

## Instilling Pride by Raising a Language's Prestige

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### ABSTRACT

Having had the privilege of staying in a Circassian (Abzakh) village and then of meeting and recording Tevfik Esenç in Turkey in 1974, and also having worked on minority-languages in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, I feel that the first step in countering the threat of extinction is to instill in speakers recognition that their language has value. Otherwise, they will see no point in passing it on to younger generations; this is what happened with Ubykh and is still happening with a number of Caucasian languages, both in Turkey and in the Caucasus. The question is how to achieve this. Ideally, the authorities in the state concerned should take the lead, but often the opposite is the case, as in multi-ethnic countries majoritarian governments often see the encouragement of minority languages/cultures as a potential threat to the integrity of the state. What one might call 'external' education of state-authorities needs to be applied to persuade them of valuing such human resources and to act accordingly to promote language-preservation (e.g. by disseminating and urging the acceptance of the European Charter for Regional & Minority Languages, in Georgia for instance); one step towards preservation can be awarding official status to minority/endangered languages by allowing 'internal' education to take place of/in the said language(s) in local schools and the media. Lack of appropriate text-books and/or general literature also needs to be addressed even in cases where the state has already awarded official status to an endangered language (e.g. Abkhaz in Abkhazia).

I have to begin by mentioning Ubykh, given my good fortune in meeting the last speakers in Hacı Osman Köyü and Istanbul in 1974.

The demise of the N. W. Caucasian language Ubykh was played out on Turkish soil following the mass-migration of the Ubykhs (perhaps upto 50,000 souls) at the end of the Great Caucasian War in 1864. The late French scholar, Georges Dumézil, who, of course, made the greatest contribution to documenting and analysing this language, wrote how the Ubykhs even in their homeland (viz. in the environs of modern-day Sochi) may

always have been bi-/tri-lingual in one or both of the languages of their neighbours and close linguistic relatives (namely the western Abkhazians and the western Circassians). After resettling in regions of Turkey where the majority of their fellow-Caucasian migrants were either Circassians or Abkhazians, their elders evidently decided that, since they would have to learn the language of their Turkish hosts and also to communicate with their fellow-migrants, they would simply not bother passing on their native Ubykh to the new generations. The decision was regrettable but understandable, given (a) the circumstances in which the Ubykhs found themselves and (b) that at that time nobody worried about the disappearance of languages. What we have here, then, is a clear example, it would seem, of a community-decision to allow their language to wither away, deeming it to be of less value than those of their neighbours and hosts.

And wither it duly did, being described as already moribund by those scholars who first visited the Ubykh settlements (the Dane Å. Benediksten 1898, the German A. Dirr 1913/14, the Hungarian J. Meszaros 1930/31, and Dumézil 1930). When Dumézil returned to Turkey in 1953 after WWII, he expected to find no speakers left, but fate brought him together with Tevfik Esenç, who, much younger than the other speakers, had been raised by his grandparents and thus had had the by-that-time rare opportunity to be exposed largely to Ubykh alone until he started school. Though the language of Tevfik's wife and the other Ubykh females in the Manyas settlements never seems to have been investigated, Tevfik is universally described as the last fully competent speaker, taking the language with him to the grave in 1992.

Had the Ubykhs reconciled themselves to Russia's victory in 1864 and accepted the offer to live compactly under Russian domination (albeit perhaps in the Kuban basin away from their traditional hilly terrain), their language would surely be alive today, even if many of its speakers would certainly have perished in the upheavals of the Revolution and Stalin's Terror. This is a realistic supposition, since both standard Abkhaz (plus its divergent Abaza dialect) and two varieties of Circassian (western Adyghe and eastern Kabardian) were included in the list of so-called 'Young Written Languages' by the early Soviets. This gave them literary status and officially approved scripts. It would be interesting to learn if anything has been published about the discussions over which languages were to be included in this classification or even if records of those discussions

have survived. The efforts that went into supporting languages in the Caucasus in the 1920s until around the mid-1930s is astonishing. For example, although the Daghestanian Lezgian language Udi was spoken in only 3 villages on either side of the Georgian-Azerbaijani border, a 2-dialect primer was published (in Sukhum!) in 1934, and, despite the fact that only a tiny number of S. Caucasian Laz speakers lived on Soviet (Georgian) territory, a school-primer was published (again in Sukhum) in 1935, two issues of a Laz paper *Mch'ita Murutsxi* 'Red Star' having appeared in 1929 (see Feurstein 1992:320-22 for images of these rarities). Though Abkhaz, Abaza, Adyghe and Kabardian have retained their literary status, literary aspirations for Udi and Laz (perhaps unsurprisingly) quickly faded. But at first glance a far more surprising loss of status was suffered by the S. Caucasian language Mingrelian, given the huge number of ethnic Mingrelians concentrated in the west Georgian province of Mingrelia.

