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## ABKHAZO-ADYGHEAN LANGUAGES AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS HOW TO SECURE THEIR FUTURE

In this paper, I shall discuss the global problem of language endangerment and how it pertains to the Abkhazo-Adyghean languages; I shall also put forward some proposals concerned with securing the future of these languages both in the Caucasus and in the Diaspora.

### Language Endangerment

Language, as is well known, is an essential part of any culture and an important component and tool of human civilization. There are languages spoken by many millions of people, like Chinese, Spanish or English, and languages spoken by very small communities, often the size of a village, or even a small group in a village. It is evident that today, in a time of globalization and mass communication, small linguistic communities are under enormous pressure, and are forced into vicious competition for survival with bigger languages. And more often than not, they are losing this uneven struggle and, sadly, disappear.

In general, the current situation with the world's linguistic diversity is very grave. Some linguists believe that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century nearly half of the 6,000 languages spoken in the world today will be doomed or will disappear altogether. There are much more funds allocated and attention paid to disappearing plants and animals species than to disappearing minority cultures and languages. Some would even argue whether or not we should support endangered languages and if they are really needed if, in fact, they are doomed to disappear anyway? Well, the answer is yes, we need them. Any language, however small, is a part of our common human cultural heritage. Any language is the product of a long process of historical development, and each one is unique in its system, structure and vocabulary.

Moreover, language forms an essential part of a small community's identity. Language death is very often a sign of a particular community's death, not necessarily physical, but cultural, which is no less tragic. The sad fate of Ubykh, a West Caucasian language discussed below, provides a cautionary illustration.

There are very subtle mechanisms at play when we analyze the situation with small languages. Sometimes it is a kind of a mystery, why some minority languages, even those in a seemingly unfavorable environment, display resilience and determination to survive, whereas others, even ones with many more speakers, are losing the battle and stop being spoken or transferred to the next generation. If we look for examples from modern societies, some optimistic cases are the situation with Basque in Spain and with Welsh in Great Britain. A unique example of the revival of a virtually dead language is Hebrew, now a fully functional modern language in the state of Israel. There are also attempts to revive the extinct Celtic Cornish language spoken until the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the southwest of Great Britain. However, these examples are few, and more often we witness a contrary situation of rapid language decline and even death. And this happens sometimes even in seemingly favorable conditions. Take, for example, Irish Gaelic spoken in The Republic of Ireland, where it is the official language of the state: despite tremendous governmental support, the population at large prefers to use English, not Irish.

In certain cases language decline reaches a point of non-return, when it is nearly impossible to motivate people to use their native tongues and pass them on to younger generations. Another factor, which can disturb the balance and cause the language to decline, is the change of geographic and social environments. From this point of view, the linguistic situation in Daghestan in the Caucasus is very instructive. Here, unlike many other places of the world, many, even the smallest linguistic communities, show a steady tendency to growth, displaying no signs of decline, despite a multilingual context and steady pressures from bigger neighbouring languages. Yet the situation changes radically when members of these communities are resettled from the mountain villages to the lowlands where, in a different geographic and socio-economic setting, they rather quickly stop using their native tongue and shift to the language(s) of their more numerous neighbours. It is thus very important to know all the factors and mechanisms which can be potentially dangerous for the normal functioning of a language. This knowledge could

assist in timely interventions to counterbalance the adverse effect of one or another factor. But this is, of course, in no way an easy task.

#### Languages Spoken in the Caucasus

Out of the many languages spoken in the Caucasus, only three genetic groupings are known to be indigenous and were spoken in the Caucasus area well before the appearance of Indo-European, Turkic or Semitic languages. These are: Abkhazo-Adyghean, or West Caucasian, spoken in the northwestern Caucasus and western Transcaucasus; Nakh-Daghestanian, or East Caucasian, spoken in the north-central and northeastern Caucasus; and Kartvelian, or South Caucasian, spoken in the southern Caucasus. The West Caucasian and East Caucasian branches have been demonstrated – in works by Russian linguists S. Trubetzkoy (1922; 1930), N. Nikolayev & S. Starostin (1994), and A. Abdokov (1983) – to be linguistically related and together form the North Caucasian linguistic family. On the other hand, the North Caucasian and the Kartvelian language families are not genetically related to each other. Apart from these indigenous Caucasian idioms, there are also Indo-European Ossetic, Armenian, Tat, Talysh, Kurdish and Russian, as well as Turkic Azeri, (Anatolian) Turkish, Karachay-Balkar, Kumyk and Nogay. One can add here as well Indo-European Greek and Semitic Neo-Aramaic (called “Aysor” in the Caucasus). The following table summarizes the languages of the Caucasus and their genetic affiliations.

