

MULTICULTURALISM AND MULTILINGUALISM IN THE GAGAUZ REGION

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Abstract

UTA Gagauzia is a region of the Republic of Moldova that has acquired autonomy; therefore, the Gagauz population want to keep their Gagauz language alive. In everyday communication contexts, Gagauzians prefer the Russian language. They admit, more and more frequently, that they don't speak the Romanian language very well or very often, although it is a state language. Gagauzia is thus defined by multiculturalism and multilingualism, considering the multitude of ethnicities, confessions and languages that interact daily in this small but complex region on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. In the contemporary context, the people of the region show tolerance and mutual acceptance of the Other, a different Other due to linguistic, cultural, and sometimes, why not, confessional peculiarities. The present study aims to capture some aspects of interculturality and multilingualism in education since the educational contexts cultivate and exploit the elements of linguistic and cultural interference.

Keywords: denomination, education, ethnicity, interaction, interference;

1. INTRODUCTION. Gagauz and identity. Contemporary perspectives

1.1 Languages of the Gagauz community

Gagauzia is defined by a heterogeneous melange from the point of view of cultures, but also from the perspective of traditions and customs that appear in the area both from the native population and from the other populations that remained, sporadically, in this area. In UTA Gagauzia, today, there are more than 100,000 people of Turkish origin, with the Orthodox religion, paradoxically, but who easily speak Russian, which they prefer, as stated

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above. The majority of Gagauz people are polyglots. They speak Russian, use Gagauz in situational communication, and employ the Romanian language in official situations, with enough difficulties in both oral and written expression. In the contemporary context, the young Gagauzians acutely feel the need for education in Romanian, especially for their children, as they appreciate that the languages spoken in the area are roughly known, without any of them being known very well. Also, the Gagauz people are keepers of local traditions, they respect the authentic, but they are also open to the new, to diversity, especially since they constantly interact with people of other nationalities and are willing to accept everyone's uniqueness. In the neighbouring regions of the autonomous region, there are large communities of Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Russians. Consequently, the Gagauzians interact both with the native population, the Moldovans, and with the other nationalities in the area.

As for the Gagauz language, it is frequently used in its spoken version, the written Gagauz language is not used, the Gagauz preferring to write in Russian. Gagauz is a Turkic language, in writing, the Cyrillic alphabet was initially used to later switch to the Latin alphabet. Gagauz and the Turkish language are roughly similar, Gagauz has acquired, with the passing of time, a unique profile through the multiple influences from the languages of the peoples with whom the Gagauz population borders. Thus, numerous borrowings are from Bulgarian and Russian, but also from Romanian and Ukrainian or from Old Turkish.

The level of mastery and use of the Romanian language among young people from Gagauzia is precarious. Among the main causes presented by specialized studies would be teaching methods insufficiently adapted to allolingual schools, and the absence of an environment conducive to a linguistic immersion of some native Romanian speakers, which could fix an authentic Romanian language. Insufficient knowledge of the state language prevents young Gagauz people from integrating easily into the desired social environment, so it can be found that discriminatory feelings may arise or the perception that such a language barrier could lead to certain limitations regarding insertion on the labour market or the level of the extended community.

Thus, the Gagauz consider that they have three official languages, namely: Gagauz, Russian and Romanian. The informal environment is often the one in

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which the Gagauz language is used, especially since it is preserved in an oral form, therefore with strong colloquial accents, while the relationship with authorities, businesses, organizations and institutions is done in Russian and Romanian.

The multilingual and multicultural contexts that characterize this multi-ethnic space are conducive to the peaceful coexistence of all citizens, offering beyond the existing limits through language barriers, which can be overcome through understanding, and many advantages to all speakers, thus contributing to the shaping of lexical baggage, but also the crystallization of a tolerant and diversified cultural horizon.

1.2 Gagauz culture and religion

Gagauz culture is defined by distinctive local elements, which give it specificity, keeping in the foreground and constantly affirming, the original nucleus crystallized through the set of Turkish traditional, folkloric elements, to which strong Slavic and Balkan influences are added. The customs of the Gagauz reflect pre-existing human prototypes, being defined by the interactions between people, giving the Gagauz an identity profile that makes them unique in the region. Many traditions are similar to the Balkan ones, with the mention that the Gagauz cultural area is strongly influenced by the Orthodox Church, taking over a considerable number of pre-Christian rites. 19th-century specialists noted the preservation of an obvious pagan layer. Thus, in time, a syncretism of pagan and Christian elements occurred, and this aspect was defining for the existence of several Christian nations. The holidays and rituals of the nations were characterized by a constant metamorphosis, and this also happened to the Gagauz. Among the preserved traditions, those related to birth and death are the ones that have been preserved over time very well.

Gagauz clothing - in terms of Gagauz women's clothing, jewellery has occupied a special place since ancient times. These accessorized ladies' corsets, are designed like coins or beads. Gold, copper, silver, pearls, or even glass can be mentioned among the materials used for crafting jewels. Jewellery can be worn every day but becomes more obvious on holidays. From the perspective of male clothing, the base was either wide black trousers or tight ones, and the shirt was often attached to them. Some defining accessories for men were sheepskin hats or caps.

