



THE GRAMMAR OF THE KABARDIAN LANGUAGE

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Ethnographic Introduction

1.1 Background

During the past five thousand years Eurasia has been swept by three major language expansions: the Semitic expansion of the Middle East, the Indo-European expansion further north, and later the Altaic expansion, most of it at the expense of the Asiatic regions of Indo-European. What earlier traces we have of linguistic diversity outside of these three families show that a heterogeneous linguistic world has been submerged. The boreal, arctic, and Far Eastern zones have escaped these inundations. Elsewhere only Basque in the Pyrenees and the languages of the Caucasus survive as relics of the earlier diversity.

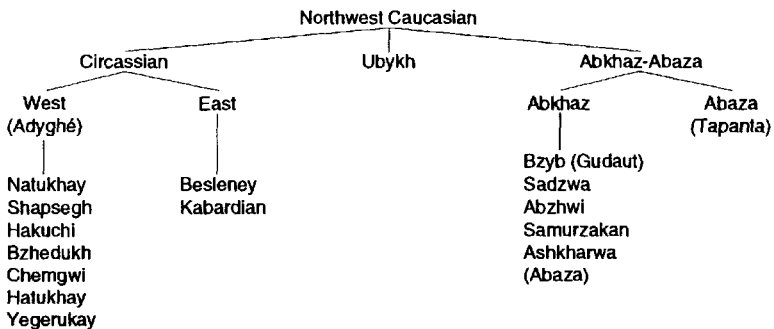
1.1.2 Diversity The Caucasus itself, long known as the Mountain of Tongues, is the most remarkable enclave of this older linguistic world. There are nearly fifty languages still spoken in and around the Caucasus that have no obvious cognates anywhere else on earth. More astonishing still, these indigenous languages fall into three distinct families: the South Caucasian or Kartvelian family, of which the best known is Georgian; the Northeast Caucasian family, consisting of Nakh and Daghestani, the latter itself being divided into three distinct branches; and the Northwest Caucasian, again divided into three branches. A good case can be made that the Northwest and the Northeast families are remotely related. If there is any connection between these two and the South Caucasian family, however, it is a very remote one. Even more surprisingly, the three families all present divergent linguistic features, though as one would expect areal trends also provide for certain vague similarities as well. What is most surprising about the Caucasus is how the linguistic standards that provide broad patterns to the Indo-European, Altaic, and Semitic worlds, abruptly end at the Caucasus. Despite millennia of contact and obvious borrowing into the languages of the Caucasus, little has happened to alter their distinctive character. Quite the contrary, the various external languages that have wandered into the region have become Caucasianised, acquiring features normally alien to their families. The best examples of this are Armenian and the Iranian Ossetic.

1.1.3 Importance The full significance of the Caucasian languages for the linguistic history of western Eurasia has yet to be fully explored, although some efforts have been made to link various ancient languages to one or the other Caucasian family, and it is even possible that Indo-European itself is an aberrant outlier of Caucasian (Colarusso 1991a). The reasons for this are twofold. First, the languages themselves are not only alien in the extreme from the standpoint of the three widespread families, but they are all extraordinarily complex by any linguistic standard. Thus, gaining control over one or more of them is a long and arduous task. Second, this task is made even harder by the difficulty of obtaining studies of the languages. The vast majority of work on these languages has been done in Soviet media, much of it hard or impossible to obtain. The work that has been done in the West has often been excellent, but incomplete, only covering some portion of the languages or some area within a language.

1.2 Northwest Caucasians

Kabardian is a northern member of a language family called Northwest Caucasian (1), that once occupied the western littoral of the Caucasus massif, up to the Sea of Azov and the Taman peninsula, then eastward south of the Kuban river until it met the territory of the Ossetians, then southward up into the mountains to the territory of the Svans, a South Caucasian people, thus forming a very rough triangle (see Colarusso, in press, b). The southern portion of this region was occupied by speakers of Abkhaz, which graded into Abaza when it spilled over the mountains. To the north were the Circassians, with the Ubykhs forming a transitional group between the Circassians and the Abkhaz-Abaza. Those Circassians who wandered farthest east toward Ossetian territory are the Kabardians. Their kinsmen to the west are known by contrast as Circassians, Kyakh (Kabardian /kʰa-x̣/ low-land) or Adyghé, though the Kabardians, Adyghé, and Ubykh all call themselves Adyghé (Kabardian /adəŋa/). 'Kabardian' is merely a tribal designation.

