

Multilingualism in Iran; Unity or Pluralism? (A case study in East Azerbaijan Province)

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Abstract

In multilingual-multicultural Iran, from among existing languages, Persian language has, naturally and in the long historical run, taken the position of both national and the sole official language. So, it can be argued that the dominant language model in Iran is language unity based on the unity approach. In the present study, first the approaches of unity and pluralism in language planning are introduced in relation to the position of national/official languages and the amount of attention paid to local languages as well. Then a specific framework is proposed to evaluate the multilingual country of Iran. The considered framework encompasses factors such as the status of existing languages in the domains of radio, television and national/local publications. In order to answer the basic question about the effect(s) of laying emphasis on Persian, both as the sole official and national language of Iran and as a determinant factor in national unity, on the status of Azeri as a non-official language in the country, the researcher referred to the well-documented resources related to East Azerbaijan's local radio, television and publications and, having extracted the amount of time allocated to Azeri language on local television and radio and the number of publications printed in Azeri, compared and evaluated their related statistical data with those related to Persian language in the mentioned domains. On the basis of the results obtained from the data analysis, it can be daringly claimed that language unity in Iran (at least in the case of Azeri language) has taken its sound version and not only is it far from being in pursuit of marginalizing and suppressing the local languages, but it has also helped them both maintain their status and enrich themselves day by day. Persian language is arguably not considered as a rival to local languages (at least Azeri) and beside Persian language introduced as the sole official language and the symbol of Iranian identity and national unity, other ethnic (local) languages are given the chance to maintain their real status. Due to such a language policy, rooted in justice-oriented policies of Islamic Republic of Iran, speakers of non-official languages in the country may develop more positive attitudes to Persian language and do their best to maintain the status of Persian as a determinant factor in the unification of all Iranians.

Keywords: multilingualism, language planning, official language, unity, pluralism

1. Introduction

Like bilingualism, multilingualism is both individual and societal. In individual multilingualism, an individual equipped with more than two languages can enjoy the available languages in different situations. An interesting example of individual multilingualism (as cited in Wardhaugh 1986: 95) can be found in the northwest Amazon, on the border between Colombia and Brazil, where individual multilingualism is the natural outcome of an interesting pattern of marriage; that is, no man may have a wife who speaks his language, for that kind of marriage relationship would be viewed as a kind of incest. Along with the acquisition of parental languages, their children learn other language(s) of the environment. As for the manifestation of individual multilingualism in Iran, West Azerbaijan province, in the northwest Iran, can be exemplified where a remarkable number of people speak Azeri, Kurdish, and Persian.

Unlike its individual form, societal multilingualism is a very widespread phenomenon. Societal multilingualism which is the consequence of the existence and operation of more than two languages within borders of a society is so prevalent in the world that following Spolsky (1998:51), monolingual countries and speech communities are hard to find. Iran, having hosted various languages such as Persian, Azeri, Kurdish, Mazandarani, and Baluchi, is among the multilingual countries in the world.

Determining the status of the languages in multilingual countries is a key issue in language planning.

2. Language Planning

Language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes (Cooper 1989:45). This definition encompasses the three areas that are traditionally addressed in language planning, namely corpus, status, and acquisition (Kloss 1967; Prator as cited in Cooper 1989:33); 1) *corpus* planning focuses on language structures such as morphological, syntactic, and semantic structures. 2.) *status* planning refers to the place and functions of a language. 3) *acquisition* planning concerns language spread.

Corpus planning, according to Wardhaugh (1986 :336), is to provide a language (variety) with the means for serving every possible language function in society. For Spolsky (1998:66), corpus planning is any effort to fix or modify the structure of a language. Wardhaugh (ibid.) maintains that status planning changes the function of a language (variety) and the rights of those who use it. In fact, through this kind of planning, a language may lose or gain its status. Spolsky (1998:67-69) considers status planning as an important activity since the issues concerning it continue to make headlines such as the riots in Soweto by African school children who were upset by a government decision to have them learn in Afrikaans rather than English. Spolsky (ibid.) points out that language status policy is by its very nature a political activity. Along with corpus and status planning, Spolsky (1998:67) refers to language acquisition planning as a process which is involved when a government decides which language is to be taught in school.

