

# Save the language, save the nation's children: The case of Azeri in Iran



elima.sub.if

Karim Sadeghi, Urmia University, Iran

International Conference on Language, Education and MDGs

Bangkok, 10 November 2010

# Outline of the speech

Iran: Some background

Iran's Languages  
&  
Dialects

Azeri Language

The Problem

Solution?!



# IRAN: some background

---

## ■ Official name

- 'Persia' until 1935
- 'Iran' between 1935 and 1959
- 'Iran' and 'Persia' after 1959
- 'Islamic Republic of Iran' after 1979

## ■ Population

- 1956 census: about 19,000,000
  - 2006 census: 70,465,782
  - 2010 estimate: 75,000,000 + (+ 5 million Iranians living abroad)
  - Two thirds of population under 25
  - 2050 estimate: 105,000,000 (Census Bureau, Government of the USA)
-

# IRAN: some background

---

- Size
    - 18<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world
    - 1,648,195 square kilometers
    - The size of the UK, France, Spain and Germany combined
    - 31 provinces
  - Capital city: Tehran with 11% of total population
  - Major cities: Mashhad, Isfahan, Tabriz
  - Official language: Persian or Farsi
  - Literacy rate : 83% (more girls attend the university than boys)
-

# IRAN: some background

---

- System of education
    - Voluntary Pre-school education
    - Compulsory primary education
    - Middle school education
    - Secondary school education
    - Pre-University education
    - Higher education of various sorts
    - Adult education
    - Mono-lingual education
    - Foreign language education
-

# IRAN: some background

---

- Policy on language education

*Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution:*

Official language [of Iran] ... is Persian ... [and] ... and the use of regional and tribal language in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their **literature** in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.

---

# Languages & Dialects (Data from Ethnologue)

- Some 56 languages and dialects
- Persian (58 – 65% as L1 speakers; all literates as L2)
- Azeri/ Azerbaijani (16 – 34%)
- Kurdish (9%)
- Arabic (1%)
- Luri
- Baluchi
- Gilaki
- Talyshi
- Mazanderani .....
- Senaya (with only 60 speakers) + Koroshi (180)

# The Azeri Language

- **Azari vs. Azeri** (also called Azerbaijani or Torki, a Turkic language, closely related to Turkish, Qashqai and Turkmen languages)
- **Number of dialects:** 24; South Azeri is the one spoken in Iran
- **Azeri as an official language** (used by Muzaffar al-Din Shah for 50 years during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Tabriz as the second capital of Iran)
- **Number of speakers:** between 20 and 30 million (Iran: 12 to 22 million; abroad, in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Turkmenistan)
- **Regions spoken in Iran:** Provinces of East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardebil, Zanjan, Hamedan, Fars, Qazvin, Karaj, Tehran, Markazi, Guilan



# The problem

---

- Resentment came with Pahlavi policies that suppressed the use of Azeri in local government, schools and the press
  - Islamic government's focus on religion as the main unifying factor
  - No schooling for Azeri (and languages other than Persian)
  - High rate of drop-outs and grade repetitions
  - Identity threat
-

# The problem

---

- Low social status
- Unequal competition esp. for employment
- Negative attitudes towards Azeri and the dominant language
- Increasingly more Azeri children have to learn Persian as L1
- Language in threat of extinction? (before revolution: 24% Azeri speakers; now 16% - CIA World Fact book; Every 2 weeks a language is becoming extinct, Evans, 2010)

# Solution?!

---

- Perish?
  - Survive?
  - Putting a case for Azeri's survival
    - political rather than academic challenge
    - Languages are people's identities; so learning one's own L1 at school will contribute to national unity as well as self identity
    - Allowing learning and using L1 will also help the government to stop separatist movements.
-

# Solution?!

---

- Children's natural right to get educated in their L1  
(UN Convention on the Rights of Children, 1989, Article 30)
- Almost one third of the country's child population is adversely affected by depriving them of getting literacy in L1; offering them opportunities to get educated in L1 will benefit at least one in 3 kids. This will also enhance positive attitudes towards self, the government and other languages.
- Bilingual/Multilingual L1-based education  
The acquisition of other languages does not have to be at the expense of exclusion of one's own. (Professor Suzanne Romaine, Keynote speech, 9 November, 2010)

- 
- Further suggestions/solutions?



If you are planning for a day, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a life-time, educate people.



**Thanks so much for the attention and  
patience ...**

**Of one essence is the human race  
thus has Creation put the base  
One limb impacted is sufficient  
for all others to feel the mace**

**Sa'adi, Iranian Poet (1184-1283)**