

The Pre-Soviet Language Reform Movement in Azerbaijan: An Overview

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In 1857, Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh first proposed linguistic reforms in Azerbaijan, kicking off a century of intense efforts to transform the hybrid written language of the time, equal parts Arabic, Persian, and Turkic, into the standardized written language (Az. *ədəbi dil*) as it exists in Azerbaijan today. This paper attempts to provide a brief overview of those efforts of several generations of writers, intellectuals, linguists, and bureaucrats.

I have divided the paper into two sections. The first section describes the written language as it existed in the first half of the nineteenth century, in particular those aspects of it that were criticized by later intellectuals. The second section is dedicated to the early period of reform, starting with Akhundzadeh's alphabet proposal in 1857, when writers and journalists generally agreed that the written language should be standardized and proposed numerous different paths to that goal. This paper does not cover the language reforms that were then carried out in the Soviet period.

Each section has been divided into two parts. Issues of alphabet and orthography are examined separately from the issues of vocabulary and grammar. These two sets of problems are fundamentally independent of each other and sometimes developed along opposite trajectories.

This article is very brief and limited in scope. No attempt was made to describe the relationship between the standardized written language and actual usage, questions of education and literacy, or the relationship of the written standard to local dialects. I have used the term "Azerbaijani" throughout to

describe the Turkic language of Azerbaijan, although usage of the term only became widespread during the Soviet period.

Azerbaijani before the reforms

The Perso-Arabic Alphabet

Ever since Islam spread to the Caucasus, Azerbaijani had been written using the Arabic alphabet in its Persian form, i.e. with the addition of four letters that are not used in Arabic: پ *peh*, چ *tcheh*, ژ *jeh*, and گ *gaf*. No attempt was made to adapt the Perso-Arabic alphabet to the phonological structure of Azerbaijani. As a result, the 23 consonant sounds of Azerbaijani were written with 32 consonant letters, meaning that several Azerbaijani phonemes could be represented by multiple letters, e.g.

Post-Soviet Latin	Perso-Arabic
t	ط 'ṭā ; ت 'tā
s	ث 'thā ; س sīn ; ص ṣād
z	ز zāy ; ذ dhāl ; ض ḍād ; ظ 'ẓā

This is similar to English, in which the phoneme /f/, for example, can be represented as 'f' *fill*, 'ph' *philosophy*, or 'gh' *enough*. Such systems result in arbitrary spelling rules which make it more difficult to achieve literacy.

The principle complaint against the Arabic alphabet, however, was not the surplus of consonants, but the lack of vowels. The Arabic language has only three vowel sounds which can be either long or short: /a/ and /ā/; /i/ and /ī/; /u/ and /ū/. The short vowels /a/, /i/, and /u/ are not normally written at all; the reader must simply know their position from experience. Long vowels are written in Arabic, but those letters double as consonants, e.g. و *wāw* might represent either /ū/ or /v/, and ی *yā'* can be either /ī/ or /y/. The reader must guess from context whether the letter is being used as a consonant or a vowel in each individual instance.

An argument can be made that this system of representing vowels is sufficient for Arabic, but it is a serious hindrance in writing in any of the Turkic languages, which are rich in vowel sounds. In Azerbaijani, for example, one Perso-Arabic vowel letter might represent up to four different vowel sounds plus a consonant:

Perso-Arabic	Post-Soviet Latin
ي 'yā	e, ə, i, y
و wāw	o, ö, u, ü, v

An oft-repeated example of the problems that arise from such a system: the words *oldu* ('became') and *öldü* ('died') were written exactly the same way: اولدو. Again, this is aside from the problem that in many cases vowels are simply omitted entirely, with the reader forced to guess from context where they might be.