According to Milligan (2007), acquisition planning is an activity that focuses on transmission of a language to its non-users and non-fluent users. Referring to the interconnectivity of the three areas of language planning, Milligan maintains that the status of a language is influenced by both corpus and acquisition planning, with the former having direct repercussions on aspects of status, and the latter altering the visibility of a language. Acquiring a language, along with its side effect, i.e. contributing to the vitality of the language in question, seems to necessitate the application of some required modifications in the structure of the language, which is expected of corpus planners.

Interconnectivity of the three types of language planning in Iran can be assumed in terms of Persian language. As went above, all non-Persian speaking Iranians in the country acquire Persian as it is the sole official and national language of Iran. This issue bears a direct and immediate effect on maintaining Persian language in Iran. The necessity of public acquisition of Persian, as well as its high status as a symbol of the Iranian identity, has urged language planners to remove foreign words from Persian language on the one hand and protect it against new foreign words, on the other hand.

Among the important aspects of language planning, the one having a direct relationship with language status planning is the choice of an official language.

2-1. Official/ National Language Choice and Approaches

The terms *official language* and *national language* are distinguished from each other. An official language is a language which is recognized by government officials, but a national language is a language which either is used as the common language among the people of a country in contrast with the local languages or plays the role of a national symbol in contrast with a colonial foreign language (Garvin, 1973; as cited in Modarresi, 1989: 244). In the context of Iran, Persian is both the sole official and national language.

As cited in Modarresi (2004), sociolinguists follow two different approaches in the choice of official and national languages: *language unity*, that is one country with one official/national language; *language pluralism*, that is one country with several official/ national languages.

Following the unity approach, one language from among the languages and dialects in a country is selected as the national and official language. Countries such as France, Germany, and England follow the unity approach. In such a model, there is an emphasis on the acquisition and use of a common language as a symbol of the national identity by all the people of a country. In language unity approach, minority languages are in the margin and the primitive linguistic rights of the speakers of such languages are sometimes neglected.

To refer to the approach in question, Haugen (1985) has used the term *centralism* beside the terms *unity* and *assimilation*. In his opinion, language unity resembles a steamroller which wipes out ethnic groups and their languages through the spread of national (and international) languages by radio and TV. Haugen believes that in such situations the minority groups struggle to assert their own linguistic rights. Such struggles between dominated and dominant groups for the right to survive include, as Haugen puts it, the *ecology of language*. That is, the preservation of language is a part of human ecology, which in turn is a branch the larger disciplines of sociology and political science.

In the second approach, that is language pluralism, which has been labeled as *coexistence* by Haugen (ibid.), it is possible for various linguistic groups in a country to coexist. Haugen has distinguished between language pluralism and *language diversity*. In his opinion, language pluralism is not a natural condition. It is, however, a goal and, as cited in Berry (1974), a theory which can be approached through careful and delicate policies. Through the application of language pluralism, language planners help various linguistic groups coexist in one country and enjoy identical ethnic and linguistic rights. Unlike language pluralism, language diversity is a natural state. For example, in Nigeria more than two hundred aboriginal languages and dialects fulfill the communication needs of various ethnic and linguistic groups. According to Haugen, such a condition is not favorable for educational systems. Hence a country may enjoy language diversity without pluralism since through pluralism the natural state of affairs give way to planned and favorable conditions (Modarresi, ibid.).

Wardhaugh(ibid. :337) defines pluralism as recognizing more than one language and divides it into two types: complete and partial; that is, all or only some aspects of life can be conducted in more than one language in a

society. Examples are countries like Belgium, Canada, Singapore, South Africa, and Switzerland. As cited in Modarresi (2005), in the above-mentioned countries all linguistic groups enjoy their linguistic rights equally despite the fact that from among different languages only one may have the largest number of speakers, the most widespread use, and the highest status in the realm of science and literature. As an example, although English and French in Canada legitimately enjoy equal status in various areas such as education, media, and legislation, English outweighs French in use, status, and prestige.

