

A Suggestion for Latinising the Abkhaz Alphabet
(Based on Monika Höhlig's **Adıġe Alfabet**)

by

B.G. Hewitt (S.O.A.S.)

In 1983 Monika Höhlig published a pamphlet (reprinted in 1990) setting out her ideas for producing a Latinised script for (North West Caucasian) Circassian. Since the bulk of the Circassian community lives not in the Caucasus but in Turkey (or elsewhere in the Near East), her basic tenet was that, where necessary, the Latin characters should have the same values that obtain for the purpose of representing Turkish -- so that, for example, the letter **c** would represent the voiced palato-alveolar affricate [dʒ]. Two further principles which guided the creation of this script were: (a) that any attempt to provide one totally independent character for each phoneme of the language would lead to an unwieldy number of new letter-shapes, and (b) that no diacritic should be employed that is not available on a Turkish typewriter. These considerations led to the following table of correspondences between the newly devised Roman script, the Cyrillic-based form presently used in Adyghea in the North West Caucasus to represent the West Circassian (Adyghe) literary language and the standard IPA equivalents:

<u>Latin-based</u>	<u>Cyrillic-based</u>	<u>IPA</u>	<u>Latin</u>	<u>Cyrillic</u>	<u>IPA</u>
a	а	a	b	б	b
c	дж	dʒ	ç	ч	tʃ
ç'	кI	tʃ'	ç̂	чъ	tʃʰ
ç̂'	чI	tʃʰ'	d	д	d
dz	дз	dz	e	э	E
ê	е	jE	f	ф	f
g	г	g	ġ	г	V
ġ	гъ	Ġ	h	хъ	ħ
ı	ы	ɨ	i	и	i:
j	жь	J	j	ж	ʒ
ĵ	жъ	Z	k	к	k
q	къ	q	l	л	Ó
lh	лъ	ɫ	lh'	лI	ɫ'
m	м	m	n	н	n
o	о	wE	p	п	p
p'	пI	p'	r	р	r
s	с	s	š	щ	S
š	ш	ʃ	š̂	шъ	ʃʰ
š'	шI	ʃ'	t	т	t

tʰ	тI	tʰ	ts	ц	ts
tsʰ	цI	tsʰ	u	у	uW
w	у	w	x	х	x
xh	хъ	X	y	й	j
z	э	z	ʻ	I	ʻ

Secondary articulation of labialisation is indicated by means of **u**, thus:

çu	цу	tʰW	ɟu	гу	ɟW
ǰu	гъу	ʌW	ju	жъу	ZW
ku	ку	kW	kʰu	кIу	kWʰ
qu	къу	qW	pʰu	пIу	pWʰ
ʒu	шъы	cW	ʒʰu	шIу	cWʰ
tʰu	тIу	tʰW	xu	ху	xW
xhu	хъу	XW	ʰu	Iу	?Wʰ
ʰo	Io	?WE			

Remaining combinations are:

ʰa	Ia	?a	ʰi	Iы	?ʻ
ʰe	Iэ	?E	ya	я	ja
we	o	wE	wi	уы	wʻ

Fieldwork with native Circassians both in Turkey, where there is no tradition of writing the language, and in Circassia, where there is such a tradition using the Cyrillic-based script just delineated, have shewn that the Roman alphabet is acquired quickly and with gratifying ease (personal communication from M. Höhlig). However, one or two points call for comment. Firstly, the pointed circumflex diacritic $\hat{\text{~}}$ is not given a uniform value: in combination with **ç** (ʧ) it marks retroflex articulation [ʧʲ], whilst in combination with **j** and **ʒ** it marks alveolo-palatal articulation [ʒC], and the diæresis is then utilised with **j** and **ʒ** to indicate retroflexion. Surely it would be preferable to have one diacritic signalling a unique articulatory feature? I suggest retaining the pointed circumflex as the exponent of alveolo-palatal articulation. Despite the fact that the only glottalised fricatives are the plain and labialised alveolo-palatals and thus cannot be confused with any other phonemes, which is the reason why both the Cyrillic-based script and Höhlig's Roman version lack any specific marker of alveolo-palatalisation (viz. **ʒʰ** шI and **ʒʰu** шIу), I would prefer to see it actually indicated (viz. **ʒʰ̂** **ʒʰ̂u**) so as to avoid any possible confusion during the learning of the new alphabet -- this is why I personally always write **qʰ** when transcribing Georgian q, which is the only uvular plosive in the language, so that **q** alone, as employed by many Kartvelologists, cannot be confused with anything else *as long as one's readers are aware of the phonological structure of Georgian*. Höhlig's diæresis could then be used as the unique marker of retroflexion. But,

since Germans when writing this diacritic in their native language simply place a macron over the relevant vowel, one might reasonably assume that Circassians using this Roman alphabet would do the same, and, as Turkish typewriters actually have the macron as a dead key, why not make the adaptation of macron for diæresis as the universal indicator of retroflexion in this alphabet? -- thus:

