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## ON A GEORGIAN BILABIAL SPIRANT (Based on the analysis of Imerkhebian data)

In the specialist literature there is still much controversy about the qualification and relationship between **ფ**, **ჟ**, and **ჭ** graphemes. Some authors consider them labio-dental while others regard them, alternately, labio-dental in some cases and bilabial in the other according to their positions.

In the modern Georgian speech distinct bilabial **ჭ** occurs in the majority of the Georgian dialects: in Mohkebian, Kartlian, Kakhian, Ingiloian, Fereidanian, Imeretian, Lechkhumian, Gurian, Acharian, and Imerkhebian. Svan vernacular does not have labio-dental **ფ**.

According to our observation in Imerkhebian all the sounds spelt with **ჭ** grapheme by other researchers are bilabial. **ჭ** is attested in the following positions: after the consonant before the vowel, after the vowel before the consonant, between the consonants, before the consonant after the pause, after the vowel before the pause.

Imerkhebian reveals interesting cases of the sound shift: **ფ-ბ**, **ბ-ფ**; **ჭ-მ**, **მ-ჭ**.

We think that there is no need of admitting of the transitional stages **ფ>ბ** and **ბ>ფ** in forms as **ღამაბიწყდა-ღამაფიწყდა**, **ვეზნევი-ვევნები**. The alternation of **ჭ** is admissible in case of regarding **ფ** as bilabial (as, only those consonants that have two markers in common could be mutually interchangeable; B.Jorbenadze).

As it was expected Imerkhebian dialect, functioning separated from the literary Georgian environment for centuries, has preserved the condition characteristic to the live speech of the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> cc.

The data of Imerkhebian dialect confirms one more times that for the Georgian speech bilabial spirant with characteristic sonority has been basic and natural, which, not infrequently, was derived from the partial reduction of **ჭ** vowel (with the influence of other vowel), and chiefly, from the influence of the neighboring labial consonant, and was seldom realized as voiced or voiceless labio-dental variants.