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Hazardous digits: Telephone keypads and Russian numbers in Tbilisi, Georgia



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ABSTRACT

Why do many Georgian speakers in Tbilisi prefer a non-native language (Russian) for providing telephone numbers to their interlocutors? One of the most common explanations is that the addressee is at risk of miskeying a number if it is given in Georgian, a vigesimal system, rather than Russian, a decimal system. Rationales emphasizing the hazards of Georgian numbers in favor of the “ease” of Russian numbers provide an entrypoint to discuss the social construction of linguistic difference with respect to technological artifacts. This article investigates historical and sociotechnical dimensions contributing to ease of communication as the primary rationale for Russian language preference. The number keypad on the telephone has afforded a normative preference for Russian linguistic code.

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1. Introduction

Near the end of the much-beloved Soviet film *Mimino* (1977), there is a memorable scene in which the protagonist, a Georgian airplane pilot, places a phone call from a payphone in Berlin. *Mimino*, played by actor Vakhtang Kikabidze, attempts to make a phone call to a town in Georgia called Telavi. The telephone operator instead connects him to Tel Aviv, Israel. Coincidentally, a Georgian in Tel Aviv answers the phone. It quickly becomes clear to *Mimino* that he has not reached Telavi, but his interlocutor in Tel Aviv urges him to stay on the line. *Mimino*'s telephonic interlocutor is eager to learn if a new bridge has been built yet in Kutaisi, and then implores *Mimino* to sing together the widely known Georgian folk song “*zhuzhuna tsvima movida*.” They sing, and *Mimino*'s unknown compatriot begins to weep, nostalgic for Georgia. One of the top youtube comments on the Mosfil'm official channel, where the film can be viewed in full, remarks in Russian: “*Ia plachu kazhdyi raz kogda smotriu kak on v Tel'-aviv zvonit*” (“I cry every time when I see how he calls Tel-Aviv”). In this humorous and moving scene, human warmth is paired with the fragility of socialist-era communicative infrastructure channels.

An accidental telephonic connection resulting in a fleeting emotional encounter between two Georgians beyond the borders of Georgia is a commentary on Georgianness and nostalgia. But at a more basic level, this strange serendipity is a consequence of a telephone misdial: a chance human mistake in the use of a communicative technology. In this scene, it is not *Mimino* who has misdialed, but the telephone operator who misheard “Telavi” as “Tel Aviv.” The normally undesirable outcome of misrecording, miskeying, or mishearing a phone number is transformed into a moment of connection. The role of the telephone operator has receded in contemporary Georgia, yet certain telephone communicative practices endure because of technological and human infrastructural expectations. In this article, I examine how and why Russian remains the preferred linguistic code in which to communicate telephone numbers in contemporary Tbilisi.

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Unlike in *Mimino*, telephone misconnections and misdials are now largely attributed to user error rather than operator failure. Wrong numbers are typically regarded as hazardous frustrations to be avoided if at all possible. For this reason, one must exercise care to record new acquaintances' phone numbers correctly, to double check the sequence of digits by reading it back, and to accurately key in numbers so that future phone calls go through. At its most extreme, a miskeyed phone number can mean the loss of a contact, a failure to connect. This article takes as its focus phone number exchange in contemporary Tbilisi, Georgia. Before telephone connection can be made, phone numbers must be exchanged, verified, and saved. This happens in a manner understood as emphasizing clarity and ease above all else.

Mobile telephone number dictation is a domain in contemporary Tbilisi in which Russian numbers are highly preferred over Georgian numbers. Because of its ubiquity in urban life, mobile telephone number dictation is a compelling speech genre in which routinized patterns crosscut ethnicity, class, gender, and age categories. Additionally, number dictation is a task-directed linguistic act that is structured primarily by the technological parameters of the mobile phone itself. Mobile phone number dictation requires inscription without literacy or computation, two tasks heavily associated with numbers and technology. In terms of language attitudes, preference for Russian numbers is typically rationalized with a narrative about "ease" or "simplicity." Why for this task is a secondary, often non-native language preferred over a primary, native language? To make sense of this, we need to account for the intersection among ideologies of number, sociotechnical forms, and Russian as a language of modernity.

