



Endangered Caucasian Languages in Georgia (ECLinG)

The Caucasus region has been renowned since antiquity as an area with an extraordinarily high number of distinct languages. The linguistic diversity of yore has not only survived until the present but has even been considerably extended by the migration of speakers of Indo-European, Turkic, Mongolian, Semitic, and other languages into the area. Today, the linguistic map of the Caucasus area comprises appr. 40 indigenous languages, pertaining to three groups which have not been proved to be genetically related with each other, but also Indo-European languages such as Armenian, Russian, Ossetic, or Tati, Turkic languages such as Azeri, Karachay-Balkar, Kumyk, or Trukhmen, the East-Aramaic Semitic language Aysor, and Mongolian Kalmyk. Furthermore, there are minor communities of speakers of languages such as Estonian or German.

The ECLinG project focusses on three endangered Caucasian languages spoken in present-day Georgia, viz. Tsova-Tush, Svan, and Udi.



The linguistic diversity of present-day Caucasias

TSOVA-TUSH



Together with Chechen and Ingush which are mostly spoken North of the Caucasus, the Tsova-Tush language (also called Bats or Batsbi) belongs to the so-called Nakh subfamily of the North-East-Caucasian stock. Its speakers live in a close community within one village of North-East Georgia, viz. Zemo-Alvani, which is situated in a region where otherwise the Tush and Kakhetian dialects of Georgian are spoken. According to recent statistics, the number of speakers has been reduced to less than 1,600. All speakers of Tsova-Tush are bilingual, speaking Georgian alongside the Tsova-Tush language. While Georgian has been used as the primary means of communication, Tsova-Tush has kept its status as a living language in familiar environments for centuries.

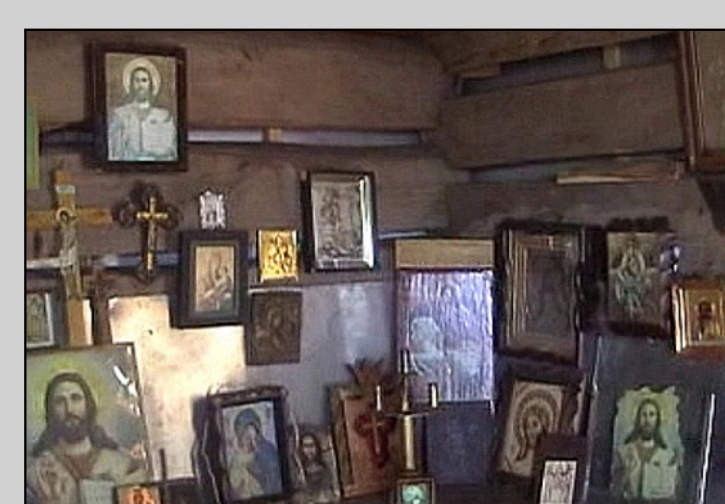


SVAN



The Svan language is located in the high mountain region of North West Georgia along the gorges of the rivers Enguri, Tskhenis-tskali and Kodori. It consists of five dialects: The so-called "Upper Svan" dialects Upper and Lower Bal, distributed in the Enguri valley, and the "Lower Svan" dialects Lashkh, Lentekhian and Cholurian spoken along the Tskhenis-tskali river. The main differences between the dialects and sub-dialects are observable in their sound systems, but there are also considerable divergences in morphology and syntax.

According to the most recent statistics, the number of speakers of Svan does not exceed 30,000 people today, with ca. 15,000 speakers of Upper Svan and less than 12,000 speakers of Lower Svan dialects. All speakers of Svan are bilingual speaking Georgian alongside Svan, with the latter being used as a familiar means of communication only while Georgian is the language of administration and school teaching everywhere in the Svan speaking areas.



UDI



Udi belongs to the Lezgian (or Southern) branch of the East Caucasian language family. Today, it is spoken in three villages in Transcaucasia as well as in a number of diaspora places scattered throughout the Russian Federation, Armenia and Kazakhstan. The original habitat of the ethnic Udis in Northern Azerbaijan is now confined to the village of Nidzh. Here, the ethnic Udis represent a rather compact unity of roughly 4,500 people. Before autumn 1989, Vartashen (now Oghuz) was the second Azerbaijani village which hosted a significant number of ethnic Udis. By virtue of the Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes in 1989, most of the roughly 3,000 Vartashen Udis were expelled. Today, some 35 ethnic Udi families still live in Oghuz. A third settlement of ethnic Udis was founded in Eastern Georgia in 1922 when a considerable number of Vartashen Udis left their original habitat for economic reasons. This village, called Oktomberi (formerly Zinobiani), today hosts some 80 Udis, living in a totally "Georgian" environment.



CONTACT ADDRESS

Prof. Dr. Jost Gippert
Vergleichende Sprachwissenschaft
Universität Frankfurt
gippert@em.uni-frankfurt.de

