Куьн атуй, рагъ атуй!

[kyn atuj, ragh atuj]

☀

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

This is the expanded written version of the second part of "Intro to Lezgi" – a presentation made for the Polyglot Conference Global 2020 – dedicated to some of the tricky aspects of Lezgi language structure (trust me, there is much more of it than what I'll be able to show here).

But first, a small recap - Lezgi (also called Lezgian or Lezgi) is a language belonging to a family called Nakh-Dagestanian or North-East Caucasian and is spoken by over half a million people chiefly in N. Azerbaijan and southern Dagestan, which is a part of Russian Federation.

Lezgi shares with its sister languages several important characteristics - and so this intro will give you some idea what Dagestani languages are like; many of these characteristics will probably seem quite outlandish to you, especially if you've only been acquainted with major European or East Asian languages so far. Nakh-Dagestani languages differ a lot from any of them as you'll be able to see shortly.

SOUNDS

Lezgi vowel system is not particularly complicated with standard analysis giving six vowels, from front to back: i, y, e, æ, a, u (note the absence of 'o', which appears in dialects). At word-end, vowel+consonant 'n' sequences can be realized as nasalized vowels.

But the real fun is with Lezgi consonant inventory, which is quite rich with 54 to 58 consonants depending on the analysis (English has 24…). The chart of the next page gives one of possible descriptions.

| Labial | Dental | | (Post)-alveolar | Palatal | Velar | | Uvular | | Glottal |
	plain	lab.			plain	lab.	plain	lab.	
/m/ м	/n/ н								
/b/ б	/d/ д				/g/ г	/gʷ/ гв			
/p/ п	/t/ т	/tʷ/ тв			/k/ к	/kʷ/ кв	/q/ къ	/qʷ/ къв	/ʔ/ ъ
/pʰ/ п	/tʰ/ т	/tʷʰ/ тв			/kʰ/ к	/kʷʰ/ кв	/qʰ/ хъ	/qʷʰ/ хъв	
/p'/ пӏ	/t'/ тӏ	/tʷ'/ тӏв			/k'/ кӏ	/kʷ'/ кӏв	/q'/ кь	/qʷ'/ кьв	
	/dz/ дз		/dʒ/ дж						
	/t͡s/ ц	/t͡sʷ/ цв	/t͡ʃ/ ч						
	/t͡sʰ/ ц	/t͡sʷʰ/ цв	/t͡ʃʰ/ ч						
	/t͡s'/ цӏ	/t͡sʷ'/ цӏв	/t͡ʃ'/ чӏ						
/v/ в	/z/ з	/zʷ/ зв	/ʒ/ ж				/ʁ/ гъ	/ʁʷ/ гъв	
/f/ ф	/s/ с	/sʷ/ св	/ʃ/ ш		/x/ хь	/xʷ/ хьв	/χ/ х	/χʷ/ хв	/h/ гь
	/l/ л			/j/ й		/w/ в			
	/r/ р								

What you can immediately grasp from here is that there is way more sounds than there are letters in the Cyrillic script so several sounds are written with two-letter or even three-letter sequences. And still, there is no way to distinguish unaspirated (no puff of air) and aspirated (puff of air) stops and affricates (so т for instance stands for both /t/ and /tʰ/ etc.)

There are two sets of sounds which you may notice as quite characteristic to overall 'feel' of Lezgi (and Caucasian) speech: on one hand you have a large set of uvulars, which is a word for consonants pronounced in the back of your throat, they give Lezgi a 'harsh' or 'guttural' sound. On the other hand there are, perhaps even more characteristic, so-called ejective or glottalized consonants, which are pronounced with a stop of airflow in your glottis (where glottal chords are), resulting in a crisp, 'pop-like' sound.

Before you ask – yes, there are glottalized uvular consonants, too!

Tough as it may seem to pronounce them in isolation, the Lezgi consonants often come in groups especially at the beginning of words. Even though Lezgi lacks formidable clusters Georgian is so famous for, pronouncing words like стха stxa 'brother' хкъведа xkweda 'will return' or ктӏкана ktkana 'hit the target' can be a bit of a pickle (but not nearly as tough as you imagine!).

STRUCTURES

Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the Lezgi syntax is that it's ergative. What this means is that in Lezgi transitive sentences it is the object that takes the same case as the subject of intransitive sentence, whereas the subject of transitive sentence is expressed by separate case form called ergative. Confused? Let's try again:

Ergativity can be compared to "passive voice"-like setup of transitive sentences (ie. ones in which somebody/something is acting on somebody/something else). Let's start by take a sentence which is **not** transitive:

аял ксанва / ajal ksanwa means 'child is asleep'

Note that the word for 'child', аял / ajal takes no case ending, and compare it with the next sentence, which **is** transitive:

дидеди аял ксурна / didedi ajal ksurna 'mother put child to sleep'

Here, mother is doing something to the child. Note that it is the word for mother that has the ergative ending attached, while the word for child stays as it was. If you switched the suffix around like this: диде аялди ксурна / dide ajaldi ksurna you'd get 'child put mother to sleep'

So, in Lezgi direct object stays unmarked, while something interesting happens to the subject… But ergative construction is only one of these interesting things!

Lezgi makes widespread use of the affective construction, which can be compared to English "it looks to me" / "it seems to me" as standard syntax for verbs of emotion and perception (seeing, hearing, loving, wanting…). Let's take a look:

дидедиз чпин аял кӏанда / didediz chpin ajal k'anda which means 'mother loves her child'

Here, again, the word for child stays unmarked, but the word for mother (дидедиз / didediz) takes on another ending which is that of a dative (so literally 'to mother'). Compare the case markings in this sentence:

Дидеди аялдиз ктаб гуда / didedi ajaldiz ktab guda = 'Mother will give book to child'

Note how the object –the thing being given- is unmarked, while the giver, as the doer takes the ergative case, and the dative case is employed in its more 'familiar' role – that of a recipient or beneficiary of an action.

