

Contact-induced changes in Circassian¹

Introduction

The two main branches of the NW Caucasian family, Abkhaz-Abaza and Circassian, are typologically similar to a remarkable degree, although they are not genetically closely related (it is estimated that the common proto-language was spoken several millennia ago, and the time-depth of NW Caucasian is comparable to that of PIE). Indeed, both Circassian and Abkhaz-Abaza are polysynthetic languages with polypersonal verbs, very complex consonant systems and rudimentary vowel systems, with a simple syllabic structure, with ergative clause alignment and highly complex verbal morphology with categories such as causative, benefactive/malefactive, involuntative, reflexive and reciprocal, antipassive and optative, all expressed by means of prefixes (and less commonly by means of suffixes) on the verb.

The question addressed by this paper is the following: Why is it that, while Circassian is typologically so similar to Abkhaz-Abaza (and Ubykh, which is extinct), it nevertheless differs from it in a number of salient grammatical features. Indeed, those features often figure in literature about language contact, as they appear to be prone to borrowing in situations of intensive language contact.

I will review a selection of these features and show that in all cases it was the Circassian languages that innovated, while Abkhaz-Abaza retained the original situation. I will then speculate about the possible causes of the changes that affected Circassian, and claim that contact with Ossetic is the most plausible explanation.

Typologically divergent features of Circassian

1. The reduced number of consonants

Bzyp	67
Abzhywa	60 (+ 2 marginal)
Tapanta	60 (+ 5 marginal)
Ubykh	80
Bzhedukh	65
Shapsugh	62
Abadzekh	56
Temirgoi	55
Besleney	56
Kabardian	47
<i>Ossetic (Iron)</i>	28

Table 1: the consonant inventories of NW Caucasian idioms and Ossetic

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Westernmost Circassian dialects (Bzhedukh and Shapsugh) are phonologically the most conservative (Chirikba 1996: 109); they preserve the original distinction of aspirated and non-aspirated consonants, along with voiced and glottalized consonants.

Chirikba posits 72 consonants in Common Abkhazian (1996: 61-62); the number of consonants in Common Circassian is controversial, and ranges from 53 (Kumaxov) to 65 (Chirikba 1996: 110).

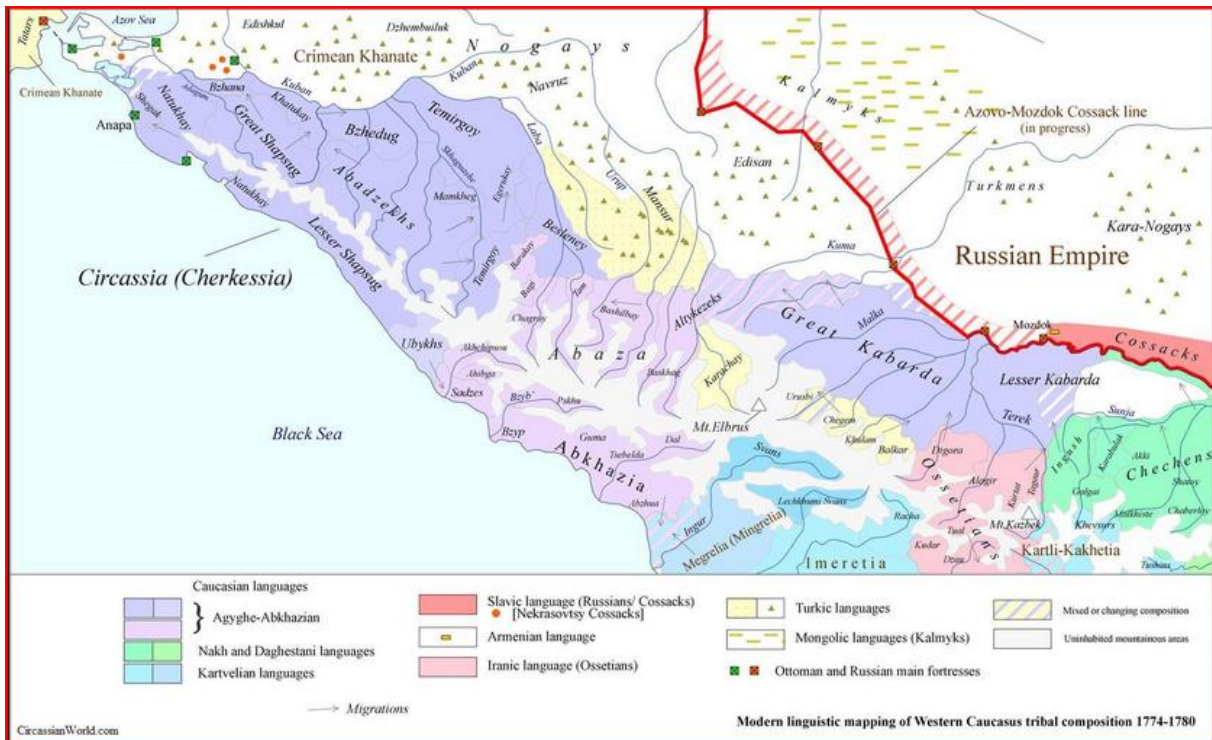
As can be seen from the comparison of data in Table 1 and the disposition of ethnic groups on Map 1, the more one moves to the Northeast, the simpler the consonant inventories of NW Caucasian idioms tend to become. Table 1 shows also that the number of consonants in Ossetic is rather limited by Caucasian standards. The comparison of Kabardian consonant system with that of Ossetic shows structural similarities.

