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Language play and norm deviation in art and advertising in Old Tiflis: Occasionalism as a didactic tool

ABSTRACT. The present article employs a diachronic linguistic landscape (LL) perspective to examine Russian-language advertising in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Tbilisi (Old Tiflis) as evidence of lived multilingualism and historically situated language competence. The analysis encompasses historically documented verbal and visual “texts in space”, primarily preserved in Armenian literary discourse, complemented by paintings depicting urban signage. The study examines the interaction of Russian, as the imperial *lingua franca*, with Armenian, Georgian and other local languages within a multiethnic urban environment. Methodologically, it combines semiotic metalanguage with Bakhtin’s theory of speech genres and the triad of norm-usus-occasionalism to classify deviations from standard Russian and interpret their pragmatic and cultural functions. The findings demonstrate that pervasive orthographic, grammatical, syntactic and stylistic “errors” cannot be reduced to illiteracy; rather, they index language contact, interference, sociolectal variation and a carnivalesque urban ethos conceptualised as “Tiflis Esperanto” and preserved in cultural memory. The article finally contends that such norm distortions possess a considerable didactic potential. At B2 level and above, the progression from occasionalism through usage to norm serves to enhance register awareness and facilitates the acquisition of spelling, grammar, syntax and pragmatic conventions. This process is facilitated by culturally grounded cognitive disruption.

Keywords: advertising occasionalism, semiotics of advertising, paintings-ads, Pirosmeni, Aghasi Ayvazyan, Vagharshak Elibekyan, Old Tbilisi / Old Tiflis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Synchronous themes take center stage in the linguistic landscape (henceforth: LL). However, this study adopts a diachronic perspective and begins with a historical observation of languages in space. The focus is on historically documented advertising texts and the Russian language used in Tbilisi, Georgia. Advertising traditionally plays an important role in the LL, especially when multiple languages, including foreign languages, are present. It provides insights

into the languages that play a significant role in a particular space, language skills, and languages of interethnic communication (Gorter & Cenoz 2024: 153). In some cases, it responds to political circumstances or changes associated with state-administrative interventions (Giger & Sloboda 2008), while migration and the resulting language contact also leave their mark in public spaces (Haci & Zafer 2021: 321; Gorter & Cenoz 2024: 174).

There is evidence that the use of different languages or their variants is related to the historical development of spaces and their societal transformation in modern times (Gorter & Cenoz 2024: 252; Henzelmann 2024: 235; Henzelmann & Haci 2025). As Henzelman (2024) shows, language use reflects the complex relationship between social values and identity, while another article co-authored with Haci (Henzelmann & Haci 2025) emphasizes the semiotization and visualization of linguistic presence in Bulgaria.

It should be noted that the linguistic landscape can also be accepted via the prism of the conceptual metaphors of Lakoff and Johnson: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 5). In this sense, LL functions as a spatial metaphor of discourse, in other words, as a “text in space” where the social and cultural metaphors of society are embodied. It follows from this that linguistic and visual signs in urban space are not only communicative acts but also a metaphorical realization of the city’s socio-cultural stratum.

When we deal with foreign languages, the glottodidactic aspect comes into play: we see that the use of foreign languages and their management in historical documents are evident, yet they receive little attention worldwide, especially in materials from the South Caucasus. However, this article reveals the linguistic spirit of that era. It provides an idea of the actual level of language proficiency of the population of Old Tiflis and the practical use of Russian as the language of advertising in public places in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

However, this topic provides insights into the actual language proficiency of the population, the degree of language transmission, and the practical usability of this language in public spaces, which we seek to assess using Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, as an example, and the specific use of Russian at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Russian has long been the lingua franca in this multiethnic city. Therefore, we can document evidence of correct language use and deviations from norms that have been consciously and unconsciously transformed into visual structures. Thus, this study aims to analyze the linguistic and visual advertisements of Old Tiflis, the distortions of linguistic norms in the Russian language, and their didactic application in language learning. It should be noted that the products of language deviations and games can be productive in teaching foreign languages and can be considered

only at the upper levels of language learning – starting from level B2 and above (cf. Kryuchkova & Moshchinskaya 2009).

This article's main argument is that grammatical, syntactic, stylistic, and linguistic "chaos", (distorting linguistic norms) – code-mixing, language switching, code-switching, etc. – are caused by linguistic ignorance and carnival thinking. These can be used as a didactic tool to teach from the inside out, from occasionalism to usage to the linguistic norm.

Our hypothesis is supported by the fact that accidental language acquisition allows one to comprehend the high, neutral, and low language registers, as well as language learning by the "roadmap". There is a game element to the ternary opposition of occasionalism, usage, and norm, which makes the didactic, cognitive, and commemorative process of language learning fruitful and productive for memorizing spelling, grammar, syntax, and pragmatic rules in the historical context of the Russian language in the South Caucasus.

2. A FEW MORE WORDS ABOUT OUR METHODOLOGY

The semiotic metalanguage (denotation, connotation, syntagma, and semantics), M. Bakhtin's theory of speech actions (Bakhtin 1997: 159–206), and the linguistic concepts of norm, *usus* / usage, and occasionalism are all employed when examining empirical data, advertising texts, and slogans. The examples will primarily be considered in the context of linguistic *usus* (as it is) and norms (as it should be), which presupposes how we should "correctly" and "non-correctly" use the language (Zakharova 2012: 33–40). The advertising examples analyzed below are occasional examples. They are, in fact, semantically already beyond the limits of usage. Occasional words, expressions, and phrases have a pronounced emotional and expressive coloring. Occasionalism requires a detailed description of the functioning of these speech acts, identifying the causes of these occasional expressions. These expressions were quite understandable to users but often not entirely understandable to native speakers who know the language's norms and usage. From a didactic point of view, the part described below can serve as an example of teaching a language in the context of a ternary opposition: *linguistic norm, usus, and occasionalism*.

3. THE LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF OLD TIFLIS

The history of Tbilisi or Tiflis can be divided into four eras: the medieval (V–XVII), pre-Soviet (from the 18th to the early 20th century), Soviet (1921–1991), and post-Soviet (since 1991).

