Part I

Ethnic Enclosure: Language, Myths and Ethnic Groups
in the Soviet Union
Questions of language are basically questions of power
Noam Chomsky

In this Chapter, we will first clarify on the basis of the review of previous studies what is an ethnic group and what is the relationship of language with an ethnic group. We will provide a review of studies on South Caucasian ethnic conflicts later, when we begin to discuss the Caucasian issues. The primary objective of our discussion below is to highlight the importance of language for an ethnic group, particularly, in the processes of modernization. We will examine some of the modernist approaches to explain the function of language in the process of nation-building and show the need for a new theoretical framework, which can be applied to contemporary ethnic rivalries. Finally, we will introduce our own notion of ethnic enclosure, which we use in order to explain the role of language in ethnic rivalries in the Caucasus.

1.1. ETHNIC GROUP AND LANGUAGE

This study explores the situations of conflict between ethnic groups. Therefore, it seems to be pivotal to start with explanations of how terms ethnicity and ethnic group understood in this research. In recent years, “ethnicity” became a word, which is widely used everywhere, from the academic literature to the mass media. In Helmet Berking’s words, “ethnicity is everywhere” (Berking 2003, 248). We can certainly find a dozen of good reasons why “ethnicity” occupies today the top of vocabulary used by so many people around the world, who often employ “ethnicity” as a euphemism for “race” or as a synonym for “nation” or “minority group”. However, it is also true that even in the academic literature there is a lot of ambiguity, which surrounds the use of the term “ethnicity”. At the same time, it seems that the main point of concern here is not so much in finding a common ground for the use of the term “ethnicity” per se, since in most of the applications ethnicity is rather similarly understood as the communal identity, which comprises some certain characteristics that link a particular group of people to each other. The core of disagreement is the question of what is included in, and excluded from that set of characteristics and for what reason, because there are long-existed differences in the basic understanding of ethnicity as a human phenomenon.
However, it is not an easy task to explain what ethnicity is. It is because there are deep contradictions that are embedded in the phenomenon of ethnicity itself. The useful summary of various approaches to explain ethnicity is given by Stephen May (2001, 27-51; see also Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Dichotomies of Ethnicity
(adapted from May 2001, 28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primordial</th>
<th>Situational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-modern</td>
<td>Modern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involuntary</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Collective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Symbolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let us here take up, for example, the opposition between primordialists and situationalists. Comparing primordialist and situationalist views of ethnicity, May points out that ethnicity is often viewed as a primordial given because every individual is born to an ethnic community which can be defined in terms of ‘language, blood and soil”. Yet, despite of the fact that cultural attributes are often associated with ethnic distinctiveness, they do not constitute a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon of ethnicity. While primordialist stand is that ethnicity is a fixed permanent category, in order to understand the way ethnic groups interact, it is necessary to provide a proper explanation of how and why differences in cultural attributes appear, persist or disappear during one or another period in history. Therefore, as situationalist approach assumes, cultural attributes of an ethnic group are not permanent and they are shaped in situations of social interactions with other ethnic group. If this is the case, then ethnic boundaries at any given point in time are largely the derivatives of social interactions between groups, and ethnicity is fluid and malleable category. However, ethnic groups usually view their ‘cultural attributes’ as primordial and it is language, which is often regarded as one of the most important permanent markers of ethnic identity.
Anthony Smith warns against taking only one approach into consideration. In his words, “by fixing attention mainly on the great dimensions and ‘fault lines’ of religion, customs, language and institutions, we run the risk of treating ethnicity as something primordial and fixed. [On the other hand], by concentrating solely on the attitudes and sentiments and political movements of specific ethnie or ethnic fragments, we risk [to view] ethnic phenomena as wholly dependent ‘tool’ or ‘boundary markers’ of other social and economic forces” (Smith 1986, 211). It is to say that the choice between primordialist or situationalist accounts of ethnicity will hardly lead us to any plausible explanation why ethnicity today is of so much of importance as a matter of politics. The fact is, while the topic of ethnicity and politics certainly does not “suffer” from a lack of scholarly interest, if we try to step away from one or another case study in order to build a theoretical model, which can be applied to a variety of cases, we will soon discover that there is a paucity of options for generalization.

