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THE LANGUAGE AND PEOPLE OF MEHWEB^{2,3}

This paper describes the sociolinguistic situation of Mehweb, a lect of the Dargwa branch of East Caucasian, in the Republic of Daghestan. In the course of several field trips to the village of Mehweb, sociolinguistic interviews were conducted in four neighbouring Avar- and Lak-speaking villages. The paper describes the demographic situation in Mehweb, the villagers' official status, their social and economic life in the past and at present. The multilingual repertoire of Mehwebs and their neighbours is described in both qualitative and quantitative terms. I conclude that, while there are no signs of language loss, the traditional patterns of multilingualism in Mehweb are highly endangered.

Key words: Daghestan, minority language, multilingualism, Mehweb, Avar, Lak

JEL Classification: Z

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1. Introduction

Mehweb belongs to the Dargwa group of East Caucasian (Nakh-Daghestanian) language family. It is sometimes considered as a dialect of Dargwa (Magometov 1982), but more often treated as a separate language (Khaidakov 1985, Koryakov & Sumbatova 2007). Mehweb is spoken in a single village called Mehweb⁴ which is geographically separated from all other Dargwa languages. While Dargwa languages generally constitute a continuous area, Mehweb is surrounded by speakers of Avar and Lak, which are languages of other branches of the family.

The village of Mehweb is located in Gunibskij region, in the central part of Daghestan about 1800 meters above the sea level. The total number of speakers is estimated to be from 800 to 900, including those who live outside the village. 600 to 700 live in Mehweb itself, from 100 to 200 in the so called *kutan*⁵ *kolkhoza imeni Gadzhieva* (located 350 km away from Mehweb, four kilometres away from the sea coast, near the village Krainovka). Kutan was not examined from either a linguistic or sociolinguistic point of view. All data in this paper come only from Mehweb. There are also Mehweb families in Makhachkala, Kizlyar, and Bujnaxsk, and a few elsewhere. All Mehweb-speaking families originate from the village Mehweb.

Like most Daghestanis, Mehwebs are Muslim.

Mehweb has no literacy tradition. The Mehwebs write in Avar or Russian. We have no evidence that Mehweb was ever written in the Arabic or Cyrillic script in the observable past.

So far, there are no indications of language loss in Mehweb. All villagers speak Mehweb, and Mehweb is the first language acquired by children.

The Mehwebs often suggest that their idiom is more conservative than other Dargwa lects and contains some archaic features. This opinion is expressed in some descriptions of Mehweb (Magometov 1982, Khaidakov 1985). Recent studies on Dargwa languages show that at least some phenomena (such as various properties of agreement) are innovative in Mehweb compared to other Dargwa lects.

In Section 2, the official status of Mehweb is discussed. Sections 3 and 4 briefly describe social and economic life of Mehweb in the past and at the present time. Section 5 is devoted to the multilingual repertoire of Mehwebs and the neighbouring villages. A brief conclusion summarizes the paper.

2. Mehweb officially

Mehweb is located in the district where Avars are numerically dominant. As a result, Mehwebs are in some respects considered to be Avars (Tishkov, Kisriev 2007: 98).

First, paradoxically, they are taught Avar at school during lessons called *mother tongue* (Russian *родной язык*, lit. native language), although Avar belongs to another group of East Caucasian and is, genealogically, distant from Mehweb. Mehweb children start learning two foreign languages already in their first grade (6-7 years old) — Avar

⁴ Russian *Межеб* – [megeb], the native term is [meh^we], while [meh^web] is the Avar spelling which includes the final -b of the locative form.

⁵ Originally, kutans were the territories for lowland herding in the winter. At the present time, people often prefer to stay in these lowland settlements for the whole year, thus establishing new villages.

and Russian, which, according to their parents, is not easy for them. Another result of learning Avar as a mother tongue is that Mehwebs are not acquainted with standard Dargwa, unlike most people who speak other lects of Dargwa.

