Abkhaz

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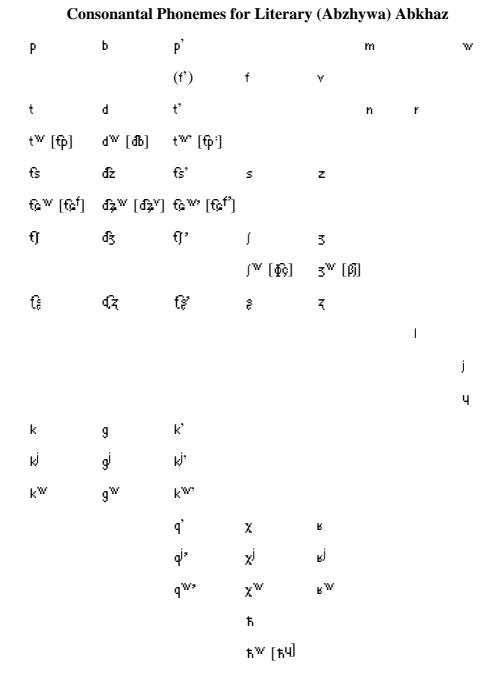
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The Abkhaz language (/[ɑ.]'ɑps.(wɑ bɜz.')ʃʷɑ/) belongs to the North West Caucasian family (see *Caucasian Languages*). Abkhazians traditionally occupied the triangle framed in northwestern Transcaucasia between the Black Sea, Greater Caucasus , R. Mzymta and R. Egry (Ingur); the Psou is now the northern frontier. This territory comprises the Republic of Abkhazia (/ɑ.ps.'nɜ/, capital Aqᵂ'a, *aka* Sukhum), *de facto* independent since the war with Georgia (1992-93) but in international law deemed to be still part of Georgia, wherein for most of the Soviet period it was an autonomous republic.

A wave of migrants out of Abkhazia after the Mongol incursions (14th century) removed the most divergent dialect, T'ap'anta, to the northern Caucasus (Karachay-Cherkessia), where, consolidated by Ashkharywa dialect speakers (17-18th centuries), today's Abaza population was created. Following Russia's conquest of the N.W. Caucasus in 1864, most N.W. Caucasian speakers (including all the Ubykhs) migrated to Ottoman lands, where the diaspora-communities (predominantly in Turkey) vastly outnumber the homelanders; the surviving languages are endangered in all locations. The dialects of Sadz, Akhch'ypsy and Ts'abal are no longer attested in Abkhazia, where northern Bzyp and southern Abzhywa alone remain. Of the 102,938 Soviet Abkhazians recorded in 1989 93,267 resided in Abkhazia, constituting 17.8 percent of the population — the single largest ethnic group in Abkhazia in 1989 were the Mingrelians; Abazas totalled 33,801. Though 93.3 percent of Abkhazians claimed fluency in Abkhaz, younger generations tend to be happier in Russian (or Turkish).

The 17th century, half-Abkhazian traveller Evliya Çelebi provides the first linguistic evidence. P. Uslar produced the first grammar (1862-63), devising a Cyrillic-based script. An adaptation served when the Soviets assigned Abkhaz literary status (1921), though two different roman orthographies were tried during the infant

USSR's *latinizatsija*-drive; a Georgian orthography was imposed in 1938 and replaced by another Cyrillic alphabet (1954). This is still used, albeit with a recent reform to regularise labialisation-marking. Abaza acquired literary status only in 1932; the Abkhaz and Abaza Cyrillic scripts diverge markedly.

Consonantal Phonemes for Literary (Abzhywa) Abkhaz

p	b	pʼ			m	w
		(fʼ)	f	v		
t	d	tʼ			n	r
tʷ [t͡p]	dʷ [d͡b]	tʷʼ [t͡pʼ]				
t͡s	d͡z	t͡sʼ	s	z		
t͡sʷ [t͡sᶠ]	d͡zʷ [d͡zᵛ]	t͡sʷʼ [t͡sᶠʼ]				
t͡ʃ	d͡ʒ	t͡ʃʼ	ʃ	ʒ		
			ʃʷ [ɸ͡ɕ]	ʒʷ [β]		
t͡ɕ	d͡ʑ	t͡ɕʼ	ɕ	ʑ		
				l		
				j		
				ɥ		
k	g	kʼ				
kʲ	gʲ	kʲʼ				
kʷ	gʷ	kʷʼ				
		qʼ	χ	ʁ		
		qʲʼ	χʲ	ʁʲ		
		qʷʼ	χʷ	ʁʷ		
			ħ			
			ħʷ [ħɥ]			