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Gagauz gastronomy – Gagauz cuisine has a number of similarities with those of other Balkan peoples. The diversity of the types of food, but also the predilection for large and abundant meals is a defining characteristic of the Gagauz people. They show a passion for viticulture, raise sheep and poultry, are prominent farmers, and their culinary recipes are distinguished by the originality of various tastes. Bread, traditional pies, tasty sauces, and steaks are just some of the dishes cooked over time. The salty cheese pie, *kyyrma*, is a dish adored by the Gagauz population, often cooked on weekends or holidays.

The Gagauz religion is Orthodox, they observe the Orthodox Church holidays. Attempts to preserve the identity were also made in this sphere, the Bible being translated at the beginning of the 20th century into the Gagauz language, using the Cyrillic alphabet, so that the Gospels were then published in the Gagauz language.

Gagauz people are very religious and never renounce their faith. Religious feeling is transmitted within the family and at the level of the restricted community, from generation to generation. They show trust in the Church, and the Gagauz people are special precisely for affirming the Orthodox religion, although they are linguistically defined by a Turkic language. Gagauz people are pacifists and easily establish natural interactions with other nations, they are open, welcoming, and this aspect has contributed to the survival of this small nation, over the years, in this geopolitical and cultural context.

The emblematic figure for the Gagauz religion is Mihail Ceachir, the one who was born into an authentic family and who affirmed Orthodox Christianity as the quintessence of all the defining aspects of the Gagauz, one of the clear landmarks of the Gagauz identity. He claimed a separate identity for the Gagauz, but did not come into conflict with the authorities, remaining in history as a militant for the cultural and religious specificity of this population.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present work aims, in addition to a review of some defining elements for the identity profile of the UTA Gagauzia region, a case study that captures some of the peculiarities of the academic community in the Gagauz area. The Gagauz, along with their other compatriots, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Ukrainians, attend undergraduate and post-graduate studies at home, in the Republic of Moldova. They choose to study in Romanian in order to deepen

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the knowledge acquired over time, to identify a linguistic environment in which to practice a literary Romanian language, to develop oral and written expression skills, to interact in a formal environment with other people, whether native speakers or non-native speakers like them.

The first questionnaire applied to the target group made up of 37 students from the master's program Romanian language, openness and cultural identity had 5 items aimed at their learning needs.

Questionnaire I

1. Mention the main reason why you want to improve your knowledge of the Romanian language.
.....
2. Specify 5 terms from the Gagauz language that you consider to define this idiom.
.....
3. Write 5 defining words for the Romanian language.
.....
4. Do you know an international language? If yes, please state that language.
.....
5. What is the defining element for a people?
.....

Also, the same target group receives a second questionnaire aimed at items that capture ways in which good knowledge of the state language and the improvement of all known languages contribute to increasing the quality of life of people in a small community such as Gagauz.

Questionnaire II

1. State your ethnicity/nationality:
.....
2. What do you mean by quality of life? Give an equivalent phrase, an approximate synonym.
.....

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3. Which part of your life is improved by participating in Romanian language courses?

.....

4. What do you understand by intercultural communication?

.....

5. Name two ways to improve intercultural communication.

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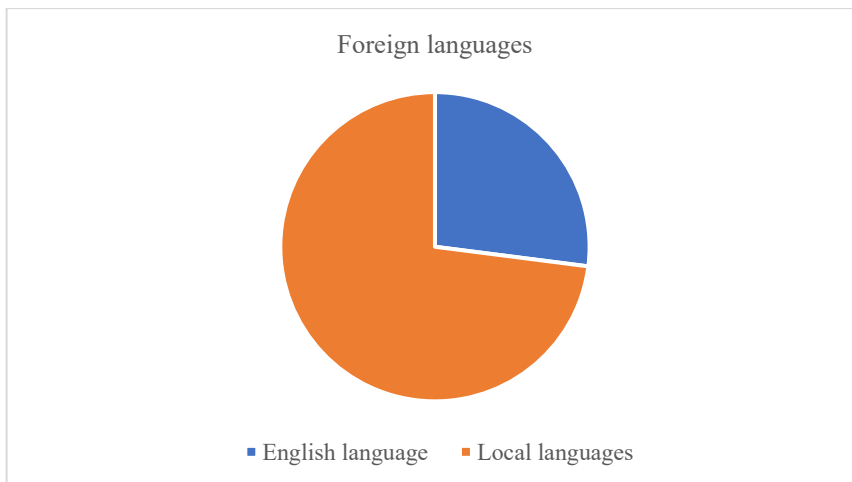
The 37 master's students answered the two questionnaires, anonymously, and the answers are the results of the present research. Intercultural communication is a defining element for multi-ethnic environments, it develops and is practiced, both in formal environments, at school, in educational institutions, as well as in non-formal or even informal environments.

