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Do the Talysh and Tat Languages Have a Future in Azerbaijan?*

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Tat and Talysh are two less-widely-used Iranian languages indigenous to Azerbaijan. Sociolinguistic research revealed that both languages are being displaced in some communities but coexist with Azerbaijani in others. Factors contributing to these differences include isolation, ethnic diversity, and economic opportunity. One other factor contributing to displacement is a desire to see children excel in school. This could well be the most important factor breaking transmission from one generation to the next. In light of this, it is important to document the language and culture while they are vital.

1. Introduction

Thousands of languages have died over the millennia, most of them displaced by languages of wider communication; this phenomenon has only accelerated in recent decades. In the face of this language death, however, some less-widely-used languages manage to persist in multilingual communities. A key question is what factors lead to the death of some languages, but the perseverance of others. In this paper I present results of research into the sociolinguistic situation found in Talysh and Tat, two Iranian languages indigenous to Azerbaijan. In the course of our research, we found communities in which the traditional languages were being displaced, and others in which they seem to exist alongside Azerbaijani in diglossic situations. I examine factors that account for these differences, and suggest that the long-term viability of both languages is still uncertain.

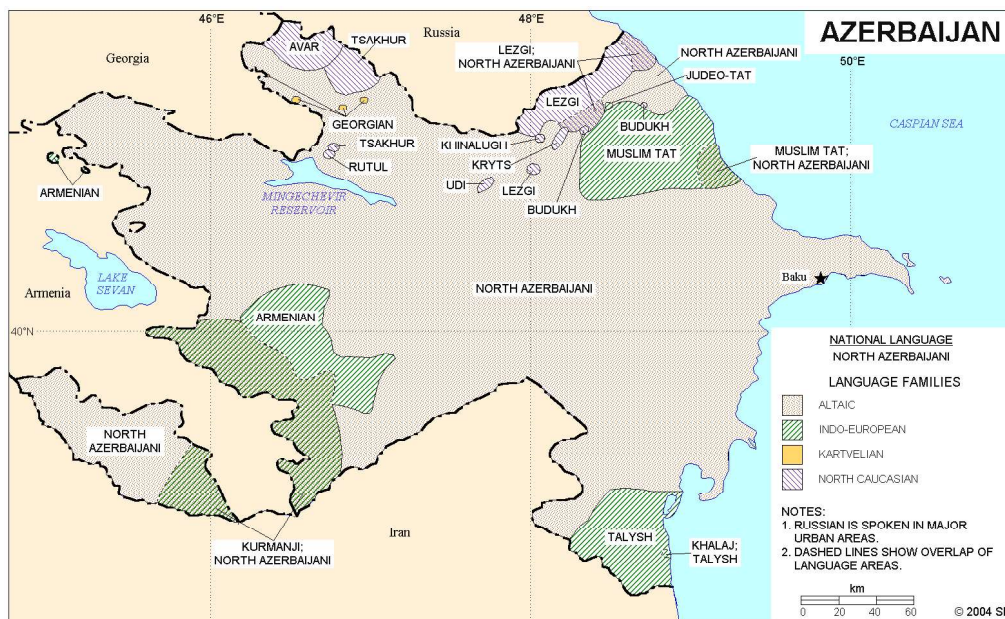
As shown in Figure 1, Talysh is spoken in the southeast corner of Azerbaijan, while Muslim Tat and Judeo-Tat are spoken in the northeast. The Talysh people were traditionally located in Iran and Azerbaijan; the Judeo-Tat were traditionally located in Russia and Azerbaijan (although now the majority of the Judeo-Tat community lives in Israel), and most of the Muslim Tat traditionally lived in Azerbaijan.

Most researchers claim that Muslim Tat and Judeo-Tat are a single language in which religious differences correlate with linguistic differences (Grjunberg 1963).¹ But speakers of each variety say that only members of the Muslim community speak Tat, while members of the Jewish community are Mountain Jews and speak Mountain Jewish, not Tat. Members of both communities feel strongly that they speak different languages, and the sociolinguistic situations in the two groups are very different. Because of this, I will limit my discussion in this paper to the speech variety used by the Muslim community, and will refer to it simply as Tat.

* A preliminary form of this paper was presented at the 14th Annual Central Eurasian Studies Conference at Indiana University in April 2007. The research on which this paper is based was carried out by members of the North Eurasia Group of SIL International under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. We are grateful for the assistance of local government officials, and for the hospitality shown to us in countless villages.

