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# Gakvarian Chamalal (Dagestan and Chechnya) – Language Snapshot

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<b>Language Name:</b>	Chamalal
<b>Language Family:</b>	Andic, Avaro-Andic, Nakh-Dagestianian
<b>ISO 639-3 Code:</b>	Cji
<b>Glottolog Code:</b>	cham1309
<b>Population:</b>	5,000-12,000
<b>Location:</b>	Tsumada district (Dagestan) and Šarojskij district (Chechnya), Russia
<b>Vitality rating:</b>	endangered

## Summary

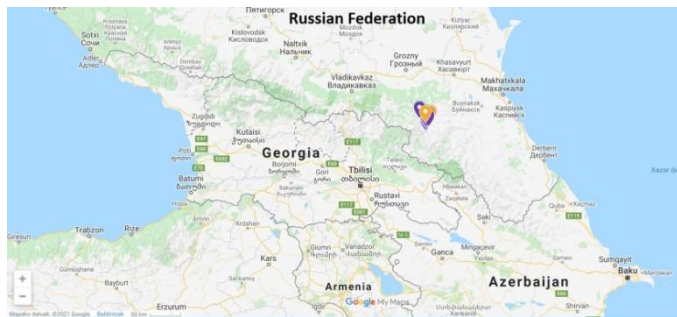
This article presents an overview of the sociolinguistic situation and typological profile of Chamalal, a Nakh-Dagestianian language of the Andic group spoken in Dagestan and Chechnya (Russia). It discusses how the language is retreating under the influence of Russian, with emigration from rural communities in the mountains to larger cities being a major factor. It concludes with a summary of existing resources and current work on the language.

## Резюме

В статье дается краткий обзор социолингвистической ситуации и типологии чамалинского языка (андийская группа нахско-дагестанской семьи) Дагестана (РФ). Здесь объясняется, как язык теряется под влиянием русского языка и эмиграции в более крупные города за пределами чамалинских сёл. В конце приводится обзор существующих ресурсов и текущей исследовательской работы над чамалинским языком.

## 1. Introduction

Chamalal (autoglotonym [ʃʷa'malal mitsʷ], also known as *Chamali* and Чамалинский *čamalinskij* (in Russian) is an Andic language from the Avaro-Andic branch of Nakh-Dagestanian). Chamalal has two main varieties: Gakvarian-Gadirian, and Gigatlian. According to Magomedova (1999: 13, 2001: 291) Gigatlian is in transition between Godoberi (another Andic language) and Gadirian Chamalal. Gilles Authier (p.c.) considers Gigatlian to be a separate language from the rest of the Chamalal varieties, nevertheless, they are considered to be the same language by most Gakvarian and Gadirian speakers interviewed, and by existing publications (note that these two varieties are highly mutually intelligible). Most of the speech community is concentrated around the alpine region of Dagestan, in the Tsumada district (Figure 1), although in recent years, many people have migrated to the plains and larger cities.



### Chamalal

- Chamalal
- Agvali
  - Gigatʹ
  - Gigatʹi-Urukʹ
  - Gaditʹ
  - Gachitʹi
  - Richaganikhʹ
  - Tsamada-Urukʹ
  - Tsamada
  - Verkh. Gakvari
  - Nizhnyaya Gakvari
  - Tsidatʹ
  - Tsydy
  - Kochali
  - Gigikh
  - S. Kenki
  - Chamalal
  - Batakhatʹi

Villages where Chamalal is spoken. The orange (Gigatlian) and purple (Gakvarian-Gadirian) represent the two main varieties.

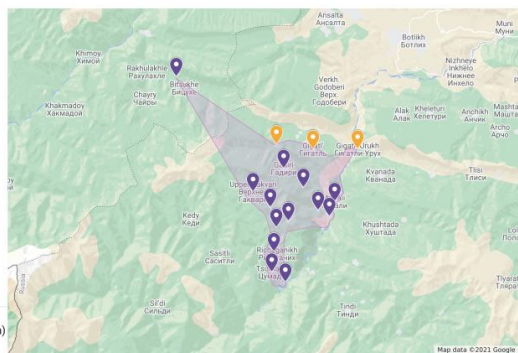


Figure 1: Chamalal settlements in the Northern Caucasus. © Google Maps (2021), Roncero (2019-2021) [Scale 1cm = 50km]  
Larger versions of these maps are on pages 73 and 74

