

# Caucasian-hunting in Turkey

Prof. Eugénie Henderson begins her 1970 article on certain acoustic features of Kabardian with these words, "Just as there are said to be "painters' painters" and "poets' poets", so too there may be said to be "linguists' languages", and amongst these must without any question be included the languages of the Caucasus". This irrefutable statement will largely have to be taken on trust, since it would obviously be out of place in a non-technical article such as this to attempt to prove it true. However, a brief sketch of the basic facts may be appreciated by those totally unacquainted with the area and its languages.

Although relatively small, geographically speaking, the Caucasus contains over 30 languages, which may be divided into 3 groups: a) N.E. Caucasian, the largest group comprising the languages of Daghestan; especially noteworthy here is the well-developed case-system for nouns (Tabasaran with, I believe, 32 cases holding the world-record in this regard), which is balanced by an extremely simple verbal system; b) N.W. Caucasian, consisting of Ubykh, Circassian and Abchaz; this group, though fairly clearly related genetically with N.E. Caucasian, shows us quite the reverse characteristics from those mentioned above - here we have basically a 2-case system for the nouns as opposed to a very rich polypersonal system for the verb; I quote a Kabardian example given by Kuipers (1955):

we<sup>1</sup>-q'e<sup>2</sup>-zare<sup>3</sup>-s<sup>4</sup>-x<sup>0</sup>e<sup>5</sup>-j<sup>6</sup>-wek<sup>7</sup>-ah<sup>8</sup>-r<sup>9</sup> = that/how<sup>3</sup> he<sup>6</sup> kill<sup>7</sup>-ed<sup>8</sup> you<sup>1</sup> (hither<sup>2</sup>)

for<sup>5</sup> me<sup>4</sup>. (N.B. the -q'e- is a directional prefix found under certain conditions and untranslatable into English; the -r is the marker of definiteness in the absolute case of the nouns; thus, the verbal complex is here acting as a noun and is roughly equivalent to the underlined part of this sentence: "The question as to how he killed you for my sake is irrelevant".); c) S. Caucasian/Kartvelian, of which the most important member is Georgian with a literature dating back to the 5th century A.D. This group occupies a middle ground between the other two, but it is by no means certain that the Kartvelian languages are genetically related to the northern groups.

In 1864, when the Russians finally pacified Circassia, following the defeat of Shamil in Daghestan, many thousands from the N.W. Caucasus chose the life of the emigré in preference to subjugation under the Russian yoke. There was a mass movement into Turkey and the Arab countries of the Near East. The largest group belonging to a single linguistic community were the Circassians; there were also a number of Abchaz and all the surviving Ubykhs, all of whom were/are bi-lingual, with Circassian as their second tongue, and many spoke Abchaz too. Their journey to the various settlements they were able to establish was a hard one, and many died in the course of it. The need to learn the language of the country in which they variously came to rest has had a grave consequence for Ubykh. Their small numbers together with their bi-lingualism in Circassian resulted in the language going into a sharp decline. Today there can be few more than 15 people with any ability to speak it at all. But I shall return to this language later.

Despite the many difficulties involved it had been arranged that I should visit the Circassian village of Demir Kapı, Anatolia, and stay with a family there for 2½ weeks this summer in order to gain both an introduction to the villagers there and some limited familiarity with their dialect of W. Circassian, Abzakh. The entire trip was made possible through the good offices of a friend now living and working in London though actually a native of Demir Kapı. I had first been introduced to this man (whose Abzakh Christian name is P'erep'en) when it came to my notice last Easter that there was a Circassian speaker in this country looking for someone to teach him how to write his native language. This language is not taught in Turkey, and it was not until after the exodus of 1864 that Circassian was written down in the Caucasus. At present there are at least two literary languages within the Soviet Union for Circassian, based on Kabardian for E. Circassian and on Chemirgoi for W. Circassian. Only slight differences separate Chemirgoi from Abzakh, and so it has been possible to give P'erep'en some instruction in the principles whereby Chemirgoi appears in written form.

