'Whored-out to the KGB': Obscenities in Georgian and other languages of the Caucasus

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This paper will explore how obscene constructions function across languages: what are obscenities, and what is their connection to anthropological taboos? It will argue that obscenities have three key characteristics: nonliteral taboo referents; lexical specificity; and grammatical idiomaticity. It will also show that these same traits found in the obscene language of Western languages can also be found in less-commonly studied languages of the Caucasus.

Perhaps the most famous 20th century statement on the definition of obscenity comes from none other than the Supreme Court of the United States. In the 1964 court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, court justice Potter Stewart famously wrote defending the release of a film that the State of Ohio wished to ban for obscenity:

> "I shall not today attempt further to define [obscenity]… and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it.*" (Stewart 1964)

Such a statement from the highest court in the land reveals something ineffable about the idea of obscenity that even intellectuals and legal professionals have difficulty putting their finger on. Why is it that it is so hard to put into words the visceral feelings we sense when an obscenity is uttered? Why do different people in the same society come to different conclusions about what is obscene and what is permissible speech? Even more so, why does obscene language differ from one society to another? This paper will seek to provide some linguistic preconditions to such a debate. Following Ljung (2011), I will argue that obscene speech differs from nonobscene speech not in any categorical way, but rather belongs to an entire pragmatic class of emotive speech triggered by anthropological taboos, among which obscene speech constitutes only one part of a broad spectrum of behavior. But obscenities, by virtue of being speech, also bear formal properties of encoding distinct from other kinds of taboo-related cultural phenomena. I will further show that the properties that distinguish obscene from

permissible speech in Western languages are also found in less familiar languages of the world, including the languages of the Caucasus, to which we will later turn.

§1   Taboos and their Linguistic Encoding

First, what is a taboo? Taboos are at base a perceived threat to the social order, along with codes of conduct in response to that threat. As Allan and Burridge put it, '[*t*]*aboo* refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts' (Allan and Burridge 2006: 11). Thus aspects of the natural world such as natural disasters or dangerous animals or human conflict are not automatically taboo; taboos also require an individual or community response to such a threat, whether by requiring actions to carry out or actions to avoid. More often, taboos come from the norms of (mis)behavior within a given community defining how individuals within that community may or may not relate to one another. While almost any kind of behavior may be proscribed as taboo, most taboos fall within a small number of generalized perceived threats:

Sex and gender	Family relations
Death	Animals (clean vs. unclean)
Disease	Spirits of the Ancestors
Bodies of humans or animals	Religion or ideology
Bodily effluvia	Religious/ritual Objects
Food and its preparation	Domiciles of humans, animals or spirits

Table 1. Generalized categories of taboos

Often, such categories of taboo overlap. Thus amongst Khevsur highlanders of the Caucasus mountains in the Republic of Georgia, some traditional practices involving blood sacrifices to local divinities separate out discrete spaces for different participants in the ritual: only the *khevisberi* (or shaman shrine priest) may enter the inner-most sanctum of the shrine, and other participating men and woman must attend in separate spaces around the shrine, with men allowed nearer the shrine while females must remain in designated spaces further away. Menstruating or recently pregnant women on the other hand form a distinct category and must remain even further away from the shrine (Charachidze 2001, Tuite 1998). In another case from a different Pshav highland community, before a sacred horse race can take place, men (and only men) must drink unfiltered beer from a vessel called a *saq'eino* filled with two liters of beer;

Pshav highlander man drinking sacred beer from a *saq'eino*-**vessel before a sacred horse race, Iremtkalo, Georgia, July 2015. Photo T. R. Wier**

one is supposed to drink all two liters in one go without touching the vessel ('It is technically forbidden to be sober', I was told on one such trip). Taboos are thus not merely lists of specific rules, but rather webs of practice and behavior, in which particular taboos interact with other kinds of taboos mediated through a structured system.

All known human societies practice taboo proscription of one kind or another, and because all human societies also communicate via spoken language, taboos have consequently become woven into the fabric of the many various forms of speech. Linguistic taboos though differ from other kinds of taboos in that merely uttering a taboo word (whether an obscenity, the name of one's mother-in-law, the name of a deceased person or some other taboo notion) threatens to reify the taboo act or status, to bring it into lived reality indirectly. Linguistic taboos thus stand as a kind of separate mirror semiotic world in which a taboo notion is formally distinct from the way in which it is encoded through language.

This has some rather important consequences for the way in which linguistic taboos function. Because linguistic signs are (famously) arbitrary, the way in which taboo notions can be attached to particular linguistic signs is likewise contingent on the way speakers structure their usage. One consequence is that openly expressing a taboo may lead not to an obscenity or a dysphemism, but rather to a euphemism or neutral expression that obliquely expresses it, since these too point semiotically to the existence of the language-external taboo. These can be structured into a kind of linguistic emotive cline, in which some lexical items or constructions express the taboo in permissible ways (euphemisms and neutralisms) while others express the taboo in increasingly impermissible ways (*Table 2*). The fact that these are indeed pragmatically structured is illustrated by the fact that one cannot mix different categories along the cline without potentially violating the taboo. In English, one cannot for example say #'I'm going to the powder room to take a shit' without impermissibly violating the taboo, since despite the fact that *powder room* is a euphemism, it is embedded in a larger construction one of whose parts still violates the taboo.

←Euphemism	Neutralism	Dysphemism	Obscenity →
powder room, restroom, the facilities	lavatory, toilet, WC	the loo, the can, the john, the bog, etc.	the shitter, the crapper, shithouse
excrement, defecation, f(a)eces, waste, No. 2	dung, stool, manure, poop, ordure	filth, crap, turd	shit, shite
copulate, fornicate, sleep with, know	have sex, make love	hump, shag, get it on, do	fuck, screw, bang, bonk, motherfucker
vagina	vagina	pussy, snatch, coochie	cunt, twat

Table 2. The emotive cline reflecting taboo language

Across languages, speakers often have other ways of avoiding the linguistic taboo. One common method in situations of language contact is to borrow a word from a contact language which, in itself, refers to the same taboo act or thing, but which because it is expressed in a separate code becomes occluded in the matrix language for purposes of the taboo. In the history of English, this has happened many times to refer to places of defecation: Middle English *privy* was replaced by French *gardez l'eau* 'watch out for the water', which in Scottish dialects became (after the Great Vowel Shift) *gardyloo* and then clipped to just *loo*; from there it was further replaced by French *toilet*, another loanword. Another avoidance strategy is to coin new words, sometimes by deformation of existing words: *feck(ing)* or *freak(ing)* instead of *fuck(ing)*; *heck* from *hell*; *gosh* from *God*; and so on. Sometimes speakers also implement metaphors such as *men's room*, *take a dump* or *beat the meat* which may or may not be strictly euphemistic, but which nonetheless avoid directly expressing the taboo. Lastly, speakers very frequently do just that: they flout the taboo with the word that most directly expresses it, as in *fuck, shit, damn, cock, whore*. These we call obscenities.

