

Language Policy in Azerbaijan toward Sustainable Change

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Language is an essential factor in nation building. When the language is in decline, the identity of a nation is in decline too. As a result, each language has a deep historical background related to its nation.

Azerbaijan is the largest country situated in the South Caucasus in the crossroads between Asia and Europe. Its nation and language have a long history. Surviving invasion by the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union, Azerbaijanis managed to preserve their national identity and native language. The period of seven decades under Soviet rule resulted in sociolinguistic problems for the country.

. The orthography of the Azerbaijani language was shifted to Cyrillic by the Russian Empire in 1939, close to the script of the Russian language. Notwithstanding all these pressures and stresses, Azerbaijani nation managed to preserve the national identity of its mother tongue, customs and traditions under Soviet rule.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Union. These years can be characterized as the times of nation building, language building, and reconstruction. During these years Azerbaijan has not only put forth a policy of improvement, but also as a young independent country has taken care of the ethnic minority groups and minority languages within Azerbaijani borders.

The Azerbaijani language was based on and developed out of the languages of the ancient Turkic tribes who settled on the Azerbaijani territory and made progress during the long historical period. Azerbaijani belongs to the Oghuz language group of the Turkic language families. Azerbaijani is the majority language used in the country.

Because Azerbaijan is situated in a geo-strategically zone, its stability was violated and interfered with by external forces. The country was invaded by Persia, Arabs, Russia and other external forces. Azerbaijan was a matter of dispute between Iran and Russia for a long time, and finally in 1813 by the Treaty of Gulistan and in 1828 by the Treaty of Turkmanchai, the Azerbaijan territory was divided between Persia and Russia (Babon *et al.*, 2004). The Southern part remained in Iran, and the northern part remained in Russia. According to the statistics, nowadays 30 million Azerbaijanis live in Iran without any opportunity to have an education in their mother tongue under Iranian rule (Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, Doc.10517). A document signed by the members of the Council of Europe, by Parliamentary Assembly clearly speaks against the violated rights of Azerbaijanis on this account (*ibid.*). This article focuses on the northern part of Azerbaijan that remained under Soviet rule for decades and declared its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Under Soviet rule, the Russian language played a role in nation building and as a language of policy. Russian was considered the state language along with Azerbaijani. Russian played the role of the lingua franca among 14 Soviet Union countries (including Russia, the Soviet Union countries numbered 15). The policy of the Soviet Union consisted of improvement of the Russian language among the union countries with the goal of gradually reaching the highest level, achieving Russophones in the union countries. Soviet Union directly and indirectly enshrined the opportunities for Russian learning and teaching. Thus, Russian speaking people could find a Russian school in any of the union countries they wished, while the Azerbaijani language, for example, was limited to within Azerbaijani borders (Schiffmann,1996).

The status of ethnicities residing on Azerbaijani territories was complicated as well. They could not have any opportunities in their native languages under the Soviet Union. The Soviet rule created a rather complicated situation for minority groups in Azerbaijan. Thus, they had to preserve their native language and acquire the Azerbaijani language together with the Russian language. As an addition to the Soviet policy by a 1938 decree, the Soviet Union declared Russian an obligatory second language status in all non-Russian schools of the union countries and increased the essence of the Russian language with a centralized curriculum and with increased hours spent on Russian learning and teaching (Pavlenko, 2008). The “Russification” policies of the Soviet Union lead to language polarization within the Azerbaijani nation, which has not yet fully resolved in Azerbaijan society. Under Soviet rule, the value of Russian language was high despite the fact that Azerbaijani held the status of a state language. The people with lack of Russian knowledge were considered less modern and less mobile. This chaos among the

nation put the stalemate of an increasing Russophone population in Azerbaijan. This situation in its turn reflected on the decision of the parents to put their children in Russian schools. It is evidenced by the statistic figures. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there were an estimated 25 million ethnic Russians and 36.5 million native speakers of Russian in ex-union countries (*ibid.*). In Azerbaijan, according to the 1994 estimation, 38 percent of the populations was fluent in Russian, while 82 percent of the population spoke Azerbaijani as their mother tongue (Federal Research Division, 2004).

