

GEORGIA

(Sociolinguistic Situation)

Georgia received international recognition in 1992 within the frontiers of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Occupying 69,500 sq. km. east of the Black Sea between longitudes 40° 05' and 46° 44' east and latitudes 41° 07' and 43° 35' north, it borders the North Caucasian territories of the Russian Federation, and the republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey.

South-west Transcaucasia is home to the South Caucasian (Kartvelian) language-family, of which Georgian is the best known member. This family cannot be demonstrated to be cognate with any other language(-family), extant or extinct. The most archaic member, Svan, is located in the N.W. mountains along the upper reaches of the Ingur and Tskhenis-ts'q'ali rivers; the western lowlands between these same rivers provide the traditional home of Mingrelian, which since the end of the 19th century has been yielding to Georgian in the east whilst gaining at the expense of (North West Caucasian) Abkhaz in the west; the ancestors of the Mingrelians and the Laz, jointly designated speakers of Zan, in classical times peopled the Black Sea littoral between northern Mingrelia and Rize, though they were split by westward moving Georgian speakers fleeing the 7th century Arab incursions into central Georgia -- only between Laz and Mingrelian is there any degree of mutual intelligibility; today Laz is spoken along the Turkish coast from the border-village of Sarpi with only small numbers of speakers living further north (e.g. in Abkhazia); most ethnic Georgians live in Georgia itself, though an indeterminate number reside in Turkey, which has inherited such historical Georgian provinces as T'ao, K'lardzheti, Shavsheti.

Abkhaz apart, other languages spoken in Georgia are: Indo-European Armenian, Greek, (Slavonic) Russian, (Iranian) Ossetic, Turkic Azeri, Semitic Assyrian, North Central Caucasian (Nakh) Chechen and Bats (in Georgian 'Ts'ova Tush'), and their North East Caucasian (Daghestanian) congeners (Avaric) Avar and (Lezgi) Udi.

Georgian has the following home-dialects: Ach'aran (Adzharian), Gurian, Imeretian in the west, Lechkhumian, Rach'an in the north-west, Mtiulur-Gudamaq'rulian, Mokhebian in the north, Khevsurian, Pshavian and Tush in the north-east, K'akh(et)ian in the east, Meskhian, Dzhavakhian in the south(-west), and Kartlian in the centre; additionally, Ingiloan is spoken in the Zakatala region of Azerbaijan, Kizlar-Mozdokian obsolescently in North Ossetia, Fereidanian in Iran, and Imerkhebian marginally in Turkey, where most ethnic Georgians are reported to have lost the language. The literary dialect is based on the speech of the province of Kartli, in which the capital Tbilisi is situated. Mingrelian has Senak'ian in the east and Samurzaq'an-Zugdidian in the west. Svan has at least Upper and Lower Bal in Upper Svanetia, Lashkh and Lent'ekh in Lower Svanetia. Laz divides into Khopian, Vits'e-Arkabian and Atinian.

Abkhaz is represented by only two surviving dialects in its homeland: northern Bzyp and southern Abzhywa, the literary base since the mid-1920s, being both the phonetically simpler variant and native to most of the leading writers of the day. The most divergent variety, Abaza, is spoken in Karachay-Cherkessia (N. Caucasus), where the Soviets created a separate literary language on the T'ap'anta sub-dialect, phonetically the most complex of all Abkhaz-Abaza forms. Abkhaz's remaining dialects are now only attested among the diaspora-communities across former Ottoman territories, whither most Abkhazians, fellow N.W. Caucasian Circassians and all speakers of the third sister-language Ubykh (extinct since 1992) migrated following Russia's conquest of the North Caucasus in 1864.

Georgia has undergone massive upheaval since the collapse of the USSR. The last two Soviet censuses gave the following picture for the main populations:

Main Population of Georgia (1979 & 1989)

	<u>1979</u>	<u>1989</u>	<u>1979</u>	<u>1989</u>
Whole Population	4,993,182	5,400,841	100%	100%
'Georgians'	3,433,011	3,787,393	68.8%	70.1%
Armenians	448,000	437,211	9.0%	8.1%
Russians	371,608	341,172	7.4%	6.3%
Azerbaijanis	255,678	307,556	5.1%	5.7%
Ossetians	160,497	164,055	3.2%	3.0%
Greeks	95,105	100,324	1.9%	1.8%
Abkhazians	85,285	95,853	1.7%	1.8%

Wars in South Ossetia (1990-92) and Abkhazia (1992-93), continuing unrest in Mingrelia following the January 1992 coup against the late president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, ethnic tensions with the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in the south(-west), lawlessness and economic decline have spawned large outflows of Ossetians, Russians, Greeks and 'Georgians' themselves. Thus, accurate demographic data are unavailable. Even (post-1926) Soviet census-results conceal important facts, for circa 1930 it was decided that henceforth all Kartvelians (and the Bats!) should be officially classified as 'Georgians', an obfuscation of ethno-linguistic categories unattested among Turkish Kartvelians. Consequently, precise figures for Mingrelians (1 million?), Svans (50,000?) and Laz within the 'Georgian' (*recte* Kartvelian) total are unknown; also masked is the nature of their mother-tongue vs 2nd/3rd language knowledge.