Table 1. Languages Spoken in the Caucasus

Language family	Branch	Group	Language(s)
<b>Kartvelian (or South Caucasian)</b>		East Kartvelian	Georgian
		West Kartvelian	Megrelian, Laz
		Svan	Svan
<b>North Caucasian</b>	West Caucasian	Abkhaz	Abkhaz, Abaza
		Circassian	Adyghe, Kabardian
		Ubykh	Ubykh
	East Caucasian	Avar	Avar
		Andi	Andi, Akhvakh, Karata, Botlikh, Godoberi, Bagvala, Chamala, Tindi
		Tsez	Tsez, Khvarshi, Hinukh, Bezhta, Hunzib
		Lak	Lak
		Dargi	Dargi (with Kubachi, Megeb, etc.)
		Lezgi	Lezgi, Tabasaran, Aghul, Rutul, Tsakhur, Udi, Kryz, Budukh, Archi
		Khinalug	Khinalug
Nakh	Chechen, Ingush, Bats		
<b>Indo-European</b>	Iranian	North-Eastern	Ossetic
		North-Western	Talysh, Kurdish
		South-Western	Tat
	Armenian		Armenian
	Slavic	East Slavic	Russian
	Greek	Northern	Pontic Greek, Tsalka-Alaverdy (< Cappadocian)
<b>Turkic</b>		North-Western (Kypchak)	Karachay-Balkar, Kumyk, Nogay
		South-Western (Oghuz)	Azeri, Turkish
<b>Afroasiatic</b>	Semitic	West-Central	Neo-Aramaic (Aysor)



The number of speakers of the West Caucasian languages in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century apparently comprised about 1 million (or even somewhat more), the majority of whom were Circassians, West and East. The number of Adyghe (i.e., West Circassians) at that time is estimated at between 700,000 to 750,000 (Pokrovskij 1958). As to East Circassians (Kabardians), their number, including the Besleneys, totaled 55,000 (Balkarov 1959: 15). Thus, the number of all Circassians before the exodus was probably about 800,000, though some authors argue that their pre-emigration number was more than one million (cf. Dzidzarija 1982: 212). The pre-exodus number of Abazas (i.e., both the Tapanta and Ashkharywa groups) can be estimated at about 40,000 to 50,000. According to historical documents, between 30,000 to 40,000 Abazas emigrated (cf. Dzidzarija 1982: 213). The pre-exodus number of Abkhazians proper was more than 130,000 (cf. Dzidzarija 1982: 161, 213, 289). Thus, before emigration there were about 170,000 to 180,000 speakers of different Abkhaz-Abaza dialects in the West Caucasus. The estimates for the number of Ubykhs before emigration are between 30,000 and 40,000.

The devastating Caucasian war, which was waged by fire and sword during several decades by Tsarist Russia aiming to conquer the Northern Caucasus, dramatically changed the entire ethnolinguistic landscape of the West Caucasus region. Most of the Abkhazo-Adyghean speaking peoples had to flee to the Ottoman Empire, and this forced emigration, during which many thousands died of hunger and epidemic diseases, resulted in the present sparseness of the Abkhazo-Adyghean population in their historical territory. In contrast to approximately one million Circassians in the middle of the previous century, after the Caucasian war and emigration there were only about 100,000 left in the Caucasus (Dzidzarija 1982: 212). The post-emigration number of Tapanta and Ashkharywa was about 10,000. According to the 1897 All-Russia census, there were 58,697 Abkhazians left in Abkhazia (Dzidzarija 1982: 447). As for the Ubykhs, the western Abkhazian tribes Sadz and Tswidzhi, and the mountain Abkhazian tribes (Ahchypsy, Aibga, Pskhwy, Guma, Abzhaqwa, Dal-Tsabal) – they were all expelled to Turkey.

