

THE UDI LANGUAGE IN GEORGIA (THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS)

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Abstract: The **Udis, Udins** – their own name „**Udi, Uti**“ – are one of the autochthonous peoples of the Caucasus. They are considered to be descendants of the Caucasian Albanians. The Udis living in Georgia migrated from the Azerbaijani village of **Vartasheni** to the village of **Zinobiani** in the Kvareli district. The Udi language is included in the **UNESCO World Atlas** of Endangered Languages.

According to the results of the 2014 general census, 203 Udis lived in Georgia, and the absolute majority of them lived in the village of Kvareli district.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, it was believed that the **Udis (Utis)** were the only remaining descendants of the ancient Albanians.

According to the majority of scholars, the only direct descendants of the ancient Albanians are the **Udis**, who have preserved the **Albanian (Udi)** language to this day. The Albanian language belongs to the group of dead languages. The Udi language belongs to the **Ibero-Caucasian** family of languages.

At present, the Udi language area is limited to three villages: **Zinobiani village** (Georgia, Kvareli municipality), **Oghuzi village** (Vartashen district) (Azerbaijan, Gabal (Kutkashen) district), **Nidzh village** (Gabal district, Azerbaijan). The Udi language is mainly used at home.

Since 2015, the Udi language has been taught in the village, in the primary classes of the Zinobiani public school.

In October 2023, I conducted a sociolinguistic study in the village of Zinobiani, Kvareli municipality, Kakheti, where the Udi people live compactly.

In order to analyse the results of the study, I used the main factors of sociolinguistic research: structured and unstructured interviews; linguistic observation, questionnaires...

During the sociolinguistic analysis of the language, I identified several important factors:

- Demographic indicators and their impact on the functioning and vitality of the Udi language;
- Proportionality of Udi speakers to the total population;
- Bilingualism in the Udi community;
- Mixed marriages and their impact on the functioning of the language;
- Migration processes and their impact on the vitality of the language.

The combination of these methods allowed me to study language in a social context and to analyse linguistic changes in different social groups.

Based on the analysis of the available data, I tried to imagine the level of vitality/viability of the Udi language in Georgia, to identify the causes of the problems and the existence of programmes supporting the functioning of the language.

Key words: The Udi language; An Endangered Language; Language Status; A minority language; Family Language.

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Introduction. At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the new one, not only large nations, but also hundreds of small ethnic groups, including the **Udis**, faced the challenge of modernity. This is one of the oldest ethnic groups in the Caucasus, living on the territory of modern Azerbaijan.

The life and destiny of the **Udis** were determined by the invasions of the ancient Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Mongols, Turks and other invaders. They lived for centuries in a multi-ethnic environment, which had a great impact on the functioning of this ethnic group and its language. Over the centuries, the Udis have endured many occupations and tragedies, as a result of which they have been reduced from a numerous nation to a small ethnic group.

Udi (also called **Uti** or **Udin**) is a language spoken by the Udi people and a member of the Lezgian branch of the Northeast Caucasian language family. It is believed an earlier form of it was the main language of Caucasian Albania, which stretched from south Dagestan to current day Azerbaijan. The Old Udi language is also called the Caucasian Albanian language.

There is no consensus on the number of Udis in the world, and it is difficult to state their number with complete accuracy. The Udi language is spoken by approximately 8,400 – 10,000 people. Their historical homeland is the territory of modern Azerbaijan. Before the Karabakh conflict, the village of **Vartashen** (now Oghuz) was a compact settlement of the Udis in Azerbaijan. They currently live in the territories of Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and other countries (Georgia C. f., 2008).

The **UNESCO Atlas of Languages in Danger** assesses the viability of languages on the basis of various criteria. Taking these factors into account, Udi is endangered, classified as „severely endangered“ by **UNESCO's Red Book of Endangered Languages**. This means that the language still has native speakers, but their numbers are declining and intergenerational transmission is weakening.