Certain idiolects have /fʼ/ only in /ɑ.ˈfʼɑ/ 'thin' (otherwise /ɑ.ˈpʼɑ/). Bzyp boasts 67 phonemes by adding /t͡ɕ d͡ʑ t͡ɕʼ ɕ ʑ ɕʷ ʑʷ/ to the alveolo-palatals and /χˤ χˤʷ/ to the back fricatives. A glottal stop, apart from possibly realising intervocalic /qʼ/, is also

heard in /ʔaj/ 'no' (cf. /aːj/ 'yes'). Open vowel /a/ contrasts with close /ə/; /aː/ might also be phonemic. Stress is distinctive.

Abkhaz(-Abaza) is unique among Caucasian languages in not employing case-markers for the verb's major arguments, relying purely on pronominal cross-referencing within the polysynthetic verb; this patterning with three sets of affixes confirms the family's ergative nature. Some preverbs distinguish directionality via an a-grade (essive/illative/allative) vs a reduced/zero grade (elative/ablative) for the specified location.

The Stative-Dynamic opposition, verbal complexity, the relative strategy, the potential/involuntary constructions, and the preverbal grade-system are illustrated below:

a-pʰʷəs   a-maˈqʼa   ø-ˈlə-mʁa-w-pː

the-woman$_{II}$ *the-belt*$_{I}$ *it*$_{I}$*-she*$_{II}$*-wear-Stat-Fin.Pres*

'The woman is wearing the/a belt'

a-pʰʷəs   a-maˈqʼa   ø-ˈlə-mʁa-l-t͡sʼa-ø-r.tʷ˴

he-woman$_{II}$ *the-belt*$_{I}$ *it*$_{I}$*-her*$_{II}$*-Prev-she*$_{III}$*-put-Past.N/F.Aor-Res*

ø-sə-z-ˈlə-r-qʼa-t͡sʼa-wa-m   /   ø-sə-ˈzə-qʼa-t͡sʼa-wa-m

it$_{I}$*-I*$_{II}$*-Pot-her*$_{II}$*-Caus-Prev-do-Dyn-not.Pres*   *it*$_{I}$*-I*$_{II}$*-Pot-Prev-do-Dyn-not.Pres*

'I cannot make the woman put on (herself/some other woman) the belt'

a-pʰʷəs   a-maˈqʼa   ø-ˈlə-mʁa-l-χə-ø-r.tʷ˴

he-woman$_{II}$ *the-belt*$_{I}$ *it*$_{I}$*-her*$_{II}$*-Prev-she*$_{III}$*-take-Past.N/F.Aor-Res*

ø-ˈs-amχa-lə-r-qʼa-t͡sʼa-ø-jtʼ   /   ø-ˈs-amχa-qʼa-t͡sʼa-ø-jtˑ

it$_{I}$*-I*$_{II}$*-unwilling-her*$_{II}$*-Caus-Prev-do-Past-Fin.Aor*   *it*$_{I}$*-I*$_{II}$*-unwilling-Prev-do-*

                                   Past-Fin.Aor

'I unwillingly/involuntarily got the woman to remove the belt (from herself/some other woman)'

a-maˈqʼa   ø-ˈzə-mʁə-z-χə-ø-z   a-pʰʷəs

the-belt$_{I}$ *it*$_{I}$*-who*$_{II}$*-Prev-who*$_{III}$*-take-Past-N/F.P/I*   *the-woman*$_{I}$

d-ˈsə-pʃʷma-w-pʼ

sheɹ-myɪɪ-wife-Stat-Fin.Pres

'The woman who took off her belt is my wife'

The lexicon reveals Iranian, Turkish, Russian and Kartvelian (mainly Mingrelian) influences.

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