Another consequence of the emotive cline is that it acts as a catalyst for language change in one direction along it or the other, either amelioration or pejoration. This can create a kind of well-known diachronic 'euphemism treadmill' of increasingly more or less obscene speech (Taylor 1974):

12th c	16th c	18th c	19th c	20th c
privy	*bog house, house of office, loo*	*water closet, toilet*	*lavatory*	*restroom*

Table 3. English terms for lavatories across the centuries

Because taboos are often the locus of language change in this way, historical linguists sometimes must take them into account in reconstructing earlier stages of languages. Thus the original Indo-European root for 'bear',*h_2ŕ̥tḱos, regularly became *ursus* in Latin, *arktos* in Greek and *ḫartakkas* in Hittite, while the Germanic and Slavic

language families lost this root: they have *berô* 'the brown one' and *medv-ĕdь* 'honey-eater' respectively. This kind of extreme semantic shift would normally not be acceptable methodologically to linguists except for the fact that it is licensed by a specific known taboo surrounding cultic and predatory animals in ancient Indo-European society.

Like most formal features of human cultures, specific cultural taboos can come to die out over time, and when they do this can have a knock-on effect in the way language is used to express them. Thus changing attitudes about social class and social hierarchies in the 19ᵗʰ and 20ᵗʰ centuries lead to the erosion of a taboo directly referring to subordinates: before this time, words like *cad*, *boor*, *rake*, or *cur* were deemed extremely obscene, while today they seem comical or banal because the underlying taboo has largely disappeared. Given enough corpus data we can even begin to pinpoint when linguistic taboos appear or disappear (at least in written form). The prescription against speaking (or at least writing) about bodily effluvia became dominant in the English-speaking world sometime in the mid-18ᵗʰ century and since the late 20ᵗʰ century has been slowly disappearing, based on shifts in their usage that we observe at these times:
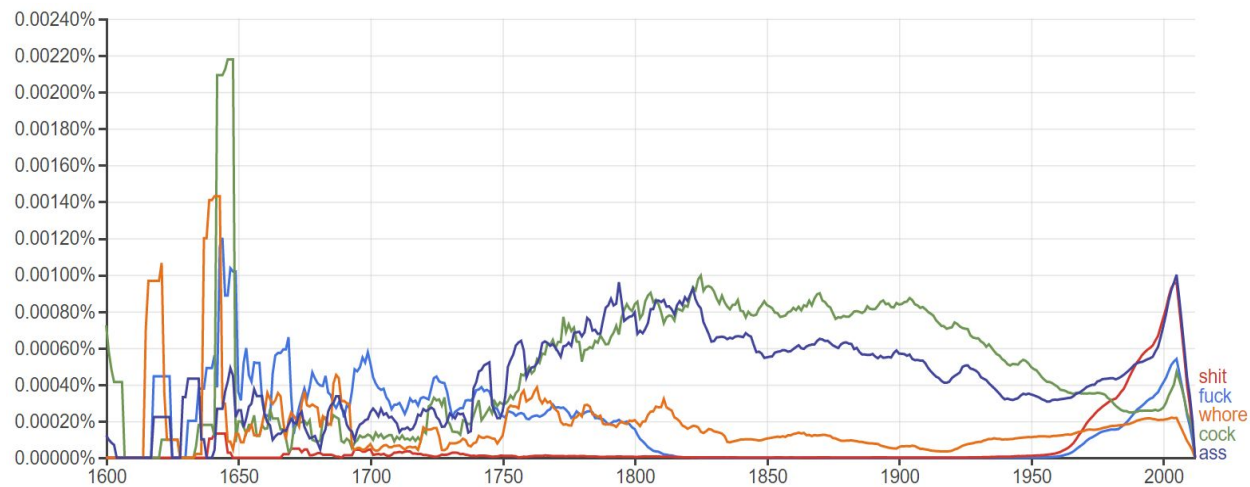

Table 4. Usage of English obscenities in print across time, 1600-2020

One key feature we see in obscenities is their structural and constructional dependence. Obscenities are not solely defined by their pragmatic use, but also by their lexical and grammatical properties. The forms on the left side of Table 5 are grammatical, while those on the right are ungrammatical (Ljung 2011):

Grammatical / Idiomatic	Ungrammatical / Unidiomatic
Execration: *Fuck you! Screw you!*	**Bonk you! *Shag you!*
Expletive infixation: *Abso-fucking-lutely!*	*?*Abso-shagging-lutely!*
Expletive intensifier: *What a fucking idiot!*	**What a screwing idiot!*
Expletive focus construction: *What the fuck do you mean?*	*?? What the copulation do you mean?* *?? What the bang do you mean?*

Table 5. Grammatical dependence of obscene language (Ljung 2011: 7; 12)

That is, even though the verb *fuck* has roughly semantically equivalent obscene synonyms in the form of *bonk*, *shag*, *screw*, etc., its functioning in an execratory construction is exclusive to that lexical item; the execration cannot be simply interchanged with other obscenities into the same slot in the construction.

This kind of lexical specificity becomes even more obvious when we widen our scope beyond English to other societies whose obscenities arose because of different taboos entirely. Although they generally fall into the same familiar overall categories discussed in Table 1, their specific translation into English (or even into other synonyms of their own language) rarely trigger the same kind of obscene reaction that standard obscenities in English do. This is possible also in part because obscenities refer not to *literal* referents, but to idiomatic *metaphorical* ones: if you call someone a prick or a bitch, you are not referring literally to a penis or to a female dog, but to a set of symbolic associations people in a community have with items in the world.

