

"From the Point of the Protection of Minority Languages: the Future of the Circassian  
Language"

Düzce University, 12 October 2014

George Hewitt

Гуп махуэ (а)пщи

Шэы мафэ шэлы

1. Thank you for this opportunity to address this gathering and thank you all for coming. I would say at the outset that, though my first introduction to Caucasian communities was when I had the chance to spend some weeks in the Circassian (Abzakh) village of Demir Kapı (nr. Balıkesir) in 1974, and though it was my intention to continue work on Circassian when I spent the academic year 1975-6 in Georgia, I got diverted and went into Abkhaz studies, which since 1976, with the invaluable help of my Abkhazian wife (Zaira Khiba), I have continued ever since. And so, I cannot claim to be an expert on Circassian, though it has remained close to my heart, for, as I have often stated, I think that phonetically it is simply the most mellifluous language I have ever heard.

2. I was invited to visit Düzce by Dr. Zeynel Besleney, whose doctoral thesis from SOAS on Circassian organisations in Turkey was published earlier this year by Routledge, as a prelude to attending a conference on endangered languages later this week in Ardahan, where I shall arrive tomorrow. I shall say a little about this topic before addressing the case of Circassian, but I want to state at the outset, that, when it comes to the question of Circassian, I would like to hear from you information about your own hopes, aspirations and achievements in connection with securing the future of Circassian, rather than impart specific advice myself.

3. It has been calculated that of the world's 6,000 or so languages perhaps more than half may no longer be spoken by the end of the present century (see, for example, Crystal 2002 and Nettle & Romaine 2000). Languages can decline and become extinct for a number of reasons: natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, diseases, wars etc.. can dramatically reduce the number of, or even totally wipe out, a speech-community. Apart from natural disasters, politics can, of course, play a negative role, whereby minority languages might be discouraged or actively repressed by the majority, politically dominant community. In bilingual/multilingual communities where

there is a major language or *lingua franca*, which perhaps exists in written form, speakers of a minority language, especially if it is unwritten/untaught and also if in today's 'global village' there is a desire to master one of the main international languages (English being the obvious choice when it comes to accessing the Net, for example), may simply view their language as having no use and thus decide not to pass it on.

4. Once numbers decline, for whatever reason, to a critical level, there may be little that can be done to save the language in question, particularly if the speakers have no interest in doing so. In such cases, the best that linguists can do is make every effort to document what they can of the sound-system, the grammar and the lexicon. Just over a decade ago, Dr. Lisbet Rausing, daughter of the Swedish billionaire Hans Rausing (of Tetra Pak fame), made a £20 million donation to SOAS to establish a professorship and finance over a 10-year period projects to research, document and archive endangered languages<sup>1</sup>. Surprisingly perhaps, some linguists are of the view that, just as in life generally, the processes of decay and death of languages are natural phenomena and that no intervention should be made to halt or reverse them. Others take the view that, just as loss of plant- or animal-species in the natural world diminishes the planet's environment, language-loss too diminishes humanity's general environment. Such linguists feel that whatever steps can be taken to ensure language-survival should indeed be taken. I belong to this category.

5. Occasionally, once a language has become extinct, one hears of moves to revive it. It will be of particular interest to an audience of Circassians (and maybe Abkhazians) to learn of an e-mail that arrived in my Inbox only two weeks ago which spoke of a movement in Kabardino-Balkaria to try to revive Ubykh<sup>2</sup>! Perhaps the most famous case of this kind is that of the Celtic language Cornish. This became extinct in Cornwall as a result of the pressure of English in 1777 with the death of the last fully competent native speaker Dolly Pentreath. But it has been revived thanks to the efforts of scholars and activists in the Cornish Language Society. One can also mention in this connection the

---

<sup>1</sup> Information about the scheme can be found at: <http://www.hrelp.org/grants/>.

<sup>2</sup> For information see: <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10/window-on-eurasia-can-ubykh-language.html>!

regeneration of Hebrew in 1904 from being by then just a language of traditional religion into what eventually became the state-language of Israel.