However, according to the 1989 census 97.7 percent of Azerbaijanis considered Azerbaijani their native and heritage tongue (Grenoble, 2003). Moreover, the majority of the elite consisted of Russophones.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan took steps towards a new era in nation building and language policy. Together with that, Azerbaijan entered into its era of independence with the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh, the unresolved war between Azerbaijan and Armenia that has lasted over 22 years.

On 18 October 1991, Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Azerbaijanis was one of the nations that managed to preserve its national identity, language and culture under Soviet rule.

More generally, the basic Soviet policy in Azerbaijan was based on the principle of gradually reaching the reduction of Azerbaijani language within the country, whereas most of the scientific books in the state libraries were in Russian. Perhaps oddly, to find a book in the Azerbaijani language was a great success for us during our university years, when most books were in Russian in the state libraries. In accordance with this policy of Russian rule, it serves as evidence to point out that, in 1959 in Azerbaijani 837 books were printed in Azerbaijan and 283 books were printed in Russian, while in 1979 the number of Azerbaijani books was 834 books (three books less than 1959), while Russian books numbered 430 books (147 books more than 1959) printed in Azerbaijan (Balayev, 2007).

Not surprisingly, Azerbaijan is the homeland of diverse ethnolinguistic groups that speak languages of different family groups. According to the 1999 statistics in Azerbaijan, the minority groups were – Lezgins, constituting 2.2%, Russians 1.8%, Armenians 1.5%, Talysh 1.0%, Avar 0.6%, Tat 0.13%, Tsakhur 0.2%, Georgians 0.2%, Kurds 0.2%, Jews 0.1%, Udin 0.005%, and other nationalities 0.12% of the total population in Azerbaijan (Library of President. *The Population*: 32). These abovementioned ethnicities in Azerbaijan belong to the following language groups: North Caucasian, Indo-European, Afro-Asiatic and Kartvelian.

According to the statistics of 1999, Lezgins were the biggest minority group in Azerbaijan (*ibid.*).

Shortly after independence, the government also enhanced its support for ethnic minority groups and their languages. In 1992, legislation adopted by the Azerbaijani government, stressed that the country protects the civil rights and freedoms, development of cultures and languages of minority ethnic groups settled on Azerbaijan territory. In contrast to the Soviet years, the minority nations were now given opportunities in their own languages. In 1992, article 6 of the 7th October law on Education and Article 3 of the state language law ensured the minority nations the rights and educational opportunities in their native tongues.

Nowadays, certain issues still remain in the improvement of the Azerbaijani language. One of the current tasks on the paths toward language policy can be considered the need to decrease numerous Russian schools remaining as the part of the former Soviet Union “Russification” policy. Taking into account that the numbers of Russian schools have not decreased in Azerbaijan nowadays, one may think that Russian has the same status as in the years of Soviet Union. According to the State Statistics Committee in Azerbaijan, the number of pupils attending state and private Russian schools was 108,240 pupils in the 2000-2001 year, and in the 2005-2006 years it constituted 108,737 pupils: moreover, beginning in the year 2006 -2007 the number starts falling down to 108,257, while in 2009-2010 this figure is indicated to be 95,567 pupils (State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan). This decrease is not related to the decrease of Russian language in Azerbaijan: in total the number of pupils decreased in Azerbaijan. It serves as evidence to point out that, the number of the pupils in Azerbaijani state and private schools was significantly reduced. This decrease is larger in comparative terms than the number of pupils in Russian schools in Azerbaijan. For the 2001-2002 years, the number of pupils attending Azerbaijani state and private schools was 1,653,703, while the figures indicate that in the 2009-2010 years there were 1,364,961 pupils, and for 2011-2012 years there were 1,291,317 pupils overall (*ibid.*). As is evident from the figures, total number of the pupils decreased in Azerbaijan, which is mostly visible in the figures of Azerbaijani schools. Taking into account the year 2009-2010, out of 1,260,600 pupils 95,567 pupils attended Russian state and private schools in Azerbaijan (*ibid.*).

