

A Brief Account of

The Circassian Language

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Circassian is one of the three divisions of the Northwest group of Caucasian languages, the other two being Abkhaz-Abaza and the now extinct Ubykh (Pakhy). Though genetically related, the three languages are mutually unintelligible, the lexical differences between them being quite substantial. Some linguistic research suggests that more than 5,000 years ago all Northwest Caucasians spoke proto-West Caucasian, much the same way as Semites conversed in proto-Semitic. However, because of geographical separation, the original language differentiated into three distinct entities: proto-Circassian, proto-Abkhaz, and proto-Ubykh.

According to recent research, Ubykh was originally closer to Abkhaz, but it subsequently underwent substantial Western Circassian influence. Some travellers thought that Ubykh was a dialect of Adiga. It may be possible that initially proto-West Caucasian split into proto-Circassian and proto-Abkhaz-Ubykh, which later divided into proto-Abkhaz and proto-Ubykh. These ancient languages were further ramified into divergent dialects.

There has been some interesting work on proto-Circassian, the forebear of all Circassian dialects, and even a dictionary was published. More recently some research was conducted on Proto-Abkhaz. Attempts have also been made at reconstruction of the system of Proto-Northwest Caucasian.

Origin and ancient relatives

Japhetic Theory and Sino-Caucasian super-family

The Japhetic Theory of the Soviet linguist N. Y. Marr proposed that all native language families in the Caucasus, including Northwest, Northeast, and South Caucasian belonged to the same ‘Japhetic’ language group, which in linguistics implied common ancestry.¹ This theory, one of the products of Soviet ideological drive to emphasize ethnic and linguistic unity of all Caucasian nations, was later discredited and superseded by the theory of language super-families, in which languages and language families that have common roots and basic lexicons are lumped together into conglomerations called ‘super-families’.

The linguist S. A. Starostin proposed the existence of the Sino-Caucasian super-family, which encompasses Nakh-Daghestani and the related Hurrian-Urartian and Etruscan,² and Northwest Caucasian, namely Circassian, Abkhaz-Abaza, and Ubykh, and the related Hattian. In addition, this super-family, also called ‘Dene-Caucasian’ or ‘Sino-Dene-Caucasian’, includes Sumerian and its proposed descendants Iberian and Basque,³ Pelasgian (pre-Hellenic language of Greece), Sino-Tibetan, Burushaski, spoken in the Karakoram Mountains of Pakistan,⁴ Yeniseian, and Na-Dene,

¹ See W. K. Mathews, *The Japhetic Theory*, London, 1948, and L. L. Thomas, *The Linguistic Theories of N. Y. Marr*, Berkeley, 1957.

² Northeast Caucasian, which is spoken by about 3.5 million people in the Caucasus, is divided into the Nakh group of languages, Chechen, Ingush and Bats, and the Daghestani group, including Avar, Lezghian, Tabasaran, Dargwa and Lak. For Nakh–Etruscan connections, see R. S. Pliev, 1992.

³ In his article ‘Is Basque Isolated?’ (*Dhumbadji!*, vol. 2, no. 2, May 1995), J. D. Bengston defends the case for a Basque–North Caucasian connection. Furthermore, in ‘The Macro-Caucasic Hypothesis’ (*Dhumbadji!*, vol. 1, no. 2, May 1993), he outlines evidence ‘for the existence of a Macro-Caucasic language phylum, encompassing Basque, Caucasian and Burushaski, and held to be at a time depth comparable to that of Indo-European.’

⁴ For further details on pre-historic Caucasian–Burushaski links, see K. Tuite, 1998, 1997.

which includes Tlingit and Eyak in western Canada and Alaska and Navajo and Apache in southwest USA. It is thought that (Caucasian) Albanian, a dead language that used to be spoken in the Eastern Caucasus, was also related to Nakh-Daghestani. On the other hand, genetic connection between Kartvelian and North Caucasian is negated in this scheme, apparent links between the two groups being explained away as results of neighbourly contacts. Instead, Kartvelian, together with Indo-European, is posited in the 'Nostratic' super-family.

Starostin and S. L. Nikolaev, who had been spearheading an ambitious project to reconstruct proto-North Caucasian as the parent language of both proto-Northeast Caucasian and proto-Northwest Caucasian, came up with a comparative dictionary of North Caucasian languages. However, this work stirred up a controversy between its proponents and Johanna Nichols, who expressed her scepticism about these efforts to reproduce proto-North-Caucasian, negating the existence of relations between Northeast Caucasian and any other language group.⁵ According to the other camp, it was the linguist Nikolai F. Troubetzkoy who first demonstrated firm connectedness between the two groups by establishing regular phonetic correspondences.