Demir Kapı lies on the main road between Istanbul and Izmir and is, thus, of easy access. From the moment of our arrival my interpreter, Miss Vanessa Shepherd of Girton, and myself were shown the utmost kindness and hospitality. There was always plenty of food, too much in fact, even during Ramazan, when we had our breakfast and lunch specially prepared. But I wasn't there just to eat rice. I had with me a cassette-recorder and 25 cassettes, a number which, before leaving England, I had thought too few - in the event it proved more than sufficient. The reasons were mainly as follows: everyone thought that I was quite mad to want to learn such a, as they put it, 'useless language', and this combined with the lazy attitude to life typical of the East resulted in the men particularly not giving me the help I required - I say 'the men', for it was not so easy for the wife of my host, Mrs. Cangül, her daughter, Hacer, and her friends, Meral and Maryam, to escape my constant search for translations. Only one man could be found, Recep Gelir, who readily admitted knowing some traditional stories, and yet it was like getting blood from a stone when I tried to tape some of them. In fact, I do have about 8 stories from Recep, but he speaks so quickly (for he was playing to the audience which sprang up from nowhere as soon as he opened his mouth) that only a native-speaker can make any sense of them. A further problem, and one which does not augur well for the survival of Circassian in Turkey, was that whilst the older folk had an excellent command of Abzakh with a corresponding insecurity in Turkish, the younger generation are more proficient in Turkish than Abzakh. This meant that I ideally required both Hacer and her mother for purposes of translation. However, the daily round of household chores generally saw them operating in different quarters, and then there was Hacer's love of that infernal noise which passes for music in Turkey and which pours hourly forth over the radio. Anyway, my short stay there really did everything for me that I should reasonably have expected of it before I went; I came home with about 700 sentences, a dozen tales and a few songs. More importantly, I met some wonderful people while there, who, I trust, will still be in the village at the time of my next visit, as soon as time and funds allow.

In Demir Kapı there is one elderly lady of Ubykh descent. She has little knowledge now of her mother-tongue, but she was the first Ubykh I met. When the distinguished Norwegian scholar, Hans Vogt, prepared the Ubykh dictionary in the early sixties, his informant was a remarkable man called Tevfik Esenç, who for some years had worked with the great Caucasologist, Georges Dumézil. On my arrival in Turkey I did not even know whether this man was still alive. In order to find out something about him I had the good fortune to meet a man in Demir Kapı who offered to take me to the last Ubykh 'stronghold', Hacı Osman Köyü, Tevfik's birthplace. This is the only place where Ubykh is spoken by more than 2 people. I spent one night here and met a mere four men, aged between 55 and 75, who know the language: Fuat Ergün, my host for the night, Hasan Cârre, Sadettin Çirik, and Sadettin Hunç. None of Fuat's 7 children knows Ubykh, though his wife may - I never saw her, for unlike the practice in Demir Kapı the women of Hacı Osman are typically Muslim in their desire to keep out of the way of strange men. I taped what material I could in the time available, but the chief benefit of the trip was that I had secured a contact-address in Istanbul for Tevfik. Twenty-four hours after my return to Istanbul there was a knock at the door of my host's flat and in he came.

Why all this fuss over a nearly extinct language and over one of its speakers? The answer is simple: Ubykh is quite unique amongst the world's languages. All the languages from the north of the Caucasus possess large numbers of consonants, but Ubykh has the greatest consonantal phoneme-inventory of any language yet discovered, having an amazing 80 (compare this with the 24 of English). Now, for a variety of reasons, this consonantal system has been simplified by all the speakers of Hacı Osman, with the result that there is only one man alive who speaks it as it should be spoken, and that man is Tevfik Esenç. Raised by his grandparents, he spoke nothing but Ubykh until the age of 8; it is, thus, the speech of his grandfather, Ibrahim, who died at the age of 120, that Tevfik preserves to this day! His wife and youngest son, Erol, who spent some years in Hacı Osman and who now lives in Cologne, both know only the simplified pronunciation. As an example of this simplification I may quote the case of the labialized 't'. This should be pronounced as a French dental 't' accompanied by the sort of vibration at the lips that you or I would make if we wished to indicate that we were cold. However, in the simplified form this appears as a straightforward English 'p'.

Every day for a week Tevfik, who, incidentally, is 70, made a long journey from his side of Istanbul to where I was staying at 10.00 a.m. to spend 2 hours translating everything I asked of him, with the result that I have almost as much material in Ubykh as in Abzakh. It is impossible to praise this man too highly; Dumézil and Vogt have already drawn attention to his superb qualities as an informant, his patience, care, intelligence and outstanding memory. I myself was equally impressed by his qualities as a man; I knew virtually no Turkish and was without the help of an interpreter for most of my sessions with him, and yet with great enthusiasm and understanding he sat there steadily translating for a total of some 14 hours. His concern to preserve as much of his language as possible for posterity contrasts sharply with the scandalous lack of interest in this rewarding field of research displayed by the scholarly community at large; during the last 100 years since the existence of such languages as Ubykh was first brought to the attention of western scholars, only a handful have been out in the field to work with the Ubykhs: Benediksten, Dirr, Dumézil, Mészáros and Vogt. It is to be hoped that as much as possible may be done, particularly with Tevfik, before his fascinating language disappears completely - and that will be in the not too distant future.

B. G. Hewitt

References:

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