

UOT: 81`27

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30546/09081.2025.1.5027>

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LANGUAGE POLICIES IN AZERBAIJAN AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

Munavvar ASGAROVA

Baku Engineering University
Department of Foreign Languages
Baku, Azerbaijan
muasgarova@beu.edu.az
0009-0007-5594-9175

Simuzar SHIRINOVA

Baku Engineering University
Department of Foreign Languages
Baku, Azerbaijan
sishirinova@beu.edu.az
0009-0001-7901-0812

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Received: 2025-05-04 Received in revised form: 2025-05-16 Accepted: 2025-06-13 Available online Keywords: linguistic diversity, language policy, social inequality, minority languages, multilingualism, education and employment access, social integration	This study examines the impact of language policies on social inequalities based on the examples of Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom. These two countries provide suitable examples for a comparative study of the relationship of language with social inequalities. It has been investigated how language diversity affects individuals' access to opportunities in the fields of education, employment and social participation. While the official language union in Azerbaijan supports social integration, it has been seen that ethnic groups can maintain their mother tongues in cultural life. In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, language proficiency is a major barrier for immigrant communities. The study reveals that multilingualism should be supported by inclusive policies, not exclusionary ones.

LİNGVİSTİK MÜXTƏLİFLİK VƏ SOSIAL BƏRABƏRSİZLİK: AZƏRBAYCAN VƏ BİRLƏŞMİŞ KRALLIQDA DİL SİYASƏTLƏRİNİN MÜQAYİSƏLİ TƏDQIQATI XÜLASƏ

Bu tədqiqat Azərbaycan və Birləşmiş Krallıq nümunəsində dil siyasətlərinin sosial bərabərsizliklərə təsirini araşdırır. Hər iki ölkə dil ilə sosial bərabərsizliklər arasındakı münasibətin müqayisəli tədqiqi üçün uyğun nümunələr təqdim edir. Tədqiqatda dil müxtəlifliyinin fərdlərin təhsil, məşğulluq və sosial iştirak sahələrində imkanlara çıxışına necə təsir etdiyi öyrənilmişdir. Azərbaycanda rəsmi dil birliyi sosial inteqrasiyanı dəstəkləşə də, etnik qrupların mədəni həyatda ana dillərini qoruyub saxladıkları müşahidə edilmişdir. Birləşmiş Krallıqda isə dil bacarığı immiqrant icmalar üçün əsas maneə olaraq qalır. Tədqiqatın nəticələri göstərir ki, çoxdillilik ayrıseçkiliyə səbəb olan deyil, əksinə, inklüziv (əhatəli) siyasətlərlə dəstəklənməli olan bir dəyər kimi qəbul edilməlidir.

Açar sözlər: lingvistik müxtəliflik, dil siyasəti, sosial bərabərsizlik, azlıq dilləri, çoxdillilik, təhsil və məşğulluğa çıxış, sosial inteqrasiya

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

As a means of communication, language is a basic structure that forms the identity, social position and social relations of people. Although the presence of more than one language or dialect in societies develops cultural richness, it can also lay the groundwork for the emergence of social inequalities. Linguistic diversity is a crucial factor that can create positive and negative

aspects for individuals accessing public services, education and employment. In multilingual societies, this situation is becoming more emphasized.

Azerbaijan and England offer different examples in terms of language policies and social structures. Although Azerbaijani is the dominant language in Azerbaijan, the multilingual structure of ethnic groups creates various problems in social cohesion and equal opportunities. In this context, the decoupling between linguistic diversity and social justice is a topic that requires more in-depth analysis.

1.2 Problem Statement

Language has a profound effect on a person's self-description and interaction with others. However, this multidimensional influence of language on personality formation is often studied superficially. Individuals express their identities (cultural, ethnic, social and gender) through language, and also connect with mutual groups through language to serve to shape their social roles. It will examine the relationship of language with social class, ethnic identity, gender and other social factors and the impact of these relationships on people's perception of personality.

1.3 Research Aims

The research aims to examine the impacts of official language policies on the immigrant groups and linguistic practices of minorities in Azerbaijan and the UK. The main purpose of this study is to analyze the relations between social inequality and linguistic diversity through the examples of Azerbaijan and England. The inequalities of opportunities that individuals face in areas such as education, employment and social participation depending on the mother tongue or the dialect they speak is also one of the important objectives of the study.