We believe that Smith’s notion of ethnie may help to avoid many of theoretical blind alleys in primordialist and situationalist approaches to explain ethnicity. Smith argues that we have to view ethnicity not through the prism of fixed set of elements, repeatedly transmitted from one generation to another, but rather by thinking about ethnicity as of a shell that conditions the preservation of the “sense of continuity on the part of successive generations of a given cultural unit of population [with respect to] shared memories and to notions entertained by each generation about the collective destiny of that unit and its culture” (Smith 1991, 25). Smith designates these cultural units as ethnie and defines a number of elements as comprising the essential core of any ethnic group (see Table 1.2).

Smith also points out that “the core of ethnicity, as it has been transmitted in the historical record and as it shapes individual experience, resides in … quartet of myths, memories, values, and symbols” (Smith 1986, 15). In Smith’s interpretations, a myth of common descent is a belief, which “provide[s] an overall framework of meaning for ethnic community [making sense of its experiences and defining its essence]”, and in ‘many ways [is] the sine qua non of ethnicity, the key elements of that complex of meaning, which underline the sense of ethnic ties and sentiments for the
participants’ (Smith 1986, 24). Smith combines myths, memories, symbols and values into a “myth-symbol complex” and argues that, while at one or another moment of a research inquiry into an ethnic group, it can be important to study the issues of, say, class stratification, military power, political relations, or outside influence, if one wants to understand the fundamental nature of ethnicity, it is important to examine the forms and content of ethnies’ myths-symbol complex, the mechanisms of its diffusion within the population in question as well as how these myths and symbols have been transmitted to the future generations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared Cultural Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myths of Common Origins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Historical Memories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common ‘historic’ territory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smith’s explanation of ethnicity may not be ideal. However, it presents a compromise solution, and, as it will be shown further in this Chapter, it serves better than any other model for the purposes of a better understanding of the role language plays in conflict between ethnic groups, which is the major objective of this research. That is because, if to agree with James Fearon’s assertion that the proper idea of an ethnic group is about the recognition by members and non-members of the ethnic distinction and anticipation of significant actions conditioned on it (Fearon 2003, 198), then Smith’s clarification of ethnicity helps to explain what distinguishes one ethnic group from another.

In the academic literature, terms nation, nationality and ethnic group are often used interchangeably. Some argue, however, that ethnic group and nation are two separate although overlapping concepts (see, e.g. Kaufman 2001, 15). A nation can be defined as a socially mobilized group that wants political self-determination and not all

---

1 As we will discuss later, in the case of ethnic rivalries in the Caucasus, we can learn the content of myths-symbol complex through the examination of historical narratives of textbooks, academic publications and publications in mass media concerned with the issues of history of ethnic groups.
ethnic groups aspire to political autonomy. However, in the cases of ethnic rivalry in the South Caucasus, ethnic groups compete over the political dominance. Therefore, these rivalries involve ethnic nations and should be labeled as ethnonational conflicts, but we use the term ‘ethnic group’ for the sake of simplicity.

1.2. LANGUAGE AND MODERNIZATION

As argued by Smith, the rise of modern nations can be viewed as the process of adaptation of pre-modern *ethnie* to the challenges brought to it by the phenomenon of modernization, and in his model of *ethnie*, the ethnic roots of modern nations extend into the past. Smith describes the pre-modern cultural traditions and identities as the “permanent cultural attributes of memory, value, myths and symbols”, which are continued to be shared by ethnic groups in modern era (Smith 1986, 16-18). These specific cultural attributes become significant markers of ethnic identity, and their purpose is to maintain boundaries between ethnic groups. As we discussed earlier, Smith’s concept refers to the idea of shared group affinity and the sense of belonging based on a myth of collective ancestry and a notion of distinctiveness. The constructed nature of ethnicity is evinced in the process of differentiation of an ethnic group, in which in many cases language serves as one of the most important differentiating characteristics. Here, the role of language becomes central because “ethnic nationalists appeal to the customary and linguistic ties which they then set out to standardize and elaborate, elevating customs into rules and laws, and turning dialects (some of them) into languages” (Smith 1986, 137-138).

