

Personal Names in Azerbaijan: A Quantitative Analysis

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This study uses a sample of over 1500 personal names to analyze gender roles and attitudes in Azerbaijan. Categories analyzed include names: 1) from natural phenomena, 2) from outside the Turkish/Middle Eastern cultural milieu, 3) denoting physical beauty, 4) reflecting parental aspirations for the child, 5) showing desirable character traits, 6) with religious significance, and 7) expressing the parents' joy at the child's birth or desire to have the child. Male names reflect their culturally approved roles in public leadership and religion, while female names imply physical attractiveness and exoticism. Moreover, a few women have pejorative names showing parental desire for male children.

Introduction

In most western cultures names do not have any 'meaning' in normal usage, or appear in the lexicon of the language, but rather function as shorthand for an individual's distinguishing characteristics. Thus, an individual may be aware of the etymology of his or her own name, but most other people are not aware of it, and that meaning is not readily accessible in normal interaction. In many other cultures of the world, however, names carry lexical meaning as well as functioning to identify and to designate a particular individual. The Azerbaijani culture is one of these: for many Azerbaijani personal names, there is a corresponding cognate word in the lexicon of the language. In normal conversation the name is used in the same way as an English name (i.e., primarily referentially), however the meaning of the cognate word is also readily available (Harrison 1999) and can be used creatively. For example, in 2002 I attended a New Year's party in Ganja, Azerbaijan where guests were invited to write 'anonymous' notes to one

another. At the end of the party, some of these notes were read out loud to the whole group. A young lady wrote to a young man: “*Etibar*¹ is your name, but you are not *etibarlı* [Etibarlıw] ‘trustworthy’.” The name’s lexical meaning made the joke possible. The meanings of such names are very important to the formation of identity, to self-image, and as indicators of cultural values. In his analysis of names in Tuva (a Turkic language area in Siberia) Harrison says:

We adopt the premise that naming practices are a type of minor, everyday linguistic behavior that may reflect the interaction of larger forces in the socio-cultural milieu. Such forces internal to a culture might include the unique aesthetic values, taboos, protocols, cultural practices and ethnic identity of a people (1999:69).

In this paper, Azerbaijani names (with and without lexical meaning) are examined to assess the ways in which they reflect and/or reify cultural gender roles and expectations. To this end, seven categories of names are analyzed: those showing the greatest differentiation between the genders. The subject of pejorative naming is also touched upon.

Background

The nation of Azerbaijan is located in the Trans-Caucases region. Situated on the western coast of the Caspian Sea, it is bordered by Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Iran. According to recent government statistics (Veliyev 2002), it has a population of just over 8 million, with 1.8 million living in the capital city, Baku. Around 300,000 people live in the second largest city, Ganja. Of the nation’s population, 90.6% claim Azerbaijani ethnicity (*millət* [millæt] ‘nationality’).

Located in a region where empires have collided throughout history, numerous cultures have influenced Azerbaijan. In the 6th century BC it was invaded by Cyrus the Great, followed by Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC. The Romans visited the



Figure 1: Map of the Republic of Azerbaijan

area in the 1st century BC, leaving what may be the easternmost Roman inscription near Baku, the capital city. Turks began migrating to the area around the time of Christ, and the area was fully Turkicized by the time modern history was recorded. With the arrival of Arab Muslims in the 7th century, Islam became the dominant religion. As a result, the Azerbaijani language, while closely related to modern Turkish, has lexical borrowings from several languages. This lexical diversity is reflected in the naming system, where indigenous Turkic names occur along with names from Persian, Arabic, Russian, and western European languages, producing a complex system of lexical meaning, religious orientation, and cultural implication.