ĉ	ч̄	Тs4	ĉ'	чI	Тs4'
j	ж	ʒ	š	ш	ʂ

This still leaves the pointed circumflex performing three functions -- it marks (a) alveolo-palatalisation, (b) the voiced velar fricative when in combination with **g**, and (c) the sequence of palatal glide plus half-open front vowel in the combination **ê**. The letter **h** too in digraphs has two roles, marking (a) lateral friction when in combination with **l** and (b) uvular (as opposed to velar) articulation when combined with **x**. Can we not tidy up both of these anomalies at the same time? In digraphs let **h** convey the fricative equivalent of the preceding character, so that it will continue to function as the lateral fricative marker in **lh**(^l), but it will also now be used to mark voiced velar friction in the combination **gh**, which thus replaces **ĝ**. In the vowel-sequence **ê** the simplest solution is to write **ye**. The voiced uvular fricative is marked by the hachek (viz. **ğ**); the equivalent voiceless fricative will now be the parallel **ǰ**, which thus replaces the digraph **xh**, thereby releasing **h** in digraphs exclusively to indicate the fricative equivalent of the preceding character. These final suggested adaptations of Höhlig's basic system give the following correspondences:

gh	г	ʋ	ǰ	ч̄	X
ǰu	ч̄у	XV			

Might it not be time for a more wholesale change to existing scripts among the North West Caucasian literary languages than that envisaged by Höhlig? I would argue that the time is ripe for the whole North West Caucasian family for a number of reasons. The alphabetical distinctions between, on the one hand, East Circassian (Kabardian) and West Circassian (Adyghe), and, on the other hand, Abkhaz and Abaza, which latter in terms of its script is closer to the Circassian alphabets than to that of Abkhaz, even though linguistically Abaza is just a divergent dialect of Abkhaz, introduce an artificial division between peoples who are linguistically close and who should be alphabetically united -- whether the distinctions were actually introduced in the first place on the principle of *Divide et Impera*, as many people suppose, is an issue we need not address here. If it were a question of regularising within the Caucasian territories the Circassian scripts alone or of unifying Abaza and Abkhaz alone, one could conceive how those whose scripts were altered in favour of those of their kinsmen might feel slighted and thus resist any such alterations. But it is

not just a matter that is of concern to North West Caucasians still resident in the Caucasus. Since Russia's conquest of the Northern Caucasus in 1864 the bulk of the North West Caucasian peoples (Circassians, Abaza-Abkhazians and Ubykhs, the language of which last people became extinct in the autumn of 1992 with the death of the last fully competent speakers, Tevfik Eseng) have dwelt outside the Caucasus in the various countries of the Near East, principally Turkey, in a *diaspora* which is little known in the rest of the world. Today it is only in Israel that any of these languages is taught (in the two settlements there where Circassians live). Given the facts of late 20th century life (pressure to move from village to city, or even abroad, in search of a better life; the necessity of knowing well the main language of the country, Turkish, Arabic, Serbo-Croat, plus essential foreign tongues like English and German; constant bombardment from the main national language on radio, television and in the press; etc..), it is hardly surprising that active language skills in the North West Caucasian languages throughout the Near East are diminishing amongst the younger generations to the extent that many feel that these languages will be dead outside the Caucasus within 100 years. However, with the death of communism in the former Soviet Union and the opening of the once closed borders, contacts are now flourishing between the old homelands and the children of the *diaspora*. The World Cherkess Movement aims to encourage as many of those resident outside of the Caucasus as it can to return to live in the Caucasus, where they can all contribute to building new, post-communist societies. It is unlikely, however, that in the short term (at least) anything like all of the relevant populations will be willing to uproot themselves to take up a new life in countries that are regrettably both politically and economically unstable. Unless something is done soon for these Near Eastern populations, their languages will be gone. It is inconceivable that pupils of village-schools will be keen to learn the Cyrillic alphabet, even if suitable teachers could be provided. This is why the use of Latin with its Turkish phonetic values could be so beneficial. If Turkic Latin is the answer for the Near Eastern populations, why not sweep away the old systems with their communist-imposed memories back in the Caucasus at the same time? Take full advantage of this moment to re-establish the old linguistic links that once bound the whole North West Caucasus by introducing a single alphabet (with local variations where necessary) that can serve the needs of Abkhazians, West and East Circassians, as well as Abazinians¹; and the added gain will be that a bond will be created that will stretch not only across the Caucasian chain from Circassia into Abkhazia (*see*

