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Lexicographical work on the Aghul Language and a new Aghul-Georgian-English Dictionary

Review article

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Abstract:

This review article discusses lexicographical work on the Aghul language, a lesser-spoken Daghestanian language with about 21,000 native speakers. Most speakers are bilingual in Russian, and intergenerational transmission is weakening; therefore, documentation and learning resources are especially important. The paper outlines the main stages of Aghul lexicography, beginning with Dirr's grammar sketch and short glossary (1907). It then examines Shaumian's grammar and Aghul–Russian dictionary (1941), based on fieldwork carried out in 1933, which introduces dialect tags, cross-references, and occasional notes on loanword sources. The study also presents the most extensive modern printed dictionary, Mahomed Ramazanov's Aghul–Russian dictionary (2010), containing about 40,000 lexical units and including detailed grammatical notes, example sentences, and expanded etymological labeling of borrowings. In addition, the article briefly considers newer digital resources, such as community-built online dictionaries and linguistic databases. Based on this overview, the paper proposes a design for a new Aghul–Georgian–English dictionary within the project “Caucasian-Georgian Dictionaries.” The planned macrostructure combines academic consistency with appliance by integrating standard headwords, transliteration (Latin and Georgian), dialect labels, part of speech, inflection notes, Georgian and English translations, corpus-based examples, usage notes, and cross-references.

ანოტაცია

სტატიაში მიმოხილულია აგული ენის ლექსიკოგრაფიული კვლევები ადულური ენის შესახებ და ახალი ადულურ-ქართულ-ინგლისური ლექსიკონის შექმნის კონცეფცია. ადულური ენა დაღესტნის საფრთხეში მყოფ ენათა რიგს მიეკუთვნება და ადულთა უმრავლესობა ორენოვანია, რაც გულისხმობს თაობათა შორის ენის ტრანსმისიის შესუსტებას; შესაბამისად, ენის დოკუმენტაცია და სასწავლო და კვლევითი რესურსები განსაკუთრებულ მნიშვნელობას იძენს. სტატიაში განხილულია ადულური ლექსიკოგრაფიის ძირითად ეტაპები. გაანალიზებულია ა. დირის (1907) გრამატიკული ნარკვევი და გლოსარიუმის ძირითადი მახასიათებლები; მიმოხილულია რ. შაუმიანის (1941) გრამატიკა და ადულურ-რუსული ლექსიკონი, რომელიც 1933 წლის საველე მასალას ეყრდნობა; ასევე აღწერილია მ. რამაზანოვის (2010) ადულურ-რუსული ლექსიკონი, რომელიც დაახლოებით 40 000 სალექსიკონო სიტყვასტატიისგან შედგება და შეიცავს გრამატიკულ ცნობებს, მაგალითებსა და სესხების უფრო დეტალურ მარკირებას. მოკლედ არის განხილული ასევე თანამედროვე ციფრული რესურსები (ონლაინ-ლექსიკონები და მონაცემთა ბაზები). ამ მიმოხილვის საფუძველზე წარმოდგენილია ახალი ადულურ-ქართული-ინგლისური ლექსიკონის კონცეფცია პროექტის „კავკასიურ-ქართული ლექსიკონები 3“ ფარგლებში. დაგეგმილი მაკროსტრუქტურაში მოიაზრება, როგორც სამეცნიერო სიზუსტე, ასევე – ლექსიკონის გამოყენების ფართო

პერსპექტივა. ლექსიკონის წინასწარი დიზაინი ამგვარია: მეთაური სიტყვა, ტრანსლიტერაცია (ლათინური და ქართული), დიალექტური მარკირება, მონაცემები, მეტყველების ნაწილი, მეთაური სიტყვის შესაბამისი ფლექსიური ფორმები, თარგმანი ქართულად და ინგლისურად, კორპუსზე დაფუძნებული მაგალითები, რეგისტრი და სხვა სემანტიკური თუ გრამატიკული ინფორმაცია.

Introduction

The Aghul language is one of the less spoken Daghestanian languages. It has approximately 21000 native speakers, all of them bilingual, as the official language is Russian (Max Plank Institute 2024). According to Ethnologue classification, it has a stable endangered language status due to the publication of some periodicals, translated or original literature regularly (Ethnologue n/d). In different terms proposed by UNESCO, the language is definitely endangered, which means “The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language” (UNESCO 2010:14). Considering the ongoing circumstances of the Aghul condition, documentation and any learning or research resource are of great importance.

Lexicographical work on an endangered language can become a part of its revitalization indirectly. Although this language, Aghul, has a long history of documentation, any attempt to create a new resource should be considered as an assistance to its preservation by native speakers and scholars who are interested in the language.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned conception, the aim of this paper is to propose a design of a new Aghul-Georgian dictionary, which is a part of the ongoing project “Caucasian-Georgian Dictionaries 3” funded by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia.

History of lexicographical work on Aghul

Documentation of the Aghul language dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, when Adolf Dirr published a grammar sketch of Aghul with a short glossary (1907).

The latter consists of about 1000 headwords. As A. Dirr notes, he worked on one variety of Aghul, intended to continue researching Qushan Aghul later (Dirr 1907: 3). The glossary itself includes some grammatical and lexical information, such as genitive case forms for nouns and converbs for verbs. Loanwords are also highlighted and there are some cross-references to other languages of the Lezgian group, namely, Tabassaran, Lezgian, Rutul, Tsakhur, Budukh, Khinalugh, Udi, Archi, and Jek (he considers it as a separate language) (Dirr, ?). Additionally, a dictionary entry contains a Russian translation and a transliteration with special symbols, e.g. a * symbol at the beginning, denotes that it is a loanword, a glottal fricative [h] is shown with a period below the [h] symbol, etc.

