

Language Choice in Azerbaijani Context: A Sociolinguistic perspective

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Abstract

This study deals with the issue of language choice from sociolinguistic perspectives. The problem of multilingualism and plurilingualism in sociolinguistics occupies a special field for the study and evokes the interest of most linguists. The goal of the research was to investigate language choice from sociolinguistic perspectives. This experimental work was carried out to verify the right choice of language (English, Russian and Azerbaijani) and to identify its effectiveness, the data were processed and interpreted based on analysis. Special attention was paid to the multilingualism / plurilingualism issues and multilingualism in Azerbaijan separately. This paper presents the results of quantitative method for the sociolinguistic research in language. It was based on the interviews that were conducted among parents in order to learn their tendency to bring up their children in a multilingual society. Thus, parents were interviewed in different schools with Russian, Azerbaijani and English medium of instructions; school with Azerbaijani medium of instruction named as “Zangi” lyceum, school with Russian medium named as “N_12”, school with English medium called as “Baku-Oxford School”. This paper is an in-depth, multidimensional study of such choices in language. The results of the data analysis affirm a solid status of English as an international language in Azerbaijan and emphasize an undeniable position of Azerbaijani language as well.

Keywords: language choice, sociolinguistics, multilingualism, plurilingualism, language of minorities.

Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, interest in inter-linguistic contacts has been so high and has generated so many researches that on the threshold of the 21st century, the scientific community has erroneously sensed that this topic has been fully studied. However, reality gives a good reason to doubt this, giving the issues of multilingualism and plurilingualism special importance in the prevailing global

multicultural and multilingual environment. Artificial or educational bilingualism is understood in a broad sense, as co-learning several foreign languages along with the mother tongue poses new questions and challenges to participants in the educational process in the modern world.

Most often, bilinguals do not seek to follow the rules of any language. The choice of language in each specific situation is not always simple. It can be influenced by various mutually affecting factors. Two are chief factors among them: the interlocutor and what language the bilingual individual prefers. Research on code switching and social identity has led to better understanding the place of language in the formation and transmission of social traditions and principles. “Communicative intention is carried out by choosing the appropriate language. Based on existing knowledge about the culture and linguistic situation, the communicants know whether the linguistic choice will be unexpected or significant, and what it means in the current social context.” The process of code switching to another language, as well as the choice of language itself, can be successful if listeners and speakers understand and interpret it correctly (Radionova & Abramova, 2015).

Since knowledge of one foreign language (even if this language is English) does not seem sufficient in the modern world, and situations of artificial bilingualism in the broad sense, especially trilingualism, are becoming more common, many researchers have looked at the features of teaching a second or a foreign language, like in the work by authors Bagramova, Baryshnikov and others; however, in many respects, such research, for example the concepts of trilingualism, still have not found such widespread application in the theory and practice of teaching a foreign language as they deserve (Baryshnikov, 2003; Bagramova, 2005).

Interest in multilingual research and the formation of natural bilingualism during this period somewhat pushed the study of artificial (educational) bilingualism to the background, although the significance of both phenomena is obvious, as well as their fundamental difference: if natural bilingualism is formed in the language environment due to constant contact with the target language and its carriers, the formation of artificial bilingualism occurs in the classroom, as a result of conscious actions aimed at mastering foreign language and foreign culture.

The need to distinguish between multilingualism and our area of interest - the development of several linguistic cultures in an artificial environment - leads us to the term “plurilingualism”, formulated in documents of the Council of Europe at the turn of the 21st century. Similarly, this study recognizes the need for a formulation of the competencies that distinguish a multilingual personality functioning in a multilingual society, from a plurilingual personality studying several foreign

languages outside the natural environment of their distribution. Authors such as Vakhtin and Golovko substantiated their interest in considering “plurilingual competence by the difference in the levels of language proficiency and cultural experience in different target languages and the need to develop strategic management skills for this “imbalance” of competencies” (Vakhtin & Golovko, 2004).

Currently, there are more than ten thousand languages and dialects in the world, but about two-third of the world’s population speak twenty-seven languages, so professional communication, regulated by economic and political needs, relies on a limited number of languages. According to linguists, sociolinguists and other specialists, the dynamics of the development of bilingualism and multilingualism in the world will maintain a steady upward trend. In Europe, this trend is reinforced by the turbulent processes of creating a single geopolitical and economic union, uniting most developed European countries in a confederate state. The global trend towards multilingualism is developing in two directions: internal and external. In the first case, we are talking about the desire of small nations to learn the language of their country, which is the language of the “titular” nation, in order to be able to fully realize their civil rights within the framework of their state. In the second case, this refers to the desire of the educated part of the population to integrate information, social and other relationships into the world system, to join the values of the world cultural heritage through the study of foreign languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, etc.).