Second, most Mehwebs are registered as Avars in their passports. That continued until the 1990s, when the obligatory indication of ethnicity in passports was cancelled in Russia. The villagers explain that those Mehwebs who got their passports in the village council were registered as Avars, while those who got their passports in the cities were registered as Dargis.

In the 2002 and 2010 censuses Mehwebs are not mentioned. Residents of Mehweb were registered as Dargis or as Avars. In 2002, 747 Dargis and 98 Avars were reported as residents in Mehweb. In 2010 the numbers were 572 Dargis and 124 Avars. The difference between the data of the two censuses has no reasonable explanation. Mehweb is very homogenous both ethnically and linguistically, as are most villages of highland Daghestan. There are no outsiders in the village except for several Avar women taken as wives. Most probably, the population of Mehweb has not changed ethnically in at least the last hundred years, and the census information does not reflect the true ethnic structure of Mehweb in any way.

According to interviews with the villagers, Mehweb residents identify themselves as Dargis. They are well aware of the closeness of their language to Dargwa, and have regular contacts with Dargwa people from the village Mugi (see Section 3).

For the native language, the data of the censuses are again controversial. Mehweb language is not mentioned. It follows from the 2002 census that 792 residents spoke Dargwa as their first language, while 53 spoke Avar. According to the 2007 census, this has changed: 566 spoke Dargwa as first language, and 113 Avar. The mention of Dargwa as a first language is because Mehweb is usually considered as a variation of Dargwa, and it could have happened that the residents of Mehweb called their native language Dargwa. But there are no reasonable explanations for the mentions of Avar as a first language: there is no one in Mehweb who speaks Avar as a first language, apart from the two or three women who married in.

Mehwebs are not officially recognised as an ethnic group, nor is Mehweb officially recognised as a language.

3. The past of Mehweb

There is a common belief that the village of Mehweb was founded by re-settlers from the Dargwa-speaking village of Mugi (Uslar 1892). Mugi is located in Akushinskij district (central part of Daghestan, about 70 km from Mehweb; it takes two to three hours by car). As far as I know, there is no tangible historical evidence for the connections between Mehweb and Mugi, apart from oral testimony. Mehwebs are convinced that Mugi is their ancestral homeland, and have several versions of how they left it. One of the local stories reports that there was an isolated part of Mugi which was in the way of Timur's (Tamerlane's) army. When they understood they could not resist Tamerlane, the residents fled and settled higher in the mountains. According to this version, Mehweb was founded in the 14th century. Khajdakov (1985: 101) dates the migration of Mehwebs to 8–9th centuries, reporting the opinion of a respected Mehweb resident. An early report

by Komarov says that Mehweb people are (descendants of) refugees, but Mugi is not named (Komarov 1868)⁶.

According to lexicostatistical analysis, Mehweb belongs to the Northern-central group of Dargwa languages, and is closer to Murego-Gubden lects than to the dialect of Mugi (Koryakov 2013).

Although it is not clear whether this view on the origins of Mehwebs has historical grounds, the residents of Mehweb and Mugi are quite positive. They have established intensive contacts: they practice reciprocal group visits, and invite each other to important festivities. Most of the Mehwebs I talked to say that they do not understand the dialect of Mugi and prefer communicating with the Mugis in Russian.

The relations of the Mehwebs with Avars were much more intensive. The main road to Mehweb went through a big Avar village, Chokh, and through another, smaller Avar village, Obokh. In the 19th century, Mehweb was a part of the so-called Andalal free association which mainly consisted of Avar villages. After the revolution of 1917, Mehweb became a part of Charoda district. In 1928, it was transferred to Gunib district. Both districts are dominated by Avars. Between 1929 and 1934, it was transferred to Lak district, and then transferred back to Gunib. Therefore, from the administrative point of view, the Mehwebs were most of time connected with Avars.