Methodology

To better understand the Azerbaijani naming system, this study examines names collected as part of an unrelated sociolinguistic survey dealing with language choice behavior conducted in the spring of 2003. A total of 1900 surveys were collected, of which 1528 met the criteria for the present analysis: Azerbaijani ethnicity, and (legible) name given. Of these 1528 surveys, 1200 were collected from the Ganja area (including the village of Khanlar), 289 from Baku, and 39 from elsewhere in Azerbaijan. 570 of the subjects are male and 958 female. Since my primary residence during this time was Ganja the sample is skewed toward this semi-rural milieu. As well, a majority of the participants were university students, so 60 % of the subjects range in age between 18 and 25.

The initial stage of analysis was to assign lexical meanings and otherwise categorize the names. Since numerous languages have influenced Azerbaijani, defining what is and is not an Azerbaijani word can be problematic. For the purposes of this study, if a name or a significant part of it occurs in either *The Azerbaijani-English Dictionary* (Musayev 1998) or *The Explanatory Dictionary of the Azerbaijani Language* (Akhoundov 2000) it is deemed to have lexical meaning. For example, the female name *Aytən* [aytæn] has two parts: *ay* ‘moon’ and *tən* [tæn] ‘equal’. Even though *tən* is from Persian, it is in one of the dictionaries and is interpreted as being an Azerbaijani word. Using this method, 56% of the subjects in this study have names with lexical meaning. This is significantly less than the 75% found by Harrison in Tuva (1999).

As well, a majority of the female names are marked for gender: 62.4% of the female names carry the ending *-a/-ə* ([a] or [æ] depending on the preceding vowel), while only 0.5% of the male names do. According to Garibova and Blair (Garibova 1998, Garibova and Blair 1996 and 1999) this gender marking has entered Azerbaijani from the Russian and Iranian naming systems. Azerbaijani currently has numerous male/female name pairs such as: *Ali* and *Alia* (from Ali the 4th Muslim caliph); and *Kamal* and *Kamala* (from *kamal* ‘perfection’). However, the distribution of

these names is far from equal. In the sample for this study there are 15 *Alis* to 1 *Alia*, and 1 *Kamal* to 13 *Kamalas*. This type of unequal distribution obtains in almost every name category. Since the majority of names are easily defined lexically or otherwise categorized, and male and female names are quite distinct, the Azerbaijani naming system is ideally suited for “the construction of ethnic and cultural identities” (Harrison 1999:78) and the reinforcement of culturally accepted gender roles and expectations (Farwaneh 2005).

In sorting and categorizing of the names in the sample, seven categories revealed themselves by showing the greatest variance from the values expected if there were no gender differentiation: 1) names from natural phenomena - *Nature*; 2) names from outside the Turkish/Middle Eastern cultural milieu - *Non-Muslim*; 3) names denoting physical beauty - *Beauty*; 4) names reflecting parental aspirations for the child - *Aspiration*; 5) names showing desirable character traits - *Character*; 6) names with religious significance - *Religion*; and, 7) names expressing the parents’ joy at the child’s birth or desire to have the child - *Desire*. These categories encompass 64% of the female subjects and 49% of the male subjects. Figure 1 shows the percentage of males and females in each category, and Chart 1 shows the frequency distribution, expected values, and the statistical significance of these results (Chi Square test).

Results

As Figure 2 and Chart 1 show, all of the name categories are either female or male dominated, with all of the differences being statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or higher. Results for the three female dominated categories are discussed first (*Nature*, *Non-Muslim*, and *Beauty*), followed by those where males predominate (*Aspiration*, *Character*, and *Religion*). While the category of *Desire* is female dominated, it is discussed in the next section along with pejorative female names.

The category *Nature* shows both the greatest number of women, and the largest variance from expected values for males and females. 24.3% of the females in the sample have names from natural

phenomena, while only 3% of males do. Examples include the female names *Gülнар* [gülнар] and *Gülнага* [gülнага] (n=18) from *gül* [gül] ‘rose or flower’ and *нар* ‘pomegranate’. Male names in this category include *Şаһин* [şahin] (n=2) ‘falcon’.

