

# The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Avar in Azerbaijan

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of sociolinguistic research conducted in June 1999 among the Avar people living in northwestern Azerbaijan. The goals of the research were to investigate patterns of language use, bilingualism, and language attitudes with regard to the Avar, Russian and Azerbaijani languages in the Avar community. Special attention was paid to developing a typology of individuals and families based on patterns of language use and language attitudes. Interviews, observations, and questionnaires were employed.\*

## 1. Background

Avar is a member of the Avaro-Andi-Dido language group. This group belongs to the Northeast branch of the North Caucasian language family (Grimes 2000). The Avars refer to themselves as Maarulal, but are also often referred to as Avartsy.

The Avar people and their language have had a widespread influence on neighboring ethnic groups. Many of these groups use the Avar language as a language of wider communication and for trade. This has resulted in researchers making associations between these groups and Avar that are inaccurate. Various references in the literature have included as many as fifteen distinct ethnic groups within the broad definition of Avar. While ethnic groups such as the Akhvakh, Andis, and Archis have often been grouped together with the Avars ethnographically, they are separate and distinct groups.

Geographically, the Avars are almost entirely concentrated in the northwest and central regions of the Republic of Dagestan in the Russian Federation. There are four distinct dialects of Avar, and as many as 100 speech varieties within these dialects, most of which are spoken in Dagestan. One dialect group exists outside of Dagestan, the Zaqatala dialect group in the northwestern districts of Balakən and Zaqatala in Azerbaijan. According to the 1989 Soviet census figures, over 600,000 Avar lived in the Soviet Union. Of these, 44,000 lived in Azerbaijan (cited in Neroznak 1995).

The Avar dialects are generally divided into two main groups: northern dialects and southern dialects. The southern dialect group, to which the Zaqatala dialect belongs, contains sixty-six dialects that are spoken in over 200 population centers. The dialect group geographically closest to the Zaqatala dialect is the Antsukh dialect in Dagestan, the only Dagestani dialect that borders on the Zaqatala dialect. Historically, the two dialects have had a wide variety of influences on one another.

Linguistic studies of Avar were of a very general nature in the period before the Soviet revolution, from the eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries, consisting of short dictionaries and sketchy grammars. In the nineteenth century, Uslar's work on the Avar language is perhaps the most in-depth. It wasn't until the post-revolutionary period, however, that the Avar language and its dialects received major attention in the writings of Dirr, Zhirkov, Bokarev, Chikobava, and Makhmudov. Thus, while Avar dialectology is by no means new, there are a number of issues that have not been studied, especially in relation to the Zaqatala dialect.

The Avar language has been written from the seventeenth century. The orthography was originally based on Arabic. This was later changed to a Latin-based and then to a Cyrillic-based script. In the Soviet period, the Avar language was one of several major

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languages in the Republic of Dagestan that was granted special status. This allowed it to become a language studied in schools in Dagestani regions where it was widely spoken. Following this, a wide variety of material began to emerge in the language, including textbooks, books of poetry and cultural folklore.

While Avar literacy was taught in the schools in Dagestan, however, it was seldom taught in schools in Azerbaijan. A further development that could affect the use of literary Avar in Azerbaijan is the recent change from a Cyrillic-based to a Latin-based orthography for the Azerbaijani language. It is unclear what effect this will have as the younger generations become familiar with the new Latin script.

This paper discusses sociolinguistic research investigating current language use patterns among speakers of Avar in Azerbaijan. The research had three primary goals:

1. To provide descriptions of the communities visited,
2. To obtain information about language use and language proficiency for the Avar, Azerbaijani, and Russian languages in Avar communities, and
3. To gain an understanding of Avar speakers' attitudes towards Avar, Azerbaijani, and Russian.

This paper also presents a typology of the Avar people in Azerbaijan based on patterns of language use and language attitudes. The purpose of this typology is to present a picture of how various aspects of sociolinguistic behavior cluster.

## 2. Methodology

The primary method of investigation involved interviews carried out in June 1999 with individuals and groups in the villages of Qəbizdərə, Matsex, and Car in the Zaqatala district, and in the village of Qabaqçöl in the Balakən district. Additional interviews were conducted with regional and local administrators regarding demographics, population trends, and general patterns of language use. School administrators and teachers in each village provided information on children's language proficiency upon entering and completing school, on the medium of instruction, and on Avar language classes. As opportunities arose, medical personnel and religious leaders were asked about language use in their respective domains.

Background research indicated that Avar was spoken in the following villages: Qabaqçöl, Mahamalar, Hənifə, Qadaşbinə, and Katex in the Balakən district, and Matsex, Qəbizdərə, Car, and Maqov in the Zaqatala district. Three criteria were used to select which villages to visit:

1. At least one village was chosen to represent every reported dialect or speech variety.
2. At least two villages were chosen to represent the most prominent dialect or speech variety.
3. Preference was given to villages with high ethnic homogeneity and large populations.

Using these criteria, we chose to visit the villages of Qabaqçöl, Qəbizdərə, Matsex, and Car.