2. Telephone number dictation in Georgian

Georgian uses a base-twenty (vigesimal) number system for numerals 30–99, whereas Russian and English use a decimal system. Essentially, numbers from 30 to 99 are reckoned in multiples of twenty, to which the remainder (1–19) is added. So, 85 is reckoned as *otkhmotsdakhuti* (lit., "four twenties and five").

Mobile telephone numbers in Tbilisi are dictated as three single digits, followed by three double-digits. For example, my telephone number is dictated as 5-9-9-54-98-45, where the dashes separate the numbers. I will use my telephone number as an example since it contains the sort of two-digit numbers that are considered by informants to be potentially confusing for listeners. Many informants say that it is *upro advili* (easier) to list the double digit numbers in Russian so that the listener does not press the wrong number on the telephone. For example, one may prematurely press a "4" when the number turns out to be "55," which is spoken as (lit.) "two twenties plus fifteen." In an essay about the history of the Georgian language, George Hewitt noticed this preference for Russian numbers in the context of telephone numbers, and adopted the dominant narrative of his informants to explain it: that using Russian, a decimal system, is done in order to "avoid any momentary confusion" (Hewitt, 1985, p. 172).¹ Let us take a closer look at this explanation and its implications.

The most common explanation for preferring Russian numbers in telephone number dictation is that Georgian numbers potentially cause confusion for the listener, possibly resulting in a miskey. For example, in my phone number (599-54-98-45), for the number "54" there is a risk that the listener will key "4" when I say "*ormots...*" ("two twenties..."), not waiting for the completion of the number "*ormotsdatokhmet'i*" ("two twenties and fourteen"), which requires that the first keyed number be "5". The figure of the potentially misunderstanding listener is widespread as a rationale for preferring base-ten numbers. During my fieldwork, no one ever suggested that a miskeying listener was impatient or inattentive for keying a number before it had been fully uttered. As a foreign, non-native speaker, I encountered this miskey problem only once: when I paused an unnaturally long time mid-number while dictating my number to a friend with whom I planned to go on a hunting trip. I was aware that my halting foreign language production was not to be trusted as a window into this phenomenon, so I listened to native Georgian speakers dictate and record phone numbers to each other over the course of a year. I was puzzled that normal, native-speed fluent production of numbers could be considered a hazard for listeners. Dictating phone numbers in Georgian was rare. Although I heard people repeat numbers for clarity, I never witnessed a miskeying issue based on the use of Georgian. Russian numbers solve this perceived problem of decimal-keypad congruence, at least for those who know Russian numbers.

Commanding the Russian numbers does not require fluency in Russian. Additionally, Russian number use is common in other contexts in Tbilisi life, such as in shops or at the marketplace, particularly where the sellers are non-Georgian. For example, Martin Frederiksen noted that during the August 2008 war with Russia, "in the bazaars the price of 2 1/2 was still given as *dva naxevar* ('*dva*' being Russian and '*naxevar*' Georgian)" (Frederiksen, 2012, p. 133). In situations of inter-ethnic contact in Georgian, the common language historically and presently is Russian. Pro-English and pro-"Western" trends in Georgia are unlikely to alter this strong trend. Because of this, in the setting of the *bazroba* (market), one hears Russian language used as a medium of communication in transactions. Likewise, purchasing telephone numbers at the market occurs in Russian, even if the sellers are Georgian. Sellers assume that Russian numbers are intelligible to customers. Russian number use is reinforced in a fashion that positions the number as linguistically marginal, yet central to certain forms of exchange.

The enduring presence of Russian in Tbilisi assumes many forms that are not seen as direct indexes of the Soviet past, even if such forms exist because of historical circumstance. Just as backgammon players in Tbilisi name dice rolls and keep

¹ As Hewitt explains: "Another occasion when pure Russian is favoured at the expense of the vernacular is in the communication of figures, especially telephone-numbers and, almost without exception, in requests for cash on the part of sales-staff. The reason for this seems to be a practical one: Georgian's system of counting is vigesimal [...] so, in order to avoid any momentary confusion (sc. after hearing a multiple of 29, one does not automatically anticipate a figure other than one beginning with 2, 4, 6 or 8), there seems to be a universal preference for the use of Russian with its decimal system" (Hewitt, 1985: 172).

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