One major difficulty arising from this system of representing (or not representing) vowels regarded the writing of foreign words and names. If the reader is highly literate in Arabic, Persian, and Azerbaijani, they simply know where the vowels should be in familiar words, and ambiguity can be resolved through context: normally the experienced reader can easily discern whether اولدو is to be read *oldu* or *öldü* through context. In the case of an unfamiliar word, however, experience and context are no help, and the reader is left to guess as to pronunciation. As Russian and European words began to enter the language, the average Azerbaijani reader had little hope of pronouncing them correctly. On the centenary of Nikolai Gogol's birth in 1909, Jalil Mammadguluzadeh wrote in the satirical journal *Molla Nasraddin*:

Without a doubt, thanks to the clear and interesting articles of the Kocharlis, the sweet translations of the Uzeyirs, and the information that our other writers have given about Gogol [Гоголь], our readers are acquainted with this writer, and maybe well-acquainted; but I want to say that, nevertheless,

despite all this reading and writing, our readers who don't know Russian still don't know what this writer's name is.

In this passage, the surname of the author of *Dead Souls* was rendered as غوغل, which in modern Azerbaijani Latin might be transliterated as *ğöğül*, *gvgvł*, or potentially in dozens of other ways. If the reader had never heard Gogol's name spoken out loud, they would not likely guess the pronunciation from the spelling.

In addition to its structural deficiencies, many Azerbaijani intellectuals criticized the visual representation of letters in the Perso-Arabic alphabet. For example, a number of basic letter shapes in the Perso-Arabic alphabet represent several different sounds, differentiated only by diacritical marks, e.g.

Perso-Arabic	Post-Soviet Latin		Perso-Arabic	Post-Soviet Latin
ج <i>jīm</i>	c	ب 'bā	b	
ح 'ḥā	h	ت 'tā	t	
خ 'khā	x	ث 'thā	s	

The reader is forced to pay careful attention to the number and placement of diacritics, which can be difficult, especially considering the quality of print in Azerbaijan in the nineteenth century. A single misplaced or missing dot could have drastic consequences. Once again Mammadguluzadeh provides a memorable illustration in *Molla Nasraddin*:

Everyone knows that to read and understand the Muslim language [Azerbaijani] is a skill. First of all, with those letters that we use to write, it's a difficult thing to read it. We've talked a lot about that. In the word 'talked' ['danışmışq' ██████████] that I just wrote, if one of the 15 dots is out of place, it'll be hard to read. Woe to our condition, woe to our typesetter's day, to the light of our poor readers' eyes. That's how it is for now.

A Hybrid Language

The other major problem that Azerbaijani language reformers intended to solve was the lack of norms regulating the use of Persian and Arabic grammatical elements and vocabulary. In a study of Ottoman poetry, E. J. W. Gibb once wrote that, until the mid-nineteenth century, “every Persian and Arabic word was a possible Ottoman word. In thus borrowing material from the two classical languages a writer was quite unrestricted save by his own taste and the limit of his knowledge.” The same was true of Azerbaijani, which drew liberally from Arabic and Persian vocabulary. Gibb goes on to say that the Perso-Arabic words were given a Turkish grammatical form “in case of need.” This is a crucial caveat, because a writer might use whole phrases or sentences without any elements of Azerbaijani grammar at all. Before the period of language reform, Azerbaijani writers and readers were expected at a minimum to have a knowledge of Koranic Arabic and fluency in Persian apart from their native Azerbaijani. With such a high threshold, literacy in Azerbaijani was restricted to a tiny educated elite.

The last major writer in Azerbaijan prior to the reform period was Abbasgulu agha Bakikhanov (1794-1846). Part of the first generation of Azerbaijanis in the service of the Russian viceroy administration, Bakikhanov nevertheless came of age prior to the Russian conquest of the South Caucasus. As the son of a Baku khan, he received a thorough, traditional education. Bakikhanov wrote primarily in Persian, even in private correspondence with his wife, and he was the last major Azerbaijani cultural figure to write extensively in Arabic as well.

