

Argumentum ad Ignorantiam: Use of Latin Script in Azerbaijani

written by Elmir Mirzəyev Elmir Mirzoyev

More than 17 years have passed since the order of July 18, 2001 on the transition of the Azerbaijani language into Latin script.

As an Objection to Latin Script

We can easily say that the desire to switch to Latin alphabet began almost 30 years ago as a movement. At that time, this desire started from small circles and its gradual transition to the masses was chaotic.

For many objective and subjective reasons, for many of us the transition to Latin script was not merely a matter of writing, it was rather about our hopes for an independent state, being a part of the colorful “free world” after painful and gray Soviet reality, as well as destroying all visible and invisible borders with ethnically close Turkey. A naïve hope, which we believed in, about a unified common Turkic language was wandering around. This move, which was related to the political sphere rather than the cultural one, originated from our desires to go beyond the “one alphabet space” we were forced to enter in the Soviet empire; in a sense, intuitively we wanted to be “civilized” and to become Europeans. Since then, all writing attempts (with or without permission, official or unofficial, at home or on the streets) in Latin script had been, in essence, spontaneous protests.

Finally, Latin script first became official in 1992 and then compulsory in the summer of 2001. Purely culturological

problems of this issue, which was attempted to be solved in a hurry and has already ceased to be political, have yet to be resolved. Since any script plays an important role within the framework of the culture in which it is applied, it is worth to look at some of its aspects.

Latin Script as a Cultural Space

The present-day Europe, with its globally dominant [\[i\]](#) role in the past few centuries, is the heir of the Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire; and Latin script is an integral part of this culture, which is part of the German-Roman civilization, [\[ii\]](#) which was formed under the influence of the Western Roman Empire.

Writing culture, which was historically closely associated with priests and church, had come from the then European “barbarian” tribes – after their conquest and dissolution by the Roman Empire – mainly due to spread of Christianity. New nations (Germans, French, English and others), formed from these tribes, namely Goths, Gales, Saxons (also Huns, Slavs, etc.), naturally created their own Latin-based transcriptions. For example, the letter we pronounce like *ş* is written as *sh* in English, *sch* in German, *ch* in French, *sc* in Italian, *sz* in Polish, and *š* in Czech. In German, when *a*, *o*, and *u* letters accept Umlaut, [\[iii\]](#) instead of two dots, these letters simply be accompanied by *e*: *ä* = *ae*, *ö* = *oe*, *ü* = *ue*; thus, there is no problem of transcription for other Latin script languages – in which two dots are not used. In other words, Latin scripts have a long history in the written cultures of their nations.

Many complexities and problems in this area still remain in the peoples which “fundamentally” use Latin script, and the ongoing reform initiatives in this field still continue. [\[iv\]](#) In this sense, it has yet to be realized how will the changes in our writing system have profound effects on the culture and future development of Azerbaijani society.

For example, if some language uses the Arabic script, it will influence deeply that language's lexicon, grammar, and in some cases even phonetics, because then vowels will not be used, naturally a number of grammar rules and many terms will enter that language from Arabic, etc. Or, say, if some language uses characters, it would be a reflection of a totally different worldview.

Since Arabic language was used for many years in Azerbaijani, it had grammatical norms corresponding to that period. The case of Cyrillic alphabet was the same – in 1940, when the application of this writing system was introduced in Azerbaijan, its grammatical norms were developed.

Latin script belongs to Azerbaijan as the stones carved in Latin by the Legio XII Fulminata (Thunderbolt) in Gobustan belong to the history and culture of Azerbaijan. The results of such a great cultural breakthrough have yet to be fully understood by our society, and the conceptual approach for its application has not been developed.

Nightmare of Cyrillic Alphabet

Changes in writing scripts are the confirmation of cultural and civilizational affiliation of any ethnos, its ideology, main areas of development as well as its geopolitical space. We want to be Europeans and we see our future prospects in the space of this civilization. Even our football teams, which disappoint us due to their defeats, are playing in this area.

Nevertheless, our situation in this game is better compared to that of writing system. Although we often lose hockey games with more agreeable scores, at least we are aware of the fact that this is a foreign game and we follow its rules. For example, this game is not played manually, there is an offside, the penalty kick is shot at 11 meters, and so on.

In the case of writing system, however, although it has been over 30 years since our initial efforts to restore Latin

alphabet, we have not been able to move beyond the influence of Cyrillic alphabet and its grammatical rules; even there have not been any serious conceptual attempt.[\[v\]](#)

Many abbreviations such as Jazz, Taxi, Sex,[\[vi\]](#) DVD, WC, VIP, Web, URL are widely used and are not translated in other Latin-based scripts. There is no need to translate such phrases into Latin-based languages because in these languages these words (including famous brands and logos such as BMW, Mercedes, Coca-Cola, SONY, Peugeot, etc.) become something like hieroglyphs, even cuneiforms and they all have only single meanings.[\[vii\]](#)

