

Chapter 8: Discussion

The processes through which identification and belonging are constructed in Georgia's Greek community has now been analyzed with focus on positioning through LANGUAGE, post-Soviet transformations, and the (un)making of boundaries. In this Chapter I integrate these threads, and show how the analysis contributes to our theoretical understanding of such processes more generally. I will firstly delineate how an analytical focus on PLACE and TIME supports an analysis of the emergence of the SOCIAL categories established in the interview conversations. Secondly, I will look at the interactional devices my consultants use in the corpus in order to position themselves, their community and "others", to draw and contest boundaries, and to speak about these topics in interview conversations with two outsiders. Thirdly, I will explore the boundaries emerging and dissolving in the interviews in terms of their quality and what is related by them, and discuss how this contributes to a deeper understanding of boundary (un)making.

Regarding how PLACE, TIME and the SOCIAL are related and used by my consultants in speaking about their identification and belonging, the most relevant and pervasive (social) categories established in the corpus are being GREEK and BELONGING TO GEORGIA. The latter both in terms of a deep emotional attachment – articulated as ROOTEDNESS – and in terms of holding CITIZENSHIP and positioning the speaker and their community as GOOD CITIZENS. I now explore the spatial and the temporal dimensions of both, before synthesizing them with their social aspect.

In the analyzed excerpts, PLACE emerges as relevant in three ways. Firstly, consultants highlight their BELONGING to a specific village, a region in Georgia (Ts'alk'a or Tetrts'i'q'aro for instance), the Georgian nation state or the post-Soviet space as a whole, which is conceptualized as unified through the shared experiences of Soviet administration. Consultants frequently underscore their BELONGING TO GEORGIA, which they achieve mainly in two ways. The first one is to emphasize their strong relationship with the *zemlya* 'land', which by ROOTING them in their place establishes both their BELONGING and in its lived facticity crucially also their right to belong – to Georgia as much as to their region or village. While this process of ROOTING a community in a particular place is only achieved with time, this is not always stressed in the corpus. The second way of establishing BELONGING TO GEORGIA does

center explicitly on this temporal dimension, i.e. the time consultants and their community have spent in a particular place and/or Georgia. In this view, the everyday experiences of having lived in that place and of experiencing its changing circumstances either contribute to belonging or are the main factor in establishing it. The metaphor of being ROOTED is not only mentioned explicitly by AK in excerpt 37 (Chapter 7),¹ but also helps us understand the process of emigration as one of painful “uprooting”. Many consultants express not wishing to go through this process themselves, even though they might speak about loneliness after their family members’ emigration (cf. Chapter 6). From an interactional point of view, this sense of BELONGING TO GEORGIA is usually conveyed in the interviews in a matter-of-fact, albeit not necessarily unemotional, way. Interactively, this makes it almost inconceivable for their interlocutor to cast any doubt on their belonging. In contrast to the extreme case formulations used in many of the excerpts discussed in the preceding chapters, we might analyze these as “normal case formulations”, specifically consultants’ successful attempts to NORMALIZE their BELONGING TO GEORGIA.

The second way PLACE is used in the interviews is to establish a contrast between “here” and “there”. “There” most frequently refers to “Greece”, which at times is used as a *pars pro toto* to denote “Europe”. “Here” in most contexts refers to a specific region in Georgia, the Georgian nation state or the post-Soviet space. By establishing juxtaposed spaces, consultants are able to compare alternative ways of “doing things” and to evaluate one of them as offering a better solution to a given problem. The excerpts analyzed in Chapter 7 provide poignantly divergent evaluations of the spaces being compared.

Somewhat obviously, a third way PLACE emerges as relevant is in shaping consultants’ experiences. For the Pontic Greek community along Georgia’s Black Sea coast, this is in many cases the (personal or family) experience of deportation after WWII. For the (Urum and Pontic) Greek community in Kvemo Kartli (encompassing Ts’alk’a and Tetrits’q’aro), internal migration from Svaneti and Ach’ara influences which boundaries they draw and which attributes they foreground, in terms of both BELONGING TO GEORGIA and their GREEK or GEORGIAN category membership.²

1 And *korennoy* ‘being at the root’ is a conventionalized way of expressing “nativeness” in Russian, cf. the discussion on *korennizatsiya* in Chapter 2.

2 While fundamental differences between the experiences of living in urban and rural spaces in Georgia abound, these are not particular to Georgia’s Greek community, and so are not examined in this book.

