

The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Lezgi in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of sociolinguistic research conducted in July 1999 and the spring of 2001 among the Lezgi people living northeastern Azerbaijan. The goals of the research were to investigate patterns of language use, bilingualism, and language attitudes with regard to the Lezgi, Russian, and Azerbaijani languages in the Lezgi community. Of particular interest is the overall vitality of the Lezgi language even among Lezgi living in multiethnic urban areas, in spite of variations in language use patterns observed between regions. Interviews, observations, and questionnaires were employed. An important part of the interviews dealt with perceived benefits of the various languages.*

1. Background

The Lezgi language belongs to the Dagestani group of Northeastern Caucasian languages. Two main dialect groups (Kjurinski and Samurski) are found in Dagestan, while a third dialect is spoken in the Qusar, Quba, and Xaçmaz districts in the northeastern part of Azerbaijan. While more Lezgis live in Qusar than in Quba, this third dialect is named for the town of Quba (Mejlanova 1964). There may be a wide variety of internal subdialects within the Quba dialect group. Saadiyev (1961) reports that the Qımıl subdialect, spoken in Qımıl, Üçgün, and Künsət, is noticeably different from the Quba standard, showing more influence from Azerbaijani. The variety spoken in Əniq is likewise classed as a subdialect, possibly distinct from the Qımıl cluster (Hacıyev 1957). Mejlanova (1964) also argues that data collected by Genko (1929) in the mountain village of Düztaħır are not representative of the core Quba dialect. The greatest variation from the Quba standard may occur in these mountain villages west of the district center.

Some Lezgi speakers in Azerbaijan live in other districts further south and west of Quba. To the best of our knowledge, detailed investigation of the varieties of Lezgi spoken in these areas has not yet been published.

According to 1989 Soviet census figures, there were 466,006 Lezgi people living in the Soviet Union (Trosterud 1998). Census data from 1970 indicated 136,835 Lezgi residents in Azerbaijan (Selections 1973). Smeets (1994) estimates a total population of about 500,000 Lezgi speakers, of whom roughly half live in Dagestan and half in Azerbaijan.

Due to Soviet educational policies, Lezgi people living in Dagestan studied Lezgi in school, and therefore are reported to use Lezgi for written purposes. Lezgis living in Azerbaijan, however, did not study Lezgi during the Soviet period, and therefore usually write in Azerbaijani or Russian (Kosvena 1960).

A Latin-based script was developed for Lezgi in 1928, using the Gjunejski variant of the Kjurinski dialect spoken in Dagestan as the literary standard. In 1938, this script was abandoned in favor of a modified Cyrillic script. This script is still in use (Mejlanova 1970).

The focus of this paper is sociolinguistic research investigating current language use among speakers of Lezgi in Azerbaijan. The primary goals of this research are:

- a. To verify the locations and overall ethnic makeup of villages and regions where Lezgi speakers live,
- b. To investigate language use and proficiency patterns for the Lezgi, Azerbaijani, and Russian languages in Lezgi communities, and
- c. To probe speakers' attitudes toward the Lezgi, Azerbaijani, and Russian languages.

2. Methodology

Our research was conducted in three main stages. In the first stage, eleven locations were selected for an initial survey. These locations included three mountain villages (Qımıl, Əniq, and Düztaħır); five foothill locations,

*The research on which this report is based was carried out by members of the North Eurasia Group of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The initial field research was conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Linguistics of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. Later research was conducted under the auspices of the Institute of International Relations of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. We wish to express our thanks to the Academy of Sciences and to the Representatives of Executive Authority of the Qusar, Quba, and Xaçmaz districts for their cooperation and assistance in this undertaking.

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including two district centers (Quba and Qusar) and three smaller settlements (Hil, Həzrə, and İmamqulukənd); and two coastal communities (Xudat and Nabran). These communities were all visited in two weeks of travel from 13 to 24 July 1999. The primary method of investigation involved direct interviews with individuals and groups in the villages visited. In each district center and village, representatives of executive authority were interviewed about demographic figures, population trends, and various language use patterns. Educators in the district centers, and school directors and teachers in each village provided information on children's language proficiency upon entering and completing school, on the medium of instruction, and on Lezgi-language teaching. As opportunity arose, medical personnel and religious leaders were asked about language use in their respective professions.

In addition, groups of residents were interviewed about the levels of proficiency in each language among older, middle-aged, and young people in their villages. These groups were also asked about their opinions concerning the importance of each language for a variety of communicative situations.

Finally, a 220-word list of basic Lezgi vocabulary was collected in six of these locations.

In the second stage, researchers visited Qalacıq in the İsmayılı district as guests in the spring of 2001. Information was gathered through observations and conversations with local residents. As with previous villages, the team focused on interviewing residents regarding levels of proficiency in various languages, language use patterns and language attitudes. Unlike in other villages, however, a new method was tested which involved asking not only which patterns were considered typical in their community, but also which were considered atypical. The aim of this research was to discover all the possible types of families that exist within the community, sociolinguistically speaking. Although we were unable to fully meet this goal, much valuable information was obtained.

In the third stage, interviews were conducted over a period of several months in 2001 with Lezgi specialists and Lezgi residents of Baku. The purpose of these interviews was to gain information regarding the Lezgi community in Baku. Again, the main questions dealt with language use patterns and language proficiencies. Additional questions dealt with preferred language(s) of education. The method employed was similar to that used in Qalacıq, where interviewees were asked about all the types of language use patterns, preferences, and proficiency levels exhibited within their speech community.

3. Results

3.1 Lezgi Locations

District and village officials and community residents indicated various sites where they knew Lezgi speakers to be living. On this basis, the inventory of Lezgi locations compiled from previous literature was confirmed and expanded. Table 1 shows a list of villages where Lezgi speakers are reported to live. This list, however, is still not comprehensive. In many interviews, only major centers were discussed; in other interviews only locations with maximally similar or different dialects of Lezgi from the one spoken in the interview site were given. Various respondents cited a range of figures from 78 to 100 for the total number of Lezgi villages in Qusar district. Several people said that the unlisted villages were all smaller than those listed here.

It should also be noted that some of the villages in the list are mixed in nature. For example, in the İsmayılı district, the village of İstisu is a mixed Lezgi/Tat village, while the village of Sumaqaılı is a mixed Lezgi/Azerbaijani village. Similarly, the majority of the residents of Nic village in Qəbələ district are Udi or Azerbaijani.

