

## **The Chechen language**

### *Distribution*

The Chechen language is distributed in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation and in the Khasavyurt rayon of the Republic of Dagestan of the Russian Federation. According to the census of 1989 there about 893 thousand speakers of the Chechen language. 98,8% of the 736 thousands ethnic Chechens in Chechnya considered Chechen to be their mother tongue, 1,1% considered Russian as their mother tongue; 76% fluently spoke Russian, 0,7% other languages of the Russian Federation<sup>1</sup>.

The Chechen language brings together a number of dialects and tongues. The main dialects are: Flatland, Akka, Cheberloi, Melkhin, Itum-Kale, Galanchozh, Kisti.

The Chechen language is also spoken by Chechen communities in Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Syria<sup>2</sup>.

### *Official status*

Chechen is official language of the Chechen Republic (as part of Russia) beneath Russian. In the (separatist) Chechen Republic Ichkeria Chechen was the official language and Russian the language of interethnic communication. Chechen is also one of the 9 official languages of the Republic of Dagestan. So Chechen is one of the (regional) official languages of the Russian Federation and a “Titular language” of the Russian Federation i.e. the language of an ethnic territorial administrative unit of Russia<sup>3</sup>. Not all titular languages are official languages.

### *Chechen grammar*

The Chechen language has (like most indigenous languages of the Caucasus) a large number of consonants (simple, glottalised, pharyngeal and glottals): about 31, more than for most languages of Europe. Unlike most other languages of the Caucasus, it has also a complicated vocalism: simply vowels (short, long and umlaut), diphthongs, triphthongs and nasalized vowels: about 27. The morphological system is agglutinative, flective. Particular features of the Chechen Grammar are ergative case system; extensive inflectional morphology, many nominal cases, several gender

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<sup>1</sup> Дешериева Т.И. Чеченский язык *in* Государственные и титулярные языки России. Москва, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Ethnologue: Languages of the World, 14th Edition. Copyright © 2004 SIL International:  
[www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=CJC](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=CJC)

<sup>3</sup> Государственные и титулярные языки России. Москва, 2002

classes (6 grammatical classes); complex sentences by chaining participial clauses; verbs have gender agreement with the direct object or intransitive subject, but no person agreement<sup>4</sup>.

### *Genetic affinity*

The Chechen language, the Ingush language and the Bats language, belongs to the Nakh (North-central) subgroup of the Nakh-Dagestan<sup>5</sup> (Northeast) group of languages. The Chechen and Ingush dialects are mutually understandable with Ingush in difference to the Georgian influenced Bats language. Chechens and Ingushs name themselves as Vainkh, the closely related Chechen and Ingush languages are called Vainakh languages.

The Nakh-Dagestan languages and the Abkhaz-Adygh<sup>6</sup> (Northwest) are called North Caucasian languages.

The Nakh-Dagestan languages together with the Abkhaz-Adygh and the Kartvelian<sup>7</sup> (South Caucasian) languages consist the Caucasian or Ibero-Caucasian family of languages.

There are about 40 Caucasian languages spoken by about 4.5 millions persons.

Georgian is the only Caucasian language with an old written tradition.

Some comparative linguists connect the Caucasian languages with the language of the Urartu civilization<sup>8</sup>. These theories were used for ideological constructions.

### *Influences of neighbouring languages*

The Chechen and Ingush languages were influenced by languages of neighbouring and culturally dominating languages. The Chechen word stock borrowed up to 500 words from Georgian, up to 700 words from Turk languages, a good number of Arabic, Persian, Ossetian and Daghestani words, and a great many words from the Russian language.

In the 16th century, Vainakh tribes moved to the Cossack-populated fertile flatland. It was the begin of intensive contact between Russians and Vainakhs. The Chechen language integrated not only proper Russian loanword but also English, German and French (“internationalisms”)

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<sup>4</sup> Nichols, Johanna. 1994. Chechen. Ingush. In Riexs Smeets, ed., *The Indigenous Languages of the Caucasus*, vol. 4: Northeast Caucasian Languages

<sup>5</sup> The Dagestan (Northeast) subgroups are Avaro-Andi-Dido (14 languages), Lak-Dargwa (2 languages), Lezgian (10 languages).

