

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC ROLES OF REGIONAL LANGUAGES IN MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITIES

Baghirova Parvana Alovzat

PhD Candidate, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Azerbaijan
orcid.org/0009-0005-2353-3154

Summary

Regional languages contribute notably to the formation of societal multilingualism and function as carriers of cultural identity. They are considered as active components of local linguistic ecologies. This article examines the cultural and linguistic roles of regional languages in multilingual communities, with a focus on Azerbaijan. Taking into consideration the linguistic landscape frameworks and sociocultural approaches, this study synthesizes Azerbaijani and international scholarship in order to develop an integrated understanding of regional languages as ecological agents. The findings demonstrate that regional languages serve a key function in translanguaging practices, intergenerational transmission and the reinforcement of community identity. There exist some challenges as well, including limited institutional support, the dominance of national and global languages, and underrepresentation of regional languages in digital platforms. Furthermore, the article highlights the practical implications which play an important role in the fields of education, policy and community initiatives targeted at maintaining regional languages within multilingual communities.

Key words: sociolinguistics, societal multilingualism, regional languages, Azerbaijan, linguistic landscape, language ecology, cultural transmission.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/7403>

1. Introduction

It is well known that there are two main types of multilingualism: individual multilingualism and societal multilingualism. Societal multilingualism refers to the coexistence and functional usage of multiple languages within a community, area or country. In this regard, linguistic diversity is embedded in social interactions, institutions and other spatial environments (Li Wei, 2018). Regional languages are essential for the formation of cultural, as well as linguistic dimensions of multilingualism, because they are closely connected with ethnic, geographic and cultural communities.

In multilingual communities, regional languages coexist with national, as well as global languages. Azerbaijan can also be considered as a multilingual society, as global lingua franca, such as English and Russian are mostly spoken in the area. Some regional languages play complementary communicative and cultural roles. Yet the official language of the country is the Azerbaijani language. Despite the fact that regional languages are spoken by relatively small proportion of people, they play an important role in the reinforcement of community identity, local communication networks, and ecological balance within multilingual interaction. It can be said that the roles of regional languages extend beyond the linguistic diversity, therefore, facilitating cultural maintenance and social cohesion. In this regard, this article examines the cultural and linguistic roles of regional languages in the construction of societal multilingualism. It integrates theoretical perspectives with Azerbaijani and international research to understand

how these languages support multilingual practices, foster cultural identity, and interact with dominant languages in various domains.

Language ecology theory provides conceptual framework for understanding the ways languages interact with cultural, social, spatial and institutional settings. Originally this phenomenon was proposed by Haugen (1972). In this theory, it is highlighted that languages are not isolated systems. Their existence and sustainability rely on much broader ecological contexts. The language ecology theory plays an important role in understanding regional languages as active agents in the formation of multilingualism. It should be mentioned that the sustainability of multilingualism is not only determined by individual speaker competence, but also some interconnected factors which enable languages to survive, function and develop in all domains. The ecological approach proposes some approaches to analyze the role of regional languages in the process of strengthening of societal multilingualism and supporting sustainable multilingual communities.

2. Cultural Transmission and Identity

Regional languages serve a key function in the cultural continuity, social cohesion and intergenerational transmission. They carry not only words, but also customs and traditions, values, history of the communities. Through traditional festivals, rituals, folktales, some oral narratives, regional languages help to encode collective memory and social norms. The very collective memory and social norms bind communities together. In Azerbaijan, regional languages, such as Lezgian, Tsakhur and Khinalug foster the maintenance of distinct cultural practices which are essential for supporting the local heritage, reflecting centuries of cultural, historical, geographic and social evolution (*Rzayeva et al., 2020; Karimova, 2017*). In this article, Lezgian, Talysh and other territorially bound minority languages of Azerbaijan are referred to as regional languages, emphasizing their geographic concentration and ecological roles, although they are also minority languages in demographic and political terms. Apart from cultural practices, the regional languages are used in daily life, including family interaction, local ceremonies and community governance. For example, the elder members of families frequently use regional languages to transmit social norms and moral teachings to younger generations, fostering a sense of identity, shaping how community members perceive themselves and how they relate to other linguistic groups.