Most traditional settlements are located between 1,500 and 2,000 meters above sea level. Consequently, winters are very cold and snowy, whilst summers are fresh and dry. Arable lands follow a terrace system, but they are very limited, and the climate of the mountains restricts the types of crops that can be grown. For these reasons, pastoralism has traditionally been the main occupation, which is being abandoned (together with rural lifestyle) by younger generations. Houses were typically built on the edges of cliffs, creating fortresses. Given the space limitations, houses could also be built in the terraces with multiple storeys (the ground level being reserved for livestock), as seen in Figures 2, 3 and 4.



*Figure 2: Houses built on cliffs for defence in Lower Gakvari.* © 2019 Kristian Roncero



*Figure 3: Traditional multi-storey houses in Lower Gakvari.* © 2019 Kristian Roncero

## 2. Language vitality

The number of speakers is uncertain, with sources giving figures between 5,000 (e.g. Bokarev 1949) and 12,000 speakers (Magomedova 2004). Native-speaker researcher Zainab Alieva (p.c.) says there are around 19,000 Chamalals, but it is unclear how many of them speak the language (I counted about 3,000 in the mountain settlements and there may be twice as much in the diaspora). The main reason for uncertainty concerning the speaker population is that Chamalal are often counted as Avar in official censuses, since the latter is the ‘big nationality’ Chamalals identify with when they come into contact with other ethnic groups in Dagestan (e.g. Dargwa). This is a common problem in Dagestan studied in greater depth by Dobrushina (2008).

Unlike in other regions of Russia, multilingualism in Dagestan is generally perceived positively and thus speaking Chamalal is not stigmatised. Nevertheless, for more intellectually demanding or formal contexts (e.g. giving a speech), Avar and Russian are preferred. Endogamy is a common practice in Dagestan and any new wives arriving in the villages often try to learn the local language quickly (except for Agvali, where multiple languages

are spoken). Moseley (2010) classifies Chamalal as 3 on the GIDS scale, i.e. ‘definitely endangered [children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home]’, however, this is not entirely accurate. Most young people leave the community when they reach adulthood for their studies or seeking better paid jobs in the cities and the lowlands, where the main *lingua franca* is Russian. As a result, children raised far from the main speech community are often not learning Chamalal (or doing so imperfectly). Even in the villages, some speakers complain that over the last ten years children have started speaking in Russian among themselves, but parents and adults from the village (who are not their teachers) continue to talk to children in Chamalal. Chamalal remains the primary language of oral communication in Chamalal settlements. Some youngsters told me that they sometimes use Chamalal for texting (in an orthography based on Avar), although they only post in Russian on social media. The hegemony of Russian as a dominant language can be seen in the fact that often voice messages sent to each other by people from the same village are in Russian (and less frequently in Avar), even if their command of Russian is not very good.

Most Chamalal over 30 are fluent in at least Chamalal, Standard Avar, which is the *lingua franca* of the area, and Russian. They also often have a passive knowledge of other neighbouring languages, particularly Tindi-Bagvalal (Andic), Godoberi (in the case of Gigatlians), and, less frequently, Chechen (mostly due to emigration and seasonal work). Because of the increasing influence of Islam, there are a growing number of people (particularly, men) with at least some basic knowledge of Classical Arabic. All the ritual prayers and readings of the Quran are done in Arabic, whilst most homilies in the mosque are in Avar, for two main reasons: (1) imams receive their religious education in Arabic and Avar; and (2) services are often attended by visitors from other villages who do not understand Chamalal.

In the past, Avar was used in rural schools as a medium of instruction, but nowadays Russian is the main language of education, from kindergarten up to grade 11, with Avar being taught marginally in schools (as ‘mother tongue’).<sup>1</sup> Many parents lament that their children do not speak Avar properly anymore, and thus neither can they understand the Friday homilies, nor communicate with other people in the district without using Russian. Most of the consumed media is in Russian, although there are some local newspapers in Avar, and Dagestanian TV and radio broadcasts in Avar a few hours per week.

