

8-2020

Religious Aspects of Bilingualism in Azerbaijan

Malahat Veliyeva

Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Islamic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Veliyeva, Malahat (2020) "Religious Aspects of Bilingualism in Azerbaijan," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 6 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss6/5>

This Thirty-Year Anniversary since the Fall of Communism is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF BILINGUALISM IN AZERBAIJAN

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful...

By Malahat Veliyeva

Malahat Veliyeva is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Linguistics at Azerbaijan University of Languages in Baku. She did her PhD in Germanic languages in 2008 and started the post-doctorate degree in Sociolinguistics in 2012. Her area of interest is also multiculturalism and religious studies. She was a SUSI scholar awarded by the scholarship of the US Department of State in 2019. She has three publications on General Linguistics. Email: malahatveliyeva@yahoo.com

Introduction

Azerbaijan is one of the former countries of the Union of Soviet Socialistic Republics (the USSR) that lost its independence in 1920 when the Russian XI Red Army brutally intervened in the country and imposed the Soviet regime throughout Azerbaijan. Since that historical period, Azerbaijani society has become bilingual, where the Russian language predominated and became the official language in the country.

Unfortunately, the first Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, established in the East in 1918, collapsed and fell under the rule of the Russian Empire, which had been benefitting from rich oil and gas resources, gold mines, and agricultural products of the country for 70 long years. As well as any empire in World history, the Soviet Union became dissolved after the idea of “*perestroyka*” (restructuring) when ethnic conflicts started to be fomented between the neighboring countries.

Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1992 with lots of social, economic, and political problems that the Soviet authorities had left for the country. It is still in war condition with Armenia, which occupied 20% of Azerbaijani lands and ignores the four United Nations Security Council resolutions demanding the immediate cessation of all hostilities and calls on the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied areas of the Azerbaijani Republic. Although Azerbaijan is in war condition with the Christian country, all the churches and Christian historical monuments are protected and restored as historical heritage of Azerbaijan.

Being the colony of the nominally Christian country, Azerbaijan has been influenced both from linguistic and religious aspects in many ways. Enforced Azerbaijanian-Russian bilingualism and strict restrictions for developing the Muslim religion in the country were quite real during the Soviet imperialism. What's more, restrictions of using Azerbaijani language at the official level were enforced. The widespread use of the Russian language was used as a political tool in the occupants' hands to have an impact on Azerbaijanis' minds and to eradicate any feeling of patriotism, national identity, and religious affiliation; because, in Azerbaijan, the Muslim religion is mostly an indicator of the national culture rather than religion itself.

In this article, Azerbaijanian-Russian bilingualism as a sociolinguistic phenomenon is regarded from a new and never investigated before religious aspect.

Literature review

Sociolinguistics develops in different directions studying the interrelation of the language with a variety of social phenomena such as cultural exchange, wars, conflicts, economic growth of countries, political changes, as well as people's religious affiliation. Although the issue of "language and religion" is still new in the sphere of sociolinguistics, this topic is of great interest not only for linguists and theologians but also for ordinary civilians.

A quick review of the background of sociolinguistics reveals the significance of religion in the study of language and linguistic issues¹. As both language and religion are related to human consciousness, there is a connection between religious affiliation, national identity, mentality, and language use among people. An interdisciplinary approach to the close connection of religious issues and language use reveals the new ways of investigation in both theological science and linguistics. The interrelation between religion and language can be observed in William Stewart's sociolinguistic research about national multilingualism. He investigates the religious language function as "the use of language primarily in connection with the ritual of a particular religion,"² which is considered one of the significant language functions.

¹ Jeroen Darquennes/ Wim Vandebussche, "Language and religion as a sociolinguistic field of study: some introductory notes," *Sociolinguistica Internationales Jahrbuch für Europäische Soziolinguistik International Yearbook of European Sociolinguistics Annuaire International de la Sociolinguistique Européenne*.25/2011.

² William Stewart, "A sociolinguistic typology for describing national multilingualism." In: Joshua A. Fishman. (ed.): *Readings in the Sociology of Language*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1968),531-545.

David Crystal³ also expressed his view on the close relationship between language and religion, as well as Charles Ferguson⁴ who studied the correlation between the written language and the spread of religions in the world.

Language is a powerful indication of social behavior, as well as religion which is directly influenced by the language individuals use. The language with which the holy books of each religion are written have an impact on people's consciousness.