I introduce Mingrelian as an example of how a state can act deliberately to undermine the prestige that I argue is necessary for speakers to feel in order to sustain their willingness to pass their language on to their children, thereby ensuring the language's long-term survival. Back in the 1980s when I was researching Mingrelian the elderly mother of my main Mingrelian informant (in Ochamchira, Abkhazia) asked her son (in his 50s) what use Mingrelian was to a British linguist when it was of no use even to native Mingrelians! It would be foolish, given the numbers involved<sup>1</sup>, to suggest that Mingrelian is in any immediate danger, but its fate over the last century well illustrates the negative consequences for languages that government-actions can have. In his paper to the 1990 Caucasian Colloquium at SOAS the German Wolfgang Feurstein, who has long championed the cause of the Laz in Turkey and that of Laz's close sister Mingrelian (plus that of the more distant sister Svan) in Georgia, compared the treatment of Laz in Turkey with that of Mingrelian and Svan in Georgia (see Feurstein 1992), and I myself have contributed to the discussion (Hewitt 1995). More recent examples could be cited, but simply consider this brief summary: the leading Mingrelian politician of the 1920s, Ishak Zhvania, advocated autonomy for Mingrelia together with the teaching of, and publication in, Mingrelian; books such as *Ch'ita Chxoria* 'Red Ray' and the *Zugdidi*

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<sup>1</sup> The number of ethnic Mingrelians (let alone that of competent speakers) is unknown, but it is suggested that speakers might number up to half a million.

newspaper *Q'azaxishi Gazeti* 'Peasant's Paper' appeared from 1930, but around this time, as Stalin secured control of the Kremlin and Lavrent'i Beria assumed Zhvania's mantle as the leading Mingrelian politician, all talk of autonomy ceased, Mingrelians were officially classified as 'Georgians', and publishing in Mingrelian **for Mingrelians** (as opposed to linguistic or folkloristic works for specialists) ended c.1938. Whilst it is popularly believed in Georgia that Mingrelian, Laz and Svan are mere dialects of Georgian, even local linguists who know this not to be the case but who do not wish to upset the official designation of these peoples as 'Georgians' have invented the (to my mind) odd term 'sociolinguistic dialect' to describe the status of these tongues in Georgia. This general downplaying of Mingrelian must surely have contributed to the sad remark made by that old lady back in the 1980s.

Of course, the clue as to why Tbilisi has wanted as many residents of Georgia as possible to identify themselves as 'Georgians' (just as for most of its existence the Turkish Republic has tended to regard all residents of Turkey as 'Turks') lies in Zhvania's desire to establish a Mingrelian autonomy. Separatism was feared and remains feared to the present day<sup>2</sup>. Let us recall Stalin's own words from his famous 1913 article on *Marxism and the National Question*: 'What is to be done with the Mingrelians, the Abkhasians, the Adjarians, the Svanetians, the Lesghians [*lek'ebi* in the Georgian version], and so on, who speak different languages but do not possess a literature of their own? To what nations are they to be attached?...What is to be done with the Ossets, of whom the Transcaucasian Ossets are becoming assimilated (but are as yet by no means wholly assimilated) by the Georgians and the Ciscaucasian Ossets are partly being assimilated by the Russians and partly continuing to develop and are creating their own literature? How are they to be "organised" into a single national union?' (pp.48-9 of the English translation).

I asked an elderly Mingrelian in Upper Gal last autumn about his ethnic self-awareness and how he distinguished between Mingrelians and Georgians. He replied: 'We Mingrelians have our own language, but we are only a people [*xalxi*], whereas the Georgians are a nation [*eri*].' Asked how he differentiated between peoples and nations,

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, it seems that the reason for the quick demise of just 2 issues of the Laz newspaper in Georgia in 1929 may have been the result of a request from Turkey to discontinue it (Feurstein 1992.299).

he said that the Georgians formed a nation ‘because they have a literature’! Whilst Stalin’s view might have prevailed amongst (?most/many/all) Mingrelians, recent attempts to introduce this categorisation to the Laz in Turkey by visitors from Georgia have caused what I would judge to be entirely natural resentment. Consider these quotes from a statement released in 2013 by a group of Laz intellectuals: ‘We do not find it ethical and vigorously condemn the appropriation of people who have contributed to the Laz Community and the attribution of those to the Georgians, through distortion and forced interpretations...If Georgia and institutions in Georgia seek to raise the Laz’s sympathy and increase their satisfaction it is recommended that they should turn to topics like cultural autonomy and mother-tongue education for Mingrelian and Svan, and support ways to encourage and strengthen these languages. It would be a more democratic manner for Georgia if they intended recognition of these languages as mother-tongues without being pressed by Europe or other political powers but by means of a feeling of responsibility coming from within the country and its institutions. It should be noted that Mingrelian and Svan are a part of the world’s cultural heritage and efforts made to keep these languages alive are nourished by universal principles, which arise out of universal human rights. The extinction of these languages is a problem that concerns not only the speakers themselves but all humanity’ (*To the Turkish and Georgian Public*, 2013)<sup>3</sup>.