The term “Old Tbilisi” or “Old Tiflis” was used in scientific literature before Georgia’s Sovietization. However, after that, Armenian scientific discourse more often used the Georgian version of the toponym – Tbilisi. In other words, after the Sovietization of Georgia, the era of multicultural Old Tbilisi ended, and a new “Georgian” Tbilisi began. Old Tbilisi was a multi-ethnic, multicultural, musical, and carnival city. Georgians comprised only one-tenth of Tiflis’ population (Zhelikhovskaya 1895: 72). By the end of the 19th century, Armenians constituted 42% of Tiflis’s population (Sahakian 1998: 103); in addition, there were Caucasian Tatars, mountaineers (Ossetians and Chechens), and Jews living there. Old Tbilisi no longer exists in reality today, and as noted by art historian Heinrich Igityan, “Old Tbilisi is an ethnographic concept” (Igityan 1991: 6).

This paper draws empirical material and linguistic examples from literary and visual texts of Armenian culture. It is based on the discourse of “Old Tbilisi in Armenian literature or culture,” which may be verifiable and expanded in the future based on texts from Georgian and Russian cultures.

According to the logic presented above, the discourse of “Old Tiflis in Armenian literature” can be compared to the discourses of “Old Tiflis in Russian literature”¹, “Old Tiflis in Georgian literature”, and so on (Manning 2023: 498–516)².

¹ It should be noted that the discourse of Old Tiflis in Russian literary studies is primarily known under the name “Caucasian text of Russian literature.” However, the phrase “Caucasian text,” as we see it, does not delineate the boundaries of the research subject, since “Caucasus” is an expansive concept (geographically).. It includes not only subjects of the Russian Federation (Chechnya, Dagestan, North Ossetia, etc.), but also Georgia. Do the countries of the South Caucasus – Armenia and Azerbaijan – belong to the geographical toponym “Caucasus”? Or should Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia be considered as countries of Transcaucasia? Thus, during the Soviet era, the term “Transcaucasia” referred to the three “brotherly” republics (Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan) (See Simyan & Dragan 2025: 95–97). In the post-Soviet period, the definition of “Transcaucasia” was too subjective or imperialistic, as it primarily emphasized the Russian perspective on territories south of the Caucasus mountain range. Therefore, in English- and German-speaking discourse, a more neutral, geographically acceptable toponym is increasingly used to refer to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: The South Caucasus. After the 44-day Second Karabakh War (2020), pro-European politicians, such as Tigran Khzmalyan, are introducing a new approach into Armenian public life: Armenia is the eastern boundary of Europe, and by 2030, as he claims, Armenia’s borders will be the southwestern borders of the European Union.

² See more about this in detail (Simyan 2019: 65–66; Anchabadze 1990; Grishashvili 1977; Mkhitaryan 1991: 59–67; Simyan & Ghazaryan 2020: 258–270).

Old Tbilisi was a multicultural and multilingual city. In this regard, the story by A. Ayvazyan's "The Gospel of Havlabari" is interesting. The story features the highly respected Mr. Asaturyan from Avlabari, "a philosopher who knew everything, had seen the world," telling about Diogenes, who spoke Armenian in Sololaki, Georgian in Vera, Old Armenian in the churchyard, Ashkharahabar (modern Armenian) to Sirachkhana's craftsmen, Russian in the palace square, Persian in the Turkish square / maidan, German in Kirichina, and Havlabari language in Havlabari (Ayvazyan 1985: 8-9).

Of course, in this quote, the author somewhat exaggerates and humorously describes the contexts in which various national languages function in the urban space. For instance, when Mr. Asaturyan spoke Havlabari with the locals. In reality, this refers to the Armenian dialect of Tbilisi. The author presents the local dialect as a language. The author is partly correct regarding the Old Armenian language, as Old Armenian's structure (grammar, semantics) is almost incomprehensible to modern Armenian speakers who are not specialists. The only meanings that can be grasped are separate words.

Nonetheless, what is important is the reference to the Armenian language in its various manifestations (Old Armenian, "Havlabari" (the Tbilisi Armenian dialect), modern Armenian, and other languages from different linguistic families, such as Indo-European (Armenian, Persian), (North) Caucasian (Georgian, Lezgian), and Turkic (Caucasian Tatar). It is important to note that Georgian in Old Tbilisi was represented in the full spectrum of its dialects (Megrelian, Svan, Gurian, Kakhetian, etc.). Approximately such a diversity of languages and dialects existed in Old Tbilisi. At this intersection of linguistic play, the language of signboards functioned, which the Armenian writer Aghasi Ayvazyan humorously called "Tbilisi Esperanto."

It should be noted that only the social "lower" class in Old Tbilisi in the 19th century spoke Armenian. This is confirmed by the example in the poem "The Grief of Levon" (1865) by Smbat Shahazis (1841-1908). Although the lyrical hero Levon, who came "from the North," (Russian Empire) finds the "dark-eyed" Armenian girls of Tbilisi beautiful in his eyes, he does not perceive them as possessing Armenian spirit, upbringing, or knowledge of the Armenian language: "Foreign dialect, foreign language // Armenian girls do not attract me // Why is there no Armenian upbringing in you, // Why does the Armenian Word not adorn you?" (Shahazis 1961: 271).

This point of view coincides with V. Zhelikhovskaya's idea that only the lower social classes spoke Armenian, and the middle and upper stratum did not know Armenian at all, "especially women" (Zhelikhovskaya 1895: 63). Literary texts show that women knew Armenian and spoke the Tbilisi (Avlabari) dialect. In their perception, Armenian was considered the language of the commoners

(kinto and karachogheli³), “the lower”, associated with a lack of education, and that is why they tried to speak “higher” languages – Russian and French.

To understand these speech acts, one must grasp the linguistic context of the region, Old Tbilisi. Georgian poet, translator, and researcher of the region’s literary connections, Iosif Grishashvili (1889–1965), describes the linguistic palette in his monograph “The Literary Bohemia of Old Tbilisi” (1926–1927) as follows: “The city had a single soul, and it spoke in its unique language. To an unaccustomed ear, the speech of the townspeople would seem wild, a peculiar mixture of Persian, Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, and Georgian words” (Grishashvili 1977: 11).