3. Functional Linguistic Roles

Within interaction domains, regional languages play an important role in the maintenance of everyday multilingualism. These domains comprise families, neighborhoods, local markets, religious spaces and some other settings. By being a part of these domains, regional languages provide a functional complementarity. In this regard, it allows multilingual communities to navigate social and communicative landscapes effectively. As an illustration, in Lezgian-speaking villages, the regional language may be the primary means of communication in homes and local facilities, while the Azerbaijani language is used for education, administration and communication with the members of other ethnic groups. It can be said that such categorization is not rigid but flexible, reflecting the ecological principle that language adapts to the specific affordances of their environment (*Hult, 2017; Li Wei, 2018*). Furthermore, the regional

languages foster the negotiation of social relationships. By doing so, they maintain solidarity within a community and define social boundaries with outsiders. They have a crucial impact on the development of collective multilingual practices, as speakers utilize multiple languages depending on the setting, communicative goals and interlocutors involved. By fulfilling diverse social functions, regional languages maintain their relevance, acting not merely as markers of heritage but as active tools for complex social and economic interactions within multilingual communities.

4. Translanguaging and Hybrid Practices

It can be said that by smoothly blending elements of regional, national and global languages, speakers in multilingual interaction often engage in translanguaging in their daily lives. This practice extends beyond simple code-switching, as it entails the creative, as well as strategic usage of multiple linguistic resources to transmit meaning, express identity, and navigate through social contexts. For the sake of clarity, we can give Azerbaijani multilingual setting as an example: in a Talysh-speaking village an interaction may combine Talysh for familial intimacy, Azerbaijani for formal or administrative references, and English or Russian for technical or educational terms. The regional languages enrich these multilingual practices with the usage of unique lexical, syntactic resources, mainly introducing culturally embedded concepts in the dominant languages. “By incorporating regional languages, translanguaging expands the collective multilingual repertoire, reinforcing community identity while promoting cognitive flexibility and linguistic creativity” (Li Wei, 2018; Hult, 2017). These hybrid practices establish a conducive environment for fostering language maintenance, and sustaining their functionality and relevance in social life. Additionally, translanguaging further develops intergenerational engagement, in turn, allows younger speakers have an access to cultural knowledge encoded in regional languages. Meanwhile, the regional languages remain competent in national and global languages. Through the medium of this dynamic, societal multilingualism is not only preserved, but actively reshaped by the interplay of linguistic resources within the communities.

5. Spatial and institutional presence

The way languages are represented in public spaces, social media, institutional communication and other settings is important for national and regional languages. In this regard, regional languages act as a major influence. Signage that schools, government offices, community centers, markets and other amenities reflects not only the languages which are being used, but also the concept of the visibility perceived by other members of the community. In multilingual Azerbaijani contexts, regional languages are confined to certain localized spaces, such as community events, cultural centers. In this way, they demonstrate their ecological role in everyday communication. However, strong institutional support appears to be limited, which constrains the broader influence of these languages in different spheres, such as administrative, public and digital spaces (Rzayeva et al., 2020; Hanaliev, 2024). The usage of regional languages will remain limited, if there is no official recognition, curricula integration, or media representation. Regional languages will experience risk being restricted to private or ceremonial domains. Then, it will be difficult for them to contribute to functional multilingualism. If regional languages are visible in public settings, they will be easy for speakers to experience

multilingual practices in these languages. It will foster cultural identity, and motivate younger generation to value and continue using regional languages in their everyday communication. The interaction between space, policy and social practice underlines the ecological principle which clearly states that the survival and vitality of regional languages rely on their close connection and integration into both physical and institutional environments. By reinforcing the existence of regional languages across multiple ecological layers, members of communities can strengthen societal multilingualism. In this way, they will ensure linguistic diversity in the community.