Very few of Bakikhanov’s works were written in Azerbaijani, and those writings are largely incomprehensible to the modern Azerbaijani reader (assuming no significant knowledge of Arabic and Persian). Below is an example from the opening of *Kitabi-əsgəriyyə* in modern Latin transcription with

punctuation added:

***Bu** rəsmi dilaviz **ilə** firqeyi-ülul-əlbabə bəyani-mafilbal **etmiş** və əlvahi-zəmairi-ərbabül-bəsairə **bu** şiveyi-zövqəngiz **ilə** qələmi-ə'lam **yürütmüş** ki, çün məzmuni-hikmət məşhünil-ərvahi-cünudi məcənnədə təarifi-minha **etmədən** və "Ma təkərrümiha" ixtilafi dəlalət **ilə** xəl'əti-xilqəti-işbah **geymədən** rəqabeyi-zənciri-məhəbbət **çəkmişlər** və riyazi-vücudi-bəşəriyyədə və "həmdəhül-insanü fəkanə zülmən cəhulən" misdaqincə nihali-möhnət **əkmişlər**.*

The words of Turkic origin are in bold, while all other words are Arabic or Persian. The hyphenated phrases indicate the use of a Persian grammatical construction called *izafet*. The verbs at the end of each clause are Azerbaijani, but virtually every other aspect of this passage is Arabic or Persian.

Bakikhanov was capable of writing in a much simpler style, as can be seen in the same work, *Kitabi-əsgəriyyə*, whenever direct speech is employed:

*Xülasə, **ol** məzlumə **dedi**:*

*– **Ey** aşiqi-mehribanım! **Bu** sözlər fayda **verməz**. **Bir** fikir **elə** ki, **sən bu yerə gəlmək** üçün **əlində** bəhanə **olsun** və xalq bəd güman **etməsin**.*

***Dedi**:*

*– **Ey** yari-mehribanım! **On** şahi **pul sənə verim**, amma **məni** rədd **etmə**, **hər** vaxt **gəlib ol** məbləği mütalibə **eyləsəm bir** bəhanə **ilə** tə'xir **et**. **Bəlkə bu** vəsilə **ilə bir-birimizi görmək** müyəssər **ola**.*

There is a much greater proportion of Azerbaijani vocabulary (marked in bold) and the Persian and Arabic vocabulary includes a number of words that are well-established borrowings, well-known even to uneducated speakers of Azerbaijani, e.g. *fikir* 'thought,' *xalq* 'people,' or *vaxt* 'time.' There are no Persian grammatical constructions except

for the forms of address *aşıqi-mehribanım* and *yari-mehribanım*, which combine the Persian *izafet* with the Azerbaijani first-person possessive ending *-ım*.

Such simple clear style was the exception in Bakikhanov's time, the rule being the hybrid language of the first passage, with Arabic, Persian, and Turkic elements combined however the author saw fit, limited only by their personal knowledge of those languages. Assuming that the second excerpt is a more or less accurate depiction of actual speech, these two passages show the enormous gulf between the written and spoken language of the time. It was the deluge of Arabic and Persian vocabulary and grammar in the written language that later generations of intellectuals would attempt to rein in.

II. Early Reforms, 1857-1920

Alphabet and Orthography Reforms

The period of language reform in Azerbaijan begins with the writings of Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878). In 1857, Akhundzadeh wrote a document called "A New Alphabet for the Languages of Islam, Consisting of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish," in which he first formulated his criticisms of the Perso-Arabic alphabet, including some of those mentioned above: many letters are the same shape, differentiated only by diacritics; some vowels aren't written at all, and the ones that are written could also be consonants; and the overall difficulty of achieving literacy engendered by the alphabet.

Akhundzadeh's wrote a lot about the reforms which he viewed as necessary, and his views evolved somewhat over time. As stated in an 1871 letter to two Ottoman officials, Akhundzadeh's plan for a new alphabet is simple and practical, and can be summed up in two principles: a) every sound in the language, be it consonant or vowel, should have a letter, and b) the letters should be clearly distinguishable from one another.

As to how the new alphabet should look, Akhundzadeh was

indifferent. In letters to Iranian and Ottoman officials, he offers his own reformed alphabet and his friend Melkum khan's as well, but he also repeatedly encourages his correspondents to create their own alphabet, as long as it meets his criteria. Ever practical, Akhundzadeh was open to any proposal which would solve the problem at hand.