This research is an in-depth, multidimensional study of the choice of language by identifying the systemically presented multi-coordinate characteristics of plurilingualism, multilingualism in unity with the concepts of a linguistic personality. Linguistic, sociological, sociolinguistic, linguoculturological analysis of language choice, on the one hand, will help fill the gap in sociolinguistics, and on the other, it should fulfill a social order in order to determine the optimal ways and methods of teaching contact languages in the aspect of the formation of two-sided bilingualism, English as a means of international communication of people’s linguistic and sociolinguistic identity.

The concepts of plurilingualism and plurilingual personality are not adequately reflected in most language sources; however, it seems that the terms “poly-linguism” and “poly-lingual personality”, which are to be further clarified and studied, can serve as adequate analogues that are more harmonious. This result of plurilingualism is the basis for the successful integration of all ethnic communities into a single whole under the conditions of partnership. The determining standards of life of such a society should be the legal norms and laws of the country of residence. In this case,

individuals and groups of people achieve and receive equal opportunities to participate in social and economic life, they can express their interests and be protected from individual and collective isolation.

The diversity of cultures, ethnic groups and languages without equal chances means aggravated social segregation. Equal odds excluding cultural diversity is an isolation of the culturally different members. It is possible to prevent isolation and, as a result, isolation of culturally different members of society, primarily of the new generation, by the actions of the linguistic majority, aimed at enhancing the integration position of parents with a migration past, whose children grow up in a new society from a cultural point of view. The fact that both formants come from the same word seems very curious in the light of the current trend to distribute their derivatives in meaning - the terms “multilingualism” and “plurilingualism”.

An analysis of French dictionaries for words with the formants “multi-” and “pluri-” showed that the number of derivative words is dominated by the prefix “multi-” –99 words, and with the prefix “pluri-” there are only 24 words, with 16 of them have “homomorphic formations with the formant “multi-”. A similar definition analysis will be carried out based on the Russian language. Note that the analysis only aims to identify the general tendency, while a detailed definitional and etymological analysis of words with the above-mentioned formants is not included in the scope of the study. Moreover, “there are only a few words with the pluri- formant in the Russian language: pluralism, plural, pluralist, pluralistic, plurilateral” (Zherebilo, 2010).

First of all, we tried to conduct a definitive analysis of existing terms using dictionary entries. However, such an analysis does not provide a clear distinction between the terms, and the term “plurilingual education” is completely absent in the dictionary of terms and concepts of Azimov and Shchukin, as in the articles of most authors it is only beginning to appear (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009).

Linguistic studies performed at the turn of the XX – XXI centuries demonstrate a special interest in the phenomenon of multilingualism (from lat. multi - many, lingua - language, speech), or poly-linguism (from Greek poly - many). The European Commission defines multilingualism as Multilingualism is “a powerful resource that allows people to interact more effectively” which causes increased interest in him from linguists, sociolinguists and psycholinguists. Authors of modern studies of multilingualism increasingly note that the current state of society can no longer be characterized in terms of monolingualism, since it has long been bi- and multilingual, and the phenomenon of multilingualism itself has become, rather, the norm than an exception (European Commission, 2007).

At the same time, multilingualism was recognized as a deviation from the generally accepted norm, opposed to the stability and stability of the contacting language systems. Population migrations, as well as cultural, commercial, military, etc. contacts generated the so-called “unnatural” language contact, “violations” of the usual “language order”, which led to a structural simplification of the contact languages (Felix, 1987). Perhaps this idea of multilingualism was the reason that, for almost the entire XX century, studies of language contacts were carried out within the framework of a monolingual paradigm, from the standpoint of which monolingualism was considered a basic concept.

The most general definition of multilingualism was proposed by F. Grozhan, who calls “the individual to use two or more languages in everyday life as the main characteristic of multilingualism” (Grozhan, 2010). A large encyclopedic dictionary defines multilingualism as “the use of several languages within a certain social community (primarily the state); the use by an individual (a group of people) of several languages, each of which is selected in accordance with a specific communicative situation” (Yartsev, 2000). Obviously, the basis of all existing definitions and the classifications of modern multilingualism resulting from them is a combination of three main elements: user (speaker / user), environment (settings / environment) and language (Grozhan, 2010). So, in accordance with the criterion of "user of the language" it is customary to distinguish between individual and national multilingualism. The identification of two levels of multilingualism: national (in other sources - social, public), characterizing the linguistic situation of an entire nation or society and the individual, which characterizes both the use of the language and the individual level of proficiency, is confirmed in many reviews on multilingualism (Yartsev, 2000).

