

## Remembering Aleksandr Evgen'evich Kibrik (1939–2012)

The following contributions derive from memorial celebration of Aleksandr E. Kibrik, held on 16th August 2013 at the 11th Biennial Conference of the Association for Linguistic Typology at Leipzig.

### That was Aleksandr Evgen'evich (“Sasha”) Kibrik

FRANS PLANK



Lidija Timoshenko, *Portret syna*, 1962 <http://www.imk.msu.ru/timoshenko/eng/index.html#>

\*26 March 1939, in Leningrad on the eve of war, †31 October 2012, in Moscow, 73 years old;

the son of painters Evgenij Adol'fovich Kibrik and Lidija Jakovlevna Timoshenko, each eminent in their own intriguingly different ways;

survived by his wife, Antonina Ivanovna Koval, linguist (with specialisation in Niger-Congo), and son Andrej Aleksandrovich Kibrik, linguist (specialisation in Athabaskan), and daughter Antonina Aleksandrovna Kibrik, painter.

(Is there a law of Mendel's superintending how inter-generational diversity turns intra-? Parents both artists; self and spouse both scholars; one sibling a scholar, the other an artist.)

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Profession: linguist;  
 profile: descriptive grammar and lexicography of (the) un-/under-described, endangered, “interesting” languages of Russia, from Archi, Alutor, Bagvalal, Godoberi to Khinalug and Tsakhur, some 45 in all (hence my temptation to put the definite article, not Sasha’s most favourite category), (North-East) Caucasiology, field linguistics, theoretical syntax, including inflection, typology and historical linguistics;  
 sidelines: producer of ethnographic films (sadly, the last: *Khinalug 2007*, <http://www.philol.msu.ru/~languedoc/assets/movies/film-xin2007-eng.rm>); guardian of the art of Lidija Timoshenko; agriculture and horticulture.

Growing up with art all around him, has the early ambition to become a film director; therefore studied Classical Philology to acquire the necessary knowledge. (What sort of film projects was he contemplating – *The Iliad & Odyssey*? *Jason and the Argonauts*? *The Fall of the Roman Empire*?)

Realised he was not “unable NOT to be an artist” (the only valid reason to become an artist, as his father would tell him), perhaps already sensing that what HE was unable NOT to be was a linguist.

Supplementing Classics with mathematics, wrote a diploma thesis on the “Spectral analysis of the vowels of Modern Greek”, which got him into linguistics and earned him early recognition.

Since 1961 in the newly founded Department of Structural/Theoretical and Applied Linguistics of Moscow State University (OSiPL/OTiPL, with the departmental naming vacillation immaterial, since “S” and “T” were more or less the same for Sasha anyhow, and “C” for Cognitive would have been fine too);

despite early antagonism, on political and personal grounds, soon to become its spiritus rector and, from 1992 until his death, its head.

Since the mid 60s, another impossible act to follow, leader of numerous, now legendary annual expeditions of his department and guests to the Caucasus, the Volga region, the Pamir, Kamchatka, and Siberia, developing the characteristic “Moscow” fieldwork methodology.



Archi expedition, 1968

Since 1965 centrally involved in another new venture, the "Traditional" Linguistic Olympiad (adorned with that epithet since its very beginning), attracting secondary school students to linguistics and inaugurating a movement eventually to spread across the world.

Academic teacher extraordinary, with scores of his students rising to eminence, at home and abroad.

In due course recipient of academic honours: corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, foreign member of the British Academy, life member of the Linguistic Society of America.

And not to forget: founding member of the Association for Linguistic Typology, present at ALT 0 (Konstanz, 1994), ALT 1 (Vitoria-Gasteiz, 1995), etc., and sadly missed at ALT 9 (Hong Kong, 2011) and ALT 10 (Leipzig, 2013); Associate Editor of *Linguistic Typology* (1997–2001).

Required reading and viewing:

- "How I became a linguist", Linguist List, Linguists of the Day 2011, <http://linguistlist.org/fund-drive/2011/linguists/AleksandrKibrik.cfm>

Adapted from an interview with POLIT.RU, autumn 2010 (condensed, paraphrased, and translated by Vladimir Borschev, Aleksandr Kibrik, and Barbara Partee): <http://polit.ru/article/2011/03/09/kibrik/>; <http://polit.ru/article/2011/03/16/kibrik/>



Planners of the first Olympiad, 1965



A. E. Kibrik at his 70th birthday celebrations, MGU

- the Russian Wikipedia entry:  
ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Кибрик,\_Александр\_Евгеньевич
- the website for A. E. Kibrik's 70th birthday celebrations, only three years ago: <http://otipl.philol.msu.ru/~kibrik/aek.php>
- the memorial booklet: *Aleksandr Evgen'evich Kibrik in memoriam*, Kafedra teoreticheskoy i prikladnoy lingvisticheskoy filologicheskogo fakulteta, MGU imeni M. V. Lomonosova, Moskva 2012.