¹My Abkhazian colleague, V. Chirikba, currently at Leiden University has prepared a draft of his own ideas for *A Latinized Alphabet for Abkhazo-Adyghean Languages*, as yet unpublished.

independent of Georgia following the tragic war of 1992-93) but across the Black Sea into Turkey as well. Faced with this marvellous possibility, negative reaction from a writers' lobby fearful of losing readers for works published in the scripts currently in use pales into insignificance. After all, any item of real literary worth could be easily re-published in the new script. The only serious problem ought to be that of the cost involved. However, a variety of former Soviet republics (in the North Caucasus one can mention Chechenia) have already taken the decision to change their scripts, and, if such a decision can be taken in the straitened economic circumstances prevailing in these other republics, the same ought to be possible in (other) North Caucasian regions also. Whether any change is eventually made or not, it is at least time openly to discuss the problem.

Before turning attention to the details of today's Abkhaz alphabet and how it might be adapted to a Roman form it might be useful to point out that the language has been written a number of different ways since it was first given a written form in the third quarter of the 19th century by the man who really began the linguistic study of North Caucasian languages, the Russian Baron Peter von Uslar. His total of 55 Cyrillic-based characters, which did not fully distinguish the phonemes of the more complex northern Bzyp dialect he chose to study, was reduced in 1865 by Bartolomej. A further reduction to 51 took place as a result of the collaboration between the Abkhazian D. Gulia and the Kartvelian K' Mač'avariani. Re-adapted by A. Č'oč'ua in 1909 to a restored total of 55 characters, this script functioned for some twenty years. In 1926 the Georgian-Scot Nikolai Marr employed his truly horrible 'Analytical Alphabet' of some 75 characters for his *Abkhaz-Russian Dictionary*. As part of the USSR's Latinisation-drive of the 'twenties, Abkhaz too went over to a Roman script with the introduction in 1928 of N. Jakovlev's 'Unified Abkhaz Alphabet' -- at this point the literary language seems to have switched to the phonetically simpler southern Abzhwa dialect, which has a mere 58 consonantal phonemes. Whilst between 1936 and 1938 the so-called 'Young Written Languages' of the USSR had their scripts altered to Cyrillic-based forms, those of Abkhaz and Ossetic (as written in Georgia -- the Ossetic of North Ossetia in the Russian Federation adopted a Cyrillic-based script) were changed to a Georgian base. Although hardly anything was published in this Georgian-based alphabet as Abkhaz language and culture were repressed during the 'forties as part of a sustained drive to georgianise Abkhazia, following the deaths of Georgian Stalin and Mingrelian Beria in 1953 the Abkhazians insisted that they be permitted to free themselves from this unwelcome sign of continuing Georgian influence at the heart of their cultural life, and as a result the present-day new Cyrillic-based

script was born. Whereas the Cyrillic-based scripts developed for the other North Caucasian languages that were awarded literary status by the early Soviet regime make use of only one character that is today not part of the Cyrillic inventory (viz. the old form of capital Ў = **И**), modern Abkhaz became burdened with no fewer 14 signs (15, if one includes the special use of the apostrophe) that are foreign to Cyrillic, although it does not utilise the old capital Ў. In addition to this, which fact alone makes it difficult to fit all of the upper and lower case letters onto a typewriter, there is a most regrettable inconsistency in the use of one of the diacritics, which sometimes marks glottalisation (as against aspiration) and sometimes marks aspiration (as against glottalisation) -- cf. **к** = [k'] vs **к̣** = [kh], whereas the role is reversed in the opposition **ч** = [tʃʰ] vs **ч̣** = [tʃ']; it has an entirely different function in association with **х** (viz. **х** = [x] vs **х̣** = [χ]). It was the labours of a committee that gave birth to this script, and such a parentage comes as no surprise. For more details with reference to Abkhaz see Hewitt (1989) and for Caucasian scripts in general Hewitt (1994).

