

Куьн атуь, рагъ атуь!

[kyn atuj, ragh atuj]



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

This is the expanded written version of the third part of “Intro to Lezgi” – a presentation made for the Polyglot Conference Global 2020 – dedicated to Lezgi language activism plus some remarks on my experience with it as a sympathetic outsider.

First, a clarification – I am not Lezgi and I don't really speak it that well. But I sort of understand it, especially when written, and I've been observing its fates for the best part of the last 20 years. So, I'd venture a guess that I have a thing or two worth sharing.



Yes, that's me right there, the guy in the blue shirt. If you take a closer look, you'll see that I don't seem to be doing anything useful at all. This, I think, serves as a good metaphor for outsider's role in language revitalization efforts. The speakers are in charge, while you remain on the margins. But you're there, ready to assist and encourage when need be, and, who knows, maybe sometimes your presence helps making things happen?

But let us start by talking a bit about the present condition of Lezgi and what its speakers are doing about it.

PREDICAMENT

As you may already know, if you've seen/read the other two parts, Lezgi, a Nakh-Dagestanian language spoken by more than half a million people, is vulnerable, as there are worrying signs of a language shift taking place - younger, urban generations of Lezgis increasingly abandon it in favour of Russian or Azerbaijani. Many know it only passively, using other languages for their daily needs, others still do not know it at all.

This situation creates a lot of concern among the general Lezgi public, as it is broadly accepted that their own language is a core element of national identity, which Lezgis value very much. There is a sense of ethnic pride and deep attachment to kinfolk and to ancestral lands.

To be able to preserve these values into the future (in short "not to forget who they are and where they are from"), Lezgis strive in many ways to retain, develop and adapt their language so that it will be passed on to next generations.

Over the last 20 years I have witnessed significant growth of online activity dedicated to language preservation and revitalization, perhaps more than in any other language of Dagestan. When compared to resources available for/in any of European state languages, that may not seem much, but given the unfavorable conditions, it is quite a lot.

TOOLS

Following list is by no means exhaustive, it is merely a subjective take of what I consider most relevant, interesting or representative. I will try to update and expand it – be it on Conference's forum or on my website (see the footer).

Traditional media:

Lezgi-language press has 100-year old traditions, for modern periodicals see Лезги Газет Lezgi Gazet (<https://lezgigazet.ru/>), Самур Samur (<http://samurpress.net/>) and literary journal Алам Alam (<https://www.alamjurnal.com/>)

Books:

Hundreds of books have been published in Lezgi including fiction, poetry and school textbooks, but also some works on linguistics and specialized dictionaries. There are several online libraries, of which LezgiChal (<https://www.lezgichal.ru/>) is perhaps the most comprehensive.

Dictionaries and apps:

There are several dictionaries (Lezgi-Russian, Lezgi-Azerbaijani and Lezgi-English, the latter the least comprehensive) available online (<https://gaf.lezgichal.ru/>) and as Android apps ([Gaf](#) and [PublicDictionary](#) – same developer has published dics for several other Dagestian languages)

Social media:

Lezgi content is easily available on all major networks (just make sure you search for both “Lezgi” and “Лезги”). A small sample from my bookmarks of language-learning focused channels/pages:

FB - <https://www.facebook.com/lezcichal> <https://www.facebook.com/Lezgisadval/>

TG – https://t.me/learning_lezgi


VK - https://vk.com/learning_lezgi <https://vk.com/lezgi.chal>

YT – [Лезгинский язык Jeyhun Amirkhanov](#) [Лезгинский язык2](#) [Lezgi Kids](#)

It is worth noting that the Russian network VKontakte has Lezgi interface (in beta):

Чинин адрес	https://vk.com/piotrkozlowski	Масаклавун
Верификаци	Profile not verified	Арза гун
Чал	Лезги чал	Масаклавун
Вавай ви чин чурни жеда.		

Wikipedia:



Куьн атуй, рагъ атуй **Лезги Википедия**диз
Кевай дуьзар хъийиз жедай ахъа энциклопедия

Къе 2020 йисан 14 октябрь я, Арбе югъ, 21:08 UTC
Лезги чалал макъалайрин къадар **4129**
Мобил жуьре, Цийи хъувун

География — Харусенят — Тарих — Илим — Жемат — Ксарикай — Дин — Техника — Спорт — Манияр — Философия

Вири

[Lezgi Wikipedia](#) counts 4129 articles at the moment and is actually very useful as repository of short texts to read / tool to expand vocab

Individual projects:

Some of their efforts short-lived, some long-lasting but there is a lot of people trying to ‘do something’ with various results.