Finally, consultants evoking the post-Soviet sphere as a relevant point of comparison put the spotlight on both PLACE and TIME. Like no other topic in the corpus, the post-Soviet context allows us to focus on the temporal dimension of BELONGING TO GEORGIA and on the challenges consultants narrate as having arisen to their self-identification as GREEK. There are four perspectives on TIME that I want to explore here. As discussed in Chapter 6, the researcher may firstly focus on the tidemarks of the Soviet experience. In the corpus, these are noticeable in consultants' language competence and in how they evaluate the necessity of speaking a certain language in order to be GREEK. The Soviet focus on ANCESTRY in establishing national affiliation constituted it as detached from other attributes, such as LANGUAGE. However, this focus is not limited to the Soviet Union – it also reveals traces of the Russian Empire's categorization practices. The Russian and Ottoman Empires alike categorized their subjects based on religious affiliation. This “imperial discourse”, as I named it in Chapter 5, helps explain the verdict of those consultants who discount the importance of speaking a language associated with a certain national category for membership in said category.³ A tidemark attributed to the Ottoman Empire is furthermore found in the conventionalized narrative of how Urum Greeks came to speak a Turkish rather than a Greek variety as their heritage language, a narrative revisited below.

Another tidemark of the Soviet experience is the frequently voiced perception that national affiliation was not important in everyday life.⁴ Consultants frequently contrast their positive recollections about this and other aspects of “Soviet life” with what came to replace them, thereby establishing the end of the Soviet Union as a temporal threshold. This threshold is constructed as a temporal boundary relating TODAY to a very different YESTERDAY (cf. Tilly, 2004), as explored in Chapter 6. This is the second perspective on TIME emerging from the interviews. The fundamental differences consultants perceive between TODAY and YESTERDAY make the Soviet Union the most important temporal point of comparison. In tracing the changes this fundamental political, economic, and social transformation engendered for my

3 Consultants evaluating LANGUAGE as constitutive for national affiliation may be argued to draw on a discourse that became pervasive with the advent of the modern nation state (cf. Chapter 5).

4 Even the dissenting view of IP and TV who deplore the tenacity of “Soviet chauvinism” in Chapter 7 centers on the way NATIONALITY as constructed in the Soviet Union left its traces (here viewed as problematic) in the post-Soviet conceptualization of NATIONALITY and CITIZENSHIP.

consultants and their community, I chose to follow the metaphor of FAMILY BREAKDOWN that emerged in the interviews (cf. Chapter 6). As they tell it, the BREAKDOWN took place on two levels. The first is the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a “family of nations”, which is perceived as a loss by some consultants and, in the case of the Georgian nation state, as instantiated by rising nationalism. They describe how this is perceptible on the level of everyday interactions and summarize it in the phrase *gruziya dlya gruzin* “Georgia for Georgians”, which they interpret as questioning their BELONGING TO GEORGIA. On the second level, all my consultants experienced the BREAKDOWN in the individual, highly tangible form of family dissolution, as their family members emigrated to Greece. This also marked the beginning of internal migration from Svaneti and Ach’ara into the regions of Tetrts’q’aro and Ts’alk’a. The massive emigration, the communicative networks between those who left and those who stayed, as well as the personal experiences of some of my consultants in Greece, all make “Greece” as an instantiation of “Europe” the relevant spatial point of comparison.

Relating things on either side of the (temporal) boundary is not the same as focusing on the threshold itself. In Georgia, the post-Soviet transition not only brought profound changes to all spheres of life – political, economical, social – it was also a time of profound insecurity on all these levels, to the point of a civil war in the early 1990s. In many accounts of this time (as exemplified in Chapter 6, excerpt 17) the *liminality* of this phase with its dangerous uncertainties make this topic difficult, or even impossible, to articulate in interviews with an outsider. Importantly, it appears to be the dangerously profound nature of these changes that makes them difficult to speak about, rather than change in itself. Thus, in contrast, many consultants speak with apparent ease about the reforms led by Mikheil Saakashvili following the so-called *Rose Revolution*.