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<sup>1</sup> Currently, higher education institutions are located outside the community, and are almost exclusively in Russian, except for religious private mid and high schools (*medrese*) in Dagestan. Some of these use Classical Arabic and Avar as their languages of instruction.



Figure 4: Terraced and traditional multi-storey houses in Higher Gakvari. © 2020 by Kristian Roncero.

### 3. Typological overview and writing system

Chamalal is a morphologically ergative language, with the peculiarity of having dative and affective constructions (Bokarev 1949, Roncero forthcoming). The most common word order is SOV, and there are five genders or noun-classes. Chamalal distinguishes five vowels (/a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/) in terms of quality, and there is a contrast between short and long vowels (represented by double graphemes). Moreover, all short vowels and low and high long vowels have a nasal counterpart, which does not exist in Avar, nasal vowels are represented in the orthography as vowel + <H> /n/). Depending on the analysis and the sub-variety, Chamalal has an inventory of approximately 44 consonants. Although stops contrast in four positions (bilabial, dental, velar, glottal), fricatives have seven points of articulation (the same as stops, plus postalveolar, pharyngeal, and uvular). In addition, many consonants are distinguished by ejectives [+/- ejective], velarisation [+/- velarised], and length [*fortis* vs. *lenis*].<sup>2</sup>

Most Chamalal speakers have never written in their own language, although most have strong intuitions on how to do so, based on the

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<sup>2</sup> Most variation between local varieties is related to length.

conventions of Literary Avar (in Cyrillic script).<sup>3</sup> The Dagestanian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences developed a writing system in the 1990s, which Magomedova (1999) used for her dictionary. Nevertheless, most speakers I have asked are unaware of this orthography; in addition, it is not practical for typing on local devices (e.g. mobile phones), and not included in Unicode. Magomedzakir D. Abdulmuslimov (a Russian teacher at the school in V. Gakvari) has developed his own orthography for publishing his anthologies of Chamalal folklore (which are the only non-scholarly publications available). His system relies primarily on the conventions for Standard Avar, and is easier to read for most speakers, although he reports some problems representing certain phonemes (mainly nasalisation and certain ejective fricatives). In any case, in consultation with him and Zainab Alieva, I am developing a working orthography that considers all the previous works, speakers' impressions, as well as practicalities for typing on local computers and smartphones.<sup>4</sup> So far it is hard to assess the impact of this on the community, but in general the community views positively the efforts to preserve the language.

#### 4. Available materials and current research

According to Bokarev (1949: 6), Uslar was the first person to gather a handful of words (mostly numerals) in Gigatlian Chamalal in 1864. Erkert (1895)<sup>5</sup> also collected a few materials (from the Gigatlian variety), but Bokarev strongly criticised the quality of these. The only existing dictionary is a Chamalal-Russian bilingual dictionary published by Magomedova (1999), a native-speaker linguist. There are three main descriptions of the language, yet all of them are less than 120 pages. The first and most complete was made by Bokarev (1949), although language assistants have pointed to several typos and mistakes in the description. The second sketch was written by Magomedova (2004), but it is brief and its translation into English is a bit unfortunate.<sup>6</sup> The latest by the author is also short and only deals with Gakvarian Chamalal, yet it is more up-to-date with developments and terminology in linguistics. The only active native Chamalal scholar is Zainab

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<sup>3</sup> Note that Chamalal has more phonemes than Avar, hence the problems with representing these additional sounds.

<sup>4</sup> An outline of the practical orthography and its justification can be found in the archive (*infra*).

<sup>5</sup> See references in Bokarev, *ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> Note that this is a translation/summary of all her previous short sketches.

Alieva, who publishes mainly on lexicography and word derivation; see, for example, Alieva (2012, 2013a, 2013b).

I am currently working on an ELDP-funded documentation and description project on Chamalal, with a focus on audio-visual documentation (Roncero 2019-2021). However, given the travel restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, the project has been seriously delayed. In order to ease access to materials in the archive, I have created a YouTube channel for the community where videos (for which there is full consent) are being uploaded.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, news from the field and some literacy materials (#WordOfTheDay) can be found on Twitter and Instagram with the hashtag #DiscoverChamalal.