Language	Obscenity	Literal Translation
Hindi	*Khutika bacha*	'son of a dog!' (cf. English 'son of a bitch')
Icelandic	*Djöfullis anskoti*	'Devil's devils'
Italian	*Porca Madonna, Porco Dio*	'pig of a madonna', 'pig God'
Spanish	*Me cago en Dios*	'I crap on God!'
Greek	*Hyesse!*	'Disbelief'
Danish	*Pokkers!*	'Pox!'
German	*Drecksau, Aasgeier, Du Fickfehler*	'crap pig', 'vulture', 'you fuck-mistake'

Table 6. Crosslinguistic variety of obscenities and their English translations (Ljung 2011: 74)

Quebecois *Sacre*	Literal English Translation
câlice	'chalice' (sacramental wine cup)
ciboire	'ciborium' (a cup for holding sacramental bread)
criss	'Christ'
maudit [moːdʒi]	'damned'
esti[əstsi]	'the host' (the sacramental bread)
tabarnak	'tabernacle' (i.e. the locked-box where the Eucharist is stored; this is the strongest *sacre*)

Table 7. Quebecois French *sacres*

In some cases, the taboos behind the obscenity are so culturally specific that they resist any close translation entirely. A famous case comes from Quebecois French, whose system of *sacres* (curses) stems entirely from the Roman Catholic mass and its various accoutrements and ritual objects (*Table 7*). In some cases, these can be concatenated into long strings of obscenities used to express extreme emotion, as in *Crisse de câlice de tabarnak d'esti de sacrament de trou viarge,* literally 'Christ of the chalice of the tabernacle of the host of the sacrament of the Virgin's pussy' (Freed and Kalina 1983).

Example of Quebecois French *sacre*: *pas de publicitétabarnak,* literally 'No fucking admail'.

So, to summarize, when we examine how obscenities function across languages, they have three main properties that distinguish them from nonlinguistic taboos and other forms of language (cf also Ljung 2011: 4): (1) pragmatically and semantically, they have nonliteral taboo referents; (2) lexically, each obscenity manifests a distinct construction, and is not automatically interchangeable with other obscenities: 'fuck' and 'bonk' are not functionally equivalent as obscene swear words just because their base verbs are synonymous; and (3) grammatically, each obscene construction has independent properties not reducible to others, e.g. 'fuck' in 'fuck you' and 'abso-fucking-lutely' have different grammatical distributions.

§2   Obscenities in Caucasian Languages

Almost all the literature on obscenities examines data from familiar western (or at least very populous) languages. Partly this is due to the nature of obscenities themselves: by virtue of being taboo, native speakers are often hesitant to discuss them[1]. But it also reflects the nature of language documentation efforts, since community-based language documentation often must work under constraints negotiated by the community. Thus dictionaries, grammars and language corpora often conscientiously avoid or are even purged of taboo topics and language. Notably, even in western languages, dictionaries historically provided entries like *membrum virile* in Latin until well into the 20th century (Coker 2019: 101), and often primary texts would remain untranslated into vernacular languages because of their obscene content, as famously was the case of the Roman poet Catullus's *Carmen 16*, which begins: *Pēdīcābo ego vōs et irrumābō* 'I will sodomize and face-fuck you'. Sometimes, linguists and language-learners also only learn about obscene words and constructions by accident. For example, while studying Chechen, I was admonished to be very careful about the pronunciation of бутт *butt* 'month, moon' because of its near homophony with the obscene word буд *bud* 'pussy, vagina'. So research on obscenities is not always straight-forward.

In an attempt to remedy this, I examined dictionaries and corpora and elicited forms from speakers of half a dozen languages of the Caucasus, a region famed at once for its linguistic diversity but also its typological distinctiveness. The Caucasus is home to approximately 80 living or recently extinct languages (see Wier forthcoming; Map 1) belonging to six different language phyla, three of which are considered so-called 'autochthonous' families, found only there: Abkhaz-Adyghean, Kartvelian and Nakh-Daghestanian. In addition to these three are three other larger families: Indo-European, Turkic, and Semitic. Although no regional specialist has ever convincingly argued that any of these six phyla are phylogenetically related to each other, they undoubtedly share many broad features as a result of millennia of language contact and in other ways stand out from neighboring languages[2]. For example, unlike most surrounding languages of Eurasia, Caucasian languages often feature typologically rare(r) voicing and phonation contrasts, such as glottalization or pharyngealization, non-nominative alignments of case assignment and agreement, unusually large numbers of categories (e.g. Batsbi's eight gender classes, or the potentially dozens of distinct cases in Tabasaran or Tsez), unusual morphological phenomena such as endoclitics in Udi or morphological blocking in Georgian, and many other features not otherwise found in

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[1] One consultant for this paper willingly provided examples of obscenities in his language only if he remained anonymous.

[2]See Tuite 1999, Wier in press, for extended discussions.

Language Map of the Caucasus

Northeast Caucasian
Agul, Akhvakh, Andi, Archi, Avar, Bagvalal, Bezhta, Botlikh, Budukh, Chamalal, Dargwa, Dido, Ghodoberi, Hinukh, Hunzib, Karata, Khinalugh, Khvarshi, Kryz, Lak, Lezgin, Rutul, Tabassaran, Tindi, Tsakhur, Udis

Indo-European
Armenian, Judeo-Tat, Kurdish, Ossetian, Russian, Talysh, Tat

Nakh
Batsbi, Chechen, Ingush

Semitic
Assyrian

Northwest Caucasian
Abaza, Abkhaz, Adyghe, Cherkess, Kabardin

Turkic
Azeri, Balkar, Karachai, Kumyk, Nogai, Tatar, Turkmen, Urum

South Caucasian
Georgian, Mingrelian, Svan

Map compiled from the following sources:
"La Composition Ethnique Du Caucase Au Début Du XXle Siècle" in Radvanyi, Jean and Nicolas Beroutchachvili, 2009. *Atlas Géopolitique Du Caucase.* 2009, Paris: Éditions Autrement.
"Ethnolinguistic Groups in the Caucasus Region," US Central Intelligence Agency, 1995, accessed online: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/georgia_republic.html
"Languages of Russian Federation," in Lewis, M. Paul (ed.), 2009. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World,* Sixteenth edition. Dallas, Tex.: SIL International. Online version: http://www.ethnologue.com/.
"A Fortress of Languages: The Caucasus," National Geographic Society, Cartographic Division. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1996.
Base data provided by Natural Earth, http://www.naturalearthdata.com.
Terrain data derived from the ASTER Global Digital Elevation Model, version 2.
Albers Equal-Area Conic Projection

Map Editor: Asya Pereltsvaig
Cartography: Jake Coolidge
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Map of Caucasian languages.

