

On Linguistic and Cultural Significance of Roza Tavdidishvili's Texts of Judeo-Georgian

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Abstract. This study discusses the linguistic and cultural significance of Roza Tavdidishvili's texts in documenting Judeo-Georgian, specifically focusing on the speech of Georgian Jews from Kutaisi. Tavdidishvili's texts recorded, in the 1930s, captures a variety of linguistic and cultural features specific to this community. These texts, now archived and digitized, serve as a crucial source for understanding the linguistic identity of Georgian Jews, especially as their speech patterns have largely disappeared. The research based on morphological analysis of the data in FLEx software highlights several aspects of the phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and lexical features of Judeo-Georgian, which align with the Imeretian dialect of Georgian, but also include unique traits. Based on the results, we may infer that, Tavdidishvili's documentation plays an essential role in preserving a linguistic heritage that has largely vanished and contributes to the ongoing study of Judeo-Georgian within the broader field of Georgian dialectology. The research also sets the stage for future studies to explore the morphosyntactic properties of these texts and their place in both the sphere of Jewish languages and the broader context of Georgian dialects. © 2025 *Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.*

Keywords: Roza Tavdidishvili, Kutaisi Jews, documenting Judeo-Georgian, Georgian Jews, Judeo-Georgian

Introduction

The centuries-long presence of Jews in Georgia is well-documented by Georgian and foreign sources [1-5]. Jewish communities established settlements across Georgia, though this landscape changed dramatically due to migration [6, 7]. By the 1970s, Georgian Jewish settlements largely disappeared, primarily due to repatriation to Israel [8: 123-129; 7: 84-85, 9: 150]. Documenting the linguistic and cultural remnants of these communities is critical, as such sources are now rare in modern Georgia.

The documentation of a small number of linguistic and cultural communities acquires a special value, considering that there are almost no such communities in modern Georgia. Therefore, the documenting data recorded in the 20th century are the main source for research.

Records of Georgian Jewish speech before the 20th century are scarce. Z. Chichinadze referred to the “Georgian language of Georgian Jews”, noting that Georgian remained their mother tongue even during migrations [10: 7-10]. He also highlighted distinctions in pronunciation between Georgian Jewish men and women, particularly regarding sibilants [10: 12], though confirming this observation today is challenging due to the limited audio data.

Systematic documentation began in the 1930s, spearheaded by Rosa Tavdidishvili, a Georgian Jew from Kutaisi. Although neither an ethnographer nor a dialectologist, her recordings – including folklore texts such as fairy tales and proverbs – serve as invaluable linguistic-anthropological material [11: 100-200]. During the period of Soviet Union, research on Jewish speech was limited, making Tavdidishvili’s work a significant contribution [11: 5]. Her unpublished texts, stored at the Arnold Chikobava Institute of Linguistics, have since been digitized and incorporated into the Georgian dialect corpus [40: 200].

The study of Judeo-Georgian gained momentum in the 21st century, transitioning from a focus on Georgian dialectology to comparative studies of “languages of the Jews” worldwide [12-17].

This paper highlights the importance of documenting Tavdidishvili’s texts and identifies key grammatical and lexical features revealed through morphological annotation. Future research will further explore the morphosyntactic properties of this archival linguistic data.

Although Georgian dialectology has a strong tradition of documenting and researching linguistic varieties, the study of Judeo-Georgian has been relatively sparse [18-24]. V. Topuria, while characterizing the Imeretian dialect, observed that the speech of Jews from Kutaisi, though marked by features such as sentence-final vowel lengthening and unique expressions, largely follows to the Imeretian dialect [9: 437]. B. Jorbenadze similarly noted that Georgian Jews adopted the dialects of their respective regions [1: 399, 442]. Despite such general observations, the status of Jewish speech as a distinct linguistic phenomenon has not been a focus in theoretical dialectology [9: 84].

This paper explores the grammatical and lexical features of Kutaisi Jewish speech, drawing on Tavdidishvili’s text recordings, which capture linguistic elements now difficult to verify due to the community migration. Future research will further investigate these features to illuminate the linguistic identity of Georgian Jews.

Methods

Linguistic documentation of Tavdidishvili’s recorded archival data implies analyzing it in accordance with modern standards in the field of linguistic documentation. A morphosyntactic data analysis was carried out in the FLEx software, making it available for interdisciplinary studies. The annotated text contains 32,000 words. The data are available in both Georgian and Latin transliteration. The morphological annotation implies glossing the data and indicating morphemes and qualifying them. On a semantic level, we identified loanwords from Hebrew. As a result, we got data that confirms the observations suggested in scholarly literature as well as allows us to arise questions regarding Judeo-Georgian.

