

Invitations – “Come to My Wedding?”

Part 11

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Azerbaijanis are famous for their hospitality and are very spontaneous about inviting guests to their homes—even individuals they've met for the first time. In this installment of “Sociolinguistically Speaking,” we take a look at the patterns that Azerbaijanis follow in terms of inviting guests to weddings, birthday parties and general get-togethers. For more Azerbaijani customs and speech patterns related to entertaining guests, see “Sociolinguistically Speaking - 7”, “Just a Cup of Tea,” found at AZERI.org, our Web site that is devoted to the Azeri language.

WEDDING INVITATIONS

Weddings are one of the most elaborate celebrations in the lives of Azerbaijani families. They can take place at any time of year except during the month of Maharram (a date that varies each year according to the lunar Islamic religious calendar, it commemorates the death of Husein, the third Imam of the Shiites). Being invited to someone's wedding in Baku usually means an invitation to an evening dinner party, not a ceremony where vows are exchanged, as is common in the West. As is true in many countries, wedding parties can be extremely elaborate and expensive. Tables are covered with so many small dishes of food that there is hardly a place to set down your glass. The wedding will last many hours, and in the countryside, wedding celebrations can continue for several days.

Foreigners are often surprised to be invited to weddings, especially when they don't know the couple. But close friends of the couple will often invite you if they think you would like to see how weddings are celebrated in Azerbaijan. And if someone invites you, consider the invitation genuine. You're not imposing. You're truly welcome. So go and enjoy the celebration!

In Baku, invitations are issued on behalf of the parents of the couple, who typically invite 150 to 300 guests, depending on their financial resources. The written invitations may also indicate the specific table number where the guests will be seated. Wedding invitations are sometimes printed in both Russian and Azeri. It's not unusual to send Russian invitations to the Russian-speaking guests, and Azeri invitations to the Azeri-speaking guests. These days the Azeri is likely to be written in the Latin script, rather than Cyrillic, since President Aliyev's decree made this switch mandatory beginning August 1, 2001.

Close relatives or friends are usually invited by phone or in person, rather than by written invitation. When calling guests to invite them to a wedding party, Azerbaijanis show that the presence of the invited person is desirable by using expressions such as:

Gözləyəcəyik.
We will be waiting.

Mütləq gəlin.
Come, by all means.

Elderly relatives are often invited in person. For example, the parents of the bride or groom go to their house to invite them, as a way of showing them deep respect.

Other Azerbaijani expressions used to show respect include:

Siz gərək başda olasınız.
You should be at the head of the table [meaning, the most honored and esteemed guest].

Sizsiz toy eləmərik.
We won't have the wedding without you.

Even if acquaintances are not invited to the wedding party, it's not unusual for them to seek out an invitation, especially if they are close friends or relatives. This would not be considered out of place.

Toy edəndə bizi unutma.
Toyda bizi yaddan çıxarma.
Don't forget about us when you hold a wedding party.

A polite reply to such a request might be:

Sizsiz toy olar?
What, a party without you?
Əlbəttə dəvət edəcəyik.
Of course, we'll invite you.

Sizin yeriniz başda olacaq.
Your place will be at the head [meaning, at the head of the table].

If the host does not intend to invite someone for a particular reason, he will give an excuse to avoid hurting the feelings of the person seeking an invitation:

Demək olar ki, heç kəsi çağırırıq. Ancaq 3-4 nəfər yaxın qohumlarımız olacaq.

We are hardly inviting anyone. We will have only 3-4 close relatives.

Guests to an Azerbaijani wedding don't have to spend a lot of time thinking about what kind of gift to give: in most cases these days, they simply bring money. It's a very simple and pragmatic solution and very much appreciated by the newly married couple. Often someone is assigned to sit at the entrance of the restaurant hall to register such gifts.

A NEW BABY

Some Azerbaijanis have baby showers while the mother is still expecting, but traditionally most families wait until after the baby is born. Generally, the mother and child are secluded for the first 40 days after the birth. Once that period of time has passed, it is considered appropriate to go see the new baby and congratulate the parents. An exception may be made for very close relatives, who may visit sooner. Gifts for the occasion include baby clothes and other things that the baby and its parents need. Toys are not usually given as presents until the child is about a year old.

