

Chapter 7

7. Epilogue

7.1. Bilingualism

The question of bilingualism and its role in the development of the Ossetic language has been treated in some detail in chapter 3 and also frequently touched on elsewhere. Nevertheless a few final remarks may not be out of place.

As already stated above (cf. ch. 3), Ossetic has during its Caucasian history repeatedly shifted its geographical location and, no doubt to a large extent, its speakers, too. While Ossetic in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages was chiefly a language of the Northwest Caucasus, it is now mainly spoken in the central Caucasian area. These changes were caused by complicated migrations and social upheavals the history and chronology of which are only imperfectly known.

In the Northwest Caucasus, an Alanic-speaking population switched to Cherkas and Turkic dialects. This development, which obviously began in the late Middle Ages, has apparently been slow. As late as the early 19th century, Ossetic-speaking communities seem to have existed west of the present-day Ossetic territory (the so-called “*Edeki Alans*“; cf. Count Potocki 1829: 146; Namitok 1939: 118). In a similar way, a Nakh-speaking population in the Central North Caucasus gradually abandoned their native language for the language of Alan immigrants or conquerors. In modern times it seems legitimate to speak about a Central Caucasian cultural area comprising the Ossetes, the Ingush-Chechen tribes and the East Georgian highlanders.

It is therefore natural to assume a Nakh dialect to be a substratum of Ossetic. On the other hand, the Circassian dialects are rather to be regarded as adstrata; the same applies to the Turkic languages of the Caucasus region. In the case of South Ossetic, we may presume that it might have been superseded by Georgian local idioms in some areas, particularly in the Liakhvi valley. But in general Georgian influence upon Ossetic seems to be that of an adstratum language.

It goes without saying that language shift has here been the result of a peaceful symbiosis as well as tribal feuds and conquests. In the west, the Alanic-speaking tribes either adopted the language of the Circassian-Kabardian and Turkic immigrants or invaders or were driven out of their former territories from where they invaded or migrated, to Nakh-speaking areas; there, their language was gradually adopted by the indigenous population. Unfortunately the absolute chronology of these events cannot be established. Needless to say, language and ethnic shift are not identical, language loyalty not being a hereditary feature; a total language shift need not take more than three generations.

7.2. Social factors

Social factors of various kinds have contributed to the development of bilingualism among the Ossetes.

The language of an immigrant population became socially advantageous as a language of prestige. As an example of such a prestige language, Kabardian (East Circassian) has already been mentioned above (cf. 3.2.4.). It seems, e.g., tempting to

ascribe the adoption of the glottalic stops to Kabardian influence at a time when it was fashionable to imitate the speech of the Kabardian feudal lords.

Russian immigration to the North Caucasus began in the 16th century, but it was hardly of great importance until the middle of the 18th century. Since that time Russian has gradually attained the position of a *lingua franca* and the language of administration and instruction among all the peoples of the area. At least in the towns it has become the dominant language; a thorough knowledge of Russian has become socially advantageous and even unavoidable. In many places the indigenous languages tend to be reduced to domestic uses. But this tendency could easily be reversed; the present state of things may point that way. Nevertheless, Russian influence upon Ossetic has in all essentials been limited to the vocabulary so far, i.e. mainly technical or other specialist vocabulary where a given term has been introduced together with the referent.

7.3. Inter-marriage

Inter-marriage between linguistically different tribes has no doubt been of importance in the history of bilingual relations in the North Caucasus. Bilingualism has probably been enhanced by the strict rules of exogamy that seems to have predominated (and still predominates) among the Ossetes. Young men are dependent on women from alien clans for their progeny.

As already mentioned above (3.1.1.), this may well have been the situation among the Alan immigrants and their non-Alan predecessors and successors, if it was something like the case of the Russian and Ukrainian Cossacks of more recent times. The practice of bride abduction, whether it took place in agreement with the bride (elopement) or not, is also linked up with the rule of exogamy. Enforced bride abduction (marriage by capture) seems to have been common formerly and even institutionalised among the East Georgian highlanders, and it may, in part at least, have been due to the high bride money (*kalym*): the bridegroom could not afford buying a wife and resorted to this means. The practice was also encouraged by shortage of women, which again was the result of infanticide: too many daughters could be disastrous to a family, as both the wedding and the dowry meant expenses. It was therefore not unusual that new-born girls were killed, and it appears from censuses that in former times there was often a certain deficiency of women in some mountainous areas of the Caucasus. Girls' names like *Aniguila* "may she die", *Cæmænquid* "for what is she needed?" and others may be indicative of these problems (cp. 3.2.3.3. above).¹⁴⁰

Marital relations are thus one of the main factors furthering the development of bilingualism.

7.4. Atalyk institution

Furthermore, the so-called "atalyk institution" has in all likelihood played an important role in the establishment of bilingual relations between different ethnic groups. After birth, a new-born child was put out to foster-parents, where it remained until it came of age (in some instances till the age of six). After the rearing was over, the child returned to its natural parents. This usage played an important part in the family life of the Ossetes as well as the other peoples of the North Caucasus. It was particularly common

¹⁴⁰ Regarding these matters, I refer to Luzbetak 1951, passim; Grigolia 1939, 63 ff.; Kovalevskij 1886: I, 232 ff.).

among the feudal aristocracy. People of the lower classes, who felt a need for protection, reared children of upper-class parents, as a rule boys. The Kabardian feudal lords frequently put out their sons to Ossetic families of the lower ranks. The aim of the *atalyk* was in part physical training, but also instruction in etiquettes and the way of life of the mountaineers. After the rearing the foster-parents received a nice reward. There were close relations between the foster-parents and the family of the child.