The third group in the Caucasian language family is South Caucasian or Kartvelian: Georgian, Mingrelian, Svan, Adjar, and Laz, all of which are spoken by about 4.5 million people in the Transcaucasus. Some linguists dispute the existence of any genetic link between North and South Caucasian. Also, suggested genetic links between the Caucasian languages and other languages and language families (Basque, Semito-Hamitic, Burushaski, Tibetan, Paleoasiatic, ancient languages of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia, etc.) are open to serious doubt.

In 1919, E. Forrer established that Hattic, the oldest known language in Asia Minor, but extinct since the early second millennium BC, was not an Indo-European language, and proposed its kinship to ancient Abkhazian and Circassian. R. Bleichsteiner arrived at this conclusion roughly at the same time. Both researchers were struck by the structural similarities

⁵ See S. A. Starostin and S. L. Nikolaev, 1994; Nichols' critique in J. Nichols, May 1997; Starostin's retort in S. Starostin, May 1997.

between Hattic and Abkhazo-Circassian, especially the inordinate use of prefixes.

General characteristics

The phonological structure of the NW Caucasian languages is unique, and is characterized by an extreme abundance of consonants and a scarcity of vowels. Some of the dialects were entered in *The Guinness Book of Records* on this account, before languages of greater number of consonants were discovered.

The vowel systems of these languages are simple and stable. There is a tendency to accumulate consonants in the same word. Declension is reduced to a minimum. Verbal forms are very complex; gerundive and participial forms being much used. Lexical material is analyzable into a small number of short roots and grammatical morphemes show semantic transparency. Abkhaz-Abaza, Circassian and Ubykh are characterised by large consonantal inventories, by mainly monosyllabic root-morphemes, and by an extreme polypersonalism within the verbal system, whereby virtually the entire syntactic structure of the clause is recapitulated in the verbal complex. These features have been the subject of study by a great number of scholars in the Soviet Union and the West.

From the perspective of a non-native speaker, Circassian presents a number of difficulties, some of which are often insurmountable. According to Olli Salmi, a Finnish expert on Kabardian, ‘the main problem of understanding Kabardian verbs is the great number of prefixes that can precede a verb stem, with pronominal prefixes in different places. Usually there are up to three pronominal prefixes, but some verbal prefixes can take pronominal prefixes as well. [These] places have to be indicated for non-native speakers.’ It has been suggested that for each verb in a lexical list, the infinitive and third person singular forms should be given at the very least, yet it is impossible for any dictionary of manageable proportions to include all verb forms.

Language divisions

Circassian is made up of Eastern and Western language groups. All Adigabze dialects are mutually intelligible. Face to face, an Adigean and a Kabardian could soon learn the peculiarities of each other's dialect. Eastern Circassian is composed of two main dialects, Kabardian and Beslanay. However, these dialects are so close that some linguists consider the latter a divergent sub-dialect of the former. There has been a suggestion that there existed in the middle of the 19th century a dialect intermediate between Kabardian and Beslanay, which at first was thought to be an earlier form of Kabardian proper.

Kabardian in Kabardino-Balkaria is divided into four sub-dialects named after the main rivers in the republic: Balhq (Malka), Bax'sen (Bakhsan), Terch (Terek), and Shejem (Chegem). Some authorities divide the language into Greater and Lesser Kabardian, the dialects spoken in Kabarda to the west and east of the Terch (Terek), respectively. Lesser Kabardian is also informally called Jilax'steney. Outside the nominal republic there are two more dialects, one spoken by the Christian community in Mozdok in North Ossetia, and Kuban Kabardian in Adigea, spoken in a few villages. In the heyday of Kabarda's dominance in the 16th to 18th centuries, Kabardian influenced Digor, a western dialect of Ossetian, in which Circassian loanwords are to be found in the semantic fields of economic life, especially in agriculture and animal husbandry.

Beslanay is spoken in a few villages in the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, and by a larger group in Turkey in many villages in the region of Çorum in Anatolia. The language was meticulously documented and recorded by Western scholars, like Georges Dumézil and his disciple Catherine Paris, and by native speakers, such as Orhan Alparslan.

