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Aleksandr Kibrik: An appreciation

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We remember Professor Aleksandr E. Kibrik (Sasha) as the leading Russian specialist on Daghestanian (North-East Caucasian) languages and a major world-authority both on the languages of the family and on ergativity. He forged this position for himself under difficult political circumstances without any compromise of principle. He was an open friend of Igor Mel'čuk, at a time when this was extremely unwise, and in 1971 invited him to take part in a linguistic expedition to Kamchatka. This was a bold step, since Kamchatka was an exclusion zone (normal Soviet citizens were not admitted there). Various special documents were required to obtain a police permit. For that, a recommendation from a scientific institution was crucial, but this was impossible, given Igor's reputation. Somehow, Sasha got a signature from someone at the university. Igor himself believes that Sasha simply counterfeited it, risking a good deal, the least being his academic career. A couple of years later, he was among the group of colleagues who saw off Viktor Raskin, when he left the Soviet Union. They were informed on, and Sasha was prevented from lecturing for several years as a result. Sasha's achievements are remarkable and enduring. But against this background of state-pressure, uncertainty as to who could be trusted, concern for family, and desire to be a part of the international scholarly community, they take on a special resonance.

He produced significant and substantial grammars for a number of languages, most notably Archi, a break-through in the description of languages showing ergativity, and earlier Khinalug (both co-authored with colleagues). In addition to grappling with the complex phonological and morphological

systems for which Daghestanian languages are famous, he worked intensely on their syntax. In addition to his descriptive work, so valued by fellow specialists, he made important contributions, arising out of his close acquaintance with the languages of the Caucasus, to the understanding of the phenomenon of ergativity for the benefit of the general linguistic community. For decades he contributed to the development of many linguists from Russia and the West, training generations of postgraduates and post-doctoral researchers, by leading annual linguistic expeditions to the Caucasus, principally to Daghestan, but also Kamchatka, Tuva, Svanetia (in Georgia), and Abkhazia. Needless to say, the conditions under which such fieldwork was carried out in remote villages of the Caucasus mountains were not easy. Two extensive grammars resulted from this training, written by teams of linguists whom Sasha trained and led, namely those of Tsakhur and Bagwalal. Other collaborative work included descriptions of Alutor and Godoberi, and the comparative dictionary of Daghestanian languages.

In celebrating these achievements we recall not only the oppressive circumstances which make them particularly striking; we remember too that Sasha had a remarkable family, and that he inspired loyalty and admiration among his colleagues and students. While their support in difficult times helped make possible his achievements, their continuing contributions, academic and moral, are a part of his legacy.

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