The fourth and final temporal phenomenon I want to highlight is the potential for TIME to further BELONGING and to diminish social boundaries, sometimes to the point of dissolution. As mentioned above, consultants frequently refer to the time their community has spent in Georgia as furthering their indubitable BELONGING TO GEORGIA. This “long time” also becomes relevant when consultants wish to emphasize a blurring of boundaries between GREEKS and GEORGIANS in order to deny any differences between them. At stake for some consultants is not merely their BELONGING TO GEORGIA or the equivalence of their and GEORGIANS’ way of life, but also their multiple self-identification as both GREEK and GEORGIAN, explored in Chapter 7. TIME is also made relevant in speaking about the processes of being accepted

as GREEKS in Greece, especially in terms of improving Georgian Greeks' competence in SMG to a level at which they can pass as "Greek Greeks", and in terms of citizenship requirements. Finally, in Ts'alk'a TIME is established as an important factor enabling people to "get used to each other", thereby calming the economic conflicts attributed to the early phase of internal migration. Especially in the last case, we can see how the fact that a boundary loses its conflictual relevance in everyday life does not necessarily entail its immediate permeability, a dissolution of the categories employed, or a more favorable evaluation of the ascriptions made to them, however.

I will now focus on the social constellations my consultants narrate and co-create. What is crucial about the positions consultants speak of occupying in Greece is that many of them perceive their self-identification as Greek to be denied recognition – at times brutally so. It is not simply the experience of emigration but this social boundary consultants find themselves having to cope with, and they achieve this by contesting and/or embracing it in various ways, as explored in Chapter 7. In cases where the boundary is interactively construed as insurmountably durable, consultants can be seen as either "turning away" or contesting it. In cases where the boundary is construed as permeable, consultants may advocate assimilation to the ways in which they perceive BELONGING to be achieved "there", often by taking the necessary time and changing one's conceptualization of "nationality" and "citizenship".

Secondly, in Ts'alk'a, consultants draw durable boundaries not because village life is "different" or "harsher", but rather based on whether they feel they must defend their GREEK category membership and the right to "their land". As in Greece, a core aspect of this defense is to emphasize their ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY and the time they have spent on the land in question, while DOWNPLAYING LANGUAGE as a relevant marker of national affiliation. In the Pontic Greek villages in Western Georgia, contrastingly, cohabitation of GREEKS and GEORGIANS is portrayed as having "always been" peaceful and harmonious. This is reflected in the reported language competencies of the villagers: GREEKS are assessed as speaking Georgian with native level competence, which is said to hold *vice versa* for their GEORGIAN counterparts' competence in Pontic Greek. Note that while this enables the perception of boundaries as blurred to the point of non-recognition in everyday life, the same does not necessarily hold for contexts in which ANCESTRY is perceived to be foregrounded, as shown in Table 7.2 and discussed in Chapter 7.

Speaking about their self-identification as GREEK, consultants in many cases and across various contexts voice their self-identification in terms of

ANCESTRY and historical trajectory, as well as RESILIENCE in holding on to their RELIGION. This is not to say that LANGUAGE is not afforded a substantial role by some consultants, either to indubitably position them as GREEK or as a desideratum. LANGUAGE in the form of competence in the state language Georgian is also considered important for being a GOOD CITIZEN of the Georgian nation state. Consultants who do not speak Georgian very well therefore say it would be desirable to improve their proficiency. Thus, LANGUAGE is not infrequently assessed as “important” in the context of speaking about their language competence and perhaps even when asked to evaluate a certain variety’s “importance” for their self-identification. However, when consultants describe being challenged, they foreground ANCESTRY and RELIGION as “proof” that their self-identification is well-founded. While in some cases this may have to do with a challenge based on someone’s seemingly “deviant” language use, this recourse to ANCESTRY is also made relevant in narratives of alienation in Greece as told by Pontic Greek consultants, for instance OP in Chapter 7.

It is impossible now to establish how my consultants would have spoken about their BELONGING in the Soviet Union, i.e. which regional, social, and political categories they might have emphasized or downplayed in various contexts. What is very clear, however, is that in interviews almost 25 years after its dissolution, their political belonging – in terms of the rights and obligations perceived to be engendered by CITIZENSHIP – is portrayed as indubitably tied to the Georgian nation state, as is their BELONGING TO GEORGIA.

Having discussed *what* consultants make relevant in our interviews, I will now turn to *how* this is achieved. To this end, I will summarize the most important interactional devices consultants use to speak about their identification, their belonging, and the boundaries they perceive and (un)make in their social world. I will not dwell on the basic processes of categorization, ascription and evaluation, which I have elucidated throughout the analysis. Two devices are used across all contexts, while others are specific to certain topics in this corpus. The most pervasive device is to CONTRAST spaces, time spans, and social categories, i.e. “groups” of people. This CONTRAST involves the juxtaposition of two entities that are constructed as very different, with one of them evaluated as superior, morally and thereby normatively. It is usually the first established item that is evaluated positively while the second is constructed as deviating from the established norm.