Western Circassian shows more marked dialect-divisions than Kabardian, which is on the whole comparatively homogeneous. This is a reflection of the differences in tribal and social structures between Eastern and Western Circassians. It comprises many dialects: Temirgoi, Abzakh, Bzhedugh, Mokhosh, Shapsugh, Agwey, Hatuqwey, Nartkhuaj, Zhaney, Adaley, and so on. Each Kiakh tribe had its own dialect, and some larger ones had sub-dialects as well. However, after the end of the Russian-Circassian War many of these dialects were lost either through extinction of their speakers

or assimilation by other Adiga tribes in the diaspora. At present, only representatives of Temirgoi, Bzhedugh and Shapsugh are found in significant numbers in the Caucasus. Abzakh is only spoken in one village, Hakurina-Habla, in the Caucasus. Nevertheless, it is still possible to salvage many of these lost dialects and record their characteristics and peculiarities.

Each branch of Circassian is represented by one literary and official language: Kabardian in Kabardino-Balkaria and the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, and Adigean in the Adigey Republic. Literary Kabardian is based on the dialect of Greater Kabarda. Literary Adigey is an advanced form of Temirgoi, with a substantive input of words and forms from Bzhedugh and Shapsugh. It is to be noted that modern West Circassian is based on the dialects of those tribes that remained in significant numbers in the Caucasus after the exodus and which have escaped the worst. It is noteworthy that both literary languages are based on the dialects spoken in the environs of the capitals of the respective republics. One notable difference between Kabardian and Adigean is that nouns in Adigean are subject to inflection, whereas they are stable in Kabardian.

Literary languages employ modified forms of the Cyrillic alphabet, which were introduced by the end of the 1930s. Both Kabardian and Adigean made the switch from Latin to Cyrillic script in 1937. In each case the one additional letter is the old Cyrillic capital І, which marks all ejectives in Adigean and some ejectives in Kabardian.

There are 57 letters in standard Kabardian (as opposed to symbols), 19 of which are digraphs (e.g. хъ, пІ), five trigraphs (e.g. хъу), and one tetragraph (кхъу). These combinations are used to represent the inordinate number of consonants. In literary Adigean there are 50 letters of which 18 are digraphs (e.g. жъ, жь, гъ). Cyrillic ordering is followed. However, there is no uniform ordering of equivalent letters in the two languages, which causes some confusion. In addition, there is often no uniform representation of identical sounds, which fact could be rectified by common consent between the two language communities.

Circassian Orthographies

Official Kabardian Alphabet (Cyrillic)*

А	Ә ⁶	Б	В	Г	Гу	Гъ	Гъу	Д	Дж
Дз	Е	Ё	Ж	Жъ	З	И	Й	К	Ку
КІ	КІу	Къ	Къу	Кхъ	Кхъу	Л	Лъ	ЛІ	М
Н	О	П	ПІ	Р	С	Т	ТІ	У	Ф
ФІ	Х	Ху	Хъ	Хъ	Хъу	Ц	ЦІ	Ч	Ш
Щ	ЩІ	Ы	Ә ⁷	Ю	Я	І	Іу	Ъ	Ь

* B. M. Kardanov (ed.), *Kabardinsko-russki slovar* [Kabardian-Russian Dictionary], Kabardino-Balkarian Science and Research Institute, Moscow: State Press of Foreign and National Dictionaries, 1957, p12.

⁶ Schwa in Circassian words.

⁷ In loan words.

Official Adigean Alphabet (Cyrillic)**

А	Б	В	Г	Гъ	Д	Дж	Дз	Е	Ё
Ж	Жъ	Жь	З	И	Й	К	Къ	КІ	Л
Ль	ЛІ	М	Н	О	П	ПІ	Р	С	Т
ТІ	У	Ф	Х	Хъ	Хь	Ц	ЦІ	Ч	Чъ
ЧІ	Ш	Шъ	ШІ	Щ	Ы	Э	Ю	Я	І
Ъ	Ь								

** А. А. Hat'ene & Z. I. Ch'erashe, Adigabzem Yizexef Gwshi'alh [Explanatory Dictionary of the Adigean Language], Bzem, Literaturem, Istoriem ya Adige Nauchne-Issledovatelske Institut [Adigean Science and Research Institute of Language, Literature and History], Maikop: Circassian Book Press, 1960, pxvi.

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For an extensive bibliography on Circassian language, refer to:

<http://iccs.synthasite.com/circassian-bibliography.php>

<http://jaimoukha.synthasite.com/circassian-bibliography.php>