Kabardian consonant system (Matasović 2013):

	unvoiced	voiced	glottalized	resonants	glides
labial	p f	b v	p' f'	m	w
dental	t c s	d dz z	t' c'	n r l ɬ ʎ'	
palatal	č š ś	dž ž ź	č' ś'		y
velar	k ^w x x ^w	g ^w γ (γ ^w)	k' ^w		
uvular	q q ^w χ χ ^w	ğ ğ ^w	q' q' ^w		
laryngeal	ʔ ʔ ^w h				

Ossetic (Iron) consonant system (Abaev 1964: 6):

	unvoiced	voiced	glottalized	resonants	glides
labial	p f	b v	p'	m	w
dental	t c s	d dz z	t' c'	n r l	
palatal	č	dž	č'		y
velar	k	g	k'		
uvular	q χ	ğ			



MAP 1: The NW Caucasian peoples in the late 18th century

2. The disappearance of grammatical gender

Abkhaz-Abaza is characterized by three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter (non-human). They are expressed on personal pronouns, numerals, and on verbs (fused with personal prefixes). Nouns distinguish human and non-human plural markers, and possessive prefixes also distinguish gender (they also occur on postpositions, which agree with their head nouns in gender/number). Masculine and neuter forms are not distinguished in the 2nd and 3rd person singular pronouns, and some verbal prefixes and numerals distinguish only human from non-human forms (Chirikba 2003: 32):

(1) personal pronouns in Abkhaz:

- wa-rá* ‘thou’ (m. and n.)
- ba-rá* ‘thou’ (f.)
- la-rá* ‘she’ (f.)
- ja-rá* ‘he’ (m.) but *jará d-ca-wá-jt* ‘(s)he goes’ (m./f.)
- ja-rá* ‘it’ (n.) *jará ca-wá-jt* ‘it goes’ (n.)

In numerals, the ‘non-human’ suffix is *-ba-*, and the human suffixes are *-dž’a* and *-j^wə*, cf. *j^w-ba* ‘two’ (n.) vs. *j^wə-dž’a* (m./f.), *x^w-ba* ‘five’ (n.) vs. *x^w-j^wə* (m./f.).