Acknowledging that any reform of the Perso-Arabic alphabet could be seen as an attack on Islam, Akhundzadeh once again offered a solution. He suggested that the clergy continue to use the Arabic alphabet, and that the new alphabet should be promoted only for secular usage. In his vision, the Muslim world would use two alphabets. He even suggests that the new writing system should not be called an alphabet, but should be promoted as a craft, like calligraphy or drawing, so as not to offend the clergy.

Despite Akhundzadeh's efforts, alphabet reform was not adopted in his lifetime, but he had pioneered a movement which quickly spread across the Muslim world. It should be noted that Akhundzadeh never intended for his proposed reform to be limited to Azerbaijan. His original project concerned the "languages of Islam" – Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and he personally presented his new alphabet in Iran and the Ottoman Empire. The reformed alphabet created by his friend, Melkum khan, was apparently actually used for a printing of Saadi's Persian classic *Gulistan*. I am unaware whether it was ever used for Azerbaijani or any other Turkic language.

Mahammadagha Shahtakhti described the scale of the reform movement in a pamphlet published in 1902:

It can be said that polemics about the alphabet's improvement is never absent from the columns of the newspapers in Cairo, Constantinople, Tehran, etc. Some talk about the desirability of inventing a never-before seen system of writing to replace the Arabic script, while others propose the Latin or Armenian alphabet. The scholar Munif pasha proposed a mixed alphabet,

composed of Arabic consonants and German vowels...The Baghdad mufti Abdurahman efendi, renowned for his erudition throughout the Muslim world, invented an entirely new alphabet with which his native language, Kurdish, can be written, among others.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, alphabet reform was an international, multilingual movement stretching across the Muslim world. There was an enormous variety of proposals, from totally new alphabets to existing ones to unexpected combinations of disparate writing systems.

Alphabet reform was widely discussed and debated in Azerbaijan itself, of course. Shahtakhtli published his own reformed alphabet based on the Arabic script and in line with Akhundzadeh's principles: all vowels were represented, the letters were not joined, there were no diacritics, etc. Shahtakhtli had designed it to meet the needs of Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and Azerbaijani. But ultimately the variety of proposals turned into white noise. Without the backing of any state, no single project was able to gain the support necessary for systematic implementation.

While the movement for a new alphabet was a major issue throughout the Muslim world, it is important to keep the phenomenon in perspective: alphabet reform was never an end in itself. Azerbaijani intellectuals were aware that a new alphabet would never be a cure-all for the perceived "backwardness" of their society, which had been brought into relief by the technological, military, and political dominance of Europe. In 1909, Faig Omar Nemanzadeh wrote:

Turks are not alone in seeing barriers to progress in the alphabet. The old European pedagogue, Leibnitz, saw barriers to progress in one type of alphabet, saying 'Give me a perfect alphabet, and I'll give you a perfect language; give me a perfect language, and I'll give you a perfect civilization.' We also understand that the true barrier to our progress is not only our alphabet, but our alphabet is one of the barriers

to our progress. I wonder, are the Japanese and the English satisfied with their alphabets, though having reached the highest level of civilization?

Nemanzadeh argues that the Perso-Arabic alphabet is only one of many barriers to progress in Azerbaijan, and points out examples (Japan, England) of successful modernization despite poorly designed writing systems. In his view, alphabet reform would facilitate modernization insofar as it facilitated education and the dissemination of new ideas, but it was not necessarily a prerequisite for modernization.

Related to the alphabet issue is the question of punctuation. In the nineteenth century, it was the norm to publish in Azerbaijani without punctuation. The works of Bakikhanov and Akhundzadeh, for instance, were published with no punctuation whatsoever. It wasn't until Hasan bay Zardabi founded Azerbaijan's first independent newspaper, *Akinchi*, in 1875, that a serious attempt was made to use punctuation systematically. On the pages of *Akinchi*, Zardabi introduced the following punctuation marks to Azerbaijani publishing:

.	Period		?	question mark
:	Colon	()	parentheses	
...	ellipses	–	dash	
!	exclamation mark	□	hyphen	

Punctuation is often omitted in histories of the language reforms in Azerbaijan, but it plays a crucial role in organizing texts and expanding their expressive power, and Zardabi's innovation is an important achievement.