It was precisely this linguistic blend that, as Armenian researcher Yervand Margaryan noted, became a trigger for the emergence of “a special urban language, a distinctive urban *lingua franca*” when encountering the Russian language in the 19th century (Margaryan 2023: 336), as Russian was the primary language of advertisements and signboards in the urban space. It is worth noting that the lyrical hero Levon, traveling through the South Caucasus, seeks a “pure” Armenian bride, a pursuit that does not align with the spirit of Old Tbilisi. In this multinational city, mixed marriages were common, and wealthy Armenian families spoke Russian and French⁴. Wealthy parents employed French-speaking tutors to give private lessons to the children of Tbilisi merchants⁵, while the storekeepers themselves were mostly semi-literate. As V. Zhelikhovskaya pointed out, “Armenians living in Georgia are undoubtedly more active and enterprising than its native inhabitants; not only is the entire trade of the region, but also all economic activities – agriculture, animal husbandry, silk production, gardening, and nearly all crafts” concentrated in the hands of Armenians (Zhelikhovskaya 1895: 66).

However, “they are not skilled in managing large capital and rarely undertake big dealings. They can engage in various transactions, often intricate schemes, for quick profit” (Zhelikhovskaya 1895: 66). Armenian traders and merchants spoke a mixed Armenian-Russian language, in other words, Caucasian “Trasyanka”, where Russian served as the imperial language. At the same time, Armenian was the language of the “lower classes.” As previously mentioned, Old Tbilisi was multinational. As Armenian poet S. Shahazis remarked, it was

³ The Kinto were street vendors in Old Tbilisi, while the karachogheli were revelers, musicians, and creators (see Grishashvili 1977: 13–15; Simyan 2019: 71–76 for details). For information on the appearance of the karachogheli, see V. Elibekyan’s painting “The Meeting of the Karachogheli with the Writer Raffi” (1986) (Elibekyan 1991: 67).

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the “Eurocentrism” of Armenians’ wealthy layers, see (Simyan & Ghazaryan 2020: 264–265).

⁵ For more details about this epoch and problem, refer to (Simyan 2024: 485–486).

a city inhabited by Armenians, Caucasian Turks, Ossetians, Circassians, Jews, Russians, and Georgians (Shahazis 1961: 268). The Russian language was the language of the empire, the “elite”, and the primary communicative “channel” for different nationalities, even though Russians were not the majority in the city. Chakhetiya, in the article “Armenians in Tbilisi in the 1860s”, provides more detailed information (Chakhetiya 1958: 163).

Table 1. Ethnic Composition of Old Tiflis (1864–1876).

Demographic composition by year	Old Tiflis	Population
1864	Armenians Georgians Russians other nationalities	28878 or 47,4% 14878 or 24,76% 12302 or 20,47% 4417 or 7,23%
1865	Armenians Georgians Russians other nationalities	31914 or 44,9% 14787 or 20,8% 12142 or 17,09% 12208 or 17,21%
1876 r.	Armenians Georgians Russians other nationalities	37308 or 40,7% 21623 or 23,6% 19574 or 21,24% 13163 or 14,46%

Source: Chakhetiya (1958: 163).

The data suggests that communication among residents had to be in Russian, as it was the connecting language among different nationalities and the language of the Russian Empire. That is why inscriptions, signboards, and advertisements were mainly written in “broken” Russian, with grammatical, syntactical, and stylistic errors. Literary texts indicate that the Russian Empire did not have an “aggressive” language policy or linguistic institutions monitoring literacy in urban spaces.

4. LANGUAGE PLAY: CODE MIXING SIGNBOARD

Before moving on to the description of the advertising signs of Old Tbilisi, it should be noted that they are essentially primary speech genres (toasts⁶, proverbs, etc.). M. Bakhtin, in his work “The Problem of Speech Genres” (1953), notes that primary genres are processed into secondary (complex) speech

⁶ See examples of Old Tiflis (Grishashvili 1977: 44–45).

genres, such as novels, dramas, various scientific studies, large journalistic genres, and so on (Bakhtin 2000: 251). It is also important to note that documented speech acts are a small part of urban space's advertising "fragments" (Chakhetiya 1958: 163). Accordingly, all these speech acts are related to the square, the market⁷.

Let us examine the speech acts of Old Tbilisi using the works of Armenian writer Aghasi Ayvazyan (1925–2007) as an example. In his story "The Signs of Tbilisi" (1981), we learn about the artist and "advertiser" Grigor, to whom the following signs belong. To anticipate, let us note that all advertising slogans are without punctuation. Firstly, this indicates that the "authors" of these speech acts did not master Russian punctuation. Secondly, it reflects the influence of Georgian, which does not use uppercase letters and has almost no punctuation, except for the period and comma. Let's consider individual examples.

1. For example, "Grigor painted dancing kinto above the door of the Kaplo tavern and below it wrote very freely and clearly, joyfully and simply: «ТАНЦУЮ Я // ТАНЦУЮТ ВСЕ // ХОЧИШЬ СМАТРИ // ХОЧИШЬ НЕ» // 'I DANCE // EVERYONE DANCES // IF YOU WANT, LOOK // IF YOU DON'T WANT, DON'T'". There are a lot of mistakes on the signboard.

Spelling errors: ХОЧИШЬ СМАТРИ // *хочЕшь* (If you want), *смОтри* (look),

Syntactical error: ХОЧИШЬ НЕ instead of НЕ ХОЧЕШЬ. In the last phrase, there is also one spelling error: *хочЕшь* instead of хочИшь.

Let's clarify some obscure realities for the modern reader who does not speak Armenian or Georgian, or the era's sociolects. Regarding the first sign, the story's narrator notes: "Grigor was sure that these awkward words, which reeked of wine and vomit, were spiritual, alive. True freedom... ТАНЦУЮ Я // ТАНЦУЮТ ВСЕ // ХОЧИШЬ СМАТРИ // ХОЧИШЬ⁸... Wow! It was a hymn to his freedom... Freedom, brotherhood, eternity... Хочишь сматри, хочишь не⁹..." (Ayvazyan 1981: 6).

2. A signboard in Sololaki: «В ДУХАХЕ ГОГА // АППЕТИТ БОГА» // "IN THE TAVERN OF GOGA // THE APPETITE OF GOD". The phrase "В ДУХАХЕ ГОГА" can be understood and translated in two ways: a. "In the tavern (is) GOGA", or b. "GOGA'S tavern."

If we accept the second version ("GOGA'S tavern"), then the Russian translation should use the genitive case (Гога / GogI). Judging by this ad in the meaning of the second version, the tavern has a 'Michelin-starred', divinely delicious

⁷ The visualization of the markets in Old Tbilisi can be seen in the paintings of V. Elibekyan's "Bazar" (1978), "Bird Bazar" (1979), "Bazar" (1983) (Elibekyan 1991: 10, 13, 24).