In discussing the links between language and ethnicity in the context of modernization, we must not ignore the arguments of Ernest Gellner. According to Gellner (1983), modernization signifies various social changes leading to the transformation of rural societies with traditional hierarchical structures, religions and customs into complex industrial and secular societies. As a result of this process, a new pattern of hierarchical and bureaucratic integration appears. In Gellner’s interpretation, the adoption of nationalism as ‘a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’ (Gellner 1983, 1) requires the transformation of a human community into a society that possesses the homogeneity of a high culture,
represented by a written language, replacing folk and low culture. For Gellner, the acceptance of the principle that the political mastering towards homogeneity of culture is the precondition of inclusive political, economical and social citizenship “…is all…[that is necessary to] explain nationalism” (Gellner 1983, 29). As he further observes, ‘whereas in the past the connection [between state and culture] was thin, fortuitous, varied, loose and often minimal … now it [becomes] unavoidable” (Gellner 1983, 38).

As regards the function of language in a modern society, the ‘political mastering’ is aimed at the creation of a bounded language community capable of sustaining an education system in a common written language because modern bureaucracy rely on the extensive use of paper chain of memos and circulars for the direct and effective administration of the state. The principle of ‘one state, one culture’ thus put into practice via education system, and, following Gellner’s logic, the growth of nationalism is linked to the prior development of a high culture, which becomes a basis for the development of a linguistically homogenous society. That is because “when general social conditions make for standardized, homogenous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading ethnic populations and not just elite minorities, a situation arises in which well-defined educationally sanctioned and unified cultures constitute very nearly the only kind of unity with which men willingly and often ardently identify. The cultures now seem to be the natural repositories of political legitimacy” (Gellner 1983, 55; emphasis added). In other words, according to Gellner, nationalism is flourishing because the spread of unified cultures (that is, written language) via education leads to the unification of cultural, and, consequently, linguistic identity.

In Gellner’s explanations of the links between language and modernization, he points out the significance of the spread of common written language and, hence, the importance of education system for language dissemination. Similar ideas can be observed in Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991). He situates the birth of modern nations in the period of industrialization and claims that

---

2 Incidentally, in the case of the Caucasus, the use of terms high and low in regard to culture creates an interesting game of words, since for the people of the highland communities low (altitude) culture (i.e. culture of the cities) actually represented a higher culture in comparison with their own (high mountains’) customs and traditions. Of course, high and low are used in this volume in regard to high and low languages corresponding to high and low cultures of Gellner.
all modern national communities are ‘imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1991, 6). Acknowledging that nation, nationality and nationalism have proved notoriously difficult to define, Anderson defines his ‘point of departure’ as the perception that ‘nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that world’s multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind” (Anderson 1991, 4). Examining the historical content of the process leading to the growth of modern nations, he places emphasis on the development of print technologies and the rapid spread of literature and printed media in previously highly localized vernacular languages in the 15th and 16th century Europe. As a result, these vernacular languages gradually replaced Latin as the language most widely used in the domains of administration (Gellner’s high culture) and the status of vernacular languages was elevated to that of ‘languages-of-power’.

The development of national imagining through common written languages can be viewed as a step-by-step process: firstly, fields of exchange and communication are created; second, a new fixity\(^3\) of language is ascertained; and thirdly, the vernacular dialects adopted as print-languages become languages-of-power (Anderson 1991, 44-45). The spread of print media enabled speakers of languages that could be characterized by the existence of linguistically very diverse dialects to distinguish each other as belonging to one and the same cultural (and hence language) group. In the process of national imagining, the importance of literacy and education is seen as crucial as in the Gellner’s account of modernization: ‘As literacy increased, it became easier to arouse popular support, with the masses discovering a new glory in the print elevation of languages they had humbly spoken all along’ (Anderson 1991, 80). This is followed by the acceptance of these languages as official national languages promoted through the system of education and public administration.

For modernists, the adoption of the official national language chosen among the variety of language and dialects spoken by the population in the area in question is

\(^3\) Here, fixity means the ability of language not to change over time and space.
an essential prerequisite of modern nations. In other words, as a result of the process of modernization, ethnic and linguistic boundaries of an ethnic group should coincide. If the state is unable to achieve the goal, then the linguistically oppressed groups will often demand a redrawing of the boundaries of the state in question and the foundation of a new political entity, in which their own language will be the official one. Further on, when such a demand involves a conflict between different ethnic groups, it may lead to an ethnic conflict, i.e. such a conflict, in which “the warring parties in all the incidents have been differentiated largely along [linguistic] lines” (Szayna 2003, 145).