BIRTHDAY INVITATIONS

Traditionally, Azerbaijanis don't invite guests to their own birthday parties, as this occasion is shared mostly with close friends and family. Very often the occasion is not even celebrated at all. Today, however, Azerbaijanis feel more comfortable inviting people to their birthday parties. More people tend to celebrate at restaurants these days, instead of at home. Close friends and relatives—even if they have not been invited—may call and ask where the party is to be held. For birthday parties, this would not be considered rude. It once was a rare practice to ask someone what he or she wanted to receive as a birthday present. But these days, it's becoming more customary to ask such a question.

Sənə nə hədiyyə edim?
What do you want me to give you as a gift?

If someone is too shy to offer a suggestion, they may answer:

Özün gəl. Sən özün mənim üçün hədiyyəsən.

Come yourself. You yourself are a gift for me. Among close friends, especially if they are about the same age, this type of exchange would be done in a joking manner.



INVITING SOMEONE OVER

Azerbaijanis invite friends and relatives to their homes with phrases like:

Bizə gəl.
Come to our place.

Niyə bizə gəlmirsən?
Why don't you come to our place?

Çoxdandır bizə gəlmirsən.
You haven't been to our place for a long time.

These expressions imply "come at any time," rather than restricting the guest to a certain day and hour. This is a more general type of invitation and definitely doesn't mean that the host is not being sincere. If Azerbaijanis invite someone to visit, they think that any time is a good time.

Deep down, perhaps Azerbaijanis feel too shy to say, "Come at such-and-such a time" because they are afraid that their invitation will be interpreted as, "We don't have time for you other than at this hour of this day."

However, as people are getting busier and busier, invitations are sometimes followed by a request for a phone call beforehand:

Nə vaxt istəyirsən gəl. Amma gəlməzdən əvvəl zəng et. Birdən evdən çıxmış olaram.

Come at any time. Just make a call before coming, in case I have left home.

Foreigners tend to respond differently to invitations than Azerbaijanis do. An Azerbaijani would usually say:

Yaxşı, gələrəm.
OK, I will come.

Zəng edib gələrəm.
I will call and come.

But a foreigner tends to ask: "OK, when?" expecting that the person inviting him has a specific date and time in mind.

Guests typically bring gifts like a box of chocolates or a bouquet of flowers (make sure it's an odd number of blossoms, as an even number is associated with death). If there is a man in the house, the men might choose to bring a bottle of champagne. On the occasion of Novruz, guests usually prepare and bring "khonchas", special baked sweets.

When expressing their appreciation, the guests don't usually follow the Western practice of sending thank-you notes after their visit. Instead, they will invite the hosts over to their own houses on a similar occasion.

DECLINING AN INVITATION

Once Azerbaijanis receive an invitation, they will make every effort to attend the event. An Azerbaijani proverb says:

Çağırılan yerə ar eləmə, çağırılmayan yeri dar eləmə.

Don't be shy to go a place where you have been invited, and don't narrow the place where you haven't been invited.

The second part of this proverb means: "Don't impose yourself or make the hosts feel uncomfortable."

If someone is reluctant to go or doesn't want to stay very long, he or she will at least show up for a few minutes. Or, they might send a family member instead. For example, if someone is unable to attend the wedding party of a relative, he might ask his son or daughter to go instead of him.

When declining an invitation, Azerbaijanis will try to give a solid reason for the refusal, even if they have to make up an excuse:

Daha əvvəl başqa bir məclisə çağırblar. Ora getməyə söz vermişəm.

I have a prior invitation and I have already promised to go there.

İşə çağırblar. Getməsəm olmaz.
I've been called to work. I have to go.

Azerbaijanis won't usually refuse an invitation right away, even if they know for certain that they won't attend:

Çalışaram gəlim.
I will try to come.

Then they may apologize later:

Bağışlayın, vacib bir iş çıxdı. Ona görə də gələ bilmədim.

I'm sorry. An unexpected problem came up, and I couldn't come.

If someone has missed an event, such as a wedding party or a birthday party, he will show up on a later date, usually with a gift, to congratulate the host. In the case of a wedding, the gift should not be money, but rather something that the couple might need for their new home, like a tablecloth, a set of cutlery or drinking glasses.



These days weddings are recorded on video, just like they are elsewhere in the world. At "Venice" down off the Boulevard at the seafront in Baku. Photo: Elman Gurbanov.

Azerbaijanis are known for their gracious hospitality, their politeness and warmth. They delight in making relationships with foreigners and in entertaining one another. They try their best to make these occasions unforgettable experiences for everyone.

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