Table of Agreement Markers

Person	Gender		Absolutive		Oblique		Ergative	
			Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl
1 st			<i>s(ə)-</i>	<i>h(a)-</i>	<i>s(ə)-</i>	<i>h(a)-</i>	<i>s(ə)-//z(ə)-</i>	<i>h(a)-//aa-</i>
2 nd	H	M	<i>w(ə)-</i>	<i>š^o(ə)-</i>	<i>w(ə)-</i>	<i>š^o(ə)-</i>	<i>w(ə)-</i>	<i>š^o(ə)-//z^o(ə)-</i>
		F	<i>b(ə)-</i>		<i>b(ə)-</i>		<i>b(ə)-</i>	
	NH		<i>w(ə)-</i>		<i>w(ə)-</i>		<i>w(ə)-</i>	
3 rd	H	M	<i>d(ə)-</i>	<i>j(ə)-</i>	<i>j(ə)-</i>	<i>r(ə)-//d(ə)-</i>	<i>j(ə)-</i>	<i>r(ə)-//d(ə)-</i>
		F	<i>j(ə)-</i>		<i>l(ə)-</i>		<i>l(ə)-</i>	
	NH		<i>j(ə)-</i>		<i>a-</i>		<i>(n)a-</i>	

Table 2: Abkhaz agreement markers (from Chirikba 2003: 40)

The Circassian languages, as well as Ubykh, do not have gender. Moreover, it is not the case that the Abkhaz-Abaza gender markers can be derived from some lexical items in Circassian (say, the words for ‘woman’, or ‘thing’, or ‘man’), so there is no reason to believe that the gender system in Abkhaz-Abaza is an innovation. It is much more likely to be an archaism, which implies that it was lost in Circassian. This is, generally, also the conclusion of Abdokov (1981: 55-61). Whether the Abkhazian gender system is derivable from a Common North Caucasian one, which was similar to the gender system found in NE Caucasian, need not concern us here, although Abdokov’s arguments in favour of that thesis appear plausible to me.

Of all the verbal person markers that distinguish gender (which are nearly identical to possessive markers on nouns and postpositions), only the masculine and non-human forms (2 sg. m/n *wə-*, 3 sg. n *jə-*) have parallels in Circassian, where they correspond to the 2nd and 3rd person sg. verbal prefixes, respectively (Kab. 2sg. *wə-*, 3sg. *yə-*).

The rules ordering the personal prefixes are identical in Abkhaz-Abaza and in Circassian and they can be projected back to Proto-NW Caucasian(2a-b). Having that in mind, it is difficult to see how Abkhaz-Abaza could have introduced a new set of gendered personal prefixes. It is much more probable that the Circassian languages simply generalized the use of masculine/inanimate personal prefixes and that the rest of them (especially the feminine prefixes) simply fell out of use.

(2a) Abkhaz (Chirikba 2003: 38)

jə-lə-s-ta-0-jt'
 3SG.O-3SG.F.IO-1SG.S-give-AOR.-DYN.
 “I gave it to her”

(2b) Kabardian:

yə-ryə-s-t-ā-ś
 3SG.O-3SG.IO-1SG.S-give-PRET.-AFF.
 “I gave it to him/her”

In most cases when gender distinctions are completely lost in a language, a substratum is involved (Matasović 2004). This can be shown, e.g., in the case of Cappadocian Greek under the influence of Turkish, in the case of Swedish dialects spoken in Finland, and it is very probable in the case of the loss of gender in Armenian (under the influence of Urartian).

Ossetic does not have grammatical gender, unlike the Nakh languages and nearly all the Daghestanian languages. It is unclear when Ossetic lost the inherited gender. Some East Iranian languages attested in the 1st millennium AD, such as Khotanese Saka, still have a two-gender system, but the disappearance of gender in Alanian could have been earlier. Karachay-Balkar, a Turkic language spoken in the Caucasus, also does not have gender, but as we shall argue later on, it was introduced to the region too late to trigger the wholesale disappearance of gender in Circassian. Kartvelian languages, which also do not have gender, were never in direct contact with Circassian; they could be expected to influence Abkhaz-Adyghe, which they did.