Sources/Literature Review. Researchers believe that the Udi people have been mentioned since ancient times. The main evidence for this is the name in historical sources, the Greek word for Udi. It is believed that this term refers to the people living in the territory of ancient **Albania**, who are now called Udi. In Georgia, they live mainly in the village of **Zinobiani, Kvareli municipality**. They also live compactly: in **Vartashen, Nij** and **Mirzabelu** – on the territory of Azerbaijan (Georgia M. S., 1986).

According to an article written by M. Bezhanova in the 1990s, not so long ago there were old people in various villages of Western Azerbaijan who knew Udi. In general, scientists see a substratum of Old Albanians (Udi) in the Azerbaijani population of the three northwestern regions of Azerbaijan (**Sheki, Oghuz, Kabali**). According to various sources, at the beginning of the 19th century, Udi also lived in the villages of **Vardanli, Bayani, Kish**. In a number of villages of the modern Kabali region lived Muslims who considered themselves **Azerbaijani Tatars**, but still knew Udi (Topchishvili, Ethnography of the Peoples of the Caucasus, Ethnic History, Ethnic Culture, 2007).

In 1989 the Udis of Vartashen were expelled from the country. The expulsion was part of the beginning of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Udis with Armenian names and belonging to the Armenian Church were considered Armenians and suffered the same fate as other Armenians in Azerbaijan. Today, a small number of Udis remain in Vartashen.

In the 19th and 20th centuries it was thought that the **Udi (Uti)** were the only remaining descendants of the ancient Albanians. In recent years, the discovery of ancient Albanian inscriptions on Mount Sinai by **Zaza Aleksidze**, and their decipherment using the Udi language, has finally justified this assumption.

The word Albania in Latin (Lat. Albania) means „mountainous country“. The Albanians were an Ibero-Caucasian tribe and spoke the Albanian language, which belongs to the Ibero-Caucasian language group (Hewsen, 1982).

At the beginning of the 4th century, the Albanian state declared Christianity to be the state religion. According to the deposed **Albanian (Ut)** historian **Movses Kalankatuatsi**, the Albanians adopted Christianity during the reign of **King Urnair**, before the **Georgians (Iberians)** (i.e. before 326 AD). However, a certain part of the Albanian population had been Christian even earlier. The Albanian Church was autocephalous and was headed by a Catholicos (Topchishvili, Ethnography of the Peoples of the Caucasus, Ethnic History, Ethnic Culture, 2007).

The prominent **Albanian (Utilian)** historian **Movses Kalankatuatsi**, in his „History of the Albanian Country“, identifies four main provinces of Albania in which four Albanian-related peoples – the Utilians (Udi), Gardamans, Gargarians and Tsavdeans – lived.

Georgian historical sources of the early Middle Ages often mention the states located on the territory of Albania: „**Ransa**“ (i.e. **Arransa**) and „**Movakan**“, which also belonged to the **Kartli (Iberian)** state or were often under its influence. It is known that the Arabic name for Albania is **Arran**. A Georgian historian of the late 18th century emphasises that the earlier name of the contemporary Muslim **khanates** – **Kazakh** and **Shamshadelu** – was **Raniao** (Egnatashvili, 1959).

According to **Strabo**, there were tribes in Albania that spoke 26 languages. It is likely that some of these tribes were related to each other and therefore gradually merged. The fact is that the unified state of Albania was formed as a result of the unification of four large territorial units. These were: **Utili**, **Gardamani**, **Tsavdei** and **Gargarali**. But from the second half of the 5th century, the centre of the kingdom was moved to Utiki, in the town of **Partavi**. The spoken language of this province was **Uti** (modern Udi). Arab historians called this language **Arranul**, or **Albanian** (Aleksidze, Caucasian Albanian Script, Language and Writing, 2003).

The Udi language was greatly influenced by the languages of neighbouring peoples. First of all, this influence was reflected in the vocabulary. **A. Dir** rightly noted at the time: „... compiling an Udi dictionary is quite a difficult task. One doesn't know whether to limit oneself to Udi words or to include Turkish, Armenian and Persian words. In the first case, we will get such a big dictionary that we will not have enough words even to describe everyday things. In the second case, even if we are satisfied with words that have no equivalent in Udi, we run the risk of compiling the same Turkish or Armenian dictionaries, scattered here and there with other words that will be Udi“ (Lolua, 2010). Historically, the Caucasian Albanian language (to which the **Old Udi** language is closely related) had an alphabet of 52 letters. The Bible was translated using this alphabet and religious services were held in Albanian, but later the language and script disappeared (Lolua, 2010).