¹ One notable exception is Miller (1929) who argues that all dialectal distinctions correspond to geographic location, not religious distinctions.

Figure 1: The Languages of Azerbaijan
(Used by permission, © SIL International, from *Ethnologue 2005*)



Speakers of both Tat and Talysh are highly multilingual. For example, Grjunberg and Davidova (1982: 231) state that “an overwhelming majority of Tats who live in Azerbaijan consider themselves Azerbaijani, and the Azerbaijani language, equally with Tat, as their mother tongue.” While Miller (1953) reports that Talysh speakers in the more remote regions, especially women and elderly individuals, have low or even no proficiency in Azerbaijani, more recent researchers have reported high levels of bilingualism in Azerbaijani among the Talysh population as a whole (Pireiko 1976; Isaev 1979; Rastorgueva 1979).

Neither Tat nor Talysh has a history of literacy. The general Soviet policy was that all children in Azerbaijan studied only Azerbaijani and Russian in school, regardless of the language of their home.² Since Azerbaijan became independent, literacy materials have been produced in both Tat and Talysh. However, the extent to which these materials are being used is unclear.

In light of the fact that neither of these languages have any official status in government, education, or the media, and that both communities are reported to be highly bilingual, the long-term viability of both languages is open to question. Comparing the statements of Miller with those of later researchers in Talysh, it appears that at least in the case of Talysh a shift in language proficiency is in progress. No recent studies have been made regarding language use, however. In addition, no quantitative studies have been conducted on the level of bilingualism in these communities or on the use of the traditional languages. This lack of current information led to the research discussed in this paper. The goal of our research was to answer the following three questions:

1. Where are Tat and Talysh still being spoken, and where are they being displaced by Azerbaijani?
2. What factors affect the maintenance or loss of Tat and Talysh?
3. What is the likely long-term viability for Tat and Talysh?

² Isaev (1970) notes that Soviet scholars viewed materials that were developed in Talysh in the 1930s as an experiment that proved to be socially unhelpful. These scholars felt that a single language was important to promote cooperation and interaction throughout Azerbaijan.

2. Data collection

In 1999 and 2000, I directed a team of researchers who studied the sociolinguistic situation in both language communities.³ We made initial, one to two day visits to thirteen Talysh villages in August-September 1999, and to nine Tat villages in July 2000. These were followed up by four to six day visits to four Talysh villages and four Tat villages in September-October 2000. We attempted to choose villages that would represent a range of village types with regard to reported dialects, degree of isolation, size, and homogeneity of population. During the first set of visits we relied primarily on observations and a set of interview questionnaires to gather general data about the language situation in each village. We interviewed government, medical, religious, and school leaders, as well as groups of village residents. During the second set of visits we used a Sentence Repetition Test (SRT) to determine levels of proficiency in Azerbaijani⁴ and interviewed individuals regarding their patterns of language use. We were also able to make more extensive observations during these longer visits, as people grew more accustomed to our presence.

3. Results and Discussion

Our findings substantiate the claims that proficiency in Azerbaijani is high in both the Talysh and Tat communities. Even in Şingədulan, the most isolated Talysh village we visited, 60 percent of the people who took the Azerbaijani Sentence Repetition Test (SRT) scored at the near-native speaker level; in other Talysh villages 75 percent of those who took it scored at the near-native speaker level. The percentages were even higher in the Tat communities: 84 percent of the Tat speakers who took the SRT scored at the near-native speaker level.

While proficiency in Azerbaijani was uniformly high, proficiency in the traditional languages was more variable. In homogeneous communities everyone was reported to have high levels of oral proficiency in the traditional language, although the age at which fluency is reportedly reached varied from 4-6 in the more isolated villages to 15 in the least isolated village. In ethnically mixed communities, on the other hand, individuals under the age of 45 are reported to have medium to no fluency in the traditional language.⁵

The data presented thus far raise at least two questions with implications for language vitality:

1. What factors contribute to lower proficiency in the traditional language?
2. When speakers are proficient in multiple languages, what influences actual use?

We concentrated on the first question in our research in Tat, and on the second question in our research in Talysh.

Two factors that contribute to lower proficiency in the traditional language have already been presented: lack of isolation and living in a mixed community. According to our research, members of these language communities living in homogeneous, relatively isolated villages should have high levels of proficiency in both Azerbaijani and the traditional language. Our work in Tat suggested that one other factor, economic opportunity, also influenced proficiency. Children in communities with little economic opportunity tend to show lower levels of proficiency in the traditional language than children in communities with greater economic opportunity. It seems that parents in villages with little hope of

³ The full results of our research are reported in Clifton, Tiessen, Deckinga, & Mak (2003) and Clifton, Deckinga, Lucht, & Tiessen (2003).