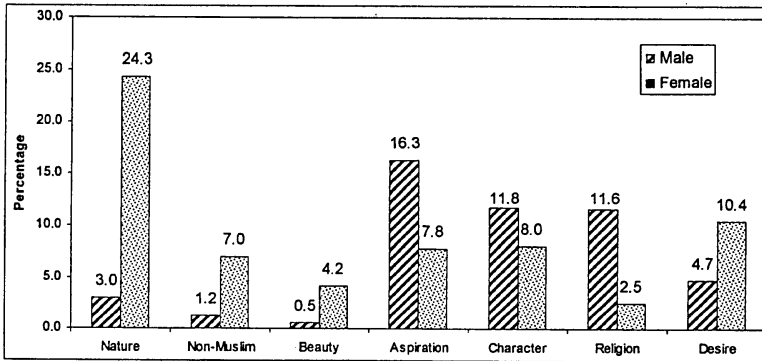


Figure 2: Percentage of Males and Females by Category

Chart 1: Frequency Distribution of Names by Category (expected values in parenthesis)²

	Nature	Non-Muslim	Beauty	Aspiration	Character	Religion	Desire
Male	17 (93.3)	7 (27.6)	3 (16.0)	93 (62.7)	67 (53.7)	66 (33.6)	27 (47.4)
Female	233 (156.7)	67 (46.4)	40 (27.0)	75 (105.3)	77 (90.3)	24 (56.4)	100 (79.6)
Chi Square	117.36 2	24.543	16.09 0	25.443	5.356	51.456	14.505
Significance	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.025	<.001	<.001

(df=1)

Females also predominate in the category Non-Muslim. 7% of the women in the study have names from outside the Turkish/Middle Eastern cultural milieu while only 1.2% of males do. Examples from this category include the female name *Esmira* (n=15; short for Esmeralda as in Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*), and the male name *Ruslan* (n=5). According to Azerbaijani informants, this was the hero in a popular Russian movie.

Beauty is also a name category dominated by women. 4.2% of the women have names denoting physical beauty, but only 0.5% of males do. While the number of women in this category is comparatively small (n=40), very few men have names in this category (n=3). Female examples include *Gözəl* [gözæl] ‘beautiful’ (n=3) and *İlahə* [ilahæ] ‘goddess’ (n=7). A male example is *Camal* [çamal] (n=1) which means ‘beautiful face’ according to *The Azerbaijani-English Dictionary* (Musayev 1998).

In the next three categories, males predominate. 16.3% of males in the sample had names reflecting parental aspirations for their sons, while only 7.8% of females fell within this category. A masculine example would be *Vügar* ‘pride’ (n=12), implying that the child would be someone to make the family proud. A feminine example is *Günəl* (n=20), comprised of two words: *gün* ‘day or sun’ and *el* ‘people or nation’. One Azerbaijani informant gave the meaning for this name as ‘sun of the nation’.

The difference between the percentage of males and females with names reflecting desirable character traits is much smaller than in the other categories: 11.8% of males, and 8.0% of females. This difference is, however, statistically significant. What is more revealing than the percentage of males and females in this category, however, are the character traits ascribed to men and women by the names. There is very little semantic overlap between the two genders, and where there are male/female name pairs, the distribution is far from equal. Please see Charts 2 and 3 under Discussion, for the most frequent male and female Character names.

As with Aspiration and Character, a higher percentage of males have names with religious significance than females: 11.6% versus 2.5%. The most common male name in this category is *Əli* [æli] or *Ali* (n=15), the 4th Muslim caliph and the adopted son of Mohammed. He was assassinated and is looked upon as a martyr by Shi’a Muslims (the dominant religious group in Azerbaijan). A female example is *Fatimə* [fatimæ] or *Fatma* (n= 5), a daughter of Mohammed and wife of Ali.