If the lexicon of a language being revived is deficient, there might, if one is lucky, be a way of filling the gaps. Assuming (a) that the language in question has close surviving relatives and (b) that the sound-changes characterising the shift from the parent-language to the daughter-languages are known, if the proto-form of the missing lexical item can be reconstructed to the parent-language, then, knowing the sound-changes that have occurred in the history of the dead language concerned, scholars can produce an educated estimation of the shape that the missing lexical item might have assumed. If the evidence from sister-languages or known sound-changes is absent, then one would have to introduce substitutes: (a) by borrowing from a related language (if any such exists); (b) by borrowing from some other language; (c) by creating a new lexeme by combining items known to have existed in the language undergoing revival — I have in mind combinations along the lines of what we find in, for example, the German word *Handschuh* ‘glove’, which in terms of its constituents means ‘hand-shoe’!

So much for revival; what of intervention to halt/reverse decline? My own contribution to the Ardahan conference will speak of lack of prestige, whether imposed or not through pressure from a politically dominant majority, as the reason why parents start to give up teaching their native tongue to their children. This is what happened when Ubykh was not passed on to children once the Ubykhs had migrated in 1864 from the Caucasus to their settlements in modern-day Turkey through (as far as I know) a purely voluntary decision taken by the elders of the Ubykh community themselves. I also speak of the situation affecting the South Caucasian languages Mingrelian and Svan in Georgia, where the languages are popularly viewed among the general public as mere dialects of Georgian and where both groups of speakers have been encouraged since c.1930 to view themselves as ‘Georgians’; the Mingrelians in particular have been discouraged from seeking language-rights for their mother-tongue, no doubt because of the large number of ethnic Mingrelians in western Georgia. Speakers of the fourth South Caucasian language, Laz, who predominantly live here in Turkey, rightly reject such a classification of their language and object to moves emanating from Georgia to view themselves as Georgians. The Laz have taken full advantage of Turkey’s changed attitude to minority-languages

and are publishing in Laz and introducing Laz as an elective subject in relevant schools. All of this raises the prestige of the language and encourages native speakers to feel pride in possessing (and thus speaking and passing on) their own cultural treasure. My message is that linguists should take every opportunity to try to persuade decision-makers in relevant states to accept that granting language-rights (including the right to have their languages taught) to minorities will not necessarily lead to the separatism that is so often feared, though, of course, it might, if the said minority is more generally suffers discrimination in the state concerned. As I have intimated, neither Mingrelian nor Svan is taught in Georgia's schools.

#### 6. The Case of Circassian

As you all know better than I do, the 'vulnerable' status assigned to Circassian in UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger<sup>3</sup> can be seen as the direct result of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Great Caucasian War with Russia. The hitherto stable dialect-continuum that stretched along the north Caucasian foothills from Kabardia to the Black Sea coast was shattered when the bulk of the Circassians decided to abandon the homeland and take up residence in the Ottoman Empire rather than live, transplanted from their rolling hills to the flatlands of the Kuban basin, under tsarist control in an Orthodox state. The western dialects suffered particularly badly, the once dominant Abzakh/Abadzekh dialect being reduced to basically a single village. In the North Caucasian administrative unit called the Republic of Adyghea, 109,699 Circassians lived (according to the 2010 census<sup>4</sup>) in a sea of Russians, representing only 25.8% of the republic's population of 439,996; a few thousand Shapsugh live around Tuapse in the Russian province of Krasnodar Krai; only in Kabardino-Balkaria do the Kabardian Circassians form an absolute majority on traditional Circassian territory; in 2010 Kabardians numbered 490,453, representing 57.2% of the total population of 859,939<sup>5</sup>. Whilst the bulk of the surviving Circassian migrants ended up in settlements in the state of Turkey that emerged when the Ottoman Empire collapsed; some found themselves as far west as Kosovo and

---

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adyghea#Demographics>, quoting Russian Federal State Statistics Service (2011). "[Всероссийская перепись населения 2010 года. Том 1](#)" [2010 All-Russian Population Census, vol. 1]. *Всероссийская перепись населения 2010 года (2010 All-Russia Population Census)* (in Russian). [Federal State Statistics Service](#). Retrieved June 29, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabardino-Balkaria#Population>.

