

The Sociolinguistic Situation of the Budukh in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of sociolinguistic research conducted in August 2000 and June 2001 among the Budukh people in northeastern Azerbaijan. The goals of the research were to investigate patterns of language use, bilingualism, and language attitudes with regard to the Budukh and Azerbaijani languages in the Budukh community. Of particular interest are the effects of out-migration from the home area that have resulted in a language shift from Budukh to Azerbaijani. Interviews, observations, and questionnaires were employed.*

1. Background

The Budukh language belongs to the Lezgian subgroup of the Dagestani group of North Caucasian languages. It is spoken primarily in the villages of Buduq, Dəli Gaya, and Güney Buduq in Quba district and in Yergüç in Xaçmaz¹ district of Azerbaijan. Individual families may be found living elsewhere in the Quba, Xaçmaz, İsmayilli, and other districts, as well as a number of towns in the Russian Federation. Buduqlu-Piriyeu (1994) lists a total of fifteen locations where Budukhs live, including those already mentioned. In their own language, Budukhs refer to themselves as *Budad* (Buduqlu-Piriyeu 1994).

Population figures for the Budukh community vary widely from census to census. These fluctuations may be due to actual shifts in population, to seasonal migration, and to the policies and classification methods used in each census. The Budukh population was reported to be 3,420 in the 1886 census, and 2,000 in the 1926 census. Budukhs were not counted as a separate ethnic group in the 1959 census, but according to the 1968 census there are only about 1,000 Budukh people. This is the last census in which Budukhs were counted as a separate ethnic group (Qardanova 1962).

Buduqlu-Piriyeu (1994) reports that in 1991 there were 527 residents (98 households) in Buduq village, and 780 (154 households) in the administrative group which includes Buduq, Pirustu, and QabQazma. However, because the living conditions in Buduq village worsened after WWII, a large number of families moved to the plains. Although it is impossible to give an exact figure, Buduqlu-Piriyeu (1994) estimates there could be as many as 15,000 Budukhs in the entire country.

Budukh is closely related to the Kryz language. Budukh and Kryz are frequently grouped together with Khinalug as the Şahdağ languages. This is, however, more of a geographic classification than a linguistic classification. Within Budukh, there are systematic differences between the varieties spoken in Buduq village and Yergüç village. Some of these differences are noted in *Jazyki Narodov SSSR* (1966–1968).

According to Qübatov (1986), with the exception of a few young people who spoke Azerbaijani, almost everyone in the core Budukh community knew and used the vernacular. At the same time, Qübatov noted that most of those who had moved away

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¹ While we are using the generally accepted spelling of Budukh for the name of the language, we are using the current Latin-based Azerbaijani orthography and spelling for place names and personal names. Thus, Budukh is the name of the language and people group, but Buduq is the name of the village.

from Buduq village were switching to use of Azerbaijani. Many of the young people and some of the older people in these other locations did not know Budukh. Buduqlu-Piriyev (1994) claims that only about 30–35% of the total Budukh population (that is, roughly 5,000 people) can speak Budukh well. He also confirms the trend of the loss of this language to Azerbaijani among plains Budukhs.

Widespread bilingualism in Azerbaijani is also consistently reported, even among those who still speak Budukh. Everyone in Buduq village, except for some of the elderly women, are said to speak Azerbaijani fluently. Alekseev (1994) also reports good command of Russian among adults from Buduq.

Budukh was never a literary language and did not have official status during the Soviet era. Azerbaijani has generally been used for literacy and education.

A number of researchers have written on the Budukh language, among them the Soviet linguists Desheriyev (1966–1968), İsaev (1978), Xidirov (1971), Qübatov (1986, 1987), and Buduqlu-Piriyev (1994). Alekseev (1994) has written a grammar sketch of Budukh in English.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the results of sociolinguistic research among the Budukh community in Azerbaijan. The main goals of this research were threefold.

