

THE LINGUISTIC DYNAMICS OF ABKHAZ, BATSBI, UDI, AVAR AND CHECHEN IN GEORGIA: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS

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Abstract. The present article aims to examine several aspects of the functioning of **Iberian-Caucasian**, or **Mountain Caucasian, languages** spoken in Georgia, specifically:

- their geographical distribution;
- the level of intergenerational language transmission;
- the degree of native language proficiency.

The study is based on field sociolinguistic research conducted between 2019 and 2024. The research focused on the linguistic situation of ethnic minority groups living in Georgia — **Abkhazians, Chechens (Kists), Bats/Batsbi (Tsova-Tush), Udis**, and **Avars** — in both compact and dispersed settlements, as well as on the sociolinguistic and demographic factors influencing these communities. The fieldwork was carried out in several regions of Georgia, including **Adjara** (Abkhaz community), the **Pankisi Gorge** (Kist community), and the municipalities of **Akhmeta** and **Kvareli** (Udi, Batsbi, and Avar (Khunz) communities).

According to the **UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger**, the unifying feature of these languages is the threat of extinction they face.

Participants in the sociolinguistic survey represented various age groups. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, including anonymous questionnaires, structured interviews, observation, audio and video recordings, and analysis of code-switching phenomena.

Keywords: endangered language; ethnic and linguistic identity; minority language; home language.

Introduction. Among the Iberian-Caucasian language group, the following languages are spoken in Georgia:

- Abkhaz — belonging to the Abkhaz-Adyghe group, Abkhaz-Abaza subgroup;
- Udi — belonging to the Nakh-Daghestanian language family, Lezgif subgroup;
- Tsova-Tush (Batsbi) — belonging to the Nakh-Daghestanian language family;
- The Kist dialect of the Chechen language — belonging to the Nakh-Daghestanian language family, Nakh group, Vainakh subgroup;
- Avar — belonging to the Daghestanian language group, Avar-Andic subgroup.

The term “endangered language” is a sociolinguistic concept referring to a language that is losing the essential characteristics of a naturally functioning language. Such a language gradually ceases to serve as a means of communication within a speech community; consequently, linguistic competence declines among its speakers, intergenerational transmission weakens or stops, and ultimately the language faces the risk of extinction. This threat may apply not only to entire languages but also to particular dialects.

§ 1. Abkhaz Language

The Abkhaz language (Abkhaz: Аҧсуаа бызшәа — Apsua Bzyshwa, or abbreviated as Аҧсшәа — Apssh-wa) belongs to the Abkhaz-Abaza subgroup of the Abkhaz-Adyghe branch within the Iberian-Caucasian language family.

The Abkhaz language is included in UNESCO's list of endangered languages. Abkhaz is spoken in Georgia (Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia) and Turkey. Certain Abkhaz-speaking settlements in Adjara, Georgia, as well as several Abkhaz-speaking communities in Syria, may be considered linguistic "islands" (Machavariani, 2017).

Abkhazians live compactly in several neighborhoods of Batumi — Angisa, Garadoki — and in nearby villages such as Feria, Salibauri, Erge, Urekhi, Adlia, Chelta, and others. Abkhaz populations also live in dispersed settlements in Gonio, Charnali, Makhinjauri, Chakvi, and Tsikhisdziri.

According to the 2002 population census, 3,527 Abkhazians lived in Georgia (excluding occupied territories), constituting approximately 0.1% of the total population. According to the 2014 census, this number decreased to 864 (National Census of Population, 2014).

During 2019–2020, a sociolinguistic survey was conducted in Adjara, including Abkhaz-inhabited villages and the Batumi area. The results demonstrated that among 150 respondents, only 4% reported fluent proficiency in Abkhaz, 10% intermediate proficiency, 16% limited proficiency, and 70% reported no knowledge of the language.

Only 4% of respondents use Abkhaz as the language of family communication; 6% use both Georgian and Abkhaz; 2% use Russian; and 88% use Georgian. In community or neighborhood communication, 2% use Abkhaz, 94% Georgian, and 4% Russian or Turkish (and occasionally English when communicating with tourists).

Currently, literacy in Abkhaz is taught in **Feria Public School** and **Batumi Public School No. 14**.

