Azeri constituent order: Persian influence on a Turkic language

Iranian Azeri, spoken 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, belonging to the southwestern group of Altaic language family, and in genetic terms is closely related to Turkish (see Comrie 1989). Azeri shares the basic typological features of the Turkic languages: agglutinating morphology with extensive suffixation, vowel harmony, lack of grammatical gender, and basic SOV word order in the simple clause. Unlike other Turkic languages, Azeri as spoken in Iran is strongly influenced by Persian, an Indo-Iranian language (see Dehghani 2000, Kiral 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 two millennia. This paper asks: what evidence is there for penetration of Persian into the syntax of Azeri?

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 the summary in Table 1, Turkish is a consistently head-final language (Kornfilt 1997). On the other hand, Persian, as noted by Comrie (1989), exhibits a combination of OV and VO typology: although it is verb final, it canonically exhibits head-initial order in NPs and PPs. In terms of adpositions, Azeri mostly behaves as a head-final language and uses post-positions, such as için “for”, “reason, purpose” in (1). Although postpositions are the norm in Azeri, there is one preposition, baraye “for” (borrowed from Persian), used to express benefactives (2). Turning to word order inside the NP, we see that both genitives and adjectives precede the head noun in Azeri, as expected in a head-final language. However, relative clauses show more variety, allowing both head-final (3, 4) with two different relativized suffixes and head-initial (5) 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 (6). Lee (2008) notes that head-final relative RCs seem to be more frequent than head-initial RCs in Azeri in his texts, but offered no explanation for this distribution.

In my research, by comparing the degree of penetration of the Persian-influenced structures in monolingual speech to the data from bilingual Azeri-Persian speakers, I have found that there are certain linguistic and social factors that predict head-initial versus head-final structures in Azeri. First, a heavy constituent will follow the head noun. Thus, Azeri conforms to Dryer (1992)’s “Branching Direction Theory”: a right branching RC constituent tends to be placed after the head noun. A second linguistic factor is NP type: pronouns tend to appear in head-final constructions while definite NPs favor head-initial constructions. In addition, some socio-cultural factors are involved: younger, educated speakers tend to use head-initial RCs more frequently than older speakers, who prefer native-Turkic word order.

To sum up, Azeri, as spoken in Iran, has maintained head-final typological properties, despite two millennia of intense contact with Persian. However, Azeri, especially as spoken by young, educated, bilingual speakers, has adopted some head-initial structures under influence from Persian. Myers-Scotton (1993) observes that, 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 one dominant language is adopted by another language. We see this is the case with Azeri constituent order.
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Table 1. Word order in three languages

(1) azr. giz-im      için
daughter-Poss.1sg     for
‘for my daughter’

(2) azr. baraye   giz-im
for          daughter-Poss.1sg
‘for my daughter’

(3) azr. [kitab-i oxay-an]  kisi
book-Acc     read-Rel  man
‘the man who reads the book’

(4) azr. [kisi-nın oxu-duğ-u]  kitab
man-Gen     read-Rel-3sg  book
‘the book that the man reads’

(5) azr. o kisi [ki get-di]  baba-m-di
that      man     that(Rel)   go-past.3sg  father-Poss.1sg-past.3sg
‘The man, who went, is my father.’

(6) azr. [o ged-an]  giz [ki san gör-dü-n]  döktür-di
that    go-Rel   girl that(Rel)  you see-past.2sg   doctor-past.3sg
‘The girl who came, whom you saw, is a doctor.’

References