3.2 Language Proficiency and Language Use

3.2.1 Lezgi language proficiency and language use

In all locations outside Baku, Lezgi adults indicated that they are able to understand and speak Lezgi perfectly, as their native language. Adults commonly use Lezgi in the home and within their Lezgi-speaking communities. In the town of Nabran in the Xaçmaz district, older adults are reported to be much more likely to speak Lezgi than are middle-aged or younger people. Middle-aged adults in Nabran understand and speak Lezgi, but often choose to speak Russian rather than Lezgi.

Table 1: Locations of Lezgi Villages[†]

Qusar District:	Quba District:	İsmayılı District:
* QUSAR	* QUBA	Qalacıq
* Əniq	* Üçgün	İstisu
Caqar	* Qımıl	Sumaqaalı
Kuzun	Küsnet	
Zindanmuruq	Digah	Qəbələ District:
Laza	Qonaqkənd	Nic
? Çatkun	? Qımıl Kazma	Laza
* Hil	? Küsnət Kazma	Qəmərvan
Cibir	? Alemid Quba	? Qalın
? Sabar	? Yelenova	Dizaxlı
? Vegola	? Qımıl Polosa	
? Qilovar		Oğuz District:
Xurel	Xaçmaz District:	Filfilı
Avaran	* Xudat	
Çilagir	Müqtədir	Şəki District:
Yasab	* Nabran	ŞƏKİ
Piral	Tel	
* Həzrə	Şimal	Göçaj District:
* Düztahir	Yalama	(villages not listed)
Gican	? Dapalın	
Sudur	? Samurçay	Zaqatala District:
Quxur	Qımılqışlaq	(villages not listed)
Yuxarı Zeyxur	? Mərzəmədkənd	
* İmamqulukənd		
Nizhniy	Dəvəçi District:	
İmamqulukənd	(villages not listed)	
Mucuq		
Gədəzeyxur		
Köhnə Xudat		
? İmamxanix		

[†] District centers are shown in small capitals. An asterisk (*) marks locations visited on the initial research trip. A question mark (?) indicates locations not yet pinpointed on a map of Azerbaijan.

In Baku, it was reported that most adults understand and speak Lezgi very well, but that some Lezgis do not have a high proficiency in the vernacular. It was reported that such Lezgis were likely to be third- or fourth-generation urban residents who have little or no contact with Lezgis in the districts outside the capital and have intermarried with other ethnic groups. This group of Lezgis, however, is reported to constitute only about 10–30% of the Baku Lezgi community. On the other hand, Lezgis who maintain contact with relatives and friends in the districts and marry other Lezgis are reported to use the vernacular in their own families and with other Lezgis in the Baku Lezgi community.

Young adult Lezgis in Baku whose parents grew up outside the capital show distinct language patterns. They are reported to speak Lezgi very well, although they are unlikely to consider it the language they are most fluent in. While they speak Lezgi with middle-aged and older adults most of the time, they use a mixture of Lezgi and Russian (or, less commonly, Azerbaijani) with their peers. Their parents also tend to use a mixture when speaking to them, but use Lezgi with each other.

3.2.1.1 *Children's Lezgi language proficiency and language use*¹

Teachers at all the schools and kindergartens in the Qusar district indicated that all the children speak and understand Lezgi when they first begin school. In fact, most do not know any language other than Lezgi. This observation supports the claim that Lezgi is spoken consistently in the home.

In the Quba district and in the town of Xudat in the Xaçmaz district, Lezgi children speak Lezgi at home, but they also learn Azerbaijani through contact with their Azerbaijani-speaking neighbors before they begin school. In spite of the interaction with Azerbaijani speakers, adults in these areas indicated that Lezgi children learn to speak Lezgi fluently and without any special difficulties.

In Nabran, it was reported that children have low proficiency in Lezgi. Teachers in Nabran said that the students could not speak Lezgi when they entered the first class, although most of the children could understand it. In contrast to all of the other locations visited, Lezgi children in Nabran do not generally master Lezgi at home before beginning school.

In Qalacıq, children are reported to be fluent in Lezgi. In the vast majority of homes Lezgi is the main language of communication, so it is the first language children learn to speak.

3.2.1.2 *Lezgi literacy*

Significant levels of literacy in Lezgi were attested only in the Qusar district. Eleven years of Lezgi classes have been offered in most Qusar district schools for most of the past decade. Young people's literacy skills are reported to be generally good. Middle-aged people are fairly literate in Lezgi, while older people tend to read Lezgi only poorly. After finishing school, adults continue to read the Qusar regional newspaper, which contains articles in both Azerbaijani and Lezgi. Some Qusar residents also indicated that they have read several different volumes of Lezgi poetry.

In Qusar town, a branch of the Baku Pedagogical Institute trains teachers from Qusar and other districts of Azerbaijan to meet the special challenges of multilingual education and first-language literacy programs. In an effort to develop more literature and teaching materials in Lezgi, the faculty of this institute is currently gathering folk tales and other Lezgi texts for publication.

In the Quba and Xaçmaz districts, reading and writing skills in Lezgi were reported to be very low. A number of reasons were given for this. One is that the full eleven years of Lezgi-language classes have only begun in the last few years in Üçgün, Qımıl, and Nabran² and that there are no Lezgi-language classes in Xudat. A second reason is that there is little written material in Lezgi available outside the classroom. The adults we interviewed felt that Azerbaijani (or, in Nabran, Russian) was sufficient to meet their literary needs.

An additional problem faced in the Lezgi-language classes in Nabran is that the students do not learn Lezgi in the home. Therefore, the students must learn to speak, as well as to read and write, the language in the Lezgi-language classes.

In Qalacıq, only a handful of individuals have read anything in literary Lezgi. During Soviet times the Lezgi-language newspaper could be obtained in this village, but it is now harder to find. There are no classes in Lezgi offered in the school.

In all village locations, residents said that they find it hard to read literary Lezgi, which is based on a dialect spoken in Dagestan. This difficulty was attributed both to the differences between the local and literary dialects of Lezgi and to the complexity of the Lezgi alphabet. Some individuals in Qalacıq said they were more comfortable reading in Azerbaijani than in literary Lezgi.

