

# Script change in Azerbaijan: acts of identity

LYNLEY HATCHER

“How can you speak about the identity of a people whose alphabet has been changed four times in the last seventy-five years?”

(Safizadeh 1998: 1)

## *Abstract*

*Each of the three major script changes of the Azeri language in the twentieth century, from traditional Arabic to Latin, to Cyrillic, and back to Latin, reflected assertions of identity in the changing social and political realities. Each of these changes represented a decision related to the allegiance of the nation, sometimes voluntary and sometimes forced. Yet none of these changes were without both significant benefits and challenges to the cohesion of Azerbaijani identity.*

## **1. Introduction**

The phrase “acts of identity” in the title is drawn from the work of LePage and Tabouret-Keller (1985), where they say that as speakers choose which language to speak, they are performing an “act of identity,” audibly projecting the identity they want to claim. In a parallel way, as people choose which script to use in writing their language, they are visibly projecting an identity, choosing to claim an identity based on factors similar to those linked with choices of spoken languages, such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, level of education, etc. As Wright (2004: 51) observed, “Choosing alphabets can also be a way of reaffirming identity or signaling new associations.” This article presents examples of how scripts have been used and exchanged through the history of Azerbaijan as choices of identity have also been exchanged.

For most of its history, Azerbaijan's identity has been rooted in the Muslim world, sharing the Arabic alphabet, which authors used to produce a rich literary history. In the twentieth century, Azerbaijan's "scriptal environment," to use Trix's (1997: 1) apt term, has been dominated by three scripts, each promoted by a powerful adjacent neighbor emphasizing particular shared links: Arabic promoted by Iran, Cyrillic promoted by Russia, and Latin promoted by Turkey. After the Soviet Union incorporated Azerbaijan as a republic in 1920, the Soviets initiated a script shift from Arabic to Latin to divide the nation from Iran and its Muslim roots. A decade later, the Soviets forced another shift from the Latin to the Cyrillic script to alienate Azerbaijan and the Turkic republics from Turkey and from each other. Today, after independence in 1991, the pendulum has swung back in favor of the Latin script.

It is worth noting that the scripts of two smaller adjacent neighbors, Georgia and Armenia, both with unique scripts and Christian identities, have not been considered by Azerbaijan. This article focuses exclusively on the script choices for the Azeri language,<sup>1</sup> though other languages in Azerbaijan have also faced choices and changes of scripts (Catford 1977: 295–297; Clifton 2003 1: 2, 2: 94–95).

Ironically, more speakers of Azeri are found in Iran than within the borders of Azerbaijan. The two governments maintain significantly different policies regarding the choice of script: "At different times in its history, alphabet changes have served to isolate Northern Azerbaijan from Southern Azerbaijan. If the Araz river was the 'natural' border between the two Azerbaijanians and if the barbed wires emphasized physical separation, then alphabet differences created a third boundary — an invisible cultural one" (Bahadori 1993: 13).

## **2. Ancient scripts in Azerbaijan**

Ancient peoples in Azerbaijan (using the term in the broad sense) used a number of scripts. Bahadori (1993: 10) puts the total number of scripts used in the area at "twelve or more, depending on how far back one digs," though all were limited in use. Those ancient scripts were swept away, however, by the spread of Islam.

## **3. Arabic script**

When Arabs arrived in Azerbaijan in the seventh century, they brought Islam and the Arabic script with them. This became the standard

alphabet in Azerbaijan and all over Central Asia. However, the Arabic script presented many difficulties, not effectively representing Azeri phonetically. In the nineteenth century, Azerbaijani intellectuals such as Mirzaa Fath ‘Ali Akhundof (1812–1872) were proposing reforms to the Arabic script (Taqizadeh 1960: 459), but “the greatest resistance came from those who believed that since the Qur’an was written in the Arabic script, it is holy and should not be tampered with” (Alakbarov 2000b: 53). In spite of the phonetic difficulties, the Arabic alphabet (in Persian form) was the script of the Azeri language for thirteen centuries until 1924, reinforcing Azerbaijan’s link with Islam and was used to produce a wealth of literature and history (Landau and Kellner-Heinkele 2001: 130).

Calls to adopt the Latin script led to the formation of the Azerbaijani committee for the New Turkic Alphabet (AzKNTA), which saw the adoption of a new script as an essential step in building their identity, calling “the Arabic script an instrument of the old Muslim culture, while the Latin alphabet was a tool of the new socialist one” (Clement 2005: 79, quoting archival manuscripts.).