3. The development of the category of grammatical case fused with the category of definiteness

Ossetic is a nominative/accusative language with differential object marking; the (unmarked) nominative is used for indefinite/impersonal objects, e.g.

- (3) *sug aersaett*
 wood(NOM) chop
 ‘chop firewood’ (Abaev 1964: 17)

For definites/personals, the genitive is used:

- (4) *mae-mad-y ragaej nal fedton*
 my-mother-GEN long.time not I.saw
 ‘I haven’t seen my mother for a long time’ (Abaev 1964: 18)

In Kabardian (and Adyghe), the Absolutive suffix *-r* marks only definite intransitive subjects and definite objects (Matasović 2008):

- (5) *ś'āla-r y-aw-dža*
 boy-ABS 3SG.-PRES.-study
 ‘The boy studies’

- (6) *sa txələ-r q'a-s-št-ā-ś*
 I book-ABS DIR-1SG.-take-PRET.-AF.
 ‘I took the book’

The ergative is the case of the transitive subject (irrespectively whether it is definite or indefinite), and of definite indirect objects and obliques:

- (7) *stwadyant-əm txələ-r ya-dž-ā-ś*
 student-ERG book-ABS 3SG.-study-PRET.-AF.
 ‘The student studied the book’

- (8) *ā c'əx"ə-m txələ-r mə fəz-əm yə-r-ya-t*
 this man-ERG book-ABS this woman-ERG 3SG.-3SG.-3SG.-give
 ‘This man gives the book to this woman’

The Circassian case system looks like an ergative-language's response to close contact with a nominative/accusative language with differential object marking: in both Ossetic and Circassian, only definite undergoers (objects) are case marked, but in Circassian the undergoer of the transitive verb

happens to bear the same case marker as the single argument of the intransitive verb, just as one might expect in an ergative language.²

4. What about word-order?

In word-order, where we would also expect mutual influences in the situation of long-standing bilingualism, Ossetic agrees not only with Circassian, but with Abkhaz as well.

<i>Abkhaz</i>	<i>Kabardian</i>	<i>Ossetic (Iron)</i>	<i>Chechen</i>	<i>Balkar</i>
SOV	SOV	SOV	SOV	SOV
Postpositions	Postpositions	Postpositions	Postpositions	Postpositions
Gen-N	Gen-N	Gen-N	Gen-N	Gen-N
N-Adj	N-Adj	Adj-N	Adj-N	Adj-N
Dem-N	Dem-N	Dem-N	Dem-N	Dem-N
Num-N, N-Num	Num-N, N-Num	Num-N	Num-N	Num-N
Rel-N	Rel-N	Rel-N	Rel-N	Rel-N

As can be seen from the table, all three languages agree in the basic order of syntactic elements, except with respect to the order of adjectives and nouns, where Ossetic diverges. The correspondences in word-order are non-informative, as these patterns are shared by many, if not most, languages of the Caucasus. They may be areal, but they do not tell us anything about the source language or the direction of borrowing/influence.

Ossetic and Caucasian or NW Caucasian?

Influences of Caucasian languages on Ossetic are well-known:

- the development of glottalic consonants and the uvular stop [q]
- the agglutinative case system with several local cases (9 cases in Iron, 8 in Digor)
- the introduction of vigesimal counting system
- the two-dimensional system of local prefixes (Abaev 1964: 76-77).

Some contact-induced innovations of Ossetic point specifically to NW Caucasian as a source:

- the development of possessive prefixes (Erschler 2009); these are not found in other Iranian languages, but all NW Caucasian languages have them, cf. Kab. *wyǝ-š* ‘your (sg.) horse’, *syǝ-š* ‘my horse’, *dyǝ-š* ‘our horse’, etc.
- the existence of adverbial case (called *equative* in Ossetic), cf. Oss. *fat-aw ataxti* ‘he flew like an arrow’, Kab. *džāta-wə* ‘like a sword’ (even the morphemes for equative/adverbial are similar, and may have been borrowed from NW Caucasian into Ossetic). Beljaev (2010: 301) argues convincingly that the development of equative is relatively recent in Ossetic.
- the use of Ablaut in differentiation of transitive from intransitive verbs, cf. Oss. *kalyn* ‘pour’ vs. *kaelyn* ‘flow’, *xalyn* ‘destroy’ vs. *xaelyn* ‘be destroyed’, *safyn* ‘lose’ vs. *saefyn* ‘get lost’

