocabulary richness, and literary heritage, maintaining linguistic identity.

Respondents hold varied views on the introduction of foreign words, slang, and neologisms into Georgian. Some see this as a natural and necessary adaptation that enriches the language and helps it reflect modern realities. Others emphasize moderation to preserve clarity and linguistic uniqueness. More critical voices argue that Georgian already has sufficient internal resources and does not need excessive borrowing, which may even create intergenerational communication difficulties.

Respondents offer a balanced yet somewhat ambivalent evaluation of younger generations' influence on the Georgian language. Some express concern that excessive use of slang and foreign words may weaken linguistic richness and authenticity. Others highlight the dual nature of this influence, noting that young speakers both preserve and transform the language through new forms. Overall, linguistic change is seen as a natural result of contemporary social dynamics, combining innovation with potential risks to norms and intergenerational communication.

Respondents report generational tensions in language use, though not always as open conflict. More often, a linguistic gap is observed, where older speakers struggle to understand modern youth slang shaped by social media and digital culture. At the same time, there are family-based efforts to correct language use and limit foreign words, promoting “proper” forms. Disagreements reflect a contrast between normative and more flexible language attitudes, although some participants do not see these differences as significant or problematic.

All four respondents acknowledge the significant and largely inevitable influence of globalization, media, and technology on the development of the Georgian language. These factors are seen as key drivers of linguistic change, accelerating the introduction of new lexical elements, especially English borrowings, and new communication patterns. Digital platforms and mass media spread these influences, simplifying syntax and fostering hybrid language practices. At the same time, there is public sensitivity regarding excessive use of foreign elements, particularly in formal speech and media contexts.

All respondents view the Georgian language as a key element of their personal and national identity. It is seen not only as a means of communication, but also as a carrier of culture, history, and collective memory. Participants emphasize its symbolic value as an expression of belonging, resilience, and historical continuity. The language is regarded as a source of pride and cultural heritage to be preserved, as well as a tool for intellectual and personal expression, and in some cases a framework for understanding the world.

Respondents generally express a positive and optimistic outlook on the future of the Georgian language. It is seen as stable and resilient, likely to be preserved across generations. At the same time, it is acknowledged that the language will inevitably change due to social development, technology, and communication practices. Some participants expect ongoing hybridization and adaptation to the global environment alongside institutional stability. There is also potential for greater international recognition, while maintaining its vitality and cultural significance.

Respondents emphasize the need for a balanced approach between preserving tradition and embracing innovation in the development of the Georgian language. Language change is seen as natural and inevitable, while cultural and linguistic identity must be consciously maintained. Some participants stress that traditions should be adapted

to remain relevant in contemporary society rather than preserved mechanically. Others highlight the role of education policies that strengthen language competence while recognizing linguistic evolution. Overall, a model of “preservation through adaptation” emerges, where balance is achieved through integration rather than opposition.

Most respondents did not add additional information beyond the topics already discussed. One participant expressed appreciation for the focus on the importance and future of the Georgian language. Another highlighted a theoretical understanding of language change as a natural feature of living languages rather than linguistic degradation, emphasizing the need to manage the balance between continuity and change. In the remaining cases, no further comments were provided.

The findings demonstrate that the Georgian language is perceived by all four respondents as a fundamental pillar of both national and personal identity. Across all respondents, it carries strong symbolic value, functioning not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of historical memory, cultural tradition, and collective belonging. This highlights its essential role in sustaining cultural continuity across generations. At the same time, the data reveal that the language is undergoing dynamic development influenced by globalization, technological advancement, and younger generations. Participants consistently note the increasing presence of English borrowings, slang, and digital expressions. While these changes are generally viewed as natural and inevitable, they also generate discussion about linguistic standards, intergenerational understanding, and the preservation of authenticity. The tension between innovation and preservation emerges as a central theme. Overall, the study indicates a dominant orientation toward balance between tradition and linguistic evolution. Respondents largely agree that language development should accommodate innovation and adaptation while maintaining core structural and cultural features. Rather than perceiving change as a threat, many emphasize its inevitability within living languages. Consequently, the concept of “preservation through adaptation” emerges as the most appropriate framework for understanding the future trajectory of the Georgian language, ensuring both continuity and relevance in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

Multilingualism should no longer be restricted to the coexistence of distinct national languages. Intra-language variation, particularly

generational slang, can function as a structured system producing communicative boundaries and ideological tensions comparable to classical multilingual conflicts. Generational slang operates as a marker of identity, belonging, and resistance, reinforcing in-group solidarity while potentially excluding older speakers. Language ideologies intensify misunderstandings by framing innovation as decline or triviality. Digital communication environments further accelerate linguistic change, creating asymmetric forms of multilingual competence in which youth become native speakers of emergent semiotic systems and older generations occupy the role of learners.

Understanding intergenerational dialogue as cross-generational multilingualism offers a productive theoretical framework for analyzing age-based linguistic conflict. Rather than interpreting generational differences as communicative failure, scholars should approach them as dynamic negotiations of power, identity, and legitimacy within evolving linguistic landscapes.

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