One of the strongest effects of language on religion is the role of language used in prayer, which is related to the psychological point in a religious community. Religion is not only a social and cultural organization of acceptable rules for human behavior and lifestyle, activities, and ethics linked to superpower and the spiritual world; but it is also the source of knowledge about the world, the philosophy of life, evaluation of important values, as well as the way to oral and written literacy through language. From this point of view, religion is directly interrelated with language since people perceive religious ideas through the use of certain language. Language as a social phenomenon in its turn promotes better understanding and interpretation of religion, and it has an impact on people's minds.

Religion also has an indisputable role in the spread of language in the period of colonization.⁵ Historically, the conquerors (Christians in the period of the Roman Empire or Muslims during the reign of the Ottoman Empire) brought their religion and languages to the colonized countries.

Discussion

Azerbaijan, the largest country in the South Caucasus with a population of over 10 million people, has always been multinational due to the turbulent events in its history and its geopolitical location between Europe and Asia. Besides that, bilingualism was always characteristic to the Azerbaijani people who experienced wars, conflicts, distribution of its lands between Russia and Iran, and cultural, political, and economic relationships with neighboring countries.

³ David Crystal, "Language and Religion" In: Lancelot Sheppard, (ed.): *Twentieth Century Catholicism*. (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966), 11-28.

⁴ Charles Ferguson, "Religious Factors in Language Spread" In: Robert L. Cooper, (ed.), *Language Spread*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 95-106.

⁵ Jeroen Darquennes/ Wim Vandenbussche, *op/cit*.

Azerbaijani - Russian bilingualism in the period of the imperialistic Soviet Union was observed during 70 years of exploitation of the natural resources of Azerbaijan. Russians brought their language, made it the official language throughout the whole country, and forced the people to do all legal documentation in the Russian language.

The religious situation in the country was also unpleasant and even dangerous. Although Christianity was not forcibly imposed on local people, the preaching of the Muslim religion which was the predominant faith among the Azerbaijani population was not welcomed and even persecuted. All kinds of religious rituals, festivities, and events were forbidden. People were not allowed to attend the mosques and pray.

Attacks on Islam increased in order to reduce the influence of religious ideas and beliefs on people and to alienate the population from religion.⁶ Mainly high school students, literary and artistic figures, intellectuals speaking Russian, and those forced to promote atheism were involved in this work. The state moved away from the principles of freedom of conscience and religion, all religious privileges were abolished, and mosques and churches were separated from the state.

Although the constitution of the Soviet Union did not presume any restrictions in the freedom of religion and language, it was only on paper. In reality, dictatorship and anti-Islamic policy ruled the country. In such conditions, the predominance of the Russian language and culture among the local Azerbaijani population, discrimination of the Azerbaijani language and national traditions as well as Islamic religion (which is very significant throughout the history of the country), had an incredible effect on the young generation's religious views in the period from the 1920s to 1980s until the beginning of the 1990s. Atheism based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels was massively propagandized among the new generation who mainly spoke Russian. Only the older generation preached Islam, prayed, and followed all religious rituals secretly in their homes without visiting mosques and hiding their religious affiliation in public. Such treatment does not characterize any Empire in history except the Soviet Union. From this point of view, the Russian language was a tool for imperialists to have an impact on people's psychology, their religious beliefs, and associatively, their political freedom.

In fact, an individual with Azerbaijani national background speaking Russian and studying in the Russian language, acquiring not only the language but also Russian culture, traditions, and

⁶ C. Məmmədov, *Sovet hakimiyyəti illərində Azərbaycan SSR-də dövlət-din münasibətləri (1920-1927-ci illər)*

national features different from Azerbaijani mentality, had very low chances to be devoted to his or her national identity, culture, or religion. Considering the long, more than 70 years' period of colonization, this tendency had deep roots in Soviet Azerbaijan.

What is more, in the former Soviet Union there was an antipropaganda of religion in books, films, TV programs, and other mass media. Unification of the Russian language throughout the whole empire, a policy of “the closed country” with limitations of leaving the country and going abroad, had a huge influence on people's consciousness and outlook. It inhibited the development of theological science and oppressed theologians, particularly the scientists in Islamic studies.

