Language Use and Attitudes among Megrelians in Georgia

Karina Vamling and Revaz Tchantouria

Megrelians, estimated to be around 400,000 in number with the vast majority living and having lived in Abkhazia and Samegrelo in the western part of the country, are rarely heard of outside of Georgia. Historically, they are descendants of the people of the ancient Colchis in Western Georgia, whereas the roots of Eastern Georgia go back to the old kingdom of Iberia.

The Megrelian language is widely used in Western Georgia, where Megrelians constitute a cohesive, dominant population. However, the number of speakers of Megrelian (in some sources Mingrelian) is not known as it has not featured as a nationality in official censuses and statistics (Klimov 1999:53). Furthermore, the language belongs to the South Caucasian (or Kartvelian) languages and is related to Georgian and Svan; it is most closely related to Laz, which is spoken in present-day Turkey.

The Megrelian-speaking areas are found in Western Georgia, in the regions of Zugdidi, Senaki, Poti, Tsalendzhikha, Khobi, Martvili, Abasha, Gali, and they include the prosperous Black Sea coast. Before the peak of the ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia in 1993, Georgians – including mostly Megrelians – constituted the most numerous group in Abkhazia, in particular in the regions of Gali, Ochamchire and Sokhumi. Georgians accounted for 46% of the population (of a total of 525,000 in the last Soviet census 1989), compared to 18% Abkhaz, 15% Armenians and 14% Russians. Today, there are almost no Georgians left in Abkhazia, except for some groups in the Gali region. Most of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Abkhazia have settled in camps in and around the Georgian capital and in Samegrelo.

Approaches to the status of Megrelian

Investigating the status of Megrelian is a sensitive matter, in particular with respect to the debate on its language/dialect status. In a diachronic perspective, following Chikobava (1936:3, 1967:15), it is common to treat Megrelian and Laz as dialects of the Zan (Megrelo-Chan or Megrelo-Laz) language. According to another approach, Megrelian is said to function as a Georgian dialect from a sociolinguistic point of view (Jorbenadze 1991:17). A more popular view is to maintain that Megrelian is not a language, but rather a dialect because it has no written standard (although Megrelian and Georgian are not mutually intelligible). Speakers of Megrelian use Georgian as their literary language. In many linguistic standard works, Megrelian is considered to be one of the Kartvelian languages (i.e. Harris 1991, Klimov 1999).

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1 A shorter version of the paper has been published in Vamling (2000).
Sociolinguistic aspects of Megrelian

Megrelian is interesting from a sociolinguistic point of view. It 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 forced migration 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.

As the speakers of Megrelian use Georgian as their written language – a situation that has been known for centuries – there has been no choice of dialect as the basis for a literary standard for Megrelian. When it is occasionally written, the Georgian alphabet is used. In schools in Samegrelo 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 Samegrelo, for instance, Zugdidi University. Here, as everywhere else, the language of instruction is Georgian.

Based on data from two pilot studies, this paper investigates self-reported use of the Megrelian language, patterns of multilingualism and attitudes among Megrelians to their language.

Two field studies

Data on attitudes to Megrelian and on language use in the region were collected in two pilot field studies. The data collection in Georgia was carried out by Revaz Tchantouria in the framework of the two projects The Language Situation in Georgia (funded by The Council for Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 1997–1999) and Minority Languages in Georgia (funded by the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences, 1997–1999).

Interviews on language attitudes

The interviews consisted of open questions: (1) what are the main factors that contribute to the maintenance of Megrelian, (2) what could threaten the development of Megrelian and lead to the demise of the language, and (3) what are current views on the future of the language. The interviews were conducted in Georgian, but the interviewer was Megrelian. The questions were posed to 20 speakers of Megrelian from different Megrelian districts and of different age and profession.

Study of language use

The second study was structured into 25 multiple choice questions (written in Georgian) and supplemented by a few open questions and background data. The questions were posed to speakers of Megrelian from two groups: (1) Megrelians living in Samegrelo and (2) internally displaced persons from Abkhazia living in the Tskhneti area in
Tbilisi. The questions were answered by 150 persons: 100 from Samegrelo and 50 IDPs 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; half of them have completed higher education. The respondents were given the context information that the questions were posed in the framework of a study of language use conducted by researchers from Sweden in collaboration with linguists from the Chikobava Institute of Linguistics of the Georgian Academy of Sciences.

Results

Results from the two studies are presented below: first the interview study on attitudes towards Megrelian, followed by a summary of results from the investigation of patterns of language use.