Although results are inconclusive, it appears that the majority of Lezgis who grew up in Baku do not read and write Lezgi. Lezgi children in Baku do not receive classes in the vernacular, so the Baku-born Lezgis who do learn to read and write Lezgi do so either because their parents taught them, or they are personally motivated to learn. There are classes in literary Lezgi in the Baku branch of the Dagestani Institute. According to one instructor, even those Lezgi students who have had no previous exposure to written Lezgi are able to read and write at a medium level in two months. The Lezgis interviewed who had read an article or a poem once or twice in the literary variety said they had few difficulties in understanding the text.

¹No information was collected with regard to children's Lezgi proficiency in Baku.

²Before this, Lezgi-language classes were only part of the curriculum for the lower classes.

There is a Lezgi newspaper, *Samur*, published in Baku which has a readership of 2,000 nationwide. This newspaper is actually multilingual. Approximately 50% of the articles are in Lezgi, 25% are in Azerbaijani, and 25% are in Russian.

On a number of occasions, we asked for people's thoughts about the possibility of changing from a Cyrillic-based alphabet to a Latin-based alphabet, since the national language Azerbaijani now uses a Latin-based alphabet. In most cases, people believed that it would be impossible to use such an alphabet for Lezgi, due to the need for additional special characters that do not occur in Azerbaijani. Several educators and officials, however, thought that such a change might be a good idea, due to the current educational emphasis on the Latin-based script in Azerbaijani.

3.2.2 Azerbaijani language proficiency and language use

In most locations, residents were asked to evaluate proficiency in Azerbaijani in the domains of comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. The responses for the oral domains of comprehension and speaking are summarized in table 2.³

Table 2: Oral Azerbaijani Proficiency[†]

Age	District: Village:	Qusar				Quba
		Hil	Həzrə	Düztahir	İmamq [‡]	Üçgün
Older (45+)	Male	3	2	3	1	2
	Female			3/2		
Middle (30–45)	Male	3	2	3		N/A
	Female			3	2	
Younger (<30)	Male	3				
	Female					

[†] The numeric values represent various levels of proficiency: 3=high, 2=medium, 1=low, 0=none. When two numbers are given, the first indicates comprehension and the second indicates speaking. N/A indicates 'not available' (no information was gathered).

[‡] İmamqulukənd

Oral Azerbaijani proficiency was reported to be fair or poor in Nabran in the Xaçmaz district. In all other locations, high or medium oral skills were reported for almost all age groups. The one exception was older speakers in İmamqulukənd whose comprehension and speaking abilities were judged to be only fair. In several locations, oral proficiency in Azerbaijani was reported to be slightly higher for young and middle-aged speakers than for those over forty-five, and slightly higher for middle-aged men than for middle-aged women. One individual remarked that education in Azerbaijani is one of the main reasons why such a high level of proficiency is achieved. In Qalaciq, oral proficiency in Azerbaijani is said to be determined by age and education. That is, older men and women and those with minimal education (usually women) attain only a fair level of proficiency in Azerbaijani.

Lezgis interviewed in Baku also reported a high level of oral proficiency in Azerbaijani, even among those who were educated in Russian. The reason given for this is that Lezgis in Baku have a high contact with Azerbaijanis. Although no interviews were conducted with Azerbaijani-educated Lezgis, it is reported that a small number of them do exist. These are likely to use a mixture of Azerbaijani and Lezgi in the home and are more comfortable using Azerbaijani than Russian.

The responses for the written domains of reading and writing are summarized in table 3.⁴

³Because information gathered in Əniq, Qalaciq, Baku, and the Xaçmaz district was not as systematic as that taken from other locations, reports from these locations are only included in prose following the table.

⁴Because information gathered in Əniq, Qalaciq, Baku, and the Xaçmaz district was not as systematic as that taken from other locations, they are not included in the table.

Table 3: Written Azerbaijani Proficiency[†]

Age	District: Village:	Qusar				Quba
		Hil	Həzrə	Düztahir	İmamq [‡]	Üçgün
Older (45+)	Male	2		3	1	1
	Female			2		N/A
Middle (30-45)	Male	2		3	2	3
	Female			3		2
Younger (<30)	Male	2	3	2	N/A	3
	Female			3	2	N/A

[†] The numeric values represent various levels of proficiency: 3=high, 2=medium, 1=low, 0=none. N/A indicates 'not available' (no information was gathered).

[‡] İmamqulukənd

In many instances, reading and writing proficiency was reported to be slightly lower than oral proficiency in Azerbaijani. In general, high or medium writing ability was reported for all age groups in all locations except İmamqulukənd and Üçgün, where low written proficiency was reported for those over forty-five.

Some of the Russian-educated young adults in Baku indicated that they have some difficulty with literary Azerbaijani. While they have a high level of oral proficiency, they reported they have difficulties understanding the higher-level vocabulary found in literature.

3.2.2.1 Children's Azerbaijani language proficiency and language use

As indicated in section 3.2.1.1, teachers at all the schools and kindergartens in the Qusar district indicated that the children do not yet speak and understand Azerbaijani when they first begin school. This was attributed to the fact that pre-school children in the villages of the Qusar district rarely have direct contact with first-language Azerbaijani speakers, although they are exposed to some Azerbaijani language through television and radio.

Kindergarten teachers in Qusar reported that the children learn to understand Azerbaijani and begin to speak it by the time they complete the kindergarten program. Elementary school teachers, however, said that children in the beginning grades still have low Azerbaijani proficiency. They report that it is typically necessary for teachers up to the fourth or fifth grade to supplement Azerbaijani-medium instruction with explanations in Lezgi in order for students to understand fully. However, in all locations in the Qusar district, teachers believed that children usually know Azerbaijani well by the time they finish the eleventh grade.

In the Quba and Xaçmaz districts, students were reported to have no great difficulties with the Azerbaijani language. Lezgi children in these districts speak Lezgi at home, but they also learn Azerbaijani through contact with their Azerbaijani-speaking neighbors before they begin school. Teachers and other adults in these districts indicated that all the children who attend the school speak Azerbaijani equally well, regardless of home language. Lezgi students in Quba and Xaçmaz districts thus have an easier transition to using literary Azerbaijani in school than do students in Qusar district.

In Nabran, it was reported that many children have low proficiency in Azerbaijani, although teachers said that most of the children do learn to speak some Azerbaijani. The lack of an Azerbaijani-language sector in the school in Nabran could be connected with lower levels of Azerbaijani proficiency among children there.

