

## WHAT IS A MOTHER TONGUE?

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13<sup>th</sup> year as a global event. First announced by UNESCO on November 17, 1999 as a means to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity this event was formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution to establish 2008 as the International Year of This year, on February 21<sup>st</sup>, the world celebrates International Mother Language Day, now in its Languages. This is an appropriate time to reflect on the topic of language and in particular on the unique and dear concept of "mother language" or "mother tongue". What is a "mother tongue"?

The term "mother tongue" is used quite widely and carries a range of meaning. It is often used synonymously with terms such as "first language", "heart language" and "native language". The use of the terms implies a deep connection to an individual's identity, as well as an element of history, tied to the home and family. It may be of use for all who use this term to understand the nuances involved in its use and to, perhaps, come to a more shared understanding of its meaning. It is, after all, a very important term and in the words of N. Pokorn, "differences in understanding the term can have far-reaching and often political consequences." (N. Pokorn, *Challenging the Traditional Axioms: Translation Into a Non-Mother Tongue*. John Benjamins, 2005)

In the elementary schools of Azerbaijan students study the Azerbaijani language under the course label of "mother language", "Ana Dili". This is in recognition of the status of the Azerbaijani language in the country. In parts of the Republic where the majority of students speak a language other than Azerbaijani in their homes, this elementary course still carries the label "mother language". The term obviously can be used in a variety of ways. So, let us begin to look at this term and consider the range of meaning it can carry.

The following definitions for mother tongue can be found in popular use:

(a) the language spoken by an individual's mother

(b) the language an individual learned first

(c) the language which an individual spoke when they were a child

(d) the language associated with the ethnicity with which an individual most closely identifies

(e) the language an individual speaks most fluently

(f) the language which an individual feels most emotionally attached to

(g) the language an individual speaks in their home most often

(h) the language which an individual shares most closely with others in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural context

While some claim that it is possible to have more than one "mother tongue" it is most common for an individual to be identified with only one. However, looking at the list above, it can be seen that in a multi-lingual situation a given individual may have 3 or 4 languages which meet one or more of these definitional criteria. For example, it is possible for an individual to grow up in a home where his mother's native language was Italian but where he spoke French as a child. After he started to attend school this individual may have started to use German most in his life and now, as an adult he is most definitely fluent in German. So, which is his mother tongue? The situation could be complicated even further if the individual is Romani by ethnicity, with many relatives who still speak Romani even though in his home Romani



was not a language that was used.

In Azerbaijan itself one does not have to go far to find a very real situation with similar complexity. In research conducted among residents of the village of Budukh in Quba region (Clifton et. al., 2005), of which this researcher was a part, a variety of questions regarding the use of individuals' "mother tongue" were presented. Answers to the questions varied widely, not the least because of the variety of definitions held for the term "mother tongue". At a deep level, the residents of Budukh village are connected to the Budukh language, an ancient Caucasian language in the Lezgian family of languages. The Budukh language has been spoken in the Budukh village and its surroundings for millennia. Today, however, the language is endangered. Very few individuals of Budukh ethnicity are passing the language on to their children. However, their ethnic identity is strong and it is not uncommon for the Budukh language to be claimed as the "mother tongue" of an individual in Budukh village even if they do not personally speak the language very well.

Due to the multi-cultural nature of the Quba region it is not uncommon for individuals of mixed ethnic background in the region to marry. It is not uncommon for an individual of Budukh ethnicity, for example, to marry an individual of Lezgi or Azerbaijani ethnicity. In Budukh village, such a marriage results in children growing up speaking Azerbaijani, Lezgi or even both fluently as their home languages. Such individuals may be just as likely to claim Azerbaijani or Lezgi as their mother tongue as Budukh.

Further, all elementary schooling in Budukh village is given in the Azerbaijani language. To prepare students for school, parents may promote the use of Azerbaijani in the home. The result may be that an individual with a Budukh father and Lezgi mother will grow up speaking Azerbaijani most in the home. This tri-lingual, multi-ethnic context can affect an individual's perception of his "mother tongue".

There are at least 10 languages other than the national language of Azerbaijani which can be considered indigenous to the geographic area of the Republic. Speakers of these languages are most typically multi-lingual and multi-cultural,

living in contexts quite similar to speakers of Budukh. It would be helpful to propose some advice for the use of the term "mother tongue" as we all, living in this rich, culturally diverse country, seek to communicate as clearly as possible when we discuss language and "mother tongue" in particular.

First, when one uses the term "mother tongue" it is prudent to strive as much as possible to be clear about one's definition of the term. In writing or research, it is advisable that one's definition be presented to readers or the subjects of one's research. This will of course, require the researcher or writer to give attention to this definition for themselves. It may be a new task for some to clarify the specific intended meaning of the term. In this case, it is most useful to be reminded that to conduct research or to write on the topic of "mother tongue" one must be clear in one's own mind what one means by the term. It cannot be assumed that we all understand the term in the same way.

Second, as the richness of the term "mother tongue" becomes more apparent to us all and we continue to grow in our appreciation of the depth and range of the concept, it is advisable that we approach discussions, research, writing and presentations concerning "mother tongue" with an eye to maximizing opportunities for bringing our global community closer together. Since we cannot assume a completely shared understanding of the term in all cases, let us, whenever possible, seek to increase the level at which we do share a common understanding for the term and concept. Let us take the time in our writing and research to explore how the term is used, and not just use it.

The world we live in is one of great diversity. It is estimated that humans speak over 6900 unique languages ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)). Multi-lingualism is the norm on our planet. Language is not only a fact of life, it is an element of life that defines our very experience of life. Since Adam first named the animals and Eve taught her children their "mother tongue", language has defined not only who we are but how we relate to one another and the world around us. So, what is your "mother tongue"?