The secondary method of investigation involved interviews with individuals in Baku, Qabaqçöl, and in the town of Balakən. The interviews in Baku were conducted between March and November 2001, while the follow-up visit to Qabaqçöl and the town of Balakən took place in July 2001. Individuals were asked questions about personal and family demographics, language use, language proficiency, language attitudes, education and knowledge of vernacular materials. The individual- and family-based interviews provided information on the kinds of individuals and families that exist in the Avar communities, and how typical each group is. The information gathered in these interviews was used to develop a typology of Avar individuals with regard to language use and attitudes.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Location Descriptions<sup>1</sup>

##### 3.1.1 *The district of Balakən (Qabaqçöl)*

The district of Balakən is located in the northwestern region of Azerbaijan in the northwestern part of the range of the Caucasus Mountains. The western side of Balakən shares a border with Georgia, while Dagestan lies just northeast of it.

The total population of the district of Balakən is 84,000, of which 35% are Avar. The number of people in the district has been growing over the past decade. The population of the town of Balakən is 8,700, of which 14% are Avar. The majority, 63% of the people in the district as a whole and 85% of the people in the town, are Azerbaijani. Overall, there are at least fifteen different ethnic groups in the district of Balakən, including Inghiloi, Tatar, Lezgi, Georgian, and Russian.

The climate of the district of Balakən is cold in the winter with snowfalls, and warm in the summer. The primary sources of employment are related to agriculture. A considerable amount of produce is grown in the district including approximately 45,000 tons of persimmons and 1,500–2,000 tons of tobacco.

The village of Qabaqçöl is the oldest part of the Qabaqçöl administrative group. The village is located approximately 15 kilometers west of the town of Balakən. There are eight villages in the Qabaqçöl administrative group: Qabaqçöl, Meşeşambul, Qaysa, Şərif I, Şərif II, Xalatala, Şambul, and Sarıbulaq. Şambul and Xalatala are the largest villages in the group. The population of the Qabaqçöl administrative group is 30,000, of which 92% are Avar. It was estimated that both parents are Avar in approximately 87% of the households, both parents are Azerbaijani in approximately 8% of the households, and an Avar is married to an Azerbaijani in approximately 5% of the households. In general, it is rare to see mixed Avar-Azerbaijani marriages in this community. Most of the Avar in the villages of Şərif and Qabaqçöl have come from Georgia. In terms of age and gender, 52% are under the age of 35, and 48% are female. The population of the Qabaqçöl group is growing, with people moving from or returning from Dagestan.

Unemployment is high within the group. According to statistics from 1999, only 6,000 to 7,000 people have jobs. Some residents work in the town of Balakən. There are one Turkish factory and five post offices. In addition, there is a hospital, technical school, and nine middle schools. A cultural center was started, but the building has yet to be completed. A farming cooperative used to exist, but the land has been privatized and divided among the local residents. Those on the outskirts of the village received the most land.

##### 3.1.2 *The district of Zaqatala (Qəbizdərə, Matsex, Car)*

The district of Zaqatala is located east of Balakən in the northwestern part of Azerbaijan and also shares borders with Georgia and Dagestan. The total population of the district of Zaqatala is 110,000, of which 25% are Avar and 53% are Azerbaijani. The climate of Zaqatala is similar to that of Balakən. Economically, Zaqatala also relies on agriculture.

The three villages of Qəbizdərə, Matsex, and Car are located in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. The village of Qəbizdərə is situated 15 kilometers northwest of the town of Zaqatala and consists of about forty-nine homes. The total population of Qəbizdərə is 250, of which 98% are Avar. In terms of age and gender, 51% are under the age of 35, and 51% are female. The population trend of Qəbizdərə is stable, with little increase or decrease in number.

The village of Matsex is located about 13 kilometers west of the district center and consists of 376 homes. The total population of Matsex is about 1,500, of which 98% are

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<sup>1</sup> All statistical figures for the community descriptions are taken from the 1999 census information provided by district statistics offices.

Avar. Both parents are ethnic Avar in over 95% of the homes in the village. In terms of age and gender, 52% are under the age of 35, and 52% are female. The population has been increasing due to the fact that the birthrate is higher than the death rate. Matsex is part of an administrative group that includes Qəbizdərə, Uzuntala (592 people), Bəretbinə (150 people), and Dzhidana (37 people).

Tobacco was grown in the village as a cash crop, but that ended when the cooperative was privatized. There are no factories in the village. Festivals, dances, and musical performances are held in a club in the village. Azerbaijani is generally used in these activities, although Russian and Avar are sometimes used.

The village of Car is located 8 kilometers north of the district center. It is the center of an administrative group of villages consisting of four villages. There is one museum in Car. There is also one library in each of the four villages within the administrative area. The population of the Car administrative group is 4,500, of which 99% are Avar. In terms of age and gender, 49% are under the age of 35, and 50% are female. The overall population trend is stable, with little increase or decrease in number. More recently, however, the population has declined due to economic concerns. Unemployment is high, and there are few factories in the area. The farming cooperative was privatized about ten years ago. Most families own about 0.21 hectares of land, but the land is 45 kilometers away, close to the Georgian border. As a result, it is expensive to travel back and forth from the farms. About five to ten people who live in Car work outside the area.

