

# Is Azerbaijani Turkish an Endangered Language? Language Attitudes among Azerbaijani Youth in Tabriz

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**Abstract**—This study investigates the most important historical factors of language change in Iran. Based on writings from history, politics, sociology and linguistics it generally discusses different causes of language change in the world and tries to arrive at a framework to describe the status of non-Persian languages in Iran, in particular Azerbaijani Turkish, and whether these languages are endangered. Data extracted from a study in which some Azerbaijani youth living in Tabriz were selected and given questionnaire to answer to several questions about their attitudes to mother tongue. The results of this study show that respondents have highly positive attitudes towards their ethnic identity and Azerbaijani language as one its indices. According to UNESCO (2003) criteria Azerbaijani Turkish now is safe. Theoretical discussions of this paper engross advocates of linguistic rights and linguists in the situation of languages in Iran and also it can inform policymakers to take compensatory measures to support these languages. Also, this study warns families and indigenous societies about the fate of their languages and can awaken them to be more faithful to their culture and to maintain their languages.

**Index Terms**—language change, language death, Azerbaijani Turkish, ethnic identity, attitude

## I. INTRODUCTION

Every language that people use changes constantly. English, for example, has been changing throughout its history and it is still changing today (Trask, 1994, p.1). Some changes are natural and usual but some others are imposed and unnatural. Iran is a multilingual and multicultural country. According to Ethnologue (2003), a widely cited reference for languages around the world, there are 73 languages in Iran. Boundary between dialects and languages has been taken for granted. Two of ancient Iranian languages, *Avestan* and *Mandaic*, are extinct. Except Persian other Iranian languages are not bestowed equal and fair quota in educational, governmental and social spheres.

Languages evolve gradually into different forms. In this paper, the variable influence of social factors on language variation and language change will be described and discussed, with material from a partial study in Azerbaijani Turkish, a major Iranian indigenous language with close to 25 million speakers (Mafinezam & Mehrabi, 2008, p.118) mostly living in Northwestern provinces and also in Tehran. Furthermore, we are considering true language death and its factors: cases in which a language literally ceases to be spoken and gives rise to no later forms at all.

Language death may result in many ways. There are four main possibilities: a sudden death; radical language death, bottom-to-top death and gradual death.

Sudden language death refers to situations in which a language dies because its speakers suddenly die. The most salient reasons for sudden language death are ethnocide or linguicide, or even genocide, of a language community (Headland, 2003). Khubrooy-Pak (2001) defines ethnocide as “the annihilation and extermination of ethnic culture which is executed through violent suppression, compulsory education in non-native language and psychological operations by lowering the indigenous language to mere dialect or accent or a combination of cacophonous sounds” (as cited in Davarnia, 2006, pp: 74-77). These factors along with natural disasters like tidal waves, severe earthquakes, famine, epidemic diseases are common causes of sudden language death.

Radical language death refers to rapid decline and loss due, for example, to severe political repression where speakers stop speaking language for self defense. Radical language death may also result from cultural disruption and dislocation. For instance, on December 17, 1946, Pahlavi's, ruling dynasty from 1925–1979, army invaded Azerbaijan and in book-burning ceremonies set fire to all Turkish books that had been published during one year ruling of Azerbaijan Democratic Party [Azerbaycan Demokrat Firqesi, ADF] (Heyat, 2002, p.25).

Bottom-to-top language death pertains to a situation where the decline of a language begins in low domains and spreads to high spheres of usage and is sometimes maintained in particular contexts like religion.

The most common form of language death is the gradual type in which a language ceases to be spoken since its speakers gradually shift to another language. This shift may be based upon economic or utilitarian grounds or prestige of the intended language. This is so-called voluntary language shift.