1.3. LANGUAGE IN ETHNIC CONFLICT

In our early discussion, we showed the importance of links between language and ethnicity, and the focal role of the spread of written languages via system of education and mass media. However, modernist accounts do not deal with the issue of ethnic relations. So, let us here focus on the role of language in ethnic interactions. Since our objective is to study ethnic rivalries, we limit our attention to the role of language in hostile ethnic relations, and below we proceed to examine how language is involved in a conflict between ethnic groups.

It is possible to distinguish several aspects of the way language functions in such a conflict. Perhaps, the most serious and conflictual role is that of official language. In modernists’ accounts, the meaning of official national languages is equated to the languages used in education system and public administration. However, in many contemporary case studies, the term “official language” is often used inconsistently (Pool 1990, 254). That is because, a language can be elevated to official language status in order to avoid accusations in discrimination when other language or languages have been already awarded the status of official language. On the other hand, in various cases, governments have treated one particular language as a “privileged one” without declaring that language “official”. That is why Jonathan Pool describes the policy of official language as a policy, which is aimed at all types of communications that are subject to governmental linguistic requirements and any of such requirements can be understood as an “officialization of a language” (Pool 1990, 256). The language placed
in a privileged position is not necessarily the language of the majority of population in the area in question.

Often, it is only the elite who can speak the language required in situations that yield power. Thus, if the language patterns of elite are distinct from that of the masses, the capacity to speak a particular language or write in that language at a significant degree is an important characteristic for differentiating elite and masses, and in such a case only those people, who can be awarded a high index of handling their ability to communicate in the official language, could be encountered among the elite.

One of the approaches to examine the use of the official language policy for the purposes of differentiating elites and masses is offered by Carol Myers-Scotton (1990). She directs her attention to the process of how groups of individuals come to occupy positions in power and how they maintain these positions through the control over language policy in the territory in question. By introducing the term ‘elite closure’, Myers-Scotton describes the strategy, which is aimed at preventing the challenge to established elites through the support of official language policies that “designate[s] a linguistic variety known largely only by the elite as necessary for participation in situations which yield power” (Myers-Scotton 1990, 25). The value of the concept of elite closure can be illustrated by numerous examples in many parts of the world, and, at some point, it may seems to be appropriate to apply the notion of elite closure for the examination of the role of language in the relations between ethnic groups in the South Caucasus during the early 20th century. In fact, during the period of 1918-1921, when the government of independent Georgia intended to restrict the use of languages other than Georgian in the official domains in Abkhazia, this measure can be evaluated as an attempt to introduce the policy of elite (or ethnic) closure in Abkhazia (see Chapter Five). However, a straight application of Myers-Scotton’s concept to the cases of our study won’t produce convincing results with regard to the identification of the role of language in these conflicts. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, in a multilingual and multiethnic state, ethnic leadership is facing a task, which is more complex than a simple implementation of the elite closure technique.
That is because, in addition to elite-masses relationships within their own ethnic group, elites in a multiethnic state have to take into account the presence of elite(s) belonging to other ethnic group(s) and to develop such a policy that would tackle the linguistic patterns of their entire ethnic group. Moreover, in modern societies elites simply cannot ignore the language spoken by the rest (majority) of their own ethnic group because elites need support of the masses and there is no way to communicate with the masses other than in the language understood by the majority of population. The notion of elite closure, thus, can be referred to as the attempts to strengthen the elite’s differentiation from the masses, and not as the policy of differentiation targeting the entire ethnic groups (while, of course, quite often elite represents one ethnic group and masses – the other, a typical situation in many African countries, which is the principal area of study for Myers-Scotton). However, if we are to keep interest in an ethnic conflict, we need to focus our attention at how language is employed in the relations between different ethnic groups.