#### **4. Early Soviet policy (1920s): Latin script**

Soviet policy stated that no official language was declared for the USSR and that everyone had the right to speak whichever language they wanted, privately or publicly. In actual practice, however, incremental Russification was part of a long-term unifying strategy. Yet the Soviets allowed other languages to develop and be used for local purposes. Moscow’s encouragement of Azeri literacy in the Latin script was intended “to free the proletariat from the Arabic script” (Clement 2005: 80). Soviet language planners sought to weaken Azerbaijan’s identification with Islam and with the large Azerbaijani population in northern Iran and to separate them from their own corpus of traditional Arabic script writings, which were largely religious.

At the same time, for totally different motivations, many Azerbaijani intellectuals were calling for the adoption of the Latin script. In 1926, the First Turcological Congress was held in Baku, with 131 participants from multiple countries including Turkey and some of the major and minor Turkic language groups in the Soviet Union, as well as a few scholars from Moscow. Samad Aghamalioghlu, an Azerbaijani delegate at the 1926 Turcology Conference, specifically rejected the sentiment that the change of script would cut Azerbaijan off from a rich literary heritage of the past, scoffing, “What was the level of society at that period?” (Arabic or Latin? 2000). Other intellectuals like Aghamalioghlu did not strongly

identify themselves with the Islamic past, but focused on what Azerbaijan could become, seeing a change to Latin script as a part of this forward movement. The congress voted overwhelmingly (101 to 7) that the Turkic peoples of the USSR should adopt the Latin script, an officially tabulated act of identity. One of Azerbaijan's premier poets, Samad Vurgun (1906–1956), boasted “Azerbaijani people are proud of being the first among Oriental nations that buried the Arabic alphabet and adopted the Latin alphabet. This event is written in golden letters of our history” (Writers 2000: 58). With the combination of Soviet support and the enthusiasm of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia for a switch to Latin, it was a relatively easy change.

Newspapers and official documents were required to use Latin script from 1925, but the Arabic script was still used concurrently until 1929 (Henze 1977: 376). Publications that continued to publish in Arabic script were used by the Soviet government to ruthlessly criticize the Arabic script and Islam (Alakbarov 2000a: 52). They viewed this as a way to change Azerbaijani culture over time.

By supporting [alphabet movements in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus], the party appeared to promote nativization policy, giving peoples new or revised alphabets designed for mass literacy and education. Yet Latinization also offered Moscow the perfect opportunity to begin to undermine the power of the Muslim clerical establishment . . . forcing Latin as the new medium of script literacy, the party would mount an impassable barrier between traditional Islamic print culture and the masses of the new “Soviet” literates. Since the vast majorities of the Turkic and indigenous populations of the east were still illiterate, control over alphabet politics meant control over them. (Michael G. Smith, quoted in Clement 2005: 80)

The Soviets then further separated the Azerbaijanis from the Muslim world by a decree in 1925 that outlawed the importing of anything printed in Arabic script (Henze 1977: 376), a policy designed to shift their loyalty from the Muslim sphere to the Soviet sphere. Vurgun supported these changes, describing them colorfully, “The old Arabic alphabet stood like a stone wall in front of the beautiful and cultural language of the Azerbaijani people for many long years. By banning the use of this alphabet, the Azerbaijani people made a great stride forward in its history” (Writers 2000: 58).

The Bolsheviks began with a moderate approach to Islam in the Muslim republics, such as the script change, since it was thought that socialism could be achieved over time. Many of their other early actions against Islam were promoted simply as modernization. Literacy in the new script became a vehicle for culture and identity change. This was

a significant element in the “emancipation of Eastern Muslim women” (Talibzade 2000: 64). As they became involved in the literacy campaign, they were able to learn to read and some even became teachers. A large-scale propaganda campaign was mounted that encouraged women to not be backward by wearing veils. This media blitz was part of an overall attempt to secularize Azerbaijani identity, and it was quite successful, as was the literacy campaign itself: Azerbaijan went from under 10% literacy to an official literacy rate of 98% within a few decades (2000: 65).

A few years after the implementation of the Latin alphabet, books in the Arabic alphabet were systematically destroyed. In 1928, Soviet government leaders went from village to village ordering Azerbaijanis to bring their Arabic script books to the town square to be burned. For a people who deeply valued their identity, culture, traditions, and history, this was a devastating order. Everyone knew, however, that to attempt to hide books would risk imprisonment or worse. Countless irreplaceable handwritten manuscripts were destroyed at this time (Rustamov 1999: 74).