It is thought that the Albanian language was the basis of the modern Udi language. The Albanian language belongs to the group of dead languages. The Caucasian Albanian language and script have been the subject of research by many scholars.

Structurally and lexically, the Udi language is closest to **Tsakhi**, **Mukhaduri (Rutuli)**, **Lezgi** or **Kyur**, **Aguli**, **Tabasaran** and the so-called **Shakh-Dagh** languages: **Budukhuri**, **Jekur** and **Kritsuli**.

Agvan, or **Caucasian Albanian**, is considered to be the language of one of the 26 tribes of ancient Caucasian Albania, the **Gargari**, and is related to the Udi language. The phonological system was probably close to that of the modern Udi language, as evidenced, for example, by the presence of pharyngealised vowels (Koryakov, 2006).

Albanian is the only Iberian-Caucasian mountain language whose written history dates back to the 15th century. Therefore, the reading and analysis of the epigraphic and manuscript monuments of the Caucasus is very important for Caucasology.

Z. Aleksidze believes that although the Udi language is a new Albanian language, it must be very different from Albanian: „The documents of the Albanian state were written in **Old Albanian**, the holy books were translated and religious services were held in this language. The Udi language belongs to the Nakh-Dagestani group of Caucasian languages. Naturally, the Udi language underwent changes over time and became quite distant from the language in which written monuments were created in the 5th-8th centuries (Aleksidze, Caucasian Albanian Script, Language and Writing, 2003).

The Udi people, currently one of the smallest ethnic groups in the Caucasus, have long attracted the attention of scholars interested in the ethnogenesis of the peoples of the Caucasus. Most of these studies consider the Udi people to be one of the (some believe the only) surviving tribes of historical Albania (according to Georgian sources – **Hereti**), which in ancient times had a wide area of distribution.

In Georgia, in the village of **Zinobiani**, **Kvareli municipality**, the Udi people migrated from **Vartashen** (now Oghuz, Azerbaijan) in 1920-1922. The reason for their migration was the conflict between Azer-

baijan and Armenians. The Udi people living in Georgia speak Georgian well. This is facilitated by daily communication with Georgians, mixed (Georgian – Udi) families and a secondary school where the language of instruction is Georgian. The newly settled Udi people in Zinobiani also knew Azerian, but later generations no longer know the Azerian language. In Vartashen, the Udi people also knew Armenian as a result of living together with the Armenians. In addition to Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani, Russian was also widely spoken among the Udi people. According to current data, in the village of Zinobiani, Georgian plays the role of almost a native language for the Udi people, who are bilingual.

Since 2015, with the support of the **Georgian Ministry of Education and Science**, regular teaching of the Udi language has been officially restored in the village of Zinobiani, where the alphabet (based on the Georgian script) and a textbook for learning the language were compiled by the local Udi, **Mamuli Neshumashvili**. This alphabet contains all the letters of the modern Georgian alphabet as well as signs: **ჲ, ა>, აა, ე, ე>, ეე, ო, ო>, ოო, ოჲ, ეჲ, ა, ჲ, ჲ, ჲ.**

At present, the Udi language is being studied by both Georgian and foreign specialists and scholars: **T. Sikharulidze, M. Tandashvili, A. Harris, V. Schulze, T. Maisaki, I. Lander, D. Ganenkov, N. Rukhadze** and others.

Methods used. For accurate analysis of the results of sociolinguistic research I systematised the data, used various research methods and auxiliary factors. I took into account the age, sex, cultural and social characteristics of the respondents.