In Qalaciq, one teacher reported that children have trouble with Azerbaijani when they start school, and even in the higher grades he sometimes has to explain concepts in Lezgi. Graduates know Azerbaijani well, but not at a high enough level to discuss politics. Only those who are highly motivated or talented reportedly achieve this high level of fluency.

3.2.3 Russian language proficiency and language use

In most locations, residents were also asked to evaluate proficiency in Russian in the domains of comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. The reported levels of proficiency for the oral domains of comprehension and

speaking were quite different for men and women. Therefore, we summarize the responses for the men and women separately. The responses for men are summarized in table 4, while those for women are summarized in table 5.⁵

Table 4: Oral Russian Proficiency among Men[†]

Age	District: Village:	Qusar				Quba
		Hil	Həzrə	Düztahir	İmamq [‡]	Üçgün
Older (45+)		N/A	2/1	3	1	2
Middle (30–45)		N/A	1/2	2	2	1
Younger (<30)		N/A	1	1	1	1/0

Table 5: Oral Russian Proficiency among Women[†]

Age	District: Village:	Qusar				Quba
		Hil	Həzrə	Düztahir	İmamq [‡]	Üçgün
Older (45+)		1	0	1	0	0
Middle (30–45)		1/2	1	2	N/A	1
Younger (<30)		N/A	1	1/0	0	1/0

[†] The numeric values represent various levels of proficiency: 3=high, 2=medium, 1=low, 0=none. When two numbers are given, the first indicates comprehension and the second indicates speaking. N/A indicates 'not available' (no information was gathered).

[‡] İmamqulukənd

Outside Baku, high levels of Russian proficiency and a preference for Russian as a primary language were reported only in Nabran in the Xaçmaz district. In other areas, men were generally reported to have low to mid levels of Russian proficiency. Women were consistently reported to have lower (or equivalent) proficiency in Russian than men. This difference in proficiency was generally associated with the fact that men served in the Soviet army.

The reported levels of proficiency for the written domains of reading and writing are summarized in table 6.⁶

Table 6: Written Russian Proficiency[†]

Age	District: Village:	Qusar			Quba
		Həzrə	Düztahir	İmamq [‡]	Üçgün
Older (45+)	Male	1	1	1	2
	Female	0	0	0	0
Middle (30–45)	Male	1	2	2	1
	Female	0		N/A	
Younger (<30)	Male	0		2	1
	Female				

[†] The numeric values represent various levels of proficiency: 3=high, 2=medium, 1=low, 0=none. N/A indicates 'not available' (no information was gathered).

[‡] İmamqulukənd

⁵Because information gathered in Əniq, Qalacıq, Baku, and the Xaçmaz district was not as systematic as that taken from other locations, they are not included in the table.

⁶Because information gathered in Əniq, Hil, Qalacıq, Baku, and the Xaçmaz district was not as systematic as that taken from other locations, they are not included in the table.

Outside of Nabran, proficiency in reading and writing in Russian was medium at best. Older women, all women in Həzrə, and younger people in Həzrə and Düztahir are reported to have no proficiency in written Russian.

In all locations other than Nabran, Russian proficiency was consistently reported to be lower than Azerbaijani proficiency for each age and gender group.

Older women and young people of both genders had especially low proficiency in Russian. This pattern was attributed to the fact that older and younger people were more likely to have studied in Azerbaijani-sector schools than in Russian sectors. Middle-aged people were more likely than old or young people to have had Russian-medium instruction. Furthermore, women lacked the exposure to Russian language which men in middle-aged and older age groups gained through travel and military service.

It is interesting to note that young people's written Russian skills tended to exceed their speaking skills. Young people in these villages do study written Russian in school, but they have limited opportunities to converse with native speakers of Russian.

In Baku, interviews indicated that the majority of Lezgis in this location are Russian educated (perhaps up to 80%) and have a high level of proficiency in Russian. Some young adults reported that Russian is the language they are most fluent in, and one of the languages they often use with their peers (in combination with Lezgi).

3.2.3.1 Children's Russian language proficiency and language use

In Nabran, it was reported that children have no difficulties with Russian. Teachers and parents reported that the children learn to speak Russian well before beginning school.

In Baku, children's level of proficiency in Russian depends on their environment. If one of the parents was educated in Russian, children seem to receive some input in this language during school years, and in some cases even before entering school. Children of Azerbaijani-educated parents, however, may have more difficulties with Russian in school. Interviewees also indicated that Lezgis who study in Azerbaijani do not achieve a high level of proficiency in Russian.

In all locations other than Nabran and Baku, children have very limited Russian proficiency. Adults in the Quba and Qusar districts and in Xudat reported that children learn Russian only from classes at school and from Russian-language programs on television. Contact with first-language Russian speakers is rare for children in these communities.

3.2.4 Education

3.2.4.1 Schools

In the four schools in Xudat, there are two 'sectors' with regard to language of instruction: a Russian-language sector and an Azerbaijani sector. Russian was formerly the only language of instruction in the four schools in Hil in the Qusar district, but Azerbaijani-language sectors were opened in all four during the past several years. Plans are for one-third of the students in Hil to attend the Azerbaijani-language sector, and for two-thirds to attend the Russian-language sector. The only school with no Azerbaijani-language sector is the school in Nabran, but an Azerbaijani-language sector is also planned for this school in the future. All the schools in the remaining villages use Azerbaijani as the only medium of instruction. Outside of Baku, Azerbaijani is becoming increasingly more common as the medium of instruction in the schools.

We cannot make a definitive statement of the percentages of Azerbaijani- and Russian-medium schools among the Lezgi community in Baku. As was indicated previously, however, interviews indicate that perhaps up to 80% of Lezgis in Baku are educated in Russian.

Lezgi is currently taught as a subject in all the schools visited in the Qusar and Quba districts. These programs were implemented up to ten years ago in the Qusar region, and during the past two to three years in the Quba region. Lezgi classes were likewise implemented two years ago in Nabran in the Xaçmaz region, but Lezgi is not taught at any of the four schools in Xudat in the Xaçmaz region, nor at the school in Qalacıq village, nor in any primary school in Baku. There is, however, a branch of the Dagestani Institute in Baku, which offers courses on Lezgi language and literature.

