review of

*The Indigenous Languages of the Caucasus*


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The languages of the Caucasus have long been an object of particular fascination for linguists. Disregarding representatives of more widespread families (Ossetic and a variety of other Iranian languages, and Armenian, from Indo-European; Azeri and various other Altaic languages; and the Neo-Aramaic Semitic language Aisor), there are three distinct families\(^1\) of languages entirely indigenous to this region, each of which presents a number of features of great interest. Serious linguistic work on the languages of the North West and North East dates to the magnificent late nineteenth century descriptions prepared by Baron P. K. Uslar and Anton von Schiefner. The South Caucasian languages, primarily Georgian, are attested since the fourth century C.E., and there is an important local grammatical tradition. Given the inherent interest of the languages, their independence from those of the major families of Europe

\(^1\)Some scholars have maintained that the languages of the North West and North East families can be shown to form a single larger family. The most extensive set of comparisons in support of this claim has been assembled by Nikolaev & Starostin 1994, but the claimed relationship remains controversial at best.
and Asia, and the amount of descriptive work that has been done on them, one would expect them to figure much more prominently (and less anecdotally) in contemporary theoretical discussion.

Apart from the somewhat forbidding complexity of the phonetics, phonology and morphology of languages like Georgian, Ubykh and Archi, an important reason for their marginal status is undoubtedly the fact that a great deal of the descriptive literature is written in Russian, or in Georgian. Even though the vast amount of work done by Georges Dumézil and his students on the North West languages was in French, and Schiefner’s descriptions of North East languages such as Avar and Udi appeared in German, one of the dirty little secrets of our field is that English speaking linguists (in the U.S. at least) are surprisingly averse to reading basic source material that is not written in their language. The series of books under review could be taken to address this concern by providing a comprehensive set of sketches of the languages of these three families and (where possible) their histories, in compact and accessible form.

Two of these volumes have already been reviewed in this journal (volume 1 by Nichols 1995 and volume 4 by Haspelmath 1996). The occasion for the present review is the appearance of volume 3, completing the set as originally envisioned in 1981. The formats of the various volumes vary considerably, as does their success in meeting the
general goal of providing a convenient and comprehensive survey of the linguistically relevant facts about the indigenous languages of the Caucasus.

As Nichols (1995) has already noted, volume 1 provides excellent coverage of the Kartvelian family, including an overall survey, insightful grammatical sketches of the major modern languages (Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz and Svan), and accounts both of the Georgian manuscript tradition and of the one language (Old Georgian) which is attested from much earlier times (roughly the fourth to the eleventh centuries C.E.). Though the individual chapters are jarringly different in appearance (due to the use of camera-ready manuscript), and the physical aspects of the book frankly deplorable at the price, this volume provides a masterful overview of a complex family of languages, one that can serve as a self-contained introduction to their linguistic analysis. The reader who has spent some time with these chapters is more than adequately prepared to approach either such comprehensive pedagogical (but linguistically sophisticated) works as Aronson 1982 and Hewitt 1996, or more detailed linguistic analyses such as Harris 1981, Holisky 1981 and many other works on the synchronic syntax of Georgian, as well as Harris 1985 for the historical morphosyntax of the family.

Volume 2, edited by B. George Hewitt, deals with the languages of the North West. These are generally considered to fall into three groups: Abkhaz-Abaza, Circassian, and Ubykh (though the placing of Ubykh as a distinct branch, rather than
connecting it with Circassian, is not entirely certain). Circassian, in turn, is conventionally divided into East Circassian, including Kabardian, and West Circassian or Adyghe, including Bzhedukh, Shapsugh, Abzakh (or Abadzhek) and Temirgoi. These languages display quite similar overall structures, such as extensive polypersonal agreement on an ergative pattern in the verb, ergative (or no) case marking on nominals, and many other common features. In phonology, they have extremely large consonant inventories (Ubykh, with somewhere around 80, being one of the contenders for the world record in this regard) and correspondingly restricted vowel inventories: one analysis of Kabardian proposes that that language actually has no phonological vowels, though a description with two seems somewhat more reasonable.

In stem structure, these languages show a considerable degree of agglutinative combination of a limited number of very basic roots. The combination of morphological and phonological properties results in a situation in which any given consonant is likely to appear in very few distinct root elements, so that the number of comparison sets available for the application of the comparative method is quite small, and the possibility of secure reconstruction correspondingly limited. The radically reduced range of vocalic distinctions does not improve matters, and if ever there were a situation that validated the characterization of etymology (attributed, probably apocryphally, to Voltaire) as “une science où les voyelles ne font rien et les consonnes fort peu de
chose,” this is probably it. The overall closeness of the languages of the family makes this a relatively minor problem within North West Caucasian itself (see Dumézil 1975 for a comparative survey of much of the morphology across the family, for example), but it accounts in part for the tenuous (if also tenacious) nature of efforts to link it to other families.