## **5. Stalin’s era: Cyrillic**

During the 1930s, the Soviets revoked many of the initially progressive language policies, stopping publication in some of the smaller languages (Comrie 1981: 26). Although Azerbaijanis were separated by script from worldwide Islam, they were culturally and linguistically linked to other Turkic peoples of the USSR through the use of the Soviet-devised Unified Turkic Latin Alphabet. This alphabet was the standard Latin alphabet with the addition of a few characters and signs to assist in meeting all of the phonetic needs of the languages (Henze 1977: 377). Soviet policy makers temporarily tolerated this situation. Then the unexpected development of Turkey adopting the Latin alphabet in November of 1928 led to fears among the Russian-led Communist leadership of a pan-Turkic identity movement among the Muslim republics.<sup>2</sup> In Azerbaijan, people were fined, even jailed, for referring to themselves as “Turks” (Mehdiyeva 2003: 279).

“As soon as the script simplification was over, the order came from Moscow that all languages should go over to the Cyrillic script within three years” (2003: 278). In 1939, Stalin announced: Cyrillic would now replace the Latin alphabet for Turkic languages. Unlike the officially allowed discussion related to the earlier switch to Latin script, the switch to Cyrillic was done by decree. One scholar reflected, “Who would have dared to raise an objection against Stalin’s decision to impose the Cyrillic

script? And if they had, who would have dared to keep any records?" (Alakbarov 2000a: 52).

During the Stalinist era, the revered poet Samad Vurgun wrote about how the Cyrillic script was needed. But a contemporary Azerbaijani writer explained it this way, "Despite how much he did not want to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet, he had no choice but to embrace the concept and to persuade others to do the same. Notice how he advocates for the integrity of the Azeri language despite the restrictions that Soviets were imposing via the Cyrillic alphabet" (Writers 2000: 58). That is, despite the Soviet pressure to adopt Cyrillic, Vurgun still stood for Azerbaijani identity.

Bahadori (1993: 11) notes that this "conversion to Cyrillic was carried out with two main goals: Russification and isolation between Turkic nations." The adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet was intended by the Russians to facilitate the acquisition of Russian as well as making it easier to incorporate Russian words into the languages (Henze 1977: 381).

The annoyance of the Azerbaijanis was deepened by the forbearance of the Soviets in allowing Christian Armenia and Georgia to maintain their traditional scripts (Comrie 1981: 23). It seemed to them like a direct attack on the identities of Muslim peoples.

Unlike the adoption of the Unified Turkic Latin Alphabet that united the Turkic peoples, each republic was encouraged to "nationalize" its own Cyrillic-based alphabet for phonemes that do not exist in Russian. Variations of the Cyrillic alphabet for each language further isolated each Turkic republic from the others (Henze 1977: 382; Talibzade 2000: 65). For example, for the phoneme /ŋ/, seven different spellings were used to represent this (Bayatly 1997). The goal of this isolation and forced Cyrillicization was to break former Turkic ethnic ties and identity, just as the previous Latinization was used to break ties with Islam and the Southern Azerbaijanis in Iran, and to better facilitate the assimilation of Azerbaijan into the wider Russian-oriented identity.

Acquisition of Russian by Azerbaijanis was aided by the use of Cyrillic, one of the original goals of the Soviets. The official Communist Party line in regards to Russian language was as described below:

Because it is the language of the Union's most developed nation, which guided the country through its revolutionary transformations and has won itself the love and respect of all other peoples, the Russian language is naturally being transformed into the language of communication and cooperation of all the peoples of the socialist state. This has been produced by growing economic and production ties among nations, by a rapid process of internationalization of the population, and a replacement of previous psychological barriers by bonds of brotherly friendship, mutual trust, and mutual help. (Comrie 1981: 36–37, quoting Isaev)

With the growing influence of the Russian identity and language, many Azerbaijanis bemoaned the watering down of their language with Russian terminology. One poet wrote in 1954, “Once it would flow fluently / But today it is frozen. / My mother tongue is so miserable today / As if it has been trampled” (Patterson 1999: 66). An Azerbaijani philologist remembers a conversation his father had with a news vendor:

“Give me the ‘Va’ (“and”) Magazine,” he had told the vendor.

“Why do you call it ‘Va’ Magazine?” came the puzzled reply.

“Because the only Azeri word in the title is ‘Va’,” my father observed.

