

## Silence is Golden - Part 12

by Jala Garibova  
and Betty Blair



**F**or Azerbaijanis, what is left unsaid can be just as important as what is said. Westerners, especially Americans who are known for their directness, sometimes miss these subtleties in Azerbaijani conversation. Talk that would be considered straightforward, or perhaps honest, in Western culture may be considered blunt, or even rude, in Azerbaijani culture. Especially in the context of the business world, this type of faux pas could be disastrous. To flush out these differences, our 12th installment of "Sociolinguistically Speaking" takes a look at the Azerbaijani tendency toward silence and indirectness.

**Danışmaq gümüşdür, susmaq qızıl.**

Speech is silver, silence is gold.



As illustrated by the above proverb, Azerbaijanis believe that being polite often means holding one's tongue and keeping silent. Children are taught to obey maxims like: "Don't contradict a person who's older than you." "Don't talk back to a woman if you are a man." "Don't argue with your teacher." "Think before you speak." "Don't talk too much, or people will think you're a chatterbox." "Don't talk too much if your guest is eating because he'll feel too shy to eat." "Don't say anything that will expose your poverty." "Don't say anything to let people know you are wearing cheap clothes." "Don't say anything that will make people feel sorry for you."

### BREAK FROM TRADITION

However, in many of the younger, more modern-thinking Azerbaijani families, children are now being encouraged to be more direct. Some of the old admonitions are no longer passed on; others, such as not arguing with grownups, are still highly esteemed and therefore retained.

For example, in traditional families, if a grownup relative were to offer a child food, it would be considered rude for the child to refuse. If he did, the parents would intervene and try to persuade the child to accept the offer. In modern families, however, children are given the freedom to choose whether or not to accept the food.

**İstəyirsənsə, götür.**

If you want, take.

Even among adults, the rules about offering food or accepting an offer of food are changing. These days in an office environment, it's not unusual to see a person who is eating food not offer any to another person who enters the room. A mere 10 or 15 years ago, this kind of behavior would have been unthinkable. But today, the offer is considered unnecessary because the other person probably would not want to eat the food anyway. To some people, offering food under such circumstances would be viewed as insincere.

Since Azerbaijan gained its independence in 1991, a number of new behavior patterns have caught on from abroad. Part of the reason for this is a rejection of the much-criticized "Soviet mentality," which was based on collective thinking. Many Azerbaijanis associate the progress of the Western world with its inherent emphasis on individualism. In this light, traditional rearing methods seem to impose an unnecessary burden on children.

### MONEY MATTERS

Another change in attitudes relates to the economic role of women in Azerbaijani society. Today, women are taking on more of the responsibility for earning a living for their families. In Soviet Azerbaijan, though women were not expected to work outside the home to support their families' needs, if they did work, it was to be only for their own pleasure or because they wished to pursue their own interests.

As the following Azerbaijani saying describes, men were expected to be the breadwinners:

**Qadının qazandığı 100 manat kişinin qazandığı 1 manata bərabərdir.**

100 manats earned by a woman is equal to one manat earned by a man.

These days, women are more active, more economically responsible for their families than in the past. Women are more likely to go out into the workforce



Soltan Gara's "Triumvirate", 1999, oil on canvas, 25 x 60 cm. Contact the artist at his home in North Carolina at (919) 933-8301.



and become major breadwinners; in turn, they are finding themselves to be less dependent upon men. They are also more open about their marital status, especially in regard to being divorced or single mothers.

In the past, Azerbaijanis used to be more hesitant to bring up the subject of money. Workers were shy about asking for a raise, even if they felt they were being underpaid. New hires often would not even inquire about the starting salary for their position, but would wait patiently to be told. Today, however, this pattern is beginning to change, especially among young people. For example, it's not unusual for them to inquire about salary during the initial interview.

Still, tradition perseveres and there are several situations in which money is not usually discussed. For instance, it's not always appropriate to offer to pay someone back for something if the cost is negligible. Let's say an Azerbaijani is looking for a specific book, and a friend finds it and buys it for him. The recipient would feel uncomfortable offering to pay for the book, especially if the other person is older than he is or someone who is highly respected in the community. However, the recipient will remember and in the future will try to find some way to acknowledge and repay the favor—but not with cash.