- a. To identify the locations where Budukhs currently live and the migration trends that have led to these settlement patterns.
- b. To verify the status of the vernacular, in particular to discover if the trend towards Azerbaijanization is continuing and what the implications are for the future of the Budukh language. This involved investigating patterns of language use.
- c. To identify the levels of Azerbaijani proficiency among Budukhs.

2. Methodology

The primary method of investigation involved direct interviews with various members of the general Budukh community and with experts on Budukh language, culture, and history. In August of 2000, a team of researchers visited the plains village of Yərgüç and interviewed the representative of the executive authority of the village. In June 2001, a visit was made to Buduq village as personal guests of Eldar Abdulayev, the Vice-President of the Budukh Society. We were able to conduct interviews with the mayor, the school director, and other members of the community (both men and women) in the village. From May through December 2001, numerous interviews were conducted, mainly in Baku, with Budukhs and experts on Budukh history, language, and culture. Among these were Rafiq Abdulayev and Eldar Abdulayev, President and Vice-President of the Budukh Society, and Buduqlu-Piriyev, author and historian.

The primary purposes of the interviews with residents of the Budukh villages were to investigate individual and community-wide patterns of language use, language proficiencies in Budukh and Azerbaijani, and the location of Budukh communities. In interviews with experts (who are also ethnically Budukh) we also asked additional questions about migration patterns and the history of Budukh settlements.

3. Results

3.1 Location of Ethnic Budukhs

Table 1 lists the core locations of ethnic Budukh, along with population figures (when available). This list has been compiled from bibliographical materials, interviews with experts on the Budukh people group, and with members of the Budukh community.

Table 1: Core Budukh Locations

Location	Population	Administrative district
Buduq	43 homes	Quba
Pirüstü	17 homes	Quba
Qab Qazma	10 homes	Quba
Dəli-Qaya	119 people	Quba
Bağbanlı	1,348 people	Quba
Yalavanc	N/A	Quba
Yergüç	2,700–2,800	Xaçmaz
Suxtəkələ	250 people	Xaçmaz

Table 2 lists other locations where Budukhs live mixed with other ethnic groups.

Table 2: Ethnically Mixed Locations

Location	Population	Administrative district	Other ethnicities represented
Barlı	1,464 people	Quba	N/A
Güney-Buduq	N/A	Quba	Azeri
Qonaqkənd	2,500	Quba	Tat
Zərdabı	3,535	Quba	N/A
Xudat	N/A	Xaçmaz	Lezgi, Azeri, Russian
Borispol	N/A	Xaçmaz	N/A
HacƏlibey and Peyəmka	1,500–1,700	Xaçmaz	Azeri, Lezgi
Sərkərli	420	Xaçmaz	Russian, Hapit, Əlik
Armudpadar	1,700+	Xaçmaz	Tat, Cek, Lezgi, Azeri
Ağyazı-Buduq	1,700–1,800	Xaçmaz	Lezgi
Padar	~1000	Xaçmaz	Azeri-speaking Iranians
Arzu	1,500–1,600	Xaçmaz	Azeri
Yalamı	~5,000	Xaçmaz	Lezgi
Vladimirovka	2,688	Xaçmaz	Azeri
Timiryazev qəsəbəsi	1,147	Xaçmaz	Azeri, Tat

In some of these locations there are only a few Budukh people. For example, out of the 2,500 people in Qonaqkənd, only about 15–20 are ethnic Budukh.

3.2 Village Descriptions

3.2.1 *Buduq and surrounding villages*

Buduq village is located on the southeastern slope of Mt. Çərəkə, approximately 90 kilometers from Quba town. The best way to reach Buduq is by taking the Quba-Qonaqkənd road, and from there to travel northwest through Söhüb. The roads are difficult in any weather and are impassible in winter, so travel should not be attempted without a four-wheel drive vehicle and a guide.