Universal literacy in Georgian, a literary language since the late 4th century, even amongst Georgians was only achieved with the introduction of universal schooling during the Soviet period (1921-91). Abkhaz too then achieved full literary status with an already devised Cyrillic-based script, for sporadic publication in Abkhaz began in the late 19th century. The Mingrelians were perhaps the largest speech-community not

to have their language recognised by the early Soviets as one of the so-called 'Young Literary Languages' -- some materials, including a primer, were provided in Roman script for even the few Soviet Laz between 1927 and 1938 (see Feurstein 1992). Various Mingrelian publications (books, journals, papers) in the Georgian script did nevertheless appear from the late 1920s until 1938, but this practice was strongly resisted by some leading Mingrelian intellectuals on the spurious grounds that Mingrelia would remain a backwater, divorced from Georgian culture -- an attempt to introduce a Mingrelian liturgy and a language-primer (in Cyrillic) had failed in the 1880-90s (see Hewitt 1995). Only literary languages could serve as pedagogical vehicles and be taught in Soviet schools (or be used to a greater or less extent in publishing, radio and television); those from ethnic minorities (i.e. the non-titular peoples within the 15 union republics) were used only for the first few grades, when tuition switched to a 'major' language (e.g. Georgian or Russian). Examples of weekly hours devoted to language/literature classes in Georgia's Georgian, Russian, Armenian, Azeri, Abkhazian and Ossetic language-schools is given in Hewitt (1989). In Svanetia only Georgian schools were created, whilst urban Georgians and Mingrelians had a choice of opting for Georgian or Russian schools -- Greek and Assyrian have at times also been taught in Georgia. Rumours that Georgian would not be specified as the official union-language in the Brezhnevite constitution of 1978 caused massive demonstrations resulting in Article 75 starting with the words: 'The state-language of the Georgian SSR is the Georgian language'; free use of Russian and unspecified 'other' languages was also guaranteed. Article 8 of the current Constitution reads: 'Georgian shall be the official language in Georgia, in Abkhazia Abkhazian as well'. Article 6 of the 1994 Constitution for the *de facto* independent Abkhazia, however, states: 'The official language of the Republic of Abkhazia shall be the Abkhazian language', Russian being also recognised as a 'language of State' and free use of other minority tongues being guaranteed.

Georgian is not widely known (or desired) amongst the compact Armenian and Azerbaijani communities outside Tbilisi itself, and in Abkhazia (even before 1992) it was rarely heard, for Russian or, south of the capital Sukhum and especially after the forced settlement there of large numbers of Mingrelians by (Georgian) Stalin and (Mingrelian) Beria in the 1930s, Mingrelian served as *linguae francae*; historically, Turkish was widely used. After the Abkhaz orthography was switched to Roman in 1928 as part of the USSR's 'Latinisation'-drive, the base was altered again in 1938 to Georgian (Ossetic in South Ossetia also followed this pattern) rather than to Cyrillic, as happened in 1936-38 with the other Young Literary Languages. In 1945 Abkhaz schools were suddenly replaced by Georgian schools, and publishing in Abkhaz effectively ceased; schools reopened and publishing restarted with the death of Stalin (1953), when the current Cyrillic script was introduced. The Abkhazians just managed

to avoid deportation to Central Asia in the late 1940s, but the Laz, Greeks, Meskh(et)ians and the Hemshin(li) (Muslim Armenians -- see Simonian: Forthcoming) were not so fortunate. The imposition of a test in Georgian language/literature as qualification for Georgian citizenship introduced during the efflorescence of nationalism in the late 1980s was a significant factor in stoking the various ethnic tensions that erupted shortly thereafter. It is a condition of Georgia's membership of the Council of Europe that all Meskh(et)ians who wish to return must be resettled within 12 years of Georgia's membership (April 1999) -- general ignorance of Georgian, their Islamic faith and uncertain ethnicity (Georgians vs Turks) are factors in the reluctance Tbilisi has repeatedly manifested to right the wrong inflicted on them in 1944.

Language-sensitivities, thus, remain one of the real or potential problems for Georgia's post-Soviet development -- the Shevardnadze Constitution says nothing of provision for the needs of the minority languages. The misconception that Mingrelian, Laz and Svan are mere dialects of Georgian is widespread, and even local linguists who know better regularly style these sister-languages 'sociological dialects' belonging to 'sub-Georgian ethnic groups', observing that the functional restrictions characterising Georgia's regular dialects apply equally to them. Any suggestion of assigning them belated literary status is met with hostility, the argument being that this is but the first stage to Georgia's political dismemberment, just as the Soviets are universally castigated for instigating 'separatism' among the Abkhazians and South Ossetians by establishing literary languages in the respective provinces in the 1920s. In the summer of 1999 books of the Georgian poet Murman Lebanidze were burned in the Mingrelian capital, Zugdidi, after disparaging remarks about the Mingrelian language. It is, however, common to hear self-deprecating remarks from Mingrelians about the uselessness of their language, and the 5,000 or so Bats, who live in the village Zemo Alvani (K'akheti(a)), are said no longer to be teaching their children this already heavily Georgian-influenced sister to Chechen and Ingush.

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