(1) Northwest Caucasian language family (alternate names in parentheses)



1.3 Demography and Political Units

At present there are more than 300,000 Kabardians living in the Caucasus, most in the Kabardino-Balkar SSR (upgraded in 1991 from an ASSR) and adjacent areas (Wixman 1984: 88–89). Following the Russian conquest of the eastern Caucasus in 1859 (Baddeley 1908: 470ff), the Northwest Caucasian peoples offered stiff resistance for another five years, only succumbing in 1864 (Henze, in press). In this year some Kabardians chose to stay in their homeland. The so-called 'Fugitive Kabardians,' those who had offered the greatest resistance to the Russians and had fled to the upper reaches of the Kuban and Zelenchuk rivers (Kuipers 1960: 8–9), emigrated to the Ottoman Empire in 1864, along with their kinsmen the West Circassians. Their descendants may be found today in the Middle East, principally in Jordan.

Speakers of a dialect transitional between Kabardian and the West Circassian dialects, Besleney (Paris 1974a; 1974b: 6), form a minority in the Karachay-Cherkess SSR. The West Circassians are centred about the Adyghé ASSR, with the majority living outside of it in the surrounding territory.

1.4 Kabardian

Kabardian's exotic (from an Indo-European, Altaic, or Semitic standpoint) aspect will become immediately apparent to the reader. Despite frequent claims that Kabardian is merely a dialect of Circassian (Wixman 1984: 88), it in fact diverges sufficiently from the other Circassian dialects to warrant status as a distinct language. One might thus view Kabardian along with the closely related Besleney and the West Circassian dialects as forming one of three distinct Circassian languages, an example of linguistic diversity prevailing among an otherwise highly homogeneous ethnic group.

1.5 Dialects

Kabardian itself is remarkably uniform, consisting of roughly five dialects: Baksan, Mozdok, Malka, Terek, and Kuban. These are all very close to one another, their variation being merely a geographical phenomenon devoid of ethnic or tribal significance. The Baksan dialect (Wixman 1984: 88) served as a basis for a literary language which arose in the nineteenth century. After several changes of alphabet this literary language still flourishes, today utilising a modified cyrillic script.

1.6 History of the Kabardians

There was a Circassian Mameluke dynasty which ruled over Egypt from A.D. 1379 to 1516. There is some native tradition linking the Kabardians with this dynasty, specifically with refugees who fled Egypt when the dynasty was overthrown. In any event, the Kabardians seem to represent an eastward expansion of the Circassians which occurred within the last five or six hundred years. They established political ties with Moscow as early as the sixteenth century, though this was not viewed by the Kabardians or any of the other Circassians as an act of political

submission. Such ties were used, however, as the basis of vague political claims when an expansionist Tsarist empire made encroachments into the Caucasus at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. There then ensued a prolonged, bloody, if sporadic, conflict which culminated in the devastation of the Kabardians and their kinsmen and the mass emigration of most of them from their old haunts into the border regions of the Ottoman Empire.

1.7 Traditional Culture

The Kabardians in the Middle East have assimilated to Turkish or Arab culture in material terms of housing and urban life. Those scattered in the countryside, particularly in Turkey, have clung more closely to their fashions and habits of housing. The Kabardians living in the Caucasus territory have also assimilated in urban settings to former Soviet standards. Those in the countryside have been in many cases relocated from more remote mountain areas, and subjected to collectivisation. With the collapse of communism and the devolution of the Soviet empire, their future may be brighter. Traditional cultural aspects, both in the Middle East and the Caucasus, can still be discerned to an extent that permits some reconstruction of earlier patterns.

1.7.1 Settlement Patterns The traditional Circassian house, the *wuna*, was single story, long and low, with a porch across its front. Often it had an enclosure around it to house livestock. A separate guest-house was usually on the margins of the property.

The West Circassians lived scattered in small villages (Kuipers 1956), many of these running like strings of beads along river courses. By contrast, the Kabardians had begun to organise into larger urban units, many of them serving as forts. Their integration into bands headed by chieftains was accordingly stronger than that of their kinsmen or of the Ossetians and Chechens to their east and southeast. They practised a mixed economy of farming and animal husbandry. Their breeding of horses was outstanding and widely known. Along with this went great skill in horsemanship. Apiculture was also practised, and hunting was carried out up in the mountains.

1.7.2 Clothing For special occasions Circassian women wore elegant, gown-like dresses which were cinched at the waist, often with long, false sleeves, and high hats, usually with scarves hanging from them. The men wore a caftan-like coat over a collarless shirt and loose riding pants. This caftan, called the 'cherkesska,' was widely copied by other groups, including the Cossacks. It was open down to a cinched belt and had a row of silver, filigreed powder cartridges on either side of the chest. Its sleeves were loose and ended halfway down the forearm. The uniform was completed with a *karakul* hat, wider side to side than front to back, and a pair of

Caucasian boots, a sort of knee-high combination boot and moccasin. Daggers were always carried at the belt, along with sabres and other weapons. Codes of dress were strict and even today Kabardians will refer to their cherkesska as a “uniform.” This reflects the almost military-like organisation of their society.