According to 2002 All-Russia census data, the number of Karbardian speakers in the Russian Federation is 580,475 (including Kabardians of Kabarda-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkesia and elsewhere in Russia); the number of Adyghe speakers (Temirgoy, Bzhadugh, Shapsugh, Abadzakh, etc.) in the Russian Federation is 131,759; and the number of Abaza

speakers in the Russian Federation is 37,942.<sup>1</sup> The Abkhazians number around 100,000, the majority of whom live in the de-facto independent Republic of Abkhazia as well as outside of Abkhazia, mainly in Russia.

It is far more difficult to provide statistics about the number of the Abkhazo-Adyghean communities in the Diaspora. The largest West Caucasian Diaspora community is in the Republic of Turkey. Although the exact figures are not known, there is no doubt that there are more Circassians and Abkhazians living in Turkey than in the Caucasus or anywhere else: an estimated two to three million Adyghe speakers and 200,000 to half a million Abkhaz-Abaza speakers. The Ubykhs, numbering probably some 15,000 to 20,000 people, are bilingual in some forms of Adyghe (mainly Shapsugh or Abadzakh) and Turkish, or are monolingual in Turkish, although they identify themselves mainly with the Circassians (Turkish: *Çerkes*).

Besides Turkey, there are large Circassian communities in Syria and Jordan, and smaller Circassian and Abkhaz groups in other countries of the Middle East, as well as in Western Europe, the United States and Canada.

Strictly linguistically, it is actually more accurate to speak in terms of three West Caucasian languages: Abkhaz-Abaza, Circassian/Adyghe, and Ubykh, because there is a considerable level of mutual comprehension between Tapanta/Ashuwa Abaza and Abkhaz, on the one hand, and Adyghe and Kabardian, on the other hand. They can thus be regarded as dialects of Abkhaz-Abaza and Circassian, respectively. From phonological, grammatical, and lexical perspectives, Ubykh occupies an intermediate position between the Abkhaz and Circassian branches.

#### Language Endangerment in the Western Caucasus

There are different types of language endangerment. Usually, a certain language is regarded as being endangered when there are only a few speakers left; with the death of these last speakers the language can also be declared dead. For instance, at present in Europe and Asia as many as 90 languages can now be regarded as nearly extinct, as there are only a few elderly speakers of these languages still living. In other cases there are still

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. <http://www.perepis2002.ru>.

many speakers of a certain language, but these speakers have stopped using their native tongue, are not passing it to the next generation, and prefer to communicate in another language.

What can be said about the West Caucasian languages from the point of view of language endangerment? The most tragic is the fate of Ubykh. The last speaker of Ubykh, the famous Tevfik Esenç, died at the age of 88 on 7 October 1992 in the Western Turkish village of Hacı Osman Köyü<sup>2</sup>. For the more fortunate of Ubykh's sister-languages, we can say with certainty that in the Caucasus only Kabardian (East Circassian) has good prospects for survival, as it is spoken by a large community in the Kabarda-Balkar Republic, numbering nearly half a million (498,702, according to the 2002 census, which is 55.32 per cent of the total population), and also in the Karachay-Cherkes Republic (49,591 Kabardians/Cherkes, comprising 11.28 per cent of the population). The situation is less secure with Adyghe, which is spoken mainly in the Adyghey Republic, where the Adyghees are a small minority (108,115, comprising 24.18 per cent of the total population) and are under significant pressure from the Russian language (Russians constitute 64.48 per cent of the republic's population). The position of Abaza, spoken in the Karachay-Cherkes Republic by 32,346 people (or 7.36 per cent of the republic's population), is also not secure, as the Abaza language undergoes pressures both from Kabardian and from Russian (33.65 per cent of the population in this republic is Russian).<sup>3</sup>

The situation is even more dramatic with the Abkhaz language. This is paradoxical, because Abkhaz is the official language of the state; there are Abkhaz kindergartens, school and university courses, and Abkhaz-language television, radio and press. However, Abkhaz is at a disadvantage due to the demographic weakness of its speakers in the cities and the fact that in the multiethnic milieu of Abkhazia's urban centers the undisputed *lingua franca* is Russian. Russian exerts enormous pressure on Abkhaz: it dominates the streets of the cities and the markets; it is the language of the government bureaucracy, the parliament, higher education, the media and business.

