The World

Barriers That Are Steep and Linguistic

By ELLEN BARRY

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Two weeks ago, when Georgian troops began shelling Tskhinvali, Eduard Kabulov couldn’t stop thinking about the trouble he had taken to learn Georgian: its base-20 counting system; its ridiculous consonant clusters (“gvprtskvni”); its diabolical irregular verbs.

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Shakh Aivazov/Associated Press

**THE RETURN** A South Ossetian refugee arrives back in her village in 1997, several years after fighting between Georgian and separatist Ossetian soldiers forced her to flee.

Mr. Kabulov, who is 22, had grown up in a valley where South Ossetians have coexisted with Georgians for many centuries, but that didn’t make it any easier. Ossetians speak a language related to Farsi; Georgians speak a language whose closest relative, some linguists say, is Basque. Mr. Kabulov’s friends were so hostile to the Georgians and their language that he kept his studies secret. He sounded bitter, talking about it.

He hasn’t opened a textbook since Aug. 8.

The languages of the Caucasus explain much about the current conflict.

Some 40 indigenous tongues are spoken in the region — more than any other spot in the world aside from Papua New Guinea and parts of the Amazon, where the jungles are so thick that small tribes rarely encounter one another. In the Caucasus, mountains serve the same purpose, offering small ethnicities a natural refuge against more powerful or aggressive ones.

As a result, there is a dense collection of ethnic groups, the kind of arrangement that was common before the Greek and Roman empires swept through the plains of Europe and Asia, shaping ethnic patchworks into states and nations, said Johanna Nichols, a linguist at the University of California at Berkeley.

Medieval scholars concluded that the Caucasian groups scattered when God wrecked the Tower of Babel. Since then, generations of linguists have made their painstaking way into the mountains to document such tongues as Svan, Ubykh, Udi, Tsova-Tush and Bzyb.

As the field gradually explained how the world’s languages shade into one another, the Caucasus remained “a residual problem area,” said William J. Poser, an adjunct professor of linguistics at the University of British Columbia. Though the Caucasian languages fall into three main groups, so far none has been decisively linked to any other language on earth.

The riddle of the Caucasian ethnicities became suddenly relevant this summer, when local hatreds in [South Ossetia](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/georgia/south_ossetia/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) opened up into the biggest rift between Russia and the West since the cold war. The Georgians and the Ossetians both claim to have arrived first in South Ossetia — a land that Georgians sometimes call “Samachablo,” that is, the property of the Georgian Machabeli family, according to a report on the conflict by the International Crisis Group. Ossetians regard the valley around Tskhinvali as their homeland; Georgians disparage them as “guests.”

A war between the two groups in the early 1990s divided them almost surgically. Young Georgians stopped learning Russian, the lingua franca for the entire region in Soviet days; young Ossetians did not learn Georgian. Older people, who spoke both, pretended not to.

Magdalena Frichova, who monitored the conflict in South Ossetia for 10 years for the crisis group, recalled watching local officials wait, poker-faced, for a translator even when it was obvious that they understood. Over time, people began to struggle with languages they once spoke fluently.

“They consciously make an effort to forget it,” she said. “I’ve heard that over and over again. You can actively make choices of what you hear and what you remember.”

Of course, there was never anything neutral about languages in the Caucasus, where great powers have tried again and again to expand their reach.

The Soviets so discouraged work on small linguistic groups that in the 1960s, the first complete transcription of Svan — work that took at least 10 years to complete — simply went unpublished, said Anna V. Dybo, a Caucasian expert at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

This dynamic continued after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and she recalled her horror at hearing Dzhokhar Dudayev, the Chechen leader, cite work from her institute in support of Chechen independence, during the build up to a bloody war with Russia.

“At those moments, you feel like the inventor of the atom bomb,” Dr. Dybo said. She was so wary of her work being used politically, she added with some amusement, that she learned to write in intentionally abstruse language, so that “no one knows what I’m talking about.”

That feeling of political risk has returned in post-Soviet [Georgia](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/georgia/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), say researchers who document minor languages there. The resistance to their work may be couched in scholarly courtesy, but behind it lies a muscular assertion.

“A language is the prime indication of the existence of a people,” said George Hewitt, a University of London scholar of Abkhaz, the language spoken in Abkhazia, another separatist region of Georgia. “If a language dies, the culture dies as well. The people will become assimilated.”

One more question to be answered in the calm that comes after the end of fighting: Dr. Dybo has yet to hear from a library in Tskhinvali, which held a magisterial lexicon of the Ossetian language that was compiled over the course of many years. It’s a single manuscript, never transferred to a computer.

She is not sure, she said, but she thinks it burned up on Aug. 8.