

CIRCISSIAN ISRAELIS: MULTILINGUALISM AS A WAY OF LIFE

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Abstract

The Circassian community in Israel, though one of the smallest in the diaspora (about 3,000), is also one of the most successful in preserving its national identity and language, while at the same time integrating into Israeli life.

We have recently launched a multi-disciplinary study of this unique community in Israel, which we hope will become part of a broader study of Circassian communities both in the diaspora (Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Germany and other countries) and in the Caucasian homeland (one of the communities is described by Bridges, this issue). Our team consists of an anthropologist, applied linguist, sociolinguist, and a historian.

This work, the first in a planned series, presents general background on the Israeli Circassians and then focuses on our recently completed study of Circassian pupils in Kfar Kama, the larger of the two Circassian villages in Israel.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

The Circassians -- self-designation Adyge -- are the oldest indigenous people of North Caucasus. Their language belongs to the North-West branch of the Caucasian family of languages. Its unusual phonological system -- an overabundance of consonants and scarcity of vowels has

stimulated much interest among linguists (Kumakhov 1973, Smeets 1984). In the 6th century, under Georgian and Byzantine influence many Circassians were Christianized, but under the growing influence of the Ottomans, Islam replaced Christianity. However, the process was gradual. Blending with Christian survivals and even pre-Christian folk beliefs, Islam became fully established only in the 18th-19th centuries. "Neither Christianity nor Islam," as Henze points out, "resulted in the creation of a distinctive priestly class who could preserve written literature or encourage literacy" (1986, p. 247). Attempts at reducing the language to writing in the 19th and early 20th century had also failed. Circassian became a literary language only after the Russian revolution.

The Circassians are Sunni of the Hanafi school who tend to be non-fanatical and among whom the Adat or custom law -- the Adyge-Habze -- has remained extremely strong (Shami, 1982). It is the language and the custom law that have formed the chief component parts in Circassian self-identity.

Into the 19th century Circassian tribal groups speaking numerous, but mutually intelligible dialects, were the main ethnic element in NW Caucasus (Bennigsen and Quelquejay 1961; Smeets 1984). This changed drastically when under the pressure of the Russian conquest, especially after the defeat of the Great Revolt (1825-1864) a Circassian mass exodus -- "one of the greatest mass movements of population in modern history" (Henze, p.273) -- took place to Turkey and other areas of the Ottoman Empire, including the Middle East. One and a half million Circassians abandoned their ancient homeland, leaving behind scattered remnant

communities. The Russian census of 1897 recorded only 150,000 Circassians, less than one tenth of the original population (Bennigsen 1985; Karpat 1985; Shami 1982).

Before the Revolution, the Circassians were one undifferentiated people with only a vague sense of national identity. After the Revolution, as part of Soviet nationality policy, they were divided into separate autonomous units under different names:

1. the Adyge Autonomous Province, which since the collapse of the Soviet Union has declared itself an Autonomous Republic. The 125,000 or so Circassians-Adyge form about 22% of the total population This is the community covered by Bridges in this issue (these and the following figures are based on the 1989 census; for a 1993 population estimate see Gammer 1995).

2. the Karachai-Cherkess Autonomous Province, which also declared itself an autonomous Republic. The 52,000 or so Circassians-Cherkess are less than 10% of the population and officially share the republic with the Karachai, an unrelated Turkic nationality.

3. the Kabardin-Balkar Autonomous Republic, the only unit where the 391,000 Circassians-Kabardins, form almost 50% of the population, but they too share the republic with an unrelated Turkic people, the Balkars.

In addition, a Shapsug autonomous area had been established in the 1920s, but was soon eliminated. Recently, the 10,000 Circassians-Shapsugs have begun an active campaign to resurrect this autonomy. (Many of the Israeli Circassians are of Shapsug origin.)

It was also under the Soviet regime that Circassian became a literary

language, or rather two literary languages. Following the Soviet populist approach to language planning, the literary language was supposed to reflect as closely as possible the dialect spoken by the people.

Therefore different alphabets were devised for the western Circassians -- the Adyge, and for the central and western Circassians -- the Cherkess and the Kabardins (Isaev 1979).