Avars were, and still are, the closest neighbours of the Mehwebs – it takes about 40 minutes to walk to Obokh. Although more distant, Lak neighbours were also important for Mehweb, because the Mehwebs used to go regularly to the Kumukh market where the communication was in Lak. It is about 15 kilometres from Mehweb to Kumukh, and it took four to five hours to get to there on foot. Some women used to go there every Thursday. Visits to the market in Kumukh gradually became less frequent after the 1950-60s.

Mehweb was one of the biggest villages in the neighbourhood. According to Komarov, in 1886 there were 727 residents. This number has remained stable over the 20th century: 710 in 1926, 780 in 2007.

The main occupation of Mehwebs was breeding sheep and cattle. They also grew corn and potatoes. The specialty of Mehweb was black peas which yielded a good harvest. There were no fruit trees before the 1950s, although at the present moment Mehwebs grow apples, pears and apricots. Mehwebs were neither rich nor poor compared to other settlements of highland Daghestan.

As Mehwebs had enough corn, they did not need to look for jobs outside the village. According to the recollections of local people, seasonal employment outside the village was not customary. Only a few Mehweb people are reported to have practiced tinsmithing, like their Lak neighbours. We were also told by the residents of the neighbouring village of Shangoda that Mehwebs were good stone masons and builders, and were invited to other villages. Another reason for inter-ethnic contact was shepherding on remote pastures (transhumance), which resulted in irregular contact with Avars and Kumyks. In general, Mehweb people did not migrate a lot.

Mehweb people rarely married out. As in all Daghestan (Comrie 2008, Wixman 1980), the preference was for a marriage partner from Mehweb. Often the spouse was chosen from the same patrilineal clan (*tukhum*). In the infrequent cases of marrying out

⁶ «Недалеко от Чоха есть большое селение Меге, по преданию, основанное даргинцами, в разное время искавшими спасения от кровомщения».

the wife was taken from one of the neighbouring Avar villages. The tradition of endogamic marriages started to die away only in the beginning of the 21th century.

4. The present of Mehweb

Today, Mehweb has between 600 and 700 residents. The population has not decreased as much as in other villages. For example, Avar villages Obokh and Shangoda were twice as big. The Lak villages Mukar and Uri are on the verge of complete abandonment; several families still live in the Lak villages Palisma and Kamakhal which recently were among the biggest in the neighbourhood. The Avar village of Shitlib (Shitli) has been abandoned. The only village in the neighbourhood which did not lose significant part of its population, apart from Mehweb, is the Avar village Bukhty. Mehweb is the biggest and the most vital village in the vicinity, with many children living in the village, and a large school. Still, the locals report a slight population decrease: the school had more pupils in the 1980s than now.

Apart from the regular school, Mehweb has a special boarding school for boys training in freestyle wrestling. There are usually about 10-15 boys from other places of Daghestan who live in Mehweb and study with local children. These boys have different native languages (most often, Avar), and communicate with the locals in Russian.

There is a kindergarten where local teachers communicate with the children in Mehweb and in Russian. Mehweb boasts a large social centre. It hosts a billiard room and, on occasions, concerts and dances. A small medical centre employs three nurses.

As elsewhere in Daghestan, the Mehwebs complain about local unemployment. Those who are not employed at the school, kindergarten, social centre or the medical centre, can make their living only by going away for construction jobs, by selling meat and cheese. There are also several small shops run by local families.

People in Mehweb, as in all other villages in the neighbourhood, have had TV since the 1980s. Regular access to broadcasts became possible from the 1990s when a transmission tower was constructed in Sogratl'. The broadcasts are mainly in Russian. Apparently this has influenced the level of bilingualism in Russian.

The Mehwebs take pride in the fact that several of its residents distinguished themselves during the WW2, two men were decorated as Hero of the Soviet Union for their military service during the war. Mehweb has a war memorial, and the Victory Day (May 9) is of special importance to the village.

