

A memorial remembrance of Aleksandr Kibrik

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I first met Aleksandr Evgen'evich Kibrik when he invited me to an international conference at Moscow State University (MGU) in February 1995.¹ My subsequent marriage to Vladimir Borschev, an old and close friend of Kibrik's, and my frequent teaching at MGU in the past 17 years, led to our becoming good friends and colleagues.

I saw and admired how Kibrik helped students at MGU develop the skills and contacts that have enabled them to win fellowships and postdoctoral positions in Europe and the U.S. The changes over the last 17 years have been huge – by now many young Russian linguists move easily between two worlds that are no longer so sharply divided. And as young Russian linguists who come from Moscow become known in the West, their work is especially valued for its typological richness, thanks to their excellent education and thanks to their experience in the remarkable linguistic expeditions that Aleksandr Evgen'evich and his teams have led them on, expeditions focused as much on the education of future generations of field linguists as on the studied languages, and for which there is no equivalent in the west.

Vladimir Borschev was on five expeditions with Kibrik between 1981 and 1988, and wrote diaries which he published, along with supplementary essays by Kibrik and others, and some expedition songs and photographs, in Borschev (2001). He was not there as a linguist but as Kibrik's friend and, as Kibrik wrote in his foreword, "in the capacity of a volunteer muzhik". Those diaries can now be seen as a kind of testament to Kibrik; they paint a vivid picture of the skills and energy and devotion to his students and colleagues that made Kibrik such a genius in the organization of the expeditions and the valuable published linguistic analyses that resulted.

One thing that struck me in Moscow was that although I perceived occasional tension concerning the relation between on the one hand Kibrik's functional-typological orientation and work of that kind that has grown and

1. Both of us submitted short remarks for the Kibrik memorial event at ALT 10 in Leipzig: my husband's remarks were mainly personal, so for our joint contribution to this publication, we are using mainly an excerpt from BHP's, with one short paragraph adapted from VB's. The 1st person pronoun here is BHP. We also wrote related pieces for a memorial event in Moscow (Borschev 2012, Partee 2012).

flourished within the great Russian linguistic traditions, and on the other hand the more Western-oriented, and more specifically Chomsky-influenced, trends among many younger Russian linguists, it has really seemed to me that these traditions are fundamentally compatible, and that Aleksandr Evgen'evich saw that and played a crucial and wise role in helping everyone keep an open mind and draw on the best in both traditions.

The drive to find the “right” kind of linguistic description, one that provides insight into the basic cognitive structures and capacities that make language what it is, is one of the key points that unites Kibrik’s work and western formal linguists influenced by Chomsky. Both are trying very hard to understand and explain the two great facts about human languages – how much alike they all are, and how much they differ from one another. Chomsky sometimes over-emphasizes the first, and shows less interest in the second than many of us, but his students and colleagues and their students and colleagues have brought a strong interest in typology and linguistic diversity into formal linguistics, so the approaches are closer now than they were earlier.

There is an unfortunate opposition – and sometimes some hostility – between two “camps” known as “Cognitive Linguistics” and “Formal Linguistics” in the U.S., and sometimes a bit of that in Russia as well, but if we get rid of the capital letters, and talk about language as a product of what’s in the minds of language users, and linguistics as the science that tries to describe language as explicitly as possible, then I think there is no need for separation into opposing camps – we are all pursuing cognitive goals and trying to develop good formal tools so that we have good theoretical frameworks to support good descriptive work.

I think that Kibrik and his students and colleagues and Chomsky and his students and colleagues can in principle all be reasonably characterized as formal cognitive linguists. Kibrik appreciated the central importance of typology early on; it took the western formal linguists longer, but typology is now flourishing within a healthy variety of theoretical frameworks, and the arguments within and among Russian and Western linguists can all in principle be carried out constructively and with mutual respect. I believe that Aleksandr Evgen'evich recognized that and encouraged – and demonstrated – exactly such mutual respect, and the work that he did and that his students and their students are doing is bringing together the best of both worlds.

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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