Pejorative Naming versus Names Reflecting Parent's Desire
for the Child

Pejorative names and names expressing the parents' joy at the child's birth or desire to have the child represent opposing cultural currents in Azerbaijan. Pejorative names are mentioned in several discussions of the Azerbaijani naming system (Garibova 1996, Garibova and Blair 1998, Mirza 1993). Garibova and Blair ascribe this naming practice to pre-Revolutionary times, and assert that if one of these names occurs in contemporary Azerbaijan, it is "in memory of a dearly loved person in the family who had that name" (1998:78). In discussing these names as historical phenomena, they propose three conditions of their use: large families, a rural setting, and parental desire for male children (Garibova and Blair 1998:78). Mirza (1993) also lists the name *Bəsti* [bəsti] (from *bəsdir* [bəsdır] 'that's enough') as being only a family name. The data in this study, however, do not indicate that this practice is totally absent from contemporary Azerbaijani culture. Eight of the 958 female subjects (0.8%) have names meaning either 'enough' or 'enough girls': *Bəsti* [bəsti] (n=3), *Qızbas* [quzbas] (n=1), *Kifayət* [kifayət] (n=3), and *Tamam* (n=1). These women range in age from 18 to 63 – none qualifying as pre-Revolutionary. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to inquire about why these names were given to these particular women. I did, however, know a man whose fifth daughter was born shortly before my arrival in Ganja, Azerbaijan in 2002. He desperately wanted a son, and was disappointed at the birth of another girl. This girl, then, met the three criteria described by Garibova and Blair: rural environment, large family, and parental desire for a male child. He named her *Bəsti* [bəsti] 'that's enough'. While this naming phenomenon may be a bit disturbing, it is not unique. Very similar naming patterns have been identified in other countries including Jordan (Abd-el-Jawad 1986) and China (Ling, Sea, and Yiu 1993, and Watson 1986).

Pejorative female names, however, only comprise 0.8% of the females in the sample population. A much larger percentage (10.4%) carry names indicating the parents' joy at the child's birth or desire to have the child. Only 4.7% of males bear such names.

Examples in this category include the female name *Sevinc* [sevindʒ] ‘joy or delight’ (n=26), and the male name *Kamran* ‘granted wish’ (n=3). Also of interest is the name *Arzu* ‘desire’, used for both males and females (n=1 for males and 5 for females). While the use of pejorative names does seem to persist, at least in rural milieux, a much higher percentage of parents express joy and desire at the birth of girls and boys.

Discussion

There appears to be a strong relationship between the names given to men and women, and the gender roles and expectations assigned to them by Azerbaijani culture. In Azerbaijan, men control the public domains, with public displays of religion serving as a good example. While Azerbaijani women may be very involved in religious practices in the home, the vast majority of those attending public religious gatherings are men. Religious names mirror this tendency: 11.6% of the men bear such names while only 2.5 % of the women in this study do.

As well, parents are much more likely to express aspirations for their children in sons’ names than in daughters’, reflecting a cultural disposition toward male public leadership. Despite the Soviet ideology of equality, female political leaders were, and still are, extremely rare. Even in an area such as academia where there are large numbers of Azerbaijani women, the departmental chairs, deans, and university presidents are almost exclusively men. Thus, the percentage of men with names expressing parental aspiration is twice that of women.

While men’s names emphasize their public roles in Azerbaijani society, women’s names focus on physical attractiveness. The three female dominated categories (Nature, Non-Muslim, and Beauty) show both the greatest disparity between the genders, and an emphasis on beauty. The category of Beauty shows that physical attractiveness is more desirable in girls than in boys. Nature shows the same trend; virtually all of the names in this category imply physical beauty: flowers, sun, moon, fruit, etc. One exception is the male name *Şahin* ‘falcon’ (n=2), which was probably given because of the bird’s predatory nature, not its beauty.