Picture credits: The Kibrik family

If I may add a speck of personal colour to this bare sketch of a life larger than life:

My professional association with Aleksandr Evgen'evich Kibrik began in the late 1970's: I had seen his awesomely painstaking work on Archi and on ergativity across Daghestanian, and he agreed to contribute a chapter to our *Ergativity* volume of 1979, entitled 'Canonical ergativity and Daghestan[ian] languages'. (I have a vague recollection that Georgij Klimov made the introductions, notwithstanding their ideological differences over stadialism.) Then, as Aleksandr Evgen'evich had become Sasha, came inflectional paradigms, then the EUROTYP years where noun phrases and Suffixaufnahme kept some of us occupied, also INTAS (International Association for the Promotion of Cooperation with Scientists from the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union – an EU programme, obviously), then ALT and LT, then other occasions to stay in touch. I last saw Sasha in May 2009, at one of our workshops in Schloss Freudental near Konstanz, this one to mark my coming of (old) age. Celebrating Daghestanian linguistic opulence, canonical or otherwise, he was in great shape, perhaps a bit overweight, and spoke about 'The incredible variability of Daghestanian clause coordination: Attempt of explanation', with no articles in the subtitle, but we didn't miss them.

I wasn't the only member of the Sasha Kibrik fan club in Konstanz. Aditi Lahiri, at EUROTYP in the prosody group that ostensibly couldn't be more distant from noun phrases, had joined up, too:

When I first met him, he came and asked me if we could discuss intonation and in particular phonology, phrasing, and intonation. I was struck by his perceptive questions. I agreed. And eventually we had the most amazing workshop in Moscow. I later had him at Freudental, and again I learnt how to combine detailed field work with establishing generalisations.

But instead of reminiscing about the over 30 years that we had the privilege of the friendship and professional partnership of a man and scholar deeply authentic, without contradiction easy-going and intense, modest and majestic, worldly and local, companionable and private, allow me to dwell on one small point relating to typology that I initially found puzzling.

Sasha would divide up languages into those which were “interesting” and those which weren’t. And he would only go to work on the former: Archi, Alutor, Bagvalal, Tsakhur, the lot. But what is it that makes a language “interesting”, *an und für sich* or for Sasha or for another investigator with a different theoretical outlook? Also, wasn’t he a bit harsh on the “uninteresting” languages, whatever it is that they are lacking? Well, one consolation for them is that interestingness or otherwise is a potentially changeable distinction.

What was at issue here were not facile subjective value judgments, but the setting of a research agenda. By “interesting” Sasha meant, I think, that a language provides a challenge, the challenge of ANALYSIS. Documenting languages without describing, let alone analysing them, was not how he saw his job description. Nor was it his ambition as a typologist to amass worldwide samples and tick off YES’s or NO’s on checklists for variables whose values could be seen at a glance, upon fleeting acquaintance and without analysis. He would sometimes refer to himself as a “microtypologist”: his samples were comprised of those languages which he (and his teams) had worked hard to get to know intimately, whose analytic challenges, for someone with his theoretical outlook, he had been able to meet – where he could glimpse the truth, and truth became one with beauty, as in the paintings and films that cast their spell over you. These select languages, or rather their hard-gained analyses, revealed to him something significant about linguistic diversity and unity, something samples, however large and shrewdly chosen, were liable to miss out on if languages included in them were under- or mis-analysed.

It saddened him when, on more than one occasion, his abstracts didn’t find favour with programme committees for typological conferences, and he sensed typology to be headed in a different direction. (Perhaps these committees could have cited subsidiary excuses, to do with the culturally vastly, and often fatally, different rhetorics of abstract writing.) It won’t now comfort Sasha, but I’m convinced that, at the end of the day, it won’t be microtypology that will be found uninteresting or indeed expendable: depending on one’s overarching questions there will be different micro or macro emphases, but typology would be ill-advised to attempt to dispense with thick description and analysis. Trust Sasha.