Haugen (ibid.), referring to the increasing interest of sociolinguists in studying minority groups, has cited Schermerhorn (1964)'s two-dimensional model which encompasses cultural prominence on the one hand and a form of the submission of the minority group, on the other hand. In Schermerhorn's model, a minority group is considered a cultural group with no power and autonomy and the term *minority group* is utilized euphemistically in the place of the term *conquered group*. The model in question is in parallel with language pluralism since in language pluralism, the linguistic rights of a minority group as a group with cultural values are held in respect. According to Haugen (ibid.), in Switzerland no one is trying to force their language or culture upon anyone else. The central government has no ambition to homogenize or uniform the languages of its population. Each canton has its own language. It is only because no one part dominates the others; and each one leaves the rest alone. So, it can be argued that Switzerland is a truly pluralistic country.

Along with language unity and pluralism, Modarresi (ibid.) has put forward another model which can probably be a combination of language unity and pluralism, as pointed out by Modarresi (ibid.). In this combined model, more than one official and local language coexist with a common national language; hence, on the one hand the linguistic rights of various linguistic-ethnic groups are valued and on the other hand, unification and national identity are preserved and highlighted through one common official language as a symbol of nationality and unity. The concerned model can be clearly observed in India, where fourteen local languages such as Bengali, Marathi, and Urdu have been recognized along with the common official language, that is Hindi.

However, each of the three models, i.e. unity, pluralism, and the combined model, has its own problems. Referring to the drawbacks of the unity model, Modarresi (ibid.) has highlighted ethnic and linguistic discrimination among minority groups, problems of monolingual educational system for minorities (particularly early in elementary school), and relatively high illiteracy rate in minority areas. As opposed to language unity, pluralism strengthens localism and separatism, weakens national unity, and puts obstacles before modernism, development, and executive issues of multilingual educational systems. As for the combined model, it is very costly and requires high executive power; however, it preserves both ethnic attachment and national identity and unity on condition that everything runs appropriately.

3. Multilingualism in Iran

As mentioned earlier, Iran is a multiethnic-multilingual country as it enjoys ethnic-linguistic diversity. It should be noted that from the two individual and societal dimensions of multilingualism, only the societal one is in question in the present paper. From among various languages in Iran such as Persian, Azeri, Baluchi, and Kurdish, Persian is the sole official and national language. Evidenced by the 15th principle of the constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran, both Persian language and orthography are official and common among various ethnic-linguistic groups in the country. Hence, every official document, text, and course book has to be written in Persian language and orthography. However, the concerned principle of the constitution has not overlooked the local languages in Iran. Based on the principle in question, making use of local languages in Press, mass media, as well as teaching their literature at schools, is not forbidden. Regarding the choice of Persian as the sole official and national language in Iran, Modarresi (1989:246) has pointed out that in early Islamic centuries, Persian was the spoken language of the capital city and later of important regions such as Khorasan. It gradually grew into the language of elite and scholars and hence turned into both a spoken and written language. Equipped with such a firm literary and social support and in a natural long run, Persian rose to the status of the country's official language.

Modarresi(1992) has put the linguistic issues of Iran into two general categories: issues related to Persian as the sole official, national, and common language of all Iranians and issues related to the country's local languages and dialects which are spoken by a remarkable number of Iranians. Considering the mentioned linguistic issues of Iran, Modarresi (ibid.) has maintained that language planning activities can be directed at two main areas: strengthening and developing Persian language on the one hand and strengthening and developing local languages and dialects, on the other hand.

In terms of strengthening Persian language, Modarresi believes that considering the increasing development of science and technology in recent years and in order to satisfy the communication needs of society in all scientific, educational, and cultural areas, Persian language requires strengthening and renovation in its general sense. In Modarresi's idea, another aspect of the great and important work of Persian language planning is finding proper, scientific, and unbiased methods of teaching it to the speakers of local languages in order to develop Persian.