Various research methods were used in the process of working on the article. In October 2023, I went on a research expedition to the village of Zinobiani, which is densely populated by the Udi ethnic group. In order to carry out sociolinguistic field research, I used the analysis of quantitative and qualitative parameters, which in turn was based on questionnaires and surveys. I also recorded interviews with the local population and collected photographic material.

In order to analyse the research results, I used the main methods of sociolinguistic research: historical-cultural factors, structured and unstructured interviews, linguistic observation, questionnaires...

Discussion/Results. Based on the fact that Georgia is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country, Georgia's state language policy is also based on a balance between protecting and strengthening the functioning of the Georgian language as the state language and ensuring the linguistic rights of ethnic minorities. The state tries to ensure that representatives of ethnic minorities are able to preserve their language. This is facilitated by programmes to teach mother tongues in schools, bilingual education models, the activities of cultural centres, etc.

The modern world is clearly moving towards globalisation, which affects all spheres, including the languages of small ethnic groups.

Multilingualism is Georgia's cultural richness, but it is also associated with challenges such as the high risk of language extinction and the acceleration of integration processes. As a result of globalisation, urbanisation and integration processes, many of the world's small languages are threatened with extinction. Georgia, as an ethnically and linguistically diverse country, is particularly affected by these challenges.

In this section of the article, I will present several key factors that influence the vitality of the Udi language:

1. Demographic indicators and their impact on the functioning of the Udi language.

Demographic changes are crucial to the functioning and viability of languages. Changes in the structure of the population often lead to changes in the linguistic atlas and sometimes to the weakening or disappearance of languages.

The viability of the Udi language (as well as all other languages) depends on the size of the population, natural growth, age structure and geographical distribution. If the number of speakers of a language decreases due to low birth rates or high death rates, the risk of language extinction increases.

Demographic indicators are statistical data that reflect the size, structure, gender and age distribution of the population. When we talk about the functioning of the Udi language, we must assume that the above indicators directly affect the process of language transmission and preservation.

The age structure of Udi speakers shows that the younger generation uses these languages less than Georgian, which increases the risk of their disappearance. 80% of respondents in the village of Zinobiani speak only Georgian, most of them young. 20% of respondents are fluent in their mother tongue Udi, but their age is over 50 years.

2. Proportion of Udi speakers in the total population.

The population of Georgia is ethnically diverse, and it is this diversity that affects the state of the Udi language and, in turn, the functioning of the state language.

The total population of Georgia in 2014 was 3.7 million, of which 302 people speak Udi. The percentage of speakers of this language is decreasing, and so are the chances of its survival.

3. Bilingualism in the Udi Community.

Bilingualism can be both beneficial (by promoting the spread of the language) and threatening (if the dominant language replaces the local language). The positive factors of bilingualism for Udi speakers are: the possibility of widespread communication in Georgian; assistance in socio-economic integration and employment. The negative factors are: the threat of the disappearance of the Udi language; difficulties in transmitting the language to the younger generation; partial loss of identity.

As sociolinguistic research has shown, Udi speakers actively use a second language – Georgian – in everyday life, leading to the weakening and gradual disappearance of their mother tongue, especially among young people. In the village of Zinobiani, 50% of the respondents do not speak their mother tongue at all, 15% speak it badly, 15% – at an average level, 20% – fluently. 80% of respondents use Georgian to communicate in the community, 15% use Georgian and Udi, and only 5% speak Udi.

4. Mixed marriages and their impact on the functioning of the Udi language.

Mixed marriages (when representatives of different ethnic and linguistic groups form a family) have a significant impact on the functioning of the language, especially if one of the languages is already in a weakened state. Such marriages often lead to linguistic assimilation, as one language becomes dominant in the family, while the other may gradually disappear.

It is well known that a particular ethnic unit can only transmit its mother tongue from generation to generation if mixed marriages are rare or absent. In the village of Zinobian, mixed marriages have intensified over the last 20-25 years.

Since the 1990s, Udi men from Zinobian have often married Georgian women. The Georgian daughters-in-law cannot, of course, teach their children the Udi language. So there are families in Zinobian where no Udi is spoken. But there are also families where the children learn Udi from their grandparents. 80% of respondents use Georgian as the spoken language in the family, 10% speak Udi and 10% speak a mixed language, Georgian-Udi. Again, the average age of Udi speakers is over 50.