<sup>6</sup> There are 5 Abkaz-Adygh languages consisting 3 subgroups: Abkhaz-Abazin (2 languages), Circassian (2 languages) and Ubykh (1 language spoken in Turkey).

<sup>7</sup> There are 3 subgroups of the Kartvelian or South Caucasian languages: Georgian (2 languages) with an old written tradition, Svan (1 language) and Zan (2 languages - Laz spoken in Turkey and Mingrel spoken in Georgia).

<sup>8</sup> Diakonoff I. M., Starostin S. A.. *Hurro-Urartian as Eastern Caucasian language*. München, 1986.

loanwords via the Russian language. Russian influenced even the phonetic system of the Chechen language. The Russian linguistic influence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very strong due to several factors among them the banishment causing the necessity permanently to communicate with persons from other ethnic groups and the fact, that Russian was the language of all levels of higher education and of the European culture.

### *Linguistic studies*

The earliest known description of the Vainakh languages is found in the Big Comparative Dictionary of the Languages of the Russian Empire published by the working in St. Petersburg naturalist Peter Simon Pallas (1740-1811)<sup>9</sup>. The Dictionary presents about 400 Chechen words and their Ingush and Bats equivalents.

Author of the first serious description of the Chechen language and other Caucasian languages was the Russian General-Major Baron Peter K. Uslar (1816—75) who worked for the General Staff of the Russian Army. His voluminous "The Chechen Language"<sup>10</sup> came off print in 1888. It contains a grammar of the Chechen language. P. K. Uslar developed a Cyrillic based alphabet for the Chechen Language. P. Uslar, a Corresponding Member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, supposed the genetic affinity of the Caucasian languages. An important scholar of the Chechen language was the linguist N.F. Yakovlev<sup>11</sup>. The Chechen publicist and politician T. Eldarkhanov wrote several linguistic researches before the Revolution and developed a Cyrillic based alphabet<sup>12</sup>.

Now there are several Russian linguists, among them Chechen linguists, Georgian and foreign linguists studying different aspect of the Chechen language.

### *Spelling systems (alphabets)*

One cannot exclude that Chechens used in pre-Islamic times a version of the alphabet developed about 590 AD by the Armenian Mesrop Mashtots and now used only for the Armenian and the Georgian languages. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were attempts to use the Arab script for some Caucasian languages (Avar). When the Chechens converted to Islam beginning in the sixteenth century, the presence of educated mullahs meant widespread, though indirect, access to writing, and many families had their clan histories put into writing, usually in Arabic but also occasionally in Chechen using the Arabic script. Apparently no spelling system in Arabic was

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<sup>9</sup> Linguarum totius Orbis vocabularia comparativa. Sectio Linguas Eur. et Asiae complexa. 2 parts. Saint Petersburg. 1786-89

<sup>10</sup> Услар П.К. Чеченский язык. - Этнография Кавказа. Языкознание. II. Тифлис, 1888.

<sup>11</sup> Яковлев Н. Ф. Синтаксис чеченского литературного языка. Москва - Ленинград, 1940.

ever systematised for Chechen, though little is known about this writing because most of these documents were destroyed by Soviet authorities in 1944.

The author of the first scientific description of the Chechen language P. K. Uslar developed a Cyrillic based alphabet for the Chechen Language as well as for several other Caucasian languages. 1862 P. Uslar opened in Fort Grozny the first school for Chechen children. 25 children learned there reading and writing in Chechen. But the school was soon closed. Supported by P. Uslar the Chechen K. Dosov compiled the first Cyrillic based Chechen primer<sup>13</sup>. The pre-Revolution Chechen publicist and politician T. Eldarkhanov developed an other Cyrillic based alphabet (see above).

After the October revolution alphabets were developed for the Abazin, Adyghe, Kabardino-Circassian, Chechen, Ingush, Avar, Lakh, Darghin, Lezghin and Tabasaran languages. From 1920 a reformed Arab script was used, since 1928 Roman characters and from 1938 Cyrillic characters were used. In the last years there were new attempts to develop alphabets for the Agul, Andi, Bezhta, Rutul, Tsakhur and Tsezi languages. A Latin spelling system was devised for Chechen in the 1920's (based on the unified Ingush-Chechen spelling system created by Zaurbek Malsagov) and used for publication until it was officially replaced by its Cyrillic transliteration in 1938<sup>14</sup>.

