

Title: Code-Switching in Azerbaijan: Constructing Identity in the Former Soviet Space

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The nation of Azerbaijan typifies the drastic changes that have altered the political, social, and linguistic landscapes of the former Soviet area since the early 1990s. It has moved from being one component of a large federal state to being an independent country, from having centralized economic control to having a market economy, and from experiencing pervasive institutional support for Russian to requiring Azerbaijani in all official government contexts and strongly supporting it in virtually every societal domain. Given this support, it is somewhat surprising that Russian use persists in many sectors of the society, and conversational code-switching between Azerbaijani and Russian is widespread. While there have been studies published on several areas of Azerbaijani sociolinguistics (Clifton 2002, 2003, and 2009; Garibova 2009; Landau & Kellner-Henkele 2001; Zuercher 2004, and 2009), Azerbaijani history (Altstadt 1992; de Waal 2003; Swietochowski 1995), and Azerbaijani anthropology (Heyat 2002), code-switching between Azerbaijani and Russian has not attracted previous scholarly attention.

By focusing on conversational data from one subject recorded in May 2007, this presentation will outline ways in which conversational code-switching can be used to negotiate the complex system of language norms and socially constructed identities in contemporary Azerbaijan. During two hours of recording this subject ‘talked out’ a number of social identities such as “government contractor” (very low Russian usage), “supportive female relative” (higher Russian usage), etc. Many of these were played out in brief phone conversations surrounded by domestic conversation with her 5 year old daughter. Therefore, in this one case study we can compare code-switching activity in numerous speech situations. Results showed her to add Russian elements to her Azerbaijani speech most when taking on a ‘teaching’ role with her daughter and far less when discussing government contract work. In most instances these served as contextualization cues to emphasize elements of the talk.

While analyzing how these various identities are constructed linguistically this study places the subject’s language use in a wider social context by drawing on a larger corpus of recorded conversation from 7 other subjects offering a description of Azerbaijani/Russian code switching in contemporary Azerbaijan following the typology presented by Muysken (2000). In addition, global measures of language use (proportions of Russian content words and clauses) demonstrate the range of variation between subjects. Results show subjects’ language use to cover the full range of code-switching/mixing in Muysken’s typology, with wide variation in the proportion of Russian language items/clauses.

This study demonstrates how one citizen of the former Soviet space negotiates a complex and changing system of language values and norms by utilizing a range of social identities. In placing this subject’s language behavior in context, it also catalogs the ways in which subjects in a larger corpus use Azerbaijani and Russian within the same conversation, confirming many of the proposals in both Myers-Scotton 2002 and Muysken 2000 with a new pair of languages. As well, it provides information on how language policy/planning efforts in Azerbaijani have affected actual language use by analyzing naturally occurring conversational data.

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