5. Neighbours and language contact

The level of multilingualism was studied in Mehweb and in four neighbouring villages: Obokh and Shangoda (Avar) and Uri and Mukar (Lak) – see Figure 1⁷. During fieldtrips in 2012–2015, a series of sociolinguistic surveys was conducted to study the multilingual repertoire of the residents⁸.

⁷ All maps in this paper are courtesy Yuri Koryakov.

⁸ Sociolinguistic study of multilingualism in Mehweb and neighbor villages is a part of a larger project documenting patterns of multilingualism in Daghestan.

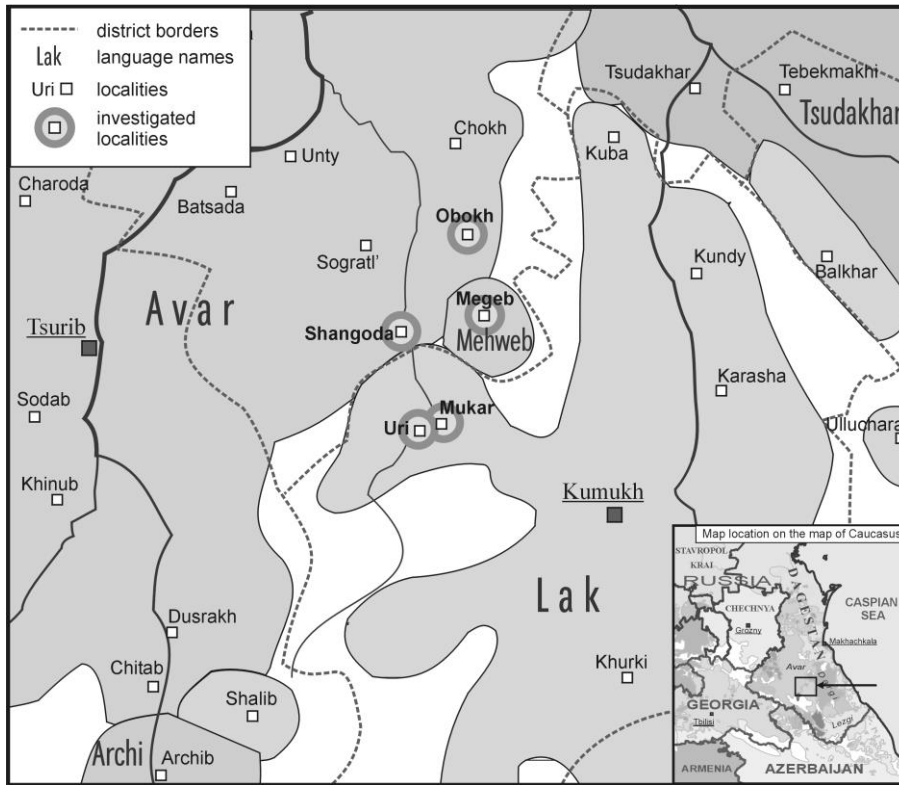


Figure 1. Mehweb and neighbouring villages

5.1. Data and method

In order to obtain quantitative data about the command of other languages in each of these villages, the method of retrospective family interviews (introduced in Dobrushina 2013) was applied⁹. The dynamics of multilingualism is accessed through, and assessed based on, short interviews with speakers of different generations, thus resembling apparent time studies (Bailey 2013). The important difference from the apparent time method is that data are obtained not only about the respondents themselves, but also about their older deceased relatives.