3.2.4.2 *Kindergartens*

Kindergartens are currently in operation in Hil, Həzrə, and İmamqulukənd in the Qusar district. In each of these kindergartens, Azerbaijani is used as the primary language. Kindergarten programs in Hil and Həzrə, but not in İmamqulukənd, include Lezgi language lessons.

Although there are no kindergartens in locations outside the capital where Russian is used as the official medium of instruction, Russian lessons are taught twice weekly at the kindergarten in Hil. Until two years ago, Russian lessons were also offered at the kindergarten in Həzrə. These lessons were discontinued when Lezgi language classes were introduced into the kindergarten program.

3.2.5 *Summary profile of language proficiency and language use*

Overall, in the Lezgi communities of the Qusar and Quba districts, in the town of Xudat in the Xaçmaz district, and in the village of Qalacıq in the İsmayılı district, Lezgi is widely used in the home. Azerbaijani proficiency is higher than Russian proficiency among Lezgis in these areas. Young people tend to have higher oral proficiency than writing skills in Azerbaijani, but better written than oral skills in Russian.

Among the Lezgi community in the town of Nabran in the Xaçmaz district, Russian is used widely in the home. Most children do not learn to speak Lezgi in the home, because Russian is actually used more frequently in conversation. Lezgi is still spoken by some older people in the community and is studied by children in school, but it is not the dominant language in any domain. Russian proficiency is generally higher than Azerbaijani proficiency among Lezgis in Nabran. Russian serves the bulk of the communication needs at home, in public, and in school. Lezgi is considered to be important for family relationships because it is the traditional language of the ethnic group, but it is losing its communicative necessity for Lezgis in Nabran.

Among the Lezgi in Baku, language use patterns depend on age, educational preferences, ethnic composition of the family, contact with Lezgis outside the capital, and length of time in the city. Most Lezgis who are married to other Lezgis use the vernacular in the home, and their children learn to speak Lezgi as well. The majority of Lezgis in this city are Russian educated, and so Russian is their main language of wider communication. While middle-aged and older Lezgis tend to use Lezgi with each other, young adults most frequently use a mixture of Lezgi and Russian. Lezgis who are third- or fourth-generation urban residents, who have little or no contact with Lezgis outside the capital, and who intermarry with other ethnic groups, have little or no proficiency in Lezgi.

Lezgi speakers in the Qusar district are literate in Lezgi, but literacy in Lezgi is limited elsewhere. Lezgi is currently taught as a school subject in almost all the locations visited, the exceptions being the town of Xudat in the Xaçmaz district and the village of Qalacıq in the İsmayılı district.

3.3 **Language Attitudes**

3.3.1 *Perceived benefit*

In seven of the villages visited, groups of residents were asked about the importance of Lezgi, Azerbaijani, and Russian in various contexts. These contexts included communicating with people in the village, earning income, gaining respect or prestige in the village, relating to extended family, participating in religious activities, and gaining information about national and world events.⁷

The responses for Lezgi are shown in Figure 1, where 3 indicates “very important,” 2 indicates “important,” 1 indicates “somewhat important,” and 0 indicates “not important.”

⁷This set of questions was adapted from those proposed in Stalder and Karan’s (1997) perceived benefit model of language choice.

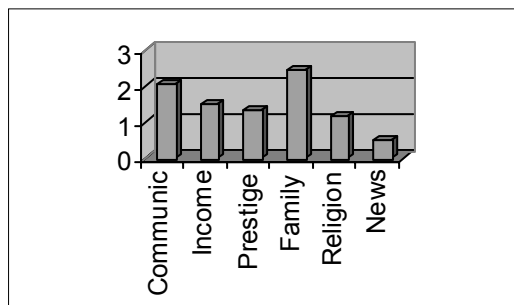


Figure 1: Perceived Benefit of Lezgi

Lezgi was reported to be most important in the contexts of family and communication. In all locations, Lezgi was reported to be essential for family interactions because it is the language of the home. Its importance in the context of communication is due to the fact that it is the language most widely used in the village.

Lezgi was important or somewhat important for earning income, especially in the village. It was also reported to be somewhat important for gaining prestige. Many respondents had difficulty imagining a Lezgi adult living in their villages who could not speak Lezgi, but said that they would not disrespect such a person for reasons of language proficiency.

Lezgi was reported to be somewhat important for religion since many religious topics are discussed in Lezgi or Azerbaijani. No religious literature, however, was reported to exist in Lezgi. Finally, since few newspapers or broadcasts in the Lezgi language are available, Lezgi is not seen as particularly useful as a medium for receiving current news reports.

The responses regarding the benefits of knowing Azerbaijani are shown in Figure 2.

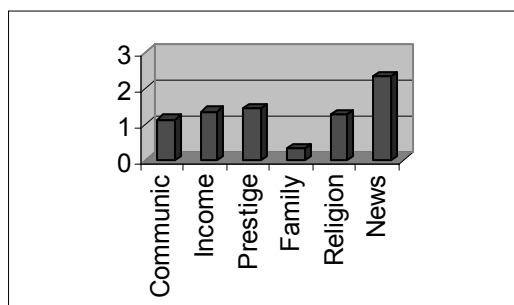


Figure 2: Perceived Benefit of Azerbaijani

Azerbaijani is seen as most beneficial in the context of acquiring information about current events in the nation and the world.

While in most locations Azerbaijani was perceived as least beneficial in the context of the family, in Üçgün it was also very important for home life, because as many as 30% of the Lezgi people there have Azerbaijani-speaking spouses. This intermarriage rate was much higher than that reported in Qusar district, where only one to five percent of marriages are between Lezgi speakers and first-language Azerbaijani speakers.

In the other four contexts, Azerbaijani was seen as somewhat important or important. In a number of locations, people indicated that they consider Azerbaijani very important for communication outside their towns, in neighboring villages or in other parts of the country, even if Azerbaijani proficiency was not essential for daily interaction in their own villages. It is not, however, uniformly seen as very important, and overall is seen as less important than Lezgi in this context.

Proficiency in Azerbaijani was considered to be important for earning income. Most people said that while it was not necessary to speak Azerbaijani in order to be able to find work in their villages, Azerbaijani was necessary for working in other parts of the republic.

As the state language, Azerbaijani was particularly valued for gaining respect from residents of other parts of the republic.