The second device is to establish a GENERAL RULE about how the topic at hand is “generally” dealt with, i.e. the rule is established as emerging

not from the opinion, experiences, wishes, or desires of the speaker, but from broadly accepted social norms. Not infrequently, this GENERAL RULE is evaluated positively, which marks deviation from it as normatively inferior. GENERAL RULES may be established in a number of ways, for instance by simply stating the rule without any argumentative support as to why and how this rule should apply. Most frequently, however, consultants adduce examples as “proof” of the rule’s application. These might take the form of extreme case formulations, as we have seen with some frequency in this book, i.e. by showing that the GENERAL RULE also applies in cases established as “far flung”. The other form comprises examples generated from the immediate interview context or from narrating one’s own experiences. “Proving” the rule in this way makes it next to impossible for the interlocutor to question it without risking loss of face (cf. Roth, 2005).

In addition to supporting the construction of GENERAL RULES, NARRATING one’s own experiences serves a number of further interactive purposes in the corpus. First and foremost, this device enables the narrator to tell their perspective on the narrated events and thereby “set the record straight”, for instance in regard to past injustices (cf. Czyżewsky et al., 1995). There are two ways in which these narratives are relevant for the (un)making of boundaries. One is to tell a story about a categorization or boundary that the narrator perceives to be wrong, thus attempting to unmake said boundary. The aim of such a narration is to depict and subsequently question the category system, ascriptions, evaluations, and boundaries established by others. We have encountered this especially in connection with boundaries drawn by “Greek Greeks” in Greece, which challenged consultants’ self-identification as GREEK, and with the struggle for belonging in Ts’alk’a. In both contexts, consultants make a point of explicating exactly where they perceive their counterparts to have wronged them.

In contrast, the other way NARRATIVES are used in the corpus is to establish boundaries. This is usually achieved by narrating a story in which the speaker ascribes a fundamental “lack of basic civility” to a person representing the relevant out-group. This might be a person perceived to wrongly exclude them from GREEK category membership (in this case including a re-evaluation of the hierarchy established by the out-group member), members of the ACH’ARIAN out-group in Ts’alk’a “misbehaving” and “destroying things”, a perpetrator of a “mindless nationalistic” attack, or an Urum Greek person speaking their heritage variety in Greece.

There appears to be, thirdly, a conventionalized narrative in the community about how Urum Greeks came to speak a Turkish variety. Consultants relate

how their ancestors in the Ottoman Empire were forced to “choose” between giving up their (Greek) language or their (Orthodox Christian) religion. In portraying their ancestors as having “chosen” RELIGION over LANGUAGE, speakers both position RELIGION as more relevant for their GREEK category membership, and imbue their community with a certain RESILIENCE in holding on to their faith in the face of substantial adversity. That Urum Greeks speak a Turkish variety to this day should therefore be considered as another tidemark, accounted for in narratives of subjugation and displacement.

Attributing RESILIENCE to oneself or one’s community is another communicative device used with some frequency in the corpus. We have encountered it mostly in connection with how consultants speak about the liminal phase following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Consultants make it relevant in terms of adapting to profound transformations, countering nationalist attacks, and coping with the emigration of family members. This is also the context in which consultants most frequently NORMALIZE their experiences, thereby DOWNPLAYING their individuality and/or their community being in any way exceptional. This is achieved, for instance, by emphasizing that the transformations were “difficult for everybody”, making their personal experiences somehow not “interesting” enough to talk about. This is the opposite of establishing a GENERAL RULE, since it DOWNPLAYS the speaker’s experiences rather than elevating them to the level of being imbued with explanatory force of how “things work”.

The final interactional device we frequently encounter is to SHIFT RESPONSIBILITY to forces outside of the individual’s or their community’s field of influence. The narrative of “choosing between language and religion” is an instance of this method, which is mostly used to explain the community’s perceived shortcomings in terms of competence in languages considered to be “important” either for their self-identification as GREEK or their BELONGING TO GEORGIA, as discussed in Chapter 5.

