

**Кунь атуј, рагъ атуј!**

[kyn atuj, ragh atuj]



(when) you all came – (it's like) the sun came

This is the expanded written version of the first part of “Intro to Lezgi” – a presentation made for the Polyglot Conference Global 2020 – dedicated to general background and linguistic history of Lezgi

Lezgi (also called Lezgian or Lezgin and sometimes spelled with “gh”) is one of the largest languages of a family called Nakh-Dagestanian or North-East Caucasian, thought indigenous to the area of eastern parts of the Greater Caucasus mountain range. Other major languages of this family are Chechen, Avar, Dargin, Ingush, Lak and Tabasaran, Chechen being the only one with more than 1M speakers. Several links to other linguistic families, both in the Caucasus area and outside of it, have been postulated, but none established.

Lezgi is spoken by at least 600k people, but as the census data (which mention 480k Lezgis in Russia and 180k in Azerbaijan with smaller numbers elsewhere in world) has been widely disputed, it is hard to give a better estimate.

Core Lezgi-inhabited areas are in southern parts of Dagestan (one of the republics forming part of Russian Federation) and northern parts of Azerbaijan; significant numbers of Lezgis live in Baku, major Russian cities as well as in Central Asian republics and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Of particular interest is Lezgi diaspora in Turkey (notably in Balıkesir province) dating back to mid-XIX century, where older generations have still retained the language. There are some faint traces of similar Lezgi dispersion in Iran (North Khorasan province), but it seems the language has been fully lost there.

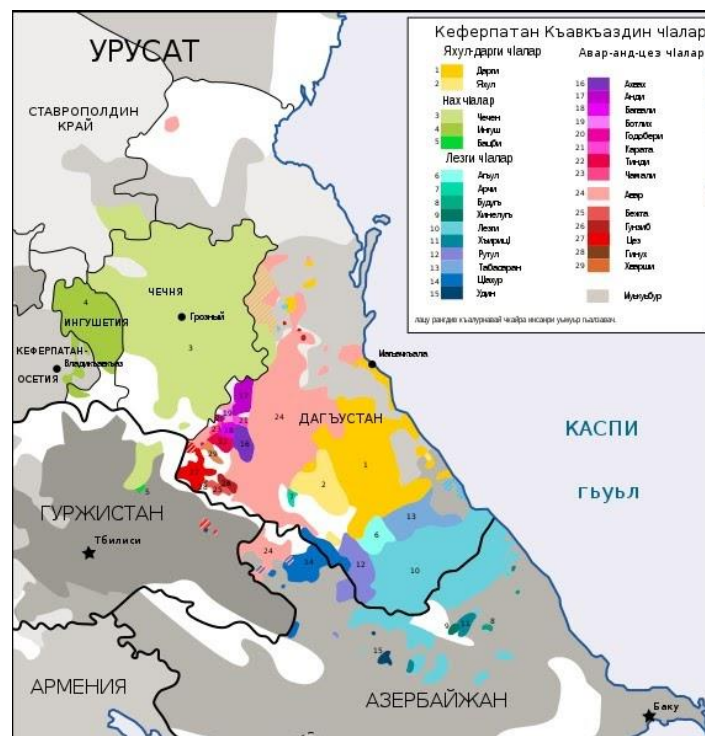
Lezgi is a literary language written in slightly expanded Cyrillic script. It is one of the 14 co-official languages of Dagestan. Both in Dagestan and in Azerbaijan (to a much greater extent in the former) Lezgi is used in primary education (taught as a subject and, to a limited extent, as language of instruction), cultural institutions, media and publishing.

However, because of several sociolinguistic factors (widespread multilingualism among Lezgis, multiethnic character of cities, linguistic policies of Russia and Azerbaijan) Lezgi –especially in cities- is used mostly as a family language and relegated to home setting. More and more urban Lezgis grow up with only passive command of it, or none at all.

I don't have current data on language retention % (it used to be around 90% in final years of the Soviet Union), but language shift (to Russian and/or Azerbaijani) is definitely happening and causes great concern. Similar processes can be noticed with other Dagestani languages, elsewhere in the Caucasus and among many other minority languages of Russia.

