

Chapter 11. Language

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Abkhaz, Circassian and the now extinct Ubykh form the small North West Caucasian language-family. As far as one can ascertain, the dialect-divisions for Abkhaz were: Sadz, Ahchypsy, Bzyp, Abzhywa, Ashkhar and T'ap'anta. Of these only Bzyp and Abzhywa are today still found in the Republic of Abkhazia, roughly spoken to the north(-west) and south(-east) of Sukhum respectively. The last two in the list are attested in the North Caucasian region of Karachay-Cherkessia, where they are viewed as dialects of the Abaza language. The majority of Abkhazians (including those who speak dialects no longer heard in Abkhazia) today live in Turkey, where knowledge of the language diminishes with the generations; there are also communities in Syria, Germany, Holland, Britain, Switzerland, and America. Until at least the troubles of 1989 a small community also lived in the environs of Batumi in the Georgian province of Ach'ara/Adzharia; in 1970 this numbered 1,361, of whom 982 considered Abkhaz to be their native tongue (Kilba 1982). A short description of (T'ap'anta) Abaza can be found in Lomtadze & Klychev (1989), whilst short accounts of (Abzhywa) Abkhaz can be found in Hewitt (1989b¹; To appear) and Hewitt & Khiba (1997), whilst a full grammar is available in Hewitt (1979). See also Dumézil (1967), Spruit (1986), and Trigo (1992).

Though mutually unintelligible, the North West Caucasian languages display a remarkable uniformity of structure. Phonetically, members of the family are characterised by large numbers of consonant-phonemes, produced not only by utilising all points of articulation from the lips back to the larynx (with the typically pan-Caucasian opposition of voiced vs voiceless aspirate vs voiceless ejective for obstruents) but by associating with plain consonants such secondary features as labialisation, palatalisation and (in the case of Ubykh and possibly Bzyp Abkhaz) pharyngalisation -- Ubykh had a minimum of 80 consonantal phonemes. As would be predicted, these languages have minimal vowel-systems, most commentators operating with just a vertical system of close /ə/ vs open /a/, though the status of Abkhaz [a:] is debateable -- Allen (1956; 1965) discusses a further reduction. The literary form of Abkhaz, Abzhywa, has the 58 consonantal phonemes given in the chart below. Bzyp additionally has a full alveolo-palatal series with tʃ , tʃ , $\text{tʃ}'$, ʒ , ʒ , ʒ^v , ʒ^f , plus the two uvular fricatives χ and χ^w , which those who view the pan-Abkhaz back-fricatives as uvulars have to analyse as pharyngalised uvulars.

¹In both this and the Lomtadze/Klychev article an oversight resulted in the phonemes /ts, dz, ts'/ being omitted from the charts on pp.41 and 94 respectively.

²Also often indicated for typographical reasons as 'y' or 'l'.

Bilabial:	b	p	p'			m		w
Labio-dental:				f	v			
Alveolar:	d	t	t'					
	ɖ ^b	tʰ	tʰ'					
	dz ³	ts ⁴	ts'	s	z	n	l	r
Alveolo-palatal:	ɟz ^v	tʃ ^f	tʃ'					
Palato-alveolar:	dʒ	tʃ ⁵	tʃ'	ʃ ⁶	ʒ ⁷			j
				ʃ ^w	ʒ ^w			ɟ
Retroflex:	ɟɻ	tʂ	tʂ'	ʂ	ʐ			
Velar:	g	k	k'	x ⁸	ɣ ⁹			
	g ^j ¹⁰	k ^j	k ^j '	x ^j	ɣ ^j			
	g ^w	k ^w	k ^w '	x ^w	ɣ ^w ¹¹			
Uvular:			q'					
			q ^j '					
			q ^w '					
Pharyngeal:			ħ ¹²					
			ħ ^w					

The phonological feature of labialisation is phonetically instantiated in three ways: simple lip-rounding is indicated by a raised 'w'¹³, labio-dentalisation by raised 'v' or 'f', and double bilabial-alveolar articulation by a raised 'b' or 'p' -- for /ɟ/¹⁴ there is a distinct constriction of the pharynx in the speech of some speakers, reflecting perhaps its origin in a labialised voiced pharyngeal fricative, still preserved in Abaza.

Native roots typically consist of the simple structure C(V), with a high tolerance of homonymy. For example, with initial /a-/ the definite-generic article and // marking stress, we have *a-x^w* 'price; wounded'¹⁵ vs *a-x^wy* 'part; portion of food; gift; hill; handle; hair; feathery down; throat' vs '*a-x^wa* 'ash; grey; bent; (meat-)worm'. Noun-

³Sometimes represented as 'j' or 'ʒ', in which case the palato-alveolar affricate could be represented by either of these with a hachek 'ˇ' above them.