In Ossetic, the name of this practice was I. *æmcek* / D. *æncæg* or *enceg*, which means both “foster-father” and the “foster-brother”; in Digor the word is used of the nursling (cf. IES: I, 142 f.). In both dialects, the nursling may also be called *qan*, e.g. *qan iæ æmceči biræ uarzi* “the nursling loves his foster-father dearly”. Both words are of Turkic origin, cp. Kar.-Balk. *emček* “(female) breast, nipple”, Anat.Turk. *emcik* “nipple” (cf. Sevortyan I, 1974: 271 ff.); Abaev (IES: II, 262) derives *qan* from Turkic *qan* “sovereign, khan”.

7.5. Blood vengeance

The law of blood vengeance (I. *tug (ra)isin* “to take blood”, cf. MF: III, 1221 ff.; IES: III, 309 f.) was of great importance in the traditional society of the Ossetes. The vengeance for a homicide and various other offences (e.g. a violation of the domestic chain, the *ræxis*, cf. IES: II, 396 f.) was a religious duty that rested with the whole patrilinear clan of the insulted against the whole patrilinear clan of the offender. According to the customary law, revenge could be inflicted by the relatives of the victim on any of the relatives of the culprit, at least on the male members of his clan. As the duty of vengeance was reciprocal and hereditary within the clan, it could result in blood feuds and downright massacres; the population of a village was wholly or partly either exterminated or expelled. The ultimate consequence would easily be the replacement of the population by immigrants who brought with them an alien language or dialect. It is a natural guess that such feuds, which until quite recent times were extremely common, were occasionally accompanied by tribal migrations and thus by language shift (cf. Kovalevskij 1886: II, 3 ff.).

In addition to large-scale migrations and invasions, the most important of which within historical times were the Mongol invasions in the 13th and the Russian conquests in the 18th and 19th centuries, the above-mentioned factors have undoubtedly contributed to the multilingualism of the Ossetes and the other peoples of the North Caucasus.

7.6. Multilingualism

The multilingualism of the North Caucasian region is no doubt of long standing. In antiquity it was renowned and commented on by Roman and Greek authors. According to Strabo (first cent. B.C. – first cent. A. D.), at least 70 tribes came together in Dioskurias – a wealthy commercial centre in Hellenistic times (in modern Abkhazia) – all speaking different languages “as they live in scattered and isolated groups because of their obstinacy and ferocity” (Geogr. 11.2.16). Pliny (first cent. A. D.) quotes Timosthenes, a Greek geographer of the 3rd cent. B. C., who stated that 300 tribes traded in Dioskurias, all of them speaking different languages, and that subsequently business was carried on by Roman merchants with the help of 130 interpreters (Hist. nat. VI, 16). Although these figures should not be taken literally, they give proof of the reputation of the North Caucasus as a multilingual area. Without doubt, *linguae francae* were needed in this situation. Unfortunately we do not know which languages were

meant, but Alanic and other Iranian (Scytho-Sarmatian) dialects were certainly among them.

We conclude from this that Ossetic (Alanic) has been spoken in multilingual surroundings for many hundreds of years.

7.7. Conclusive remarks

It goes without saying that the present-day Ossetes can only in part be blood-relatives of the ancient Alan immigrants. To a large extent they owe their origin to an intermixture of the immigrants with the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus (correspondingly the Kartvelians in South Ossetia). In a similar way, the other linguistic groups of the region are made up of mixed tribes, descending from the aboriginal populations and immigrants or invaders. Thus, e.g., the Circassian tribes in part originated from an Alanic-speaking population that adopted the language of the invaders. This is of course nothing particular; similar alterations are continuously taking place all over the world.

The relative conservatism of the Ossetic language has already been commented upon in preceding paragraphs (cf. chapters 3.6.3. to 3.6.5.). We have no reason to regard Ossetic, as it has appeared during the last two centuries, as a creolised language that developed from a pidgin stage of Old Alanic, originating in an area inhabited by a numerous indigenous population and an immigrant minority. As far as our knowledge permits to conclude, there is no reason to doubt that prehistoric Ossetic was an omnifunctional language, serving the speakers in most social situations. When we come down to the 20th century, this must be stated with some reservations, however; at least in the towns, Russian has shown a tendency towards supplanting Ossetic as well as most of the other languages of the North Caucasus in a number of social situations, thus limiting its functional validity. But this tendency could easily be reversed.

Alien elements have for long been incorporated into Ossetic, but without changing its basic structure. The language has remained basically Iranian.

The linguistic coherence gives evidence of a strong cultural and social continuity. The Alan invaders and immigrants impressed their language upon the aboriginal tribes whom they subjugated or mixed with. There are, of course, many parallels to the imposition of the language of a conquering minority upon a larger indigenous population. The traditional culture of the Ossetes bears witness of this continuity, too. I may mention, e.g., the burial rites called "Horse Consecration" (*Bæx fældisin*) which are no doubt rooted in Alanic, or even Scythic-Sarmatian, practices. The *Nart* epic tales, whose motives and basic structures are to a great extent of Iranian origin, point the same way.

The result of this ethnic intermixture, which has been going on from times immemorial, is a North Caucasian community made up of multifarious linguistic groups who in a social and ideological interplay have formed their own distinct cultural area. In this process the Ossetes have filled a large, at times even a predominant, place.