It remains to examine how the Höhlig model could be adapted to meet the needs of Abkhaz (and Abaza). I shall set out the present Abkhaz alphabet in the traditional order², placing alongside it my suggested Roman forms -- if adopted, a re-ordering would be essential to conform with the traditional order of Latin. Comments will follow this presentation:

<u>Abkhaz Script</u>	<u>Roman version</u>	<u>IPA</u>	<u>Abkhaz</u>	<u>Roman</u>	<u>IPA</u>
а(а)	a(a)	a/a:	б	b	b
в	v	v	г	g	g
гь	gi	g̣	гь	gu	g ^w
ҧ	gh	ɣ	ҧб	ghi	ɣ̣
ҧу	ghu	ɣ ^w	д	d	d
дә	du	db	е	e	E
ж	j	ʒ	жб	j	J
жә	ju	J ^w	э	z	z
з	dz	dz	зә	ĉu	dZ ^w
и	y/y1/1y	j/jə/i:	к	k'	k'
кь	k'i	k'	кь	k'u	k ^w '
қ	k	k	қб	ki	k
қу	ku	k ^w	к	q'	q'
қь	q'i	q'	кь	q'u	q ^w '

²To be read according to the pattern:

1	2
3	4
5	6

л	l	l	м	m	m
н	n	n	о	o	o
п	p'	p'	п	p	p
р	r	r	с	s	s
т	t'	t'	тә	t'u	t'p'
т	t	t	тә	tu	tp
у	w/w1/1w	w/wə/u:	ф	f	f
х	x	x	хь	xi	x̣
ху	xu	x ^w	х̣	h	ḥ
хә	hu	ḥ ^w	ц	ts	ts
цә	ḥu	tCW	ц	ts'	ts'
цә	ḥ̣u	tCW'	ч	ç	tS
ч	ç'	tS'	ч	ç̣	Ts4
ч	ç'	Ts4'	ш	š	s4
шь	ž	S	шә	ʒu	S ^w
ы	ɪ	ə	ә	yu	·
ұ	ē	əΩ	ұь	c	dJ
ь	i	·	ә	u	w

It will be obvious from the above that, having followed Höhlig's use of the letter 'u' to mark the secondary feature of labialisation, I have taken the letter 'y' to mark the corresponding feature of palatalisation. This immediately introduces a disparity between the use of 'y' in the Adyghe script and its use here in Abkhaz, for, not being faced with the necessity of having to indicate palatalisation in Adyghe, Höhlig was free to use this vowel-character in the way she chose. However, in Abkhaz we cannot avoid marking palatalisation, and, having followed Höhlig's lead in using the vowel-sign 'u' for labialisation, the simplest choice for palatalisation was 'y'. For [i:] in Abkhaz, which phonologically is /aj/, I recommend writing it according to its phonological makeup, namely 'iy'. For the corresponding long vowel [u:] I recommend a parallel solution, namely '1w', which again mirrors the phonological structure of this long vowel. It would be convenient to adapt Höhlig's Adyghe script in both these ways, so that in place of her **dunayer** I would write **d1wnayer**, and in place of her **zi** I would write **z1y**.

Phonological labialisation in Abkhaz has three realisations (lip-rounding, as in [sw], vs labio-dentalisation, as in [cW], vs double articulation with bilabial trill, as in [tp]); no distinction is made between these three types in the script. It should also be pointed out that whilst **t'u** in Adyghe has the bilabial type of labialisation (to give [w]), in Abkhaz this same alphabetic sequence is realised as double articulation of the type [t'p]

Literary Abkhaz lacks the Adyghe opposition of voiced/voiceless velar fricatives vs voiced/voiceless uvular fricatives. Most commentators seem to place the Abkhaz pair of back fricatives in the uvular region, but over the years I have tended to describe them merely as ‘back fricatives’ whose precise point of articulation is largely determined by their phonetic environment. I have, therefore, chosen to indicate them in the script rather as velars, hence their representation as **gh/x** (etc...) rather than as **ǵ/ǵ̣**. This leaves the diacritical sign **ǵ̣** free to act as base for the representation of the extra uvular (or pharyngalised uvular) voiceless fricatives possessed by the northern Bzyp dialect.

Long (or double) ‘a’ is written, as now, by doubling the ‘a’-character (viz. **aa**). Latin ‘o’ corresponds to present-day Cyrillic ‘o’ in such verb-forms as: **ditson** ‘X was going’ (currently дцон) ⇐ /d̪ə-ca-wa-n/ = ‘[s]he-go-DYNAMIC-FINITE(IMPERFECT)’; **dıq’owp’** ‘X is’ (currently дыкоyn) ⇐ /d̪ə-q’a-w-p’/ = ‘[s]he-be-STATIC-FINITE(PRESENT)’.