⁴Sometimes represented as 'c'.

⁵Also representable as 'ch', or as 'c' with a hachek above it.

⁶Also representable as 'sh', or as 's' with a hachek above it.

⁷Also representable as 'zh', or as 'z' with a hachek above it.

⁸Also representable as 'kh'.

⁹Also representable as 'gh'.

¹⁰Palatalisation is sometimes marked by placing an acute accent either above or immediately after the relevant consonant.

¹¹Some commentators place these last 6 fricatives with the uvular plosives; I normally call them 'back fricatives', as their articulation can shift between more velar and more uvular depending on the phonetic environment.

¹²For typographical simplicity, 'h' is normally substituted.

¹³Usually one symbol, either this raised 'w' or the degree-sign (°), is used for all varieties of labialisation.

¹⁴One could represent this as 'j^w', as generally in this volume.

¹⁵Cf. also the root *x^w*- as cardinal '5'.

morphology is rudimentary, singular being distinguished from plural and, in Abkhaz, there being only one formally marked case (the Adverbial/Predicative, in *-s* or less commonly *-ny*). Most adjectives follow their nouns, and possession is marked by a pronominal prefix on the possessed nominal. This simplicity is counterbalanced by extreme polypersonalism in the verbal system, where such categories as finite vs non-finite, stative vs dynamic, tense vs mood, simplex vs causative are found, though there is no simple active vs passive opposition. The function of the NPs in a clause is indicated by the form and position of coreferential pronominal prefixes within the verbal complex; tripersonal verbs are common, though Abkhaz avoids four prefixes in one complex. The word-order is predominantly SOV. Examples:

s-ab s-an a-para (Ø-)'ly-j-ta-Ø-jt'¹⁶
 my-father my-mother the-money (it-)her-he-give-PAST -FINITE
My father gave the money to my mother

s-an s-ab a-para (Ø-)'jy-l-ta-Ø-jt'
 my-mother my-father the-money (it-)him-she-give-PAST-FINITE
My mother gave the money to my father

r-'jWyz-ʈʂa r-an r-ab dy-l-dy-r-'dyry-Ø-jt'
 their-friend-s their-mother their-father him-her-they-CAUSE-know-PAST-
 FINITE

Their friends introduced their father to their mother

ʃW-y-ʈʂ-'ry-gy-ʃW-my-r-xa-la-n
 your.PLURAL-self-them-late.for-you.PL-not-CAUSE-become-ITERATIVE-
 PROHIBITION

Don't in general (let yourselves) be late for them [lessons]!

Evliya Çelebi provides the earliest concrete linguistic evidence for North West Caucasian in his travel-book of the 1640s; examples of Ubykh, Circassian and probably (as argued by Chirikba) the Sadz dialect of Abkhaz-Abaza, still then spoken in Abkhazia, feature in his word- and phrase-lists. More extensive items of vocabulary were cited by Johann Anton Güldenstädt in the description he wrote of his own travels in the Caucasus between 1770 and 1773. Though a manuscript of an early 19th century Abkhaz-Russian dictionary is reported to have been discovered in a Tbilisi archive, and though G. Rosen included reference to Abkhaz in a paper delivered in 1845 on Svan, Mingrelian and Abkhaz, the first person to attempt a full-scale description of Abkhaz and provide it with a script was the Russian Baron Peter von Uslar¹⁷, whose grammar of Abkhaz first appeared in lithograph format in 1862; it was printed in 1887, the final

¹⁶Cf. *ʃy-'ly-j-ta-Ø-jt'* 'he gave it/them to her'.

¹⁷Uslar went on to lay the foundations of North Caucasian philology by composing grammars of Chechen, Avar, Lak, Dargwa, Lezgian, Tabasaran.

27 pages being devoted to the only scholarly work on Ubykh to have been carried out while the Ubykhs still dwelled on their native soil.