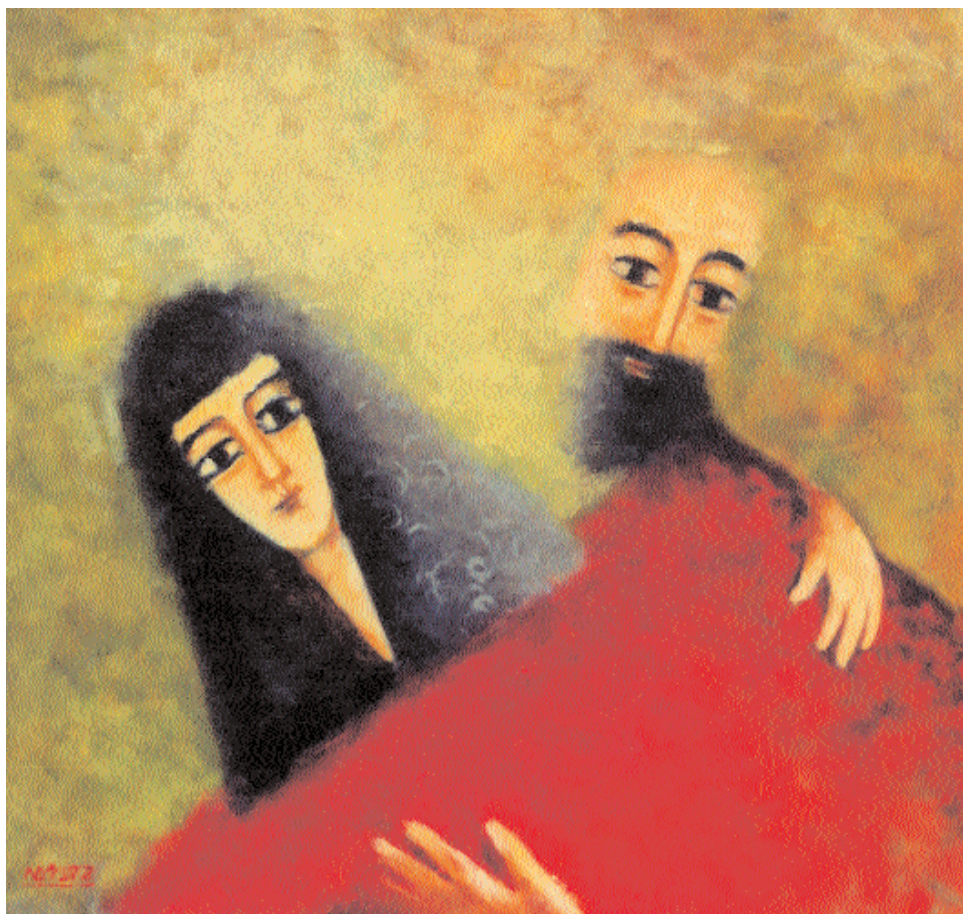
## BREAKING BAD NEWS

In many ways, the Eastern way of thinking is still deeply ingrained in Azerbaijanis. Consider the way that they deliver unpleasant news. If a patient has cancer, the doctor will not tell them the diagnosis but will rather inform the close relatives of the truth. In turn, the relatives are not likely to tell other people about the cancer; they're more likely to provide an alternate, less-serious explanation. Instead of saying, "So-and-so has cancer" (*mədə xərcəngi*), they might say, "So-and-so has an ulcer" (*mədə yarası*).

Similarly, if a young woman is unable or unlikely to conceive, her doctor is not likely to disclose this to her directly. Since not being able to have children is considered a failure on her part, the doctor might recommend a common remedy and tell the truth only to her parents.

News about a person's death is announced very cautiously and slowly to close relatives. In one case, a young Azerbaijani student was taking his medical qualifying exams in Turkey when his mother died. The family did not tell the young man about his mother's death until a month later—after his exams were over. They didn't want to jeopardize his chances of becoming a doctor.

If the cause of death happened to be murder, it's not likely that the parents will be told specifically about what happened. They might hear that it was an accident or a heart attack. (Since autopsies are socially



Soltan Gara's "Together", 1999, oil on canvas, 70 x 75 cm. More of Gara's works are on display at AZgallery.org.

unacceptable in Azerbaijani society, this type of misrepresentation is easy to pull off.) In this way, the victim's family is spared the even greater anguish of hearing that the death was gruesome and deliberate.