Concerning descriptive work, in addition to the grammar sketch (Roncero forthcoming), I am working on the analysis of gender assignment and verbal morphology. In addition, I am involved in: (1) writing a description of the phonological inventory for *The Journal of the IPA* with Alieva; (2) gathering a 1,100 wordlist (with IPA transcriptions) for a Pan-Caucasian lexicography project called *LexCauc*; and (3) eliciting comparative information on non-indicative moods for the project *Optatives in the Caucasus in typological perspective*, based at the Linguistic Convergence Laboratory (HSE, Moscow).

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<sup>7</sup> see <https://bit.ly/3dIAZF2> (accessed 2020-11-04)

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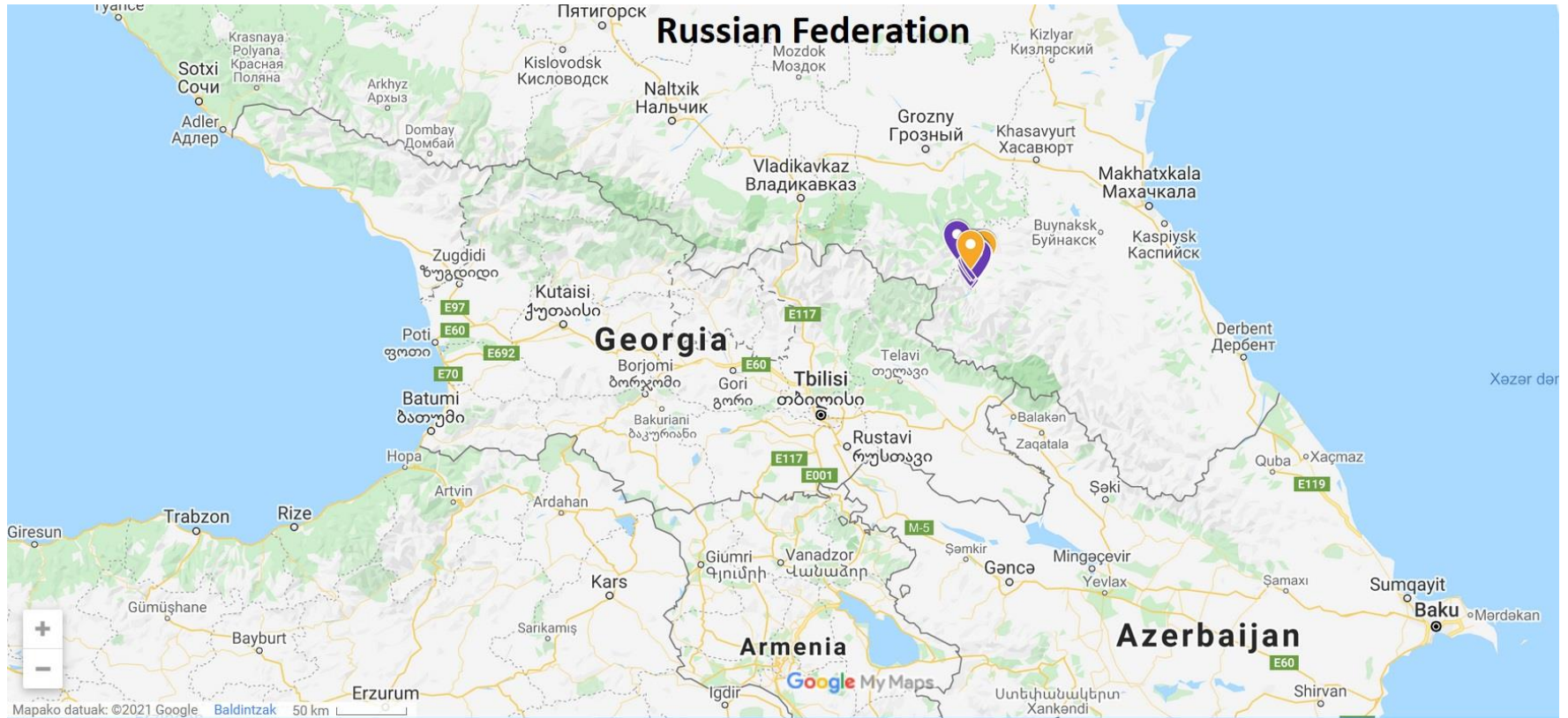



















Figure 1a: A regional view - Chamalal settlements in the Northern Caucasus. © Google Maps (2021), Roncero (2019-2021)

This is a large version of the map on page 65.