This volume contains, in addition to a short introduction by the editor, sketches of Abkhaz (by Hewitt) and Abaza (by Ketevan Lomtatidze and Rauf Klychev); of the Abzakh form of Adyghe (by Catherine Paris, written in French) and Kabardian (by John Colarusso); and of Ubykh (by Georges Charachidze, again in French). A serious review of all of these would occupy much too much space to be possible here, but it can be said that each provides a good account of the phonetics, descriptive morphology, and basic syntax of the language in question. These are languages for which a good deal of descriptive material already exists in English (e.g., Colarusso 1988, 1992; Hewitt 1979; O’Herin 2002) and in French, and while the sketches here by no means obviate reference to those sources, they provide excellent introductions to the more detailed issues addressed there. Production issues due to the use of camera ready copy arise again as in volume 1, though perhaps not quite as seriously. Once more, however, the value of the material would merit much more attractive presentation, especially considering the rather high price.
The last two volumes of the set concern the languages of the North East, or Nakh-Daghestanian family. These include the Nakh languages (Chechen, Ingush and Tsova-Tush, also known as “Bats(bi)’’); while once thought to be a distinct family of their own, these are now generally considered to form a larger genetic grouping with the Daghestanian languages. The latter, in turn, can be grouped into a Western sub-group (Avar, seven Andian languages and five Tsezian languages); a Central sub-group (Lak and several forms of Dargya), and a Southern or Lezgian sub-group of about ten languages. These are the indigenous languages of the Caucasus that are least known to Western linguists, and accordingly it is here that the collection under review could perform its greatest service. Unfortunately, it is here that the standard of content is the lowest.

That is not at all to say that there is nothing of value here. As Haspelmath (1996) points out in his review of volume 3, the coverage of the Nakh languages by Nichols (Chechen and Ingush, in largely complementary descriptions of these two very similar languages) and Dee Holisky and Rusudan Gagua (for Tsova-Tush) is excellent, and provides a very good survey of important structural points in these languages. The remainder of this volume is given over to sketches of “six minor Lezgian languages.” These are “minor” as opposed to the literary languages Lezgian and Tabassaran; for the former, at least, we have the comprehensive grammar of Haspelmath 1993, but
nothing on either in this collection. The Daghestanian sketches in volume 3 are relatively short but informative, especially about syntax. Their usability is reduced in various ways by their format, such as the lack of detailed (or even word-by-word) glosses except in the Archi, Khinalug and Udi chapters, lack of sample texts, etc., and by the problems of production and presentation they share with those in the first two volumes. The absence of coverage of the most important languages of the sub-group is surely to be regretted in what presents itself as a general survey. As complements to a more extensive grammar of some member of the family, though, such as Haspelmath’s Lezgian grammar, the descriptions here are certainly worthwhile additions to the literature in English.

The introduction to volume 4 promised that volume 3, when it appeared, would make up for the lacunae in coverage of this family with descriptions of the literary languages Avar, Lak, Dargva, Lezgi and Tabassaran, as well as a few of the remaining languages. It is this volume that has just appeared, but it must be adjudged a major disappointment. On the one hand, the physical presentation has been greatly improved over its predecessors, with all of the sketches presented in a uniform format and a generally quite readable typeface. This gain in appearance, however, is more than made up for by the weakness of the content.

The only literary language represented is Dargva, with the remaining sketches de-
voted to two Andian languages (Ghodoberi and Chamalal), the Tsezian languages Tsez, Bezhta, and Hinukh, and the Lezgian language Tsakur. The absence of descriptions of nearly all of the major languages that were anticipated for this volume is attributed to the difficulty of finding authors who would agree to write them and then actually submit a usable manuscript. Anyone who has ever compiled a multi-authored collection will surely sympathize with this, but the excuse it supplies is surely limited. Confronted with a similar problem with respect to Mingrelian in volume 1, the editor (Alice Harris) supplied the necessary sketch herself on the basis of the published literature, with remarkably good results. A similar path could surely have been taken for at least some of the languages so conspicuously lacking here. Avar, for instance, perhaps the most serious omission, is extensively described in works such as Bokarev 1949, Čikobava & Cercvadze 1962 and Charachidzé 1981, not to mention the much earlier (but still valuable) work of Uslar and Schiefner. It would certainly be possible to compile a summary description from such sources, and this has indeed been done by Ebeling (1966).

The descriptions that are here do not compensate for the ones that are not by their clarity or usefulness. They follow a largely standardized format (resulting perhaps from the fact that in each case an original manuscript in Russian has been translated and re-organized by the editor and his staff). Each provides an inventory of phonemes, some
unsystematic remarks about phonotactics and alternations, a survey of the morphology in terms of basic formal categories, and some remarks about syntax largely limited to the order of elements within the Noun Phrase and the instantiation of a few central patterns of sentence structure. The only one of these that shows any glimmer of interesting analysis is the sketch of Bezhta by A. E. Kibrik and Ja. G. Testelets. All of them are seriously impaired as useful references by the absence of detailed glosses for the examples, although these do appear sporadically and unsystematically in some. None have sample texts. Surely many of these languages have a great deal to teach us about a variety of issues in phonology, morphology, and syntax, but the generally uninspired nature of these descriptions reveals little if any of the unusual and important features that may be present.

In summary, then, this set of four expensive and overall poorly produced volumes does a rather uneven job of introducing the English speaking linguist to the wonders of a set of languages that are quite as interesting and unusual as any in the world. For those languages and families where the existing literature in Western languages is already quite deep, these volumes provide well organized and quite useful summaries and introductions to the field. For those on which there is at present little to consult, the descriptions here do not advance that situation nearly as much as one might wish. Perhaps this is not really surprising, but it does make clear that there is still room for
someone to provide the information on (at least some of) the indigenous languages of the Caucasus that will elevate them to the place in general linguistic discussion that their intrinsic interest merits.

References


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[Review article based on Čikobava & Cercvadze 1962.]