The category of Non-Muslim is much the same. I propose that this use of foreign names represents exoticization of females. Parents give these names because they seem exotic and attractive, much like French names are seen as “sexy” in the United States

Another factor affecting female names in all categories is Russification. According to Garibova and Blair (1996:56) most Russian female names have three syllables, receive penultimate stress, and end in an *-a*. For example *Esmíra* (n=15), and *Sabína* (n=9), from the Non-Muslim category in this study. Traditional Azerbaijani names, however, tend to have two syllables with ultimate stress. When the *-a* typical of female names in modern Azerbaijani is added to traditional two syllable names, they fit the Russian phonological pattern. Consider these two set of female names: *Aynúr* (n=6) and *Aynúra* (n=15) both meaning ‘moon light’; and *Gülnár* [gülnár] (n=6) and *Gülnára* [gülnára] (n=12) both meaning ‘pomegranate flower’. Thus even names that are not foreign in origin are made more exotic by imposing a foreign phonological pattern on them.

While the name category Character has a significantly higher percentage of males than females (11.8% versus 8.0% for females), the distribution of the names in this category and their meanings provides a much deeper view into Azerbaijani culture, than a glance at the overall statistics. Table 2 gives the most common Character names for men (n≥4) along with their female counterparts (where they exist), and their frequency counts. Table 3 gives the corresponding information for female Character names.

Chart 2: Most Frequent Character Names for Males

Male Name		Equiv. Female Name		Meaning
<i>Adil</i>	n=8	n/a		‘just’
<i>Mehman</i>	n=7	n/a		‘hospitable’
<i>Mahir</i>	n=5	<i>Mahirə</i> [mahirə]	n=1	‘clever’
<i>Rəşad</i> [rəʃad]	n=5	n/a		‘bravery’
<i>Rovşən</i> [rövʃæn]	n=5	<i>Rovşən</i> [rövʃæn] ³	n=1	‘clean/bright’

<i>Bəxtiyar</i>	n=4	n/a		'happy/lucky'
[bəxtiyar]				
<i>İlqar</i> [ilGAR]	n=4	<i>İlqarqia/İlqarə</i> [ilGARæ]	n=2	'faithfulness'
<i>Natiq</i> [natik]	n=4	n/a		'orator'

Chart 3: Most Frequent Character Names for Females

Female Name		Equiv. Male Name		Meaning
<i>Kamala</i>	n=13	<i>Kamal</i>	n=1	'perfection'
<i>İradə</i> [iradæ]	n=6	n/a		'determination'
<i>Mətanət</i>	n=7	n/a		'determination'
[mətanæt]				
<i>Nailə</i> [nailæ]	n=9	<i>Nail</i>	n=1	'attaining/achieving'
<i>Məhriban</i>	n=8	n/a		'affectionate'
<i>Səadət</i> [sæadæt]	n=4	n/a		'happiness'
<i>Vəfa</i> [væfa]	n=4	n/a		'faithfulness/loyalty'

If we assume that these names represent character traits the parents desire in their children, or prize in boys and girls, men and women, then we can tentatively suggest characteristics of the prototypical Azerbaijani male and female based upon them. It appears that it is honorable for a man to be fair and hospitable, but also good natured, witty, and brave. The qualities ascribed to women, however, do not fit the passive western stereotypes: perfect, determined, and able to achieve goals, but also affectionate and happy. The quality of faithfulness is prized in both genders.

The female name *Kamala* 'perfection' deserves special mention. It seems clear that this name could have multiple meanings: moral uprightness, as well as physical beauty. This parallels the situation described by Gardner for Sudan where "...names with multiple significance are generally more popular than those with a narrower range of significance" (1994:111). *Kamala's* polysemy seems to account for its popularity: women are expected to be both above reproach morally and physically beautiful.

Conclusions

Speaking globally, the Azerbaijani naming system views men as agents and women as objects. The names in the Aspiration and Religion categories mirror the male dominance in public domains, while the female dominated categories of Nature, Non-Muslim, and Beauty focus on the desirability of physical attractiveness and exoticness in women. There are at least two available theoretical positions on the relationship between Azerbaijani names and Azerbaijani culture: 1) that the naming system simply reflects the culture, or 2) that the naming system is used to enforce and reify cultural stereotypes, expectations, and gender roles. This study as well as that of Garibova and Blair (1996), indicates that the names and therefore the cultural categories can be changed. Even though Aspiration is dominated by males, 7.8% of the females in this study have such names. As well, the category of Character presents women as being determined and able to achieve their goals, as well as having qualities more 'feminine' to the western eye. Also of note, names expressing parents' desire for and joy at the birth of female children far outstrip pejorative female names (10.4% to 0.8%).