§ 2. Kist Dialect of the Chechen Language

The Kist dialect represents a mixed dialectal variety of Chechen dialects and belongs to the Vainakh subgroup of the Iberian-Caucasian language family. Kists mainly reside in the Pankisi Gorge in the Akhmeta Municipality of Georgia. Compact Kist settlements include the villages of Dumasturi, Omalo, Jokolo, Birkiani, Khalatsani (Lower, Middle, and Upper), Tsinubani, Dzibakhevi, and Kvareltskali. Kists also live alongside ethnic Georgians in the village of Koreti. According to the 2014 census, 5,697 Kists lived in Georgia, representing approximately 0.15% of the country's population.

The Kist population of Pankisi has preserved its native language. They speak the Kist dialect of Chechen, although the language has undergone phonetic, morphological, and lexical changes due to the influence of Georgian, resulting in significant borrowing of Georgian vocabulary (Pareulidze, 2011).

In October 2023, sociolinguistic research was conducted in several villages of the Pankisi Gorge — Omalo, Jokolo, Birkiani, and Khalatsani — involving 150 respondents. The survey was anonymous.

The Kist dialect of Chechen is fluently spoken by 100% of respondents. For 82%, Chechen is the exclusive language of family communication; 10% use both Georgian and Chechen; 6% use Georgian; and 2% use Russian.

The Chechen/Kist population of Pankisi is bilingual, with high proficiency in both Georgian and Chechen. The 2% using Russian at home likely represent recent migrants from Chechnya. Although formal education in Pankisi is conducted in Georgian, native language proficiency remains universally high.

The Kist dialect has developed in relative isolation from other Nakh languages and has evolved under strong Georgian influence. This influence intensified from the 1930s, when Georgian schools, libraries, print media, radio, and television became widespread, facilitating bilingualism within Kist society. Georgian has effectively become a second native language for the Kists of Pankisi.

§ 3. Tsova-Tush (Batsbi) Language

Tsova-Tush, or Batsbi, speakers traditionally identify themselves as ethnically Georgian, although their spoken language belongs to the Vainakh subgroup of the Iberian-Caucasian language family. Historically, they inhabited Tusheti but later resettled in the lowland village of Zemo Alvani. The Tsova-Tush (Batsbi) language is classified by UNESCO as severely endangered.

According to the 2014 census, Zemo Alvani has a population of 3,306. UNESCO data from 2010 estimated approximately 500 speakers of the Batsbi language. However, interviews and surveys conducted in 2022 suggest that the number of active speakers has declined to approximately 300–400. One contributing factor appears to be increased migration, which has intensified significantly during the last decade.

The Tsova-Tush population functions within a bilingual environment. Mixed Georgian-Batsbi families are common, and Batsbi is not the native language for all residents. Most fluent speakers belong to the 50+ age group, indicating weakening intergenerational transmission.

A sociolinguistic study conducted in Zemo Alvani in 2022 revealed that many respondents identified Georgian as their native language. This is largely due to strong Georgian ethnic self-identification and widespread mixed families.

Among respondents, 10% identified Batsbi as their native language: 10% reported fluent proficiency, 16% intermediate, 24% limited, and 50% no knowledge (predominantly respondents under 30).

In family communication, 76% use Georgian, 10% Batsbi (mostly older individuals), and 14% both languages. In community communication, 80% use Georgian exclusively, 12% use both languages (often using Batsbi for greetings only), and 8% use Batsbi — primarily individuals over 60.

Zemo Alvani Public School provides education exclusively in Georgian, and Batsbi is not taught. Currently, the language faces severe vitality challenges, including reduced intergenerational transmission and shrinking functional domains.

§ 4. Udi Language

The Udi language is an endangered language considered a descendant of Caucasian Albanian. It belongs to the Lezgi subgroup of the Daghestanian branch of the Iberian-Caucasian language family and includes two dialects: Vartashen and Nij.

The Udi constitute one of the world's smallest ethnic groups, with a global population of approximately 15,000, making them particularly vulnerable to assimilation and language loss.

In Georgia, Udis live compactly in the village of Zinobiani in Kvareli Municipality. They resettled there between 1920 and 1922 following the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict (Library, 2008). According to census data, 203 Udis lived in Georgia in 2002 and 174 in 2014.

A sociolinguistic survey conducted in Zinobiani in October 2023 indicated that many respondents identified Georgian as their native language. The age distribution of speakers demonstrates a significant intergenerational imbalance. Younger generations rarely use Udi in daily communication, weakening language vitality.

Approximately 80% of respondents use Georgian in community communication, 14% use both Georgian and Udi, and only 6% use Udi, mainly middle-aged and elderly speakers.

Mixed Georgian-Udi families are increasingly common. Approximately 80% use Georgian at home, 10% use Udi, and 10% use both languages. Most Udi speakers are over 50.