One obvious way of language death is for all the speakers of a language to die, without leaving any survivors. This might at first seem unlikely, but in fact it has taken place a number of times, though perhaps not often naturally (Trask,

1994, p.15). Much more frequently, a language dies when its speakers give up speaking it in favor of some other languages. This can happen when a language comes into contact with another language which is perceived as being more prestigious (ibid, p.16). This is true about indigenous languages of Iran. Persian is presented as the most prestigious language in audio-visual media and IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), a giant Iranian corporation in control of radio and television, formal and public education is offered solely in this language and non-Persian Iranian languages and dialects are limited to only local and trivial affairs and their social and cultural functions are restricted continuously. In Iran, languages like Azerbaijani Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish and Baluchi succumb to the increasing prestige of Persian in much the same way as non English languages to English. It can be said that indigenous languages are incapable and feeble in front of the dominant official language. This situation is the heritage of Pahlavi era and its Persian only language policy. Compared to the status of Persian language, even major languages like Azerbaijani Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish and Baluchi even with relatively high populations are deprived of the natural right of being educated and flourished.

Another important factor of rapid language change and consequent language death is that of modern culture, abetted by new technologies, encroaching on once isolated peoples with drastic effect on their way of life and on the environments they inhabit. Destruction of lands and livelihoods; the spread of consumerism, individualism, and other western values, pressures for assimilation into dominant cultures; and conscious policies of repression directed at indigenous groups are among the factors threatening the worlds biodiversity as well as its cultural and linguistic diversity (Crawford, 1994).

This agent has had great impact on the languages in Iran. Urbanization, Persianization and communications grow daily, all serving to diminish the self sufficiency and self-confidence of small and traditional communities. Discriminatory policies and population movements also take their toll of languages. For example, young Azerbaijani Turks do not know of much Turkish vocabulary instead they use Persian equivalents, they have forgotten many local customs, traditions and ceremonies, and they no longer use or even remember sayings, proverbs, adages, anecdotes and words of wisdom of their ancestors.

Crawford (1994) maintains that:

By the 1880s strict English Only rules taken by the U.S government in order to eradicate native American languages were institutionalized and students in boarding school systems were *punished* and *humiliated* [italics added] for speaking their native language as part of a general campaign to erase every vestige of their Indian-ness. A teacher in the early 1900s explained that the schools 'went on the assumption that any Indian custom was, per se, objectionable, whereas the customs of whites were the ways of civilization'.

This was the case about Azerbaijani Turkish in Iran in Pahlavi era. Mohseni, cultural affairs chief of Azerbaijan province in 1941, was saying that "whoever speaks Turkish, tether him like a donkey and fasten him to stall...". Zoghi, successor of Mohseni, put a charging box for speaking Turkish in order to punish and fine every Azerbaijani school child who has dared to speak in Turkish (JAMI, 2002, p.263).

Reza shah's notorious "one country, one nation, one language" policy and his attempts to homogenize cultures did take a toll on the pride and identity of many ethnic groups, alienating them from their cultural roots and from their tribes, and giving them little or nothing in turn. Being punished for speaking their ancestral and native language often devalued it in their own minds, and some accepted the dominant society's judgments. Rashedi (2005), Azerbaijani cultural activist and researcher, believes that one of the social problems of today's Azerbaijani youths and intellectuals is identity crisis. Due to the detrimental effect of crisis of identity except young Azerbaijani cultural activists and pioneers even still Azerbaijani university student and ordinary youth refuses to be called Turk. Since the advent of Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, Azerbaijani Turks and their language have sustained most dastardly blows which their ominous effects still burdens Azerbaijani community in Iran (p.4).

Javad Sheikh-Al-Eslami, an advocate and theoretician of Pahlavi's "one country, one nation, one language" doctrine, put forward the theory according which newly-born Azerbaijani child and children of other Turkish speaking areas in Iran should be separated from their mother and be kept and raised in special nurseries up to the age of seven in order to cut any contact with their parents to learn Persian as their first tongue instead of Turkish (Rashedi, 2005, p.11).

One way of gauging the endangerment of a minority language is to look at the marriage patterns of its speakers. Endogamous ethnolinguistic groups have a better chance of retaining their language than do groups with young people who marry outsiders (Headland, 2003).

As mentioned above, close to 25 million Azerbaijani Turks live in Iran. Although Azerbaijani Turks are called minority and their culture is described as subculture by authorities, indeed they are a majority in Iran; therefore, because of great population this last agent, i.e., intermarriage and loss of some of the speakers due to mixed marriages can not be a menacing factor, at least an imminent factor in vitality of Azerbaijani Turkish.