In this context, by evaluating the role of language in social exclusion or participation processes, it is aimed to provide suggestions on how to develop more inclusive and fair language policies. At the same time, raising awareness about how linguistic diversity can be decried as social wealth and not an element of social disadvantage is also among the indirect aims of the study.

1.4 Research Questions

How do language policies in Azerbaijan and the UK form the social inequality of minority and immigrant communities?

In what ways does linguistic diversity create inequalities in individuals' access to education, employment, and social participation, and how are these inequalities experienced differently in Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic diversity has become a feature of modern societies, and this situation plays an important role in shaping social inequality. Linguistic differences between people are an important factor that affects not only cultural diversity but also social structures and the place of individuals in society. Language policies can be a factor that reinforces or reduces social inequality, especially for ethnic minorities and immigrant communities. In this context, the examples of Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom provide important opportunities for comparative study of the ways in which linguistic diversity creates social inequality and how these inequalities are experienced in social life.

The Republic of Azerbaijan adopted Azerbaijani as an official language when the Soviet Union collapsed. This situation has largely ignored the ethnic and linguistic diversity in Azerbaijan. Minority languages in Azerbaijan, especially the languages of Lezgi, Talysh, Kurdish and other ethnic groups, are underrepresented in both education and public services. Mammadova (2013) states that the exclusion of the languages of ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan in public and educational spheres restricts the access of these communities to education and leads to social exclusion. In Azerbaijan, when the linguistic rights of minorities are limited, social inequalities deepen and this leads to the marginalization of certain segments of society.

In the United Kingdom, linguistic diversity is shaped by immigrant communities and their linguistic identities. Since the United Kingdom is a country that has historically received immigration, it is common for different languages to be spoken. However, individuals who do not speak English face significant difficulties in the education and labour market. Migration Observatory (2024) highlights that immigrants face fewer opportunities in the job market due to their linguistic inadequacies, which increases income inequality. It is observed that immigrants and linguistically diverse communities, especially those with low incomes, take up less space in social life and lag in social participation. Individuals who do not speak English not only experience difficulties in finding a job and studying, but also cultural integration poses a major obstacle.

It is observed that the language policies in Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom have similar effects. In both countries, language barriers lead to the exclusion of ethnic and linguistic minorities from social opportunities. Skutnabb-Kangas and Annamalai (2020) argue that linguistic diversity is directly related to social justice and that language barriers prevent individuals from accessing social and economic opportunities. The similarity between the minority languages in Azerbaijan and the immigrant languages in the United Kingdom shows that these languages are not only a form of cultural expression, but also indicators of social exclusion and inequality.

Linguistic inequalities are also clearly seen in the field of education. In the United Kingdom, students with low English proficiency do not usually achieve higher achievements at school and cannot be successful in academic processes. The OECD (2022) reports that individuals, especially from minority ethnic groups and students from immigrant backgrounds are influenced by language barriers. This situation, in the long term, limits the social mobility of these groups, causing them to be trapped in lower-income strata of society. Similarly, the education system in Azerbaijan restricts the rights of ethnic and linguistic minorities to receive education in their mother tongue, which negatively affects their academic achievement (Mammadova, 2013). Language barriers lead to individuals falling behind not only in education but also in terms of social and economic opportunities.

The impact of linguistic diversity is also felt to a great extent in the field of employment. In the United Kingdom, immigrant communities in particular experience great difficulties in finding and rising to employment due to language barriers. Skutnabb-Kangas and Annamalai (2020) state that linguistic inequality not only prevents finding a job but also obliges to stay in low-wage jobs and work in low-status jobs. This situation hinders the economic development of migrants and deepens social injustice. Similarly, in Azerbaijan, speaking languages other than Azerbaijani causes individuals to have a lower status in the labour market. This situation not only limits job opportunities but also leads to the social exclusion of individuals.

The impact of linguistic diversity on social participation is also great. In the United Kingdom, immigrants and ethnic minorities are less represented in participation in public life, especially at the local level, due to language barriers. Koopmans (2010) states that language is a critical factor affecting individuals' social belonging and ties with society. Language barriers not only break social ties but also cause individuals to experience difficulties in political participation. Linguistic exclusion also has a negative impact on the political representation of ethnic communities in Azerbaijan.

As a result, linguistic diversity is an important factor that reinforces social inequalities in both countries. Language policies in Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom lead to the exclusion of linguistic minorities and immigrant communities from social opportunities. Language barriers create huge inequalities not only in education but also in the labour market and social participation. For linguistic diversity not to deepen social inequality, language policies need to be restructured taking into account the rights and needs of minority groups.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study examines the effects of linguistic diversity on social inequality through the examples of Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom with a comparative qualitative research approach. Semi-structured interviews were used for Azerbaijan and literature and report analyses were used for the United Kingdom. The data were evaluated by the thematic content analysis method.