Located at the crossroads of civilizations, Azerbaijan has always been a territory where peoples harmoniously coexist and constitute a single whole culture and complement each other; in other words, it is where a special, one of the most successful multiculturalism models in the world has established itself. Many national cultures and cultures of ethnic minorities coexist on the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and all of them develop and perform certain functions. Thus, linguistic diversity, i.e., the coexistence of a multitude of languages in a single society, is a regularity for our society (Gadzhi, 2017).

Very often, the term “linguistic diversity” is used as a synonym for the terms “multilingualism”, “plural linguism”. There are certain differences in the meaning of these terms, and they cannot be used as synonyms. Speaking about pluralism in Azerbaijan, it is noted: “...Students are encouraged to learn at least two foreign languages at secondary and higher education. In Azerbaijan these plurilingual

competencies are especially necessary in reference to English and Russian” (Mammadov, 2009). In this paragraph, to characterize the linguistic features and linguistic situation in the Republic of Azerbaijan, we consider it appropriate to use the term “linguistic diversity”.

Azerbaijan seeks to intensify the dialogue of cultures, preserve cultural heritage and disseminate cultural values. Despite the existence of such linguistic diversity, various ethnic groups in the territory of Azerbaijan have managed to maintain and develop their language for many years. Confirmation that the Azerbaijani people deeply value ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity is the fact that multiculturalism has been elevated to the rank of state policy and is a way of life of this people. “The most widely spoken of these languages, Azerbaijani, is a Turkic language. Talysh, Tat, Mountain Jewish, and Kurdish are Iranian languages. Lezgi, Budukh, Kryz, Khinalug, Udi, Tsakhur, Avar, and Inghiloi/Georgian are Caucasian languages. Alongside the speakers of these indigenous languages, carriers of other languages also now name Azerbaijan their home” (Clifton, 2009).

Method

Research setting

The research site is chosen to range over three schools; a school with Azerbaijani medium of instruction named “Zangi” lyceum, one with Russian medium named “N_12”, and one with English medium of instruction named “Baku-Oxford School” in Baku, Azerbaijan.

“Zangi” Lyceum was established in 1992 under the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, by the decision of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. It is considered a public secondary school-lyceum. The study at “Zangi” lyceum was conducted on March 23rd, 2019 in which 5 parents were interviewed (n = 5; female 5, male 0). “School N_12” was established in 1974 on the personal initiative of former Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev and was commissioned with his participation. It is a public school. Study at “School N_12” was conducted on April 20th, 2019. 5 parents were reached out to (n=5; female 5, male 0). “Baku-Oxford School” was established and licensed by the government of Azerbaijan in 1998 immediately settling itself as one of the leading international schools in Baku. It is considered a private school. The study phase at “School N_12” was conducted on May 18th, 2019. Five parents were asked to attend the interview (n=5; female 3; male 2).

Sampling method

Quantitative method was used in this research work. It was based on the interviews that were conducted among parents to learn their tendency to bring up their children in a multilingual society. Overall 6 questions were asked. As it was a structured type of interview, all questions were predetermined. Participants' voices were recorded by asking their permission.

All respondents were intentionally selected because of being monolingual, bilingual or plurilingual. While parents with more than one language competence had better understanding of different languages, monolingual parents were aware of the necessity of knowing two or more languages too, which is meant that they were able to assess the importance of each language separately, and it helped them to answer the questions in a comprehensive way. One of them answered the questions in Russian, four of them answered in English and the rest answered in Azeri. Those responses that were in Russian and Azerbaijani languages were then translated into English.

Participants

Parents of children in the first-year grade were interviewed. Interviewees were at the age of 30-40. Two of the participants were male, and 13 were female. Totally 15 respondents were involved in the study.

Data analyses

The results of data analysis from the interview conducted among the parents of three Azerbaijani Schools confirm a strong status of English language in the country, in line with what we discussed above, going hand in hand with the rising interest and demand for English as an international language. However, the highest proportion of respondents did not disregard the status of Azerbaijani language as well.

Table 1

Factors influenced parents' decisions

Q1. What is the reason for choosing English/ Russian/ Azerbaijani language as a medium of instruction for your child's study?			
<i>Social factors</i>	<i>Cultural factors</i>	<i>Prestige</i>	<i>Total</i>

1 parent (Azeri)	1 parent (Azeri)	3 parents (Azeri)	5parents
	4 parents (Russian)	1 parent (Russian)	5parents
	0 (English)	5 parents (English)	5parents

Table 1 shows that when the questions tapped into the choice the parents made when sending their children to school, the parents mentioned three main factors that had influence on their decisions. They were social, cultural factors and prestige of the language. While only 1 parent (from Azeri medium) mentioned the social factor, 5 parents (1-Azeri, 4 -Russian medium) mentioned cultural factors. The majority of the parents (3 Azeri, 5 English, 1 Russian medium) noted prestige of the language.