⁸ "I DANCE // EVERYONE DANCES // IF YOU WANT, LOOK // IF YOU DON'T WANT".

⁹ "If you want, look; if you don't want, don't."

cooking master – God (Goga), since the words “Goga” and “God” rhyme in the advertising phrase. Moreover, the hyperbolic phrase “АППЕТИТ БОГА // THE APPETITE OF GOD” refers to the appetites of customers who will enjoy divine food prepared by God-Goga in the tavern.

3. A signboard in Havlabari: «ДУША РАЙ // ДВЕР ОТКРИВАЙ // НЕ СТУЧАЙ» // “SOUL (IS) PARADISE // OPEN THE DOOR // DON’T KNOCK”. We can identify some kinds of mistakes.

Spelling errors: it must be *дверь* (door) with a soft sign (door).

Grammatical error: It should be *не стучи* (“Do not knock”) and not *НЕ СТУЧАЙ* (“Do not knock”). The ad emphasizes the host’s openness and the tavern’s atmosphere. One can enter as if into their home without knocking at the door, passing through the demarcated space: street vs. tavern.

4. A signboard in Klor-takhe: «ВИНИ ПОГРЕБА // КАХЕТИНСКИЙ АКОБА // ПИОМ ДО ГРОБА И ДАЖЕ В ГРОБА» // “WINE CELLARS // KAKHETIAN (wine is made by) Hakob // DRINK UNTIL THE GRAVE // AND EVEN IN THE GRAVE”. According to language norms, this advertising text should have been formulated as follows: «Винные погребы // КахетинскоГО АкоПа, пьем до гроба и даже в гробу». According to language norms, the following spelling and grammatical errors are present in this ad. If translated from the language (sociolect) of kinto, karachogheli, it offers Kakhétéan wine supplied by the Armenian Hakob. The second part of the ad uses hyperbole (“even in the grave”). The text appeals to the notion that one should drink until losing consciousness.

In addition to hyperbole, an antithesis is used, from which one can derive the opposition: life (to drink) vs. death (grave); in other words, Hakob’s Kakhétéan wine is so good that one could transition to another world. Into a world of temporary non-being: drunkenness (temporary) vs. death (timeless). The advertisement emphasizes the rhyming words: ПОГРЕБА vs. АКОБА vs. ГРОБА (two times mentioned) // cellars vs. Hakob vs. grave / grave. Thus, the use of the phraseology “drink to the grave,” and its twist, makes the phrase carnival-like, implicitly pointing to the opposition life vs. death.

5. A signboard in Narikala: “САЛИДНИ ОБЕДИ ДЛЯ САЛИДНИ ЛЮДИ” (cf. figure 1). According to the linguistic norm, it should be: “*Respectable (not SOLID) dinners for respectable (not SOLID) people*”. There are obvious spelling, grammatical, and stylistic errors. Analyzing this advertisement, Yervand Margaryan notes that “the establishment is not just a simple eatery for urban ‘riffraff,’ but a respectable place where people of high-status visit” (Margaryan 2023: 339). Indeed, on a pragmatic level, the advertisement alludes to the prestige of the establishment and attributes a high status to the visitor while simultaneously indicating the high quality of the food, the elegance of the presentation, and the



Figure 1. Vladimir Garnikyan. САЛИДНИ ОБЕДИ ДЛЯ САЛИДНИ ЛЮДИ
[Respectable (not SOLID) dinners for respectable (not SOLID) people]. 2018

Source: https://artchive.ru/garnikyanart/works/582376~Vyveski_Tiflisa

traditional nature of the dishes, as the specified semes fall under the notion of “Respectable” (Солидный / сАлидный) (sememe).

However, this creates a dual, ambivalent situation for the speaker of the linguistic norm, raising the question: Why was the eatery’s client unable to effectively advertise its product? For didactic material, one can utilize a painting by contemporary artist Vladimir Garnikyan to visualize the advertisement sign and analyze the artwork. In a didactic sense, similar paintings should also be examined during the discussion to see how well the artist conveys the spirit of Old Tbilisi. This painting is perceived in contradictory terms: it seems to depict the spirit of Old Tbilisi, yet the mountain Ararat is visible through the windows. The space of Old Tbilisi has been “expanded” and placed in the Ararat Valley¹⁰.

6. A signboard at Sheytan Bazaar: «Բարև, կազո, մարդ-օրսին // Добри человек» (in Armenian) // “HELLO, FRIEND, PERSON // GOOD PERSON”

¹⁰ The painting can be analyzed in terms of the clothing language of the figures depicted, and an attempt can be made to reconstruct it in the context of the opposition: traditional (Georgian) clothing vs. European-style clothing.

This advertising text is designed based on the model of code-switching, addressing different residents of the city at once: “*barev*” in Armenian means “hello”; “*ḡuḡn*” (katso) in Georgian means “friend”, “*mard*” means “person”; *oqmin* means “someone”, “any person”) (Aghayan 1976: 1600). The word collocation “Добри человек” is in Russian means “GOOD PERSON”. As can be seen, while there are no errors in the Armenian part of Russian, word collocation is an obvious spelling mistake. If this multilingual jumble is translated into Russian, it reads: «Здравствуй, друг, добрый человек» // “Hello, friend, good person.”

7. A signboard in Ortachala: «ГОСТИНИЦА // ИМЕЕШЬ МЕСТО // НА МАЯ ГАЛАБА» // “HOTEL // YOU HAVE A PLACE // ON MY HEAD”.

The distortion of linguistic norms «Имеешь место на Моей ГОЛОВЕ» (“You have a place on my head”) makes the phrase somewhat unclear even after translating it without grammatical or spelling errors. This idiomatic phrase is a literal translation from Armenian, meaning “to be respected, loved, worthy of hospitality.” A survey among native Russian speakers showed that the idiom is entirely unclear. One respondent suggested rephrasing it as: «Имеешь место // В МОЕЙ ГОЛОВЕ» // “You have a place // In my head,” interpreted in the context of “a place in memory, in life.” Another respondent interpreted the idiom as «ты создаешь мне хлопоты, приходится заботиться о тебе, решать твои проблемы» “You are making a trouble, I have to take care of you, solve your problems.” To check if similar idioms exist in the Georgian language for «Имеешь место на Моей ГОЛОВЕ» (“You have a place on My Head,”) only one respondent gave a close answer: “A guest like a boss” (in Georgian *Batoni brdzandebit*), or “the customer is always right.” The Georgian respondent proposed another interpretation, suggesting it might mean “A guest from God” (Stumari dwtnisaa). As shown by all the Georgian respondent’s interpretations, the literal phrase “YOU HAVE A PLACE // ON MY HEAD” is linked to codes of xenophilia. The code of hospitality, familiar to Georgians and Armenians, serves as the basis for suggesting a correct response.