Azerbaijani Turkish does not appear threatened at first notice. The children are still speaking it, any Azerbaijani speaker is not aware that his language is dying or even changing. He seems completely unaware of how much his speech has changed. In any case, Azerbaijani Turkish is not at this time moribund. It is in danger not because Azerbaijani children are not speaking it, but because it is changing so fast. Most Azerbaijani officials in their interviews with media or in meetings or forums speak in an ugly amalgamation of Persian and Azerbaijani within which most of the compound is Persian and just the final word or verb is Turkish or Turkicized.

The number of speakers is not a reliable indicator of language health. More reliable indicators are the following: 1) rate of acquisition by children, i.e. the number of children learning the language in question, 2) distribution of speakers in age cohorts, 3) attitude towards the language on the part of language community, 4) the level of impact on a certain language coming from another language (Riese, 2002).

The main purpose of this study is to investigate language change in Iran with respect to Azerbaijani Turkish on the basis of the community members' attitudes toward their own language. Hypothesis of the current investigation is that Azerbaijani speakers do not have positive attitudes towards their own language.

Members of a speech community may see their language as essential to their community and identity, and they promote it. The more positive their attitudes and the more pride they have in their language, the stronger the language is. The more value they attach to their traditions, the more likely the community's language is maintained and promoted.

Moreover, the author is hopeful that the results of this study help advocates of linguistic rights and linguists recognize the main causes and different levels of change. Based on this study, policy makers can decide on the proper attitudes and options toward these endangered languages.

## II. DATA AND PARTICIPANTS

A number of questionnaires were distributed to the subjects in different areas of Tabriz, the center of East Azerbaijan province. The total number of respondents is 380 youth between 20 to 30 years drawn randomly from different areas of Tabriz. Some of the answers which directly or indirectly were related to the attitudes of the speakers towards their native language, Azerbaijani Turkish, were selected and analyzed manually.

In this study the following forth main indices of ethnic identity have been used: *1. Azerbaijani Turkish Language and Literature, 2. Azerbaijani Music 3. Ethnic History 4. Ethnic Affiliation*

Azerbaijani Turkish Language and Literature as a main indicator of the attitudes of the respondents includes these sub-indicators: *1. Significance of Learning Azerbaijani Turkish for the Respondents, 2. Necessity of Turkish Language Education in Schools and Universities, 3. Interest of the Respondents to the Learning of Turkish, 4. Having the Books and Reading Materials in Turkish at Home, 5. Amount of Studying these Materials.*

Azerbaijani Music as the second main factor incorporates following sub-indices: *1. Interest of the Respondent to Turkish Music, 2. Interest of the Respondent to Ashiqs, Folk Music Singers, as the Keepers of Traditional Music, 3. The Importance of Invitation of Ashiqs to Ceremonies and Celebrations, 4. Amount of listening to the Traditional Music*

Ethnic History as the third main indicator of the respondents' attitudes towards their ethnic identity includes these sub-indicators: *1. Belief to the Special Ethnic History, 2. Significance of Having Knowledge and Awareness about History of Iran's Turks, 3. Being Proud of Ethnic History, 4. Knowledge about Symbols of Turk Ethnic Group.*

Ethnic Affiliation as the forth and final indicator of the participants' attitudes towards their ethnic identity incorporates following four sub-indicators: *1. Interest of the Respondent to Have Relations with co-ethnics, 2. Degree of Considering Problems of the Iran's Turks as one's Personal concern, 3. Importance of Being Turk for the Participant, 4. Being Proud of Being Turk.*

## III. DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of data indicates that average of tendency to ethnic language and literature, i.e. Azerbaijani Turkish, is medium about 18.66 percent. As it is clear from Figure 1, about 40.3 percent of the respondents had medium tendency to this main factor of the attitude towards native language. 4.4 percent of the participants had very strong and 31.3 percent showed strong inclination to this index. 4.6 percent of the respondents declared that they had very weak inclination towards their ethnic language and literature while 19.3 percent stated that their tendency towards Azerbaijani language and literature is weak.