It is also worthy of note, that the tendency for Azerbaijani names to ascribe attractiveness to women and agency to men seems to be common in other areas of the world. According to Gardner it is common in onomastic studies to find that "[m]ales are seen as continuing the traditions and the good family name; whereas females are given names that will enhance their attractiveness and suggest change for a better future" (1994:104). In China "women's names are concerned with female virtues and stereotyped roles, [and] men's deal with future achievements, ambition and their contribution to family or even country" (Ling and Yiu 1993:4). Similar results obtain for several Arab countries (Jordan - Ad-el Jawad 1986; Sudan - Gardner 1994; Arab countries in general, Farwanah (2005).

Although it is not necessarily reflected in the naming systems, western cultures show this tendency to objectify women. In his analysis of "covert prestige" in Norwich, England, Peter Trudgill said:

Men in our society can be rated socially by their occupation, their earning power, and perhaps by their abilities in other words by what they do. For the most part, however, this is not possible for women. It may be therefore, that they have instead to be rated on how they appear (Trudgill 1972:183).

Many argue that this is still the case. Azerbaijani culture, however, takes it a step further: women are named based on how they are expected to appear (name categories Nature, Non-Muslim, and Beauty), while men are named based on what they are expected to accomplish (Aspiration, and Religion).

Further Research

While the conclusions in this paper are based on a sizable sample, studies using more rigorous sampling are needed. The names in the present sample do not come from all parts of the country, but are skewed toward the somewhat rural cultural milieu of Ganja. If the data were predominantly from Baku, the results could be quite different. Informal observations show a significant amount of cultural variation across the country with Baku being more westernized and the rural regions being more traditional. A study utilizing census data or a more broadly based sample that could be generalized to the entire country would be very enlightening.

As well, the subject of pejorative naming deserves more attention. My intuition is that this is a rural phenomenon reflecting the cultural conservatism prevalent outside Baku. It would be hoped that this practice is declining over time, but the data in this study are insufficient to draw such a conclusion. Though this phenomenon can be documented in other cultures, no writings have been found examining the effects of such naming on the women involved. Do they develop identities of rejection? How do the women who carry names such as 'enough girls' feel about these naming practices, and do they ever try to change their names? Also, does this naming practice put emotional stress on them resulting in greater rates of mental or physical illness? Similar studies indicate that this is indeed possible: Plank (1971) found a higher rate of mental illness in men who bore the epithet "Jr.", and Christenfeld, Phillips, and Glynn (1999) found that subjects who bore initials with negative

connotations (such as A.S.S.) had a reduced lifespan. Further research on rural naming practices in Azerbaijan could well answer such questions.

Notes

¹ All names and other words in italics in this article are written in the Azerbaijani Latin Alphabet. Where pronunciation varies from that expected by someone from a western European background, it is given in square brackets using the International Phonetic Alphabet.

² Each column in this table summarizes a two by two contingency table. For example:

	With Nature Name	Without Name	Nature
Male	17	553	
Female	233	725	

The expected values were calculated for each cell by multiplying the row total by the column total and dividing by the total of all four cells. The Chi Square test compares the actual values and expected values (including Yate's correction) to show the probability that the differences are due to random chance. In all cases, the differences are significant at $p < .001$ or $p < .025$. For more information on the Chi Square test and Yate's correction for two by two contingency tables see Woods, Fletcher, and Hughes (1986) pages 139-151.

³ Since it is extremely rare to have male/female name pairs in the Azerbaijani naming system where the female name is not marked for gender, this occurrence of *Rovşən* [rövʃæn] as a female name is probably a mistake. It is reported here for the sake of thoroughness.

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