Europe of the Middle East. These many unusual typological features have some rather profound effects on what a possible obscenity in a Caucasian language is because, as noted above, speakers express themselves through the medium of the language they already speak. Thus the categories of such languages act as a kind of constraint.

2.1 Semantic domains of Caucasian obscenities

What is clear from this research is that Caucasian languages broadly do share many of the same families of linguistic taboos found in Western languages. So for example genitalia, 'private' body parts and sexuality form an important part of the obscene lexicon in a range of languages across different families: Georgian ყლე *q'le*, Armenian կլիր *klir*, Azerbaijani *sik*, Chechen ӆур *lur* or т1ен *t'ien*, Udi *k'ol*, all literally meaning 'penis'. As in Western languages, these obscenities need not and in fact usually do not refer to their literal referents; more commonly they are simply terms of abuse or approbation. So in Georgian to refer to a man as a ყლე *q'le* is an expression of disrespect and abuse toward his entire person, and not merely a reference to his anatomy. The proof of this is that in some cases obscene forms become uninterpretable *except* in their broader metaphorical sense: Georgian ყლექალა *q'lekala* lit. 'dick-woman' usually refers

	penis	*buttocks*	*excrement*	*prostitute*	*breasts*	*vagina*	*place of perdition*
Georgian	ყლე q̇le	ტრაკი ṭraḳi	მძღნერი mʒğneri, ქააქი kaaḳi	ბოზი bozi	ზუზუ zuzu	მუტელი muṭeli	ჯანდაბა jandaba
Armenian	կլիր klir	որ vor	քաք kak	բոզ boz	ծիծ cic	պուց puc	ջհանդամ jhandam
Azeri	sik	göt	pox	qəhbə	məmə	am	cəhənnəm
Chechen	лур lur, тӀен tʼien	кӀег ḱeg	бид bid	бӀиж bˤiž	накха naqa	буд bud	жоьжахати žöžaxati
Udi	ḱol	šan	ḱaḱala	q̇ähbä	c'ic'iḱ	ḱuť	jähnäm, gehena

Table 8. Selected nominal obscenities in Caucasian languages

	copulate	*ejaculate*	*defecate*	*urinate*	*masturbate*	*kiss (heavy)*
Georgian	ტყვნა ṭq̇vna, შეცემა šecema, გათხრა gatxra	გათავება gataveba	მოჯმა mojma, გაჯმა gajma	ფსმა psma	წმრევა n̄ʒreva	ჩაზასა čazasa, მიზასა mizasa, მოჯიგრა mojigra
Armenian	կունել kunel	թափեմ tapem	քաքել kakel	շռել šřel	ժաժ տալ žaž tal	?
Azeri	sikmək	gəlmək	sıçmaq	işəmək	oynamaq	?
Chechen	тӀен/буд дола tʼien/bud dola (male) тӀен хахка tʼien xaxka (female)	в-асвала v-aslala	?	чиш тела čiš tela	сух тоха sux toxa	?

Table 9. Selected verbal obscenities in Caucasian languages

to a woman who speaks abusively or profanely in an exceptionally provocative way, and makes no particular suggestion about her gender identity or biological traits. And in fact, the obscene way to refer to a despicable obscenity or act is ყლეობა *q'leoba* 'a dicking'. Many of these obscenities in fact form entire families of abusive or offensive language. Thus in Georgian we find the forms like the following (Friedman 1988):

(1) a. ძაღლიშვილი *dzağlišvili* 'son of a dog', ვირიშვილი *virišvili* 'son of an ass', მშობელძაღლი *mšobelʒağli* 'parent-dog', *mamaʒağli 'father-dog'*, ღორიშვილი *ğorišvili 'son of a pig'*,

b. ყლეთაყლე *q'letaq'le* 'dick of dicks' (stupid person), ყლინჯი *q'linji*(idiot), ყლეობა *q'leoba* 'a dicking' (terrible deed), ყლექალა *q'lekala* 'dick woman', გამოყლევებული *gamoq'levebuli* 'dicked person' (very stupid person)

c. ტრაკიანი *t'rak'iani* 'assy person' (brave person), უტრაკო *ut'rak'o* 'assless' (coward), ნუ გაატრაკე *nu gaat'rak'e* 'don't ass it!' (expression of disbelief, cf. English 'you're shitting me'),მაზოლი მაქვს ტრაკზე *mazoli makvs t'rak'ze* 'you're a pain in the ass' (lit. 'I have a callous on my ass'), სადღაცტრაკში *sadğac tr'ak'ši* 'somewhere far away' (lit. somewhere in the ass; cf German *am Arsch der Welt*)

d. ბოზიშვილი *bozišvili* 'whore-son' (despicable person), ნაბოზარი *nabozari* (lit. 'whored', someone who is despicable), გაბოზებული *gabozebuli* 'whored-out' (KGB agent), ბოზიიიშ! *boziiiiš!* 'whore-sss' (expression of amazement or shock, like English 'Holy fuck!')

e. იჯვამს *ijvams* 'he shits himself', ჩაჯმული *čajmuli* 'one who is easily frightened' (lit. 'one who shat downward'), გააჯვი *gaajvi* 'fuck off!' (lit. 'shit away')

f. იფსამს *ipsams* 'he pisses himself', ჩაფსმული *čapsmuli* 'one who is easily frightened' (lit. 'one who pissed downward')

In general, combinations of taboo categories heighten the intensity of the obscenity. So for example, ძაღლიშვილი *dzağlišvili* 'son of a dog' is stronger than just ძაღლი *dzağli* 'dog' by virtue of using two taboo categories: unclean animals and family members. Combinations of obscenities also sometimes allude to historical linguistic tropes, as with ყლეთაყლე *q'letaq'le* 'dick of dicks', which has the same structure as the

Georgian translation of the Persianate titulature *mepe-ta mepe* 'king of kings', thus providing a kind of satirical inversion of the nonprophane world.