## 3.2 Descriptions of Key Social Domains

### 3.2.1 Education<sup>2</sup>

Overall, the majority of students attend schools or tracks in which Azerbaijani is the medium of instruction, although Russian-language schools or tracks are also available in the towns of Balakan and Zaqatala, and the villages of Qabaqçöl, Matsex, Car, and Katex.<sup>3</sup> At least in the case of Katex, it was reported that the fact that most children attend the Azerbaijani school was due more to the location of the school than to the language issue. Students in Azerbaijani-medium schools study Russian twice a week, while students in Russian-medium schools study Azerbaijani twice a week. It is reported, however, that students in the Azerbaijani sector actually learn little or no Russian. Most of the children of Avar families in Baku study in Azerbaijani schools.

Avar language classes have been available in the schools up to grade 4 since 1989. It was reported that Avar lessons were also available in Qabaqçöl schools in grades 1 and 2 in 1936 and 1937.

According to statistics from 1999 provided by the administrator of one of the middle schools in Qabaqçöl, there are 686 students in grades 1 through 11. Of these, one is from a Russian home, five or six come from homes in which one parent is Avar and one is Azerbaijani, while the rest come from homes in which both parents are Avar. Instruction in Azerbaijani has been offered since the beginning of the school in 1932, while the Russian sector was added in 1970. Overall, 62% study in the Russian sector, while 38% study in the Azerbaijani sector. In terms of gender, however, 70% of the males study in Russian, while only 53% of the females study in Russian. It was also noted that Avar is increasingly being spoken at school.

There are more than 300 students attending the middle school in Matsex. Half of the students are in the Russian sector, and half are in the Azerbaijani sector. In 1998, two of the seven students who graduated from the Azerbaijani sector and three or four of the fourteen students who graduated from the Russian sector continued on for further studies. Six or seven of the teachers grew up in Matsex, studied in Gəncə and Baku, and then returned to work in Matsex. In grade 1, Avar is sometimes used to explain concepts to the children.

<sup>2</sup> All statistics are from 1999 records of school attendance and teacher population.

<sup>3</sup> Katex was not visited, but information about this village was gathered through interviews.

The technical school in Qabaqçöl provides training in areas such as farming, hairstyling, and mechanics to about 185 students at the school. The language of instruction at the technical school is Azerbaijani. Most of the textbooks and other materials, however, are from Russia, and so are in Russian. A few books are being prepared in Azerbaijani.

The directors of the kindergartens in Qabaqçöl and Matsex reported a mix of languages is used in the kindergartens. One of the main purposes of the kindergartens is to prepare the children for Azerbaijani-medium schools. Therefore, although all the staff members are local and frequently address the children in Avar, most instruction in the kindergartens is in Azerbaijani. In the Qabaqçöl kindergarten the children have lessons in oral Avar and in Russian once a week. Pre-reading is taught for Azerbaijani using the new Latin-based alphabet. By the end of kindergarten, the children know the Azerbaijani alphabet well, but have not been exposed to the Cyrillic-based Avar alphabet. Monthly meetings with other educational workers are held in the town of Zaqatala in Azerbaijani.

Attitudes concerning the preferred language of education are split. Most children in the town of Balakən study in Russian schools or sectors, although there is a rising interest in Azerbaijani and most non-Avar children study in Azerbaijani. Among Avars living in Baku, the preferred language of schooling is reported to be evenly split between Russian and Azerbaijani, with perhaps a slightly higher preference for Russian.

A resident in Qabaqçöl reported that parents believe that life in Russia is easier than in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, it was reported that many children who grow up in Qabaqçöl are likely to go to Russia for work. Therefore, their parents want them to study in the Russian sector, although they also want them to study Azerbaijani in school as a subject.

In general, children who have relatives living in Russia are more likely to study in the Russian sector in hopes of higher education and work opportunities in Russia. Many Avars have relatives in Russia. It is also common for children to study in the language in which their fathers studied. For example, one woman commented that her children studied in the Russian sector because her husband had studied in Russian. She, on the other hand, had studied in Azerbaijani because both of her parents had received their education in Azerbaijani.

### *3.2.2 Health*

Medical facilities are present in most of the communities we visited. The largest is the hospital in Qabaqçöl that was established in the 1930s. The staff includes fifteen doctors and eighty nurses, and most procedures other than heart surgery are performed at this hospital.

The medical facilities in the other villages are all smaller. There is a medical and dental clinic with a staff of five in Matsex. The clinic in Qəbizdərə is staffed by a single nurse. A common problem faced at all the medical facilities is that people find it difficult to pay for treatment and medicine. Now most injections are simply given at home.

In some cases, the staff at medical facilities do not know Avar. Even when they do, however, they generally use Azerbaijani or Russian.

### *3.2.3 Religion*

There are mosques in Qabaqçöl, Matsex, and Car. Some residents of Qəbizdərə attend the mosque in Matsex. The mosques in Qabaqçöl and Matsex are quite old, having been built in 1907 and 1881, respectively. The imams at each of these mosques are from the area and know Avar. Once a month, there is a gathering of imams in the district of Zaqatala. The imams speak Azerbaijani with one another during these meetings. The leader of the imams speaks Azerbaijani as his first language.