Modarresi(ibid.) has pointed out that providing proper conditions for all L2 Persian learners, especially pre-school children, is inevitable in order to help them learn Persian. Otherwise, insufficient proficiency of non-Persian speaking school children in Persian as the language of education and, as a consequence, the incidence of educational failure are not unexpected.

Planning for the strengthening and development of local languages and dialects is another area for language planners in the country as the speakers of the local languages and dialects are naturally interested in preserving and strengthening them.

Modarresi(2005) has considered the choice of Persian as the sole official and national language of Iran in parallel with language unity approach. That is, from among various languages in Iran, only Persian plays the role of official and national language while other languages enjoy local and non-official uses. In Modarresi (ibid.)'s words, language planners and policy makers in Iran approach minority languages and dialects conservatively and cautiously. This policy is in parallel with the presupposition of language unity approach on the basis of which the *one nation, one country, and one language* model is a crucial factor in preserving national unity and eradicates the separatism probability.

4. National Language, National Identity, and National Unity in Iran

As went above in section 2.1, Garvin has defined national language as the common language in a country in contrast with local languages and also as a national symbol in contrast with a colonial foreign language. National identity, in Ahmadi(2003:9)'s words (as cited in Ghamari & Hassanzadeh, 2010), is the feeling of an individual's belonging to a particular country. People have just one national identity. As psychologists such as Piaget and Freud (as cited in Ghamari & Hassanzadeh, ibid) put it, national identity is the highest and best type of human identities¹.

Concerning the relationships between national language and national identity, it can be argued that they are interrelated. On the one hand, national language is the basis of national identity and on the other hand, national identity affects national language. Rahman (2007:2), a Pakistani sociologist, has maintained that the national language of Urdu and the religion the means of the unity of various Islamic sects in Pakistan (as cited in Ghamari & Hassanzadeh, ibid). Therefore, the strengthening of both national identity and national language can bring about national unity.

In multiethnic-multilingual Iran, Persian as the national language and a symbol of national (Iranian) identity has been able to unify various ethnic groups. Fallah (2007) has pointed out that Persian language is both a key to the unity of all ethnic groups, sects, and social classes in Iran and a means of preventing chaos and separation in the country. Fallah (ibid.) highlights the important point that focusing on the importance of Persian language as the national language of Iranians should not have the importance and status of other languages and dialects in the country neglected. As Ghamari & Hassanzadeh(ibid) put it, minority groups resist any attempt which may menace their ethnic languages. In the present paper, the researcher tries to evaluate the state of Azeri language as one of the non-official languages in Iran and answers the following central question: how much has the status of Azeri language in Iran been affected by the fact that Persian language is centered on as it is one of the determinant factors of the unity all ethnic groups in Iran?

5. Methodology

5.1. Data collection

The data of the present paper contain local television and radio programs, publications, and children's names in both Persian language and Azeri language in East Azerbaijan Province. To collect the required data, the researcher attended Television & Radio organization, Press & Advertisement department, and Civil Registration organization of East Azerbaijan Province. The data collection procedure was conducted in May, 2012.

5.2. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data related to the productions of television and radio the number and the duration of radio and television programs produced in Azeri language outweigh those produced in the national language, i.e. Persian. Although the outweighing number and duration are not unexpected of the local television and radio channels, the possibility of producing programs in a local and non-official language, i.e. Azeri, with the above-mentioned volume through state-run television and radio is an indication of holding the local language and the cultural values of its speakers in respect. Another crucial point in terms of television and radio programs produced in Azeri language is that in addition to the mentioned quantity of the programs, their quality is considerable, too. That is, the programs broadcasted in Azeri in May, 2012 covered a wide range of subjects such as social, cultural and political talk shows, movies, serials, and sport programs.

In the following comes the analysis of the data related to the publications of East Azerbaijan Province. Tables 2 and 3 indicate that from among 106 published journals in East Azerbaijan Province in 2010¹, 43 journals, i.e. approximately % 40/56, had been published in Azeri language.

Based on the information in both table 2 and table 3 and considering the fact that a considerable number of provincial publications are in Azeri language, it can be argued that Azeri as a local and non-official language is not being suppressed by the national Persian language.