Thus, it can be concluded that the advertising text is unclear to native Russian speakers and also not clearly understood by those with intermediate Armenian language proficiency. Almost all respondents at this level struggled to offer any approximate version, and only one Armenian-speaking respondent suggested his variant: «Я про тебя не забыл» // “I have not forgotten about you.” It should be noted that native Armenian speakers have no trouble understanding the idiom’s meaning. Respondents indicated that this advertisement, in its connotative potential, can function fully only for native speakers of Armenian and is partially understandable to Georgians, as their thesaurus emphasizes love for guests – xenophilia.

8. A signboard in Didube: «СКОРИ ФАЙТОН // ВЕСОЛИ АНТОН / ИДУ ВАГЗАЛ // И ОБРАТОН» “FAST PHAETON // CHEERFUL ANTON / I AM GOING TO THE STATION // AND BACK.” The linguistic norm suggests that this shouting advertisement should have been written: «СкорЫЙ фаЭтон // ВесЕлый Антон // еду (вместо иду) на вОКзал // и обрАтно» // “Fast phaeton // Cheerful Anton // I am going (instead of I am going) to the station // and back.” In the phrase “fast phaeton,” the coachman Anton adds an emotional nuance, as the words «скорый фаэтон» (“quick phaeton”) is used in formal, “high” speech. Based on the rhyme, three keywords are emphasized in the advertisement: *phaeton*-Anton-*obraton* (файтон-Антон-обратон). Anton advertises himself and the emotions he will convey during the client’s transportation. Jokingly, he will “quickly” take the rushing client to the station, while “back” indicates a “shuttle” route.

9. A signboard in Sirachkhana: а) «БАЛЬНИЦА // ПУСКАЙ БЕЗ РАБОТИ // ЧАСТНИ ВЕНЕРИЧЕСКИЙ // УМРУ Я // ФЕЛШЕР ЛЕЧУ ВСЕ БОЛЕЗНИ // НЕ ЗАХОДИ, НЕ НАДО» “HOSPITAL LET IT GO WITHOUT WORK // PRIVATE VENEREAL I’LL DIE // THE PARAMEDIC TREATS ALL DISEASES // DO NOT COME IN, NOT NEEDED.” (Ayvazyan 1981: 6–7).

Judging by the advertising text in Old Tbilisi, the paramedic is illiterate. The signboard should have read:

«бОльница // пусть(кай) без работЫ // частнЫЙ венерический (кабинет) умру я // фельДшер лечу все болезни // не заходи, не надо». This signboard hung in Old Tiflis on Sirachkhana Street (translated from Georgian as “Wine Cellar”) and referred to the consequences of entertainment in the Ortachala brothels. A. Ayvazyan notes in his story “Activities on This Land”: “the kinto were cheerful, karachogheli were generous, and the women were voluptuous and sweet...” (Ayvazyan 1996: 75). There was high demand for such women in Old Tbilisi, as they were perceived as sweet by clients. The paintings-signs by Pirosmiani, “Woman with a Fan”, “Ortachala Beauties” (diptych), 1905, and “Beauty with a Mug of Beer” (Pirosmiani 2019: 71, 74, 120–121) refer to the voluptuous women, where one could drink beer¹¹.

For a native speaker of the language, the norm of this advertisement is not entirely clear. Since there are no punctuation marks, the semantic “noise” increases. To understand, we need to collect phrases in two blocks. The first semantic block includes medical information: the hospital has a venereal disease office, and a paramedic with specialized medical education treats venereal diseases. The “spirit” of Old Tiflis is already evident in the second block. A kinto-style paramedic invites sick clients with an emphasis on honesty, and he treats them

¹¹ See in detail about the Ortachala realia (Simyan & Ghazaryan 2020: 266–269).

honestly and completely. Otherwise, if he is not a professional, he is ready to lose his job and die. He swears that he is an honest and decent paramedic, not some charlatan. As for the last phrase, "Don't come in, don't needed," the advertising phrase is based on denial: don't come in, live without problems. The phrase ("DON'T COME IN, DON'T NEEDED") functions in the context of a virtual dialogue with sexually transmitted diseases. The dialogue is full of jokes: if you are not sick, don't come in; if you're sick, you'll have to go in.

5. ADVERTISING SLOGANS OF THE STREETS IN OLD TBILISI

Let us provide other examples from the street "shouts" and "slogans" of Tiflis kinto in the context of urban multilingualism on the streets of Old Tiflis: «Агурец, Агурец, Александре молодец» // "Cucumber, Cucumber, Alexander is a good fellow". We can see spelling (and grammatical) errors: Огурец (ы) with plural ending "Ы" (Cucumber+S): he is not selling only one cucumber. Александре (AlexandrE without E, just Alexander).

- a) «Черешни, черешни испански» // "Cherries, Spanish cherries" (Spelling and grammatical error: испанскиЕ (Spanish);
- b) «Яблок антоновски» // "Antonov apples" (Spelling and grammatical error: must be яблок+И as a plural form of apple. «АНТОНОВСКИ» is falsely written; the right is АнтоноВСкиЕ.
- c) «Перчик, перчик, априкос» // "Peach, peach, apricot". Spelling and grammatical errors: перСикИ (PeachES), аБрикосИ (apricotS).
- d) «Смотри сюда, купи што ли» // "Look here, buy something". There are semantic errors: Russian "купи што ли" (literally "buy what it is") must be "купи что-нибудь" (buy something) (Anchabadze & Volkova 1990: 66).

The first commercial "slogan" example shows a rhyming play: огурец vs. молодец / ogurets vs. molodets). Who is Alexander? We assume that the choice of name has at least three potential functions: 1) Alexander is used just for alliteration (A). In addition, the sound [a] at the beginning of the word allows the kinto – "advertiser" of their goods to shout much louder ("Агурец, Агурец, Александре молодец" Cucumber, Cucumber, Alexander is a good fellow), since there are no preceding muffling consonants; 2) Alexander may match the name of a potential client, which pragmatically will serve as a "hooking" mechanism.