² The inherited Iranian case system was thoroughly re-shaped in Ossetic (Cheung 2008, Beljaev 2010); its development may have been influenced by Kartvelian (Beljaev 2010: 309-10), as it shows close affinities with it.

(Abaev 1964: 42); here Ossetic agrees essentially particularly with Circassian rather than with NW Caucasian in general, cf. Kab. *dan* ‘to sew (intrans.)’ - *dən* ‘to sew (trans.)’, *txan* ‘to write (intrans.)’ - *txən* ‘to write (trans.)’, *xan* ‘mow (intrans.)’ - *xən* ‘mow (trans.)’. In Abkhaz-Abaza and Ubykh the opposition between [a] and [ə] expresses directionality (the opposition between centripetal and centrifugal action, which is presumably more archaic than the opposition found in Circassian).

There are a few other features in which Circassian probably innovated, differing from Abkhaz-Abaza and agreeing with Ossetic. They are, however, not specific enough to be probative on their own.

1. Circassian probably lost the opposition of inclusive and exclusive pronouns in the 1st person pl., which exists in Abkhaz (though this is somewhat complicated and controversial, see Hewitt 1979: 56-59): Abkh. 1. pl. *ħa(rà)* inclusive and general vs. *ħar-t* exclusive. Apparently, this opposition has been lost in contemporary language.³ Like other Indo-Iranian and Indo-European languages, Ossetic lacks the inclusive-exclusive opposition (which exists in Nakh languages and in many Daghestanian languages).

2. Circassian probably reduced three degrees of deixis found in Abkhaz to just two; Ossetic is also characterized by two degrees of deixis:

Abkhaz	Kabardian	Adyghe (Shapsugh)	Ossetic (Iron)
<i>aráj</i>	<i>mə</i>	<i>mə</i>	<i>a, ay</i>
<i>anáj</i>	<i>maw</i>	<i>wa, wə</i>	<i>wəy</i>
<i>wəj</i>			

In Kabardian, the form *maw* probably developed from *mə + wa* (Kumaxov 1989: 93-95), where *wa* is the demonstrative stem preserved in Shapsugh, cognate with Abkhaz *wəj*.

3. Abkhaz-Abaza has free accent, and some dialects (e.g. T’apanta Abaza) are tonal (Dybo 1989). In Circassian, all traces of tonal oppositions are lost, and the accent is fixed and dynamic, falling on the last syllable before the final consonant of the root. This is generally on the ultimate or penultimate syllable, e.g. Kab. *zátan* "give presents", *džáta* "sword", but *džáta-mč’a* "with the sword", *pśáśa* "girl", but *pśáśa-xa-r* "girls". It appears very probable that the Common NW Caucasian protolanguage was tonal, just like T’apanta (Abitov 1981: 29). In Ossetic, the stress is also dynamic and predictable, generally falling on the first syllable (if its vowel is “strong”), or on the second syllable (if its vowel is “weak”), cf. Oss. *súdzag* ‘burning’, *saenaéfsir* ‘grapes’ (Abaev 1964: 11). It is possible, though unprovable, that the elimination of free tonal accent and the development of fixed dynamic accent in Circassian is also due to Ossetic influence. In Nakh languages, we find tonal oppositions, so they are an unlikely source of the innovation in Circassian.