Across the Caucasus by far the most general obscenity refers to the sexuality of families and especially mothers. Thus in Georgian there are at least four common general verbal constructions to refer to sex with someone's mother, as in (5):

(2) a. შენი დედა შევეცი *šen(i) deda(s) ševeci* 'I fucked [lit. gave it to] your mother'

b. შენი დედა მოვწყან *šeni deda movt'q'an[e]* 'I fucked your mother'

c. შენი ჯიში მოვწყან *šeni jiši movt'q'an[e]* 'I fucked your origin'

d. შენს დედას გავთხარე *šens dedas gavtxare* 'I fucked [lit. dug] your mother'

In some Caucasian cultures, obscenities more often involve ritual uncleanness. This is the case with many Chechen obscenities, as in (6):

(6)	a.	*Ħan korta çilla kerčila*	'May your head roll in blood'
	b.	*Ħan da haqic volila*	'May your father deal with a pig'
	c.	*Mollin k'eag sanna çan-vealla ħo*	'You're as clean as a mullah's ass'
	d.	*ʔoudel bid büicu aħ*	'You're talking stupid shit'
	e.	*Čiš dalla ħöga*	'You're a pussy, grow up' (lit. 'You appear as piss')
	f.	*Nir yalla ħöga*	'You're a pussy, grow up' (lit. 'You appear as diarrhea')

And across the Caucasus, divine curses are frequent sources of obscenities:

(7)	Georgian:	ღმერთმადაგწყევლოს!	'May God damn you!'
		Ğmertma dagc'q'evlos	
(8)	Chechen:	*De:lan nealt xilla ħun/çun*	'God damn you'
		Vorhden nealt xilla	'Damn your seventh-generation great-grandfather'
		Dalla daeçilla ħo	'God take you away!'
(9)	Armenian	Աստված անիծի քեզ	'God damn you'
		Atsvats anitsi kez	
		Բոզի վաստակ	'God damn whore'
		Bozi vastak	
(10)	Azerbaijani	Allah sənə lənət eləsin	'God damn you'

In some cases obscenities come to have exceptionally specific usages that are almost impossible to translate into other languages. One example is the Soviet practice of installing in each courtyard in each city block a representative of the secret police, almost always a woman, who was essentially a 'rat' (to use an English term from the Mafia). This person would pass on sensitive information about other citizens' personal lives and social connections and receive remuneration or state services in turn. Such people were termed derisively in Georgian გაბოზებული *gabozebuli* lit. 'whored-out', from ბოზი *bozi* 'whore'.

2.2   Obscenities and Language Contact

Another salient feature of Caucasian obscenities is the clear evidence for language contact amongst them. Virtually all basic obscenities show some evidence of being loan words, albeit sometimes only with numerous subsequent sound-changes or adaptation to the borrowing language's phonology. Thus in the chart above, words for 'penis', 'excrement', 'prostitute', 'breasts' and 'place of perdition' are all broadly likely to be loan words from one source language or another, often one from outside the region. Thus a word for 'hell' in Georgian, Armenian, Azeri and Udi all stem from the Arabic جَهَنَّم *jahannama*, the genitive of جَهَنَّم *jahannam.* The older Georgian word, ჯოჯოხეთი *jojoxeti* (< *dojoxeti) likewise is a loan from Middle Persian *dušox*, with a Georgian gentilic suffix –*et* attached; the Chechen word is a transparent loan from Georgian. Meanwhile, Azeri *qəhbə* 'prostitute' and Udi *q'ähbä* 'prostitute' are both loans from Arabic قَحْبَة *qaḥba*, which literally means 'cougher' – a word evocative of the taboo nature of a prostitute's services. In some cases, a regional language is likely the original source: Armenian կլիր *klir*, Chechen *lur* and Udi *k'ol* are all likely loans from Georgian ყლე *q'le* 'penis', which is reconstructible to Proto-Kartvelian (Fähnrich 2007: 505). Georgian is also the likely source in Armenian and Chechen for the word 'prostitute', as the Laz cognate of Georgian ბოზი *bozi* 'whore' simply means 'girl'.

	penis	*buttocks*	*excrement*	*prostitute*	*breasts*	*vagina*	*place of perdition*
Georgian	ყლე qle	ტრაკი ṭraḳi	მმწნერი mʒǧneri, კააკი kaaki	ბოზი bozi	ზუზუ ʒuʒu	მუტელი muṭeli	ჯანდაბა jandaba, ჯოჯოხეთი jojoxeti
Armenian	կլիր klir	որ vor	քաք kak	բոզ boz	ծիծ cic	պուց puc	ջհանդամ jhandam
Azeri	sik	göt	pox	qəhbə	məmə	am	cəhənnəm
Chechen	лур lur, тиен ťien	кIег ḳeg	бид bid	бIиж bʿiž	накха naqa	буд bud	жоьжахати žöžaxati
Udi	ḳol	šan	ḳaḳ'ala	q'əhbä	c'ic'iḳ'	ḳuť'	jähnäm, gehena

Table 10. Examples of language contact across Caucasian obscenities.

These cross-cutting patterns of contact illustrate a feature of obscenities we saw in more familiar languages: that one way to obfuscate the linguistic taboo is to make use of another language's term for the same referent, thus creating an alternative, more euphemistic encoding. For this reason, many people of the Caucasus have at least two obscene spoken registers: one a set of obscenities in their own indigenous language, which is generally regarded as stronger, and a second milder set of obscenities drawn from another language, often Russian. In the case of some minority languages, as amongst the Megrelians, there is a tripartite system of obscene registers: the most obscene being Megrelian, a somewhat milder set taken from Georgian, and a third taken from Russian (see Friedman forthcoming for more on Slavic obscenities).

2.3   Formal properties of obscenities
So it is clear that obscenities in Caucasian languages are drawn from familiar taboo categories, like Western obscenities, are generally interpreted not literally but metaphorically, and also like Western languages are frequently sourced from neighboring languages. But Caucasian obscenities also tend to have specific formal morphosyntactic or phonological profiles that set them apart from nonprophane speech.

2.3.1 Obscenities as expressive constructions

Many Caucasian obscenities share similarities with so-called 'expressive' speech consisting of 'marked words that depict sensory information' (Dingemanse 2012, 2015; Wier 2023). Dingemanse has shown that expressive vocabulary often forms its own distinct subset within a language's lexicon:

(12) a. they are conventionalized expressions with consistent forms and meanings and not nonce formations or interjections;
     b. they typically possess structural properties (of phonology or morphosyntax) that distinguish them from other classes of words;
     c. they depict rather than merely describe an event or state in an affective, performative or mimetic way;
     d. their semantic content encodes sensory information of sight, sound, or a speaker's internal psychological state.

