

STIGMA – GASLIGHTING SEMANTICS: LANGUAGE, MANIPULATION AND CULTURAL STEREOTYPES IN GEORGIA

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Abstract

The present article concerns the issues of linguistic semantics in the context of gaslighting mobilized through the cultural stereotypes widely accepted in Georgia. Empirical material was obtained from the students of Javakhisvili Tbilisi State University (Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences). The theoretical framework of the study is linguistic semantics, in particular, Leech's theory of meaning. The value of the study is in its focus on the unconscious form of gaslighting which is widespread in different social contexts. Despite the growing interest in mental health and psychological manipulation, the fact that unconscious gaslighting, which often remains unnoticed, is no less harmful than conscious, preplanned manipulation, is often neglected.

The study shows that most respondents had personally experienced a negative influence of gaslighting especially when they were criticized and shamed by older generation in Georgia. Specific cases of gaslighting are mostly related to gender and cultural issues (politics, religion) and contribute to stigmatization. The analysis of empirical material demonstrates that certain semantic changes are observed in such discourse. In particular, the social meaning of the lexical units used by the speaker (manipulator) acquires affective connotation, which has a negative influence on the listener's (victim's) self-confidence and makes them question correctness of their perceptions.

The study also demonstrates that the Georgian youth is aware of the above manipulations, can identify them and is less susceptible to the negative influence of gaslighting.

Key words: *gaslighting, psychological manipulation, linguistic semantics, cultural stereotypes, gender*

1. Introduction

Personality develops through the interaction of genetic characteristics and social contexts. In addition, language, as the main medium of communication, significantly contributes to the formation of the perceptual system and behavioral habits. Therefore, it is logical that the cultural stereotypes in the collective consciousness of society largely determine the individual's self-perception as well as the models of interaction with other people.²

In Georgia, like in many other societies, cultural stereotypes have a significant effect on a personal identity. In the last decades, the Georgian mentality, which had been traditionally patriarchal, underwent important transformations. The rigid frame of thinking

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² According to the principle of linguistic relativity (Sapir – Whorf theory) language influences thought. Ottenheimer, H. (2009). *The Anthropology of Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

established in the Soviet Union has been replaced with the European values. Such a dramatic shift in the paradigm caused ideological conflict between generations. The difference in perspectives is naturally reflected in personal relations and verbal communication. However, interpersonal communication goes beyond the transmission of information, because language is an instrument used to perform certain functions ¹ (Jakobson, 1960) and speech acts ² (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). This means that not only do we express what we want to say, but we also negatively influence the other person's reality perception, which is often the case. It is the context where the concept of *gaslighting* becomes extremely important.

Gaslighting is a psychological manipulation which forces a person to question one's own feelings and the correctness of one's perceptions.³ This phenomenon goes beyond the field of psychology and extends to social and sociolinguistic contexts (Sweet, 2019; Catapang Podosky, 2021). As a social phenomenon, gaslighting is used as an instrument to gain influence and power in different social environments, such as interpersonal relations, legal system, employment, and politics (Ruíz, 2020; Spear, 2023, etc.). From the sociolinguistic perspective, the mechanisms of gaslighting effect involve *linguistic order* (Catapang Podosky, 2021). However, it should be emphasized that despite researchers' growing interest in this phenomenon, gaslighting as a kind of discourse, has not been much studied from the linguistic perspective. In my opinion, gaslighting, as a linguistic phenomenon mostly uses specific speech patterns, namely assertives (Purtseladze, 2024). In the present study gaslighting is examined from the linguistic perspective in the context of Georgian cultural stereotypes.

The value of the present study is in its focus on the so-called *unconscious gaslighting* ⁴. This form of psychological manipulation is often encountered in different social contexts. Even though modern world shows a growing interest in mental health and the instruments of psychological manipulation, unconscious gaslighting often remains unnoticed by a victim or the person it is directed at. Despite being unnoticed, its effect is as destructive as that of a conscious, preplanned psychological manipulation.