Thus, it becomes obvious that the prestige status was considered the most influential factor the parents took into consideration while making a decision; it was mainly mentioned by the parents of children in English medium of instruction. Obviously, these parents did not mention cultural factor as a reason at all.

Table 2

Teaching quality of foreign languages

Q2. Are you satisfied with the teaching quality of foreign languages at school where your child studies?
<i>Yes: 3 parents (Azeri) 2parents (Russian) 4 parents (English)</i>
<i>No: 0</i>
<i>Would be better: 2 parents (Azeri) 3 parents (Russian) 1 parent (English)</i>
<i>Total: 15parents</i>

In asking about the teaching quality of foreign languages at school, especially English language where their children study it, it is clear from the Table 2 that, overall, 9 parents (3 Azeri, 4 English, 2 Russian) mentioned their satisfaction while 5 parents (2 Azeri, 2 Russian and 1 English) noted that it could have been better. Mainly in public education institutions, most of the parents are not satisfied with the teaching quality, mentioning the importance of foreign language courses that improve their children's language skills via these language centers.

Table 3

Role of English language

Q3. What is the role of English language in our country and worldwide?

Worldwide:	<i>Travel/ Tourism:</i>	<i>6 parents</i>
	<i>Internet access :</i>	<i>3 parents</i>
	<i>Information source:</i>	<i>2parents</i>
	<i>No idea:</i>	<i>4 parents</i>

In Azerbaijan:	<i>Language of economy(oil and industry):</i>	<i>7 parents</i>
	<i>Second language :</i>	<i>4 parents</i>
	<i>International events:</i>	<i>1 parent</i>
	<i>No idea:</i>	<i>3 parents</i>

It is apparent from Table 3 that when parents were asked about the role of English language in our country and worldwide, they gave various answers. They stressed the importance of English language on a global spectrum in mainly three spheres; travel/ tourism (6 parents); information source (2 parents); and internet access (3 parents) while 4 parents did not have any idea about the role of English in the world. As for the role of English in Azerbaijan, spheres in which English is attached importance and required were categorized under these names: language of economy (oil and industry) (7 parents); importance as the second language (4 parents); language of international events (1 parent); 3 parents did not have any idea about the role of language in our country. So, it is shown that the majority of respondents are aware that English is an international language and recognize it as a dominant language in the above-mentioned domains in our country and worldwide. Note should be made however of some uneducated parents who were not aware of the current role of English language in our country and worldwide at all.

Table 4

Influence of the parents' choices in children's future career

Q4.	
Will your choice be supposed to have any influence in your child's future career?	
<i>Yes, definitely:</i>	<i>10 parents</i>
<i>No, definitely :</i>	<i>2 parents</i>
<i>Neutral:</i>	<i>3 parents</i>

According to Table 2, while asking about the parents' expectations regarding their language choice whether it will have any influence on their child's future career, 10 parents gave 'yes' answer, 2 parents answered 'no', while 3 parents held neutral views. Parental impact can manifest itself in both positive and negative ways. Parents who responded "yes" stressed the importance of talking with their children. Most of the parents supposed that their decisions related to studying languages will influence their children's future career in a positive way because they stressed that it is important to have conversation with their children about their plans including their aspirations about the future.

Table 5

Parents' opinions about plurilingualism

Q5.	
Would you like your child to be a plurilingual person in the future?	
<i>Yes:</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>No:</i>	<i>0</i>

Parents confirm that knowing many languages is an essential factor that takes children to success in their future professional endeavors and enables a plurilingual person to stay miles ahead of his/her peers in job sphere and high-status positions. As it is obvious from the Table 5, when they were asked about their desire for their children to become a plurilingual person, all parents maintained positive views.

Table 6

Different views towards multiculturalism

Q6.	
What is your attitude toward multiculturalism in Azerbaijan?	
<i>Positive:</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Negative:</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>Neutral:</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Total:</i>	<i>15</i>

Table 6 shows that multiculturalism is welcomed with positive views by the majority of the parents (11 parents), while only four parents maintained neutral views about the presence of different cultures existing in Azerbaijan.

