RELIGIOUS INCULTURATION AND PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE GEORGIAN LANGUAGE

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Introduction

The study of the historical sociolinguistics of the Georgian language is among the numerous fields that emerged and developed on the basis of Shalva Nutsubidze’s scholarly initiatives. In his monumental History of Georgian Philosophy, Nutsubidze described the translation activities of bilingual Georgian thinkers from the 4th to the 12th centuries and, in particular, the importation of the Oriental (Arabic) cultural heritage into the Greek world via Georgian as the Georgian contribution to this linkage between East and West. He thus pointed to one of the important functions of the Georgian language—that of an intermediary between the East and West.

The identification of this function gave an impetus to important research in the 1980s. Their aim was to study patterns in the historical development of the Georgian language, establish its social and public functions, and reconstruct connections between the language, its speakers, and their activities (translations and original creations) in the Georgian cultural context.

One of the first scholars to engage in this task was the well-known German Kartvelologist Winfried Boeder, whose works shaped an important stage in the study of the social history of the Georgian language. It was

1 On bilingual thinkers in the history of Georgian philosophy see Ш. Ницубидзе, История грузинской философии (Sh. Nutsubidze, Istorija gruzinskoi filosofii (History of Georgian Philosophy)) (Tbilisi, 1960), 145–153; see 146.

Boeder who raised the important problem of the functions of Georgian in the Middle Ages and who carried out substantial research in Georgian sources that had never been studied from this point of view. This is particularly true of the important issue of the self-awareness of Georgian monks, who worked in an alien linguistic environment on Mount Athos. As Boeder observed:

If an ordinary linguist compares the history of the Georgian and Oriental languages with that of Western European languages, he will definitely be surprised at the significant difference visible in the development of these languages. For example, the English language has undergone significant transformation over the past 1,200 years, but there have been comparatively fewer changes in the forms of the Georgian language over the same period, which is quite rare in the history of the development of world languages (to the extent they are attested). Historical, linguistic, and social problems also need explanation. How did it happen that Georgian was established not only as a language spreading Christianity, but has firmly maintained its place up to our time? Why did Greek fail to dominate here as an ecclesiastic, liturgical, scientific, as well as literary and official language, which could be expected as an analogy of Latin in Europe?³

This article investigates some aspects of these problems, in particular, the process of religious inculturation under way in Georgia from the 4th century and its impact on the development of the Georgian language. It also shows the use of the acculturation model in various cultural and historical contexts and its role in the weakening and loss of social and public functions of Georgian at the beginning of the 19th century.

1. Linguistic Signs of Inculturation in the Christian East

Before turning to the main problems to be addressed in this article, I would like to explain briefly the essential signs of events such as religious inculturation and acculturation that are closely linked to missionary activities practiced by the church in ancient times. The term “inculturation” is used to denote processes that unfold together with the spread of a new religion

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