The personal [web-page of Sedaget Kerimova](#), poetess, editor-in-chief of “Samur” and prominent language activist can serve as an example of focused, persistent works. An attempt to create [Lezgi-language news broadcast](#) didn’t survive, but is useful for learners. Lastly, [this channel](#) explaining social media and mobile technology in Lezgi is a new, promising initiative

THEMES

Given the fact that most Lezgis are fluent in other languages which they share with their non-Lezgi speaking environment, choosing to communicate in Lezgi means drastically reducing their potential audience. After all, outsiders who understand Lezgi are but a handful. So, what people talk about when they make that choice?

A lot of Lezgi-language communication centers around history, including –for instance- people trying to reconstruct proto-Lezgic language or writing about history of Caucasian Albania. It is no accident that one of versions of an unofficial Lezgi flag, quite common online, displays writing in Caucasian Albanian script:



On another level, book and articles of Muzaffar Melikmamedov telling (in Lezgi) the history of various episodes of Lezgi resistance insurrections against Russian rule are definitely worth mentioning.



Another focal point is preservation of language and traditions, with exhortations like Хайи члал хуьх! [xaji ch'al xyx] 'preserve/keep native language!' being commonplace. Considerable attention is dedicated to linguistic purism. As growing influence of Azerbaijani and Russian on Lezgi vocabulary is hard to miss, and is taken to be a clear sign of the language's deteriorating condition, many activists attempt to replace as many obvious loanwords as possible with 'pure Lezgi' equivalents.

Religion is another field where Lezgi is actively used. I notice relatively more Islam-themed material now than I did back when my interest in the language began. I can't tell if that reflects any broader trend or is just a happenstance. In any case, a couple of years ago a Lezgi "explanation of the sense of Qur'an" (they use this phrasing because Qur'an is seen as untranslatable) appeared, which is a significant step for the language.

Lezgi is of course used a lot in music. Type *лезги манияр* *lezgi manijar* 'Lezgi songs' in any search engine and you will find a lot of mostly traditional (and/or so-called "estrada") music. Here I'll only stop to recommend a non-obvious choice – a Lezgi hip-hop artist called [Eltudo](#)

UNCOMMON LANGUAGE LEARNING

Now, if all you've ever had contact with are official languages of well-functioning nation-states you may react to what I've enumerated above by thinking that the resources for learning Lezgi are quite scarce. And this is true in a way. After all, I don't know of a single textbook of Lezgi for non-Lezgis (there are books for teaching Lezgi schoolchildren to read) and I don't think I would have missed such a thing if it existed...

But this is precisely what makes attempting to learn an unusual language like Lezgi so interesting and rewarding a journey. Without textbooks and scripts you are forced to make new discoveries on uncharted territory and become an independent learner. Being on your own doesn't mean going it alone – you won't get anywhere without direct interactions with linguists, activists and speakers from all walks of life.

This in turn exposes you to people with whom you have very little in common, of different cultural backgrounds, assumptions, value systems, unexpected points-of-view. Ability to embrace that experience is, in my opinion, an absolutely crucial skill in this increasingly self-segregating world.

Perhaps most importantly, scarcity of resources invites you to "pitch in" maybe by amplifying work of others, maybe by connecting people in your orbit who had never met before, maybe by creating your own resources. That's exactly what I've been trying to do in my small way, after having noticed how little was (and still is) available on English (apart from some excellent academic works, notably "A Grammar of Lezgian" by Martin Haspelmath)

For me, learning Lezgi has been extremely rewarding and I'm deeply thankful to all those wonderful and kind people who helped me, especially Elman and Samir, with whom it all started almost 20 years ago.

My concluding argument is that **you** can embark on a similar journey, too. Most of the world's languages are understudied and underrepresented, yet each of them is a rich world of its own. There are so many new worlds out there, waiting for you to discover them!

Reach out, take a look around, maybe even try to learn whatever you feel most connected to (because of your roots, where you live, because it 'clicked' with you or any other factor). I can guarantee you that no matter where you are in the world, somewhere nearby live people (and languages and cultures) you know next to nothing about.

I am not calling upon you to drop everything and become a full-time minority language activist (I certainly am not!), only to get out of your familiar bubble and explore.

Moreover, not just explore, interact! Language is a social practice, don't treat it as a code or a game only (it is that, but so much more). No matter what your personal constraints and limitations are, I'm sure there is a form of interaction (with people or with texts) which will feel comfortable with you. Try it out.

Do not be a stranger – you don't have to!

Thanks for making it through the 'sermon' above. If you want to talk like a real person, look me up on the forum or through the addresses at the footer below.