The three villages in the Buduq administrative group of villages—Buduq, Pirüstü and Qab Qazm—are all Budukh-speaking villages. As indicated in table 1, there are forty-three homes in Buduq, seventeen in Pirüstü, and ten in Qab Qazma. There are an estimated thirty pensioners in Buduq village. According to the mayor, Buduq village is shrinking. Ten years ago there were approximately seventy families in the village. This sharp decrease in population is blamed on the poor condition of the road and the difficult economic situation. In recent years many families have left, mainly for Quba or Baku because of work or their children's education. In 2000 alone, five to seven families left.

One of the main forms of subsistence is animal husbandry. During the Soviet period, residents of Buduq were part of a collective farm which also included the residents from the villages of Xınalıq, Hapıt, Cək, Əlik, Qrız, and Qrız Dəhnə. Although the collective has broken up since the fall of the Soviet Union, Buduq herders often share mountain pastures with those from the latter five villages.

Buduq village is mostly made up of houses made of clay and straw that have been whitewashed. Because of this the village was called “The White City.”

Buduq village has a school which includes grades 1 through 9, along with a preparatory class. Azerbaijani is the language of instruction, as it was during the Soviet period. There are eight teachers and 170 students at the school, with class size ranging from eight to sixteen. All of the nine graduates from the 2000–01 school year have gone elsewhere to continue studying, and their families moved with them.

There used to be a hospital, but the doctor left three years ago. Currently, then, there is no hospital or clinic in the village.

3.2.2 Yergüç and surrounding villages

Yergüç is a plains village located five kilometers west of Xaçmaz on the Quba-Xaçmaz road. There are ten villages in the administrative group, with a total of 9,800 people (approximately 3,000 families). Between 2,700 and 2,800 of these live in Yergüç, which is the administrative center of these villages. The population has seen a slight increase of from 600 to 800 over the past ten years. According to the mayor, this increase is due to migration from the mountains of people looking for land and work (especially from Suxtəkələ). At present no one is leaving Yergüç.

Two of the ten villages in the administrative group, Yergüç and Suxtəkələ, have a majority of Budukhs, and six more have a number of Budukh families living in them. According to the mayor, the ethnic composition of the population has remained constant over the last ten years, though the number of Budukhs has increased by about 1%.

The main industries are agriculture and animal husbandry. During the Soviet period there were collective farms operating, but since independence the land belonging to these farms has been divided up. The soil continues to yield a wide variety of crops. For those products which are unavailable in Yergüç, people go to Xaçmaz, or sometimes vendors come from Xaçmaz to Yergüç.

Each village has a middle school going through grade 11, and in all of these Azerbaijani is the only language of instruction. As in the case of Buduq village, Azerbaijani was also the language of instruction during the Soviet period. The school in Yergüç has 1,200 students. About 90% of adults in Yergüç itself have finished middle school.

The only kindergarten in the administrative group that is currently in operation is in Peyəmka. In that kindergarten, Azerbaijani is the language of instruction. There used to be kindergartens in Yergüç and Sərkərli, but neither are operating at present.

The post offices in Yergüç and in Peyəmka serve the entire administrative group of villages.

3.3 Language Proficiency and Language Use Patterns

3.3.1 Buduq village

Interviews with various people in Buduq indicated that both Azerbaijani and Budukh are used in the life of the village. The families visited used both languages in the home, and said that was the case with the majority of families in the village. One resident estimated that about ten to fifteen of the forty-three families use only Budukh in the home and only a few use only Azerbaijani in the home. One group of women indicated that the majority of children can speak both Budukh and Azerbaijani.

All adult residents of the village are said to speak Azerbaijani well with the exception of a few very old women. One group of women reported that children speak Azerbaijani well and use it more often than children did in the past. The school director, however, reported that about 40% of students in Buduq village do not understand or use Azerbaijani before they come to school.

Russian language proficiency among women of all ages is reported to be low at best in Buduq village.

3.3.2 Plains villages

According to residents of Buduq village, the families that have moved down to the plains mainly use Azerbaijani. While the adults in these families can speak Budukh, and do when visiting Buduq village, their children use only Azerbaijani. According to Vaqif Buduqlu-Piriyev (personal communication), some of these children may understand Budukh if they migrated from the mountains recently, but in general they do not even understand Budukh.

