

## Taboos and Euphemisms Part 16

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and Betty Blair

**E**very culture has its own set of unwritten rules regarding social etiquette and interaction. What is appropriate to say? To whom? When? How direct can you be with others without seeming intrusive or offensive? Every language has its own euphemisms—inoffensive words that are substituted for something that might be construed as harsh or unpleasant. For example, in many countries, including Azerbaijan, speaking directly about death is usually avoided.

Here we've tried to identify some of the situations that might differ from what Westerners would expect. Of course, as is always true: with every rule, there are always exceptions.

### 1. Don't speak about death or dying directly.

Death is a topic that people are very sensitive about. Azeri has a number of expressions, which are traditionally used in place of the verb "to die" (*ölmək*). The most common euphemisms are expressed as follows:

*O, rəhmətə getdi.*

He passed away.

But there are other expressions, which are more literary and poetic:

*O, vəfat edib.*

He entered God's Mercy.

*O, dünyasını dəyişdi.*

He changed his world.

In the course of a conversation, if the name of someone who has died happens to be mentioned, both the speaker and the listeners are expected to repeat:

*Allah rəhmət eləsin.*

God rest his soul.

*Behiştlik olsun.*

May God take him to heaven.

*Qəbri nurla dolsun.*

May his grave be filled with light.

To which the listener may reply:

*Allah sizin də önlərinizə rəhmət eləsin.*

May God also have mercy upon those of yours who have passed away.

The reply, in this case, is not "Thank you!" but rather: *Amin* (Amen).

This tradition of interjecting this blessing even appears in email correspondence carried out in English between Azerbaijani youth, as in this code-switching example where the main conversation is in English with the blessing interjected in Azeri, but typed in English transliteration, as such: "On the issue of *rahmatlik* Elchibey..." [former President of Azerbaijan].

When someone has just died and the news is just starting to spread, Azerbaijanis are likely to broach the situation obliquely when bringing up the subject with the loved ones.

*Eşitdim başınıza iş gəlib.*

I heard something happened to you.

*Bu nə işdir başımıza gəlib?*

What is this that has happened to you?

When Azerbaijanis learn that someone has died unexpectedly; generally, they are not likely to ask specific questions of the loved one unless they know the person well. Instead, they try to find out from others the details surrounding the cause of death.

Unlike Americans, Azerbaijanis rarely send sympathy cards. Perhaps, the main reason is that there are social traditions in place that allow for friends and community members to express their condolences directly with the loved ones. Death commemorations are traditionally scheduled for Day 3, Day 7 and Day 40 and then on the yearly anniversary of the death date.

### 2. Don't criticize a person who has died.

It is generally not acceptable to criticize someone who has died. An expression cautions against this practice:

*Ölənin arxasınca danışmazlar.*

It is not good to talk about a dead person.

Another rather humorous, ironic expression states:

*Ölən inək südlü olar.*

Literally: The dead cow has much milk.

In other words, only good things should be said about someone who has died. Even people who were considered scoundrels are generally not talked about in a negative way after they die. If someone does say critical words, they often preface their remarks:

*O ölüb o dünyadadır, amma..."*

He's dead, he's in the other world, but still...

*Şeytan xəbər aparmasın.*

Don't let the devil carry the news to him.

*Yox, Allah rəhmət eləsin, elə də pis adam deyildi.*

No, May God have mercy on him, he wasn't such a bad person.

In the West, great commemorations take place after a person passes away. For example, a documentary had been prepared for the life of Mother Theresa of India did not air until she actually died even though it had been ready months prior to her death.

In contrast, Azerbaijanis have a tradition of celebrating Jubilees to honor the elderly while they are still alive—perhaps this can be traced to the Soviet influence since it does not exist among Azerbaijanis living in Iran. If the individual has made a significant contribution to society, the Jubilee may even be carried out on a State level. Laudatory speeches and music are traditionally part of the program. Jubilees are celebrated when such people reach 60, 70, 75, 80, 85, 90 and older. Sometimes, Jubilees begin at 50, on rare occasions they are celebrated at 40.

If the person is deeply respected, Jubilees may continue as a tradition even after the person dies. For example, in 2005, the 120th Jubilee will be celebrated for Uzeyir Hajibeyov, Founder of Composed Music in Azerbaijan, even though he died in 1948—55 years earlier.

### 3. Don't talk about deadly diseases.

Diseases that are considered to be deadly are rarely talked about very openly, especially cancer. The literal translation of the Azeri word (*xərçəng xəstəliyi*) means crab. In Azerbaijan a medical diagnosis of cancer is still viewed as a death sentence. Consequently, people rarely say the "C-word". Instead, they are more likely to refer to this disease as "*pis xəstəlik*" (bad disease).

Usually when someone is diagnosed with cancer, the family keeps it a secret. Unfortunately, this practice only goes to reinforce the public assumption that cancer cannot be cured. Because of the secrecy surrounding the disease, the general public doesn't hear when people recover from cancer, though the word spreads quickly when someone dies from it.

Doctors rarely tell their patients directly that they have cancer, although they do pass on the information to the nearest of kin. Unlike the general practice followed by many doctors in the West, it would be considered totally unacceptable for a doctor to suddenly announce to a patient that he has cancer. The relationship between mind and body is deeply respected. Doctors would not shock their patients with bad news for fear it might depress them and make recovery less likely. Telling bad news to patients is viewed as counterproductive.