Most people go to the mosque on Thursday or Friday, with the majority going on Friday. About 500–600 men regularly go to the mosque in Qabaqçöl, while 100 regularly attend in Matsex. The number of women or children who go to the mosque is small.

People also attend the mosque on holidays and for religious festivals, weddings, and funerals.

The imam's job involves tutoring, directing funerals, and leading gatherings of people who invite him to pray. Prayers in the mosque are said in Arabic and translated into Avar. Most of the tutoring is been done in Avar, but the Qoran is read in Arabic with explanations in Avar as necessary. Both children and adults study Arabic with the imam. There are some religious books from Dagestan that are available in Arabic. There are no religious materials in Avar.

### 3.3 Language Proficiency

#### 3.3.1 Vernacular

In all the villages we visited, people of all ages report they speak Avar with one another. Before beginning school, many children speak only Avar. Oral proficiency in Avar is high in communities with homogeneous populations of Avar speakers. At the same time, it is reported that in communities where there is a mixture of ethnic groups, there is a tendency for less proficiency in Avar. In Baku, in general, proficiency in Avar among those who are ethnically Avar is reported to be low.

Literary Avar is reported to be difficult for Avars in Azerbaijan. Very few Avars, whether they live in towns or villages, can speak, read, or write it. A professor who specializes in the Avar language, and who is a native speaker of Azerbaijani Avar, reported that after many years of study she is still not completely familiar with literary Avar. In fact, she is more comfortable with Azerbaijani grammar than with the grammar of literary Avar.

#### 3.3.2 Azerbaijani

Avars are generally fluent in Azerbaijani. Everyone except for the older women from Qəbizdərə is reported to speak Azerbaijani. Women under 30 know Azerbaijani better than older women due to schooling in Azerbaijani. The only group that is not fluent in Azerbaijani is preschool children. As indicated above, many of them only know Avar, although some know a little Azerbaijani or Russian.

Avars who have lived in Baku for many years are generally most fluent in Azerbaijani.

#### 3.3.3 Russian

Proficiency in the Russian language is declining, although Russian is valued as a language of work and education opportunities. Table 1 summarizes reported proficiency in Russian according to age and gender. A plus sign (+) signifies that the group is reported to have at least average ability in Russian, while the minus sign (-) signifies below average or no ability.

**Table 1: Reported Russian Proficiency According to Age and Gender**

Location	<30		30–45		>45	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Car	+	+	+	+	+	-
Others	-	-	+	-	+	-

Proficiency is much more limited in Russian than in Azerbaijani. The only group that is generally proficient in Russian is men over 30, due to their service in the Soviet army. Except for those in Car, women generally do not speak Russian. Moreover, the vast majority of people under 30 do not speak Russian.

### 3.4 Domains of Language Use

#### 3.4.1 Physical domains of language use

Patterns of language use differ greatly depending on the type of community. In communities with homogeneous populations of Avar speakers, Avar is the main language



of home and of community life. In ethnically mixed, less rural communities, like the town of Balakən,<sup>4</sup> Azerbaijani is much more important for social life and is used in the home alongside Avar. In Baku, Avars speak Azerbaijani and/or Russian at home and in the community. Table 2 lists the languages that are reportedly used in the various physical domains in homogeneous Avar communities, in ethnically mixed communities, and in Baku.

**Table 2: Languages Used in Various Physical Domains**

Physical Domains	Communities with Avar speakers		
	Homogeneous Communities	Ethnically Mixed Communities	Baku
Home	Avar	Avar/Azeri	Azeri/Russian
Kindergarten: In Class	Azeri/Avar	Azeri	Azeri/Russian
Kindergarten: Outside	Avar	Azeri	Azeri/Russian
School: In Class	Azeri/Russian	Azeri/Russian	Azeri/Russian
School: Outside Class	Avar	Azeri	Azeri/Russian
Street	Avar	Avar/Azeri/Russian	Azeri
Mosque	Arabic/Avar		
Weddings/Funerals	Azeri/Avar		Azeri/Russian
Official meetings	Azeri	Azeri	Azeri
Hospital/Clinic	Azeri/Russian		Azeri/Russian

In communities with homogeneous populations of Avar speakers, preschool children speak only Avar, and people in all age groups speak Avar as their first language. The use of Azerbaijani is generally limited to situations when non-Avar speakers are present.

In ethnically mixed communities, Azerbaijani, Avar, or Russian is spoken depending on the participants in the interaction. There is a tendency in these communities for young people to speak less Avar even in the home and in social situations with Avar friends. For example, it was reported that while the young people in Qabaqçöl are maintaining their use of Avar, those who live in the town of Balakən are losing their Avar.

There is a low rate of intermarriage between speakers of different languages in the villages. As a result, children in the villages, in general, are growing up in homes where Avar is the main language of communication. In Balakən town and in Baku, however, it is more common for mixed marriages to occur. In Balakən, the language of these homes depends on the language of the mother. In families where the father is Avar and the mother is Azerbaijani, the language of the home is Azerbaijani, while in families where the mother is Avar and the father is Azerbaijani, a mixture of Avar and Azerbaijani is spoken in the home. As a result, there are fewer families in which Avar is the only language of the home in these communities. In Baku, children are frequently not taught Avar even in homes where the mother is Avar, as they are brought up in a community of Azerbaijani and Russian speakers.