So far, in the examination of the issue of official language, we discussed the case where language is used for the purpose of exclusion. However, as we shall see shortly, language is also exploited for the purpose of inclusion. One type of language conflicts in a multilingual state is a “nested conflict”. According to Masatsugu Matsuo (1999, 88), a nested conflict is a two-tiered conflict, with each of the tiers involving a conflict between two power-asymmetric groups. The model proposed by Matsuo (1999, 89) is based on the following settings. First, he assumes that there is a territorial political unit with one (or more) ethnolinguistic group or groups dominating the political unit, on the one hand, and one or more non-dominant subordinated groups within the territory in question, on the other hand. Secondly, it is presumed that a non-dominant group is allowed a certain degree of autonomy in some part of the territory within the political unit⁴. Thirdly, the model is expanded by the inclusion of another non-dominant minority group, which is politically subordinated to the first non-dominant group. Therefore, the model illustrates a conflict within a conflict, i.e. a case, where there is a group (which Matsuo calls “an intermediate group”) that must fight on two fronts, i.e. in both the tiers, and which has to employ both strategies –

---

⁴ Often, granting the official status to language of non-dominant group is one of the attributes of autonomy.
In the studies of language strategies, the strategy of homogenization is understood as an attempt of one group to linguistically assimilate the other group or groups and the strategy to maintain the linguistically different patterns of speech between groups means the strategy of differentiation (Matsuo 1999, 91-92). The group has to use language in order to differentiate them from a more powerful group, but at the same time the language must be used in such a way that it enables the intermediate group to adopt the policy of homogenization towards a weaker (in terms of political power), rival group (see Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1 Nested Conflict**
(source: adapted from Matsuo 1999, 90)

The approach adopted by Matsuo very appropriately shows the hierarchical, or the vertical, linguistic relationships between the “subordinated” ethnic groups. The notion of “nested conflict” can be applied to many cases of ethnonational conflicts in the Soviet Union, in which language can be considered as one of the most important factors causing conflicts, in order to better understand the character of linguistic opposition between ethnic groups. On the other hand, the examination of the Soviet language policy and of its changing trends towards indigenization and Russification (see Chapter Three) shows the contradictory trends in the official language policy implemented in the Soviet Union. Therefore, the role of language in the relations
between ethnic groups cannot be explained solely through the notion of ‘nested conflicts’ although the acknowledgement of a nested character of ethnic rivalries in the Caucasus should be regarded as a sine qua non for building our own model of ethnic enclosure later in this Chapter. Although the nested conflict model neatly captured some aspects of the Caucasian ethnic conflicts, the related concepts of homogenization and differentiation have more important theoretical significance.

When we admit the importance of language homogenization and differentiation, a different issue arises. In many cases, which involve languages spoken by ethnic groups, one group claims that its language should be regarded as a separate language but the rival ethnic group denies such a claim. As argued by Matsuo, there is no handy objective criterion by which the separateness of a language can be determined (Matsuo 2005, 189). The starting point of Matsuo’s discussion is the assumption that many languages can be compared as having a number of elements in common (see Figure 1.2). This represents the reality of the relation of the two “languages”.

Figure 1.2 Basic Relationship of Two Languages
(source: Matsuo 2005, 191)

![Diagram showing the relationship between two languages](source: Matsuo 2005, 191)

However, the identification and differentiation of language is often made on non-linguistic, political grounds, and, thus, becomes primarily the matter of political perception (Matsuo 2005, 190-191).

---

5 The term language is used to acknowledge “a possible separate language”, “what can be regarded as a separate language” or a “dialect”. While “language variety” is a more precise term, “language” is used for simplicity’s sake (Matsuo 2005, 190).
In the cases, when differentiation or identification of two languages is made mainly on the basis of perception rather than on some objective criteria, one of the languages may be perceived as having only a small part of common elements by that party to the conflict, which wishes to strengthen its separate identity through language B (Figure 1.3). However, the opposite party may claim that language spoken by their ethnic group and the language of its rivalry are two dialects of one common language A (Figure 1.4). In this way, identity and difference of language greatly depends upon perception. In fact, there is a great variety of patterns of this kind of perception and above-mentioned examples of differentiation and inclusion are not the only possible scenarios. As noted by Matsuo, ‘even when … two languages (or dialects) seem far apart with very little in common, perceptual identification can still occur” (Matsuo 2005, 198). That is because “[l]anguages seem, by their very nature, to allow a wide variety of perception patterns concerning their identity and difference... [T]here is nothing objective in the nature of language which automatically determines the sameness or difference of two languages, as far as the languages in question are somehow related languages” (Matsuo 2005, 202).