Although the prestige of Abkhaz has risen significantly over the past decades, and there is now more awareness among parents about the importance of teaching it to their

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<sup>2</sup> I was extremely fortunate to have met and worked with Tevfik Esenç in his native village one day in December 1991.

<sup>3</sup> The 2002 census percentage figures are from <http://www.mojgorod.ru/regs/list.html>.

children, the overall influence of Russian in urban parts of Abkhazia is still so overwhelming that it nearly neutralizes these recent positive trends and adversely affects native language competence among the younger generation of urban Abkhazians. There are many urban Abkhaz families, who, although possessing a full command of Abkhaz, prefer to use Russian in everyday life. Many of these families do send their children to Abkhaz schools, and there, from the first to the third grade, the language of instruction is Abkhaz. Many children of Russian-speaking Abkhaz urban families therefore learn, as their only opportunity, their native tongue in school. And the results are extremely successful. But the situation changes abruptly in the fourth grade, when the language of instruction shifts from Abkhaz to Russian. There are no schools in Abkhazia with a full educational cycle in Abkhaz. And from the fourth grade on, the children virtually stop using the native idiom during the educational process, aside from native language and literature lessons once or twice a week, and shift nearly exclusively to Russian.

*Table 2. The number of ethnic Abkhaz pupils in Abkhaz and Russian schools in Abkhazia (as of 11.09.2008 г.; source: Ministry of Education of the Republic of Abkhazia)*

1	Number of schools	169	%
2	Total number of pupils of all nationalities	26,220	
3	Total number of ethnic Abkhaz pupils	15,185	100
4	Number of Abkhazians who attend Abkhaz schools	9,358	61.63
5	Number of Abkhazians who attend Abkhaz sectors of two-sector (Abkhaz and Russian) schools	1,209	7.96
6	Number of Abkhazians who attend Russian schools or Russian sectors of two-sector schools	4,618	30.41

The data given in this table show that the Abkhaz parents of more than 30 per cent of pupils prefer to send their children to Russian, not to Abkhaz schools or to Abkhaz sectors of two-sector schools.

Another adverse factor is that due to the unfavorable economic conditions in the rural areas, many young Abkhazians prefer to leave their village homes and move to the

cities, where in the multiethnic milieu they are forced to use Russian. Coming from the village and being aware of their own inadequacy in Russian, they choose to give their children the advantages associated with a good command of the majority language by sending them, for example, to Russian schools. Although Abkhaz is still the only language used in the villages, the influence of nearby cities, where family members might work, the predominantly Russian language educational system, as well as the ever-present television have contributed to the increasing penetration of Russian into the rural areas.

This rather alarming situation presents a significant challenge to Abkhaz society. I would like to emphasize that currently there is no effort underway to require members of other ethnic groups in Abkhazia – Russians, Armenians, Georgians and others – to use Abkhaz. The learning of Abkhaz, the official language of the state, by non-Abkhaz communities should of course be encouraged, and the Abkhaz language is indeed present in the school curriculum of non-Abkhaz schools. However, the biggest problem is how to motivate the urban Abkhazians themselves to use their mother tongue and, no less importantly, to pass it on to their children.

Thus, Abkhaz should be regarded as more endangered than its sister-languages. It is obvious that serious governmental efforts should be undertaken in order to reverse these negative trends and to secure both the full functionality of Abkhaz within the framework of state institutions, including the educational cycle and sectors of bureaucracy, and the future fate of the Abkhaz language, reaching out especially to the younger generations.

#### Language Endangerment in the Diaspora

Much more alarming is the state of Adyghe-Abkhaz languages in the Diaspora. The situation there is somewhat paradoxical: there are still plenty of competent speakers of West Caucasian languages. Yet, some twenty or thirty years ago many of them stopped passing their language to their children, with the result that there now exists a striking gap between the often excellent native language competence of the parents and a near-zero knowledge of it by their children. This situation is characteristic of both urban and rural population groups, as the villages in this respect by and large are only in a slightly better position. Sadly, the described situation is not a trend or a tendency, but a predominant

phenomenon. The knowledge of their native tongue by Circassian or Abkhaz children in most parts of Turkey can now be regarded as more of an exception rather than a rule. This kind of language decline might be called “linguistic suicide”, when a community “decides” to discontinue the life of its native tongue, does not pass it to the children and shifts to another language.