So for example obscene words often have a regular prosodic profile of simple consonant-vowel-(consonant) sequences: Georgian ძუძუ *dzudzu* 'breasts', ჯანდაბა *jandaba* 'hell'; Armenian որ *vor* 'butt', քաք *kak* 'shit', բոզ *boz* 'whore', ծիծ *cic* 'tits', պուց puc 'pussy'; Azerbaijani *sik* 'cock', *göt* 'butt', *pox* 'shit', *məmə* 'tits', etc. Like these Caucasian obscenities, expressives across languages tend to make use of reduced numbers of phonemes otherwise available in the language, often have CVCV syllable sequences, and/or make use of partial or complete reduplication. While not all Caucasian obscenities manifest these traits, a great many of them do. What distinguishes obscenities from other kinds of expressive constructions is that they almost never directly reflect sensory information of sight or sound; they do however almost always reflect speakers' internal psychological states. In this sense, obscenities might be considered to be a subclass of the wider category of expressives.

2.3.2 Distinctions between obscene and nonobscene grammatical constructions

Another feature of Caucasian obscenities that relates them to more familiar forms found in Western languages is that many of them bear idiosyncratic or unusual grammatical properties that cannot be directly derived from nonobscene parts of the lexicon. One particularly striking example is found in Georgian execration formulas. As noted above, one common Georgian execration involves the use of the verb *šecema* 'give into' and a reference to one's mother. Now, most nouns in Georgian indicate possession by a separate preposed possessive pronoun, as with *čemi saxli* 'my house' in (13a) and

šeni saxli 'your house' in (13b). However kinship terms like *mama* 'father', *deda* 'mother', *deida* 'maternal aunt', *mamida* 'paternal aunt' etc. do not function this way; instead, they take incorporated pronouns for possessors, as in *dedačemi* 'my mother' in (14a) and *dedašeni* 'your mother' (in 14b). Such a distinction represents a well-known typological contrast between alienably possessed nouns, whose possessors can in principle change, and inalienably possessed nouns, whose possessors are in some sense seen to be permanent possessors, as kinship terms, body parts, and other similarly seemingly inherent forms of possession usually are[3].

(13)　Georgian alienable possession
　　　a. *čem-i*　　　　　*saxl-i*　　　*ak*　　*ar-is*
　　　　 1POSS-NOM　　　 house-NOM　here　be-3SG
　　　　 'My house is here'
　　　b. *šen-i*　　　　　*saxl-i*　　　*ak*　　*ar-is*
　　　　 2POSS-NOM　　　 house-NOM　here　be-3SG
　　　　 'Your house is here'

(14)　Georgian inalienable possession of kinship terms
　　　a. *deda-čem-i*　　　　　*ak*　　*ar-is*
　　　　 mother-1POSS-NOM　　here　be-3SG
　　　　 'my mother is here'
　　　b. *deda-šen-i*　　　　　*ak*　　*ar-is*
　　　　 mother-2POSS-NOM　　here　be-3SG
　　　　 'your mother is here'

Crucially, Georgian obscene execrations do not make use of the inalienable incorporation: the possessor in (15a) is a separate prenominal modifier analogous to those in (13), and not formed like those in (14):

(15)　a. Alienable possession construction with obscenity reading
　　　　 šen-i　　　　 *deda*　　　　　 *še-v-e-c-i*
　　　　 2POSS-NOM　mother.NOM　　　PVB-1-PRV-give.AOR-AOR1
　　　　 'I fucked your mother' (lit. I gave it to your mother)

---

[3] In point of fact, there is some variation amongst languages with a contrast of alienable vs. inalienable possession in which precise sets of lexical items count as grammatically alienable vs. inalienable. Thus 'home' or 'land' might also count as inalienably possessed in some languages. For purposes of this example it is sufficient to know that in Georgian only kinship terms have this particular grammatical property.

b. Infelicitous inalienable construction with obscenity reading

#deda-šen-s   *še-v-e-c-i*

 mother-2POSS-DAT   PVB-1-PRV-give.AOR-AOR1

#'I fucked your mother' (acceptable reading: I gave it (in)to your mother)

The implication of this is rather profound, since it means that *an inalienably possessed noun can be converted to an alienably possessed noun, but only when used as an obscenity*. That is, a kinship term, with all its affective emotional content, is in effect converted to an everyday object to be used as one likes. It is hard to think of a more direct manifestation of a culture's objectification of women than that they are literally converted grammatically into alienable, disposable objects!

In fact, the obscene construction in (15a) has clearly shifted somewhat from its original meaning in more than just this grammatical sense. In normal conditions, Georgian assigns dative case to indirect objects in an aorist past tense, and nominative case to direct objects[4]. Before about the last quarter of the 20th century, the obscene construction worked the same way: one would have said *šens dedas ševeci*, with the dative *–s* on 'mother'. However, in contemporary, 21st century Georgian, the normal way to use this construction amongst all but the oldest generations is to mark it with nominative case. This is a strong indication that the meaning of the verb has fully grammaticalized as a direct object in nominative case *–i*, as in (15a), and has lost its original meaning 'give' entirely.

The Nakh-Daghestanian languages also provide us some interesting examples of obscenities with distinct grammatical properties, and here these mostly involve the behavior of grammatical gender. Unlike most Indo-European or Semitic languages, which often have three, two or no grammatical genders, Nakh-Daghestanian languages are famous for having many multiple gender classes, with as many as eight gender classes in the Nakh language Batsbi (Holisky and Gagua 1994). The way gender is marked in such languages is determined by their agreement with verbal and adjectival prefixes in the singular and in the plural, with different gender classes having different singular/plural pairs of the same prefixes. Thus in Chechen, which has six gender classes, words that agree with a prefix *v-* in the singular and *b-* in the plural are Gender

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[4] Georgian has a complicated system of case-shifting from one tense to the next; see Table 14 below.

		SG	PL		
1	*k'ant* (boy)	v-	b-	*k'ant* **v**-eza **v**-u 'the boy is heavy'	*k'entii* **d**-eza **d**-u 'the boys are heavy'
2	*zuda* (woman)	y-	b-	*zuda* **y**-eza **y**-u 'the woman is heavy'	*zudari* **b**-eza **b**-u 'the women are heavy
3	*ph'āgal* (rabbit)	y-	y-	*ph'āgal* **y**-eza **y**-u 'the rabbit is heavy'	*ph'āgalash* **y**-eza **y**-u 'the rabbits are heavy'
4	*naž* (oak)	d-	d-	*naž* **d**-eza **d**-u 'the oak is heavy'	*niežnash* **d**-eza **d**-u 'the oaks are heavy'
5	*mangal* (scythe)	b-	b-	*mangal* **b**-eza **b**-u 'the scythe is heavy'	*mangalash* **b**-eza **b**-u 'the scythes are heavy'
6	*ˤaž* (apple)	b-	d-	*ˤaž* **b**-eza **b**-u 'the apple is heavy'	*ˤežash* **d**-eza **d**-u 'the apples are heavy'

Table 11. Gender classes in Chechen.