Greece, whilst, to the east, others were to become citizens of Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Israel, thus finding themselves on opposite sides of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

The early Soviets capitalised on pre-Soviet efforts to write Circassian and included both western Circassian/Adyghe (Temirgoi/Chemgwi dialect) and eastern Kabardian in their list of so-called Young Written Languages, for which scripts were developed, schooling introduced and a literature created/encouraged. Though the development of the USSR's literary language has not followed a uniformly positive course (for details see Wixman 1980), despite the pressure from Russian(s), the Circassian literary languages have maintained their status. All commentators accept that the Kabardians' majority-status in their republic provides a pretty secure basis for the continuing development of that dialect. During my recent stay in Abkhazia, I met a former prime minister of Adyghea (Muxarsbi Txarkaxov) and asked him about the current state of Circassian in Adyghea. I expected a pessimistic reply and was pleasantly surprised by his positive assessment. My Dutch friend and colleague, Dr. Rieks Smeets, himself an authority on Circassian, once told me that, in his opinion, the best course for Circassians to follow in order to ensure the long-term future of Circassian in the North Caucasus would be for speakers of western Circassian dialects to give up Temirgoi/Chemgwi as their literary language and adopt Kabardian instead.

What then of Circassian in Turkey? Well, what can I say that you do not know already? The greater size of the Circassian and Abkhazian diaspora-communities no doubt helped contribute to the fact that the Circassian and Abkhaz dialects did not decay as quickly here as Ubykh. But, the attitude to minorities and their languages that was characteristic of Turkey for most of the Republic's existence (specifically the inability to teach and the impossibility, or at least difficulty, of publishing in these languages), the universal tendency for younger generations to move away from the countryside to urban centres, and the desire to learn such Western languages as German and now English have all contributed to a downgrading of prestige and the consequent decline in knowledge of the languages/dialects by young(er) generations.

Perhaps as a result of Turkey's yearning to gain support among European states for the long-sought entry into the EU, Turkey has relaxed its restrictive laws on minority language rights (starting with allowing broadcasting in 'traditionally used languages'

from January 2004), and Circassians have been among the minorities taking advantage of the opportunity. Before I hear from you exactly what has been done and what ideally should be done to raise Circassian's prestige across the Circassian settlements and to ensure the language's survival, I would add that some years ago I gave a talk in Istanbul in which, following the lead of the Circassian specialist Monika Höhlig, I argued in defence of writing Circassian (especially in Turkey) in a roman-based script using the phonetic values employed in the roman-based script of Turkish — my ideas, not only for Circassian but for any other North Caucasian language were published in an article in 1999. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on such questions as: the most suitable writing-system for Circassian; whether you feel it is necessary and possible to preserve all the dialectal varieties of Circassian; which form(s) of Circassian is/are being/should be taught where Circassian is currently being studied in Turkey; if Cyrillic is the base of choice for teaching Circassian, what you think about the inconsistencies in marking the same sound in the two official orthographies back in the Caucasus (e.g. the sound [š] exists in both official varieties of Circassian in the Caucasus and yet in the western script it is represented by the Cyrillic character ш, whilst in the eastern script it is represented by ш. This latter character is also employed in the western script, but here it has the value of the retroflex fricative [ʂ]. The same can be said of the sound [ž] which in the western script is represented by жь, but in the eastern script by ж; again this latter graph exists in the western script, but here it is pronounced [z]); and how far, if at all, are your links with Maykop, Nalchik and Cherkessk important to you and helpful in your quest to find a solution to the problems facing your language both in the Caucasian homeland and here in Turkey?

I wish you every success in your endeavours to keep the precious A:dyghabza alive with an every growing number of speakers and an array of exciting publications!

ТХЪЭМ ШЪЫГЪЭПСЭУ

## References

Crystal, David. 2002. *Language Death*. Cambridge: University Press.

Hewitt, [B.] George. 1999. Roman-based alphabets as a life-line for endangered languages, in *Tipologija i teorija jazyka. Ot opisaniya k objasneniju. K 60-letiju*

- Aleksandra Evgenjevicha Kibrika* [Typology and Linguistic Theory. From Description to Explanation], edited by Ja.G. Testeleets & E.V. Rakhilina, 613-621pp. Moscow: Jazyki Russkoj Kul'tury.
- Hewitt, [B.] George. 2014. Instilling Pride by Raising a Language's Prestige. Conference-paper, Ardahan, October 2014.
- Höhlig, Monika. 1983 [1990] *Draft of an orthography for Adyghe, Abzakh dialect, on the basis of the Turkish alphabet*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, with Turkish and English gloss. 48pp.
- Nettle, Daniel & Romain, Suzanne. 2000. *Vanishing Voices: the Extinction of the World's Languages*. Oxford: University Press.
- Wixman, Ronald 1980. *Language Aspects of Ethnic Patterns and Processes in the North Caucasus*. Chicago: University Press.