

Language Use and Attitudes among Megrelians¹

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Megrelians are a group that is rarely heard of outside Georgia, despite the fact that it is one of the largest ethnic groups in the former USSR without any kind of autonomy. Megrelians are included among Georgians, as *Megrelian* is not distinguished as a nationality in official censuses and statistics.

What are the reasons for singling out the Megrelians as a distinct ethnic group? The foremost feature to mention is the Megrelian language. A second important point is that the Megrelians constitute a cohesive, dominant population in Western Georgia.

The Megrelian language. The Caucasus is a region that is well-known for its linguistic diversity. Of the approximately 50 indigenous languages spoken in the area 40 belong to the Caucasian languages. Megrelian (in some sources Mingrelian) is a South Caucasian or Kartvelian language along with Georgian, Svan and Laz. Megrelian is most closely related to Laz, spoken in present-day Turkey. Megrelian, Georgian and Svan are not mutually intelligible.

Majority population in Western Georgia. The Megrelian speaking areas are found in Western Georgia, in the regions of Zugdidi, Senaki, Poti, Tsalendzhikha, Khobi, Martvili, Abasha, including the prosperous Black Sea coast. Before the peak of the ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia in 1993, the Georgians – including mostly Megrelians – constituted the most numerous group in Abkhazia, in particular in the regions of Gali, Ochamchire and Sokhumi. Today, there are virtually no Georgians left in Abkhazia. Most of them have settled in refugee camps in and around the Georgian capital and in Megrelia.

The number of Megrelians. Census statistics do not give any figures for Megrelians. Estimates of the number of Megrelians range from 400.000, as in Klimov 1999:53. An additional source of information regarding the number of speakers of different ethnic groups in Georgia is the nation-wide privatisation undertaken in 1995, where the whole population was listed by name. Megrelian surnames typically end in *-ia*, *-ava* and *-ua*, in contrast to the common Georgian names in *-shvili* and *-dze*. The distribution of

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surnames is given in Table 1. Only in Megrelia names ending in *-ia*, *-ava* and *-ua* amount to 490.000. Thus, 400.000 as the estimated total number of Megrelians in Georgia is a far too low.

Table 1. NUMBER OF SURNAME ENDINGS: GEORGIA TOTAL / MEGRELIA

	Georgia Tot.		in Megrelia	% of Total
1. -dze	1.649.222	43%	46.718	3%
2. -shvili	1.303.723	34%	46.329	2%
3. -ia	494.224	13%	321.571	65%
4. -ava	200.642	5%	124.526	62%
5. -iani	129.206	3%	10.218	8%
6. -eri	116.044	3%	11956	1%
7. -ua	114.817	3%	43.192	58%

Source: Silagadze & Totadze 1997.

Megrelian as a dialect. Megrelian is often referred to as a dialect. It is common to treat Megrelian and Laz as dialects of the Zan language, which is correct in a diachronic perspective. However, one has to go many centuries back in time in order to find speakers of Zan, the common ancestor of Megrelian-Laz. According to another approach, Megrelian is recognized as a language but said to *function* as a Georgian dialect from a sociolinguistic point of view (Jorbenadze 1991:17). A more popular view held by ‘the man in the street’ is to maintain that Megrelian is not a language, but rather a dialect, because it has no written standard (Megrelians use Georgian as their literary language). The reasoning behind these attempts to suppress Megrelian to dialect status seems to be a fear for potential separatistic sentiments.

Historical background. In the 19th century, during the tsarist rule, attempts were made to create a Megrelian orthography based on the Cyrillic alphabet (Gamaxaria & Gogia 1997). In the 1920s and early 1930s there was a movement in support of Megrelian autonomy led by the Zugdidi party secretary Isaki Zhvania (Gamsakhurdia 1989). In accordance to the Leninist language policy that everybody should learn to read and write in their own language, decisions were made by the Georgian Central Committee to introduce Megrelian as the language of instruction in the lower grades, local administration and the publication of books and newspapers. In the 1930s newspapers such as *Qazakhishi* (The Peasant's)

and *Mokhandeshi khonari* (The Voice of the Contemporary) appeared in Megrelian.

At first, the ideas of Megrelian autonomy were supported by Stalin, but the matter caused a great deal of protest from the Georgian as well as the Megrelian intelligentsia. The question was handed over the Georgian Central Party Committee. Subsequently, Beria took charge of the matter and Isaki Zhvania and his followers became subject to repression. The question of Megrelian autonomy was closed, and even the scientific study of the language was avoided for several decades.

Language use and attitudes among Megrelians. With this background in mind, it is interesting to examine the present status of Megrelian and the attitudes among Megrelians to their language. Data from a pilot field study is presented below.

Megrelian attracts attention as presently being a rather thriving language, despite a number of factors that would indicate expected loss of the language (Edwards 1992). For instance, there is no institutional support for the language and all speakers are at least bilingual in Megrelian-Georgian. Within the Megrelian communities the adherence to Megrelian is very high in everyday life, in family and social activities. Outside the Megrelian area the language is often not transmitted to the second generation, typically in mixed marriages. However, due to the recent migrations of Megrelians from Abkhazia to other parts of Georgia the linguistic map has changed and Megrelian is now used actively even outside its traditional area.