3.2 Participants

A total of 10 participants were included in the study. The participants consist of individuals belonging to the Lezgi, Talish and Avar ethnic groups. The ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 52; a balance was observed in the representation of men and women. The levels of education vary from elementary school to graduate school. Some of the participants live in rural areas while others live in urban centers. Thanks to this diversity, the experiences of linguistic inequality of individuals living in different social, cultural and economic conditions have been able to be comprehensively analyzed. The participants were selected by purposeful sampling method and participated in the interviews voluntarily.

3.3 Data collection

The data on the United Kingdom were obtained through the analysis of the existing academic literature and reports. In Azerbaijan, semi-structured interviews were held with a total of 10 participants from the Lezgi, Talish and Avar communities. The participants vary in terms of age, education level and region. The interviews were evaluated by thematic content analysis; the exclusionary effects of language have been examined under the headings of education, employment and social participation. This design makes it possible to perform a comparative analysis of two different sociolinguistic structures.

3.4 Data analysis

The data were analyzed with a qualitative approach. The interview data were examined by thematic content analysis method using NVivo software. The participants' experiences related to language use, intercultural competence and social inequality were analyzed by coding them under certain themes. This analysis has revealed important patterns for understanding the effects of linguistic diversity on social inequality.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings

Within the scope of this study, qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with individuals belonging to the Lezgi, Talis and Avar ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan were evaluated by thematic content analysis method. The experiences of the participants were collected under three main themes: language policies in education and the protection of the mother tongue, the perception of equal opportunities in employment and participation in social life and the expression of identity. The findings show that despite the multilingual structure of Azerbaijan, the efforts to achieve social unity through the official language of Azerbaijani have yielded positive results in some respects.

1. Language Policies in Education and the Protection of the Mother Tongue

The participants stated that the provision of the education system in Azerbaijan with Azerbaijani, which is the official language, is important in terms of communication unity and standardization in education throughout the country. The majority of the participants stated that their children have the opportunity to learn both Azerbaijani and the native language they speak at home. Opinions have come to the fore that the mother tongue is maintained in the home environment, with cultural traditions and family ties; and that a quality education is provided in the Azerbaijani language at school.

One participant expressed the situation as follows: "Our children speak Talish at home, and they learn Azerbaijani at school. Thanks to this, they know both the state language and our own language. This also gives them an advantage."

In this context, the emphasis on the official language of the Azerbaijani state in education supports the social integration of individuals, while families continue to preserve their native languages, which allows the preservation of cultural diversity. Some of the participants stated that there are initiatives such as teaching their language as an elective course at the primary school level and stated that such practices should be expanded.

2. The Perception of Equal Opportunities in Employment

Another prominent theme in the interviews is that linguistic barriers in the field of employment do not turn into a systematic exclusion. Most of the participants stated that individuals who know the official language at a sufficient level have the opportunity to work in the public and private sectors. Azerbaijani, as the common language of communication throughout the country, constitutes an equal ground in the field of employment.

Some participants stated that thanks to the development projects and employment supports carried out by the state in different regions, the job opportunities of individuals living in rural areas have increased and they have not been subjected to language-based discrimination. One participant described his own experience as follows:

"I am of Avar origin, but I speak Azerbaijani easily. I work in a government agency and I have not had any difficulties because of my language so far."

These statements show that the official language functions as a tool aimed at ensuring equality of opportunity in public life. At the same time, some participants expressed that cultural programs and local events organized in their native languages also increase social solidarity outside of employment.

3. Participation in Social Life and Expression of Identity

In the evaluations conducted on participation in social life, the participants stated that linguistic diversity exists in a way that is compatible with cultural life and that local governments are acting sensitively on this issue. In particular, the inclusion of languages and traditions of different ethnic groups in activities such as cultural festivals, music events and language days ensures the strengthening of social ties.

One participant said: "Last year, a Lezgi cultural festival was held in our village. We sang songs in our language and introduced Azerbaijani culture. Such events bring us together more."

It has been observed that social participation is related not only to political representation but also to cultural visibility and social belonging. Although the majority of the participants agreed that the official language is important for the integrity of the country, they stated that their mother tongue was not completely lost in the social sphere, but rather was kept alive on certain cultural grounds.