In interviews with residents in the plains village of Yergüç, it was reported that the main languages of communication are Azerbaijani and, to a lesser extent, Russian. Adults over 30 years of age know how to speak Budukh well, and may speak it sometimes with one another, but Azerbaijani is the main language of daily interactions. The mayor reported that there are some homes in which adults speak Budukh with one another. Young people and children, however, use Azerbaijani for interpersonal communication and are not learning Budukh. The mayor attributed young people's ignorance of Budukh to the lack of a written grammar and an official alphabet.

According to Vaqif Buduqlu-Piriyev (personal communication), residents in Bağbanlı used Budukh as their main language of interpersonal communication in the 1940s. Residents now, however, are using Azerbaijani as their primary language of interaction. Those older than 25 or 30 can speak Budukh, but those younger cannot. He also reports that this is also the case in villages such as Suxtəkələ. On the other hand, he says that Budukh is still the main language of communication only in the villages of Buduq and Dəli Qaya.

3.3.3 Towns

Although information about Budukhs living in the towns is limited, it was reported in a number of interviews that the majority of Budukhs in Xaçmaz, Quba, and Baku speak Azerbaijani as their first language. A few adults may speak the vernacular within the family, and a few others may understand the language (especially in Quba). Most Budukhs living in the towns, however, do not speak Budukh well and have little, if any, regular contact with the language. The President of the Budukh Society also reported that the vast majority of Budukhs receive their schooling in Azerbaijani rather than in Russian.

3.4 Migration and Marriage Patterns

Interviews in Buduq village indicated a high degree of "traffic" between the Budukh villages of the plains and those in the Buduq administrative group of villages. As was noted in sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2., a number of families have moved from the mountains to the plains mainly because of education or work considerations. The families interviewed in Buduq village confirmed that most of the grown children have moved down to the plains. Furthermore, many of the remaining families also want to move out of the mountain villages, but may lack the resources or the opportunity to do so. The residents of Buduq village listed Yalavanc, Yalamı, Yergüç, and Quba town as places to which mountain Budukhs have moved.

According to Buduqlu-Piriyev (personal communication), some seasonal migration occurs from the summer pastures in the mountains to the winter pastures in the plains. The plains villages where the majority of Budukhs currently live have since their beginnings been the winter settlements of Budukhs. Since the 1940s, however, there has been a drastic migration from the mountains to plains.

While most movement has been from the mountain villages to the plains villages, it must also be noted that there is some movement in the opposite direction. For example, several brides from other ethnically Budukh plains villages have married into Buduq village. In addition, children of relatives in the plains villages sometimes come to Buduq village for an extended period of time.

3.5 Vernacular Materials

The Budukh Society in Baku publishes the newspaper *Babadağ*, which serves the Budukhs in Azerbaijan. The articles are written in Azerbaijani since a majority of Budukhs speak Azerbaijani as their first language. No official alphabet has been created, and no written materials have been developed in the Budukh language. To the best of our knowledge, no radio or television programs have been broadcast in Budukh. None of the Budukh experts or village residents knew of any Budukh language classes in the schools.

4. Discussion

The information gathered regarding the sociolinguistic situation among the Budukh people group indicates that it has low vitality. The majority of ethnic Budukhs live outside the core mountain area, and there is strong evidence to suggest that the migration of those in the mountains to the plains will continue unless the economic situation in the mountain region dramatically improves. The population of Buduq village has decreased from ninety-eight households in 1991 to forty-three in 2001, with five to seven of those leaving in 2000 alone. This appears to be a continuation of the large migration seen after WWII, and the residents believe such a migration will continue. If residents from the mountain villages continue leaving at this rate, the village could be empty in a decade.