In the first two decades of the Soviet regime, tremendous language construction work was accomplished and the mother tongue began to play an important role in almost all domains, including education. However, in the late 1930s Soviet language policy began to shift away from the emphasis on the mother tongue. In 1938 Russian was officially decreed a compulsory subject in all Soviet schools. In the last decades of the Soviet Union, outright promotion of Russian as the language of a new community -- the Soviet People, became the chief goal of Soviet language policy and many non-Russian languages, including Circassian in both its varieties, were phased out of the school system as languages of instruction (Kreindler 1982, 1989, 1995).

The collapse of the Soviet Union has heightened Circassian national feeling both in Russia and in the diaspora. Since the collapse, the Circassians have forged links with their brethren all over the world. The International Association of Circassian Peoples has organized world congresses in which Israeli delegations have taken a very active part. Among the issues raised are the need to revive the language in Russia and the diaspora, the desirability of constructing a common literary language and a return to the Latin alphabet (Bram 1994a; Pafova 1992).

Circassians in Israel

The Circassians came to Israel in service to the Sultan in the late 19th century. Their two surviving villages, Reikhania and Kfar Kama were founded in the 1870s. Because of their language, customs and loyalty to the Ottomans, the Circassians "were not on the best terms with their local Arab neighbors (Hourani 1947, p. 58). Relations with the Jews, however, have been cordial from the very beginning (Stendel 1973). Today (1995), the majority -- about 2,000 -- live in Kafr Kama; fewer than 800 live in Reikhania and a score of families live in various Israeli cities and towns near their jobs. However, they all keep in touch with the village and return whenever they can (Gavron 1986). Circassians are well integrated into Israeli life, with the men serving in the Israeli army and with many employed in the border and regular police (Gerkhad 1993; Hatukay 1991).

The two villages differ not only in size. Kama, the larger of the two, has Jewish settlements as neighbors and sends its pupils to mainly Jewish schools after they graduate from the village school. Reikhania, on the other hand is closer to Arab settlements, 15% of its population is in fact Arab, and after finishing the village school, children continue their education mainly in Arab schools. In 1978, Kfar Kama decided to shift its language of instruction from Arabic to Hebrew whereas Reikhania decided to keep Arabic, but to teach some subjects in the upper grades in Hebrew. The Israeli Circassians were unaware that their language had a written form. In 1958, a Kfar Kama teacher picked up Adyge broadcasts

originating from the Soviet Union and learned to his surprise that Adyge was a literary language. After writing to the announcer and receiving Adyge language texts, the teacher proceeded to teach himself to read and write and then taught a few others. The community was then mobilized to get the Ministry of Education to agree to introduce the language in school. (There is a certain irony here, for at the very time that the struggle to introduce the language in school was being waged in Israel, it was being phased out of the school in the Soviet Union. (Bridges, this issue; Kreindler 1982, 1989).

In 1971 the Ministry agreed to introduce the study of the language in the village schools and even invited Professor John Catford of Michigan University to stay for two months with the teachers and intellectuals of the Circassian community in order to teach them the grammar of their language. At the time, Professor Joshua Fishman enthusiastically welcomed their victory as the beginning "on the long road toward non-Hebrew/non-Arab mother tongue recognition" in Israel (Fishman and Fishman 1978, p.255). In 1982, the Ministry of Education published its own Circassian primer based on a Soviet model, complete with such non-Israeli themes as Young Pioneers with their red ties, or sledding and snow balls (Hatukay and Gush).

The Circassian language is taught at present only in the 6th-8th grades for two hours a week. Since many of the pupils, usually the most ambitious, leave the school after 6th grade for schools outside the village, they are not likely to gain even basic literacy in the language. The two weekly hours are treated chiefly as 'heritage lessons' and are

not taken very seriously (Bram 1994b). Recently, the Ministry of Education has agreed to finance a teacher from the Caucasus and to add two hours of Circassian songs and stories to the first two grades (Bram). The language picture in school is extremely complex. Four languages are now routinely studied with slight variations in each village: Arabic, Circassian, English and Hebrew.