To obtain empirical material we conducted interviews with the students of Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences). The interview results showed that the majority of respondents had repeatedly experienced the effect of gaslighting rendered through cultural stereotypes, especially when they were subjected to criticism and reprehension on the part of older generation living in Georgia. In such case, the linguistic

¹ Functions of Language. Jakobson, R. (1960). *Linguistics and Poetics*. In T. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in Language* (pp. 350-377). Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.

² Speech Act Theory. Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Searle, J. (1979). *Expression and Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ APA Dictionary of Psychology. APA.org. American Psychological Association. Retrieved May 20, 2024.

⁴ Wilson, V. (2024) *Unconscious Gaslighting: What Is It and How to Manage It*. Exceptional Futures, <https://www.exceptionalfutures.com/unconscious-gaslighting>. Retrieved March 3, 2024.

semantics of gaslighting mainly involved the concepts associated with gender and socio-cultural aspects (politics, religion). When viewed from the given perspective, gaslighting involves *stigmatization*¹ because it intensifies a negative impact of cultural stereotypes through the devaluation of the ideas and feelings of the person who is the target of manipulation and, also, by emphasizing his/her difference.

2. Method

The study was conducted in two stages. The students were asked to participate in an anonymous interview with the aim of obtaining information about their personal experience with gaslighting. In particular, respondents were asked to list the phrases they often heard in the context of gaslighting mobilized through cultural stereotypes.

Twenty students agreed to participate in the study. The average age of respondents was 19. All of them were of Georgian nationality. A relatively small number of participants could be explained by the specificity of the study: The study did not aim to present the results of a large-scale social survey; its purpose was to conduct the semantic analysis of those lexical units that are used during manipulative gaslighting and, at the same time, are based on cultural stereotypes. In particular, we will focus on the actualization of the meaning of frequently used words (concepts) during this kind of discourse. The semantic analysis of lexical units was based on G. Leech's theory of meaning, in particular, the classification of meaning (Leech, 1981).

Traditional methods (analysis, synthesis) were applied to the empirical data. As it turned out, the young people living in Georgia become the targets of gaslighting because of gender related issues, ideological and political opinions, career prospects and emigration, choice of a partner in romantic relationships, cross-cultural marriages, appearance and dressing style. The linguistic context of gaslighting reveals a certain semantic trend: the lexical units (concepts) used during discourse, acquire a new affective connotation in addition to the well-known social connotation. This phenomenon is discussed in more detail in the below sections.

3. The meaning of word and gaslighting

Semantics, in a broad sense, studies expression of meaning through language. In addition to the definition of the word given in the dictionary, meaning, also, comprises all the hues of the associations linked to this word. The purpose of semantics is to examine all the ways in which the word is expressed and used in a particular context in the course of verbal and non-verbal communication.² G. Leech, a well-known linguist, who studied a complex and versatile world of meaning, largely influenced the development of linguistic

¹ Stigmatization by Shame. In the modern world, it refers to the labelling of individuals in a social context. Sh. Gabunia (2013). Introduction into LGBT journalism. Tbilisi: Identity (in Georgian)

² Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2024, May 14). Semantics. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/science/semantics>

semantics, as a discipline of linguistics. G. Leech argued that the meaning of word cannot be studied without considering sociolinguistic factors because one and the same word may have different connotations in different contexts.¹ According to Leech's theory, a lexical unit, in addition to its denotative meaning, might have additional meanings depending on the context (Leech, 1981).

In this study we focused on two types of meaning: *social meaning* and *affective meaning*. Social meaning is assigned to the word by society. These historically developed connotations determine interpretations of the word by members of individual cultures or social groups because they comprise certain metalinguistic dimensions, such as socio-cultural norms and values, historical experience, the current dynamics of power, etc. Differently from social meaning, affective meaning refers to the emotions evoked by a lexical unit and the subjective interpretations which exist in the form of psycho-emotional reactions elicited in us by individual words (Leech, 1981).

Expression and perception of meaning are extremely important in the context of gaslighting. Since gaslighting is a verbal manipulation in the first place (Purtseladze, 2024), it is largely based on a specific use of linguistic constructs, which, among other things, implies their distortion to manipulate the victim and exert a psychological influence upon them. Therefore, the identification of such attempts aimed at distorting the meaning is very important for the effective resistance to verbal manipulations.