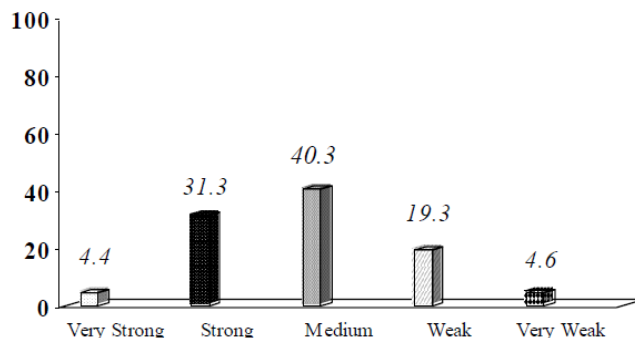


Figure1. Azerbaijani Turkish

As portrayed in figure 2 the average of the inclination of the respondents to Turkish music is 12.97. About 25.1 percent of the respondents declared that they had very strong tendency towards the sub-indices of the ethnic music.

Degree of tendency to Azerbaijani folk Ashiq music and other sub-factors of Azerbaijani Turkish music among respondents was 20.9 percent. 24.9 percent of the participants had medium tendency. 16 percent of the respondents declared that they had weak inclination to this factor of ethnic identity while 13.1 percent stated that their tendency towards Azerbaijani music was very weak.

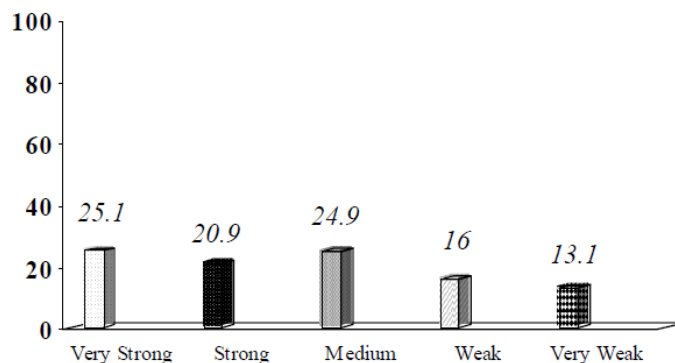


Figure2. Azerbaijani Music

Figure 3 reflects the results of the data analysis pertained to the study of the respondents' tendency and feelings to ethnic history and its four sub-factors. Among the factors of ethnic identity respondents had the highest tendency to ethnic history and existence of special ethnic history with special historical events and heroes and myths and symbols. 87.9 percent declared that their inclination to this factor was strong (52.5 very strong and 35.4 strong). 8.5 percent of the respondents reported that their tendency to ethnic history was medium while 3.6 percent stated they had weak inclination to this indicator of ethnic identity. No respondent had very weak tendency to ethnic history and its abovementioned four sub-factors which in turn can be an indicator of historical consciousness of the participants.

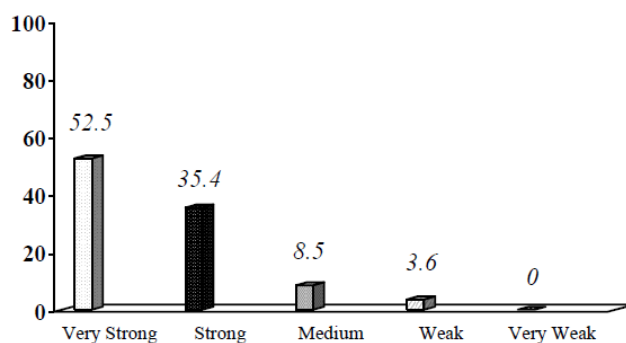


Figure3. Ethnic History

As figure 4 illustrates tendency to ethnic affiliation and interest to co-ethnics and being proud of being Turk among the participants is high and 45.8 percent had very strong and 29.4 percent of the subjects showed strong inclination to ethnic attachment. 18 percent stated that they had medium tendency to ethnic affiliation. 5.9 percent of the participants declared they had weak tendency while only 1.1 percent stated weak tendency.