**Figure 1.3 Language Differentiation: Perception**
(source: adapted from Matsuo 2005, 194)
The intrinsic property of language, namely, the absence of an objective criterion to differentiate or equate, is crucial to understand the role of language in ethnic conflict. As we will show in the following Chapters, perceptions of language differentiation or identification played a key role in the way language was exploited in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and in other ethnic rivalries in the Caucasus. This clearly casts doubts in the effectiveness of the approaches, which focus on the study of the actual linguistic patterns of the ethnic group in question, to explain the role of language in ethnic conflict. As the case of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict will clearly show, while the issue of official language in Abkhazia was indeed an important one, during the most of the Soviet period the disputes between Abkhazians and Georgians over which language or languages should enjoy the status of official in Abkhazia was primarily related to the attempts to increase the symbolic value of Abkhaz or Georgian as part of the status struggle and less to the attempts to advance the practical use of either of the languages in the region since it was the Russian language, which ruled in the domains of the official business in Abkhazia and occupied dominant positions in Georgia as well, especially during the second part of the 20th century.

At the same time, in the case of not only the Georgian-Abkhazian ethnic rivalry but also in a number of other ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus, language always conserved its power as a feature of differentiation of ethnic groups. Therefore, the modernist account, emphasizing the need to equate linguistic and ethnic boundaries, cannot explain why over and over again language continues to be a key feature of
contemporary ethnic conflicts. The model of *ethnie*, introduced by Smith, heavily relies on language as one of the key attributives of an *ethnie*, and, thus shows the importance of language in relation to ethnic group. However, Smith’s approach can also be applied only to those cases, in which we consider reality of language alone and in which language is examined as a marker of real linguistic identity of ethnic group in question. Hence, there is a need for a new theoretical framework that can explain the role of language in those conflicts, when language is exploited based on the perception of language differentiation or identification.

1.4 ETHNIC ENCLOSURE

As we discuss in Chapter Three, in the case of an ethnic rivalry, the functioning of myth – as a belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning – requires the use of symbols, which provides a shorthand reference to the myth in question. According to Murray Edelman, who introduced the notion of symbols to the study of politics, people make political choices based on emotions, and almost every political action has a symbolic side. Symbols are crucial elements for the functioning of an ethnogenetic myth because “[e]very symbol stands for something other than itself, and it also evokes an attitude, a set of impressions, or a pattern of events associated through time, through space, through logic, or through imagination with symbol” (Edelman 1985, 6).

The examination of the case of the Georgian-Abkhazian rivalry in this volume will reveal active use of symbols that are linked through language to the Georgian and Abkhazian myths of ethnogenesis: references to ancient inscriptions and medieval manuscripts, illustrations in the textbooks, targeting of archives and memorials during the Georgian-Abkhazian 1992-1993 war are just a few of the examples. On the other hand, the exploitation of language by Georgian and Abkhazian ethnic leaders was not limited to the revoking of language-related visual symbols. That is because language was exploited in a more complex way in order to maximize the effectiveness of the use of myths and, thus, we have to touch upon a broader spectrum of issues concerned with

---

6 We discuss relations between language and myths in more detail in *Chapter Three*
the role language plays in the relations between ethnic groups.

As we will show later, in the case of the Georgian-Abkhazian ethnic conflict, one ethnic group (Abkhazians) had to resist the policy of homogenization attempted by the rival ethnic group (Georgians). Despite of the significant language shift of the majority of Abkhazians to Russian, they were still able to use the Abkhaz language as a political resource. In order to find the answer to the question why Abkhazians were able to exploit so successfully Abkhaz as a political resource in their opposition to Georgians, we have to make two assumptions. First, following the approach proposed by Matsuo and discussed earlier in this Chapter, we have to assume that the emphasis should be placed not on the discussion of the issue of identity and the differentiation between two languages as a factual linguistic issue, but on the description of how perceived identity or difference between language varieties is used for political purposes. Secondly, we have to view the process of the establishment of ethnic boundaries as a process of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion, or as the process of enclosure.

The use of the term “enclosure” is intended to generate associations with historical enclosure, because the enclosure of the 18th century presented a case of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion: in the process of enclosure, peasants were excluded from owning land, but at the same time the land was fenced in and secured for farming and sheep grazing, i.e. included. Similarly, ethnic enclosure is understood as an attempt at simultaneous exclusion and inclusion: there are ethnic groups who are expelled from the area in question, i.e. excluded, and there is a territory that becomes enclosed, or included.