In summary, in homogeneous populations of Avar speakers, only Avar is spoken in interactions with other Avar speakers, especially in informal domains. Azerbaijani is spoken when non-Avar speakers are present, and in the formal domains of life. In ethnically mixed communities, Azerbaijani was reported to be the primary language used in most domains. The use of Avar is limited to the home and on the street. There are some Avars, though, who are most fluent in Russian or Azerbaijani. As a result, they tend to use a mixture of Avar and either Azerbaijani or Russian even in the home and with other Avar speakers. In Baku, many Avar individuals are most fluent in either Russian or Azerbaijani, even though Avar was the first language for some of them. These individuals speak Russian and/or Azerbaijani in their homes. Avar individuals tend to speak Azerbaijani on the streets of Baku.

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<sup>4</sup>We did not gather information about the town of Zaqatala, but expect the situation there is similar to that in the town of Balakən.

### 3.4.2 Functional domains of language use

Patterns of language use in various functional domains also vary depending on the type of community. Table 3 lists the languages that are reportedly used in the various functional domains in the communities where Avar people live.

Regardless of location, Azerbaijani and/or Russian are most commonly used in the functional domains of the media and literacy. There are no television or radio programs in Avar. There are also few Avar materials to read. Many do not understand literary Avar, and have never learned to read or write any dialect of Avar.

In Baku, Russian is used in most domains due to the number of Avars in the city who are most fluent in Russian.

**Table 3: Languages Used in Various Functional Domains**

Functional Domains	Communities with Avar speakers		
	Homogeneous Communities	Ethnically Mixed Communities	Baku
First Lang. Learned	Avar	Avar	Avar/Azeri
Lang. Most Fluent	Avar	Avar/Azeri	Azeri/Russian
TV	Azeri/Russian	Azeri/Russian	Azeri/Russian
Arguing	Avar	Avar/Azeri	Azeri/Russian
Singing	Avar/Azeri	Azeri/Russian	Azeri/Russian
Work	Azeri/Avar	Azeri/Russian	Azeri/Russian
Radio	Azeri/Russian	Azeri/Russian	Azeri/Russian
Counting	Avar	Avar/Azeri	Azeri/Russian
Easiest to Read	Azeri	Azeri	Azeri/Russian
Easiest to Write	Azeri	Azeri	Azeri/Russian

### 3.4.3 Interpersonal domains of language use

In homogeneous village communities, the Avar language is used in and across all age groups. In an ethnically mixed community such as the town of Balakən, Avar is spoken more often among the older people. Children of Avar parents are taught Avar, but they speak more Azerbaijani since it is the language of school and of play. Children and young people may understand Avar when spoken to, but generally speak it poorly themselves. They are more likely to speak Azerbaijani with Avars of their own age group. In Baku, some children of parents who are Avar are learning Avar at home, while others are not. Children or adult children from families where there is one non-Avar parent are frequently not able to understand Avar. They speak Azerbaijani and/or Russian with family and friends. Some Avar individuals who have lived in Baku for many years speak Avar with friends who also speak Avar, but many interact only in Azerbaijani and/or Russian even with Avar friends.

## 3.5 Language Attitudes

In general, attitudes towards Avar, Azerbaijani, and Russian tend to be pragmatically oriented. Languages are valued for what they provide. As citizens of Azerbaijan, there is uniform agreement among the Avar that it is necessary to be fluent in Azerbaijani. The most commonly identified advantages of speaking Azerbaijani well are the availability of higher education and employment opportunities outside the local area.

Ability in Russian is also valued because it provides opportunities for higher education and work. Many Avar want their children to learn Russian in order to work and to live in Russia.

There is little concern among most of the Avar people in the villages that bilingualism will undermine the vernacular language. The general belief is that children will continue to learn and speak Avar alongside Azerbaijani and Russian. There is, however, no consensus as to whether Azerbaijani Avar should be developed as a literary language.

### 3.5.1 *Avar*

Avars are proud of their language, culture, and heritage. Although it is not important to know Avar for making money in the villages, it is very important for family life. Some Avar young adults in the town of Balakən are reported to have scolded their parents for not having taught them Avar.

The situation is more complex in Baku. It is not important to know or speak Avar for work or community life. Some ethnic Avars do not even consider themselves Avar at this point in time. They know Azerbaijani well, and love its language and literature. Avar remains the heart language for others, however, even for those who may not speak Avar in the home.

### 3.5.2 *Azerbaijani*

Azerbaijani is not important for daily life in the homogeneous Avar villages, but it is moderately important for prestige. In Baku, Avars respect the Azerbaijani language, and some view themselves as Azerbaijani. It is also seen to be very important for employment.

### 3.5.3 *Russian*

Due to relatives and roots in Dagestan, Avars are reported to be more oriented towards Russian than are most other ethnic groups in Azerbaijan. Most people older than fifty-five studied in Russian because of this tie to Russia and Russian culture. Although Azerbaijani is gaining prestige, and most Avar speakers are more fluent in Azerbaijani than they are in Russian, Russian is generally considered to be more prestigious than Azerbaijani.