Both empirical evidence and specialized studies indicate that Circassian and Abkhaz are highly endangered and undergoing a rapid process of decline in the Diaspora.. It appears that without special measures the fate of these languages is doomed. Speaking about the situation in Turkey, the last several decades witnessed a dynamic process of urbanization and modernization of Turkish society paralleled by the increasing importance of linguistic competence in Turkish in virtually every aspect of life. Another general factor is the large-scale internal migration, for economic reasons, from rural villages, with their traditional socio-cultural environment, more favorable for the preservation of native tongues, to the cities, natural melting pots of cultures. This process, which has fully involved the Circassian and Abkhaz communities, also accelerates shifts in language preference and use. Another additional important factor is television broadcasts in majority languages, which weaken the viability of minority languages as they penetrate even the remotest areas.

This general pessimistic conclusion about the present state of the West Caucasian languages in the Diaspora can be corroborated by recent socio-economic and statistical studies conducted on the Circassian and Abkhaz/Abaza communities in Turkey. One such welcome study is the book *Doğu Akdeniz’deki Çerkesler [Circassians of the Eastern Mediterranean]* authored by Dr. Cahit Aslan and published by the Adana Caucasian Cultural Society (2005). Regarding native language competence within the Abkhazo-Adyghean community in the Adana province, Aslan provides the following breakdown, summarized in Table 2:

Table 3. The Level of Language Competence (Aslan 2005: 51)<sup>4</sup>

Ethnic group	Zero competence		Can understand		<b>Can speak</b>		Can write		Total	
		%		%		%		%		%

<sup>4</sup> Bolded emphasis added by me – V. Ch.

Adyghe	953	15.9	1104	18.4	<b>3758</b>	<b>62.9</b>	93	1.5	5968	100.0
Abaza	109	19.0	124	21.6	<b>334</b>	<b>58.2</b>	6	1.0	573	100.0

These data can create an impression that things are not that bad after all: nearly 63% of the community members are competent speakers. However, this impression changes when we look at the age parameters of competent speakers:

Table 4. The Level of Language Competence According to Age Group (Aslan 2005: 53)<sup>5</sup>

Age group	Zero competence		Can understand		Can speak		Can write		Total	
		%		%		%		%		%
0-10	419	62.3	176	26.1	<b>74</b>	<b>11.0</b>	3	0.4	672	100.0
11-20	454	33.9	523	39.0	<b>343</b>	<b>25.6</b>	19	1.4	1339	100.0
21-30	326	24.0	349	25.7	<b>656</b>	<b>48.4</b>	22	1.6	1353	100.0
31-40	152	15.8	137	14.3	<b>654</b>	<b>68.2</b>	15	1.5	958	100.0
41-50	126	11.8	119	11.1	<b>783</b>	<b>73.6</b>	35	3.2	1063	100.0
51-60	91	9.8	56	6.0	<b>761</b>	<b>82.0</b>	19	2.0	927	100.0
60 and older	49	4.8	29	2.8	<b>910</b>	<b>90.8</b>	14	1.3	1002	100.0
All ages	1617	22.1	1389	18.9	<b>4181</b>	<b>57.1</b>	127	1.7	7314	100.0

These figures clearly demonstrate a steady language decline and a dramatic gap in the language competence between the older and the younger generations: from 90.8% among those who are 60 years of age and older, to a meager 11% among young children up to 10 years of age. The general conclusion following from this statistics would be that nearly 90 % of Circassians and Abazas/Abkhazians living in the Adana province do not transmit their native tongues to their children anymore.