1, which mostly consists of masculine human nouns; while words that agree with *y-* in the singular and *b-* in the plural are Gender 2, which mostly consists of feminine human nouns; and so forth as in Table 11 above. As may be seen from this chart, the actual exponent of agreement, whether *v-*, *b-*, *y-* or *d-*, is almost never unique for any particular gender class, so that *b-* could represent plural agreement for classes 1, 2 and 5, while it represents singular agreement for classes 5 and 6. Semantically, only genders 1 and 2 are almost fully consistent, referring to male and female human nouns respectively, while the other genders divide up the rest of the world in different ways. Gender 3 mostly refers to domestic animals, while Gender 5 is where most words referring to tools and man-made products are classed. This reinforces the notion that formal gender in language is simply a way of dividing the world into classes of things on a grammatical basis (Corbett 1991).

Now, most nouns in Chechen belong in fixed classes: like Spanish or French, they simply belong to one class or another. But a certain number of nouns show variation in which gender they assign, and this is where it gets interesting for the purpose of the study of obscenities. One of these is *zuda*, one word for 'woman'. Normally this noun belongs to Gender 2, since it agrees with *y-* in the singular and *b-* in the plural, as in (16a). But it also can occasionally shift to Gender 4, with agreement of *d-* in both the

singular and in the plural, as in (16b). Crucially, this *also* induces an obscene reading in that particular agreement pattern:

(16) a. zuda   y-eza   y-u
          woman   2-heavy   2-be.PRES
          'The woman is heavy.'
       b. zuda   d-eza   d-u
          woman   4-heavy   4-be.PRES
       'The bitchy, whoring woman is heavy.'

Here we see that something can be made to be obscene not because of particular word-choice, but because of the particular choice on the part of speakers to manipulate the grammar of the language they are speaking, since one and the same noun is being used in both sentences, while the agreement pattern differs. Why this particular gender? Gender 4 often includes nouns that refer to aspects of the undomesticated world, like wild animals and plants, and so shifting the gender agreement from the normal one for female humans to one for wild animals could also be seen as a kind of objectification or derogatory demotion of women on the part of Chechen speakers.

A similar but even more extensive kind of maledictory speech is found in the Lak language of Daghestan. Lak is a distinct branch of the Nakh-Daghestanian family, and like Chechen and most Nakh-Daghestanian languages, many of its verbs, numerals, demonstratives, adjectives and even adverbs agree with nouns in four gender classes (Friedman 1996):

Set 1 prefixes/nonprefixes	Singular	Plural
Gender 1	Ø / -w-, -j-	b- / -w-
Gender 2	d- / -r-, -rd-	b- / -w-
Gender 3	b- / -w-, -pp-	b- / -w-
Gender 4	d- / -r-, -rd-	d- / -r-

Table 12. Gender prefixes and nonprefixes (variously suffixes or infixes)

As we saw with Chechen, it is the particular combination of agreement in the singular and the plural that distinguishes one gender from the other, and different parts of speech take different exponents of gender agreement (Friedman 1996: 4):

(17) a. Ki-j-a   ars   ša-w-a   Ø-ussar
           two.1   son   at.home.1 1-be
           'Two sons are at home.'

      b. Traditional agreement pattern (> now pejorative outside family):
           Ki-r-a   ššarssa   ša-rd-a   d-ussar
           two.2   woman   at.home.2 2-be
           'Two women are at home.'

      c. Innovative agreement pattern (> now normative outside family):
           Ki-w-a   ššarssa   ša-pp-a   b-ussar
           two.3   woman   at.home.3 3-be
           'Two women are at home.'

In (17), gender marking is found on every constituent of the clause except the actual controlling noun, respectively: in (17a) the markers *–j-*, *-w-*, and *Ø-* for the first gender are used in agreement with *ars* 'son', while in (17b) the markers *–r-*, *-rd-*, and *d-* for the second gender are used in agreement with *ššarssa* 'woman'. (17c) illustrates 'proper' usage of the same construction for use with outsiders, using Gender 3 agreement markers instead of Gender 2.

However, in Lak assignment of nouns to particular gender classes is not at all straightforward, as nouns with female human or female animate referents are found not just in Gender 2, as in Chechen above, but also Gender 3 and a few in Gender 4. What's more, most nouns with female referents in Gender 2 refer specifically to older or married women, while the productive category referring to all other women is Gender 3. As noted by Friedman (1996), already by the time of the first documentation in the 1860s, gender agreement with Gender 2 had taken on derogatory connotations, while Gender 3 had become a kind of default class:

> "Class 3 was used for and by young women [when referring to themselves – TRW] and the use of Class 2 for them was regarded as an insult. […] It was considered inappropriate for a bride to switch to Class 2 immediately after marriage but ridiculous for a woman who already had a child to continue to use Class 3 when speaking of herself."

So for example, typical Gender 2 nouns referring to female entities are not just the expected *ninu* 'mother', *amu* 'grandmother' and *nittilsu* 'aunt', but also more pragmatically marked words like *buwč'u* 'fortune-teller', *japaluq* 'beggar woman', *lut'u* 'sorceress', *qqah'wa* 'prostitute, whore', *čuntuka* 'slattern', *akka* 'fool', *ganzaw* 'fatso', *harzaqus* 'chatterbox, busybody', and *suxasulu* 'female evil spirit that smothers people in their sleep'.

And since this earliest period of documentation, this trend has only become accentuated as newer generations of speakers eschew use of Gender 2 agreement for an ever larger number of nouns. Xajdakov suggested that use of Gender 2 agreement outside the immediate family, as shown in (17b-c), and Friedman reports that in some Lak dialects Gender 2 agreement has been lost entirely either by merging it with Gender 3 in Arakul dialect or Gender 4 in Balxar dialect (Friedman 1996: 7). So again we see that obscenity can manifest itself not only exclusively in a particular grammatical patterning, the obscene or pejorative nature of that pattern can also have important diachronic knock-on effects for the grammar of a language as a whole, since some Lak dialects have effectively lost an entire gender-marking system in part due to the obscene readings that such a pattern sometimes induces.