⁴ In Sentence Repetition Tests, subjects are asked to repeat a set of 15 sentences of increasing complexity. Each response is scored for accuracy and a picture of overall levels of proficiency among various subgroups can be determined from the scores (Radloff 1991).

⁵ The ethnically mixed Tat communities are also less isolated than the homogeneous communities, so it is difficult to separate the effects of these two factors.

economic improvement have a greater motivation to make sure their children speak Azerbaijani well so they can leave and improve their economic situation.

Turning to the question of what influences actual use, it is important to examine the effects different domains have on which languages are used. Our initial interviews suggested a typical diglossic situation for Talysh in homogeneous communities: Azerbaijani is used primarily or even exclusively in formal situations such as school, government offices, and the media, while Talysh is used primarily or exclusively in informal settings, such as the home, market, and tea house. Talysh was also reported to be the first language learned. The situation in ethnically mixed communities was similar, although more in favor of the national language: Azerbaijani is used in all situations, while the use of Talysh is limited to a secondary role in informal situations.

In individual interviews, however, a more nuanced picture emerged of language use in homogeneous communities. In the more isolated villages, 85 to 95 percent of the respondents indicated they use Talysh in various informal situations, while in the less isolated villages only 55 to 66 percent of the respondents said they used Talysh in the same situations. In Germətük, the least isolated village, the picture was further complicated by age. Less than 20 percent of respondents under the age of 30 in Germətük indicated they use Talysh in a range of informal situations.

One other important finding related to language use with children. Azerbaijani is the language of education, and people in both the Tat and Talysh communities feel their children need to speak it well. The implication is that people are increasingly using Azerbaijani with children. Initial reports were that parents are using Azerbaijani regularly even with preschool children in order to minimize any potential non-native accent. More detailed study indicated that the situation was more mixed. In Tat communities, approximately 43 to 49 percent of all adults use only Azerbaijani with school children. Approximately 35 percent of older adults and 15 percent of young people, however, use only Tat with school children. With preschool children, most Tat adults of all ages use Tat or a mixture of Tat and Azerbaijani. This suggests that in many families adults speak to their children in Tat before they start school, but switch to Azerbaijani once the children reach school age.

A similar situation is evident in the Talysh communities, but with a strong gender distinction: More men than women report using Talysh with preschool children, especially in the more isolated communities. We hypothesize that women have greater responsibility for raising the children, and thus feel pressure to help them increase their proficiency in Azerbaijani in order to help them succeed in school.

4. Talysh and Tat vitality

Our results indicate that the Talysh and Tat communities are currently maintaining stable diglossia. However, while it is theoretically possible to maintain this situation indefinitely, it is clear that the traditional languages are under considerable pressure, especially in communities that are less isolated and less homogeneous. I expect these pressures will increase as communities are becoming less isolated and less homogeneous over time. Already, a large percentage of ethnic Tat live in lowland villages that are either mixed in ethnicity or are surrounded by ethnic Azerbaijani villages. Most of these members of the Tat community have already shifted to Azerbaijani. Furthermore, recent economic development has not been distributed equally; rural communities have seen less development than urban centers.

Finally, the emphasis on using Azerbaijani with children could have serious repercussions for language transmission. At this point in time, parents express confidence that children will continue to learn the traditional languages from friends on the street, and from adults outside the household. In addition, the majority of parents are still using the traditional languages with preschool children. If, however, the desire to see children speak standard Azerbaijani becomes stronger, it is very possible that the use of Azerbaijani could become even more widespread with preschool children, and transmission of the traditional languages could be broken.

5. Call for language documentation

In this situation, it is especially important that linguists, anthropologists, and other specialists work with local community leaders to document the traditional language and culture. At this point in time there are many people in the communities who could be involved in carrying out such projects, and documentation in the form of audio and video recordings, with transcriptions as possible, will serve as a rich resource for future generations. Furthermore, such projects might help to stabilize the diglossia that is present in many of the communities. There is strong appreciation in the Tat and Talysh communities for both Azerbaijani and the traditional languages. People do not want to have to make a choice between the two. It is my hope that we can help provide people with the ability to maintain both for future generations.

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