

Azerbaijani: Language of a Divided Nation The Differences Between the North and the South

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What happens to a language when the country in which it is spoken is divided and ruled by two separate and very different political systems? What kinds of influences shape the vocabulary, phonological and grammatical structure and even graphic presentation of the language?

In 1828, Azerbaijan was divided into two separate entities – Northern Azerbaijan (ruled by Russian czars and later Soviet Union from which it gained independence in 1991) and Southern Azerbaijan (Iran). Habib Azarsina from Urmia (Southern Azerbaijan) and his wife, Naida Mamedova from Baku (the Republic of Azerbaijan), experience the nuances of these language differences daily. Together they share their observations.

Historical Overview

Despite the separation into what is commonly referred to as “Northern and Southern Azerbaijan,” the Azerbaijani language has remained basically the same. Azerbaijanis of Iran are able to carry on long conversations with Azerbaijanis of the Republic of Azerbaijan with very little difficulty.

Although Azerbaijan has been divided for more than 150 years, no border control existed between the two regions until the 1920's when the Bolsheviks took over in the North. Even after that date, two major migrations took place. During Stalin's purges of the 1930's, thousands of Azerbaijanis from Soviet Azerbaijan were either deported or escaped to the Iranian side. The reverse situation took place in December 1946 after the collapse of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic government when thousands of Southern Azerbaijanis fled north. But even up until 1947, Azerbaijanis living on either side of the border were in frequent contact with each other.

Government Policy

The Azerbaijani language has been treated very differently by the two separate governments. In the North, it enjoyed official language status along with Russian. However, in the South, official use was banned after 1946 and the Shah's government did everything in its power to discourage people from even speaking Azerbaijani. Even children in elementary schools were scolded for using their mother tongue.

Despite these pressures, Azerbaijani in Iran survived simply from the sheer number of native Azerbaijani speakers (one third of Iran's population – approximately 20 million people). It was only natural, however, that the language would begin to incorporate many words and even some grammatical features of the more prestigious national language, Persian.

In contrast, in Northern Azerbaijan (population 7 million) under the Soviet regime, thousands of books, magazines and daily newspapers were published despite the fact that Azerbaijani was always under the shadow of the more prestigious Russian language. Azerbaijanis who knew Russian always qualified for better jobs and advanced more rapidly.

In Southern Azerbaijan very few avenues of media were available in the native language. One exception was a single radio program which consisted of a one hour government-sponsored program. There were no TV programs, no movies, and very few books. Therefore, many Southerners tuned in to Baku radio or listened to pirate radio stations; and intellectuals occasionally found ways to get books that were published in Azerbaijani (Arabic script) from the North (Progress Press-Moscow; and Yazichi Press-Baku).

Written Form

Considerable differences lie in the written forms of the language in the two regions. In the South, Azerbaijani has survived more as a spoken language rather than a written one as it is rarely written or published. Consequently, when it comes to writing, most Iranian Azerbaijanis, no matter how highly educated, simply cannot read and write Azerbaijani.

However the Pahlavi dynasty is not fully to blame for the differences. Under the Soviet regime, Azerbaijan's alphabet script was changed three times – from Arabic, with its right to left orientation, to Latin during the decade between the late 20s and 30s and finally to Cyrillic form 1940 up until 1991. Very few Iranian Azerbaijanis were able to read Cyrillic. Apart from the script, the differences in written forms are basically superficial and most variations have emerged during the last 50 years. The language and style of books written before 1940s are almost identical. For instance, poems of the famous Southern poet, Mirza Ali Mo'jiz Shabestari are widely read in the North while poems of the Northern poet, Mirza Alakbar Sabir, are widely circulated in the South.

The Future

With the collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, contacts have increased significantly between Azerbaijanis. Weekly flights connect Tehran and Tabriz to Baku; daily bus service exists, and relatives and business people cross the border frequently. Telephone communication is available, and audio and video tapes are widely shared.

The Republic of Azerbaijan's decision to adopt a modified Latin alphabet will make it easier for Iranian Azerbaijanis to read than Cyrillic, as educated Iranian Azerbaijanis have studied English and other foreign languages at school and are familiar with the Latin

alphabet. Many have traveled to Turkey or have studied there and are familiar with the Turkish alphabet which is closely related to the new one that Azerbaijan is using. Iranian Azerbaijanis need only spend a few hours., or, at most, a few days to master the new script. Therefore, it is inevitable that once publishing in the new script becomes regular in the North, a significant exchange of ideas between the Azerbaijanis of the North and South will occur.

Some Vocabulary Differences between Northern and Southern Azerbaijani		
English	Southern Azerbaijan	Northern Azerbaijan
table	miz	stol
chair	səndəl	stul
bench	nimkət	skamyə
bicycle	çərx, düçərxə	velosiped
driver	şofer, ranəndə	sürücü
intersection	çaharrah	tin
newspaper	ruznamə	qəzet
university	danişqah	universitet
number	şumarə	nömrə
pen	xutqar	ruçka
purse	kif	sumka
skirt	ətək	yupka
necktie	kravat	qalstuk
army	ərteş	ordu
soldier	sərbaz	əsgər
general	sərhəng	palkovnik
helicopter	helikopter	vertolyot
nurse	pərəstar	şəfqət bacısı
veteinarian	dampizişk	baytar
elections	intixabat	seçkilər
minister	vəzir	nəzir
meeting	cələsə	iclas
break	tənəffüs	fasilə
secretary	munşi	katibə
salary	hüquq	maaş
announcer	quyəndə	diktor
listener	eşidən	dinləyici
to take photos	əks salmaq	şəkil çəkmək
tooth paste	xəmir dəndan	diş pastası
electricity	bərq	elektrik, işıq