

TEVFIK ESEŇ AND THE UBYKH LANGUAGE



“I will suddenly remember (my tongue), repeat its last words... So that they are not forgotten, the last voices. I have seen many deaths. I have had a long life, I am too tired now. My heart will not last long, I know. If I keep them inside, it is not possible. I want to tell them in my mother tongue, forgetting and being forgotten.” (Arasan, 1987).

On October 7, 1992, Tevfik Esenç died at the age of 88. His death meant more than the demise of a human being as he was the last speaker of the Ubykh language. On that day, not only him but also his language disappeared.

According to Ethnologue (Lewis, Simons & Fennig, 2014), there are currently 7106 languages spoken in the world. 1519 of them are in trouble and 915 are dying, meaning they will soon become extinct. Roughly one third of the languages spoken today will not be heard in the years to come. Linguists estimate that each single day one language disappears. When a language becomes extinct, the culture accompanying it also disappears. In other words, the abstract heritage of human society is diminished when a language disappears, not to mention the linguistic diversity.

Tevfik Esenç’s death marked the extinction of Ubykh. He was born in 1904 in Hacı Osman village, Manyas, Balıkesir. He was raised there by his grandparents, from whom he learned his native language Ubykh. Learning the language directly from his grandparents, who were probably among those who could still speak it fluently, would later put him in a higher competency level than his peers. He served as the “muhtar” (mayor) of the village for a term and, worked as a civil servant in Istanbul. His gentle manners gained him the nickname “Kaymakam”.

While in Istanbul he was discovered by Georges Dumézil, the French linguist who accepted a job offer in 1925 from the newly reorganized Istanbul University. Ubykh had first come to attention of the scientific community as a result of Dumézil’s work *“La Langue des Oubykhs”*, which was published in 1931 in Paris. After 1956, Tevfik Esenç was the only speaker to help Dumézil record the Ubykh language. Having a perfect memory and great intelligence, he was quick to understand the purposes of Dumézil and other linguists that worked with him.

Because of several reasons such as the need to speak Turkish to communicate in Turkey and the competition from other Caucasian languages, knowing Ubykh became useless. As a result, Esenç witnessed the inevitable decline of his native language in his lifetime. In the 1980s, although several other elders could still remember some words and phrases, it was just Tevfik Esenç who had a complete mastery of Ubykh.

He was taken to Paris and Oslo several times so that the dying language could be recorded as much as possible. He was the main source of not only the language but also the culture, traditions and mythology of the Ubykh people. Apart from Ubykh, he could also speak Turkish and a dialect of Adyge, which helped to compare the two languages. He even accepted to be x-rayed while

articulating some sounds so that some ambiguous characteristics of the language could be clarified. Dumézil stated that Esenç was a purist, and considered his idiolect to be the closest thing to a standard literary Ubykh language that existed.



How come the last speaker of a Caucasian language died not in Caucasia but in northwestern Turkey? The answer lies in the imperialistic policies of tsarist Russia in the 19th century. Some 40-50 bin Ubykhs inhabited the region around the city of Sochi at that time. It is mentioned that even the name of the city comes from an Ubykh word which means “seaside” (Peterson, 2014). These people, who lived a communal life in tribes, were Muslim and more or less happy under the Ottoman rule until the 1830s. With the Adrianople treaty in 1829, Ottomans left all the coastal

areas of the Caucasus along the Black Sea to the Russians, providing them with an opportunity to conquer the western Caucasus.

However, the Russians had to abandon their initial campaign in the western Caucasus when faced with the fierce resistance from the peoples of the Caucasia. The struggle continued throughout the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s. In 1857, after the Crimean War, the Russians resumed their campaign to conquer the Caucasus. In March 1864, the Ubykhs, surrounded by the Russian army, had to stop resisting and started negotiations with the Russians. They were given only two options: either to move to Ottoman territories or to resettle in another area in the Russian Empire. Except a few families, all opted for Ottoman rule, and during March 1864, about 30 bin Ubykhs moved to Turkey. For many other Caucasian tribes the fate was the same. That is how the Caucasian diaspora has formed in modern Turkey and the Middle East. Tefvik Esenç was born in their new homeland forty years after the expulsion of the Ubykh from the Caucasus.

The Ubykh Language

The Ubykh language belongs to North-West Caucasian (Abkhazo-Adyghean) language family. It was first mentioned in 1650 in the Seyahatname of Evliya Çelebi. The language is defined as SOV, ergative, postpositional, head-marking, and massively agglutinative (Fenwick, 2011). It was originally spoken in the region around the modern Russian city of Sochi, and later, in northwestern Turkey, after the mass exodus of the Ubykh from the Caucasus. Since 1992, when the last speaker Tefvik Esenç died, it has been functionally extinct.

Ubykh is famous for its titanic inventory of consonant phonemes: It consists of 81 consonant phonemes (Colarusso, 1992). This is the second largest consonant inventory in the world after Khoisan languages in southern Africa. It has consonants in eight basic places of articulation. For example it distinguishes alveolar, post-alveolar, alveo-palatal and retroflex affricates and fricatives. It also distinguishes plain, palatalized and labialized stops and fricatives. The sound inventory of the Ubykh language contains 29 distinct fricatives, 27 sibilants, 20 uvulars and 3 different /l / sounds. However, the number of vowels is only 3, although different linguists come up with different numbers. In this sense, Ubykh has the most disproportionate ratio of phonemic consonants to vowels. Colarusso underlines that Ubykh is a phonetic “marvel”.

Apart from its rich sound inventory, Ubykh also demonstrates great complexity in morphology and syntax. In his book *A Grammar of Ubykh*, Fenwick (2011) exhibits its inflectional and derivational morphology, including the noun morphology, and syntax.

Fortunately, some of Ubykh has been recorded on cards and tapes. There are also x-ray images of Tefvik Esenç. Among other linguists who studied Ubykh are Hans Vogt with his book *Dictionnaire de*

la Langue Oubykh, George Hewitt, John Colarusso, Georges Charachidze and Sumru Özsoy. Rohan S. H. Fenwick published his *A Grammar of Ubykh* in 2011. The 1991-92 (No 6-7) issue of the *Revue des Etudes Georgiennes et Caucasiennes* was also dedicated to Tevfik Eseñ. On the Internet, it is possible to find most of the studies on the following website. In 1987, Ismet Arasan, a young film director, made a 26-minute documentary, *Son Sesler (The Last Voices)* where, focusing on Tevfik Eseñ, he told the tragic story of the Ubykh people and their language.

The chance of resurrecting Ubykh seems very little today. In an interview Tevfik Eseñ said, "Turkish authorities are not interested, and our own young do not want to learn it." (Dahlburg, 1987). Even his own three sons cannot carry on a conversation in Ubykh. The Ethnologue website points out that the ethnic Ubykh community now speaks a distinct dialect of Adyge.



If you happen to visit Hacı Osman village one day, on the tombstone of Tevfik Eseñ, you may read the following inscription which he himself wanted to be engraved: "This is the grave of Tevfik Eseñ. He was the last person able to speak the language they called Ubykh."

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