

A phonetic comparison of Kabardian spoken in the Caucasus and Diaspora

This paper reports results of a quantitative phonetic study of Kabardian, a Northwest Caucasian language, as represented by speakers from the Caucasian homeland and three countries of the diaspora.

Kabardian belongs to the East Circassian branch of the Northwest Caucasian language family. Kabardian phonology is of typological interest for a variety of reasons, including its small vowel inventory, twelve-way contrast among voiceless fricatives, and its contrast of ejective and non-ejective fricatives at three places of articulation.

Although the largest concentration of Kabardian speakers is in the Kabardino-Balkar and Karachai-Cherkess Republics of southern Russia, large numbers of Kabardians left the Caucasus in the mid-19th century after the Russian military conquest. Their descendants are found largely in Turkey, Jordan and Syria.

This paper presents results of an analysis of a word list illustrating the principal phonetic properties of Kabardian. The word list was recorded in Turkey and Southern California from eleven speakers from the diaspora and four speakers from the Caucasus region of Russia. The speakers from the Caucasus include three from the Kabardino-Balkar Republic and one from the Karachai-Cherkess Republic. The speakers from the diaspora include seven from Turkey, three from Jordan and one from Syria.

Data were recorded on digital audio tape using a high quality unidirectional microphone and converted to .wav files for acoustic analysis using Praat. Quantitative analysis of stops, fricatives and vowels was performed. Measurements included closure duration of intervocalic stops, voice onset time of voiced stops in word initial and word medial position, voice onset time of voiceless aspirated and ejective stops in initial and intervocalic position, fricative duration and intensity for plain voiceless and ejective fricatives, and formant analysis of vowels.

Several phonetic differences between Russian and Kabardian of the diaspora as represented by speakers from Turkey have emerged thus far. Further results for speakers from Syria and Jordan will be considered in the talk:

1. The palatal fricative of Turkish Kabardian /ç/ corresponds to a velar fricative /x/ in literary Kabardian.
2. Speakers from Russia generally have a voiced postalveolar affricate /dʒ/ instead of the voiced palatalized velar stop /gʲ/ consistently employed by the Turkish Kabardians.
3. A salient area of divergence between Turkish and Russian Kabardian is the neutralization of the literary Kabardian contrast between palato-alveolars and alveolopalatals by the speakers from Turkey. Speakers in the diaspora have a single set of postalveolar coronal fricatives, while speakers of Russian Kabardian contrast postalveolar /ʃ, ʒ/ with alveolopalatals /ç, çʲ, ʒʲ/.
4. Kabardian stops among speakers in the diaspora are often less salient for the labialized ejectives than for the non-labialized ones. In fact, the labialized ejectives appear to have been replaced by either voiceless unaspirated stops or voiced stops for certain speakers, an observation which is supported by the very short VOT values found for the labialized ejectives for certain speakers.