Islam was interpreted as a religion of excessive restrictions, negative emotions, and was sarcastically propagandized as ignorance among Russian-speaking Azerbaijanis. All kinds of books, references, and sources of information about Islam and Muslims were prohibited, the mosques were closed. The only source of true information about real Islam was representatives of the old generation who secretly practiced their religion.

Since Azerbaijani-Russian bilingualism was enforced, it affected the people's ideology, world vision, and religious views. The new generation living under the Soviet regime, whose education was in the Russian language, had their knowledge of history and religion completely falsified, biased, and delivered to them in a beneficial way for the colonizers. Using the Russian language manipulatively to convince people to convert to atheism and to hold antipropaganda against religions, especially Islam, imperialists prevented colonized nations from returning to their national identity and any religious affiliation that was considered a potential danger for the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is necessary to mention that the religious aspect of bilingualism in Azerbaijan during the period of the Soviet Union is quite an important issue revealing social, political, linguistic, and religious pressures of the Soviet imperialists on the Azerbaijanis as well as other nationalities with a Muslim background. Its purpose was to maintain their authority, keep nations oppressed, and inhibit the development of theological science and Islamic studies in Azerbaijan.

Today, Azerbaijan is a secular, independent country ensuring the freedom of religion for everyone to preach any faith, adopt any religion, or even refuse to practice any religion.⁷ Although Azerbaijanian-Russian bilingualism still exists in Azerbaijan, the dominating and official language in the country is the Azerbaijani language. The Azerbaijanis are free to practice Islamic religion, as more than 96% of the local population are Muslims. Together with Islam, people have the liberty to practice all other religions, as Azerbaijan is a multicultural country giving equal rights to all citizens irrespective of their national identity or religious affiliation.

After gaining independence, all the historical mosques, churches, and synagogues were restored and rebuilt in the country, and even new mosques have been built. The Azerbaijani language was proclaimed as the official language in the country, and speakers of Russian, English, and other foreign languages are free to develop their own national culture and traditions as well as religion.

Christianity in modern Azerbaijan is represented by Orthodox and Catholic churches actively functioning in the country, and Judaism is one of the successful religions co-existing with other religions. As per authentic Islam, it is developing on the scientific level, taught by the educated theologians at the Islamic Faculties of Azerbaijani Universities and other educational institutions specializing in Religious studies. Most of them are concentrated in Baku rather than in remote regions of the country.

On behalf of the present government of independent Azerbaijan, which is in the condition of unfair war with Armenia, many interreligious dialogues of international importance have been organized by the president of the Azerbaijan Republic – Mr. Ilham Aliyev. An example of one of the similar events is the conference on the Azerbaijani model of interfaith tolerance hosted by the UK parliament in the United Kingdom, which was followed by viewing “Azerbaijan – home to cultural traditions and tolerance,” an exhibition organized with the support of the State Committee on Religious Associations at Baku Culture Center in London.

Baku International Multiculturalism Center, organized by the president of Azerbaijan, is another example of the manifestation of religious tolerance in Azerbaijan. The organization holds

⁷ Religion in Azerbaijan. Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan presidential library. http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf_en/atr_din.pdf

winter and summer schools for students from all over the world and supports interreligious dialogue on political, religious, and cultural levels.

The religious aspect of Azerbaijanian-Russian bilingualism is of great importance and plays an important role in sociolinguistics, history, and religious studies.

Bibliography

In English:

1. Crystal, D. "Language and Religion." In: Sheppard, Lancelot (Ed.): *Twentieth Century Catholicism*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966. 11-28.
2. Darquennes J. / Vandebussche W. "Language and religion as a sociolinguistic field of study: some introductory notes." *Sociolinguistica Internationales Jahrbuch für Europäische Soziolinguistik International Yearbook of European Sociolinguistics Annuaire International de la Sociolinguistique Européenne*. 25/2011.
3. Ferguson, Ch. "Religious Factors in Language Spread." In: Cooper, Robert L. (Ed.): *Language Spread*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. 95-106.
4. "Religion in Azerbaijan." Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan presidential library. http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf_en/atr_din.pdf
5. W. Stewart, "A Sociolinguistic Typology for Describing National Multilingualism." In: Joshua A. Fishman, (ed.): *Readings in the Sociology of Language*. The Hague: Mouton, 1968. 531-545.

In Azerbaijani:

6. Məmmədov C. *Sovet hakimiyyəti illərində Azərbaycan SSR-də dövlət-din münasibətləri (1920-1927-ci illər)*.