TABLE 1: Language Acquisition of Circassian Children

grade	language	purpose	language	purpose
(age)	Kfar Kama		Reikhania	
home (to 4 yrs)	vernacular Circassian	socializing	vernacular Circassian	socializing
kindergarten (5 yrs)	vernacular Circassian Hebrew	socializing socializing	vernacular Circassian Arabic	socializing socializing
first - 4th (6 - 9 yrs)	Hebrew Arabic	socializing separate subject learn Islam	Arabic	instruction
2nd (7 yrs)			Hebrew	separate subject
5th (10 yrs)	English	separate subject	English	separate subject
6th - 8th (11 - 13 yrs)	Circassian	reading, writing, grammar	Circassian Arabic	reading, writing, grammar learn Math

KAFR KAMA STUDY

We first directed our attention to Kfar Kama, which is of special interest not only because the majority of Circassians live in this village, but also because 17 years ago, at the request of the parents the school has shifted from Arabic to Hebrew as the language of instruction. Our findings are based chiefly on questionnaires administered in the Kama school, anthropological studies by Bram (1989-1993) as well as interviews with Ministry of Education personnel and Circassian students at Haifa University. The questionnaires were directed mainly at the social context of language use, language attitudes, and motivation since these non-cognitive factors as numerous studies have shown (Henning 1983, Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, Schumann 1986, Spolsky 1989) have a significant impact on learning and language maintenance.

The Subjects and Their Background

Questionnaires were administered on June 25-26, 1994 to 70 fifth and sixth grade pupils in the Kfar Kama school. In order to maintain normal school conditions, the questionnaires were administered during the English lesson by one of the teachers in the school who was instructed by one of the researchers (Bram). The age of the pupils ranged from 10 to 12 years, with the mean being 11.2 (SD=.73). An almost even distribution between boys (n=35) and girls (n=33) was reported. (Two did not report their sex.)

More than 90% of the pupils have lived all their lives in Kfar Kama. But six pupils, in response to the question 'How long have you lived

here?' responded as follows:

11 years: 1 (2%)
 10 years: 2 (3%)
 6 years: 2 (3%)
 4 years: 1 (2%)

Since Hebrew is the language in kindergarten and in the first grades in the areas of employment outside the village, it is assumed that the three pupils who have lived only 4 to 6 years in Kfar Kama, grew up with Hebrew in their first years of schooling. According to Bram's observations, some children living outside the village have a very poor grasp of Circassian. This may explain why one pupil reported Hebrew as the mother tongue (see below).

The fear of language loss by the children appears to be one of the main motivations for the parents desire to return to the village and most do return. To the question of 'Has your family ever lived outside the village?' 70% of the children responded 'yes'. Most of these families came from other Israeli towns and villages. In addition, reflecting the character of the Circassians as a diaspora people, children also reported that some family members came from branches who lived in North America, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, the Caucasus and other places.

As many as seven children responded that their family had lived in the Caucasus. This number seems very high. It may be that the term "lived" is not clearly defined in the questionnaire. Another explanation might be that now that relations have been reestablished with their homeland, the children are keenly aware of their Caucasian origins. According to our anthropological data, three Israeli Circassians went to the Caucasus to

marry after 1990 and are now living there. On the other hand, Kfar Kama contains a few Circassians who came from abroad to marry Israeli Circassians and received Israeli citizenship. For example, two Turkish Circassian men married Israeli Circassian women and remained in Kfar Kama. In addition, relatives have gone for long visits (19 or more months). It is possible that the children are including these visits in the term "lived."

On Language Use

Our data unequivocally showed the solid foundation of Circassian as the mother tongue. With the exception of one pupil, who claimed Hebrew, all children reported that their mother tongue was Circassian.

Hebrew came in first place as the second language, considerably ahead of Arabic. (We are planning to distribute the same questionnaires in Arabic in Reikhania where the language of instruction has remained Arabic. We expect the results to be quite different.) There was much less unanimity in Hebrew as a second language: 48 pupils reported it as the second language, followed by 13 pupils for Arabic, 3 for English and 1 pupil reporting Turkish.

Circassian was also reported unequivocally as the language of the home, of the school and of the street.

21-26. Which language(s) do you use the most AT HOME?