This magazine could easily have been called “*İngilab və Mədəniyyət*” — the Azeri equivalent for “revolution” and “culture”. But Russian had penetrated so deeply into the Azeri language, and the policy had been carried out in such an extensive, well-organized manner that one sometimes marvels how the word “va” even managed to escape unscathed. (Jabiroghlu 2005: 84)

After “Black January,” a three-day period in 1990 when Russian tanks took over the capital city of Baku, killing hundreds of civilians and dumping their bodies into the Caspian Sea, anti-Russian feelings had quickly grown stronger. Firidun Jalilov reported that this spurred those in his circle to seek ways to de-Russianify themselves (Bayatly 1997: 24). In addition to seeking independence from the USSR, they considered two symbolic alternatives: modifying their Russianized last names and “rid ourselves of the Cyrillic script” (1997: 25). They considered “either the Latin or Arabic script” (Mehdiyeva 2003: 279), seeing the change to either script as an act of identity, a momentous and visible divorce from a Russian-influenced identity.

## **6. Independence (1991)**

On 21 December 1991, the leaders of most Soviet Republics signed the Alma Ata Protocol, dissolving the Soviet Union and giving independence to Azerbaijan and the other republics. Immediately, on 25 December, the Azerbaijani Parliament voted to change the script back to Latin, rejecting the Cyrillic script.<sup>3</sup> “More potently than any other single reform, the new alphabet symbolized the birth of a new order and the death of the old” (Lester 1997: 26).

Before and after independence, Russia, Turkey, and Iran have worked hard to influence Azerbaijan’s choice of scripts, each hoping to have newly independent Azerbaijan align itself with them. All sides saw the choice of script as a clear visible symbol of such an alignment. A writer

of the time noted, “Turkey has been campaigning vigorously for the adoption of the Turkish form of the Latin script. The competition includes Cyrillic, which is the script in common use, and the Arabic script, which both Iran and Saudi Arabia are pushing” (Robins 1993: 607).

Russia used its influence to support retaining Cyrillic script. For pragmatic reasons, many Azerbaijanis felt that continued use of Cyrillic was preferable to the disruption caused by changing scripts. But for reasons of identity, others felt Cyrillic was not an option:

The imposition of a Cyrillic writing system injured the pride of the various nationalities because it reminded them of their humiliating status in the Russian or Soviet colonialism. They wanted to exalt their own national heroes and celebrities, present and past. They wanted to be recognized for their own poets and artists, and for the distinctiveness of their own folklore and national talents . . . It was this attitude that these people resented, not [merely] the replacing of the Cyrillic alphabet for other scripts. Consequently, it is very understandable that in the new social-political order that the Cyrillic-based orthographies were targeted for elimination. (Bodrogligeti 1993)

Iran, with a large Azeri-speaking population within its borders, had long been promoting Arabic script for the Azeri language. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, “some Azerbaijani intellectuals in Iran explored the question of which was the most appropriate alphabet” but most simply “created revised versions of the Arabic script.” In contrast, Habib Azarsina “published a pamphlet suggesting a revised Latin alphabet for Azerbaijani in Iran. Upon its publication Azarsina was arrested” (Shaffer 2000: 253, 254).

Pressure to adopt Arabic script was strongest from religious leaders, using the claim that it was “the alphabet of Islam,” and also that it linked the people with centuries of literary heritage. Iran and other Muslim countries provided financing to teach Arabic script (Bayatly 1997: 25). Although Azerbaijan retains a deep personal and cultural commitment to Islam, it is a secularized country due to decades of Soviet efforts. As in Turkey, the external trappings of Islam are a weak part of Azerbaijani identity (Brown 2002). This led to there being little support for Arabic script. It is interesting to note that as the supporters of Arabic script saw that they were not gaining support, “they united with pro-Cyrillic forces against those advocating Latin” (Bayatly 1997: 25), mirroring the rapprochement between Iran and Russia in the face of Azerbaijan identifying with Turkey (Mehdiyeva 2003: 274).

At the Alma-Ata meeting that brought independence in 1991, there was also a meeting of the Turkic republics of the suddenly former USSR, agreeing that they should all share a single script, bolstering a



common Turkic identity. Though they all shared a recent history of using the Cyrillic script, they now rejected it (and the identity it symbolized) and selected the Latin alphabet, a move that was seen as “oriented toward Turkey” (Naumkin 1992: 139), although only Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan followed through with this decision.