Results and Discussion

As noteworthy attention has been increasing in the field of linguistics, many research works have shed a light upon a great role of language shift in lots of domains in Azerbaijan. Our research reveals the increasing focus on the opportunities that bilingualism or multilingualism provides for the society and positive views towards multiculturalism existing in Azerbaijan. The results of data analysis from the interview conducted among the parents of the first-grade students verify that all respondents think positively about bilingualism and multilingualism. The data contributes a clearer understanding of language choice in Azerbaijan. Parents do their best to create a better learning environment for their children. Even though the English and Russian languages are taught at schools as compulsory subjects, majority of the parents are inclined to send their children to different language courses. As all the parents are well aware of the importance, and big advantages of being bilingual or multilingual, they want their offspring to get the major benefits of it. However, the respondents did not disregard the status of the Azerbaijani language alongside Russian, and English. Almost all of them have positive attitude towards increasing awareness of significance of multilingualism in Azerbaijan. They emphasized the highest position of the English language in the global world as well. Consequently, all respondents underlined the increasing role of the English language in all spheres of their lives: work, travel, education, culture and so on.

There are some limitations to this research. First of all, the main problem was in the ratio of male and female participants, as gender issue would be a naturally important factor in this research with regard to male and female interviewees; in the interviewed group the number of the participants was 15. Out of 15 participants only two parents were male and 13 parents were female. The second problem concerned getting clear answers for each item of the interview. This is explained by the fact that some parents' English was poor and even without any level. Hence, most parents did not understand the essence of many items in English. So all questions were translated into Azeri language as well. This caused difficulties for obtaining the necessary data and clarity of methodology and procedure.

The following recommendations for the research are based on the study findings. The importance of the knowledge of English is becoming more and more significant nowadays. Apart from other reasons, this knowledge is extremely important for Azeri people, because there are words that come from English and become completely admitted terms in the Azerbaijani language. Thus, the knowledge of the English language should be highly evaluated by each.

Another recommendation is the issue of language use (the English language) among different social groups. Because of the limitation of time and space for this study, the use of the English language was investigated among the lyceum students and their parents. The study of English language use among other social contexts still remains open for researchers in their future works.

Finally, the last recommendation concerns the role of the Russian language in this social context. The paper provides a description of the role of the English language, but the role of the Russian language is just poorly touched on. This is an excellent opportunity for future research.

The results of data analysis from the interview conducted among parents of three Azerbaijani schools confirm a strong status of English language in Azerbaijan. This goes hand in hand with the rising interest and demand for English as an international language.

Conclusion

To sum up the findings of this quantitative descriptive research, we can conclude that interest in multilingual research and the formation of natural bilingualism during this period have somewhat pushed the study of artificial (educational) bilingualism to the background, although the significance of both phenomena is obvious, as well as their fundamental difference: if natural bilingualism is formed in the language environment due to constant contact with the target language and its carriers, the formation of artificial bilingualism occurs in the classroom, as a result of conscious actions aimed at mastering the foreign language and foreign culture. The difference in knowledge of different languages can vary from knowledge of several lexical units (speech clichés – greetings and rudimentary colloquial phrases) to excellent knowledge of both grammar and vocabulary, as well as the corresponding registers (language uses appropriate for a given communicative situation) and styles. Multilinguals develop linguistic competence in each of the language codes to the level they need in accordance with the communicative situations in which these languages are used. Azerbaijan tends to boost the mutual interaction of cultures, protect its cultural legacy and spread cultural assets and resources. In spite of the presence of linguistic diversity, different ethnic groups in Azerbaijan have succeeded in improving and keeping their languages in existence for many years, which is one sign of a constructive language policy in Azerbaijan in tune with some measure of sustainable change (Mammadova, 2013) and also certain logistical and economic decisions that could have contributed to and fueled the consistent trajectory of this sociolinguistic state of affairs (Ibrahimov, 2018). Confirmation that the Azerbaijani

people deeply value ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity is the fact that multiculturalism has been elevated to the rank of state policy and is a way of life of this people.

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Appendix

This interview is conducted for research purposes by Narmin Rzayeva.

The goal of the research was to investigate the issue of language choice from sociolinguistic perspectives in Azerbaijan.

Ethics: It is voluntary to participate in this interview. You may refuse to answer the interview questions without any negative results. Anonymity will be remained in your responses, confidentiality will be maintained, and no data that could uncover your identity will be utilized.

Table A 1. Interview step I

What is your age range?
_____ <i>20 to 30 years old</i>
_____ <i>31- 40 years old</i>
_____ <i>41 to 50 years old</i>

Table A 2. Interview step II

What is your gender identification?
_____ <i>male</i>
_____ <i>female</i>

Table A 3. Interview step III

How many languages do you know?
_____ <i>only one</i>
_____ <i>two</i>
_____ <i>more than two</i>