There is an oblique reference in this statement to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), which Georgia has yet to sign (cf. Wheatley 2009). It is true that Turkey too has not signed it either, but, possibly as part of its drive to join the EU, Turkey has relaxed official sanctions against the use of minority-languages on its territory. And the Laz (along with Circassians and Abkhazians) have taken welcome advantage of this positive change in official attitudes<sup>4</sup>. It is my firm conviction that

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<sup>3</sup> Read the statement at: <http://abkhazworld.com/news/statements/973-laz-intellectuals-explain-their-view-of-laz-ethnicity.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The Laz have made tremendous progress as outlined in a recent communication from a member of the community, Eylem Bostancı: 1) From September 2013, in the 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> classes of the secondary schools Laz can be taken as an elective lesson. In 2013, there were only five classes in the towns of Findikli (Rize) and Arhavi (Artvin). In September 2014, the number of classes went up to 15, with pupils taking Laz as an elective lesson in the towns of Ardesen, Pazar and Findikli in the province of Rize, and in the towns of Borcka and Arhavi in the province of Artvin. We are hoping that the number of classes will go up to at least 30 in the next academic year and that classes will also open in Hopa.

2) The Laz Institute, which was established in 2013, is developing relations with the linguists and scholars around the world. It introduced courses for the teaching of Laz for adults in Istanbul. The Institute has been commissioned by the Turkish Ministry of Education to prepare text books to be used during the elective Laz lessons at the secondary schools. The institute is also having talks with a number of universities in Turkey for Laz courses to be introduced at these universities. Laz elective courses will continue to take place at the University of Bosphorus (Bogazici Universitesi) in the 2014 academic year.

3) Laz intellectuals continue to work towards creating a Laz literature. The Laz Yayin Kollektifi (The Laz Publication Collective) has published more than 60 books in the last four years of its establishment, of which only five are in Turkish and all the rest are in Laz. We have published Laz dictionaries, a Laz

linguists wishing to preserve endangered languages should, (even at the risk of incurring unpopularity) either themselves or through statist institutions like the ECRML, seek to persuade non-progressive states to recognise that providing proper provision (including tuition at school) for minority languages is NOT necessarily an encouragement to separatism. If proper linguistic provision is accompanied by respect for ethnic identity and non-discriminatory treatment across the board, there is absolutely no reason why separatism should result.

To turn finally and briefly to Abkhazia, I would note that, possibly as a direct result of the war with Georgia, one has the impression that the need to preserve Abkhaz is more widely felt than previously, language being an obvious and immediate marker of identity — in this case the identity targeted by Georgian nationalism. With the aim of encouraging universal study and use of the language, a law was introduced on 27 November 2007 under the late Pres. S. Bagapsh requiring all official business to be conducted in Abkhaz from 1 January 2015. Whilst this might have been (and indeed remains) a noble aspiration, passing a law without making provision in terms of teaching, publication of relevant language-materials, etc... means that it will be impossible to enforce (the Vice-President elected on 24 August 2014 does not, for example, know Abkhaz!) and renders that law pointless. With Abkhazia's economy still in a straitened state, any assistance in terms of help with producing suitable manuals and the training of teachers would be welcome. And, of course, the question of Mingrelian is also relevant to Abkhazia. Here I have long advocated that, if the local Mingrelians want their children to be educated through the medium of Georgian (as seems to be the case), this should be allowed on condition that Mingrelian too is taught in local schools up to a certain level of competence in order to raise its profile and prestige amongst its native speakers. This

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periodical (Tanura), five Laz novels, books on the Laz history, Laz poem books, a high number of children's books, and a variety of translations into Laz from famous fairytales/stories from around the world. The fairytales/stories that have been translated into Laz so far are as below and more are to come. We will be attending to the Tüyap Istanbul Book Fair (the largest book fair in the country) in November.

\* The Little Prince (also translated into Mingrelian by the Laz Cultural Association)

\* Romeo and Juliet

\* The Little Black Fish

\* Polly-Anna

\* The Snow White

\* Don Quixote

\* Pinocchio

view is not popular, however, with many Abkhazians, I have to admit! But if the cause is noble, the battle is worth fighting, as I hope we can all agree.

#### References

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