These attitudes, however, are not uniform even among the homogenous villages. Most Avars in Qabaqçöl want their children to study in the Russian sector so they will have the opportunity to live and to work in Russia. Russian is also the common language spoken with the Georgians, and Qabaqçöl is located a few kilometers from the Georgian border. In another village, however, younger and middle-aged men indicated a desire to place less emphasis on Russian because Azerbaijan is no longer a part of the Soviet Union. They would like their children to study in Azerbaijani.

## 3.6 **Varieties of the Avar Language**

As indicated in section 1, there is considerable variation across the Avar language. The extent of this variation ranges from subdialectal to varieties that are mutually unintelligible. Speakers of Azerbaijani Avar who interact with speakers from Dagestan report that they can generally understand the other varieties of Avar. At the same time, some speakers report that it is easier to use Russian or a combination of Russian and Avar in such interactions because of the differences.

Within Azerbaijan, it is reported that the differences between the local varieties of Avar spoken in the villages are minimal. The differences are mainly in the areas of accent and vocabulary.

The common perception is that the purest Avar is spoken in Dagestan; that Dagestani Avars know Avar better than do Azerbaijani Avars. Among the varieties of Avar spoken in Azerbaijan, some speakers feel that the variety spoken in Car is closer to Dagestani Avar because some residents of Car studied in Dagestan. Others feel that the Avar spoken in Qabaqçöl is closer to Dagestani Avar than is the Avar spoken in other communities.

### 3.7 Typology of Avar Individuals/Families

As outlined in section 2, a typology of Avar individuals can be constructed based on patterns of language use and language attitudes. Five distinct groups of Avar individuals can be distinguished on this basis.<sup>5</sup>

Individuals in group 1 speak Russian and Azerbaijani as their first and second languages and Avar as their third language. Russian and Azerbaijani are valued as languages for work and in the community. Individuals in this group speak Russian and/or Azerbaijani at home. Avar is valued as the language of identity and family background. Children of individuals in this group do not speak Avar.

Individuals in group 2 exhibit the same general patterns of language use and language attitudes as do those in group 1. The difference between the two groups is that individuals in group 2 consider themselves Azerbaijani rather than Avar.

Individuals in group 3 speak Avar as their first language and consider Avar the most important language for family and community life. At the same time, they possess basic knowledge of Azerbaijani and/or Russian. Preschool children of individuals in this group do not know Azerbaijani or Russian.

Individuals in group 4 speak Avar as their first language and value it highly. Individuals in this group also speak Azerbaijani and/or Russian for work and community life. Children of individuals in this group speak a mixture of Avar and Azerbaijani and/or Russian at home.

Individuals in group 5 do not speak Avar. One parent of individuals in this group is not Avar.

The majority of individuals in group 3 are found in the villages in the districts of Balakən and Zaqatala. The majority of individuals in group 4 live in the district of Balakən. The majority of individuals in groups 1, 2, and 5 are found in Baku. Individuals in these three groups are most fluent in Russian or Azerbaijani, and Avar is either spoken a little or not known at all. The general composition of the various communities we visited can be characterized in terms of these five groups as in table 4.

**Table 4: Percentages of Various Types in the Avar Communities**

Types of Individuals/ Families	Avar Communities				
	Balakən District			Zaqatala District	
	Balakən town	Qabaqçöl	Katex	Qəbizdərə, Matsex, Car	Baku
Group 1	10%	0%	0%	0%	60%
Group 2	0%	0%	0%	0%	10%
Group 3	30%	97%	92%	98%	0%
Group 4	58%	3%	7%	2%	10%
Group 5	2%	0%	1%	0%	20%

### 3.8 Vernacular Materials

There are written materials and books available in literary Avar that are produced in Dagestan. These materials, however, are not generally available in Azerbaijan. There are also no television and radio programs in literary Avar available in Azerbaijan. In addition, there are no existing written materials, or television or radio programs in literary Avar available in the Azerbaijani varieties of Avar.

At present, there is little interest in developing materials in the Azerbaijani varieties of Avar. The general opinion is that since literary Avar already exists, there is no need to develop regional varieties as literary languages. The lack of interest in developing local

<sup>5</sup> These are the most common types of individuals or families. Other less common types can also be found. For example, there may be families in the villages where the mother is Russian and the father is Avar, and Russian is the only language of the home.

varieties is also influenced by the concern that Avars in Dagestan could not understand materials produced in Azerbaijani Avar. This lack of interest in written materials seems to be limited to books, however. Interviewees indicated they would be interested in a newspaper written in Azerbaijani Avar. There is also interest in audio and video productions in Azerbaijani Avar. The general consensus is that such programs would be enthusiastically received.

There is little overall interest among Azerbaijani Avars in learning to read and write literary Avar. There are Avar individuals, however, who want to read and write literary Avar and want their own children to know it as well. One of the reasons given is the simple fact that most Avars are in Dagestan, and hence, it is important to know the literary variety.

