

# Names of maize in the eastern Caucasus

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Caucasian linguistics 11–13 Jun 2025, Lyon (France)

## Introduction

Maize (*Zea mays*) is a crop from Mesoamerica that made its way across the world through the Columbian exchange (Bonavia 2013: 14–15). It is unclear when it arrived in different parts of the Caucasus exactly, but names for the crop were recorded in a number of languages in the second half of the 18th century by Güttenstädt (1791: 500–540), indicating that it was well-established by then. Currently it is widely cultivated across the Caucasus, and it has become a staple of traditional local cuisine (e.g. Georgian cornbread *mchadi* or Kumyk stuffed dumplings *khalpama*).

Figure 1: Maize field in Zilo, Botlikh district of Dagestan, in 2017 (personal archive)



At first glance maize has many different names in the eastern Caucasus, which is unusual for something relatively new, exotic and ubiquitous. At the same time, similar terms are found among languages that are not known to be in close contact with each other.

- Which terms are used and how are they distributed?
- What can these patterns tell us about how maize was introduced and spread across the area?

## Method and sample

- Words for maize were collected from 119 distinct idioms spoken in the eastern Caucasus (= Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia + bordering territories of Georgia and Azerbaijan where languages of the East Caucasian family are spoken)
- Comprises all East Caucasian languages, local Turkic languages (Kumyk, Nogai, Azeri), Georgian, and Indo-European languages spoken in the region (Armenian and Tat)
- The aim was to collect as many datapoints as possible, following the approach of the Typological Atlas of the Languages of Dagestan (Daniel et al. 2022)
- Sources were mostly dictionaries and the Daghestanian loans database (Chechuro, Daniel & Verhees 2019)
- Additionally, lexemes were collected from older sources such as Güttenstädt (1791) and von Erckert (1895), including some languages that are just outside the area sketched above, such as Ossetic and West Caucasian languages

Browsable data and interactive map visualizations are available at  
[https://github.com/sverhees/2025caucling\\_maize](https://github.com/sverhees/2025caucling_maize)