Intercultural communication competence, specialists claim, can be inherited, but current studies show that it is learned having three dimensions, namely: the cognitive one, related to information, the affective one, related to feelings, emotions, motivation, and the behavioural one. (1) Like any broad notion, intercultural communication competence has received multiple definitions and interpretations over time. Intercultural competence can develop during intercultural exchanges, but, above all, it manifests itself in communities where there are people of different ethnicities and who speak distinct idioms: " ... an intercultural situation can be defined as any occasion of interaction between interlocutors of different cultural origins." (2) This is contextualized, it is situational, particular, different from one group to another or from one community to another. Intercultural communication competence also covers a series of general elements, among which can be mentioned: awareness of diversity, cultural specificity, identification of cultural stereotypes, acceptance of the other, tolerance, altruism, etc. Multiethnic communities and multicultural are defined by diversity, openness, and acceptance when language barriers are optimally overcome through education.

3. RESULTS

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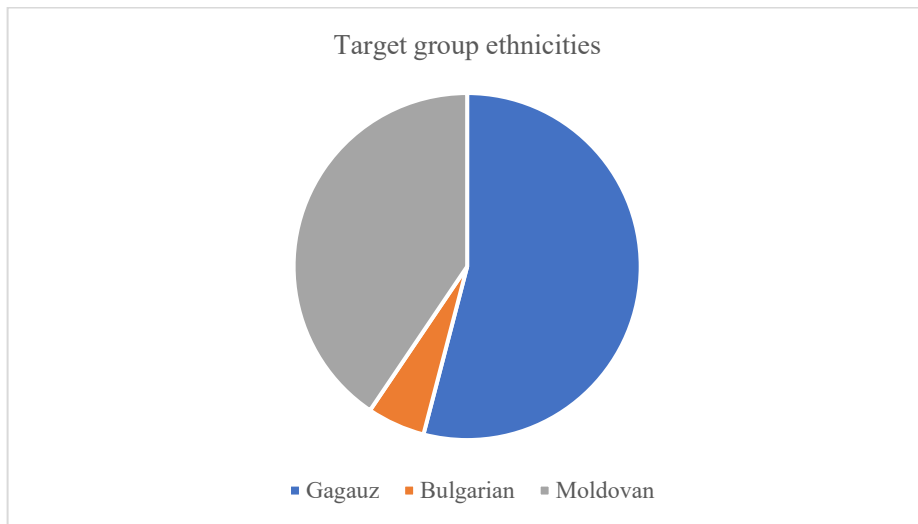
The first questionnaire reflects the fact that the students want to expand their competencies in the Romanian language to improve their university studies but also to optimize the quality of life in the multilingual community in which they live. The defining terms for Gagauz are those from the family sphere and for the Romanian language those from the sphere of education, of the profession. This aspect highlights the fact that the Gagauz language is closely related to the family environment, to history, to the affective structure of each individual, and the Romanian language is related to the subsequent evolution of the individual in society, and it is closely related to education.



The answers were similar for all 37 students, highlighting that both the Gagauzians and the other respondents noticed similar aspects in the behaviour of their compatriots. Only 10 of them know English as a language of international circulation, the rest confess that they know approximately the languages spoken in the region. From the interpretation of the first applied questionnaire, the 37 master's students are divided by ethnicity as follows: 20 are Gagauz, 2 are Bulgarian, 15 are Moldovan, and for them the quality of life means being able to develop optimally professionally, to be fulfilled on a personal level, and all this are possible to the extent that there is a common language among all members of the community, in a broad sense, among all members of the country, region, locality in which they live, but also at the micro level, respectively at the educational level, at the course group. They consider it important to understand each other, to accept each other, and these

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aspects are essential only if they know the linguistic, cultural and confessional peculiarities of those they interact with in order to be able to tolerate each other.



The Romanian language is essential for optimal communication at work for many of them, with the authorities, with the neighbours, but also in the educational environment. Knowledge of the Romanian language, they believe, is also relevant for future generations living in a different society that is based on other values and principles.

Intercultural communication is perceived as a set of elements that define both small groups such as those who simultaneously study the same courses, but also larger groups, for example, the local community of the city in which they live or that of the UTA Gagauzia region.

Two of the most effective methods of improving intercultural communication competence in the narrow sense of the academic environment would be related to tasks given in teams, in groups: projects, portfolios, and digital collaborative learning products, for those who have such competencies and it is easy for them to work on the computer/laptop. Likewise, festivals organized at the level of communities that bring together distinct cultural elements are also effective, because in this way the specificity of each ethnicity is observed, as well as the points of cultural and linguistic contamination.

4. CONCLUSIONS

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The present study highlights that both the small academic communities and the largest ones in the region are defined by diversity, but this implies acceptance, people keep their cultural and linguistic identity, but show openness to a permanent learning of the languages with which come into contact frequently. The multi-ethnic and multicultural areas are also characterized by a special specificity of each community, but also by the wide sphere of cultural intersection and contamination, both linguistically and through traditions, customs, and daily behaviour.

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(2) Ibidem, p. 53;