The method aims at capturing multilingual repertoires of the speakers of the recoverable past in order to reconstruct traditional (i.e. pre-Soviet) patterns of language contact. It was typical for highland Daghestani to have large families where parents lived together with their youngest son and communicated with other children on a daily basis, looked after their grandchildren and helped to run the household. The younger generation was usually well acquainted with their grandparents. By asking 60 to 80 year old villagers about language repertoires of their grandparents, the data collected sometimes

⁹ I am deeply grateful to Darya Baryl'nikova, Ilja Chechuro, Michael Daniel, Nina Dobrushina, Violetta Ivanova, Aleksandra Khadzhijskaya, Marina Korshak, Aleksandra Kozhukhar', Marina Kustova, Olga Shapovalova, Marija Shejanova, Semen Sheshenin, Aleksandra Sheshenina who took part in the interviews on multilingualism.

dates back to the end of the 19th century, and even to the mid-19th century. Table 1 provides an example of the questionnaire filled for one person.

| <i>questions</i> | <i>Answers</i> |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Name</i> | Amin |
| <i>year of birth</i> | 1908 |
| <i>year of death</i> | 1985 |
| <i>is a relative of</i> | father of Mohammad, father-in-law of Mariam |
| <i>information was given by</i> | Mohammad (son of Amin) |
| <i>education and occupation</i> | studied in madrasah, was a shepherd, a foremen in kolkhoz |
| <i>command of Quranian Arabic</i> | could read the Arabic script, but did not understand the text |
| <i>Lak</i> | Yes |
| <i>Avar</i> | Yes |
| <i>Russian</i> | No |
| <i>other languages</i> | Akusha dialect of Dargwa |

Table 1. Example of a filled sociolinguistic questionnaire

The choice of respondents was more or less random. The aim of the study is to reconstruct the multilingualism of the past; so the eldest possible respondents were preferred, and younger generation was included for the sake of comparison. The controlled parameters of the sample were thus respondents age and gender.

The shortcomings of this method include, first of all, the subjective character of judgments about language proficiency. No test of proficiency of the respondent was used (and obviously no such test was possible for his or her late relatives). Estimations of the level of bilingualism were based on the respondents' judgments. The second shortcoming is the fact that the respondent's memories of e.g. his mother and father are limited to their adult or older period of life. Third and probably most importantly, judgments may reflect stereotyped notions about past multilingualism widespread in the village rather than be based on personal memories of individual linguistic repertoires. For a further discussion, see (Dobrushina 2013).

Multilingualism is a social behaviour developed through interaction. Hence sociolinguistic surveys were run not only in the village of Mehweb but also in the neighbouring villages. The data from retrospective family interviews in neighbouring villages helped us to better understand how the communication between neighbouring villages was performed. Were both languages used for communication or one of them was preferred? For example, if we only find that most Mehwebs spoke Avar and Lak, we still do not know whether Avar and Lak neighbours of Mehwebs could speak Mehweb or not, and can not estimate the role of Mehweb language in the area.

The closest neighbours of Mehweb are the Avar villages Obokh and Shangoda.

Obokh villagers speak a dialect of Avar. In their opinion, this variety differs from the dialects of other villages in the area. At school, the Obokhs learn standard Avar. There is an opinion among them that their village is the oldest in the neighbourhood. They support this idea by the size of the cemetery. Another fact which might prove that Mehweb is

younger than Obokh is that Obokh possesses more land than Mehweb, although the village itself is smaller.

Shangoda, an Avar village, is further away from Mehweb than Obokh. The track goes up and down, and it takes about 90 minutes to reach Shangoda. Slightly closer than Shangoda was the Avar village Shitlib, which is now abandoned. After Shangoda, there are the Lak villages Palisma and Kamakhal, also now abandoned (about 30 minutes walk from Shangoda). In the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, Shangoda belonged to the Kazikumukh district dominated by Laks. It was connected to Kumukh by a mountain path. Until the 1930s, when Shangoda was transferred to the Gunib district, the inhabitants of Shangoda had their administrative centre in the village of Palisma. Therefore, relations with Laks were more important for Shangoda than relations with Mehwebs or with Avar villages.

Lak villages are further away from Mehweb than Obokh or Shangoda, but the contacts with them were essential for Mehwebs because of their regular visits to the Lak market in Kumukh. In Lak villages, Mehweb people had friends with whom they could stay on their way to Kumukh market.

