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Loanword Typology: the Case of Bezhta

The Loanword Typology project of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/files/lwt.html) investigates patterns of lexical borrowing across some 46 languages of the world. The aim is to answer questions of the type: Are there particular semantic fields that are more or less resistant to borrowing? Are there particular lexical concepts that are more or less resistant to borrowing? Are more frequent lexical items less resistant to borrowing than less frequent ones? To what extent does the presence of an existing lexical item inhibit the borrowing of a replacement with the same meaning? While questions of this kind have been posed and at least in part answered for some individual languages, this is the first time that a wide-ranging cross-linguistic project has been conceived to address this question across different language families, in different geographical areas, and in different kinds of language contact situations. Moreover, the project does so in a consistent way, by examining the linguistic expressions in the different languages for a fixed list of some 1,367 lexical concepts.

One of the languages included in the sample is Bezhta, a member of the Tsezic sub-group within the Nakh-Daghestanian language family, spoken by some 6,500 people in the west of the Daghestan Republic in the Russian Federation. Bezhta provides an interesting ex-ample, first, because of the number of languages that have contributed to its loanword inventory, in particular Georgian, Avar, and Russian, each instantiating a different type of language contact situation. It also poses particular problems in that many words have entered Bezhta through several stages of borrowing(e.g. from Arabic into Avar into Bezhta), which complicates the task of assigning unique etymologies to many loanwords.

In this paper, we present preliminary results from our investigation of loanwords in Bezhta within the framework of the Loanword Typology project, paying particular attention to the semantic fields that have been affected by loans from different languages, to the extent to which loanwords have replaced existing words, and to the different contexts of language contact that have in part determined answers to these and other questions.