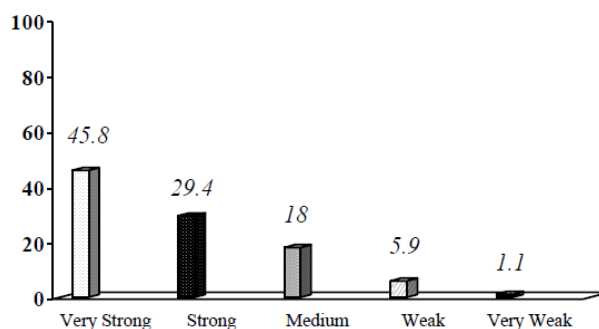


Figure4. Ethnic Affiliation

The participants' self-evaluation of their tendency to ethnic identity which directly or indirectly is related to the attitudes of the speakers to their language in general is illustrated and summarized in Figure 5. After analyzing and comparing the answers, the author found that there is a high commitment to ethnic identity among subjects. 10.4

percent of the respondents hold a very strong tendency to ethnic identity while 41.5 have strong inclination. 36.6 percent of the respondents reported that their commitment to ethnic identity is medium. 10.7 percent had weak tendency while only 0.9 percent of the participants declared very weak attitude to ethnic identity.

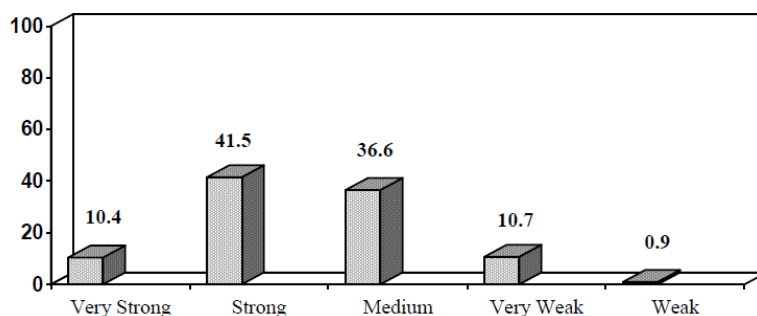


Figure5. Attitude towards Ethnic Identity among Respondents

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The facts mentioned and summarized above are instrumental and helpful for predicting the future of Azerbaijani Turkish as an underprivileged ethnic language in Iran. Members of a speech community are not usually neutral towards their own language. They may see it as essential to their community and identity and promote it; they may use it without promoting it; they may be ashamed of it and, therefore, not promote it; or they may see it as a nuisance and actively avoid using it (UNESCO, 2003). Seen from the perspective of the UNESCO criteria and with regard to *Factor 8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language* Azerbaijani Turkish is not an endangered language among Tabriz youth since most of them hold positive attitudes towards generally ethnic identity and Azerbaijani Turkish as their ethnic language as particular.

Findings of this study confirm the Bani-Hashemi (2007) who concluded that Azerbaijani students are strongly interested to the history, civilization and culture of Azerbaijan. He also found that majority of the study population, 84.2%, view the education of Azerbaijani Turkish in universities and schools of Azerbaijan highly important. He also came to the conclusion that Azerbaijani students hold favorable attitude toward their ethnic identity. This study is also in line with the partially similar investigation done by the student magazine of *Sas* (2000). Zanzan-based Persian-Turkish bilingual student magazine of *Sas* (Turkish word meaning voice) conducted a wide opinion poll among students of Zanzan state university on October 2000. It found that most of the respondents (60.4%) were dissatisfied with the treatment of Islamic republic towards ethnic minorities. Great majority of them (70.8%) also believed that non-Persian families should maintain their own languages. 77.3 % of the study population also opined that ethnic and cultural diversity should be sustained rather than ethnic homogenization in the form of Persianization which can be interpreted as a positive indicator of favorable stance towards ethnic language.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Drawing upon various Persian, Turkish and English writings in linguistics, history, politics and sociology this paper has investigated historical yoke of indigenous Azerbaijani language in Iran. It has also scrutinized language attitudes among youth in Tabriz. More specifically, the paper discussed the respondents' tendency to four factors of 1.Azerbaijani Turkish Language and Literature, 2.Azerbaijani Music 3.Ethnic History 4.Ethnic Affiliation as indicators of attitude to ethnic identity. Results suggested that subjects showed more positive tendency to the components of their ethnic identity.

According to levels of endangerment recognized by UNESCO (2003), Azerbaijani Turkish is not an endangered language with regard to community members' attitudes towards language. However determining the absolute status of this language requires a more comprehensive investigation which incorporates and examines all the factors of language endangerment. Likely discrepancy between self-evaluation of the attitudes to native language and actual maintenance is another obstacle to cope with.

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