Foreign Elements in Grammar and Vocabulary

Akhundzadeh wrote extensively in Persian, but when writing in Azerbaijani, he often used the Perso-Arabic style of the day, which, while slightly more comprehensible than Bakikhanov to the modern reader, includes many Perso-Arabic lexical and

grammatical elements. Here is a typical excerpt from an Azerbaijani manuscript of *Kəmalüddövlə...* in which Akhundzadeh's fictional Indian prince critiques the Perso-Arabic alphabet (Turkic vocabulary in bold):

*Bir əlac **elə** ki, İran əhli **oxumağa** qadir **olsun**. Bir əlac **elə** ki, **bu** bərbəriyyət zaman**ının** əlifba**sında** e'rab hüruf **ilə** müttəsil **yazılsın** və nüqat küllən saqit **olsun** və hüruf əşkal **ilə** biduni-vasiteyi-nüqat, **bir-birindən** təşxis **tapıb** e'rab **ilə** müttəsil mərqum **olsun**, taki, **hər kəs** ədna müddət**də** cüzvi ehtimam **ilə**, biistitaət **olsa da**, **öz dilini oxuyub yazmağa** qüdrət **tapsın**.*

In this text there is more Turkic vocabulary than in the first sample from Bakikhanov, and some well-established borrowings from Persian and Arabic show up with Turkic grammatical endings (əlifba**sında**, zaman**ının**). But the text includes a Persian izafet construction (*biduni-vasiteyi-nüqat*), Arabic plurals (*hüruf* = *hərflər*; *əşkal* = *şəkillər*; *nüqat* = *nöqtələr*), and some rare borrowings unfamiliar to a reader ignorant of Persian and Arabic (*biistitaət* 'unable,' *e'rab* 'vowel'). In the entire passage, only one noun, *dil* 'language,' is of Turkic origin.

In his plays, however, Akhundzadeh attempted to write in the spoken language. The plays are composed entirely of direct speech, and are meant to be performed rather than read. Akhundzadeh strove to make the dialogue as natural as possible, and as a result he created the first examples of everyday spoken language in Azerbaijani literature:

*Tükəz: **A kişi, nə qayıırırsan? Bu yaraq-əsbabı qabağına niyə tökübsən?***

*Hacı Qara: Səfər**im var, yola çıxacam!***

*Tükəz: **De görüm hara gedəcəksən?***

*Hacı Qara: **Sənə deməli deyil!***

Tükəz: *Necə deməli deyil? Quldurluğa getmirsən ki, məndən gizlirsən.*

Hacı Qara: *Elə bir zaddır.*

Tükəz: *Bəs elə zad isə, heç vaxt gedə bilməzsən! Dur ayağa, get dükanına, malını sat!*

Words of Turkic origin are clearly in the majority in this passage, and the Perso-Arabic borrowings are limited to extremely common ones, understandable to any speaker of Azerbaijani, e.g. *zad* ‘thing,’ *dükan* ‘shop.’ Perhaps more significantly, the grammar is clear, conversational, and entirely Azerbaijani.

The next major proponent of the clear, unadorned style pioneered in Akhundzadeh’s plays was Hasan Bay Zardabi. In his newspaper, *Akinchi*, Zardabi attempted to develop a journalistic writing style that nevertheless remained close to the spoken language. For example, the following news item, chosen at random, was published in *Akinchi* in 1876:

Amerikadan yazırlar ki, Cəmahiri-Müttəfiqə dövlətin sakinlərinin qədəri qırx milyondur. Amma orada 7643 qəzet çap olunur, lakin tamam Avropa, Asiya və Afrika qitələrində ki, bir neçə yüz milyon sakin var, ol qədr qəzet çap olunmur. Buna səbəb oldur ki, zikr olan dövlətin xalqı tamam oxuyubdurlar və hər gündə qəzet alıb oxuyur.