## GIVING CRITICISM

Azerbaijanis are not inclined to criticize the services they receive, even if the service is unsatisfactory. Some of them rationalize this tendency by saying that complaining won't change anything anyway. Perhaps they believe that any effort should be appreciated, no matter how disappointing the result.

For example, if a woman doesn't like her new haircut, she's still likely to tell her hairdresser:

**Çox sağ olun, çox yaxşıdır.**  
Thanks, you did a good job.

Many Azerbaijanis shy away from giving criticism in general. Instead of saying "It is bad," (*pisdir*) they put it as, "It is not very good". Also, if they criticize

someone publicly, they will refrain from naming names. They may, however, give the title, position or other clues to the identity of the person being criticized.

## COURTESY TO GUESTS

An Azerbaijani proverb says:

**Qonaq, dur altını süpürüm.**

You say to your guest: "Stand up, I need to sweep the floor under your seat."

The general idea behind this saying is that, without telling your guest directly that it is time to leave, he will understand this by your actions.

Azerbaijanis will not be direct about letting their guests know they've overstayed their welcome. In most cases, the hosts will not even drop any hints. However, if the situation becomes urgent, the hosts might ask their children or family members questions that will lead the guest to understand that it's time to leave. These might include:

## Bizi saat neçə üçün dəvət etmişdilər?

What time did so-and-so invite us?

## (Saat) Neçədə getməli idik?

What time were we supposed to go?

In terms of offering food to a guest, it is not common for Azerbaijanis, especially in traditional families, to ask guests whether or not they would like to eat. It is generally thought that a polite guest would never respond “yes”, even if they are hungry.

An Azerbaijani proverb deals with this situation:

## Qonaq acam deməz.

The guest will never say “I want to eat.” / “I am hungry.”

A guest may try to decline an invitation to eat, saying:

## Sağ olun, ac deyiləm.

No, I don't want to eat./Thank you, I'm not hungry.

## Sağ olun, doymuşam.

No, thanks, I'm full.

Even with such a response, Azerbaijanis will assume that the guest is just being polite and actually does want to eat.

Guests usually praise the host for the food that is served. This happens even when the guest has decided not to eat a specific food—perhaps because he doesn't like it or because of religious or traditional reasons. Even under these circumstances, Azerbaijanis aren't likely to let the host discover that they didn't taste the food. The host may ask:

## Dadına baxdınız mı?

Did you taste it?

Instead of acknowledging that they didn't taste the food, the guest is likely to reply:

## Bəli, çox dadlı idi. Çox sağ olun.

Yes, it was very delicious. Thanks.

## DEALING WITH INVITATIONS

Refusing an invitation is considered to be impolite. To avoid giving offense, Azerbaijanis who are invited to a party or a ceremony sometimes contrive excuses or say, “I'll try to come,” even though they already know they won't be attending.

Before, being invited to a wedding party was considered an honor. These days, due to the economic difficulties, not many people can afford to attend wedding parties because they will be expected to give the couple an expensive gift or cash. Many people admit that they try to avoid being invited and are glad if a wedding party passes by without touching them. However, maybe because of old habits, Azerbaijanis still reproach their acquaintances or friends when they don't receive an invitation:

## Niyə məni toyuna çağırmadın? Səndən incimişəm.

Why didn't you invite me to your wedding party? My feelings are hurt.

Note that this statement does not necessarily mean that the person actually feels hurt or that he really did want to be invited.

## AVOIDING THE EVIL EYE

Another example of carefully worded or ambiguous speech relates to the superstition of the “evil eye”. Even Azerbaijanis who are quite Western in their worldview may use charms to ward off the evil eye, just in case.

To counteract the evil eye, elderly women sometimes say peculiar things to their grandchildren, like:

## Ay, nə kifirsən.

Oh, how ugly you are!

## Meymuna oxşayırsan.

You look like a monkey.

Typically, elderly women say these things in a joking, playful manner, while kissing the baby, or holding him up high above their heads.

Some Azerbaijanis believe that it's even possible to bring down the evil eye upon oneself. For example, an Azerbaijani might believe that if he thinks or talks too much about how good he is feeling, he might become ill. So, if someone asks him how he's feeling, he may respond, “So-so”, so as not to jeopardize his own health. He may actually “feel” very good at the time.