Empirical data show the following: We encounter semantic transformation of social meaning into affective meaning in the stigma-gaslighting context, when the speaker/manipulator uses the social connotations of lexical meaning in an abusive way to evoke in the listener specific emotional reactions; e.g. when the manipulator uses the opinions, traditions and cultural norms established in the society to evoke negative emotions like shame, guilt feeling or fear in the victim. In such cases, semantic changes serve the achievement of the destructive effect characteristic of gaslighting and intensify the psychological influence over the victim because the affective meaning belongs to the sphere of *emotive language*² and, consequently, becomes the instrument for the manipulation of human emotions because of its ability to influence the listener's decision. Therefore, in the stigma-gaslighting context the affective connotations of lexical units are a means of psychological manipulation.

However, it should be noted that the phenomenon in question is often unconscious, which means that people use gaslighting as a manipulation instrument unconsciously, without any intention. This is often the case when people of different generations communicate with each other. The next section concerns the semantics of stigma-gaslighting specific of the Georgian reality.

¹ Ramtirthe, P., Ovhal, M. (2024). Geoffrey Leech's Seven Types of Meaning. *Journal of Research Administration*, 5(2), 11465-11469.
Retrieved from <https://journalra.org/index.php/jra/article/view/1242>

² Macagno, F., Walton, D. (2014). When Words Are Emotive. In *Emotive Language in Argumentation* (pp. 5–29). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4. Semantics of stigma-gaslighting in Georgia

4.1. Interview results

The interview was conducted in two stages: respondents had to answer a number of questions, and, in case of the positive response, were asked to share their impressions and experience by listing those phrases which they had heard in the context of gaslighting mobilized through cultural stereotypes. The study results with the corresponding percentage are given in Table 1. The analysis of linguistic data is given in the next section.

Table 1. Stigma-gaslighting and cultural stereotypes in Georgia

Question	Yes	No	Don't know
Have you been told that your feelings/emotions are incorrect or irrelevant because they contradict the accepted cultural norms?	55%	45%	-
Have you been told that your ideas and opinions are incorrect or unrealistic because they contradict the accepted cultural norms or the associated expectations?	75%	25%	-
Have you been told that you are too emotional when it comes to cultural stereotypes?	60%	40%	-
Have you questioned correctness of your ideas only because they contradict the accepted cultural norms?	45%	55%	-
Have you felt humiliated or inferior because your feelings and opinions were considered incorrect or irrelevant since they contradicted the accepted cultural norms?	45%	55%	-
Stemming from these questions, do you think that you have experienced gaslighting mobilized through the cultural stereotypes?	60%	40%	-
Do you think that gaslighting was used in your case consciously, in a predetermined way?	30%	40%	30%

As we see, most respondents believed that they had experienced a negative influence of the psychological manipulation mobilized through cultural stereotypes; in addition, they thought they had been somewhat resistant to its influence. Respondents were able to identify the specific cases of harmful influence which is demonstrated by the percentage shown in the table. As seen from the table, a large part of the study participants had experienced the influence of gaslighting mobilized through cultural stereotypes, which proves that the Georgian youth is familiar with this kind of manipulation and that the level of their awareness is sufficiently high. Although the majority of respondents believed that the psychological manipulation experienced by them was not intentional, part of respondents was not quite sure about its unintentional character, which points to the fact that respondents were impartial in their judgment and critically approached their personal experience.

4.2. The semantic change of meaning in the stigma-gaslighting context

4.2.1. *Semantics reflecting gender stereotypes*

The analysis of empirical data revealed a large amount of gender related semantic material in the context of gaslighting mobilized through cultural stereotypes. Linguistically loaded material obtained from the respondents contained quite a few expressions denoting expectations related to gender roles. The respondents noted that the language loaded with the lexical units reflecting gender stereotypes had a negative effect on their self-confidence and self-esteem, which points to the role of semantics in the formation of social dynamics and personal perceptions.

