

Azeri relative clauses with an influence from Persian

Iranian Azeri, as a spoken language predominantly in the northwestern part of Iran, is the most important non-Persian language in that country in terms of the number of speakers (approximately 15–20 million speakers). Linguistically, Azeri is classified as a Turkic language, and in genetic terms is closely related to Turkish (see Comrie 1989). Unlike other Turkic languages, Azeri as spoken in Iran is strongly influenced by Persian, an Indo-Iranian language (see Dehghani 2000, Kırıl 2001 and Lee 2008). The primary reason for this influence is that Persian and Azeri have been in close linguistic and cultural contact for at least a millennium. This paper asks: what evidence is there for penetration of Persian into the syntax of Azeri? What properties of Azeri are Turkic and what properties are due to contact with Persian?

I answer this question by finding features in which Turkish and Persian differ and then investigating how Azeri, my native language, compares with respect to those features. For example, the word order in all three languages generally follows Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) order. According to Comrie (1989), if a language has basic SOV order, it is likely to have other head-final properties: postpositions, genitive-head noun order, adjective-head noun order, and relative clause-head noun order. As seen in summary in Table 1, Turkish is a consistently head-final language (Kornfilt 1997). On the other hand, Persian, as noted by Comrie (1989), although it is verb final, it canonically exhibits head-initial order (Mahootian 1997). Although, Azeri mostly behaves as a head-final language like Turkish, but show some head-initial features as well which are borrowed from Persian. The structure focused in this paper is the Azeri relative clauses which show more variety, allowing native pre-nominal relative clause (1, 2) with two different relativized suffixes and borrowed post-nominal relative clause (3) constructions. Azeri also allows for the two types of relative clauses to modify the same head noun, resulting in a cross-linguistic rare structure of RC-head-RC (4). Lee (2008) notes that pre-nominal relative RCs seem to be more frequent than post-nominal RCs in Azeri in his texts, but offered no explanation for this distribution.

In my research, by comparing the data from Azeri monolingual speakers to the data from Azeri-Persian bilingual speakers, I have found that there is certain socio-cultural factors—age and education—that predict post-nominal versus pre-nominal relative clause structures in Azeri. Although all speakers accept and use both types of relative clauses, but the results show that the factors of age and education has a decisive role in choice of variants. The finding reveals that the younger and educated speakers tend to use more post-nominal borrowed RCs— 82% post-nominal borrowed RCs versus 18% pre-nominal native RCs—whereas the older speakers prefer more pre-nominal native Turkic relative clause—68% pre-nominal native RCs versus 32% post-nominal borrowed RCs.

To sum up, Azeri, as spoken in Iran, has maintained head-final typological properties, despite a millennium of intense contact with Persian. However, Azeri, especially as spoken by young, educated and bilingual speakers, has adopted some head-initial structures under the influence from Persian. Myers-Scotton (1993) observes when two linguistically unrelated languages share a high degree of bilingualism in a geographic location it is possible that an element of the grammar of the dominant language is adopted by another language. We see this is the case with Azeri constituent order.

Table1. Word order in three languages

	Turkish	Azeri	Persian
Clause	SOV	SOV	SOV
Adposition	NP P	NP P / P NP	P NP
Possession	POSS N	POSS N	N POSS
Adjective	ADJ N	ADJ N	N ADJ
relative clause	RC N	RC N/ N RC	N RC

- (1) Azr. [kitab oxuy-an] **kişi**
 [book read-REL] man
 ‘the man who reads the book’
- (2) Azr. [kişi-nin oxu-duğ-u] **kitab**
 man-GEN read-REL-POSS.3SG book
 ‘the book that the man reads’
- (3) Azr. o **kişi** [ki get-dı] baba-m-dir
 that man [COMP go-PST.3SG] father-POSS.1SG-PST.3SG
 ‘The man who went is my father.’
- (4) Azr. [o ged-an] **qız** [ki sän gör-dün]
 that go-REL] girl [COMP you see-PST.2SG]
 döktür-dür
 doctor-PST.3SG
 ‘The girl who came, whom you saw, is a doctor.’

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