## 4. Discussion

Several issues arise from the findings reported in section 3, some of which suggest a need for further research. These issues deal mainly with language use and language attitudes.

### 4.1 Language Use

Issues involving language use include the use of Azerbaijani in the future, factors affecting the use of Avar in Baku, and factors affecting the typology of language use in Avar communities. Each of these will be discussed in the following sections.

#### 4.1.1 *Use of Azerbaijani in the future*

The issue here is whether the use of Azerbaijani is likely to shift dramatically in the future. At least three factors need to be considered in this context: the type of community, attitudes towards Azerbaijani, and proficiency in Azerbaijani.

##### 4.1.1.1 *Kind of community*

At present, most Avars live in one of three general types of communities: villages, the towns of Balakən and Zaqatala, and the city of Baku. The villages predominantly consist of Avar speakers. In the towns, there is a mixture of ethnic groups, with Avar being only one among the various groups. For example, 14% of the town of Balakən is Avar. Finally, the vast majority of residents of the city of Baku are ethnic Azerbaijanis or first-language Azerbaijani speakers. The level of contact with Azerbaijani speakers within each type of community greatly influences both the level of Azerbaijani used by Avars and their level of proficiency in Azerbaijani.

In the villages, Avar is the main language of communication in the homes and in the community due to the homogeneous nature of most villages. Azerbaijani is a language spoken at school and at work. Social contact with Azerbaijani speakers is low. As a result, Azerbaijani is not important for life in the villages.

In the towns, on the other hand, Azerbaijani plays an important role in the lives of Avar speakers. Due to the mixture of various language groups within the town, Azerbaijani is the main language of communication both for work and for community life. The high level of contact with Azerbaijani speakers provides motivation and opportunity for Avars to speak Azerbaijani and to gain higher levels of proficiency in the language. At the same time, Avar remains the language of the home and of interactions among Avar speakers.

In Baku, Azerbaijani is essential for daily life. It is the language of education, community life, and work. Among the Avar population who have lived in Baku for many years, Azerbaijani or Russian is the language of the home. Avar is a language that is spoken only during trips to the districts, to other Avars in the city who have maintained the Avar language, and with those who are visiting from the districts.

#### *4.1.1.2 Attitudes towards and proficiency in Azerbaijani*

The types of communities in which Avars live influence not only their use of the Azerbaijani language, but also their attitudes towards and their abilities in the language. Greater proficiency in Azerbaijani correlates positively with greater social contact with Azerbaijani speakers in terms of frequency and amount. For example, Avars in the village of Qabaqçöl relate less with Azerbaijani speakers than do those who live in Balakən town. We suggest that this accounts for the reports that Avar young people living in Balakən town are losing their ability to speak the Avar language, while those in Qabaqçöl are maintaining their language. In Baku, Azerbaijani is the language in which many Avars are most fluent.

In all communities, Avars see Azerbaijani as important because it is the national language and, therefore, it is the language of work and higher education. Depending on the type of community in which they live, the perceived importance of Azerbaijani in daily life varies. The importance of Azerbaijani is limited to the domains of work and schooling in the villages. In Balakən town, Azerbaijani is additionally seen as important in the domain of social life. In Baku, Azerbaijani is important for all domains of daily life. The type of community also influences the perceived importance of Avar in daily life. Those in the villages value Avar as the main language of communication. Some Avars in Balakən town value Avar as the language of the home and of community life with other Avar speakers. In Baku, the importance of Avar ranges from being valued as the heart language and the language of ethnic identity to not being valued at all.

These findings suggest that Avar will continue to be the primary language in the villages where there are homogeneous populations of Avar speakers. In an ethnically mixed community such as Balakən town, there may be a trend towards greater use of Azerbaijani even in homes as the younger generation speaks less and less Avar. At the same time, it is interesting to note that there are young Avar people in Balakən town who desire to speak and to know more of the Avar language. In Baku, unless individuals make a concerted effort to maintain the Avar language in their homes, Azerbaijani will continue to be the main language in their daily lives. The overall fate of the Avar language in Azerbaijan also hinges on how many Avar eventually move out of the villages and into mixed communities. At present, there are no indications of a migration trend towards the urban areas. While the Azerbaijani language continues to gain prestige among the Avar, it appears the Avar language is maintaining a definite role in the rural areas.

#### *4.1.2 Factors affecting the use of Avar in Baku*

Many of the Avars who live in Baku have lived in the city for a number of years. Even among these, however, are those who continue to use the Avar language. Further investigation might reveal why there are differences in the use of Avar in Baku. Our findings suggest two factors which appear to play a part in the choice of whether or not Avar individuals in Baku maintain the use of the Avar language: (1) ethnic identity and (2) contact with other Avars.

A strong sense of ethnic identity as an Avar provides motivation to maintain the ability to speak and to comprehend the Avar language. Even some Avars in Baku who report a low level of proficiency in Avar, also say they consider Avar to be their heart language.

The amount of contact with other Avar speakers in the city influences the choice that an Avar individual makes in whether or not to continue using Avar. Contacts with friends and relatives who are visiting from the districts also play a part in maintaining proficiency in Avar, as do trips to the Avar villages to visit family and friends. The main consideration in all of this is one of motivation. If it is important to maintain Avar because of one's circle of friends and family within the city, or because of contacts with Avar people in the districts, proficiency in Avar will be maintained.

