

The Language of Azerbaijan: Turkish or Azerbaijani?

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In June of 1918, the government of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR) enacted a law declaring *Turkish* the state language. In a period during which romantic ethnic nationalism was a part of the ongoing national building process, this was a natural development and it reflected historical realities as well.

For example, poet and educator Mirza Shefi Vazeh, who lived in Azerbaijan in the 19th century titled his instructive linguistic manual of local vernacular language “Kitabi – Turki” (Book of Turkish). Abbaskuli agha Bakikhanov, a writer, educator, and linguist from the 19th century, also said that the language of the majority of Muslims from the South Caucasus is Turkish. Mirza Fatali Akhundov and other educators considered the language spoken by the majority in Azerbaijan as “the Turkish language” as well. However, the Soviets that succeeded the ADR changed and modified their policies regarding the language issue of Azerbaijan several times.

From Turkish to Azerbaijani

While in Moscow, some officials, including, as some sources suggest, Lenin himself initially were in favor of absolutely abandoning the idea of state language, for the other nations of the USSR which were struggling for the right to self-determination the language issue was vital for this question. This contradictory situation manifested itself in many official documents of the Soviet government in the early years. Nevertheless, there were no disputes in the first years of the Soviet Union regarding the name of the majority’s language in Azerbaijan SSR. In other words, the tradition of the ADR, which named the local language Turkish, was continued.

So in February of 1921, on the decree of the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Committee, the Turkish was officially declared as another working-language of the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic alongside with Russian. In 1922, the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic was merged with Georgia and Armenia to create the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) (dissolved in 1936). The coat of arms of the TSFSR in the constitution of 1922 described the language of Azerbaijan as "Turkish" and its constitution of 1925 recognized "Turkish" as one of the official working-languages of this federation.

In 1922, an agreement on the formation of the USSR was reached. In article 14, "Turkish" as the language of Azerbaijanis (alongside with Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Georgian, and Armenian) was acknowledged as one of the six working languages of the USSR. Additionally, in June of 1924, the local Central Executive Committee made "Turkish" the official language of Soviet Azerbaijan. Although there was no such notion as "official language" in the 1927 constitution of Azerbaijan SSR, written words on the flag of the Republic mentioned the term "Turkish".

However, in 1936-1937, the situation changed fundamentally. Even though there was no explicit mention of an enactment of state language in local Azerbaijani laws, the term "Turkish" was substituted by "Azerbaijani" in state and court documents. Later in 1956, "Azerbaijani" was given the status of the official state language of Soviet Azerbaijan. This was also mentioned in Soviet Azerbaijan's last Constitution adopted in 1978.

As we see, the enactment of "Turkish language" as a state language during ADR was the outcome of the political ideals of its time, yet it also reflected an historical and factual reality on the ground. The concept of "the Azerbaijani language" on the other hand was enforced by the Stalinist Soviet government and it was implemented to create an ethnic "Azerbaijani" nation and separate it from the influence of

Turkey.

During the last years of the USSR and first years after its demise there was a rise in ethnic Turkish nationalism in Azerbaijan. So the law enacted in 1992 changed the name of the local language once more. "Turkish" was reinstated and replaced "Azerbaijani" as the name of the state language of now independent Azerbaijan. However, it did not last long. The Constitution of 1995, which was initiated by the late third president Heydar Aliyev, replaced "Turkish" with "Azerbaijani" again, as the name of the official language of the Republic of Azerbaijan. It should be noted that the majority of millions of Azerbaijanis in Iran unlike their ethnic brethren in Azerbaijani Republic never adopted the term Azerbaijani and they still call their native language "Turkish".

The language itself

During the Azerbaijani Enlightenment in the 19th century, although local intellectuals did not display disagreement on the subject of the name of the language (all of them called it Turkish), the nature of the literary language posed serious questions and raised many disputes. For example, in his appeal to readers in the first issue of the popular local journal called "Molla Nasraddin," famous writer and founder of this journal Mirza Jalil Mammedguluzadeh called the local language "Turkish." Yet, interestingly in his play called "My Mother's Book," the author professed critical attitudes towards Azerbaijanis who preferred to speak Ottoman literary language instead of their vernacular. At that time, the Enlightenment intellectuals such as Mirza Jalil Mammadguluzadeh were in favor of adopting local literary language in accordance with the local vernacular, that is, spoken language. However, some others like Huseyn Javid preferred to adopt the language of Ottoman Turks as local literary language in Azerbaijan. A similar duality existed in the press of those times as well. While some used a language based on local vernacular, some other journals were published in Ottoman Turkish.

After the Sovietization, the first idea i.e. the promotion of local standard language based on vernacular, became more popular and it was improved and standardized by writers such as Jafar Jabbarli in order to form an Azerbaijani Turkic language. So until 1936-1937 local standard language was called Turkish, however it was different than the official language of the Republic of Turkey. However, it should be admitted that throughout the years of the 1920s and the 1930s, the grammar, writing, vocabulary and etc. of Turkey's Turkish still had a strong influence on the standard language of Azerbaijanis. However, since 1936-1937, when the name of the language in Soviet Azerbaijan was altered, the language itself has become subject to significant linguistic changes, as part of the soviet calculated intention. At the same time in Turkey their standard Turkish had been significantly reformed as well.

In other words, subsequently two differently standardized written and spoken languages – Turkish and Azerbaijani – were formed. With the influence of urbanization, science, education, and television, this polarization was further deepened. I remember when I began to watch Turkish films and television programs during the late Soviet times, I found them very difficult to understand. The situation has changed since Turkish TV has become popular in post-Soviet Azerbaijan and currently Azerbaijanis easily understand Turkey's Turkish. Yet in general the majority of Turks still find it difficult to properly understand standard Azerbaijani.

Post-Soviet Period

The restoration of the "Azerbaijani language" in the constitution adopted in 1995 and the reinstatement of the ethnic Azerbaijani nationalism by Heydar Aliyev were to some extent the continuation of the Soviet policy, which aimed to protect the language from the cultural and political influences of Turkey.

In Soviet times, the closed borders strengthened the position of literary Azerbaijani. Before that, Azerbaijani Enlightenment literature was setting trends in the region. Currently, however, it lacks competitiveness. Inability to produce high quality literature in the last 25 years weakened the competitiveness of Azerbaijani language. Azerbaijani education, science, media, and literature have yet to promote high quality language. So due to the influence of Turkish science and artistic literature, as well as the thousands of Azerbaijanis who graduated from universities in Turkey, and Turkish schools in Azerbaijan, the growing influence of standard Turkish on the Azerbaijani language is undeniable. In addition, the majority of people in Azerbaijan do not read, they just watch. Turkish TV, with their soap dramas and reality shows are the most popular in Azerbaijan. The younger generation understands and speaks this language (Turkish) far better than older generations. But whether this trend is sustainable remains to be seen. Let us repeat that the political factor has always played an important role in the issue of language in Azerbaijan.