6. Challenges to regional languages

Despite the fact that regional languages have attained cultural and linguistic roles, they face some challenges within contemporary multilingual communities. These are as follows:

- Sociopolitical marginalization
- Dominance of national and global languages
- Digital underrepresentation

One of the challenges that regional languages encounter today is sociopolitical marginalization. The reason is that many regional languages lack formal recognition in national language policy. In addition, they have limited representation in educational systems. When regional languages are excluded from schooling, literacy development, administration, younger people are not prone to learn and use them. This will be an obstacle for intergenerational transmission. Meanwhile, as national and global languages grow rapidly, they exert strong pressure on regional languages. There is no doubt that global as well as national languages provide greater access to education, employment, social mobility. These opportunities make global and national languages attractive for everyday communication, making regional languages less attractive. As a result, regional languages are often sidelined in different domains, such as economic, public, institutional spaces, thus reducing their prestige. Another challenge, which is considered as a major one, is digital underrepresentation. As it is known, nowadays modern communication tools are widespread, it is almost impossible to imagine life without them. In the contemporary communicative settings, digital platforms are essential for language use, individual identity construction and global communication. Despite the fact that we live in a globalized world, many regional languages lack digital content, technical support and digital visibility. It affects their participation in transnational and youth-oriented communication spaces. This digital gap is a barrier for regional languages being represented in online spaces, thus limiting their ability to adapt to modern communication practices. In this respect, it is difficult for regional languages to contribute to the evolving ecology of societal multilingualism.

In Azerbaijan, linguistic diversity is acknowledged. Regional languages in this area often appear to be limited to informal and domestic domains. However, it should be noted that regional and minority languages are formally recognized within education system. Their existence surely differs by regions as well as level of instruction. According to the Ministry of Education in Azerbaijan, the main language of instruction is Azerbaijani. There is a proportion of schools which offer education in Russian as well. The Azerbaijani language is taught as an official state language. In areas with significant population of national minorities, the instruction of native languages, such as Lezgian, Talysh, Tsakhur, Udi, is offered as a part of school curriculum. The programmes for instruction of minority languages have been developed by the state, and with state support textbooks, some other teaching aids have been prepared. These

languages are usually being taught for a limited number of hours per week (*Baku International Multiculturalism Center, 2024*). In many regions, children have an access to instruction of their native language alongside the official state language. In this way, both linguistic diversity and cultural transmission are preserved. Despite this, the extent of this instruction can be limited: regional languages are usually taught only in primary or lower secondary classes, and are taught as a native language subject. They are not the primary language of instruction for all subjects. However, these conducive conditions still help native learners to maintain the regional languages and contribute to societal multilingualism in the region.

Table 1

Regional languages taught in Azerbaijani schools and their institutional coverage

Languages	Number of schools teaching language	
Lezgian	95–101 schools	Taught in I–IX grades in regions with Lezgins.
Talysh	about 251–254 schools	Mostly offered as a native language subject in primary schools.
Avar	about 19 schools	Taught mainly in primary classes.
Tsakhur	3–4 schools	Limited usage but officially included.
Udi	3 schools	Taught in selected regions.
Kurdish	1–2 schools	Rare but present.
Khinalug	1 school	Taught mainly in primary classes.

It should be noted that the numbers represent schools where each language is formally offered as a part of curriculum. They do not demonstrate full language of instruction status in the area.

Regional languages contribute significantly to the cultural and linguistic dimensions of societal multilingualism. They play an important role in the preservation of heritage, the reinforcement of cultural and social identity, the maintenance of functional multilingual repertoires. Despite the fact that there exist some challenges, they remain vital components of multilingual communities. Policy, education and digital platforms can be helpful for supporting these languages and ensuring that societal multilingualism remains dynamic and culturally grounded. Furthermore, regional languages are of great importance for promoting linguistic diversity by creating opportunities for expressing local knowledge, values and worldviews. Their usage in public institutions and digital spaces is a way for enhancing social inclusion and intergenerational transmission. In multilingual societies, regional languages act a major influence on the prevention of the dominant languages, thus, paving the way to the improvement of cultural continuity and social cohesion.