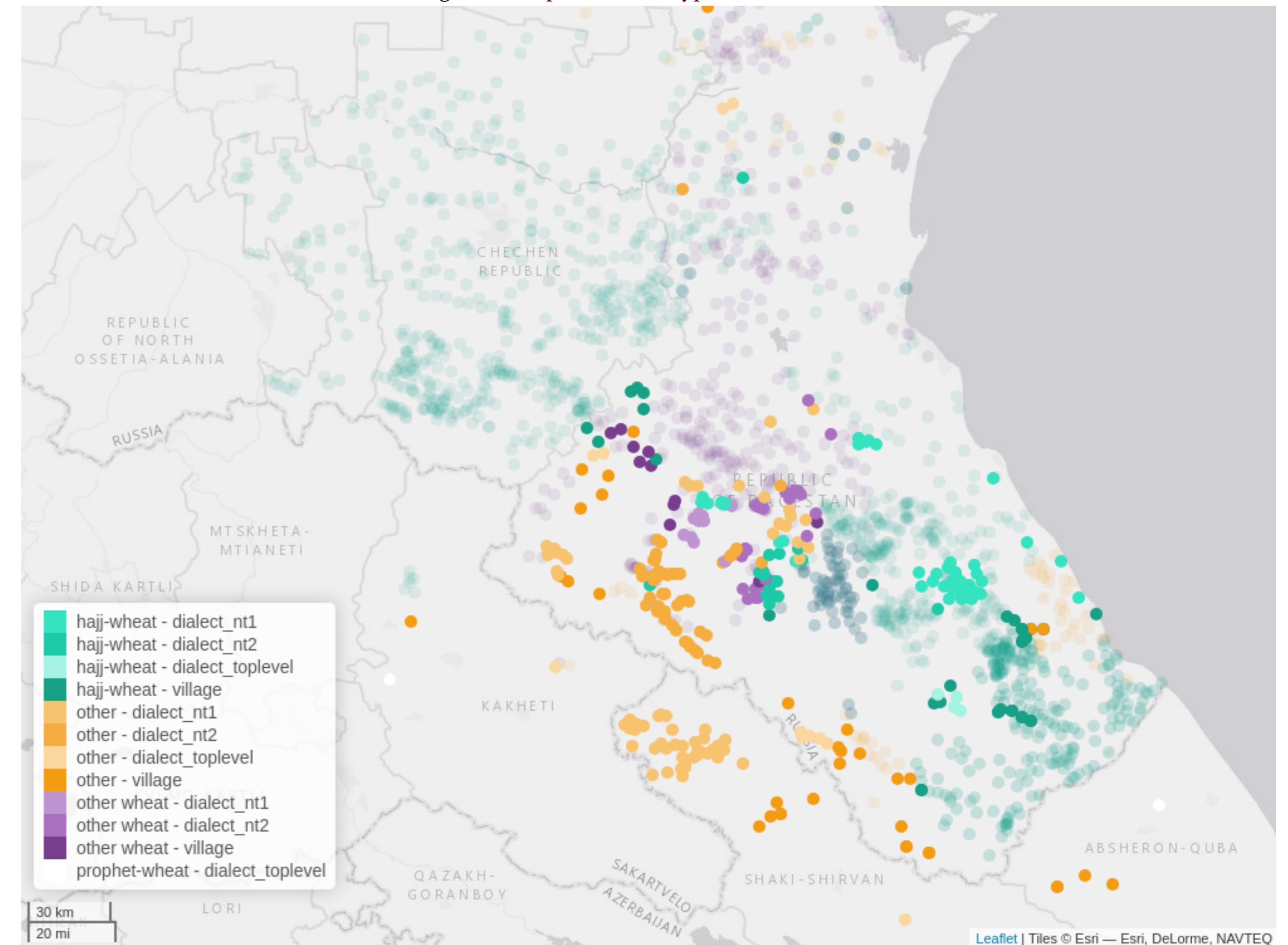
## Types of names for maize

Outside of Mesoamerica, words for maize, if not a variant of ‘maize’, are often formed with existing terms for ‘wheat’, ‘grain’, ‘millet’ or ‘sorghum’. Either an older term is repurposed (e.g. Portuguese *milho* < ‘millet’), or a descriptive adjective is added for differentiation (e.g. *Indian corn* in English). Common in the eastern Caucasus are compounds with ‘wheat’, especially ‘hajj-wheat’, or, more precisely, ‘Islamic pilgrim wheat’.

Type	Idioms
wheat-compounds	71
hajj-wheat	48
hažibuya - Azeri	17
calque	17
ħæžk'a - Chechen	11
unclear	3
prophet wheat pejyæmbærbuyda - Azeri	2
other wheat	21
unclear	19
king-wheat	1
Egyptian wheat	1
other	53
garyudalu - Azeri	26
unclear	10
simindi - Georgian	11
kukuruza - Russian	5
nart-millet	1

## Distribution

Figure 2: Map – different types of names for maize



Each dot is a village. Color is type of name, hue is precision of available data from most precise (darkest) to least precise (translucent): village < dialect non-toplevel n < dialect non-toplevel 1 < dialect toplevel < language

## Discussion

- Most common is some form of ‘hajj-wheat’, which is unique to this area
- Possible parallel only in ‘(wheat from) Mecca’, found in Central and Southeast Asia (Bonavia 2013: 256)
- Many forms with native components as well as matter copies from Azeri *hažibuya* in southern Dagestan > ‘hajj-wheat’ in East Caucasian comes from Azeri?
- Some problems:
  - ‘hajj-wheat’ in Azeri is limited to the dialects of Quba and Dagestan
  - *hažibuya* has a rival in Chechen *ħæžk'a*: matter copies found in Lak, Standard Lezgian and Rissib Avar. Possibly the influence went in the opposite direction?
- Maize ultimately entered the eastern Caucasus from Arabia?
  - ‘hajj-’ as geographical reference: only parallel I know of so far is *hacileylək* ‘stork’ in spoken Azeri
  - If so, is it connected to Arabic merchants (as in Central/Southeast Asia) or pilgrims (folk etymology)?
  - Or ‘hajj-’ in a figurative sense: ‘great figure’ > ‘great wheat’ (Vagapov 2022: 29)
    - > parallel in the western Caucasus? e.g. Kabardian *nartixʷ* ‘nart-millet’
  - Maize entered the eastern Caucasus from the western Caucasus?

☞ If you enjoy wild theories, ask me who I think really introduced ‘hajj-wheat’. I have an idea, but it is too speculative at this point to put in writing.

☞ Or ask me about the other curiosities in this dataset which did not fit on the poster.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Timur Maisak for bringing the work of Vagapov to my attention among other things, Maxim Stepaniants for providing translations from Armenian dialects, Murad Suleymanov for his insights on Tat and Azeri etymology and Samopriya Basu on languages of the western Caucasus.

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