There is one Persian izafet construction (*Cəmahiri-Müttəfiqə* ‘The United States’), but otherwise the grammar is entirely Azerbaijani. Zardabi liberally uses the Persian conjunction *ki* to create subordinate clauses, as well as the Arabic conjunction *və*, but both of those grammatical constructions had been borrowed long ago and were not perceived as foreign in the nineteenth century.

Zardabi largely avoids arcane Arabic and Persian vocabulary, and this passage reflects the growing influence of Western

languages. In his philosophical writings Akhundzadeh had used European words in their Russian or French form, including *patriot*, *revolyusiya*, *sivilizasyon*, and *elektriçestva*, even compiling a glossary of European neologisms in Azerbaijani and Persian. Apart from words in the passage above like *qəzet* and *milyon*, which had been used prior to *Akinchi*, Zardabi introduced to his readers European and Russian vocabulary such as *birjə*, *tamojni*, *konfrans*, *bank*, *muzey*, *universitet*, and many more.

In opposition to the movement for a simpler written language, many Azerbaijani intellectuals still preferred the Perso-Arabic style which had traditionally been dominant. The simplified language of Akhundzadeh and Zardabi had the advantage of being practical and it could be mastered by the general population relatively easily. The traditional written language required a highly-educated reading public with a significant knowledge of Arabic and Persian, but its great advantage was that it was understood by intellectuals well beyond Azerbaijan's borders.

One of the leading proponents of the traditional, Perso-Arabic writing style was Ali bay Huseynzadeh. Here is a short passage from an article by Huseynzadeh in the first issue of his newspaper, *Fuyuzat*, from 1906:

Rusiyanın xaricində və daxilində vəqə' olan əhvala bir nəzəridiqqətlə baxılırsa, görünür ki, bunların əksəri, bəlkə kəffesi rus-yapon müharibəsi ilə Rusiya hərəkəti-inqilabiyyəsi kibi iki vəq'eyi-üzmanın ə'lan davam edən asarından, əks-sədasından başqa bir şey degildir: Şərqi-əqsadə yaponlar Koreya və Mancuriya əndişəsindən xilas olub nəzəri-cahangiranələrini başqa məmalikə əz cümlə Filippin cazairinə çeviriyorlar, bir az amerikalılar ilə bozuşuyorlar.

Once again we find many foreign elements, such as Persian izafet constructions (e.g. *vəq'eyi-üzma*, *Şərqi-əqsadə*) and Arabic plurals (*məmalik* = *məmləkətlər*, *asar* = *əsərlər*). The

influence of Ottoman Turkish is clear as well (in italics), in the choice of *kibi* instead of Azerbaijani *kimi*, *degil* instead of *deyil*, the use of the present tense verb ending *-yor-*, etc. This style was favored by an international group of writers and intellectuals, like Crimean Tatar journalist Ismail Gaspirali and the Turkish political philosopher Ziya Gökalp, who supported a unified language across the Turkic-speaking world.

In a review of the first Azerbaijani translation of the Koran in 1908, Zardabi's nephew, Rahim bay Melikov, lamented the continued use of the hybrid language his uncle had sought to reform:

Our misfortune is that we still cannot bring our language into use, that language that is spoken by every Azerbaijani tatar. Our 'fathers' force on us Arabic and Persian; they can't let go of their childishly naive and utopian desire to create a pan-Muslim language.

But the dream of creating a "pan-Muslim" language would soon fall out of favor in Azerbaijan. As Altstadt points out, the views of "localists," as represented by reformers like Akhundzadeh and Zardabi, became dominant after the influential "Ottomanists," Ahmad bay Aghaoghlu and Huseynzadeh himself, emigrated to Turkey (in 1908 and 1910 respectively).