Azerbaijani officials favored a more Turkish identity, including the Latin script. Ebulföz Elçibey, president at the time, spoke glowingly of the links with Turkey: “In the past, there was only one independent Turkish state, it was the Anatolian Turks who were our symbol for independence ... We have fifty million Turkish brothers in Anatolia” (Bal 1998: 6).

To support the Latin script and a Turkic identity, Turkey soon began sending in Latin script typewriters (Cornell 1999: 68). It directed television programming to Azerbaijan with subtitles in Latin script (Robins 1993: 607), as well as working to increase its influence by a variety of foreign aid, including trade and the opening of schools in Azerbaijan (Aras 2000).

Heydar Aliyev, the next president of Azerbaijan, greatly supported the Latin script initiative in terms of nation building and the creation of a distinct Azerbaijani identity. Aliyev, a former member of the Politburo, was often complimented for having better Russian than that of his Russian colleagues. Nevertheless, he was a strong advocate for the transition to the Latin script and of moving away from Russian language usage throughout his presidency. In early 2001, Aliyev declared 1 August 2001 the deadline for a mandatory shift from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. This decree included newspapers, books, government documents, and government correspondence switching to the Latin script (Blair 2001: 17).

Even writers who support the shift to the Latin script recognize that within several years of the shift, many of their own works published in the Cyrillic script will be inaccessible to young people taught to read in the Latin script. Kamal Talibzade (2000: 66) has faced this and made a clear choice for the Latin-related identity:

Within five years or so, the younger generation won't be able to read my books. Sometimes I think: “What a pity! I've been serving this society as a scholar for 55 years. But none of my books will even be readable in the future.” I'm still convinced, however, that we made the right decision to embrace Latin. Our future is the main issue ... I'm among the happiest people in the world because I've seen the collapse of the Soviet Union ... It's important for us to adopt the Latin alphabet.

In some ways, it has been a slow transition to Latin. For some years, the Latin and Cyrillic scripts have existed side by side. The Cyrillic script has been gradually replaced in shops, restaurants, and newspapers. Some

government officials resisted the shift, perhaps hoping that the policy would be reversed to Cyrillic again (Talibzade 2000: 66). Present challenges to the transition to the Latin script include the desperate need for Eastern and Western classics, including modern world literature, to be translated and published. The works that are available in the Latin script are very limited and are not adequate for students to achieve a good education (Lester 1997: 27). The loss of knowledge and information due to the multiple alphabet shifts is staggering. One librarian moaned, “The books that we are reading today will be inaccessible to future generations and this worries me” (Gafurova 2000: 27).

Despite these challenges, including unsettled issues of identity, Azerbaijan continues down the road of scriptal change. It is not yet clear what identity they will form: “It’s a nation with multiple identities and no identity, where contradictory forces still contend for influence in . . . building blocks of society. But deciding that some of those blocks should be A, B, C — rather than A, Б, Г, or ا, ب, ت — represents a start” (Lester 1997: 27).

## 7. Questions for further research

Fishman (1988: 1648, 1649), the sociologist of language, recognized the sociolinguistic and sociological impact of studying the effect of script change and gives a helpful list of questions to ask when a writing system is replaced. For further research, it would be interesting to measure the continued progress of the transition to the Latin script. Specifically for Azerbaijan, in addition to Fishman’s questions, it will be useful to ask, will the critical literary classics be translated into the Latin script, allowing young people educational opportunities? What effect will this latest alphabet selection have on older members of society and their relationships with the younger generation? Will schools someday teach the reading of Cyrillic and Arabic scripts as additional subjects so that students can read the existing body of records and literature? It will be fascinating to observe the long-term impact of the multiple alphabet transitions on the identity, culture, and daily lives of the Azerbaijani people.

*Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics*

## Notes

1. In the literature, the terms “Azerbaijani” and “Azeri” are used in different ways by different authors, often interchangeably. I have chosen to use “Azeri” to refer to the language and “Azerbaijani” to refer to the people and culture.

2. Many mistakenly assume that Turkey was the originator and first user of the Latin script among Turkic peoples, but the adaptation of the Latin to Turkic phonetic structures was first proposed by Mirza Akhundzade, an Azerbaijani, and Turkey did not adopt the Latin script until 1928, four years after the Azerbaijani SSR had in 1924 (Heinze 1977: 376; Bayatly 1997).
3. Ironically, the proclamation to change to Latin script was itself written in Cyrillic script, the script in common use (Lester 1997: 26).

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