In practice it takes some mental adjustments to avoid saying things backwards in Lezgi, especially with affective construction.

CASES AND LOCATIONS

Apart from cases like ergative or dative which express core grammatical relations Lezgi has a neat matrix of **locative cases** used for spatial relationships (and much more!).

The system combines **5 location** suffixes ('near', 'under', 'behind', 'on', 'in') with **3 directions** ('at', 'to', 'from'), like this:

> столдихъ stoldiqh '(at) behind the table' [-qh is 'behind']
> столдихъди stoldiqhdi '(to) behind the table'
> столдихъай stoldiqhaj '(from) behind the table',
> столдив stoldiv 'near the table' [-v is 'near']
> столдивди stoldiv '(to) near the table'
> and so on…

There are altogether 14, not 15, such combined forms because one of the slots ('to-in') has been taken over by the dative.

But what's really interesting is that these case forms are rarely used in their original, spatial meaning, having instead adopted some interesting figurative uses, which are very much current. For instance:

> -ldi form, 'on-to', expresses 'in the manner of, -ly', as in
> ch'exi hyrmetdaldi
> 'great respect on-to' = respectfully;

> -laj form, 'on-from', expresses comparison, as in
> charadan balk'andilaj zhuvan lam qhsan ja
> 'other's horse-on-from own donkey good is' = one's own donkey is better than somebody else's horse;

> -vaj form, 'near-from' expresses ability as in
> zavaj taparar avun zhedach
> 'I-near-from lies make becomes-not' = I am unable to tell lies;

> -kaj form, 'under-from' expresses 'about', as in
> vi bubadikaj ak' luhumir!
> 'your father-under-from that-way speak-not' = don't talk about your father like this!

Complementing the system of locative cases there is a set of **locative copulas** – verbs expressing the meaning of "there is" but with a separate copula form for each location:

адаз пул ава adaz pul awa - he has money (lit. 'there's money to him')

адав пул гва adaw pul gwa - he has money (at the moment, money is near him)

адак хъел ква adak qhel kwa - he's angry ('anger is under him')

Further on**, there is a parallel set of continuative** copulas ("to still be somewhere") for each location, too. Compare the sentences below with previous ones:

адаз пул ама adaz pul ama - he still has money

адак хъел кума adak qhel kuma - he is still angry

ви рикlел аламани? vi rik'el alamani? - do you still remember?

The last sentence means literally "is it still on your heart?" and brings us to yet another aspect of Lezgi which I will touch upon but briefly – it uses different metaphors and imagery than what had been familiar to me from Europe. Two of my favourite examples:

Heart is the place where memories are stored, and there are constructions like:

рикlелай алатун rik'elaj alatun = to forget (= fall from heart)

рикlелай алудун rik'elaj aludun = to (make) forget (= to take down from heart)

The first is accidental ("it fell down from my heart" = "I forgot"), the second purposeful ("I wanted to forget, so I've taken it down from my heart")

Cardinal points have quite loaded meanings:

кефер пад kefer pad 'north' vs. кьибле пад q'ible pad 'south'

Q'ible is the word for direction of Muslim prayer (towards Mecca) and as Mecca is southwards from Lezgi lands its usage here is hardly surprising.

The word for North is more interesting, because it is linked to the Arabic word 'kofr' which means 'unbelief'. So, for Lezgis, South is where Mecca is and North is where the non-believers are.

There are many more semantic nuggets like this, and many more fascinating aspects of Lezgi language structure, but for now these will have to do before we move on to the final section.

CHANGES

No language is static and Lezgi is no exception, as it continues to evolve. Some noteworthy examples from different levels of language structure:

> Between the time the first grammar was written and now, Lezgi has undergone what's called a pre-tonic vowel syncope. In human language this means that some of the vowels in first syllables of the words have fallen out leaving… the very consonant clusters I mentioned. So the word for 'brother' is now pronounced 'stxa', but it used to be 'sitxa' back in XIX cent.

> To express spatial relationships post-positions (small words coming after the noun they modify) take place of the locative noun cases. So, for instance, the word 'patav' is used in place of the –v suffix to express the meaning of 'near'

> Traditionally Lezgi didn't have grammatical means to express politeness. Of course you could (and did) use different words to refer to people of different social standing, but on the level of grammar you used the same 'you' with everyone. However, I've noticed that more and more Lezgis have taken (presumably under influence of Russian where such distinction is long-standing) to use plural pronoun куьн kyn 'you all; you guys' to refer politely to a single person (like Russian Вы or French vous)

This last bit points to the biggest challenge facing Lezgi now. It needs to cope with pressures of the changing modern world, where modern state policies (universal education in national languages, promotion through mass media etc.) and trends such as urbanization and globalization have resulted in a new kind of multilingualism.

Nowadays, most Lezgis are fluent in the official language of the state they're living in, and those living in the cities are also surrounded by it. The other languages they learn, use, or aspire to are 'world languages' such as English, German or French associated with high prestige, better job opportunities and modern entertainment. Lezgi therefore remains a family language, but its standing becomes more and more precarious.

Urban Lezgis of young generation often describe their skills in native language as "I understand it, but cannot speak it" which is a cause for great concern for the future.

How Lezgi activists try to cope with that challenge is the topic of the third, and final, part of this brief presentation.