7. Conclusions

The results of the study. The analysis reflects that one of the functions of the regional languages is to act as ecological agents within multilingual communities. By doing so, they aid to sustain local linguistic diversity and maintain sustainable patterns of language use. They have a crucial impact on the construction of cultural identity and the transmission of values, knowledge, customs and traditions through generations. There is no doubt that regional languages are actively participating in multilingual practices as well as translanguaging practices. By combining regional, national and global languages, speakers foster the development of societal multilingualism. At the same time, it should be mentioned that their potential is sometimes restricted by the existence of limited institutional support and increasing dominance and demand for national and global languages. Insufficient digital presence should be included here as well. It limits the visibility and functional usage of regional languages in modern communication settings.

The relevance of the study. This study is highly relevant in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity, which are growing day by day. Meanwhile, regional languages face some challenges, such as socio-economic pressures, limited institutional support, and the preeminence of national and global languages. Thus, understanding the role of regional languages is considered essential for the maintenance of balanced multilingual ecologies and the prevention of language shift and attrition. Additionally, regional languages serve as transmitters of local knowledge and, cultural heritage, making their study crucial for strengthening cultural resilience and community cohesion. Finally, by demonstrating the ecological importance of how regional languages contribute to societal multilingualism, this study provides evidence-based insights for educational planning, language policy, and digital inclusion. In this way, they provide conducive conditions for more inclusive multilingual communities.

The novelty of the study. While previous researches have largely addressed individual multilingualism or national language use, this article introduces a novel perspective by integrating language ecology theory with regional language study in the Azerbaijani context. The study highlights the dual linguistic and cultural functions of regional languages and put them within the system of ecological agents. Furthermore, by drawing on international theoretical frameworks, this article develops a conceptual, multi-layered framework for understanding how regional languages function within communities. In this way, a more nuanced understanding of the roles of regional languages is further explained.

The research methods. This study adopts a theoretical and conceptual research design based on qualitative literature synthesis. In order to examine the linguistic and cultural roles of regional languages within societal multilingualism, this article draws on key works in sociolinguistics, language ecology, and multilingual policy studies. The comparative analysis is applied to situate the Azerbaijani context within broader ecological perspectives on multilingualism. It should be mentioned that the article develops a conceptual ecological model which give further explanation how regional languages act as major influences within different domains, such as institutional, cultural, spatial and digital spaces.

The practical implications of the study. Having greater insight into the roles of linguistic and cultural roles of regional languages yield useful information which can be taken into consideration in language policy, education, community engagement, and digital development. In order to provide conducive conditions for the institutional visibility and functional use of regional languages, inclusive language policies should recognize regional languages within public services, media platforms, more importantly education systems. The integration of

regional languages into educational programs and community-based learning initiatives can be helpful for the promotion of sustainable multilingual ecologies and the reinforcement of support to the intergenerational transmission. Additionally, digital initiatives are of great importance. The presence and availability of regional languages in modern communication spaces can further foster the development of multilingualism. Online dictionaries, learning platforms and social media content may contribute notably to this process. Active community attendance in maintaining and valuing regional languages plays a significant role in the sustenance of both cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. As a result, it ensures that societal multilingualism stays as a living and dynamic social resource.

References

1. Baku International Multiculturalism Centre. (2024). *Report on the fight against racism and discrimination in the Republic of Azerbaijan: Protection of national minorities and development of their languages and cultures*. Baku International Multiculturalism Centre. <https://www.multikulturalizm.gov.az/en/post/2850/report-on-the-fight-against-racism-and-discrimination-in-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-2024.html>
2. Hult, F. M. (2017). *Language ecology and language policy*. In O. García, N. Flores, & M. Spotti (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Society* (pp. 436–456). Oxford University Press.
3. Karimova, V. (2017). *Multilingualism in Azerbaijan: Preferred foreign languages in universities and its socioeconomic aspects*. *International Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 2(4), 120–125.
4. Li Wei. (2018). *Translanguaging as a practical theory of language*. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 9–30.
5. Liddicoat, A. J., & Taylor-Leech, K. (2020). *Multilingual education and language ecology*. *Multilingual Matters*.
6. Rzayeva, N., Tagiyev, I., & Mammadov, A. (2020). *Language choice in Azerbaijani context: A sociolinguistic perspective*. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 77–88.
7. Hanaliev, E. A. (2024). *Languages of small-numbered peoples living in Azerbaijan and preservation of their languages*. *Path of Science*, 5001–5006.