The policy of ethnic enclosure is a deliberate attempt of the ethnic leadership to exclude rival ethnic group(s) from the disputed territory. At the same time, it is possible to identify two facets of ethnic enclosure: its material, or physical, and its symbolic, or verbal, aspects. Actually, in many ethnic conflicts, the actions of rival parties can be characterized as attempts at material enclosure aiming at the physical expulsion or forced assimilation of rival population. However, our particular interest in this publication is to the less explored symbolic phase of enclosure that may start well
before ethnic rivalry turns violent. The symbolic feature of ethnic enclosure can be understood as the process of X-ation of Y, where X and Y stand for rival ethnic groups. In other words, symbolic enclosure is an attempt to revoke distinct identity of the rival ethnic group in the territory in question, i.e. to exclude, but at the same time to encompass the population that may remain in the territory, i.e. to include. Obviously, it is much easier to attempt a symbolic ethnic enclosure rather than a physical one. In the case of the Soviet ethno-territorial division, the borders between autonomies were often set arbitrary by the Soviet authorities, and only few ethnic groups did in fact manage to expand their territorial boundaries in practice. However, as we will show later, all ethnic groups were trying to expand symbolically in space and in time. Bearing in mind these considerations, the model of ethnic enclosure can be described as follows:

Let us suppose that there are two ethnic groups sharing some common territory. A possible scenario is that the leadership of one of the ethnic groups faces the task of establishing, maintaining, or improving its position of power within the territory in question. These attempts meet the resistance of the competing ethnic leadership, whose power is threatened by the actions of its ethnic rival. In order to justify the ties to the territory in question, each side claims the first-settlers principle with respect to the territory in question by referring to some historical evidences. As a result, two rival versions of ethnogenesis emerge, each reflecting the distant past of both ethnic groups. These two versions are political myths, i.e. the credibility of historical proofs matter little. In an ethnic enclosure process, at a point in time, the myth gives the historical advantage to one ethnic group at the expense of the rival ethnic group and the latter is excluded from the area in question. Hence, the disputed territory becomes ethnically enclosed by only one ethnic group. Usually, during ethnic enclosure, each party attempts to justify current boundary by the perceived existence of much wider ethnic boundaries in the past.

In principle, in the process of ethnic enclosure there might be various cultural properties that are used by rival ethnic leaderships in order to justify the enclosure. However, most often it is language that is adopted as the weapon of verbal attack. That is because, in many cases, it is language that is most central to an ethnic group. As our
examination of the Abkhazian and Georgian historiography will show, for professional historians and historical linguists, it is extremely difficult to establish from a scientific point of view the true identification of the language spoken in the area in the distant past. However, if in a political discourse the focus is placed on the perceived identification of the language spoken by the people who lived in the disputed area in the remote past with the language currently ascribed to an ethnic group in question, then it becomes relatively easy to give life to such myths of the distant past that leave no doubt about their credibility in the minds of the majority of the ethnic group since in these myths the continued use of the language, or the language itself, becomes a ‘primordial’ property, i.e. a property unchanged throughout history. Moreover, it can be said that the historical memory of a social group involves a complex combination of meeting the needs of accurate representation and providing a usable past (Wretch 2002, 35-40). The perceived language identification or differentiation not only provides a perfect link between past and present, but is also turned into an emotionally-charged quick reference to myths used to justify ethnic boundaries in question. It can easily be used to strengthen the group’s sense of solidarity without a significant number of people necessarily actually speaking the language.

As we discussed earlier, in an attempt of enclosure, the existence of an ethnic group in the territory in question is established at the expense of rival ethnic group(s). In so doing, if language particular to the ethnic group (or the continuous use of this language) is considered the primary evidence of the first-settlers status, ethnic groups seek linguistic proofs in further going back in history, earlier days of the past. Since in the distant past there is less factual evidence, ethnogenetic myths are built primarily upon the perception on language identification / differentiation. The group that attempts an enclosure (group A) refutes other’s claims (that of group B) by temporary pushing group A’s origin further back into the past. More importantly, trying to establish that group A’s ancestors were living in the area claimed by group B, the ethnic borders allegedly existed in the past are expanded to include the territory claimed by group B. Hence, a symbolic enclosure is accomplished. Moreover, these attempts at symbolic enclosure are often mutual, as shown in Figure 1.5:
Figure 1.5 Stages of Ethnic Enclosure
(A = ethnogenetic myth of group A,
B = ethnogenetic myth of group B)

