Much Ado About Nothing

written by Robert Denis

Over a year ago, it was first reported that a new reform of the rules of Azeri orthography was being planned. The Orthography Commission, a body of the Academy of Sciences with the imprimatur of the Cabinet of Ministers, was developing the reform to be enshrined eventually in a new dictionary. When some of the linguists' proposals became known to the public, heated debates began over the details: would it be *ədəbiyyat* or *ədəbiyat*, *əsgər* or *əskər*? Defenders of the reforms said that they would bring written Azeri closer to actual pronunciation, while critics replied that changes would simply cause confusion and would be another blow to literacy.

In September, the Commission began to back down from some of the proposals which had caused the most controversy. The double **y** in Arabic borrowings would remain, it was announced, "in the name of stability,"[i] something which Azeri orthography has rarely enjoyed in its modern history. The 19th century drive to reform the Azeri Arabic script inspired many intellectuals to ponder the rules of spelling and punctuation, resulting in numerous published and unpublished treatises and proposals. In the 20th century, the expansion and revision of orthographic norms continued, intensified by the alphabet switches, with newly sanctioned norms published every few years from the late 1920s on. This time, the rejection of some controversial proposals seemed to indicate that the latest reform would be more conservative than originally feared by critics.

The final draft of the orthographic revision was published on April 20 on the Cabinet of Ministers' website,[ii] and the changes it proposed were indeed modest. Most of the document simply repeats the norms codified in a previous Cabinet decision from 2004.[iii] Many of the additions in the new

document are not actually changes, but simply affirm widely accepted norms that for whatever reason were left out of the 2004 document. For example, the 2019 decision states that phonetic **[x]** or **[ğ]** at the end of some Azeri words is to be written with a **q**, as in *ayaq*, *bulaq*, *qatıq*, etc., or that phonetic **[kg]** is to be written as **kk**, as in *mürəkkəb*, *səkkiz*, etc. These rules were not included in the Cabinet of Ministers' 2004 norms, but they were as widely accepted then as now. They have been added not as innovations, but in an attempt to make the current document more comprehensive than the previous one.

A few additions to the new norms attempt to clarify certain issues where there is currently a lot of variation in actual usage. For instance, section 3.9 stipulates that the **w** in foreign borrowings should be written as **v** in Azeri. At the moment, a Google search for "vilyam şekspir" returns 13,020 hits, while there are 20,200 instances of "uilyam şekspir." The authors of the new norms clearly hope to set a standard with this new rule where none existed before.

There are very few actual changes in the 2019 norms and they are very minor. For example, while the word for "minister" is normally to be written with a lowercase letter (as in section 31 of the 2004 norms), e.g. *Səhiyyə naziri* or *Kənd Təsərrüfatı naziri*, now "Prime Minister" is to be written with a capital letter, i.e. *Baş Naziri* (section 8.6 of the 2019 norms). As of 2019, there may be many ministers, but only one Minister. Or section 19.2 of the 2004 norms says that *anti-* should be written with a hyphen between it and the word it refers to, while section 5.1 of the 2019 document states that *anti-* should be written with a hyphen only before proper nouns, e.g. *anti-Azərbaycan*, but without one before common nouns, e.g. *antivirus*.

The fact that the new changes are minor and cannot be considered a reform of Azeri orthography is not a cause for criticism. No language's orthography is perfect, and Azeri's

is actually quite good if you compare it to other writing systems around the world. Azeri orthography is largely based on pronunciation, and where it differs from pronunciation, it usually does so in regular ways for logical reasons. For example, the double **y** of words like *ədəbiyyat* or *səhiyyə* is not pronounced doubly long in Azeri, but it accurately reflects the original Arabic form, and it is not hard to learn as a spelling rule in Azeri because it is used regularly, consistently in all similar Arabic borrowings. Furthermore, the critics of reform that argue for stability make an important point. Minor problems and inconsistencies in a writing system are more than compensated for by the benefits of an uninterrupted written tradition. In the context of Azerbaijan, where language policies have brought about a situation where some parents cannot write to their own children despite being literate, stability is probably worth encouraging.

Unfortunately, however, it is often frustrating to read the new norms, because even the small changes that have been made are unsystematic, unmotivated, and sloppily written. In the 2004 guidelines, there is a rule that states the following:

6.* Two- and multi-syllable words ending a double consonant in the original are written with one consonant: *ekspres, kilovat, kiloqram, konqres, metal, mühüm, proses, sərhəd, hüsnxət.

The fact that some people seem not to have known that *ekspres* should be written with one final **s** perhaps shows how effective these actually rules are. *Ekspress* is printed with a double final **s** even in the standard four-volume dictionary last republished in 2006, two years after the spelling *ekspres* was mandated by law.[iv] In any case, in the new regulations, this rule has been retained but revised:

4.8.* Two- and multi-syllable words ending in a double consonant in the source language are written with one consonant: *hüsnxət, kilovat, mühüm, rəsmxət and etc. …

4.10. **The foreign borrowings below with a double s at the end of the word are written with one s*: ekspres, konqres, kros, bras, stres.***

Note. *Press* is an exception.