2.3.3 Structure dependence and thematic encoding in obscene constructions

A final conclusion from this survey that reinforces the idea of structure dependence of obscenities across languages is that different obscenities have different morphosyntactic distributions from other obscenities. In a survey of 3,205 Georgian obscenities found in the Georgian National Corpus, some obscenities are very strongly preferentially found in certain case-forms, almost to the exclusion of other case-forms. So for example the word ყლე *q'le* 'dick' is found 73% of the time in the nominative case (i.e. just ყლე *q'le*, as in 18a), while it is found 16% of the time in the dative case (ყლეს *q'les*). On the other hand, ძუძუ dzudzu 'breast' and ჯანდაბა jandaba 'hell' are found predominantly in the dative case, as in (18b):

GEORGIAN	*penis* ყლე qle	*buttocks* ტრაკი ṭraḳi	*excrement* მძღნერი mʒğneri	*prostitute* ბოზი bozi	*breasts* ზუზუ zuzu	*vagina* მუტელი muṭeli	*hell* ჯანდაბა jandaba
Nominative	49 (73%)	98 (55%)	10 (40%)	285 (65%)	452 (39%)	3 (100%)	451 (33%)
Dative	11 (16%)	28 (16%)	2 (8%)	46 (11%)	[687] (60%)	0 (0%)	856 (63%)
Genitive	2 (3%)	45 (25%)	10 (40%)	30 (7%)	[3] (< 1%)	0 (0%)	39 (< 3%)
Vocative	5 (7%)	7 (4%)	3 (12%)	77 (18%)	3 (< 1%)	0 (0%)	3 (< 1%)
Total	67	178	25	438	1145	3	1349

Table 13. Statistical case-assignment of obscenities in Georgian

(18) a. vis=tan   i-bazr-a   **eg**   **q'le**   ega
    who.DAT=with   PRV-chat-3SG this.**NOM**   dick.**NOM**   this.one.NOM
    'Who did this dick here talk to?' (GNC)

   b. **jandaba-s**   šen-i   tav-i,   otx-i
    hell-**DAT**   2SGPOSS-NOM   head-NOM   four-NOM
    i-q'-os
    PRV-be-OPT.3SG
    'To hell with you, I want four [rounds of tobacco]!' (GNC)

   c. odesme   **mdzğner-is** č'am-a-s=tan   axlo-s
    ever   shit-GEN   eat-MAS-DAT=at   close-DAT
    v-i-q'av-i   sast'umro-s bupet'=ši
    1-PRV-be.AOR-1SG.AOR   hotel-GEN   buffet=in
    'I was close to eating shit at the hotel's buffet.' (GNC)

   d. st'epler-i   ra   čem   q'le-d   g-i-nd-od-a
    stapler-NOM   what   1POSS dick-ADV   2-PRV-want-IMPF-3SG
    'Why the fuck did you want a stapler?' (lit. 'what as my cock did you
    want a stapler')

How do we explain such variation? To a certain extent, such variation in case assignment reflects the peculiarities of case assignment specific to Georgian (and so, *mutatis mutandis*, in every language with case-marking). Georgian is famous for its

baroquely complex system of case-assignment, in which the case-marking for subjects and objects found in one tense-aspect series differs from other tense aspect series, sometimes with the effect that case-marking for a subject in one tense marks the object in a different tense, as in Table 14. Georgian is a so-called split-intransitive language, in which some intransitives pattern like the subjects of transitive verbs (so-called 'medial' intransitives), while other intransitives pattern like the objects of transitives (so-called 'stative' intransitives).

	Transitive		'Medial' Intr.	Stative Intr.	Dative-Affective
PRESENT-FUTURE	SUBJ: NOM IOBJ: DAT DOBJ: DAT		SUBJ: NOM	SUBJ: NOM	SUBJ: DAT DOBJ: NOM
AORIST	SUBJ: NARR IOBJ: DAT DOBJ: NOM		SUBJ: NARR	SUBJ: NOM	SUBJ: DAT DOBJ: NOM
PERFECT-EVIDENTIAL	SUBJ: DAT IOBJ: PP DOBJ: NOM		SUBJ: DAT	SUBJ: NOM	SUBJ: DAT DOBJ: NOM

Table 14. Distribution of case-marking in Georgian across tense-aspect series.

The specific origins and functioning of this system are far beyond the scope of this paper (see e.g. Harris 1981, Holisky 1981, Wier 2011 for extended discussions), but suffice it to say that some of the statistical reason why some obscenities have the distribution they do is because of this many-to-many mapping of case and grammatical function.

But there is probably another deeper reason related specifically to the encoding of obscenities in Georgian. This is that some obscenities carry out prototypical thematic roles within clauses: 'hell' for example is often encoded as a location, which means across languages it is often encoded with a locative, dative or allative case; kinship terms like დედა *deda* 'mother' and body parts like ჯიში *jiši* 'origin; pussy' are often treated thematically as the objects of abuse in obscene language, as patient or theme

thematic roles, and therefore are coded with the marking of direct objects, either nominative or dative case. Some terms are preferentially used as terms of (abusive) address: it is normal in Georgian to call someone a ყლეო *q'leo* 'dick.VOC' or ბოზო *bozo* 'whore.VOC', while it is not at all normal to call someone a მუტელო *mut'elo* 'cunt.VOC' or ძუძუო *dzudzuo* 'tit.VOC'. That is, the specific encoding of obscenities is constrained not just by the general system of case-marking but also by a given culture's set of idioms and the semantic roles they perform in particular constructions.

§3 Conclusion

What such a study reveals is that while Georgian and other Caucasian languages are often exoticized as alien to the modes of speech found in better-known European languages, the ways in which they express obscenities are in fact quite familiar. As with European languages, Caucasian obscenities express a similar range of taboos concerning sex, gender, family relations and other topics, but like European languages these obscenities formally constitute idioms within the language that have not literal but usually only metaphorical content. As in Western languages, obscenities are often borrowed from other languages in order as an act of taboo avoidance; these start out as euphemisms (such as Arabic قَحْبَة *qaḥba*) but evolve over time simply into the latest form of obscene speech. We have also seen that obscene constructions in Caucasian languages often have grammatical properties that mark them out as distinct from other parts of the lexicon in a way similar to expressive constructions. Obscenities are interesting, therefore, not just because of what they reveal about the societies in which they are used, but also because of what they reveal about the breadth of diversity of the languages of the world.

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