Circassian:	66 pupils	(96%)
Arabic:	1	(1%)
Hebrew:	5	(7%)

27-32. Which language(s) do you use the most AT SCHOOL?

Circassian:	52 pupils	(75%)
Arabic:	4	(6%)
Hebrew:	20	(29%)

33-38. Which language(s) do you use the most IN THE STREET?

Circassian:	69 pupils	(100%)
Hebrew:	1	(1%)

In contrast, Hebrew was reported as a significant second language only in the school (29%), which seems strange since it is the language of instruction. Does this mean that while Hebrew is officially the language of instruction, de facto Circassian is used most of the time? This question calls for ethnographic study in the classroom. The dominance of Circassian in the street shows beyond doubt that both the community and the peer group are Circassian-speaking.

To pinpoint more exactly the language in use, we also asked the following questions:

45-50. Which languages does your family speak at home?

Circassian:	68 pupils	(99%)
Hebrew:	44	(64%)
Arabic:	28	(41%)
English:	7	(10%)
Other:	1	(1%)

51-56. Which languages do YOU speak at home?

Circassian:	65 pupils	(94%)
Hebrew:	45	(65%)
Arabic:	22	(32%)
English:	10	(15%)
Turkish:	1	(1%)

More than 90% of the pupils and their families speak Circassian at home, and more than 60% also speak Hebrew. Here, Hebrew seems to be making some inroads. Arabic was reported as being spoken in the family by 41% of the pupils, but only 32% reported that they themselves speak Arabic at home. English, on the other hand, was reported as being spoken less by the family (10%) than by the pupils (15%).

We assume that the word "speak" was understood by the pupils to include passive knowledge, ability, or the potential to speak rather than actually speaking. Alternative explanations might be that Arabic is the language of religion and therefore spoken more by the adults, and that English is the language of the media and therefore heard more by the children.

We also tried to tap actual language use in terms of function.

65. In which language do you prefer to read?

Hebrew:	46 pupils	(68%)
English:	14	(21%)
Arabic:	11	(16%)
Circassian:	10	(15%)

66. In which language do you like to listen to songs?

English:	44 pupils	(65%)
Hebrew:	26	(38%)
Circassian:	17	(25%)
Arabic:	10	(15%)
Turkish:	1	(1%)

In reading, Circassian is in last place. This is most likely a reflection of the difficult, unsuitable alphabet based on Cyrillic with many phonemes rendered by two and even three letters. In addition,

Circassian reading lessons are introduced only in the 6th grade and the two weekly hours do not seem to be very effective. Finally, the lack of availability of reading materials is obviously discouraging.

Hebrew received first place for reading (68%), followed by English (21%) Arabic (16%) and last, Circassian (15%). The word "prefer" in the questionnaire was probably taken to mean (or translated as) "would like to", since the children do not actually read in all these languages.

The high number of pupils (52%) reporting that they would like to read in a language other than Hebrew, while Hebrew is in fact the chief language of instruction, is perhaps not insignificant. It may reflect a conflict between language and culture. On the other hand, six children indicated at least three languages in which they would like to read: One marked Circassian, Arabic, Hebrew, and English; another marked Circassian, Arabic, and Hebrew and four marked Arabic, Hebrew, and English. This multilingual preferences may reflect not conflict, but a melting pot of acculturation as symbolized by the languages.

The response to question no. 66, indicated that like youngsters all over the world, most of the pupils (65%) like to listen to songs in English. Hebrew and Circassian were next, followed by Arabic and finally, Turkish which was chosen by only one pupil. Again, the same six pupils indicated several languages for listening to songs. Three marked Circassian, Arabic, Hebrew, and English; one marked Circassian, Hebrew English, and two marked Arabic, Hebrew and English.

To summarize the linguistic usage: The data clearly indicate that Circassian is the mother tongue used at home and in the street. Hebrew

is the second language used at school, for reading, and at home. Whereas according to anthropological observations Arabic, the third language, is hardly used in Kfar Kama, it is still considered as a language in use, most likely because of its religious significance and use in the media. English is less used than the other three languages but is popular because of music and popular culture, as we would expect Circassian children to be exposed to the same media as other Israeli children. In any case, the sign welcoming visitors to Kfar Kama appears in four languages: Circassian, Hebrew, Arabic and English.