The speakers of Megrelian use Georgian as their written language. When it is occasionally written, the Georgian alphabet is used. In Megrelian schools the language of instruction is Georgian, starting from the first grade. Even pre-school institutions function in Georgian. During the 1990s new institutions of higher education have opened in Megrelia, for instance, Zugdidi University. Here, as everywhere else, the language of instruction is Georgian.

Questionnaire study. Data on attitudes to Megrelian and use of the language have been collected in a pilot field study², based on multiple choice questionnaires (in Georgian) distributed among speakers of Megrelian (1) in Megrelia and (2) refugees from Abkhazia, presently living in the Tskhneti

²The data collection in Georgia was conducted by Revaz Tchantouria of Lund University, in collaboration with linguists from the Chikobava Institute of Linguistics of the Georgian Academy of Sciences. The study was conducted in the framework of the projects 'The Language Situation in Georgia' (The Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences) and 'Minority Languages in Georgia' (The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences).

area in Tbilisi. The questionnaire was answered by 175 persons, 100 from Megrelia and 75 from Abkhazia. The age of the respondents range from 11 to 81, with the age group 20-30 as the largest. There is a larger proportion of women among the respondents than men. A variety of professions is represented among the respondents; 54% have completed higher education.

Language fluency in Megrelian, Georgian and Russian. The respondents were asked to indicate their fluency (Fluently/Well/Not very well) in the three languages Megrelian, Georgian and Russian. As Megrelian is not written, only oral fluency was taken into consideration. The greatest differences are noted with respect to Megrelian and Russian. There is a higher fluency ranking for Megrelian in Megrelia, whereas the knowledge of Russian is considerably stronger in Abkhazia. The knowledge of Georgian does not show drastic differences in the two groups.

Respondents in Megrelia indicated that they speak Megrelian Fluently: 81%, Well: 18%, Not very well: 1%, whereas the corresponding figures for respondents from Abkhazia are: 16% – 56% – 24%. All respondents speak Georgian fluently or well. The respondents in Megrelia answered that they speak Russian Fluently: 3%, Well: 33%, Not very well: 59%, compared to 6% – 83% – 11% among respondents from Abkhazia.

Language fluency of parents and first language acquisition The most common situation in Megrelia is to have bilingual parents that are fluent in both Megrelian and Georgian (mother/father 92/91%). Trilingual parents that are fluent in Georgian, Megrelian and Russian are more common in Abkhazia (mother/father 52/83%).

Looking at the first language acquired in early childhood, Megrelian is shown to hold a stronger position in Megrelia compared to Abkhazia. The first language acquired by respondents from Megrelia was most often Megrelian (73%), more rarely Georgian (10%) or the two languages in parallel (17%). Even if Megrelian is acquired earlier, Megrelian children usually acquire some knowledge of Georgian as well before school age. The corresponding responses from Abkhazia are: 28% – 50% – 22%.

Language choice according to interlocutor. Language choice – Georgian, Megrelian or Russian – was studied according to interaction with representatives of three generations: grandparents, parents and persons of the same age. Megrelian is shown to be the dominating language in Megrelia. It is chosen in over 90% of the responses for all three generations, with almost no use of Russian. The use of Megrelian is less dominating among the Megrelians from Abkhazia, whereas the position of Russian is considerably stronger. A notable tendency among Megrelians from both

Megrelia and Abkhazia is a more common use of Georgian in interaction with persons of the same age than with parents and, in particular, grandparents.

Use of Megrelian (in Megrelia) in different social domains. When asked about the use of Megrelian (in Megrelia) it was found to be of common use ('often', 'sometimes') in the following domains: at home, in oral folklore, at the market, at funerals and banquets. In domains that are outside but somehow related to education – kindergarten and free time at university or school – Megrelian is less frequently used. The use of Megrelian is personal correspondence does occur but is very limited.

Table 2. USE OF MEGRELIAN IN DIFFERENT SOCIAL DOMAINS

	Often (%)	Sometim. (%)	Seldom (%)	Never (%)
At home	82	14	4	-
Oral folklore	79	21	-	-
At the market	77	23	-	-
At funerals	59	38	3	-
At banquets	57	41	2	-
Free time at school	25	43	29	3
In kindergarten	19	53	25	2
Among coll. at work	19	44	35	2
Free time at univ.	12	45	38	3
Personal corresp.	2,5	1	3,5	93

Ranking of factors determining identity. The questionnaire includes a ranking of six factors according to perceived importance for national identity (Georg. *erovnuli vinaobis mtavari nishnebi*). The replies single out one factor as the clearly most important one: the common literary language. It is given the highest ranking by 64% of the respondents. The common cultural heritage, the Megrelian language and the common religion pattern similarly, whereas the common history and origin are lower in ranking.

Concluding remarks. The questionnaire data on the use of Megrelian confirm the thriving status of the language, particularly in Megrelia. Presently, there are no reasons to view Megrelian as an endangered language, despite the fact that it has no written standard. The data show that there is a clear functional division between the domains of use for the two

languages Megrelian and Georgian, which is typical of a situation with stable bilingualism among speakers.

The linguistic situation of Georgia has changed due to the forced migration of large numbers of Megrelians from Abkhazia in the beginning of the 1990s. As a result, the number of Megrelians has increased in Western Georgia and Tbilisi, where the language has gained higher status and is used actively, even outside its traditional areas.

The common literary language is chosen by the respondents to be the most important component in the perception of their national identity, thus indicating that they consider themselves Georgian in a wide sense, closely tied by cultural and historical bonds to the other Kartvelian ethnic groups.

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