Dirr documented a solid number of the inherited vocabulary of Aghul, including obscenities, which disappeared from the dictionaries published in the Soviet era. In addition to the above-mentioned glossary, a Russian wordlist is attached to Dirr’s work as an index for Aghul vocabulary.

Shaumian’s grammar of Aghul (1941) also contains a short Aghul-Russian dictionary. Both the grammar and the dictionary had been tailored to the appropriate standard of that time’s language description, particularly of non-standard varieties. The work was based on his linguistic fieldwork of 1933 in Daghestan. He tried to cover all varieties of Aghul. A dictionary entry of Shaumian’s dictionary has grammatical information alongside Russian translation, dialect tag, and for loanwords, there is sometimes source language information; the dictionary also consists of cross-references to synonyms. Optionally, there might be some illustrations with a headword, unlike Dirr’s glossary. The headwords are proposed in Latin Analytical transliteration (Shaumian 1941: 136).

The recent work in Aghul lexicography is Ramazanov’s Aghul-Russian dictionary, published in 2010, which contains 40000 lexical units. This number already raises its value. Besides, the dictionary

includes grammatical and lexical information, as well as example sentences and cross-references. The information about the source language of a loanword dictionary entry is more detailed than in the previously mentioned ones. It has tags such as rus. - Russian, Alan. - the Alan (Ossetian) language, lezg. - Lezginism. Even Urartian and Sumerian are mentioned as source languages for particular words. This destruction of the borrowing hierarchy might be an issue for discussion.

There are some other bilingual dictionaries of various purposes, e.g., Suleimanov's Dialectal dictionary of the Aghul Language (Suleimanov 2003) covers all the dialects of Aghul, including Qushan, which, according to some studies, is considered a separate language. In the framework of the Intercontinental dictionaries series, the Aghul dictionary was prepared by Khalilov (Khalilov 2023).

Therefore, there are two ways of obtaining the lexical data digitally: the data collected and posted by the language specialists or by the community itself. In the case of Aghul, a community-built online Russian-Aghul dictionary containing almost 5000 words can be found on the website denoting the Aghul language (agullang.ru). The website and the resources are created by Aghuls, namely, A. Aiubov and R. Ramazanov. They reported that the Aghul-Russian dictionary is under construction. The online dictionary is handy; a reader can find a translation by typing a Russian word, although the data is not consistent, as some Aghul verb translations include different tense forms, some do not. Moreover, there is no other grammatical information on nouns or other parts of speech.

The Aghul Data is included in the Daghestanian Loans Database (2024). According to the project, the target words are 30970, although not all of them are realised in all languages they cover (23 in total). The words are classified in the concept, and the data is collected in various villages as well as from dictionaries, which are noted in the database.

Any online data will increase the emergence of a language in the digital sphere, which is crucial in modern times. This works for the Aghul as well. Besides the printed or online dictionaries and databases mentioned above, there is quite a big documentation data collected within the Max-Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, counting "47,5 hours of recordings, of which 33 hours were transcribed, glossed, and translated into Russian" (Max-Planck Institute 2024).

The proposed Aghul-Georgian-English Dictionary

Analysing the dictionaries and databases for the Aghul language leads me to the following classification: there are online vs printed dictionaries; plain wordlists vs entries with illustrations; Entries with grammatical information and transliteration vs without them. All of them vary publication by publication.

Considering all the analyses carried out, we intend to construct a multilingual dictionary with precise semantic, dialect, and grammatical data.

In particular, the macrostructure of a forthcoming dictionary will be as follows:

An entry will include:

Headword (standard orthographic form);

Transliteration (special transliteration for Caucasian languages, Georgian transliteration);

Dialect label(s) (if possible);

Part of speech;

Inflection notes (different according to a part of speech);

Translation into Georgian;

Translation in English (it was not necessary according to our primary plan, although I decided to add English translation too);

Illustration (examples from the text corpus, books, or native speakers directly);

Usage notes (style, loanwords);

Cross-references (synonyms, antonyms, derivational relatives, etc.).

This kind of macrostructure will give us more precise information about the vocabulary of Aghul. The proposed dictionary is aimed at combining academic accuracy with accessibility. We intend to integrate

dialectal, morphological, and semantic annotations, which will increase the usage of the dictionary. The transliteration label (both in Latin and Georgian) gives a reader an opportunity to read the entries properly. Such an approach will not only preserve linguistic diversity within Aghul but also make its lexicon available to a broader scholarly and educational audience.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the main stages of Aghul lexicography. The first important work is Dirr's grammar with a glossary (1907). Later, Shaumian (1941) added new fieldwork data and dialect labels, and Ramazanov (2010) produced a much larger dictionary with rich information and examples. These publications show that Aghul documentation has developed over time, from short wordlists to larger and more systematic dictionaries.

At the same time, Aghul is still an endangered language. Many speakers are bilingual in Russian, and children often do not learn Aghul as their first home language. For this reason, new lexicographical resources are important not only for linguistics but also for language maintenance.

The proposed Aghul-Georgian dictionary (with English equivalents) is designed to answer both research and practical needs. It will include standard headwords, transliteration, dialect labels (when possible), part of speech, necessary inflection notes, clear translations, corpus-based examples, usage notes (including loanword information), and cross-references. This structure should make the dictionary reliable for scholars and also useful for learners and community members.

In conclusion, creating a new multilingual dictionary can support further research on Aghul and also help increase the language's visibility and usability in modern contexts, especially in education and the digital sphere.

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