Interviews

In answer to the first question (Which are the main factors that contribute to the maintenance of Megrelian?), respondents underline, in a variety of ways, that Megrelian is the language of communication in interaction between Megrelians:

Megrelians everywhere try to communicate in Megrelian. They do that intuitively, as they have learnt to speak Megrelian from childhood (F, nurse, b. 1949, Gulripshi)

Megrelian has been maintained especially in Samegrelo and Abkhazia. Before the conflict, many Abkhaz spoke Megrelian. Outside the official sphere, communication took place in Megrelian. Abkhaz and other non-Kartvelian minorities learned Megrelian, if they lived in the area for a longer period. (M, worker, b. 1962, Gali)

We students communicate among ourselves and with older people in Megrelian (F, student, b. 1979, Zugdidi)

Respondents are also highly aware of demographic factors – such as the fact that Megrelian is spoken in a rather large area, by a relatively high number of speakers, and that the population is mostly cohesive. Another factor drawn attention to by many respondents is that although Megrelian parents speak Megrelian to their children during their first years, they introduce them to Georgian in order to prepare them for school, where Georgian is the language of instruction:

It's important that the children speak Megrelian as their first language at home. I myself taught the children songs and traditions from an early age. Parents teach the Georgian alphabet to children so that they can read simple words before school. In this way Georgian does not feel foreign to them. The history classes at school also help them to understand that Georgia is their native land (SS, F, retired, b. 1928, Gegechkori)

Megrelians are conscious of their Colchian roots and show great pride in their history.
The most common answer to the second question (What could threaten the development of Megrelian and lead to loss of the language?) concerns demographic factors. Changes in the demographic situation are considered to be the greatest possible threat to the maintenance of Megrelian. In particular, it is the migration of young people from the area that is particularised:

A threat could be a heavy industrialisation with new labour forces moving into the area. Another threat is the written language, the official Georgian and the foreign languages that are taking the place of the unwritten language. The need for this is growing, especially among young people... (VG, M, construction worker, b. 1960, Tsalendzhikha)

A sensitive matter is the perceived negative attitude towards Megrelian in areas outside Samegrelo, which is noted by several respondents:

A threat to Megrelian could be erroneous political measures from the Georgian government; and also if young people are ashamed to speak Megrelian in the cities. (BK, F, retired, b. 1923, Zugdidi)

... a supercilious relation to Megrelian as not being a written language... (KG, M, b. 1927, Senaki)

... that you are ashamed of speaking Megrelian outside Samegrelo and where there are no other speakers (TsS, F, student b. 1979, Zugdidi)

Mixed marriages, that is Megrelians marrying non-Megrelian Georgians, is another factor to be highlighted by the respondents. If such couples settle outside Samegrelo, this has typically lead to a rapid shift to Georgian. In Abkhazia, Megrelian-Russian and Megrelian-Abkhaz marriages were common.

When questioned about their beliefs about the future of the language, respondents, generally, expressed a rather optimistic view on the future of Megrelian:

As a future teacher of Georgian, I intend to work in Samegrelo. If I will have children of my own, I will encourage their knowledge of Megrelian (TsS, F, student, b. Zugdidi)

I believe that there is a future for Megrelian, as long as there are strong family traditions, folklore, songs, dances...' (LU, F, nurse, b. 1962, Gali)

The very drastic changes in the demographic situation for the Megrelians, decreasing in large numbers in Abkhazia, but at the same time gaining new domains in the capital due to the settlement of the IDPs from Abkhazia are noted:

Megrelian will live on – it is notable that young people from Samegrelo and Abkhazia speak Megrelian among themselves. It shows their orientation, at the same time they know Georgian and consider it to be their mother tongue and they also study foreign languages (AS, M, medical doctor, b. 1950, Gegechkori)
It makes me happy to hear that young people speak Megrelian even in Tbilisi... Megrelian is resistant to assimilation, even in a non-Kartvelian environment (KsG, F, lawyer, b. 1924, Senaki)

Study of language use

Results from the second field study are given below. We focus on a comparison of data from the two groups: (1) Megrelians in Samegrelo and (2) Megrelian IDPs from Abkhazia according to various parameters. The diagrams below show results as percentage of responses.

Language fluency in Megrelian, Georgian and Russian

The respondents were asked to indicate fluency in the three languages: Megrelian, Georgian and Russian. As Megrelian is not written, only oral fluency in the three languages was taken into consideration.