Moreover, the young participants stated that thanks to digital media, they can actively use both Azerbaijani and their languages, and this multilingualism makes them more flexible and communicative individuals. This shows that linguistic diversity is seen as a richness and supports cultural pluralism instead of social exclusion.

4.2 Discussion

These findings reveal that the official language policies in Azerbaijan perform the function of ensuring social integration positively; at the same time, individuals continue to maintain their cultural and linguistic identities at certain levels. Participants stated that instead of deconflicting the use of the mother tongue with the official language policies of the state, they are trying to establish a balance between the two languages, and therefore, this balance preserves both individual identities and social harmony.

Most of the participants think that the state's language policies provide equal opportunities in education and employment and positively assess the fact that the official language is a common means of communication. The fact that mother tongues are kept alive at home and cultural events shows that multilingualism is perceived as social wealth, not an element of conflict. The findings indicate that the language policy in Azerbaijan is moving towards inclusiveness instead of social exclusion. This case provides an important example that official language policies can be implemented without excluding native languages in order to increase social cohesion in multilingual societies.

4.3 Challenges and Limitations

In this research, the fieldwork was carried out only in Azerbaijan, while the UK data were obtained from secondary sources. This situation has led to data imbalance in comparative analysis. In addition, the limited number of participants reduces the generalizability of the findings obtained. Regional, cultural and socioeconomic differences experienced by ethnic groups should be examined with a wider sample. The inability of the participants to express themselves comfortably on some subjects limited the depth of the data. For these reasons, more comprehensive field research is needed in the future.

4.4 Recommendations

It is proposed to increase educational and cultural support for minority languages in order to make language policies in Azerbaijan more inclusive. Local programs that will ensure that the mother tongue is also kept alive outside of school should be encouraged. Likewise, language support practices for immigrant communities in the United Kingdom should be expanded, and cultural belonging should be preserved along with English learning. In both countries, multilingualism should be treated as a social wealth, not a barrier; language policies should be restructured in a way that strengthens social cohesion and equality of opportunity.

5 CONCLUSION

In response to research questions, it has been understood that in both countries language is not only a means of communication but also an effective factor in the production of social positioning and inequality. While Azerbaijani, which is the official language in Azerbaijan, plays an important role in terms of social unity and communication, it has been seen that ethnic groups can protect their mother tongues in cultural life. It has been determined that individuals who know the official language at a sufficient level in education and employment can benefit from equality of opportunity. In the United Kingdom, it has been supported by literature that immigrant communities who do not speak English are disadvantaged in education, work and social participation. In both countries, multilingualism deepens social inequalities if it is not supported by inclusive language policies. As a result, language diversity should be treated as a social wealth, not a social threat, and policies should be restructured in this direction.

REFERENCES

1. Mammadova, J. I. (2013). Language Policy in Azerbaijan toward Sustainable Change. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 16(1), 45–58.
2. Najafov, E. (2019). Statement by the Delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan. OSCE.
3. Migration Observatory. (2024). Migrants and Discrimination in the UK. *University of Oxford*.
4. Koopmans, R. (2010). Immigration, Diversity and Social Cohesion. *Migration Observatory*.
5. Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Annamalai, E. (2020). Social Justice and Inclusiveness through Linguistic Human Rights in Education. In A. Schalley & S. Eisenclas (Eds.), *Handbook of Home Language Maintenance and Development* (pp. 377–400). De Gruyter Mouton.
6. OECD. (2022). The Social and Economic Rationale of Inclusive Education. *OECD Publishing*.
7. English in Azerbaijan: Developments and Perspectives. (2021). *English Today*, 37(2), 1–7.
8. Language Policy and Legislation in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan. (2009). *Academia.edu*.
9. Language Barrier in UK Newspapers 2010–2020: Figurative Meaning, Migration, and Language Needs. (2020). *ResearchGate*.
10. Ethnic Minority Immigrants and Their Children in Britain. (2010). *Oxford Economic Papers*, 62(2), 209–233.
11. Legal Regulation of Ethnic Minorities in Azerbaijan. (2023). *Baku Research Institute*.
12. Language Choice in Azerbaijani Context: A Sociolinguistic Perspective. (2021). *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 24(1), 65–78.
13. Non-Standard and Minority Varieties as Community Languages in the UK. (2019). *University of Westminster*.
14. Immigration, Diversity and Trust: The Competing and Intersecting Role. (2021). *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44(6), 1–20.
15. Social Inequalities Experienced by Children of Immigrants Across Europe. (2022). *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(1), 1–25.