Language Prestige

If further confirmation of the solid position of the mother tongue were needed, it was found in the replies to questions tapping language prestige. Unlike most prestige rankings in which English comes in first place (see Bensoussan et al., this issue), pupils rated Circassian, their own mother tongue in first place. Hebrew came second and Arabic third, while English was listed only in fourth place and followed by Turkish and Russian. Obviously, the pupils are not only proud of their language but also have the self-confidence to rank it in first place!. It will be interesting if this evaluation will be duplicated in our planned study of the adults.

67-76. Rank the following languages from 1 to 10 in order of importance. Rank the most important language in the first place (number 1), and the least important in last place (number 10).

- 2.14 Circassian
- 2.88 Hebrew
- 3.02 Arabic
- 3.24 English
- 5.70 Turkish
- 6.64 Russian
- 7.29 French
- 7.29 German
- 7.52 Italian
- 8.55 Greek

We were also interested in analyzing the reasons given for the different ranking of the languages. Although, we had asked the pupils to check only one reason, many of the pupils had disregarded this limitation.

77. Why did you rank CIRCASSIAN the way you did? (Check one.)

- | | |
|---|----------|
| a. mother tongue | 60 (87%) |
| b. beauty of the language | 33 (48%) |
| c. need to know | 54 (78%) |
| d. easy to learn | 28 (41%) |
| e. like to speak | 49 (71%) |
| f. useful for schoolwork | 40 (58%) |
| g. job opportunities | 11 (16%) |
| h. warm feeling | 29 (42%) |
| i. travel | |
| YES | 16 (23%) |
| to Caucasus | 17 (25%) |
| to other places in Israel | 1 (1%) |
| to the US or England | 2 (3%) |
| to Turkey | 1 (1%) |
| j. other | 4 (6%) |
| It's the homeland -- we came from Caucasus and our language is Circassian, and we have to learn them. | 1 |

Note: Students' responses were translated from Hebrew by the researchers.

With the exception of 'job opportunities', all the reasons for ranking Circassian in first place were high, with mother tongue at the top (87%), followed by the need to know (78%) and liking to speak (71%). On the other hand, beauty of the language and warm feeling drew fewer responses (48% and 42% respectively).

78. Why did you rank ARABIC the way you did? (Check one.)

a. mother tongue	8 (12%)
b. beauty of the language	30 (44%)
c. need to know	58 (84%)
d. easy to learn	29 (42%)
e. like to speak	25 (36%)
f. useful for schoolwork	30 (44%)
g. job opportunities	21 (30%)
h. warm feeling	22 (32%)
i. travel	
YES	9 (13%)
to Caucasus	1 (1%)
to Jordan	4 (6%)
to other places in Israel	2 (3%)
to the US or England	2 (3%)
to Turkey	2 (3%)
to Syria or Saudia Arabia	8 (11%)
to Egypt	3 (4%)
to Indonesia	2 (3%)
j. other	8 (12%)
religion - Muslim language	3
I want to meet my mother's cousins (family).	
because it is not so important	1

The only high response for ranking Arabic was the need to know (84%). We believe this is linked to religious identity. On the other hand, warm feeling was chosen only by 22%. Travel plans of 21% of the pupils would be to the Arab countries

79. Why did you rank HEBREW the way you did? (Check one.)

a. mother tongue	5 (7%)
b. beauty of the language	49 (71%)
c. need to know	59 (86%)
d. easy to learn	56 (81%)
e. like to speak	52 (77%)
f. useful for schoolwork	49 (72%)
g. job opportunities	49 (71%)
h. warm feeling	21 (30%)
i. travel	
YES	7 (10%)
to other places in Israel	7 (10%)
to the US or England	2 (3%)
to Turkey	1 (1%)
j. other	8 (12%)
because it is a Jewish State	1

The ranking of Hebrew reflects chiefly pragmatic motivations. The most popular reasons for ranking Hebrew were: need to know (86%), easy to learn (81%), like to speak (77%), useful for schoolwork (72%), and job opportunities (71%), but also one non-pragmatic reason, beauty of the language (71%). Warm feeling was chosen by relatively fewer pupils (only 30%), but only by one pupil fewer than for Arabic. Travel plans of 10% of the pupils would be to other places in Israel.