All five villages are located at more or less same height above the sea level (1500-1800 meters). In the observable past, the economic life and the standard of life in all these villages were similar.

In Mehweb, the sociolinguistic survey was the most extensive. Our database contains 240 entries, including 90 people who are not living. The databases for other villages have less entries: 80 in Shangoda, 80 in Uri, 103 in Obokh, 110 in Mukar. (Note that these villages are presently much less populated than Mehweb).

People were divided in two groups: those who were born before and those who were born after 1919. The reason for establishing 1919 as a cut-off point was that in the 1930s in all villages Soviet schools were opened. The teaching was done in Russian. The generation born after 1919 therefore usually had a secular education, often had some level of literacy, had less opportunities to learn Arabic script (because of the atheistic politics of the USSR), and most often spoke some Russian. The generation born before 1919 was closer to what we consider traditional patterns of multilingualism.

5.2. Multilingualism among the residents born before 1919

According to our study, Mehwebs communicated with Avars and Laks in Avar and Lak respectively. It follows from the level of mutual bilingualism of the Mehwebs and their neighbours. Almost 100% of Mehwebs born before 1919 spoke Avar and Lak (see Table 2). Their neighbours from Avar and Lak villages had no command of Mehweb at all. Only 8% of the people from Obokh, the closest Avar village, were reported to speak Mehweb (Table 2).

Mehwebs acquired Avar through the communication with the neighbouring Avar villages, Obokh and Shangoda, and bigger villages which were more distant but important economically and socially, including Sogratl', Chokh, and Gunib. There were no Lak villages located as close as Obokh and Shangoda to Mehweb and the main source of the knowledge of Lak was the market in Kumukh. The role of this market in the area was important enough for the Mehwebs to acquire Lak.

Occasionally, Mehwebs also mention the command of Kumyk. Kumyk was acquired by those who brought sheep to the lowlands where Kumyks lived. This practice was apparently not very common – only 2–3% of people born before 1919 spoke Kumyk.

About 45-50% of the Mehwebs born before 1919 could read the Quran¹⁰. Note that the reported ability to read does not imply ability to understand Arabic, but only to recite the text. The knowledge of Arabic was usually limited to the knowledge of phonetic meaning of letters. If a person was reported to be able to read Arabic, the researchers asked more specific questions about the ability to translate (understand) Arabic text. According to our study, only 6% of Mehwebs could understand and translate Quran.

About 20% of Mehwebs in this generation spoke Russian. The command of Russian was much more common among men who travelled in order to earn money.

As for the residents of Avar villages, the knowledge of Lak was reported significantly more often in Shangoda (93%), than in Obokh (22%). This is not surprising. Lak villages were very close to Shangoda (30 minutes walk), and the residents of Shangoda and Lak villages were socially and economically connected. For both Shangoda and Obokh, the market in Kumukh was very important, but Kumukh was much closer to Shangoda. There was a striking difference between Obokh and Mehweb. The villages were almost at the same walking distance from Lak villages, but the difference in the level of Lak is striking: 95% in Mehweb and 22% in Obokh. There is only one plausible explanation for this discrepancy. Mehwebs as speakers of a minor language were disposed to speak other languages, while Avars, being the majority in their district, were in general oriented to use their own language in all circumstances.

The residents of Lak villages also had some command of Avar, but the level of their bilingualism was lower than in Avar villages (Table 2).