Without a doubt, the importance of the Azerbaijani language has significantly increased within 21 years of independence. Instead, the Russian language is in the process of steadily shifting to a widely used L2 (second language) along with English language among the population. The status of the Russian language is decreasing; the importance of English language is increasing in comparative terms

with decades before. From this standpoint, some scholars maintain Russian and English languages as a threat to the national purity and threat to the development of titular languages in Azerbaijan (Pavlenko, 2008). From my point of view, the importance of Russian in Azerbaijan can decrease and transfer to the L2 spoken status, if the number of Russian schools would decrease. The next logical step, where the government should make a gradual change, is the field of primary and secondary education sectors.

Another current issue is ensuring Azerbaijani language learning and teaching for Azerbaijanis living abroad. A law of Azerbaijan Republic on State language, section 3.0.6., passed 30 September 2002, clearly declares the enhancement of Azerbaijani language for Azerbaijani people living abroad, to get their education and to help use their mother tongue in a free atmosphere. Moreover, Azerbaijanis have difficulties in getting an education in their mother tongue in foreign countries. We do not mean only the case of Azerbaijani immigrants (of course, this is a worldwide issue), but the case of the families from the diplomatic ranks of Azerbaijan: this issue has turned to be rather a problem. Thus, schoolchildren cannot continue or begin their education in the Azerbaijani language. Instead, the children are faced with the situation to attend local schools of foreign countries and continue their education completely in a foreign language, namely called *submersion* in linguistics. This situation can cause the same situation as Russian schools in Azerbaijan. In this case, the children learn and hear Azerbaijani only within the family. This situation characterizes itself with the weak competence of the mother tongue among those children. In order to fix it, we could enact teaching Azerbaijani language at least three times a week, to organize an overall overview of the curricula by the ministry of Education of Azerbaijan to teach Azerbaijani children abroad. It would facilitate the problems that the child could face when he/she returns to Azerbaijan, enabling him/her to easily and successfully get used to the curriculum of the Republic of Azerbaijan (in local schools). Edwards 1994 states: '*the language is in decline if it is no longer passed on to children*' (Edwards, 1994:106). And similarly, one of the aspects where we should take a step for the improvement of Azerbaijani language policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union should constitute the removal of all complications that can be considered further threat to the national language.

Moreover, current problems inherited from the former Soviet Union, unquestionably, urge continuous steps in the field of language. The numerous steps taken by the Azerbaijani government on language improvement and language policy portray the range of democracy and the national sense towards language policy in Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani language has become more popular and significantly enhanced in the post-Soviet era. The importance of the language reasonably increased and was pushed forward to improvement by numerous decrees as the state language of the country. The importance and scale of the Russian language and Russophone population in Azerbaijan has diminished, but not significantly disappeared. The importance of the English language as a foreign language increased after the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Moreover, Russian is still in use as a communication method rather than as a foreign language in the country. The amount of Russophone elites has diminished, but not disappeared. Among the growing generation, Azerbaijani is important. Moreover, there are still families that allow their children or grandchildren grow up in Russian. The Azerbaijani language is now far from being threatened by either language. However, the improvement and enhancement of the language should be put into practice for the long term.

Along with these complexities, Azerbaijan has a 22-year-long unresolved war over the ethnic diversity field in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has resulted in many fatalities for the country. 20 percent of the territories of Azerbaijan were occupied by Armenians and 10% of the population has refugee status (Hörner *et al.*, 2007:77). However, all these processes also resulted in unplanned retardation of the advancement of other issues.

The Azerbaijani language has endured repressions, limits and pressures through its history, but has never lost its national essence as the sole language of the country. Firm determination and the national unity of Azerbaijanis resulted in independence of the Azerbaijani nation and Azerbaijani language.

To conclude, Azerbaijan is still marching forward with an effort to solve its inherited language problems remaining from the Soviet era and taking steps toward the settlement of all national issues in a peaceful and democratic manner. Removing all the casualties of the Soviet era will still take decades.

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Summary

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has been working towards a way to improve the Azerbaijani language as the sole state language of the country. The continuing war over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict slowed the speed of all these ameliorating processes. There are certain issues in the field of language policy in Azerbaijan. It will take several decades for the country to remove all the obstacles and to make its way to the peak in the field of language.

Key words: *Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, state language, Nagorno-Karabakh, language policy*