In the context of religion, Azerbaijani is seen as somewhat important, since religious topics are discussed in Azerbaijani or Lezgi. In Əniq, Hil, İmamqulukənd, and Üçgün, religious literature is available in Azerbaijani.

The responses regarding the benefits of knowing Russian are shown in Figure 3.

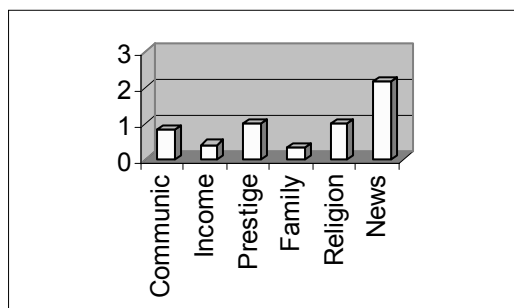


Figure 3: Perceived Benefit of Russian

Overall, Russian is perceived to be less important than either Lezgi or Azerbaijani. The only context in which Russian is seen as important is in acquiring information about current events in the nation and the world.

Russian was reported to be very important for village communication only in Nabran, where many people speak Russian as their first language. In the other locations, Russian was considered to be important only for talking to occasional Russian-speaking visitors, or for travelling outside Azerbaijan. Russian was also reported to be important for family life in Nabran, because many Lezgi people speak Russian more than Lezgi at home. Overall, however, Russian was less important in these contexts than either Lezgi or Azerbaijani.

Russian was also seen as less important for economic purposes, with the exception of younger and middle-aged men who go to Russia to find work. People had difficulty estimating what percentage of the men from their villages go to Russia for employment.

The importance of Russian for prestige lies in the fact that it is a sign of a good education. A number of respondents commented that knowledge of any language could increase a person's prestige, because it is good to know many languages, but lack of proficiency in any particular language is no cause for shame.

A general comment should be made in regard to the role of language in religion. Responses indicated that language choice is less relevant for religion than for other types of activities. Most people said that Arabic was the most important language for religious practice, but few people could read or write it. Among those who could, it was not clear whether or not they were actually able to understand Arabic. Religious literature is also available in Turkish. Most people said that it is not essential to know Azerbaijani, Lezgi, Russian, or any other particular language in order to participate in religious activities.

In sum, the Lezgi language was most valued for home life and communication within Lezgi-majority villages. Azerbaijani, as the state language, was considered important for communicating with Azerbaijani-speaking neighbors, for finding work and for participating in the republic as a whole. Russian was valued as a sign of education, and as a means of learning about world events. Language choice and proficiency were considered to be a less critical factor in the context of personal prestige and noncritical in the context of religion.

Although group interviews were not conducted in Qalaciq, some individuals expressed their opinions regarding the benefit of various languages. One individual indicated Lezgi was very valuable in all domains except making money and news. Another said that for the domains of making money and family life, either Lezgi or Azerbaijani were needed but not both, but that both were important for communication in daily life. Also, Russian was only considered important in the contexts of news and of gaining prestige.

3.3.2 Language attitudes among Baku Lezgis

As is indicated above, Lezgis in Baku prefer Russian over Azerbaijani in the domain of education. Most Lezgis in Baku desire their children to know both Russian and Azerbaijani. Some Lezgis interviewed indicated that children who study at Azerbaijani-medium schools do not achieve a high level of proficiency in Russian, whereas children who study in Russian also obtain a high oral proficiency in Azerbaijani. Thus, it appears that most Lezgis in Baku currently see Russian education as the best way for their children to achieve high oral proficiencies in both languages.

In some of our interviews, however, there were indications that this might change in the future. Some people indicated that due to the independence of the Azerbaijani Republic and the encouragement of Azerbaijani-medium education, the status of the Azerbaijani language is increasing. There is general agreement that children need to learn Azerbaijani well in order to obtain good jobs. It is possible that the increased need for high proficiency in literary and official Azerbaijani could motivate more Lezgis to put their children in Azerbaijani-medium schools.

Another pressure on the preservation of the Lezgi language among the community in Baku is due to potential changes in marriage patterns. There is a general awareness among Lezgis of all ages that their culture is unique, and that they need to preserve it. Most Lezgi middle-aged parents want their children to marry other Lezgis, and it appears that most marriages among Lezgis in Baku are with other Lezgis. Those who marry Azerbaijanis are the exception.

At the same time, young adult Lezgis expressed openness to marrying individuals from other ethnic groups. Along with this, most young Lezgis interviewed also expressed the desire to have their children learn Russian; in some cases this was perceived as being more important than having them learn Lezgi. The ultimate fate of the Lezgi language among the urban Lezgi community is not clear. One young woman said she wanted to teach her children Lezgi, even if she married a non-Lezgi. She was aware that this would require her making an effort to speak Lezgi in the home and taking her children to visit her Lezgi relatives.

4. Discussion

4.1 Demographic Patterns and Language Proficiency

Language use and proficiency patterns in Qusar, Quba, and Xaçmaz districts correlate with the demographic patterns noted for each of these three main districts.⁸ Several key points from the language use and demographic factors discussed above are summarized in table 7.

Table 7: Summary of Results by District

	Qusar District	Quba District	Xaçmaz District	
			Xudat	Nabran
% of Lezgis in community	90–100%	50–80%	50%	50%
Languages used in home	Lezgi only	Lezgi, Azerbaijani	—	Russian, Lezgi
Children's proficiency before school	Lezgi only	Lezgi, Azerbaijani	Lezgi, Azerbaijani	Russian, some Azerbaijani
Lezgi literacy	mid	almost none	low	almost none
Azerbaijani proficiency	high	high	high	mid to low
Russian proficiency	low	low	low	high

The dominance of the Lezgi language in Qusar district correlates to the large Lezgi majority in that area. Because most residents of the district and the district center are Lezgi speakers, many public activities within the district can be conducted in Lezgi. There is also a wider audience for Lezgi-language literature and cultural materials, which motivates their production. Throughout most of Qusar district, Lezgi is the dominant language of the home and community, and it plays a significant role in the educational system. Lezgi is generally considered to be the only language necessary for relating to family members. Pre-school children speak only Lezgi. Azerbaijani proficiency is gained chiefly through instruction at school and from media broadcasts, rather than through direct contact with people in the village. Lezgi literacy is widespread and receives considerable emphasis in the school system. For residents of Qusar district, Azerbaijani is significant chiefly as the state language, which is needed for relating to people outside their home area and for participating in the life of the republic.