So now, like multi-syllable words, one-syllable words will also drop final double consonants, but only if that consonant is **s**, only some words, and *press* is an exception. Why was this revision deemed necessary? Why single out **s**? Why not apply the rule to *press*? We are not told.

Other sections of the document are problematic, as well. Take, for example, section 3.9 about the letter **w**:

3.9 **Borrowed words with a w in the original are written with the letter v: *veb-sayt, Vilyam, vörd and etc.***

This rule is stated much too broadly to be useful. First of all, any rules for writing foreign borrowings should specify what foreign language they refer to. The letter **s**, for example, is typically pronounced **[s]** in English, **[z]** in German, and **[ş]** in Hungarian. The rules for writing the letter **s** in foreign borrowings must be specifically tailored for each language, and the same can be said about any other letter. But even for a single language, the rules must be more specific. In English, **s** is typically pronounced **[s]**, but **sh** is usually **[ş]**. In German, **s** is typically pronounced **[z]**, but **ss** is **[s]**, and **st** is **[şt]**. As currently written, section 3.9 is a very broad rule seemingly encompassing any **w** in any language, in any position of any word. Does it mean that “New York” should now be written *Nev York* in Azeri? A similar complaint could be made about section 3.3, which states that the letter **h** at the beginning of foreign borrowings should be written as **h** in Azeri. This rule specifies the letter’s position in the word but not the language from which the word originates. François Hollande was president of France from 2012-2017. In Azeri his name is written without an initial **h** (Fransua Olland), because the French **h** is not pronounced. Is this now considered a

mistake? I doubt that this was the intent of the authors of the new norms, but that is in fact what they wrote. Some rules, such as sections 3.1 and 3.2 about the Russian letters **ц** and **щ** respectively, are more detailed and can easily be implemented, but others, like sections 3.3 and 3.9, are much too vague and require further explanation.

This document is in no way a complete or systematic outline of Azeri orthography. It touches on the writing of foreign borrowings in Azeri by mentioning how to write this letter or that sound, but it doesn't offer a complete system for writing borrowings from any particular language. It lists a number of suffixes (*-vari*, *-ağan/-əyən*, *-kı/-ki/-ku/-kü*) and states how to use them in accordance with vowel harmony, but ignores other suffixes (the majority) for some unstated reason. Why include some but not others? No explanation is offered. And why produce an incomplete set of orthographic rules when there already exist very similar documents that are more complete and systematic? This new set of norms is very reminiscent of the chapter on orthography in Abdulazal Damirchizadeh's book *The Modern Azerbaijani Language*, in fact some rules have been copied virtually verbatim, but Damirchizadeh's version, written many decades ago, is actually more fully developed. So why was this new document produced?

Simultaneously with the new norms, the Cabinet of Ministers published a decision[v] to create a Monitoring Center intended, according to a presidential order, "to oversee the use of the state language of the Azerbaijan Republic, and to ensure the protection of the norms of the literary language in mass media, internet resources, and advertising venues."[vi] It is unclear how the Monitoring Center will operate or what authorities it will have, but in November of last year, not long after the president signed the initial order, there were calls for "radical steps," including giving the Center the power to fine for linguistic misdemeanors.[vii] The new orthographic norms, despite their flaws, seem to be intended

as a legal document, based on which the new Monitoring Center will be policing language online and in the media.

And so the new orthographic norms will not have much effect on the average citizen, who will not be forced to write *ədəbiyat* or *əskər* as they may have feared. But its effects may well be felt by professional writers, editors, advertisers, and anyone who publishes texts, not because it changed orthographic norms, but because its rules may soon be obligatory and their violation subject to fines or other forms of censure.

References

[i] https://www.azadliq.org/a/azerbaycan-dili-orfoqrafiya/29489880.html

[ii] https://cabmin.gov.az/az/document/3621/

[iii] http://e-qanun.az/framework/5507 (archived version here: https://web.archive.org/web/20160306122808/http://e-qanun.az/framework/5507)

[iv] *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lüğəti*. Dörd cilddə. II cild. Bakı, "Şərq-Qərb", 2006, p. 14.

[v] https://cabmin.gov.az/az/document/3617/

[vi] https://president.az/articles/30563

[vii] https://report.az/elm-ve-tehsil/dilcilik-i-nstitutunun-direktor-muavini-monitoring-merkezine-cerimeler-tetbiq-etmek-selahiyyeti-verilmelidir/, https://report.az/elm-ve-tehsil/parlamentin-komite-sedri-azerbaycan-respublikasinin-dovlet-dili-haqqinda-qanuna-yeniden-baxilmasina-boyuk-ehtiyac-var/