Mehwebs were the most multilingual people of the villages in the area. The language contact between Mehwebs and their neighbours was asymmetrical. They spoke the languages of their neighbours, while the neighbours did not speak Mehweb. Presumably, Mehweb was never used as a second language (we cannot be positive because we have no information about the more distant past). The reason for this asymmetry in the linguistic relations between neighbours was obviously the fact that Mehweb was spoken only in one village and had no importance at the supralocal level.

| | <i>Mehweb</i> | <i>Avar</i> | <i>Lak</i> | <i>Russian</i> |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| <i>Mehweb</i> | Native | 97% | 95% | 21% |
| <i>Obokh</i> | 7% | native | 22% | 22% |
| <i>Shangoda</i> | 0% | native | 93% | 50% |
| <i>Uri</i> | 0% | 78% | native | 40% |
| <i>Mukar</i> | 0% | 40% | native | 50% |

Table 2. The level of multilingualism in five villages: generations born before 1919.

¹⁰ See also Kozhukhar', Baryl'nikova 2013 about the dynamics of literacy in Mehweb.

5.3. Multilingualism among the residents born after 1920

In the second half of the 20th century, knowledge of local languages decreased, while knowledge of Russian increased significantly. People in Mehweb and Obokh spoke virtually no Lak (Table 3). In Shangoda, the command of Lak persisted longer, but it was almost lost in the generation born after 1960. The command of Avar in Lak villages Uri and Mukar was also practically lost.

There are several factors in the drastic changes in local multilingualism. First, the relations within the neighbourhood started to lose their economic significance, being substituted by connections with bigger towns. At present, the Mehwebs prefer shopping in Makhachkala rather than in Kumukh. Villagers also ceased cultivating fields, the borders with the neighbours have lost their significance, and communication became rarer. The second reason is the spread of Russian as lingua franca across Daghestan. The command of Russian substituted local bilingualism.

There are rare cases of some Obokhs speaking Mehweb among those born in 1960s. This is because until the 2000s there was no senior school in Obokh, and some children continued their education in Mehweb. Several people reported their ability to understand Mehweb, acquired during their school years.

In Mehweb, people born after the 1950s speak almost no Lak, but the command of Avar is still very high. Avar was supported by schooling and communication with neighbours and with the Avar administration. Mehwebs born after 1990, however, do not speak Avar. This might be a manifestation of the same process of the loss of local multilingualism as in other villages, but it could also be a pattern of age-based multilingualism, when a neighbouring language is acquired when people start to work. In the latter case, this generation will speak Avar after their professional socialization, at the age of 30-40. Only later research will show what pattern the now young Mehwebs will follow.

Some Mehwebs report a command of the Akusha dialect of Dargwa. In the 1950–1970s, Mehweb did not have enough shepherds, and the Dargis from Akushinskij district worked in the Mehweb kolkhoz as shepherders. The Mehwebs remember communicating with these shepherds and with their wives who came to see their husbands when they returned to Mehweb with the sheep. As a result, some of Mehwebs acquired the Akusha dialect which is otherwise not intelligible for Mehwebs.

Another change concerned literacy. The atheistic politics of the USSR resulted in a dramatic loss of Arabic literacy. Only 5% of Mehwebs born after 1920 knew the Arabic script (as compared to the 48% in the generation born before 1919). A similar change happened in other villages. At the same time, most villagers became literate in Cyrillic and could read and write Russian and Avar.

| | <i>Mehweb</i> | <i>Avar</i> | <i>Lak</i> | <i>Russian</i> |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| <i>Mehweb</i> | Native | 85% | 17% | 91% |
| <i>Obokh</i> | 4% | native | 6% | 83% |
| <i>Shangoda</i> | 0% | native | 42% | 86% |
| <i>Uri</i> | 0% | 37% | native | 96% |
| <i>Mukar</i> | 0% | 17% | native | 88% |

Table 3. The level of multilingualism in the generation born after 1920.