At the same time a new problem arose: a flood of new European and Russian words. Akhundzadeh and Zardabi were the first major writers to introduce this vocabulary into the language, but they had done so when they couldn't find Azerbaijani equivalents. As more and more intellectuals traveled to Russia and Europe for their educations, Russian, French, and German seemed poised to take the place Arabic and Persian had typically held in Azerbaijan, i.e. any word or grammatical construction might be transplanted from those languages into Azerbaijani, depending only on the whim of the author. The Crimean Tatar writer, Gaspirali, wrote in 1895 that the young

generation mixed so much French and German into their language, replacing Arabic and Persian, that you would soon get sentences like (*French and German in bold*): “**Morgen aujour’hui kirchwasser bois** eylədim.” Nariman Narimanov claimed that, in the early twentieth century, the following type of language had become commonplace (*Russian in bold*):

Mən hələ **obed** eləməmişdim, **vizitni kartočka** gəldi ki, **madam Pankova** səni **veçerə priqlasit** eləyir, gəlməsən **obijatsya** olar... **İsbalşim udovolstviyem soqlasiya zayavit** eliyoruz... **Qospadin predsdatelin mneniyası komissiya naznaçit** eləməkdir...

Although systematic attempts to regulate the vocabulary of Azerbaijani would only begin in the Soviet period, the written form of a language is always conservative in relation to speech, and this new hybrid language never gained currency as a register of the written standard.

III. Conclusion

Prior to the language reform period in Azerbaijan, the written form of Azerbaijani had been a hybrid, equal parts Arabic, Persian, and Turkic, and incomprehensible except to the highly educated. The language was written with the Perso-Arabic alphabet, which was not designed to represent Azerbaijani phonology (especially the vowel system), forcing the reader to rely heavily on experience and context to decipher a text. Reform of the written language was widely considered an important step toward modernization, insofar as it would facilitate widespread literacy and the dissemination of ideas.

The alphabet’s deficiencies were not dealt with until the Soviet period, but in the pre-Soviet period Akhundzadeh’s proposed improvements set off an international debate across the Muslim world which would pave the way for the later reforms. No single alphabet project gained the political support necessary to be implemented systematically until after WWI, but Akhundzadeh’s principles ultimately provided the

theoretical basis for the alphabet reforms in the Soviet Union, Turkey, and among national minorities in China.

Pre-Soviet reformers had greater success in their lifetimes in the normalization of vocabulary and grammar. Akhundzadeh's plays were the first works of literature to employ the spoken language, and Zardabi started to develop new registers, namely journalistic and academic styles, based on Akhundzadeh's clear, conversational language. The influence of Arabic and Persian was not rejected, but norms started to develop regulating which borrowings from those languages, both lexical and grammatical, would be incorporated into Azerbaijani, and which would not. Thanks to the reformers' efforts, the "localist" trend in language reform was already dominant before it became official state policy in the Soviet period.

Without a doubt, thanks to the clear and interesting articles of the Kocharlis, the sweet translations of the Uzeyirs, and the information that our other writers have given about Gogol [غوگول], our readers are acquainted with this writer, and maybe well-acquainted; but I want to say that, nevertheless, despite all this reading and writing, our readers who don't know Russian still don't know what this writer's name is.

Söz yox, Köçərli cənablarının
açıq və mənalı məqalələrindən,
Üzeyir cənablarının şirin
tərcümələrindən və qeyri
yazıçılarımızın Qoqol [غوگول]
barəsində verdikləri məlumatdan
oxucularımız həmin yazıçını bir
növ tanıdılar və bəlkə yaxşı
tanıdılar; amma mən bunu
istəyirəm deyəm ki, yenə bunula
belə, yəni bu yazı-pozuların
varlığı ilə, rus dilini bilməyən
oxucularımız indi hələ yenə
bilmirlər ki, bu yazıçının adı
nədir. – "Molla Nəsrəddin", 5
April, 1909, № 14, from
Məmmədquluzadə, *Əsərləri*, v. II,
p. 353, 731

Everyone knows that to read and understand the Muslim language [Azerbaijani] is a skill. First of all, with those letters that we use to write, it's a difficult thing to read it. We've talked a lot about that. In the word 'talked' [‘danışmışıq’ دانیشمیشیق] that I just wrote, if one of the 15 dots is out of place, it'll be hard to read. Woe to our condition, woe to our typesetter's day, to the light of our poor readers' eyes. That's how it is for now.

