

Georgia: The language-situation

[B.] George Hewitt FBA, Professor of Caucasian Languages, NME Dept., SOAS,
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK.

Georgia (capital Tbilisi) officially occupies 69,500 square-kilometers in north-west Transcaucasia. It lies between longitudes 40°05' and 46°44' east, and latitudes 41°07' and 43°35' north, bordering the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and the Black Sea. The last census covering this entire territory took place during the final years of Soviet rule in 1989. The main figures are presented in Table 1:

Main Population of Georgia (1989)

Whole Population	5,400,841	100%
'Georgians'	3,787,393	70.1%
Armenians	437,211	8.1%
Russians	341,172	6.3%
Azerbaijanis	307,556	5.7%
Ossetians	164,055	3.0%
Greeks	100,324	1.8%
Abkhazians	95,853	1.8%

But two areas have been *de facto* independent of the central government for most of the period since the collapse of the USSR (1991): the former Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (capital Sukhum) in the north-western triangle of Transcaucasia, and the former Autonomous Region of South Ossetia (capital Tskhinval), to the south of Russia's North Ossetian republic across the main chain of the Caucasus mountains. Georgia's population (as of 2004) is lower than the 1989-figure partly because of post-1991 emigration (non-Georgians leaving largely because of ethnic tensions; Georgians themselves abandoning the homeland for economic betterment), and partly because of the loss of the afore-mentioned territories, whose own populations are reduced as a result of the respective wars with Georgia in the early 1990s (1990-92 for S. Ossetia; 1992-93 for Abkhazia). The draft of a Georgian Language Law, which was published in 1988, with its requirement that all entrants to higher education in the

republic be able to pass a test in Georgian language and literature, was a contributory factor to the ethnic strife which began to scar the body politic in the last years of Soviet communism, for many (?the majority) amongst certain ethnic minorities, generally living compactly around Georgia's borders, tended to have little or no knowledge of Georgian.

The 1989-figures for both the basic number of 'Georgians' and the almost 100 percent registering fluency in the 'mother tongue' are vitiated, as 'Georgians' have included since around 1930 all of the Kartvelian peoples, namely: Georgians proper (in Georgian *kartvel-eb-i*), as well as the related Mingrelians (in Mingrelian *margal-ep-i*), Svans (in Svan *shwan-är*) and the relatively few coastal Laz (in Laz *laz-epe/ch'an-epe*) residing here (the bulk of the Laz live along the north-east Turkish littoral) — the Georgian language lacks a superordinate term for these four peoples, whilst 'Kartvelian' is the natural choice in English, given the expression 'Kartvelian languages' (in Georgian *kartvel-ur-i en-eb-i*) as a synonym for 'South Caucasian languages'; the entire North Central Caucasian Bats (Ts'ova-Tush) community of circa 5,000, concentrated in the east Georgian village of Zemo Alvani, are also so categorised. All of the Svans (circa 55,000, centred in the high valleys along the Ingur and Tskhenis-ts'q'ali rivers in western Georgia) and most of the Mingrelian-speaking Mingrelians (\pm half a million, in the western Georgian lowlands) have Georgian as their second (literary) language through receiving their education in Georgian-language schools. No widespread knowledge of Georgian among Svans or Mingrelians should be assumed for pre-Soviet times, despite Georgian's role as the language of worship in the Georgian Orthodox Church. Only between Mingrelian and Laz is there any degree of mutual intelligibility within the Kartvelian family; native scholars treat them as co-dialects of the so-called Zan language.

Though they never gained the status of permanent literary languages during the Soviet period, a number of books, journals and newspapers were produced in Mingrelian from the late 1920s to 1938 (Enwall 1992), and a language-primer was even published in Sukhum for the few Soviet Laz residents in 1935 (Feurstein 1992).

Otherwise, the only publications in these languages (and Svan) were designed for linguists and/or folklorists, rather than the native speakers themselves, who were obliged to view themselves as 'Georgians' (hence the post-1930 census-classification). During Soviet times all Svans and most (Laz-)Mingrelians were educated in Georgian-language schools, where tuition was in Georgian and their true mother-tongues were not taught; in such schools Russian was also taught from the first grade.

Russian was likewise taught *ab initio* in Armenian-, Azeri-, Ossetian- and Abkhaz-language schools (these being the other literary languages found in Georgia, in addition to Russian), whilst in Russian-language schools tuition was in Russian, with Georgian introduced from grade 3 (though Abkhaz became the optional second language in such schools from 1981-2) — see Hewitt (1989). No Chechen-language schools seem ever to have been established to cater for the Chechen-speaking Kist' population of the P'ank'isi Gorge in eastern Georgia.

Georgia's independence, combined with Georgians' well-known antipathy towards Russia, has meant a drastic diminution in the teaching of Russian within Georgia proper, such that knowledge of it can no longer be taken for granted amongst the post-Soviet generation. According to the latest information available, there were in 2004 86 Russian, 127 Armenian, 117 Azeri, and 73 mixed schools subordinate to the Ministry of Education (plus 2,023 Georgian schools), and in all of them Georgian is taught from grade 1. Within S. Ossetia and Abkhazia it is essentially the Soviet system which still applies, though the Abkhazian authorities do not sanction the teaching of/in Georgian, as reportedly desired by the republic's Kartvelian (mostly Mingrelian) residents, concentrated in the south-easternmost Gal District; Abkhazia's main *lingua franca* is Russian.

With the post-independence rise of private publishing, a number of Mingrelian publications have appeared for popular consumption. Within Abkhazia a trilingual (Russian, Mingrelian, Abkhaz) newspaper ('Gal') has been established, and one periodically hears calls for the establishment of full literary status for this language, a

move which is strenuously discouraged in Tbilisi because of the perceived threat of the political separatism which it is feared might follow.

Georgia also has small communities of speakers of Greek, Assyrian, and some Daghestanian languages (e.g. Udi). Whilst Bats is actually moribund, Udi, Svan, Laz (even in Turkey) and Abkhaz are endangered, as in the longer term will be Mingrelian, which has been losing ground from the east to Georgian since the 19th century, unless appropriate measures are taken.

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Cross-reference: Abkhaz