# Chamalal

## Chamalal

-  Agvali
-  Gigatl'
-  Gigatli-Uruk
-  Gadiri
-  Gachitli
-  Richaganikh
-  Tsumada-Uruk
-  Tsumada
-  Verkh. Gakvari
-  Nizhnyaya Gakvari
-  Tsidatl'
-  Tsuydi
-  Kochali
-  Gigikh
-  S. Kenkhi
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Villages where Chamalal is spoken. The orange (Gigatlian) and purple (Gakvarian-Gadirian) represent the two main varieties.

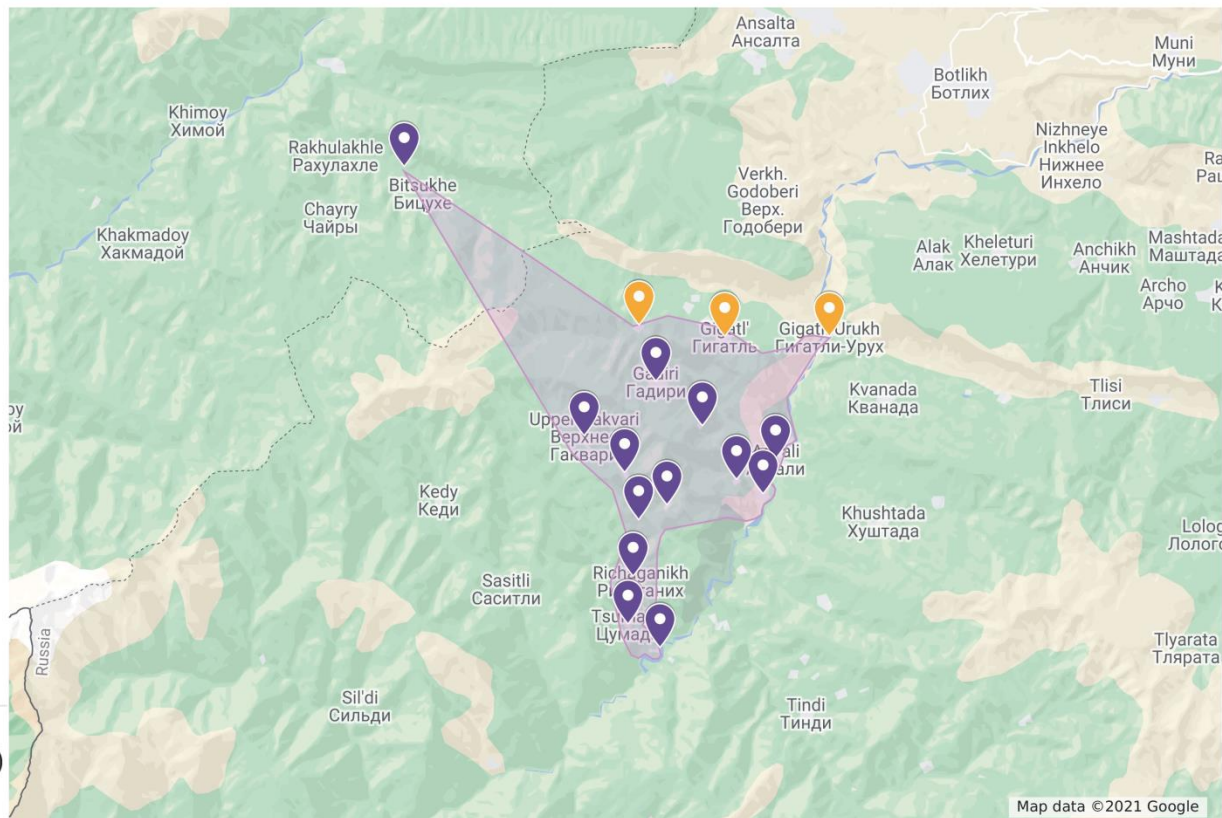


Figure 1b: A local view - Chamalal settlements in the Northern Caucasus. © Google Maps (2021), Roncero (2019-2021) [Scale 1cm = 50km]  
This is a large version of the map on page 65.