The strong sense of aesthetics exhibited in clothing carries over into design in general. The chief decorative motif is a simple foliate pattern of leaves and vines. Unlike typical Middle Eastern patterns, these designs do not fill space so much as they demarcate pleasing zones of space on items such as books, furniture, and clothing.

1.7.3 Social Organisation Circassian society as a whole and that of the Kabardians in particular was organised in something almost like a caste system. The princes (Kabardian /pʂə/) were at the pinnacle. They exercised control over their clans and saw to relations between clans and outsiders. Their rule was enforced by the next stratum, the nobles (Kabardian /wahrq/). Trade, manufacture, and agriculture were carried out by the Freeman (Kabardian /ʁʁˈa-qˈa-ʁ/ born-free-man). Prisoners of war became the retainers or servants of the princes and nobility, and were known as prince’s men (Kabardian /pʂə-ʁ/ prince-man). There were complex rankings within each stratum and movement within or between strata, though possible, was extremely difficult. Cutting across this system was one of clans or “blood frames” (Kabardian /ʁ-a-pq/ blood-connective-frame). Members of a clan all shared a common surname (which came before the given name). The ranks of various members of the clan was determined by the prestige of an ancestor within it. These groups of ranking were called “sons of a man” (Kabardian /ʁˈ-a-qˈ/ man-connective-son). This was opposed to “traces of a man” (Kabardian /ʁˈə-wəʒə/ man-trace), any descent grouping, irrespective of rank.

1.7.4 Custom The whole social structure was held together by a set of customs, the Adyghé Khabza (Kabardian /adəġa-ʁaabza/ Circassian-custom), which was interpreted and expanded upon by a council of elders, the Khasa (Kabardian /ʁa-a-s-a/ mass-in-sit-in = ‘a sit-in,’ ‘a council’). Disputes were resolved, when possible, by a body of codified law universal throughout the Caucasus, the *adat* (Luzbetak 1951). Despite such an elaborate social structure, disputes often turned to bloodshed, and this sparked the curse of the Caucasus—the blood feud. Such feuds were interminable, ceasing only during times of war and general conscription. Vengeance for a killing of a kinsman was an obligation that was marked as inalienably possessed in West Circassian dialects. The term in Kabardian and the other dialects is /ʁə-sˈə-ʒə-n/ blood-make-again-infinitive, ‘to make blood again.’

1.7.5 Kinship The Kabardians shared with their kinsmen a type of kinship system that has become an archetype within anthropology, the “Cherkess-Trobriand”

kinship system. In this system the husband and wife have a socially formal relationship (whatever its qualities in private). This formality extends to a father and his sons, but not to his daughters. The wife has a spontaneous, unfettered relationship with her brother and this extends to this brother and his nephew, his sister's son but not her daughter. One might add that a brother's children are ego's children. In other words, one's fraternal nephews and nieces are considered to be one's children as well.

1.7.5.1 *Fictive Kinship* The fictive kinship of milk-brother also existed. This form of adoption was also used in desperate straits to stop a blood feud. A man could put his mouth to the breast of a woman of a warring clan and thereby gain fictive membership in that clan. This would stop the bloodshed.

1.7.5.2 *Kin Terminology* The kinship terminology is of interest. It reads like a direct gloss of an elicitation list: father's father, father's elder brother, mother's sister's daughter, and so forth. Hypocoristic (baby-talk, terms of endearment) kin terms also occur.

1.7.6 *Religion and Myth* Kabardians are Sunni Moslems and have been since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century and the onset of the Tsarist invasion of their homeland. When Islam entered their society is unclear, but there is evidence that it did so in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Certainly it could not have been earlier than the thirteenth, for at that time Circassians were still conscripted as *mamelukes*, non-Moslem mercenary soldiers. This is consistent with the persistence of many pre-Islamic features in their society. A large corpus of myth, the Nart sagas, enshrines traditions and beliefs of extreme antiquity, with many parallels to the ancient lore of Vedic India, pagan Scandinavia, and Classical Greece. The ideals of conduct exemplified in these myths are still largely seen as desirable goals. The social patterns depicted therein are still often adhered to.

1.7.7 *Social Etiquette* A strong sense of restraint and decorum dominate the social arena. Utterances made and positions taken cannot be withdrawn without the loss of face. Thus, compromise and dialogue are difficult to establish, and most energy is directed to staving off discord rather than handling it once it has begun.

1.7.7.1 *The Elderly* One must show respect to elders; especially the young must do so. Elders are not merely shown respect, but are expected in turn to show a full range of passions and activities in their advanced years, albeit of a somewhat reduced form. No one thinks an elder person foolish if they fall in love or seek a mate. For a young person to wait upon an elder is considered a great honour. Similarly one must show respect to one's parents. The father arbitrates in matters outside the house and in cases of serious dispute, while the mother sets the tone and tempo of events within the home. There is usually only one wife, though in times past more than one,

either simultaneously or by a series of marriages, seems to have been possible upon occasion.