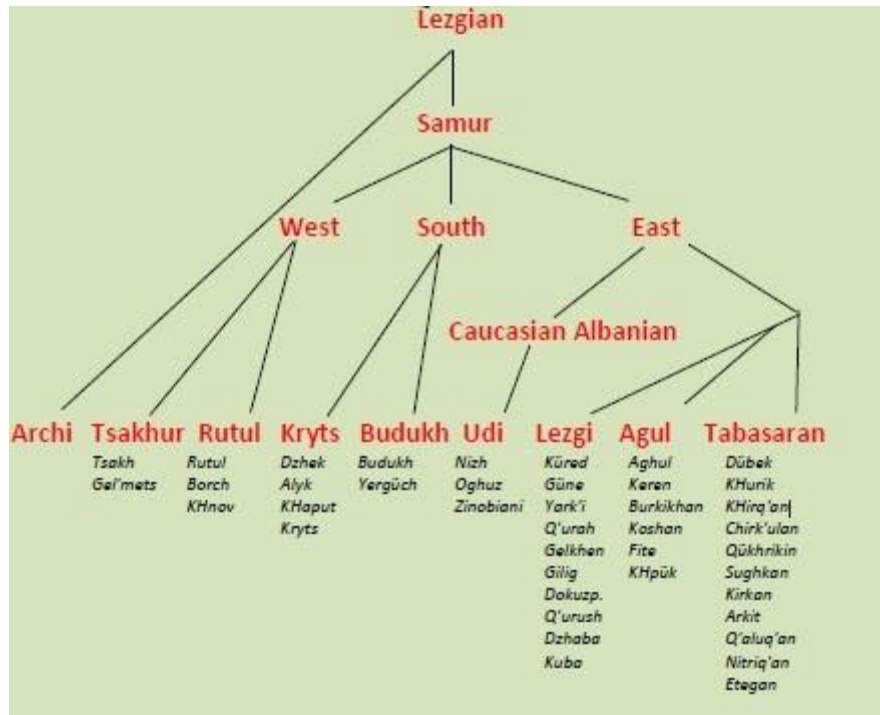
### DIVERSITY

Caucasus in general is one of the world's hotspots of language diversity and East Caucasus is linguistically very diverse even for Caucasian standards, as you can see on this map which downplays diversity (colours mark North-East Caucasian languages only; languages of other families are in shades of grey; Lezgi is no. 10, light blue shade).



Several North-East Caucasian “languages” (Dargin and Avar being the most obvious examples) could be meaningfully treated as clusters of several, mutually unintelligible varieties, in places approaching model “every village with a language of its own”

Chart below depicts the subdivisions of the Lezgian (here called ‘Lezgian’) branch of North-East Caucasian, of which Lezgi is, by far, the largest member. Language names in red, names of dialects in black (Archi doesn’t have any because it is spoken in a single village!):



Of the languages listed here only Lezgi and Tabasaran have more than 100k speakers and several have less than 10k. Tabasaran and Agul are the only ones where my half-knowledge of Lezgi is of any use – meaning I can pick out and recognize single words, whereas my understanding of e.g. Tsakhur is practically zero.

So, even though the linguistic kinship is quite obvious, sometimes even speakers of what’s considered dialect of a single language would resort to Russian when speaking with each other. On the other hand, there are many structural similarities not only within Lezgi, but even among the Nakh-Dagestanian as a whole. This means that various traits of Lezgi are quite typical for its family, thus “Intro to Lezgi” can be a useful introduction to North-East Caucasian (on top of that, Lezgi is, in my opinion, one of the relatively easier ones to learn – no noun classes! no weird lateral sounds!).

## HISTORY

The area inhabited by Lezgis - from eastern reaches of Caucasus to shores of the Caspian sea have always been a sort of crossroads between steppes to the North and Iranian plateau to the South, and place of encounters (peaceful or otherwise) between various steppe peoples (Alans, Chazars...) and Persian Empire (occasionally Romans wandered there, too)

Of particular importance is a city called Derbent and located in southern Dagestan, founded and garrisoned by Sassanian Persians to guard the passage between the mountains and the sea. Its Lezgi name Къвевар q'wevar lit. 'two gates' explains its role well. Ever since, speakers of Iranian languages (now represented by Tats and Mountain Jews) have been living in this area in proximity to Lezgis.

As a result, there is a deep layer of Iranian loanwords in Lezgi (and its sister languages), also among basic vocabulary, with many of them not perceived as foreign. There are, of course, cultural linkages with Iran visible in folklore or everyday traditions (such as games people play)

The most important political entity on Lezgi lands was a little-known kingdom called Caucasian Albania (or Aghwan, or Aluan, or Arran or...), whose history combined heavy Iranian influence (being ruled by dynasty of Iranian origin) with periods of relative independence and early adoption of Christianity (314 CE!).