The greatest differences in fluency are noted with respect to Megrelian and Russian. There is a higher fluency ranking for Megrelian in Samegrelo (Fig. 1a), whereas the knowledge of Russian is considerably stronger among IDPs from Abkhazia (Fig. 1b). A few respondents in Samegrelo even state that they have no knowledge of Russian.

Fig. 1a. Self-reported language fluency among in Samegrelo
Fig. 1b. Self-reported language fluency among IDPs from Abkhazia

**First language(s) acquired**

There is a considerable difference in the answers with respect to which language or languages were acquired at a very early age. Over 70% of the respondents in Samegrelo acquired Megrelian as their first language at home. Respondents from Abkhazia give a more complex picture, with either Georgian or Megrelian as their first language or both languages together.

**Language fluency of parents**

In the question concerning language fluency of parents, the choices—for mother and father respectively—were as follows: Fluent in 1. Megrelian; 2. Megrelian and Georgian; 3. Georgian; 4. Megrelian, Georgian and Russian; and 5. Russian. Generally, speakers that are fluent in only one language are very few. The most common situation in Samegrelo is to have bilingual parents that are fluent in both Megrelian and Georgian (Fig. 3a). Trilingual parents that are fluent in Georgian, Megrelian and Russian are more common among respondents from Abkhazia (Fig. 3b). Fluency in Russian is notably higher among the fathers.
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Language choice according to interlocutor

Language choice—Georgian, Megrelian or Russian—was studied according to interlocutors of three generations: grandparents, parents and persons of the same age. Megrelian is shown to be the dominating language in Samegrelo, with almost no use of Russian (Fig. 4a). The use of Megrelian is less prevalent among the Megrelians from Abkhazia. Russian, on the other hand, is considerably stronger (Fig. 4b). A notable tendency among Megrelians from both Samegrelo and Abkhazia is a more common use of Georgian in interaction with persons of the same age than with parents and, in particular, grandparents.
Among the respondents from Abkhazia, Megrelian is the preferred language of communication with grandparents (Fig. 5b) than with parents (Fig. 4b). The use of Russian with grandparents is also much less common.
Use of Megrelian (in Samegrelo) in different domains

When asked about the use of Megrelian (in Samegrelo), it was found to be widespread (‘often’, ‘sometimes’) in the following domains (Fig. 6b): at home, in oral folklore, at the market, at funerals and supra (banquets), and at the workplace. 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 in personal correspondence is very limited. The same domains of the use of Megrelian – at home, in oral folklore, at the market, at funerals and supra – show up in replies by IDPs from Abkhazia (Fig. 6b), but at a considerably lower level.
Fig. 6a. Reported language use in different domains (Samegrelo)

Fig. 6a. Reported language use in different domains (IDP:s from Abkhazia)

**Ranking of factors determining identity**

The study includes a ranking of factors according to perceived importance for national identity (Georg. *erovnuli vinaobis mtavari nishnebi*). The replies single out one factor very clearly as the most important one: the common literary language (Fig. 7). The common cultural heritage, the Megrelian language and common religion pattern similarly, whereas common history and origin are much lower in this ranking. As almost all the respondents indicated Georgian when asked about Nationality (Georg. *erovneba*); hence, the ranking responses regard Georgian (in the wide sense).
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**Concluding remarks**

It should be kept in mind that the results presented in the paper have to be seen in the light of the rather small scale of the studies. Both pilot studies show extensive use of Megrelian, especially in Samegrelo. When comparing reported language use and fluency among Megrelians in Samegrelo and Megrelian IDPs from Abkhazia, the overall patterns are very similar, although the percentages for Megrelian are lower in the latter group on all parameters. The picture of language use and fluency is more complex and diffused in this group, which reflects the multilingual setting of Abkhazia and the impact of Russian in the region.

The linguistic situation of Georgia has changed due to the forced migration of large numbers of Megrelians from Abkhazia at the beginning of the 1990s. As a result, the number of Megrelians has increased in Western Georgia and in Tbilisi, where they use their language actively, even outside its traditional areas. However, the strong position of the Georgian language in Tbilisi is a further factor that may play a role in language fluency and patterns of language use among the IDPs from Abkhazia who live in the capital.

The ranking of factors according to perceived importance for national identity indicate that Megrelians consider themselves Georgian by nationality in a wide sense, and are closely tied by cultural and historical bonds to the other Kartvelian ethnic groups, where the common literary language is selected as the most important factor for their national identity.
References