1.7.7.2 *Romance* Young people are to postpone serious romantic involvement until their late twenties or thirties, at which time they are expected to settle down into a career and family. Marriage was and still is by mock abduction. Actual abductions also counted as marriages, though they were frowned upon.

1.7.7.3 *Fosterage* The young of princes and nobles were often fostered out to trusted retainers to raise as their own children. When coming of age in their teens, they were to be returned to their biological parents. It was a great honour for a retainer to serve as such a foster parent, but the greatest honour was for such a foster child to choose to remain with his foster parents. Such a child was called a *qana* (Kabardian /q'a-a-n-a/hither-in-remain-in = 'the one who remained'). The children of poor families were often sold as *mamelukes* or servants to wealthy members of the Ottoman Empire. In effect this was a sort of conscription with a compensatory sum being paid to the parents, rather than a slave market as is often depicted. This fate was preferable to that of the grinding poverty which must have been the lot of many of the poor in the Caucasus. As has been mentioned, one such group even became the lords of Egypt for a while.

1.7.7.4 *Feasting and Dancing* The community as a whole cemented its relationship by means of large feasts and dancing. The feasts are depicted in the Nart sagas as Olympian banquets, with the head god leading the toasts and festivities. The same ideal is carried out in life, and the greatest honour is to be selected a *tamada* (Kabardian /tʰaamada/), which might originally have meant 'father of the gods' (Knobloch 1989: 52). This term has been borrowed into Russian to the north and Persian to the south.

Integral to the feasts is dancing. Both young and old dance and sing at such festivities. Women's dances emphasise gliding movements and overall gracefulness. The men's dances at times seem to verge on the physically impossible: enormous leaps, dancing on the toes without padding, dancing on the knees, and dancing with a blur of daggers or sabres. Horsemanship reaches one of its peaks in a round dance, the *wugya* (Kabardian /wə-gʷ-a/ many (= a valence affix)-turn-intransitive), in which the horsemen dance in a circle on their horses, each horse facing inward.

1.7.7.5 *Hospitality* Universal in the Caucasus was a strong tradition of offering hospitality to a guest, and the Kabardians are no exception in this regard. The arrival of a guest, whether anticipated or not, is often the excuse for a major feast. Traditionally the guest was housed in a special building, and while there domiciled was the responsibility of his host. A host had to defend his guest even in a blood feud. One of the most poignant tales is of a host giving his life in defence of a guest.

1.8 Present Culture and Future Prospects

1.8.1 The Russian Federation In the Russian Federation the Kabardians and their kinsmen enjoy a modern style of life, with urban centres, publishing houses, folklore institutes, theatres and symphonies, schools and universities. Instruction in Kabardian or Adyghean (as the West Circassian standard is called) seems to be possible in ever higher grades, reaching now to the university level. A similar degree of enfranchisement is sadly lacking among the diaspora Circassians.

1.8.2 The Middle East In the Middle East the Kabardians and other Circassians enjoy mixed blessings. The West Circassians in Israel enjoy substantial freedom, as do the various Kabardians and West Circassians in Jordan. Those in Jordan, centred about Amman, are often relatively wealthy, even if their long-term political position is less than secure. Those in Turkey are just beginning to enjoy a modicum of recognition and ethnic enfranchisement. Those in Syria are suppressed and denied ethnic institutions.

1.8.3 Repatriation In general, however, the Circassians find life in the Middle East at odds with many of their traditional values. This has given rise to a repatriation movement (Colarusso 1991b). To date (1992) three international congresses have been held to discuss the prospect of returning to the homeland. The last conference was held in Nal'chik, a Kabardian city. The Soviet authorities permitted the Circassians to fly their national flag, and also agreed to allow repatriation. The exact mechanism of such repatriation has yet to be worked out and there are, as one might imagine, many difficulties, not the least of which is the transmission of information to Circassians scattered throughout the Middle East. Further, the prospect of repatriation raises the issues of what constitutes Circassian identity, of what social and political institutions would best embody such an identity, and of which language or languages would best encode these institutions.

1.8.4 Recent Changes in Circassia Certainly, the Soviets seemed willing to help, but their power did not continue to hold in this region. They elevated the three Circassian political units one notch up on their administrative hierarchy, and extended the power of the Circassian Cultural Council over all things Circassian not only by granting them new powers, but by infusing large sums of money into their efforts as well. The long-term intentions of the Russian Federation remain to be seen.

1.8.5 The Future The coming decades may well witness the elevation of Kabardian and one or more of its sisters to the status of national languages. Set in this context, this grammar may take on greater significance than originally intended.