

The Abkhaz National Corpus

Paul Meurer

University of Bergen
Bergen, Norway
paul.meurer@uib.no

Abstract

In this paper, we present the Abkhaz National Corpus, a comprehensive and open, grammatically annotated text corpus which makes the Abkhaz language accessible to scientific investigations from various perspectives (linguistics, literary studies, history, political and social sciences etc.). The corpus also serves as a means for the long-term preservation of Abkhaz language documents in digital form, and as a pedagogical tool for language learning. It now comprises more than 10 million words and is continuously being extended. Abkhaz is a lesser-resourced language; prior to this work virtually no computational resources for the language were available. As a member of the West-Caucasian language family, which is characterized by an extremely rich, polysynthetic morphological structure, Abkhaz poses serious challenges to morphosyntactic analysis, the main problem being the high degree of morphological ambiguity. We show how these challenges can be met, and what we plan to further enhance the performance of the analyser.

Keywords: Abkhaz National Corpus, lesser-resourced languages, polysynthetic languages, parsing of rich morphology

1. Motivation, sociolinguistic situation

Abkhaz, a West-Caucasian language, is spoken in Abkhazia by approx. 100,000 people, and by a considerable number of people in the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Adzharia (Georgia), Russia and elsewhere, with exact numbers unknown.

Abkhaz has a rather young literary tradition, reaching back no further than to the end of the 19th century, when Russian linguists devised a script for the language. In the 20th century, a vivid literary production developed, and the language was taught in schools and used as a medium of mainstream communication.

However, already in the 19th century, when Abkhazia became part of the Russian Empire and the muslim Abkhazians were deported to Turkey, the Abkhazians were in the minority. Because of the Soviet and Georgian rule, and the continuous influx of Georgians and other non-Abkhaz population, Abkhaz came, in the course of the 20th century, even more in the position of a minority language, with many ethnic Abkhazians giving up their language in favour of Russian. In 1989, before the Abkhaz-Georgian war, only 17.8% of the population of the Autonomous Republic Abkhazia were ethnic Abkhazians.¹

Because of the almost total exodus of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia during the Abkhaz-Georgian war, the Abkhazians are now again the majority population in the region (50,7% according to the 2011 census). However, Russian, which is the second official language in the self-declared Abkhaz state, has remained the dominant language of mainstream communication.

Since the Abkhaz de-facto independence, there is a growing awareness in the Abkhaz public of the need to improve the viability of the language. There are also political aspirations to make Abkhaz more widely used in public, and even a law ("Law on the official language of the Republic Abkhazia" from 2006) that tries to enforce the use of

Abkhaz in the state administration and in public life, with the long-term aim to have Abkhaz replace Russian as the dominant language.

But the implementation of these measures, overzealous as they appear from the outset, is severely hampered by the lack of qualified teachers and adequate or even basic printed or electronic teaching material.

On this background, the Abkhaz National Corpus (AbNC)² project has the following aims:

- To establish a linguistically annotated Abkhaz language corpus of reasonable size
- To develop freely available computational resources (electronic dictionaries and lexicons, parsers and more) for the language
- To give learners of the language a tool that provides electronic support for reading texts online
- To serve as a long-time storage repository for Abkhaz language texts, dictionaries and other resources in electronic form (as a CLARIN³ resource)

2. Previous work

The project I am reporting on is the first computational work being done on Abkhaz, and indeed on any West-Caucasian language. The only corpus resource besides the AbNC is a small corpus of 2 million words without grammatical annotation.⁴ There are plans to create an annotated Circassian/Adyghe corpus (Arkhangelskij and Lander, 2016), but this work seems still to be in a preparatory phase.

3. The project

The AbNC project is in the fortunate situation that there exists a large online collection of freely available Abkhaz

¹See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Abkhazia for these numbers.

² <http://clarino.uib.no/abnc>

³ <https://www.clarin.eu>

⁴ <http://baltoslav.eu/apsua>

The texts belong to a variety of genres, with novels, traditional texts and news texts in the majority. Table (1) shows approximate sizes for the genres represented in the corpus. The sizes are in 1000 tokens, where tokens comprise both words and punctuation.

<i>Genre</i>	<i>Size</i>
fiction	
traditional (fairy tales, Nart saga etc.)	1,000
religious (New Testament)	200
novels and other prose	6,700
poetry	400
drama	300
non-fiction	
journalism and news	1,250
political	20
textbook	140

The project was able to agree with the Abkhaz partners on an open license that poses very few restrictions on the use of the texts in the confines of the project. In technical terms, the license is a CLARIN PUB license (CLARIN_PUB-BY-NC-ND).

Phonetically, Abkhaz is characterized by a large number of consonant phonemes (between 56 and 65, depending on the dialect), whereas there are few vowel phonemes. Only *a* and *ə* are phonemic, whereas *e*, *i*, *o* and *u* can appear in loan words and as phonetic realizations of *a* and *ə* in certain contexts. The nominal morphology is rather simple; there is no case marking, but the language exhibits noun-noun and noun-adjective compounding. Postpositions can be suffixed to the noun or adjective. Remarkably, cardinal numbers can be prefixed to the noun. The verbal morphology can be characterized as agglutinative and polysynthetic, with a huge number of verbal prefixes and suffixes. The position of the affixes in the verb is rigid, they fit into given slots of a general template.

⁵ <http://apsnyteka.org>

A specific problem is to properly segment the stem of intransitive verbs. A verbal stem is either simple (consisting of the verbal root only), or it is composed of a (simple or complex) preverb and the root. For transitive verbs, the boundary between preverb and root is obvious from the inflected form, because the agent affix (normally *-i-*, *-l-* or *-r-* in the sample forms) is placed immediately before the root. Intransitive verbs however have no agent affix; here, the boundary is only visible in comparatively rare negated

aurist forms, where negation is marked by the negation infix *-m-* placed between preverb and root. When such a form was not contained in the example phrases, we had to find evidence for the correct segmentation by a corpus search or from informants.