⁸Because Qalacıq is only one of three Lezgi villages in the İsmayılı region, the sociolinguistic situation in this village will be discussed separately.

The shared importance of the Azerbaijani and Lezgi languages for Lezgis living in the Quba district and in Xudat town correlates to the ethnically mixed population of these areas. Even fairly homogenous Lezgi villages in Quba district are closely surrounded by ethnic Azerbaijani communities, so there is considerable contact between the two groups. Because the population of the Quba district as a whole is divided among several ethnic groups, including Azerbaijanis, Lezgis, Tats, Mountain Jews, and others, emphasis is placed on Azerbaijani as a common language for education and literacy.

In the Lezgi villages of Quba district and in Xudat, the Lezgi language is important for home life, optional in community life, and minimally emphasized in education. Although Lezgi is spoken consistently in the home, Azerbaijani is also important for a significant number of families (as many as 30%) where one spouse is Azerbaijani and the other is Lezgi. Children receive enough direct language input to master Azerbaijani apart from formal study. Lezgi and Azerbaijani are used equally in the daily life of the town, due to frequent contact between Lezgis and their Azerbaijani-speaking neighbors. Literacy in Lezgi is very low among adults. Although Lezgi language classes are offered in some locations, adults emphasize the greater need for their children to become literate in Azerbaijani than in Lezgi. Most Lezgi speakers in Quba and Xaçmaz districts depend more heavily on Azerbaijani for many daily communication needs than do those in Qusar district.

The population of Nabran is fairly evenly mixed between Lezgis and other ethnicities, as is the case in Quba district and the remainder of Xaçmaz district. Unlike the Lezgis living in these latter areas, however, Lezgis in Nabran use Russian more than they use either Lezgi or Azerbaijani.

The preference for Russian and the limited use of Lezgi among middle-aged and young generations in Nabran can possibly be explained by the history of the community and the nature of its language contacts over the past decades.

The history of Nabran differs significantly from that of the Lezgi communities in Qusar and Quba districts. Most of the population of Nabran moved there for economic reasons during or shortly after World War II. Lezgi people from Dagestan and various places in Azerbaijan resettled to Nabran, along with many Russians and Ukrainians. Most of the families in Nabran have lived there for sixty years or less, rather than for several hundred years, as is the case in many villages of Qusar and Quba districts. The process of resettlement and mixing with speakers of various Lezgi dialects and with native speakers of Russian may have facilitated the transition to Russian within Lezgi households.

Due to its coastal location near the border with Russia, Nabran has maintained a higher level of interaction with communities across the border than have the mountain villages of Quba and Qusar districts. People from Russia often travel through Nabran on the way to Baku, or come there for vacations. The village of Samurchay, which belongs to the administrative district centered in Nabran, formerly shared a school with another village across the border in Dagestan. It seems likely that the higher level of contact with first-language Russian speakers promoted the use of Russian rather than Lezgi in Nabran.

This language situation has entered a new phase of change in recent years as many ethnic Russians have moved away from Nabran, and more ethnic Azerbaijanis have moved into the area. The fact that Azerbaijani is taking on new importance in this community is shown through the establishment of an Azerbaijani sector in the local school. As the official state language, the role of Azerbaijani seems likely to increase in other ways, as well, in Nabran.

The sociolinguistic situation in Qalacıq in the İsmayılı district appears to be a unique one. Although it is the only village in the district with a large majority of Lezgis,⁹ it has maintained the vernacular; Lezgi continues to be the main language of the family and of the village. It should be noted that there is only a small number of mixed marriages in the village, which may partly explain why Lezgi continues to have such an important role in the community. Although its geographic isolation from the rest of the Lezgi population prevents frequent contact with Lezgis from other regions, residents of this village have a sense of belonging to a larger community. This may also be an influence for the preservation of the vernacular. Qalacıq may, however, become further isolated from other Lezgis in the realm of literacy. While the northern regions are showing a growing interest in the development of materials in their language, the difference in their dialect and the lack of classes in Lezgi will hinder residents of this village from becoming literate in the vernacular.

As in other Lezgi locations, residents of Qalacıq also have a high level of ability in Azerbaijani, although some individuals may only have a medium level. This reported proficiency is not likely to decrease, and may in fact increase over time, if contact with other villages also increases. With the breakdown of the Soviet structure, more families may be required to increase contact outside the village in order to find jobs.

⁹The Lezgis in the nearby villages of İstisu and Sumaqaılı are intermixed with other ethnicities.

The language situation among the Lezgis in Baku reflects the effects of urbanization on this people group. Perhaps due to the high value Lezgis place on their language and culture, they have for the most part continued to use their own language among themselves, even in the urban context. We see this most pronounced in the patterns of language use of the middle and older generations. Interviews among the young adults, however, indicate that further generations of urban residents might be less likely to continue using Lezgi in the personal domains. We see this already in their high use of a language of wider communication (most commonly Russian) with their Lezgi peers, and the openness to intermarriage with other ethnic groups. The possible increase in intermarriage, combined with decreased contact with Lezgis outside the city, could lead to fewer and fewer Baku Lezgis who actively learn and use their language.

In spite of these factors which could lead to a decrease in use of the Lezgi language in Baku, however, there are several factors that could keep the language vital in this urban setting. First, there are large numbers of Lezgis in Baku and in Qusar, Quba and Xaçmaz districts, and as a whole there appears to be a high degree of contact between those in Baku and those in Qusar, Quba, and Xaçmaz districts. Furthermore, ethnic Lezgis in Baku seem to maintain a high contact with other Lezgis within the city itself. Thus, overall there are many opportunities for Baku Lezgis to maintain contact with fellow speakers.

Another factor that must be taken into account is the countrywide shift from Russian to Azerbaijani as the main language of wider communication. This is especially pronounced in the areas of education and employment. The increasing emphasis on high Azerbaijani proficiency for employment and the switch from a Cyrillic to a Latin-based orthography increase the likelihood that future generations of Lezgis will choose to place their children in Azerbaijani rather than Russian schools. How long it would take for such a transition to take place is unclear.

A continuing study of the Lezgis in Baku would yield some valuable observations regarding language preferences in an urban setting.