Since 2015, with support from the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science, Udi has been taught in primary grades in Zinobiani. The alphabet (based on Georgian script) and textbooks were developed by local Udi scholar Mamuli Neshumashvili.

Despite these efforts, Udi remains highly endangered, with reduced social prestige and limited functional domains. Georgian dominates education, media, administration, and legal communication. Intergenerational transmission remains the most critical factor weakening language vitality.

§ 5. Avar Language

The Avar people (Avar: *ма'арулал* / *ma'arulal*) represent the largest ethnic group in Dagestan. They primarily inhabit mountainous Dagestan, as well as regions of Azerbaijan and Turkey. The global Avar population is estimated at approximately one million (B., 2023).

Small Avar communities live compactly in eastern Georgia, particularly in Kvareli Municipality, in the villages of Tivi, Chantliskure, and Shorokhi (Saruso). According to the 2014 census, 954 Avars lived in Georgia.

A sociolinguistic survey conducted in October 2023 examined Avar-speaking communities in Kvareli Municipality. Historically, the language of instruction in Avar-inhabited schools shifted several times between Russian and Georgian. Currently, education is conducted in Georgian, while Avar is taught three hours weekly since the 2015–2016 academic year.

Younger generations demonstrate high proficiency in Georgian, whereas older generations, especially those over 50, show limited knowledge of Georgian. Among respondents, 88% reported fluent proficiency in Avar, and 12% intermediate proficiency.

Approximately 80% use Avar in community communication, 16% use both Georgian and Avar, and 4% use Georgian. All respondents reported using Avar in family communication.

However, the literary Avar language differs from local spoken varieties. Overall, Avar functions primarily as a home language, while Georgian dominates public domains such as education, media, and administration.

Conclusions. The analysis of the presented data demonstrates that the linguistic situation of the **Mountain Iberian-Caucasian** languages spoken in Georgia — **Abkhaz, Chechen (Kist dialect), Tsova-Tush (Batsbi), Udi, and Avar (Khunz)** — differs significantly from one another; however, they also reveal common tendencies related to language vitality, bilingualism, and assimilation processes.

The research confirms that language vitality is determined by a combination of factors such as the continuity of intergenerational language transmission, language prestige (among native speakers), and demographic indicators. According to **UNESCO** criteria, the decline in language prestige and the disruption of intergenerational transmission are considered critical threats to language preservation.

The study revealed that the highest level of linguistic stability is characteristic of Chechen (Kist dialect) speech. In the Pankisi Gorge, the Kist language has preserved both family and everyday communicative functions, which ensures its intergenerational transmission. Despite the strong Georgian linguistic environment, stable bilingualism has developed within the Kist community.

The condition of the Avar (Khunz) language is relatively stable; however, the study indicates an age-related imbalance. The older generation actively uses the native language, whereas its functional use among younger generations has decreased and is largely limited to family communication. At the same time, education in the Georgian language and participation in public life have significantly strengthened the position of the state language.

A different situation is observed in the cases of Tsova-Tush (Batsbi) and Udi languages. Both languages are classified by **UNESCO** as being under serious threat of extinction. Research has shown that intergenerational transmission in these languages has significantly weakened. A large portion of the younger generation either does not speak the native language at all or uses it only in limited social contexts. The growth of mixed families, migration processes, and the dominant status of the Georgian language contribute to the reduction of the functional domains of these languages and their gradual recession.

According to sociolinguistic survey results, the vitality of Abkhaz, Batsbi, and Avar languages has significantly weakened. The situation of the Abkhaz language in Georgia is particularly critical. The decline in the prestige of the Abkhaz language accelerates the reduction of its functional domains and linguistic assimilation. Batsbi and Avar languages, in the context of difficulties in intergenerational transmission, demographic decline, and mixed marriages, are in a critically endangered condition. In contrast, the Kist dialect of the Chechen language demonstrates a sociolinguistic balance with Georgian, where Chechen dominates in family and community domains, while Georgian dominates in the public sphere. The **Chechen** language is perceived as a primary element of ethnic identity, whereas Georgian is regarded as an important prerequisite for social success.

Thus, the presented research confirms that the vitality of **Mountain Iberian-Caucasian languages** in Georgia is uneven: **Kist** and partially **Avar** speech remain relatively stable, while **Tsova-Tush**, **Udi**, and especially **Abkhaz** languages are facing serious linguistic threats. This situation requires targeted language policies, the strengthening of educational programs, and cultural initiatives to ensure the preservation of these languages and their intergenerational transmission.

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