5. Migration processes and their impact on the vitality of the Udi language.

Any language, especially when it is the language of an ethnic minority, is not only a means of communication, but also a carrier of cultural identity and identity, which has a significant impact on the social life of individuals, society and the state.

Migration has a significant impact on the vitality of a language. The Udi language belongs to a group of critically endangered languages, one of the main reasons being migration processes. Over the past twenty years, the Udi population has been leaving the country en masse and moving abroad. They settle there in scattered settlements. Those who live in dispersed settlements have difficulty maintaining their mother tongue. They cannot use their mother tongue even at a basic level of communication, so

the chances of the language surviving are diminishing. If migrants maintain cultural ties and speak their mother tongue, the vitality of the language is maintained for longer.

Conclusions. Today the Udi language is threatened with extinction, both in Georgia and in the world. The majority of young people do not/cannot speak this language. Despite a number of measures taken by international organisations and the state, the process of extinction/disappearance of the Udmurt language is becoming almost irreversible.

The social status of the Udi language is significantly weakened. In most cases, it has the status of a family language, and in all other cases, the Georgian language dominates: in education, in television and radio broadcasting, in the activities of state and municipal bodies, in official or legal proceedings.

It is obvious that the number of Udi speakers is significantly small in relation to the total population of the state.

Despite a number of measures taken by the state, the preservation of the Udi language is also becoming difficult in this respect, as its demographic statistics are alarming.

The study of demographic changes leads to the conclusion that the vitality of a language is related to the degree of demographic change. A decrease in the demographic indicator also leads to a decrease in the number of speakers of that language.

Based on the analysis of the sociolinguistic research I conducted in 2023, it can be said that the intergenerational transmission factor has the worst effect on the vitality indicator of the Udi language.

The Udi population systematically left the country for various European countries. They are scattered in their new surroundings. The migrants have to use the languages in which they are starting a new life on a daily basis. **The mother tongue** only has the status of a **family language** (and only if they do not form mixed families).

Interviews and surveys have shown that a certain part of the population does not consider the Udi language to be prestigious. According to them, their mother tongue is of little use in terms of knowledge, education and career, which explains the younger generation's lack of interest in their mother tongue. 60% of respondents consider knowledge of Georgian to be prestigious, 35% of them prefer English, and only 5% consider knowledge of the mother tongue to be essential.

Although the public school in the village of Zinobiani has been teaching the native language at primary level since 2015, there is a lack of textbooks, visual aids and other support materials.

What can be done to save the Udi language?

1. Strengthening bilingual education is necessary – Strengthening bilingual education in the Udi community is important not only for the survival of the language, but also for the preservation of cultural identity and social integration. It is necessary to train highly qualified teachers who can not only teach the Udi language, but also use bilingual methodology to create an effective learning environment. To this end, teacher training programmes can also be set up.

2. Supporting social and cultural programmes – The survival and development of the Udi language can only be possible if various social and cultural programmes promote its use and popularisation. This should be done not only through schools and the education system, but also with the active support and participation of the whole society. For example, cultural events such as festivals, exhibitions, poetry evenings and art exhibitions will contribute to the popularisation of the language. It is then that the language becomes an important social tool, uniting and bringing together the community and its members.

3. Creation of digital resources – The preservation and popularisation of small languages using modern technologies, especially digital resources, is considered to be one of the most effective ways. Therefore, there should be websites, applications, dictionaries, textbooks and audio/video materials in Udi, which will significantly increase the vitality of the language.

4. Language documentation and research – When languages are under threat, their documentation and thorough research ensures the preservation not only of the language system, but also of the cultural heritage of the speakers of that language and its history. The process of documenting a language allows all aspects of the language to be represented, including its phonology, punctuation, syntax, morphology, vocabulary and texts, i.e. the language is systematised and passed on to future generations. Accordingly, it is necessary to systematically study the state of the Udi language and to create mechanisms for its protection.

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