5. Conclusion

The results of this research reveal a variety of sociolinguistic situations among Lezgi speakers in Azerbaijan. In Qusar district, Lezgi is spoken by many people in a large number of homogeneous communities, and it plays a significant role in literacy and education. Although there is a high level of Azerbaijani proficiency among Lezgi people in the region, they are more likely to use Lezgi than Azerbaijani for everyday communication in their homes and villages. In the mixed Lezgi communities in Quba and Xaçmaz districts, Lezgi speakers use Lezgi and Azerbaijani together for daily communication purposes, although they retain the use of Lezgi in the home. In these areas, Azerbaijani predominates in educational and literary contexts. The village of Qalacıq is similar to the Qusar villages in that Lezgi is the predominant language of family and community life. On the other hand, it is similar to the Quba and Xaçmaz villages in that Azerbaijani plays an important role in the area of education. In the town of Nabran in the Xaçmaz district, many Lezgi people prefer to speak Russian rather than either Lezgi or Azerbaijani. The youngest generation of Lezgis in this community is learning to speak the language through instruction in school rather than at home. At the same time, the role of Azerbaijani in Nabran is increasing through its function as a state language and through the establishment of an Azerbaijani-language sector in the local school.

In Baku, roughly 80% of Lezgis are reported to speak Lezgi at a high level. Lezgis who marry other Lezgis tend to speak Lezgi with each other, though they may speak a mixture of the vernacular and the language of wider communication (for most of them, Russian) with their children. Young adults tend to speak a mixture of Russian and Lezgi with their peers. Those who don't know Lezgi well or at all may constitute 10 to 30% of the Baku Lezgi population. These are usually third- or fourth-generation urban residents, who have little or no contact with Lezgis outside the capital, and who intermarry with other ethnic groups.

High language vitality for Lezgi is predicted by the fact that it is used widely in the home in throughout much of the northern districts, and among the majority of Lezgis in Baku. Lezgi literacy is established and on the rise in Qusar district. The efforts of educators and publishers in Qusar district to promote Lezgi literacy could encourage similar interest within other districts as well.

Appendix: Comprehensive Charts

Table A: Reported Azerbaijani Language Proficiency¹⁰

		District: Village:	Qusar					Quba				
			Əniq	Hil	Həzrə	Düztahir	İmamq	Üçgün				
Older (45+)	M	C	N/A	3	2	3	1	2				
		S		2				3	2	1	N/A	
		R										2
		W										
	F	C	2	3	2	3	1	2				
		S	+	2		2		1	N/A			
		R										
		W								N/A		
Middle (30-45)	M	C	N/A	3	3	3	3	3				
		S	+	2					2	2		
		R										
		W									N/A	
	F	C	N/A	3	2	3	2	N/A				
		S	2	2				3	2	2		
		R										
		W									N/A	
Younger (<30)	M	C	+	3	3	3	3	3				
		S		2					2	2	N/A	
		R										
		W										N/A
	F	C	+	3	3	3	3	3				
		S	N/A	2				3	2	N/A		
		R										
		W										

3 = high

2 = medium

1 = low

0 = none

N/A = not available

+ = high/medium

- = low/none

N/A = not available

C = Comprehension

S = Speaking

R = Reading

W = Writing

Where a range of responses were given by the group, number values for their responses were averaged.

¹⁰In Qımıl, Xudat, Nabran Tel', and Qalacıq, we were not able to conduct full group interviews covering this entire proficiency paradigm. In these locations, we either spoke only with selected individuals and specialists, or we had insufficient time to complete this section of the interview. For this reason, the results from these locations are reported only in prose.

Table B: Reported Russian Language Proficiency¹¹

District: Village:		Qusar					Quba
		Əniq	Hil	Həzrə	Düztahir	İmamq	Üçgün
Older (45+)	M	C	+	N/A	2	3	2
		S	N/A		1		
		R				1	
		W					
	F	C	+	1	0	1	0
		S	-			0	
		R	N/A				
		W				0	
Middle (30-45)	M	C	+	N/A	1	2	2
		S	N/A		2		
		R			1		
		W			1		
	F	C	2	1	1	2	N/A
		S	N/A	2			
		R		N/A			
		W					
Younger (<30)	M	C	+	N/A	1	1	1
		S	-		0	0	2
		R	+				
		W	N/A		1		
	F	C	+	N/A	1	1	0
		S	-		0	0	
		R	N/A				
		W			2		

3 = high
 2 = medium
 1 = low
 0 = none
 N/A = not available

+ = high/medium
 - = low/none
 N/A = not available

C = Comprehension
 S = Speaking
 R = Reading
 W = Writing

Where a range of responses were given by the group, number values for their responses were averaged.

¹¹In Qımıl, Xudat, Nabran Tel', and Qalacıq, we were not able to conduct full group interviews covering this entire proficiency paradigm. In these locations, we either spoke only with selected individuals and specialists, or we had insufficient time to complete this section of the interview. For this reason, the results from these locations are reported only in prose.

Table C: Perceived Benefit Responses

District: Village:		Qusar					Quba	Xaçmaz
		Əniq	Hil	Həzrə	Düztahir	İmamq	Üçgün	Nabran
Com	L	2	3	2	2	1.5	2	2
	A	2	2	1*	1	1	1	0
	R	0	1	1*	0	1	0	3
Inc	L	0.5	2	2	2	2	2	0
	A	2	0.5	1	2	1	1	2
	R	0	0.5	—	M: 2 F: 0	1	0	0
Pres	L		2	1	2	1	1	1
	A	3	1	1	1	1	2	1
	R		1	1	1	1	—	1
Fam	L	3	2	3	2	3	2	2
	A	0	0	0	0	0	2	—
	R	0	0	0	0	0	—	2
Rel	L	1	1	1.5	1	1	—	1.5
	A	2	1	1	1	1	2	1
	R	1	1	1	1	1	—	1
Inf	L	—	0	0	0	2	0	1
	A	—	3	3	2	2	2	2
	R	—	3	2	2	2	2	2

3 = very important Com = Communication
 2 = important Inc = Income
 1 = neutral Pres = Prestige
 0 = not important Fam = Family
 1* = average of 0 and 1 Rel = Religion
 — = no response Inf = Information

Where a range of responses were given by the group, number values for their responses were averaged.

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