### 4. Don't talk about things in a negative way.

Azerbaijanis are generally very careful about not talking about something in a negative way in public. Who knows whether this practice stems from living under the Soviet regime for most of the last century, or whether it coincides with their worldview, believing that to speak negatively about something will actually cause it to happen. Regardless of the rationale, there is a tendency to be non-committal about things that they are uneasy about. Say: "*Yaxşı deyil*" (It's not good), rather than "*Pisdir*" (It's bad).

In the same way, Azerbaijanis are careful about praising somebody or something that belongs to them. This tendency may be influenced both by a belief in the evil eye, as well as the tendency towards modesty.

#### *İşləriniz necədir?*

"How's your business going?"

The usual answer is:

*Pis deyil.*

Not bad.

They're not likely to simply say, "Good" (*Yaxşı*).

### 5. Don't say bad things about flour and products made from wheat.

Azerbaijanis usually don't say negative things about bread, or other products made from flour (wheat), including cakes and cookies. Bread is considered sacred. The strongest criticism that you're likely to hear:

#### *Çörək yaxşı bişməmişdir.*

The bread is not cooked very well.

It is also considered like a sin to step on a piece of bread that has fallen to the floor or ground. If they see a piece of bread on the ground, they'll pick it up and place it somewhere so that it will not be stepped on. The elderly can often be seen kissing the bread and putting it to their eyes three times. Rice is also held in great esteem and people generally don't say bad things about it either.

### 6. Don't compliment the opposite sex on clothes they are wearing unless you are close friends.

Unless Azerbaijanis know each other fairly well, they tend not to compliment members of the opposite sex about their clothing. A woman is not likely to compliment a man on the choice of his tie, shirt or jacket. Nor would a man show his appreciation about a woman's dress, suit or jewelry—unless they were close friends. Otherwise, the gesture could be mistaken for an advance. A man would never express approval of a woman's makeup unless they were close friends.

On the other hand, if a male boss disapproves of the way a female employee is dressed or finds it inappropriate for work, he is not likely to say anything directly to her but rather pass the message to the woman via another woman who is close to him in rank.

### 7. Don't refer to someone in your presence by using the pronoun, "O" ("He" or "She").

It is considered rude in Azeri not to name the person if that person is in your presence.

For example, don't say:

*O da bilir.*

He/she also knows.

Rather name the individual so it won't be perceived as disrespectful.

*Rəna da bilir.*

Rena also knows.

### 8. Don't inquire when your guests plan to leave.

It's not considered appropriate to ask your guests when they plan to leave.

Don't ask:

*Nə vaxt geri dönürsünüz? / Nə vaxt qayıdırsınız?*

When are you leaving?

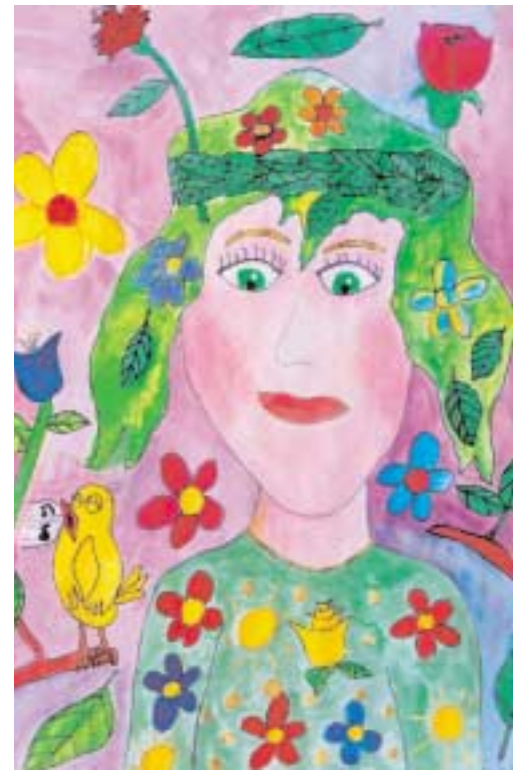
### 9. Don't ask your guests if they are hungry.

Go ahead and prepare something for them to eat.

Don't say:

*Acsımızmı?*

Are you hungry?



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When Azerbaijanis have guests, you'll hear them repeatedly urging their guests to partake of the food that is on the table. One Azerbaijani woman who is in the habit of visiting her Russian relatives always returns home to complain that she is hungry. The Russian aunt always invited her to eat something, but she would always reply "no". As a result, the Russian aunt would not ask a second time, but just start eating without her.

When Azerbaijanis's daughter asked why she always complained about being hungry when she always refused, her mother replied: "But, of course, I should refuse the first time!" This practice has been going on for 40 years. And still the woman always returns home hungry.

### 10. Good girls don't swear.

It is considered very bad for girls to swear in public or, for that matter, for anyone to swear who has had a "good upbringing". However, in reality, there seems to be a double standard when it comes to boys who often do swear. Sometimes, girls who study in the United States, after returning to Azerbaijan also swear on occasions. Curiously, they do it only in English, as they consider that swearing in Azeri would be very bad.

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*The entire series of "Sociolinguistically Speaking" may be downloaded at AZERI.org. Click Learn Azeri. ■*