What, then, does this study contribute to the theoretical discussion on positioning, identification, belonging, and the (un)making of boundaries? Crucially, it underscores the importance of the sequential context for positioning and boundary (un)making. I have analyzed two illustrative examples of this. First, there is IP, who in tracing the historical trajectory of his community and their heritage variety Pontic Greek initially emphasizes the proximity of “Ancient Greek” and “Pontic Greek” (cf. excerpt 4, Chapter 5). In this, “Pontic Greek” is positioned as closer to “Ancient Greek” than to “Modern Greek”, thereby strengthening his community’s link to antiquity and thus their GREEK category membership. In the same excerpt IP also compares

“Modern Greek” and “Pontic Greek”, establishing that as “Pontic Greeks” his community also understands some “Modern Greek”, thereby also construing a link to “contemporary Greece”. When asking about the languages he is competent in, I later pick up on this difference he had established between “Modern Greek” and “Pontic Greek”. This takes place right after he has explained how “Georgian Greeks” were not recognized as “genuine Greeks” in Greece and is understood by IP to be a very different conversational context. This becomes apparent when he diverges from his earlier assessment and states that “Pontic Greek” and “Modern Greek” are basically the same language (just prior to excerpt 26, Chapter 7). In this context, his focus is on establishing that, in his view, “Georgian Greeks” conceptualize the relationship between “nationality” and “citizenship” differently (and incorrectly) compared to how these matters are handled in Greece (correctly). Thus, his argument about his in-group’s “deviant” conceptualizations is supported by him downplaying the importance of the linguistic differences for how his in-group is perceived in Greece. The linguistic difference is, hence, positioned as basically non-existent in correcting my question about his language competence. Here, it is not the existence of *difference* itself – in this case linguistic – which establishes a boundary. Instead, it is the difference that is conversationally made relevant – namely the different conceptualization of “nationality” and “citizenship” – that establishes the boundary, in line with observations made since Barth (1969).

The second example comes from the interview with MP, who declares Georgia to be “his country”, expresses his wish to speak Georgian (excerpt 14, Chapter 5), and further positions himself as GEORGIAN due to the time his community has spent in Georgia, which he exemplifies by his “dancing the Georgian way” (excerpt 35, Chapter 7). Thus, in the context of establishing his BELONGING TO GEORGIA and in answering my question about potential differences between “Greeks” and “Georgians”, MP emphasizes their similarity and the blurring of boundaries between GEORGIAN GREEKS and GEORGIANS. In the context of asking whether there are situations in which he might *feel* “Georgian”, he denies this, however, and makes his GREEK ANCESTRY relevant (cf. Section D. of Chapter 7). This turns the question from one of personal emotional attachment and rootedness into one probing a trace of the Soviet system of categorizing its subjects’ national affiliation in terms of their ancestry, as discussed above. It is therefore a heavily context-dependent boundary and one that in many contexts is blurred and permeable to the point of being imperceptible.

Examining more closely the qualities of the boundaries that are made and unmade in the interviews allows us to appraise the boundary theories introduced in Chapter 3. First of all, there does, indeed, appear to be a distinction between *difference* and *boundary*, with the latter carrying more consequential – at times painful – implications for ordering the social world. Further to the two examples above, which illustrate this and show how boundaries are context-dependent, the differences between the categories GREEK and GEORGIAN are not perceived as equally *consequential* for all consultants. Consultants may also underscore their multiple belongings and self-identify as GREEK GEORGIANS. Thus, from a theoretical perspective, some consultants establish a *boundary* – i.e. a difference with consequences – between these two categories, while for others this is established as merely a matter of – inconsequential – *difference* (cf. Barth 1969; Lamont / Molnár 2002).

Secondly, the boundaries established in the interviews vary not only across conversational contexts but also across the categories that are made relevant. An approach centering on *adding* boundary layers but theoretically accounting neither for how they are related to each other nor for their removal (cf. Haselsberger, 2014) does not help explain how category-bound predicates and activities are made more or less relevant in a conversation. It also does not offer an explanation for processes of diminishing and/or shifting boundaries. Both issues, however, clearly emerge in the analysis. Approaches taking into account the historical (un)making of boundaries are much more promising in this respect (cf. Green, 2009; Hirschauer, 2014). This historical perspective is championed for instance by Wimmer (2008, 2013), though he does little to account for the interactional boundary (un)making on which I have focused. Analyzing the conversationally established and contested boundaries multidimensionally (cf. Schiffauer et al. 2018) has shown to be very productive in exploring their full breadth and complexity (cf. Gerst et al., 2018b).

From a methodological perspective, finally, these findings highlight the importance of combining an approach that is on the one hand open enough to enable consultants to establish what is relevant to them and to let these relevancies emerge without explicitly asking for them, while including more probing questions on the other. In the present case, not asking consultants to evaluate the importance of Georgian or Russian, for instance, has proven immensely fruitful in allowing them to articulate their BELONGING TO GEORGIA precisely because I did not ask for it. On the other hand, asking sometimes very direct questions has been advantageous in corroborating points emerging from the open parts of the conversation. This was especially the case when

consultants quite clearly understood different questions as creating contexts that foregrounded very different relevancies.