It had its own church (eventually subsumed by Armenian Church), but more importantly – its own script and literary language (one of probably dozens of languages spoken by its inhabitants). It is only in the last 20 years or so that long enough texts written in Caucasian Albanian have been discovered for a proper analysis of the language, which is the ancestor of Udi, a small language of the Lezgi branch.

Even if there's no direct descent between Caucasian Albanian / Old Udi and modern Lezgi, Lezgis today take great pride in this ancient literary tradition they consider their own. So it has great symbolic importance.

Arab conquest in 8<sup>th</sup> cent. brought new religion and its sacred language, Arabic, to the region. Adoption of Islam began quickly but was gradual and uneven. By this I mean that even though both Islam and Arabic exerted strong influence on local cultures and languages they didn't eradicate previous customs and traditions, only supplement them.

Clearly visible outside influences do not preclude the fact that the core of Lezgi culture is easily identifiable as what I'd call "Caucasian cultural complex", a 'package' of cultural traits which to large extent shared between dozens of Caucasian peoples despite all their differences.

Most prominently:

- emphasis on warrior ethos, 'manly' virtues, fighting prowess, being able to avenge oneself and own kin;
- combining the above with tradition of communal self-help (called мел mel in Lezgi);
- maintenance of mutual hospitality networks across different ethnic groups (relationship of people obliged to host and protect one another in case of need called хванахва хwanaxwa in Lezgi), necessary for survival in the patchwork of sometimes warring ethnicities and clans;
- particular modes of music, dance, dress and crafts (carpet-weaving, metalworking...)

It is interesting to note that both the ethnonym "Lezgi" and the name of their dance "Lezginka" (lit. 'Lezgi woman' in Russian) were used more broadly than to refer to just Lezgis. Lezginka is danced all over the Caucasus and in XIX cent. Russian literature "Lezgi" can mean any Dagestani mountaineer (esp. from south Dagestan). Lezgis were thus, possibly because of their relatively more accessible location, taken to be a "representative" or "archetypal" highlander ethnic group.

An important element of "Caucasian cultural complex" was the prevalent multilingualism which was asymmetric in that men usually spoke more languages than women (who travelled much less beyond their home village) and highlanders spoke the languages of lowlanders more often than the other way around. Same reasoning goes for more isolated villages vs. those serving as local market places.

In various parts of the region, Avar, Kumyk and Azerbaijani were used as local *lingua francas* between different ethnic groups. Arabic was widely, but relatively thinly, spread and used for law, jurisprudence, and, obviously, in all matters of religion. Persian was used by itinerant poets and entertainers – and so was Azerbaijani. Lezgi itself sometimes served as contact language, but usually only between people speaking languages of Lezgi branch.

## HISTORY SHIFTS GEARS

Iran's influence waned significantly as it adopted Shiism as its official creed (vast majority of Lezgis –and other Dagestanis- are Sunni). Memory of sequence of defensive wars fought against Iranian punitive expeditions (but really plundering parties) seeking to subjugate the region again are still alive in Lezgi folk memory.

But soon enough Russia's encroachment to the Caucasus meant that Lezgis were now facing two empires and their lands became one of the arenas of Russian-Persian wars in early XIX cent.

Russia's efforts to conquer the mountains and impose its rule over their inhabitants meant that the XIX century can be described as a period of intermittent warfare. Lezgis played an important role in mountaineers' resistance, as Lezgi sheikh Muhammad Yaraghvi was the spiritual leader of the murid movement and ideologue of the holy war espoused by famous imam Shamil.

What's important from a linguistic point of view is that the conquest brought about the first sound description of Lezgi language, written (under the title Кюринский язык "Kurinskiy yazyk" as the name "lezginskij" referred to all mountaineers then) by Petr Karlovitch Uslar, Russian military officer and an accomplished ethnographer and linguist.

Becoming a part of successive Russian empires – Tsarist and then Soviet – led to important changes – first, development of oil industry and construction of roads and railroads under Russian rule meant job opportunities in towns like Baku (and Lezgis were relatively better poised to take them because of shorter distances); and then Soviet language policy led to development of Lezgi literary standard (eventually in Cyrillic).

Taken together, these factors meant that Lezgis today are relatively well-educated (quite many scholars, poets, linguists, engineers...) and represented in business circles (Lezgi multibillionaire Suleiman Kerimov is one of the richest people in Russia and, according to Forbes, 60<sup>th</sup> richest person in the world) and the language has been used in fields such as media, science or theater for almost 100 years.

Dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant that Lezgis are divided by a hard state border, and are facing new challenges to maintain national cohesion, retain and develop the language. This is all the more complicated as one of the states they live in, Azerbaijan, since independence has been trying to build its new national and linguistic identity.