Almost in every Latin-based language and country (including Turkey) proper names are written without any changes. We, however, write proper names as well as the names of historical figures as we hear, that is, in a non-logical way (under the influence of Cyrillic, for example, we write *İ. S. Bax* instead of I. S. Bach, *Freyd* instead of Freud, *Sveyq* instead of Zweig, *Homer* instead of Homeros, who is known as Homeros throughout the world, *Herakl* instead of Hercules, *Höte* instead of Goethe or *Hayne* instead of Heine). This, in turn, leads to total illiteracy as well as phonetic and grammatical inaccuracy.[\[viii\]](#)

Another meaninglessness in our writing system is that even some Latin words, which do not have an Azeri equivalent, were attempted to be “nationalized;” for example, *Kasus belli* (*Casus belli*), *Karpe Diem* (*Carpe Diem*), and etc.

In addition, names of toponymics in Latin script should be clarified. For instance, there is an ambiguity in the name of Hamburger (though sellers mostly write Cyrillic *Qamburger*, and even *Gamburger*), which is widespread in the streets of Baku.[\[ix\]](#)

Similarly, it is also impossible to understand why apostrophe (’), which is used in the middle of words in all Latin-based scripts, was abolished in Azerbaijani. This symbol was

necessary for proper expression of many words. For example, *mə'na* (meaning), *şe'r* (poem), *ən'ənə* (tradition), *e'lan* (announcement) and etc. Moreover, as it is mentioned, when we add suffixes to proper names, we would need to use apostrophes; for example, *George Bush'un siyasəti* (George Bush's policy) or *J. W. Goethe'nin yaradıcılığı* (J. W. Goethe's works) and etc.

Before refuting the above-mentioned notes on the grounds that they are “national features of our language,” one should also consider thousands of years' tradition of Latin script before our adoption of Latin alphabet. The presented evidences are features of Cyrillic alphabet rather than that of our language. The nightmare of Cyrillic alphabet is still alive in our language.[\[x\]](#)

Alphabet Wars

Moldova, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were the first former Soviet countries that adopted Latin script. In Russia, this issue was first raised in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria during the presidency of Dzhokhar Dudayev, and then in Tatarstan.

The consequences of these alphabet wars are clear – in January 2005, the Russian Constitutional Court ruled against Tatarstan on the grounds that the latter's transition to Latin script was the violation of the “unified alphabetic sphere” of the country, and this decision proved that this was primarily political rather than cultural issue.

However, one of the most important factors in this process is the psychological one. In Japan and China, this issue was raised and discussed several times. Such an incident was created in Japan,[\[xi\]](#) but the rejection of hieroglyphics was primarily impossible due to physiological reasons.

There has been no case in the world history that can be cited as an example of alphabetic changes in languages, such as

Japanese, Chinese or Russian, that have rich literature. Some countries, however, are just faced with material problems. For example, even though Mongolia,[\[xii\]](#) which was forced into Cyrillic alphabet in the 1970s, declared that it would adopt the ancient Mongolian writing system, it was not realized because unlike rich countries like Azerbaijan, such an expensive project was impossible to implement for this poor state.

Changing Writing Systems as a Global Civilizational Project

Of course, changing writing system in any culture is related to some global civilizational project. For instance, the transition of Kemalist Turkey to Latin alphabet in 1928 was result of the abolition of Sharia courts, madrassahs and hijri calendar (and even the ban on fez) along with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire as well as the symbolization and confirmation of a new secular state project of Turks in line with the requirements of that time.

This modernization process, in line with the demands of time, was a necessity. Otherwise, the existence of this state would be shaky. However, many other aspects should also be considered. First of all, strong relations[\[xiii\]](#) of the Ottoman Turks with Europe had begun six century ago and as the Ottoman Empire influenced the West, it was naturally influenced by Europe, too. From this point of view, although the Turkish transition to Latin script was not clearly justified, it was not completely unnatural.

Furthermore, during transition to Latin-based script, almost 90 percent of Turkish population was illiterate (as opposed to higher literacy rate of Azerbaijan in 1922) and this factor significantly simplified this painful process. Undoubtedly, the État-nation[\[xiv\]](#) project, which now seems quite skeptical, was the most optimal model for collapsed Ottoman Empire.

Indeed, at the same period there were supporters of this path in Russia, however, for quite other reasons – Russians, with reasonably grounds, were expecting [\[xv\]](#) the “world revolution,” and the alphabet of this future global language could only be Latin script. In general, the Bolsheviks, like in all matters, had unique ideas in the field of language –in 1920s and 1930s it was considered that all small peoples living in the USSR should have writing culture. Some of these peoples had never had a writing culture, and some of them had only “reactionary” – Arabic or Ancient Mongolian and etc. – writing systems.

So, between 1923 and 1939 approximately 50 new alphabets [\[xvi\]](#) were created, and in January 1930 the Latinization project of Russian language was ready. [\[xvii\]](#) This project was highly appreciated by the then Soviet-era ideologist A. Lunacharski who reminded his colleagues that Lenin was also a supporter of Latin alphabet.