## Necəsiniz? / Özünüzü necə hiss edirsiniz?

How are you feeling?

## Babat, çox sağ olun.

So-so, thanks.

Similarly, an Azerbaijani will answer cautiously when he is asked about his business:

## İşləriniz necədir?

How is your business doing?

## Pis deyil.

Not too bad.

## Əvvəlkindən yaxşıdır.

Better than before.

In general, it is not typical for Azerbaijanis to give frank replies such as, “My work is going very well” or “My business is in great shape.”

## DIFFERENT SENSE OF TIME

According to an Azerbaijani proverb:

## Müsəlmanın srağagünü bir il əvvəl olur.

A Muslim's “two days ago” means “a year ago.”



When Azerbaijanis speak about something that happened "two days ago" (**srağagün**) this amount of time should not be taken literally. Azerbaijanis are more flexible in their expectations related to time, which sometimes shocks foreigners.

Punctuality is not usually an Azerbaijani virtue. You may hear someone tell you,

**Yarım saatdan sonra orada olacağam.**

I'll be there in half an hour.

Azerbaijanis themselves would not be surprised if the person shows up an hour and a half later. However, it should be noted that more and more business meetings, especially with foreign companies, are held on time these days; even concerts are starting close to the designated hour.

"Come after 2 p.m. tomorrow" is a typical Azerbaijani way of making an appointment. This expression of "after 2" should be treated rather abstractly. It doesn't mean precisely at 2 p.m., but rather, implies sometime in the afternoon, as it suits one's schedule.

**Sabah saat 2-dən sonra gəlin.**

Come after 2 p.m. tomorrow.

## MEN AND WOMEN

Azerbaijani men are careful not to bring up female-related topics such as gynecological matters or pregnancy. It's very rare for an Azerbaijani man to ask a woman (other than a close relative) which month of pregnancy she is in, how much weight she has gained or what the sex of the baby is. Exceptions may occur if the conversation takes place among close friends or relatives who share a less traditional way of thinking.

Azerbaijani men enjoy complimenting women on their appearance. However, they usually refer to the general appearance rather than specific details of her dress, makeup or hairstyle. They use phrases like:

**Çox gözəl/cazibədar görünürsünüz.**

You look attractive/charming/beautiful.

They would seldom say things like:

**Paltarınız xoşuma gəlir.**

I like your dress.

**Pomadanızın rəngi xoşuma gəlir.**

I like the color of your lipstick.

**Saçlarınızın bu günkü düzümü xoşuma gəlir.**

I like the way you've done your hair today.

However, they might point out the color of the woman's dress, saying something like:

**Bu rəng sizə çox yaraşır.**

That color suits you perfectly.

Attitudes in Azerbaijan are changing, but many of these behavioral changes are still limited to Baku and have not yet spread throughout Azerbaijan. On a daily basis, older people can see vivid differences in the way they were raised, the way their children are being raised and the way Azerbaijanis interact with foreigners. Hopefully what will not change is the essential Azerbaijani character: a deep respect for hospitality expressed through politeness and thoughtfulness toward others.

*Jala Garibova holds a doctorate in linguistics and teaches at Western University in Baku. Betty Blair is the Editor of Azerbaijan International. The entire "Sociolinguistically Speaking" series may be accessed at [AZERI.org](http://AZERI.org); click on LEARN AZERI. ■*

**AZERI**  
• org

Articles in the Azeri language – Latin and Arabic scripts

Caspian Drilling Company is a joint venture operating in Azerbaijan. The partnership is comprised of SOCAR, Global Santa Fe Corporation. CDC upgraded and operated the semi-submersible Dada Gorgud and Istiglal over the past five years. It has worked for AIOC, BP, ExxonMobil, Agip, Chevron, NAOC and CIPCO. The primary goal of CDC is to perform work in the safest practical manner in compliance with applicable regulations and consistent with recognized good industry practices.



370003 Vishechnaya Street, 3 • North Wharf, Baku Azerbaijan  
Tel: (994-12) 97-46-12 • Fax: 97-46-10 • sbakirov@ggsdrill.com • jboone@ggsdrill.com