There is evidence that the situation in other regions of Turkey would be close to that described here, or sometimes probably even worse. For example, as far as the Abkhaz communities in the north-central parts of Anatolia are concerned, the level of native language competence among the children up to 10 years of age are most likely even lower

<sup>5</sup> Bolded emphasis added by me – V. Ch.

than the figures available for Adana. I have traveled rather extensively in that part of Turkey collecting linguistic material and folklore, and I can say that during my visits, with a single exception, I have not met any Abkhaz family that is raising its children in the native tongue, contrary to the situation that existed some 25 years ago. The youngest speakers of Abkhaz in Turkey are thus now in their thirties, and this is the last generation of competent speakers. Younger Abkhazians may understand the native tongue to a greater or lesser extent, but this rarely results in its full mastery, although there are of course individual cases to the contrary.<sup>6</sup> Again, in the Diaspora too, Abkhaz is more endangered compared to Circassian.

#### What Can and Should Be Done?

The convening of recent conferences by the Caucasian Diaspora community in Turkey demonstrates the recognition of the importance of preserving native heritage – including languages – among community members. This is reflected in Aslan’s previously cited study where 43.5% of the respondents believe that the learning of native tongues is very important (2005: 57). There is thus at least voiced interest in preserving these native languages and transmitting them to the younger generations. But what can be proposed as concrete measures, which could secure the future of the West Caucasian languages both in the Caucasus and in the Diaspora?

In the Caucasus, possible guidelines and recommendations include:

- Raising the prestige of native languages;
- Further expansion of pre-school, primary and secondary school and university instruction in native languages. This would entail, for instance, an increase in the time allotted to native language study. Speaking specifically about Abkhazia, although it would be an enormously difficult task to shift the entire curriculum for Abkhaz pupils completely into Abkhaz, one which may not even be feasible in the

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<sup>6</sup>Note that in the mixed Turkish Abkhazian-Caucasian Abkhazian families, the children are normally raised bilingual in both Abkhaz and Turkish, making it thus a welcome, but rare, exception to the general rule.

immediate future, it is however quite possible to shift at least some of the subjects now taught in Russian into Abkhaz. This will create the necessary continuity between the first three grades, which are nearly exclusively in Abkhaz, and the next eight grades, which are nearly exclusively in Russian, a gap that most adversely affects the motivation and general competence in Abkhaz of young people;

- An increase in the funding of native language schools, especially in the rural areas, and the substantial raising of salaries for teachers of native languages;
- The partial shift of the language of governmental institutions into official native languages; and
- An increase in the funding of the local television stations to expand native language TV broadcasts and to improve the quality of these TV programmes.

Regarding other measures, it is very important to set up small enterprises or factories in the rural areas, so that the young people could find work there and are not forced to migrate to the cities looking for jobs. Another factor is the availability of cultural and sports facilities in the rural areas which would also diminish the need for the young people to move to the cities. Speaking about the situation in Abkhazia, it is important to provide material support for the young families with two or more children, which could positively influence the present unfavorable demographic situation in the republic. These and similar measures could, it is hoped, reverse the current negative trends and make Abkhaz, Abaza, Adyghe and Kabardian fully functional languages in all spheres of life in their societies.

In the Diaspora, where the conditions are naturally quite different from those in the Caucasus, other remedial methods are needed. Despite the overall negative picture, there are several important factors, which can be built upon to improve the situation, provided, of course, that energetic efforts by the respective communities are made. These positive factors are:

- Still a significant number of competent speakers;
- New possibilities, both national and international, to acquire financial means needed for the language revitalization programs;

- The undoubted motivation of groups of younger members of the Diaspora community to master their parental language(s). It is very important that many of those young West Caucasians, who do not speak their parents' tongue, still have at least rudimentary, and some even more than rudimentary, level of prior knowledge of the native tongue, acquired through the communication within the family; and
- The availability of intellectual, technical and financial support from the Caucasian homeland.

All this means that the situation, while dramatic, is not yet desperate, and the combination of financial resources and concerted efforts on the part of members of the Diaspora community could turn the tide and substantially improve the prognosis. First of all, what is needed is the maximization of opportunities provided by the newly-implemented Turkish laws concerning the languages of ethnic minorities. Among the concrete measures aimed at the ameliorating problems surrounding native language competence are:

- The organization of native language classes (like those functioning, for example, rather successfully in Moscow), or even broader private schools, which would combine the standard governmental educational programs with some subjects (especially, language and literature) in the native language;
- Preparing school textbooks and appealing children's books with parallel texts in both native and official languages;
- Training local teachers in native languages, which is already being planned in some cases;
- Creating or importing interesting TV programmes in native languages;
- Developing computer programs to help individuals learn native languages;
- Developing websites in the native tongues, with parallel functions to those of the official language;
- Organizing educational trips to the Caucasus, where community members, most of all young people, could participate in intensive language and culture courses while experiencing living in the homeland environment.

