

5. Language Contact in the Ancient Caucasus: the View from Kartvelian

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The Kartvelian language family has been spoken in the southwestern portion of the Caucasus since at least the Middle Bronze Age (Tuite 2004), and as a consequence constitutes a particularly rich window onto language contacts throughout the region. Unlike almost all other autochthonous Caucasian languages, the written attestation of such contacts also extends back to the fifth century A.D. in the Old Georgian corpus. This allows us to trace with much greater precision than with most other regional languages how and when such contacts occurred. In this talk, I will provide a survey of Kartvelian's contacts with other language families, and discuss how these contacts elucidate various aspects of the phonological history of Kartvelian and other language families.

We might divide the set of lexical contacts of Kartvelian into five main sets: (1) intra-Kartvelian; (2) Indo-European, (3) Nakh-Daghestanian, (4) Semitic and (5) all other non-Indo-European. The first category of contacts has occurred continuously since the protolanguage's first phylogenetic differentiation, but is visible in texts mostly as borrowings from the Zan languages (Megrelian and Laz) into Georgian and, later, Svan, and Georgian into all the other branches. The second consists of a vast and diverse array of direct loans in various periods from Greek, Indo-Iranian, Armenian, Hittite and other often indeterminate but likely Indo-European sources. The third consists of loans (often with fossilized remnants of gender markers) from Lezgian, Tsezic, Nakh, and Avar-Andic languages or other languages likely from the Nakh-Daghestanian family (Xalilov 1993). The fourth consists of loans primarily from Akkadian and Aramaic, but also a distinct residue of loans from unclear Semitic sources. Although it is likely that Kartvelian has/had been in contact with Abkhaz-Adyghean and Hurro-Urartian languages since remote antiquity, demonstrable evidence of direct ancient lexical loans from these sources is surprisingly limited. (Loans from Abkhaz into Megrelian are ubiquitous however.)

Such loans both within and without Kartvelian not only provide a picture of who Kartvelian speakers were in contact with, it also provides data that allow us to understand the internal phonological development of the family. By careful comparison of dates of first attestation with attested forms in donor languages, we can begin to build a picture of when certain phonological shifts occurred over time. Thus the Megrelian shift that raised *a to /o/ (Gamkrelidze & Machavariani 1965; Fähnrich 2007) must have occurred after *pat- was borrowed into Greek as *Φᾶσις*, but before Greek's own well-documented rule of assibilation; this Zanism became the modern town of *Poti*. This narrows down the Megrelian sound-shift to around the late first millennium BC. And because some Svan words like *čönčx* 'skeleton, face' borrowed from Megrelian *čončxi* undergo umlaut, we can date Svan's umlaut rule to a period after Megrelian's raising rule. Likewise, the Megrelian rule lowering *e to /a/ and epenthesis nasal obstruents in accented syllables must have occurred after a loaning event: *mankana* 'machine, device' from Greek *μηχανή*. We also see direct evidence for the loss of a laryngeal in Kartvelian: Kartvelian **hezo* 'courtyard' from Ugaritic *h̄zr* 'courtyard'. Such ancient contacts in other words reveal not just the lexical but also the structural history of the family.

References

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