### *4.1.3 Factors affecting the typology of the Avar community*

There are three factors that seem to influence language use and language attitudes which, in turn, influence the types of individuals and families that can be found in Avar communities: (1) composition of the language community, (2) choice of language of the home, and (3) cultural ties. The issue of cultural ties will be discussed in section 4.2.

#### *4.1.3.1 Composition of the language community*

The Avar language is widely spoken in communities where there are homogeneous populations of Avar speakers. In Qabaqçöl, both parents are Avar in 87% of the households, while one parent is Avar and one is Azerbaijani in only 5% of the households. In both Qəbizdərə and Matsex, 98% of the residents are Avar, while 99% of the residents in Car are Avar. In these communities, Avar is the main language of the home and in community life, and even some of the non-Avar residents have learned Avar. Children learn Azerbaijani or Russian at school, but most do not know any Azerbaijani or Russian before they start school. Young adults are maintaining a high level of proficiency in Avar use due to the importance of Avar in community life. Although adults may use Azerbaijani and/or Russian at work, Avar remains the most important language of the community.

In contrast, only 15% of the residents of Balakən town are Avar. The majority of the residents are Azerbaijani, along with smaller numbers of other nationalities including Georgian, Lezgi, and Tatar. As a result, Azerbaijani and/or Russian are important in community life for Avar speakers. It was reported that young adults are losing their ability to speak Avar due to their daily interactions in Azerbaijani and/or Russian. The language in which they are most fluent is either Russian or Azerbaijani. Children of Avar homes in the town speak Azerbaijani before they begin school. Azerbaijani and Russian are important for social life in Balakən town.

#### *4.1.3.2 Choice of the language of the home*

The language of the home was reported to depend on the language of the mother. In all families where only one parent speaks Avar, the children speak Azerbaijani and/or Russian in the home. When it is the father who is Avar, the children are reported not speak Avar in the home. But when the mother is Avar, the children tend to speak Avar in addition to Azerbaijani and/or Russian.

In the villages, few Avar speakers marry non-Avar speakers. As a result, children in the villages generally grow up in homes where Avar is the main language of communication. In the town of Balakən and in Baku, however, it is more common for mixed marriages to occur. As a result, there are fewer families in these communities in which Avar is the major language of the home. Furthermore, there are families in Baku in which the mother is Avar but the children are not taught the language. Instead, they are raised in a community of Azerbaijani and Russian speakers and never learn Avar.

## **4.2 Language attitudes towards Russian**

A strong sense of cultural ties to Russia exists among the Avar. This sense of belonging to their historic homeland in Russia plays a major role in the area of language attitudes. Many Avars have relatives living in Dagestan. Hence, speakers of Avar show a stronger attachment to the Russian language than do speakers of many other less commonly spoken languages. Russian is viewed as a language of prestige. Russian is also used extensively as a language of wider communication with both relatives and non-Avars, especially in villages like Qabaqçöl that are located close to the borders of Georgia and Russia.

The majority of Avar children in villages receive their schooling in Azerbaijani. It was reported, however, that most parents now want their children to study in Russian in communities like Qabaqçöl where such schools exist. While most of the non-Avar children in the town of Balakən attend Azerbaijani schools, most Avar children there attend Russian schools.

One of the major motivations for learning Russian is the belief that knowledge of Russian will provide opportunities for work and higher education. Avar parents, particularly those who are in the villages, believe that life in Russia is easier than in Azerbaijan. They want their children to have the opportunity to live and to work in Russia. Many Avars have gone to Russia, and many parents want their children to follow that example.

In spite of the cultural, emotional, and pragmatic attachment to Russian, actual proficiency is apparently higher in Azerbaijani than in Russian. Azerbaijani, as the national language, is seen as an important language for communication and work. While most people in the villages speak Azerbaijani, proficiency in Russian is much more limited. The only group that generally speaks Russian is men over age 30. Overall then, people in the villages are more proficient in Azerbaijani, but view Russian as more prestigious. In light of the fact that Avars are generally more proficient in Azerbaijani than in Russian, the attitudes towards Azerbaijani could well change as it gains prestige as the language of work and higher education.

The preference for Russian seems to be weaker among the Avar living in Baku. Both Azerbaijani and Russian are regarded as important for work and education. Especially in light of the changes that can be seen in Baku, it is difficult to predict how long the cultural ties with Russia will continue.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper discussed findings that shed light on the patterns of language use, language proficiency, and language attitudes of the Avar people of Azerbaijan. The strongest influences on these aspects of sociolinguistic behavior have been the types of communities in which Avars live and the cultural ties that they have with Russia. These two factors have affected the preference of language of education; levels of proficiency in Avar, Azerbaijani, and Russian; and the perceived benefits of the three languages.

A typology of Avar was presented based on information regarding language use and language attitudes. From the data, five different groups of individuals and/or families within the Avar communities were described. Through discovering the types of individuals and families that exist in Avar communities, we can understand and learn more about the sociolinguistic situation of the Avar language in Azerbaijan.

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