Uslar studied the Bzyp dialect but did not manage to distinguish all its 67 consonant-phonemes with his Cyrillic-based script of 55 characters. The first moves to publish materials in Abkhaz followed Uslar's pioneering efforts, and his script underwent a number of adaptations, the most successful of which was introduced by A. Ch'och'ua in 1909; this version also employed 55 characters and remained in use until 1926. N. Marr employed his own staggeringly complex so-called 'Analytical Alphabet' with its 75 characters for his 1926 Abkhaz-Russian dictionary. Although this system was Roman-based, it was not adopted as the official Abkhaz script when the Soviet Union, in pursuance of its Romanisation-drive for the 'Young Written Languages'¹⁸ (viz. those languages granted literary status by the Soviets and for which either scripts were first devised or recently devised orthographies received official approval), sanctioned in 1928 the 'Unified Abkhaz Alphabet' of the Russian caucasologist, N. Jakovlev. Until this time most published works had been in the Bzyp dialect (such as the Gospels of 1912, reprinted with Ch'och'ua's original script in 1975 by the Institute for Bible Translation in Stockholm), but partly because most prominent writers of the day hailed from Abzhywa-speaking areas and also because Abzhywa is phonetically the simpler variety surviving in the Abkhazian homeland, from this time Abzhywa has been the literary dialect -- see Bgazhba (1964) for a description of Bzyp. With Stalin anassailable in the Kremlin and the Soviet borders secure, internationalism was abandoned, and this was reflected in the attitude towards scripts functioning inside the USSR -- between 1936 and 1938 Cyrillic became the base for yet new orthographies for all the Young Written Languages, with two significant exceptions, both within Stalin's home-republic of Georgia. In 1931 Stalin had reduced the status of Abkhazia to that of a mere Autonomous Republic within the confines of Georgia, and South Ossetia was an Autonomous Region therein. In 1938 new Georgian-based orthographies were approved for both Abkhaz and the Ossetic of South Ossetia (even though Cyrillic was introduced for the Ossetic of North Ossetia). Linguistically it cannot be denied that Georgian's is the best already established writing-system to serve as base for the representation of any Caucasian language¹⁹, but this shift was primarily motivated not by linguistic considerations but in order to underscore Abkhazia's new subservience to Tbilisi. As the repression of Abkhazian culture intensified under the sustained attempt by Beria and his successor in Tbilisi, the Svan K'andid Chark'viani, to georgianise Abkhazia, publishing of materials in Abkhaz diminished and dried up altogether when all Abkhaz language-schools were closed in 1945-46 and replaced by

¹⁸Although the switch to Roman was apparently discussed even for Russian, the three traditional orthographies of Russian, Georgian and Armenian survived.

¹⁹Though not all will necessarily agree with this view!

Georgian language-schools, in which children were beaten if overheard speaking Abkhaz -- see the 1947 letter of complaint written by G. Dzidzarija *et al.* (1992; English translation in Hewitt 1996). With the deaths of Stalin and Beria in 1953 anti-Abkhazian activity was reversed: teaching of the language and publishing in it were restored, and for this a committee [sic!] devised a new Cyrillic-based script that is still in use. Although not all Cyrillic's characters are utilised, fourteen non-Cyrillic items were incorporated. Even so, the script leaves much to be desired: it is not compatible with the Cyrillic-based orthography that Abaza has used since 1938; some graphs differ in phonetic realisation even between Russian and Abkhaz; it is inconsistent in marking the phonological opposition ejective vs non-ejective. Since there is obviously no possibility of a Georgian base ever appealing to the Abkhazians, one might have thought that, had not the question of their very survival come on the agenda in 1992, the collapse of the Soviet Union would have been an appropriate time for the Abkhazians to introduce a more user-friendly, preferably Roman-based variant that could be easily written with a basic typewriter/computer-keyboard -- for my own ideas on this theme see Hewitt (1995c). Whichever script finally serves post-Soviet Abkhaz, word-stress should certainly be indicated, as it is by no means easy to predict. The chart below presents the Cyrillic-based, introduced in 1954, and the preceding Georgian-based scripts; the order of the post-1953 alphabet is determined by that of Russian, but, when the Georgian-based orthography was in use, it was the sequence of the basic Georgian which determined the order of letters (see Dzhanaashia's *Abkhaz-Georgian Dictionary*, which, though it was published only in 1954, had been prepared in the late 1930s and thus uses the Georgian alphabet for both languages):

Chart of the Cyrillic- and Georgian-based Alphabets for Abkhaz

Cyrillic:	А,а	Б,б	В,в	Г,г	Гь,гь	Гу,гу	҃,҃	҃ь,҃ь	҃у,҃у	Д,д	Дә,дә
Georgian:	a	b	v	g	g ^h	gu	⊙	⊙ ^h	⊙u	d	d ^o
Phonetic:	a	b	v	g	g ^j	g ^w	ɣ	ɣ ^j	ɣ ^w	d	d ^b