Now the Chechen and Ingush languages have a written (Cyrillic) tradition in difference to the Bats language spoken in the Pankisi-Valley in Georgia.

A new attempt to develop a Latin orthography was made in 1992 according to instructions of President Dzhokhar Dudaev and a resolution of Parliament of the Republic. This alphabet was a mechanical transliteration of the Cyrillic spelling into a Latin system based on Turkish and Azeri spelling but with a number of special diacritics<sup>15</sup>. This attempt failed politically.

### *Epic poetry*

Traditional epic poetry played an important role in consolidating different taips and preserving the lexicological richness of the Chechens.

### *Chechen literature*

The modern literary language was shaped in the Soviet time. The literary Chechen language rests on the Grozny dialect of flatland Chechnya. The first Chechen newspaper “Serlo” (The Light) began to appear in 1925. At 1990 the Chechen language was used in domains typical for an

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<sup>12</sup> Элдарханов Т. Чеченская азбука и первая книга для чтения. Тифлис, 1911

<sup>13</sup> Яндаров Х. История чеченской письменности//Записки Северокавказского краевого горского НИИ. Ростона-Дону, 1928.

<sup>14</sup> Хамидова Зулай. Проблемы становления и развития чеченского языка in Чечня и Россия: общества и государства. Чечня и Россия: общества и государства. Москва, 1999

<sup>15</sup> The Alphabets of Europe. Chechen: [www.evertype.com/alphabets/chechen.pdf](http://www.evertype.com/alphabets/chechen.pdf)

autonomous republic in Russia. There was a Chechen education in schools. In the literary Chechen language were published books (fiction, translations, textbooks, popular scientific, Soviet socio-political), magazines and newspapers. There was broadcasting and TV-transmitting in Chechen. Also there was a Chechen national theatre.

*The use of different languages (the linguistic situation)*

Traditionally, as in most North Caucasian societies, many individuals were bilingual or multilingual, using an important lowlands language (e.g. Kumyk, spoken in market towns and prestigious as its speakers were early converts to Islam) for inter-ethnic communication; any literacy was in Arabic. Russian has now displaced both Kumyk and Arabic in these functions. Particularly if the Chechen and Ingush economies continue to be destroyed and unemployment and mass homelessness continue to undermine the social structure, there is a danger that Chechen and Ingush will be functionally reduced to household languages and will then yield completely to Russian, with concomitant loss of much of the cultural heritage<sup>16</sup>.

The situation in Grozny is different, because the big amount of Russians and other non-Vainakhs in pre-war Grozny and the accessibility of many world literature and scientific texts in Russian. Russian was the language of higher education and European culture. As well as in other capitals of autonomous republics in Russia there was a bilingual Chechen and Ingush urban population. The last years before the dissolution of the USSR and the years before the First Chechen war there began a linguistic offensive of Chechen officially occupying new domains<sup>17</sup>. Since 1989 Chechen become the language of education in primary schools and rural schools.

In general competence in Russian became part of the modern Chechen identity. For instance, the widow of the former provisional separatist president Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, who was killed by supposedly Russian agents in Qatar at the 13.02.2003 mentioned in a interview for the Russian TV station NTV that her children in Qatar speak neither Chechen nor Russian.

The linguistic situation of the Chechens in Chechnya shortly characterised looks following:

	Household	School		Specialised secondary education. University		Interethnic with	
		Communication	Teaching	Communication	Teaching	Ingush	other
Rural	x	x	x	x, o	o, (x?)	x	o
Grozny	x, o	x, o	x, o			x, o	o

x: Chechen language  
o: Russian language

<sup>16</sup> Nichols, Johanna. An overview of languages of the Caucasus: <http://popgen.well.ox.ac.uk/eurasia/htdocs/nichols/nichols.html>

<sup>17</sup> Хамидова Зулай Х. Проблемы...

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