At the end comes the analysis of the frequency of children's names in East Azerbaijan Province in 2011². Table 4 shows the distribution of the topmost twenty names with the highest frequency.

Table 4 shows that all male names and approximately 80/59 percent of female names are in Arabic, which is the language of religion in Iran and is in parallel with the religious identity of Iranians. Along with Arabic and Persian names, 1193 (approximately % 8/18) names are in Azeri, which is indicative of preserving ethnic identity. The fact that Azeri children in Iran are legitimately allowed to have their ethnic names indicates that Azeri as a local language is not pushed to the margin. On the contrary, Azeri language is the center of public attraction in East Azerbaijan Province.

6. Conclusion

Persian language has been chosen as the sole official and national language of Iran in the framework of language unity approach. The principal aim of the mentioned approach is trying to preserve the national unity in a multiethnic-multilingual country via choosing one language as the official and national language. In the extreme version of the unity approach, local and non-official languages are pushed to the margin and their native speakers have to acquire the official and national language in order to use it in formal situations. As observed in the data analysis section of the present paper, it can be argued (at least in the case of Azeri language) that the language unity approach in Iran has taken a sound version. That is, not only is it not in the pursuit of marginalizing and suppressing the local languages, but it has also paved the ground for such languages to preserve their status. Assuming the three main approaches to official/national language choice on a continuum with the extreme version of language unity on the one end, the complete version of pluralism on the other end, and the combined approach in the middle, the language unity approach in Iran can be claimed to have distanced itself from its extreme version and can also be partially claimed to have taken threads of the combined approach though none of the local languages has been labeled as an official language. The unbiased linguistic policy in Iran rooted in the justice-oriented policies of Islamic Republic of Iran helps the speakers of local and non-official languages to grow more positive attitudes toward Persian language and encourages them to preserve the status of Persian as one of the determinant factors of the unity of all Iranians.

Notes

1. The other two types of identities are individual and ethnic ones.
2. At the time of the study, there was no systematic information available any longer than 2010.
3. At the time of the study, there was no systematic information available any longer than 2011.

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M= medium **L**= language **N**= number **D**= duration **BP**= broadcast percentage **T**= total

Table 1. Frequency of radio & TV programs

M					T
Radio	L	Persian	Azeri	Persian-Azeri	N=46
	N	15	20	11	D= 434 h, 27', 22"
	D	129 h,25', 36"	305 h, 1',46"		P= 100 %
	BP	29/79 %	70/21%		
TV	L	Persian	Azeri	Persian-Azeri	N=28
	N	5	12	11	D= 221 h, 55', 39"
	D	36 h, 50', 26"	185 h, 5', 13"		P= 100 %
	BP	16/60 %	83/40 %		

Table 2. Frequency publications

Publication type	N.	language	N.
Daily	8	Persian	2
		Persian-Azeri	6
Weekly	34	Persian	10
		Persian-Azeri	24
Semiweekly	2	Persian	-
		Persian-Azeri	2
Biweekly	5	Persian	2
		Persian-Azeri	3
Quarterly	27	Persian	17
		Persian-Azeri-English	1
		Persian-◌Arabic-English	1
		Persian-English	8
Monthly	27	Persian	17
		Persian-Azeri	6
		Persian-English	3
		Persian-◌Arabic-English - Azeri	1
Semiannual	3	Persian	3
		Persian-Azeri	-
Total		106	106

Table 3. Linguistic frequency of publications

publication language	Persian	Persian-Azeri	Arabic-Persian-English	Persian-Azeri-English	Persian-English	Persian-Azeri-English-Arabic	Total
No.	51	41	1	1	11	1	106

Table 4. Frequency of children's names in 2011

language	Arabic		Persian		Azeri	
	male	female	male	female	male	female
No.	17481	11748	-	1636	-	1193
percentage	100%	80/59%	-	11/22%	-	8/18%
names	Abolfazl- Ali-.Ehsan	Zahra- Fatemeh.Kosar	-	Setayesh- Hasti	-	Ailin- Ainaz-Aida

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