It is obvious that more scientific research work along the lines of that presented by Aslan (*op cit.*) is urgently needed for both the Diaspora and the Caucasus, which could elucidate the dynamics of language endangerment within various Abkhazo-Adyghean communities and suggest ways to overcome negative trends.

In addition, it is necessary to emphasize the great importance of documenting the languages, oral history and folklore of the Abkhazo-Adyghean Diaspora communities. Much has already been done in this field, but such efforts should acquire a more systematic and organized character. It would also be important to set up one or more museums and archives of the Diaspora, where personal papers, manuscripts, books, newspapers and magazines, photographs, audio and video recordings and various other documents pertaining to the history and cultural life of the Diaspora could be collected, preserved, exhibited and published.

These are just some possible measures, which could help slow down the process of language decline and sustain a reasonable level of native language competence, especially among the younger generations of the Diaspora community. To achieve these goals, the Diaspora community in Turkey should avail itself of the opportunities provided by Turkish governmental institutions, special international funds created to support minority languages and cultures, and collaboration with the governmental and private educational institutions in the Caucasus, which should be fully used to promote educational programs in the native languages in the Diaspora.

### The Alphabet Debate

The last issue, which will be touched upon very briefly, is the problem of a common alphabet for Abkhazo-Adyghean languages. There has been much discussion concerning the basis for such an alphabet and whether it should be based on the existing Cyrillic orthographies used in the Caucasus, or modeled on the Latin alphabet.

Given the numerical importance of the West Caucasian community in Turkey, I am convinced, as are a number of my colleagues, that any common Latin-based system should be built on the present Turkish alphabet. I myself have developed one version of such a Latinized Turkish-based system for Abkhaz/Abaza and Circassian, which I am preparing

for publication. Professor George Hewitt and Dr. Monika Höhlig have proposed other versions (Hewitt 1995; Höhlig 1983). There have also been attempts in the Caucasus to create Latin-based alphabets not oriented on Turkish orthography, which I consider less desirable.

There has been a heated debate in the Diaspora community on the feasibility of introducing a unified Latin-based orthography for all Abkhazo-Adyghean languages when there is already a nearly century-long Cyrillic-based system in the Caucasus. Indeed, though the idea of promoting a common Latin-based alphabet for Abkhazo-Adyghean peoples is extremely appealing, as it would further enhance the sense of unity between these closely related cultures and would allow for better communication between the Caucasus and the Diaspora, the practical implementation of this idea meets with nearly insurmountable difficulties, and besides the significant financial consequences of such a step, this shift would inevitably sever the long Cyrillic-based literary tradition in the Caucasus and create undesirable difficulties for later generations in accessing their literary heritage.

However, according to data assembled in Aslan's study, out of 1766 respondents representing the Circassian and Abkhaz/Abaza community in the Adana province, 63% advocated the introduction of the Latin-based system, and only 31,8% favored the Cyrillic-based system (Aslan 2005: 57). One way to address this dilemma would be the introduction of a parallel Latin-based alphabet, both in the Caucasus and in the Diaspora, as was done, for instance, in Moldova. Time would tell whether a Latin-based system would be more successful than the traditional and well-established Cyrillic one.

## Conclusion

In this time of globalization it is a challenge for every nation, big or small, to preserve its own cultural identity and to be modern without losing its unique character. For the members of minority cultures the task is often nearly insurmountable, as such efforts need huge financial resources and the enthusiastic efforts of the community at large. However, as the optimistic examples cited at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate, sincere efforts can bring about positive results and the battle is not lost as long as there are still a considerable number of competent and motivated speakers. It is hoped that welcome

initiatives by the North Caucasian community to enhance the situation of native tongues in the Diaspora, as well as willingness to work in harmonious collaboration with the Turkish government, will help slow down the process of native languages decline and, hopefully, eventually reverse it.

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