However, there was a very strong factor against the alteration of Cyrillic alphabet – it was the ideology. Stalin abandoned the concept of “world revolution” and preferred the model of “socialism in one country.” Therefore, many revolutionary Bolsheviks abandoned their expansionist goals and in the 1930s, the USSR was totally becoming a closed orthodox Empire. As a result of such a sharp breakthrough in the state policy, during 1937-1941, alphabets of all Soviet languages (except some of them such as Georgian, Armenian, German, Baltic state languages and etc.) were altered to Cyrillic and the goal of “unified alphabetic sphere” was achieved. By doing so, Stalin reaffirmed the alphabet as an ideological weapon.

Would this tyrant ever imagined that the same weapon would be used to dissolve his own Empire? Maybe not, but in any case, strange use of Latin script in our language is result of the same historical-cultural ballast and, as we have already mentioned, our alphabet continues to remain in the cultural space of Cyrillic.

Notes & References

[i] Here many aspects are also considered: military-political, scientific-technical, cultural, and etc.

[ii] Finns, Hungarians, and western Slavs (Polish, Czechs, Slovaks, Croatians, Slovenians, etc.) may also be included in this notion regardless of their ethnic differences.

[iii] Umlaut – it is a mark (¨) in German used over a vowel in order to indicate a different vowel quality: ä, ö, ü.

[iv] Bernard Shaw, a famous writer, was unsatisfied with the very intricate transcription of the 26-character English language; therefore, he had donated 25000 pounds for the development of a new English alphabet. This work was completed in 1962 and the 48-character alphabet was ideally suited to the phonetics of English, however, it was so radically different from the traditional alphabet that it was believed to be impossible to apply it in real life.

[v] Compared to other Latin based scripts, Azeri Latin script has different types of problems – in particular, inadequate use of the letters *x* and *q*, as well as use of *ə*, which does not have any equivalent in other Latin script languages.

[vi] Since recently there were some funny announcements in Baku – carpenter sex, woodworking sex, glass sex, etc.

[vii] The fact that the name of an international organization called UNESCO is written as YUNESKO by both state and non-governmental organizations in Azerbaijan is one of the examples of illiteracy in this area. Since the name of this organization is translated into Azerbaijani as *Birləşmiş Millətlərin Beynəlxalq Təhsil, Elm və Mədəniyyət Təşkilatı* (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), its abbreviation should either be written as BMBTEMT, or it should be kept as UNESCO (which is the best option because other Latin-based scripts also use it). The

same can be said about all other abbreviations (ISESCO, etc.).

[\[viii\]](#) There are some exceptions, for example, the scandal broke out after the name of the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who visited Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, was written as *Malgorzata Thatcherova*.

[\[ix\]](#) There are many problems here as well. For example, the name of New York is written as *New York* by Americans and British, *Nowy York* by Polish, *Нью-Йорк* by Russians, and *New York* (as it is in original) by other nations, including Turks. However, we write the name as *Nyu York* (as it is written in Cyrillic), which seems a bit illogical.

[\[x\]](#) If you remember, we did not have proper unified fronts to print texts before Microsoft XP 2002 program. As you know, Azerbaijani fonts, which are available until now, were downloaded separately since they were not included in the standard Microsoft Office suite, and our fonts, although in Latin alphabet, were programmed in the RU (Cyrillic alphabet) code. It seems absurd, but it was the standard practice because all programmers and others were Russian speakers. In any case, it is possible to confidently say that the nightmare of Cyrillic alphabet is still alive among us and in the most up-to-date technologies.

[\[xi\]](#) The Romaji (Japanese – Roman writing) system, the transliteration of Japanese into Latin script for foreign readers, was created in a long period of time. Yet Romaji was only for foreigners, not for the language itself.

[\[xii\]](#) When I was a participant in an International Festival held in Gobi Desert in 2002, I witnessed how this alphabet makes the country, of which people I love so much, ridiculous

[\[xiii\]](#) In any area, such as wars – we should not overlook that the last siege of Vienna in the heart of Europe took place in 1683, when the Ottoman border was only a few kilometers east of that city. If Europe could easily import the Ottoman battle

tactics, coffee culture and drums, then the vice versa was also true.

[\[xiv\]](#) État-nation (fr.) – a nation-state, traditionally formed European model of centralized states, such as France, Italy, Germany, etc.

[\[xv\]](#) In the Autumn of 1920, as a result of internal conflicts in the Bolshevik government, unexpected defeat of the Red Army to Marshal Pilsudski near Warsaw was the last blow to these plans. Otherwise, the path to Europe was completely open over the hastily created Weimar Republic, which was established by social democrats in the ruins of devastated Empire (II Reich).

[\[xvi\]](#) As it is known, later all these languages adopted Cyrillic alphabet.

[\[xvii\]](#) A scholarly group, led by Professor Nikolay Feofanovich Yakovlev, proposed three similar alternative variants.

[Argumentum ad Ignorantiam: Use of Latin Script in Azerbaijani](#)