Discussion

Phonetics and phonology. The phonetic analysis of Tavdidishvili’s texts reveals that the phoneme inventory of Kutaisi Jewish speech aligns with standard Georgian phonetics, reflecting the phonological rules of the Imeretian dialect. These include processes such as assimilation, dissimilation, deletion, epenthesis, and metathesis, demonstrating a dynamic interplay of phonetic phenomena [1, 21, 25].

Some examples of complete assimilation are:

(1) *eedevneboda* < *a-e-devn-eb-od-a* 'she would follow smb'

(2) *eemso* < *a-e-m-s-o* 'he would fill smth'

(3) *gamuuviododa* < *gamo-u-vidoda* 'he would manage smth'.

In assimilation, the weight of back row vowel *u* is much greater than other vowels. In our data, the phonological processes characteristic of the Imeretian dialect are not confirmed: *ie* > *ee*, *eo* > *oo*, *eo* > *io*, *ai* > *ei*, *oi* > *ei*, *au* > *ou*, *eu* > *uo*, *iu* > *uu*.

The assimilation of consonants also looks quite natural and similar to other Georgian dialects:

(4) *makvcemt* < *mo-gv-cem-t* 'you will give us'

(5) *šaxši* < *saxl-ši* 'at home'.

It is worth noting the form of the pronoun *vin-ca-ya* ('someone'), obtained by the progressive assimilation – *vin-ca-xa*, which is irreducibly confirmed in the data and which differs from Kutaisi Imeretian [1: 454].

According to our data, the speech should have been characterized by specific prosody – raising an intonation at the end of the phrase, which is evidenced by two identical vowel sequences in the texts. R. Tavdidishvili notes, that the speech of the Kutaisi Jews is characterized by “delaying the last vowel in the conversation” [11: 8]. However, a key issue in verifying this observation is the lack of relevant audio materials.

While the phonological features largely conform to Imeretian patterns, some distinct traits are evident. For instance, the progressive assimilation of vowels and consonants is prominent, as is the reduction of the suffix *-s* functioning as a dative case marker in consonant-ending nouns, as well 3rd person singular marker in some verbs, resulting in compensatory vowel lengthening and rising intonation [12: 12]. This morpho-phonological adjustment underscores the interaction between phonetics and grammar in the Kutaisi Jewish dialect.

(6) *დგას < დგას*

dgā < dga-s

stand-3.SG.PRES

'he is standing'.

(7) *გაუდექი*

ga-u-deki

PRE-OV-set-2.SG

გზას

gza-s

road-DAT

და

da

And

წადი.

c'adi

PRE-go.2.SG.

'Set off the road and go!'

Morphology. The morphological characteristics of the Kutaisi Jewish speech, as documented in Tavdidishvili's texts, closely align with the Imeretian dialect but exhibit unique deviations that reflect a distinct linguistic identity. Notable features include:

Reduction of Nominative and Dative Case Markers: consonant ending nouns frequently lack nominative case marker *-i*:

(8) *თლათ*

tlat

completely

ვაშკაც

vašk'ac.Ø

courageous.NOM

გამადგა

gama-dg-a

PRE-turn out-3.SG.AOR

სუყველაფრით

suq'velapr-it

everything-INST

'He turned out to be an absolute courageous with everything'.

(14) ახალგაზრდებ გული უხარისე.

The young people feel the joy in their heart.

Recent fieldwork data suggests that these grammatical phenomena are no longer consistently present, underscoring the value of archival records such as Tavdidishvili's texts for preserving and studying these unique syntactic traits.

The plural suffix is used when the noun is preceded by a quantifier:

(15)	ორივე	ქვისლებმა
	or-i-ve	kvisl-eb-ma
	two-NOM-PART	brother-in-law-PL-ERG
	Both brother-in-laws	

It seems significant that the first of the two members of the phrase connected with *da* coordinating conjunction in dative, genitive, and instrumental cases. The first is always with an emphatic vowel:

(16)	გემეემშვიდობა	ე	ღარიბი	კაცი	ცოლსა	და	შვილ.
	geme-e-mšvidob-a	e	yarib-i	k'ac-i	col'sa	da	švīl

PRE-OV-part-3.RD.SG.AOR this poor-NOM man-NOM wife-DAT-EMP and child.DAT

This poor man took leave from the wife and child.

The main lexical features of Rosa Tavdidishvili's texts are divided into two groups: a) semantic, shifts in Georgian words and b) Hebraisms.