Stage 0: Before enclosure begins

Stage 1 of enclosure: Group A advances

Stage 2 of enclosure: Group B advances in return to the enclosure by Group A

Stage n of enclosure: Group A advances again
The symbolic aspect of ethnic enclosure is closely associated with the process of the formation and strengthening of a language-territory complex. Language-territory complex is viewed as a core of the symbolic ethnic enclosure, in which the perceived language identification or differentiation is used in order to justify the claims of ethnic groups over the territory in question, and can be defined as a particular way of collective remembering based on a strong correlation between the territorial boundaries of the ethnic group, its ascribed language and the historical past of the territory in question. The language-territory complex is characterized by its focus on the importance of historical events to the present, and reflects not only the acceptance of the historical-linguistic justification for the group’s links to the disputed territory but also the rejection of similar claims made by a rival ethnic group. Thus, if historical awareness is to be understood not only as individual and collective understandings of the past, but also as the relationships between historical understandings and those of the present and the future (Seixas 2004, 45), then Abkhazian and Georgian ethnic groups can be characterized as possessing an extreme degree of historical awareness.

The existence of a strong language-territory complex should be seen as an important feature of the entire process of enclosure leading to the reinforcement of hostilities between ethnic groups. The process of formation and maintenance of language-territory complex can be seen as a cyclical one and we can describe it in the following way.

Once again, let us assume that we have two groups, A and B, sharing some common territory within a multiethnic and multilingual state. At a point in time, the political environment changes in such a way that group A may consider it is possible to challenge the claims made by group B. This changing political environment influences enormously the ethnic group’s academic scholarship, since scholars then feel obliged to look for historico-linguistic evidences from the distant past so as to demonstrate the existence of ethnic links to the area in question, and reject the claims of the competing ethnic group. And – somehow not surprisingly – such evidences are always found.

As a next step, the appropriate version of the ethnic group’s distant past, which contains references to the language ascribed to the ethnic group in modern times, is diffused to the population through the mass media and education system, leading to the
strengthening of a language-territory complex. In the Caucasus, the specifics of the Soviet political settings caused the process to take place simultaneously in both ethnic groups. It is also interesting to note that scholars of group A, in order to justify historical ties of their ethnic group to the area in question, often make references to the same historical events or proofs as scholars of group B. Basically, both the language-territory complex of group A and language-territory complex of group B are built upon references to one and the same historical pool. Often, the only difference is the interpretation and perception (see Figure 1.6, next page).

As we will show in Chapter Three, in a particular type of a nested conflict under the Soviet political settings, the status of an ethnic group and privileges accorded to it depend to a significant degree on the ability of the ethnic group to prove its historical ties to the area in question, along with the continuous use of its own distinct language. Therefore, a struggle for which version of history – that of group A or that of group B – is to be accepted as the official history begins. The division is very acute, since the version of group A rejects the arguments of group B and vice-versa. The success or failure of one group or another was often reflected in changes of language policy with respect to the language ascribed to the ethnic group in question and, of course, in changes in the content of textbooks and in the propaganda of the mass media. Again, it is important to remember that we are dealing here with collective memory, which is slow to change, and language, which is central to the individual’s sense of place in the world. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that people were quite sensitive to changes in the official history and language policy, especially when official history justified the official language policy.

The following two Chapters will focus on the examination of some of the important aspects of the Soviet language policy and history writing, which in the specific settings of a nested competition among ethnic groups in the USSR facilitated the growth of possibilities for different perceptions of language and enabled ethnonational leaders in Soviet autonomies to exploit language ascribed to their respective ethnic groups as a vital political resource of ethnic enclosure.
Figure 1.6 Clash of Language-Territory Complexes
(adapted from Rouvinski and Matsuo 2003, 110)

Historical Evidence
(documentary, archaeological, linguistic, etc.)

Political Environment

Intellectuals

Mass Media Education

New History
New Myth

Language – Territory
COMPLEX

loops

CLASH

Group A

Group B

Political Environment

Intellectuals

Mass Media Education

New History
New Myth

Language – Territory
COMPLEX

loops