Furthermore, how do we interpret the word "молодец" ("good fellow")? It is better to interpret the phrase «Alexandre molodets» (Alexander – good fellow) in context as a compliment to himself. In this case, in the context of the playful spirit of Old Tbilisi, it can also be interpreted in a Freudian way.

In the second example by the Kinto “Spanish cherry”, it is hardly necessary to believe it is a marketing trick. European products in residents’ minds at the end of the 19th to 20th centuries were seen as premium, and wealthy residents of Tbilisi were fond of “European” goods. The third and fourth examples are not pronounced according to the norms of the language speaker. As our reader see, all correct ad slogans lose their charm and humorous undertone. Native speakers immediately notice humorous situations related to the pronunciation of Russian words. For example, Russian writer and journalist Nicolai Vezhbitsky notes similarly that typesetters and printers (Armenians, Georgians) of the newspaper “Zarya Vostoka” (Tbilisi) asked him to invite them to a party in honor of the anniversary of the October Revolution “Sirozha” («Сирожу») – Sergei Yesenin (Chakhetiya 1958). Typesetters and printers thought that the name “Сепёжа” (Serezha) was connected with the Russian word of the lower register – “rozha”¹² (рожа) that means “erysipelas”, “muzzle”).

The game of kinto with language can also be traced in the kinto song mentioned in the story by Aghasi Ayvazyan, “A Road for Horses,” in which the coachman Yuvan sings: «Идет СИМОН, // Несет ЛИМОН. // Вай, вай, вай! // Упал СИМОН, // Пропал ЛИМОН. // Вай, вай, вай. // Плачет СИМОН, // Пропал ЛИМОН, // Вай, вай, вай. // Не плачь, СИМОН, // Куплю ЛИМОН. // Вай, вай, вай!¹³ // “Simon is coming, // Carrying a lemon. // Oh, oh, oh! // Simon fell, // The lemon is lost. // Oh, oh, oh. // Simon is crying, // The lemon is gone, // Oh, oh, oh. // Don’t cry, Simon, // I will buy a lemon. // Oh, oh, oh!” (Ayvazyan 1981: 30)¹⁴.

One of the beautiful examples of “poetry” of kinto and language play is provided by I. Grishashvili in his work “Literary Bohemia of Old Tbilisi.” Kar-chokheli sings to the music of a mechanical organ:

«Облака за облаками по небу плывут, // Весть от девушки, любимой мне они несут... Или Ах, луна, луна, надежда пылающих любовью...» // “Clouds float across the sky, // They bring news from the girl I love... Or Oh, moon, moon, the hope of those aflame with love...” (Grishashvili 1977: 14).

¹² Si-rozha.

¹³ The author of the essay takes some examples from the previous article (Simyan 2020: 277), but they are analyzed from a completely different perspective.

¹⁴ According to the hyponym of the fruit (lemon), the song originated in Georgia, and from the interjections, it can be understood that it was composed by an Armenian. The interjection “vay, vay, vay” may be unclear to Russian speakers, as the Russian equivalent of the used interjection is “oy, oy, oy”, which in the text is used in two meanings: in the first case, “oy, oy, oy” means “look here,” and in all subsequent cases, it means “what a trouble”. For the semantics of the interjection “vay, vay, vay,” see the Rabiz song (Hayrapetyan 2017; “Ara vay, vay, vay” song 2009). It should be noted that territorially, this song was spread throughout the South Caucasus.

As seen from the quote, Karchokheli sings a “pure” text in grammatical terms, but the “kinto, for more fun, translates his lines into a “Russian,” so to speak, language:

«Кусок, кусок облак идет с висок небеса, // Запечатан письмо несет от лубовниса... // Ах, луна, луна, жаренных надежда»

“A piece, a piece of cloud goes from high in the sky, // A sealed letter brings news from the beloved... // Oh, moon, moon, the fried hope” (Grishashvili 1977: 14). Grammatically, the language is distorted, but the text conveys humor, a creative “translation” of connotations in a carnival style and an erotic code, if in the phrase “fried hope” («жаренных надежда») the last word is read as a proper noun, female name – Nadezhda: “Oh, moon, moon, fried Nadezhda.” The erotic code can also be read in opposition to the primary text, the song of karchokheli: “Oh, moon, moon, the hope of those aflame with love...”).

In the first version, the lyrical hero hopes for a flaming love with the moon woman, whereas in the kinto version, Nadezhda is fried, banged, and intimate.

A vivid example of folk texts of kinto is provided by Partugimov and Babloyan: «Бедный, бедный, бедный я кинто, // Не пожалеет меня никто! // Женился я давным-давно – / Не любит меня все равно. // Жена моя Кекела – // Черная, как холера, // С длинным носом красным // И лицом ужасным. // Хочу жена белый – // Как на стене мелом, // Чтоб любила меня и на самом деле» // “Poor, poor, poor I am kinto, // No one will pity me! // I married a long time ago – // She doesn’t love me anyway. // My wife Kekela¹⁵ – // Black as cholera, // With a long red nose // And a terrible face. // I want a white wife – // Like chalk on the wall, // To love me for real.” The text humorously represents the emotional, social, and civic state of kinto.

The social status is emphasized through the repetition of the word “poor,” while alienation in urban space is reflected in the second line (“No one will pity me!”). Family conditions, desires, and feelings are revealed in the contrast of skin color: black vs. white. The black, unloving Kekela with an unattractive appearance (long red nose, terrible face) is contrasted with a “white” woman who truly loves. The humor and comedy of the contrasting images manifest through metaphors and comparisons of appearance.

As seen from the above, thanks to social memory recorded in literary slogans, it is possible to reconstruct the speech acts of Tiflis’ kinto. At the same time,

¹⁵ The painting can be analyzed in terms of the clothing language of the figures depicted, and an attempt can be made to reconstruct it in the context of the opposition: traditional (Georgian) clothing vs. European-style clothing.

painting has allowed us to “see” the winding streets of Old Tiflis with “talking” advertising signboards.

6. OCCASIONAL EXPRESSIONS IN THE VISUAL PAINTINGS-ADS OF OLD TBILISI

In this section, we will focus on visual advertisements featuring promotional text. Such texts can also be used to teach Russian, allowing students to identify spelling, grammatical, and syntactical errors.