To be more precise, when gaslighting is mobilized through cultural stereotypes and stigmatization, the speaker uses the utterances which clearly refer to a man's and a woman's ability to cope with life difficulties and the expectations determined by the gender stereotypes related to psycho-emotional responses. This is proved by the abundance of expressions such as: *'You are a man, so you should be stronger'*, *'You are a girl, so you should be more resilient'*, *'You should better endure difficulties'*. The above examples show that in the Georgian society the social meanings related to both genders imply 'resilience' and/or 'endurance', but if the above terms are used in the situational context when the person does not accept the gender-related expectations established in the society or acts against them, they acquire a different affective meaning (e.g. 'weak') and are linked to the corresponding associations.

The semantic units reflecting gender stereotypes are also abundant in the context of career prospects and future vocational choice. These semantic units are mostly used in relation to women (e.g., *'Are not your ambitions too high for a girl?' 'It is not a woman's job.'*) Similar examples show that in the Georgian context gender-related social meanings associated with women are 'modest', and 'domestic'. In terms of professional development, the social meanings related to women are 'modest/narrow-minded', whereas a healthy ambition and the willingness to develop oneself have a negative affective connotation (e.g., 'queer', 'crazy', 'unfeminine').

4.2.2. *Semantics reflecting 'difference'*

Another, no less important finding, is the abundance of the lexical units referring to the difference of the person. This tendency is closely linked with the connotation of 'difference', 'outcast', or the notion of 'othering'.

Othering is the attribution of negative characteristics to someone by an individual or a group which emphasizes their exclusion and positions them as 'different', as 'others'¹. According to the results of the empirical analysis, the word 'betrayal' is the best example of othering as described above. This word has been used in relation to respondents when they did not agree with the widely shared opinions about political or religious issues. Its

¹ Rohleder, P. (2014). Othering. In Teo, T. (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* (pp. 1306 – 1308). New York: Springer.

destructive effect on human psyche (stigma-gaslighting effect) as well as its social and affective meaning are self-explanatory.

Here are more examples of expressions with similar meaning: 'This is the local rule', 'People are like this here', 'You can't go against traditions', 'This is Georgia'. The meaning of the listed phrases can be generalized as a conformist attitude to cultural norms and social stereotypes. Each lexical unit creates a specific expectation and emphasizes a certain behavioral standard. In these phrases geographical location is used as an argument for acting in accordance with the established standards, even when this way of thinking or behavioral model are unacceptable for the person.

Similar expressions used in relation to individuals with a different way of thinking which emphasize the inviolability of cultural norms and the established social stereotypes are used as an instrument for the devaluation of the person's ideas and feelings. As a result, the person might doubt oneself, doubt correctness of personal ideas and give up or accept undesirable opinions she/he does not agree with in order not to feel excluded and isolated, which, in its turn, has a negative effect on critical thinking. The latter is the worst result the gaslighting effect may have. In addition, the use of the vocabulary associated with 'difference' in the context of gaslighting could be especially harmful for minority representatives, because it strengthens and intensifies the negative stereotypes held in relation to such groups.

5. Conclusion

The present article concerns gaslighting mobilized through the stereotypes and stigmatization characteristic of Georgian reality. It also discusses the linguistic means (in particular, lexical semantics) specifically used for its realization. The study shows that such discourse is abundant with gender-related vocabulary which strengthens social stereotypes even further and reinforces the stigmatization of individuals and groups. In addition, the semantics associated with 'othering' is quite prominent, which makes the effect of psychological manipulation even more harmful because it evokes the feeling of exclusion when the person opposes the established stereotypes with a word or action.

The analysis of empirical material shows some changes in the meaning of lexical units used in the context of gaslighting that is related to cultural stereotypes. In particular, a kind of semantic transformation is observed during which the social meaning of lexical units is transformed into affective meaning that intensifies their negative connotation. It is important to underline this kind of semantic change because affective change is a dimension of emotive language which makes the psychological effect of gaslighting even more destructive. The abovesaid emphasizes the significance of linguistic semantics in the formation of the individual's personal perceptual systems, as well as its importance in the formation of social dynamics. All this proves that we need to be more careful and empathic when using linguistic resources.

The study demonstrates that most respondents were familiar with this kind of psychological manipulation, could identify it in the relevant context and despite a negative

personal experience were less susceptible to stigma-gaslighting influence. This indicates that the Georgian youth is aware of gaslighting as a phenomenon and possesses some knowledge about it.

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