

**SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: LANGUAGE AND POLITICS**  
COCO 9 / LING 11 / GOVT 40 / RUSS 39



Professors: Ioana Chitoran  
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Term: Spring 2010

Time: 10A T TH 10 – 10:50 x-hour: W 3 – 3:50

distributive requirements: WCult: Culture and Identity  
SOC

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Many areas of the world are linguistically and culturally diverse. This is a reality thinly concealed behind the concept of a nation. Most nations are not linguistically homogeneous, yet they all rely on language as a powerful tool for defining and building the nation. Language is exploited as an irrefutable symbol of the unity of a nation, under every definition of this concept. For this reason the fate of a language is closely intertwined with the historical-political fate of its community of speakers.

The complex scenario of the Caucasus is the focus of this course. Here the relationships of language and politics have led to separatist struggles and political explosions such as the August

2008 conflict in Georgia, the Chechen wars, or the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Caucasus is one of the areas of the world with the highest linguistic and cultural diversity – over 50 indigenous languages are spoken across this mountain range, inspiring 10<sup>th</sup> century Arab geographers to call it “mountain of tongues”. Other languages have been added by waves of invasion and colonial expansion throughout history, resulting in today’s intricate web of Indo-European, Turkic, and indigenous Caucasian languages. Many languages from the last group are currently endangered – spoken by very small isolated communities, and no longer transmitted to younger generations. Some (e.g., Ubykh) have disappeared.

The goal of this course is to follow in parallel the political development of the Caucasus and its linguistic history, under the hypothesis that one informs the other. We will study primarily the South Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia), the linguistic features of the languages spoken in this area, the language policies that have affected them, and the major political trends. We are adopting here a less common dual perspective, but one that we believe can prove particularly successful in understanding the specific factors that have led to the current linguistic and political situation and especially to the endangered status of many of the indigenous languages.

No prerequisites

Coursework will consist of readings, class discussions, one short paper, oral presentation, final paper.