6. Summary

Mehweb is a minor language, spoken in only one village. As mentioned in the introduction, there are no signs of language shift in Mehweb. In the village, everybody speaks Mehweb, and since the 19th century the number of speakers has not decreased. There is, however, a strong tendency towards the loss of traditional patterns of multilingualism. Over the 20th century, knowledge of neighbouring languages in highland villages was substituted by a knowledge of Russian, because Russian spread all over Daghestan and started to serve as the lingua franca (the level of bilingualism is shown in Figure 2). A good command of Russian was supported by the arrival of television and by intensive migration to towns: almost every family has relatives who live elsewhere and come to the village for vacations or on some special occasions (such as weddings and funerals). Children who were born in cities usually only speak Russian, and pass Russian to their peers who live in the village (Daniel et al. 2011). Therefore, until recently the languages that could influence the vocabulary and the grammar of Mehweb were Avar and Lak. This role has now been assumed by Russian. In spite of the changes in the multilingualism patterns, the Mehweb community still remains, comparatively, more multilingual than other neighbouring communities

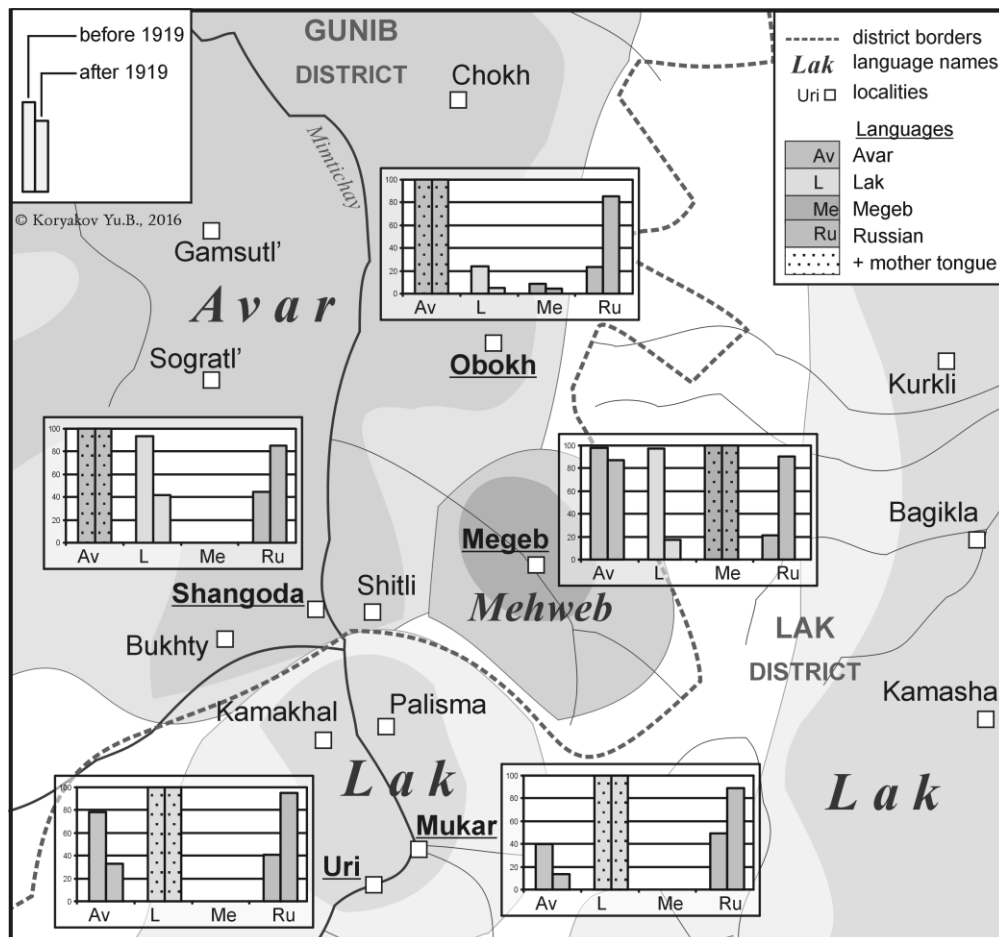


Figure 2. Multilingualism in five villages: before 1919 and after 1920.

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