The bright signs of Old Tbilisi caught the attention of Armenian artist Vagharshak Elibekyan, who depicted them in his works. In his painting “Street Barbers” (1979), we read an informative advertising inscription: «Пускаем кровь с пиявкам (И)» (“We bleed with leeches.”). The painting, presented humorously, implicitly alludes to unsanitary conditions. The humor is conveyed through the grammatical, orthographic, and stylistic inscription that should have been written according to linguistic norms: «Лечим пиявкамИ» (“We treat with leeches.”). Instead of the letter “А,” it should be “Я / Ya” the word “пиявки” / “leeches” in the plural.

The visual text shows that leech therapy was practiced in Old Tbilisi to improve blood circulation, combat inflammation, lower blood pressure, and relieve migraines and headaches. The painting’s irony and humor are evident in its reference to the services of an outdoor barber shop: haircut, shaving, and leech therapy.

Regarding leeches, the Armenian writer provides another interesting example. The sign in Sirachkhan reads: «ПУСКАЙ БЕЗ РАБОТЫ // УМРУ Я // ЛЕЧУ ВСЕ БОЛЕЗНИ // УМЕУ ПИАВКА» // “LET ME WITHOUT WORK // I WILL DIE // I CURE ALL DISEASES // I HAVE LEECHES” (Ayvazyan 1981: 6–7). If we translate this advertisement into standard language, the doctor’s speech could be approximated as follows: “Let me remain unemployed, and I may die, but I cure all diseases; I practice hippotherapy.” However, it is not entirely clear why the “author” of the advertisement wants to die. The main message of the advertisement is that he treats without deceit. He treats them with leeches (“I HAVE LEECHES”). Honesty and responsibility are important to him. This is a matter of honor. The emotionally charged advertisement emphasizes: “Trust me,” the “author” addresses his potential patients, “if I am a charlatan, then I am ready to remain unemployed or even die.”

Let us return to the visual artistry of V. Elibekyan.

In his paintings “Street in Old Tbilisi” (1988), “Street in Old Tbilisi” (1988, Figure 2), one can read the signs “WE MAKE HIDE” (spelling error: “We Make

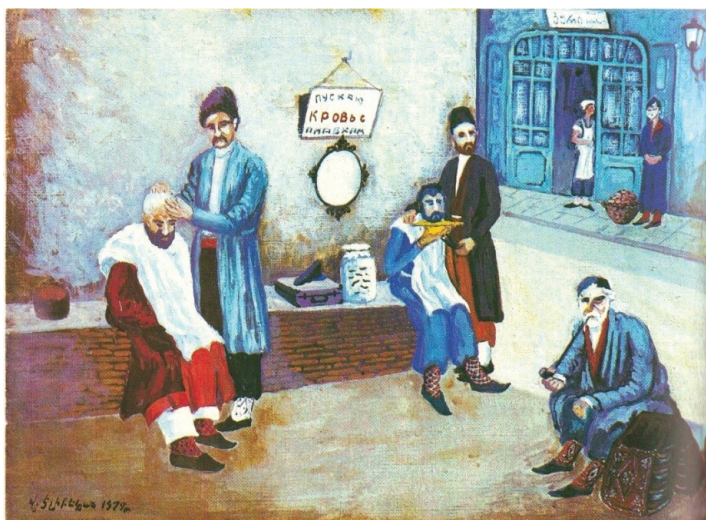


Figure 2. Vagarshak Elibekyan. Street Barbers 1979

Source: Elibekyan 1991: 118.

Hides”), and in the “Butcher Shop,” we read another amusing signboard: «ИМЕ-ИЦА СВЕЖИ УМИ» “(WE) HAVE FRESH BRAINS” (Figure 3).

A native Russian speaker is unlikely to understand that by-products are being sold. However, this phrase takes on an additional connotation in the context of the depicted human and animal heads. The following asymmetrical oppositions can be drawn:

1. human heads vs. “fresh brains” of domestic animals,
2. “fresh minds” of people vs not fresh heads of domestic animals (head trophies),
3. Fresh vs not fresh heads / minds of the workers and clients of the butcher shop.

Examples from Georgian painting will be provided.

The distortion of language can also be illustrated by taking the painting «Живая рыба»¹⁶ / “Living Fish” (1920) by Georgian artist Lado Gudiashvili (1896–1980). The fisherman-kinto playfully offers his catch. However, the humorous title of the painting enters visual dissonance with the expressions of the faces depicted as kinto. The play with language can also be seen in Pirosmani’s painting “Still Life» (The State Museum of Fine Arts of Georgia, Tbilisi),

¹⁶ Here, there are spelling and grammatical mistakes. It should be: “Жи (without ‘a’) вая рыба” / “Zhi (without ‘a’) vaya ryba”).



Figure 3. Vagarshak Elibekyan. Trio. 1980

Source: Elibekyan (1991: 12).

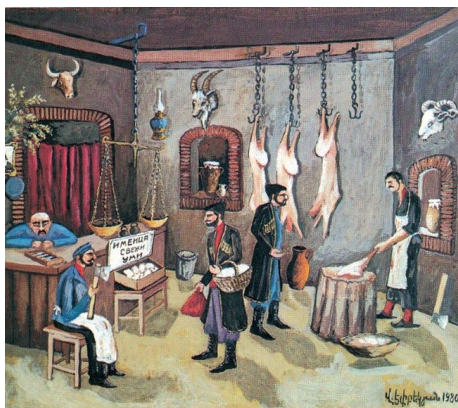


Figure 4. Vagarshak Elibekyan. Meat Shop. 1980

Source: Elibekyan (1991: 25).

which has the inscription in Georgian and Russian: “Да здрастуйте хълеба солнаго человека”¹⁷ / “Long live the hospitable man” (Pirosmani 1986: 48).

An example of wordplay is found in a beer advertisement: «Холодный пиво» (on signboard “Cold beer”), where there is a precise spelling and grammatical mistake according to the linguistic norm of the Russian language: “ХолодНОЕ пиво” (Pirosmani 2019: 118). In the same grammatical register, Nikolai Vezhbisky cites another signboard in his memoirs “Meetings with Yesenin” with a blue background: “‘Дарьял’ Вино, закуски и разный горячий пицц”¹⁸ (Chakhetiya 1958).