It remains to demonstrate the Roman script in a few excerpts of continuous texts, taken at random from a language-primer:

1. K’aç’ıç’ amatua lıçûçûon. Açuaçuala yaak’ılsnı, lyuizçua litsxraayt’. Açui yılrıyuan, aççâçui yıxıışwan. Yaarlâsnı açuçuât’u zegıı rıçûçueyt’. K’aç’ıç’ lan şuişua wirt yıtabıwp’ hua ralhueyt’.

2. Abar ahaq’ia. Ahaq’ia guayuowp’. Ahaq’iaç’ı pxnıgala acık’a rxweyt’. Kiata, bara ahaq’iaç’ı acık’a bızxwama? Şara mak’iana ahaq’iaç’ı acık’a sızxwam. Nas yızxwada? Hara hayunataç’ı san lowp’ acık’a zxwa.

3. Dırmıyt’ Yısf-yıpa Guılıya apıwa şuquıyuyı dıwıwp’. Wıy apıwa lıy’eratıwra abdıw hua yızahhuoyt’. Axuıç’kua rzı ajueynraalakua raçuanı yıyuxıeyt’: «Aq’ızıy ak’uat’ey», «Ats’ısıy ahııhuıy», «Ak’ut’ı k’ark’arra», «Axuıç’kua raşua», «Aapın», «Axuıç’ı yabjgat’uıw».

4. Sıy-ts’aa zegı dzıtıyt’,

Abghıı p’ıt’ın, zegı şutıyt’.

Axıta abaq’ow, amra pxeyt’,

Ats’x yagxan, amş yazhayt’.

Ajular xııyowp’, aşua rhuoyt’,

Adgııl rçuaghuan, yılarıts’oyt’.

Only minor adjustments are needed to render the script complete for use with literary Abaza (based on the T’ap’anta dialect) -- Abaza was first given a

Roman script in 1932, which yielded to the present-day Cyrillic-based form in 1938. The labialised lamino-post-alveolar affricates can be written **cu/çu/ç'u** to reflect their standard articulation as [dʃw/ʃw/ʃw']. The letters **q/qu** are simple insertions for the plain and labialised voiceless uvular plosives. The plain and ejective lateral affricates can be **tlh/tlh'**, or, since there is no contrast between voiceless fricative and voiceless affricate, we could simplify these to **lh/lh'**. The voiced lateral fricative, which together with the two previous sounds, is found only in loans could be marked by **l'**. This, of course, introduces an unfortunate disparity between Abkhaz-Abaza, on the one hand, and Adyghe, where **l** is suggested by Höhlig as the exponent of the voiced lateral fricative (Adyghe lacks the simple voiced lateral continuant [l]). Perhaps uniformity could be achieved by using **l'** in place of **l** in Adyghe. The glottal stop will obviously be **ʔ**. This leaves as the most difficult case the voiced pharyngeal fricatives (plain and labialised). In the IPA the glottal stop is signalled by an undotted question-mark and the voiced pharyngeal fricative has this character back-to-front. Since we are using the apostrophe to mark the glottal stop, perhaps the simplest solution is to make the question mark the voiced pharyngeal fricative marker in our Roman script (thus: **ʔ** for the plain fricative vs **ʔu** for the labialised fricative).

Sample-text (part of the story in Языки народов СССР IV (p.143)):

akuicma alagan așuarax huiş xpata yașat': aqa, așap'kua , aquadiy. yaștaʔaywata, arıy aqa, -- ahuat' akuicma, -- wara amșu wahbap'ta, wara jıwquıp', abaga wayts'hap'ta, arat așap'kua wara yıwquıp', aquadiygii sara skutanayp'ta, sara yısquıp'.

ara'a amșu çʔanarıghughuan akuicma yaç'atast'. akuicma rıtsha așa ʔaç'ıjıt'. amșu abaga çazınanarxan, wara wıç'k'uınızıt'-hua wıguıbzıghap', wıhayı'ap', yıșa!

References

- Hewitt, B.G. 1989. Aspects of Language Planning in Georgia (Georgian and Abkhaz), in M. Kirkwood (ed.) *Language Planning in the Soviet Union*, 123-144. London: Macmillan.
- Hewitt, B.G. 1994. Peoples of the Caucasus, in F. Fernández-Armesto (ed.) *Guide to the Peoples of Europe*, 366-384. London: Times Books.
- Höhlig, M. 1983 (2nd ed. 1990). *Draft of an orthography for Adyghe, Abdzakh dialect, on the basis of the Turkish alphabet (with Turkish and English gloss (2nd edition only))*.