4. The development of the opposition between alienable and inalienable possession. This opposition does not exist in Abkhaz-Abaza, but it is found in Adyghe, where the inalienable possessive prefixes are opposed to alienable prefixes, cf. Ad. *sə-* ‘my (inal.)’ *wə-* ‘your (inal.)’ vs. *syə-* ‘my (al.)’, *wyə-* ‘your (al.)’. The opposition between inalienable and alienable forms of possessive prefixes does not

³ “The strictly inclusive forms may and usually do appear where one would expect exclusives” (Hewitt 1979: 57). “At present the inclusive exclusive category does not seem to be existent in Abkhaz” (Chirikba 1996: 33).

exist in Kabardian, except residually in the Besleney dialect. The Kabardian possessive forms correspond to the alienable forms of Adyghe, and they can be shown to be morphologically complex (they contain the possessive particle *yǝ- besides the person marker). Moreover, the inalienable forms of possessive prefixes have their exact cognates in Abkhaz-Abaza, while the alienable forms do not. On the basis of this, Kumaxov (1989: 44-5) concludes that the opposition of alienable and inalienable possessive prefixes is a Circassian innovation, which was subsequently lost in Kabardian. In Ossetic, the opposition of alienable and inalienable possession is expressed in the fact that kinship terms and body parts are obligatorily possessed nouns: *mae-k'yx nyccavton* 'I hurt my arm' / **k'yx nyccavton* 'I hurt an arm'. Ossetic also shows alienability oppositions in predicative possessive constructions. Inalienably possessed nouns take the dative case, while the alienably possessed nouns are in the allative. Since the alienability opposition seems to be expressed in a similar way in Batsbi (a Nakh language) Belyaev (2010: 316) tentatively assumes that in Ossetic it may have developed under the areal influence of Nakh languages. From Ossetic, it may have spread to Circassian, but not to Abkhaz-Adyghe.

Historical context

Today, only Kabardian neighbors the area where Ossetic is spoken, and even this is a recent development, since it is known that the speakers of Kabardia moved to their present-day area in the Middle Ages, after the Mongol invasion, and after the collapse of Alanian power. However, before that invasion Alanian (the precursor of Ossetic) was much more widespread. It was one of the most prestigious languages on the Northern Caucasus (Map 2).



Map 2: Medieval Alania

There are many lexical borrowings from Circassian into Ossetic and vice versa. It is often impossible to ascertain who borrowed what from whom, and many such words have parallels in other Caucasian languages (Klimov 1986: 194). Kambolov (2006: 260ff.) claims there are around 750 Alanian-NW Caucasian lexical isoglosses, 480 of which are shared with Kabardian, and only 140 with Abkhaz. Here are some examples of probable Ossetic loans in Kabardian:

Kab. *ābdž* ‘glass’ (Šagirov I: 55) vs. Osset. *avg/avgae* (cf. also Ingush *oaqae*)

Kab. *bəsəm* ‘lord, master’ (Šagirov I: 104), Abkh. *a-pš^wma* vs. Osset. *fysym/fusum* (cf. also Chechen *husam*)

Kab. *wāsa* ‘price’, Abkh. *a-wasa* ‘sheep’ (Šagirov II: 89) vs. Osset. *waess* ‘calf’ (cf. also Chechen *fuos* ‘booty’), etc.

Kab. *zantχ* ‘oats’ (Šagirov I: 206), Osset. (Digor) *zaetxae* (Cf. also Balkar *zəntxə*).

The adduced evidence certainly does not prove that there was significant linguistic influence from Ossetic on Circassian. But a case can be made, and there is a plausible historical scenario for such an influence. I would not claim that I was able to prove that the linguistic innovations in Circassian that we discussed in this paper were the result of linguistic contact with Ossetic, but I would like to argue for a weaker claim: if these innovations are due to language contact, Ossetic is the most likely candidate for the source language. None of the features discussed above are found in the other possible

candidates. The Nakh languages lack all of the discussed features, with the (rather trivial) exception of the two-way contrast in demonstratives that is attested in Ingush. The other candidate, the Karachay-Balkar language, came into the area too late (in the 11th century) for it to exercise a significant influence on Circassian). However, it does show a few of the features we discussed in this paper: it has differential object marking (like Turkish), a fixed dynamic accent, and no gender.

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