The analyser lexicon comprises 6,750 verb stems, 16,000 nouns, 3,000 adjectives and 1,350 adverbs.

5.2. The feature set

The morphological analyser (Meurer, 2011) takes as input an orthographic surface form in the Abkhaz Cyrillic script and returns, for each found reading, a lemma form (containing stress information), and a bag of morpho-syntactic features.

The feature set is quite rich, it comprises more than 350 features. There are 160 features for inflected verb forms alone. This high number is due to the polysynthetic nature of the Abkhaz verb; there are affixes not only for the subject, but also for direct, indirect and locative objects in the verb, there are applicative markers with associated person affixes, as well as adverbial, conjunctive, question and clitic elements. Person affixes include relative and reciprocal markers. The verb form in Example (2) will be analysed as the lemma form ‘аеамадара’ *a-č·á·ma·da-ra* with feature set (*V Dyn Tr NonFin Pres Neg Refl:Rel Reln:Pot RO:Rel LO:3Pl QWho Excess*).

- (2) зѣызырыматѡѡда
z.čə-zə.z-rə-ma-m-da-c^w a.wa-da
 Rel.Refl-Rel.Pot-3Pl-PV-Neg-ROOT-Exc-Pres-Who?
 ‘who cannot trust them too much?’, lit.: ‘who is it who cannot trust whose head to them in excess?’

5.3. Ambiguity

Since nominal and verbal stems and affixes often consist of only one simple (CV) syllable, there is considerable homonymy among those morphemes. Although morphemes of equal syllable structure may differ in their accent status, this information is not (or in some cases only indirectly) available in the orthographic word form, since stress is not marked in present-day orthography.

As a consequence, most word forms are highly ambiguous; often there are many ways to segment a word form into preverb(s), stem, and affixes, and those stems and affixes may by themselves be ambiguous. In addition, lemma forms may differ solely in their stress pattern.

For example, the word ‘илаба’ *ilaba* (with its most frequent reading ‘his stick’) gets 42 analyses, consisting of inflected and predicative forms of *a-labá* N ‘stick’, *a-lába* N ‘male dog’, *abá* N ‘textile’, *abá* A ‘dry’, *á-la·ba-ra* V ‘suck up’, *a-ba-rá* V ‘see’.

5.4. Disambiguation

Abkhaz poses serious challenges to disambiguation due to the virtual absence of dependent marking (e.g., no case marking), the weak significance of word order, and the extreme prevalence of homonymy.

To keep ambiguity not higher than necessary, we tried as much as possible to avoid overgeneration in the morphological analyser. Obviously, the prefixes and suffixes that can

fill the slots of the verb template cannot combine freely. The negation marker *-m-*, for example, can only occur in one position at a time, although there is a prefix and a suffix slot position for negation. The position of the marker depends on a combination of tense, finiteness, and whether the form is dynamic or static. Relational prefixes are restricted to non-finite tense suffixes. Other restrictions depend on syntactic and semantic properties of a verb; e.g., agent prefixes are obviously restricted to transitive verbs only. The relevant grammatical literature (e.g., (Spruit, 1986; Šaduri, 2006; Hewitt, 2010), to mention a few important works) is however in many cases vague about those combinatorial restrictions, and we had to work out specific rules to be used in the implementation of the morphology.

One such case is the possibility of relative markers in a verb form. A general rule restricts relative markers to non-absolutive non-finite forms. However, a corpus search reveals that the situation regarding absolutes is more complicated:

In Abkhaz, absolutes are used in serial verb constructions, where the absolute and the verb following it are part of the same event. This can be seen in (3), where the verb ‘амазаара’ *á-ma-zaa-ra* ‘have’ initiates a serial construction.

- (3) Ача иманы иааит.
a-č·á_i ϕ_i-i_j-ma-nó i_j-áai-ť
 the-bread (it)-it-have.Abs it-come.Aor.Fin
 ‘It came with (lit. having) the bread.’

However, if the main verb of the serial construction is a non-finite relativized verb like in (4), its subject relative marker (*-i-*) is taken up by the absolute (in the form of the indirect object relative marker *-z-*). Thus, we get an absolutive form with a relative marker.

- (4) ача зманы иааиз
a-č·á_i ϕ_i-z_j-ma-nó i_j-áai-z
 the-bread (it)-Rel-have.Abs Rel-come.Aor.NonFin
 амашына
a-maš·’əna
 the-car
 ‘the car which came with the bread’

In devising the Constraint Grammar rules, several strategies were used to disambiguate homonymous forms:

- Highly unlikely (albeit possible) analyses of frequent words were ruled out.
- Syntactic rules were used where possible.
- To disambiguate further, semantic information in the form of selectional restrictions was used.
- As a heuristics, analyses that match a dictionary entry were preferred.

5.5. Treatment of predicate phrases

In Abkhaz, stative verbs can be formed from nouns and adjectives, but also from two-element noun phrases, with predicative meaning: ‘X is NP’. This is shown in (5), where the brackets indicate the NP that is surrounded by verbal morphological material.

remains to be done to improve precision and recall of the analyser, it is already in its present state a useful tool for annotating a text corpus of medium size, the Abkhaz National Corpus. When the feature set has stabilized, a gold corpus will be manually annotated, so that exact performance figures can be calculated. The gold corpus will also be used to train a statistical disambiguator that will be used on top of the Constraint Grammar-based disambiguator.

The corpus itself is continually growing, and the long-term aim is to include all important texts that have been written in Abkhaz.

8. Acknowledgments

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