The above examples of visual advertising show that the authors did not play with the language; they did not use phrases such as ‘occasionalism,’ meaning that the linguistic norm was unintentionally broken. Language slogans and occasionalisms begin to function in a completely different way when they are used deliberately. Cognitive dissonance caused by intentional errors in advertising is a prerequisite for remembering the advertisement’s location and central message. The slogan becomes a memorable linguistic “virus.” Distortion of the linguistic norm in advertising

¹⁷ It must be “Да, здравствует хлебосольный человек!” from the point of view of the linguistic norm.

¹⁸ Spelling and grammar errors. It should be snacks and various hot foods. There may be a stylistic error in the phrase instead of the word “food,” which indicates an ordinary and neutral meaning – food. It should be written “dishes,” used stylistically in restaurant menus and served as a ready-made dish and served to the table, i.e., food and dishes differ in their micro-meanings – semes, but denote food.

can become a notable marker, a trick for linking the product with the slogan and the location. However, such pragmatic connections only work in native speakers' minds.

7. CONCLUSION

An analysis of the linguistic material of Old Tiflis, from signage, street chants, and folklore songs, showed that the urban speech environment of the 19th–early 20th centuries represented a genuine carnival multilingual cosmos. Tiflis existed as a multilingual and multinational space, where Russian served as the imperial lingua franca and the language of signage, but in fact constantly interacted with Armenian, Georgian (and its dialects), Turkic, and other languages of the region. At this junction, a special urban “language of Tiflis” arose – a hybrid, which Aghasi Ayvazyan aptly designated as “Tiflis Esperanto”. The analysis of empirical material allows us to conclude that the numerous spelling, grammatical, and syntactic deviations in the advertising texts of Old Tbilisi cannot be interpreted solely as manifestations of illiteracy. They are the result of clashes among different language systems, interference, and the presence of different sociolects in the city. In artistic texts (Ayvazyan, Grishashvili, etc.) and paintings (Elibekyan, Gudiashvili, Pirosmiani) (Simyan 2020: 266, 277–278), these distorted speech acts and visual texts are fixed as part of the cultural memory of the city: a signboard, a chant, a song turn into signs of the urban text and the urban “signage” semiosphere. In Old Tiflis, language norm distortion was mainly unintentional and resulted from differences in language proficiency. In fact, there is also a carnival attitude towards the language that has developed in Tiflis.

The didactic potential of this material confirms the hypothesis put forward in the work: the movement from occasionalism to usage, and then to the norm, effectively supports Russian language teaching at the B2 level and above. A violation of the norm, when understood and analyzed, highlights the boundaries of the “high”, “neutral”, and “low” registers and helps better understand spelling, grammar, syntax, and pragmatic rules. The game component, i.e., the effect of cognitive and cultural “disruption”, enhances memorability, and the inclusion of examples in a lively urban and cultural context makes the learning process not only more productive but also memorable.

The language games of Old Tiflis, manifested in various verbal and visual discourses, are not only an object of nostalgia but also a valuable source for modern linguodidactics and urban semiotics. They allow us to reconstruct the multilingual fabric of the city, trace the transformation of language policy “from below” and propose a methodology for teaching the language “inside out” –

from linguistic “chaos” to the norm. A promising area of further research is the expansion of the corpus of analyzed texts to include Georgian and Russian discourses on Tiflis, as well as a comparison of the “Tiflis text” with other urban texts of the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe.

It can be concluded that such empirical material can serve as excellent didactic material for teaching language norms, articulation standards, and usage, on which issues of language contact, code-mixing (Gorter & Cenoz 2024), problems of code-switching, dialects, and accents, depending on the situation, identity, etc., can be studied. Therefore, we recognize that language learning (LL) from a diachronic perspective is a multifaceted field that has been relatively underexplored against the backdrop of historical language teaching and lived multilingualism. The Caucasus has traditionally been a region where not only many languages but also very different languages meet. Historically, Russian has served as a lingua franca (and continues to do so in large parts of the region today). However, there is undoubtedly a need for further, comprehensive studies to analyze the use of the Russian language in Tbilisi and elsewhere in the Caucasus, in interaction with the numerous other languages of the Caucasus, from a diachronic perspective, especially in the era of modern change.

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Zabawa z językiem w sztuce i reklamie. Przykład rosyjskiego w Starym Tbilisi

ABSTRAKT. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje zjawisko okazjonalizmu w języku rosyjskim używanym przez sprzedawców i kupców na peryferiach carskiej Rosji, w Tyflisie, w drugiej połowie XIX wieku i na początku XX wieku. Przejawiało się ono w mieszaniu kodów i odtwarzaniu kodów oraz przełączaniu języków. Przyczyną okazjonalizmu było myślenie karnawałowe i ingerencja językowa (ormiański, gruziński itp.) ludzi żyjących w Starym Tyflisie jako zewnętrzny pogląd na język rosyjski. Ponadto argumentuje się, że zjawiska te wynikają z myślenia karnawałowego. Badanie sugeruje, że takie okazjonalne podejście może być wykorzystywane jako narzędzie dydaktyczne w nauczaniu języków obcych. Nauka okazjonalności ułatwia zrozumienie wysokich, neutralnych i niskich rejestrów języka. Trójsłonna opozycja okazjonalność – użycie – norma wzmacnia procesy dydaktyczne, poznawcze i pamięciowe w uczeniu się i nauczaniu języków obcych. Podejście to jest praktyczne w opanowaniu i nauczaniu ortografii, gramatyki, składni i pragmatyki. Artykuł analizuje również okazjonalizm wizualny w reklamie, który możemy zobaczyć na przykładach łączących go z dziełami artystycznymi malarzy ormiańskich i gruzińskich, a także Pirosmeni, Aghasi Ayvazyana i Vagharshak Elibekyan, a także z obrazami kulturowymi Starego Tbilisi / Tyflisu. Integrując opozycję trójskładnikową z semiotyką kulturową, badania te stanowią produktywną podstawę do zrozumienia i nauczania dynamiki języka w wielokulturowym i wielojęzycznym środowisku, w naszym przypadku w języku rosyjskim.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: okazjonalizm reklamy, semiotyka reklamy, obrazy-reklamy, Pirosmeni, Aghasi Ayvazyan, Vagharshak Elibekyan, Stare Tbilisi/Stary Tiflis.

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