Bunu hamı bilir ki, müsəlmanca oxumaq və qanmaq bir hünərdir. Əvvələn, o hürufat ilə ki, biz yazırıq, onu oxumaq çətin məsələdir. Bu barədə çox danışmışıq. Hazır bu yazdığım “danışmışıq” [دانیشمیشیق] kəlməsinin onbeş nöqtəsinin biri artıq-əskik düşsə, oxumağı çətin olacaq. Vay bizim halımıza, vay mürəttiblərimizin gününə, heyif oxucularımızın gözlərinin işığına. Hələ bu belə. – “Molla Nəsrəddin”, 28 June, 1914, № 21, from Məmmədquluzadə, *Əsərləri*, v. II, pp. 600, 743

It can be said that polemics about the alphabet's improvement is never absent from the columns of the newspapers in Cairo, Constantinople, Tehran, etc.

Some talk about the desirability of inventing a never-before seen system of writing to replace the Arabic script, while others propose the Latin or Armenian alphabet. The scholar Munif pasha proposed a mixed alphabet, composed of Arabic consonants and German vowels....The Baghdad mufti Abdurahman efendi, renowned for his erudition throughout the Muslim world, invented an entirely new alphabet with which his native language, Kurdish, can be written, among others.

Можно сказать никогда из столбцов мусульманских газет в Каиро, Константинополе, Тегеране и т. д. не исходит полемика об улучшении письмен. Говорят о желательности изобретения никогда небывалой системы писания для замены ею арабского шрифта, другие предлагают латинскую или армянскую азбуку. Ученый Мюниф паша предлагал ввести смешанную азбуку, состоящую из арабских согласных и немецких гласных....Багдадский муфтий Абдурахман эфенди, славящийся своею эрудициею во всем мусульманском мире, изобрел совершенно новый алфавит по которому можно в числе других писать и его родной язык – курдский. – *Şahtaxtlı, Seçilmiş əsərləri*, pp. 420-421

Turks are not alone in seeing barriers to progress in the alphabet. The old European pedagogue, Leibnitz, saw barriers to progress in one type of alphabet, saying 'Give me a perfect alphabet, and I'll give you a perfect language; give me a perfect language, and I'll give you a perfect civilization.' We also understand that the true barrier to our progress is not only our alphabet, but our alphabet is one of the barriers to our progress. I wonder, are the Japanese and the English satisfied with their alphabets, though having reached the highest level of civilization?

Tərəqqinin maneələrini əlifbada görənlər yalnız türklər olmamışdır. Avropalı qoca pedaqoq Leybnits 'Mənə mükəmməl bir əlifba verin, mükəmməl bir dil verim, mükəmməl dil verin, mükəmməl bir mədəniyyət verim' – sözlərinə tərəqqinin maneələrini bir növ əlifbada görür. Biz də qanırıq ki, tərəqqimizin əsil maneəsi yalnız əlifbamız deyil, amma əlifbamız hər halda tərəqqimizin maneələrindən biridir. Əcəba, mədəniyyətin ən yuxarı qatına çıxan yaponiyalılar, ingilislər əlifbalarından razıdırlarmı? – Nemanzadə, *Seçilmiş əsərləri*, p. 165

Our misfortune is that we still cannot bring our language into use, that language that is spoken by every Azerbaijani tatar. Our 'fathers' force on us Arabic and Persian; they can't let go of their childishly naive and utopian desire to create a pan-Muslim language.

В этом-то и несчастье наше, что мы до сих пор не можем ввести в употребление свой язык, тот язык, на котором говорит каждый азербайджанский татарин. Наши "отцы" нам навязывают языки арабский и персидский; они не могут оставить свое детски-наивное и утопическое вожеление создать общемусульманский язык. – "Сегодня", 6 June, 1908, № 37, from Меликов, *Память будет почтена...*, p. 77

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