Cyrillic:	Е,е	Ж,ж	Жь,жь	Жә,жә	З,з	З,з	Зә,зә	И,и	К,к	Кь,кь	Ку,ку
Georgian:	e	Ωә	Ω	Ω ^o	z	j	j ^o	i	°	° ^h	°u
Phonetic:	e	ʒ	ʒ	ʒ ^w	z	dz	dz ^v	i/j	k'	kj'	k ^w '

Cyrillic:	К,к	Кь,кь	Ку,ку	Қ,қ	Қь,қь	Қу,қу	Л,л	М,м	Н,н	О,о	П,п
Georgian:	k	k ^h	ku	q	q ^h	qu	l	m	n	o	π
Phonetic:	k	k ^j	k ^w	q'	q ^j '	q ^w '	l	m	n	o	p'

Cyrillic: С,с Т,т Тә,тә Т,т Тә,тә У,у П,п Х,х Хь,хь Ху,ху Х,х
 Georgian: s ᵛ ᵛo t to u p x xᵛ xu h
 Phonetic: s t' tP t tP u/w p x xj xʷ h̄

Cyrillic: Хә,хә Ц,ц Цә,цә Ц,ц Цә,цә Ч,ч Ч,ч Ё,ё Ё,ё Ш,ш Шь,шь
 Georgian: ho c co ç ço f ≈ fə ≈ə βə β
 Phonetic: h̄ʷ ts tʃʰ ts' tʃʰʰ tʃ tʃʰ tʃ tʃ' ʃ ʃ

Cyrillic: Шә/шә Ё,ё Ё,ё Ц,ц Ць,ць
 Georgian: βo ჟ √ Δə Δ
 Phonetic: ʃʷ ə ʦ dʒ dʒ

A recent innovation, introduced since the end of the war in 1993, serves to standardise the marking of the feature of labialisation by use of the sign ə. This means that the sounds represented above by the digraphs რუ, ფუ, კუ, ზუ, ზუ, ზუ are now written as რә, ფә, კә, ზә, ზә, ზә. As a consequence, the script no longer needs to utilise the reverse apostrophe to distinguish a sequence of plain consonant followed by bilabial continuant from the labialised form of that same consonant (e.g. იკ'უენი vs იკუენი = *jy-j-k'*-*'wa-jt'* vs *jy-j-kʷ*-*'a-yt'* = 'he seizes it/them' vs 'he filed/polished it/them', for the two verb-forms would now be represented respectively as იკუენი vs იკәენი).

Teaching of Abkhaz was first introduced in 1892 on the basis of the 51-letter script of D. Gulia and K'. Mach'avariani²⁰, but in 1914-15 only 10% of the population was literate. At the time of the closure of Abkhaz language-schools in 1945-46 Abkhaz served as the language of tuition upto Class 5, after which Russian replaced it. In 1966 there were only 91 Abkhaz language-schools in the whole of Abkhazia (the number of all types of schools in 1980 was stated to be 365 by the Appendix to the 11-volume Georgian Encyclopædia). The teaching-plan for 1981-82 divided language- and literature-lessons as follows for Abkhaz language-schools, where teaching was entirely in Abkhaz (apart from Russian language-classes) up to the fourth class, after which the switch occurred to Russian, except for Abkhaz language-classes:

Number of weekly lessons for language and literature in Abkhaz Language-Schools

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Abkhaz Lg	7	6	6	3	3	3	2	2	-	-
Russian Lg	8	9	9	6	6	4	4/3	2	1	1
Abkhaz Lit	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	3	3
Russian Lit	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	3	3	2

²⁰In 1865 Bartolomej had devised a 52-letter orthography.

The non-existence of appropriate text-books coupled with the political-economic-social disruption to life in the republic from 1992 will make any wider teaching in Abkhaz problematic. For further details of language-planning in Soviet Georgia see Hewitt (1989c).