80. Why did you rank ENGLISH the way you did? (Check one.)

a. mother tongue	5 (7%)
b. beauty of the language	49 (72%)
c. need to know	56 (82%)
d. easy to learn	36 (53%)
e. like to speak	48 (70%)
f. useful for schoolwork	25 (36%)
g. job opportunities	28 (41%)
h. warm feeling	37 (54%)
i. travel	
YES	15 (22%)
to the US or England	20 (29%)
to Russia (CIS)	4 (6%)
to Brazil	1 (1%)

	to Hawaii	1 (1%)
j. other		8 (12%)
	useful to lawyers	1
	On trips everywhere almost everyone knows English	
	-- so we can speak to them	1

The most popular reasons for ranking English were: need to know (82%), beauty of the language (72%), like to speak (70%), and curiously enough warm feeling (54%) which is even higher than for Circassian itself!. Job opportunities were indicated by only 41% of the pupils. This rating indicates a focus on the village and local surroundings rather than on the whole country or the world at large. Other Israelis would need English for academic and professional studies and for training courses. On the other hand, it may be that at this age, children are more focused on their home environment. Travel plans of 29% of the pupils would be to the US or England.

81. Why did you rank RUSSIAN the way you did? (Check one.)

a. mother tongue		3 (4%)
b. beauty of the language		22 (32%)
c. need to know		15 (22%)
d. easy to learn		8 (12%)
e. like to speak		13 (19%)
f. useful for schoolwork		2 (3%)
g. job opportunities		2 (3%)
h. warm feeling		15 (22%)
i. travel		
	YES	16 (23%)
	to Caucasus	5 (7%)
	to the US or England	2 (3%)
	to Russia (CIS)	8 (12%)
j. other		8 (12%)
	because I don't know Russian	1

In general, Russian did not receive very high ratings. The most popular reason for ranking Russian was the beauty of the language (32%). Warm feeling, however, was chosen by only 22% of the pupils. Travel plans of 19% of the pupils would be to the Caucasus or Russia (CIS).

Feelings toward Russia among all Circassians are mixed. On the one hand is the memory of the historical struggle and expulsion from the homeland, but on the other is the gratitude for the constructive linguistic and cultural work under the Soviet regime (Kreindler 1995; Smeets 1984).

82. Why did you rank TURKISH the way you did? (Check one.)

a. mother tongue	6 (9%)
b. beauty of the language	35 (51%)
c. need to know	23 (33%)
d. easy to learn	15 (22%)
e. like to speak	12 (17%)
f. useful for schoolwork	3 (4%)
g. job opportunities	7 (10%)
h. warm feeling	20 (29%)
i. travel	
YES	12 (17%)
to Caucasus	3 (4%)
to Jordan	1 (1%)
to the US or England	4 (6%)
to Russia (CIS)	1 (1%)
to Turkey	24 (35%)
j. other	11 (14%)
My aunt lives there	1
because I know it a little	1
I love the country Turkey	1
It's good to hear the language spoken	1

Pupils' reactions to the prestige of Turkish were varied. Turkey has the largest Circassian community in the world -- estimates range up to

three million. However, the Circassian language is unrecognized officially and as Andrews put it "language as a criterion of ethnicity has been increasingly eroded by mass media and education in Turkish" (1989). Visits between Israel and Turkey, however, are becoming more common, and Circassian shares many similar words and expressions with Turkish.

CONCLUSION

Our study seems to confirm the solid self-identity and firmly entrenched position of the mother tongue among the Circassians of Israel. Their language loyalty seems especially striking when compared to the much larger diaspora community in Turkey and even to one of the communities on its own home territory (Bridges 1992, this issue; Lolar (Bridges) 1988).

We plan to continue our study of Circassians in Israel: next semester we will administer the same questionnaires to pupils in Reikhania and another battery of questionnaires to the adult population in both villages, as well as to continue anthropological observations and sociolinguistic study of the world Circassian communities.

We hope a study of this unique ethnolinguistic community will contribute to a better understanding of multilingual and multiethnic communities and the problems they face.

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