Example of the first group is as follows:

(17) ძვირფას ტანფეხში გამოწყობილი დგაა და ირემის ხოორც აარშვიებს
 zvirpas t'anpexši gamoc'q'obili dgaa da iremis xoorcs aaršivebs

In Georgian *arshia* means 'ribbon, edge', or border of the fabric and it is unusual to produce the verb out of this stem. While in Judeo-Georgian, it had the meaning of assigning/dividing meat or meal [8: 3].

Hebraisms, by contrast, pertain to the integration of Hebrew-origin terms, often tied to religious practices, biblical stories, and cultural traditions. Non-religious Hebrew terms also appear, frequently undergoing phonetic adaptation. For example, the consonant *ʔ* [ʕ] in Hebrew, which is nearly silent, is rendered as *q* (q') in Judeo-Georgian. This phonetic transformation illustrates the nativization of Hebrew terms within the Georgian linguistic framework.

A critical question in analyzing Hebraisms involves determining whether such terms were historically adopted as loanwords or represent recent transfers from Modern Hebrew or other Jewish languages. Tavdidishvili's recordings provide invaluable insights into Hebraisms prevalent among the Sephardic Jewish community in the 1940s, prior to repatriation to Israel. These texts document traditional biblical loanwords as well as everyday vocabulary, some of which were included in Reuven Enoch's "Dictionary of Judeo-Georgian," highlighting their enduring significance in the lexicon of Georgian Jews [26: 2].

Conclusion

Documenting R. Tavdidishvili's texts by modern standards allows us to: 1. Make the archival material available for interdisciplinary research for both Georgian and foreign specialists; 2. Restore those linguistic indicators, which are almost impossible to record in the modern period. 3. Compare the influences of ancient

and modern Hebrew and differentiate them. 4. Compare the indicating grammatical features with other dialects of the Georgian language.

The core characteristic of the speech of Kutaisi Jews preserved in R. Tavdidishvili's texts is that all grammatical features can be found in Georgian dialects. However, compared to the Imeretian dialect, whose area should be the primary source of influencing this variety of Judeo-Georgian, we can reveal the critical phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and lexical phenomena uncommon in Imeretian. This can be explained as a 'migration dialectisms' or self-demarcating strategy by the community. As mentioned above, the linguistic qualification of the phenomenon could be an issue of further research.

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ენათმეცნიერება

როზა თავდიდიშვილის ტექსტების ენობრივი და კულტურული მნიშვნელობა ქართველ ებრაელთა მეტყველების კვლევისას

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(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ვ. შენგელიას მიერ)

ნაშრომში განხილულია როზა თავდიდიშვილის ტექსტების მნიშვნელობა ლინგვისტური და კულტურული თვალსაზრისით ებრაელთა ქართულის დოკუმენტებისას. თავდიდიშვილის ტექსტები ჩაწერილია 1930-იან წლებში და მასში შემორჩენილია ქუთაისის ებრაელთა მეტყველების თავისებურებანი. გაციფრულებული ტექსტები წარმოადგენს უნიკალურ წყაროს ქართველ ებრაელთა ენობრივი მახასიათებლების კვლევისას. კვლევა ეფუძნება თავდიდიშვილის ტექსტების ფლექსის პროგრამაში მორფოლოგიურ ანალიზს. ნაშრომში გამოკვეთილია ის ფონეტიკური, მორფოლოგიური, სინტაქსური და ლექსიკური ნიშან-თვისებები, რომლებიც, ერთი მხრივ, თანხვედრა იმერული დიალექტის თავისებურებებს, მაგრამ, ამავედროულად, განხილულია მხოლოდ ამ მეტყველებისთვის დამახასიათებელი მოვლენებიც.

ენობრივი მემკვიდრეობის შენახვის თვალსაზრისით თავდიდიშვილის ტექსტების თანამედროვე სტანდარტებით დოკუმენტირებას გამორჩეული როლი ეკისრება, განსაკუთრებით, იმის ფონზე, რომ ებრაელთა ქართული მეტყველება მეტწილად გაქრობის საფრთხის წინაშე დგას. ნაშრომში განხილულმა საკითხებმა სამომავლო, მორფოსინტაქსური თავისებურებების შესახებ კვლევებს შეიძლება დაუდოს სათავე. კვლევაში, ამავდროულად, წარმოჩენილია დოკუმენტური მასალის როლი ებრაელთა ლინგვისტურ სამყაროსა და ქართული დიალექტების უფრო ფართო კონტექსტში განხილვისათვის.

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