In addition, our research indicates that both Budukh and Azerbaijani are used in the domain of the home even in the core village of Buduq. While only a small percentage of families are reported to speak only Azerbaijani within the family, at least half are said to use both languages. This could indicate a gradual shift from Budukh to Azerbaijani, though a definitive statement cannot be made since a significant percentage of the children do learn to speak Budukh. The claim that 40% of children do not understand or use Azerbaijani upon entering school indicates Budukh is still the primary language in a significant number of homes, although it is not known how many of these children are from Budukh and how many are from one of the other two villages in the administrative group of villages.

Furthermore, the reported language-use patterns among the plains Budukhs indicate a loss of the vernacular among the younger generation there. It is clear that for Budukhs who move down to the plains, Budukh is no longer an important language of daily interaction. Instead, Azerbaijani has become the main language of interpersonal communication and family life. Given this, and given the migration patterns of the people group as a whole, it does not seem likely that the language will survive into the foreseeable future.

This situation raises the question as to why there has been such a rapid decline in the use of Budukh, especially given that even in the plains communities there are large settlements of Budukhs. Buduqlu-Piriyeu (personal communication) suggests that the ethnic mix of Xaçmaz, the plains district, has given rise to the importance of a common language of daily interaction. As shown in table 2, a number of villages in which Budukhs live are also home to Azerbaijani, Tat, Lezgi, Hapıt, Cək, Qrız, and Əlık peoples. And even villages such as Yergüç, which are majority Budukh, are close to these ethnically mixed villages. Because Azerbaijani is the main second language of Budukhs, it is natural that this language would take on additional importance in communicating with their neighbors. This has extended itself to the home domain, so that now the main language of Budukh children is Azerbaijani. In short, the Budukhs in the plains, which represent the majority of the Budukh population, are in the process of shifting from Budukh to Azerbaijani.

Marriage patterns may also play a role in the loss of Budukh within the mountain population. As noted in section 3.4, a number of wives in Buduq village are from one of

the plains villages. These wives from the plains are likely to hear more Budukh used in the mountain community. At the same time, however, these women tend to speak Azerbaijani as their first language with their children. This means their influence could accelerate the loss of the vernacular in the mountain community itself.

The apparent ease with which Budukhs have left the mountain villages, despite their isolation, can be explained by their history. Since before WWII, Budukhs have had a large number of winter pastures in the plains. Thus, when economically difficult times came they already had places where they could move. While one might think that such a large number of people speaking Budukh would mean the community would continue to use the vernacular, it appears that since they live among other ethnic groups there is strong motivation to use Azerbaijani in an increasing number of domains.

This brings us to another interesting point. There are a number of other ethnic groups in Azerbaijan which are not seeing the loss of the vernacular, despite living among other ethnicities. In the case of Budukhs, however, it appears that their identity as Budukhs is tied less to their language and more to their history. A number of Budukhs interviewed readily identified themselves as Budukhs, even though they do not speak the vernacular as their first language.

Also, Budukh did not have official status during the Soviet period and because of this did not receive government support for development of written materials. The current policy of the Azerbaijani Republic encourages the development of minority languages, but no efforts have been made to develop an official alphabet or publish materials in the vernacular. Similarly, there are no reports of efforts to institute classes in Budukh anywhere in the country. There are also no radio programs in Budukh, although the President of the Budukh Society thought such programs might be well received in Xaçmaz and Quba districts. Perhaps the lack of effort among the Budukh community to develop and encourage the study of the Budukh language in the schools could be a sign that, generally speaking, Budukhs do not consider proficiency in the vernacular to be an integral part of Budukh ethnic identity.

5. Conclusion

Given the current migration patterns among the Budukh, as well as the language use patterns in the majority of Budukh communities, it appears that the viability of the Budukh language is low. While Budukh is still spoken in the mountain villages, even there a number of individuals use Azerbaijani in the domain of the home. In the plains communities, where a majority of Budukhs live, Azerbaijani is already the main language of communication; children and young adults are not learning Budukh. In the towns, some Budukh adults may understand the vernacular, but most do not speak the language well.

While a study of identity issues and language attitudes was not a focus of this project, such research may shed light on why Budukhs are losing their language while continuing to identify themselves as Budukh.

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