The paucity of Abkhaz language-schools, the larger number of Russian language-schools and the natural desire of parents to see their children proficient in the Soviet Union's (and Abkhazia's!) main *lingua franca* often meant that Abkhazian children were simply enrolled in Russian language-schools²¹. Throughout Soviet Georgia the second language taught in Russian language-schools was usually Georgian, but there is evidence that from at least the 1970s Abkhaz could be studied in not only Russian but even Armenian schools in the republic²². According to data from the 1979 Soviet census published in the Georgian journal *economist'i* (The Economist, 3, 1981, p.74), 96.1% of the Abkhazians considered Abkhaz to be their native tongue (with 2.4% naming Russian vs 1.5% naming Georgian); as for second-language knowledge, 73.9% claimed fluency in Russian²³ (2.1% citing Georgian, 0.4% citing Abkhaz, and 0.1% citing some other unspecified language). The first second language acquired by many Abzhywa Abkhazians for much of the 20th century (at least those in mixed Abkhazian-Mingrelian communities) was Mingrelian²⁴. Naturally, the southernmost region of Abkhazia, Gal (roughly equivalent to the former Samurzaq'an(o) district), was the first to experience this, and indeed became thoroughly mingrelianised quite early. Clear evidence for this dates from 1919 when the Georgian Sh. Beridze was conducting field-work for the Mingrelian grammar he published in manuscript-form in 1920: 'So Samurzaq'ano (from the Ingur to the Ghalidzga, north to the gates of Ochamchira) should be styled a "Mingrelianised" region, for you will be unable to hear here the Abkhaz language, as you could 30-50 years ago; Mingrelian predominates. The intelligentsia ([in the towns of] Gali-Achigvara) know, or course, how to read and write in Russian, speak Mingrelian and do not know Georgian' (p.20, stresses added). This observation vis-à-vis knowledge of Georgian continued to reflect the situation on the ground, for, apart from those educated during the closure of Abkhaz language-schools, Abkhazians tended not to learn Georgian. Nor was there any need: Russian was the natural second (or, in the case of Abkhaz-Mingrelian bilinguals, third) language for Abkhazians, and, since the bulk of the 239, 872 Kartvelian residents of Abkhazia in 1989 were Mingrelians who spoke Mingrelian amongst themselves or in the bazaars,

²¹The same could be said *mutatis mutandis* for non-Russian children across the Union.

²²P.c. from Slava Chirikba, based on his personal recollections of schooling in Gagra.

²³Compare this with the derisory figure of a mere 25.5% of 'Georgians' (viz. Kartvelians) making such a claim.

²⁴Knowledge of Mingrelian in the north was rare, though Turkish was not uncommon there in earlier days.

even in those areas where Kartvelians predominated since Beria's importations of the 1930s, Georgian was rarely heard.

Until 1979, when the Pedagogical Institute in Sukhum was upgraded to a university (following disturbances in Abkhazia in 1978 connected with increasing dominance of Georgian and Kartvelians in the life of the republic), Georgia could boast only one university, that of Tbilisi (founded 1918), where a very small number of places were reserved each year for Abkhazians. From its foundation the Abkhazian State University consisted of three sectors (Russian, Abkhaz, Georgian), of which the largest was always the Georgian.

When the Kartvelian staff and students wrenched the Georgian sector away to form the rival (and illegal) Sukhum Branch of Tbilisi State University as part of the agitation that led to the inter-ethnic clashes of July 1989 (described elsewhere in this volume), the authorities at the Abkhazian State University made the most of this opportunity and opened an Armenian sector to replace the Georgian one -- in 1989 there were 76,541 Armenians (14.6% of the republic's population) in Abkhazia -- this arrangement was resumed after the Abkhazian victory in 1993 and serves as an excellent indication of Abkhazians readiness to cooperate with other peoples living in their republic.

In addition to the Abkhaz-Russian and Abkhaz-Georgian dictionaries by Marr and Dzhanaashia mentioned above, neither of which could claim to be at all exhaustive, a number of specialist dictionaries or lexicological works appeared from the 1960s (e.g. Bghaz̄wba 1968; Bghaz̄wba 1977; Khalbad 1977; Khalbad 1980; Aryṣ-pha 1980; Kvarchija, V. 1981; K'aslandzia 1981; K'aslandzia 1985; K'aslandzia 1989; Mikaia 1985; Aryṣ-pha/Nach'q'ebia-pha 1986; Samandzhia 1987; Nach'qj'ebia-pha 1988; Dzidzarija 1989), but it was only in 1986 that a reasonably comprehensive 2-volume dictionary with both Abkhaz and Russian explanations appeared in Sukhum (Shakryl & Kondzharija 1986). Wim Lucassen and Albert Starreveld are producing an Abkhaz-English dictionary in Holland. F. Agrba of the Turkish diaspora-community published an Abkhaz-Turkish dictionary in 1990. Bgazhba (1964a) produced a Russian-Abkhaz dictionary in 1964. For Abaza there is Zhirov & Èkba (1956) from Russian, and Tugov (1967) into Russian. Collections of Abkhazian proverbs are: Gulia (1939), Arch'elia (1986), and Bghaz̄wba (1983).

The long-term viability of Abkhaz will be precarious, given both the low number of speakers and the unfavourable linguistic environment, whatever the outcome of current political problems.